Tom Clancy

The Hunt for RED OCTOBER

A NOVEL

Tom Clancy

THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER

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THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER

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For Ralph Chatham,
a sub driver who spoke the truth,
and for all the men who wear dolphins

THE FIRST DAY
FRIDAY, 3 DECEMBER

The Red October

Captain First Rank Marko Ramius of the Soviet Navy was dressed for the Arctic conditions normal to the Northern Fleet submarine base at Polyarnyy. Five layers of wool and oilskin enclosed him. A dirty harbor tug pushed his submarine's bow around to the north, facing down the channel. The dock that had held his *Red October* for two interminable months was now a water-filled concrete box, one of the many specially built to shelter strategic missile submarines from the harsh elements. On its edge a collection of sailors and dockyard workers watched his ship sail in stolid Russian fashion, without a wave or a cheer.

"Engines ahead slow, Kamarov," he ordered. The tug slid out of the way, and Ramius glanced aft to see the water stirring from the force of the twin bronze propellers. The tug's commander waved. Ramius returned the gesture. The tug had done a simple job, but done it quickly and well. The *Red October*, a *Typhoon*-class sub, moved under her own power towards the main ship channel of the Kola Fjord.

"There's *Purga*, Captain." Gregoriy Kamarov pointed to the icebreaker that would escort them to sea. Ramius nodded. The two hours required to transit the channel would tax not his seamanship but his endurance. There was a cold north wind blowing, the only sort of north wind in this part of the world. Late autumn had been surprisingly mild, and scarcely any snow had fallen in an area that measures it in meters; then a week before a major winter storm had savaged the Murmansk coast, breaking pieces off the Arctic icepack. The icebreaker was no formality. The *Purga* would butt aside any ice that might have drifted overnight into the channel. It would not do at all for the Soviet Navy's newest missile submarine to be damaged by an errant chunk of frozen water.

The water in the fjord was choppy, driven by the brisk wind. It began to lap over the *October*'s spherical bow, rolling back down the flat missile deck which lay before the towering black sail. The water was coated with the bilge oil of numberless ships, filth that

would not evaporate in the low temperatures and that left a black ring on the rocky walls of the fjord as though from the bath of a slovenly giant. An altogether apt simile, Ramius thought. The Soviet giant cared little for the dirt it left on the face of the earth, he grumbled to himself. He had learned his seamanship as a boy on inshore fishing boats, and knew what it was to be in harmony with nature.

"Increase speed to one-third," he said. Kamarov repeated his captain's order over the bridge telephone. The water stirred more as the *October* moved astern of the *Purga*. Captain Lieutenant Kamarov was the ship's navigator, his last duty station having been harbor pilot for the large combatant vessels based on both sides of the wide inlet. The two officers kept a weather eye on the armed icebreaker three hundred meters ahead. The *Purga*'s after deck had a handful of crewmen stomping about in the cold, one wearing the white apron of a ship's cook. They wanted to witness the *Red October*'s first operational cruise, and besides, sailors will do almost anything to break the monotony of their duties.

Ordinarily it would have irritated Ramius to have his ship escorted out—the channel here was wide and deep—but not today. The ice was something to worry about. And so, for Ramius, was a great deal else.

"So, my Captain, again we go to sea to serve and protect the *Rodina!*" Captain Second Rank Ivan Yurievich Putin poked his head through the hatch—without permission, as usual—and clambered up the ladder with the awkwardness of a landsman. The tiny control station was already crowded enough with the captain, the navigator, and a mute lookout. Putin was the ship's *zampolit* (political officer). Everything he did was to serve the *Rodina* (Motherland), a word that had mystical connotations to a Russian and, along with V. I. Lenin, was the Communist party's substitute for a godhead.

"Indeed, Ivan," Ramius replied with more good cheer than he felt. "Two weeks at sea. It is good to leave the dock. A seaman belongs at sea, not tied alongside, overrun with bureaucrats and workmen with dirty boots. And we will be warm."

"You find this cold?" Putin asked incredulously.

For the hundredth time Ramius told himself that Putin was the perfect political officer. His voice was always too loud, his humor too affected. He never allowed a person to forget what he was. The

perfect political officer, Putin was an easy man to fear.

"I have been in submarines too long, my friend. I grow accustomed to moderate temperatures and a stable deck under my feet." Putin did not notice the veiled insult. He'd been assigned to submarines after his first tour on destroyers had been cut short by chronic seasickness—and perhaps because he did not resent the close confinement aboard submarines, something that many men cannot tolerate.

"Ah, Marko Aleksandrovich, in Gorkiy on a day like this, flowers bloom!"

"And what sort of flowers might those be, Comrade Political Officer?" Ramius surveyed the fjord through his binoculars. At noon the sun was barely over the southeast horizon, casting orange light and purple shadows along the rocky walls.

"Why, snow flowers, of course," Putin said, laughing loudly. "On a day like this the faces of the children and the women glow pink, your breath trails behind you like a cloud, and the vodka tastes especially fine. Ah, to be in Gorkiy on a day like this!"

The bastard ought to work for Intourist, Ramius told himself, except that Gorkiy is a city closed to foreigners. He had been there twice. It had struck him as a typical Soviet city, full of ramshackle buildings, dirty streets, and ill-clad citizens. As it was in most Russian cities, winter was Gorkiy's best season. The snow hid all the dirt. Ramius, half Lithuanian, had childhood memories of a better place, a coastal village whose Hanseatic origin had left rows of presentable buildings.

It was unusual for anyone other than a Great Russian to be aboard—much less command—a Soviet naval vessel. Marko's father, Aleksandr Ramius, had been a hero of the Party, a dedicated, believing Communist who had served Stalin faithfully and well. When the Soviets first occupied Lithuania in 1940, the elder Ramius was instrumental in rounding up political dissidents, shop owners, priests, and anyone else who might have been troublesome to the new regime. All were shipped off to fates that now even Moscow could only guess at. When the Germans invaded a year later, Aleksandr fought heroically as a political commissar, and was later to distinguish himself in the Battle of Leningrad. In 1944 he returned to his native land with the spearhead of the Eleventh Guards Army to wreak bloody vengeance on those who had collaborated with the Germans or been suspected of such. Marko's

father had been a true Soviet hero—and Marko was deeply ashamed to be his son. His mother's health had been broken during the endless siege of Leningrad. She died giving birth to him, and he was raised by his paternal grandmother in Lithuania while his father strutted through the Party Central Committee in Vilnius, awaiting his promotion to Moscow. He got that, too, and was a candidate member of the Politburo when his life was cut short by a heart attack.

Marko's shame was not total. His father's prominence had made his current goal a possibility, and Marko planned to wreak his own vengeance on the Soviet Union, enough, perhaps, to satisfy the thousands of his countrymen who had died before he was even born.

"Where we are going, Ivan Yurievich, it will be colder still."

Putin clapped his captain's shoulder. Was his affection feigned or real? Marko wondered. Probably real. Ramius was an honest man, and he recognized that this short, loud oaf did have some human feelings.

"Why is it, Comrade Captain, that you always seem glad to leave the *Rodina* and go to sea?"

Ramius smiled behind his binoculars. "A seaman has one country, Ivan Yurievich, but two wives. You never understand that. Now I go to my other wife, the cold, heartless one that owns my soul." Ramius paused. The smile vanished. "My only wife, now."

Putin was quiet for once, Marko noted. The political officer had been there, had cried real tears as the coffin of polished pine rolled into the cremation chamber. For Putin the death of Natalia Bogdanova Ramius had been a cause of grief, but beyond that the act of an uncaring God whose existence he regularly denied. For Ramius it had been a crime committed not by God but the State. An unnecessary, monstrous crime, one that demanded punishment.

"Ice." The lookout pointed.

"Loose-pack ice, starboard side of the channel, or perhaps something calved off the east-side glacier. We'll pass well clear," Kamarov said.

"Captain!" The bridge speaker had a metallic voice. "Message from fleet headquarters."

"Read it."

"'Exercise area clear. No enemy vessels in vicinity. Proceed as per orders. Signed, Korov, Fleet Commander.'"

"Acknowledged," Ramius said. The speaker clicked off. "So, no *Amerikantsi* about?"

"You doubt the fleet commander?" Putin inquired.

"I hope he is correct," Ramius replied, more sincerely than his political officer would appreciate. "But you remember our briefings."

Putin shifted on his feet. Perhaps he was feeling the cold.

"Those American 688-class submarines, Ivan, the *Los Angeleses*. Remember what one of their officers told our spy? That they could sneak up on a whale and bugger it before it knew they were there? I wonder how the KGB got that bit of information. A beautiful Soviet agent, trained in the ways of the decadent West, too skinny, the way the imperialists like their women, blond hair…" The captain grunted amusement. "Probably the American officer was a boastful boy, trying to find a way to do something similar to our agent, no? And feeling his liquor, like most sailors. Still. The American *Los Angeles* class, and the new British *Trafalgars*, those we must guard against. They are a threat to us."

"The Americans are good technicians, Comrade Captain," Putin said, "but they are not giants. Their technology is not so awesome. *Nasha lutcha*," he concluded. Ours is better.

Ramius nodded thoughtfully, thinking to himself that *zampoliti* really ought to know something about the ships they supervised, as mandated by Party doctrine.

"Ivan, didn't the farmers around Gorkiy tell you it is the wolf you do not see that you must fear? But don't be overly concerned. With this ship we will teach them a lesson, I think."

"As I told the Main Political Administration," Putin clapped Ramius' shoulder again, "*Red October* is in the best of hands!"

Ramius and Kamarov both smiled at that. You son of a bitch! the captain thought, saying in front of my men that *you* must pass on my fitness to command! A man who could not command a rubber raft on a calm day! A pity you will not live to eat those words, Comrade Political Officer, and spend the rest of your life in the gulag for that misjudgment. It would almost be worth leaving you alive.

A few minutes later the chop began to pick up, making the submarine roll. The movement was accentuated by their height above the deck, and Putin made excuses to go below. Still a weak-legged sailor. Ramius shared the observation silently with Kamarov,

who smiled agreement. Their unspoken contempt for the *zampolit* was a most un-Soviet thought.

The next hour passed quickly. The water grew rougher as they approached the open sea, and their icebreaker escort began to wallow on the swells. Ramius watched her with interest. He had never been on an icebreaker, his entire career having been in submarines. They were more comfortable, but also more dangerous. He was accustomed to the danger, though, and the years of experience would stand him in good stead now.

"Sea buoy in sight, Captain." Kamarov pointed. The red lighted buoy was riding actively on the waves.

"Control room, what is the sounding?" Ramius asked over the bridge telephone.

"One hundred meters below the keel, Comrade Captain."

"Increase speed to two-thirds, come left ten degrees." Ramius looked at Kamarov. "Signal our course change to *Purga*, and hope he doesn't turn the wrong way."

Kamarov reached for the small blinker light stowed under the bridge coaming. The *Red October* began to accelerate slowly, her 30,000-ton bulk resisting the power of her engines. Presently the bow wave grew to a three-meter standing arc of water; man-made combers rolled down the missile deck, splitting against the front of the sail. The *Purga* altered course to starboard, allowing the submarine to pass well clear.

Ramius looked aft at the bluffs of the Kola Fjord. They had been carved to this shape millennia before by the remorseless pressure of towering glaciers. How many times in his twenty years of service with the Red Banner Northern Fleet had he looked at the wide, flat U-shape? This would be the last. One way or another, he'd never go back. Which way would it turn out? Ramius admitted to himself that he didn't much care. Perhaps the stories his grandmother had taught him were true, about God and the reward for a good life. He hoped so—it would be good if Natalia were not truly dead. In any case, there was no turning back. He had left a letter in the last mailbag taken off before sailing. There was no going back after that.

"Kamarov, signal to *Purga:* 'Diving at—,'" he checked his watch, "'—1320 hours. Exercise OCTOBER FROST begins as scheduled. You are released to other assigned duties. We will return as scheduled.'"

Kamarov worked the trigger on the blinker light to transmit the

message. The *Purga* responded at once, and Ramius read the flashing signal unaided: "IF THE WHALES DON'T EAT YOU. GOOD LUCK TO *RED OCTOBER!*"

Ramius lifted the phone again, pushing the button for the sub's radio room. He had the same message transmitted to fleet headquarters, Severomorsk. Next he addressed the control room.

"Depth under the keel?"

"One hundred forty meters, Comrade Captain."

"Prepare to dive." He turned to the lookout and ordered him below. The boy moved towards the hatch. He was probably glad to return to the warmth below, but took the time for one last look at the cloudy sky and receding cliffs. Going to sea on a submarine was always exciting, and always a little sad.

"Clear the bridge. Take the conn when you get below, Gregoriy." Kamarov nodded and dropped down the hatch, leaving the captain alone.

Ramius made one last careful scan of the horizon. The sun was barely visible aft, the sky leaden, the sea black except for the splash of whitecaps. He wondered if he were saying goodbye to the world. If so, he would have preferred a more cheerful view of it.

Before sliding down he inspected the hatch seat, pulling it shut with a chain and making sure the automatic mechanism functioned properly. Next he dropped eight meters down the inside of the sail to the pressure hull, then two more into the control room. A *michman* (warrant officer) shut the second hatch and with a powerful spin turned the locking wheel as far as it would go.

"Gregoriy?" Ramius asked.

"Straight board shut," the navigator said crisply, pointing to the diving board. All hull-opening indicator lights showed green, safe. "All systems aligned and checked for dive. The compensation is entered. We are rigged for dive."

The captain made his own visual inspection of mechanical, electrical, and hydraulic indicators. He nodded, and the *michman* of the watch unlocked the vent controls.

"Dive," Ramius ordered, moving to the periscope to relieve Vasily Borodin, his *starpom* (executive officer). Kamarov pulled the diving alarm, and the hull reverberated with the racket of a loud buzzer.

"Flood the main ballast tanks. Rig out the diving planes. Ten degrees down-angle on the planes," Kamarov ordered, his eyes alert

to see that every crewman did his job exactly. Ramius listened carefully but did not look. Kamarov was the best young seaman he had ever commanded, and had long since earned his captain's trust.

The *Red October*'s hull was filled with the noise of rushing air as vents at the top of the ballast tanks were opened and water entering from the tank floods at the bottom chased the buoying air out. It was a lengthy process, for the submarine had many such tanks, each carefully subdivided by numerous cellular baffles. Ramius adjusted the periscope lens to look down and saw the black water change briefly to foam.

The *Red October* was the largest and finest command Ramius had ever had, but the sub had one major flaw. She had plenty of engine power and a new drive system that he hoped would befuddle American and Soviet submarines alike, but she was so big that she changed depth like a crippled whale. Slow going up, even slower going down.

"Scope under." Ramius stepped away from the instrument after what seemed a long wait. "Down periscope."

"Passing forty meters," Kamarov said.

"Level off at one hundred meters." Ramius watched his crewmen now. The first dive could make experienced men shudder, and half his crew were farmboys straight from training camp. The hull popped and creaked under the pressure of the surrounding water, something that took getting used to. A few of the younger men went pale but stood rigidly upright.

Kamarov began the procedure for leveling off at the proper depth. Ramius watched with a pride he might have felt for his own son as the lieutenant gave the necessary orders with precision. He was the first officer Ramius had recruited. The control room crew snapped to his command. Five minutes later the submarine slowed her descent at ninety meters and settled the next ten to a perfect stop at one hundred.

"Well done, Comrade Lieutenant. You have the conn. Slow to one-third speed. Have the sonarmen listen on all passive systems." Ramius turned to leave the control room, motioning Putin to follow him.

And so it began.

Ramius and Putin went aft to the submarine's wardroom. The captain held the door open for the political officer, then closed and locked it behind himself. The *Red October*'s wardroom was a

spacious affair for a submarine, located immediately forward of the galley, aft of the officer accommodations. Its walls were soundproofed, and the door had a lock because her designers had known that not everything the officers had to say was necessarily for the ears of the enlisted men. It was large enough for all of the *October*'s officers to eat as a group—though at least three of them would always be on duty. The safe containing the ship's orders was here, not in the captain's stateroom where a man might use his solitude to try opening it by himself. It had two dials. Ramius had one combination, Putin the other. Which was hardly necessary, since Putin undoubtedly knew their mission orders already. So did Ramius, but not all the particulars.

Putin poured tea as the captain checked his watch against the chronometer mounted on the bulkhead. Fifteen minutes until he could open the safe. Putin's courtesy made him uneasy.

"Two more weeks of confinement," the *zampolit* said, stirring his tea.

"The Americans do this for two *months*, Ivan. Of course, their submarines are far more comfortable." Despite her huge bulk, the *October*'s crew accommodations would have shamed a gulag jailer. The crew consisted of fifteen officers, housed in fairly decent cabins aft, and a hundred enlisted men whose bunks were stuffed into corners and racks throughout the bow, forward of the missile room. The *October*'s size was deceptive. The interior of her double hull was crammed with missiles, torpedoes, a nuclear reactor and its support equipment, a huge backup diesel power plant, and bank of nickle-cadmium batteries outside the pressure hull, which was ten times the size of its American counterparts. Running and maintaining the ship was a huge job for so small a crew, even though extensive use of automation made her the most modern of Soviet naval vessels. Perhaps the men didn't need proper bunks. They would only have four or six hours a day to make use of them. This would work to Ramius' advantage. Half of his crew were draftees on their first operational cruise, and even the more experienced men knew little enough. The strength of his enlisted crew, unlike that of Western crews, resided much more in his eleven *michmanyy* (warrant officers) than in his *glavnyy starshini* (senior petty officers). All of them were men who would do—were specifically trained to do—exactly what their officers told them. And Ramius had picked the officers.

"You want to cruise for two months?" Putin asked.

"I have done it on diesel submarines. A submarine belongs at sea, Ivan. Our mission is to strike fear into the hearts of the imperialists. We do not accomplish this tied up in our barn at Polyarnyy most of the time, but we cannot stay at sea any longer because any period over two weeks and the crew loses efficiency. In two weeks this collection of children will be a mob of numbed robots." Ramius was counting on that.

"And we could solve this by having capitalist luxuries?" Putin sneered.

"A true Marxist is objective, Comrade Political Officer," Ramius chided, savoring this last argument with Putin. "Objectively, that which aids us in carrying out our mission is good, that which hinders us is bad. Adversity is supposed to hone one's spirit and skill, not dull them. Just being aboard a submarine is hardship enough, is it not?"

"Not for you, Marko." Putin grinned over his tea.

"I am a seaman. Our crewmen are not, most never will be. They are a mob of farmers' sons and boys who yearn to be factory workers. We must adjust to the times, Ivan. These youngsters are not the same as we were."

"That is true enough," Putin agreed. "You are never satisfied, Comrade Captain. I suppose it is men like you who force progress upon us all."

Both men knew exactly why Soviet missile submarines spent so little of their time—barely fifteen percent of it—at sea, and it had nothing to do with creature comforts. The *Red October* carried twenty-six SS-N-20 Seahawk missiles, each with eight 500-kiloton multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles—MIRVs—enough to destroy two hundred cities. Land-based bombers could only fly a few hours at a time, then had to return to their bases. Land-based missiles arrayed along the main East-West Soviet rail network were always where paramilitary troops of the KGB could get at them lest some missile regiment commander suddenly came to realize the power at his fingertips. But missile submarines were by definition beyond any control from land. Their entire mission was to disappear.

Given that fact, Marko was surprised that his government had them at all. The crew of such vessels had to be trusted. And so they sailed less often than their Western counterparts, and when they did

it was with a political officer aboard to stand next to the commanding officer, a second captain always ready to pass approval on every action.

"Do you think you could do it, Marko, cruise for two months with these farmboys?"

"I prefer half-trained boys, as you know. They have less to unlearn. Then I can train them to be seamen the right way, my way. My personality cult?"

Putin laughed as he lit a cigarette. "That observation has been made in the past, Marko. But you are our best teacher and your reliability is well known." This was very true. Ramius had sent hundreds of officers and seamen on to other submarines whose commanders were glad to have them. It was another paradox that a man could engender trust within a society that scarcely recognized the concept. Of course, Ramius was a loyal Party member, the son of a Party hero who had been carried to his grave by three Politburo members. Putin waggled his finger. "You should be commanding one of our higher naval schools, Comrade Captain. Your talents would better serve the state there."

"It is a seaman I am, Ivan Yurievich. Only a seaman, not a schoolmaster—despite what they say about me. A wise man knows his limitations." And a bold one seizes opportunities. Every officer aboard had served with Ramius before, except for three junior lieutenants, who would obey their orders as readily as any wet-nosed *matros* (seaman), and the doctor, who was useless.

The chronometer chimed four bells.

Ramius stood and dialed in his three-element combination. Putin did the same, and the captain flipped the lever to open the safe's circular door. Inside was a manila envelope plus four books of cipher keys and missile-targeting coordinates. Ramius removed the envelope, then closed the door, spinning both dials before sitting down again."

"So, Ivan, what do you suppose our orders tell us to do?" Ramius asked theatrically.

"Our duty, Comrade Captain." Putin smiled.

"Indeed." Ramius broke the wax seal on the envelope and extracted the four-page operation order. He read it quickly. It was not complicated.

"So, we are to proceed to grid square 54-90 and rendezvous with our attack submarine *V. K. Konovalov*—that's Captain

Tupolev's new command. You know Viktor Tupolev? No? Viktor will guard us from imperialist intruders, and we will conduct a four-day acquisition and tracking drill, with him hunting us—if he can." Ramius chuckled. "The boys in the attack submarine directorate still have not figured how to track our new drive system. Well, neither will the Americans. We are to confine our operations to grid square 54-90 and the immediately surrounding squares. That ought to make Viktor's task a bit easier."

"But you will not let him find us?"

"Certainly not," Ramius snorted. "Let? Viktor was once my pupil. You give nothing to an enemy, Ivan, even in a drill. The imperialists certainly won't! In trying to find us, he also practices finding their missile submarines. He will have a fair chance of locating us, I think. The exercise is confined to nine squares, forty thousand square kilometers. We shall see what he has learned since he served with us—oh, that's right, you weren't with me then. That's when I had the *Suslov*."

"Do I see disappointment?"

"No, not really. The four-day drill with *Konovalov* will be interesting diversion." Bastard, he said to himself, you knew beforehand exactly what our orders were—and you do know Viktor Tupolev, liar. It was time.

Putin finished his cigarette and his tea before standing. "So, again I am permitted to watch the master captain at work—befuddling a poor boy." He turned towards the door. "I think—"

Ramius kicked Putin's feet out from under him just as he was stepping away from the table. Putin fell backwards while Ramius sprang to his feet and grasped the political officer's head in his strong fisherman's hands. The captain drove his neck downward to the sharp, metal-edged corner of the wardroom table. It struck the point. In the same instant Ramius pushed down on the man's chest. An unnecessary gesture—with the sickening crackle of bones Ivan Putin's neck broke, his spine severed at the level of the second cervical vertebra, a perfect hangman's fracture.

The political officer had no time to react. The nerves to his body below the neck were instantly cut off from the organs and muscles they controlled. Putin tried to shout, to say something, but his mouth flapped open and shut without a sound except for the exhalation of his last lungful of air. He tried to gulp air down like a landed fish, and this did not work. Then his eyes went up to

Ramius, wide in shock—there was no pain, and no emotion but surprise. The captain laid him gently on the tile deck.

Ramius saw the face flash with recognition, then darken. He reached down to take Putin's pulse. It was nearly two minutes before the heart stopped completely. When Ramius was sure that his political officer was dead, he took the teapot from the table and poured two cups' worth on the deck, careful to drip some on the man's shoes. Next he lifted the body to the wardroom table and threw open the door.

"Dr. Petrov to the wardroom at once!"

The ship's medical office was only a few steps aft. Petrov was there in seconds, along with Vasily Borodin, who had hurried aft from the control room.

"He slipped on the deck where I spilled my tea," Ramius gasped, performing closed heart massage on Putin's chest. "I tried to keep him from falling, but he hit his head on the table.

Petrov shoved the captain aside, moved the body around, and leapt on the table to kneel astride it. He tore the shirt open, then checked Putin's eyes. Both pupils were wide and fixed. The doctor felt around the man's head, his hands working downward to the neck. They stopped there, probing. The doctor shook his head slowly.

"Comrade Putin is dead. His neck is broken." The doctor's hands came loose, and he closed the *zampolit*'s eyes.

"No!" Ramius shouted. "He was alive only a minute ago!" The commanding officer was sobbing. "It's my fault. I tried to catch him, but I failed. My fault!" He collapsed into a chair and buried his face in his hands. "My fault," he cried, shaking his head in rage, struggling visibly to regain his composure. An altogether excellent performance.

Petrov placed his hand on the captain's shoulder. "It was an accident, Comrade Captain. These things happen, even to experienced men. It was not your fault. Truly, Comrade."

Ramius swore under his breath, regaining control of himself. "There is nothing you can do?"

Petrov shook his head. "Even in the finest clinic in the Soviet Union nothing could be done. Once the spinal cord is severed, there is no hope. Death is virtually instantaneous—but also it is quite painless," the doctor added consolingly.

Ramius drew himself up as he took a long breath, his face set.

“Comrade Putin was a good shipmate, a loyal Party member, and a fine officer.” Out the corner of his eye he noticed Borodin’s mouth twitch. “Comrades, we will continue our mission! Dr. Petrov, you will carry our comrade’s body to the freezer. This is—gruesome, I know, but he deserves and will get an honorable military funeral, with his shipmates in attendance, as it should be, when we return to port.”

“Will this be reported to fleet headquarters?” Petrov asked.

“We cannot. Our orders are to maintain strict radio silence.” Ramius handed the doctor a set of operations orders from his pocket. Not those taken from the safe. “Page three, Comrade Doctor.”

Petrov’s eyes went wide reading the operational directive.

“I would prefer to report this, but our orders are explicit: Once we dive, no transmissions of any kind, for any reason.”

Petrov handed the papers back. “Too bad, our comrade would have looked forward to this. But orders are orders.”

“And we shall carry them out.”

“Putin would have it no other way,” Petrov agreed.

“Borodin, observe: I take the comrade political officer’s missile control key from his neck, as per regulations,” Ramius said, pocketing the key and chain.

“I note this, and will so enter it in the log,” the executive officer said gravely.

Petrov brought in his medical corpsman. Together they took the body aft to the medical office, where it was zippered into a body bag. The corpsman and a pair of sailors then took it forward, through the control room, into the missile compartment. The entrance to the freezer was on the lower missile deck, and the men carried the body through the door. While two cooks removed food to make room for it, the body was set reverently down in the corner. Aft, the doctor and the executive officer made the necessary inventory of personal effects, one copy for the ship’s medical file, another for the ship’s log, and a third for a box that was sealed and locked up in the medical office.

Forward, Ramius took the conn in a subdued control room. He ordered the submarine to a course of two-nine-zero degrees, west-northwest. Grid square 54-90 was to the east.

THE SECOND DAY
SATURDAY, 4 DECEMBER

The Red October

It was the custom in the Soviet Navy for the commanding officer to announce his ship's operational orders and to exhort the crew to carry them out in true Soviet fashion. The orders were then posted for all to see—and be inspired by—outside the ship's Lenin Room. In large surface ships this was a classroom where political awareness classes were held. In *Red October* it was a closet-sized library near the wardroom where Party books and other ideological material were kept for the men to read. Ramius disclosed their orders the day after sailing to give his men the chance to settle into the ship's routine. At the same time he gave a pep talk. Ramius always gave a good one. He'd had a lot of practice. At 0800 hours, when the forenoon watch was set, he entered the control room and took some file cards from an inside jacket pocket.

"Comrades!" he began, talking into the microphone, "this is the captain speaking. You all know that our beloved friend and comrade, Captain Ivan Yurievich Putin, died yesterday in a tragic accident. Our orders do not permit us to inform fleet headquarters of this. Comrades, we will dedicate our efforts and our work to the memory of our comrade, Ivan Yurievich Putin—a fine shipmate, an honorable Party member, and a courageous officer.

"Comrades! Officer and men of *Red October!* We have orders from the Red Banner Northern Fleet High Command, and they are orders worthy of this ship and this crew!

"Comrades! Our orders are to make the ultimate test of our new silent propulsion system. We are to head *west,* past the North Cape of America's imperialist puppet state, Norway, then to turn southwest towards the Atlantic Ocean. We will pass all of the imperialist sonar nets, and we will *not* be detected! This will be a true test of our submarine and his capabilities. Our own ships will engage in a major exercise to locate us and at the same time to befuddle the arrogant imperialist navies. Our mission, first of all, is to evade detection by anyone. We will teach the Americans a lesson about Soviet technology that they will not soon forget! Our orders

are to continue southwest, skirting the American coast to challenge and defeat their newest and best hunter submarines. We will proceed all the way to our socialist brothers in Cuba, and we will be the *first ship* to make use of a new and supersecret nuclear submarine base that we have been building for two years right under their imperialist noses on the south coast of Cuba. A fleet replenishment vessel is already en route to rendezvous with us there.

"Comrades! If we succeed in reaching Cuba undetected by the imperialists—and we will!—the officers and men of *Red October* will have a week—*a week*—of shore leave to visit our fraternal socialist comrades on the beautiful island of Cuba. I have been there, comrades, and you will find it to be exactly what you have read, a paradise of warm breezes, palm trees, and comradely good fellowship." By which Ramius meant women. "After this we will return to the Motherland by the same route. By this time, of course, the imperialists will know who and what we are, from their slinking spies and cowardly reconnaissance aircraft. It is intended that they should know this, because we will again evade detection on the trip home. This will let the imperialists know that they may not trifle with the men of the Soviet Navy, that we can approach their coast at the time of our choosing, and that they must respect the Soviet Union!

"Comrades! We will make the first cruise of *Red October* a memorable one!"

Ramius looked up from his prepared speech. The men on watch in the control room were exchanging grins. It was not often that a Soviet sailor was allowed to visit another country, and a visit by a nuclear submarine to a foreign country, even an ally, was nearly unprecedented. Moreover, for Russians the island of Cuba was as exotic as Tahiti, a promised land of white sand beaches and dusky girls. Ramius knew differently. He had read articles in *Red Star* and other state journals about the joys of duty in Cuba. He had also been there.

Ramius changed cards in his hands. He had given them the good news.

"Comrades! Officers and men of *Red October!*" Now for the bad news that everyone was waiting for. "This mission will not be an easy one. It demands our best efforts. We must maintain absolute radio silence, and our operating routines must be *perfect!* Rewards

only come to those who truly earn them. Every officer and every man aboard, from your commanding officer to the newest *matros*, must do his socialist duty and do it well! If we work together as comrades, as the New Soviet Men we are, we shall succeed. You young comrades new to the sea: Listen to your officers, to your *michmanyy*, and to your *starshini*. Learn your duties well, and carry them out exactly. There are no small jobs on this ship, no small responsibilities. Every comrade depends for his life upon every other. Do your duty, follow your orders, and when we have completed this voyage, you will be true Soviet sailors! That is all." Ramius released his thumb from the mike switch and set it back in the cradle. Not a bad speech, he decided—a large carrot and a small stick.

In the galley aft a petty officer was standing still, holding a warm loaf of bread and looking curiously at the bulkhead-mounted speaker. That wasn't what their orders were supposed to be, was it? Had there been a change in plans? The *michman* pointed him back to his duties, grinning and chuckling at the prospect of a week in Cuba. He had heard a lot of stories about Cuba and Cuban women and was looking forward to seeing if they were true.

In the control room Ramius mused. "I wonder if any American submarines are about?"

"Indeed, Comrade Captain," nodded Captain Second Rank Borodin, who had the watch. "Shall we engage the caterpillar?"

"Proceed, Comrade."

"Engines all stop," Borodin ordered.

"All stop." The quartermaster, a *starshina* (petty officer), dialed the annunciator to the STOP position. An instant later the order was confirmed by the inner dial, and a few seconds after that the dull rumble of the engines died away.

Borodin picked up the phone and punched the button for engineering. "Comrade Chief Engineer, prepare to engage the caterpillar."

It wasn't the official name for the new drive system. It had no name as such, just a project number. The nickname *caterpillar* had been given it by a young engineer who had been involved in the sub's development. Neither Ramius nor Borodin knew why, but as often happens with such names, it had stuck.

"Ready, Comrade Borodin," the chief engineer reported back in a moment.

"Open doors fore and aft," Borodin ordered next.

The *michman* of the watch reached up the control board and threw four switches. The status light over each changed from red to green. "Doors show open, Comrade."

"Engage caterpillar. Build speed slowly to thirteen knots."

"Build slowly to one-three knots, Comrade," the engineer acknowledged.

The hull, which had gone momentarily silent, now had a new sound. The engine noises were lower and very different from what they had been. The reactor plant noises, mainly from pumps that circulated the cooling water, were almost imperceptible. The caterpillar did not use a great deal of power for what it did. At the *michman*'s station the speed gauge, which had dropped to five knots, began to creep upward again. Forward of the missile room, in a space shoehorned into the crew's accommodations, the handful of sleeping men stirred briefly in their bunks as they noted an intermittent rumble aft and the hum of electric motors a few feet away, separated from them by the pressure hull. They were tired enough even on their first day at sea to ignore the noise, fighting back to their precious allotment of sleep.

"Caterpillar functioning normally, Comrade Captain," Borodin reported.

"Excellent. Steer two-six-zero, helm," Ramius ordered.

"Two-six-zero, Comrade." The helmsman turned his wheel to the left.

The USS Bremerton

Thirty miles to the northeast, the USS *Bremerton* was on a heading of two-two-five, just emerging from under the icepack. A 688-class attack submarine, she had been on an ELINT—electronic intelligence gathering—mission in the Kara Sea when she was ordered west to the Kola Peninsula. The Russian missile boat wasn't supposed to have sailed for another week, and the *Bremerton*'s skipper was annoyed at this latest intelligence screw-up. He would have been in place to track the *Red October* if she had sailed as scheduled. Even so, the American sonarmen had picked up on the Soviet sub a few minutes earlier, despite the fact that they were traveling at fourteen knots.

"Conn, sonar."

Commander Wilson lifted the phone. “Conn, aye.”

“Contact lost, sir. His screws stopped a few minutes ago and have not restarted. There’s some other activity to the east, but the missile sub has gone dead.”

“Very well. He’s probably settling down to a slow drift. We’ll be creeping up on him. Stay awake, Chief.” Commander Wilson thought this over as he took two steps to the chart table. The two officers of the fire control tracking party who had just been establishing the track for the contact looked up to learn their commander’s opinion.

“If it was me, I’d go down near the bottom and circle slowly right about here.” Wilson traced a rough circle on the chart that enclosed the *Red October*’s position. “So let’s creep up on him. We’ll reduce speed to five knots and see if we can move in and reacquire him from his reactor plant noise.” Wilson turned to the officer of the deck. “Reduce speed to five knots.”

“Aye, Skipper.”

Severomorsk, USSR

In the Central Post Office building in Severomorsk a mail sorter watched sourly as a truck driver dumped a large canvas sack on his work table and went back out the door. He was late—well, not really late, the clerk corrected himself, since the idiot had not been on time once in five years. It was a Saturday, and he resented being at work. Only a few years before, the forty-hour week had been started in the Soviet Union. Unfortunately this change had never affected such vital public services as mail delivery. So, here he was, still working a six-day week—and without extra pay! A disgrace, he thought, and had said often enough in his apartment, playing cards with his workmates over vodka and cucumbers.

He untied the drawstring and turned the sack over. Several smaller bags tumbled out. There was no sense in hurrying. It was only the beginning of the month, and they still had weeks to move their quota of letters and parcels from one side of the building to the other. In the Soviet Union every worker is a government worker, and they have a saying: As long as the bosses pretend to pay us, we will pretend to work.

Opening a small mailbag, he pulled out an official-looking envelope addressed to the Main Political Administration of the

Navy in Moscow. The clerk paused, fingering the envelope. It probably came from one of the submarines based at Polyarnyy, on the other side of the fjord. What did the letter say? the sorter wondered, playing the mental game that amused mailmen all over the world. Was it an announcement that all was ready for the final attack on the imperialist West? A list of Party members who were late paying their dues, or a requisition for more toilet paper? There was no telling. Submariners! They were all prima donnas—even the farmboy conscripts still picking shit from between their toes paraded around like members of the Party elite.

The clerk was sixty-two. In the Great Patriotic War he had been a tankrider serving in a guards tank corps attached to Konev's First Ukrainian Front. That, he told himself, was a man's job, riding into action on the back of the great battle tanks, leaping off to hunt for the German infantrymen as they cowered in their holes. When something needed doing against those slugs, it was *done!* Now what had become of Soviet fighting men? Living aboard luxury liners with plenty of good food and warm beds. The only warm bed he had ever known was over the exhaust vent of his tank's diesel—and he'd had to fight for that! It was crazy what the world had become. Now sailors acted like czarist princes and wrote tons of letters back and forth and called it work. These pampered boys didn't know what hardship was. And their privileges! Every word they committed to paper was priority mail. Whimpering letters to their sweethearts, most of it, and here he was sorting through it all on a Saturday to see that it got to their womenfolk—even though they couldn't possibly have a reply for two weeks. It just wasn't like the old days.

The sorter tossed the envelope with a negligent flick of the wrist towards the surface mailbag for Moscow on the far side of his work table. It missed, dropping to the concrete floor. The letter would be placed aboard the train a day late. The sorter didn't care. There was a hockey game that night, the biggest game of the young season, Central Army against Wings. He had a liter of vodka bet on Wings.

Morrow, England

"*Halsey's greatest popular success was his greatest error. In establishing himself as a popular hero with legendary aggressiveness, the admiral would blind later generations to his impressive intellectual abilities and a*

shrewd gambler's instinct to—" Jack Ryan frowned at his computer. It sounded too much like a doctoral dissertation, and he had already done one of those. He thought of dumping the whole passage from the memory disk but decided against it. He had to follow this line of reasoning for his introduction. Bad as it was, it did serve as a guide for what he wanted to say. Why was it that introductions always seemed to be the hardest part of a history book? For three years now he had been working on *Fighting Sailor*, an authorized biography of Fleet Admiral William Halsey. Nearly all of it was contained on a half-dozen floppy disks lying next to his Apple computer.

"Daddy?" Ryan's daughter was staring up at him.

"And how's my little Sally today?"

"Fine."

Ryan picked her up and set her on his lap, careful to slide his chair away from the keyboard. Sally was all checked out on games and educational programs, and occasionally thought that this meant she was able to handle Wordstar also. Once that had resulted in the loss of twenty thousand words of electronically recorded manuscript. And a spanking.

She leaned her head against her father's shoulder.

"You don't look fine. What's bothering my little girl?"

"Well, Daddy, y'see, it's almost Chris'mas, an…I'm not sure that Santa knows where we are. We're not where we were last year."

"Oh, I see. And you're afraid he doesn't come here?"

"Uh huh."

"Why didn't you ask me before? Of course he comes here. Promise."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Okay." She kissed her father and ran out of the room, back to watching cartoons on the telly, as they called it in England. Ryan was glad she had interrupted him. He didn't want to forget to pick up a few things when he flew over to Washington. Where was—oh, yeah. He pulled a disk from his desk drawer and inserted it in the spare disk drive. After clearing the screen, he scrolled up the Christmas list, things he still had to get. With a simple command a copy of the list was made on the adjacent printer. Ryan tore the page off and tucked it in his wallet. Work didn't appeal to him this Saturday morning. He decided to play with his kids. After all, he'd

be stuck in Washington for much of the coming week.

The V. K. Konovalov

The Soviet submarine *V. K. Konovalov* crept above the hard sand bottom of the Barents Sea at three knots. She was at the southwest corner of grid square 54–90 and for the past ten hours had been drifting back and forth on a north-south line, waiting for the *Red October* to arrive for the beginning of Exercise OCTOBER FROST. Captain Second Rank Viktor Alexievich Tupolev paced slowly around the periscope pedestal in the control room of his small, fast attack sub. He was waiting for his old mentor to show up, hoping to play a few tricks on him. He had served with the Schoolmaster for two years. They had been good years, and while he found his former commander to be something of a cynic, especially about the Party, he would unhesitatingly testify to Ramius' skill and craftiness.

And his own. Tupolev, now in his third year of command, had been one of the Schoolmaster's star pupils. His current vessel was a brand-new *Alfa*, the fastest submarine ever made. A month earlier, while Ramius had been fitting out the *Red October* after her initial shakedown, Tupolev and three of his officers had flown down to see the model sub that had been the test-bed for the prototype drive system. Thirty-two meters long and diesel-electric powered, it was based in the Caspian Sea, far from the eyes of imperialist spies, and kept in a covered dock, hidden from their photographic satellites. Ramius had had a hand in the development of the caterpillar, and Tupolev recognized the mark of the master. It would be a bastard to detect. Not quite impossible, though. After a week of following the model around the north end of the Caspian Sea in an electrically powered launch, trailing the best passive sonar array his country had yet made, he thought he had found a flaw. Not a big one, just big enough to exploit.

Of course there was no guarantee of success. He was not only in competition with a machine, but also with the captain commanding her. Tupolev knew this area intimately. The water was almost perfectly isothermal; there was no thermal layer for a submarine to hide under. They were far enough from the freshwater rivers on the north coast of Russia not to have to worry about pools and walls of variable salinity interfering with their sonar searches. The

Konovalov had been built with the best sonar systems the Soviet Union had yet produced, copied closely from the French DUUV-23 and a bit improved, the factory technicians said.

Tupolev planned to mimic the American tactic of drifting slowly, with just enough speed to maintain steerage, perfectly quiet and waiting for the *Red October* to cross his path. He would then trail his quarry closely and log each change in course and speed, so that when they compared logs in a few weeks the Schoolmaster would see that his erstwhile student had played his own winning game. It was about time someone did.

"Anything new on sonar?" Tupolev was getting tense. Patience came hard to him.

"Nothing new, Comrade Captain." The *starpom* tapped the *X* on the chart that marked the position of the *Rokossovskiy*, a *Delta*-class missile sub they had ben tracking for several hours in the same exercise area. "Our friend is still cruising in a slow circle. Do you think that *Rokossovskiy* might be trying to confuse us? Would Captain Ramius have arranged for him to be here, to complicate our task?"

The thought had occurred to Tupolev. "Perhaps, but probably not. This exercise was arranged by Korov himself. Our mission orders were sealed, and Marko's orders should have been also. But then, Admiral Korov is an old friend of our Marko." Tupolev paused for a moment and shook his head. "No. Korov is an honorable man. I think Ramius is proceeding this way as slowly as he can. To make us nervous, to make us question ourselves. He will know we are to hunt him and will adjust his plans accordingly. He might try to enter the square from an unexpected direction—or to make us think that he is. You have never served under Ramius, Comrade Lieutenant. He is a fox, that one, an old gray-whiskered fox. I think we will continue to patrol as we are for another four hours. If we have not yet acquired him then, we will cross over to the southeast corner of the square and work our way in to the center. Yes."

Tupolev had never expected that this would be easy. No attack submarine commander had ever embarrassed Ramius. He was determined to be the first, and the difficulty of the task would only confirm his own prowess. In one or two more years, Tupolev planned to be the new master.

THE THIRD DAY
SUNDAY, 5 DECEMBER

The Red October

The *Red October* had no time of her own. For her the sun neither rose nor set, and the days of the week had little significance. Unlike surface ships, which changed their clocks to conform with the local time wherever they were, submarines generally adhered to a single time reference. For American subs this was Zulu, or Greenwich mean time. For the *Red October* it was Moscow standard time, which by normal reckoning was actually one hour ahead of standard time to save on utility expenses.

Ramius entered the control room in mid-morning. Their course was now two-five-zero, speed thirteen knots, and the submarine was running thirty meters above the bottom at the west edge of the Barents Sea. In a few more hours the bottom would drop away to an abyssal plain, allowing them to go much deeper. Ramius examined the chart first, then the numerous banks of instruments covering both side bulkheads in the compartment. Last he made some notations in the order book.

"Lieutenant Ivanov!" he said sharply to the junior officer of the watch.

"Yes, Comrade Captain!" Ivanov was the greenest officer aboard, fresh from Lenin's Komsomol School in Leningrad, pale, skinny, and eager.

"I will be calling a meeting of the senior officers in the wardroom. You will now be the officer of the watch. This is your first cruise, Ivanov. How do you like it?"

"It is better than I had hoped, Comrade Captain," Ivanov replied with greater confidence than he could possibly have felt.

"That is good, Comrade Lieutenant. It is my practice to give junior officers as much responsibility as they can handle. While we senior officers are having our weekly political discussion, *you* are in command of this vessel! The safety of this ship and all his crew is *your* responsibility! You have been taught all you need to know, and my instructions are in the order book. If we detect another submarine or surface ship you will inform me at once and instantly

initiate evasion drill. Any questions?"

"No, Comrade Captain." Ivanov was standing at rigid attention.

"Good." Ramius smiled. "Pavel Ilych, you will forever remember this as one of the great moments of your life. I know, I can still remember my first watch. Do not forget your orders or your responsibilities!"

Pride sparkled in the boy's eyes. It was too bad what would happen to him, Ramius thought, still the teacher. On first inspection, Ivanov looked to have the makings of a good officer.

Ramius walked briskly aft to the ship's medical office.

"Good morning, Doctor."

"Good morning to you, Comrade Captain. It is time for our political meeting?" Petrov had been reading the manual for the sub's new X-ray machine.

"Yes, it is, Comrade Doctor, but I do not wish you to attend. There is something else I want you to do. While the senior officers are at the meeting, I have the three youngsters standing watch in control and the engineering spaces."

"Oh?" Petrov's eyes went wide. It was his first time on a submarine in several years.

Ramius smiled. "Be at ease, Comrade. I can get from the wardroom to control in twenty seconds, as you know, and Comrade Melekhin can get to his precious reactor just as fast. Sooner or later our young officers must learn to function on their own. I prefer that they learn sooner. I want you to keep an eye on them. I know that they all have the knowledge to do their duties. I want to know if they have the temperament. If Borodin or I watch over them, they will not act normally. And in any case, this is a medical judgment, no?"

"Ah, you wish me to observe how they react to their responsibilities."

"Without the pressure of being observed by a senior line officer," Ramius confirmed. "One must give young officers room to grow—but not too much. If you observe something that you question, you will inform me at once. There should be no problems. We are in open sea, there is no traffic about, and the reactor is running at a fraction of its total power. The first test for young officers ought to be an easy one. Find some excuse for traveling back and forth, and keep an eye on the children. Ask questions about what they are doing."

Petrov laughed at that. “Ah, and also you would have me learn a few things, Comrade Captain? They told me about you at Severomorsk. Fine, it will be as you say. But this will be the first political meeting I have missed in years.”

“From what your file says, you could teach Party doctrine to the Politburo, Yevgeni Konstantinovich.” Which said little about his medical ability, Ramius thought.

The captain moved forward to the wardroom to join his brother officers, who were waiting for him. A steward had left several pots of tea along with black bread and butter to snack on. Ramius looked at the corner of the table. The bloodstains had long since been wiped away, but he could remember exactly what it looked like. This, he reflected, was one difference between himself and the man he had murdered. Ramius had a conscience. Before taking his seat, he turned to lock the door behind him. His officers were all sitting at attention, since the compartment was not large enough for them to stand once the bench seats were folded down.

Sunday was the normal day for the political awareness session at sea. Ordinarily Putin would have officiated, reading some *Pravda* editorials, followed by selected quotations from the works of Lenin and a discussion of the lessons to be learned from the readings. It is very much like a church service.

With the demise of the *zampolit* this duty devolved upon the commanding officer, but Ramius doubted that regulations anticipated the sort of discussion on today’s agenda. Each officer in this room was a member of his conspiracy. Ramius outlined their plans—there had been some minor changes which he had not mentioned to anyone. Then he told them about the letter.

“So, there is no going back,” Borodin observed.

“We have all agreed upon our course of action. Now we are committed to it.” Their reactions to his words were just what he expected them to be—sober. As well they might be. All were single; no one left behind a wife or children. All were Party members in good standing, their dues paid up to the end of the year, their Party cards right where they were supposed to be, “next to their hearts.” And each one shared with his comrades a deep-seated dissatisfaction with, in some cases a hatred of, the Soviet government.

The planning had begun soon after the death of his Natalia. The rage he had almost unknowingly suppressed throughout his life had

burst forth with a violence and passion that he had struggled to contain. A lifetime of self-control had enabled him to conceal it, and a lifetime of naval training had enabled him to choose a purpose worthy of it.

Ramius had not yet begun school when he first heard tales from other children about what his father Aleksandr had done in Lithuania in 1940 and after that country's dubious liberation from the Germans in 1944. These were the repeated whisperings of their parents. One little girl told Marko a story that he recounted to Aleksandr, and to the boy's uncomprehending horror her father vanished. For his unwitting mistake Marko was branded an informer. Stung by the name he was given for committing a crime—which the State taught was not a crime at all—whose enormity never stopped pulling at his conscience, he never informed again.

In the formative years of his life, while the elder Ramius ruled the Lithuanian Party Central Committee in Vilnius, the motherless boy was raised by his paternal grandmother, common practice in a country savaged by four years of brutal war. Her only son left home at an early age to join Lenin's Red Guards, and while he was away she kept to the old ways, going to mass every day until 1940 and never forgetting the religious education that had been passed on to her. Ramius remembered her as a silver-haired old woman who told wonderful bedtime stories. Religious stories. It would have been far too dangerous for her to bring Marko to the religious ceremonies that had never been entirely stamped out, but she did manage to have him baptized a Roman Catholic soon after his father had deposited him with her. She never told Marko about this. The risk would have been too great. Roman Catholicism had been brutally suppressed in the Baltic states. It was a religion, and as he grew older Marko learned that Marxism-Leninism was a jealous god, tolerating no competing loyalties.

Grandmother Hilda told him nighttime stories from the Bible, each with a lesson of right and wrong, virtue and reward. As a child he found them merely entertaining, but he never told his father about them because even then he knew that Aleksandr would object. After the elder Ramius again resumed control of his son's life, this religious education faded into Marko's memory, neither fully remembered nor fully forgotten.

As a boy, Ramius sensed more than thought that Soviet Communism ignored a basic human need. In his teens, his

misgivings began to take a coherent shape. The Good of the People was a laudable enough goal, but in denying a man's soul, an enduring part of his being, Marxism stripped away the foundation of human dignity and individual value. It also cast aside the objective measure of justice and ethics which, he decided, was the principal legacy of religion to civilized life. From earliest adulthood on, Marko had his own idea about right and wrong, an idea he did not share with the State. It gave him a means of gauging his actions and those of others. It was something he was careful to conceal. It served as an anchor for his soul and, like an anchor, it was hidden far below the visible surface.

Even as the boy was grappling with his first doubts about his country, no one could have suspected it. Like all Soviet children, Ramius joined the Little Octobrists, then the Young Pioneers. He paraded at the requisite battle shrines in polished boots and blood-red scarf, and gravely stood watch over the remains of some unknown soldier while clasping to his chest a deactivated PPSh submachinegun, his back ramrod straight before the eternal flame. The solemnity of such duty was no accident. As a boy Marko was certain that the brave men whose graves he guarded so intensely had met their fates with the same sort of selfless heroism that he saw portrayed in endless war movies at the local cinema. They had fought the hated Germans to protect the women and children and old people behind the lines. And like a nobleman's son of an earlier Russia, he took special pride in being the son of a Party chieftain. The Party, he heard a hundred times before he was five, was the Soul of the People; the unity of Party, People, and Nation was the holy trinity of the Soviet Union, albeit with one segment more important than the others. His father fit easily into the cinematic image of a Party apparatchik. Stern but fair, to Marko he was a frequently absent, gruffly kind man who brought his son what presents he could and saw to it that he had all the advantages the son of a Party secretary was entitled to.

Although outwardly he was the model Soviet child, inwardly he wondered why what he learned from his father and in school conflicted with the other lessons of his youth. Why did some parents refuse to let their children play with him? Why when he passed them did his classmates whisper "*stukach*," the cruel and bitter epithet of informer? His father and the Party taught that informing was an act of patriotism, but for having done it once he

was shunned. He resented the taunts of his boyhood peers, but he never once complained to his father, knowing that this would be an evil thing to do.

Something was very wrong—but what? He decided that he had to find the answers for himself. By choice Marko became individual in his thinking, and so unknowingly committed the gravest sin in the Communist pantheon. Outwardly the model of a Party member's son, he played the game carefully and according to all the rules. He did his duty for all Party organizations, and was always the first to volunteer for the menial tasks allotted to children aspiring to Party membership, which he knew was the only path to success or even comfort in the Soviet Union. He became good at sports. Not team sports—he worked at track and field events in which he could compete as an individual and measure the performance of others. Over the years he learned to do the same in all of his endeavors, to watch and judge the actions of his fellow citizens and officers with cool detachment, behind a blank face that concealed his conclusions.

In the summer of his eighth year the course of his life was forever changed. When no one would play with "the little *stukach*," he would wander down to the fishing docks of the small village where his grandmother had made her home. A ragtag collection of old wooden boats sailed each morning, always behind a screen of patrol boats manned by MGB—as the KGB was then known—border guards, to reap a modest harvest from the Gulf of Finland. Their catch supplemented the local diet with needed protein and provided a minuscule income for the fishermen. One boat captain was old Sasha. An officer in the czar's navy, he had revolted with the crew of the cruiser *Avrora*, helping to spark the chain of events that changed the face of the world. Marko did not learn until many years later that the crewmen of the *Avrora* had broken with Lenin—and been savagely put down by Red Guards. Sasha had spent twenty years in labor camps for his part in that collective indiscretion and only been released at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War. The *Rodina* had found herself in need of experienced seamen to pilot ships into the ports of Murmansk and Archangel, to which the Allies were bringing weapons, food, and the sundries that allow a modern army to function. Sasha had learned his lesson in the gulag: he did his duty efficiently and well, asking for nothing in return. After the war he'd been given a kind of freedom for his

services, the right to perform back-breaking work under perpetual suspicion.

By the time Marko met him, Sasha was over sixty, a nearly bald man with ropy old muscles, a seaman's eye, and a talent for stories that left the youngster wide-eyed. He'd been a midshipman under the famous Admiral Marakov at Port Arthur in 1906. Probably the finest seaman in Russian history, Marakov's reputation as a patriot and an innovative fighting sailor was sufficiently unblemished that a Communist government would eventually see fit to name a missile cruiser in his memory. At first wary of the boy's reputation, Sasha saw something in him that others missed. The boy without friends and the sailor without a family became comrades. Sasha spent hours telling and retelling the tale of how he had been on the admiral's flagship, the *Petropavlovsk*, and participated in the one Russian victory over the hated Japanese—only to have his battleship sunk and his admiral killed by a mine while returning to port. After this Sasha had led his seamen as naval infantry, winning three decorations for courage under fire. This experience—he waggled his finger seriously at the boy—taught him of the mindless corruption of the czarist regime and convinced him to join one of the first naval soviets when such action meant certain death at the hands of the czar's secret police, the *okhrana*. He told his own version of the October Revolution from the thrilling perspective of an eyewitness. But Sasha was very careful to leave the later parts out.

He allowed Marko to sail with him and taught him the fundamentals of seamanship that decided a boy not yet nine that his destiny lay on the sea. There was a freedom at sea he could never have on land. There was a romance about it that touched the man growing within the boy. There were also dangers, but in a summer-long series of simple, effective lessons, Sasha taught the boy that preparation, knowledge, and discipline can deal with any form of danger; that danger confronted properly is not something a man must fear. In later years Marko would reflect often on the value this summer had held for him, and wonder just how far Sasha's career might have led if other events had not cut it short.

Marko told his father about Sasha towards the end of that long Baltic summer and even took him to meet the old seadog. The elder Ramius was sufficiently impressed with him and what he had done for his son that he arranged for Sasha to have command of a newer,

larger boat and moved him up on the list for a new apartment. Marko almost believed that the Party could do a good deed—that he himself had done his first manly good deed. But old Sasha died the following winter, and the good deed came to nothing. Many years later Marko realized that he hadn't known his friend's last name. Even after years of faithful service to the *Rodina*, Sasha had been an unperson.

At thirteen Marko traveled to Leningrad to attend the Nakhimov School. There he decided that he, too, would become a professional naval officer. Marko would follow the quest for adventure that had for centuries called young men to the sea. The Nakhimov School was a special three-year prep school for youngsters aspiring to a career at sea. The Soviet Navy at that time was little more than a coastal defense force, but Marko wanted very much to be a part of it. His father urged him to a life of Party work, promising rapid promotion, a life of comfort and privilege. But Marko wanted to earn whatever he received on his own merits, not to be remembered as an appendage of the "liberator" of Lithuania. And a life at sea offered romance and excitement that even made serving the State something he could tolerate. The navy had little tradition to build on. Marko sensed that in it there was room to grow, and saw that many aspiring naval cadets were like himself, if not mavericks then as close to mavericks as was possible in a society so closely controlled as his own. The teenager thrived with his first experience of fellowship.

Nearing graduation, his class was exposed to the various components of the Russian fleet. Ramius at once fell in love with submarines. The boats at that time were small, dirty, and smelled from the open bilges that the crews used as a convenient latrine. At the same time submarines were the only offensive arm that the navy had, and from the first Marko wanted to be on the cutting edge. He'd had enough lectures on naval history to know that submarines had twice nearly strangled England's maritime empire and had successfully emasculated the economy of Japan. This had greatly pleased him; he was glad the Americans had crushed the Japanese navy that had so nearly killed his mentor.

He graduated from the Nakhimov School first in his class, winner of the gold-plated sextant for his mastery of theoretical navigation. As leader of his class, Marko was allowed the school of his choice. He selected the Higher Naval School for Underwater

Navigation, named for Lenin's Komsomol, VVMUPP, still the principal submarine school of the Soviet Union.

His five years at VVMUPP were the most demanding of his life, the more so since he was determined not to succeed but to excel. He was first in his class in every subject, in every year. His essay on the political significance of Soviet naval power was forwarded to Sergey Georgiyevich Gorshkov, then commander in chief of the Baltic Fleet and clearly the coming man in the Soviet Navy. Gorshkov had seen the essay published in *Morskoi Sbornik (Naval Collections)*, the leading Soviet naval journal. It was a model of progressive Party thought, quoting Lenin six different times.

By this time Marko's father was a candidate member of the Presidium, as the Politburo was then called, and very proud of his son. The elder Ramius was no one's fool. He finally recognized that the Red Fleet was a growing flower and that his son would someday have a position of importance in it. His influence moved his son's career rapidly along.

By thirty, Marko had his first command and a new wife. Natalia Bogdanova was the daughter of another Presidium member whose diplomatic duties had taken him and his family all over the world. Natalia had never been a healthy girl. They had no children, their three attempts each ending in miscarriage, the last of which had nearly killed her. She was a pretty, delicate woman, sophisticated by Russian standards, who polished her husband's passable English with American and British books—politically approved ones to be sure, mainly the thoughts of Western leftists, but also a smattering of genuine literature, including Hemingway, Twain, and Upton Sinclair. Along with his naval career, Natalia had been the center of his life. Their marriage, punctuated by prolonged absences and joyous returns, made their love even more precious than it might have been.

When construction began on the first class of Soviet nuclear-powered submarines, Marko found himself in the yards learning how the steel sharks were designed and built. He was soon known as a very hard man to please as a junior quality control inspector. His own life, he was aware, would ride on the workmanship of these often drunk welders and fitters. He became an expert in nuclear engineering, spent two years as a *starpom*, and then received his first nuclear command. She was a *November*-class attack submarine, the first crude attempt by the Soviets to make a

battleworthy long-range attack boat to threaten Western navies and lines of communication. Not a month later a sister ship suffered a major reactor casualty off the Norwegian coast, and Marko was first to arrive on the scene. As ordered, he successfully rescued the crew, then sank the disabled sub lest Western navies learn her secrets. Both tasks he performed expertly and well, a noteworthy tour de force for a young commander. Good performance was something he had always felt it was important to reward in his subordinates, and the fleet commander at that time felt the same way. Marko soon moved on to a new *Charlie I*–class sub.

It was men like Ramius who went out to challenge the Americans and the British. Marko took few illusions with him. The Americans, he knew, had long experience in naval warfare—their own greatest fighter, Jones, had once served the Russian navy for the Czaritza Catherine. Their submariners were legendary for their craftiness, and Ramius found himself pitted against the last of the war-trained Americans, men who had endured the sweaty fear of underwater combat and utterly defeated a modern navy. The deadly serious game of hide-and-seek he played with them was not an easy one, the less so because they had submarines years ahead of Soviet design. But it was not a time without a few victories.

Ramius gradually learned to play the game by American rules, training his officers and men with care. His crews were rarely as prepared as he wished—still the Soviet Navy's greatest problem—but where other commanders cursed their men for their failings, Marko corrected the failings of his men. His first *Charlie*-class submarine was called the Vilnius Academy. This was partially a slur against his half-Lithuanian blood—though since he had been born in Leningrad of a Great Russian, his internal passport designated him as that—but mainly recognition that officers came to him half-trained and left him ready for advancement and eventual command. The same was true of his conscripted crewmen. Ramius did not permit the hazing and low-level terrorism normal throughout the Soviet military. He saw his task as the building of seamen, and he produced a greater percentage of reenlistments than any other submarine commander. A full ninth of the *michmanyy* in the Northern Fleet submarine force were Ramius-trained professionals. His brother submarine commanders were delighted to take aboard his *starshini*, and more than one advanced to officer's school.

After eighteen months of hard work and diligent training, Marko

and his Vilnius Academy were ready to play their game of fox and hounds. He happened upon the USS *Triton* in the Norwegian Sea and hounded her mercilessly for twelve hours. Later he would note with no small satisfaction that the *Triton* was soon thereafter retired, because, it was said, the oversized vessel had proven unable to deal with the newer Soviet designs. The diesel-powered submarines of the British and the Norwegians that he occasionally happened across while snorkling he dogged ruthlessly, often subjecting them to vicious sonar lashing. Once he even acquired an American missile submarine, managing to maintain contact with her for nearly two hours before she vanished like a ghost into the black waters.

The rapid growth of the Soviet Navy and the need for qualified officers during his early career prevented Ramius from attending the Frunze Academy. This was normally a *sine qua non* of career advancement in all of the Soviet armed services. Frunze, in Moscow near the old Novodevichiy Monastery, was named for a hero of the Revolution. It was the premiere school for those who aspired to high command, and though Ramius had not attended it as a student, his prowess as an operational commander won him an appointment as an instructor. It was something earned solely on merit, for which his highly placed father was not responsible. That was important to Ramius.

The head of the naval section at Frunze liked to introduce Marko as “our test pilot of submarines.” His classes became a prime attraction not only for the naval officers in the academy but also for the many others who came to hear his lectures on naval history and maritime strategy. On weekends spent at his father’s official dacha in the village of Zhukova-1, he wrote manuals for submarine operations and the training of crews, and specifications for the ideal attack submarine. Some of his ideas had been controversial enough to upset his erstwhile sponsor, Gorshkov, by this time commander in chief of the entire Soviet Navy—but the old admiral was not entirely displeased.

Ramius proposed that officers in the submarine service should work in a single class of ship—better yet, the same ship—for years, the better to learn their profession and the capabilities of their vessels. Skilled captains, he suggested, should not be forced to leave their commands for desk-bound promotions. Here he lauded the Red Army’s practice of leaving a field commander in his post so

long as the man wanted it, and deliberately contrasted his view on this matter with the practice of imperialist navies. He stressed the need for extended training in the fleet, for longer-service enlisted men, and for better living conditions on submarines. For some of his ideas he found a sympathetic ear in the high command. For others he did not, and thus Ramius found himself destined never to have his own admiral's flag. By this time he did not care. He loved his submarines too much ever to leave them for a squadron or even a fleet command.

After finishing at Frunze, he did indeed become a test pilot of submarines. Marko Ramius, now a captain first rank, would take out the first ship of every submarine class to "write the book" on its strengths and weaknesses, to develop operational routines and training guidelines. The first of the *Alfas* was his, the first of the *Deltas* and *Typhoons*. Aside from one extraordinary mishap on an *Alfa*, his career had been one uninterrupted story of achievement.

Along the way he became the mentor of many young officers. He often wondered what Sasha would have thought as he taught the demanding art of submarine operations to scores of eager young men. Many of them had already become commanding officers themselves; more had failed. Ramius was a commander who took good care of those who pleased him—and took good care of those who did not. Another reason why he had never made admiral was his unwillingness to promote officers whose fathers were as powerful as his own but whose abilities were unsatisfactory. He never played favorites where duty was concerned, and the sons of a half-dozen high Party officials received unsatisfactory fitness reports despite their active performance in weekly Party discussions. Most had become *zampoliti*. It was this sort of integrity that earned him trust in fleet command. When a really tough job was at hand, Ramius' name was usually the first to be considered for it.

Also along the way he had gathered to himself a number of young officers whom he and Natalia virtually adopted. They were surrogates for the family Marko and his wife never had. Ramius found himself shepherding men much like himself, with long-suppressed doubts about their country's leadership. He was an easy man to talk to, once a man had proven himself. To those with political doubts, those with just grievances, he gave the same advice: "Join the Party." Nearly all were already Komsomol members, of course, and Marko urged them to take the next step.

This was the price of a career at sea, and guided by their own craving for adventure most officers paid that price. Ramius himself had been allowed to join the Party at eighteen, the earliest possible age, because of his father's influence. His occasional talks at weekly Party meetings were perfect recitations of the Party line. It wasn't hard, he'd tell his officers patiently. All you had to do was repeat what the Party said—just change the words around slightly. This was much easier than navigation—one had only to look at the political officer to see that! Ramius became known as a captain whose officers were both proficient and models of political conformity. He was one of the best Party recruiters in the navy.

Then his wife died. Ramius was in port at the time, not unusual for a missile sub commander. He had his own dacha in the woods west of Polyarnyy, his own Zhiguli automobile, the official car and driver those which his command station enjoyed, and numerous other creature comforts that came with his rank and his parentage. He was a member of the Party elite, so when Natalie had complained of abdominal pain, going to the Fourth Department clinic which served only the privileged had been a natural mistake —there was a saying in the Soviet Union: Floors parquet, docs okay. He'd last seen his wife alive lying on a gurney, smiling as she was wheeled towards the operating room.

The surgeon on call had arrived at the hospital late, and drunk, and allowed himself too much time breathing pure oxygen to sober up before starting the simple procedure of removing an inflamed appendix. The swollen organ burst just as he was retracting tissue to get at it. A case of peritonitis immediately followed, complicated by the perforated bowel the surgeon caused by his clumsy haste to repair the damage.

Natalia was placed on antibiotic therapy, but there was a shortage of medicine. The foreign—usually French—pharmaceuticals used in Fourth Department clinics had run out. Soviet antibiotics, "plan" medications, were substituted. It was a common practice in Soviet industry for workers to earn bonuses by manufacturing goods over the usual quota, goods that bypassed what quality control existed in Soviet industry. This particular batch of medication had never been inspected or tested. *And the vials had probably been filled with distilled water instead of antibiotics*, Marko learned the next day. Natalia had lapsed into deep shock and coma, dying before the series of errors could be corrected.

The funeral was appropriately solemn, Ramius remembered bitterly. Brother officers from his own command and over a hundred other navy men whom he had befriended over the years were there, along with members of Natalia's family and representatives of the Local Party Central Committee. Marko had been at sea when his father died, and because he had known the extent of Aleksandr's crimes, the loss had had little effect. His wife's death, however, was nothing less than a personal catastrophe. Soon after they had married Natalia had joked that every sailor needs someone to return to, that every woman needs someone to wait for. It had been as simple as that—and infinitely more complex, the marriage of two intelligent people who had over fifteen years learned each other's foibles and strengths and grown ever closer.

Marko Ramius watched the coffin roll into the cremation chamber to the somber strain of a classical requiem, wishing that he could pray for Natalia's soul, hoping that Grandmother Hilda had been right, that there was something beyond the steel door and mass of flame. Only then did the full weight of the event strike him: *the State had robbed him of more than his wife, it had robbed him of a means to assuage his grief with prayer, it had robbed him of the hope—if only an illusion—of ever seeing her again*. Natalia, gentle and kind, had been his only happiness since that Baltic summer long ago. Now that happiness was gone forever. As the weeks and months wore on he was tormented by her memory; a certain hairstyle, a certain walk, a certain laugh encountered on the streets or in the shops of Murmansk was all it took to thrust Natalia back to the forefront of his consciousness, and when he was thinking of his loss, he was not a professional naval officer.

The life of Natalia Bogdanova Ramius had been lost at the hands of a surgeon who had been drinking while on call—a court-martial offense in the Soviet Navy—but Marko could not have the doctor punished. The surgeon was himself the son of a Party chieftain, his status secured by his own sponsors. Her life might have been saved by proper medication, but there had not been enough foreign drugs, and Soviet pharmaceuticals were untrustworthy. The doctor could not be made to pay, the pharmaceutical workers could not be made to pay—the thought echoed back and forth across his mind, feeding his fury until he decided that the State would be made to pay.

The idea had taken weeks to form and was the product of a career of training and contingency planning. When the construction

of the *Red October* was restarted after a two-year hiatus, Ramius knew that he would command her. He had helped with the designing of her revolutionary drive system and had inspected the model, which had been running on the Caspian Sea for some years in absolute secrecy. He asked for relief from his command so that he could concentrate on the construction and outfitting of the *October* and select and train his officers beforehand, the earlier to get the missile sub into full operation. The request was granted by the commander of the Red Banner Northern Fleet, a sentimental man who had also wept at Natalia's funeral.

Ramius had already known who his officers would be. All graduates of the Vilnius Academy, many the "sons" of Marko and Natalia, they were men who owed their place and their rank to Ramius; men who cursed the inability of their country to build submarines worthy of their skills; men who had joined the Party as told and then become even more dissatisfied with the Motherland as they learned that the price of advancement was to prostitute one's mind and soul, to become a highly paid parrot in a blue jacket whose every Party recitation was a grating exercise in self-control. For the most part they were men for whom this degrading step had not borne fruit. In the Soviet Navy there were three routes to advancement. A man could become a *zampolit* and be a pariah among his peers. Or he could be a navigation officer and advance to his own command. Or he could be shunted into a specialty in which he would gain rank and pay—but never command. Thus a chief engineer on a Soviet naval vessel could outrank his commanding officer and still be his subordinate.

Ramius looked around the table at his officers. Most had not been allowed to pursue their own career goals despite their proficiency and despite their party membership. The minor infractions of youth—in one case an act committed at age eight—prevented two from ever being trusted again. With the missile officer, it was because he was a Jew; though his parents had always been committed, believing Communists, neither they nor their son was ever trusted. Another officer's elder brother had demonstrated against the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and disgraced his whole family. Melekhin, the chief engineer and Ramius' equal in rank, had never been allowed the route to command simply because his superiors wanted him to be an engineer. Borodin, who was ready for his own command, had once accused a *zampolit* of

homosexuality; the man he had informed on was the son of the chief *zampolit* of the Northern Fleet. There are many paths to treason.

"And what if they locate us?" Kamarov speculated.

"I doubt that even the Americans can find us when the caterpillar is operating. I am certain that our own submarines cannot. Comrades, I helped design this ship," Ramius said.

"What will become of us?" the missile officer muttered.

"First we must accomplish the task at hand. An officer who looks too far ahead stumbles over his own boots."

"They will be looking for us," Borodin said.

"Of course," Ramius smiled, "but they will not know where to look until it is too late. Our mission, comrades, is to avoid detection. And so we shall."

THE FOURTH DAY
MONDAY, 6 DECEMBER

CIA Headquarters

Ryan walked down the corridor on the top floor of the Langley, Virginia, headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency. He had already passed through three separate security checks, none of which had required him to open his locked briefcase, now draped under the folds of his buff-colored toggle coat, a gift from an officer in the Royal Navy.

What he had on was mostly his wife's fault, an expensive suit bought on Savile Row. It was English cut, neither conservative nor on the leading edge of contemporary fashion. He had a number of suits like this arranged neatly in his closet by colors, which he wore with white shirts and striped ties. His only jewelry was a wedding band and a university ring, plus an expensive but accurate digital watch on a more expensive gold band. Ryan was not a man who placed a great deal of value in appearances. Indeed, his job was to see through these in the search for hard truth.

He was physically unremarkable, an inch over six feet, and his average build suffered a little at the waist from a lack of exercise enforced by the miserable English weather. His blue eyes had a deceptively vacant look; he was often lost in thought, his face on autopilot as his mind puzzled through data or research material for his current book. The only people Ryan needed to impress were those who knew him; he cared little for the rest. He had no ambition to celebrity. His life, he judged, was already as complicated as it needed to be—quite a bit more complicated than most would guess. It included a wife he loved and two children he doted on, a job that tested his intellect, and sufficient financial independence to choose his own path. The path Jack Ryan had chosen was in the CIA. The agency's official motto was, The truth shall make you free. The trick, he told himself at least once a day, was finding that truth, and while he doubted that he would ever reach this sublime state of grace, he took quiet pride in his ability to pick at it, one small fragment at a time.

The office of the deputy director for intelligence occupied a

whole corner of the top floor, overlooking the tree-covered Potomac Valley. Ryan had one more security check to pass.

"Good morning, Dr. Ryan."

"Hi, Nancy." Ryan smiled at her. Nancy Cummings had held her secretarial job for twenty years, had served eight DDIs, and if the truth were known she probably had as good a feel for the intelligence business as the political appointees in the adjacent office. It was the same as with any large business—the bosses came and went, but the good executive secretaries lasted forever.

"How's the family, Doctor? Looking forward to Christmas?"

"You bet—except my Sally's a little worried. She's not sure Santa knows that we've moved, and she's afraid he won't make it to England for her. He will," Ryan confided.

"It's so nice when they're that little." She pressed a hidden button. "You can go right in, Dr. Ryan."

"Thanks, Nancy." Ryan twisted the electronically protected knob and walked into the DDI's office.

Vice Admiral James Greer was reclining in his high-backed judge's chair reading through a folder. His oversized mahogany desk was covered with neat piles of folders whose edges were bordered with red tape and whose covers bore various code words.

"Hiya, Jack!" he called across the room. "Coffee?"

"Yes, thank you, sir."

James Greer was sixty-six, a naval officer past retirement age who kept working through brute competence, much as Hyman Rickover had, though Greer was a far easier man to work for. He was a "mustang," a man who had entered the naval service as an enlisted man, earned his way into the Naval Academy, and spent forty years working his way to a three-star flag, first commanding submarines, then as a full-time intelligence specialist. Greer was a demanding boss, but one who took care of those who pleased him. Ryan was one of these.

Somewhat to Nancy's chagrin, Greer liked to make his own coffee with a West Bend drip machine on the credenza behind his desk, where he could just turn around to reach it. Ryan poured himself a cup—actually a navy-style handleless mug. It was traditional navy coffee, brewed strong, with a pinch of salt.

"You hungry, Jack?" Greer pulled a pastry box from a desk drawer. "I got some sticky buns here."

"Why, thanks, sir. I didn't eat much on the plane." Ryan took

one, along with a paper napkin.

"Still don't like to fly?" Greer was amused.

Ryan sat down in the chair opposite his boss. "I suppose I ought to be getting used to it. I like the Concorde better than the wide-bodies. You only have to be terrified half as long."

"How's the family?"

"Fine, thank you, sir. Sally's in first grade—loves it. And little Jack is toddling around the house. These buns are pretty good."

"New bakery just opened up a few blocks from my place. I pass it on the way in every morning." The admiral sat upright in his chair. "So, what brings you over today?"

"Photographs of the new Soviet missile boat, *Red October*," Ryan said casually between sips.

"Oh, and what do our British cousins want in return?" Greer asked suspiciously.

"They want a peek at Barry Somers' new enhancement gadgets. Not the machines themselves—at first—just the finished product. I think it's a fair bargain, sir." Ryan knew the CIA didn't have any shots of the new sub. The operations directorate did not have a man at the building yard at Severodvinsk or a reliable man at the Polyarnyy submarine base. Worse, the rows of "boat barns" built to shelter the missile submarines, modeled on World War II German submarine pens, made satellite photography impossible. "We have ten frames, low obliques, five each bow and stern, and one from each perspective is undeveloped so that Somers can work on them fresh. We are not committed, sir, but I told Sir Basil that you'd think it over."

The admiral grunted. Sir Basil Charleston, chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service, was a master of the quid pro quo, occasionally offering to share sources with his wealthier cousins and a month later asking for something in return. The intelligence game was often like a primitive marketplace. "To use the new system, Jack, we need the camera used to take the shots."

"I know." Ryan pulled the camera from his coat pocket. "It's a modified Kodak disk camera. Sir Basil says it's the coming thing in spy cameras, nice and flat. This one, he says, was hidden in a tobacco pouch."

"How did you know that—that we need the camera?"

"You mean how Somers uses lasers to—"

"Ryan!" Greer snapped. "How much do you know?"

“Relax, sir. Remember back in February, I was over to discuss those new SS-20 sites on the Chinese border? Somers was here, and you asked me to drive him out to the airport. On the way out he started babbling about this great new idea he was heading west to work on. He talked about it all the way to Dulles. From what little I understood, I gather that he shoots laser beams through the camera lenses to make a mathematical model of the lens. From that, I suppose, he can take the exposed negative, break down the image into the—original incoming light beams, I guess, then use a computer to run *that* through a computer-generated theoretical lens to make a perfect picture. I probably have it wrong.” Ryan could tell from Greer’s face that he didn’t.

“Somers talks too goddamned much.”

“I told him that, sir. But once the guy gets started, how the hell do you shut him up?”

“And what do the Brits know?” Greer asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine, sir. Sir Basil asked me about it, and I told him that he was asking the wrong guy—I mean, my degrees are in economics and history, not physics. I told him we needed the camera—but he already knew that. Took it right out of his desk and tossed it to me. I did not reveal a thing about this, sir.”

“I wonder how many other people he spilled to. Geniuses! They operate in their own crazy little worlds. Somers is like a little kid sometimes. And you know the First Rule of Security: The likelihood of a secret’s being blown is proportional to the *square* of the number of people who’re in on it.” It was Greer’s favorite dictum.

His phone buzzed. “Greer…Right.” He hung up. “Charlie Davenport’s on the way up, per your suggestion, Jack. Supposed to be here half an hour ago. Must be the snow.” The admiral jerked a hand towards the window. There were two inches on the ground, with another inch expected by nightfall. “One flake hits this town and everything goes to hell.”

Ryan laughed. That was something Greer, a down-easter from Maine, never could seem to understand.

“So, Jack, you say this is worth the price?”

“Sir, we’ve wanted these pictures for some time, what with all the contradictory data we’ve been getting on the sub. It’s your decision and the judge’s but, yes, I think they’re worth the price. These shots are very interesting.”

“We ought to have our own men in that damned yard,” Greer

grumped. Ryan didn't know how Operations had screwed that one up. He had little interest in field operations. Ryan was an analyst. How the data came to his desk was not his concern, and he was careful to avoid finding out. "I don't suppose Basil told you anything about their man?"

Ryan smiled, shaking his head. "No, sir, and I did not ask." Greer nodded his approval.

"Morning, James!"

Ryan turned to see Rear Admiral Charles Davenport, director of naval intelligence, with a captain trailing in his wake.

"Hi, Charlie. You know Jack Ryan, don't you?"

"Hello, Ryan."

"We've met," Ryan said.

"This is Captain Casimir."

Ryan shook hands with both men. He'd met Davenport a few years before while delivering a paper at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. Davenport had given him a hard time in the question-and-answer session. He was supposed to be a bastard to work for, a former aviator who had lost flight status after a barrier crash and, some said, still bore a grudge. Against whom? Nobody really knew.

"Weather in England must be as bad as here, Ryan." Davenport dropped his bridge coat on top of Ryan's. "I see you stole a Royal Navy overcoat."

Ryan was fond of his toggle coat. "A gift, sir, and quite warm."

"Christ, you even talk like a Brit. James, we gotta bring this boy home."

"Be nice to him, Charlie. He's got a present for you. Grab yourself some coffee."

Casimir scurried over to fill a mug for his boss, then sat down at his right hand. Ryan let them wait a moment before opening his briefcase. He took out four folders, keeping one and handing the others around.

"They say you've been doing some fairly good work, Ryan," Davenport said. Jack knew him to be a mercurial man, affable one moment, brittle the next. Probably to keep his subordinates off balance. "And—Jesus Christ!" Davenport had opened his folder.

"Gentlemen, I give you *Red October*, courtesy of the British Secret Intelligence Service," Ryan said formally.

The folders had the photographs arranged in pairs, four each of

four-by-four prints. In the back were ten-by-ten blowups of each. The photos had been taken from a low-oblique angle, probably from the rim of the graving dock that had held the boat during her post-shakedown refit. The shots were paired, fore and aft, fore and aft.

"Gentlemen, as you can see, the lighting wasn't all that great. Nothing fancy here. It was a pocket camera loaded with 400-speed color film. The first pair was processed normally to establish high levels. The second was pushed for greater brightness using normal procedures. The third pair was digitally enhanced for color resolution, and the fourth was digitally enhanced for line resolution. I have undeveloped frames of each view for Barry Somers to play with."

"Oh?" Davenport looked up briefly. "That's right neighborly of the Brits. What's the price?" Greer told him. "Pay up. It's worth it."

"That's what Jack says."

"Figures," Davenport chuckled. "You know he really is working for them."

Ryan bristled at that. He liked the English, liked working with their intelligence community, but he knew what country he came from. Jack took a deep breath. Davenport liked to goad people, and if he reacted Davenport would win.

"I gather that Sir John Ryan is still well connected on the other side of the ocean?" Davenport said, extending the prod.

Ryan's knighthood was an honorary one. It was his reward for having broken up a terrorist incident that had erupted around him in St. James's Park, London. He'd been a tourist at the time, the innocent American abroad, long before he'd been asked to join the CIA. The fact that he had unknowingly prevented the assassination of two very prominent figures had gotten him more publicity than he'd ever wanted, but it had also brought him in contact with a lot of people in England, most of them worth the time. Those connections had made him valuable enough that the CIA asked him to be part of a joint American-British liaison group. That was how he had established a good working relationship with Sir Basil Charleston.

"We have lots of friends over there, sir, and some of them were kind enough to give you these," Ryan said coolly.

Davenport softened. "Okay, Jack, then you do me a favor. You see whoever gave us these gets something nice in his stocking. They're worth plenty. So, exactly what do we have here?"

To the unschooled observer, the photographs showed the standard nuclear missile submarine. The steel hull was blunt at one end, tapered at the other. The workmen standing on the floor of the dock provided scale—she was huge. There were twin bronze propellers at the stern, on either side of a flat appendage which the Russians called a beaver tail, or so the intelligence reports said. With the twin screws the stern was unremarkable except in one detail.

"What are these doors for?" Casimir asked.

"Hmm. She's a big bastard." Davenport evidently hadn't heard. "Forty feet longer than we expected, by the look of her."

"Forty-four, roughly." Ryan didn't much like Davenport, but the man did know his stuff. "Somers can calibrate that for us. And more beam, two meters more than the other *Typhoons*. She's an obvious development of the *Typhoon* class, but—"

"You're right, Captain," Davenport interrupted. "What are those doors?"

"That's why I came over." Ryan had wondered how long this would take. He'd caught onto them in the first five seconds. "I don't know, and neither do the Brits."

The *Red October* had two doors at the bow and stern, each about two meters in diameter, though they were not quite circular. They had been closed when the photos were shot and only showed up well on the number four pair.

"Torpedo tubes? No—four of them are inboard." Greer reached into his drawer and came out with a magnifying glass. In an age of computer-enhanced imagery it struck Ryan as charmingly anachronistic.

"You're the sub driver, James," Davenport observed.

"Twenty years ago, Charlie." He'd made the switch from line officer to professional spook in the early sixties. Captain Casimir, Ryan noted, wore the wings of a naval aviator and had the good sense to remain quiet. He wasn't a "nuc."

"Well, they can't be torpedo tubes. They have the normal four of them at the bow, inboard of these openings…must be six or seven feet across. How about launch tubes for the new cruise missile they're developing?"

"That's what the Royal Navy thinks. I had a chance to talk it over with their intelligence chaps. But I don't buy it. Why put an anti-surface-ship weapon on a strategic platform? We don't, and we

deploy our boomers a lot further forward than they do. The doors are symmetrical through the boat's axis. You can't launch a missile out of the stern, sir. The openings barely clear the screws."

"Toward sonar array," Davenport said.

"Granted they could do that, if they trail one screw. But why two of them?" Ryan asked.

Davenport gave him a nasty look. "They love redundancies."

"Two doors forward, two aft, I can buy cruise missile tubes. I can buy a towed array. But both sets of doors exactly the same size?" Ryan shook his head. "Too much of a coincidence. I think it's something new. That's what interrupted her construction for so long. They figured something new for her and spent the last two years rebuilding the *Typhoon* configuration to accommodate it. Note also that they added six more missiles for good measure."

"Opinion," Davenport observed.

"That's what I'm paid for."

"Okay, Jack, what do you think it is?" Greer asked.

"Beats me, sir. I'm no engineer."

Admiral Greer looked his guests over for a few seconds. He smiled and leaned back in his chair. "Gentlemen, we have what? Ninety years of naval experience in this room, plus this young amateur." He gestured at Ryan. "Okay, Jack, you've set us up for something. Why did you bring this over personally?"

"I want to show these to somebody."

"Who?" Greer's head cocked suspiciously to one side.

"Skip Tyler. Any of you fellows know him?"

"I do," Casimir nodded. "He was a year behind me at Annapolis. Didn't he get hurt or something?"

"Yeah," Ryan said. "Lost his leg in an auto accident four years ago. He was up for command of the *Los Angeles* and a drunk driver clipped him. Now he teaches engineering at the Academy and does a lot of consulting work with Sea Systems Command—technical analysis, looking at their ship designs. He has a doctorate in engineering from MIT, and he knows how to think unconventionally."

"How about his security clearance?" Greer asked.

"Top secret or better, sir, because of his Crystal City work."

"Objections, Charlie?"

Davenport frowned. Tyler was not part of the intelligence community. "Is this the guy who did the evaluation of the new

Kirov?"

Yes, sir, now that I think about it," Casimir said. "Him and Saunders over at Sea Systems."

"That was a nice piece of work. It's okay with me."

"When do you want to see him?" Greer asked Ryan.

"Today, if it's all right with you, sir. I have to run over to Annapolis anyway, to get something from the house, and—well, do some quick Christmas shopping."

"Oh? A few dolls?" Davenport asked.

Ryan turned to look the admiral in the eye. "Yes, sir, as a matter of fact. My little girl wants a Skiing Barbie doll and some Jordache doll outfits. Didn't you ever play Santa, Admiral?"

Davenport saw that Ryan wasn't going to back off anymore. He wasn't a subordinate to be browbeaten. Ryan could always walk away. He tried a new tack. "Did they tell you over there that *October* sailed last Friday?"

"Oh?" They hadn't. Ryan was caught off guard. "I thought she wasn't scheduled to sail until this Friday."

"So did we. Her skipper is Marko Ramius. You heard about him?"

"Only secondhand stuff. The Brits say he's pretty good."

"Better than that," Greer noted. "He's about the best sub driver they have, a real charger. We had a considerable file on him when I was at DIA. Who's bird-doggin' him for you, Charlie?"

"*Bremerton* was assigned to it. She was out of position doing some ELINT work when Ramius sailed, but she was ordered over. Her skipper's Bud Wilson. Remember his dad?"

Greer laughed out loud. "Red Wilson? Now there was one spirited submarine driver! His boy any good?"

"So they say. Ramius is about the best the Soviets have, but Wilson's got a 688 boat. By the end of the week, we'll be able to start a new book on *Red October*." Davenport stood. "We gotta head back, James." Casimir hurried to get the coats. "I can keep these?"

"I suppose, Charlie. Just don't go hanging them on the wall, even to throw darts at. And I guess you want to get moving, too, Jack?"

"Yes, sir."

Greer lifted his phone. "Nancy, Dr. Ryan will need a car and a driver in fifteen minutes. Right." He set the receiver down and waited for Davenport to leave. "No sense getting you killed out

there in the snow. Besides, you'd probably drive on the wrong side of the road after a year in England. Skiing Barbie, Jack?"

"You had all boys, didn't you, sir? Girls are different." Ryan grinned. "You've never met my little Sally."

"Daddy's girl?"

"Yep. God help whoever marries her. Can I leave these photographs with Tyler?"

"I hope you're right about him, son. Yes, he can hold onto them—if and only if he has a good place to keep them."

"Understood, sir."

"When you get back—probably be late, the way the roads are. You're staying at the Marriott?"

"Yes, sir."

Greer thought that over. "I'll probably be working late. Stop by here before you bed down. I may want to go over a few things with you."

"Will do, sir. Thanks for the car." Ryan stood.

"Go buy your dolls, son."

Greer watched him leave. He liked Ryan. The boy was not afraid to speak his mind. Part of that came from having money and being married to more money. It was a sort of independence that had advantages. Ryan could not be bought, bribed, or bullied. He could always go back to writing history books full time. Ryan had made money on his own in four years as a stockbroker, betting his own money on high-risk issues and scoring big before leaving it all behind—because, he said, he hadn't wanted to press his luck. Greer didn't believe that. He thought Jack had been bored—bored with making money. He shook his head. The talent that had enabled him to pick winning stocks Ryan now applied to the CIA. He was rapidly becoming one of Greer's star analysts, and his British connections made him doubly valuable. Ryan had the ability to sort through a pile of data and come out with the three or four facts that meant something. This was too rare a thing at the CIA. The agency still spent too much of its money collecting data, Greer thought, and not enough collating it. Analysts had none of the supposed glamour—a Hollywood-generated illusion—of a secret agent in a foreign land. But Jack knew how to analyze reports from such men and data from technical sources. He knew how to make a decision and was not afraid to say what he thought, whether his bosses liked it or not. This sometimes grated the old admiral, but on the whole he liked

having subordinates whom he could respect. The CIA had too many people whose only skill was kissing ass.

The U.S. Naval Academy

The loss of his left leg above the knee had not taken away Oliver Wendell Tyler's roguish good looks or his zest for life. His wife could testify to this. Since leaving the active service four years before, they had added three children to the two they already had and were working on a sixth. Ryan found him sitting at a desk in an empty classroom in Rickover Hall, the U.S. Naval Academy's science and engineering building. He was grading papers.

"How's it goin', Skip?" Ryan leaned against the door frame. His CIA driver was in the hall.

"Hey, Jack! I thought you were in England." Tyler jumped to his foot—his own phrase—and hobbled over to grab Ryan's hand. His prosthetic leg ended in a square, rubber-coated band instead of a pseudo-foot. It flexed at the knee, but not by much. Tyler had been a second-squad All American offensive tackle sixteen years before, and the rest of his body was as hard as the aluminum and fiberglass in his left leg. His handshake could make a gorilla wince. "So, what are you doing here?"

"I had to fly over to get some work done and do a little shopping. How's Jean and your…five?"

"Five and two-thirds."

"Again? Jean ought to have you fixed."

"That's what she said, but I've had enough things disconnected." Tyler laughed. "I guess I'm making up for all those monastic years as a nuc. Come on over and grab a chair."

Ryan sat on the corner of the desk and opened his briefcase. He handed Tyler a folder.

"Got some pictures I want you to look at."

"Okay." Tyler flipped it open. "Whose—a Russian! Big bastard. That's the basic *Typhoon* configuration. Lots of modifications, though. Twenty-six missiles instead of twenty. Looks longer. Hull's flattened out some, too. More beam?"

"Two or three meters' worth."

"I heard you were working with the CIA. Can't talk about that, right?"

"Something like that. And you never saw these pictures, Skip.

Understood?"

"Right." Tyler's eyes twinkled. "What do you want me not to look at them for?"

Ryan pulled the blowups from the back of the folder. "These doors, bow and stern."

"Uh-huh." Tyler set them down side by side. "Pretty big. They're two meters or so, paired fore and aft. They look symmetrical through the long axis. Not cruise missile tubes, eh?"

"On a boomer? You put something like that on a strategic missile sub?"

"The Russkies are a funny bunch, Jack, and they design things their own way. This is the same bunch that built the *Kirov* class with a nuclear reactor *and* an oil-fired steam plant. Hmm…twin screws. The aft doors can't be for a sonar array. They'd foul the screws."

"How 'bout if they trail one screw?"

"They do that with surface ships to conserve fuel, and sometimes with their attack boats. Operating a twin-screw missile boat on one wheel would probably be tricky on this baby. The *Typhoon*'s supposed to have handling problems, and boats that handle funny tend to be sensitive to power settings. You end up jinking around so much that you have trouble holding course. You notice how the doors converge at the stern?"

"No, I didn't."

Tyler looked up. "Damn! I should have realized it right off the bat. It's a propulsion system. You shouldn't have caught me marking papers, Jack. It turns your brain to Jell-O."

"Propulsion system?"

"We looked at this—oh, must have been twenty some years ago—when I was going to school here. We didn't do anything with it, though. It's too inefficient."

"Okay, tell me about it."

"They called it a tunnel drive. You know how out West they have lots of hydroelectric power plants? Mostly dams. The water spills onto wheels that turn generators. Now there's a few new ones that kind of turn that around. They tap into underground rivers, and the water turns impellers, and they turn the generators instead of a modified mill wheel. An impeller is like a propeller, except the water drives it instead of the other way around. There's some minor technical differences, too, but nothing major. Okay so far?

“With this design, you turn that around. You suck water in the bow and your impellers eject it out the stern, and that moves the ship.” Tyler paused, frowning. “As I recall you have to have more than one per tunnel. They looked at this back in the early sixties and got to the model stage before dropping it. One of the things they discovered is that one impeller doesn’t work as well as several. Some sort of back pressure thing. It was a new principle, something unexpected that cropped up. They ended up using four, I think, and it was supposed to look something like the compressor sets in a jet engine.”

“Why did we drop it?” Ryan was taking rapid notes.

“Mostly efficiency. You can only get so much water down the pipes no matter how powerful your motors are. And the drive system took up a lot of room. They partially beat that with a new kind of electric induction motor, I think, but even then you’d end up with a lot of extraneous machinery inside the hull. Subs don’t have that much room to spare, even this monster. The top speed limit was supposed to be about ten knots, and that just wasn’t good enough, even though it did virtually eliminate cavitation sounds.”

“Cavitation?”

“When you have a propeller turning in the water at high speed, you develop an area of low pressure behind the trailing edge of the blade. This can cause water to vaporize. That creates a bunch of little bubbles. They can’t last long under the water pressure, and when they collapse the water rushes forward to pound against the blades. That does three things. First, it makes noise, and us sub drivers hate noise. Second, it can cause vibration, something else we don’t like. The old passenger liners, for example, used to flutter several inches at the stern, all from cavitation and slippage. It takes a hell of a lot of force to vibrate a 50,000-ton ship; that kind of force breaks things. Third, it tears up the screws. The big wheels only used to last a few years. That’s why back in the old days the blades were bolted onto the hub instead of being cast in one piece. The vibration is mainly a surface ship problem, and the screw degradation was eventually conquered by improved metallurgical technology.

“Now, this tunnel drive system avoids the cavitation problem. You still have cavitation, but the noise from it is mainly lost in the tunnels. That makes good sense. The problem is that you can’t generate much speed without making the tunnels too wide to be

practical. While one team was working on this, another was working on improved screw designs. Your typical sub screw today is pretty large, so it can turn more slowly for a given speed. The slower the turning speed, the less cavitation you get. The problem is also mitigated by depth. A few hundred feet down, the higher water pressure retards bubble formation."

"Then why don't the Soviets copy our screw designs?"

"Several reasons, probably. You design a screw for a specific hull and engine combination, so copying ours wouldn't automatically work for them. A lot of this work is still empirical, too. There's a lot of trial and error in this. It's a lot harder, say, than designing an airfoil, because the blade cross-section changes radically from one point to another. I suppose another reason is that their metallurgical technology isn't as good as ours—same reason that their jet and rocket engines are less efficient. These new designs place great value on high-strength alloys. It's a narrow specialty, and I only know the generalities."

"Okay, you say that this is a silent propulsion system, and it has a top speed limit of ten knots?" Ryan wanted to be clear on this.

"Ballpark figure. I'd have to do some computer modeling to tighten that up. We probably still have the data laying around at the Taylor Laboratory." Tyler referred to the Sea Systems Command design facility on the north side of the Severn River. "Probably still classified, and I'd have to take it with a big grain of salt."

"How come?"

"All this work was done twenty years ago. They only got up to fifteen-foot models—pretty small for this sort of thing. Remember that they had already stumbled across one new principle, that back-pressure thing. There might have been more out there. I expect they tried some computer models, but even if they did, mathematical modeling techniques back then were dirt-simple. To duplicate this today I'd have to have the old data and programs from Taylor, check it all over, then draft a new program based on this configuration." He tapped the photographs. "Once that was done, I'd need access to a big league mainframe computer to run it."

"But you could do it?"

"Sure. I'd need exact dimensions on this baby, but I've done this before for the bunch over at Crystal City. The hard part's getting the computer time. I need a big machine."

"I can probably arrange access to ours."

Tyler laughed. “Probably not good enough, Jack. This is specialized stuff. I’m talking about a Cray-2, one of the biggies. To do this you have to mathematically simulate the behavior of millions of little parcels of water, the water flow over—and through, in this case—the whole hull. Same sort of thing NASA has to do with the Space Shuttle. The actual work is easy enough—it’s the *scale* that’s tough. They’re simple calculations, but you have to make millions of them per second. That means a big Cray, and there’s only a few of them around. NASA has one in Houston, I think. The navy has a few in Norfolk for ASW work—you can forget about those. The air force has one in the Pentagon, I think, and all the rest are in California.”

“But you could do it?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, get to work on it, Skip, and I’ll see if we can get you the computer time. How long?”

“Depending on how good the stuff at Taylor is, maybe a week. Maybe less.”

“How much do you want for it?”

“Aw, come on, Jack!” Tyler waved him off.

“Skip, it’s Monday. You get us this data by Friday and there’s twenty thousand dollars in it. You’re worth it, and we want this data. Agreed?”

“Sold.” They shook hands. “Can I keep the pictures?”

“I can leave them if you have a secure place to keep them. Nobody gets to see them, Skip. Nobody.”

“There’s a nice safe in the superintendent’s office.”

“Fine, but he doesn’t see them.” The superintendent was a former submariner.

“He won’t like it,” Tyler said. “But okay.”

“Have him call Admiral Greer if he objects. This number.” Ryan handed him a card. “You can reach me here if you need me. If I’m not in, ask for the admiral.”

“Just how important is this?”

“Important enough. You’re the first guy who’s come up with a sensible explanation for these hatches. That’s why I came here. If you can model this for us, it’ll be damned useful. Skip, one more time: This is highly sensitive. If you let anybody see these, it’s my ass.”

“Aye aye, Jack. Well, you’ve laid a deadline on me, I better get

down to it. See you." After shaking hands, Tyler took out a lined pad and started listing the things he had to do. Ryan left the building with his driver. He remembered a Toys-R-Us right up Route 2 from Annapolis, and he wanted to get that doll for Sally.

CIA Headquarters

Ryan was back at the CIA by eight that evening. It was a quick trip past the security guards to Greer's office.

"Well, did you get your Surfing Barbie?" Greer looked up.

"Skiing Barbie," Ryan corrected. "Yes, sir. Come on, didn't you ever play Santa?"

"They grew up too fast, Jack. Even my grandchildren are all past that stage." He turned to get some coffee. Ryan wondered if he ever slept. "We have something more on *Red October*. The Russians seem to have a major ASW exercise running in the northeast Barents Sea. Half a dozen ASW search aircraft, a bunch of frigates, and an *Alfa*-class attack boat, all running around in circles."

"Probably an acquisition exercise. Skip Tyler says those doors are for a new drive system."

"Indeed." Greer sat back. "Tell me about it."

Ryan took out his notes and summarized his education in submarine technology. "Skip says he can generate a computer simulation of its effectiveness," he concluded.

Greer's eyebrows went up. "How soon?"

"End of week, maybe. I told him if he had it done by Friday we'd pay him for it. Twenty thousand sound reasonable?"

"Will it mean anything?"

"If he gets the background data he needs, it ought to, sir. Skip's a very sharp cookie. I mean, they don't give doctorates away at MIT, and he was in the top five of his Academy class."

"Worth twenty thousand dollars of our money?" Greer was notoriously tight with a buck.

Ryan knew how to answer this. "Sir, if we followed normal procedure on this, we'd contract one of the Beltway Bandits—," Ryan referred to the consulting firms that dotted the beltway around Washington, D.C., "—they'd charge us five or ten times as much, and we'd be lucky to have the data by Easter. This way we might just have it while the boat's still at sea. If worse comes to worst, sir, I'll foot the bill. I figured you'd want this data fast, and

it's right up his alley."

"You're right." It wasn't the first time Ryan had short-circuited normal procedure. The other times had worked out fairly well. Greer was a man who looked for results. "Okay, the Soviets have a new missile boat with a silent drive system. What does it all mean?"

"Nothing good. We depend on our ability to track their boomers with our attack boats. Hell, that's why they agreed a few years back to our proposal about keeping them five hundred miles from each other's coasts, and why they keep their missile subs in port most of the time. This could change the game a bit. By the way, *October*'s hull, I haven't seen what it's made of."

"Steel. She's too big for a titanium hull, at least for what it would cost. You know what they have to spend on their *Alfas*."

"Too much for what they got. You spend that much money for a superstrong hull, then put a noisy power plant in it. Dumb."

"Maybe. I wouldn't mind having that speed, though. Anyway, if this silent drive system really works, they might be able to creep up onto the continental shelf."

"Depressed-trajectory shot," Ryan said. This was one of the nastier nuclear war scenarios in which a sea-based missile was fired within a few hundred miles of its target. Washington is a bare hundred air miles from the Atlantic Ocean. Though a missile on a low, fast flight path loses much of its accuracy, a few of them can be launched to explode over Washington in less than a few minutes' time, too little for a president to react. If the Soviets were able to kill the president that quickly, the resulting disruption of the chain of command would give them ample time to take out the land-based missiles—there would be no one with authority to fire. This scenario is a grandstrategic version of a simple mugging, Ryan thought. A mugger doesn't attack his victim's arms—he goes for the head. "You think *October* was built with that in mind?"

"I'm sure the thought occurred to them," Greer observed. "It would have occurred to us. Well, we have *Bremerton* up there to keep an eye on her, and if this data turns out to be useful we'll see if we can come up with an answer. How are you feeling?"

"I've been on the go since five-thirty London time. Long day, sir."

"I expect so. Okay, we'll go over the Afghanistan business tomorrow morning. Get some sleep, son."

"Aye, aye, sir." Ryan got his coat. "Good night."

It was a fifteen-minute drive to the Marriott. Ryan made the mistake of turning the TV on to the beginning of Monday Night Football. Cincinnati was playing San Francisco, the two best quarterbacks in the league pitted against one another. Football was something he missed living in England, and he managed to stay awake nearly three hours before fading out with the television on.

SOSUS Control

Except for the fact that everyone was in uniform, a visitor might easily have mistaken the room for a NASA control center. There were six wide rows of consoles, each with its own TV screen and typewriter keyboard supplemented by lighted plastic buttons, dials, headphone jacks, and analog and digital controls. Senior Chief Oceanographic Technician Deke Franklin was seated at console fifteen.

The room was SOSUS (sonar surveillance system) Atlantic Control. It was in a fairly nondescript building, uninspired government layer cake, with windowless concrete walls, a large air-conditioning system on a flat roof, and an acronym-coded blue sign on a well-tended but now yellowed lawn. There were armed marines inconspicuously on guard inside the three entrances. In the basement were a pair of Cray-2 supercomputers tended by twenty acolytes, and behind the building was a trio of satellite ground stations, all up-and down-links. The men at the consoles and the computers were linked electronically by satellite and landline to the SOSUS system.

Throughout the oceans of the world, and especially astride the passages that Soviet submarines had to cross to reach the open sea, the United States and other NATO countries had deployed gangs of highly sensitive sonar receptors. The hundreds of SOSUS sensors received and forwarded an unimaginably vast amount of information, and to help the system operators classify and analyze it a whole new family of computers had to be designed, the supercomputers. SOSUS served its purpose admirably well. Very little could cross a barrier without being detected. Even the ultraquiet American and British attack submarines were generally picked up. The sensors, lying on the bottom of the sea, were periodically updated; many now had their own signal processors to presort the data they forwarded, lightening the load on the central

computers and enabling more rapid and accurate classification of targets.

Chief Franklin's console received data from a string of sensors planted off the coast of Iceland. He was responsible for an area forty nautical miles across, and his sector overlapped the ones east and west so that, theoretically, three operators were constantly monitoring any segment of the barrier. If he got a contact, he would first notify his brother operators, then type a contact report into his computer terminal, which would in turn be displayed on the master control board in the control room at the back of the floor. The senior duty officer had the frequently exercised authority to prosecute a contact with a wide range of assets, from surface ships to antisubmarine aircraft. Two world wars had taught American and British officers the necessity of keeping their sea lines of communication—SLOCs—open.

Although this quiet, tomblike facility had never been shown to the public, and though it had none of the drama associated with military life, the men on duty here were among the most important in the service of their country. In a war, without them, whole nations might starve.

Franklin was leaning back in his swivel chair, puffing contemplatively on an old briar pipe. Around him the room was dead quiet. Even had it not been, his five-hundred-dollar headphones would have effectively sealed him off from the outside world. A twenty-six year chief, Franklin had served his entire career on destroyers and frigates. To him, submarines and submariners were the enemy, regardless of what flag they might fly or what uniform they might wear.

An eyebrow went up, and his nearly bald head cocked to one side. The pulls on the pipe grew irregular. His right hand reached forward to the control panel and switched off the signal processors so that he could get the sound without computerized interference. But it was no good. There was too much background noise. He switched the filters back on. Next he tried some changes in his azimuth controls. The SOSUS sensors were designed to give bearing checks through the selective use of individual receptors, which he could manipulate electronically, first getting one bearing, then using a neighboring gang to triangulate for a fix. The contact was very faint, but not too far from the line, he judged. Franklin queried his computer terminal. The USS *Dallas* was up there. *Gotcha!* he said

with a thin smile. Another noise came through, a low-frequency rumble that only lasted a few seconds before fading out. Not all that quiet, though. Why hadn't he heard it before switching the reception azimuth? He set his pipe down and began making adjustments on his control board.

"Chief?" A voice came over his headphones. It was the senior duty officer.

"Yes, Commander?"

"Can you come back to control? I have something I want you to hear."

"On the way, sir." Franklin rose quietly. Commander Quentin was a former destroyer skipper on a limited duty after a winning battle with cancer. Almost a winning battle, Franklin corrected himself. Chemotherapy had killed the cancer—at the cost of nearly all his hair, and turning his skin into a sort of transparent parchment. Too bad, he thought, Quentin was a pretty good man.

The control room was elevated a few feet from the rest of the floor so that its occupants could see over the whole crew of duty operators and the main tactical display on the far wall. It was separated from the floor by glass, which allowed them to speak to one another without disturbing the operators. Franklin found Quentin at his command station, where he could tap into any console on the floor.

"Howdy, Commander." Franklin noted that the officer was gaining some weight back. It was about time. "What do you have for me, sir?"

"On the Barents Sea net." Quentin handed him a pair of phones. Franklin listened for several minutes, but he didn't sit down. Like many people he had a gut suspicion that cancer was contagious.

"Damned if they ain't pretty busy up there. I read a pair of *Alfas*, a *Charlie*, a *Tango*, and a few surface ships. What gives, sir?"

"There's a *Delta* there, too, but she just surfaced and killed her engines."

"Surfaced, Skipper?"

"Yep. They were lashing her pretty hard with active sonar, then a 'can queried her on a gertrude."

"Uh-huh. Acquisition game, and the sub lost."

"Maybe. Quentin rubbed his eyes. The man looked tired. He was pushing himself too hard, and his stamina wasn't half what it should have been. "But the *Alfas* are still pinging, and now they're

headed west, as you heard."

"Oh." Franklin pondered that for a moment. "They're looking for another boat, then. The *Typhoon* that was supposed to have sailed the other day, maybe?"

"That's what I thought—except she headed west, and the exercise area is northeast of the fjord. We lost her the other day on SOSUS. *Bremerton*'s up sniffing around for her now."

"Cagey skipper," Franklin decided. "Cut his plant all the way back and just drifting."

"Yeah," Quentin agreed. "I want you to move down to the North Cape barrier supervisory board and see if you can find her, Chief. She'll still have her reactor working, and she'll be making some noise. The operators we have on that sector are a little young. I'll take one and switch him to your board for a while."

"Right, Skipper," Franklin nodded. That part of the team was still green, used to working on ships. SOSUS required more finesse. Quentin didn't have to say that he expected Franklin to check in on the whole North Cape team's boards and maybe drop a few small lessons as he listened in on their channels.

"Did you pick up on *Dallas?*"

"Yes, sir. Real faint, but I think I got her crossing my sector, headed northwest for Toll Booth. If we get an Orion down there, we might just get her locked in. Can we rattle their cage a little?"

Quentin chuckled. He didn't much care for submarines either. "No, NIFTY DOLPHIN is over. Chief. We'll just log it and let the skipper know when he comes back home. Nice work, though. You know her reputation. We're not supposed to hear her at all."

"That'll be the day!" Franklin snorted.

"Let me know what you find, Deke."

"Aye aye, Skipper. You take care of yourself, hear?"

THE FIFTH DAY
TUESDAY, 7 DECEMBER

Moscow

It was not the grandest office in the Kremlin, but it suited his needs. Admiral Yuri Ilych Padorin showed up for work at his customary seven o'clock after the drive from his six-room apartment in the Kutuzovskiy Prospekt. The large office windows overlooked the Kremlin walls; except for those he would have had a view of the Moscow River, now frozen solid. Padorin did not miss the view, though he had won his spurs commanding river gunboats forty years before, running supplies across the Volga into Stalingrad. Padorin was now the chief political officer of the Soviet Navy. His job was men, not ships.

On the way in he nodded curtly to his secretary, a man of forty. The yeoman leaped to his feet and followed his admiral into the inner office to help him off with his greatcoat. Padorin's navy-blue jacket was ablaze with ribbons and the gold star medal of the most coveted award in the Soviet Military, Hero of the Soviet Union. He had won that in combat as a freckled boy of twenty, shuttling back and forth on the Volga. Those were good days, he told himself, dodging bombs from the German Stukas and the more random artillery fire with which the Fascists had tried to interdict his squadron…Like most men he was unable to remember the stark terror of combat.

It was a Tuesday morning, and Padorin had a pile of mail waiting on his desk. His yeoman got him a pot of tea and a cup—the usual Russian glass cup set in a metal holder, sterling silver in this case. Padorin had worked long and hard for the perqs that came with this office. He settled in his chair and read first through the intelligence dispatches, information copies of data sent each morning and evening to the operational commands of the Soviet Navy. A political officer had to keep current, to know what the imperialists were up to so that he could brief his men on the threat.

Next came the official mail from within the People's Commissariat of the Navy and the Ministry of Defense. He had access to all of the correspondence from the former, while that from

the latter had been carefully vetted since the Soviet armed services share as little information as possible. There wasn't too much mail from either place today. The usual Monday afternoon meeting had covered most of what had to be done that week, and nearly everything Padorin was concerned with was now in the hands of his staff for disposition. He poured a second cup of tea and opened a new pack of unfiltered cigarettes, a habit he'd been unable to break despite a mild heart attack three years earlier. He checked his desk calendar—good, no appointments until ten.

Near the bottom of the pile was an official-looking envelope from the Northern Fleet. The code number at the upper left corner showed that it came from the *Red October*. Hadn't he just read something about that?

Padorin rechecked his ops dispatches. So, Ramius hadn't turned up in his exercise area? He shrugged. Missile submarines were supposed to be elusive, and it would not have surprised the old admiral at all if Ramius were twisting a few tails. The son of Aleksandr Ramius was a prima donna who had the troubling habit of seeming to build his own personality cult: he kept some of the men he trained and discarded others. Padorin reflected that those rejected for line service had made excellent *zampoliti*, and appeared to have more line knowledge than was the norm. Even so, Ramius was a captain who needed watching. Sometimes Padorin suspected that he was too much a sailor and not enough a Communist. On the other hand, his father had been a model Party member and a hero of the Great Patriotic War. Certainly he had been well thought of, Lithuanian or not. And the son? Years of letter-perfect performance, as many years of stalwart Party membership. He was known for his spirited participation at meetings and occasionally brilliant essays. The people in the naval branch of the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence agency, reported that the imperialists regarded him as a dangerous and skilled enemy. Good, Padorin thought, the bastards ought to fear our men. He turned his attention back to the envelope.

Red October, now there was a fitting name for a Soviet warship! Named not only for the revolution that had forever changed the history of the world but also for the Red October Tractor Plant. Many was the dawn when Padorin had looked west to Stalingrad to see if the factory still stood, a symbol of the Soviet fighting men struggling against the Hitlerite bandits. The envelope was marked

Confidential, and his yeoman had not opened it as he had the other routine mail. The admiral took his letter opener from the desk drawer. It was a sentimental object, having been his service knife years before. When his first gunboat had been sunk under him, one hot August night in 1942, he had swum to shore and been pounced on by a German infantryman who hadn't expected resistance from a half-drowned sailor. Padorin had surprised him, sinking the knife in his chest and breaking off half the blade as he stole his enemy's life. Later a machinist had trimmed the blade down. It was no longer a proper knife, but Padorin wasn't about to throw this sort of souvenir away.

"Comrade Admiral," the letter began—but the type had been scratched out and replaced with a hand-written "Uncle Yuri." Ramius had jokingly called him that years back when Padorin was chief political officer of the Northern Fleet. "Thank you for your confidence, and for the opportunity you have given me with command of this magnificent ship!" Ramius ought to be grateful, Padorin thought. Performance or not, you don't give this sort of command to—

What? Padorin stopped reading and started over. He forgot the cigarette smoldering in his ashtray as he reached the bottom of the first page. A joke. Ramius was known for his jokes—but he'd pay for this one. This was going too fucking far! He turned the page.

"*This is no joke, Uncle Yuri—Marko*."

Padorin stopped and looked out the window. The Kremlin wall at this point was a beehive of niches for the ashes of the Party faithful. He couldn't have read the letter correctly. He started to read it again. His hands began to shake.

He had a direct line to Admiral Gorshkov, with no yeomen or secretaries to bar the way.

"Comrade Admiral, this is Padorin."

"Good morning, Yuri," Gorshkov said pleasantly.

"I must see you immediately. I have a situation here."

"What sort of situation?" Gorshkov asked warily.

"We must discuss it in person. I am coming over now." There was no way he'd discuss this over the phone; he knew it was tapped.

The USS Dallas

Sonarman Second Class Ronald Jones, his division officer noted, was in his usual trance. The young college dropout was hunched over his instrument table, body limp, eyes closed, face locked into the same neutral expression he wore when listening to one of the many Bach tapes on his expensive personal cassette player. Jones was the sort who categorized his tapes by their flaws, a ragged piano tempo, a botched flute, a wavering French horn. He listened to sea sounds with the same discriminating intensity. In all the navies of the world, submariners were regarded as a curious breed, and submariners themselves looked upon sonar operators as odd. Their eccentricities, however, were among the most tolerated in the military service. The executive officer liked to tell a story about a sonar chief he'd served with for two years, a man who had patrolled the same areas in missile submarines for virtually his whole career. He became so familiar with the humpback whales that summered in the area that he took to calling them by name. On retiring, he went to work for the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, where his talent was regarded not so much with amusement as awe.

Three years earlier, Jones had been asked to leave the California Institute of Technology in the middle of his junior year. He had pulled one of the ingenious pranks for which Cal Tech students were justly famous, only it hadn't worked. Now he was serving his time in the navy to finance his return. It was his announced intention to get a doctorate in cybernetics and signal processing. In return for an early out, after receiving his degree he would go to work for the Naval Research Laboratory. Lieutenant Thompson believed it. On joining the *Dallas* six months earlier, he had read the files of all his men. Jones' IQ was 158, the highest on the boat by a fair margin. He had a placid face and sad brown eyes that women found irresistible. On the beach Jones had enough action to wear down a squad of marines. It didn't make much sense to the lieutenant. He'd been the football hero at Annapolis. Jones was a skinny kid who listened to Bach. It didn't figure.

The USS *Dallas*, a 688-class attack submarine, was forty miles from the coast of Iceland, approaching her patrol station, code-named Toll Booth. She was two days late getting there. A week earlier, she had participated in the NATO war game NIFTY DOLPHIN, which had been postponed several days because the worst North Atlantic weather in twenty years had delayed other ships detailed to it. In that exercise the *Dallas*, teamed with HMS

Swiftsure, had used the foul weather to penetrate and ravage the simulated enemy formation. It was yet another four-oh performance for the *Dallas* and her skipper, Commander Bart Mancuso, one of the youngest submarine commanders in the U.S. Navy. The mission had been followed by a courtesy call at the *Swiftsure*'s Royal Navy base in Scotland, and the American sailors were still shaking off hangovers from the celebration…Now they had a different mission, a new development in the Atlantic submarine game. For three weeks, the *Dallas* was to report on traffic in and out of Red Route One.

Over the past fourteen months, newer Soviet submarines had been using a strange, effective tactic for shedding their American and British shadowers. Southwest of Iceland the Russian boats would race down the Reykjanes Ridge, a finger of underwater highlands pointing to the deep Atlantic basin. Spaced at intervals from five miles to half a mile, these mountains with their knife-edged ridges of brittle igneous rock rivaled the Alps in size. Their peaks were about a thousand feet beneath the stormy surface of the North Atlantic. Before the late sixties submarines could barely approach the peaks, much less probe their myriad valleys. Throughout the seventies Soviet naval survey vessels had been seen patrolling the ridge—in all seasons, in all weather, quartering and requartering the area in thousands of cruises. Then, fourteen months before the *Dallas'* present patrol, the USS *Los Angeles* had been tracking a Soviet *Victor II*-class attack submarine. The *Victor* had skirted the Icelandic coast and gone deep as she approached the ridge. The *Los Angeles* had followed. The *Victor* proceeded at eight knots until she passed between the first pair of seamounts, informally known as Thor's Twins. All at once she went to full speed and moved southwest. The skipper of the *Los Angeles* made a determined effort to track the *Victor* and came away from it badly shaken. Although the 688-class submarines were faster than the older *Victors*, the Russian submarine had simply not slowed down—for fifteen hours, it was later determined.

At first it had not been all that dangerous. Submarines had highly accurate inertial navigation systems able to fix their positions to within a few hundred yards from one second to another. But the *Victor* was skirting cliffs as though her skipper could see them, like a fighter dodging down a canyon to avoid surface-to-air missile fire. The *Los Angeles* could not keep track of

the cliffs. At any speed over twenty knots both her passive and active sonar, including the echofathometer, became almost useless. The *Los Angeles* thus found herself navigating completely blind. It was, the skipper later reported, like driving a car with the windows painted over, steering with a map and a stopwatch. This was theoretically possible, but the captain quickly realized that the inertial navigation system had a built-in error factor of several hundred yards; this was aggravated by gravitational disturbances, which affected the "local vertical," which in turn affected the inertial fix. Worst of all, his charts were made for surface ships. Objects below a few hundred feet had been known to be misplaced by miles—something that mattered to no one until recently. The interval between mountains had quickly become less than his cumulative navigational error—sooner or later his submarine would drive into a mountainside at over thirty knots. The captain backed off. The *Victor* got away.

Initially it was theorized that the Soviets had somehow staked out one particular route, that their submarines were able to follow it at high speed. Russian skippers were known to pull some crazy stunts, and perhaps they were trusting to a combination of inertial systems, magnetic and gyro compasses attuned to a specific track. This theory had never developed much of a following, and in a few weeks it was known for certain that the Soviet submarines speeding through the ridge were following a multiplicity of tracks. The only thing American and British subs could do was stop periodically to get a sonar fix of their positions, then race to catch up. But the Soviet subs never slowed, and the 688s and *Trafalgars* kept falling behind.

The *Dallas* was on Toll Booth station to monitor passing Russian subs, to watch the entrance to the passage the U.S. Navy was now calling Red Route One, and to listen for any external evidence of a new gadget that might enable the Soviets to run the ridge so boldly. Until the Americans could copy it, there were three unsavory alternatives: they could continue losing contact with the Russians; they could station valuable attack subs at the known exits from the route; or they could set up a whole new SOSUS line.

Jones' trance lasted ten minutes—longer than usual. He ordinarily had a contact figured out in far less time. The sailor leaned back and lit a cigarette.

"Got something, Mr. Thompson."

“What is it?” Thompson leaned against the bulkhead.

“I don’t know.” Jones picked up a spare set of phones and handed them to his officer. “Listen up, sir.”

Thompson himself was a masters candidate in electrical engineering, an expert in sonar system design. His eyes screwed shut as he concentrated on the sound. It was a very faint low-frequency rumble—or swish. He couldn’t decide. He listened for several minutes before setting the headphones down, then shook his head.

“I got it a half hour ago on the lateral array,” Jones said. He referred to a subsystem of the BQQ-5 multifunction submarine sonar. Its main component was an eighteen-foot-diameter dome located in the bow. The dome was used for both active and passive operations. A new part of the system was a gang of passive sensors which extended two hundred feet down both sides of the hull. This was a mechanical analog to the sensory organs on the body of a shark. “Lost it, got it back, lost it, got it back,” Jones went on. “It’s not screw sounds, not whales or fish. More like water going through a pipe, except for that funny rumble that comes and goes. Anyway, the bearing is about two-five-zero. That puts it between us and Iceland, so it can’t be too far away.”

“Let’s see what it looks like. Maybe that’ll tell us something.”

Jones took a double-plugged wire from a hook. One plug went into a socket on his sonar panel, the other into the jack on a nearby oscilloscope. The two men spent several minutes working with the sonar controls to isolate the signal. They ended up with an irregular sine wave which they were only able to hold a few seconds at a time.

“Irregular,” Thompson said.

“Yeah, it’s funny. It sounds regular, but it doesn’t look regular. Know what I mean, Mr. Thompson?”

“No, you’ve got better ears.”

“That’s cause I listen to better music, sir. That rock stuff’ll kill your ears.”

Thompson knew he was right, but an Annapolis graduate doesn’t need to hear that from an enlisted man. His vintage Janis Joplin tapes were his own business. “Next step.”

“Yessir.” Jones took the plug from the oscilloscope and moved it into a panel to the left of the sonar board, next to a computer terminal.

During her last overhaul, the *Dallas* had received a very special toy to go along with her BQQ-5 sonar system. Called the BC-10, it was the most powerful computer yet installed aboard a submarine. Though only about the size of a business desk, it cost over five million dollars and ran at eighty million operations per second. It used newly developed sixty-four-bit chips and made use of the latest processing architecture. Its bubble memory could easily accommodate the computing needs of a whole squadron of submarines. In five years every attack sub in the fleet would have one. Its purpose, much like that of the far larger SOSUS system, was to process and analyze sonar signals; the BC-10 stripped away ambient noise and other naturally produced sea sounds to classify and identify man-made noise. It could identify ships by name from their individual acoustical signatures, much as one could identify the finger or voice prints of a human.

As important as the computer was its programming software. Four years before, a PhD candidate in geophysics who was working at Cal Tech's geophysical laboratory had completed a program of six hundred thousand steps designed to predict earthquakes. The problem the program addressed was one of signal versus noise. It overcame the difficulty seismologists had discriminating between random noise that is constantly monitored on seismographs and genuinely unusual signals that foretell a seismic event.

The first Defense Department use of the program was in the Air Force Technical Applications Command (AFTAC), which found it entirely satisfactory for its mission of monitoring nuclear events throughout the world in accordance with arms control treaties. The Navy Research Laboratory also redrafted it for its own purposes. Though inadequate for seismic predictions, it worked very well indeed in analyzing sonar signals. The program was known in the navy as the signal algorithmic processing system (SAPS).

"SAPS SIGNAL INPUT," Jones typed into the video display terminal (VDT).

"READY," the BC-10 responded at once.

"RUN."

"WORKING."

For all the fantastic speed of the BC-10, the six hundred thousand steps of the program, punctuated by numerous GOTO loops, took time to run as the machine eliminated natural sounds with its random profile criteria and then locked into the anomalous

signal. It took twenty seconds, an eternity in computer time. The answer came up on the VDT. Jones pressed a key to generate a copy on the adjacent matrix printer.

"Hmph." Jones tore off the page. "'ANOMALOUS SIGNAL EVALUATED AS MAGMA DISPLACEMENT.' That's SAPS' way of saying take two aspirin and call me at end of the watch."

Thompson chuckled. For all the ballyhoo that had accompanied the new system, it was not all that popular in the fleet. "Remember what the papers said when we were in England? Something about seismic activity around Iceland, like when that island poked up back in the sixties."

Jones lit another cigarette. He knew the student who had originally drafted this abortion they called SAPS. One problem was that it had a nasty habit of analyzing the wrong signal—and you couldn't tell it was wrong from the results. Besides, since it had been originally designed to look for seismic events, Jones suspected it of a tendency to interpret anomalies as seismic events. He didn't like the built-in bias, which he felt the research laboratory had not entirely removed. It was one thing to use computers as a tool, quite another to let them do your thinking for you. Besides, they were always discovering new sea sounds that nobody had ever heard before, much less classified.

"Sir, the frequency is all wrong for one thing—nowhere near low enough. How 'bout I try an' track in on this signal with the R-15?" Jones referred to the towed array of passive sensors the *Dallas* was trailing behind her at low speed.

Commander Mancuso came in just then, the usual mug of coffee in his hand. If there was one frightening thing about the captain, Thompson thought, it was his talent for showing up when something was going on. Did he have the whole boat wired?

"Just wandering by," he said casually. "What's happening this fine day?" The captain leaned against the bulkhead. He was a small man, only five eight, who had fought a battle against his waistline all his life and was now losing because of the good food and lack of exercise on a submarine. His dark eyes were surrounded by laugh lines that were always deeper when he was playing a trick on another ship.

Was it day, Thompson wondered? The six-hour one-in-three rotating watch cycle made for a convenient work schedule, but after a few changes you had to press the button on your watch to figure

out what day it was, else you couldn't make the proper entry in the log.

"Skipper, Jones picked up a funny signal on the lateral. The computer says it's magma displacement."

"And Jonesy doesn't agree with that." Mancuso didn't have to make it a question.

"No, sir, Captain, I don't. I don't know what it is, but for sure it ain't that."

"You against the machine again?"

"Skipper, SAPS works pretty well most of the time, but sometimes it's a real *kludge*." Jones' epithet was the most perjorative curse of electronics people. "For one thing the frequency is all wrong."

"Okay, what do you think?"

"I don't know, Captain. It isn't screw sounds, and it isn't any naturally produced sound that I've heard. Beyond that…" Jones was struck by the informality of the discussion with his commanding officer, even after three years on nuclear subs. The crew of the *Dallas* was like one big family, albeit one of the old frontier families, since everybody worked pretty damned hard. The captain was the father. The executive officer, everyone would readily agree, was the mother. The officers were the older kids, and the enlisted men were the younger kids. The important thing was, if you had something to say, the captain would listen to you. To Jones, this counted for a lot.

Mancuso nodded thoughtfully. "Well, keep at it. No sense letting all this expensive gear go to waste."

Jones grinned. Once he had told the captain in precise detail how he could convert this equipment into the world's finest stereo rig. Mancuso had pointed out that it would not be a major feat, since the sonar gear in this room alone cost over twenty million dollars.

"Christ!" The junior technician bolted upright in his chair. "Somebody just stomped on the gas."

Jones was the sonar watch supervisor. The other two watchstanders noted the new signal, and Jones switched his phones to the towed array jack while the two officers kept out of the way. He took a scratch pad and noted the time before working on his individual controls. The BQR-15 was the most sensitive sonar rig on the boat, but its sensitivity was not needed for this contact.

"Damn," Jones muttered quietly.

"*Charlie*," said the junior technician.

Jones shook his head. "*Victor. Victor* class for sure. Doing turns for thirty knots—big burst of cavitation noise, he's digging big holes in the water, and he doesn't care who knows it. Bearing zero-five-zero. Skipper, we got good water around us, and the signal is real faint. He's not close." It was the closest thing to a range estimate Jones could come up with. Not close meant anything over ten miles. He went back to working his controls. "I think we know this guy. This is the one with a bent blade on his screw, sounds like he's got a chain wrapped around it."

"Put it on speaker," Mancuso told Thompson. He didn't want to disturb the operators. The lieutenant was already keying the signal into the BC-10.

The bulkhead-mounted speaker would have commanded a four-figure price in any stereo shop for its clarity and dynamic perfection; like everything else on the 688-class sub, it was the very best that money could buy. As Jones worked on the sound controls they heard the whining chirp of propeller cavitation, the thin screech associated with a bent propeller blade, and the deeper rumble of a *Victor*'s reactor plant at full power. The next thing Mancuso heard was the printer.

"*Victor I*-class, number six," Thompson announced.

"Right," Jones nodded. "*Vic*-six, bearing still zero-five-zero." He plugged the mouthpiece into his headphones. "Conn, sonar, we have a contact. A *Victor* class, bearing zero-five-zero, estimated target speed thirty knots."

Mancuso leaned out into the passageway to address Lieutenant Pat Mannion, officer of the deck. "Pat, man the fire-control tracking party."

"Aye, Cap'n."

"Wait a minute!" Jones' hand went up. "Got another one!" He twiddled some knobs. "This one's a *Charlie* class. Damned if he ain't digging holes, too. More easterly, bearing zero-seven-three, doing turns for about twenty-eight knots. We know this guy, too. Yeah, *Charlie II*, number eleven." Jones slipped a phone off one ear and looked at Mancuso. "Skipper, the Russkies have sub races scheduled for today?"

"Not that they told me about. Of course, we don't get the sports page out here," Mancuso chuckled, swirling the coffee around in his

cup and hiding his real thoughts. What the hell was going on? "I suppose I'll go forward and take a look at this. Good work, guys."

He went a few steps forward into the attack center. The normal steaming watch was set. Mannion had the conn, with a junior officer of the deck and seven enlisted men. A first-class firecontrolman was entering data from the target motion analyzer into the Mark 117 fire control computer. Another officer was entering control to take charge of the tracking exercise. There was nothing unusual about this. The whole watch went about its work alertly but with the relaxed demeanor that came with years of training and experience. While the other armed services routinely had their components run exercises against allies or themselves in emulation of Eastern Bloc tactics, the navy had its attack submarines play their games against the real thing—and constantly. Submariners typically operated on what was effectively an at-war footing.

"So we have company," Mannion observed.

"Not that close," Lieutenant Charles Goodman noted. "These bearings haven't changed a whisker."

"Conn, sonar." It was Jones' voice. Mancuso took it.

"Conn, aye. What is it, Jonesy?"

"We got another one, sir. *Alfa 3*, bearing zero-five-five. Running flat out. Sounds like an earthquake, but faint, sir."

"*Alfa 3?* Our old friend, the *Politovskiy*. Haven't run across her in a while. Anything else you can tell me?"

"A guess, sir. The sound on this one warbled, then settled down, like she was making a turn. I think she's heading this way—that's a little shaky. And we have some more noise to the northeast. Too confused to make any sense of just now. We're working on it."

"Okay, nice work, Jonesy. Keep at it."

"Sure thing, Captain."

Mancuso smiled as he set the phone down, looking over at Mannion. "You know, Pat, sometimes I wonder if Jonesy isn't part witch."

Mannion looked at the paper tracks that Goodman was drawing to back up the computerized targeting process. "He's pretty good. Problem is, he thinks we work for him."

"Right now we are working for him." Jones was their eyes and ears, and Mancuso was damned glad to have him.

"Chuck?" Mancuso asked Lieutenant Goodman.

"Bearing still constant on all three contacts, sir." Which probably meant they were heading for the *Dallas*. It also meant that they could not develop the range data necessary for a fire control solution. Not that anyone wanted to shoot, but this was the point of the exercise.

"Pat, let's get some sea room. Move us about ten miles east," Mancuso ordered casually. There were two reasons for this. First, it would establish a base line from which to compute probable target range. Second, the deeper water would make for better acoustical conditions, opening up to them the distant sonar convergence zone. The captain studied the chart as his navigator gave the necessary orders, evaluating the tactical situation.

Bartolomeo Mancuso was the son of a barber who closed his shop in Cicero, Illinois, every fall to hunt deer on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Bart had accompanied his father on these hunts, shot his first deer at the age of twelve and every year thereafter until entering the Naval Academy. He had never bothered after that. Since becoming an officer on nuclear submarines he had learned a much more diverting game. Now he hunted people.

Two hours later an alarm bell went off on the ELF radio in the sub's communications room. Like all nuclear submarines, the *Dallas* was trailing a lengthy wire antenna attuned to the extremely low-frequency transmitter in the central United States. The channel had a frustratingly narrow data band width. Unlike a TV channel, which transmitted thousands of bits of data per frame, thirty frames per second, the ELF radio passed on data slowly, about one character every thirty seconds. The duty radioman waited patiently while the information was recorded on tape. When the message was finished, he ran the tape at high speed and transcribed the message, handing it to the communications officer who was waiting with his code book.

The signal was actually not a code but a "one-time-pad" cipher. A book, published every six months and distributed to every nuclear submarine, was filled with randomly generated transpositions for each letter of the signal. Each scrambled three-letter group in this book corresponded to a preselected word or phrase in another book. Deciphering the message by hand took under three minutes, and when that was completed it was carried to the captain in the attack center.

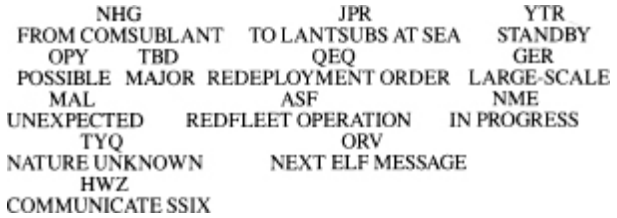

COMSUBLANT—commander of the Submarine Force in the Atlantic—was Mancuso's big boss, Vice Admiral Vincent Gallery. The old man was evidently contemplating a reshuffling of his entire force, no minor affair. The next wake-up signal, AAA—encrypted, of course—would alert them to go to periscope-antenna depth to get more detailed instructions from SSIX, the submarine satellite information exchange, a geosynchronous communications satellite used exclusively by submarines.

The tactical situation was becoming clearer, though its strategic implications were beyond his ability to judge. The ten-mile move eastward had given them adequate range information for their initial three contacts and another *Alfa* which had turned up a few minutes later. The first of the contacts, *Vic 6*, was now within torpedo range. A Mark 48 was locked in on her, and there was no way that her skipper could know the *Dallas* was here. *Vic 6* was a deer in his sights—but it wasn't hunting season.

Though not much faster than the *Victors* and *Charlies*, and ten knots slower than the smaller *Alfas*, the *Dallas* and her sisters could move almost silently at nearly twenty knots. This was a triumph of engineering and design, the product of decades of work. But moving without being detected was useful only if the hunter could at the same time detect his quarry. Sonars lost effectiveness as their carrier platform increased speed. The *Dallas*' BQQ-5 retained twenty percent effectiveness at twenty knots, nothing to cheer about. Submarines running at high speed from one point to another were blind and unable to harm anyone. As a result, the operating pattern of an attack submarine was much like that of a combat infantryman. With a rifleman it was called dash-and-cover; with a sub, sprint-and-drift. After detecting a target, a sub would race to a more advantageous position, stop to reacquire her prey, then dash again until a firing position had been achieved. The sub's quarry would be moving too, and if the submarine could gain position in front of it, she had then only to lie in wait like a great hunting cat

to strike.

The submariner's trade required more than skill. It required instinct, and an artist's touch; monomaniacal confidence, and the aggressiveness of a professional boxer. Mancuso had all of these things. He had spent fifteen years learning his craft, watching a generation of commanders as a junior officer, listening carefully at the frequent round-table discussions which made submarining a very human profession, its lessons passed on by verbal tradition. Time on shore had been spent training in a variety of computerized simulators, attending seminars, comparing notes and ideas with his peers. Aboard surface ships and ASW aircraft he learned how the "enemy"—the surface sailors—played his own hunting game.

Submariners lived by a simple motto: There are two kinds of ships, submarines…and targets. What would *Dallas* be hunting? Mancuso wondered. Russian subs? Well, if that was the game and the Russians kept racing around like this, it ought to be easy enough. He and the *Swiftsure* had just bested a team of NATO ASW experts, men whose countries depended on their ability to keep the sea-lanes open. His boat and his crew were performing as well as any man could ask. In Jones he had one of the ten best sonar operators in the fleet. Mancuso was ready, whatever the game might be. As on the opening day of hunting season, outside considerations were dwindling away. He was becoming a weapon.

CIA Headquarters

It was 4:45 in the morning, and Ryan was dozing fitfully in the back of a CIA Chevy taking him from the Marriott to Langley. He'd been over for what? twenty hours? About that, enough time to see his boss, see Skip, get the presents for Sally, and check the house. The house looked to be in good shape. He had rented it to an instructor at the Naval Academy. He could have gotten five times the rent from someone else, but he didn't want any wild parties in his home. The officer was a Bible-thumper from Kansas, and made an acceptable custodian.

Five and a half hours of sleep in the past—thirty? Something like that; he was too tired to look at his watch. It wasn't fair. Sleeplessness murders judgment. But it made little sense telling himself that, and telling the admiral would make less.

He was in Greer's office five minutes later.

“Sorry to have to wake you up, Jack.”

“Oh, that’s all right, sir,” Ryan returned the lie. “What’s up?”

“Come on over and grab some coffee. It’s going to be a long day.”

Ryan dropped his topcoat on the sofa and walked over to pour a mug of navy brew. He decided against Coffee Mate or sugar. Better to endure it naked and get the caffeine full force.

“Any place I can shave around here, sir?”

“Head’s behind the door, over in the corner.” Greer handed him a yellow sheet torn from a telex machine. “Look at this.”

TOP SECRET

102200Z*****38976

NSA SIGINT BULLETIN

REDNAV OPS

MESSAGE FOLLOWS

AT 083145Z NSA MONITOR STATIONS [DELETED] [DELETED] AND [DELETED] RECORDED AN ELF BROADCAST FROM REDFLEET ELF FACILITY SEMIPOLIPINSK XX MESSAGE DURATION 10 MINUTES XX 6 ELEMENTS XX

ELF SIGNAL IS EVALUATED AS “PREP” BROADCAST TO REDFLEET SUBMARINES AT SEA XX

AT 090000Z AN “ALL SHIPS” BROADCAST WAS MADE BY REDFLEET HEADQUARTERS CENTRAL COMMO STATION TULA AND SATELLITES THREE AND FIVE XX BANDS USED: HF VHF UHF XX MESSAGE DURATION 39 SECONDS WITH 2 REPEATS IDENTICAL CONTENT MADE AT 091000Z AND 092000Z XX 475 5-ELEMENT CIPHER GROUPS XX

SIGNAL COVERAGE AS FOLLOWS: NORTHERN FLEET AREA BALTIC FLEET AREA AND MED SQUADRON AREA XX NOTE FAR EAST FLEET NOT REPEAT NOT AFFECTED BY THIS BROADCAST XX

NUMEROUS ACKNOWLEDGMENT SIGNALS EMANATED FROM ADDRESSES IN AREAS CITED ABOVE XX ORIGIN AND TRAFFIC ANALYSIS TO FOLLOW XX NOT COMPLETED

AT THIS TIME XX BEGINNING AT 100000Z NSA MONITOR STATIONS [DELETED] [DELETED] AND [DELETED] RECORDED INCREASED HF AND VHF TRAFFIC AT REDFLEET BASES POLYARNYY SEVEROMORSK PECHENGA TALLINN KRONSTADT AND EASTERN MED AREA XX ADDITIONAL HF AND VHF TRAFFIC FROM REDFLEET ASSETS AT SEA XX AMPLIFICATION TO FOLLOW XX

EVALUATION: A MAJOR UNPLANNED REDFLEET OPERATION HAS BEEN ORDERED WITH FLEET ASSETS REPORTING AVAILABILITY AND STATUS XX

END BULLETIN

NSA SENDS

102215Z

BREAKBREAK

Ryan looked at his watch. “Fast work by the boys at NSA, and fast work by our duty watch officers, getting everybody up.” He drained his mug and went over for a refill. “What’s the word on signal traffic analysis?”

“Here.” Greer handed him a second telex sheet.

Ryan scanned it. “That’s a lot of ships. Must be nearly everything they have at sea. Not much on the ones in port, though.”

“Landline,” Greer observed. “The ones in port can phone fleet ops, Moscow. By the way, that *is* every ship they have at sea in the Western Hemisphere. Every damned one. Any ideas?”

“Let’s see, we have that increased activity in the Barents Sea. Looks like a medium-sized ASW exercise. Maybe they’re expanding it. Doesn’t explain the increased activity in the Baltic and Med, though. Do they have a war game laid on?”

“Nope. They just finished CRIMSON STORM a month ago.”

Ryan nodded. “Yeah, they usually take a couple of months to evaluate that much data—and who’d want to play games up there at this time of the year? The weather’s supposed to be a bitch. Have they ever run a major game in December?”

“Not a big one, but most of these acknowledgments are from submarines, son, and subs don’t care a whole lot about the weather.”

"Well, given some other preconditions, you might call this ominous. No idea what the signal said, eh?"

"No. They're using computer-based ciphers, same as us. If the spooks at the NSA can read them, they're not telling me about it." In theory the National Security Agency came under the titular control of the director of Central Intelligence. In fact it was a law unto itself. "That's what traffic analysis is all about, Jack. You try to guess intentions by who's talking to whom."

"Yes, sir, but when everybody's talking to everybody—"

"Yeah."

"Anything else on alert? Their army? Voyska PVO?" Ryan referred to the Soviet air defense network.

"Nope, just the fleet. Subs, ships, and naval aviation."

Ryan stretched. "That makes it sound like an exercise, sir. We'll want a little more data on what they're doing, though. Have you talked to Admiral Davenport?"

"That's the next step. Haven't had time. I've only been in long enough to shave myself and turn the coffee on." Greer sat down and set his phone receiver in the desk speaker before punching in the numbers.

"Vice Admiral Davenport." The voice was curt.

"Morning, Charlie, James here. Did you get that NSA-976?"

"Sure did, but that's not what got me up. Our SOSUS net went berserk a few hours ago."

"Oh?" Greer looked at the phone, then at Ryan.

"Yeah, nearly every sub they have at sea just put the pedal to the metal, and all at about the same time."

"Doing what exactly, Charlie?" Greer prompted.

"We're still figuring that out. It looks like a lot of boats are heading into the North Atlantic. Their units in the Norwegian Sea are racing southwest. Three from the western Med are heading that way, too, but we haven't got a clear picture yet. We need a few more hours."

"What do they have operating off our coast, sir?" Ryan asked.

"They woke you up, Ryan? Good. Two old *Novembers*. One's a raven conversion doing an ELINT job off the cape. The other one's sitting off King's Bay making a damned nuisance of itself."

Ryan smiled to himself. An American or allied ship was a *she;* the Russians used the male pronoun for a ship; and the intelligence community usually referred to a Soviet ship as *it.*

"There's a *Yankee* boat," Davenport went on, "a thousand miles south of Iceland, and the initial report is that it's heading north. Probably wrong. Reciprocal bearing, transcription error, something like that. We're checking. Must be a goof, because it was heading south earlier."

Ryan looked up. "What about their other missile boats?"

"Their *Deltas* and *Typhoons* are in the Barents Sea and the Sea of Okhotsk, as usual. No news on them. Oh, we have attack boats up there, of course, but Gallery doesn't want them to break radio silence, and he's right. So all we have at the moment is the report on the stray *Yankee*."

"What are we doing, Charlie?" Greer asked.

"Gallery has a general alert out to his boats. They're standing by in case we need to redeploy. NORAD has gone to a slightly increased alert status, they tell me." Davenport referred to the North American Aerospace Defense Command. "CINCLANT and CINCPAC fleet staffs are up and running around in circles, like you'd expect. Some extra P-3s are working out of Iceland. Nothing much else at the moment. First we have to figure out what they're up to."

"Okay, keep me posted."

"Roger, if we hear anything, I'll let you know, and I trust—"

"We will." Greer killed the phone. He shook a finger at Ryan. "Don't you go to sleep on me, Jack."

"On top of this stuff?" Ryan waved his mug.

"You're not concerned, I see."

"Sir, there's nothing to be concerned about yet. It's what, one in the afternoon over there now? Probably some admiral, maybe old Sergey himself, decided to toss a drill at his boys. He wasn't supposed to be all that pleased with how CRIMSON STORM worked out, and maybe he decided to rattle a few cages—ours included, of course. Hell, their army and air force aren't involved, and it's for damned sure that if they were planning anything nasty the other services would know about it. We'll have to keep an eye on this, but so far I don't see anything to—" Ryan almost said lose sleep over "—sweat about."

"How old were you at Pearl Harbor?"

"My father was nineteen, sir. He didn't marry until after the war, and I wasn't the first little Ryan." Jack smiled. Greer knew all this. "As I recall you weren't all that old yourself."

"I was a seaman second on the old *Texas*." Greer had never made it into that war. Soon after it started he'd been accepted by the Naval Academy. By the time he had graduated from there and finished training at submarine school, the war was almost over. He reached the Japanese coast on his first cruise the day after the war ended. "But you know what I mean."

"Indeed I do, sir, and that's why we have the CIA, DIA, NSA, and NRO, among others. If the Russkies can fool all of us, maybe we ought to read up on our Marx."

"All those subs heading into the Atlantic…"

"I feel better with word that the *Yankee* is heading north. They've had enough time to make that a hard piece of data. Davenport probably doesn't want to believe it without confirmation. If Ivan was looking to play hardball, that *Yankee*'d be heading south. The missiles on those old boats can't reach very far. Sooo—we stay up and watch. Fortunately, sir, you make a decent cup of coffee."

"How does breakfast grab you?"

"Might as well. If we can finish up on the Afghanistan stuff, maybe I can fly back tomorr—tonight."

"You still might. Maybe this way you'll learn to sleep on the plane."

Breakfast was sent up twenty minutes later. Both men were accustomed to big ones, and the food was surprisingly good. Ordinarily CIA cafeteria food was government-undistinguished, and Ryan wondered if the night crew, with fewer people to serve, might take the time to do their job right. Or maybe they had sent out for it. The two men sat around until Davenport phoned at quarter to seven.

"It's definite. All the boomers are heading towards port. We have good tracks on two *Yankee*s, three *Delta*s, and a *Typhoon*. *Memphis* reported when her *Delta* took off for home at twenty knots after being on station for five days, and then Gallery queried *Queenfish*. Same story—looks like they're all headed for the barn. Also we just got some photos from a Big Bird pass over the fjord—for once it wasn't covered with clouds—and we have a bunch of surface ships with bright infrared signatures, like they're getting steam up."

"How about *Red October*?" Ryan asked.

"Nothing. Maybe our information was bad, and she didn't sail.

Wouldn't be the first time."

"You don't suppose they've lost her?" Ryan wondered aloud.

Davenport had already thought of that. "That would explain the activity up north, but what about the Baltic and Med business?"

"Two years ago we had that scare with *Tullibee*," Ryan pointed out. "And the CNO was so pissed he threw an all-hands rescue drill on both oceans."

"Maybe," Davenport conceded. The blood in Norfolk was supposed to have been ankle deep after that fiasco. The USS *Tullibee*, a small one-of-a-kind attack sub, had long carried a reputation for bad luck. In this case it had spilled over onto a lot of others.

"Anyway, it looks a whole lot less scary than it did two hours back. They wouldn't be recalling their boomers if they were planning anything against us, would they?" Ryan said.

"I see that Ryan still has your crystal ball, James."

"That's what I pay him for, Charlie."

"Still, it is odd," Ryan commented. "Why recall all of the missile boats? Have they ever done this before? What about the ones in the Pacific?"

"Haven't heard about those yet," Davenport replied. "I've asked CINCPAC for data, but they haven't gotten back to me yet. On the other question, no, they've never recalled all their boomers at once, but they do occasionally reshuffle all their positions at once. That's probably what this is. I said they're heading towards port, not into it. We won't know that for a couple of days."

"What if they're afraid they've lost one?" Ryan ventured.

"No such luck," Davenport scoffed. "They haven't lost a boomer since that *Golf* we lifted off Hawaii, back when you were in high school, Ryan. Ramius is too good a skipper to let that happen."

So was Captain Smith of the *Titanic*, Ryan thought.

"Thanks for the info, Charlie." Greer hung up. "Looks like you were right, Jack. Nothing to worry about yet. Let's get that data on Afghanistan in here—and just for the hell of it, we'll look at Charlie's pictures of their Northern Fleet when we're finished."

Ten minutes later a messenger arrived with a cart from central files. Greer was the sort who liked to see the raw data himself. This suited Ryan. He'd known of a few analysts who had based their reports on selective data and been cut off at the knees for it by this man. The information on the cart was from a variety of sources, but

to Ryan the most significant were tactical radio intercepts from listening posts on the Pakistani border, and, he gathered, from inside Afghanistan itself. The nature and tempo of Soviet operations did not indicate a backing off, as seemed to be suggested by a pair of recent articles in *Red Star* and some intelligence sources inside the Soviet Union. They spent three hours reviewing the data.

"I think Sir Basil is placing too much stock in political intelligence and too little in what our listening posts are getting in the field. It would not be unprecedented for the Soviets not to let their field commanders know what's going on in Moscow, of course, but on the whole I do not see a clear picture," Ryan concluded.

The admiral looked at him. "I pay you for answers, Jack."

"Sir, the truth is that Moscow moved in there by mistake. We know that from both military and political intelligence reports. The tenor of the data is pretty clear. From where I sit, I don't see that *they* know what they want to do. In a case like this the bureaucratic mind finds it most easy to do nothing. So, their field commanders are told to continue the mission, while the senior party bosses fumble around looking for a solution and covering their asses for getting into the mess in the first place."

"Okay, so we know that we don't know."

"Yes, sir. I don't like it either, but saying anything else would be a lie."

The admiral snorted. There was a lot of that at Langley, intelligence types giving answers when they didn't even know the questions. Ryan was still new enough to the game that when he didn't know, he said so. Greer wondered if that would change in time. He hoped not.

After lunch a package arrived by messenger from the National Reconnaissance Office. It contained the photographs taken earlier in the day on two successive passes by a KH-11 satellite. They'd be the last such photos for a while because of the restrictions imposed by orbital mechanics and the generally miserable weather on the Kola Peninsula. The first set of visible light shots taken an hour after the FLASH signal had gone out from Moscow showed the fleet at anchor or tied to the docks. On infrared a number of them were glowing brightly from internal heat, indicating that their boilers or gas-turbine engine plants were operating. The second set of photos had been taken on the next orbital pass at a very low angle.

Ryan scrutinized the blowups. "Wow! *Kirov, Moskva, Kiev*, three

Karas, five *Krestas*, four *Krivaks*, eight *Udaloys*, and five *Sovremennys*."

"Search and rescue exercise, eh?" Greer gave Ryan a hard look. "Look at the bottom here. Every fast oiler they have is following them out. That's most of the striking force of the Northern Fleet right there, and if they need oilers, they figure to be out for a while."

"Davenport could have been more specific. But we still have their boomers heading back in. No amphibious ships in this photo, just combatants. Only the new ones, too, the ones with range and speed."

"And the best weapons."

"Yeah," Ryan nodded. "And all scrambled in a few hours. Sir, if they had this planned in advance, we'd have known about it. This must have been laid on today. Interesting."

"You've picked up the English habit of understatement, Jack." Greer stood up to stretch. "I want you to stay over an extra day."

"Okay, sir." He looked at his watch. "Mind if I phone the wife? I don't want her to drive out to the airport for a plane I'm not on."

"Sure, and after you've finished that, I want you to go down and see someone at DIA who used to work for me. See how much operational data they're getting on this sortie. If this is a drill, we'll know soon enough, and you can still take your Surfing Barbie home tomorrow."

It was a Skiing Barbie, but Ryan didn't say so.

THE SIXTH DAY
WEDNESDAY, 8 DECEMBER

CIA Headquarters

Ryan had been to the office of the director of central intelligence several times before to deliver briefings and occasional personal messages from Sir Basil Charleston to his highness, the DCI. It was larger than Greer's, with a better view of the Potomac Valley, and appeared to have been decorated by a professional in a style compatible with the DCI's origins. Arthur Moore was a former judge of the Texas State Supreme Court, and the room reflected his southwestern heritage. He and Admiral Greer were sitting on a sofa near the picture window. Greer waved Ryan over and passed him a folder.

The folder was made of red plastic and had a snap closure. Its edges were bordered with white tape and the cover had a simple white paper label bearing the legends EYES ONLY ¸ and WILLOW. Neither notation was unusual. A computer in the basement of the Langley headquarters selected random names at the touch of a key; this prevented a foreign agent from inferring anything from the name of the operation. Ryan opened the folder and looked first at the index sheet. Evidently there were only three copies of the WILLOW document, each initialed by its owner. This one was initialed by the DCI himself. A CIA document with only three copies was unusual enough that Ryan, whose highest clearance was NEBULA, had never encountered one. From the grave looks of Moore and Greer, he guessed that these were two of the ¸-cleared officers; the other, he assumed, was the deputy director of operations (DDO), another Texan named Robert Ritter.

Ryan turned the index sheet. The report was a xeroxed copy of something that had been typed on a manual machine, and it had too many strikeovers to have been done by a real secretary. If Nancy Cummings and the other elite executive secretaries had not been allowed to see this…Ryan looked up.

"It's all right, Jack," Greer said. "You've just been cleared for WILLOW."

Ryan sat back, and despite his excitement began to read the

document slowly and carefully.

The agent's code name was actually CARDINAL. The highest ranking agent-in-place the CIA had ever had, he was the stuff that legends are made of. CARDINAL had been recruited more than twenty years earlier by Oleg Penkovskiy. Another legend—a dead one—Penkovskiy had at the time been a colonel in the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence agency, a larger and more active counterpart to America's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). His position had given him access to daily information on all facets of the Soviet military, from the Red Army's command structure to the operational status of intercontinental missiles. The information he smuggled out through his British contact, Greville Wynne, was supremely valuable, and Western countries had come to depend on it—too much. Penkovskiy was discovered during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. It was his data, ordered and delivered under great pressure and haste, that told President Kennedy that Soviet strategic systems were not ready for war. This information enabled the president to back Khrushchev into a corner from which there was no easy exit. The famous blink ascribed to Kennedy's steady nerves was, as in many such events throughout history, facilitated by his ability to see the other man's cards. This advantage was given him by a courageous agent whom he would never meet. Penkovskiy's response to the FLASH request from Washington was too rash. Already under suspicion, this finished him. He paid for his treason with his life. It was CARDINAL who first learned that he was being watched more closely than was the norm for a society where everyone is watched. He warned Penkovskiy—too late. When it became clear that the colonel could not be extracted from the Soviet Union, he himself urged CARDINAL to betray him. It was the final ironic joke of a brave man that his own death would advance the career of an agent whom he had recruited.

CARDINAL's job was necessarily as secret as his name. A senior adviser and confidant of a Politburo member, CARDINAL often acted as his representative within the Soviet military establishment. He thus had access to political and military intelligence of the highest order. This made his information extraordinarily valuable—and, paradoxically, highly suspect. Those few experienced CIA case officers who knew of him found it impossible to believe that he had not been "turned" somewhere along the line by one of the thousands of KGB counterintelligence officers whose sole duty it is

to watch everyone and everything. For this reason CARDINAL-coded material was generally cross-checked against the reports of other spies and sources. But he had outlived many small-fry agents.

The name CARDINAL was known in Washington only to the top three CIA executives. On the first day of each month a new code name was chosen for his data, a name made known only to the highest echelon of CIA officers and analysts. This month it was WILLOW. Before being passed on, grudgingly, to outsiders, CARDINAL data was laundered as carefully as Mafia income to disguise its source. There were also a number of security measures that protected the agent and were unique to him. For fear of cryptographic exposure of his identity, CARDINAL material was hand delivered, never transmitted by radio or landline. CARDINAL himself was a very careful man—Penkovskiy's fate had taught him that. His information was conveyed through a series of intermediaries to the chief of the CIA's Moscow station. He had outlived twelve station chiefs; one of these, a retired field officer, had a brother who was a Jesuit. Every morning the priest, an instructor in philosophy and theology at Fordham University in New York, said mass for the safety and the soul of a man whose name he would never know. It was as good an explanation as any for CARDINAL's continued survival.

Four separate times he had been offered extraction from the Soviet Union. Each time he had refused. To some this was proof that he'd been turned, but to others it was proof that like most successful agents CARDINAL was a man driven by something he alone knew—and therefore, like most successful agents, he was probably a little crazy.

The document Ryan was reading had been in transit for twenty hours. It had taken five for the film to reach the American embassy in Moscow, where it was delivered at once to the station chief. An experienced field officer and former reporter for the *New York Times*, he worked under the cover of press attaché. He developed the film himself in his private darkroom. Thirty minutes after its arrival, he inspected the five exposed frames through a magnifying glass and sent a FLASH-priority dispatch to Washington saying that a CARDINAL signal was en route. Next he transcribed the message from the film to flash paper on his own portable typewriter, translating from the Russian as he went. This security measure erased both the agent's handwriting and, by the paraphrasing

automatic to translation, any personal peculiarities of his language. The film was then burned to ashes, the report folded into a metal container much like a cigarette case. This held a small pyrotechnic charge that would go off if the case were improperly opened or suddenly shaken; two CARDINAL signals had been lost when their cases were accidentally dropped. Next the station chief took the case to the embassy's courier-in-residence, who had already been booked on a three-hour Aeroflot flight to London. At Heathrow Airport the courier sprinted to make connections with a Pan Am 747 to New York's Kennedy International, where he connected with the Eastern shuttle to Washington's National Airport. By eight that morning the diplomatic bag was in the State Department. There a CIA officer removed the case, drove it immediately to Langley, and handed it to the DCI. It was opened by an instructor from the CIA's technical services branch. The DCI made three copies on his personal Xerox machine and burned the flash paper in his ashtray. These security measures had struck a few of the men who had succeeded to the office of the DCI as laughable. The laughs had never outlasted the first CARDINAL report.

When Ryan finished the report he referred back to the second page and read it through again, shaking his head slowly. The WILLOW document was the strongest reinforcement yet of his desire not to know how intelligence information reached him. He closed the folder and handed it back to Admiral Greer.

"Christ, sir."

"Jack, I know I don't have to say this—but what you have just read, nobody, not the president, not Sir Basil, not God if He asks, *nobody* learns of it without the authorization of the director. Is that understood?" Greer had not lost his command voice.

"Yes, sir." Ryan bobbed his head like a schoolboy.

Judge Moore pulled a cigar from his jacket pocket and lit it, looking past the flame into Ryan's eyes. The judge, everyone said, had been a hell of a field officer in his day. He'd worked with Hans Tofte during the Korean War and had been instrumental in bringing off one of the CIA's legendary missions, the disappearance of a Norwegian ship that had been carrying a cargo of medical personnel and supplies for the Chinese. The loss had delayed a Chinese offensive for several months, saving thousands of American and allied lives. But it had been a bloody operation. All of the Chinese personnel and all of the Norwegian crewmen had vanished.

It was a bargain in the simple mathematics of war, but the morality of the mission was another matter. For this reason, or perhaps another, Moore had soon thereafter left government service to become a trial lawyer in his native Texas. His career had been spectacularly successful, and he'd advanced from wealthy courtroom lawyer to distinguished appellate judge. He had been recalled to the CIA three years earlier because of his unique combination of absolute personal integrity and experience in black operations. Judge Moore hid a Harvard law degree and a highly ordered mind behind the facade of a West Texas cowboy, something he had never been but simulated with ease.

"So, Dr. Ryan, what do you think of this?" Moore said as the deputy director of operations came in. "Hi, Bob, come on over here. We just showed Ryan here the WILLOW file."

"Oh?" Ritter slid a chair over, neatly trapping Ryan in the corner. "And what does the admiral's fair-haired boy think of that?"

"Gentlemen, I assume that you all regard this information as genuine," Ryan said cautiously, getting nods. "Sir, if this information was hand delivered by the Archangel Michael, I'd have trouble believing it—but since you gentlemen say it's reliable…" They wanted his opinion. The problem was, his conclusion was too incredible. Well, he decided, I've gotten this far by giving my honest opinions…

Ryan took a deep breath and gave them his evaluation.

"Very well, Dr. Ryan," Judge Moore nodded sagaciously. "First I want to hear what else it might be, then I want you to defend your analysis."

"Sir, the most obvious alternative doesn't bear much thinking about. Besides, they've been able to do it since Friday and they haven't done it," Ryan said, keeping his voice low and reasonable. Ryan had trained himself to be objective. He ran through the four alternatives he had considered, careful to examine each in detail. This was no time to allow personal views to intrude on his thinking. He spoke for ten minutes.

"I suppose there's one more possibility, Judge," he concluded. "This could be disinformation aimed at blowing this source. I cannot evaluate that possibility."

"The thought has occurred to us. All right, now that you've gone this far, you might as well give your operational recommendation."

"Sir, the admiral can tell you what the navy'll say."

"I sorta figured that one out, boy," Moore laughed. "What do you think?"

"Judge, setting up the decision tree on this will not be easy—there are too many variables, too many possible contingencies. But I'd say yes. If it's possible, if we can work out the details, we ought to try. The biggest question is the availability of our own assets. Do we have the pieces in place?"

Greer answered. "Our assets are slim. One carrier, *Kennedy*. I checked. *Saratoga*'s in Norfolk with an engineering casualty. On the other hand, HMS *Invincible* was just over here for the NATO exercise, sailed from Norfolk Monday night. Admiral White, I believe, commanding a small battle group."

"Lord White, sir?" Ryan asked. "The earl of Weston?"

"You know him?" Moore asked.

"Yes, sir. Our wives are friendly. I hunted with him last September, a grouse shoot in Scotland. He makes noises like a good operator, and I hear he has a good reputation."

"You're thinking we might want to borrow their ships, James?" Moore asked. "If so, we'll have to tell them about this. But we have to tell our side first. There's a meeting of the National Security Council at one this afternoon. Ryan, you will prepare the briefing papers and deliver the briefing yourself."

Ryan blinked. "That's not much time, sir."

"James here says you work well under pressure. Prove it." He looked at Greer. "Get a copy of his briefing papers and be ready to fly to London. That's the president's decision. If we want their boats, we'll have to tell them why. That means briefing the prime minister, and that's your job. Bob, I want you to confirm this report. Do what you have to do, but do not get WILLOW involved."

"Right," Ritter replied.

Moore looked at his watch. "We'll meet back here at 3:30, depending on how the meeting goes. Ryan, you have ninety minutes. Get cracking."

What am I being measured for? Ryan wondered. There was talk in the CIA that Judge Moore would be leaving soon for a comfortable ambassadorship, perhaps to the Court of St. James's, a fitting reward for a man who had worked long and hard to reestablish a close relationship with the British. If the judge left, Admiral Greer would probably move into his office. He had the virtues of age—he wouldn't be around that long—and of friends on

Capitol Hill. Ritter had neither. He had complained too long and too openly about congressmen who leaked information on his operations and his field agents, getting men killed in the process of demonstrating their importance on the local cocktail circuit. He also had an ongoing feud with the chairman of the Select Intelligence Committee.

With that sort of reshuffling at the top and this sudden access to new and fantastic information…What does it mean for me? Ryan asked himself. They couldn't want him to be the next DDI. He knew he didn't have anything like the experience required for that job—though maybe in another five or six years…

Reykjanes Ridge

Ramius inspected his status board. The *Red October* was heading southwest on track eight, the westernmost surveyed route on what Northern Fleet submariners called Gorshkov's Railroad. His speed was thirteen knots. It never occurred to him that this was an unlucky number, an Anglo-Saxon superstition. They would hold this course and speed for another twenty hours. Immediately behind him, Kamarov was seated at the submarine's gravitometer board, a large rolled chart behind him. The young lieutenant was chain-smoking, and looked tense as he ticked off their position on the chart. Ramius did not disturb him. Kamarov knew this job, and Borodin would relieve him in another two hours.

Installed in the *Red October*'s keel was a highly sensitive device called a gradiometer, essentially two large lead weights separated by a space of one hundred yards. A laser-computer system measured the space between the weights down to a fraction of an angstrom. Distortions of that distance or lateral movement of the weights indicated variations in the local gravitational field. The navigator compared these highly precise local values to the values on his chart. With careful use of gravitometers in the ship's inertial navigation system, he could plot the vessel's location to within a hundred meters, half the length of the ship.

The mass-sensing system was being added to all the submarines that could accommodate it. Younger attack boat commanders, Ramius knew, had used it to run the Railroad at high speed. Good for the commander's ego, Ramius judged, but a little hard on the navigator. He felt no need for recklessness. Perhaps the letter had

been a mistake…No, it prevented second thoughts. And the sensor suites on attack submarines simply were not good enough to detect the *Red October* so long as he maintained his silent routine. Ramius was certain of this; he had used them all. He would get where he wanted to go, do what he wanted to do, and nobody, not his own countrymen, not even the Americans, would be able to do a thing about it. That's why earlier he had listened to the passage of an *Alfa* thirty miles to his east and smiled.

The White House

Judge Moore's CIA car was a Cadillac limousine that came with a driver and a security man who kept an Uzi submachinegun under the dashboard. The driver turned right off Pennsylvania Avenue onto Executive Drive. More a parking lot than a street, this served the needs of senior officials and reporters who worked at the White House and the Executive Office Building. "Old State," that shining example of Institutional Grotesque that towered over the executive mansion. The driver pulled smoothly into a vacant VIP slot and jumped out to open the doors after the security man had swept the area with his eyes. The judge got out first and went ahead, and as Ryan caught up he found himself walking on the man's left, half a step behind. It took a moment to remember that this instinctive action was exactly what the marine corps had taught him at Quantico was the proper way for a junior officer to accompany his betters. It forced Ryan to consider just how junior he was.

"Ever been in here before, Jack?"

"No, sir, I haven't."

Moore was amused. "That's right, you come from around here. Now, if you came from farther away, you'd have made the trip a few times." A marine guard held the door open for them. Inside a Secret Service agent signed them in. Moore nodded and walked on.

"Is this to be in the Cabinet Room, sir?"

"Uh-uh. Situation Room, downstairs. It's more comfortable and better equipped for this sort of thing. The slides you need are already down there, all set up. Nervous?"

"Yes, sir, I sure am."

Moore chuckled. "Settle down, boy. The president has wanted to meet you for some time now. He liked that report on terrorism you did a few years back, and I've shown him some more of your work,

the one on Russian missile submarine operations, and the one you just did on management practices in their arms industries. All in all, I think you'll find he's a pretty regular guy. Just be ready when he asks questions. He'll hear every word you say, and he has a way of hitting you with good ones when he wants." Moore turned to descend a staircase. Ryan followed him down three flights, then they came to a door which led to a corridor. The judge turned left and walked to yet another door, this one guarded by another Secret Service agent.

"Afternoon, Judge. The president will be down shortly."

"Thank you. This is Dr. Ryan. I'll vouch for him."

"Right." The agent waved them in.

It was not nearly as spectacular as Ryan had expected. The Situation Room was probably no larger than the Oval Office upstairs. There was expensive-looking wood paneling over what were probably concrete walls. This part of the White House dated back to the complete rebuilding job done under Truman. Ryan's lectern was to his left as he went in. It stood in front and slightly to the right of a roughly diamond-shaped table, and behind it was the projection screen. A note on the lectern said the slide projector in the middle of the table was already loaded and focused, and gave the order of the slides, which had been delivered from the National Reconnaissance Office.

Most of the people were already here, all of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the secretary of defense. The secretary of state, he remembered, was still shuttling back and forth between Athens and Ankara trying to settle the latest Cyprus situation. This perennial thorn in NATO's southern flank had flared up a few weeks earlier when a Greek student had run over a Turkish child with his car and been killed by a gang minutes later. By the end of the day fifty people had been injured, and the putatively allied countries were once more at each other's throats. Now two American aircraft carriers were cruising the Aegean as the secretary of state labored to calm both sides. It was bad enough that two young people had died, Ryan thought, but not something to get a country's army mobilized for.

Also at the table were General Thomas Hilton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Jeffrey Pelt, the president's national security adviser, a pompous man Ryan had met years before at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International

Studies. Pelt was going through some papers and dispatches. The chiefs were chatting amicably among themselves when the commandant of the marine corps looked up and spotted Ryan. He got up and walked over.

"You Jack Ryan?" General David Maxwell asked.

"Yes, sir." Maxwell was a short, tough fireplug of a man whose stubbly haircut seemed to spark with aggressive energy. He looked Ryan over before shaking hands.

"Pleased to meet you, son. I liked what you did over in London. Good for the corps." He referred to the terrorist incident in which Ryan had very nearly been killed. "That was good, quick action you took, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir. I was lucky."

"Good officer's supposed to be lucky. I hear you got some interesting news for us."

"Yes sir. I think you will find it worth your time."

"Nervous?" The general saw the answer and smiled thinly. "Relax, son. Everybody in this damned cellar puts his pants on the same way as you." He backhanded Ryan to the stomach and went back to his seat. The general whispered something to Admiral Daniel Foster, chief of naval operations. The CNO looked Ryan over for a moment before going back to what he was doing.

The president arrived a minute later. Everyone in the room stood as he walked to his chair, on Ryan's right. He said a few quick things to Dr. Pelt, then looked pointedly at the DCI.

"Gentlemen, if we can bring this meeting to order, I think Judge Moore has some news for us."

"Thank you, Mr. President. Gentlemen, we've had an interesting development today with respect to the Soviet naval operation that started yesterday. I have asked Dr. Ryan here to deliver the briefing."

The president turned to Ryan. The younger man could feel himself being appraised. "You may proceed."

Ryan took a sip of ice water from a glass hidden in the lectern. He had a wireless control for the slide projector and a choice of pointers. A separate high-intensity light illuminated his notes. The pages were full of errors and scribbled corrections. There had not been time to edit the copy.

"Thank you, Mr. President. Gentlemen, my name is Jack Ryan, and the subject of this briefing is recent Soviet naval activity in the

North Atlantic. Before I get to that it will be necessary for me to lay a little groundwork. I trust you will bear with me for a few minutes, and please feel free to interrupt with questions at any time." Ryan clicked on the slide projector. The overhead lights near the screen dimmed automatically.

"These photographs come to us courtesy of the British," Ryan said. He now had everyone's attention. "The ship you see here is the Soviet fleet ballistic missile submarine *Red October*, photographed by a British agent in her dock at their submarine base at Polyarnyy, near Murmansk in northern Russia. As you can see, she is a very large vessel, about 650 feet long, a beam of roughly 85 feet, and an estimated submerged displacement of 32,000 tons. These figures are roughly comparable to those of a World War I battleship."

Ryan lifted a pointer. "In addition to being considerably larger than our own *Ohio*-class Trident submarines, *Red October* has a number of technical differences. She carries twenty-six missiles instead of our twenty-four. The earlier *Typhoon*-class vessels, from which she was developed, only have twenty. *October* carries the new SS-N-20 sea-launched ballistic missile, the Seahawk. It's a solid-fuel missile with a range of about six thousand nautical miles, and it carries eight multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles, MIRVs, each with an estimated yield of five hundred kilotons. It's the same RV carried by their SS-18s, but there are less of them per launcher.

"As you can see, the missile tubes are located forward of the sail instead of aft, as in our subs. The forward diving planes fold into slots in the hull here; ours go on the sail. She has twin screws; ours have one propeller. And finally, her hull is oblate. Instead of being cylindrical like ours, it is flattened out markedly top and bottom."

Ryan clicked to the next slide. It showed two views superimposed, bow over stern. "These frames were delivered to us undeveloped. They were processed by the National Reconnaissance Office. Please note the doors here at the bow and here at the stern. The British were a little puzzled by these, and that's why I was permitted to bring the shots over earlier this week. We weren't able to figure out this function at the CIA either, and it was decided to seek the opinion of an outside consultant."

"Who decided?" the secretary of defense demanded angrily. "Hell, I haven't even seen them yet!"

"We only got them Monday, Bert," Judge Moore replied

soothingly. “These two on the screen are only four hours old. Ryan suggested an outside expert, and James Greer approved it. I concurred.”

“His name is Oliver W. Tyler. Dr. Tyler is a former naval officer who is now associate professor of engineering at the Naval Academy and a paid consultant to Sea Systems Command. He’s an expert in the analysis of Soviet naval technology. Skip—Dr. Tyler—concluded that these doors are the intake and exhaust vents for a new silent propulsion system. He is currently developing a computer model of the system, and we hope to have this information by the end of the week. The system itself is rather interesting.” Ryan explained Tyler’s analysis briefly.

“Okay, Dr. Ryan.” The president leaned forward. “You’ve just told us that the Soviets have built a missile submarine that’s supposed to be hard for our men to locate. I don’t suppose that’s news. Go on.”

“*Red October*’s captain is a man named Marko Ramius. That is a Lithuanian name, although we believe his internal passport designates his nationality as Great Russian. He is the son of a high Party official, and as good a submarine commander as they have. He’s taken out the lead ship of every Soviet submarine class for the past ten years.

“*Red October* sailed last Friday. We do not know exactly what her orders were, but ordinarily their missile subs—that is, those with the newer long-range missiles—confine their activities to the Barents Sea and adjacent areas in which they can be protected from our attack boats by land-based ASW aircraft, their own surface ships, and attack submarines. About noon local time on Sunday, we noted increased search activity in the Barents Sea. At the time we took this to be a local ASW exercise, and by late Monday it looked to be a test of *October*’s new drive system.

“As you all know, early yesterday saw a vast increase in Soviet naval activity. Nearly all of the blue-water ships assigned to their Northern Fleet are now at sea, accompanied by all of their fast fleet-replenishment vessels. Additional fleet auxiliaries sailed from the Baltic Fleet bases and the western Mediterranean. Even more disquieting is the fact that nearly every nuclear submarine assigned to the Northern Fleet—their largest—appears to be heading into the North Atlantic. This includes three from the Med, since submarines there come from the Northern Fleet, not the Black Sea Fleet. Now

we think we know why all this happened." Ryan clicked to the next slide. This one showed the North Atlantic, from Florida to the Pole, with Soviet ships marked in red.

"The day *Red October* sailed, Captain Ramius evidently posted a letter to Admiral Yuri Ilych Padorin. Padorin is chief of the Main Political Administration of their navy. We do not know what that letter said, but here we can see its results. This began to happen not four hours after that letter was opened. Fifty-eight nuclear-powered submarines and twenty-eight major surface combatants all headed our way. This is a remarkable reaction in four hours. This morning we learned what their orders are.

"Gentlemen, these ships have been ordered to locate *Red October*, and if necessary, to sink her." Ryan paused for effect. "As you can see, the Soviet surface force is here, about halfway between the European mainland and Iceland. Their submarines, these in particular, are all heading southwest towards the U.S. coast. Please note, there is no unusual activity on the Pacific side of either country—except we have information that Soviet fleet ballistic missile submarines in *both* oceans are being recalled to port.

"Therefore, while we do not know exactly what Captain Ramius said, we can draw some conclusions from these patterns of activity. It would appear that they think he's heading in our direction. Given his estimated speed as something between ten and thirty knots, he could be anywhere from here, below Iceland, to here, just off our coast. You will note that in either case he has successfully avoided detection by all four of these SOSUS barriers—"

"Wait a minute. You say they have issued orders to their ships to sink one of their submarines?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

The president looked at the DCI. "This is reliable information, Judge?"

"Yes, Mr. President, we believe it to be solid."

"Okay, Dr. Ryan, we're all waiting. What's this Ramius fellow up to?"

"Mr. President, our evaluation of this intelligence data is that *Red October* is attempting to defect to the United States."

The room went very quiet for a moment. Ryan could hear the whirring of the fan in the slide projector as the National Security Council pondered that. He held his hands on the lectern to keep them from shaking under the stare of the ten men in front of him.

"That's a very interesting conclusion, Doctor." The president smiled. "Defend it."

"Mr. President, no other conclusion fits the data. The really crucial thing, of course, is the recall of their other missile boats. They've never done that before. Add to that the fact that they have issued orders to sink their newest and most powerful missile sub, and that they are chasing in this direction, and one is left with the conclusion that they think she has left the reservation and is heading this way."

"Very well. What else could it be?"

"Sir, he could have told them that he's going to fire his missiles. At us, at them, the Chinese, or just about anyone else."

"And you don't think so?"

"No, Mr. President. The SS-N-20 has a range of six thousand miles. That means he could have hit any target in the Northern Hemisphere from the moment he left the dock. He's had six days to do that, but he has not fired. Moreover, if he had threatened to launch his birds, he would have to consider the possibility that the Soviets would enlist our assistance to locate and sink him. After all, if our surveillance systems detect the launch of nuclear-armed missiles in any direction, things could get very tense, very quickly."

"You know he could fire his birds in both directions and start World War III," the secretary of defense observed.

"Yes, Mr. Secretary. In that case we'd be dealing with a total madman—more than one, in fact. On our missile boats there are five officers, who must all agree and act in unison to fire their missiles. The Soviets have the same number. For political reasons their nuclear warhead security procedures are even more elaborate than ours. Five or more people, all of whom wish to end the world?" Ryan shook his head. "That seems most unlikely, sir, and again, the Soviets would be well advised to inform us and enlist our aid."

"Do you really think they would inform us?" Dr. Pelt asked. His tone indicated what he thought.

"Sir, that's more a psychological question than a technical one, and I deal principally with technical intelligence. Some of the men in this room have met their Soviet counterparts and are better equipped to answer that than I am. My answer to your question, however, is yes. That would be the only rational thing for them to do, and while I do not regard the Soviets as entirely rational by our

standards, they are rational by their own. They are not given to this sort of high-stakes gambling."

"Who is?" the president observed. "What else might it be?"

"Several things, sir. It could simply be a major naval exercise aimed at testing their ability to close our sea lines of communication and our ability to respond, both on short notice. We reject this possibility for several reasons. It's too soon after their autumn naval exercise, CRIMSON STORM, and they are only using nuclear submarines; no diesel-powered boats seem to be involved. Clearly speed is at a premium in their operation. And as a practical matter, they do not run major exercises at this time of year."

"And why is that?" the president asked.

Admiral Foster answered for Ryan. "Mr. President, the weather up there at this time of the year is extremely bad. Even we don't schedule exercises under these conditions."

"I seem to recall we just ran a NATO exercise, Admiral," Pelt noted.

"Yes, sir, south of Bermuda, where the weather's a lot nicer. Except for an antisub exercise off the British Isles, all of NIFTY DOLPHIN was held on our side of the lake."

"Okay, let's get back to what else their fleet might be up to," the president ordered.

"Well, sir, it might not be an exercise at all. It could be the real thing. This could be the beginning of a conventional war against NATO, its first step being interdiction of the sea lines of communication. If so, they've achieved complete strategic surprise and are now throwing it away by operating so overtly that we cannot fail to notice or react forcefully. Moreover, there is no corresponding activity whatever in their other armed services. Their army and air force—except for maritime surveillance aircraft—and their Pacific Fleet are engaged in routine training operations.

"Finally, this could be an attempt to provoke or divert us, drawing our attention to this while they are preparing to spring a surprise somewhere else. If so, they're going about it in a strange way. If you try to provoke somebody, you don't do it in his front yard. The Atlantic, Mr. President, is still our ocean. As you can see from this chart, we have bases here in Iceland, the Azores, all up and down our coast. We have allies on both sides of the ocean, and we can establish air superiority over the entire Atlantic if we so choose. Their navy is numerically large, larger than ours in some

critical areas, but they cannot project force as well as we can—not yet, anyway—and certainly not right off our coast." Ryan took a sip of water.

"So, gentlemen, we have a Soviet missile submarine at sea when all the others, in both oceans, are being recalled. We have their fleet at sea with orders to sink that sub, and evidently they are chasing it in our direction. As I said, this is the only conclusion that fits the data."

"How many men on the sub, Doctor?" the president asked.

"We believe 110 or so, sir."

"So, 110 men all decide to defect to the United States at one time. Not an altogether bad idea," the president observed wryly, "but hardly a likely one."

Ryan was ready for that. "There is precedent for this, sir. On November 8, 1975, the *Storozhevoy*, a Soviet *Krivak*-class missile frigate, attempted to run from Riga, Latvia, to the Swedish island of Gotland. The political officer aboard, Valery Sablin, led a mutiny of the enlisted personnel. They locked their officers in their cabins and raced away from the dock. They came close to making it. Air and fleet units attacked them and forced them to halt within fifty miles of Swedish territorial waters. Two more hours and they would have made it. Sablin and twenty-six others were court-martialed and shot. More recently we have had reports of mutinous episodes on several Soviet vessels—especially submarines. In 1980 an *Echo*-class Soviet attack submarine surfaced off Japan. The captain claimed to have had a fire aboard, but photographs taken by naval reconnaissance aircraft—ours and Japanese—did not show smoke or fire-damaged debris being jettisoned from the submarine. However, the crewmen on deck did show sufficient evidence of trauma to support the conclusion that a riot had taken place aboard. We have had similar, sketchier reports for some years now. While I admit this is an extreme example, our conclusion is decidedly not without precedent."

Admiral Foster reached inside his jacket and came out with a plastic-tipped cigar. His eyes sparkled behind the match. "You know, I could almost believe this."

"Then I wish you'd tell us all why, Admiral," the president said, "because I still don't."

"Mr. President, most mutinies are led by officers, not enlisted men. The reason for this is simply that the enlisted men do not

know how to navigate the ship. Moreover, officers have the advantages and educational background to know that successful rebellion is a possibility. Both of these factors would be even more true in the Soviet Navy. What if just the officers are doing this?"

"And the rest of the crew is going along with them?" Pelt asked. "Knowing what would happen to them and their families?"

Foster puffed a few times on his cigar. "Ever been to sea, Dr. Pelt? No? Let's imagine for the moment that you're taking a world cruise, on the *Queen Elizabeth* 2, say. One fine day you're in the middle of the Pacific Ocean—but how do you know exactly where you are? You don't know. You know what the officers tell you. Oh, sure, if you know a little astronomy, you might be able to estimate your latitude to within a few hundred miles. With a good watch and some knowledge of spherical trigonometry you might even guess your longitude to within a few hundred. Okay? That's on a ship that you can see from.

"These guys are on a submarine. You can't see a whole lot. Now, what if the officers—not even all the officers—are doing this? How will the crew know what's going on?" Foster shook his head. "They won't. They can't. Even our guys might not, and our men are trained a lot better than theirs. Their seamen are nearly all conscripts, remember. On a nuclear submarine you are absolutely cut off from the outside world. No radios except for ELF and VLF—and that's all encrypted; messages have to come through the communications officer. So, he has to be in on it. Same thing with the boat's navigator. They use inertial navigation systems, same as us. We have one of theirs, from that *Golf* we lifted off Hawaii. In their machine the data is also encrypted. The quartermaster reads the numbers off the machine, and the navigator gets their position from a book. In the Red Army, on *land*, maps are classified documents. Same thing in their navy. The enlisted men don't get to see charts and are not encouraged to know where they are. This would be especially true on missile submarines, right?

"On top of all that, these guys are working sailors, nucs. When you're at sea, you have a job to do, and you do it. On their ships, that means from fourteen to eighteen hours a day. These kids are all draftees with very simple training. They're taught to perform one or two tasks—and to follow their orders exactly. The Soviets train people to do their jobs by rote, with as little thinking as possible. That's why on major repair jobs you see officers holding tools. Their

men will have neither the time nor the inclination to question their officers about what's going on. You do your job, and depend on everybody else to do his. That's what discipline at sea is all about." Foster tapped his cigar ash into an ashtray. "Yes, sir, you get the officers together, maybe not even all of them, and this would work. Getting ten or twelve dissidents together is a whole lot easier than assembling a hundred."

"Easi*er*, but hardly easy, Dan," General Hilton objected. "For Christ's sake, they have at least one political officer aboard, plus moles from their intelligence outfits. You really think a Party hack would go along with this?"

"Why not? You heard Ryan—that frigate's mutiny was led by the political officer."

"Yeah, and since then they have shaken up that whole directorate," Hilton responded.

"We have defecting KGB types all the time, all good Party members," Foster said. Clearly he liked the idea of a defecting Russian sub.

The president took all this in, then turned to Ryan. "Dr. Ryan, you have managed to persuade me that your scenario is a theoretical possibility. Now, what does the CIA think we ought to do about it?"

"Mr. President, I'm an intelligence analyst, not—"

"I know very well what you are, Dr. Ryan. I've read enough of your work. I can see you have an opinion. I want to hear it."

Ryan didn't even look at Judge Moore. "We grab her, sir."

"Just like that?"

"No, Mr. President, probably not. However, Ramius could surface off the Virginia Capes in a day or two and request political asylum. We ought to be prepared for that contingency, sir, and my opinion is that we should welcome him with open arms." Ryan saw nods from all the chiefs. Finally somebody was on his side.

"You've stuck your neck out on this one," the president observed kindly.

"Sir, you asked me for an opinion. It will probably not be that easy. These *Alfas* and *Victors* appear to be racing for our coast, almost certainly with the intention of establishing an interdiction force—effectively a blockade of our Atlantic coast."

"*Blockade*," the president said, "an ugly word."

"Judge," General Hilton said, "I suppose it's occurred to you that

this is a piece of disinformation aimed at blowing whatever highly placed source generated this report?"

Judge Moore affected a sleepy smile. "It has, Gener'l. If this is a sham, it's a damned elaborate one. Dr. Ryan was directed to prepare this briefing on the assumption that this data is genuine. If it is not, the responsibility is mine." God bless you, Judge, Ryan said to himself, wondering just how gold-plated the WILLOW source was. The judge went on, "In any case, gentlemen, we will have to respond to this Soviet activity whether our analysis is accurate or not."

"Are you getting confirmation on this, Judge?" the president asked.

"Yes, sir, we are working on that."

"Good." The president was sitting straight, and Ryan noted his voice become crisper. "The judge is correct. We have to react to this, whatever they're really up to. Gentlemen, the Soviet Navy is heading for our coast. What are we doing about it?"

Admiral Foster answered first. "Mr. President, our fleet is pulling to sea at this moment. Everything that'll steam is out already, or will be by tomorrow night. We've recalled our carriers from the South Atlantic, and we are redeploying our nuclear submarines to deal with this threat. We began this morning to saturate the air over their surface force with P-3C Orion patrol aircraft, assisted by British Nimrods operating out of Scotland. General?" Foster turned to Hilton.

"At this moment we have E-3A Sentry AWACS-type aircraft circling them along with Dan's Orions, both accompanied by F-15 Eagle fighters out of Iceland. By this time Friday we'll have a squadron of B-52s operating from Loring Air Base in Maine. These will be armed with Harpoon air-to-surface missiles, and they'll be orbiting the Soviets in relays. Nothing aggressive, you understand," Hilton smiled. "Just to let them know we're interested. If they continue to come this way, we will redeploy some tactical air assets to the East Coast, and, subject to your approval, we can activate some national guard and reserve squadrons quietly."

"Just how will you do that quietly?" Pelt asked.

"Dr. Pelt, we have a number of guard outfits scheduled to run through our Red Flag facility at Nellis in Nevada starting this Sunday, a routine training rotation. They go to Maine instead of Nevada. The bases are pretty big, and they belong to SAC." Hilton

referred to the Strategic Air Command. “They have good security.”

“How many carriers do we have handy?” the president asked.

“Only one at the moment, sir, *Kennedy*. *Saratoga* stripped a main turbine last week, and it’ll take a month to replace. *Nimitz* and *America* are both in the South Atlantic right now, *America* coming back from the Indian Ocean, *Nimitz* heading out to the Pacific. Bad luck. Can we recall a carrier from the eastern Med?”

“No.” The president shook his head. “This Cyprus thing is still too sensitive. Do we really need to? If anything…untoward happens, can we handle their surface force with what we have at hand?”

“Yes, sir!” General Hilton said at once. “Dr. Ryan said it: the Atlantic is our ocean. The air force alone will have over five hundred aircraft designated for this operation, and another three or four hundred from the navy. If any sort of shooting match develops, that Soviet fleet will have an exciting and short life.”

“We will try to avoid that, of course,” the president said quietly. “The first press reports surfaced this morning. We had a call from Bud Wilkins of the *Times* right before lunch. If the American people find out too soon what the scope of this is…Jeff?”

“Mr. President, let’s assume for the moment that Dr. Ryan’s analysis is correct. I don’t see what we can do about it,” Pelt said.

“What?” Ryan blurted. “I, ah, beg your pardon, sir.”

“We can’t exactly steal a Russian missile sub.”

“Why not!” Foster demanded. “Hell, we have enough of their tanks and aircraft.” The other chiefs agreed.

“An aircraft with a crew of one or two is one thing, Admiral. A nuclear-powered submarine with twenty-six rockets and a crew of over a hundred is something else. Naturally, we can give asylum to the defecting officers.”

“So, you’re saying that if the thing does come sailing into Norfolk,” Hilton joined in, “we give it back! Christ, man, it carries two hundred warheads! They just might use those goddamned things against us someday, you know. Are you *sure* you want to give them back?”

“That’s a billion-dollar asset, General,” Pelt said diffidently.

Ryan saw the president smile. He was said to like lively discussions. “Judge, what are the legal ramifications?”

“That’s admiralty law, Mr. President.” Moore looked uneasy for once. “I’ve never had an admiralty practice, takes me all the way

back to law school. Admiralty is *jus gentium*—the same legal codes theoretically apply to all countries. American and British admiralty courts routinely cite each other's rulings. But as for the rights that attach to a mutinous crew—I have no idea."

"Judge, we are not dealing with mutiny or piracy," Foster noted. "The correct term is *barratry*, I believe. Mutiny is when the crew rebels against lawful authority. Gross misconduct of the officers is called barratry. Anyway, I hardly think we need to attach legal folderol to a situation involving nuclear weapons."

"We might, Admiral," the president mused. "As Jeff said, this is a highly valuable asset, legally their property, and they will know we have her. I think we are agreed that not all the crew is likely to be in on this. If so, those not party to the mutiny—barratry, whatever—will want to return home after it's all over. And we'll have to let them go, won't we?"

"Have to?" General Maxwell was doodling on a pad. "Have to?"

"General," the president said firmly, "we will not, repeat *not*, be party to the imprisonment or murder of men whose only desire is to return to home and family. Is that understood?" He looked around the table. "If they know we have her, they'll want her back. And they will know we have her from the crewmen who want to return home. In any case, big as this thing is, how could we hide her?"

"We might be able to," Foster said neutrally, "but as you say, the crew is a complication. I presume we'll have the chance to look her over?"

"You mean conduct a quarantine inspection, check her for seaworthiness, maybe make sure they're not smuggling drugs into the country?" The president grinned. "I think we might arrange that. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. There's a lot of ground to cover before we get to that point. What about our allies?"

"The English just had one of their carriers over here. Could you use her, Dan?" General Hilton asked.

"If they let us borrow her, yes. We just finished that ASW exercise south of Bermuda, and the Brits acquitted themselves well. We could use *Invincible*, the four escorts, and the three attack boats. The force is being recalled at high speed because of this."

"Do they know of this development, Judge?" the president asked.

"Not unless they've developed it themselves. This information is only a few hours old." Moore did not reveal that Sir Basil had his

own ear in the Kremlin. Ryan didn't know much about it himself, had only heard some disconnected rumblings. "With your permission, I have asked Admiral Greer to be ready to fly to England to brief the prime minister."

"Why not just send—"

Judge Moore was shaking his head. "Mr. President, this information—let's say it's only delivered by hand." Eyebrows went up all around the table.

"When is he leaving?"

"This evening, if you wish. There are a couple of VIP flights leaving Andrews tonight. Congressional flights." It was the usual end-of-session junket season. Christmas in Europe, on fact-finding missions.

"General, do we have anything quicker?" the president asked Hilton.

"We can scratch up a VC-141. Lockheed JetStar, almost as fast as a -135, and we can have it up in half an hour."

"Do it."

"Yes, sir, I'll call them in right now." Hilton rose and walked to a phone in the corner.

"Judge, tell Greer to pack his bags. I'll have a cover letter waiting for him on the plane to give to the prime minister. Admiral, you want the *Invincible?*"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll get her for you. Next, what do we tell our people at sea?"

"If *October* just sails in, it won't be necessary, but if we have to communicate with her—"

"Excuse me, Judge," Ryan said, "that is rather likely—that we'll have to. They'll probably have these attack boats on the coast before she gets here. If so, we'll have to warn her off if only to save the defecting officers. They are out to locate and sink her."

"We haven't detected her. What makes you think they can?" Foster asked, miffed at the suggestion.

"They did build her, Admiral. So they might know things about her that will enable them to locate her more easily than us."

"Makes sense," the president said. "That means somebody goes out to brief the fleet commanders. We can't broadcast this, can we, Judge?"

"Mr. President, this source is too valuable to compromise in any way. That's all I can say here, sir."

"Very well, somebody flies out. Next thing is, we'll have to talk to the Soviets about this. For the moment they can say that they're operating in home waters. When will they pass Iceland?"

"Tomorrow night, unless they change course," Foster answered.

"Okay, we give it a day, for them to call this off and for us to confirm this report. Judge, I want something to back up this fairy tale in twenty-four hours. If they haven't turned back by midnight tomorrow, I'll call Ambassador Arbatov into my office Friday morning." He turned to the chiefs. "Gentlemen, I want to see contingency plans for dealing with this situation by tomorrow afternoon. We will meet here tomorrow at two. One more thing: *no leaks!* This information does not go beyond this room without my personal approval. If this story breaks to the press, I'll have heads on my desk. Yes, General?"

"Mr. President, in order to develop those plans," Hilton said after sitting back down, "we have to work through our field commanders and some of our own operations people. Certainly we'll need Admiral Blackburn." Blackburn was CINCLANT, commander in chief of the Atlantic.

"Let me think that one over. I'll be back to you in an hour. How many people at the CIA know about this?"

"Four, sir. Ritter, Greer, Ryan, and myself, sir. That's all."

"Keep it that way." The president had been bedeviled by security leaks for months.

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Meeting is adjourned."

The president stood. Moore walked around the table to keep him from leaving at once. Dr. Pelt stayed also as the rest filed out of the room. Ryan stood outside the door.

"That was all right." General Maxwell grabbed his hand. He waited until everyone else was a few yards down the hall before going on. "I think you're crazy, son, but you sure put a burr under Dan Foster's saddle. No, even better: I think he got a hard-on." The little general chuckled. "And if we get the sub, maybe we can change the president's mind and arrange for the crew to disappear. The judge did that once, you know." It was a thought that chilled Ryan as he watched Maxwell swagger down the hall.

"Jack, you want to come back in here a minute?" Moore's voice called.

"You're an historian, right?" the president asked, reviewing his

notes. Ryan hadn't even noticed him holding a pen.

"Yes, Mr. President. That's what my graduate degree's in." Ryan shook his hand.

"You have a fine sense of the dramatic, Jack. You would have made a decent trial lawyer." The president had made his reputation as a hard-driving state's attorney. He had survived an unsuccessful Mafia assassination attempt early in his career which hadn't hurt his political ambitions one bit. "Damned nice briefing."

"Thank you, Mr. President." Ryan beamed.

"The judge tells me you know the commander of that British task force."

It was like a sandbag hitting his head. "Yes, sir. Admiral White. I've hunted with him, and our wives are good friends. They're close to the Royal Family."

"Good. Somebody has to fly out to brief our fleet commander, then go on to talk to the Brits, if we get their carrier, as I expect we will. The judge says we ought to let Admiral Davenport go out with you. So, you fly out to *Kennedy* tonight, then on to *Invincible*."

"Mr. President, I—"

"Come now, Dr. Ryan," Pelt smiled thinly. "You are uniquely suited to this. You already have access to the intelligence, you know the British commander, and you're a naval intelligence specialist. You fit. Tell me, how eager do you think the navy is about getting this *Red October?*"

"Of course they're interested in it, sir. To get a chance to look at it, better yet to run it, take it apart, and run it some more. It would be the intelligence coup of all time."

"That's true. But maybe they're a little too eager."

"I don't understand what you mean, sir," Ryan said, though he understood it just fine. Pelt was the president's favorite. He was not the Pentagon's favorite.

"They might take a chance that we might not want them to take."

"Dr. Pelt, if you're saying that a uniformed officer would—"

"He's not saying that. At least not exactly. What he's saying is that it might be useful for me to have somebody out there who can give me an independent, civilian point of view."

"Sir, you don't know me."

"I've read a lot of your reports." The chief executive was smiling. It was said he could turn dazzling charm on and off like a

spotlight. Ryan was being blinded, knew it, and couldn't do a thing about it. "I like your work. You have a good feel for things, for facts. Good judgment. Now, one reason I got to where I am is good judgment, too, and I think you can handle what I have in mind. The question is, will you do it, or won't you?"

"Do what, exactly, sir?"

"After you get out there, you stay put for a few days, and report directly to me. Not through channels, directly to me. You'll get the cooperation you need. I'll see to that."

Ryan didn't say anything. He'd just become a spy, a field officer, by presidential fiat. Worse, he'd be spying on his own side.

"You don't like the idea of reporting on your own people, right? You won't be, not really. Like I said, I want an independent, civilian opinion. We'd prefer to send an experienced case officer out, but we want to minimize the number of people involved in this. Sending Ritter or Greer out would be far too obvious, whereas you, on the other hand, are a relative—"

"Nobody?" Jack asked.

"As far as they're concerned, yes," Judge Moore replied. "The Soviets have a file on you. I've seen parts of it. They think you're an upper-class drone, Jack."

I am a drone, Ryan thought, unmoved by the implicit challenge. In this company I sure as hell am.

"Agreed, Mr. President. Please forgive me for hesitating. I've never been a field officer before."

"I understand." The president was magnanimous in victory. "One more thing. If I understand how submarines operate, Ramius could just have taken off, not saying anything. Why tip them off? Why the letter? The way I read this, it's counterproductive."

It was Ryan's turn to smile. "Ever meet a sub driver, sir? No? How about an astronaut?"

"Sure, I've met a bunch of the Shuttle pilots."

"They're the same breed of cat, Mr. President. As to why he left the letter, there's two parts to that. First, he's probably mad about something, exactly what we'll find out when we see him. Second, he figures he can pull this off regardless of what they try to stop him with—and he wants them to know that. Mr. President, the men who drive subs for a living are aggressive, confident, and very, very smart. They like nothing better than making somebody else, a surface ship operator for example, look like an idiot."

"You just scored another point, Jack. The astronauts I've met, on most things they're downright humble, but they think they're gods when it comes to flying. I'll keep that in mind. Jeff, let's get back to work. Jack, keep me posted."

Ryan shook his hand again. After the president and his senior adviser left, he turned to Judge Moore. "Judge, what the hell did you tell him about me?"

"Only the truth, Jack." Actually, the judge had wanted this operation to be run by one of the CIA's senior case officers. Ryan had not been part of this scheme, but presidents have been known to spoil many carefully laid plans. The judge took this philosophically. "This is a big move up in the world for you, if you do your job right. Hell, you might even like it."

Ryan was sure he wouldn't, and he was right.

CIA Headquarters

He didn't speak the whole way back to Langley. The director's car pulled into the basement parking garage, where they got out and entered a private elevator that took them directly to Moore's office. The elevator door was disguised as a wall panel, which was convenient but melodramatic, Ryan thought. The DCI went right to his desk and lifted a phone.

"Bob, I need you in here right now." He glanced at Ryan, standing in the middle of the room. "Looking forward to this, Jack?"

"Sure, Judge," Ryan said without enthusiasm.

"I can see how you feel about this spying business, but the whole thing could develop into an extremely sensitive situation. You ought to be damned flattered you're being trusted with it."

Ryan caught the between-the-line message just as Ritter breezed in.

"What's up, Judge?"

"We're laying an operation on. Ryan is flying out to the *Kennedy* with Charlie Davenport to brief the fleet commanders on this *October* business. The president bought it."

"Guess so. Greer left for Andrews just before you pulled in. Ryan gets to fly out, eh?"

"Yes. Jack, the rule is this: you can brief the fleet commander and Davenport, that's all. Same for the Brits, just the boss-sailor. If

Bob can confirm WILLOW, the data can be spread out, but only as much as is absolutely necessary. Clear?"

"Yes, sir. I suppose somebody has told the president that it's hard to accomplish anything if nobody knows what the hell is going on. Especially the guys who're doing the work."

"I know what you're saying, Jack. We have to change the president's mind on that. We will, but until we do, remember—he is the boss. Bob, we'll need to rustle something up so he'll fit in."

"Naval officer's uniform? Let's make him a commander, three stripes, usual ribbons." Ritter looked Ryan over. "Say a forty-two long. We can have him outfitted in an hour, I expect. This operation have a name?"

"That's next." Moore lifted his phone again and tapped in five numbers. "I need two words…Uh-huh, thank you." He wrote a few things down. "Okay, gentlemen, you're calling this Operation MANDOLIN. You, Ryan, are Magi. Ought to be easy to remember, given the time of year. We'll work up a series of code words based on those while you're being fitted. Bob, take him down there yourself. I'll call Davenport and have him arrange the flight."

Ryan followed Ritter to the elevator. It was going too fast, everyone was being too clever, he thought. This Operation MANDOLIN was racing forward before they knew what the hell they were going to do, much less how. And the choice of his code name struck Ryan as singularly inappropriate. He wasn't anyone's wise man. The name should have been something more like "Halloween."

THE SEVENTH DAY
THURSDAY, 9 DECEMBER

The North Atlantic

When Samuel Johnson compared sailing in a ship to "being in jail, with the chance of being drowned," at least he had the consolation of travelling to his ship in a safe carriage, Ryan thought. Now he was going to sea, and before he got to his ship Ryan stood the chance of being smashed to red pulp in a plane crash. Jack sat hunched in a bucket seat on the port side of a Grumman Greyhound, known to the fleet without affection as a COD (for carrier onboard delivery), a flying delivery truck. The seats, facing aft, were too close together, and his knees jutted up against his chin. The cabin was far more amenable to cargo than to people. There were three tons of engine and electronics parts stowed in crates aft—there, no doubt, so that the impact of a plane crash on the valuable equipment would be softened by the four bodies in the passenger section. The cabin was not heated. There were no windows. A thin aluminum skin separated him from a two-hundred-knot wind that shrieked in time with the twin turbine engines. Worst of all, they were flying through a storm at five thousand feet, and the COD was jerking up and down in hundred-foot gulps like a berserk roller coaster. The only good thing was the lack of lighting, Ryan thought—at least nobody can see how green my face is. Right behind him were two pilots, talking away loudly so they could be heard over the engine noise. The bastards were enjoying themselves!

The noise lessened somewhat, or so it seemed. It was hard to tell. He'd been issued foam-rubber ear protectors along with a yellow, inflatable life preserver and a lecture on what to do in the event of a crash. The lecture had been perfunctory enough that it took no great intellect to estimate their chances of survival if they did crash on a night like this. Ryan hated flying. He had once been a marine second lieutenant, and his active career had ended after only three months when his platoon's helicopter had crashed on Crete during a NATO exercise. He had injured his back, nearly been crippled for life, and ever since regarded flying as something to be

avoided. The COD, he thought, was bouncing more down than up. It probably meant they were close to the *Kennedy*. The alternative did not bear thinking about. They were only ninety minutes out of Oceana Naval Air Station at Virginia Beach. It felt like a month, and Ryan swore to himself that he'd never be afraid on a civilian airliner again.

The nose dropped about twenty degrees, and the aircraft seemed to be flying right at something. They were landing, the most dangerous part of carrier flight operations. He remembered a study conducted during the Vietnam War in which carrier pilots had been fitted with portable electrocardiographs to monitor stress, and it had surprised a lot of people that the most stressful time for carrier pilots wasn't while they were being shot at—it was while they were landing, particularly at night.

Christ, you're full of happy thoughts! Ryan told himself. He closed his eyes. One way or another, it would be over in a few seconds.

The deck was slick with rain and heaving up and down, a black hole surrounded by perimeter lights. The carrier landing was a controlled crash. Massive landing gear struts and shock absorbers were needed to lessen the bone-crushing impact. The aircraft surged forward only to be jerked to a halt by the arresting wire. They were down. They were safe. Probably. After a moment's pause, the COD began moving forward again. Ryan heard some odd noises as the plane taxied and realized that they came from the wings folding up. The one danger he had not considered was flying on an aircraft whose wings were supposed to collapse. It was, he decided, just as well. The plane finally stopped moving, and the rear hatch opened.

Ryan flipped off his seatbelts and stood rapidly, banging his head on the low ceiling. He didn't wait for Davenport. With his canvas bag clutched to his chest he darted out of the rear of the aircraft. He looked around, and was pointed to the *Kennedy*'s island structure by a yellow-shirted deck crewman. The rain was falling heavily, and he felt rather than saw that the carrier was indeed moving on the fifteen-foot seas. He ran towards an open, lighted hatch fifty feet away. He had to wait for Davenport to catch up. The admiral didn't run. He walked with a precise thirty-inch step, dignified as a flag officer should be, and Ryan decided that he was probably annoyed that his semisecret arrival prohibited the usual ceremony of bosun's pipes and side boys. There was a marine

standing inside the hatch, a corporal, resplendent in striped blue trousers, khaki shirt and tie, and snow-white pistol belt. He saluted, welcoming both aboard.

"Corporal, I want to see Admiral Painter."

"The admiral's in flag quarters, sir. Do you require escort?"

"No, son. I used to command this ship. Come along, Jack." Ryan got to carry both bags.

"Gawd, sir, you actually used to do this for a living?" Ryan asked.

"Night carrier landings? Sure, I've done a couple of hundred. What's the big deal?" Davenport seemed surprised at Ryan's awe. Jack was sure it was an act.

The inside of the *Kennedy* was much like the interior of the USS *Guam*, the helicopter assault ship Ryan had been assigned to during his brief military career. It was the usual navy maze of steel bulkheads and pipes, everything painted the same shade of cave-gray. The pipes had some colored bands and stenciled acronyms which probably meant something to the men who ran the ship. To Ryan they might as well have been neolithic cave paintings. Davenport led him through a corridor, around a corner, down a "ladder" made entirely of steel and so steep he almost lost his balance, down another passageway, and around another corner. By this time Ryan was thoroughly lost. They came to a door with a marine stationed in front. The sergeant saluted perfectly, and opened the door for them.

Ryan followed Davenport in—and was amazed. Flag quarters on the USS *Kennedy* might have been transported as a block from a Beacon Hill mansion. To his right was a wall-sized mural large enough to dominate a big living room. A half-dozen oils, one of them a portrait of the ship's namesake, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, dotted the other walls, themselves covered with expensive-looking paneling. The deck was covered in thick crimson wool, and the furniture was pure civilian, French provincial, oak and brocade. One could almost imagine they were not aboard a ship at all, except that the ceiling—"overhead"—had the usual collection of pipes, all painted gray. It was a decidedly odd contrast to the rest of the room.

"Hi ya, Charlie!" Rear Admiral Joshua Painter emerged from the next room, drying his hands with a towel. "How was it coming in?"

"Little rocky," Davenport allowed, shaking hands. "This is Jack

Ryan."

Ryan had never met Painter but knew him by reputation. A Phantom pilot during the Vietnam War, he had written a book, *Paddystrikes*, on the conduct of the air campaigns. It had been a truthful book, not the sort of thing that wins friends. He was a small, feisty man who could not have weighed more than a hundred thirty pounds. He was also a gifted tactician and a man of puritanical integrity.

"One of yours, Charlie?"

"No, Admiral, I work for James Greer. I am not a naval officer. Please accept my apologies. I don't like pretending to be what I'm not. The uniform was the CIA's idea." This drew a frown.

"Oh? Well, I suppose that means you're going to tell me what Ivan's up to. Good, I hope to hell somebody knows. First time on a carrier? How did you like the flight in?"

"It might be a good way to interrogate prisoners of war," Ryan said as offhandedly as he could. The two flag officers had a good laugh at his expense, and Painter called for some food to be sent in.

The double doors to the passageway opened serveral minutes later and a pair of stewards—"mess management specialists"—came in, one bearing a tray of food, the other two pots of coffee. The three men were served in a style appropriate to their rank. The food, served on silver-trimmed plates, was simple but appetizing to Ryan, who hadn't eaten in twelve hours. He dished cole slaw and potato salad onto his plate and selected a pair of corned-beef-on-ryes.

"Thank you. That's all for now," Painter said. The stewards came to attention before leaving. "Okay, let's get down to business."

Ryan gulped down half a sandwich. "Admiral, this information is only twenty hours old." He took the briefing folders from his bag and handed them around. His delivery took twenty minutes, during which he managed to consume the two sandwiches and a goodly portion of his cole slaw and spill coffee on his hand-written notes. The two flag officers were a perfect audience, not interrupting once, only darting a few disbelieving looks at him.

"God Almighty," Painter said when Ryan finished. Davenport just stared poker-faced as he contemplated the possibility of examining a Soviet missile sub from the inside. Jack decided he'd be a formidable opponent over cards. Painter went on, "Do you really believe this?"

"Yes, sir, I do." Ryan poured himself another cup of coffee. He would have preferred a beer to go with his corned beef. It hadn't been bad at all, and good kosher corned beef was something he'd been unable to find in London.

Painter leaned back and looked at Davenport. "Charlie, you tell Greer to teach this lad a few lessons—like how a bureaucrat ain't supposed to stick his neck this far out on the block. Don't *you* think this is a little far-fetched?"

"Josh, Ryan here's the guy who did the report last June on Soviet missile-sub patrol patterns."

"Oh? That was a nice piece of work. It confirmed something I've been saying for two or three years." Painter rose and walked to the corner to look out at the stormy sea. "So, what are we supposed to do about all this?"

"The exact details of the operation have not been determined. What I expect is that you will be directed to locate *Red October* and attempt to establish communications with her skipper. After that? We'll have to figure a way to get her to a safe place. You see, the president doesn't think we'll be able to hold onto her once we get her—if we get her."

"What?" Painter spun around and spoke a tenth of a second before Davenport did. Ryan explained for several minutes.

"Dear God above! You give me one impossible task, then you tell me that if we succeed in it, we gotta give the goddamned thing back to them!"

"Admiral, my recommendation—the president asked me for one—was that we keep the submarine. For what it's worth, the Joint Chiefs are on your side, too, along with the CIA. As it is, though, if the crewmen want to go back home, we have to send them back, and then the Soviets will know we have the boat for sure. As a practical matter, I can see the other side's point. The vessel is worth a pile of money, and it is their property. And how would we hide a 30,000-ton submarine?"

"You hide a submarine by sinking it," Painter said angrily. "They're designed to do that, you know. 'Their property!' We're not talking about a damned passenger liner. That's something designed to kill people—our people!"

"Admiral, I am on your side," Ryan said quietly. "Sir, you said we've given you an impossible task, Why?"

"Ryan, finding a boomer that does not want to be found is not

the easiest thing in the world. We practice against our own. We damned near always fail, and you say this one's already passed all the northeast SOSUS lines. The Atlantic's a rather large ocean, and a missile sub's noise footprint is very small."

"Yes, sir." Ryan noted to himself that he might have been overly optimistic about their chances for success.

"What sort of shape are you in, Josh?" Davenport asked.

"Pretty good, really. The exercise we just ran, NIFTY DOLPHIN, worked out all right. Our part of it," Painter corrected himself. "*Dallas* raised some hell on the other side. My ASW crews are functioning very well. What sort of help are we getting?"

"When I left the Pentagon, the CNO was checking the availability of P-3s out on the Pacific, so you'll probably be seeing more of those. Everything that'll move is putting to sea. You're the only carrier, so you've got overall tactical command, right? Come on, Josh, you're our best ASW operator."

Painter poured some coffee for himself. "Okay, we have one carrier deck. *America* and *Nimitz* are still a good week away. Ryan, you said you're flying out to *Invincible*. We get her, too, right?"

"The president was working on that. Want her?"

"Sure. Admiral White has a good nose for ASW, and his boys really lucked out during DOLPHIN. They killed two of our attack boats, and Vince Gallery was some kind of pissed about that. Luck's a big part of this game. That would give us two decks instead of one. I wonder if we can get some more S-3s?" Painter referred to the Lockheed Vikings, carrier-borne antisubmarine aircraft.

"Why?" Davenport asked.

"I can transfer my F-18s to shore, and that'll give us room for twenty more Vikings. I don't like losing the striking power, but what we're going to need is more ASW muscle. That means more S-3s. Jack, you know that if you're wrong, that Russkie surface force is going to be a handful to deal with. You know how many surface-to-surface missiles they're packing?"

"No, sir." Ryan was certain it was too many.

"We're one carrier, and that makes us their primary target. If they start shooting at us, it'll get awful lonesome—then it'll get awful exciting." The phone rang. "Painter here…Yes. Thank you. Well, *Invincible* just turned around. Good, they're giving her to us along with two tin cans. The rest of the escorts and the three attack subs are still heading home." He frowned. "I can't really fault them

for that. That means we have to give them some escorts, but it's a good trade. I want that flight deck."

"Can we chopper Jack out to her?" Ryan wondered if Davenport knew what the president had ordered him to do. The admiral seemed interested in getting him off the *Kennedy*.

Painter shook his head. "Too far for a chopper. Maybe they can send a Harrier back for him."

"The Harrier's a fighter, sir," Ryan commented.

"They have an experimental two-seat version set up for ASW patrolling. It's supposed to work reasonably well outside their helo perimeter. That's how they bagged one of our attack boats, caught her napping." Painter finished off the last of his coffee.

"Okay, gentlemen, let's get ourselves down to ASW control and try and figure a way to run this circus act. CINCLANT will want to hear what I have in mind. I suppose I'd better decide for myself. We'll also call *Invincible* and have them send a bird back to ferry you out, Ryan."

Ryan followed the two admirals out of the room. He spent two hours watching Painter move ships around the ocean like a chess master with his pieces.

The USS Dallas

Bart Mancuso had been on duty in the attack center for more than twenty hours. Only a few hours of sleep separated this stretch from the previous one. He had been eating sandwiches and drinking coffee, and two cups of soup had been thrown in by his cooks for variety's sake. He examined his latest cup of freeze-dried without affection.

"Cap'n?" He turned. It was Roger Thompson, his sonar officer.

"Yes, what is it?" Mancuso pulled himself away from the tactical display that had occupied his attention for several days. Thompson was standing at the rear of the compartment. Jones was standing beside him holding a clipboard and what looked like a tape machine.

"Sir, Jonesy has something I think you ought to look at."

Mancuso didn't want to be bothered—extended time on duty always taxed his patience. But Jones looked eager and excited. "Okay, come on over to the chart table."

The *Dallas'* chart table was a new gadget wired into the BC-10

and projected onto a TV-type glass screen four feet square. The display moved as the *Dallas* moved. This made paper charts obsolete, though they were kept anyway. Charts can't break.

"Thanks, Skipper," Jones said, more humbly than usual. "I know you're kinda busy, but I think I got something here. That anomalous contact we had the other day's been bothering me. I had to leave it after the ruckus the other Russkie subs kicked up, but I was able to come back to it three times to make sure it was still there. The fourth time it was gone, faded out. I want to show you what I worked up. Can you punch up our course track for back then on this baby, sir?"

The chart table was interfaced through the BC-10 into the ship's inertial navigation system, SINS. Mancuso punched the command in himself. It was getting so that they couldn't flush the head without a computer command…The *Dallas'* course track showed up as a convoluted red line, with tick marks displayed at fifteen-minute intervals.

"Great!" Jones commented. "I've never seen it do that before. That's all right. Okay." Jones pulled a handful of pencils from his back pocket. "Now, I got the contact first at 0915 or so, and the bearing was about two-six-nine." He set a pencil down, eraser at *Dallas'* position, point directed west towards the target. "Then at 0930 it was bearing a two-six-zero. At 0948, it was two-five-zero. There's some error built into these, Cap'n. It was a tough signal to lock in on, but the errors should average out. Right about then we got all this other activity, and I had to go after them, but I came back to it about 1000, and the bearing was two-four-two." Jones set down another pencil on the due-east line traced when the *Dallas* had moved away from the Icelandic coast. "At 1015 it was two-three-four, and at 1030 it was two-two-seven. These last two are shaky, sir. The signal was real faint, and I didn't have a very good lock on it." Jones looked up. He appeared nervous.

"So far, so good. Relax, Jonesy. Light up if you want."

"Thanks, Cap'n." Jones fished out a cigarette and lit it with a butane lighter. He had never approached the captain quite this way. He knew Mancuso to be a tolerant, easygoing commander—if you had something to say. He was not a man who liked his time wasted, and it was sure as hell he wouldn't want it wasted now. "Okay, sir, we gotta figure he couldn't be too far away from us, right? I mean, he had to be between us and Iceland. So let's say he was about

halfway between. That gives him a course about like this." Jones set down some more pencils.

"Hold it, Jonesy. Where does the course come from?"

"Oh, yeah." Jones flipped open his clipboard. "Yesterday morning, night, whatever it was, after I got off watch, it started bothering me, so I used the move we made offshore as a baseline to do a little course track for him. I know how, Skipper. I read the manual. It's easy, just like we used to do at Cal Tech to chart star motion. I took an astronomy course in my freshman year."

Mancuso stifled a groan. It was the first time he had ever heard this called easy, but on looking at Jones' figures and diagrams, it appeared that he had done it right. "Go on."

Jones pulled a Hewlitt Packard scientific calculator from his pocket and what looked like a National Geographic map liberally coated with pencil marks and scribblings. "You want to check my figures, sir?"

"We will, but I'll trust you for now. What's the map?"

"Skipper, I know it's against the rules an' all, but I keep this as a personal record of the tracks the bad guys use. It doesn't leave the boat, sir, honest. I may be a little off, but all this translates to a course of about two-two-zero and a speed of ten knots. And *that* aims him right at the entrance of Route One. Okay?"

"Go on." Mancuso had already figured that one. Jonesy was on to something.

"Well, I couldn't sleep after that, so I skipped back to sonar and pulled the tape on the contact. I had to run it through the computer a few times to filter out all the crap—sea sounds, the other subs, you know—then I rerecorded it at ten times normal speed." He set his cassette recorder on the chart table. "Listen to this, Skipper."

The tape was scratchy, but every few seconds there was a *thrum*. Two minutes of listening seemed to indicate a regular interval of about five seconds. By this time Lieutenant Mannion was looking over Thompson's shoulder, listening, and nodding speculatively.

"Skipper, that's gotta be a man-made sound. It's just too regular for anything else. At normal speed it didn't make much sense, but once I speeded it up, I had the sucker."

"Okay, Jonesy, finish it," Mancuso said.

"Captain, what you just heard was the acoustical signature of a Russian submarine. He was heading for Route One, taking the inshore track off the Icelandic coast. You can bet money on that,

Skipper."

"Roger?"

"He sold me, Captain," Thompson replied.

Mancuso took another look at the course track, trying to figure an alternative. There wasn't any. "Me, too. Roger, Jonesy makes sonarman first class today. I want to see the paper work done by the turn of the next watch, along with a nice letter of commendation for my signature. Ron," he poked the sonarman in the shoulder, "that's all right. Damned well done!"

"Thanks, Skipper." Jones' smile stretched from ear to ear.

"Pat, please call Lieutenant Butler to the attack center."

Mannion went to the phones to call the boat's chief engineer.

"Any idea what it is, Jonesy?" Mancuso turned back.

The sonarman shook his head. "It isn't screw sounds. I've never heard anything like it." He ran the tape back and played it again.

Two minutes later, Lieutenant Earl Butler came into the attack center. "You rang, Skipper?"

"Listen to this, Earl." Mancuso rewound the tape and played it a third time.

Butler was a graduate of the University of Texas and every school the navy had for submarines and their engine systems. "What's that supposed to be?"

"Jonesy says it's a Russian sub. I think he's right."

"Tell me about the tape," Butler said to Jones.

"Sir, it's speeded up ten times, and I washed it through the BC-10 five times. At normal speed it doesn't sound like much of anything." With uncharacteristic modesty, Jones did not point out that it had sounded like something to him.

"Some sort of harmonic? I mean, if it was a propeller, it'd have to be a hundred feet across, and we'd be hearing one blade at a time. The regular interval suggests some sort of harmonic." Butler's face screwed up. "But a harmonic what?"

"Whatever it was, it was headed right here." Mancuso tapped Thor's Twins with his pencil.

"That makes him a Russian, all right," Butler agreed. "Then they're using something new. Again."

"Mr. Butler's right," Jones said. "It does sound like a harmonic rumble. The other funny thing is, well, there was this background noise, kinda like water going through a pipe. I don't know, it didn't pick up on this. I guess the computer filtered it off. It was real faint

to start with—anyway, that's outside my field."

"That's all right. You've done enough for one day. How do you feel?" Mancuso asked.

"A little tired, Skipper. I've been working on this for a while."

"If we get close to this guy again, you think you can track him down?" Mancuso knew the answer.

"You bet, Cap'n! Now that we know what to listen for, you bet I'll bag the sucker!"

Mancuso looked at the chart table. "Okay, if he was heading for the Twins, and then ran the route at, say twenty-eight or thirty knots, and then settled down to his base course and speed of about ten or so…that puts him about here now. Long ways off. Now, if we run at top speed…forty-eight hours will put us here, and that'll put us in front of him. Pat?"

"That's about right, sir," Lieutenant Mannion concurred. "You're figuring he ran the route at full speed, then settled down—makes sense. He wouldn't need the quiet drive in that damned maze. It gives him a free shot for four or five hundred miles, so why not uncrank his engines? That's what I'd do."

"That's what we'll try and do, then. We'll radio in for permission to leave Toll Booth station and track this character down. Jonesy, running at max speed means you sonarmen will be out of work for a while. Set up the contact tape on the simulator and make sure the operators all know what this guy sounds like, but get some rest. All of you. I want you at a hundred percent when we try to reacquire this guy. Have yourself a shower. Make that a Hollywood shower—you've earned it—and rack out. When we do go after this character, it'll be a long, tough hunt."

"No sweat, Captain. We'll get him for you. Bet on it. You want to keep my tape, sir?"

"Yeah." Mancuso ejected the tape and looked up in surprise. "You sacrificed a Bach for this?"

"Not a good one, sir. I have a Christopher Hogwood of this piece that's much better."

Mancuso pocketed the tape. "Dismissed, Jonesy. Nice work."

"A pleasure, Cap'n." Jones left the attack center counting the extra money for jumping a rate.

"Roger, make sure your people are well rested over the next two days. When we do go after this guy, it's going to be a bastard."

"Aye, Captain."

"Pat, get us up to periscope depth. We're going to call this one into Norfolk right now. Earl, I want you thinking about what's making that noise."

"Right, Captain."

While Mancuso drafted his message, Lieutenant Mannion brought the *Dallas* to periscope-antenna depth with an upward angle on the diving planes. It took five minutes to get from five hundred feet to just below the stormy surface. The submarine was subject to wave action, and while it was very gentle by surface ship standards, the crew noted her rocking. Mannion raised the periscope and ESM (electronic support measures) antenna, the latter used for the broad-band receiver designed to detect possible radar emissions. There was nothing in view—he could see about five miles—and the ESM instruments showed nothing except for aircraft sets, which were too far away to matter. Next Mannion raised two more masts. One was a reed-like UHF (ultrahigh frequency) receiving antenna. The other was new, a laser transmitter. This rotated and locked onto the carrier wave signal of the Atlantic SSIX, the communications satellite used exclusively by submarines. With the laser, they could send high-density transmissions without giving away the sub's position.

"All ready, sir," the duty radioman reported.

"Transmit."

The radioman pressed a button. The signal, sent in a fraction of a second, was received by photovoltaic cells, read over to a UHF transmitter, and shot back down by a parabolic dish antenna towards Atlantic Fleet Communications headquarters. At Norfolk another radioman noted the reception and pressed a button that transmitted the same signal up to the satellite and back to the *Dallas*. It was a simple way to identify garbles.

The *Dallas* operator compared the received signal with the one he'd just sent. "Good copy, sir."

Mancuso ordered Mannion to lower everything but the ESM and UHF antennae.

Atlantic Fleet Communications

In Norfolk the first line of the dispatch revealed the page and line of the one-time-pad cipher sequence, which was recorded on computer tape in the maximum security section of the communications

complex. An officer typed the proper numbers into his computer terminal, and an instant later the machine generated a clear text. The officer checked it again for garbles. Satisfied there were none, he took the printout to the other side of the room where a yeoman was seated at a telex. The officer handed him the dispatch.

The yeoman keyed up the proper addressee and transmitted the message by dedicated landline to COMSUBLANT Operations, half a mile away. The landline was fiber optic, located in a steel conduit under a paved street. It was checked three times a week for security purposes. Not even the secrets of nuclear weapons performance were as closely guarded as day-to-day tactical communications.

COMSUBLANT *Operations*

A bell went off in the operations room as the message came up on the "hot" printer. It bore a Z prefix, which indicated FLASH-priority status.

Z090414ZDEC

TOP SECRET THEO

FM: USS DALLAS

TO: COMSUBLANT

INFO: CINCLANTFLT

//NOOOOO//

REDFLEET SUBOPS

1. REPORT ANOMALOUS SONAR CONTACT ABOUT 0900Z 7DEC AND LOST AFTER INCREASE IN REDFLEET SUB ACTIVITY. CONTACT SUBSEQUENTLY EVALUATED AS REDFLEET SSN/SSBN TRANSITING ICELAND INSHORE TRACK TOWARDS ROUTE ONE. COURSE SOUTHWEST SPEED TEN DEPTH UNKNOWN.

2. CONTACT EVIDENCED UNUSUAL REPEAT UNUSUAL ACOUSTICAL CHARACTERISTICS. SIGNATURE UNLIKE ANY KNOWN REDFLEET SUBMARINE.

3. REQUEST PERMISSION TO LEAVE TOLL BOOTH TO PURSUE AND INVESTIGATE. BELIEVE A NEW DRIVE

SYSTEM WITH UNUSUAL SOUND CHARACTERISTICS BEING USED THIS SUB. BELIEVE GOOD PROBABILITY CAN LOCATE AND IDENTIFY.

A lieutenant junior grade took the dispatch to the office of Vice Admiral Vincent Gallery. COMSUBLANT had been on duty since the Soviet subs had started moving. He was in an evil mood.

"A FLASH priority from *Dallas*, sir."

"Uh-huh." Gallery took the yellow form and read it twice. "What do you suppose this means?"

"No telling, sir. Looks like he heard something, took his time figuring it out, and wants another crack at it. He seems to think he's onto something unusual."

"Okay, what do I tell him? Come on, mister. You might be an admiral yourself someday and have to make decisions." An unlikely prospect, Gallery thought.

"Sir, *Dallas* is in an ideal position to shadow their surface force when it gets to Iceland. We need her where she is."

"Good textbook answer." Gallery smiled up at the youngster, preparing to cut him off at the knees. "On the other hand, *Dallas* is commanded by a fairly competent man who wouldn't be bothering us unless he really thought he had something. He doesn't go into specifics, probably because it's too complicated for a tactical FLASH dispatch, and also because he thinks that we know his judgment is good enough to take his word on something. 'New drive system with unusual sound characteristics.' That may be a crock, but he's the man on the scene, and he wants an answer. We tell him yes."

"Aye aye, sir," the lieutenant said, wondering if the skinny old bastard made decisions by flipping a coin when his back was turned.

The Dallas

Z090432ZDEC

TOP SECRET

FM: COMSUBLANT

TO: USS DALLAS

A. USS DALLAS Z090414ZDEC

B. COMSUBLANT INST 2000.5

OPAREA ASSIGNMENT //N04220//

1. REQUEST REF A GRANTED.

2. AREAS BRAVO ECHO GOLF REF B ASSIGNED FOR UNRESTRICTED OPS 090500Z TO 140001Z. REPORT AS NECESSARY. VADM GALLERY SENDS.

"Hot damn!" Mancuso chuckled. That was one nice thing about Gallery. When you asked him a question, by God, you got an answer, yes or no, before you could rig your antenna in. Of course, he reflected, if it turned out that Jonesy was wrong and this was a wild-goose chase, he'd have some explaining to do. Gallery had handed more than one sub skipper his head in a bag and set him on the beach.

Which was where he was headed regardless, Mancuso knew. Since his first year at Annapolis all he had ever wanted was command of his own attack boat. He had that now, and he knew that the rest of his career would be downhill. In the rest of the navy your first command was just that, a first command. You could move up the ladder and command a fleet at sea eventually, if you were lucky and had the right stuff. Not submariners, though. Whether he did well with the *Dallas* or poorly, he'd lose her soon enough. He had this one and only chance. And afterwards, what? The best he could hope for was command of a missile boat. He'd served on those before and was sure that commanding one, even a new *Ohio*, was about as exciting as watching paint dry. The boomer's job was to stay hidden. Mancuso wanted to be the hunter, that was the exciting end of the business. And after commanding a missile boat? He could get a "major surface command," perhaps a nice oiler—it would be like switching mounts from Secretariat to Elsie the Cow. Or he could get a squadron command and sit in an office onboard a tender, pushing paper. At best in that position he'd go to sea once a month, his main purpose being to bother sub skippers who didn't want him there. Or he could get a desk job in the Pentagon—what fun! Mancuso understood why some of the astronauts had cracked up after coming back from the moon. He, too, had worked many years for this command, and in another year his boat would be

gone. He'd have to give the *Dallas* to someone else. But he did have her now.

"Pat, let's lower all masts and take her down to twelve hundred feet."

"Aye aye, sir. Lower the masts," Mannion ordered. A petty officer pulled on the hydraulic control levers.

"ESM and UHF masts lowered, sir," the duty electrician reported.

"Very well. Diving officer, make your depth twelve hundred feet."

"Twelve hundred feet, aye," the diving officer responded. "Fifteen degrees down-angle on the planes."

"Fifteen degrees down, aye."

"Let's move her, Pat."

"Aye, Skipper. All ahead full."

"All ahead full, aye." The helmsman reached up to turn the annunciator.

Mancuso watched his crew at work. They did their jobs with mechanistic precision. But they were not machines. They were men. His.

In the reactor spaces aft, Lieutenant Butler had his enginemen acknowledge the command and gave the necessary orders. The reactor coolant pumps went to fast speed. An increased amount of hot, pressurized water entered the exchanger, where its heat was transferred to the steam on the outside loop. When the coolant returned to the reactor it was cooler than it had been and therefore denser. Being denser, it trapped more neutrons in the reactor pile, increasing the ferocity of the fission reaction and giving off yet more power. Farther aft, saturated steam in the "outside" or nonradioactive loop of the heat exchange system emerged through clusters of control valves to strike the blades of the high-pressure turbine. The *Dallas*' huge bronze screw began to turn more quickly, driving her forward and down.

The engineers went about their duties calmly. The noise in the engine spaces rose noticeably as the systems began to put out more power, and the technicians kept track of this by continuously monitoring the banks of instruments under their hands. The routine was quiet and exact. There was no extraneous conversation, no distraction. Compared to a submarine's reactor spaces, a hospital operating room was a den of libertines.

Forward, Mannion watched the depth gauge go below six hundred feet. The diving officer would wait until they got to nine hundred feet before starting to level off, the object being to zero the dive out exactly at the ordered depth. Commander Mancuso wanted the *Dallas* below the thermocline. This was the border between different temperatures. Water settled in isothermal layers of uniform stratification. The relatively flat boundary where warmer surface water met colder depth water was a semipermeable barrier which tended to reflect sound waves. Those waves that did manage to penetrate the thermocline were mostly trapped below it. Thus, though the *Dallas* was now running below the thermocline at over thirty knots and making as much noise as she was capable of, she would still be difficult to detect with surface sonar. She would also be largely blind, but then, there was not much down there to run into.

Mancuso lifted the microphone for the PA system. “This is the captain speaking. We have just started a speed run that will last forty-eight hours. We are heading towards a point where we hope to locate a Russian sub that went past us two days ago. This Russkie is evidently using a new and rather quiet propulsion system that nobody’s run across before. We’re going to try and get ahead of him and track on him as he passes us again. This time we know what to listen for, and we’ll get a nice clear picture of him. Okay, I want everyone on this boat to be well rested. When we get there, it’ll be a long, tough hunt. I want everybody at a hundred percent. This one will probably be interesting.” He switched off the microphone. “What’s the movie tonight?”

The diving officer watched the depth gauge stop moving before answering. As chief of the boat, he was also manager of the *Dallas*’ cable TV system, three video-cassette recorders in the mess room which led to televisions in the wardroom, and various other crew accommodations. “Skipper, you got a choice. *Return of the Jedi* or two football tapes: Oklahoma-Nebraska and Miami-Dallas. Both those games were played while we were on the exercise, sir. It’ll be like watching them live.” He laughed. “Commercials and all. The cooks are already making the popcorn.”

“Good. I want everybody nice and loose.” Why couldn’t they ever get Navy tapes, Mancuso wondered. Of course, Army had creamed them this year…

“Morning, Skipper.” Wally Chambers, the executive officer,

came into the attack center. “What gives?”

“Come on back to the wardroom, Wally. I want you to listen to something.” Mancuso took the cassette from his shirt pocket and led Chambers aft.

The V. K. Konovalov

Two hundred miles northeast of the *Dallas*, in the Norwegian Sea, the *Konovalov* was racing southwest at forty-one knots. Captain Tupolev sat alone in the wardroom rereading the dispatch he’d received two days before. His emotions alternated between rage and grief. The Schoolmaster had done *that!* He was dumbfounded.

But what was there to do? Tupolev’s orders were explicit, the more so since, as his *zampolit* had pointed out, he was a former pupil of the traitor Ramius. He, too, could find himself in a very bad position. If the slug succeeded.

So, Marko had pulled a trick on everyone, not just the *Konovalov*. Tupolev had been slinking about the Barents Sea like a fool while Marko had been heading the other way. Laughing at everyone, Tupolev was sure. Such treachery, such a hellish threat against the *Rodina*. It was inconceivable—and all too conceivable. All the advantages Marko had. A four-room apartment, a dacha, his own Zhiguli. Tupolev did not yet have his own automobile. He had earned his way to a command, and now it was all threatened by—this! He’d be lucky to keep what he had.

I have to kill a friend, he thought. Friend? Yes, he admitted to himself, Marko had been a good friend and a fine teacher. Where had he gone wrong?

Natalia Bogdanova.

Yes, that had to be it. A big stink, the way that had happened. How many times had he had dinner with them, how many times had Natalia laughed about her fine, strong, big sons? He shook his head. A fine woman killed by a damned incompetent fool of a surgeon. Nothing could be done about it, he was the son of a Central Committee member. It was an outrage the way things like that still happened, even after three generations of building socialism. But nothing was sufficient to justify this madness.

Tupolev bent over the chart he’d brought back. He’d be on his station in five days, in less time if the engine plant held together and Marko wasn’t in too much of a hurry—and he wouldn’t be.

Marko was a fox, not a bull. The other *Alfas* would get there ahead of his, Tupolev knew, but it didn't matter. He had to do this himself. He'd get ahead of Marko and wait. Marko would try to slink past, and the *Konovalov* would be there. And the *Red October* would die.

The North Atlantic

The British Sea Harrier FRS.4 appeared a minute early. It hovered briefly off the *Kennedy*'s port beam as the pilot sized up his landing target, the wind, and sea conditions. Maintaining a steady thirty-knot forward speed to compensate for the carrier's forward speed, he side-slipped his fighter neatly to the right, then dropped it gently amidships, slightly forward of the *Kennedy*'s island structure, exactly in the center of the flight deck. Instantly a gang of deck crewmen raced for the aircraft, three carrying heavy metal chocks, another a metal ladder which he set up by the cockpit, whose canopy was already coming open. A team of four snaked a fueling hose towards the aircraft, eager to demonstrate the speed with which the U.S. Navy services aircraft. The pilot was dressed in an orange coverall and yellow life jacket. He set his helmet on the back of the front seat and came down the ladder. He watched briefly to be sure his fighter was in capable hands before sprinting to the island. He met Ryan at the hatch.

"You Ryan? I'm Tony Parker. Where's the loo?" Jack gave him the proper directions and the pilot darted off, leaving Ryan standing there in a flight suit, holding his bag and feeling stupid. A white plastic flight helmet dangled from his other hand as he watched the crewmen fueling the Harrier. He wondered if they knew what they were doing.

Parker was back in three minutes. "Commander," he said, "there's one thing they've never put in a fighter, and that's a bloody toilet. They fill you up with coffee and tea and send you off, and you've no place to go."

"I know the feeling. Anything else you have to do?"

"No, sir. Your admiral chatted with me on the radio when I was flying in. Looks like your chaps have finished fueling my bird. Shall we be off?"

"What do I do with this?" Ryan held up his bag, expecting to have to hold it in his lap. His briefing papers were inside the flight

suit, tucked against his chest.

"We put it in the boot, of course. Come along, sir."

Parker walked out to the fighter jauntily. The dawn was a feeble one. There was a solid overcast at one or two thousand feet. It wasn't raining, but looked as though it might. The sea, still rolling at about eight feet, was a gray, crinkled surface dotted with whitecaps. Ryan could feel the *Kennedy* moving, surprised that something so huge could be made to move at all. When they got to the Harrier, Parker took the duffle in one hand and reached for a recessed handle on the underside of the fighter. Twisting and pulling the lever, he revealed a cramped space about the size of a small refrigerator. Parker stuffed the bag into it, slamming the door shut behind it, making sure the locking lever was fully engaged. A deck crewman in a yellow shirt conferred with the pilot. Aft a helicopter was revving its engines, and a Tomcat fighter was taxiing towards a midships catapult. On top of this a thirty-knot wind was blowing. The carrier was a noisy place.

Parker waved Ryan up the ladder. Jack, who liked ladders about as much as he liked flying, nearly fell into his seat. He struggled to get situated properly, while a deck crewman strapped him into the four-point restraint system. The man put the helmet on Ryan's head and pointed to the jack for its intercom system. Maybe American crews really did know something about Harriers. Next to the plug was a switch. Ryan flipped it.

"Can you hear me, Parker?"

"Yes, Commander. All settled in?"

"I suppose."

"Right." Parker's head swiveled to check the engine intakes. "Starting the engine."

The canopies stayed up. Three crewmen stood close by with large carbon dioxide extinguishers, presumably in case the engine exploded. A dozen others were standing by the island, watching the strange aircraft as the Pegasus engine screamed to life. Then the canopy came down.

"Ready, Commander?"

"If you are."

The Harrier was not a large fighter, but it was certainly the loudest. Ryan could feel the engine noise ripple through his body as Parker adjusted his thrust-vector controls. The aircraft wobbled, dipped at the nose, then rose shakily into the air. Ryan saw a man

by the island point and gesture to them. The Harrier slid to port, moving away from the island as it gained in height.

"That wasn't too bad," Parker said. He adjusted the thrust controls, and the Harrier began true forward flight. There was little feeling of acceleration, but Ryan saw that the *Kennedy* was rapidly falling behind. A few seconds later they were beyond the inner ring of escorts.

"Let's get on top of this muck," Parker said. He pulled back on the stick and headed for the clouds. In seconds they were in them, and Ryan's field of view was reduced from five miles to five feet in an instant.

Jack looked around his cockpit, which had flight controls and instruments. Their airspeed showed one hundred fifty knots and rising, altitude four hundred feet. This Harrier had evidently been a trainer, but the instrument panel had been altered to include the read-out instruments for a sensor pod that could be attached to the belly. A poor man's way of doing things, but from what Admiral Painter said it had evidently worked well enough. He figured the TV-type screen was the FLIR readout, which monitored a forward-looking infrared heat sensor. The airspeed gauge now said three hundred knots, and the climb indicator showed a twenty-degree angle of attack. It felt like more than that.

"Should be hitting the top of this soon," Parker said. "Now!"

The altimeter showed twenty-six thousand feet when Ryan was blasted by pure sunlight. One thing about flying that he never got used to was that no matter how awful the weather was on the ground, if you flew high enough you could always find the sun. The light was intense, but the sky's color was noticeably deeper than the soft blue seen from the ground. The ride became airliner smooth as they escaped the lower turbulence. Ryan fumbled with his visor to shield his eyes.

"That better, sir?"

"Fine, Lieutenant. It's better than I expected."

"What do you mean, sir?" Parker inquired.

"I guess it beats flying on a commercial bird. You can see more. That helps."

"Sorry we don't have any extra fuel, or I'd show you some aerobatics. The Harrier will do almost anything you ask of her."

"That's all right."

"And your admiral," Parker went on conversationally, "said that

you don't fancy flying."

Ryan's hands grabbed the armrests as the Harrier went through three complete revolutions before snapping back to level flight. He surprised himself by laughing. "Ah, the British sense of humor."

"Orders from your admiral, sir," Parker semi-apologized. "We wouldn't want you to think the Harrier's another bloody bus."

Which admiral, Ryan wondered, Painter or Davenport? Probably both. The top of the clouds was like a rolling field of cotton. He'd never appreciated that before, looking through a foot-square window on an airliner. In the back seat he almost felt as if he were sitting outside.

"May I ask a question, sir?"

"Sure."

"What's the flap?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, sir, that they turned my ship around. Then I get orders to ferry a VIP from *Kennedy* to *Invincible*."

"Oh, okay. Can't say, Parker. I'm delivering some messages to your boss. I'm just the mailman," Ryan lied. Roll that one three times.

"Excuse me, Commander, but you see, my wife is expecting a child, our first, soon after Christmas. I hope to be there, sir."

"Where do you live?"

"Chatham, that's—"

"I know. I live in England myself at the moment. Our place is in Marlow, upriver from London. My second kid got started over there."

"Born there?"

"Started there. My wife says it's those strange hotel beds, do it to her every time. If I were a betting man, I'd give you good odds, Parker. First babies are always late anyway."

"You say you live in Marlow?"

"That's right, we built a house there earlier this year."

"Jack Ryan—John Ryan? The same chap who—"

"Correct. You don't have to tell anybody that, Lieutenant."

"Understood, sir. I didn't know you were a naval officer."

"That's why you don't have to tell anyone."

"Yes, sir. Sorry for the stunt earlier."

"That's all right. Admirals must have their little laughs. I understand you guys just ran an exercise with our guys."

"Indeed we did, Commander. I sank one of your submarines, the *Tullibee*. My systems operator and I, that is. We caught her near the surface at night with our FLIR and dropped noisemakers all round her. You see, we didn't let anyone know about our new equipment. All's fair, as you know. I understand her commander was bloody furious. I'd hoped to meet him in Norfolk, but he didn't arrive until the day we sailed."

"You guys have a good time in Norfolk?"

"Yes, Commander. We were able to get in a day's shooting on your Chesapeake Bay, the Eastern Shore, I believe you call it."

"Oh yeah? I used to hunt there. How was it?"

"Not bad. I got my three geese in half an hour. Bag limit was three—stupid."

"You called in and blasted three geese in a half hour this late in the season?"

"That is how I earn my modest living, Commander, shooting," Parker commented.

"I was up for a grouse shoot with your admiral last September. They made me use a double. If you show up with my kind of gun—I use a Remington automatic—they look at you like you're some kind of terrorist. I got stuck with a pair of Purdeys that didn't fit. Got fifteen birds. Seemed an awful lazy way to hunt, though, with one guy loading my gun for me, and another platoon of ghillies driving the game. We just about annihilated the bird population, too."

"We have more game per acre than you do."

"That's what the admiral said. How far to *Invincible?*"

"Forty minutes."

Ryan looked at the fuel gauges. They were half empty already. In a car he'd be thinking about a fill-up. All that fuel gone in half an hour. Well, Parker didn't seem excited.

The landing on HMS *Invincible* was different from the COD's arrival on the *Kennedy*. The ride became rocky as Parker descended through the clouds, and it occurred to Ryan that they were on the leading edge of the same storm he'd endured the night before. The canopy was coated with rain, and he heard the impact of thousands of raindrops on the airframe—or was it hail? Watching the instruments, he saw that Parker leveled out at a thousand feet, while they were still in clouds, then descended more slowly, breaking into the clear at a hundred feet. The *Invincible* was scarcely a half the *Kennedy*'s size. He watched her bobbing actively on the

fifteen-foot seas. Parker used the same technique as before. He hovered briefly on the carrier's port side, then slid to the right, dropping the fighter twenty feet onto a painted circle. The landing was hard, but Ryan was able to see it coming. The canopy came up at once.

"You can get out here," Parker said. "I have to taxi to the elevator."

A ladder was already in place. He unbuckled and got out. A crewman had already retrieved his bag. Ryan followed him to the island and was met by an ensign—a sublieutenant, the British call the rank.

"Welcome aboard, sir." The youngster couldn't be more than twenty, Ryan thought. "Let me help you out of the flight suit."

The sublieutenant stood by as Ryan unzipped and took off his helmet, Mae West, and coverall. He retrieved his cap from the bag. In the process he bounced off the bulkhead a few times. The *Invincible* seemed to be corkscrewing in a following sea. A bow wind and a following sea? In the North Atlantic in winter, nothing was too crazy. The officer took his bag, and Ryan held onto the briefing material.

"Lead on, *lef*tenant," Ryan gestured. The youngster shot up a series of three ladders, leaving Jack panting behind, thinking about the jogging he wasn't getting in. The combination of the ship's motion and an inner ear badly scrambled from the day's flying made him dizzy, and he found himself bumping into things. How did professional pilots do it?

"Here's the flag bridge, sir." The sublieutenant held the door open.

"Hello, Jack!" boomed the voice of Vice Admiral John White, eighth earl of Weston. He was a tall, well-built man of fifty with a florid complexion set off by a white scarf at his neck. Jack had first met him earlier in the year, and since then his wife Cathy and the countess, Antonia, had become close friends, members of the same circle of amateur musicians. Cathy Ryan played classical piano. Toni White, an attractive woman of forty-four, owned a Guarnieri del Jesu violin. Her husband was a man whose peerage was treated as the convenient afterthought. His career in the Royal Navy had been built entirely on merit. Jack walked over to take his hand.

"Good day, Admiral."

"How was your flight?"

“Different. I’ve never been in a fighter before, much less one with ambitions to mate with a hummingbird,” Ryan smiled. The bridge was overheated, and it felt good.

“Jolly good. Let’s go aft to my sea cabin.” White dismissed the sublieutenant, who handed Jack his bag before withdrawing. The admiral led him aft through a short passageway and left into a small compartment.

It was surprisingly austere, considering that the English liked their comforts and that White was a peer. There were two curtained portholes, a desk, and a couple of chairs. The only human touch was a color photograph of his wife. The entire port wall was covered with a chart of the North Atlantic.

“You look tired, Jack.” White waved him to the upholstered chair.

“I am tired. I’ve been on the go since—hell, since 6:00 A.M. yesterday. I don’t know about time changes, I think my watch is still on European time.”

“I have a message for you.” White pulled a slip of paper from his pocket and handed it over.

“Greer to Ryan. WILLOW confirmed,” Ryan read. “Basil sends regards. Ends.” Somebody had confirmed WILLOW. Who? Maybe Sir Basil, maybe Ritter. Ryan would not quote odds on that one.

Jack tucked it in his pocket. “This is good news, sir.”

“Why the uniform?”

“Not my idea, Admiral. You know who I work for, right? They figured I’d be less conspicuous this way.”

“At least it fits.” The admiral lifted a phone and ordered refreshments sent to them. “How’s the family, Jack?”

“Fine, thank you, sir. The day before I came over Cathy and Toni were playing over at Nigel Ford’s place. I missed it. You know, if they get much better, we ought to have a record cut. There aren’t too many violin players better than your wife.”

A steward arrived with a plateful of sandwiches. Jack had never figured out the British taste for cucumbers on bread.

“So, what’s the flap?”

“Admiral, the significance of the message you just gave me is that I can tell this to you and three other officers. This is very hot stuff, sir. You’ll want to make your choices accordingly.”

“Hot enough to turn my little fleet around.” White thought it over before lifting the phone and ordering three of his officers to

the cabin. He hung up. “Captain Carstairs, Captain Hunter, and Commander Barclay—they are, respectively, *Invincible*’s commanding officer, my fleet operations officer, and my fleet intelligence officer.”

“No chief of staff?”

“Flew home, death in the family. Something for your coffee?” White extracted what looked like a brandy bottle from a desk drawer.

“Thank you, Admiral.” He was grateful for the brandy. The coffee needed the help. He watched the admiral pour a generous amount, perhaps with the ulterior motive of making him speak more freely. White had been a British sailor longer than he’d been Ryan’s friend.

The three officers arrived together, two carrying folding metal chairs.

“Admiral,” Ryan began, “you might want to leave that bottle out. After you hear this story, we might all need a drink.” He passed out his two remaining briefing folders and talked from memory. His delivery took fifteen minutes.

“Gentlemen,” he concluded, “I must insist that this information be kept strictly confidential. For the moment no one outside this room may learn it.”

“That is too bad,” Carstairs said. “This makes for a bloody good sea story.”

“And our mission?” White was holding the photographs. He poured Ryan another shot of brandy, gave the bottle a brief look, then stowed it back in the desk.

“Thank you, Admiral. For the moment our mission is to locate *Red October*. After that we’re not sure. I imagine just locating her will be hard enough.”

“An astute observation, Commander Ryan,” Hunter said.

“The good news is that Admiral Painter has requested that CINCLANT assign you control of several U.S. Navy vessels, probably three 1052-class frigates, and a pair of FFG *Perrys*. They all carry a chopper or two.”

“Well, Geoffrey?” White asked.

“It’s a start,” Hunter agreed.

“They’ll be arriving in a day or two. Admiral Painter asked me to express his confidence in your group and its personnel.”

“A whole fucking Russian missile submarine…” Barclay said

almost to himself. Ryan laughed.

"Like the idea, Commander?" At least he had one convert.

"What if the sub is heading for the U.K.? Does it then become a British operation?" Barclay asked pointedly.

"I suppose it would, but from the way I read the map, if Ramius was heading for England, he'd already be there. I saw a copy of the president's letter to the prime minister. In return for your assistance, the Royal Navy gets the same access to the data we develop as our guys get. We're on the same side, gentlemen. The question is, can we do it?"

"Hunter?" the admiral asked.

"If this intelligence is correct…I'd say we have a good chance, perhaps as good as fifty percent. On one hand, we have a missile submarine attempting to evade detection. On the other, we have a great deal of ASW arrayed to locate her, and she will be heading towards one of only a few discrete locations. Norfolk, of course, Newport, Groton, King's Bay, Port Everglades, Charleston. A civilian port such as New York is less likely, I think. The problem is, what with Ivan sending all his *Alfas* racing to your coast, they will get there ahead of *October*. They may have a specific port target in mind. We'll know that in another day. So, I'd say they have an equal chance. They'll be able to operate far enough off your coast that your government will have no viable legal reason to object to whatever they do. If anything, I'd say the Soviets have the advantage. They have both a clearer idea of the submarine's capabilities and a simpler overall mission. That more than balances their less capable sensors."

"Why isn't Ramius coming on faster?" Ryan asked. "That's the one thing I can't figure. Once he clears the SOSUS lines off Iceland, he's clear into the deep basin—so why not crack his throttles wide open and race for our coast?"

"At least two reasons," Barclay answered. "How much operational intelligence data do you see?"

"I handle individual assignments. That means I hop around a lot from one thing to another. I know a good deal about their boomers, for example, but not as much about their attack boats." Ryan didn't have to explain he was CIA.

"Well, you know how compartmentalized the Sovs are. Ramius probably doesn't know where their attack submarines are, not all of them. So, if he were to race about, he'd run the off chance of

blundering into a stray *Victor* and being sunk without ever knowing what was happening. Second, what if the Soviets did enlist American assistance, saying perhaps that a missile sub had been taken over by a mutinous crew of Maoist counterrevolutionaries—and then your navy detects a missile submarine racing down the North Atlantic towards the American coast. What would your president do?"

"Yeah," Ryan nodded. "We'd blow it the hell out of the water."

"There you have it. Ramius is in the trade of stealth, and he'll likely stick to what he knows," Barclay concluded. "Fortunately or unfortunately, he's jolly good at it."

"How soon will we have performance data on this quiet drive system?" Carstairs wanted to know.

"Next couple of days, we hope."

"Where does Admiral Painter want us?" White asked.

"The plan he submitted to Norfolk puts you on the right flank. He wants *Kennedy* inshore to handle the threat from their surface force. He wants your force farther out. You see, Painter thinks there's the chance that Ramius will come straight south from the G-I-U.K. gap into the Atlantic basin and just sit for a while. The odds favor his not being detected there, and if the Soviets send the fleet after him, he's got the time and supplies to sit out there longer than they can maintain a force off our coast—both for technical and political reasons. Additionally, he wants your striking power out here to threaten their flank. It has to be approved by the commander in chief of the Atlantic Fleet, and a lot of details, remain to be worked out. For example, Painter requested some E-3 Sentries to support you out here."

"A month in the middle of the North Atlantic in winter?" Carstairs winced. He had been the *Invincible*'s executive officer during the war around the Falklands and had ridden in the violent South Atlantic for endless weeks.

"Be happy for the E-3s." The admiral smiled. "Hunter, I want to see plans for using all these ships the Yanks are giving us, and how we can cover a maximum area. Barclay, I want to see your evaluation of what our friend Ramius will do. Assume he's still the clever bastard we've come to know and love."

"Aye aye, sir." Barclay stood with the others.

"Jack, how long will you be with us?"

"I don't know, Admiral. Until they recall me to the *Kennedy*, I

guess. From where I sit, this operation was laid on too fast. Nobody really knows what the hell we're supposed to do."

"Well, why don't you let us see to this for a while? You look exhausted. Get some sleep."

"True enough, Admiral." Ryan was beginning to feel the brandy.

"There's a cot in the locker over there. I'll have someone set it up for you, and you can sleep in here for the time being. If anything comes in for you, we'll get you up."

"That's kind of you, sir." Admiral White was a good guy, Jack thought, and his wife was something very special. In ten minutes, Ryan was on the cot and asleep.

The Red October

Every two days the *starpom* collected the radiation badges. This was part of a semiformal inspection. After seeing to it that every crewman's shoes were spit-shined, every bunk was properly made, and every footlocker was arranged according to the book, the executive officer would take the two-day-old badges and hand the sailors new ones, usually along with some terse advice to square themselves away as New Soviet Men ought. Borodin had this procedure down to a science. Today, as always, the trip from one compartment to another took two hours. When he was finished, the bag on his left hip was full of old badges, and the one on his right depleted of new ones. He took the badges to the ship's medical officer.

"Comrade Petrov, I have a gift for you." Borodin set the leather bag on the physician's desk.

"Good." The doctor smiled up at the executive officer. "With all the healthy young men I have little to do but read my journals."

Borodin left Petrov to his task. First the doctor set the badges out in order. Each bore a three-digit number. The first digit identified the badge series, so that if any radiation were detected there would be a time reference. The second digit showed where the sailor worked, the third where he slept. This system was easier to work with than the old one, which had used individual numbers for each man.

The developing process was cookbook-simple. Petrov could do it without a thought. First he switched off the white overhead light and replaced it with a red one. Then he locked his office door. Next

he took the development rack from its holder on the bulkhead, broke open the plastic holders, and transferred the film strips to spring clips on the rack.

Petrov took the rack into the adjacent laboratory and hung it on the handle of the single filing cabinet. He filled three large square basins with chemicals. Though a qualified physician, he had forgotten most of his inorganic chemistry and didn't remember exactly what the developing chemicals were. Basin number one was filled from bottle number one. Basin two was filled from bottle two, and basin three, he remembered, was filled with water. Petrov was in no hurry. The midday meal was not for two more hours, and his duties were truly boring. The last two days he had been reading his medical texts on tropical diseases. The doctor was looking forward to visiting Cuba as much as anyone aboard. With luck a crewman would come down with some obscure malady, and he'd have something interesting to work on for once.

Petrov set the lab timer for seventy-five seconds and submerged the film strips in the first basin as he pressed the start button. He watched the timer under the red light, wondering if the Cubans still made rum. He had been there, too, years before, and acquired a taste for the exotic liquor. Like any good Soviet citizen, he loved his vodka but had the occasional hankering for something different.

The timer went off and he lifted the rack, shaking it carefully over the tank. No sense getting the chemical—silver nitrate? something like that—on his uniform. The rack went into the second tank, and he set the timer again. Pity the orders had been so damned secret—he could have brought his tropical uniform. He'd sweat like a pig in the Cuban heat. Of course, none of those savages ever bothered to wash. Maybe they had learned something in the past fifteen years? He'd see.

The timer *dinged* again, and Petrov lifted the rack a second time, shaking it and setting it in the water-filled basin. Another boring job completed. Why couldn't a sailor fall down a ladder and break something? He wanted to use his East German X-ray machine on a live patient. He didn't trust the Germans, Marxists or not, but they did make good medical equipment, including his X-ray, autoclave, and most of his pharmaceuticals. Time. Petrov lifted the rack and held it up against the X-ray reading plate, which he switched on.

"*Nichevo!*" Petrov breathed. He had to think. His badge was fogged. Its number was 3-4-8: third badge series, frame fifty-four

(the medical office, galley section), aft (officers') accommodations.

Though only two centimeters across, the badges were made with variable sensitivity. Ten vertically segmented columns were used to quantify the exposure level. Petrov saw that his was fogged all the way to segment four. The engine room crewmen's were fogged to segment five, and the torpedomen, who spent all their time forward, showed contamination only in segment one.

"Son of a bitch." He knew the sensitivity levels by heart. He took the manual down to check them anyway. Fortunately, the segments were logarithmic. His exposure was twelve rads. Fifteen to twenty-five for the engineers. Twelve to twenty-five rads in two days, not enough to be dangerous. Not really life threatening, but…Petrov went back into his office, careful to leave the films in the labs. He picked up the phone.

"Captain Ramius? Petrov here. Could you come aft to my office, please?"

"On the way, Comrade Doctor."

Ramius took his time. He knew what the call was about. The day before they sailed, while Petrov had been ashore procuring drugs for his cupboard, Borodin had contaminated the badges with the X-ray machine.

"Yes, Petrov?" Ramius closed the door behind him.

"Comrade Captain, we have a radiation leak."

"Nonsense. Our instruments would have detected it at once."

Petrov got the films from the lab and handed them to the captain. "Look here."

Ramius held them up to the light, scanning the film strips top to bottom. He frowned. "Who knows of this?"

"You and I, Comrade Captain."

"You will tell no one—no one." Ramius paused. "Any chance that the films were—that they have something wrong, that you made an error in the developing process?"

Petrov shook his head emphatically. "No, Comrade Captain. Only you, Comrade Borodin, and I have access to these. As you know, I tested random samples from each batch three days before we sailed." Petrov wouldn't admit that, like everyone, he had taken the samples from the top of the box they were stored in. They weren't really random.

"The maximum exposure I see here is…ten to twenty?" Ramius understated it. "Whose numbers?"

"Bulganin and Surzpoi. The torpedomen forward are all under three rads."

"Very well. What we have here, Comrade Doctor, is a possible minor—minor, Petrov—leak in the reactor spaces. At worst a gas leak of some sort. This has happened before, and no one has ever died from it. The leak will be found and fixed. We will keep this little secret. There is no reason to get the men excited over nothing."

Petrov nodded agreement, knowing that men had died in 1970 in an accident on the submarine *Voroshilov*, more in the icebreaker *Lenin*. Both accidents were a long time ago, though, and he was sure Ramius could handle things. Wasn't he?

The Pentagon

The E ring was the outermost and largest of the Pentagon's rings, and since its outside windows offered something other than a view of sunless courtyards, this was where the most senior defense officials had their offices. One of these was the office of the director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the J-3. He wasn't there. He was down in a subbasement room known colloquially as the Tank because its metal walls were dotted with electronic noisemakers to foil other electronic devices.

He had been there for twenty-four hours, though one would not have known this from his appearance. His green trousers were still creased, his khaki shirt still showed the folds made by the laundry, its collar starched plywood-stiff, and his tie was held neatly in place by a gold marine corps tiepin. Lieutenant General Edwin Harris was neither a diplomat nor a service academy graduate, but he was playing peacemaker. An odd position for a marine.

"God damn it!" It was the voice of Admiral Blackburn, CINCLANT. Also present was his own operations officer, Rear Admiral Pete Stanford. "Is this any way to run an operation?"

The Joint Chiefs were all there, and none of them thought so.

"Look, Blackie, I told you where the orders come from." General Hilton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sounded tired.

"I understand that, General, but this is largely a submarine operation, right? I gotta get Vince Gallery in on this, and you should have Sam Dodge working up at this end. Dan and I are both fighter jocks, Pete's an ASW expert. We need a sub driver in on

this."

"Gentlemen," Harris said calmly, "for the moment the plan we have to take to the president need only deal with the Soviet threat. Let's hold this story about the defecting boomer in abeyance for the moment, shall we?"

"I agree," Stanford nodded. "We have enough to worry about right here."

The attention of the eight flag officers turned to the map table. Fifty-eight Soviet submarines and twenty-eight surface warships, plus a gaggle of oilers and replenishment ships, were unmistakably heading for the American coast. To face this, the U.S. Navy had one available carrier. The *Invincible* did not rate as such. The threat was considerable. Among them the Soviet vessels carried over three hundred surface-to-surface cruise missiles. Though principally designed as antiship weapons, the third of them believed to carry nuclear warheads were sufficient to devastate the cities of the East Coast. From a position off New Jersey, these missiles could range from Norfolk to Boston.

"Josh Painter proposes that we keep *Kennedy* inshore," Admiral Blackburn said. "He wants to run the ASW operation from his carrier, transferring his light attack squadrons to shore and replacing them with S-3s. He wants *Invincible* out on their seaward flank."

"I don't like it," General Harris said. Neither did Pete Stanford, and they had agreed earlier that the J-3 would launch the counterplan. "Gentlemen, if we're only going to have one deck to use, we damned well ought to have a carrier and not an oversized ASW platform."

"We're listening, Eddie," Hilton said.

"Let's move *Kennedy* out here." He moved the counter to a position west of the Azores. "Josh keeps his attack squadrons. We move *Invincible* inshore to handle the ASW work. It's what the Brits designed her for, right? They're supposed to be good at it. *Kennedy* is an offensive weapon, her mission is to threaten them. Okay, if we deploy like this, she is the threat. From over here she can range against their surface force from outside their surface-to-surface missile perimeter—"

"Better yet," Stanford interjected, pointing to some vessels on the map, "threaten this service force here. If they lose these oilers, they ain't going home. To meet that threat they'll have to redeploy

themselves. For starters, they'll have to move *Kiev* offshore to give themselves some kind of air defense against *Kennedy*. We can use the spare S-3s from shore bases. They can still patrol the same areas." He traced a line about five hundred miles off the coast.

"Leaves *Invincible* kind of naked, though," the CNO, Admiral Foster, noted.

"Josh was asking about some E-3 coverage for the Brits." Blackburn looked at the air force chief of staff, General Claire Barnes.

"You want help, you get help," Barnes said. "We'll have a Sentry operating over *Invincible* at dawn tomorrow, and if you move her inshore we can maintain that round the clock. I'll throw in a wing of F-16s if you want."

"What do you want in return, Max?" Foster asked. Nobody called him Claire.

"The way I see this, you have *Saratoga*'s air wing sitting around doing nothing. Okay, by Saturday I'll have five hundred tactical fighters deployed from Dover to Loring. My boys don't know much about antiship stuff. They'll have to learn in a hurry. I want you to send your kids to work with mine, and I also want your Tomcats. I like the fighter-missile combination. Let one squadron work out of Iceland, the other out of New England to track the Bears Ivan's starting to send our way. I'll sweeten that. If you want, we'll send some tankers to Lajes to help keep *Kennedy*'s birds flying."

"Blackie?" Foster asked.

"Deal," Blackburn nodded. "The only thing that bothers me is that *Invincible* doesn't have all that much ASW capacity."

"So we get more," Stanford said. "Admiral, what say we take *Tarawa* out of Little Creek, team her with *New Jersey*'s group, with a dozen ASW choppers aboard and seven or eight Harriers?"

"I like it," Harris said quickly. "Then we have two baby carriers with a noteworthy striking force right in front of their groups, *Kennedy* playing stalking tiger to their east, and a few hundred tactical fighters to the west. They have to come into a three-way box. This actually gives us more ASW patrolling capacity than we'd have otherwise."

"Can *Kennedy* handle her mission alone out there?" Hilton asked.

"Depend on it," Blackburn replied. "We can kill any one, maybe any two of these four groups in an hour. The ones nearest shore will

be your job, Max."

"How long did you two characters rehearse this?" General Maxwell, commandant of the marine corps, asked the operations officer. Everyone chuckled.

The Red October

Chief Engineer Melekhin cleared the reactor compartment before beginning the check for the leak. Ramius and Petrov were there also, plus the engineering duty officers and one of the young lieutenants, Svyadov. Three of the officers carried Geiger counters.

The reactor room was quite large. It had to be to accommodate the massive, barrel-shaped steel vessel. The object was warm to the touch despite being inactive. Automatic radiation detectors were in every corner of the room, each surrounded by a red circle. More were hanging on the fore and aft bulkheads. Of all the compartments on the submarine, this was the cleanest. The deck and bulkheads were spotless white-painted steel. The reason was obvious: the smallest leak of reactor coolant had to be instantly visible even if all the detectors failed.

Svyadov climbed an aluminum ladder affixed to the side of the reactor vessel to run the detachable probe from his counter over every welded pipe joint. The speaker-annunciator on the hand-held box was turned to maximum so that everyone in the compartment could hear it, and Svyadov had an earpiece plugged in for even greater sensitivity. A youngster of twenty-one, he was nervous. Only a fool would feel entirely safe looking for a radiation leak. There is a joke in the Soviet Navy: How do you tell a sailor from the Northern Fleet? He glows in the dark. It had been a good laugh on the beach, but not now. He knew that he was conducting the search because he was the youngest, least experienced, and most expendable officer. It was an effort to keep his knees from wobbling as he strained to reach all over and around the reactor piping.

The counter was not entirely silent, and Svyadov's stomach cringed at each click generated by the passage of a random particle through the tube of ionized gas. Every few seconds his eyes flickered to the dial that measured intensity. It was well inside the safe range, hardly registering at all. The reactor vessel was a quadruple-layer design, each layer several centimeters of tough stainless steel. The three inner spaces were filled with a barium-

water mixture, then a barrier of lead, then polyethylene, all designed to prevent the escape of neutrons and gamma particles. The combination of steel, barium, lead, and plastic successfully contained the dangerous elements of the reaction, allowing only a few degrees of heat to escape, and the dial showed, much to his relief, that the radiation level was less than that on the beach at Sochi. The highest reading was made next to a light bulb. This made the lieutenant smile.

"All readings in normal range, comrades," Svyadov reported.

"Start over," Melekhin ordered, "from the beginning."

Twenty minutes later Svyadov, now sweating from the warm air that gathered at the top of the compartment, made an identical report. He came down awkwardly, his arms and legs tired.

"Have a cigarette," Ramius suggested. "You did well, Svyadov."

"Thank you, Comrade Captain. It's warm up there from the lights and the coolant pipes." The lieutenant handed the counter to Melekhin. The lower dial showed a cumulative count, well within the safe range.

"Probably some contaminated badges," the chief engineer commented sourly. "It would not be the first time. Some joker in the factory or at the yard supply office—something for our friends in the GRU to check into. 'Wreckers!' A joke like this ought to earn somebody a bullet."

"Perhaps," Ramius chuckled. "Remember the incident on *Lenin?*" He referred to the nuclear-powered icebreaker that had spent two years tied to the dock, unusable because of a reactor mishap. "A ship's cook had some badly crusted pans, and a madman of an engineer suggested that he use live steam to get them cleaned. So the idiot walked down to the steam generator and opened an inspection valve, with his pots under it!"

Melekhin rolled his eyes. "I remember it! I was a staff engineering officer then. The captain had asked for a Kazakh cook —"

"He liked horsemeat with his kasha," Ramius said.

"—and the fool didn't know the first thing about a ship. Killed himself and three other men, contaminated the whole fucking compartment for twenty months. The captain only got out of the gulag last year."

"I bet the cook got his pans cleaned, though," Ramius observed.

"Indeed, Marko Aleksandrovich—they may even be safe to use

in another fifty years." Melekhin laughed raucously.

That was a hell of a thing to say in front of a young officer, Petrov thought. There was nothing, nothing at all funny about a reactor leak. But Melekhin was known for his heavy sense of humor, and the doctor imagined that twenty years of working on reactors allowed him and the captain to view the potential dangers phlegmatically. Then, there was the implicit lesson in the story: never let someone who does not belong into the reactor spaces.

"Very well," Melekhin said, "now we check the pipes in the generator room. Come, Svyadov, we still need your young legs."

The next compartment aft contained the heat exchanger/steam generator, turboalternators, and auxiliary equipment. The main turbines were in the next compartment, now inactive while the electrically driven caterpillar was operating. In any case, the steam that turned them was supposed to be clean. The only radioactivity was in the inside loop. The reactor coolant, which carried short-lived but dangerous radioactivity, never flashed to steam. This was in the outside loop and boiled from uncontaminated water. The two water supplies met but never mixed inside the heat exchanger, the most likely site for a coolant leak because of its more numerous fittings and valves.

The more complex piping required a full fifty minutes to check. These pipes were not as well insulated as those forward. Svyadov nearly burned himself twice, and his face was bathed in perspiration by the time he finished his first sweep.

"Readings all safe again, comrades."

"Good," Melekhin said. "Come down and rest a moment before you check it again."

Svyadov almost thanked his chief for that, but this would not have done at all. As a young, dedicated officer and member of the Komsomol, no exertion was too great. He came down carefully, and Melekhin handed him another cigarette. The chief engineer was a gray-haired perfectionist who took decent care of his men.

"Why, thank you, Comrade," Svyadov said.

Petrov got a folding chair. "Sit, Comrade Lieutenant, rest your legs."

The lieutenant sat down at once, stretching his legs to work out the knots. The officers at VVMUPP had told him how lucky he was to draw this assignment. Ramius and Melekhin were the two best teachers in the fleet, men whose crews appreciated their kindness

along with their competence.

"They really should insulate those pipes," Ramius said. Melekhin shook his head.

"Then they'd be too hard to inspect." He handed the counter to his captain.

"Entirely safe," the captain read off the cumulative dial. "You get more exposure tending a garden."

"Indeed," Melekhin said. "Coal miners get more exposure than we do, from the release of radon gas in the mines. Bad badges, that's what it has to be. Why not take out a whole batch and check it?"

"I could, Comrade," Petrov answered. "But then, due to the extended nature of our cruise, we'd have to run for several days without any. Contrary to regulations. I'm afraid."

"You are correct. In any case the badges are only a backup to our instruments." Ramius gestured to the red-circled detectors all over the compartment.

"Do you really want to recheck the piping?" Melekhin asked.

"I think we should," Ramius said.

Svyadov swore to himself, looking down at the deck.

"There is no extravagance in the pursuit of safety," Petrov quoted doctrine. "Sorry, Lieutenant." The doctor was not a bit sorry. He had been genuinely worried, and was now feeling a lot better.

An hour later the second check had been completed. Petrov took Svyadov forward for salt tablets and tea to rehydrate himself. The senior officers left, and Melekhin ordered the reactor plant restarted.

The enlisted men filed back to their duty stations, looking at one another. Their officers had just checked the "hot" compartments with radiation instruments. The medical corpsman had looked pale a while earlier and refused to say anything. More than one engine attendant fingered his radiation badge and checked his wristwatch to see how long it would be before he went off duty.

THE EIGHTH DAY
FRIDAY, 10 DECEMBER

HMS Invincible

Ryan awoke in the dark. The curtains were drawn on the cabin's two small portholes. He shook his head a few times to clear it and began to assess what was going on around him. The *Invincible* was moving on the seas, but not as much as before. He got up to look out of a porthole and saw the last red glow of sunset aft under scudding clouds. He checked his watch and did some clumsy mental arithmetic, concluding that it was six in the evening, local time. That translated to about six hours of sleep. He felt pretty good, considering. A minor headache from the brandy—so much for the theory that good stuff doesn't give you a hangover—and his muscles were stiff. He did a few sit-ups to work out the knots.

There was a small bathroom—head, he corrected himself—adjoining the cabin. Ryan splashed some water on his face and washed his mouth out, not wanting to look in the mirror. He decided he had to. Counterfeit or not, he was wearing his country's uniform and he had to look presentable. It took a minute to get his hair in place and the uniform arranged properly. The CIA had done a nice job of tailoring, given such short notice. Finished, he went out the door towards the flag bridge.

"Feeling better, Jack?" Admiral White pointed him to a tray full of cups. It was only tea, but it was a start.

"Thank you, Admiral. Those few hours really helped. I guess I'm in time for dinner."

"Breakfast," White corrected him with a laugh.

"What—uh, pardon me, Admiral?" Ryan shook his head again. He was still a little groggy.

"That's a *sunrise*, Commander. Change in orders, we're heading west again. *Kennedy*'s moving east at high speed, and we're to take station inshore."

"Who said, sir?"

"CINCLANT. I gather Joshua was not at all pleased. You are to remain with us for the moment, and under the circumstances it seemed the reasonable thing to let you sleep. You did appear to

need it."

Must have been eighteen hours, Ryan thought. No wonder he felt stiff.

"You do look much better," Admiral White noted from his leather swivel chair. He got up, took Ryan's arm, and guided him aft. "Now for breakfast. I've been waiting for you. Captain Hunter will brief you on your revised orders. Weather's clearing up for a few days, they tell me. Escort assignments are being reshuffled. We're to operate in conjunction with your *New Jersey* group. Our antisubmarine operations begin in earnest in another twelve hours. It's a good thing you got that extra sleep, lad. You'll bloody need it."

Ryan ran his hand over his face. "Can I shave, sir?"

"We still permit beards. Let it wait until after breakfast."

Flag quarters on HMS *Invincible* were not quite to the standard of those on the *Kennedy*—but close. White had a private dining area. A steward in a white livery served them expertly, setting a third place for Hunter, who appeared within a few minutes. When they started talking, the steward was excused.

"We rendezvous with a pair of young *Knox*-class frigates in two hours. We already have them on radar. Two more 1052s, plus an oiler and two *Perrys* will join us in another thirty-six hours. They were on their way home from the Med. With our own escorts, a total of nine warships. A noteworthy collection, I think. We'll be working five hundred miles offshore, with the *New Jersey—Tarawa* force two hundred miles to our west."

"*Tarawa?* What do we need a regiment of marines for?" Ryan asked.

Hunter explained briefly. "Not a bad idea, that. The funny thing is, with *Kennedy* racing for the Azores, that rather leaves us guarding the American coast." Hunter grinned. "This may be the first time the Royal Navy has ever done that—certainly since it belonged to us."

"What are we up against?"

"The first of the *Alfas* will be on your coast tonight, four of them ahead of all the others. The Soviet surface force passed Iceland last night. It's divided into three groups. One is built around their carrier *Kiev*, two cruisers and four destroyers; the second, probably the force flag, is built around *Kirov*, with three additional cruisers and six destroyers; and the third is centered on *Moskva*, three more

cruisers and seven destroyers. I gather that the Soviets will want to use the *Kiev* and *Moskva* groups inshore, with *Kirov* guarding them out to sea—but *Kennedy*'s relocation will make them rethink that. Regardless, the total force carries a considerable number of surface-to-surface missiles, and potentially, we are very exposed. To help out with that, your air force has an E-3 Sentry detailed to arrive here in an hour to exercise with our Harriers, and when we get farther west, we'll have additional land-based air support. On the whole our position is hardly an enviable one, but Ivan's is rather less so. So far as the question of finding *Red October* is concerned?" Hunter shrugged. "How we conduct our search will depend on how Ivan deploys. At the moment we're conducting some tracking drills. The lead *Alfa* is eighty miles northwest of us, steaming at forty-plus knots, and we have a helicopter in pursuit—which is roughly what it amounts to," the fleet operations officer concluded. "Will you join us below?"

"Admiral?" Ryan wanted to see *Invincible*'s combat information center.

"Certainly."

Thirty minutes later Ryan was in a darkened, quiet room whose walls were a solid bank of electronic instruments and glass plotting panels. The Atlantic Ocean was full of Russian submarines.

The White House

The Soviet ambassador entered the Oval Office a minute early, at 10:59 A.M. He was a short, overweight man with a broad Slavic face and eyes that would have done a professional gambler proud. They revealed nothing. He was a career diplomat, having served in a number of posts throughout the Western world, and a thirty-year member of the Communist party's Foreign Department.

"Good morning, Mr. President, Dr. Pelt," Alexei Arbatov nodded politely to both men. The president, he noted at once, was seated behind his desk. Every other time he'd been here the president had come around the desk to shake hands, then sat down beside him.

"Help yourself to some coffee, Mr. Ambassador," Pelt offered. The special assistant to the president for national security affairs was well known to Arbatov. Jeffrey Pelt was an academic from the Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies—an enemy, but a well-mannered, *kulturny* enemy. Arbatov

had a fondness for the niceties of formal behavior. Today, Pelt was standing at his boss's side, unwilling to come too close to the Russian bear. Arbatov did not get himself any coffee.

"Mr. Ambassador," Pelt began, "we have noted a troubling increase in Soviet naval activity in the North Atlantic."

"Oh?" Arbatov's eyebrows shot up in a display of surprise that fooled no one, and he knew it. "I have no knowledge of this. As you know, I have never been a sailor."

"Shall we dispense with the bullshit, Mr. Ambassador?" the president said. Arbatov did not permit himself to be surprised by the vulgarity. It made the American president seem very Russian, and like Soviet officials he seemed to need a professional like Pelt around to smooth the edges. "You certainly have nearly a hundred naval vessels operating in the North Atlantic or heading in that direction. Chairman Narmonov and my predecessor agreed years ago that no such operation would take place without prior notification. The purpose of this agreement, as you know, was to prevent acts that might appear to be unduly provocative to one side or the other. This agreement has been kept—until now.

"Now, my military advisers tell me that what is going on looks very much like a war exercise, indeed, could be the precursor to a war. How are we to tell the difference? Your ships are now passing east of Iceland, and will soon be in a position from which they can threaten our trade routes to Europe. This situation is at the least unsettling, and at the most a grave and wholly unwarranted provocation. The scope of this action has not yet been made public. That will change, and when it does, Alex, the American people will demand action on my part." The president paused, expecting a response but getting only a nod.

Pelt went on for him. "Mr. Ambassador, your country has seen fit to cast aside an agreement which for years has been a model of East-West cooperation. How can you expect us to regard this as anything other than a provocation?"

"Mr. President, Dr. Pelt, truly I have no knowledge of this." Arbatov lied with the utmost sincerity. "I will contact Moscow at once to ascertain the facts. Is there any message you wish me to pass along?"

"Yes. As you and your superiors in Moscow will understand," the president said, "we will deploy our ships and aircraft to observe yours. Prudence requires this. We have no wish to interfere with

whatever legitimate operations your forces may be engaged in. It is not our intention to make a provocation of our own, but under the terms of our agreement we have the right to know what is going on, Mr. Ambassador. Until we do, we are unable to issue the proper orders to our men. It would be well for your government to consider that having so many of your ships and our ships, your aircraft and our aircraft in close proximity is an inherently dangerous situation. Accidents can happen. An action by one side or the other which at another time would seem harmless might seem to be something else entirely. Wars have begun in this way, Mr. Ambassador." The president leaned back to let that thought hang in the air for a moment. When he went on, he spoke more gently. "Of course, I regard this possibility as remote, but is it not irresponsible to take such chances?"

"Mr. President, you make your point well, as always, but as you know, the sea is free for the passage of all, and—"

"Mr. Ambassador," Pelt interrupted, "consider a simple analogy. Your next-door neighbor begins to patrol his front yard with a loaded shotgun while your children are at play in your own front yard. In this country such action would be technically legal. Even so, would it not be a matter of concern?"

"So it would, Dr. Pelt, but the situation you describe is very different—"

Now the president interrupted. "Indeed it is. The situation at hand is far more dangerous. It is the breach of an agreement, and I find that especially disquieting. I had hoped that we were entering a new era of Soviet-American relations. We have settled our trade differences. We have just concluded a new grain agreement. You had a major part in that. We have been moving forward, Mr. Ambassador—is this at an end?" The president shook his head emphatically. "I hope not, but the choice is yours. The relationship between our countries can only be based on trust.

"Mr. Ambassador, I trust that I have not alarmed you. As you know, it is my habit to speak plainly. I personally dislike the greasy dissimulation of diplomacy. At times like this, we must communicate quickly and clearly. We have a dangerous situation before us, and we must work together, rapidly, to resolve it. My military commanders are greatly concerned, and I need to know—today—what your naval forces are up to. I expect a reply by seven this evening. Failing that I will be on the direct line to Moscow to

demand one."

Arbatov stood. "Mr. President, I will transmit your message within the hour. Please keep in mind, however, the time differential between Washington and Moscow—"

"I know that a weekend has just begun, and that the Soviet Union is a worker's paradise, but I expect that some of your country's managers may still be at work. In any case, I will detain you no further. Good day."

Pelt led Arbatov out, then came back and sat down.

"Maybe I was just a little tough on him," the president said.

"Yes, sir." Pelt thought that he had been too damned tough. He had little affection for the Russian but he too liked the niceties of diplomatic exchange. "I think we can say that you succeeded in getting your message across."

"He knows."

"He knows. But he doesn't know we know."

"We think," the president grimaced. "What a crazy goddamned game this is! And to think I had a nice, safe career going for me putting mafiosi in jail…Do you think he'll snap at the bait I offered?"

"'Legitimate operations?' Did you see his hands twitch at that? He'll go after it like a marlin after a squid." Pelt walked over to pour himself half a cup of coffee. It pleased him that the china service was gold trimmed. "I wonder what they'll call it? Legitimate operations…probably a rescue mission. If they call it a fleet exercise they admit to violating the notification protocol. A rescue operation justifies the level of activity, the speed with which it was laid on, and the lack of publicity. Their press never reports this sort of thing. As a guess, I'd say they'll call it a rescue, say a submarine is missing, maybe even to the point of calling it a missile sub."

"No, they won't go that far. We also have that agreement about keeping our missile subs five hundred miles offshore. Arbatov probably has his instructions on what to tell us already, but he'll play for all the time he can. It's also vaguely possible that he's in the dark. We know how they compartmentalize information. You suppose we're reading too much into this talent for obfuscation?"

"I think not, sir. It is a principle of diplomacy," Pelt observed, "that one must know something of the truth in order to lie convincingly."

The president smiled. "Well, they've had enough time to play

this game. I hope my belated reaction will not disappoint them."

"No, sir. Alex must have half expected you to kick him out the door."

"The thought's occurred to me more than once. His diplomatic charm has always been lost on me. That's the one thing about the Russians—they remind me so much of the mafia chieftains I used to prosecute. The same smattering of culture and good manners, and the same absence of morality." The president shook his head. He was talking like a hawk again. "Stay close, Jeff. I have George Farmer coming in here in a few minutes, but I want you around when our friend comes back."

Pelt walked back to his office pondering the president's remark. It was, he admitted to himself, crudely accurate. The most wounding insult to an educated Russian was to be called *nekulturny*, uncultured—the term didn't translate adequately—yet the same men who sat in the gilt boxes at the Moscow State Opera weeping at the end of a performance of *Boris Gudunov* could immediately turn around and order the execution or imprisonment of a hundred men without blinking. A strange people, made more strange by their political philosophy. But the president had too many sharp edges, and Pelt wished he'd learn to soften them. A speech in front of the American Legion was one thing, a discussion with the ambassador of a foreign power was something else.

CIA Headquarters

"CARDINAL's in trouble, Judge." Ritter sat down.

"No surprise there." Moore removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Something Ryan had not seen was the cover note from the station chief in Moscow saying that to get his latest signal out, CARDINAL had bypassed half the courier chain that ran from the Kremlin to the U.S. embassy. The agent was getting bold in his old age. "What does the station chief say exactly?"

"CARDINAL's supposed to be in the hospital with pneumonia. Maybe it's true, but…"

"He's getting old, and it is winter over there, but who believes in coincidences?" Moore looked down at his desk. "What do you suppose they'd do if they've turned him?"

"He'd die quietly. Depends on who turned him. If it was the KGB, they might want to make something out of it, especially since

our friend Andropov took a lot of their prestige with him when he left. But I don't think so. Given who his sponsor is, it would raise too much of a ruckus. Same thing if the GRU turns him. No, they'd grill him for a few weeks, then quietly do away with him. A public trial would be too counterproductive."

Judge Moore frowned. They sounded like doctors discussing a terminally ill patient. He didn't even know what CARDINAL looked like. There was a photograph somewhere in the file, but he had never seen it. It was easier that way. As an appellate court judge he had never had to look a defendant in the eye; he'd just reviewed the law in a detached way. He tried to keep his stewardship of the CIA the same way. Moore knew that this might be perceived as cowardly, and was very different from what people expect of a DCI —but even spies got old, and old men developed consciences and doubts that rarely troubled the young. It was time to leave the "Company." Nearly three years, it was enough. He'd accomplished what he was supposed to do.

"Tell the station chief to lay off. No inquiries of any kind directed at CARDINAL. If he's really sick, we'll be hearing from him again. If not, we'll know that soon enough, too."

"Right."

Ritter had succeeded in confirming CARDINAL's reports. One agent had reported that the fleet was sailing with additional political officers, another that the surface force was commanded by an academic sailor and crony of Gorshkov, who had flown to Severomorsk and boarded the *Kirov* minutes before the fleet had sailed. The naval architect who was believed to have designed the *Red October* was supposed to have gone with him. A British agent had reported that detonators for the various weapons carried by the surface ships had been hastily taken aboard from their usual storage depots ashore. Finally, there was an unconfirmed report that Admiral Korov, commander of the Northern Fleet, was not at his command post; his whereabouts were unknown. Together the information was enough to confirm the WILLOW report, and more was still coming in.

The U.S. Naval Academy

"Skip?"

"Oh, howdy, Admiral. Will you join me?" Tyler waved to a

vacant chair across the table.

"I got a message from the Pentagon for you." The superintendent of the Naval Academy, a former submarine officer, sat down. "You have an appointment tonight at 1930 hours. That's all they said."

"Great!" Tyler was just finishing his lunch. He'd been working on the simulation program nearly around the clock since Monday. The appointment meant that he would have access to the air force's Cray-2 tonight. His program was just about ready.

"What's this all about anyway?"

"Sorry, sir, I can't say. You know how it is."

The White House

The Soviet ambassador was back at four in the afternoon. To avoid press notice he had been taken into the Treasury building across the street from the White House and brought through a connecting tunnel which few knew existed. The president hoped that he had found this unsettling. Pelt hustled in to be there when Arbatov arrived.

"Mr. President," Arbatov reported, standing at attention. The president had not known that he had any military experience. "I am instructed to convey to you the regrets of my government that there has not been time to inform you of this. One of our nuclear submarines is missing and presumed lost. We are conducting an emergency rescue operation."

The president nodded soberly, motioning the ambassador to a chair. Pelt sat next to him.

"This is somewhat embarrassing, Mr. President. You see, in our navy as in yours, duty on a nuclear submarine is a posting of the greatest importance, and consequently those selected for it are among our best educated and trusted men. In this particular case several members of the crew—the officers, that is—are sons of high Party officials. One is even the son of a Central Committee member—I cannot say which, of course. The Soviet Navy's great effort to find her sons is understandable, though I admit a bit undisciplined." Arbatov feigned embarrassment beautifully, speaking as though he were confiding a great family secret. "Therefore, this has developed into what your people call an 'all hands' operation. As you undoubtedly know, it was undertaken virtually overnight."

“I see,” the president said sympathetically. “That makes me feel a little better, Alex. Jeff, I think it’s late enough in the day. How about you fix us all a drink. Bourbon, Alex?”

“Yes, thank you, sir.”

Pelt walked over to a rosewood cabinet against the wall. The ornate antique contained a small bar, complete with an ice bucket which was stocked every afternoon. The president often liked to have a drink or two before dinner, something else that reminded Arbatov of his countrymen. Dr. Pelt had had ample experience playing presidential bartender. In a few minutes he came back with three glasses in his hands.

“To tell you the truth, we rather suspected this was a rescue operation,” Pelt said.

“I don’t know how we get our young men to do this sort of work.” The president sipped at his drink. Arbatov worked hard on his. He had said frequently at local cocktail parties that he preferred American bourbon to his native vodka. Maybe it was true. “We’ve lost a pair of nuclear boats, I believe. How many does this make for you, three, four?”

“I don’t know, Mr. President. I expect your information on this is better than my own.” The president noted that he had just told the truth for the first time today. “Certainly I can agree with you that such duty is both dangerous and demanding.”

“How many men aboard, Alex?” the president asked.

“I have no idea. A hundred more or less, I suppose. I’ve never been aboard a naval vessel.”

“Mostly kids, probably, just like our crews. It is indeed a sad commentary on both our countries that our mutual suspicions must condemn so many of our best young men to such hazards, when we know that some won’t be coming back. But—how can it be otherwise?” The president paused, turning to look out the windows. The snow was melting on the South Lawn. It was time for his next line.

“Perhaps we can help,” the president offered speculatively. “Yes, perhaps we can use this tragedy as an opportunity to reduce those suspicions by some small amount. Perhaps we can make something good come from this to demonstrate that our relations really have improved.”

Pelt turned away, fumbling for his pipe. In their many years of friendship he could never understand how the president got away

with so much. Pelt had met him at Washington University, when he was majoring in political science, the president in prelaw. Back then the chief executive had been president of the dramatics society. Certainly amateur theatrics had helped his legal career. It was said that at least one Mafia don had been sent up the river by sheer rhetoric. The president referred to it as his sincere act.

"Mr. Ambassador, I offer you the assistance and the resources of the United States in the search for your missing countrymen."

"That is most kind of you, Mr. President, but—"

The president held his hand up. "No buts, Alex. If we cannot cooperate in something like this, how can we hope to cooperate in more serious matters? If memory serves, last year when one of our navy patrol aircraft crashed off the Aleutians, one of your fishing vessels"—it had been an intelligence trawler—"picked up the crew, saved their lives. Alex, we owe you a debt for that, a debt of honor, and the United States will not be said to be ungrateful." He paused for effect. "They're probably all dead, you know. I don't suppose there's more chance of surviving a sub accident than of surviving a plane crash. But at least the crew's families will know. Jeff, don't we have some specialized submarine rescue equipment?"

"With all the money we give the navy? We damned well ought to. I'll call Foster about it."

"Good," the president said. "Alex, it is too much to expect that your mutual suspicions will be allayed by something so small as this. Your history and ours conspire against us. But let's make a small beginning with this. If we can shake hands in space or over a conference table in Vienna, maybe we can do it here also. I will give the necessary instructions to my commanders as soon as we're finished here."

"Thank you, Mr. President." Arbatov concealed his uneasiness.

"And please convey my respects to Chairman Narmonov and my sympathy for the families of your missing men. I appreciate his effort, and yours, in getting this information to us."

"Yes. Mr. President." Arbatov rose. He left after shaking hands. What were the Americans really up to? He'd warned Moscow: call it a rescue mission and they'd demand to help. It was their stupid Christmas season, and Americans were addicted to happy endings. It was madness not to call it something else—to hell with the protocol.

At the same time he was forced to admire the American

president. A strange man, very open, yet full of guile. A friendly man most of the time, yet always ready to seize the advantage. He remembered stories his grandmother had told, about how the gypsies switched babies. The American president was very Russian.

"Well," the president said after the doors closed, "now we can keep a nice close eye on them, and they can't complain. They're lying and we know it—but they don't know we know. And we're lying, and they certainly suspect it, but not why we're lying. Gawd! and I told him this morning that not knowing was dangerous! Jeff, I've been thinking about this. I do not like the fact that so much of their navy is operating off our coast. Ryan was right, the Atlantic is our ocean. I want the air force and the navy to cover them like a goddamned blanket! That's our ocean, and I damned well want them to know it." The president finished off his drink. "On the question of the sub, I want our people to have a good look at it, and whoever of the crew wants to defect, we take care of. Quietly, of course."

"Of course. As a practical matter, having the officers is as great a coup as having the submarine."

"But the navy still wants to keep it."

"I just don't see how we can do that, not without eliminating the crewmen, and we can't do that."

"Agreed." The president buzzed his secretary. "Get me General Hilton."

The Pentagon

The air force's computer center was in a subbasement of the Pentagon. The room temperature was well below seventy degrees. It was enough to make Tyler's leg ache where it met the metal-plastic prothesis. He was used to that.

Tyler was sitting at a control console. He had just finished a trial run of his program, named MORAY after the vicious eel that inhabited oceanic reefs. Skip Tyler was proud of his programming ability. He'd taken the old dinosaur program from the files of the Taylor Lab, adapted it to the common Defense Department computer language, ADA—named for Lady Ada Lovelace, daughter of Lord Byron—and then tightened it up. For most people this would have been a month's work. He'd done it in four days, working almost around the clock not only because the money was

an attractive incentive but also because the project was a professional challenge. He ended the job quietly satisfied that he could still meet an impossible deadline with time to spare. It was eight in the evening. MORAY had just run through a one-variable-value test and not crashed. He was ready.

He'd never seen the Cray-2 before, except in photographs, and he was pleased to have a chance to use it. The -2 was five units of raw electrical power, each one roughly pentagonal in shape, about six feet high and four across. The largest unit was the main-frame processor bank; the other four were memory banks, arrayed around it in a cruciform configuration. Tyler typed in the command to load his variable sets. For each of the *Red October*'s main dimensions—length, beam, height—he input ten discrete numerical values. Then came six subtly different values for her hull form block and prismatic coefficients. There were five sets of tunnel dimensions. This aggregated to over thirty thousand possible permutations. Next he keyed in eighteen power variables to cover the range of possible engine systems. The Cray-2 absorbed this information and placed each number in its proper slot. It was ready to run.

"Okay," he announced to the system operator, an air force master sergeant.

"Roge." The sergeant typed "XQT" into his terminal. The Cray-2 went to work.

Tyler walked over to the sergeant's console.

"That's a right lengthy program you've input, sir." The sergeant laid a ten-dollar bill on the top of the console. "Betcha my baby can run it in ten minutes."

"Not a chance." Tyler laid his own bill next to the sergeant's. "Fifteen minutes, easy."

"Split the difference?"

"Alright. Where's the head around here?"

"Out the door, sir, turn right, go down the hall and it's on the left."

Tyler moved towards the door. It annoyed him that he could not walk gracefully, but after four years the inconvenience was a minor one. He was alive—that's what counted. The accident had occurred on a cold, clear night in Groton, Connecticut, only a block from the shipyard's main gate. On Friday at three in the morning he was driving home after a twenty-hour day getting his new command ready for sea. The civilian yard worker had had a long day also,

stopping off at a favorite watering hole for a few too many, as the police established afterwards. He got into his car, started it, and ran a red light, ramming Tyler's Pontiac broadside at fifty miles per hour. For him the accident was fatal. Skip was luckier. It was at an intersection, and he had the green light; when he saw the front end of the Ford not a foot from his left-side door, it was far too late. He did not remember going through a pawnshop window, and the next week, when he hovered near death at the Yale-New Haven hospital, was a complete blank. His most vivid memory was of waking up, eight days later he was to learn, to see his wife, Jean, holding his hand. His marriage up to that point had been a troubled one, not an uncommon problem for nuclear submarine officers. His first sight of her was not a complimentary one—her eyes were bloodshot, her hair was tousled—but she had never looked quite so good. He had never appreciated just how important she was. A lot more important than half a leg.

"Skip? Skip Tyler!"

The former submariner turned awkwardly to see a naval officer running towards him.

"Johnnie Coleman! How the hell are you!"

It was Captain Coleman now, Tyler noted. They had served together twice, a year on the *Tecumseh*, another on the *Shark*. Coleman, a weapons expert, had commanded a pair of nuclear subs.

"How's the family, Skip?"

"Jean's fine. Five kids now, and another on the way."

"Damn!" they shook hands with enthusiasm. "You always were a randy bugger. I hear you're teaching at Annapolis."

"Yeah, and a little engineering stuff on the side."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm running a program on the air force computer. Checking a new ship configuration for Sea Systems Command." It was an accurate enough cover story. "What do they have you doing?"

"OP-02's office. I'm chief of staff for Admiral Dodge."

"Indeed?" Tyler was impressed. Vice Admiral Sam Dodge was the current OP-02. The office of the deputy chief of naval operations for submarine warfare had administrative control of all aspects of submarine operations. "Keeping you busy?"

"You know it! The crap's really hit the fan."

"What do you mean?" Tyler hadn't seen the news or read a paper since Monday.

"You kidding?"

"I've been working on this computer program twenty hours a day since Monday, and I don't get ops dispatches anymore." Tyler frowned. He had heard something the other day at the Academy but not paid any attention to it. He was the sort who could focus his whole mind on a single problem.

Coleman looked up and down the corridor. It was late on a Friday evening, and they had it entirely to themselves. "Guess I can tell you. Our Russian friends have some sort of major exercise laid on. Their whole Northern Fleet's at sea, or damned near. They have subs all over the place."

"Doing what?"

"We're not sure. Looks like they might have a major search and rescue operation. The question is, after what? They have four *Alfas* doing a max speed run for our coast right now, with a gaggle of *Victors* and *Charlies* charging in behind them. At first we were worried that they wanted to block the trade routes, but they blitzed right past those. They're definitely heading for our coast, and whatever they're up to, we're getting tons of information."

"What do they have moving?" Tyler asked.

"Fifty-eight nuclear subs, and thirty or so surface ships."

"Gawd! CINCLANT must be going ape!"

"You know it, Skip. The fleet's at sea, all of it. Every nuke we have is scrambling for a redeployment. Every P-3 Lockheed ever made is either over the Atlantic or heading that way." Coleman paused. "You're still cleared, right?"

"Sure, for the work I do for the Crystal City gang. I had a piece of the evaluation of the new *Kirov*."

"I thought that sounded like your work. You always were a pretty good engineer. You know, the old man still talks about that job you did for him on the old *Tecumseh*. Maybe I can get you in to see what's happening. Yeah, I'll ask him."

Tyler's first cruise after graduating from nuc school in Idaho had been with Dodge. He'd done a tricky repair job on some ancillary reactor equipment two weeks earlier than estimated with a little creative effort and some back-channel procurement of spare parts. This had earned him and Dodge a flowery letter of commendation.

"I bet the old man would love to see you. When will you be finished down here?"

"Maybe half an hour."

"You know where to find me?"

"Have they moved OP-02?"

"Same place. Call me when you're finished. My extension is 78730. Okay? I gotta get back."

"Right." Tyler watched his old friend disappear down the corridor, then proceeded on his way to the men's room, wondering what the Russians were up to. Whatever it was, it was enough to keep a three-star admiral and his four-striped captain working on a Friday night in Christmas season.

"Eleven minutes, 53.18 seconds, sir," the sergeant reported, pocketing both bills.

The computer printout was over two hundred pages of data. The cover sheet plotted a rough-looking bell curve of speed solutions, and below it was the noise prediction curve. The case-by-case solutions were printed individually on the remaining sheets. The curves were predictably messy. The speed curve showed the majority of solutions in the ten-to twelve-knot range, the total range going from seven to eighteen knots. The noise curve was surprisingly low.

"Sergeant, that's one hell of a machine you have here."

"Believe it, sir. And reliable. We haven't had an electronic fault all month."

"Can I use a phone?"

"Sure, take your pick, sir."

"Okay, Sarge." Tyler picked up the nearest phone. "Oh, and dump the program."

"Okay." He typed in some instructions. "MORAY is…gone. Hope you kept a copy, sir."

Tyler nodded and dialed the phone.

"OP-02A, Captain Coleman."

"Johnnie, this is Skip."

"Great! Hey, the old man wants to see you. Come right up."

Tyler placed the printout in his briefcase and locked it. He thanked the sergeant one more time before hobbling out the door, giving the Cray-2 one last look. He'd have to get in here again.

He could not find an operating elevator and had to struggle up a gently sloped ramp. Five minutes later he found a marine guarding the corridor.

"You Commander Tyler, sir?" the guard asked. "Can I see some ID, please?"

Tyler showed the corporal his Pentagon pass, wondering how many one-legged former submarine officers there might be.

"Thank you, Commander. Please go down the corridor. You know the room, sir?"

"Sure. Thanks, Corporal."

Vice Admiral Dodge was sitting on the corner of a desk reading over some message flimsies. Dodge was a small, combative man who'd made his mark commanding three separate boats, then pushing the *Los Angeles*-class attack submarines through their lengthy development program. Now he was "Grand Dolphin," the senior admiral who fought all the battles with Congress.

"Skip Tyler! You're looking good, laddy." Dodge gave Tyler's leg a furtive glance as he came over to take his hand. "I hear you're doing a great job at the Academy."

"It's all right, sir. They even let me scout the occasional ballgame."

"Hmph, shame they didn't let you scout Army."

Tyler hung his head theatrically. "I did scout Army, sir. They were just too tough this year. You heard about their middle linebacker, didn't you?"

"No, what about him?" Dodge asked.

"He picked armor as his duty assignment, and they gave him an early trip to Fort Knox—not to learn about tanks. To *be* a tank."

"Ha!" Dodge laughed. "Johnnie says you have a bunch of new kids."

"Number six is due the end of February," Tyler said proudly.

"Six? You're not a Catholic or a Mormon, are you? What's with all this bird hatching?"

Tyler gave his former boss a wry look. He'd never understood that prejudice in the nuclear navy. It came from Rickover, who had invented the disparaging term *bird hatching* for fathering more than one child. What the hell was wrong with having kids?

"Admiral, since I'm not a nuc anymore, I have to do *something* on nights and weekends." Tyler arched his eyebrows lecherously. "I hear the Russkies are playing games."

Dodge was instantly serious. "They sure are. Fifty-eight attack boats—every nuclear boat in the Northern Fleet—heading this way with a big surface group, and most of their service forces tagging along."

"Doing what?"

"Maybe you can tell me. Come on back to my inner sanctum." Dodge led Tyler into a room where he saw another new gadget, a projection screen that displayed the North Atlantic from the Tropic of Cancer to the polar ice pack. Hundreds of ships were represented. The merchantmen were white, with flags to identify their nationality; the Soviet ships were red, and their shapes depicted their ship type; the American and allied ships were blue. The ocean was getting crowded.

"Christ."

"You got that one right, lad," Tyler nodded grimly. "How are you cleared?"

"Top secret and some special things, sir. I see everything we have on their hardware, and I do a lot of work with Sea Systems on the side."

"Johnnie said you did the evaluation of the new *Kirov* they just sent out to the Pacific—not bad, by the way."

"These two *Alfas* heading for Norfolk?"

"Looks like it. And they're burning a lot of neutrons doing it." Dodge pointed. "That one's heading to Long Island Sound as though to block the entrance to New London and that one's heading to Boston, I think. These *Victors* are not far behind. They already have most of the British ports staked out. By Monday they'll have two or more subs off every major port we have."

"I don't like the looks of this, sir."

"Neither do I. As you see, we're nearly a hundred percent at sea ourselves. The interesting thing, though—what they're doing just doesn't figure. I—" Captain Coleman came in.

"I see you let the prodigal son in, sir," Coleman said.

"Be nice to him, Johnnie. I seem to remember when he was a right fair sub driver. Anyway, at first it looked like they were going to block the SLOCs, but they went right past. What with these *Alfas*, they might be trying to blockade our coast."

"What about out west?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all, just routine activity."

"That doesn't make any sense," Tyler objected. "You don't ignore half the fleet. Of course, if you're going to war you don't announce it by kicking every boat to max power either."

"The Russians are a funny bunch, Skip," Coleman pointed out.

"Admiral, if we start shooting at them—"

"We hurt 'em," Dodge said. "With all the noise they're making

we have good locations on near all of 'em. They have to know that, too. That's the one thing that makes me believe they're not up to anything really bad. They're smart enough not to be that obvious—unless that's what they want us to think."

"Have they said anything?" Tyler asked.

"Their ambassador says they've lost a boat, and since it has a bunch of big shots' kids aboard, they laid on an all-hands rescue mission. For what that's worth."

Tyler set his briefcase down and walked closer to the screen. "I can see the pattern for a search and rescue, but why blockade our ports?" He paused, thinking rapidly as his eyes scanned the top of the display. "Sir, I don't see any boomers up here."

"They're in port—all of 'em, on both oceans. The last *Delta* tied up a few hours ago. That's funny, too," Dodge said, looking at the screen again.

"All of them, sir?" Tyler asked as offhandedly as he could. Something had just occurred to him. The display screen showed the *Bremerton* in the Barents Sea but not her supposed quarry. He waited a few seconds for an answer. Getting none, he turned to see the two officers observing him closely.

"Why do you ask, son?" Dodge said quietly. In Sam Dodge, gentleness could be a real warning flag.

Tyler thought this one over for a few seconds. He'd given Ryan his word. Could he phrase his answer without compromising it and still find out what he wanted? Yes, he decided. There was an investigative side to Skip Tyler's character, and once he was onto something, his psyche compelled him to run it down.

"Admiral, do they have a missile sub at sea, a brand new one?"

Dodge stood very straight. Even so he still had to look up at the younger man. When he spoke, his voice was glacial. "Exactly where did you get that information, Commander?"

Tyler shook his head. "Admiral, I'm sorry, but I can't say. It's compartmented, sir. I think this is something you ought to know, and I'll try to get it to you."

Dodge backed off to try a different tack. "You used to work for me, Skip." The admiral was unhappy. He'd bent a rule to show something to his former subordinate because he knew him well and was sorry that he had not received the command he had worked so hard for. Tyler was technically a civilian, even though his suits were still navy blue. What made it really bad was that he knew

something himself. Dodge had given him some information, and Tyler wasn't giving any back.

"Sir, I gave my word," Skip apologized. "I will try to get this to you. That's a promise, sir. May I use a phone?"

"Outer office," Dodge said flatly. There were four telephones within sight.

Tyler went out and sat at a secretary's desk. He took his notebook from a coat pocket and dialed the number on the card Ryan had left him.

"Acres," a female voice answered.

"Could I speak to Dr. Ryan, please?"

"Dr. Ryan is not here at the moment."

"Then…give me Admiral Greer, please."

"One moment, please."

"James Greer?" Dodge was behind him. "Is that who you're working for?"

"This is Greer. Your name Skip Tyler?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have that information for me?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Where are you?"

"In the Pentagon, sir."

"Okay, I want you to drive right up here. You know how to find the place? The guards at the main gate will be waiting for you. Get moving, son." Greer hung up.

"You're working for the CIA?" Dodge asked.

"Sir—I can't say. If you will excuse me, sir, I have some information to deliver."

"*Mine?*" the admiral demanded.

"No, sir. I already had it when I came in here. That's the truth, Admiral. And I will try to get this back to you."

"Call me," Dodge ordered. "We'll be here all night."

CIA Headquarters

The drive up the George Washington Parkway was easier than he expected. The decrepit old highway was crowded with shoppers but moved along at a steady crawl. He got off at the right exit and presently found himself at the guard post for the main highway entrance to the CIA. The barrier was down.

"Your name Tyler, Oliver W.?" the guard asked. "ID please." Tyler handed him his Pentagon pass.

"Okay, Commander. Pull your car right to the main entrance. Somebody will be there to meet you."

It was another two minutes to the main entrance through mostly empty parking lots glazed with ice from yesterday's melted snow. The armed guard who was waiting for him tried to help him out of the car. Tyler didn't like to be helped. He shrugged him off. Another man was waiting for him under the canopied main entrance. They were waved right through to the elevator.

He found Admiral Greer sitting in front of his office fireplace, seemingly half asleep. Skip didn't know that the DDI had only returned from England a few hours earlier. The admiral came to and ordered his plain-clothes security officer to withdraw. "You must be Skip Tyler. Come on over and sit down."

"That's quite a fire you have going there, sir."

"I shouldn't bother. Looking at a fire makes me go to sleep. Of course, I could use a little sleep right now. So, what do you have for me?"

"May I ask where Jack is?"

"You may ask. He's away."

"Oh." Tyler unlocked his briefcase and removed the printout. "Sir, I ran the performance model for this Russian sub. May I ask her name?"

Greer chuckled. "Okay, you've earned that much. Her name is *Red October*. You'll have to excuse me, son. I've had a busy couple of days, and being tired makes me forget my manners. Jack says you're pretty sharp. So does your personnel file. Now, you tell me. What'll she do?"

"Well, Admiral, we have a wide choice of data here, and—"

"The short version, Commander. I don't play with computers. I have people who do that for me."

"From seven to eighteen knots, the best bet is ten to twelve. With that speed range, you can figure a radiated noise level about the same as that of a *Yankee* doing six knots, but you'd have to factor reactor plant noise into that also. Moreover, the character of the noise will be different from what we're used to. These multiple impeller models don't put out normal propulsion noises. They seem to generate an irregular harmonic rumble. Did Jack tell you about this? It results from a back-pressure wave in the tunnels. This fights

the water flow, and that makes the rumble. Evidently there's no way around it. Our guys spent two years trying to find one. What they got was a new principle of hydrodynamics. The water almost acts like air in a jet engine at idle or low speed, except that water doesn't compress like air does. So, our guys will be able to detect something, but it will be different. They're going to have to get used to a wholly new acoustical signature. Add to that the lower signal intensity, and you have a boat that will be harder to detect than anything they have at this time."

"So that's what all this says." Greer riffled through the pages.

"Yes, sir. You'll want to have your own people look through it. The model—the program, that is—could stand a little improvement. I didn't have much time. Jack said you wanted this in a hurry. May I ask a question, sir?"

"You can try." Greer leaned back, rubbing his eyes.

"Is, ah, *Red October* at sea? That's it, isn't it? They're trying to locate her right now?" Tyler asked innocently.

"Uh huh, something like that. We couldn't figure what these doors meant. Ryan said you might be able to, and I suppose he was right. You've earned your money, Commander. This data might just enable us to find her."

"Admiral, I think *Red October* is up to something, maybe even trying to defect to the United States."

Greer's head came around. "Whatever makes you think that?"

"The Russkies have a major fleet operation in progress. They have subs all over the Atlantic, and it looks like they're trying to blockade our coast. The story is a rescue job for a lost boat. Okay, but Jack shows up Monday with pictures of a new missile boat—and today I hear that all of their other missile boats have been recalled to port." Tyler smiled. "That's kind of an odd set of coincidences, sir."

Greer turned and stared at the fire. He had just joined the DIA when the army and air force had pulled off the daring raid on the Song Tay prison camp twenty miles west of Hanoi. The raid had been a failure because the North Vietnamese had removed all of the captured pilots a few weeks before, something that aerial photographs could not determine. But everything else had gone perfectly. After penetrating hundreds of miles into hostile territory, the raiding force appeared entirely by surprise and caught many of the camp guards literally with their pants down. The Green Berets

did a letter-perfect job of getting in and out. In the process they killed several hundred enemy troops, themselves sustaining a single casualty, a broken ankle. The most impressive part of the mission, however, was its secrecy. Operation KINGPIN had been rehearsed for months, and despite this its nature and objective had not been guessed by friend or enemy—until the day of the raid itself. On that day a young air force captain of intelligence went into his general's office to ask if a deep-penetration raid into North Vietnam had been laid on for the Song Tay prisoner-of-war camp. His astonished commander proceeded to grill the captain at length, only to learn that the bright young officer had seen enough disjointed bits and pieces to construct a clear picture of what was about to happen. Events like this gave security officers peptic ulcers.

"*Red October*'s going to defect, isn't she?" Tyler persisted.

If the admiral had had more sleep he might have bluffed it out. As it was, his response was a mistake. "Did Ryan tell you this?"

"Sir, I haven't spoken with Jack since Monday. That's the truth, sir."

"Then where did you get this other information?" Greer snapped.

"Admiral, I used to wear the blue suit. Most of my friends still do. I hear things," Tyler evaded. "The whole picture dropped into place an hour ago. The Russkies have never recalled all of their boomers at once. I know, I used to hunt them."

Greer sighed. "Jack thinks the same as you. He's out with the fleet right now. Commander, if you tell that to anyone, I'll have your other leg mounted overtop that fireplace. Do you understand me?"

"Aye aye, sir. What are we going to do with her?" Tyler smiled to himself, thinking that as a senior consultant to Sea Systems Command, he'd sure as hell get a chance to look at a for-real Russian submarine.

"Give her back. After we've had a chance to look her over, of course. But there's a lot of things that could happen to prevent our ever seeing her."

It took Skip a moment to grasp what he'd just been told. "Give her back! Why, for Christ's sake?"

"Commander, just how likely do you think this scenario is? Do you think the whole crew of a submarine has decided to come over to us all at once?" Greer shook his head. "Smart money is that it's

only the officers, maybe not all of them, and that they're trying to get over here without the crew's knowing what they're up to."

"Oh." Tyler considered that. "I suppose that does make sense—but why give her back? This isn't Japan. If somebody landed a MiG-25 here we wouldn't give it back."

"This is not like holding onto a stray fighter plane. The boat is worth a billion dollars, more if you throw in the missiles and warheads. And legally, the president says, it's their property. So if they find out we have her, they'll ask for her back, and we'll have to give her back. Okay, how will they know we have her? Those crew members who don't want to defect will ask to go home. Whoever asks, we send."

"You know, sir, that whoever does want to go back will be in a whole shitload of trouble—excuse me, sir."

"A shitload and a half." Tyler hadn't known that Greer was a mustang and could swear like a real sailor. "Some will want to stay, but most won't. They have families. Next you'll ask me if we might arrange for the crew to disappear."

"The thought has occurred to me," Tyler said.

"It's occurred to us, too. But we won't. Murder a hundred men? Even if we wanted to, there's no way we could conceal it in this day and age. Hell, I doubt even the Soviets could. Besides that, this simply is not the sort of thing you do in peacetime. That's one difference between us and them. You can take those reasons in any order you want."

"So, except for the crew, we'd keep her…"

"Yes, if we could hide her. And if a pig had wings, it could fly."

"Lots of places to hide her, Admiral. I can think of a few right here on the Chesapeake, and if we could get her round the Horn, there's a million little atolls we could use, and they all belong to us."

"But the crew will know, and when we send them home, they'll tell their bosses," Greer explained patiently. "And Moscow will ask for her back. Oh, sure, we'll have a week or so to conduct, uh, safety and quarantine inspections, to make sure they weren't trying to smuggle cocaine into the country." The admiral laughed. "A British admiral suggested we invoke the old slave-trading treaty. Somebody did that back in World War II, to put the grab on a German blockade runner right before we got into it. So, we'll get a ton of intelligence regardless."

"Better to keep her, and run her, and take her apart…" Tyler said quietly, staring into the orange-white flames on the oak logs. How do we keep her? he wondered. An idea began to rattle around in his head. "Admiral, what if we could get the crew off without them knowing that we have the submarine?"

"Your full name is Oliver Wendell Tyler? Well, son, if you were named after Harry Houdini instead of a justice of the Supreme Court, I—" Greer looked into the engineer's face. "What do you have in mind?"

While Tyler explained Greer listened intently.

"To do this, sir, we'll have to get the navy in on it right quick. Specifically, we'll need the cooperation of Admiral Dodge, and if my speed figures for this boat are anything like accurate, we'll have to move smartly."

Greer rose and walked around the couch a few times to get his circulation going. "Interesting. The timing would be almost impossible, though."

"I didn't say it would be easy, sir, just that we *could* do it."

"Call home, Tyler. Tell your wife you won't be making it home. If I don't get any sleep tonight, neither do you. There's coffee behind my desk. First I have to call the judge, then we'll talk to Sam Dodge."

The USS Pogy

"*Pogy*, this is Black Gull 4. We're getting low on fuel. Have to return to the barn," the Orion's tactical coordinator reported, stretching after ten hours at his control console. "Anything you want us to get you? Over."

"Yeah, have a couple cases of beer sent out," Commander Wood replied. It was the current joke between P-3C and submarine crews. "Thanks for the data. We'll take it from here. Out."

Overhead, the Lockheed Orion increased power and turned southwest. The crewmen aboard would each hoist an extra beer or two at dinner, saying it was for their friends on the submarine.

"Mr. Dyson, take her two hundred feet. One-third speed."

The officer of the deck gave the proper orders as Commander Wood moved over to the plot.

The USS *Pogy* was three hundred miles northeast of Norfolk, awaiting the arrival of two Soviet *Alfa*-class submarines which

several relays of antisubmarine patrol aircraft had tracked all the way from Iceland. The *Pogy* was named for a distinguished World War II fleet submarine, named in turn for an undistinguished game fish. She had been at sea for eighteen hours, and was fresh from an extended overhaul at the Newport News shipyard. Nearly everything aboard was either straight from manufacturers' crates or had been completely worked over by the skilled shipfitters on the James River. This was not to say that everything worked properly. Many items had failed in one way or another on the post-overhaul shakedown the previous week, a fact less unusual than lamentable, Commander Wood thought. The *Pogy*'s crew was new, too. Wood was on his first deployment as a commanding officer after a year of desk duty in Washington, and too many of the enlisted men were green, just out of sub school at New London, still getting accustomed to their first cruise on a submarine. It takes time for men used to blue skies and fresh air to learn the regime inside a thirty-two-foot-diameter steel pipe. Even the experienced men were making adjustments to their new boat and officers.

The *Pogy* had met her top speed of thirty-three knots on post-overhaul trials. This was fast for a ship but slower than the speed of the *Alfas* she was listening to. Like all American submarines, her long suit was stealth. The *Alfas* had no way of knowing she was there and that they would be easy targets for her weapons, the more so since the patrolling Orion had fed the *Pogy* exact range information, something that ordinarily takes time to deduce from a passive sonar plot.

Lieutenant Commander Tom Reynolds, the executive officer and fire control coordinator, stood casually over the tactical plot. "Thirty-six miles to the near one, and forty on the far one." On the display they were labeled Pogy-Bait 1 and 2. Everyone found the use of this service epithet amusing.

"Speed forty-two?" Wood asked.

"Yes, Captain." Reynolds had handled the radio exchange until Black Gull 4 had announced its intention to return to base. "They're driving those boats for all they're worth. Right for us. We have hard solutions on both…zap! What do you suppose they're up to?"

"The word from CINCLANT is that their ambassador says they're on a SAR mission for a lost boat." His voice indicated what he thought of that.

"Search and rescue, eh?" Reynolds shrugged. "Well, maybe they

think they lost a boat off Point Comfort, 'cause if they don't slow down real fast, that's where they'll end up. I've never heard of *Alfas* operating this close to our coast. Have you, sir?"

"Nope." Wood frowned. The thing about the *Alfas* was that they were fast and noisy. Soviet tactical doctrine seemed to call for them mainly in defensive roles: as "interceptor submarines" they could protect their own missile subs, and with their high speed they could engage American attack submarines, then evade counterattack. Wood didn't think the doctrine was sound, but that was all right with him.

"Maybe they want to blockade Norfolk," Reynolds suggested.

"You might have a point there," Wood said. "Well, in any case, we'll just sit tight and let them burn right past us. They'll have to slow as they cross the continental shelf line, and we'll tag along behind them, nice and quiet."

"Aye," Reynolds said.

If they had to shoot, both men reflected, they'd find out just how tough the *Alfa* really was. There had been much talk about the strength of the titanium used for her hull, whether it really would withstand the force of several hundred pounds of high explosive in direct contact. A new shaped-charge warhead for the Mark 48 torpedo had been developed for just this purpose and for handling the equally tough *Typhoon* hull. Both officers set this thought aside. Their assigned mission was to track and shadow.

The E. S. Politovskiy

Pogy-Bait 2 was known to the Soviet Navy as the *E. S. Politovskiy*. This *Alfa*-class attack sub was named for the chief engineering officer of the Russian fleet who had sailed all the way around the world to meet his appointment with destiny in the Tsushima Straits. Evgeni Sigismondavich Politovskiy had served the czar's navy with skill and a devotion to duty equal to that of any officer in history, but in his diary, which was discovered years later in Leningrad, the brilliant officer had decried in the most violent terms the corruption and excesses of the czarist regime, giving a grim counterpoint to the selfless patriotism he had shown as he sailed knowingly to his death. This made him a genuine hero for Soviet seamen to emulate, and the State had named its greatest engineering achievement in his memory. Unfortunately the *Politovskiy* had enjoyed no better luck

than he had enjoyed in the face of Togo's guns.

The *Politovskiy*'s acoustical signature was labeled *Alfa 3* by the Americans. This was incorrect; she had been the first of the *Alfas*. The small, spindle-shaped attack submarine had reached forty-three knots three hours into her initial builder's trials. Those trials had been cut short only a minute later by an incredible mishap: a fifty-ton right whale had somehow blundered in her path, and the *Politovskiy* had rammed the unfortunate creature broadside. The impact had smashed ten square meters of bow plating, annihilated the sonar dome, knocked a torpedo tube askew, and nearly flooded the torpedo room. This did not count shock damage to nearly every interior system from electronic equipment to the galley stove, and it was said that if anyone but the famous Vilnius headmaster had been in command, the submarine would surely have been lost. A two-meter segment of the whale's rib was now a permanent fixture at the officer's club in Severomorsk, dramatic testament to the strength of Soviet submarines; in fact the damage had taken over a year to repair, and by the time the *Politovskiy* sailed again there were already two other *Alfas* in service. Two days after sailing on her next shakedown, she suffered another major casualty, the total failure of her high-pressure turbine. This had taken six months to replace. There had been three more minor incidents since, and the submarine was forever marked as a bad luck ship.

Chief Engineer Vladimir Petchukocov was a loyal Party member and a committed atheist, but he was also a sailor and therefore profoundly superstitious. In the old days, his ship would have been blessed on launching and thereafter every time she sailed. It would have been an impressive ceremony, with a bearded priest, clouds of incense, and evocative hymns. He had sailed without any of that and found himself wishing otherwise. He needed some luck. Petchukocov was having trouble with his reactor.

The *Alfa* reactor plant was small. It had to fit into a relatively small hull. It was also powerful for its size, and this one had been running at one hundred percent rated power for just over four days. They were racing for the American coast at 42.3 knots, as fast as the eight-year-old plant would permit. The *Politovskiy* was due for a comprehensive overhaul: new sonar, new computers, and a redesigned reactor control suite were all planned for the coming months. Petchukocov thought it irresponsible—reckless—to push his submarine so hard, even if everything were functioning

properly. No *Alfa* plant on a submarine had ever been pushed this hard, not even a new one. And on this one, things were beginning to come apart.

The primary high-pressure reactor coolant pump was beginning to vibrate ominously. This was particularly worrying to the engineer. There was a backup, but the secondary pump had a lower rated power, and using it meant losing eight knots of speed. The *Alfa* plant achieved its high power not with a sodium-cooled system —as the Americans thought—but by running at a far higher pressure than any reactor system afloat and using a revolutionary heat exchange system that boosted the plant's overall thermal efficiency to forty-one percent, well in excess of that for any other submarine. But the price of this was a reactor that at full power was red-lined on every monitor gauge—and in this case the red lines were not mere symbolism. They signified genuine danger.

This fact, added to the vibrating pump, had Petchukocov seriously concerned; an hour earlier he had pleaded with the captain to reduce power for a few hours so that his skilled crew of engineers could make repairs. It was probably only a bad bearing, after all, and they had spares. The pump had been designed so that it would be easy to fix. The captain had wavered, wanting to grant the request, but the political officer had intervened, pointing out that their orders were both urgent and explicit: they had to be on station as quickly as possible; to do otherwise would be "politically unsound." And that was that.

Petchukocov bitterly remembered the look in his captain's eyes. What was the purpose of a commanding officer if his every order had to be approved by a political flunky? Petchukocov had been a faithful Communist since joining the Octobrists as a boy—but damn it! what was the point of having specialists and engineers? Did the Party really think that physical laws could be overturned by the whim of some apparatchik with a heavy desk and a dacha in the Moscow suburbs? The engineer swore to himself.

He stood alone at the master control board. This was located in the engine room, aft of the compartment that held the reactor and the heat exchanger/steam generator, the latter placed right at the submarine's center of gravity. The reactor was pressurized to twenty kilograms per square centimeter, about twenty-eight hundred pounds per square inch. Only a fraction of this pressure came from the pump. The higher pressure caused a higher boiling

point for the coolant. In this case, the water was heated to over 900° Celsius, a temperature sufficient to generate steam, which gathered at the top of the reactor vessel; the steam bubble applied pressure to the water beneath, preventing the generation of more steam. The steam and water regulated one another in a delicate balance. The water was dangerously radioactive as a result of the fission reaction taking place within the uranium fuel rods. The function of the control rods was to regulate the reaction. Again, the control was delicate. At most the rods could absorb just less than one percent of the neutron flux, but this was enough either to permit the reaction or to prevent it.

Petchukocov could recite all this data in his sleep. He could draw a wholly accurate schematic diagram of the entire engine plant from memory and could instantly grasp the significance of the slightest change in his instrument readings. He stood perfectly straight over the control board, his eyes tracing the myriad dials and gauges in a regular pattern, one hand poised over the SCRAM switch, the other over the emergency cooling controls.

He could hear the vibration. It had to be a bad bearing getting worse as it wore more and more unevenly. If the crankshaft bearings went bad, the pump would seize, and they'd have to stop. This would be an emergency, though not really a dangerous one. It would mean that repairing the pump—if they could repair it at all—would take days instead of hours, eating up valuable time and spare parts. That was bad enough. What was worse, and what Petchukocov did not know, was that the vibration was generating pressure waves in the coolant.

To make use of the newly developed heat exchanger, the *Alfa* plant had to move water rapidly through its many loops and baffles. This required a high-pressure pump which accounted for one hundred fifty pounds of the total system pressure—almost ten times what was considered safe in Western reactors. With the pump so powerful, the whole engine room complex, normally very noisy at high speed, was like a boiler factory, and the pump's vibration was disturbing the performance of the monitor instruments. It was making the needles on his gauges waver, Petchukocov noted. He was right, and wrong. The pressure gauges were really wavering because of the thirty-pound overpressure waves pulsing through the system. The chief engineer did not recognize this for what it was. He had been on duty too many hours.

Within the reactor vessel, these pressure waves were approaching the frequency at which a piece of equipment resonated. Roughly halfway down the interior surface of the vessel was a titanium fitting, part of the backup cooling system. In the event of a coolant loss, and *after* a successful SCRAM, valves inside and outside the vessel would open, cooling the reactor either with a mixture of water and barium or, as a last measure, with seawater which could be vented in and out of the vessel—at the cost of ruining the entire reactor. This had been done once, and though it had been costly, the action of a junior engineer had prevented the loss of a *Victor*-class attack sub by catastrophic meltdown.

Today the inside valve was closed, along with the corresponding through-hull fitting. The valves were made of titanium because they had to function reliably after prolonged exposure to high temperature, and also because titanium was very corrosion-resistant —high-temperature water was murderously corrosive. What had not been fully considered was that the metal was also exposed to intense nuclear radiation, and this particular titanium alloy was not completely stable under extended neutron bombardment. The metal had become brittle over the years. The minute waves of hydraulic pressure were beating against the clapper in the valve. As the pump's frequency of vibration changed it began to approach the frequency at which the clapper vibrated. This caused the clapper to snap harder and harder against its retaining ring. The metal at its edges began to crack.

A *michman* at the forward end of the compartment heard it first, a low buzz coming through the bulkhead. At first he thought it was feedback noise from the PA speaker, and he waited too long to check it. The clapper broke free and dropped out of the valve nozzle. It was not very large, only ten centimeters in diameter and five millimeters thick. This type of fitting is called a butterfly valve, and the clapper looked just like a butterfly, suspended and twirling in the water flow. If it had been made of stainless steel it would have been heavy enough to fall to the bottom of the vessel. But it was made of titanium, which was both stronger than steel and very much lighter. The coolant flow moved it up, towards the exhaust pipe.

The outward-moving water carried the clapper into the pipe, which had a fifteen-centimeter inside diameter. The pipe was made of stainless steel, two-meter sections welded together for easy

replacement in the cramped quarters. The clapper was borne along rapidly towards the heat exchanger. Here the pipe took a forty-five-degree downward turn and the clapper jammed momentarily. This blocked half of the pipe's channel, and before the surge of pressure could dislodge the clapper too many things happened. The moving water had its own momentum. On being blocked, it generated a back-pressure wave within the pipe. Total pressure jumped momentarily to thirty-four hundred pounds. This caused the pipe to flex a few millimeters. The increased pressure, lateral displacement of a weld joint, and cumulative effect of years of high-temperature erosion of the steel damaged the joint. A hole the size of a pencil point opened. The escaping water flashed instantly into steam, setting off alarms in the reactor compartment and neighboring spaces. It ate at the remainder of the weld, rapidly expanding the failure until reactor coolant was erupting as though from a horizontal fountain. One jet of steam demolished the adjacent reactor-control wiring conduits.

What had just begun was a catastrophic loss-of-coolant accident.

The reactor was fully depressurized within three seconds. Its many gallons of coolant exploded into steam, seeking release into the surrounding compartment. A dozen alarms sounded at once on the master control board, and in the blink of an eye Vladimir Petchukocov faced his ultimate nightmare. The engineer's automatic trained reaction was to jam his finger on the SCRAM switch, but the steam in the reactor vessel had disabled the rod control system, and there wasn't time to solve the problem. In an instant, Petchukocov knew that his ship was doomed. Next he opened the emergency coolant controls, admitting seawater into the reactor vessel. This automatically set off alarms throughout the hull.

In the control room forward, the captain grasped the nature of the emergency at once. The *Politovskiy* was running at one hundred fifty meters. He had to get her to the surface immediately, and he shouted orders to blow all ballast and make full rise on the diving planes.

The reactor emergency was regulated by physical laws. With no reactor coolant to absorb the heat of the uranium rods, the nuclear reaction actually stopped—there was no water to attenuate the neutron flux. This was no solution, however, since the residual decay heat was sufficient to melt everything in the compartment. The cold water admitted into the vessel drew off the heat but also

slowed down too many neutrons, keeping them in the reactor core. This caused a runaway reaction that generated even more heat, more than any amount of coolant could control. What had started as a loss-of-coolant accident became something worse: a cold-water accident. It was now only a matter of minutes before the entire core melted, and the *Politovskiy* had that long to get to the surface.

Petchukocov stayed at his post in the engine room, doing what he could. His own life, he knew, was almost certainly lost. He had to give his captain time to surface the boat. There was a drill for this sort of emergency, and he barked orders to implement it. It only made things worse.

His duty electrician moved along the electrical control panels switching from main power to emergency, since residual steam power in the turboalternators would die in a few more seconds. In a moment the submarine's power completely depended on standby batteries.

In the control room power was lost to the electrically controlled trim tabs on the trailing edge of the diving planes, which automatically switched back to electrohydraulic control. This powered not just the small trim tabs but the diving planes as well. The control assemblies moved instantly to a fifteen-degree up-angle —and she was still moving at thirty-nine knots. With all her ballast tanks now blasted free of water by compressed air, the submarine was very light, and she rose like a climbing aircraft. In seconds the astonished control room crew felt their boat rise to an up-angle that was forty-five degrees and getting worse. A moment later they were too busy trying to stand to come to grips with the problem. Now the *Alfa* was climbing almost vertically at thirty miles per hour. Every man and unsecured item aboard fell sternward.

In the motor control room aft, a crewman crashed against the main electrical switchboard, short-circuiting it with his body, and all power aboard was lost. A cook who had been inventorying survival gear in the torpedo room forward struggled into the escape trunk as he fought his way into an exposure suit. Even with only a year's experience, he was quick to understand the meaning of the hooting alarms and unprecedented actions of his boat. He yanked the hatch shut and began to work the escape controls as he had been taught in submarine school.

The *Politovskiy* soared through the surface of the Atlantic like a broaching whale, coming three quarters of her length out of the

water before crashing back.

The USS Pogy

"Conn, sonar."

"Conn, aye, Captain speaking."

"Skipper, you better hear this. Something just went crazy on Bait 2," *Pogy*'s chief reported. Wood was in the sonar room in seconds, putting on earphones plugged into a tape recorder which had a two-minute offset. Commander Wood heard a whooshing sound. The engine noises stopped. A few seconds later there was an explosion of compressed air, and a staccato of hull popping noises as a submarine changed depth rapidly.

"What's going on?" Wood asked quickly.

The E. S. Politovskiy

In the *Politovskiy*'s reactor, the runaway fission reaction had virtually annihilated both the incoming seawater and the uranium fuel rods. Their debris settled on the after wall of the reactor vessel. In a minute there was a meter-wide puddle of radioactive slag, enough to form its own critical mass. The reaction continued unabated, this time directly attacking the tough stainless steel of the vessel. Nothing man made could long withstand five thousand degrees of direct heat. In ten seconds the vessel wall failed. The uranium mass dropped free, against the aft bulkhead.

Petchukocov knew he was dead. He saw the paint on the forward bulkhead turn black, and his last impression was of a dark mass surrounded with the blue glow. The engineer's body vaporized an instant later, and the mass of slag dropped to the next bulkhead aft.

Forward, the submarine's nearly vertical angle in the water eased. The high-pressure air in the ballast tanks spilled out of the bottom floods and the tanks filled with water, dropping the angle of the boat and submerging her. In the forward part of the submarine men were screaming. The captain struggled to his feet, ignoring his broken leg, trying to get control, to get his men organized and out of the submarine before it was too late, but the luck of Evgeni Sigismondavich Politovskiy would plague his namesake one last time. Only one man escaped. The cook opened the escape trunk

hatch and got out. Following what he had learned during the drill, he began to seal the hatch so that men behind him could use it, but a wave slapped him off the hull as the sub slid backwards.

In the engine room, the changing angle dropped the melted core to the deck. The hot mass attacked the steel deck first, burning through that, then the titanium of the hull. Five seconds later the engine room was vented to the sea. The *Politovskiy*'s largest compartment filled rapidly with water. This destroyed what little reserve buoyancy the ship had, and the acute down-angle returned. The *Alfa* began her last dive.

The stern dropped just as the captain began to get his control room crew to react to orders again. His head struck an instrument console. What slim hopes his crew had died with him. The *Politovskiy* was falling backwards, her propeller windmilling the wrong way as she slid to the bottom of the sea.

The Pogy

"Skipper, I was on the *Chopper* back in sixty-nine," the *Pogy*'s chief said, referring to a horrifying accident on a diesel-powered submarine.

"That's what it sounds like," his captain said. He was now listening to direct sonar input. There was no mistaking it. The submarine was flooding. They had heard the ballast tanks refill; this could only mean interior compartments were filling with water. If they had been closer, they might have heard the screams of men in that doomed hull. Wood was just as happy he couldn't. The continuing rush of water was dreadful enough. Men were dying. Russians, his enemy, but men not unlike himself, and there was not a thing that could be done about it.

Bait 1, he saw, was proceeding, unmindful of what had happened to her trailing sister.

The E. S. Politovskiy

It took nine minutes for the *Politovskiy* to fall the two thousand feet to the ocean floor. She impacted savagely on the hard sand bottom at the edge of the continental shelf. It was a tribute to her builders that her interior bulkheads held. All the compartments from the reactor room aft were flooded and half the crew killed in them, but

the forward compartments were dry. Even this was more curse than blessing. With the aft air storage banks unusable and only emergency battery power to run the complex environmental control systems, the forty men had only a limited supply of air. They were spared a rapid death from the crushing North Atlantic only to face a slower one from asphyxiation.

THE NINTH DAY
SATURDAY, 11 DECEMBER

The Pentagon

A female yeoman first class held the door open for Tyler. He walked in to find General Harris standing alone over the large chart table pondering the placement of tiny ship models.

"You must be Skip Tyler." Harris looked up.

"Yes, sir." Tyler was standing as rigidly at attention as his prosthetic leg allowed. Harris came over quickly to shake hands.

"Greer says you used to play ball."

"Yes, General, I played right tackle at Annapolis. Those were good years." Tyler smiled, flexing his fingers. Harris looked like an iron-pumper.

"Okay, if you used to play ball, you can call me Ed." Harris poked him in the chest. "Your number was seventy-eight, and you made All American, right?"

"Second string, sir. Nice to know somebody remembers."

"I was on temporary duty at the Academy for a few months back then, and I caught a couple games. I never forget a good offensive lineman. I made All Conference at Montana—long time ago. What happened to the leg?"

"Drunk driver clipped me. I was the lucky one. The drunk didn't make it."

"Serves the bastard right."

Tyler nodded agreement, but remembered that the drunken shipfitter had had his own wife and family, according to the police. "Where is everybody?"

"The chiefs are at their normal—well, normal for a weekday, not a Saturday—intelligence briefing. They ought to be down in a few minutes. So, you're teaching engineering at Annapolis now, eh?"

"Yes, sir. I got a doctorate in that along the way."

"Name's Ed, Skip. And this morning you're going to tell us how we can hold onto that maverick Russian sub?"

"Yes, sir—Ed."

"Tell me about it, but let's get some coffee first." The two men went to a table in the corner with coffee and donuts. Harris listened

to the younger man for five minutes, sipping his coffee and devouring a couple of jelly donuts. It took a lot of food to support his frame.

"Son of a gun," the J-3 observed when Tyler finished. He walked over to the chart. "That's interesting. Your idea depends a lot on sleight of hand. We'd have to keep them away from where we're pulling this off. About here, you say?" He tapped the chart.

"Yes, General. The thing is, the way they seem to be operating we can do this to seaward of them—"

"And do a double shuffle. I like it. Yeah, I like it, but Dan Foster won't like losing one of our own boats."

"I'd say it's worth the trade."

"So would I," Harris agreed. "But they're not my boats. After we do this, where do we hide her—if we get her?"

"General, there are some nice places right here on the Chesapeake Bay. There's a deep spot on the York River and another on the Patuxent, both owned by the navy, both marked Keep Out on the charts. Nice thing about subs, they're supposed to be invisible. You just find a deep enough spot and flood your tanks. That's temporary, of course. For a more permanent spot, maybe Truk or Kwajalein in the Pacific. Nice and far from any place."

"And the Soviets would never notice the presence of a sub tender and three hundred submarine technicians there all of a sudden? Besides, those islands don't really belong to us anymore, remember?"

Tyler hadn't expected this man to be a dummy. "So, what if they do find out in a few months? What will they do, announce it to the whole world? I don't think so. By that time we'll have all the information we want, and we can always produce the defecting officers in a nice news conference. How would that look for them? Anyway, it figures that after we've had her for a while, we'll break her up. The reactor'll go to Idaho for tests. The missiles and warheads will get taken off. The electronics gear will be taken to California for testing, and the CIA, NSA, and navy will have gunfights over the crypto gear. The stripped hulk will be taken to a nice deep spot and scuttled. No evidence. We don't have to keep this a secret forever, just for a few months."

Harris set his cup down. "You'll have to forgive me for playing devil's advocate. I see you've thought this out. Fine, I think it's worth a hard look. It means coordinating a lot of hardware, but it

doesn't really interfere with what we're already doing. Okay, you have my vote."

The Joint Chiefs arrived three minutes later. Tyler had never seen so many stars in one room.

"You wanted to see all of us, Eddie?" Hilton asked.

"Yes, General. This is Dr. Skip Tyler."

Admiral Foster came over first to take his hand. "You got us that performance data on *Red October* that we were just briefed on. Good work, Commander."

"Dr. Tyler thinks we should hold onto her if we get her," Harris said deadpan. "And he thinks he has a way we can do it."

"We already thought of killing the crew," Commandant Maxwell said. "The president won't let us."

"Gentlemen, what if I told you that there was a way to send the crewmen home without them knowing that we have her? That's the issue, right? We have to send the crewmen back to Mother Russia. I say there's a way to do that, and the remaining question is where to hide her."

"We're listening," Hilton said suspiciously.

"Well, sir, we'll have to move quickly to get everything in place. We'll need *Avalon* from the West Coast. *Mystic* is already aboard the *Pigeon* in Charleston. We need both of them, and we need an old boomer of our own that we can afford to do without. That's the hardware. The real trick, however, is the timing—and we have to find her. That may be the hardest part."

"Maybe not," Foster said. "Admiral Gallery reported this morning that *Dallas* may be onto her. Her report dovetails nicely with your engineering model. We'll know more in a few days. Go on."

Tyler explained. It took ten minutes since he had to answer questions and use the chart to diagram time and space constraints. When he was finished, General Barnes was at the phone calling the commander of the Military Airlift Command. Foster left the room to call Norfolk, and Hilton was on his way to the White House.

The Red October

Except for those on watch, every officer was in the wardroom. Several pots of tea were on the table, all untouched, and again the door was locked.

“Comrades,” Petrov reported, “the second set of badges was contaminated, worse than the first.”

Ramius noted that Petrov was rattled. It wasn’t the first set of badges, or the second. It was the third and fourth since sailing. He had chosen his ship’s doctor well.

“Bad badges,” Melekhin growled. “Some bastard of a trickster in Severomorsk—or perhaps an imperialist spy playing a typical enemy trick on us. When they catch the son of a bitch I will shoot him myself—whoever he is! This sort of thing is treasonous!”

“Regulations require that I report this,” Petrov noted. “Even though the instruments show safe levels.”

“Your adherence to the rules is noted, Comrade Doctor. You have acted correctly,” Ramius said. “And now regulations stipulate that we make yet another check. Melekhin, I want you and Borodin to do it personally. First check the radiation instruments themselves. If they are working properly, we will be certain that the badges are defective—or have been tampered with. If so, my report on this incident will demand someone’s head.” It was not unknown for drunken shipyard workers to be sent to the gulag. “Comrades, in my opinion there is nothing at all to concern us. If there were a leak, Comrade Melekhin would have discovered it days ago. So. We all have work to do.”

They were all back in the wardroom half an hour later. Passing crewmen noticed this, and already the whispering started.

“Comrades,” Melekhin announced, “we have a major problem.”

The officers, especially the younger ones, looked a little pale. On the table was a Geiger counter stripped into a score of small parts. Next to it was a radiation detector taken off the reactor room bulkhead, its inspection cover removed.

“Sabotage,” Melekhin hissed. It was a word fearsome enough to make any Soviet citizen shudder. The room went deathly still, and Ramius noted that Svyadov was holding his face under rigid control.

“Comrades, mechanically speaking these instruments are quite simple. As you know, this counter has ten different settings. We can choose from ten sensitivity ranges, using the same instrument to detect a minor leak or to quantify a major one. We do that by dialing this selector, which engages one of ten electrical resistors of increasing value. A child could design this, or maintain and repair it.” The chief enginer tapped the underside of the selector dial. “In

this case the proper resistors have been clipped off, and new ones soldered on. Settings one to eight have the same impedance value. All of our counters were inspected by the same dockyard technician three days before we sailed. Here is his inspection sheet." Melekhin tossed it on the table contemptuously.

"Either he or another spy sabotaged this and all the other counters I've looked at. It would have taken a skilled man no more than an hour. In the case of this instrument." The engineer turned the fixed detector over. "You see that the electrical parts have been disconnected, except for the test circuit, which was rewired. Borodin and I removed this from the forward bulkhead. This is skilled work; whoever did this is no amateur. I believe that an imperialist agent has sabotaged our ship. First he disabled our radiation monitor instruments, then he probably arranged a low-level leak in our hot piping. It would appear, comrades, that Comrade Petrov was correct. We may have a leak. My apologies, Doctor."

Petrov nodded jerkily. Compliments like this he could easily forego.

"Total exposure, Comrade Petrov?" Ramius asked.

"The greatest is for the enginemen, of course. The maximum is fifty rads for Comrades Melekhin and Svyadov. The other engine crewmen run from twenty to forty-five rads, and the cumulative exposure drops rapidly as one moves forward. The torpedomen have only five rads or so, mostly less. The officers exclusive of engineers run from ten to twenty-five." Petrov paused, telling himself to be more positive. "Comrades, these are not lethal doses. In fact, one can tolerate a dose of up to a hundred rads without any near-term physiological effects, and one can survive several hundred. We do face a serious problem here, but it is not yet a life-threatening emergency."

"Melekhin?" the captain asked.

"It is my engine plant, and my responsibility. We do not yet *know* that we have a leak. The badges could still be defective or sabotaged. This could all be a vicious psychological trick played on us by the main enemy to damage our morale. Borodin will assist me. We will personally repair these and conduct a thorough inspection of all reactor systems. I am too old to have children. For the moment, I suggest that we deactivate the reactor and proceed on battery. The inspection will take us four hours at most. I also

recommend that we reduce reactor watches to two hours. Agreed, Captain?"

"Certainly, Comrade. I know that there is nothing you cannot repair."

"Excuse me, Comrade Captain," Ivanov spoke up. "Should we report this to fleet headquarters?"

"Our orders are not to break radio silence," Ramius said.

"If the imperialists were able to sabotage our instruments…What if they knew our orders beforehand and are attempting to make us use the radio so they can locate us?" Borodin asked.

"A possibility," Ramius replied. "First we will determine if we have a problem, then its severity. Comrades, we have a fine crew and the best officers in the fleet. We will see to our own problems, conquer them, and continue our mission. We all have a date in Cuba that I intend to meet—to hell with imperialist plots!"

"Well said," Melekhin concurred.

"Comrades, we will keep this secret. There is no reason to excite the crew over what may be nothing, and at most is something we can handle on our own." Ramius ended the meeting.

Petrov was less sure, and Svyadov was trying very hard not to shake. He had a sweetheart at home and wanted one day to have children. The young lieutenant had been painstakingly trained to understand everything that went on in the reactor systems and to know what to do if things went awry. And it was some consolation to know that most of the solutions to reactor problems to be found in the book had been written by some of the men in this room. Even so, something that could neither be seen nor felt was invading his body, and no rational person would be happy with that.

The meeting adjourned. Melekhin and Borodin went aft to the engineering stores. A *michman* electrician came with them to get the proper parts. He noted that they were reading from the maintenance manual for a radiation detector. When he went off duty an hour later, the whole crew knew that the reactor had been shut down yet again. The electrician conferred with his bunkmate, a missile maintenance technician. Together they discussed the reason for working on a half dozen Geiger counters and other instruments, and their conclusion was an obvious one.

The submarine's bosun overheard the discussion and pondered the conclusion himself. He had been on nuclear submarines for ten years. Despite this he was not an educated man and regarded any

activity in the reactor spaces as something to the left of witchcraft. It worked the ship, how he did not know, though he was certain that there was something unholy about it. Now he began to wonder if the devils he never saw inside that steel drum—were coming loose? Within two hours the entire crew knew that something was wrong and that their officers had not yet figured out a way to deal with it.

The cooks bringing food forward from the galley to the crew spaces were seen to linger in the bow as long as they could. Men standing watch in the control room shifted on their feet more than usual, Ramius noted, hurrying forward at the change of watch.

The USS New Jersey

It took some getting used to, Commodore Zachary Eaton reflected. When his flagship was built, he was sailing boats in a bathtub. Back then the Russians were allies, but allies of convenience, who shared a common enemy instead of a common goal. Like the Chinese today, he judged. The enemy then had been the Germans and the Japanese. In his twenty-six-year career, he had been to both countries many times, and his first command, a destroyer, had been home-ported at Yokoshuka. It was a strange world.

There were several nice things about his flagship. Big as she was, her movement on the ten-foot seas was just enough to remind him that he was at sea, not at a desk. Visibility was about ten miles, and somewhere out there, about eight hundred miles away, was the Russian fleet. His battleship was going to meet them just like in the old old days, as if the aircraft carrier had never come along. The destroyers *Caron* and *Stump* were in sight, five miles off either bow. Further forward, the cruisers *Biddle* and *Wainwright* were doing radar picket duty. The surface action group was marking time instead of proceeding forward as he would have preferred. Off the New Jersey coast, the helicopter assault ship *Tarawa* and two frigates were racing to join up, bringing ten AV-8B Harrier attack fighters and fourteen ASW helicopters to supplement his air strength. This was useful, but not of critical concern to Eaton. The *Saratoga*'s air wing was now operating out of Maine, along with a goodly collection of air force birds working hard to learn the maritime strike business. HMS *Invincible* was two hundred miles to his east, conducting aggressive ASW patrols, and eight hundred

miles east of that force was the *Kennedy*, hiding under a weather front off the Azores. It slightly irked the commodore that the Brits were helping out. Since when did the U.S. Navy need help defending the American coast? Not that they didn't owe us the favor, though.

The Russians had split into three groups, with the carrier *Kiev* easternmost to face the *Kennedy*'s battle group. His expected responsibility was the *Moskva* group, with the *Invincible* handling the *Kirov*'s. Data on all three was being fed to him continuously and digested by his operations staff down in flag plot. What were the Soviets up to? he wondered.

He knew the story that they were searching for a lost sub, but Eaton believed that as much as if they'd explained that they had a bridge they wanted to sell. Probably, he thought, they want to demonstrate that they can trail their coats down our coast whenever they want, to show that they have a seagoing fleet and to establish a precedent for doing this again.

Eaton did not like that.

He did not much care for his assigned mission either. He had two tasks that were not fully compatible. Keeping an eye on their submarine activity would be difficult enough. The *Saratoga*'s Vikings were not working his area, despite his request, and most of the Orions were working farther out, closer to the *Invincible*. His own ASW assets were barely adequate for local defense, much less active sub hunting. The *Tarawa* would change that, but also change his screening requirements. His other mission was to establish and maintain sensor contact with the *Moskva* group and to report at once any unusual activity to CINCLANTFLT, the commander in chief of the Atlantic Fleet. This made sense, sort of. If their surface ships did anything untoward, Eaton had the means to deal with them. It was being decided now how closely he should shadow them.

The problem was whether he should be nearby or far away. Near meant twenty miles—gun range. The *Moskva* had ten escorts, none of which could possibly survive more than two of his sixteen-inch projectiles. At twenty miles he had the choice of using full-sized or subcaliber rounds, the latter guided to their targets by a laser designator installed atop the main director tower. Tests the previous year had determined that he could maintain a steady firing rate of one round every twenty seconds, with the laser shifting fire

from one target to another until there were no more. But this would expose the *New Jersey* and her escorts to torpedo and missile fire from the Russian ships.

Backing farther off, he could still fire sabot rounds from fifty miles, and they could be directed to the target by a laser designator aboard the battlewagon's helicopter. This would expose the chopper to surface-to-air missile fire and to Soviet helicopters suspected of having air-to-air missile capability. To help out with this, the *Tarawa* was bringing a pair of Apache attack helicopters, which carried lasers, air-to-air missiles, and their own air-to-surface missiles; they were antitank weapons expected to work well against small warships.

His ships would be exposed to missile fire, but he didn't fear for his flagship. Unless the Russians were carrying nuclear warheads, their antiship missiles would not be able to damage his ship gravely —the *New Jersey* had upwards of a foot of class B armor plate. They would, however, play hell with his radar and communications gear, and worse, they would be lethal to his thin-hulled escorts. His ships carried their own antiship missiles, Harpoons and Tomahawks, though not as many as he would have liked.

And what about a Russian sub hunting them? Eaton had been told of none, but you never knew where one might be hiding. Oh well—he couldn't worry about everything. A submarine could sink the *New Jersey*, but she would have to work at it. If the Russians were really up to something nasty, they'd get the first shot, but Eaton would have enough warning to launch his own missiles and get off a few rounds of gunfire while calling for air support—none of which would happen, he was sure.

He decided that the Russians were on some sort of fishing expedition. His job was to show them that the fish in these waters were dangerous.

Naval Air Station, North Island, California

The oversized tractor-trailer crept at two miles per hour into the cargo bay of the C-5A Galaxy transport under the watchful eyes of the aircraft's loadmaster, two flight officers, and six naval officers. Oddly, only the latter, none of whom wore aviator's wings, were fully versed in the procedure. The vehicle's center of gravity was precisely marked, and they watched the mark approach a particular

number engraved on the cargo bay floor. The work had to be done exactly. Any mistake could fatally impair the aircraft's trim and imperil the lives of the flight crew and passengers.

"Okay, freeze it right there," the senior officer called. The driver was only too glad to stop. He left the keys in the ignition, set all the brakes, and put the truck in gear before getting out. Someone else would drive it out of the aircraft on the other side of the country. The loadmaster and six airmen immediately went to work, snaking steel cables to eyebolts on the truck and trailer to secure the heavy load. Shifting cargo was something else an aircraft rarely survived, and the C-5A did not have ejection seats.

The loadmaster saw to it that his ground crewmen were properly at work before walking over to the pilot. He was a twenty-five-year sergeant who loved the C-5s despite their blemished history.

"Cap'n, what the hell is this thing?"

"It's called a DSRV, Sarge, deep submergence rescue vehicle."

"Says *Avalon* on the back, sir," the sergeant pointed out.

"Yeah, so it has a name. It's a sort of a lifeboat for submarines. Goes down to get the crew out if something screws up."

"Oh." The sergeant considered that. He'd flown tanks, helicopters, general cargo, once a whole battalion of troops on his—he thought of the aircraft as his—Galaxy before. This was the first time he had ever flown a ship. If it had a name, he reasoned, it was a ship. Damn, the Galaxy could do anything! "Where we takin' it, sir?"

"Norfolk Naval Air Station, and I've never been there either." The pilot watched the securing process closely. Already a dozen cables were attached. When a dozen more were in place, they'd put tension on the cables to prevent the minutest shift. "We figure a trip of five hours, forty minutes, all on internal fuel. We got the jet stream on our side today. Weather's supposed to be okay until we hit the coast. We lay over for a day, then come back Monday morning."

"Your boys work pretty fast," said the senior naval officer, Lieutenant Ames, coming over.

"Yes, Lieutenant, another twenty minutes." The pilot checked his watch. "We ought to be taking off on the hour."

"No hurry, Captain. If this thing shifts in flight, I guess it would ruin our whole day. Where do I send my people?"

"Upper deck forward. There's room for fifteen or so just aft of the flight deck." Lieutenant Ames knew this but didn't say so. He'd flown with his DSRV across the Atlantic several times and across the Pacific once, every time on a different C-5.

"May I ask what the big deal is?" the pilot inquired.

"I don't know," Ames said. "They want me and my baby in Norfolk."

"You really take that little bitty thing underwater, sir?" the loadmaster asked.

"That's what they pay me for. I've had her down to forty-eight hundred feet, almost a mile." Ames regarded his vessel with affection.

"A mile *under* water, sir? Jesus—uh, pardon me, sir, but I mean, isn't that a little hairy—the water pressure, I mean?"

"Not really. I've been down to twenty thousand aboard *Trieste*. It's really pretty interesting down there. You see all kinds of strange fish." Though a fully qualified submariner, Ames' first love was research. He had a degree in oceanography and had commanded or served in all of the navy's deep-submergence vehicles except the nuclear-powered *NR-1*. "Of course, the water pressure would do bad things to you if anything went wrong, but it would be so fast you'd never know it. If you fellows want a check ride, I could probably arrange it. It's a different world down there."

"That's okay, sir." The sergeant went back to swearing at his men.

"You weren't serious," the pilot observed.

"Why not? It's no big deal. We take civilians down all the time, and believe me, it's a lot less hairy than riding this damned white whale during a midair refueling."

"Uh-huh," the pilot noted dubiously. He'd done hundreds of those. It was entirely routine, and he was surprised that anyone would find it dangerous. You had to be careful, of course, but, hell, you had to be careful driving every morning. He was sure that an accident on this pocket submarine wouldn't leave enough of a man to make a decent meal for a shrimp. It takes all kinds, he decided. "You don't go to sea by yourself in that, do you?"

"No, ordinarily we work off a submarine rescue ship, *Pigeon* or *Ortolan*. We can also operate off a regular submarine. That gadget you see there on the trailer is our mating collar. We can nest on the back of a sub at the after escape trunk, and the sub takes us where

we need to go."

"Does this have to do with the flap on the East Coast?"

"That's a good bet, but nobody's said anything official to us. The papers say the Russians have lost a sub. If so, we might go down to look at her, maybe rescue any survivors. We can take off twenty or twenty-five men at a time, and our mating collar is designed to fit Russian subs as well as our own."

"Same size?"

"Close enough." Ames cocked an eyebrow. "We plan for all kinds of contingencies."

"Interesting."

The North Atlantic

The YAK-36 Forger had left the *Kiev* half an hour before, guided first by gyro compass and now by the ESM pod on the fighter's stubby rudder fin. Senior Lieutenant Viktor Shavrov's mission was not an easy one. He was to approach the American E-3A Sentry radar surveillance aircraft, one of which had been shadowing his fleet for three days now. The AWACS (airborne warning and control system) aircraft had been careful to circle well beyond SAM range, but had stayed close enough to maintain constant coverage of the Soviet fleet, reporting every maneuver and radio transmission to their command base. It was like having a burglar watching one's apartment and being unable to do anything about it.

Shavrov's mission was to do something about it. He couldn't shoot, of course. His orders from Admiral Stralbo on the *Kirov* had been explicit about that. But he was carrying a pair of Atoll heat-seeking missiles which he would be sure to show the imperialists. He and his admiral expected that this would teach them a lesson: the Soviet Navy did not like having imperialist snoopers about, and accidents had been known to happen. It was a mission worthy of the effort it took.

This effort was considerable. To avoid detection by the airborne radar Shavrov had to fly as low and slow as his fighter could operate, a bare twenty meters above the rough Atlantic; this way he would get lost in the sea return. His speed was two hundred knots. This made for excellent fuel economy, though his mission was at the ragged edge of his fuel load. It also made for very rough flying as his fighter bounced through the roiled air at the wave tops. There

was a low-hanging mist that cut visibility to a few kilometers. So much the better, he thought. The nature of the mission had chosen him, rather than the other way around. He was one of the few Soviet pilots experienced in low-level flying. Shavrov had not become a sailor-pilot by himself. He'd started flying attack helicopters for frontal aviation in Afghanistan, graduating to fixed-wing aircraft after a year's bloody apprenticeship. Shavrov was an expert in nap-of-the-earth flying, having learned it by necessity, hunting the bandits and counterrevolutionaries that hid in the towering mountains like hydrophobic rats. This skill had made him attractive to the fleet, which had transferred him to sea duty without his having had much say in the matter. After a few months he had no complaints, his perqs and extra pay being more attractive than his former frontal aviation base on the Chinese border. Being one of the few hundred carrier-qualified Soviet airmen had softened the blow of missing his chance to fly the new MiG-27, though with luck, if the new full-sized carrier were ever finished, he'd have the chance to fly the naval version of that wonderful bird. Shavrov could wait for that, and with a few successful missions like this one he might have his squadron command.

He stopped daydreaming—the mission was too demanding for that. This was real flying. He'd never flown against Americans, only against the weapons they gave to the Afghan bandits. He had lost friends to those weapons, some of whom had survived their crashes only to be done to death by the Afghan savages in ways that would have made even a German puke. It would be good to teach the imperialists a lesson personally.

The radar signal was growing stronger. Beneath his ejection seat a tape recorder was making a continuous record of the signal characteristics of the American aircraft so that the scientific people would be able to devise a means of jamming and foiling the vaunted American flying eye. The aircraft was only a converted 707, a glorified passenger plane, hardly a worthy opponent for a crack fighter pilot! Shavrov checked his chart. He'd have to find it soon. Next he checked his fuel. He'd dropped his last external tank a few minutes earlier, and all he had now was his internal fuel. The turbofan was guzzling fuel, something he had to keep an eye on. He planned to have only five or ten minutes of fuel left when he returned to his ship. This did not trouble him. He already had over a hundred carrier landings.

There! His hawk's eyes caught the glint of sun off metal at one o'clock high. Shavrov eased back on his stick and increased power gently, bringing his Forger into a climb. A minute later he was at two thousand meters. He could see the Sentry now, its blue paint blending neatly into the darkening sky. He was coming up beneath its tail, and with luck the empennage would shield him from the rotating radar antenna. Perfect! He'd blaze by her a few times, letting the flight crew see his Atolls, and—

It took Shavrov a moment to realize that he had a wingman.

Two wingmen.

Fifty meters to his left and right, a pair of American F-15 Eagle fighters. The visored face of one pilot was staring at him.

"YAK-106, YAK-106, please acknowledge." The voice on the SSB (single side band) radio circuit spoke flawless Russian. Shavrov did not acknowledge. They had read the number off his engine intake housing before he had known they were there.

"106, 106, this is the Sentry aircraft you are now approaching. Please identify yourself and your intentions. We get a little anxious when a stray fighter comes our way, so we've had three following you for the past hundred kilometers."

Three? Shavrov turned his head around. A third Eagle with four sparrow missiles was hanging fifty meters from his tail, his "six."

"Our men compliment you on your ability to fly low and slow, 106."

Lieutenant Shavrov was shaking with rage as he passed four thousand meters, still eight thousand from the American AWACS. He had checked his six every thirty seconds on the way in. The Americans must have been riding back there, hidden in the mist, and vectored in on him by instructions from the Sentry. He swore to himself and held course. He'd teach that AWACS a lesson!

"Break off, 106." It was a cool voice, without emotion except perhaps a trace of irony. "106, if you do not break off, we will consider your mission to be hostile. Think about it, 106. You are beyond radar coverage of your own ships, and you are not yet within missile range of us."

Shavrov looked to his right. The Eagle was breaking off—so was the one to the left. Was it a gesture, taking the heat off of him and expecting some courtesy in return? Or were they clearing the way for the one behind him—he checked, still there—to shoot? There was no telling what these imperialist criminals would do; he was at

least a minute from the fringe of their missile range. Shavrov was anything but a coward. Neither was he a fool. He moved his stick, curving his fighter a few degrees to the right.

"Thank you, 106," the voice acknowledged. "You see, we have some trainee operators aboard. Two of them are women, and we don't want them to get rattled their first time out." Suddenly it was too much. Shavrov thumbed the radio switch on his stick.

"Shall I tell you what you can do with your women, Yankee?"

"You are *nekulturny*, 106," the voice replied softly. "Perhaps the long overwater flight has made you nervous. You must be about at the limit of your internal fuel. Bastard of a day to fly, what with all these crazy, shifting winds. Do you need a position check, over?"

"Negative, Yankee!"

"Course back to *Kiev* is one-eight-five, true. Have to be careful using a magnetic compass this far north, you know. Distance to *Kiev* is 318.6 kilometers. Warning—there is a rapidly moving cold front moving in from the southwest. That's going to make flying a little rough in a few hours. Do you require an escort back to *Kiev?*"

"Pig!" Shavrov swore to himself. He switched his radio off, cursing himself for his lack of discipline. He had allowed the Americans to wound his pride. Like most fighter pilots, he had a surfeit of that.

"106, we did not copy your last transmission. Two of my Eagles are heading that way. They will form up on you and see that you get home safely. Have a happy day, Comrade. Sentry-November, out."

The American lieutenant turned to his colonel. He couldn't keep a straight face any longer. "God, I thought I'd strangle talking like that!" He sipped some Coke from a plastic cup. "He really thought he'd sneak up on us."

"In case you didn't notice, he did get within a mile of Atoll range, and we don't have authorization to shoot at him until he flips one at us—which might wreck our day," the colonel grumped. "Nice job of twisting his tail, Lieutenant."

"A pleasure, Colonel." The operator looked at his screen. "Well, he's heading back to momma, with Cobras 3 and 4 on his six. He's going to be one unhappy Russkie when he gets home. If he gets home. Even with those drop tanks, he must be near his range limit." He thought for a moment. "Colonel, if they do this again, how 'bout we offer to take the guy home with us?"

“Get a Forger—what for? I suppose the navy’d like to have one to play with, they don’t get much of Ivan’s hardware, but the Forger’s a piece of junk.”

Shavrov was tempted to firewall his engine but restrained himself. He’d already shown enough personal weakness for one day. Besides, his YAK could only break Mach 1 in a dive. Those Eagles could do it straight up, and they had plenty of fuel. He saw that they both carried FAST-pack conformal fuel cells. They could cross whole oceans with those. Damn the Americans and their arrogance! Damn his own intelligence officer for telling him he could sneak up on the Sentry! Let the air-to-air armed Backfires go after them. They could handle that famed overbred passenger bus, could get to it faster than its fighter guardians could react.

The Americans, he saw, were not lying about the weather front. A line of cold weather squawls racing northeast was just on the horizon as he approached the *Kiev*. The Eagles backed off as he approached the formation. One American pilot pulled alongside briefly to wave goodbye. His head bobbed at Shavrov’s return gesture. The Eagles paired up and turned back north.

Five minutes later he was aboard the *Kiev*, still pale with rage. As soon as the wheels were chocked he jumped to the carrier deck, stomping off to see his squadron commander.

The Kremlin

The city of Moscow was justly famous for its subway system. For a pittance, people could ride nearly anywhere they wanted on a modern, safe, garishly decorated electric railway system. In case of war, the underground tunnels could serve as a bomb shelter for the citizens of Moscow. This secondary use was the result of the efforts of Nikita Khrushchev, who when construction was begun in the mid-thirties had suggested to Stalin that the system be driven deep. Stalin had approved. The shelter consideration had been decades ahead of its time; nuclear fission had then only been a theory, fusion hardly thought of at all.

On a spur of the line running from Sverdlov Square to the old airport, which ran near the Kremlin, workers bored a tunnel that was later closed off with a ten-meter-thick steel and concrete plug. The hundred-meter-long space was connected to the Kremlin by a pair of elevator shafts, and over time it had been converted to an

emergency command center from which the Politburo could control the entire Soviet empire. The tunnel was also a convenient means of going unseen from the city to a small airport from which Politburo members could be flown to their ultimate redoubt, beneath the granite monolith at Zhiguli. Neither command post was a secret to the West—both had existed far too long for that—but the KGB confidently reported that nothing in the Western arsenals could smash through the hundreds of feet of rock which in both places separated the Politburo from the surface.

This fact was of little comfort to Admiral Yuri Ilych Padorin. He found himself seated at the far end of a ten-meter-long conference table looking at the grim faces of the ten Politburo members, the inner circle that alone made the strategic decisions affecting the fate of his country. None of them were officers. Those in uniform reported to these men. Up the table to his left was Admiral Sergey Gorshkov, who had disassociated himself from this affair with consummate skill, even producing a letter in which he had opposed Ramius' appointment to command the *Red October*. Padorin, as chief of the Main Political Administration, had successfully blocked Ramius' transfer, pointing out that Gorshkov's candidate for command was occasionally late in paying his Party dues and did not speak up at the regular meetings often enough for an officer of his rank. The truth was that Gorshkov's candidate was not so proficient an officer as Ramius, whom Gorshkov had wanted for his own operations staff, a post that Ramius had successfully evaded for years.

Party General Secretary and President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Andre Narmonov shifted his gaze to Padorin. His face gave nothing away. It never did, unless he wished it to—which was rare enough. Narmonov had succeeded Andropov when the latter had suffered a heart attack. There were rumors about that, but in the Soviet Union there are always rumors. Not since the days of Laventri Beria had the security chieftain come so close to power, and senior Party officials had allowed themselves to forget that. It would not be forgotten again. Bringing the KGB to heel had taken a year, a necessary measure to secure the privileges of the Party elite from the supposed reforms of the Andropov clique.

Narmonov was the apparatchik par excellence. He had first gained prominence as a factory manager, an engineer with a reputation for fulfilling his quota early, a man who produced

results. He had risen steadily by using his own talents and those of others, rewarding those he had to, ignoring those he could. His position as general secretary of the Communist Party was not entirely secure. It was still early in his stewardship of the Party, and he depended on a loose coalition of colleagues—not friends, these men did not make friends. His succession to this chair had resulted more from ties within the Party structure than from personal ability, and his position would depend on consensus rule for years, until such time as his will could dictate policy.

Narmonov's dark eyes, Padorin could see, were red from tobacco smoke. The ventilation system down here had never worked properly. The general secretary squinted at Padorin from the other end of the table as he decided what to say, what would please the members of this cabal, these ten old, passionless men.

"Comrade Admiral," he began coldly, "we have heard from Comrade Gorshkov what the chances are of finding and destroying this rebellious submarine before it can complete its unimaginable crime. We are not pleased. Nor are we pleased with the fantastic error in judgment that gave command of our most valuable ship to this slug. What I want to know from you, Comrade, is what happened to the *zampolit* aboard, and what security measures were taken by your office to prevent this infamy from taking place!"

There was no fear in Narmonov's voice, but Padorin knew it had to be there. This "fantastic error" could ultimately be laid at the chairman's feet by members who wanted another in that chair—unless he were able somehow to separate himself from it. If this meant Padorin's skin, that was the admiral's problem. Narmonov had had men flayed before.

Padorin had prepared himself for this over several days. He was a man who had lived through months of intensive combat operations and had several boats sunk from under him. If his body was softer now, his mind was not. Whatever his fate might be, Padorin was determined to meet it with dignity. If they remember me as a fool, he thought, it will be as a courageous fool. He had little left to live for in any case. "Comrade General Secretary," he began, "the political officer aboard *Red October* was Captain Ivan Yurievich Putin, a stalwart and faithful Party member. I cannot imagine—"

"Comrade Padorin," Defense Minister Ustinov interrupted, "we presume that you also could not imagine the unbelievable treachery

of this Ramius. You now expect us to trust your judgment on this man also?"

"The most disturbing thing of all," added Mikhail Alexandrov, the Party theoretician who had replaced the dead Mikhail Suslov and was even more determined than the departed ideologue to be simon-pure on Party doctrine, "is how tolerant the Main Political Administration has been toward this renegade. It is amazing, particularly in view of his obvious efforts to construct his own personality cult throughout the submarine service, even in the political arm, it would seem. Your criminal willingness to overlook this—this *obvious* aberration from Party policy—does not make your judgment appear very sound."

"Comrades, you are correct in judging that I erred badly in approving Ramius for command, and also that we allowed him to select most of *Red October*'s senior officers. At the same time, we chose some years ago to do things in this way, to keep officers associated with a single ship for many years, and to give the captain great sway over their careers. This is an operational question, not a political one."

"We have already considered that," Narmonov replied. "It is true that in this case there is enough blame for more than one man." Gorshkov didn't move, but the message was explicit: his effort to separate himself from this scandal had failed. Narmonov didn't care how many heads it took to prop up his chair.

"Comrade Chairman," Gorshkov objected, "the efficiency of the fleet—"

"Efficiency?" Alexandrov said. "Efficiency. This Lithuanian half-breed is *efficiently* making fools of our fleet with his chosen officers while our remaining ships blunder about like newly castrated cattle." Alexandrov alluded to his first job on a state farm. A fitting beginning, it was generally thought, for the man who held the position of chief ideologue was as popular in Moscow as the plague, but the Politburo had to have him or one like him. The ideological chieftain was always the kingmaker. Whose side was he on now—in addition to his own?

"The most likely explanation is that Putin was murdered," Padorin continued. "He alone of the officers left behind a wife and family."

"That's another question, Comrade Admiral." Narmonov seized this issue. "Why is it that none of these men are married? Didn't

that tell you something? Must we of the Politburo supervise everything? Can't you think for yourselves?"

As if you want us to, Padorin thought. "Comrade General Secretary, most of our submarine commanders prefer young, unmarried officers in their wardrooms. Duty at sea is demanding, and single men have fewer distractions. Moreover, each of the senior officers aboard is a Party member in good standing with a praiseworthy record. Ramius has been treacherous, there is no denying that, and I would gladly kill the son of a bitch with my own hands—but he has deceived more good men than there are in this room."

"Indeed," Alexandrov observed. "And now that we are in this mess, how do we get out of it?"

Padorin took a deep breath. He'd been waiting for this. "Comrades, we have another man aboard *Red October*, unknown to either Putin or Captain Ramius, an agent of the Main Political Administration."

"What?" Gorshkov said. "And why did I not know of this?"

Alexandrov smiled. "That's the first intelligent thing we've heard today. Go on."

"This individual is covered as an enlisted man. He reports directly to our office, bypassing all operational and political channels. His name is Igor Loginov. He is twenty-four, a—"

"*Twenty-four!*" Narmonov shouted. "You trust a child with this responsibility?"

"Comrade, Loginov's mission is to blend in with the conscripted crewmen, to listen in on conversations, to identify likely traitors, spies, and saboteurs. In truth he looks younger still. He serves alongside young men, and he must be young himself. He is, in fact, a graduate of the higher naval school for political officers at Kiev and the GRU intelligence academy. He is the son of Arkady Ivanovich Loginov, chief of the Lenin Steel Plant at Kazan. Many of you here know his father." Narmonov was among those who nodded, a flickering of interest in his eyes. "Only an elite few are chosen for this duty. I have met and interviewed this boy myself. His record is clear, he is a Soviet patriot without question."

"I know his father," Narmonov confirmed. "Arkady Ivanovich is an honorable man who has raised several good sons. What are this boy's orders?"

"As I said, Comrade General Secretary, his ordinary duties are to

observe the crewmen and report on what he sees. He's been doing this for two years, and he is good at it. He does not report to the *zampolit* aboard, but only to Moscow or to one of my representatives. In a genuine emergency, his orders are to report to the *zampolit*. If Putin is alive—and I do not believe this, comrades—he would be part of the conspiracy, and Loginov would know not to do this. In a true emergency, therefore, his orders are to destroy the ship and make his escape."

"This is possible?" Narmonov asked. "Gorshkov?"

"Comrades, all of our ships carry powerful scuttling charges, submarines especially."

"Unfortunately," Padorin said, "these are generally not armed, and only the captain can activate them. Ever since the incident on *Storozhevoy*, we in the Main Political Administration have had to consider that an incident such as this one was indeed a possibility, and that its most damaging manifestation would involve a missile-carrying submarine."

"Ah," Narmonov observed, "he is a missile mechanic."

"No, Comrade, he is a ship's cook," Padorin replied.

"Wonderful! He spends all his day boiling potatoes!" Narmonov's hands flew up in the air, his hopeful demeanor gone in an instant, replaced with palpable wrath. "You wish your bullet now, Padorin?"

"Comrade Chairman, this is a better cover assignment than you may imagine." Padorin did not flinch, wanting to show these men what he was made of. "On *Red October* the officers' accommodations and galley are aft. The crew's quarters are forward—the crew eat there since they do not have a separate messroom—with the missile room in between. As a cook he must travel back and forth many times each day, and his presence in any particular area will not be thought unusual. The food freezer is located adjacent to the lower missile deck forward. It is not our plan that he should activate the scuttling charges. We have allowed for the possibility that the captain could disarm them. Comrades, these measures have been carefully thought out."

"Go on," Narmonov grunted.

"As Comrade Gorshkov explained earlier, *Red October* carries twenty-six Seahawk missiles. These are solid-fuel rockets, and one has a range-safety package installed."

"Range safety?" Narmonov was puzzled.

Up to this point the other military officers at the meeting, none of them Politburo members, had kept their peace. Padorin was surprised when General V.M. Vishenkov, commander of the Strategic Rocket Forces, spoke up. “Comrades, these details were worked out through my office some years ago. As you know, when we test our missiles, we have safety packages aboard to explode them if they go off course. Otherwise they might land on one of our own cities. Our operational missiles do not ordinarily carry them—for the obvious reason, the imperialists might learn a way to explode them in flight.”

“So, our young GRU comrade will blow up the missile. What of the warheads?” Narmonov asked. An engineer by training, he could always be distracted by technical discourse, always impressed by a clever one.

“Comrade,” Vishenkov went on, “the missile warheads are armed by accelerometers. Thus they cannot be armed until the missile reaches its full programmed speed. The Americans use the same system, and for the same reason, to prevent sabotage. These safety systems are absolutely reliable. You could drop one of the reentry vehicles from the top of the Moscow television transmitter onto a steel plate and it would not fire.” The general referred to the massive TV tower whose construction Narmonov had personally supervised while head of the Central Communications Directorate. Vishenkov was a skilled political operator.

“In the case of a solid-fuel rocket,” Padorin continued, recognizing his debt to Vishenkov, wondering what he’d ask for in return, and hoping he’d live long enough to deliver, “a safety package ignites all of the missile’s three stages simultaneously.”

“So the missile just takes off?” Alexandrov asked.

“No, Comrade Academician. The upper stage might, if it could break through the missile tube hatch, and this would flood the missile room, sinking the submarine. But even if it did not, there is sufficient thermal energy in either of the first two stages to reduce the entire submarine to a puddle of molten iron, twenty times what is necessary to sink it. Loginov has been trained to bypass the alarm system on the missile tube hatch, to activate the safety package, set a timer, and escape.”

“Not just to destroy the ship?” Narmonov asked.

“Comrade General Secretary,” Padorin said, “it is too much to ask a young man to do his duty, knowing that it means certain

death. We would be unrealistic to expect this. He must have at least the possibility of escape, otherwise human weakness might lead to failure."

"This is reasonable," Alexandrov said. "Young men are motivated by hope, not fear. In this case, young Loginov would hope for a considerable reward."

"And get it," Narmonov said. "We will make every effort to save this young man, Gorshkov."

"If he is truly reliable," Alexandrov noted.

"I know that my life depends on this, Comrade Academician," Padorin said, his back still straight. He did not get a verbal answer, only nods from half the heads at the table. He had faced death before and was at the age where it remains the last thing a man need face.

The White House

Arbatov came into the Oval Office at 4:50 P.M. He found the president and Dr. Pelt sitting in easy chairs across from the chief executive's desk.

"Come on over, Alex. Coffee?" The president pointed to a tray on the corner of his desk. He was not drinking today, Arbatov noted.

"No, thank you, Mr. President. May I ask—"

"We think we found your sub, Alex," Pelt answered. "They just brought these dispatches over, and we're checking them now." The adviser held up a ring binder of message forms.

"Where is it, may I ask?" The ambassador's face was deadpan.

"Roughly three hundred miles northeast of Norfolk. We have not located it exactly. One of our ships noted an underwater explosion in the area—no, that's not right. It was recorded on a ship, and when the tapes were checked a few hours later, they thought they heard a submarine explode and sink. Sorry, Alex," Pelt said. "I should have known better than to read through all this stuff without an interpreter. Does your navy talk in its own language, too?"

"Officers do not like for civilians to understand them," Arbatov smiled. "This has doubtless been true since the first man picked up a stone."

"Anyway, we have ships and aircraft searching the area now."

The president looked up. "Alex, I talked to the chief of naval

operations, Dan Foster, a few minutes ago. He said not to expect any survivors. The water there's over a thousand feet deep, and you know what the weather is like. They said it's right on the edge of the continental shelf."

"The Norfolk Canyon, sir," Pelt added.

"We are conducting a thorough search," the president continued. "The navy is bringing in some specialized rescue equipment, search gear, all that sort of thing. If the submarine is located, we'll get somebody down to them on the chance there might be survivors. From what the CNO tells me it is just possible that there might be if the interior partitions—bulkheads, I think he called them—are intact. The other question is their air supply, he said. Time is very much against us, I'm afraid. All this fantastically expensive equipment we buy them, and they can't locate one damned object right off our coast."

Arbatov made a mental record of these words. It would make a worthwhile intelligence report. The president occasionally let—

"By the way, Mr. Ambassador, what exactly was your submarine doing there?"

"I have no idea, Dr. Pelt."

"I trust it was not a missile sub," Pelt said. "We have an agreement to keep those five hundred miles offshore. The wreck will of course be inspected by our rescue craft. Were we to learn that it is indeed a missile sub…"

"Your point is noted. Still, those are international waters."

The president turned and spoke softly. "So is the Gulf of Finland, Alex, and, I believe, the Black Sea." He let this observation hang in the air for a moment. "I sincerely hope that we are not heading back to that kind of situation. Are we talking about a missile submarine, Alex?"

"Truly, Mr. President, I have no idea. Certainly I should hope not."

The president could see how carefully the lie was phrased. He wondered if the Russians would admit that there was a captain out there who had disregarded his orders. No, they would probably claim a navigation error.

"Very well. In any case, we will be conducting our own search and rescue operation. We'll know soon enough what sort of vessel we're talking about." The president looked suddenly uneasy. "One more thing Foster talked about. If we find bodies—pardon the

crudity on a Saturday afternoon—I expect that you will want them returned to your country."

"I have had no instructions on this," the ambassador answered truthfully, caught off guard.

"It was explained to me in too much detail what a death like this does to a man. In simple terms, they're crushed by the water pressure, not a very pretty thing to see, they tell me. But they were men, and they deserve some dignity even in death."

Arbatov conceded the point. "If this is possible, then, I believe that the Soviet people would appreciate this humanitarian gesture."

"We'll do our best."

And the American best, Arbatov remembered, included a ship named the *Glomar Explorer*. This notorious exploration ship had been built by the CIA for the specific purpose of recovering a Soviet *Golf*-class missile submarine from the floor of the Pacific Ocean. She had been placed in storage, no doubt to await the next such opportunity. There would be nothing the Soviet Union could do to prevent the operation, a few hundred miles off the American coast, three hundred miles from the United States' largest naval base.

"I trust that the precepts of international law will be observed, gentlemen. That is, with respect to the vessel's remains and the crew's bodies."

"Of course, Alex." The president smiled, gesturing to a memorandum on his desk. Arbatov struggled for control. He'd been led down this path like a schoolboy, forgetting that the American president had been a skilled courtroom tactician—not something that life in the Soviet Union prepares a man for—and knew all about legal tricks. Why was this bastard so easy to underestimate?

The president was also struggling to control himself. It was not often that he saw Alex flustered. This was a clever opponent, not easily caught off balance. Laughing would spoil it.

The memorandum from the attorney general had arrived only that morning. It read:

> Mr. President,
> Pursuant to your request, I have asked the chief of our admiralty law department to review the question of international law regarding the ownership of sunken or derelict vessels, and the law of salvage pertaining to such vessels. There is a good deal of case law on the subject. One

simple example is *Dalmas v Stathos* (84FSuff. 828, 1949 A.M.C. 770 [S.D.N.Y. 1949]):

> No problem of foreign law is here involved, for it is well settled that "salvage is a question arising out of the *jus gentium* and does not ordinarily depend on the municipal law of particular countries."

The international basis for this is the Salvage Convention of 1910 (Brussels), which codified the transnational nature of admiralty and salvage law. This was ratified by the United States in the Salvage Act of 1912, 37 Stat. 242, (1912), 46 U.S.C.A. §§ 727–731; and also in 37 Stat. 1658 (1913).

"International law will be observed, Alex," the president promised. "In all particulars." And whatever we get, he thought, will be taken to the nearest port, Norfolk, where it will be turned over to the receiver of wrecks, an overworked federal official. If the Soviets want anything back, they can bring action in admiralty court, which means the federal district court sitting in Norfolk, where, if the suit were successful—*after* the value of the salvaged property was determined, and *after* the U.S. Navy was paid a proper fee for its salvage effort, also determined by the court—the wreck would be returned to its rightful owners. Of course, the federal district court in question had, at last check, an eleven-month backlog of cases.

Arbatov would cable Moscow on this. For what good it would do. He was certain the president would take perverse pleasure in manipulating the grotesque American legal system to his own advantage, all the time pointing out that, as president, he was constitutionally unable to interfere with the working of the courts.

Pelt looked at his watch. It was about time for the next surprise. He had to admire the president. For a man with only limited knowledge of international affairs only a few years earlier, he'd learned fast. This outwardly simple, quiet-talking man was at his best in face to face situations, and after a lifetime's experience as a prosecutor, he still loved to play the game of negotiation and tactical exchange. He seemed able to manipulate people with frighteningly casual skill. The phone rang and Pelt got it, right on

cue.

"This is Dr. Pelt speaking. Yes, Admiral—where? When? Just one? I see…Norfolk? Thank you, Admiral, that is very good news. I will inform the president immediately. Please keep us advised." Pelt turned around. "We got one, alive, by God!"

"A survivor off the lost sub?" The president stood.

"Well, he's a Russian sailor. A helicopter picked him up an hour ago, and they're flying him to the Norfolk base hospital. They picked him up 290 miles northeast of Norfolk, so I guess that makes it fit. The men on the ship say he's in pretty bad shape, but the hospital is ready for him."

The president walked to his desk and lifted the phone. "Grace, ring me Dan Foster right now…Admiral, this is the president. The man they picked up, how soon to Norfolk? Another two hours?" He grimaced. "Admiral, you get on the phone to the naval hospital, and you tell them that *I* say they are to do everything they can for that man. I want him treated like he was my own son, is that clear? Good. I want hourly reports on his condition. I want the best people we have in on this, the very best. Thank you, Admiral." He hung up. "All right!"

"Maybe we were too pessimistic, Alex," Pelt chirped up.

"Certainly," the president answered. "You have a doctor at the embassy, don't you?"

"Yes, we do, Mr. President."

"Take him down, too. He'll be extended every courtesy. I'll see to that. Jeff, are they searching for other survivors?"

"Yes, Mr. President. There's a dozen aircraft in the area right now, and two more ships on the way."

"Good!" The president clapped his hands together, enthusiastic as a kid in a toystore. "Now, if we can find some more survivors, maybe we can give your country a meaningful Christmas present, Alex. We will do everything we can, you have my word on that."

"That is very kind of you, Mr. President. I will communicate this happy news to my country at once."

"Not so fast, Alex." The chief executive held his hand up. "I'd say this calls for a drink."

THE TENTH DAY
SUNDAY, 12 DECEMBER

SOSUS Control

At SOSUS Control in Norfolk, the picture was becoming increasingly difficult. The United States simply did not have the technology to keep track of submarines in the deep ocean basins. The SOSUS receptors were principally laid at shallow-water choke points, on the bottom of undersea ridges and highlands. The strategy of the NATO countries was a direct consequence of this technological limitation. In a major war with the Soviets, NATO would use the Greenland—Iceland—United Kingdom SOSUS barrier as a huge tripwire, a burglar alarm system. Allied submarines and ASW patrol aircraft would try to seek out, attack, and destroy Soviet submarines as they approached it, before they could cross the lines.

The barrier had never been expected to halt more than half of the attacking submarines, however, and those that succeeded in slipping through would have to be handled differently. The deep ocean basins were simply too wide and too deep—the average depth was over two miles—to be littered with sensors as the shallow choke points were. This was a fact that cut both ways. The NATO mission would be to maintain the Atlantic Bridge and continue transoceanic trade, and the obvious Soviet mission would be to interdict this trade. Submarines would have to spread out over the vast ocean to cover the many possible convoy routes. NATO strategy behind the SOSUS barriers, then, was to assemble large convoys, each ringed with destroyers, helicopters, and fixed-wing aircraft. The escorts would try to establish a protective bubble about a hundred miles across. Enemy submarines would not be able to exist within that bubble; if in it they would be hunted down and killed—or merely driven off long enough for the convoy to speed past. Thus while SOSUS was designed to neutralize a huge, fixed expanse of sea, deep-basin strategy was founded on mobility, a moving zone of protection for the vital North Atlantic shipping.

This was an altogether sensible strategy, but one that could not be tested under realistic conditions, and, unfortunately, one that was largely useless at the moment. With all of the Soviet *Alfas* and

Victors already on the coast, and the last of the *Charlies, Echoes*, and *Novembers* just arriving on their stations, the master screen Commander Quentin was staring at was no longer filled with discrete little red dots but rather with large circles. Each dot or circle designated the position of a Soviet submarine. A circle respresented an estimated position, calculated from the speed with which a sub could move without giving off enough noise to be localized by the many sensors being employed. Some circles were ten miles across, some as much as fifty; an area anywhere from seventy-eight to two thousand square miles had to be searched if the submarine were again to be pinned down. And there were just too damned many of the boats.

Hunting the submarines was principally the job of the P-3C Orion. Each Orion carried sonobuoys, air-deployable active and passive sonar sets that were dropped from the belly of the aircraft. On detecting something, a sonobuoy reported to its mother aircraft and then automatically sank lest it fall into unfriendly hands. The sonobuoys had limited electrical power and thus limited range. Worse, their supply was finite. The sonobuoy inventory was already being depleted alarmingly, and soon they would have to cut back on expenditures. Additionally, each P-3C carried FLIRs, forward-looking infrared scanners, to identify the heat signature of a nuclear sub, and MADs, magnetic anomaly detectors that located the disturbance in the earth's magnetic field caused by a large chunk of ferrous metal like a submarine. MAD gear could only detect a magnetic disturbance six hundred yards to the left and right of an aircraft's course track, and to do this the aircraft had to fly low, consuming fuel and limiting the crew's visual search range. FLIR had roughly the same limitation.

Thus the technology used to localize a target first detected by SOSUS, or to "delouse" a discrete piece of ocean preparatory to the passage of a convoy, simply was not up to a random search of the deep ocean.

Quentin leaned forward. A circle had just changed to a dot. A P-3C had just dropped an explosive sounding charge and localized an *Echo*-class attack sub five hundred miles south of the Grand Banks. For an hour they had a near-certain shooting solution on that *Echo;* her name was written on the Orion's Mark 46 ASW torpedoes.

Quentin sipped at his coffee. His stomach rebelled at the

additional caffeine, remembering the abuse of four months of hellish chemotherapy. If there were to be a war, this was one way it might start. All at once, their submarines would stop, perhaps just like this. Not sneaking to kill convoys in midocean but attacking them closer to shore, the way the Germans had done…and all the American sensors would be in the wrong place. Once stopped the dots would grow to circles, ever wider, making the task of finding the subs all the more difficult. Their engines quiet, the boats would be invisible traps for the passing merchant vessels and warships racing to bring life-saving supplies to the men in Europe. Submarines were like cancer. Just like the disease that he had only barely defeated. The invisible, malignant vessels would find a place, stop to infect it, and on his screen the malignancies would grow until they were attacked by the aircraft he controlled from this room. But he could not attack them now. Only watch.

"PK EST 1 HOUR—RUN," he typed into his computer console.

"23," the computer answered at once.

Quentin grunted. Twenty-four hours earlier the PK, probability of a kill, had been forty—forty probable kills in the first hour after getting a shooting authorization. Now it was barely half that, and this number had to be taken with a large grain of salt, since it assumed that everything would work, a happy state of affairs found only in fiction. Soon, he judged, the number would be under ten. This did not include kills from friendly submarines that were trailing the Russians under strict orders not to reveal their positions. His sometime allies in the *Sturgeons, Permits*, and *Los Angeleses* were playing their own ASW game by their own set of rules. A different breed. He tried to think of them as friends, but it never quite worked. In his twenty years of naval service submarines had always been the enemy. In war they would be useful enemies, but in a war it was widely recognized that there was no such thing as a friendly submarine.

A B-52

The bomber crew knew exactly where the Russians were. Navy Orions and air force Sentries had been shadowing them for days now, and the day before, he'd been told, the Soviets had sent an armed fighter from the *Kiev* to the nearest Sentry. Possibly an attack mission, probably not, it had in any case been a provocation.

Four hours earlier the squadron of fourteen had flown out of Plattsburg, New York, at 0330, leaving behind black trails of exhaust smoke hidden in the predawn gloom. Each aircraft carried a full load of fuel and twelve missiles whose total weight was far less than the -52's design bombload. This made for good, long range.

Which was exactly what they needed. Knowing where the Russians were was only half the battle. Hitting them was the other. The mission profile was simple in concept, rather more difficult in execution. As had been learned in missions over Hanoi—in which the B-52 had participated and sustained SAM (surface-to-air missile) damage—the best method of attacking a heavily defended target was to converge from all points of the compass at once, "like the enveloping arms of an angry bear," the squadron commander had put it at the briefing, indulging his poetic nature. This gave half the squadron relatively direct courses to their target; the other half had to curve around, careful to keep well beyond effective radar coverage; all had to turn exactly on cue.

The B-52s had turned ten minutes earlier, on command from the Sentry quarterbacking the mission. The pilot had added a twist. His course to the Soviet formation took his bomber right down a commercial air route. On making his turn, he had switched his IFF transponder from its normal setting to international. He was fifty miles behind a commercial 747, thirty miles ahead of another, and on Soviet radar all three Boeing products would look exactly alike—harmless.

It was still dark down on the surface. There was no indication that the Russians were alerted yet. Their fighters were only supposed to be VFR (visual flight rules) capable, and the pilot imagined that taking off and landing on a carrier in the dark was pretty risky business, doubly so in bad weather.

"Skipper," the electronic warfare officer called on the intercom, "we're getting L-and S-band emissions. They're right where they're supposed to be."

"Roger. Enough for a return off us?"

"That's affirm, but they probably think we're flying Pan Am. No fire control stuff yet, just routine air search."

"Range to target?"

"One-three-zero miles."

It was almost time. The mission profile was such that all would

hit the 125-mile circle at the same moment.

"Everything ready?"

"That's a roge."

The pilot relaxed for another minute, waiting for the signal from the entry.

"FLASHLIGHT, FLASHLIGHT, FLASHLIGHT." The signal came over the digital radio channel.

"That's it! Let 'em know we're here," the aircraft commander ordered.

"Right." The electronic warfare officer flipped the clear plastic cover off his set of toggle switches and dials controlling the aircraft's jamming systems. First he powered up his systems. This took a few seconds. The -52's electronics were all old seventies-vintage equipment, else the squadron would not be part of the junior varsity. Good learning tools, though, and the lieutenant was hoping to move up to the new B-1Bs now beginning to come off the Rockwell assembly line in California. For the past ten minutes the ESM pods on the bomber's nose and wingtips had been recording the Soviet radar signals, classifying their exact frequencies, pulse repetition rates, power, and the individual signature characteristics of the transmitters. The lieutenant was brand new to this game. He was a recent graduate of electronic warfare school, first in his class. He considered what he should do first, then selected a jamming mode, not his best, from a range of memorized options.

The Nikolayev

One hundred twenty-five miles away on the *Kara*-class cruiser *Nikolayev*, a radar *michman* was examining some blips that seemed to be in a circle around his formation. In an instant his screen was covered with twenty ghostly splotches tracing crazily in various directions. He shouted the alarm, echoed a second later by a brother operator. The officer of the watch hurried over to check the screen.

By the time he got there the jamming mode had changed and six lines like the spokes of a wheel were rotating slowly around a central axis.

"Plot the strobes," the officer ordered.

Now there were blotches, lines, and sparkles.

"More than one aircraft, Comrade." The *michman* tried flipping

through his frequency settings.

"Attack warning!" another *michman* shouted. His ESM receiver had just reported the signals of aircraft search-radar sets of the type used to acquire targets for air-to-surface missiles.

The B-52

"We got hard targets," the weapons officer on the -52 reported. "I got a lock on the first three birds."

"Roger that," the pilot acknowledged. "Hold for ten more seconds."

"Ten seconds," the officer replied. "Cutting switches…*now*."

"Okay, kill the jamming."

"ECM systems off."

The Nikolayev

"Missile acquisition radars have ceased," the combat information center officer reported to the cruiser's captain, just now arrived from the bridge. Around them the *Nikolayev*'s crew was racing to battle stations. "Jamming has also ceased."

"What is out there?" the captain asked. Out of a clear sky his beautiful clipper-bowed cruiser had been threatened—and now all was well?

"At least eight enemy aircraft in a circle around us."

The captain examined the now normal S-band air search screen. There were numerous blips, mainly civilian aircraft. The half circle of others had to be hostile, though.

"Could they have fired missiles?"

"No, Comrade Captain, we would have detected it. They jammed our search radars for thirty seconds and illuminated us with their own search systems for twenty. Then everything stopped."

"So, they provoke us and now pretend nothing has happened?" the captain growled. "When will they be within SAM range?"

"This one and these two will be within range in four minutes if they do not change course."

"Illuminate them with our missile control systems. Teach the bastards a lesson."

The officer gave the necessary instructions, wondering who was

being taught what. Two thousand feet above one of the B-52's was an EC-135 whose computerized electronic sensors were recording all signals from the Soviet cruiser and taking them apart, the better to know how to jam them. It was the first good look at the new SA-N-8 missile system.

Two F-14 Tomcats

The double-zero code number on its fuselage marked the Tomcat as the squadron commander's personal bird; the black ace of spades on the twin-rudder tail indicated his squadron, Fighting 41, "The Black Aces." The pilot was Commander Robby Jackson, and his radio call sign was Spade 1.

Jackson was leading a two-plane section under the direction of one of the *Kennedy*'s E-2C Hawkeyes, the navy's more diminutive version of the air force's AWACS and close brother to the COD, a twin-prop aircraft whose radome makes it look like an airplane being terrorized by a UFO. The weather was bad—depressingly normal for the North Atlantic in December—but was supposed to improve as they headed west. Jackson and his wingman, Lieutenant (j.g.) Bud Sanchez, were flying through nearly solid clouds, and they had eased their formation out somewhat. In the limited visibility both remembered that each Tomcat had a crew of two and a prise of over thirty million dollars.

They were doing what the Tomcat does best. An all-weather interceptor, the F-14 has transoceanic range, Mach 2 speed, and a radar computer fire control system that can lock onto and attack six separate targets with long-range Phoenix air-to-air missiles. Each fighter was now carrying two of those along with a pair each of AIM-9M Sidewinder heat-seekers. Their prey was a flight of YAK-36 Forgers, the bastard V/STOL fighters that operated from the carrier *Kiev*. After harassing the Sentry the previous day, Ivan had decided to close with the *Kennedy* force, no doubt guided in with data from a reconnaissance satellite. The Soviet aircraft had come up short, their range being fifty miles less than they needed to sight the *Kennedy*. Washington decided that Ivan was getting a little too obnoxious on this side of the ocean. Admiral Painter had been given permission to return the favor, in a friendly sort of way.

Jackson figured that he and Sanchez could handle this, even outnumbered. No Soviet aircraft, least of all the Forger, was equal

to the Tomcat—certainly not while I'm flying it, Jackson thought.

"Spade 1, your target is at your twelve o'clock and level, distance now twenty miles," reported the voice of Hummer 1, the Hawkeye a hundred miles aft. Jackson did not acknowledge.

"Got anything, Chris?" he asked his radar intercept officer, Lieutenant Commander Christiansen.

"An occasional flash, but nothing I can use." They were tracking the Forgers with passive systems only, in this case an infrared sensor.

Jackson considered illuminating their targets with his powerful fire control radar. The Forgers' ESM pods would sense this at once, reporting to their pilots that their death warrant had been written but not yet signed. "How about *Kiev?*"

"Nothing. The *Kiev* group is under total EMCON."

"Cute," Jackson commented. He guessed that the SAC raid on the *Kirov-Nikolayev* group had taught them to be more careful. It was not generally known that warships often made no use whatever of their radar systems, a protective measure called EMCON, for emission control. The reason was that a radar beam could be detected at several times the distance at which it generated a return signal to its transmitter and could thus tell an enemy more than it told its operators. "You suppose these guys can find their way home without help?"

"If they don't, you know who's gonna get blamed." Christiansen chuckled.

"That's a roge," Jackson agreed.

"Okay, I got infrared acquisition. Clouds must be thinning out some." Christiansen was concentrating on his instruments, oblivious of the view out of the canopy.

"Spade 1, this is Hummer 1, your target is twelve o'clock, at your level, range now ten miles." The report came over the secure radio circuit.

Not bad, picking up the Forgers' heat signature through this slop, Jackson thought, especially since they had small, inefficient engines.

"Radar coming on, Skipper," Christiansen advised. "*Kiev* has an S-band air search just come on. They have us for sure."

"Right." Jackson thumbed his mike switch. "Spade 2, illuminate targets—now."

"Roger, lead," Sanchez acknowledged. No point hiding now.

Both fighters activated their powerful AN/AWG-9 radars. It was now two minutes to intercept.

The radar signals, received by the ESM threat-receivers on the Forgers' tail fins, set off a musical tone in the pilot headsets which had to be turned off manually, and lit up a red warning light on each control panel.

The Kingfisher Flight

"Kingfisher flight, this is *Kiev*," called the carrier's air operations officer. "We show two American fighters closing you at high speed from the rear."

"Acknowledged." The Russian flight leader checked his mirror. He'd hoped to avoid this, though he hadn't expected to. His orders were to take no action unless fired upon. They had just broken into the clear. Too bad, he'd have felt safer in the clouds.

The pilot of Kingfisher 3, Lieutenant Shavrov, reached down to arm his four Atolls. Not this time, Yankee, he thought.

The Tomcats

"One minute, Spade 1, you ought to have visual any time," Hummer 1 called in.

"Roger…Tallyho!" Jackson and Sanchez broke into the clear. The Forgers were a few miles ahead, and the Tomcats' 250-knot speed advantage was eating that distance up rapidly. The Russian pilots are keeping a nice, tight formation, Jackson thought, but anybody can drive a bus.

"Spade 2, let's go to burners on my mark. Three, two, one—mark!"

Both pilots advanced their engine controls and engaged their afterburners, which dumped raw fuel into the tail pipes of their new F-110 engines. The fighters lept forward with a sudden double thrust and went quickly through Mach 1.

The Kingfisher Flight

"Kingfisher, warning, warning, the *Amerikantsi* have increased speed," *Kiev* cautioned.

Kingfisher 4 turned in his seat. He saw the Tomcats a mile aft,

twin dart-like shapes racing before trails of black smoke. Sunlight glinted off one canopy, and it almost looked like the flashes of a—

"They're attacking!"

"What?" The flight leader checked his mirror again. "Negative, negative—hold formation!"

The Tomcats screeched fifty feet overhead, the sonic booms they trailed sounding just like explosions. Shavrov acted entirely on his combat-trained instincts. He jerked back on his stick and triggered his four missiles at the departing American fighters.

"Three, what did you do?" the Russian flight leader demanded.

"They were attacking us, didn't you hear?" Shavrov protested.

The Tomcats

"Oh shit! Spade Flight, you have four Atolls after you," the voice of the Hawkeye's controller said.

"Two, break right," Jackson ordered. "Chris, activate countermeasures." Jackson threw his fighter into a violent evasive turn to the left. Sanchez broke the other way.

In the seat behind Jackson's, the radar intercept officer flipped switches to activate the aircraft's defense systems. As the Tomcat twisted in midair, a series of flares and balloons was ejected from the tail section, each an infrared or radar lure for the pursuing missiles. All four were targeted on Jackson's fighter.

"Spade 2 is clear, Spade 2 is clear. Spade 1, you still have four birds in pursuit," the voice from the Hawkeye said.

"Roger." Jackson was surprised at how calmly he took it. The Tomcat was doing over eight hundred miles per hour and accelerating. He wondered how much range the Atoll had. His rearward-looking-radar warning light flicked on.

"Two, get after them!" Jackson ordered.

"Roger, lead." Sanchez swept into a climbing turn, fell off into a hammerhead, and dove at the retreating Soviet fighters.

When Jackson turned, two of the missiles lost lock and kept going straight into open air. A third, decoyed into hitting a flare, exploded harmlessly. The fourth kept its infrared seeker head on Spade 1's glowing tail pipes and bored right in. The missile struck the Spade 1 at the base of its starboard rudder fin.

The impact tossed the fighter completely out of control. Most of the explosive force was spent as the missile blasted through the

boron surface into open air. The fin was blown completely off, along with the right-side stabilizer. The left fin was badly holed by fragments, which smashed through the back of the fighter's canopy, hitting Christiansen's helmet. The right engine's fire warning lights came on at once.

Jackson heard the *oomph* over his intercom. He killed every engine switch on the right side and activated the in-frame fire extinguisher. Next he chopped power to his port engine, still on afterburner. By this time the Tomcat was in an inverted spin. The variable-geometry wings angled out to low-speed configuration. This gave Jackson aileron control, and he worked quickly to get back to normal attitude. His altitude was four thousand feet. There wasn't much time.

"Okay, baby," he coaxed. A quick burst of power gave him back aerodynamic control, and the former test pilot snapped his fighter over—too hard. It went through two complete rolls before he could catch it in level flight. "Gotcha! You with me, Chris?"

Nothing. There was no way he could look around, and there were still four hostile fighters behind him.

"Spade 2, this is lead."

"Roger, lead." Sanchez had the four Fighters bore-sighted. They had just fired at his commander.

Hummer 1

On Hummer 1, the controller was thinking fast. The Forgers were holding formation, and there was a lot of Russian chatter on the radio circuit.

"Spade 2, this is Hummer 1, break off, I say again, break off, do not, repeat do not fire. Acknowledge. Spade 2, Spade 1 is at your nine o'clock, two thousand feet below you." The officer swore and looked at one of the enlisted men he worked with.

"That was too fast, sir, just too fuckin' fast. We got tapes of the Russkies. I can't understand it, but it sounds like *Kiev* is right pissed."

"They're not the only ones," the controller said, wondering if he had done the right thing calling Spade 2 off. It sure as hell didn't feel that way.

The Tomcats

Sanchez' head jerked in surprise. "Roger, breaking off." His thumb came off the switch. "Goddammit!" He pulled his stick back, throwing the Tomcat into a savage loop. "Where are you, lead?"

Sanchez brought his fighter under Jackson's and did a slow circle to survey the visible damage.

"Fire's out, Skipper. Right side rudder and stabilizer are gone. Left side fin—shit, I can see through it, but it looks like it oughta hold together. Wait a minute. Chris is slumped over, Skipper. Can you talk to him?"

"Negative, I've tried. Let's go back home."

Nothing would have pleased Sanchez more than to blast the Forgers right out of the sky, and with his four missiles he could have done this easily. But like most pilots, he was highly disciplined.

"Roger, lead."

"Spade 1, this is Hummer 1, advise your condition, over."

"Hummer 1, we'll make it unless something else falls off. Tell them to have docs standing by. Chris is hurt. I don't know how bad."

It took an hour to get to the *Kennedy*. Jackson's fighter flew badly, would not hold course in any specific attitude. He had to adjust trim constantly. Sanchez reported some movement in the aft cockpit. Maybe it was just the intercom shot out, Jackson thought hopefully.

Sanchez was ordered to land first so that the deck would be cleared for Commander Jackson. On the final approach the Tomcat started to handle badly. The pilot struggled with his fighter, planting it hard on the deck and catching the number one wire. The right-side landing gear collapsed at once, and the thirty-million-dollar fighter slid sideways into the barrier that had been erected. A hundred men with fire-fighting gear raced toward it from all directions.

The canopy went up on emergency hydraulic power. After unbuckling himself Jackson fought his way around and tried to grab for his backseater. They had been friends for many years.

Chris was alive. It looked like a quart of blood had poured down the front of his flight suit, and when the first corpsman took the helmet off, he saw that it was still pumping out. The second corpsman pushed Jackson out of the way and attached a cervical collar to the wounded airman. Christiansen was lifted gently and

lowered onto a stretcher whose bearers ran towards the island. Jackson hesitated a moment before following it.

Norfolk Naval Medical Center

Captain Randall Tait of the Navy Medical Corps walked down the corridor to meet with the Russians. He looked younger than his forty-five years because his full head of black hair showed not the first sign of gray. Tait was a Mormon, educated at Brigham Young University and Stanford Medical School, who had joined the navy because he had wanted to see more of the world than one could from an office at the foot of the Wasatch Mountains. He had accomplished that much, and until today had also avoided anything resembling diplomatic duty. As the new chief of the Department of Medicine at Bethesda Naval Medical Center he knew that couldn't last. He had flown down to Norfolk only a few hours earlier to handle the case. The Russians had driven down, and taken their time doing it.

"Good morning, gentlemen. I'm Dr. Tait." They shook hands all around, and the lieutenant who had brought them up walked back to the elevator.

"Dr. Ivanov," the shortest one said. "I am physician to the embassy."

"Captain Smirnov." Tait knew him to be assistant naval attaché, a career intelligence officer. The doctor had been briefed on the helicopter trip down by a Pentagon intelligence officer who was now drinking coffee in the hospital commissary.

"Vasily Petchkin, Doctor. I am second secretary to the embassy." This one was a senior KGB officer, a "legal" spy with a diplomatic cover. "May we see our man?"

"Certainly. Will you follow me please?" Tait led them back down the corridor. He'd been on the go for twenty hours. This was part of the territory as chief of service at Bethesda. He got all the hard calls. One of the first things a doctor learns is how not to sleep.

The whole floor was set up for intensive care, Norfolk Naval Medical Center having been built with war casualties in mind. Intensive Care Unit Number Three was a room twenty-five feet square. The only windows were on the corridor wall, and the curtains had been drawn back. There were four beds, only one

occupied. The young man in it was almost totally concealed. The only thing not hidden by the oxygen mask covering his face was an unruly clump of wheat-colored hair. The rest of his body was fully draped. An IV stand was next to the bed, its two bottles of fluid merging in a single line that led under the covers. A nurse dressed like Tait in surgical greens was standing at the foot of the bed, her green eyes locked on the electrocardiograph readout over the patient's head, dropping momentarily to make a notation on his chart. On the far side of the bed was a machine whose function was not immediately obvious. The patient was unconscious.

"His condition?" Ivanov asked.

"Critical," Tait replied. "It's a miracle he got here alive at all. He was in the water for at least twelve hours, probably more like twenty. Even accounting for the fact that he was wearing a rubber exposure suit, given the ambient air and water temperatures there's just no way he ought to have been alive. On admission his core temperature was 23.8°C." Tait shook his head. "I've read about worse hypothermia cases in the literature, but this is by far the worst I've ever seen."

"Prognosis?" Ivanov looked into the room.

Tait shrugged. "Hard to say. Maybe as good as fifty-fifty, maybe not. He's still extremely shocky. He's a fundamentally healthy person. You can't see it from here, but he's in superb physical shape, like a track and field man. He has a particularly strong heart; that's probably what kept him alive long enough to get here. We have the hypothermia pretty much under control now. The problem is, with hypothermia so many things go wrong at once. We have to fight a number of separate but connected battles against different systemic enemies to keep them from overwhelming his natural defenses. If anything's going to kill him, it'll be the shock. We're treating that with electrolytes, the normal routine, but he's going to be on the edge for several days at least I—"

Tait looked up. Another man was pacing down the hall. Younger than Tait, and taller, he had a white lab coat over his greens. He carried a metal chart.

"Gentlemen, this is Doctor—Lieutenant—Jameson. He's the physician of record on the case. He admitted your man. What do you have, Jamie?"

"The sputum sample showed pneumonia. Bad news. Worse, his blood chemistry isn't getting any better, and his white count is

dropping."

"Great." Tait leaned against the window frame and swore to himself.

"Here's the printout from the blood analyzer." Jameson handed the chart over.

"May I see this, please?" Ivanov came around.

"Sure." Tait flipped the metal cloud chart open and held it so that everyone could see it. Ivanov had never worked with a computerized blood analyzer, and it took several seconds for him to orient himself.

"This is not good."

"Not at all," Tait agreed.

"We're going to have to jump on that pneumonia, hard," Jameson said. "This kid's got too many things going wrong. If the pneumonia really takes hold…" He shook his head.

"Keflin?" Tait asked.

"Yeah." Jameson pulled a vial from his pocket. "As much as he'll handle. I'm guessing that he had a mild case before he got dumped in the water, and I hear that some penicillin-resistant strains have been cropping up in Russia. You use mostly penicillin over there, right?" Jameson looked down at Ivanov.

"Correct. What is this keflin?"

"It's a big gun, a synthetic antibiotic, and it works well on resistant strains."

"Right now, Jamie," Tait ordered.

Jameson walked around the corner to enter the room. He injected the antibiotic into a 100cc piggyback IV bottle and hung it on a stand.

"He's so young," Ivanov noted. "He treated our man initially?"

"His name's Albert Jameson. We call him Jamie. He's twenty-nine, graduated Harvard third in his class, and he's been with us ever since. He's board-certified in internal medicine and virology. He's as good as they come." Tait suddenly realized how uncomfortable he was dealing with the Russians. His education and years of naval service taught him that these men were the enemy. That didn't matter. Years before he had sworn an oath to treat patients without regard to outside considerations. Would they believe or did they think he'd let their man die because he was a Russian? "Gentlemen, I want you to understand this: we're giving your man the very best care we can. We're not holding anything

back. If there's a way to give him back to you alive, we'll find it. But I can't make any promises."

The Soviets could see that. While waiting for instructions from Moscow, Petchkin had checked up on Tait and found him to be, though a religious fanatic, an efficient and honorable physician, one of the best in government service.

"Has he said anything?" Petchkin asked, casually.

"Not since I've been here. Jamie said that right after they started warming him up he was semiconscious and babbled for a few minutes. We taped it, of course, and had a Russian-speaking officer listen to it. Something about a girl with brown eyes, didn't make any sense. Probably his sweetheart—he's a good-looking kid, he probably has a girl at home. It was totally incoherent, though. A patient in his condition has no idea what's going on."

"Can we listen to the tape?" Petchkin said.

"Certainly. I'll have it sent up."

Jameson came around the corner. "Done. A gram of keflin every six hours. Hope it works."

"How about his hands and feet?" Smirnov asked. The captain knew something about frostbite.

"We're not even bothering about that," Jameson answered. "We have cotton around the digits to prevent maceration. If he survives the next few days, we'll get blebs and maybe have some tissue loss, but that's the least of our problems. You guys know what his name is?" Petchkin's head snapped around. "He wasn't wearing any dogtags when he arrived. His clothes didn't have the ship's name. No wallet, no identification, not even any coins in the pockets. It doesn't matter very much for his initial treatment, but I'd feel better if you could pull his medical records. It would be good to know if he has any allergies or underlying medical conditions. We don't want him to go into shock from an allergic reaction to drug treatment."

"What was he wearing?" Smirnov asked.

"A rubber exposure suit," Jameson answered. "The guys who found him left it on him, thank God. I cut it off him when he arrived. Under that, shirt, pants, handerchief. Don't you guys wear dogtags?"

"Yes," Smirnov responded. "How did you find him?"

"From what I hear, it was pure luck. A helicopter off a frigate was patrolling and spotted him in the water. They didn't have any

rescue gear aboard, so they marked the spot with a dye marker and went back to their ship. A bosun volunteered to go in after him. They loaded him and a raft cannister into the chopper and flew him back, with the frigate hustling down south. The bosun kicked out the raft, jumped in after it—and landed on it. Bad luck. He broke both his legs, but he did get your sailor into the raft. The tin can picked them up an hour later and they were both flown directly here."

"How is your man?"

"He'll be all right. The left leg wasn't too bad, but the right tibia was badly splintered," Jameson went on. "He'll recover in a few months. Won't be doing much dancing for a while, though."

The Russians thought the Americans had deliberately removed their man's identification. Jameson and Tait suspected that the man had disposed of his tags, possibly hoping to defect. There was a red mark on the neck that indicated forcible removal.

"If it is permitted," Smirnov said, "I would like to see your man, to thank him."

"Permission granted, Captain," Tait nodded. "That would be kind of you."

"He must be a brave man."

"A sailor doing his job. Your people would do the same thing." Tait wondered if this were true. "We have our differences, gentlemen, but the sea doesn't care about that. The sea—well, she tries to kill us all regardless what flag we fly."

Petchkin was back looking through the window, trying to make out the patient's face.

"Could we see his clothing and personal effects?" he asked.

"Sure, but it won't tell you much. He's a cook. That's all we know," Jameson said.

"A cook?" Petchkin turned around.

"The officer who listened in on the tape—obviously he was an intelligence officer, right? He looked at the number on his shirt and said it made him a cook." The three-digit number indicated that the patient had been a member of the port watch, and that his battle station was damage control. Jameson wondered why the Russians numbered all their enlisted men. To be sure they didn't trespass? Petchkin's head, he noticed, was almost touching the glass pane.

"Dr. Ivanov, do you wish to attend the case?" Tait asked.

"Is this permitted?"

"It is."

"When will he be released?" Petchkin inquired. "When may we speak with him?"

"Released?" Jameson snapped. "Sir, the only way he'll be out of here in less than a month will be in a box. So far as consciousness is concerned, that's anyone's guess. That's one very sick kid you have in there."

"But we must speak to him!" the KGB agent protested.

Tait had to look up at the man. "Mr. Petchkin, I understand your desire to communicate with your man—but he is my patient now. We will do nothing, repeat *nothing*, that might interfere with his treatment and recovery. I got orders to fly down here to handle this. They tell me those orders came from the White House. Fine. Doctors Jameson and Ivanov will assist me, but that patient is now my responsibility, and my job is to see to it that he walks out of this hospital alive and well. Everything else is secondary to that objective. You will be extended every courtesy. But I make the rules here." Tait paused. Diplomacy was not something he was good at. "Tell you what, you want to sit in there yourselves in relays, that's fine with me. But you have to follow the rules. That means you scrub, change into sterile clothing, and follow the instructions of the duty nurse. Fair enough?"

Petchkin nodded. American doctors think they are gods, he said to himself.

Jameson, busy reexamining the blood analyzer printout, had ignored the sermon. "Can you gentlemen tell us what kind of sub he was on?"

"No," Petchkin said at once.

"What are you thinking, Jamie?"

"The dropping white count and some of these other indicators are consistent with radiation exposure. The gross symptoms would have been masked by the overlying hypothermia." Suddenly Jameson looked at the Soviets. "Gentlemen, we have to know this, was he on a nuclear sub?"

"Yes." Smirnov answered, "he was on a nuclear-powered submarine."

"Jamie, take his clothing to radiology. Have them check the buttons, zipper, anything metal for evidence of contamination."

"Right." Jameson went to collect the patient's effects.

"May we be involved in this?" Smirnov asked.

"Yes, sir," Tait responded, wondering what sort of people these were. The guy had to come off a nuclear submarine, didn't he? Why hadn't they told him at once? Didn't they want him to recover?

Petchkin pondered the significance of this. Didn't they know he had come off a nuclear-powered sub? Of course—he was trying to get Smirnov to blurt out that the man was off a missile submarine. They were trying to cloud the issue with this story about contamination. Nothing that would harm the patient, but something to confuse their class enemies. Clever. He'd always thought the Americans were clever. And he was supposed to report to the embassy in an hour—report what? How was he supposed to know who the sailor was?

Norfolk Naval Shipyard

The USS *Ethan Allen* was about at the end of her string. Commissioned in 1961, she had served her crews and her country for over twenty years, carrying Polaris sea-launched ballistic missiles in endless patrols through sunless seas. Now she was old enough to vote, and this was very old for a submarine. Her missile tubes had been filled with ballast and sealed months before. She had only a token maintenance crew while the Pentagon bureaucrats debated her future. There had been talk of a complicated cruise missile system to make her into a SSGN like the new Russian *Oscars*. This was judged too expensive. *Ethan Allen*'s was generation-old technology. Her S5W reactor was too dated for much more use. Nuclear radiation had bombarded the metal vessel and its internal fittings with many billions of neutrons. As recent examination of test strips had revealed, over time the character of the metal had changed, becoming dangerously brittle. The system had at most another three years of useful life. A new reactor would be too expensive. The *Ethan Allen* was doomed by her senescence.

The maintenance crew was made up of members of her last operational team, mainly old-timers looking forward to retirement, with a leavening of kids who needed education in repair skills. The *Ethan Allen* could still serve as a school, especially a repair school since so much of her equipment was worn out.

Admiral Gallery had come aboard early that morning. The chiefs had regarded that as particularly ominous. He had been her first skipper many years before, and admirals always seemed to visit

their early commands—right before they were scrapped. He'd recognized some of the senior chiefs and asked them if the old girl had any life left in her. To a man, the chiefs said yes. A ship becomes more than a machine to her crew. Each of a hundred ships, built by the same men at the same yard to the same plans, will have her own special characteristics—most of them bad, really, but after her crew becomes accustomed to them they are spoken of affectionately, particularly in retrospect. The admiral had toured the entire length of the *Ethan Allen*'s hull, pausing to run his gnarled, arthritic hands over the periscope he had used to make certain that there really was a world outside the steel hull, to plan the rare "attack" against a ship hunting his sub—or a passing tanker, just for practice. He'd commanded the *Ethan Allen* for three years, alternating his gold crew with another officer's blue crew, working out of Holy Loch, Scotland. Those were good years, he told himself, a damned sight better than sitting at a desk with a lot of vapid aides running around. It was the old navy game, up or out: just when you got something that you were really good at, something you really liked, it was gone. It made good organizational sense. You had to make room for the youngsters coming up—but, God! to be young again, to command one of the new ones that now he only had the opportunity to ride a few hours at a time, a courtesy to the skinny old bastard in Norfolk.

She'd do it, Gallery knew. She'd do fine. It was not the end he would have preferred for *his* fighting ship, but when you came down to it, a decent end for a fighting ship was something rare. Nelson's *Victory*, the *Constitution* in Boston harbor, the old battleship kept mummified by her namesake state—they'd had honorable treatment. Most warships were sunk as targets or broken up for razor blades. The *Ethan Allen* would die for a purpose. A crazy purpose, perhaps crazy enough to work, he said to himself as he returned to COMSUBLANT headquarters.

Two hours later a truck arrived at the dock where the *Ethan Allen* lay dormant. The chief quartermaster on deck at the time noted that the truck came from Oceana Naval Air Station. Curious, he thought. More curiously, the officer who got out was wearing neither dolphins nor wings. He saluted the quarterdeck first, then the chief who had the deck while *Ethan Allen*'s remaining two officers supervised a repair job on the engine spaces. The officer from the naval air station made arrangements for a work gang to

load the sub with four bullet-shaped objects, which went through the deck hatches. They were large, barely able to fit through the torpedo and capsule loading hatches, and it took some handling to get them emplaced. Next came plastic pallets to set them on and metal straps to secure them. They look like bombs, the chief electrician thought as the younger men did the donkey work. But they couldn't be that; they were too light, obviously made of ordinary sheet metal. An hour later a truck with a pressurized tank on its loadbed arrived. The submarine was cleared of her personnel and carefully ventilated. Then three men snaked a hose to each of the four objects. Finished, they ventilated the hull again, leaving gas detectors near each object. By this time, the crew noted, their dock and the one next to it were being guarded by armed marines so that no one could come over and see what was happening to the *Ethan Allen*.

When the loading, or filling, or whatever, was finished, a chief went below to examine the metal shells more carefully. He wrote down the stenciled acronym PPB76A/J6713 on a pad. A chief yeoman looked the designation up in a catalog and did not like what he found—Pave Pat Blue 76. Pave Pat Blue 76 was a bomb, and the *Ethan Allen* had four of them aboard. Nothing nearly so powerful as the missile warheads she had once carried, but a lot more ominous, the crew agreed. The smoking lamp was out by mutual accord before anyone made an order of it.

Gallery came back soon thereafter and spoke with all of the senior men individually. The youngsters were sent ashore with their personal gear and an admonition that they had not seen, felt, heard, or otherwise noticed anything unusual on the *Ethan Allen*. She was going to be scuttled at sea. That was all. Some political decision in Washington—and if you tell *that* to anyone, start thinking about a twenty-year tour at McMurdo Sound, as one man put it.

It was a tribute to Vincent Gallery that each of the old chiefs stayed aboard. Partly it was a chance for one last cruise on the old girl, a chance to say goodbye to a friend. Mostly it was because Gallery said it was important, and the old-timers remembered that his word had been good once.

The officers showed up at sundown. The lowest-ranking among them was a lieutenant commander. Two four-striped captains would be working the reactor, along with three senior chiefs. Two more four-stripers would handle the navigation, a pair of commanders

the electronics. The rest would be spread around to handle the plethora of specialized tasks necessary to the operation of a complex warship. The total complement, not even a quarter the size of a normal crew, might have caused some adverse comment on the part of the senior chiefs, who didn't consider just how much experience these officers had.

One officer would be working the diving planes, the chief quartermaster was scandalized to learn. The chief electrician he discussed this with took it in stride. After all, he noted, the real fun was driving the boats, and officers only got to do that at New London. After that all they got to do was walk around and look important. True, the quartermaster agreed, but could they handle it? If not, the electrician decided, they would take care of things—what else were chiefs for but to protect officers from their mistakes? After that they argued good-naturedly over who would be chief of the boat. Both men had nearly identical experience and time in rate.

The USS *Ethan Allen* sailed for the last time at 2345 hours. No tug helped her away from the dock. The skipper eased her deftly away from the dock with gentle engine commands and strains on his lines that his quartermaster could only admire. He'd served with the skipper before, on the *Skipjack* and the *Will Rogers*. "No tugs, no nothin'," he reported to his bunkmate later. "The old man knows his shit." In an hour they were past the Virginia Capes and ready to dive. Ten minutes later they were gone from sight. Below, on a course of one-one-zero, the small crew of officers and chiefs settled into the demanding routine of running their old boomer shorthanded. The *Ethan Allen* responded like a champ, steaming at twelve knots, her old machinery hardly making any noise at all.

THE ELEVENTH DAY
MONDAY, 13 DECEMBER

An A-10 Thunderbolt

It was a lot more fun than flying DC-9s. Major Andy Richardson had over ten thousand hours in those and only six hundred or so in his A-10 Thunderbolt II strike fighter, but he much preferred the smaller of the twin-engine aircraft. Richardson belonged to the 175th Tactical Fighter Group of the Maryland Air National Guard. Ordinarily his squadron flew out of a small military airfield east of Baltimore. But two days earlier, when his outfit had been activated, the 175th and six other national guard and reserve air groups had crowded the already active SAC base at Loring Air Force Base in Maine. They had taken off at midnight and had refueled in midair only half an hour earlier, a thousand miles out over the North Atlantic. Now Richardson and his flight of four were skimming a hundred feet over the black waters at four hundred knots.

A hundred miles behind the four fighters, ninety aircraft were following at thirty thousand feet in what would look very much to the Soviets like an alpha strike, a weighted attack mission of armed tactical fighters. It was exactly that—and also a feint. The real mission belonged to the low-level team of four.

Richardson loved the A-10. She was called with backhanded affection the Warthog or just plain Hog by the men who flew her. Nearly all tactical aircraft had pleasing lines conferred on them by the need in combat for speed and maneuverability. Not the Hog, which was perhaps the ugliest bird ever built for the U.S. Air Force. Her twin turbofan engines hung like afterthoughts at the twin-rudder tail, itself a throwback to the thirties. Her slablike wings had not a whit of sweepback and were bent in the middle to accommodate the clumsy landing gear. The undersides of the wings were studded with many hard points so ordnance could be carried, and the fuselage was built around the aircraft's primary weapon, the GAU-8 thirty-millimeter rotary cannon designed specifically to smash Soviet tanks.

For tonight's mission, Richardson's flight had a full load of depleted uranium slugs for their Avenger cannons and a pair of

Rockeye cluster bomb cannisters, additional antitank weapons. Directly beneath the fuselage was a LANTIRN (low-altitude navigation and targeting infrared for night) pod; all the other ordnance stations save one were occupied by fuel tanks.

The 175th had been the first national guard squadron to receive LANTIRN. It was a small collection of electronic and optical systems that enabled the Hog to see at night while flying at minimum altitude searching for targets. The systems projected a heads-up display (HUD) on the fighter's windshield, in effect turning night to day and making this mission profile marginally less hazardous. Beside each LANTIRN pod was a smaller object which, unlike the cannon shells and Rockeyes, was intended for use tonight.

Richardson didn't mind—indeed, he relished—the hazards of the mission. Two of his three comrades were, like him, airline pilots, the third a crop duster, all experienced men with plenty of practice in low-level tactics. And their mission was a good one.

The briefing, conducted by a naval officer, had taken over an hour. They were paying a visit to the Soviet Navy. Richardson had read in the papers that the Russians were up to something, and when he had heard at the briefing that they were sending their fleet to trail its coat this close to the American coast, he had been shocked by their boldness. It had angered him to learn that one of their crummy little day fighters had back-shot a navy Tomcat the day before, nearly killing one of its officers. He wondered why the navy was being cut out of the response. Most of the *Saratoga*'s air group was visible on the concrete pads at Loring, sitting alongside the B-52s, A-6E Intruders, and F-18 Hornets with their ordnance carts a few feet away. He guessed that his mission was only the first act, the delicate part. While Soviet eyes were locked on the alpha strike hovering at the edge of their SAM range, his flight of four would dash in under radar cover to the fleet flagship, the nuclear-powered battle cruiser *Kirov*. To deliver a message.

It was surprising that guardsmen had been selected for this mission. Nearly a thousand tactical aircraft were now mobilized on the East Coast, about a third of them reservists of one kind or another, and Richardson guessed that that was part of the message. A very difficult tactical operation was being run by second-line airmen, while the regular squadrons sat ready on the runways of Loring, and McGuire, and Dover, and Pease, and several other bases from Virginia to Maine, fueled, briefed, and ready. Nearly a

thousand aircraft! Richardson smiled. There wouldn't be enough targets to go around.

"Linebacker Lead, this is Sentry-Delta. Target bearing zero-four-eight, range fifty miles. Course is one-eight-five, speed twenty."

Richardson did not acknowledge the transmission over the encrypted radio link. The flight was under EMCON. Any electronic noise might alert the Soviets. Even his targeting radar was switched off, and only passive infrared and low-light television sensors were operating. He look quickly left and right. Second-line flyers, hell! he said to himself. Every man in the flight had at least four thousand hours, more than most regular pilots would ever have, more than most of the astronauts, and their birds were maintained by people who tinkered with airplanes because they liked to. The fact of the matter was that his squadron had better aircraft-availability than any regular squadron and had had fewer accidents than the wet-nosed hotdogs who flew the warthogs if England and Korea. They'd show the Russkies that.

He smiled to himself. This sure beat flying his DC-9 from Washington to Providence and Hartford and back every day for U.S. Air! Richardson, who had been an air force fighter pilot, had left the service eight years earlier because he craved the higher pay and flashy lifestyle of a commercial airline pilot. He'd missed Vietnam, and commercial flying did not require anything like this degree of skill; it lacked the *rush* of skimming at treetop level.

So far as he knew, the Hog had never been used for maritime strike missions—another part of the message. It was no surprise that she'd be good at it. Her antitank munitions would be effective against ships. Her cannon slugs and Rockeye clusters were designed to shred armored battle tanks, and he had no doubts what they would do to thin-hulled warships. Too bad this wasn't for real. It was about time somebody taught Ivan a lesson.

A radar sensor light blinked on his threat receiver; S-band radar, it was probably meant for surface search, and was not powerful enough for a return yet. The Soviets did not have any aerial radar platforms, and their ship-carried sets were limited by the earth's curvature. The beam was just over his head; he was getting the fuzzy edge of it. They would have avoided detection better still by flying at fifty feet instead of a hundred, but orders were not to.

"Linebacker flight, this is Sentry-Delta. Scatter and head in," the AWACS commanded.

The A-10s separated from their interval of only a few feet to an extended attack formation that left miles between aircraft. The orders were for them to scatter at thirty miles' distance. About four minutes. Richardson checked his digital clock; the Linebacker flight was right on time. Behind them, the Phantoms and Corsairs in the alpha strike would be turning toward the Soviets, just to get their attention. He ought to be seeing them soon…

The HUD showed small bumps on the projected horizon—the outer screen of destroyers, the *Udaloys* and *Sovremennys*. The briefing officer had shown them silhouettes and photos of the warships.

Beep! his threat receiver chirped. An X-band missile guidance radar had just swept over his aircraft and lost it, and was now trying to regain contact. Richardson flipped on his ECM (electronic countermeasures) jamming systems. The destroyers were only five miles away now. Forty seconds. Stay dumb, comrades, he thought.

He began to maneuver his aircraft radically, jinking up, down, left, right, in no particular pattern. It was only a game, but there was no sense in giving Ivan an easy time. If this had been for real, his Hogs would be blazing in behind a swarm of antiradar missiles and would be accompanied by Wild Weasel aircraft trying to scramble and kill Soviet missile control systems. Things were moving very fast now. A screening destroyer loomed in his path, and he nudged his rudder to pass clear of her by a quarter mile. Two miles to the *Kirov*—eighteen seconds.

The HUD system painted an intensified image. The *Kirov*'s pyramidal mast-stack-radar structure was filling his windshield. He could see blinking signal lights all around the battle cruiser. Richardson gave more right rudder. They were supposed to pass within three hundred yards of the ship, no more, no less. His Hog would blaze past the bow, the others past the stern and either beam. He didn't want to cut it too close. The major checked to be certain that his bomb and cannon controls were locked in the safe position. No sense getting carried away. About now in a real attack he'd trigger his cannon and a stream of solid slugs would lance the light armor of the *Kirov*'s forward missile magazines, exploding the SAM and cruise missiles in a huge fireball and slicing through the superstructure as if it were thin as newsprint.

At five hundred yards, the captain reached down to arm the flare pod, attached next to the LANTIRN.

Now! He flipped the switch, which deployed half a dozen high-intensity magnesium parachute flares. All four Linebacker aircraft acted within seconds. Suddenly the *Kirov* was inside a box of blue-white magnesium light. Richardson pulled back on his stick, banking into a climbing turn past the battle cruiser. The brilliant light dazzled him, but he could see the graceful lines of the Soviet warship as she was turning hard on the choppy seas, her men running along the deck like ants.

If we were serious, you'd all be dead now—get the message?

Richardson thumbed his radio switch. "Linebacker Lead to Sentry-Delta," he said in the clear. "Robin Hood, repeat, Robin Hood. Linebacker flight, this is lead, form up on me. Let's go home!"

"Linebacker flight, this is Sentry-Delta. Outstanding!" the controller responded. "Be advised that *Kiev* has a pair of Forgers in the air, thirty miles east, heading your way. They'll have to hustle to catch up. Will advise. Out."

Richardson did some fast arithmetic in his head. They probably could not catch up, and even if they did, twelve Phantoms from the 107th Fighter Interceptor Group were ready for it.

"Hot damn, lead!" Linebacker 4, the crop duster, moved gingerly into his slot. "Did you see those turkeys pointing up at us? God damn, did we rattle their cage!"

"Heads up for Forgers," Richardson cautioned, grinning ear to ear inside his oxygen mask. *Second-line flyers, hell!*

"Let 'em come," Linebacker 4 replied. "Any of those bastards closes me and my thirty, it'll be the last mistake he ever makes!" Four was a little too aggressive for Richardson's liking, but the man did know how to drive his Hog.

"Linebacker flight, this is Sentry-Delta. The Forgers have turned back. You're in the clear. Out."

"Roger that, out. Okay, flight, let's settle down and head home. I guess we've earned our pay for the month." Richardson looked to make sure he was on an open frequency. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Barry Friendly," he said, using the in-house U.S. Air public relations joke that had become a tradition in the 175th. "I hope you have enjoyed your flight, and thank you for flying Warthog Air."

The Kirov

On the *Kirov*, Admiral Stralbo raced from the combat information center to the flag bridge, too late. They had acquired the low-level raiders only a minute from the outer screen. The box of flares was already behind the battle cruiser, several still burning in the water. The bridge crew, he saw, was rattled.

"Sixty to seventy seconds before they were on us, Comrade Admiral," the flag captain reported, "we were tracking the orbiting attack force and these four—we think, four—racing in under our radar coverage. We had missile lock on two of them despite their jamming."

Stralbo frowned. That performance was not nearly good enough. If the strike had been real, the *Kirov* would have been badly damaged at least. The Americans would gladly trade a pair of fighters for a nuclear powered cruiser. If all American aircraft attacked like this…

"The arrogance of the Americans is fantastic!" The fleet *zampolit* swore.

"It was foolish to provoke them," Stralbo observed sourly. "I knew that something like that would happen, but I expected it from *Kennedy*."

"That was a mistake, a pilot error," the political officer replied.

"Indeed, Vasily. And *this* was no mistake! They just sent us a message, telling us that we are fifteen hundred kilometers from their shore without useful air cover, and that they have over five hundred fighters waiting to pounce on us from the west. In the meantime *Kennedy* is stalking us to the east like a rabid wolf. We are not in an attractive position."

"The Americans would not be so brash."

"Are you sure of that, Comrade Political Officer? Sure? What if one of their aircraft commits a 'pilot error'? And sinks one of our destroyers? And what if the American president gets a direct link to Moscow to apologize before we can ever report it? They swear it was an accident and promise to punish the stupid pilot—then what? You think the imperialists are so predictable this close to their own coastline? I do not. I think they are praying for the smallest excuse to pounce on us. Come to my cabin. We must consider this."

The two men went aft. Stralbo's cabin was a spartan affair. The only decoration on the wall was a print of Lenin speaking to Red Guards.

"What is our mission, Vasily?" Stralbo asked.

“To support our submarines, help them to conduct the search—”

“Exactly. Our mission is to support, not to conduct offensive operations. The Americans do not want us here. Objectively, I can understand this. With all our missiles we are a threat to them.”

“But our orders are not to threaten them,” the *zampolit* protested. “Why would we want to strike their homeland?”

“And, of course, the imperialists recognize that we are peaceful socialists! Come now, Vasily, these are our enemies! Of course they do not trust us. Of *course* they wish to attack us, given the smallest excuse. They are already interfering with our search, pretending to help. They do not want us here—and in allowing ourselves to be provoked by their aggressive actions, we fall into their trap.” The admiral stared down at his desk. “Well, we shall change that. I will order the fleet to discontinue anything that may appear the least bit aggressive. We will end all air operations beyond normal local patrolling. We will not harass their nearby fleet units. We will use only normal navigational radars.”

“And?”

“And we will swallow our pride and be as meek as mice. Whatever provocation they make, we will not react to it.”

“Some will call this cowardice, Comrade Admiral,” the *zampolit* warned.

Stralbo had expected that. “Vasily, don’t you see? In pretending to attack us they have already victimized us. They force us to activate our newest and most secret defense systems so they can gather intelligence on our radars and fire control systems. They examine the performance of our fighters and helicopters, the maneuverability of our ships, and most of all, our command and control. We shall put an end to that. Our primary mission is too important. If they continue to provoke us, we will act as though our mission is indeed peaceful—which it is as far as they are concerned—and protest our innocence. And we make them the aggressors. If they continue to provoke us, we shall watch to see what their tactics are, and give them nothing in return. Or would you prefer that they prevent us from carrying out our mission?”

The *zampolit* mumbled his consent. If they failed in their mission, the charge of cowardice would be a small matter indeed. If they found the renegade submarine, they’d be heroes regardless of what else happened.

How long had he been on duty? Jones wondered. He could have checked easily enough by punching the button on his digital watch, but the sonarman didn't want to. It would be too depressing. Me and my big mouth—*you bet, Skipper*, my ass! he swore to himself. He'd detected the sub at a range of about twenty miles, maybe, had just barely gotten her—and the fuckin' Atlantic Ocean was three thousand miles across, at least sixty footprint diameters. He'd need more than luck now.

Well, he did get a Hollywood shower out of it. Ordinarily a shower on a freshwater-poor ship meant a few seconds of wetting down and a minute or so of lathering, followed by a few more seconds of rinsing the suds off. It got you clean but was not very satisfying. This was an improvement over the old days, the oldtimers liked to say. But back then, Jones often responded, the sailors had to pull oars—or run off diesel and batteries, which amounted to the same thing. A Hollywood shower is something a sailor starts thinking about after a few days at sea. You leave the water running, a long, continuous stream of wonderfully warm water. Commander Mancuso was given to awarding this sensuous pastime in return for above-average performance. It gave people something tangible to work for. You couldn't spend extra money on a sub, and there was no beer or women.

Old movies—they were making an effort on that score. The boat's library wasn't bad, when you had time to sort through the jumble. And the *Dallas* had a pair of Apple computers and a few dozen game programs for amusement. Jones was the boat champion at Choplifter and Zork. The computers were also used for training purposes, of course, for practice exams and programmed learning tests that ate up most of the use time.

The *Dallas* was quartering an area east of the Grand Banks. Any boat transiting Route One tended to come through here. They were moving at five knots, trailing out the BQR-15 towed-array sonar. They'd had all kinds of contacts. First, half the submarines in the Russian Navy had whipped by at high speed, many trailed by American boats. An *Alfa* had burned past them at over forty knots, not three thousand yards away. It would have been so easy, Jones had thought at the time. The *Alfa* had been making so much noise that one could have heard it with a glass against the hull, and he'd

had to turn his amplifiers down to minimums to keep the noise from ruining his ears. A pity they couldn't have fired. The setup had been so simple, the firing solution so easy that a kid with an old-fashioned sliderule could have done it. That *Alfa* had been meat on the table. The *Victors* came running next, and the *Charlies* and *Novembers* last of all. Jones had been listening to surface ships a ways to the west, a lot of them doing twenty knots or so, making all kinds of noise as they pounded through the waves. They were way far off, and not his concern.

They had been trying to acquire this particular target for over two days, and Jones had had only an odd hour of sleep here and there. Well, that's what they pay me for, he reflected bleakly. This was not unprecedented, he'd done it before, but he'd be happy when the labor ended.

The large-aperture towed array was at the end of a thousand-foot cable. Jones referred to the use of it as trolling for whales. In addition to being their most sensitive sonar rig, it protected the *Dallas* against intruders shadowing her. Ordinarily a submarine's sonar will work in any direction except aft—an area called the cone of silence, or the baffles. The BQR-15 changed that. Jones had heard all sorts of things on it, subs and surface ships all the timé, low-flying aircraft on occasion. Once, during an exercise off Florida, it had been the noise of diving pelicans that he could not figure out until the skipper had raised the periscope for a look. Then off Bermuda they had encountered mating humpbacks, and a very impressive noise that was. Jones had a personal copy of the tape of them for use on the beach; some women had found it interesting, in a kinky sort of way. He smiled to himself.

There was a considerable amount of surface noise. The signal processors filtered most of it out, and every few minutes Jones switched them off his channel, getting the sound unimpeded to make sure that they weren't filtering too much out. Machines were dumb; Jones wondered if SAPS might be letting some of that anomalous signal get lost inside the computer chips. That was a problem with computers, really a problem with programming: you'd tell the machine to do something, and it would go do it to the wrong thing. Jones often amused himself working up programs. He knew a few people from college who drew up game programs for personal computers; one of them was making good money with Sierra On-Line Systems…

Daydreaming again, Jonesy, he chided himself. It wasn't easy listening to nothing for hours on end. It would have been a good idea, he thought, to let sonarmen read on duty. He had better sense than to suggest it. Mr. Thompson might go along, but the skipper and all the senior officers were ex-reactor types with the usual rule of iron: You shall watch every instrument with absolute concentration all the time. Jones didn't think this was very smart. It was different with sonarmen. They burned out too easily. To combat this Jones had his music tapes and his games. He could lose himself in any sort of diversion, especially Choplifter. A man had to have something, he reasoned, to lose his mind in, at least once a day. And something on duty in some cases. Even truck drivers, hardly the most intellectual of people, had radios and tape players to keep from becoming mesmerized. But sailors on a nuclear sub costing the best part of a billion…

Jones leaned forward, pressing the headphones tight against his head. He tore a page of doodles from his scratch pad and noted the time on a fresh sheet. Next he made some adjustments on his gain controls, already near the top of the scale, and flipped off the processors again. The cacophony of surface noise nearly took his head off. Jones tolerated this for a minute, working the manual muting controls to filter out the worst of the high-frequency noise. Aha! Jones said to himself. Maybe SAPS is messing me up a little—too soon to tell for sure.

When Jones had first been checked out on this gear in sonar school he'd had a burning desire to show it to his brother, who had a masters in electrical engineering and worked as a consultant in the recording industry. He had eleven patents to his name. The stuff on the *Dallas* would have knocked his eyes out. The navy's systems for digitalizing sound were years ahead of any commercial technique. Too bad it was all classified right alongside nuclear stuff…

"Mr. Thompson," Jones said quietly, not looking around, "can you ask the skipper if maybe we can swing more easterly and drop down a knot or two?"

"Skipper," Thompson went out into the passageway to relay the request. New course and engine orders were given in fifteen seconds. Mancuso was in sonar ten seconds after that.

The skipper had been sweating this. It had been obvious two days ago that their erstwhile contact had not acted as expected, had

not run the route, or had never slowed down. Commander Mancuso had guessed wrong on something—had he also guessed wrong on their visitor's course? And what did it mean if their friend had not run the route? Jones had figured that one out long before. It made her a boomer. Boomer skippers never go fast.

Jones was sitting as usual, hunched over his table, his left hand up commanding quiet as the towed array came around to a precise east-west azimuth at the end of its cable. His cigarette burned away unnoticed in the ashtray. A reel-to-reel tape recorder was operating continuously in the sonar room, its tapes changed hourly and kept for later analysis on shore. Next to it was another whose recordings were used aboard the *Dallas* for reexamination of contacts. He reached up and switched it on, then turned to see his captain looking down at him. Jones' face broke into a thin, tired smile.

"Yeah," he whispered.

Mancuso pointed to the speaker. Jones shook his head. "Too faint, Cap'n. I just barely got it now. Roughly north, I think, but I need some time on that." Mancuso looked at the intensity needle Jones was tapping. It was down to zero—almost. Every fifty seconds or so it twitched, just a little. Jones was making furious notes. "The goddamned SAPS filters are blanking part of this out!!!!! We need smoother amplifiers and better manual filter controls!!" he wrote.

Mancuso told himself that this was faintly ridiculous. He was watching Jones as he had watched his wife when she'd had Dominic and he was timing the twitches on a needle as he had timed his wife's contractions. But there was no thrill to match this. The comparison he used to explain it to his father was the thrill you got on the first day of hunting season, when you hear the leaves rustle and you know it's not a man making the noise. But it was better than that. He was hunting men, men like himself in a vessel like his own…

"Getting louder, Skipper." Jones leaned back and lit a cigarette. "He's heading our way. I make him three-five-zero, maybe more like three-five-three. Still real faint, but that's our boy. We got him." Jones decided to risk an impertinence. He'd earned a little tolerance. "We wait or we chase, sir?"

"We wait. No sense spooking him. We let him come in nice and close while we do our famous imitation of a hole in the water, then we tag along behind him to wax his tail for a while. I want another tape of this set up, and I want the BC-10 to run a SAPS scan. Use

the instruction to bypass the processing algorithms. I want this contact analyzed, not interpreted. Run it every two minutes. I want his signature recorded, digitalized, folded, spindled, and mutilated. I want to know everything there is about him, his propulsion noises, his plant signature, the works. I want to know exactly who he is."

"He's a Russkie, sir," Jones observed.

"But which Russkie?" Mancuso smiled.

"Aye, Cap'n." Jones understood. He'd be on duty another two hours, but the end was in sight. Almost. Mancuso sat down and lifted a spare set of headphones, stealing one of Jones' cigarettes. He'd been trying to break the habit for a month. He'd have a better chance on the beach.

HMS Invincible

Ryan was now wearing a Royal Naval uniform. This was temporary. Another mark of how fast this job had been laid on was that he had only the one uniform and two shirts. All of his wardrobe was now being cleaned and in the interim he had on a pair of English-made trousers and a sweater. Typical, he thought—nobody even knows I'm here. They had forgotten him. No messages from the president—not that he'd ever expected one—and Painter and Davenport were only too glad to forget that he was ever on the *Kennedy*. Greer and the judge were probably going over some damned fool thing or another, maybe chuckling to themselves about Jack Ryan having a pleasure cruise at government expense.

It was not a pleasure cruise. Jack had rediscovered his vulnerability to seasickness. The *Invincible* was off Massachusetts, waiting for the Russian surface force and hunting vigorously after the red subs in the area. They were steaming in circles on an ocean that would not settle down. Everyone was busy—except him. The pilots were up twice a day or more, exercising with their U.S. Air Force and Navy counterparts working from shore bases. The ships were practicing surface warfare tactics. As Admiral White had said at breakfast, it had developed into a jolly good extension of NIFTY DOLPHIN. Ryan didn't like being a supernumerary. Everyone was polite, of course. Indeed, the hospitality was nearly overpowering. He had access to the command center, and when he watched to see how the Brits hunted subs down, everything was explained to him in sufficient detail that he actually understood about half of it.

At the moment he was reading alone in White's sea cabin, which had become his permanent home aboard. Ritter had thoughtfully tucked a CIA staff study into his duffle bag. Entitled "Lost Children: A Psychological Profile of East Bloc Defectors," the three-hundred-page document had been drafted by a committee of psychologists and psychiatrists who worked with the CIA and other intelligence agencies helping defectors settle into American life—and, he was sure, helping spot security risks in the CIA. Not that there were many of those, but there were two sides to everything the Company did.

Ryan admitted to himself that this was pretty interesting stuff. He had never really thought about what makes a defector, figuring that there were enough things happening on the other side of the Iron Curtain to make any rational person want to take whatever chance he got to run west. But it was not that simple, he read, not that simple at all. Everyone who came over was a fairly unique individual. While one might recognize the inequities of life under Communism and yearn for justice, religious freedom, a chance to develop as an individual, another might simply want to get rich, having read about how greedy capitalists exploit the masses and decided that being an exploiter has its good points. Ryan found this interesting if cynical.

Another defector type was the fake, the imposter, someone planted on the CIA as a living piece of disinformation. But this kind of character could cut both ways. He might ultimately turn out to be a genuine defector. America, Ryan smiled, could be pretty seductive to someone used to the gray life in the Soviet Union. Most of the plants, however, were dangerous enemies. For this reason a defector was never trusted. Never. A man who had changed countries once could do it again. Even the idealists had doubts, great pangs of conscience at having deserted their motherland. In a footnote a doctor commented that the most wounding punishment for Aleksander Solzhenitsyn was exile. As a patriot, being alive far from his home was more of a torment than living in a gulag. Ryan found that curious, but enough so to be true.

The rest of the document addressed the problem of getting them settled. Not a few Soviet defectors had committed suicide after a few years. Some had simply been unable to cope with freedom, the way that long-term prison inmates often fail to function without highly structured control over their lives and commit new crimes

hoping to return to their safe environment. Over the years the CIA had developed a protocol for dealing with this problem, and a graph in an appendix showed that the severe maladjustment cases were trending dramatically down. Ryan took his time reading. While getting his doctorate in history at Georgetown University he had used a little free time to audit some psychology classes. He had come away with the gut suspicion that shrinks didn't really know much of anything, that they got together and agreed on random ideas they could all use…He shook his head. His wife occasionally said that, too. A clinical instructor in ophthalmic surgery on an exchange program at St. Guy's Hospital in London, Caroline Ryan regarded everything as cut and dried. If someone had eye trouble, she would either fix it or not fix it. A mind was different, Jack decided after reading through the document a second time, and each defector had to be treated as an individual, handled carefully by a sympathetic case officer who had both the time and inclination to look after him properly. He wondered if he'd be good at it.

Admiral White walked in. "Bored, Jack?"

"Not exactly, Admiral. When do we make contact with the Soviets?"

"This evening. Your chaps have given them a very rough time over that Tomcat incident."

"Good. Maybe people will wake up before something really bad happens."

"You think it will?" White sat down.

"Well, Admiral, if they really are hunting a missing sub, yes. If not, then they're here for another purpose entirely, and I've guessed wrong. Worse than that, I'll have to live with that misjudgment—or die with it."

Norfolk Naval Medical Center

Tait was feeling better. Dr. Jameson had taken over for several hours, allowing him to curl up on a couch in the doctor's lounge for five hours. That was the most sleep he ever seemed to get in one shot, but it was sufficient to make him look indecently chipper to the rest of the floor staff. He made a quick phone call and some milk was sent up. As a Mormon, Tait avoided everything with caffeine—coffee, tea, even cola drinks—and though this type of self-discipline was unusual for a physician, to say nothing of a

uniformed officer, he scarcely thought about it except on rare occasions when he pointed out its longevity benefits to his brother practitioners. Tait drank his milk and shaved in the restroom, emerging ready to face another day.

"Any word on the radiation exposure, Jamie?"

The radiology lab had struck out. "They brought a nucleonics officer over from a sub tender, and he scanned the clothes. There was a possible twenty-rad contamination, not enough for frank physiological effects. I think what it might have been was that the nurse took the sample from the back of his hand. The extremities might still have been suffering from the vascular shutdown. That could explain the depleted white count. Maybe."

"How is he otherwise?"

"Better. Not much, but better. I think maybe the keflin's taking hold." The doctor flipped open the chart. "White count is coming back. I put a unit of whole blood into him two hours ago. The blood chemistry is approaching normal limits. Blood pressure is one hundred over sixty-five, heart rate is ninety-four. Temperature ten minutes ago was 100.8—it's been fluctuating for several hours.

"His heart looks pretty good. In fact, I think he's going to make it, unless something unexpected crops up." Jameson reminded himself that in extreme hypothermia cases the unexpected can take a month or more to appear.

Tait examined the chart, remembering what he had been like years ago. A bright young doc, just like Jamie, certain that he could cure the world. It was a good feeling. A pity that experience—in his case, two years at Danang—beat that out of you. Jamie was right, though; there was enough improvement here to make the patient's chances appear measurably better.

"What are the Russians doing?" Tait asked.

"Petchkin has the watch at the moment. When it came his turn, and he changed into scrubs—you know he has that Captain Smirnov holding onto his clothes, like he expected us to steal them or something?"

Tait explained that Petchkin was a KGB agent.

"No kidding? Maybe he has a gun tucked away." Jameson chuckled. "If he does, he'd better watch it. We got three marines up here with us."

"Marines. What for?"

"Forgot to tell you. Some reporter found out we had a Russkie

up here and tried to bluff his way onto the floor. A nurse stopped him. Admiral Blackburn found out and went ape. The whole floor's sealed off. What's the big secret, anyway?"

"Beats me, but that's the way it is. What do you think of this Petchkin guy?"

"I don't know. I've never met any Russians before. They don't smile a whole lot. The way they're taking turns watching the patient, you'd think they expect us to make off with him."

"Or maybe that he'll say something they don't want us to hear?" Tait wondered. "Did you get the feeling that they might not want him to make it? I mean, when they didn't want to tell us about what his sub was?"

Jameson thought about that. "No. The Russians are supposed to make a secret of everything, aren't they? Anyway, Smirnov did come through with it."

"Get some sleep, Jamie."

"Aye, Cap'n." Jameson walked off toward the lounge.

We asked them what kind of a sub, the captain thought, meaning whether it was a nuke or not. What if they thought we were asking if it was a missile sub? That makes sense, doesn't it? Yeah. A missile sub right off our coast, and all this activity in the North Atlantic. Christmas season. Dear God! If they were going to do it, they'd do it right now, wouldn't they? He walked down the hall. A nurse came out of the room with a blood sample to be taken down to the lab. This was being done hourly, and it left Petchkin alone with the patient for a few minutes.

Tait walked around the corner and saw Petchkin through the window, sitting in a chair at the corner of the bed and watching his countryman, who was still unconscious. He had on green scrubs. Made to put on in a hurry, these were reversible, with a pocket on both sides so a surgeon didn't have to waste a second to see if they were inside out. As Tait watched, Petchkin reached for something through the low collar.

"Oh, God!" Tait raced around the corner and shot through the swinging door. Petchkin's look of surprise changed to amazement as the doctor batted a cigarette and lighter from his hand, then to outrage as he was lifted from his chair and flung towards the door. Tait was the smaller of the two, but his sudden burst of energy was sufficient to eject the man from the room. "Security!" Tait screamed.

“What is the meaning of this?” Petchkin demanded. Tait was holding him in a bearhug. Immediately he heard feet racing down the hall from the lobby.

“What is it, sir?” A breathless marine lance corporal with a .45 Colt in his right hand skidded to a halt on the tile floor.

“This man just tried to kill my patient!”

“*What!*” Petchkin’s face was crimson.

“Corporal, your post is now at that door. If this man tries to get into that room, you will stop him any way you have to. Understood?”

“Aye aye, sir!” the corporal looked at the Russian. “Sir, would you please step away from the door?”

“What is the meaning of this outrage!”

“Sir, you will step away from the door, right now.” The marine holstered his pistol.

“What is going on here?” It was Ivanov, who had sense enough to ask this question in a quiet voice from ten feet away.

“Doctor, do you want your sailor to survive or not?” Tait asked, trying to calm himself.

“What—of course we wish him to survive. How can you ask this?”

“Then why did Comrade Petchkin just try to kill him?”

“I did not do such a thing!” Petchkin shouted.

“What did he do, exactly?” Ivanov asked.

Before Tait could answer, Petchkin spoke rapidly in Russian, then switched to English. “I was reaching for a smoke, that is all. I have no weapon. I wish to kill no one. I only wish to have a cigarette.”

“We have No Smoking signs all over the floor, except in the lobby—you didn’t see them? You were in a room in intensive care, with a patient on hundred-percent oxygen, the air and bedclothes saturated with oxygen, and you were going to flick your goddamned Bic!” The doctor rarely used profanity. “Oh sure, you’d get burned some, and it would look like an accident—and that kid would be dead! I know what you are, Petchkin, and I don’t think you’re that stupid. Get off my floor!”

The nurse, who had been watching this, went into the patient’s room. She came back out with a pack of cigarettes, two loose ones, a plastic butane lighter, and a curious look on her face.

Petchkin was ashen. “Dr. Tait, I assure you that I had no such

intention. What are you saying would happen?"

"Comrade Petchkin," Ivanov said slowly in English, "there would be an explosion and fire. You cannot have a flame near oxygen."

"*Nichevo!*" Petchkin finally realized what he had done. He had waited for the nurse to leave—medical people never let you smoke when you ask. He didn't know the first thing about hospitals, and as a KGB agent he was accustomed to doing whatever he wanted. He started speaking to Ivanov in Russian. The Soviet doctor looked like a parent listening to a child's explanation for a broken glass. His response was spirited.

For his part, Tait began to wonder if he hadn't overreacted—anyone who smoked was an idiot to begin with.

"Dr. Tait," Petchkin said finally, "I swear to you that I had no idea of this oxygen business. Perhaps I am a fool."

"Nurse," Tait turned, "we will not leave this patient unattended by our personnel at any time—never. Have a corpsman come to pick up the blood samples and anything else. If you have to go to the head, get relief first."

"Yes, Doctor."

"No more screwing around, Mr. Petchkin. Break the rules again, sir, and you're off the floor again. Do you understand?"

"It will be as you say, Doctor, and allow me, please, to apologize."

"You stay put," Tait said to the marine. He walked away shaking his head angrily, mad at the Russians, embarrassed with himself, wishing he were back at Bethesda where he belonged, and wishing he knew how to swear coherently. He took the service elevator down to the first floor and spent five minutes looking for the intelligence officer who had flown down with him. Ultimately he found him in a game room playing Pac Man. They conferred in the hospital administrator's vacant office.

"You really thought he was trying to kill the guy?" the commander asked incredulously.

"What was I supposed to think?" Tait demanded. "What do you think?"

"I think he just screwed up. They want that kid alive—no, first they want him talking—more than you do."

"How do you know that?"

"Petchkin calls their embassy every hour. We have the phones

tapped, of course. How do you think?"

"What if it's a trick?"

"If he's that good an actor he belongs in the movies. You keep that kid alive, Doctor, and leave the rest to us. Good idea to have the marine close, though. That'll rattle 'em a bit. Never pass up a chance to rattle 'em. So, when will he be conscious?"

"No telling. He's still feverish, and very weak. Why do they want him to talk?" Tait asked.

"To find out what sub he was on. Petchkin's KGB contact blurted that out on the phone—sloppy! *Very* sloppy! They must be real excited about this."

"Do we know what sub it was?"

"Sure," the intelligence officer said mischievously.

"Then what's going on, for Lord's sake!"

"Can't say, Doc." The commander smiled as if he knew, though he was as much in the dark as anyone.

Norfolk Naval Shipyard

The USS *Scamp* sat at the dock while a large overhead crane settled the *Avalon* in its support rack. The captain watched impatiently from atop the sail. He and his boat had been called in from hunting a pair of *Victors*, and he did not like it one bit. The attack boat skipper had only run a DSRV exercise a few weeks before, and right now he had better things to do than play mother whale to this damned useless toy. Besides, having the minisub perched on his after escape trunk would knock ten knots off his top speed. And there'd be four more men to bunk and feed. The *Scamp* was not all that large.

At least they'd get good food out of this. The *Scamp* had been out five weeks when the recall order arrived. Their supply of fresh vegetables was exhausted, and they availed themselves of the opportunity to have fresh food trucked down to the dock. A man tires quickly of three-bean salad. Tonight they'd have real lettuce, tomatoes, fresh corn instead of canned. But that didn't make up for the fact that there were Russians out there to worry about.

"All secure?" the captain called down to the curved after deck.

"Yes, Captain. We're ready when you are," Lieutenant Ames answered.

"Engine room," the captain called down on intercom. "I want

you ready to answer bells in ten minutes."

"Ready now, Skipper."

A harbor tug was standing by to help maneuver them from the dock. Ames had their orders, something else that the captain didn't like. Surely they would not be doing any more hunting, not with that damned *Avalon* strapped on.

The Red October

"Look here, Svyadov," Melekhin pointed, "I will show you how a saboteur thinks."

The lieutenant came over and looked. The chief engineer was pointing at an inspection valve on the heat exchanger. Before he got an explanation, Melekhin went to the bulkhead phone.

"Comrade Captain, this is Melekhin. I have found it. I require the reactor to be stopped for an hour. We can operate the caterpillar on batteries, no?"

"Of course, Comrade Chief Engineer," Ramius said, "proceed."

Melekhin turned to the assistant engineering officer. "You will shut the reactor down and connect the batteries to the caterpillar motors."

"At once, Comrade." The officer began to work the controls.

The time taken to find the leak had been a burden on everyone. Once they had discovered that the Geiger counters were sabotaged and Melekhin and Borodin had repaired them, they had begun a complete check of the reactor spaces, a devilishly tricky task. There had never been a question of a major steam leak, else Svyadov would have gone looking for it with a broomstick—even a tiny leak could easily shave off an arm. They reasoned that it had to be a small leak in the low-pressure part of the system. Didn't it? It was the not knowing that had troubled everyone.

The check made by the chief engineer and executive officer had lasted no less than eight hours, during which the reactor had again been shut down. This cut all electricity off throughout the ship except for emergency lights and the caterpillar motors. Even the air systems had been curtailed. That had set the crew muttering to themselves.

The problem was, Melekhin could still not find the leak, and when the badges had been developed a day earlier, there was nothing on them! How was this possible?

“Come, Svyadov, tell me what you see.” Melekhin came back over and pointed.

“The water test valve.” Opened only in port, when the reactor was cold, it was used to flush the cooling system and to check for unusual water contamination. The thing was grossly unremarkable, a heavy-duty valve with a large wheel. The spout underneath it, below the pressurized part of the pipe, was threaded rather than welded.

“A large wrench, if you please, Lieutenant.” Melekhin was drawing the lesson out, Svyadov thought. He was the slowest of teachers when he was trying to communicate something important. Svyadov returned with a meter-long pipe wrench. The chief engineer waited until the plant was closed down, then double-checked a gauge to make sure the pipes were depressurized. He was a careful man. The wrench was set on the fitting, and he turned it. It came off easily.

“You see, Comrade Lieutenant, the threads on the pipe actually go up onto the valve casing. Why is this permitted?”

“The threads are on the outside of the pipe, Comrade. The valve itself bears the pressure. The fitting which is screwed on is merely a directional spigot. The nature of the union does not compromise the pressure loop.”

“Correct. A screw fitting is not strong enough for the plant’s total pressure.” Melekhin worked the fitting all the way off with his hands. It was perfectly machined, the threads still bright from the original engine work. “And there is the sabotage.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Someone thought this one over very carefully, Comrade Lieutenant.” Melekhin’s voice was half admiration, half rage. “At normal operating pressure, cruising speed, that is, the system is pressurized to eight kilograms per square centimeter, correct?”

“Yes, Comrade, and at full power the pressure is ninety percent higher.” Svyadov knew all this by heart.

“But we rarely go to full power. What we have here is a dead-end section of the steam loop. Now, here a small hole has been drilled, not even a millimeter. Look.” Melekhin bent over to examine it himself. Svyadov was happy to keep his distance. “Not even a millimeter. The saboteur took the fitting off, drilled the hole, and put it back. The tiny hole permits a minuscule amount of steam to escape, but only very slowly. The steam cannot go up, because

the fitting sits against this flange. Look at this machine work! It is perfect, you see, perfect! The steam, therefore, cannot escape upward. It can only force its way down the threads around and around, ultimately escaping inside the spout. Just enough. Just enough to contaminate this compartment by a tiny amount." Melekhin looked up. "Someone was a very clever man. Clever enough to know exactly how this system works. When we reduced power to check for the leak before, there was not enough pressure remaining in the loop to force the steam down the threads, and we could not find the leak. There is only enough pressure at normal power levels—but if you suspect a leak, you power-down the system. And if we had gone to maximum power, who can say what might have happened?" Melekhin shook his head in admiration. "Someone was very, very clever. I hope I meet him. Oh, I hope I meet this clever man. For when I do, I will take a pair of large steel pliers—," Melekhin's voice lowered to a whisper, "—and I will crush his balls! Get me the small electric welding set, Comrade. I can fix this myself in a few minutes."

Captain First Rank Melekhin was as good as his word. He wouldn't let anyone near the job. It was his plant, and his responsibility. Svyadov was just as happy for that. A tiny bead of stainless steel was worked into the fault, and Melekhin filed it down with jeweler's tools to protect the threads. Then he brushed rubber-based sealant onto the threads and worked the fitting back into place. The whole procedure took twenty-eight minutes by Svyadov's watch. As they had told him in Leningrad, Melekhin was the best engineer in submarines.

"A static pressure test, eight kilograms," he ordered the assistant engineer officer.

The reactor was reactivated. Five minutes later the pressure went all the way to normal power. Melekhin held a counter under the spout for ten minutes—and got nothing, even on the number two setting. He walked to the phone to tell the captain the leak was fixed.

Melekhin had the enlisted men let back into the compartment to return the tools to their places.

"You see how it is done, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Comrade. Was that one leak sufficient to cause all of our contamination?"

"Obviously."

Svyadov wondered about this. The reactor spaces were nothing but a collection of pipes and fittings, and this bit of sabotage could not have taken long. What if other such time bombs were hidden in the system?

“Perhaps you worry too much, Comrade,” Melekhin said. “Yes, I have considered this. When we get to Cuba, I will have a full-power static test made to check the whole system, but for the moment I do not think this is a good idea. We will continue the two-hour watch cycle. There is the possibility that one of our own crewmen is the saboteur. If so, I will not have people in these spaces long enough to commit more mischief. You will watch the crew closely.”

THE TWELFTH DAY
TUESDAY, 14 DECEMBER

The Dallas

"*Crazy Ivan!*" Jones shouted loudly enough to be heard in the attack center. "Turning to starboard!"

"Skipper!" Thompson repeated the warning.

"All stop!" Mancuso ordered quickly. "Rig ship for ultraquiet!"

A thousand yards ahead of the *Dallas*, her contact had just begun a radical turn to the right. She had been doing so about every two hours since they had regained contact, though not regularly enough for the *Dallas* to settle into a comfortable pattern. Whoever is driving that boomer knows his business, Mancuso thought. The Soviet missile submarine was making a complete circle so her bow-mounted sonar could check for anyone hiding in her baffles.

Countering this maneuver was more than just tricky—it was dangerous, especially the way Mancuso did it. When the *Red October* changed course, her stern, like those of all ships, moved in the direction opposite the turn. She was a steel barrier directly in the *Dallas'* path for as long as it took her to move through the first part of the turn, and the 7,000-ton attack submarine took a lot of space to stop.

The exact number of collisions that had occurred between Soviet and American submarines was a closely guarded secret; that there had been such collisions was not. One characteristically Russian tactic for forcing Americans to keep their distance was a stylized turn called the Crazy Ivan in the U.S. Navy.

The first few hours they had trailed this contact, Mancuso had been careful to keep his distance. He had learned that the submarine was not turning quickly. She was, rather, maneuvering in a leisurely manner, and seemed to ascend fifty to eighty feet as she turned, banking almost like an aircraft. He suspected that the Russian skipper was not using his full maneuverability—an intelligent thing for a captain to do, keeping some of his performance in reserve as a surprise. These facts allowed the *Dallas* to trail very closely indeed and gave Mancuso a chance to chop his speed and drift forward so that he barely avoided the Russian's

stern. He was getting good at it—a little too good, his officers were whispering. The last time they had not missed the Russian's screws by more than a hundred fifty yards. The contact's large turning circle was taking her completely around the *Dallas* as the latter sniffed at her prey's trail.

Avoiding collision was the most dangerous part of the maneuver, but not the only part. The *Dallas* also had to remain invisible to her quarry's passive sonar systems. For her to do so the engineers had to cut power in their S6G reactor to a tiny fraction of its total output. Fortunately the reactor was able to run on such low power without the use of a coolant pump, since coolant could be transferred by normal convection circulation. In addition, a strict silent ship routine was enforced. No activity on the *Dallas* that might generate noise was permitted, and the crew took it seriously enough that even ordinary conversations in the mess were muted.

"Speed coming down," Lieutenant Goodman reported. Mancuso decided that the *Dallas* would not be part of a ramming this time and went aft to sonar.

"Target is still turning right," Jones reported quietly. "Ought to be clear now. Distance to the stern, maybe two hundred yards, maybe a shade less…Yeah, we're clear now, bearing is changing more rapidly. Speed and engine noises are constant. A slow turn to the right." Jones caught the captain out of the corner of his eye and turned to hazard an observation. "Skipper, this guy is real confident in himself. I mean, *real* confident."

"Explain," Mancuso said, figuring he knew the answer.

"Cap'n, he's not chopping speed the way we do, and we turn a lot sharper than this. It's almost like—like he's doing this out of habit, y'know? Like he's in a hurry to get somewhere, and really doesn't think anybody can track—wait…Yeah, okay, he's just about reversed course now, bearing off the starboard bow, say half a mile…Still doing the slow turn. He'll go right around us again. Sir, if he knows anybody's back here, he's playing it awful cool. What do you think, Frenchie?"

Chief Sonarman Laval shook his head. "He don't know we're here." The chief didn't want to say anything else. He thought Mancuso's close tailing was reckless. The man had balls, playing with a 688 like this, but one little screw-up and he'd find himself with a pail and shovel, on the beach.

"Passing down the starboard side. No pinging." Jones took out

his calculator and punched in some numbers. “Sir, this angular turn rate at this speed makes the range about a thousand yards. You suppose his funny drive system goofs up his rudders any?”

“Maybe.” Mancuso took a spare set of phones and plugged them in to listen.

The noise was the same. A swish, and every forty or fifty seconds an odd, low-frequency rumble. This close they could also hear the gurgling and throbbing of the reactor pump. There was a sharp sound, maybe a cook moving a pan on a metal grate. No silent ship drill on this boat. Mancuso smiled to himself. It was like being a cat burglar, hanging this close to an enemy submarine—no, not an enemy, not exactly—hearing everything. In better acoustical conditions they could have heard conversations. Not well enough to understand them, of course, but as if they were at a dinner party listening to the gabble of a dozen couples at once.

“Passing aft and still circling. His turning radius must be a good thousand yards,” Mancuso observed.

“Yes, Cap’n, about that,” Jones agreed.

“He just can’t be using all his rudder, and you’re right, Jonesy, he is very damned casual about this. Hmph, the Russians are all supposed to be paranoid—not this boy.” So much the better, Mancuso thought.

If he were going to hear the *Dallas* it would be now, with the bow-mounted sonar pointed almost directly at them. Mancuso took off his headphones to listen to his boat. The *Dallas* was a tomb. The words *Crazy Ivan* had been passed, and within seconds his crew had responded. How do you reward a whole crew? Mancuso wondered. He knew he worked them hard, sometimes too hard—but damn! Did they deliver!

“Port beam,” Jones said. “Exactly abeam now, speed unchanged, traveling a little straighter, maybe, distance about eleven hundred, I think.” The sonarman took a handkerchief from his back pocket and used it to wipe his hands.

There’s tension all right, but you’d never know it listening to the kid, the captain thought. Everyone in his crew was acting like a professional.

“He’s passed us. On the port bow, and I think the turn has stopped. Betcha he’s settled back down on one-nine-zero.” Jones looked up with a grin. “We did it again, Skipper.”

“Okay. Good work, you men.” Mancuso went back to the attack

center. Everyone was waiting expectantly. The *Dallas* was dead in the water, drifting slowly downward with her slight negative trim.

"Let's get the engines turned back on. Build her up slowly to thirteen knots." A few seconds later an almost imperceptible noise began as the reactor plant increased power. A moment after that the speed gauge twitched upward. The *Dallas* was moving again.

"Attention, this is the captain speaking," Mancuso said into the sound-powered communications system. The electrically powered speakers were turned off, and his word would be relayed by watchstanders in all compartments. "They circled us again without picking us up. Well done, everybody. We can all breathe again." He placed the handset back in its holder. "Mr. Goodman, let's get back on her tail."

"Aye, Skipper. Left five degrees rudder, helm."

"Left five degrees rudder, aye." The helmsman acknowledged the order, turning his wheel as he did so. Ten minutes later the *Dallas* was back astern of her contact.

A constant fire control solution was set up on the attack director. The Mark 48 torpedoes would barely have sufficient distance to arm themselves before striking the target in twenty-nine seconds.

Ministry of Defense, Moscow

"And how are you feeling, Misha?"

Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov looked up from a large pile of documents. He looked flushed and feverish still. Dmitri Ustinov, the defense minister, worried about his old friend. He should have stayed in the hospital another few days as the doctors had advised. But Misha had never been one to take advice, only orders.

"I feel good, Dmitri. Any time you walk out of a hospital you feel good—even if you are dead," Filitov smiled.

"You still look sick," Ustinov observed.

"Ah! At our age you always look sick. A drink, Comrade Defense Minister?" Filitov hoisted a bottle of Stolychnaya vodka from a desk drawer.

"You drink too much, my friend," Ustinov chided.

"I do not drink enough. A bit more antifreeze and I would not have caught cold last week." He poured two tumblers half full and held one out to his guest. "Here, Dmitri, it is cold outside."

Both men tipped their glasses, took a gulp of the clear liquid, and expelled their breath with an explosive *pah*.

"I feel better already." Filitov's laugh was hoarse. "Tell me, what became of that Lithuanian renegade?"

"We're not sure," Ustinov said.

"Still? Can you tell me now what his letter said?"

Ustinov took another swallow before explaining. When he finished the story Filitov was leaning forward at his desk, shocked.

"Mother of God! And he has still not been found? How many heads?"

"Admiral Korov is dead. He was arrested by the KGB, of course, and died of a brain hemorrhage soon thereafter."

"A nine-millimeter hemorrhage, I trust," Filitov observed coldly. "How many times have I said it? What goddamned use is a navy? Can we use it against the Chinese? Or the NATO armies that threaten us—no! How many rubles does it cost to build and fuel those pretty barges for Gorshkov, and what do we get for it—nothing! Now he loses one submarine and the whole fucking fleet cannot find it. It is a good thing that Stalin is not alive."

Ustinov agreed. He was old enough to remember what happened then to anyone who reported results short of total success. "In any case, Padorin may have saved his skin. There is one extra element of control on the submarine."

"Padorin!" Filitov took another gulp of his drink. "That eunuch! I've only met him, what, three times. A cold fish, even for a commissar. He never laughs, even when he drinks. Some Russian he is. Why is it, Dmitri, that Gorshkov keeps so many old farts like that around?"

Ustinov smiled into his drink. "The same reason I do, Misha." Both men laughed.

"So, how will Comrade Padorin save our secrets and keep his skin? Invent a time machine?"

Ustinov explained to his old friend. There weren't many men whom the defense minister could speak to and feel comfortable with. Filitov drew the pension of a full colonel of tanks and still wore the uniform proudly. He had faced combat for the first time on the fourth day of the Great Patriotic War, as the Fascist invaders were driving east. Lieutenant Filitov had met them southeast of Brest Litovsk with a troop of T-34/76 tanks. A good officer, he had survived his first encounter with Guderian's panzers, retreated in

good order, and fought a constant mobile action for days before being caught in the great encirclement at Minsk. He had fought his way out of that trap, and later another at Vyasma, and had commanded a battalion spearheading Zhukov's counterblow from the suburbs of Moscow. In 1942 Filitov had taken part in the disastrous counter-offensive toward Kharkov but again escaped, this time on foot, leading the battered remains of his regiment from that dreadful cauldron on the Dnieper River. With another regiment later that year he had led the drive that shattered the Italian Army on the flank of Stalingrad and encircled the Germans. He'd been wounded twice in that campaign. Filitov had acquired the reputation of a commander who was both good and lucky. That luck had run out at Kursk, where he had battled the troopers of SS division *Das Reich*. Leading his men into a furious tank battle, Filitov and his vehicle had run straight into an ambush of eighty-eight-millimeter guns. That he had survived at all was a miracle. His chest still bore the scars from the burning tank, and his right arm was next to useless. This was enough to retire a charging tactical commander who had won the old star of the Hero of the Soviet Union no less than three times, and a dozen other decorations.

After months of being shuttled from one hospital to another, he had become a representative of the Red Army in the armament factories that had been moved to the Urals east of Moscow. The drive that made him a premiere combat soldier would come to serve the State even better behind the lines. A born organizer, Filitov learned to run roughshod over factory bosses to streamline production, and he cajoled design engineers to make the small but often crucial changes in their products that would save crews and win battles.

It was in these factories that Filitov and Ustinov first met, the scarred combat veteran and the gruff apparatchik detailed by Stalin to produce enough tools to drive the hated invaders back. After a few clashes, the young Ustinov came to recognize that Filitov was totally fearless and would not be bullied on a question involving quality control or fighting efficiency. In the midst of one disagreement, Filitov had practically dragged Ustinov into the turret of a tank and taken it through a combat training course to make his point. Ustinov was the sort who only had to be shown something once, and they soon became fast friends. He could not fail to admire

the courage of a soldier who could say no to the people's commissar of armaments. By mid-1944 Filitov was a permanent part of his staff, a special inspector—in short, a hatchet man. When there was a problem at a factory, Filitov saw that it was settled, quickly. The three gold stars and the crippling injuries were usually enough to persuade the factory bosses to mend their ways—and if not, Misha had the booming voice and vocabulary to make a sergeant major wince.

Never a high Party official, Filitov gave his boss valuable input from people in the field. He still worked closely with the tank design and production teams, often taking a prototype or randomly chosen production model through a test course with a team of picked veterans to see for himself how well things worked. Crippled arm or not, it was said that Filitov was among the best gunners in the Soviet Union. And he was a humble man. In 1965 Ustinov thought to surprise his friend with general's stars and was somewhat angered by Filitov's reaction—he had not earned them on the field of battle, and that was the only way a man could earn stars. A rather impolitic remark, as Ustinov wore the uniform of a marshal of the Soviet Union, earned for his Party work and industrial management, it nevertheless demonstrated that Filitov was a true New Soviet Man, proud of what he was and mindful of his limitations.

It is unfortunate, Ustinov thought, that Misha has been so unlucky otherwise. He had been married to a lovely woman, Elena Filitov, who had been a minor dancer with the Kirov when the youthful officer had met her. Ustinov remembered her with a trace of envy; she had been the perfect soldier's wife. She had given the State two fine sons. Both were now dead. The elder had died in 1956, still a boy, an officer cadet sent to Hungary because of his political reliability and killed by counterrevolutionaries before his seventeenth birthday. He was a soldier who had taken a soldier's chance. But the younger had been killed in a training accident, blown to pieces by a faulty breech mechanism in a brand-new T-55 tank in 1959. That had been a disgrace. And Elena had died soon thereafter, of grief more than anything else. Too bad.

Filitov had not changed all that much. He drank too much, like many soldiers, but he was a quiet drunk. In 1961 or so, Ustinov remembered, he had taken to cross-country skiing. It made him healthier and tired him out, which was probably what he really

wanted, along with the solitude. He was still a fine listener. When Ustinov had a new idea to float before the Politburo, he usually tried it out on Filitov first to get his reaction. Not a sophisticated man, Filitov was an uncommonly shrewd one who had a soldier's instinct for finding weaknesses and exploiting strengths. His value as a liaison officer was unsurpassed. Few men living had three gold stars won on the field of battle. That got him attention, and it still made officers far his senior listen to him.

"So, Dmitri Fedorovich, do you think this would work? Can one man destroy a submarine?" Filitov asked. "You know rockets, I don't."

"Certainly. It's merely a question of mathematics. There is enough energy in a rocket to melt the submarine."

"And what of our man?" Filitov asked. Always the combat soldier, he would be the type to worry about a brave man alone in enemy territory.

"We will do our best, of course, but there is not much hope."

"He must be rescued, Dmitri! Must! You forget, young men like that have a value beyond their deeds, they are not mere machines who perform their duties. They are symbols for our other young officers, and alive they are worth a hundred new tanks or ships. Combat is like that, Comrade. We have forgotten this—and look what has happened in Afghanistan!"

"You are correct, my friend, but—only a few hundred kilometers from the American coast, if that much?"

"Gorshkov talks so much about what his navy can do, let him do this!" Filitov poured another glass. "One more, I think."

"You are not going skiing again, Misha." Ustinov noted that he often fortified himself before driving his car to the woods east of Moscow. "I will not permit it."

"Not today, Dmitri, I promise—though I think it would do me good. Today I will go to the *banya* to take steam and sweat the rest of the poisons from this old carcass. Will you join me?"

"I have to work late."

"The *banya* is good for you," Filitov persisted. It was a waste of time, and both knew it. Ustinov was a member of the "nobility" and would not mingle in the public steam baths. Misha had no such pretentions.

Exactly twenty-four hours after reacquiring the *Red October*, Mancuso called a conference of his senior officers in the wardroom. Things had settled down somewhat. Mancuso had even managed to squeeze in a couple of four-hour naps and was feeling vaguely human again. They now had time to build an accurate sonar picture of the quarry, and the computer was refining a signature classification that would be out to the other fleet attack boats in a matter of weeks. From trailing they had a very accurate model of the propulsion system's noise characteristics, and from the bihourly circling they had also built a picture of the boat's size and power plant specifications.

The executive officer, Wally Chambers, twirled a pencil in his fingers like a baton. "Jonesy's right. It's the same power plant that the *Oscars* and *Typhoons* have. They've quieted it down, but the gross signature characteristics are virtually identical. Question is, what's it turning? It sounds like the propellers are ducted somehow, or shrouded. A directional prop with a collar around it, maybe, or some sort of tunnel drive. Didn't we try that once?"

"Long time ago," Lieutenant Butler, the engineering officer, said. "I heard a story about it while I was at Arco. It didn't work out, but I don't remember why. Whatever it is, it's really knocked down on the propulsion noises. That rumble though…It's some sort of harmonic all right—but a harmonic of what? You know, except for that we'd never have picked it up in the first place."

"Maybe," Mancuso said. "Jonesy says that the signal processors have tended to filter this noise out, almost as though the Soviets know what SAPS does and have tailored a system to beat it. But that's hard to believe." There was general agreement on this point. Everyone knew the principles on which SAPS operated, but there were probably not fifty men in the country who could really explain the nuts and bolts details.

"We're agreed she's a boomer?" Mancuso asked.

Butler nodded. "No way you could fit that power plant into an attack hull. More important, she acts like a boomer."

"Could be an *Oscar*," Chambers suggested.

"No. Why send an *Oscar* this far south? *Oscar*'s an antiship platform. Uh-uh, this guy's driving a boomer. He ran the route at the speed he's running now—and that's acting like a missile boat," Lieutenant Mannion noted. "What are they up to with all this other activity? That's the real question. Maybe trying to sneak up on our

coast—just to see if they can do it. It's been done before, and all this other activity makes for a hell of a diversion."

They all considered that. The trick had been tried before by both sides. Most recently, in 1978, a Soviet *Yankee*-class missile sub had closed to the edge of the continental shelf off the coast of New England. The evident objective had been to see if the United States could detect it or not. The navy had succeeded, and then the question had been whether or not to react and let the Soviets know.

"Well, I think we can leave the grand strategy to the folks on the beach. Let's phone this one in. Lieutenant Mannion, tell the OOD to get us to periscope depth in twenty minutes. We'll try to slip away and back without his noticing." Mancuso frowned. This was never easy.

A half an hour later the *Dallas* radioed her message.

Z140925ZDEC

TOP SECRET THEO

FR: USS DALLAS

TO: COMSUBLANT

INFO: CINCLANTFLT

A. USS DALLAS Z090414ZDEC

1. ANOMALOUS CONTACT REACQUIRED 0538Z 13DEC. CURRENT POSITION LAT 42° 35$$$ LONG 49° 12$$$. COURSE 194 SPEED 13 DEPTH 600. HAVE TRACKED 24 HOURS WITHOUT COUNTERDETECTION. CONTACT EVALUATED AS REDFLEET SSBN GROSS SIZE, ENGINE CHARACTERISTICS INDICATIVE TYPHOON CLASS. HOWEVER CONTACT USING NEW DRIVE SYSTEM NOT REPEAT NOT PROPELLERS. HAVE ESTABLISHED DETAILED SIGNATURE PROFILE.

2. RETURNING TO TRACKING OPERATIONS. REQUEST ADDITIONAL OPAREA ASSIGNMENTS. AWAIT REPLY 1030Z.

COMSUBLANT Operations

“Bingo!” Gallery said to himself. He walked back to his office, careful to close the door before lifting the scrambled line to Washington.

“Sam, this is Vince. Listen up: *Dallas* reports she is tracking a Russian boomer with a new kind of quiet drive system, about six hundred miles southwest of the Grand Banks, course one-nine-four, speed thirteen knots.”

“All right! That’s Mancuso?” Dodge said.

“Bartolomeo Vito Mancuso, my favorite Guinea,” Gallery confirmed. Getting him this command had not been easy because of his age. Gallery had gone the distance for him. “I told you the kid was good, Sam.”

“Jesus, you see how close they are to the *Kiev* group?” Dodge was looking at his tactical display.

“They are cutting it close,” Gallery agreed. “*Invincible*’s not too far away, though, and I have *Pogy* out there, too. We moved her off the shelf when we called *Scamp* back in. I figure *Dallas* will need help. The question is how obvious do we want to be.”

“Not very. Look, Vince, I have to talk to Dan Foster about this.”

“Okay. I have to reply to *Dallas* in, hell, in fifty-five minutes. You know the score. He has to break contact to reach us, then sneak back. Hustle, Sam.”

“Right, Vince.” Dodge switched buttons on his phone. “This is Admiral Dodge. I need to talk to Admiral Foster right now.”

The Pentagon

“Ouch. Between *Kiev* and *Kirov*. Nice.” Lieutenant General Harris took a marker from his pocket to represent the *Red October*. It was a sub-shaped piece of wood with a Jolly Roger attached. Harris had an odd sense of humor. “The president says we can try and keep her?” he asked.

“If we can get her to the place we want at the time we want,” General Hilton said. “Can *Dallas* signal her?”

“Good trick, General.” Foster shook his head. “First things first. Let’s get *Pogy* and *Invincible* there for starters, then we figure out how to warn him. From this course track, Christ, he’s heading right for Norfolk. You believe the balls on this guy? If worse comes to worse, we can always try to escort him in.”

“Then we’d have to give the boat back,” Admiral Dodge

objected.

"We have to have a fall-back position, Sam. If we can't warn him off, we can try and run a bunch of ships through with him to keep Ivan from shooting."

"The law of the sea is your bailiwick, not mine," General Barnes, the air force chief of staff, commented. "But from where I sit doing that could be called anything from piracy to an overt act of war. Isn't this exercise complicated enough already?"

"Good point, General," Foster said.

"Gentlemen, I think we need time to consider this. Okay, we still have time, but right now let's tell *Dallas* to sit tight and track the bugger," Harris said. "And report any changes in course or speed. I figure we have about fifteen minutes to do that. Next we can get *Pogy* and *Invincible* staked out on their path."

"Right, Eddie." Hilton turned to Admiral Foster. "If you agree, let's do that right now."

"Send the message, Sam," Foster ordered.

"Aye aye." Dodge went to the phone and ordered Admiral Gallery to send the reply.

Z141030ZDEC

TOP SECRET

FR: COMSUBLANT

TO: USS DALLAS

A. USS DALLAS Z140925ZDEC

1. CONTINUE TRACKING. REPORT ANY CHANGES IN COURSE OR SPEED. HELP ON THE WAY.

2. ELF TRANSMISSION "G" DESIGNATES FLASH OPS DIRECTIVE READY FOR YOU.

3. YOUR OPAREA UNRESTRICTED BRAVO ZULU DALLAS KEEP IT UP. VADM GALLERY SENDS.

"Okay, let's look at this," Harris said. "What the Russians are up to never has figured, has it?"

"What do you mean, Eddie?" Hilton asked.

"Their force composition for one thing. Half these surface

platforms are antiair and antisurface, not primary ASW assets. And why bring *Kirov* along at all? Granted she makes a nice force flag, but they could do the same thing with *Kiev*."

"We talked about that already," Foster observed. "They ran down the list of what they had that could travel this far at a high speed of advance and took everything that would steam. Same with the subs they sent, half of them are antisurface SSGNs with limited utility against submarines. The reason, Eddie, is that Gorshkov wants every platform here he can get. A half-capable ship is better than nothing. Even one of the old *Echoes* might get lucky, and Sergey is probably hitting the knees every night praying for luck."

"Even so, they've split their surface groups into three forces, each with antiair and antisurface elements, and they're kind of thin on ASW hulls. Nor have they sent their ASW aircraft to stage out of Cuba. Now that is curious," Harris pointed out.

"It would blow their cover story. You don't look for a dead sub with aircraft—well, they might, but if they started using a wing of Bears out of Cuba, the president would go ape," Foster said. "We'd harass them so much they'd never accomplish anything. For us this would be a technical operation, but they factor politics into everything they do."

"Fine, but that still doesn't explain it. What ASW ships and choppers they do have are pinging away like mad. You might look for a dead sub that way, but *October* ain't dead, is she?"

"I don't understand, Eddie," Hilton said.

"How would you look for a stray sub, given these circumstances?" Harris asked Foster.

"Not like this," Foster said after a moment. "Using surface, active sonar would warn the boat off long before they could get a hard contact. Boomers are fat on passive sonar. She'd hear them coming and skedaddle out of the way. You're right, Eddie. It's a sham."

"So what the hell are their surface ships up to?" Barnes asked, puzzled.

"Soviet naval doctrine is to use surface ships to support submarine operations," Harris explained. "Gorshkov is a decent tactical theoretician, and occasionally a very innovative gent. He said years ago that for submarines to operate effectively they have to have outside help, air or surface assets in direct or proximate support. They can't use air this far from home without staging out

of Cuba, and at best finding a boat in open ocean that doesn't want to be found would be a difficult assignment.

"On the other hand, they know where she's heading, a limited number of discrete areas, and those are staked out with fifty-eight submarines. The purpose of the surface forces, therefore, is not to participate in the hunt itself—though if they got lucky, they wouldn't mind. The purpose of the surface forces is to keep us from interfering with their submarines. They can do that by staking out the areas we're likely to be with their surface assets and watching what we're doing." Harris paused for a moment. "That's smart. We have to cover them, right? And since they're on a 'rescue' mission, we have to do more or less what they're doing, so we ping away also, and they can use our own ASW expertise against us for their own purposes. We play right into their hands."

"Why?" Barnes asked again.

"We're committed to helping in the search. If we find their boat, they're close enough to find out, acquire, localize, and shoot—and what can we do about it? Not a thing.

"Like I said, they figure to locate and shoot with their submarines. A surface acquisition would be pure luck, and you don't plan for luck. So, the primary objective of the surface fleet is to ride shotgun for, and draw our forces away from, their subs. Secondarily they can act as beaters, driving the game to the shooters—and again, since we're pinging, we're helping them. We're providing an additional stalking horse." Harris shook his head in grudging admiration. "Not too shabby, is it? If *Red October* hears them coming, she runs a little harder for whatever port the skipper wants, right into a nice, tight trap. Dan, what are the chances they can bag her coming into Norfolk, say?"

Foster looked down at the chart. Russian submarines were staked out on every port from Maine to Florida. "They have more subs than we have ports. Now we know that this guy can be picked up, and there's only so much area to cover off each port, even outside the territorial limit…You're right, Eddie. They have too good a chance of making the kill. Our surface groups are too far away to do anything about it. Our subs don't know what's happening, we have orders not to tell them, and even if we could, how could they interfere? Fire at the Russian subs before they could shoot—and start a war?" Foster let out a long breath. "We gotta warn him off."

"How?" Hilton asked.

"Sonar, a gertrude message maybe," Harris suggested.

Admiral Dodge shook his head. "You can hear that through the hull. If we continue to assume that only the officers are in on this, well, the crew might figure out what's happening, and there's no predicting the consequences. Think we can use *Nimitz* and *America* to force them off the coast? They'll be close enough to enter the operation soon. Damn! I don't want this guy to get this close, then get blown away right off our coast."

"Not a chance," Harris said. "Ever since the raid on *Kirov* they've been acting too docile. That's pretty cute, too. I bet they had that figured out. They know that having so many of their ships operating off our coast is bound to provoke us, so they make the first move, we up the ante, and they just plain fold—so now if we keep leaning on them, we're the bad guys. They're just doing a rescue operation, not threatening anybody. The *Post* reported this morning that we have a Russian survivor in the Norfolk naval hospital. Anyway, the good news is that they've miscalculated *October*'s speed. These two groups will pass her left and right, and with their seven-knot speed advantage they'll just pass her by."

"Disregard the surface groups entirely?" Maxwell asked.

"No," Hilton said, "that tells them we are no longer buying the cover story. They'd wonder why—and we still have to cover their surface groups. They're a threat whether they're acting like honest merchants or not."

"What we can do is pretend to release *Invincible*. With *Nimitz* and *America* ready to enter the game, we can send her home. As they pass *October* we can use that to our advantage. We put *Invincible* to seaward of their surface groups as though she's heading home and interpose her on *October*'s course. We still have to figure out a way to communicate with her, though. I can see how to get the assets in place, but that hurdle remains, gentlemen. For the moment, are we agreed to position *Invincible* and *Pogy* for the intercept?"

The Invincible

"How far is she from us?" Ryan asked.

"Two hundred miles. We can be there in ten hours." Captain Hunter marked the position on the chart. "USS *Pogy* is coming east, and she ought to be able to rendezvous with *Dallas* an hour or so

after we do. This will put us about a hundred miles east of this surface group when *October* arrives. Bloody hell, *Kiev* and *Kirov* are a hundred miles east and west of her."

"You suppose her captain knows it?" Ryan looked at the chart, measuring the distances with his eyes.

"Unlikely. He's deep, and their passive sonars are not as good as ours. Sea conditions are against it also. A twenty-knot surface wind can play havoc with sonar, even that deep."

"We have to warn him off." Admiral White looked at the ops dispatch. "'Without using acoustical devices.'"

"How the hell do you do that? You can't reach down that far with a radio," Ryan noted. "Even I know that. My God, this guy's come four thousand miles, and he's going to get killed within sight of his objective."

"How to communicate with a submarine?"

Commander Barclay straightened up. "Gentlemen, we are not trying to communicate with a submarine, we are trying to communicate with a man."

"What are you thinking?" Hunter asked.

"What do we know about Marko Ramius?" Barclay's eyes narrowed.

"He's a cowboy, typical submarine commander, thinks he can walk on water," Captain Carstairs said.

"Who spent most of his time in attack submarines," Barclay added. "Marko's bet his life that he could sneak into an American port undetected by anyone. We have to shake that confidence to warn him off."

"We have to talk to him first," Ryan said sharply.

"And so we shall," Barclay smiled, the thought now fully formed in his mind. "He's a former *attack* submarine commander. He'll still be thinking about how to attack his enemies, and how does a sub commander do that?"

"Well?" Ryan demanded.

Barclay's answer was the obvious one. They discussed his idea for another hour, then Ryan transmitted it to Washington for approval. A rapid exchange of technical information followed. The *Invincible* would have to make the rendezvous in daylight, and there was not time for that. The operation was set back twelve hours. The *Pogy* joined formation with the *Invincible*, standing as sonar sentry twenty miles to her east. An hour before midnight, the ELF

transmitter in northern Michigan transmitted a message: “G.” Twenty minutes later, the *Dallas* approached the surface to get her orders.

THE THIRTEENTH DAY
WEDNESDAY, 15 DECEMBER

The Dallas

"Crazy Ivan," Jones called out again, "turning to port!"

"Okay, all stop," Mancuso ordered, holding a dispatch in his hand which he had been rereading for hours. He was not pleased with it.

"All stop, sir," the helmsman responded.

"All back full."

"All back full, sir." The helmsman dialed in the command and turned, his face a question.

Throughout the *Dallas* the crew heard noise, too much noise as poppet valves opened to vent steam onto the reverse turbine blades, trying to spin the propeller the wrong way. It made for instant vibration and cavitation noises aft.

"Right full rudder."

"Right full rudder, aye."

"Conn, sonar, we are cavitating," Jones spoke over the intercom.

"*Very well*, sonar!" Mancuso answered sharply. He did not understand his new orders, and things he didn't understand made him angry.

"Speed down to four knots," Lieutenant Goodman reported.

"Rudder amidships, all stop."

"Rudder amidships aye, all stop aye," the helmsman responded at once. He didn't want the captain barking at him. "Sir, my rudder is amidships."

"Jesus!" Jones said in the sonar room. "What's the skipper doin'?"

Mancuso was in sonar a second later.

"Still doing the turn to port, Cap'n. He's astern of us 'cause of the turn we made," Jones observed as neutrally as he could. It was close to an accusation, Mancuso noticed.

"Flushing the game, Jonesy," Mancuso said coolly.

You're the boss, Jones thought, smart enough not to say anything else. The captain looked as though he was going to snap somebody's head off, and Jones had just used up a month's worth of

tolerance. He switched his phones to the towed array plug.

"Engine noises diminishing, sir. He's slowing down." Jones paused. He had to report the next part. "Sir, it's a fair guess he heard us."

"He was supposed to," Mancuso said.

The Red October

"Captain, an enemy submarine," the *michman* said urgently.

"Enemy?" Ramius asked.

"American. He must have been trailing us, and he had to back down to avoid a collision when we turned. Definitely an American, broad on the port bow, range under a kilometer, I think." He handed Ramius his phones.

"688," Ramius said to Borodin. "Damn! He must have stumbled across us in the past two hours. Bad luck."

The Dallas

"Okay, Jonesy, yankee-search him." Mancuso gave the order for an active sonar search personally. The *Dallas* had slewed farther around before coming to a near halt.

Jones hesitated for a moment, still reading the reactor plant noise on his passive systems. Reaching, he powered up the active transducers in the BQQ-5's main sphere at the bow.

Ping! A wave front of sound energy was directed at the target.

Pong! The wave was reflected back off the hard steel hull and returned to the *Dallas*.

"Range to target 1,050 yards," Jones said. The returning pulse was processed through the BC-10 computer and showed some rough details. "Target configuration is consistent with a *Typhoon*-class boomer. Angle on the bow seventy or so. No doppler. He's stopped." Six more pings confirmed this.

"Secure pinging," Mancuso said. There was some small satisfaction in learning that he had elevated the contact correctly. But not much.

Jones killed power to the system. What the hell did I have to do that for? he wondered. He'd already done everything but read the number off her stern.

The Red October

Every man on the *October* knew now that they had been found. The lash of the sonar waves had resounded through the hull. It was not a sound a submariner liked to hear. Certainly not on top of a troublesome reactor, Ramius thought. Perhaps he could make use of this…

The Dallas

"Somebody on the surface," Jones said suddenly. "Where the hell did they come from? Skipper, there was nothing, *nothing*, a minute ago, and now I'm getting engine sounds. Two, maybe more—make that two 'cans…and something bigger. Like they were sitting up there waiting for us. A minute ago they were sitting still. Damn! I didn't hear a *thing*."

The Invincible

"We timed that rather nicely," Admiral White said.

"Lucky," Ryan observed.

"Luck is part of the game, Jack."

HMS *Bristol* was the first to pick up the sound of the two submarines and of the turn the *Red October* had made. Even at five miles the subs were barely readable. The Crazy Ivan maneuver had terminated three miles away, and the surface ships had been able to get good position fixes by reading off the *Dallas'* active sonar emissions.

"Two helicopters en route, sir," Captain Hunter reported. "They'll be on station in another minute."

"Signal *Bristol* and *Fife* to stay to windward of us. I want *Invincible* between them and the contact."

"Aye aye, sir." Hunter relayed the order to the communications room. The destroyermen on the escorts would find that order peculiar, using a carrier to screen destroyers.

A few seconds later a pair of Sea King helicopters stopped and hovered fifty feet over the surface, letting down dipping sonars at the end of a cable as they struggled to hold position. These sonars were far less powerful than ship-carried sonars and had distinctive characteristics. The data they developed was transmitted by digital

link to the *Invincible*'s command center.

The Dallas

"Limeys," Jones said at once. "That's a helicopter set, the 195, I think. That means the big ship off to the south is one of their baby carriers, sir, with a two-can escort."

Mancuso nodded. "HMS *Invincible*. She was over our side of the lake for NIFTY DOLPHIN. That means the Brit varsity, their best ASW operators."

"The big one's moving this way, sir. Turns indicate ten knots. The choppers—two of them—have both of us. No other subs around that I hear."

The Invincible

"Positive sonar contact," said the metal speaker. "Two submarines, range two miles from *Invincible*, bearing zero-two-zero."

"Now for the hard part," Admiral White said.

Ryan and the four Royal Navy officers who were privy to the mission were on the flag bridge, with the fleet ASW officer in the command center below, as the *Invincible* steamed slowly north, slightly to the left of the direct course to the contacts. All five swept the contact area with powerful binoculars.

"Come on, Captain Ramius," Ryan said quietly. "You're supposed to be a hotshot. Prove it."

The Red October

Ramius was back in his control room scowling at his chart. A stray American *Los Angeles* stumbling onto him was one thing, but he had run into a small task force. English ships, at that. Why? Probably an exercise. The Americans and the English often work together, and pure accident had walked *October* right into them. Well. He'd have to evade before he could get on with what he wanted to do. It was that simple. Or was it? A hunter submarine, a carrier, and two destroyers after him. What else? He would have to find out if he were going to lose them all. This would take the best part of a day. But now he'd have to see what he was up against. Besides, it would show them that he was confident, that he could hunt *them* if he

wished.

"Borodin, bring the ship to periscope depth. Battle stations."

The Invincible

"Come up, Marko," Barclay urged. "We have a message for you, old boy."

"Helicopter three reports contact is coming up," the speaker said.

"All right!" Ryan pounded his hand on the rail.

White lifted a phone. "Recall one of the helicopters."

The distance to the *Red October* was down to a mile and a half. One of the Sea Kings lifted up and circled around, reeling in its sonar transducer.

"Contact depth is five hundred feet, coming up slowly."

The Red October

Borodin was pumping water slowly from the *October*'s trim tanks. The missile submarine increased speed to four knots, and most of the force required to change her depth came from the diving planes. The *starpom* was careful to bring her up slowly, and Ramius had her heading directly towards the *Invincible*.

The Invincible

"Hunter, are you up on your Morse?" Admiral White inquired.

"I believe so, Admiral," Hunter answered. Everyone was getting excited. What a chance this was!

Ryan swallowed hard. In the past few hours, while the *Invincible* had been lying still on the rolling sea, his stomach had really gone bad. The pills the ship's doctor had given him helped, but now the excitement was making it worse. There was an eighty-foot sheer drop from the flag bridge to the sea. Well, he thought, if I have to puke, there's nothing in the way. Screw it.

The Dallas

"Hull popping noises, sir," Jones said. "Think he's heading up."

"Up?" Mancuso wondered for a second. "Yeah, that fits. He's a

cowboy. He wants to see what he's up against before he tries to evade. That fits. I bet he doesn't know where we've been the past few days." The captain went forward to the attack center.

"Looks like he's going up, Skipper," Mannion said, watching the attack director. "Dumb." Mannion had his own opinion of submarine captains depending on their periscopes. Too many of them spent too much time looking out at the world. He wondered how much of this was an implicit reaction to the enforced confinement of submarining, something just to make sure that there really was a world up there, to make sure the instruments were correct. Entirely human, Mannion thought, but it could make you vulnerable…

"We go up, too, Skipper?"

"Yeah, slow and easy."

The Invincible

The sky was half-filled with white, fleecy clouds, their undersides gray with the threat of rain. A twenty-knot wind was blowing from the southwest, and a six-foot sea was running, its dark waves streaked with whitecaps. Ryan saw the *Bristol* and *Fife* holding station to windward. Their captains, no doubt, were muttering a few choice words at this disposition. The American escorts, which had been detached the previous day, were now sailing to rendezvous with the USS *New Jersey*.

White was talking into the phone again. "Commander, I want to know the instant we get a radar return from the target area. Train every set aboard onto that patch of ocean. I also want to know of any, repeat any, sonar signals from the area…That is correct. Depth of target? Very well. Recall the second helicopter, I want both on station to windward."

They had agreed that the best method of passing the message would be to use a blinker light. Only someone placed in the direct line of sight would be able to read the signal. Hunter moved to the light, holding a sheet of paper Ryan had given him. The yeomen and signalmen normally stationed here were gone.

The Red October

"Thirty meters, Comrade Captain," Borodin reported. The battle

watch was set in the control center.

"Periscope," Ramius said calmly. The oiled metal tube hissed upward on hydraulic pressure. The captain handed his cap to the junior officer of the watch as he bent to look into the eyepiece. "So, we have here three imperialist ships. HMS *Invincible*. Such a name for a ship!" He scoffed for his audience. "Two escorts, *Bristol*, and a County-class cruiser."

The Invincible

"Periscope, starboard bow!" the speaker announced.

"I see it!" Barclay's hand shot out to point. "There it is!" Ryan strained to find it. "I got it." It was like a small broomstick sitting vertically in the water, about a mile away. As the waves rolled past, the bottommost visible part of the periscope flared out.

"Hunter," White said quietly. To Ryan's left the captain began jerking his hand on the lever that controlled the light shutters.

The Red October

Ramius didn't see it at first. He was making a complete circle of the horizon, checking for any other ships or aircraft. When he finished the circuit, the flashing light caught his eye. Quickly he tried to interpret the signal. It took him a moment to realize it was pointed right at him.

> AAA AAA AAA RED OCTOBER RED OCTOBER CAN YOU READ THIS CAN YOU READ THIS PLEASE PING US ONE TIME ON ACTIVE SONAR IF YOU CAN READ THIS PLEASE PING US ONE TIME ON ACTIVE SONAR IF YOU CAN READ THIS AAA AAA AAA RED OCTOBER RED OCTOBER CAN YOU READ THIS CAN YOU READ THIS

The message kept repeating. The signal was jerky and awkward. Ramius didn't notice this. He translated the English signal in his head, at first thinking it was a signal to the American submarine. His knuckles went white on the periscope hand grips as he translated the message in his mind.

"Borodin," he said finally, after reading the message a fourth

time, “we set up a practice firing solution on *Invincible*. Damn, the periscope rangefinder is sticking. A single ping, Comrade. Just one, for range.”

Ping!

The Invincible

“One ping from the contact area, sir, sounds Soviet,” the speaker reported.

White lifted his phone. “Thank you. Keep us informed.” He set it back down. “Well, gentlemen…”

“He did it!” Ryan sang out. “Send the rest, for Christ’s sake!”

“At once.” Hunter grinned like a madman.

RED OCTOBER RED OCTOBER YOUR WHOLE FLEET IS CHASING AFTER YOU YOUR WHOLE FLEET IS CHASING AFTER YOU YOUR PATH IS BLOCKED BY NUMEROUS VESSELS NUMEROUS ATTACK SUBMARINES ARE WAITING TO ATTACK YOU REPEAT NUMEROUS ATTACK SUBMARINES ARE WAITING TO ATTACK YOU PROCEED TO RENDEZVOUS 33N 75W WE HAVE SHIPS THERE WAITING FOR YOU REPEAT PROCEED TO RENDEZVOUS 33N 75W WE HAVE SHIPS THERE WAITING FOR YOU IF YOU UNDERSTAND AND AGREE PLEASE PING US AGAIN ONE TIME

The Red October

“Distance to target, Borodin?” Ramius asked, wishing he had more time as the message was repeated again and again.

“Two thousand meters, Comrade Captain. A nice, fat target for us if we…” The *starpom*’s voice trailed off as he saw the look on his commander’s face.

They know our name, Ramius was thinking, *they know our name! How can this be? They knew where to find us—exactly! How? What can the Americans have? How long has the* Los Angeles *been trailing us? Decide—you must decide!*

“Comrade, one more ping on the target, just one.”

The Invincible

"One more ping, Admiral."

"Thank you." White looked at Ryan. "Well, Jack, it would seem that your intelligence estimate was indeed correct. Jolly good."

"Jolly good my ass, my Lord Earl! I was right. Son of a *bitch!*" Ryan's hands flew up in the air, his seasickness forgotten. He calmed down. The occasion called for more decorum. "Excuse me, Admiral. We have some things to do."

The Dallas

Whole fleet is chasing after you…Proceed to 33N 75W. What the hell was going on? Mancuso wondered, catching the end of the second signal.

"Conn, sonar. Getting hull popping noises from the target. His depth is changing. Engine noise increasing."

"Down scope." Mancuso lifted the phone. "Very well, sonar. Anything else, Jones?"

"No, sir. The helicopters are gone, and there aren't any emissions from the surface ships. What gives, sir?"

"Beats me." Mancuso shook his head as Mannion brought the *Dallas* back in pursuit of the *Red October*. What the hell was happening here? the captain wondered. Why was a Brit carrier signaling to a Russian submarine, and why were they sending her to a rendezvous off the Carolinas? *Whose* subs were blocking her path? It couldn't be. No way. It just couldn't be…

The Invincible

Ryan was in the *Invincible*'s communications room. "MAGI TO OLYMPUS," he typed into the special encoding device the CIA had sent out with him, "PLAYED MY MANDOLIN TODAY. SOUNDED PRETTY GOOD. I'M PLANNING A LITTLE CONCERT, AT THE USUAL PLACE. EXPECT GOOD CRITICAL REVIEWS. AWAITING INSTRUCTIONS." Ryan had laughed before at the code words he was supposed to use for this. He was laughing now, for a different reason.

The White House

“So,” Pelt observed, “Ryan expects the mission will be successful. Everything’s going according to plan, but he didn’t use the code group for certain success.”

The president leaned back comfortably. “He’s honest. Things can always go wrong. You have to admit, though, things do look good.”

“This plan the chiefs came up with is crazy, sir.”

“Perhaps, but you’ve been trying to poke a hole in it for several days now, and you haven’t succeeded. The pieces will all fall in place shortly.”

The president was being clever, Pelt saw. The man liked being clever.

The Invincible

“OLYMPUS TO MAGI. I LIKE OLD-FASHIONED MANDOLIN MUSIC. CONCERT APPROVED,” the message said.

Ryan sat back comfortably, sipping at his brandy. “Well, that’s good. I wonder what the next part of the plan is.”

“I expect that Washington will let us know. For the moment,” Admiral White said, “we’ll have to move back west to interpose ourselves between *October* and the Soviet fleet.”

The Avalon

Lieutenant Ames surveyed the scene through the tiny port on the *Avalon*’s bow. The *Alfa* lay on her port side. She had obviously hit stern first, and hard. One blade was snapped off the propeller, and the lower rudder fin was smashed. The whole stern might have been knocked off true; it was hard to tell in the low visibility.

“Moving forward slowly,” he said, adjusting the controls. Behind him an ensign and a senior petty officer were monitoring instruments and preparing to deploy the manipulator arm, attached before they sailed, which carried a television camera and floodlights. These gave them a slightly wider field of view than the navigation ports permitted. The DSRV crept forward at one knot. Visibility was under twenty yards, despite the million candles of illumination from the bow lights.

The sea floor at this point was a treacherous slope of alluvial silt dotted with boulders. It appeared that the only thing that had prevented the *Alfa* from sliding farther down was her sail, driven

like a wedge into the bottom.

"Holy gawd!" The petty officer saw it first. There was a crack in the *Alfa*'s hull—or was there?

"Reactor accident," Ames said, his voice detached and clinical. "Something burned through the hull. Lord, and that's *titanium!* Burned right through, from the inside out. There's another one, two burn-throughs. This one's bigger, looks like a good yard across. No mystery what killed her, guys. That's two compartments open to the sea." Ames looked over to the depth gauge: 1,880 feet. "Getting all this on tape?"

"Aye, Skipper," the electrician first class answered. "Crummy way to die. Poor bastards."

"Yeah, depending on what they were up to." Ames maneuvered the *Avalon* around the *Alfa*'s bow, working the directional propeller carefully and adjusting trim to cruise down the other side, actually the top of the dead sub. "See any evidence of a hull fracture?"

"No," the ensign answered, "just the two burn-throughs. I wonder what went wrong?"

"A for-real China Syndrome. It finally happened to somebody." Ames shook his head. If there was anything the navy preached about reactors, it was safety. "Get the transducer against the hull. We'll see if anybody's alive in there."

"Aye." The electrician worked the waldo controls as Ames tried to keep the *Avalon* dead still. Neither task was easy. The DSRV was hovering, nearly resting on the sail. If there were survivors, they had to be in the control room or forward. There could be no life aft.

"Okay, I got contact."

All three men listened intently, hoping for something. Their job was search and rescue, and as submariners themselves they took it seriously.

"Maybe they're asleep." The ensign switched on the locater sonar. The high-frequency waves resonated through both vessels. It was a sound fit to wake the dead, but there was no response. The air supply in the *Politovskiy* had run out a day before.

"That's that," Ames said quietly. He maneuvered upward as the electrician rigged in the manipulator arm, looking for a spot to drop a sonar transponder. They would be back again when the topside weather was better. The navy would not pass up this chance to inspect an *Alfa*, and the *Glomar Explorer* was sitting unused somewhere on the West Coast. Would she be activated? Ames

would not bet against that.

"*Avalon, Avalon*, this is *Scamp*—" the voice on the gertrude was distorted but readable, "—return at once. Acknowledge."

"*Scamp*, this is *Avalon*. On the way."

The *Scamp* had just received an ELF message and gone briefly to periscope depth for a FLASH operational order. "PROCEED AT BEST SPEED TO 33N 75W." The message didn't say why.

CIA Headquarters

"CARDINAL is still with us," Moore told Ritter.

"Thank God for that." Ritter sat down.

"There's a signal en route. This time he didn't try to kill himself getting it to us. Maybe being in the hospital scared him a little. I'm extending another offer to extract him."

"Again?"

"Bob, we have to make the offer."

"I know. I had one sent myself a few years back, you know. The old bastard just doesn't want to quit. You know how it goes, some people thrive on the action. Or maybe he hasn't worked out his rage yet…I just got a call from Senator Donaldson." Donaldson was the chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence.

"Oh?"

"He wants to know what we know about what's going on. He doesn't buy the cover story about a rescue mission, and thinks we know something different."

Judge Moore leaned back. "I wonder who planted that idea in his head?"

"Yeah. I have a little idea we might try. I think it's time, and this is a dandy opportunity."

The two senior executives discussed this for an hour. Before Ritter left for the Hill, they cleared it with the president.

Washington, D.C.

Donaldson kept Ritter waiting in his outer office for fifteen minutes while he read the paper. He wanted Ritter to know his place. Some of the DDO's remarks about leaks from the Hill had touched a sore spot with the senator from Connecticut, and it was important for appointed and civil service officials to understand the difference

between themselves and the elected representatives of the people.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Ritter." Donaldson did not rise, nor did he offer to shake hands.

"Quite all right, sir. Took the chance to read a magazine. Don't get to do that much, what with the schedule I work." They fenced with each other from the first moment.

"So, what are the Soviets up to?"

"Senator, before I address that subject, I must say this: I had to clear this meeting with the president. This information is for you alone, no one else may hear it, sir. No one. That comes from the White House."

"There are other men on my committee, Mr. Ritter."

"Sir, if I do not have your word, as a gentleman," Ritter added with a smile, "I will not reveal this information. Those are my orders. I work for the executive branch, Senator. I take my orders from the president." Ritter hoped his recording device was getting all of this.

"Agreed," Donaldson said reluctantly. He was angry because of the foolish restrictions, but pleased that he was getting to hear this. "Go on."

"Frankly, sir, we're not sure exactly what's going on," Ritter said.

"Oh, so you've sworn me to secrecy so that I can't tell anyone that, again, the CIA doesn't know what the hell is going on?"

"I said we don't know exactly what's happening. We do know a few things. Our information comes mainly from the Israelis, and some from the French. From both channels we have learned that something has gone very wrong with the Soviet Navy."

"I gathered that. They've lost a sub."

"At least one, but that's not what's going on. Someone, we think, has played a trick on the operations directorate of the Soviet Northern Fleet. I can't say for sure, but I think it was the Poles."

"Why the Poles?"

"I don't know for sure that it is, but both the French and Israelis are well connected with the Poles, *and* the Poles have a long-standing beef with the Soviets. I do know—at least I think I know—that whatever this is did not come from a Western intelligence agency."

"So, what's happening?" Donaldson demanded.

"Our best guess is that someone has committed at least one

forgery, possibly as many as three, all aimed at raising hell in the Soviet Navy—but whatever it was, it's gotten far out of hand. A lot of people are working hard to cover their asses, the Israelis say. As a guess, I think they managed to alter a submarine's operational orders, then forged a letter from her skipper threatening to fire his missiles. The amazing thing is that the Soviets went for it." Ritter frowned. "We may have it all backwards, though. All we really know for sure is that somebody, probably the Poles, has played a fantastic dirty trick on the Russians."

"Not us?" Donaldson asked pointedly.

"No, sir, absolutely not! If we tried something like that—even if we succeeded, which isn't likely—they might try the same thing with us. You could start a war that way, and you know the president would never authorize it."

"But someone at the CIA might not care what the president thinks."

"Not in my department! It would be my head. Do you really think we could run an operation like this and then successfully conceal it? Hell, Senator, I *wish* we could."

"Why the Poles, and why are they able to do it?"

"We've been hearing for some time about a dissident faction inside their intelligence community, one that does not especially love the Soviets. You can pick any number of reasons why. There's the fundamental historical enmity, and the Russians seem to forget that the Poles are Polish first, Communists second. My own guess is that it's this business with the pope, even more than the martial law thing. We know that our old friend Andropov initiated a replay of the Henry II/Becket business. The pope has given Poland a great deal of prestige, done things for the country that even Party members feel good about. Ivan went and spit on their whole country when he did that—you wonder that they're mad? As to their ability, people seem to overlook just what a class act their intelligence service always has been. They're the ones who made the Enigma break-through in 1939, not the Brits. They're damned effective, and for the same reason as the Israelis. They have enemies to the east and the west. That sort of thing breeds good agents. We know for certain that they have a lot of people inside Russia, guest workers paying Narmonov off for the economic supports given to their country. We also know that a lot of Polish engineers are working in Soviet shipyards. I admit it's funny, neither country has

much of a maritime tradition, but the Poles build a lot of Soviet merchant hulls. Their yards are more efficient than the Russian ones, and lately they've been giving technical help, mainly in quality control, to the naval building yards."

"So, the Polish intelligence service has played a trick on the Soviets," Donaldson summarized. "Gorshkov is one of the guys who took a hard line on intervention, wasn't he?"

"True, but he's probably just a target of opportunity. The real aim of this has to be to embarrass Moscow. The fact that this operation attacks the Soviet Navy has no significance in itself. The objective is to raise hell in their senior military channels, and they all come together in Moscow. God, I wish I knew what was really happening! From the five percent we do know, this operation has to be a real masterpiece, the sort of thing legends are made of. We're working on it, trying to find out. So are the Brits, and the French, and the Israelis—Benny Herzog of the Mossad is supposed to be going ape. The Israelis *do* pull this kind of trick on their neighbors, regularly. They say officially that they don't know anything beyond what they've told us. Maybe so. Or maybe they gave the Poles some technical help—hard to say. It's certain that the Soviet Navy is a strategic threat to Israel. But we need more time on that. The Israeli connection looks a little too pat at this point."

"But you don't know what's happening, just the how and why."

"Senator, it's not that easy. Give us some time. At the moment we may not even want to know. To summarize, somebody has laid a colossal piece of disinformation on the Soviet Navy. It was probably aimed at merely shaking them up, but it has clearly gotten out of hand. How or why it happened, we do not know. You can bet, however, that whoever initiated this operation is working very hard to cover his tracks." Ritter wanted the senator to get this right. "If the Soviets find out who did it, their reaction will be nasty—depend on it. In a few weeks we might know more. The Israelis owe us for a few things, and eventually they'll let us in on it."

"For a couple more F-15s and a company of tanks," Donaldson observed.

"Cheap at the price."

"But if we're not involved in this, why the secrecy?"

"You gave me your word, Senator," Ritter reminded him. "For one thing, if word leaked out, would the Soviets believe we're not involved? Not likely! We're trying to civilize the intelligence game.

I mean, we're still enemies, but having the various intelligence services in conflict uses up too many assets, and it's dangerous to both sides. For another, well, if we ever do find out how all this happened, we just might want to make use of it ourselves."

"Those reasons are contradictory."

Ritter smiled. "The intelligence game is like that. If we find out who did this, we can use that information to our advantage. In any case, Senator, you gave me your word, and I will report that to the president on my return to Langley."

"Very well." Donaldson rose. The interview was at an end. "I trust you will keep us informed of future developments."

"That's what we have to do, sir." Ritter stood.

"Indeed. Thank you for coming down." They did not shake hands this time either.

Ritter walked into the hall without passing through the anteroom. He stopped to look down into the atrium of the Hart building. It reminded him of the local Hyatt. Uncharacteristically, he took the stairs instead of the elevator down to the first floor. With luck he had just settled a major score. His car was waiting for him outside, and he told the driver to head for the FBI building.

"Not a CIA operation?" Peter Henderson, the senator's chief aide, asked.

"No, I believe him," Donaldson said. "He's not smart enough to pull something like that."

"I don't know why the president doesn't get rid of him," Henderson commented. "Of course, the kind of person he is, maybe it's better that he's incompetent." The senator agreed.

When he returned to his office, Henderson adjusted the venetian blinds on his window, though the sun was on the other side of the building. An hour later the driver of a passing Black & White taxicab looked up at the window and made a mental note.

Henderson worked late that night. The Hart building was nearly empty with most of the senators out of town. Donaldson was there only because of personal business and to keep an eye on things. As chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, he had more duties than he would have liked at this time of year. Henderson took the elevator down to the main lobby, looking every inch the senior congressional aide—a three-piece gray suit, an expensive leather attaché case, his hair just so, and his stride jaunty as he left the building. A Black & White cab came around the corner and

stopped to let out a fare. Henderson got in.

"Watergate," he said. Not until the taxi had driven a few blocks did he speak again.

Henderson had a modest one-bedroom condo in the Watergate complex, an irony that he himself had considered many times. When he got to his destination he did not tip the driver. A woman got in as he walked to the main entrance. Taxis in Washington are very busy in the early evening.

"Georgetown University, please," she said, a pretty young woman with auburn hair and an armload of books.

"Night school?" the driver asked, checking the mirror.

"Exams," the girl said, her voice a trace uneasy. "Psych."

"Best thing to do with exams is relax," the driver advised.

Special Agent Hazel Loomis fumbled with her books. Her purse dropped to the floor. "Oh, damn." She bent over to pick it up, and while doing so retrieved a miniature tape recorder that another agent had left under the driver's seat.

It took fifteen minutes to get to the university. The fare was $3.85. Loomis gave the driver a five and told him to keep the change. She walked across the campus and entered a Ford which drove straight to the J. Edgar Hoover Building. A lot of work had gone into this—and it had been so easy!

"Always is, when the bear walks into your sight." The inspector who had been running the case turned left onto Pennsylvania Avenue. "The problem is finding the damned bear in the first place."

The Pentagon

"Gentlemen, you have been asked here because each of you is a career intelligence officer with a working knowledge of submarines and Russian," Davenport said to the four officers seated in his office. "I have need of officers with your qualifications. This is a volunteer assignment. It could involve a considerable element of danger—we cannot be sure at this point. The only other thing I can say is that this will be a dream job for an intelligence officer—but the sort of dream that you'll never be able to tell anyone about. We're all used to that, aren't we?" Davenport ventured a rare smile. "As they say in the movies, if you want in, fine; if not, you may leave at this point, and nothing will ever be said. It is asking a lot to

expect men to walk into a potentially dangerous assignment blindfolded."

Of course nobody left; the men who had been called here were not quitters. Besides, something would be said, and Davenport had a good memory. These were professional officers. One of the compensations for wearing a uniform and earning less money than an equally talented man can make in the real world is the off chance of being killed.

"Thank you, gentlemen. I think you will find this worth your while." Davenport stood and handed each man a manila envelope. "You will soon have the chance to examine a Soviet missile submarine—from the inside." Four pairs of eyes blinked in unison.

33N 75W

The USS *Ethan Allen* had been on station now for more than thirty hours. She was cruising in a five-mile circle at a depth of two hundred feet. There was no hurry. The submarine was making just enough speed to maintain steerage way, her reactor producing only ten percent of rated power. The chief quartermaster was assisting in the galley.

"First time I've ever done this in a sub," one of the *Allen*'s officers who was acting as ship's cook noted, stirring an omelette.

The quartermaster sighed imperceptibly. They ought to have sailed with a proper cook, but theirs had been a kid, and every enlisted man aboard now had over twenty years of service. The chiefs were all technicians, except the quartermaster, who could handle a toaster on a good day.

"You cook much at home, sir?"

"Some. My parents used to have a restaurant down at Pass Christian. This is my mama's special Cajun omelette. Shame we don't have any bass. I can do some nice things with bass and a little lemon. You fish much, Chief?"

"No, sir." The small complement of officers and senior chiefs was working in an informal atmosphere, and the quartermaster was a man accustomed to discipline and status boundaries. "Commander, can I ask what the hell we're doing?"

"Wish I knew, Chief. Mostly we're waiting for something."

"But what, sir?"

"Damned if I know. You want to hand me those ham cubes? And

could you check the bread in the oven? Ought to be about done."

The New Jersey

Commander Eaton was perplexed. His battle group was holding twenty miles south of the Russians. If it hadn't been dark he could have seen the *Kirov*'s towering superstructure on the horizon from his perch on the flat bridge. Her escorts were in a single broad line ahead of the battle cruiser, pinging away in the search for a submarine.

Since the air force had staged its mock attack the Soviets had been acting like sheep. This was out of character to say the least. The *New Jersey* and her escorts were keeping the Russian formation under constant observation, and a pair of Sentry aircraft were watching for good measure. The Russian redeployment had switched Eaton's responsibility to the *Kirov* group. This suited him. His main battery turrets were trained in, but the guns were loaded with eight-inch guided rounds and the fire control stations were fully manned. The *Tarawa* was thirty miles south, her armed strike force of Harriers sitting ready to move at five-minute notice. The Soviets had to know this, even though their ASW helicopters had not come within five miles of an American ship for two days. The Bear and Backfire bombers which were passing overhead in shuttle rounds to Cuba—only a few, and those returning to Russia as quickly as they could be turned around—could not fail to report what they saw. The American vessels were in extended attack formation, the missiles on the *New Jersey* and her escorts being fed continuous information from the ships' sensors. And the Russians were ignoring them. Their only electronic emissions were routine navigation radars. Strange.

The *Nimitz* was now within air range after a five-thousand-mile dash from the South Atlantic; the carrier and her nuclear-powered escorts, the *California, Bainbridge*, and *Truxton*, were now only four hundred miles to the south, with the *America* battle group half a day behind them. The *Kennedy* was five hundred miles to the east. The Soviets would have to consider the danger of three carrier air wings at their backs and hundreds of land-based air force birds gradually shifting south from one base to another. Perhaps this explained their docility.

The Backfire bombers were being escorted in relays all the way

from Iceland, first by navy Tomcats from the *Saratoga*'s air wing, then by air force Phantoms operating in Maine, which handed the Soviet aircraft off to Eagles and Fighting Falcons as they worked down the coast almost as far south as Cuba. There was not much doubt how seriously the United States was taking this, though American units were no longer actively harassing the Russians. Eaton was glad they weren't. There was nothing more to be gained from harassment, and anyway, if it had to, his battle group could switch from a peace to a war footing in about two minutes.

The Watergate Apartments

"Excuse me. I just moved in down the hall, and my phone isn't hooked up yet. Would you mind if I made a call?"

Henderson arrived at that decision quickly enough. Five three or so, auburn hair, gray eyes, adequate figure, a dazzling smile, and fashionably dressed. "Sure, welcome to the Watergate. Come on in."

"Thank you. I'm Hazel Loomis. My friends call me Sissy." She held out her hand.

"Peter Henderson. The phone's in the kitchen. I'll show you." Things were looking up. He'd just ended a lengthy relationship with one of the senator's secretaries. It had been hard on both of them.

"I'm not disturbing anything, am I? You don't have anyone here, do you?"

"No, just me and the TV. Are you new to D.C.? The night life isn't all it's cracked up to be. At least, not when you have to go to work the next day. Who do you work for—I take it you're single?"

"That's right. I work for DARPA, as a computer programmer. I'm afraid I can't talk about it very much."

All sorts of good news, Henderson thought. "Here's the phone."

Loomis looked around quickly as though evaluating the job the decorator had done. She reached into her purse and took out a dime, handing it to Henderson. He laughed.

"The first call is free, and believe me, you can use my phone whenever you want."

"I just knew," she said, punching the buttons, "that this would be nicer than living in Laurel. Hello, Kathy? Sissy. I just got moved in, haven't even got my phone hooked up yet…Oh, a guy down the hall was kind enough to let me use his phone…Okay, see you tomorrow for lunch. Bye, Kathy."

Loomis looked around. “Who decorated for you?”

“Did it myself. I minored in art at Harvard, and I know some nice shops in Georgetown. You can find some good bargains if you know where to look.”

“Oh, I’d just *love* to have my place look like this! Could you show me around?”

“Sure, the bedroom first?” Henderson laughed to show that he had no untoward intentions—which of course he did, though he was a patient man in such matters. The tour, which lasted several minutes, assured Loomis that the condo was indeed empty. A minute later there was a knock at the door. Henderson grumbled good-naturedly as he went to answer it.

“Pete Henderson?” The man asking the question was dressed in a business suit. Henderson had on jeans and a sport shirt.

“Yes?” Henderson backed up, knowing what this had to be. What came next, though, surprised him.

“You’re under arrest, Mr. Henderson,” Sissy Loomis said, holding up her ID card. “The charge is espionage. You have the right to remain silent, you have the right to speak with an attorney. If you give up the right to remain silent, everything you say will be recorded and may be used against you. If you do not have an attorney or cannot afford one, we will see to it that an attorney is appointed to represent you. Do you understand these rights, Mr. Henderson?” It was Sissy Loomis’ first espionage case. For five years she had specialized in bank robbery stakeouts, often working as a teller with a .357 magnum revolver in her cash drawer. “Do you wish to waive these rights?”

“No, I do not.” Henderson’s voice was raspy.

“Oh, you will,” the inspector observed. “You will.” He turned to the three agents who accompanied him. “Take this place apart. Neatly, gentlemen, and quietly. We don’t want to wake anyone. You, Mr. Henderson, will come with us. You can change first. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. If you promise to cooperate, no cuffs. But if you try to run—you don’t want to do that, believe me.” The inspector had been in the FBI for twenty years and had never even drawn his service revolver in anger, while Loomis had already shot and killed two men. He was old-time FBI, and couldn’t help but wonder what Mr. Hoover would think of that, not to mention the new Jewish director.

Ramius and Kamarov conferred over the chart for several minutes, tracing alternate course tracks before agreeing on one. The enlisted men ignored this. They had never been encouraged to know about charts. The captain walked to the aft bulkhead and lifted the phone.

"Comrade Melekhin," he ordered, waiting a few seconds. "Comrade, this is the captain. Any further difficulties with the reactor systems?"

"No, Comrade Captain."

"Excellent. Hold things together another two days." Ramius hung up. It was thirty minutes to the turn of the next watch.

Melekhin and Kirill Surzpoi, the assistant engineer, had the duty in the engine room. Melekhin monitored the turbines and Surzpoi handled the reactor systems. Each had a *michman* and three enlisted men in attendance. The engineers had had a very busy cruise. Every gauge and monitor in the engine spaces, it seemed, had been inspected, and many had been entirely rebuilt by the two senior officers, who had been helped by Valintin Bugayev, the electronics officer and on-board genius who was also handling the political awareness classes for the crewmen. The engine room crewmen were the most rattled on the vessel. The supposed contamination was common knowledge—there are no long-lived secrets on a submarine. To ease their loads ordinary seamen were supplementing the engine watches. The captain called this a good chance for the cross-training he believed in. The crew thought it was a good way to get poisoned. Discipline was being maintained, of course. This was owing partly to the trust the men had in their commanding officer, partly to their training, but mostly to their knowledge of what would happen if they failed to carry out their orders immediately and enthusiastically.

"Comrade Melekhin," Surzpoi called, "I am showing pressure fluctuation on the main loop, number six gauge."

"Coming." Melekhin hurried over and shoved the *michman* out of the way when he got to the master control panel. "More bad instruments! The others show normal. Nothing important," the chief engineer said blandly, making sure everyone could hear. The whole compartment watch saw the chief engineer whisper something to his assistant. The younger one shook his head slowly, while two sets of hands worked the controls.

A loud two-phase buzzer and a rotating red alarm light went off.

"SCRAM the pile!" Melekhin ordered.

"SCRAMing." Surzpoi stabbed his finger on the master shutdown button.

"You men, get forward!" Melekhin ordered next. There was no hesitation. "No, you, connect battery power to the caterpillar motors, quickly!"

The warrant officer raced back to throw the proper switches, cursing his change of orders. It took forty seconds.

"Done, Comrade!"

"*Go!*"

The warrant officer was the last man out of the compartment. He made certain that the hatches were dogged down tight before running to the control room.

"What is the problem?" Ramius asked calmly.

"Radiation alarm in the heat-exchange room!"

"Very well, go forward and shower with the rest of your watch. Get control of yourself." Ramius patted the *michman* on the arm. "We have had these problems before. You are a trained man. The crewmen look to you for leadership."

Ramius lifted the phone. It was a moment before the other end was picked up. "What has happened, Comrade?" The control room crew watched their captain listen to the answer. They could not help but admire his calm. Radiation alarms had sounded throughout the hull. "Very well. We do not have too many hours of battery power left, Comrade. We must go to snorkling depth. Stand by to activate the diesel. Yes." He hung up.

"Comrades, you will listen to me." Ramius' voice was under total control. "There has been a minor failure in the reactor control systems. The alarm you heard was not a major radiation leak, but rather a failure of the reactor rod control systems. Comrades Melekhin and Surzpoi successfully executed an emergency reactor shutdown, but we cannot operate the reactor properly without the primary controls. We will, therefore, complete our cruise on diesel power. To ensure against any *possible* radiation contamination, the reactor spaces have been isolated, and all compartments, engineering spaces first, will be vented with surface air when we snorkle. Kamarov, you will go aft to work the environmental controls. I will take the conn."

"Aye, Comrade Captain!" Kamarov went aft.

Ramius lifted the microphone to give this news to the crew. Everyone was waiting for something. Forward, some crewmen muttered among themselves that *minor* was a word suffering from overuse, that nuclear submarines did not run on diesel and ventilate with surface air for the hell of it.

Finished with his terse announcement, Ramius ordered the submarine to approach the surface.

The Dallas

"Beats me, Skipper." Jones shook his head. "Reactor noises have stopped, pumps are cut way back, but he's running at the same speed, just like before. On battery, I guess."

"Must be a hell of a battery system to drive something that big this fast," Mancuso observed.

"I did some computations on that a few hours ago." Jones held up his pad. "This is based on the *Typhoon* hull, with a nice slick hull coefficient, so it's probably conservative."

"Where did you learn to do this, Jonesy?"

"Mr. Thompson looked up the hydrodynamic stuff for me. The electrical end is fairly simple. He might have something exotic—fuel cells, maybe. If not, if he's running ordinary batteries, he has enough raw electrical power to crank every car in L.A."

Mancuso shook his head. "Can't last forever."

Jones held up his hand. "Hull creaking…Sounds like he's going up some."

The Red October

"Raise snorkle," Ramius said. Looking through the periscope he verified that the snorkle was up. "Well, no other ships in view. That is good news. I think we have lost our imperialist hunters. Raise the ESM antenna. Let's be sure no enemy aircraft are lurking about with their radars."

"Clear, Comrade Captain." Bugayev was manning the ESM board. "Nothing at all, not even airline sets."

"So, we have indeed lost our rat pack." Ramius lifted the phone again. "Melekhin, you may open the main induction and vent the engine spaces, then start the diesel." A minute later everyone aboard felt the vibration as the *October*'s massive diesel engine

cranked on battery power. This sucked up all the air from the reactor spaces, replacing it with air drawn through the snorkle and ejecting the “contaminated” air into the sea.

The engine continued to crank two minutes, and throughout the hull men waited for the rumble that would mean the engine had caught and could generate power to run the electric motors. It didn’t catch. After another thirty seconds the cranking stopped. The control room phone buzzed. Ramius lifted it.

“What is wrong with the diesel, Comrade Chief Engineer?” the captain asked sharply. “I see. I’ll send men back—oh. Stand by.” Ramius looked around, his mouth a thin, bloodless smile. The junior engineering officer, Svyadov, was standing at the back of the compartment. “I need a man who knows diesel engines to help Comrade Melekhin.”

“I grew up on a State farm,” Bugayev said. “I started playing with tractor engines as a boy.”

“There is an additional problem…”

Bugayev nodded knowingly. “So I gather, Comrade Captain, but we need the diesel, do we not?”

“I will not forget this, Comrade,” Ramius said quietly.

“Then you can buy me some rum in Cuba, Comrade.” Bugayev smiled courageously. “I wish to meet a Cuban comrade, preferably one with long hair.”

“May I accompany you, Comrade?” Svyadov asked anxiously. He had just been going on watch, approaching the reactor room hatch, when he’d been knocked aside by escaping crewmen.

“Let us assess the nature of the problem first,” Bugayev said, looking at Ramius for confirmation.

“Yes, there is plenty of time. Bugayev, report to me yourself in ten minutes.”

“Aye aye, Comrade Captain.”

“Svyadov, take charge of the lieutenant’s station.” Ramius pointed to the ESM board. “Use the opportunity to learn some new skills.”

The lieutenant did as he was ordered. The captain seemed very preoccupied. Svyadov had never seen him like this before.

THE FOURTEENTH DAY
THURSDAY, 16 DECEMBER

A Super Stallion

They were traveling at one hundred fifty knots, two thousand feet over the darkened sea. The Super Stallion helicopter was old. Built towards the end of the Vietnam War, she had first seen service clearing mines off Haiphong harbor. That had been her primary duty, pulling a sea sled and acting as a flying minesweeper. Now, the big Sikorski was used for other purposes, mainly long-range heavy-lift missions. The three turbine engines perched atop the fuselage packed a considerable amount of power and could carry a platoon of armed combat troops a great distance.

Tonight, in addition to her normal flight crew of three, she was carrying four passengers and a heavy load of fuel in the outrigger tanks. The passengers were clustered in the aft corner of the cargo area, chatting among themselves or trying to over the racket of the engines. Their conversation was animated. The intelligence officers had dismissed the danger implicit in their mission—no sense dwelling on that—and were speculating on what they might find aboard an honest-to-God Russian submarine. Each man considered the stories that would result, and decided it was a shame that they would never be able to tell them. None voiced this thought, however. At most a handful of people would ever know the entire story; the others would only see disjointed fragments that later might be thought parts of any number of other operations. Any Soviet agent trying to determine what this mission had been would find himself in a maze with dozens of blank walls.

The mission profile was a tight one. The helicopter was flying on a specific track to HMS *Invincible*, from which they would fly to the USS *Pigeon* aboard a Royal Navy Sea King. The Stallion's disappearance from Oceana Naval Air Station for only a few hours would be viewed merely as a matter of routine.

The helicopter's turboshaft engines, running at maximum cruising power, were gulping down fuel. The aircraft was now four hundred miles off the U.S. coast and had another eighty miles to go. Their flight to the *Invincible* was not direct; it was a dogleg course

intended to fool whoever might have noticed their departure on radar. The pilots were tired. Four hours is a long time to sit in a cramped cockpit, and military aircraft are not known for their creature comforts. The flight instruments glowed a dull red. Both men were especially careful to watch their artificial horizon; a solid overcast denied them a fixed reference point aloft, and flying over water at night was mesmerizing. It was by no means an unusual mission, however. The pilots had done this many times, and their concern was not unlike that of an experienced driver on a slick road. The dangers were real, but routine.

"Juliet 6, your target is bearing zero-eight-zero, range seventy-five miles," the Sentry called in.

"Thinks we're lost?" Commander John Marcks wondered over the intercom.

"Air force," his copilot replied. "They don't know much about flying over water. They think you get lost without roads to follow."

"Uh-huh," Marcks chuckled. "Who do you like in the Eagles game tonight?"

"Oilers by three and a half."

"Six and a half. Philly's fullback is still hurt."

"Five."

"Okay, five bucks. I'll go easy on you." Marcks grinned. He loved to gamble. The day after Argentina had attacked the Falklands, he'd asked if anyone in the squadron wanted to take Argentina and seven points.

A few feet above their heads and a few feet aft, the engines were racing at thousands of RPM, turning gears to drive the seven-bladed main rotor. They had no way of knowing that a fracture was developing in the transmission casing, near the fluid test port.

"Juliet 6, your target has just launched a fighter to escort you in. Will rendezvous in eight minutes. Approaching you at eleven o'clock, angels three."

"Nice of them," Marcks said.

Harrier 2–0

Lieutenant Parker was flying the Harrier that would escort the Super Stallion. A sublieutenant sat in the back seat of the Royal Navy aircraft. Its purpose was not actually to escort the chopper to the *Invincible*; it was to make a last check for any Soviet submarines

that might notice the Super Stallion in flight and wonder what it was doing.

"Any activity on the water?" Parker asked.

"Not a glimmer." The sublieutenant was working the FLIR package, which was sweeping left and right over their course track. Neither man knew what was going on, though both had speculated at length, incorrectly, on what it was that was chasing their carrier all over the bloody ocean.

"Try looking for the helicopter," Parker said.

"One moment…There. Just south of our track." The sublieutenant pressed a button and the display came up on the pilot's screen. The thermal image was mainly of the engines clustered atop the aircraft inside the fainter, dull-green glow of the hot rotor tips.

"Harrier 2-0, this is Sentry Echo. Your target is at your one o'clock, distance twenty miles, over."

"Roger, we have him on our IR box. Thank you, out," Parker said. "Bloody useful things, those Sentries."

"The Sikorski's running for all she's worth. Look at that engine signature."

The Super Stallion

At this moment the transmission casing fractured. Instantly the gallons of lubricating oil became a greasy cloud behind the rotor hub, and the delicate gears began to tear at one another. An alarm light flashed on the control panels. Marcks and the copilot instantly reached down to cut power to all three engines. There was not enough time. The transmission tried to freeze, but the power of the three engines tore it apart. What happened was the next thing to an explosion. Jagged pieces burst through the safety housing and ripped the forward part of the aircraft. The rotor's momentum twisted the Stallion savagely around, and it dropped rapidly. Two of the men in the back, who had loosened their seatbelts, jerked out of their seats and rolled forward.

"MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY, this is Juliet 6," the copilot called. Commander Marcks' body slumped over the controls, a dark stain at the back of his neck. "We're goin' in, we're goin' in. MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY."

The copilot was trying to do something. The main rotor was

windmilling slowly—too slowly. The automatic decoupler that was supposed to allow it to autorotate and give him a vestige of control had failed. His controls were nearly useless, and he was riding the point of a blunt lance towards a black ocean. It was twenty seconds before they hit. He fought with his airfoil controls and tail rotor in order to jerk the aircraft around. He succeeded, but it was too late.

Harrier 2-0

It was not the first time Parker had seen men die. He had taken a life himself after sending a Sidewinder missile up the tailpipe of an Argentine Dagger fighter. That had not been pleasant. This was worse. As he watched, the Super Stallion's humpbacked engine cluster blew apart in a shower of sparks. There was no fire as such, for what good it did them. He watched and tried to will the nose to come up—and it did, but not enough. The Stallion hit the water hard. The fuselage snapped apart in the middle. The front end sank in an instant, but the after part wallowed for a few seconds like a bathtub before beginning to fill with water. According to the picture supplied by the FLIR package, no one got clear before it sank.

"Sentry, Sentry, did you see that, over?"

"Roger that, Harrier. We're calling a SAR mission right now. Can you orbit?"

"Roger, we can loiter here." Parker checked his fuel. "Nine-zero minutes. I—stand by." Parker nosed his fighter down and flicked on his landing lights. This lit up the low-light TV system. "Did you see that, Ian?" he asked his backseater.

"I think it moved."

"Sentry, Sentry, we have a possible survivor in the water. Tell *Invincible* to get a Sea King down here straightaway. I'm going down to investigate. Will advise."

"Roger that, Harrier 2-0. Your captain reports a helo spooling up right now. Out."

The Royal Navy Sea King was there in twenty-five minutes. A rubber-suited paramedic jumped in the water to get a collar on the one survivor. There were no others, and no wreckage, only a slick of jet fuel evaporating slowly into the cold air. A second helicopter continued the search as the first raced back to the carrier.

Ryan watched from the bridge as the medics carried the stretcher into the island. Another crewman appeared a moment later with a briefcase.

"He had this, sir. He's a lieutenant commander, name of Dwyer, one leg and several ribs broken. He's in a bad way, Admiral."

"Thank you." White took the case. "Any possibility of other survivors?"

The sailor shook his head. "Not a good one, sir. The Sikorski must have sunk like a stone." He looked at Ryan. "Sorry, sir."

Ryan nodded. "Thanks."

"Norfolk on the radio, Admiral," a communications officer said.

"Let's go, Jack." Admiral White handed him the briefcase and led him to the communications room.

"The chopper went in. We have one survivor being worked on right now," Ryan said over the radio. It was silent for a moment.

"Who is it?"

"Name's Dwyer. They took him right to sick bay, Admiral. He's out of action. Tell Washington. Whatever this operation is supposed to be, we have to rethink it."

"Roger. Out," Admiral Blackburn said.

"Whatever we decide to do," Admiral White observed, "it will have to be fast. We must get our helo off to the *Pigeon* in two hours to have her back before dawn."

Ryan knew exactly what that would mean. There were only four men at sea who both knew what was going on and were close enough to do anything. He was the only American among them. The *Kennedy* was too far away. The *Nimitz* was close enough, but using her would mean getting the data to her by radio, and Washington was not enthusiastic about that. The only other alternative was to assemble and dispatch another intelligence team. There just wasn't enough time.

"Let's get this case open, Admiral. I need to see what this plan is." They picked up a machinist's mate on the way to White's cabin. He proved to be an excellent locksmith.

"Dear God!" Ryan breathed, reading the contents of the case. "You better see this."

“Well,” White said a few minutes later, “that is clever.”

“It’s cute, all right,” Ryan said. “I wonder what genius thought it up. I know I’m going to be stuck with this. I’ll ask Washington for permission to take a few officers along with me.”

Ten minutes later they were back in communications. White had the compartment cleared. Then Jack spoke over the encrypted voice channel. Both hoped the scrambling device worked.

“I hear you fine, Mr. President. You know what happened to the helicopter.”

“Yes, Jack, most unfortunate. I need you to pinch-hit for us.”

“Yes, sir, I anticipated that.”

“I can’t order you, but you know what the stakes are. Will you do it?”

Ryan closed his eyes. “Affirmative.”

“I appreciate it, Jack.”

Sure you do. “Sir, I need your authorization to take some help with me, a few British officers.”

“One,” the president said.

“Sir, I need more than that.”

“One.”

“Understood, sir. We’ll be moving in an hour.”

“You know what’s supposed to happen?”

“Yes, sir. The survivor had the ops orders with him. I’ve already read them over.”

“Good luck, Jack.”

“Thank you, sir. Out.” Ryan flipped off the satellite channel and turned to Admiral White. “Volunteer once, just one time, and see what happens.”

“Frightened?” White did not appear amused.

“Damned right I am. Can I borrow an officer? A guy who speaks Russian if possible. You know what this may involve.”

“We’ll see. Come on.”

Five minutes later they were back in White’s cabin awaiting the arrival of four officers. All turned out to be lieutenants, all under thirty.

“Gentlemen,” the admiral began, “this is Commander Ryan. He needs an officer to accompany him on a voluntary basis for a mission of some importance. Its nature is secret and most unusual, and there may be some danger involved. You four have been asked here because of your knowledge of Russian. That is all I can say.”

"Going to talk to a Sov submarine?" the oldest of them chirped up. "I'm your man. I have a degree in the language, and my first posting was aboard HMS *Dreadnought*."

Ryan weighed the ethics of accepting the man before telling him what was involved. He nodded, and White dismissed the others.

"I'm Jack Ryan." He extended his hand.

"Owen Williams. So, what are we up to?"

"The submarine is named *Red October*—"

"*Krazny Oktyabr*." Williams smiled.

"And she's attempting to defect to the United States."

"Indeed? So that's what we've been mucking about for. Jolly decent of her CO. Just how certain are we of this?"

Ryan took several minutes to detail the intelligence information. "We blinkered instructions to him, and he seems to have played along. But we won't know for sure until we get aboard. Defectors have been known to change their minds, it happens a lot more often than you might imagine. Still want to come along?"

"Miss a chance like this? Exactly how do we get aboard, Commander?"

"The name's Jack. I'm CIA, not navy." He went on to explain the plan.

"Excellent. Do I have time to pack some things?"

"Be back here in ten minutes," White said.

"Aye aye, sir." Williams drew to attention and left.

White was on the phone. "Send Lieutenant Sinclair to see me." The admiral explained that he was the commander of the *Invincible*'s marine detachment. "Perhaps you might need another friend along."

The other friend was an FN nine-millimeter automatic pistol with a spare clip and a shoulder holster that disappeared nicely under his jacket. The mission orders were shredded and burned before they left.

Admiral White accompanied Ryan and Williams to the flight deck. They stood at the hatch, looking at the Sea King as its engines screeched into life.

"Good luck, Owen." White shook hands with the youngster, who saluted and moved off.

"My regards to your wife, Admiral." Ryan took his hand.

"Five and a half days to England. You'll probably see her before I do. Be careful, Jack."

Ryan smiled crookedly. “It’s my intelligence estimate, isn’t it? If I’m right, it’ll just be a pleasure cruise—assuming the helicopter doesn’t crash on me.”

“The uniform looks good on you, Jack.”

Ryan hadn’t expected that. He drew himself to attention and saluted as he’d been taught at Quantico. “Thank you, Admiral. Be seeing you.”

White watched him enter the chopper. The crew chief slid the door shut, and a moment later the Sea King’s engines increased power. The helicopter lifted unevenly for a few feet before its nose dipped to port and began a climbing turn to the south. Without flying lights the dark shape was lost to sight in less than a minute.

33N 75W

The *Scamp* rendezvoused with the *Ethan Allen* a few minutes after midnight. The attack sub took up station a thousand yards astern of the old missile boat, and both cruised in an easy circle as their sonar operators listened to the approach of a diesel-powered vessel, the USS *Pigeon*. Three of the pieces were now in place. Three more were to come.

The Red October

“There is no choice,” Melekhin said. “I must continue to work on the diesel.”

“Let us help you,” Svyadov said.

“And what do you know of diesel fuel pumps?” Melekhin asked in a tired but kind voice. “No, Comrade. Surzpoi, Bugayev, and I can handle it alone. There is no reason to expose you also. I will report back in an hour.”

“Thank you, Comrade.” Ramius clicked the speaker off. “This cruise has been a troublesome one. Sabotage. Never in my career has something like this happened! If we cannot fix the diesel…We have only a few hours more of battery power, and the reactor requires a total overhaul and safety inspection. I swear to you, Comrades, if we find the bastard who did this to us…”

“Shouldn’t we call for help?” Ivanov asked.

“This close to the American coast, and perhaps an imperialist submarine still on our tail? What sort of ‘help’ might we get, eh?

Comrades, perhaps our problem is no accident, have you considered that? Perhaps we have become pawns in a murderous game." He shook his head. "No, we cannot risk this. The Americans must not get their hands on this submarine!"

CIA Headquarters

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, Senator. I apologize for getting you up so early." Judge Moore met Donaldson at the door and led him into his capacious office. "You know Director Jacobs, don't you?"

"Of course, and what brings the heads of the FBI and CIA together at dawn?" Donaldson asked with a smile. This had to be good. Heading the Select Committee was more than a job, it was fun, real fun to be one of the few people who were really in the know.

The third person in the room, Ritter, helped a fourth person out of a high-backed chair that had blocked him from view. It was Peter Henderson, Donaldson saw to his surprise. His aide's suit was rumpled as though he'd been up all night. Suddenly it wasn't fun anymore.

Judge Moore waxed solicitous. "You know Mr. Henderson, of course."

"What is the meaning of this?" Donaldson asked, his voice more subdued than anyone expected.

"You lied to me, Senator," Ritter said. "You promised that you would not reveal what I told you yesterday, knowing all the time you'd tell this man—"

"I did no such thing."

"—who then told a fellow KGB agent," Ritter went on. "Emil?"

Jacobs set his coffee down. "We've been onto Mr. Henderson for some time. It was his contact that had us stumped. Some things are just too obvious. A lot of people in D.C. have regular cab pickup. Henderson's contact was a cab driver. We finally got it right."

"The way we found out about Henderson was through you, Senator." Moore explained: "We had a very good agent in Moscow a few years ago, a colonel in their Strategic Rocket Forces. He'd been giving us good information for five years, and we were about to get him and his family out. We try to do that, you know; you can't run agents forever, and we really owed this man. But I made the

mistake of revealing his name to your committee. One week later, he was gone—vanished. He was eventually shot, of course. His wife and three daughters were sent to Siberia. Our information is that they live in a lumber settlement east of the Urals. Typical sort of place, no plumbing, lousy food, no medical facilities available, and since they're the family of a convicted traitor, you can probably imagine what sort of hell they must endure. A good man dead, and a family destroyed. Try thinking about that, Senator. This is a true story, and these are real people.

"We didn't know at first who had leaked it. It had to be you, or one of two others, so we began to leak information to individual committee members. It took six months, but your name came up three times. After that we had Director Jacobs check out all of your staffers. Emil?"

"When Henderson was an assistant editor of the Harvard *Crimson*, in 1970, he was sent to Kent State to do a piece on the shooting. You remember, the 'Days of Rage' thing after the Cambodian incursion and that awful screw-up with the national guard. I was in on that, too, as luck would have it. Evidently it turned Henderson's stomach. Understandable. But not his reaction. When he graduated and joined your staff he started talking with his old activist friends about his job. This led to a contract from the Russians, and they asked for some information. That was during the Christmas bombing—he really didn't like that. He delivered. It was low-level stuff at first, nothing they couldn't have gotten a few days later from the *Post*. That's how it works. They offered the hook, and he nibbled at it. A few years later, of course, they struck the hook nice and hard and he couldn't get away. We all know how the game works.

"Yesterday we planted a tape recorder in his taxi. You'd be amazed how easy it was. Agents get lazy, too, just like the rest of us. To make a long story short, we have you on tape promising not to reveal the information to anyone, and we have Henderson here spilling that data not three hours later to a known KGB agent, also on tape. You have violated no laws, Senator, but Mr. Henderson has. He was arrested at nine last night. The charge is espionage, and we have the evidence to make it stick."

"I had no knowledge whatever of this," Donaldson said.

"We hadn't the slightest thought that you might," Ritter said.

Donaldson faced his aide. "What do you have to say for

yourself?"

Henderson didn't say anything. He thought about saying how sorry he was, but how to explain his emotions? The dirty feeling of being an agent for a foreign power, juxtaposed with the thrill of fooling a whole legion of government spooks. When he was caught these emotions changed to fear at what would happen to him, and relief that it was all over.

"Mr. Henderson has agreed to work for us," Jacobs said helpfully. "As soon as you leave the Senate, that is."

"What does that mean?" Donaldson asked.

"You've been in the Senate, what? Thirteen years, isn't it? You were originally appointed to fill out an unexpired term, if memory serves," Moore said.

"You might try asking my reaction to blackmail," the senator observed.

"Blackmail?" Moore held his hands out. "Good Lord, Senator, Director Jacobs has already told you that you have broken no laws, and you have my word that the CIA will not leak a word of this. Now, whether or not the Justice Department decides to prosecute Mr. Henderson is not in our hands. 'Senate Aide Convicted of Treason: Senator Donaldson Professes No Knowledge of Aide's Action.'"

Jacobs went on, "Senator, the University of Connecticut has offered you the chair in their school of government for some years now. Why not take it?"

"Or Henderson goes to prison. You put that on my conscience?"

"Obviously he cannot go on working for you, and it should be equally obvious that if he is fired after so many years of exemplary service in your office, it will be noticed. If, on the other hand, you decide to leave public life, it would not be too surprising if he were not able to get a job of equivalent stature with another senator. So, he will get a nice job in the General Accounting Office, where he will still have access to all sorts of secrets. Only from now on," Ritter said, "we decide which secrets he passes along."

"No statute of limitations on espionage," Jacobs pointed out.

"If the Soviets find out," Donaldson said, and stopped. He didn't really care, did he? Not about Henderson, not about the fictitious Russian. He had an image to save, losses to cut.

"You win, Judge."

"I thought you'd see it our way. I'll tell the president. Thanks for

coming in, Senator. Mr. Henderson will be a little late to the office this morning. Don't feel too badly about him, Senator. If he plays ball with us, in a few years we might let him off the hook. It's happened before, but he'll have to earn it. Good morning, sir."

Henderson would play along. His alternative was life in a maximum security penitentiary. After listening to the tape of his conversation in the cab, he'd made his confession in front of a court stenographer and a television camera.

The Pigeon

The ride to the *Pigeon* had been mercifully uneventful. The catamaran-hull rescue ship had a small helicopter platform aft, and the Royal Navy helicopter had hovered two feet above it, allowing Ryan and Williams to jump down. They were taken immediately to the bridge as the helicopter buzzed back northeast to her home.

"Welcome aboard, gentlemen," the captain said agreeably. "Washington says you have orders for me. Coffee?"

"Do you have tea?" Williams asked.

"We can probably find some."

"Let's go someplace we can talk in private," Ryan said.

The Dallas

The *Dallas* was now in on the plan. Alerted by another ELF transmission, Mancuso had brought her to antenna depth briefly during the night. The lengthy EYES ONLY message had been decrypted by hand in his cabin. Decryption was not Mancuso's strong point. It took him an hour as Chambers conned the *Dallas* back to trail her contact. A crewman passing the captain's cabin heard a muted *damn* through the door. When Mancuso reappeared, his mouth couldn't keep from twitching into a smile. He was not a good card player either.

The Pigeon

The *Pigeon* was one of the navy's two modern submarine rescue ships designed to locate and reach a sunken nuclear sub quickly enough to save her crew. She was outfitted with a variety of sophisticated equipment, chief among them the DSRV. This vessel,

the *Mystic*, was hanging on its rack between the *Pigeon*'s twin catamaran hulls. There was also a 3-d sonar operating at low power, mainly as a beacon, while the *Pigeon* cruised in slow circles a few miles south of the *Scamp* and *Ethan Allen*. Two *Perry*-class frigates were twenty miles north, operating in conjunction with three Orions to sanitize the area.

"*Pigeon*, this is *Dallas*, radio check, over."

"*Dallas*, this is *Pigeon*. Read you loud and clear, over," the rescue ship's captain replied on the secure radio channel.

"The package is here. Out."

"Captain, on *Invincible* we had an officer send the message with a blinker light. Can you handle the blinker light?" Ryan asked.

"To be part of this? Are you kidding?"

The plan was simple enough, just a little too cute. It was clear that the *Red October* wanted to defect. It was even possible that everyone aboard wanted to come over—but hardly likely. They were going to get everyone off the *Red October* who might want to return to Russia, then pretend to blow up the ship with one of the powerful scuttling charges Russian ships are known to carry. The remaining crewmen would then take their boat northwest into Pamlico Sound to wait for the Soviet fleet to return home, sure that the *Red October* had been sunk and with the crew to prove it. What could possibly go wrong? A thousand things.

The Red October

Ramius looked through his periscope. The only ship in view was the USS *Pigeon*, though his ESM antenna reported surface radar activity to the north, a pair of frigates standing guard over the horizon. So, this was the plan. He watched the blinker light, translating the message in his mind.

Norfolk Naval Medical Center

"Thanks for coming down, Doc." The intelligence officer had taken over the office of assistant hospital administrator. "I understand our patient woke up."

"About an hour ago," Tait confirmed. "He was conscious for about twenty minutes. He's asleep now."

"Does that mean he'll make it?"

"It's a positive sign. He was reasonably coherent, so there's no evident brain damage. I was a little worried about that. I'd have to say the odds are in his favor now, but these hypothermia cases have a way of souring on you in a hurry. He's a sick kid, that hasn't changed." Tait paused. "I have a question for you, Commander: Why aren't the Russians happy?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Kind of hard to miss. Besides, Jamie found a doctor on staff who understands Russian, and we have him attending the case."

"Why didn't you let me know about that?"

"The Russians don't know either. That was a medical judgment, Commander. Having a physician around who speaks the patient's language is simply good medical practice." Tait smiled, pleased with himself for having thought up his own intelligence ploy while at the same time adhering to proper medical ethics and naval regulations. He took a file card from his pocket. "Anyway, the patient's name is Andre Katyskin. He's a cook, like we thought, from Leningrad. The name of his ship was the *Politovskiy*."

"My compliments, Doctor." The intelligence officer acknowledged Tait's maneuver, though he wondered why it was that amateurs had to be so damned clever when they butted into things that didn't concern them.

"So why are the Russians unhappy?" Tait did not get an answer. "And why don't *you* have a guy up there? You knew all along, didn't you? You knew what ship he escaped from, and you knew why she sank…So, if they wanted most of all to know what ship he came from, and if they don't like the news they got—does that mean they have *another* missing sub out there?"

CIA Headquarters

Moore lifted his phone. "James, you and Bob get in here right now!"

"What is it, Arthur?" Greer asked a minute later.

"The latest from CARDINAL." Moore handed xeroxed copies of a message to both men. "How quick can we get word out?"

"That far out? Means a helicopter, a couple of hours at least. We have to get this out quicker than that," Greer urged.

"We can't endanger CARDINAL, period. Draw up a message and get the navy or air force to relay it by hand." Moore didn't like it,

but he had no choice.

"It'll take too long!" Greer objected loudly.

"I like the boy, too, James. Talking about it doesn't help. Get moving."

Greer left the room cursing like the fifty-year sailor he was.

The Red October

"Comrades. Officers and men of *Red October*, this is the captain speaking." Ramius' voice was subdued, the crewmen noticed. The incipient panic that had started a few hours earlier had driven them to the brittle edge of riot. "Efforts to repair our engines have failed. Our batteries are nearly flat. We are too far from Cuba for help, and we cannot expect help from the *Rodina*. We do not have enough electrical power even to operate our environmental control systems for more than a few hours. We have no choice, we must abandon ship.

"It is no accident that an American ship is now close to us, offering what they call assistance. I will tell you what has happened, comrades. An imperialist spy has sabotaged our ship, and somehow they knew what our orders were. They were waiting for us, comrades, waiting and hoping to get their dirty hands on our ship. They will not. The crew will be taken off. They will not get our *Red October!* The senior officers and I will remain behind to set off the scuttling charges. The water here is five thousand meters deep. They will not have our ship. All crewmen except those on duty will assemble in their quarters. That is all." Ramius looked around the control room. "We have lost, comrades. Bugayev, make the necessary signals to Moscow and to the American ship. We will then dive to a hundred meters. We will take no chance that they will seize our ship. I take full responsibility for this—disgrace! Mark this well, comrades. The fault is mine alone."

The Pigeon

"Signal received: 'SSS,'" the radioman reported.

"Ever been on a submarine before, Ryan?" Cook asked.

"Nope, I hope it's safer 'n flying." Ryan tried to make a joke of it. He was deeply frightened.

"Well, let's get you down to *Mystic*."

The Mystic

The DSRV was nothing more than three metal spheres welded together with a propeller on the back and some boiler plating all around to protect the pressure-bearing parts of the hull. Ryan was first through the hatch, then Williams. They found seats and waited. A crew of three was already at work.

The *Mystic* was ready for operation. On command, the *Pigeon*'s winches lowered her to the calm water below. She dived at once, her electric motors hardly making any noise. Her low-power sonar system immediately acquired the Russian submarine, half a mile away, at a depth of three hundred feet. The operating crew had been told that this was a straightforward rescue mission. They were experts. The *Mystic* was hovering over the missile sub's forward escape trunk within ten minutes.

The directional propellers worked them carefully into place and a petty officer made certain that the mating skirt was securely fastened. The water in the skirt between *Mystic* and *Red October* was explosively vented into a low-pressure chamber on the DSRV. This established a firm seal between the two vessels, and the residual water was pumped out.

"Your ball now, I guess." The lieutenant motioned Ryan to the hatch in the floor of the middle segment.

"I guess." Ryan knelt by the hatch and banged a few times with his hand. No response. Next he tried a wrench. A moment later three clangs echoed back, and Ryan turned the locking wheel in the center of the hatch. When he pulled the batch up, he found another that had already been opened from below. The lower perpendicular hatch was shut. Ryan took a deep breath and climbed down the ladder of the white painted cylinder, followed by Williams. After reaching the bottom Ryan knocked on the lower hatch.

The Red October

It opened at once.

"Gentlemen, I am Commander Ryan, United States Navy. Can we be of assistance?"

The man he spoke to was shorter and heavier than himself. He wore three stars on his shoulder boards, an extensive set of ribbons on his breast, and a broad gold stripe on his sleeve. So, this was

Marko Ramius…

"Do you speak Russian?"

"No sir, I do not. What is the nature of your emergency, sir?"

"We have a major leak in our reactor system. The ship is contaminated aft of the control room. We must evacuate."

At the words *leak* and *reactor* Ryan felt his skin crawl. He remembered how positive he had been that his scenario was correct. On land, nine hundred miles away, in a nice, warm office, surrounded by friends—well, not enemies. The looks he was getting from the twenty men in this compartment were lethal.

"Dear God! Okay, let's get moving then. We can take off twenty-five men at a time, sir."

"Not so fast, Commander Ryan. What will become of my men?" Ramius asked loudly.

"They will be treated as our guests, of course. If they need medical attention, they will get it. They will be returned to the Soviet Union as quickly as we can arrange it. Did you think we'd put them in prison?"

Ramius grunted and turned to speak with the others in Russian. On the flight from the *Invincible* Ryan and Williams had decided to keep the latter's knowledge of Russian secret for a while, and Williams was now dressed in an American uniform. Neither thought a Russian would notice the different accent.

"Dr. Petrov," Ramius said, "you will take the first group of twenty-five. Keep control of the men, Comrade Doctor! Do not let the Americans speak to them as individuals, and let no man wander off alone. You will behave correctly, no more, no less."

"Understood, Comrade Captain."

Ryan watched Petrov count the men off as they passed through the hatch and up the ladder. When they were finished, Williams secured first the *Mystic*'s hatch and then the one on the *October*'s escape truck. Ramius had a *michman* check it. They heard the DSRV disengage and motor off.

The silence that ensued was as long as it was awkward. Ryan and Williams stood in one corner of the compartment, Ramius and his men opposite them. It made Ryan think back to high school dances where boys and girls gathered in separate groups and there was a no-man's-land in the middle. When an officer fished out a cigarette, he tried breaking the ice.

"May I have a cigarette, sir?"

Borodin jerked the pack, and a cigarette came part way out. Ryan took it, and Borodin lit it with a paper match.

"Thanks. I gave it up, but underwater in a sub with a bad reactor, I don't think it's too dangerous, do you?" Ryan's first experience with a Russian cigarette was not a happy one. The black coarse tobacco made him dizzy, and it added an acrid smell to the air around them, which was already thick with the odor of sweat, machine oil, and cabbage.

"How did you come to be here?" Ramius asked.

"We were heading towards the coast of Virginia, Captain. A Soviet submarine sank there last week."

"Oh?" Ramius admired the cover story. "A Soviet submarine?"

"Yes, Captain. The boat was what we call an *Alfa*. That's all I know for sure. They picked up a survivor, and he's in the Norfolk naval hospital. May I ask your name, sir?"

"Marko Aleksandrovich Ramius."

"Jack Ryan."

"Owen Williams." They shook hands all around.

"You have a family, Commander Ryan?" Ramius asked.

"Yes, sir. A wife, a son, and a daughter. You, sir?"

"No, no family." He turned and addressed a junior officer in Russian. "Take the next group. You heard my instructions to the doctor?"

"Yes, Comrade Captain!" the young man said.

They heard the *Mystic*'s electric motors overhead. A moment later came the metallic clang of the mating collar gripping the escape trunk. It had taken forty minutes, but it had seemed like a week. God, what if the reactor really was bad? Ryan thought.

The Scamp

Two miles away, the *Scamp* had halted a few hundred yards from the *Ethan Allen*. Both submarines were exchanging messages on their gertrudes. The *Scamp* sonarmen had noted the passage of the three submarines an hour earlier. The *Pogy* and *Dallas* were now between the *Red October* and the other two American subs, their sonar operators listening intently for any interference, any vessel that might come their way. The transfer area was far enough offshore to miss the coastal traffic of commercial freighters and tankers, but that might not keep them from meeting a stray vessel

from another port.

The Red October

When the third set of crewmen left under the control of Lieutenant Svyadov, a cook at the end of the line broke away, explaining that he wanted to retrieve his cassette tape machine, something he had saved months for. No one noticed when he didn't return, not even Ramius. His crewmen, even the experienced *michmanyy*, jostled one another to get out of their submarine. There was only one more group to go.

The Pigeon

On the *Pigeon*, the Soviet crewmen were taken to the crew's mess. The American sailors were observing their Russian counterparts closely, but no words passed. The Russians found the tables set with a meal of coffee, bacon, eggs, and toast. Petrov was happy for that. It was no problem keeping control of the men when they ate like wolves. With a junior officer acting as interpreter, they asked for and got plenty of additional bacon. The cooks had orders to stuff the Russians with all the food they could eat. It kept everyone busy as a helicopter landed from shore with twenty new men, one of whom raced to the bridge.

The Red October

"Last group," Ryan murmured to himself. The *Mystic* mated again. The last round trip had taken an hour. When the pair of hatches was opened, the lieutenant from the DSRV came down.

"Next trip will be delayed, gentlemen. Our batteries have about had it. It'll take ninety minutes to recharge. Any problem?"

"It will be as you say," Ramius replied. He translated for his men and then ordered Ivanov to take the next group. "The senior officers will stay behind. We have work to do." Ramius took the young officer's hand. "If something happens, tell them in Moscow that we have done our duty."

"I will do that, Comrade Captain." Ivanov nearly choked on his answer.

Ryan watched the sailors leave. The *Red October*'s escape trunk

hatch was closed, then the *Mystic*'s. One minute later there was a clanging sound as the minisub lifted free. He heard the electric motors whirring off, fading rapidly away, and felt the green-painted bulkheads closing in on him. Being on an airplane was frightening, but at least the air didn't threaten to crush you. Here he was, underwater, three hundred miles from shore in the world's largest submarine, with only ten men aboard who knew how to run her.

"Commander Ryan," Ramius said, drawing himself to attention, "my officers and I request political asylum in the United States—and we bring you this small present." Ramius gestured toward the steel bulkheads.

Ryan had already framed his reply. "Captain, on behalf of the president of the United States, it is my honor to grant your request. Welcome to freedom, gentlemen."

No one knew that the intercom system in the compartment had been switched on. The indicator light had been unplugged hours before. Two compartments forward the cook listened, telling himself that he had been right to stay behind, wishing he had been wrong. Now what will I do? he wondered. His duty. That sounded easy enough—but would he remember how to carry it out?

"I don't know what to say about you guys." Ryan shook everyone's hand again. "You pulled it off. You really pulled it off!"

"Excuse me, Commander," Kamarov said. "Do you speak Russian?"

"Sorry, Lieutenant Williams here does, but I do not. A group of Russian-speaking officers was supposed to be here in my place, but their helicopter crashed at sea last night." Williams translated this. Four of the officers had no knowledge of English.

"And what happens now?"

"In a few minutes, a missile submarine will explode two miles from here. One of ours, an old one. I presume that you told your men you were going to scuttle—Jesus, I hope you didn't say what you were really doing?"

"And have a war aboard my ship?" Ramius laughed. "No, Ryan. Then what?"

"When everybody thinks *Red October* has sunk, we'll head northwest to the Ocracoke Inlet and wait. USS *Dallas* and *Pogy* will be escorting us. Can these few men operate the ship?"

"These men can operate any ship in the world!" Ramius said it in Russian first. His men grinned. "So, you think that our men will

not know what has become of us?"

"Correct. *Pigeon* will see an underwater explosion. They have no way of knowing it's in the wrong place, do they? You know that your navy has many ships operating off our coast right now? When they leave, well, then we'll figure out where to keep this present permanently. I don't know where that will be. You men, of course, will be our guests. A lot of our people will want to talk with you. For the moment, you can be sure that you will be treated very well —better than you can imagine." Ryan was sure that the CIA would give each a considerable sum of money. He didn't say so, not wanting to insult this kind of bravery. It had surprised him to learn that defectors rarely expect to receive money, almost never ask for any.

"What about political education?" Kamarov asked.

Ryan laughed. "Lieutenant, somewhere along the line somebody will take you aside to explain how our country works. That will take about two hours. After that you can immediately start telling us what we do wrong—everybody else in the world does, why shouldn't you? But I can't do that now. Believe this, you will love it, probably more than I do. I have never lived in a country that was not free, and maybe I don't appreciate my home as much as I should. For the moment, I suppose you have work to do."

"Correct," Ramius said. "Come, my new comrades, we will put you to work also."

Ramius led Ryan aft through a series of watertight doors. In a few minutes he was in the missile room, a vast compartment with twenty-six dark-green tubes towering through two decks. The business end of a boomer, with two-hundred-plus thermonuclear warheads. The menace in this room was enough to make hair bristle at the back of Ryan's neck. These were not academic abstractions, these were real. The upper deck he walked on was a grating. The lower deck, he could see, was solid. After passing through this and another compartment they were in the control room. The interior of the submarine was ghostly quiet; Ryan sensed why sailors are superstitious.

"You will sit here." Ramius pointed Ryan to the helmsman's station on the port side of the compartment. There was an aircraft-style wheel and a gang of instruments.

"What do I do?" Ryan asked, sitting.

"You will steer the ship, Commander. Have you never done this

before?"

"No, sir. I've never been on a submarine before."

"But you are a naval officer."

Ryan shook his head. "No, captain. I work for the CIA."

"CIA?" Ramius hissed the acronym as if it were poisonous.

"I know, I know." Ryan dropped his head on the wheel. "They call us the Dark Forces. Captain, this is one Dark Force who's probably going to wet his pants before we're finished here. I work at a desk, and believe me on this if nothing else—there's nothing I'd like better than to be home with my wife and kids right now. If I had half a brain, I would have stayed in Annapolis and kept writing my books."

"Books? What do you mean?"

"I'm an historian, Captain. I was asked to join the CIA a few years ago as an analyst. Do you know what that is? Agents bring in their data, and I figure out what it means. I got into this mess by mistake—shit, you don't believe me, but it's true. Anyway, I used to write books on naval history."

"Tell me your books," Ramius ordered.

"*Options and Decisions, Doomed Eagles*, and a new one coming out next year, *Fighting Sailor*, a biography of Admiral Halsey. My first one was about the Battle of Leyte Gulf. It was reviewed in *Morskoi Sbornik*, I understand. It dealt with the nature of tactical decisions made under combat conditions. There's supposed to be a dozen copies at the Frunze library."

Ramius was quiet for a moment. "Ah, I know this book. Yes, I read parts of it. You were wrong, Ryan. Halsey acted stupidly."

"You will do well in my country, Captain Ramius. You are already a book critic. Captain Borodin, can I trouble you for a cigarette?" Borodin tossed him a full pack and matches. Ryan lit one. It was terrible.

The Avalon

The *Mystic*'s fourth return was the signal for the *Ethan Allen* and *Scamp* to act. The *Avalon* lifted off her bed and motored the few hundred yards to the old missile boat. Her captain was already assembling his men in the torpedo room. Every hatch, door, manhole, and drawer had been opened all over the boat. One of the officers was coming forward to join the others. Behind him trailed a

black wire that led to each of the bombs aboard. This he connected to a timing device.

"All ready, Captain."

The Red October

Ryan watched Ramius order his men to their posts. Most went aft to run the engines. Ramius had the good manners to speak in English, repeating himself in Russian for those who did not understand their new language.

"Kamarov and Williams, will you go forward and secure all hatches." Ramius explained for Ryan's benefit. "If something goes wrong—it won't, but if it does—we do not have enough men to make repairs. So, we seal the entire ship."

It made sense to Ryan. He set an empty cup on the control pedestal to serve as an ashtray. He and Ramius were alone in the control room.

"When are we to leave?" Ramius asked.

"Whenever you are ready, sir. We have to get to Ocracoke Inlet at high tide, about eight minutes after midnight. Can we make it?"

Ramius consulted his chart. "Easily."

Kamarov led Williams through the communications room forward of control. They left the watertight door there open, then went forward to the missile room. Here they climbed down a ladder and walked forward on the lower missile deck to the forward missile room bulkhead. They proceeded through the door into the stores compartments, checking each hatch as they went. Near the bow they went up another ladder into the torpedo room, dogging the hatch down behind them, and proceeded aft through the torpedo storage and crew spaces. Both men sensed how strange it was to be aboard a ship with no crew, and they took their time, Williams twisting his head to look at everything and asking Kamarov questions. The lieutenant was happy to answer them in his mother language. Both men were competent officers, sharing a romantic attachment to their profession. For his part, Williams was greatly impressed by the *Red October* and said as much several times. A great deal of attention had been paid to small details. The deck was tiled. The hatches were lined with thick rubber gaskets. They hardly made any noise at all as they moved about checking watertight integrity, and it was obvious that more than mere lip

service had been paid to making this submarine a quiet one.

Williams was translating a favorite sea story into Russian as they opened the hatch to the missile room's upper deck. When he stepped through the hatch behind Kamarov, he remembered that the missile room's bright overhead lights had been left on. Hadn't they?

Ryan was trying to relax and failing at it. The seat was uncomfortable, and he recalled the Russian joke about how they were shaping the New Soviet Man—with airliner seats that contorted an individual into all kinds of impossible shapes. Aft, the engine room crew had begun powering up the reactor. Ramius was speaking over the intercom phone with his chief engineer, just before the sound of moving reactor coolant increased to generate steam for the turboalternators.

Ryan's head went up. It was as though he felt the sound before hearing it. A chill ran up the back of his neck before his brain told him what the sound had to be.

"What was that?" he said automatically, knowing already what it was.

"What?" Ramius was ten feet aft, and the caterpillar engines were now turning. A strange rumble reverberated through the hull.

"I heard a shot—no, several shots."

Ramius looked amused as he came a few steps forward. "I think you hear the sounds of the caterpillar engines, and I think it is your first time on a submarine boat, as you said. The first time is always difficult. It was so even for me."

Ryan stood up. "That may be, Captain, but I know a shot when I hear it." He unbottoned his jacket and pulled out the pistol.

"You will give me that." Ramius held out his hand. "You may not have a pistol on my submarine!"

"Where are Williams and Kamarov?" Ryan wavered.

Ramius shrugged. "They are late, yes, but this is a big ship."

"I'm going forward to check."

"You will stay at your post!" Ramius ordered. "You will do as I say!"

"Captain, I just heard something that sounded like gunshots, and I am going forward to check it out. Have you ever been shot at? I have. I have the scars on my shoulder to prove it. You'd better take the wheel, sir."

Ramius picked up a phone and punched a button. He spoke in

Russian for a few seconds and hung up. “I will go to show you that my submarine has no souls—ghosts, yes? Ghosts, no ghosts.” He gestured to the pistol. “And you are no spy, eh?”

“Captain, believe what you want to believe, okay? It’s a long story, and I’ll tell it to you someday.” Ryan waited for the relief that Ramius had evidently called for. The rumble of the tunnel drive made the sub sound like the inside of a drum.

An officer whose name he did not remember came into the control room. Ramius said something that drew a laugh—which stopped when the officer saw Ryan’s pistol. It was obvious that neither Russian was happy he had one.

“With your permission, Captain?” Ryan gestured forward.

“Go on, Ryan.”

The watertight door between control and the next space had been left open. Ryan entered the radio room slowly, eyes tracing left and right. It was clear. He went forward to the missile room door, which was dogged tight. The door, four feet or so high and about two across, was locked in place with a central wheel. Ryan turned the wheel with one hand. It was well oiled. So were the hinges. He pulled the door open slowly and peered around the hatch coaming.

“Oh, shit,” Ryan breathed, waving the captain forward. The missile compartment was a good two hundred feet long, lit only by six or eight small glow lights. Hadn’t it been brightly lit before? At the far end was a splash of bright light, and the far hatch had two shapes sprawled on the gratings next to it. Neither moved. The light Ryan saw them by was flickering next to a missile tube.

“Ghosts, Captain?” he whispered.

“It is Kamarov.” Ramius said something else under his breath in Russian.

Ryan pulled the slide back on his FN automatic to make sure a round was in the chamber. Then he stepped out of his shoes.

“Better let me handle this. Once upon a time I was a lieutenant in the marines.” And my training at Quantico, he thought to himself, had damned little to do with this. Ryan entered the compartment.

The missile room was almost a third of the submarine’s length and two decks high. The lower deck was solid metal. The upper one was made of metal grates. Sherwood Forest, this place was called on American missile boats. The term was apt enough. The missile

tubes, a good nine feet in diameter and painted a darker green than the rest of the room, looked like the trunks of enormous trees. He pulled the hatch shut behind him and moved to his right.

The light seemed to be coming from the farthest missile tube on the starboard side of the upper missile deck. Ryan stopped to listen. Something was happening there. He could hear a low rustling sound, and the light was moving as though it came from a hand-held work lamp. The sound was traveling down the smooth sides of the interior hull plating.

"Why me?" he whispered to himself. He'd have to get past thirteen missile tubes to get to the source of that light, cross over two hundred feet of open deck.

He moved around the first one, pistol in his right hand at waist level, his left hand tracing the cold metal of the tube. Already he was sweating into the checkered hard-rubber pistol grips. That, he told himself, is why they're checkered. He got between the first and second tubes, looked to port to make sure nobody was there, and got ready to move forward. Twelve to go.

The deck grating was welded out of eighth-inch metal bars. Already his feet hurt from walking on it. Moving slowly and carefully around the next circular tube, he felt like an astronaut orbiting the moon and crossing a continuous horizon. Except on the moon there wasn't anybody waiting to shoot you.

A hand came down on his shoulder. Ryan jumped and whirled around. Ramius. He had something to say, but Ryan put his fingertips on the man's lips and shook his head. Ryan's heart was beating so loudly that he could have used it for sending Morse code, and he could hear his own breathing—so why the hell hadn't he heard Ramius?

Ryan gestured his intention to go around the outboard side of each missile. Ramius indicated that he would go around the inboard sides. Ryan nodded. He decided to button his jacket and turn the collar up. It would make him a harder target. Better a dark shape than one with a white triangle on it. Next tube.

Ryan saw that words were painted on the tubes, with other inscriptions forged onto the metal itself. The letters were in Cyrillic and probably said No Smoking or Lenin Lives or something similarly useless. He saw and heard everything with great acuity, as though someone had taken sandpaper to all his senses to make him fantastically alert. He edged around the next tube, his fingers

flexing nervously on the pistol grip, wanting to wipe the sweat from his eyes. There was nothing here; the port side was okay. Next one…

It took five minutes to get halfway down the compartment, between the sixth and seventh tubes. The noise from the forward end of the compartment was more pronounced now. The light was definitely moving. Not by much, but the shadow of the number one tube was jittering ever so slightly. It had to be a work light plugged into a wall socket or whatever they called that on a ship. What was he doing? Working on a missile? Was there more than one man? Why didn't Ramius do a head count getting his crew into the DSRV?

Why didn't *I?* Ryan swore to himself. Six more to go.

As he went around the next tube he indicated to Ramius that there was probably one man all the way at the far end. Ramius nodded curtly, having already reached that conclusion. For the first time he noticed that Ryan's shoes were off, and, thinking that was a good idea, he lifted his left foot to take off a shoe. His fingers, which felt awkward and stiff, fumbled with the shoe. It fell on a loose piece of grating with a clatter. Ryan was caught in the open. He froze. The light at the far end shifted, then went dead still. Ryan darted to his left and peered around the edge of the tube. Five more to go. He saw part of a face—and a flash.

He heard the shot and cringed as the bullet hit the after bulkhead with a *clang*. Then he drew back for cover.

"I will cross to the other side," Ramius whispered.

"Wait till I say." Ryan grabbed Ramius' upper arm and went back to the starboard side of the tube, pistol in front. He saw the face and this time he fired first, knowing he'd miss. At the same moment he pushed Ramius left. The captain raced to the other side and crouched behind a missile tube.

"We have you," Ryan said aloud.

"You have nothing." It was a young voice, young and very scared.

"What are you doing?" Ryan asked.

"What do you think, Yankee?" This time the taunt was more effective.

Probably figuring a way to set off a warhead, Ryan decided. A happy thought.

"Then you will die too," Ryan said. Didn't the police try to reason with barricaded suspects? Didn't a New York cop say on TV

once, “We try to bore them to death?” But those were criminals. What was Ryan dealing with? A sailor who stayed behind? One of Ramius’ own officers who’d had second thoughts? A KGB agent? A GRU agent covered as a crewman?

“Then I will die,” the voice agreed. The light moved. Whatever he was doing, he was trying to get back to it.

Ryan fired twice as he went around the tube. Four to go. His bullets clanged uselessly as they hit the forward bulkhead. There was a remote chance that a carom shot—no…He looked left and saw that Ramius was still with him, shading to the port side of the tubes. He had no gun. Why hadn’t he gotten himself one?

Ryan took a deep breath and leaped around the next tube. The guy was waiting for this. Ryan dove to the deck, and the bullet missed him.

“Who are you?” Ryan asked, raising himself on his knees and leaning against the tube to catch his breath.

“A Soviet patriot! You are the enemy of my country, and you shall not have this ship!”

He was talking too much, Ryan thought. Good. Probably. “You have a name?”

“My name is of no account.”

“How about a family?” Ryan asked.

“My parents will be proud of me.”

A GRU agent. Ryan was certain. Not the political officer. His English was too good. Probably some kind of backup for the political officer. He was up against a trained field officer. Wonderful. A trained agent, and just like he said, a patriot. Not a fanatic, a man trying to do his duty. He was scared, but he’d do it.

And blow this whole fucking ship up, with me on it.

Still, Ryan knew he had an edge. The other guy had something he had to do. Ryan only had to stop him or delay him long enough. He went to the starboard side of the tube and looked around the edge with just his right eye. There was no light at his end of the compartment—another edge. Ryan could see him more easily than he could see Ryan.

“You don’t have to die, my friend. If you just set the gun down…” And *what?* End up in a federal prison? More likely just disappear. Moscow could not learn that the Americans had their sub.

“And CIA will not kill me, eh?” the voice sneered, quavering. “I

am no fool. If I am to die, it will be to my purpose, my friend!"

Then the light clicked off. Ryan had wondered how long that would take. Did it mean that he was finished whatever the hell he was doing? If so, in an instant they'd be all gone. Or maybe the guy just realized how vulnerable the light made him. Trained field officer or not, he was a kid, a frightened kid, and probably had as much to lose as Ryan had. Like hell, Ryan thought, I have a wife and two kids, and if I don't get to him fast, I'll sure as hell lose them.

*Merry Christmas, kids, your daddy just got blown up. Sorry there's no body to bury, but you see…*It occurred to Ryan to pray briefly—but for what? For help in killing another man? *It's like this, Lord…*

"Still with me, Captain?" he called out.

"*Da.*"

That would give the GRU agent something to worry about. Ryan hoped the captain's presence would force the man to shade more to the port side of his tube. Ryan ducked and rushed around the port side of his. Three to go. Ramius followed suit on his side. He drew a shot, but Ryan heard it miss.

He had to stop, to rest. He was hyperventilating. It was the wrong time for that. He had been a marine lieutenant—for three whole months before the chopper crashed—and he was supposed to know what to do! He had *led* men. But it was a whole lot easier to lead forty men with rifles than it was to fight all by himself.

Think!

"Maybe we can make a deal," Ryan suggested.

"Ah, yes, we can decide which ear the shot comes in."

"Maybe you'd like being an American."

"And my parents, Yankee, what of them?"

"Maybe we can get them out," Ryan said from the starboard side of his tube, moving left as he waited for a reply. He jumped again. Now there were two missile tubes separating him from his friend in the GRU, who was probably trying to crosswire the warheads and make half a cubic mile of ocean turn to plasma.

"Come, Yankee, we will die together. Now only one *puskatel* separates us."

Ryan thought quickly. He couldn't remember how many times he'd fired, but the pistol held thirteen rounds. He'd have enough. The extra clip was useless. He could toss it one way and move the other, creating a diversion. Would it work? Shit! It worked in the

movies. It was for damned sure that doing nothing wasn't going to work.

Ryan took the gun in his left hand and fished in his coat pocket for the spare clip with his right. He put the clip in his mouth while he switched the gun back. A poor highwayman's shift…He took the clip in his left hand. Okay. He had to toss the clip right and move left. Would it work? Right or wrong, he didn't have a hell of a lot of time.

At Quantico he was taught to read maps, evaluate terrain, call in air and artillery strikes, maneuver his squads and fire teams with skill—and here he was, stuck in a goddamned steel pipe three hundred feet under water, shooting it out with pistols in a room with two hundred hydrogen bombs!

It was time to do something. He knew what that had to be—but Ramius moved first. Out the corner of his eye he caught the shape of the captain running toward the forward bulkhead. Ramius leaped at the bulkhead and flicked a light switch on as the enemy fired at him. Ryan tossed the clip to the right and ran forward. The agent turned to his left to see what the noise was, sure that a cooperative move had been planned.

As Ryan covered the distance between the last two missile tubes he saw Ramius go down. Ryan dove past the number one missile tube. He landed on his left side, ignoring the pain that set his arm on fire as he rolled to line up his target. The man was turning as Ryan jerked off six shots. Ryan didn't hear himself screaming. Two rounds connected. The agent was lifted off the deck and twisted halfway around from the impact. His pistol dropped from his hand as he fell limp to the deck.

Ryan was shaking too badly to get up at once. The pistol, still tight in his hand, was aimed at his victim's chest. He was breathing hard and his heart was racing. Ryan closed his mouth and tried to swallow a few times; his mouth was as dry as cotton. He got slowly to his knees. The agent was still alive, lying on his back, eyes open and still breathing. Ryan had to use his hand to stand up.

He'd been hit twice, Ryan saw, once in the upper left chest and once lower down, about where the liver and spleen are. The lower wound was a wet red circle which the man's hands clutched. He was in his early twenties, if that, and his clear blue eyes were staring at the overhead while he tried to say something. His face was rigid with pain as he mouthed words, but all that came out was

an unintelligible gurgle.

"Captain," Ryan called, "you okay?"

"I am wounded, but I think I shall live, Ryan. Who is it?"

"How the hell should I know?"

The blue eyes fixed on Jack's face. Whoever he was, he knew death was coming to him. The pain on the face was replaced by something else. Sadness, an infinite sadness…He was still trying to speak. A pink froth gathered at the corners of his mouth. Lung shot. Ryan moved closer, kicking the gun clear and kneeling down beside him.

"We could have made a deal," he said quietly.

The agent tried to say something, but Ryan couldn't understand it. A curse, a call for his mother, something heroic? Jack would never know. The eyes went wide with pain one last time. The last breath hissed out through the bubbles and the hands on the belly went limp. Ryan checked for a pulse at the neck. There was none.

"I'm sorry." Ryan reached down to close his victim's eyes. He was sorry—why? Tiny beads of sweat broke out all over his forehead, and the strength he had drawn up in the shootout deserted him. A sudden wave of nausea overpowered him. "Oh, Jesus, I'm—" He dropped to all fours and threw up violently, his vomit spilling through the grates onto the lower deck ten feet below. For a whole minute his stomach heaved, well past the time he was dry. He had to spit several times to get the worst of the taste from his mouth before standing.

Dizzy from the stress and the quart of adrenalin that had been pumped into his system, he shook his head a few times, still looking at the dead man at his feet. It was time to come back to reality.

Ramius had been hit in the upper leg. It was bleeding. Both his hands, covered with blood, were placed on the wound, but it didn't look that bad. If the femoral artery had been cut, the captain would already have been dead.

Lieutenant Williams had been hit in the head and chest. He was still breathing but unconscious. The head wound was only a crease. The chest wound, close to the heart, made a sucking noise. Kamarov was not so lucky. A single shot had gone straight through the top of his nose, and the back of his head was a bloody wreckage.

"Jesus, why didn't somebody come and help us!" Ryan said when the thought hit him.

"The bulkhead doors are closed, Ryan. There is the—how do you

say it?"

Ryan looked where the captain pointed. It was the intercom system. "Which button?" The captain held up two fingers. "Control room, this is Ryan. I need help here, your captain has been shot."

The reply came in excited Russian, and Ramius responded loudly to make himself heard. Ryan looked at the missile tube. The agent had been using a work light, just like an American one, a lightbulb in a metal holder with wire across the front. A door into the missile tube was open. Beyond it a smaller hatch, evidently leading into the missile itself, was also open.

"What was he doing, trying to explode the warheads?"

"Impossible," Ramius said, in obvious pain. "The rocket warheads—we call this special safe. The warheads cannot—not fire."

"So what was he doing?" Ryan went over to the missile tube. A sort of rubber bladder was lying on the deck. "What's this?" He hefted the gadget in his hand. It was made of rubber or rubberized fabric with a metal or plastic frame inside, a metal nipple on one corner, and a mouthpiece.

"He was doing something to the missile, but he had an escape device to get off the sub," Ryan said. "Oh, Christ! A timing device." He bent down to pick up the work light and switched it on, then stood back and peered into the missile compartment. "Captain, what's in here?"

"That is—the guidance compartment. It has a computer that tells the rocket how to fly. The door—," Ramius' breaths were coming hard, "—is a hatch for the officer."

Ryan peered into the hatch. He found a mass of multicolored wires and circuit boards connected in a way he'd never seen before. He poked through the wires half expecting to find a ticking alarm clock wired to some dynamite sticks. He didn't.

Now what should he do? The agent had been up to something—but what? Did he finish? How could Ryan tell? He couldn't. One part of his brain screamed at him to do something, the other part said that he'd be crazy to try.

Ryan put the rubber-coated handle to the light between his teeth and reached into the compartment with both hands. He grabbed a double handful of wires and yanked back. Only a few broke loose. He released one bunch and concentrated on the other. A clump of plastic and copper spaghetti came loose. He did it again for the

other bunch. “Aaah!” he gasped, receiving an electric shock. An eternal moment followed while he waited to be blown up. It passed. There were more wires to pull. In under a minute he’d ripped out every wire he could see along with a half-dozen small breadboards. Next he smashed the light against everything he thought might break until the compartment looked like his son’s toybox—full of useless fragments.

He heard people running into the compartment. Borodin was in front. Ramius motioned him over to Ryan and the dead agent.

“Sudets?” Borodin said. “Sudets?” He looked at Ryan. “This is cook.”

Ryan took the pistol from the deck. “Here’s his recipe file. I think he was a GRU agent. He was trying to blow us up. Captain Ramius, how about we launch this missile—just jettison the goddamned thing, okay?”

“A good idea, I think.” Ramius’ voice had become a hoarse whisper. “First close the inspection hatch, then we—can fire from the control room.”

Ryan used his hand to sweep the fragments away from the missile hatch, and the door slid neatly back into place. The tube hatch was different. It was a pressure-bearing one and much heavier, held in place by two spring-loaded latches. Ryan slammed it three times. Twice it rebounded, but the third time it stuck.

Borodin and another officer were already carrying Williams aft. Someone had set a belt on Ramius’ leg wound. Ryan got him to his feet and helped him walk. Ramius grunted in pain every time he had to move his left leg.

“You took a foolish chance, Captain,” Ryan observed.

“This is my ship—and I do not like the dark. It was my fault! We should have made a careful counting as the crew left.”

They arrived at the watertight door. “Okay, I’ll go through first.” Ryan stepped through and helped Ramius through backward. The belt had loosened, and the wound was bleeding again.

“Close the hatch and lock it,” Ramius ordered.

It closed easily. Ryan turned the wheel three times, then got under the captain’s arm again. Another twenty feet and they were in the control room. The lieutenant at the wheel was ashen.

Ryan sat the captain in a chair on the port side. “You have a knife, sir?”

Ramius reached in his pocket and came out with a folding knife

and something else. “Here, take this. It’s the key for the rocket warheads. They cannot fire unless this is used. You keep it.” He tried to laugh. It had been Putin’s, after all.

Ryan flipped it around his neck, opened the knife, and cut the captain’s pants all the way up. The bullet had gone clean through the meaty part of the thigh. He took a clean handkerchief from his pocket and held it against the entrance wound. Ramius handed him another handkerchief. Ryan placed this against the half-inch exit wound. Next he set the belt across both, drawing it as tight as he could.

“My wife might not approve, but that will have to do.”

“Your wife?” Ramius asked.

“She’s a doc, an eye surgeon to be exact. The day I got shot she did this for me.” Ramius’ lower leg was growing pale. The belt was too tight, but Ryan didn’t want to loosen it just yet. “Now, what about the missile?”

Ramius gave an order to the lieutenant at the wheel, who relayed it through the intercom. Two minutes later three officers entered the control room. Speed was cut to five knots, which took several minutes. Ryan worried about the missile and whether or not he had destroyed whatever boobytrap the agent had installed. Each of the three newly arrived officers took a key from around his neck. Ramius did the same, giving his second key to Ryan. He pointed to the starboard side of the compartment.

“Rocket control.”

Ryan should have guessed as much. Arrayed throughout the control room were five panels, each with three rows of twenty-six lights and a key slot under each set.

“Put your key in number one, Ryan.” Jack did, and the others inserted their keys. The red light came on and a buzzer sounded.

The missile officer’s panel was the most elaborate. He turned a switch to flood the missile tube and open the number one hatch. The red panel lights began to blink.

“Turn your key, Ryan,” Ramius said.

“Does this fire the missile?” Christ, what if that happens? Ryan wondered.

“No no. The rocket must be armed by the rocket officer. This key explodes the gas charge.”

Could Ryan believe him? Sure he was a good guy and all that, but how could Ryan know he was telling the truth?

"Now!" Ramius ordered. Ryan turned his key at the same instant as the others. The amber light over the red light blinked on. The one under the green cover stayed off.

The *Red October* shuddered as the number one SS-N-20 was ejected upward by the gas charge. The sound was like a truck's air brake. The three officers withdrew their keys. Immediately the missile officer shut the tube hatch.

The Dallas

"What?" Jones said. "Conn, sonar, the target just flooded a tube—a missile tube? God almighty!" On his own, Jones powered up the under-ice sonar and began high-frequency pinging.

"What the hell are you doing?" Thompson demanded. Mancuso was there a second later.

"What's going on?" the captain snapped. Jones pointed at his display.

"The sub just launched a missile, sir. Look, Cap'n, two targets. But it's just hangin' there, no missile ignition. God!"

The Red October

Will it float? Ryan wondered.

It didn't. The Seahawk missile was pushed upward and to starboard by the gas charge. It stopped fifty feet over her deck as the *October* cruised past. The guidance hatch that Ryan had closed was not fully sealed. Water filled the compartment and flooded the warhead bus. The missile in any case had a sizable negative bouyancy, and the added mass in the nose tipped it over. The nose-heavy trim gave it an eccentric path, and it spiraled down like a seedpod from a tree. At ten thousand feet water pressure crushed the seal over the missile blast cones, but the Seahawk, otherwise undamaged, retained its shape all the way to the bottom.

The Ethan Allen

The only thing still operating was the timer. It had been set for thirty minutes, which had allowed the crew plenty of time to board the *Scamp*, now leaving the area at ten knots. The old reactor had been completely shut down. It was stone cold. Only a few

emergency lights remained on from residual battery power. The timer had three redundant firing circuits, and all went off within a millisecond of one another, sending a signal down the detonator wires.

They had put four Pave Pat Blue bombs on the *Ethan Allen*. The Pave Pat Blue was a FAE (fuel-air explosive) bomb. Its blast efficiency was roughly five times that of an ordinary chemical explosive. Each bomb had a pair of gas-release valves, and only one of the eight valves failed. When they burst open, the pressurized propane in the bomb casings expanded violently outward. In an instant the atmospheric pressure in the old submarine tripled as her every part was saturated with an explosive air-gas mixture. The four bombs filled the *Ethan Allen* with the equivalent of twenty-five tons of TNT evenly distributed throughout the hull.

The squibs fired almost simultaneously, and the results were catastrophic: the *Ethan Allen*'s strong steel hull burst as if it were a balloon. The only item not totally destroyed was the reactor vessel, which fell free of the shredded wreckage and dropped rapidly to the ocean floor. The hull itself was blasted into a dozen pieces, all bent into surreal shapes by the explosion. Interior equipment formed a metallic cloud within the shattered hull, and everything fluttered downward, expanding over a wide area during the three-mile descent to the hard sand bottom.

The Dallas

"Holy shit!" Jones slapped the headphones off and yawned to clear his ears. Automatic relays within the sonar system protected his ears from the full force of the explosion, but what had been transmitted was enough to make him feel as though his head had been hammered flat. The explosion was heard through the hull by everyone aboard.

"Attention all hands, this is the captain speaking. What you just heard is nothing to worry about. That's all I can say."

"Gawd, Skipper!" Mannion said.

"Yeah, let's get back on the contact."

"Aye, Cap'n." Mannion gave his commander a curious look.

The White House

“Did you get the word to him in time?” the president asked.

“No, sir.” Moore slumped into his chair. “The helicopter arrived a few minutes too late. It may be nothing to worry about. You’d expect that the captain would know enough to get everyone off except for his own people. We’re concerned, of course, but there isn’t anything we can do.”

“I asked him personally to do this, Judge. Me.”

Welcome to the real world, Mr. President, Moore thought. The chief executive had been lucky—he’d never had to send men to their deaths. Moore reflected that it was something easy to consider beforehand, less easy to get used to. He had affirmed death sentences from his seat on an appellate bench, and that had not been easy—even for men who had richly deserved their fates.

“Well, we’ll just have to wait and see, Mr. President. The source this data comes from is more important than any one operation.”

“Very well. What about Senator Donaldson?”

“He agreed to our suggestion. This aspect of the operation has worked out very well indeed.”

“Do you really expect the Russians to buy it?” Pelt asked.

“We’ve left some nice bait, and we’ll jerk the line a little to get their attention. In a day or two we’ll see if they nibble at it. Henderson is one of their all-stars—his code name is Cassius—and their reaction to this will tell us just what sort of disinformation we can pass through him. He could turn out to be very useful, but we’ll have to watch out for him. Our KGB colleagues have a very direct method for dealing with doubles.”

“We don’t let him off the hook unless he earns it,” the president said coldly.

Moore smiled. “Oh, he’ll earn it. We own Mr. Henderson.”

THE FIFTEENTH DAY
FRIDAY, 17 DECEMBER

Ocracoke Inlet

There was no moon. The three-ship procession entered the inlet at five knots, just after midnight to take advantage of the extra-high spring tide. The *Pogy* led the formation since she had the shallowest draft, and the *Dallas* trailed the *Red October*. The coast guard stations on either side of the inlet were occupied by naval officers who had relieved the "coasties."

Ryan had been allowed atop the sail, a humanitarian gesture from Ramius that he much appreciated. After eighteen hours inside the *Red October* Jack had felt confined, and it was good to see the world—even if it was nothing but dark empty space. The *Pogy* showed only a dim red light that disappeared if it was looked at for more than a few seconds. He could see the water's feathery wisps of foam and the stars playing hide-and-seek through the clouds. The west wind was a harsh twenty knots coming off the water.

Borodin was giving terse, monosyllabic orders as he conned the submarine up a channel that had to be dredged every few months despite the enormous jetty which had been built to the north. The ride was an easy one, the two or three feet of chop not mattering a whit to the missile sub's 30,000-ton bulk. Ryan was thankful for this. The black water calmed, and when they entered sheltered waters a Zodiac-type rubber boat zoomed towards them.

"Ahoy *Red October!*" a voice called in the darkness. Ryan could barely make out the gray lozenge shape of the Zodiac. It was ahead of a tiny patch of foam formed by the sputtering outboard motor.

"May I answer, Captain Borodin?" Ryan asked, getting a nod. "This is Ryan. We have two casualties aboard. One's in bad shape. We need a doctor and a surgical team right away! Do you understand?"

"Two casualties, and you need a doc, right." Ryan thought he saw a man holding something to his face, and thought he heard the faint crackle of a radio. It was hard to tell in the wind. "Okay. We'll have a doc flown down right away, *October. Dallas* and *Pogy* both have medical corpsmen aboard. You want 'em?"

"Damn straight!" Ryan replied at once.

"Okay. Follow *Pogy* two more miles and stand by." The Zodiac sped forward, reversed course, and disappeared in the darkness.

"Thank God for that," Ryan breathed.

"You are be—believer?" Borodin asked.

"Yeah, sure." Ryan should not have been surprised by the question. "Hell, you gotta believe in something."

"And why is that, Commander Ryan?" Borodin was examining the *Pogy* through oversized night glasses.

Ryan wondered how to answer. "Well, because if you don't, what's the point of life? That would mean Sartre and Camus and all those characters were right—all is chaos, life has no meaning. I refuse to believe that. If you want a better answer, I know a couple priests who'd be glad to talk to you."

Borodin did not respond. He spoke an order into the bridge microphone, and they altered course a few degrees to starboard.

The Dallas

A half mile aft, Mancuso was holding a light-amplifying night scope to his eyes. Mannion was at his shoulder, struggling to see.

"Jesus Christ," Mancuso whispered.

"You got that one right, Skipper," Mannion said, shivering in his jacket. "I'm not sure I believe it either. Here comes the Zodiac." Mannion handed his commander the portable radio used for docking.

"Do you read?"

"This is Mancuso."

"When our friend stops, I want you to transfer ten men to her, including your corpsman. They report two casualties who need medical attention. Pick good men, Commander, they'll need help running the boat—just make damned sure they're men who don't talk."

"Acknowledged. Ten men including the medic. Out." Mancuso watched the raft speed off to the *Pogy*. "Want to come along, Pat?"

"Bet your ass, uh, sir. You planning to go?" Mannion asked.

Mancuso was judicious. "I think Chambers is up to handling *Dallas* for a day or so, don't you?"

On shore, a naval officer was on the phone to Norfolk. The coast guard station was crowded, almost entirely with officers. A

fiberglass box sat next to the phone so that they could communicate with CINCLANT in secrecy. They had been here only two hours and would soon leave. Nothing could appear out of the ordinary. Outside, an admiral and a pair of captains watched the dark shapes through starlight scopes. They were as solemn as men in a church.

Cherry Point, North Carolina

Commander Ed Noyes was resting in the doctor's lounge of the naval hospital at the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, North Carolina. A qualified flight surgeon, he had the duty for the next three nights so that he'd have four days off over Christmas. It had been a quiet night. This was about to change.

"Doc?"

Noyes looked up to see a marine captain in MP livery. The doctor knew him. Military police delivered a lot of accident cases. He set down his *New England Journal of Medicine*.

"Hi, Jerry. Something coming in?"

"Doc, I got orders to tell you to pack everything you need for emergency surgery. You got two minutes, then I take you to the airfield."

"What for? What kind of surgery?" Noyes stood.

"They didn't say, sir, just that you fly out somewheres, alone. The orders come from topside, that's all I know."

"Damn it, Jerry, I have to know what sort of surgery it is so I know what to take!"

"So take everything, sir. I gotta get you to the chopper."

Noyes swore and went into the trauma receiving room. Two more marines were waiting there. He handed them four sterile sets, prepackaged instrument trays. He wondered if he'd need some drugs and decided to grab an armful, along with two units of plasma. The captain helped him on with his coat, and they moved out the door to a waiting jeep. Five minutes later they pulled up to a Sea Stallion whose engines were already screaming.

"What gives?" Noyes asked the colonel of intelligence inside, wondering where the crew chief was.

"We're heading out over the sound," the colonel explained. "We have to let you down on a sub that has some casualties aboard. There's a pair of corpsmen to assist you, and that's all I know, okay?" It had to be okay. There was no choice in the matter.

The Stallion lifted off at once. Noyes had flown in them often enough. He had two hundred hours piloting helicopters, another three hundred in fixed-wing aircraft. Noyes was the kind of doctor who'd discovered too late that flying was as attractive a calling as medicine. He went up at every opportunity, often giving pilots special medical care for their dependents to get backseat time in an F-4 Phantom. The Sea Stallion, he noted, was not cruising. It was running flat out.

Pamlico Sound

The *Pogy* came to a halt about the time the helicopter left Cherry Point. The *October* altered course to starboard again and halted even with her to the north. The *Dallas* followed suit. A minute after that the Zodiac reappeared at the *Dallas'* side, then approached the *Red October* slowly, almost wallowing with her cargo of men.

"Ahoy *Red October!*"

This time Borodin answered. He had an accent but his English was understandable. "Identify."

"This is Bart Mancuso, commanding officer of USS *Dallas*. I have our ship's medical representative aboard and some other men. Request permission to come aboard, sir."

Ryan saw the *starpom* grimace. For the first time Borodin really had to face up to what was happening, and he would have been less than human to accept it without some kind of struggle.

"Permission is—yes."

The Zodiac edged right up to the curve of the hull. A man leaped aboard with a line to secure the raft. Ten men clambered off, one breaking away to climb up the submarine's sail.

"Captain? I'm Bart Mancuso. I understand you have some hurt men aboard."

"Yes," Borodin nodded, "the captain and a British officer, both shot."

"Shot?" Mancuso was surprised.

"Worry about that later," Ryan said sharply. "Let's get your doc working on them, okay?"

"Sure, where's the hatch?"

Borodin spoke into the bridge mike, and a few seconds later a circle of light appeared on deck at the foot of the sail.

"We haven't got a physician, we have an independent duty

corpsman. He's pretty good, and *Pogy*'s man will be here in another couple minutes. Who are you, by the way?"

"He is a spy," Borodin said with palpable irony.

"Jack Ryan."

"And you, sir?"

"Captain Second Rank Vasily Borodin. I am—first officer, yes? Come over into the station, Commander. Please excuse me, we are all very tired."

"You're not the only ones." There wasn't that much room. Mancuso perched himself on the coaming. "Captain, I want you to know we had a bastard of a time tracking you. You are to be complimented for your professional skill."

The compliment did not elicit the anticipated response from Borodin. "You were able to track us. How?"

"I brought him along, you can meet him."

"And what are we to do?"

"Orders from shore are to wait for the doc to arrive and dive. Then we sit tight until we get orders to move. Maybe a day, maybe two. I think we could all use the rest. After that, we get you to a nice safe place, and I will personally buy you the best damned Italian dinner you ever had." Mancuso grinned. "You get Italian food in Russia?"

"No, and if you are accustomed to good food, you may find *Krazny Oktyabr* not to your liking."

"Maybe I can fix that. How many men aboard?"

"Twelve. Ten Soviet, the Englishman, and the spy." Borodin glanced at Ryan with a thin smile.

"Okay." Mancuso reached into his coat and came out with a radio. "This is Mancuso."

"We're here, Skipper," Chambers replied.

"Get some food together for our friends. Six meals for twenty-five men. Send a cook over with it. Wally, I want to show these men some good chow. Got it?"

"Aye aye, Skipper. Out."

"I got some good cooks, Captain. Shame this wasn't last week. We had lasagna, just like momma used to make. All that was missing was the Chianti."

"They have vodka," Ryan observed.

"Only for spies," Borodin said. Two hours after the shootout Ryan had had the shakes badly, and Borodin had sent him a drink

from the medical stores. “We are told that your submarine men are greatly pampered.”

“Maybe so,” Mancuso nodded. “But we stay out sixty or seventy days at a time. That’s hard enough, don’t you think?”

“How about we go below?” Ryan suggested. Everyone agreed. It was getting cold.

Borodin, Ryan and Mancuso went below to find the Americans on one side of the control room and the Soviets on the other, just like before. The American captain broke the ice.

“Captain Borodin, this is the man who found you. Come here, Jonesy.”

“It wasn’t very easy, sir,” Jones said. “Can I get to work? Can I see your sonar room?”

“Bugayev.” Borodin waved the ship’s electronics officer over. The captain-lieutenant led the sonarman aft.

Jones took one look at the equipment and muttered, “Kludge.” The face plates all had louvers on them to let out the heat. God, did they use vacuum tubes? Jones wondered. He pulled a screwdriver from his pocket to find out.

“You speak English, sir?”

“Yes, a little.”

“Can I see the circuit diagrams for these, please?”

Bugayev blinked. No enlisted man, and only one of his *michmanyy*, had ever asked for it. Then he took the binder of schematics from its shelf on the forward bulkhead.

Jones matched the code number of the set he was checking with the right section of the binder. Unfolding the diagram, he noted with relief that ohms were ohms, all over the world. He began tracing his finger along the page, then pulled the cover panel off to look inside the set.

“Kludge, megakludge to the max!” Jones was shocked enough to lapse into Valspeak.

“Excuse me, what is this ‘kludge’?”

“Oh, pardon me, sir. That’s an expression we use in the navy. I don’t know how to say it in Russian. Sorry.” Jones stifled a grin as he went back to the schematic. “Sir, this one here’s a low-powered high-frequency set, right? You use this for mines and stuff?”

It was Bugayev’s turn to be shocked. “You have been trained in Soviet equipment?”

“No, sir, but I’ve sure heard a lot of it.” Wasn’t this obvious?

Jones wondered. “Sir, this is a high-frequency set, but it doesn’t draw a lot of power. What else is it good for? A low-power FM set you use for mines, for work under ice, and for docking, right?”

“Correct.”

“You have a gertrude, sir?”

“Gertrude?”

“Underwater telephone, sir, for talking to other subs.” Didn’t this guy know anything?

“Ah, yes, but it is located in control, and it is broken.”

“Uh-huh.” Jones looked over the diagram again. “I think I can rig a modulator on this baby, then, and make it into a gertrude for ya. Might be useful. You think your skipper would want that, sir?”

“I will ask.” He expected Jones to stay put, but the young sonarman was right behind him when he went to control. Bugayev explained the suggestion to Borodin while Jones talked to Mancuso.

“They got a little FM set that looks just like the old gertrudes in sonar school. We have a spare modulator in stores, and I can probably rig it up in thirty minutes, no sweat,” the sonarman said.

“Captain Borodin, do you agree?” Mancuso asked.

Borodin felt as if he were being pushed too fast, even though the suggestion made perfectly good sense. “Yes, have your man do it.”

“Skipper, how long we gonna be here?” Jones asked.

“A day or two, why?”

“Sir, this boat looks kinda thin on creature comforts, you know? How ’bout I grab a TV and a tape machine? Give ’em something to look at, you know, sort of give ’em a quick look at the USA?”

Mancuso laughed. They wanted to learn everything they could about this boat, but they had plenty of time for that, and Jones’ idea looked like a good way to ease the tension. On the other hand, he didn’t want to incite a mutiny on his own sub. “Okay, take the one from the wardroom.”

“Right, Skipper.”

The Zodiac delivered the *Pogy*’s corpsman a few minutes later, and Jones took the boat back to the *Dallas*. Gradually the officers were beginning to engage in conversation. Two Russians were trying to talk to Mannion and were looking at his hair. They had never met a black man before.

“Captain Borodin, I have orders to take something out of the control room that will identify—I mean, something that comes from this boat.” Mancuso pointed. “Can I take that depth gauge? I can

have one of my men rig a substitute." The gauge, he saw, had a number.

"For what reason?"

"Beats me, but those are my orders."

"Yes," Borodin replied.

Mancuso ordered one of his chiefs to perform the job. The chief pulled a crescent wrench from his pocket and removed the nut holding the needle and dial in place.

"This is a little bigger than ours, Skipper, but not by much. I think we have a spare. I can flip it backwards and scribe in the markings, okay?"

Mancuso handed his radio over. "Call it in and have Jonesy bring the spare back with him."

"Aye, Cap'n." The chief put the needle back in place after setting the dial on the deck.

The Sea Stallion did not attempt to land, though the pilot was tempted. The deck was almost large enough to try. As it was, the helicopter hovered a few feet over the missile deck, and the doctor leaped into the arms of two seamen. His supplies were tossed down a moment later. The colonel remained in the back of the chopper and slid the door shut. The bird turned slowly to move back southwest, its massive rotor raising spray from the waters of Pamlico Sound.

"Was that what I think it was?" the pilot asked over the intercom.

"Wasn't it backwards? I thought missile subs had the missiles aft of the sail. Those were in front of the sail, weren't they? I mean, wasn't that the rudder sticking up behind the sail?" the copilot responded quizzically.

"It was a Russian sub!" the pilot said.

"*What?*" It was too late to see, they were already two miles away. "Those were our guys on the deck. They weren't Russians."

"*Son of a bitch!*" the major swore wonderingly. And he couldn't say a thing. The colonel of division intelligence had been damned specific about that: "You don't see nothin', you don't hear nothin', you don't think nothin', and you goddamned well don't ever say nothin'."

"I'm Doctor Noyes," the commander said to Mancuso in the control room. He had never been on a submarine before, and when he looked around he saw a compartment full of instruments all in a foreign language. "What ship is this?"

"*Krazny Oktyabr*," Borodin said, coming over. In the centerpiece of his cap there was a gleaming red star.

"What the hell is going on here?" Noyes demanded.

"Doc," Ryan took him by the arm, "you have two patients aft. Why not let's worry about them?"

Noyes followed him aft to sick bay. "What's going on here?" he persisted more quietly.

"The Russians just lost a submarine," Ryan explained, "and now she belongs to us. And if you tell anybody—"

"I read you, but I don't believe you."

"You don't have to believe me. What kind of cutter are you?"

"Thoracic."

"Good," Ryan turned into sick bay, "you have a gunshot wound victim who needs you bad."

Williams was lying naked on the table. A sailor came in with an armful of medical supplies and set them on Petrov's desk. The *October*'s medical locker had a supply of frozen plasma, and the two corpsmen already had two units running into the lieutenant. A chest tube was in, draining into a vacuum bottle.

"We got a nine-millimeter in this man's chest," one of the corpsmen said after introducing himself and his partner. "He's had a chest tube in the last ten hours, they tell me. The head looks worse than it is. Right pupil is a little blown, but no big deal. The chest is bad, sir. You'd better take a listen."

"Vitals?" Noyes fished in his bag for a stethoscope.

"Heart is 110 and thready. Blood pressure's eighty over forty."

Noyes moved his stethoscope around Williams' chest, frowning. "Heart's in the wrong place. We have a left tension pneumothorax. There must be a quart of fluid in there, and it sounds like he's heading for congestive failure." Noyes turned to Ryan. "You get out of here. I've got a chest to crack."

"Take care of him, Doc. He's a good man."

"Aren't they all," Noyes observed, stripping off his jacket. "Let's get scrubbed, people."

Ryan wondered if a prayer would help. Noyes looked and talked like a surgeon. Ryan hoped he was. He went aft to the captain's cabin, where Ramius was sleeping with the drugs he'd been given. The leg had stopped bleeding, and evidently one of the corpsmen had checked on it. Noyes could work on him next. Ryan went forward.

Borodin felt he had lost control and didn't like it, though it was something of a relief. Two weeks of constant tension plus the nerve-wrenching change in plans had shaken the officer more than he would have believed. The situation now was unpleasant—the Americans were trying to be kind, but they were so damned overpowering! At least the *Red October*'s officers were not in danger.

Twenty minutes later the Zodiac was back again. Two sailors went topside to unload a few hundred pounds of frozen food, then helped Jones with his electronic gear. It took several minutes to get everything squared away, and the seamen who took the food forward came back shaken after finding two stiff bodies and a third frozen solid. There had not been time to move the two recent casualties.

"Got everything, Skipper," Jones reported. He handed the depth gauge dial to the chief.

"What is all of this?" Borodin asked.

"Captain, I got the modulator to make the gertrude." Jones held up a small box. "This other stuff is a little color TV, a video cassette recorder, and some movie tapes. The skipper thought you gentlemen might want something to relax with, to get to know us a little, you know?"

"Movies?" Borodin shook his head. "Cinema movies?"

"Sure," Mancuso chuckled. "What did you bring, Jonesy?"

"Well, sir, I got *E.T., Star Wars, Big Jake*, and *Hondo*." Clearly Jones wanted to be careful what parts of America he introduced the Russians to.

"My apologies, Captain. My crewman has limited taste in movies."

At the moment Borodin would have settled for *The Battleship Potemkin*. The fatigue was really hitting him hard.

The cook bustled aft with an armload of groceries. "I'll have coffee in a few minutes, sir," he said to Borodin on his way to the galley.

"I would like something to eat. None of us has eaten in a day," Borodin said.

"Food!" Mancuso called aft.

"Aye, Skipper. Let me figure this galley out."

Mannion checked his watch. "Twenty minutes, sir."

"We have everything we need aboard?"

"Yes, sir."

Jones bypassed the pulse control on the sonar amplifier and wired in the modulator. It was even easier than he'd expected. He had taken a radio microphone from the *Dallas* along with everything else and now connected it to the sonar set before powering the system up. He had to wait for the set to warm up. Jones hadn't seen this many tubes since he'd gone out on TV repair jobs with his father, and that had been a long time ago.

"*Dallas*, this is Jonesy, do you copy?"

"Aye." The reply was scratchy, like a taxicab radio.

"Thanks. Out." He switched off. "It works. That was pretty easy, wasn't it?"

Enlisted man, hell! And not even trained on Soviet equipment! the *October*'s electronics officer thought. It never occurred to him that this piece of equipment was a near copy of an obsolete American FM system. "How long have you been a sonarman?"

"Three and a half years, sir. Since I dropped out of college."

"You learn all this in three years?" the officer asked sharply.

Jones shrugged. "What's the big deal, sir? I've been foolin' with radios and stuff since I was a kid. You mind if I play some music, sir?"

Jones had decided to be especially nice. He had only one tape of a Russian composer, the Nutcracker Suite, and had brought that along with four Bachs. Jones liked to hear music while he prayed over circuit diagrams. The young sonarman was in Hog Heaven. All the Russian sets he had listened to for three years—now he had their schematics, their hardware, and the time to figure them all out. Bugayev continued to watch in amazement as Jones' fingers did their ballet through the manual pages to the music of Tchaikovsky.

"Time to dive, sir," Mannion said in control.

"Very well. With your permission, Captain Borodin, I will assist with the vents. All hatches and openings are…shut." The diving board used the same light-array system as American boats, Mancuso

noticed.

Mancuso took stock of the situation one last time. Butler and his four most senior petty officers were already tending to the nuclear tea kettle aft. The situation looked pretty good, considering. The only thing that could really go badly wrong would be for the *October*'s officers to change their minds. The *Dallas* would be keeping the missile sub under constant sonar observation. If she moved, the *Dallas* had a ten-knot speed advantage with which to block the channel.

"The way I see it, Captain, we are rigged for dive," Mancuso said.

Borodin nodded and sounded the diving alarm. It was a buzzer, just like on American boats. Mancuso, Mannion, and the Russian officer worked the complex vent controls. The *Red October* began her slow descent. In five minutes she was resting on the bottom, with seventy feet of water over the top of her sail.

The White House

Pelt was on the phone to the Soviet embassy at three in the morning. "Alex, this is Jeffrey Pelt."

"How are you, Dr. Pelt? I must offer my thanks and that of the Soviet people for your action to save our sailor. I was informed a few minutes ago that he is now conscious, and that he is expected to recover fully."

"Yes, I just learned that myself. What's his name, by the way?" Pelt wondered if he had awakened Arbatov. It didn't sound like it.

"Andre Katyskin, a cook petty officer from Leningrad."

"Good, Alex, I am informed that USS *Pigeon* has rescued nearly the entire crew of another Soviet submarine off the Carolinas. Her name, evidently, was *Red October*. That's the good news, Alex. The bad news is that the vessel exploded and sank before we could get them all off. Most of the officers, and two of our officers, were lost."

"When was this?"

"Very early yesterday morning. Sorry about the delay, but *Pigeon* had trouble with the radio, as a result of the underwater explosion, they say. You know how that sort of thing can happen."

"Indeed." Pelt had to admire the response, not a trace of irony. "Where are they now?"

"The *Pigeon* is sailing to Charleston, South Carolina. We'll have

your crewmen flown directly to Washington from there."

"And this submarine exploded? You are sure?"

"Yeah, one of the crewmen said they had a major reactor accident. It was just good luck that *Pigeon* was there. She was heading to the Virginia coast to look at the other one you lost. I think your navy needs a little work, Alex," Pelt observed.

"I will pass that along to Moscow, Doctor," Arbatov responded dryly. "Can you tell us where this happened?"

"I can do better than that. We have a ship taking a deep-diving research sub down to look for the wreckage. If you want, you can have your navy fly a man to Norfolk, and we'll fly him out to check it for you. Fair enough?"

"You say you lost two officers?" Arbatov played for time, surprised at the offer.

"Yes, both rescue people. We did get a hundred men off, Alex," Pelt said defensively. "That's something."

"Indeed it is, Dr. Pelt. I must cable Moscow for instructions. I will be back to you. You are at your office?"

"Correct. Bye, Alex." He hung up and looked at the president. "Do I pass, boss?"

"Work a little bit on the sincerity, Jeff." The president was sprawled in a leather chair, a robe over his pajamas. "They'll bite?"

"They'll bite. They sure as hell want to confirm the destruction of the sub. Question is, can we fool 'em?"

"Foster seems to think so. It sounds plausible enough."

"Hmph. Well, we have her, don't we?" Pelt observed.

"Yep, I guess that story about the GRU agent was wrong, or else they kicked him off with everybody else. I want to see that Captain Ramius. Jeez! Pulling a reactor scare, no wonder he got everybody off the ship!"

The Pentagon

Skip Tyler was in the CNO's office trying to relax in a chair. The coast guard station on the inlet had had a low-light television, the tape from which had been flown by helicopter to Cherry Point and from there by Phantom jet fighter to Andrews. Now it was in the hands of a courier whose automobile was just pulling up at the Pentagon's main entrance.

"I have a package to hand deliver to Admiral Foster," an ensign

announced a few minutes later. Foster's flag secretary pointed him to the door.

"Good morning, sir! This is for you, sir." The ensign handed Foster the wrapped cassette.

"Thank you. Dismissed."

Foster inserted the cassette in the tape player atop his office television. The set was already on, and the picture appeared in several seconds.

Tyler was standing beside the CNO as it focused. "Yep."

"Yep," Foster agreed.

The picture was lousy—no other word for it. The low-light television system did not give a very sharp picture since it amplified all of the ambient light equally. This tended to wash out many details. But what they saw was enough: a very large missile submarine whose sail was much farther aft than the sails on anything a Western country made. She dwarfed the *Dallas* and *Pogy*. They watched the screen without a word for the next fifteen minutes. Except for the wobbly camera, the picture was about as lively as a test pattern.

"Well," Foster said as the tape ended, "we got us a Russian boomer."

"How 'bout that?" Tyler grinned.

"Skip, you were up for command of *Los Angeles*, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"We owe you for this, Commander, we owe you a lot. I did some checking the other day. An officer injured in the line of duty does not necessarily have to retire unless he is demonstrably unfit for duty. An accident while returning from working on your boat is line of duty, I think, and we've had a few ship commanders who were short a leg. I'll go to the president myself on this, son. It will mean a year's work getting back in the groove, but if you still want your command, by God, I'll get it for you."

Tyler sat down for that. It would mean being fitted for a new leg, something he'd been considering for months, and a few weeks getting used to it. Then a year—a good year—relearning everything he needed to know before he could go to sea…He shook his head. "Thank you, Admiral. You don't know what that means to me—but, no. I'm past that now. I have a different life, and different responsibilities now, and I'd just be taking someone else's slot. Tell you what, you let me get a look at that boomer, and we're even."

"That I can guarantee." Foster had hoped he'd respond that way, had been nearly sure of it. It was too bad, though. Tyler, he thought, would have been a good candidate for his own flag except for the leg. Well, nobody ever said the world was fair.

The Red October

"You guys seem to have things under control," Ryan observed. "Does anybody mind if I flake out somewhere?"

"Flake out?" Borodin asked.

"Sleep."

"Ah, take Dr. Petrov's cabin, across from the medical office."

On his way aft Ryan looked in Borodin's cabin and found the vodka bottle that had been liberated. It didn't have much taste, but it was smooth enough. Petrov's bunk was not very wide or very soft. Ryan was past caring. He took a long swallow and lay down in his uniform, which was already so greasy and dirty as to be beyond hope. He was asleep in five minutes.

The Sea Cliff

The air-purifier system was not working properly, Lieutenant Sven Johnsen thought. If his sinus cold had lasted a few more days he might not have noticed. The *Sea Cliff* was just passing ten thousand feet, and they couldn't tinker with the system until they surfaced. It was not dangerous—the environmental control systems had as many built-in redundancies as the Space Shuttle—just a nuisance.

"I've never been so deep," Captain Igor Kaganovich said conversationally. Getting him here had been complicated. It had required a Helix helicopter from the *Kiev* to the *Tarawa*, then a U.S. Navy Sea King to Norfolk. Another helicopter had taken him to the USS *Austin*, which was heading for 33N 75W at twenty knots. The *Austin* was a landing ship dock, a large vessel whose aft end was a covered well. She was usually used for landing craft, but today she carried the *Sea Cliff*, a three-man submarine that had been flown down from Woods Hole, Massachusetts.

"Does take some getting used to," Johnsen agreed, "but when you get down to it, five hundred feet, ten thousand feet, doesn't make much difference. A hull fracture would kill you just as fast, just down here there'd be less residue for the next boat to try and

recover."

"Keep thinking those happy thoughts, sir," Machinist's Mate First Class Jesse Overton said. "Still clear on sonar?"

"Right, Jess." Johnsen had been working with the machinist's mate for two years. The *Sea Cliff* was their baby, a small, rugged research submarine used mainly for oceanographic tasks, including the emplacement or repair of SOSUS sensors. On the three-man sub there was little place for bridge discipline. Overton was not well educated or very articulate—at least not politely articulate. His skill at maneuvering the minisub was unsurpassed, however, and Johnsen was just as happy to leave that job to him. It was the lieutenant's task to manage the mission at hand.

"Air system needs some work," Johnsen observed.

"Yeah, the filters are about due for replacement. I was going to do that next week. Coulda' done it this morning, but I figured the backup control wiring was more important."

"Guess I have to go along with you on that. Handling okay?"

"Like a virgin." Overton's smile was reflected in the thick Lexan view port in front of the control seat. The *Sea Cliff*'s awkward design made her clumsy to maneuver. It was as though she knew what she wanted to do, just not quite how she wanted to do it. "How wide's the target area?"

"Pretty wide. *Pigeon* says after the explosion the pieces spread from hell to breakfast."

"I believe it. Three miles down, and a current to spread it around."

"The boat's name is *Red October*, Captain? A *Victor*-class attack submarine, you said?"

"That is your name for the class," Kaganovich said.

"What do you call them?" Johnsen asked. He got no reply. What was the big deal? he wondered. What did the name of the class matter to anybody?

"Switching on locater sonar." Johnsen activated several systems, and the *Sea Cliff* pulsed with the sound of the high-frequency sonar mounted on her belly. "There's the bottom." The yellow screen showed bottom contours in white.

"Anything sticking up, sir?" Overton asked.

"Not today, Jess."

A year before they had been operating a few miles from this spot and nearly been impaled on a Liberty ship, sunk around 1942 by a

German U-boat. The hulk had been sitting up at an angle, propped up by a massive boulder. That near collision would surely have been fatal, and it had taught both men caution.

"Okay, I'm starting to get some hard returns. Directly ahead, spread out like a fan. Another five hundred feet to the bottom."

"Right."

"Hmph. There's one big piece, 'bout thirty feet long, maybe nine or ten across, eleven o'clock, three hundred yards. We'll go for that one first."

"Coming left, lights coming on now."

A half-dozen high-intensity floodlights came on, at once surrounding the submersible in a globe of light. It did not penetrate more than ten yards in the water, which ate up the light energy.

"There's the bottom, just where you said, Mr. Johnsen," Overton said. He halted the powered descent and checked for buoyancy. Almost exactly neutral, good. "This current's going to be tough on battery power."

"How strong is it?"

"Knot an' a half, maybe more like two, depending on bottom contours. Same as last year. I figure we can maneuver an hour, hour an' a half, tops."

Johnsen agreed. Oceanographers were still puzzling over this deep current, which seemed to change direction from time to time in no particular pattern. Odd. There were a lot of odd things in the ocean. That's why Johnsen got his oceanography degree, to figure some of the buggers out. It sure beat working for a living. Being three miles down wasn't work, not to Johnsen.

"I see somethin', a flash off the bottom right in front of us. Want I should grab it?"

"If you can."

They couldn't see it yet on any of the *Sea Cliff*'s three TV monitors, which looked straight ahead, forty-five degrees left and right of the bow.

"Okay." Overton put his right hand on the waldo control. This was what he was really best at.

"Can you see what it is?" Johnsen asked, fiddling with the TV.

"Some kinda instrument. Can you kill the number one flood, sir? It's dazzlin' me."

"Wait one." Johnsen leaned forward to kill the proper switch. The number one floodlight provided illumination for the bow

camera, which went immediately blank.

"Okay, baby, now let's just hold steady…" The machinist's mate's left hand worked the directional propeller controls; his right was poised in the waldo glove. Now he was the only one who could see the target. Overton's reflection was grinning at itself. His right hand moved rapidly.

"Gotcha!" he said. The waldo took the depth-gauge dial a diver had magnetically affixed to the *Sea Cliff*'s bow prior to setting out from the *Austin*'s dock bay. "You can hit the light again, sir."

Johnsen flicked it on, and Overton maneuvered his catch in front of the bow camera. "Can ya see what it is?"

"Looks like a depth gauge. Not one of ours, though," Johnsen observed. "Can you make it out, Captain?"

"*Da*," Kaganovich said at once. He let out a long breath, trying to sound unhappy. "It is one of ours. I cannot read the number, but it is Soviet."

"Put it in the basket, Jess," Johnsen said.

"Right." He maneuvered the waldo, placing the dial in a basket welded on the bow, then getting the manipulator arm back to its rest position. "Getting some silt. Let's pick up a little."

As the *Sea Cliff* got too close to the bottom the wash from her propellers stirred up the fine alluvial silt. Overton increased power to get back to a twenty-foot height.

"That's better. See what the current is doin', Mr. Johnsen? Good two knots. Gonna cut our bottom time." The current was wafting the cloud to port, rather quickly. "Where's the big target?"

"Dead ahead, hundred yards. Let's make sure we see what that is."

"Right. Going forward…There's something, looks like a butcher knife. We want it?"

"No, let's keep going."

"Okay, range?"

"Sixty yards. Ought to be seeing it soon."

The two officers saw it on TV the same time Overton did. Just a spectral image at first, it faded like an afterimage in one's eye. Then it came back.

Overton was the first to react. "Damn!"

It was more than thirty feet long and appeared perfectly round. They approached from its rear and saw the main circle and within it four smaller cones that stuck out a foot or so.

"That's a missile, Skipper, a whole fuckin' Russkie nuclear missile!"

"Hold position, Jess."

"Aye aye." He backed off on the power controls.

"You said she was a *Victor*," Johnsen said to the Soviet.

"I was mistaken." Kaganovich's mouth twitched.

"Let's take a closer look, Jess."

The *Sea Cliff* moved forward, up the side of the rocket body. The Cyrillic lettering was unmistakable, though they were too far off to make out the serial numbers. There was a new treasure for Davey Jones, an SS-N-20 Seahawk, with its eight five-hundred-kiloton MIRVs.

Kaganovich was careful to note the markings on the missile body. He'd been briefed on the Seahawk immediately before flying from the *Kiev*. As an intelligence officer, he ordinarily knew more about American weapons than their Soviet counterparts.

How convenient, he thought. The Americans had allowed him to ride in one of their most advanced research vessels whose internal arrangements he had already memorized, and they had accomplished his mission for him. The *Red October* was dead. All he had to do was get that information to Admiral Stralbo on the *Kirov* and the fleet could leave the American coast. Let them come to the Norwegian Sea to play their nasty games! See who would win them up there!

"Position check, Jess. Mark the sucker."

"Aye." Overton pressed a button to deploy a sonar transponder that would respond only to a coded American sonar signal. This would guide them back to the missile. They would return later with their heavy-lift rig to put a line on the missile and haul it to the surface.

"That is the property of the Soviet Union," Kaganovich pointed out. "It is in—under international waters. It belongs to my country."

"Then you can fuckin' come and get it!" snapped the American seaman. He must be an officer in disguise, Kaganovich thought. "Beg pardon, Mr. Johnsen."

"We'll be back for it," Johnsen said.

"You'll never lift it. It is too heavy," Kaganovich objected.

"I suppose you're right." Johnsen smiled.

Kaganovich allowed the Americans their small victory. It could have been worse. Much worse. "Shall we continue to search for

more wreckage?"

"No, I think we'll go back up," Johnsen decided.

"But your orders—"

"My orders, Captain Kaganovich, were to search for the remains of a *Victor*-class attack submarine. We found the grave of a boomer. You lied to us, Captain, and our courtesy to you ends at this point. You got what you wanted, I guess. Later we'll be back for what we want." Johnsen reached up and pulled the release handle for the iron ballast. The metal slab dropped free. This gave the *Sea Cliff* a thousand pounds of positive buoyancy. There was no way to stay down now, even if they wanted to.

"Home, Jess."

"Aye aye, Skipper."

The ride back to the surface was a silent one.

The USS Austin

An hour later, Kaganovich climbed to the *Austin*'s bridge and requested permission to send a message to the *Kirov*. This had been agreed upon beforehand, else the *Austin*'s commanding officer would have refused. Word on the dead sub's identity had spread fast. The Soviet officer broadcast a series of code words, accompanied by the serial number from the depth-gauge dial. These were acknowledged at once.

Overton and Johnsen watched the Russian board the helicopter, carrying the depth-gauge dial.

"I didn't like him much, Mr. Johnsen. *Keptin Kaganobitch*. The name sounds like a terminal studder. We snookered him, didn't we?"

"Remind me never to play cards with you, Jess."

The Red October

Ryan woke up after six hours to music that seemed dreamily familiar. He lay in his bunk for a minute trying to place it, then slipped his feet into his shoes and went forward to the wardroom.

It was *E.T.* Ryan arrived just in time to see the credits scrolling up the thirteen-inch TV set sitting on the forward end of the wardroom table. Most of the Russian officers and three Americans had been watching it. The Russians were all dabbing their eyes.

Jack got a cup of coffee and sat at the end of the table.

"You liked it?"

"It was magnificent!" Borodin proclaimed.

Lieutenant Mannion chuckled. "Second time we ran it."

One of the Russians started speaking rapidly in his native language. Borodin translated for him. "He asks if all American children act with such—Bugayev, *svobodno?*"

"Free," Bugayev translated, incorrectly but close enough.

Ryan laughed. "I never did, but the movie was set in California—people out there are a little crazy. The truth is, no, kids don't act like that—at least I've never seen it, and I have two. At the same time, we do raise our kids to be a lot more independent than Soviet parents do."

Borodin translated, and then gave the Russian response. "So, all American children are not such hooligans?"

"Some are. America is not perfect, gentlemen. We make lots of mistakes." Ryan had decided to tell the truth insofar as he could.

Borodin translated again. The reactions around the table were a little dubious.

"I have told them this movie is a child's story and should not be taken too seriously. This is so?"

"Yes, sir," Mancuso, who had just come in, said. "It's a kid's story, but I've seen it five times. Welcome back, Ryan."

"Thank you, Commander. I take it you have things under control."

"Yep. I guess we all needed the chance to unwind. I'll have to write Jonesy another commendation letter. This really was a good idea." He waved at the television. "We have lots of time to be serious."

Noyes came in. "How's Williams?" Ryan asked.

"He'll make it." Noyes filled his cup. "I had him open for three and a half hours. The head wound was superficial—bloody as hell, but head wounds are like that. The chest was a close one, though. The bullet missed the pericardium by a whisker. Captain Borodin, who gave that man first aid?"

The *starpom* pointed to a lieutenant. "He does not speak English."

"Tell him that Williams owes him his life. Putting that chest tube in was the difference. He would have died without it."

"You're sure he'll make it?" Ryan persisted.

"Of course he'll make it, Ryan. That's what I do for a living. He'll be a sick boy for a while, and I'd feel better if we had him in a real hospital, but everything's under control."

"And Captain Ramius?" Borodin asked.

"No problem. He's still sleeping. I took my time sewing it up. Ask him where he got his first aid training."

Borodin did. "He said he likes to read medical books."

"How old is he?"

"Twenty-four."

"Tell him if he ever wants to study medicine, I'll tell him how to get started. If he knows how to do the right thing at the right time, he might just be good enough to do it for a living."

The young officer was pleased by this comment and asked how much money a doctor could make in America.

"I'm in the service, so I don't make very much. Forty-eight thousand a year, counting flight pay. I could do a lot better on the outside."

"In the Soviet Union," Borodin pointed out, "doctors are paid about the same as factory workers."

"Maybe that explains why your docs are no good," Noyes observed.

"When will the captain be able to resume command?" Borodin asked.

"I'm going to keep him down all day," Noyes said. "I don't want him to start bleeding again. He can start moving around tomorrow. Carefully. I don't want him on that leg too much. He'll be fine, gentlemen. A little weak from the blood loss, but he'll recover fully." Noyes made his pronouncements as though he were quoting physical laws.

"We thank you, Doctor," Borodin said.

Noyes shrugged. "It's what they pay me for. Now can I ask a question? What the hell is going on here?"

Borodin laughed, translating the question for his comrades. "We will all become American citizens."

"And you're bringing a sub along with you, eh? Son of a gun. For a while there I thought this was some sort of—I don't know, something. This is quite a story. Guess I can't tell it to anybody, though."

"Correct, Doctor." Ryan smiled.

"Too bad," Noyes muttered as he headed back to sick bay.

Moscow

"So, Comrade Admiral, you report success to us?" Narmonov asked.

"Yes, Comrade General Secretary," Gorshkov nodded, surveying the conference table in the underground command center. All of the inner circle were here, along with the military chiefs and the head of the KGB. "Admiral Stralbo's fleet intelligence officer, Captain Kaganovich, was permitted by the Americans to view the wreckage from aboard one of their deep-submergence research vessels. The craft recovered a fragment of wreckage, a depth-gauge dial. These objects are numbered, and the number was immediately relayed to Moscow. It was positively from *Red October*. Kaganovich also inspected a missile blasted loose from the submarine. It was definitely a Seahawk. *Red October* is dead. Our mission is accomplished."

"By chance, Comrade Admiral, not by design," Mikhail Alexandrov pointed out. "Your fleet failed in its mission to *locate* and destroy the submarine. I think Comrade Gerasimov has some information for us."

Nikolay Gerasimov was the new KGB chief. He had already given his report to the political members of this group and was eager to release it to these strutting peacocks in uniform. He wanted to see their reactions. The KGB had scores to settle with these men. Gerasimov summarized the report he had from agent Cassius.

"Impossible!" Gorshkov snapped.

"Perhaps," Gerasimov conceded politely. "There is a strong probability that this is a very clever piece of disinformation. It is now being investigated by our agents in the field. There are, however, some interesting details which support this hypothesis. Permit me to review them, Comrade Admiral.

"First, why did the Americans allow our man aboard one of their most sophisticated research submarines? Second, why did they cooperate with us at all, saving our sailor from the *Politovskiy* and *telling* us about it? They let us see our man immediately. Why? Why not keep our man, use him, and dispose of him? Sentimentality? I think not. Third, at the same time they picked this man up their air and fleet units were harassing our fleet in the most blatant and aggressive manner. This suddenly stopped, and a day later they were tripping over their own feet in their efforts to assist in our

‘search and rescue.’”

“Because Stralbo wisely and courageously decided to refrain from reacting to their provocations,” Gorshkov replied.

Gerasimov nodded politely again. “Perhaps so. That was an intelligent decision on the admiral’s part. It cannot be easy for a uniformed officer to swallow his pride so. On the other hand, I speculate that it is also possible that about this time the Americans received this information which Cassius passed on to us. I further speculate that the Americans were fearful of our reaction were we to suspect that they had perpetrated this entire affair as a CIA operation. We know now that several imperialist intelligence services are inquiring as to the reason for this fleet operation.

“Over the past two days we have been doing some fast checking of our own. We find,” Gerasimov consulted his notes, “that there are twenty-nine Polish engineers at the Polyarnyy submarine yard, mainly in quality control and inspection posts, that mail and message-handling procedures are very lax, and the Captain Ramius did not, as he supposedly threatened in his letter to Comrade Padorin, sail his submarine into New York harbor, but was rather in a position a thousand kilometers south when the submarine was destroyed.”

“That was an obvious piece of disinformation on Ramius’ part,” Gorshkov objected. “Ramius was both baiting us and deliberately misleading us. For that reason we deployed our fleet at all of the American ports.”

“And never did find him,” Alexandrov noted quietly. “Go on, Comrade.”

Gerasimov continued. “Whatever port he was supposedly heading for, he was over five hundred kilometers from any of them, and we are certain that he could have reached any of them on a direct course. In fact, Comrade Admiral, as you reported in your initial briefing, he could have reached the American coast within seven days of leaving port.”

“To do that, as I explained at length last week, would have meant traveling at maximum speed. Missile submarine commanders prefer not to do this,” Gorshkov said.

“I can understand it,” Alexandrov observed, “in view of the fate of the *Politovskiy*. But you would expect a traitor to the *Rodina* to run like a thief.”

“Into the trap we set,” Gorshkov replied.

"Which failed," Narmonov commented.

"I do not claim that this story is true, nor do I claim it is even a likely one at this point," Gerasimov said, keeping his voice detached and clinical, "but there is sufficient circumstantial evidence supporting it that I must recommend an in-depth investigation by the Committee for State Security touching on all aspects of this affair."

"Security in my yards is a naval and GRU matter," Gorshkov said.

"No longer." Narmonov announced the decision reached two hours earlier. "The KGB will investigate this shameful business along two lines. One group will investigate the information from our agent in Washington. The other will proceed on the assumption that the letter from—allegedly from—Captain Ramius was genuine. If this was a traitorous conspiracy, it could only have been possible because Ramius was able under current regulations and practices to choose his own officers. The Committee for State Security will report to us on the desirability of continuing this practice, on the current degree of control ship captains have over the careers of their officers, and over Party control of the fleet. I think we will begin our reforms by allowing officers to transfer from one ship to another with greater frequency. If officers stay in one place too long, obviously they may develop confusion in their loyalties."

"What you suggest will destroy the efficiency of my fleet!" Gorshkov pounded on the table. It was a mistake.

"The People's fleet, Comrade Admiral," Alexandrov corrected. "The Party's fleet." Gorshkov knew where that idea came from. Narmonov still had Alexandrov's support. That made the comrade general secretary's position secure, and that meant the positions of other men around this table were not. Which men?

Padorin's mind revolted at the suggestion from the KGB. What did those bastard spies know about the navy? Or the Party? They were all corrupt opportunists. Andropov had proven that, and the Politburo was now letting this whelp Gerasimov attack the armed services, which safeguarded the nation against the imperialists, had saved it from Andropov's clique, and had never been anything but the stalwart servants of the Party. But it does all fit, doesn't it? he thought. Just as Khrushchev had deposed Zhukov, the man who made his succession possible when Beria was done away with, so these bastards would now play the KGB against the uniformed men

who had made their positions safe in the first place…

"As for you, Comrade Padorin," Alexandrov went on.

"Yes, Comrade Academician." For Padorin there was no apparent escape. The Main Political Administration had passed final approval on Ramius' appointment. If Ramius were indeed a traitor, then Padorin stood condemned for gross misjudgment, but if Ramius had been an unknowing pawn, then Padorin along with Gorshkov had been duped into precipitous action.

Narmonov took his cue from Alexandrov. "Comrade Admiral, we find that your secret provisions to safeguard the security of the submarine *Red October* were successfully implemented—unless, that is, Captain Ramius was blameless and scuttled the ship himself along with his officers and the Americans who were doubtless trying to steal it. In either case, pending the KGB's inspection of the parts recovered from the wreck, it would appear that the submarine did not fall into enemy hands."

Padorin blinked several times. His heart was beating fast, and he could feel a twinge of pain in his left chest. Was he being let off? Why? It took him a second to understand. He was the political officer, after all. If the Party was seeking to reestablish political control over the fleet—no, to reassert what never had been lost—then the Politburo could not afford to depose the Party's representative in high command. This would make him the vassal of these men, Alexandrov especially. Padorin decided that he could live with that.

And it made Gorshkov's position extremely vulnerable. Though it would take some months, Padorin was sure that the Russian fleet would have a new chief, one whose personal power would not be sufficient to make policy without Politburo approval. Gorshkov had become too big, too powerful, and the Party chieftains did not wish to have a man with so much personal prestige in high command.

I have my head, Padorin thought to himself, amazed at his good fortune.

"Comrade Gerasimov," Narmonov went on, "will be working with the political security section of your office to review your procedures and to offer suggestions for improvements."

So, now he became the KGB's spy in high command? Well, he had his head, his office, his dacha, and his pension in two years. It was a small price to pay. Padorin was more than content.

THE SIXTEENTH DAY
SATURDAY, 18 DECEMBER

The East Coast

The USS *Pigeon* arrived at her dock in Charleston at four in the morning. The Soviet crewmen, quartered in the crew's mess, had become a handful for everyone. As much as the Russian officers had worked to limit contact between their charges and their American rescuers, this had never really been possible. To state it simply, they had been unable to block the call of nature. The *Pigeon* had stuffed her visitors with good navy chow, and the nearest head was a few yards aft. On the way to and from the facilities, the *Red October*'s crewmen met with American sailors, some of whom were Russian-speaking officers disguised as enlisted men, others of whom were Russian language specialists in the enlisted rates flown out just as the last load of Soviets had arrived aboard. The fact that they were aboard a putatively hostile vessel and had found friendly Russian-speaking men had been overpowering for many of the young conscripts. Their remarks had been recorded on hidden tape machines for later examination in Washington. Petrov and the three junior officers had been slow to catch on, but when they did they took to escorting the men to the toilet in relays, like protective parents. What they were not able to prevent was an intelligence officer in a bosun's uniform making an offer of asylum: anyone who wished to remain in the United States would be permitted to do so. It took ten minutes for the information to spread throughout the crew.

When it came time for the American crewmen to eat, the Russian officers could hardly prohibit contact, and it turned out that the officers themselves got very little to eat, so busy were they patrolling the mess tables. To the bemused surprise of their American counterparts, they were forced to decline repeated invitations to the *Pigeon*'s wardroom.

The *Pigeon* docked carefully. There was no hurry. As the gangway was set in place, the band on the dock played a selection of Soviet and American airs to mark the cooperative nature of the rescue mission. The Soviets had expected that their arrival would be

a quiet one given the time of day. They were mistaken in this. When the first Soviet officer was halfway down the gangway, he was dazzled by fifty high-intensity television lights and the shouted questions of television reporters routed out of bed to meet the rescue ship and so have a bright piece of Christmas season news for the morning network broadcasts. The Russians had never encountered anything like Western newsmen before, and the resulting cultural collision was total chaos. Reporters singled out the officers, blocking their paths to the consternation of marines trying to keep control of things. To a man the officers pretended not to know a word of English, only to find that an enterprising reporter had brought along a Russian language professor from the University of South Carolina in Columbia. Petrov found himself stumbling through politically acceptable platitudes in front of a half-dozen cameras and wishing the entire affair were the bad dream it seemed to be. It took an hour to get every Russian sailor aboard the three buses chartered for the purpose and off to the airport. Along the way cars and vans filled with news crews raced alongside the buses, continuing to annoy the Russians with camera lights and further shouted questions that no one could understand. The scene at the airport was not much different. The air force had sent down a VC-135 transport, but before the Russians could board it they again had to jostle their way through a sea of reporters. Ivanov found himself confronted with a Slavic language expert whose Russian was marred by a horrendous accent. Boarding took another half hour.

A dozen air force officers got everyone seated and passed out cigarettes and liquor miniatures. By the time the VIP transport reached twenty thousand feet, it was a very happy flight. An officer spoke to them over the intercom system, explaining what was to happen. Medical checks would be made of everyone. The Soviet Union would be sending a plane for them the next day, but everyone hoped their stay might be extended a day or two so that they might experience American hospitality in full. The flight crew outdid itself, telling their passengers the history of every landmark, town, village, interstate highway, and truck stop on the flight route, proclaiming through the interpreter the wish of all Americans for peaceful, friendly relations with the Soviet Union, expressing the professional admiration of the U.S. Air Force for the courage of the Soviet seamen, and mourning the deaths of the officers who had

courageously lingered behind, allowing their men to go first. The whole affair was a masterpiece of duplicity aimed at overwhelming them, and it began to succeed.

The aircraft flew low over the Washington suburbs while approaching Andrews Air Force Base. The interpreter explained that they were flying over middle-class homes that belonged to ordinary workers in government and local industry. Three more buses awaited them on the ground, and instead of driving on the beltway around Washington, D.C., the buses drove directly through town. American officers on each bus apologized for the traffic jams, telling the passengers that nearly every American family has one car, many two or more, and that people only use public transportation to avoid the nuisance of driving. The *nuisance* of driving one's own car, the Soviet seaman thought in amazement. Their political officers might later tell them that this was a total lie, but who could deny the thousands of cars on the road? Surely this could not all be a sham staged for the benefit of a few sailors on an hour's notice? Driving through southeast D.C. they noted that black people owned cars—scarcely had room to park them all! The bus continued down the Mall, with the interpreters voicing the hope that they would be allowed to see the many museums open to everyone. The Air and Space Museum, it was mentioned, had a moon rock brought back by the Apollo astronauts…The Soviets saw the joggers in the Mall and the thousands of people casually strolling around. They jabbered among themselves as the buses turned north to Bethesda through the nicer sections of northwest Washington.

At Bethesda they were met by television crews broadcasting live over all three networks and by friendly, smiling U.S. Navy doctors and corpsmen who led them into the hospital for medical checks.

Ten embassy officials were there, wondering how to control the group but politically unable to protest the attention given their men in the spirit of détente. Doctors had been brought in from Walter Reed and other government hospitals to give each man a quick and thorough medical examination, particularly to check for radiation poisoning. Along the way each man found himself alone with a U.S. Navy officer who asked politely if that individual might wish to stay in the United States, pointing out that each man making this decision would be required to make his intentions known in person to a representative of the Soviet embassy—but that if he wished to

do so, he would be permitted to stay. To the fury of the embassy officials, four men made this decision, one recanting after a confrontation with the naval attaché. The Americans had been careful to have each meeting videotaped so that later accusations of intimidation could be refuted at once.

When the medical checks were completed—thankfully, radiation exposure levels had been slight—the men were again fed and bedded down.

Washington, D.C.

"Good morning, Mr. Ambassador," the president said. Arbatov noted that again Dr. Pelt was standing at his master's side behind the large antique desk. He had not expected this meeting to be a pleasant one.

"Mr. President, I am here to protest the attempted kidnapping of our seamen by the United States government."

"Mr. Ambassador," the president responded sharply, "in the eyes of a former district attorney, kidnapping is a vile and loathsome crime, and the government of the United States of America will not be accused of such a thing—certainly not in this office! We have not, do not, and never will kidnap people. Is that clear to you, sir?"

"Besides which, Alex," Pelt said less forcefully, "the men to whom you refer would not be alive were it not for us. We lost two good men rescuing your servicemen. You might at least express some appreciation for our efforts to save your crew, and perhaps make a gesture of sympathy for the Americans who lost their lives in the process."

"My government notes the heroic effort of your two officers, and does wish to express its appreciation and that of the Soviet people for the rescue. Even so, gentlemen, deliberate efforts have been made to entice some of those men to betray their country."

"Mr. Ambassador, when your trawler rescued the crew of our patrol plane last year, officers of the Soviet armed forces offered money, women, and other enticements to our crewmen if they would give out information or agree to stay behind in Vladivostok, correct? Don't tell me that you have no knowledge of this. You know that's how the game is played. At the time we did not object to this, did we? No, we were sufficiently grateful that those six men were still alive, and now, of course, all of them are back at work.

We remain grateful for your country's humanitarian concern for the lives of ordinary American citizens. In this case, each officer and enlisted man was told that he could stay if he wished to do so. No force of any kind was used. Each man wishing to remain here was required by us to meet with an official of your embassy so as to give you a fair chance to explain to him the error of his ways. Surely this is fair, Mr. Ambassador. We made no offers of money or women. We do not buy people, and we damned well do not—ever—kidnap people. Kidnappers are people I put in jail. I even managed to have one executed. Don't you ever accuse me of that again," the president concluded righteously.

"My government insists that all of our men be returned to their homeland," Arbatov persisted.

"Mr. Ambassador, any person in the United States, regardless of his nationality or the manner of his arrival, is entitled to the full protection of our law. Our courts have ruled on this many times, and under our law no man or woman may be compelled to do something against his will without due process. The subject is closed. Now, I have a question for you. What was a ballistic missile submarine doing three hundred miles from the American coast?"

"A missile submarine, Mr. President?"

Pelt lifted a photograph from the president's desk and handed it to Arbatov. Taken from the tape recorder on the *Sea Cliff*, it showed the SS-N-20 sea-launched ballistic missile.

"The name of the submarine is—was *Red October*," Pelt said. "It exploded and sank three hundred miles from the coast of South Carolina. Alex, we have an agreement between our two countries that no such vessel will approach either country to within five hundred miles—eight hundred kilometers. We want to know what that submarine was doing there. Don't try to tell us that this missile is some kind of fabrication—even if we had wanted to do such a foolish thing, we wouldn't have had the time. That's one of your missiles, Mr. Ambassador, and the submarine carried nineteen more just like it." Pelt deliberately misstated the number. "And the government of the United States asks the government of the Soviet Union how it came to be there, in violation of our agreement, while so many other of your ships are so close to our Atlantic coast."

"That must be the lost submarine," Arbatov offered.

"Mr. Ambassador," the president said softly, "the submarine was not lost until Thursday, seven days after you told us about it. In

short, Mr. Ambassador, your explanation of last Friday does not coincide with the facts we have physically established."

"What accusation are you making?" Arbatov bristled.

"Why, none, Alex," the president said. "If that agreement is no longer operative, then it is no longer operative. I believe we discussed that possibility last week also. The American people will know later today what the facts are. You are sufficiently familiar with our country to imagine their reaction. I will have an explanation. For the moment, I see no further reason for your fleet to be off our coast. The 'rescue' has been successfully concluded, and the further presence of the Soviet fleet can only be a provocation. I want you and your government to consider what my military commanders are telling me right now—or if you prefer, what your commanders would be telling General Secretary Narmonov if the situation were reversed. I will have an explanation. Without one I can reach one of only a few conclusions—and those are conclusions I would prefer not to choose from. Send that message to your government, and tell them that since some of your men have opted to stay here, we'll probably find out what was really happening in short order. Good day."

Arbatov left the office, turning left to leave by the west entrance. A marine guard held the door open, a polite gesture that stopped short of his eyes. The ambassador's driver, waiting outside in a Cadillac limousine, held the door open for him. The driver was chief of the KGB's political intelligence section at that organization's Washington station.

"So," he said, checking traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue before making a left turn.

"So, the meeting went exactly as I had predicted, and now we can be absolutely certain why they are kidnapping our men," Arbatov replied.

"And that is, Comrade Ambassador?" the driver prompted. He did not let his irritation show. Only a few years before this Party hack would not have dared temporize with a senior KGB officer. It was a disgrace, what had happened to the Committee for State Security since the death of Comrade Andropov. But things would be set right again. He was certain of that.

"The president all but accused us of sending the submarine deliberately to their shore in violation of our secret 1979 protocol. They are holding our men to interrogate them, to take their heads

apart so that they can learn what the submarine's orders were. How long will that take the CIA? A day? Two?" Arbatov shook his head angrily. "They may know already—a few drugs, a woman, perhaps, to loosen their tongues. The president also invited Moscow to imagine what the Pentagon hotheads are telling him to think! And telling him to do. No mystery there, is there? They will say we were rehearsing a surprise nuclear attack—perhaps even executing one! As if we were not working harder than they to achieve peaceful coexistence! Suspicious fools, they are fearful about what has happened, and even more angry."

"Can you blame them, Comrade?" the driver asked, taking all of this in, filing, analyzing, composing his independent report to Moscow Center.

"And he said that there was no further reason for our fleet to be off their coast."

"How did he say this? Was it a demand?"

"His words were soft. Softer than I expected. This concerns me. They are planning something, I think. Rattling a saber makes noise, drawing it does not. He demands an explanation for this entire affair. What do I tell him? What *was* happening?"

"I suspect that we will never know." The senior agent did know—the original story, that is, incredible as it was. That the navy and the GRU could allow such a fantastic error to take place had amazed him. The story from agent Cassius was scarcely less mad. The driver had passed it on to Moscow himself. Was it possible that the United States and the Soviet Union were both victims of a third party? An operation gone awry, and the Americans trying to find out who was responsible and how it was done so that they might try to do it themselves? That part of the story made sense, but did the rest? He frowned at the traffic. He had orders from Moscow Center: if this was a CIA operation, he was supposed to find out immediately. He didn't believe it was. If so the CIA was being unusually effective in covering it. Was it possible to cover such a complex operation? He didn't think so. Regardless, he and his colleagues would be working for several weeks to penetrate any cover there was, to find out what was being said in Langley and in the field, while other KGB sections did the same throughout the world. If the CIA had penetrated the Northern Fleet's high command he'd find out. Of that he was confident. He could almost wish they had done so. The GRU would be responsible for the

disaster, and would be disgraced after profiting from the KGB's loss of prestige a few years back. If he was reading the situation correctly, the Politburo was turning the KGB loose on the GRU and the military, allowing Moscow Center to initiate its own independent investigation of the affair. Regardless of what was found, the KGB would come out ahead and deflate the armed services. One way or another, his organization would discover what had taken place, and if it was damaging to his rivals, so much the better…

When the door closed behind the Soviet ambassador, Dr. Pelt opened a side door to the Oval Office. Judge Moore came in.

"Mr. President, it's been a while since I've had to do things like hide in closets."

"You really expect this to work?" Pelt said.

"Yes, I do now," Moore settled comfortably into a leather chair.

"Isn't this a little shaky, Judge?" Pelt asked. "I mean, running an operation this complex?"

"That's the beauty of it, Doctor, we're not running anything. The Soviets will be doing that for us. Oh, sure, we'll have a lot of our people prowling around Eastern Europe asking a lot of questions. So will Sir Basil's fellows. The French and the Israelis already are, because we've asked them if they know what's happening with the stray missile sub. The KGB will find out quickly enough and wonder why the four main Western intelligence agencies are all asking the same questions—instead of pulling into their shells like they'd expect them to if this were our operation.

"You have to appreciate the dilemma the Soviets face, a choice between two equally unattractive scenarios. On the one hand, they can choose to believe that one of their most trusted professional officers has committed high treason on an unprecedented scale. You've seen our file on Captain Ramius. He's the Communist version of an eagle scout, a genuine New Soviet Man. Add to that the fact that a defection conspiracy necessarily involves a number of equally trusted officers. The Soviets have a mind block against believing that individuals of this type will ever leave the Workers' Paradise. That seems paradoxical, I admit, given the strenuous efforts they expend to keep people from leaving their country, but it's true. Losing a ballet dancer or a KGB agent is one thing—losing

the son of a Politburo member, an officer with nearly thirty years of unblemished service, is quite another. Moreover, a naval captain has a lot of privileges; you might call his defection the equivalent of a self-made millionaire leaving New York to live in Moscow. They simply will not believe it.

"On the other hand, they can believe the story we planted through Henderson, which is also unattractive but is supported by a good deal of circumstantial evidence, especially our efforts to entice their crewmen to defect. You saw how furious they are about that. The way they think, this is a gross violation of the rules of civilized behavior. The president's forceful reaction to our discovery that this was a missile submarine is also evidence that favors Henderson's story."

"So what side will they come down on?" the president asked.

"That, sir, is a question of psychology more than anything else, and Soviet psychology is very hard for us to read. Given the choice between the collective treason of ten men and an outside conspiracy, my opinion is that they will prefer the latter. For them to believe that this really was defection—well, it would force them to reexamine their own beliefs. Who likes to do that?" Moore gestured grandly. "The latter alternative means that their security has been violated by outsiders, but being a victim is more palatable than having to recognize the intrinsic contradictions of their own governing philosophy. On top of that we have the fact that the KGB will be running the investigation."

"Why?" Pelt asked, caught up in the judge's plot.

"In either case, a defection or a penetration of naval operational security, the GRU would have been responsible. Security of the naval and military forces is their bailiwick, the more so with the damage done to the KGB after the departure of our friend Andropov. The Soviets can't have an organization investigating itself—not in their intelligence community! So, the KGB will be looking to take its rival service apart. From the KGB's perspective, outside instigation is the far more attractive alternative; it makes for a bigger operation. If they confirm Henderson's story and convince everyone that it's true—and they will, of course—it makes them look all that much better for having uncovered it."

"They will confirm the story?"

"Of course they will! In the intelligence business if you look hard enough for something, you find it, whether it's really there or

not. Lord, we owe this Ramius fellow more than he will ever know. An opportunity like this doesn't come along once in a generation. We simply can't lose."

"But the KGB will emerge stronger," Pelt observed. "Is that a good thing?"

Moore shrugged. "Bound to happen eventually. Unseating and possibly killing Andropov gave the military services too much prestige, just like with Beria back in the fifties. The Soviets depend on political control of their military as much as we do—more. Having the KGB take their high command apart gets the dirty work done for them. It had to happen anyway, so it's just as well that we can profit by it. There's only a few more things we have to do."

"Such as?" the president asked.

"Our friend Henderson will leak information in a month or so saying that we had a submarine tracking *Red October* all the way from Iceland."

"But why?" Pelt objected. "Then they'll know that we were lying, that all the excitement over the missile sub was a lie."

"Not exactly, Doctor," Moore said. "Having a missile sub this close to our coast remains a violation of the agreement, and from their point of view we have no way of knowing why she was there—until we interrogate the crewmen remaining behind, who will probably tell us little of value. The Soviets will expect that we have not been completely truthful with them on this affair. The fact that we were trailing their sub and were ready to destroy it at any time gives them the evidence of our duplicity that they'll be looking for. We'll also say that *Dallas* monitored the reactor incident on sonar, and that will explain the proximity of our rescue ship. They know, well, they certainly suspect, that we have concealed something. This will mislead them about what it was we really concealed. The Russians have a saying for this. They call it wolf meat. And they will launch an extensive operation to penetrate our operation, whatever it is. But they will find nothing. The only people in the CIA who know what is really going on are Greer, Ritter, and myself. Our operations people have orders to *find out* what was going on, and that's all that can leak out."

"What about Henderson, and how many of our people know about the submarine?" the president asked.

"If Henderson spills anything to them he'll be signing his own death warrant. The KGB deals severely with double agents, and

would not believe that we tricked him into delivering false information. He knows it, and we'll be keeping a close eye on him in any case. How many of our people know about the sub? A hundred perhaps, and the number will increase somewhat—but remember that they think we now have two dead Soviet subs off our coast, and they have every reason to believe that whatever Soviet sub equipment turns up in our labs has been recovered from the ocean floor. We will, of course, be reactivating the *Glomar Explorer* for just that purpose. They'd be suspicious if we didn't. Why disappoint them? Sooner or later they just might figure the whole story out, but by that time the stripped hulk will be at the bottom of the sea."

"So, we can't keep this a secret forever?" Pelt asked.

"Forever's a long time. We have a plan for the possibility. For the immediate future the secret should be fairly safe, what with only a hundred people in on it. In a year, minimum, more likely two or three, they may have accumulated enough data to suspect what has happened, but by that time there won't be much physical evidence to point to. Moreover, if the KGB discovers the truth, will they *want* to report it? Were the GRU to find out, they certainly would, and the resulting chaos within their intelligence community would also work to our benefit." Moore took a cigar from a leather holder. "As I said, Ramius has given us a fantastic opportunity on several levels. And the beauty of it is that we don't have to do much of anything. The Russians will be doing all the legwork, looking for something that isn't there."

"What about the defectors, Judge?" the president asked.

"They, Mr. President, will be taken care of. We know how to do this, and we rarely have a complaint about the CIA's hospitality. We'll take some months to debrief them, and at the same time we'll be preparing them for life in America. They'll get new identities, reeducation, cosmetic surgery if necessary, and they'll never have to work another day as long as they live—but they will want to work. Almost all of them do. I expect the navy will find places for them, paid consultants for their submarine warfare department, that sort of thing."

"I want to meet them," the president said impulsively.

"That can be arranged, sir, but it will have to be discreet," Moore cautioned.

"Camp David, that ought to be secure enough. And Ryan, Judge,

I want him taken care of."

"Understood, sir. We're bringing him along rather quickly already. He has a big future with us."

Tyuratam, USSR

The reason *Red October* had been ordered to dive long before dawn was orbiting the earth at a height of eight hundred kilometers. The size of a Greyhound bus, Albatross 8 had been sent aloft eleven months earlier by a heavy-lift booster from the Cosmodrome at Tyuratam. The massive satellite, called a RORSAT, for radar ocean reconnaissance satellite, was specifically designed for maritime surveillance.

Albatross 8 passed over Pamlico Sound at 1131 local time. Its on-board programming was designed to trace thermal receptors over the entire visible horizon, interrogating everything in sight and locking on any signature that fit its acquisition parameters. As it continued on its orbit and passed over elements of the U.S. fleet, the *New Jersey*'s jammers were aimed upward to scramble its signal. The satellite's tape systems dutifully recorded this. The jamming would tell the operators something about American electronic warfare systems. As Albatross 8 crossed the pole, the parabolic dish on its front tracked in on the carrier signal of another bird, the *Iskra* communications satellite.

When the reconnaissance satellite located its higher flying cousin, a laser side-link transmitted the contents of the Albatross' tape bank. The *Iskra* immediately relayed this to the ground station at Tyuratam. The signal was also received by a fifteen-meter dish located in western China which was operated by the U.S. National Security Agency in cooperation with the Chinese, who used the data received for their own purposes. The Americans transmitted it via their own communications satellite to NSA headquarters at Fort Meade, Maryland. At almost the same time the digital signal was examined by two teams of experts five thousand miles apart.

"Clear weather," a technician moaned. "*Now* we get clear weather!"

"Enjoy it while you can, Comrade." His neighbor at the next console was watching data from a geosynchronous weather satellite that monitored the Western Hemisphere. Knowing the weather over a hostile country can have great strategic value. "There's another

cold front approaching their coast. Their winter has been like ours. I hope they are enjoying it."

"Our men at sea will not." The technician mentally shuddered at the thought of being at sea in a major storm. He'd taken a Black Sea cruise the previous summer and become hopelessly seasick. "Aha! What is this? Colonel!"

"Yes, Comrade?" The colonel supervising the watch came over quickly.

"See here, Comrade Colonel." The technician traced a finger on the TV screen. "This is Pamlico Sound, on the central coast of the United States. Look here, Comrade." The thermal image of the water on the screen was black, but as the technician adjusted the display it changed to green with two white patches, one larger than the other. Twice the large one split into two segments. The image was of the surface of the water, and some of the water was half a degree warmer than it should have been. The differential was not constant, but it did return enough to prove that something was adding heat to the water.

"Sunlight, perhaps?" the colonel asked.

"No, Comrade, the clear sky gives even sunlight to the entire area," the technician said quietly. He was always quiet when he thought he was on to something. "Two submarines, perhaps three, thirty meters under the water."

"You are certain?"

The technician flipped on a switch to display the radar picture, which showed only the corduroy pattern of small waves.

"There is nothing *on* the water to generate this heat, Comrade Colonel. Therefore it must be something *under* the water. The time of year is wrong for mating whales. It can only be nuclear submarines, probably two, perhaps three. I speculate, Colonel, that the Americans have been sufficiently frightened by the deployment of our fleet to seek shelter for their missile submarines. Their missile sub base is only a few hundred kilometers south. Perhaps one of their *Ohio*-class boats have taken shelter here and is being protected by a hunter sub, as ours are."

"Then he will soon move out. Our fleet is being recalled."

"Too bad, it would be good to track him. This is a rare opportunity, Comrade Colonel."

"Indeed. Well done, Comrade Academician." Ten minutes later the data had been transmitted to Moscow.

Soviet Naval High Command, Moscow

"We will make use of this opportunity, Comrade," Gorshkov said. "We are now recalling our fleet, and we will allow several submarines to remain behind to gather electronic intelligence. The Americans will probably lose several in the shuffle."

"Quite likely," the chief of fleet operations said.

"The *Ohio* will go south, probably to their submarine base at Charleston or Kings Bay. Or north to Norfolk. We have *Konovalov* at Norfolk, and *Shabilikov* off Charleston. Both will stay in place for several days, I think. We must do something right to show the politicians that we have a real navy. Being able to track on an *Ohio* would be a beginning."

"I'll have the orders out in fifteen minutes, Comrade." The chief of operations thought this was a good idea. He had not liked the report of the Politburo meeting that he'd gotten from Gorshkov—though if Sergey were on his way out, he would be in a good place to take over the job…

The New Jersey

The RED ROCKET message had arrived in Eaton's hand only moments before: Moscow had just transmitted a lengthy operational letter via satellite to the Soviet fleet. Now the Russians were in a real fix, the commodore thought. Around them were three carrier battle groups—the *Kennedy, America*, and *Nimitz*—all under Josh Painter's command. Eaton had them in sight, and had operational control of the *Tarawa* to augment his own surface action group. The commodore turned his binoculars on the *Kirov*.

"Commander, bring the group to battle stations."

"Aye." The group operations officer lifted the tactical radio mike. "Blue Boys, this is Blue King. Amber Light, Amber Light, execute. Out."

Eaton waited four seconds for the *New Jersey*'s general quarters alarm to sound. The crew raced to their guns.

"Range to *Kirov?*"

"Thirty-seven thousand six hundred yards, sir. We've been sneaking in a laser range every few minutes. We're dialed in, sir," the group operations officer reported. "Main battery turrets are still loaded with sabots, and gunnery's been updating the solution every

thirty seconds."

A phone buzzed next to Eaton's command chair on the flag bridge.

"Eaton."

"All stations manned and ready, Commodore," the battleship's captain reported. Eaton looked at his stopwatch.

"Well done, Captain. We've got the men drilled very well indeed."

In the *New Jersey*'s combat information center the numerical displays showed the exact range to the *Kirov*'s mainmast. The logical first target is always the enemy flagship. The only question was how much punishment the *Kirov* could absorb—and what would kill her first, the gun rounds or the Tomahawk missiles. The important part, the gunnery officer had been saying for days, was to kill the *Kirov* before any aircraft could interfere. The *New Jersey* had never sunk a ship all on her own. Forty years was a long time to wait.

"They're turning," the group operations officer said.

"Yep, let's see how far."

The *Kirov*'s formation had been on a westerly course when the signal arrived. Every ship in the circular array turned to starboard, all together. Their turns stopped when they reached a heading of zero-four-zero.

Eaton set his glasses down in the holder. "They're going home. Let's inform Washington and keep the men at stations for a while."

Dulles International Airport

The Soviets outdid themselves getting their men away from the United States. An Aeroflot Illyushin IL-62 was taken out of regular international service and sent directly from Moscow to Dulles. It landed at sunset. A near copy of the British VC-10, the four-engine aircraft taxied to the remotest service area for refueling. Along with some other passengers who did not deplane to stretch their legs, a spare flight crew was brought along so that the plane could immediately return home. A pair of mobile lounges drove from the terminal building two miles to the waiting aircraft. Inside them the crewmen of the *Red October* looked out at the snow-dusted countryside, knowing this was their final look at America. They were quiet, having been roused from bed in Bethesda and taken by

bus to Dulles only an hour earlier. This time no reporters harassed them.

The four officers, nine *michmanyy*, and the remaining enlisted crew were split into distinct groups as they boarded. Each group was taken to a separate part of the aircraft. Each officer and *michman* had his own KGB interrogator, and the debriefing began as the aircraft started its takeoff roll. By the time the Illyushin reached cruising altitude most of the crewmen were asking themselves why they had not opted to remain behind with their traitorous countrymen. These interviews were decidedly unpleasant.

"Did Captain Ramius act strangely?" a KGB major asked Petrov.

"Certainly not!" Petrov answered quickly, defensively. "Didn't you know our submarine was sabotaged? We were lucky to escape with our lives!"

"Sabotaged? How?"

"The reactor systems. I am the wrong one to ask on this, I am not an engineer, but it was I who detected the leaks. You see, the radiation film badges showed contamination, but the engine room instruments did not. Not only was the reactor tampered with, but all of the radiation-sensing instruments were disabled. I saw this myself. Chief Engineer Melekhin had to rebuild several to locate the leaking reactor piping. Svyadov can tell this better. He saw it himself."

The KGB officer was scribbling notes. "And what was your submarine doing so close to the American coast?"

"What do you mean? Don't you know what our orders were?"

"What were your orders, Comrade Doctor?" The KGB officer stared hard into Petrov's eyes.

The doctor explained, concluding, "I saw the orders. They were posted for all to see, as is normal."

"Signed by whom?"

"Admiral Korov. Who else?"

"Did you not find those orders a little strange?" the major asked angrily.

"Do you question your orders, Comrade Major?" Petrov summoned up some spine. "*I* do not."

"What happened to your political officer?"

In another space Ivanov was explaining how the *Red October* had been detected by American and British ships. "But Captain Ramius evaded them brilliantly! We would have made it except for that

damned reactor accident. You must find who did that to us, Comrade Captain. I wish to see him die myself!"

The KGB officer was unmoved. "And what was the last thing the captain said to you?"

"He ordered me to keep control of my men, not to let them speak with Americans any more than necessary, and he said that the Americans would never get their hands on our ship." Ivanov's eyes teared at the thought of his captain and his ship, both lost. He was a proud and privileged young Soviet man, the son of a Party academician. "Comrade, you and your people must find the bastards who did this to us."

"It was very clever," Svyadov was recounting a few feet away. "Even Comrade Melekhin only found it on his third attempt, and he swore vengeance on the men who did it. I saw it myself," the lieutenant said, forgetting that he never had, really. He explained in detail, to the point of drawing a diagram of how it had been done. "I don't know about the final accident. I was just coming on duty then. Melekhin, Surzpoi, and Bugayev worked for hours attempting to engage our auxiliary power systems." He shook his head. "I tried to join them, but Captain Ramius forbade it. I tried again, against orders, but Comrade Petrov prevented me."

Two hours over the Atlantic the senior KGB interrogators met aft to compare notes.

"So, if this captain was acting, he was devilishly good at it," the colonel in charge of the initial interrogations summarized. "His orders to his men were impeccable. The mission orders were announced and posted as is normal—"

"But who among these men knows Korov's signature? And we can't very well ask Korov, can we?" a major said. The commander of the Northern Fleet had died of a cerebral hemorrhage two hours into his first interrogation in the Lubyanka, much to everyone's disappointment. "It could have been forged in any case. Do we have a secret submarine base in Cuba? And what of the death of the *zampolit?*"

"The doctor is sure it was an accident," another major answered. "The captain thought he had struck his head, but he had actually broken his neck. I feel they should have radioed for instructions, though."

"A radio silence order," the colonel said. "I checked. This is entirely normal for missile submarines. Was this Captain Ramius

skilled in unarmed combat? Might he have murdered the *zampolit?*"

"A possibility," mused the major who had questioned Petrov. "He was not trained in such things, but it is not hard to do."

The colonel did not know whether to agree. "Do we have any evidence that the crew thought a defection was being attempted?" All heads shook negatively. "Was the submarine's operational routine otherwise normal?"

"Yes, Comrade Colonel," a young captain said. "The surviving navigation officer, Ivanov, says that the evasion of imperialist surface and sub forces was effected perfectly—exactly in accordance with established procedures, but executed brilliantly by this Ramius fellow over a period of twelve hours. I have not even suggested that treason might be involved. Yet." Everyone knew that these sailors would be spending time in the Lubyanka until each head had been picked clean.

"Very well," the colonel said, "up to this point we have no indication of treason by the officers of the submarine? I thought not. Comrades, you will continue your interrogations in a gentler fashion until we arrive in Moscow. Allow your charges to relax."

The atmosphere on the aircraft gradually became more pleasant. Snacks were served, and vodka to loosen the tongues and encourage comradely good fellowship with the KGB officers, who were drinking water. The men all knew that they would be imprisoned for some time, and this fate was accepted with what to a Westerner would be surprising fatalism. The KGB would be working for weeks to reconstruct every event on the submarine from the time the last line was cast off at Polyarnyy to the moment the last man entered the *Mystic*. Other teams of agents were already working worldwide to learn if what happened to the *Red October* was a CIA plot or the plot of some other intelligence service. The KGB would find its answer, but the colonel in charge of the case was beginning to think the answer did not lie with these seamen.

The Red October

Noyes allowed Ramius to walk the fifteen feet from sick bay to the wardroom under supervision. The patient did not look very good, but this was largely because he needed a wash and a shave, like everyone else aboard. Borodin and Mancuso assisted him into his seat at the head of the table.

"So, Ryan, how are you today?"

"Good, thank you, Captain Ramius." Ryan smiled over his coffee. In fact he was hugely relieved, having for the past several hours been able to leave the question of running the sub to the men who actually knew something about it. Though he was counting the hours until he could get out of the *Red October*, for the first time in two weeks he was neither seasick nor terrified. "How is your leg, sir?"

"Painful. I must learn not to be shot again. I do not remember saying to you that I owe you my life, as all of us do."

"It was my life, too," Ryan replied, a little embarrassed.

"Good morning, sir!" It was the cook. "May I fix you some breakfast, Captain Ramius?"

"Yes, I am very hungry."

"Good! One U.S. Navy breakfast. Let me get some fresh coffee, too." He disappeared into the passageway. Thirty seconds later he was back with fresh coffee and a place setting for Ramius. "Ten minutes on the breakfast, sir."

Ramius poured a cup of coffee. There was a small envelope in the saucer. "What is this?"

"Coffee Mate," Mancuso chuckled. "Cream for your coffee, Captain."

Ramius tore open the packet, staring suspiciously inside before dumping the contents into the cup and stirring.

"When do we leave?"

"Sometime tomorrow," Mancuso answered. The *Dallas* was going to periscope depth periodically to receive operational orders and relaying them to the *October* by gertrude. "We learned a few hours ago that the Soviet fleet is heading back northeast. We'll know for sure by sundown. Our guys are keeping a close eye on them."

"Where do we go?" Ramius asked.

"Where did you tell them you were going?" Ryan wanted to know. "What exactly did your letter say?"

"You know about the letter—how?"

"We know—that is, I know about the letter, but that's all I can say, sir."

"I told Uncle Yuri that we were sailing to New York to make a present of this ship to the president of the United States."

"But you didn't head for New York," Mancuso objected.

"Certainly not. I wished to enter Norfolk. Why go to a civilian

port when a naval base is so close? You say I should tell Padorin the truth?" Ramius shook his head. "Why? Your coast is so large."

Dear Admiral Padorin, I'm sailing for New York… No wonder they went ape! Ryan thought.

"We go to Norfolk or Charleston?" Ramius asked.

"Norfolk, I think," Mancuso said.

"Didn't you know they'd send the whole fleet after you?" Ryan snapped. "Why send the letter at all?"

"So they will know," Ramius answered. "So they will know. I did not expect that anyone would locate us. There you surprised us."

The American skipper tried to smile. "We detected you off the coast of Iceland. You were luckier than you imagine. If we'd sailed from England on schedule, we'd have been fifteen miles closer in shore, and we would have had you cold. Sorry, Captain, but our sonars and sonar operators are very good. You can meet the man who first tracked you later. He's working with your man Bugayev at the moment."

"*Starshina*," Borodin said.

"Not an officer?" Ramius asked.

"No, just a very good operator," Mancuso said, surprised. Why would anyone want an officer to stand watch on sonar gear?

The cook came back in. His idea of the standard U.S. Navy breakfast was a large platter with a slab of ham, two eggs over easy, a pile of hash browns, and four slices of toast, with a container of apple jelly.

"Let me know if you want more, sir," the cook said.

"This is a normal breakfast?" Ramius asked Mancuso.

"Nothing unusual about it. I prefer waffles myself. Americans eat big breakfasts." Ramius was already attacking his. After two days without a normal meal and all the blood loss from his leg wound, his body was screaming for food.

"Tell me, Ryan," Borodin was lighting a cigarette, "what is it in America that we will find most amazing?"

Jack motioned to the captain's plate. "Food stores."

"Food stores?" Mancuso asked.

"While I was sitting on *Invincible* I read over a CIA report on people who come over to our side." Ryan didn't want to say *defectors*. Somehow the word sounded demeaning. "Supposedly the first thing that surprises people, people from your part of the world,

is going through a supermarket."

"Tell me about them," Borodin ordered.

"A building about the size of a football field—well, maybe a little smaller than that. You go in the front door and get a shopping cart. The fresh fruits and vegetables are on the right, and you gradually work your way left through the other departments. I've been doing that since I was a kid."

"You say fresh fruits and vegetables? What about now, in winter?"

"What about winter?" Mancuso said. "Maybe they cost a little more, but you can always get fresh produce. That's the one thing we miss on the boats. Our supply of fresh produce and milk only lasts us about a week."

"And meat?" Ramius asked.

"Anything you want," Ryan answered. "Beef, pork, lamb, turkey, chicken. American farmers are very efficient. The United States feeds itself and has plenty left over. You know that, the Soviet Union buys our grain. Hell, we pay farmers not to grow things, just to keep the surplus under control." The four Russians were doubtful.

"What else?" Borodin asked.

"What else will surprise you? Nearly everyone has a car. Most people own their own homes. If you have money, you can buy nearly anything you want. The average family in America makes something like twenty thousand dollars a year, I guess. These officers all make more than that. The fact of the matter is that in our country if you have some brains—and all of you men do—and you are willing to work—and all of you men are—you will live a comfortable life even without any help. Besides, you can be sure that the CIA will take good care of you. We wouldn't want anybody to complain about our hospitality."

"And what will become of my men?" Ramius asked.

"I can't say exactly, sir, since I've never been involved in this sort of thing myself. I would guess that you will be taken to a safe place to relax and unwind. People from the CIA and the navy will want to talk to you at length. That's no surprise, right? I told you this before. A year from now you will be doing whatever you choose to do."

"And anybody who wants to take a cruise with us is welcome to," Mancuso added.

Ryan wondered how true this was. The navy would not want to let any of these men on a 688-class boat. It might give one of them information valuable enough to enable him to return home and keep his head.

"How does a friendly man become a CIA spy?" Borodin asked.

"I am not a spy, sir," Ryan said again. He couldn't blame them for not believing him. "Going through graduate school I got to know a guy who mentioned my name to a friend of his in the CIA, Admiral James Greer. Back a few years ago I was asked to join a team of academics that was called in to check up on some of the CIA's intelligence estimates. At the time I was happily engaged writing books on naval history. At Langley—I was there for two months during the summer—I did a paper on international terrorism. Greer liked it, and two years ago he asked me to go to work there full time. I accepted. It was a mistake," Ryan said, not really meaning it. Or did he? "A year ago I was transferred to London to work on a joint intelligence evaluation team with the British Secret Service. My normal job is to sit at a desk and figure out the stuff that field agents send in. I got myself roped into this because I figured out what you were up to, Captain Ramius."

"Was your father a spy?" Borodin asked.

"No, my dad was a police officer in Baltimore. He and my mother were killed in a plane crash ten years ago."

Borodin expressed his sympathy. "And you, Captain Mancuso, what made you a sailor?"

"I wanted to be a sailor since I was a kid. My dad's a barber. I decided on submarines at Annapolis because I thought it looked interesting."

Ryan was watching something he had never seen before, men from two different places and two very different cultures trying to find common ground. Both sides were reaching out, seeking similarities of character and experience, building a foundation for understanding. This was more than interesting. It was touching. Ryan wondered how difficult it was for the Soviets. Probably harder than anything he had ever done—their bridges were burned. They had cast themselves away from everything they had known, trusting that what they found would be better. Ryan hoped they would succeed and make their transition from Communism to freedom. In the past two days he had come to realize what courage it took for men to defect. Facing a gun in a missile room was a small matter

compared with walking away from one's whole life. It was strange how easily Americans put on their freedoms. How difficult would it be for these men who had risked their lives to adapt to something that men like Ryan so rarely appreciated? It was people like these who had built the American Dream, and people like these who were needed to maintain it. It was odd that such men should come from the Soviet Union. Or perhaps not so odd, Ryan thought, listening to the conversation going back and forth in front of him.

THE SEVENTEENTH DAY
SUNDAY, 19 DECEMBER

The Red October

"Eight more hours," Ryan whispered to himself. That's what they had told him. An eight-hour run to Norfolk. He was back at the rudder diving-plane controls by his own request. Operating them was the only thing he knew how to do, and he had to do something. The *October* was still badly shorthanded. Nearly all of the Americans were helping out in the reactor and engine spaces aft. Only Mancuso, Ramius, and himself were in control. Bugayev, with the help of Jones, was monitoring the sonar equipment a few feet away, and the medical people were still worrying over Williams in sick bay. The cook was shuttling back and forth with sandwiches and coffee, which Ryan found disappointing, probably because he had been spoiled by Greer's.

Ramius was half sitting on the rail that surrounded the periscope pedestal. The leg wound was not bleeding, but it had to be hurting more than the man admitted since he was letting Mancuso check the instruments and handle the navigation.

"Rudder amidships," Mancuso ordered.

"Midships," Ryan turned the wheel back to the right to center it, checking his rudder angle indicator. "Rudder is amidships, steady on course one-two-zero."

Mancuso frowned at his chart, nervous at being forced to pilot the massive submarine in so cavalier a manner. "You have to be careful around here. The sandbar keeps building up from the southerly littoral drift, and they have to dredge it every few months. The storms this area's been having can't have helped much." Mancuso went back to look through the periscope.

"I am told this is a dangerous area," Ramius said.

"The graveyard of the Atlantic," Mancuso confirmed. "A lot of ships have died along the Outer Banks. Weather and current conditions are bad enough. The Germans are supposed to have had a hell of a time here during the war. Your charts don't show it, but there's hundreds of wrecks spotted on the bottom." He went back to the chart table. "Anyway, we give this place a nice wide berth, and

we don't turn north till about here." He traced a line on the chart.

"These are your waters," Ramius agreed.

They were in a loose three-boat formation. The *Dallas* was leading them out to sea, the *Pogy* was trailing. All three boats were traveling flooded-down, their decks nearly awash, with no one on their bridge stations. All visual navigation was being done by periscope. No radar sets were operating. None of the three boats was making any electronic noise. Ryan glanced casually at the chart table. They were beyond the inlet proper, but the chart was marked with sandbars for several more miles.

Nor were they using the *Red October*'s caterpillar drive system. It had turned out to be almost exactly what Skip Tyler had predicted. There were two sets of tunnel impellers, a pair about a third of the way back from the bow and three more just aft of midships. Mancuso and his engineers had examined the plans with great interest, then commented at length on the quality of the caterpillar design.

For his part, Ramius had not wanted to believe that he had been detected so early on. Mancuso had ultimately produced Jones with his personal map to show the *October*'s estimated course off Iceland. Though a few miles off the ship's log, it was too close to have been a coincidence.

"Your sonar must be better than we expected," Ramius grumbled a few feet from Ryan's control station.

"It is pretty good," Mancuso allowed. "Better yet, there's Jonesy—he's the best sonarman I've ever had."

"So young, and so smart."

"We get a lot of them that way," Mancuso smiled. "Never as many as we'd like, of course, but our kids are all volunteers. They know what they're getting into. We're picky about who we take, and then we train the hell out of 'em."

"Conn, sonar." It was Jones' voice. "*Dallas* is diving, sir."

"Very well." Mancuso lit a cigarette as he went to the intercom phone. He punched the button for engineering. "Tell Mannion we need him forward. We'll be diving in a few minutes. Yeah." He hung up and went back to the chart.

"You have them for more than three years, then?" Ramius asked.

"Oh, yeah. Hell, otherwise we'd be letting them go right after they're fully trained, right?"

Why couldn't the Soviet Navy get and retain people like this? Ramius thought. He knew the answer all too well. The Americans fed their men decently, gave them a proper mess room, paid them decently, gave them trust—all the things he had fought twenty years for.

"You need me to work the vents?" Mannion said, coming in.

"Yeah, Pat, we'll dive in another two or three minutes."

Mannion gave the chart a quick look on his way to the vent manifold.

Ramius hobbled to the chart. "They tell us that your officers are chosen from the bourgeois classes to control ordinary sailors from the working class."

Mannion ran his hands over the vent controls. There sure were enough of them. He'd spent two hours the previous day figuring the complex system out. "That's true, sir. Our officers do come from the ruling class. Just look at me," he said deadpan. Mannion's skin was about the color of coffee grounds, his accent pure South Bronx.

"But you are a black man," Ramius objected, missing the jibe.

"Sure, we're a real ethnic boat." Mancuso looked through the periscope again. "A Guinea skipper, a black navigator, and a crazy sonarman."

"I heard that, sir!" Jones called out rather than use the intercom speaker. "Gertrude message from *Dallas*. Everything looks okay. They're waiting for us. Last gertrude message for a while."

"Conn, aye. We're clear, finally. We can dive whenever you wish, Captain Ramius," Mancuso said.

"Comrade Mannion, vent the ballast tanks," Ramius said. The *October* had never actually surfaced and was still rigged for dive.

"Aye aye, sir." The lieutenant turned the topmost rank of master switches on the hydraulic controls.

Ryan winced. The sound made him think of a million toilets being flushed at once.

"Five degrees down on the planes, Ryan," Ramius said.

"Five degrees down, aye." Ryan pushed forward on the yoke. "Planes five degrees down."

"She's slow going down," Mannion observed, watching the handpainted depth-gauge replacement. "So durn big."

"Yeah," Mancuso said. The needle passed twenty meters.

"Planes to zero," Ramius said.

"Planes to zero angle, aye." Ryan pulled back on the control. It

took thirty seconds for the submarine to settle. She seemed very slow to respond to the controls. Ryan had thought that submarines were as responsive as aircraft.

"Make her a little light, Pat. Enough that it takes a degree of down to hold her level," Mancuso said.

"Uh-huh." Mannion frowned, checking the depth gauge. The ballast tanks were now fully flooded, and the balancing act would have to be done with the much smaller trim tanks. It took him five minutes to get the balance exactly right.

"Sorry, gentlemen. I'm afraid she's too big to dial in quick," he said, embarrassed with himself.

Ramius was impressed but too annoyed to show it. He had expected the American captain to take longer than this to do it himself. Trimming a strange sub so expertly on his first try…

"Okay, now we can come around north," Mancuso said. They were two miles past the last charted bar. "Recommend new course zero-zero-eight, Captain."

"Ryan, rudder left ten degrees," Ramius ordered. "Come to zero-zero-eight."

"Okay, rudder left ten degrees," Ryan responded, keeping one eye on the rudder indicator, the other on the gyro compass repeater. "Come to oh-oh-eight."

"Caution, Ryan. He turns slowly, but once turning you must use much backward—"

"Opposite," Mancuso corrected politely.

"Yes, opposite rudder to stop him on proper course."

"Right."

"Captain, do you have rudder problems?" Mancuso asked. "From tracking you it seemed that your turning circle was rather large."

"With the caterpillar it is. The flow from the tunnels strikes the rudder very hard, and it flutters if you use too much rudder. On our first sea trials, we had damage from this. It comes from—how do you say—the come-together of the two caterpillar tunnels."

"Does this affect operations with the propellers?" Mannion asked.

"No, only with the caterpillar."

Mancuso didn't like that. It didn't really matter. The plan was a simple, direct one. The three boats would make a straight dash to Norfolk. The two American attack boats would leapfrog forward at thirty knots to sniff out the areas ahead while the *October* plodded

along at a constant twenty.

Ryan began to ease his rudder as the bow came around. He waited too long. Despite five degrees of right rudder, the bow swung right past the intended course, and the gyro repeater clicked accusingly on every third degree until it stopped at zero-zero-one. It took another two minutes to get back on the proper course.

"Sorry about that. Steady on zero-zero-eight," he finally reported.

Ramius was forgiving. "You learn fast, Ryan. Perhaps one day you will be a true sailor."

"No thanks! The one thing I've learned on this trip is that you guys earn every nickel you get."

"Don't like subs?" Mannion chuckled.

"No place to jog."

"True. Unless you still need me, Captain, I'm ready to go aft. The engine room's awful shorthanded," Mannion said.

Ramius nodded. Was he from the ruling class? the captain wondered.

The V. K. Konovalov

Tupolev was heading back west. The fleet order had instructed everyone but his *Alfa* and one other to return home at twenty knots. Tupolev was to move west for two and half hours. Now he was on a reciprocal heading at five knots, about the top speed the *Alfa* could travel without making much noise. The idea was that his sub would be lost in the shuffle. So, an *Ohio* was heading for Norfolk—or Charleston more probably. In any case, Tupolev would circle quietly and observe. The *Red October* was destroyed. That much he knew from the ops order. Tupolev shook his head. How could Marko have done such a thing? Whatever the answer, he had paid for his treason with his life.

The Pentagon

"I'd feel better if we had some more air cover," Admiral Foster said, leaning against the wall.

"Agreed, sir, but we can't be so obvious, can we?" General Harris asked.

A pair of P-3Bs was now sweeping the track from Hatteras to the

Virginia Capes as though on a routine training mission. Most of the other Orions were far out at sea. The Soviet fleet was already four hundred miles offshore. The three surface groups had rejoined and were now ringed by their submarines. The *Kennedy, America*, and *Nimitz* were five hundred miles to their east, and the *New Jersey* was dropping back. The Russians would be watched all the way home. The carrier battle groups would be following them all the way to Iceland, keeping a discreet distance and maintaining air groups at the fringe of their radar coverage continuously, just to let them know that the United States still cared. Aircraft based in Iceland would track them the rest of the way home.

HMS *Invincible* was now out of operation and about halfway home. American attack subs were returning to normal patrol patterns, and all Soviet subs were reported to be off the coast, though this data was sketchy. They were traveling in loose packs and the noise generated made tracking difficult for the patrolling Orions, which were short of sonobuoys. Still and all, the operation was about over, the J-3 judged.

"You heading for Norfolk, Admiral?" Harris asked.

"Thought I might get together with CINCLANT, a post-action conference, you understand," Foster said.

"Aye aye, sir," Harris said.

The New Jersey

She was traveling at twelve knots, with a destroyer fueling on either beam. Commodore Eaton was in the flag plot. It was all over and nothing had happened, thank God. The Soviets were now a hundred miles ahead, within Tomahawk range but well beyond everything else. All in all, he was satisfied. His force had operated successfully with the *Tarawa*, which was now headed south to Mayport, Florida. He hoped they'd be able to do this again soon. It had been a long time since a flag officer on a battleship had had a carrier respond to his command. They had kept the *Kirov* force under continuous surveillance. If there had been a battle, Eaton was convinced that they'd have handled Ivan. More importantly, he was certain that Ivan knew it. All they awaited now was the order to return to Norfolk. It would be nice to be back home for Christmas. He figured his men had earned it. Many of the battleship's men were oldtimers, and nearly everyone had a family.

Ping. Jones noted the time on his pad and called out, "Captain, just got a ping from *Pogy*."

The *Pogy* was now ten miles ahead of the *October* and *Dallas*. The idea was that after she got ahead and listened for ten minutes, a single ping from her active sonar would signal that the ten miles to the *Pogy* and the twenty or more miles beyond her were clear. The *Pogy* would drift slowly to confirm this, and a mile to the *October*'s east the *Dallas* went to full speed to leapfrog ten miles beyond the other attack sub.

Jones was experimenting with the Russian sonar. The active gear, he'd found, was not too bad. The passive systems he didn't want to think about. When the *Red October* had been lying still in Pamlico Sound, he'd been unable to track in on the American subs. They had also been still, with their reactors only turning generators, but they had been no more than a mile away. He was disappointed that he'd not been able to locate them.

The officer with him, Bugayev, was a friendly enough guy. At first he'd been a little standoffish—as if he were a lord and I were a serf, Jones thought—until he'd seen how the skipper treated him. This surprised Jones. From what little he knew of Communism, he had expected everyone to be fairly equal. Well, he decided, that's what I get from reading *Das Kapital* in a freshman poli-sci course. It made a lot more sense to look at what Communism built. Garbage, mostly. The enlisted men didn't even have their own mess room. Wasn't that some crap! Eating your meals in your bunk rooms!

Jones had taken an hour—when he was supposed to be sleeping—to explore the submarine. Mr. Mannion had joined him. They started in the bunkroom. The individual footlockers didn't lock—probably so that officers could rifle through them. Jones and Mannion did just that. There was nothing of interest. Even the sailor porn was junk. The poses were just plain dumb, and the women—well, Jones had grown up in California. Garbage. It was not at all hard for him to understand why the Russians wanted to defect.

The missile had been interesting. He and Mannion opened an inspection hatch to examine the inside of the missile. Not too shabby, they thought. There was a little too much loose wiring, but that probably made testing easier. The missile seemed awfully big.

So, he thought, that's what the bastards have been aiming at us. He wondered if the navy would hold onto a few. If it was ever necessary to flip some at old Ivan, might as well include a couple of his own. *Dumb* idea, Jonesy, he said to himself. He didn't ever want those goddamned things to fly. One thing was for sure: everything on this bucket would be stripped off, tested, taken apart, tested again—and he was the navy's number one expert on Russian sonar. Maybe he'd be present during the analysis…It might be worth staying in the navy a few extra months for.

Jones lit a cigarette. "Want one of mine, Mr. Bugayev?" He held his pack out to the electronics officer.

"Thank you, Jones. You were in university?" The lieutenant took the American cigarette that he'd wanted but been too proud to ask for. It was dawning on him slowly that this enlisted man was his technical equal. Though not a qualified watch officer, Jones could operate and maintain sonar gear as well as anyone he'd known.

"Yes, sir." It never hurt to call officers sir, Jones knew. Especially the dumb ones. "California Institute of Technology. Five semesters completed. A average. I didn't finish."

"Why did you leave?"

Jones smiled. "Well, sir, you gotta understand that Cal Tech is, well, kinda a funny place. I played a little trick on one of my professors. He was working with strobe lights for high-speed photography, and I rigged a little switch to work the room lights off the strobe. Unfortunately there was a short in the switch, and it started this little electrical fire." Which had burned out a lab, destroying three months of data and fifteen thousand dollars of equipment. "That broke the rules."

"What did you study?"

"I was headin' for a degree in electrical engineering, with a strong minor in cybernetics. Three semesters to go. I'll get it, then my masters, then my doctorate, and then I'll go back to work for the navy as a civilian."

"Why are you a sonar operator?" Bugayev sat down. He had never spoken like this with an enlisted man.

"Hell, sir, it's fun! When something's going on—you know, a war game, tracking another sub, like that—*I* am the skipper. All the captain does is react to the data I give him."

"And you like your commander?"

"Sure thing! He's the best I've had—I've had three. My skipper's

a good guy. You do your job okay, and he doesn't hassle you. You got something to say to him, and he listens."

"You say you will go back to college. How do you pay for it? They tell us that only the ruling class sons go to university."

"That's crap, sir. In California if you're smart enough to go, you go. In my case, I've been saving my money—you don't spend much on a sub, right?—and the navy pitches in, too. I got enough to see me all the way through my masters. What's your degree in?"

"I attended a higher naval school. Like your Annapolis. I would like to get a proper degree in electronics," Bugayev said, voicing his own dream.

"No sweat. I can help you out. If you're good enough for Cal Tech, I can tell you who to talk to. You'd like California. That is the place to live."

"And I wish to work on a real computer," Bugayev went on, wishful.

Jones laughed quietly. "So, buy yourself one."

"Buy a computer?"

"Sure, we got a couple of little ones, Apples, on *Dallas*. Cost you about, oh, two thousand for a nice system. That's a lot less than what a car goes for."

"A computer for two thousand dollars?" Bugayev went from wishful to suspicious, certain that Jones was leading him on.

"Or less. For three grand you can get a really nice rig. Hell, you tell Apple who you are, and they'll probably give it to you for free, or the navy will. If you don't want an Apple, there's the Commodore, TRS-80, Atari. All kinds. Depends on what you want to use it for. Look, just one company, Apple, has sold over a million of 'em. They're little, sure, but they're real computers."

"I have never heard of this—Apple?"

"Yeah, Apple. Two guys started the company back when I was in junior high. Since then they've sold a million or so, like I said—and they are some kinda rich! I don't have one myself—no room on a sub—but my brother has his own computer, an IBM-PC. You still don't believe me, do you?"

"A working man with his own computer? It is hard to believe." He stabbed out the cigarette. American tobacco was a little bland, he thought.

"Well, sir, then you can ask somebody else. Like I said, *Dallas* has a couple of Apples, just for the crew to use. There's other stuff

for fire control, navigation, and sonar, of course. We use the Apples for games—you'll *love* computer games, for sure. You've never had fun till you've tried Choplifter—and other things, education programs, stuff like that. Honest, Mr. Bugayev, you can walk into most any shopping center and find a place to buy a computer. You'll see."

"How do you use a computer with your sonar?"

"That would take a while to explain, sir, and I'd probably have to get permission from the skipper." Jones reminded himself that this guy was still the enemy, sort of.

The V. K. Konovalov

The *Alfa* drifted slowly at the edge of the continental shelf, about fifty miles southeast of Norfolk. Tupolev ordered the reactor plant chopped back to about five percent of total output, enough to operate the electrical systems and little else. It also made his submarine almost totally quiet. Orders were passed by word of mouth. The *Konovalov* was on a strict silent ship routine. Even ordinary cooking was forbidden. Cooking meant moving metal pots on metal grates. Until further notice, the crew was on a diet of cheese sandwiches. They spoke in whispers when they spoke at all. Anyone who made noise would attract the attention of the captain, and everyone aboard knew what that meant.

SOSUS Control

Quentin was reviewing data sent by digital link from the two Orions. A crippled missile boat, the USS *Georgia*, was heading into Norfolk after a partial turbine failure, escorted by a pair of attack boats. They had been keeping her out, the admiral had said, because of all the Russian activity on the coast, and the idea now was to get her in, fixed, and out as quickly as possible. The *Georgia* carried twenty-four Trident missiles, a noteworthy fraction of the country's total deterrent force. Repairing her would be a high priority item now that the Russians were gone. It was safe to bring her in, but they wanted the Orions first to check and see if any Soviet submarines had lingered behind in the general confusion.

A P-3B was cruising at nine hundred feet about fifty miles southeast of Norfolk. The FLIR showed nothing, no heat signature

on the surface, and the MAD gear detected no measurable disturbance in the earth's magnetic field, though one aircraft's flight path took her within a hundred yards of the *Alfa*'s position. The *Konovalov*'s hull was made of non-magnetic titanium. A sonobuoy dropped seven miles to the south of her position also failed to pick up the sound of her reactor plant. Data was being transmitted continuously to Norfolk, where Quentin's operations staff entered it into his computer. The problem was, not all of the Soviet subs had been accounted for.

Well, the commander thought, that figures. Some of the boats had taken the opportunity to creep away from their charted loci. There was the odd chance, he had reported, that one or two strays were still out there, but there was no evidence of this. He wondered what CINCLANT had working. Certainly he had seemed awfully pleased with something, almost euphoric. The operation against the Soviet fleet had been handled pretty well, what he'd seen of it, and there was that dead *Alfa* out there. How long until the *Glomar Explorer* came out of mothballs to go and get that? He wondered if he'd get a chance to look the wreck over. What an opportunity!

Nobody was taking the current operation all that seriously. It made sense. If the *Georgia* were indeed coming in with a sick engine she'd be coming slow, and a slow *Ohio* made about as much noise as a virgin whale determined to retain her status. And if CINCLANTFLT were all that concerned about it, he would not have detailed the delousing operation to a pair of P-3s piloted by reservists. Quentin lifted the phone and dialed CINCLANTFLT Operations to tell them again that there was no indication of hostile activity.

The Red October

Ryan checked his watch. It had been five hours already. A long time to sit in one chair, and from a quick glance at the chart it appeared that the eight-hour estimate had been optimistic—or he'd misunderstood them. The *Red October* was tracing up the shelf line and would soon begin to angle west for the Virginia Capes. Maybe it would take another four hours. It couldn't be too soon. Ramius and Mancuso looked pretty tired. Everybody was tired. Probably the engine room people most of all—no, the cook. He was ferrying coffee and sandwiches to everyone. The Russians seemed especially

hungry.

The Dallas/*The* Pogy

The Dallas passed the *Pogy* at thirty-two knots, leapfrogging again, with the *October* a few miles aft. Lieutenant Commander Wally Chambers, who had the conn, did not like being blind on the speed run of thirty-five minutes despite word from the *Pogy* that everything was clear.

The *Pogy* noted her passage and turned to allow her lateral array to track on the *Red October*.

"Noisy enough at twenty knots," the *Pogy*'s sonar chief said to his companions. "*Dallas* doesn't make that much at thirty."

The V. K. Konovalov

"Some noise to the south," the *michman* said.

"What, exactly?" Tupolev had been hovering at the door for hours, making life unpleasant for the sonarmen.

"Too soon to say, Comrade Captain. Bearing is not changing, however. It is heading this way."

Tupolev went back to the control room. He ordered power reduced further in the reactor systems. He considered killing the plant entirely, but reactors took time to start up and there was no telling yet how distant the contact might be. The captain smoked three cigarettes before going back to sonar. It would not do at all to make the *michman* nervous. The man was his best operator.

"One propeller, Comrade Captain, an American, probably a *Los Angeles*, doing thirty-five knots. Bearing has changed only two degrees in fifteen minutes. He will pass close aboard, and—wait… His engines have stopped." The forty-year-old warrant officer pressed the headphones against his ears. He could hear the cavitation sounds diminish, then stop entirely as the contact faded away to nothing. "He has stopped to listen, Comrade Captain."

Tupolev smiled. "He will not hear us, Comrade. Racing and stopping. Can you hear anything else? Might he be escorting something?"

The *michman* listened to the headphones again and made some adjustments on his panel. "Perhaps…there is a good deal of surface noise, Comrade, and I—wait. There seems to be some noise. Our

last target bearing was one-seven-one, and this new noise is…one-seven-five. Very faint, Comrade Captain—a ping, a single ping on active sonar."

"So." Tupolev leaned against the bulkhead. "Good work, Comrade. Now we must be patient."

The Dallas

Chief Laval pronounced the area clear. The BQQ-5's sensitive receptors revealed nothing, even after the SAPS system had been used. Chambers maneuvered the bow around so that the single ping would go out to the *Pogy*, which in turn fired off her own ping to the *Red October* to make sure the signal was received. It was clear for another ten miles. The *Pogy* moved out at thirty knots, followed by the U.S. Navy's newest boomer.

The V. K. Konovalov

"Two more submarines. One single screw, the other twin screw, I think. Still faint. The single-screw submarine is turning much more rapidly. Do the Americans have twin-screw submarines, Comrade Captain?"

"Yes, I believe so." Tupolev wondered about this. The difference in signature characteristics was not all that pronounced. They'd see in any case. The *Konovalov* was creeping along at two knots, one hundred fifty meters beneath the surface. Whatever was coming seemed to be coming right for them. Well, he'd teach the imperialists something after all.

The Red October

"Can anybody spell me at the wheel?" Ryan asked.

"Need a stretch?" Mancuso asked, coming over.

"Yeah. I could stand a trip to the head, too. The coffee's about to bust my kidneys."

"I relieve you, sir." The American captain moved into Ryan's seat. Jack headed aft to the nearest head. Two minutes later he was feeling much better. Back in the control room, he did some knee bends to get circulation back in his legs, then looked briefly at the chart. It seemed strange, almost sinister, to see the U.S. coast

marked in Russian.

"Thank you, Commander."

"Sure." Mancuso stood.

"It is certain that you are no sailor, Ryan." Ramius had been watching him without a word.

"I have never claimed to be one, Captain," Ryan said agreeably. "How long to Norfolk?"

"Oh, another four hours, tops," Mancuso said. "The idea's to arrive after dark. They have something to get us in unseen, but I don't know what."

"We left the sound in daylight. What if somebody saw us then?" Ryan asked.

"I didn't see anything, but if anybody was there, all he'd have seen was three sub conning towers with no numbers on them." They had left in daylight to take advantage of a "window" in Soviet satellite coverage.

Ryan lit another cigarette. His wife would give him hell for this, but he was tense from being on the submarine. Sitting at the helmsman's station left him with nothing to do but stare at the handful of instruments. The sub was easier to hold level than he had expected, and the only radical turn he had attempted showed how eager the sub was to change course in any direction. Thirty-some-thousand tons of steel, he thought—no wonder.

The Pogy/*The* Red October

The *Pogy* stormed past the *Dallas* at thirty knots and continued for twenty minutes, stopping eleven miles beyond her—and three miles from the *Konovalov*, whose crew was scarcely breathing now. The *Pogy*'s sonar, though lacking the new BC-10/SAPS signal-processing system, was otherwise state of the art, but it was impossible to hear something that made no noise at all, and the *Konovalov* was silent.

The *Red October* passed the *Dallas* at 1500 hours after receiving the latest all-clear signal. Her crew was tired and looking forward to arriving at Norfolk two hours after sundown. Ryan wondered how quickly he could fly back to London. He was afraid that the CIA would want to debrief him at length. Mancuso and the crewmen of the *Dallas* wondered if they'd get to see their families. They weren't counting on it.

The V. K. Konovalov

"Whatever it is, it is big, very big, I think. His course will take him within five kilometers of us."

"An *Ohio*, as Moscow said," Tupolev commented.

"It sounds like a twin-screw submarine, Comrade Captain," the *michman* said.

"The *Ohio* has one propeller. You know that."

"Yes, Comrade. In any case, he will be with us in twenty minutes. The other attack submarine is moving at thirty-plus knots. If the pattern holds, he will proceed fifteen kilometers beyond us."

"And the other American?"

"A few kilometers seaward, drifting slowly, like us. I do not have an exact range. I could raise him on active sonar, but that—"

"I am aware of the consequences," Tupolev snapped. He went back to the control room.

"Tell the engineers to be ready to answer bells. All men at battle stations?"

"Yes, Comrade Captain," the *starpom* replied. "We have an excellent firing solution on the American hunter sub—the one moving, that is. The way he runs at full speed makes it easy for us. The other we can localize in seconds."

"Good, for a change," Tupolev smiled. "You see what we can do when circumstances favor us?"

"And what shall we do?"

"When the big one passes us, we will close and ream his asshole. They have played their games. Now we shall play ours. Have the engineers increase power. We will need full power shortly."

"It will make noise, Comrade," the *starpom* cautioned.

"True, but we have no choice. Ten percent power. The *Ohio* cannot possibly hear that, and perhaps the near hunter sub won't either."

The Pogy

"Where did that come from?" The sonar chief made some adjustments on his board. "Conn, sonar, I got a contact, bearing two-three-zero."

"Conn, aye," Commander Wood answered at once. "Can you classify?"

"No, sir. It just came up. Reactor plant and steam noises, real faint, sir. I can't quite read the plant signature…" He flipped the gain controls to maximum. "Not one of ours. Skipper, I think maybe we got us an *Alfa* here."

"Oh, great! Signal *Dallas* right now!"

The chief tried, but the *Dallas*, running at thirty-two knots, missed the five rapid pings. The *Red October* was now eight miles away.

The Red October

Jones' eyes suddenly screwed shut. "Mr. Bugayev, tell the skipper I just heard a couple of pings."

"Couple?"

"More'n one, but I didn't get a count."

The Pogy

Commander Wood made his decision. The idea had been to send the sonar signals on a highly directional, low-power basis so as to minimize the chance of revealing his own position. But the *Dallas* hadn't picked that up.

"Max power, Chief. Hit *Dallas* with everything."

"Aye aye." The chief flipped his power controls to full. It took several seconds until the system was ready to send a hundred-kilowatt blast of energy.

Ping ping ping ping ping!

The Dallas

"Wow!" Chief Laval exclaimed. "Conn, sonar, danger signal from *Pogy!*"

"All stop!" Chambers ordered. "Quiet ship."

"All stop." Lieutenant Goodman relayed the orders a second later. Aft, the reactor watch reduced steam demand, increasing the temperature in the reactor. This allowed neutrons to escape out of the pile, rapidly slowing the fission reaction.

"When speed gets to four knots, go to one-third speed," Chambers told the officer of the deck as he went aft to the sonar room. "Frenchie, I need data in a hurry."

"Still going too fast, sir," Laval said.

The Red October

"Captain Ramius, I think we should slow down," Mancuso said judiciously.

"The signal was not repeated," Ramius disagreed. The second directional signal had missed them, and the *Dallas* had not relayed the danger signal yet because she was still traveling too fast to locate the *October* and pass it along.

The Pogy

"Okay, sir, *Dallas* has killed power."

Wood chewed on his lower lip. "All right, let's find the bastard. Yankee search, Chief, max power." He went back to control. "Man battle stations." An alarm went off two seconds later. The *Pogy* had already been at increased readiness, and within forty seconds all stations were manned, with the executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Tom Reynolds, as fire control coordinator. His team of officers and technicians were waiting for data to feed into the Mark 117 fire control computer.

The sonar dome in the *Pogy*'s bow was blasting sound energy into the water. Fifteen seconds after it started the first return signal appeared on Chief Palmer's screen.

"Conn, sonar, we have a positive contact, bearing two-three-four, range six thousand yards. Classify probable *Alfa* class from his plant signature," Palmer said.

"Get me a solution!" Wood said urgently.

"Aye." Reynolds watched the data input as another team of officers was making a paper and pencil plot on the chart table. Computer or not, there had to be a backup. The data paraded across the screen. The *Pogy*'s four torpedo tubes contained a pair of Harpoon antiship missiles and two Mark 48 torpedoes. Only the torpedoes were useful at the moment. The Mark 48 was the most powerful torpedo in the inventory; wire-guided—and able to home in with its own active sonar—it ran at over fifty knots and carried a half-ton warhead. "Skipper, we got a solution for both fish. Running time four minutes, thirty-five seconds."

"Sonar, secure pinging," Wood said.

"Aye aye. Pinging secured, sir." Palmer killed power to the active systems. "Target elevation-depression angle is near zero, sir. He's about at our depth."

"Very well, sonar. Keep on him." Wood now had his target's position. Further pinging would only give it a better idea of his own.

The Dallas

"*Pogy* was pinging something. They got a return, bearing one-nine-one, about," Chief Laval said. "There's another sub out there. I don't know what. I can read some plant and steam noises, but not enough for a signature."

The Pogy

"The boomer's still movin', sir," Chief Palmer reported.

"Skipper," Reynolds looked up from the paper tracks, "her course takes her between us and the target."

"Terrific. All ahead one-third, left twenty degrees rudder." Wood moved to the sonar room while his orders were carried out. "Chief, power up and stand by to ping the boomer hard."

"Aye aye, sir." Palmer worked his controls. "Ready, sir."

"Hit him straight on. I don't want him to miss this time."

Wood watched the heading indicator on the sonar plot swing. The *Pogy* was turning rapidly, but not rapidly enough to suit him. The *Red October*—only he and Reynolds knew that she was Russian, though the crew was speculating like mad—was coming in too fast.

"Ready, sir."

"Hit it."

Palmer punched the impulse control.

Ping ping ping ping ping!

The Red October

"Skipper," Jones yelled. "Danger signal!"

Mancuso jumped to the annunciator without waiting for Ramius to react. He twisted the dial to All Stop. When this was done he looked at Ramius. "Sorry, sir."

"All right." Ramius scowled at the chart. The phone buzzed a

moment later. He took it and spoke in Russian for several seconds before hanging up. “I told them that we have a problem but we do not know what it is.”

“True enough.” Mancuso joined Ramius at the chart. Engine noises were diminishing, though not quickly enough to suit the American. The *October* was quiet for a Russian sub, but this was still too noisy for him.

“See if your sonarman can locate anything,” Ramius suggested.

“Right.” Mancuso took a few steps aft. “Jonesy, find what’s out there.”

“Aye, Skipper, but it won’t be easy on this gear.” He already had the sensor arrays working in the direction of the two escorting attack subs. Jones adjusted the fit of his headphones and started working on the amplifier controls. No signal processors, no SAPS, and the transducers weren’t worth a damn! But this wasn’t the time to get excited. The Soviet systems had to be manipulated electromechanically, unlike the computer-controlled ones he was used to. Slowly and carefully, he altered the directional receptor gangs in the sonar dome forward, his right hand twirling a cigarette pack, his eyes shut tight. He didn’t notice Bugayev sitting next to him, listening to the same input.

The Dallas

“What do we know, Chief?” Chambers asked.

“I got a bearing and nothing else. *Pogy*’s got him all dialed in, but our friend powered back his engine right after he got lashed, and he faded out on me. *Pogy* got a big return off him. He’s probably pretty close, sir.”

Chambers had only moved up to his executive officer’s posting four months earlier. He was a bright, experienced officer and a likely candidate for his own command, but he was only thirty-three years old and had only been back in submarines for those four months. The year and a half prior to that he’d been a reactor instructor in Idaho. The gruffness that was part of his job as Mancuso’s principal on-board disciplinarian also shielded more insecurity than he would have cared to admit. Now his career was on the line. He knew exactly how important this mission was. His future would ride on the decisions he was about to make.

“Can you localize with one ping?”

The sonar chief considered this for a second. “Not enough for a shooting solution, but it’ll give us something.”

“One ping, do it.”

“Aye.” Laval worked on his board briefly, triggering the active elements.

The V. K. Konovalov

Tupolev winced. He had acted too soon. He should have waited until they were past—but then if he had waited that long, he would have had to move, and now he had all three of them hovering nearby, almost still.

The four submarines were moving only fast enough for depth control. The Russian *Alfa* was pointed southeast, and all four were arrayed in a roughly trapezoidal fashion, open end seaward. The *Pogy* and the *Dallas* were to the north of the *Konovalov*, the *Red October* was southeast of her.

The Red October

“Somebody just pinged her,” Jones said quietly. “Bearing is roughly northwest, but she isn’t making enough noise for us to read her. Sir, if I had to make a bet, I’d say she was pretty close.”

“How do you know that?” Mancuso asked.

“I heard the pulse direct—just one ping to get a range, I think. It was from a BQQ-5. Then we heard the echo off the target. The math works out a couple of different ways, but smart money is he’s between us and our guys, and a little west. I know it’s shaky, sir, but it’s the best we got.”

“Range ten kilometers, perhaps less,” Bugayev commented.

“That’s kinda shaky, too, but it’s as good a starting place as any. Not a whole lot of data. Sorry, Skipper. Best we can do,” Jones said.

Mancuso nodded and returned to control.

“What gives?” Ryan asked. The plane controls were pushed all the way forward to maintain depth. He had not grasped the significance of what was going on.

“There’s a hostile submarine out there.”

“What information do we have?” Ramius asked.

“Not much. There’s a contact northwest, range unknown, but probably not very far. I know for sure it’s not one of ours. Norfolk

said this area was cleared. That leaves one possibility. We drift?"

"We drift," Ramius echoed, lifting the phone. He spoke a few orders.

The *October*'s engines were providing the power to move the submarine at a fraction over two knots, barely enough to maintain steerage way and not enough to maintain depth. With her slight positive buoyancy, the *October* was drifting upward a few feet per minute despite the plane setting.

The Dallas

"Let's move back south. I don't like the idea of having that *Alfa* closer to our friend than we are. Come right to one-eight-five, two-thirds," Chambers said finally.

"Aye aye," Goodman said. "Helm, right fifteen degrees rudder, come to new course one-eight-five. All ahead two thirds."

"Right fifteen degrees rudder, aye." The helmsman turned the wheel. "Sir, my rudder is right fifteen degrees, coming to new course one-eight-five."

The *Dallas*' four torpedo tubes were loaded with three Mark 48s and a decoy, an expensive MOSS (mobile submarine simulator). One of her torpedoes was targeted on the *Alfa*, but the firing solution was vague. The "fish" would have to do some of the tracking by itself. The *Pogy*'s two torpedoes were almost perfectly dialed in.

The problem was that neither boat had authority to shoot. Both attack submarines were operating under the normal rules of engagement. They could fire in self-defense only and defend the *Red October* only by bluff and guile. The question was whether the *Alfa* knew what the *Red October* was.

The V. K. Konovalov

"Steer for the *Ohio*," Tupolev ordered. "Bring speed to three knots. We must be patient, comrades. Now that the Americans know where we are they will not ping us again. We will move from our place quietly."

The *Konovalov*'s bronze propeller turned more quickly. By shutting down some nonessential electrical systems, the engineers were able to increase speed without increasing reactor output.

The Pogy

On the *Pogy*, the nearest attack boat, the contact faded, degrading the directional bearing somewhat. Commander Wood debated whether or not to get another bearing with active sonar but decided against it. If he used active sonar his position would be like that of a policeman looking for a burglar in a dark building with a flashlight. Sonar pings could well tell his target more than they told him. Using passive sonar was the normal routine in such a case.

Chief Palmer reported the passage of the *Dallas* down their port side. Both Wood and Chambers decided not to use their underwater telephones to communicate. They could not afford to make any noise now.

The Red October

They had been creeping along for a half hour now. Ryan was chain-smoking at his station, and his palms were sweating as he struggled to maintain his composure. This was not the sort of combat he had been trained for, being trapped inside a steel pipe, unable to see or hear anything. He knew that there was a Soviet submarine out there, and he knew what her orders were. If her captain realized who they were—then what? The two captains, he thought, were amazingly cool.

"Can your submarines protect us?" Ramius asked.

"Shoot at a Russian sub?" Mancuso shook his head. "Only if he shoots first—at them. Under the normal rules, we don't count."

"*What?*" Ryan was stunned.

"You want to start a war?" Mancuso smiled, as though he found this situation amusing. "That's what happens when warships from two countries start exchanging shots. We have to smart our way out of this."

"Be calm, Ryan," Ramius said. "This is our usual game. The hunter submarine tries to find us, and we try not to be found. Tell me, Captain Mancuso, at what range did you hear us off Iceland?"

"I haven't examined your chart closely, Captain," Mancuso mused. "Maybe twenty miles, thirty or so kilometers."

"And then we were traveling at thirteen knots—noise increases faster than speed. I think we can move east, slowly, without being detected. We use the caterpillar, move at six knots. As you know,

Soviet sonar is not so efficient as American. Do you agree, Captain?"

Mancuso nodded. "She's your boat, sir. May I suggest northeast? That ought to put us behind our attack boats inside an hour, maybe less."

"Yes." Ramius hobbled over to the control board to open the tunnel hatches, then went back to the phone. He gave the necessary orders. In a minute the caterpillar motors were engaged and speed was increasing slowly.

"Rudder right ten, Ryan," Ramius said. "And ease the plane controls."

"Rudder right ten, sir, easing the planes, sir." Ryan carried the orders out, glad that they were doing something.

"Your course is zero-four-zero, Ryan," Mancuso said from the chart table.

"Zero-four-zero, coming right through three-five-zero." From the helmsman's seat he could hear the water swishing down the portside tunnel. Every minute or so there was an odd rumble that lasted three or four seconds. The speed gauge in front of him passed through four knots.

"You are frightened, Ryan?" Ramius chuckled.

Jack swore to himself. His voice had wavered. "I'm a little tired, too."

"I know it is difficult for you. You do well for a new man with no training. We will be late to Norfolk, but we shall get there, you will see. Have you been on a missile boat, Mancuso?"

"Oh, sure. Relax, Ryan. This is what boomers do. Somebody comes lookin' for us, we just disappear." The American commander looked up from the chart. He had set coins at the estimated positions of the three other subs. He considered marking it up more but decided not to. There were some very interesting notations on this coastal chart—like programmed missile-firing positions. Fleet intelligence would go ape over this sort of information.

The *Red October* was moving northeast at six knots now. The *Konovalov* was coming southeast at three. The *Pogy* was heading south at two, and the *Dallas* south at fifteen. All four submarines were now within a six-mile-diameter circle, all converging on about the same point.

The V. K. Konovalov

Tupolev was enjoying himself. For whatever reason, the Americans had chosen to play a conservative game that he had not expected. The smart thing, he thought, would have been for one of the attack boats to close in and harrass him, allowing the missile sub to pass clear with the other escort. Well, at sea nothing was ever quite the same twice. He sipped at a cup of tea as he selected a sandwich.

His sonar *michman* noted an odd sound in his sonar set. It only lasted a few seconds, then was gone. Some far-off seismic rumble, he thought at first.

The Red October

They had risen because of the *Red October*'s positive trim, and now Ryan had five degrees of down-angle on the diving planes to get back down to a hundred meters. He heard the captains discussing the absence of a thermocline. Mancuso explained that it was not unusual for the area, particularly after violent storms. They agreed that it was unfortunate. A thermal layer would have helped their evasion.

Jones was at the aft entrance of the control room, rubbing his ears. The Russian phones were not very comfortable. "Skipper, I'm getting something to the north, comes and goes. I haven't gotten a bearing lock on it."

"Whose?" Mancuso asked.

"Can't say, sir. The active sonar isn't too bad, but the passive stuft just isn't up to the drill, Skipper. We're not blind, but close to it."

"Okay, if you hear something, sing out."

"Aye aye, Captain. You got some coffee out here? Mr. Bugayev sent me for some."

"I'll have a pot sent in."

"Right." Jones went back to work.

The V. K. Konovalov

"Comrade Captain, I have a contact, but I do not know what it is," the *michman* said over the phone.

Tupolev came back, munching on his sandwich. *Ohios* had been acquired so rarely by the Russians—three times to be exact, and in each case the quarry had been lost within minutes—that no one had

a feel for the characteristics of the class.

The *michman* handed the captain a spare set of phones. "It may take a few minutes, Comrade. It comes and goes."

The water off the American coast, though nearly isothermal, was not entirely perfect for sonar systems. Minor currents and eddies set up moving walls that reflected and channeled sound energy on a nearly random basis. Tupolev sat down and listened patiently. It took five minutes for the signal to come back.

The *michman*'s hand waved. "Now, Comrade Captain."

His commanding officer looked pale.

"Bearing?"

"Too faint, and too short to lock in—but three degrees on either bow, one-three-six to one-four-two."

Tupolev tossed the headphones on the table and went forward. He grabbed the political officer by the arm and led him quickly to the wardroom.

"It's *Red October!*"

"Impossible. Fleet Command said that his destruction was confirmed by visual inspection of the wreckage." The *zampolit* shook his head emphatically.

"We have been tricked. The caterpillar acoustical signature is unique, Comrade. The Americans have him, and he is out there. We must destroy him!"

"No. We must contact Moscow and ask for instructions."

The *zampolit* was a good Communist, but he was a surface ship officer who didn't belong on submarines, Tupolev thought.

"Comrade Zampolit, it will take several minutes to approach the surface, perhaps ten or fifteen to get a message to Moscow, thirty more for Moscow to respond at all—and then they will request *confirmation!* An hour in all, two, three? By that time *Red October* will be gone. Our original orders are operative, and there is no time to contact Moscow."

"But what if you are wrong?"

"I am not wrong, Comrade!" the captain hissed. "I will enter my contact report in the log, and my recommendations. If you forbid this, I will log that also! I am right, Comrade. It will be your head, not mine. Decide!"

"You are certain?"

"*Certain!*"

"Very well." The *zampolit* seemed to deflate. "How will you do

this?"

"As quickly as possible, before the Americans have a chance to destroy us. Go to your station, Comrade." The two men went back to the control room. The *Konovalov*'s six bow torpedo tubes were loaded with Mark C 533-millimeter wire-guided torpedoes. All they needed was to be told where to go.

"Sonar, search forward on all active systems!" the captain ordered.

The *michman* pushed the button.

The Red October

"Ouch." Jones' head jerked around. "Skipper, we're being pinged. Port side, midships, maybe a little forward. Not one of ours, sir."

The Pogy

"Conn, sonar, the *Alfa*'s got the boomer! The *Alfa* bearing is one-nine-two."

"All ahead two-thirds," Wood ordered immediately.

"All ahead two-thirds, aye."

The *Pogy*'s engines exploded into life, and soon her propeller was thrashing the black water.

The V. K. Konovalov

"Range seven thousand, six hundred meters. Elevation angle zero," the *michman* reported. So, this was the submarine they had been sent to hunt, he thought. He had just donned a headset that allowed him to report directly to the captain and fire control officer.

The *starpom* was the chief fire control supervisor. He quickly entered the data into the computer. It was a simple problem of target geometry. "We have a solution for torpedoes one and two."

"Prepare to fire."

"Flooding tubes." The *starpom* flipped the switches himself, reaching past the petty officer. "Outer torpedo tube doors are open."

"Recheck firing solution!" Tupolev said.

The Pogy

The *Pogy*'s sonar chief was the only man to hear the transient noise.

"Conn, sonar, *Alfa* contact—she just flooded tubes, sir! Target bearing is one-seven-nine."

The V. K. Konovalov

"Solution confirmed, Comrade Captain," the *starpom* said.

"Fire one and two," Tupolev ordered.

"Firing one…Firing two." The *Konovalov* shuddered twice as compressed air charges ejected the electrically powered torpedoes.

The Red October

Jones heard it first. "High-speed screws port side!" he said loudly and clearly. "Torpedoes in the water port side!"

"*Ryl nalyeva!*" Ramius ordered automatically.

"*What?*" Ryan asked.

"Left, rudder left!" Ramius pounded his fist on the rail.

"Left full, do it!" Mancuso said.

"Left full rudder, aye." Ryan turned the wheel all the way and held it down. Ramius was spinning the annunciator to flank speed.

The Pogy

"Two fish running," Palmer said. "Bearing is changing right to left. I say again, torpedo bearing changing right to left rapidly on both fish. They're targeted on the boomer."

The Dallas

The *Dallas* heard them, too. Chambers ordered flank speed and a turn to port. With torpedoes running his options were limited, and he was doing what American practice taught, heading someplace else—very fast.

The Red October

"I need a course!" Ryan said.

"Jonesy, give me a bearing!" Mancuso shouted.

"Three-two-zero, sir. Two fish heading in," Jones responded at

once, working his controls to nail the bearing down. This was no time to screw up.

"Steer three-two-zero, Ryan," Ramius ordered, "if we can turn so fast."

Thanks a lot, Ryan thought angrily, watching the gyrocompass click through three-five-seven. The rudder was hard over, and with the sudden increase in power from the caterpillar motors, he could feel feedback flutter through the wheel.

"Two fish heading in, bearing is three-two-zero, I say again bearing is constant," Jones reported, much cooler than he felt. "Here we go, guys…"

The Pogy

Her tactical plot showed the *October*, the *Alfa*, and the two torpedoes. The *Pogy* was four miles north of the action.

"Can we shoot?" the exec asked.

"At the *Alfa?*" Wood shook his head emphatically. "No, dammit. It wouldn't make a difference anyway."

The V. K. Konovalov

The two Mark C torpedoes were charging at forty-one knots, a slow speed for this range, so that they could be more easily guided by the *Konovalov*'s sonar system. They had a projected six-minute run, with one minute already completed.

The Red October

"Okay, coming through three-four-five, easing the rudder off," Ryan said.

Mancuso kept quiet now. Ramius was using a tactic that he didn't particularly agree with, turning into the fish. It offered a minimum target profile, but it gave them a simpler geometric intercept solution. Presumably Ramius knew what Russian fish could do. Mancuso hoped so.

"Steady on three-two-zero, Captain," Ryan said, eyes locked on the gyro repeater as though it mattered. A small voice in his brain congratulated him for going to the head an hour earlier.

"Ryan, down, maximum down on the diving planes."

“All the way down.” Ryan pushed the yoke to the stops. He was terrified, but even more frightened of fouling up. He had to assume that both commanders knew what they were about. There was no choice for him. Well, he thought, he did know one thing. Guided torpedoes can be tricked. Like radar signals that are aimed at the ground, sonar pulses can be obscured, especially when the sub they are trying to locate is near the bottom or the surface, areas where the pulses tend to be reflected. If the *October* dove she could lose herself in an opaque field—presuming she got there fast enough.

The V. K. Konovalov

“Target aspect has changed, Comrade Captain. Target is now smaller,” the *michman* said.

Tupolev considered this. He knew everything there was on Soviet combat doctrine—and knew that Ramius had written a good deal of it. Marko would do what he taught all of us to do, Tupolev thought. Turn into the oncoming weapons to minimize target cross-section and dive for the bottom to become lost in the confused echoes. “Target will be attempting to dive into the bottom-capture field. Be alert.”

“Aye, Comrade. Can he reach the bottom quickly enough?” the *starpom* asked.

Tupolev racked his brain for the *October*’s handling characteristics. “No, he cannot dive that deep in so short a time. We have him.” Sorry, my old friend, but I have no choice, he thought.

The Red October

Ryan cringed each time the sonar lash echoed through the double hull. “Can’t you jam that or something?” he demanded.

“Patience, Ryan,” Ramius said. He had never faced live warheads before but had exercised this problem a hundred times in his career. “Let him know he has us first.”

“Do you carry decoys?” Mancuso asked.

“Four of them, in the torpedo room, forward—but we have no torpedomen.”

Both captains were playing the cool game, Ryan noted bitterly from inside his terrified little world. Neither was willing to show fright before his peer. But they were both trained for this.

“Skipper,” Jones called, “two fish, bearing constant at three-two-zero—they just went active. I say again, the fish are now active—shit! they sound just like 48s. Skipper, they sound like Mark 48 fish.”

Ramius had been waiting for this. “Yes, we stole the torpedo sonar from you five years ago, but not your torpedo engines. *Bugayev!*”

In the sonar room, Bugayev had powered up the acoustical jamming gear as soon as the fish were launched. Now he carefully timed his jamming pulses to coincide with those from the approaching torpedoes. The pulses were dialed into the same carrier frequency and pulse repetition rate. The timing had to be precise. By sending out slightly distorted return echoes, he could create ghost targets. Not too many, nor too far away. Just a few, close by, and he might be able to confuse the fire control operators on the attacking *Alfa*. He thumbed the trigger switch carefully, chewing on an American cigarette.

The V. K. Konovalov

“Damn! He’s jamming us.” The *michman*, noting a pair of new pips, showed his first trace of emotion. The fading pip from the true contact was now bordered with two new ones, one north and closer, the other south and farther away. “Captain, the target is using Soviet jamming equipment.”

“You see?” Tupolev said to the *zampolit*. “Use caution now,” he ordered his *starpom*.

The Red October

“Ryan, all up on planes!” Ramius shouted.

“All the way up.” Ryan yanked back, pulling the yoke hard against his belly and hoping that Ramius knew what the hell he was doing.

“Jones, give us time and range.”

“Aye.” The jamming gave them a sonar picture plotted on the main scopes. “Two fish, bearing three-two-zero. Range to number one is 2,000 yards, to number two is 2,300—I got a depression angle on number one! Number one fish is heading down a little, sir.” Maybe Bugayev wasn’t so dumb after all, Jones thought. But

they had two fish to sweat…

The Pogy

The *Pogy*'s skipper was enraged. The goddamned rules of engagement prevented him from doing a goddamned thing, except, maybe—

"Sonar, ping the sonuvabitch! Max power, blast the sucker!"

The *Pogy*'s BQQ-5 sent timed wave fronts of energy lashing at the *Alfa*. The *Pogy* couldn't shoot, but maybe the Russian didn't know that, and maybe this lashing would interfere with their targeting sonar.

The Red October

"Any time now—one of the fish has capture, sir. I don't know which." Jones moved the phones off one ear, his hand poised to slap the other off. The homing sonar on one torpedo was now tracking them. Bad news. If these were like Mark 48s…Jones knew all too well that those things didn't miss much. He heard the change in the Doppler shift of the propellers as they passed beneath the *Red October*. "One missed, sir. Number one missed under us. Number two is heading in, ping interval is shortening." He reached over and patted Bugayev on the shoulder. Maybe he really was the on-board genius that the Russians said he was.

The V. K. Konovalov

The second Mark C torpedo was cutting through the water at forty-one knots. This made the torpedo-target closing speed about fifty-five. The guidance and decision loop was a complex one. Unable to mimic the computer homing system on the American Mark 48, the Soviets had the torpedo's targeting sonar report back to the launching vessel through an insulated wire. The *starpom* had a choice of sonar data with which to guide the torpedoes, that from the sub-mounted sonar or that from the torpedoes themselves. The first fish had been duped by the ghost images that the jamming had duplicated on the torpedo sonar frequency. For the second, the *starpom* was using the lower-frequency bow sonar. The first one had missed low, he knew now. That meant that the target was the

middle pip. A quick frequency change by the *michman* cleared the sonar picture for few seconds before the jamming mode was altered. Coolly and expertly, the *starpom* commanded the second torpedo to select the center target. It ran straight and true.

The five-hundred-pound warhead struck the target a glancing blow aft of midships, just forward of the control room. It exploded a millisecond later.

The Red October

The force of the explosion hurled Ryan from his chair, and his head hit the deck. He came to from a moment's unconsciousness with his ears ringing in the dark. The shock of the explosion had shorted out a dozen electrical switchboards, and it was several seconds before the red battle lights clicked on. Aft, Jones had flipped his headphones off just in time, but Bugayev, trying to the last second to spoof the incoming torpedo, had not. He was rolling in agony on the deck, one eardrum ruptured, totally deafened. In the engine spaces men were scrambling back to their feet. Here the lights had stayed on, and Melekhin's first action was to look at the damage-control status board.

The explosion had occurred on the outer hull, a skin of light steel. Inside it was a water-filled ballast tank, a beehive of cellular baffles seven feet across. Located beyond the tank were high-pressure air flasks. Then came the *October*'s battery and the inner pressure hull. The torpedo had impacted in the center of a steel plate on the outer hull, several feet from any weld joints. The force of the explosion had torn a hole twelve feet across, shredded the interior ballast tank baffles, and ruptured a half-dozen air flasks, but already much of its force had been dissipated. The final damage was done to thirty of the large nickle-cadmium battery cells. Soviet engineers had placed these here deliberately. They had known that such a placement would make them difficult to service, difficult to recharge, and worst of all expose them to seawater contamination. All this had been accepted in light of their secondary purpose as additional armor for the hull. The *October*'s batteries saved her. Had it not been for them, the force of the explosion would have been spent on the pressure hull. Instead it was greatly reduced by the layered defensive system which had no Western counterpart. A crack had developed at the weld joint on the inner hull, and water

was spraying into the radio room as though from a high-pressure hose, but the hull was otherwise secure.

In control, Ryan was soon back in his seat trying to determine if his instruments still worked. He could hear water splashing into the next compartment forward. He didn't know what to do. He did know it would be a bad time to panic, much as his brain screamed for the release.

"What do I do?"

"Still with us?" Mancuso's face looked satanic in the red lights.

"No goddammit, I'm dead—what do I do?"

"Ramius?" Mancuso saw the captain holding a flashlight taken from a bracket on the aft bulkhead.

"Down, dive for bottom." Ramius took the phone and called engineering to order the engines stopped. Melekhin had already given the order.

Ryan pushed his controls forward. In a goddamned submarine that's got a goddamned hole punched in it, they tell you to go *down!* he thought.

The V. K. Konovalov

"A solid hit, Comrade Captain," the *michman* reported. "His engines stopped. I hear hull creaking noises, his depth is changing." He tried some additional pings but got nothing. The explosion had greatly disturbed the water. There were rumbling echoes of the initial explosion reverberating through the sea. Trillions of bubbles had formed, creating an "ensonified zone" around the target that rapidly obscured it. His active pings were reflected back by the cloud of bubbles, and his passive listening ability was greatly reduced by the recurring rumbles. All he knew for sure was that one torpedo had hit, probably the second. He was an experienced man trying to decide what was noise and what was signal, and he had reconstructed most of the events correctly.

The Dallas

"Score one for the bad guys," the sonar chief said. The *Dallas* was running too fast to make proper use of her sonar, but the explosion was impossible to miss. The whole crew heard it through the hull.

In the attack center Chambers plotted their position two miles

from where the *October* had been. The others in the compartment looked at their instruments without emotion. Ten of their shipmates had just been hit, and the enemy was on the other side of the wall of noise.

"Slow to one-third," Chambers ordered.

"All ahead one-third," the officer of the deck repeated.

"Sonar, get me some data," Chambers said.

"Working on it, sir." Chief Laval strained to make sense of what he heard. It took a few minutes as the *Dallas* slowed to under ten knots. "Conn, sonar, the boomer took one hit. I don't hear her engines…but there ain't no breakup noises. I say again, sir, no breakup noises."

"Can you hear the *Alfa?*"

"No, sir, too much crud in the water."

Chamber's face screwed into a grimace. You're an officer, he told himself, they pay you to think. First, what's happening? Second, what do you do about it? Think it through, then act.

"Estimated distance to target?"

"Something like nine thousand yards, sir," Lieutenant Goodman said, reading the last solution off the fire control computer. "She'll be on the far side of the ensonified zone."

"Make your depth six hundred feet." The diving officer passed this on to the helmsman. Chambers considered the situation and decided on his course of action. He wished Mancuso and Mannion were here. The captain and navigator were the other two members of what passed for the *Dallas'* tactical management committee. He needed to exchange some ideas with other experienced officers—but there weren't any.

"Listen up. We're going down. The disturbance from the explosion will stay fairly steady. If it moves at all, it'll go up. Okay, we'll go under it. First we want to locate the boomer. If she isn't there, then she's on the bottom. It's only nine hundred feet here, so she could be on the bottom with a live crew. Whether or not she's on the bottom, we gotta get between her and the *Alfa*." And, he thought on, if the *Alfa* shoots then, I kill the fucker, and rules of engagement be damned. They had to trick this guy. But how? And where was the *Red October?*

She was diving more quickly than expected. The explosion had also ruptured a trim tank, causing more negative buoyancy than they had at first allowed for.

The leak in the radio room was bad, but Melekhin had noted the flooding on his damage control board and reacted immediately. Each compartment had its own electrically powered pump. The radio room pump, supplemented by a master-zone pump that he had also activated, was managing, barely, to keep up with the flooding. The radios were already destroyed, but no one was planning to send any messages.

"Ryan, all the way up, and come right full rudder," Ramius said.

"Right full rudder, all the way up on the planes," Ryan said. "We going to hit the bottom?"

"Try not to," Mancuso said. "It might spring the leak worse."

"Great," Ryan growled back.

The *October* slowed her descent, arcing east below the ensonified zone. Ramius wanted it between himself and the *Alfa*. Mancuso thought that they might just survive after all. In that case he'd have to give this boat's plans a closer look.

The Dallas

"Sonar, give me two low-powered pings for the boomer. I don't want anybody else to hear this, Chief."

"Aye." Chief Laval made the proper adjustments and sent the signals out. "All right! Conn, sonar, I got her! Bearing two-zero-three, range two thousand yards. She is not, repeat *not*, on the bottom, sir."

"Left fifteen degrees rudder, come to two-zero-three," Chambers ordered.

"Left fifteen degrees rudder, aye!" the helmsman sang out. "New course two-zero-three. Sir, my rudder is left fifteen degrees."

"Frenchie, tell me about the boomer!"

"Sir, I got…pump noises, I think…and she's moving a little, bearing is now two-zero-one. I can track her on passive, sir."

"Thompson, plot the boomer's course. Mr. Goodman, we still have that MOSS ready for launch?"

"Aye aye," responded the torpedo officer.

The V. K. Konovalov

“Did we kill him?” the *zampolit* asked.

“Probably,” Tupolev answered, wondering if he had or not. “We must close to be certain. Ahead slow.”

“Ahead slow.”

The Pogy

The *Pogy* was now within two thousand yards of the *Konovalov*, still pinging her mercilessly.

“He’s moving, sir. Enough that I can read passive,” Sonar Chief Palmer said.

“Very well, secure pinging,” Wood said.

“Aye, pinging secured.”

“We got a solution?”

“Locked in tight,” Reynolds answered. “Running time is one minute eighteen seconds. Both fish are ready.”

“All ahead one-third.”

“All ahead one-third, aye.” The *Pogy* slowed. Her commanding officer wondered what excuse he might find for shooting.

The Red October

“Skipper, that was one of our sonars that pinged us, off north-north-east. Low-power ping, sir, must be close.”

“Think you can raise her on gertrude?”

“Yes sir!”

“Captain?” Mancuso asked. “Permission to communicate with my ship?”

“Yes.”

“Jones, raise her right now.”

“Aye. This is Jonesy calling Frenchie, do you copy?” The sonarman frowned at the speaker. “Frenchie, answer me.”

The Dallas

“Conn, sonar, I got Jonesy on the gertrude.”

Chambers lifted the control room gertrude phone. “Jones, this is Chambers. What is your condition?”

Mancuso took the mike away from his man. “Wally, this is Bart,” he said. “We took one midships, but she’s holding together. Can you

run interference for us?"

"Aye aye! Starting right now, out." Chambers replaced the phone. "Goodman, flood the MOSS tube. Okay, we'll go in behind the MOSS. If the *Alfa* shoots at it, we take her out. Set it to run straight for two thousand yards, then turn south."

"Done. Outer door open, sir."

"Launch."

"MOSS away, sir."

The decoy ran forward at twenty knots for two minutes to clear the *Dallas*, then slowed. It had a torpedo body whose forward portion carried a powerful sonar transducer that ran off a tape recorder and broadcast the recorded sounds of a 688-class submarine. Every four minutes it changed over from loud operation to silent. The *Dallas* trailed a thousand yards behind the decoy, dropping several hundred feet below its course track.

The *Konovalov* approached the wall of bubbles carefully, with the *Pogy* trailing to the north.

"Shoot at the decoy, you son of a bitch," Chambers said quietly. The attack center crew heard him and nodded grim agreement.

The Red October

Ramius judged that the ensonified zone was now between him and the *Alfa*. He ordered the engines turned back on, and the *Red October* proceeded on a north-easterly course.

The V. K. Konovalov

"Left ten degrees rudder," Tupolev ordered quietly. "We'll come around the dead zone to the north and see if he is still alive when we turn back. First we must clear the noise."

"Still nothing," the *michman* reported. "No bottom impact, no collapse noises…New contact, bearing one-seven-zero…Different sound, Comrade Captain, one propeller…Sounds like an American."

"What heading?"

"South, I think. Yes, south…The sound's changing. It is American."

"An American sub is decoying. We ignore it."

"Ignore it?" the *zampolit* said.

"Comrade, if you were heading north and were torpedoed,

would you then head south? Yes, you would—but not Marko. It is too obvious. This American is decoying to try to take us away from him. Not too clever, this one. Marko would do better. And he would go north. I know him, I know how he thinks. He is now heading north, perhaps northeast. They would not decoy if he was dead. Now we know that he is alive but crippled. We will find him, and finish him," Tupolev said calmly, fully caught up in the hunt for *Red October*, remembering all he had been taught. He would prove now that he was the new master. His conscience was still. Tupolev was fulfilling his destiny.

"But the Americans—"

"Will not shoot, Comrade," the captain said with a thin smile. "If they could shoot, we would already be dead from the one to the north. They cannot shoot without permission. They must *ask* for permission, as we must—but we already have the permission, and the advantage. We are now where the torpedo struck him, and when we clear the disturbance we will find him again. Then we will have him."

The Red October

They couldn't use the caterpillar. One side was smashed by the torpedo hit. The *October* was moving at six knots, driven by her propellers, which made more noise than the other system. This was much like the normal drill of protecting a boomer. But the exercise always presupposed that the escorting attack boats could shoot to make the bad guy go away…

"Left rudder, reverse course," Ramius ordered.

"What?" Mancuso was astounded.

"Think, Mancuso," Ramius said, looking to be sure that Ryan carried out the order. Ryan did, not knowing why.

"Think, Commander Mancuso," Ramius repeated. "What has happened? Moskva ordered a hunter sub to remain behind, probably a *Politovskiy*-class boat, the *Alfa* you call him. I know all their captains. All young, all, ah, aggressive? Yes, aggressive. He must know we are not dead. If he knows this, he will pursue us. So, we go back like a fox and let him pass."

Mancuso didn't like this. Ryan could tell without looking.

"We cannot shoot. Your men cannot shoot. We cannot run from him—he is faster. We cannot hide—his sonar is better. He will

move east, use his speed to contain us and his sonar to locate us. By moving west, we have the best chance to escape. This he will not expect."

Mancuso still didn't like it, but he had to admit it was clever. Too damned clever. He looked back down at the chart. It wasn't his boat.

The Dallas

"The bastard went right past. Either ignored the decoy or flat didn't hear it. He's abeam of us, we'll be in his baffles soon," Chief Laval reported.

Chambers swore quietly. "So much for that idea. Right fifteen degrees rudder." At least the *Dallas* had not been heard. The submarine responded rapidly to the controls. "Let's get behind him."

The Pogy

The *Pogy* was now a mile off the *Alfa*'s port quarter. She had the *Dallas* on sonar and noted her change of course. Commander Wood simply did not know what to do next. The easiest solution was to shoot, but he couldn't. He contemplated shooting on his own. His every instinct told him to do just this. The *Alfa* was hunting Americans…But he couldn't give in to his instinct. Duty came first.

There was nothing worse than overconfidence, he reflected bitterly. The assumption behind this operation had been that there wouldn't be anybody around, and even if there were the attack subs would be able to warn the boomer off well in advance. There was a lesson in this, but Wood didn't care to think about it just now.

The V. K. Konovalov

"Contact," the *michman* said into the microphone. "Ahead, almost dead ahead. Using propellers and going at slow speed. Bearing zero-four-four, range unknown.'

"Is it *Red October?*" Tupolev asked.

"I cannot say, Comrade Captain. It could be an American. He's coming this way, I think."

"Damn!" Tupolev looked around the control room. Could they

have passed the *Red October?* Might they already have killed him?

The Dallas

"Does he know we're here, Frenchie?" Chambers asked, back in sonar.

"No way, sir." Laval shook his head. "We're directly behind him. Wait a minute…" The chief frowned. "Another contact, far side of the *Alfa*. That's gotta be our friend, sir. Jesus! I think he's heading this way. Using his wheels, not that funny thing."

"Range to the *Alfa?*"

"Under three thousand yards, sir."

"All ahead two thirds! Come left ten degrees!" Chambers ordered. "Frenchie, ping, but use the under-ice sonar. He may not know what that is. Make him think we're the boomer."

"Aye aye, sir!"

The V. K. Konovalov

"High-frequency pinging aft!" the *michman* called out. "Does not sound like an American sonar, Comrade."

Tupolev was suddenly puzzled. Was it an American to seaward? The other one on his port quarter was certainly American. It had to be the *October*. Marko was still the fox. He had lain still, letting them go past, so that he could shoot at them!

"All ahead full, left full rudder!"

The Red October

"Contact!" Jones sang out. "Dead ahead. Wait…It's an *Alfa!* She's close! Seems to be turning. Somebody pinging her on the other side. Christ, she's *real* close. Skipper, the *Alfa* is not a point source. I got signal separation between the engine and the screw."

"Captain," Mancuso said. The two commanders looked at one another and communicated a single thought as if by telepathy. Ramius nodded.

"Get us range."

"Jonesy, ping the sucker!" Mancuso ran aft.

"Aye." The systems were fully powered. Jones loosed a single ranging ping. "Range fifteen hundred yards. Zero elevation angle,

sir. We're level with her."

"Mancuso, have your man give us range and bearing!" Ramius twisted the annunciator handle savagely.

"Okay, Jonesy, you're our fire control. Track the mother."

The V. K. Konovalov

"One active sonar ping to starboard, distance unknown, bearing zero-four-zero. The seaward target just ranged on us," the *michman* said.

"Give me a range," Tupolev ordered.

"Too far aft of the beam, Comrade. I am losing him aft."

One of them was the *October*—but which? Could he risk shooting at an American sub? No!

"Solution to the forward target?"

"Not a good one," the *starpom* replied. "He's maneuvering and increasing speed."

The *michman* concentrated on the western target. "Captain, contact forward is not, repeat not Soviet. Forward contact is American."

"*Which* one?" Tupolev screamed.

"West and northwest are both American. East target unknown."

"Keep the rudder at full."

"Rudder is full," the helmsman responded, holding the wheel over.

"The target is behind us. We must lock on and shoot as we turn. Damn, we are going too fast. Slow to one-third speed."

The *Konovalov* was normally quick to turn, but the power reduction made her propeller act like a brake, slowing the maneuver. Still, Tupolev was doing the right thing. He had to point his torpedo tubes near the bearing of the target, and he had to slow rapidly enough for his sonar to give him accurate firing information.

The Red October

"Okay, the *Alfa* is continuing her turn, now heading right to left… Propulsion sounds are down some. She just chopped power," Jones said, watching the screen. His mind was working furiously computing course, speed, and distance. "Range is now twelve

hundred yards. She's still turning. We doin' what I think?"

"Looks that way."

Jones set the active sonar on automatic pinging. "Have to see what this turn does, sir. If she's smart she'll burn off south and get clear first."

"Then pray she ain't smart," Mancuso said from the passageway. "Steady as she goes!"

"Steady as she goes," Ryan said, wondering if the next torpedo would kill them.

"Her turn is continuing. We're on her port beam now, maybe her port bow." Jones looked up. "She's going to get around first. Here come the pings."

The *Red October* accelerated to eighteen knots.

The V. K. Konovalov

"I have him," the *michman* said. "Range one thousand meters, bearing zero-four-five. Angle zero."

"Set it up," Tupolev ordered his exec.

"It will have to be a zero-angle shot. We're swinging too rapidly," the *starpom* said. He set it up as quickly as he could. The submarines were now closing at over forty knots. "Ready for tube five only! Tube flooded, door—open. Ready!"

"Shoot!"

"Fire five!" The *starpom*'s finger stabbed the button.

The Red October

"Range down to nine hundred—high-speed screws dead ahead! We have one torpedo in the water dead ahead. One fish, heading right in!"

"Forget it, track the *Alfa!*"

"Aye, okay, the *Alfa*'s bearing two-two-five, steadying down. We need to come left a little, sir."

"Ryan, come left five degrees, your course is two-two-five."

"Left five rudder, coming to two-two-five."

"The fish is closing rapidly, sir," Jones said.

"Screw it! Track the *Alfa*."

"Aye. Bearing is still two-two-five. Same as the fish."

The combined speed ate up the distance between the submarines

rapidly. The torpedo was closing the *October* faster still, but it had a safety device built in. To prevent them from blowing up their own launch platform, torpedoes could not arm until they were five hundred to a thousand yards from the boat that launched them. If the *October* closed the *Alfa* fast enough, she could not be hurt.

The *October* was now passing twenty knots.

"Range to the *Alfa* is seven hundred fifty yards, bearing two-two-five. The torpedo is close, sir, a few more seconds." Jones cringed, staring at the screen.

Klonk!

The torpedo struck the *Red October* dead center in her hemispherical bow. The safety lock still had another hundred meters to run. The impact broke it into three pieces, which were batted aside by the accelerating missile submarine.

"A dud!" Jones laughed. "Thank you, God! Target still bearing two-two-five, range is seven hundred yards."

The V. K. Konovalov

"No explosion?" Tupolev wondered.

"The safety locks!" The *starpom* swore. He'd had to set it up too fast.

"Where is the target?"

"Bearing zero-four-five, Comrade. Bearing is constant," the *michman* replied, "closing rapidly."

Tupolev blanched. "Left full rudder, all ahead flank!"

The Red October

"Turning, turning left to right," Jones said. "Bearing is now two-three-zero, spreading out a little. Need a little right rudder, sir."

"Ryan, come right five degrees."

"Rudder is right five," Jack answered.

"No, rudder ten right!" Ramius countermanded his order. He had been keeping a track with pencil and paper. And he knew the *Alfa*.

"Right ten degrees," Ryan said.

"Near-field effect, range down to four hundred yards, bearing is two-two-five to the center of the target. Target is spreading out left and right, mostly left," Jones said rapidly. "Range…three hundred

yards. Elevation angle is zero, we are level with the target. Range two hundred fifty, bearing two-two-five to target center. We can't miss, Skipper."

"We're gonna hit!" Mancuso called out.

Tupolev should have changed depth. As it was he depended on the *Alfa*'s acceleration and maneuverability, forgetting that Ramius knew exactly what these were.

"Contact spread way the hell out—instantaneous return, sir!"

"Brace for impact!"

Ramius had forgotten the collision alarm. He yanked at it only seconds before impact.

The *Red October* rammed the *Konovalov* just aft of midships at a thirty-degree angle. The force of the collision ruptured the *Konovalov*'s titanium pressure hull and crumpled the *October*'s bow as if it were a beer can.

Ryan had not braced hard enough. He was thrown forward, and his face struck the instrument panel. Aft, Williams was catapulted from his bed and caught by Noyes before his head hit the deck. Jones' sonar systems were wiped out. The missile submarine bounded up and over the top of the *Alfa*, her keel grating across the upper deck of the smaller vessel as the momentum carried her forward and upward.

The V. K. Konovalov

The *Konovalov* had had full watertight integrity set. It did not make a difference. Two compartments were instantly vented to the sea, and the bulkhead between the control room and the after compartments failed a moment later from hull deformation. The last thing that Tupolev saw was a curtain of white foam coming from the starboard side. The *Alfa* rolled to port, turned by the friction of the *October*'s keel. In a few seconds the submarine was upside down. Throughout her length men and gear tumbled about like dice. Half the crew were already drowning. Contact with the *October* ended at this point, when the *Konovalov*'s flooded compartments made her drop stern first toward the bottom. The political officer's last conscious act was to yank at the disaster beacon handle, but it was to no avail: the sub was inverted, and the cable fouled on the sail. The only marker on the *Konovalov*'s grave was a mass of bubbles.

The Red October

"We still alive?" Ryan's face was bleeding profusely.

"Up, up on the planes!" Ramius shouted.

"All the way up." Ryan pulled back with his left hand, holding his right over the cuts.

"Damage report," Ramius said in Russian.

"Reactor system is intact," Melekhin answered at once. "The damage control board shows flooding in the torpedo room—I think. I have vented high-pressure air into it, and the pump is activated. Recommend we surface to assess damage."

"*Da!*" Ramius hobbled to the air manifold and blew all tanks.

The Dallas

"Jesus," the sonar chief said, "somebody hit somebody. I got breakup noises going down and hull-popping noises going up. Can't tell which is which, sir. Both engines are dead."

"Get us up to periscope depth quick!" Chambers ordered.

The Red October

It was 1654 local time when the *Red October* broke the surface of the Atlantic Ocean for the first time, forty-seven miles southeast of Norfolk. There was no other ship in sight.

"Sonar is wiped out, Skipper." Jones was switching off his boxes. "Gone, crunched. We got some piddly-ass lateral hydrophones. No active stuff, not even the gertrude."

"Go forward, Jonesy. Nice work."

Jones took the last cigarette from his pack. "Any time, sir—but I'm gettin' out next summer, depend on it."

Bugayev followed him forward, still deafened and stunned from the torpedo hit.

The *October* was sitting still on the surface, down by the bow and listing twenty degrees to port from the vented ballast tanks.

The Dallas

"How about that," Chambers said. He lifted the microphone. "This is Commander Chambers. They killed the *Alfa!* Our guys are safe.

Surfacing the boat now. Stand by the fire and rescue party!"

The Red October

"You okay, Commander Ryan?" Jones turned his head carefully. "Looks like you broke some glass the hard way, sir."

"You don't worry till it stops bleeding," Ryan said drunkenly.

"Guess so." Jones held his handkerchief over the cuts. "But I sure hope you don't always drive this bad, sir."

"Captain Ramius, permission to lay to the bridge and communicate with my ship?" Mancuso asked.

"Go, we may need help with the damage."

Mancuso got into his jacket, checking to make sure his small docking radio was still in the pocket where he had left it. Thirty seconds later he was atop the sail. The *Dallas* was surfacing as he made his first check of the horizon. The sky had never looked so good.

He couldn't recognize the face four hundred yards away, but it had to be Chambers.

"*Dallas*, this is Mancuso."

"Skipper, this is Chambers. You guys okay?"

"Yes! But we may need some hands. The bow's all stove in and we took a torpedo midships."

"I can see it, Bart. Look down."

"Jesus!" The jagged hole was awash, half out of the water, and the submarine was heavily down by the bow. Mancuso wondered how she could float at all, but it wasn't the time to question why.

"Come over here, Wally, and get the raft out."

"On the way. Fire and rescue is standing by, I—there's our other friend," Chambers said.

The *Pogy* surfaced three hundred yards directly ahead of the *October*.

"*Pogy* says the area's clear. Nobody here but us. Heard that one before?" Chambers laughed mirthlessly. "How about we radio in?"

"No, let's see if we can handle it first." The *Dallas* approached the *October*. Within minutes Mancuso's command submarine was seventy yards to port, and ten men on a raft were struggling across the chop. Up to this time only a handful of men aboard the *Dallas* had known what was going on. Now everyone knew. He could see his men pointing and talking. What a story they had.

Damage was not as bad as they had feared. The torpedo room had not flooded—a sensor damaged by the impact had given a false reading. The forward ballast tanks were permanently vented to the sea, but the submarine was so big and her ballast tanks so subdivided that she was only eight feet down at the bow. The list to port was only a nuisance. In two hours the radio room leak had been plugged, and after a lengthy discussion among Ramius, Melekhin, and Mancuso it was decided that they could dive again if they kept their speed down and did not go below thirty meters. They'd be late getting to Norfolk.

THE EIGHTEENTH DAY
MONDAY, 20 DECEMBER

The Red October

Ryan again found himself atop the sail thanks to Ramius, who said that he had earned it. In return for the favor, Jack had helped the captain up the ladder to the bridge station. Mancuso was with them. There was now an American crew below in the control room, and the engine room complement had been supplemented so that there was something approaching a normal steaming watch. The leak in the radio room had not been fully contained, but it was above the waterline. The compartment had been pumped out, and the *October*'s list had eased to fifteen degrees. She was still down by the bow, which was partially compensated for when the intact ballast tanks were blown dry. The crumpled bow gave the submarine a decidedly asymmetrical wake, barely visible in the moonless, cloud-laden sky. The *Dallas* and the *Pogy* were still submerged, somewhere aft, sniffing for additional interference as they neared Capes Henry and Charles.

Somewhere farther aft an LNG (liquified natural gas) carrier was approaching the passage, which the coast guard had closed to all normal traffic in order to allow the floating bomb to travel without interference all the way to the LNG terminal at Cove Point, Maryland—or so the story went. Ryan wondered how the navy had persuaded the ship's skipper to fake engine trouble or somehow delay his arrival. They were six hours late. The navy must have been nervous as all hell until they had finally surfaced forty minutes earlier and been spotted immediately by a circling Orion.

The red and green buoy lights winked at them, dancing on the chop. Forward he could see the lights of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, but there were no moving automobile lights. The CIA had probably staged a messy wreck to shut it down, maybe a tractor-trailer or two full of eggs or gasoline. Something creative.

"You've never been to America before," Ryan said, just to make conversation.

"No, never to a Western country. Cuba once, many years ago."

Ryan looked north and south. He figured they were inside the

capes now. “Well, welcome home, Captain Ramius. Speaking for myself, sir, I’m damned glad you’re here.”

“And happier that you are here,” Ramius observed.

Ryan laughed out loud. “You can bet your ass on that. Thanks again for letting me up here.”

“You have earned it, Ryan.”

“The name’s Jack, sir.”

“Short for John, is it?” Ramius asked. “John is the same as Ivan, no?”

“Yes, sir, I believe it is.” Ryan didn’t understand why Ramius’ face broke into a smile.

“Tug approaching.” Mancuso pointed.

The American captain had superb eyesight. Ryan didn’t see the boat through his binoculars for another minute. It was a shadow, darker than the night, perhaps a mile away.

“*Sceptre*, this is tug *Paducah*. Do you read? Over.”

Mancuso took the docking radio from his pocket. “*Paducah* this is *Sceptre*. Good morning, sir.” He was speaking in an English accent.

“Please form up on me, Captain, and follow us in.”

“Jolly good, *Paducah*. Will do. Out.”

HMS *Sceptre* was the name of an English attack submarine. She must be somewhere remote, Ryan thought, patrolling the Falklands or some other faraway location so that her arrival at Norfolk would be just another routine occurrence, not unusual and difficult to disprove. Evidently they were thinking about some agent’s being suspicious of a strange sub’s arrival.

The tug approached to within a few hundred yards, then turned to lead them in at five knots. A single red tuck light showed.

“I hope we don’t run into any civilian traffic,” Mancuso said.

“But you said the harbor entrance was closed,” Ramius said.

“Might be some guy in a little sailboat out there. The public has free passage through the yard to the Dismal Swamp Canal, and they’re damned near invisible on radar. They slip through all the time.”

“This is crazy.”

“It’s a free country, Captain,” Ryan said softly. “It will take you some time to understand what free really means. The word is often misused, but in time you will see just how wise your decision was.”

“Do you live here, Captain Mancuso?” Ramius asked.

"Yes, my squadron is based in Norfolk. My home is in Virginia Beach, down that way. I probably won't get there anytime soon. They're going to send us right back out. Only thing they can do. So, I miss another Christmas at home. Part of the job."

"You have a family?"

"Yes, Captain. A wife and two sons. Michael, eight, and Dominic, four. They're used to having daddy away."

"And you, Ryan?"

"Boy and a girl. Guess I will be home for Christmas. Sorry, Commander. You see, for a while there I had my doubts. After things get settled down some I'd like to get this whole bunch together for something special."

"Big dinner bill," Mancuso chuckled.

"I'll charge it to the CIA."

"And what will the CIA do with us?" Ramius asked.

"As I told you, Captain, a year from now you will be living your own lives, wherever you wish to live, doing whatever you wish to do."

"Just so?"

"Just so. We take pride in our hospitality, sir, and if I ever get transferred back from London, you and your men are welcome in my home at any time."

"Tug's turning to port." Mancuso pointed. The conversation was taking too maudlin a turn for him.

"Give the order, Captain," Ramius said. It was, after all, Mancuso's harbor.

"Left five degrees rudder," Mancuso said into the microphone.

"Left five degrees rudder, aye," the helmsman responded. "Sir, my rudder is left five degrees."

"Very well."

The *Paducah* turned into the main channel, past the *Saratoga*, which was sitting under a massive crane, and headed towards a mile-long line of piers in the Norfolk Naval Shipyard. The channel was totally empty, just the *October* and the tug. Ryan wondered if the *Paducah* had a normal complement of enlisted men or a crew made entirely of admirals. He would not have given odds either way.

Norfolk, Virginia

Twenty minutes later they were at their destination. The Eight-Ten Dock was a new dry dock built to service the *Ohio*-class fleet ballistic missile submarines, a huge concrete box over eight hundred feet long, larger than it had to be, covered with a steel roof so that spy satellites could not see if it were occupied or not. It was in the maximum security section of the base, and one had to pass several security barriers of armed guards—marines, not the usual civilian guards—to get near the dock, much less into it.

"All stop," Mancuso ordered.

"All stop, aye."

The *Red October* had been slowing for several minutes, and it was another two hundred yards before she came to a complete halt. The *Paducah* curved around to starboard to push her bow round. Both captains would have preferred to power their own way in, but the damaged bow made maneuvering tricky. The diesel-powered tug took five minutes to line the bow up properly, headed directly into the water-filled box. Ramius gave the engine command himself, the last for this submarine. She eased forward through the black water, passing slowly under the wide roof. Mancuso ordered his men topside to handle the lines tossed them by a handful of sailors on the rim of the dock, and the submarine came to a halt exactly in its center. Already the gate they had passed through was closing, and a canvas cover the size of a clipper's mainsail was being drawn across it. Only when cover was securely in place were the overhead lights switched on. Suddenly a group of thirty or so officers began screaming like fans at a ballgame. The only thing left out was the band.

"Finished with the engines," Ramius said in Russian to the crew in the maneuvering room, then switched to English with a trace of sadness in his voice. "So. We are here."

The overhead traveling crane moved down toward them and stopped to pick up the brow, which it brought around and laid carefully on the missile deck forward of the sail. The brow was hardly in place when a pair of officers with gold braid nearly to their elbows walked—ran—across it. Ryan recognized the one in front. It was Dan Foster.

The chief of naval operations saluted the quarterdeck as he got to the edge of the gangway, then looked up at the sail. "Request permission to come aboard, sir."

"Permission is—"

"Granted," Mancuso prompted.

"Permission is granted," Ramius said loudly.

Foster jumped aboard and hurried up the exterior ladder on the sail. It wasn't easy, since the ship still had a sizable list to port. Foster was puffing as he reached the control station.

"Captain Ramius, I'm Dan Foster." Mancuso helped the CNO over the bridge coaming. The control station was suddenly crowded. The American admiral and the Russian captain shook hands, then Foster shook Mancuso's. Jack came last.

"Looks like the uniform needs a little work, Ryan. So does the face."

"Yeah, well, we ran into some trouble."

"So I see. What happened?"

Ryan didn't wait for the explanation. He went below without excusing himself. It wasn't his fraternity. In the control room the men were standing around exchanging grins, but they were quiet, as if they feared the magic of the moment would evaporate all too quickly. For Ryan it already had. He looked for the deck hatch and climbed up through it, taking with him everything he'd brought aboard. He walked up the gangway against traffic. No one seemed to notice him. Two hospital corpsmen were carrying a stretcher, and Ryan decided to wait on the dock for Williams to be brought out. The British officer had missed everything, having only been fully conscious for the past three hours. As Ryan waited he smoked his last Russian cigarette. The stretcher, with Williams tied onto it, was manhandled out. Noyes and the medical corpsmen from the subs tagged along.

"How are you feeling?" Ryan walked alongside the stretcher toward the ambulance.

"Alive," Williams said, looking pale and thin. "And you?"

"What I feel under my feet is solid concrete. Thank God for that!"

"And what he's going to feel is a hospital bed. Nice meeting you, Ryan," the doctor said briskly. "Let's move it, people." The corpsmen loaded the stretcher into an ambulance parked just inside the oversized doors. A minute later it was gone.

"You Commander Ryan, sir?" a marine sergeant asked after saluting.

Ryan returned the salute. "Yes."

"I have a car waiting for you, sir. Will you follow me, please?"

"Lead on, Sergeant."

The car was a gray navy Chevy that took him directly to the Norfolk Naval Air Station. Here Ryan boarded a helicopter. By now he was too tired to care if it were a sleigh with reindeer attached. During the thirty-five-minute trip to Andrews Air Force Base Ryan sat alone in the back, staring into space. He was met by another car at the base and driven straight to Langley.

CIA Headquarters

It was four in the morning when Ryan finally entered Greer's office. The admiral was there, along with Moore and Ritter. The admiral handed him something to drink. Not coffee, Wild Turkey bourbon whiskey. All three senior executives took his hand.

"Sit down, boy," Moore said.

"Damned well done." Greer smiled.

"Thank you." Ryan took a long pull on the drink. "Now what?"

"Now we debrief you," Greer answered.

"No, sir. Now I fly the hell home."

Greer's eyes twinkled as he pulled a folder from a coat pocket and tossed it in Ryan's lap. "You're booked out of Dulles at 7:05 A.M. First flight to London. And you really should wash up, change your clothes, and collect your Skiing Barbie."

Ryan tossed the rest of the drink off. The sudden slug of whiskey made his eyes water, but he was able to refrain from coughing.

"Looks like that uniform got some hard use," Ritter observed.

"So did the rest of me." Jack reached inside the jacket and pulled out the automatic pistol. "This got some use, too."

"The GRU agent? He wasn't taken off with the rest of the crew?" Moore asked.

"You *knew* about him? You knew and you didn't get word to me, for Christ's sake!"

"Settle down, son," Moore said. "We missed connections by half an hour. Bad luck, but you made it. That's what counts."

Ryan was too tired to scream, too tired to do much of anything. Greer took out a tape recorder and a yellow pad full of questions.

"Williams, the British officer, is in a bad way," Ryan said, two hours later. "The doc says he'll make it, though. The sub isn't going anywhere. Bow's all crunched in, and there's a pretty nice hole where the torpedo got us. They were right about the *Typhoon*,

Admiral, the Russians built that baby strong, thank God. You know, there may be people left alive on that *Alfa*…"

"Too bad," Moore said.

Ryan nodded slowly. "I figured that. I don't know that I like it, sir, leaving men to die like that."

"Nor do we," Judge Moore said, "nor do we, but if we were to rescue someone from her, well, then everything we've—everything you've been through would be for nothing. Would you want that?"

"It's a chance in a thousand anyway," Greer said.

"I don't know," Ryan said, finishing off his third drink and feeling it. He had expected Moore to be uninterested in checking the *Alfa* for signs of life. Greer had surprised him. So, the old seaman had been corrupted by this affair—or just by being at the CIA—into forgetting the seaman's code. And what did this say about Ryan? "I just don't know."

"It's a war, Jack," Ritter said, more kindly than usual, "a real war. You did well, boy."

"In a war you do well to come home alive," Ryan stood, "and that, gentlemen, is what I plan to do, right now."

"Your things are in the head." Greer checked his watch. "You have time to shave if you want."

"Oh, almost forgot." Ryan reached inside his collar to pull out the key. He handed it to Greer. "Doesn't look like much, does it? You can kill fifty million people with that. 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings! Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'" Ryan headed for the washroom, knowing he had to be drunk to quote Shelley.

They watched him disappear. Greer switched off the tape machine, looking at the key in his hand. "Still want to take him to see the president?"

"No, not a good idea," Moore said. "Boy's half smashed, not that I blame him a bit. Get him on the plane, James. We'll send a team to London tomorrow or the next day to finish the debriefing."

"Good." Greer looked into his empty glass. "Kind of early in the day for this, isn't it?"

Moore finished off his third. "I suppose. But then it's been a fairly good day, and the sun's not even up yet. Let's go, Bob. We have an operation of sorts to run."

Norfolk Naval Shipyard

Mancuso and his men boarded the *Paducah* before dawn and were ferried back to the *Dallas*. The 688-class attack submarine sailed immediately and was back underwater before the sun rose. The *Pogy*, which had never entered port, would complete her deployment without her corpsman aboard. Both submarines had orders to stay out thirty more days, during which their crewmen would be encouraged to forget everything they had seen, heard, or wondered about.

The *Red October* sat alone with the dry dock draining around her, guarded by twenty armed marines. This was not unusual in the Eight-Ten Dock. Already a select group of engineers and technicians was inspecting her. The first items taken off were her cipher books and machines. They would be in National Security Agency headquarters at Fort Meade before noon.

Ramius, his officers, and their personal gear were taken by bus to the same airfield Ryan had used. An hour later they were in a CIA safe house in the rolling hills south of Charlottesville, Virginia. They went immediately to bed except for two men, who stayed awake watching cable television, already amazed at what they saw of life in the United States.

Dulles International Airport

Ryan missed the dawn. He boarded a TWA 747 that left Dulles on time, at 7:05 A.M. The sky was overcast, and when the aircraft burst through the cloud layer into sunlight, Ryan did something he had never done before. For the first time in his life, Jack Ryan fell asleep on an airplane.

Red Storm Rising

Tom Clancy

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RED STORM RISING

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From time immemorial, the purpose of a navy has been to influence, and sometimes decide, issues on land. This was so with the Greeks of antiquity; the Romans, who created a navy to defeat Carthage; the Spanish, whose armada tried and failed to conquer England; and, most eminently, in the Atlantic and Pacific during two world wars. The sea has always given man inexpensive transport and ease of communication over long distances. It has also provided concealment, because being over the horizon meant being out of sight and effectively beyond reach. The sea has supplied mobility, capability, and support throughout Western history, and those failing in the sea-power test—notably Alexander, Napoleon and Hitler—also failed the longevity one.

—Edward L. Beach, in *Keepers of the Sea*

Author's Note

This book began sometime ago. I got to know Larry Bond through an advertisement in the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings,* when I purchased his war game, "Harpoon." It turned out to be amazingly useful, and served as a primary source for *The Hunt for Red October.* I was intrigued enough about it that I drove to a wargamers' convention that summer (1982) to meet him in person, and we ended up becoming close friends.

In 1983, while *Red October* was in pre-production, Larry and I started talking about one of his projects: "Convoy-84," a macrowargame or "campaign" game which, using the "Harpoon" system, would fight out a new Battle of the North Atlantic. I thought this was fascinating and we began talking about building a book around the idea, since, we both agreed, no one outside the Defense Department had ever examined in adequate detail what such a campaign would be like with modern weapons. The more we talked, the better the idea got. Soon we were fiddling with an outline and trying to find a way to limit the scenario to a manageable scope—but to do so without removing any essential elements from the stage. (This proved to be a problem without a really adequate solution, despite endless discussion and not a few violent disagreements!)

Although Larry's name does not appear on the title page, this book is his as much as mine. We never did figure out the division of labor, but what Larry and I accomplished was to complete a book as co-authors when our only contract was a handshake—and have a whole lot of fun doing it! It is for the reader to decide how successful we have been.

1

The Slow Fuse

NIZHNEVARTOVSK, R.S.F.S.R.

They moved swiftly, silently, with purpose, under a crystalline, star-filled night in western Siberia. They were Muslims, though one could scarcely have known it from their speech, which was Russian, though inflected with the singsong Azerbaijani accent that wrongly struck the senior members of the engineering staff as entertaining. The three of them had just completed a complex task in the truck and train yards, the opening of hundreds of loading valves. Ibrahim Tolkaze was their leader, though he was not in front. Rasul was in front, the massive former sergeant in the MVD who had already killed six men this cold night—three with a pistol hidden under his coat and three with his hands alone. No one had heard them. An oil refinery is a noisy place. The bodies were left in shadows, and the three men entered Tolkaze's car for the next part of their task.

Central Control was a modern three-story building fittingly in the center of the complex. For at least five kilometers in all directions stretched the cracking towers, storage tanks, catalytic chambers, and above all the thousands of kilometers of large-diameter pipe which made Nizhnevartovsk one of the world's largest refining complexes. The sky was lit at uneven intervals by waste-gas fires, and the air was foul with the stink of petroleum distillates: aviation kerosene, gasoline, diesel fuel, benzine, nitrogen tetroxide for intercontinental missiles, lubricating oils of various grades, and complex petrochemicals identified only by their alphanumeric prefixes.

They approached the brick-walled, windowless building in Tolkaze's personal Zhiguli, and the engineer pulled into his reserved parking place, then walked alone to the door as his comrades crouched in the back seat.

Inside the glass door, Ibrahim greeted the security guard, who smiled back, his hand outstretched for Tolkaze's security pass. The need for security here was quite real, but since it dated back over forty years, no one took it more seriously than any of the pro forma bureaucratic complexities in the Soviet Union. The guard had been drinking, the only form of solace in this harsh, cold land. His eyes were not focusing and his smile was too fixed. Tolkaze fumbled handing over his pass, and the guard lurched down to retrieve it. He never came back up. Tolkaze's pistol was the last thing the man felt, a cold

circle at the base of his skull, and he died without knowing why—or even how. Ibrahim went behind the guard's desk to get the weapon the man had been only too happy to display for the engineers he'd protected. He lifted the body and moved it awkwardly to leave it slumped at the desk—just another swingshift worker asleep at his post—then waved his comrades into the building. Rasul and Mohammet raced to the door.

"It is time, my brothers." Tolkaze handed the AK-47 rifle and ammo belt to his taller friend.

Rasul hefted the weapon briefly, checking to see that a round was chambered and the safety off. Then he slung the ammunition belt over his shoulder and snapped the bayonet in place before speaking for the first time that night: "Paradise awaits."

Tolkaze composed himself, smoothed his hair, straightened his tie, and clipped the security pass to his white laboratory coat before leading his comrades up the six flights of stairs.

Ordinary procedure dictated that to enter the master control room, one first had to be recognized by one of the operations staffers. And so it happened. Nikolay Barsov seemed surprised when he saw Tolkaze through the door's tiny window.

"You're not on duty tonight, Isha."

"One of my valves went bad this afternoon and I forgot to check the repair status before I went off duty. You know the one—the auxiliary feed valve on kerosene number eight. If it's still down tomorrow we'll have to reroute, and you know what that means."

Barsov grunted agreement. "True enough, Isha." The middle-aged engineer thought Tolkaze liked the semi-Russian diminutive. He was badly mistaken. "Stand back while I open this damned hatch."

The heavy steel door swung outward. Barsov hadn't been able to see Rasul and Mohammet before, and scarcely had time now. Three 7.62mm rounds from the Kalashnikov exploded into his chest.

The master control room contained a duty watch crew of twenty, and looked much like the control center for a railroad or power plant. The high walls were crosshatched with pipeline schematics dotted with hundreds of lights to indicate which control valve was doing what. That was only the main display. Individual segments of the system were broken off onto separate status boards, mainly controlled by computer but constantly monitored by half the duty engineers. The staff could not fail to note the sound of the three shots.

But none of them were armed.

With elegant patience, Rasul began to work his way across the room, using his Kalashnikov expertly and firing one round into each watch engineer. At first they tried to run away—until they realized that Rasul was herding them into a corner like cattle, killing as he moved. Two men bravely got on their command phones to summon a fast-response team of KGB security troops. Rasul shot one of them at his post, but the other ducked around the line of command consoles to evade the gunfire and bolted for the door, where Tolkaze stood. It was Boris, Tolkaze saw, the Party favorite, head of the local *kollektiv,* the man who had "befriended" him, making him the special pet

native of the Russian engineers. Ibrahim could remember every time this godless pig had patronized him, the savage foreigner imported to amuse his Russian masters. Tolkaze raised his pistol.

"Ishaaa!" the man screamed in terror and shock. Tolkaze shot him in the mouth, and hoped Boris didn't die too quickly to hear the contempt in his voice: "Infidel." He was pleased that Rasul had not killed this one. His quiet friend could have all the rest.

The other engineers screamed, threw cups, chairs, manuals. There was nowhere left to run, no way around the swarthy, towering killer. Some held up their hands in useless supplication. Some even prayed aloud—*but not to Allah, which might have saved them.* The noise diminished as Rasul strode up to the bloody corner. He smiled as he shot the very last, knowing that this sweating infidel pig would serve him in paradise. He reloaded his rifle, then went back through the control room. He prodded each body with his bayonet, and again shot the four that showed some small sign of life. His face bore a grim, content expression. At least twenty-five atheist pigs dead. Twenty-five foreign invaders who would no longer stand between his people and their God. Truly he had done Allah's work!

The third man, Mohammet, was already at his own work as Rasul took his station at the top of the staircase. Working in the back of the room, he switched the room systems-control mode from computer-automatic to emergency-manual, bypassing all of the automated safety systems.

A methodical man, Ibrahim had planned and memorized every detail of his task over a period of months, but still he had a checklist in his pocket. He unfolded it now and set it next to his hand on the master supervisory control board. Tolkaze looked around at the status displays to orient himself, then paused.

From his back pocket he took his most treasured personal possession, half of his grandfather's Koran, and opened it to a random page. It was a passage in The Chapter of the Spoils. His grandfather having been killed during the futile rebellions against Moscow, his father shamed by helpless subservience to the infidel state, Tolkaze had been seduced by Russian schoolteachers into joining their godless system. Others had trained him as an oil-field engineer to work at the State's most valuable facility in Azerbaijan. Only then had the God of his fathers saved him, through the words of an uncle, an "unregistered" imam who had remained faithful to Allah and safeguarded this tattered fragment of the Koran that had accompanied one of Allah's own warriors. Tolkaze read the passage under his hand:

And when the misbelievers plotted to keep thee prisoner, or kill thee, or drive thee forth, they plotted well; but God plotted, too. And God is the best of plotters.

Tolkaze smiled, certain that it was the final Sign in a plan being executed by hands greater than his own. Serene and confident, he began to fulfill his destiny.

First the gasoline. He closed sixteen control valves—the nearest of them three kilometers away—and opened ten, which rerouted eighty million liters of gasoline to gush out from a bank of truck-loading valves. The gasoline did not ignite at once. The three had left no pyrotechnic devices to explode this first of many disasters. Tolkaze reasoned that if he were truly doing the work

of Allah, then his God would surely provide.

And so He did. A small truck driving through the loading yard took a turn too fast, skidded on the splashing fuel, and slid broadside into a utility pole. It only took one spark . . . and already more fuel was spilling out into the train yards.

With the master pipeline switches, Tolkaze had a special plan. He rapidly typed in a computer command, thanking Allah that Rasul was so skillful and had not damaged anything important with his rifle. The main pipeline from the nearby production field was two meters across, with many branchlines running to all of the production wells. The oil traveling in those pipes had its own mass and its own momentum supplied by pumping stations in the fields. Ibrahim's commands rapidly opened and closed valves. The pipeline ruptured in a dozen places, and the computer commands left the pumps on. The escaping light crude flowed across the production field, where only one more spark was needed to spread a holocaust before the winter wind, and another break occurred where the oil and gas pipelines crossed together over the river Ob'.

"The greenskins are here!" Rasul shouted a moment before the quick-response team of KGB border guards stormed up the staircase. A short burst from the Kalashnikov killed the first two, and the rest of the squad stopped cold behind a turn in the staircase as their young sergeant wondered what the hell they had walked into.

Already, automatic alarms were erupting around him in the control room. The master status board showed four growing fires whose borders were defined by blinking red lights. Tolkaze walked to the master computer and ripped out the tape spool that contained the digital control codes. The spares were in the vault downstairs, and the only men within ten kilometers who knew its combination were in this room—dead. Mohammet was busily ripping out every telephone in the room. The whole building shook with the explosion of a gasoline storage tank two kilometers away.

The crashing sound of a hand grenade announced another move by the KGB troops. Rasul returned fire, and the screams of dying men nearly equaled the earsplitting fire-alarm klaxons. Tolkaze hurried over to the corner. The floor there was slick with blood. He opened the door to the electrical fusebox, flipped the main circuit breaker, then fired his pistol into the box. Whoever tried to set things aright would also have to work in the dark.

He was done. Ibrahim saw that his massive friend had been mortally hit in the chest by grenade fragments. He was wobbling, struggling to stay erect at the door, guarding his comrades to the last.

"'I take refuge in the Lord of the worlds,' " Tolkaze called out defiantly to the security troops, who spoke not a word of Arabic. " 'The King of men, the God of men, from the evil of the whispering devil—' "

The KGB sergeant leaped around the lower landing and his first burst tore the rifle from Rasul's bloodless hands. Two hand grenades arched through the air as the sergeant disappeared back around the corner.

There was no place—and no reason—to run. Mohammet and Ibrahim stood immobile in the doorway as the grenades bounced and skittered across the tiled floor. Around them the whole world seemed to be catching fire, *and*

because of them, the whole world really would.

"Allahu akhbar!"

SUNNYVALE, CALIFORNIA

"God almighty!" the chief master sergeant breathed. The fire which had begun in the gasoline/diesel section of the refinery had been sufficient to alert a strategic early-warning satellite in geosynchronous orbit twenty-four thousand miles above the Indian Ocean. The signal was downlinked to a top-security U.S. Air Force post.

The senior watch officer in the Satellite Control Facility was an Air Force colonel. He turned to his senior technician: "Map it."

"Yes, sir." The sergeant typed a command into his console, which told the satellite cameras to alter their sensitivity. With the flaring on the screen reduced, the satellite rapidly pinpointed the source of the thermal energy. A computer-controlled map on the screen adjacent to the visual display gave them an exact location reference. "Sir, that's an oil refinery fire. Jeez, and it looks like a real pisser! Colonel, we got a Big Bird pass in twenty minutes and the course track is within a hundred twenty kilometers."

"Uh-huh," the colonel nodded. He watched the screen closely to make sure that the heat source was not moving, his right hand lifting the Gold Phone to NORAD headquarters, Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado.

"This is Argus Control. I have Flash Traffic for CINC-NORAD."

"Wait one," said the first voice.

"This is CINC-NORAD," said the second, Commander-in-Chief of the North American Aerospace Defense Command.

"Sir, this is Colonel Burnette at Argus Control. We show a massive thermal energy reading at coordinates sixty degrees fifty minutes north, seventy-six degrees forty minutes east. The site is listed as a POL refinery. The thermal source is not, repeat not moving. We have a KH-11 pass close to the source in two-zero minutes. My preliminary evaluation, General, is that we have a major oil-field fire here."

"They're not doing a laser-flash on your bird?" CINC-NORAD asked. There was always a possibility the Soviets were trying to play games with their satellite.

"Negative. The light source covers infrared and all of the visible spectrum, not, repeat not, monochromatic. We'll know more in a few minutes, sir. So far everything is consistent with a massive ground fire."

Thirty minutes later they were sure. The KH-11 reconnaissance satellite came over the horizon close enough for all of its eight television cameras to catalog the chaos. A side-link transmitted the signal to a geosynchronous communications satellite, and Burnette was able to watch it all "in real time." Live and in color. The fire had already engulfed half of the refinery complex and more than half of the nearby production field, with more burning crude oil spreading from the ruptured pipeline onto the river Ob'. They were able to

watch the fire spread, the flames carried rapidly before a forty-knot surface wind. Smoke obscured much of the area on visible light, but infrared sensors penetrated it to show many heat sources that could only be vast pools of oil products burning intensely on the ground. Burnette's sergeant was from east Texas, and had worked as a boy in the oil fields. He keyed up daylight photographs of the site and compared them with the adjacent visual display to determine what parts of the refinery had already ignited.

"Goddamn, Colonel." The sergeant shook his head reverently. He spoke with quiet expertise. "The refinery—well, it's gone, sir. That fire'll spread in front of that wind, and ain't no way in hell they'll stop it. The refinery's gone, total loss, burn maybe three, four days—maybe a week, parts of it. And unless they find a way to stop it, looks like the production field is going to go, too, sir. By next pass, sir, it'll all be burnin', all those wellheads spillin' burnin' o'l . . . Lordy, I don't even think Red Adair would want any part of this job!"

"Nothing left of the refinery? Hmph." Burnette watched a tape rerun of the Big Bird pass. "It's their newest and biggest, ought to put a dent in their POL production while they rebuild that from scratch. And once they get those field fires put out, they'll have to rearrange their gas and diesel production quite a bit. I'll say one thing for Ivan. When he has an industrial accident, he doesn't screw around. A major inconvenience for our Russian friends, Sergeant."

This analysis was confirmed the next day by the CIA, and the day after that by the British and French security services.

They were all wrong.

2

Odd Man In

DATE-TIME 01/31-06: 15 COPY 01 of 01 SOVIET FIRE
BC-Soviet Fire, Bjt, 1809•FL•
Disastrous Fire Reported in Soviet Nizhnevartovsk Oil Field•FL•
EDS: Moved in advance for WEDNESDAY PMS•FL• By William Blake •FC•
AP Military/Intelligence Writer

WASHINGTON (AP)—"The most serious oil field fire since the Mexico City disaster of 1984, or even the Texas City fire of 1947," sundered the darkness in the central region of the Soviet Union today, according to military and intelligence sources in Washington.

The fire was detected by American "National Technical Means," a term that generally denotes reconnaissance satellites operated by the Central Intelligence Agency. CIA sources declined comment on the incident.

Sources in the Pentagon confirmed this report, noting that the energy given off by the fire was sufficient to cause a brief stir in the North American Aerospace Defense Command, which was concerned that the fire was a possible missile launch directed at the United States, or an attempt to blind American Early-Warning satellites with a laser or other ground-based device.

At no time, the source pointed out, was there any thought of increasing American alert levels, or of bringing American nuclear forces to higher states of readiness. "It was all over in less than thirty minutes," the source said.

No confirmation was received from the Russian news agency, TASS, but the Soviets rarely publish reports of such incidents.

The fact that American officials referred to two epic industrial accidents is an indication that many fatalities might result from this major fire. Defense sources were unwilling to speculate on the possibility of civilian casualties. The city of Nizhnevartovsk is bordered by the petroleum complex.

The Nizhnevartovsk oil production field accounts for roughly 31. 3 percent of total Soviet crude oil, according to the American Petroleum Institute, and the adjacent, newly built Nizhnevartovsk refinery for approximately 17.3 percent of petroleum distillate production.

"Fortunately for them," Donald Evans, a spokesman for the Institute explained, "oil underground is pretty hard to burn, and you can expect the fire to burn itself out in a few days." The refinery, however, depending on how much of it was involved, could be a major expense. "When they go, they usually go pretty big," Evans said. "But the Russians have sufficient excess refining capacity to take up the slack, especially with all the work they've been doing at their Moscow complex."

Evans was unable to speculate on the cause of the fire, saying, "The climate could have something to do with it. We had a few problems in the Alaskan fields that took some careful work to solve. Beyond that, any refinery is a potential Disneyland for fire, and there simply is no substitute for intelligent, careful, well-trained crews to run them."

This is the latest in a series of setbacks to the Soviet oil industry. It was admitted only last fall at the plenum of the Communist Party Central Committee that production goals in both the Eastern Siberian fields "had not entirely fulfilled earlier hopes."

This seemingly mild statement is being seen in Western circles as a stinging

indictment of the policies of now-departed Petroleum Industry minister Zatyzhin, since replaced by Mikhail Sergetov, former chief of the Leningrad Party apparatus, regarded as a rising star in the Soviet Party. A technocrat with a background of engineering and Party work, Sergetov's task of reorganizing the Soviet oil industry is seen as a task that could last years. AP-BA-01-31 0501EST•FL•
* *END OF STORY* *

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

Mikhail Eduardovich Sergetov never had a chance to read the wire service report. Summoned from his official dacha in the birch forests surrounding Moscow, he'd flown at once to Nizhnevartovsk and stayed for only ten hours before being recalled to make his report in Moscow. *Three months on the job,* he thought, sitting in the empty forward cabin of the IL-86 airliner, *and this has to happen!*

His two principal deputies, a pair of skilled young engineers, had been left behind and were trying even now to make sense of the chaos, to save what could be saved, as he reviewed his notes for the Politburo meeting later in the day. Three hundred men were known to have died fighting the fire, and, miraculously, fewer than two hundred citizens in the city of Nizhnevartovsk. That was unfortunate, but not a matter of great significance except insofar as those trained men killed would eventually have to be replaced by other trained men drawn from the staffs of other large refineries.

The refinery was almosty totally destroyed. Reconstruction would take a minimum of two to three years, and would account for a sizable percentage of national steel pipe production, plus all the other specialty items unique to a facility of this type: *Fifteen thousand million rubles.* And how much of the special equipment would have to be purchased from foreign sources—how much precious hard currency and gold would be wasted?

And that was the good news.

The bad news: the fire that had engulfed the production field had totally destroyed the welltops. Time to replace: at least thirty-six months!

Thirty-six months, Sergetov reflected bleakly, *if we can divert the drillrigs and crews to redrill every damned well and at the same time rebuild the EOR systems. For a minimum of eighteen months the Soviet Union will have an enormous shortfall in oil production. Probably more like thirty months.* What will happen to our economy?

He pulled a pad of lined paper from his briefcase and began to make some calculations. It was a three-hour flight, and Sergetov did not notice it was over until the pilot came back to announce they had landed.

He looked with squinted eyes at the snow-covered landscape of Vnukovo-2, the VIP-only airport outside of Moscow, and walked alone down the boarding stairs to a waiting ZIL limousine. The car sped off at once, without stopping at any of the security checkpoints. The shivering militia officers snapped to attention as the ZIL passed, then returned to the business of keeping warm in the subzero temperatures. The sun was bright, the sky clear but for some thin,

high clouds. Sergetov looked vacantly out the windows, his mind mulling over figures he had already rechecked a half-dozen times. The Politburo was waiting for him, his KGB driver told him.

Sergetov had been a "candidate," or nonvoting member, of the Politburo for just six months, which meant that, along with his eight other junior colleagues, he advised the thirteen men who alone made the decisions that mattered in the Soviet Union. His portfolio was energy production and distribution. He had held that post since September, and was only beginning to establish his plan for a total reorganization of the seven regional and all-union ministries that handled energy functions—and predictably spent most of their time battling one another—into a full department that reported directly to the Politburo and Party Secretariat, instead of having to work through the Council of Ministers bureaucracy. He briefly closed his eyes to thank God—there might be one, he reasoned—that his first recommendation, delivered only a month earlier, had concerned security and political reliability in many of the fields. He had specifically recommended further Russification of the largely "foreign" workforce. For this reason, he did not fear for his own career, which up to now had been an uninterrupted success story. He shrugged. The task he was about to face would decide his future in any case. And perhaps his country's.

The ZIL proceeded down Leningradskiy Prospekt, which turned into Gor'kogo, the limousine speeding through the center lane that policemen kept clear of traffic for the exclusive use of the *vlasti.* They motored past the Intourist Hotel into Red Square, and finally approached the Kremlin gate. Here the driver did stop for the security checks, three of them, conducted by KGB troops and soldiers of the Taman Guards. Five minutes later the limousine pulled to the door of the Council of Ministers building, the sole modern structure in the fortress. The guards here knew Sergetov by sight, and saluted crisply as they held open the door so that his exposure to the freezing temperatures would last but a brief span of seconds.

The Politburo had been holding its meetings in this fourth-floor room for only a month while their usual quarters in the old Arsenal building were undergoing a belated renovation. The older men grumbled at the loss of the old Czarist comforts, but Sergetov preferred the modernity. About time, he thought, that the men of the Party surrounded themselves with the works of socialism instead of the moldy trappings of the Romanovs.

The room was deathly quiet as he entered. Had this been in the Arsenal, the fifty-four-year-old technocrat reflected, the atmosphere would have been altogether like a funeral—and there had been all too many of those. Slowly, the Party was running out of the old men who had survived Stalin's terror, and the current crop of members, all "young" men in their fifties or early sixties, was finally being heard. The guard was being changed. Too slowly—too damned slowly—for Sergetov and his generation of Party leaders, despite the new General Secretary. The man was already a grandfather. It sometimes seemed to Sergetov that by the time these old men were gone, he'd be one himself. But looking around this room now, he felt young enough.

"Good day, Comrades," Sergetov said, handing his coat to an aide, who withdrew at once, closing the doors behind him. The other men moved at once

to their seats. Sergetov took his, halfway down the right side.

The Party General Secretary brought the meeting to order. His voice was controlled and businesslike. “Comrade Sergetov, you may begin your report. First, we wish to hear your explanation of exactly what happened.”

“Comrades, at approximately twenty-three hundred hours yesterday, Moscow Time, three armed men entered the central control complex of the Nizhnevartovsk oil complex and committed a highly sophisticated act of sabotage.”

“Who were they?” the Defense Minister asked sharply.

“We only have identification for two of them. One of the bandits was a staff electrician. The third”—Sergetov pulled the ID card from his pocket and tossed it on the table—“was Senior Engineer I.M. Tolkaze. He evidently used his expert knowledge of the control systems to initiate a massive fire which spread rapidly before high winds. A security team of ten KGB border guards responded at once to the alarm. The one traitor still unidentified killed or wounded five of these with a rifle taken from the building guard, who was also shot. I must say, having interviewed the KGB sergeant—the lieutenant was killed leading his men—that the border guards responded quickly and well. They killed the traitors within minutes, but were unable to prevent the complete destruction of the facility, both the refinery *and* production fields.”

“And if the guards responded so fast, how then did they fail to prevent this act?” the Defense Minister demanded angrily. He examined the photographic pass with palpable hatred in his eyes. “What was this black-ass Muslim doing there in the first place?”

“Comrade, work in the Siberian fields is arduous, and we have had serious difficulties in filling the posts we have there. My predecessor decided to conscript experienced oil-field workers from the Baku region to Siberia. This was madness. You will recall that my first recommendation last year was to change this policy.”

“We have noted it, Mikhail Eduardovich,” the Chairman said. “Go on.”

“The guard post records all telephone and radio traffic. The response team was moving in under two minutes. Unfortunately, the guard post is located adjacent to the original control building. The current building was constructed three kilometers away when new computerized control equipment was obtained from the West two years ago. A new guard post was also supposed to have been built, and the proper materials were allocated for this purpose. It would appear that these building materials were misappropriated by the complex director and local Party secretary, for the purpose of building dachas on the river a few kilometers away. Both of these men have been arrested by my order, for crimes against the State,” Sergetov reported matter-of-factly. There was no reaction around the table. By unspoken consensus, those two men were sentenced to death; the formalities would be worked out by the proper ministries. Sergetov continued: “I have already ordered greatly increased security at all petroleum sites. Also on my orders, the families of the two known traitors have been arrested at their homes outside Baku and are being rigorously interrogated by State Security, along with all who knew and worked with them.

“Before the border guards were able to kill the traitors, they were able to

sabotage the oil-field control systems in such a way as to create a massive conflagration. They were also able to wreck the control equipment so that even if the guard troops had been able to get a crew of engineers in to restore control, it is unlikely that anything would have been saved. The KGB troops were forced to evacuate the building, which was later consumed by the fire. There was nothing more they could have done." Sergetov remembered the sergeant's badly burned face, the tears flowing down over the blisters as he told his story.

"The fire brigade?" the General Secretary asked.

"More than half of them died fighting the fire," Sergetov replied. "Along with over a hundred citizens who joined the battle to save the complex. Truly there is no blame to be assessed here, Comrade. Once this bastard Tolkaze began his devil's work, it would have been as easy to control an earthquake. For the most part, the fire has been put out by now, due to the fact that most of the fuels stored in the refinery were consumed in about five hours; also because of the destruction of the wellheads in the oil field."

"But how was this catastrophe possible?" a senior member asked. Sergetov was surprised by the quiet mood in the room. Had they met and discussed this affair already?

"My report of December 20 described the dangers here. This room quite literally controlled the pumps and valves for over a hundred square kilometers. The same is true of all of our large oil complexes. From the nerve center, a man familiar with control procedures could manipulate the various systems throughout the field at will, causing the entire complex quite simply to self-destruct. Tolkaze had such skill. He was an Azerbaijani chosen for special treatment for his intelligence and supposed loyalty, an honor student educated at Moscow State University and a member in good standing of the local Party. It would also seem that he was a religious fanatic capable of astounding treachery. All the people killed in the control room were friends of his—or so they thought. After fifteen years in the Party, a good salary, the professional respect of his comrades, even his own automobile, his last words were a shrill cry to Allah," Sergetov said dryly. "The reliability of people from that region cannot be accurately predicted, Comrades."

The Defense Minister nodded again. "So, what effect will this have on oil production?" Half the men at the table leaned forward to hear Sergetov's answer:

"Comrades, we have lost thirty-four percent of our total crude oil production for a period of at least one year, possibly as many as three." Sergetov looked up from his notes to see the impassive faces cringe as though from a slap. "It will be necessary to redrill every production well and finally reconstruct the pipelines from the fields to the refinery and elsewhere. The concurrent loss of the refinery is serious, but not an immediate concern since the refinery can be rebuilt, and in any case represents less than a seventh of our total refining capacity. The major injury to our economy will come from the loss of our crude oil production.

"In real terms, due to the chemical makeup of the Nizhnevartovsk oil, the net total production loss understates the actual impact on our economy. Siberian oil is 'light, sweet' crude, which means that it contains a

disproportionately large amount of the most valuable fractions—those which we use to make gasoline, kerosene, and diesel fuel, for example. The net loss in these particular areas is forty-four percent of our gasoline production, forty-eight percent of kerosene, and fifty percent of diesel. These figures are rough calculations I made on the flight back, but they should be accurate to within two percent. My staff will have more precise figures ready in a day or so."

"Half?" the General Secretary asked quietly.

"Correct, Comrade," Sergetov responded.

"And how long to restore production?"

"Comrade General Secretary, if we bring in every drilling rig and operate them around the clock, my rough estimate is that we can begin to restore production in twelve months. Clearing the site of wreckage will take at least three months, and another three will be needed to relocate our equipment and commence drilling operations. Since we have exact information for well locations and depths, the usual element of uncertainty is not part of the equation. Within a year—that is, six months after we commence the redrilling—we will begin to bring the production wells back on stream, and full restoration of the wells will be achieved within two more years. While all this is going on, we will need to replace the EOR equipment also—"

"And what might that be?" Defense asked.

"Enhanced Oil Recovery systems, Comrade Minister. Had these been relatively new wells, pressurized from underground gas, the fires might have lasted for weeks. As you know, Comrades, these are wells from which a good deal of oil has already been extracted. To enhance production we have been pumping water into the wells, which has the effect of forcing more oil out. It may also have had the effect of damaging the oil-bearing strata. This is something our geologists are even now attempting to evaluate. As it was, when power was lost, the force driving the oil from the ground was removed, and the fires in the production fields rapidly began to run out of fuel. They were for the most part dying out when my flight left for Moscow."

"So even three years from now production may not be completely restored?" the Minister of the Interior asked.

"Correct, Comrade Minister. There is simply no scientific basis for making an estimate of total production. The situation we have here has never happened before, either in the West or the East. We can drill some test wells in the next two or three months that will give us some indications. The staff engineers I left behind are making arrangements to begin the process as quickly as possible with equipment already at the site."

"Very well," the General Secretary nodded. "The next question is how long the country can operate on this basis."

Sergetov went back to his notes. "Comrades, there is no denying that this is a disaster of unprecedented scale for our economy. The winter has drawn down our heavy oil inventories more than usual. Certain energy expenditures must remain relatively intact. Electrical power generation last year, for example, accounted for thirty-eight percent of our oil products, far more than planned, due to past disappointments in coal and gas production, which we had expected to reduce oil demand. The coal industry will require at least five years to restore due to failures in modernization. And gas drilling operations

are currently slowed by environmental conditions. For technical reasons it is extremely hard to operate such equipment in extreme cold weather—"

"So make those lazy bastards on the drilling crews work harder!" suggested the chief of the Moscow Party.

"It is not the workers, Comrade." Sergetov sighed. "It is the machines. Cold temperature affects metal more than men. Tools and equipment break simply because they are brittle with cold. Weather conditions make resupply of spare parts to the camps more difficult. Marxism-Leninism cannot dictate the weather."

"How difficult would it be to conceal the drilling operations?" Defense asked.

Sergetov was surprised. "Difficult? No, Comrade Minister, impossible. How can one conceal several hundred drilling rigs, each twenty to forty meters high? One might as easily attempt to conceal Plesetsk's missile launch complexes." Sergetov noticed for the first time the glances being exchanged by Defense and the General Secretary.

"Then we must reduce the consumption of oil by the electrical industry," the General Secretary pronounced.

"Comrades, allow me to give you some rough figures on the way in which we consume our oil products. Please understand that I am going from memory, since the annual departmental report is in the process of formulation at this time.

"Last year we produced 589 million tons of crude oil. This fell short of planned production by thirty-two million tons, and the amount actually produced was only possible due to the artificial measures that I have already discussed. Roughly half of that production was semirefined into *mazut,* or heavy fuel oil, for use in electrical power plants, factory boilers, and the like. Most of this oil simply cannot be used otherwise, since we have only three—excuse me, now only two—refineries with the sophisticated catalytic cracking chambers needed to refine heavy oil into light distillate products.

"The fuels we produce serve our economy in many ways. As we have already seen, thirty-eight percent goes for electrical and other forms of power generation, and fortunately much of this is *mazut.* Of the lighter fuels—diesel, gasoline, and kerosene—agricultural production and the food industries, transportation of goods and commodities, public consumption and passenger transportation, and finally military uses, these alone absorbed more than half of last year's production. In other words, Comrades, with the loss of the Nizhnevartovsk field the end users I just mentioned account for more than we are able to produce, leaving nothing at all for metallurgy, heavy machinery, chemical, and construction uses, not to mention what we customarily export to our fraternal socialist allies in Eastern Europe and throughout the world.

"To answer your specific question, Comrade General Secretary, we can make perhaps a modest reduction in the use of light oils in electrical power usage, but even now we have a serious shortfall in electric power production, resulting in occasional brownouts and complete power outages. Further cuts in power generation will adversely affect such crucial State activities as factory production and rail transport. You will recall that three years ago we experimented with altering the voltage of generated power to conserve fuels,

and this resulted in damage to electric motors throughout the Donets industrial basin."

"What about coal and gas?"

"Comrade General Secretary, coal production is already sixteen percent below planned output, and getting worse, which has caused conversion of many coal-fired boilers and power plants to oil. Moreover, the conversion of such facilities from oil back to coal is costly and time-consuming. Conversion to gas is a much more attractive and cheaper alternative that we have been vigorously pursuing. Gas production is also under-plan, but it is improving. We had expected to exceed planned targets later this year. Here we must also account for the fact that much of our gas goes to Western Europe. It is from this that we gain Western currency with which to purchase foreign oil, and, of course, foreign grain."

The Politburo member in charge of agriculture winced at this reference. How many men, Sergetov wondered, had been done in by their inability to make the Soviet agricultural industry perform? Not the current General Secretary, of course, who had somehow managed to advance despite his failures there. But good Marxists weren't supposed to believe in miracles. His elevation to the titular chairmanship had had its own price, one which Sergetov was only beginning to understand.

"So, what is your solution, Mikhail Eduardovich?" the Defense Minister inquired with unsettling solicitude.

"Comrades, we must bear this burden as best we can, improving efficiency at every level of our economy." Sergetov didn't bother talking about increasing imports of oil. The shortfall he had explained would result in more than a thirtyfold increase in imports, and hard currency reserves would scarcely allow a doubling of foreign oil purchases. "We will need to increase production and quality control at the Barricade drilling rig factory in Volgograd, and to purchase more drilling equipment from the West so that we can expand exploration and exploitation of known fields. And we need to expand our construction of nuclear reactor plants. To conserve what production we do have, we can restrict supplies available to trucks and personal automobiles—there is much waste in this sector, as we all know, perhaps as much as a third of total usage. We can *temporarily* reduce the amount of fuel consumed by the military, and perhaps also divert some heavy machine production from military hardware to necessary industrial areas. We face three very hard years—but only three," Sergetov summarized on an upbeat note.

"Comrade, your experience in foreign and defense areas is slim, no?" the Defense Minister asked.

"I have never pretended otherwise, Comrade Minister," Sergetov answered warily.

"Then I will tell you why this situation is unacceptable. If we do what you suggest, the West will learn of our crisis. Increased purchases of oil production equipment and unconcealable signs of activity at Nizhnevartovsk will demonstrate to them all too clearly what is happening here. That will make us vulnerable in their eyes. Such vulnerability will be exploited. And, at the same time"—he pounded his fist on the heavy oak table—*"you propose reducing the*

fuel available to the forces who defend us against the West!"

"Comrade Defense Minister, I am an engineer, not a soldier. You asked me for a technical evaluation, and I gave it." Sergetov kept his voice reasonable. "This situation is very serious, but it does not, for example, affect our Strategic Rocket Forces. Cannot they alone shield us against the Imperialists during our recovery period?" *Why else had they been built?* Sergetov asked himself. All that money sunk into unproductive holes. Wasn't it enough to be able to kill the West ten times over? Why twenty times? And now *this* wasn't enough?

"And it has not occurred to you that the West will not allow us to purchase what we need?" the Party theoretician asked.

"When have the capitalists refused to sell us—"

"When have the capitalists had such a weapon to use against us?" the General Secretary observed. "For the first time, the West has the ability to strangle us in a single year. What if now they also prevent our purchase of grain?"

Sergetov hadn't considered that. With yet another disappointing grain harvest, the seventh out of the last eleven years, the Soviet Union needed to make massive purchases of wheat. And this year America and Canada were the only reliable sources. Bad weather in the Southern Hemisphere had damaged Argentina's harvest, and to a lesser extent Australia's, while the U.S. and Canada had enjoyed their customary record crops. Negotiations were even now under way in Washington and Ottawa to secure such a purchase, and the Americans were making no trouble at all, except that the high value of the dollar made their grain disproportionately expensive. But that grain would take months to ship. How easy would it be, Sergetov wondered, for "technical difficulties" in the grain ports of New Orleans and Baltimore to slow or even stop shipments entirely at a crucial moment?

He looked around the table. Twenty-two men, of whom only thirteen really decided matters—and one of those was missing—were silently contemplating the prospect of over two hundred fifty million Soviet workers and peasants, all hungry and in the dark, at the same time that the troops of the Red Army, the Ministry of the Interior, and the KGB found their own fuel supplies—and because of it, their training and mobility—restricted.

The men of the Politburo were among the most powerful in the world, far more so than any of their Western counterparts. They answered to no one, not the Central Committee of the Communist Party, not the Supreme Soviet, certainly not the people of their nation. These men had not walked on the streets of Moscow for years, but been whisked by chauffeured, handmade cars to and from their luxury apartments within Moscow, or to their ceremonial dachas outside the city. They shopped, if at all, in guarded stores restricted to the elite, were served by doctors in clinics established only for the elite. Because of all this, these men regarded themselves as masters of their destiny.

It was only now beginning to strike them that like all men, they too were subject to a fate which their immense personal power merely made all the more intractable.

Around them was a country whose citizens were poorly fed and poorly housed, whose only abundant commodities were the painted signs and slogans praising Soviet Progress and Solidarity. Some of the men at this table actually

believed those slogans, Sergetov knew. Sometimes he still did, mainly in homage to his idealistic youth. But Soviet Progress had not fed their nation, and how long would Soviet Solidarity endure in the hearts of people hungry, cold, in the dark? Would they be proud of the missiles in the Siberian forests then? Of the thousands of tanks and guns produced every year? Would they then look to the sky that held a Salyut space station and feel inspired—or would they wonder what kind of food was being eaten by that elite? Less than a year before, Sergetov had been a regional Party chieftain, and in Leningrad he had been careful to listen to his own staff people's description of the jokes and grumblings in the lines which people endured for two loaves of bread, or toothpaste, or shoes. Detached even then from the harsher realities of life in the Soviet Union, he had often wondered if one day the burden of the ordinary worker would become too heavy to endure. How would he have known then? How would he know now? Would the older men here ever know?

Narod, they called it, a masculine noun that was nonetheless raped in every sense: the masses, the faceless collection of men and women who toiled every day in Moscow and throughout the nation in factories and on collective farms, their thoughts hidden behind unsmiling masks. The members of the Politburo told themselves that these workers and peasants did not grudge their leaders the luxuries that accompanied responsibility. After all, life in the country had improved in measurable terms. That was the compact. But the compact was about to be broken. What might happen then? Nicholas II had not known. These men did.

The Defense Minister broke the silence. "We must obtain more oil. It is as simple as that. The alternative is a crippled economy, hungry citizens, and reduced defense capacity. The consequences of which are not acceptable."

"We cannot purchase oil," a candidate member pointed out.

"Then we must take it."

FORT MEADE, MARYLAND

Bob Toland frowned at his spice cake. I shouldn't be eating dessert, the intelligence analyst reminded himself. But the National Security Agency commissary served this only once a week, and spice cake was his favorite, and it was only about two hundred calorics. That was all. An extra five minutes on the exercise bike when he got home.

"What did you think of that article in the paper, Bob?" a co-worker asked.

"The oil-field thing?" Toland rechecked the man's security badge. He wasn't cleared for satellite intelligence. "Sounds like they had themselves quite a fire."

"You didn't see anything official on it?"

"Let's just say that the leak in the papers came from a higher security clearance than I have."

"Top Secret—Press?" Both men laughed.

"Something like that. The story had information that I haven't seen," Toland

said, speaking the truth, mostly. The fire was out, and people in his department had been speculating on how Ivan had put it out so fast. “Shouldn’t hurt them too bad. I mean, they don’t have millions of people taking to the road on summer vacations, do they?”

“Not hardly. How’s the cake?”

“Not bad.” Toland smiled, already wondering if he needed the extra time on the bike.

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

The Politburo reconvened at nine-thirty the next morning. The sky outside the double-paned windows was gray and curtained with the heavy snow that was beginning to fall again, adding to the half-meter already on the ground. There would be sledding tonight on the hills of Gorkiy Park, Sergetov thought. The snow would be cleared off the two frozen lakes for skating under the lights to the music of Tschaikovskiy and Prokofiev. Moscovites would laugh and drink their vodka and savor the cold, blissfully ignorant of what was about to be said here, of the turns that all of their lives would take.

The main body of the Politburo had adjourned at four the previous afternoon, and then the five men who made up the Defense Council had met alone. Not even all of the full Politburo members were privy to that decision-making body.

Overseeing them at the far end of the room was a full-length portrait of Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov—Lenin, the revolutionary saint of Soviet Communism, his domed forehead thrown back as though in a fresh breeze, his piercing eyes looking off toward the glorious future which his stern face confidently proclaimed, which the “science” of Marxism-Leninism called a historic inevitability. A glorious future. Which future? Sergetov asked himself. What has become of our Revolution? What has become of our Party? Did Comrade Ilych really mean it to be like this?

Sergetov looked at the General Secretary, the “young” man supposed by the West to be fully in charge, the man who was even now changing things. His accession to the highest post in the Party had been a surprise to some, Sergetov among them. The West still looked to him as hopefully as we once had, Sergetov thought. His own arrival in Moscow had changed that rapidly enough. Yet another broken dream. The man who had put a happy face on years of agricultural failure now applied his superficial charm to a larger arena. He was laboring mightily—anyone at this table would admit that—but his task was an impossible one. To get here he had been forced to make too many promises, too many deals with the old guard. Even the “young” men of fifty and sixty he’d added to the Politburo had their own ties to former regimes. Nothing had really changed.

The West never seemed to absorb the idea. Not since Khrushchev had one man held sway. One-man rule held dangers vividly remembered by the older generation of the Party. The younger men had heard the tales of the great

purges under Stalin often enough to take the lesson to heart, and the Army had its own institutional memory of what Khrushchev had done to its hierarchy. In the Politburo, as in the jungle, the only rule was survival, and for all collective safety lay in collective rule. Because of this the men selected for the titular post of General Secretary were not elected so much for their personal dynamism as for their experience in the Party—an organization that did not reward people for standing out too distinctly from the crowd. Like Brezhnev, and Andropov, and Chernenko, the current chief of the Party lacked the power of personality to dominate this room with his will alone. He'd had to compromise to be in his chair, and he would have to compromise to remain there. The real power blocs were amorphous things, relationships among men, loyalties that changed with circumstance and knew only expediency. The real power lay within the Party itself.

The Party ruled all, but the Party was no longer the expression of one man. It had become a collection of interests represented here by twelve other men. Defense had its interest, the KGB, and Heavy Industry, and even Agriculture. Each interest held its own brand of power, and the chief of each allied himself with others in order to secure his own place. The General Secretary would try to change this, would gradually appoint men loyal to himself to the posts that death made vacant. Would he then learn, as his predecessors had, that loyalty so easily died around this table? For now, he still carried the burden of his own compromises. With his own men not yet fully in place, the General Secretary was only the foremost member of a group that could unseat him as easily as it had unseated Khrushchev. What would the West say if it learned that the "dynamic" General Secretary mainly served as executor for the decisions of others? Even now, he did not speak first.

"Comrades," began the Defense Minister. "The Soviet Union must have oil, at least two hundred million tons more than we can produce. Such oil exists, only a few hundred kilometers from our border in the Persian Gulf—more oil than we will ever need. We have the ability to take it, of course. Inside of two weeks, we could assemble enough aircraft and airborne troops to swoop down on those oil fields and gobble them up.

"Unfortunately, there could not fail to be a violent Western response. Those same oil fields supply Western Europe, Japan, and to a lesser extent, America. The NATO countries do not have the ability to defend those fields with conventional means. The Americans have their Rapid Deployment Force, a hollow shell of headquarters and a few light troops. Even with their pre-positioned equipment at Diego Garcia, they could not hope to stop our airborne and mechanized forces. Were they to try, and they would have to try, their elite troops would be overwhelmed and exterminated in a few days—and they would be faced with a single alternative: nuclear weapons. This is a real risk that we cannot disregard. We know for a fact that American war plans call for nuclear weapons in this case. Such weapons are stored in quantity at Diego Garcia, and would almost certainly be used.

"Therefore, before we can seize the Persian Gulf, we must first do one other thing. We must eliminate NATO as a political and military force."

Sergetov sat upright in his leather chair. What was this, what was he saying? He struggled to keep his face impassive as the Defense Minister

continued.

"If NATO is first removed from the board, America will be in a most curious position. The United States will be able to meet its own energy needs from Western Hemisphere sources, removing the need to defend the Arab states, who are in any case not terribly popular with the American Jewish Zionist community."

Did they really believe this, Sergetov wondered, did they actually believe the United States would sit on its hands? *What went on at the late meeting yesterday?*

At last one other person shared his concern. "So, the only thing we have to do is conquer Western Europe, Comrade?" a candidate member asked. "Are these not the countries against whose conventional forces you warn us every year? Every year you tell us of the threat the massed NATO armies present to us, and now you say casually that we must conquer them? Excuse me, Comrade Defense Minister, but do not France and England have their own nuclear arsenals? And why would America not fulfill its treaty promise to use nuclear weapons in the defense of NATO?"

Sergetov was surprised that a junior member had put the issues so quickly on the table. He was more surprised that the Foreign Minister answered. So, another piece of the puzzle. But what did the KGB think of this? Why were they not represented here? The chairman was recovering from surgery, but there should have been someone here—unless that had been taken care of last night.

"Our objectives must be limited, and obviously so. This presents us with several political tasks. First, we must engender a feeling of security in America, to put them off guard until it is too late for them to react forcefully. Second, we must attempt to unravel the NATO alliance in a political sense." The Foreign Minister ventured a rare smile. "As you know, the KGB has been working on such a plan for the past several years. It is now in its final form. I will outline it for you."

He did so, and Sergetov nodded at its audacity and also with a new understanding of the power balance in this room. So, it was the KGB. He should have known. But would the rest of the Politburo fall in line? The minister went on, "You see how it would work. One piece after another would fall into place. Given these preconditions, the waters so thoroughly muddied, and the fact that we would proclaim our unwillingness to threaten directly the two independent NATO nuclear powers, we feel that the nuclear risk, while real, is less than the risk that we already face in our economy."

Sergetov leaned back in his leather chair. So, there it was: war was less risky than a cold, hungry peace. It had been decided. Or had it? Might some combination of other Politburo members have the power or prestige to reverse that decision? Could he dare to speak out against this madness? Perhaps a judicious question first.

"Do we have the ability to defeat NATO?" He was chilled by the glib reply.

"Of course," Defense answered. "What do you think we have an army for? We have already consulted with our senior commanders."

And when you asked us last month for more steel for more new tanks, Comrade Defense Minister, was your excuse that NATO was too weak? Sergetov asked

himself angrily. What machinations had taken place? Have they even spoken with their military advisers yet, or had the Defense Minister exploited his vaunted personal expertise? Had the General Secretary allowed himself to be bullied by Defense? And by the Foreign Minister? Had he even objected? Was this how the decisions were made to decide the fate of nations? What would Vladimir Ilych have thought of this?

"Comrades, this is madness!" said Pyotr Bromkovskiy. The oldest man there, frail and past eighty, his conversation occasionally rambled about the idealistic times long before, when Communist Party members really believed that they were the leading wave of history. The Yezhovshchina purges had ended that. "Yes, we have a grave economic danger. Yes, we have a grave danger to the security of the State—but do we replace this with a greater danger? Consider what can happen—how long, Comrade Defense Minister, before you can initiate your conquest of NATO?"

"I am assured that we can have our army fully ready for combat operations in four months."

"Four months. I presume that we will have fuel four months from now—enough fuel to begin a war!" Petya was old, but no one's fool.

"Comrade Sergetov." The General Secretary gestured down the table, dodging his responsibility yet again.

Which side to take? The young candidate member made a swift decision. "Inventories of light fuels—gasoline, diesel, et cetera—are high at the moment," Sergetov had to admit. "We always use the cold-weather months—the time when usage of these fuels is lowest—to build up our stocks, and added to this are our strategic defense reserves, enough for forty-five—"

"Sixty!" insisted the Defense Minister.

"Forty-five days is a more realistic figure, Comrade." Sergetov held his position. "My department has studied fuel consumption by military units as part of a program to increase the strategic fuel reserves, something neglected in past years. With savings in other consumption and certain industrial sacrifices, we might expand this to sixty days of war stocks, perhaps even seventy, plus giving you other stocks to expand training exercises. The near-term economic costs would be slight, but by midsummer this would change rapidly." Sergetov paused, greatly disturbed at how easily he had gone along with the unspoken decision. *I have sold my soul . . . Or have I acted like a patriot? Have I become like the other men around this table? Or have I merely told the truth—and what is truth?* All he could be certain of, he told himself, is that he had survived. For now. "We do have the limited ability, as I told you yesterday, to restructure our distillate production. In this case, my staff feels that a nine-percent increase in the militarily important fuels can be accomplished—based on our reduced production. I caution, however, that my staff analysts also feel that all existing estimates of fuel usage in combat conditions are grossly optimistic." A last, feeble attempt at protest.

"Give us the fuel, Mikhail Eduardovich," the Defense Minister smiled coldly, "and we'll see it is properly used. My analysts estimate that we can accomplish our goals in two weeks, perhaps less—but I will grant you the strength of the NATO armies, and double our estimates to thirty days. We will still have more than enough."

“And what if NATO discovers our intentions?” old Petya demanded.

“They will not. Already we are preparing our *maskirovka,* our trickery. NATO is not a strong alliance. It cannot be. The ministers bicker over each country’s defense contribution. Their peoples are divided and soft. They cannot standardize their weapons, and because of it their supply situation is utter chaos. And their most important, most powerful member is separated from Europe by five thousand kilometers of ocean. The Soviet Union is only an overnight train ride from the German border. But, Petya, my old friend, I will answer your question. If everything fails, and our intentions are discovered, we can always stop, say that we were running an exercise, and return to peacetime conditions—and be no worse off than if we do nothing at all. We need strike only if all is ready. We can always draw back.”

Everyone at the table knew that was a lie, though a clever one, because no one had the courage to denounce it as such. What army had ever been mobilized to be called back? No one else spoke up to oppose the Defense Minister. Bromkovskiy rambled on for a few minutes, quoting Lenin’s stricture about endangering the home of World Socialism, but even that drew no response. The danger to the State—actually the danger to the Party and the Politburo—was manifest. It could not become graver. The alternative was war.

Ten minutes later, the Politburo voted. Sergetov and his eight fellow candidate members were mere spectators. The vote was eleven to two for war. The process had begun.

DATE-TIME 02/03 17: 15 COPY 01 OF 01 OF SOVIET-REPORT
BC-Soviet Report, Bjt, 2310•FL•
TASS Confirms Oil Field Fire•FL•
EDS: Moved in advance for SATURDAY PMs•FL•
BY: Patrick Flynn•FC•
AP Moscow Correspondent

MOSCOW (AP)—It was confirmed today by TASS, the Soviet news agency, that “a serious fire” had taken place in the western Siberian region of the Soviet Union.

A back-page article in *Pravda,* the official Communist Party newspaper, noted the fire, commenting that the “heroic fire brigade” had saved countless lives by its skill and devotion to duty, also preventing more serious damage to the nearby oil facilities.

The fire was reportedly begun by a “technical malfunction” in the automatic refinery control systems and spread rapidly, but was swiftly extinguished, “not without casualties among the brave men detailed to attack the fire, and the courageous workmen who raced heroically to their comrades’ side.”

Though somewhat at odds with Western reports, the fire in the area did go out more quickly than had been expected. Western officials are now speculating about a highly sophisticated firefighting system built into the Nizhnevartovsk facility that allowed the Soviets to extinguish the fire.

AB-BA-2-3 16: 01 EST•FL•
* *END OF STORY* *

3

Correlation of Forces

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

"They didn't *ask* me," explained Chief of the General Staff Marshal Shavyrin. "They didn't ask for my evaluation. The political decision was already made when they called me in Thursday night. When was the last time the Defense Minister asked me for a substantive judgmental decision?"

"And what did you say?" asked Marshal Rozhkov, Commander-in-Chief of Ground Forces. The initial response was a grim, ironic smile.

"That the armed forces of the Soviet Union were able to carry out this task, given four months of preparation."

"Four months . . ." Rozhkov stared out the window. He turned back. "We won't be ready."

"Hostilities will commence on 15 June," Shavyrin replied. "We must be ready, Yuri. And what choice did I have? Would you have had me say, 'I am sorry, Comrade General Secretary, but the Soviet Army is unable to carry out this task'? I would have been dismissed and replaced by someone more tractable—you know who my replacement will be. Would you rather answer to Marshal Bukharin—"

"That fool!" Rozhkov growled. It had been the then-Lieutenant General Bukharin whose brilliant plan had led the Soviet Army into Afghanistan. Professionally a nonentity, his political connections had not only saved him, but continued his career to near the pinnacle of uniformed power. A clever man, Bukharin. Never involved in the mountain campaigns himself, he could point to his brilliant paper plan and complain that it had been poorly executed, after he had moved on to command of the Kiev Military District, historically the shining gate to marshal's rank.

"So, would you have him in this office, dictating your plans to you?" Shavyrin asked. Rozhkov shook his head. The two men had been friends and comrades since each had commanded a tank troop in the same regiment, just in time for the final surge toward Vienna in 1945.

"How are we to go about it?" Rozhkov asked.

"Red Storm," the Marshal replied simply. Red Storm was the plan for a mechanized attack into West Germany and the Low Countries. Constantly updated for changes in the force structures of both sides, it called for a two- to

three-week campaign commencing after a rapid escalation of tension between East and West. Despite this, in accordance with standard Soviet strategic doctrine, it called for strategic surprise as a precondition for success, and the use of conventional weapons only.

"At least they aren't talking about atomic arms." Rozhkov grunted. Other plans with other names applied to different scenarios, including many for the use of tactical and even strategic nuclear arms, something no one in uniform wished to contemplate. Despite all the saber-rattling of their political masters, these professional soldiers knew all too well that the use of nuclear arms made only for ghastly uncertainties. "And the *maskirovka?"*

"In two parts. The first is purely political, to work against the United States. The second part, immediately before the war begins, is from KGB. You know it, from KGB Group Nord. We reviewed it two years ago."

Rozhkov grunted. Group Nord was an ad hoc committee of KGB department chiefs, first assembled by then-chief of the KGB Yuri Andropov in the mid-1970s. Its purpose was to research means of splitting the NATO alliance, and in general to conduct political and psychological operations aimed at undermining Western will. Its specific plan to shake the NATO military and political structure in preparation for a shooting war was Nord's proudest example of legerdemain. But would it work? The two senior officers shared an ironic look. Like most professional soldiers, they distrusted spies and all their plans.

"Four months," Rozhkov repeated. "We have much to do. And if this KGB magic fails to work?"

"It is a good plan. It need only deceive the West for a week, though two weeks would be better. The key, of course, is how quickly NATO can reach full readiness. If we can delay the mobilization process seven days, victory is assured—"

"And if not?" Rozhkov asked sharply, knowing that even a seven-day delay was no guarantee.

"Then it is not assured, but the balance of forces is on our side. You know that, Yuri." The option of recalling the mobilized forces had never been discussed with the Chief of the General Staff.

"We will need to improve discipline throughout the force first of all," CINC-Ground said. "And I need to inform our senior commanders at once. We need to implement intense training operations. Just how awful is this fuel problem?"

Shavyrin handed his subordinate the notes. "It could be worse. We have enough for extended unit training. Your task is no easy one, Yuri, but four months is a long time for this task, is it not?"

It wasn't, but there was no point in saying so. "As you say, four months to instill fighting discipline. I will have a free hand?"

"Within limits."

"It is one thing to make a private soldier snap to the orders of his sergeant. It might be another for officers conditioned to pushing paper to change into combat leaders." Rozhkov skirted the issue, but his superior received the message clearly enough.

"A free hand on both, Yuri. But act carefully, for both our sakes."

Rozhkov nodded briefly. He knew whom he'd use to get this done. "With the troops we led forty years ago, Andrey, we could do this." Rozhkov sat down. "And in truth we have the same raw material now that we had then—and better weapons. The chief unknown remains the men. When we drove our tanks into Vienna, our men were tough, hard veterans—"

"And so were the SS bastards we crushed." Shavyrin smiled, remembering. "Keep in mind that the same forces are at work in the West, even more so. How well will they fight, surprised, divided? It can work. We must make it work."

"I'm meeting with our field commanders Monday. I will tell them myself."

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

"I hope you take good care of it," the Mayor said.

It was a moment before Commander Daniel X. McCafferty reacted. USS *Chicago* had been in commission for only six weeks, her completion delayed by a yard fire and her commissioning ceremony marred by the absence of the Mayor of Chicago due to a strike of city workers. Just back from five tough weeks of workups in the Atlantic, his crew was now loading provisions for their first operational deployment. McCafferty was still entranced with his new command, and never tired of looking at her. He'd just walked the Mayor along the curved upper deck, the first part of any submarine tour, even though there was almost nothing to be seen there. "Excuse me?"

"Take good care of our ship," said the Mayor of Chicago.

"We call them boats, sir, and we'll take good care of her for you. Will you join us in the wardroom?"

"More ladders." The Mayor pretended to grimace, but McCafferty knew him to be a former fire chief. *Would have been useful a few months back,* the captain thought. "Where are you heading tomorrow?"

"To sea, sir." The captain started down the ladder. The Mayor of Chicago followed him.

"I figured that." For a man in his late fifties, he handled the steel ladder easily enough. They met again at the bottom. "What exactly do you do in these things?"

"Sir, the Navy calls it 'Oceanographic Research.' " McCafferty led him forward, turning for a smile with his answer to the awkward question. Things were starting quickly for *Chicago.* The Navy wanted to see just how effective her new quieting systems were. Everything looked good in the acoustical test range off the Bahamas. Now they wanted to see how well things worked in the Barents Sea.

The Mayor laughed at that one. "Oh, I suppose you'll be counting the whales for Greenpeace!"

"Well, I can say that there are whales where we're heading."

"What's with the tile on your deck? I never heard of rubber decks on a ship."

"It's called anechoic tile, sir. The rubber absorbs sound waves. It makes us quieter to operate, and makes it harder to detect us on sonar if somebody pings at us. Coffee?"

"You'd think that on a day like this—"

The captain chuckled. "Me, too. But it's against regulations."

The Mayor hoisted his cup and clicked against McCafferty's. "Luck."

"I'll drink to that."

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

They met at the Main Officers Club of the Moscow Military District on Ulitsa Krasnokazarmennaya, a massively impressive building dating back to Czarist times. It was the normal time of year for senior field commanders to confer in Moscow, and such events were always punctuated by elaborate ceremonial dinners. Rozhkov greeted his fellow officers at the main entrance, and when all were assembled, he led them downstairs to the ornate steam baths. Present were all Theater commanders, each accompanied by his deputy, his air force commander, and the fleet commanders: a small galaxy of stars, ribbons, and braid. Ten minutes later, naked but for a pair of towels and a handful of birch branches each, they were just another group of middle-aged men, perhaps a bit fitter than was the average in the Soviet Union.

They all knew one another. Though many were rivals, they were members of the same profession nevertheless, and with an intimacy characteristic of the Russian steam baths they exchanged small talk for several minutes. Several of them were grandfathers now, and spoke with animation about the continuation of their lines. Regardless of personal rivalries, it was expected that senior officers would look out for the careers of their comrades' sons, and so information was briefly exchanged on whose son was in which command and wanted advancement to what new posting. Finally came the classically Russian dispute over the "strength" of the steam. Rozhkov peremptorily settled the argument with a thin but steady stream of cold water onto the heated bricks in the center of the room. The resulting hiss would be sufficient to interfere with any listening devices in the room, if the foggy air hadn't already corroded them to junk. Rozhkov had not given the first hint of what was happening. Better, he thought, to shock them into the situation and get candid reactions to the situation at hand.

"Comrades, I must make an announcement."

Conversation stilled, and the men looked inquiringly in his direction.

Here we go. "Comrades, on 15 June of this year, just four months from now, we launch an offensive against NATO."

For a moment, only the hiss of the steam could be heard, then three men laughed, having imbibed a few stiff drinks in the sanctity of their staff cars on the drive over from the Kremlin. Those close enough to see CINC-Ground's face did not.

"You are serious, Comrade Marshal?" asked the Commander-in-Chief of the

Western Theater. Receiving a nod in reply, he said, “Then perhaps you will be so kind as to explain the reason for this action?”

“Of course. You are all aware of the Nizhnevartovsk oil-field disaster. What you have not yet learned are its strategic and political implications.” It took six brisk minutes to outline everything the Politburo had decided. “In just over four months from now, we shall launch the most crucial military operation in the history of the Soviet Union: the destruction of NATO as a political and military force. And we will succeed.”

Finished, he stared at the officer in silence. The steam was having its desired effects on the assembly of flag officers. Its searing heat assaulted their breathing passages, sobering those who had been drinking. And it made them sweat. They’d be doing a lot of that in the next few months, Rozhkov thought.

Then Pavel Alekseyev, deputy commander of the South-western Theater, spoke. “I heard rumors,” he said. “But *that* bad?”

“Yes. We have sufficient POL supplies for twelve months of normal operations, or enough for sixty days of war operations after a brief period of increased training activity.” At the cost, he didn’t say, of crippling the national economy by mid-August.

Alekseyev leaned forward and swatted himself with his bundle of branches. The action was strangely like a lion’s swishing its tail. At fifty, he was the second-youngest officer there, a respected intellectual soldier and a fit, handsome man with the shoulders of a lumberjack. His intense, dark eyes squinted down through the rising cloud of steam.

“Mid-June?”

“Yes,” Rozhkov said. “We have that long to prepare our plans and our troops.” CINC-Ground looked around the room. Already the ceiling had become partially obscured by a mist.

“I presume we are here so that we may speak frankly among ourselves, no?”

“This is so, Pavel Leonidovich.” Rozhkov replied, not the least surprised that Alekseyev had been the first to speak. CINC-GROUND had carefully advanced the man’s career over the last decade. He was the only son of a hard-charging tank general of the Great Motherland War, one of the many good men pensioned off during the bloodless purges under Nikita Khrushchev in the late 1950s.

“Comrades.” Alekseyev stood, climbing slowly down the benches to the marble floor. “I accept everything Marshal Rozhkov has told us. But—four months! Four months in which we may be detected, four months in which we may lose all the element of surprise. Then what may happen? No, we have a plan already for this: Zhukov-4! Instant mobilization! We can all be back to our command posts in six hours. If we are going to conduct a surprise attack, then let us make it one no one can detect in time—seventy-two hours from now!”

Again the only sound in the room was that of the water flashing to steam on the dun-colored bricks, then the room erupted with noise. Zhukov-4 was the winter variant of a plan which hypothesized discovery of NATO’s intention to launch a surprise attack of its own on the Warsaw Pact. In such a case, standard Soviet military doctrine was the same as anyone else’s: the best defense is a good offense—preempt the NATO armies by attacking at once

with the Category-A mechanized divisions in East Germany.

"But we are not ready!" objected CINC-West. His was the "point" command with headquarters in Berlin, the single most powerful military command in the world. An attack into West Germany was primarily his responsibility.

Alekseyev held up his hands. "Neither are they. In fact, they are less ready than we," he said reasonably. "Look, consider our intelligence data. Fourteen percent of their officers are on holidays. They are coming off a training cycle, true, but because of it much of their equipment will be down for maintenance, and many of their senior officers will be away in their respective capitals for consultations, just as we are now. Their troops are in winter quarters, on a winter routine. This is the time of year for maintenance and paperwork. Physical training is curtailed—who wants to run in the snow, eh? Their men are cold, and drinking more than usual. This is *our* time to act! We all know that historically the Soviet fighting man performs at his best in winter, and NATO is at its lowest state of readiness."

"But so are we, you young fool!" CINC-Western Theater growled back.

"We can change that in forty-eight hours," Alekseyev countered.

"Impossible," observed West's deputy, careful to back up his boss.

"To reach our maximum readiness will take some months," Alekseyev agreed. His only chance to carry his point with his seniors was to reason with them. He knew that he was almost certainly doomed to failure, but he had to try. "It will be difficult, if not impossible, for us to conceal it."

"As Marshal Rozhkov told us, Pavel Leonidovich, we are promised political and diplomatic *maskirovka,"* a general pointed out.

"I have no doubt that our comrades in the KGB, and our skillful political leadership, will perform miracles." The room just might have functioning bugs, after all. "But is it not asking too much to expect that the Imperialists—as much as they fear and hate us, as active as their agents and spy satellites are—will fail to note a doubling of our training activity? We know that NATO increases its readiness when we go into major unit training, and their preparedness will automatically be increased by their own spring training cycles. If we continue our training beyond the normal pattern, they will be even more alert. Achieving full combat readiness requires that we do too many things out of the ordinary. If nothing else, East Germany is rife with Western spies. NATO will notice. NATO will react. They will meet us on the border with everything in their collective arsenals.

"If, on the other hand, we attack with what we have—*now!*—we have the advantage. Our men are not off skiing in the fucking Alps! Zhukov-4 is designed to cycle from peace to war in forty-eight hours. There is no way possible for NATO to react in so little time. They'll take forty-eight hours to get their intelligence information organized and presented to their ministers. By that time our shells will be falling on the Fulda Gap, and our tanks will be advancing behind them!"

"Too many things can go wrong!" CINC-West rose so swiftly that the towel nearly came off his waist. His left hand grabbed downward while his right fist shook at the younger man. "What about traffic control? What about training our men in their new battle equipment? What about getting my Frontal Aviation pilots ready for combat operations against the Imperialists? There—

right there is an insurmountable problem! Our pilots need at least a month of intensive training. And so do my tankers, and so do my gunners, and so do my riflemen."

If you knew your job, they would be ready now, you worthless, whore-chasing son of a bitch! Alekseyev thought but did not dare to say aloud. CINC-West was a man of sixty-one who liked to demonstrate his manly prowess—boasted of it—to the detriment of his professional duties. Alekseyev had heard that story often enough, whispered jovially in this very room. But CINC-West was politically reliable. *Such is the Soviet system, the younger* general reflected. *We need fighting soldiers and what do we get with which to defend the* Rodina? *Political reliability!* He remembered bitterly what had happened to his father in 1958. But Alekseyev did not allow himself to begrudge the Party its control of the armed forces. The Party was the State, after all, and he was a sworn servant of the State. He had learned these truisms at his father's knee. One more card to play:

"Comrade General, you have good officers commanding your divisions, regiments, and battalions. Trust them to know their duties." It couldn't hurt to wave the standards of the Red Army, Alekseyev reasoned.

Rozhkov stood, and everyone in the room strained to hear his pronouncement. "What you say has merit, Pavel Leonidovich, but do we gamble with the safety of the Motherland?" He shook his head, quoting doctrine exactly, as he had been doing for too many years. "No. We rely on surprise, yes, on the first weighted blow to blast open a path for the daring thrust of our mechanized forces. And we will have our surprise. The Westerners will not wish to believe what is happening, and with the Politburo soothing them even as we prepare the first blow, we will have our strategic surprise. The West will have perhaps three days—four at most—to know what is coming, and even then they will not be mentally prepared for us."

The officers followed Rozhkov from the room to rinse the sweat from their bodies with cold-water showers. Ten minutes later, refreshed and dressed in full uniform, the officers reassembled in a second-floor banquet room. The waiters, many of them KGB informers, noted the subdued mood and quiet conversations that frustrated their efforts to listen in. The generals knew that KGB's Lefortovo prison was a bare kilometer away.

"Our plans?" CINC-Southwest asked his deputy.

"How many times have we played this war game?" Alekseyev responded. "All the maps and formulae we have examined for years. We know the troop and tank concentrations. We know the routes, the highways, the crossroads that we must use, and those that NATO will use. We know our mobilization schedules, and theirs. The only thing we don't know is whether our carefully laid plans will in fact work. We should attack at once. Then the unknowns will work against both sides equally."

"And if our attack goes too well, and NATO relies on a nuclear defense?" the senior officer asked. Alekseyev acknowledged the importance and grave unpredictability of the point.

"They might do that anyway. Comrade, all of our plans depend heavily on surprise, no? A mixture of surprise and success will force the West to consider nuclear weapons—"

"Here you are wrong, my young friend," CINC-Southwest chided. "The decision to use nuclear weapons is political. To prevent their use is also a political exercise for which time is required."

"But if we wait over four months—*how can we be assured of strategic surprise?"* Alekseyev demanded.

"Our political leadership has promised it."

"The year I entered Frunze Academy, the Party told us the date on which we would surely have 'True Communism in our lifetime.' A solemn promise. That date was six years ago."

"Such talk is safe with me, Pasha, I understand you. But if you do not learn to control your tongue—"

"Forgive me, Comrade General. We must allow for the chance that surprise will not be achieved. 'In combat, despite the most careful preparation, risks cannot be avoided,' " Alekseyev quoted from the syllabus of the Frunze Academy. " 'Attention must therefore be given, and the most detailed plans prepared, for every reasonable exigency of the overall operation. For this reason, the unsung life of a staff officer is among the most demanding of those honored to serve the State.' "

"You have the memory of a *kulak,* Pasha." CINC-Southwest laughed, filling his deputy's glass with Georgian wine. "But you are correct."

"Failure to achieve surprise means that we are forcing a campaign of attrition on a vast scale, a high-technology version of the '14—'18 war."

"Which we will win." CINC-Ground sat down next to Alekseyev.

"Which we will win," Alekseyev agreed. All Soviet generals accepted the premise that the inability to force a rapid decision would force a bloody war of attrition that would grind each side down equally. The Soviets had far more reserves of men and material with which to fight such a war. And the political will to use them. *"If and only if* we are able to force the pace of battle, and if our friends in the Navy can prevent the resupply of NATO from America. NATO has war stocks of materiel to sustain them for roughly five weeks. Our pretty, expensive fleet must close the Atlantic."

"Maslov." Rozhkov beckoned to the Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Navy. "We wish to hear your opinion of the correlation of forces in the North Atlantic."

"Our mission?" Maslov asked warily.

"If we fail to achieve surprise in the West, Andrey Petravich, it will be necessary for our beloved comrades in the Navy to isolate Europe from America," Rozhkov pronounced. He blinked hard at the response.

"Give me a division of airborne troops, and I can fulfill that task," Maslov responded soberly. He held a glass of mineral water, and had been careful to avoid drink on this cold February night. "The question is whether our strategic stance at sea should be offensive or defensive. The NATO navies—above all the United States Navy—is a direct threat to the *Rodina.* It alone has the aircraft and aircraft carriers with which to attack the homeland, at the Kola Peninsula. In fact, we know that they have plans to do exactly that."

"So what?" CINC-Southwest observed. "No attack on Soviet soil is to be taken lightly, of course, but we will take severe losses in this campaign no matter how brilliantly we fight it. What matters is the final outcome."

“If the Americans succeed in attacking Kola, they effectively prevent our closure of the North Atlantic. And you are wrong to shrug off these attacks. American entry into the Barents Sea will constitute a direct threat to our nuclear deterrent forces, and could have more dire consequences than you imagine.” Admiral Maslov leaned forward. “On the other hand, if you persuade STAVKA to give us the resources to execute Operation Polar Glory, we can seize the combat initiative and dictate the nature of operations in the North Atlantic on our chosen terms.” He held up a closed fist. “By doing this we can, first”—he raised a finger—“prevent an American naval attack against the *Rodina;* second”—another finger—“use the majority of our submarine forces in the North Atlantic basin where the trade routes are, instead of keeping them on passive defense; and, third”—a final finger—“make maximum use of our naval aviation assets. At one stroke this operation makes our fleet an offensive rather than a defensive weapon.”

“And to accomplish this you need only one of our Guards Air Rifle divisions? Outline your plan for us, please, Comrade Admiral,” Alekseyev said.

Maslov did so over a period of five minutes. He concluded, “With luck, we will with one blow give the NATO navies more than they can deal with, and leave us with a valuable position for postwar exploitation.”

“Better to draw their carrier forces in and destroy them.” CINC-West joined the discussion.

Maslov responded: “The Americans will have five or six carriers available to use against us in the Atlantic. Each one carries fifty-eight aircraft that can be used in an air superiority or nuclear strike role, aside from those used for fleet defense. I submit, Comrade, that it is in our interest to keep those ships as far from the *Rodina* as possible.”

“Andrey Petravich, I am impressed,” Rozhkov said thoughtfully, noting the respect in Alekseyev’s eyes as well. Polar Glory was both bold and simple. “I want a full briefing on this plan tomorrow afternoon. You say that if we can allocate the resources, success in this venture is highly probable?”

“We have worked on this plan for five years, with particular emphasis on simplicity. If security can be maintained, only two things need go right for success to be achieved.”

Rozhkov nodded. “Then you will have my support.”

4

Maskirovka 1

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

The Foreign Minister entered stage left, as he always did, and walked to the lectern with a brisk step that belied his sixty years. Before him was a mob of reporters arrayed by the Soviet Guards into their respective groups, the print press grasping at their pads and backed up by their photographers, the visual media arrayed in front of their portable klieg lights. The Foreign Minister hated the damned things, hated the people in front of them. The Western press with its lack of manners, always prying, always probing, always demanding answers that he need not give to his own people. How odd, he thought, while looking up from his notes, that he often had to speak more openly to these paid foreign spies than to members of the Party Central Committee. Spies, exactly what they were . . .

They could be manipulated, of course, by a skilled man with a collection of carefully prepared disinformation—which was precisely what he was about to do. But on the whole they were a threat because they never stopped doing what it was they did. It was something the Foreign Minister never allowed himself to forget, and the reason he did not hold them in contempt. Dealing with them always held potential danger. Even while being manipulated, they could be dangerous in their quest for information. If only the rest of the Politburo understood.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, speaking in English. "I will be making a brief statement, and I regret that I cannot answer any questions at this time. A full handout will be given to everyone as you leave—that is, I think they are ready by now—" He gestured to a man at the back of the room, who nodded emphatically. The Foreign Minister arranged his papers one more time and began to speak with the precise diction for which he was known.

"The President of the United States has often asked for 'deeds not words' in the quest for control of strategic arms.

"As you know, and to the disappointment of the entire world, the ongoing arms negotiations in Vienna have made no significant progress for over a year, with each side blaming the other for the lack of it.

"It is well known by peace-loving people the world over that the Soviet Union has never wished for war, and that only a madman would even consider

nuclear war a viable policy option in our modern world of overkill, fallout, and 'nuclear winter.' "

"Damn," muttered AP bureau chief Patrick Flynn. The Soviets scarcely acknowledged "nuclear winter" and had never mentioned the concept in so formal a setting. His antennae were already twitching at whatever there was in the wind.

"The time has come for substantive reductions in strategic arms. We have made numerous, serious, sincere proposals for real arms reductions, and despite this the United States has proceeded with the development and deployment of its destabilizing, openly offensive weapons: the MX first-strike missile, so cynically called the 'Peacekeeper'; the advanced Trident D-5 first-strike sea-launched ballistic missile; two separate varieties of cruise missiles whose characteristics conspire to make arms control verification almost totally impossible; and of course, the so-called Strategic Defense Initiative, which will take offensive strategic weapons into space. Such are America's deeds." He looked up from his notes and spoke with irony. "And through it all, America's pious words demand Soviet deeds.

"Starting tomorrow, we will see once and for all if America's words are to be believed or not. Starting tomorrow we will see how great a difference there is between America's words about peace and Soviet deeds for peace.

"Tomorrow, the Soviet Union will put on the table at Vienna a proposal to reduce existing arsenals of strategic and theater nuclear weapons by fifty percent, this reduction to be accomplished over a period of three years from ratification of the agreement, subject to on-site verification conducted by third-party inspection teams whose composition will be agreed upon by all signatories.

"Please note that I say 'all signatories.' The Soviet Union invites the United Kingdom, the French Republic, and"—he looked up—"the People's Republic of China to join us at the negotiating table." The explosion of flashbulbs caused him to look away for a moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please—" He smiled, holding his hand up to shield his face. "These old eyes are not up to such abuse as this, and I have not memorized my speech—unless you want me to continue in Russian!"

There was a wave of laughter, then a sprinkling of applause at the jibe. The old bastard was really turning on the charm, Flynn thought, furiously taking notes. This was potential dynamite. He wondered what would come next, and he especially wondered what the precise wording on the proposal was. Flynn had covered arms talks before, and knew all too well that general descriptions of proposals could grossly distort the nuts-and-bolts details of the real issues to be negotiated. The Russians couldn't be this open—they just couldn't be.

"To proceed." The Foreign Minister blinked his eyes clear. "We have been accused of never making a gesture of our good faith. The falsehood of the charge is manifest, but this evil fiction continues in the West. No longer. No longer will anyone have cause to doubt the sincerity of the Soviet people's quest for a just and lasting peace.

"Beginning today, as a sign of good faith which we challenge the United States and any other interested nation to match, the Soviet Union will remove from service an entire class of nuclear-powered missile submarines. These

submarines are known to the West as the Yankee class. We call them something else, of course," he said with an ingenuous grin that drew another wave of polite laughter. "Twenty of the vessels are presently in service, each carrying twelve sea-launched ballistic missiles. All active members of the class are assigned to the Soviet Northern Fleet based on the Kola Peninsula. Beginning today, we will deactivate these vessels at a rate of one per month. As you know, complete deactivation of so complex a machine as a missile submarine requires the services of a shipyard—the missile compartment must be physically removed from the body of the vessel—and so these vessels cannot be fully disarmed overnight. However, to make the honesty of our intentions undeniable, we invite the United States to do one of two things:

"First, we will permit a selected team of six American naval officers to inspect these twenty vessels to verify that their missile tubes have been filled with concrete ballast pending removal of the entire missile rooms from all of the submarines. In return for this, we would require that a comparable inspection visit by an equal number of Soviet officers to American yards would be allowed at a later date to be agreed on.

"Second, as an alternative should the United States be unwilling to allow reciprocal verification of arms reductions, we will permit another group of six officers to perform this service, these officers to be from a country—or countries—upon which the United States and the Soviet Union can agree within the next thirty days. A team from such neutral countries as Sweden or India would be acceptable in principle to the Soviet Union.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the time has come to put an end to the arms race. I will not repeat all of the flowery rhetoric we've all heard over the past two generations. We all know the threat that these ghastly weapons represent to every nation. Let no one ever say again that the government of the Soviet Union has not done its part to reduce the danger of war. Thank you."

The room suddenly fell silent but for the sound of motor-driven still cameras. The Western press representatives assigned to their respective Moscow bureaus were among the best in their profession. Uniformly bright, uniformly ambitious, uniformly cynical about what they found in Moscow and the conditions under which they were forced to work, all were stunned to silence.

"Goddamn," muttered Flynn after a full ten seconds.

"One must admire your understatement, old boy," agreed Reuters correspondent William Calloway. "Wasn't it your Wilson who spoke of open covenants openly arrived at?"

"Yeah, my granddad covered that peace conference. Remember how well it worked out?" Flynn grimaced, watching the Foreign Minister depart, smiling at the cameras. "I want to see the handout. Want to ride back with me?"

"Yes on both."

It was a bitterly cold day in Moscow. Snow piles were heaped at the roadsides. The sky was a frigid crystal blue. And the car's heater didn't work. Flynn drove while his friend read aloud from the handout. The draft treaty proposal took up nineteen annotated pages. The Reuters correspondent was a Londoner who had begun as a police reporter, and since covered assignments all over the world. He and Flynn had met many years before at the famous

Caravelle Hotel in Saigon, and shared drinks and typewriter ribbons on and off for more than two decades. In the face of a Russian winter, they remembered the oppressive heat of Saigon with something akin to nostalgia.

"It's bloody fair," Calloway said wonderingly, his breath giving ghostly substance to his words. "They propose a builddown with elimination of many existing weapons, allowing both sides to replace obsolete launchers, both sides to reach a total of five thousand deliverable warheads, that number to remain stable for five years after the three-year reduction period. There is a separate proposal to negotiate complete removal of 'heavy' missiles, replacing them with mobile missiles, but to limit missile flight tests to a fixed number per year —" He flipped that page and rapidly scanned the remainder. "Nothing in the draft treaty about your Star Wars research . . . ? Didn't he mention that in his statement? Patrick, old son, this is, as you say, dynamite. This could as easily have been written in Washington. It will take months to work out all the technical points, but this is a bloody serious, and bloody generous, proposal."

"Nothing about Star Wars?" Flynn frowned briefly as he turned right. Did that mean that the Russians had made a breakthrough of their own? Have to query Washington about that . . . "We got us a story here, Willie. What's your lead? How's 'Peace' grab you?" Calloway just laughed at that.

FORT MEADE, MARYLAND

American intelligence agencies, like their counterparts throughout the world, monitor all news wire services. Toland was examining the AP and Reuters reports before most news bureau chiefs, and comparing them with the version transmitted over Soviet microwave circuits for publication in the regional editions of *Pravda* and *Isvestia.* The way items of hard news were reported in the Soviet Union was intended to show Party members how their leaders felt.

"We've been down this road before," his section chief said. "The last time, things broke down on this issue of mobile missiles. Both sides want them, but both sides are afraid of the other side having them."

"But the tone of the report—"

"They're *always* euphoric about *their* arms-control proposals, dammit! Hell, Bob, you know that."

"True, sir, but it's the first time that I know of that the Russians have unilaterally removed a weapons platform from service."

"The 'Yankees' are obsolete."

"So what? They never throw anything away, obsolete or not. They still have World War II artillery pieces sitting in warehouses in case they need them again. This is different, and the political ramifications—"

"We're not talking politics, we're talking nuclear strategy," the section chief growled back.

As if there were a difference, Toland said to himself.

KIEV, THE UKRAINE

"Well, Pasha?"

"Comrade General, we truly have a man's work before us," Alekseyev answered, standing at attention in the Kiev headquarters of the Southwest Theater.

"Our troops need extensive unit training. Over the weekend I read through more than eighty regimental readiness reports from our tank and motor-rifle divisions." Alekseyev paused before going on. Tactical training and readiness was the bane of the Soviet military. Their troops were almost entirely conscripts, in and out in two years, half of whose uniformed service was occupied just in acquiring basic military skills. Even the noncoms, the backbone of every army since the Roman legions, were conscripts selected for special training academies, then lost as soon as their enlistment periods ended. For that reason, the Soviet military leaned heavily on its officers, who often performed what in the West was sergeants' work. The professional officer corps of the Soviet Army was its only permanent, only dependable feature. In theory. "The truth of the matter is that we *don't know* our readiness posture at the moment. Our colonels all use the same language in their reports, without the slightest deviation. Everyone reports meeting norms, with the same amount of training hours, the same amount of political indoctrination, the same number of practice shots fired—that is, a deviation of under three percent!—and the requisite number of field exercises run, all of course of the proper type."

"As prescribed in our training manuals," the Colonel General noted.

"Naturally. Exactly—too damned exactly! No deviation for adverse weather. No deviation for late fuel deliveries. No deviation for anything at all. For example, the 703rd Motor-Rifle Regiment spent all of last October on harvesting duty south of Kharkov—yet somehow they met their monthly norms for unit training at the same time. Lies are bad enough, but these are *stupid* lies!"

"It cannot be as bad as you fear, Pavel Leonidovich."

"Do we dare to assume otherwise, Comrade?"

The General stared down at his desk. "No. Very well, Pasha. You've formulated your plan. Let me hear it."

"For the moment, you will be outlining the plan for our attack into the Muslim lands. I must get into the field to whip our field commanders into shape. If we wish to accomplish our goals in time for the attack west, we must make an example of the worst offenders. I have four commanders in mind. Their conduct has been grossly and undeniably criminal. Here are the names and charges." He handed over a single sheet of paper.

"There are two good men here, Pasha," the General objected.

"They are guardians of the State. They enjoy positions of the greatest trust. They have betrayed that trust by lying, and in doing so, they have endangered the State," Alekseyev said, wondering how many men in his country could have that said of them. He dismissed the thought. There were problems enough right here.

"You understand the consequences of the charges you bring?"

“Of course. The penalty for treason is death. Did I ever falsify a readiness report? Did you?” Alekseyev looked away briefly. “It is a hard thing, and I take no pleasure in it—but unless we snap our units into shape, how many young boys will die for their officers’ failings? We need combat readiness more than we need four liars. If there is a gentler way to achieve this, I don’t know what that might be. An army without discipline is a worthless mob. We have the directive from STAVKA to make examples of unruly privates and restore the authority of our NCOs. It is fitting that if privates must suffer for their failings, then their colonels must suffer too. Theirs is the greater responsibility. Theirs is the greater reward. A few examples here will go a long way to restoring our army.”

“The inspectorate?”

“The best choice,” Alekseyev agreed. That way blame would not necessarily be traced back to the senior commanders themselves. “I can send teams from the Inspector General’s service out to these regiments day after tomorrow. Our training memoranda arrived in all divisional and regimental headquarters this morning. The news of these four traitors will encourage our unit commanders to implement them with vigor. Even then, it will be two weeks before we have a clear picture of what we need to focus on, but once we can identify the areas that need buttressing, we should have ample time to accomplish what we need to accomplish.”

“What will CINC-West be doing?”

“The same, one hopes.” Alekseyev shook his head. “Has he asked for any of our units yet?”

“No, but he will. We will not be ordered to launch offensive operations against NATO’s southern flank—part of the continuing *maskirovka.* You may assume that many of our Category-B units will be detailed to Germany, possibly some of our ‘A’ tank forces also. However many divisions that fool has, he’ll want more.”

“Just so we have enough troops to seize the oil fields when the time comes,” Pasha observed. “Which plan are we supposed to execute?”

“The old one. We’ll have to update it, of course.” The old plan predated Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, and now the Red Army had a whole new perspective on sending mechanized forces into an area occupied by armed Muslims.

Alekseyev’s hands bunched into fists. “Marvelous. We must formulate a plan without knowing when it will be implemented or what forces we’ll have available to execute it.”

“Remember what you told me about the life of a staff officer, Pasha?” CINC-Southwest chuckled.

The younger man nodded ruefully, hoist on his own petard. “Indeed, Comrade General: we will do our sleeping after the war.”

5

Sailors and Spooks

THE CHESAPEAKE BAY, MARYLAND

His eyes squinted painfully at the horizon. The sun was only half a diameter above the green-brown line of Maryland's Eastern Shore, a reminder, if he needed one, that he'd worked late the day before, gone to bed later still, then arisen at four-thirty so that he could get in a day's fishing. A slowly receding sinuslike headache also let him know about the six-pack of beer he'd consumed in front of the TV.

But it was his first fishing day of the year, and the casting rod felt good in his hand as he gave it a gentle swing toward a ripple on the calm surface of the Chesapeake Bay. A blue or a rockfish? Whatever it was, it didn't nibble at his Bucktail lure. But there was no hurry.

"Coffee, Bob?"

"Thanks, Pop." Robert Toland set his rod in its holder and leaned back into the 'midships swivel chair of his Boston Whaler Outrage. His father-in-law, Edward Keegan, held out the plastic cup-cap from a large thermos jug. Bob knew the coffee would be good. Ned Keegan was a former naval officer who appreciated a good cup, preferably flavored with brandy or Irish whiskey—something to open the eyes and put a fire in the belly.

"Cold or not, damn if it ain't nice to get out here." Keegan sipped at his cup, resting one foot on the bait box. It wasn't just the fishing, both men agreed, getting out on the water was one sure cure for civilization.

"Be nice if the rock really are coming back, too," Toland observed.

"What the hell—no phones."

"What about your beeper?"

"I must have left it with my other pants." Keegan chuckled. "DIA will have to manage without me today."

"Think they can?"

"Well, the Navy did." Keegan was an academy graduate who had put in his thirty and retired to become a double-dipper. In uniform, he'd been an intelligence specialist, and now he had essentially the same job, which added civil service salary to his pension.

Toland had been a lieutenant (j.g.) serving aboard a destroyer based at Pearl Harbor when he'd first noticed Martha Keegan, a junior at the University of

Hawaii, majoring in psychology and minoring in surfing. They'd been happily married for fifteen years now.

"So." Keegan stood and lifted his rod. "How are things at the Fort?"

Bob Toland was a middle-level analyst at the National Security Agency. He'd left the Navy after six years when the adventure of uniformed service had palled, but he remained an active reservist. His work at NSA dovetailed nicely with his naval reserve service. A communications expert with a degree in electronics, his current job was monitoring Soviet signals gathered by the NSA's numerous listening posts and ferret satellites. Along the way he'd also gotten a masters in the Russian language.

"Heard something real interesting last week, but I couldn't convince my boss it meant anything."

"Who's your section chief?"

"Captain Albert Redman, U.S. Navy." Toland watched a bay-built fishing boat motoring a few miles away, her captain laying out his crab pots. "He's an asshole."

Keegan laughed. "You want to be careful saying stuff like that out loud, Bob, especially seeing how you go on active duty next week. Bert worked with me, oh, must have been fifteen years ago. I had to slap him down a few times. He does tend to be slightly opinionated."

"Opinionated?" Toland snorted. "That bastard's so friggin' narrow-minded his scratch pads are only an inch wide! First there was this new arms control thing, then I came up with something really unusual last Wednesday and he circular-filed it. Hell, I don't know why he even bothers looking at new data—he made his mind up five years ago."

"I don't suppose you could tell me what it was?"

"I shouldn't." Bob wavered for a moment. Hell, if he couldn't talk with his kids' own grandfather . . . "One of our ferret birds was over a Soviet military district headquarters last week and intercepted a microwaved telephone conversation. It was a report to Moscow about four colonels in the Carpathian Military District who were being shot for gundecking readiness reports. The story on their court-martial and execution was being set up for publication, probably in a Red Star this week." He had entirely forgotten about the oil-field fire.

"Oh?" Keegan's eyebrows went up. "And what did Bert say?"

"He said, 'It's Goddamned about time they cleaned their act up.' And that was that."

"And what do you say?"

"Pop, I'm not in Trends and Intentions—those idiot fortune-tellers! —but I know that even the Russians don't kill people for jollies. When Ivan kills people publicly, he does it to make a point. These were not manpower officers taking bribes to fake deferments. They weren't popped for stealing diesel fuel or building dachas with pilfered lumber. I checked our records, and it turned out we have files on two of them. They were both experienced line officers, both with combat experience in Afghanistan, both Party members in good standing. One was a graduate of Frunze Academy, and he even had a few articles published in *Military Thought,* for God's sake! But all four were court-martialed for falsifying their regimental readiness reports—and shot three

days later. That story will hit the streets in *Krasnaya Zvezda* over the next few days as a two- or three-part story under 'The Observer's' by-line—and *that* makes it a political exercise with a capital P."

The Observer was the cover name for any number of high-ranking officers who contributed to *Red Star,* the daily newspaper of the Soviet armed services. Anything on the front page and under that by-line was taken quite seriously, both in the Soviet military services and by those whose job it was to watch them, because this by-line was used explicitly to make policy statements approved by both the military high command and the Politburo in Moscow.

"A multipart story?" Keegan asked.

"Yeah, that's one of the interesting things about it. The repetition means they really want this lesson to sink in. Everything about this is out of pattern, Pop. Something funny is happening. They *do* shoot officers and EMs—but not full colonels who've written for the journal of the general staff, and not for faking a few lines in a readiness statement." He let out a long breath, happy to have gotten this off his chest. The workboat was proceeding south, her wake rippling out toward them in parallel lines on the mirrored surface. The image made Toland wish for his camera.

"Makes sense," Keegan mumbled.

"Huh?"

"What you just said. That does sound out of pattern."

"Yep. I stayed in late last night, running down a hunch. In the past five years, the Red Army has published the names of exactly fourteen executed officers, none higher than a full colonel, and even then only one—a manpower officer in Soviet Georgia. The guy was taking payoffs for deferments. The others broke down into one case of spying, for us or somebody, three derelictions of duty while under the influence of alcohol, and nine conventional corruption cases, selling everything from gasoline to a whole mainframe computer *nalyevo,* 'on the left,' the shadow market. Now all of a sudden they waste four regimental commanders, all in the same military district."

"You could take that to Redman," Keegan suggested.

"Waste of time."

"Those other cases—I seem to remember the three guys who—"

"Yeah, that was part of the temperance campaign. Too many guys turn up drunk on duty, and they pick three volunteers, pour *encourager les autres."* Bob shook his head. "Jeez, Voltaire would have loved these guys."

"You talk with people who're into civilian intelligence?"

"No, my crowd is all military telecommunications."

"At lunch last—Monday, I think, I was talking with a guy from Langley. Ex-Army, we go way back. Anyway, he was joking that there's a new shortage over there."

"Another one?" Bob was amused. Shortages were nothing new in Russia. One month toothpaste, or toilet paper, or windshield wipers—he had heard of many such things over lunch at the NSA commissary.

"Yeah, car and truck batteries."

"Really?"

"Yeah, for the last month you can't get a battery for your car or truck over

there. A lot of cars are not moving, and batteries are being stolen left and right, so people are disconnecting their batteries at night and taking them home, would you believe?"

"But Togliattishtadt—" Toland said, and stopped. He referred to the massive auto factory-city in European Russia, the construction of which was a "Hero Project" for which thousands of workers had been mobilized. Among the most modern auto complexes in the world, it had been built mainly with Italian technology. "They have a hell of a battery manufacturing facility there. Hasn't blown up, has it?"

"Working three shifts. What do you think of that?"

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

Toland examined himself in the full-sized mirror in the Norfolk BOQ complex. He'd made the drive down the evening before. The uniform still fit, he noted, maybe a little tight at the waist, but that was nature at work, wasn't it? His "salad bar" of decorations was a bleak row and a half, but he had his surface warfare officer's badge, his "water wings"—he hadn't always been a glorified radio operator. His sleeves bore the two and a half stripes of a lieutenant commander. A final swipe of a cloth across his shoes and he was out the door, ready on this bright Monday morning for his annual two weeks of duty with the fleet.

Five minutes later, he was driving down Mitcher Avenue toward headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic Fleet—CINCLANTFLT—a flat, thoroughly undistinguished building that had once been a hospital. An habitual early riser, Toland found the Ingersoll Street parking lot half empty, but he was still careful to take an unmarked space lest he incur the wrath of a senior officer.

"Bob? Bob Toland!" a voice called.

"Ed Morris!"

It was now Commander Edward Morris, USN, Toland noted, and a shiny gold star on his uniform jacket designated him as the commander of some ship or other. Toland saluted his friend before shaking hands.

"Still playing bridge, Bob?" Toland, Morris, and two other officers had once established the most regular bridge foursome at the Pearl Harbor officers' club.

"Some. Marty isn't much of a card player, but we got a bunch at work that meets once a week."

"Good as we used to be?" Morris asked as they headed off in the same direction.

"Are you kidding? You know where I work now?"

"I heard you ended up at Fort Meade after you hung it up."

"Yeah, and there's bridge players at NSA who're wired into the damn computers—I'm talking assassins!"

"So how's the family?"

"Just great. How's yours?"

"Growing up too damned fast—makes you feel old."

"That's the truth," Morris chuckled. He jabbed a finger at his friend's star. "Now you can tell me about your new kid."

"Look at my car."

Toland turned around. Morris's Ford had a personalized license plate: FF-1094. To the uninitiated it was an ordinary license number, but to a sailor it advertised his command: antisubmarine frigate number one thousand ninety-four, USS Pharris.

"You always were nice and modest," Toland noted with a grin. "That's all right, Ed. How long you had her?"

"Two years. She's big, she's pretty, and she's *mine*! You should have stayed in, Bob. The day I took command—hell, it was like the day Jimmy was born."

"I hear you. The difference, Ed, is that I always knew you'd have your ship, and I always knew I wouldn't." In Toland's personnel jacket was a letter of admonishment for grounding a destroyer while he had the deck. It had been no more than bad luck. An ambiguity on the chart and adverse tidal conditions had caused the error, but it didn't take much to ruin a Navy career.

"So, doing your two weeks?"

"That's right."

"Celia is off visiting her parents, and I'm baching it. What're you doing for dinner tonight?"

"McDonald's?" Toland laughed.

"Like hell. Danny McCafferty's in town, too. He's got the *Chicago,* tied up at Pier 22. You know, if we can scare up a fourth, maybe we can play a little bridge, just like the old days." Morris poked his friend in the chest. "I gotta head along. Meet me in the O-Club lobby at 1730, Bob. Danny invited me over to his boat for dinner at 1830, and we'll have an hour's worth of Attitude Adjustment before we drive over. We'll have dinner in the wardroom and a few hours of cards, just like old times."

"Aye aye, Commander."

* * *

"Anyway, there I was on *Will Rogers,"* McCafferty said. "Fifty days out on patrol and I got the watch, right? Sonar says they have a goofy signal, bearing zero-five-two. We're at periscope depth, so I put the search scope up, train it out to zero-five-two, and sure enough, there's this Gulfstream-36 sailboat, moving along at four or five knots with the autosteering rig set. What the hell, it's a dull day, so I flip the scope to hi-power, and guess what? The captain and the mate—there's one gal who'll never drown!—are on top the deckhouse, horizontal and superimposed. The boat was maybe a thousand yards away—just like being there. So we turn on the scope TV camera and get the tape machine running. Had to maneuver for a better view, of course. Lasted fifteen minutes. The crew ran the tape for the next week. Great for morale to know just what you're fighting for." All three officers laughed.

“Like I always told you, Bob,” Morris noted. “These sub-drivers are a nasty, sneaky bunch. Not to mention perverts.”

“So how long you had the Chicago, Danny?” Toland asked over his second cup of after-dinner coffee. The three had the submarine’s wardroom to themselves. The only officers aboard were either standing watch or asleep.

“Three busy months, not counting yard time,” McCafferty said, finishing off his milk. He was the first skipper for the new attack sub, the best of all possible worlds, a captain and a “plankowner.” Toland noted that Dan had not joined him and Morris for “attitude adjustment” at the base officers’ club, during which they’d tossed down three stiff drinks apiece. It wasn’t like the McCafferty of old. Perhaps he was unwilling to leave his sub, lest the dream of his career somehow end while he was away from her.

“Can’t you tell from the pale, pasty look common to cave-dwellers and submariners?” Morris joked. “Not to mention the faint glow associated with nuclear reactor types?” McCafferty grinned, and they waited for their fourth to arrive. He was a junior engineer, just about to come off reactor watch. *Chicago’s* reactor wasn’t operating. She was drawing electrical power from the dock, but regulations demanded a full reactor watch whether the teakettle was working or not.

“I tell you guys, I was a little pale four weeks ago.” McCafferty turned serious—or about as serious as he ever got.

“How so?” Bob Toland asked.

“Well, you know the kinda shit we do with these boats, right?”

“If you mean inshore intelligence gathering, Dan, you ought to know that that electronic intelligence stuff you collect comes to my office. Hell, I probably know the people who originate a lot of the data requests that generate your op-orders. How’s that for a revolting thought!” Bob laughed. He fought the urge to look around too obviously. He’d never been aboard a nuclear submarine before. It was cold—nuclear subs have nuclear-powered air conditioning—and the air was heavy with the smell of machine oil. Everything he could see sparkled both from being almost new, and from the fact that McCafferty had undoubtedly made sure that his crew had gotten things looking especially good for his friends. So, this was the billion-dollar machine that gathered all that ELINT data. . . .

“Yeah, well, we were up in the Barents Sea, you know, northeast of the Kola Fjord, trailing a Russian sub—an Oscar—about, oh, ten miles back of her—and all of a sudden we find ourselves in the middle of a friggin’ live-fire exercise! Missiles were flying all over the damned place. They wasted three old hulks, and blasted hell out of a half-dozen target barges.”

“Just the Oscar?” Morris asked.

“Turned out there was a Papa and a Mike out there, too. That’s one problem with us being so quiet in these babies. If they don’t know we’re there, we can find ourselves in the middle of some really unpleasant shit! Anyway, sonar starts screaming ‘Transients! Transients!’ from all the missile tubes being flooded. No way we could be sure they weren’t getting ready to put some real torpedoes in the water, but we stuck up the ESM and picked up their periscope radars, then I saw some of the things whipping over our heads. Damn, guys, for about three minutes there it was just a little hairy, y’know?” McCafferty

shook his head. “Anyway, two hours after that, all three boats crack on twenty knots and head back to the barn. Your basic out-and-in live-fire. How’s that for a lively first deployment?”

“You get the feeling that the Russians are doing anything out of the ordinary, Dan?” Toland asked, suddenly interested.

“You didn’t hear?”

“Hear what?”

“They’ve cut back their diesel sub patrols up north, quite a bit, too. I mean, normally they’re pretty hard to hear, but mostly over the past two months they just ain’t there. I heard one, just one. Wasn’t like that the last time I was up north. There have been some satellite photos of them, a lot of diesel boats tied up alongside for some reason or another. In fact, their patrol activity up north is down across the board, with a lot of maintenance activity going on. The current guess is that they’re changing their training cycle. This isn’t the usual time of year for live-firing.” McCafferty laughed. “Of course, it could be that they finally got tired of chippin’ and paintin’ those old ‘cans, and decided to use ’em up—best thing to do with a ’can anyway.”

“Bubblehead,” Morris snorted.

“Give me a reason you’d have a bunch of diesel boats out of service all at once,” Toland said. He was wishing that he’d passed on the second and third rounds during Happy Hour. Something important was flashing lights inside his head, and the alcohol was slowing his thinking down.

“Shit,” McCafferty observed. “There isn’t any.”

“So what are they doing with the diesel boats?”

“I haven’t seen the satellite photos, Bob, just heard about them. No special activity in the drydocks, though, so it can’t be too major.”

The light bulb finally went off in Toland’s head. “How hard is it to change batteries in a sub?”

“It’s a nasty, heavy job. I mean, you don’t need special machinery or anything. We do it with Tiger Teams, and it takes something like three or four weeks. Ivan’s subs are designed with larger battery capacities than ours, and also for easier battery replacement—they’re supposed to go through their batteries faster than Western subs, and they compensate for it by making replacement easier, hard-patches on the hull, things like that. So for them it’s probably an all-hands evolution. What exactly are you getting at, Bob?”

Toland related the story about the four Soviet colonels who had been shot, and why. “Then I hear this story about how the supply of batteries in Russia has dried up. No batteries for cars and trucks. The car batteries I can understand, but the trucks—hey, every truck in Russia is government-owned. They all have mobilization uses. Same sort of batteries, right?”

“Yeah, they all use lead-acid batteries. The factory burn-down?” Commander Morris asked. “I know Ivan likes One Big Factory rather than a bunch of little ones.”

“It’s working three shifts.”

McCafferty sat back, away from the table.

“So, what uses batteries?” Morris asked rhetorically.

“Submarines,” McCafferty pronounced. “Tanks, armored vehicles, command cars, starter carts for planes, lots of stuff painted green, y’know? Bob, what

you're saying—shit, what you're saying is that all of a sudden Ivan has decided to increase his readiness across the board. Question: Do you know what the hell you're talking about?"

"You can bet your ass on it, Danny. The bit on the four colonels crossed my desk, I eyeballed that report myself. It was received on one of our ferret satellites. Ivan doesn't know how sensitive those Hitchhiker birds are, and he still sends a lot of stuff in the clear on surface microwave nets. We listen in to voice and telex transmissions all the time—you guys can forget you heard that, okay?" Toland got nods from the others. "The thing about the batteries I picked up by accident, but I confirmed it with a guy I know in the Pentagon. Now we have your story about increased live-fire exercises, Dan. You just filled in a blank space. Now if we can confirm that those diesel boats really are down for battery replacement, we have the beginnings of a picture. Just how important are new batteries for a diesel boat?"

"Very important," the sub skipper said. "Depends a lot on quality control and maintenance, but new ones can give you up to double the range and power of old ones, and that's obviously an important tactical factor."

"Jesus, you know what this sounds like? Ivan's always ready to go to sea, and now it looks like he wants to be *real* ready," Morris observed. "But the papers all say that they're acting like born-again angels with this arms-control stuff. Something does not compute, gentlemen."

"I have to get this to someone in the chain of command. I could drop this on a desk at Fort Meade and it might never get anywhere," Toland said, remembering his section chief.

"You will," McCafferty said after a moment's pause. "I have an appointment tomorrow morning with COMSUBLANT. I think you're coming with me, Bob."

The last member of the foursome arrived ten minutes later. He was disappointed with the quality of the game. He'd thought his skipper was better than this.

Toland spent twenty minutes reviewing his data in front of Vice Admiral Richard Pipes, Commander, Submarine Force, U.S. Atlantic Fleet. Pipes was the first black submariner to make three-star rank, a man who had paid his dues with performance as he'd climbed up the ladder in what had traditionally been a whites-only profession, and he had the reputation of a tough, demanding boss. The Admiral listened without a word as he sipped coffee from a three-starred mug. He'd been annoyed to have McCafferty's patrol report supplanted by a speech from a reservist—but that attitude had lasted only three minutes. Now the lines around his mouth deepened.

"Son, you violated a few security restrictions to give me some of that."

"I know that, sir," Toland said.

"Took balls to do that, and it's nice to see in a young officer, what with all the ones who just want to cover their ass." Pipes rose. "I don't like what you just told me, son, not one little bit. We got Ivan playing Santa Claus with all this diplomatic horseshit, and at the same time he's dialing his submarine force in. Could be a coincidence. Then again, it might not be. How about you and me go over to talk with CINCLANT and his intelligence chief?"

Toland winced. *What have I got myself into?* "Sir, I'm down here for a

training rotation, not to—"

"Looks to me like you got this intelligence crap down pretty pat, Commander. You believe what you just told me is true?"

Toland stiffened. "Yes, sir."

"Then I'm giving you a chance to prove it. You afraid to stick your neck out—or do you just offer opinions to relatives and friends?" the Admiral asked harshly.

Toland had heard that Pipes was a real hard-case. The reservist rose to his feet.

"Let's do it, Admiral."

Pipes picked up his phone and dialed in a three-digit number, his direct line to CINCLANT. "Bill? Dick. I got a boy in my office I think you oughta talk to. Remember what we discussed last Thursday? We may have confirmation." A brief pause. "Yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying. . . . Aye aye, sir, on the way." Pipes set the phone down. "McCafferty, thank you for bringing this man in with you. We'll go over your patrol report this afternoon. Be here at 1530. Toland, you come along with me."

An hour later, Lieutenant Commander Robert M. Toland, USNR-R, was informed that he had been placed on extended active duty by order of the Secretary of Defense. In fact it was by order of CINCLANT, but the forms would be correctly filled out in a week or so.

At lunch that day in "flag country" of Building One of the complex, CINCLANT called in all his type commanders—the three-star admirals who controlled the aircraft, surface ships, submarines, and replenishment ships. The conversation was subdued, and ceased entirely when the stewards came in to change the courses. They were all in their fifties, experienced, serious men who both made and implemented policy, preparing for something they hoped would never come. This hope continued, but by the time each had finished his second cup of coffee, it was decided that fleet training cycles would be increased, and a few surprise inspections would be made. CINCLANT made an appointment with the Chief of Naval Operations for the following morning, and his deputy intelligence chief boarded a commercial airliner for a quick trip to Pearl Harbor, to meet with his opposite number in the Pacific.

Toland was relieved of his post and transferred to Intentions, part of CINCLANT's personal intelligence advisory staff.

6

The Watchers

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

Intentions was a small second-floor office normally occupied by four officers. Shochorning Toland in there was difficult, mainly because all the classified material had to be covered up while the civilian movers got the desk in place. When they finally left, Bob found he had just about enough space to get into and out of his swivel chair. The office door had a cipher lock with five rocker switches concealed in a steel container. Located in the northwest corner of CINCLANT headquarters, the office's barred windows overlooked a highway and little else. The drab curtains were closed anyway. Inside, the walls might have been painted beige once, but the plaster had whitened from underneath to give the office the sort of pallor expected in a yellow-fever ward.

The senior officer was a Marine colonel named Chuck Lowe, who had watched the moving-in process with a silent resentment that Bob only understood when the man got to his feet.

"I may never make it to the head now," Lowe grumped, sticking his cast around the corner of his desk. They shook hands.

"What happened to the leg, Colonel?"

"Mountain Warfare School out in California, day after Christmas, skiing on my own Goddamned time. The docs say you should never break the tibia close to the bottom," Lowe explained with an ironic smile. "And you never get used to the itching. Should have this thing off in another three or four weeks. Then I have to get used to running again. You know, I spent three years trying to break my ass out of intel, then I finally get my Goddamned regiment, and *this* happens. Welcome aboard, Toland. Why don't you grab us both a cup of coffee?"

There was a pot atop the farthest filing cabinet. The other three officers, Lowe explained, were giving a briefing.

"I saw the write-up you gave CINCLANT. Interesting stuff. What do you think Ivan's up to?"

"It looks like he's increasing readiness across the board, Colonel—"

"In here, you can call me Chuck."

"Fine—I'm Bob."

"You do signal intelligence at NSA, right? You're one of the satellite

specialists, I heard."

Toland nodded. "Ours and theirs, mostly ours. I see photos from time to time, but mostly I do signals work. That's how we twigged to the report on the four colonels. There has also been a fair amount of operational maneuvering done, more than usual for this time of year. Ivan's been a little freer with how his tankers drive around, too, less concern about running a battalion across a plowed field, for example."

"And you're supposed to have a look at anything that's unusual, no matter how dumb it seems, right? That gives you a pretty wide brief, doesn't it? We got something interesting along those lines from DIA. Have a look at these." Lowe pulled a pair of eight-by-ten photographs from a manila envelope and handed them to Toland. They seemed to show the same parcel of land, but from slightly different angles and different times of year. In the upper left corner was a pair of *isbas,* the crude huts of Russian peasant life. Toland looked up.

"Collective farm?"

"Yeah. Number 1196, a little one about two hundred klicks northwest of Moscow. Tell me what's different between the two."

Toland looked back at the photos. In one was a straight line of fenced gardens, perhaps an acre each. In the other he could see a new fence for four of the patches, and one patch whose fenced area had been roughly doubled.

"A colonel—army-type—I used to work with sent me these. Thought I'd find it amusing. I grew up on a corn farm in Iowa, you see."

"So Ivan's increasing the private patches for the farmers to work on their own, eh?"

"Looks that way."

"Hasn't been announced, has it? I haven't read anything about it." Toland didn't read the government's secret in-house publication, *National Intelligence Digest,* but the NSA cafeteria gossip usually covered harmless stuff like this. Intelligence types talked shop as much as any others.

Lowe shook his head slightly. "Nope, and that's a little odd. It's something they should announce. The papers would call that another sure sign of the 'liberalization trend' we've been seeing."

"Just this one farm, maybe?"

"As a matter of fact, they've seen the same thing at five other places. But we don't generally use our reconsats for this sort of thing. They got this on a slow news day, I suppose. The important stuff must have been covered by clouds." Toland nodded agreement. The reconnaissance satellites were used to evaluate Soviet grain crops, but that happened later in the year. The Russians knew it also, since it had been in the open press for over a decade, explaining why there was a team of agronomists in the U.S. Department of Agriculture with Special Intelligence-Compartmented security clearance."

"Kind of late in the season to do that, isn't it? I mean, will it do any good to give 'em this land this time of year?"

"I got these a week ago. I think they're a little older than that. This is about the time most of their farms start planting. It stays cold there quite a long time, remember, but the high latitudes make up for it with longer summer days. Assume that this is a nationwide move on their part. Evaluate that for

me, Bob." The colonel's eyes narrowed briefly.

"Smart move on their part, obviously. It could solve a lot of their food supply problems, particularly for—truck-farm stuff, I guess, tomatoes, onions, that sort of thing."

"Maybe. You might also note that this sort of farming is manpower-intensive but not machinery-intensive. What about the demographic aspect of the move?"

Toland blinked. There was a tendency in the U.S. Navy to assume that since they made their living by charging into machine-gun fire, Marines were dumb. "Most of the *kokolzniki* are relatively old folks. The median age is in the late forties, early fifties. So most of the private plots are managed by the older people, while the mechanized work, like driving the combines and trucks—"

"Which pays a hell of a lot better."

"—is done by the younger workers. You're telling me that this way they can increase some food production without the younger men . . . of military service age."

"One way to look at it," Lowe said. "Politically it's dynamite. You can't take away things people already have. Back in the early sixties, a rumor—wasn't even true—got started to the effect that Khrushchev was going to reduce or eliminate the private plots those poor bastards get. There was hell to pay! I was in the language school at Monterey then, and I remember the Russian papers that came through the language school. They spent weeks denying the story. Those private plots are the most productive sector of their agricultural system. Less than two percent of their arable land, it produces about half of their fruit and potatoes, more than a third of their eggs, vegetables, and meat. Hell, it's the only part of the damned agricultural system that works. The bigshots over there have known for years that by doing this they could solve their food shortage problems, and *still* they haven't done it for political reasons. They couldn't run the risk of State sponsorship for a whole new generation of *kulaks.* Until now. But it appears they've done it without making a formal announcement. And it just so happens that they're increasing their military readiness at the same time. I never believe in coincidences, even when I'm a dumb line officer running across a beach."

Lowe's uniform blouse hung in the corner. Toland sipped at his coffee and surveyed its four rows of decorations. There were three repeat pips on his Vietnam service ribbon. And a Navy Cross. Dressed in the olive-green sweater affected by Marine officers, Lowe was not a big man, and his Midwest accent gave evidence of a relaxed, almost bored outlook on life. But his brown eyes said something else entirely. Colonel Lowe was thinking along Toland's lines already, and he was not the least happy about it.

"Chuck, if they are really preparing for some action—action on a large scale, they just can't mess with a few colonels. Something else will start showing up. They'll have to do some work at the bottom, too."

"Yeah, that's the next thing we have to look for. I sent a request into DIA yesterday. From now on, when *Red Star* comes out, the attaché in Moscow will send a photo-facsimile to us via satellite. If they start doing that, it'll sure as hell turn up in *Kraznaya Zvesda.* Bob, I think you've opened a very interesting can of worms, and you're not going to be alone examining it."

Toland finished his coffee. The Soviets had taken an entire class of fleet ballistic missile submarines out of service. They were conducting arms talks in Vienna. They were buying grain from America and Canada under surprisingly favorable terms, even allowing American hulls to handle 20 percent of the cargo. How did this jibe with the signs he had seen? Logically it didn't, except in one specific case—and that wasn't possible. Was it?

SHPOLA, THE UKRAINE

The crashing sound of the 125mm tank gun was enough to strip the hair off your head, Alekseyev thought, but after five hours of running this exercise, it came through his ear protectors as a dull ringing sound. This morning the ground had been covered with grass and dotted with new saplings, but now it was a uniform wasteland of mud, marked only with the tread marks of T-80 main battle tanks and BMP armored infantry fighting vehicles. Three times the regiment had run this exercise, simulating a frontal assault of tanks and mounted infantry against an enemy of equal strength. Ninety mobile guns had supplied fire support, along with a battery of rocket launchers. Three times.

Alekseyev turned, removing his helmet and earmuffs to look at the regimental commander. "A Guards regiment, eh, Comrade Colonel? Elite soldiers of the Red Army? These tit-sucking children couldn't guard a Turkish whorehouse, *much less do anything worthwhile inside of it!* And what have you been doing for the past four years commanding this rolling circus, Comrade Colonel? You have learned to kill your whole command *three times!* Your artillery observers are not located properly. Your tanks and infantry carriers still can't coordinate their movements, and your tank gunners can't find targets three meters high! If that had been a NATO force holding that ridge, you and your command would be *dead!"* Alekseyev examined the colonel's face. His demeanor was changing from red-fear to white-anger. Good. "The loss of these people is no great penalty for the State, but that is valuable equipment, burning valuable fuel, shooting valuable ordnance, *and taking up my valuable time!* Comrade Colonel, I must leave you now. First I will throw up. Then I will fly to my command post. I will be back. When I come back, we will run this exercise again. Your men will perform properly, Comrade Colonel, or you will spend the rest of your miserable life counting trees!"

Alekseyev stomped off, not even acknowledging the colonel's salute. His adjutant, a full colonel of tank troops, held open the door and got in behind his boss.

"Shaping up rather well, eh?" Alekseyev asked.

"Not well enough, but there has been progress," the colonel allowed. "They have only another six weeks before they have to start moving west."

It was the wrong thing to say. Alekseyev had spent two weeks chivvying this division toward combat readiness, only to learn the day before that it had been allocated to Germany instead of toward his own as-yet incomplete plan to descend into Iraq and Iran. Already four divisions—*all of his elite Guards*

tank units—had been taken away, and each change in CINC-Southwest's order of battle forced him to restructure his own plan for the Gulf. An endless circle. He was being forced to select less-ready units, forcing Alekseyev to devote more time to unit training and less time to the plan that had to be completed in another two weeks.

"Those men are going to have a very busy six weeks. What about the commander?" the colonel asked.

Alekseyev shrugged. "He's been in this job too long. Forty-five is too old for this kind of command, and he reads his fucking parade manuals too much instead of going out in the field. But a good man. Too good to be sent counting trees." Alekseyev chuckled heavily. It was a Russian saying that dated back to the czars. People exiled to Siberia were said to have nothing to do but count trees. Another of the things Lenin had changed. Now people in the Gulag had plenty to do. "The last two times they did well enough to succeed, I think. This regiment will be ready, along with the whole division."

USS *PHARRIS*

"Bridge, sonar: we have a contact bearing zero-nine-four!" announced a voice on the bulkhead-mounted speaker. Commander Morris turned in his elevated swivel chair to watch his officer of the deck respond.

The OOD trained his binoculars to the direction of the contact. There was nothing there: "Bearing is clear."

Morris got up from his chair. "Set Condition 1-AS."

"Aye aye. Battle Stations," the OOD acknowledged the order. The boatswain's-mate-of-the-watch walked to the announcing system, and blew a three-note whistle on his bosun's pipe into the speaker. "General Quarters, General Quarters, all hands man your battle stations for antisubmarine warfare." The alarm gong came next, and a quiet forenoon watch ended.

Morris went aft, down the ladder to the Combat Information Center, or CIC. His executive officer would take the conn at the bridge, allowing the captain to control the ship's weapons and sensors from her tactical nerve center. All over the ship, men were running to stations. Watertight doors and hatches were dropped into place and dogged down to give the ship full watertight integrity. Damage-control parties donned emergency equipment. It took just over four minutes. Getting better, Morris noted as the "manned and ready" calls were relayed to him by the CIC talker. Since leaving Norfolk four days before, *Pharris* was averaging three GQ calls per day, as ordered by Commander, Naval Surface Forces, Atlantic. No one had confirmed it, but Morris figured that his friend's information had kicked over an anthill. His training routines had been doubled, and the orders for the increase of activity were classified as high as anything he had ever seen. More remarkably, the increased training tempos would interfere with maintenance scheduling, something not lightly set aside.

"All stations report manned and ready!" the talker finally announced.

“Condition Zebra set throughout the ship.”

“Very well,” the tactical action officer acknowledged.

“Report, mister,” Morris ordered.

“Sir, the navigation and air-search radars are in stand-by and the sonar is in passive mode,” replied the TAO. “Contact looks like a snorkeling submarine. Came in clear all at once. We’ve got a target-motion-analysis track going. His bearing is changing fore-to-aft, and pretty fast, too. A little soon to be sure, but it’s shaping up like he’s on a reciprocal heading, probably no more than ten miles out.”

“Contact report off to Norfolk yet?”

“Waiting for your say-so.”

“Very well. Let’s see how well we can run a hold-down exercise, mister.”

Within fifteen minutes, *Pharris’s* helicopter was dropping sonobuoys on the submarine, and the frigate was lashing it with her powerful active sonar. They wouldn’t stop until the Soviet submarine admitted defeat by coming back to schnorkeling depth—or until he evaded the frigate, which would put a large black mark in Morris’s copybook. The objective of this nonlethal exercise was nasty enough: to break the submarine captain’s confidence in his vessel, his crew, and himself.

USS *CHICAGO*

They were a thousand miles offshore, heading northeast at twenty-five knots. The crew was decidedly unhappy, though they’d all been through this before. What should have been a three-week layover at Norfolk had been cut short at eight days, a bitter pill after a long first cruise. Trips and vacations had been interrupted, and some minor maintenance work supposed to have been done by shoreside technicians was now being done round the clock by her own crew. McCafferty had announced his sealed orders to the crew two hours after diving: conduct two weeks of intensive tracking and torpedo drills, then proceed to the Barents Sea for further intelligence gathering. It was important, he told them. They’d heard that one before, too.

7

Initial Observations

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

Toland hoped his uniform was properly arranged. It was 0630 on a Wednesday morning, and he'd been up since four rehearsing his presentation, and cursing CINCLANT for an early-riser who probably wanted to get in a round of golf that afternoon. He would spend the afternoon as he had for several weeks, sifting through endless intel documents and copies of Soviet publications in the Intentions cubbyhole half a building away.

The Flag Officers Briefing Room seemed a different world from the rest of the tawdry building, but that was hardly a surprise. Admirals liked their comforts. Bob made a quick trip to the nearby head to eliminate a distraction caused by too much wake-up coffee. By the time he came back, the flag officers were filing in. They exchanged greetings, but there were no jokes, none of the banter one would expect this early in the morning. The officers selected their leather seats by order of rank. Those few who smoked had ashtrays. Each had a note pad. Stewards brought in several pots of coffee, cream, and sugar on silver trays, then withdrew. The cups were already in place. Each officer poured himself a cup as part of the morning ritual. CINCLANT nodded to Toland.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Approximately a month ago, four colonels in the Soviet Army, all regimental commanders in mechanized divisions, were court-martialed and executed for falsifying data on their unit training and readiness reports," Toland began, explaining the significance of this.

"Earlier this week *Kraznaya Zvesda,* 'Red Star,' the daily newspaper of the entire Soviet military, publicized the execution of a number of privates in the Soviet Army. All but two were in the final six months of their enlistment period, and all were charged with disobeying the orders of their sergeants. Why is this significant?

"The Russian Army has long been known for its tough discipline, but as with many aspects of the Soviet Union, not everything is as it seems. A sergeant in the Soviet Army is not a professional soldier as is the case in most armies. He is a conscript, just like the privates, selected early in his enlistment term for special training due to his intelligence, political reliability, or perceived leadership ability. He is sent to a tough six-month course to make him an

instant sergeant, then returned to his operational unit. In fact he has about as little practical experience as his subordinates, and his superior knowledge of tactics and weapons-use is a matter of increments rather than the more dramatic differences between sergeants and new recruits in Western forces.

"Because of this, the real pecking order in Soviet ground formations does not necessarily derive from rank, but from time in service. The Soviets induct their troops twice a year, in December and June. With the usual two-year term of service, we see that there are four 'classes' in any formation: the lowest class is in its first six-month period and the highest is in its fourth. The young men who have the actual status in a Soviet rifle company are those in their final six-month term. They typically demand and get the best—or at least the most—food, uniforms, and work details. And they typically obviate the authority of the company NCOs. In fact, orders come directly from the officers, not the platoon and squad sergeants, and are usually carried out with little regard to what we consider conventional military discipline at the sub-officer level. As you can imagine, this places an enormous strain on the junior officers, and in many ways forces the officers to live with some things that they clearly do not and cannot like."

"You're saying that their military formations operate under the principle of organized anarchy," observed the commander of Strike Fleet Atlantic. "Their Navy sure as hell doesn't."

"That is true, sir. As we know, their seamen are in for three years instead of two, and their situation, while similar, has many differences from that of the Soviet Army. And it would seem that this situation is ending in the Soviet Army as well, that sub-unit discipline is being quickly and vigorously reestablished."

"Just how many privates got themselves popped?" asked the general commanding 2nd Marine Division.

"Eleven, sir, listed by name and unit. That information is in your handout. Most were in their 'fourth class,' meaning the last six months of their enlistment period."

"Did the article you read make general conclusions?" CINCLANT asked.

"No, Admiral. There is an unwritten rule in Soviet publications, both military and civilian, that you can criticize, but not generalize. What that means is that individual screwups can be identified and castigated at length, but for political reasons it is unacceptable to make general criticisms applying to a whole institution. You see, a critique that pointed to an all-pervasive condition would *ipso facto* critique Soviet society as a whole, and thereby the Communist Party, which oversees every aspect of Soviet life. It is a thin, but to them a philosophically important, distinction. In fact, when individual malefactors are named, the system as a whole is being criticized, but in a politically acceptable way. This article is a signal to every officer, NCO, and private soldier in the Soviet military: the times, they are a changin'. The question we've been asking over in Intentions is, Why?

"It would appear that this is not an isolated case of changing times." Toland flipped on an overhead projector and set a view graph in place. "Within the Soviet Navy, surface-to-surface missile live-fires are up seventy percent from last year, not quite an all-time high, but as you can see from this graph, pretty

close to it. Submarine deployments, mainly those for diesel subs, are down, and intelligence reports tell us that an unusually high number of submarines are in the yards for what appears to be routine but unscheduled maintenance. We have reason to believe that this situation is connected with a nationwide shortage of lead-acid batteries. It appears likely that all Soviet submarines are undergoing battery replacement, and that regular battery production is being redirected to militarily important segments of the Soviet economy.

"We have also noted higher levels of activity by Soviet naval surface forces, naval aviation units and other long-range aircraft formations, again with increased weapons exercises. Finally, there has been an increase in the time-away-from-port days of Soviet surface combatants. Although this number represents a small increase, operational patterns are different from what we've become accustomed to. Instead of sailing from one point to another and just dropping the hook, their surface combatants appear to be running more realistic exercises. They've done this before, but never without announcing it.

"So what we are seeing in the Soviet Navy is an extensive stand-down accompanied by increasing tempos in the actual exercises that are being run. Matched with what we're seeing in the Soviet Army and Air Force, it appears that their military readiness is being increased across the board. At the same time that they are proposing reductions in strategic nuclear weapons, their conventional forces are rapidly improving their ability to engage in combat operations. We in Intentions regard this combination of factors as potentially dangerous."

"Looks kind of hazy to me," an admiral said around his pipe. "How are we supposed to persuade somebody that this means anything?"

"A good question, sir. Any of these indicators taken in isolation would appear entirely logical in and of itself. What concerns us is why they are all happening at once. The problem of manpower utilization in the Soviet military has been around for generations. The problem of training norms, and integrity in their officer corps, is not exactly new either. What caught my interest was the battery thing. We are seeing the beginnings of what could become a major disruption within the Soviet economy. The Russians plan everything centrally in their economy, and on a political basis as well. The main factory that makes batteries is operating three shifts instead of the usual two, so production is up, but supply in the civilian economy is down. In any case, Admiral, you're correct. Individually, these things mean nothing at all. It's only when taken in combination that we see anything to be concerned about."

"But you're concerned," CINCLANT said.

"Yes, sir."

"Me too, son. What else are you doing about it?"

"We have an inquiry into SACEUR to notify us of anything they think is unusual in the current activities of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany. The Norwegians have increased their surveillance in the Barents Sea. We're starting to get more access to satellite photography of ports and fleet bases. DIA has been informed of our data, and is running its own investigation. More bits and pieces are beginning to show up."

"What about CIA?"

"DIA is handling that for us through their headquarters at Arlington Hall."

"When do their spring maneuvers begin?" CINCLANT asked.

"Sir, the annual Warsaw Pact spring exercise—they're calling it Progress this year—is scheduled to begin in three weeks. There are indications that in keeping with the spirit of detente, the Soviets will invite NATO military representatives to keep an eye on things, and Western news crews as well—"

"I'll tell you what's scary about this," Commander, Naval Surface Forces, Atlantic, grunted. "All of a sudden they've started doing what we've always asked them to do."

"Try selling that to the papers," Commander, Naval Air Forces, Atlantic, suggested.

"Recommendations?" CINCLANT asked his operations officer.

"We're already running a pretty active training schedule ourselves. I don't suppose it would hurt to beef that up. Toland, you said that what tipped you to this situation was this battery thing in the civilian economy. Are you looking for other economic disruptions?"

"Yes, sir, we are. That's DIA's brief, and my contact in Arlington Hall is also asking CIA to run some additional checks. If I might amplify on this point, gentlemen, the Soviet economy is centrally managed, as I said earlier. Those industrial plans they have arc fairly rigid. They don't deviate from them lightly, since those deviations tend to have a ripple effect throughout the economy as a whole. 'Disruption' may be too strong a word at present—"

"You just have a nasty suspicion," CINCLANT said. "Fine, Toland, that's what we pay you for. Good brief."

Bob took his cue and left. The admirals stayed put to talk things over.

It was a relief to leave. Much as he liked the attention, being examined by senior officials like a tissue culture on a petrie dish could make you old rather quickly. He walked through a covered walkway back to his building, and watched the late arrivals wander about looking for parking places. The grass was greening up. A civilian crew was mowing while another was fertilizing. The shrubbery was already beginning to grow, and he hoped they'd let the bushes expand a bit before they trimmed them back again. Norfolk could be pleasant in the spring, he knew, with the fragrance of azaleas on the salt-laden air. He wondered how pleasant it would be in summer.

"How'd it go?" Chuck asked.

Toland stripped off his jacket and allowed his knees to sag theatrically in front of the Marine. "Pretty well. Nobody snapped my head off."

"Didn't want to worry you before, but there's people in there been known to do that. They say CINCLANT likes nothing better for breakfast than fried commander garnished with diced lieutenant."

"Big surprise. He's an admiral, isn't he? I've done briefs before, Chuck." All Marines thought all sailors were wimps, Toland reminded himself. No sense giving Chuck more encouragement for that view.

"Any conclusions?"

"CINCLANT ops talked about increasing training schedules. I got excused right after that."

"Good. We ought to have a packet of satellite shots later today. There are some questions coming in from Langley and Arlington. Nothing firm yet, but I think they might be stumbling onto some odd data. If it turns out you're right,

Bob—well, you know how it works."

"Sure. Somebody closer to D.C. will make The Discovery. Shit, I don't care about that, Chuck, I want to be *wrong!* I want this whole friggin' thing to blow over, then I can go home and play in my garden."

"Well, maybe I got some good news for you. We got our TV tied into a new satellite receiver. I talked the communications guys into letting us tap into Russian television to catch their evening news. We won't learn anything hard, but it's a good way of catching moods. Just tried it out before you got here, and found out Ivan's running a film festival for all of Sergey Eisenstein's classics. Tonight, *The Battleship Potemkin,* followed by all the others, and ending on May 30 with *Alexander Nevsky."*

"Oh? I have *Nevsky* on tape."

"Yeah, well, they took the original negatives, flew them to EMI in London to make digitalized masters, and rerecorded the original Prokofiev score on a Dolby format. We'll be making tapes. Your machine VHS or Beta?"

"VHS." Toland laughed. "Maybe this job has a few bennies after all. So, what new stuff do we have?"

Lowe handed him a six-inch file of documents. Time to get back to work. Toland settled in his chair and began sorting through the papers.

KIEV, THE UKRAINE

"Things are looking better, Comrade," Alekseyev reported. "Discipline in the officer corps has improved immeasurably. The exercise with 261st Guards went very well this morning."

"And 173rd Guards?" CINC-Southwest asked.

"They too need further work, but they should be ready in time," Alekseyev said confidently. "The officers are acting like officers. Now we need to get the privates to act like soldiers. We'll see when Progress begins. We must have our officers turn away from the usual set-piece choreography and seek realistic engagement scenarios. We can use Progress to identify leaders who cannot adapt to a real combat environment and replace them with younger men who can." He sat down opposite his commander's desk. Alekseyev calculated that he was exactly one month behind in his sleep.

"You look weary, Pasha," CINC-Southwest observed.

"No, Comrade General, I haven't had the time." Alekseyev chuckled. "But if I make one more helicopter trip I think I shall sprout wings."

"Pasha, I want you to go home and not return for twenty-four hours."

"I—"

"If you were a horse," the General observed, "you would have broken down by now. This is an order from your commander-in-chief: twenty-four hours of rest. I would prefer that you spend it all sleeping, but that is your affair. Think, Pavel Leonidovich. Were we now engaged in combat operations, you would be better rested—regulations require it, a harsh lesson from our last war with the Germans. I need your talents unhindered—and if you drive

yourself too hard now, you won't be worth a damn when I really need you! I will see you at 1600 tomorrow to go over our plan for the Persian Gulf. You will be clear of eye and straight of back."

Alekseyev stood. His boss was a gruff old bear, so much like his own father had been. And a soldier's soldier. "Let the record show that I obey all orders from my commander-in-chief." Both men laughed. Both needed it.

Alekseyev left the office and walked downstairs to his official car. When it arrived at the apartment block a few kilometers away, the driver had to awaken his general.

USS CHICAGO

"Close-approach procedures," McCafferty ordered.

McCafferty had been tracking a surface ship for two hours, ever since his sonarmen had detected her at a range of forty-four miles. The approach was being made on sonar only, and under the captain's orders, sonar had not told the fire-control party what they were tracking. For the time being, every surface contact was being treated as a hostile warship.

"Range three-five hundred yards," the executive officer reported. "Bearing one-four-two, speed eighteen knots, course two-six-one."

"Up scope!" McCafferty ordered. The attack periscope slid up from its well on the starboard side of the pedestal. A quartermaster's mate got behind the instrument, dropped the handles in place, and trained it to the proper bearing. The captain sighted the crosshairs on the target's bow.

"Bearing—*mark!"*

The quartermaster squeezed the button on the "pickle," transmitting the bearing to the MK-117 fire-control computer.

"Angle on the bow, starboard twenty."

The fire-control technician punched the data into the computer. The microchips rapidly computed distances and angles.

"Solution set. Ready for tubes three and four!"

"Okay." McCafferty stepped back from the periscope and looked over at the exec. "You want to see what we killed?"

"Damn!" The executive officer laughed and lowered the periscope. "Move over, Otto Kretchmer!"

McCafferty picked up the microphone, which went to speakers throughout the submarine. "This is the captain speaking. We just completed the tracking exercise. For anyone who's interested, the ship we just 'killed' is the *Universe Ireland,* three hundred forty thousand tons' worth of ultra-large crude-carrier. That is all." He put the mike back in its cradle.

"XO, critique?"

"It was too easy, skipper," the executive officer said. "His speed and course were constant. We might have shaved four or five minutes on the target-motion analysis right after we acquired him, but we were looking for a zigzag instead of a constant course. For my money, it's better to proceed like that on

a slow target. I'd say we have things going pretty well."

McCafferty nodded agreement. A high-speed target like a destroyer might well head directly for them. The slow ones would probably be altering course constantly under wartime conditions. "We're getting there." The captain looked over to his fire-control party. "That was well done. Let's keep it that way." The next time, McCafferty thought, he'd arrange for sonar not to report a target until it got really close. Then he'd see how fast his men could handle a snapshot engagement. Until then he decided on a strenuous series of computer-simulated engagement drills.

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

"Those are batteries. Okay, it's confirmed." Lowe handed over the satellite photographs. A number of trucks were visible, and though most had their loadbeds covered by canvas, the loadbeds of three were exposed to the high-flying satellite. What he saw were the bathtub-shapes of oversized battery cells, and gangs of seamen manhandling them across a pier.

"How old are these shots?" Toland asked.

"Eighteen hours."

"Would have been useful this morning," the younger man grumped. "Looks like three Tangos nested together. These are ten-ton trucks. I count nine of them. I checked around, each individual battery cell weighs two hundred eighteen kilograms empty—"

"Ouch. How many to fill up a sub?"

"A lot!" Toland grinned. "We don't know that, exactly. I found four different estimates, with a thirty-percent spread. It probably differs from ship to ship anyway. The more you build of a design, the more you're tempted to fool around with it. That's what we do." Toland looked up. "We need more access to these."

"Already taken care of. From here on we're on the distribution list for all shots of naval sites. What do you think of the activity for the surface ships?"

Toland shrugged. The photographs showed perhaps a dozen surface combatants, ranging from cruisers to corvettes. The decks of all were littered with cables and crates; a large number of men was visible. "You can't tell much from this. No cranes, so nothing massive was being onloaded, but cranes can move, too. That's the problem with ships. Everything you need to know about is under cover. All we can tell from these photos is that they're tied alongside. Anything else is pure supposition. Even with the subs, we're inferring that they're loading batteries aboard."

"Come on, Bob," Lowe snorted.

"Think about it, Chuck," Toland replied. "They *know* what our satellites are for, right? They know what their orbital paths are, and they know when they will be at any given point in space. If they really want to fake us out, how hard is it? If *your* mission was to fake out satellites, and you knew when they came, you think you might play games with the other guy's head? We depend

too much on these things. They're useful as hell, sure, but they have their limitations. It'd be nice to get some human intelligence on this."

POLYARNYY, R.S.F.S.R.

"There's just something weird about watching a guy pour cement into a ship," Flynn observed on the ride back to Murmansk. No one had ever told him about ballast.

"Ah, but it can be a beautiful thing!" exclaimed their escort, a junior captain in the Soviet Navy. "Now if only your navies can do the same!"

The small press group that had been allowed to stand on a pier and watch the neutralization of the first two Yankee-class fleet ballistic missile submarines was being carefully managed, Flynn and Calloway noted. They were being driven around in groups of two and three, each group with a naval officer and a driver. Hardly unexpected, of course. Both men were amazed that they were being allowed onto so sensitive a base at all.

"A pity that your president did not allow a team of American officers to observe this," the escort went on.

"Yeah, I have to agree with you there, Captain," Flynn nodded. It would have made a much better story. As it was, a Swede and an Indian officer, neither a submariner, had gotten a closer look at what the reporters called the "cement ceremony," and reported somberly afterward that, yes, cement had been poured into each missile launch tube on the two submarines. Flynn had timed the length of each pour, and would do some checking when he got back. What was the volume of a missile tube? How much cement to fill it? How long to pour the cement? "Even so, Captain, you must agree that the American response to your country's negotiating position has been extremely positive."

Through all this, William Calloway kept his peace and stared out the car's window. He'd covered the Falkland Islands War for his wire service, and spent a lot of time with the Royal Navy, both afloat and in naval shipyards watching preparations for sending the Queen's fleet south. They were now passing by the piers and work areas for a number of surface warships. Something was wrong here, but he couldn't quite pin it down. What Flynn did not know was that his colleague often worked informally for the British Secret Intelligence Service. Never in a sensitive capacity—the man was a correspondent, not a spy—but like most reporters he was a shrewd, observant man, careful to note things that editors would never allow to clutter up a story. He didn't even know who the station chief in Moscow was, but he could report on this to a friend in Her Majesty's embassy. The data would find its way to the right person.

"So what does our English friend think of Soviet shipyards?" the captain inquired with a broad smile.

"Far more modern than ours," Calloway replied. "And I gather you don't have dockyard unions, Captain?"

The officer laughed. "We have no need for unions in the Soviet Union. Here

the workers already own everything." That was the standard Party line, both reporters noted. Of course.

"Are you a submarine officer?" the Englishman inquired.

"No!" the captain exclaimed. A hearty laugh. *Russians are big on laughs when they want to be,* Flynn thought. "I come from the steppes. I like blue sky and broad horizons. I have great respect for my comrades on submarines, but I have no wish to join them."

"My feelings exactly, Captain," Calloway agreed. "We elderly Brits like our parks and gardens. What sort of sailor are you?"

"I have shore assignment now, but my last ship was *Leonid Brezhnev,* icebreaker. We do some survey work, and also make a way for merchant ships along the Arctic Coast to the Pacific."

"That must be a demanding job," Calloway said. "And a dangerous one." *Keep talking, old boy . . .*

"It demands caution, yes, but we Russians are accustomed to cold and ice. It is a proud task to aid the economic growth of your country."

"I could never be a sailor," Calloway went on. He saw a curious look in Flynn's eyes: *The hell you couldn't . . .* "Too much work, even when you're in port. Like now. Are your shipyards always this busy?"

"Ah, this is not busy," the captain said without much thought.

The man from Reuters nodded. The ships were cluttered, but there was not that much obvious activity. Not so many people moving about. Many cranes were still. Trucks were parked. But the surface warships and auxiliaries were cluttered as if . . . He checked his watch. Three-thirty in the afternoon. The workday was hardly over. "A great day for East-West détente," he said to cover his feelings. "A great story for Pat and me to tell our readers."

"This is good." The captain smiled again. "It is time we had real peace."

The correspondents were back in Moscow four hours later, after the usual uncomfortable ride on an Aeroflot jet with its Torquemada seats. The two reporters walked to Flynn's car—Calloway's was still *hors de combat* with mechanical problems. He grumbled at having gotten a Soviet car instead of bringing his Morris over with him. Bloody impossible to get parts.

"A good story today, Patrick?"

"You bet. But I wish we'd been able to snap a picture or two." They were promised Sovfoto shots of the "cement ceremony."

"What did you think of the shipyard?"

"Big enough. I spent a day at Norfolk once. They all look alike to me."

Calloway nodded thoughtfully. Shipyards do look alike, he thought, but why did Polyarnyy seem strange? His suspicious reporter's mind? The constant question: What is he/she/it hiding? But the Soviets had never allowed him on a naval base, and this was his third tour in Moscow. He'd been to Murmansk before. Once he'd spoken with the Mayor and asked how the naval personnel affected his administration of the city. There were always uniforms visible on the street. The Mayor had tried to evade the question, and finally said, "There are no Navy in Murmansk." A typical Russian answer to an awkward question —but now they'd let a dozen Western reporters into one of their most sensitive bases. QED, they were not hiding anything. Or were they? After he filed his story, Calloway decided, he'd have a brandy with his friend at the

embassy. Besides, there was a party celebrating something or other.

He arrived at the embassy, on Morisa Toreza Embankment across the river from the Kremlin walls, just after nine o'clock that night. It turned into four brandies. By the fourth, the correspondent was going over a map of the naval base and using his trained memory to indicate just what activity he'd seen where. An hour later, the data was encrypted and cabled to London.

8

Further Observations

GRASSAU, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

The TV news crew was having a great time. It had been years since they'd been allowed to film a Soviet military unit in action, and the entertainment value of the mistakes they saw gave plenty of spice for a piece on the NBC Nightly News. As they watched, a tank battalion was stalled at a crossroads on Highway 101, fifty kilometers south of Berlin. They'd taken a wrong turn somewhere, and the battalion commander was screaming at his subordinates. After two minutes of that, a captain stepped forward and made a few gestures at the map. A major was banished from the scene as the younger man apparently solved the problem. The camera followed the dejected major into a staff car, which drove north along the main road. Five minutes later, the battalion was mounted and rolling. The news crew took its time reloading its equipment into their carryall, and the chief reporter took the time to walk over to a French officer who had also observed the procedure.

The Frenchman was a member of the Joint Military Liaison Group, a convenient leftover of the Second World War which enabled both sides to spy on each other. A lean, poker-faced man, he wore paratrooper's wings and smoked Gauloises. He was an intelligence officer, of course.

"What do you make of this, Major?" the NBC reporter asked.

"They made a mistake four kilometers back. They should have turned left, but didn't." A Gallic shrug.

"Not very impressive performance for the Russians, is it?" The reporter laughed. The Frenchman was more thoughtful.

"Did you notice that they had a German officer with them?"

The reporter had noticed the different uniform, but not realized its significance. "Oh, is that what he was? Why didn't they ask him for help?"

"Yes," the French major answered. He didn't say that this was the fourth time he had seen a Soviet officer refrain from asking assistance from his East German guide . . . and all in the last two days. To have Soviet units get lost was an old story. The Russians used a different alphabet in addition to the different language. That made it easy to make navigational errors, and the Soviets always had DDR officers along to help them find their way around. Until now. He flicked his cigarette onto the road. "What else did you notice,

Monsieur?"

"The colonel was pretty mad at that major. Then a captain—I think—showed him the mistake, I guess, and how to correct it."

"How long?"

"Less than five minutes after they stopped."

"Very good." The Frenchman smiled. The major was heading back to Berlin, and that battalion had a new operations officer now. The smile disappeared.

"Looks pretty dumb to get lost like that, doesn't it?"

The Frenchman got back into his car to follow the Russians. "Have you ever gotten lost in a foreign country, Monsieur?"

"Yes, who hasn't?"

"But they found their mistake quickly, no?" The major waved to his driver to pull off. And all by themselves this time, he thought. *Intéressant* . . .

The TV reporter shrugged and walked back to his own vehicle. He followed the last tank in line, annoyed that they were moving at only thirty kilometers per hour. The tanks moved northwest at that speed until they reached Highway 187, where miraculously they joined up with another Soviet unit and, dropping back to their normal speed of twenty kilometers per hour, resumed their progress west toward the exercise area.

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

It was impressive. As they watched the Moscow television news program, a whole regiment of tanks advanced across a flat landscape. Their objective turned to a horizontal fountain of dirt as an artillery barrage pounded the simulated enemy positions. Fighter-bombers streaked across the sky and helicopters performed their own death-dance. The voice-over commentary proclaimed the readiness of the Soviet Army to meet any foreign threat. It certainly looked that way.

The next five-minute segment concerned the Vienna arms talks. There was the usual complaint about how the United States was fighting over certain aspects of the clearly generous original Soviet proposal, but the speaker went on to say that real progress was being made despite American intransigence, and that a comprehensive agreement was possible by the end of summer. Toland was puzzled by the nature of the Soviet description of the negotiations. He'd never paid much attention to this sort of rhetoric before, and found the good-guy/bad-guy descriptions curious.

"Pretty normal stuff," Lowe responded to the question. "You'll know the deal is close to being struck when the beefs start disappearing. Then they talk about how enlightened our President is for a class enemy. They can get real euphoric around signing time. Really, this stuff is pretty mild. Think about it. What sort of language do they usually use about us?"

"The exercise look normal?"

"It's normal, all right. Ever think about how much fun it is to face a hundred tanks? You did notice that they all carry five-inch guns? Then think about the

artillery support they get. Then think about the aircraft. The Russians are real believers in this combined-arms stuff. When they come at you, they come with the whole inventory. They have this set-piece stuff down cold."

"How do we counter it?"

"You take the initiative. You let the other guy get all set to fight his battle his way, son, you might as well bag it."

"Same story at sea."

"Yeah."

KIEV, THE UKRAINE

Alekseyev atypically poured himself a cup of tea at the corner table before approaching his commander's desk. When he walked over, his grin was a meter wide.

"Comrade General, Progress goes well!"

"So I can see, Pavel Leonidovich."

"I would never have believed it. The improvement in our officer corps is extraordinary. The deadwood is being disposed of, and those men whom we've moved up to new posts are eager and capable."

"So, shooting those four colonels has worked?" CINC-Southwest noted sardonically. He'd run the first two days of the exercise from his command headquarters and yearned to get into the field where the real action was. But that was not a theater commander's job. Alekseyev was his best set of eyes for what was really happening.

"A hard choice, but a good one. The results speak for themselves." The edge came off the younger man's enthusiasm. His conscience still remembered that. The problem with hard decisions, he learned, was not making them, but learning to live with the consequences, however necessary. He set the thought aside yet again. "With two more weeks of intensive exercises, the Red Army will be ready. We can do it. We can defeat NATO."

"We don't have to fight NATO, Pasha."

"Then Allah help the Arabs!" Alekseyev said.

"Allah help us. West gets another of our tank divisions." The General held up a dispatch. "The one you were with today, in fact. I wonder how he has been doing?"

"My spies tell me, quite well."

"And you have joined the KGB, Pasha?"

"A classmate of mine is on CINC-West staff. They, too, have adopted a policy for eliminating incompetents. I have seen the benefits. A new man in a posting has much better incentive to do his job properly than one for whom it has become routine."

"Except at the top, of course."

"Commander-in-Chief West is one man I never expected to defend, but everything I've been told leads me to believe he's getting his forces ready in the same way as we."

“Things must indeed be improved if you are this magnanimous.”

“They are, Comrade. Another tank division lost to Germany. Well, he needs it more than we. I tell you, we will sweep the Arabs aside like dirt on a smooth tile floor. In truth we always could. There are not so many of them, and if these Arabs are like the Libyans I saw three years ago—these have no mountains to hide in. This is not Afghanistan. Our mission is to conquer, not to pacify. This we can do. I estimate two weeks. The only problem I foresee is the destruction of the oil fields. They can use scorched earth as a defense just as we have, and that will be difficult for us to prevent, even with paratroops. Still and all, our objective is achievable. Our men will be ready.”

9

A Final Look

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

"There's something to be said for instant traditions, Chuck." This was their fourth Russian movie via satellite. Toland handed over the bowl of popcorn. "It'll be a pity to lose you back to the Corps."

"Bite your tongue! Sixteen-hundred hours Tuesday, Colonel Charles DeWinter Lowe goes back into the Marine business. I'll leave the paper-shuffling to you squids."

Toland laughed. "And you won't miss the evening movie?"

"Maybe a little." Half a mile away a satellite receiver was tracking a Soviet communications satellite. They'd been pirating signals off this satellite and two of her sisters for weeks now, to keep tabs on the Soviet TV news, and also to catch the evening movie. Both men admired the work of Sergey Eisenstein.

And *Alexander Nevsky* was his masterwork.

Toland popped open a can of Coke. "I wonder how Ivan would react to a John Ford Western? Somehow I get the feeling that Comrade Eisenstein might have been exposed to one or two."

"Yeah, the Duke would have fit in pretty good here. Or better yet, Errol Flynn. You heading home tonight?"

"Right after the movie. God, a four-day weekend off. Can I stand the strain?"

The titles showed a new frame, different from the one on his personal tape of the movie back home. The original soundtrack dialogue had been retained and cleaned up somewhat, but the music had been redone by the Moscow State Symphony and chorus. They did true justice to Prokofiev's evocative score.

The film began with a view of the Russian . . . steppes? Toland wondered. Or was that supposed to be the southern part of the country? Anyway, it showed rolling grassland littered with bones and weapons from an old battle against the Mongols. The Yellow Peril, still a Russian bugaboo. The Soviet Union had absorbed a lot of Mongols—but now the Chinese had nuclear weapons and the world's largest army.

"The print is terrific," Lowe observed.

"Hell of a lot better than my tape," Toland agreed. A pair of VHS machines

was recording this, though the Navy wasn't supplying the tapes. Each officer had bought one himself. SACLANT's Inspector General had an evil reputation.

All this happened pretty close to the Baltic coast, Toland reminded himself. The introduction of the main character was made through a song as he was evidently out directing some men with a fishing net. A good socialist introduction, the officers agreed: the hero out doing manual labor. A brief verbal confrontation with the Mongols, then a musing about which danger to Russian integrity was greater, the German or the Mongol.

"Jesus, you know they *still* think that way?" Toland chuckled.

"The more things change . . ." Lowe popped open his own Coke.

"I kinda wonder about this guy, though. When he went back into the water after the net, he ran like a girl, what with his arms flying all over."

"You should try running in knee-deep water," the Marine growled.

And the scene shifted to the German Danger.

"A bunch of out-of-work knights, just like the crusades. Hell, just like Indian movies from the thirties. Chopping people up, throwing babies into the fire."

"You suppose they really did things like that?"

"Ever hear of a place called Auschwitz, Bob?" Lowe inquired. "You know, in the civilized twentieth century?"

"Those guys didn't bring a bishop with them."

"Try reading up on the crusaders' liberation of Jerusalem. Either they killed, or raped first and then killed, all for the Greater Glory of God, with bishops and cardinals cheering them on. Nice bunch. Yeah, it's probably true enough. Christ knows the Eastern Front in '41-'45 saw a lot of it on both sides. Nasty campaign, that was. Want some more popcorn?"

Finally the people mobilized themselves, especially the peasants:

> *Vstavaitye, lyudi russkiye,*
> *na slavny boi, na smyertny boi . . .*

"Damn!" Toland sat forward. "They really punched that song up." The soundtrack was almost perfect, even accounting for the satellite transmission difficulties.

> *Arise, you Russian People,*
> *in a just battle, in a fight to the death:*
> *arise, you people free and brave,*
> *defend our fair native land!*

Toland counted more than twenty specific uses of the word "Russia" or "Russian."

"That's odd," he observed. "They're trying to get away from that. The Soviet Union is supposed to be all one happy family, not the New Russian Empire."

"I guess you'd call it a historical quirk," Lowe commented. "Stalin commissioned the film to alert his people to the Nazi threat. Ole Joe was a Georgian, but he turned out to be one hell of a Russian nationalist. Strange, but he was one strange dude."

The movie was clearly a production of the 1930s. The strident characters were right out of John Ford or Raoul Walsh: a stand-alone heroic figure in Prince Alexander Nevsky, two brave but buffoonish sidekicks, and the *de rigueur* love interest. The German enemies were arrogant and for the most part invisible behind unlikely helmets designed by Eisenstein himself. The invading

Germans had already divided up Russia among themselves, one knight made "prince" of Pskov, where in a horrible example of pacification the invaders had slaughtered men, women, and children—the children were thrown into a bonfire—to show who was boss. The great battle scene took place on a frozen lake.

"What kinda lunatic is going to fight on a frozen lake when he's wearing a half ton of sheet steel?" Toland groaned. Lowe explained that it had really happened that way, more or less.

"I'm sure they played around with it some, like *They Died With Their Boots On,"* the colonel observed. "But the battle really happened."

The battle was a truly epic scene. The German knights attacked with casual disregard for proper tactics, and the Russian peasants, ably led by Alexander and his two sidekicks, encircled them with a Cannae-like envelopment maneuver. Then, of course, came single combat between Prince Alexander and the German chieftain. There was no doubt of the outcome. Their commander vanquished in single combat, the German ranks came apart, and when they tried to rally on the edge of the lake, the ice gave way, drowning nearly everyone.

"That's realistic enough," Lowe chuckled. "Think how many armies have been swallowed up by the Russian countryside!"

The remainder of the movie resolved the love interest (each buffoon got himself a pretty girl), and liberated Pskov. Curiously, while the prince hoisted a bunch of children into his saddle for the ride in, he never showed the slightest interest in female company—and ended with a sermon, Alexander standing alone and speaking about what happens to people who invaded Russia.

"Trying to make Nevsky look like Stalin, eh?"

"There is some of that," Lowe agreed. "The strong man, all alone, a fatherly benefactor—some benefactor! Anyway you cut it, this is just about the best propaganda movie ever made. The punch line is that when Russia and Germany signed their nonaggression pact a year later, Eisenstein was detailed to direct a stage production of Wagner's *The Valkyries.* Call it penance for offending the German sensibilities."

"Oof. You study these guys more than I do, Chuck."

Colonel Lowe pulled a cardboard box from under his desk and began to load up his personal effects. "Yeah, well if you have to face the possibility of fighting a man, you might as well learn all you can about him."

"You think we will?"

Lowe frowned briefly. "I saw enough of that in Nam, but that's what they pay us for, isn't it?"

Toland stood and stretched. He had a four-hour drive ahead of him. "Colonel, it has been a pleasure for this squid to work with you."

"It hasn't been half bad for this jarhead. Hey, when I get the family set up down in Lejeune, why don't you come on down sometime? There's some great fishing down there."

"Deal." They shook hands. "Good luck with your regiment, Chuck."

"Good luck here, Bob."

Toland walked out to his car. He'd already packed up, and drove quickly out

Terminal Boulevard to Interstate 64. The worst part of the drive home was the traffic to the Hampton Roads tunnel, after which things settled down to the usual superhighway ratrace. All the way home, Toland's mind kept going over the scenes from Eisenstein's movie. The one that kept coming back was the most horrible of all, a German knight wearing a crusader's cross tearing a Pskov infant from his mother's breast and throwing him—her?—into a fire. Who could see that and not be enraged? No wonder the rabble-rousing song "Arise, you Russian People" had been a genuinely popular favorite for years. Some scenes cried out for bloody revenge, the theme for which was Prokofiev's fiery call to arms. Soon he found himself humming the song. A *real intelligence officer you are* . . . Toland smiled to himself, thinking just like the people you're supposed to study . . . defend our fair native land . . . *za nashu zyemlyu chestnuyu!*

"Excuse me, sir?" the toll collector asked.

Toland shook his head. Had he been singing aloud? He handed over the seventy-five cents with a sheepish grin. What would this lady think, an American naval officer singing in Russian?

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

It was just after midnight when the truck drove north across the Kemenny Bridge to Borovitskaya Square and turned right, toward the Kremlin. The driver stopped for the first group of Kremlin Guards. Their papers were fully in order, of course, and they were waved through. The truck pulled up to the second checkpoint by the Kremlin Palace, where their papers were also in order. From there it was five hundred meters to the service entrance of the Council of Ministers Building.

"What are you delivering this time of day, Comrades?" the Red Army captain asked.

"Cleaning supplies. Come, I will show you." The driver got out and walked slowly around the back of the truck. "Must be nice, working here at night when things are so peaceful."

"True enough," the captain agreed. He'd go off duty in another ninety minutes.

"Here." The driver pulled back the canvas cover. There were twelve cans of industrial-strength solvent and a crate of hardware parts.

"German supplies?" The captain was surprised. He'd been on Kremlin duty for only two weeks.

"*Da*. The Krauts make very efficient cleaning machinery, and the *vlasti* make use of it. This is carpet-cleaning fluid. This is for lavatory walls. This one here is for windows. The crate—ah, I will open it." The lid came off easily since the nails had already been loosened. "As you see, Comrade Captain, parts for some of the machines." He smirked. "Even German machines break."

"Open one of the cans," the captain ordered.

"Sure, but you won't like the smell. Which one do you want opened?" The

driver picked up a small prybar.

"That one." The captain pointed to a can of bathroom cleaner.

The driver laughed. "The worst-smelling of all. Stand back, Comrade, we don't want to splash this slop on your clean uniform."

The captain was new enough on the job that he scrupulously did not step back. *Good,* the driver thought. He worked the prybar under the can's lid, twisted, and popped his free hand down on the end. The lid flew off, and the captain was splashed by some flying solvent.

"Shit!" It did smell bad.

"I *warned* you, Comrade Captain."

"What is this garbage?"

"It's used to clean mildew off bathroom tiles. It will come right out of the uniform, Comrade Captain. But be sure you have it dry-cleaned soon. An acid solution, you see, it could damage the wool."

The captain wanted to be mad, but the man had warned him, hadn't he? *Next time I'll know better,* he thought. "Very well, take it in."

"Thank you. I am sorry about the uniform. Don't forget to have it cleaned."

The captain waved to a private and walked off. The soldier unlocked the door. The driver and his assistant went inside to get a two-wheeled handtruck.

"I warned him," the driver said to the private.

"You certainly did, Comrade." The soldier was amused. He, too, was looking forward to going off duty, and it wasn't often that you saw an officer get caught.

The driver watched his assistant load the cans onto the handtruck, and followed him as he wheeled it into the building to the service elevator. Then both returned for the second load.

They took the elevator to the third floor, shut the power off, and moved their loads to a storage room directly below the large fourth-floor conference room.

"That was good with the captain," the assistant said. "Now let's get to work."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel," the driver answered at once. The four cans of carpet-cleaning fluid had false tops which the lieutenant removed and set aside. Next he took out the satchel charges. The colonel had memorized the blueprints of the building. The wall pillars were in the outside corners of the room. One charge went to each, fixed to the inboard side. The empty cans were placed next to the charges, hiding them. Next the lieutenant removed two of the false-ceiling panels, exposing the steel beams supporting the fourth floor slab. The remaining charges were attached there, and the ceiling panels replaced. The charges already had their detonators attached. The colonel took the electronic triggering device out of his pocket, he checked his watch, and waited for three minutes before pressing the button to activate the timers. The bombs would explode in exactly eight hours.

The colonel watched the lieutenant tidy up, then wheeled the handtruck back to the elevator. Two minutes later, they left the building. The captain was back.

"Comrade," he said to the driver. "You shouldn't let this old one do all the heavy work. Show some respect."

“You are kind, Comrade Captain.” The colonel smiled crookedly and pulled a half-liter bottle of vodka from his pocket. “Drink?”

The captain’s solicitous attitude ended abruptly. A worker drinking on duty —in the Kremlin! “Move along!”

“Good day, Comrade.” The driver got into the truck and drove off. They had to pass through the same security checkpoints, but their papers were still in order.

After leaving the Kremlin, the truck turned north on Marksa Prospekt and followed it all the way to the KGB headquarters building at 2 Dzerzhinskiy Square.

CROFTON, MARYLAND

“Where are the kids?”

“Asleep.” Martha Toland hugged her husband. She was wearing something filmy and attractive. “I had them out swimming all day, and they just couldn’t stay awake.” An impish smile. He remembered the first such smile, on Sunset Beach, Oahu, she with a surfboard and a skimpy swimsuit. She still loved the water. And the bikini still fit.

“Why do I sense a plan here?”

“Probably because you’re a nasty, suspicious spook.” Marty walked into the kitchen and came out with a bottle of Lancers Rose and two chilled glasses. “Now why don’t you take a nice hot shower and unwind a bit. When you’re finished, we can relax.”

It sounded awfully good. What followed was even better.

10

Remember, Remember

CROFTON, MARYLAND

Toland woke to hear his phone ringing in the dark. He was still dopey from the drive up from Norfolk and the wine. It took a ring or two for him to react properly. His first considered action was to check the display on the clock-radio—2:11. *Two in the fuckin' morning!* he thought, sure that the ringing was caused by a prank or a wrong number. He lifted the receiver.

"Hello," he said gruffly.

"Lieutenant Commander Toland, please."

Uh-oh. "Speaking."

"This is the CINCLANT intel watch officer," the disembodied voice said. "You are ordered to return to your duty station at once. Please acknowledge the order, Commander."

"Back to Norfolk right away. Understood." Wholly on instinct, Bob rotated himself in the bed to a sitting position, his bare feet on the floor.

"Very well, Commander." The phone clicked off.

"What is it, honey?" Marty asked.

"They need me back at Norfolk."

"When?"

"Now." That woke her up. Martha Toland bolted upright in the bed. The covers spilled off her chest, and the moonlight through the window gave her skin a pale, ethereal glow.

"But you just got here!"

"Don't I know it." Bob stood and walked awkwardly toward the bathroom. He had to shower and drink some coffee if he had any hope of reaching Norfolk alive. When he returned ten minutes later, lathering his face, he saw that his wife had clicked on the bedroom TV to Cable Network News.

"Bob, you better listen to this."

"This is Rich Suddler coming to you *live* from the Kremlin," said a reporter in a blue blazer. Behind him Toland could see the grim stone walls of the ancient citadel fortified by Ivan the Terrible—now being patrolled by armed soldiers in combat dress. Toland stopped what he was doing and walked toward the TV. Something very strange was going on. A full company of armed troops in the Kremlin could mean many things, all of them bad. "There

has been an explosion in the Council of Ministers building here in Moscow. At approximately nine-thirty this morning, Moscow Time, while I was taping a report not half a mile away, we were surprised to hear a sharp sound coming from the new glass-and-steel structure, and—"

"Rich, this is Dionna McGee at the anchor desk." The image of Suddler and the Kremlin retreated to a corner of the screen as the director inserted the attractive black anchorperson who ran the night desk for CNN. "I presume that you had some Soviet security personnel with you at the time. How did they react?"

"Well, Dionna, we can show you that if you can hold a minute for my technicians to set up that tape, I—" He pressed the earphone tight into his ear. "Okay, coming up now, Dionna—"

The tape cut off the live picture, filling the entire screen. It was on a pause setting, with Suddler frozen in the middle of a gesture to something or other, probably the part of the wall where they buried important Communists, Toland thought. The tape began to roll.

Simultaneously, Suddler flinched and spun around as a thundering report echoed across the expanse of the square. By professional instinct the cameraman turned at once to the source of the sound, and after a moment's wobble, the lens settled in on a ball of dust and smoke expanding up and away from the strangely modern building in the Kremlin's otherwise Slavic Rococo complex. A second later the zoom lens darted in on the scene. Fully three floors of the building had been stripped of their glass curtain wall, and the camera followed a large conference table as it fell down off one floor slab that seemed to be dangling from a half dozen reinforcing rods. The camera went down to street level, where there was one obvious body, and perhaps another, along with a collection of automobiles crushed by debris.

In seconds, the whole square was filled with running men in uniform and the first of many official cars. A blurred figure that could only be a man in uniform suddenly blocked the camera lens. The tape stopped at that point, and Rich Suddler came back into the screen with a LIVE caption in the lower left corner.

"Now, at that point the militia captain who had been escorting us—the militia is the Soviet equivalent of, oh, like a U.S. state police force—he made us stop taping and confiscated our tape cassette. We weren't allowed to tape the fire trucks or the several hundred armed troops who arrived and are now guarding the whole area. But the tape was just returned to us and we are able to give you this live picture of the building, now that the fires have been put out. In fairness I really can't say that I blame him—things were pretty wild there for a few minutes."

"Were you threatened in any way, Rich? I mean, did they act as though they thought you—"

Suddler's head shook emphatically.

"Not at all, Dionna. In fact, more than anything they seemed concerned for our safety. In addition to the militia captain, we have a squad of Red Army infantrymen with us now, and their officer was very careful to say that he was here to protect us, not to threaten us. We were not allowed to approach the site of the incident, and of course we were not allowed to leave the area—but

we wouldn't have, anyway. The tape was just returned to us a few minutes ago, and we were informed that we'd be allowed to make this live broadcast." The camera shifted to the building. "As you can see, there are roughly five hundred fire, police, and military personnel still here, sorting through the wreckage and looking for additional bodies, and just to our right is a Soviet TV news crew, doing the same thing we are." Toland examined the television picture closely. The one body he could see looked awfully small. He wrote it off to distance and perspective.

"Dionna, what we seem to have here is the first major terrorist incident in the history of the Soviet Union—"

"Since the bastards set themselves up," Toland snorted.

"We know for certain—at least we've been told—that a bomb was detonated in the Council of Ministers building. They're certain it was a bomb, not some kind of accident. And we know for sure that three, possibly more people were killed, and perhaps as many as forty or fifty wounded.

"Now the really interesting thing about this is that the Politburo had been scheduled to hold a meeting here at about that time."

"Holy shit!" Toland set the aerosol can on the night table, one hand still covered in shaving cream.

"Can you tell us if any of them were among the dead or wounded?" Dionna asked at once.

"No, Dionna. You see, we're more than a quarter of a mile away, and the senior Kremlin officials arrive by car—when they do, that is, they come in from the other side of the fortress, through another gate. So, we never even knew that they were here, but the militia captain with our team did, and he kind of blurted it out. His exact words were, 'My God, the Politburo's in there!'"

"Rich, can you tell us what the reaction in Moscow has been like?"

"It's still pretty hard for us to gauge, Dionna, since we've been right here covering the story as it unfolds. The Kremlin Guards' reaction is just what you might imagine—just like American Secret Service people would react, I suppose—a mixture of horror and rage, but I want to make it clear that that rage is not being directed against anyone, certainly not against Americans. I told the militia officer who's been with us that I was in the U.S. Capitol building when the Weathermen's bomb was set off, back in 1970, and he replied rather disgustedly that Communism was indeed catching up with capitalism, that the Soviet Union was growing a bumper crop of hooligans. It's a measure of how seriously they're taking this that a Soviet police officer would comment so openly on a subject that they're not all that willing to discuss normally. So, if I had to pick one word to describe the reaction here, that word would be 'shock.'

"So, to summarize what we know to this point, there has been a bombing incident within the Kremlin walls, possibly an attempt to eliminate the Soviet Politburo, though I must emphasize we are not certain of that. We have had it confirmed by police at the scene that at least three people are dead, with forty or so other wounded, those wounded being evacuated to nearby hospitals. We will be reporting throughout the day as more information becomes available. This is Rich Suddler, CNN, coming to you live from the Kremlin." The scene

shifted back to the anchor desk.

"And there you have it, another exclusive report from Cable Network News." Dionna the anchorperson smiled, and the screen faded again, this time to a commercial for Lite Beer from Miller. Marty stood up and put on a robe.

"I'll get the coffee going."

"Holy shit," Toland said again. He took longer than usual to shave, nicking himself twice as he kept looking in the mirror at his own eyes rather than his jawline. He dressed quickly, then looked in on his sleeping children. He decided against waking them.

Forty minutes later, he was in his car heading south, down U.S. 301, with his windows open, allowing cool night air to wash over him, and the car radio tuned to an all-news station. It was clear enough what was happening in the U.S. military. A bomb had been set off—probably a bomb in the Kremlin. Toland reminded himself that reporters hard up against deadlines, or TV types trying to score an instant scoop, often did not have the time to check things out. Maybe it was a gas main? Did Moscow have gas mains? If it were a bomb, he was sure the Soviets would instinctively think that the West had something to do with it, regardless of what that Suddler fellow thought, and go to higher alert status. The West would automatically do the same in anticipation of possible Soviet action. Nothing too obvious, nothing to provoke them further, mainly an exercise conducted by intelligence and surveillance types. The Soviets would understand that. That's how the game was played, more from their side than from ours, Toland reflected, remembering assassination attempts against American presidents.

What if they really do *think?* Toland wondered. No, he decided, they had to know that no one was that crazy. Didn't they?

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

He drove for another three hours, wishing that he'd drunk more coffee and less wine, and listening to his car radio to stay awake. He arrived just after seven, the normal beginning of the day's work. He was surprised to find Colonel Lowe at his desk.

"I don't report to Lejeune until Tuesday, so I decided to come in and take a look at this. How was the drive?"

"I made it alive—that's about all I can say. What's happening?"

"You'll love it." Lowe held up a telex sheet. "We pirated this off the Reuters wire half an hour ago, and CIA confirms—meaning they probably stole it, too—that the KGB has arrested one Gerhardt Falken, a West German national, and accused him of setting off a bomb in the fuckin' Kremlin!" The Marine let out a long breath. "He missed the big shots, but now they're saying that among the victims are six Young Octobrists—from Pskov, by God!—who were making a presentation to the Politburo. Kids. There's going to be hell to pay."

Toland shook his head. It couldn't get much worse than that. "And they say a German did it?"

"A West German," Lowe corrected. "NATO intel services are already going ape trying to run him down. The official Soviet statement gives his name and address—some suburb of Bremen—and business, a small import-export house. Nothing else yet on that subject, but the Russian Foreign Ministry did go on to say that they expect 'this despicable act of international terrorism' to have no effect on the Vienna Arms Talks, that while they do not believe at this time that Falken was acting on his own, they 'have no wish' to believe that we had anything to do with it."

"Cute. It's going to be a shame to lose you back to your regiment, Chuck. You have such a nice way of finding the important quotes."

"Commander, we just might need that regiment soon. This whole thing smells like dead fish to me. Last night: the final film in the Eisenstein film festival, *Alexander Nevsky*, a new digitalized print, a new soundtrack—and what's the message? 'Arise, ye Russian people,' the Germans are coming! This morning, we have six dead Russian kids, *from Pskov!* and a German is supposed to have planted the bomb. The only thing that doesn't fit is that it ain't exactly subtle."

"Maybe," Toland said speculatively. He spoke like a halfhearted devil's advocate. "You think we could sell this combination of factors to the papers or anybody in Washington? It's too crazy, too coincidental—what if it is subtle, but backwards subtle? Besides, the object of the exercise wouldn't be to convince us, it would be to convince their own citizens. You could say it works both ways. That make sense, Chuck?"

Lowe nodded. "Enough to check out. Let's do some sniffing around. First thing, I want you to call CNN in Atlanta and find out how long this Suddler guy's been trying to tape his story about the Kremlin. How much lead time did he have, when was this approved, who he worked through to get it, and if someone other than his regular press contact finally did approve it."

"Setup." Toland said it out loud. He wondered if they were being clever—or clinically paranoid. He knew what most people would think.

"You can't smuggle a *Penthouse* into Russia without using the diplomatic bag, and now we're supposed to believe a German smuggled a bomb in? Then tries to blow up the Politburo?"

"Could we do it?" Toland wondered aloud.

"If CIA was crazy enough to try it? God, that's more than just crazy." Lowe shook his head. "I don't think anybody could do it, even the Russians themselves. It's got to be a layered defense. X-ray machines. Sniffer dogs. A couple of hundred guards, all from three different commands, the Army, KGB, MVD, probably their militia, too. Hell, Bob, you know how paranoid they are against their own people. How do you suppose they feel about Germans?"

"So they can't say he was a crazy operating on his own."

"Which leaves . . ."

"Yeah." Toland reached for his phone to call CNN.

KIEV, THE UKRAINE

"Children!" Alekseyev barely said aloud. "For our *maskirovka* the Party murders children! *Our own children. What have we come to?"*

What have I come to? If I can rationalize the judicial murder of four colonels and some privates, why shouldn't the Politburo blow up a few children . . . ? Alekseyev told himself there was a difference.

His General was also pale as he switched off the television set. " 'Arise, ye Russian people.' We must set these thoughts aside, Pasha. It is hard, but we must. The State is not perfect, but it is the State we must serve."

Alekseyev eyed his commander closely. The General had almost choked on those words; he was already practicing how to use them on the crucial few who would know of this outrage, yet had to perform their duties as though it never existed. There will come a day of reckoning, Pasha told himself, a day of reckoning for all the crimes committed in the name of Socialist Progress. He wondered if he'd live to see it and decided he probably wouldn't.

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

The Revolution has come to this, he thought. Sergetov was staring into the rubble. The sun was still high, even this late in the afternoon. The firefighters and soldiers were almost finished sorting through the wreckage, heaving the loose pieces into trucks a few meters from where he stood. There was dust on his suit. *I'll have to have it cleaned,* he thought, watching the seventh small body being lifted with a gentleness all too late and obscenely out of place. One more child was still unaccounted for, and there was still some lingering hope. A uniformed Army medic stood nearby, unwrapped dressings in his quivering hands. To his left a major of infantry was weeping with rage. A man with a family, no doubt.

The television cameras were there, of course. *A lesson learned from the American media*, Sergetov thought, the crews poking their way into the action to record every horrible scene for the evening news. He was surprised to see an American crew with their Soviet counterparts. So, we have made mass murder an international spectator sport.

Sergetov was far too angry for visible emotion. *That could have been me,* he thought. *I always show up early for the Thursday meetings. Everyone knows it. The guards, the clerical staff, and certainly my Comrades on the Politburo. So this is the penultimate segment of the* maskirovka. *To motivate, to lead our people, we must do this. Was there supposed to be a Politburo member in the rubble? he* wondered. *A junior member, of course.*

Surely I am wrong, Sergetov told himself. One part of his mind examined the question with chilling objectivity while another considered his personal friendships with some of the senior Politburo members. He didn't know what to think. An odd position for a leader of the Party.

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

"I am Gerhardt Falken," the man said. "I entered the Soviet Union six days ago through the port of Odessa. I have been for ten years an agent of the *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, the intelligence apparat of the government of West Germany. My assignment was to kill the Politburo at its Thursday-morning session by means of a bomb placed in a storage room directly beneath the fourth-floor conference room in which they meet." Lowe and Toland watched their televisions in total fascination. It was perfect. "Falken" spoke perfect Russian, with the precise syntax and diction that schoolteachers in the Soviet Union sought to achieve. His accent was that of Leningrad.

"I have run an import-export business in Bremen for many years, and I have specialized in trade with the Soviet Union. I have traveled into the Soviet Union many times, and on many of these occasions I have used my business identity to run agents whose mission was to weaken and spy upon the Soviet Party and military infrastructures."

The camera closed in. "Falken" was reading in a monotone from a script, his eyes seldom rising to the cameras. Behind the glasses on one side was a large bruise. His hands shook slightly when he changed pages of the script.

"Looks like they beat up on him some," Lowe observed.

"Interesting," Toland replied. "They're letting us know that they work people over."

Lowe snorted. "A guy who blows little kids up? You can burn the bastard at the stake, and who'll give a good Goddamn? Some serious thought went into this, my friend."

"I wish to make it clear," Falken went on in a firmer voice, "that I had no intention of injuring children. The Politburo was a legitimate political target, but my country does not make war on children."

A howl of disgust came from off-camera. As though on cue, the camera backed away to reveal a pair of uniformed KGB officers flanking the speaker, their faces impassive. The audience was composed of about twenty people in civilian clothes.

"Why did you come into our country?" demanded one of them.

"I have told you this."

"Why does your country wish to kill the leaders of our Soviet Party?"

"I am a spy," Falken replied. "I carry out assignments. I do not ask such questions. I follow my orders."

"How were you captured?"

"I was arrested at the Kiev Railroad Station. How I was caught they have not told me."

"Cute," Lowe commented.

"He called himself a spy," Toland objected. "You don't say that. You call yourself an 'officer.' An 'agent' is a foreigner who works for you, and a 'spy' is a bad guy. They use the same terms that we do."

The CIA/DIA report arrived on the telex printer an hour later. Gerhardt Eugen Falken. Age forty-four. Born in Bonn. Educated in public schools, good marks on his records—but his picture was missing from his high school yearbook. Military service as a draftee in a transport battalion whose records

had been destroyed in a barracks fire twelve years before, honorable discharge found in his personal effects. University degree in liberal arts, good marks, but again no picture, and three professors who gave him B grades can't seem to recall him. A small import-export business. Where did the money come from to start it? Nobody could answer that one. Lived in Bremen quietly, modestly, and alone. Friendly man, after a fashion. Always nodded to his neighbors, but never socialized with them. A good—"very correct," his elderly secretary said—boss to his employees. Traveled a lot. In short, many people knew he existed, quite a few did business with his firm, but nobody really knew a thing about him.

"I can hear the papers now: this guy has 'Agency' written all over him." Toland tore off the printer paper and tucked it into a folder. He had to brief CINCLANT in half an hour—and tell him what? Toland wondered.

"Tell him the Germans are going to attack Russia. Who knows, maybe this time they'll take Moscow," Lowe mused.

"Goddamn it, Chuck!"

"Okay, maybe just an operation to cripple the Russians so that they can reunite Germany once and for all. That's what Ivan is saying, Bob." Lowe looked out the window. "What we have here is a classic intelligence op. This guy Falken is a stone spook. No way in hell we can tell who he is, where he comes from, or, of course, who he's working for, unless something big breaks, and I'll wager you that it doesn't. We know—we think—that the Germans aren't this crazy, but the only evidence there is points to them. Tell the Admiral something bad is happening."

Toland did precisely that, only to have his head nearly taken off by a senior man who wanted and needed hard information.

KIEV, THE UKRAINE

"Comrades, we will commence offensive operations against the NATO land forces in two weeks," Alekseyev began. He explained the reasons for this. The assembled corps and division commanders accepted the information impassively. "The danger to the State is as great as anything we've had to face in over forty years. We have used the past four months to whip our Army into shape. You and your subordinates have responded well to our demands, and I can only say that I am proud to have served with you.

"I will leave the usual Party harangue to your group political officers." Alekseyev ventured a single smile in his delivery. "We are the professional officers of the Soviet Army. We know what our task is. We know why we have it. The life of the *Rodina* depends on our ability to carry out our mission. Nothing else matters," he concluded. *The hell it doesn't* . . .

11

Order of Battle

SHPOLA, THE UKRAINE

"You may proceed, Comrade Colonel," Alekseyev said over his radio circuit. He didn't say, *Make a fool of me now and you* will *be counting trees!* The General stood on a hill five hundred meters west of the regimental command post. With him was his aide, and Politburo member Mikhail Sergetov. *As if I need that distraction,* the General thought bleakly.

First the guns. They saw the flashes long before they heard the rolling thunder of the reports. Fired from behind another hill three kilometers away, the shells arced through the sky to their left, cutting through the air with a sound like the ripping of linen. The Party man cringed at the noise, Alekseyev noted, another soft civilian—

"I never did like that sound," Sergetov said shortly.

"Heard it before, Comrade Minister?" the General asked solicitously.

"I served my four years in a motor-rifle regiment," he replied. "And I never learned to trust my comrades at the artillery plotting tables. Foolish, I know. Excuse me, General."

Next came the tank guns. They watched through binoculars as the big main battle tanks emerged from the woods like something from a nightmare, their long cannon belching flame as they glided across the rolling ground of the exercise area. Interspersed with the tanks were the infantry fighting vehicles. Then came the armed helicopters, swooping at the objective from left and right, firing their guided missiles at the mockups of bunkers and armored vehicles.

By this time the hilltop objective was nearly hidden by explosions and flying dirt as the artillery fire marched back and forth across it. Alekseyev's trained eye evaluated the exercise closely. Anyone on that hilltop would be having a very hard time. Even in a small, deep, protective hole, even in a defiladed tank, that artillery fire would be terrifying, enough to distract the guided-weapons crews, enough to rattle communications men, perhaps enough to impede the officers there. Perhaps. But what of return fire from enemy artillery? What of antitank helicopters and aircraft that could sweep over the advancing tank battalions? So many unknowns in battle. So many imponderables. So many reasons to gamble, and so many reasons not to. What

if there were Germans on that hill? Did the Germans get rattled—even in 1945 at the gates of Berlin, had Germans ever been rattled?

It took twelve minutes before the tanks and infantry carriers were atop the hill. The exercise was over.

"Nicely done, Comrade General." Sergetov removed his ear protectors. It was good, to be away from Moscow, he thought, even for a few hours. Why, he wondered, did he feel more at home here than in his chosen place? Was it this man? "As I recall, the standard for this particular drill is fourteen minutes. The tanks and infantry vehicles cooperated well. I've never seen the use of armed helicopters, but that too was impressive."

"The greatest improvement was the coordination of artillery fire and infantry in the final assault phase. Before, they failed miserably. This time it was done properly—a tricky procedure."

"Well I know it." Sergetov laughed. "My company never took casualties from this, but two of my friends did, fortunately none of them fatal."

"Excuse my saying so, Comrade Minister, but it is good to see that our Politburo members have also served the State in a uniformed capacity. It makes communication easier for us poor soldiers." Alekseyev knew that it never hurt to have a friend at court, and Sergetov seemed a decent chap.

"My older son just left military service last year. My younger son will also serve the Red Army when he leaves the university."

It was not often that the General was so surprised. Alekseyev lowered his binoculars to stare briefly at the Party man.

"You need not say it, Comrade General." Sergetov smiled. "I know that too few children of high Party officials do this. I have spoken against it. Those who would rule must first serve. So I have some questions for you."

"Follow me, Comrade Minister, we shall speak sitting down." The two men walked back to Alekseyev's armored command vehicle. The General's aide dismissed the vehicle's crew and himself, leaving the two senior men alone inside the converted infantry carrier. The General pulled a thermos of hot tea from a compartment and poured two metal cups of the steaming liquid.

"Your health, Comrade Minister."

"And yours, Comrade General." Sergetov sipped briefly, then set the cup down on the map table. "How ready are we for Red Storm?"

"The improvement since January is remarkable. Our men are fit. They have been drilling in their tasks continuously. I would honestly prefer another two months, but, yes, I think we are ready."

"Well said, Pavel Leonidovich. Now shall we speak the truth?"

The Politburo member said this with a smile, but Alekseyev was instantly on guard. "I am not a fool, Comrade Minister. Lying to you would be madness."

"In our country, truth is often greater madness. Let us speak frankly. I am a candidate member of the Politburo. I have power, yes, but you and I both know what the limits of that power are. Only candidate members are out with our forces now, and we are tasked with reporting back to the full members. You might also draw some meaning from the fact that I am here with you, not in Germany."

That was not entirely true, Alekseyev noted. This unit would entrain for Germany in three days, and that was why the Party man was here.

“Are we truly ready, Comrade General? Will we win?”

“If we have strategic surprise, and if the *maskirovka* succeeds, yes, I believe we should win,” Alekseyev said cautiously.

“Not ‘we will surely win’?”

“You have served in uniform, Comrade Minister. On the field of battle there are no certainties. The measure of an army is not known until it has been blooded. Ours has not. We have done everything we know how to do to make our Army ready—”

“You said you wished for two more months,” Sergetov noted.

“A task like this is never truly finished. There are always improvements that need to be made. Only a month ago we initiated a program of replacing some senior officers at battalion and regimental level with younger, more vigorous subordinates. It is working very well indeed, but a number of these young captains now in majors’ jobs could do with some further seasoning.”

“So, you still have doubts?”

“There are always doubts, Comrade Minister. Fighting a war is not an exercise in mathematics. We deal with people, not numbers. Numbers have their own special kind of perfection. People remain people no matter what we try to do with them.”

“That is good, Pavel Leonidovich. That is very good. I have found an honest man.” Sergetov toasted the General with his tea. “I asked to come here. A comrade on the Politburo, Pyotr Bromkovskiy, told me of your father.”

“Uncle Petya?” Alekseyev nodded. “He was commissar with my father’s division on the drive to Vienna. He often visited our home when I was young. He is well?”

“No, he is old and sick. He says that the attack on the West is madness. The ramblings of an old man, perhaps, but his war record is distinguished, and because of that I want your evaluation of our chances. I will not inform on you, General. Too many people are fearful of telling us—we of the Politburo—the truth. But this is a time for that truth. I need your professional opinion. If I can trust you to give it to me, you can trust me not to harm you for it.” The entreaty ended as a harsh command.

Alekseyev looked his guest hard in the eyes. The charm was gone now. The blue was the color of ice. There was danger here, danger even for a general officer, but what the man had said was true.

“Comrade, we plan on a rapid campaign. The projections are that we can reach the Rhein in two weeks. Those are actually more conservative than our plans of only five years ago. NATO has improved its readiness, particularly its antitank capabilities. I would say three weeks is more realistic, depending on the degree of tactical surprise and the many imponderables present in war.”

“So the key is surprise?”

“The key is always surprise,” Alekseyev answered at once. He quoted Soviet doctrine exactly. “Surprise is the greatest factor in war. There are two kinds, tactical and strategic. Tactical surprise is an operational art. A skilled unit commander can generally achieve it. Strategic surprise is attained on the political level. That is your mission, not mine, and it is far more important than anything we in the Army can do. With true strategic surprise, if our *maskirovka* works, yes, we will almost certainly win on the battlefield.”

"And if not?"

Then we have murdered eight children for nothing, Alekseyev thought. And what part did this charming fellow have in that? "Then we might fail. Can you answer me a question? Can we split NATO politically?"

Sergetov shrugged, annoyed at being caught in one of his own traps. "As you said, Pavel Leonidovich, there are many imponderables. If it fails, then what?"

"Then the war will become a test of will and a test of reserves. We should win. It is far easier for us to reinforce our troops. We have more trained troops, more tanks, more aircraft close to the zone of action than do the NATO powers."

"And America?"

"America is on the far side of the Atlantic Ocean. We have a plan for closing the Atlantic. They can fly troops to Europe—but only troops, not their weapons, not their fuel. Those require ships, and ships are easier to sink than it is to destroy a fighting division. If full surprise is not achieved, that operational area will become quite important."

"And what of NATO surprises?"

The General leaned back. "By definition you cannot predict surprises, Comrade. That is why we have the intelligence organs, to reduce or even eliminate them. That is why our plans allow for a number of contingencies. For example, what if surprise is totally lost and NATO attacks first?" He shrugged. "They would not go far, but they would upset things. What still concerns me are nuclear responses. Again, more of a political question."

"Yes." Sergetov's worry was for his elder son. When the reserves were mobilized, Ivan would climb back into his tank, and he didn't need to be a Politburo member to know where that tank would be sent. Alekseyev had only daughters. *Lucky man,* Sergetov thought. "So, this unit goes to Germany?"

"The end of the week."

"And you?"

"During the initial phase we are tasked to be the strategic reserve for CINC-West's operations, plus to defend the Motherland against possible incursions from the southern flank. That does not concern us greatly. To threaten us, Greece and Turkey must cooperate. They will not, unless our intelligence information is completely false. My commander and I will later execute Phase 2 of the plan, and seize the Persian Gulf. Again, this will not be a problem. The Arabs are armed to the teeth, but there are not so many of them. What is your son doing now?"

"The elder? He's ending his first year of graduate school in languages. Top of his class—Middle Eastern languages." Sergetov was surprised at himself for not thinking of this.

"I could use a few more of those. Most of our Arabic language people are Muslims themselves, and for this task I would prefer people more reliable."

"And you do not trust the followers of Allah?"

"In war I trust no one. If your son is good at these languages, I will find a use for him, be sure of that." The formal agreement was made with nods, and each wondered if the other had planned it that way.

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

"Progress hasn't ended as scheduled," Toland said. "Satellite and other reconnaissance shows that the Soviet forces in Germany and western Poland are still together in operational formations living in the field. There are indications that rail transport is being marshaled at various points in the Soviet Union—that is, at points consistent with plans to move large numbers of troops west.

"Soviet Northern Fleet this morning sortied six submarines. The move is ostensibly a scheduled rotation to replace their operational squadron in the Med, so for the next two weeks they'll have more subs in the North Atlantic than is normally the case."

"Tell me about the group rotating out of the Med," CINCLANT ordered.

"A Victor, an Echo, three Foxtrots, and a Juliet. They all spent the last week tied alongside their tender at Tripoli—the tender stayed put, in Libyan territorial waters. They will clear the Straits of Gibraltar about 1300 Zulu tomorrow."

"They're not waiting for the new group to relieve them on station first?"

"No, Admiral. Usually they do wait for the replacement group to enter the Med, but about a third of the time they do it this way. That gives us twelve Soviet subs in transit north and south, plus a November and three more Foxtrots that have been exercising with the Cuban Navy. At the moment they are all tied alongside also—we checked up on them this morning, that data is two hours old."

"Okay, what about Europe?"

"No further information on Mr. Falken. The NATO intelligence services have run up against a blank wall, and there's been nothing new from Moscow, not even a date for the public trial. The Germans say that they have no knowledge whatever of the guy. It's just as though he appeared fully grown at age thirty-one when he started his business. His apartment was taken apart one stick at a time. No incriminating evidence was found—"

"Okay, Commander, give us your professional gut feeling."

"Admiral, Falken is a Soviet sleeper agent who was inserted into the Federal Republic thirteen years ago and used for very few missions, or more probably none at all, until this."

"So you think this whole thing's a Soviet intelligence operation. No big surprise there. What's its objective?" CINCLANT asked sharply.

"Sir, at the very least they are trying to put enormous political pressure on West Germany, perhaps to force them out of NATO. At worst—"

"I think we already figured the worst-case scenario out. Nice job, Toland. And I owe you an apology for yesterday. Not your fault that you didn't have all the information I wanted." Toland blinked. It was not often that a four-star admiral apologized to a reserve lieutenant-commander in front of other flag officers. "What's their fleet doing?"

"Admiral, we have no satellite photos of the Murmansk area. Too much cloud cover, but we expect clear weather tomorrow afternoon. The Norwegians are running increased air patrols in the Barents Sea, and they say that, aside from submarines, the Russians have relatively few ships at sea at

the moment. Of course, they've had relatively few ships at sea for a month."

"And that can change in three hours," an admiral noted. "Your evaluation of their fleet readiness?"

"The best it's been since I've been studying them," Toland replied. "As close to a hundred percent as I've ever seen it. As you just said, sir, they can put to sea at any time with almost their whole inventory."

"If they sortie, we'll know it quick. I have three subs up there keeping an eye on things," Admiral Pipes said.

"I talked with the Secretary of Defense right before I came here. He's going to meet with the President today and request a DEFCON-3 alert, global. The Germans are requesting that we keep Spiral Green in operation until the Russians show signs of easing things off. What do you think the Russians will do, Commander?" CINCLANT asked.

"Sir, we'll know more later today. The Soviet Party Secretary will be speaking at an emergency meeting of the Supreme Soviet, maybe also at the funeral tomorrow."

"Sentimental bastard," Pipes growled.

In front of the office television an hour later, Toland missed having Chuck Lowe around to back up his translation. The Chairman had an annoying tendency to speak rapidly, and Toland's Russian was barely up to it. The speech took forty minutes, three-quarters of which was standard political phraseology. At the end, however, the Chairman announced mobilization of Category-B reserve units to meet the potential German threat.

12

Funeral Arrangements

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

The House of Unions was unusually crowded, Toland saw. Ordinarily they only buried one hero at a time with such ceremony. Once there had been three dead cosmonauts, but now there were eleven heroes. Eight Young Octobrists from Pskov, three boys and five girls ranging in age from eight to ten, and three clerical employees, all men who worked directly for the Politburo, were laid out in polished birchwood coffins, surrounded by a sea of flowers. Toland examined the screen closely. The caskets were elevated so that the victims were visible, but two of the faces were covered with black silk, a framed photograph atop the coffins to show what the children had looked like in life. It was a piteous, horrible touch for the television cameras to linger on.

The Hall of Columns was draped in red and black, with even the ornate chandeliers masked for this solemn occasion. The families of the victims stood in an even line. Parents without their children, wives and children without fathers. They were dressed in the baggy, ill-cut clothes so characteristic of the Soviet Union. Their faces showed no emotion but shock, as if they were still trying to come to terms with the damage done to their lives, still hoping that they'd awake from this ghastly nightmare to find their loved ones safe in their own beds. And knowing that this would not be.

The Chairman of the Party came somberly down the line, embracing each of the bereaved, a black mourning band on his sleeve to contrast with the gaudy Order of Lenin emblem on his lapel. Toland looked closely at his face. There was real emotion there. One could almost imagine that he was burying members of his own family.

One of the mothers accepted the embrace, then the kiss, and nearly collapsed, falling to her knees and burying her face in her hands. The Chairman dropped down to her side even before her husband did, and pulled her head into his shoulder. A moment later he helped her back to her feet, moving her gently toward the protective arm of her husband, a captain in the Soviet Army whose face was a stone mask of rage.

God almighty, Toland thought. *They couldn't have staged that any better with Eisenstein himself directing.*

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

You cold-hearted bastard, Sergetov said to himself. He and the rest of the Politburo stood in another line to the left of the caskets. He kept his face pointed forward, toward the line of coffins, but he averted his eyes, only to see four television cameras recording the ceremony. The whole world was watching them, the TV people had assured them. So exquisitely organized it was. Here was the penultimate act of the *maskirovka.* The honor guard of Red Army soldiers mixed with boys and girls of the Moscow Young Pioneers to watch over the murdered children. The lilting violins. *Such a masquerade!* Sergetov told himself. *See how kind we are to the families of those we have murdered!* He had seen many lies in his thirty-five years in the Party. He had told enough of them himself—but never anything that came close to this. *Just as well,* he thought, *that I've had nothing to eat today.*

His eyes came back reluctantly to the waxen face of a child. He remembered the sleeping faces of his own children, now grown. So often after arriving home late from Party work, he had stolen a look into their bedroom at night to see their peaceful faces, always lingering to be sure that they were breathing normally, listening for the sniffles of a cold or the murmurs of a dream. How often had he told himself that he and the Party worked for their future? *No more colds, little one,* he said with his eyes to the nearest child. *No more dreams. See what the Party has done for your future.* His own eyes filled with tears—and he hated himself for it. His Comrades would think it part of the performance. He wanted to look around, to see what his Comrades of the Politburo thought of their handiwork. He wondered what the KGB team that had done the deed thought of their mission now. *If* they were still alive, he reflected. So easy to put them on an airplane and crash it into the ground so that not even executioners would know of them. All records of the bomb plot were already destroyed, he was sure, and of the thirty men who knew of it, more than half were right there, standing in line with him. Sergetov almost wished he had entered the building five minutes sooner. Better to be dead than to be a beneficiary of such infamy—but he knew better. In that case he would have played an even larger role in this brutal farce.

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

"Comrades. We see before us the innocent children of our nation," the Chairman began, speaking with slow, quiet diction that made Toland's translation job easier. CINCLANT's intelligence chief was at his side. "Killed by the infernal engine of State terrorism. Killed by a nation that has twice defiled our Motherland with unholy dreams of conquest and murder. We see before us the dedicated, humble servants of our Party who asked nothing more than to serve the State. We see martyrs to the security of the Soviet Union. We see martyrs to the aggression of fascists.

"Comrades, to the families of these innocent children, and to the families of

these three fine men, I say that a reckoning will come. I say that their deaths will not be forgotten. I say that there will be justice for this vicious crime . . .”

“Jesus.” Toland stopped translating and looked over at his senior.

“Yeah. There’s going to be a war. We have a linguistic team across the street doing a full translation, Bob. Let’s go see the boss.”

“You’re sure?” CINCLANT asked.

“It’s possible they will settle for something less, sir,” Toland replied. “But I don’t think so. Everything about this exercise has been run in such a way as to inflame the Russian population to a degree I’ve never seen before.”

“Let’s put this all the way on the table. You’re saying that they deliberately murdered these people to foment a crisis.” CINCLANT looked down at his desk. “It’s hard to believe, even for them.”

“Admiral, either we believe that or we believe that the West German government has decided to precipitate a war against the Soviet Union on their own hook. In the second case the Germans would have to be totally out of their fucking minds, sir,” Toland blurted, forgetting that only admirals swear in front of admirals.

“But *why?”*

“We don’t know the why. That’s a problem with intelligence, sir. It’s a lot easier to tell the what than the why.”

CINCLANT stood and walked to the corner of his office. There was going to be a war, and he didn’t know why. He wanted the why. The why might be important.

“We’re starting to call up reserves. Toland, you have done one hell of a good job over the past two months. I’m going to request that you get bumped up a grade to full commander. You’re outside the normal zone, but I think I just might be able to handle it. There’s an open intel billet with Com Second Fleet staff. He’s put in a request for you if things go sour, and it looks like they are. You would be number three on his threat team, and you’d be out on a carrier. I want you out there.”

“It sure would be nice to have a day or two with the family, sir.”

The Admiral nodded. “We owe you that much. *Nimitz* is in transit anyway. You can meet her off the Spanish coast. Report back here Wednesday morning with your bags packed.” CINCLANT came over to shake his hand. “Well done, Commander.”

Two miles away, *Pharris* was tied alongside her tender. As Ed Morris watched from the bridge, ASROC rocket-boosted torpedoes were being lowered onto his bow by crane, then fed into the magazine. Another crane was lowering supplies onto the helicopter hangar aft, and a third of his crew was hard at work moving them into proper storage spaces throughout the ship. He’d had the *Pharris* for nearly two years now, and this was the first time they’d had a full weapons loadout. The eight-cell “pepperbox” ASROC launcher was being serviced by shoreside technicians to correct a minor mechanical glitch. Another team from the tender was going over a radar problem with his own crew. This was the end of his own checklist of problems to be fixed. The ship’s engineering plant was functioning perfectly, better than he would have expected for a ship nearly twenty years old. In another few hours, USS *Pharris* would be completely ready . . . for what?

"Still no sailing orders, skipper?" his executive officer asked.

"Nope. I imagine everybody's wondering what we'll be doing, but for my money even the flags"—Morris always referred to admirals as flags—"don't know yet. There's a meeting of COs tomorrow morning at CINCLANTFLT. S'pose I'll find out something then. Maybe," he said dubiously.

"What do you think of this German stuff?"

"The Krauts I've worked with at sea have been all right. Trying to blast the whole Russian command structure—nobody's that crazy." Morris shrugged, a frown spreading across his dark face. "XO, there ain't no rule that says the world has to make sense."

"Damn if that ain't the truth. I think those ASROCs are going to be needed, skipper."

"I'm afraid you're right."

CROFTON, MARYLAND

"To sea?" Martha Toland asked.

"That's where they want me, and it's where I belong, like it or not." Bob had trouble meeting his wife's eyes. Listening to the brittle edge on her voice at the moment was bad enough. It wasn't his job to bring fear into her life, but that was precisely what he'd just done.

"Bob, is it as bad as I think?"

"There's no telling, babe. It might be, but there's no telling. Look, Marty, you remember Ed Morris and Dan McCafferty, right? They both have their own commands now, and they have to go. Am I supposed to stay in a nice safe place on the beach?"

His wife's reply was devastating.

"They're professionals, you're not," she said coldly. "You play weekend warrior and serve your two weeks a year just to *pretend* that you're still in the Navy, Bob. You're a civilian spook, you don't belong out there. You can't even *swim!"* Marty Toland could give lessons to sea lions.

"The hell I can't!" Toland protested, knowing that it was an absurd thing to argue about.

"Right! I haven't seen you in a pool in five years. Oh, dammit, Bob, what if something happens to you? You go out there to play your damned games and leave me behind with the kids. What do I tell *them?"*

"You tell them I didn't run away, I didn't hide, I—" Toland looked away. He hadn't expected this. Marty came from a Navy family. She was supposed to understand. But there were tears on her cheeks now, and her mouth was quivering. He took a step forward to wrap his arms around her. "Look, I'm going to be on a carrier, okay? The biggest ship we have, the safest, best-protected ship we have, with a dozen other ships surrounding her to keep the bad guys away, and a hundred airplanes. They need me to help figure out what the bad guys are up to so they can keep them as far away as possible. Marty, what I'm doing is necessary. They need me. The Admiral asked for me

by name. I'm important—at least somebody thinks so." He smiled gently to hide his lie. A carrier was the best-protected ship in the fleet because she had to be: the carrier was also the number-one target for the Russians.

"I'm sorry." She broke out of his grasp and walked to the window. "How are Danny and Ed?"

"A lot busier that I am. Danny's sub is somewhere up—well, right now he's a lot closer to the Soviets than I'll ever be. Ed's getting ready to sail. He's got a 1052—an escort ship—and he'll probably be out protecting convoys or something from submarines. They both have their own families. At least you get a chance to see me before I go."

Marty turned and smiled for the first time since he had unexpectedly walked through the door. "You will be careful."

"I'll be damned careful, babe." But would it matter?

13

The Strangers Arrive and Depart

AACHEN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

It was the traffic that did it. The envelope came as promised to the proper post office box, and the key worked as he'd been told to expect. *Minimum personnel involvement.* The major grumbled at having to expose himself in the open this way, but it wasn't the first time he'd had to work with the KGB, and he needed this up-to-date information if his mission were to have any chance of success. Besides, he smiled briefly, the Germans are *so* proud of their postal service . . .

The major folded the oversized envelope and tucked it into his jacket pocket before leaving the building. His clothing was entirely German in origin, as were the sunglasses which he donned on opening the door. He scanned the sidewalk in both directions, looking for anyone who might be trailing him. Nothing. The KGB officer had promised him that the safe house was totally secure, that no one had the least suspicion that they were here. Perhaps. The taxi was waiting for him across the street. He was in a hurry. The cars were stopped on the street, and he decided to go straight across instead of walking to the corner. The major was from Russia and not accustomed to the unruly European traffic where the pedestrians are expected to follow the rules too. He was a hundred meters from the nearest traffic cop, and the nearby German drivers could sense that the cop's back was turned. It should have been as much a surprise to the major as to American tourists that, when driving, the orderly Germans were anything but. He stepped off the curb without looking, just as the traffic started moving.

He never even saw the accelerating Peugeot. It was not moving fast, only twenty-five kilometers per hour. Fast enough. The right fender caught him on the hip, spun him around, and catapulted the major into a lamppost. He was knocked unconscious before he knew what had happened, which was just as well, since his legs remained in the street and the Peugeot's rear wheel crushed both ankles. The damage to his head was spectacular. A major artery was cut open, and blood fountained onto the sidewalk as he lay motionless on his face. The car stopped at once, its driver leaping out to see what she had done. There was a scream from a child who had never seen so much blood, and a postman raced to the corner to summon the police officer standing in the traffic circle, while another man went into a store to call an ambulance.

The stopped traffic allowed the taxi driver to leave his vehicle and come over. He tried to get close, but already a half dozen men were bending over the body.

"Er ist tot," one observed, and the body was pale enough to make one think so. The major was already in shock. So was the Peugeot's driver, whose eyes were already dripping tears as her breaths came in irregular sobs. She was trying to tell everyone that the man had stepped right in front of her car, that she hadn't had a chance to stop. She spoke in French, which only made things more difficult.

Pushing through the spectators, the taxi driver was almost close enough to touch the body by now. He had to get that envelope . . . but then the policeman arrived.

"Alles zurück!" the cop ordered, remembering his training: first, get things under control. His training also enabled him to resist the instinct to move the body. This was a head injury, perhaps a neck injury also, and those were not to be moved except by *Experten.* A bystander called out that he had summoned an ambulance. The policeman nodded curtly and hoped it would arrive soon. Making traffic accident reports was far more routine than watching an unconscious—or dead?—man bleed untidily on the sidewalk. He looked up gratefully a moment later to see a lieutenant—a senior watch supervisor—pushing his way in.

"Ambulance?"

"On the way, Herr Leutnant. I am Dieter, Gunther—traffic detail. My post is down the street."

"Who was driving the car here?" the lieutenant asked.

The driver stood as erect as she could and started gasping out her story in French. A passerby who had seen the whole thing cut her off.

"This one just stepped off the curb without looking. The lady had no chance to stop. I am a banker, and I came out of the post office right behind this one. He tried to cross at the wrong place and stepped into the street without looking at the traffic. My card." The banker handed the lieutenant his business card.

"Thank you, Dr. Müller. You have no objection to making a statement?"

"Of course. I can come directly to your station if you wish."

"Good." The lieutenant rarely had one this clean-cut.

The taxi driver just stood at the edge of the crowd. An experienced KGB case officer, he'd seen operations go bad before, but this was . . . absurd. There was always something new that could ruin an operation, so often the most simple, most foolish thing. This proud Spetznaz commando, cut down by a middle-aged Frenchwoman driving a sedan! Why hadn't he looked at the damned traffic? *I should have gotten someone else to fetch the envelope, and screw the damned orders. Security,* he swore behind an impassive face. Orders from Moscow Center: *minimum personnel involvement.* He walked back across the street to his cab, wondering how he'd explain this to his control. Mistakes were never the Center's fault.

The ambulance arrived next. The sergeant removed the victim's wallet from his pants. The victim was one Siegfried Baum—wonderful, the lieutenant thought, a Jew—from the Altona district of Hamburg. The driver of the car

was French. He decided he had to ride in to the hospital with the victim. An "international" accident: there'd be extra paperwork on this. The lieutenant wished he'd stayed in the *Gasthaus* across the street and finished his after lunch pilsener. So much for devotion to duty. Then there was his possible mobilization to worry about . . .

The ambulance crew worked quickly. A cervical collar was fitted around the victim's neck, and a backboard brought in before they rolled him over onto the stretcher. The broken lower legs were immobilized with cardboard splints. The paramedic clucked over them. Both ankles looked to be badly crushed. The whole procedure took six minutes by the lieutenant's watch, and he boarded the ambulance, leaving three police officers to manage the rest of the incident and clear the accident scene.

"How bad is he?"

"Probably fractured his skull. He has lost a lot of blood. What happened?"

"Walked out into traffic without watching."

"Idiot," the paramedic commented. "As if we don't have work enough."

"Will he live?"

"Depends on the head injury." The ambulanceman shrugged. "The surgeons will be working on him within the hour. You know his name? I have a form to fill out."

"Baum, Siegfried. Kaiserstrasse 17, Altona District, Hamburg."

"Well, he'll be in the hospital in four minutes." The paramedic took his pulse and made a notation. "Doesn't look Jewish."

"Be careful saying things like that," the lieutenant cautioned.

"My wife is Jewish. His blood pressure is dropping rapidly." The ambulanceman debated starting an IV, but decided against it. Better to let the surgeons make that decision.

"Hans, have you radioed in?"

"Ja, they know what to expect," the driver replied. "Isn't Ziegler on duty today?"

"I hope so."

The driver horsed the ambulance into a hard left turn, and all the while the two-tone siren cleared traffic ahead of them. One minute later he halted the Mercedes and backed it into the emergency receiving area. A doctor and two orderlies were already waiting.

German hospitals are nothing if not efficient. Within ten minutes the victim, now a patient, had been intubated to protect his airway, punctured for a unit of O-positive blood and a bottle of IV fluids, and wheeled up to neurosurgery for immediate surgery at the hands of Professor Anton Ziegler. The lieutenant had to stay in the emergency room with the registrar.

"So who was he?" the young doctor asked. The policeman gave the information over.

"A German?"

"Does that seem strange?" the lieutenant asked.

"Well, when the radio call came in, and said you were coming also, I assumed that this was, well, sensitive, as though a foreigner were injured."

"The auto was driven by a Frenchwoman."

"Ach, that explains it. I thought he was the foreigner."

"Why so?"

"His dental work. I noticed when I intubated him. He has a number of cavities, and they've been repaired with stainless steel—sloppy work."

"Perhaps he originally comes from the East Zone," the lieutenant observed. The registrar snorted.

"No German ever did that work! A carpenter could do better." The doctor filled out the admission form rapidly.

"What are you telling me?"

"He has poor dental work. Strange. He is very fit. Dressed well. Jewish. But he has miserable dental work." The doctor sat down. "We see many strange things, of course."

"Where are his personal effects?" The lieutenant was a naturally curious type, one reason he'd become a policeman after his service in the *Bundeswehr*. The doctor walked the officer to a room where the personal effects were inventoried for secure storage by a hospital employee.

They found the clothing neatly arranged, with the jacket and shirt separate so that their bloodstains would not damage anything else. Pocket change, a set of keys, and a large envelope were set aside for cataloging. The orderly was filling out a form, looking up to list exactly what had come in with the patient.

The policeman lifted the manila envelope. It had been mailed from Stuttgart yesterday evening. A ten-mark stamp. On an impulse he pulled out a pocketknife and slit the top of the envelope open. Neither the doctor nor the orderly objected. This was a police officer, after all.

A large and two smaller envelopes were inside. He opened the large one first and extracted the contents. First he saw a diagram. It looked ordinary enough until he saw that it was a photocopy of a German Army document stamped *Geheim.* Secret. Then the name: Lammersdorf. He was holding a map of a NATO communications headquarters not thirty kilometers from where he stood. The police lieutenant was a captain in the German Army Reserves, and held an intelligence billet. Who was Siegfried Baum? He opened the other envelopes. Next he went to a phone.

ROTA, SPAIN

The transport jet arrived right on time. A fair breeze greeted them from the sea as Toland emerged from the cargo door. A pair of sailors was there to direct the arrivals. Toland was pointed to a helicopter a hundred yards away, its rotor already turning. He walked quickly toward it, along with four other men. Five minutes later he was airborne, his first visit to Spain having lasted exactly eleven minutes. No one attempted conversation. Toland looked out one of the small windows available. They were over a patch of blue water, evidently flying southwest. They were aboard a Sea King antisubmarine helicopter. The crew chief was also a sonar operator, and he was fiddling with his gear, evidently running some sort of test. The interior walls of the aircraft were bare. Aft was the sonobuoy storage, and the dipping sonar transducer

was caged in its compartment in the floor. For all that, the aircraft was crowded, most of its space occupied by weapon and sensor instrumentation. They'd been in the air for half an hour when the helo started circling. Two minutes later, they landed on USS *Nimitz*.

The flight deck was hot, noisy, and stank of jet fuel. A deck crewman motioned them toward a ladder which led down to the catwalk surrounding the deck, and into a passageway beneath it. Here they encountered air conditioning and relative quiet, sheltered from the flight operations going on overhead.

"Lieutenant Commander Toland?" a yeoman called out.

"Here."

"Please come with me, sir."

Toland followed the sailor through the rabbit warren of compartments below the flight deck, and was finally pointed to an open door.

"You must be Toland," observed a somewhat frazzled officer.

"Must be—unless the time zone changes did something."

"You want the good news or the bad news?"

"Bad."

"Okay, you'll have to hot-bunk. Not enough berths for all of us intel types. Shouldn't matter much, though. I haven't slept for three days—one of the reasons you're here. The good news is that you just got another half a stripe. Welcome aboard, Commander. I'm Chip Bennett." The officer handed Toland a telex sheet. "Looks as though CINCLANT likes you. Nice to have friends in high places."

The message announced tersely that Lieutenant Commander Robert A. Toland, III, USNR, had been "frocked" as a commander, USNR, which gave him the right to wear the three gold stripes of a commander, but not to collect a commander's pay just yet. It was like a kiss from one's sister. Well, he reflected, maybe a cousin.

"I guess it's a step in the right direction. What am I going to be doing here?"

"Theoretically you're supposed to assist me, but we're so friggin' overwhelmed with information at the moment that we're divvying the territory up some. I'm going to let you handle the morning and evening briefs to the battle group commander. We do that at 0700 and 2000. Rear Admiral Samuel B. Baker, Jr. Son of a B. He's an ex-nuc. Likes it quick and clean, with footnotes and sources on the writeup to read afterward. He almost never sleeps. Your battle station will be in the CIC with the group tactical warfare officer." Walker rubbed his eyes. "So what the hell is happening in this crazy world?"

"What's it look like?" Toland answered.

"Yeah. Something new just came in. The space shuttle *Atlantis* was pulled off the pad at Kennedy today, supposedly for a computer glitch, right? Three newspapers just broke a story that she was taken down for payload replacement. They were supposed to loft three or four commercial communications birds. Instead, the payload is reconnaissance satellites."

"I guess people are starting to take this seriously."

AACHEN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

"Siegfried Baum" awoke six hours later to see three men wearing surgical garb. The effect of the anesthesia still heavy on him, his eyes could not focus properly.

"How are you feeling?" one asked. In Russian.

"What happened to me?" The major answered in Russian.

Ach so. "You were struck by a car and you are now in a military hospital," the man lied. They were still in Aachen, near the German-Belgian frontier.

"What . . . I was just coming out to—" The major's voice was that of a drunken man, but it stopped abruptly. His eyes tried to focus properly.

"It is all finished for you, my friend." Now the speaker switched to German. "We know you are a Soviet officer, and you were found in possession of classified government documents. Tell me, what is your interest in Lammersdorf?"

"I have nothing to say," replied "Baum" in German.

"A little late for that," the interrogator chided, switching back to Russian. "But we'll make it easy for you. The surgeon tells us that it is now safe to try a new, ah, medication for you, and you will tell us everything you know. Be serious. No one can resist this form of questioning. You might also wish to consider your position," the man said more harshly. "You are an officer in the army of a foreign government, here in the Federal Republic illegally, traveling with false papers, and in possession of secret documents. At the least, we can imprison you for life. But, given what your government is doing at the moment, we are not concerned with 'least' measures. If you cooperate you will live, and probably be exchanged back to the Soviet Union at a later date for a German agent. We will even say that we got all our information due to the use of drugs; no harm could possibly come to you from this. If you do not cooperate, you will die of injuries received in a motor accident."

"I have a family," Major Andre Chernyavin said quietly, trying to remember his duty. The combination of fear and drug-induced haze made a hash of his emotions. He couldn't tell there was a vial of sodium pentothol dripping into his IV line, and already impairing his higher brain functions. Soon he would be unable to consider the long-term consequences of his action. Only the here and now would matter.

"They will come to no harm," Colonel Weber promised. An Army officer assigned to the *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, he had interrogated many Soviet agents. "Do you think they punish the family of every spy we catch? Soon no one would ever come here to spy on us at all." Weber allowed his voice to soften. The drugs were beginning to take effect, and as the stranger's mind became hazy he would be gentle, cajoling the information from him. The funny part, he mused, was that he'd been instructed on how to do this by a psychiatrist. Despite the many movies about brutal German interrogators, he hadn't had the least training in forceful extraction of information. *Too bad,* he thought. *If there was ever a time I need it, it is now.* Most of the colonel's family lived outside Kulmbach, only a few kilometers from the border.

KIEV, THE UKRAINE

"Captain Ivan Mikhailovich Sergetov reporting as ordered, Comrade General."

"Be seated, Comrade Captain." The resemblance to his father was remarkable, Alekseyev thought. Short and stocky. The same proud eyes, the same intelligence. Another young man on his way up. "Your father tells me that you are an honor student in Middle East languages."

"This is correct, Comrade General."

"Have you also studied the people who speak them?"

"That is an integral part of the curriculum, Comrade." The younger Sergetov smiled. "We've even had to read through the Koran. It is the only book most of them have ever read, and therefore an important factor in understanding the savages."

"You do not like the Arabs, then?"

"Not particularly. But our country must do business with them. I get along with them well enough. My class will occasionally meet with diplomats from politically acceptable countries to practice our language skills. Mainly Libya, and occasionally people from Yemen and Syria."

"You have three years in tanks. Can we defeat the Arabs in battle?"

"The Israelis have done so with ease, and they don't have a fraction of our resources. The Arab soldier is an illiterate peasant, poorly trained and led by incompetent officers."

A young man with all the answers. And perhaps you will explain Afghanistan to me? Alekseyev thought. "Comrade Captain, you will be attached to my personal staff for the forthcoming operation against the Persian Gulf states. I will lean on you for linguistic work, and to support our intelligence estimates. I understand that you are training to be a diplomat. That is useful to me. I always like to have a second opinion of the intelligence data that KGB and GRU send us. Not that I distrust our comrades in the intelligence arms, you understand. I simply like to have someone who thinks 'Army' to review the data. The fact that you've served in tanks is doubly valuable to me. One more question. How are the reservists reacting to the mobilization?"

"With enthusiasm, of course," the captain replied.

"Ivan Mikhailovich, I presume your father told you about me. I listen attentively to the words of our Party, but soldiers preparing for battle need to know the unvarnished truth so that we can bring about the Party's wishes."

Captain Sergetov noted how carefully that had been phrased. "Our people are angry, Comrade General. They are enraged over the incident in the Kremlin, the murder of the children. I think 'enthusiasm' is not a great exaggeration."

"And you, Ivan Mikhailovich?"

"Comrade General, my father told me that you would ask this question. He told me to assure you that he had no prior knowledge of it, and that the important thing is to safeguard our country so that similar tragedies will never again be necessary."

Alekseyev did not reply at once. He was chilled by the knowledge that Sergetov had read his mind three days before, and dumbfounded that he had confided so enormous a secret to his son. But it was good to know that he had

not misread the Politburo man. He was a man to be trusted. Perhaps his son also? Mikhail Eduardovich evidently thought so.

"Comrade Captain, these are things to be forgotten. We have enough to occupy us already. You will work down the hall in room twenty-two. There is work waiting for you. Dismissed."

BONN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

"It's all a sham," Weber reported to the Chancellor four hours later. The helicopter he'd flown to Bonn hadn't even left the ground yet. "The whole bomb-plot business is all a cruel and deliberate sham."

"We know that, Colonel," the Chancellor replied testily. He'd been awake for two days straight now, trying to come to grips with the sudden German-Russian crisis.

"Herr Kanzler, the man we now have in the hospital is Major Andre Ilych Chernyavin. He entered the country over the Czech border two weeks ago with a separate set of false papers. He is an officer in the Soviet Spetznaz forces, their elite *Sturmtruppen.* He was badly injured in an auto accident—the fool stepped right in front of an automobile without looking—and was carrying a complete diagram for the NATO communications base at Lammersdorf. The station's security posts were just relocated a month ago. This document is only two weeks old. He also has the watch schedule and a roster of watch officers—and that is only three *days* old! He and a team of ten men came over the Czech border, and only just got their operational orders. His current orders are to attack the base exactly at midnight, the day after receipt of his alert signal. There is also a cancellation signal should plans change. We have them both."

"He came into Germany long before—" The Chancellor was surprised in spite of himself. The entire affair was so unreal.

"Exactly. It all fits, Herr Kanzler. For whatever reason, Ivan is coming to attack Germany. Everything to this point was a sham, all designed to put us to sleep. Here is a full transcript of our interview with Chernyavin. He has knowledge of four other Spetznaz operations, all of them consistent with a full-scale assault across our borders. He is now at our military hospital in Koblenz under heavy guard. We also have a videotape of his admission."

"What of the chance that this is all some sort of Russian provocation? Why weren't these documents brought over when they crossed the border?"

"The reconstruction of the Lammersdorf installation meant that they needed correct information. As you know, we've been upgrading the security measures at our NATO communications stations since last summer, and our Russian friends must have been updating their assault plans as well. The fact that they have these documents at all—just days old, some of them—is most frightening. As for how we happened to get hold of this man—" Weber explained the circumstances of the accident. "We have every reason to believe that it was a genuine accident, not a provocation. The driver, a Madame Anne-

Marie LeCourte, is a fashion agent—she sells dresses for some Paris designer or other; not a likely cover for a Soviet spy. And why do such a thing? Do they expect us to launch an attack into the DDR based on this? First they accuse of us of bombing the Kremlin, then try to provoke us? It's not logical. What we have here is a man whose mission is to prepare the way for a Soviet invasion of Germany by paralyzing NATO communication links immediately before hostilities commence."

"But to do such a thing—even if such an attack is planned...."

"The Soviets are intoxicated with 'special operations' groups, a lesson from Afghanistan. These men are highly trained, very dangerous. And it's a cunning plan. The Jewish identification, for example. The bastards play on our sensitivity with the Jews, no? If he is stopped by a police officer, he can make a casual remark about how Germans treat Jews, and what would a young policeman do, eh? Probably apologize and send him on his way." Weber smiled grimly. That had been a carefully thought-out touch. He had to admire it. "What they could not allow for was the unexpected. We've been lucky. We should now make use of this luck. Herr Kanzler, this data must go to NATO high command immediately. For the moment we have their safe house under observation. We may wish to assault it. GSG-9 is ready for the mission, but perhaps it should be a NATO operation."

"I must meet with my cabinet first. Then I will speak with the President of the United States on the telephone and the other NATO chiefs of government."

"Forgive me, Chancellor, but there is no time for that. With your permission, within the hour I will give a copy of the videotape to the CIA liaison officer, and also to the British and French. The Russians are going to attack us. Better to alert the intelligence services first, which will lay the groundwork for your talk with the President and others. We must move at once, Herr Kanzler. This is a life-and-death situation."

The Chancellor stared down at his desk. "Agreed, Colonel. What do you propose to do with this Chernyavin?"

Weber had already moved on that score. "He died of injuries sustained in the auto accident. It will appear on the television news this evening, and in the newspapers. Of course he will be made available to our allies for further interrogation. I am certain the CIA and others will wish to see him before midnight."

The Chancellor of the German Federal Republic stared out the windows of his Bonn office. He remembered his armed service forty years before: a frightened teenager with a helmet that nearly covered his eyes. "It's happening again." *How many will die this time?*

"Ja." Dear God, what will it be like?

LENINGRAD, R.S.F.S.R.

The captain looked out over the port side of his ship from the bridge wing. Tugs pushed the last barge onto the aft elevator, then backed away. The

elevator rose a few meters, and the barge settled into place on the trolleys already set on the fore-and-aft tracks. *Julius Fucik's* first officer supervised the loading process from the winch-control station aft, communicating by portable radio to other men scattered about the afterpart of the ship. The elevator matched levels with that of the third cargo deck, and the access door opened to expose the vast cargo deck. Crewmen strung cables onto the trolleys and bolted them rapidly into place.

Winches pulled the barge forward into the third, lowermost, cargo deck of the Seabee—for Seagoing Barge Carrier—ship. As soon as the trolleys were over their painted marks, the watertight door closed and lights came on to allow the crew to secure the barge firmly in place. *Neatly done*, the first officer thought. The whole loading process had been completed in only eleven hours, almost a record. He supervised the process of securing the after-portion of the ship for sea.

"The last barge will be fully secured in thirty minutes," the bosun reported to the first officer, who forwarded the information to the bridge.

Captain Kherov switched buttons on his phone to talk to the engineering spaces. "You will be ready to answer bells in thirty minutes."

"Very well. Thirty minutes." The engineer hung up.

On the bridge, the captain turned to his most senior passenger, a general of paratroops wearing the blue jacket of a ship's officer. "How are your men?"

"Some are seasick already." General Andreyev laughed. They had been brought aboard inside the sealed barges—except for the General, of course—along with tons of military cargo. "Thank you for allowing my men to walk around the lower decks."

"I run a ship, not a prison. Just so they don't tamper with anything."

"They've been told," Andreyev assured him.

"Good. We will have plenty of work for them to do in a few days."

"You know, this is my first trip aboard ship."

"Really? Fear not, Comrade General. It is much safer, and much more comfortable, than flying in an aircraft—and then jumping out of it!" The captain laughed. "He is a big ship and he rides very well even with so light a load."

"Light load?" the General asked. "This is more than half of my division's equipment you have aboard."

"We can carry well over thirty-five thousand metric tons of cargo. Your equipment is bulky, but not that heavy." This was a new thought for the General, who usually had to calculate in terms of moving equipment by air.

Below, over a thousand men of the 234th Guards Air Assault Regiment were milling about under the control of their officers and NCOs. Except for brief periods at night, they'd be stuck down there until the *Fucik* cleared the English Channel. They tolerated it surprisingly well. Even when crammed with barges and equipment, the cavernous cargo spaces were far larger than the military transport aircraft they were accustomed to. The ship's crew was rigging planks from one barge top to another so that there would be more room for them to use for sleeping, and to get the soldiers off the oily workspaces that the crew needed to patrol. Soon, the regimental officers were to be briefed on shipboard systems, with special attention to the firefighting systems. A strict

no-smoking rule was being enforced, but the professional seamen took no chances. The crewmen were surprised at the humble demeanor of the swaggering paratroopers. Even elite troops, they learned, could be cowed by exposure to a new environment. It was a pleasant observation for the merchant seamen.

Three tugs pulled on lines hanging from the ship's side, drawing her slowly away from her dock. Two others joined as soon as she was clear, pushing the bow around to face out to sea from the Leningrad terminal. The General watched the ship's captain control the procedure, as he raced from one bridge wing to another with a junior officer in tow, often giving rudder orders as he passed. Captain Kherov was nearly sixty, and more than two-thirds of his life had been spent at sea.

"Rudder amidships!" he called. "Ahead slow."

The helmsman accomplished both commands in under a second, the General saw. *Not bad,* he thought, remembering the surly comments he'd heard from time to time about merchant seamen. The captain rejoined him.

"Ah, that's the hardest part behind us."

"But you had help for that," the General observed.

"Some help! Damned tugboats are run by drunks. They damage ships all the time here." The captain walked over to the chart. *Good: a deep straight channel all the way to the Baltic.* He could relax a bit. The captain walked over to his bridge chair and settled in. "Tea!"

A steward appeared at once with a tray of cups.

"There is no liquor aboard?" Andreyev was surprised.

"Not unless your men brought it, Comrade General. I do not tolerate alcohol on my ship."

"That is true enough." The first officer joined them. "All secure aft. The special sea detail is set. Lookouts posted. The deck inspection is under way."

"Deck inspection?"

"We normally check at the turn of every watch for open hatches, Comrade General," the first officer explained. "With your men aboard, we will check every hour."

"You do not trust my men?" The General was mildly offended.

"Would you trust one of us aboard one of your airplanes?" the captain replied.

"You are right, of course. Please excuse me." Andreyev knew a professional when he saw one. "Can you spare a few men to teach my junior officers and sergeants what they need to know?"

The first officer pulled a set of papers from his pocket. "The classes begin in three hours. In two weeks, your men will be proper seamen."

"We are particularly worried about damage control," the captain said.

"That concerns you?"

"Of course. We stand into danger, Comrade General. I would also like to see what your men can do for ship defense."

The General hadn't thought of that. The operation had been thrown together too quickly for his liking, without the chance to train his men in their shipboard duties. Security considerations. Well, no operation was ever fully planned, was it? "I'll have my antiair commander meet with you as soon as

you are ready." He paused. "What sort of damage can this ship absorb and still survive?"

"He is not a warship, Comrade General." Kherov smiled cryptically. "However, you will note that nearly all of our cargo is on steel barges. Those barges have double steel walls, with a meter of space between them, which may even be better than the compartmentalization on a warship. With luck, we will not have to learn. Fire is what concerns me most. The majority of ships lost in battle die from fire. If we can set up an effective firefighting drill, we may well be able to survive at least one, perhaps as many as three missile hits."

The General nodded thoughtfully. "My men will be available to you whenever you wish."

"As soon as we clear the Channel." The captain got up and checked the chart again. "Sorry that we cannot offer you a pleasure cruise. Perhaps the return trip."

The General lifted his tea. "I will toast that, Comrades. My men are at your disposal until the time comes. Success!"

"Yes. Success!" Captain Kherov lifted his cup also, almost wishing for a glass of vodka to toast their enterprise properly. He was ready. Not since his youth in Navy minesweepers had he had the chance to serve the State directly, and he was determined to see this mission through.

KOBLENZ, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

"Good evening, Major." In a guarded wing of the military hospital, the chief of CIA's Bonn Station sat down with his British and French counterparts and a pair of translators. "Shall we talk about Lammersdorf?" Unbeknownst to the Germans, the British had a file on Major Chernyavin's activities in Afghanistan, including a poor but recognizable photograph of the man remembered by the Mudjahaddin as the Devil of the Kandahar. General Jean-Pierre de Ville of the French DGSE handled the questioning, since he spoke the best Russian. By this time Chernyavin was a broken man. His only attempt at resistance was killed by listening to a tape of his drug-induced confession. A dead man to his own countrymen, the major repeated what these men already knew but had to hear for themselves. Three hours later, Flash-priority dispatches went to three Western capitals, and representatives of the three security services prepared briefing papers for their counterparts in the other NATO countries.

14

Gas

WANDLITZ, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

SCENARIO 6

Spring-summer weather patterns (moderate humidity and temperatures; rain probability 35% per day); westerly and southwesterly winds of 10 to 30 km/hr at ground level, indexed for altitude; use of highly persistent agents against communications nexi, POMCUS sites, airfields, supply, and nuclear weapon storage facilities (normal computed delivery error rate, see Appendix F of Annex 1). The chief of the Communist Party of the German Democratic Republic read on to the bottom of the abstract, despite the acid churning in his stomach:

As with Scenarios 1, 3, 4, and 5, any warning of over 15 minutes will ensure virtually complete MOPP-4 protection of alerted combat and support personnel. The problem of civilian casualties remains, since over a hundred targets of the categories cited above are near major population centers. Biodegradation of persistent agents such as GD (the expected Soviet agent of choice; for an analysis of Soviet literature on this topic, see Appendix C of Annex 2) will be slowed by generally mild temperatures and weather-reduced sunlight photochemical action. This will allow the agents in aerosol form to drift on wind currents. Given minimum source concentrations of 2 milligrams per cubic meter, predicted vertical temperature gradients, and cloudwidth inputs, we see that the downwind toxic vapor hazard to large areas of the FRG and DDR will be approximately 0.3 (plus or minus 50% in our calculations, allowing for expected impurities and chemical breakdown in the chemical munitions) as great as that at the targets themselves.

Since open Soviet literature calls for source (that is, target) concentrations well beyond median lethal dose (LCT-50), we see that the entire German civilian population is at the gravest risk. Expected allied retaliation to such chemical strikes would be largely psychological in nature—the use of Soviet munitions alone will effectively contaminate most of Greater Germany; it is expected that no part of Germany east of the Rhein can be considered safe to unprotected personnel, beginning 12 hours after the first munitions are expended. Similar effects may be expected in parts of Czechoslovakia, and even western Poland, depending on wind direction and speed. Such contamination must be expected, moreover, to continue at least 1.5 times the mean persistence level of the agents used.

This is the last (and statistically most likely) of the scenarios outlined by the contract specifications.

SECTION VIII: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the reader will appreciate, although given tactical warning of only a few minutes, alerted military formations can confidently be expected to suffer few casualties (albeit with 30-50% degradation of combat effectiveness; this degradation likely, however, to equate to both sides), expected casualties to civilians will actually be greater than those anticipated from a Level-2 exchange of tactical nuclear weapons (200 warheads @ < 100kt yield; see Appendix A of Annex 1) at a mix of military and civilian/industrial targets. Thus, despite the fact that chemical munitions are not of themselves directly damaging to fixed industrial assets, serious near- and long-term economic effects must be expected. Even the use of nonpersistent agents at the FEBA (Forward Edge of the Battle Area) cannot but have major impact on the civilian population due to the heavily urbanized character of the German countryside and the patent inability of any government to provide adequate protection for its civilian population.

In terms of immediate effects, the 10,000,000+ civilian fatality floor figure in Scenario 2 represents a public health problem worse by an order of magnitude than that following the Bangladesh Cyclone disaster of 1970, and is likely to include synergistic effects well beyond the scope of this study. (Contract specifications specifically excluded investigation into bio-ecological effects from a major chemical exchange. While the difficulty associated with an in-depth examination of this subject is impossible at this writing to estimate, the reader is cautioned that such far-reaching effects are less easily dealt with than studied. It might be necessary, for example, to import tons of insect larvae before the simplest food crops can again flourish in Western Europe.) *For the moment the ability even of organized armies to dispose of millions of civilian bodies in advanced stages of decomposition is not something to be taken for granted. And the civilians needed for the reestablishment of industrial production (under what are almost certainly optimistic estimates) will have been at the least decimated in the literal, classical sense.*

An Analysis of the Effects of Chemical
Warfare in the European Theater Utilizing
Atmospheric Release Advisory Capability (ARAC) Prediction
Lawrence-Livermore National Laboratories
*LLNL 88-2504 * CR 8305/89/178*
SIGMA 2
Specified External Distribution Only
> > SECRET < <

Johannes Bitner did not throw the report into his trash basket—he felt like washing his hands. *Yet another similarity between East and West,* he thought coldly. *Their government reports are written by computers to be read by calculators. Just like ours. Just like ours.*

"Herr Generaloberst." The Chief of the Communist Party of the DDR looked up at his Commander-in-Chief. He and another officer had come early in the morning—and in civilian clothes—to visit him at his plush private residence in Wandlitz, the enclave of the Party elite outside Berlin. They had delivered the

document obtained only two days earlier through a highly placed DDR agent in West Germany's Ministry of Defense. "Just how accurate is this document?"

"Comrade Secretary, we cannot check their computer models, of course, but their formulae, their estimates for the persistence of Soviet chemical weapons, their predicted weather patterns—that is, all of the data which supposedly underlies this study—has been examined by members of my intelligence staff and rechecked by some chosen faculty members at the University of Leipzig. There is no reason to believe that it is anything but genuine."

"In fact," said Colonel Mellethin, director of Foreign Operations Analysis—he was a spare, austere man with eyes that clearly had not known sleep for some days—"the Americans understate the total quantities of munitions employed, because they consistently overstate the accuracy of Russian delivery systems." The other two men in the room noted at once that *Russian* had been substituted for *Soviet.*

"There is something else you wish to say, Mellethin?" Bitner asked sharply.

"Comrade Secretary, from the Russian point of view, what is the objective of this war?"

"The neutralization of NATO, and access to greater economic assets. Say what you have to say, Comrade Colonel," Bitner ordered.

"Comrade, success for the Warsaw Pact would leave a united Germany. I point out that a united Germany, even a united *socialist* Germany, would be viewed as a strategic threat by the Soviet Union—after all, we are better socialists than they, *nicht wahr?"* Mellethin took a deep breath before going on. Was he risking his life? Did it matter? The family name had once been *von* Mellethin, and unwavering loyalty to the State was not something that Communism had taught his line of professional soldiers. "Comrade Party Secretary, Soviet success in this operation will leave Germany, socialist and capitalist, as barren as the surface of the moon, a minimum of ten to thirty percent of our people dead, our land poisoned, even without Western chemical retaliation. Comrade, we learned today that the Americans have begun airlifting 'Bigeye' chemical aircraft bombs into their base at Ramstein. If our 'allies' use their chemical weapons, and then NATO retaliates in kind, it is entirely possible that our country—that German culture itself—will completely cease to exist. Such an objective is not militarily defensible, but I suggest, Comrade, that this could be an additional, *political* objective of the Russian plan."

Bitner's expression didn't change a whit, and his visitors couldn't see the chill that was enveloping their national leader. The meeting he'd had the previous week in Warsaw had been unsettling enough, but now the reason behind the greasy reassurances offered him by the Soviet leadership seemed all too clear.

"There is no way to protect our civilian population?" Bitner asked.

"Comrade." The General sighed. "These persistent agents need not be breathed. They also work through the skin. If one touches a contaminated surface, one is poisoned. Even if we order our people to remain in their homes with windows and door closed, houses and apartment blocks arc not airtight. And people still must eat. Factory workers in certain essential industries still must work. Medical personnel, police, and internal security personnel—some

of our most valuable citizens will be the most gravely exposed. These aerosols will travel invisibly across our country, virtually undetectable. They will leave a toxic film on lawns, trees, fences, walls, trucks—nearly anything. The rain will wash much off, but tests made years ago show that some of these poisons —those on the undersides of fences, for example—will persist for weeks, even months. We would need thousands of decontamination teams even to begin the task of making our country safe enough for our citizens to walk to their markets. Colonel Mellethin is correct: if the Russians use their gas weapons, and then the Americans reply in kind, we would be fortunate if half our citizens were alive six months from today. It is actually easier to protect our citizens from nuclear weapons than against gasses, and nuclear effects are shorter-lived."

"Du lieber Gott."

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

"They said *what?"* The Defense Minister almost screamed.

"Our fraternal socialist comrades of the German Democratic Republic have informed us that they can only view the use of chemical munitions inside their territory as a matter of the gravest national concern." The Foreign Minister spoke dryly. "Moreover, they have forwarded to us intelligence reports which show clearly that the use of such weapons would only serve to harden NATO resolve—and possibly open the door to other weapons of mass destruction."

"But they are part of the plan!" Defense objected.

"Comrades," Sergetov observed. "We all know that the use of chemical munitions will have calamitous effects on civilians—wouldn't this compromise our political *maskirovka?* Aren't we saying that our quarrel is with the West German *government?* How might it look then if on the first day of the war we coldly exterminate many thousands of civilians?" *How many more innocents shall we slaughter?* he thought.

"And there is another question," said Bromkovskiy. Old and frail though he was, he was still an experienced man from the last war against the Germans, and his views on defense affairs still commanded respect. "If we use these weapons against all the NATO armies—and how can we restrict them to German formations? —America and France have made it clear that they consider gas as a weapon of mass destruction, to which they would respond in kind."

"The American chemical arsenal is a joke," replied Defense.

"I have seen studies from your ministry that suggest otherwise," Bromkovskiy shot back. "And perhaps you will laugh at their nuclear weapons! If we kill many thousands of German civilians, their government will demand the use of atomic weapons against targets in our territory. If our gas weapons kill some thousands of American soldiers, do you think the American President will refrain from using his own weapons of mass destruction? Comrades, we have discussed this before. This war against NATO

is a political operation, no? Do we cast away our political camouflage by using a weapon like this? We have the assurance now that at least one NATO country will not join in a Russian-German war. This is a great victory for our political policy. The use of chemical weapons will cast away that advantage and open political dangers from more than one direction.

"I feel that we should retain control of these weapons in the Politburo. Comrade Defense Minister, are you telling us that we can win only if weapons of mass destruction are used?" The old man leaned forward and spoke with harsh determination. "Has the situation changed? You will remember telling us that if strategic surprise were lost, our armies could be recalled. Has surprise been lost?"

The Defense Minister's face went rigid for a moment. "The Soviet Army is ready and able to carry out its mission. It is now too late to retreat. This is also a political question, Petya."

"NATO is mobilizing," Sergetov said.

"Too late, and too halfheartedly," replied the Director of the KGB. "We have split one country from the NATO alliance. We are working on others, and are hard at work throughout Europe and America spreading disinformation about the bomb attack. The will of the people in the NATO countries is low. They will not want to fight a war for German murderers, and their political leaders will find a way to disassociate themselves from the conflict."

"But not if we slaughter civilians with gas." The Foreign Minister nodded. "Petya and young Sergetov are correct: the political cost of these weapons is simply too high."

WASHINGTON, D.C.

"But why? Why are they doing this?" the President demanded.

"We simply do not know, sir." The Director of Central Intelligence was clearly uncomfortable with the question. "We know that this Kremlin Bomb Plot was a complete fabrication—"

"Did you see what the *Post* said this morning? The press says that this guy Falken has 'agency' or its German equivalent written all over him."

"Mr. President, the truth of the matter is that Herr Falken was almost certainly a Soviet sleeper agent under KGB control. The Germans have been unable to uncover very much about him. It's as though he just sprang into being thirteen years ago, and he's been quietly running his import-export business for the last twelve years. Sir, every indication we have is that the Soviets are prepared for an attack against NATO. There is no indication, for example, that they are demobilizing their conscripts who are at the end of their enlistment periods, nor any evidence of preparations for the new 'class' of conscripts that should have begun to arrive several days ago. Finally, there's the case of this Spetznaz major the Germans picked up. He was infiltrated into the Federal Republic before the bomb plot, with orders to attack a NATO communications base. As to why—Mr. President, we simply do not know. We

can describe what the Russians are doing but not the reason for it."

"I told the country last night that we would be able to control this situation through diplomatic means . . ."

"We still might. We need to communicate directly with the Soviets," the President's national security adviser said. "Until they respond positively, however, we have to show that we mean business, too. Mr. President, a further call-up of reservists is necessary."

NORTH ATLANTIC

The *Julius Fucik* was rolling ten degrees with a beam sea. It made life hard on the soldiers, Captain Kherov noted, but they were doing well for landsmen. His own crewmen were dangling over the sides with sprayguns, painting over the ship's Interlighter markings, preparatory to replacing them with the Lykes Lines emblem. The soldiers were cutting away parts of the superstructure to conform with the silhouette of the *Doctor Lykes,* a U.S.-flag Seabee carrier remarkably similar to the *Fucik.* The Soviet ship had been built years before in Finland's Valmet yard from plans purchased in America. Already the elevator winch area aft had been painted completely black to match the American line's house colors, and a black diamond had been painted on both sides of the superstructure. Gangs of men were changing the shape and colors of the two funnels with prefabricated parts. The hardest job remaining was the paintwork on the hull. The Interlighter markings were made of twenty-foot letters. Replacing them called for the use of canvas templates, and the lettering had to be neat and exact. Worst of all, there was no way to check the workmanship short of launching a ship's boat, something he had neither the time nor the inclination to do.

"How long, Comrade Captain?"

"Four hours at least. The work goes well." Kherov couldn't hide his concern. Here they were, mid-Atlantic, far from the usual sea lanes, but there was no telling—

"And if we are spotted by an American aircraft or ship?" General Andreyev asked.

"Then we will find out how effective our damage-control drills have been—and our mission will be a failure." Kherov ran his hand along the polished teak rail. He'd commanded this ship for six years, taken her into nearly every port on the North and South Atlantic. "We'll get some way on. The ship will ride more easily on a bow sea."

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

"When are you planning to leave?" Flynn asked Calloway.

"Soon, Patrick. I hope you'll be coming with me?" The unmarried children of both men were in college, and both had sent their wives west the day before.

"I don't know. I've never run away before." Flynn scowled at the empty stage at the end of the room. He had the scars to prove it. "They pay me to report the news."

"You'll be reporting no bloody news from inside Lefortovo Prison, my friend," Calloway observed. "Isn't one Pulitzer Prize enough?"

Flynn laughed. "I thought nobody but me remembered. What do you know that I don't, Willie?"

"I know I wouldn't be leaving without a damned good reason. And if it's good enough for me to leave, Patrick, it's bloody good enough for you." He'd been told only the night before that a peaceful resolution of this crisis was now less than a 50-percent probability. For the hundredth time, the Reuters correspondent blessed his decision to cooperate with the SIS.

"Here we go." Flynn took out his notepad.

The Foreign Minister entered from the usual door and moved to the lectern. He looked uncharacteristically frazzled, his suit rumpled, his shirt collar dingy, as though he'd been up all the previous night laboring to resolve the German crisis through diplomatic means. When he looked up, his eyes squinted through his reading glasses.

"Ladies and gentlemen, a year that has gone so well for East-West relations has turned to ashes in the mouths of us all. The United States, the Soviet Union, and the other nations that accepted our invitation to Vienna are within weeks of a comprehensive agreement on the control of strategic nuclear arms. America and the Soviet Union have agreed upon and implemented a grain sales agreement with unprecedented speed and cooperation, and even as we speak, deliveries are being made in Odessa on the Black Sea. Western tourism within the Soviet Union is at an all-time high, and this is perhaps the truest reflection of the spirit of detente—now our peoples are finally beginning to trust one another. All this effort, the efforts of East and West to bring about a just and lasting peace, have been brought to ruin by a handful of revanchist men who have not taken the lessons of the Second World War to heart.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Soviet Union has received irrefutable evidence that the government of the Federal Republic of Germany exploded its bomb in the Kremlin as part of a plot to bring about the reunification of Germany by force. We have in our possession classified German documents which prove that the West German government planned to bring down the Soviet government and use the resulting period of internal confusion to achieve their aim of remaking Germany into the principal continental power in Europe yet again. All Europeans know what that would mean to world peace.

"In this century, Germany has invaded my country twice. Over forty million Soviet citizens died repelling those two invasions, and we do not forget the deaths of so many millions of our fellow Europeans who were also the victims of German nationalism—Polish, Belgian, Dutch, French, English, and American men and women labored as our allies to safeguard the peace of Europe. After the Second World War, we all thought that this problem was completely at an end. Such was the reasoning behind the treaties which

divided Germany and Europe into spheres of influence—remember that these spheres were ratified further by the Helsinki Accords in 1975—whose balance would serve to make a European war impossible.

"We know that the rearming of Germany by the West, supposedly a defensive measure against the imagined threat from the East—despite the fact that the Warsaw Pact was not even formed until well *after* the NATO alliance was formed—was the first step in the West's own plan to unify Germany as a pawn to counterbalance the Soviet Union. That this was a foolish and unnecessary policy is now manifestly clear. I ask you if there is anyone in Europe who truly wants a unified Germany. The NATO countries themselves stopped agitating for this years ago. Except, of course, for some Germans who remember the days of German power in rather a different light from those of us who were its victims.

"The Federal Republic of Germany has evidently turned the tables on her Western allies, and plans to use the NATO alliance as a shield behind which to launch her own offensive operations, the objective of which can only upset the power balance that has safeguarded the peace in Europe for two generations. Although we can fault the West for creating this situation, the government of the Soviet Union does not—I repeat, does *not*—hold America or her NATO allies responsible for this. My country, too, has learned the bitter lesson that allies can turn on their supposed friends, much as a dog can turn on his master.

"The Soviet Union has no wish to cast away the dramatic progress made this year in foreign relations with the West." The Foreign Minister paused before going on. "But the Soviet Union cannot ignore, cannot set aside the fact, that a deliberate act of aggression has been made against the Soviet Union, on Soviet soil.

"The government of the Soviet Union will today deliver a note to the Bonn government. As a price of our forbearance, as a price of keeping the peace, we demand that the Bonn government immediately demobilize its army to a level consistent with maintenance of the civil peace. We further call upon the Bonn government to admit its aggressive action, to dissolve and call for new elections, so that the German people themselves may judge how well they have been served. Finally, we demand and expect that full reparations be paid to the government of the Soviet Union, and to the families of those so callously murdered by the revanchist German nationalists who hide in their city on the west bank of the Rhein. Failure to meet with these demands will have the gravest possible consequences.

"As I have already said, we have no reason whatever to believe that any other Western nation had the slightest complicity in this act of international terrorism. This crisis is, therefore, a matter between the government of the Soviet Union and the government in Bonn. It is our hope that this crisis can be resolved through diplomatic means. We call on the Bonn government to consider the consequences of its actions with the greatest care and to act to preserve the peace.

"That is all I have to say." The Foreign Minister gathered his papers and left. The gathered reporters did not even attempt to shout questions at the receding form.

Flynn tucked his notepad back into his pocket, and screwed his pen closed. The AP correspondent had stayed behind at Phnom Penh to see the arrival of the Khmer Rouge, almost at the cost of his life. He'd covered wars, revolutions, riots, and been wounded twice as a result of his devotion to his business. But covering wars was a young man's game.

"When are you planning to leave?"

"Wednesday at the latest. I already have two tickets reserved, SAS to Stockholm," Calloway answered.

"I'm going to cable New York to shut down the Moscow office tomorrow. I'll stick around until you leave, but, Willie, it's time to go. If I cover any more of this story, it'll be from a safer place."

"How many wars have you covered, Patrick?"

"Korea was my first. Haven't missed many since then. Damned near bled to death at a place called Con Thien. Caught two mortar fragments in the Sinai in '73."

USS *PHARRIS*

DEFCON-2. RULES OF ENGAGEMENT OPTION BRAVO NOW IN EFFECT. THIS MESSAGE IS TO BE UNDERSTOOD AS A WAR-WARNING, Morris read in the privacy of his stateroom. HOSTILITIES BETWEEN NATO AND THE WARSAW PACT ARE NOW TO BE CONSIDERED AS LIKELY BUT NOT CERTAIN. TAKE ALL MEASURES CONSISTENT WITH THE SAFETY OF YOUR COMMAND. HOSTILITIES COULD INITIATE WITHOUT RPT WITHOUT WARNING.

Ed Morris lifted his phone. "Call the XO to my stateroom."

He was there in under a minute.

"I hear you got a hot message, skipper."

"DEFCON-2, ROE Option Bravo." He handed over the terse message form. "We start maintaining round-the-clock Condition-Three steaming at once. The ASROC and torpedo tube directors are to be manned at all times."

"What do we tell the men?"

"I want to go over this with the wardroom first. Then I'll speak to the crew. We haven't got specific operations orders yet. I figure we head either to Norfolk or New York for convoy duty."

USS *NIMITZ*

"Okay, Toland, let's hear it." Baker sat back in his chair.

"Admiral, NATO has increased its alert level. The President has authorized DEFCON-2. The Naval Defense Reserve Fleet is being mobilized. Reforger will begin at 0100 Zulu. The commercial jets are already being taken into military

service. The Brits have enacted Queen's Order Two. A lot of airports in Germany are going to be busy as hell."

"How long to complete Reforger?"

"Eight to twelve days, sir."

"We may not have that long."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me about their satellite reconnaissance," Baker ordered.

"Admiral, they currently have one radar ocean reconnaissance satellite up—Kosmos 1801. It's paired with Kosmos 1813, an electronic intelligence bird. 1801 is the nuclear-powered radar bird, and we think it may have a photographic capability to back up the radar system."

"I never heard that before."

"NSA detected indications of a video signal several months ago, but that information was never released to the Navy because it was unconfirmed." Toland didn't say that it had been decided at the time the Navy didn't need-to-know this. They needed to know now, Toland judged. *I'm here now.* "I'd expect that Ivan has another of his radar satellites ready for immediate launch, probably a few more in the barn. They've been launching an unusual number of their low-altitude communications birds, plus a lot of electronic intelligence satellites—ordinarily they have six or seven of them up, but now the total is ten. That gives them awfully good ELINT coverage. If we make electronic noise, they'll hear it."

"And not a Goddamned thing we can do about them."

"Not for a while, sir,".Toland agreed. "The Air Force has its antisatellite missiles, six or seven as I recall, but they've only been tested once against a real satellite, and there's been a moratorium on the ASAT tests since last year. The Air Force can probably dust them off and try to reactivate the program, but that'll take a few weeks. Their first priority is the radar satellites," Toland concluded hopefully.

"Okay, our orders are to rendezvous with *Saratoga* at the Azores and escort our Marine Amphibious Unit to Iceland. I suppose the Russians will watch us all the way up! Hopefully by the time we get there, the Icelandic government will allow us to land them. I just learned that their government can't decide if this crisis is real or not. God, I wonder if NATO will hold together?"

"Supposedly we have proof that it's all a put-up job, but we don't need to know what that evidence is. The problem is that a lot of countries are buying this charade, at least publicly."

"Yeah, I love that. I want you to refine your estimate of the threat from Soviet subs and aircraft on a continuous basis. I want information about the smallest change in what they have at sea the moment you get it."

15

The Bastion Gambit

USS *CHICAGO*

"What's the sounding?" McCafferty asked quietly.

"Fifty feet under the keel," the navigator answered at once. "We're still well outside Russian territorial waters, but we start approaching real shoals in twenty miles, skipper." It was the eighth time in half an hour that he had commented on what lay ahead.

McCafferty nodded, not wanting to speak, not wanting to make any unnecessary sound at all. The tension hung in the attack center of the *Chicago* like the cigarette smoke that the ventilators would not entirely remove. Looking around, he caught his crewmen furtively disclosing their states of mind with a raised eyebrow or a slightly shaken head.

The navigator was the most nervous of all. There were all sorts of good reasons not to be here. *Chicago* might or might not have been in Soviet territorial water, itself a legal question of no small complexity. To the northeast was Cape Kanin; to the northwest, Cape Svyatoy. The Soviets claimed the entire region as a "historic bay," while the United States chose to recognize the international twenty-four-mile closure rule. Everyone aboard knew that the Russians were more likely to shoot today than request a decision under the International Law of the Sea Convention. Would the Russians find them?

They were in a bare thirty fathoms of water—and, like the great pelagic sharks, nuclear attack submarines are creatures of the deep, not the shallows. The tactical plot showed bearings to three Soviet patrol craft, two Grisha-class frigates and a Poti-class corvette, all specialized antisubmarine ships. All were miles away, but they were still a very real threat.

The only good news was a storm overhead. The twenty-knot surface wind and sheets of falling rain made noise that interfered with sonar performance—but that included their own sonar, and sonar was their only safe means for getting information.

Then there were the imponderables. What sensing devices did the Soviets have in these waters? Might the water be clear enough that a circling helicopter or ASW aircraft could *see* them? Might there be a Tango-class diesel boat out there, moving slowly on her quiet, battery-powered electric motors?

The only way they'd learn the answer to any of those questions was the metallic whine of a torpedo's high-speed propellers or the simple explosion of a falling depth-bomb. McCafferty considered all these things, and weighed the dangers against the priority of his Flash directive from COMSUBLANT:

Determine at once the operating areas of REDFLT SSBNs.

That sort of language gave him little leeway.

"How tight is the inertial fix?" McCafferty asked as casually as he could.

"Plus or minus two hundred yards." The navigator didn't even look up.

The captain grunted, knowing what the navigator was thinking. They should have gotten a NAVSTAR satellite fix a few hours ago, but the risk of detection was too high in an area crawling with Soviet surface craft. Two hundred yards, plus or minus, was fine accuracy by any rational standard—but not while submerged in shallow water off a hostile coast. How accurate were his charts? Were there unmarked wrecks out there? Even if his navigational data were completely accurate, quarters would be so tight in another few miles that a goof of two hundred yards could ground them, damaging the submarine . . . and making noise. The captain shrugged to himself. The *Chicago* was the best platform in the world for this mission. He'd done this sort of thing before, and he couldn't worry about everything at the same time. McCafferty took a few steps forward and leaned into the sonar compartment.

"How's our friend doing?"

"Continuing as before, skipper. No changes at all in the target's radiated noise level. Just toolin' right along at fifteen knots, dead ahead, no more than two thousand yards off. Pleasure cruise, like," the sonar chief concluded with no small irony.

Pleasure cruise. The Soviets were sorticing their ballistic missile submarines at intervals of one sub every four hours. Already a majority of them were at sea. They had *never* done that before. And all seemed to be heading east—not north and northeast as they usually did to cruise in the Barents or Kara seas, or most recently under the arctic ice cap itself. SACLANT had learned that piece of information from Norwegian P-3 aircraft patrolling Checkpoint Charlie, the spot fifty miles offshore where Soviet submarines always submerged. *Chicago,* the nearest sub to the area, had been sent to investigate.

They'd soon detected and gotten into trail position behind a Delta-III, a modern Soviet "boomer," as missile subs were known. Trailing her, they'd stayed within the hundred-fathom curve the whole way . . . until the target had turned southeast into shallow water toward Mys Svyatoy Nos, which led to the entrance to the White Sea—all of which was Soviet territorial water.

How far did they dare follow? *And what was going on?* McCafferty returned to control and went to the periscope pedestal.

"Look around," he said. "Up scope." A petty officer turned the hydraulic ring control and the portside search periscope slid upward from its well. "Hold!" McCafferty stooped at the conning station, catching the instrument as the quartermaster stopped it below the surface. From a position that was murderously uncomfortable, the skipper duck-walked the scope in a full circle. On the forward bulkhead was a television monitor which worked off a camera built into the scope. It was watched by the executive officer and a senior petty officer.

"No shadows," McCafferty said. Nothing to make him suspect that something was there.

"Concur, skipper," the XO agreed.

"Check with sonar."

Forward, the sonar watch listened carefully. Circling aircraft made noise, and there was about an even chance that they'd heard it. But now they heard nothing—which *didn't* mean that nothing was there, like maybe a high-flying chopper or another Grisha laying to, her diesels shut down as she drifted, listening for someone like *Chicago*.

"Sonar says they don't have anything, skipper," the XO reported.

"Two more feet," McCafferty ordered.

The quartermaster worked the lever again, bringing the periscope up by twenty-three inches, just barely out of the water in the troughs of the waves.

"Skipper!" It was the senior ESM technician. The highest item on *Chicago's* periscope was a miniature antenna array which fed signals to a broadband receiver. The instant it projected above the surface, three lights flickered on the ESM tactical warning board. "I read three—five, maybe six India-band search radars. Signature characteristics say ship and land-based search radars, sir, not, repeat not, aircraft sets. Nothing in the Juliet-band." The technician started reading off the bearings.

McCafferty allowed himself to relax. There was no way a radar could detect so small a target as his periscope in these waves. He turned the periscope in a complete circle. "I see no surface ships. No aircraft. Seas about five feet. Estimate the surface wind from the northwest at, oh, about twenty, twenty-five knots." He snapped up the handles and stepped back. "Down scope." The oiled steel tube was heading down before he'd spoken the second word. The captain nodded approval at his quartermaster, who held out a stopwatch. The scope had been up above the surface for a total of 5.9 seconds. After fifteen years in submarines, it still amazed him how so many people could do so much in six seconds. When he'd gone through submarine school, the criterion had been a seven-second exposure.

The navigator examined his chart quickly, a quartermaster assisting him to plot the bearings to the signal sources.

"Captain." The navigator looked up. "Bearings are consistent with two known shore radar transmitters, and three Don-2 sets match the bearings of Sierra-2, -3, and -4." He referred to the plotted positions of the three Soviet surface ships. "We got one unknown, bearing zero-four-seven. What's that one look like, Harkins?"

"A land-based India-band surface search, one of those new 'Shore Cans,' " the technician responded, reading off frequency and pulse-width numbers. "Weak signal and kinda fuzzy, sir. Lots of activity, though, and all the transmitters are dialed into different frequencies." The technician meant that the radar searches were well coordinated, so that the radar transmitters would not interfere with one another.

An electrician rewound the videotape, allowing McCafferty to reexamine what he'd seen through the periscope. The only difference was that the periscope TV camera was black and white. The tape had to be run at slow speed to avoid blurring, so rapidly had the captain made his visual search.

“Amazing how good nothing can look, eh, Joe?” he asked his executive officer. The cloud ceiling was well below a thousand feet, and the wave action had rapidly coated the periscope lens with water droplets. No one had ever invented an efficient gadget for keeping that lens clear, McCafferty reflected, you’d think that after eighty-some years . . .

“Water looks a little murky, too,” Joe answered hopefully. A visual sighting by antisubmarine warfare aircraft is one of the nightmares all submariners share.

“Doesn’t look like a nice day to fly, does it? I don’t think we have to worry about somebody getting an eyeball sight on us.” The captain spoke loudly enough for the control room crew to hear.

“The water deepens out some for the next two miles,” the navigator reported.

“How much?”

“Five fathoms, skipper.”

McCafferty looked over at the XO, who was conning the boat at the moment. “Use it.” On the other hand, some helicopter jockey might get lucky . . .

“Aye. Diving officer, take her down another twenty feet. Gently.”

“Aye.” The chief gave the necessary orders to the planesmen and you could feel the sighs through the attack center.

McCafferty shook his head. *When was the last time you saw your men look relieved over a twenty-foot change in depth?* he asked himself. He went forward to sonar. He did not remember being there only four minutes earlier.

“How are our friends doing, chief?”

“The patrol boats are still faint, sir. They seem to be circling—the bearings are changing back and forth like they been doin’. The boomer’s blade count is also constant, sir, he’s just toolin’ right along at fifteen knots. Not especially quiet, either. I mean, we still got plenty of mechanical transients, y’know? There’s maintenance work—lot of it—going on in there, by the sound he’s making. Want to listen in, skipper?” The chief held up a pair of earphones. Most sonar scanning was done visually—the on-board computers converted acoustical signals into a display on TV-type tubes that looked most of all like some sort of arcade game. But there was still no real substitute for listening in. McCafferty took the phones.

First he heard the Delta’s whirring reactor pumps. They were running at medium speed, driving water out of the reactor vessel into the steam generator. Next he concentrated on the screw sounds. The Russian boomer had a pair of five-bladed screws, and he tried to make his own count of the *chuga-chuga* noise made as each blade made its circuit. No good, he’d have to take the chief’s word, as he usually did . . . *klang!*

“What was that?”

The chief turned to another senior operator. “Hatch slammin’?”

The first-class sonarman shook his head judiciously. “More like somebody dropped a wrench. Close, though, pretty close.”

The captain had to smile. Everybody aboard was trying to affect a casual manner that had to be outrageously faked. Certainly everyone was as tense as he was, and McCafferty wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of this

miserable lake. Of course he couldn't act in such a way as to allow his crew to become overly concerned; the captain must be in total control at all times—what fucking games we play! he told himself. *What are we doing here?* What *is going on in this crazy world? I don't want to fight a fucking war!*

He leaned against the doorframe, just forward of the control room, only a few feet from his own stateroom, wanting to go in, just to lie down for a minute or two, to take a few deep breaths, maybe go to his sink and splash a little cold water . . . but then he might accidentally look in the mirror. None of that, he knew. Command of a submarine was one of the last truly godlike jobs left in the world, and at times it required a truly godlike demeanor. Like now. *Play the game, Danny,* he told himself. The captain withdrew a handkerchief from his back pocket and rubbed his nose with it, his face locked into a neutral, almost bored expression as his eyes traced over the sonar displays. The cool captain . . .

McCafferty returned to the attack center a moment later, telling himself that he'd spent just enough time to inspire his sonar crewmen without pressuring them with too much attention from the CO. A fine balance. He looked around casually. The room was as crowded as an Irish bar on St. Patrick's Day. His men's outwardly cool faces were sweating, despite the nuclear-powered air conditioning. The planesmen especially were concentrating on their instruments, guiding the submarine down an electronically defined display, with the diving officer—*Chicago's* most senior chief—right behind them.

In the center of the control room, the two side-by-side attack periscopes were fully retracted, with a quartermaster's mate poised to raise them. The XO paced as much as he could, looking at the chart every twenty seconds or so as he turned at the rear of the compartment. Not much here to complain about. Everybody was tense, but all the work was getting done.

"All things considered," McCafferty said for all to hear, "things are going pretty good. Surface conditions are working against them detecting us."

"Conn, sonar."

"Conn, aye." The captain took the phone.

"Hull-popping noises. He seems to be surfacing. Yeah, target is now blowing tanks, skipper."

"Understood. Keep us posted, chief." McCafferty put the phone back. He took three steps back to the chart table. "Why surface now?"

The navigator stole a cigarette from an enlisted man and lit it. McCafferty knew he didn't smoke. The lieutenant nearly gagged on it, drawing a brief smirk from a second-class quartermaster and a rueful grin from the navigator. He looked over at the captain.

"Sir, something is wrong about this," the lieutenant said quietly.

"Just one thing," the captain asked. "Why did he surface here?"

"Conn, sonar." McCafferty went forward and took the phone again. "Skipper, the boomer's doing a long blow, really blowing his tanks out like, sir."

"Anything else unusual?"

"No, sir, but he must've just used a lot of his reserve air, sir."

"Okay, chief, thank you." McCafferty hung up and wondered if *that* meant anything.

“Sir, you ever done this before?” the navigator asked.

“I’ve trailed a lot of Russian boats, but no, never in here.”

“The target has to surface eventually, only sixty feet of water down here along Terskiy Bereg.” The navigator traced his finger along the chart.

“And we have to break off the trail,” McCafferty agreed. “But that’s another forty miles.”

“Yeah.” The navigator nodded agreement. “But starting five miles back, this gulf starts to narrow down like a funnel, and for a submerged sub, it eventually closes down to two, then only one safe passage. Jeez, I don’t know.” McCafferty came aft again to examine the chart.

“He was content to run fifteen knots at periscope depth all this way down from Kola. The usable depth has been about the same for the past five hours—just bottomed out some—and figures to be the same for another hour or two . . . but he surfaces anyway. So,” McCafferty said, “the only change in environmental conditions is the width of the channel, and that’s still over twenty miles . . .” The captain mulled this over, staring down at the chart. The sonar room called yet again.

“Conn, aye. What is it, chief?”

“New contact, sir, bearing one-nine-two. Designate target Sierra- 5. Twin-screw surface ship, diesel engines. They just came on all at once, sir. Sounds like a Natya-class. Bearing changing right to left slowly, seems to be converging with the boomer. Blade count puts her speed at about twelve knots.”

“What’s the boomer doing?”

“Speed and bearing are unchanged, skipper. The blow has ended. She’s on the surface, sir, we’re starting to get pounding and some racing on her screws—wait a minute . . . an active sonar just started up, we’re getting reverbs, bearing seems to be about one-nine-zero, probably from the Natya. It’s a very high frequency sonar, above aural range . . . I make it twenty-two-thousand hertz.”

An icy ball suddenly materialized in McCafferty’s stomach.

“XO, I’m taking the conn.”

“Aye, Captain, you have the conn.”

“Diving officer: get her up to sixty feet, high as you can without broaching her. Observation! Up scope!” The search scope came up and McCafferty met it as he had before and quickly checked the surface of the sea for shadows. “Three more feet. Okay, still nothing. What’s the ESM reading?”

“Now seven active radar sources, skipper. Plot out about the same as before, plus the new one at one-nine-one, another India-band, looks like another Don-2.”

McCafferty turned the periscope handle to twelve-power, its highest setting. The Soviet missile submarine was sitting extremely high in the water.

“Joe, tell me what you see,” McCafferty asked, wanting a quick second opinion.

“That’s a Delta-III, all right. Looks like she’s blown dry, Cap’n, they come out pretty far, and that looks like about three or four feet higher than they usually do. He just used up a lot of his air . . . That might be the Natya’s mast ahead of her, hard to be sure.”

McCafferty could feel that his own *Chicago* was rolling. His hands tingled with the transmitted wave-slaps against the periscope. The seas were crashing against the Delta, too, and he could see water splashing in and out of the limber holes that lined the boomer's flanks.

"ESM board says that signal strengths are approaching detection values," the technician warned.

"His periscopes are both up," McCafferty said, knowing that his scope had already been up too long. He squeezed the trigger to double the magnification. It cost optical detail, but the picture zoomed in on the Delta's conning tower. "The control station atop his sail is fully manned. Everyone has glasses . . . not looking aft, though. Down scope. Diving officer, take her down ten feet. Nice work, planesmen. Let's see that tape, Joe." The picture returned to the TV monitor in a few seconds.

They were two thousand yards behind the Delta. Beyond her by about half a mile was a spherical radar dome, probably the Natya, rolling noticeably with the beam seas. To house her sixteen SS-18 missiles, the Russian sub had a sloped turtleback, and from directly aft it looked like a highway ramp. An ungainly design, the Delta, but she had to survive only long enough to launch her missiles, and the Americans had no doubt that her missiles worked just fine.

"Look at that, they blew her so high half her screws are clear," the XO pointed.

"Navigator, how far to shallow water?"

"Along this channel, a minimum of twenty-four fathoms for ten miles."

Why did the Delta surface this far out?

McCafferty lifted the phone. "Sonar, tell me about the Natya."

"Skipper, he's pinging away like mad. Not toward us, but we're getting lots of reflections and reverberations off the bottom."

The Natya was a specialized mine-hunter . . . also used, to be sure, as an escort for submarines in and out of safe areas. But her mine-hunting VHF sonar was operating . . . *dear God!*

"Left full rudder!" McCafferty shouted.

"Left full rudder, aye!" The helmsman would have hit the overhead but for the seatbelt. He instantly snapped his wheel to port. "Sir, my rudder is left full!"

"Minefield," the navigator breathed. Heads all over the room turned around.

"That's a good bet." McCafferty nodded grimly. "How far are we from the point where the boomer rendezvoused with the Natya?"

The navigator examined the plot closely. "Stopped about four hundred yards short of it, sir."

"All stop."

"All stop, aye." The helmsman dialed the annunciator handle. "Engine room answers all stop, sir. Passing left through one-eight-zero, sir."

"Very well. We ought to be safe enough here. You have to figure the Delta'd rendezvous with the sweeper a few miles clear of the field, right? Anybody here think Ivan would gamble with a boomer?" It was a rhetorical question. Nobody ever gambled with boomers.

Everyone in the control room took a deep breath at the same moment. The

Chicago slowed rapidly, her turn taking her broadside to her previous course.

"Rudder amidships." McCafferty ordered one-third speed and lifted the phone for sonar. "The boomer doing anything different?"

"No, sir. Bearing is still constant at one-nine-zero. Speed still fifteen knots. We can still hear the Natya pinging, nearing one-eight-six, and her blade count is now about fifteen knots, too."

"Navigator, start figuring a way for us to get out of here. We want to keep well clear of all those patrol boats and report this news in as quick as we can."

"Aye. Three-five-eight looks pretty good for the moment, sir." The navigator had been updating that course continuously for two hours.

"Sir, if Ivan really has laid out a minefield, part of it's in international waters," the exec noted. "Cute."

"Yeah. Of course, to them it's territorial waters, so anybody bumps into a mine, it's just too damned bad—"

"And maybe an international incident?" Joe observed.

"But why did they ping at all?" the communications officer asked. "If they got a clear channel they can navigate visually."

"What if there's no channel at all?" the exec answered. "What if they set ground mines, and moored mines strung, say, at a uniform depth of fifty feet. You have to figure they'd be a little nervous that a mine or two might have too long a mooring cable. So they're playing it safe, just like we'd do. What's all that tell you?"

"Nobody can trail their boomers without surfacing . . ." the lieutenant understood.

"And we sure as hell aren't going to do that. Nobody ever said that Ivan was dumb. They got a perfect system here. They're putting all their missile boats where we can't get at them," McCafferty went on. "Even SUBROC can't make it from where we are into the White Sea. Final point, if they have to scatter the boats, they don't have to screw around in a single channel, they can all surface, spread out, and run for daylight.

"What this means, gentlemen, is that instead of detailing an attack boat to guard every boomer against somebody like us, they can put all the missile boats into one nice, safe basket and release their attack boats to other missions. Let's get the hell out of here."

NORTH ATLANTIC

"Ship in view, this is U.S. Navy aircraft on your port beam. Please identify, over." Captain Kherov handed the bridge-to-bridge phone to a Red Army major.

"Navy, this is the *Doctor Lykes.* How are y'all?" Kherov spoke halting English. The major's Mississippi accent might as well have been Kurdish for all he understood of it. They could barely make out the haze-gray patrol aircraft that was now circling their ship—circling, they noted, at a five-mile distance and certainly inspecting them through binoculars.

"Amplify, *Doctor Lykes,"* the voice ordered tersely.

"We're out of New Orleans, bound for Oslo with general cargo, Navy. What's the big deal?"

"You're well north of a course to Norway. Please explain, over."

"Y'all read the damned papers, Navy? It's liable to get dangerous out here, and this big ole ship costs money. We got orders from the home office to keep close to some friendly folks. Hell, we're glad to see ya', boy. Y'all want to escort us a ways?"

"Roger, copy. *Doctor Lykes,* be advised no submarines known to be in this area."

"Y'all guarantee that?"

This drew a laugh. "Not hardly, *Doc."*

"That's about what I thought, Navy. Well, if it's all right with you, we'll keep heading north a ways and try to stay under your air cover, over."

"We can't detail an aircraft to escort you."

"Understood, but you will come if we call you—right?"

"That's a roger," agreed Penguin 8.

"Okay, we'll continue north, then turn east for the Faroes. Will you warn us if any bad guys show up? Over."

"If we find any, *Doc,* the idea is we'll try an' sink 'em first," the pilot exaggerated.

"Fair enough. Good huntin', boy. Out."

PENGUIN 8

"God, do people really talk like that?" the pilot of the Orion wondered aloud.

"Never heard about Lykes Lines?" his copilot chuckled. "They used to say they wouldn't hire a guy 'less he had a Southern accent. I never believed it until now. Nothing like tradition. He is kinda off the beaten track, though."

"Yeah, but until the convoys form up, hell, I'd try to bounce from one protected area to another. Anyway, let's finish the visual." The pilot increased power and headed in closer while his copilot lifted the recognition book.

"Okay, we have an all-black hull with 'Lykes Lines' on the side, midships. White superstructure with black diamond, a block L inside the diamond." He lifted his binoculars. "Lookout mast forward of the superstructure. Check. Superstructure is nicely raked. Electronics mast is not. Proper ensign and house flag. Black funnels. Winches aft by the barge elevator—doesn't say how many winches. Damn, she's carrying a full load of barges, isn't she? Paintwork looks a little shabby. Anyway, it all checks with the book; that's a friendly."

"Okay, let's give her a wave." The pilot turned the yoke to the left, taking the Orion directly over the barge-carrier. He waggled his wings slightly as he passed overhead, and two men on the bridge waved back at them. The flyers couldn't pick out the two men tracking them with hand-held SAMs. "Good luck, fella. You might need it."

MV *JULIUS FUCIK*

"The new paint scheme will make visual spotting difficult, Comrade General," the air-defense officer said quietly. "I saw no air-to-surface missiles attached."

"That will change quickly enough. As soon as our fleet puts to sea, they will load them. Besides, if they identify us as enemy, how far can we run while they call up other aircraft, or simply fly to their base to rearm?" The General watched the aircraft depart. His heart had been in his throat for the whole episode, but now he could walk out to where Kherov stood on the open bridge wing. Only the ship's officers had been issued American-style khaki uniforms.

"My compliments to your language officer. I presume he was speaking English?"

Andreyev laughed jovially, now that the danger was past. "So I am told. The Navy requested a man with his particular skills. He's an intelligence officer, served in America."

"In any case, he succeeded. Now we may approach our objective safely," Kherov said, using the last word relatively.

"It will be good to be on land again, Comrade Captain." The General didn't like being on such a large, unprotected target and would not feel safe until he had solid ground under his feet. At least as an infantryman you had a rifle with which to defend yourself, usually a hole to hide in, and always two legs to run away. Not so on a ship, he had learned. A ship was one large target, and this one was virtually unprotected. Amazing, he thought, that anything would feel worse than being on a transport aircraft. But there he had a parachute. He had no illusions about his ability to swim to land.

SUNNYVALE, CALIFORNIA

"There goes another one," the chief master sergeant said.

It was almost boring now. Never in the colonel's memory had the Soviets had more than six photographic reconnaissance satellites in orbit. There were now ten, plus ten electronic-intelligence gatherers, some launched from the Baikonor Cosmodrome outside Leninsk in the Kazakh S.S.R., the other half from Plesetsk in northern Russia.

"That's an F-type booster, Colonel. Burn time is wrong for the A-type," the sergeant said, looking up from his watch.

This Russian booster was a derivation of the old SS-9 ICBM, and it had only two functions—to launch radar ocean reconnaissance satellites, called RORSATS, that monitored ships at sea and to loft the Soviet antisatellite system. The Americans were watching the launch from a newly launched KH-11 reconnaissance satellite of their own, sweeping over the central region of the USSR. The colonel lifted the phone to Cheyenne Mountain.

USS *PHARRIS*

I should be sleeping, Morris told himself. *I should stockpile sleep, bank it away against the time when I can't have any.* But he was too keyed up to sleep.

USS Pharris was steaming figure eights off the mouth of the Delaware River. Thirty miles north, at the piers of Philadelphia, Chester, and Camden, ships of the National Reserve Defense Fleet that had been held in readiness for years were getting ready to sail. Cargo holds were loading with tanks, guns, and crates of explosive ordnance. His air-search radar showed the tracks of numerous troop transports lifting out of Dover Air Force Base. The Military Airlift Command's huge aircraft could ferry the troops across to Germany where they would be mated with their pre-positioned equipment, but when their unit loads of munitions ran out, the resupply would have to be ferried across the way it had always been, in ugly, fat, slow merchant ships—targets. Maybe the merchies weren't so slow anymore, and were larger than before, but there were fewer of them. During his naval career, the American merchant fleet had fallen sharply, even supplemented by these federally funded vessels. Now a submarine could sink one ship and get the benefit it would have achieved in World War II by sinking four or five.

The merchant crews were another problem. Traditionally held in contempt by Navy sailors—a truism in the U.S. Navy was to steer well clear of any merchantman, lest he decide to liven up his day by ramming you—the average age of the crews running the ships was about fifty, more than double that in any American naval vessel. How would those grandfathers take the stress of combat operations? Morris wondered. They were quite well paid—some of the senior seamen made as much as he did—but would their comfortable, union-negotiated salaries devalue in the face of missiles and torpedoes? He had to erase the thought from his mind. These old men with kids in high school and college were his flock. He was the shepherd, and there were wolves hiding under the gray surface of the Atlantic.

Not a large flock. He had seen the figures only a year ago: the total number of privately owned cargo ships in operation under the American flag was 170 and averaged about eighteen thousand tons apiece. Of those, a mere 103 were routinely engaged in overseas trade. The supplemental National Defense Reserve Fleet consisted of only 172 cargo ships. To call the situation a disgrace was to describe gang rape as a mild social deviation.

They couldn't allow even one to be lost.

Morris wandered over to the bridge radarscope and looked down into the rubber eyeshicld to watch the aircraft lifting out of Dover. Each blip contained three to five hundred men. What would happen when they ran out of shells?

"Another merchie, skipper." The officer of the dock pointed to a dot on the horizon. "She's a Dutch container boat. I expect she's inbound for military cargo."

Morris grunted. "We need all the help we can get."

SUNNYVALE, CALIFORNIA

"It's definite, sir," the colonel said. "That's a Soviet ASAT-bird, seventy-three nautical miles behind one of ours."

The colonel had ordered his satellite to turn in space and point its cameras at its new companion. The light wasn't all that good, but the shape of the Soviet killer satellite was unmistakable: a cylinder nearly a hundred feet long, with a rocket motor at one end and a radar seeker antenna at the other.

"What's your recommendation, Colonel?"

"Sir, I am requesting unlimited authority to maneuver my birds at will. As soon as anything with a red star on it gets within fifty miles, I'm going to do a series of delta-V maneuvers to screw up their intercept solution."

"That will cost you a lot of fuel, son," CINC-NORAD warned.

"What we have here, General, is a binary solution set." The colonel responded like a true mathematician. "Choice one, we maneuver the birds and risk the fuel loss. Choice two, we don't maneuver the birds and risk having them taken out. Once they close to fifty miles, they can achieve intercept and negate our bird in as little as five minutes. Maybe faster. Five minutes is only the best we've observed them to do. Sir, you have my recommendation." The colonel had a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Illinois, but that was not where he'd learned to back generals into corners.

"Okay. This one goes to Washington, but I'll forward your recommendation with my endorsement."

USS *NIMITZ*

"Admiral, we've just had a disturbing report from the Barents Sea." Toland read the dispatch from CINCLANTFLT.

"How many more subs can they throw at us now?"

"Perhaps as many as thirty additional boats, Admiral."

"Thirty?" Baker hadn't liked anything he'd been told for a week now. He especially didn't like this.

The *Nimitz* battle group, in company with *Sarotoga* and the French carrier *Foch,* was escorting a marine amphibious unit, called a MAU, to reinforce the ground defenses on Iceland. A three-day run. If the war started soon after they made their delivery, their next mission would be to support the GIUK barrier defense plan, the critically important link that covered the ocean between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom. Carrier Task Force 21 was a powerful force. But would it be powerful enough? Doctrine required a four-carrier group to fight and survive up here, but the fleet had not yet been fully assembled. Toland was getting reports on frantic diplomatic activity aimed at averting the war that appeared about to start, much as everyone hoped it wouldn't. How would the Soviets react to four or more carriers in the Norwegian Sea? It seemed that no one in Washington wanted to find out, but Toland was wondering if it would matter at all. As it was, Iceland had

approved the reinforcements they were escorting only twelve hours before, and this NATO outpost needed immediate reinforcement.

USS *CHICAGO*

McCafferty was thirty miles north of the entrance to the Kola Fjord. The crew was relatively happy to be here after a tense sixteen-hour run from Cape Svyatoy. Though the Barents Sea was alive with antisubmarine ships, immediately after making their report they had been withdrawn from the entrance to the White Sea for fear of fomenting a major incident. Here there was a hundred thirty fathoms of water and room to maneuver, and they were confident in their ability to keep out of trouble. There was supposed to be a pair of American subs within fifty miles of *Chicago,* plus a Brit and two Norwegian diesel boats. His sonarmen couldn't hear any of them, though they could hear a quartet of Grisha-class frigates pinging away at something to the southeast. The allied submarines here were assigned to watch and listen. It was a nearly ideal mission for them, since they only had to creep along, avoiding contact with surface ships, which they could detect from a good, long distance.

There was no hiding it now. McCafferty didn't even consider not telling his men the significance of what they had learned about the Russian boomers. Submarines have no long-lived secrets. It looked like they were about to fight a war. The politicians in Washington and the strategists in Norfolk and elsewhere might still have their doubts, but there, at the sharp end of the lance, the officers and men aboard *Chicago* discussed the way the Soviets were using their ships and came up with a single answer. The submarine's torpedo tubes were loaded with MK-48 torpedoes and Harpoon missiles. Her vertical missile tubes forward of the pressure hull held twelve Tomahawks, three nuclear-tipped land-attack missiles, and nine conventional antiship models. When a shipboard machine showed the first suggestion of a fault, a technician immediately tore it down to fix it. McCafferty was pleased and not a little surprised by his crew. So young they were—the average age on his submarine was twenty-one—to have to adapt to this.

He stood in the sonar room, forward and to starboard of the attack center. A few feet from him, a massive computer system sifted through an avalanche of waterborne sound, analyzing individual frequency bands known from experience to mark the acoustical signature of a Soviet vessel. The signals were displayed on a visual screen called a waterfall display, a monocolor curtain of yellow whose brighter lines indicated the bearing to a sound that might be a source of interest. Four lines indicated the Grishas, and offset dots marked the pings from their active sonars. McCafferty wondered what they were after. His interest was mainly academic. They weren't pinging his ship, but there was always something to learn from how the enemy did his job. A team of officers in the attack center was plotting the movement of the Soviet patrol ships, carefully noting their formation patterns and hunting technique

for later comparison with intelligence estimates.

A new series of dots appeared at the bottom of the screen. A sonarman punched a button for a more selective frequency setting, altering the display slightly, then plugged in a pair of microphones. The display was on fast-speed image generation, and McCafferty saw the dots grow to lines around bearing one-nine-eight, the direction to the Kola channel.

"Lots of confused noise, skipper," the sonarman reported. "I read Alfas and Charlies coming out, with other stuff behind them. Blade count on one Alfa is something like thirty knots. Lots of noise behind them, sir."

The visual display confirmed it a minute later. The frequency-or tone-lines were in the areas known to depict specific classes of submarines, all moving at high speed to clear the harbor. The bearing-to-contact lines spread apart as the boats fanned out. The boats had already dived, he noted. Usually Soviet submarines didn't dive until they were well offshore.

"Ship count is over twenty, sir," the chief sonarman said quietly. "We have a major sortie here."

"Sure looks like it." McCafferty moved back to the attack center. His men were already entering the contact positions into the fire-control computer, and sketching paper tracks on the chart table. The war hadn't started yet, and though it appeared it could come at any time, McCafferty's orders were to keep clear of any Soviet formation until the Word came. He didn't like it—better to get his blows in quick—but Washington had made it clear they wanted no one to cause an incident that might prevent some kind of diplomatic settlement. That made sense, the captain admitted to himself. Maybe the lace-panty folks could still get things under control. A faint hope, but a real one. Real enough to overcome his tactical desire to hold an attack position.

He ordered his submarine moved farther offshore. In half an hour, things were clearer still, and the captain had a SLOT-buoy launched. The buoy was programmed to allow *Chicago* thirty minutes to clear the area, then it started sending a series of burst transmissions on a UHF satellite band. From ten miles away, he listened to Soviet ships going berserk around the radio buoy, doubtlessly thinking it was the location of the submarine. The game was becoming all too real.

The buoy operated for over an hour, continuously sending its data to a NATO communications satellite. By nightfall the data was being broadcast to all NATO units at sea. The Russians are coming.

16

Last Moves/First Moves

USS *NIMITZ*

The speaker had announced sunset two hours before, but Bob had to finish his work. Sunsets at sea far away from the polluted city air, with a sharp horizon for the sun to slide under, were always something he enjoyed watching. What he saw now was almost as good. He stood with his hands on the rail, first looking down at the foam alongside the carrier's sleek hull, then after a brief moment of preparation, up. Born and raised in Boston, Toland hadn't known what the Milky Way was until joining the Navy, and the discovery of the wide, bright belt of stars overhead was always a source of wonder to him. There were the stars he'd learned to navigate by, with sextant and trigonometric tables—largely replaced now by electronic aids like Omega and Loran—but they were still beautiful to behold. Arcturus, and Vega, and Altair, all blinking at him with their own colors, their own unique characteristics that made them benchmarks in the night sky.

A door opened, and a sailor dressed in what looked like a purple plane-fueler's shirt joined him on the flight deck catwalk.

"Darkened ship, sailor. I'd dump that cigarette," Toland said sharply, more annoyed to have his precious solitude destroyed.

"Sorry, sir." The butt sailed over the side. The man was silent for a few minutes, then looked at Toland. "You know about the stars, sir?"

"What do you mean?"

"This is my first cruise, sir, an' I grew up in New York. Never saw the stars like this, but I don't even know what they are—the names, I mean. You officers know all that stuff, right?"

Toland laughed quietly. "I know what you mean. Same with my first time out. Pretty, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. What's that one?" The boy's voice sounded tired. *Small wonder,* Toland thought, *with all the flight operations they've been through today.* The youngster pointed to the brightest dot in the eastern sky, and Bob had to think for a few seconds.

"That's Jupiter. A planet, not a star. With the quartermaster's spyglass, you can pick out her moons—some of them anyway." He went on to point out some of the stars used for navigation.

"How do you use 'em, sir?" the sailor asked.

"You take a sextant and plot their height above the horizon—sounds harder than it is, just takes some practice—and you check that against a book of star positions."

"Who does that, sir?"

"The book? Standard stuff. I imagine the book we use comes from the Naval Observatory in D.C., but people have been measuring the tracks of the stars and planets for three or four thousand years, long before telescopes were invented. Anyway, if you know the exact time, and you know where a particular star is, you can plot out where you are on the globe pretty accurately, within a few hundred yards if you really know your stuff. Same thing with the sun and the moon. That knowledge has been around for hundreds of years. The tricky part was inventing a clock that kept good time. That happened about two hundred and some years ago."

"I thought they used satellites and stuff like that."

"We do now, but the stars are just as pretty."

"Yeah." The sailor sat down, his head leaning way back to watch the curtain of white points. Beneath them the ship's hull churned the water to foam with the whispering sound of a continuously breaking wave. Somehow the sound and the sky matched each other perfectly. "Well, at least I learned something about the stars. When's it gonna start, sir?"

Toland looked up at the constellation of Sagittarius. The center of the galaxy was behind it. Some astrophysicists said there was a black hole in there. The most destructive force known to physics, it made the forces under man's control appear puny by comparison. But men were a lot easier to destroy.

"Soon."

USS *CHICAGO*

The submarine was far offshore now, west of the surging Soviet submarine and surface forces. They'd heard no explosions yet, but it couldn't be far off. The nearest Soviet ship was about thirty miles off to the east, and a dozen more were plotted. All were blasting the sea with their active sonars.

McCafferty was surprised by his Flash operational order. Chicago was being pulled out of the Barents Sea and shifted to a patrol area in the Norwegian Sea. Mission: to interdict Soviet submarines expected to head south toward the North Atlantic. A political decision had been made: It must not appear that NATO was forcing the Soviets into a war. In a stroke, the pre-war strategy of engaging the Soviet Fleet in its own backyard had been tossed away. Like every pre-war battle plan in this century, the sub skipper reflected, this one too was being torn up because the enemy wasn't going to cooperate and do what we thought he'd do. Of course. He was putting many more submarines in the Atlantic than had been expected—even worse, we were making it easier for him! McCafferty wondered what other surprises were in store. The submarine's torpedoes and missiles were now fully armed, her fire-control

systems continuously manned, her crew standing Condition-3 wartime watch routine. But their orders at present were to run away. The captain swore to himself, angry with whoever had made this decision, yet still hoping in a quiet corner of his mind that somehow the war could be stopped.

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

"It's gotta happen soon," COMAIRCENT observed. "Shit, they got their troops as ready as I've ever seen. They can't wait until all our Reforger units are fully in place. They *have* to hit us soon."

"I know what you're saying, Charlie, but we can't move first."

"Any word on our visitors?" The Air Force general referred to Major Chernyavin's team of Spetznaz commandos.

"Still sitting tight." A unit of the elite GSG-9 German border guards had the safe house under continuous surveillance, with a second English ambush team between them and their supposed target in Lammersdorf. Intelligence officers from most of the NATO countries were part of the surveillance team, each with a direct line to his government. "What if they're bait, trying to get us to strike first?"

"I know we can't do that, General. What I want is a green light to initiate Dreamland when we know it's all for-real. We have to get our licks in fast, boss."

SACEUR leaned back. Trapped by his duties in his underground command post, he hadn't been to his official residence in ten days. He wondered if any general officer in the whole world had gotten any sleep in the past two weeks.

"If you put the orders up, how fast can you react?"

"I have all the birds loaded and ready now. My crews are briefed. If I order them to stand to, I can have Dreamland running thirty minutes from your signal."

"Okay, Charlie. The President has given me authority to react to any attack. Tell your people to stand to."

"Right."

SACEUR's phone rang. He lifted it, listened briefly, and looked up. "Our visitors are moving," he told COMAIRCENT. To his operations officer, "The code word is Firelight." NATO forces would now go to maximum alert.

AACHEN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

The Spetznaz team left the safe house in two small vans and drove south on the road to Lammersdorf. With their leader killed in a traffic accident, the second in command, a captain, had been delivered copies of the papers his boss had died to get, and fully briefed his men. They were quiet and tense.

The officer had taken pains to explain to his men that their escape had been carefully planned, that once clear of the target they'd get to another safe house and wait for their Red Army comrades to arrive in five days. They were the cream of the Red Army, he'd told them, thoroughly trained to carry out dangerous missions behind enemy lines, hence valuable to the State. Every man had combat experience fighting in the mountains of Afghanistan, he reminded them. They were trained. They were ready.

The men accepted this speech as elite troopers usually did, in total silence. Chosen most of all for their intelligence, each of them knew that the speech was merely that. The mission depended largely on luck, and their luck had already gone bad. Every one of them wished that Major Chernyavin were there, and wondered if somehow the mission might have been blown. One by one, they set these thoughts aside. Soon every man was reviewing his part in the mission to destroy Lammersdorf.

The drivers were KGB agents well experienced at working in foreign lands, and wondering exactly the same thing. Both vehicles stayed together, driving conservatively, wary of vehicles that followed them. Each had a scanner radio tuned to the local police frequencies, and another for communicating with each other. The KGB officers had discussed the mission an hour before. Moscow Center had told them that NATO was not yet fully alerted. The lead driver, whose regular cover job was driving a taxi, wondered if a "full" NATO alert meant a parade through Red Square.

"Turning right now. Car three, close in. Car one, turn left at the next intersection and get ahead of them." Colonel Weber spoke over a tactical radio of the sort used by FIST—fire-support team—units. The ambush had been ready for several days now, and as soon as their targets had emerged from their safe house, the word had been flashed all over the Federal Republic. NATO establishments already on alert were brought to full battle-readiness. This could only be the opening move in a shooting war . . . unless, Weber admitted to himself, they were simply moving from one secure place to wait further in another one. He didn't know which way things would turn, though surely it had to begin soon. Didn't it?

The two trucks were now in a rural part of Western Germany, driving southeast through the German-Belgian Nature Park, a scenic route often traveled by tourists and sightseers. They had chosen this side road to avoid the military traffic on the major highways, but as they passed through Mulartshutte, the lead driver frowned as he saw a military convoy of tanks on low-hauler trailers. Strangely, the tanks were loaded backwards, with their massive guns facing aft. British tanks, he saw, new Challengers. Well, he hadn't expected to see any German Leopard tanks on the Belgian border. There had never been any possibility of preventing a German mobilization, and he tried to convince himself that the rest of the NATO countries had not moved as quickly as they could have. Ah, if this mission were successful, then NATO's communications would be seriously damaged, and maybe the armored spearheads would indeed come to rescue them. The convoy slowed. The driver considered pulling around them, but his orders were to be inconspicuous.

“Everyone ready?” Weber asked from his chase car.

“Ready.” *Bloody complex op, this,* Colonel Armstrong thought. *Tankers, SAS, and the Germans all working together. But worth it to bag a bunch of Spetznaz.* The convoy slowed and stopped at a picnicking area. Weber halted his car a hundred meters away. It was now in the hands of the English ambush team.

Flares erupted around the two small vans.

The KGB driver cringed at being in the center of so much light. Then he looked forward to see the barrel of the tank just fifty meters ahead of him rise from its travel-rest and center on his windshield.

“Attention,” a voice called in Russian over a megaphone. “Spetznaz soldiers, attention. You are surrounded by a company of mechanized troops. Come out of your vehicles singly and unarmed. If you open fire, you will be killed within seconds.” A second voice began speaking.

“Come out, Comrades, this is Major Chernyavin. There is no chance.”

The commandos exchanged looks of horror. In the lead vehicle the captain started to pull the pin on a grenade. A sergeant leaped on him and wrapped his hand around the captain’s.

“We cannot be taken alive! Those are our orders!” the captain shouted.

“The devil’s mother we can’t!” the sergeant screamed. “One at a time, Comrades—out with hands high. And be careful!”

A private emerged from the back door of the van, one slow foot at a time.

“Come to the sound of my voice, Ivanov,” Chernyavin said from a wheelchair. The major had told much to earn the chance to save his detachment. He had worked with these men for two years, and he could not let them be slaughtered to no purpose. It was one thing to be loyal to the State, another to be loyal to the men he’d led in combat operations. “You will not be hurt. If you have any weapons, drop them now. I know about the knife you carry, Private Ivanov . . . Very good. Next man.”

It went quickly. A joint team of Special Air Service and GSG-9 commandos collected their Soviet counterparts, hand-cuffed them, and led them off to be blindfolded. Soon only two were left. The grenade made it tricky. By this time the captain had seen the futility of his action, but it proved impossible to locate the pin for the grenade. The sergeant shouted a warning to Chernyavin, who wanted to come forward himself, but couldn’t. The captain came out last. He wanted to throw the grenade at the officer who, he thought, had betrayed his country, only to see a man whose legs were swathed in plaster.

Chernyavin could see the look on the man’s face.

“Andrey Ilych, would you prefer that your life should end for nothing?” the major asked. “The bastards drugged me and learned enough to kill you all. I could not let them do this.”

“I have a live grenade!” the captain said loudly. “I will throw it into the truck.” This he did before anyone could shout to stop him. A moment later the truck exploded, destroying the group’s maps and plans for escape. For the first time in a week, Chernyavin’s face broke into a wide grin. “Well done, Andrushka!”

Two other Spetznaz groups were less lucky, and were intercepted within sight of their targets by German units privy to Chernyavin's capture. But twenty additional groups were in the Federal Republic, and not every NATO site had gotten the word in time. A score of vicious firefights erupted on both sides of the Rhein. A war to involve millions began with squad- and platoon-sized units fighting desperate actions in the dark.

17

The Frisbees of Dreamland

GERMANY, FORWARD EDGE OF THE BATTLE AREA

The view would have been frightening to most men. There were solid clouds overhead at four thousand feet. He flew through showers that he more heard than saw on this black night, and the dark outlines of trees appeared to reach up and snatch at his speeding fighter. Only a madman would be so low on such a night—so much the better, he smiled inside his oxygen mask.

Colonel Douglas Ellington's fingertips caressed the control stick of his F-19A Ghostrider attack fighter, while his other hand rested on the side-by-side throttle controls on the left-side cockpit wall. The head-up display projected on the windshield in front of him reported 625 knots Indicated Air Speed, a hundred six feet of altitude, a heading of 013, and around the numbers was a monocolor holographic image of the terrain before him. The image came from a forward-looking infrared camera in the fighter's nose, augmented by an invisible laser that interrogated the ground eight times per second. For peripheral vision, his oversized helmet was fitted with low-light goggles.

"Raisin' hell over our heads," his back-seater reported. Major Don Eisly monitored the radio and radar signals, as well as their own instruments: "All systems continue nominal, range to target now ninety miles."

"Right," the Duke responded. It had been an automatic nickname for Ellington, who even looked vaguely like the jazz musician.

Ellington relished the mission. They were skimming north at perilously low level over the angular terrain of East Germany, and their Frisbee, never more than two hundred feet off the ground, jerked up and down to the pilot's constant course adjustments.

Lockheed called her the Ghostrider. The pilots called her the Frisbee, the F-19A, the secretly developed Stealth attack fighter. She had no corners, no box shapes to allow radar signals to bounce cleanly off her. Her high-bypass turbofans were designed to emit a blurry infrared signature at most. From above, her wings appeared to mimic the shape of a cathedral bell. From in front, they curved oddly toward the ground, earning her the affectionate nickname of Frisbee. Though she was a masterpiece of electronic technology inside, she usually didn't use her active systems. Radars and radios made electronic noise that an enemy might detect, and the whole idea of the Frisbee

was that she didn't seem to exist at all.

Far over their heads on both sides of the border, hundreds of fighter aircraft played a deadly game of bluff, racing toward the border and then turning away, both sides trying to goad the other into committing to battle. Each side had airborne radar aircraft with which to control such a battle and so gain the advantage in a war which, though few yet knew it, had already begun.

And we're getting a quick one in, Ellington thought. *We're finally doing something smart!* He'd had a hundred missions over Vietnam in the first production F-111A fighters. The Duke was the Air Force's leading expert on covert low-level missions, and it was said that he could "bull's-eye a chuckhole in a Kansas tornado at midnight." That wasn't quite true. The Frisbee could never handle a tornado. The sad truth was that the F-19 handled like a pig—a consequence of her ungainly design. But Ellington didn't care. Being invisible was better than being agile, he judged, knowing that he was about to prove or disprove that proposition.

The Frisbee squadron was now penetrating the most concentrated SAM belt the world had ever known.

"Range to primary target is now sixty miles," Eisly advised. "All on-board systems continue nominal. No radars are locked onto us. Lookin' good, Duke."

"Roger." Ellington pushed the stick forward and dived as they passed over the crest of a small hill, then bottomed out at eighty feet over a wheatfield. The Duke was playing his game to the limit, drawing on years of experience in low-level attacks. Their primary target was a Soviet IL-76 Mainstay, an AWACS-type aircraft that was circling near Magdeburg, agreeably within ten miles of their secondary target, the E-8 highway bridges over the Elbe at Hohenroarthe. The mission was getting a lot hairier. The closer they got to the Mainstay the more radar signal hit their aircraft, its intensity growing at a square function. Sooner or later, enough signal would be reflected back to the Mainstay to be detectable, even by curved wings made of radar-transparent composites. All the Stealth technology did was to make radar detection harder, not impossible. Would they be seen by the Mainstay? If so, when, and how quickly would the Russians react?

Keep her on the deck, he told himself. *Play the game by the rules you've practiced out.* They had rehearsed this mission for nine days in "Dreamland," the top-secret exercise area in the sprawl of Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. Even the E-3A Sentry could barely make them out at forty miles, and the Sentry was a far better radar platform that the Mainstay, wasn't it?

That's what you're here to find out, boy . . .

There were five Mainstays on duty, all a hundred klicks east of the inter-German border. A nice safe distance, what with over three hundred fighters between them and the border.

"Twenty miles, Duke."

"Right. Call it off, Don."

"Roge. Still no fire-control emanations on us, and no search stuff is lingering our way. Lots of radio chatter, but mostly west of us. Very little VOX coming from the target."

Ellington reached his left hand down to arm the four AIM-9M Sidewinder missiles hanging under his wings. The weapon-indicator light blinked a lethal,

friendly green.

"Eighteen miles. Target appears to be circling normally, not taking evasive action."

Ten miles to the minute, Ellington computed in his mind, *one minute forty seconds.*

"Sixteen miles." Eisly read the numbers off a computer readout keyed to the NAVSTAR satellite navigation system.

The Mainstay would not have a chance. The Frisbee would not begin to climb until she was directly underneath the target. Fourteen miles. Twelve. Ten. Eight. Six miles to the converted air transport.

"The Mainstay just reversed her turn—yeah, she's jinking. A Foxfire just swept over us," Eisly said evenly. A MiG-25 interceptor, presumably acting on instructions from the IL-76, was now searching for them. With its high power and small arc, the Foxfire stood a good chance of acquiring them, Stealth technology or not. "The Mainstay might have us."

"Anything locked on us?"

"Not yet." Eisly's eyes were glued to the threat-receiver instruments. No missile-control radars had centered on the Frisbee yet. "Coming under the target."

"Right. Climbing now." Ellington eased back on his stick and punched up full afterburners. The Frisbee's engines could only give him Mach 1.3, but this was the place to use all the power he had. According to the weather people, these clouds topped out at twenty thousand feet, and the IL-76 would be about five thousand above that. Now the Frisbee was vulnerable. No longer lost in the ground clutter, her engines radiating their maximum signature, the Stealth aircraft was broadcasting her presence. *Climb faster, baby . . .*

"Tallyho!" Ellington said too loudly over the intercom as he burst through the clouds, and the night-vision systems instantly showed him the Mainstay, five miles away and diving for cover in front of him. Too late. The head-on closing speed was nearly a thousand miles per hour. The colonel centered his gunsight pipper on the target. A warbling tone came into his headset: the Sidewinders' seekers had locked onto the target. His right thumb toggled the launch-enable switch, and his forefinger squeezed the trigger twice. The Sidewinders left the aircraft half a second apart. Their brilliant exhaust flames dazzled him, but he did not take his eyes off the missiles as they raced for the target. It took eight seconds. He looked them all the way in. Both missiles angled for the Mainstay's starboard wing. Thirty feet away, laser proximity fuses detonated, filling the air with lethal fragments. It happened too fast. Both of the Mainstay's right-side engines exploded, the wing came off, and the Soviet aircraft began cartwheeling violently downward, lost seconds later in the clouds.

Jesus! Ellington thought as he rolled and dived back to the ground and safety. *Nothing like the movies. The target was hit and gone between blinks. Well, okay, that was easy enough. Primary target gone. Now for the hard part . . .*

* * *

Aboard an E-3A Sentry circling over Strasbourg, the radar technicians noted with satisfaction that all five Soviet radar craft had been killed within two minutes: it all worked, the F-19 really did surprise them.

The brigadier general in command of Operation Dreamland leaned forward in his command chair and toggled his microphone.

"Trumpeter, Trumpeter, Trumpeter," he said, then switched off. "Okay, boys," he breathed. "Make it count."

Amid the clouds of NATO tactical fighters hovering near the border, a hundred low-level attack fighters broke clear and dove for the ground. Half were F-111F Aardvarks, the other half "GR.1" Tornados, their wings heavy with fuel tanks and smart bombs. They followed the second wave of Frisbees, already sixty miles into East Germany, fanning out to their ground targets. Behind the strike aircraft, all-weather Eagle and Phantom interceptors, directed by the Sentries circling over the Rhein, began to launch their radar-guided missiles at Soviet fighters that had just lost their airborne controllers. Finally, a third team of NATO aircraft swooped in low, seeking out the ground radar sites that were coming on to replace the radar coverage of the dead Mainstays.

HOHENROARTHE, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Ellington circled his target at a thousand feet, several miles away. It was a double bridge, a pair of concrete arches, each about five hundred yards across, and with two traffic lanes, that crossed the River Elbe in the middle of a gentle S-curve. Pretty bridges. Ellington guessed that they dated back to the thirties, since this main road from Berlin to Braunschweig had been one of the first autobahns. *Ole Adolf himself might have driven across these bridges,* Ellington reflected. So much the better.

At the moment, a low-light television in his targeting systems showed them to be covered with Russian T-80 tanks, all heading west. Ellington evaluated the picture on his television screen. This could only be the second echelon of the army deployed to attack NATO. There was an SA-6 battery atop Hill 76 south of the bridges on the east bank, sited there to defend them. It had to be fully alert now. His earphones chirped constantly with noise from his threat receiver as the search radars from a score of air-defense batteries swept continuously over his aircraft. If only one of them got a good return . . . *Pucker factor,* Ellington reflected grimly.

"How's the Pave Tack?"

"Nominal," Eisly responded curtly. Pilot and back-seater were both under enormous stress.

"Illuminate," Ellington ordered. In the back seat, Eisly activated the Pave Tack target-illumination laser.

The elaborate Pave Tack gear was built into the Frisbee's drooping nosecone. Its lowermost part was a rotating turret containing a carbon-dioxide laser and television camera. The major used his joystick controls to center the

TV picture on the bridge, then unmasked the infrared laser. An invisible dot appeared in the center of the north span's bridge deck. A computer system would keep it there until told to do otherwise, and a videotape recorder would make a visual record of the raid's success or failure.

"The target is lit," Eisly said. "Still no fire-control radars on us."

"Nemo, this is Shade 4. The target is lit."

"Roge."

Fifteen seconds later the first Aardvark screamed south a bare thirty feet over the water, popped up, and loosed a single GBU-15 Paveway laser-guided bomb before it turned hard to the east over Hohenroarthe. An optical-computer system in the bomb's nose noted the reflected infrared beam, centered it, and adjusted the fins accordingly.

South of the bridge, the SAM battery commander was trying to decide what the noise was. His search radar did not show the Frisbee. He had been told not to expect the presence of "friendly" aircraft—the safe travel lane was fifteen miles to the north, over the Frontal Aviation base at Mahlminkel. *Maybe that's where the noise was coming from,* he thought. *No special alarm has been sent out —*

The northern horizon went bright yellow. Though he did not know it, four Luftwaffe Tornados had just made a single pass over Mahlminkel, leaving hundreds of explosive cluster munitions in their wake. A half-dozen Soviet Sukhoi attack fighters went up in flames, sending a fireball of jet fuel that rose up into the rain-filled sky.

The battery commander hesitated not at all—he shouted an order for his men to switch their fire-control radars from stand-by to active, and trace them around "their" bridges. A moment later, one detected an F-111 coming upriver.

"Oh, shit!" The Aardvark's systems operator instantly loosed a Shrike antiradar missile at the SAM battery, another for good measure at the search radar, a second Paveway at the bridge, then the F-111 turned violently left.

A missile-launch officer blanched as he realized what had just appeared from nowhere onto his scopes, and salvoed his three missiles in return. The incoming aircraft had to be hostile, and had just separated three smaller objects . . .

His first SAM struck and exploded on the high-tension power lines that spanned the river just south of the bridges. The entire valley was strobelighted as the power lines fell sparking into the river. The other two SAMs raced past the surreal explosion and locked onto the second F-111.

The first Paveway impacted precisely in the center of the northern span. It was a delayed-action bomb, and penetrated into the thick concrete before exploding a few yards from a battalion commander's tank. The north span was strong—it had been in use for over fifty years—but the 945 pounds of high explosive ripped it apart. In an instant the graceful concrete arch was cut in two, a ragged twenty-foot gap appearing between the two unsecured flying buttresses. They were not designed to stand alone, particularly with armored vehicles rumbling over them. The bomb released by the second Aardvark struck closer to shore, and the eastern side of the span failed entirely, taking eight tanks into the Elbe with it.

The second F-111 did not live to see this, however. One of the racing SA-6 missiles struck it broadside and blew it to pieces three seconds after the aircraft-launched Shrikes obliterated the pair of Soviet radar vehicles. Neither side had time for grief. Another F-111 screamed upriver as the surviving SAM crews frantically searched for targets.

Thirty seconds later, the north span was totally destroyed, brick-sized chunks of ferroconcrete scattered on the river bottom from three smart-bomb impacts.

Eisly switched his laser-designator to the south span. It was clogged with tanks, logjammed by a BMP-1 personnel carrier blown whole from one bridge span to the other by the first bomb, torn asunder and blazing on the west end of the bridge. The fourth Aardvark lofted a pair of bombs which homed in remorselessly on the laser-spot now stuck on the turret of a stopped tank. The sky was alight with blazing diesel fuel and streaked with hand-launched SAMs that had been blind-fired by panicked riflemen.

Both Paveways exploded a scant ten feet apart, and the entire bridge span failed at once, dropping a company of armored vehicles into the Elbe.

One more thing to do, Ellington told himself, *there!* The Soviets had stockpiled bridging equipment on the secondary road paralleling the river. The engineers were probably nearby. The Frisbee screeched over the rows of trucks, each of which carried a section of ribbon bridge, and deployed a row of flares before skimming back west toward the Federal Republic of Germany, and safety. The three surviving Aardvarks came in one at a time, each dropping a pair of Rockeye canisters into the truck park, ripping the bridging equipment to bits, and, their pilots fervently hoped, killing some of the skilled bridging engineers as well. Then the Aardvarks turned west to follow the F-19 home.

By this time, a second team of F-15 Eagle fighters had darted into East Germany to clear four lanes for the returning NATO strike aircraft. They fired their radar- and infrared-guided missiles at the MiGs trying to vector toward the returning fighter-bombers—but the American fighters still had their aerial radars to direct them, and the Soviets did not. The results reflected it. The Soviet fighters had not had time to reorganize after the loss of the Mainstays, and their formations were savaged. Even worse, the SAM batteries that were supposed to support the MiGs were ordered to engage the invading aircraft, and the surface-to-air missiles began to pluck targets out of the sky entirely without discrimination as the NATO aircraft clung to the nap of the earth.

By the time the last aircraft recrossed the border into West Germany, Operation Dreamland had lasted a total of twenty-seven minutes. It had been a costly mission. Two of the priceless Frisbees and eleven strike aircraft had been lost. Yet it had been a success. Over two hundred Soviet all-weather fighters had been destroyed by the NATO fighters, and perhaps a hundred more by “friendly” SAMs. The most elite squadrons of the Soviet air-defense force had been brutalized, and because of it, for the time being NATO would own the night skies over Europe. Thirty-six major bridges had been targeted: thirty had been destroyed and all of the rest damaged. The initial Soviet ground attack scheduled to begin in two hours would not be supported by the second echelon, nor by specialty units of mobile SAMs, engineers, and other

crucial late-arrivals fresh from special training in the Soviet homeland. Finally, the attacks against airfields would give NATO air parity, at least for the moment. The NATO air forces had fulfilled their most crucial mission: the much-feared Soviet ground superiority was decisively reduced. The land battle for Western Europe would now be fought on nearly even terms.

USS *PHARRIS*

It was still the previous day on the American East Coast. USS *Pharris* led the way out of the Delaware at 2200 hours. Behind her was a convoy of thirty ships, with a dozen escorting vessels. In both cases it was all that could be assembled on the short notice. Dozens of American and foreign-flag vessels were racing to American ports, many taking southerly routings to keep as far away as possible from the Soviet submarines reported surging south from the Norwegian Sea. The first few days would be tough, Morris knew.

"Captain, please come to communications," the announcing system squawked. Morris immediately went aft to the always-locked radio room.

"It's for-real." The communications officer handed him the yellow message form. Morris read it in the dim lights.

> Z0357Z15JUNE
> FR: SACLANT
> TO: ALL SACLANT SHIPS
> TOP SECRET
> 1. EXECUTE UNRESTRICTED AIR AND SEA WARFARE AGAINST WARSAW PACT FORCES.
> 2. WARPLAN GOLF TAC 7.
> 3. STOUT HEARTS. SACLANT SENDS.

Rules of Engagement War Option Seven. That meant no nukes, he was perfectly happy to see—*Pharris* didn't have any at the moment. He was now free to engage without warning any East Bloc warship or merchant vessel. *Well* . . . Morris nodded. He tucked the message form into his pocket, returned to the bridge, and went without a word to the microphone.

"This is the captain speaking. Listen up: It's official. We are now in a shooting war. No more drills, gentlemen. If you hear an alarm from now on, it means there's a Bad Guy out there, and they have live weapons, too. That is all." He hung up and looked over to the officer of the deck. "Mr. Johnson, I want the Prairie/Masker systems operating continuously. If they go down, I want to know about it at once. That goes in the order book."

"Aye, Captain."

Prairie/Masker was a system for defeating submarine sonars. Two metallic bands surrounded the frigate's hull, fore and aft of the engine spaces. This was Masker. It took compressed air and bled it into the water around the ship in the form of millions of tiny bubbles. The Prairie part of the system did the same with the propeller blades. The air bubbles created a semipermeable barrier that tended to trap sounds made by the ship, letting only a fraction of her propulsion noises escape—which made the ship extremely difficult for a

submarine to detect.

"How long till we clear the channel?" Morris asked.

"We'll be at the sea buoy in ninety minutes."

"Okay, tell the bosun's mate of the watch to be ready to stream the tail and the Nixie"—the towed-array sonar and the Nixie torpedo decoy—"at twenty-three forty-five. I'm going to take a nap. Wake me at twenty-three thirty. Anything happens, call me."

"Aye aye, sir."

A trio of P-3C Orion antisubmarine aircraft swept the area ahead of them. The only hazard was that of normal navigation, and suddenly the prospect of grazing the bottom or smashing an errant buoy looked like a minor affair. He'd need his sleep now, Morris knew, and he would not be at all surprised to find a submarine waiting right on the continental shelf in three hours. He'd want to be rested for that eventuality.

SUNNYVALE, CALIFORNIA

What was holding Washington up? the colonel asked himself. All he needed was a simple yes or no. He checked his boards. Three KH-type photoreconnaissance satellites were currently in orbit, plus nine electronic surveillance birds. That was his low-level "constellation." He didn't fear for his higher-flying navigation and communications satellites, but the twelve in low earth orbit, especially the KHs, were valuable and vulnerable. Two of them had Russian killersats in close proximity, and one of his birds was now approaching Soviet territory, with another only forty minutes behind. The third Key-Hole bird didn't have a satellite assigned yet, but the last pass over Leninsk showed another F-type booster being fueled on the pad.

"Take another look at the trailer," he ordered.

A technician made the requisite commands, and half a world away, the satellite fired its altitude control thrusters and pivoted in space to allow its cameras to search for the Russian killer satellite. It had held position fifty miles behind, and nine miles below the American satellite, but now was . . . gone.

"They moved it. They moved it in the last half hour." He lifted the phone to tell CINC-NORAD that he was moving the satellite on his own authority. Too late. As the satellite turned again to point its cameras at the ground, a cylindrical mass covered a sizable percentage of the earth's face—there was a flash and the TV screen went blank. Just like that.

"Chris, you have those maneuver commands set up?"

"Yes, sir," the captain answered, still staring at the screen.

"Execute them right now!"

The captain called up the command sequence on his computer console and punched Enter. The colonel's phone rang as the satellites' onboard rocket motors made subtle changes in their orbital paths.

"Argus Control," the colonel answered.

“This is CINC-NORAD. What the hell happened?”

“That Russian killersat closed and detonated. We have no signal from the KH-11, sir. I must assume they have successfully negated the bird. I’ve just ordered the other two Key-Holes to make a hundred-foot-per-second delta-V. Tell Washington they waited too long, sir.”

18

Polar Glory

KIEV, THE UKRAINE

It had been decided that all Soviet theater and front commanders would be briefed on developments in Germany. Alekseyev and his superior knew why: if anyone were to be relieved from his command, the new man would have to know the situation. They listened to the intelligence report with fascination. Neither of them had expected many of the Spetznaz attacks to fare well, but it seemed that some had been successful, especially those in the German ports. Then the operational intelligence brief got to the bridges on the Elbe.

"Why weren't we warned about this?" CINC-Southwest demanded.

"Comrade General," the Air Force officer responded. "Our information was that this Stealth aircraft was a prototype, not yet in regular service. Somehow the Americans have managed to construct a number of them, at least part of a squadron. They used it to eliminate our airborne radar coverage, thus paving the way for a massive penetration raid against our airfields and lines of supply, plus a well-planned air battle against our all-weather fighter aircraft. Their mission was successful, but not decisively so."

"Oh, and the commander of Air Forces West was arrested for successfully repelling it, eh?" Alekseyev snarled. "How many aircraft did we lose?"

"I am not authorized to reveal that, Comrade General."

"Can you tell us of the bridges, then!"

"Most of the bridges on the Elbe have been damaged to some extent or another, plus attacks on the bridging units stationed near them for tactical replacement."

"The fucking maniac—he had his bridging units right next to the primary targets!" Southwest looked up at the ceiling as though expecting an air attack right there in Kiev.

"That is where the roads are, Comrade General," the intelligence officer said quietly. Alekseyev waved him out of the room.

"Not a good start, Pasha." Already a general had been arrested. His replacement had not yet been named.

Alekseyev nodded agreement, then checked his watch. "The tanks will cross the border in thirty minutes, and we have a few surprises in store for them. Only half of their reinforcements are in place. They still have not achieved the

psychological degree of preparedness that our men have. Our first blow will hurt them. If our friend in Berlin has made his deployments properly."

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

"Perfect weather," First Lieutenant Mike Edwards pronounced, looking up from the chart just off the facsimile machine. "We have this strong cold front due in from Canada in twenty to twenty-four hours. That'll bring a lot of rain with it, maybe an inch worth, but for all of today we have clear skies—less than two-tenths high clouds—and no precip. Surface winds west to southwest at fifteen to twenty knots. And lots of 'shine," he concluded with a grin. The sun had risen for the last time nearly five weeks before, and wouldn't truly set for another five. They were so close to the North Pole here in Iceland that in summer the sun wandered in a lazy circle around the azure sky, dipping fractionally below the northwestern horizon but never truly setting. It was something that took getting used to.

"Fighter weather," agreed Lieutenant Colonel Bill Jeffers, commander of the 57th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, the "Black Knights," most of whose F-15 Eagle interceptors were sitting in the open a bare hundred yards away. The pilots were in those fighters, waiting. They'd been waiting for ninety minutes now. Two hours before, they'd been warned of a large number of Soviet aircraft taking off from their tactical air bases on the Kola Peninsula, destination unknown.

Keflavik was always a busy place, but for the last week it had been a madhouse. The airport was a combination Navy and Air Force base *and* a busy international airport at which many airliners stopped to refuel.

The past week had seen this traffic supplemented by grim tactical fighters transiting from the United States and Canada to Europe, cargo aircraft transporting overloads of critical equipment, and airliners returning to America crowded with pale tourists and dependents of the military men who were now on the battle line. The same had happened to Keflavik. Three thousand wives and children had been evacuated. The base facility was cleared for action. If the Soviets kicked off the war that seemed to be springing from the ground like a new volcano, Keflavik was as ready as it could be.

"With your permission, Colonel, I want to check a few things at the tower. This forecast is pretty solid, for the next twelve hours anyway."

"Jet stream?" Colonel Jeffers looked up from the yard-square chart of isobars and wind-trees.

"Same place it's been all week, sir, no sign at all of a change."

"Okay, go ahead."

Edwards put on his cap and walked out the door. He wore a thin blue officer's jacket over his Marine-style fatigues, pleased that the Air Force was still pretty casual about dress codes. His jeep held the rest of his "battle gear," a .38 revolver and pistol belt, and the field jacket that went with the

camouflage gear everybody had been issued three days before. They'd thought of everything, Edwards reflected as he started up the jeep for the quarter-mile drive to the tower. Even the flak jacket.

Keflavik had to get hit, Edwards reminded himself. Everybody knew it, prepared for it, and then tried not to think about it. This most isolated of all NATO outposts on the western coast of Iceland was the barred gate to the North Atlantic. If Ivan wanted to fight a naval war, Iceland had to be neutralized. From Keflavik's four runways flew eighteen Eagle interceptors, nine sub-hunting P-3C Orions, and deadliest of all, three E-3A AWACS birds, the eyes of the fighters. Two were operating now; one was circling twenty miles northeast of Cape Fontur, the other directly over Ritstain, 150 miles north of Keflavik. This was most unusual. With only three AWACS birds available, keeping one constantly in the air was difficult enough. The commander of the Iceland defense forces was taking all of this very seriously. Edwards shrugged. If there really were Backfires bearing down on them, there was nothing else for him to do. He was the brand-new squadron meteorological officer, and he'd just given his weather report.

Edwards parked his jeep in an officer's slot next to the tower and decided to take his .38 with him. The lot was not fenced, and there was no telling if someone might want to "borrow" his handgun. The base was crawling with a company of Marines and another of Air Force police, all looking very nasty with their M-16 rifles and web belts festooned with grenades. He hoped they'd be careful with those. Late the next day, a whole Marine Amphibious Unit was due to arrive to beef up base security, something that should have been done a week earlier but had been delayed, partly because of the Icelandic sensitivity regarding large numbers of armed foreigners, but mainly due to the unreal speed with which this crisis had developed. He trotted up the outside stairs and found the tower's control room crowded with eight people rather than the usual five.

"Hi, Jerry," he said to the boss, Navy lieutenant Jerry Simon. The Icelandic civilian controllers who usually worked here were nowhere to be seen. *Well,* Edwards thought, *there's no civilian traffic for them to control.*

"Morning, Mike," was the response. The ongoing joke at Keflavik. It was 0315 hours local time. Morning. The sun was already up, glaring in at them from the northeast through roll-down shades inside of the tilted glass windows.

"Let's have an attitude check!" Edwards said as he walked over to his meteorological instruments.

"I *hate* this fucking place!" the tower crew answered at once.

"Let's have a positive attitude check."

"I *positively* hate this fucking place!"

"Let's have a negative attitude check."

"I *don't like* this fucking place!"

"Let's have a short attitude check."

"Fuckit!" Everyone had a good laugh. They needed it.

"Nice to see that we're all maintaining our equilibrium," Edwards observed. The short, scrawny officer had become instantly popular on his arrival two months earlier. A native of Eastpoint, Maine, and a graduate of the Air Force

Academy, his glasses prevented him from flying. His diminutive size—five—six and a hundred twenty pounds—was not designed to command respect, but his infectious grin, ready supply of jokes, and recognized expertise at making sense of the confused North Atlantic weather patterns had combined to make him an acceptable companion for anyone at Keflavik. Everyone thought he would make one hell of a TV weatherman one day.

"MAC Flight Five-Two-Zero, roger. Roll her out, Big Guy, we need the room," said a tired controller. A few hundred yards away, a C-5A Galaxy cargo plane began to accelerate down runway one-eight. Edwards took a pair of binoculars to watch. It was hard to get used to the fact that something so monstrous could actually fly.

"Any word from anywhere?" Simon asked Edwards.

"Nope, nothing since the Norwegian report. Lots of activity at Kola. You know, I picked a hell of a time to come here to work," Mike replied. He went back to checking the calibration of his digital barometer.

It had started six weeks before. The Soviet Naval and Long-Range Aviation groups based at a half-dozen airfields around Severomorsk had exercised almost continuously, flying attack-profile missions that could have been directed at nearly anyone or anything. Then two weeks before, the activity had been cut way back. That was the ominous part: first they drilled all their flight crews to perfection and then they went to a stand-down maintenance period to make sure that every bird and every instrument was also fully operational . . . What were they doing now? An attack against Bodø in Norway? Or Iceland maybe? Another exercise? There was no telling.

Edwards lifted a clipboard to sign off for having checked his tower instruments that day. He could have left it to his enlisted technicians, but they were backstopping the aircraft techs with the fighter squadron, and he could handle it for them. Besides, it gave him an excuse to visit the tower and—

"Mr. Simon," the senior enlisted controller said rapidly. "I just copied a Flash from Sentry One: Warning Red. Many bandits inbound, sir. Approaching from due north to northeast—Sentry Two is checking in . . . they got 'em, too. Jesus. Sounds like forty to fifty bandits, sir." Edwards noted that the inbounds were being called Bandits instead of the usual Zombies.

"Anything friendly coming in?"

"Sir, we got a MAC C-141 twenty minutes out, eight more behind it at five-minute intervals, all inbound from Dover."

"Tell them to turn back, *and get an acknowledgment!* Keflavik is closed to all inbounds until further notice." Simon turned to his telecommunications man. "Tell Air-Ops to radio SACLANT that we're under attack, and to get the word out. I—"

Klaxons erupted all around them. Below, in the early-morning shadows, ground crewmen pulled red-flagged safety pins off the waiting interceptors. Edwards saw a pilot drain a Styrofoam cup and begin to strap himself in tight. The starter carts next to each fighter belched black smoke as they generated power to turn the engines.

"Tower, this is Hunter Leader. We're scrambling. Clear those runways, boy!"

Simon took the microphone. "Roger, Hunter Leader, the runways are yours. Scatter Plan Alpha. Go for it! Out."

Below, canopies were coming down, chocks were pulled away from wheels, and each crew chief gave his pilot a smart salute. The shriek of jet engines changed to a roar as the aircraft started to roll awkwardly off the flight line.

"Where's your battle station, Mike?" Simon asked.

"The met building." Edwards nodded and headed for the door. " 'Luck, guys."

Aboard Sentry Two, the radar operators watched a broad semicircle of blips converging on them. Each blip had "BGR" painted next to it, plus data on course, altitude, and speed. Each blip was a Tu-16 Badger bomber of Soviet Naval Aviation. There were twenty-four of them, inbound for Keflavik at a speed of six hundred knots. They had approached at low altitude to stay below the E-3A's radar horizon, and, once detected, were now climbing rapidly, two hundred miles away. This mission profile enabled the radar operators to classify them instantly as hostile. There were four Eagles on Combat Air Patrol, two of them with operating AWACS, but it was close to changeover point and the fighters were too low on fuel to race after the Badgers on afterburner. They were directed to head for the incoming Russian bombers at six hundred knots, and could not yet detect the Badgers on their own missile-targeting radars.

Sentry One off Cape Fontur reported something worse. Her blips were supersonic Tu-22M Backfires, coming in slowly enough to indicate that they were heavily loaded with external ordnance. The Eagles here also moved off to intercept. A hundred miles behind them, the two F-15s kept on point defense over Reykjavik had just been topped off from an orbiting tanker and were charging northeast at a thousand knots while the remainder of the squadron was even now leaving the ground. The radar picture from both AWACS aircraft was being transmitted by digital link to Keflavik's fighter-ops center so that ground personnel could monitor the action. Now that the fighters were rotating off the ground, the crews for every other aircraft at the air station worked frantically to ready their birds for flight.

They had practiced this task eight times in the past month. Some flight crews had been sleeping with their aircraft. Others were summoned from their quarters, no more than four hundred yards away. Those aircraft just back from patrol had their fuel tanks topped off, and were pre-flighted by the ground crews. Marine and Air Force guards not already at their posts rushed to them. It was just as well that the attack had come at this hour. There was only a handful of civilians about, and civilian air traffic was at its lowest. On the other hand, the men at Keflavik had been on double duty for a week now, and they were tired. Things which might have been done in five minutes now took seven or eight.

Edwards was back in his meteorological office, wearing his field jacket, flak jacket, and "fritz" style helmet. His emergency duty station—he could not think of his office as a "battle" station—was his assigned post. As if someone might need an especially deadly weather chart with which to attack an incoming bomber! The service had to have a plan for everything, Edwards knew. There had to be a plan. It *didn't* have to make sense. He went downstairs to Air-Ops.

“I got breakaway on Bandit Eight, one—two birds launched. The machine says they’re AS-4s,” a Sentry controller reported. The senior officer got on the radio for Keflavik.

MV *JULIUS FUCIK*

Twenty miles southwest of Keflavik, the “*Doctor Lykes*” was also a beehive of activity. As each Soviet bomber squadron launched its air-to-ground missiles, its commander transmitted a predetermined codeword that the *Fucik* copied. Her time had come.

“Rudder left,” Captain Kherov ordered. “Bring his bow into the wind.”

A full regiment of airborne infantry, many of them seasick from two weeks aboard the huge barge-carrier, was at work testing and loading weapons. The *Fucik’s* augmented crew was stripping the falsework from the aftermost four “barges,” revealing each in fact to be a Lebed-type assault hovercraft. The six-man crew of each removed the covers over the air intakes that led to the engines they had tended with loving care for a month. Satisfied, they waved to the craft commanders, who lit off the three engines in each of the aftermost pair.

The ship’s first officer stood at his elevator control station aft. On a hand signal, an eighty-five-man infantry company plus a reinforced mortar team were loaded into each craft. Power was increased, the hovercraft lifted up on their air cushions and were winched aft. In another four minutes, the vehicles were resting on the barge-loading elevator that formed the stem of the Seabee vessel.

“Lower away,” the first officer ordered. The winch operators lowered the elevator to the surface. The sea was choppy, and four-foot waves lapped at the *Fucik*’s bifurcated stem. When the elevator was level with the sea, first one, then the other Lebed commander increased power and moved off. At once, the elevator returned to the topmost deck while the first pair of hovercraft circled their mothership. In five more minutes, the four assault craft moved off in box formation toward the Keflavik Peninsula.

The *Fucik* continued her turn, returning to a northerly course to make the next hovercraft trip a shorter one. Her weather deck was ringed with armed troops carrying surface-to-air missiles and machine guns. Andreyev remained on the bridge, knowing this was where he belonged, but wishing he were leading his assault troops.

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

“Kef-Ops, the bandits are all turning right back after launching their ASMs. So far it’s been two birds per aircraft. We got fifty—make that fifty-six inbound

missiles, and more are being launched. Nobody behind them, though. I repeat, nothing behind the bomber force. At least we don't have any paratroopers headed in. Hunker down, guys, we now have sixty inbound missiles," Edwards heard as he came through the door.

"At least they won't be nukes," said a captain.

"They're shooting a hundred missiles at us—they don't fuckin' *need* nukes!" replied another.

Edwards watched the radar picture over the shoulder of one of the officers. It was eerily like an arcade game. Big, slow-moving blips denoted the aircraft. Smaller, quicker blips were the Mach-2 missiles.

"Gotcha!" hooted the enlisted radar operator. The leading Eagle had gotten within missile range of the Badgers and exploded one with a Sparrow missile —ten seconds *after* it had launched its own missiles. A second Sparrow missed its separate target, but a third appeared locked on it. The first fighter's wingman was just launching at yet another Russian. The Soviets had thought this one out, Edwards saw. They were attacking from all around the northern littoral, with lots of space between the bombers so that no single fighter could engage more than one or two. It was almost like—

"Anybody check the geometry of this?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" The captain looked around. "How come you aren't where you belong?"

Edwards ignored the irrelevancy. "What's the chance they're trying to draw our fighters out, like?"

"Expensive bait." The captain dismissed the idea. "You're saying they might have launched their ASMs from farther out. Maybe they don't fly as far as we thought. Point is, those missiles are ten minutes out now, the first of them, with about a five- or seven-minute delay to the last. And not a Goddamned thing we can do about it."

"Yeah." Edwards nodded. The Air-Ops/Met building was a two-story frame structure that vibrated every time the wind hit fifty knots. The lieutenant took out a stick of gum and started chewing on it. In ten minutes a hundred missiles, each carrying about a ton of high explosives—or *a nuclear warhead*— would start falling. The men outside would get the worst of it; the enlisted men and the flight crews trying to get the airplanes ready to race off. His assigned job was merely to keep out of the way. It made him a little ashamed. The fear he could now taste along with the peppermint made him more ashamed.

The Eagles were now all airborne, racing north. The last of the Backfires had just launched their missiles and were turning back northeast at full power as the Eagles raced at twelve hundred knots to catch up. Three of the interceptors launched missiles, and they succeeded in killing a pair of Backfires and damaging a third. The "Zulu" fighters which had scrambled off the deck could not catch the Backfires, the commanding controller on Sentry One noted, cursing himself for not having sent them after the older, less valuable Badgers, some of which they might have caught. Instead, he ordered them to slow down, and had his controllers vector them toward the supersonic missiles.

Penguin 8, the first of the P-3C Orion antisubmarine warfare aircraft, was

rolling now, down runway two-two. It had been on patrol only five hours before, and its flight crew was still trying to shake off the sleep as they rotated the propjet aircraft off the concrete.

"Tipping over now," the radar operator said. The first Russian missile was almost overhead, beginning its terminal dive. The Eagles had hit two of the incoming missiles, but courses and altitudes had been against them, and most of their Sparrows had missed, unable to catch the Mach-2 missiles. The F-15s orbited over central Iceland, well away from their base, as each pilot wondered if he'd have an airfield to return to.

Edwards cringed as the first landed—or didn't land. The air-to-surface missile had a radar-proximity fuse. It detonated twenty meters off the ground, and the effects were horrific. It exploded directly over International Highway, two hundred yards from Air-Ops, its fragments ripping into a number of buildings, the worst hit being the base fire station. Edwards fell to the floor as fragments lashed through the wooden wall. The door was torn off its hinges by the blast and the air filled with dust. A moment later, at the Esso facility a hundred yards away, a fuel truck exploded, sending a fireball towering into the sky, and dropping burning jet fuel for blocks around. Electrical power was immediately lost. Radars, radios, and room lights went out at once, and battery-powered emergency lights didn't come on as they were supposed to. For a terrified moment, Edwards wondered if the first missile really might have been a nuke. The blast had rippled through his chest, and he felt sudden nausea as his body tried to adjust to the sensations that assaulted it. He looked around and saw a man knocked unconscious by a falling light fixture. He didn't know if he was supposed to buckle his helmet strap or not, and somehow this question seemed enormously important at the moment, though he didn't remember why.

Another missile landed farther away, and then for a minute or so the sounds blended into a series of immense thunderclaps. Edwards was choking from the dust. It felt as though his chest would burst, and impulsively he bolted for the door to get fresh air.

He was greeted by a solid wall of heat. The Esso facility was a roaring mass of flames which had already engulfed the nearby photo lab and base thrift shop. More smoke rose from the enlisted housing area to the east. A half-dozen aircraft still on the flightline would never leave it, their wings snapped like toys from the blast of a missile that had exploded directly over the runway crossroads. A smashed E-3A Sentry burst into flames before his eyes. He turned to see that the control tower had been damaged, too, all its windows gone. Edwards ran that way, not thinking to take his jeep.

Two minutes later, he entered the tower breathlessly to find the crew all dead, torn apart by flying glass, the tiled floor covered with blood. Radio receivers were still making noise over desk-mounted speakers, but he couldn't seem to find a working transmitter.

PENGUIN 8

“What the hell is that?” the Orion pilot said. He turned his aircraft violently to the left and increased power. They had been orbiting ten miles out from Keflavik, watching the smoke and flames rising from their home field, when four massive objects passed under them.

“It’s a—” the copilot breathed. *“Where—”*

The four Lebeds were moving at over forty knots, bouncing roughly over the four- to five-foot waves. About eighty feet long and thirty-five wide, each had a pair of ducted propellers atop, immediately forward of a tall,’aircraft-type rudder painted with the Soviet naval ensign, a red hammer and sickle over a blue stripe. They were already too close to shore for the Orion to use any of her weapons.

The pilot watched incredulously as he approached, and any doubts he had ended as a 30mm cannon fired at them. It missed wide, but the pilot jerked the Orion around to the west.

“Tacco, tell Keflavik ASW Ops they got company coming. Four armed hovercraft, type unknown, but Russian—and they gotta be carrying troops.”

“Flight,” the tactical coordinator reported back thirty seconds later. “Keflavik is off the air. ASW Ops Center is gone; the tower is gone, too. I’m trying to raise the Sentries. Maybe we can get a fighter or two.”

“Okay, but keep trying Keflavik. Get our radar lit off. We’ll see if we can find where they came from. Get our Harpoons lit off, too.”

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

Edwards was surveying the damage through binoculars when he heard the message come in—and could not answer it. *Now what do I do?* He looked around and saw one useful thing, a Hammer Ace radio. He took the oversized backpack and ran down the steps. He had to find the Marine officers and warn them.

The hovercraft raced up Djupivogur Cove and came to land a minute later less than a mile from the airbase. The troopers gratefully noted the smoother ride as their craft spread out to line abreast, three hundred yards between them as they tore across the flat, rocky gorse toward the NATO air base.

“What in the hell—” a Marine corporal said. Like a dinosaur coming to the picnic, a massive object appeared on the horizon, apparently coming overland at high speed.

“You! Marine, get over here!” Edwards screamed. A jeep with three enlisted men stopped, then raced toward him. “Get me to your CO fast!”

“CO’s dead, sir,” the sergeant said. “CP took a hit, Lieutenant—fuckin’ gone!”

“Where’s the alternate?”

“Elementary school.”

“Go, I gotta let them know, we got bad guys coming in from the sea—shit! You got a radio.”

“Tried calling, sir, but no answer.” The sergeant turned south down

International Highway. At least three missiles had landed here, judging by the smoke. All around, the small city that had been the Keflavik air base was a loose collection of smoking fires. A number of people in uniforms were running around, doing things that Edwards didn't have time to guess at. Was anybody in charge?

The elementary school had also been hit. The third of the building still standing was a mass of flame.

"Sergeant, that radio work?"

"Yes, sir, but it ain't tuned into the perimeter guards."

"Well, fix it!"

"Right." The sergeant dialed into a different frequency.

The Lebeds halted in two pairs, each a quarter mile from the perimeter. The bow door on each opened, and out rolled a pair of BMD infantry assault vehicles, followed by mortar crews who began at once to set up their weapons. The 73mm guns and missile launchers on the minitanks began to engage the Marine defensive positions as the reinforced company in each vehicle advanced slowly and skillfully, using their cover and taking advantage of their fire support. The assault force had been handpicked from units that had fought in Afghanistan. Every man had been under fire before. The Lebeds immediately turned crablike and sped back to sea to pick up yet more infantrymen. Already, elements of two elite airborne battalions were engaging a single company of Marines.

The frantic words on the platoon radio nets were all too clear. The base electrical supply was cut, and along with it the main radios. The Marine officers were dead, and there was no one to coordinate the defense. Edwards wondered if anyone really knew what the hell was going on. He decided that it probably didn't matter.

"Sergeant, we gotta get the hell outa here!"

"You mean run away!"

"I mean get away and report what's happened here. Looks like we lost this one, Sarge. Somebody's gotta report in so they don't send any more planes to land here. What's the fastest way to Reykjavik?"

"Dammit, sir, there's Marines out there—"

"You wanna be a Russian prisoner? We lost! I say we gotta report in and you'll do what I Goddamned tell you, Sergeant, you got that!"

"Aye aye, sir."

"How we fixed for weapons?"

On his own, a private ran to what was left of the school. A Marine was lying there facedown, a pool of red spreading from some invisible, fatal wound. The private came back with the man's M-16, field pack, and ammo belt, handing the collection to Edwards.

"We all got one now, sir."

"Let's get the hell outa here."

The sergeant threw the jeep into gear. "How we gonna report in?"

"Let me worry about that, okay?"

"You say so." The sergeant turned the jeep completely around, back up International, toward the wrecked satellite antennae.

MV *JULIUS FUCIK*

"Aircraft sighted, port bow!" a lookout screamed. Kherov raised his binoculars to his eyes and swore softly. He saw what could only be missiles dangling from each wing of the multiengined aircraft.

PENGUIN 8

"Well, lookie what we got here," the Orion's pilot said quietly. "Our old friend, the *Doctor Lykes.* Combat, Flight, what else is around?"

"Nothin', Flight, not another surface ship for over a hundred miles." They had just completed a complete circuit of the horizon, scanning with their surface-search radar.

"And it's for Goddamned sure those hovercraft didn't come in off no submarine." The pilot adjusted course to pass within two miles of the ship, with the sun behind the four-engine patrol aircraft. His copilot examined the ship through binoculars. On-board TV cameras operated by the weapons crew would provide even better close-up pictures. They saw a pair of helicopters warming up. Someone aboard the *Fucik* panicked and fired a hand-held SA-7 missile. It failed to lock onto the Orion and blazed off directly into the low sun.

MV *JULIUS FUCIK*

"Idiot!" Kherov growled. The smoke from the rocket motor didn't even come close to the aircraft. "He'll shoot at us now. All ahead flank! Helmsman, be alert!"

PENGUIN 8

"Okay," the pilot said, turning away from the merchantman. "Tacco, we got a target for your Harpoons. Any luck with Keflavik?"

"Negative, but Sentry One is relaying the data into Scotland. They say a bunch of missiles hit Keflavik, looks like the place is closed whether we keep it or not."

The pilot cursed briefly. "Okay. We'll blow this pirate right out of the water."

"Roge, Flight," the tactical coordinator replied. "Two minutes before we can launch the—damn! I got a red light on the portside Harpoon. The sucker won't

arm."

"Well, play with the bastard!" the pilot growled. It didn't work. In the haste to get off the ground, the missile's control cables had not been fully attached by the weary ground crew.

"Okay, I got one working. Ready!"

"Shoot!"

The missile dropped clear of the wing and fell thirty feet before its engine ignited. *Fucik's* weather deck was lined with paratroopers, many holding hand-launched SAMs and hoping to intercept the incoming ASM.

"Tacco, see if you can raise an F-15. Maybe they can rip this baby up with twenty-millimeters."

"Doing that already. We got a pair of Eagles coming in, but they're skosh fuel. One or two passes'll be all they can manage."

Forward, the pilot had binoculars to his eyes, watching the white-painted missile skimming the wavetops. "Go, baby, go..."

MV *JULIUS FUCIK*

"Rocket coming in, low on the horizon, portside." *At least we have good lookouts,* Kherov thought. He estimated the distance to the horizon, and gave the missile a speed of a thousand kilometers per hour . . .

"Right hard rudder!" he screamed. The helmsman threw the wheel over as far as it would go and held it down.

"You cannot run from a missile, Kherov," the General said quietly.

"I know this. Watch, my friend."

The black-hulled vessel was turning radically to starboard. As she did so, the ship heeled in the opposite direction, the same way a car rolls away from a turn on a flat road, which artificially raised the waterline on the vulnerable portside.

Some enterprising officers aboard fired signal flares, hoping to decoy the missile away, but all the missile's microchip brain cared about was the enormous blip that occupied the center of its radar seeker head. It noted that the ship's heading was changing slightly, and altered its own course accordingly. Half a mile from the target, the Harpoon lurched upward from its ten-foot altitude in its programmed "pop-up" terminal maneuver. The troopers aboard the Fucik instantly fired an even dozen SAMs. Three locked onto the Harpoon's engine exhaust plume, but were unable to turn rapidly enough to hit the incoming missile, and continued past it. The Harpoon tipped over and dove.

PENGUIN 8

"All right . . ." the pilot whispered. There was no stopping it now.

The missile struck the *Fucik's* hull six feet above the waterline, slightly abaft the bridge. The warhead exploded at once, but the missile body kept moving forward, spreading two hundred pounds of jet fuel that fireballed into the lowest cargo deck. In an instant, the ship disappeared behind a wall of smoke. Three paratroopers, thrown off their feet by the impact, accidentally triggered their SAMs straight up.

"Tacco, your bird hit just fine. We got warhead detonation. Looks like . . ." The pilot's eyes strained at his binoculars to assess the damage.

MV *JULIUS FUCIK*

"Rudder amidships!" Kherov had expected to be knocked from his feet, but the missile was a small one, and *Julius Fucik* still had thirty-five thousand tons of mass. He ran out to the bridge wing to survey the damage. As the ship returned to an even keel, the ragged hole in her side rose ten feet from the lapping waves. Smoke poured from the hole. There was fire aboard, but the ship should not flood from the blow, the captain judged. There was only one danger. Kherov rapidly gave orders to his damage-control teams, and the General sent one of his own officers to assist. A hundred of the paratroopers had been trained over the last ten days in shipboard firefighting. They would now put what they had learned to use.

PENGUIN 8

The Fucik emerged at twenty knots from the smoke, a fifteen-foot hole in the ship's side. Smoke poured from the opening, but the pilot knew at once that the damage would not be fatal. He could see hundreds of men on the upper deck, some of them already running toward ladders to fight the fire below.

"Where are those fighters?" the pilot asked. The tactical coordinator didn't answer. He switched his radio circuits.

"Penguin Eight, this is Cobra One. I got two birds. Our missiles are all gone, but we both got a full load of twenty-mike-mike. I can give you two passes, then we gotta bingo to Scotland."

"That's a roge, Cobra Lead. The target has some helos spooling up. Watch out for hand-held SAMs. I seen 'em fire about twenty of the bastards."

"Roger that, Penguin. Any further word of Keflavik?"

"We're gonna have to find a new home for a while."

"Roger, copy. Okay, keep clear, we're coming in from up-sun, on the deck."

The Orion continued to orbit three miles out. Her pilot didn't see the fighters until they started firing. The two Eagles were a few feet apart, perhaps twenty feet over the water as their noses sparkled with the flash from their

20mm rotary cannon.

MV *JULIUS FUCIK*

Nobody aboard saw them come in. A moment later, the water around the Fucik's side turned to froth from short-falling rounds, then her main deck was hidden with dust. A sudden orange fireball announced the explosion of one of the Russian helicopters, and burning jet fuel splattered over the bridge, narrowly missing the General and captain.

"What was that?" Kherov gasped.

"American fighters. They came in very low. They must only have their cannon, else they'd have bombed us already. It is not over yet, my captain."

The fighters split, passing left and right of the ship, which continued to move at twenty knots in a wide circle. No SAMs followed the Eagles away, and both turned, re-formed, and closed on the *Fucik*'s bow. The next target was the superstructure. A moment later, the freighter's bridge was peppered with several hundred rounds. Every window was blown away, and most of the bridge crew killed, but the ship's watertight integrity hadn't been damaged a whit.

Kherov surveyed the carnage. His helmsman had been blown apart by a half-dozen exploding bullets and every man present on the bridge was dead. It took a second for him to overcome the shock and notice a crippling pain in his own abdomen, his dark jacket darkening further with blood.

"You are hit, Captain." Only the General had had the instinct to duck behind something solid. He looked at the eight mutilated bodies in the pilothouse and wondered once again why he was so lucky.

"I must get the ship to port. Go aft. Tell the first officer to continue landing operations. You, Comrade General, supervise the fires topside. We must get my ship to port."

"I will send you help." The General ran out the door as Kherov went to the wheel.

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

"Stop, hold it right here!" Edwards screamed.

"What now, Lieutenant?" the sergeant demanded. He stopped the jeep by the BOQ parking lot.

"Let's get my car. This jeep's too friggin' conspicuous." The lieutenant jumped out of the jeep, pulling his car keys from his pants pocket. The Marines just looked at each other for a moment before running after him.

His car was a ten-year-old Volvo that he'd purchased from a departing officer a few months before. It had seen rugged service on Iceland's mainly

unpaved roads, and it showed. “Well, get in!”

“Sir, what the hell are we doing, exactly?”

“Look, Sarge, we gotta clear the area. What if Ivan’s got helicopters? What do you suppose a jeep looks like from the air?”

“Oh, okay.” The sergeant nodded. “But what are we doing, sir?”

“We’ll drive at least as far as Hafnarfjördur, ditch the car, and start walking back into the boonies. Soon as we get to a safe place, we’ll radio in. That’s a satellite radio I got. We have to let Washington know what’s happening here. That means we gotta be able to see what Ivan’s got coming in. Our people are gonna at least try to take this rock back. Our mission, Sergeant, is to stay alive, report in, and maybe make that easier.” Edwards hadn’t thought this out until a few moments before he said it. Would they try to take Iceland back? Would they be able to try? What else was going wrong all over the friggin’ world? Did any of this make sense? He decided it didn’t have to make sense. *One thing at a time,* he told himself. He for damned sure didn’t want to be a prisoner of the Russians, and maybe if they could radio some information in they could get even for what had happened to Keflavik.

Edwards started up the car and drove east up Highway 41. Where to ditch the car? There was a shopping center at Hafnarfjördur . . . and Iceland’s only Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet. What better place to ditch a car than that? The young lieutenant smiled in spite of himself. They were alive, and they had the most dangerous weapon known to man—a radio. He’d work out the problems as they arose. His mission, he decided, was to stay alive and report in. After they did that, someone else could tell them what to do. *One thing at a time,* he repeated to himself, and pray to God somebody knows what the hell is going on . . .

PENGUIN 8

“Looks like the fire’s under control,” the copilot commented sourly.

“Yeah, how do you think they managed that? Shit, that boat should’ve gone up like—but it didn’t.” As they watched, a second load of troops was dispatched on the four hovercraft. The pilot hadn’t thought of having the two available Eagle fighters—now heading for England—shoot them up instead of this huge black ship. *Some fucking officer you are,* he told himself. Penguin 8 carried eighty sonobuoys, four Mk-46 ASW torpedoes, and some other high-technology weapons—none of which were of the least use against a simple large target like this merchie. Unless he wanted to play kamikaze . . . the pilot shook his head.

“If you want to head for Scotland, we got another thirty minutes of fuel,” the flight engineer advised.

“Okay, let’s take a last look at Keflavik. I’m going up to six thousand. Oughta keep us out of SAM range.”

They were over the coast in two minutes. A Lebed was approaching the SOSUS and SIGINT station opposite Hafnir. They could just make out some

movement on the ground, and a wisp of smoke coming from the building. The pilot didn't know much about the SIGINT activities, but SOSUS, the oceanic Sonar Surveillance System, was the principal means of detecting targets for the P-3C Orion crews to pounce on. This station covered the gaps from Greenland to Iceland, and from Iceland to the Faroe Islands. The main picketline needed to keep Russian subs out of the trade routes was about to go permanently off the air. Great.

They were over Keflavik a minute after that. Seven or eight aircraft had not gotten off the ground. All were burning. The pilot examined the runways through binoculars and was horrified to see that it was uncratered.

"Tacco, you got a Sentry on the line?"

"You can talk to one right now, Flight. Go right ahead, you got Sentry Two."

"Sentry Two, this is Penguin 8, do you read, over?"

"Roger, Penguin 8, this is the senior controller. We show you over Keflavik. What's it look like?"

"I count eight birds on the ground, all broke and burning. The missiles did not, repeat not, crater the airfield."

"You sure about that, Eight?"

"Affirmative. A whole lot of blast damage, but I don't see any holes in the ground. The in-close fuel tanks appear undamaged, and nothing at all seems to have hit the tank farm at Hakotstangar. We left our friends a whole shitload of jet fuel and an airfield. The base—let's see. Tower's still standing. Lots of smoke and fire around Air/Ops . . . base looks pretty badly beat-up, but those runways are sure as hell usable. Over."

"How about the ship you shot at?"

"One solid hit, I eyeballed the missile in, and two of your '15s strafed his ass, but it ain't enough. She'll probably make port. I'd guess she'll try to come into Reykjavik, maybe Hafnarfjördur, to unload. She's gotta be carrying a lot of stuff. It's a forty-thousand-ton ship. She can make port in two or three hours unless we can whistle up something to take her out."

"Don't count on it. What's your fuel state?"

"We gotta head for Stornoway right now. My camera guys have shot pictures of the area, and that ship. About all we can do."

"Okay, Penguin 8. Go find yourself a place to land. We're leaving in a few minutes, too. 'Luck. Out."

HAFNARFJÖRDUR, ICELAND

Edwards parked the car in the shopping center. There had been some people outside along the drive in, mainly looking west toward Keflavik. Awakened by the noise a few miles away and wondering what was happening. *Just like us,* Edwards thought. Fortunately, there seemed to be no one about right here yet. He locked the car and pocketed the keys without thinking about it.

"Where to, Lieutenant?" Sergeant Smith asked.

"Sergeant, let's straighten a few things out. You're the ground-pounder. You

got any ideas, I want to know about 'em, okay?"

"Well, sir, I'd say we oughta head straight east for a while, to get away from the roads, like, and find you a place to play with that radio. An' do it quick."

Edwards looked around. There was no one on the streets here yet, but they'd want to get into the back country before being noticed by anybody who might tell someone about it afterward. He nodded, and the sergeant directed a private to lead off. They took off their helmets and slung their rifles to appear as harmless as possible, each sure that a hundred pairs of eyes were locked on them from behind the curtained windows. *What a way to start a war,* he thought.

MV *JULIUS FUCIK*

"The fires are out, by God!" General Andreyev proclaimed. "There is much damage to our equipment, mainly from water, but the fires are out!" His expression changed when he saw Kherov.

The captain was ghostly pale. An Army medic had bandaged his wound, but there had to be internal bleeding. He struggled to hold himself erect over the chart table.

"Come right to zero-zero-three."

A junior officer was on the wheel. "Right to zero-zero-three, Comrade Captain."

"You must lie down, my captain," Andreyev said softly.

"I must get my ship to safe harbor first!"

The Fucik ran almost due north, the westerly wind and sea on her beam, and water was lapping at the missile wound. His earlier optimism was fading. Some seams in the lower hull had sprung from the missile impact, and water was entering the lower cargo deck, though so far the pumps were keeping up with it. There was twenty thousand tons of cargo to deliver.

"Captain, you must have medical attention," Andreyev persisted.

"After we round the point. When we have the damaged port side alee, then I shall be tended to. Tell your men to stay alert. One more successful attack could finish us. And tell them they have done well. I would be happy to sail with them again."

USS *PHARRIS*

"Sonar contact, possible submarine bearing three-five-three," the sonarman announced.

And so it begins, Morris said to himself. *Pharris* was at general quarters for the first leg of the trip away from the U.S. coast. The frigate's tactical towed-array sonar was trailed out in her wake. They were twenty miles north of the

convoy, a hundred ten miles east of the coast, just crossing the continental shelf line into truly deep water at the Lindenkohl Canyon. A perfect place for a submarine to hide.

"Show me what you have," the ASW officer ordered. Morris kept his peace and just watched his men at work.

The sonarman pointed to the waterfall display. It showed as a series of small digital blocks, numerous shades of green on a black background. Six blocks in a row were different from the random background pattern. Then a seventh. The fact that they were in a vertical row meant that the noise was being generated at a constant bearing from the ship, just west of north. Up to now, all they had was a direction to a possible noise source. They had no way of knowing the distance nor any of determining if it were really a submarine, a fishing boat with an overly loud motor, or simply a disturbance in the water. The signal source did not repeat for a minute, then came back. Then it disappeared again.

Morris and his ASW officer looked at the bathythermograph reading. Every two hours they dropped an instrument that measured water temperature as it fell through the water, reporting back by wire until it was cut loose to fall free to the bottom. The trace showed an uneven line. The water temperature decreased with depth, but not in a uniform way.

"Could be anything," the ASW officer said quietly.

"Sure could," the captain agreed. He went back to the sonar scope. It was still there. The trace had remained fairly constant for nine minutes now.

But what was the range to it? Water was a fine medium for carrying sound energy, far more efficient at it than air, but it had its own rules. One hundred feet below the *Pharris* was "the layer," a fairly abrupt change in water temperature. Like an angled pane of glass, it allowed some sound to pass through, but reflected most of it. Some of the energy would be ducted between layers, retaining its intensity for an enormous distance. The signal source they were listening to could be as close as five miles or as distant as fifty. As they watched, the scope trace started leaning a bit to the left, which meant that they were pulling east of it . . . or it was pulling west of them, as a submarine might slide aft of her target as part of her own hunting maneuver. Morris went forward to the plotting table.

"If it's a target, it's pretty far off, I think," the quartermaster said quietly. It was surprising how quiet people were during antisubmarine warfare exercises, Morris thought, as though a submarine might hear their voices.

"Sir," the ASW officer said after a moment. "With no perceptible change in bearing, the contact has to be a good fifteen miles off. That means it has to be a fairly noisy source, probably too far to be an immediate threat. If it's a nuclear sub, we can get a cross-bearing after a short sprint."

Morris looked to the CIC's after bulkhead. His frigate was steaming at four knots. He lifted a "growler" phone.

"Bridge, Combat."

"Bridge aye. XO speaking."

"Joe, let's bend on twenty knots for five minutes. See if we can get a cross-bearing on the target we're working."

"Aye, skipper."

A minute later, Morris could feel the change in his ship's motion as her steam plant drove the frigate hard through the six-foot seas. He waited thoughtfully, wishing his ship had one of the more sensitive 2X arrays being fitted to the Perry-class fast-frigates. It was a predictably long five minutes, but ASW was a game that demanded patience.

Power was reduced, and as the ship slowed, the pattern on the sonar screen changed from random flow noise to random ambient noise, something more easily perceived than described. The captain, his ASW officer, and the sonar operator watched the screen intently for ten minutes. The anomalous sound tracing did not reappear. In a peacetime exercise they would have decided that it was a pure anomaly, water-generated noise that had stopped as unpredictably as it had started, perhaps a minor eddy that subsided on the surface. But now everything they detected had a potential red star and a periscope attached.

My first dilemma, Morris thought. If he investigated by sending his own helicopter or one of the Orion patrol aircraft, he might be sending them after nothing at all, and away from a path that could end with a real contact. If he did nothing, he might not be prosecuting a real contact. Morris sometimes wondered if captains should be issued coins with YES and NO stamped on either side, perhaps called a "digital decision generator" in keeping with the Navy's love for electronic-sounding titles.

"Any reason to think it's real?" he asked the ASW officer.

"No, sir." The officer wondered by this time if he had been right to call it to his captain's attention. "Not now."

"Fair enough. It won't be the last one."

19

Journeys End/Journeys Begin

HAFNARFJÖRDUR, ICELAND

Sergeant James Smith was a company clerk, which meant that he carried his commander's maps, Edwards was grateful to learn. He would have been less happy to learn what Smith thought about what they were doing, and who was leading this party. A company clerk was also supposed to pack an ax with him, but since Iceland was almost entirely devoid of trees, his was still in the company headquarters, probably burned down to a charred axhead by now. They walked east in silence, their eyes punished by the low sun, past two kilometers of lava field that gave mute testimony to Iceland's volcanic birth.

They moved fast, without pausing for rest. The sea was at their back, and as long as they could see it, men on the coast might see them. Each puff of dust raised by their boots made them feel increasingly vulnerable, and Private Garcia, who brought up the rear of their small unit, periodically turned and walked backward for a few yards to be sure that no one was following them. The others looked ahead, to the sides, and up. They were sure that Ivan had thought to bring a helicopter or two along. Few things can make a man feel as naked as an aircraft filled with eyes.

The ground was almost totally barren. Here and there a few sprigs of grass fought their way through the rocks to sunlight, but for the most part the terrain was as barren as the surface of the moon—the Apollo astronauts had trained somewhere in Iceland for that very reason, Edwards remembered. The mild surface winds scoured up the slopes they were climbing, raising small quantities of dust that made the lieutenant sneeze periodically. He was already wondering what they would do when their rations ran out. This was no place to try living off the land. He'd been in Iceland only for a few months, and hadn't had a single chance to tour the countryside. *Cross one bridge at a time,* Edwards told himself. *People* grow *their own food everywhere. There have to be farms around, and you'll be able to find them on the maps.*

"Chopper!" Garcia called out.

The private had a great set of eyes, Edwards noted. They couldn't hear it yet, but there it was on the horizon, coming in from the sea.

"Everybody down. Let me see those glasses, Sergeant." Edwards held out his hand as he sat. Smith came down next to him, the binoculars already at his

eyes.

"It's a Hip, sir. Troop carrier." He handed the glasses over.

"I'll take your word for it," Edwards replied. He could see the ungainly shape, perhaps three miles away, heading southeast toward Hafnarfjördur. "Looks like it's heading for the piers. Oh. They came in on a ship. They want to dock it, and they'll want to secure the waterfront first."

"Makes sense," Sergeant Smith agreed.

Edwards followed the helicopter until it dropped behind some buildings. Less than a minute later, it was up again, heading back northwest. He gave the horizon a close look.

"Looks like a ship out there."

MV *JULIUS FUCIK*

Kherov moved slowly back to the chart table with an Army medic at his side. His pumps were almost keeping up with the inflow of water. The Fucik was down half a meter at the bow. Portable fire pumps were being set near the bilges to draw more seawater out and eject it over the side—through the hole the American missile had made. He smiled wanly to himself. An Army medic followed him around. The General had practically pulled a gun on the captain, forcing him to allow the medic to give him a bottle of blood plasma and some morphine. He was grateful for the latter—his pain was still there, but not nearly so bad as it had been. The plasma container was a damned nuisance, with the medic holding it aloft as he moved around the pilothouse. But he knew he needed it. Kherov wanted to stay alive a few hours longer—*and who knows,* he thought, *if the regimental surgeon has skill, I might even live . . .*

There were more important things at hand. He had studied the charts of this port, but he had never been here before. He had no pilot. There would be no harbor tugs, and the tiny barge-tugs carried in his ship's split stem would be useless for docking.

The helicopter circled his ship after making its first trip. A miracle that it flew at all, the captain thought, after having the one next to it shattered by that strafing run. The mechanics had managed to extinguish that fire rapidly and place a curtain of water fog around the other aircraft. Some minor repairs had been needed, there were an even dozen holes in the sheet metal, but there it was, hovering just aft of the superstructure, landing slowly and awkwardly in the roiled air.

"How are you feeling, my captain?" the General inquired.

"How do I look?" A brave smile that failed to draw one in return. The General knew that he should physically carry the man to his surgeon's emergency medical post, but who then would dock the ship? Captain Kherov was dying before his eyes. The medic had made that clear enough. There was internal bleeding. The plasma and bandages couldn't hope to keep up with it. "Have your men secured their objectives?"

"They report some fighting still at the air base, but it will soon be under

control. The first team at the main quay reports no one there. That will be secure, my captain. You should rest a bit."

Kherov shook his head like a drunken man. "That will come soon enough. Fifteen more kilometers. We race in too fast as it is. The Americans may yet have some aircraft heading for us. We must get to the dock and unload your equipment before noon. I have lost too many of my crewmen to fail."

HAFNARFJÖRDUR, ICELAND

"We gotta report this," Edwards said quietly. He shrugged out of his pack and opened it. He'd watched a man test the radio before, and saw that instructions were printed on the side of the radio set. The six pieces of the antenna fitted easily into the pistol grip. Next he plugged in his headset and switched the radio on.

He was supposed to point the flowerlike antenna at a satellite on the 30° meridian, but he didn't have a compass to tell him where that was. Smith unfolded a map and selected a landmark in that general direction. Edwards pointed the antenna at it and waved it slowly across the sky until he heard the warbling carrier wave of the communications bird.

"Okay." Edwards turned the frequency knob to a preselected channel and toggled the Transmit switch.

"Anyone on this net, this is Mike Edwards, first lieutenant, United States Air Force, transmitting from Iceland. Please acknowledge, over." Nothing happened. Edwards reread the instructions to make sure he was doing the right thing, and rebroadcast the same message three more times.

"Sender on this net, please identify. Over." A voice finally answered.

"Edwards, Michael D., first lieutenant, U.S. Air Force, serial number 328-61-4030. I'm the meteorological officer attached to the 57th Fighter Interceptor Squadron at Keflavik. Who is this? Over."

"If you don't know that, pal, you don't belong on this net. Clear off, we need this for official traffic," the voice answered coldly. Edwards stared at the radio in mute rage for several seconds before exploding.

"Listen up, asshole! The guy who knows how to work this damned radio is dead, and I'm all you got. The base at Keflavik was hit seven hours ago by a Russian air and ground attack. The place is crawling with bad guys, there's a Russian ship coming into Hafnarfjördur harbor right now, and you're playing fucking word games! Let's get it together, mister. Over!"

"Copy that. Stand by. We have to verify who you are." Not a trace of remorse.

"Dammit, this thing works on batteries. You want me to run them down while you open a file cabinet?"

A new voice came on the circuit. "Edwards, this is the senior communications watch officer. Get off the air. They might be able to monitor you. We'll check you out and be back in three-zero minutes from now. You got that? Over."

That was more like it. The lieutenant checked his watch. “Roger, understand. We’ll be back in three-zero minutes. Out.” Edwards flipped the power switch off. “Let’s get moving. I didn’t know they could track in on this.” The good news was that the radio broke down in under two minutes, and they were moving again.

“Sarge, let’s head for this Hill 152. We should be able to see pretty good from up there, and there’s water on the way.”

“It’s hot water, sir, full of sulfur. Just as soon not drink that shit, if you know what I mean.”

“Suit yourself.” Edwards moved off at a slow trot. Once as a boy he’d had to call in to report a fire. They’d believed him then. Why not now?

MV *JULIUS FUCIK*

Kherov knew that he was finishing the work that the Americans had begun. Driving his ship into the harbor at eighteen knots was worse than reckless. The sea bottom here was rock, not mud, and a grounding could easily rip his bottom out. But he feared another air attack even more, and he was sure that a flight of American fighters was heading this way, laden with missiles and bombs that would rob him of success in the most important mission of his life.

“Midships!” he called.

“Rudder amidships,” the helmsman acknowledged.

He’d learned minutes before that his first officer was dead, from wounds sustained in the first strafing attack. His best helmsman had died screaming before his eyes, along with many of his skilled deck crewmen. He had only one man qualified to take the shore sightings necessary for a positive position fix. But the quay was in sight, and he’d depend on a seaman’s eye.

“Slow to half speed,” he ordered. The helmsman relayed the order on the engine room telegraph.

“Rudder right full.” He watched his ship’s head come slowly right. He stood on the centerline of the bridge, carefully lining his jackstaff up with the quay. There was no one trained to handle the mooring lines. He wondered if the soldiers could manage it.

The ship touched bottom. Kherov was thrown from his feet and cursed loudly with pain and rage. He’d misjudged his approach. The Fucik shuddered as she slid across the rocky bottom. There was no time to check his chart. When the tide turned, the harbor’s strong eddy currents would make his landing an impossible nightmare.

“Reverse your rudder.” A minute later the ship was fully afloat again. The captain ignored the flooding alarms that hooted behind him. The hull was penetrated, or maybe the damaged seams had sprung further. No matter. The dock was a mere thousand meters away. It was a massive quay made of rough stone. “Midships. All stop.”

The ship was moving far too fast to stop. The soldiers on the dock could already see that, and were slowly backing up, away from the edge, fearing

that it would crumble when the ship struck. Kherov grunted with dark amusement. So much for the line handlers. Eight hundred meters.

"All back full."

Six hundred meters. The ship's whole mass shuddered as the engines fought to slow her. She headed into the berth at a thirty-degree angle, her speed now eight knots. Kherov walked to the engine room voice tube.

"On my order, shut down the engines, pull the manual sprinkler handle, and evacuate the engine spaces."

"What are you doing?" the General asked.

"We cannot moor to the quay," Kherov answered simply. "Your soldiers don't know how to handle the lines, and many of my seamen are dead." The berth Kherov had selected was precisely half a meter shallower than his ship's draft. He went back to the voice tube.

"Now, Comrades!"

Below, the chief engineer gave the orders. His chief machinist cut off the diesel engines and ran to the escape ladder. The engineer yanked the emergency handle for the fire-suppression system and followed, after counting heads to make sure that all his men had gotten out.

"Rudder hard right!"

A minute later the bow of *Julius Fucik* rammed the quay at a speed of five knots. Her bow crumpled as though constructed of paper, and the whole ship pivoted to the right, her side slamming against the rocks in a shower of orange sparks. The impact ripped the ship's bottom open at the turn of her starboard bilges. Instantly her lower decks flooded, and the ship settled rapidly to the bottom, only a few feet below her flat keel. The *Julius Fucik* would never sail again. But she had reached her objective.

Kherov waved to the General. "My men will deploy the two baby tugboats we have in the stem. Tell them to remove two barges and set them between the stem and the end of the quay. My men will show you how to secure the barges properly so they don't drift off. Then use your bridging equipment to take your vehicles off the elevator onto the barges, then from the barges to the quay."

"We can do this easily. Now, Comrade Captain, you will see my surgeon. I will brook no further argument." The General waved to his orderly and both men assisted the captain below. There might still be time.

HILL 152, ICELAND

"You decide who I am yet?" Edwards asked testily. Another really annoying thing was the quarter-second delay caused by the signal's travel time to and from the satellite.

"That's affirmative. The problem is, how do we know it's really you?" The officer had a telex in his hand confirming that one First Lieutenant Michael D. Edwards, USAF, had indeed been the met officer for the 57th FIS, information that could easily have been in Russian hands before the attack.

"Look, turkey, I'm sitting here on Hill 152, east of Hafnarfjördur, okay? There is a Russian helicopter flying around, and some godawful big ship just docked in the harbor. It's too far to see a flag, but I don't figure the son of a bitch came from New York, y'know? The Russians have invaded this rock. They pounded hell out of Keflavik, and they got troops all over the place."

"Tell me about the ship."

Edwards locked the binoculars to his eyes. "Black hull, white superstructure. Big block letters on the side. Can't quite make it out. Something-Lines. The first word begins with an L. Some kind of barge-carrying ship. There's a tugboat moving a barge around right now."

"Have you seen any Russian troops?"

Edwards paused before answering. "No. I've just heard radio reports of the Marines at Keflavik. They were being overrun. They've been off the air ever since. I can see some people on the dock, but I can't tell what they are."

"Okay, we'll be checking that out. For the moment I'd suggest that you find a good, safe place to belly-up, and stay off the air. If we have to contact you, we'll broadcast on the hour, every even hour. If you want to talk to us, we'll be here. Understood?"

"Roger, copy. Out." Edwards switched off. "I don't believe this."

"Nobody knows what the hell's going on, Lieutenant," Smith observed. "Why should they? We sure as hell don't."

"Ain't that the truth!" Edwards repacked his radio. "If those idiots would listen to me, we could have some fighter-bombers here to blast that ship inside two hours. God, but she's a big one. How much equipment can you Marines load in something that big?"

"A lot," Smith said quietly.

"You think they'll be trying to land more troops?"

"It figures, sir. They couldn't have hit Keflavik with all that many—figure a battalion, tops. This here's a pretty big rock. I'd sure as hell want more troops to hold it than that. Course, I'm just a buck sergeant."

HAFNARFJÖRDUR, ICELAND

The General could finally get to work. The first order of business was to board the single working helicopter, now operating off the dock, its pilots delighted to see the ship sunk alongside the quay. He left a rifle company to secure the harbor area, sent another to Reykjavik airport to reinforce that, and detailed his last to get the division's equipment moving off the ship. Then he flew to Keflavik to survey the situation.

Most of the fires were still burning, he saw. The aircraft fuel dump nearest the base was ablaze, but the main storage tanks five kilometers away seemed intact, and, he could see, were already guarded by a BMD assault vehicle and some men. The assault regiment commander met him on one of the undamaged runways.

"Keflavik air base is secure, Comrade General!" he proclaimed.

"How did it go?"

"Hard. The Americans were uncoordinated—one of the missiles hit their command post—but they did not give up easily. We have nineteen dead and forty-three wounded. We have accounted for most of the Marines and other security troops, and we are still counting the other prisoners."

"How many armed troops escaped?"

"None that we know of. Too early to tell, of course, but some undoubtedly died in the fires." The colonel waved at the smashed base area to the east. "How is the ship? I heard he took a missile hit."

"And we were strafed by American fighters. He's tied to the dock, and the equipment is being unloaded now. Can we use this airfield? I—"

"Getting that report now." The colonel's radio operator handed his radiophone over. The colonel spoke for a minute or so. A five-man party of Air Force personnel had accompanied the second wave and was evaluating the base facilities.

"Comrade General, the base radar and radio systems are destroyed. The runways are littered with debris, and they tell me that they need some hours to sweep them clear. Also the fuel pipeline is broken in two places. Fortunately it did not burn. For the moment we'll have to use the airport's trucks to transfer fuel. All of them seem to be intact . . . they recommend that the airlift come into Reykjavik. Have we secured that?"

"Yes, and it is intact. Any hope of getting information from the American aircraft?"

"Unfortunately not, Comrade. The aircraft were badly damaged from incoming missiles. Those that did not burn of their own accord were burned by their crews. As I said, they fought hard."

"Very well. I'll send the remainder of your two battalions with your equipment as soon as we can get things organized. I'll need the third at the dock for the moment. Set up your perimeter. Start the cleanup, we need this airfield operational as soon as possible. Get the prisoners together and ready to move. We'll be flying them out tonight. They are to be treated correctly." His orders on that score were very precise. Prisoners are assets.

"As you say, Comrade General. And please get me some engineers so that we can repair that fuel pipe."

"Well done, Nikolay Gennadyevich!"

The General ran back to his helicopter. Only nineteen dead. He'd expected a higher number than that. Taking out the Marine command center had been a real stroke of luck. By the time his Hip returned to the dock, the equipment was already rolling off. The ship's barges had been fitted with loading doors in their hulls, like miniature landing craft, which allowed vehicles to roll straight out. The units already were being organized on the dock and nearby lots. His staff officers were fully in charge of things, the General saw. To this point, Operation Polar Glory was a total success.

When the Hip landed, it refueled from a line draped down from the ship's side. The General went to his operations officer.

"Reykjavik airport is secure also, Comrade General, and there we have complete fueling facilities. Is that where you want the airlift to come in?"

The General thought about that one. Reykjavik's airport was a small one,

but he didn't want to wait until the larger Keflavik was clear to bring in his reinforcements. "Yes. Send the code word to headquarters: I want the airlift to begin at once."

HILL 152, ICELAND

"Tanks." Garcia had the binoculars. "A bunch of 'em and they all got red stars. Heading west on Route 41. This oughta convince 'em, sir."

Edwards took the field glasses. He could see the tanks, but not the stars. "What kind are they? They don't look like real tanks."

It was now Smith's turn. "That's BMPs—maybe BMDs. It's an infantry assault vehicle, like an amtrak. Holds a squad of men and a 73-millimeter gun. They're Russian, that's for sure, Lieutenant. I count eleven of the bastards, and maybe twenty trucks with men in 'em."

Edwards broke out his radio again. Garcia was right. This did get their attention.

"Okay, Edwards, who do you have with you?"

Edwards rattled off the names of his Marines. "We bugged out before the Russians got into the base."

"Where are you now?"

"Hill 152, four kilometers due east of Hafnarfjördur. We can see all the way into the harbor. There are Russian vehicles heading west toward Keflavik, and some trucks—we can't tell what kind—heading northeast toward Reykjavik on Highway 41. Look, guys, if you can whistle up a couple of Aardvarks, maybe we can kill that ship before she unloads," the lieutenant said urgently.

"I'm afraid the Varks are a little busy right now, fella. In case nobody told you, there's a shooting war in Germany. World War III kicked off ten hours ago. We're trying to get a recon bird up your way, but it might take awhile. Nobody's decided what to do about you either. For right now, you're on your own."

"No shit," Edwards replied, looking at his men.

"Okay, Edwards. Use your head, avoid contact with the enemy. If I read this right, you're the only friendly we have there right now. It figures they'll want you to keep the reports coming in. Observe and report. Conserve the battery power you have. Play it nice and cool, guy. Help will be coming, but it might take awhile. Just hang in there. You can listen for us on the hour, on even hours. You got a good watch?" *In the meantime,* the communications officer thought, *we'll try to figure a way to find out if you're really who you say, and that you haven't got a Russian pistol at your head.*

"Roger, it's set to Zulu time. We'll be listening. Out."

"More tanks," Smith said. "Jeez, that ship sure is a busy place!"

HAFNARFJÖRDUR, ICELAND

The General would not have believed how well things were going. When he had seen the Harpoon coming, he was sure that his mission would be a failure. Already a third of his vehicles had rolled off the ship and were en route to their destinations. Next, he wanted the rest of his division flown in. After that came more helicopters. For the present, all around him were a hundred thousand Icelanders whose friendship he did not expect. A few hardy souls were watching him from the opposite side of the harbor, and he'd already sent a squad of men to get rid of them. How many people were making telephone calls? Was the telephone-satellite relay base still intact? Might they be calling the United States to tell what was happening in Iceland? So many things to worry about.

"General, the airlift is under way. The first aircraft took off ten minutes ago with a fighter escort. They should begin to arrive in four hours," his communications officer reported.

"Four hours." The General looked up from the ship's bridge into a clear blue sky. How long before the Americans reacted and threw a squadron of fighter-bombers at him? He pointed to his operations officer.

"We have too many vehicles sitting on the quay. As soon as a platoon-sized grouping is together, move them off to their objectives. There is no time to wait for company groups. What about Reykjavik airport?"

"We have one company of infantrymen in place, with another twenty minutes away. No opposition. The civilian air controllers and the airport maintenance people are all under guard. A patrol going through Reykjavik reports little activity on the streets. Our embassy personnel report that a government radio broadcast told people to remain in their homes, and for the most part they seem to be doing this."

"Tell the patrol to seize the main telephone exchange. Leave the radio and television stations alone, but get the telephone exchange!" He turned as a squad of paratroopers arrived at the crowd on the far side of the harbor. He estimated perhaps thirty people there. The eight soldiers approached quickly after dismounting from their truck, rifles at the ready. One man walked up to the soldiers, waving his arms wildly. He was shot down. The rest of the crowd ran.

The General shouted a curse. "Find out who did that!"

USS *CHICAGO*

McCafferty returned to the attack center after a brief visit to his private head. Coffee would always keep you awake, he thought, either through the caffeine or the discomfort of an always-full bladder. Things were already not going well. Whatever genius had decided to order the American submarines out of the Barents Sea in the hope of avoiding an "incident" had neatly gotten them out of the way. *Just in time for the war to start,* the captain grumbled, forgetting that the idea hadn't seemed all that bad at the time.

Had they stuck to the plan, he might already have put a dent in the Soviet

Navy. Instead, someone had panicked over the new Soviet missile sub dispositions, and so far as he could tell, the result was that no one had accomplished much of anything. The Soviet subs that had come storming out of the Kola Fjord had not come south into the Norwegian Sea as expected. His long-range sonar reported possible submarine noises far to his north, heading west before fading out. So, he thought, *Ivan's sending his boats down the Denmark Strait? The* SOSUS *line between Iceland and Greenland could make that idea a costly one.*

USS Chicago was steaming at five hundred feet just north of the 69° parallel, about a hundred miles west of Norway's rocky coastline. The Norwegians' collection of diesel boats was inside of him, guarding their own coast. McCafferty understood that, but didn't like it.

So far nothing had gone right, and McCafferty was worried. That was expected, and he could suppress it. He could fall back on his training. He knew what his submarine could do, and had a pretty good idea of what the Russian subs were capable of. He had the superior capabilities, but some Russian could always get lucky. This was war. A different sort of environment, not one judged by umpires and rule books. Mistakes now were not a matter of a written critique from his squadron commander. And so far luck seemed to be on the other side.

He looked around at his men. They had to be thinking the same thoughts, he was sure, but they all depended on him. The crewmen of his submarine were essentially the physical extensions of his own mind. He was the central control for the entire corporate entity known as USS *Chicago,* and for the first time the awesome responsibility struck him. If he messed up, all these men would die. And he, too, would die—with the knowledge that he had failed them.

You can't think like this, the captain told himself. *It will eat you up. Better to have a combat situation where I can limit my thinking to the immediate.* He checked the clock. Good.

"Take her up to periscope depth," he ordered. "It's time to check for orders, and we'll try an ESM sweep to see what's happening."

Not a simple procedure, that. The submarine came up slowly, cautiously, turning to allow her sonar to make certain that there was not a ship around.

"Raise the ESM."

An electronics technician pressed the button to raise the mast for his broad-band receiver. The board lit up instantly.

"Numerous electronic sources, sir. Three J-band search sets, lots of other stuff. Lots of VHF and UHF chatter. The recorders are going."

That figures, McCafferty thought. *The odds against having anyone here after us are pretty low, though.* "Up scope."

The captain angled the search-scope lens upward to scan the sky for a nearby aircraft and made a quick turn around the horizon. He noticed something odd, and had to angle down the lens to see what it was.

There was a green smoke marker not two hundred yards away. McCafferty cringed and spun the instrument back around. A multi-engine aircraft was coming out of the haze—directly in at them.

The captain reached up and spun the periscope wheel, lowering the

instrument. *"Take her down!* All ahead flank! Make your depth eight hundred feet!" *Where the hell did he come from?*

The submarine's engines fairly exploded into action. A flurry of orders had the helmsmen push their controls to the stops.

"Torpedo in the water, starboard side!" a sonartnan screamed.

McCafferty reacted at once. "Left full rudder!"

"Left full rudder, aye!" The speed log was at ten knots and rising quickly. They passed below one hundred feet.

"Torpedo bearing one-seven-five relative. It's pinging. Doesn't have us yet."

"Fire off a noisemaker."

Seventy feet aft of the control room, a five-inch canister was ejected from a launcher. It immediately started making all kinds of noise for the torpedo to home in on.

"Noisemaker away!"

"Right fifteen degrees rudder." McCafferty was calmer now. He'd played this game before. "Come to new course one-one-zero. Sonar, I want true bearings on that torpedo."

"Aye. Torpedo bearing two-zero-six, coming port-to-starboard."

Chicago passed through two hundred feet. The boat had a twenty-degree down angle. The planesmen and most of the technicians had seatbelts to hold them in place. The officers and a few others who had to circulate around grasped at rails and stanchions to keep from falling.

"Conn, sonar. The torpedo seems to be following a circular path. Now traveling starboard-to-port, bearing one-seven-five. Still pinging, but I don't think it has us."

"Very well. Keep those reports coming." McCafferty climbed aft to the plot. "Looks like he made a bad drop."

"Could be," the navigator agreed. "But how in hell—"

"Had to be a MAD pass. The magnetic anomaly detector. Was the tape running? I didn't have him long enough for an ID." He checked the plot. They were now a mile and a half from where they'd been when the torpedo was dropped. "Sonar, tell me about the fish."

"Bearing one-nine-zero, dead aft. Still circling, seems to be going down a little. I think maybe the noisemaker drew him in and he's trying to hit it."

"All ahead two-thirds." *Time to slow down,* McCafferty thought. They'd cleared the initial datum point, and the aircraft's crew would need a few minutes to evaluate their attack before beginning a new search. In that time they'd be two or three miles away, below the layer, and making little noise.

"All ahead two-thirds, aye. Leveling off at eight hundred feet."

"We can start breathing again, people," McCafferty said. His own voice was not as even as he would have preferred. For the first time, he noted a few shaky hands. *Just like a car wreck,* he thought. *You only shake after you're safe.* "Left fifteen degrees rudder. Come left to two-eight-zero." If the aircraft dropped again, no sense in traveling in a straight path. But they should be fairly safe now. The whole episode, he noted, had lasted less than ten minutes.

The captain walked to the forward bulkhead and rewound the videotape, then set it up to run. It showed the periscope breaking the surface, the first quick search . . . then the smoke marker. Next came the aircraft. McCafferty

froze the frame.

The plane looked like a Lockheed P-3 Orion.

"That's one of ours!" the duty electrician noted. The captain stepped forward into sonar.

"The fish is fading aft, Cap'n. Probably still trying to kill the noisemaker. I think when it hit the water it circled in the wrong direction, away from us, I mean."

"What's it sound like?"

"A lot like one of our Mark-46s"—the leading sonarman shuddered—"it really did sound like a forty-six!" He rewound his own tape and set it on speaker. The *screeeing* sound of the twin-screw fish was enough to raise the hairs on your neck. McCafferty nodded and went back aft.

"Okay, that might have been a Norwegian P-3. Then again it might have been a Russian May. They look pretty much alike, and they have exactly the same job. Well done, people. We're going to clear the area." The captain congratulated himself on his performance. He'd just evaded his first war shot—dropped by a friendly aircraft! But he had evaded it. Not all the luck was with the other side. Or was it?

USS *PHARRIS*

Morris was catnapping in his bridge chair, wondering what was missing from his life. It took a few seconds to realize that he wasn't doing any paperwork, his normal afternoon pastime. He had to transmit position reports every four hours, contact reports when he had any—he hadn't yet—but the routine paper-shuffling that ate up so much of his time was a thing of the past. A pity, he thought, that it took a war to relieve one of that! He could almost imagine himself starting to enjoy it.

The convoy was still twenty miles to his southeast. *Pharris* was the outlying sonar picket. Her mission was to detect, localize, and engage any submarine trying to close the convoy. To do that, the frigate was alternately dashing—"sprinting"—forward at maximum speed, then drifting briefly at slower speed to allow her sonar to work with maximum efficiency. Had the convoy proceeded at twenty knots on a straight course, it would have been nearly impossible. The three columns of merchantmen were zigzagging, however, making life a little easier on all concerned. Except on the merchant sailors, for whom stationkeeping was as foreign as marching.

Morris sipped at a Coke. It was a warm afternoon and he preferred his caffeine cold.

"Signal coming in from *Talbot,* sir," the junior officer of the deck reported.

Morris rose and walked to the starboard bridge wing with his binoculars. He prided himself on being able to read Morse almost as quickly as his signalmen: REPORT ICELAND ATTACKED AND NEUTRALIZED BY SOVIET FORCES X EXPECT MORE SERIOUS AIR AND SUB THREAT X.

"More good news, skipper," the OOD commented.

"Yeah."

USS *NIMITZ*

"How did they do it?" Chip wondered aloud.

"How don't matter a damn," Toland replied. "We gotta get this to the boss." He made a quick phone call and left for flag country.

He almost got lost. *Nimitz* had over two *thousand* compartments. The Admiral lived in only one of them, and Toland had only been there once. He found a Marine sentry at the door. The carrier's commander, Captain Svenson, was already there.

"Sir, we have a Flash message that the Soviets have attacked and neutralized Iceland. They may have troops there."

"Do they have aircraft there?" Svenson asked at once.

"We don't know. They're trying to get a recon bird to take a look, probably the Brits, but we won't have any hard information for at least six hours. The last friendly satellite pass was two hours ago, and we won't have another one of those for nine hours."

"Okay, tell me what you have," the Admiral ordered.

Toland went over the sketchy data that had come in the dispatch from Norfolk. "From what we know, it was a pretty off-the-wall plan, but it seems to have worked."

"Nobody ever said Ivan was dumb," Svenson commented sourly. "What about our orders?"

"Nothing yet."

"How many troops on Iceland?" the Admiral asked.

"No word on that, sir. The P-3 crew watched two relays of four hovercraft. At a hundred men per load, that's eight hundred men, at least a battalion, probably more like a regiment. The ship is large enough to carry the equipment load for a full brigade and then some. It's in one of Gorshkov's books that this sort of ship is uniquely useful for landing operations."

"That's too much for a MAU to take on, sir," Svenson said. A Marine Amphibious Unit consisted of a reinforced battalion of troops.

"With three carriers backing them up?" Admiral Baker snorted, then adopted a more thoughtful pose. "You could be right at that. What does this do to the air threat to us?"

"Iceland had a squadron of F-15s and a couple AWACS birds. That's a lot of protection for us—gone. We've lost raid warning, attrition, and raid-tracking capabilities." Svenson didn't like this at all. "We should be able to handle their Backfires ourselves, but it would have been a lot easier with those Eagles running interference."

Baker sipped at his coffee. "Our orders haven't changed."

"What else is going on in the world?" Svenson asked.

"Norway is being hit hard, but no details yet. Same story in Germany. The Air Force is supposed to have gotten a heavy hit in on the Soviets, again no

details. It's still too early for any substantive intel assessments of what's happening."

"If Ivan was able to suppress the Norwegians and fully neutralize Iceland, the air threat against this battle group has at least doubled," Svenson said. "I have to get talking with my air group."

The captain left. Admiral Baker was silent for several minutes. Toland had to stay put. He hadn't been dismissed yet. "They just hit Keflavik?"

"Yes, sir."

"Find out what else is there and get back to me."

"Yes, sir." As Toland walked back to the intelligence shack, he pondered what he'd told his wife: *The carrier is the best-protected ship in the fleet.* But the captain was worried . . .

HILL 152, ICELAND

They were almost thinking of it as home. The position was at least easily defensible. No one could approach Hill 152 without being seen, and that meant crossing a lava field, then climbing up a steep, bare slope. Garcia found a small lake a kilometer away, evidently filled with water from the winter snows that had only lately melted. Sergeant Smith observed that it would have made a good mixer for bourbon, if they had any bourbon.

They were hungry, but all had four days of rations along, and they feasted on such delicacies as canned lima beans and ham. Edwards learned a new and indelicate name for this item.

"Anybody here know how to cook a sheep?" Rodgers asked. Several miles south of them was a large herd of the animals.

"Cook with what?" Edwards asked.

"Oh." Rodgers looked around. There wasn't a tree in sight. "How come there ain't no trees?"

"Rodgers only been here a month," Smith explained. "Prive, you ain't never seen a windy day till you been here in the winter. The only way a tree can grow here is if you set her in concrete. I seen wind strong enough to blow a deuce-and-a-half right off the road."

"Airplanes." Garcia had the binoculars. He pointed northeast. "Lots."

Edwards took the field glasses. They were just dots, but they grew rapidly into shapes. "I count six, big ones, look like C-141s . . . that makes them IL-76s, I think. Maybe some fighters, too. Sergeant, get a pad and a pencil—we have to do a count."

It lasted for hours. The fighters landed first, rolling off to the refueling area at once, then taxiing to one of the shorter runways. One aircraft came in every three minutes, and Edwards couldn't help be impressed. The IL-76, code-named the Candid by the NATO countries, was an awkward, ungainly design, like its American counterpart. The pilots landed, stopped, and rolled their aircraft onto the taxiway off the main north-south runway as though they had practiced for months—as Edwards rather suspected they had. They unloaded

at the airport terminal building, then rolled to the refueling area and took off, coordinating neatly with the landing aircraft. Those lifting off came very close to their hill, close enough that Edwards was able to copy down a few tail numbers. When the count reached fifty, he set up his radio.

"This is Edwards transmitting from Hill 152. Do you copy, over."

"Roger, copy," the voice came back at once. "From now on, your code name is Beagle. We are Doghouse. Continue your report."

"Roger, Doghouse. We have a Soviet airlift in progress. We have counted fifty—five-zero—Soviet transport aircraft, India-Lima-Seven-Six type. They are coming into Reykjavik, unloading, and rolling back out to the northeast."

"Beagle, are you sure, repeat are you sure of your count?"

"That is affirmative, Doghouse. The takeoff run brings them right over our heads, and we got a paper record. No shit, mister, five-zero aircraft"—Smith held up his pad—"make that five-three aircraft, and the operation is continuing. We also have six single-seat aircraft sitting at the end of runway four. I can't make out the type, but they sure as hell look like fighters. You copy that, Doghouse?"

"I copy five-three transports and six possible fighters. Okay, Beagle, we gotta get this information upstairs fast. Sit tight and we'll keep to the regular transmission schedule. Is your position safe?"

That's a good question, Edwards thought. "I hear you, Doghouse. We're staying put. Out." He took off the headset. "We safe, Sergeant'?"

"Sure, Lieutenant, I haven't felt this safe since Beirut."

HAFNARFJÖRDUR, ICELAND

"A beautiful operation, Comrade General." The Ambassador beamed.

"Your support was most valuable," the General lied through his teeth. The Soviet embassy to Iceland had over sixty members, almost all intelligence types of one sort or another. Instead of doing something useful, like seizing the telephone exchange, on donning their uniforms they had been rounding up local political figures. Most of the members of Iceland's ancient Parliament, the Althing, had been arrested. Necessary, the General agreed, but too roughly done, with one of them killed in the process and two more shot. *Better to be gentle with them,* he thought. This was not Afghanistan. The Icelanders had no warrior tradition, and a gentler approach might have shown better returns. But that aspect of the operation was under KGB control, its control team already in place with the embassy personnel. "With your permission, there is much yet to be done."

The General went back up the jacob's ladder onto the *Fucik.* Problems had developed in off-loading the division's missile battalion. The barges that contained that equipment had been damaged by the missile strike. The newly installed landing doors had jammed solid and had to be torched free. He shrugged. Up to now, Polar Glory had been a near textbook operation. Not bad for a scratch crew. Most of his rolling equipment—two hundred armored

vehicles and many trucks—had already been mated with their troops and dispersed. The SA-11 battalion was all that remained.

"Bad news, Comrade General," the SAM commander reported.

"Must I wait for it?" the General asked testily. It had been a very long day.

"We have three usable rockets."

"Three?"

"Both these barges were ruptured when the American missile hit us. The shock damage accounted for several. The main damage came from the water used to fight the fire."

"Those are mobile missiles," the General objected. "Surely the designers anticipated that they might get wet!"

"Not with saltwater, Comrade. This is the army version, not the naval, and it is not protected against saltwater corrosion. The men who fought the fire did so with great gusto, and most of the rockets were soaked. The exposed control wiring and the radar seeker heads on the missile noses were badly damaged. My men have run electronic tests of all the rockets. Three are fully functional. Four more we can probably clean off and repair. The rest are ruined. We have to fly more in."

The General controlled his temper. So, a small thing that no one had thought of. Aboard ship, fires are fought with saltwater. They should have asked for the naval variant of this rocket. It was always the small things.

"Divide your launchers as planned. Place all the usable missiles at the Reykjavik airport, and the ones you think you can fix at Keflavik. I'll order the replacement rockets to be flown in. Is there other damage?"

"Apparently not. The radar antennae were covered with plastic, and the instruments inside the vehicles were safe because the vehicles themselves were sealed. If we get new rockets, my battalion is fully ready. We'll be ready to travel in twenty minutes. Sorry, Comrade."

"Not your fault. You know where you are to go?"

"Two of my battery commanders have already checked the routes."

"Excellent. Carry on, Comrade Colonel." The General climbed back up the ladder to the bridge to look for his communications officer. Within two hours a plane loaded with forty SA-11 surface-to-air missiles was rolling off Murmansk's Kilpyavr airfield bound for Iceland.

20

The Dance of the Vampires

USS *NIMITZ*

Toland had been a busy fellow for the past twelve hours. The data on Iceland came in slowly, one confusing piece at a time, and even now he didn't have enough to call a clear picture. The group's orders had been changed, though only after too many hours of indecision. The mission to reinforce Iceland was a washout. For the past ten hours the battle group had been heading due east toward friendly air cover from England and France. Someone had decided that if the Marines could not go to Iceland, then they might find useful employment in Germany. Bob had expected them to be diverted to Norway, where a Marine Amphibious Brigade was already in place, but getting them there could prove difficult. A furious air battle had been raging over northern Norway for almost twenty hours, with losses heavy on both sides. The Norwegians had started the war with scarcely a hundred modern fighters. They were screaming for help, but there was no help for anyone as yet.

"They're not just chewing the Norwegians up," Toland observed. "They're driving them south. Most of the attacks are on the northern bases, and they're not giving them any breather at all."

Chip nodded. "That figures. Gives their Backfires a straighter shot at us. Briefing time."

"Yeah." Toland packed up his notes and walked again toward flag country. It was easier this time.

"Okay, Commander," Admiral Baker said. "Start with the peripheries."

"Nothing much seems to be happening in the Pacific as yet. The Soviets are evidently putting a lot of diplomatic pressure on Japan. The same story they've given the rest of the world—it's all a German plot."

"Horseshit," Baker observed.

"True enough, Admiral, but it's a plausible enough story that Greece is refusing to honor its treaty commitments, and a lot of neutral and third-world countries are buying it. Anyway, the Russians are making noises about giving the Sakhalin Islands back if they play ball—or pounding hell out of them if they don't. Bottom line: Japan is not allowing any bases on its soil to be used for offensive strikes against the Soviet Union. What we have in Korea is needed there. The only carrier group we have in the Western Pacific is

centered on *Midway*. They're well out to sea at present, and they don't have the moxie to go after Kamchatka alone. There's some air activity in the South China Sea west of the Philippines, but nothing major yet. Cam Ranh Bay appears to be empty of Soviet shipping. So the Pacific is quiet, but that won't last long.

"In the Indian Ocean, somebody launched a missile attack against Diego Garcia, probably a submarine. Not much damage—just about everything there was sent out to sea five days ago—but it got their attention. At last report, their IO squadron was at fifteen-north, ninety-east, a long way from our guys, and heading south.

"No activity at all on NATO's southern flank. The Turks aren't about to attack Russia on their own hook, and Greece is staying out of what they call 'this German-Russian dispute.' So Ivan has a secure southern flank, too, and so far it looks like he's happy enough to keep it that way. So far the Russians are only fighting in Western Europe and against selected American installations elsewhere. They are telling anyone who'll listen that they don't even want to fight us. They've even guaranteed the safety of American tourists and businessmen in the Soviet Union. Supposedly, they're flying them all out through India. We've underestimated the political dimension here, sir. So far it's working for them.

"Okay. In Europe their operations began with from twenty to thirty Spetznaz commando attacks throughout Germany. For the most part they were defeated, but they scored big in two places. The port of Hamburg has been blocked. A pair of merchantmen was scuttled in the main channel, and the team that pulled it off got away clean. The same thing was attempted in Bremen—they blocked one channel partially and burned three ships at one of the container terminals. This team didn't get away. The other attacks were against nuclear weapons storage sites, communications posts, and one big one against a tank site. Our guys were ready for it. We took losses, but those Spetznaz troops got chewed up in most cases.

"The Soviet Army attacked west just before dawn yesterday. The good news here is that the Air Force pulled something really wild. That new Stealth fighter we've been hearing rumblings about is in squadron service, and it was used to raise a lot of hell behind Russian lines. The Air Force says they've got air superiority, or something close to it, so Ivan must have taken a big hit. Whatever they did, the initial Russian attack was not as powerful as expected. They're moving forward, but as of midnight nothing more than fifteen kilometers, and in two places they got stopped cold. So far no word on nukes or chemical weapons. Losses are reported heavy on both sides, especially up in northern Germany, where they moved the farthest. Hamburg is threatened. The Kiel Canal may have been hit with an airborne or airmobile attack, we're not sure, but part is under Russian control. That situation is a little confused. A lot of activity on the Baltic, too. The fast attack boats of the German and Danish navies claim to have beaten up hard on a combined Soviet and East German attack, but again things are pretty confused."

Toland went on to describe the situation in Norway.

"The direct threats against us are from submarines and aircraft. Ivan's subs have been pretty busy. We have reports of twenty-two merchant ships sunk.

The worst was Ocean Star, a Panamanian-flag passenger liner coming back from a Med cruise. Eight hundred miles northwest of Gibraltar she took a missile hit, type unknown, but probably from a Juliet. She burned, lots of casualties. Two Spanish frigates are moving in for the search-and-rescue.

"We have three submarines reported close to our course track, an Echo, a Tango, and a Foxtrot. There could be more, but intelligence reports have most of them south and west of us. When Iceland got neutralized, we lost the G-I-UK SOSUS line, and that will allow Ivan's subs an easier access to the North Atlantic. SACLANT is dispatching subs to block the gaps. They'll have to hustle; we have reports of numerous Soviet submarines heading for the Denmark Strait."

"How many subs have we taken out?" Svenson asked.

"Lajes and Brunswick claim four kills. The P-3s got off to a good start. The bad news here is that one Orion is missing, and another reported being shot at by a sub-launched missile. This is being evaluated now, and we expect something firm by noon. In any case, the main threat to us now appears to be from aircraft, not subs. That could change by tomorrow, though."

"One day at a time. Get to Iceland," Baker ordered.

"The reports we had yesterday were correct. Evidently a regimental-sized unit came in by sea, and the rest of its division was airlifted in, starting around 1400 hours. We have to assume they're all in by now."

"Fighters?" Svenson asked.

"None reported, but it's possible. Iceland has four usable airfields—"

"Wrong, Toland, it's three," Baker said harshly.

"Beg pardon, sir, four. The big base is Keflavik. Five runways, two of them over ten thousand feet long. We built the place to stage B-52s out of, and it's quite a facility. Ivan got it virtually intact. His attack was planned deliberately not to crater the runways. Second, they have the civilian airfield at Reykjavik. The longest runway there is about two thousand meters, plenty big enough for fighters, and it's got a city wrapped around it. Hitting that place means running the risk of civilian casualties. On the north side of the island is Akureyri, one hard-surface strip. The fourth one, Admiral, is old Keflavik, about two miles southeast of the current NATO air base. It shows on the maps as unusable, but I ran into a guy who put in two years on Iceland. That strip is usable, certainly for rough-surface-capable aircraft like our C-130. The base personnel use it for racing their go-carts and sports cars. He thinks you could use fighters out of there, too. Finally, every city on that island has a gravel strip for their domestic airline. The MiG-23 and several other Russian fighters have a rough-field capability, and could use any one of those."

"You're full of good news," observed *Nimitz*'s commander, air group, known as the CAG. "What about the other base facilities, like fuel?"

"The fuel depot right on the base was destroyed in the attack, but the base tank-farm was not, and neither was the new terminal at Hakotstanger. Unless somebody takes it out, we've left the Russians enough jet fuel to operate for months."

"How solid is all this?" Baker wanted to know.

"We have an eyeball report from a Navy P-3 crew who surveyed the damage immediately after the attack. The RAF sent two recce birds for a look-see. The

first one got good shots of Keflavik and the surrounding area. The second didn't make it back, reason unknown."

"SAMs." The CAG really looked unhappy now.

Toland nodded. "A good bet. The photos show vehicles consistent with the presence of a reinforced Soviet Air Rifle division. Icelandic radio and TV are off the air. The Brits report contact with ham radio operators on the Icelandic coast, but nothing at all is coming out of the southwest corner of the island. That's where most of the people are, and it looks to be completely under Soviet control. We're getting some intel information, but it can't last."

"What you're telling us is that we can't expect raid warning from the Norwegians, and we've lost our picket fence at Iceland. What other assets do we have?" Svenson asked.

"Evidently something. I've been told to expect possible raid warning from an asset code-named Realtime. If a large force of Soviet aircraft leaves Kola, we ought to know about it."

"What's Realtime?" the CAG asked.

"They didn't tell me that."

"Submarine." Baker smiled thinly. "Jesus protect him when he transmits. Well, Ivan sent his bombers against Iceland yesterday. Anybody wonder where they'll be coming today?"

"In case anyone wants it, my official intelligence estimate is, right here," Toland said.

"Always nice to have a professional opinion," the CAG observed acidly. "We ought to head north and pound on those Russians" —by training and experience the CAG was an attack pilot—"but we can't do that until we deal with the Backfires. What is the strength of the threat to us?"

"I'm assuming no assistance from the Air Force units. With Soviet Naval Aviation alone we have six regiments of strike aircraft, three each of Backfires and Badgers. One regiment of Badger jammers. One regiment of Bear reconnaissance birds. Add some tanker assets to that. Twenty-seven aircraft to the regiment. That's about a hundred sixty strike aircraft, each of which can carry two or three air-to-surface missiles."

"Those Badgers will have to stretch to get here. The round trip must be a good four thousand miles, even if they cut across Norway. Those are tired old birds," CAG said. "What about their satellites?"

Toland checked his watch. "There will be a RORSAT pass over us in fifty-two minutes. They got us twelve hours ago, too."

"I hope the Air Force gets its act together with their ASAT pretty soon," Svenson said quietly. "If Ivan can real-time that satellite intelligence, they don't need those damned Bears. They can figure our course easily enough, and it's only a four-hour cruise down here for them."

"Try a course change as it passes overhead?" CAG wondered.

"Not much point in it," Baker replied. "We've been heading east for ten hours. They can't miss that, and we can only do twenty knots. We can give them a plus-minus of eighty miles. How long does it take to fly that?"

Toland noted that Svenson and the CAG didn't like that decision, but neither disputed the point. He'd been told that Baker wasn't a man to argue with, and wondered if that was a good trait in a combat commander.

HILL 152, ICELAND

Edwards took some solace in having predicted the cold front's arrival properly. The rain had come exactly on time, just after midnight. If there was anything to make the worst situation worse still, it was a steady cold rain. The showers were intermittent now, a ceiling of gray clouds two thousand feet over their heads, blown along by thirty-knot winds toward Iceland's mountainous center.

"Where are the fighters?" Edwards asked. He swept Reykjavik airport with his binoculars, but couldn't find the six fighters he'd reported on the previous evening. All the transports were gone also. He saw one Soviet helicopter and some tanks. There was very little traffic on the streets and roads he could see. Certainly not much for a Monday morning. Surely the commercial fishermen would be driving to their boats? "Anybody see them lift out?"

"No, sir. Weather we had last night, the whole Russian Air Force could have come in and left." Sergeant Smith was annoyed too, mainly with the weather. "Could be in those hangars, maybe."

About 2300 the previous night, they'd observed a streak of light like that of a rocket taking off, but whatever it had been aimed at had been lost in a rain shower. Edwards had not reported that, halfway wondering if it might have been lightning.

"What's that? That's no tank. Garcia, check it out—five hundred yards west of the terminal." The lieutenant handed the glasses over.

"Okay. That's some kinda tracked vehicle. Looks like it has some sort of—not a gun, there's three of them. Rocket launcher, maybe."

"SAMs," the sergeant commented. "How much you wanna bet that's what we saw shot off last night?"

"E.T., phone home." Edwards started putting his radio together.

"How many launchers and what type?" Doghouse asked.

"We see one launcher, possibly three missiles on it. We can't tell the type. I wouldn't know the difference anyway. They might have fired off a missile last night about 2300 local."

"Why the hell didn't you tell us?" Doghouse demanded.

" 'Cause I didn't know what it was!" Edwards nearly yelled. "Goddammit! We're reporting on everything we see, and you don't even believe half of what we tell you!"

"Settle down, Beagle. We believe you. I know it's hard. Anything else happening?"

"He knows it's hard," Edwards told his men. "Can't see much activity at all, Doghouse. Still early, but we'd expect civilian traffic on the streets."

"Copy that. Okay now, Edwards, real fast, what's your father's middle name?"

"Doesn't have one," Edwards said. "What—"

"The name of his boat?"

"The *Annie Jay*. What the hell is this?"

"What happened to your girlfriend Sandy?"

It was like a knife in the guts. The tone of his voice answered for him. "You go and fuck yourself!"

"Copy that," the voice replied. "Sorry, Lieutenant, but you had to pass that test. We have no further orders for you yet. Tell you the truth, nobody's decided what to do about you. Stay cool and avoid contact. Same transmission schedule. If you get tagged and they try to make you play radio games, start off every transmission with our call sign and say that everything is going great. Got that? Going great."

"Roger. If you hear me say that, you know something's wrong. Out."

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

The major commanding the Air Force detachment was enjoying himself despite having been up for over thirty hours. Keflavik was a magnificent base, and the paratroopers had captured it nearly intact. Most importantly, the Americans had thoughtfully stored their maintenance equipment in protective shelters dispersed throughout the base, and all of it had survived. As he watched from the smashed control tower, a half-dozen sweeper trucks were brushing the last fragments from runway nine. In thirty minutes it would be safe to use. Eight fuel bowsers sat filled and ready on the field, and by the end of the day the pipeline should be repaired. Then this would be a fully functional Soviet air base.

"How long before our fighters arrive?"

"Thirty minutes, Comrade Major."

"Get the radar operating."

The Soviets had packed most of the equipment for a forward air base in one of the *Fucik*'s barges. A mobile long-range radar was now operating just west of the main runway intersection, plus a van from which ground controllers could direct radar intercepts of incoming targets. Three truck-vans of spare parts and air-to-air missiles were on the base, and three hundred maintenance personnel had been flown in the previous day. A full battery of SA-11 missiles guarded the runways, plus eight mobile antiaircraft guns and a platoon of infantrymen armed with hand-held SAMs for low-flying raiders. The only hangup had been with the SAMs, and the replacements flown in a few hours ago had already been loaded on the launcher vehicles. Any NATO aircraft that came waltzing into Iceland was in for a rude surprise, as a Royal Air Force Jaguar had discovered the night before, shot out of the sky over Reykjavik before its pilot could react.

"Runway nine is cleared for operation," the radio operator reported.

"Excellent! Now get them working on one-eight. I want every strip operational by this afternoon."

HILL 152, ICELAND

"What's that?" Edwards saw it first for a change. The wide silver wings of a Badger bomber skirted in and out of the lower cloud layer. Then something else. It was smaller, and it disappeared back into the clouds.

"Was that a fighter?"

"I didn't see anything, sir." Garcia had been looking in the wrong direction. The sound passed overhead, the distinctive whine of turbojets on a low throttle setting.

The lieutenant was becoming a master at getting his radio in operation. "Doghouse, this is Beagle, and things are rotten. Do you copy?"

"Roger, Beagle. What do you have for us?"

"We have aircraft flying overhead, westbound, probably for Keflavik. Stand by."

"I can hear 'em, but I don't see nothin'." Garcia handed the glasses over.

"I saw one twin-engine aircraft, probably a bomber, and one other aircraft, a lot smaller, like a fighter. We have aircraft sounds overhead, but we got solid clouds at about two thousand feet. No more visual sightings."

"You say heading toward Keflavik?"

"That's affirm. The bomber appeared to be westbound and descending."

"Any chance you can walk back to Keflavik to see what's happening there?"

Edwards didn't speak for a second. Couldn't the bastard read a map? That meant walking thirty miles over bare ground.

"Negative. Say again, negative, no chance. Over."

"Understood, Beagle. Sorry about that. I had orders to ask. Get back to us when you have a better count. You're doing good, guys. Hang in there. Out."

"They asked if we wanted to walk over to Keflavik," Edwards announced as he took off his headset. "I said no."

"Real good, sir," Smith observed. At least Air Force officers weren't total idiots.

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

The first MiG-29 Fulcrum landed at Keflavik a minute later. It taxied behind a base jeep and stopped close to the tower. The major in command of the base was there to meet it.

"Welcome to Keflavik!"

"Excellent. Find me a lavatory," the colonel replied.

The major motioned him to his own jeep—the Americans had left seventy jeeps behind, plus over three hundred private automobiles—and drove toward the tower. The American radios had been destroyed, but the plumbing was made of sterner stuff.

"How many?"

"Six," the colonel answered. "A Goddamned Norwegian F-16 jumped us off Hammerfest and got one before we knew he was there. Another aborted with

engine trouble, and a third had to land at Akureyri. Do we have men there?"

"Not yet. We have only one helicopter. More should be coming in today." They pulled to the door. "Inside, second door on the right."

"Thank you, Comrade Major!" The colonel was back in three minutes. "The unglamorous side of flying fighter aircraft. Somehow we never warn our cadets about this."

"Here, coffee. The previous occupants were most kind to us." The major unscrewed an American thermos. The colonel took the cup, savoring the flavor as though it were fine brandy while he watched his fighters land. "We have your missiles all ready for you, and we can refuel every aircraft from our trucks. How soon can you fly again?"

"I'd prefer that my men get at least two hours to rest and eat. And I want those aircraft dispersed after they're fueled. Have you been hit yet?"

"Only two reconnaissance aircraft, and we killed one. If we're lucky—"

"Luck is for fools. The Americans will hit us today. I would."

USS *NIMITZ*

"We have a new intel source on Iceland, code name Beagle," Toland reported. They were in the carrier's Combat Information Center now. "He counted over eighty transport flights into Reykjavik last night, at least six fighters with them. That's enough airlift capacity for a whole airborne division and then some. Doghouse in Scotland says that they have an unconfirmed report of Soviet fighters landing now."

"Have to be a long-range one. Foxhound, maybe a Fulcrum," CAG said. "If they have them to spare. Well, we weren't planning to visit the place just yet. We might have a problem with them trying raid-escort, though."

"Any word on E-3 support from the U.K.?" Baker asked Svenson.

"Looks like none."

"Toland, when do you expect our friends to arrive?"

"The RORSAT passes overhead in twenty minutes. They'll probably want that data before they take off. They could take off at any time after that, Admiral. If the Backfires tank up partway down and proceed at max power, two hours. That's worst case. More likely four to five hours."

"CAG?"

The air group commander looked tense. "Each carrier has a Hummer radar bird up, a pair of F-14 Tomcats with each. Two more Tomcats on the catapults, ready to go at five minutes' notice, another Hummer and a tanker. The rest of the fighters are at plus-fifteen on the roof, loaded and fueled. The flight crews are briefed. One Prowler over the formation, the rest ready to go at fifteen. The A-7s have buddy stores rigged. We're ready. *Foch* has her Crusaders at plus-fifteen. Good birds, but short legs. When the time comes we'll use them for overhead coverage."

KIROVSK, R.S.F.S.R.

The Radar Ocean Reconnaissance Satellite, called a RORSAT, passed over the formation at 0310. Its radar transmitter noted the formation and its cameras tracked in on their wakes. Five minutes later, the data was in Moscow. Fifteen minutes after that, flight crews were given their final brief at four military air bases grouped around the city of Kirovsk on the Kola Peninsula. The crews were quiet, no less tense than their American targets. Both sides mulled over the same thoughts. This was the exercise both sides had practiced for over fifteen years. Millions of hours of planning, studies and simulations were about to be put to the test.

The Badgers lifted off first, pushed by their twin Mikulin engines. Each takeoff was an effort. The bombers were so heavily loaded that the tower controllers reached out with their minds to wish every aircraft into the still morning air. Once off the ground they headed north, forming up into loose regimental formations just north of Murmansk before heading west and skirting past the North Cape, before their slow left turns took them toward the North Atlantic.

Twenty miles off the North Russian coast, USS *Narwhal* hovered beneath the surface of a slate-gray sea. The quietest submarine in the U.S. fleet, she was a specialized intelligence-gathering platform that spent more time on the Soviet coast than did some ships in the Russian Navy. Her three thin ESM antennae were raised, as was a million-dollar search periscope. Technicians aboard listened in on low-power radio conversations between aircraft as they formed up. Three uniformed intelligence specialists and a civilian from the National Security Agency evaluated the strength of the raid and decided that it was large enough to risk a warning broadcast. An additional mast was raised and aimed at a communications satellite twenty-four thousand miles away. The burst transmission lasted less than a fifteenth of a second.

USS *NIMITZ*

The message was automatically relayed to four separate communications stations, and within thirty seconds was at SACLANT headquarters. Five minutes after that, Toland had the yellow message form in his hand. He walked immediately to Admiral Baker, and handed the message over: 0418z REALTIME SENDS WARNING AIR RAID TAKE OFF 0400 HEADING WEST FROM KOLA ESTIMATE FIVE REGIMENT PLUS.

Baker checked his watch. “Fast work. CAG?”

The air group commander looked at the form and walked to a phone. “Shoot off the plus-fives, recall the patrol aircraft when they get to station, and set up two more Tomcats and a Hummer on plus-five. I want the returning aircraft turned around immediately. Reserve one catapult for tankers.” He came back. “With your permission, sir, I propose to put another pair of F-14s and another Hummer up in an hour, and put all the fighters on plus-five. At 0600, the rest

of the fighters go up, with tankers in support. We'll meet them with everything we have about two hundred miles out and kick their ass."

"Very well. Comments?"

Svenson looked pensively at the master plot. Circles were already being drawn for the farthest possible advance of the Soviet bombers.

"The Brits get the same warning?"

"Yes, sir," Toland answered. "Norwegians, too. With luck, one or the other might make contact with the raid and nibble at it some, maybe put a trailer with them."

"Nice idea, but don't count on it. If I was running the attack, I'd come way west and turn south right over Iceland." Svenson looked back at the plot. "You think Realtime would have broadcast a warning for Bear-Ds?"

"My information, sir, is that they are allowed to broadcast only for three regiments or more. Ten or twenty Bears wouldn't be enough. They might not even notice."

"So right now we probably have a herd of Bears out there, not emitting anything, just flying around listening for our radar signals."

Toland nodded agreement. The battle group was a circle of ships with a radius of thirty miles, the carriers and troop ships in the center surrounded by nine missile-armed escorts and six more specialized antisubmarine ships. None of the ships had a radar transmitter working. Instead, they got all their electronic information from the two circling E-2C air-surveillance aircraft, known colloquially as Hummers, whose radars swept a circle over four hundred miles across.

The drama being played out was more complex than the most intricate game. More than a dozen variable factors could interact, with their permutations running into the thousands. Radar detection range depended on altitude and consequent distance to the horizon that neither eyes nor radar can see past. An aircraft could avoid, or at least delay, detection by skimming the waves. But this carried severe penalties in fuel consumption and range.

They had to locate the battle group without being detected by it first. The Russians knew where the carrier group was, but it would move in the four hours required for the bombers to get there. Their missiles needed precise information if they were to home in on the raid's primary target, the two American and one French carrier, or the mission was a wasted effort.

Putting the group's fighters on station to intercept the incoming raid depended on expert prognostication of its direction and speed. Their job: to locate and engage the bombers before they could find the carriers.

For both sides, the fundamental choice was whether or not to radiate, to use their radar transmitters. Either choice carried benefits and dangers, and there was no "best" solution to the problem. Nearly every American ship carried powerful air-search radars that could locate the raid two hundred or more miles away. But those radar signals could be detected at an even greater range, generating a return signal, that would potentially allow the Soviets to circle the formation, pinpoint it, then converge in from all points of the compass.

The game was hide and seek, played over a million square miles of ocean. The losers died.

NORTH ATLANTIC

The Soviet Bear-D reconnaissance bombers were passing south of Iceland. There were ten of them, covering a front of a thousand miles. The monstrous propeller-driven aircraft were packed full of electronics gear and crewed by men with years of training and experience in locating the American carrier groups. At the nose, tail, and wingtips, sensitive antennae were already reaching out, searching for the signals from American radar transmitters. They would close on those signals, chart them with great care, but remain forever outside the estimated detection radius. Their greatest fear was that the Americans would use no radar at all, or that they would switch their sets on and off at random intervals and locations, which posed the danger of the Bears' blundering directly into armed ships and aircraft. The Bear had twenty hours of endurance, but the penalty for it was virtually no combat capability. It was too slow to run from an interceptor, and had no ability to fight one. "We have located the enemy battle force," the crews' bitter joke ran: *"Dosvidania, Rodina!"* But they were a proud group of professionals. The attack bombers depended on them—as did their country.

Eight hundred miles north of Iceland, the Badgers altered their course to one-eight-zero, due south at five hundred knots. They had avoided the still-dangerous Norwegians, and it was not thought that the British would reach this far out. These air crews kept a nervous watch out their windows nevertheless, their own electronic sensors fully operative and under constant scrutiny. An attack by tactical fighters against Iceland was expected at any time, and the bomber crews knew that any NATO fighter pilot worthy of his name would instantly jettison his bombload for a chance at air-to-air combat with so helpless a target as a twenty-year-old Badger. They had reached the end of their useful lives. Cracks were developing in the wings. The turbine blades in their jet engines were worn, reducing performance and fuel efficiency.

Two hundred miles behind them, the Backfire bombers were finishing their refueling operations. The Tu-22Ms had been accompanied by tankers, and, after topping off their tanks, they headed south, slightly west of the Badgers' course track. With an AS-6 Kingfish missile hanging under each wing, the Backfires, too, were potentially vulnerable, but the Backfire had the ability to run at high Mach numbers and stood a fair chance at survival, even in the face of determined fighter opposition. Their crews were the elite of Soviet Naval Aviation, well-paid and pampered by Soviet society, their commanders had reminded them at the regimental briefings. Now it was time to deliver.

All three groups of aircraft came south at optimum cruise speed, their flight crews monitoring fuel consumption, engine heat, and many other gauges for the long over-water flight.

USS *NIMITZ*

Toland stepped outside for a breath of air. It was a fine morning, the cotton-ball clouds overhead turning briefly pink from the sunrise. *Saratoga* and *Foch* were visible on the horizon, perhaps eight miles away, their size impressive even at this distance. Closer in, *Ticonderoga* was cutting through the five-foot seas, white-painted missiles visible on her twin launchers. A few blinker lights traded signals. Otherwise the ships in view were gray shapes without noise, waiting. *Nimitz's* deck was covered with aircraft. F-14 Tomcat interceptors sat everywhere. Two were hooked up on the midships catapults, only a hundred feet from him, their two-man flight crews dozing. The fighters carried Phoenix long-range missiles. The attack bombers carried buddy-store tanks instead of weapons. They'd be used to refuel the fighters in flight, enabling them to remain aloft an extra two hours. Deck crewmen in multicolored shirts scurried about, checking and rechecking the aircraft. The carrier began turning to port, coming around into the westerly wind in preparation for launching aircraft. He checked his watch. 0558. Time to get back to CIC. The carrier would go to general quarters in two minutes. The intelligence watch officer took one more breath of fresh sea air and wondered if it would be his last.

NORTH ATLANTIC

"Contact!" the technician said over the Bear's interphone. "Signals indicate an American airborne radar transmitter, carrier type."

"Give me a bearing!" the pilot commanded.

"Patience, Comrade Major." The technician made an adjustment on his board. His radio-interferometers timed the signals as they arrived at antennae arrayed all over the aircraft. "Southeast. Bearing to signal is one-three-one. Signal strength one. He is quite distant. Bearing is not changing as yet. I recommend we maintain a constant course for the present."

The pilot and copilot exchanged a look, but no words. Somewhere off to their left was an American E-2C Hawkeye radar aircraft. A flight crew of two —a radar intercept officer and two radar operators. It could manage the air battle for over a hundred enemy aircraft, could vector a missile-armed interceptor in at them within seconds of detection. The pilot wondered just how accurate his information was on the Hawkeye's radar. What if they had already detected his Bear? He knew the answer to that. His first warning would come when he detected the fire-control radar of an American F-14 Tomcat heading right at him. The Bear held course one-eight-zero while the plotting officer tracked the change in bearing to the radar signal. In ten minutes they might just have an accurate fix. If they lived that long. They would not break radio silence until they had a fix.

"I have it," the plotting officer reported. "Estimate distance to contact is six hundred fifty kilometers, position forty-seven degrees, nine minutes north, thirty-four degrees, fifty minutes west."

"Get it out," the pilot ordered. A directional HF antenna in the aircraft's tail fin turned within its housing and radioed the information to the raid commander, whose Bear command aircraft was a hundred miles behind the snoopers.

The raid commander compared this datum with that from the reconnaissance satellite. Now he had two pieces of information. The Americans' position three hours ago was sixty miles south of the estimated plot for the Hawkeye. The Americans probably had two of them up, northeast and northwest of the formation. That was normal fleet doctrine. So, the carrier group was right about . . . here. The Badgers were heading right for it. They would encounter the American radar coverage in . . . two hours. Good, he said to himself. Everything is going according to plan.

USS *NIMITZ*

Toland watched the aircraft plot in silence. The radar picture from the Hawkeyes was being transmitted to the carrier by digital radio link, enabling the battle group commander to follow everything. The same data went to the group air defense boss on *Ticonderoga* and every other ship fitted with the Naval Tactical Data System. That included the French ships, which had long since been equipped to operate closely with the U.S. Navy. So far there was nothing to be seen except the tracks of American military and commercial aircraft ferrying men and supplies across the ocean, and dependents back to the States. These were beginning to swing south. Warned that an air battle was possible, the pilots of DC-10s and C-5As were prudently keeping out of the way, even if it meant having to land and refuel on the way to their destinations.

The group's forty-eight Tomcat interceptors were now mostly on station, spread in a line three hundred miles across. Each pair of Tomcats had a tanker aircraft in attendance. The attack birds, Corsairs and Intruders, carried oversized fuel tanks with refueling drogues attached, and one by one the Tomcats were already beginning to top off their fuel tanks from them. Soon the Corsairs began returning to their carriers for refills. They could keep this up for hours. The aircraft remaining on the carriers were spotted on the decks for immediate takeoff. If a raid came in, they would be shot off the catapults at once to eliminate the fire hazard inherent in any type of aircraft.

Toland had seen all this before, but could not fail to be amazed by it. Everything was going as smoothly as a ballet. The aircraft loitered at their patrol stations, tracing lazy, fuel-efficient circles in the sky. The carriers were racing east now at thirty knots to make up the distance lost during launch operations. The Marines' landing ships *Saipan, Ponce,* and *Newport* could make only about twenty knots, and were essentially defenseless. East of the group, carrier S-3A Viking and land-based P-3C Orion antisubmarine aircraft were patrolling for Soviet submarines. They reported to the group ASW commander on the destroyer *Caron.* There was as yet nothing for anyone to direct his

frustration against. The old story known to all fighting men. You wait.

NORTH ATLANTIC

The raid commander was rapidly accumulating data. He now had positions on four American Hawkeyes. The first two had barely been plotted when the second pair had showed up, outside and south of the first. The Americans had unwittingly given him a very accurate picture of where the battle group was, and the steady eastward drift of the Hawkeyes gave him course and speed. His Bears were now in a wide semicircle around the Americans, and the Badgers were thirty minutes north of American radar cover, four hundred miles north of the estimated location of the ships.

"Send to Group A: 'Enemy formation at grid coordinates 456/810, speed twenty, course one-zero-zero. Execute Attack Plan A at 0615 Zulu time.' Send the same to Group B. Tactical control of Group B switches to Team East Coordinator." The battle had begun.

The Badger crews exchanged looks of relief. They had detected the American radar signals fifteen minutes before, and knew that each kilometer south meant a greater chance that they would run into a cloud of enemy fighters. Aboard each aircraft the navigator and bombardier worked quickly to feed strike information into the Kelt missiles slung under each wing.

Eight hundred miles to their southwest, the Backfire crews advanced their throttles slightly, plotting a course to the datum point supplied by the raid commander. Having circled far around the American formation, they would now be controlled by the strike officer aboard the first Bear to make electronic contact with the Hawkeyes. They had a solid fix on the NATO formation, but they needed better if they were to locate and engage the carriers. These crews were not relieved, but excited. Now came the challenging part. The battle plan had been formulated a year before and practiced—over land exclusively—five times. Four times it had worked.

Aboard eighty Badger bombers, pilots checked their watches, counting off the seconds to 0615 Zulu.

"Launch!"

The lead Badger launched eight seconds early. First one, then the second, aircraft-shaped Kelt dropped free of its pylon, falling several hundred feet before their turbojet engines ran up to full power. Running on autopilot, the Kelts climbed back to thirty thousand feet and cruised on south at six hundred knots indicated air speed. The bomber crews watched their birds proceed for a minute or two, then each of the bombers turned slowly and gracefully for home, their mission done. Six Badger-J stand-off jamming aircraft continued south. They would stay sixty kilometers behind the Kelts. Their crews were nervous but confident. It would not be easy for American radar to burn through their powerful jammers, and in any case, the Americans would soon

have many targets to concern them.

The Kelts continued on, straight and level. They carried their own electronic equipment, which would be triggered automatically by sensors in their tail fins. When they entered the theoretical arc of the Hawkeyes' radar range, transponders in their noses clicked on.

USS *NIMITZ*

"Radar contacts! Designate Raid-1, bearing three-four-niner, range four-six-zero miles. Numerous contacts, count one-four-zero contacts, course one-seven-five, speed six hundred knots."

The master tactical scope plotted the contacts electronically, and a pair of plexiglass plates showed another visual display.

"So, here they come," Baker said quietly. "Right on time. Comments?"

"I—" Toland didn't get a chance.

The computer display went white.

"Clipper Base, this is Hawk-Three. We're getting some jamming," reported the senior airborne control officer. "We plot six, possibly seven jammers, bearing three-four-zero to zero-three-zero. Pretty powerful stuff. Estimate we have stand-off jammers, but no escort jammers. Contacts are lost for the present. Estimate burn-through in ten minutes. Request weapons free, and release to vector intercepts."

Baker looked over to his air operations officer. "Let's get things started."

Air/Ops nodded and picked up a microphone. "Hawk-Three, this is Clipper Base. Weapons free. I say again, weapons are free. Release authority is granted. Splash me some bombers. Out."

Svenson frowned at the display. "Admiral, we're coming about to clear decks. Recommend the formation stays together now." He got a nod. "Clipper Fleet, this is Clipper Base, come left to two-seven-zero. Launch all remaining aircraft. Execute."

On the single command, the formation made a hundred-eighty-degree left turn. Those ships that did not as yet have missiles on their launchers rectified this. Fire-control radars were trained north, but kept in standby mode. Thirty different captains waited for the word to activate.

NORTH ATLANTIC

She was pissed off. *Sure,* she thought, *I'm good enough to fly. I'm good enough to be an instructor pilot for the Eagle. Engineering test pilot, assistant project officer for the ASAT program—I'm good enough to get an invite to Houston, even—but will they let me fly combat? No, there's a war going on and I'm nothing but a Goddamned ferry pilot!*

"Shit." Her name was Amy Nakamura. She was a major, United States Air Force, with three thousand hours of jet time, two-thirds of it in F-15s. Short and stocky like many fighter pilots, only her father had ever called her beautiful. He also called her Bunny. When her fellow pilots found that one out, they shortened it to Buns. She and three men were ferrying four brand-new Eagle fighters to Germany where others—men!—would get to use them properly. They each carried fast-pack conformal fuel tanks to make the trip in one long hop, and for self-defense a single Sidewinder missile, plus their usual load of 20mm cannon shells. *The* Russians *let women fly combat in World War II!* she thought. A *couple even* made *ace!*

"Hey, Buns, check your three o'clock!" called her *wingman.*

Nakamura had phenomenal eyesight, but she could scarcely believe it. "Tell me what you see, Butch."

"Badgers . . . ?"

"Fuckin' Tu-16 Badgers—*taldyho!* Where's the Navy supposed to be?"

"Close. Try and raise 'em, Buns!"

"Navy task force, Navy task force, this is Air Force ferry flight Golf-Four-Niner. We are eastbound with four Foxtrot-One-Fives. We have a visual on a Russian bomber formation position—shit, do you read, over?"

"Who the hell is that?" a Hawkeye crewman asked aloud.

The communications technician answered, "Golf-Four-Niner, we need authentication. November Four Whiskey." This could be a Russian playing radio games.

Major Nakamura swore to herself as she ran her finger down the list of communication codes. There! "Alpha Six Hotel."

"Golf-Four-Niner, this is Navy Hawk-One, say your position. Warning, we are calling in the clans on those Badgers. You'd better get clear, acknowledge."

"Like hell, Navy, I got visual on three-plus Badgers northbound, position forty-nine north, thirty-three east."

"*North*bound?" the intercept officer said. "Golf, this is Hawk-One. Confirm your visual. Say again your visual."

"Hawk-One, this is Golf, I now have a dozen Badger, say again Tango-Uniform-One-Six bombers visual, south of my position, heading toward me and closing fast. We are engaging. Out."

"Nothing on radar, boss," the radar operator said. "That's way the hell north of here."

"Then what the *hell* is he talking about?"

Major Amelia "Buns" Nakamura reached down without looking to toggle up her missile and head-up display to tactical. Then she flipped the switch for her air-intercept radar. Her IFF system interrogated the target as a possible friendly and came up blank. That was enough.

"Frank, take your element east. Butch, follow me. Everybody watch your fuel states. Charge!"

The Badger pilots were a little too relaxed, now that the most dangerous part of their mission was behind them. They didn't spot the four American fighters until they were less than a mile away, their robin's-egg-blue paint blending

them in perfectly with the clear morning sky.

Buns selected her cannon for the first pass and triggered two hundred rounds into the cockpit of a Badger. The twin-engine bomber went instantly out of control and rolled over like a dead whale. One. The major howled with delight, pulled the Eagle up into a five-g loop, then over to dive on the next target. The Soviets were alerted now, and the second Badger attempted to dive away. It had not the slightest chance. Nakamura fired her Sidewinder from a range of less than a mile and watched the missile trace all the way into the Badger's left-side engine, and blast the wing right off the airplane. Two. Another Badger was three miles ahead. *Patience,* she told herself. *You have a big speed advantage.* She nearly forgot that the Russian bomber had tail guns. A Soviet sergeant reminded her of it, missing, but scaring the hell out of her. The Eagle jerked in a six-g turn to the left and closed on a parallel course before turning in. The next burst from her cannon exploded the Badger in midair, and she had to dive to avoid the wreckage. The engagement lasted all of ninety seconds, and she was wringing wet with perspiration.

"Butch, where are you?"

"I got one! Buns, I got one!" The Eagle pulled up alongside.

Nakamura looked around. Suddenly the sky was clear. Where had they all gone?

"Navy Hawk-One, this is Golf, do you read, over?"

"Roger, Golf."

"Okay, Navy. We just smoked four, repeat four, Badgers for you."

"Make that five, Buns!" the other element leader called in.

"Something's wrong, sir." The radar operator on Hawk-One motioned to his scope. "We have these buggers just popped through, and they say they bagged some, gotta be three, four hundred miles away."

"Clipper Base, this is Hawk-One, we just had contact with an Air Force ferry flight eastbound. They claim they just splashed five Badgers northbound several hundred miles north of us. Say again *northbound."*

Toland's eyebrows went up.

"Probably some had to abort," Baker observed. "This is close to their fuel limit, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," replied Air/Ops. He didn't look happy with his own answer.

"Burn-through," announced the radar operator. "We have reacquired the targets."

The Kelts had flown on, oblivious to the furor around them. Their radar transponders made them look like hundred-ten-foot Badgers. Their own white-noise jammers came on, somewhat obscuring them yet again on the radar scopes, and autopilot controls began to jerk them up, down, left, right, in hundred-meter leaps as an aircraft might do when trying to avoid a missile. The Kelts had been real missiles once, but on retirement from front-line service six years earlier, their warheads had been replaced with additional fuel tankage, and they had been relegated to a role as target drones, a purpose they were serving admirably now.

"Tallyho!" The first squadron of twelve Tomcats was now a hundred fifty miles away. The Kelts showed up perfectly on radar, and the intercept officers in the back seat of each fighter quickly established target tracks. The Kelts were approaching what would have been nominal missile-launch distance—if they were the bombers everyone thought they were.

The Tomcats launched a volley of million-dollar AIM-54C Phoenix missiles at a range of a hundred forty miles. The missiles blazed in on their targets at Mach-5, directed by the fighters' targeting radars. In under a minute the forty-eight missiles had killed thirty-nine targets. The first squadron broke clear as the second came into launch position.

USS *NIMITZ*

"Admiral, something is wrong here," Toland said quietly.

"What might that be?" Baker liked the way things were going. Enemy bomber tracks were being wiped off his screen just as the war games had predicted they would.

"The Russians are coming in dumb, sir."

"So?"

"So this far the Soviets have not been very dumb! Admiral, why aren't the Backfires going supersonic? Why one attack group? Why one direction?"

"Fuel constraints," Baker answered. "The Badgers are at the limit of their fuel, they have to come in direct."

"But not the Backfires!"

"The course is right, the raid count is right." Baker shook his head and concentrated on the tactical plot.

The second squadron of fighters had just launched. Unable to get a head-on shot, their missile accuracy suffered somewhat. They killed thirty-four targets with forty-eight missiles. There had been a hundred fifty-seven targets plotted.

The third and fourth Tomcat squadrons arrived together and launched as a group. When their Phoenixes had been fully expended, nineteen targets were left. The two fighter squadrons moved in to engage the remaining targets with their cannon.

"Clipper Base, this is SAM Boss. We're going to have some leakers. Recommend we start lighting up SAM radars."

"Roger, SAM Boss. Permission granted," answered the group tactical warfare coordinator.

NORTH ATLANTIC

"I have air-search radars, bearing zero-three-seven," the Bear ESM officer

noted. “They have detected us. Recommend we illuminate also.” The Bear lit off its Big Bulge look-down radar.

USS *NIMITZ*

“New radar contact. Designate Raid-2—”

“What?” snapped Baker. Next came a call from the fighters.

“Clipper Base, this is Slugger Lead. I have a visual on my target.” The squadron commander was trying to examine the target on his long-range TV camera. When he spoke, the anguish in his voice was manifest. “Warning, warning, this is not a Badger. We’ve been shooting at Kelt missiles!”

“Raid-2 is seventy-three aircraft, bearing two-one-seven, range one-three-zero miles. We have a Big Bulge radar tracking the formation,” said the CIC talker.

Toland cringed as the new contacts were plotted. “Admiral, we’ve been had.”

The group tactical warfare officer was pale as he toggled his microphone. “Air Warning Red. Weapons free! Threat axis is two-one-seven. All ships turn as necessary to unmask batteries.”

The Tomcats had all been drawn off, leaving the formation practically naked. The only armed fighters over the formation were *Foch’s* eight Crusaders, long since retired from the American inventory. On a terse command from their carrier, they went to afterburner and rocketed southwest toward the Backfires. Too late.

The Bear already had a clear picture of the American formations. The Russians could not determine ship type, but they could tell large from small, and identify the missile cruiser *Ticonderoga* by her distinctive radar emissions. The carriers would be close to her. The Bear relayed the information to her consorts. A minute later, the seventy Backfire bombers launched their hundred forty AS-6 Kingfish missiles and turned north at full military power. The Kingfish was nothing like the Kelt. Powered by a liquid-fuel rocket engine, it accelerated to nine hundred knots and began its descent, its radar-homing head tracking on a pre-programmed target area ten miles wide. Every ship in the center of the formation had several missiles assigned.

“Vampire, Vampire!” the CIC talker said aboard *Ticonderoga.* “We have numerous incoming missiles. Weapons free.”

The group antiair warfare officer ordered the cruiser’s Aegis weapons system into full automatic mode. *Tico* had been built with this exact situation in mind. Her powerful radar/computer system immediately identified the incoming missiles as hostile and assigned each a priority of destruction. The computer was completely on its own, free to fire on its electronic will at anything diagnosed as a threat. Numbers, symbols, and vectors paraded across the master tactical display. The fore and aft twin missile launchers trained out at the first targets and awaited the orders to fire. Aegis was state-of-the-art,

the best SAM system yet devised, but it had one major weakness: *Tico* carried only ninety-six SM2 surface-to-air missiles; there were one hundred forty incoming Kingfish. The computer had not been programmed to think about that.

Aboard *Nimitz,* Toland could feel the carrier heeling into a radical turn, her engines advanced to flank speed, driving the massive warship at over thirty-five knots. Her nuclear-powered escorts, *Virginia* and *California,* were also tracking the Kingfish, their own missiles trained out on their launchers.

The Kingtish were at eight thousand feet, one hundred miles out, covering a mile every four seconds. Each had now selected a target, choosing the largest within their fields of view. *Nimitz* was the nearest large ship, with her missile-ship escorts to her north.

Tico launched her first quartet of missiles as the targets reached a range of ninety-nine miles. The rockets exploded into the air, leaving a trail of pale gray smoke. They had barely cleared the launch rails when the mounts went vertical and swiveled to receive their reloads. The load-and-fire time was under eight seconds. The cruiser would average one missile fired every two seconds. Just over three minutes later, her missile magazines were empty. The cruiser emerged from the base of an enormous gray arch of smoke. Her only remaining defenses were her gun systems.

The SAMs raced in at their targets with a closing speed of over two thousand miles per hour, directed in by the reflected waves of the ship's own fire-control radars. At a range of a hundred fifty yards from their targets, the warheads detonated. The Aegis system did quite well. Just over 60 percent of the targets were destroyed. There were now eighty-two incoming missiles targeted on a total of eight ships.

Other missile-equipped ships joined the fray. In several cases two or three missiles were sent for the same target, usually killing it. The number of incoming "vampires" dropped to seventy, then sixty, but the number was not dropping quickly enough. The identity of the targets was now known to everyone. Powerful active jamming equipment came on. Ships began a radical series of maneuvers like some stylized dance, with scant attention paid to station-keeping. Collision at sea was now the least of anyone's worries. When the Kingfish got to within twenty miles, every ship in the formation began to fire off chaff rockets, which filled the air with millions of aluminized Mylar fragments that fluttered on the air, creating dozens of new targets for the missiles to select from. Some of the Kingfish lost lock with their targets and started chasing Mylar ghosts. Two of them got lost, and selected new targets on the far side of the formation.

The radar picture on *Nimitz* suddenly was obscured. What had been discrete pips designating the positions of ships in the formation became shapeless clouds. Only the missiles stayed constant: inverted V-shapes, with line vectors to designate direction and speed. The last wave of SAMs killed three more. The vampire count was down to forty-one. Toland counted five heading for *Nimitz.*

Topside, the final defensive weapons were now tracking the targets. These were the CIWS, 20mm Gatling guns, radar-equipped to explode incoming missiles at a range of under two thousand yards. Designed to operate in a fully

automatic mode, the two after gun mounts on the carrier angled up and began to track the first pair of incoming Kingfish. The portside mount fired first, the six-barrel cannon making a sound like that of an enormous zipper. Its radar system tracked the target, and tracked the outgoing slugs, adjusting fire to make the two meet.

The leading Kingfish exploded eight hundred yards from *Nimitz's* port quarter. The thousand kilograms of high explosive rocked the ship. Toland felt it, wondering if the ship had been hit. Around him, the CIC crewmen were concentrating frantically on their jobs. One target track vanished from the screen. Four left.

The next Kingfish approached the carrier's bow and was blasted out of the sky by the forward CIWS, too close aboard. Fragments ripped across the carrier's deck, killing a dozen exposed crewmen.

Number three was decoyed by a chaff cloud and ran straight into the sea half a mile behind the carrier. The warhead caused the carrier to vibrate and raised a column of water a thousand feet into the air.

The fourth and fifth missiles came in from aft, not a hundred yards apart. The after gun mount tracked on both, but couldn't decide which to engage first. It went into Reset mode and petulantly didn't engage any. The missiles hit within a second of one another, one on the after port corner of the flight deck, the other on the number two arrestor wire.

Toland was thrown fifteen feet, and slammed against a radar console. Next he saw a wall of pink flame that washed briefly over him. Then came the noises. First the thunder of the explosion. Then the screams. The after CIC bulkhead was no longer there; instead there was a mass of flame. Men twenty feet away were ablaze, staggering and screaming before his eyes. Toland's only thought was escape. He bolted for the watertight door. It opened miraculously under his hand and he ran to starboard. The ship's fire-suppression systems were already on, showering everything with a curtain of saltwater. His skin burned from it as he emerged, hair and uniform singed, to the flight deck catwalk. A sailor directed a water hose on him, nearly knocking him over the side.

"Fire in CIC!" Toland gasped.

"What the hell ain't!" the sailor screamed.

Toland fell to his knees and looked outboard. *Foch* had been to their north, he remembered. Now there was a pillar of smoke. As he watched, the last Kingfish was detonated a hundred feet over *Saratoga's* flight deck. The carrier seemed undamaged. Three miles away, *Ticonderoga's* after superstructure was shredded and ablaze from a rocket that had blown up within yards of her. On the horizon a ball of flame announced the destruction of yet another—*my God,* Toland thought, *might that be Saipan?* She had two thousand Marines aboard . . .

"Get forward, you dumbass!" a firefighter yelled at him. Another man emerged to the catwalk.

"Toland, you all right?" It was Captain Svenson, his shirt torn away and his chest bleeding from a half-dozen cuts.

"Yes, sir," Bob answered.

"Get to the bridge. Tell 'em to put the wind on the starboard beam. Move!"

Svenson jumped up onto the flight deck.

Toland did likewise, racing forward. The deck was awash in firefighting foam, slippery as oil. Toland ran recklessly, falling hard on the deck before he reached the carrier's island. He was in the pilothouse in under a minute.

"Captain says put the wind on the starboard beam!" Toland said.

"It *is* on the fucking beam!" the executive officer snapped back. The bridge deck was covered with broken glass. "How's the skipper?"

"Alive. He's aft with the fire."

"And who the hell are you?" the XO demanded.

"Toland, group intel. I was in CIC."

"Then you're one lucky bastard. That second bird hit fifty yards from you. Captain got out? Anyone else?"

"I don't know. Burning like hell."

"Looks like you caught part of it, Commander."

Bob's face felt as if he'd shaved with a piece of glass. His eyebrows crumpled to his touch. "Flashburns, I guess. I'll be okay. What do you want me to do?"

The XO pointed to Toland's water wings. "Can you conn the ship? Okay, do it. Nothing left to run into anyway. I'm going aft to take charge of the fire. Communications are out, radar's out, but the engines are okay and the hull's in good shape. Mr. Bice has the deck. Mr. Toland has the conn," XO announced as he left.

Toland hadn't conned anything bigger than a Boston Whaler in over ten years, and now he had a damaged carrier. He took a pair of binoculars and looked around to see what ships were nearby. What he saw chilled him.

Saratoga was the only ship that looked intact, but on second glance her radar mast was askew. *Foch* was lower in the water than she ought to have been, and ablaze from bow to stem.

"Where's *Saipan?"*

"Blew up like a fucking firework," Commander Bice replied. "Holy Jesus, there were twenty-five hundred men aboard! *Tico* took one close aboard. *Foch* took three hits, looks like she's gone. Two frigates and a destroyer gone, too—just fucking gone, man! Who fucked up? You were in CIC, right? Who fucked up?"

The eight French Crusaders were just making contact with the Backfires. The Russian bombers were on afterburner and were nearly as fast as the fighters. The carrier pilots had all heard their ship go off the air and were consumed with rage at what had happened, no longer the cool professionals who drove fighters off ships. Only ten Backfires were within their reach. They got six of them with their missiles and damaged two more before they had to break off.

USS *Caron,* the senior undamaged ship, tracked the Russians on her radar, calling Britain for fighters to intercept them on the trip home. But the Russians had anticipated this, and detoured far west of the British Isles, meeting their tankers four hundred miles west of Norway.

Already the Russians were evaluating the results of their mission. The first major battle of modern carriers and missile-armed bombers had been won and lost. Both sides knew which was which.

The fire on *Nimitz* was out within an hour. With no aircraft aboard, there were few combustibles about, and the ship's firefighting abilities equaled that of a large city. Toland brought her back to an easterly course. *Saratoga* was recovering aircraft, refueling them, and sending all but the fighters to the beach. Three frigates and a destroyer lingered to recover survivors, as the large ships turned back toward Europe.

"All ahead full," Svenson ordered from his seat on the bridge. "Toland, you all right?"

"No complaints." No point in it, the ship's hospital was more than full with hundreds of major injury cases. There was no count of the dead yet, and Toland didn't want to think about that.

"You were right," the captain said, his voice angry and subdued. "You were right. They made it too easy and we fell for it."

"There'll be another day, Captain."

"You're Goddamned right there will! We're heading for Southampton. See if the Brits can fix anything this big. My regulars are still busy aft. Think you can handle the conn a little longer?"

"Yes, sir."

Nimitz and her nuclear escorts bent on full speed, nearly forty knots, and rapidly left the formation behind. A reckless move, racing too fast for antisubmarine patrols, but a submarine would have to move quickly indeed to catch them.

21

Nordic Hammer

HILL 152, ICELAND

"I know that was a fighter, and there had to be more than one," Edwards said. It was raining again, probably for the last time. The clouds to the southwest were breaking up, and there was a hint of clear sky on the horizon. Edwards just sat there in his helmet and poncho, staring into the distance.

"I suppose you're right, sir," Smith replied. The sergeant was nervous. They'd been on this hilltop for almost twenty-four hours, a long time to be stationary in hostile country. The best time to move out would have been during the rain showers, when visibility was cut to a few hundred yards. Soon the sky might be clear again, and it wouldn't get dark again for quite a while. As it was, they sat on their hilltop in camouflage ponchos that kept them partly dry and wholly miserable.

There was a heavy shower north of them that prevented their seeing Reykjavik, and they could barely make out Hafnarfjördur to the west, which worried the sergeant, who wanted to know what Ivan was up to. What if they detected Edwards's satellite radio and began to triangulate on it? What if there were patrols out?

"Lieutenant?"

"Yeah, Sarge?"

"We got those phone lines on one side of us, and those power lines on the other—"

"You want to blow some up?" Edwards smiled.

"No, sir, but Ivan is going to start patrolling them soon, and this ain't a very good place for us to make contact."

"We're supposed to observe and report, Sarge," Edwards said without conviction.

"Yes, sir."

Edwards checked his watch. It was 1955Z. Doghouse might want to talk with them, though they hadn't called in to him yet. Edwards broke the radio out of the pack again, assembled the pistol-grip antenna, and donned his headset. At 1959 he switched on and tracked in on the satellite carrier wave.

"Doghouse calling Beagle. Doghouse calling Beagle. Do you copy? Over."

"Well, how about that." He toggled the Transmit switch. "Roger, we're here,

Doghouse."

"Anything new to report?"

"Negative, unless you want to know about the rain. Visibility is down. We can't see very much."

The communications watch officer at Doghouse looked at a weather map. So it really was raining there. He hadn't been able to convince his boss that Beagle could be trusted. Edwards had answered the questions that the counterintelligence guys had come up with. They'd even had a voice-stress analyzer handy to check the tapes of his answers. The needle had pegged on the last answer about his girlfriend. That hadn't been faked. Copies of the relevant parts of his personnel package had been faxed to them. Upper fifth of his class at Colorado Springs. Good in math and engineering studies, did extremely well in his postgraduation studies in meteorology. His eyesight had worsened slightly during his tenure at Colorado Springs, becoming just bad enough to keep him from flying. Regarded as quiet and shy, but evidently well liked by his classmates. Not a warrior type, the psychological profile said. How long would the kid last?

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

One MiG-29 was flying. The others were in the hardened shelters the Americans had only just finished at the end of runway eleven. The fighter's mission was twofold. It was a standing combat air patrol aircraft should an incoming raid be detected, but more importantly, it was being tracked carefully by the ground radar controllers: their radar needed to be calibrated. Iceland's irregular terrain made for troublesome radar performance, and as with the surface-to-air missiles, the instruments themselves had been badly jostled by the trip aboard the *Fucik*. The fighter flew circles around the airport while the radar operators determined that what their instruments told them was correct.

The fighters were fully fueled and armed, their pilots resting on cots near them. At the moment, the bowsers were fueling the Badger bomber that had given the fighters navigational and electronic support. Soon it would be leaving to bring in nine more. The Air Force detachment was rapidly finishing their job of clearing the airfield. All but one of the runways was swept clear of fragments now. The remains of the American aircraft had been bulldozed off the pavement. The fuel pipeline would be repaired in an hour, the engineers said.

"Quite a busy day," the major said to the fighter commander.

"It's not over yet. I'll feel better when we get the rest of the regiment in," the colonel observed quietly. "They should have hit us already."

"How do you expect them to attack?"

The colonel shrugged. "Hard to say. If they're really serious about closing this field, they'll use a nuclear warhead."

"Are you always so optimistic, Comrade Colonel?"

The raid was an hour away. The eighteen B-52H bombers had left Louisiana ten hours before and landed to refuel at Sondrestrom Air Force Base on Greenland's west coast. Fifty miles ahead of them were a single Raven EF-111 jamming aircraft and four F-4 Phantoms configured for defense-suppression.

The radar was about halfway calibrated, though what had been done was the easy part. The fighter that had just landed had flown racetrack ovals from due north around the western horizon to due south of Keflavik. The area to the west of the air base, though not exactly flat, was nearly so, with low rocky hills. Next came the hard part, plotting radar coverage of the eastern arc over Iceland's mountainous center, a solid collection of hills that worked up to the island's tall central peak. Another Fulcrum rolled off the runway to begin this task, its pilot wondering how long it might take to map all the nulls—areas blanked to radar coverage by the steep valleys—areas that an attacking aircraft could use to mask its approach to Keflavik.

The radar officers were plotting probable troublesome spots on their topographical maps when an operator shouted a warning. Their clear radar screens had just turned to hash from powerful electronic jammers. That could mean only one thing.

The klaxons sounded in the fighter shelters at the end of runway eleven. Fighter pilots who had been dozing or playing dominos jumped to their feet and raced to their aircraft.

The tower officer lifted the field phone to give more exact warning to the fighters, then called up the missile battery commander: "Incoming air raid!"

Men leaped into action all across the air base. The fighter ground crews hit the built-in self-starters, turning the jet engines even as the pilots climbed into the cockpits. The SAM battery turned on its search and fire-control systems while the launch vehicles slewed their missiles into firing position.

Just under the radar horizon, eighteen B-52 bombers had just lit off their ECM jamming systems. They were deployed in six groups of three each. The first skimmed over the top of Mt. Snaefells, sixty miles north of Keflavik, and the rest came from all around the west side of the compass, converging on the target behind a wall of electronic noise provided by their own systems and the supporting EF-111 Raven jammer.

The Russian fighter just lifting off climbed to altitude, the pilot keeping his radar off as he scanned the sky visually, waiting for intercept information from the ground-based radar. His comrades were even now taxiing into the open, racing straight down the runway and into the sky. The aircraft that had just landed taxied to a fuel bowser, its pilot gesturing and cursing at the ground crewmen who were struggling to fuel his fighter. In their haste, they spilled ten gallons of fuel over the wing. Amazingly, it did not ignite, and a dozen men ran in with CO_2 extinguishers to prevent an explosion as the fighter drank in a full load of fuel.

HILL 152, ICELAND

Edwards's head jerked up at the noise, the distinctive roar of jet fighters. He saw a dark trail of smoke approaching in from the east, and the silhouettes passed within a mile. The shapes were heavy with ordnance, the up-angled wingtips making identification easy.

"F-4s!" he hooted. "They're our guys!"

They were Phantom jets of the New York Air National Guard, configured as Wild Weasel SAM-killers. While Russian attention was on the converging bomber raid, they skimmed over hilltops and down valleys, using the crenellated landscape to mask their low-level approach. The back-seat crewman in each aircraft counted the missile radars, selecting the most dangerous targets. When they got to within ten miles of Keflavik, they popped up high and fired a salvo of Standard-ARM antiradar missiles.

The Russians were caught by surprise. Laboring to direct missile fire at the bombers, they didn't expect a two-part raid. The incoming missiles were not detected. Three of the ARMs found targets, killing two search radars and a missile-launch vehicle. One launch commander turned his vehicle around and trained manually on the new threat. The Phantoms jammed his fire-control radar, leaving behind a series of chaff clouds as they came in at thirty-foot height. As each pilot raced to the target area assigned to him, he conducted a hasty visual search. One saw an undamaged SAM launcher and streaked toward it, dropping Rockeye cluster-bomb canisters that fell short but spread over a hundred bomblets all over the area. The SA-11 launcher exploded in his wake; its crew never knew what had happened. A thousand yards beyond it was a mobile antiaircraft gun vehicle. The Phantom engaged it with his own cannon, badly damaging it as he swept across the rest of the peninsula and escaped back over the sea, a cloud of chaff and flares in his wake. It was a letter-perfect Weasel mission. All four aircraft were gone before the Soviet missile crews were able to react. The two SAMs that were launched exploded harmlessly in chaff clouds. The battery had lost two-thirds of its launcher vehicles and all of its search radars. Three of the mobile guns were also destroyed or damaged. The bombers were now a mere twenty miles out, their powerful ECM jamming systems drowning the Soviet radar with electronic noise.

They could not defeat the radar on the mobile guns, however. The new system had a radar for which they were not equipped, but it didn't matter. The guns had been designed to deal with small fighters, and when their radars tried to lock on the huge bombers, they found a target so large that their radar signals traced from one part to another. The computers could not decide what the target range was, and kept recycling automatically, rendering the electronics package useless. The gun crews cursed as one man and switched over to manual fire-control, using their eyes to sight in on the massive incoming targets.

The bombers popped up to nine hundred feet now, hoping to avoid the worst of the gunfire and escape without loss. They had not been warned of a possible fighter presence. Their mission was to wreck Keflavik before fighters could get there.

Now surprise was on the Soviet side. The Fulcrums dived out of the sun at the bombers. Their own fire-control radars were nearly useless as they

approached, but half their missiles were infrared-guided, and the American bombers gave off enough heat to attract the attention of a blind man in a fur coat.

The southbound flight of three never saw them coming in. Two took missile hits and exploded in midair. The third radioed for fighter cover, jinking his aircraft hard—too hard. His second dive bottomed out too late, and the aircraft disintegrated on the ground north of Keflavik in a fireball visible to Edwards thirty miles away.

The Russian fighters were experiencing an airman's dream. All eight aircraft had individual targets, and they split to hunt them singly before Keflavik absorbed too many bomb hits. The bomber crews pressed in on their targets. It was too late to run away, and all that they could do was scream for the fighters to come back and support them.

The ground-based gunners joined in. Firing over open sights, a young sergeant hit a bomber just dropping its load. The bomb bay took a dozen rounds, and the aircraft vanished in a deafening explosion that shook the sky and damaged yet another B-52. One missile-launch crew successfully switched their missile-control systems to the backup infrared mode and fired a single rocket at a bomber. It hit just after the bombs were released. The bomber's wing erupted in flame and the aircraft swooped east trailing a black river of smoke.

They watched it approach their hill, a wounded monster whose right wing trailed burning fuel. The pilot was trying to maintain altitude so that his crew could eject, but all four of his right engines were gone and the burning wing collapsed. The bomber staggered in the air and dropped, rolling into the west face of Hill 152. None of the crew escaped. Edwards didn't have to give an order. In five seconds, his men had packed their gear and were running northeast.

The remaining bombers were now over the target and screaming for help from their escorting fighters. Eight successfully dropped their bombloads before turning clear of the area. The Soviet fighters had claimed five by now, and the surviving crews were desperate to escape the unexpected hazard. The Russians were now out of missiles, and attempting to engage with their cannon. That was dangerous. The B-52s retained their tail guns, and one Fulcrum was damaged by machine-gun fire from his target and had to break off.

The final element of confusion was the return of the American Phantoms. They carried only three Sparrow missiles each, and when they lit off their missile-intercept radars, the Soviet fighters all received warning tones from their defense systems. The Fulcrums scattered before the twelve incoming missiles and dove for the ground. Four dropped down right on top of Edwards's group, swooping low over a crashed B-52 east of Hafnarfjördur. When they came back up, the sky was clear again. The Phantoms were short on fuel. They could not press their attack and turned away without a single kill. The surviving bombers were now safely hidden in the cloud of jamming. The Soviets re-formed and moved back to Keflavik.

Their first impression was a bad one. Fully two hundred bombs had fallen within the airport perimeter, and nine of them had found runway targets. But

runway eleven was unscarred. As they watched, the single Fulcrum left on the ground roared off into the sky, its pilot frantic with rage, demanding a vector to a target. He was ordered to patrol as the rest of the squadron landed to refuel.

The first battle had mixed results. The Americans lost half their bomber force in return for damaging three of Keflavik's five runways. The Soviets had most of a SAM battery smashed to little gain, but Keflavik was still usable. Already the ground personnel were running to the runway-repair equipment left behind by the Americans. At the end of each runway was a pile of gravel, and a half-dozen bunkers contained steel mats. Heavy equipment would bulldoze the debris back into the holes, even it out, then cover it over with gravel and steel. Keflavik was damaged, but its runways would be fully operational again before midnight.

USS *PHARRIS*

"I think this one's for-real, Captain," the ASW officer said quietly. The line of colored blocks on the passive sonar display had lasted for seven minutes. Bearing was changing slowly aft, as though the contact were heading for the convoy, but not *Pharris.*

The frigate was steaming at twelve knots, and her Prairie/Masker systems were operating. Sonar conditions were better today. A hard thermocline layer at two hundred feet severely impeded the utility of a surface sonar. *Pharris* was able to deploy her towed-array sonar below it, however, and the lower water temperature there made for an excellent sound channel. Better still, the layer worked in both directions. A submarine's sonar had as much trouble penetrating the thermocline as a surface sonar. *Pharris* would be virtually undetectable to a submarine below the layer.

"How's the plot look?" the tactical action officer asked.

"Firming up," ASW answered. "Still the distance question. Given the water conditions and our known sonar performance, our sonar figure of merit gives us a contact distance of anything from five to fourteen miles on direct path, or into the first convergence zone. That predicts out from nineteen to twenty-three miles ..." A convergence zone is a trick of physics. Sound traveling in water radiates in all directions. Noise that traveled down was gradually turned by water temperature and pressure into a series of curves, rising to the surface, then bending again downward. While the frigate could hear noise out from herself for a distance of about fourteen nautical miles, the convergence zone was in the shape of an annulus—the area between two concentric circles—a donut-shaped piece of water that began nineteen miles and ended twenty-three miles away. The distance to the submarine was unknown, but was probably less than twenty-three miles. That was already too close. The submarine could attack them or the convoy they guarded with torpedoes, or with surface-to-surface missiles, a technology pioneered by the Soviets.

"Recommendation, gentlemen?" Morris asked. The TAO spoke first.

“Let’s put the helicopter up for the near solution, and get an Orion working the far one.”

“Sounds good,” ASW agreed.

Within five minutes, the frigate’s helo was five miles out, dropping Lofar-type sonobuoys. On striking the water, these miniature passive sonar sets deployed a nondirectional sonar transducer at a preselected depth. In this case all dipped above the thermocline layer to determine if the target was close. The data was relayed back to *Pharris’s* combat information center: nothing. The passive sonar track, however, still showed a submarine or something that *sounded* like a submarine. The helo began moving outward, dropping sonobuoys as it went.

Then the Orion arrived. The four-engine aircraft swooped low along the frigate’s reported bearing-to-target. The Orion carried over fifty sonobuoys, and was soon dropping them in sets both above and below the layer.

“I got a weak signal on number six and a medium on number five,” a sonar operator reported. Excitement crept into his voice.

“Roger, confirm that,” the tactical coordinator on Bluebird-Three agreed. He’d been in the ASW game for six years, but he was getting excited, too. “We’re going to start making MAD runs.”

“You want our helo to back you up?”

“Roger that, yes, but tell him to keep low.”

Seconds later the frigate’s SH-2F Sea Sprite helicopter sped off north, her magnetic anomaly detector trailing out by cable from a shroud on the right side of the aircraft. Essentially a highly sensitive magnetometer, it could detect the disturbance in the earth’s magnetic field made by a large chunk of ferrous metal—like the steel hull of a submarine.

“Signal on number six is now medium-strength. Signal on seven remains medium.” The plotting team took this to mean that the submarine was heading south.

“I can give you a working range figure,” ASW said to the TAO. “Forty-two to forty-five thousand yards, bearing three-four-zero to three-three-six.” The frigate relayed this at once to the Orion.

As they watched on radar, the P-3C quartered the area, flying very precise tracks across the box of ocean defined by *Pharris’s* sonar data as the probable location of the submarine. A computer system plotted the lines as they extended to the south.

“Pharris, this is Bluebird. Our data indicates no friendly subs in the area. Please confirm, over.”

“Roger that, Bluebird. We confirm no reports of friendlies in the area.” Morris had checked that himself half an hour before.

“Signal strength increasing on number six. We now have a weak signal on number five. Number seven is fading out.” The technician was really struggling to be professionally impassive now.

“Range is firming up. Estimate target speed roughly eight knots, distance forty-three thousand yards.”

“Transient! Transient!” called the ship sonar operator. A metallic noise had come from the target bearing. A closing hatch, a dropped tool, an opening torpedo tube door—something had made a uniquely man-made sound.

“Confirm mechanical transient, copied on buoys five and six,” the aircraft called immediately.

“Confirmed,” *Pharris’s* TAO answered. “We got that on the towed-array, too. We evaluate the contact as positive submarine at this time.”

“Concur,” the Orion replied. “Positive Redboat classification—madman! Madman, madman, smoke away! We have a MAD contact.” A big spike appeared on the MAD readout. Instantly, a crewman flipped a switch to deploy a smoke marker and the aircraft turned hard right to circle back on the contact point.

“Plotted!” The tactical action officer marked the position on his tactical display scope with a large V symbol.

The helo raced in on the contact as the Orion circled back.

“Madman!” its systems operator called out, and the helo dropped its own smoke bomb, slightly south and west of the Orion’s.

The data was now being relayed to the frigate’s torpedo-tube and ASROC attack directors. Neither had anything like the range to engage the target, but that could change quickly.

“Patience,” Morris breathed from his chair in the CIC, then louder: “Take your time, people. Let’s lock this guy in before we fire.”

The Orion’s tactical coordinator agreed, forcing himself to relax and take the time needed. The P-3 and the helicopter made another MAD run north to south. This time the Orion got a reading and the helo did not. Another run, and both had the contact’s course line. Next came an east-to-west run. At first, both missed, but on the second run both had him. The contact was no longer an *it.* Now it was a *he,* a submarine being driven by a man. Control of the operation now passed exclusively to the tactical coordinator on the Orion. The big patrol aircraft orbited two miles away as the helicopter lined up for the final pass. The pilot made a very careful check of his tactical display, then locked his eyes on the gyrocompass.

The helo began the last MAD run, with the Orion two miles behind it.

“Madman, madman, smoke away!” The final smoke marker dropped, a green flare floating on the surface. The Sea Sprite banked hard to the right to clear the area as the Orion came in low. The pilot watched the smoke’s movement to figure wind drift as he lined up on the target. The P-3C’s bomb bay doors opened. A single Mk-46 ASW torpedo was armed for launch.

“Torp away!”

The torpedo dropped cleanly, its braking parachute trailed out of the tail to make sure the weapon entered the water nose down. The Orion also dropped an additional sonobuoy, this time a directional DIFAR.

“Strong signal, bearing one-seven-niner.”

The torpedo dove to two hundred feet before beginning its circular search. Its high-frequency sonar came on as it reached search depth. Things started happening quickly.

The submarine had been oblivious to the activity over her head. She was an old Foxtrot. Too old and too noisy for front-line operations, she was there nonetheless, hoping to catch up with the convoy reported to her south. Her sonar operator had noted and reported a possible overhead splash, but the captain was busy plotting the position of the convoy he had been ordered to

approach. The torpedo's homing sonar changed that. Instantly, the Foxtrot went to flank speed, turning hard to the left in a pre-planned evasion maneuver. The suddenly increased noise of her cavitating screws was discernible to several sonobuoys and *Pharris's* tactical sonar.

The torpedo was in ping-and-listen mode, using both active and passive sonar to find its target. As it completed its first circle, the passive receptors in the nose heard the cavitation noises of the submarine and homed in on them. Soon the active sonar pings were reflecting off the submarine's stern as it dodged left and right trying to get away. The torpedo automatically went to continuous pinging, increasing to maximum speed as it homed in on its target like the remorseless robot it was.

The sonar operators on the aircraft and the frigate had the best picture of what was happening. As they watched, the bearing lines of the submarine and torpedo began to converge. At fifteen knots, the Foxtrot was too slow to run away from the forty-knot torpedo. The submarine began a radical series of turns with the torpedo in pursuit. The Mk-46 missed its first attempt for a kill by twenty feet, and immediately turned for another try. Then the submarine's captain made a mistake. Instead of continuing his left turn, he reversed it, hoping to confuse the oncoming torpedo. He ran directly into its path . . .

Immediately overhead, the helicopter crew saw the water appear to leap, then froth, as the shock wave of the explosion reached the surface.

"We have warhead detonation," the pilot reported. A moment later his systems operator dropped a passive buoy. The sound came into them in less than a minute.

The Foxtrot was dying. They heard the sounds of air blowing into her ballast tanks and continued flank power from her electric motors, her propellers struggling to overcome the weight of water entering the hull and drive the wounded submarine to the surface. Suddenly the engine sounds stopped. Two minutes later, they heard the metallic scream of internal bulkheads being torn asunder by water pressure as the submarine fell below crush depth.

"This is Bluebird. We score that one as a kill. Can you confirm, over?"

"Roger, Bluebird," the ASW officer answered. "We copied blowing air and breakup noises. We confirm your kill." The crewmen cheered, forgetting the decorum that went with duty in CIC.

"All right! That's one less to worry about. We'll give you a big assist on that one, *Pharris.* Nice job from your sonar folks and the helo. Out." The Orion increased power and returned to her patrol station forward of the convoy.

"Assist, hell!" snorted the ASW officer. "That was our contact. We could have dropped the torp on him just as easy as he did." Morris punched him in the shoulder and went up the ladder to the pilothouse.

The bridge crew was all grins. Soon the bosun's mate would paint half of a red submarine silhouette next to the pilothouse door. It had not struck them yet that they had just helped in the killing of a hundred young men not at all unlike themselves, their lives cut short by the hammering pressure of the North Atlantic.

"What's that?" called a lookout. "Possible explosion on the starboard beam!"

Morris grabbed his binoculars and raced out the open door. The lookout

pointed.

A column of black smoke was reaching into the sky from the direction of the convoy. Someone else had just gotten his first kill.

USS *NIMITZ*

Toland had never seen so many welding torches operating. Under the supervision of the executive officer and three damage-control experts, crewmen were using acetylene torches to cut away the damaged portions of *Nimitz's* flight deck and its supporting steel beams. What had been bad enough became worse on more thorough examination. Six of the enormous frames under the flight deck had been wrecked, and the damage extended two decks below that. A third of the hangar deck was burned out. Most of the plane-fueling network and all of the ordnance elevators had to be repaired. CIC was gone, and with it all of the computers and communications needed to fight the ship. The arrester wire systems would have to be fully replaced. The main search radar was gone. The list went on.

Tugs were pushing the wounded carrier into Southampton's Ocean Dock, a task made doubly hard because of the ship's induced ten-degree list. Water cascaded from the carrier's clifflike hull into the harbor while more entered the bilges below. Already a senior Royal Navy repair expert and the chief of the Vesper Ship Repair Yard were aboard, reviewing the damage below and cataloging the material needed to enable the ship to operate again. Captain Svenson watched the messenger lines being shot off to handlers who would secure the ship. He was an angry man, Toland noted. Five hundred of his men known dead, another three hundred wounded, and the count was nowhere near complete. The most grievous losses were in the flight deck crews, many of whose shelters had been immolated by the two Soviet missiles. They would also have to be replaced before *Nimitz* could sail and fight again.

"Toland, you'll be heading to Scotland."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"The air wing is being split. The fighters and Hawkeyes are going north. Ivan's been pounding on the Brits' northern radar line, and their fighters have taken a beating trying to help the Norwegians out. The Tomcats are already on the way, and we'll be loading their missiles onto the dock so the Brits can fly them north. I want you to operate with the fighter teams to evaluate what Ivan's up to with his Badgers, and maybe help our guys to cull off some of the bastards. The attack birds are joining the NATO tactical air reserve for the present."

"When do I leave?" Toland reflected that he had nothing to pack. The Kingfish had taken care of that, too. His first order of business was to cable his family that he was all right.

ICELAND

"Doghouse, this is Beagle, and what the hell just happened, over?"

"Beagle, I am authorized to tell you that an attack was just made against Keflavik."

"No kidding, guy. A B-52 just crashed right on our Goddamned hill. Didn't you tell anybody that I reported fighters?"

"Your information was evaluated as unconfirmed and was not passed on, Beagle. I did not concur in that. Continue your report."

"I saw four, repeat four, Soviet single-seat aircraft with a twin-rudder configuration. I can't be sure of the type, but they had double tails, you copy that?"

"Twin rudders, copy that. Confirm you saw four."

"One-two-three-four, Doghouse. I can't arrange them to parade overhead. But if you send bombers in here unescorted again, mister, don't blame me."

"Any survivors from the crash you saw?"

"Negative. No 'chutes, and no way anyone would have survived the crash. Saw one fireball on the horizon, but I'm not sure what that was. How did the Weasels do?"

"Can't say, Beagle, but thanks for the word on the SAMs."

"You have instructions for me?"

"Your status is being reevaluated now. We'll be back on the hour."

"Make it two, fella. We have to move some before the bad guys send a patrol this way. Out." The Marines were around him, weapons ready, alert for the patrol or helicopter, or both, that had to be heading their way. Edwards tore off the headset and repacked the radio. "Great, just great," he muttered. "Let's move it, people."

They had already jogged a full kilometer from their former home, heading due east into the uninhabited wasteland that formed this part of the island. Smith kept them on slopes, off the crests and hilltops that could silhouette them against the clearing sky. There was a lake off to their left, with many houses on its western side. They had to be careful here. There was no telling who might note their passing and inform someone of it. They passed under the main power transmission lines at a run, angling south to keep a crest line between them and most of the houses. An hour later, they were in the Holmshraun lava field, an incredible collection of rocks overlooking Highway 1, one of Iceland's two major thoroughfares. There were vehicles on the road heading in both directions. Many of them carried soldiers.

"What are we figuring to do now, sir?" Smith asked pointedly.

"Well, Sarge, we got good concealment here. Hell, a guy fifty yards away would have trouble spotting us in this crap. I say we wait for it to get a little dark tonight and get north of the road. Once we get past that, the population thins out—at least that's what the map says. It ought to be fairly safe once we get away from the population centers."

"What will our friends on the other side of that radio say about that?"

"I guess we better find out." Edwards checked his watch. He was nearly two hours overdue. Doghouse was annoyed with him.

"What kept you off the air?"

"We just moved about eight klicks. Maybe you'd prefer we waited around and counted the Russians picking over the wreckage. Listen up, we're all alone here and that's a little scary, you know?"

"Understood, Beagle. Okay, we got orders for you. You have a map of the area you're in?"

"That's affirm, a one-to-fifty-thousand one."

"Okay, they want you to move to Grafarholt. There's a hill there. You're supposed to find a safe place near there and belly-up for further instructions."

"Hey, Doghouse, before we get any farther, what if Ivan starts playing DF games and tries to track us down from our radio transmissions?"

"Okay, about time you asked that. The radio you got is encrypted UHF, single-sideband. That means it's got thousands of channels, and having him lock into one is not real likely. Second, you have a directional antenna. When you transmit, make sure there's a hill between you and them. UHF is line-of-sight only. So you ought to be safe on that score, too. Happy?"

"It helps."

"How soon can you get to that hill for us?"

Edwards looked at the map. About seven kilometers. A comfortable two-hour walk in peacetime, maybe three or four not so comfortable hours, given the terrain here. They'd have to wait for darkness, detour around a few villages . . . and there was that one other little thing to be concerned about . . . "Twelve hours, minimum."

"Roger, understood, Beagle. Copy twelve hours. That's fine. We'll be calling for you then. Anything else to report?"

"Some activity on the road below us. Several trucks, Army-type, painted green. A lot of personal vehicles, four-by-fours. No armored stuff, though."

"Okay. Take your time and play it safe. Your mission is to avoid contact and report. We'll be here if you need us. Out."

At Doghouse in northern Scotland, the communications officer leaned back in his swivel chair.

"The lad sounds somewhat rattled," an intelligence officer commented over his tea.

"Not quite SAS material, is he?" another asked.

"Let's not be too hasty," said a third. "He's bright, something of an athlete, and he had the presence of mind to escape when events called for it. Seems a bit high-strung, but given his position that's understandable, I think."

The first pointed on the map. "Twelve hours to go this little distance?"

"Across hilly, open terrain, with a whole bloody division of paras running about in lorries and BMPs, *and* with a sun that never sets, what the hell do you expect of four men?" demanded the fourth, a man dressed in civilian clothes who had been gravely wounded while in the 22nd SAS Regiment. "If that lad had any sense, he'd have packed it in yesterday. Interesting psychological profile here. If he manages to get to this hill on time for us, I think he'll do all right."

USS *PHARRIS*

The convoy had scattered. Toland looked at the radar display, an expanding ring of ships, now beginning to turn back east to reassemble. One merchantman had been sunk, another badly damaged and limping west. Three frigates were trying to locate the submarine that had done the damage. *Gallery* had gotten a possible contact and fired a torpedo at it, without result. Four helicopters were dropping sonobuoys in hope of reacquiring it, and a half-dozen sonars were pinging away, but so far it looked as though the submarine had evaded the angry escorts.

"That was a beautiful approach," the tactical action officer observed grudgingly. "His only goof was hitting the back end of the convoy."

"His fire control wasn't all that great," Morris said. "They say they had sonar readings on five fish. Figure three targets. Two hits for a kill on one, and a scratch hit on another for damage. The other was a clean miss. Not a bad afternoon's work. What's he doing now, people?"

"How much you want to bet it's an old nuc boat?" TAO asked. "Their fire-control systems aren't up to current standards, and they can't run very fast and still stay covert. He just barely made the intercept, and bit off two ships. When they scattered he didn't have the speed to pursue without advertising his position, and he's too smart for that."

"Then what did he do?" ASW asked.

"He was in close when he launched. Ducked inside the convoy and went deep. Used the noise from the thundering herd to mask himself, then motored off clear . . ."

"North." Morris bent over the display. "Most of the merchies went northeast when the scatter order went out. He probably went north to trail, and maybe hope to get another shot in later. What do you think we're up against?"

"Intel says this area had three Foxtrots and a November, plus maybe another nuc. The one we killed was probably a Fox. Doesn't have the speed to trail the convoy." The ASW officer looked up. "But a November would. We're not up against a new nuc. He'd still be shooting. Call it a November."

"Okay, say he came north at six or seven knots, then turned east hoping to pick us up again tomorrow, say. Where would he be?"

"Right now . . . here, sir," ASW said. He pointed to a spot fifteen miles aft of the frigate. "We can't go back after him."

"No, but we can listen for him if he tries to play catchup." Morris thought hard. The convoy would be altering base course to one-two-zero on the hour to head farther south, away from the suddenly increased threat of Soviet long-range bombers. More time would be needed for them to re-form and establish proper stations. That would allow the submarine to cut the corner and close the target. With all the zigzagging the merchies were doing, their effective speed of advance was only about sixteen knots, and a November might try to catch up with that. "I want the operators to pay particular attention to this sector. Our friend just might be back."

"Call in a P-3?" TAO wondered.

Morris shook his head. "They want to keep station forward. The main threat is still ahead of us. Us 'cans have to worry about the trailers, until we get a hot contact, anyway. I think this guy will trail, and he might try and get off a contact report."

KIEV, THE UKRAINE

"Good news," the naval officer said. "Our bombers report sinking three aviation ships, two cruisers, and two destroyers."

Alekseyev and his boss exchanged a look: their colleagues in blue would be insufferable now.

"How firm is that evaluation?" CINC-Southwest asked.

"There were four carrier-type ships photographed before the attack. The next satellite pass eight hours after the attack showed only one. Two cruisers and two destroyers were also missing. Finally we have intelligence reports of numerous carrier-type aircraft landing at French naval air bases in Brittany. Our submarines were unable to make contact with the formation—it would seem that one was sunk, unfortunately, but our first naval air battle was a smashing success. We will close the Atlantic for you, Comrades," the captain predicted.

"We may need it closed," Alekseyev said after the captain left.

His boss grunted agreement. Things in Germany were not going well. The Soviet Air Force had been hurt even worse than they had feared, and as a result the land campaign was already far behind schedule. On the second day of the war, the first day's objectives had been met in only one army's zone, and that one was being heavily counterattacked twenty kilometers east of Hamburg. Tank losses had been 50 percent higher than predicted, and control of the air was in jeopardy, with many units reporting heavier-than-expected air attacks. Only half of the Elbe bridges had been replaced as yet, and the floating ribbon bridges could not carry all the load of the highway bridges they replaced. The NATO armies had not yet reached their peak strength. American reinforcements were still arriving by air, mating up with their pre-positioned equipment. The Soviet first echelon was being bled, and the second echelon was still largely trapped behind the Elbe.

ICELAND

"About as dark as it's gonna get," Edwards said. The light level was what meteorologists and sailors called nautical twilight. Visibility was down to five hundred yards with the sun just below the northwest horizon. The lieutenant put on his pack and rose. His Marines did the same, with as much enthusiasm as a child on his way to school.

They headed down the shallow slope toward the Sudura River, more a fair-sized creek, Edwards thought. The lava field provided good cover. The ground was littered with rocks, some as much as three feet high, a landscape that broke up shapes and disguised movement to the casual observer. He hoped

there was nothing more than that out there. They had observed a number of Soviet patrols, mainly on military trucks that passed through the area at intervals of about thirty minutes. They saw no fixed positions. Certainly they had garrisoned the hydroelectric power station at Burfell, farther east on Route 1. No one had bombed that yet: the lights were still bright in some of the homes below them.

The rocks got smaller as the land changed to a grassy meadow. There had been sheep here recently—the smell was unmistakable and the grass was short. Instinctively the men walked in a crouch toward a gravel road. The houses and barns here were spread irregularly. They picked a spot where the space between buildings was about five hundred yards, hoping that the dim light and their camouflage uniforms would make them invisible to any observer. No one was about in the open. Edwards halted his group and looked carefully through his binoculars at the nearest houses. Lights burned in some, but no people were visible outside. Perhaps the Russians had imposed a curfew . . . meaning that anyone seen moving might be shot on sight. Happy thought.

The riverbanks sloped downward sharply about twenty feet to the water, and were covered with rocks smoothed by years of erosion at high-water time. Smith went down first as the others lay with weapons ready at the lip of the south bank. The sergeant moved slowly at first, checking the water depth before hurrying across, rifle held high in the air. Edwards was surprised how quickly he went through it, then up the far bank. The sergeant waved, and the rest of the men followed. Edwards soon found out why the sergeant had crossed the stream quickly. The waist-deep water was icy cold, like most of the streams on Iceland, fed by melting glaciers. He gasped and went across as fast as he could, his rifle and radio held above his head. A minute later he was atop the far bank.

Smith chuckled in the dark. “I guess that woke everybody up.”

“Like to froze my balls off, Sarge,” Rodgers groused.

“Looks clear ahead,” Edwards said. “Beyond this meadow is another creek, then the main road, a secondary road, then up a hill into a lava field. Let’s keep moving.”

“Right, Lieutenant.” Smith got to his feet and moved off. The others trailed behind him at five-yard intervals. *The little bastard’s in a hurry, isn’t he?*

The ground here was agreeably flat, the grass as high as their boot tops. They moved rapidly, keeping low, weapons held ready across their chests as they angled slightly east to avoid the village of Holmur. The next stream was shallower than the Sudura, though no less cold. They stopped on crossing it, now only two hundred yards from the highway. Again Smith moved off first, this time with his back bent double, moving in rushes followed by pauses while he knelt to examine the terrain repeatedly. The men behind him matched his movements exactly, and the team got together again in tall grass fifty feet from the road.

“Okay,” Smith said. “We cross one at a time, a minute apart. I go first. I’ll stop fifty feet on the other side by those rocks. When you cross, don’t screw around—run and keep low, and come to me. If you see something coming, get as far from the road as you can and drop. They can’t see you if you lay still,

people. Take things real easy. Okay?" Everyone, Edwards included, nodded agreement.

The sergeant was as good as his word. After a final look to be sure that nothing was moving in their direction, he raced off across the road, his personal gear flopping and slapping against his body as he did so. They waited a minute, then Garcia followed. After another minute, Rodgers went. Edwards counted to sixty and darted forward. The lieutenant was amazed—and appalled—at how stressful this was. His heart pounded with terror as he reached the roadway, and he froze dead in the center. Automobile lights were approaching them from the north. Edwards just stood there, watching them come closer—

"Move your ass, Lieutenant!" the sergeant's voice rasped at him.

The lieutenant shook his head clear and ran to the sound of the sergeant's voice, one hand holding his helmet in place on his head.

"Lights coming down!" he gasped.

"No shit. Be cool, sir. People, let's get spread out. Find some good cover and freeze. And make Goddamned sure those weapons are on *safe!* You stay with me, sir."

The two privates moved left and right into tall weeds, disappearing from view as soon as they stopped moving. Edwards lay next to Sergeant Smith.

"You think they saw me?"

The darkness prevented him from seeing the angry expression accompanying Smith's reply: "Prob'ly not. Don't freeze in the road like that again, sir."

"I won't. Sorry, Sarge, this isn't exactly my thing."

"Just listen and learn what we tell ya', okay?" Smith whispered. "We're Marines. We'll take good care of you."

The lights approached slowly, proceeding down the steep grade to their north. The driver didn't trust the loose gravel surface. The north-south road split here, forking left and right to Route 1. It had to be a military truck, they saw. The lights were rectangular, taped slips over headlights installed at the Soviets' massive Kama River factory, built largely with Western aid. The truck stopped.

Edwards did not allow himself to react, except that his grip tightened on the plastic stock of his rifle. What if someone had seen them cross the road and telephoned the Russians? Smith's hand reached out and pushed the lieutenant's rifle down.

"Let's be careful with that, Lieutenant," Smith whispered.

The ten men in the truck dismounted and spread into the grass off the road, perhaps fifty yards away. Edwards couldn't tell if they carried weapons or not. Each man stopped, and almost in unison they unbuttoned their flies to urinate. Edwards gawked and nearly laughed. Finished, they moved back to the truck, which started up and proceeded west on the fork to the main road, motoring off with the sound on a poorly muffled diesel engine. The Marines reformed as the truck's taillights dipped under the horizon.

"Too bad." Rodgers smiled in the semidarkness. "I coulda blow'd one guy's pecker right off!"

"You done good, people," Smith said. "Ready to move out, Lieutenant?"

"Yeah." Shamed by his performance, the lieutenant let Smith lead them off. They crossed the gravel road and a hundred yards later were in yet another lava field, climbing over rocks into the wasteland. Their wet fatigue pants clung to their legs, drying slowly in the cool westerly breeze.

USS *PHARRIS*

"Our friend the November doesn't have an anechoic coating," ASW said quietly, pointing to the display. "I think that's him, running to catch up with the convoy."

"We have this trace plotted at about forty-six thousand yards," the tactical action officer said.

"Get the helo up," Morris ordered.

Five minutes later, *Pharris's* helicopter was running southwest at full speed, and Bluebird-Seven, another P-3C Orion, was closing on the datum point from the east. Both aircraft flew low, hoping to surprise the submarine that had killed one of their flock and gravely damaged another. The Russian had probably made a mistake by increasing his speed. Maybe he had orders to trail the convoy and radio data for other submarines to use. Maybe he wanted to catch up to make another attack. Whatever the reason, his reactor pumps were running and making noise that his hull could not contain. His periscope was up, and that gave the aircraft a chance to spot him with their look-down radars. The helo was closer, and its pilot was communicating with the tactical coordinator of the Orion. This could be a textbook attack if things worked out right.

"Okay, Bluebird, we are now three miles from datum center. Say your position."

"We're two miles behind you, Papa-One-Six. Illuminate!"

The systems operator flipped the cover off the radar switch and moved it from Standby to Active. Instantly, energy began to radiate from the radar transmitter slung under the helicopter's nose.

"Contact, we have a radar contact bearing one-six-five, range eleven hundred yards!"

"Stream the MAD gear!" The pilot advanced his throttles to race toward the contact.

"We got him, too," the Tacco called swiftly. The petty officer beside him armed a torpedo, setting its initial search depth for a hundred feet.

The helicopter's anticollision lights came on, the red lights flashing in the darkness. No sense in hiding their approach now. The sub must have detected their radar signals and would now be attempting a crash dive. But that took more time than he had.

"Madman, madman, smoke away!" the systems operator screamed.

The smoke was invisible in the darkness, but the short green flame was an unmissable beacon in the darkness. The helo banked left, clearing the way for the Orion now only five hundred yards behind him.

The P-3C's powerful searchlights came on, spotting the telltale wake left by the now-invisible periscope. The MAD contact had been right on, the pilot saw at once. The Orion's bomb doors swung open and the torpedo dropped toward the black waters along with a sonobuoy.

"Positive sonar contact, evaluate as submarine!" a sonar-board operator said over the intercom. The tone lines displayed on his screen were exactly what a November at high speed looked like, and the torpedo chasing her was already on continuous pinging. "Torpedo is closing the target rapidly . . . Looks good, Tacco, closing . . . closing—*impact!*" The torpedo's sound tracing merged with that of the submarine, and a brilliant splotch appeared in the waterfall display. The Orion's operator switched the sonobuoy from active to passive, recording the recurring rumbles of the torpedo warhead explosion. The submarine's screw sounds stopped, and again he heard the sound of blowing air that quickly stopped as the submarine began her last dive.

"That's a kill, that's a kill!" exulted the Tacco.

"Confirm the kill," Morris said over the radio. "Nice job, Bluebird. That was a real quick-draw!"

"Roger, copy, *Pharris.* Thank you, sir! Beautiful job with the helo and the detection, guy. You just got another assist. Hell, we might just orbit you for a while, Captain, looks like you got all the action. Out."

Morris walked to the corner and poured himself a cup of coffee. So, they had just helped to kill a pair of Soviet submarines.

The TAO was less enthusiastic. "We got a noisy old Foxtrot and a November who did something dumb. You suppose he had orders to trail and report, and that's why we got him?"

"Maybe," Morris nodded. "If Ivan's making his skippers do things like that—well, they like central control, but that can change if they find out it's costing them boats. We learned that lesson ourselves once."

USS *CHICAGO*

McCafferty had his own contact. They had been tracking it for over an hour now, the sonar operators struggling to discern random noise from discrete signal on their visual displays. Their data was passed to the fire-control tracking party, four men hovering over the chart table in the after corner of the attack center.

Already the crew was whispering, McCafferty knew. First the yard fire before they were commissioned. Then being pulled out of the Barents Sea at the wrong time. Then being attacked by a friendly aircraft . . . was *Chicago* an unlucky boat? they wondered. The chiefs and officers would work to dispel that thought, but the chiefs and officers held it, too, since all sailors believed in luck, an institutional faith among submariners. *If you're not lucky, we can't* use you, a famous submarine admiral once said. McCafferty had heard that story often enough. He had so far been devoid of luck.

The captain moved back to the chart table. "What's happening?"

"Not much in the way of a bearing change. He has to be way out there, skipper, like the third convergence zone. Maybe eighty miles. He can't be closing us. We would have lost the signal as he passed out of the zone." The executive officer was showing the strain of the past week's operations, too. "Captain, if I had to guess, I'd say we're tracking a nuclear sub. Probably a noisy one. Acoustical conditions are pretty good, so we have three CZs to play with. And I'd bet he is doing the same thing we are, patrolling a set position. Hell, he could be running back and forth on a racetrack pattern, same as us. That would account for the minimal bearing changes."

The captain frowned. This was the only real contact he'd had since the war started. He was close to the northern border of his patrol area, and the target was probably just on the other side of it. Going after it meant leaving the bulk of his assigned sector unprotected . . .

"Let's go after him," McCafferty ordered. "Left ten degrees rudder, come left to new course three-five-one. All ahead two thirds."

Chicago rapidly turned to a northerly heading, accelerating to fifteen knots, her maximum "silent" speed. At fifteen knots the submarine radiated only a small amount of noise. The risk of counterdetection was slight, since even at this speed her sonars could detect a target five to ten miles off. Her four tubes were loaded with a pair of Mk-48 torpedoes and two Harpoon antiship missiles. If the target was a submarine or a surface ship, *Chicago* could handle it.

GRAFARHOLT, ICELAND

"You're early, Beagle," Doghouse replied.

Edwards was sitting between two rocks and leaning back against a third, the antenna resting on his knee. He hoped it was pointing in a safe direction. The Russians, he figured, were strung mostly along the coast from Keflavik to Reykjavik, well to the west of the direction to the satellite. But there were houses and factories below him, and if they had a listening post down there . . .

"We had to get here before it got too light," the lieutenant explained. They had run the last kilometer with the rising sun behind them. Edwards took some small comfort in the fact that the Marines were puffing harder than he was.

"How secure are you?"

"There is some movement on the road below us, but that's a good ways off, maybe a mile."

"Okay, you see the electrical switching station southwest of you?"

Edwards got out his binoculars with one hand to check. The map called the place Artun. It held the main electrical transformers for the power grid on this part of the island. The high-voltage lines came in from the east, and the feeder cables radiated out from this point.

"Yeah, I see it."

“How are things going, Beagle?”

Edwards almost said they were going great, but stopped himself. “Lousy. Things are going lousy.”

“Roger that, Beagle. You keep an eye on that power station. Anything around it?”

“Stand by.” Edwards set down the antenna and gave the place a closer look. Aha! “Okay, I got one armored vehicle, just visible around the corner on the west side. Three—no, four armed men are in the open. Nothing else that I can see.”

“Very good, Beagle. Now you keep watch on that place. Let us know if any SAMs show up. We also want data if you see any more fighters. Start keeping records of how many trucks and troops you see, where they’re heading. Be sure to write things down. Got that?”

“Okay. We write it all down and report in.”

“Good. You’re doing all right, Beagle. Your orders are to observe and report,” Doghouse reminded them. “Avoid contact. If you see enemy troops heading in your direction, bug out. Don’t worry about calling in, just bug the hell out and report when you can. Now get off the air for a while.”

“Roger that. Out.” Edwards repacked the radio. It was getting so that he could do it with his eyes closed.

“What gives, Lieutenant?” Smith asked.

The lieutenant grunted. “We sit tight and watch that electrical place off that way.”

“You s’pose they want us to turn some lights off?”

“There’s too many troops down there, Sarge,” Edwards replied. He stretched and opened his canteen. Garcia was on guard atop the knoll to his right, and Rodgers was asleep. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Well, if you got peanut butter and crackers, I’ll trade you my peaches for it.”

Edwards ripped open the C-Ration container and inspected the contents. “Deal.”

22

Ripostes

USS *CHICAGO*

The submarine slowed to reacquire the target. She'd run deep at fifteen knots for over an hour, and now reduced speed and came up to five hundred feet, right in the middle of the deep sound channel. McCafferty ordered an easterly course, which allowed the towed-array sonar—his "tail"—to bear on the supposed target to the north. It took several minutes before the array was straight and aligned in the proper direction so that the sonar operators could begin their work in earnest. Slowly the data came up on their displays, and a senior petty officer plugged in a set of headphones, hoping for an aural detection. There was nothing to detect. For twenty minutes the screen showed only random noise patterns.

McCafferty examined the paper plot. Their erstwhile contact would now be exactly two convergence zones away and should have been easily detected, given known water conditions. But their screens showed nothing.

"We never did have a classification." The executive officer shrugged. "He's gone."

"Take her up to antenna depth. Let's see what's cooking topside." McCafferty moved back to the periscope pedestal. He could not fail to note the instant tension in the compartment. The last time they'd done this, they'd nearly been sunk. The submarine leveled off at a depth of sixty feet. Sonar did another check and found nothing. The ESM mast went up, and the electronics technician reported only weak signals. The search periscope went up next. McCafferty made a very quick check of the horizon—nothing in the air, nothing on the surface.

"There's a storm to the north, line squall," he said. "Down scope."

The executive officer grumbled an inaudible curse. The noise from the storm would make the normally difficult task of finding a conventional sub motoring along on battery power nearly impossible. It was one thing for them to dart a short distance out of their patrol area with a good chance for a kill. It was another to leave for a whole day looking for something that they might never find. He looked at the captain, waiting for the decision to be made.

"Secure from general quarters," McCafferty said. "XO, take us back to station at ten knots. Keep her deep. I'm going to take a nap. Wake me in two

hours."

The captain walked a few steps forward to his stateroom. The bunk was already folded down, unmade, from the portside bulkhead. Instrument repeaters would show him course and speed, and a TV set could show him whatever the periscope might be looking at, or a taped movie. McCafferty had been awake for about twenty hours now, and the added stress that comes from a combat environment made it feel like a week. He took off his shoes and lay down, but sleep would not come.

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

The colonel ran his hand along the bomber silhouette painted on the side of his fighter. His first combat victory, recorded on his gun cameras. Not since a handful of his comrades had fought in the skies of North Vietnam had a Soviet Air Force pilot won a real air-to-air victory, and this one had been over a nuclear-capable bomber that might otherwise have threatened the homeland.

There were now twenty-five MiG-29 fighters on Iceland, and four of them were aloft at all times to protect the bases as the ground troops tightened their control of the island.

The B-52 raid had hurt them. Their main search radar was slightly damaged, but another was being flown out today, a more modern, mobile unit whose position would be changed twice a day. He wished they had an airborne radar, but learned that losses over Germany had severely limited their availability. The news of the air war there was not good, though the two regiments of MiG-29s were doing well. The colonel checked his watch. In two hours he would be leading a squadron escorting a small force of Backfires that was searching for a convoy.

GRAFARHOLT, ICELAND

"Okay, Doghouse, I can see six fighter aircraft sitting on the runways at Reykjavik. They all got red stars on them. They have twin-rudder configuration and appear to be armed with air-to-air missiles. Two SAM launchers, and some kind of gun—looks like a Gatling gun—mounted on a tracked vehicle."

"That's a Zulu-Sierra-Uniform Three-Zero, Beagle. They're very bad news. We want to know all about those bastards. How many of them?"

"Only one, located on the grassy triangle a few hundred yards west of the terminal building."

"Are the fighters together or dispersed?"

"Dispersed, two on each runway. There's a small van with each pair, plus five or six soldiers. I estimate a hundred troops here, with two armored

vehicles and nine trucks. They're patrolling the airport perimeter, and there are several machine-gun emplacements. The Russians also seem to be using the local short-haul airliners for moving troops around. We've seen soldiers boarding the little twin-prop birds. I've counted four flights today. We have not seen a Russian chopper since yesterday."

"How's Reykjavik city look?" Doghouse asked.

"It's hard to see into the streets. We can look down a valley toward the airport, but we can only see down a few streets. One armored vehicle is visible in there parked, like, at an intersection. Troops are just hanging around, like cops or something at every intersection we can see. If I had to guess, I'd say most of their troops are around Reykjavik and Keflavik. Not many civilians around, and almost no civilian traffic. There's a lot of movement on the main roads, both along the coast to our west, and also east on Route 1. It's all back-and-forth traffic, like they're patrolling. We've counted a total of fifty-some trips, split about even on the two highways. One other thing. We saw some Russians using a civilian vehicle. We haven't seen a jeep yet, except a few of ours on the airport grounds. The Russians have jeeps—their kind, I mean—right? I think they've commandeered the people's four-by-fours. That's practically the national vehicle here, and a lot of them are moving around on the roads."

"Any more incoming transport flights?"

"Five. We have clear skies, and we can watch them going in toward Keflavik. Four were IL-76s, and the other one looked kind of like a C-130. I don't know the designation for that one."

"Are the fighters flying?"

"We saw one take off two hours ago. I'd say they have a patrol up, and have fighters here and Keflavik both. That's a guess, but I'll bet money on it. I'd also say the fighters we're looking at can roll off in less than five minutes. Looks a lot like a hot-pad alert status."

"Okay, copy that, Beagle. How is your situation?"

"We're pretty well concealed, and the sarge has two escape routes scouted. We haven't seen the Russians beat any bushes yet. Mostly they seem to be hanging in populated areas and on the roads. If they start heading this way, we'll be bugging out."

"Exactly right, Beagle. We will probably be ordering you off that hill soon anyway. You're doing good, boy. Hang in there. Out."

SCOTLAND

"The kid's doing all right," the major said. He was in an awkward position—an American officer in a NATO communications post run by Brit intelligence types who were evenly split on Edwards's reliability.

"I'd say he's doing bloody marvelously," nodded the senior Brit. He'd lost an eye, quite some time ago by the look of it, but was still one tough-looking bastard, the major thought. "Notice how he discriminates between what his

observations and opinions are."

"Weather forecaster," snorted another. "We must get some professionals in there. How quickly can we whistle some up?"

"Perhaps by tomorrow. The Navy wants to put them in by submarine, though, and I agree. A bit dicey for a parachute infiltration, you know. Iceland's covered with rocks, the place is made to break ankles and legs. Then there's the Soviet fighters. No hurry on putting troops there, is it? We've got to reduce their air assets first and generally make life as difficult for them as we can."

"That starts tonight," the major said. "Nordic Hammer Phase Two will hit around the local sunset time."

"Hope it works better than Phase One did, old boy."

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

"So how are things going up here?" Toland asked his Royal Air Force counterpart. Right before boarding the flight he'd sent the telegram to Marty: I'M ALL RIGHT. ON THE BEACH FOR A WHILE. LOVE. He hoped that would reassure her. Probably the news of the carrier battle was already in the papers.

"Could be better. We've lost eight Tornados trying to assist the Norwegians. We're about down to a bare minimum for local defense, and Ivan's begun to attack our northern radar installations. Sorry about what happened to your aircraft carrier, but I must say we're very happy indeed to have you chaps with us for a bit."

Nimitz's interceptors and radar birds were split among three RAF bases. The maintenance crews were still arriving by transport aircraft, and some hitch had developed with the missiles, but the F-14s each carried a full load for one engagement, and they could use RAF Sparrows to reload. Operating off a land base, the fighter could carry a larger load of fuel and ordnance, packing a heavier punch than off a ship. The fighter crews were in a foul humor. Having used their aircraft and precious missiles to kill drones, they had returned to the formation to see the fearful results of the mistake. The total loss of life was still uncertain, but scarcely two hundred men had escaped from *Saipan,* and only a thousand from *Foch.* In terms of casualties this had been the bloodiest defeat in the history of the United States Navy, with thousands of men gone and not a single kill to offset the losses. Only the French had scored against the Backfires, succeeding with twenty-year-old Crusaders where the vaunted Tomcats had failed.

Toland sat in on their first briefing, conducted by the RAF. The fighter pilots were absolutely silent. He had trouble gauging their mood. No jokes. No whispered remarks. No smiles. They knew that the error had not been theirs, that it was not their fault at all, but that didn't seem to matter. They were shaken by what had happened to their ship.

As was he. Toland's mind kept coming back to the image of the four-inch-thick flight deck steel bent into the sky like cellophane, a blackened cavern

below it where the hangar deck used to be. The rows of bags—crewmen who had died aboard the world's most powerful warship . . .

"Commander Toland?" An airman tapped him on the shoulder. "Would you come with me, please?" The two men walked to the operations room. Bob noted instantly that a new raid was being plotted. The operations officer, a flight lieutenant, motioned for Toland to join him.

"One regiment, perhaps less. One of your EP-3s is snooping up there and caught their radio chatter while they were refueling north of Iceland. They'll be going for one of these convoys, we think."

"You want the Tomcats to ambush them on the way home? The timing's going to be tricky."

"Extremely. Another complication. They will use Iceland as a navigational check and a secure assembly point. We know Ivan has fighters there, and now it's reported that he has fighters operating from these two airfields on Iceland."

"Is the source for this something called Beagle?"

"Ah, you've heard about that one. Yes."

"What kind of fighters?"

"Twin tails, is what your chap reported. Could be MiG-25s, -29s, or -31s."

"Fulcrums," Toland said. "The others are interceptors. Didn't the B-52s get a look at them?" The briefing he'd just left had gone over the Air Force mission against Keflavik. More good news to cheer the troops up.

"Evidently not a good one, and superficially they are quite similar. I agree they're probably Fulcrums, and the sensible thing for Ivan to do is have the fighters establish a safe corridor for his bombers."

"They might have to tank coming back . . . go for the tankers?"

"We've thought of that. But they have a million square miles of ocean to use." The area on the chart was obvious. "The timing for that will be damned near impossible, but we think it would be worth the effort some time in the future. For the moment our primary concern is air defense. After that, we think Ivan may be planning an amphibious operation for Norway. If his surface fleet sorties, it's our job to hammer it."

USS *PHARRIS*

"Raid warning, skipper," the executive officer said. "There's about twenty-five Backfires downbound, target unknown."

"Well, they won't be going after the carrier group, not with twenty-five aircraft now that they're under NATO fighter cover. Where are they now?"

"Probably over Iceland. Three to five hours off. We're not the biggest convoy in range, but we are the most exposed."

"On the other hand, if they go for all those independents out there, they can hunt undefended ships in open ocean. But I wouldn't. Our ships are carrying war materiel . . ." The convoy had only five SAM-equipped ships. A ripe target.

GRAFARHOLT, ICELAND

"Contrails, Doghouse, we have contrails overhead, looks like twenty or so. Passing overhead right now."

"Can you get an ID?"

"Negative. Large aircraft with no engines visible on the wings, but I can't be sure of the type. They're pretty high, heading south. Can't gauge the speed, either—no sonic booms, though if they were busting Mach 1, we should have heard it by now."

"Repeat your count," Doghouse ordered.

"I count twenty-one sets of contrails, two-one sets, heading about one-eight-zero. All the fighters at Reykjavik lifted off and went north about thirty minutes before they passed overhead. They still haven't landed back here yet, but we do not know where they are. The bombers do not appear to be escorted. Nothing else new to report."

"Roger, Beagle. Let us know when the fighters land. Might be nice to get a feel for their cycle time. Out." The major turned to his sergeant. "Get that one out on the printer right now. Confirm the one-regiment Backfire raid downbound, over Reykjavik right now, estimated course one-eight-zero. Possibly with fighter escort . . . yeah, better put that in, too."

The NATO communications center was about the only thing working as planned. The communications satellites in their as-yet unreachable orbits over the equator were supplying information to units all over the world, and here in Scotland was one of the main "nodes," military parlance for a high-tech telephone exchange.

USS *PHARRIS*

A good day for contrails, Morris saw. Just the right mixture of temperature and humidity at high altitude, it would cause condensation in the hot exhaust from aircraft engines. They could see the tracks of air traffic crossing the Atlantic. The big twenty-power binoculars usually kept on the bridge wings for surface lookout work had been moved to the flying bridge atop the forward superstructure, and his lookouts were using them to identify the aircraft. They were mainly looking for Bears, the Soviet search aircraft that scouted targets for the Backfires.

Everyone was tense, and no relief was in sight. The submarine threat was bad enough, but with the carrier group savaged the day before, the convoy was virtually naked to air attack. They were too far at sea for any hope of land-based fighter protection. *Pharris* had only the most rudimentary air defenses. She could barely protect herself and was of no use whatever to

anyone else. The ships equipped with surface-to-air missiles were now assembling in line on the north side of the convoy, twenty miles south of the frigate, while *Pharris* continued her antisubmarine search. All the frigate could do was keep watch on her threat-warning instruments and radio any data developed. They were sure that Ivan would be using his own Big Bulge search radars aboard the Bears to locate and classify the target. The convoy commander's plan was to use the SAM-ships as an additional row of targets, formed up just like the merchantmen. With luck, an especially curious Bear might mistake them for unarmed ships and be lured in for a visual search. A long shot, it was the only card they had to play . . .

"Contact! We have a Big Bulge radar bearing zero-zero-nine. Signal strength is low."

"Miss us, you bastard," the tactical action officer breathed.

"Not much chance of that," Morris said. "Get the data to the escort commander."

The Bear was on a southerly heading, using its radar only two minutes out of every ten as it approached the convoy. Soon another was detected slightly to the west. Plotting teams estimated their positions, and a report was sent via satellite to CINCLANTFLT in Norfolk with an urgent request for assistance. Norfolk receipted their message; ten minutes later they learned that no help was available.

Pharris manned her gun mount. The point-defense missile system and Gatling gun radar aft were switched to standby. Other radar was kept off. The radar operators in the combat information center sat nervously at their posts, fingering their switches while listening to the ESM reports and stealing an occasional look at the plot.

"Both of them probably have us now."

Morris nodded. "Next come the Backfires."

The captain thought of the battles he had studied at the naval academy—early in World War II, when the Japanese fleet had had air superiority, or when the Germans had used long-range Condors to circle convoys, radioing their positions to any interested party, and not a thing the Allies back then could do about. He'd never expected to be in the same fix. The same tactical situation repeating itself after forty years? It was absurd, Morris told himself. Absurd and terrifying.

"We have a visual sight on a Bear, just over the horizon at two-eight-zero," the talker said.

"Director, use your optics to track the target aft," the tactical action officer said at once. He looked over to Morris. "Maybe he'll fly close enough for a shot."

"Don't light off any radars just yet. He might just wander into somebody's missile envelope if he's not careful."

"No way he'll be that dumb."

"He will try to evaluate the convoy defenses," Morris said quietly. "He can't have them visually yet, not quite yet. Then for a while all he'll be able to see is bumps with wakes behind them. Not easy to identify a ship from an airplane, mister. Let's see just how curious this guy is . . ."

"Aircraft just changed course," the talker reported. "Turning east toward

us."

"Air action starboard! Right standard rudder. All ahead full! Come to new course one-eight-zero," Morris ordered immediately. He turned south to lure the Bear closer to the SAM ships. "Illuminate the target. Weapons free! Engage when he gets within range."

Pharris heeled hard to the left as she changed course. Forward, the five-inch gun mount rotated clockwise as the ship brought her stern across the target bearing. As soon as the gun mount was unmasked, fire-control radars gave it a target solution, and the long-barrel gun elevated to thirty degrees and locked on the target. The point-defense missile mount on the fantail did the same.

"Target is at thirty thousand feet, range fifteen miles and closing."

The escort commander still had not authorized a missile launch. Better to have Ivan shoot his missiles first, before he knew what lay in his path. Data from the carrier battle was already out to the fleet. The big Russian air-to-surface missiles were not especially hard targets to hit, since they ran straight for their targets, though you did have to react in a hurry: they were mighty fast. He figured that the Bear was still doing a target evaluation and did not yet know the strength of the escort force. The longer he was kept in the dark, the better, because the Backfires would not have much time to loiter this far from their bases. And if the Bear came in just a little closer . . .

"Commence firing!" the TAO shouted.

Pharris's gun mount went to full-automatic mode, firing a round every two seconds. The Bear was barely within range of her gun, and there was scant chance of a kill, but it was time to give him something to worry about.

The first five rounds fell short, exploding harmlessly a mile from the Bear, but the next three came closer, one exploding only two hundred yards from his left wing. The Soviet pilot instinctively turned right to evade. That was a mistake. He didn't know that the nearest row of "merchantmen" carried missiles.

Seconds later, two missiles launched and the Bear immediately dove to evade, a shower of chaff in her wake as she headed right for *Pharris,* which gave the frigate's gun crew another chance to score a kill. They fired off twenty new rounds as the plane approached. Perhaps two were close enough to damage the bomber, but there was no visible result. The missiles came in next, tiny white darts trailing columns of gray smoke. One missed and detonated in the chaff cloud, but the second detonated a hundred yards away from the bomber. The warhead expanded explosively like a watchspring, breaking into thousands of fragments, and several ripped into the Bear's port wing. The massive propjet lost power in one engine and suffered major wing damage before the pilot regained control just outside *Pharris's* gun range. She headed off north, trailing smoke.

The other Bear remained discreetly out of everyone's range. The raid commander had just learned a lesson that he'd pass on to his regimental intelligence officer.

"More radars coming on. Down Beats!" warned the ESM technician. "I count ten—count is increasing. Fourteen—eighteen!" the air-search radar operator sang out next.

"Radar contacts, bearing zero-three-four, range one-eight-zero miles. I count

four targets, now five—six targets. Course two-one-zero, speed six hundred knots."

"Here come the Backfires," TAO said.

"Radar contact!" came the next call. "Vampire! Vampire! We have inbound missiles."

Morris cringed inwardly. The escorts all switched on their radar transmitters. Missiles trained out on the incoming targets. But Pharris was not part of that game. Morris ordered his ship to flank speed, turning north to race away from the missiles' probable target area.

"The Backfires are turning back. The Bear is holding position. We have some radio chatter. Now twenty-three inbound missiles. Bearing changing on all contacts," TAO said. "They're all headed for the convoy. Looks like we're in the clear."

Morris could hear the crew in the Combat Information Center take one deep collective breath. He watched the radar display with marginal relief. The missiles were streaking in from the northeast, and the SAMs were coming up to meet them. The convoy was again ordered to scatter, the merchantmen racing away from the center of the target. What followed had an eerie resemblance to an arcade game. Of the twenty-three Soviet-launched missiles, nine broke through the SAMs and dove into the convoy. They hit seven merchantmen.

All seven were lost. Some disintegrated at once under the hammering impact of the thousand-kilogram warheads. The others lingered long enough for their crews to escape with their lives. The convoy had left the Delaware with thirty ships. Only twenty were left, and there was almost fifteen hundred miles of open ocean between them and Europe.

GRAFARHOLT, ICELAND

Two Backfires ran short of fuel and decided to land at Keflavik. Behind them was the damaged Bear. It circled Reykjavik waiting for the Backfires to clear the runway. Edwards reported it in as a propeller aircraft with a damaged engine. The sun was low over the northwestern horizon, and the Bear gleamed yellow against the cobalt-blue sky.

"Stay on the air, Beagle," Doghouse ordered. Three minutes later, Edwards saw why.

This time there was no standoff jamming to warn the Soviets. Eight FB-111s swept in over the rocks, southwest from the island's rocky center. They skimmed down the bottom of Selja Valley in elements of two, their green and gray camouflage making them almost invisible to the fighters circling overhead. The lead pair turned due west, with another pair half a mile behind it. The remaining four went south around Mt. Hus.

"Holy shit." Smith saw them first, two fast-moving tail fins to the south. Just as Edwards found them, the lead aircraft popped up and launched a pair of TV-guided bombs. The wingman did the same, and both attackers turned

north. The four bombs homed in on the transformer station below them, and all landed within the fence perimeter. As though a single switch had been thrown, every light in view went out. The second pair of Aardvarks roared low over Highway 1, blazing over the rooftops of Reykjavik to line up on their target. The leader lofted his own smart-bombs, and his wingman broke left for the airport tankfarm on the waterfront. Moments later, the control tower exploded, along with a hangar, and Rockeye cluster-bombs blew the fuel tanks apart. Caught by surprise, the Russian gun and missile crews fired too late.

The defense troops at Keflavik were surprised, too, first by the sudden loss of electrical power, then by the bombers, which arrived only a minute later. Here, too, the control tower and hangars were the primary targets, and most came apart under the impact of two-thousand-pound bombs. The second team found two parked Backfires and a missile-launch vehicle for their Rockeyes to hit, and sprinkled more softball-sized bomblets over the runways and taxiways. Meanwhile, the FB-111s continued west on afterburner, with gunfire and missiles chasing them—and fighters. Six Fulcrums dove for the retreating Varks, whose protective jammers filled the sky with electronic noise.

Free of their ordnance loads, the American bombers blazed away at seven hundred knots, a scant hundred feet over the wavetops, but the Soviet fighter commander would not turn away from this one. He'd seen what they had done to Keflavik, and he was furious at having been caught unaware despite having his fighters aloft. The Fulcrums had a slight speed advantage and closed the gap slowly. They were over a hundred miles offshore when their missile radars burned through the Americans' jamming. Two fighters immediately launched missiles, and the American aircraft jinked up, then down to lose them. One FB-111 took a hit and cartwheeled into the sea, and the Soviets were preparing a second volley when their threat receivers came on.

Four American Phantoms were waiting in ambush for them. In a moment eight Sparrow missiles were diving toward the Fulcrums. Now it was time for the Soviets to run. The MiG-29s wheeled and ran back for Iceland on afterburner. One was felled by a missile, and another damaged. The battle had lasted all of five minutes.

"Doghouse, this is Beagle. The electrical station is *gone!* The Varks knocked it flat, guy. One hell of a fire at the southwest edge of the airport, and looks like the tower got chopped in half. Two hangars look shot up. I see two, maybe three burning aircraft, civilian types. The fighters got off half an hour ago. Damn, that tank farm is burning like a sonuvagun! Lots of people running around on the ground below us." As Edwards watched, a dozen vehicles with headlights blazing ran back and forth over the roads below him. Two stopped a kilometer away and dismounted troops. "Doghouse, I think it's time for us to leave this hill."

"That's a roger, Beagle. Head northeast toward Hill 482. We'll expect to hear from you in ten hours. Get moving, boy! Out."

"Time to leave, sir." Smith tossed the lieutenant his pack and motioned for the privates to move. "Looks like we can score one for the good guys."

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

The MiGs landed on the still undamaged runway one-eight, the base's longest. They had barely stopped rolling when ground crews began the process of turning them around for further combat operations. The colonel was surprised to see the base commander still alive.

"How many did you get, Comrade Colonel?"

"Only one, and they got one of mine. Didn't you get anything on radar?" the colonel demanded.

"Not a thing. They hit Rejkyavik first. Two groups of aircraft, they came in from the north. The bastards must have flown between the rocks," the major snarled. He pointed to the big mobile radar that sat in the open between two runways. "They missed it completely. Amazing."

"We must move it. Someplace high, very high. We'll never get an airborne radar, and unless we improve radar warning, this low-level business will eat us up. Find a good hilltop. How badly are our facilities damaged?"

"Many small holes in the runways from these bomblets. We'll have them all patched in two hours. The loss of the tower will hinder our ability to operate large numbers of aircraft. When we lost electrical power, we lost the ability to move fuel through our pipeline, probably lost the local telephone service." He shrugged. "We can make adjustments, but it's a major inconvenience. Too much work, too few men. We must disperse the fighters, and we must make alternate arrangements for fueling. The next target will be the fuel dumps."

"Did you expect this to be easy, Comrade?" The colonel looked over at the blazing pyres that only thirty minutes before had been a pair of Tu-22M Backfires. The damaged Bear was just touching down. "Their timing was too good. They caught us when half my fighters were escorting a bomber force off the north coast. Luck, perhaps, but I do not believe in luck. I want ground troops to check for enemy infiltrators around all the airports. And I want better security arrangements. I—what the hell is that?"

A Rockeye bomblet lay on the concrete not twenty feet from them. The major took a plastic flag from his jeep and set it near the bomb.

"The Americans set some for delayed detonation. My men are already searching for them. Be at ease, Comrade, all your fighters have landed safely. Your dispersal areas are clear."

The colonel drew back a few feet. "What do you do with them?"

"We've already practiced this. We'll use a specially fitted bulldozer to push them off the concrete. Some will explode, some won't. Those that do not go 'off of their own accord will be detonated by a marksman with a rifle."

"The tower?"

"Three men were on duty. Good men." The major shrugged again. "You must excuse me. I have work to do."

The colonel took a last look at the bomblet before walking toward his fighters. He'd underestimated the major.

ICELAND

"There's a light on our hill," Garcia said. Everyone dropped to the ground. Edwards got next to the sergeant.

"Some bastard just lit a cigarette," Smith observed sourly. He'd finished his last one several hours before and was going through withdrawal symptoms. "Now you see why we're carrying our trash with us?"

"They're looking for us?" Edwards asked.

"Figures. That attack was pretty cute. They'll wonder if the airedales had any help. I'm surprised they didn't do it sooner. Guess they were pretty busy with other stuff."

"Think they can see us?" Edwards didn't like that idea.

"From two miles? Pretty dark for that, and if they're smoking, they're being pretty casual. Relax, Lieutenant. It isn't all that easy to find four guys. Lots of hills to check out on this rock. We want to be careful where we walk. Keep off the ridges, like. Even if they got low-light gear, we won't be easy to see if we keep to the valleys. Let's move it out, troops, and keep low."

USS PHARRIS

One last merchant was burning. Her crew had abandoned ship two hours before, but still she burned on the western horizon. *More* deaths, Morris thought. Only about half of the crews had been saved, and there wasn't time for a more careful search. The convoy had sailed without a designated rescue ship. The helicopters had pulled many out of the water, but most of them were still needed to hunt submarines. He held a dispatch saying that Orions out of Lajes had prosecuted and probably killed an Echo-class missile submarine in their path. Some good news, but intelligence reported indications of two more.

The loss of Iceland was a disaster whose dimensions were only now becoming apparent. The Soviet bombers had a clear lane to reach into the trade route. Their submarines were racing through the Denmark Strait even as the NATO navies were trying to position their submarines to re-form the barrier they had lost—the barrier upon which the convoys depended. The Air Force and Navy would soon try to rearrange fighter coverage to harass the Backfires, but those measures were all stopgaps. Until Iceland was fully neutralized, or better yet retaken, the Third Battle of the North Atlantic hung in an uneven balance.

At the Pacific fleet bases of San Diego and Pearl Harbor, darkened ships stood out to sea. Once in open ocean they all headed south toward Panama.

23

Returns

USS *PHARRIS*

Things had settled down again. A very relative term: the Backfires were still coming down the gap over Iceland, but they'd hit another convoy this afternoon, killing eleven merchantmen in the process. All the eastbound convoys were angling south, trading a longer voyage to Europe for reduction of the air threat. As bad as losses were to this point—nearly sixty ships had already been sunk—a routing south at least meant the Soviet bombers could carry only one missile instead of two.

The strain was beginning to tell on everyone. Morris's crew had been "port and starboard" for almost a week now, four hours on duty, four hours off. Sleep patterns had been broken up. People didn't eat proper meals. Crucial maintenance requirements cut into what sleep allocations his men had. On top of that was the knowledge that a submarine or aircraft attack could come at any time. The work was still getting done, but Morris noted that his men were becoming terse and ill-tempered. People were beginning to trip over doorsills, a sure sign of fatigue. More serious mistakes would soon follow. The relationship between fatigue and errors was as certain as gravity. In another day or so he hoped a solid routine would establish itself, something for his men to adjust to. There were signs of this, and his chiefs were telling him not to worry. Morris worried.

"Bridge, Combat. Sonar contact, possible submarine, bearing zero-zero-nine."

"Here we go again," the conning officer said. For the twenty-fourth time on this voyage, *Pharris's* crew raced to battle stations.

It took three hours this time. No Orions were available for them, and the escorts pooled their helicopters to track down the submarine, all directed by Morris and his CIC crew. This submarine driver really knew his business. At the first suspicion that he had been detected—perhaps his sonar had detected a helicopter overhead or heard the splash of a falling sonobuoy—he went deep and began a confusing series of sprints and drifts, porpoising over and under the layer, working hard to break contact—*toward* the convoy. This one wasn't interested in running away. The submarine disappeared and reappeared on their tactical plot, always closing but never revealing his position clearly

enough for a shot.

"Gone again," the antisubmarine-warfare officer said pensively. A sonobuoy dropped ten minutes earlier had detected a weak signal, held it for two minutes, then lost it. "This guy's beautiful."

"And too close," Morris said. If the submarine was continuing south, he was now at the edge of the frigate's active sonar range. Up to now, *Pharris* had not revealed herself. The sub's captain would know surface ships were about from the presence of the helicopters, but it wasn't likely that he suspected a frigate only ten miles south of his position.

Morris looked up at the ASW officer. "Let's update our temperature profile."

Thirty seconds later they dropped a bathythermograph probe. The instrument measured water temperature and reported it to a display in the sonar compartment. Water temperature was the most important environmental condition affecting sonar performance. Surface ships checked it periodically, but a submarine could do it continuously—yet another edge that went with a submarine.

"There!" Morris pointed. "The gradient's a lot stronger now and this guy's exploiting it. He's staying out of the deep channel, probably doing his sprints on top of the layer instead of under it where we expect. Okay . . ."

The helicopters continued to drop buoys, and the brief glimpses they got were of a target heading south, toward *Pharris.* Morris waited ten minutes.

"Bridge, Combat, left standard rudder, come to new course zero-one-one," Morris ordered, pointing his ship at the submarine's estimated position. The frigate was doing five knots, moving quietly on the calm seas. The CIC crew watched the heading readout on the aft bulkhead change slowly from the easterly heading.

The tactical display was useless. Confused by many brief reports from sonobuoys, most of which were probably false signals to begin with, the computer-generated estimate for the submarine's position covered over a hundred square miles. Morris walked over to the paper display in the after corner of the room.

"I think he's right about here." Morris tapped the chart. "Comments?"

"Running shallow? That's contrary to doctrine," ASW pointed out. Soviet submariners were supposed to stick with established doctrine, the fleet intelligence reports said.

"Let's find out. Yankee-search."

The ASW officer gave the order at once. Yankee-search meant turning on the frigate's active sonar and hammering the water to find the sub. Morris was taking a chance. If the submarine was as close as he thought, then he was advertising his own ship's location and inviting a missile attack that his point-defense systems were ill-equipped to stop. The sonar operator watched his screen intently. The first five pings came up blank as the sonar beam swept west-to-east. The next one painted a bright dot on the screen.

"Contact—positive sonar contact, direct path, bearing zero-one-four, range eleven thousand six hundred yards. Evaluate as probable submarine."

"Nail him," Morris ordered.

The solid-fuel ASROC booster ignited, blasting clear of the ship and curving across the sky with a trail of pale gray smoke. The rocket burned out in three

seconds, coasting through the sky like a bullet. A thousand feet over the water, the torpedo separated from the booster, retarded by a parachute in its fall toward the water.

"He's changed course, sir," the sonar operator warned. "Target is turning and increasing speed. I—there's the fish, we have the torp in the water and pinging. Dropped in pretty close."

The tactical action officer was ignoring this. Three helicopters were converging on the target datum point now. There was a good chance the torpedo would miss, and the task now was to pin the contact down. He ordered a right turn, allowing the frigate's passive sonar array to track in on the submarine, which was moving swiftly now to evade the torpedo, and making a lot of noise. The first helicopter arrived and dropped a buoy.

"Twin screws and cavitation noise. Sounds like a Charlie at full speed, sir," a petty officer announced. "I think the torp may have him."

The torpedo switched from ping-and-listen to continuous pinging, chasing after the racing submarine, arcing downward. The weapon momentarily lost the sub as she passed through the thermocline layer, then reacquired when it too entered the colder deep water, rapidly closing the distance. The submarine loosed a noisemaker, but it malfunctioned. Another was loaded into the launcher. Too late. The torpedo struck the submarine on her port screw and exploded.

"All right!" hooted a petty officer on the sonar crew. "We have warhead detonation. We got the sucker!"

"We have impact. We have detonation," confirmed a helo crew. "Stand by. Target engines have not stopped completely . . . additional propulsion noises—clanking. Air blowing, he's blowing tanks. Coming up, target is coming up. We have bubbles on the surface. Hot damn, there he is!"

The Charlie's bow broke the surface six miles from the frigate. Three helicopters circled the wounded vessel like wolves, and *Pharris* turned north to close the target, her five-inch gun tracking it. It wasn't necessary. The forward hatch opened and men began scrambling out. More appeared on the sail, jumping overboard as the submarine's engine room filled with water. A total of ten got off before the submarine slid backward below the waves. Another appeared on the surface a few seconds later, but no more.

The helicopters dropped life jackets to the men in the water. The helo with the rescue hoist aboard managed to lift two men before the frigate arrived on the scene. Morris supervised the operation from the bridge. The motor whaleboat was swiftly launched, and the rescue was an easy one. The Russian crewmen were stunned and did not resist. The helicopters guided the boat to each man, carefully searching the area for more. All eleven were recovered and the whaleboat returned to the drop lines. *Pharris's* chief boatswain supervised the operation, an ensign standing quietly at his side.

No one had seriously considered this possibility. A torpedo hit on a submarine was supposed to kill her entirely. *Prisoners,* Morris thought to himself. *What the hell am I supposed to do with* prisoners? He had to decide where to keep them, how to treat them. How to interrogate them—did he have anyone aboard who spoke Russian? The captain turned the conn over to his executive officer and hurried aft.

Armed crewmen were already there, holding their M-14 rifles awkwardly as they looked down with great curiosity at the whaleboat. The boat crew secured the hoist lines to the lift points, and the seaman on the winch lifted the boat up into the davits.

The Soviets were not an impressive lot, many of them clearly in shock from their near escape from death. Morris counted three officers, one of them probably the captain. He whispered a quick command to Bosun Clarke.

The chief had his armed party step back, and took the whistle from his pocket. As the whaleboat settled into place, he blew a three-tone note on his whistle and saluted the Soviet captain like an arriving dignitary.

The Russian's reaction was one of astonishment. Morris stepped forward to help him off the boat.

"Welcome aboard, Captain. I'm Captain Morris, United States Navy." Ed looked around briefly to see the incredulous expressions on his crew's faces. But his ploy failed. The Russian said something in Russian, and either spoke no English or had the presence of mind to pretend he didn't. Someone else would have to handle the interrogation. Morris told his bosun to carry on. The Russians were taken below for a medical check. For the moment, they'd be kept under guard in sickbay. The bosun hurried back for a moment.

"Skipper, what the hell was that all about?" Chief Boatswain's Mate Clarke inquired.

"They've probably been told that we'd shoot them in the head. I read a book once that said the most effective technique—look, there was this German, the guy specialized in getting information out of our guys in World War Two, okay? He was good at it, and what he did was treat our guys decently. Hell, they sponsored him to come over after the war, and now he's an American citizen. Separate the officers from the enlisted, and the senior EMs from the juniors. Keep 'em separate. Then make sure they're kept comfortable. Feed 'em, give 'em cigarettes, make 'em feel safe. If you happen to know anyone aboard who has a bottle, get it, and give our guests a couple of stiff drinks. Everybody gets new clothes. We keep theirs. Send all of it to the wardroom. We'll see if they have anything valuable. Make sure they're treated nice, and just maybe we can get one or two to spill his guts."

"You got it, skipper." The chief went away shaking his head. At least he'd get to paint a whole submarine on the pilothouse this time.

Morris went back to the pilothouse. He ordered his men to secure from general quarters, and the frigate to return to her patrol station. Next he called up the escort commander and reported on the prisoners.

"Pharris," the Commodore replied. "You are directed to paint a gold 'A' on your ASROC launcher. Well done to all aboard, Ed. You're the champs for this crossing. I'll get back to you on the prisoners. Out."

The captain turned around to see that the bridge watch had not left. They'd all heard the Commodore on the radio. Their fatigue was gone, and the grins directed at Morris meant more to him than the words of his boss.

KIEV, THE UKRAINE

Alekseyev looked over the intelligence material on his desk. His boss was in Moscow for a high-level briefing, but this data was—should be, he corrected himself—little different from what his commander was hearing.

"Things are not going well in Germany?" Captain Sergetov asked.

"No. We were supposed to have reached the outskirts of Hamburg by H +36. A day and a half, the plan called for. Instead we're not quite there yet, and Third Shock Army has taken murderous losses from NATO aircraft." He paused, staring at the map. "If I were the NATO commander, I'd counterattack again, right there."

"Perhaps they are unable to do so. Their first counterattack was repulsed."

"At the cost of a broken tank division and sixty aircraft. Victories like that we can do without. The picture in the south is scarcely better. The NATO forces are trading space for time, and doing it very well. Their ground forces and tactical aircraft are operating over the same ground they've practiced on for thirty years. Our losses are nearly double the estimates, and we can't sustain that." Alekseyev leaned back. He chided himself for being defeatist. It was mainly a manifestation of his desire to join the action. He was certain, as any general would be certain, that he could do things better.

"What about NATO losses?"

"Heavy, we think. They have been remarkably profligate in their weapons expenditures. The Germans have staked too much on defending Hamburg, and it has to be costing them dearly. If I could not counterattack in their place, I would withdraw. A city is not worth breaking the balance of your army. We learned that lesson at Kiev—"

"Excuse me, Comrade General, what about Stalingrad?"

"A somewhat different situation, Captain. Remarkable, nonetheless, how history can repeat itself," Alekseyev muttered, studying the map on the wall. He shook his head. West Germany had too much in the way of road communications for that to work. "The KGB reports that NATO has two, at most three weeks' supply of munitions left. That will be the decisive factor."

"What of our supplies and fuel?" the young captain asked. His answer was a scowl.

ICELAND

At least there was water. The streams were fed by glaciers that lay in the center of the island—water that had fallen as snow over a thousand years before, long before atmospheric pollution, and been compressed to ice. When finally it melted to fill the rocky streams, it turned back into water of crystalline purity and marvelous taste, but absolutely no nutritional value. It was also ice cold, and fords were not easily found.

"Down to one day's rations, Lieutenant," Smith observed as they finished off their meal.

"Yeah, we'll have to think that one over." Edwards assembled his trash. Garcia collected it all for burial. If there had been a way to cover their

footprints in the dirt, Smith would have had them doing that too.

It wasn't easy. As Edwards assembled his radio, he listened to muttered Spanish curses and the sound of a folding shovel slamming against the loose rocks that passed for soil atop Hill 482.

"Doghouse, this is Beagle, and we're running out of food, over."

"Sorry to hear that, Beagle. Maybe we'll have some pizzas sent out."

"You funny bastard," Edwards said without toggling the Transmit key. "What do you want us to do this time?"

"Have you been spotted by anyone?"

"We're alive, ain't we? Negative."

"Tell me what you can see."

"Okay, there's a gravel road downhill to the north, maybe two miles away. Looks like a farm—plowed fields, like, but can't tell what's growing there. Another sheep farm to the west of us, we passed it coming here. Lots of sheep. Ten minutes ago we saw a truck on the road heading west. Haven't seen anything flying yet today, but I suppose that'll change. The only civilians we've seen have been right by their houses, we haven't even seen farmers with their sheep, and the farm to the north has no visible activity. No—say again zero—civilian road traffic. Ivan's got this island shut down, Doghouse, really shut down. That's about all I can say. Tell those Vark drivers they really did the job on that powerhouse. Nothing left but a hole in the ground. We haven't seen an electric light lit since."

"Copy that, Beagle. Okay, your orders arc to head north toward Hvammsfjördur. You need to take a wide detour cast to avoid all these bays I see. We want you there in ten days. Say again ten days, twelve at the most. You can make it easy. Stay out in the boonies and avoid contact with anyone. Continue the normal contact schedule and report on anything you see that may be of interest. Acknowledge."

"Roger, Doghouse, you want us in sight of Hvammsfjördur at the end of next week, and keep up the usual radio routine. Anything else?"

"Be careful. Out."

"Hvammsfjördur?" Smith asked. "That's a hundred miles on a straight line."

"They want us to detour east to avoid contact."

"Two hundred miles—walking over this shit." Smith's frown was enough to split a rock. "End of next week? Ten or eleven days?"

Edwards nodded dumbly. He hadn't known it would be that far.

"Gonna be a little tough, Mr. Edwards." The sergeant pulled a large-scale map from his case. "I don't even have cards for the whole coastline. Damn. Look here, Lieutenant. The ridges and rivers on this rock come out from the center like the spokes on a wheel, y'see? That means we climb a lot, and these here ain't little hills. All the low places got roads, and sure as hell we can't follow no roads, right?" He shook his head.

Edwards forced a grin. "Can't hack it? I thought you Marines were in good shape."

Smith was a man who ran five miles every morning. He could not recall ever seeing this little Air Force wimp out doing road-work. "Okay, Mr. Edwards. They say nobody ever drowned in sweat. On your feet, Marines, we got orders for a little hike." Rodgers and Garcia exchanged a look. "Mister"

was not exactly a term of endearment for an officer, but Smith figured that insubordination only counted if the officer *knew* he was being insulted.

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

The helicopters took time to assemble. The big AN-22 transport had delivered two Mi-24 attack choppers, quite a load even for that four-engine monster. Another IL-76 flight had delivered the technicians and flight crews to assemble, service, and fly them. There had been a major oversight in the plan, the General thought. The one helicopter that had survived the strafing attack on the first day was now broken down—and of course the broken part was not one which had been included in their pre-packaged equipment. There should have been more helicopters. He shrugged eloquently. No plan was ever perfect. More helicopters would be flown in, plus a few more mobile radar sets and some additional SAM launchers. The Americans looked to have every intention of making his tenure on Iceland difficult, and he needed more equipment to counter that . . .

Then there were those KGB bastards. *We have to pacify the island,* they said. As if Iceland wasn't already passive enough. There had been not a single incident of active resistance yet—*not one,* the General thought, remembering his year's service in Afghanistan. Compared with that mountainous hell, this was paradise itself. But that wasn't good enough for the KGB! *Nekulturny* barbarians. A thousand hostages had been taken, only to learn that there was no jail space to keep them. *So my paratroopers must guard the poor, harmless wretches, using up a whole company of troops.* His orders were to cooperate with the local KGB contingent. One did not cooperate with the KGB, of course, one was dominated by them. There were KGB officers with his mobile patrols, to *advise,* they put it.

General Andreyev was beginning to worry. Crack paratroopers were not the sort to be good jailers. Had they been ordered to go easily on the Icelanders, that would be one thing. Instead, their orders forced them to be harsh, which generated hostility. Some people had actually been heard to cheer when the last American bombers had come through. Absurd, the General thought. They had lost electricity but we had lost nothing—and they cheered. Because of the KGB's orders. What stupidity. An opportunity lost. He considered protesting his orders to his central command in Moscow, but to what point? An officer who disliked the KGB was an officer who disliked the Party itself.

He was aroused from his reveries by the whining sound of turboshaft engines. The first of the Mi-24 Hinds was turning its rotor, testing its engines. An officer ran toward him.

"Comrade General, with your permission, we are ready for a test flight. We're doing it light, unarmed. We'll load weapons when we get back."

"Very well. Captain, just check out the hilltops around Keflavik and Rejkyavik. How long on the second one?" Andreyev asked.

"Two hours."

"Excellent. Good work, Comrade Captain."

A minute later the heavy attack chopper lifted into the air.

"Down and freeze!" Garcia screamed. It didn't come close to them, but seeing it was enough.

"What kind is it?"

"Hind. It's an attack bird, like the Cobra. Bad news, Lieutenant. It carries eight troops and a whole shitload of rockets and guns. An' don't even think about shooting at it. Sucker's armored like a damned tank."

The Mi-24 circled the hill they'd just been on, then disappeared, heading south to loop over another hill.

"Didn't see us, I guess," Edwards said.

"Let's keep it that way. Keep the radio stowed awhile, Lieutenant. We can call this one in after we move out a ways, okay?"

Edwards nodded agreement. He remembered a brief on Soviet helicopters in the Air Force Academy. "We are not afraid of the Russians," an Afghan had been quoted, "but we are afraid of their helicopters."

BITBURG, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

Colonel Ellington awoke at six that evening. He shaved and walked outside, the sun still high in the evening sky. He wondered what mission they'd have tonight. He was not a bitter man, but to have nearly a quarter of his crews—men with whom he had worked for two straight years—lost in a week was a difficult thing to accept. It had been too long since his experience in Vietnam. He'd forgotten how terrible losses could be. His men could not stand down a day to mourn their dead and ease the pain, much as they needed to. They were being carefully rested. Standing orders gave them eight hours of sleep a day—like night-hunters, they slept only by day.

They were making a difference, however. He was sure of that. Every night the black and green Frisbees lifted off for some special target or other, and the Russians still had not figured a counter. The strike cameras mounted in each aircraft were bringing back pictures that the wing intelligence officers could scarcely believe. But at such a cost.

Well. The colonel reminded himself that one sortie a day was a lighter load than the other air crews were bearing, and that the close-support crews were taking losses equal to his own. Tonight held another mission. He ordered his brain to occupy itself with that task alone.

The briefings took an hour. Ten aircraft would fly tonight: two planes each at five targets. As commander he drew the toughest. Surveillance indicated that Ivan had a previously unsuspected forward fuel dump at a position west of Wittenburg that was supporting the drive on Hamburg, and the Germans wanted it taken out. His wingman would go in with Durandals, and he'd follow with Rockeyes. There would be no supporting aircraft on this one, and the colonel didn't want jammer aircraft to go in with him. Two of his lost

birds had had such support, and the jamming had merely alerted the defenses.

He examined the topographical maps closely. The land was flat. Not much in the way of mountains and hills to hide behind, but then he could skim at treetop level, and that was almost as good. He'd approach from the east, behind the target. There was a twenty-knot west wind, and if he came in from leeward, the defenders would be unable to hear his approach until bomb release . . . probably. They'd egress the area by heading southwest. Total mission time seventy-five minutes. He computed his necessary fuel load, careful as always to allow for the drag of his bombs. To the bare-bones fuel requirements he added five minutes on afterburner in case of air-to-air combat and ten minutes to orbit Bitburg for landing. Satisfied, he went off for breakfast. With each bite of toast his mind ran through the mission like a movie, visualizing every event, every obstacle, every SAM site to be avoided. He randomly inserted the unexpected. A flight of low-level fighters at the target, what effect would this have on the mission? What would the target look like on this approach? If he had to make a second bombing pass, from what direction? Major Eisly ate with his commander in silence, recognizing the blank look on his face and running through his own mental checklist.

They headed straight into East Germany for fifty miles before turning north at Rathenow. Two Soviet Mainstay aircraft were up, a good distance back from the border and surrounded by agile Flanker interceptors. Staying well outside the effective range of their radar, the two aircraft flew low and in tight formation. When they screeched over main roads, it was always in a direction away from a course to their target. They avoided cities, towns, and known enemy depots where there might be SAMs.

The inertial navigation systems kept track of their progress on a map display on the pilot's instrument panel. The distance to the target shrank rapidly as the aircraft curved west.

They flashed over Wittenberg at five hundred knots. The infrared cameras showed fueling vehicles on the roads heading right for the target area . . . there! At least twenty tank trucks were visible in the trees, fueling from underground tanks.

"Target in sight. Execute according to plan."

"Roge," acknowledged Shade-Two. "I have them visual."

The Duke broke left, clearing the way for his wingman to make the first run. Shade-Two's aircraft was the the only one left with the proper ejector racks for the bulky hard-target munitions.

"Gawd!" The Duke's display showed an SA-11 launcher right in his flight path, its missiles aimed northwest. One of his aircraft had learned the hard way that the SA-11 had an infrared homing capacity that no one had suspected. The colonel reefed his aircraft into a hard right turn away from the launcher, wondering where the rest of the missile battery's vehicles were.

Shade-Two skimmed over the target. The pilot toggled off his four bombs and kept heading west. Gunfire rippled across the sky in his wake. Too late.

The French-made Durandal weapons fell off the ejector racks and scattered. Once free, they pointed down, and rockets fired to accelerate the munitions straight at the ground. They were designed to break up concrete runways and

were ideal for underground fuel tanks. The bombs did not explode on impact. Instead, the hard-steel weapons lanced into the ground, penetrating several feet before detonating. Three found underground fuel tanks. The Durandals exploded upward, breaking open a path for burning fuel to leap into the air.

It was the next thing to a nuclear detonation. Three white columns of flame rocketed into the air, spreading like fountains and dropping fuel for hundreds of yards. Every vehicle in the compound was engulfed in flame, and only those men near the perimeter escaped with their lives. Rubber fuel bladders brought to the site exploded a few seconds later, and a river of burning diesel and gasoline spread through the trees. In a matter of seconds, twenty acres of woods were transformed into a fireball that raced skyward, punctuated by secondary explosions. Ellington's fighter rocked violently as the shock wave passed.

"Damn," he said quietly. The plan called for him to use his cluster munitions to ignite what the Durandals had burst open.

"Don't think the Rockeyes are necessary, Duke," Eisly observed.

Ellington tried to blink away the dots as he turned away, keeping as low as he could. He found himself flying right down a road.

The Soviet Commander-in-Chief of the Western Theater was already angry, and what he saw to the east didn't help. He'd just conferred with the commander of the Third Shock Army at Zarrentin to learn that the attack had again bogged down within sight of Hamburg. Furious that his most powerful tank force had failed to achieve its objective, he'd relieved its commander on the spot and was returning to his own command post. Now he saw what could only be one of his three major fuel depots rising into the clear sky. The General cursed and stood, pushing aside the roof panel on his armored command vehicle. As he blinked his dazzled eyes, a black mass seemed to appear at the lower edge of the fireball.

What's that? Ellington wondered. His TV display showed four armored vehicles in a tight column—one of them a SAM launcher! He flicked his bomb-release controls to Armed and dropped his four Rockeye canisters, then turned south. His tail-mounted strike cameras recorded what followed.

The Rockeyes split open, distributing their bomblets at a shallow angle across the road. They exploded on impact.

* * *

CINC-West died a soldier's death. His last act was to seize a machine gun and fire at the aircraft. Four bomblets fell within a few meters of his vehicle. Their fragments sliced through the light armor, killing everyone inside even before its fuel tank exploded, adding another fireball to a sky that had still not returned to darkness.

USS *CHICAGO*

The submarine came slowly to the surface, spiraling up to allow her sonar to check the entire area as she rose to antenna depth. His luck had been bad so far, McCafferty considered, which was not a situation that encouraged risk taking. As the submarine leveled off beneath the waves, the ESM mast went up first, sniffing for hostile electronic signals, then the search periscope. The captain made a quick sweep around the sky, then the surface, his executive officer closely watching the television readout to back up the skipper's observations. Everything looked clear. There was a moderate sea running, with five-foot swells, and the clear blue sky was decorated with fair-weather cumulus clouds. On the whole, a beautiful day. Except for the war.

"Okay, transmit," McCafferty ordered. His eyes never left the periscope, which he turned continuously, angling the lens up and down to look for trouble. A petty officer raised the UHF antenna, and the "okay to transmit" light blinked on in the radio room aft of the attack center.

They had been summoned to the surface by an extremely low-frequency radio message with their call sign, QZB. The senior radioman powered up his transmitter, keyed out QZB on the UHF satellite broadcast band, and waited for a reply. There was none. He gave his neighbor a look and repeated the procedure. Again the satellite missed the signal. The petty officer took a deep breath and transmitted QZB yet a third time. Two seconds later the hot printer in the after corner of the room began to print up a coded reply. The communications officer keyed a command into the cipher machine, and the clear text came up on another printer.

> TOP SECRET
> FR: COMSUBLANT
> TO: USS CHICAGO
> 1. REPORT LARGE REDFLT AMPHIBIOUS GRP DEPARTING KOLA 1150Z19JUNE. FORCE COMPOSITION 10-PLUS PHIBS WITH 15-PLUS COMBATANT ESCORT INCL KIROV, KIEV. HEAVY RPT HEAVY AIR ASW SUPPORT THIS GRP. EXPECT ALSO REDFLT SS/SSN SUPPORT THIS GRP. WESTERLY COURSE, HIGH SPEED.
> 2. EVALUATE OBJECTIVE THIS GRP BODØ.
> 3. PROCEED AT BEST SPEED TO 70N 16W.
> 4. ENGAGE AND DESTROY. REPORT CONTACT IF POSSIBLE BEFORE ATTACK. OTHER NATO SS/SSN TRAFFIC THIS AREA. AIR SUPPORT POSSIBLE BUT NOT RPT NOT LIKELY AT PRESENT.
> 5. WILL AMPLIFY LOCATION THIS GRP AS POSSIBLE.

McCafferty read the dispatch without comment, then handed it to the navigator. "How long to get there at fifteen knots?"

"About eleven hours." The navigator took a pair of dividers and walked them across the chart. "Unless they're flying, we'll be there long before they are."

"Joe?" The captain looked at his executive officer.

"I like it. Right on the hundred-fathom curve, and water conditions are a little squirrelly there, what with the Gulf Stream coming in so close and fresh water coming out of the fjords. They won't want to be too close inshore because of the Norwegian diesel boats, and they won't stray too far out

because of the NATO nucs. If I had to bet, I'd say they'll come right to us."

"Okay, take her down to nine hundred feet and head east. Secure from general quarters. Let's get everybody fed and rested."

Ten minutes later, *Chicago* was on a heading of zero-eight-one, steaming at fifteen knots. Deep, but in relatively warm water from the ocean current that begins in the Gulf of Mexico and runs all the way to the Barents Sea, she enjoyed sonar conditions that made detection by a surface ship nearly impossible. The water pressure prevented cavitation noises. Her engines could drive the submarine at this speed with only a fraction of her total rated power, obviating the need for the reactor pumps. The reactor's cooling water circulated on natural convection currents, which eliminated the major source of radiated noise. *Chicago* was completely in her element, a noiseless shadow moving through black water.

The crew's mood changed slightly, McCafferty noticed. Now they had a mission. A dangerous mission, but one they had trained for. Orders were carried out with calm precision. In the wardroom his tactical officers reviewed tracking and attack procedures long since memorized, and a pair of exercises were run on a computer. Charts were examined to predict likely places for especially bad water conditions in which they might hide. In the torpedo room two decks below the attack center, sailors ran electronic tests on green-painted Mk-48 "fish" and the Harpoon missiles in their white canisters. One weapon showed an electronic fault, and a pair of torpedomen immediately stripped off an inspection plate to replace a component. Similar checks were made of the Tomahawk missiles in their vertical launch tubes nested in the bow. Finally the weapons-control team ran a computer simulation through the Mk-117 attack director to ensure that it was fully operational. Within two hours they were sure that every system aboard was operating within expected limits. The crewmen exchanged hopeful smiles. After all, they reasoned, it wasn't their fault that no Russian had been dumb enough to come their way, was it? Just a few days before, hadn't they practically landed on the beach—in Russia!—without being detected? The Old Man was a real pro, wasn't he?

USS *PHARRIS*

Dinner was awkward to say the least. The three Russian officers sat at the end of the table, mindful of the two armed guards ten feet away, and the cook in the wardroom pantry who kept a large knife conspicuously in view. The officers were served by a young seaman, a beardless boy of seventeen who scowled mightily at the Russians as he served the salad.

"So," Morris said cordially, "do any of you speak English?"

"I do," answered one. "I am instructed my captain to thank you for rescue our men."

"Tell your captain that war has rules, and so does the sea. Please tell him also that he showed great skill in his approach." Morris poured some Thousand Island dressing on his lettuce as the message was translated. His

officers were keeping a close eye on their guests. Morris was careful to avert his gaze. His remark had the desired effect. A rapid exchange took place at the other end of the table.

"My captain ask how you find us. We—how you say—get away from your helicopters, no?"

"Yes, you did," Morris answered. "We did not understand your operating pattern."

"Then how you find us?"

"I knew you were attacked earlier by the Orion, and that you ran at high speed to catch up with us. The angle for your attack was predictable."

The Russian shook his head. "What attack is this? Who attack us?" He turned to his commander and spoke for thirty seconds.

There's another Charlie out there, Morris thought, *if he's not lying to us. We ought to get someone who speaks Russian to talk to the crewmen below. Damn, why don't I have one of those?*

"My captain says you are mistake in this. Our first contact with you was from helicopters. We did not expect your ship to be here. Is this new tactic?"

"No, we've practiced this for some years."

"How you find us, then?"

"You know what a towed-array sonar is? We first detected you on that, about three hours before we shot at you."

The Russian's eyes went wide. "Your sonar so good as that?"

"Sometimes." After this was translated the Russian captain spoke what seemed a terse order, and the conversation stopped. Morris wondered if his radio technicians had wired the microphone into the Russians' quarters yet. Perhaps what they said among themselves would be useful to fleet intelligence. Until then he'd continue to make them comfortable. "How is the food aboard a Soviet submarine?"

"Not same as this," the navigator answered after conferring with his boss. "Good, but not same. We eat different foods. More fish, less meat. We have tea, not coffee."

Ed Morris saw that his prisoners were going after their plates with scarcely concealed gusto. *Even our sub guys don't get enough fresh vegetables,* he reminded himself. An enlisted man entered the wardroom and stood by the door. It was his leading radioman. Morris waved him over.

The sailor handed the captain a message form. THE SPECIAL JOB IS DONE, it read, and Morris noted that the man had taken the time to print it up on a standard message format so that no one would suspect what it meant. The Russians' accommodations were all bugged now. Morris dismissed his man with a nod and pocketed the form. His bosun had miraculously discovered two bottles of hard liquor—probably from the chiefs' quarters, but Morris knew better than to inquire—and these would find their way to the Russians tonight. He hoped the liquor would loosen tongues.

24

Rape

USS *PHARRIS*

Morris didn't wave at the low-flying aircraft, but wanted to. The French Navy's patrol plane signaled that they were within range of land-based air cover. It would take a very brave Russian sub skipper to want to play games here, with a screen of French diesel subs a few miles north of the convoy lane and several ASW patrol aircraft forming a tricolored umbrella over the convoy.

The French had also sent out a helicopter to collect the Russian submariners. They were being flown to Brest for a full interrogation by NATO intelligence types. Morris didn't envy them the trip. They'd be held by the French, and he had no doubt that the French Navy was in an evil mood after the loss of one of its carriers. The tapes his crew had made of their conversations were also being sent. The Russians had talked among themselves, aided by the chiefs' liquor, and perhaps their whispered conversations had some value.

They were about to turn the convoy over to a mixed British-French escort force and take over a group of forty merchantmen bound for America. Morris stood on the bridge wing, turning every five minutes or so to look at the two half and one full silhouettes that the bosun had painted on *both* sides of the pilothouse—" No sense having some jerk on the wrong side of the ship missing them," the bosun had pointed out seriously. Their ASW tactics had worked fairly well. With *Pharris* as outlying sonar picket, and heavy support from the Orions, they had intercepted all but one of the inbound Russian subs. There had been a lot of skepticism on this point, but the tactic had worked, by God. But it had to work better still.

Morris knew that things would be getting harder. For the first trip the Soviets had been able to put no more than a fraction of their submarines into action against them. Those submarines were now forcing their way down the Denmark Strait. The NATO sub force trying to block the passage no longer had the SOSUS line to give them intercept vectors, nor Orions to pounce on the contacts that submarines could not reach. They would score kills, but would they score enough? How much larger would the threat be this week? Morris could see from their return route to the States that they were adding nearly

five hundred miles to the passage by looping far to the south—partially because of the Backfires, but more now to dilute the submarine threat. Two threats to worry about. His ship was equipped to deal with only one.

They'd lost a third of the convoy, mainly to aircraft. Could they sustain that? He wondered how the merchant crews were holding up.

They had closed in on the convoy, and he could see the northernmost line of merchies. On the horizon a big container ship was blinking a light at them. Morris raised his glasses to read the signal.

THANKS FOR NOTHING NAVY. One question answered.

USS CHICAGO

"So, there they are," McCafferty said.

The trace showed almost white on the screen, a thick spoke of broadband noise bearing three-two-nine. It could only be the Soviet task force heading for Bodø.

"How far out?" McCafferty asked.

"At least two CZs, skipper, maybe three. The signal just increased in intensity four minutes ago."

"Can you get a blade count on anything?"

"No, sir." The sonarman shook his head. "Just a lot of undifferentiated noise for the moment. We've tried to isolate a few discrete frequencies, but even that's all screwed up. Maybe later, but all we got now is a thundering herd."

McCafferty nodded. The third convergence zone was a good hundred miles off. At such ranges acoustical signals lost definition, to the point that their bearing to target was only a rough estimate. The Russian formation could be several degrees left or right of where they thought, and at this range that was a difference measured in miles. He went aft to Control.

"Take her west five miles at twenty knots," McCafferty ordered. It was a gamble, but a small one. On reaching station, they'd found unusually good water conditions, and the small move risked losing the contact temporarily. On the other hand, getting precise range information would give him a much better tactical picture and enable them to make a solid contact report—and make it by line-of-sight UHF radio before the Soviet formation got close enough that they could intercept the submarine's transmission. As the boat raced west, McCafferty watched the bathythermograph trace. As long as the temperature didn't change, he'd keep that good sound channel. It didn't. The submarine slowed rapidly and McCafferty went back to sonar.

"Okay, where are they now?"

"Got 'em! Right there, bearing three-three-two."

"XO, plot it and get a contact report made up."

Ten minutes later the report was sent via satellite. The reply ordered *Chicago* in: GO FOR THE HEAVIES.

The farm was three miles away, thankfully downhill through tall, rough grass. On first sighting it through binoculars, Edwards called it the Gingerbread House. A typical Icelandic farmhouse, it had white stucco walls buttressed by heavy wooden beams, a contrasting red-painted trim, and a steeply pitched roof right out of the Brothers Grimm. The outlying barns were large, but low-slung with sod-covered roofs. The lower meadows by the stream were dotted with hundreds of large, odd-looking sheep with massively thick coats of wool, asleep in the grass half a mile beyond the house.

"Dead-end road," Edwards said, folding up the map. "And we could use some food. Gentlemen, it's worth the chance, but we approach *carefully*. We'll follow this dip to the right and keep that ridgeline between us and the farm till we're within half a mile or so."

"Okay, sir," Sergeant Smith agreed. The four men struggled into a sitting position to don their gear yet again. They'd been moving almost continuously for two and a half days, and were now about thirty-five miles northeast of Reykjavik. A modest pace on flat roads, it was a man-killing effort cross country, particularly while staying watchful for the helicopters that were now patrolling the countryside. They had consumed their last rations six hours before. The cool temperatures and hard physical effort conspired to drain the energy from their bodies as they picked their way around and over the two-thousand-foot hills that dotted the Icelandic coast like so many fence pickets.

Several things kept them moving. One was the fear that the Soviet division they had watched airlifted in would expand its perimeter and snap them up. No one relished the thought of captivity under the Russians. But worse than this was fear of failure. They had a mission, and no taskmaster is harsher than one's own self-expectations. Then there was pride. Edwards had to set an example for his men, a principle remembered from Colorado Springs. The Marines, of course, could hardly let a "wing-wiper" outperform them. Thus, without thinking consciously about it, four men contrived to walk themselves into the ground, all in the name of pride.

"Gonna rain," Smith said.

"Yeah, the cover will be nice," Edwards said, still sitting back. "We'll wait for it. Jesus, I never thought working in daylight would be so Goddamned tough. There's just something weird about not having the friggin' sun go down."

"Tell me about it. And I ain't even got a cigarette," Smith growled.

"Rain *again?"* Private Garcia asked.

"Get used to it," Edwards said. "It rains seventeen days in June, on average, and so far this's been a wet year. How d'you think the grass got so tall?"

"You like this place?" Garcia asked, dumbfounded enough to forget the "sir." Iceland had little in common with Puerto Rico.

"My dad's a lobsterman working out of Eastpoint, Maine. When I was a kid I went out on the boat every time I could, and it was always like this."

"What we gonna do when we get down to that house, sir?" Smith brought them back to things that mattered.

"Ask for food—"

"Ask?" Garcia was surprised.

"Ask. And pay for it, with cash. And smile. And say, 'Thank you, sir,' " Edwards said. "Remember your manners, guys, unless you want him to phone Ivan ten minutes after we leave." He looked around at his men. The thought sobered them all.

The rain started with a few sprinkles. Two minutes later it was falling heavily, cutting visibility down to a few hundred yards. Edwards wearily got to his feet, forcing his Marines to do likewise, and they all moved downhill as the sun above the clouds dipped in the northwestern sky and slid down behind a hill. The hill—since they'd probably have to climb it the next day, they thought of it as a mountain—had a name, but none of them could pronounce it. By the time they were a quarter mile from the farmhouse, it was as dark as it would get, and the rain had the visibility down to about eighty yards.

"Car coming." Smith saw the glare of the lights first. All four men dropped and instinctively aimed their rifles at the dots on the horizon.

"Relax, guys. This road here breaks off the main road, and those lights could just be—*shit!"* Edwards cursed. The lights hadn't taken the sweeping turn on the coastal highway. They were coming down the road to the farm. Was it a car or a track with its driving lights on? "Spread out and stay awake." Smith stayed with Edwards, and the two privates moved downhill about fifty yards.

Edwards lay prone, his elbows propped up on the wet grass and binoculars to his eyes. He didn't think they could be spotted. The Marine pattern camouflage made them nearly invisible in daylight as long as they didn't move rapidly. In the dark they were transparent shadows.

"Looks like a pickup, four-by-four, something like that. Lights are pretty far off the ground, bouncing around too much to be a track," Edwards thought aloud.

The lights came directly—but slowly—to the farmhouse and stopped. Its doors opened, men got out, and one stepped in front of the headlights before they were extinguished.

"Damn!" Smith snarled.

"Yep, looks like four or five Ivans. Get Garcia and Rodgers over here, Sergeant."

"Right."

Edwards kept his binoculars on the house. There were no electric lights lit. He guessed that this area got its power from Artun, and he'd watched the bombs wipe that plant off the map. There was some internal illumination, though, maybe from candies or a hurricane lamp. It really was a lot like home, Edwards told himself; our electricity went off often enough, from nor'east-em storms or ice on the wires. The people in that house had to be asleep. *Working farmers, early to bed, early to rise—wears you out and dulls the brain,* Edwards thought. Through the lenses he watched the Russians—he counted five—circle the house. *Like burglars,* he thought. They looking for . . . us? No. If they were looking for us, there'd be more than five guys in a four-by-four. *That's interesting. They must be looting—but what if somebody . . . Jesus, we know that* somebody *lives there. Somebody lit that lamp. What are they up to?*

"What gives, sir?" Smith asked.

"Looks like we got five Russkies. They're playing peeper, looking in the

windows and—one just kicked the door in! I don't like the way this is going, troops, I—"

A scream confirmed his evaluation. A woman's scream, it cut right through the falling rain and made them feel someone's terror, chilling men already cold.

"People, let's move in a little. We stay together and we damned well stay alert."

"Why we movin' in now, sir?" Smith asked sharply.

" 'Cuz I say so." Edwards stowed his field glasses. "Follow me."

Another light was lit in the building, and it seemed to be moving around. Edwards walked quickly, keeping low in a way that punished his back. In two minutes he was a few yards from the truck that had driven in, no more than twenty yards from the home's front door.

"Sir, you're getting a little careless," Smith warned.

"Yeah, well, if I guess right, so are they. I bet—"

There was a sound of breaking glass. A shot rang out through the semidarkness. It was followed by a blood-chilling shriek—and a second shot, and a third. Then there was another scream.

"What the hell's going on in there?" Garcia asked in a rasp.

A hoarse male voice shouted something in Russian. The front door opened and four men came out. They conferred for a moment, then split into pairs, going left and right to side windows, where all four men stood to look inside. Then there came another scream, and it was perfectly clear what was going on.

"Those son of a bitches," Smith observed.

"Yeah," Lieutenant Edwards agreed. "Let's back off and think about this for a minute." The four men retreated about fifty yards and bunched together.

"I think it's time we do something. Anybody disagree?" Edwards asked. Smith just nodded, interested in Edwards's change of demeanor. "Okay, we take our time and do it right. Smith, you come with me and we go around the left. Garcia and Rodgers go around the right. Go wide and come in slow. Ten minutes. If you can take 'em alive, that's okay. If not, stick 'em. We try not to make noise. But if you gotta shoot, make Goddamned sure the first burst does it. Okay?" Edwards looked around for additional Russians. None. The four men slipped out of their packs, checked their watches, and moved out, crawling through the wet grass.

There was another scream, but none after that. Edwards was glad there weren't—he didn't need the distraction. The crawling was a slow, tiring effort that sapped the strength from his arms. Edwards and Smith took a long route, around a tractor and some other implements. When they came into the clear there was only one man on their side of the house. *Where's the other one?* the lieutenant asked himself. *Now what do we do? You gotta stick to the plan. Everyone's depending on you.*

"Back me up."

Smith was amazed. "Let me, sir, I—"

"Back me up," Edwards whispered. He set his M-16 down and drew his combat knife.

The Russian soldier made it easy, as he stood on tiptoe, entranced with the

goings-on within the farmhouse. Ten feet behind him, Edwards got to his feet and approached one slow step at a time. It took him a moment to realize that his target was a full head taller than he was—how was he supposed to take this monster alive?

He didn't have to. There must have been an intermission inside. The Soviet private slumped down and reached in his pocket for a pack of cigarettes, then turned slightly to light one from a cupped match. He caught Edwards out of the corner of his eye, and the American lieutenant lunged forward with his knife, stabbing the larger man in the throat. The Russian started to cry out, but Edwards wrestled him down and slapped his left hand over the man's mouth as he struck again with the knife. Edwards twisted the man's head one way, and the knife the other. The blade grated against something hard, and his victim went slack.

Edwards felt nothing, his emotions submerged in a flood of adrenaline. He wiped the knife on his trousers and stood on the man's body to look in the window. What he saw caught the breath in his throat.

"Hi, guys!" Garcia whispered. Two Russian privates turned to face a pair of M-16s. They had left their rifles in the truck. Garcia gestured at the ground with his rifle, and both men went facedown, spread-eagled. Rodgers frisked them both for weapons, then went around the front to report in.

"Took 'em both alive, sir." He was surprised to see their "wing-wiper" lieutenant with blood on his hands.

"I'm going in," Edwards told Smith. The sergeant nodded quickly.

"I'll cover you from here. Rodgers, you back him up."

The lieutenant moved through the half-open door. The living room was empty and unlit. The noise of heavy breathing came from around the corner, and a steady pale light. Edwards approached the corner—and found himself faced with a Russian in the process of unbuttoning his pants. There was no time for much of anything.

Edwards rammed his knife under the man's ribs, turning his right hand within the brass-knuckled grip as he pushed the blade all the way in. The man screamed and lifted himself up on his toes before falling backward, trying to get himself off the knife. Edwards withdrew and stabbed again, falling atop the man in a grotesquely sexual position. The paratrooper's hands tried to force him off, but the lieutenant felt the strength drain from his victim as he moved farther forward to stab him again in the chest. A shadow moved and he looked up to see a man stumbling forward with a pistol—and the room exploded with noise.

"Freeze, motherfucker!" Rodgers screamed, his M-16 aimed at the man's chest, and everyone's ears ringing from the thunder of the three-round burst. "You okay, skipper?" It was the first time they had called him that.

"Yeah." Edwards got to his feet, letting Rodgers precede him as he backed the Russian up. The man was exposed below the waist, his pants hobbling his ankles. The lieutenant picked up the pistol the Soviet had dropped and looked down at the man he'd knifed. There was no doubt that he was dead. His handsome Slavic face was contorted with surprise and pain, and his uniform blouse was soaked black with blood. The eyes might have been marbles for all the life they contained.

"You okay, ma'am?" Rodgers asked, briefly turning his head around.

Edwards saw her for the second time, sprawled out on the wooden floor. A pretty girl, her woolen nightdress torn apart, barely covering one breast, and the rest of her pale body, already red and bruised in several places, exposed for all to see. Beyond her in the kitchen Edwards saw the unmoving legs of another woman. He went into the room and saw a dog and a man, also dead. Each body displayed a single red circle in the chest.

Smith came in. He looked around the room, then at Edwards. The wimp had fangs. "I'll check the upstairs. Heads up, skipper."

Rodgers kicked the Russian down to the floor and placed his bayonet point in the small of his back. "You move and I'll fuckin' cut you in half," the private snarled.

Edwards stooped down to the blond girl. Her face was puffing up from blows to the jaw and cheek, her breath coming in shudders. He guessed her age at twenty or so. Her nightdress was destroyed. Edwards looked around and, pulling the cloth off the dining room table, draped it over her.

"You okay? Come on, you're alive, honey. You're safe. You're okay now."

Her eyes seemed pointed in different directions at first, then they focused and came over to the young lieutenant. Edwards cringed to see the look in them. His hand touched her cheek as gently as he could.

"Come on, let's get you up off the floor. Nobody's going to hurt you, not now." She started shaking so violently that it seemed the whole house would join her. He helped her up, careful to wrap the tablecloth all around her. "Come on."

"Upstairs is clear, sir." Smith returned, holding a robe. "You wanna put this on the lady? They do anything else to her?"

"Killed her mom and dad. And a dog. I imagine they were going to do her, too, when they got finished. Sarge, get things organized. Search the Russians, get some food, anything else that looks useful. Move quick, Jim. Lots of things we gotta do. You have a first-aid pack?"

"Right, skipper. Here." Smith tossed him a small package of bandages and antiseptics, then went back out the door to check on Garcia.

"Let's get you upstairs and cleaned off." Edwards wrapped his left arm around her shoulders and helped her up the steep old wooden steps. His heart went out to the girl. She had china-blue eyes, obscenely empty of life though even now they caught the light in a way certain to attract any man's attention. *As they just had,* Edwards thought. She was only an inch shorter than he, with pale, almost transparent skin. Her figure was marred by a slight bulge at the abdomen, and Mike had a good idea what that was, the rest of her figure was so perfect. And she'd just been raped by one Russian, paving the way for a long night of it, Mike Edwards thought, enraged that once more this foul crime had touched his life. There was a small room at the top of the twisting stairs. She entered it and sat on the single bed.

"Wh-wh-who—" she stammered in accented English.

"We're Americans. We escaped from Keflavik when the Russians attacked. What's your name?"

"Vigdis Agustdottir." The slightest sign of life in her voice. Vigdis, the daughter of Agust, dead in the kitchen. He wondered what Vigdis meant, sure

that it wasn't pretty enough.

He set the hurricane lamp on the night table and broke open the pack. Her skin was broken along the jawline, and he swabbed disinfectant there. It had to hurt, but the girl didn't wince at all. The rest of her, he'd seen, was just bruised, maybe some scrapes on her back from the hardwood floor. She'd fought hard to defend herself, and taken a dozen punches. And certainly she was no virgin. Just a bloodied face. It could have been far worse, but Edwards's rage continued to grow. Such a pretty face desecrated—well, he'd already reached that decision. "You can't stay here. We have to leave soon. You'll have to leave, too."

"But—"

"I'm sorry. I understand—I mean, when the Russians attacked, I lost some friends, too. Not the same as your mom and dad, but—Jesus!" Edwards's hands shook in frustration as he stumbled through the meaningless words. "I'm sorry we didn't get here sooner." *What is it that some of the feminists say? That rape is the crime that all men use to subjugate all women? Then why do you want to go downstairs and—* Edwards knew that something almost as satisfying was in the works. He took her hand and she didn't resist. "We're going to have to leave. We'll take you anywhere we can. You must have family around here, or friends. We'll take you to them and they can take care of you. But you can't stay here. If you stay here, you're sure to get killed. Do you understand?" He saw her head nod jerkily in the shadows.

"Yes. Please—please leave me alone. I must be alone for a little."

"Okay." He touched her cheek again. "If you need anything, call us." Edwards went back downstairs. Smith had taken charge. There were three men on their knees, blindfolded, gagged, and hands tied behind their backs. Garcia was standing over them. Rodgers was in the kitchen. Smith was sorting through a pile of stuff on the table.

"Okay, what d'we got here?"

Smith regarded his officer with something akin to affection. "Well, sir, we got us a Russian lieutenant with a wet dick. A dead sergeant. A dead private, and two live ones. The lieutenant had this, sir."

Edwards took the map and unfolded it. "Damn, ain't that nice!" The map was covered with scribbled markings.

"We got another set of binoculars, a radio—shame we can't use that! Some rations. Looks like shit, but better'n nothin'. We done good, skipper. Bag five Russians with three rounds expended."

"What do we need to take, Jim?"

"Just food, sir. I mean, we could take a couple of their rifles, and that'd double up our ammo load, y'know? But we're already loaded pretty heavy—"

"And we aren't here to fight a war, just to play scout. Right."

"I think we oughta take some clothes, sweaters and like that. We taking the lady with us?"

"Have to."

Smith nodded. "Yeah, makes sense. Hope she likes walkin', sir. Looks like she's in decent shape, 'cept for being pregnant. Four months, I'd say."

"Pregnant?" Garcia turned. "Rapin' a pregnant girl?" He muttered something in Spanish.

"Any of them say anything?" Mike asked.

"Not a word, sir." Garcia answered.

"Jim, take a look at the girl, and get her down here. Her name's Vigdis. Easy on her."

"Don't worry, sir." Smith went upstairs.

"The lieutenant's the one with it hanging out, right?" Garcia nodded and Edwards went around to face him. He had to remove the gag and blindfold. The man was his own age. He was sweating. "You speak English?"

The man shook his head. *"Spreche deutsch."*

Edwards had taken two years of German in high school, but suddenly found himself unwilling to talk with this man. He had already decided to kill him, and he didn't wish to speak with someone he was about to kill—it might bother his conscience. Edwards didn't want his conscience to remember this. But he watched the man for a minute or two, examining what sort of person would do what he had done. He expected to discover something monstrous, but didn't. He looked up. Smith was leading Vigdis down the stairs.

"She's got good gear, skipper. Nice warm clothes, her boots are all broke in. I expect we can get her a canteen, a parka, and a field pack. I'd let her bring a brush an' girl stuff, sir. I'll get us some soap, too, and maybe a razor."

"Way to go, Sergeant. Vigdis," Edwards said, getting her attention. "We will be leaving soon." He turned to look back down at the Russian:

"Leutnant. Wofür? Warum?" What for—why did you do all this? Not for me. For her.

The man knew what was coming. He shrugged. "Afghanistan."

"Skipper, they're prisoners," Rodgers blurted. "I mean, sir, you can't—"

"Gentlemen, you are charged under Uniform Code of Military Justice with one specification of rape and two specifications of murder. These are capital crimes," Edwards said, mainly so that he could assuage his conscience for the other two. "Do you have anything to say in your defense? No? You are found guilty. Your sentence is death." With his left hand, Edwards pushed the lieutenant's head back. His right hand flipped the knife into the air, reversing it; then he swung it viciously, striking the man's larynx with the pommel. The sound was surprisingly loud in the room, and Edwards kicked him backward.

A terrible thing to watch, it lasted several minutes. The lieutenant's larynx was instantly fractured, and its swelling blocked his trachea. Unable to breathe, his torso bucked from side to side as his face darkened. Everyone in the room who could see watched. If any felt pity for the man, none showed it. Finally he stopped moving.

"I'm sorry we weren't faster, Vigdis, but this *thing* won't be hurting anyone else." Edwards hoped that his amateur psychiatry would work. The girl went back upstairs, probably to wash, he thought. He'd read that after being raped one thing women wanted to do was bathe, as though there were a visible stigma from being the victim of an animal's lust. He turned toward the remaining two. There was no way they could manage prisoners, and what they had been up to merely provided him with a good excuse. But these two hadn't hurt the girl yet, and—

"I'll take care of it, sir," Garcia said quietly. The private was standing behind the kneeling prisoners. One of them was making some noise, but even

if he hadn't been gagged, none of the Americans knew a word of Russian. They had no chance at all. Garcia stabbed from the side, sticking his knife completely through one neck, then the other. Both men fell. It was over quickly. The private and the lieutenant went into the kitchen to wash their hands.

"Okay, we load them back into the four-by-four and drive it back to the main road. We'll see if we can fake an accident and torch the vehicle. Get some liquor bottles. We'll make it look like they were drinking."

"They were, sir." Rodgers held up a bottle of clear liquor.

Edwards gave the bottle a brief look, but shook off the thought. "Figures. If I guess right, these guys were the crossroads guards from the main highway—or maybe just a patrol. I don't think they can guard every crossroads on this island. If we're just a little lucky, maybe their bosses'll never figure out we were involved in this." *A long shot,* he thought, *but what the hell?*

"Skipper," Smith said. "If you want to do that, we gotta—"

"I know. You and Rodgers stay here and get ready. If you see anything else we can use, pack it up. When we get back, we'll have to haul ass."

Edwards and Garcia loaded all the bodies into the back of the truck, careful to sort through the battle gear. They unloaded waterproof parkas whose camouflage pattern was almost identical with their own and a few other items that wouldn't be missed, then drove off quickly down the road.

Luck was with them. There was no permanent guard post at the crossroads, perhaps because the farm road led nowhere. The Russians had probably been a patrol team, and had chosen the farm for a little informal R&R. Two hundred yards down the coastal highway the road paralleled a steep cliff. They halted the vehicle there and manhandled the bodies into the seats. Garcia emptied a jerrican of gasoline into the back and the two men pushed it toward the edge with the rear hatch open. Garcia tossed a Russian grenade into the back as it went over the edge. Neither man wanted to admire their handiwork. They ran back the half mile to the farmhouse. Everything was ready.

"We have to burn the house, Miss Vigdis," Smith was explaining. "If we don't, the Russians'll know for sure what happened here. Your mom and dad are dead, ma'am, but I'm sure they'd want you to stay alive, okay?"

She was still too much in shock to offer more than token resistance. Rodgers and Smith had cleaned off the bodies, and moved them upstairs to their own bedroom. It would have been better to bury them, but there just wasn't time.

"Let's get moving, people," Edwards ordered. They should have been moving already. Somebody had to be coming to investigate the burning truck, and if they used a chopper . . . "Garcia, you watch the lady. Smith has the rear. Rodgers, take the point. We have to put six miles between us and this place in the next three hours."

Smith waited ten minutes before tossing his grenade into the house. The kerosene he'd spread on the first floor went up at once.

USS CHICAGO

The contact was a lot better now. They had classified one ship as a Kashin-class missile destroyer, and her propeller-blade count indicated a speed of twenty-one knots. The leading elements of the Soviet formation were now thirty-seven miles away. There seemed to be two groups, the leading formation fanned out and screening the second. McCafferty ordered the ESM mast raised. It showed lots of activity, but he expected that.

"Up scope." The quartermaster worked the operating ring, then snapped the handles into place and stepped back. McCafferty swept the horizon quickly. After ten seconds, he flipped the handles up, and the periscope was instantly lowered back into its well.

"It's going to be a busy day, troops," the captain said; he always let the attack center crew know as much of what was going on as possible. The more they knew, the better they could do their jobs. "I saw a pair of Bear-Fs, one due north, the other west. Both a good way off, but you can bet they're dropping sonobuoys. XO, take her back down to five hundred feet, speed five knots. We'll let them come to us."

"Conn, sonar."

"Conn, aye," McCafferty answered.

"We got some pingers, active sonobuoys to the northwest. We count six of them, all very faint." The sonar chief read off the bearings to the signal sources. "Still no active sonar signals coming from the target formation, sir."

"Very well." McCafferty returned the mike to its holder. Chicago's depth was changing quickly, as they dove at a fifteen-degree angle. He watched the bathythermograph readout. At two hundred twenty feet the water temperature began to drop rapidly, changing twelve degrees inside of seventy feet. Good, a strong layer to hide under, and cold water deep to allow good sonar performance for his own sensors.

Two hours before he had removed a torpedo from one of his tubes and replaced it with a Harpoon missile. It gave him only one torpedo ready for instant use if he found a submarine target, but a salvo of three missiles available to fling at surface ships, plus his Tomahawks. He could fire either now, and expect hits, but McCafferty didn't want to fire at just anything. There was no sense wasting a missile on a small patrol craft when there was a cruiser and a carrier out there waiting for him. He wanted to identify specific targets first. It wouldn't be easy, but he knew that easy things didn't have to be done by the 688-class subs. He went forward into sonar.

The chief caught him out the corner of his eye. "Skipper, I may have a bearing to *Kirov*. I just copied six pings from a low-frequency sonar. I think that's him, bearing zero-three-nine. Trying to isolate his engine signature now. And if—okay, some more sonobuoys are dropping to the right." The display showed new points of light well to the right of the first string, and a sizable gap between the two.

"Think he's dropping them in chevrons, Chief?" McCafferty asked. He got a smile and a nod for an answer. If the Soviets were deploying their sonobuoys in angled lines left and right of the formation, that could mean that their ships were heading right for Chicago. The submarine would not have to maneuver at all to intercept them. She could stay as quiet as an open grave.

"They seem to be alternating them above and below the layer, sir. A pretty

fair gap between them, too." The chief lit a cigarette without averting his eyes from the screen. The ashtray next to him was crammed with butts.

"We'll plot that one out. Good work, Barney." The captain patted his sonar chief on the shoulder and went back to the attack center. The fire-control tracking party was already plotting the new contacts. It looked like an interval of just over two miles between the sonobuoys. If the Soviets were alternating them above and below the layer, there was a good chance he could sneak between a pair. The other question was the presence of passive buoys, whose presence he could not detect.

McCafferty stood at the periscope pedestal, watching his men at work as they entered data into the fire-control computers, backed up by other men with paper plots and hand-held calculators. The weapons-control panel was lit up by indicators showing ready. The submarine was at battle stations.

"Take her up to two hundred feet, we'll listen above the layer for a few minutes." The maneuver paid off at once.

"I got direct-path to the targets," the sonar chief announced. They could now detect and track sound energy radiating directly from the Soviet ships, without depending on the on-again, off-again convergence zones.

McCafferty commanded himself to relax. He'd soon have work enough.

"Captain, we're about due for another sonobuoy drop. They've been averaging about every fifteen minutes, and this one might be close."

"Getting that Horse-Jaw sonar again, sir," sonar warned. "Bearing three-two-zero at this time. Signal weak. Classify this contact as the cruiser *Kirov*. Stand by—another one. We have a medium-frequency active sonar bearing three-three-one, maneuvering left-to-right. We classify this contact as a Kresta-II ASW cruiser."

"I think he's right," the plotting officer said. "Bearing three-two-zero is close to our bearings for a pair of screen ships, but far enough off that it's probably a different contact. Three-three-one is consistent with the center screen ship. It figures. The Kresta will be the screen commander, with the flagship a ways behind him. Need some time to work out the ranges, though."

The captain ordered his submarine to stay above the layer, able to duck beneath it in seconds. The tactical display was evolving now. He had a workable bearing on *Kirov*. Almost good enough to shoot on, though he still needed range data. There seemed to be a pair of escorts between him and the cruiser, and unless he had a proper range estimate, any missile he launched at the Soviet flagship might attack a destroyer or frigate by mistake. In the interim, the solution on the attack director set the Harpoons to fly straight for what he believed to be the battle cruiser *Kirov*.

Chicago began to zigzag left and right of her course track. As the submarine changed her position, the bearing to her sonar contacts changed also. The tracking party could use the submarine's own course deviation as a baseline to compute ranges to the various contacts. A straightforward process—essentially an exercise in high-school trigonometry—it nevertheless took time because they had to estimate the speed and course of the moving targets. Even computer support couldn't make the process go much faster, and one of his quartermasters took great pride in his ability to use a circular slide rule and race the computer to a hard solution.

The tension seemed to grow by degrees, then it plateaued. The years of training were paying off. Data was handled, plotted, and acted upon in seconds. The crew suddenly seemed a physical part of the gear they were operating, their feelings shut off, their emotions submerged, only the sweat on their foreheads betraying that they were men after all, and not machines. They depended absolutely on their sonar operators. Sound energy was their only indication of what was happening, and each new bearing report triggered furious activity. It was clear that their targets were zigzagging, which made the range computations even more difficult.

"Conn, sonar! Active sonobuoy close aboard to port! Below the layer, I think."

"Right full rudder, all ahead two-thirds," the executive officer ordered instantly.

McCafferty went to sonar and plugged in a set of headphones. The pings were loud but . . . distorted, he thought. If the buoy was below the temperature gradient, the signals radiating upward would be unable to detect his submarine—probably. "Signal strength?" he asked.

"Strong," the chief replied. "Even money they might have picked us up. Five hundred yards farther out and they lose us for sure."

"Okay, they can't monitor them all at once."

The XO moved *Chicago* a thousand yards before returning to base course. Overhead, they knew, was a Bear-F ASW aircraft armed with homing torpedoes and a crew whose job it was to listen to the sonobuoy signals. How good were the buoys and the men? That was one thing that they didn't know. Three tense minutes passed and nothing happened.

"All ahead one-third, come left to three-two-one," the executive officer ordered. They were now through the line of buoys. Three more such lines were between them and their target. They'd nearly determined range for three of the escorts, but not to the *Kirov* yet.

"Okay, people, the Bears are behind us. That's one less thing to worry about. Range to the nearest ship?" he asked the approach officer.

"Twenty-six thousand yards. We think he's a Sovremenny. The Kresta is about five thousand yards east of him. He's pinging away with hull and VDS sonars." McCafferty nodded. The variable-depth sonar would be below the layer and had scant chance of detecting them. The hull sonar they'd have to pay attention to, but it wouldn't be a problem for a while yet. Okay, the captain thought, things are going pretty much according to plan—

"Conn, sonar, torpedoes in the water, bearing three-two-zero! Signal faint. Say again torpedoes in the water, three-two-zero, bearing changing—additional, lots of active sonars just lit up. We're getting increased screw noises for all contacts." McCafferty was in the sonar room before the report ended.

"Torpedo bearing change?"

"Yes! Moving left-to-right—Jesus. I think somebody's attacking the Russians. Impact!" The chief jabbed his finger at the display. A series of three bright spokes appeared right on the bearing to *Kirov*. The display suddenly went berserk. The high-and medium-frequency segment lit up with active sonar lines. The lines indicating ships became brighter as the ships increased

engine speeds and changed direction as they began to maneuver.

"Secondary explosion on this contact—holy shit! Lots of explosions in the water now. Depth charges, maybe, something's really ripping the water up. There's another torpedo—way off, bearing changing right to left."

The display was now too complex for McCafferty to follow. The chief expanded the time scale to allow easier interpretation, but only he and his experienced operators could understand it.

"Skipper, it looks like somebody just got inside on them and launched an attack. He got three solid hits on *Kirov,* and now they're trying to beat on him. These two ships appear to be converging on something. I—another torpedo in the water, don't know whose. Gawd, look at all these explosions!"

McCafferty went aft.

"Periscope depth, now!" *Chicago* angled upward, taking a minute to reach her position.

He saw what might have been a mast on the horizon, and a column of black smoke, bearing three-two-zero. Over twenty radars were operating along with a number of voice radios.

"Down scope. We have any target solutions?"

"No, sir," the XO answered. "When they started maneuvering, all our data went to hell."

"How far to the next sonobuoy line?"

"Two miles. We're positioned to run right through a gap."

"Make your depth eight hundred feet. Ahead full, move us in."

Chicago's engines sprang into life, accelerating the submarine to thirty knots. The executive officer dived the boat to eight hundred feet, ducking deep below a sonobuoy set for shallow search. McCafferty stood over the chart table, took a pen from his pocket, and unconsciously began chewing on the plastic end as he watched his sub's course take him closer and closer to the enemy formation. Sonar performance dropped virtually to nil with the high speed, but soon the low-frequency sounds of the exploding ordnance echoed through the steel hull. Chicago ran for twenty minutes, zigzagging slightly to avoid the Russian sonobuoys, as the fire-control men kept updating their solutions.

"Okay, all ahead one-third and take her back up to periscope depth," McCafferty said. "Tracking party, stand by for a firing run."

The sonar picture cleared up rapidly. The Soviets were continuing to hunt frantically for whoever had fired at their flagship. One ship's trace was entirely gone—at least one Russian ship had been sunk or crippled. Explosions rippled through the water, punctuated by the screeing sound of homing torpedoes. All were close enough to be a matter of real concern.

"Shooting observation. Up scope!"

The search periscope slid upward. McCafferty caught it low and swept the horizon. "I—Jesus!" The TV monitor showed a Bear only half a mile to their right, heading north for the formation. He could see seven ships, mainly mast tops, but one Sovremenny-class destroyer was hull-down, perhaps four miles away. The smoke he'd seen before was gone. The water resounded with the noise of Russian sonars.

"Raise the radar, power-up, and stand by."

A petty officer pushed the button to raise the submarine's surface-search radar, activated the system, but kept it in standby mode.

"Energize and give me two sweeps," the captain ordered. There was a real danger here. The Soviets would almost certainly detect the submarine's radar and try to attack it.

The radar was on for a total of twelve seconds. It "painted" a total of twenty-six targets on the screen, two of them close together about where he would have expected *Kirov* to be. The radar operator read off ranges and bearing, which were entered into the Mk-117 fire-control director and relayed to the Harpoon missiles in the torpedo tubes, giving them bearing to target and the range at which to switch on their seeker-heads. The weapons officer checked his status lights, then selected the two most promising targets for the missiles.

"Set!"

"Flood tubes." McCafferty watched the weapons-panel operator go through the launch sequence. "Opening outer doors."

"Solution checked and valid," the weapons officer said calmly. "Firing sequence: two, one, three."

"Shoot!" McCafferty ordered.

"Fire two." The submarine shuddered as the powerful impulse of high-pressure air ejected the weapon from the tube, followed by the whoosh of water entering the void. "Fire one . . . fire three. Two, one, and three fired, sir. Torpedo tube doors are shut, pumping out to reload."

"Reload with Mark-48s. Prepare to fire Tomahawks!" McCafferty said. The fire-control men switched the attack director over to activate the bow-mounted missiles.

"Up scope!" The quartermaster spun the control wheel. McCafferty let it come all the way up. He could see the smoke trail of the last Harpoon, and right behind it . . . McCafferty slapped the periscope handles up and stepped back. "Helix heading in! Take her down, all ahead flank!" The submarine raced downward. A Soviet antisub helicopter had seen the missile launch and was racing in at them. "Left full rudder."

"Left full rudder, aye!"

"Passing through one hundred feet. Speed fifteen knots," the XO reported.

"There he is," McCafferty said. The pings from the helicopter's active sonar reverberated through the hull. "Reverse your rudder. Shoot off a noisemaker." The captain ordered his submarine back to an easterly course and reduced speed as they dropped through the layer. With luck the Soviets would mistake the noisemaker for the cavitation noises of the submarine and attack it as Chicago drew clear.

"Conn, sonar, we have a destroyer heading in, bearing three-three-nine. Sounds like a Sovremenny—torpedo in the water aft. We have one torpedo in the water bearing two-six-five."

"Right twenty degrees rudder. All ahead two-thirds. Come to new course one-seven-five."

"Conn, sonar, new contact, twin screws, just started with a low-frequency sonar, probably a Udaloy, blade count says twenty-five knots, bearing three-five-one and constant. Torpedo bearing changing, heading aft and fading."

"Very well." McCafferty nodded. "The helicopter dropped on the noisemaker. We don't have to sweat that one. All ahead one-third, make your depth one thousand feet."

The Sovremenny he didn't worry too greatly about, but the Udaloy was another thing entirely. The new Soviet destroyer carried a low-frequency sonar that could penetrate the layer under certain conditions, plus two helicopters and a long-range rocket-boosted torpedo weapon that was better than the American ASROC.

Ba-wah! The sound of a low-frequency sonar. It had hit them on the first shot. Would it report *Chicago's* position to the Udaloy? Or would the submarine's rubber coating prevent it?

"Target bearing three-five-one. Blade count is down, indicates speed of ten knots," sonar reported.

"Okay, he's slowed to search for us. Sonar, how strong was that ping?"

"Low edge of detection range, sir. Probably did not get a return off us. Contact is maneuvering, bearing now three-five-three. Continuing to ping, but his sonar is searchlighting west-to-east away from us. Another helo is pinging, sir, bearing zero-nine-eight. This one's below the layer, but fairly weak."

"XO, take us west. We'll try to loop around them to seaward and approach their amphibs from the west." McCafferty returned to the sonar room. He was tempted to engage the Udaloy, but could not launch a torpedo this deep without using a dangerously high amount of his reserve high-pressure air. Besides, his job was to kill the command ships, not the escorts. His fire-control team set up a solution anyway in case killing the Russian destroyer became a necessity.

"God, what a mess," the chief breathed. "The depth-charging up north has tapered off some. Bearing is steadying down on these contacts here. Either they've resumed their base course or they're heading away. Can't tell which. Uh-oh, more sonobuoys are dropping down." The chief's finger traced the new dots, in a steady line—heading toward *Chicago.* "Next one's going to be real close, sir."

McCafferty stuck his head into the attack center. "Bring her around south, and go to two-thirds."

The next sonobuoy splashed into the water directly overhead. Its cable deployed the transducer below the layer and began automatic pinging.

"They got us for sure, skipper!"

McCafferty ordered a course change to the west and again increased to full speed to clear the area. Three minutes later a torpedo dropped into the water, either dropped by the Bear or fired from the Udaloy, they couldn't tell. The torpedo started searching for them from a mile off and turned away. Again their rubber anechoic coating had saved them. A helo's dipping sonar was detected ahead of them. McCafferty went south to avoid it, knowing that he was being driven away from the Soviet fleet, but unable to do much about it at the moment. A pair of helicopters was now after him, and for a submarine to defeat two dipping sonars was no simple exercise. It was clear that their mission was not so much to find him as to drive him off, and he could not maneuver fast enough to get past them. After two hours of trying, he broke off for the last time. The Soviet force had moved beyond sonar range, their last

reported course being southeast toward Andøya.

McCafferty swore to himself. He'd done everything right, gotten through the outer Soviet defenses, and had had a clear idea of how to duck under the destroyer screen. But someone had gotten there first, probably attacked *Kirov*—his target!—and messed everything up for his approach. His three Harpoons had probably found targets unless Ivan had shot them down—but he'd been unable even to monitor their impacts. If they had made impacts. The captain of USS Chicago wrote up his contact report for transmission to COMSUBLANT and wondered why things were going the way they were.

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

"A long way to go," the fighter pilot said.

"Yeah," Toland agreed. "Our last report had the group heading southeast to evade a submarine attack. We figure they're back to a southerly course now, but we don't know where they are. The Norwegians sent their last RF-5 in to look, and it disappeared. We have to hit them before they get to Bodø. To hit them, we need to know where they are."

"No satellite intel?"

"Nope."

"Okay. I go in with the reconnaissance pod, out and back . . . four hours. I'll need a tanker to top me off about three hundred miles out."

"No problem," the RAF group captain agreed. "Do be careful, we need all your Tomcats to escort the strike tomorrow."

"I'll be ready in an hour." The pilot left.

"Wish you luck, old boy," the group captain said quietly. This was the third attempt to locate the Soviet invasion force by air. After the Norwegian reconnaissance aircraft had disappeared, the Brits had tried with a Jaguar. That, too, had vanished. The most obvious solution was to send a Hawkeye with the strike to conduct a radar search, but the Brits weren't letting the E-2s stray too far from their shore. The U.K. radar stations had taken a fearful pounding, and the Hawkeyes were needed for local defense.

"It's not supposed to be this hard," Toland observed. Here was a golden opportunity to pound the Soviet fleet. Once located, they could strike the force at dawn tomorrow. The NATO aircraft would swoop in with their own air-to-surface missiles. But the extreme range of the mission gave no time for the strike force to loiter around looking. They had to have a target location before they took off. The Norwegians were supposed to have handled this, but NATO plans had not anticipated the virtual annihilation of the Royal Norwegian Air Force in a week's time. The Soviets had enjoyed their only major tactical successes at sea, and they were successes indeed, Toland thought. While the land war in Germany was heading toward a high-technology stalemate, up to now the vaunted NATO navies had been outmancuvered and out-thought by their supposed dullard Soviet adversaries. Taking Iceland had been a masterpiece of an operation. NATO was still scrambling to reestablish the

Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom barrier with submarines that were supposed to have other missions. The Russian Backfires were ranging far into the North Atlantic, hitting one convoy a day, and the main Russian submarine force hadn't even gotten there yet. The combination of the two might just close the Atlantic, Toland thought. Then the NATO armies would surely lose, for all their brilliant performance to date.

They had to stop the Soviets from taking Bodø in Norway. Once emplaced there, Russian aircraft could attack Scotland, draining resources from the German front and hampering efforts to interdict the bomber forces heading into the Atlantic. Toland shook his head. Once the Russian force was located, they'd pound hell out of it. They had the right weapons, the right doctrine. They could launch their missiles outside the Russian SAM envelopes, just as Ivan was doing to the convoys. It was about time things changed.

The tanker lifted off first, followed half an hour later by the fighter. Toland and his British counterpart sat in the intelligence center napping, oblivious to the teletype printer that chattered in the corner. If anything important came in, the junior watch officers would alert them, and senior officers needed their sleep, too.

"Huh?" Toland started when the man tapped his shoulder.

"Coming in, sir—your Tomcat is arriving, Commander." The RAF sergeant handed Bob a cup of tea. "Fifteen minutes out. Thought you might wish to freshen up."

"Thanks, Sergeant." Toland ran a hand over his unshaven face and decided not to shave. The group captain did, mainly to preserve the look that went with an RAF mustache.

The F-14 came in gracefully, its engines idling and wings outstretched as though grateful for the chance for a landing on something larger than a carrier. The pilot taxied into a hard shelter and quickly dismounted. Technicians were already removing the film cartridge from the camera pod.

"Nothing on their fleet, guys," he said at once. The radar-intercept officer came down behind him.

"God, there's fighters up there!" the RIO said. "Haven't seen so much activity since the last time we went through aggressor school."

"And I got one of the bastards, too. But no joy on the fleet. We covered the coast from Orland to Skagen before we turned back, not one surface ship visible."

"You're certain?" the group captain asked.

"You can check my film, Captain. No visual sightings, nothing on infrared, no radar emissions but airborne stuff—nothing, but lots of fighters. We started finding those just south of Stokke and counted—what was it, Bill?"

"Seven flights, mainly MiG-23s, I think. We never got a visual, but we picked up a lot of High Lark radars. One guy got a little close and I had to pop him with a Sparrow. We saw the flash. That was a hard kill. In any case, guys, our friends ain't coming to Bodø unless it's by submarine."

"You turned back at Skagen?"

"Ran out of film, and we were low on fuel. The fighter opposition really started picking up north of Bodø. If you want a guess, we need to check out Andøya, but we need something else to do it, SR-71 maybe. I don't think I can

get in and out of there except on burner. I'd have to tank right close to there even to try that, and—like I said, lots of fighters were operating there."

"Hardly matters," the group captain said. "Our aircraft haven't the legs for a strike that far without massive tanker support, and most of our tankers are committed elsewhere."

25

Treks

ICELAND

Once clear of the meadow, they were back in what the map called wasteland. It was level for the first kilometer, then the uphill effort began in earnest on the Glymsbrekkur, a seven-hundred-foot climb. *So soon your legs forget,* Edwards thought. The rain hadn't let up, and the deep twilight they had to guide them forced a slow pace. Many of the rocks they tried to walk on were loose. The footing was treacherous, and a misstep could easily be fatal. Their ankles were sore from the constant twists on the uneven ground, and their tightly laced boots didn't seem to help anymore.

After six days in the back country, Edwards and his Marines were beginning to understand what fatigue was. At each step their knees gave just an inch or so too much, making the next step that much more of an effort. Their pack straps cut cruelly into their shoulders. Their arms were tired from carrying their weapons and from constantly adjusting their gear. Necks sagged. It was an effort to look up and around, always having to be alert for a possible ambush.

Behind them the glow of the house fire disappeared behind a ridgeline, the first good thing that had happened. No helicopters yet, no vehicles investigating the fire. Good, but how long would that last? How soon would the patrol be missed? they all wondered.

All but Vigdis. Edwards walked a few yards in front of her, listening to her breathing, listening for sobs, wanting to say something to her, but not knowing what. Had he done the right thing? Was it murder? Was it expediency? Or was it justice? Did that matter? So many questions. He set them aside. They had to survive. That mattered.

"Take a break," he said. "Ten minutes."

Sergeant Smith checked to see where the others were, then sat down beside his officer.

"We done good, Lieutenant. I figure four, maybe five miles in the past two hours. I think we can ease up a little."

Edwards smiled wanly. "Why not just stop and build a house here?"

Smith chuckled in the darkness. "I hear you, skipper."

The lieutenant studied the map briefly, looking up to see how well it

matched with what he could see. “What say we go left around this marsh? The map shows a waterfall here, the Skulafoss. Looks like a nice deep canyon. Maybe we’ll get lucky and find a cave or something. If not, it’s deep. No choppers’ll come in there, and we’ll have shadows to hide in. Five hours?”

“ ’Bout that,” Smith agreed. “Roads to cross?”

“Nothing shows but foot trails.”

“I like it.” Smith turned to the girl, who watched them without a word as she sat with her back against a rock. “How do you feel, ma’am?” he inquired gently.

“Tired.” Her voice said more than that, Edwards thought. There was no emotion there, none at all. He wondered if this was good or bad. What was the right thing to do for the victims of serious crime? Her parents murdered before her eyes, her own body brutally violated, what kind of thoughts were going through that head? Get her mind off it, he decided.

“How well do you know this area?” the lieutenant asked.

“My father fish here. I come with him many times.” Her head leaned back into a shadow. Her voice cracked and dropped into quiet sobs.

Edwards wanted to wrap an arm around her, to tell her things were all right now, but he was afraid it might only make things worse. Besides, who would believe that things were all right now?

“How we fixed for food, Sarge?”

“I figure we got maybe four days’ worth of canned stuff. I went through the house pretty good, sir,” Smith whispered. “Got a pair of fishing rods and some lures. If we take our time, we ought to be able to feed ourselves. Lots of good fishin’ creeks around here, maybe at this place we’re goin’. Salmon and trout. Never could afford to do it myself, but I heard tell that the fishing’s really something. You said your daddy’s a fisherman, right?”

“Lobsterman—close enough. You said you couldn’t afford—”

“Lieutenant, they charge you like two hundred bucks a day to fish up here,” Smith explained. “Hard to afford on a sergeant’s pay, you know? But if they charge that much, there must be a shitload of fish in the water, right?”

“Sounds reasonable,” Edwards agreed. “Time to move. When we get to that mountain, we’ll belly-up for a while and get everybody rested.”

“I’ll drink to that, skipper. Might make us late getting to—”

“Screw it! Then we’re late. The rules just changed some. Ivan’s liable to be looking for us. We take it slow from now on. If our friends on the other end of this radio don’t like it, too damned bad. We’ll get there late, but we’ll get there.”

“You get it, skipper. Garcia! Take the point. Rodgers, cover the back door. Five more hours, Marines, then we sleep.”

USS *PHARRIS*

The spray stung his face, and Morris loved it. The convoy of ballasted ships was steaming into the teeth of a forty-knot gale. The sea was an ugly, foam-

whipped shade of green, droplets of seawater tearing off the whitecaps to fly horizontally through the air. His frigate climbed up the steep face of endless twenty-foot swells, then crashed down again in a succession that had lasted six hours. The ship's motion was brutal. Each time the bow nosed down it was as though the brakes had been slammed on a car. Men held on to stanchions and stood with their feet wide apart to compensate for the continuous motion. Those in the open like Morris wore life preservers and hooded jackets. A number of his young crewmen would be suffering from this, ordinarily—even professional sailormen wanted to avoid this sort of weather—but now mainly they slept. Pharris was back to normal Condition-3 steaming, and that allowed the men to catch up on their rest.

Weather like this made combat nearly impossible. Submarines were mainly a one-sensor platform. For the most part, they detected targets on sonar and the crashing sea noise tended to blanket the ship sounds submarines listened for. A really militant sub skipper could try running at periscope depth to operate his search radar, but that meant running the risk of broaching and momentarily losing control of his boat, not something a nuclear submarine officer looked kindly upon. A submarine would practically have to ram a ship to detect it, and the odds against that were slim. Nor did they have to worry about air attacks for the present. The sea's crenellated surface would surely confuse the seeker head of a Russian missile.

For their own part, their bow-mounted sonar was useless, as it heaved up and down in a twenty-foot arc, sometimes rising completely clear of the water. Their towed-array sonar trailed in the placid waters a few hundred feet below the surface, and so could theoretically function fairly well, but in practice, a submarine had to be moving at high speed to stand out from the violent surface noise, and even then engaging a target under these conditions was no simple matter. His helicopter was grounded. Taking off might have been possible, but landing was a flat impossibility under these conditions. A submarine would have to be within ASROC torpedo range—five miles—to be in danger from the frigate, but even that was a slim possibility. They could always call in a P-3 Orion—two were operating with the convoy at present—but Morris did not envy their crews a bit, as they buffeted through the clouds at under a thousand feet.

For everyone a storm meant time off from battle, for both sides to rest up for the next round. The Russians would have it easier. Their long-range aircraft would be down for needed maintenance, and their submarines, cruising four hundred feet down, could keep their sonar watches in comfort.

"Coffee, skipper?" Chief Clarke came out of the pilothouse, a cup in his hand with a saucer on top to keep the saltwater out.

"Thanks." Morris took the cup and drained half of it. "How's the crew doing?"

"Too tired to barf, sir." Clarke laughed. "Sleeping like babies. How much longer this slop gonna last, Cap'n?"

"Twelve more hours, then it's supposed to clear off. High-pressure system right behind this." The long-range weather report had just come in from Norfolk. The storm track was moving farther north. Mostly clear weather for the next two weeks. Wonderful.

The chief leaned outboard to see how the forward deck fittings were taking the abuse. Every third or fourth wave, *Pharris* dug her nose in hard, occasionally taking green water over the bow. This water slammed into things, and the chief's job was to get them fixed. Like most of the 1052s assigned to the stormy Atlantic, *Pharris* had been given spray strakes and higher bow plating on her last overhaul, which reduced but did not entirely eliminate the problem known to sailors since men first went to sea: the ocean will try very hard to kill you if you lack the respect she demands. Clarke's trained eye took in a hundred details before he turned back.

"Looks like she's riding this one out okay."

"Hell, I'd settle for this all the way back," Morris said after finishing off his coffee. "After it's over, we'll have to round up a lot of merchies, though."

Clarke nodded agreement. Station-keeping was not especially easy in this kind of weather.

"So far, so good, Captain. Nothing big has come loose yet."

"How 'bout the tail?"

"No sweat, sir. I got a man keeping an eye on that. Should hold up nice, 'less we have to speed up." Both men knew they wouldn't speed up. They were making ten knots, and the frigate couldn't run much faster than that in these seas no matter what the cause. "Heading aft, sir."

"Okay. Heads up." Morris looked aloft to check that his lookouts were still alert. Probabilities or not, there was danger out there. All kinds.

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

"Andøya. They weren't heading for Bodø after all," Toland said as he pored over the satellite photographs of Norway.

"How many troops on the ground do you think?"

"At least a brigade, Group Captain. Maybe a short division. Lots of tracked vehicles here, lots of SAMs, too. They're already basing fighters at the airfield. Be bombers next—maybe there by now. These shots arc three hours old." The Russian naval force was already headed back to the Kola Fjord. They could reinforce by air now. He wondered what had happened to the regiment of Norwegians supposed to be based there.

"Their Blinder light bombers can reach us from there. Bastards can dash in and out at high-mach numbers, be bloody difficult to intercept." The Soviets had launched a systematic attack on the RAF radar stations arrayed on the Scottish coast. Some attacks were by air-to-surface missiles, others by submarine-launched cruise missiles. One had even been by fighter-bombers with massive jamming support—but that one had been costly. RAF Tornados had killed half of the raiders, mainly on the return leg. Twin-engine Blinder bombers could deliver their heavy bombloads after running in low and fast. Probably why Ivan wanted Andøya, Toland thought. Perfectly located for them. Easy to support from their own northern bases, and just a little too far for fighter-bombers in Scotland to counterattack without heavy tanker

support.

"We can get there," the American said, "but it means getting half our attack birds loaded up with buddy stores."

"No chance. They'll never release them from the reserve force." The group captain shook his head.

"Then we have to start running a heavy patrol over the Faroes, and that keeps us from bothering Iceland too much." Toland looked around the table. "Don't you just love it when a plan comes together? How do we take the initiative away from these bastards? We're playing their game. We're reacting to their actions, not doing what we want to do. That's how you lose, people. Ivan's got his Backfires standing down because of this front moving across the central Atlantic. They'll be flying again tomorrow after a good day's rest, gunning for our convoys. If we can't hit Andøya, and we can't do much about Iceland, what the hell are we going to do, just sit here and worry about defending Scotland?"

"If we allow Ivan to establish air superiority over us—"

"If Ivan can kill the convoys, Group Captain, we lose the fucking war!" Toland pointed out.

"True. You're quite correct, Bob. The problem is, how do we hit the Backfires? They appear to be flying directly down over Iceland. Fine, we have a known area of transit, but it's protected by MiGs, laddy. We'd end up sending fighters to battle fighters."

"So we try something indirect. We gun for the tankers they're using."

The fighter pilots present, two squadron operations officers had silently been watching the intelligence types talk.

"How the hell arc we going to find their tankers?" one asked now.

"You think they can refuel thirty or more bombers without *some* radio chatter?" Toland asked. "I've listened in on Russian tanker ops by satellite, and I *know* there's chatter. Let's say we can get a snooper up there, and he finds out where they're tanking. Why not then put some Toms astride their flightpath home?"

"Hit them *after* they tank the strike . . ." the fighter jock mused.

"It won't do diddly for the strike today, say, but it'll hurt the bastards tomorrow. If we succeed even once, then Ivan has to change his operational pattern, maybe send fighters out with them. If nothing else, we'll have them reacting to us for a change."

"And perhaps take the heat off us," the group captain went on. "Right, let's look at this."

ICELAND

The map didn't begin to show how hard it would be. The Skula River had carved a series of gorges over the centuries. The river was high, and the falls generated a cloud of spray from which a rainbow arched in the morning sun. It made Edwards angry. He'd always liked rainbows before, but this one meant

the rocks they had to climb down were slick and wet. He figured it to be two hundred feet down to a floor of granite boulders. It looked a lot farther than that.

"You ever do any rock climbin', Lieutenant?" Smith asked.

"Nope, nothing like this. You?"

"Yeah, 'cept we mostly practice goin' up. This here oughta be easier. Don't worry too much about slipping. These boots hold pretty good. Just make sure you set your feet on something solid, okay? And you take it nice and slow. Let Garcia lead off. I already like this place, skipper. See that pool below the falls? There's fish in there, and I don't think anybody'll ever spot us down this hole."

"Okay, you watch the lady."

"Right. Garcia, lead off. Rodgers, cover the rear." Smith slung his rifle across his back as he walked to Vigdis.

"Ma'am, you think you can handle this?" Smith held out his hand.

"I have been here before." She almost smiled until she remembered who had brought her here, and how many times. She didn't take his hand.

"That's good, Miss Vigdis. Maybe you can teach us a thing or two. You be careful, now."

It would have been fairly easy except for their heavy packs. Each man carried a fifty-pound load. The added weight and their fatigue affected their balance, with the result that someone watching from a distance might have taken the Marines for old women crossing an icy street. It was a fifty-degree slope down, in some places almost vertical, with some paths worn into the slopes, perhaps by the wild deer that throve here. For the first time fatigue worked in their favor. Fresher, they might have tried to move more quickly; as it was, each man was near the end of his string, and feared his own weakness more than the rocks. It took over an hour, but they made it down with nothing worse than cuts on their hands and bruises somewhere else.

Garcia crossed the river to the east side, where the canyon wall was steeper, and they camped out on a rocky shelf ten feet above the water. Edwards checked his watch. They had been on the move continuously for more than two days. Fifty-six hours. Each found himself a place in the deep shadows.

First they ate. Edwards downed a can of something without troubling to see what it was. His burps tasted like fish. Smith let the two privates sleep first, and gave his own sleeping bag to Vigdis. The girl fell mercifully asleep almost as quickly as the Marines. The sergeant made a quick tour of the area while Edwards watched, amazed that he had any energy left at all.

"This is a good spot, skipper," the sergeant pronounced finally, collapsing down next to his officer. "Smoke?"

"I don't smoke. Thought you were out."

"I was. The lady's dad did, though, and I got a few packs." Smith lit an unfiltered cigarette with a Zippo lighter bearing the globe and anchor of the Marine Corps. He took a long pull. "Jesus, ain't this wonderful!"

"I figure we can spend a day here to rest up."

"Sounds good to me." Smith leaned back. "You held up pretty good, Lieutenant."

"I ran track at the Air Force Academy. Ten-thousand-meter stuff, some marathons, that sort of thing."

Smith gave him a baleful look. “You mean I’ve been trying to walk a damned runner into the ground?”

“You *have* walked a marathoner into the friggin’ ground.” Edwards massaged his shoulders. He wondered if the pain from his pack straps would ever go away. His legs felt as though someone had hammered on them with a baseball bat. He leaned back and commanded every muscle in his body to relax. The rocky ground didn’t help, but he could not raise the energy even to look for a better spot. He remembered something. “Shouldn’t somebody stand guard?”

“I thought about that,” Smith said. He was lying back also, his helmet down over his eyes. “I think just this once we can forget it. Only way anybody’ll spot us is if a chopper hovers right overhead. Nearest road’s ten miles from here. Screw it. What d’you think, skipper?”

Edwards didn’t hear the question.

KIEV, THE UKRAINE

“Ivan Mikhailovich, are your bags packed?” Alekseyev asked.

“Yes, Comrade General.”

“Commander-in-Chief West is missing. He was en route from Third Shock Army to his forward headquarters and disappeared. It is thought he might have been killed by an air attack. We’re taking over.”

“Just like that?”

“Not at all,” Alekseyev said angrily. “They took thirty-six hours to decide that he was probably dead! The maniac had just relieved Third Shock’s commander, then disappeared, and his deputy couldn’t decide what to do. A scheduled attack never began, and the fucking Germans counterattacked while our men were waiting for orders!” Alekseyev shook his head to clear it and went on more calmly. “Well, now we will have soldiers running the campaign, not some politically reliable whoremonger.”

Sergetov again noted his superior’s puritanical streak. It was one of the few traits that agreed exactly with Party policy.

“Our mission?” the captain asked.

“While the General takes charge at the command post, you and I will tour the forward divisions to ascertain the situation at the front. Sorry, Ivan Mikhailovich, I’m afraid this is not the safe posting I promised your father.”

“I speak good English in addition to Arabic,” the younger man sniffed. Alekseyev had checked that out before writing up the transfer orders. Captain Sergetov had been a good company officer before being lured out of uniform by the promise of a comfortable life of Party work. “When do we leave?”

“We fly out in two hours.”

“In daylight?” The captain was surprised at that.

“It would appear that air travel by day is safer. NATO claims to dominate the night sky. Our people say otherwise, but they are flying us out in daylight. Draw your own conclusions, Comrade Captain.”

DOVER AIR FORCE BASE, DELAWARE

A C-5A transport aircraft sat outside its hangar, waiting. Within the cavernous structure a team of forty—half officers in naval dress, half civilians wearing General Dynamics coveralls—worked on Tomahawk missiles. While one group removed the massive antiship warheads and replaced them with something else, the other group's task was more difficult. They were replacing the missile guidance systems, the usual ship-hunting packages being removed in favor of terrain-matching systems that the men knew were used only for nuclear-tipped missiles intended for land targets. The guidance boxes were new, fresh from the factory. They had to be checked and calibrated. A delicate job. Though the systems had already been certified by the manufacturer, the usual peacetime routines were gone, replaced with an urgency that all of them felt but none of them knew the reason for. The mission was a complete secret.

Delicate electronic instruments fed pre-programmed information into the guidance packages, and other monitors examined the commands generated by the on-board computers. There were only enough men to check out three missiles at a time, and each check took just over an hour. Occasionally one would look up to see the massive Galaxy transport, still waiting, its crew pacing about between trips to the weather office. When each missile was certified, a grease pencil mark was made next to the "F" code letter on the warhead, and the torpedo-shaped weapon was carefully loaded into its launch canister. Nearly a third of the guidance packages were discarded and replaced. Several had failed completely, but the problems with most were quite minor, though serious enough to warrant replacement instead of adjustment. The technicians and engineers from General Dynamics wondered about that. What sort of target demanded this sort of precision? All in all, the job took twenty-seven hours, six more than expected. About half of the men boarded the aircraft, which lifted off the concrete twenty minutes later, bound for Europe. They slept in the rear-facing seats, too tired to care about the dangers that might await them at their destination, wherever that was.

THE SKULAFOSS, ICELAND

Edwards was sitting up almost before he knew why. Smith and his Marines were even faster, already on their feet, weapons in their hands and racing to cover. Their eyes scanned the rocky rim of their small canyon as Vigdis continued to scream. Edwards left his rifle and went to her.

The automatic reaction of the Marines was to assume that she had seen some danger upon them. Instinctively, Edwards knew different. Her eyes looked blankly toward the bare rocks a few yards away, her hands gripped at

the bedroll. By the time he reached her, she had stopped screaming. This time Edwards did not stop to think. He grabbed her around the shoulders and pulled her head toward his own.

"You're safe. Vigdis, you are safe."

"My family," she said, her chest heaving as she caught her breath. "They kill my family. Then—"

"Yes, but you are alive."

"The soldiers, they—" The girl had evidently loosened her clothes to sleep more comfortably. Now she drew back from Edwards, pulling them tight around her. The lieutenant kept his hands away from her clothes and wrapped the sleeping bag around her.

"They will not hurt you again. Remember all of what happened. They will not hurt you again."

She looked into his face. He didn't know what to make of her expression. The pain and grief were evident, but there were other things there, and Edwards didn't know this girl well enough to read what she was thinking.

"The one who kill my family. You kill—killed him."

Edwards nodded. "They are all dead. They cannot hurt you."

"Yes." Vigdis looked down at the ground.

"You all right?" Smith asked.

"Yeah," Edwards answered. "The lady had a—a bad dream."

"They come back," she said. "They come back again."

"Ma'am, they ain't never coming back to hurt you." Smith grasped her arm through the sleeping bag. "We'll protect you. Nobody will hurt you while we are here. Okay?"

The girl nodded jerkily.

"Okay, Miss Vigdis, now why don't you try to get some sleep? Ain't nobody gonna hurt you while we're around. You need us, you can call us."

Smith walked away. Edwards started to rise, but the girl's hand came out of the bag and took his arm.

"Please, do not go away. I—fear, fear to be alone."

"Okay. I'll stay with you. You lie back and get some sleep."

Five minutes later her eyes were closed and her breathing was regular. Edwards tried not to look at her. Should she suddenly awake and see his eyes on her—what might she think? And she could be right, Edwards admitted to himself. Two weeks ago, had he encountered her at the Keflavik Officers Club . . . he was a young, unattached man, and she was evidently a young, unattached woman. His main thought after the second drink would have been to get her back to his quarters. A little soft music. How beautiful she would have looked there, slipping demurely from her fashionable clothes in the soft light coming through the shades. Instead he had met her stark naked, cuts and bruises on her exposed flesh. So strange it was now. Edwards knew without thinking that if another man tried to put hands on her, he'd kill him without hesitation, and he couldn't bring himself to think of what taking the girl himself might be like—his only likely thought if he had encountered her on the street. What if I hadn't decided to come to her house? he wondered. She'd be dead by now, along with her parents. Probably someone would have found them in a few days . . . like they'd discovered Sandy. And that, Edwards knew

all along, was the reason he'd killed the Russian lieutenant and enjoyed the man's slow trip to hell. A pity no one had seen fit to do that—

Smith waved to him. Edwards rose quietly and walked over.

"I got Garcia on guard. I think we better go back to being Marines after all. If that'd been for real, we'd all be cold meat by now, Lieutenant."

"We're all too tired to move out just yet."

"Yes, sir. The lady okay?"

"She's had a tough time. When she wakes up—hell, I don't know. I'm afraid she might just come apart on us."

"Maybe." Smith lit a cigarette. "She's young. She might bounce back if we give her a chance."

"Get her something to do?"

"Same as us, skipper. You're better off doin' than thinkin'."

Edwards checked his watch. He'd actually gotten six hours of sleep before all this had happened. Though his legs were stiff, otherwise he felt better than he would have imagined. It was an illusion, he knew. He needed at least another four hours, and a good meal, before he'd be ready to move.

"We won't move out until about eleven. I want everybody to get some more sleep and one decent meal before we head out of here."

"Makes sense. When you gonna radio in?"

"I should have done that a long time ago, I just don't want to climb those damned rocks."

"Lieutenant, I'm just a dumbass grunt, but insteada doing that, why don't you just walk downstream about half a mile? You oughta be able to track in on your satellite that way, right?"

Edwards turned to look north. Walking about that far would lower the angle to the satellite as well as climbing . . . why didn't *I* think of that? *Because like any good Air Force Academy graduate, you thought in terms of up-and-down instead of sideways.* The lieutenant shook his head angrily, noting the sergeant's sly grin before he lifted the radio pack and heading down the canyon's rocky floor.

"You're very late, Beagle," Doghouse said at once. "Repeat your status."

"Doghouse, things are just terrible. We had a run-in with a Russian patrol." Edwards explained for another two minutes.

"Beagle, are you out of your Goddamned mind? Your orders are to avoid, repeat avoid, contact with the enemy. How do you know that somebody doesn't know you're there? Over!"

"They're all dead. We rolled their vehicle over a cliff and set fire to it. We made it look like an accident, just like on TV. It's all over, Doghouse. No sense worrying about it now. We are now ten klicks from where it happened. I'm resting my men for the rest of the day. We will continue our march north tonight. This may take longer than you expect. The terrain is rugged as hell, but we'll do our best. Nothing more to report. We can't see much from where we are."

"Very well. Your orders are unchanged, and please don't play white knight again—acknowledge."

"Roger that. Out." Edwards smiled to himself as he repacked the radio. When he got back to the others, he saw that Vigdis was stirring in her sleep.

He lay down beside her, careful to stay a few feet away.

SCOTLAND

"Bloody cowboy—John Wayne rescuing the settlers from the bloody red Indians!"

"We weren't there," said the man with the eye patch. He fingered it briefly. "It is a mistake to judge a man from a thousand miles away. He was there, he saw what was happening. The next thing is, what does this tell us about Ivan's troops?"

"The Sovs do not exactly have an exemplary record for dealing with civilians," the first man pointed out.

"The Soviet airborne troops are known for their stem discipline," the second replied. Formerly a major in the SAS, and invalided out, he was now a senior man with the Special Operations Executive, the SOE. "Conduct like this is not indicative of well-disciplined troops. That may be important later on. For the moment, as I told you earlier, this lad is turning out very nicely indeed." He said it without a trace of smugness.

26

Impressions

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

The flight in was bad enough. They'd come in aboard a light bomber, racing in at low level to a military airport east of Berlin, no more than four staff members to an aircraft. All had arrived safely, but Alekseyev wondered how much of it was skill and how much luck. This airfield had clearly been visited by NATO aircraft recently and the General already had his doubts about what his colleagues in the Air Force had told him about their ability to control the sky even in daylight. From Berlin a helicopter took his party to CINC-West's forward command post outside Stendal. Alekseyev was the first senior officer to arrive at the underground bunker complex, and he did not like what he found. The staff officers present were too concerned with what the NATO forces were doing and not concerned enough with what the Red Army was supposed to be doing to them. The initiative had not been lost, but his first impression was that the danger was real. Alekseyev located the command operations officer and started assembling information on how the campaign was going. His commander arrived half an hour later, and immediately took Alekseyev into his office.

"Well, Pasha?"

"I have to see the front at once. We have three attacks under way. I need to see how they are going. The German counterattack at Hamburg was repulsed, again, but this time we lack the forces to exploit it. The northern area is currently in stalemate. Our deepest penetration to date is just over one hundred kilometers. The timetable has gone completely to hell, losses are far higher than expected—on both sides, but worse for us. We have gravely underestimated the lethality of NATO antitank weapons. Our artillery has been unable to suppress them enough for our forces to achieve a major breakthrough. NATO air power is hurting us badly, especially at night. Reinforcements are not getting forward as well as we expected. We still have the initiative in most areas, but unless we achieve a breakthrough, that may not last more than another few days. We must find a weakness in NATO lines and launch a major coordinated attack soon."

"The NATO situation?"

Alekseyev shrugged. "Their forces are fully in the field. Further

reinforcements are coming in from America, but from what our prisoners have told us, not so well as they expected. My impression is that they are stretched very thin in some areas, but we have not as yet identified a major area of weakness. If we can find one, and exploit it, I think we can rupture the front and stage a multidivisional breakout. They can't be strong everywhere. The German demand for forward defense compels the NATO forces to try and stop us everywhere. We made the same mistake in 1941. It cost us heavily. It must be doing the same to them."

"How soon do you wish to visit the front?"

"Within the hour. I'll take Captain Sergetov with me—"

"The Party man's son? If he's hurt, Pasha . . ."

"He's an officer in the Soviet Army, whatever his father might be. I need him."

"Very well. Keep me posted on where you are. Send the operations people in. We have to get control of this whorehouse."

Alekseyev commandeered a new Mi-24 attack helicopter for his reconnaissance. Overhead, a flight of agile MiG-21 fighters guarded the General as the helicopter skimmed low over the treetops. He eschewed the seat, instead crouching by the windows to see what he could. A lifetime of military service had not prepared him for the destruction that lay on the landscape below him. It seemed that every road held a burned-out tank or truck. The major crossroads had gotten particularly severe attention from NATO air power. Here a bridge had been knocked out, and immediately behind it a company of tanks waiting its repair had been savaged. The charred remains of aircraft, vehicles, and men had transformed the neat, picturesque German countryside into a junkyard of high-technology weapons. As they crossed the border into West Germany, things only got worse. Each road had been fought for, each tiny village. He counted eleven smashed tanks outside one such village, and wondered how many others had been pulled off the battlefield for repair. The town itself was almost totally destroyed by artillery and resulting fires. He saw only one building that looked like it might be habitable. Five kilometers west, the same story was repeated, and Alekseyev realized that a whole regiment of tanks had been lost in a ten-kilometer advance down a single road. He began to see NATO equipment, a German attack helicopter identifiable only from the tail rotor that stuck out from the circle of ashes, a few tanks and infantry carriers. For both sides the proud vehicles manufactured at the greatest expense and skill were scattered on the landscape like trash thrown from a car window. The Soviets had more to expend, the General knew, but how many more?

The helicopter landed at the edge of a forest. Just within the treeline, Alekseyev saw, antiaircraft guns tracked them all the way to the ground. He and Sergetov jumped out, ducking under the still-turning main rotor as they ran into the trees. There they found a cluster of command vehicles.

"Welcome, Comrade General," said a dirty-faced Red Army colonel.

"Where is the divisional commander?"

"I'm in command. The General was killed day before yesterday by enemy artillery fire. We have to move the CP twice a day. They are becoming very skilled at locating us."

"Your situation?" Alekseyev asked curtly.

"The men arc tired, but they can still fight. We are not getting sufficient air support, and the NATO fighters give us no rest at night. We have about half our nominal combat strength, except in artillery. That's down to a third. The Americans have just changed tactics on us. Now, instead of attacking the leading tank formations, they are sending their aircraft after our guns first. We were badly hurt last night. Just as we were launching a regimental attack, four of their ground-attack fighters nearly wiped out a battalion of mobile guns. The attack failed."

"What about concealment!" Alekseyev demanded.

"Ask the devil's mother why it doesn't work," the colonel shot back. "Their radar aircraft can evidently track vehicles on the ground—we've tried jamming, we've tried lures. Sometimes it works, but sometimes not. The division command post has been attacked twice. My regiments are commanded by majors, my battalions by captains. NATO tactics are to go for the unit commanders, and the bastards are good at it. Every time we approach a village, my tanks have to fight through a swarm of missiles. We've tried rockets and artillery to suppress them, but you can't take the time to blast every building in sight—we'd never get anywhere."

"What do you need?"

"Air support and lots of it. Get me the support to smash through what's opposing me, and I'll give you your damned breakout!" Ten kilometers behind the front, a tank division was waiting for this very unit to rupture the front—but how could it exploit a breakthrough that was never made?

"Your supply situation?"

"Could be better, but we're getting enough forward to supply what we have left—not enough to support an intact division."

"What arc you doing now?"

"We launch a two-regiment attack just over an hour from now. Another village, named Bieben. We estimate enemy strength as two understrength battalions of infantry, supported by tanks and artillery. The village commands a crossroads we need. Same one we tried to get last night. This assault should work. Do you wish to observe?"

"Yes."

"Then we'd better get you forward. Forget the helicopter unless you want to die. Besides"—the colonel smiled—"I can use it to support the attack. I'll give you an infantry carrier to get you forward. It will be dangerous up there, Comrade General," the colonel warned.

"Fine. You can protect us. When do we leave?"

USS *PHARRIS*

The calm sea meant that *Pharris* was back on port-and-starboard steaming. Half the crew was always on duty as the frigate held her station north of the convoy. The towed sonar was streamed aft, and the helicopter sat ready on the

flight deck, its crew dozing in the hangar. Morris slept also, snoring away in his leather bridge chair, to the amusement of his crewmen. So, officers did it, too. The crew accommodations often sounded like a convention of chainsaws.

"Captain, message from CINCLANTFLT."

Morris looked up at the yeoman and signed for the message form. An eastbound convoy one hundred fifty miles north of them was under attack. He walked back to the chart table to check distances. The submarines there were not a threat to him. That was that. He had his own concerns, and his world had shrunk to include them only. Another forty hours to Norfolk, where they would refuel, replace expended ordnance, and sail again within twenty-four hours.

"What the hell's that?" a sailor said loudly. He pointed to a low-lying trail of white smoke.

"That's a missile," answered the officer of the deck. "General quarters! Captain, that was a cruise missile southbound a mile ahead of us."

Morris snapped upright in his seat and blinked his eyes clear. "Signal the convoy. Energize the radar. Fire the chaff." Morris ran to the ladder to CIC. The ship's alarm was sounding its strident note before he got there. Aft, two Super-RBOC chaff rockets leaped into the sky and exploded, surrounding the frigate with a cloud of aluminum foil.

"I count five inbounds," a radar operator was saying. "One's heading toward us. Bearing zero-zero-eight, range seven miles, speed five hundred knots."

"Bridge, come right full rudder to zero-zero-eight." the tactical action officer ordered. "Stand by to fire off more chaff. Air action forward, weapons free."

The five-inch gun swiveled slightly and loosed several rounds, none of which came near the incoming missile.

"Range two miles and closing," reported the radarman.

"Fire four more Super-RBOCs."

Morris heard the rockets launch. The radar showed their chaff as an opaque cloud that enveloped the ship.

"CIC," called a lookout. "I see it. Starboard bow, inbound—it's gonna miss, I got a bearing change. There—there it goes, passing aft. Missed us by a couple hundred yards."

The missile was confused by the chaff. Had its brain had the capacity to think, it would have been surprised that it struck nothing. Instead, on coming back to a clear sky, the radar seeker merely looked for another target. It found one, fifteen miles ahead, and altered course toward it.

"Sonar," Morris ordered, "check bearing zero-zero-eight. There's a missile-armed sub out there."

"Looking now, sir. Nothing shows on that bearing."

"A five-hundred-knot sea-skimmer. That's a Charlie-class sub, maybe thirty miles out," Morris said. "Get the helo out there. I'm going topside."

The captain reached the bridge just in time to see the explosion on the horizon. That was no freighter. The fireball could only mean a warship had had her magazines exploded by a missile, perhaps the one that had just missed them. Why hadn't they been able to stop it? Three more explosions followed. Slowly the noise traveled across the sea toward them, reaching *Pharris* as the deep sound of an enormous bass drum. The frigate's Sea Sprite helicopter was

just lifting off, racing north in the hope of catching the Soviet sub near the surface. Morris ordered his ship to slow to five knots in the hope that the lower speed would allow his sonar to perform just a little better. Still nothing. He returned to CIC.

The helicopter's crew dropped a dozen sonobuoys. Two showed something, but the contact faded, and was not reestablished. Soon an Orion showed up and carried on the search, but the submarine had escaped cleanly, her missiles having killed a destroyer and two merchantmen. *Just like that,* Morris thought. *No warning at all.*

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

"Raid warning again," the Group Captain said.

"Realtime?" Toland asked.

"No, an asset we have in Norway. Contrails overhead heading southwest. He counts twenty or so, aircraft type unknown. We have a Nimrod patrolling north of Iceland now. If they're Backfires, and if they rendezvous with a tanker group, we might just get something. See if your idea works, Bob."

Four Tomcat interceptors were sitting ready on the flight line. Two were armed with missiles. The other pair carried buddy-stores, fuel tanks designed to transfer fuel to other aircraft. The distance they expected for a successful intercept meant a round trip of two thousand miles, which meant that only two aircraft could reach far enough, and they were stretching to the limit.

The Nimrod circled two hundred miles east of Jan Mayen Land. The Norwegian island had been subjected to several air attacks, destroying the radar there, though so far the Russians had not launched a ground attack as expected. The British patrol aircraft bristled with antennae but carried no armament of her own. If the Russians sent escorting fighters out with the bomber/tanker force, she could only evade. One team listened in on the bands used by the Russians to communicate between aircraft, another on radar frequencies.

It was a long, tense wait. Two hours after the raid warning, a garbled transmission was heard, interpreted as a warning to a Backfire pilot approaching a tanker. The bearing was plotted, and the Nimrod turned east hoping for a cross bearing on the next such signal. None was detected. Without a firm fix, the fighters had only the slimmest hope of an intercept. They were kept on the ground. Next time, they decided, there'd be a pair of snoopers up.

USS *CHICAGO*

The QZB bell-ringer call arrived just after lunch. McCafferty brought his

submarine to antenna depth and received orders to proceed to Faslane, the Royal Navy submarine base in Scotland. Since losing contact with the Russian surface force, they had not tracked a single positive contact. It was crazy. All the pre-war assessments told McCafferty to expect a "target-rich environment." So far he was rich only in frustration. The executive officer took them back down to a deep cruising depth while McCafferty began to write up his patrol report.

BIEBEN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

"You're pretty exposed here," the captain observed, crouching just behind the turret.

"True enough," Sergeant Mackall agreed. His M-1 Abrams tank was dug into the reverse slope of a hill, its gun barely clear of the ground behind a row of shrubs. Mackall looked down a shallow valley to a treeline fifteen hundred meters away. The Russians were in there, surveying the ridges with powerful field glasses, and he hoped that they could not make out the squat, ominous profile of the main battle tank. He was in one of three prepared firing positions, a sloped hole in the ground dug by the engineers' bulldozers, helped over the last few days by local German farmers who had taken to the task with a will. The bad news was that the next line of such positions required traversing five hundred meters of open fields. They'd been planted with something a bare six weeks before. Those crops would never amount to much, the sergeant knew.

"Ivan must love this weather," Mackall observed. There was an overcast at about thirteen hundred feet. Whatever air support he could expect would have a bare five seconds to acquire and engage their targets before having to break clear of the battlefield. "What can you give us, sir?"

"I can call four A-10s, maybe some German birds," the Air Force captain replied. He surveyed the terrain himself from a slightly different perspective. What was the best way to get the ground-attack fighters in and out? The first Russian attack on this position had been repulsed, but he could see the remains of two NATO aircraft that had died in the effort. "There should be three choppers, too."

That surprised Mackall—and worried him. Just what sort of attack were they expecting here?

"Okay." The captain stood and turned back to his armored command vehicle. "When you hear 'Zulu, Zulu, Zulu,' that means the air is less than five minutes out. If you see any SAM vehicles or antiair guns, for Christ's sake take them out. The Warthogs have been hit real hard, Sarge."

"You got it, Cap'n. You better get your ass outa here, it's gonna be showtime soon." One thing Mackall had learned was just how important a good forward air-control officer was, and this one had dug the sergeant's troop out of a really bad scrape three days before. He watched the officer sprint fifty yards to the waiting vehicle, its engine already turning. The rear door hadn't yet closed

when the driver pulled out fast, zigzagging down the slope and across the plowed field toward the command post.

B Troop, 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment had once been fourteen tanks. Five of the originals were gone, and there had been only two replacements. Of the rest, all had been damaged to one degree or another. His platoon leader had been killed on the second day of the war, leaving Mackall in command of the three-tank platoon, covering nearly a kilometer of front. Dug in between his tanks was a company of German infantry—men of the *Landwehr,* the local equivalent of the National Guard, farmers and shopowners for the most part, men fighting to defend not just their country, but their own homes. They, too, had taken serious losses. The "company" was no more than two platoons of effectives. *Surely the Russians know just how thin we're spread,* Mackall thought. Everyone was dug in—deep. The power of Russian artillery had come as a shock despite all the pre-war warnings they'd had.

* * *

"The Americans must love this." The colonel gestured at the low clouds. "Their damned airplanes come swooping in too low for our radar, and this way we have practically no chance to see them before they fire."

"How badly have they hurt you?"

"See for yourself." The colonel gestured at the battlefield. Fifteen tanks lay in view—the burned-out remains. "That American low-level fighter did this—the Thunderbolt. Our men call it the Devil's Cross."

"But you killed two aircraft yesterday," Sergetov objected.

"Yes, and only one of four gun vehicles survived the effort. The same vehicle got both—Senior Sergeant Lupenko. I recommended him for the Red Banner. It will be posthumous—the second aircraft crashed right on his vehicle. My best gunner," the colonel said bitterly. Two kilometers away, the wreckage of a German Alphajet was a charred garnish atop the remains of a ZSU-30 gun vehicle. No doubt it had been deliberate, the colonel thought, that German had wanted to kill just a few more Soviets before he died. A sergeant handed his colonel a radio headset. The officer listened for half a minute before speaking a few words that he punctuated with a quick nod.

"Five minutes, Comrades. My men are fully in place. Would you follow me, please?"

The command bunker had been hastily built of logs and earth, with a full meter of overhead cover. Twenty men were crammed into it, communications men for the two regiments in the assault. The division's third regiment waited to exploit the breakthrough and pave the way for the reserve armored division to break into the enemy's rear. If, Alekseyev reminded himself, everything went as planned.

No enemy troops or vehicles could be seen, of course. They would be in the woods atop the ridge less than two kilometers away, dug in deep. He watched the divisional commander nod to his artillery chief, who lifted a field phone and spoke two words:

"Commence firing."

It took several seconds for the sound to reach them. Every gun the division owned, with an additional battery from the tank division, spoke as one dreadful voice, and the thunder echoed across the countryside. The shells arched overhead, at first striking short of the opposite ridgeline, then closing on it. What had once been a gentle hill covered with lush grass turned into a brown obscenity of bare earth and smoke.

"I think they're serious, Sarge," the loader said, pulling his hatch down tight.

Mackall adjusted his helmet and microphone as he peered out the view ports built into his commander's cupola. The thick armor plate kept most of the noise out, but when the ground shook beneath them, the shock came through the treads and suspension to rock the vehicle, and each crewman reflected to himself on the force needed to budge a sixty-ton tank. This was how the lieutenant had bought it—a one-in-a-thousand shot from a heavy gun had landed a round right on his turret, and it had burrowed through the thin overhead armor to explode the vehicle.

Left and right of Mackall's tank, the largely middle-aged German territorials cowered in their deep, narrow holes, their emotions oscillating between terror and rage at what was happening to them and their country—*and their homes!*

"Good fire plan, Comrade Colonel," Alekseyev said quietly. A screaming sound passed overhead. "There is your air support."

Four Russian ground-attack fighters wheeled overhead to trace parallel to the ridgeline and dropped their loads of napalm. As they turned back toward Russian lines, one exploded in midair.

"What was that?"

"Probably a Roland," the colonel answered. "Their version of our SA-8 rocket. Here we go. One minute."

Five kilometers behind the command bunker, two batteries of mobile rocket launchers ripple-fired their weapons in a continuous sheet of flame. Half were high-explosive warheads, the other half smoke.

Thirty rockets landed in Mackall's sector and thirty in the valley before him. The impact of the explosives shook his tank violently, and he could hear the *pings* of fragments bouncing off his armor. But it was the smoke that frightened him. That meant Ivan was coming. From thirty separate points, gray-white smoke billowed into the air, forming an instant man-made cloud that enveloped all the ground in view. Mackall and his gunner activated their thermal-imaging sights.

"Buffalo, this is Six," the troop commander called in over the command circuit. "Check in."

Mackall listened in closely. All eleven vehicles were intact, protected by their deep holes. Again he blessed the engineers—and the German farmers—who had dug the shelters. No further orders were passed. None were needed.

"Enemy in view," the gunner reported.

The thermal sight measured differences in temperature and could penetrate most of the mile of smoke cover. And the wind was on their side. A ten-mile-

per-hour breeze was driving the cloud back east. Sergeant First Class Terry Mackall took a deep breath and went to work.

"Target tank, ten o'clock. Sabot! Shoot!"

The gunner trained left and centered the sight reticle on the nearest Soviet battle tank. His thumbs depressed the laser button, and a thin beam of light bounced off the target. The range display came up in his sight: 1310 meters. The fire-control computer plotted target distance and speed, elevating the main gun. The computer measured wind speed and direction, air density and humidity, the temperature of the air, and the tank's own shells, and all the gunner had to do was place the target in the center of his sights. The whole operation took less than two seconds, and the gunner's fingers jammed home on the triggers.

A forty-foot muzzle blast annihilated the shrubs planted two years earlier by some German Boy Scouts. The tank's 105mm gun jerked back in recoil, ejecting the spent aluminum case. The shell came apart in the air, the sabot falling free of the projectile, a 40mm dart made of tungsten and uranium that lanced through the air at almost a mile a second.

The projectile struck the target one second later at the base of the gun turret. Inside, a Russian gunner was just picking up a round for his own cannon when the uranium core of the shot burned through the protective steel. The Russian tank exploded, its turret flying thirty feet into the air.

"Hit!" Mackall said. "Target tank, twelve o'clock. Sabot! Shoot!"

The Russian and American tanks fired at the same instant, but the Russian shot went high, missing the defiladed M-1 by nearly a meter. The Russian was less lucky.

"Time to leave," Mackall announced. "Straight back! Heading for alternate one."

The driver already had reverse engaged, and twisted hard on his throttle control. The tank surged backward, then spun right and headed fifty yards to another prepaied position.

"Damned smoke!" Sergetov swore. The wind blew it back in their faces, and they couldn't tell what was going on. The battle was now in the hands of captains, lieutenants, and sergeants. All they could see was the orange fireballs of exploding vehicles, and there was no way to know whose they were. The colonel in command had his radio headset on and was barking orders to his subunit commanders.

Mackall was in his first alternate position in less than a minute. This one had been dug parallel to the ridgeline, and his massive turret trained to the left. He could see the infantry now, dismounted and running ahead of their assault carriers. Allied artillery, both German and American, ripped through their ranks, but not quickly enough . . .

"Target—tank with an antenna, just coming out of the treeline."

"Got 'em!" the gunner answered. He saw a Russian T-80 main battle tank with a large radio antenna projecting from the turret. That would be a company commander—maybe a battalion commander. He fired.

The Russian tank wheeled just as the shot left the muzzle. Mackall watched

the tracer barely miss his engine compartment.

"Gimme a HEAT round!" the gunner shouted over the intercom.

"Ready!"

"Turn back, you mother—"

The Russian tank was driven by an experienced sergeant who zigzagged his way across the valley floor. He jinked every five seconds, and now brought his tank left again—

The gunner squeezed off his round. The tank jumped at the recoil and the spent round *clanged* off the turret's rear wall. Already the closed tank hull stank of the ammonia-based propellant.

"Hit! Nice shot, Woody!"

The shell hit the Russian between the last pair of road wheels and wrecked the tank's diesel engine. In a moment the crew began to bail out, "escaping" into an environment alive with shell fragments.

Mackall ordered his driver to move again. By the time they were in their next firing position, the Russians were less than five hundred meters away. They fired two more shots, killing an infantry carrier and knocking the tread off a tank.

"Buffalo, this is Six, begin moving to Bravo Line—execute."

As platoon leader, Mackall was the last to leave. He saw both of his companion tanks rolling down the open reverse slope of the hill. The infantry was moving also, into their armored carriers, or just running. "Friendly" artillery blanketed the ridgeline with high explosives and smoke to mask their withdrawal. On command, the tank leaped forward, accelerating to thirty miles per hour and racing to the next defense line before the Russians could occupy the ridge they were leaving behind. Artillery fire was all over them, exploding a pair of German personnel carriers.

"Zulu, Zulu, Zulu!"

"Get me a vehicle!" Alekseyev ordered.

"I cannot permit this. I cannot let a general—"

"Get me a damned vehicle! I must observe this," Alekseyev repeated.

A minute later, he and Sergetov joined the colonel in a BMP armored command vehicle that raced to the position the NATO troops had just vacated. They found a hole that had sheltered two men—until a rocket had landed a meter away.

"My God, we've lost twenty tanks here!" Sergetov said, looking back.

"Down!" The colonel pushed both men into the bloody hole. A storm of NATO shells landed on the ridge.

"There's a Gatling gun!" the gunner said. A Russian antiaircraft gun carrier came over the ridge. A moment later a HEAT round exploded it like a plastic toy. His next target was a Russian tank coming down the hill they'd just left.

"Heads up, friendly air coming in!" Mackall cringed, hoping the pilot could tell the sheep from the goats.

Alekseyev watched the twin-engine fighter swoop straight down the valley. Its nose disappeared in a mass of flame as the pilot fired his antitank cannon.

Four tanks exploded before his eyes as the Thunderbolt appeared to stagger in midair, then turned west, a missile chasing after him. The SA-7 fell short.

"The Devil's Cross?" he asked. The colonel nodded in reply, and Alekseyev realized where the name had come from. From an angle, the American fighter did look like the stylized Russian Orthodox crucifix.

"I just called up the reserve regiment. We may have them on the run," the colonel said.

This, Sergetov thought incredulously to himself, *is a* successful *attack?*

Mackall watched a pair of antitank missiles reach out into the Russian lines. One miss, one kill. More smoke came in from both sides as the NATO troops fell back another five hundred meters. The village they were defending was now in sight. The sergeant had counted a total of five kills to his tank. He hadn't been hit yet, but that wouldn't last. The friendly artillery was really in the fight now. The Russian infantry was down to half the strength he'd first seen, and their tracked vehicles were laying back, trying to engage the NATO positions with their own missiles. Things looked to be going reasonably well when the third regiment appeared.

Fifty tanks came over the hill in front of him. An A-10 swept across the line and killed a pair, then was blotted out of the sky by a SAM. The burning wreckage fell three hundred yards in front of him.

"Target tank, one o'clock. Shoot!" The Abrams rocked backward with yet another shot. "Hit."

"Warning, warning," called the troop commander. "Enemy choppers approaching from the north."

Ten Mi-24 Hinds arrived late, but they made up for it by killing a pair of tanks in less than a minute. German Phantom jets then appeared, engaging them with air-to-air missiles and cannon in a wild melee that suddenly included surface-to-air missiles also. The sky was crisscrossed with smoke trails, and suddenly there were no aircraft in view.

"It's bogging down," Alekseyev said. He'd just learned one important lesson: attack helicopters cannot hope to survive in the face of enemy fighters. Just when he thought the Mi-24s would make a decisive difference, they'd been forced away by the appearance of the German fighters. Artillery support was slacking off. The NATO gunners were counterbattering the Soviet guns expertly, helped by ground-attack fighters. He had to get more front-line air support.

"The hell it is!" the colonel answered. He radioed new orders to the battalions on his left flank.

"Looks like a command vehicle at ten o'clock, on the ridgeline, can you reach it?"

"Long shot, I—"

Whang! A shot glanced off the turret's face.

"Tank, three o'clock, close in—"

The gunner turned his yoke controls and nothing happened. Immediately he reached for the manual traverse. Mackall engaged the target with his machine

gun, bouncing bullets off the advancing T-80 that had come out of nowhere. The gunner cranked frantically at the handle as another round crashed into their armor. The driver aided him, turning the vehicle and praying that they could return the fire.

The computer was out, damaged by the shock of the first hit. The T-80 was less than a thousand meters away when the gunner settled on it. He fired a HEAT round, and it missed. The loader slammed another home in the breech. The gunner worked his controls and fired again. Hit.

"There's more behind that one," the gunner warned.

"Buffalo Six, this is three-one, bad guys coming in from our flank. We need help here," Mackall called; then to the driver: "Left track and back up fast!"

The driver needed no encouragement. He cringed, looking out his tiny viewing prisms, and rocked the throttle handle all the way back. The tank raced backward and left as the gunner tried to lock onto another target—but the automatic stabilization was also out. They had to sit still to fire accurately, and it was death to sit still.

Another Thunderbolt came in low, dropping cluster munitions on the Russian formation. Two more Soviet tanks were stopped, but the fighter went away trailing smoke. Artillery fire joined in to stop the Soviet maneuver.

"For Christ's sake, stop so I can shoot one of the fuckers!" the gunner screamed. The tank stopped at once. He fired, hitting a T-72 on the tread. "Reload!"

A second tank joined Mackall's, a hundred meters to his left. It was intact and fired off three quick rounds for two hits. Then a Soviet helicopter reappeared and exploded the troop commander's tank with a missile. A shoulder-fired Stinger missile then killed the chopper as the German infantry redeployed. Mackall watched a pair of HOT antitank missiles go left and right of his turret, reaching for the advancing Soviets. Both hit.

"Antenna tank, dead ahead."

"I see him. Sabot!" the gunner cranked the turret back to the right. He elevated his gun to battle sights and fired.

"Captain Alexandrov!" the division commander shouted into his microphone. The battalion commander's transmission had stopped in midword. The colonel was using his radio too much. Ten miles away, a German battery of 155mm mobile guns tracked in on the radio signals and fired twenty quick rounds.

Alekseyev heard the incoming and jumped into a German-dug foxhole, dragging Sergetov with him. Five seconds later the area was blanketed by smoke and noise.

The General stuck his head up to see the colonel still standing, still giving radio orders. Behind him the command vehicle was burning, the radios with it. Five men were dead, another half-dozen screaming with the pain of their injuries. Alekseyev looked with annoyance at a bloody streak on the back of his hand.

Mackall killed one more tank, but it was the Germans who stopped the attack, using the last of their HOT missiles to do so. The remaining Russian commander lost his nerve when half the tanks in the battalion were hit. The

survivors turned on their smoke generators and retreated back around the hill to the south. Artillery chased after them. The land battle was over for the moment.

"Mackall, what's happening down your way?" the troop executive officer inquired.

"Where's Six?"

"To your left." Mackall looked and saw the troop commander's burning tank. So that's who it was . . .

"Just us, sir. What's left?"

"I count four."

My God, the sergeant thought.

"Get me a Regiment from the tank division and I can do it. They have nothing left!" the colonel insisted. His face was bloody from a superficial wound.

"I will do this. How soon can you continue the attack?" Alekseyev asked.

"Two hours. I need that long to regroup my forces."

"Very well. I must return to headquarters. The enemy opposition was tougher than you expected, Comrade Colonel. Otherwise your forces performed well. Tell your intelligence section to work harder. Gather up your prisoners and interrogate them rigorously!" Alekseyev moved off with Sergetov in his wake.

"Worse than I expected," the captain observed once they were inside their vehicle.

"They must have had nearly a Regiment facing us." Alekseyev shrugged. "We can't make that kind of mistake very often and expect to succeed. We advanced four kilometers in two hours, but the cost was murderous. And those bastards in the Air Force! I'll have something to say to our Frontal Aviation generals when we get back!"

"That makes you troop XO," the lieutenant said. It turned out there were five surviving tanks. One had both radios broken. "You did good, real good."

"How'd the Germans make out?" Mackall asked his new boss.

"Fifty-percent losses, and Ivan kicked us back four klicks. We can't expect to survive much more of this. We may have some reinforcements in an hour. I think I convinced Regiment that Ivan really wants this place. We'll be getting help. Same for the Germans. They promised another battalion by nightfall, maybe a second one by dawn. Take your track down for refuel and reload. Our friends may be back soon."

"That's one little and two big attacks for this village. They ain't got it yet, sir."

"One other thing. I talked to Regiment about you. The colonel says you're an officer now."

Mackall's tank spent ten minutes getting to the rearm point. Fueling took ten minutes while the exhausted crewmen loaded a new collection of shells. The sergeant was surprised that he had to head back to the front five rounds short.

"You've been hit, Pasha." The younger man shook his head.

"I scratched my hand getting out of the helicopter. I'll let it bleed awhile to punish myself for clumsiness." Alekseyev sat opposite his commander and downed a full liter canteen of water. He was embarrassed by his slight wound and decided to lie about it.

"The attack?"

"Opposition was ferocious. We'd been told to expect two infantry battalions, plus tanks. I estimate the actual enemy strength as a damaged regiment, and they had well-prepared positions. Even so, we almost broke through. The colonel in command had a good plan, and his men pushed as hard as anyone could expect. We forced them back to within sight of the objective. I want to release a regiment of tanks from the OMG to the next attack."

"We are not permitted to do this."

"What?" Alekseyev was stunned.

"The Operational Maneuver Groups are to remain intact until the breakthrough is achieved. Orders from Moscow."

"One more regiment will do it. The objective is in sight! We've chewed up one motor rifle division to get this far, and lost half the strength of another. We can win this battle and get the first major rupture in NATO lines—but we have to act now!"

"You're certain?"

"Yes, but we must move fast. The Germans must realize how close this battle has become. They'll try to reinforce also. The lead regiment from 30th Guards Tank Division is one hour from the front. If we can get them moving within thirty minutes, they'll be part of the next attack. In fact, we should move the whole division up. This opportunity will not last long."

"Very well. I'll call STAVKA for permission."

Alekseyev leaned back and closed his eyes. The Soviet command structure: to deviate from the Plan, even a Theater commander had to get *permission!* It took over an hour while the staff geniuses in Moscow examined the maps. The lead regiment of 30th Guards was released and ordered to join the motor-rifle division in the next attack. But they were late, and the attack was delayed ninety minutes.

Second Lieutenant Terry Mackall—he still wore his stripes and was too tired to care about his change in rank—wondered how seriously Command was taking this little tank battle. Two battalions of German regulars arrived in tracked vehicles, relieving the exhausted *Landwehr* men, who moved back to prepare defensive positions in and around the village to their rear. A company of Leopard tanks and two platoons of M-1s reinforced the position, with a German colonel in overall command. He arrived by helicopter and surveyed all the defensive positions. A tough-looking little bastard, Mackall thought, with some bandages on his face and a tight unsmiling mouth. Mackall remembered that if Ivan broke through here, he just might be able to flank the German and British forces that had stopped the Russians' deepest penetration at the suburbs of Hannover. That made the battle important to the Germans.

The German Leopards took the frontal positions, relieving the Americans. It was a full troop now, back to fourteen vehicles. The troop commander split the force into two parts, with Mackall commanding the southern group. They

found the last line of dug shelters, just southeast of the village. Mackall arrayed his newly assigned command with care, checking each position on foot and conferring with each tank commander. The Germans were thorough enough. Any position that did not already have natural shrubbery in place had had it transplanted in. Nearly all of the civilians who lived here had been evacuated, but a handful of people were unwilling to desert the homes they'd built. One of them brought some of the tankers hot food. Mackall's crew didn't have time to eat it. The gunner repaired two loose connectors and reset the balky fire-control computer. The loader and driver worked on a loose tread. Artillery was falling around them before they finished.

Alekseyev wanted to be there. He had a telephone link with the division, and listened in on the division command circuit. The colonel—Alekseyev wanted to make him a general if the attack succeeded—complained that they had been forced to wait too long. He'd asked for and gotten a reconnaissance mission over enemy lines. One of the aircraft had vanished. The other's pilot reported movement, but could not provide a strength estimate, so busy had he been dodging surface-to-air missiles. The colonel feared there had been an increase in enemy strength, but without hard evidence could not justify either a further delay or further reinforcements.

Mackall also watched from a distance. The last row of hills was a mile away, across what had been a farm but was now covered mostly with small trees, as though the soil had been exhausted. His forces were organized in two three-tank platoons. As commander, his job was to lie back and direct them by radio.

Twenty minutes after the radio reported a strong Russian advance, he began to see movement. German personnel carriers began streaming down the hill, toward the village. Some Soviet helicopters appeared to the north, but this time a Roland battery hidden in the village engaged them, exploding three before they retreated out of sight. Next came the German Leopard tanks. Mackall counted and came up three short. NATO artillery pounded the hilltops, and Soviet guns dropped shells in the fields around the American tanks. Then the Russians appeared.

"Buffalo, all units hold fire. Repeat, everyone hold fire," the troop commander said over the radio.

Mackall saw that the retreating Germans were passing through the village. *So, that's what that little Kraut bastard has planned,* he thought. *Beautiful . . .*

"We have them on the run!" the colonel told Alekseyev over the command circuit. On the map table in front of the General, counters were moved and plotting officers made marks with grease pencils. They penciled in a red gap in the German lines.

The leading Soviet tanks were now five hundred meters from the village, racing down the two-kilometer gap between B-Troop's tanks. The German colonel gave his order to the American troop commander.

"Buffalo, this is Six—take 'em!" Twelve tanks fired at once and hit nine targets.

“Woody, look for antennas,” Mackall ordered his gunner. He used his viewing prisms to keep an eye on his subordinates as the gunner traversed right and searched the rear Soviet ranks.

“There’s one! Load a HEAT round! Target tank. Range twenty-six hundred —” The tank lurched sideways. The gunner watched the tracer on the shell arc through the air on its two-mile path . . . “Hit!”

The second volley from the M-1s killed eight tanks, then others began to explode from antitank missiles launched out of the village. The Russians had defiladed tanks on their flanks, and in front of them was a village bristling with antitank missiles: the German colonel had set a moving ambush, and the pursuing Russians had fallen into it. Already the Leopards were sweeping around left and right from behind the village to catch the Russians in the open. The air-control officer brought his fighter-bombers in on the Soviet artillery positions yet again. Soviet fighters engaged them, but while doing that they could not interfere with the land battle, and now a squadron of German Gazelle missile-armed choppers added their fire into the killing ground. The Soviet tanks fired off smoke and desperately tried to engage their enemies, but the Americans were dug in deep, and the German missileers in the village skillfully changed firing points after every shot.

Mackall shifted one platoon right and the other left. His own gunner located and killed a second command tank, then the Germans enveloped the Russian formation from north and south. Still outnumbered, the Germans nevertheless caught the Russians off balance, raking the tank column with their big 120mm gun tubes. The Soviet commander ordered his helicopters back in to blast open an escape route. They surprised and killed three German tanks before missiles began to drop them from the sky yet again. Suddenly it became too much. As Mackall watched, the Soviet force wheeled and retreated toward the hills, with the Germans in pursuit. The counterattack was pressed to the limit, and Mackall knew that *nobody* did that as well as the Krauts. By the time he had orders to move, the initial defense position was back in friendly hands. The battle had lasted barely over an hour. Two Soviet motor-rifle divisions had now been decimated on the road to Bieben.

The crewmen opened their hatches to let fresh air into the stifling turret. Fifteen empty cases rattled about on the floor. The fire-control computer was out again, but Woody had killed another four tanks, two of them belonging to Soviet officers. The troop commander came over to him in a jeep.

“Three tanks damaged,” Mackall reported. “Have to drag them clear for repairs.” His face split into a wide grin: “They ain’t never gonna take this town away from us!”

“Those *Bundeswehr* regulars made the difference.” The lieutenant nodded. “Okay, start getting your people reloaded.”

“Oh, yeah. Last time I came back five rounds short.”

“They’re thinning out the ammo issue. It’s not getting across to us as quick as we thought.”

Mackall thought that one over and didn’t like what he came up with. “Have somebody tell those Navy pukes that we can stop these bastards if they get their shit together!”

USS *PHARRIS*

Morris had never seen Hampton Roads so crowded. At least sixty merchantmen were swinging at anchor, with a beefed-up escort force preparing to take them to sea. *Saratoga* was in also, her mainmast gone and a replacement being fabricated on the quay while repairs were under way for less visible damage from her near-miss. Numerous aircraft circled overhead, and several ships had their search radars on lest a Soviet submarine sneak close inshore and launch cruise missiles into the mass of shipping.

Pharris was tied to the fueling pier, taking on fuel oil for her boilers and jet fuel for her helicopter. The single ASROC she'd expended had already been replaced, as had the six chaff rockets. Aside from that, the only thing that needed to be taken aboard was food. Ed Morris handed his patrol report to a messenger who would deliver it to his squadron commander. He would have gone himself, but there was no time. They were scheduled to sail in another twelve hours. This was another twenty-knot convoy, bound for the French ports of LeHavre and Brest with heavy equipment and munitions.

Morris had been given the fleet intelligence report. If anything, matters had gotten worse. Twenty NATO submarines were now staked out in the G-I-UK gap, trying to make up for the loss of the SOSUS line. They reported killing a sizable number of Soviet submarines, but they also reported that some had gotten through, and for each known leaker, Morris was sure that there were four or five unknowns. The first convoy had gotten virtually a free ride. Those few Soviet submarines in the Atlantic at the time had been spread thin, and were forced to race noisily to their convoy targets. No longer. About sixty were thought to be in the Atlantic now, at least half of them nuclear-powered. Morris thought over the numbers, what the Soviet inventory was, how many kills NATO claimed, and wondered if sixty was an optimistic assessment.

Then there were the Backfires. The convoy would be taking a southerly routing, adding two full days to the crossing time but forcing the Soviet bombers to stretch to the limit of their fuel. Also, thirty minutes before each satellite pass, the convoy would reverse course to a westerly heading in the hope that the Soviets would then vector their bombers and submarines to the wrong point. A pair of carrier battle groups was at sea and would offer support if possible. Clearly they wanted to spring a trap on the Backfires. The carrier groups would be steaming an evasive path, trying to avoid satellite detection entirely. Morris knew this was possible, an exercise in geometry, but it placed serious limits on the carriers' freedom of action—and having the carrier groups at sea would take up some of the antisubmarine patrol aircraft that the convoys depended on. A compromise, but then all life, and certainly any war operation, was a collection of compromises. Morris lit an unfiltered cigarette. He'd broken the habit years before, but halfway through the outbound leg of his first war cruise he'd found himself at the ship's store purchasing a carton of tax-free "at sea" smokes. The added hazard to his health, he judged, was no more than incidental. Already nine destroyers and frigates had been sunk, two with all hands.

ICELAND

Edwards had learned to hate the rust-colored contour lines on his maps. Each one announced a change of twenty meters. He tried to work it out in his head, but got no further than sixty-five-point-six feet for every one of the Goddamned red-brown lines. Sometimes the lines were spread apart by as much as an eighth of an inch. Other times they were packed together tightly enough that the lieutenant half expected to find a sheer wall. He remembered the one visit he'd had to Washington, D.C., and the time he and his father had scornfully walked past the tourists lined up to wait for an elevator ride to the top of the Washington Monument, preferring to walk the five hundred feet up the square-spiral staircase to the observation deck. They'd arrived at the top tired but proud. He was now making that same climb about every ninety minutes, except this time there were no smooth, even steps, and no elevator awaited them at the top for a more relaxing trip down . . . and no taxi to the hotel.

They climbed ten contour lines—two hundred meters, or six hundred fifty-six feet—three hours after breaking camp; crossing, the map said, from the Skorradalshreppur second-order administrative division to the Lundarreykjadashreppur second-order administrative division. There was no green highway sign to announce this, the Icelanders being bright enough to know that anyone who traveled out here lived here and needed no directions. They were rewarded with two kilometers of fairly level terrain as they walked between a pair of marshes. It was littered with rock and ash from what seemed to be an extinct volcano about four miles away.

"Take a break," Edwards said. He sat down next to a three-foot rock so that he'd have something to lean against, and was surprised when Vigdis came over. She sat down three feet away, facing him.

"How are you today?" he asked. There was life in her eyes now, Mike saw. Perhaps the demons that had awakened her the previous day were now gone? No, he thought, they'd never be completely gone—but you had to be alive to have nightmares, and they would probably fade in time. With time you could recover from anything, except murder.

"I have not thank you for my life."

"We could not stand by and let them kill you," he said, wondering if it was a lie. If the Russians had simply killed all three people in the house, would he have attacked them or would he have waited and simply looted the house after they'd left? It was a time for the truth.

"I didn't do it for you, not only for you."

"I do not understand."

Edwards took his wallet from a back pocket and opened it to a five-year-old photograph. "That's Sandy, Sandra Miller. We grew up on the same block, all the way through school. Maybe we would have gotten married someday," he said quietly. *And maybe not,* he admitted to himself. *People change.* "I went to the Air Force Academy, she went to the University of Connecticut in Hartford. October of her second year, she disappeared. She was raped and murdered. They found her a week later in a ditch. The guy who did it—they never proved he killed Sandy, but he raped two other girls at the school—well, he's

in a mental hospital now. They said he was crazy, wasn't really responsible. So someday the does'll say he's cured, and they'll let him out, and Sandy'll still be dead." Edwards looked down at the rocks.

"I couldn't do anything about that. I'm not a cop, I was two thousand miles away. But not this time." His voice showed no emotion at all. "This time was different."

"You love Sandy?" Vigdis asked.

How to answer that one? Mike wondered. It sure did seem like that, five years ago, didn't it? But would it have worked out? *You haven't exactly been celibate these last few years, have you? But it hasn't been the same, either, has it?* He looked at the photograph taken three days before Sandy had been killed. It had arrived in his box at Colorado Springs after her death, though he hadn't known it at the time. Her dark, shoulder-length hair, the tilt of the head, the impish smile that went with an infectious laugh . . . all gone.

"Yes." There was emotion in his voice now.

"You do for her then, yes?"

"Yes," Edwards lied. *I did it for me.*

"I do not know your name."

"Mike, Michael Edwards."

"You do this for me, Michael. Thank you for my life." There were the first beginnings of a smile. She placed her hand on his. It was soft and warm.

27

Casualties

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

"At first we thought that they simply drove off the cliff road. We found this in the vehicle." The major of field police held up the top of a broken bottle of vodka. "But the medical corpsman who collected their personal effects found this."

The major pulled the rubberized sheet off the one body that had been thrown clear when the vehicle hit the rocks. The stab wound in the chest was unmistakable.

"And you said that the Icelanders were as peaceful as sheep, Comrade General," the KGB colonel observed sardonically.

The major continued, "It is difficult to reconstruct exactly what happened. There was a farm a short distance away whose house was burned to the ground. We found two bodies in the wreckage. Both had been shot."

"Who were they?" General Andreyev asked.

"Impossible to identify the bodies. The only way we knew they were shot was the bullet hole in the sternum, so that was likely done at very close range. I had one of our surgeons look at them. A man and a woman, probably in their middle years. According to a local government official, the farm was occupied by a married couple with one daughter, age"—the major checked his notes —"twenty. The daughter has not been found."

"What of the patrol?"

"They were southbound on the coast road when they disappeared—"

"No one spotted the fires?" the KGB colonel asked sharply.

"There was heavy rain that night. Both the burning vehicle and the farmhouse were below the horizon for the neighboring observation patrols. As you know, the road conditions here have upset our patrol schedules, and the mountains interfere with radio performance. So when the patrol was late getting in, no particular note was made of it. You can't see the vehicle from the road, and as a result they were not spotted until the helicopter flew over it."

"The other bodies, how did they die?" the General wanted to know.

"When the vehicle burned, the soldiers' hand grenades cooked off, with the obvious results. Except for the sergeant here, there is no telling how they died.

So far as we can tell, no weapons were taken. All the rifles were there, but some items are unaccounted for: a map case and some other minor things. Possibly they were blown clear of the vehicle by the explosions and fell into the sea, but I doubt this."

"Conclusions?"

"Comrade General, there is not a great deal to go on, but I surmise that the patrol visited the farmhouse, 'liberated' this bottle of vodka, probably shot and killed the two people who lived there, and burned the house. The daughter is missing. We are searching the area for her body. At some time after this happened, the patrol was surprised and killed by an armed party which then tried to make their deaths look like a vehicle accident. We should assume that there is at least one band of resistance fighters at large."

"I disagree," the KGB colonel announced. "Not all the enemy troops have been accounted for. I think that your 'resistance fighters' are probably NATO personnel who escaped when we took Keflavik. They ambushed our troops, then murdered the farm people in the hope of stirring the local population against us."

General Andreyev shared a furtive look with his major of field police. It had been a KGB lieutenant commanding the patrol. The *chekisti* had insisted that some of their people accompany the roving patrols. Just what he needed, the General thought. Bad enough that his crack paratroopers were consigned to garrison duty—always destructive to unit morale and discipline—but now they were jailers, too, and in some cases commanded by jailers. So the arrogant young KGB officer—he'd never met a humble one—had thought to have himself some fun. Where was the daughter? The answer to this mystery certainly lay with her. But the mystery wasn't the important thing, was it?

"I think we should interrogate the local inhabitants to see what they know," the KGB officer announced.

"There are no 'local inhabitants,' Comrade," the major answered. "Look at your map. This is an isolated farm. The nearest neighbor is seven kilometers away."

"But—"

"Who killed these unfortunates, and why, is unimportant. We have armed enemies out there," Andreyev said. "This is a military matter, not something for our colleagues in the KGB. I'll have a helicopter search the area around the farm. If we find this resistance group, or whatever it is, we will deal with it as with any band of armed enemies. You may interrogate any prisoners we manage to capture, Comrade Colonel. Also, for the moment any KGB officer who accompanies our security patrols will be an observer, not a commander. We cannot risk your men in combat situations for which they have not been fully trained. So. Let me talk to my operations officer to see how we will handle the search. Comrades, you did well to bring this to our attention. Dismissed." The chekist wanted to stay, but KGB or not, he was only a colonel, and the General was exercising his legitimate prerogatives as commander on the scene.

An hour later, a Mi-24 attack helicopter lifted off to check the area around the burned farm.

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

"Again?" Toland asked.

"Not a bank holiday, Commander," the group captain replied. "Two regiments of Backfires departed their bases twenty minutes ago. If we want to catch their tankers, we must move smartly."

Within minutes, two EA-6B Prowlers, designed to find and jam enemy radar and radio signals, were climbing to altitude on a northwest heading. Known with backhanded affection as the Queer, the EA-6B's most striking characteristic was its canopies, inlaid with real gold to protect sensitive on-board instruments against electromagnetic radiation. As the planes climbed, their pilots and electronics officers were already working in their gilt cages.

Two hours later they spotted their prey, radioed back the signal bearings—and four Tomcats rolled down the runway of Stornoway.

NORWEGIAN SEA

Cruising at an altitude of thirty-six thousand feet the Tomcats flew racetrack-shaped patterns north and south of the predicted course for the Soviet tankers. Their powerful search/missile-guidance radars were shut down. Instead, they swept the skies with a built-in TV camera that could identify aircraft as far as forty miles away. Conditions were ideal, a clear sky with only a few high cirrus clouds; the fighters left no contrails that might warn another aircraft of their presence. The pilots curved their fighters around the sky, their eyes shifting out to check the horizon, then in to check engine instruments, a cycle repeated every ten seconds.

"Well, lookie here . . ." the squadron commander said to his weapons operator. The flight officer in the Tomcat's back seat centered the TV camera on the aircraft.

"Looks like a Badger to me."

"I don't suppose he's alone. Let's wait."

"Roge."

The bomber was over forty miles off. Soon two more appeared, along with something smaller.

"That's a fighter. So, they have fighter escorts this far out, eh? I count a total of . . . six targets." The weapons operator tightened up his shoulder straps, then activated his missile controls. "All weapons armed and ready. Fighters first?"

"Fighters first, light 'em up," the pilot agreed. He toggled up his radio. "Two, this is Lead, we have four tankers and a pair of fighters on a course of about zero-eight-five, forty miles west of my position. We are engaging now. Come on in. Over."

"Roger that. On the way, Lead. Out." Two brought his interceptor into a tight turn and advanced his throttles to the stops.

The leader's radar activated. They now had two fighters and four tankers

identified. The first two Phoenixes would be targeted on the fighters.

"Shoot!"

The two missiles dropped clear of their shackle points and ignited, leading the Tomcat to the targets.

The Russian tankers had detected the fighter's AWG-9 radar and were already trying to evade. Their escorting fighters went to full power and activated their own missile-guidance radars, only to find that they were still outside missile range to the attacking fighters. Both switched on their jamming pods and began to jink their aircraft up and down as they closed in hope of launching their own missiles. They couldn't run away, there wasn't enough fuel for that, and their mission was to keep the fighters off the tankers.

The Phoenix missiles burned through the air at Mach 5, closing the distance to their targets in just under a minute. One Soviet pilot never saw the missile, and was blotted from the sky in a ball of red and black. The other did, and threw his stick over, a second before the missile exploded. It nearly missed, but fragments tore into the fighter's port wing. The pilot struggled to regain control as he fell from the sky.

Behind the fighters, the tankers split up, two heading north, the other pair south. The lead Tomcat took the northern pair and killed both with his remaining two Phoenixes. His wingman racing up from the north fired two missiles, hitting with one, and missing with the other, as the missile was confused by the Badger's jamming gear. The Tomcat continued to close, and fired another missile. By this time he was close enough to track the bird visually. The AIM-54 missile ran straight and true, exploding only ten feet from the Badger's tail. Hot fragments ripped into the converted bomber and detonated the remaining fumes in its refueling tanks. The Soviet bomber disappeared in a thundering orange flash.

The fighters swept their radars around the sky, hoping to find targets for their remaining missiles. Six more Badgers were a hundred miles off, but they had already been warned by the leading tankers and were heading north. The Tomcats didn't have enough fuel to pursue. They turned for home and landed at Stornoway an hour later with nearly dry tanks.

"Five confirmed kills and a damage," the squadron commander told Toland. "It worked."

"This time." Toland was pleased nevertheless. The U.S. Navy had just completed its first offensive mission. Now for the next one. Information was just in on the Backfire raid. They'd hit a convoy off the Azores, and a pair of Tomcats was waiting two hundred miles south of Iceland to meet them on the return leg.

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

"Our losses have been murderous," said the General of Soviet Frontal Aviation.

"I will tell our motor-rifle troops just how serious your losses have been," Alekseyev replied coldly.

"We have lost nearly double our projections."

"So have we! At least our ground troops are fighting. I watched an attack. You sent in *four* attack fighters. *Four!"*

"I know of this attack. There was a full regiment assigned, more than twenty, plus your own attack helicopters. The NATO fighters are engaging us ten kilometers behind the front. My pilots must fight for their lives simply to get where your tanks are—and then all too often they are engaged by our own surface-to-air missiles!"

"Explain," ordered Alekseyev's superior.

"Comrade General, the NATO radar surveillance aircraft are not easy targets—they are too well protected. With their airborne radar, they can vector their fighters against ours to launch their missile attacks from beyond visual range. When our pilots learn that they are being attacked, they must evade, no? Do your tankers sit still to give their enemies an easy shot? This often means that they must drop their bombs to maneuver. Finally, when they do manage to reach the battle zone they are frequently shot at by friendly missile units who don't take the time to distinguish between friend and foe." It was an old story, and not merely a Soviet problem.

"You are telling us that NATO has command of the air," Alekseyev said.

"No, they do not. Neither side does. Our surface-to-air missiles deny them the ability to control the air over the battle line, and their fighters—helped by their surface-to-air missiles, and ours!—deny it to us. The sky over the battlefield belongs to no one." *Except the dead,* the Air Force General thought to himself.

Alekseyev thought of what he had seen at Bieben, and wondered how correct he was.

"We must do better," the Theater Commander said. "The next massed attack we launch will have proper air support if it means stripping fighters from every unit on the front."

"We are trying to get more aircraft forward by using deceptive maneuvering. Yesterday we tried to feint NATO's fighters to the wrong place. It nearly worked, but we made a mistake. That mistake has been identified."

"We attack south of Hannover at 0600 tomorrow. I want two hundred aircraft at the front line supporting my divisions."

"You'll have them," the Air Force General agreed. Alekseyev watched the flyer leave.

"So, Pasha?"

"That's a start—if the two hundred fighters show up."

"We have our helicopters, too."

"I watched what happens to helicopters in a missile environment. Just when I thought they'd blast a hole through the German lines, a combination of SAMs and fighters nearly annihilated them. They have to expose themselves too greatly when they fire their missiles. The courage of the pilots is remarkable, but courage alone is not enough. We have underestimated NATO firepower—no, more properly we have overestimated our ability to neutralize it."

"We've been attacking prepared positions since this war began. Once we break into the open—"

"Yes. A mobile campaign will reduce our losses and give us a much more

even contest. We have to break through." Alekseyev looked down at the map. Just after dawn tomorrow, an army—four motor-rifle divisions, supported by a division of tanks—would hurl itself into the NATO lines. "And here seems to be the place. I want to be forward again."

"As you wish, Pasha. But be careful. By the way, the doctor tells me the cut on your hand was from a shell fragment. You are entitled to a decoration."

"For this?" Alekseyev looked at his bandaged hand. "I've cut myself worse than this shaving. No medal for this, it would be an insult to our troops."

ICELAND

They were climbing down a rocky slope when the helicopter appeared two miles west of them. It was low, about three hundred feet over the ridge line, and moving slowly toward them. The Marines immediately fell to the ground and crawled to places where they might hide in shadows. Edwards took a few steps to Vigdis and pulled her down also. She was wearing a white patterned sweater that was all too easy to spot. The lieutenant stripped off his field jacket and draped it around her, holding her head down as he wrapped the hood over her blond hair.

"Don't move at all. They're looking for us." Edwards kept his own head up briefly to see where his men were. Smith waved for him to get down. Edwards did so, keeping his eyes open so that he could look sideways at the chopper. It was another Hind. He could see rocket pods hanging from stubby wings on either side of the airframe. Both the doors to the passenger compartment were open, revealing a squad of infantrymen, weapons at the ready, looking down. "Oh, shit."

The noise from its turboshaft engines increased as the Hind came closer, and the massive five-bladed main rotor beat at the air, stirring up the volcanic dust that coated everything on the plateau they had just left. Edwards's hand tightened on the M-16's pistol grip, and he thumbed off the safety. The helicopter was coming almost sideways, its rocket pods pointed at the flatlands behind the Marines. Edwards could make out the machine guns in the Hind's nose, some kind of rotary gun like the American mini-gun that spat out four thousand rounds per minute. They wouldn't have a chance in hell against that.

"Turn, you son of a bitch," Mike said under his breath.

"What is it doing?" Vigdis asked.

"Just relax. Don't move at all." Oh, God, don't let them see us now...

"There! Look there at one o'clock," the gunner said from the front seat of the helicopter.

"So this mission isn't a waste after all," the pilot replied. "Go ahead."

The gunner centered his sights and armed the machine gun, setting his selector for a five-shot burst. His target was agreeably still as he depressed the trigger.

"Got him!"

Edwards jumped at the sound. Vigdis didn't move at all. The lieutenant moved his rifle slightly, bringing it to bear on the chopper—which moved south, dropping below the ridgeline. He saw three heads come up. What had they shot at? The engine sounds changed as the helicopter landed, not far away.

The gunner had hit the buck with three bullets, with little damage to the edible tissue. There was just enough in the eighty-pound animal to feed the squad and the helicopter crew. The paratroop sergeant slit the deer's throat with his combat knife, then set to remove the viscera. The local deer were nothing like the animals his father hunted in Siberia, but for the first time in three weeks he'd have some fresh meat. That was sufficient to make this boring mission worthwhile. The carcass was loaded into the Hind. Two minutes later it circled up to cruise altitude and flew back to Keflavik.

They watched it depart, the stuttering rotor sound diminishing on the breeze.

"What was that all about?" Edwards asked his sergeant.

"Beats the hell out of me, skipper. I think we better boogie on outa here. They were sure as hell looking for something, and I'll betcha it's us. Let's keep to places with some kind of cover."

"You got it, Jim. Lead off." Edwards walked back to Vigdis.

"Is safe now?"

"They've gone. Why don't you keep that jacket on. It makes you harder to spot."

It was two sizes too large for Edwards, and looked like a tent on Vigdis's diminutive frame. She held her arms out straight in an effort to get her hands out of the sleeves, and for the first time since he met her, Vigdis Agustdottir smiled.

USS *PHARRIS*

"All ahead one-third," the executive officer ordered.

"All ahead one-third, aye," the quartermaster of the watch responded, moving the annunciator handle up from the Ahead Full setting. A moment later the inside pointer changed also. "Engine room answers all ahead one-third."

"Very well."

Pharris slowed, coming off a twenty-five-knot sprint to commence another drift maneuver, and allowing her towed-array sonar to listen for hostile submarines. Morris was in his bridge chair, going over messages from shore. He rubbed his eyes and lit up another Pall Mall.

"Bridge," called the urgent voice of a lookout. "Periscope feather on the port bow! Halfway to the horizon, port bow!" Morris snatched his binoculars from the holder and had them to his eyes in an instant. He didn't see anything.

“Battle stations!” ordered the XO. The alarm gong went off a second later and weary men ran again to their posts. Morris looped his binoculars around his neck and ran down the ladder to his battle station in CIC.

The sonar loosed a dozen ranging pings to port as Morris took his position in CIC. Nothing. The helo lifted off as the frigate maneuvered north, allowing her towed-array sonar to track on the possible contact.

“Passive sonar contact, evaluate as possible submarine bearing zero-one-three,” announced the towed-array operator. “Steam noises, sounds like a possible nuke.”

“I got nothing there,” said the active-sonar operator.

Morris and his ASW officer examined the water-conditions board. There was a layer at two hundred feet. The passive sonar was below it, and could well be hearing a submarine that the active pings could not reach. The lookout might have seen anything from a spouting whale—this was the mating season for humpbacks—to a streak of foam . . . or the feathery wake left by a periscope. If it was a submarine, he had plenty of time to duck under the layer. The target was too close to be bottom-bounced and too far for the sonar to blast directly through the layer.

“Less than five miles,” ASW said. “More than two. If this is a sub, we’re up against a good one.”

“Great. Get the helo on him right now!” Morris examined the plot. The submarine could have heard his frigate as it sprinted at twenty-five knots. Now, at reduced speed, and with Prairie/Masker operating, *Pharris* would be very hard to detect . . . so the sub’s fire-control solution had probably just gone out the window. But Morris didn’t have one either, and the submarine was perilously close. An urgent contact report was radioed to the screen commander twenty miles away.

The Sea Sprite dropped a pattern of sonobuoys. Minutes passed.

“I got a weak signal on number six and a medium on number four,” the sonobuoy petty officer said. Morris watched the plot. That made the contact less than three miles off.

“Drop some pingers,” he ordered. Behind him the ship’s weapons officer ordered the arming of the ASROC and torpedo launchers. Three miles off, the helicopter turned and swept across the target area, dropping three CASS buoys this time, which sent out active, nondirectional pings.

“Contact, a strong contact on buoy nine. Classify as possible submarine.”

“I got him, bearing zero-one-five—this one’s a sub, classify as positive submarine contact,” said the towed-array man. “He just increased power. Some cavitation sounds. Single-screw submarine, maybe a Victor-class, bearing changing rapidly left-to-right.”

The active sonar still didn’t have him despite continuous maximum-power pings down the correct line of bearing. The submarine was definitely under the layer.

Morris wanted to maneuver but decided against it. A radical turn would cause his towed-array sonar to curve, rendering it useless for several minutes. Then he would have to depend on sonobuoys alone, and Morris trusted his towed sonar more than the buoys.

“Bearing to contact is now zero-one-five and steady . . . noise level is down

somewhat." The operator pointed at his screen. Morris was surprised. The contact bearing had been changing rapidly and was now steadied down?

The helicopter made yet another pass. A new sonobuoy registered the contact, but the MAD gear didn't confirm the presence of a submarine and the contact was fading. The noise level continued to drop. Morris watched the relative position of the contact pass aft. What the hell was this character doing?

"Periscope, starboard bow!" the talker reported.

"Wrong place, sir . . . unless we're looking at a noisemaker," the operator said.

The ASW officer had the active sonar change bearing and the results were immediate.

"Contact bearing three-four-five, range fifteen hundred yards!" A bright pip glowed on the sonar scope.

"All ahead flank!" Morris yelled. Somehow the submarine had evaded the towed sonar, then popped up atop the layer and run up his periscope. That could only mean one thing. "Right full rudder."

"Hydrophone effects—torpedoes inbound, bearing three-five-one!"

Instantly the weapons officer ordered the launch of an antisubmarine torpedo down the same bearing in the hope that it would disturb the attacking submarine. If the Russian's torpedoes were wire-guided, he'd have to cut the wires free to maneuver the sub clear of the American return shot.

Morris raced up the ladder to the bridge. Somehow the submarine had broken contact and maneuvered into firing position. The frigate changed course and speed in an attempt to ruin the submarine's fire-control solution.

"I see one!" the XO said, pointing over the bow. The Soviet torpedo left a visible white trail on the surface. Morris noted it, something he had not expected. The frigate turned rapidly.

"Bridge, I show two torpedoes, bearing constant three-five-zero and decreasing range," the tactical action officer said rapidly. "Both are pinging at us. The Nixie is operating."

Morris lifted a phone. "Report the situation to the escort commander."

"Done, skipper. Two more helos are heading this way."

Pharris was now doing twenty knots and accelerating, turning her stem to the torpedoes. Her helicopter was now aft of the beam, frantically making runs with its magnetic anomaly detector, trying to locate the Soviet sub.

The torpedo's wake crossed past the frigate's bow as Morris's ship kept her helm over. There was an explosion aft. White water leaped a hundred feet into the air as the first Russian "fish" collided with the nixie torpedo decoy. But they had only one nixie deployed. There was another torpedo out there.

"Left full rudder!" Morris told the quartermaster. "Combat, what about the contact?" The frigate was now doing twenty-five knots.

"Not sure, sir. The sonobuoys have our torp but nothing else."

"We're gonna take a hit," the XO said. He pointed to a white trail on the water, less than two hundred yards away. It must have missed the frigate on its first try, then turned for another. Homing torpedoes kept looking until they ran out of fuel.

There was nothing Morris could do. The torpedo was approaching on his

port bow. If he turned right, it would only give the fish a larger target. Below him the ASROC launcher swung left toward the probable location of the submarine, but without an order to fire, all the operator could do was train it out. The white wake kept getting closer. Morris leaned over the rail, staring at it with mute rage as it extended like a finger toward his bow. It couldn't possibly miss now.

"That's not real smart, Cap'n." Bosun Clarke's hand grabbed Morris's shoulder and yanked him down to the deck. He was just grabbing for the executive officer when it hit.

The impact lifted Morris a foot off the steel deck. He didn't hear the explosion, but an instant after he had bounced off the steel a second time, he was deluged with a sheet of white water that washed him against a stanchion. His first thought was that he'd been thrown overboard. He rose to see his executive officer—headless, slumped against the pilothouse door. The bridge wing was torn apart, the stout metal shielding ripped by fragments. The pilothouse windows were gone. What he saw next was worse.

The torpedo had struck the frigate just aft of the bow-mounted sonar. Already the bow had collapsed, the keel sundered by the explosion. The foc's'l was awash, and the horrible groaning of metal told him that the bow was being ripped off his ship. Morris staggered into the bridge and yanked the annunciator handle to All Stop, failing to notice that the engineers had already stopped engines. The ship's momentum pushed her forward. As Morris watched, the bow twisted to starboard, ten degrees off true, and the forward gunmount became awash, its crew trying to head aft. Below the mount were other men. Morris knew that they were dead, hoped that they had died instantly, and were not drowning, trapped in a sinking steel cage. His men. How many had their battle stations forward of the ASROC launcher?

Then the bow tore away. A hundred feet of the ship left the remainder to the accompaniment of screeching metal. It turned as he watched, colliding with the afterpart of the ship as it rotated in the water like a small berg. There was movement at an exposed watertight door. He saw a man try to get free, and succeed, the figure jumping into the water and swimming away from the wallowing bow.

The bridge crew was alive, all cut by flying glass but at their posts. Chief Clarke took a quick look at the pilothouse, then ran below to assist with damage control. The damage-control parties were already racing forward with fire hoses and welding gear, and at damage-control central the men examined the trouble board to see how severe the flooding was. Morris lifted a sound-powered phone and twisted the dial to this compartment.

"Damage-control report!"

"Flooding aft to frame thirty-six, but I think she'll float—for a little while anyway. No fires. Waiting for reports now."

Morris switched settings on the phone. "Combat, radio the screen commander that we've taken a hit and need assistance."

"Done, sir. *Gallery*'s heading out this way. Looks like the sub got away. They're still searching for her. We have some shock damage here. All the radars are down. Bow sonar is out. ASROC is out. The tail is still working, though, and the Mark-32 mounts still work. Wait—screen commander's

sending us a tug, sir."

"Okay, you have the conn. I'm going below to look at the damage." *You have the conn,* Morris thought. How do you conn a ship that ain't moving? A minute later he was at a bulkhead, watching men trying to shore it up with lumber.

"This one's fairly solid, sir, the next one forward's leaking like a damn sieve, no way we'll patch it all. When the bow let go, it must have twisted everything loose." The officer grabbed a seaman by the shoulder. "Go to the after D/C locker and get more four-by-fours!"

"Will this one hold?"

"I don't know. Clarke is checking the bottom out now. We'll have to weld in some patches and stiffeners. Give me about ten minutes and I'll tell you if she'll float or not."

Clarke appeared. He was breathing heavily. "The bulkhead's sprung at the tank tops, and there's a small crack, too. Leaking pretty good. The pumps are on, and just about keeping even. I think we can shore it up, but we have to hustle."

The damage-control officer led the welders below at once. Two men appeared with a portable pump. Morris ordered them below.

"How many men missing?" Morris asked Chief Clarke. He was holding his arm strangely.

"All the guys made it out of the five-inch mount, but I haven't seen anybody from belowdecks. Shit, I think I broke something myself." Clarke looked at his right arm and shook his head angrily. "I don't think many guys made it outa the bow, sir. The watertight doors are twisted some, they gotta be jammed tight."

"Get that arm looked at," Morris ordered.

"Oh, fuck the arm, skipper! You need me." The man was right. Morris went back topside with Clarke behind him.

On reaching the bridge, Morris dialed up engineering. The noise on the phone answered his first question.

The engineer spoke over the hiss of escaping steam. "Shock damage, Captain. We got some ruptured steam pipes on the number one boiler. I think number two will still work, but I've popped the safeties on both just in case. The diesel generators are on line. I got some hurt men here. I'm sending them out. I—okay, okay. We just did a check of number two boiler. A few minor leaks, but we can fix 'em quick. Otherwise everything looks pretty tight. I can have it back on line in fifteen minutes."

"We need it." Morris hung up.

Pharris lay dead in the water. With the safety valves opened, steam vented onto the massive stack structure, giving off a dreadful rasping sound that seemed like the ship's own cry of pain. The frigate's sleek clipper bow had been replaced by a flat face of torn metal and hanging wires. The water around the ship was foul with oil from ruptured fuel tanks. For the first time Morris noticed that the ship was down by the stern; when he stood straight, the ship was misaligned. He knew he had to wait for another damage-control report. As with an accident victim, the prognosis depended on the work of surgeons, and they could not be rushed or disturbed. He lifted the phone to

CIC.

"Combat, Bridge. What's the status of that submarine contact?"

"Gallery's helo dropped on it, but the torp ran dry without hitting anything. Looks like he ran northeast, but we haven't had anything for about five minutes. There's an Orion in the area now."

"Tell them to check inside of us. This character isn't going to run away unless he has to. He might be running in, not out. Tell the screen commander."

"Aye, Cap'n."

He hadn't hung the phone up when it buzzed.

"Captain speaking."

"She'll float, sir," the damage-control officer said at once. "We're patching the bulkhead now. It won't be tight, but the pumps can handle the leakage. Unless something else goes bad on us, we'll get her home. They sending the tug out to us?"

"Yes."

"If we get a tow, sir, it better be sternfirst. I don't want to think about trying to run this one into a seaway."

"Right." Morris looked at Clarke. "Get a gang of men aft. We'll be taking the tow at the stern, rig it up. Have them launch the whaleboat to look for survivors. I saw at least one man in the water. And get a sling on that arm."

"You got it, Cap'n." Clarke moved aft.

Morris went to CIC and found a working radio.

"X-Ray Alfa, this is *Pharris,"* Morris called to the screen commander.

"State your condition."

"We took one hit forward, the bow is gone all the way to the ASROC launcher. We cannot maneuver. I can keep her afloat unless we hit some bad weather. Both boilers currently down, but we should have power back in less than ten minutes. We have casualties, but I don't know how many or how bad yet.

"Commodore, we got hit by a nuke boat, probably a Victor. Unless I miss my guess, he's headed your way."

"We lost him, but he was heading out," the Commodore said.

"Start looking inside, sir," Morris urged. "This fellow got to knife-fighting range and pulled a beautiful number on us. This one isn't going to run away for long, he's too damned good for that."

The Commodore thought that one over briefly. "Okay, I'll keep that in mind. *Gallery's* en route to you. What other assistance do you need?"

"You need *Gallery* more than we do. Just send us the tug," Morris answered. He knew that the submarine wouldn't be coming back to finish the kill. He'd accomplished that part of his mission. Next, he'd try to kill some merchants.

"Roger that. Let me know if you need anything else. Good luck, Ed."

"Thank you, sir. Out."

Morris ordered his helo to drop a double ring of sonobuoys around his ship just in case. Then the Sea Sprite found three men in the water, one of them dead. The whaleboat recovered them, allowing the helo to rejoin the convoy. It was assigned to *Gallery,* which took *Pharris's* station as the convoy angled south.

Below, welders worked their gear in waist-deep saltwater as they struggled to seal off the breaks in the frigate's watertight bulkheads. The task lasted nine hours, then the pumps drained the water from the flooded compartments.

Before they had finished, the fleet tug *Papago* pulled alongside the frigate's square stern. Chief Clarke supervised as a stout towing wire was passed across and secured. An hour later, the tug was pulling the frigate on an easterly course at four knots, backwards to protect the damaged bow. Morris ordered his towed-array sonar to be strung over the bow, trailing it out behind to give them some small defense capability. Several extra lookouts were posted to watch for periscopes. It would be a slow, dangerous trip back home.

28

Breakthroughs

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

"Be careful, Pasha."

"As always, Comrade General." Alekseyev smiled. "Come, Captain."

Sergetov fell in behind his superior. Unlike during their previous front-line outing, both men wore protective body armor. The General carried only a sidearm to go along with his map case, but the captain was now officially a bodyguard in addition to a staff officer and had a small Czech submachine gun slung over his shoulder. He was a different man today, the captain saw. On Alekseyev's first trip to the front, he'd been tentative, almost hesitant in manner—it hadn't occurred to the younger man that, as senior as Alekseyev was, he had never seen combat before and had approached this gravest of contests with the same sort of apprehension as a new private. No longer. He had smelled the smoke. Now he knew how things worked or didn't work. The change was remarkable. His father was right, Sergetov thought, he was a man to be reckoned with. They were joined in their helicopter by an Air Force colonel. The Mi-24 lifted off in darkness, its fighter escort overhead.

LAMMERSDORF, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

Not many people appreciated the importance of the videocassette recorder. A useful convenience for the home, to be sure, but not until a captain in the Royal Dutch Air Force had demonstrated a bright idea two years before had its battlefield utility been proven in secret exercises first in Germany, then in the Western United States.

NATO radar surveillance aircraft kept their customary positions high over the Rhein. The E-3A Sentry aircraft, better known as AWACS, and the smaller, lesser-known TR-1, flew their missions in boring circles or straight lines far behind the fighting front. They had similar but different functions. The AWACS was mainly concerned with air traffic. The TR-1, an upgraded version of the venerable U-2, looked for vehicles on the ground. Initially the TR-1 had

been something of a failure. Because it tracked too many targets, many of them immobile radar reflectors set everywhere by the Soviets, the NATO commanders had been deluged with information that was too disordered to use. Then came the VCR. All the data relayed from the aircraft was recorded on videotape anyway since it was a convenient medium for data storage, but the VCRs built into the NATO system possessed only a few operating features. The Dutch captain thought to bring his personal machine into his office, and demonstrated how by using fast forward and fast reverse, the radar data could be used to show not only where things were going, but also where they had come *from.* Computer support made the task easier by eliminating items that moved no more than once every two hours—thus erasing the Russian radar lures—and there it was, a brand-new intelligence tool.

With several copies made of each tape, a staff of over a hundred intelligence and traffic-control experts examined the data round the clock. Some engaged in straight tactical intelligence. Others looked for patterns. A large number of trucks moving at night to and from front-line units could only mean shuttle runs to fuel and ammunition dumps. A number of vehicles breaking away from a divisional convoy and deploying in line parallel to the front meant artillery preparing for an attack. The real trick, they had learned, was to get the data to the forward commanders quickly enough so they could make use of it.

At Lammersdorf, a Belgian lieutenant was just finishing up a tape that was six hours old, and his report was sent by land line to the forward NATO commanders. At least three divisions had been moved north and south on Autobahn-7, he reported. The Soviets would attack at Bad Salzdetfurth in strength, sooner than expected. Immediately, reserve units from the Belgian, German, and American armies were rushed forward, and allied air units alerted for a major land action. Fighting in this sector had been vicious enough already. The German forces covering the area south of Hannover were at less than 50-percent strength, and the battle that had not yet begun was already a race, as both sides tried to get reserves to the point of attack before the other.

HOLLE, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

“Thirty minutes,” Alekseyev told Sergetov. Four motor-rifle divisions were on line, covering a front of less than twenty kilometers. Behind them a tank division waited to exploit the first breach in German lines. The objective was the town of Alfeld on the Leine River. The town commanded two roads being used by NATO to shuttle units and supplies north and south, and its capture would open a breach in the NATO lines, allowing the Soviet operational/maneuver groups to burst into NATO’s rear.

“Comrade General, how are things progressing in your opinion?” the captain asked quietly.

“Ask me in a few hours,” the General answered. The river valley to his rear

was yet another wasteland of men and arms. They were only thirty kilometers from the border—and the Red Army's tanks had been expected to reach Holle in only two days. Alekseyev frowned, wondering what staff genius had come up with that timetable. Again the human factor had been overlooked. The morale and fighting spirit of the Germans was like nothing he had ever seen. He remembered his father's stories of the battles across the Ukraine and Poland, but he had never quite believed them. He believed them now. The Germans contested every lump of dirt in their country like wolves defending their cubs, retreating only when they were forced to, counterattacking at every opportunity, draining the blood from the advancing Russian units as they brought every weapon they had to bear.

Soviet doctrine had predicted heavy losses. The battle of movement could be achieved only by costly frontal assault which first had to blast a hole in the front lines—but the NATO armies were denying that hole to the Soviets. Their sophisticated weapons, firing from safe, prepared positions, were ripping through each attack wave. Their aircraft attacks in the Soviet rear sapped the strength of units before they could be committed to decisive battle and played hob with artillery support despite the most careful deceptive measures.

The Red Army was moving forward, Alekseyev reminded himself, and NATO was paying its own price. Their reserves were also being thinned out. The German forces were not using their mobility as Alekseyev would have, too often tying themselves to geographic locations instead of fighting the Soviet forces on the move. Of course, the General thought, they didn't have very much terrain to trade for time. He checked his watch.

A sheet of flame rose from the forests below him as Russian artillery began its preparatory bombardment. Next came the multiple-rocket launchers, and the morning sky was alight with streaks of fire. Alekseyev turned his binoculars downrange. In a few seconds he saw the orange-white explosions of the rounds as they impacted on NATO lines. He was too far from the fighting front to see any detail, but an area that had to be many kilometers across, lit up like the neon signs so popular in the West. There was a roar overhead, and the General saw the leading elements of the ground-attack fighters racing to the front.

"Thank you, Comrade General," Alekseyev breathed. He counted at least thirty Sukhoi and MiG fighter-bombers, all hugging the ground as they headed toward the battle line. His face crinkled into a determined smile as he walked into the command bunker.

"The lead elements are moving now," a colonel announced. On a table made of rough planks laid across sawhorses, grease pencil marks were made on the tactical maps. Red arrows began their march toward a series of blue lines. The plotters were all lieutenants, and each wore a telephone headset linked to a specific regimental headquarters. The officers connected to reserve units stood away from the table, puffing on their cigarettes as they watched the march of the arrows. Behind them the commander of 8th Guards Army stood quietly, watching his plan of attack unfold.

"Meeting moderate resistance. Enemy artillery and tank fire is being encountered," a lieutenant said.

Explosions rocked the command bunker. Two kilometers away, a flight of

German Phantoms had just torn into a battalion of mobile guns.

"Enemy fighters overhead," the air defense officer said belatedly. A few eyes looked apprehensively up at the log ceiling of the bunker. Alekseyev's didn't join them. A NATO smart-bomb would kill them all in a blink. Much as he enjoyed his post as deputy commander of the theater, he wished himself back to the days when he had commanded a fighting division. Here he was only an observer, and he felt the need to have the reins in his own two hands.

"Artillery reports heavy counterbattery fire and air attacks. Our missiles are engaging enemy aircraft in the 57th Motor-Rifle Division's rear area," the air defense officer went on. "Heavy air activity over the front."

"Our fighters are engaging NATO aircraft," the Frontal Aviation officer reported. He looked up angrily. "Friendly SAMs are shooting down our fighters!"

"Air Defense Officer!" Alekseyev shouted. "Tell your units to identify their targets!"

"We have fifty aircraft over the front. We can handle the NATO fighters alone!" the aviator insisted.

"Tell all SAM batteries to hold fire on all targets above one thousand meters," Alekseyev ordered. He had discussed this with his Frontal Aviation commander the night before. The MiG pilots were to stay high after making their own attack runs, leaving the missile and gun batteries free to engage only those NATO aircraft that were an immediate threat to ground units. Why were his own planes getting hit?

Thirty thousand feet over the Rhein, two NATO E-3A radar aircraft fought for their lives. A determined Soviet attack was under way, two regiments of MiG-23 interceptors rocketing through the sky toward them. The on-board controllers were calling for help. This both distracted them from countering the attack, and stripped fighters from other missions. Heedless of their own safety, the Russians came west at over a thousand miles per hour with heavy jamming support. American F-15 Eagles and French Mirage jets converged on the threat, filling the sky with missiles. It was not enough. When the MiGs got to within sixty miles, the AWACS aircraft shut down their radars and dove for the ground to evade the attack. The NATO fighters over Bad Salzdetfurth were on their own. For the first time the Soviets had achieved air superiority over a major battlefield.

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"Hundred-forty-third Guards Rifle Regiment reports they have broken through German lines," a lieutenant said. He didn't look up, but extended the arrow for which he was responsible. "Enemy units retreating in disarray."

"Hundred-forty-fifth Guards checking in," reported the plotting officer next to him. "The first line of German resistance has collapsed. Proceeding south along the axis of the rail line . . . enemy units are on the run. They are not regrouping, not attempting to turn."

The general commanding 8th Guards Army gave Alekseyev a triumphant

look. “Get that tank division moving!”

The two understrength German brigades covering this sector had suffered too much, been called upon to stop too many attacks. Their men spent, their weapons depleted, they had no choice but to run from the enemy, hoping to form a new line in the woods behind Highway 243. At Hackenstedt, four kilometers away, 20th Guards Tank Division started moving down the road. Its three hundred T-80 main battle tanks, supported by several hundred more infantry assault carriers, spread left and right of the secondary road and formed its attack formation in columns of regiments. The 20th Tanks was the operation/maneuver group for 8th Guards Army. Since the war had begun, the Soviet Army had been trying to break one of these powerful units into the NATO rear. It was now possible.

“Well done, Comrade General,” Alekseyev said. The plotting table showed a general breakthrough. Three of the four attacking motor-rifle divisions had broken through the German lines.

The MiGs succeeded in killing one of the AWACS aircraft and three Eagle fighters, at the price of nineteen of their own, in a furious air battle that lasted fifteen minutes. The surviving AWACS was back at altitude now, eighty miles behind the Rhein, and its radar operators were working to reestablish control of the air battle over central Germany as the MiGs ran for home through a cloud of NATO surface-to-air missiles. At murderous cost they had accomplished a mission for which they had not even been briefed.

But this was only the beginning. Now that the initial attack had succeeded, the most difficult part of the battle was under way. The generals and colonels commanding the attack had to move their units forward rapidly, careful to keep the formations intact as they leapfrogged their artillery southwest to provide continuous support for the advancing regiments. The tank division had the highest priority. It had to hit the next set of German lines only minutes behind the motor-rifle troops, in order to reach Alfeld before nightfall. Units of the field police established pre-planned traffic-control points, and directed units down roads whose marker signs had been removed by the Germans—of course. The process was not as easy as might have been expected. Units were not intact. Some commanders were dead, vehicles had broken down, and damaged roads slowed traffic well below normal rates of advance.

For their part the German troops were trying to reorganize. Rear-guard units lingered behind every turn in the road, pausing to loose their antitank missiles at the hard-charging Soviet advance guard, which took a particularly heavy toll of unit commanders. Allied aircraft were reorganizing also, and low-level attack fighters began to engage the Soviet units in the open.

Behind the sundered battle line a German tank brigade rolled into Alfeld, with a Belgian motorized regiment ten minutes behind. The Germans proceeded northeast on the main road, watched by citizens who had just been ordered to evacuate their homes.

FASLANE, SCOTLAND

“No luck, eh?” asked Todd Simms, commander of USS *Boston.*

“None,” McCafferty confirmed. Even the trip into Faslane had been unlucky. The guard ship for the safe-transit corridor, HMS *Osiris,* had gotten into attack position without their having detected her. Had that Brit diesel sub been a Russian, McCafferty could very well be dead now. “We had our big chance against that amphibious group. Things were going perfect, y’know? The Russians had their sonobuoy lines out, and we beat them clean, just about had our targets lined up for the missile attack—I figured we’d hit with our missiles first, then go in with torpedoes—”

“Sounds good to me,” Simms agreed.

“And somebody else launches his own torpedo attack. Screwed everything up. We lofted three Harpoons, but a helo saw us do it, and, bingo! we had the bastards all over us.” McCafferty pulled open the door to the Officers Club. “I need a drink!”

“Hell, yes!” Simms laughed. “Everything looks better after a few beers. Hey, that sort of thing happens. Luck changes, Danny.” Simms leaned over the bar. “Two strong ones.”

“As you say, Commander.” A white-coated steward drew two mugs of warm, dark beer. Simms picked up the bill and led his friend to a corner booth. There was some sort of small party going on at the far end of the room.

“Danny, for crying out loud, let up on yourself. Not your fault that Ivan didn’t send you any targets, is it?”

McCafferty took a long pull on his mug. Two miles away *Chicago* was reprovisioning. They’d be in port for two days. *Boston* and another 688-class sub were tied to the same quay, with another pair due in later today. They were to be outfitted for a special mission, but they didn’t yet know what it was. In the meantime, the officers and crewmen were using their modicum of free time to breathe fresh air and unwind. “You’re right, Todd, right as ever.”

“Good. Have some pretzels. Looks like quite a shindig over there. How about we wander over?” Simms lifted his beer and walked to the end of the room.

They found a gathering of submarine officers, which was not a surprise, but the center of attention was. He was a Norwegian captain, a blond man of about thirty who clearly hadn’t been sober for several hours. As soon as he drained one jar of beer, a Royal Navy commander handed him another.

“I *must* find the man who save us!” the Norwegian insisted loudly and drunkenly.

“What gives?” Simms asked. Introductions were exchanged. The Royal Navy officer was captain of HMS *Oberon.*

“This is the chappie who blasted *Kirov* all the way back to Murmansk,” he said. “He tells the story about every ten minutes. About time for him to begin again.”

“Son of a bitch,” McCafferty said. This was the guy who had sunk *his* target! Sure enough, the Norwegian began speaking again.

“We make our approach slowly. They come right”—he belched—“to us, and we creep very slow. I put periscope up, and there he is! Four thousand meters, twenty knots, he will pass within five hundred meters starboard.” The beer mug swept toward the floor. “Down periscope! Arne—where are you, Arne?

Oh, is drunk at table. Arne is weapons officer. He set to fire four torpedoes. Type thirty-seven, American torpedoes." He gestured at the two American officers who had just joined the crowd.

Four Mark-37s! McCafferty winced at the thought. That could ruin your whole day.

"Kirov is very close now. Up periscope! Course same, speed same, distance now two thousand meters—I shoot! One! Two! Three! Four! Reload and dive deep."

"You're the guy who ruined my approach!" McCafferty shouted.

The Norwegian almost appeared sober for a moment. "Who are you?"

"Dan McCafferty, USS *Chicago."*

"You were there?"

"Yes."

"You shoot missiles?"

"Yes."

"Hero!" The Norwegian submarine commander ran to McCafferty, almost knocking him down as he wrapped the American in a crushing bear hug. "You save my men! You save my ship!"

"What the hell is this?" Simms asked.

"Oh, introductions," said a Royal Navy captain. "Captain Bjorn Johannsen of His Norwegian Majesty's submarine *Kobben.* Captain Daniel McCafferty of USS *Chicago."*

"After we shoot *Kirov,* they come around us like wolves. *Kirov* blow up—"

"Four fish? I believe it," Simms agreed.

"Russians come to us with cruiser, two destroyers," Johannsen continued, now quite sober. "We, ah, evade, go deep, but they find us and fire their RBU rockets—many, many rockets. Most far, some close. We reload and I shoot at cruiser."

"You hit her?"

"One hit, hurt but not sink. This take, I am not sure, ten minutes, fifteen. It was very busy time, yes?"

"Me, too. We came in fast, flipped on the radar. There were three ships where we thought *Kirov* was."

"Kirov was sunk—blow up! What you see was cruiser and two destroyers. Then you shoot missiles, yes?" Johannsen's eyes sparkled.

"Three Harpoons. A Helix saw the launch and came after us. We evaded, never did know if the missiles hit anything."

"Hit? Hah! Let me tell you." Johannsen gestured. "We dead, battery down. We have damage now, cannot run. We already evade four torpedoes, but they have us now. Sonar have us. Destroyer fire RBU at us. First three miss, but they have us. Then—Boom! Boom! Boom! Many more. Destroyer blow up. Other hit, but not sink, I think.

"We escape." Johannsen hugged McCafferty again, and both spilled their beer on the floor. The American had never seen a Norwegian display this much emotion, even around his wife. "My crew alive because of you, *Chicago!* I buy you drink. I buy all your men drink."

"You are sure we killed that tin can?"

"You not kill," Johannsen said. "My ship dead, my men dead, I dead. You

kill." A destroyer wasn't exactly as good as sinking a nuclear-powered battle cruiser, McCafferty told himself, but it was a whole lot better than nothing, too. And a piece of another, he reminded himself. And who knows, maybe that one sank on the way home.

"Not too shabby, Dan," Simms observed.

"Some people," said the skipper of HMS *Oberon,* "have all the bloody luck!"

"You know, Todd," said the commanding officer of USS *Chicago,* "this is pretty good beer."

USS *PHARRIS*

There were only two bodies to bury. Another fourteen men were missing and presumed dead, but for all that, Morris counted himself fortunate. Twenty sailors were injured to one extent or another. Clarke's broken forearm, a number of broken ankles from the shock of the torpedo impact, and a half-dozen bad scaldings from ruptured steam pipes. That didn't count minor cuts from flying glass.

Morris read through the ceremony in the manual, his voice emotionless as he went through the words about the sure and certain hope of how the sea will one day give up her dead . . . On command the seamen tilted up the mess tables. The bodies wrapped in plastic bags and weighted with steel slid out from under the flags, dropping straight into the water. It was ten thousand feet deep here, a long last trip for his executive officer and a third-class gunner's mate from Detroit. The rifle salute followed, but not taps. There was no one aboard who could play a trumpet, and the tape recorder was broken. Morris closed the book.

"Secure and carry on."

The flags were folded properly and taken to the sail locker. The mess tables were carried below and the stanchions were replaced to support the lifelines. And USS *Pharris* was still only half a ship, fit only to be broken up for scrap, Morris knew.

The tug *Papago* was pulling her backwards at just more than four knots. Three days to shore. They were heading toward Boston, the closest port, rather than a naval base. The reason was clear enough. Repairs would take over a year and the Navy didn't want to clutter up one of its own repair facilities with something that would take that long. Only those ships that could be repaired for useful war service would get rapid attention.

Even his continued command of *Pharris* was a joke. The tug had a reserve crew, many of them salvage experts in civilian life. Three of them were aboard to keep an eye on the towing cable and "advise" Morris on the things he had to do. Their pieces of advice were really orders, but polite ones.

There were plenty of things to keep his crew busy. The forward bulkheads required constant watching and attention. Repairs were under way to the engine plant. Only one boiler was working, providing steam to turn the turbogenerators and provide electrical power. The second boiler needed at

least another day of work. His main air-search radar, they said, would be working in four hours. The satellite antenna was just back on line also. By the time they reached port—if they reached port—everything aboard that his crew could fix would be fixed. That didn't really matter, but a busy crew, the Navy has always said, is a happy crew. In practical terms it meant that the crewmen, unlike their captain, did not have time to brood on what mistakes had been made, the lives that had been lost because of them, and who had made them.

Morris went to the Combat Information Center. The tactical crew was rerunning the tape and paper record of the encounter with the Victor, trying to find what had happened.

"I don't know." The sonar operator shrugged. "Maybe it was two subs, not just one. I mean, here he is, right? This bright trail here—then a couple minutes later the active sonar picked him up over here."

"Only one sub," Morris said. "Getting from here to there is about a four-minute run at twenty-five knots."

"But we didn't hear him, sir, an' it don't show on the screen. Besides, he was heading the other way when we lost him." The sonarman rewound the tape to run it all again.

"Yeah." Morris went back to the bridge, playing it over again in his mind. He had the entire sequence memorized now. He walked out on the bridge wing. The spray shields were still perforated, and there was a faint bloodstain where the XO had died. Someone would be painting over that today. Chief Clarke had all kinds of work gangs going. Morris lit a cigarette and stared at the horizon.

REYDARVATH, ICELAND

The helicopter was the last warning they needed. Edwards and his party were heading northeast. They passed through an area of many small lakes, crossed a gravel road after waiting an hour to see what the traffic there was like—none—and began to traverse a series of marshes. By this time Edwards was thoroughly confused by the terrain. The mixture of bare rock, grassy meadows, lava fields, and now a freshwater marsh made him wonder if Iceland might not be the place where God had put everything that had been left over after the world was built. Evidently He'd made just the right amount of trees, though, because there were none here, and their best cover was the knee-high grass that sprouted from the water. It must be hardy grass, Edwards thought, since this marsh had been frozen not too long ago. It was still cold, and within minutes of entering the marshes everyone's legs ached with it. They endured the misery. The alternative was to travel on bare and slightly elevated ground, not something to be contemplated with enemy helicopters about.

Vigdis surprised them with her endurance. She kept up with the Marines without faltering or complaining. A true country girl, Edwards thought, she

was still benefiting from a childhood of chasing the family sheep around—or whatever it was you did with sheep—and climbing these Goddamned hills.

"Okay, people, take ten," Edwards called. Immediately everyone looked for a dry spot to collapse. Mainly they found rocks. *Rocks in a marsh!* Edwards thought. Garcia kept watch with the purloined Russian binoculars. Smith lit up a cigarette. Edwards turned around to see Vigdis sitting down next to him.

"How do you feel?"

"Very tired," she said with a slight smile. "But not so tired as you."

"Is that so!" Edwards laughed. "Maybe we should step up the pace."

"Where we go?"

"We're going to Hvammsfjördur. They didn't say why. I figure another four or five days. We want to stay clear of all the roads we can."

"To protect me, yes?" Edwards shook his head.

"To protect all of us. We don't want to fight anybody. There's too many Russians around to play soldier games."

"So, I don't hurt—ah, stop you from important things?" Vigdis asked.

"Not at all. We're all happy to have you with us. Who wouldn't like a walk in the country with a beautiful girl?" Edwards asked gallantly. *Was that a smart thing to say?*

She gave him a strange look. "You think I pretty, after—after—"

"Vigdis, if you were hit by a truck—yes, you are very beautiful. No man could change that. What happened to you was not your fault. Whatever changes it made are inside, not outside. And I know somebody must like you."

"My baby, you mean? Mistake. He find another girl. This is not important, all my friends have babies." She shrugged it off.

That stupid son of a bitch, Edwards thought. He remembered that bastardy carried no stigma on Iceland. Since no one had a surname—most of the Icelanders had given names followed by patronymics—you couldn't even tell the difference between the legitimate and illegitimate. Besides which, the Icelanders didn't seem to give a damn one way or the other. Young unmarried girls had babies, took proper care of them, and that was that. But who would walk away from this girl?

"Well, speaking for myself: Vigdis, I've never met a girl prettier than you."

"Truly?"

Her hair looked like hell, tangled and filthy, Edwards admitted to himself. Her face and clothing were covered with dust and mud. A hot shower could change that in a few minutes, revealing the lovely thing that she was. But beauty comes from within, and he was only beginning to appreciate the person inside. He ran his hand along her cheek.

"Any man who says different is an idiot." He turned to see Sergeant Smith coming over.

"Time to move, 'less you want our legs to stiffen up, Lieutenant."

"Okay. I want to make another eight or ten miles. There's farms and roads on the far side of this mountain we're walking around. We'll want to eyeball that area before we try to cross it. I'll call in from there, too."

"You got it, skipper. Rodgers! Take the point and bend it a little west."

BODENBURG, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

The ride forward had not been an easy one. Eighth Guards Army moved its forward command post as close behind the leading troops as possible. Its commander, like Alekseyev, believed in having his eyes and ears as close to the front as possible. The trip took forty minutes in armored troop carriers—it was far too dangerous to use helicopters—during which Alekseyev had observed a pair of savage air attacks on Russian columns.

German and Belgian reinforcements had joined the action, and intercepts of radio messages indicated that American and British units were also en route. Alekseyev had called up more Russian units as well. What had begun as a relatively simple push by one mechanized army was now growing into a major engagement. He took this to be a good sign. NATO would not be reinforcing if they did not regard the situation as dangerous. The Soviet task was to achieve the desired result before reinforcements came into play.

The general commanding 20th Guards Tank Division was in the command post. They'd set it up in a secondary school. A new building, it had lots of space, and until an underground bunker could be prepared, it would have to do. The pace of the advance had slowed, as much because of traffic control difficulties as from the Germans.

"Straight down this road to Sack," 8th Guards Army told the tanker. "My motor-rifle troops should have it clear by the time you get there."

"Four more kilometers to Alfeld. Yes, just make sure you can support us when we jump across the river." The General set his helmet atop his head and moved out the door. It was going to work, Alekseyev thought. This general had done a magnificent job of delivering his unit to the front in nearly perfect order.

The next thing he heard was an explosion. Windows shattered, pieces of ceiling dropped around him. The Devil's Cross had returned yet again.

Alekseyev raced outside to see a dozen burning armored vehicles. As he watched, the crew bailed out of a brand-new T-80 tank. An instant later the vehicle brewed up: a fire swept through the ammunition racks inside and a pillar of flame rose toward the sky as from a small volcano.

"The General is dead—the General is dead!" a sergeant shouted. He pointed to a BMD infantry carrier from which no one had escaped alive.

Alekseyev found the commander of the 8th Guards Army cursing beside him. "The assistant commander of that tank division is a new colonel."

Pavel Leonidovich reached a quick and convenient decision. "No, Comrade General. What about me?"

Startled, the commander stared at him, then remembered Alekseyev's reputation as a tank commander, and his father's. He made a quick decision of his own. "Twentieth Tanks is yours. You know the mission."

Another infantry assault carrier rolled up. Alekseyev and Sergetov boarded it, and the driver sped off toward the divisional command post. It took half an hour before they stopped. Alekseyev saw rows of tanks parked inside the treeline. Allied artillery was falling close by, but he ignored it. His regimental commanders were grouped together. The General quickly gave orders for objective and timing. It spoke well of the General not dead an hour that

everyone here knew his mission. The division was finely organized, with every part of the assault plan already firmed up. Alekseyev saw at once that he had a good battle staff. He set them to work as his unit commanders rejoined their regiments.

His first battle headquarters was fittingly in the shade of a tall tree. His father could have wished for no better. Alekseyev smiled. He found his divisional intelligence officer. "What's the situation?"

"A battalion of German tanks is counterattacking on this road leading cast from Sack. They should be contained, and in any case our vehicles are moving southwest behind them. The lead motor-rifle troops are just inside the town, and report only minor resistance. Our leading elements are now moving and should be there within the hour."

"Air Defense Officer?"

"SAMs and mobile antiaircraft guns are just behind the leading echelons. We also have friendly air cover. Two regiments of MiG-21s are on call for air defense, but we haven't had any ground-attack fighters assigned yet. They took a beating this morning—but so did the other side. We killed twelve NATO aircraft before noon."

Alekseyev nodded, dividing that number by three, as he had learned.

"Excuse me, Comrade General. I am Colonel Popov, your divisional political officer."

"Fine, Comrade Colonel. My Party dues are paid to the end of the year, and with luck I will live to pay them again. If you have something important to say, be quick!" If there was anything Alekseyev didn't need now, it was a *zampolit!*

"After we capture Alfeld—"

"*If* we capture Alfeld I will let you have the keys to the city. For the present, let me do my job. Dismissed!" *Probably wanted permission to shoot suspected fascists.* As a four-star general, Alekseyev could not ignore political officers, but at least he could ignore those under the rank of general. He walked over to the tactical maps. On one side as before, lieutenants showed the advance of his—*his!*—units. On the other, intelligence officers were assembling what data they had on enemy opposition. He grabbed the shoulder of his operations officer.

"I want that lead regiment right behind the motor-rifle troops. If they need some help, give it to them. I want this breakthrough and I want it today. What artillery do we have set up?"

"Two battalions of heavy guns are ready now."

"Good. If those infantry have targets for them, find out, and let's start hitting them now. This is not a time for finesse. NATO knows we're here, and our worst enemy is time. Time works for them, not for us." The operations officer and artillery commander got together, and two minutes later his 152mm guns were delivering fire to the front. He'd have to have a medal awarded to the dead commander of 20th Tanks, Alekseyev decided; the man deserved a reward of some kind for the training he saw evident in this staff.

"Enemy air attack in progress," a plotting officer said.

"Enemy tanks emerging from woods east of Sack, estimate battalion strength. Heavy artillery fire supporting the Germans."

He had to trust his colonels now, Alekseyev knew. The time at which a general could observe the entire battle and control it was long past. His staff officers made their little marks on the map. The Germans should have waited, the General thought, they should have let the division spearhead go through, then attack the division supply column. That was foolish, the first time he had seen a German commander make a tactical error. Probably a junior officer who had relieved a dead or wounded superior, or perhaps a man whose home was nearby. Whatever the reason, it was a mistake and Alekseyev was profiting by it. His leading two tank regiments took losses, but they smashed the German counterattack in ten furious minutes.

"Two kilometers—leading elements now two kilometers from Sack. Opposition from artillery only. Friendly units are in sight. Infantry troops in Sack report minor resistance only. The town is nearly clear. Forward scouts report the road to Alfeld is open!"

"Bypass Sack," Alekseyev ordered. "The objective is Alfeld on the Leine."

ALFELD, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

It was a scratch team. American mechanized infantrymen and the lead tank squadron of an advancing British brigade reinforced the remains of Germans and Belgians who had been crushed by five Soviet divisions that day. There was little time. Combat engineers worked furiously with their armored bulldozers to scrape shelters for the tanks while infantrymen dug holes for their antitank weapons. A cloud of dust on the horizon was all the warning they needed. A division of tanks was reported heading their way, and the civilians had not entirely evacuated the town behind them. Twenty miles behind them, a squadron of ground-attack aircraft circled, waiting for the call-down signal.

"Enemy in sight!" a lookout on a church steeple radioed. In seconds, artillery fire lashed at the leading Soviet columns. Antitank-missile crews popped the covers off their targeting scopes and loaded the first weapons of what promised to be a long afternoon. The Challenger tanks of 3rd Royal Tank Regiment settled into their holes, hatches shut tight as the gunners zeroed their sights on distant targets. Things were too confused, and there had not been enough time to establish a firm chain of command here. An American was first to fire. The TOW-2 missile sped downrange, its control wires trailing out behind like a spider's web as it reached four kilometers to a T-80 tank . . .

"Advanced elements are now under fire from enemy missile teams," reported a plotting officer.

"Flatten them!" Alekseyev ordered his artillery commander. Within a minute the division's multiple-rocket launchers were filling the sky with trails of fire. Tube artillery fire added to the carnage at the battle line. Then NATO artillery joined the fray in earnest.

"Lead regiment is taking losses."

Alekseyev watched the map in silence. There was no room for deceptive maneuver here, nor was there time. His men had to race through the enemy lines as quickly as possible in order to seize the bridges on the Leine. That meant that his leading tank crews would suffer heavily. The breakthrough would have its own heavy price, but the price had to be paid.

* * *

Twelve Belgian F-16 fighters swept in low over the front at five hundred knots, dropping tons of cluster munitions on the lead Soviet regiment, killing nearly thirty tanks and a score of infantry carriers less than a kilometer from the allied lines. A swarm of missiles rose into the sky after them, and the single-engine fighters turned west, skimming over the ground in their attempt to evade. Three were smashed to the ground, and fell among the NATO troops, adding to the carnage already created by Soviet fire. The commander of the British tanks saw that he lacked the firepower to stop the Soviet attack. There just wasn't enough. It was time to leave while his battalion was still able to fight. He alerted his companies to be ready to pull out and tried to get the word to neighboring units. But the troops around Alfeld came from four different armies, with separate languages and radio settings. There hadn't been time to establish exactly who was in overall command. The Germans didn't want to leave. The town had not yet been fully evacuated, and the German troops would not desert their positions until their countrymen were safely across the river. The Americans and Belgians began to move when the British colonel told them to, but not the Germans, and the result was chaos within the NATO lines.

"Forward observers report enemy units moving back on the right, repeat, enemy units appear to be disengaging on the northern side of the town."

"Move the second regiment north, loop around and head for the bridges, fast as they can. Disregard losses and charge for those damned bridges! Operations Officer, keep pressure on all enemy units. We want to trap them on this side and finish them if we can," Alekseyev ordered. "Sergetov, come with me. I have to go forward."

The attack had ripped the heart out of his lead regiment, Alekseyev knew, but it had been worth the cost. The NATO forces would have to move their units through a smashed town to get to the bridges, and having the allied units on the north side disengage first was a godsend. Now with a fresh regiment he'd be able to run over them and, if he were very lucky, get the bridges intact. This he'd have to supervise himself. Alekseyev and Sergetov boarded a tracked vehicle, which motored southeast to catch the maneuvering regiment. Behind them his operations officer began to give new orders over the divisional radio net.

Five kilometers on the far side of the river, a battery of German 155mm guns was waiting for this opportunity. They had remained silent, waiting for their radio-intercept experts to pin down the divisional headquarters. Quickly

the gunners punched the target data into their fire-control computers while others loaded high-explosive shells. Every gun in the battery trained out on an identical azimuth. The ground shook when they began rapid fire.

A hundred shells fell in and around the divisional headquarters in less than two minutes. Half the battle staff was killed outright, most of the others wounded.

Alekseyev looked at his radio headset. His third close brush with death. *That was my fault. I should have checked the siting of the radio transmitters. I must not make that mistake again . . . Damn! Damn! Damn!*

Alfeld's streets were clogged with civilian vehicles. The Americans in their Bradley tracked vehicles avoided the town entirely, hurrying down the right bank of the Leine and crossing to the other side in good order. There, they took positions on the hills overlooking Leine, and set up to cover the crossing of the other allied troops. The Belgians were next. Only a third of their tanks had survived, and these covered the southern flank on the far side of the river, hoping to stop the Russians before they were able to cross. German *Staatspolizei* had held back civilian traffic and allowed the armored units to pass, but this changed when Soviet artillery began bursting in the air close to the river. The Russians had hoped it would impede traffic, and it did. Civilians who had been late to follow orders to leave their homes now paid for their error. The artillery did scant damage to fighting vehicles but thoroughly wrecked civilian cars and trucks. In minutes, the streets of Alfeld were jammed with disabled and burning cars. People left them, braving the fire to run for the bridges, and the tanks trying to make their way to the river found their way blocked. Their only escape was over the bodies of innocent civilians, and even when ordered to proceed, the drivers shrank from it. Gunners rotated their turrets to face over the rear and began to engage the Russian tanks now entering the town. Smoke from burning buildings wafted across everyone's field of view. Cannons fired at targets glimpsed for a moment, rounds went wild, and the streets of Alfeld turned into a slaughterhouse of soldiers and noncombatants.

"There they are!" Sergetov pointed. Three highway bridges spanned the Leine. Alekseyev started to give orders, but they weren't necessary. The regimental commander already had his radio microphone keyed, and directed a battalion of tanks with infantry support to proceed up the west bank, following the same route, still relatively open, that the Americans had used.

The American fighting vehicles on the far side of the river opened fire with missiles and their light cannon, killing a half-dozen tanks, and the remainder of the regiment engaged them with direct fire while Alekseyev personally called down artillery on the hilltops.

In Alfeld the battle had come to a bloody standstill. The German and British tanks took up positions at intersections largely hidden from view by wrecked cars and trucks, and backed toward the river slowly as they fought to give the civilians time. The Russian infantry tried to engage them with missiles, but too often debris lying in the streets tore the flight-control wires, causing the missiles to fall out of control and explode harmlessly. Russian and allied

artillery fire churned the town to rubble.

Alekseyev watched his troops advancing toward the first bridge.

South of him, the commander of the lead regiment swore at his losses. More than half his tanks and assault vehicles had been destroyed. Victory was within his grasp, and now his troops had been stopped again by impassable streets and murderous fire. He saw the NATO tanks pulling slowly back, and, enraged that they were escaping, called in for artillery.

Alekseyev was surprised when the artillery fire shifted from the center of the town to the riverfront. He was shocked when he realized that it was not tube artillery fire, but rockets. As he watched, explosions appeared at random over the riverfront. Then rounds began exploding in the river in rapid succession. The rate of fire increased as more and more launchers were trained on the target, and it was already too late for him to stop them. The farthest bridge went first. Three rockets landed at once, and it came apart. Alekseyev watched in horror as over a hundred civilians fell into the churning water. His horror was not for the loss of life—he needed that bridge! Two more rockets landed on the center bridge. It did not collapse, but the damage it took was serious enough to prevent tanks from using it. The fools! Who was responsible for this? He turned to Sergetov.

"Call up the engineers. Get bridging units and assault boats to the front. They have absolute priority. Next, I want every surface-to-air missile and antiair gun battery you can find. Anyone who gets in their way will be shot. Make sure the traffic-control officers know this. Go!"

The Soviet tanks and infantry had reached the only surviving bridge. Three infantry vehicles raced to the far side and were taken under fire by the Belgians and Americans as they raced to cover. A tank followed. The T-80 rumbled across, got to the far side and exploded from an impacting missile. Another followed, then a third. Both reached the west bank. Then a British Chieftain emerged from behind a building and followed the Soviet tanks across. Alekseyev watched in amazement as it ran right between the two Soviet vehicles, neither of which saw it. An American missile ran just behind it and plowed into the ground, raising a cloud of dirt and dust. Two more Chieftains emerged at the bridgehead. One exploded from a point-blank shot by a T-80, the other fired back, killing the Russian tank a second later. Alekseyev remembered a tale from his boyhood of a brave peasant on a bridge as the British tank engaged and killed two more Soviet tanks before succumbing to a barrage of direct fire. Five more Soviet vehicles raced across the bridge.

The General lifted his headset and dialed up 8th Guards Army Headquarters. "This is Alekseyev. I have a company of troops across the Leine. I need support. We have broken through. Repeat: we have broken through the German front! I want air support and helicopters to engage NATO units north and south of Bridge 439. I need two regiments of infantry to assist with the river crossing. Get me support and I might have my division across by midnight."

"You'll get everything I have. My bridging units are on the way."

Alekseyev leaned against the side of his BMP. He unbuckled his canteen and took a long drink as he watched his infantry climb the hills under fire. Two complete companies were across now. Allied fire was now attempting to destroy the remaining bridge. He had to get at least a full battalion across if he wanted to hold this bridgehead for more than a few hours. "I'll get the bastard," he promised himself, "who fired on my bridges."

"Boats and bridges are en route, Comrade General," Sergetov reported. "They have first priority, and the sector traffic-control officers have been informed. Two SAM batteries are starting this way, and I found three mobile AA guns three kilometers off. They said they can be here in fifteen minutes."

"Good." Alekseyev trained his binoculars on the far bank.

"Comrade General, our infantry carriers are amphibious. Why don't we swim them across?"

"Look at the riverbank, Vanya." The General handed his glasses over. As far as he could see, the far side was all set with stone and concrete to prevent erosion. It would be difficult if not impossible for the tracked vehicles to climb that. Damn the Germans for that! "Besides, I wouldn't want to try that in anything less than regimental strength. That bridge is all we have, and it can't last very long. With the best of luck we won't have any assault bridges in place for several hours. The troops on the far side are on their own for at least that long. We'll run as many troops and vehicles across the bridge as we can, then reinforce with infantry assault boats as soon as they arrive. The book calls for this sort of crossing to be made in assault boats, under cover of darkness or smoke. I don't want to wait for night, and I need the guns to fire live shells, not harmless ones. We must break the rules, Vanya. Fortunately the book allows for that also. You have performed well, Ivan Mikhailovich. You are now a major. Don't thank me—you've earned it."

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

"We didn't miss 'em by much. If we'd seen them five minutes sooner, we could have taken a few out. As it was—" The Tomcat pilot shrugged.

Toland nodded. The fighters had orders to remain outside Soviet radar coverage.

"You know, it's a funny thing. There were three of them flying a nice tight formation. I had them on my TV system from fifty miles away. No way in hell they could tell we were there. If we had better range, we could follow them all the way home. Like that game the Germans played on us once upon a time—send a bird right behind a returning raid and drop a few bombs right after they landed."

"We'd never get anything through their IFF," Toland replied.

"True, but we'd know their arrival time at their bases to within, oh, ten minutes. That's gotta be useful to somebody."

Commander Toland set his cup down. "Yeah, you're right." He decided he'd put that idea on the printer to Commander, Eastern Atlantic.

LAMMERSDORF, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

There was no mistaking it. NATO lines had been decisively broken south of Hannover. Two brigades were taken from the perilously thin NATO ground reserve and sent toward Alfeld. Unless this hole was plugged, Hannover would be lost, and with it all of Germany east of the Weser.

29

Remedies

ALFELD, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

As predicted, the bridge lasted less than an hour. In that time Alekseyev had gotten a full battalion of mechanized infantry across, and though the NATO troops launched a pair of vicious counterattacks on his bridgehead, the tanks he'd placed on the east bank had been able to break them up with direct fire. Now NATO had caught its breath, and was assembling artillery. Heavy guns pounded his bridgehead and the tanks on the Soviet side of the river, and to make matters worse, the assault boats had been held up by incredible traffic snarls on the road between Sack and Alfeld. German heavy guns were littering the road and surrounding land with artillery-deployed mines, each powerful enough to knock the tread off a tank or the wheel off a truck. Sappers swept the roads continuously, using heavy machine guns to detonate the mines, but every one took time, and not all were seen before they exploded under a heavily loaded vehicle. The loss of the individual trucks and tanks was bad enough; worse still were the traffic tieups that resulted from each disabled vehicle.

Alekseyev's headquarters were in a camera shop overlooking the river. The plate-glass window had long since been blown away, and his boots crackled with every step. He surveyed the far bank through his binoculars and anguished for his men as they tried to fight back at the men and tanks on the hills above them. A few kilometers away, every mobile gun in 8th Guards Army was racing forward to provide fire support for his tank division, and he and Sergetov set them to counterbattery the NATO guns.

"Enemy aircraft!" a lieutenant shouted.

Alekseyev craned his neck and saw a dot to the south, which grew rapidly into a German F-104 fighter. Yellow tracer lines reached out from his AA guns and blotted it from the sky before it could release, but instantly another appeared, this one firing its own cannon at the gun vehicle and exploding it. Alekseyev swore as the single-engine fighter bored in, dropped two bombs on the far side of the river, and streaked away. The bombs fell slowly, retarded by small parachutes, then, twenty meters over the ground, appeared to fill the air with fog—Alekseyev dove to the floor of the shop as the cloud of explosive vapor detonated from the fuel-air-explosive bombs. The shock wave was

fearful, and above his head a display case shattered, dropping broken glass all over him.

"What the hell was that?" Sergetov yelled, deafened by the blast, then, looking up, "You're hit, Comrade General!"

Alekseyev ran his hand over his face. It came away red. His eyes stung, and he poured the contents of his canteen over his face to clear them of the blood. Major Sergetov slapped a bandage on his general's forehead with only one hand, Alekseyev noticed.

"What happened to you?"

"I fell on some of this damned glass! Stay still, Comrade General, you're bleeding like a slaughtered cow." A lieutenant general showed up. Alekseyev recognized him as Viktor Beregovoy, 8th Guards Army's second in command.

"Comrade General, you have orders to return to headquarters. I am here to relieve you."

"The hell you say!" Alekseyev bellowed.

"The orders come from Commander-in-Chief West, Comrade. I am a general of tank troops. I can carry on here. If you will permit me to say so, you have performed brilliantly. But you are needed elsewhere."

"Not until I'm finished!"

"Comrade General, if you want this crossing to succeed, we need more support here. Who can better arrange that support, you or I?" Beregovoy asked reasonably.

Alekseyev let out a long angry breath. The man was right—but for the first time Pavel Leonidovich Alekseyev had led—really led!—men in combat, and he had done well. Alekseyev knew it—he had done well!

"There is no time to argue. You have your task and I have mine," the man said.

"You know the situation?"

"Fully. There is a vehicle in the back to return you to headquarters."

Alekseyev held the bandage to his head—Sergetov hadn't tied it properly—and walked out the back of the shop. Where the door had once been, he found a gaping hole. A BMD infantry carrier was there, its motor running. Alekseyev got in and found a medical orderly who clucked over the General and went immediately to work. As the carrier pulled off, Alekseyev listened to the noise of combat diminish. It was the saddest sound he had ever heard.

LANGLEY AIR FORCE BASE, VIRGINIA

There was nothing like a Distinguished Flying Cross to make a person happy about flying, and she wondered if she might be the first female Air Force pilot to have one. If not, Major Nakamura decided, what the hell? She had a gun-camera videotape of all three of her Badgers, and a Navy pilot she'd met in Brittany before catching a flight Stateside had called her one damned fine pilot, for an Air Force puke. After which she had reminded him that if the dumbass Navy pilots had listened to her, maybe their air base wouldn't be in a

body and fender shop. Game, set, and match, she grinned, to Major Amelia Nakamura, USAF.

All the F-15s that could be ferried across the Atlantic had been ferried, and now she had another job. Only four of the 48th Fighter Interceptor Squadron's Eagles were still at Langley. The

rest were scattered up and down the East Coast, including the two pilots who were qualified for the ASAT antisatellite missiles. As soon as she'd heard that, she had made a phone call and informed Space Command that she was the Eagle driver who had worked out the ASAT flight profile, and why take a combat pilot off the line when she could handle the mission very well, thank you.

She checked to make sure the ugly missile was properly attached to the airframe. It had been taken out of secure storage and reexamined by a team of experts. Buns shook her head. There had only been one real test of the system before a moratorium had been slapped on the project. A successful test, to be sure, but only one. She hoped it would work. The Navy really needed help from the Air Force pukes. Besides, that A-6 driver was cute.

The major finished her walkaround, taking her time—her target wasn't over the Indian Ocean yet—then strapped herself into her Eagle, ran her eyes and hands over the gauges and handles, adjusted the seat, and finally input the numbers painted on the wall of the aircraft shelter into the aircraft's inertial navigation system so that the fighter would know where it was. Finished, she began to fire up her engines. Her flight helmet protected her from the shriek of the two Pratt and Whitney engines. The needles on her engine gauges rotated into proper position. Below her, the crew chief gave the aircraft a careful examination, then waved to her to taxi the aircraft into the open. Six people were out there, standing behind the red warning line to protect their ears from the noise. *Always nice to have an audience,* she thought, ignoring them.

"Eagle One-Zero-Four ready to taxi," she told the tower.

"One-Zero-Four, roger. You are cleared to taxi," the tower controller replied. "Wind is two-five-three at twelve knots."

"Roger that, One-Zero-Four is rolling."

Buns brought her canopy down. The crew chief snapped to attention and gave the major a perfect salute. Nakamura answered it with panache, advanced her throttles slightly, and the Eagle fighter moved off to the runway like a crippled stork. A minute later, she was in the air, a silky smooth feeling of pure power enveloping her as she pointed her Eagle at the sky.

Kosmos 1801 was just completing its southbound leg, bending around the Straits of Magellan to head north over the Atlantic. The orbital pass would take it two hundred miles off the American coast. At the ground-control station, technicians prepared to switch on the powerful sea-surveillance radar. They were sure an American carrier battle group was at sea, but had been unable to locate it. Three regiments of Backfires were waiting for information that would allow them to repeat the feat accomplished on the second day of the war.

Nakamura eased her fighter under the tanker's tail, and the boom operator expertly shoved the refueling probe into the back of her fighter. Ten thousand pounds of fuel transferred into her tanks in only a few minutes, and as she disengaged, a small cloud of kerosene vapor escaped into the sky.

"Gulliver, this is One-Zero-Four, over," she called over the radio.

"One-Zero-Four, this is Gulliver," replied a colonel in the passenger compartment of a LearJet cruising at forty thousand feet.

"All tanked and ready to go. All on-board systems show green. Orbiting at Point Sierra. Ready to initiate intercept climb. Standing by."

"Roger that, One-Zero-Four."

Major Nakamura kept her Eagle in a small turning circle. She didn't want to waste a drop of fuel when she started her climb. She shifted ever so slightly in her seat, which for her was a violent show of emotion when flying, and concentrated on her aircraft. As her eyes traced over her cockpit instruments, she told herself to control her breathing.

Space Command's radars picked up the Soviet satellite as it passed the bulge of South America. Computers compared its course and speed with known data, matched them with the position of Nakamura's fighter, and a computer spat out its commands, which were relayed to the LearJet.

"One-Zero-Four, come to heading two-four-five."

"Turning now." The major brought her fighter into a tight turn. "Holding on two-four-five."

"Stand by . . . stand by—initiate!"

"Roger." Buns pushed her throttles to the stops and punched up the afterburners. The Eagle leaped forward like a spurred horse, accelerating through Mach 1 in seconds. Next she eased back on the stick, bringing her Eagle into a forty-five-degree climb, still accelerating into a darkening sky. She didn't look out. Her eyes were locked on her cockpit gauges: the fighter had to maintain a specific flight profile for the next two minutes. As the Eagle rocketed into the sky, the altimeter needle whirled around its clockface. Fifty thousand feet, sixty thousand feet, seventy, eighty, ninety thousand feet. Stars were visible now in the nearly black sky, but Nakamura didn't notice.

"Come on, baby, find the son of a bitch . . ." she thought aloud.

Beneath the aircraft the ASAT missile's tracking head came on, searching the sky for the infrared heat signature of the Soviet satellite. A light blinked on Buns's instrument panel.

"My weapon is tracking! Repeat, my weapon is tracking. Auto launch sequence equipment is activated. Altitude ninety-four thousand feet seven hundred—breakaway, breakaway!" She felt her aircraft lurch as the heavy missile dropped free and immediately brought her throttles back to low power and brought the stick back to loop the fighter. She checked her fuel state. The afterburning climb had nearly emptied her tanks, but she had enough to make Langley without tanking again. She had already turned for home when she realized that she hadn't seen the missile. It didn't matter anyway. Nakamura turned west, letting the Eagle settle into a shallow dive that would terminate on the Virginia Coast.

Aboard the LearJet, a tracker camera followed the missile upward. The solid-fuel rocket motor burned for thirty seconds, then the warhead separated.

The Miniature Homing Vehicle, an infrared heat sensor embedded in its flat face, had long since acquired its target. The Soviet satellite's on-board nuclear reactor radiated waste heat out into space, and the resulting infrared signature rivaled the sun. As its microchip brain computed the intercept course, the MHV made a tiny course alteration and the distance between warhead and satellite dropped at a precipitous rate. The satellite was northbound at eighteen thousand miles per hour, the MHV southbound at over ten thousand, yet another hitech kamikaze. Then—

"Jesus!" said the senior officer on the LearJet as he blinked his eyes and turned away from the TV screen. Several hundred pounds of steel and ceramic had just turned to vapor. "That's a kill, say again that's a *kill!"*

The TV picture was downlinked to Space Command, where a radar picture backed it up. The massive satellite was now an expanding cloud of orbiting rubble. "Target is negated," said a calmer voice.

LENINSK, KAZAKH S.S.R.

The loss of signal from the Kosmos 1801 satellite was recorded scant seconds after it was obliterated from the sky. It was no surprise to the Russian space experts, since 1801 had used up its maneuvering thrusters several days before, and had been an easy target. Another F-1M rocket booster was sitting on a launch pad of the Baikonur Kosmodrome Complex. An abbreviated launch sequence countdown would be under way inside of two hours—but from now on the ability of the Soviet Navy to locate convoys and fighting fleets would be in jeopardy.

LANGLEY AIR FORCE BASE, VIRGINIA

"Well?" Buns asked as she jumped down from her fighter.

"Kill. We have it on tape," another major said. "It worked."

"How soon do you think they'll launch a replacement?" *One more kill and I'll be an ace!*

"We think they have one on the pad now. Twelve to twenty-four hours. No telling how many spares they have ready."

Nakamura nodded. The Air Force had a total of six remaining ASAT rockets. Maybe enough, maybe not—one successful mission did not make it a reliable weapon. She walked over to the squadron headquarters for coffee and donuts.

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

“Goddammit, Pasha!” CINC-West swore. “I don’t have a four-star deputy so that he can run around playing divisional commander. Look at you! You might have got your head cut off!”

“We needed a breakthrough. The tank commander was killed and his deputy was too young. I have given us the breakthrough.”

“Where is Captain Sergetov?”

“Major Sergetov,” Alekseyev corrected. “He performed well as my aide. His hand got carved up and he’s having it attended to. So. What reinforcements do we have moving to the 8th Guards Army?”

Both generals moved over to a large map. “These two tank divisions are already en route—ten to twelve hours. How firm is your bridgehead?”

“Could be better,” Alekseyev admitted. “There were three bridges there, but some madman started dropping rockets into the town and wrecked two of them. That left one. We managed to get a mechanized battalion across, along with some tanks, before the Germans were able to destroy it. They have plenty of artillery support, and when I left, we had boats and bridging equipment coming in. The man who relieved me will be trying to reinforce as soon as he can arrange a crossing in force.”

“Opposition?”

“Thin, but the terrain is on their side. I’d estimate one regiment or so, the remains of other NATO units. Some tanks, but mainly mechanized infantry. They also have plenty of artillery support. When I left it was a very even match. We have more firepower, but most of it’s trapped on our side of the Leine. It’s a race to see who can reinforce quickest.”

“After you left, NATO threw aircraft in. Our people are trying to hold them back, but NATO seems to be ahead in the air.”

“We can’t wait for night. Those bastards own the night sky.”

“Go now?”

Alekseyev nodded, thinking of what casualties he was bringing down on “his” division. “As soon as we can assemble the boats. Expand the bridgehead to two kilometers, then get the bridges across. What’s NATO bringing in?”

“Radio intercepts have identified two brigades en route. One British and one Belgian.”

“They’ll send more than that. They must know what we can do if we exploit this. We have 1st Guards Tank Army in reserve . . .”

“Commit half of our reserves here?”

“I can’t think of a better place.” Alekseyev gestured at the map. The drive toward Hannover had been stopped within sight of the city. The northern army groups had gotten into the outskirts of Hamburg, at the cost of gutting 3rd Shock Army’s tank formations. “With luck, we can break all of the 1st into the enemy rear. That will get us to the Weser at least—maybe the Rhein.”

“A large gamble, Pasha,” CINC-West breathed. But the odds here were better than anything else on the map. If the NATO forces were stretched as thinly as his intelligence staff said, they had to crumble someplace. Perhaps this was it? “Very well. Start posting the orders.”

FASLANE, SCOTLAND

"What about their ASW forces?" asked the captain of USS *Pittsburgh.*

"Considerable. We estimate that Ivan has two major antisubmarine-warfare groups, one centered on *Kiev,* the other on a Kresta cruiser. There are also four smaller groups, each composed of a Krivak-class frigate and four to six patrol frigates of the Grisha and Mirka type. Add to that a large collection of ASW aircraft and finally twenty or so submarines, half nuclear, half conventional," answered the briefing officer.

"Why don't we let them keep the Barents Sea?" muttered Todd Simms of USS *Boston.*

There's an idea, Dan McCafferty agreed silently.

"Seven days to get there?" *Pittsburgh* asked.

"Yes, that gives us a good deal of freedom on how to enter the area. Captain Little?"

The captain of HMS *Torbay* took the podium. McCafferty wondered if the Brits had any need for NFL-style noseguards in their team sports. Under six feet, but very broad across the shoulders, his head topped by a shock of sandy, unruly hair, James Little certainly looked like one. When he spoke, it was with toughly won assurance.

"We've been running a campaign we call Keypunch. The objective of Keypunch is to evaluate what ASW defenses Ivan has operating in the Barents Sea—and also, of course, to lop off the odd Sov who gets in our way." He smiled. *Torbay* had four kills. "Ivan's set a barrier from Bear Island to the coast of Norway. The immediate area around Bear Island is a solid minefield. Ivan's been laying the things since he took the island by parachute assault two weeks ago. South of this area, so far as we can determine, the barrier is composed of some small minefields and Tango-class diesel subs as a front line, backed by the mobile ASW groups and Victor-III-class nuclear submarines. Their aim appears to be not so much prosecute-to-kill as prosecute-to-drive-off. Every time one of our submarines has made an attack on this barrier line, there has been a vigorous response.

"Inside the Barents, things are pretty much the same. These small hunter-killer groups can be bloody dangerous. I personally had an encounter with a Krivak and four Grishas. Inshore, they have helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft in direct support, and it was a most unpleasant experience. We also found several new minefields. The Soviets appear to be sowing them almost at random in water as deep as one hundred fathoms. Finally they seem to have set a number of traps. One of them cost us Trafalgar. They set a small minefield and placed a noisemaker within it that sounds exactly like a Tango snorkeling her diesels. As near as we can make out, *Trafalgar* moved in to collect the Tango and ran right into a mine. Something to keep in mind, gentlemen." Little paused to let that bit of hard-won intelligence sink in.

"Right. What we intend you chaps to do is head north-northwest toward the edge of the Greenland Icepack, then east along the edge of the pack to the Svyatana Anna Trough. Five days from today three of our submarines will raise pure bloody hell on the barrier, supported by our own ASW aircraft and some fighters if that can be arranged. That ought to get Ivan's attention and

draw his mobile forces west. You should then be able to proceed south to your objective. It's a roundabout route, of course, but it enables you to use your towed sonars for the maximum period of time, and you should be able to run at relatively high speed at the edge of the icepack without being detected."

McCafferty thought that one over. The edge of the icepack was a noisy place, with billions of tons of ice in constant movement.

"The route has been scouted, by HMS *Sceptre* and *Superb*. They encountered minor patrolling only. Two Tangos were found in that area. Our chaps had orders not to engage." That told the Americans how important this mission was. "They will be waiting for you, so do be careful about engaging something in your path."

"How do we get out?" Todd Simms wondered.

"As quickly as you can. By that time we should have at least one more submarine to assist you. They'll stay roughly twelve hours ahead of your estimate speed of advance, eliminating any opposition they find. Once you reach the icepack, you're on your own. Our chaps will be there only as long as it takes to reach the pack. After that they have other duties to perform. We expect that Ivan's ASW groups will come after you—no surprise there, is it? We'll try to maintain pressure south of Bear Island to tie down as many as we can, but speed will be your best defense in this case."

The skipper of USS *Boston* nodded. He could run faster than the Russians could hunt.

"Further questions?" asked Commander, Submarines, Eastern Atlantic. "Good luck, then. We'll give you all the support we can."

McCafferty leafed through his briefing papers to check for the firing orders, then tucked the ops orders into his back pocket. Operation Doolittle. He and Simms left together. Their submarines were at the same quay. It was a short, quiet drive. They arrived to see Tomahawk missiles being loaded, in *Chicago*'s case into the twelve vertical tubes installed forward of the pressure hull in the submarine's bow. *Boston* was an older boat and had had to offload some of her torpedoes to make room for them. No submarine captain is ever happy offloading torpedoes.

"Don't worry, I'll back you up," McCafferty said.

"You do that. Looks like they're almost finished. Be nice to have one more beer, wouldn't it?" Simms chuckled.

"See you when we get back." Simms and McCafferty shook hands. A minute later both were below, seeing to the final arrangements for going back to sea.

USS *PHARRIS*

The Sikorsky Sea King helicopter was a tight fit on the frigate's helo deck, but for casualties the rules were always bent. The ten worst cases, all scald/burns and broken limbs, were loaded aboard after the helo was refueled, and Morris watched it lift off for the beach. The captain of what was left of USS *Pharris* put his cap back on and lit another cigarette. He still didn't know what had

gone wrong with that Victor-class. Somehow the Russian skipper had teleported himself from one place to another.

"We killed three o' the bastards, sir." Chief Clarke appeared at Morris's side. "Maybe this one just got lucky."

"Reading minds, Chief?"

"Beg pardon, sir. You wanted me to report on some things. The pumps have just about dried things out. I'd say we're leaking ten gallons an hour at the crack on the lower starboard corner, hardly worth talking about. The bulkhead's holding, and we got people keeping an eye on it. Same story with the tow cable. Those tugboat guys know their stuff. The engineer reports both boilers are fully repaired, number two still on line. The Prairie Masker is operating. The Sea Sparrow is working again in case we need that, but the radars're still down."

Morris nodded. "Thank you, Chief. How are the men?"

"Busy. Kinda quiet. Mad."

That's one advantage they have over me, Morris thought. *They're busy.*

"If you'll pardon me saying so, skipper, you look awful tired," Clarke said. The bosun was worried about his captain, but had already said more than he was supposed to.

"We'll all get a good rest soon enough."

SUNNYVALE, CALIFORNIA

"We show one bird lifting off," the watch officer told North American Aerospace Defense Command. "Coming out of Baikonur Kosmodrome on a heading of one-five-five, indicating a probable orbital inclination of sixty-five degrees. Signature characteristics say it's either an SS-11 ICBM or an F-1-type space booster."

"Only one?"

"Correct, one bird only."

A lot of U.S. Air Force officers had suddenly become very tense. The missile was on a heading that would take it directly over the central United States in forty to fifty minutes. The rocket in question could be many things. The Russian SS-9 missile, like many American counterparts, was obsolete and had been adapted as a satellite booster rocket. Unlike its American counterparts, it had been originally designed as a fractional-orbital-bombardment system: FOBS, *a missile that could put a 25-megaton nuclear warhead into a flight path mimicking that of a harmless satellite.*

"Booster-engine cutoff—okay, we show separation and second-stage ignition," the colonel said on the phone. *The Russians would freak if they knew how good our cameras are,* he thought. "Flight path continues as before."

Already NORAD had flashed a warning to Washington. If this was a nuclear strike, National Command Authority was ready to react. So many current scenarios began with a large warhead exploded at orbital height over the target country, causing massive electromagnetic damage to communications

systems. The SS-9 FOBS system was tailor-made for that sort of thing.

"Second-stage cutoff . . . and there's third-stage ignition. Do you copy our position fix, NORAD?"

"That's a roger," acknowledged the general under Cheyenne Mountain. The signal from the early-warning satellite was linked into NORAD headquarters, and a watch crew of thirty was holding its breath, watching the image of the space booster move across the map projection. *Dear God, don't let it be a nuke . . .*

Ground-based radar in Australia now tracked the vehicle, showing the climbing third stage and the spent second stage falling into the Indian Ocean. Their information also was linked by satellite to Sunnyvale and Cheyenne Mountain.

"That looks like shroud release," the man in Sunnyvale said. The radar picture showed four new objects fluttering away from the third stage. Probably the protective aluminum shroud needed for atmospheric flight, but unnecessary weight for a space vehicle. People began to breathe more regularly. A reentry vehicle needed such a shroud, but a satellite did not. After five tense minutes, this was the first piece of good news. The FOBS didn't do that.

An Air Force RC-135 aircraft was already lifting off the ground at Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma, its engines fire-walled as the flight crew raced the converted 707 airliner to altitude. The roof of what otherwise would be a passenger compartment held a large telescope/camera assembly used to inspect Soviet space vehicles. In the back, technicians activated the sophisticated tracking systems used to lock the camera in on its distant target.

"Burnout," they announced at Sunnyvale. "The vehicle has achieved orbital velocity. Initial numbers look like an apogee of one hundred fifty-six miles and a perigee of one hundred forty-eight." They'd have to refine those numbers, but NORAD and Washington needed something right now.

"Your evaluation?" NORAD asked Sunnyvale.

"Everything is consistent with a radar-ocean-reconnaissance-satellite launch. The only change is the orbital insertion path was southerly instead of northerly." Which made perfectly good sense, as everyone knew. Any kind of rocket launched over the pole entailed dangers that no one wanted to contemplate.

Thirty minutes later they were sure. The crewmen on the RC-135 got good pictures of the new Soviet satellite. Before it had completed its first revolution, it was classified as a RORSAT. The new radar-ocean-surveillance satellite would be a problem for the Navy, but not something to end the world. The people in Sunnyvale and Cheyenne Mountain maintained their vigil.

ICELAND

They followed a footpath around the mountain. Vigdis told them it was a favorite place for tourists to visit. A small glacier on the northern side of the

mountain fed a half-dozen streams, which led in turn to a sizable valley full of small farms. They had a fine vantage point. Almost everything in sight was below them, including several roads that were kept under constant scrutiny. Edwards debated the advantages of cutting straight across the valley toward their objective or staying on the rough ground to the east.

"I wonder what kinda radio station that is," Smith said. There was a tower of some sort eight miles west of them.

Mike looked at Vigdis and got a shrug. She didn't listen to the radio.

"Not easy to tell from this far," Edwards observed. "But probably they have some Russians." He unfolded his big map. This part of the island showed lots of roads, but the information had to be taken with a grain of salt. Only two of the roads had decent surfaces. The rest were called "seasonal" on the map—meaning exactly what? Edwards wondered. Of these, some were well maintained, others were not. The map didn't say which was which. All of the Soviet troops they'd seen on the ground were driving jeep-type vehicles, not the tracked infantry-carriers they'd observed on the invasion day. A good driver in a four-by-four could go almost anywhere, however. How good were the Soviets at driving jeeps over broken ground . . . so *many* things to worry about, Edwards thought.

Edwards tracked his field glasses over the area to his west. He saw a twin-prop airliner lift off from a small airfield. *You forgot about that, didn't you? The Russians are using those puddle-jumpers to ferry troops around . . .*

"Sarge, what do you think?" *Might as well get a professional decision.*

Smith grimaced. The choice was between physical danger and physical exhaustion. *Some choice,* he thought. *That's supposed to be why we have officers.*

"I'd at least have some patrols down there, Lieutenant. Lots of roads, figure some checkpoints so they can-keep an eye on the local folks. Let's say that radio's a navigation beacon. It'll be guarded. Regular radio station'll be guarded, too. All these farms—what kinda farms, Miss Vigdis?"

"Sheep, some milk cows, potatoes," she answered.

"So when the Russkies are off duty, there'll be some wandering around to get some fresh food instead of their canned crap. We would, too. I don't much like it, Lieutenant."

Edwards nodded agreement. "Okay, we head east. Just about out of food."

"There's always fish."

FASLANE, SCOTLAND

Chicago led the procession. A Royal Navy fleet tug had helped her away from the quay, and the American sub was heading out the channel at six knots. They were taking advantage of a "window" in Soviet satellite coverage. It would be at least six hours before another Russian reconnaissance satellite came overhead. Behind McCafferty came *Boston, Pittsburgh, Providence, Key West,* and *Groton,* at two-mile intervals.

"What's the sounding?" McCafferty asked over the intercom.

"Five hundred seventy feet."

Time. McCafferty ordered the lookouts below. The only ships in sight were aft. *Boston* was clearly visible, her black sail and twin diving planes gliding over the water like the angel of death. *That was apt enough,* he thought. The captain of USS *Chicago* made a final check of the control station atop the sail, then dropped down the ladder, pulling the hatch closed behind him. Another twenty-five feet and he was in the attack center, where he closed another hatch, turning the locking wheel as far as it would go.

"Straight board shut," the executive officer reported, going through the official litany that signified that the submarine was rigged for dive. Submariners evolved check lists long before aviators discovered them. McCafferty checked the status boards himself—and so, furtively, did several others of the attack center crew. Everything was as it should be.

"Dive. Make your depth two hundred feet," McCafferty ordered.

The submarine filled with the sound of rushing air and water, and the sleek black hull began her descent.

McCafferty reviewed the chart in his head. Seventy-four hours to the icepack, and turn east. Forty-three hours to Svyatana and turn south. Then came the really hard part.

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

The Battle of Alfeld was turning into a living thing that ate men and tanks like a wolf eats rabbits. Alekseyev chafed at being two hundred kilometers distant from the tank division he now regarded as his own. He could not complain about his relief—which only made things worse. The new commander had staged a successful forced river crossing, putting another two regiments of mechanized infantry on the far bank, and now three ribbon bridges were being built across the Leine-or at least a spirited attempt was under way to build them, despite murderous artillery fire from NATO units.

"We have created a 'meeting engagement,' Pasha," CINC-WEST said, staring down at the map.

Alekseyev nodded agreement. What had begun as a limited attack was fast becoming the focal point of the whole fighting front. Two more Soviet tank divisions were now near the battle area, racing to the Leine. Three NATO brigades were known to be heading the same way, along with artillery. Both sides were pulling tactical fighters from other sectors, one to smash the bridgehead, the other to support it. The terrain at the front didn't give the SAM crews enough time to discriminate friend from foe. The Russians had many more surface-to-air missiles, and so a free-fire zone had been established at Alfeld. Anything that flew was automatically a target for the Russian missiles, while Soviet aircraft kept clear, working instead to locate and kill NATO artillery and reinforcements. That ran contrary to pre-war doctrine—another gamble, but a favorable one, Alekseyev judged, given his experiences at the front. That was an important lesson not stressed enough in pre-war

training: senior commanders had to see what was happening with their own eyes. *How did we ever forget that?* Pasha wondered.

He fingered the bandage on his forehead. Alekseyev was suffering from a murderous headache, and a doctor had used twelve stitches to close the wound. Crude stitches, the doctor had told him—they would leave a scar. His father had had several such scars, all worn with pride. He'd accept the decoration for this one.

"We have the ridge north of the town!" 20th Tanks' commander called in. "We've pushed the Americans off."

Alekseyev took the phone. "How soon on the bridges?"

"We ought to have one ready in another half hour. Their artillery support is slackening off. They blew one bridging unit to hell, but this one will be completed. I have a battalion of tanks lined up already. The SAMs are doing well. I can see the wreckage of five aircraft from where I'm standing. I see—" The General was interrupted by man-made thunder.

Alekseyev could do nothing but stare at the telephone receiver. His fist tightened in anger around the handset.

"Excuse me. That was close. The final section of bridge is rolling out now. Those engineers have taken terrible losses, Comrade General. They deserve particular attention. The major in command of the unit has been exposed for three hours now. I want the gold star for him."

"Then he'll get it."

"Good, good—the bridge section is off the truck and in the water. If they give us ten minutes to anchor the far end, I'll get those damned tanks across for you. How long on my reinforcements?"

"The lead elements will arrive just after sunset."

"Excellent! I must leave now. I'll be back when we start rolling tanks."

Alekseyev handed the phone back to a junior officer. It was like listening to a hockey game on the radio!

"The next objective, Pasha?"

"Northwest to Hameln and beyond. We might be able to cut off NATO's northern army groups. If they start to disengage their forces around Hamburg, we go to a general attack and chase them all the way to the English Channel! I think we have the situation we've been hoping for."

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

At NATO headquarters, staff officers looked at the same maps and reached the same conclusions with less enthusiasm. Reserves were dangerously low—yet there was no choice. Men and guns converged on Alfeld in ever increasing numbers.

PANAMA

It was the biggest transit of U.S. Navy ships in years. The gray hulls used both sides of each lock system, preventing westbound traffic from moving. They were in a hurry. Helicopters moved the Canal pilots to and from ships; speed restrictions were broken, regardless of the erosion problems at the Gaillard Cut. Those ships needing refueling had it done as soon as they exited the Canal at the Gatun Locks, then formed an antisubmarine barrier outside Limón Bay. The formation's transit from Pacific to Atlantic lasted twelve hours under ruthless security. Finished, they departed north at a fleet speed of twenty-two knots. They had to go through the Windward Passage at night.

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Approaches

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

They call it the smell of the sea, Morris thought, *but really it's not. It's the smell of land.* It came from the tidal marshes—all the things that lived and died and rotted at the water's edge, all the smells that fermented in the marginal wetlands and when released blew out to sea. Sailors considered it a friendly odor because it meant that land, port, home, family were near. Otherwise it was something to be neutralized with Lysol.

As Morris watched, the tug *Papago* shortened her towline for better control in the restricted waters. Three harbor tugs came alongside, their crews throwing messenger lines to the frigate's sailors. When they were secured, *Papago* cast off and proceeded up the river to refuel.

"Good afternoon, Captain." The harbor pilot had come out on one of the tugs. He looked to have been bringing ships in and out of Boston for fifty years.

"And to you, Captain," Morris acknowledged.

"I see you killed three Russian subs?"

"Only one by ourselves. The others are assists."

"How much water are you drawing forward?"

"Just under twenty-five feet—no," Morris had to correct himself. The sonar dome was at the bottom of the Atlantic now.

"You did well to bring her back, Captain," the pilot said, looking forward. "My 'can didn't survive. Before you were born, I guess. *Callaghan,* seven ninety-two. Assistant gunnery officer, I'd just made j.g. We got twelve Jap planes, but just after midnight the thirteenth kamikaze got through on us. Forty-seven men—well." The pilot took the walkie-talkie from his pocket and started giving directions to the tugs. *Pharris* began to move sideways toward a pier. A medium-sized drydock was straight ahead, but they were not moving that way.

"Not the drydock?" Morris asked, surprised and angry that his ship was being moved to an ordinary pier.

"Mechanical problems in the dock. They're not ready for you yet. Tomorrow, day after for sure. I know how you feel, Captain. Like your kid's hurt and they won't let her in the hospital. Cheer up, I watched mine sink."

It made no sense to grumble, Morris knew. The man was right. If *Pharris* hadn't sunk during the tow, she was safe enough alongside the pier for a day or two. The pilot was an expert. His trained eye measured the wind and the tide, and he gave the proper orders to the tug captains. Within thirty minutes the frigate was secured to the cargo pier. Three TV news crews were waiting for them behind a screen of sailors in shore patrol livery. As soon as the brow was rigged, an officer hurried aboard and came right to the bridge.

"Captain, I'm Lieutenant Commander Anders. I have this for you, sir." He handed over an official-looking envelope.

Morris tore it open and found a standard Navy dispatch form. The message ordered him in terse Navy prose to Norfolk by the quickest available transport.

"I have a car waiting. You can catch the shuttle to D.C., then hop a short-hauler to Norfolk."

"What about my ship?"

"That's my job, Captain. I'll take good care of her for you."

Just like that, Morris thought. He nodded and went below to pack his gear. Ten minutes later he walked without speaking past the TV cameras and was taken to Logan International Airport.

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

Toland went over the satellite photographs of Iceland's four airfields. Strangely, the Russians were not making any use of the old Keflavik field, preferring instead to base their fighters at Reykjavik and the new NATO base. Occasionally, a Backfire or two were landing at Keflavik, bombers with mechanical problems or running short of fuel, but that was it. The northerly fighter sweeps had had their effect, too—the Russians were doing their tanking farther north and east now, which had produced a marginal but nevertheless negative effect on the Backfires' range. The experts estimated that it cut twenty minutes off the time they had to search for convoys. Despite the searching done by the Bears and satellite reconnaissance, only two-thirds of the raids actually launched attacks. Toland didn't know why. Was there a problem with Soviet communications? If so, could they find a way to exploit it?

The Backfires were still hurting the convoys, and badly. After considerable Navy prodding, the Air Force was starting to base fighters in Newfoundland, Bermuda, and the Azores. Supported by tankers borrowed from the Strategic Air Command, they were trying to maintain a combat air patrol over those convoys they could reach. There was no hope of actually breaking up a Backfire raid, but they could start thinning the Bears out. The Soviets had only about thirty of the wide-ranging Bear-D reconnaissance aircraft. Roughly ten flew every day with their powerful Big Bulge radars turned on to guide the bombers and submarines in on the convoys, which made them relatively easy to find, if a fighter could be put out there to find them. After much experimentation, the Russians had fallen into a predictable pattern of air

operations. They would be made to pay for that. Tomorrow the Air Force would have a two-plane patrol over six different convoys.

The Russians would be made to pay a toll for basing aircraft on Iceland, too.

"I make it a regiment, say twenty-four to twenty-seven aircraft. All MiG-29 Fulcrums," Toland said. "We never seem to see more than twenty-one on the ground. I figure they're running a fairly steady combat air patrol, say four birds aloft almost around the clock. They also appear to have three ground-based radars, and they're moving them around a lot. That probably means that they're set up for ground-controlled intercepts. Any problem jamming the search radars?"

A fighter pilot shook his head. "With the right support, no."

"So we'll just have to flush the MiGs off the ground and kill some." The commanders of both Tomcat squadrons were with Toland, examining the maps. "Want to keep clear of those SAMs, though. From what the guys in Germany say, the SA-11 is very bad news."

The first Air Force effort to flatten Keflavik with B-52s had been a disaster. Follow-up efforts with smaller, faster FB-111s had harassed the Russians but could not put Keflavik totally out of business. SAC was unwilling to part with enough of its fastest strategic bombers to do this. There still had not been a successful mission against the main fuel-storage site. It was too close to a populated area, and satellite photos revealed that the civilians were still there. Of course.

"Let's get the Air Force to try another B-52 mission," one fighter jock suggested. "They come in like before, except . . ." He outlined some changes in the attack profile. "Now that we have our Queers with us, it might work out all right."

"If you want my help, Commander, you might at least be a little polite about it." The Prowler pilot in the room clearly didn't like to have his forty-million-dollar aircraft referred to by that nickname. "I can knock those SAM radars back some, just keep in mind that SA-11 has a backup infrared tracker system. You get within ten miles of the launchers, they have an even-money chance of smoking your Tomcat right out of the sky." The really nasty thing about the SA-11, pilots had learned, was that it left almost no exhaust trail, which made it very hard to spot, and it was even harder to evade a SAM you couldn't see.

"We'll stay clear of Mr. SAM. First time, gentlemen, we got the odds on our side." The fighter pilots started putting a plan together. They now had solid intelligence of how Russian fighters operated in combat. The Soviets had good tactics, but they were also predictable. If the American aircraft could contrive to present a situation for which the Russians were trained, they knew how Ivan would react to it.

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

He had never expected it to be easy, but neither had Alekseyev expected

NATO air forces to have control of the night skies. Four minutes after midnight, an aircraft that had never registered on their radar had obliterated the radio transmitter station for CINC-WEST'S headquarters. They'd only had three alternate stations, each more than ten kilometers from the underground bunker complex. Now they had one, plus a mobile transmitter that had already been bombed once. The underground telephone cables were still being used, of course, but advances into enemy territory had made telephone communications unreliable. Too often, the cables strung by Signal Corps troops were being destroyed by air attack and badly driven vehicles. They needed the radio links, and NATO was systematically eliminating them. They'd even attempted an attack on the bunker complex itself—the decoy site set exactly between two transmitter stations had been hit by eight fighter-bombers and liberally sprinkled with napalm, cluster munitions, and delay-fused high explosives. If the attack had been on the real complex, the ordnance experts said, there might have been casualties. *So much for the skill of our engineers.* The bunkers were supposed to withstand a near-miss from a nuclear warhead.

He now had a full fighting division across the Leine—the remains of one, he corrected himself. The two reinforcing tank divisions were trying to cross now, but the ribbon bridges had been bombed overnight along with the advancing divisions. The NATO reinforcements were beginning to arrive—their road advances had also suffered from air attacks, though at ghastly cost to the Soviet fighter-bombers. *The tactics . . . no, amateurs discuss tactics,* Alekseyev thought wryly. *Professional soldiers study logistics.* The key to his success would pivot on his ability to maintain bridges on the river Leine and to run traffic efficiently down the roads to Alfeld. The traffic-control system had already broken down twice before Alekseyev had dispatched a team of colonels to handle things.

"We should have picked a better place," Alekseyev muttered.

"Excuse me, Comrade General?" Sergetov asked.

"There's only one good road into Alfeld." The General smiled ironically. "We should have made our breakthrough at a town with at least three."

They watched wooden counters march—creep—down the line on the map. Each counter was a battalion. Missile and antiaircraft-gun units lined the corridor north and south of this road, and the road itself constantly swept to rid it of the remotely deployed mines that NATO was using in large numbers for the first time.

"Twentieth Tanks has taken a serious mauling," the General breathed. *His* troops. It might have been a quick breakthrough—should have been but for NATO aircraft.

"The two reinforcing divisions will complete the maneuver," Sergetov predicted confidently.

Alekseyev thought him right. Unless something else went wrong.

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

Morris sat across the deck from COMNAVSURFLANT: Commander, Naval Surface Forces, U.S. Atlantic Fleet. A three-star admiral, he'd spent his whole career in what he liked to call "the real Navy," frigates, destroyers, and cruisers. The small gray ships lacked the glamour of aviation and the mystery of the submarines, but right now they were the key to getting the convoys across the Atlantic.

"Ivan's changed tactics on us—a hell of a lot faster than we thought he was able to. They're going for the escorts. The attack on your frigate was deliberate, you didn't just stumble across him. He was probably laying for you."

"They're trying to roll back the escorts?"

"Yes, but with particular attention to the ships with tails. We've hurt their submarine force—not enough, but we have hurt them. The towed-array pickets have worked out very well. Ivan picked up on that and he's trying to take them out. He's looking for the SURTASS ships, too, but that's a harder proposition. We've killed three submarines that tried to move in on them."

Morris nodded. The Surface Towed-Array Sonar Ships were modified tuna clippers that trailed enormous passive sonar cables. There weren't enough of them to provide coverage for more than half the convoy routes, but they fed good information into ASW headquarters in Norfolk. "Why don't they send Backfires after the ships?"

"We've wondered about that, too. Evidently the Russians don't think they're worth the diversion of that much effort. Besides, we've got a lot more electronic capability built into them than anyone thought. They're not easy to locate on radar." The Admiral went no further than that, but Morris wondered if stealth technology—which the Navy had been working on for years—had been applied to the SURTASS force. If the Russians were limiting their effort to locate and kill the tuna boats with submarines, he thought, so much the better.

"I'm putting you in for a decoration, Ed. You did very well. I've only got three skippers who've done better, and one of them was killed yesterday. So how bad was your damage?"

"She may be a total loss, sir. It was a Victor. We took one hit in the bow. The keel let go, and—the bow tore off, sir. We lost everything forward of the ASROC launcher. Lots of shock damage, but most of it's already fixed. Before she'll sail again, we have to build her a new bow." The Admiral nodded. He'd already seen the casualty reports.

"You did well to save her, Ed. Damned well. *Pharris* doesn't need you for the moment. I want you here with my operations people. We have to change tactics, too. I want you to look over what intelligence and operational information we have and feed me some ideas."

"For starters, we might stop those damned Backfires."

"That's being worked on." The reply held both confidence and skepticism.

THE WINDWARD PASSAGE

To the east was Haiti on the island of Hispaniola. To the west was Cuba. Blacked out, radar systems fully energized but placed on standby, the ships sailed in battle formation, escorted by destroyers and frigates. Missiles were hung on launchers and trained out to port, while the launch controllers sweated in their air-conditioned battle stations.

They didn't expect trouble. Castro had gotten word to the American government that he had had no part in this, and was angered that the Soviets had not informed him of their plans. It was diplomatically important, however, that the American fleet traverse the passage in darkness so that the Cubans could say truthfully that they had seen nothing. As a sign of good faith, Castro had also alerted the Americans to the presence of a Soviet submarine in the Florida Straits. To be used as a vassal was one thing, to have his country used as a base for a war without being informed was too much.

The sailors didn't know all of this, just that no serious opposition was expected. They took it with a grain of salt, as they did all intelligence reports. Their helicopters had laid a string of sonobuoys, and their ESM radar receivers listened for the pulsing signal of a Soviet-made radar. Aloft, lookouts trained clumsy starlight scopes around the sky, searching for aircraft that might be hunting them visually—which would not be hard. At twenty-five knots, every ship left a foaming wake that seemed to fluoresce like neon in the darkness.

Maalox didn't work anymore, one frigate captain grumbled to himself. He sat in the command chair in his ship's Combat Information Center. To his left was the chart table, in front of him (he faced aft) the young tactical action officer stood over his plotting scope. The Cubans were known to have surface-to-surface missile batteries arrayed on their coastline like the fortresses of old. At any moment the ships might detect a swarm of incoming vampires. Forward, his single-arm missile launcher was loaded and trained out, as were his three-inch gun and CIWS topside. The coffee was a mistake, but he had to stay alert. The price was a stabbing pain in his upper abdomen. *Maybe I should talk to the corpsman,* he thought, and shrugged it off. There wasn't time for that. He'd been working around the clock for three months to get his ship ready for action, racing through the acceptance trials and conducting continuous workups, working his men and ship hard, but working himself hardest of all. He was too proud to admit that he'd pushed too hard, even to himself.

It came just as he finished his third cup of coffee. For all the warnings, it was a pain as severe and surprising as a thrown knife. The captain doubled over and vomited on the tiled deck of CIC. A sailor mopped it up at once, and it was too dark to see that there'd been blood on the tile. He couldn't leave his post, despite the pains, despite the sudden chill from the blood loss. The captain made a mental note to keep off the coffee for a few hours. Maybe he'd see the corpsman when he got the chance. *If* he got the chance. There'd be a three-day layover in Norfolk. He could rest a little then. He knew he needed rest. The fatigue that had been building for days hammered at him. The captain shook his head. Throwing up was supposed to make you feel better.

VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA

Morris found his home empty. At his suggestion, his wife had gone home to Kansas to stay with her family. No sense having you and the kids home worrying about me, he'd told her. He regretted it now. Morris needed the company, needed a hug, needed to see his kids. Within a minute of opening the door, he was on the phone. His wife already knew what had happened to his ship, but had withheld it from the kids. It took two minutes to assure her that he was indeed all right, at home, and uninjured. Then came the kids, and finally the knowledge that they couldn't arrange a flight home. All the airliners were either ferrying men and supplies overseas or booked solid until mid-August. Ed saw no sense in having his family drive all the way from Salinas to Kansas City to wait on standby. Good-byes were hard.

What came next was harder. Commander Edward Morris donned his whites and from his wallet took a list of family calls he had to make. They'd all been officially notified, but another of the duties that came with command was to make the trips himself. The widow of his executive officer lived only half a mile away. A good man with a barbecue, the XO, Morris remembered. How many weekends had he spent in their backyard watching steaks sizzle over charcoal? What would he tell her now? What would he tell the rest of the widows? What would he tell the *kids?*

Morris walked to his car and was mocked by the license plate, FF-1094. Not every man got to carry his failure around with him. Most were fortunate enough to leave it behind. As he started the engine, Morris wondered if he'd ever be able to sleep without the fear of reliving again that moment on the bridge of his ship.

ICELAND

For the first time Edwards had beaten his sergeant at his own game. For all his alleged expertise with a fishing rod, Smith had come away with nothing after an hour's effort, and handed the rod to Mike in disgust. Ten minutes later, Edwards landed a four-pound trout.

"Ain't that some shit," Smith growled.

The last ten kilometers they'd covered had taken eleven hours. The one road they'd had to cross, they learned, was a busy one. Every few minutes a vehicle headed north or south. The Russians were using this gravel strip as their principal means of overland travel to Iceland's northern coast. Edwards and his party had spent six hours hiding in the rocks of yet another lava field, watching and waiting for a safe time to cross. Twice they'd seen Mi-24 helicopters patrolling the area, but neither had come close. They'd seen no foot patrols either, and Edwards had concluded that Iceland was too big for the Soviet force to control. At that point he'd taken out his Russian map and set to analyzing the symbols. The Soviet troops were concentrated in an arc extending north and south of the Reykjavik peninsula. He'd radioed that into

Scotland, spending ten minutes describing the Russian symbology.

Road traffic had dropped off at dusk, allowing them to cross the road on the run. They'd found themselves without food in another area of lakes and streams. Enough was enough, Edwards had decided. They had to rest again and began fishing to get themselves some food. The next leg of their journey would keep them well clear of inhabited areas.

His rifle and other gear lay next to a rock, covered with his camouflage jacket. Vigdis was with him. She'd hardly left his side all day. Smith and the Marines had found places to relax while their lieutenant did most of the work.

The local bug population was out in force today. His sweater kept most of them off his skin, but his face attracted their share. He tried to ignore them. Quite a few bugs had found their way to the surface of the stream, and the trout were going after them. Every time he saw a ripple, he cast the feathery lure toward it. The rod bent again.

"Got another one!" he hooted. Smith's head came up, shook angrily, and went back down in the bushes fifty yards away.

Edwards had never done this sort of fishing. All his experience was in his father's boat, but the principles were pretty much the same. He let the trout pull against the line, but not too much, just enough to wear him out as Edwards worked the rod up and down, drawing the fish upstream and into the rocks. Suddenly he tripped over a rock and fell into the shallow water, managing, however, to keep his rod-tip high. Struggling to his feet, he stepped back, his fatigue pants black and wet against his legs.

"This is a big one." He turned to see Vigdis laughing. She watched him work the fish in and began moving toward it. A minute later she grabbed the leader and pulled the trout clear of the water.

"Three kilos, this one." She held it up.

At age ten Mike had caught a hundred-pound albacore, but this brown trout looked a lot bigger. He reeled in the line as Vigdis walked toward him. *Ten pounds of fish in twenty minutes,* he thought. *We might just be able to live off the land yet.*

The helicopter appeared without warning. There was a westerly wind—it had probably been patrolling the road to the east—and the aircraft was less than a mile away before they heard the stuttering sound of its five-bladed rotor headed right toward them. "Everyone freeze!" Smith yelled. The Marines were in good cover, but Mike and Vigdis were in the open.

"Oh, God," Edwards breathed. He finished reeling his line in. "Take the fish off the hook. Relax."

She looked at him as the helicopter approached, afraid to turn around toward the incoming chopper. Her hands shook as she worked the hook free of the wriggling trout.

"It's going to be all right, Vigdis." He wrapped his arm about her waist and walked slowly away from the stream. Her arm pulled his body close against hers. It came as a greater shock than the Russian chopper. She was stronger than he'd expected, and her arm was a heated path around his back and chest.

The chopper was less than five hundred yards off, bearing directly at them, nose down, the multibarreled gun trained directly at them.

He'd never make it, Edwards saw. His rifle was fifty feet away under his

camouflage jacket. If he moved fast enough to get there, they'd know why. His legs were weak beneath him as he watched death approach.

Slowly, carefully, Vigdis moved the hand in which she held the fish. She used two fingers to grab Mike's hand at her waist, moving it up and around until it rested on her left breast. Then she held the fish high above her head. Mike dropped his rod and stooped to get the other trout. Vigdis followed his movements and managed to keep his left hand in place. Mike held up his fish as the Mi-24 attack helicopter hovered fifty yards away. Its rotor tossed up a circle of spray from the surrounding marsh.

"Go away," Mike rasped through his grinning teeth.

"My father loves to fish," the senior lieutenant said, manipulating the flight controls to Hover.

"Shit on the fish," the gunner snapped back. "I want to catch one of those. Look where that young bastard has his hand!"

They probably don't even know what's going on, he thought. *Or if they know, they have sense enough not to do anything about it. Nice to see that some people are untouched by the madness that's sweeping the world . . .* The pilot looked down at his fuel gauges.

"They look harmless enough. We're down to thirty minutes' fuel. Time to return."

The chopper settled at the tail, and for a terrible moment Edwards thought it might be landing. Then it pivoted in midair and moved to the southwest. One of the soldiers riding in the back waved at them. Vidgis waved back. They stood there as it fiew off. Their hands came down, and her left arm held his tight against her. Edwards had not realized that Vigdis didn't wear a bra. He was afraid to move his hand, afraid to appear to make an advance. Why had she done that? To help fool the Russians—to reassure him, or herself? That it had in fact worked seemed unimportant. The Marines were still concealed. They stood there quite alone, and his left hand seemed to burn as his mind stumbled over what he ought to do.

Vigdis acted for him. His hand slid away as she turned to him and buried her head against his shoulder. *Here I am holding the prettiest girl I ever met in one hand,* Edwards thought, *and a Goddamned fish in the other.* That was easily solved. Edwards dropped the fish, wrapped both arms around her, and held on tight.

"Are you all right?"

She looked up at his face. "I think yes."

There was only one word for what he felt toward the girl in his arms. Edwards knew this wasn't the time, and wasn't the place, but the look and the word remained. He kissed her gently on the cheek. The smile that answered him counted more than all the passionate encounters of his life.

"Excuse me, folks," Sergeant Smith said from a few feet away.

"Yeah." Edwards disengaged himself. "Let's get moving before they decide to come back."

Things were going well. American P-3C Orions and British Nimrods were scouting the route to the icepack. The submarines had been forced to detour east around one suspected Russian submarine, but that was all. Ivan was sending most of his boats south, it seemed, confident that the Norwegian Sea was under his control. Another six hours to the pack.

Chicago was drifting now, finished with her turn at the head of the "freight train" procession of submarines. Her sonar gear searched the black water for the telltale noise of a Russian submarine. They heard nothing but the distant growling of the icepack.

The tracking team plotted the position of the other American submarines. McCafferty was glad to see they had trouble doing so, even with America's best sonar equipment. If they had trouble, so would the Russians. His crew looked to be in good shape. Three days on the beach had counted for a lot. The beer supplied by the Norwegian skipper, plus word on what their Harpoon had done in *Chicago's* one real engagement, had counted for even more. He'd already briefed the crew on their current mission. The information was accepted quietly, with a couple of jokes about going back home—to the Barents Sea.

"That was *Boston,* skipper," the XO said. "Now we're the caboose."

McCafferty walked back to examine the chart. Everything looked okay, but he checked everything carefully. With so many submarines running the same course track, the risk of collision was real. A quartermaster ran down the list of the sister subs that had passed *Chicago.* The skipper was satisfied.

"All ahead two-thirds," he ordered. The helmsman acknowledged the order and twisted the annunciator dial.

"Engine room answers all ahead two-thirds."

"Very well. Left ten degrees rudder. Come to new course three-four-eight."

Chicago accelerated to fifteen knots, taking her station at the end of the column as the freight train raced to the Arctic.

31

Demons

VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA

"Left full rudder!" Morris screamed, pointing at the torpedo's wake.

"Right full rudder, aye!" the helmsman replied, spinning the wheel right, then left, then centering it.

Morris stood on the port bridge wing. The sea was flat calm, and the torpedo's wake was clearly visible, following every turn and maneuver the frigate made. He even tried reversing, and that didn't work—the torpedo appeared to go sideways. It stopped dead in the water and rose to the surface where he could see it. It was white, with what seemed to be a red star on the nose . . . and it had eyes, like all homing torpedoes. He ordered flank speed, but the torpedo stayed with him on the surface now, skimming along like a flying fish, clearly visible to all who could see—but only Morris saw it.

It closed ever so slowly as the frigate maneuvered. Fifty feet, thirty, ten . . .

"Where did my daddy go?" the little girl asked. "I want my daddy!"

"What's the problem, skipper?" the exec asked. This was very strange, because he didn't have a head—

Sweat poured from Morris's face as he bolted upright in his bed, his heart racing. The digital clock on the headboard said 4:54. Ed got up and walked shakily into the bathroom to splash cold water on his face. *The second time tonight,* he thought. Twice more during the tow back to Boston the nightmare had come, robbing him of the few hours of rest he allowed himself. Morris wondered if he had screamed in his sleep.

You did everything you could have done. It's not your fault, he told the face in the mirror.

But you were the captain, it replied.

Morris had gotten through five homes when he'd had to stop. It was one thing to talk to wives and parents. They understood. Their sons and husbands were sailors, and had taken a sailor's risk. But the four-year-old daughter of Gunner's Mate Second Class Jeff Evans had not understood why her daddy would never come home again. A second-class petty officer didn't make much, Morris knew. Evans must have worked like a madman on that little house to make it as neat as it was. A good man with his hands, he remembered, a good gunner's mate. Every wall was newly painted. Much of the interior woodwork

had been replaced. They'd been in the house only seven months, and Morris wondered how the petty officer had found the time to get all that work done. He had to have done it himself. No way he could have afforded contractors. Ginny's room had been a testimony to her father's love. Dolls from all over the world had stood on handmade shelves. As soon as he'd seen Ginny's room, Morris had had to leave. He'd felt himself on the verge of breaking down, and some absurd code of conduct wouldn't allow him to do that in front of strangers. So he'd left and driven home, with the rest of the list tucked back in his wallet. Certainly the fatigue that had enveloped him would allow him a night's sleep . . .

But now he stood in front of the mirror, looking at a man with hollow eyes who wished his wife were there.

Morris went out to the kitchen of his one-story house and went mindlessly through the process of making coffee. The morning paper was on the doorstep, and he found himself reading stories about the war that he knew to be inaccurate or out of date. Things were happening much too fast for reporters to keep up. There was an eyewitness account from an unnamed destroyer about a missile that had leaked through her missile defenses. An "analysis" piece explained how surface warships were obsolete in the face of determined missile attacks and asked where the fleet's vaunted carriers were. That, he thought, was a pretty good question.

Morris finished his coffee and returned to the bathroom for a shower. If he had to be awake, he thought, he might as well be at work. He had one set of undress whites in the closet. He donned them a few minutes later and walked out to his car. It was already first light when he drove to the Norfolk Navy Base.

Forty minutes later he was in one of several operations rooms, where the positions of convoys and suspected submarine locations were plotted. On the far wall the threat board listed estimated Russian assets and the numbers and types of kills accumulated to date. Another wall showed losses. If the intel guys were right, he thought, the war at sea had the look of a draw—but for the Russians a draw was the same as a win.

"Good morning, Commander," COMNAVSURFLANT said. Another man who had not slept very much. "You look a little better."

Better than what? Morris wondered.

"We have some good news for a change."

NORTH ATLANTIC

The B-52 crews were nervous despite the heavy fighter escort. Five thousand feet above them, a full squadron of F-14 Tomcats flew top cover, having just refueled from KC-135 tankers. The other squadron was tanking now for their part in the mission. The sun was just peeping above the horizon, and the ocean below them was still dark. It was 0300 local time, when human reaction times are at their worst.

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

The alarm klaxon jolted the sleeping Russian pilots off their cots. Their ground crews took fewer than ten seconds to begin preflight procedures as the airmen climbed the steel ladders into their cockpits and plugged in their helmet radios to learn what the emergency was.

"Heavy enemy jamming activity to the west," the regimental commander announced. "Plan Three. Repeat: Plan Three."

In the control trailer, radar operators had just seen their radar screens turn to a cluttered nightmare of white-noise jamming. An American raid was coming in—probably B-52s, probably in force. Soon the American aircraft would be so close that the ground-based radars could burn through the jamming. Until then, the fighters would try to engage as far out as they could to reduce the number of bombers before they could strike their target.

The Soviet pilots had been well drilled in their time on Iceland. Within two minutes the first pair of MiG-29s was rolling; in seven all were in the air. The Soviet plan left a third of the fighters over Keflavik while the others charged west toward the jamming, their own missile-targeting radars on, seeking targets. They were ten minutes out when the jamming stopped. A single MiG got a radar contact off a retreating jamming aircraft and radioed Keflavik, only to learn from his ground controllers that nothing was on the scopes out to a range of three hundred kilometers.

A minute later, the jamming began again, this time from the south and east. More cautiously this time, the MiGs flew south. On orders, they kept their radar systems shut down until they were a hundred miles offshore, but when they switched on they found nothing. Whoever was jamming was doing it from a great distance. The ground controllers reported that three jammers had been involved in the first incident and four in the second. *Quite a lot of jammers,* the regimental commander thought. *They're trying to run us around, trying to make us use up our fuel.*

"Come east," he ordered his flight leaders.

The B-52 crews were really nervous now. One of the escorting Prowlers had picked up the voice radio orders from the MiGs, and another had caught a flash of their air-intercept radars to the southwest. The fighters eased south also. They were now one hundred fifty miles from Keflavik, crossing the Icelandic coast. The mission commander evaluated the situation and ordered the bombers to turn slightly north.

The B-52s carried no bombs, just the powerful radar jammers designed to allow other bombers to reach targets within the Soviet Union. Below them, the second squadron of Tomcats was heading for the deck, the eastern slopes of the Vatna glacier. With them were four Navy Prowlers for additional protection against air-to-air missiles in case the MiGs got too close.

"Starting to get some airborne radars, bearing two-five-eight. Seems to be

closing," one Prowler reported. Another copied the same signal and they triangulated the range to fifty miles. Close enough. The mission commander was flying a Prowler.

"Amber Moon. Say again, Amber Moon."

The B-52s turned back east and dove, opening their bomb bays to disgorge tons of aluminum chaff that no radar signal could penetrate. As soon as they saw that, the American fighters all dropped their external fuel tanks, and the Prowlers broke off from the bombers to orbit just west of the chaff. Now came the tricky part. The fighters of both sides were closing at a combined speed of over one thousand miles per hour.

"Queer check," the mission commander radioed.

"Blackie check," acknowledged the skipper of VF-41.

"Jolly check," replied the commander of VF-84. Everyone was in position.

"Execute." The four Prowlers flipped on their antimissile jamming gear.

The twelve Tomcats of the Jolly Rogers were strung on a line at thirty thousand feet. On command they activated their missile-guidance radars.

"American fighters!" shouted a number of Russian pilots. Their threat receivers instantly told the pilots that fighter-type radars were locked on their aircraft.

The Soviet fighter commander was not surprised. Surely the Americans would not risk their heavy bombers again without a proper escort. He'd ignore these and bore in for the B-52s, as his training dictated. The MiG radars were heavily jammed, their ranges cut in half and as yet unable to track any targets at all. He ordered his pilots to be alert for incoming missiles, confident that they could avoid those that they saw, and had all his aircraft increase power. Next, he ordered all but two of his reserve force to leave Keflavik and come east to support him.

The Americans needed only seconds to lock onto targets. Each Tomcat carried four Sparrows and four Sidewinders. The Sparrows went first. There were sixteen MiGs in the air. Most had at least two missiles targeted, but the Sparrows were radar-guided. Each American fighter had to remain pointed at its target until the missile hit. This ran the risk of closing within range of Soviet missiles, and the Tomcats were not equipped with protective jammers.

The Americans had taken position up-sun from the Russians. Just as their radars began to burn through the American jamming, the Sparrows arrived, the first directly from the sun, exploding its MiG in midair and warning everyone in its flight. The Soviet aircraft began radical jinks up and down, some pilots breaking into hard turns as they saw the seven-inch wide missiles racing in, but four more found their targets, and in moments there were three hard kills and one severely damaged aircraft that turned to limp for home.

The Jolly Rogers turned as soon as their missiles were spent and ran northeast with the Soviets in pursuit. The Russian commander was relieved that the American missiles had performed so poorly, yet still enraged at the loss of five aircraft. His remaining aircraft bore in on afterburner as their targeting radars began to defeat the American jamming. The American fighter

escort had had its turn, he knew. Now it was his turn. They ran northeast, their visored eyes alternating between squints into the sun and quick looks at their radarscopes to pick out targets. They never looked down. The lead MiG finally had a target and launched two missiles.

Twenty thousand feet below them, shielded from ground radar by a pair of mountains, twelve Tomcats of the Black Aces went to afterburner, their radars shut off as the twin-engined fighters rocketed skyward. Within ninety seconds the pilots began to hear the growling signal that indicated their Sidewinder heat-seeking missiles were tracking targets. Seconds later, sixteen missiles were fired from a range of two miles.

Six Russian pilots never knew what hit them. Of the eleven MiGs, eight were hit in a matter of seconds. The commander's luck remained briefly as he jerked his fighter around, causing a Sidewinder to break lock and fly into the sun, but now what could he do? He saw two Tomcats running south, away from his remaining fighters. It was too late to organize an attack—his wingman was gone, and the only friendly aircraft he could see was to his north—so the colonel reefed his MiG into an eight-g turn and dove at the American, oblivious to the warning buzz of his threat receiver. Both Sparrows launched from the second group of Black Aces struck his wing. The MiG came apart around him.

The Americans had no time to gloat. The mission commander reported a second group of MiGs heading their way and the American squadrons regrouped to meet them, forming a solid wall of twenty-four aircraft, their radars shut down for two minutes as the MiGs raced into the cloud of jamming. The Russian second-in-command was making a serious error. His fellow pilots were in danger. He had to go to their rescue. One group of Tomcat volleyed off its remaining Sparrows; the other fired Sidewinders. A total of thirty-eight missiles closed in on eight Soviet aircraft who had no clear picture of what they were running into. Half of them never did, blotted out of the sky by American air-to-air missiles; three more were damaged.

The Tomcat pilots all wanted to close, but the commander ordered them off. They were all short of fuel, and Stornoway was seven hundred miles off. They turned east, ducking through the cloud of aluminum chaff left by the B-52s. The Americans would claim thirty-seven kills, quite a score since they had expected a total of only twenty-seven Russian aircraft. In fact, of twenty-six MiGs, only five undamaged aircraft remained. A stunned air base commander immediately began rescue operations. Soon the parachute division's attack helicopters were flying northeast, searching for downed pilots.

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Thirty kilometers from Alfeld to Hameln, Alekseyev thought. An hour's drive in a tank. Elements of three divisions were making that drive now, and since the crossing had been achieved, they'd advanced a total of only eighteen kilometers. This time it was the English: the tanks of the Royal Tank Regiment and 21st Lancers had stopped his leading elements cold halfway to Hameln and hadn't budged in eighteen hours.

There was real danger here. For a mechanized formation, safety lay in movement. The Soviets were feeding units into the gap, but NATO was using its air power to the utmost. The bridges on the Leine were being destroyed almost as fast as they could be repaired. Engineers had prepared crossing points on the riverbanks, and the Russians were able to swim their infantry carriers across now, but the tanks couldn't swim, and every attempt to run them across underwater—as they were supposedly equipped to do—had been a failure. Too many units had had to be deployed to protect the breach in NATO's lines, and too few were able to exploit it. Alekseyev had achieved a perfect textbook breakthrough—only to see that the other side had its own textbook for containing and smashing it. Western Theater had a total of six reserve class-A divisions to send into the fighting. After that they would have to start using class-B units composed of reservists, with older men and equipment. There were many of them, but they would not—could not—perform as well as the younger soldiers. The General bridled at the necessity of committing units to battle that would certainly take higher casualties than normal. But he had no choice. His political masters wanted it, and he was only the executor of political policy.

"I have to go back forward," Alekseyev told his boss.

"Yes, but no closer than five kilometers to the front line, Pasha. I cannot afford to lose you now."

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

The Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, looked at his own tally sheet. Nearly all of his reserves were committed to the fighting now, and the Russians seemed to have an endless supply of men and vehicles moving forward. His units had no time to reorganize and redeploy. NATO faced the nightmare of all armies: they could only react to the moves of their opponent, with almost no chance to launch their own initiatives. So far things were holding together—but only barely. Southeast of Hameln his map showed a British brigade. In fact it was nothing more than a reinforced regiment composed of exhausted men and damaged equipment. Artillery and aircraft were all that allowed him to prevent a collapse, and even that would not be enough if his units didn't get much more replacement equipment. More ominously, NATO was now down to two weeks of ordnance, and the resupply coming from America had been seriously impeded by attacks on the convoys. What could he tell his men? Reduce munitions expenditures—when the only thing stopping the Russians was the profligate use of every weapon at hand?

His morning intelligence brief was starting. The chief NATO intelligence officer was a German general who was accompanied by a Dutch major carrying a videotape cassette. For something this important, the intel officer knew, SACEUR wanted to see the raw data, not just the analysis. The Dutch officer set up the machine.

A computer-generated map appeared, then units showed up. The tape took under two minutes to display five hours of data, repeating it several times so that the officers could discern patterns.

"General, we estimate that the Soviets are sending six full divisions toward Alfeld. The movement you see here on the main road from Braunschweig is the first of them. The others come from their theater reserve, and these two coming south are reserve formations from their northern army group."

"So you think that they are making this their main point of attack?" SACEUR asked.

"Ja." The German General nodded. "The *Schwerpunkt* is here."

SACEUR frowned. The rational thing to do would be to withdraw behind the river Weser to shorten his defensive line and reorganize his forces. But that would mean abandoning Hannover. The Germans would never accept that. Their own national strategy of defending each home and field had cost the Russians dear—and stretched NATO forces to the breaking point. Politically they would never accept such a strategic withdrawal. West German units would fight on alone if they had to: he could see it clearly enough in the eyes of his own intelligence chief. *And if somebody invaded New Hampshire,* he admitted to himself, *would I withdraw into Pennsylvania?*

An hour later, half of the existing NATO reserves were heading east from Osnabrück to Hameln. The battle for Germany would be won or lost on the right bank of the Weser.

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

The returning Tomcats got little rest. As soon as they landed, the British and American ground crewmen refueled and rearmed the fighters. The Russians were raiding the British northern airfields more carefully now. The American airborne radar aircraft supporting the British Nimrods and Shackletons were making life hard on the twin-engine Blinder bombers flying out of Andøya in Norway. Royal Air Force Tornados flew combat air-patrol missions two hundred miles offshore while the American pilots rested, a few enterprising crew chiefs painted red stars underneath the cockpits, and intelligence officers evaluated gunsight videotapes and recordings of Soviet missile radars.

"Looks like we hurt them," Toland judged. The kill claims were too high, but with fighter pilots they always were.

"Bet your ass!" replied the commander of the Jolly Rogers. The Navy commander chewed on a cigar. He claimed personal credit for a pair of MiGs. "Question is, will they reinforce? It worked once, but they won't fall for that gag again. You tell me, Toland: can they replace what we culled out?"

"I don't think so. The MiG-29 is about the only fighter they can stage out that far. The rest of those are in Germany, and they've taken a beating there, too. If the Russians decide to cut loose some MiG-31s, I think they can reach that far, but I don't see them releasing their prime bomber-interceptor for this kind of mission."

The Jolly Rogers's skipper nodded agreement. "Okay. Next step then is we put a combat air patrol close to Iceland and start beating on those Backfire raids for-real."

"They might just come looking for us, too," Toland warned. "They have to know now what we did, and where we did it from." The commander of VF-41 looked out the window. One of his Tomcats sat half a mile away between two piles of sandbags. Four missiles were visible on the airframe. He fingered the Ace of Spades emblem on his chest and turned back.

"Good. If they want to fight us on our turf, in our radar cover, fine."

ALFELD, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

Alekseyev left his helicopter on the outskirts of the town and climbed into yet another BMP infantry carrier. Two ribbon bridges were operating. Fragments of at least five others littered the riverbanks, along with countless burned-out tanks and trucks. The commander of 20th Tanks rode with them.

"NATO air attacks are murderous," General Beregovoy said. "I've never seen anything like it. Even with our SAMs they close in. We get our share, but it's not enough, and things only get worse as we approach the front."

"What progress have you made today?"

"The main opposition at the moment is English. At least a brigade of tanks. We've pushed them back two kilometers since dawn."

"There's supposed to be a Belgian force out there also," Sergetov pointed out.

"They've disappeared. We don't know where they are—and, yes, that worries me also. I've placed one of the new divisions on our left flank to guard against counterattack. The other will join 20th Tanks when we resume the attack this afternoon."

"Strength?" Alekseyev asked.

"The Twentieth is down to ninety working tanks. Maybe less," the General said. "That number is four hours old. Our infantry has done better, but the division is now under fifty-percent nominal strength."

Their vehicle angled down onto the floating ribbon bridge. Each boxlike segment was bolted to two others, and the vehicle bobbed up and down like a small boat in the surf as they drove across the Leine. All three officers controlled their feelings, but none liked being locked inside a steel box over the water. The BMP infantry assault vehicle was technically amphibious, but many had sunk without warning and it was rare for anyone to escape when that happened. They could hear distant artillery fire. Air attacks at Alfeld happened without warning. It took just over a minute to complete the

crossing.

"In case you're curious, that bridge we just crossed holds the record for the longest survival." He checked his watch. "Seven hours."

"What of that major you requested the gold star for?" Alekseyev asked.

"He was wounded in an air attack. He'll live."

"Give him this. Perhaps it will speed his recovery." Alekseyev reached into a pocket and came out with a five-pointed gold star attached to a blood-red ribbon. He handed it to the General. That major of engineers was now a Hero of the Soviet Union.

USS CHICAGO

All the boats slowed on reaching the icepack. McCafferty inspected it through his periscope, a thin white line less than two miles away. There was nothing else visible. Few ships lingered so near the ice, and no aircraft were visible.

Sonar reported a gratifying amount of noise. The serrated fringe of the pack was composed of thousands of individual floes, slabs of ice a few feet thick, ranging in size from a few square feet to several acres. Every year they came loose with the spring thaw and drifted at random until the freeze began again. While loose in the brief arctic summer, they drifted at random, grinding against one another in a process that destroyed some of the smaller floes, which added to the never-ending groans and pops of the solid ice that went across the top of the pole all the way to the North Slope of Alaska.

"What's that?" McCafferty adjusted the scope slightly, turning the handle to the twelve-power setting. He'd glimpsed what might have been a periscope for the merest instant. It was gone now and—reappeared: the swordlike dorsal fin of a male killer whale. A puff of spray marked its breath, condensing to vapor in the polar air, then a few more whales appeared. What was it they called a family of orcas? A school—no, a pod. Up here hunting seals, probably. He wondered if the omen was good or bad. *Orcinus orca* was the scientific name: Bringer of Death.

"Sonar, do you have anything at one-three-nine?"

"Conn, we have eleven killer whales on that bearing. I make it three males, six females, and two adolescents. Pretty close in, I think. Bearing is changing slowly." The sonar chief responded as if insulted. There were standing orders not to report "biologicals" unless specifically ordered otherwise.

"Very well." McCafferty had to grin in spite of himself.

The other submarines of Operation Doolittle were strung out on a line more than ten miles across. One by one they went deep and headed under the pack. An hour later the freight train headed east, five miles inside the nominal edge of the pack. Twelve thousand feet below them was the floor of the Barents Abyssal Plain.

ICELAND

"Haven't seen a chopper all day," Sergeant Smith observed.

Conversation, Edwards noted, made a nice distraction from the fact that they were eating raw fish. He checked his watch. It was time to call in again. It had gotten so that he could assemble the radio antenna in his sleep.

"Doghouse, this is Beagle, and things could be a lot better, over."

"Beagle, we read you. Where are you now?"

"About forty-six kilometers from our objective," Edwards replied. He gave them map coordinates. There was one road yet to cross, and only one more row of hills, according to the map. "Nothing much to report except we have not seen any choppers today. In fact we haven't seen any aircraft at all." Edwards looked up. The sky was pretty clear, too. Usually they spotted fighters once or twice a day as they patrolled overhead.

"Roger that, Beagle. Be advised that the Navy sent some fighters over and beat them up pretty good around dawn."

"All right! We haven't seen any Russians since the chopper looked us over." In Scotland his controller shuddered at that. Edwards went on, "We're down to eating fish we catch, but the fishing's pretty good."

"How's your lady friend?"

Mike had to smile at that one. "She's not holding us back, if that's what you mean. Anything else?"

"Negative."

"Okay, we'll be back if we see anything. Out." Edwards flipped the power switch on the radio pack. "Our friends say the Navy chewed up some Russian fighters today."

" 'Bout time," Smith said. He was down to his last five cigarettes and stared at one now, deciding whether or not to reduce his supply to four. As Edwards watched, he opened his lighter to poison himself again.

"We go to Hvammsfjördur?" Vidgis asked. "Why?"

"Somebody wants to know what's there," Edwards said. He unfolded the tactical map. It showed the entrance to the bay to be crammed with rocks. It took him a moment to realize that while the land elevations were in meters, the depth curves on the map were in fathoms . . .

KEFLAVIK

"How many?"

The fighter regiment commander was lowered gently from the helicopter, his arm tied across his chest. Ejecting from his disintegrating aircraft, the colonel had dislocated his shoulder, and then his parachute had landed him on a mountainside, giving him a sprained ankle plus several facial cuts. It had taken eleven hours to find him. On the whole, the colonel considered himself lucky—for a fool who had allowed his command to be ambushed by a superior force.

“Five aircraft are mission capable,” he was told. “Of the damaged ones, we can repair two.”

The colonel swore, angered in spite of the morphine that coursed through his veins. “My men?”

“We’ve found six, including you. Two are uninjured and can still fly. The rest are in the hospital.”

Another helicopter landed close by. The paratroop general got out and came over.

“Good to see you alive.”

“Thank you, Comrade General. You are continuing the search?”

“Yes. I have detailed two helicopters to the task. What happened?”

“The Americans staged a raid with heavy bombers. We never saw them, but we could tell from the jamming. They had fighters mixed in with them. The bombers fled when we approached.” The Air Force colonel tried to put the best face on it, and the General did not press him. This was an exposed post, and such things were expected. The MiGs could hardly have ignored the American raid. There was no point in punishing this man.

The General had already radioed for more fighters, though he didn’t expect any. The plan said they would not be necessary, but the plan had also said his division had to hold the island unsupported for only two weeks. By that time Germany was supposed to be fully defeated, and the land war in Europe mainly over. He received reports from the front that were mere embellishments of the news on Radio Moscow. The Red Army was driving on the Rhein—and they’d been driving on the Rhein since the first day of the damned war! The names of the cities under daily attack were strangely left out. His intelligence chief was risking his life by listening in on Western radio broadcasts—the KGB regarded it as a disloyal act—in order to get an idea of how the fighting was going. If Western reports were true—he didn’t really believe them either—the campaign in Germany was a bloody mess. Until that was over, he was vulnerable.

Would NATO try to invade? His operations officer said it was impossible unless the Americans were able to destroy the long-range bombers flying out of Kirovsk first, and the whole point of seizing Iceland had been to prevent the American carriers from moving to a position from which they could do just that. On paper, then, the General expected only increased air attacks, and he had surface-to-air missiles to defend against those. But he hadn’t become a divisional commander by merely shuffling papers.

NORTH ATLANTIC

“What the hell happened?” The captain looked up to see a tube stuck in his arm. The last thing he remembered was being on the bridge halfway through the afternoon watch. Now the porthole on the starboard side of his stateroom was covered. Darkened ship: it was night outside.

“You passed out, Captain,” the chief hospital corpsman said. “Don’t—”

The captain tried to rise. His head made it about eighteen inches off the pillow when his strength gave way.

"You have to rest. You got internal bleeding, skipper. You threw up blood last night. I think it's a perforated ulcer. You scared the hell outa me last night. Why didn't you come see me?" The chief held up a bottle of Maalox tablets. *People gotta be so damned smart about everything.* "Your blood pressure's down twenty points and you durned near went into shock on me. This ain't no bellyache you got, Captain. You might have to have surgery. There's a helo on the way out now to medevac you to the beach."

"I can't leave the ship, I—"

"Doc's orders, Captain. If you die on me I lose my perfect record. I'm sorry, sir, but unless you get real medical attention real quick, you could be in real trouble. You're heading for the beach."

32

New Names, New Faces

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

"Good morning, Ed." Commander, Naval Surface Forces, U.S. Atlantic Fleet was seated behind a desk covered with dispatches that seemed to be organized into piles. Morning—half an hour after midnight. Morris hadn't left Norfolk since arriving at dawn on the previous day. If he went home, he'd have to sleep again . . .

"Morning, sir. What can I do for you?" Morris didn't want to sit down.

"You want to go back out?" COMNAVSURFLANT asked bluntly.

"Who with?"

"Reuben James's skipper came down with a bleeding ulcer. They flew him in this morning. She arrives in another hour with the 'phibs from PACFLT. I'm assigning her to convoy duty. We have a big one assembling in New York harbor. Eighty ships, all big, all fast, loaded with heavy equipment for Germany. It sails in four days with a heavy U.S./U.K. escort, plus carrier support. *Reuben James* will be in port long enough to refuel and reprovision. She sails for New York this evening in company with HMS *Battleaxe.* If you're up to it, I want you to take her." The Vice Admiral eyed Morris closely. "She's yours if you want her. You up to it?"

"My personal gear's still aboard *Pharris."* Morris temporized. Did he really want to go back out?

"Packed up and on the way down, Ed."

There were plenty of men who could do it, Morris thought. The operations staff he'd been working with since he arrived in Norfolk was full of people who'd leap at this. *Go back to sea and put it on the line again—or drive back every night to an empty home and nightmares?*

"If you want me, I'll take her."

FOLZIEHAUSEN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

The northern horizon flashed with artillery fire that backlit the trees. The sky

was never free of the thunder. The drive to the divisional command post was a mere fifteen kilometers from Alfeld. Three vicious air attacks and twenty separate artillery barrages had converted the morning drive into a nightmare lasting into dusk and beyond.

The forward headquarters of 20th Tanks was now the command post for the entire drive toward Hameln. Lieutenant General Beregovoy, who had relieved Alekseyev, now wore the hats of commander 20th Tanks and operational-maneuver group commander. The OMG concept had been one of the most precious Soviet pre-war ideas. The "daring thrust" would open a corridor into the enemy's rear, and the operational-maneuver group would exploit it, racing into the corridor to seize important economic or political targets. Alekseyev stood with his back against an armored vehicle, looking north at the flashing outline of a forest. *Another thing that hasn't gone according to plan,* he thought. *As if we expected NATO to cooperate with our plans!*

There was a yellow flash overhead. Alekseyev blinked his eyes clear and watched the fireball turn to a comet that fell to the earth, landing several kilometers away. Ours or theirs? he wondered. Another promising young life snuffed out by a missile. Now we kill our young men with robots. *Who said mankind was not using his technology to worthwhile ends?*

He had prepared his whole life for this. Four years in officer school. The difficult initiation as a junior officer, promotion to command a company. Three more years at Frunze Military Academy in Moscow after he'd been recognized as a rising star. Then command of a battalion. Back to Moscow to the Voroshilov Academy of the General Staff. Top man in his class. Command of a regiment, then a division. *All for this?*

A field hospital was in the trees five hundred meters away, and the wind carried the shrieks of the wounded to the command post. Not like that in the movies he'd watched as a child—and still watched. The wounded were supposed to suffer in quiet, determined dignity, puffing on cigarettes proffered by the kindly, hardworking medics, waiting their turn for the courageous, hardworking surgeons and the pretty, dedicated nurses. *A fucking lie, all of it a monstrous fucking lie,* he told himself. The profession for which he had prepared his life was organized murder. He sent boys with pimples on their faces into a landscape rained on with steel and watered with blood. The burns were the worst. The tank crews who escaped from their brewed-up vehicles with their clothes alight—they never stopped screaming. Those killed by shock or the pistol of a merciful officer were only replaced by more. The lucky ones who reached the casualty-clearing stations found medics too busy to offer cigarettes, and doctors who were dropping from fatigue.

His brilliant tactical success at Alfeld had led nowhere yet, and he wondered in his soul if it ever would, if he had cast young lives away for nothing more than words in books written by men who did their best to forget the horrors they had inflicted and endured.

Second thoughts now, *Pasha?* he asked himself. *And what of those four colonels you had shot? Rather late to discover a conscience, isn't it?* But now it wasn't a map-table game or an exercise at Shpola, nor a handful of routine training accidents. It was one thing for a company commander to see all this after following orders from above. It was another for the man who gave the orders

to view his handiwork.

"There is nothing so terrible as a battle won—except a battle lost." Alekseyev remembered the quote from Wellington's commentary on Waterloo, one of the two million books in the Frunze library. Certainly not something written by a Russian general. Why had he ever been allowed to read that? If soldiers read more of those remarks and less of glory, then what would they do when their political masters ordered them to march? *Now there,* the General told himself, *there is a radical idea* . . . He urinated against a tree and walked back toward the command post.

He found Beregovoy leaning over the map. A good man, and an effective soldier, Alekseyev knew, what did he think of all this?

"Comrade, that Belgian brigade just reappeared. It's attacking our left flank. They caught two regiments moving into new positions. We have a problem here."

Alekseyev strode to Beregovoy's side and surveyed the available units. NATO still was not cooperating. The attack had come at the junction of two divisions, one worn out, the other fresh but unblooded. A lieutenant moved some counters. The Soviet regiments were pulling back.

"Keep the reserve regiment in place," Alekseyev ordered. "Have this one move northwest. We'll try to catch the Belgians' flank as they approach this road junction." Professionalism dies hard in the soldier.

ICELAND

"Well, there it is." Edwards handed his binoculars to Sergeant Smith. Hvammsfjördur was still miles away. Their first sight of it came from the top of a two-thousand-foot hill. A sparkling river below them fed into the fjord, more than ten miles away. Everyone kept low, afraid to be skylined with the low sun behind them. Edwards broke out his radio.

"Doghouse, this is Beagle. The objective is in sight." This was a particularly dumb thing to say, Edwards knew. Hvammsfjördur was almost thirty miles long, about ten miles across at its widest point.

The man in Scotland was impressed. Edwards's party had covered fifteen kilometers in the past ten hours.

"What kind of shape are you in?"

"If you want us to go any farther, fella, this radio might malfunction."

"Roger, copy that." The major tried not to laugh. "Where exactly are you?"

"About five miles east of Hill 578. Now that we're here, maybe you might tell us why," Edwards suggested.

"If you see any, repeat any Russian activity, we want to know about it immediately. One guy taking a leak against a rock, we want to know about it. Do you copy that?"

"Roger. You want the size in inches. No Russkies in view yet. Some ruins to our left, and a farm a ways downriver from us. Nothing moving at either place. Any particular location you want us?"

"We're working on that. Sit tight for the moment. Find a nice place to hide and stay put. What's your food situation?"

"We have enough fish to last out the day, and I can see a lake where we might get some more. Remember when you said you'd have some pizzas sent out, Doghouse? Right now I'd kill for one. Pepperoni and onions."

"Fish is good for you. Beagle, your signal strength is down. You want to start thinking about conserving your batteries. Anything else to report?"

"Negative. We'll be back if we see anything. Out." Edwards slapped his hand down on the power switch. "People, we are home!"

"That's nice, skipper." Smith laughed. "Where's home?"

"Budhardalur is other side that mountain," Vigdis offered. "My Uncle Helgi live there."

We could probably get a decent meal there, Edwards told himself. *Maybe some lamb, a few beers or something stronger, and a bed . . . a real, soft bed with sheets and the down quilts they use here. A bath, hot water to shave. Toothpaste.* Edwards could smell every part of himself. They tried to wash in the streams when they could, but mostly they couldn't. *I smell like a goat,* Edwards thought. *Whatever a goat smells like. But we didn't walk this far to do something as stupid as that.*

"Sarge, let's secure this place."

"You got it, skipper. Rodgers, sack out. Garcia, you and me have the first watch. Four hours. You take that little knoll over there. I'll head over to the right." Smith stood and looked down at Edwards. "Good idea that we all get some rest while we can, skipper."

"Sounds great to me. You see anything important, give me a kick." Smith nodded and moved about a hundred yards.

Rodgers was already half asleep, his head resting on his folded jacket. The private's rifle was cradled on his chest.

"We stay here?" Vigdis asked.

"I'd sure like to go see your uncle, but there might be Russians in that town. How do you feel?"

"Tired."

"Tired as us?" he asked with a grin.

"Yes, tired as you," she admitted. Vigdis lay back next to Edwards. She was filthy. Her woolen sweater was torn in several places, and her boots scuffed beyond repair. "What will happen to us now?"

"I don't know. They wanted us here for a reason, though."

"But they don't tell you reason!" she objected.

Now there's an intelligent observation, Edwards thought.

"They tell you and you not tell us?" Vigdis asked.

"No, you know as much as I do."

"Michael, why all this happen? Why do the Russians come here?"

"I don't know."

"But you are officer. You must know." Vigdis propped herself up on her elbows. She seemed genuinely astonished. Edwards smiled. He couldn't blame her for being confused. Iceland's only armed force was its police. A real-to-life Peaceable Kingdom, the country had no military to speak of. A few small armed ships for fishery protection and the police were all the country had ever needed to maintain security. This war had ruined their perfect record. For a

thousand years, without an army or a navy, Iceland had never been attacked. It had only happened now because they were in the way. He wondered if that would have happened if NATO hadn't built its base at Keflavik. Of course not! You idiot, you've seen what wonderful folks the Russians are! NATO base or not, Iceland was in their way. But why the hell *had* all this happened?

"Vigdis, I'm a meteorologist—a weatherman, I predict the weather for the Air Force." That only made her more confused.

"Not soldier? Not, ah, Marine soldier?"

Mike shook his head. "I'm an officer in the U.S. Air Force, yes, but I am not really a soldier like the sergeant. I have a different job."

"But you save my life. You are soldier."

"Yeah, I suppose I am—by accident."

"When this all over, what will you do?" Her eyes held a great deal of interest now.

"One thing at a time." He was thinking in terms of hours, not days or weeks. *If we do survive, then what? Put that one aside. First comes survival. You think about "after the war," and there won't be any.* "I'm too tired to think about that. Let's get some sleep."

She fought it. He knew that she wanted to know things he hadn't consciously considered, but she was more fatigued than she'd admitted, and ten minutes later she was asleep. She snored. Mike hadn't noticed before. This was no china doll. She had strengths and weaknesses, good points and bad. She had the face of an angel, but she'd gotten herself pregnant—*so what!* Edwards thought. She's braver than she's beautiful. She saved *my* life when that chopper came in on us. A man could do far worse.

Edwards commanded himself to lie down and sleep. He couldn't think about this. First he had to survive.

SCOTLAND

"If the area checks out?" the major asked. He had never really expected Edwards and his party to make it this far, not with eight thousand Russian troops on the island. Every time he thought about those five people trekking over bare, rocky ground and Soviet helicopters circling overhead, his skin crawled.

"Around midnight, I think," the man from Special Operations Executive said. You could see the smile crinkling the skin around his eyepatch. "You chaps had better decorate this young man. I've been in his boots myself. You cannot imagine how difficult it is to do what these people have done. And having a bloody Hind helicopter sit right on top of them! I've always said it's the quiet little bastards that you have to watch out for."

"In any case, it's time we got some professionals in to back them up," pronounced the captain of Royal Marines.

"Make sure they take in some food," suggested the USAF major.

LANGLEY AIR FORCE BASE, VIRGINIA

"So, what's the problem?" Nakamura asked.

"There are irregularities in some of the rocket motor casings," the engineer explained.

" 'Irregularities' meaning they go boom?"

"Possibly," the engineer admitted.

"Super," said Major Nakamura. "I'm supposed to carry that monster seventeen miles straight the hell up and then find out who goes into orbit, me or it!"

"When this sort of rocket explodes, it doesn't do much. It just breaks into a couple of pieces that burn out by themselves."

"I imagine from seventeen miles off it doesn't look like much—what about when the sucker ignites twenty feet from my F-15?" *A long way to skydive,* Buns thought.

"I'm sorry, Major. This rocket motor is nearly ten years old. Nobody checked our spec sheet on proper storage after it was mated with the ASAT warhead. We've checked it out with X rays and ultrasound. I think it's okay, but I might be wrong," the man from Lockheed said. Of the six remaining ASAT missiles, three had been decertified by the man for cracks in the solid-fuel propellant. The other three were question marks. "You want the truth or you want a song and dance?"

"You gotta fly it, Major," the deputy commander of Tactical Air Command said. "It's your decision."

"Can we rig it so the bird doesn't ignite until I'm clear?"

"How long will you need?" the engineer asked. Buns thought about her speed and maneuverability at that altitude.

"Say ten or fifteen seconds."

"I'll have to make a small change in the programming software, but that shouldn't be much of a problem. We'll have to make sure that the missile will retain enough forward velocity to keep its launch attitude, though. You sure that's enough time?"

"No. We'll have to check that out on the simulator, too. How long we got?"

"Minimum two days, maximum six days. Depends on the Navy," replied the General.

"Great."

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

"Here's some good news," Toland announced. "An Air Force F-15 Eagle fighter was flying over a fast convoy north of the Azores. Two Bears came looking for the ships and the Eagle got 'em both. That makes three in the past four days. The Backfire raid appears to have aborted."

"What's their position?" the group captain asked.

Toland ran his hand along the chart, checking latitude and longitude against

the numbers on the dispatch form. “Looks like right about here, and that datum is twenty minutes old.”

“That puts them over Iceland in just under two hours.”

“What about tankers?” the Navy fighter commander asked.

“Not on such short notice.”

“We can stretch that far with two fighters, using another two for buddy stores, but it only gives them about twenty minutes on station, under five on burner, and a ten-minute reserve when they get back here.” The fighter boss whistled. “Close. Too close. We have to wave off on this.”

A phone rang. The British base commander grabbed.

“Group Captain Mallory. Yes . . . very well, scramble.” He hung up. Klaxons went off at the ready shack half a mile away. Fighter pilots raced to their aircraft. “Ivan’s settled the argument in any case, Commander. Your radar aircraft report heavy jamming activity inbound from the north.”

The commander raced out the door and jumped into a jeep.

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

The drive from SACLANT headquarters took ten minutes. The Marines at the main gate were checking everyone and everything carefully, even a Chevy with a three-star flag. They drove to the waterfront amid an unending flurry of activity. Trains rolled down the tracks set in the streets, repair shops and testing facilities worked around the clock. Even the McDonald’s on the road immediately outside was working a twenty-four-hour day, feeding hamburgers and fries to the men who took a few minutes for nourishment. For sailors spending a day or so on land it was an important, if seemingly trivial, touchstone. The car turned right as it reached the docks, past the submarine piers to the ones that held destroyers.

“She’s brand new, only a month in commission, just about long enough to calibrate the electronics, and they must have shaved some time on that,” the Admiral said. “Captain Wilkens did continuous workups on the transit from San Diego, but nothing with helicopters yet. PACFLT kept hers, and I can’t give you a regular helo complement either. All we have left is one Seahawk-F variant, a prototype helo they were evaluating down at Jacksonville.”

“The one with the dipping sonar?” Ed Morris asked. “I can live with that. How aboat a driver who knows how to use it?”

“It’s covered. Lieutenant Commander O’Malley. We pulled him out of a training billet at Jax.”

“I’ve heard the name. He was doing systems qualifications on *Moosbrugger* when I was tactical action officer on *John Rodgers.* Yeah, he knows the job.”

“Have to drop you off here. I’ll be back in an hour, after I have a look at what’s left of the *Kidd.”*

Reuben James. Her raked clipper bow marked with hull number 57 hung over the dock like a guillotine blade. His weariness momentarily forgotten, Morris stepped out of the Chevy to examine his new command with all the

quiet enthusiasm of a man with his newborn child.

He'd seen FFG-7-class frigates, but never been aboard one. Her severe hull lines reminded him of a Cigarette racing yacht. Six five-inch mooring lines secured her to the pier, but the sleek form already seemed to be straining at them. At only 3900 tons full load, not a large ship but manifestly a fast one to go in harm's way.

Her superstructure was an aesthetic embarrassment, with all the grace of a brick garage, topped with antenna whips and radar masts that looked like they had been built by a child's erector set, but Morris saw the functional simplicity of the design. The frigate's forty missiles were tucked away in circular racks forward. Her boxy after deckhouse contained enough room for a pair of deadly ASW helicopters. Her hull was sleek because speed required it. Her superstructure was boxy because it had to be. This was a warship, and whatever beauty *Reuben James* might have had was accidental.

Sailors wearing blue shirts and jeans moved rapidly across three gangways, bringing supplies aboard for an immediate sailing. Morris walked briskly to the after gangway. A Marine guard saluted him at the foot of the brow and an officer on the frigate's deck frantically ordered preparations to receive his new CO. The ship's bell was struck four times, and Commander Ed Morris assumed his new identity.

"Reuben James, arriving."

Morris saluted the colors, then the officer of the deck.

"Sir, we didn't expect you for another—" the lieutenant blurted.

"How's the work going?" Morris cut him off.

"Two more hours, tops, sir."

"Fine." Morris smiled. "We can worry about the Mickey Mouse later. Get back to work, Mister—"

"Lyles, sir. Ship control officer."

And what the hell is that? Morris wondered. "Okay, Mr. Lyles. Where's the XO?"

"Right here, skipper." The executive officer had grease on his shirt and a smudge on his cheek. "I was in the generator room. Pardon the way I look."

"What kind of shape are we in?"

"It'll do. Full load of fuel and weapons. The tail's fully calibrated—"

"How'd you do that so fast?"

"It wasn't easy, sir, but we got it done. How's Captain Wilkens?"

"The docs say he'll be all right, but—well, he's out of the business for a while. I'm Ed Morris." Captain and executive officer shook hands.

"Frank Ernst. First time I've operated in the Atlantic Fleet." The lieutenant commander smiled crookedly. "Picked a great time for it. Anyway, we're in good shape, skipper. Everything works. Our helo pilot's up in the Combat Information Center with the tactical guys. We got Jerry the Hammer. I played ball with him at Annapolis, he's good people. We got three real good chiefs. One's a qualified officer of the deck. The crew's on the young side, but I'd say we're about as ready as you could ask. Ready to sail in two, three hours, tops. Where's your personal gear, sir?"

"It ought to be here in half an hour. What was the problem below?"

"No sweat. An oil line let go on number-three diesel generator. Yard goof,

wasn't welded right. It's fixed. You'll love the engine room, skipper. On builder's trials in five-foot seas we topped out at thirty-one-and-a-half knots." Ernst raised his eyebrows. "Fast enough?"

"And the stabilizers?" Morris asked.

"They work just fine, skipper."

"What about the ASW troops?"

"Let's meet 'em."

Morris followed his XO into the superstructure. They proceeded forward between the two helicopter hangars, then to the left past officers' country and up a ladder. The Combat Information Center was located one level below and just aft of the bridge, adjoining the commanding officer's stateroom. Dark as a cave, it was newer than *Pharris's* and larger, but no less crammed. Twenty or more people were at work running a simulation.

"No, Goddammit!" howled a loud voice. "You have to react *faster*. This here's a Victor, and he ain't gonna wait for you to make up your damn mind!"

"Attention on deck! Captain in Combat," called Ernst.

"As you were," called Morris. "Who's that loud sunuvabitch?"

A barrel-chested man emerged from the shadows. His eyes were surrounded by crinkles from looking into too many low suns. So this was Jerry the Hammer O'Malley. He knew him only by a crackling voice on a UHF radio, and by his reputation as a sub-hunter who cared more for his trade than promotion boards.

"I guess you mean me, Captain. O'Malley. I'm supposed to drive your Seahawk-Foxtrot."

"You're right about the Victor. One of those bastards blew my first ship near in half."

"Sorry to hear that, but you oughta know that Ivan's putting his best skippers in the Victors. She handles better than anything else they got, and that rewards a smart driver. So you were up against the varsity. Did you have him outside?"

Morris shook his head. "We were late picking him up, just coming off a sprint, and acoustical conditions weren't all that great, but we detected him, he couldn't have been more than five miles out. We had the helo after him, just about had him localized, then he broke contact neat as you please and got inside on us."

"Yeah, the Victor's good at that. Pump-fake, I call it. He starts going one way, then turns hard the other, leaves a knuckle in the water, and probably a noisemaker, too, right in the middle of it. Then he dives down under the layer and makes a quick sprint in. They've been refining that tactic for the past few years, and we've had trouble programming a reliable counter for it. You need a sharp crew in the helo, and you need good teamwork with these guys here."

"Unless you read my report, my friend, you must be a mind reader."

"Right, Captain. But all the minds I read think in Russian. The pump-fake's what the Victor is best at, and you have to pay attention, what with his ability to accelerate and turn so quick. What I've been trying to teach people is when he shows turn to port, you start thinkin' he's really going to starboard, and you slide over maybe two thousand yards and wait a minute or two, then you hammer the bastard hard and pickle off the fish before he can react."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then you're wrong, skipper. Mostly, though, Ivan's predictable—if you think like a submariner and you look at his tactical situation instead of your own. You can't keep him from running away, but his mission is to close on the target, and you can make life real hard for him if he does."

Morris looked O'Malley hard in the eyes. He didn't like having the loss of his first command analyzed so glibly. But there was no time for these thoughts. O'Malley was a pro, and if there was a man to handle another Victor, this might be the one. "You all ready?"

"The bird is at the air station. We'll join up after you clear the capes. I wanted to talk things over with the ASW team while we had the time. We're gonna play outside ASW picket?"

"Probably. With a towed-array, it doesn't figure that we're going to be in close. And we might be teamed with a Brit for the convoy mission."

"Fair enough. If you want my opinion, we have a pretty solid ASW team here. We might just give the bad guys a hard time. Weren't you on *Rodgers* a few years back?"

"When you were working with the *Moose.* We worked together twice, but never met. I was 'X-Ray Mike' when we exercised against *Skate."*

"I thought I remembered you." O'Malley came closer and dropped his voice. "How bad is it out there?"

"Bad enough. We lost the G-I-UK line. We're getting some pretty good SURTASS info, but you can bet Ivan's going to be gunning for those tuna boats pretty soon. Between the air threat and the sub threat—I don't know." His face showed more than his voice did. Close friends dead or missing. His own first command blown in half. Morris was tired in a way that sleep alone would not cure.

O'Malley nodded. "Skipper, we got us a shiny new frigate, a great new helo, and a tail. We can hold our end up."

"Well, we'll have a shot soon enough. We sail for New York in two hours and take a convoy out on Wednesday."

"Alone?" O'Malley asked.

"No, we'll have Brit company for the New York run, HMS Battleaxe. The orders haven't been confirmed yet, but it looks like we'll be working together all the way across."

"That'll be useful," Ernst agreed. "Come on aft, skipper, I'll show you what we're up to." The sonar room was aft of CIC, closed off by a curtain. Here real lighting was on, as opposed to the darkened, red-light world of Combat.

"Jeez, nobody ever tells me anything!" growled a young lieutenant commander. "Good morning, Captain. I'm Lenner, combat systems officer."

"How come you're not at your scope?"

"We froze the game, skipper, and I wanted to check out the display on playback."

"I brought the game tape myself," O'Malley explained. "This is the track of a Victor-III that faked out one of our carriers in the eastern Med last year. See here? That's the pump-fake. You'll notice that the contact fades out, then brightens up. That's the noisemaker inside the knuckle. At this point he ducked under the layer and sprinted inside the screen. Would've hit the

carrier, too, because they didn't get him for another ten minutes. That"—he jammed his finger at the display—"is what you look for. This tells you you're up against a driver who knows his stuff, and he's out for your ass." Morris examined the screen closely enough to recognize the pattern. He'd seen it once before.

"What if they use the maneuver to break clear?" Lenner asked.

"Because if they can break contact, why not break contact *toward* the target?" Morris asked quietly, noting that he had a very young combat systems officer.

"That's right, skipper." O'Malley nodded ruefully. "Like I said, this is a standard tactic for them, and it rewards a sharp driver. The aggressive ones will always bore in. The ones who break off—that's effectively a kill. We have to reacquire, but so do they. With a twenty-knot speed of advance, once we get past them, they have to play catch-up. That means making noise. The guy who runs away probably won't run the risk, or if he does, he'll do it badly and we'll get him. No, this tactic is for the guy who really wants to get in close. Question is, how many of their skippers are that aggressive?"

"Enough." Morris looked away for a moment. "How's the helicopter complement?"

"Only one flight crew for the bird. My copilot's pretty green, but our on-board systems operator's a first-class petty officer who's been around the block a few times. The maintenance guys are a pickup bunch, mostly from the readiness group at Jax. I've talked to them, they should do just fine."

"We got berths for them all?" Morris asked.

Ernst shook his head. "Not hardly. We're packed pretty tight."

"O'Malley, is your copilot deck-qualified?"

"Not on a frigate. I am—hell, I did some of the first systems trials back in '78. We'll have to do workups on the way to New York, both day and night to get my ensign in the groove. Scratch team, skipper. The bird doesn't even belong to an operational squadron."

"You sounded confident a minute ago," Morris objected.

"I *am* fairly confident," O'Malley said. "My people know how to use the tools they got. They're sharp kids. They'll learn fast. And we even get to make up our own call signs." A wide grin. Certain things are important to aviators. There was one other unspoken message: when O'Malley referred to the aviation department as "my people," he meant that he didn't want any interference in how he ran his shop. Morris ignored it. He didn't want an argument, not now.

"Okay, XO, let's look around. O'Malley, I expect we'll rendezvous off the capes."

"The helo's ready to launch right now, Captain. We'll be there when you want us."

Morris nodded and went forward. The captain's personal ladder to the bridge was a bare three feet from the CIC door, and his own. He trotted up—or tried to, his legs rubbery with exhaustion.

"Captain on the bridge!" a petty officer announced.

Morris was not impressed. He was appalled to see that the ship's "wheel" was only a brass dial about the size of a telephone's. The helmsman actually

had a seat, offset from the centerline, and to his right was a clear plastic box containing the direct-control throttle to the ship's jet-turbine engines. A metal rod suspended from the overhead ran completely from one side of the pilothouse to the other at a height that allowed it to be grabbed easily in heavy seas, an eloquent comment on this ship's stability.

"Have you served on a 'fig' before, sir?" the XO asked.

"Never been aboard one," Morris answered. The heads of the four men on bridge watch each turned a hair at that. "I know the weapons systems; I was part of the design team at NAVSEA back a few years ago, and I know more or less how she handles."

"She handles, sir. Like a sports car," Ernst assured him. "You'll especially like the way we can turn the engines off, drift as quiet as a log, then be up to thirty knots in two minutes flat."

"How quickly can we get under way?"

"Ten minutes from your say-so, Captain. The engine lube oil is already warmed up. There's a harbor tug standing by to assist us away from the dock."

"NAVSURFLANT, arriving," boomed the announcing system. Two minutes later, the Admiral appeared in the pilothouse.

"I have a man bringing your gear up. What do you think?"

"XO, will you see to the provisioning?" Morris said to Ernst, then, "Shall we discover my stateroom together, Admiral?"

A steward was waiting for them below with a tray of coffee and sandwiches. Morris poured himself a cup, another for the Admiral, and ignored the food.

"Sir, I've never handled one of these before. I don't know the engines—"

"You've got a great chief engineer and she's a dream to handle. Besides, you have your conning officers. You're a weapons and tactics man, Ed. All your work is done in CIC. We need you out there."

"Fair enough, sir."

"XO, take her out," Morris ordered two hours later. He watched Ernst's every move, embarrassed that he had to depend on another to do it.

But it was amazingly easy. The wind was off the pier, and the frigate had a huge sail area that invited help. As the mooring lines were slackened off, the wind and the auxiliary power units located on the hull directly under the bridge pushed *James's* bow into the clear, then the gas-turbine engines moved her forward into the channel. Ernst took his time, though he was clearly capable of doing it faster. Morris took careful note of this, too. The man didn't want to make his captain look bad.

From there on it was easy, and Ed Morris watched his new crew at work. He'd heard stories about the California Navy—*like, okay, man*—but the quartermasters at the chart table updated the position with crisp assurance, despite the unfamiliar harbor. They glided noiselessly past the piers of the navy yard. He saw empty berths that would not soon be filled, and not a few ships whose sleek gray hulls were marred with scorched holes and twisted steel. *Kidd* was there, her forward superstructure wrecked by a Russian missile that had gotten past her multilayered defenses. One of his sailors was looking that way, too, a boy still in his teens, puffing on a cigarette which he flicked over the side. Morris wanted to ask what he was thinking, but could scarcely

describe his own thoughts.

It went quickly after that. They turned east at the empty carrier berthings, over the Hampton bridge-tunnel, then past the crowded amphibious basin at Little Creek. Now the sea beckoned them, forbiddingly gray under the cloudy sky.

HMS *Battleaxe* was already out there, three miles ahead, a subtly different shade on her hull, and the White Ensign fluttering at her mast. A signal light started blinking at them.

WHAT THE DEVIL IS A REUBEN JAMES, *Battleaxe* Wanted to know.

"How do you want to answer that, sir?" a signalman asked.

Morris laughed, the ominous spell broken. "Signal, 'At least we don't name warships for our mother-in-law. ' "

"All right!" The petty officer loved it.

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

"The Blinder isn't supposed to be able to carry missiles," Toland said, but what he saw gave the lie to that intelligence assessment. Six missiles had gotten through the defending fighters and landed inside the perimeter of the RAF base. Two aircraft were burning, half a mile away, and one of the base's radars was wrecked.

"Well, now we know why their activity has been light the past few days. They were refitting their bombers to deal with our new fighter force," Group Captain Mallory said, surveying the damage to his base. "Action, reaction. We learn, they learn."

The fighters were returning. Toland counted them off in his head. He came up short by two Tornados and one Tomcat. As soon as the landing rolls were completed, each fighter taxied to its shelter. The RAF did not have enough permanent ones. Three of the American fighters ended up in sandbag revetments where ground crews immediately refueled and rearmed their aircraft. The crews climbed down their ladders to waiting jeeps and were driven off for debriefing.

"Bastards used our own trick on us!" one Tomcat pilot exclaimed.

"Okay, what did you run into?"

"There were two groups, about ten miles apart. Lead group was MiG-23 Floggers with the Blinders behind them. The MiGs launched before we did. They really knocked our radars back with white noise, and some of their fighters were using something brand new, a deceptive jammer we haven't run across yet. They must have been at the edge of their fuel, 'cause they didn't try to mix it up with us. I guess they just wanted to keep us off the bombers until they launched. Damn near worked. A flight of Tornados came around them on the left and bagged four of the Blinders, I think. We got a pair of MiGs—no Blinders—and the boss vectored the rest of the Toms onto the missiles. I splashed two. Anyway, Ivan's changed tactics on us. We lost one Tomcat, I don't know what got him."

"Next time," another pilot said. "We go up with some of our missiles pre-set to go after the jammers. We didn't have enough time to set that up. If we can get the jammers first, it'll be easier to handle the fighters."

And then the Russians will change their tactics again, Toland thought. *Well, at least we have them reacting to us for a change.*

FÖLZIEHAUSEN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

After eight hours of vicious fighting that saw artillery fire dropping on the forward command post, Beregovoy and Alekseyev stopped the Belgian counterattack. But stopping them wasn't enough. They'd advanced six kilometers before running into a solid wall of tanks and missiles, and the Belgian artillery was laying heavy intermittent fire on the main road supporting the Russian advance toward Hameln. Certainly they were preparing for another attack, Alekseyev thought. *We have to hit them first—but with what?* He needed his three divisions to advance on the British formations standing before Hameln.

"Every time we break through," Major Sergetov observed quietly, "they slow us down and counterattack. This was not supposed to happen."

"A splendid observation!" Alekseyev snarled, then regained his temper. "We expected that a breakthrough would have the same effect as in the last war against the Germans. The problem is these new light antitank missiles. Three men and a jeep"—he even used the American title for it—"can race along the road, set up, fire one or two missiles, be gone before we can react, then repeat the process a few hundred meters away. Defensive firepower was never so strong before, and we failed to appreciate how effectively a handful of rear-guard troops can slow down an advancing column. Our security is based on movement"—Alekseyev explained the basic lesson from tank school—"a mobile force under these conditions cannot afford to be slowed down. A simple breakthrough is not enough! We must blast a massive hole in their front and race at least twenty kilometers to be free of these roving missile-crews. Only then can we switch over to true mobile doctrine."

"You say we cannot win?" Sergetov had begun to have his own doubts, but did not expect to hear them from his commander.

"I say what I did four months ago, and I was correct: this campaign of ours has become a war of attrition. For the moment, technology has defeated the military art, ours and theirs. What we're doing now is seeing who runs out of men and arms first."

"We have more of both," Sergetov said.

"That is true, Ivan Mikhailovich. I have many more young men to throw away." More casualties were arriving at the field hospital. The line of trucks running in and out never stopped.

"Comrade General, I received a message from my father. He wishes to know how things progress at the front. What should I tell him?"

Alekseyev walked away from his aide for a minute to ponder that.

"Ivan Mikhailovich, tell the Minister that NATO opposition is far more serious than we expected. The key now is supplies. We need the best information we can get on NATO's supply situation and a determined effort to worsen that situation. We have received little information on how well the naval operations to kill NATO convoys are going. I need that in order to evaluate NATO's endurance. I don't want analyses out of Moscow. I want the raw data."

"You are unhappy with what we get from Moscow?"

"We were told that NATO was politically divided and militarily uncoordinated. How would you evaluate that report, Comrade Major?" Alekseyev asked sharply. "I can't go through military channels with that sort of request, can I? Write up your travel orders. I want you back here in thirty-six hours. I'm sure we'll still be here."

ICELAND

"They should be there in half an hour."

"Roger that, Doghouse," Edwards replied. "Like I said, no Russians visible. We haven't seen any aircraft all day. There was some movement on the road west of us six hours ago. Four jeep-type vehicles. Too far off to tell what was in them, and they were southbound. The coast is clear. Over."

"Okay, let us know when they get there."

"Will do. Out." Edwards killed the radio. "People, we got some friends coming in."

"Who and when, skipper?" Smith asked at once.

"Didn't say, but they'll be here in half an hour. Must be an air drop."

"They come take us out?" Vigdis asked.

"No, they can't land a plane here. Sarge, you got any opinions?"

"Same as yours, I 'spect."

The plane was early, and for once Edwards saw it first. The C-130 Hercules four-engine transport skimmed down from the northwest, only a few hundred feet over the eastern slope of the ridge they were on. A stiff breeze blew from the west as four small shapes emerged from the aft cargo door and the Hercules turned abruptly north to leave the area. Edwards concentrated on the descending parachutes. Instead of drifting down into the valley below them, the parachutists were coming straight down to a rock-filled slope.

"Oh, shit, he misjudged the wind! Come on!"

The parachutes dropped below them as they ran downhill. One by one they stopped, losing their shape in the semidarkness as the men landed. Edwards and his party moved rapidly, trying to remember where the men had landed. Their camouflage 'chutes turned invisible as soon as they touched the ground.

"Halt!"

"Okay, okay. We're here to meet you," Edwards said.

"Identify yourself!" The voice had an English accent.

“Code name Beagle.”

“Proper name?”

“Edwards, first lieutenant, U.S. Air Force.”

“Approach slowly, mate.”

Mike went forward alone. At length he saw a vague shape half-hidden by a rock. The shape held a submachine gun.

“Who are you?”

“Sergeant Nichols, Royal Marines. You picked a bloody poor place to receive us, Lieutenant.”

“I didn’t do it!” Edwards answered. “We didn’t know you were coming until an hour ago.”

“Balls-up, another bloody balls-up.” The man stood and walked forward with a pronounced limp. “Parachuting’s dangerous enough without coming into a fucking rock garden!” Another figure came up.

“We found the lieutenant—I think he’s dead!”

“Need help?” Mike asked.

“I need to wake up and find myself home in bed.”

Edwards soon found that the party sent to rescue him—or whatever their mission was—had gotten off to a disastrous start. The lieutenant in command of the group had landed on one boulder and fallen backward on another. His head hung from the rest of his body as if on a string. Nichols had sprained his ankle badly, and the other two were uninjured but shaken. It took over an hour to locate all their gear. There was no time for sentiment. The lieutenant was wrapped in his parachute and covered with loose rocks. Edwards led the rest back to his perch on the hilltop. At least they’d brought a new battery pack for his radio.

“Doghouse, this is Beagle, and things suck, over.”

“What took so long?”

“Tell that Herky-Bird driver to get a new eye doctor. The Marines you sent here got their boss killed, and their sergeant ripped his ankle up.”

“Have you been spotted?”

“Negative. They landed in rocks. It’s a miracle they weren’t all killed. We’re back on the hilltop. We covered our tracks.”

Sergeant Nichols was a smoker. He and Smith found a sheltered spot to light up.

“Sounds rather excitable, your lieutenant.”

“He’s only a wing-wiper, but he’s doin’ all right. How’s the ankle?”

“I’ll have to walk on it whether it’s fit or not. Does he know what he’s about?”

“The skipper? I watched him kill three Russians with a knife. That good enough?”

“Bloody hell.”

33

Contact

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

"Captain?"

Morris started at the hand on his shoulder. He'd just wanted to lie down in his stateroom for a few minutes after conducting helicopter night landing practice, and—he checked his watch. After midnight. His face was sweaty. The dream had just started again. He looked up at his executive officer.

"What is it, XO?"

"We got a request to check something out. Probably a snow-bird, but—well, see for yourself."

Morris took the dispatch with him to his private bathroom, tucked it in his pocket, then washed his face quickly.

" 'Unusual contact repeated several times, have attempted localization without success'? What the hell is this supposed to be?" he asked, toweling off.

"Beats the hell out of me, skipper. Forty degrees, thirty minutes north, sixty-nine, fifty west. They got a location but no ID. I'm having the chart pulled now."

Morris ran his hand through his hair. Two hours' sleep was better than none. Wasn't it? "Okay, let's see how it looks from CIC."

The tactical action officer had the chart out on the table next to the captain's chair. Morris checked the main tactical-display scope. They were still far offshore in accordance with their orders to check out the hundred-fathom curve.

"That's way the hell away from here," Morris observed immediately. There was something familiar about the location. The captain bent over the chart.

"Yes, sir, about a sixty-mile run," Ernst agreed. "Shallow water, too. Can't use the towed array there."

"Oh, I know what this place is! That's where the *Andrea* Doria sank. Probably somebody's got a MAD contact and didn't bother checking his chart."

"Don't think so." O'Malley emerged from the shadows. "A frigate heard something first. The winch on their tail was busted. They didn't want to lose it, so they were heading into Newport instead of New York because the harbor's deeper. They say they copied a strange passive-sonar contact that faded out. They did a target-motion analysis and generated this position. Their

helicopter made a few passes, and its magnetic anomaly detector registered right over the *Doria,* and that was that."

"How'd you find that out?"

O'Malley handed over a message form. "Came in right after the XO went to get you. They sent an Orion to check it. Same story. They heard something odd, and it faded out."

Morris frowned. They were chasing after a wild goose, but the orders came from Norfolk. That made it an *official* wild-goose chase.

"What's the helo status?"

"I can be up in ten minutes. One torpedo and an auxiliary fuel tank. All the gear's on line."

"Tell the bridge to take us there at twenty-five knots. *Battleaxe* know about this?" He got a nod. "Okay. Signal them what we're up to. Winch in the tail. Won't do us any good where we're going. O'Malley, we'll close to within fifteen miles of the contact and have you search for it. That puts you in the air about 0230. If you need me, I'll be in the wardroom." Morris decided to sample his new ship's "mid-rats." O'Malley was headed the same way.

"These ships are a little weird," the flyer said.

Morris grunted agreement. The main fore-and-aft passageway was on the port side instead of the centerline, for one thing. The "figs" broke a number of long-standing traditions in ship design.

O'Malley went down the ladder first and opened the wardroom door for the captain. They found two junior officers in front of the TV set, watching a taped movie that had mainly to do with fast cars and naked women. The tape machine, Morris had already learned, was run from the chiefs' quarters. One result of this was that a particularly attractive chest was instant-replayed for all hands.

Midwatch rations, or "mid-rats," was an open loaf of bread and a plate of cold cuts. Morris got himself a cup of coffee and built a sandwich. O'Malley opted for a fruit drink from the cooler on the after bulkhead. The official Navy term for it was bug juice.

"No coffee?" Morris asked. O'Malley shook his head.

"Too much makes me jumpy. You don't want shaky hands when you're landing a helo in the dark." He smiled. "I really am getting too old for this crap."

"Kids?"

"Three boys, and ain't none of them gonna be a sailor if I have anything to say about it. You?"

"Boy and a girl. They're back in Kansas with their mother." Morris went after his sandwich. The bread was a little stale and the cold cuts weren't cold, but he needed to eat. This was the first meal in three days he hadn't eaten alone. O'Malley pushed the potato chips over.

"Get all your carbohydrates, Captain."

"That bug juice'll kill you." Morris nodded at the fruit drink.

"It's been tried before. I flew two years over 'Nam. Mostly search-and-rescue stuff. Got shot down twice. Never got scratched, though. Just scared to death."

Was he that old? Morris wondered. He had to have been passed over for promotion a few times. The captain made a mental note to check O'Malley's

date of rank.

"How come you were in CIC?" the captain asked.

"I wasn't very sleepy and I wanted to see how the towed array was working."

Morris was surprised. Aviators didn't generally show this much interest in the ship's equipment.

"The word is you did pretty well with *Pharris."*

"Not good enough."

"That happens, too." O'Malley watched his skipper very closely. The only man aboard with extended combat experience, O'Malley recognized something in Morris that he hadn't seen since Vietnam. The flyer shrugged. It wasn't his problem. He fished in his flight suit and came out with a pack of cigarettes. "Mind if I smoke?"

"I just restarted myself."

"Thank God!" O'Malley raised his voice. "With all these virtuous children in the wardroom, I thought I was the only dirty old man here!" The two young lieutenants smiled at that, without taking their eyes from the television screen.

"How much experience you have on figs?"

"Most of my time is on carriers, skipper. Last fourteen months I've been an instructor down at Jax. I've done a lot of odd jobs, most of them with the Seahawk. I think you'll like my bird. The dipping sonar is the best I've ever worked with."

"What do you think about this contact report?"

O'Malley leaned back and puffed on his cigarette with a far-away look. "It's interesting. I remember seeing something on TV about the *Doria.* She sank on her starboard side. A lot of people have dived to look at the wreck. It's about two hundred feet of water, just shallow enough for amateurs to try. And there's a million cables draped over her."

"Cables?" Morris asked.

"Trawls. Lot of commercial fishing goes on there. They tangle their nets on the wreck. It's looks like Gulliver on the beach at Lilliput."

"You're right! I remember that," Morris said. "That explains the noise. It's the tide, or currents whistling through all those cables."

O'Malley nodded. "Yep, that could explain it. I still want to give it a look."

"Why?"

"All the traffic coming out of New York has to pass right overtop the place for one thing. Ivan knows we got a big convoy forming up in New York—he has to know unless the KGB has gone out of business. That's one hell of a good place to park a submarine if they want to put a trailer on the convoy. Think about it. If you get a MAD contact there, you write it off. The noise from a reactor plant at low power probably won't be louder than the flow noise over the wreck if they get in close enough. If I was a real nervy sub-driver, I'd think hard about using a place like that to belly-up."

"You really do think like them," Morris observed. "Okay, let's see how we should handle this . . ."

0230 hours. Morris watched the takeoff procedures from the control tower, then walked forward to CIC. The frigate was at battle stations, doing eight

knots, her Prairie/Masker systems operating. If there were a Russian sub out there, fifteen or so miles away, there was no way she'd suspect a frigate was nearby. In CIC the radar plot showed the helo moving into position.

"Romeo, this is Hammer. Radio check, over," O'Malley said. The helicopter's on-board data link also transmitted a test message to the frigate. The petty officer on the helicopter communications panel checked it out, and grunted with satisfaction. What was that expression he'd heard? Yeah, right—they had a "sweet lock on momma's gadget." He grinned.

The helo began its search two miles from the grave of *Andrea Doria.* O'Malley halted his aircraft and hovered fifty feet above the rolling surface.

"Down dome, Willy."

In the back, the petty officer unlocked the hoist controls and lowered the dipping sonar transducer down a hole in the belly of the helicopter. The Seahawk carried over a thousand feet of cable, enough to reach below the deepest of thermocline layers. It was only two hundred feet to the bottom here, and they had to be careful not to let the transducer come near the bottom for risk of damage. The petty officer paid close attention to the cable and halted the winch when the transducer was a hundred feet down. As with surface ships, the sonar readout was both visual and aural. A TV-type tube began to show frequency lines while the sailor listened in on his headphones.

This was the hard part, O'Malley reminded himself. Hovering a helicopter in these wind conditions required constant attention—there was no autopilot—and hunting for a submarine was always an exercise in patience. It would take several minutes for the passive sonar to tell them anything, and they could not use their active sonar systems. The pinging would only serve to alert a target.

After five minutes they had detected nothing but random noise. They recovered the sonar and moved east. Again there was nothing. *Patience,* the pilot told himself. He hated being patient. Another move east and another wait.

"I got something at zero-four-eight. Not sure what it is, a whistle or something in the high-frequency range." They waited another two minutes to make sure it wasn't a spurious signal.

"Up dome." O'Malley brought the helicopter up and moved off northeast for three thousand yards. Three minutes later the sonar went down again. Nothing this time. O'Malley changed positions again. *If I ever write a song about hunting submarines,* he thought, *I'll call it "Again, and Again, and AGAIN!"* This time a signal came back—two signals, in fact.

"That's interesting," the ASW officer aboard *Reuben James* observed. "How close is this to the wreck?"

"Very close," Morris answered. "Just about the same bearing, too."

"Could be flow noise," Willy told O'Malley. "Very faint, just like the last time."

The pilot reached up to flip a switch to feed the sonar signal into his headset. *We're looking for a very faint signal,* O'Malley reminded himself. "Could be steam noise, too. Prepare to raise dome, I'm gonna go east to triangulate."

Two minutes later, the sonar transducer went into the water for a sixth

time. The contact was now plotted on the helicopter's on-board tactical display that sat on the control panel between pilot and copilot.

"We got two signals here," Ralston said. "About six hundred yards apart."

"Looks that way to me. Let's go see the near one. Willy—"

"Cable within limits, ready to raise, skipper."

"Up dome. Romeo, Hammer. You got what we got?"

"Affirmative, Hammer," Morris answered. "Check out the southern one."

"Doing that right now. Stand by." O'Malley paid close attention to his instruments as he flew toward the nearer of the two contacts. Again he halted the aircraft. "Down dome."

"Contact!" the petty officer said a minute later. He examined the tone lines on his display and mentally compared them with data he had on Soviet submarines. "Evaluate this contact as steam and plant noises from a nuclear submarine, bearing two-six-two."

O'Malley listened for thirty seconds. His face broke into a slight smile. "That's a nuc boat all right! Romeo, Hammer, we have a probable submarine contact bearing two-six-two our position. Moving to firm that fix up right now."

Ten minutes later they had the contact locked in. O'Malley made directly for it and lowered his sonar right on top of the contact.

* * *

"It's a Victor-class," the sonarman aboard the frigate said. "See this frequency line? A Victor with his reactor plant turned down to minimum power output."

"Hammer," Morris called. "Romeo. Any suggestions?"

O'Malley was flying away from the contact, having left a smoke float to mark it. The submarine probably hadn't heard them because of the surface conditions, or if he had, he knew his safest bet was to sit on the bottom. The Americans carried only homing torpedoes, which couldn't detect a submarine on the bottom. Once launched, they'd either motor along in a circle until running out of fuel or drive straight into the bottom. He could go active and try to flush the submarine off the bottom, he thought, but active sonar wasn't all that effective in shallow water, and what if Ivan didn't move? The Seahawk was down to one hour's fuel. The pilot made his decision.

"Battleaxe, this is Hammer. Do you read, over?"

"Took your time to call us, Hammer," Captain Perrin replied at once. The British frigate was monitoring the search closely.

"You have any Mark-11s aboard?"

"We can load them in ten minutes."

"We'll be waiting. Romeo, do you approve a VECTAC?"

"Affirmative," Morris answered. The vectored attack approach was perfect, and he was too excited at what they had here to be annoyed at O'Malley for bypassing him. "Weapons free."

O'Malley circled his aircraft at one thousand feet while he waited. This was

really crazy. Was Ivan just sitting there? Was he waiting for a convoy to pass by? It was about an even-money chance that he'd heard the helicopter. If he'd heard the helo, did he want the frigate to come in so he could attack her? His systems operator watched the sonar display intently for any change in the signal from the contact. So far there'd been none. No increase in engine power, no mechanical transients. Nothing at all but the hissing of a reactor plant at fractional power, a sound undetectable from more than two miles off. No wonder several people had looked and found nothing. He found himself admiring the nerve of the Soviet submarine commander.

"Hammer, this is Hatchet."

O'Malley smiled to himself. Unlike American procedures, the Brits assigned helicopter names associated with that of their mother ships. HMS Brazen's helo was "Hussy." Battleaxe's was "Hatchet."

"Roger, Hatchet. Where are you?"

"Ten miles south of you. We've two depth charges aboard."

O'Malley switched his flying lights back on. "Very well, stand by. Romeo, the way I want to work this, you give Hatchet a radar steer to our sonobuoy and we'll use our sonar for the cross-bearing to drop. Do you concur, over?"

"Roger, concur," Morris answered.

"Arm the fish," O'Malley told his copilot.

"Why?"

"If the charges miss, you can bet he'll come off the bottom like a salmon at spawning time." O'Malley brought his helo around and spotted the blinking anticollision lights of the British Lynx helicopter. "Hatchet, tallyho, I have you now at my nine o'clock. Please hold your current position while we get set. Willy, any change in the contact?"

"No, sir. This dude's playing it awful cool, sir."

You poor brave bastard, O'Malley thought to himself. The smoke float atop the contact was about burned out. He dropped another. After rechecking his tactical display he moved to a position one thousand yards east of the contact, hovered fifty feet above the surface and deployed the dipping sonar.

"There he is," the petty officer reported. "Bearing two-six-eight."

"Hatchet, Hammer. We're ready for your VECTAC. Take your steer from Romeo."

Control of the British helicopter's course came now from *Reuben James's* radar, which steered it onto a precise northerly course. O'Malley watched the Lynx approach, checking to make sure the wind wasn't driving him off his own position.

"You will drop your charges one at a time, on my mark. Stand by, Hatchet."

"Standing by." The British pilot armed his depth charges and came forward at ninety knots. O'Malley lined up the blinking lights with the smoke float.

"Charge one—Mark-mark! Charge two—Mark-mark! Get clear!"

The Lynx pilot needed no encouragement. Scarcely had the second depth charge fallen free when the helo leaped upward and raced northeast. Simultaneously, O'Malley yanked up on his collective control to bring his delicate sonar transducer out of the water.

There was an odd flash of light from the bottom, then another. The surface of the sea turned to foam that leaped into the starry sky. O'Malley closed in

and switched on his landing lights. The surface was churned with mud, and . . . oil? *Just like in the movies,* he thought, and dropped another sonobuoy into the water.

The bottom reverberated with the rumbles from the depth charges, but the system filtered them out and locked in on the higher frequency sounds. They heard escaping air and rushing water. Someone aboard the submarine might have hit the ballast controls in a vain attempt to blow the submarine to the surface. Then there was something else, like water dropped on a hot plate. It was a moment before O'Malley had it figured out.

"What's that, skipper?" Willy asked over the intercom. "I never heard that before."

"The reactor vessel's ruptured. You're hearing a runaway nuclear reactor." *God, what a mess that'll be this close into shore!* he thought. No more diving on the *Doria* for a few years . . . O'Malley switched to the radio circuit. "Hatchet, this is Hammer. I copy collapse noises. We score that one as a kill. Do you claim the kill, over?"

"Our fox, Hammer. Thanks for the steer in."

O'Malley laughed. "Roger that, Hatchet. If you want the kill, you also get to file the environmental-impact statement. Out."

Aboard the Lynx, pilot and copilot exchanged a look. "What the devil is that?"

The two helicopters returned in loose formation and made a pass over both the British and American frigates to celebrate their kill. It was the second for *Battleaxe,* and *Reuben James* would now paint half a submarine on the side of her pilothouse. The ships recovered their helicopters and turned west for New York.

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

Mikhail Sergetov embraced his son in the Russian way, with passion and kisses to welcome him back from the front. The Politburo member took his son's arm and led him to his chauffeured Zil for the drive into Moscow.

"You've been hurt, Vanya."

"I cut my hand on some glass." Ivan shrugged it off. His father offered him a small glass of vodka, which he took. "I haven't had a drink in two weeks."

"Oh?"

"The General does not permit it in his command post," Ivan explained.

"Is he as good an officer as I thought?"

"Perhaps a better one. I've seen him in command at the front. He is a truly gifted leader."

"Then why haven't we conquered Germany?"

Ivan Mikhailovich Sergetov had grown up while his father had climbed the Party ladder nearly to the top, and he had often seen him switch in a moment from affable host to abrasive Party apparatchik. This was the first time it had ever happened to him, however.

“NATO was far readier than we had been led to expect, father. They were waiting for us to come, and their first mission of the war—before we had even crossed the border in force—came as a rude shock.” Ivan explained the effects of Operation Dreamland.

“We were not told it was that bad. Are you sure?”

“I’ve seen some of the bridges. Those same aircraft raided a dummy command post outside Stendal. The bombs were falling before we knew they were there. If their intelligence had been better, I might not be here.”

“So it’s their air power?”

“That’s a major part of it. I’ve seen their ground-attack fighters cut through a tank column like a harvester through a wheatfield. It’s horrible.”

“But our missiles?”

“Our missile troops practice once or twice a year, firing at target drones that plod along in a straight line up where everyone can see them. The NATO fighters fly between the trees. If the antiaircraft missiles on either side worked as well as their makers said, every airplane in the world would have been shot down twice over by now. But the worst thing of all are their antitank missiles—you know, just like ours, and these missiles work all too well.” The younger man gestured with his hands. “Three men in a wheeled vehicle. One driver, one loader, one gunner. They hide behind a tree at a turn in the road and wait. Our column comes into view and they fire from a range of—say two kilometers. They’re trained to go for the command tank—the one with the radio antenna up. As often as not the first warning we have is when the first weapon hits. They fire one more and kill another tank, then race away before we can call down artillery fire. Five minutes later, from another spot, it happens again.

“It’s eating us up,” the young man said, echoing the words of his commander.

“You say we are losing?”

“No. I say that we are not winning,” Ivan said. “But for us that is the same thing.” He continued with the message from his commander and saw his father settle into the leather seat of the car.

“I knew it. I warned them, Vanya. The fools!” Ivan gestured with his head to the driver. His father smiled and made a dismissive gesture. Vitaly had served Sergetov for years. His daughter was now a doctor because of the Minister’s patronage, his son safe in the university while most of the young men in the country were under arms. “Oil expenditures are twenty-five percent above predictions. That is, twenty-five percent above my ministerial predictions. They are forty percent above the Defense Ministry’s predictions. It never occurred to anyone that NATO aircraft would be able to find our hidden petroleum storage facilities. My people are reevaluating national reserves even now. I am to receive the interim report this afternoon if it’s ready on time. Look around, Vanya. See for yourself.”

There were hardly any vehicles in view, not even trucks. Never a lively city, now Moscow was grim even to Russian eyes. People hurried along half-empty streets, not looking around, not looking up. So many men were gone, Ivan realized. So many of them would never return. As usual his father read his thoughts.

"How bad are casualties?"

"Dreadful. Far over estimates. I do not have exact numbers—my posting is intelligence, not administration—but losses are very bad."

"This is all a mistake, Vanya," the Minister said quietly. *But the Party is always right. How many years did you believe that?*

"Nothing can be done about that now, father. We also need information on NATO's supplies. The data that gets to us at the front is—overprocessed, shall we say. We need better data to make our own estimates."

At the front, Mikhail thought. His anger at those words could not entirely suppress the pride he felt at what his son had become. He'd worried often that he'd turn into another young "nobleman" of a Party family. Alekseyev was not the sort to promote lightly, and from his own sources he'd learned that Ivan had accompanied the General to the battle line many times. The boy had become a man. Pity it had taken a war to make that happen.

"I'll see what I can do."

USS *CHICAGO*

The Svyatana Anna Trough was their last bit of deep water. The freight train of fast-attack submarines slowed almost to a halt as it approached the edge of the icepack. They expected to find two friendly submarines here, but "friendly" was not a word that went well with combat operations. All the American submarines were at battle stations. McCafferty checked the time and the location. So far everything had gone according to plan. *Amazing,* he thought.

He didn't like being the lead boat. If there were a Russian patrolling the edge of the pack . . . he'd get first shot, McCafferty knew. Wondering if the "he" would be a speaker of English or Russian.

"Conn, sonar, I got faint machinery noises bearing one-nine-one."

"Bearing change?"

"Just picked it up, sir. Bearing is not changing at the moment."

McCafferty reached past the duty electrician's mate and switched on the gertrude, a sonar telephone as archaic as it was effective. The only noise was the hissing and groaning of the icepack. Behind him the exec got the fire-control tracking party working on a torpedo solution for the new target.

A garbled group of syllables came over the speaker.

McCafferty took the gertrude phone off the receiver and depressed the Transmit trigger.

"Zulu X-ray." There came a pause of several seconds, then a scratchy reply.

"Hotel Bravo," replied HMS *Sceptre.* McCafferty let out a long breath that went unnoticed by the rest of the attack center crew, all of whom were doing exactly the same thing.

"All ahead one-third," the captain said. Ten minutes later they were within easy range of the gertrude. *Chicago* halted to communicate.

"Welcome to the Soviet back garden, old boy. Slight change in plans.

Keyboard"—the code name for HMS *Superb*—"is two-zero miles south to check further on your route. We've encountered no hostile activity for the past thirty hours. The coast is clear. Good hunting."

"Thank you, Keylock. The gang's all here. Out." McCafferty hung the phone set back in its place. "Gentlemen, the mission is a go! All ahead two-thirds!"

The nuclear attack submarine increased speed to twelve knots on a heading of one-nine-seven degrees. HMS Sceptre counted the American boats as they passed, then resumed her station, circling slowly at the edge of the icepack.

"Good luck, chaps," her captain breathed.

"They should get in all right."

"It's not getting in that I'm worried about, Jimmy," the captain replied, using the traditional name for a British sub's first officer. "The ticklish part's getting back out."

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

"Telex for you, Commander." An RAF sergeant handed the message form over to Toland.

"Thank you." He scanned the form.

"Leaving us?" Group Captain Mallory asked.

"They want me to fly down to Northwood. That's right outside London, isn't it?"

Mallory nodded. "No problem getting you there."

"That's nice. It says 'immediate.' "

NORTHWOOD, ENGLAND

He'd been to England many times, all on business with his opposite numbers at Government Communications Headquarters outside Cheltenham. His flights always seemed to arrive at night. He was flying at night now, and something was wrong. Something obvious . . .

Blackout. There were few lights below. Did that really matter now that aircraft had sophisticated navigation aids, or was it mainly a psychological move to remind the people of what was going on? If the continuous television coverage, some of it "live" from the battlefront, didn't do that already. Toland had been spared most of that. Like most men in uniform, he had no time for the big picture while he concentrated on his little corner of it. He imagined it was the same for Ed Morris and Danny McCafferty, then realized this was the first time he'd thought of them in over a week. How were they doing? They were certainly more exposed to danger than he was at the moment, though his experience on *Nimitz* the second day of the war had given him enough terror to last the remainder of his life. Toland did not yet know that with a routine

telex message sent a week before, he would directly affect their lives for the second time this year.

The Boeing 737 airliner touched down ten minutes later. Only twenty people were aboard, almost all of them in uniform. Toland was met by a car and a driver which sped him off to Northwood.

"You're Commander Toland?" a Royal Navy lieutenant asked. "Please come with me, sir. COMEASTLANT wants to see you."

He found Admiral Sir Charles Beattie chewing on an unlit pipe in front of a huge map of the eastern and northern Atlantic.

"Commander Toland, sir."

"Thank you," the Admiral said without turning. "Tea and coffee in the corner, Commander."

Toland availed himself of the tea. He drank it only in the U.K., and after several weeks he found himself wondering why he didn't have it at home.

"Your Tomcats have done well up in Scotland," Beattie said.

"It was the aerial radar that made the real difference, sir. More than half the kills were made by the RAF."

"Last week you sent a message to our air operations chaps to the effect that your Tomcats were able to track Backfires visually at very long range."

It took Toland a few seconds to remember it. "Oh, yes. It's the videocamera system they have, Admiral. It's designed to identify fighter-size aircraft at thirty miles or so. Tracking something as big as a Backfire they can do at fifty or so if the weather's good."

"And the Backfires would not know they were there?"

"Not likely, sir."

"How far could they follow a Backfire?"

"That's a question for a driver, sir. With tanker support, we can keep a Tomcat aloft for almost four hours. Two hours each way, that would take them almost all the way home."

Beattie turned to face Toland for the first time. Sir Charles was a former aviator himself, last commander of the old *Ark Royal,* Britain's last real carrier. "How sure are you of Ivan's operating airfields?"

"For the Backfires, sir? They operate from the four airfields around Kirovsk. I would presume you have satellite photos of the places, sir."

"Here." Beattie handed him a folder.

There was a degree of unreality to this, Toland thought. Four-star admirals didn't chew the fat with newly frocked commanders unless they had nothing better to do, and Beattie had lots of things to do. Bob opened the folder.

"Oh." He looked at a photo set for Umbozero, the field east of Kirovsk. There'd been lit smokepots during the satellite pass, and the resulting black smoke had completely hidden the runways to visual light, with flares messing up the infrared imaging systems as well. "Well, there are the hardened shelters, and maybe three aircraft. Was this taken during a raid?"

"Correct. Very good, Commander. The Backfire force left the airfield three hours before the satellite pass."

"Trucks, too—fuel bowsers?" He got a nod. "They refuel them right after they land?"

"We think yes, before they get into the shelters. Evidently they don't like the

idea of fueling inside a building. Seems reasonable enough. Ivan's had problems with accidental explosions the last few years."

Toland nodded, remembering the explosion at the main ordnance storage facility for the Russian Northern Fleet in 1984. "Be a hell of a nice time to catch them on the ground—but we don't have any tactical aircraft that'll reach nearly that far. B-52*s* could do it, but they'd be murdered. We learned that over Iceland."

"But a Tomcat could trail the Backfires nearly to the Russian doorstep, and that *could* allow you to predict exactly when they'll land?" Sir Charles persisted.

Toland looked at the map. The Backfires reentered Russian fighter cover about thirty minutes' flying time from their home bases.

"Plus or minus fifteen minutes . . . yes, Admiral, I think we can do that. I wonder how long it takes to refuel a Backfire." There was a lot of thinking going on behind those blue eyes, Toland saw.

"Commander, my operations officer will brief you on something called Operation Doolittle. We named it after one of your chaps as a clever bit of subterfuge to weasel the assets from your navy. For the moment, this information is eyes-only to you. Be back here in an hour. I want your evaluation of how we can improve the basic operational concept."

"Yes, sir."

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

They were in New York harbor. O'Malley was in the wardroom finishing up the written account of the destruction of the Soviet submarine when the growler phone on the port bulkhead started making noise. He looked up and discovered he was the only officer in the room. That meant he had to answer it.

"Wardroom. Lieutenant Commander O'Malley."

"Battleaxe here. May I please speak to your CO?"

"He's taking a nap. Can I help you, or is it important?"

"If he's not too busy, the captain wishes to invite him to dinner. Half an hour from now. Your XO and helicopter pilot also if he's available."

The pilot laughed. "The XO's on the beach, but the helo driver's available if the Queen's ships are still wet."

"Indeed we are, Commander."

"Okay. I'll go wake him up. Be back to you in a few minutes." O'Malley hung up and went out the door. He bumped into Willy.

"Excuse me, sir. The torpedo-loading practice?"

"Okay, I'm going to see the skipper anyway." Willy had complained that the last practice had gone a little slow. He handed the petty officer his report. "Take this down to the ship's office and tell 'em to type it up."

O'Malley went forward and found the door to the captain's stateroom closed, but the do-not-disturb light was switched off. He knocked and went in.

The noise surprised him.

"Don't you see it!" The words came out as a gasp. Morris was lying on his back, his hands balled into fists on the blanket. His face was covered in sweat and he breathed like a man finishing a marathon.

"Jesus." O'Malley hesitated. He didn't really know the man.

"Look out!" This was louder, and the pilot wondered if anyone in the passageway outside might hear it and wonder if the captain were—he had to do something.

"Wake up, Captain!" Jerry grabbed Morris by the shoulders and lifted him up into a sitting position.

"Don't you see it!" Morris shouted, still not really awake.

"Settle down, pal. You're tied to the pier in New York harbor. You're safe. The ship is safe. Come around, Captain. It's okay." Morris blinked his eyes about ten times. He saw O'Malley's face about six inches away.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Glad I came. You all right?" The pilot lit a cigarette and handed it to the captain.

Morris refused it and stood. He walked to his basin and got a glass of water. "Just a dumb dream. What do you want?"

"We've been invited out to dinner next door in half an hour—I guess a reward for giving them the Victor. Also, I'd like your deck crew to practice loading torps on my bird. Last time was a little slow, my petty says."

"When do you want 'em to do it?"

"Soon as it gets dark, Captain. Better they should learn it the hard way."

"Okay. Half an hour on dinner?"

"Yes, sir. Be nice to have a drink."

Morris smiled without much enthusiasm. "Guess it would. I'll wash up. Meet you in the wardroom. This thing formal?"

"They didn't say so. I wasn't planning to change, if that's all right with you, skipper." O'Malley was wearing his flight suit. He got lonely without all the pockets.

"Twenty minutes."

O'Malley went to his stateroom and ran a cloth over his flight boots. The flight suit was new, and he figured that was dressy enough. Morris worried him. The man might come apart, not something that should happen to a commanding officer. That made it partly his problem. *Besides,* O'Malley told himself, *he's a pretty good man.*

He looked better when they met again. Amazing what a shower could do. His hair was brushed back and his service khakis pressed. The two officers went aft to the helicopter pad, then down the brow to the dock.

HMS Battleaxe gave the appearance of a larger ship than the American frigate. In fact she was about twelve feet shorter, but seven hundred tons heavier, various differences in her design reflecting the philosophies of her builders. She was undeniably prettier than her American counterpart, her unexciting hull lines more than balanced by a superstructure that looked as though it had been sculpted to sit atop a ship instead of a parking lot.

Morris was glad to see that things were informal. A youthful midshipman met them at the foot of the brow and escorted them aboard, explaining that

the captain was on the radio at the moment. After the customary salutes of flag and duty officer, the midshipman led them into the ship's air-conditioned citadel, then forward to the wardroom.

"Hot damn, a piano!" O'Malley exclaimed. A battered upright was secured to the port bulkhead with two-inch line. Several officers rose and introduced themselves.

"Drinks, gentlemen?" a steward asked. O'Malley got himself a can of beer and moved toward the piano. A minute later he was battering his way through some Scott Joplin. The wardroom's forward door opened.

"Jerr-O!" a man with four stripes on his shoulder boards exclaimed.

"Doug!" O'Malley jumped up from the stool and ran to shake his hand. "How the hell are you!"

"I knew it was your voice on the radio. 'Hammer,' indeed. The American Navy's run out of competent pilots and scraped you up, eh?" Both men laughed out loud. O'Malley waved his captain over.

"Captain Ed Morris, meet Captain Doug Perrin, MBE, RN, and a shitload of other acronyms. Watch this turkey, skipper, he used to drive submarines before he went straight."

"I see you guys know each other."

"Some bloody fool decided to send him to lecture at HMS Dryad, our ASW school, when I was taking the advanced course. Set back our relations by at least a hundred years."

"Is the Fox and Fence put back together yet?" O'Malley asked. "Skipper, there was this pub about half a mile from the place, and one night Doug and me—"

"I am trying to forget that night, Jerr-O. Susan gave me hell about it for weeks." He led them aft and got himself a drink. "Marvelous job with that Victor last night! Captain Morris, I understand you did very well with your previous command."

"Killed a Charlie and picked up two assists."

"We stumbled across an Echo on our last convoy. Old boat, but she had a good driver. Took us six hours. But a pair of diesel submarines, probably Tangos, got inside and killed five ships and an escort. *Diomede* may have gotten one of them. We're not sure."

"Was the Echo coming after you?" Morris asked.

"Possibly," Perrin answered. "It does appear that Ivan's going after the escorts quite deliberately. We had two missiles shot at us by the last Backfire raid. One ran into our chaff cloud, and fortunately our Sea Wolf intercepted the other. Unfortunately, the one that exploded behind us amputated our towed array and we're down to just our 2016 sonar."

"So you've been assigned to ride shotgun on us then?"

"It would seem so."

The captains lapsed into shoptalk, which was the whole point of the dinner in any case. O'Malley found the English helicopter pilot while the tables were set, and they started the same thing while the American played the piano. Somewhere in the Royal Navy was a directive: when dealing with American naval officers, get them over early, get a drink in them first, then talk business.

Dinner was excellent, though the Americans' judgment was somewhat affected by the liquid refreshments. O'Malley listened closely as his captain described the loss of *Pharris,* the tactics employed by the Russians, and how he had failed to counter them properly. It was like listening to a man relate the death of his child.

"Under the circumstances, hard to see what you could have done differently," Doug Perrin sympathized. "Victor is a capable opponent, and he must have timed your coming off the sprint very carefully."

Morris shook his head. "No, we came off sprint well away from him, and that blew his solution right out the window. If I'd done things better, those men wouldn't be dead. I was the captain. It was my fault."

Perrin said, "I've been there in the submarine, you know. He has the advantage because he's already been tracking you." He flashed O'Malley a look.

Dinner ended at eight. The escort commanders would meet the following afternoon, and the convoy would sail at sundown. O'Malley and Morris left together, but the pilot stopped at the brow.

"Forgot my hat. I'll be back in a minute." He hurried back to the wardroom. Captain Perrin was still there.

"Doug, I need an opinion."

"He shouldn't go back out in his current state. Sorry, Jerry, but that's how I see things."

"You're right. There's one thing I can try." O'Malley made a small purchase and rejoined Morris two minutes later.

"Captain, any particular reason you have to head right back to the ship?" he asked quietly. "Something I need to talk about and I don't want to do it aboard. It's a personal thing. Okay?" The pilot looked very embarrassed.

"How about we take a little walk?" Morris agreed. The two officers walked east. O'Malley looked up and down the street, and found a waterfront bar with sailors going in and out. He steered Morris into it and they found a booth in the back.

"Two glasses," O'Malley told the barmaid. He unzipped the leg pocket of his flight suit and withdrew a bottle of Black Bush Irish whiskey.

"You want to drink here, you buy it here." O'Malley handed her two twenty-dollar bills.

"Two glasses and ice." His voice did not brook argument. "And leave us alone." Service was quick.

"I checked my logbook this afternoon," O'Malley said after tossing off half his first drink. "Four thousand three hundred sixty hours of stick time. Counting last night, three hundred eleven hours of combat time."

"Vietnam. You said you were there." Morris sipped at his own.

"Last day, last tour. Search-and-rescue mission for an A-7 pilot shot down twenty miles south of Haiphong." He had never even told his wife this story. "Saw a flash, made the mistake of ignoring it. Thought it was a reflection off a window or a stream or something. Kept going. Turned out it was probably a reflection of a gunsight, maybe a pair of binoculars. One minute later some hundred-millimeter flak goes off around us. Helo just comes apart. I get her down, we're on fire. Look left—copilot's torn apart, his brains are in my lap.

My crew chief, a third-class named Ricky, he's in the back. I look. Both his legs are torn off. I think he was still alive then, but there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it—couldn't even get to him the way things were—and there's three people heading toward us. I just ran away. Maybe they didn't see me. Maybe they didn't care—hell, I don't know. Another helo found me twelve hours later." He poured himself another drink and topped off the one for Morris. "Don't make me drink alone."

"I've had enough."

"No, you haven't. And neither have I. It took me a year to get over that. You don't have a year. All you got's tonight. You gotta talk about it, Captain. I know. Think it's bad now? It gets worse."

He took another pull on the drink. At least it was good stuff, O'Malley told himself. He watched Morris sit there for five minutes, sipping at his drink and wondering if he should just go back to the ship. The proud captain. Like all captains, condemned to live alone, and this one was lonelier than most. He's *afraid I'm right,* O'Malley thought. *He's afraid it* will *get worse. You* poor *bastard. If you only knew.*

"Run through it," the pilot said quietly. "Analyze it one step at a time."

"You already did that for me."

"I have a big mouth. Has to be for my feet to fit in it. You do it in your sleep, Ed. Might as well do it when you're awake."

And, slowly, he did. O'Malley coached him through the sequence. Weather conditions, ship's course and speed. What sensors were operating. In an hour they were three quarters of the way down the bottle. Finally they got to the torpedoes. Morris's voice started to crack.

"There just wasn't anything else I could *do!* The Goddamned thing just came in. We only had one nixie out, and the first fish blew that the hell away. I tried to maneuver the ship, but—"

"But you were up against a homing torpedo. You can't outrun 'em and you can't outturn 'em."

"I'm not supposed to let—"

"Oh, horseshit!" The pilot refilled the glasses. "You think you're the first guy ever lost a 'can? Didn't you ever play ball, Ed? Hell, there's two sides, and both of 'em play to win. You expect those Russian sub skippers are just gonna sit there and say, 'Kill me, kill me'? You must be dumber 'n I thought."

"My men—"

"Some of them are dead, most of them aren't. I'm sorry some're dead. I'm sorry Ricky died. Kid wasn't even nineteen yet. But I didn't kill him, and you didn't kill your men. You saved your ship. You brought her back with most of the crew."

Morris drained his glass with one long pull. Jerry refilled it, not bothering with ice.

"It's my *responsibility*. Look, when I got back to Norfolk, I visited—I mean, I *had* to visit their families. I'm the captain. I gotta—there was this little girl, and . . . Jesus, O'Malley, what the hell do you say?" Morris demanded. He was sobbing, near tears, Jerry saw. Good.

"They don't put that in the book," O'Malley agreed. *You think they would have learned by now.*

“Pretty little girl. What do you tell the kids?” The tears started. It had taken nearly two hours.

“You tell the little girl that her daddy was a good man and he did his best, and you did your best, ‘cause that’s all we can do, Ed. You did everything right, but sometimes it just doesn’t matter.” It wasn’t the first time O’Malley had had men cry on his shoulder. He remembered doing it himself. *What a miserable life this can be,* he thought, *that it can bring good men to this.*

Morris recovered a few minutes later, and by the time they finished the bottle both men were as drunk as either ever got. O’Malley helped his captain up and walked him to the door.

“What’s the matter, Navy, can’t take it?” He was a merchant seaman standing alone at the bar. It was the wrong thing to say.

It was hard to tell from the baggy flight suit that O’Malley was a man of considerable strength. His left arm was wrapped around Morris. His right hand grabbed the other man by the throat and dragged him away from the bar.

“You got anything else to say about my friend, Dickweed?” O’Malley tightened his grip.

The reply came in a whisper. “All I meant was he has trouble with his liquor.”

The pilot released him. “Good night.”

Maneuvering the captain back to the ship was difficult, partly because O’Malley was also drunk but mainly because Morris was on the point of passing out. That had been part of the plan, too, but the Hammer had cut his timing a little close. The brow looked awfully steep from the pier.

“What seems to be the problem?”

“Good evening, Master Chief.”

“Good evening, Commander. You got the captain with you?”

“Sure could use a hand, too.”

“You’re not kidding.” The chief came down the gangway. Together they got the captain aboard. The really hard part was the ladder up to his stateroom. For this another sailor was summoned.

“Damn,” the youngster observed. “The old man really knows how to tie one on!”

“Takes a real sailorman to know how to get blasted,” the master chief agreed. The three of them got him up the ladder. O’Malley took it from there and landed Morris on his bunk. The captain was sleeping soundly, and the flyer hoped the nightmare wouldn’t come back. His still did.

NORTHWOOD, ENGLAND

“Well, Commander?”

“Yes, sir. I think it’ll work. I see most of the assets are nearly in place.”

“The original plan had a lesser chance of success. I’m sure it would have got their attention, of course, but this way we just might be able to damage the force severely.”

Toland looked up at the map. “The timing is still tricky, but not very different from that attack we made on the tankers. I like it, sir. Sure would solve a few problems. What’s the convoy situation?”

“There are eighty ships assembled in New York harbor. They sail in twenty-four hours. Heavy escort, carriers in support, even a new Aegis cruiser with the merchants. And the next step after that, of course—” Beattie went on.

“Yes, sir. And Doolittle is the key.”

“Exactly. I want you back at Stornoway. I’ll also be sending one of my air operations types to work with your chaps. We’ll keep you informed of all developments. Remember that distribution for this is to be strictly limited to the personnel involved.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Off with you, then.”

34

Feelers

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

0700 hours came rather early for Jerry O'Malley. He had the lower bunk in a two-man stateroom—his copilot had the upper—and his first considered move was to take three aspirins and sit back down. It was almost funny, he thought. "The Hammer." He felt it inside his head. No, he corrected himself, he had his dipping sonar in there, on automatic ping. Still and all, he had performed something remembered from his youth as a corporal work of mercy, and that helped give purpose to his suffering. He gave the aspirins ten minutes to get into his bloodstream, then went forward to the shower. First cold, then hot water cleared his head.

The wardroom was full but quiet, the officers assembled according to age into little knots of whispered conversation. These young officers hadn't faced combat before, and the bravado they might have felt on leaving San Diego some weeks before had been replaced with the sober reality of the task at hand. Ships had been sunk. Men they knew were dead. For these kids, fear was a more terrible unknown than the technical aspects of combat for which they had been trained. He could see the question in their faces; only time would answer it. They would learn to endure it, or they would not. Combat held no mysteries for O'Malley. He knew that he would be afraid, and that he would put the fear aside as best he could. There was no sense dwelling on it. It would come soon enough.

"Good morning, XO!"

"Morning, Jerry. I was just going to call the skipper."

"He needs his sleep, Frank." The pilot had disconnected Morris's alarm clock before leaving the stateroom. Ernst read O'Malley's face.

"Well, nothing we really need him for till eleven."

"I knew you were a good XO, Frank." O'Malley debated between bug juice and coffee. The fruit drink this morning was the orange kind—the flavors didn't relate to any particular fruit. O'Malley liked the red kind, but not the orange. He poured some coffee.

"I supervised the torpedo loading last night. We cut a minute off our best time—in the dark."

"Sounds good to me. When's the pre-sail brief?"

"Fourteen hundred, in a theater two blocks from here. COs, XOs, and selected others. I expect you'll want to come, too?"

"Yeah."

Ernst's voice dropped. "You sure the skipper's all right?" There are no secrets aboard a ship.

"He's been on straight combat ops since Day One of this fracas. He needed to get a little unwrapped, an ancient and honored naval tradition"—he raised his voice—"damned shame that all these little boys are too young to partake in it! Didn't anybody think to get a newspaper? NFL summer camps are opened all over the country, and there ain't no paper! What the hell kind of wardroom is this!"

"I've never met a dinosaur before," a junior engineering officer observed *sotto voce.*

"You get used to him," Ensign Ralston explained.

ICELAND

Two days' rest was just what the doctor ordered for everyone. Sergeant Nichols could almost walk normally on his ankle, and the Americans, who were beginning to regard fish with distinct distaste, filled up on the extra rations the Royal Marines had packed in.

Edwards's eyes traced around the horizon again. The human eye automatically locks onto movement, and she was moving. It was hard not to look. It was almost impossible. In fact, Edwards told himself, it was impossible to stand guard and not look around. The hell of it was, she thought it was funny. Their rescuers—Edwards knew better, but why upset her?—had also brought soap. A tiny lake half a mile from their hilltop perch was the designated bathing area. In hostile country no one went that far alone, and the lieutenant had naturally been detailed to look after her—and she after him. Guarding her as she bathed with a loaded rifle seemed absurd, even with Russians around. Her bruises were nearly healed, he noted as she dressed.

"Finished, Michael." They didn't have towels, but that was a small price to pay for smelling human. She came up to him with her hair still wet and an impish expression on her face. "I embarrass you. Sorry."

"It's not your fault." It was also impossible to be angry with her.

"The baby makes me fat," she said. Mike could scarcely tell, but then it wasn't his figure being changed.

"You look fine. I'm sorry if I looked when I shouldn't have."

"What is wrong?"

Edwards found himself struggling with his words again. "Well, after—after what happened to you, I mean, you probably don't need a bunch of strange men standing around looking at you when you're, well, naked."

"Michael, you are not like that one. I know you would never hurt me. Even after what he do to me, you say I am pretty—when I grow fat."

"Vigdis, baby or no baby, you are the prettiest girl I have ever known.

You're strong, and you're brave." *And I think I love you, but I'm afraid to say so.* "We just picked a bad time to meet, that's all."

"For me was a very good time, Michael." She took his hand. She smiled a lot now. She had a gentle, friendly smile.

"As long as you know me, every time you think about me, you'll remember that—Russian."

"Yes, Michael, I will remember that. I remember that you save my life. I ask Sergeant Smith. He say you have orders not to come near Russians because it so dangerous for you. He say you come because of me. You do not even know me then, but you come."

"I did the right thing." He held both of her hands now. What do I say now? *Darling, if we ever get out of this alive . . . that sounds like a bad movie.* Edwards hadn't been sixteen in a long time, but now all the awkwardness that had poisoned his adolescence came back to him. Mike hadn't exactly been the makeout king of Eastpoint High School. "Vigdis, I'm not any good at this. It was different with Sandy. She understood me. I don't know how to talk to girls—hell, I'm not that good talking to *people.* I do weather maps, and play with computers, but I usually have to have a few beers in me before I get the nerve to say—"

"I know you love me, Michael." Her eyes sparkled when she revealed the secret.

"Well, yes."

She handed him the soap. "Your time to wash. I will not look too much."

FOLZIEHAUSEN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

Major Sergetov handed over his notes. The Leine had been forced at a second place—Gronau, fifteen kilometers north of Alfeld—and now six divisions were involved in the drive on Hameln and others were attempting to widen the breach. Still they were handicapped. There were relatively few roads in this part of Germany, and those routes they controlled were still suffering from air and artillery attacks that bled reinforcement columns long before they could be committed to battle.

What had begun with three motor-rifle divisions attempting to forge an opening for one tank division had now become the focus of two complete Soviet armies. Where they had attacked into a pair of depleted German brigades, now they faced a hodgepodge of units from nearly all NATO members. Alekseyev anguished over lost chances. What if divisional artillery hadn't dropped multiple rocket fire on the bridges? Could he have reached the Weser in a day as he had thought? *That is in the past,* Pasha told himself. He looked over the information on fuel availability.

"One month?"

"At current operational tempos, yes," Sergetov said grimly. "And to do this we have crippled the whole national economy. My father asks if we can reduce expenditures at the front—"

“Certainly,” the General exploded. “We can lose the war! That ought to save his precious fuel!”

“Comrade General, you requested that I provide you with accurate information. I have done this. My father was also able to give me this.” The younger man took a document from his coat pocket. Ten pages thick, it was a KGB intelligence assessment marked POLITBURO EYES ONLY. “It makes very interesting reading. My father asks me to point out the risk he has taken in giving you this document.”

The General was a fast reader and ordinarily not a man given to displays of emotion. The West German government had established direct contact with the Soviets through the embassies both maintained in India. The preliminary discussion had been an inquiry into the possibility of a negotiated settlement. The KGB’s assessment was that the inquiry reflected the fragmentation of NATO politically, and possibly a grave supply situation on the other side of the battle line. There followed two pages of graphs and claims of damage to NATO shipping, plus analysis of NATO’s munitions expenditures to date. The KGB calculated that NATO supplies were down to the two-week mark now, despite all the shipping that had arrived to date. Neither side had produced enough consumable ordnance and fuel to sustain its forces.

“My father feels that this data on the Germans is particularly significant.”

“Potentially so,” Alekseyev said cautiously. “They will not slacken their fighting while their political leadership works to achieve an acceptable settlement, but if we can make them an acceptable offer and remove the Germans from NATO, then our objective is achieved, and we can seize the Persian Gulf at leisure. What offer are we making to the Germans?”

“That has not yet been decided. They have asked for our withdrawal to pre-war lines, with final terms to be negotiated on a more formal basis under international supervision. Their withdrawal from NATO is to be contingent upon the terms of the final treaty.”

“Not acceptable. It gives us nothing. Why are they negotiating at all, I wonder?”

“Evidently there has been considerable turmoil in their government over the dislocation of civilians, and destruction of economic assets.”

“Ah.” The economic damage to Germany was not something in which Alekseyev had the slightest interest, but the German government was watching the work of two generations being dismantled by Soviet explosives. “But why haven’t they told us this?”

“The Politburo feels that news of a possible negotiated settlement would discourage further pressure on the Germans.”

“Idiots. This sort of thing tells us what to attack!”

“That is what my father said. He wants your opinion on all this.”

“Tell the Minister that I see no indication at all of weakening NATO resolve on the battle line. German morale in particular is still high. They resist everywhere.”

“Their government could be doing this without the knowledge of their own army. If they are deceiving their NATO allies, why not their high command also?” Sergetov suggested. After all, it worked that way in his country . . .

“A possibility, Ivan Mikhailovich. There is another one, as well.” Alekseyev

turned back to the papers. “That this is all a sham.”

NEW YORK

The briefing was conducted by a captain. As he spoke, the escort commanders and their senior officers leafed through the briefing documents like high school students at a Shakespeare play.

“Outlying sonar pickets will be positioned along the threat axis here.” The captain moved his pointer across the viewgraph. The frigates *Reuben James and Battleaxe* were to be almost thirty miles from the rest of the formation. That put them outside SAM coverage from the other ships. They had their own surface-to-air missiles, but they would be completely on their own. “We will have SURTASS support for most of the trip. The ships are repositioning themselves now. We can expect Soviet submarine and air attacks.

“To deal with the air threat, the carriers *Independence* and *America* will be supporting the convoy. The new Aegis cruiser *Bunker Hill,* as you may have noticed, will be traveling in the convoy. Also, the Air Force will be taking out the Russian radar-ocean-reconnaissance satellite on its next pass, about twelve hundred hours zulu tomorrow.”

“All right!” a destroyer captain observed.

“Gentlemen, we are delivering a total load of over two million tons of equipment, plus a complete armored division made up of reserve and National Guard formations. Not counting the materiel reinforcements, this is enough supplies to keep NATO in action for three weeks. This one goes through.

“Any questions? No? Then, good luck.”

The theater emptied, the officers filing past the armed guards onto the sunny street.

“Jerry?” Morris said quietly.

“Yes, Captain?” The pilot donned his aviator’s sunglasses.

“About last night—”

“Captain, last night we both had too much to drink, and to tell you the truth, I don’t remember all that much. Maybe six months from now we can decide what happened. You sleep well?”

“Almost twelve hours. My alarm clock didn’t go off.”

“Maybe you should get a new one.” They walked past the bar both had visited the night before. The captain and the pilot gave it a look, then laughed.

“Once more into the breach, dear friends!” Doug Perrin joined them.

“Just don’t give us any of this laying your ship alongside the enemy crap,” O’Malley suggested. “That ‘away boarders’ shit is dangerous.”

“Your job to keep the bastards away from us, Jerr-O. Up to it?”

“He’d better be,” Morris observed lightly. “I’d hate to think he’s *all* talk!”

“We got a real nice bunch here,” the pilot observed angrily. “Jeez, I fly up all on my own, find a damned submarine, *give* it to Doug here, and do I get any respect?”

“That’s the problem with aviators. You don’t tell them how great they are

every five minutes, they go and get depressed on you," Morris said with a smile. He was a different person from the one who had mumbled through dinner last night. "Anything you need that we might have, Doug?"

"Perhaps we might exchange some foodstuffs?"

"No problem. Send your supply officer over. I'm sure we can negotiate something." Morris checked his watch. "We don't sail for another three hours. Let's have a sandwich and talk over a few things. I got an idea for spoofing those Backfires that I want to try out on you . . ."

Three hours later, a pair of Moran harbor tugs eased the frigates away from the pier. *Reuben James* moved slowly, her turbine engines pushing her through the polluted water at a gentle six knots. O'Malley watched from the right seat of his helicopter, on alert for a possible Russian sub near the entrance to the harbor, though four Orion patrol aircraft were vigorously sanitizing the area. Probably the Victor they had killed two days before had been detailed to trail and report on the convoy, first to direct a Backfire raid, then to close and launch her own attack. The trailer was dead, but that did not mean that the sailing was a secret. New York was a city of eight million, and surely one of them was standing at his window with a pair of binoculars, cataloging the ship types and numbers. He or she would make an innocent telephone call, and the data would be in Moscow in a few hours. Other submarines would close on their expected track. As soon as they were outside of shore-based air cover, Soviet search aircraft would come looking, with missile-armed Backfires behind them.

So many ships, O'Malley thought. They passed a series of Ro/Ros, roll-on/roll-off container ships loaded with tanks, fighting vehicles, and the men of a whole armored division. Others were piled high with containers that could be loaded right onto trucks for dispatch to the front, their contents recorded on computer for rapid delivery to the proper destination. He thought about the news reports, the taped scenes of land combat in Germany. That was what this was all about. The Navy's mission: keep the sea-lanes open to deliver the tools those men in Germany needed. Get the ships across.

"How does she ride?" Calloway asked.

"Not too bad," Morris answered the reporter. "We have fin stabilizers. She doesn't roll very much. If you have any problem, our corpsman can probably come up with something. Don't be bashful about asking."

"I will try to keep out of your way."

Morris gave the man from Reuters a friendly nod. He'd arrived with only an hour's warning, but he seemed to be a pro, or at least experienced enough to have all his gear packed in one bag. He took the last available bunk in officers' country.

"Your admiral said that you're one of his best commanders."

"I guess we'll find that out," Morris said.

35

Time on Target

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

The first two days went well. The escort force sailed first, blasting with their sonars at the shallow coastal water for possible submarines and finding none. The merchant ships followed, forming slowly into eight columns of ten each. The twenty-knot convoy was in a hurry to deliver its goods. Covered by a massive umbrella of land-based aircraft, it pressed on through the first forty-eight hours with only minor zigzagging as it sailed past the coast of New England and Eastern Canada, Sable Island, and the Grand Banks. The easy part was behind them now. As they left coastal waters for the Atlantic Ocean proper, they entered the unknown territory.

"About filing my dispatches . . ." Calloway said to Morris.

"Twice a day you can use my satellite transmitter as long as it doesn't interfere with official traffic. You understand that your reports will be run through Norfolk for sensitive information?"

"Quite so. Captain, you may believe me when I say that as long as I'm here with you, I will reveal nothing that would endanger your ship! I had quite enough excitement this year in Moscow."

"What?" Morris turned and lowered his binoculars. Calloway explained what his spring had been like.

"Patrick Flynn, my opposite number from Associated Press, is aboard *Battleaxe.* Doubtless drinking beer," he concluded.

"So you were there when all this boiled up. Do *you* know why all this started?"

Calloway shook his head. "If I did, Captain, I'd have filed the story long ago."

A messenger appeared on the bridge wing with a clipboard. Morris took it, read through three messages, and signed for them.

"Something dramatic?" Calloway asked hopefully.

"Fleet weather-update and something about that Russian reconnaissance satellite. It comes overhead in another three hours. The Air Force is going to try and shoot it down before it gets to us, though. Nothing major. You're comfortable, I presume. Any problems?"

"None, Captain. Nothing like a nice sea voyage."

"True enough." Morris stuck his head into the pilothouse. "General Quarters, Air Action."

Morris led the reporter into the Combat Information Center, explaining that the drill he was about to see was to make sure his men could do everything properly even in the dark.

"One of those dispatches give you a warning?"

"No, but in six hours we'll be outside of land-based fighter cover. That means Ivan is going to come looking for us." *And it's going to get awfully lonely out here by ourselves,* Morris thought. He gave his men an hour's worth of drill. The CIC crew ran a pair of computer simulations. On the second one an enemy missile got through their defenses.

LANGLEY AIR FORCE BASE, VIRGINIA

The F-15 fighter rolled to a halt just outside the shelter building. The crew chief set the ladder next to the aircraft, and Major Nakamura climbed down, already looking aft at her scorched airplane. She walked over to examine the damage.

"Don't look bad, Major," the sergeant assured her. A fragment from the exploding rocket motor had drilled a hole the size of a beer can right through her left wing, missing a fuel tank by three inches. "I can fix that in a couple of hours."

"You all right?" the Lockheed engineer asked.

"It blew, fifty feet away, and it just blew the hell up. You were wrong, by the way. When they blow, it's pretty spectacular. Pieces all over the damned place. I was lucky I only caught one of them." It had scared the hell out of the pilot, but she'd then had an hour to recover. Now she was just mad.

"Sorry, Major. Wish I could say more than that."

"Just have to try again," Buns said, looking up at the sky through the hole. "When's the next window?"

"Eleven hours, sixteen minutes."

"That's it, then." She walked into the building, then upstairs to the pilots' lounge. There was carpeting on the walls of the building for noise absorption. It also prevented serious injury to the pilots' fists.

KIROVSK, R.S.F.S.R.

Unhampered, the Radar Ocean Reconnaissance Satellite continued its orbit, and on its next pass over the North Atlantic found itself looking down on a collection of nearly a hundred ships in even columns. This must be the convoy their intelligence reports had told them about, the Russian analysts decided—

and, they noted with satisfaction, it was out in the open, right where they could get at it.

Ninety minutes later, two regiments of missile-armed Backfire bombers, preceded by Bear-D search aircraft, lifted off the four airfields around Kirovsk, topped off their fuel tanks, and headed for the radar gap over Iceland.

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

"So this is the surprise you have in store for them?" Calloway asked. He tapped some symbols on the main tactical-display scope.

Morris nodded thoughtfully. "So far we've sent most of the convoys across under EMCON—that's emission control—with their radars blacked out to make them hard to find. This time we're doing something a little different. This is the display from the SPS-49 radar—"

"That black monster atop the pilothouse?"

"Right. These symbols are Tomcats from the carrier *America.* This is a KC-135 tanker, and this baby here is an E-2C Hawkeye radar bird. The Hawkeye's radar is shut down. When Ivan shows up, he'll have to close to see what's here."

"But he already knows," Calloway objected.

"No, he knows there's a convoy around here somewhere. That's not good enough to launch missiles. All he knows for sure is that there is one operating SPS-49 radar. He'll have to light off his own radar to see what's on the water. If Mr. Bear does that, we see him, and we'll have fighters on his ass so fast he'll never know what hit him."

"And if the Backfires don't come today?"

"Then we'll see them some other time. The Bears talk to submarines, too, Mr. Calloway. They are still worth killing."

ICELAND

It was the first time they'd been bored. Edwards and his party had been terrified often enough, but never bored. Now they had been in the same place for four complete days, and still they had no orders to move. They observed, and reported minor Russian activity, but without anything substantive to do, time was heavy on them.

"Lieutenant." Garcia pointed up. "I got airplanes heading south."

Edwards got out his binoculars. The sky was dotted with white, fleecy clouds. There were no contrails to be seen today, but—there! he saw a flash, a reflection off something. He strained his eyes to identify it.

"Nichols, what do you think?" He handed the glasses over.

"That's a Russian Backfire," Nichols said simply.

"You sure?"

"Quite sure, *Leftenant.* I've seen them before often enough."

"Get a count." Edwards unpacked his radio.

"I only see four. All heading south, sir."

"You're sure they're Backfires?" Edwards persisted.

"I am bloody sure, *Lef*tenant Edwards!" Nichols answered testily. He watched the officer turn on the radio.

"Beagle calling Doghouse, over." The communications station was a little slow today. It took three calls before they acknowledged.

"Doghouse, this is Beagle, and I have some information for you. We see Backfire-type bombers southbound over our position."

"How do you know they're Backfires?" Doghouse wanted to know.

"Because Sergeant Nichols of the Royal Marines says he's bloody sure they're Backfires. Four of them"—Nichols held up five fingers now —"correction five aircraft southbound."

"Roger, thank you, Beagle. Anything else happening?"

"Negative. How long do you expect us to sit on this hill, over?"

"We'll let you know. Patience, Beagle. We haven't forgotten you. Out."

NORTH ATLANTIC

Bears advanced in an oblique line, their crews scanning the air with their eyes and probing the radar and radio frequencies. Presently the leading Bear detected the emissions of a single American radar, and it took only a minute to identify it as an SPS-49 air-search model of the type used by Perry-class missile frigates. The technicians on board measured the signal's intensity and, plotting its position, judged that they were far outside the radar's detection range.

The raid commander riding in the third Bear received the information and compared it with his intelligence data for the convoy. The position was exactly in the middle of the circle he had drawn on his map. He was suspicious of things that were so exact. The convoy was taking a direct route to Europe? Why? Most convoys to date had taken a more evasive course, detouring far south to the Azores in order to force his aircraft to reach farther than they wanted—and thereby forcing the Backfires trailing the scouts to carry only one missile instead of two. Something was strange here. On his order, the patrol line reoriented itself to a north-south disposition and began reducing altitude to keep below the horizon of the American radar.

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

"How far can you see?" Calloway asked.

"Depends on the altitude and size of the target, and atmospheric conditions," Morris answered, staring down from his chair to the electronic displays. Two Navy Tomcats were ready for combat. "For the Bear, at thirty thousand feet or so, we can probably spot it about two hundred fifty miles away. But the lower he flies, the closer he can get. Radar can't see through the horizon."

"But flying low will cost him fuel."

Morris looked down at the reporter. "Those damned things carry enough fuel to stay up all week," he exaggerated.

"Message from LANTFLT, Captain." The communications officer handed the form over: REPORT POSSIBLE BACKFIRE RAID SOUTHBOUND OVER ICELAND 1017z. Morris handed the message to his tactical action officer, who immediately looked at the chart.

"Good news?" Calloway asked. He had better sense than to ask to see the dispatch.

"We may be seeing Backfire bombers in a little over two hours."

"Shooting for the convoy?"

"No, probably they'll want to shoot at us first. They have a good four days to blast the convoy, and getting the escorts out of the way makes that job a lot easier."

"Are you concerned?"

Morris smiled thinly. "Mr. Calloway, I'm always concerned."

The captain reflexively checked the various status boards. All his weapons and sensor systems were fully operational—so nice to have a brand-new ship! The threat board showed no known submarine activity in the immediate area, a datum to be taken with a considerable bit of skepticism. He could call General Quarters now, but much of his crew was at lunch. Better to have everyone fed and alert.

The damned waiting, Morris thought. He watched the displays in silence. The blips indicating friendly aircraft orbited slowly as their pilots waited too.

"More CAP coming up," an officer reported. Another pair of Tomcats, part of the combat air patrol, appeared on the scope. *America* had gotten the same raid warning. The carrier was two hundred miles away, westbound for Norfolk. The same was true of *Independence,* returning from the Azores. The carriers had been at sea since the war began, cruising back and forth to avoid the orbiting Soviet ocean-reconnaissance satellites. They had been able to provide antisubmarine protection for a number of convoys, though only at great hazard to the carriers themselves. Up to now, the American flattops had not been able to act as they were supposed to act. They were not yet offensive weapons. The fate of the *Nimitz* group had come as a bitter lesson. Morris lit another cigarette. Now he remembered why he'd quit in the first place. Too many of them burned his throat, destroyed his sense of taste, and made his eyes water. On the other hand, they did give him something to do while he waited.

NORTH ATLANTIC

The Bears were on a precise north-south line now centered on the position of the frigate's radar signals. The raid commander ordered them to turn west and reduce altitude. Two aircraft failed to acknowledge the order, and he had to repeat it.

Two hundred miles west of them, aboard the circling E-2C Hawkeye surveillance aircraft, a technician's head went up. He'd just heard someone speaking Russian; in code, but definitely Russian.

Within minutes, every ship in the escort force had the information, and they all came up with the same answer: the Backfires couldn't be here yet. These were Bears. Everyone wanted to kill the Bears. The carrier *America* started launching her fighters and additional radar aircraft. After all, the Russians could be looking for her.

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

"He's gotta be heading right for us," the tactical action officer said.

"That's the general idea," Morris agreed.

"How far?" Calloway asked.

"No way to know that. The Hawkeye copied a voice radio transmission. Probably it's fairly close, but freak atmospheric conditions can let you hear that sort of thing from half a world away. Mr. Lenner, let's go to battle stations for air action."

Five minutes later the frigate was ready.

NORTH ATLANTIC

"Good morning, Mr. Bear." The Tomcat pilot stared at his TV display tube. The Russian aircraft was about forty miles away, the sun glinting off its massive propellers. Deciding to close without using his radar for the moment, the fighter pilot advanced his throttles to 80-percent power and activated his missile controls. The head-on closure rate was over a thousand miles per hour, seventeen miles per minute.

Then: "Energize!" the pilot ordered, and instantly the radar intercept officer in the rear seat powered up the fighter's AWG-9 radar.

"We've got him," the RIO reported a moment later.

"Shoot!" Two missiles dropped free and accelerated to over three thousand miles per hour.

The Soviet electronics-warfare technician was trying to isolate the signature characteristics of the frigate's search radar when a beep sounded on a separate warning receiver. He turned to see what the noise was and went pale.

"Air-attack warning!" he shouted over the intercom.

Reacting at once, the pilot rolled the Bear left and dove for the surface of

the ocean, while aft the EW technician activated his protective jamming systems. However, the turn had masked the jammer pods from the incoming missiles.

"What's happening?" the raid commander demanded over the intercom.

"We have an interceptor radar on us," the technician replied, scared but cool. "Jamming pods are activated."

The raid commander turned to his communications man. "Get a warning out: enemy fighter activity this position."

But there wasn't time. The Phoenixes covered the distance in less than twenty seconds. The first went wild and missed, but the second locked on the diving bomber and blew its tail off. The Bear fell to the sea with as little grace as a dropped sheet of paper.

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

The radar showed the Tomcat, and they watched as it launched two missiles that immediately disappeared from sight, and then, silently, as the Tomcat continued east for thirty seconds. Then it turned around and headed back west.

"That, gentlemen, is a kill," Morris said. "Splash one Bear."

"How do you know?" Calloway asked.

"You think he would have turned back if he missed? And if it was anything but a Bear, he'd have broken radio silence. ESM, we copy any radio traffic from zero-eight-zero?"

The petty officer in the forward starboard corner of the compartment didn't look up. "No, Captain, not a peep."

"Damn," Morris said. "It works."

"And if the bugger didn't get a message out—" Calloway understood.

"We're the only ones who know. Maybe we can bushwhack the whole attack force." Morris stepped over to the display screen. The *America's* fighters were now all in the air, seventy miles south of the convoy. He looked at the bulkhead clock: the Backfires were about forty minutes away. He lifted a phone. "Bridge, Combat. Signal *Battleaxe* to close in."

Within seconds, *Battleaxe* turned hard a'port and headed west toward *Reuben James.* One new thing had already worked today, Morris thought. Why not another?

"Stand by to launch helo," he ordered.

O'Malley was sitting in his cockpit reading a magazine, or at least letting his eyes scan the pictures while his mind struggled to detach itself from what was going on around him. The announcement over the loudspeaker tore him away from Miss July. Immediately, Ensign Ralston began the engine start sequence while O'Malley scanned the trouble board for any mechanical problems, then looked out the door to be sure that the deck crewmen were clear.

"What are we supposed to be doing, Commander?" the systems operator inquired.

"We're supposed to be missile bait, Willy," O'Malley replied amiably, and lifted off.

NORTH ATLANTIC

The southernmost Bear was within sixty miles of the convoy, but didn't yet know it, nor did the Americans, since he was below the horizon from *Reuben James's* radar. The Bear's pilot did know that it was about time for the aircraft to climb and switch on their own search radars. But word hadn't come yet from the raid commander. Though there was no indication of trouble, the pilot was worried. His instinct told him something strange was happening. One of the Bears that had disappeared last week reported tracking a single American frigate radar—nothing more. *Just like now* . . . The raid commander then had aborted the Backfire mission for fear of enemy fighter activity, only to be dressed down for supposed cowardice. As was so often the case in combat, the only data available were negative. They knew that four Bears had not returned. He knew that his raid commander had not yet given the expected order. He knew there had not been any positive sign of trouble. He also knew that he was not happy.

"Estimated distance to that American frigate?" he asked over his intercom.

"One hundred thirty kilometers," the navigator answered.

Maintain radio silence, the pilot told himself. *Those are the orders* . . .

"Screw the orders!" he said aloud. The pilot reached down and flipped on his radio. "Gull Two to Gull One, over." Nothing. He repeated the call twice more.

Lots of radio receivers heard that, and in less than a minute the Bear's position was plotted, forty miles southeast of the convoy. A Tomcat dove after the contact.

* * *

The raid commander didn't answer . . . he would have answered, the pilot told himself. He would have answered. The Backfires should now be less than two hundred kilometers away. *What are we leading them into?*

"Activate the radar!" he ordered.

Every screen ship detected the distinctive emissions from the Big Bulge radar. The nearest SAM-equipped ship, the frigate Groves, immediately energized her missile radars and fired a surface-to-air missile at the oncoming Bear—but the Tomcat fighter that was also racing toward the Bear was too close. The frigate shut down her tracking radar, and the SMI missile lost radar lock and self-destructed automatically.

Aboard the Bear the warnings came back to back, first surface-to-air missile alarm, then an air-intercept radar—and then the radar operator acquired the convoy.

"Many ships to the northwest." The radar operator passed the information to the navigator, who worked out a position report for the Backfires. The Bear shut down her radar and dove while the communications officer broadcast his sighting report. And then everyone's radars lit up.

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

"There are the Backfires," the tactical action officer said as the symbols appeared on the scope. "Bearing zero-four-one, range one hundred eighty miles."

On the bridge the executive officer was as nervous as he would ever get. In addition to the inbound bomber raid, he was now conning his ship exactly fifty feet from the side of HMS *Battleaxe.* The ships were so close together that on a radarscope they'd appear as a single target. Five miles away'Malley and the helicopter from *Battleaxe* were also flying close formation over the ocean at twenty knots. Each had its blip-enhance transponder turned on. Ordinarily too small to register on this sort of radar, the helicopters would now appear to be a ship, something worthy of a missile attack.

NORTH ATLANTIC

The air action now had all the elegance of a saloon fight. The Tomcats on combat air patrol near the convoy flew toward the three Bears, the first of which already had a missile streaking toward it. The other two had not yet detected the convoy, and never would, as they ran due east to get away. It was a vain attempt. Propeller-driven patrol bombers cannot run from supersonic fighters.

Gull Two died first. The pilot managed to get his contact report out and acknowledged before a pair of Sparrow missiles exploded close aboard, setting his wing afire. He ordered his men to bail out, kept the aircraft level so they could, and a minute later struggled out of his seat and jumped through the escape hatch in the floor. The Bear exploded five seconds after he opened his parachute. As the pilot watched his aircraft fireball into the sea, he wondered if he'd drown.

Above him a squadron of Tomcats headed toward the Backfires, and the race was to see who got into missile-firing position first. The Soviet bombers climbed steeply on afterburner, activating their own look-down radars to find targets for their missiles. Their orders were to locate and kill escorts, and they

found what they were looking for thirty miles from the body of the convoy: two blips. The large blip in the rear drew six shots. The smaller one five miles away drew four.

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

"We have a multiregiment Backfire raid in progress now at forty-five degrees north, forty-nine west." Toland held the Red Rocket telex in his hand.

"What does COMEASTLANT have to say about it?"

"He's probably going over this one now. You ready?" he asked the fighter pilot.

"Damned right I'm ready!"

The teleprinter in the corner of the room started chattering: INITIATE OPERATION DOOLITTLE.

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

"Vampire, vampire! We have incoming missiles."

Here we go again, Morris thought. The tactical display was more modern than what he'd had on *Pharris*—each of the incoming missiles was marked with a velocity vector that indicated speed and direction. They were coming in low.

Morris lifted his phone. "Bridge, Combat. Execute separation maneuver."

"Bridge, aye. *Separating now,"* Ernst said. "Crash stop! All back emergency!"

The helmsman pulled the throttle control back, then abruptly reversed the pitch of the propeller blades, throwing the ship from ahead to full astern. *Reuben James* slowed so rapidly that men had to brace themselves, and *Battleaxe* forged ahead, accelerating to twenty-five knots. As soon as it was safe, the British frigate turned hard to port, and *Reuben James* went to ahead full and turned sharply to starboard.

Any Soviet radar operator who had lingered behind would have been impressed by the deception. The oncoming AS-4 missiles had been targeted on a single blip. Now there were two, and they were separating. The missiles divided their attention evenly, with three opting for either target.

Morris watched his display intently. The distance between his ship and his companion was widening rapidly.

"Missiles are tracking us!" the ESM operator said loudly. "We have multiple missile seeker heads tracking us."

"Right full rudder, reverse course. Fire off chaff rockets!"

Everyone in the Combat Information Center jumped as four canisters exploded directly overhead, filling the air with aluminum foil and creating a radar target for the missiles to track while the frigate heeled violently to port

as she turned. Her forward missile launcher turned around with her, a SAM already assigned to the first incoming Russian missile. The frigate righted herself on a northerly course, three miles behind *Battleaxe.*

"Here we go," the weapons officer said. The solution light blinked on the fire-control console.

The first of the white-painted SMI missiles shot into the sky. It had scarcely cleared the launch rail when the launcher twisted in two dimensions and accepted another missile from the circular magazine, then turned and elevated again, firing seven seconds after the first missile was launched, then repeated the cycle twice more.

"That's it!" O'Malley said when he saw the first smoke trail. He punched his finger on the blip-enhance button. "Hatchet, shut down your emitter and break left!" Both helicopters went to full power and ran away. Four missiles suddenly had no targets. They kept heading west to look for more, but there were none to be found.

"More chaff," Morris ordered, watching the electronic traces of friendly and unfriendly missiles converge. The CIC shook again as another cloud of aluminum blasted into the air, and the wind carried it toward the incoming missiles.

"We still have missiles tracking us!"

"Hit!" the weapons officer exclaimed. The first missile disappeared from the scope, intercepted sixteen miles out, but the second Soviet missile kept coming. The first SAM sent after it missed, exploding harmlessly behind it, and then the second one missed, too. Another SAM was fired. Range was down to six miles. Five. Four. Three.

"Hit! One missile left—veering off. Going after the chaff! Passing aft!"

The missile struck the water two thousand yards from *Reuben James.* Even at that distance the noise was impressive. It was followed by total silence in the CIC. Men kept staring at their instruments, looking for additional missiles, and it took several seconds before they were satisfied that there were no more. One by one the sailors looked at their comrades and began to breathe again.

"What modern combat lacks in humanity," Calloway observed, "it more than makes up for in intensity."

Morris leaned back in his chair. "Or something like that. What's the story on *Battleaxe?"*

"Still on radar, sir," the tactical action officer replied. Morris lifted the radiotelephone.

"Bravo, this is Romeo. Do you read, over."

"I do believe we're still alive." Perrin was examining his tactical display and shaking his head in amazement.

"Any damage?"

"None. Hatchet is checking in. He's all right, too. Remarkable," Captain Perrin said. "Any further inbound traffic? We show none."

"Negative. The Tomcats chased the Backfires off the scope. Let's get reformed."

"Roger, Romeo."

Morris hung up and looked around the CIC. “Well done, people.”

The sailors in the room looked at each other, and presently some grins started showing. But they didn’t last long.

The TAO looked up. “For your information, Captain, Ivan fired a quarter of his missiles at us. So far as I can tell, the Tomcats got about six, and *Bunker Hill* got most of the rest . . . but we show one frigate hit, and three merchies. The fighters are returning.” He kept his voice neutral. “They report zero kills on the Backfire force.”

“Damn!” Morris said. The trap had failed—and he didn’t know why.

He had no idea that Stornoway considered it a success.

STORNOWAY, SCOTLAND

The key to the operation, as with all military operations, was communications, and not enough time had been spent setting the lines up on this one to suit Toland. The *America’s* radar aircraft tracked the Backfires all the way off the scope. The data from the aircraft was linked to the carrier, thence by satellite to Norfolk, and by satellite again to Northwood. His data came by land line from Royal Navy headquarters. The most important NATO mission of the war depended on transistors and telephone wire more than the weapons that were to be employed.

“Okay, their last course was zero-two-nine, speed six hundred ten knots.”

“That puts them over Iceland’s north coast in two hours, seventeen minutes. How much time did they have on burner?” Commander Winters asked.

“About five, according to *America.”* Toland frowned. This was pretty thin intelligence information.

“Any way you cut it, their fuel reserves are thinned down some . . . Okay. Three aircraft, eighty miles apart.” He looked over at the newest satellite weather photo. “Good visibility. We’ll spot ’em. Whoever does, follows—the other planes come right back home.”

“Good luck, Commander.”

NORTH ATLANTIC

The three Tomcats climbed slowly to altitude on a course northwest from Stornoway, and at thirty-five thousand feet linked up with their tankers. Several hundred miles away the Backfire crews did much the same thing. The presence of American fighters over the convoy in large numbers had come as a rude shock, but time and distance had been in their favor, and they’d managed to escape without loss this time. The crew of each aircraft talked among themselves, their emotions released by the climax of yet another dangerous mission. They discussed the claims they’d make on returning to Kirovsk, based

on a straightforward mathematical formula. One missile in three was judged to have hit a target, even accounting for enemy SAM fire. Today SAM opposition had been light—though none had lingered to evaluate it properly. By consensus they would claim sixteen ship kills, and claim both the outside sonar pickets that their comrades in submarines were having such a bad time with. The flight crews relaxed and sipped tea from thermos jugs as they contemplated their next visit to the eighty-ship convoy.

The Tomcats separated as they spotted the mountains of Iceland. No radio signals were passed; the flyers exchanged hand signals before breaking off on their patrol stations. They knew the radars couldn't reach them there. Commander Winters checked his watch. The Backfires should be here in about thirty minutes.

"Such a beautiful island," the Backfire pilot observed to his copilot.

"Pretty to look at, living there I am not so certain about. I wonder if the women are as pretty as I have heard? One day we must have 'mechanical difficulties.' Then we could land there and find out."

"We must get you married, Volodya."

The copilot laughed. "So many tears would be shed! How can I deny myself to the women of the world?"

The pilot punched up his radio. "Keflavik, this is Sea Eagle Two-Six, status check."

"Sea Eagle, we show no contacts except for your group. Count is correct. IFF transponders show normal."

"Acknowledged. Out." The pilot switched off. "So, Volodya, our friends are still there. Lonely place."

"If there are women about, and you are kulturny, you need never be lonely." Another voice came over the intercom.

"Will somebody shut that horny bastard up!" the navigator suggested.

"Studying to be a political officer?" the copilot inquired. "How long to home?"

"Two hours twenty-five minutes."

The Backfire continued northeast at six hundred knots as it passed over the desolate center of the island.

"Tallyho!" the pilot said quietly. "One o'clock and low." The Tomcat's on-board television system showed the distinctive shape of the Russian bomber. *Say what you want about the Russians,* Winters thought, *they do build 'em pretty.*

He turned the aircraft, which took his nose-mounted camera off the target, but his back-seat officer put his binoculars on the Backfire and soon spotted two more flying in a loose formation. As expected, their course was northeast, and they were cruising at about thirty thousand feet. Winters looked for a big cloud to hide in and found one. Visibility dropped to a few yards. *There could be another Backfire out there,* Winters thought, *and maybe he likes flying in clouds, too. That could really ruin this mission.*

He ran out of cloud a moment later, banked his fighter hard, and ducked back inside, his mind computing time and distance. *The Backfires should all be*

past now. He pulled back on his stick and popped out of the cloud top.

"There they be," the back-seater said first. "Heads up! I see more of 'em at three o'clock."

The pilot vanished back into the cloud for another ten minutes. Finally: "Nothing to the south of us. They should all be past by now, don't you think?"

"Yeah, let's go looking."

One terrifying minute later, Winters was wondering if he hadn't let them get too far ahead, as his TV system swept across the sky and found nothing. Patience, he told himself, and increased his speed to six hundred ninety knots. Five minutes later, a dot appeared on his screen. It grew to three dots. He estimated he was forty miles behind the Backfires, and with the sun at his back, there was no way they could spot him. His back-seater made a check of the radar warning receiver and the air behind them for additional aircraft, a procedure repeated three times a minute. If an American fighter could be out here, why not a Russian?

The pilot watched the numbers click off on his inertial navigation system, kept an eye on fuel, and watched forward for any change in the Russian bomber formation. It was both exciting and boring. He knew the significance of what he was doing, but the actual *doing* was no more thrilling than driving a 747 from New York to L.A. For over an hour they flew, covering the seven hundred miles between Iceland and the Norwegian coast.

"Here's where it gets cute," the back-seater said. "Air-search radar ahead, looks like Andøya. Still over a hundred miles away, they'll probably have us in two or three minutes."

"That's nice." Where there was air-search radar, there would be fighters. "Got their position worked out?"

"Yep."

"Start transmitting." Winters turned the aircraft and headed back out to sea.

Two hundred miles away, a circling British Nimrod receipted the signal and retransmitted to a communications satellite.

NORTHWOOD, ENGLAND

Admiral Beattie was trying to remain calm, but it didn't come easily to a man whose nerves had been stretched and abused by crisis after crisis since the war began. Doolittle was his baby. For the past two hours, he'd waited for word from the Tomcat. Two had returned without sighting the Russians. One had not. Was it tracking them as planned or had it merely fallen into the sea?

The printer in the corner of the communications room began to make the screeing sound that the Admiral had learned to hate: EYEBALLS REPORTS HARES AT 69/20N, 15/45E AT 1543z COURSE 021 SPEED 580 KTS ALT 30.

Beattie tore the page off and handed it to his air-operations officer. "That puts them on the ground in thirty-seven minutes. Assuming it's the last group, and a fifteen-minute spread, the first bombers will be landing in twenty-two

minutes."

"Fifteen minutes from now, then?"

"Yes, Admiral."

"Get the order out!"

In thirty seconds half a dozen separate satellite channels began transmitting the same message.

USS *CHICAGO*

The three American submarines had lain on the bottom of the Barents Sea near the Russian coastline—so near, it was only one hundred seventy-four feet of water—for what seemed like half a lifetime, before finally receiving the signal to move south. McCafferty smiled with relief. The three British submarines, including HMS Torbay, had already done their job. They had sneaked up on a Russian frigate and four patrol boats patrolling the Russian/Norwegian coastline and attacked with torpedoes. The Russians could only assume a major effort was under way to penetrate their patrol barrier, and had sent their antisub patrol force west to meet it.

Leaving the way clear for *Chicago* and her mates. He hoped.

As they closed in, his electronics technicians plotted and re-plotted their bearings. They had to be in exactly the right place when they fired their missiles.

"How long before we shoot?" the XO asked.

"They'll let us know," McCafferty said.

And then, with the chatter of the message from Northwood, they did know.

They would launch at 1602 Zulu Time.

"Up scope." McCafferty spun the instrument around. A rainstorm overhead drove four-foot waves.

"Looks clear to me," the XO said, watching the TV display.

The captain slapped the handles up on the scope. It headed down into its well. "ESM?"

"Lots of radar stuff, Cap'n," the technician replied. "I show ten different transmitters in operation."

McCafferty inspected the Tomahawk weapons status board on the starboard side of the attack center. His torpedo tubes were loaded with two Mark-48s and two Harpoon missiles. The clock ticked away toward 1602.

"Commence launch sequence."

Toggle switches were thrown, and the weapons status lights blinked red; the captain and the weapons officer inserted their keys in the panel, and turned them; the petty officer on the weapons board turned the firing handle to the left—and the arming process was complete. Forward, in the bow of the submarine, the guidance systems of twelve Tomahawk cruise missiles were fully activated. On-board computers were told where their flight would begin. They already knew where it was supposed to end.

"Initiate launch," McCafferty ordered.

Ametist was not part of the regular Soviet Navy. Principally concerned with security operations, this Grisha-class patrol frigate was manned by a KGB crew, and her captain had spent the last twelve hours sprinting and drifting, dipping his helicopter-type sonar and listening in the American fashion rather than the Russian. With her diesel engines shut down, she made no noise at all, and her short profile was hard to spot from more than a mile away. She had not heard the American submarines approach.

The first Tomahawk broke the surface of the Barents Sea at 16:01:58, two thousand yards from the Russian frigate. The lookout took a second or two to react. As he saw the cylindrical shape rise on its solid-rocket booster and arc southwest, an icy lead ball materialized in his stomach.

"Captain! Missile launch to starboard!"

The captain raced out onto the bridge wing and looked on in amazement as a second missile broke the surface, then he leaped back into the pilothouse.

"Battle stations! Radio room, call Fleet HQ, tell them enemy missiles launching from grid square 451/679—now! All ahead full! Rudder right!"

The frigate's diesel engines roared into life.

"What in hell is that?" the sonar chief asked. His submarine shuddered every four seconds with the missile launches, but—"Conn, sonar, we have a contact bearing zero-nine-eight. Diesel—surface ship, sounds like a Grisha, and he's close, sir!"

"Up scope!" McCafferty whirled the periscope around and snapped the handle to full power. He saw the Russian frigate turning hard. "Snap shot! Set it up! Surface target bearing zero-nine-seven, range"—he worked the stademeter control—"one six hundred, course, shit! he's turning away. Call it zero-nine-zero, speed twenty." Too close for a missile shot, they had to engage with torpedoes. "Down scope!"

The fire-control man tapped the numbers into the computer. The computer needed eleven seconds to digest the information. "Set! Ready for tubes one and three."

"Flooding tubes, outer doors open—ready!" the XO said.

"Match generated bearings and *shoot!"*

"Fire one, fire three." The executive officer struggled with his emotions and won. Where had that Grisha come from? "Reload with 48s!"

"Last bird away!" the missile technician announced. "Securing from launch."

"Left full rudder!"

Ametist never saw the missiles launching behind her. The men were too busy racing to stations, while her captain rang up full power and the ship's weapons officer ran up in his shorts to work the rocket launchers. They didn't need sonar for this; they could see all too well where the submarine was—firing missiles at the *Motherland!*

"Fire when ready!" the captain yelled.

The lieutenant's thumb came down on the firing key. Twelve antisubmarine rockets arched through the air.

"Ametist," the radio squawked. "Repeat your message—what missiles? What *kind* of missiles!"

USS Providence discharged her last missile just as the frigate fired at her. The captain ordered flank speed and a radical turn even as the rockets tipped over and began to fall toward his submarine. They fell in a wide circular pattern designed to cover the maximum possible area, two exploding within one hundred yards, close enough to startle but not to damage. The last one hit the water directly over the submarine's sail. A second later, the forty-six-pound warhead exploded.

Ametist's captain ignored the radio while he tried to decide if his first salvo had hit the target or not. The last rocket had exploded faster than the others. He was about to give the order to fire again when the sonar officer reported two objects approaching from aft, and he shouted rudder orders. The ship was already at full speed as the radio speaker continued to scream at him.

"Both fish have acquired the target!"

"Up scope!" McCafferty let it go all the way up before pulling the handles down. At full magnification the Grisha nearly filled the lens, and then both fish hit her port side and the thousand-ton patrol frigate disintegrated before his eyes. He turned completely around, sweeping the horizon to check for additional enemy ships. "Okay, it's clear."

"That won't last very long. He was shooting at *Providence,* sir."

"Sonar, what do you have on zero-nine-zero?" McCafferty asked.

"Lotsa noise from the fish, sir, but I think we have blowing air at zero-nine-eight."

"Get us over there." McCafferty kept the periscope up as the XO conned the sub toward *Providence.* The Grisha was well and truly destroyed. Together the torpedoes carried nearly fifteen hundred pounds of high explosives. He saw two life rafts that had inflated automatically on hitting the water, but no men.

"Boston is calling on the gertrude, skipper. They want to know what the hell happened."

"Tell 'em." The captain adjusted the periscope slightly. "Okay, there she is, she's surfacing—holy shit!"

The submarine's sail was wrecked, the after third of it completely gone, and the rest shredded. One diving plane hung down like the wing of a crippled bird, and the periscopes and masts housed in the structure were bent into the shape of a modernistic sculpture.

"Try to raise *Providence* on the gertrude."

Sixty Tomahawk missiles were now in the air. On leaving the water, solid-fuel rockets had boosted them to an altitude of one thousand feet, where their wings and jet-engine air inlets had deployed. As soon as their jet engines had begun to function, the Tomahawks began a shallow descent that ended thirty feet above the ground. On-board radar systems scanned ahead to keep the missiles close to the ground, and to match the terrain with map coordinates

stored in their computer memories. Six separate Soviet radars detected the missiles' boost phase, then lost them as they went low.

The Russian technicians whose job it was to watch for a possible nuclear attack against their homeland were every bit as tense as their Western counterparts, and the weeks of sustained conventional conflict, coupled with continuous maximum-alert status, had frayed nerves to the breaking point. As soon as the Tomahawks had been detected rising from the sea, a ballistic-missile attack warning had flashed to Moscow. Ametist's visual missile warning arrived at naval headquarters in Severomorsk almost as fast, and a THUNDERBOLT alert sent immediately, the code-word prefix guaranteeing instant passage to the Ministry of Defense. Launch authority for the antiballistic missiles deployed around Moscow was automatically released to the battery commanders, and though it was several minutes before radar officers were able to confirm to Moscow's satisfaction that the missiles had dropped off their scopes and were not on ballistic trajectories, defense units stayed on alert, and all over northern Russia air-defense interceptors scrambled.

The missiles could not have cared about the furor they had caused. At this point, the Russian coast was composed of rocky bluffs and cliffs that gave way to tundra, the flat marsh of northern climes. It was ideal terrain for the cruise missiles, which settled down to a flight path scant feet over the grassy swamps at a speed of five hundred knots. Each flew over Lake Babozero, their first navigational reference point, and there their flight paths diverged.

The Soviet fighters now lifting off the ground had little idea what they were after. Radar information gave the course and speed of the targets, but if they were cruise missiles, they could reach as far as the Black Sea coast. They could even be targeted on Moscow and be flying a deceptive course far off the direct path to the Soviet capital. On orders from their ground controllers, the interceptors arrayed themselves south of the White Sea, and switched on their look-down radars to see if they could spot the missiles crossing the flat surface.

But they weren't going to Moscow. Dodging between the occasional hills, the missiles flew on a bearing of two-one-three until they reached the scrub pine forest. One by one they banked hard to the right and changed course to two-nine-zero. One missile went out of control and fell to the earth, another failed to make the turn and went south. The rest continued to their targets.

SEA EAGLE TWO-SIX

The last Backfire bomber circled Umbozero-South, waiting to land. The pilot checked his fuel. About thirty minutes left, there was not that much of a hurry. For security reasons the three regiments were divided among four airfields clustered south of the mining city of Kirovsk. The tall hills around the town held powerful radars and mobile SAM batteries to stave off a NATO air attack. Most of the smelters were still operating, the pilot saw, the smoke

rising from the many tall chimneys.

"Sea Eagle Two-Six, you are cleared to land," the tower said finally.

"Who will it be tonight, Volodya?"

"Twenty degrees of flaps. Air speed two hundred. Landing gear is down and locked. Irina Petrovna, I think. The tall, skinny one at the telephone exchange."

"What's that?" the pilot asked. A small white object suddenly appeared over the runway in front of him.

The first of twelve Tomahawk missiles assigned to Umbozero-South cut across the runway at a shallow angle, then the blunt nose cover sprang off the airframe, and several hundred small bomblets began to sprinkle over the area. Seventeen Backfires were already on the ground. Ten were being refueled from trucks in the open, the others were armed and ready for another mission, dispersed in concrete revetments. Each bomblet was the equivalent of a mortar shell. The Tomahawk dropped its complete load, then climbed straight up, stalled, and crashed back to earth, adding its own fuel load to the destruction. A ready-force Backfire went first. Two bomblets fell on its wing and the bomber fireballed into the sky.

The pilot of Two-Six advanced his throttles and climbed out of the landing pattern, watching in horror as ten bombers exploded before his eyes and telltale puffs of smoke told him of less serious damage to many others. In two minutes, it was over. Crash trucks raced like toys along the concrete as men played fire hoses on the burning trucks and aircraft. The pilot headed north for his alternate field and saw smoke rising there also.

"Fifteen minutes' fuel. You'd better find us a place fast," Volodya warned. They turned left for Kirovsk-South and the same story was repeated. The attack had been timed for the missiles to hit all four targets simultaneously.

"Afrikanda, this is Sea Eagle Two-Six. We are low on fuel and need to land immediately. Can you take us?"

"Affirmative, Two-Six. Runway is clear. Wind is two-six-five at twenty."

"Very well, we're coming in. Out." The pilot turned. "What the hell was that?" he asked Volodya.

USS *CHICAGO*

"Communications is gone, fire-control is gone, fairwater planes gone. We stopped the leaks. Engines are okay, we can steam," the skipper of USS *Providence* said over the gertrude.

"Very well. Stand by." *Boston* was also alongside. "Todd, this is Danny. What do you think?"

"She won't make it out alone. I suggest we send the rest back out. You and me escort her."

"Agreed. You follow 'em out. We'll try to clear datum as quick as we can."

"Good luck, Danny." *Boston* raised her radio whip and made a quick

transmission. A minute later *Chicago*'s sonar showed the noise of the other submarines racing north.

"Providence, recommend you come to course zero-one-five and go as fast as you can. We'll cover your tail. *Boston* will rendezvous later and we'll both escort you to the pack."

"You can't risk it, we can—"

"Move your fucking boat!" McCafferty shouted into the microphone. He was exactly three months senior in rank to his counterpart on *Providence.* Presently the wounded submarine dived and headed northeast at fifteen knots. Her damaged sail structure sounded like a junk wagon in the waterflow, but there was nothing they could do about it. If the submarines were to have any chance of survival, they had to put as much distance between themselves and the firing point as they could.

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

Mikhail Sergetov looked around at a group of men still pale at what might have been.

"Comrade Defense Minister," the General Secretary said. "Can you tell us what has happened?"

"It would seem that submarines launched a number of cruise missiles at some of our northern airfields. Their aim was evidently to destroy a number of our Backfire bombers. How successful they were I do not yet know."

"Where did they launch their missiles from?" Pyotr Bromkovskiy asked.

"East of Murmansk, less than thirty kilometers from our coast. A frigate saw and reported the launch, then went off the air. We have aircraft searching for him now."

"How the hell did he get there! If that submarine had launched ballistic missiles at us," Bromkovskiy demanded, "how much warning would we have had?"

"Six to seven minutes."

"Wonderful! We cannot react that fast. How can you let them get so close!"

"They won't get out, Petya, I promise you that!" the Defense Minister replied heatedly.

The General Secretary leaned forward. "You will see to it that this can never happen again!"

"While we are all here, Comrades," Sergetov spoke up. "Can the Comrade Defense Minister review overnight developments on the German Front?"

"NATO forces are strained to the breaking point. As the KGB has told us, their supplies are critically low, and with the diplomatic developments of the past few days, I think we may safely assume that NATO is on the verge of political disintegration. All we have to do is keep the pressure on, and they must collapse!"

"But we are running out of fuel also!" Bromkovskiy said. "The offer the Germans have given us is a reasonable one."

“No.” The Foreign Minister shook his head emphatically. “This gives us nothing.”

“It gives us peace, Comrade,” Bromkovskiy said quietly. “If we continue—consider, my friends, consider what we were all thinking a few hours ago when the rocket warning came in.”

For the first time, Sergetov realized, the old man had made a point they all agreed with. After weeks and months of promises and plans and assurances on how things could be kept under control, that one false alarm had forced them to look at what lay over the edge of the abyss. For ten minutes they feared that control had been lost, and all the Defense Minister’s bluster could not make them forget that.

After a moment of consideration, the General Secretary spoke. “Our representatives are meeting with the Germans in a few hours. The Foreign Minister will report to us tomorrow on the substance of their new offer.”

On that note the session ended. Sergetov tucked his notes in his leather briefcase, left the room alone, and walked downstairs to his official car. A junior aide held the door open when a voice called.

“Mikhail Eduardovich, may I ride with you? My car has broken down.” It was Boris Kosov, chairman of the Committee for State Security, the KGB.

36

Shoot-out at 31 West!

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

"Shall we take a drive today, Mikhail Eduardovich? Perhaps we can talk?" Sergetov's blood chilled, though he did not let it show. Was it possible for the Chief of the KGB *not* to look sinister? he wondered. From Leningrad, like Sergetov, Kosov was a short, rotund man who had taken over the KGB after running the Central Committee's shadowy "General Department." He had a jolly laugh when he wanted to, and in another guise could be the personification of Grandfather Frost, the State's acceptable version of Santa Claus. But he was not in another guise now.

"Certainly, Boris Georgiyevich," Sergetov said, and pointed at his driver. "You may speak freely. Vitaly is a good man."

"I know it," Kosov replied. "He's worked for us the last ten years." Sergetov only had to watch the back of his driver's neck to know that Kosov spoke the truth.

"So what shall we talk about?"

The Director of the KGB reached into his briefcase and came out with a device about the size of a paperback book. He flipped a switch and it gave off an unpleasant buzz.

"A clever new device made in the Netherlands," he explained. "It gives off a noise that renders most microphones useless. Something to do with harmonics, my people tell me." Then his manner changed abruptly.

"Mikhail Eduardovich, do you know the significance of the American attack on our airfields?"

"A troublesome development to be sure, but—"

"I thought not. Several NATO convoys are at sea. A major one left New York several days ago. It carries two million tons of essential war materiel, plus a complete American division, to Europe. In destroying a number of our bombers, NATO has significantly reduced our ability to deal with the convoys. They have also cleared the way for direct attacks against Soviet soil."

"But Iceland—"

"Has been neutralized." Kosov explained what had happened to the Soviet fighters at Keflavik.

"You're telling me the war goes badly? Then why is Germany making

overtures for peace?"

"Yes, that is a very good question."

"If you have suspicions, Comrade Director, you should not bring them to me!"

"I will tell you a story. Back in January when I had my bypass surgery, day-to-day control of KGB passed to the First Deputy Chairman, Josef Larionov. Have you met little Josef?" Kosov asked.

"No, he never took your place at Politburo meetings—what about the Defense Council?" Sergetov's head snapped around. "They did not consult you? You were recovering then."

"An exaggeration. I was quite ill for two weeks, but naturally this information was kept quiet. It took another month before I was back working full time. The members of the Defense Council had no wish to impede my recovery, and so young, ambitious Josef was called in to give KGB's official intelligence assessment. As you might imagine, we have many schools of thought in the intelligence services—it is not like your precious engineering where all things are broken into neat little numbers and graphs. We have to look inside the heads of men who often as not do not themselves know what they think on an issue. Sometimes I wonder why we do not employ gypsy fortune-tellers . . . but I digress.

"KGB maintains what we call the Strategic Intelligence Estimate. This is a document updated on a daily basis which gives our assessment of the political and military strength of our adversaries. Because of the nature of our work, and because of serious mistakes made in the past, we have three assessment teams who make the estimate: Best Case, Worst Case, and Middle Case. The terms are self-explanatory, are they not? When we make a presentation to the Politburo, we generally use the Middle Case estimate, and for the obvious reasons we annotate our estimates with data from the other two."

"So when he was called in to give his assessment to the Politburo—"

"Yes. Young Josef, the ambitious little bastard who wants my job as a wolf wants a sheep, was clever enough to bring all three with him. When he saw what they wanted, he gave them what they wanted."

"But when you returned, why didn't you correct the mistake?"

Kosov gave his companion an ironic smile. "Misha, Misha, sometimes you can be most engagingly naive. I should have killed the son of a bitch, but this was not possible. Josef suffers from poor health, though he is not aware of it. The time is not yet right," Kosov said, as though discussing a vacation. "KGB is split into several factions at the moment. Josef controls one. I control another. Mine is larger, but not decisively so. He has the ear of the General Secretary and the Defense Minister. I am a sick old man—they have told me this. Except for the war I would have been replaced already."

"But he lied to the Politburo!" Sergetov nearly shouted.

"Not at all. You think Josef is foolish? He handed over an official KGB intelligence estimate drawn up under my chairmanship, by my department heads."

Why is he telling me all this? He fears losing his post, and he wants support with other Politburo members. Is that all?

"You're telling me that this is all a mistake."

"Exactly," Kosov answered. "Bad luck and poor judgment in our oil industry —not *your* fault, of course. Add some fear in the hearts of our Party hierarchy, some ambition in one of my subordinates, the Defense Minister's sense of importance, and outright stupidity on the part of the West; and here we are today."

"So, what do you think we should do?" Sergetov asked warily.

"Nothing. I ask that you keep in mind, however, that the next week will probably decide the outcome of our war. Ah!" he exclaimed. "Look, my car has been repaired. You may pull over here, Vitaly. Thank you for the ride, Misha. Good day." Kosov retrieved his jamming device and stepped out of the car.

Mikhail Eduardovich Sergetov watched the KGB limousine pull away and disappear around the corner. He had played many power games in his life. Sergetov's climb up the Party ladder had been more than an exercise in efficiency. Men had stood in his way, and needed brushing aside. Promising careers had been broken so that he could sit in this Zil automobile and aspire to real power in his country. But never had the game been this dangerous. He didn't know the rules, was not sure what Kosov was really up to. Was his story even true? Might he be trying to cover his own flanks for errors he had made and blame it all on Josef Larionov? Sergetov could not recall ever meeting the First Deputy Chairman.

"Straight to the office, Vitaly," Sergetov ordered. He was too deep in thought to worry about his driver's other activities.

NORTHWOOD, ENGLAND

Toland scanned the satellite photographs with great interest. The KH-11 satellite had passed over Kirovsk four hours after the missile attack and the signals sent by real-time link to the NATO command center. There were three frames for each of the Backfire bases. The intelligence officer took out a pad and started his tally, commanding himself to be conservative. The only aircraft he counted as destroyed were those with large pieces broken or burned off.

"We figured a total force of about eighty-five aircraft. Looks to me like twenty-one totally destroyed, and another thirty or so damaged. The base facilities took a real beating. The only other thing I'd like to know is how hard their personnel were hit. If we killed a lot of crews, too—the Backfires are out of business for at least a week. They still have the Badgers, but those birds have shorter legs, they're a lot easier to kill. Admiral, it's a new ball game."

Admiral Sir Charles Beattie smiled. His intelligence chief had said almost exactly the same thing.

LANGLEY AIR FORCE BASE, VIRGINIA

The F-15 interceptor streaked over the runway at a height of one hundred feet. As she passed the tower, Major Nakamura threw her fighter into a slow roll, then turned around for a more sedate landing. She was an Ace! Three Badger bombers and two satellites ! The first female Ace in the history of the U.S. Air Force. The first Space Ace.

She rolled to a stop at the ready shelter, jumped off the ladder, and ran to the reception committee. The deputy commander of Tactical Air Command was red-faced with anger.

"Major, if you ever pull something like that again I'll bust your ass back to doolie!"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir." She grinned. Nothing was going to spoil today. "Won't ever happen again, sir. You only make Ace once, sir."

"Intelligence says Ivan has one more RORSAT ready to use. Probably they'll think it over some before launching," the General said, calming down somewhat.

"Have they put any more birds together?" Buns asked.

"They're working on two, and we might have them by the end of the week. If we get them, your next target will be their realtime photo reconnaissance satellite. Until then the RORSATs have highest priority." The General smiled briefly. "Don't forget to paint that fifth star on the bird, Major."

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

They would have sailed anyway. The destruction of the Soviet RORSAT merely made it safer. First came the destroyers and frigates, fanning out, looking for submarines under an umbrella of patrol aircraft. Then the cruisers and carriers. Last of all came the ships from Little Creek, *Tarawa, Guam, Nassau, Inchon,* and twenty more. Over sixty ships in all, they formed into three groups and steamed northeast at twenty knots. It would be a six-day trip.

USNS *PREVAIL*

Even at three knots she didn't ride well. The ship was just over two hundred feet long, and she responded to every wave like a horse to a fence. She had a mixed crew, not really Navy, not really civilian. The civilians ran the ship. The naval personnel ran the electronics gear. The really amazing thing, everyone agreed, was that they were still alive.

Prevail was an adaptation of a blue-water fishing boat. Instead of a trawl, she pulled a sonar array at the end of a six-thousand-foot cable filled with sonar sensors. The signals received were preprocessed by on-board computers, then sent via satellite to Norfolk at a rate of thirty-two thousand bits of data

per second. The ship was driven by quiet electric motors, and her hull had been installed with the Prairie/Masker system to eliminate even her tiny amount of machinery noise. Her topsides were made of fiberglass to reduce her radar signature. In a very real sense she was one of the first Stealth ships, and despite the fact that she carried no weapon other than a rifle for dealing with sharks, she was also the most dangerous antisubmarine platform ever made. Prevail and three sister ships were cruising the North Atlantic on the great circle route between Newfoundland and Ireland, listening for the telltale noise of a submarine in transit. Two already had kills painted up on their bridges since each had an Orion patrol aircraft in constant attendance, and Soviet submarines had twice had the misfortune to approach one of them. But their job was not to kill submarines. It was to warn others of them, far away.

In the midships operations center of Prevail, a team of oceanographic technicians watched a bank of TV-type display tubes, while others worked up tracks of anything that might be close enough to be a direct threat.

A petty officer ran his finger down a fuzzy line on the display. “That must be the convoy from New York.”

“Yeah,” said the technician next to him. “And there’re the folks who want to meet them.”

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

“At least we’re not going to be lonely,” O’Malley observed.

“You always have such a positive attitude?” Frank Ernst inquired.

“Our Russian friends must have excellent intelligence. I mean, your Air Force chaps did kill their satellite.” Captain Perrin set his coffee down on the table. The five officers conferred in Morris’s stateroom. Perrin had flown over by helicopter from Battleaxe.

“Yeah, so they know our composition,” Morris said. “And they’ll want to cut this bunch down to size.”

The message from Norfolk stated in clipped navalese that at least six Soviet submarines were believed to be heading for the convoy. Four would be on the north. That was their area of responsibility.

“We should be getting some data off the tail any time now,” Morris said. “Jerry, you up to three days of continuous ops?”

O’Malley laughed. “If I say no, will it matter?”

“I think we should remain close together,” Perrin said. “Five miles’ separation at most. The real trick will be timing our sprints. The convoy wants to make as straight a run as possible, right?”

“Yeah.” Morris nodded. “Hard to blame the Commodore for that. Zigzagging all those ships could create almost as much confusion as a real attack.”

“Hey, the good news is no more Backfires for a while,” O’Malley pointed out. “We’re back to a one-dimension threat.”

The ship’s motion changed as power was reduced. The frigate was ending a twenty-eight-knot sprint and would now drift for several minutes at five knots

to allow her passive sonar to function.

USS *CHICAGO*

"Sonar contact, bearing three-four-six."

Seven hundred miles to the icepack, McCafferty thought as he went forward. At five *knots.*

They were in deep water. It was a gamble, but a good one, to run away from the coast at fifteen knots despite the noise *Providence* made. It had taken four hours to reach the hundred-fathom curve, a period of constant tension as he had worried about the Russian reaction to their missile attack. The Russians had sent antisubmarine patrol aircraft first of all, the ubiquitous Bears dropping sonobuoys, but they'd been able to avoid them. Providence still had most of her sonar systems in operation, and though she could not defend herself, she could at least hear the danger coming.

Throughout the four-hour run the wounded submarine had sounded like a wagonload of pipes, and McCafferty didn't want to think about how she had handled, with her fairwater planes hanging like laundry in a breeze. But that was behind them. Now they were in seven hundred feet of water. With their towed-array sonars deployed, they'd have an extra measure of warning for approaching danger. *Boston* and *Chicago* cruised three miles on either side of their wounded sister. *Seven hundred miles at five knots,* McCafferty thought. *Almost six days . . .*

"Okay, what do we have here, Chief?"

"Came in slowly, sir, so it's probably direct path. We have a slow bearing-change rate. My first guess would be a diesel boat on batteries, and close." The sonar chief showed no emotion.

The captain leaned back into the attack center. "Come right to zero-two-five."

The helmsman applied five degrees of right rudder, gently bringing the submarine to a northeasterly course. At five knots Chicago was "a hole in the ocean" that made almost no noise at all, but her contact was almost as quiet. McCafferty watched the line on the screen change shape ever so slightly over a period of several minutes.

"Okay, we have a bearing change to the contact. Bearing is now three-four-one."

"Joe?" McCafferty asked his executive officer.

"I make the range eight thousand yards, plus or minus. He's on a reciprocal heading, speed about four knots."

Too close, the captain thought. *He probably doesn't hear us yet, though.*

"Let's get him."

The Mark-48 torpedo fired at its slowest speed setting, turned forty degrees to the left on leaving the tube, then settled down to head for the contact, its guidance wires trailing back to the submarine. The sonarmen directed the fish toward its target while Chicago moved slowly away from the launch point.

Suddenly the sonar chief's head jerked up.

"He's heard it! He just kicked his engines. I got a blade count—it's a Foxtrot-class, doing turns for fifteen. Transient, transient, he just flooded tubes."

The torpedo accelerated and switched on its homing sonar. The Foxtrot knew it had been found, and her captain reacted automatically, increasing speed and ordering a radical turn to starboard, then firing a homing torpedo back down the line of bearing at its attacker. Finally he dove deep, hoping to shake off the closing fish.

The hard turn left a knuckle in the water, an area of turbulence which confused the Mark-48 briefly, but then the torpedo charged right through it, and on coming back to undisturbed water, found its target again. The green-painted weapon dove after the Foxtrot and caught it at a depth of four hundred feet.

"Bearing is changing rapidly on the inbound," the sonar chief said. "It's going to pass well aft of us—hit, we got a hit on the target." The sound echoed through the steel hull like distant thunder. McCafferty plugged in a set of phones in time to hear the Foxtrot's frantic attempt to blow to the surface, and the screech of metal as the internal bulkheads gave way. He did not hear the captain's last act. It was to deploy the rescue buoy located on the aft corner of the sail. The buoy floated to the surface and began transmitting a continuous message. All the men aboard the Foxtrot were already dead, but the rescue buoy told their fleet headquarters where they had died—and several submarines and surface ships immediately set off to that point.

USS REUBEN *JAMES*

O'Malley pulled up on the collective control and climbed to five hundred feet. From this height he could see the northern edge of the convoy off to the southwest. Several helicopters were in the air—a good idea of someone's. Many of the merchant ships were carrying Army helicopters as deck cargo, and most of them were flyable. Their crews were taking them up to patrol the convoy perimeter, looking for periscopes. The one thing any submariner would admit to being afraid of was a helicopter. This procedure was called "black-sky" ASW. Throughout the convoy, soldiers were being told to watch the ocean and report *anything* they saw, which made for many false sighting reports, but it gave the men something to do, and sooner or later they might just spot a real periscope. The Seahawk moved twenty miles east before circling. They were looking for a possible submarine detected on the frigate's passive sonar array during the last drift.

"Okay, Willy, drop a LOFAR—now-now-now!"

The petty officer punched a button to eject a sonobuoy out the side panel. The helicopter continued forward, dropping four additional buoys at intervals of two miles to create a ten-mile barrier, then O'Malley held his aircraft in a wide circle, watching the sea himself as the petty officer examined the sonar display on his screen.

“Commander, what’s this I hear about the skipper? You know, the night before we sailed.”

“I felt like getting drunk, and he was kind enough not to make me drink alone. Didn’t you ever get drunk before?”

“No, sir. I don’t drink.”

“What’s this Navy coming to! You take her for a minute.” O’Malley took his hand off the stick and adjusted his helmet. It was a new one and he hadn’t quite gotten used to it yet. “You got anything, Willy?”

“Not sure yet, sir. Give me another minute or two.” “Fair enough.” The pilot contemplated his instruments briefly, then resumed his outside scanning. “I ever tell you about this thirty-five-footer in the Bermuda-to-Newport race? Storm beat hell out of it. Anyway, it had an all-girl crew and when the boat swamped they lost all their—”

“Skipper, I got a weak signal on number four.”

“Grateful as hell for being rescued, too.” O’Malley took the stick and brought the helicopter around to the northwest. “You don’t do any of that either, Mr. Ralston?”

“Strong drink giveth the desire, sir, but taketh away the ability,” the copilot said. “Two more miles, sir.”

“He even knows Shakespeare. There may be hope for you yet. Talk to me, Willy.”

“Still a ‘weak’ on number four. Nothing else.”

“One mile,” Ralston said, watching the tactical display.

O’Malley’s eyes scanned the surface, looking for a straight vertical line or a wisp of foam.

“Number four’s signal strength is now medium, sir. Getting a twitch on five.”

“Romeo, Hammer, I think we may have something here. I’m going to drop another LOFAR between four and five. Designate this one number six. Dropping—now!” Another sonobuoy was ejected clear of the aircraft.

“Hammer, this is Romeo,” called the controller. “Looks to us like the contact is north of the line, say again north.”

“Roger, concur on that. We ought to know something in a minute.”

“Skipper,” Willy called. “I have a ‘medium’ on six.”

“Romeo, Hammer, we’re going to dip on this character right now.”

Aboard *Reuben* James they marked the helicopter’s position, along with the line of sonobuoys.

O’Malley eased back on the stick to kill forward velocity, while his other hand eased the collective control down very gently until the helicopter was in hover fifty feet over the water. Willy unlocked the dipping sonar and lowered it to a depth of two hundred feet.

“Sonar contact, sir. Classify as possible submarine, bearing three-five-six.”

“Up dome!” O’Malley commanded.

The Seahawk lifted high and raced north for one mile. Hovering once more, O’Malley dipped his sonar a second time.

“Contact! Bearing one-seven-five. Sounds like a twin screw doing turns for maybe ten knots.”

“We’ve bracketed him,” the pilot said. “Let’s set this one up.” Ralston

entered the numbers into the tactical computer.

"Bearing change, looks like he's turning to port—yeah," Willy confirmed. "Turning to port."

"He hear us?" Ralston asked.

"He might hear the convoy and be turning to get a fix on them. Willy, up dome," O'Malley ordered. "Romeo, Hammer, we have a maneuvering target, classify as probable submarine. Request weapons free."

"Roger, Hammer, weapons free, repeat weapons are free."

The pilot flew one thousand yards southeast. The sonar dome went down again and the helicopter hovered head into the wind.

"Got him again, sir," Willy said excitedly. "Bearing three-five-five. Bearing is changing right to left, sir."

"Going right past us," Ralston said, looking at the TACNAV.

"Romeo, this is Hammer. We're calling this a positive submarine and we are making a deliberate attack on this contact." O'Malley held the aircraft in hover as his petty officer called off the bearing change. "Attack sequence."

"Master Arm." Ralston ran his hands across the buttons. "Torpedo Select, position one."

"Set initial search depth two-fifty; course-select, Snake." Ralston made the proper settings.

"Set."

"Okay, Willy, get ready for Yankee-search," O'Malley ordered, meaning a search using active sonar.

"Ready, sir. Bearing to contact now two-zero-zero, changing right-to-left rapidly."

"Hammer his ass!" O'Malley switched the sonar signals into his headset.

Willy thumbed the button and the sonar transducer fired off a series of pings. The wave fronts of sound energy reflected off the submarine's hull and came back to the transducer. The contact suddenly increased engine power.

"Positive contact, bearing one-eight-eight, range eight hundred yards."

Ralston fed the last numbers into the fire-control system: "Set!"

The pilot brought his thumb across the stick to a button on the right side and pressed it home. The Mark-46 torpedo dropped free of its shackles and plunged into the sea. "Torp away."

"Willy, secure pinging." O'Malley keyed his radio. "Romeo, we just dropped on a diving two-screw submarine, approximately eight hundred yards from us on a bearing of one-eight-eight. Torpedo is in the water now. Stand by."

The Mark-46 torpedo was set on a "snake" pursuit pattern, a series of undulating curves that carried it in a southerly direction. Alerted by the helicopter's sonar, the Soviet submarine was running at flank speed and diving to evade the torpedo.

"Hammer, Romeo, be advised that Hatchet is en route to you in case your torp misses, over."

"Roger that," O'Malley acknowledged.

"It's got him!" Willy said excitedly. The torpedo was on automatic pinging as it closed with the submarine. The captain made a hard right turn, but the fish was too close to be fooled.

"Hit! That's a hit!" Willy said almost as loudly as the noise of the explosion.

Directly ahead of them the surface seemed to jump, but no gout of foam leaped up. The torpedo had gone off too deep for that.

"Well," O'Malley said. In all his years of practice he'd never fired a live fish at a live sub. The sounds of the dying sub seemed the saddest thing he'd ever heard. Some oil bubbled to the surface. "Romeo, we're calling that one a kill. Tell the bosun to get out his paintbrush. We are now orbiting to look for wreckage and possible survivors." Another frigate had rescued the entire crew from a downed Russian Bear the previous day. They were already on the mainland for interrogation. But there would be none from this incident. O'Malley circled for ten minutes, then turned for home.

ICELAND

"Beagle, you all fed and rested?" Doghouse asked.

"I guess you could say that." Edwards had been waiting for this, but now that it had come it sounded ominous enough.

"We want you to patrol the southern shore of the Hvammsfjördur and let us know of any Russian activity you see. We are particularly interested in the town of Stykkisholmur. That's a small port about forty miles west of you. As before, your orders are to evade, observe, and report. You got that?"

"Roger. How long we got?"

"I can't say that, Beagle. I don't know. You want to move right along, though."

"Okay, we'll be moving in ten minutes. Out." Edwards dismantled the antenna, then stowed the complete radio assembly in the backpack. "People, it's time to leave this mountain retreat. Sergeant Nichols?"

"Yes, sir?" Nichols and Smith came over together.

"Were you briefed on what we're supposed to be up to?"

"No, sir. Our orders were to relieve your party and await further instructions." Edwards had already seen the sergeant's map case. He had cards for the whole western Icelandic coast, all but their drop zone in a pristine condition. Of course, the purpose of their coastal reconnaissance was clear enough, wasn't it? The lieutenant took out a tactical map and plotted their course west.

"Okay, we'll pair off. Sergeant Smith, you take the point along with one of our new friends. Nichols, you take Rodgers with you and cover the back door. You both have a radio, and I'll take the third and keep the rest of the party with me. The groups stay within sight of each other. We keep to the high ground as much as possible. The first hard-surface road we hit is ten miles west of here. If you see anything, you drop and report in to me. We are supposed to avoid contact. No hero crap, okay? Good, we'll move out in ten minutes." Edwards assembled his gear.

"Where we go, Michael?" Vigdis asked.

"Stykkisholmur," he answered. "You feel okay?"

"I can walk with you, yes." She sat down beside him. "And when we get to

Stykkisholmur?"

Mike smiled. "They didn't tell me that."

"Why they never tell you anything?"

"It's called security. That means the less we know, the better it is for us."

"Stupid," she replied. Edwards didn't know how to explain that she was both right and wrong.

"I think when we get there, we can start thinking about a normal life again."

Her face changed. "What is normal life, Michael?"

Another good question, Edwards thought. *But I have too much on my mind to chew that one over.* "We'll see."

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

The battle for Hameln and the battle for Hannover were now essentially the same action. Two hours before, the NATO forces had withdrawn to the west, south of the industrial city, allowing them to shorten lines and consolidate. Soviet units were probing forward cautiously, suspicious of another German trap. Alekseyev and Commander-in-Chief West pored over their maps in an attempt to analyze the consequences of the NATO withdrawal.

"It allows them to put at least one, probably two brigades in reserve," Alekseyev thought. "They can use this Highway 217 to move troops rapidly from one sector to another."

"How often have the Germans given ground voluntarily?" his superior asked. "They didn't do this because they wanted to. Their lines were overextended. Their units are depleted."

"So are ours. The Category-B units we're committing to battle are taking losses almost a third greater than the 'A' units they replace. We are paying dearly for our advances now."

"We have paid dearly already! If we fail now it will all have been for nothing. Pasha, we must attack in force. This entire sector is ready to collapse."

"Comrade General, that is not my impression. Resistance is spirited. German morale remains high despite their losses. They have hurt us badly and they know it." Alekseyev had returned from the forward command post at Fölziehausen only three hours before.

"Viewing the action from the front lines is very useful, Pasha, but it hinders your ability to perceive the larger picture."

Alekseyev frowned at that. "The larger picture" was frequently an illusion. His commander had told him that very thing many times.

"I want you to organize an attack along this entire front. NATO formations are gravely depleted. Their supplies are low, they have taken massive casualties. A vigorous attack now will sunder their lines on a fifty-kilometer front."

"We don't have enough A units to attack on this scale," Alekseyev objected.

"Keep them in reserve to exploit the breakthrough. We'll launch the attack with our best reserve divisions from Hannover in the north to Bodenwerder in the south."

"We don't have the strength for that, and it will use up too much fuel," Alekseyev warned. "If we have to attack, I suggest an assault on a two-division front here, south of Hameln. The units are in place. What you propose is too ambitious."

"This is not a time for half measures, Pasha!" CINC-West shouted. He'd never raised his voice to Alekseyev before. The younger man found himself wondering what pressure was being applied to his commander, who calmed down now. "An attack along a single axis allows a counterattack along a single axis," he continued. "This way we can greatly complicate the enemy's task. He can't be strong everywhere. We will find a weakness, break out, and drive our remaining A units through to the Rhein."

USS REUBEN JAMES

"Drop now-now-now!" O'Malley yelled. The eighth sonobuoy ejected from the side of the Seahawk, and the pilot brought the helicopter around and headed back east.

O'Malley had already been up for three long, grueling hours this time, with precious little to show for it. Stop, dip, listen; stop, dip, listen. He knew there was a sub down there, but every time he thought he was beginning to get a line on it, the damn thing slipped away! What was it doing different?

Hatchet was having the same problem, except *its* sub had turned around on it and nearly scored a hit on *Battleaxe.* The frigate's violent wake turbulence had detonated the Russian torpedo astern, but it had been close, too close by half. He brought the helicopter into hover.

"Down dome!" They hovered for a minute. Nothing. It began again. "Romeo, this is Hammer. You got anything, over?"

"Hammer, he just faded out a moment ago. Our last bearing was three-four-one."

"Cute. This character's listening for you to stop your sprint, and he cuts his power back."

"That's a fair guess, Hammer," Morris said.

"Okay, I got a barrier to the west if he heads that way. I think he's going due south, and we're dipping for him now. Out." O'Malley switched to intercom. "You got anything, Willy?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Prepare to raise dome." A minute later the helicopter was moving again. They dipped their sonar six more times in the next twenty minutes and came up blank.

"Again, Willy. Prepare to lower. Set it down to, uh, eight hundred feet this time."

"Ready, sir."

“Down dome.” O’Malley squirmed in his seat. The outside temperature was moderate, but the sun made a greenhouse of the cockpit. He’d need a shower when he got back to the frigate.

“Searching at eight hundred feet, sir,” the petty officer said. He was hot, too, though he’d brought a pair of cold drinks along for the flight. “Sir, I have something . . . possible contact bearing one-eight-five.”

“Up dome! Romeo, Hammer, we got a possible contact south of us. Going after it now.”

“Hammer, we have nothing anywhere near you. Be advised Bravo and Hatchet are working a contact. Two torps have been launched with no hits.”

Nobody ever said it was easy, the pilot thought. He moved three thousand yards and dipped the sonar again.

“Contact, this one’s for real. Type-two engine plant bearing one-eight-three.”

O’Malley checked his fuel. Forty minutes. He had to get this one in a hurry. He ordered the dome up again and went another three thousand yards south. His shoulders flexed against the seat straps. It seemed to take forever for the sonar dome to get down to search depth.

“There it is again, sir, north of us, bearing zero-one-three. Bearing is changing. Zero-one-five now.”

“Set it up!” Thirty minutes’ fuel. Time was their enemy now. Ralston punched up the Master Arm and Select buttons.

“Willy: hammer!” The sonar sent out five ranging pings.

“Zero-one-nine, range nine hundred!”

Ralston set search depth and pattern. O’Malley brought his thumb across the stick and dropped the torpedo.

The submarine went to full power and turned left away from the helicopter while the torpedo plunged to eight hundred feet before beginning its search. O’Malley growled to himself that he’d launched from a bad angle, but it would have taken too long to reel in and reacquire. He held the aircraft in hover and listened over his headset as the whine of the torpedo screws chased after the deeper *thrum* of the Charlie’s powerful twin screws. The nuclear sub maneuvered frantically, trying to turn inside the pursuing torpedo.

“They’re on the same bearing now,” Willy reported. “I think the fish has him—hit!”

But the Charlie didn’t die. They heard the sound of blowing air, then it stopped. A wild cacophony of mechanical noise followed as the contact moved off to the north, then faded as the submarine slowed. O’Malley didn’t have enough fuel to pursue. He came around west and headed for *Reuben James.*

“Hammer, Romeo, what happened?”

“We hit him, but he’s still alive. Stand by, Romeo, we’re coming in skosh fuel. Five minutes out.”

“Roger that, we’ll be ready for you. We’re vectoring another helo onto the Charlie. I want you to join Hatchet.”

“How come we didn’t kill him?” Ralston asked.

“Almost all Russian subs have double hulls, and that dinky hundred-pound warhead on the Mark-46 isn’t gutsy enough to give you a kill every time. You try to attack from the stem if you can, but this time we couldn’t. If you get a

stem hit, you pop the shaft seals and flood his engine room. That'll kill anybody. They didn't tell you to go for a stem shot in school, did they?"

"Not especially."

"Figures," O'Malley growled.

It was good to see the *Reuben* James after four hours. It would have been even better to visit the officers' head, O'Malley thought bleakly. He brought the Seahawk over the port corner of the frigate's stem and paced the ship. Aft, Willy opened the sliding door and tossed down a messenger line. The frigate's deck crew attached a refueling hose to the line and Willy hauled it in, plugging the hose into the fuel tank. The procedure was called HIFR, for helicopter in-flight refueling. While O'Malley fought his helo through the roiled air behind the ship, fuel was pumped into his tanks, giving him another four hours' endurance. Ralston kept his eyes on the fuel indicators while O'Malley flew the aircraft.

"We're full up, Willy. Secure."

The petty officer lowered the fuel hose and retrieved his line. He was glad to close the door and strap himself back into his chair. Officers, he told himself, were too smart to do what he just did.

"Bravo, this is Hammer, where do you want us, over?"

"Hammer, Bravo, come right to one-three-zero and rendezvous with Hatchet eight miles from Bravo."

"On the way." O'Malley curved around *Reuben James* and headed southeast.

"Hammer, Romeo, be advised Sea Sprite from *Sims* just finished off that Charlie for you. We got a 'well done' from the screen commander for that prosecution, over."

"Tell the Commodore 'you're welcome.' Bravo, Hammer, what is it we're after, over?"

"We thought it was a twin-screw submarine. We're not quite so sure now, Hammer," Perrin replied. "We've fired three torpedoes at this target now for zero hits. He got one off at us, but it prematured in our wake."

"How close was it?"

"Fifty yards."

Ouch! the pilot thought.

"Okay, I have Hatchet in sight. Bravo, it's your ball game. Where do you want me now?"

* * *

Morris had allowed himself to fall far behind in the hunt for the now-dead Charlie. On his command the frigate went to full speed, closing on *Battleaxe* at twenty-five knots. In response to the multiple submarine contacts, the convoy was turning slightly south.

O'Malley's Seahawk hovered seven miles from *Battleaxe* while Hatchet ran back home for fuel and sonobuoys. Again the process of dipping and moving began.

"Nothing," Willy reported.

"Bravo, Hammer, can you give me a rundown of what this target's been doing?"

"We've nearly gotten him twice atop the layer. His course is generally south."

"Sounds like a missile boat."

"Agreed," Perrin answered. "Our last datum point was within one thousand yards of your position. We have nothing at this time."

O'Malley examined the data transmitted from *Battleaxe's* plot. As was usually true of submarine course tracks, it was a collection of vague opinions, shaky judgments, and not a few wild guesses.

"Bravo, you're a sub-driver. Talk to me, over." This was lousy radio procedure, but what the hell?

"Hammer, the only thing that makes the least bit of sense is that he's extremely fast." O'Malley examined the tactical display more closely.

"You're right, Bravo." O'Malley pondered this. A Papa, maybe? he wondered. Twin screws, cruise missiles, fast as a thief.

"Hammer, Bravo, if we proceed on the assumption that he's very fast, I recommend you go east until Romeo comes off sprint and can give us a bearing."

"Concur, Bravo. Give me a vector." On command from *Battleaxe,* the Seahawk ran twenty miles east and began dipping his sonar. It took fifteen minutes to load another pair of Stingray torpedoes on Hatchet, along with fuel and sonobuoys.

"What do you think we're after, skipper?" Ralston asked.

"How's a Papa grab you?" O'Malley asked.

"But the Russians only have one of those," the copilot objected.

"Doesn't mean they're saving it for a museum, mister."

"Nothing, sir," Willy reported.

Reuben James came off sprint, turning to a southerly heading to bring her sonar to bear on the remaining contact. *If only* Battleaxe *still had her tail,* Morris thought, *we could triangulate on every contact, and with two helos . . .*

"Contact, evaluate as possible submarine, bearing zero-eight-one, bearing—changing slowly, looks like. Yeah, bearing changing north to south." The data went at once to *Battleaxe* and the screen commander. Another helicopter joined the hunt.

"Down dome!" This was the thirty-seventh time today, O'Malley thought. "My ass is asleep."

"Wish mine was." Ralston laughed without much humor. Again they detected nothing.

"How can something be exciting and boring at the same time?" the ensign asked, unconsciously echoing the Tomcat pilot days ago.

"Up dome! You know, I've wondered that a few times myself." O'Malley keyed his radio. "Bravo, Hammer, I got an idea for you."

"We're listening, Hammer."

"You have Hatchet dropping a line of buoys south of us. Deploy another line west. Then I start pinging. Maybe we can flush the guy into doing something.

You ever get herded by a dipping helo when you were driving subs?"

"Not herded, Hammer, but I have gone far out of my way to avoid one. Stand by while I get things organized."

"You know, this one's a nervy bastard. He's gotta know we're onto him, but he isn't breaking off. He really thinks he can beat us."

"He has for the last four hours, boss," Willy observed.

"You know what the most important part of gambling is? You have to know when it's time to quit." O'Malley circled up high and turned his search radar on for the first time that day. It was not very useful for detecting a periscope, but it might just scare a sub running near the surface into heading back under the layer. The sun was sinking, and O'Malley could pick out the two other helicopters working this contact from their flying lights. They dropped two lines of passive sonobuoys, each eight miles long, at right angles to each other.

"The picket lines are in place, Hammer," Captain Perrin called. "Begin."

"Willy: hammer!" Six hundred feet below the helicopter, the sonar transducer pounded the water with high-frequency sonar pulses. He did this for one minute, then reeled in and flew southeast. The process lasted half an hour. By this time his legs were knotting up, making his control movements awkward.

"Take over for a few minutes." O'Malley took his feet off the pedals and worked his legs around to restore circulation.

"Hammer, Bravo, we have a contact. Buoy six, line Echo." This was the east-west line. Buoy number six was third from the west end, where the north-south "November" line began. "Weak signal at this time."

O'Malley took the controls back and headed west while the other two helicopters circled behind their respective lines.

"Gently, gently," he murmured over the intercom. "Let's not spook him too much." He picked his course carefully, never heading directly for the contact, never heading far away from it. Another half hour passed, one miserable second at a time. Finally they had the contact running east at about ten knots, far below the layer.

"We now have him on three buoys," Perrin reported. "Hatchet is moving into position."

O'Malley watched the blinking red lights about three miles away. Hatchet dropped a pair of directional DIFAR buoys and waited. The display came up on O'Malley's scope. The contact passed right between the DIFARS.

"Torpedo away!" Hatchet called. The black-painted Stingray dropped invisibly into the water, half a mile in front of the oncoming submarine. O'Malley closed and dropped his own buoy to listen as he brought the Seahawk into hover.

Like the American Mark-48 torpedo, the Stingray didn't use conventional propellers, which made it hard to locate on sonar both for O'Malley and the submarine. Suddenly they heard the sound of propeller cavitation as the submarine went to full power and turned. Then came hull-popping noises as she changed depth abruptly to throw the fish off. It didn't work. Next came the metallic crash of the exploding warhead.

"Hit!" Hatchet called.

"Down dome!"

Willy lowered the sonar transducer one last time. The submarine was coming up.

"Again!" Ralston wondered. "That's two in a row."

"Set it up! Willy, hammer him."

"Range four hundred, bearing one-six-three, I have an up-doppler."

"Circular search, initial search depth one hundred."

"Set," Ralston replied.

O'Malley dropped his torpedo at once. "Up dome! Bravo, the hit did not kill the target, we just dropped another one on him."

"He might be trying to surface to get his crew off," Ralston said.

"He might want to fire his missiles, too. He should have run when he had the chance. I would have."

The second hit finished the submarine. O'Malley flew straight back to *Reuben James.* He let Ralston land the Seahawk. As soon as its wheels were chocked and chained down, he got out and walked forward. Morris met him in the passageway between the helo hangars.

"Great job, Jerry."

"Thanks, skipper." O'Malley had left his helmet in the aircraft. His hair was matted to his head with perspiration and his eyes stung from hours of it.

"I want to talk over a few things."

"Can we do it while I shower and change, Cap'n?" O'Malley went through the wardroom and into his stateroom. He stripped out of his clothing in under a minute and headed for the officers' shower.

"How many pounds you sweat off on a day like this?" Morris said.

"A lot." The pilot pushed the shower button, closing his eyes as the cold water sprayed over him. "You know, I've been saying for ten years that the -46 needed a bigger warhead. I hope to hell those bastards in ordnance will listen to me now!"

"The second one. What was it?"

"If I had to bet, I'd say it was Papa. Great job from the sonar guys. Those steers you gave us were beautiful." He pushed the button again for more cold water. O'Malley emerged a minute later, looking and feeling human again.

"The Commodore is writing you up for something. Your third DFC, I guess."

O'Malley thought about that briefly. His first two were for rescues, not for killing other men.

"How soon will you be ready to go up again?"

"How does next week grab you?"

"Get dressed. We'll talk in the wardroom."

The pilot raked his hair into place and changed into fresh clothing. He remembered the last time his wife had told him to use baby powder to protect his skin from the abuse of sweaty, tight clothes, and how stupid he'd been to reject the suggestion as not in keeping with aviator machismo. Despite the shower, there were a few patches of skin that would continue to itch and chafe. When he went to the wardroom, he found Morris waiting for him with a pitcher of iced bug juice.

"You got a diesel boat and two missile boats. How were they operating? Anything unusual?"

"Awfully aggressive. That Papa should have backed off. The Charlie took a

smart route, but he was boring in pretty hard, too." O'Malley thought it over as he drained his first glass. "You're right. They are pushing awful hard."

"Harder than I expected. They're taking chances they ordinarily wouldn't take. What's that tell us?"

"It tells us we got two more busy days ahead, I guess. Sorry, Captain, I'm a little too wasted for deep thinking at the moment."

"Get some rest."

37

The Race of the Cripples

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Two o'clock in the morning. The attack would begin in four hours despite all his efforts to change it. Alekseyev stared at the map with its symbols of friendly units and intelligence estimates of enemies.

"Cheer up, Pasha!" Commander-in-Chief West said. "I know that you think we use up too much fuel. It will also destroy their remaining stocks of war supplies."

"They can resupply, too."

"Nonsense. Their convoys have suffered heavily, as our own intelligence reports have told us. They are sending one massive shipment across now, but the Navy tells me they are sending everything they have against it. And in any case it will arrive too late."

Alekseyev told himself that his boss was probably right. After all, he had made his rank on the basis of a distinguished career. But still . . .

"Where do you want me?"

"With the OMG command post. No closer to the front than that."

The OMG command post, Pavel thought ironically. First 20th Guards Tank Division was supposed to be the operational-maneuver group, then a two-division formation, then three divisions. Every time the breakthrough maneuver had been frustrated, until the very term "operational-maneuver group" sounded like some kind of absurd joke. His pessimism returned. The reserve formations held for exploitation of the attack were far behind the front, so as to be able to move to wherever the best penetration of NATO lines happened. It might take hours for them to reach the proper point. NATO had demonstrated a remarkable ability to compensate for sudden breakthroughs, he reminded himself. Alekseyev set this thought aside as he had with so many others and left the command center, collected Sergetov, and once again found a helicopter to take him on the trip west. His aircraft waited on the ground for its usual fighter escort.

The use of fighters to escort a single helicopter lifting off from Stendal was a pattern NATO air-control officers had noted before, but they'd never had the available units to do anything about it. This time it was different. An AWACS

control aircraft over the Rhein watched the chopper lift off with three MiGs in attendance. The sector controller had a pair of F-4 Phantoms returning from a counter-air mission south of Berlin, and he vectored them north. The fighters skimmed the trees, their own radars off as they followed a safe-transit lane used by Russian aircraft.

Alekseyev and Sergetov sat alone in the back of the Mi-24 attack helicopter. There was room for eight combat-loaded infantrymen, so both had room to stretch and Sergetov took the chance for a nap. Their escorting MiGs were a thousand meters overhead, circling continuously as they watched for low-flying NATO fighters.

"Six miles," came the call from the AWACS.

One Phantom popped up, illuminated two MiGs with its radar, and loosed a pair of Sparrow missiles. The other fired two Sidewinders at the helicopter.

The MiGs were caught looking the wrong way when their threat receivers went off. One dashed to the ground and evaded. The other exploded in midair as the surviving wingman radioed a warning. Alekseyev blinked in surprise at the sudden gout of light overhead, then grabbed for his seatbelt as the helicopter turned hard left and dropped like a stone. It was almost in the trees when the Sidewinder chopped off the tail rotor. Sergetov awoke and shouted in surprise and alarm. The Mi-24 spun in the air as it crashed into the trees and bounced the last fifty feet to the ground. The main rotor came apart, sending pieces in all directions, and the sliding door on the left side of the aircraft popped off as though made of plastic. Alekseyev went out right behind it, dragging Sergetov with him. Once again his instincts had saved him. The two officers were twenty meters away when the fuel tanks exploded. They never heard or saw the Phantoms that continued west to safety.

"Are you hurt, Vanya?" the General asked.

"I didn't even piss my pants. That must mean I'm a seasoned veteran." The joke didn't work. The young man's voice shook along with his hands. "Where the hell are we?"

"An excellent question." Alekseyev looked around. He hoped to see lights, but the entire country had a blackout in force, and Soviet units had learned the hard way about using lights on the highways. "We have to find a road. We'll head south until we hit one."

"Where is south?"

"Opposite from north. That is north." The General pointed to a star, then turned to select another. "That one will lead us south."

SEVEROMORSK, R.S.F.S.R.

Admiral Yuri Novikov monitored the progress of the battle from his underground headquarters a few kilometers from his main fleet base. He was

stung by the loss of his principal long-range weapon—the Backfire bombers—but the way the Politburo had reacted to the missile attack was a greater shock. Somehow the politicians thought that it meant a ballistic-missile attack from the same area was possible, and no amount of argument to the contrary would change their minds. *As if the Americans would risk their precious ballistic-missile subs in such restricted waters!* the Admiral growled to himself. He was up against fast-attack boats—he was certain of it—and he was being forced to go after them with half his assets to prevent their escape. He didn't have that many assets to go around.

The Commander-in-Chief of Soviet Northern Fleet had had a good war to this point. The operation to seize Iceland had gone almost perfectly—the boldest Soviet attack ever staged! The very next day he had smashed a carrier battle group, an epic victory for his forces. His plan to use his missile-armed bombers and submarines in combination against the convoys had worked well, particularly after he'd decided to use the bombers to eliminate the escort ships first. Submarine losses to date had been heavy, but he'd expected that. The NATO navies had practiced antisubmarine warfare for generations. There had to be losses. He'd made mistakes, Novikov admitted to himself. He should have gone after the escorts in a systematic way sooner—but Moscow wanted the merchants killed most of all, and he'd acceded to the "suggestion."

Things were changing now. The sudden loss of his Backfire force—it would be out of action for another five days—forced him to take his dedicated anticarrier submarine teams and send them against the convoys, which meant crossing NATO's picket line of submarines, and losses there were heavy, too. His force of Bear reconnaissance bombers was hard hit. *The damned war was supposed to be over by now,* Novikov thought angrily. He had a powerful surface force waiting to escort additional troops to Iceland, but he couldn't move that group until the campaign in Germany was within sight of its conclusion. No battle plan survives the first contact with the enemy, he reminded himself.

"Comrade Admiral, satellite photographs have arrived." His aide handed over a leather dispatch case. The fleet intelligence chief arrived a few minutes later with his senior photo-interpretation expert. The photos were spread out across a table.

"Ah, we have a problem here," the photo expert said.

Novikov didn't need the expert to tell him that. The piers at Little Creek, Virginia, were empty. The American amphibious assault force had sailed with a full Marine division. Novikov had watched the progress of Pacific Fleet units to Norfolk with great interest, but then his ocean-reconnaissance satellites had both been killed, and launch authority on the last of them had been withheld. The next photo showed the carrier berths, also empty.

"Nimitz is still at Southampton," his intelligence chief pointed out. "He came into port with a severe list, and there is no drydock large enough to accommodate him. He's tied to the Ocean Dock; he's not going anywhere. That gives the Americans three carriers: *Coral Sea, America,* and *Independence. Saratoga* is being used for convoy escorting duties. The rest of their Atlantic Fleet carriers are in the Indian Ocean."

Novikov grunted. That was bad news for the Indian Ocean squadron, but

they were part of the Soviet Pacific Fleet. Not his problem. He had enough of his own. For the first time he faced a dilemma that he'd inflicted on the NATO navies. He had more tasks than he had ships, and sending half of his dedicated ASW forces after submarines that were already retreating didn't help matters!

NORTHWOOD, ENGLAND

"Hello again, Admiral," Toland said.

Beattie looked much better. The blue eyes had the gleam of crystal now and the Admiral's back was ramrod-straight as he stood in front of his wall-sized map with his arms folded.

"How are things in Scotland, Commander?"

"Good, sir. The last two raids got chewed up. May I ask how the Doolittle force made out? One of the boats is commanded by a friend of mine."

Beattie turned. "Which?"

"Chicago, sir. Dan McCafferty."

"Oh. It would seem that one of the boats was damaged. Chicago and one other are escorting her out. In fact, they are raising quite a rumpus in the eastern Barents. We have indications that the Soviets are sending a sizable force after them. In any case, you're going back to your carrier fleet, and you're to meet with my intelligence staff so that you can bring your chaps up to date when you get there. I wanted to see you personally to thank you for that telex you sent about trailing the Backfires to their doorstep. That idea was very useful to us. You're a reservist, I understand. How on earth did they ever let you go?"

"I put my destroyer on a sandbar once."

"I see. You have atoned for that error, Commander." Beattie offered his hand.

WACHERSLEBEN, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

"Stop that Goddamned truck!" Alekseyev screamed. He stood in the middle of the road, daring the vehicle to run over him. It stopped and he ran around to the cab.

"Who the hell are you?" the corporal asked.

"I am General Colonel Alekseyev," he answered agreeably. "Who might you be, Comrade?"

"I am Corporal Vladimir Ivan'ch Maryakhin." He managed to say this despite a mouth that hung open on seeing the General's shoulder boards.

"Since I appear to outrank you, Corporal, you will take me and my aide to the next traffic-control point as quickly as this truck will go. Move!"

Alekseyev and Sergetov got in the back. They found a solid mass of crates,

but had enough room to sit on top of them.

The General swore. "Three wasted hours."

"It could have been worse."

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

"It's a major attack, sir. They just started moving on what looks like a eighty-kilometer front."

SACEUR looked at the map impassively. It wasn't as though they hadn't expected this. Intelligence had predicted it twelve hours earlier from Soviet traffic patterns. He had exactly four reserve brigades that he could use in this sector. *Thank God,* he thought, *that I managed to persuade the Germans to shorten the line at Hannover.* Half his reserves had come from that, and not a day too soon.

"Main axis of the attack?" the General asked his operations officer.

"None is apparent at the moment. It looks like a general attack—"

"Pushing hard to find a weak point," SACEUR finished the statement. "Where's their reserve force?"

"Sir, we've identified elements of three divisions here south of Fölziehausen. They appear to be A units. The attack now under way appears to be mainly B formations."

"Have we hurt them that bad?" SACEUR asked rhetorically. His intelligence officers were working hard to establish just what enemy casualties were, and he got a report every evening. B-class reserve units had started appearing at the front five days before, which was puzzling. He knew the Soviets had at least six Category-A units in reserve in the southern Ukraine, but there were no indications they were moving. Why wasn't this force being committed to the German front? Why were they sending reservists instead? He'd been asking that question for several days, only to get shrugs from his intelligence chief. Not that I'm complaining, he thought. Those two field armies might have been enough to rupture his front entirely.

"Where's a good place to hit back?"

"Sir, we have these two German tank brigades at Springe. The Russian attack appears to have two reserve motor-rifle divisions, with a divisional border right here, ten kilometers from them. They've been off the line for two days now. I wouldn't call them well rested, but—"

"Yeah." SACEUR was given to cutting his officers off. "Get 'em moving."

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

O'Malley circled the frigate after a long morning's search for what turned out to be nothing. Three merchant ships had died in the past three hours, two to

missiles that had leaked through the convoy's SAM defenses and one to a torpedo. Both submarines had been prosecuted, one sunk by *Gallery's* helo inside the convoy itself. They were about to come within ground-based air coverage from the European mainland, and it seemed to the pilot that they'd won this battle. The convoy was getting across with acceptable losses. Thirty-six more hours to landfall.

The landing was routine, and after a trip to the head, O'Malley went into the wardroom for a drink and a sandwich. He found Calloway waiting for him. The pilot had met the reporter briefly but not really spoken with him.

"Is landing your helicopter on this little toy ship as dangerous as it looks?"

"A carrier has a slightly larger deck. You're not doing a story about me, are you?"

"Why not? You killed three submarines yesterday."

O'Malley shook his head. "Two ships, two helos, plus some help from the rest of the screening force. I just go where they send me. There's a lot to sub-hunting. All the parts have to work or the other guy wins."

"Is that what happened last night?"

"Sometimes the other guy does something right, too. I just spent four hours looking and came away empty. Maybe that was a sub, maybe not. Yesterday was pretty lucky all the way around."

"Does it bother you, sinking them?" Calloway asked.

"I've been in the Navy for seventeen years and I've never met anybody who likes killing people. We don't even call it that, except maybe when we're drunk. We sink ships and try to pretend that they're just ships—things without people in them. It's dishonest, but we do it anyway. Hell, this is the first time I've actually done what my main job is supposed to be. Until now all my combat experience has been search-and-rescue stuff. I never even dropped a war-shot on a real sub until yesterday. I haven't thought about it enough to know if I like it or not." He paused. "It's an awful sound. You hear rushing air. If you penetrate the hull at deep depth, the sudden pressure change inside the hull supposedly causes the air to ignite and everyone inside the boat incinerates. I don't know if it's true, but somebody told me that once. Anyway, you hear the rushing air, then you hear the screech—like a car throwing its brakes on hard. That's the bulkheads letting go. Then comes the noise of the hull collapsing, hollow boom, sort of. And that's it: a hundred people just died. No, I don't much like it.

"The hell of it is, it's exciting," O'Malley went on. "You're doing something extremely difficult. It requires concentration and practice and a lot of abstract thought. You have to get inside the other guy's head, but at the same time you think of your mission as destroying an inanimate object. Doesn't make much sense, does it? So, what you do is, you don't think about that aspect of the job. Otherwise the job wouldn't get done."

"Are we going to win?"

"That's up to the guys on land. All we do is support them. This convoy's going to make it."

FÖLZIEHAUSEN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

"They told me you were dead," Beregovoy said.

"Not even scratched this time. It startled Vanya here out of a sound sleep, however. How does the attack go?"

"Initial signs arc promising. We have an advance of six kilometers here, and almost as much here at Springe. We might have Hannover surrounded by tomorrow."

Alekseyev found himself wondering if his superior had been right. Perhaps NATO lines had been thinned so much they'd been forced to give ground.

"Comrade General." It was the Army intelligence officer. "I have a report of German tanks at Eldagsen. He—he just went off the air."

"Where the hell is Eldagsen?" Beregovoy peered down at the map. "That's ten kilometers behind the line! Confirm that report!"

The ground shook under them, followed by the roar of jet engines and launching missiles.

"They just hit our radio transmitters," the communications officer reported.

"Switch to the alternate!" Alekseyev shouted.

"That was the alternate. They took out the primary last night," Beregovoy answered. "Another is being assembled now. So we use what we have here."

"No," Alekseyev said. "If we do that, we do it on the move."

"I can't coordinate well that way!"

"You can't coordinate at all if you're dead."

USS *CHICAGO*

All hell was breaking loose. It was like a nightmare, except you woke up from those, McCafferty reminded himself. At least three Bear-F patrol aircraft were overhead, dropping sonobuoys all over the place, two Krivak-type frigates and six Grisha patrol boats had shown up on the sonar, and a Victor-III submarine had decided to come to the party.

Chicago had nibbled the odds down some. For the past few hours, fancy footwork had killed the Victor and a Grisha and damaged a Krivak, but the situation was deteriorating. The Russians were mobbing him, and he would not be able to keep them at arm's length much longer. In the time it had taken him to localize and kill the Victor, the surface groups had closed five miles on him. Like a boxer against a puncher, he had the advantage only as long as he kept them away.

What McCafferty wanted and needed to do was talk with Todd Simms on *Boston* to coordinate their activities. He couldn't, because the underwater telephone couldn't reach that far and made too much noise. Even if he tried to make a radio broadcast, *Boston* would have to be near the surface, with her antenna up to hear him. He was sure Todd had his boat as deep as he could drive her. American submarine doctrine was for each boat to operate alone. The Soviets practiced cooperative tactics, but the Americans never felt the

need. McCafferty needed some ideas now. The "book" solution to the tactical problem at hand was to maneuver and look for openings, but *Chicago* was essentially tied to a fixed position and could not stray too far from her sisters. As soon as the Russians understood that there was a cripple out there, they'd close in like a pack of dogs to finish *Providence* off, and he would not be able to stop them. Ivan would gladly exchange some of his small craft for a 688.

"Ideas, XO?" McCafferty asked.

"How about, 'Scotty, beam us up!' " The executive officer tried to brighten things a bit. It didn't work. So, okay, maybe the skipper wasn't a *Star Trek* fan. "The only way I see to keep them off our friends is to get them to chase us awhile."

"Go east and attack this group from the beam?"

"It's a gamble," the exec admitted. "But what isn't?"

"You conn her. Two-thirds, and hug the bottom."

Chicago turned southeast and increased speed to eighteen knots. This was a fine time to find out how accurate our charts are, McCafferty thought. Did Ivan have any minefields set here? He had to shut that thought out. If they hit one, he'd never know it. The executive officer kept the submarine within fifty feet of where the chart said the bottom was—actually he hedged, keeping fifty feet above the highest bottom marker within a mile. Even that would do no good if there was an uncharted wreck. McCafferty remembered his first trip into the Barents Sea. Somewhere close to here were those destroyers sunk as targets. If he hit one of those at eighteen knots . . . The run lasted forty minutes.

"All ahead one-third!" McCafferty ordered when he couldn't stand it anymore. *Chicago* slowed to five knots. To the diving officer: "Take her up to periscope depth."

The planesmen pulled back on their controls. There was some minor groaning from the hull as the outside water pressure relented, allowing the hull to expand an inch or so. On McCafferty's order the ESM mast went up first. As before there were several radar sources. The search periscope went up next.

A weather front was moving in, with a rain squall to the west. *Fabulous,* McCafferty thought. *There goes ten percent of our sonar performance.*

"I got a mast at two-six-four—what is it?"

"No radar signals on that bearing," a technician said.

"It's broken—it's the Krivak. We got a piece of her, let's finish her off. I—" A shadow went across the lens. McCafferty angled the instrument up and saw the swept wings and propellers of a Bear.

"Conn, sonar, multiple sonobuoys aft!"

McCafferty slapped the scope handles up and lowered the scope. "Take her down! Make your depth four hundred feet, left full rudder, all ahead full."

A sonobuoy deployed within two hundred yards of the submarine. The brassy sound of its pings reverberated through the hull.

How long for the Bear to turn and drop on us? On McCafferty's order a noisemaker was ejected into the water. It didn't work, and he fired off another. One minute passed. *He'll try to get a magnetic fix on us first.*

"Rewind the tape." The duty electrician was grateful to have something to

do. The video record of his five-second periscope exposure showed what looked like the remains of a Krivak's topsides.

"Passing three hundred feet. Speed twenty and increasing."

"Scrape the bottom, Joe," McCafferty said. He watched the tape rerun, but that was only to have something for his eyes to do.

"Torpedo in the water port quarter! Torpedo bearing zero-one-five."

"Right fifteen degrees rudder! All ahead flank! Come to new course one-seven-five." McCafferty put the torpedo on his stem. His mind went through the tactical situation automatically. *Russian ASW torpedo: sixteen-inch diameter, speed about thirty-six knots, range four miles, runs about nine minutes. We're doing* —he looked—*twenty-five knots. It's behind us. So if he's a mile behind us . . . seven minutes to cover the distance. It can get us. But we're accelerating at ten knots per minute . . . No, it can't.*

"High-frequency pinging aft! Sounds like a torpedo sonar."

"Settle down, people, I don't think it can catch us." *Any Russian ship in the neighborhood can hear us, though.*

"Passing through four hundred feet, starting level out."

"Torpedo is closing, sir," the sonar chief reported. "The pings sound a little funny, like—" The sub shook with a powerful explosion aft.

"All ahead one-third, right ten degrees rudder, come to new course two-six-five. What you just heard was their fish hitting the bottom. Sonar, start feeding me data."

The Russians had a new line of sonobuoys north of *Chicago,* probably too far off to hear them. Bearings to the nearest Soviet ships were steadying down: they were heading right for *Chicago.*

"Well, that'll keep them off our friends for a while, XO."

"Super."

"Let's go south some more and see if we can get them to pass us. Then we'll remind 'em what they're up against."

ICELAND

If I ever get off this rock alive, Edwards thought, I'll move to Nebraska. He remembered flying over the state many times. It was so agreeably flat. Even the counties were nice neat squares. Not so in Iceland. For all that, it was easier going than they had enjoyed since leaving Keflavik. Edwards and his party kept to the five-hundred-foot elevation line, which kept them at least two miles from the gravel coast road, with mountains at their backs and a good long field of view. Up to now they had seen nothing more than routine activity. They assumed that every vehicle on the move had Russians aboard. That probably was not true, but since the Soviet troops had appropriated so many civilian vehicles there was no way to tell the sheep from the goats. That made them all goats.

"Enjoying your rest, Sarge?" Edwards and his group caught up with Smith. There was a road half a mile farther ahead, the first they'd seen in two days.

"See that mountaintop?" Smith pointed. "A chopper landed on it twenty minutes ago."

"Great." Edwards unfolded his map and sat down. "Hill 1063—that's thirty-five hundred feet."

"Makes a nice lookout point, don't it? You suppose they can see us from there?"

"Ten or eleven miles. Depends, skipper. I figure they're using it to watch the water on both sides. If they have any brains, they'll keep an eye on the rocks, too."

"Any idea how many people they have there?" Edwards asked.

"No way. Maybe nobody—hell, they might have been making a pickup, but I wouldn't bet on it. Maybe a squad, maybe a platoon. You gotta figure they have a good pair of spotting glasses and a radio."

"And how do we get past them?" Edwards asked. The ground was mostly open, with only a few bushes in sight.

"That's a real good question, skipper. Pick our routes carefully, keep low, use dead ground—all the usual stuff. But the map shows a little bay that comes within four miles of them. We can't detour around the far side without running into the main road—can't hardly do that."

"What's the problem?" Sergeant Nichols arrived. Smith explained matters. Edwards got on the radio.

"You just know they're on the hilltop, not strength or weapons, right?" Doghouse asked.

"Correct."

"Damn. We wanted you on that hill." Now there's *a surprise,* Edwards thought. "No chance you can go up that hill?"

"None. Say again no chance at all. I can think of easier ways to commit suicide, mister. Let me think this one over and get back to you. Okay?"

"Very well, we'll be waiting. Out."

Edwards got his sergeants together and they started exploring the maps.

"Really a question of how many men they have there, and how alert they are," Nichols thought. "If they have a platoon there, we can expect some patrol activity. Next question is how much? I wouldn't be very keen on doing that hill twice a day myself."

"How many men would you put there?" Edwards asked.

"Ivan has a whole paratroop division here, plus other attachments. Call it ten thousand men total. He can't garrison the entire island, can he? So, would he have a rifle platoon on this or any other hilltop, or just a spotting team—artillery observers, that sort of mob. They're looking for your invasion force, and from up there a man with a decent spyglass can cover all of this bay to our north, and probably see all the way to bloody Keflavik the other way. They'll also be looking for aircraft."

"You're trying to make it sound easy?" Smith wondered.

"I think we can approach the hill safely enough, then wait for nightfall—what of it we have—and try to pass under them then. They will have the sun in their eyes, you know."

"You've done this before?" Edwards asked.

Nichols nodded. "Falklands. We were there a week before the invasion to

scout various things. Same thing we're doing now."

"They haven't said anything on the radio about an invasion."

"*Lef*tenant, this is where your Marines are going to land. No one's told me as much, but they didn't send us here to find a football pitch, did they?" Nichols was in his mid-thirties, approaching twenty years of service. He was by far the oldest member of the party, and the past few days of serving under a rank amateur had chafed on him. The one nice thing about this young weatherman, however, was his willingness to listen.

"Okay, they wanted us on this hill to eyeball things, too. How about this smaller peak to the west of the main summit?"

"We'll have to go far out of our way to be able to climb without being seen, but yes, we can establish ourselves there, I think. So long as they are not terribly alert, that is."

"Okay, once we cross this road, we keep together in one group. You got the point, Sergeant Nichols. I'd suggest we rest up a bit. Looks like we'll have to be on the move for quite a while once we get moving."

"Eight miles to the foot of the hill. We will want to be there about sunset."

Edwards checked his watch. "Okay, we start moving in an hour." He walked over to Vigdis.

"So, Michael, what do we do now?" He explained the situation to her at length.

"We're going to be close to some Russians. It might be dangerous."

"You ask if I want to not go with you?"

Say yes and hurt her feelings. Say no and . . . shit!

"I don't want to see you hurt any more."

"I stay with you, Michael. I am safe with you."

SOUTHAMPTON, ENGLAND

It took several hours to pump out the water that had given her the false list, an impression that had been reinforced by the ostentatious activities of divers. The powerful tugs *Catcombe* and *Vecta* moved her slowly aft into the Solent. Her flight deck had been fully repaired by the Vosper shipwrights though so much of the gray steel showed the slapdash bandage work of a job done more in haste than in consideration for the ship's proud name. Two thousand men had done the job. New arresting gear had been flown in from America, along with electronic equipment that came nowhere near replacing what the Russian missiles had destroyed. The tugs escorted her to Calshot Castle, then she moved alone south to Thorn Channel, east by the yachts docked at Cowes. Escorts were waiting at Portsmouth, then the small formation turned south and west into the English Channel.

Flight operations began at once. The first aircraft to arrive were the Corsair attack bombers, then the heavier Intruders and the sub-hunting Vikings. USS *Nimitz* was back in business.

"—and shoot!" Three hours of excruciating work distilled down to half a second. The now-familiar shudder of compressed air ejected a pair of torpedoes into the black water of the Barents Sea.

The Soviet commander had been just a little too eager to verify Chicago's death and allowed his frigate to run in close behind his two remaining Grishas. All three ships were pinging at the bottom, looking for a dead submarine. *You didn't expect us to run south, did you?* North or east, maybe, but not south. McCafferty had maneuvered his submarine wide around the Russian frigate, staying at the fringe of her sonar range, then closed up two thousand yards behind her. One fish for the Krivak and one running for the nearest patrol boat.

"No change in target course and speed, sir." The torpedo raced after the Soviet frigate. "He's still pinging the other way, sir."

The waterfall display lit up, a bright dot on the contact's tone line. Simultaneously the thundering explosion echoed through the hull.

"Up scope!" McCafferty met the eyepiece at deck level and worked it up slowly. "That's a kill. We broke her back. Okay . . ." He turned to the bearing of the near Grisha. "Okay, target number two is turning—wow. there go his engines. Increasing speed and going left."

"Skipper, the wire's cut on the fish."

"How long on the run?"

"Another four minutes, sir." In four minutes at full speed the Grisha would be outside the torpedo's acquisition radius.

"Damn, it's going to miss. Down scope. Let's get out of here. We'll go east this time. Make your depth four hundred, all ahead two-thirds. Come right to zero-five-five."

"Must have been the shock of the explosion, sir. Half a second later, the control wires let go on the number-two fish." McCafferty and his weapons officer reexamined the plot.

"You're right. I cut that one too close. Okay." The captain stepped over to the chart table. "Where do you figure our friends are?"

"Right about here, sir. Twenty- to twenty-five miles."

"I think we've taken enough heat off them. Let's see if we can get back up there while Ivan tries to figure out what's going on."

"We've been lucky, skipper," the exec observed.

"That's true enough. I want to know where their submarines are. That Victor we got just walked across our sights. Where are the rest of 'em? They can't just be chasing after us with these." Of course not, McCafferty realized. The Russians set up hunting preserves, sectors limited to specific types of ships. Their surface ships and aircraft would be in one sector, and next to it their submarines would have exclusive hunting rights . . .

He told himself that he'd done well to date. Three patrol boats, a full-sized frigate, and a sub, quite a week in anybody's book. But it wasn't over. Not until they got *Providence* to the ice.

38

Stealth on the Rocks

ICELAND

The first leg of the trip was only eight miles in a straight line, but the line they traveled was straight in no dimension. The terrain here was volcanic also, littered with rocks large and small. The large ones made shadows, and whenever possible they stayed in them, but with every step they had also to detour, uphill and down, left and right, until every yard of forward travel was accompanied by a yard in another direction, and eight miles became sixteen.

For the first time, Edwards knew that he was under possible observation. Even when the hilltop they skirted was hidden by a ridge, who could say that the Russians did not have another scouting party out? Who could be sure that they were not being watched, that some Russian sergeant with binoculars had noticed their rifles and packs, then picked up his portable radio and sent out a call for an armed helicopter? The effort of the walk made their hearts beat fast. Fear made their hearts beat faster still, compounding their fatigue like interest on a usurer's loan.

Sergeant Nichols proved an efficient leader, and a hard one. The oldest member of the party, his stamina—sore ankle and all—amazed Edwards. They all kept quiet, no one wanted to make noise, and Nichols was unable to growl at those too slow to keep up. His contemptuous look was enough. *He's ten years older than me,* Edwards told himself, *and I'm a track man. I can keep up with this bastard. Can't I?*

Nichols managed to keep them clear of the coast road for most of their journey, but there was one point where the road looped around a small cove to within a mile of their path. Here they faced a cruel choice: risk observation from the road, where the traffic was probably Russian, or from the mountaintop. They risked the road, slowly and gingerly as they watched traffic motor along every fifteen minutes or so. The sun was low in the northwestern sky as they crept up a ravine with steep walls. They found a rockpile to rest in before their dash below the observation post.

"Well, that was a nice day's walk, wasn't it?" the sergeant of Royal Marines asked. He wasn't even sweating.

"You trying to prove something, Sergeant?" Edwards asked. He was.

"Sorry, *Lef*tenant. Your friends told me you were in proper shape."

“I don’t think I’ll have a heart attack just yet, if that’s what you mean. Now what?”

“I’d suggest that we wait an hour, until the sun sinks lower, then press on. Nine more miles. We’ll want to move as quick as we can.”

Sweet *Jesus!* Edwards thought. He kept his face impassive. “You sure they won’t see us?”

“Sure? No, I am not sure, *Lef*tenant. Twilight is the hardest time to see, however. The eye cannot adjust from the bright sky to the dark ground.”

“Okay, you got us this far. I’m going to go and check on the lady.”

Nichols watched him walk off. “I would not mind seeing ‘the lady’ myself.”

“That wasn’t a good thing to say, Nick,” Smith observed quietly.

“Come on, you know what he’s—”

“Nick, talk nice about the lady,” Smith warned. He was tired, but not that tired. “She’s had a bad time, man. And the skipper’s a gentleman, y’dig? Hey, I thought he was a wimp, too. I was wrong. Anyway, Miss Vigdis, man, that’s one hell of a lady.”

Mike found her curled in a fetal position next to a rock. Rodgers was keeping an eye on her, and moved off when the lieutenant arrived.

“How are you?” Mike asked. She turned her head fractionally.

“Dead. Michael, I am so tired.”

“Me, too, babe.” Mike sat down beside her and stretched his legs out, wondering if the muscle tissue would just fall off the bones. He was strong enough to stroke her hair. It was matted with sweat, but Mike was past noticing such things. “Just a little while longer. Hey, you’re the one who wanted to stay with us, remember?”

“I am fool!” There was a note of humor in her voice. *As long as you can laugh,* Mike remembered his father saying, *you are not defeated.*

“Come on, you better stretch those legs out or they’re gonna knot up. Come on, roll over.” Edwards straightened her legs and massaged her calves briefly. “What we need is some bananas.”

“What?” Her head came up.

“Bananas have lots of potassium. Helps to prevent cramps.” Or was it calcium for pregnant women? he wondered.

“What do we do when we get to our new hill?”

“We wait for the good guys.”

“They come?” Her voice changed slightly.

“I think so.”

“And you leave then?” Mike was quiet for a moment, measuring his boldness against his shyness. What if she says—

“Not without you, I don’t.” He hesitated again. “I mean, if that’s—”

“Yes, Michael.”

He lay down beside her. Edwards was startled by the fact that he desired her now. She was no longer the victim of rape, or a girl pregnant by another man, or a strange person from another culture. He was awed by her inner strength and other things for which he had no names, and needed none.

“You’re right. I do love you.” *Son of a bitch.* He held her hand as both rested for the task ahead.

"That's one of 'em, sir. *Providence,* I think. I got some funny transients, like metal pieces beating against each other."

They'd been tracking the target—every contact was a target—for two hours, closing very carefully as the possible noise source changed into a probable one. The overhead storm degraded their sonar performance measurably, and the target's stealth prevented their developing a signature identification for an agonizing period. Might she be a Russian sub creeping in search of her own target? Finally the faint rattles from the damaged sail betrayed her. McCaffcrty ordered his boat to close the target at eight knots.

Had *Providence* repaired her sonar systems? Certainly they'd try, McCafferty thought, and if they then detected a submarine approaching very cautiously from the rear, would they think this was their old friend *Chicago,* or another Victor-III? For that matter, how sure were they that their target was *Providence?* That was why American subs were trained to operate alone. Too many uncertainties attached to cooperative operations.

They'd left the Soviet surface forces behind. McCafferty's hit-and-run maneuver had fooled them, and before the noise faded out, they listened to a spirited hunt involving aircraft and surface forces, now thirty miles astern. That was a positive development, but the absence of any surface ships in this area made McCafferty uneasy. He might now be in a submarine-dedicated sector, and submarines were by far the more dangerous opponents. His earlier success against the Victor had been pure luck. That Soviet skipper had been too interested in starting his own hunt to check his flanks. It was a mistake he did not expect to be repeated.

"Range?" McCafferty asked his tracking party.

"About two miles, sir."

That was the fringe of gertrude range, but McCafferty wanted to get a lot closer than that. *Patience,* he told himself. Submarining was a continuous exercise in patience. You spent hours in preparation for a few seconds of activity. *It's a wonder we don't all have ulcers.* Twenty minutes later, they had closed to within a thousand yards of *Providence.* McCafferty lifted the gertrude phone.

"Chicago calling *Providence,* over."

"You took your time about it, Danny."

"Where's Todd?"

"He went off west after something two hours ago. We lost him. No noise at all from that direction."

"What's your condition?"

"The tail works. Rest of our sonar's shot. We can shoot fish from the torpedo-room control systems. Still raining in the control room, but we can live with it as long as we stay above three hundred feet."

"Can you go any faster?"

"We tried going to eight knots. Found out we couldn't keep it up. The sail's coming apart. The noise just gets worse. I can give you six, that's it."

"Very well. If you got a working tail, we'll try to take station a few miles ahead. Call it five miles."

"Thanks, Danny."

McCafferty hung up the phone. "Sonar, you got anything that even looks like it might be something?"

"No, sir, it's clear right now."

"All ahead two-thirds." *So, where the hell is* Boston? the captain asked himself.

"Funny how quiet things have got," the exec pointed out.

"Tell me about it. I know I'm acting paranoid, but am I acting paranoid enough!" McCafferty needed the laugh. "Okay. We sprint and drift north, fifteen minutes sprint, ten drift, until we're five miles ahead of *Providence.* Then we settle down to six knots and continue the mission. I'm going to catch a nap. Wake me in two hours. Talk to the division officers and chiefs, make sure the troops are getting some rest. We've been pushing pretty hard. I don't want anybody to fold up." McCafferty grabbed half a sandwich as he walked forward. It was only eight steps to his stateroom. The food was swallowed by then.

"Captain to control!" It seemed he had only just closed his eyes when the speaker over his head went off. McCafferty checked his watch on the way out the door. He'd been asleep for ninety minutes. It would have to do.

"What do we got?" he asked the exec.

"Possible submarine contact on the port quarter. Just picked it up. We got a bearing change already—it's close. No signature yet."

"Boston?"

"Could be."

I wish Todd hadn't gone off like that, McCafferty told himself. He found himself wondering if they shouldn't just tell *Providence* to go to her best speed and screw the noise. That was fatigue talking, he knew. Tired people make mistakes, especially judgmental errors. *Captains can't afford those, Danny.*

Chicago was making six knots. *No noise at all,* the captain thought. *Nobody can hear us . . . maybe, probably. You don't really know anymore, do you?* He went into the sonar room.

"How you feeling, Chief?"

"Hangin' in there, skipper. This contact's a beaut. See how he fades in and out. He's there, all right, but it's a cast-iron bitch to hold him."

"Boston headed off west a few hours ago."

"Could be him coming back, sir. Lord knows he's quiet enough. Or it could be a Tango on batteries, sir. I don't have enough signal to tell the difference. Sorry, sir. I just don't know." The chief rubbed raw eyes and let out a long breath.

"How long since you had any rest?"

"I don't know that either, sir."

"When we finish up this one, you hit the rack, Chief." The tracking party officer called forward next.

"I have a working range for you, sir. Five thousand yards. I think he's on an easterly course. Trying to firm that up." McCafferty ordered a fire-control solution to be run on the contact.

"What's this?" the chief asked. "Another sonar contact behind the first one,

bearing two-five-three. He's following the other guy!"

"I need an ID, Chief."

"I don't have enough data, Captain. Both these guys are creeping."

Is Boston one of them? If so, which? If the one in front, do we warn him and reveal our position? Or shoot and risk shooting at the wrong one? Or just do nothing at all?

McCafferty went aft to the plotting board. "How close is this one to *Providence?"*

"Just over four thousand yards, coming in on her port bow."

"He probably has her then," the captain thought aloud.

"But who the hell is he?" the tracking officer asked quietly. "And what's this Sierra-2 contact behind him?"

"Transient! Transient!" the sonar chief called. "Mechanical transient on Sierra-2!"

"Left fifteen degrees rudder," McCafferty ordered quietly.

"Torpedo in the water, bearing two-four-nine!"

"All ahead two-thirds!" This order was loud.

"Conn, sonar, we got increased machinery noises on Sierra-1. Okay, the front contact is a two-screw boat, blade count indicates speed of ten knots and increasing, getting some cavitation. Target Sierra-1 is maneuvering. Classify this target as a Tango-class."

"Boston's the one in back. All ahead one-third." McCafferty ordered his submarine to slow back down. "Get him, Todd!"

His wish was rewarded with an explosion fifteen seconds later. Simms had come up with the same tactic as his friend on *Chicago.* Close to a few thousand yards of the target, and give him no chance to maneuver clear. Fifteen minutes later, *Boston* joined her healthy sister.

"Talk about a tough four hours. That Tango was good!" Simms called over on the gertrude. "You in good shape?"

"Yes. We have the front guard position. You want to take the rear for a while?"

"You got it, Danny. See ya'."

ICELAND

"Lead off, Sergeant Nichols."

The Russian outpost was three miles south and three thousand feet up. They climbed up the walls of the ravine and into relatively open ground. They were between the sun and the outpost. Edwards found that intellectually he believed what Nichols said about light conditions, and how the eye reacted to them—and how easy was it to spot something three miles away?—but walking like this felt like being naked on the street at rush hour. They had darkened their faces with camouflage makeup, and their uniforms blended in well with the color and texture of the land. *But the human eye looks for movement,* Edwards told himself, *and we're moving. What am I doing here?*

One step at a time. Walk softly. Don't raise any dust. Slow, easy pace. No sudden moves. Heads down. All the things Nichols had said echoed through his mind. *Look at me, I'm invisible.*

He commanded himself not to look up, but Edwards would have been less than human not to sneak an occasional look. The hill—mountain—towered above them. It really got steep near the top. A volcano? he wondered. There was no sign of activity at the summit. Maybe nobody is there? *Right. Do us all a favor and be blind, or asleep, or eating, or looking for airplanes.* He had to pull his eyes away from it.

The rocks he stepped over and around blended together after a while. Each member of the party walked alone. No one said anything. Every face was couched in a neutral expression that might have meant quiet determination or concealed exhaustion. Just walking the rocks safely required concentration.

This is the end of it. The last hike. The last hill to climb. The end, Edwards promised himself. *After this I drive a car to get the morning paper. If I can't have a one-story house I'll damned well have an elevator installed. I'll get kids to cut the grass for me and sit on the porch watching them.*

Finally the hilltop was behind him. He had to sneak his looks over his shoulder now. For some reason the helicopter full of Russian paratroopers didn't come. They were somewhat safer now. So Nichols stepped up the pace.

Four hours later the mountaintop was behind a knife-edge ridge of volcanic rock. Nichols called a halt. They'd been moving for seven hours.

"Well," the sergeant said. "That was easy enough, wasn't it?"

"Sarge, next time you jump out of an airplane, please break your ankle," Mike suggested.

"Hard part's behind us. Now all we have left is to climb this wee hill," Nichols pointed out.

"Might want to get some water first," Smith said. He pointed to a stream a hundred yards away.

"Good idea. *Lef*tenant, I do think we should be atop the hill as quick as we can."

"Agreed. This is absolutely the last Goddamned hill I ever climb!"

Nichols chuckled. "I have said that myself once or twice, sir."

"I don't believe it."

USS *INDEPENDENCE*

"Welcome aboard, Toland!" Commander, Strike Fleet Atlantic was a three-star billet, but Rear Admiral Scott Jacobsen would have to settle for the job instead of the rank for the moment. The life-long aviator was the most senior carrier-division commander in the Navy, and was the replacement for the late Admiral Baker. "You have one hell of a letter of introduction here from Admiral Beattie."

"He made too big a deal of it. All I did was pass along an idea somebody else came up with."

"Okay. You were on *Nimitz* when the task force got hit, right?"

"Yes, sir, I was in CIC."

"The only other guy who got out was Sonny Svenson?"

"Captain Svenson, yes, sir."

Jacobsen picked up his phone and punched three digits. "Ask Captain Spaulding to join me. Thank you. Toland, you, me, and my operations officer are going to relive that experience. I want to see if there might be something our briefing left out. They're not going to punch any holes in my carriers, son."

"Admiral, don't underestimate them," Toland warned.

"I won't underestimate them, Toland. That's why I have you here. Your group got caught too far north for the circumstances. Taking Iceland was a beautiful move on their part. It screwed our plans pretty well. We are going to fix that, Commander."

"So I gather, sir."

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

"Ain't she pretty!" O'Malley said. He flipped his cigarette over the side and crossed his arms, staring at the massive carrier on the horizon. She was just a dim gray shape, with aircraft landing on the flat deck.

"My story is supposed to be about the convoy," Calloway sniffed.

"Well, they're making port right about now. End of story." The pilot turned with a wide grin. "Hell, you made me famous, didn't you?"

"You bloody aviators are all the same!" the Reuters correspondent snapped angrily. "The captain won't even tell me where we're going."

"You don't know?" O'Malley asked in surprise.

"Well, where are we going?"

"North,"

LE HAVRE, FRANCE

The port had been cleared in expectation of the convoy. The merchantmen were brought past several wrecks of ships that had died from Soviet mines, some laid before the war, others dropped from aircraft. The port had also been bombed six times by long-range fighter-bombers, each time at a murderous price from French air defense forces.

The first ships in were the big Ro/Ros, the roll-on/roll-off container ships. Eight of them together carried a full armored division, and these were taken quickly to the Bassin Théophile Ducrocq. One by one, the ships lowered their curved stem ramps to the dock and the tanks began to roll off. They met a continuous taxi-rank of low-loader tractor-trailers, each of which would carry

a tank or other armored fighting vehicle to the front lines. Loaded, they rolled off one by one to the assembly point at the Renault facility adjacent to the port. It would take hours to unload the division, but it had been decided nevertheless to move everything in a body to the fighting front, less than five hundred kilometers away.

After what had seemed an endless, tense voyage, arrival was a culture shock for the American troops, many of them National Guardsmen who rarely went overseas. The dock workers and traffic police were too exhausted from weeks of frantic work to show any human emotion, but ordinary people who had learned, despite heavy security, that reinforcing troops were landing came out, first in small groups, soon in small mobs, to watch the new arrivals. The American troops were not allowed to leave their company areas. After some informal negotiations, it was decided small delegations would be allowed to meet briefly with some of the troops. The security risk was minor—the telephone lines in and out of all NATO ports were under tight control—and there was an unexpected result to this exercise in simple courtesy. Like their fathers and grandfathers, the arriving troops saw that Europe was worth fighting for. The people who were often seen merely as threats to American jobs had faces and hopes and dreams, all of which were in danger. They were not fighting for a principle, or a political decision, or a treaty made of paper. They were here for these people and others not the least different from those they'd left at home.

It took two hours longer than they'd hoped. Some vehicles were broken down, but the port and police officials had organized the assembly points with skill. The division moved off in the early afternoon at a steady fifty kilometers per hour, driving down a multilane highway cleared for its path. Every few yards, someone stood to wave while the troops made final checks on their gear. The easy part of their journey was about to end.

ICELAND

It was four in the morning when they reached the top, only to find that this mountain had a number of "tops." The Russians had the highest one, three miles away. Edwards's group had a choice of two subsidiary peaks, each a few hundred feet lower than the adjacent thousand-meter summit. They picked the higher of the two, overlooking the small fishing port of Stykkisholmur, almost due north, and the large rock-filled bay that the map called Hvammsfjördur.

"Looks like a fine observation point, *Lef*tenant Edwards," Nichols judged.

"That's good, Sarge, 'cause I am not going another foot." Edwards already had his binoculars on the eastern peak. "I don't see any movement."

"They're there," Nichols said.

"Yeah," Smith agreed. "Sure as hell."

Edwards slid down from the crestline and unpacked his radio.

"Doghouse, this is Beagle, and we are where you want us, over."

"Give me your exact position."

Edwards opened his map and read off the coordinates. “We believe there’s a Russian observation post on the next peak over. They’re about five klicks away, according to this map. We’re well concealed here and we have food and water for two days. We can see the roads leading into Stykkisholmur. Matter of fact, it’s nice and clear now, and we can see all the way to Keflavik. We can’t pick anything out, but we can see the peninsula.”

“Very well. I want you to look north and tell us what you see in detail.”

Edwards handed the radio antenna to Smith, then turned and put his field glasses on the town.

“Okay. The land is pretty flat, but higher than the water, on a shelf, like. The town is fairly small, maybe eight square blocks. There are some little fishing boats tied up to the docks . . . I count nine of them. The harbor north and east of the port is wall-to-wall rocks that go on for miles. I do not see any armored vehicles, no obvious signs of Russian troops—wait. I do see two four-by-fours parked in the middle of the street, like, but nobody around ’em. The sun’s still low, and there’s lots of shadows. Nothing moving on the roads. I guess that’s about it.”

“Very well, Beagle. Good report. Let us know if you see any Soviet personnel at all. Even one, we want to know about him. Stay put.”

“Somebody coming to get us?”

“Beagle, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

USS *INDEPENDENCE*

Toland stood in the Combat Information Center, watching the displays. Submarines concerned him the most. Eight allied subs were in the Denmark Strait, west of Iceland, forming a barrier that few submarines would be able to pass. They were supported by Navy Orions operating out of Sondrestrom, Greenland, something impossible until the Russian fighters at Keflavik had been whittled down. That closed off one possible avenue of access to Strike Fleet Atlantic. More submarines formed a line parallel to the fleet’s line of advance, and those were supported by the carrier-borne S-3A Vikings that operated continuously off the flight decks.

The Pentagon had leaked to the press that this Marine division was en route to Germany, where the battle hung in the balance. In fact, the tight formation of amphibs was twenty miles from his carrier on a course of zero-three-nine, four hundred miles from its real objective.

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

“We’re not heading north any longer,” Calloway said. Dinner was being served in the wardroom. The officers were plowing through the last fresh lettuce

aboard.

"I believe you're right," O'Malley agreed. "I think we're heading west now."

"You might as well tell me what the devil we're up to. I've been shut off from your satellite transmitters."

"We're screening the *Nimitz* battle group, except that when you're motoring along at twenty-five knots, it's not all that easy." O'Malley didn't like this. They were running a risk. It was part of war, but the pilot didn't like any part of war. Especially risks. *They pay me to do it, not to like it.*

"The escort is mostly British, isn't it?"

"Yeah, so?"

"That's a story I can use to tell the people at home how important—"

"Look, Mr. Calloway, let's say you file your story, and it got published in the local papers. Then let's say a Soviet agent reads the story and passes it along to—"

"How would he do that? The government has undoubtedly put severe restrictions on all forms of communication."

"Ivan has lots of communications satellites, same as us. We have two satellite transmitters on this dinky little frigate. You've seen 'em. How expensive do they look? Think maybe you could have one in your backyard, inside a bush maybe? Besides, the whole group is blacked out. Total EMCON. Nobody is transmitting anything at the moment."

Morris arrived and took his seat at the head of the table.

"Captain, where are we going?" Calloway asked.

"I just found out. Sorry I can't tell you. *Battleaxe* and we will continue to work together for a while as stem guard for the *Nimitz* group. We are now designated 'Mike Force.' "

"We getting any more help?" O'Malley asked.

"Bunker Hill is heading this way. She had to reload her magazines and join up with HMS *Illustrious.* They'll operate in close when they catch up. We're going to outside picket again. We start doing real ASW work in another four hours. Still going to be a bastard trying to keep up with the carrier, though."

USS *CHICAGO*

There were three contacts. All arrived within ten minutes. Two were ahead of *Chicago,* left and right of her bow. The third was on her port beam. Somehow, McCafferty realized, the Russians knew of the submarines they had killed. Probably some sort of radio buoy, he was sure. That meant all that his tactical successes had really accomplished was to draw more dangers in on the trio of American submarines.

"Conn, sonar. We have some sonobuoy signals at two-six-six. Count three buoys—four, make it four."

More Bears? McCafferty wondered. *A cooperative hunt?*

"Skipper, you better come forward," the sonar chief called.

"What's happening?" The waterfall display screen was suddenly crowded.

"Sir, we have three lines on sonobuoys forming up right now. Gotta be at least three aircraft up there. This one's fairly close, looks like it'll extend aft of us, maybe right on our friends."

McCafferty watched the new signal lines appear at the rate of one per minute. Each was a Russian sonobuoy, and the line marched east as two others grew on different azimuths.

"They're trying to box us in, Chief."

"Looks that way, sir."

Every time we destroyed a Russian ship we gave them a location reference. They've confirmed our course and speed of advance many times over. McCafferty had gotten his submarine back to the Svyataya Anna Trough. His path to the icepack was a hundred miles wide and three hundred fathoms deep. But how many Russian subs were there? The sonar crew continued to call off bearings to the submarine contacts while the captain watched the buoy lines extend.

"I think this is *Providence,* sir. She just increased speed—yeah, look at the noise now, she's really increased speed. This buoy must be right near her. Still can't find Boston, though."

Bearing was constant to the two forward submarine contacts. He couldn't develop a range figure unless he or they maneuvered. If he turned left, he'd then close on a third contact, which might not be a good idea. If he turned right, he'd run away from the submarine that might then close on *Providence.* If he did nothing, he'd accomplish nothing, but McCafferty didn't know what to do.

"There's another buoy, sir." The new one was between the bearings of two existing contacts. They were trying to localize *Providence.*

"There's Boston. She's—yeah, she's running past a buoy." A new contact line appeared suddenly bright where nothing had been before. *Todd just increased power and he's going to allow himself to be picked up,* McCafferty thought. *Then he'll dive deep to evade.*

Look at it from the Russian side, the captain told himself. *They don't really know what they're up against, do they? They probably figure they're up against more than one, but how many more? They can't know that. So they'll want to flush the game before they shoot, just to see what's here.*

"Torpedo in the water, bearing one-nine-three!"

A Russian Bear had dropped on *Boston.* McCafferty watched the sonar display as Simms took his boat deep with the torpedo in pursuit. He'd change depth and make a few radical changes in course and speed, trying to evade the fish. The bright line of a noisemaker appeared, holding a constant bearing as *Boston* maneuvered further. The torpedo chased the noisemaker, running another three minutes before it ran out of fuel.

The screen was relatively clear again. The sonobuoy signals remained. *Boston* and *Providence* had reduced power and disappeared—but so had the Russian sub signals.

What are they doing? What is their plan? the captain asked himself. *What submarines are out there?*

Tangos, has to be Tangos. They cut their electric motors back, slowed to steerageway, and that's why they disappeared off the scopes. Okay, they're not coming in after us anymore. They stopped moving when the aircraft detected

Providence and Boston. *They're coordinating with the Bears! That means they have to be at shallow depth, and their sonar performance is down because they're close to the surface.*

"Chief, assume that these two contacts you had were Tangos doing about ten knots. The figure of merit gives us a detection range of what?"

"These water conditions . . . ten to twelve miles. I'd be real careful using that number, sir."

Three more sonobuoy lines began to appear north of Chicago. McCafferty went aft to see how they were plotted out. They assumed about a two-mile spacing on the sonobuoy lines, and that gave them range figures.

"Not being very subtle, are they?" the exec observed.

"Why bother when you don't have to? Let's see if we can pick our way through the buoys."

"What are our friends doing?"

"They'd better be coming north, too. I don't want to think about what other assets they have moving in on us. Let's head right through here."

The executive officer gave the orders. *Chicago* began to move forward again. Now they'd really find out if the rubber tiles on the hull absorbed sonar waves or not. The last bearings to the Russian submarines were plotted also. McCafferty knew that they too could be moving behind that wall of noise. When he detected them again it would be at perilously close range. They went deep. The submarine dove to a thousand feet and cruised toward the precise midpoint between a pair of pinging buoys.

Another torpedo appeared in the water aft, and McCafferty maneuvered quickly to evade, only to realize that it was aimed at someone else, or nothing at all. They listened to it run for several minutes, then fade out. *A perfect way to break a man's concentration,* McCafferty thought, bringing his sub back to a northerly course.

Bearings to the sonobuoys changed as they got closer. They were almost exactly two miles apart, a mile on either beam, as *Chicago* went through the first line, crawling just above the bottom. They were set on a frequency that could be heard clearly through the *hull. Just like the movies,* the captain thought, as the crewmen not directly involved in navigating the boat looked up and outward at the hull as though it were being caressed by the noise. Some caress. The second line was three miles beyond the first. *Chicago* turned slightly left to head for another gap.

Speed was down to four knots now. Sonar called out a possible contact to the north that immediately faded away. Maybe a Tango, maybe nothing. It was plotted anyway, as the submarine took nearly an hour to reach the second line of pinging buoys.

"Torpedo in the water, port side!" sonar screamed out.

"Right full rudder, all ahead flank!"

Chicago's propeller thrashed at the water, creating a bonanza of noise for the Russian aircraft who'd dropped a fish on a possible contact. They ran for three minutes while waiting for additional data on the torpedo.

"Where's the torpedo?"

"It's pinging, sir—but it's pinging the other way, bearing changing south, left to right, and weakening."

“All ahead one-third, rudder amidships,” McCafferty ordered.

“Another one—torpedo in the water bearing zero-four-six.”

“Right full rudder, all ahead flank,” McCafferty ordered yet again. He turned to the exec. “You know what they just did? They dropped a fish to spook us into moving! *Damn!” Beautiful tactic, whoever you are. You know we can’t afford to ignore a torpedo.*

“But how’d they know we were here?”

“Maybe they just guessed well, maybe they got a twitch. Then we gave ’em the contact.”

“Torpedo bearing zero-four-one. The torpedo is pinging at us, don’t know if it has us, sir. Captain, I got a new contact bearing zero-nine-five. Sounds like machinery noises—possible submarine.”

“Now what?” McCafferty whispered. He put the Russian torpedo on his stem and hugged the bottom. Sonar performance dropped to zero as *Chicago* accelerated past twenty knots. Their instruments could still hear the ultrasonic pings of the torpedo, however, and McCafferty maneuvered to keep the weapon behind him as it dove down after the American sub.

“Bring her up! Make your depth one hundred feet. Shoot off a noisemaker.”

“Full rise on the planes!” The diving officer ordered a short blow on the forward trim tanks to effect the maneuver. Along with the noisemaker, it created an enormous disturbance in the water. The torpedo raced in after it, missing below *Chicago.* A good maneuver, it was also a desperate one. The submarine rose quickly, her elastic hull popping as the pressure on the steel diminished. There was an enemy sub out there, and he now had all sorts of noise from *Chicago.* All McCafferty could do was run. He was confident that the other sub would chase after him with a homing torpedo circling below, but didn’t understand why the other sub was there at all. He slowed *Chicago* to five knots and turned as the torpedo ran out of fuel below him. Next problem: there was a Soviet submarine close by.

“He’s gotta know about where we are, skipper.”

“You got that one right, XO. Sonar, Conn, Yankee-search!” Both sides could use unusual tactics. “Fire-control party, stand by, this one’s going to be a snapshot.”

The powerful but seldom-used active sonar installed in Chicago’s bow blasted the water with low-frequency energy.

“Contact, bearing zero-eight-six, range four six hundred!”

“Set it up!”

Chicago’s steel hull reverberated three seconds later with Soviet sonar waves.

“Set! Ready for tubes three and two.”

“Match bearings and shoot!” The torpedoes were fired within seconds of one another. “Cut the wires. Take her down! Make your depth one thousand feet, all ahead flank, left full rudder, come to new course two-six-five!” The submarine wheeled and sped west as her torpedoes raced toward their target.

“Transients—torpedoes in the water aft, bearing zero-eight-five.”

“Patience,” McCafferty said. *You didn’t expect us to do that, did you?* “Nice job, fire-control! We got our shots off a minute faster than the other guy. Speed?”

"Twenty-four knots and increasing, sir," the helmsman answered. "Passing four hundred feet, sir."

"Sonar, how many fish we got chasing us?"

"At least three, sir. Sir, our units are pinging. I believe they have the target."

"XO, in a few seconds we're going to turn and change depth. When we do, I want you to fire off four noisemakers at fifteen-second intervals."

"Aye, Cap'n."

McCafferty went over to stand behind the helmsman. He'd just turned twenty the day before. The rudder indicator was amidships, with ten degrees of down angle on the planes, and the submarine was just passing through five hundred feet and hurtling down. The speed log now showed thirty knots. The rate of acceleration slowed as *Chicago* neared her maximum speed. He patted the boy on the shoulder.

"Now. Ten degrees rise on the planes and come right twenty degrees rudder."

"Yes, sir!"

The hull thundered with the news that their fish had found their target. Everyone jumped or cringed—they had their own problems chasing after them. *Chicago's* maneuver left a massive knuckle in the water that the executive officer punctuated with four noisemakers. The small gas canisters filled the disturbance with bubbles that made excellent sonar targets while *Chicago* sped north. She raced right under a sonobuoy, but the Russians could not put another torpedo down for fear of interfering with those already running.

"Bearing is changing on all contacts, sir," sonar reported.

McCafferty started to breathe again. "Ahead one-third."

The helmsman dialed the annunciator handle. The engineers responded at once, and again *Chicago* slowed.

"We'll try to disappear again. They probably aren't sure yet who killed who. We'll use that time to get back down to the bottom and crawl northeast. Well done, people, that was sorta hairy."

The helmsman looked up. "Skipper, the south side of Chicago ain't the baddest part of town anymore!"

Sure as hell is the tiredest, though, the captain thought. *They can't keep coming at us this way. They have to back off and rethink, don't they?* He had the chart memorized. Another hundred fifty miles to the icepack.

39

The Shores of Stykkisholmur

HUNZEN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

They'd finally defeated the counterattack. *No,* Alekseyev told himself, *we didn't defeat it, we drove it off.* The Germans had withdrawn of their own accord after blunting half of the Russian attack. There was more to victory than being in possession of the battlefield.

It only got harder. Beregovoy had been right when he'd said that coordinating a large battle on the move was much harder than doing it from a fixed command post. Just the effort of getting the right map opened inside a cramped command vehicle was a battle against time and space, and eighty kilometers of front made for too many tactical maps. The counterattack had forced the generals to move one of their precious A reserve formations north, just in time to watch the Germans withdraw after savaging the rear areas of three B motor-rifle divisions, and spreading panic throughout the thousands of reservists who were trying to cope with old equipment and barely remembered training.

"Why did they pull back?" Sergetov asked his general.

Alekseyev did not respond. There was a fine question that he had already asked half a dozen times. *There were probably two reasons,* he told himself. *First, they'd lacked the strength to pursue the effort and had had to settle for a spoiling attack to unbalance our operation. Second, the central axis of our attack was on the verge of reaching the Weser, and they might have been called back to deal with this possible crisis.* The Army group intelligence officer approached.

"Comrade General, we have a disturbing report from one of our reconnaissance aircraft." The officer related the sketchy radio message from a low-flying recce aircraft. NATO's control of the air had brought particularly grim losses to those all-important units. The pilot of this MiG-21 had seen and reported a massive column of allied armor on the E8 highway south of Osnabrück before disappearing. The General immediately lifted the radiophone to Stendal.

"Why were we not informed of this as soon as you received it?" Alekseyev demanded of his superior.

"It is an unconfirmed report," CINC-West replied.

"Dammit, we *know* the Americans landed reinforcements at Le Havre!"

"And they can't be at the front for at least another day. How soon will you have a bridgehead on the Weser?"

"We have units on the river now at Rühle—"

"Then move your bridging units there and *get them across!"*

"Comrade, my right flank is still in disarray, and now we have this report of a possible enemy division forming up there!"

"You worry about crossing the Weser and let me worry about this phantom division! That's an order, Pavel Leonidovich!"

Alekseyev set the phone back in its place. *He has a better overall picture of what's going on,* Pasha told himself. *After we bridge the Weser, we have no really serious obstacle in front of us for over a hundred kilometers. After the river Weser, we can race into the Ruhr, Germany's industrial heart. If we destroy that, or even threaten it, then perhaps the Germans will seek their political solution and the war is won. That is what he is telling me.*

The General looked at his maps. Soon the lead regiment would try to force men across the river at Rühle. A bridging regiment was already en route. And he had his orders.

"Start moving the OMG troops."

"But our right flank!" Beregovoy protested.

"Will have to look after itself."

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

SACEUR was still worried about his supplies. He'd also been forced to gamble in giving highest transport priority to the armored division now approaching Springe. The container ships loaded with munitions, spare parts, and the millions of other specialty items were just now sending their cargoes to the front. His largest reserve formation, the tank force, was about to team up with two German brigades, and what was left of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, once a brigade in all but name, now only two battalions of weary men.

His supply situation was still tenuous. Many of his line units were down to four days of consumable stores, and the resupply effort would take two days, even if things went perfectly: a thin margin that in a pre-war exercise might have seemed equitable enough, but not now, when men and nations were at stake. Yet what choice did he have?

"General, we have a report here of a regiment-sized attack on the Weser. It looks like Ivan's trying to put troops on the left bank."

"What do we have there?"

"One battalion of *Landwehr,* and they're pretty beat up. There are two companies of tanks on the way, ought to be there in a little over an hour. There are preliminary indications that Soviet reinforcements are heading that way. This might be the main axis of their attack, at least it seems that they're orienting in that direction."

SACEUR rocked back in his chair, looking up at the map display. He had

one reserve regiment within three hours of Rühle. The General was a man who loved to gamble. He was never happier than when sitting at a table with a deck of cards and a few hundred dollars' worth of chips. He usually won. If he attacked south from Springe and failed . . . the Russians would put two or three divisions across the Weser, and he had precisely one regiment in reserve to stand in their way. If he moved his new tank division there, and by some miracle they got there in time, he would have frittered away his best chance for a counterattack by reacting to a Soviet move again. No, he couldn't just react anymore. He pointed to Springe.

"How long before they're ready to move?"

"The whole division—six hours at best. We can divert the units still on the road south to—"

"No."

"Then we go south from Springe with what's ready now?"

"No." SACEUR shook his head and outlined his plan . . .

ICELAND

"I see one," Garcia called. Edwards and Nichols were beside him in a moment.

"Hello, Ivan," Nichols said quietly.

Even with binoculars, the distance was still a little over three miles. Edwards saw a tiny figure walking along the crest of the mountaintop. He carried a rifle and appeared to be wearing a soft hat—perhaps a beret—instead of a helmet. The figure stopped and brought his hands up to his face. He had binoculars, too, Edwards saw. He looked north, slightly downward, training his field glasses left to right and back again. Then he turned and looked off in the direction of Keflavik.

Another man appeared, approaching the first. Perhaps they were talking, but it was impossible to tell at this distance. The one with binoculars pointed at something to the south.

"What do you suppose this is all about?" Edwards asked.

"Talking about the weather, girls, sports, food—who knows?" Nichols replied. "Another one!"

The third figure appeared, and the trio of Russian paratroopers stood together doing whatever it was that they were doing. One had to be an officer, Edwards decided. He said something, and the others moved off quickly, dropping out of sight below the crest. *What order did you just give?*

Presently a group of men appeared. The light was bad, and they shuffled around too much to get an accurate count, but there had to be at least ten. About half of them were carrying their personal weapons, and these started moving downhill. To the west.

"Right, he's a smart soldier," Nichols announced. "He's sending out a patrol to make certain the area's secure."

"What do we do about it?" Edwards asked.

"What do you think, *Lef*tenant?"

"Our orders are to sit tight. So we sit tight and hope they don't see us."

"Not likely they will, you know. I shouldn't think they'd climb down—must be eight hundred feet—then cross that rock yard, then climb up here just to see if any Yanks are about. Remember, the only reason we know they're there is that we saw their helicopter."

Otherwise we might have walked right into them, and that would have been that, Edwards reminded himself. *I won't* be safe *until I'm back home in Maine.* "Is that more of them?"

"Must be at least a platoon over there. That is rather clever of our friends, isn't it?"

Edwards got on the radio to report this development to Doghouse while the Marines kept track of the Russians.

"A platoon?"

"That's Sergeant Nichols's estimate. Kinda hard to count heads from three miles away, fella."

"Okay, we'll pass that one along. Any air activity?"

"Haven't seen any aircraft at all since yesterday."

"How about Stykkisholmur?"

"Too far to make anything out. We still can see those four-by-fours sitting in the street, but no armored vehicles. I'd say they had a small garrison force there to keep an eye on the port. The fishing boats aren't going anywhere."

"Very well. Good report, Beagle. Hang in there." The major switched off and turned to his neighbor at the communications console. "It's a shame to keep them in the dark like this, isn't it?"

The SOE man sipped at his tea. "It would be a greater shame to blow the operation."

Edwards didn't take the radio apart, but left it leaning against a rock. Vigdis was still asleep on a flat ledge twenty feet below the top. Sleep was about the most attractive thing Edwards could think of at the moment.

"They're heading in this direction," Garcia said. He handed the glasses to Edwards. Smith and Nichols were conferring a few yards away.

Mike trained the binoculars on the Russians. He told himself that to have them come right to his position was a very low order of probability. *Keep telling yourself that.* He shifted his glasses to the Russian observation post.

"There it is again," the sergeant told his lieutenant.

"What's that?"

"I saw a flash from that hilltop, sun reflected off something."

"A shiny rock," the lieutenant snorted, not taking the time to look. "Comrade Lieutenant!" The officer turned at the sharp tone to see a rock flying through the air at his face. He caught it, and was too surprised to be angry. "How shiny does that rock look?"

"An old can, then! We've found enough trash here from tourists and mountain climbers, haven't we?"

"Then why does it come and go and come back?"

The lieutenant got visibly angry at last. "Sergeant, I know you have a year's

combat experience in Afghanistan. I know I am a new officer. *But I am a Goddamned officer and you are a Goddamned sergeant!"*

The wonders of our classless society, the sergeant thought, continuing to look at his officer. Few officers could bear his look.

"Very well, Sergeant. You tell them." The lieutenant pointed at the radio.

"Markhovskiy, before you come back, check out the hilltop to your right."

"But it's two hundred meters high!" the squad leader shot back.

"Correct. It shouldn't take long at all," the platoon sergeant said comfortingly.

USS *INDEPENDENCE*

Toland switched viewgraphs in the projector. "Okay, these satellite shots are less than three hours old. Ivan has three mobile radars, here, here, and here. He moves them about daily—meaning that one's probably been moved already—and usually has two operating around the clock. At Keflavik we have five SA-11 launch vehicles, four birds per vehicle. This SAM is very bad news. You've all been briefed on its known capabilities, and you'd better figure on a few hundred hand-held SAMs, too. The photo shows six mobile antiaircraft guns. We don't see any fixed ones. They're there, gentlemen, they're just camouflaged. At least five, perhaps as many as ten MiG-29 fighter interceptors. This used to be a regiment until the guys from *Nimitz* cut them down to size. Remember that the ones who're left are the ones who survived two squadrons of Tomcats. That is the opposition at Keflavik."

Toland stepped aside while the wing operations officer went over the mission profile. It sounded impressive to Toland. He hoped it would be so for the Russians.

The curtain went up fifty minutes later. The first aircraft launched for the strike were the E-2C Hawkeyes. Accompanied by fighters, they flew to within eighty miles of the Icelandic coast and radiated their own radar coverage all over the formation. More Hawkeyes reached farther out to cover the formation from possible air- and submarine-launched missile attack.

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

Ground-based Soviet radar detected the Hawkeyes even before their powerful systems went active. They could see two of the slow propeller-driven aircraft hovering beyond SAM range, each accompanied by two other aircraft whose extended figure-eight-course tracks denoted them as Tomcat interceptors guarding the Hawkeyes. The alarm was sounded. Fighter pilots boarded their aircraft while missile and gun crews raced to their stations.

The fighter-force commander was a major with three kills to his credit—but who had learned the virtue of caution the hard way. He'd been shot down once already. The Americans had sprung one trap on his regiment and he had no wish to participate in a second. If this was an attack and not a feint to draw out what fighters remained on Iceland—how would he know? He reached his decision. On the major's command, the fighters lifted off, climbed to twenty thousand feet, and orbited over the peninsula, conserving their fuel and remaining over land, where they could be supported by friendly SAMs. They had exercised carefully the previous few days with these tactics, and were as confident as they could be that the missile crews could distinguish between friendly and unfriendly aircraft. When they got to altitude, their radar threat receivers told them of more American Hawkeyes to the east and west. The information was relayed home with a request for a strike by the Backfires. What they got back was a request to identify the American fleet's location and composition. The airbase commander didn't bother forwarding that. The Soviet fighter commander swore under his breath. The American radar aircraft were prime targets, and tantalizingly within reach. With a full regiment, he'd streak after them and risk losses from their fighter escorts, but he was sure that that was precisely what the Americans were hoping he'd do.

The Intruders went in first, skimming above the wavetops from the south at five hundred knots, Standard-ARM missiles hanging from their wings. More Tomcat fighters were behind them at high altitude. When the fighters passed the radar aircraft, they illuminated the circling MiGs with their radars and began to fire off Phoenix missiles.

The MiGs couldn't ignore them. The Soviet fighters separated into two-plane elements and scattered, coached from their ground-based radar controllers.

The Intruders popped up at a range of thirty miles, just outside range of the SAMs, and loosed four Standard-ARM missiles each, which homed in on the Russian search radars. The Russian radar operators faced a cruel choice. They could leave their search radars on and almost certainly have them destroyed or turn them off and lessen the chance—and completely lose track of the overhead air battle. They chose a middle ground. The Soviet SAM commander ordered his men to flip their systems on and off at random intervals, hoping to confuse the incoming missiles while keeping tenuous coverage of the incoming strike. The missile flight time was just over a minute, and most of the radar crews took the time to switch their systems off and leave them off—each misunderstanding the order in the most advantageous manner.

The Phoenixes arrived first. The MiG pilots suddenly lost their ground-control guidance, but kept maneuvering. One aircraft had four missiles targeted, and evaded two missiles only to blunder into another one. The major in command swore at his inability to hit back as he tried to think of something that would work.

Next came the Standard-ARMs. The Russians had three air-search radars and three more for missile-acquisition. All had been turned on when the first alarm sounded, then all had gone black after the missiles had been detected in the air. The Standards were only partially confused. Their guidance systems had been designed to record the position of a radar in case it did go off the air, and

they homed in on those positions now. The missiles killed two transmitters entirely and damaged two others.

The American mission commander was annoyed. The Russian fighters were not cooperating. They hadn't come out even when the Intruders had popped up—he'd had more fighters waiting low for that eventuality. But the Soviet radars were down. He gave the next order. Three squadrons of F/A-18 Hornets streaked in low from the north.

The Russian air-defense commander ordered his radars back on, saw that no more missiles were in the air, and soon picked up the low-flying Hornets. The MiG commander saw the American attack aircraft next, and with them, his chance. The MiG-29 was a virtual twin to the new American aircraft.

The Hornets sought out the Russian SAM launchers and began to launch their guided weapons at them. Missiles crisscrossed the sky. Two Hornets fell to missiles, two more to guns, as the American fighter-bombers scoured the ground with bombs and gunfire. Then the MiGs arrived.

The American pilots were warned, but were too close to their bombing targets to react at once. Once free of their heavy ordnance, they were fighters again, and climbed into the sky—they feared MiGs more than missiles. The resulting air battle was a masterpiece of confusion. The two aircraft would have been hard to distinguish sitting side by side on the ground. At six hundred knots, in the middle of battle, the task was almost impossible, and the Americans, with their greater numbers, had to hold fire until they were sure of their targets. The Russians knew what they were attacking, but they too shrank from shooting with abandon at a target that looked too much like a comrade's aircraft. The result was a swarming mix of fighters closing to a range too short for missiles, as pilots sought positive target identification, an anachronistic gun duel punctuated by surface-to-air missiles from the two surviving Russian launchers. Controllers on the American aircraft and the Russian ground station never had a chance to direct matters. It was entirely in the hands of the pilots. The fighters went to afterburner and swept into punishing high-g turns while heads swiveled and eyes squinted at familiar shapes while trying to decide if the paint scheme was friendly or not. That part of the task was fairly even. The American planes were haze-gray and harder to spot, allowing easier target identification at long range than at short. Two Hornets died first, followed by a MiG. Then another MiG fell to cannon fire, and a Hornet to a snap-shot missile. An errant SAM exploded a MiG and a Hornet together.

The Soviet major saw that and screamed for the SAMs to hold fire; then he fired his cannon at a Hornet blazing across his nose, missed, and turned to follow him. He watched the American close for a high-deflection shot on a MiG-29 and damage its engine. The major didn't know how many of his aircraft were left. It was beyond that. He was engaged in a struggle for personal survival—which he expected to lose. Caution faded to nothing as he closed on afterburner and ignored his low-fuel-state light. His target turned north and led him over the water. The major fired his last missile and then watched it track right into the Hornet's right engine as his own engines flamed out. The Hornet's tail fragmented and the major screamed with delight as he and the American pilot ejected a few hundred meters apart. *Four kills,* the

major thought. *At least I have done my duty.* He was in the water thirty seconds later.

Commander Davies crawled into his raft despite a broken wrist, cursing and blessing his luck at the same time. His first considered action was to activate his rescue radio. He looked around and saw another yellow raft a short distance away. It wasn't easy paddling with one arm, but the other guy was paddling toward him. What came next was quite a surprise.

"You are prisoner!" The man was pointing a gun at him. Davies's revolver was at the bottom of the sea.

"Who the hell are you?"

"I am Major Alexandr Georgiyevich Chapayev—Soviet Air Force."

"Howdy. I'm Commander Gus Davies, U.S. Navy. Who got you?"

"No one get me! I run out of fuel!" He waved the gun. "And you are my prisoner."

"Oh, horseshit!"

Major Chapayev shook his head. Like Davies, he was in a near-state of shock from the stress of combat and his close escape from death.

"Hold on to that gun, though, Major. I don't know if there're sharks around here or not."

"Sharks?"

Davies had to think for a moment. The code name for that new Russian sub. *"Akula. Akula* in the water."

Chapayev went pale. *"Akula?"*

Davies unzipped his flight suit and tucked in his injured arm. "Yeah, Major. This is the third time I've had to go swimming. Last time I was on the raft for twelve hours, and I saw a couple of the Goddamned things. You got any repellant on your raft?"

"What?" Chapayev was really confused now.

"This stuff." Davies dipped the plastic envelope in the water. "Let's rope your raft to mine. Safer that way. This repellant stuff's supposed to keep the *akula* away."

Davies tried to secure the rafts one-handed and failed. Chapayev set the gun down to help. After being shot down once, then surviving an air battle, the major was suddenly obsessed with the idea of being alive. The idea of being eaten by a carnivorous fish horrified him. He looked over the side of the raft into the water.

"Christ, what a morning," Davies groaned. His wrist was really hurting now.

Chapayev grunted agreement. He looked around for the first time and realized he couldn't see land. Next he reached for his rescue radio and found that his leg was lacerated, the radio pocket on his flight suit ripped away in the ejection.

"Aren't we two sorry sons of bitches," he said in Russian.

"What's that?"

"Where is land?" The sea had never looked so vast.

"About twenty-five miles that way, I think. That leg doesn't look too good, Major." Davies laughed coldly. "We must have the same kind of ejector seats. Oh, shit! This arm hurts."

“Damn, what do you suppose that’s all about?” Edwards wondered aloud. They were too far away to hear anything, but they could not miss the smoke rising from Keflavik.

A more immediate concern was the squad of Russians now at the base of their hill. Nichols, Smith, and the four privates were spread out across a front of a hundred yards centered on Edwards, faces darkened, mainly squatting behind rocks and watching the Russians half a mile away.

“Doghouse, this is Beagle, and we got trouble here, over.” He had to call twice more to get an answer.

“What’s the problem, Beagle?”

“We got five or six Russians climbing our hill. They’re about six hundred feet below us, half a mile away. Also, what’s going on at Keflavik?”

“We have an air attack under way there, that’s all I know at the moment. Keep us posted, Beagle. I’ll see if I can send you some help.”

“Thank you. Out.”

“Michael?”

“Good morning. Glad one of us got a decent night’s sleep.” She sat down beside him, resting her hand on his leg, and the fear subsided for a moment.

“I’d swear I just saw some movement on the top there,” the platoon sergeant said.

“Let me see.” The lieutenant moved his powerful spotting glasses on the peak. “Nothing. Nothing at all. Maybe you saw a bird. Those little puffin things are all over the place.”

“Possibly,” the sergeant allowed. He was starting to feel guilty for sending Markhovskiy up there. *If this lieutenant had half a brain,* he thought, *he’d have sent a larger force, maybe led it himself, like an officer should.*

“The air base is being heavily attacked.”

“Have you radioed in?”

“Tried to. They’re off the air at the moment.” There was concern in his voice. Sixty miles was too far for the small tactical radios. Their heavy VHF set reported into the air base. As much as he wanted to be with the patrol, the lieutenant knew his proper place was here. “Warn Markhovskiy.”

Edwards saw one of the Russians stop and fiddle with his walkie-talkie. *Tell him he’s climbing the wrong hill—tell him to come home to Mama.*

“Keep your head down, babe.”

“What is it, Michael?”

“We got some people climbing this hill.”

“Who?” There was concern in her voice.

“Guess.”

“Skipper, they’re coming up for sure,” Smith warned over the radio.

“Yeah, I see that. Everybody got a good place?”

“*Lef*tenant, I strongly recommend that we let them get in very close before opening fire,” Nichols called.

“Makes sense, skipper,” Smith agreed on the same circuit.

“Okay. You got ideas, gentlemen, I want to hear them right away. Oh, yeah,

I've called in for some help. Maybe we can get some air support."

Mike pulled back on the charging handle of his rifle to make sure a round was chambered, set it on safe, then put the M-16 down. The Marines had all the hand grenades. Edwards had never been taught how to use them, and they frightened him.

Come on, fellows, just go the hell away and we'll be glad to leave you alone. They kept coming. Each paratrooper climbed slowly, rifle in one hand and the other hand grabbing or fending off rocks. They spent their time evenly looking up toward Edwards and down at their footing. Mike was truly frightened. These Russians were elite soldiers. So were his Marines—but he was not. He didn't belong here. The other times he'd faced Russians, in Vigdis's house, the terrifying incident with the helicopter, all those were behind him and for the moment forgotten. He wanted to run away—but what if he did? He'd earned the respect of his Marines, and could he throw that away and still live with himself? What of Vigdis—could he run away in front of her? *What are you most afraid of, Mike?*

"Stay cool," he muttered to himself.

"What?" Vigdis asked. She too was afraid, just from seeing his face.

"Nothing." He tried to smile and half succeeded. *You can't let her down, can you?*

The Russians were now five hundred yards away and still well below them. Their approach became more cautious. There were six of them, and they moved two at a time, fanning out and no longer taking what looked to be the easy route to the top.

"Skipper, we got a problem," Smith called. "I think they know we're here."

"Nichols, I want to hear you."

"We wait until they get within one hundred yards, and for Christ's good sake, keep heads down! If you can get some support, I would suggest you do so."

Edwards switched radios. "Doghouse, this is Beagle, and we need some help here."

"We're working on that. We're trying to get—to get some friends to listen in on this frequency. It takes time, Lieutenant."

"I got about another five minutes—tops—before the shooting starts."

"Keep this channel open."

Where are they? Edwards asked himself. He couldn't see anyone now. The rocks and cover that had so often worked for them were now working against them. He stopped bobbing his head up and down. He was the officer, he was in command, he had the best vantage point, and he had to see what was happening. Edwards moved slightly to get a decent view of the events below him.

"There is somebody there!" the platoon sergeant said, grabbing for the radio. "Markhovskiy, you're heading into a trap! I see a man with a helmet atop the hill."

"You're right," the lieutenant said. He turned. "Get the mortar set up!" The officer ran over to the big VHF radio and tried to raise Keflavik. Armed troops on this hill could only mean one thing—but Keflavik was still off the air.

Edwards saw one Russian rise up, then drop back down on a shout from someone else. When the shape reappeared, it was behind a rifle. He heard a whistling sound, then there was an explosion fifty yards away.

"Oh, shit!" Edwards fell to his face and cowered next to his rock. Bits of other rocks fell around him. He looked at Vigdis, who seemed all right, then over at the far peak, where men were racing downhill. Another mortar round fell to his right, and was followed by automatic-rifle fire. He grabbed his satellite radio.

"Doghouse, this is Beagle. We are under attack."

"Beagle, we are now in contact with a Navy carrier. Stand by." The ground shook again. The round fell less than thirty feet in front of his position, but he was well shielded. "Beagle, the Navy carrier is now on your frequency. Go ahead and transmit. Their call sign is Starbase, and they know where you are."

"Starbase, this is Beagle, over!"

"Roger, Beagle, we show your position five klicks west of hill 1064. Tell me what's happening."

"Starbase, we are under attack by a squad of Russian infantrymen, with reinforcements on the way. Their observation post on 1064 has a mortar and we're getting fire from that. We need help fast."

"Roger, copy, Beagle. Stand by . . . Beagle, be advised we're diverting some help your way, ETA two-five minutes. Can you mark your position?"

"Negative, we don't have anything to do it with."

"Roger, understand. Hang in there, Beagle. We'll be back. Out."

Edwards heard a scream to his left. He stuck his head up and saw mortar rounds falling near Nichols's position—and Russians less than a hundred yards to his front. Mike grabbed his rifle and sighted it on a moving shape, only to have it drop out of sight again. He picked his walkie-talkie up with his free hand.

"Nichols, Smith, this is Edwards, report in."

"Nichols here. Whoever has that mortar knows what he's about. I have two wounded men here."

"We're okay, skipper. We seen two Russians go down hard. I sent Garcia to cover you."

"Okay, guys, we have air cover on the way in. I—" The shape came up again. Edwards dropped the radio, aimed his rifle, and fired three rounds, missing the shape that dodged out of sight. Back to the radio. "Nichols, you need help?"

"Two of us can still shoot. I'm afraid your Rodgers is dead. There—" The radio went dead for a moment. "All right, all right. We killed one, and the other is backing away. Look out, *Lef*tenant, there are two fifty yards to your left front."

Mike looked around his rock and got shot at for his trouble. He shot back without hitting anything.

"Hi, skipper!" Garcia crashed down next to him.

"Two bad guys, that way." Edwards pointed. The private nodded and moved left behind cover of the hill crest. He got thirty feet when another mortar round exploded four strides behind him. The private fell hard and didn't

move.

It's not fair, it's not fair. I got them this far, and it's not fair!

"Smith, Garcia's down. Get back up here. Nichols, if you can get to my position, move!" He switched radios. "Starbase, this is Beagle. Tell your birds to hurry."

"Two-zero minutes out, Beagle. Four A-7s. We have some other help coming, but they'll get to you first."

Edwards took his rifle and moved over to Garcia. The private was still breathing, but his back and legs were peppered with fragments. The lieutenant crawled to the crest and saw a Russian crouched thirty feet away. He aimed his rifle and fired two bursts. The Russian went down, firing his own weapon in a wide arc that missed Edwards by a scant yard. Where was the other one? Mike stuck his head up and saw something the size of a baseball flying through the air. He scrambled backwards as the grenade went off ten feet from where he'd been. Mike rolled to his right and went back uphill.

The Russian had disappeared again, but Edwards saw the others had reached the foot of his hill on a dead run and were starting up to his position. He strained to look and keep his head down at the same time. The other one—there! He was clambering down the hill, apparently dragging a wounded man with him. Mortar fire started to drop behind him, covering the man's retreat.

"You okay, Lieutenant?" It was Smith. He was wounded in the arm. "Whoever's working that Goddamned mortar must be the Russian Davy Crockett!"

Nichols arrived three minutes later. He was unhurt, but the Royal Marine private with him was bleeding from the abdomen. Edwards looked at his watch.

"We got air support coming in about ten minutes. If we stay here at the top in one place, they can drop all around us."

The men took position within fifty feet of Edwards. Mike grabbed Vigdis by the arm and set her between two boulders.

"Michael, I'm—"

"I'm scared, too. Stay here no matter what happens, stay here! You can—" The whistling sound came again, and this one was close. Mike stumbled and fell right on top of her. A hot needle seemed to penetrate his lower leg.

"Shit!" The wound was just above his boot. He tried to rise, but the leg wouldn't take any weight. He looked around for the radio and hopped over to it, cursing all the way. "Starbase, this is Beagle, over."

"Nine minutes out, Beagle," the voice said patiently.

"Starbase, we're all on top of this hilltop, okay? We're all within fifty feet of the summit." He stuck his head up. "We have about fifteen bad guys coming toward us, maybe seven hundred yards away. We beat off the first attack, but we're down to—four, I guess, and three of us are wounded. For God's sake, get that mortar first, it's murdering us."

"Roger that. Hold it together, son. Help is coming."

"You're wounded, *Lef*tenant," Nichols said.

"I noticed. The planes are eight or nine minutes out. I told them to take the mortar position out first."

"Very good. Ivan's in love with the bloody things." Nichols cut the pants

away from the wound and tied a bandage on. “You won’t be doing much dancing for a while.”

“What can we do to slow them down?”

“We’ll open fire at five hundred. That will make them more cautious, I think. Come on.” Nichols grabbed his arm and pulled him to a position on the crest.

The Russians were moving forward with great skill. Men alternated brief rushes with dives behind whatever cover was available. The mortar was quiet at the moment, but that would change as soon as the paratroopers got close enough for their final assault. Nichols had discarded his submachine gun, and was aiming a semiautomatic rifle. When he figured the range at five hundred yards, the sergeant took careful aim and squeezed the trigger. He missed, but every Russian on the hill dropped.

“You know what you just did?” Edwards asked.

“Yes, I just invited more mortar fire on us.” Nichols turned to look at his lieutenant. “Bloody poor choice we have, isn’t it?”

“Michael, you need this.” Vigdis came down beside him.

“I told you to stay—”

“Here is your radio. I go—”

“Down!” Mike yanked her beside him as a mortar round dropped thirty feet away. A series of five dropped across their position.

“Here they come!” Smith yelled.

The Marines opened fire, and the Russians returned it, dashing from one piece of cover to another in a two-pronged advance that threatened to envelop the hilltop. Mike got back on the radio.

“Starbase, this is Beagle, over.”

“Roger, Beagle.”

“They’re coming in on us now.”

“Beagle, our A-7s have you in sight. I want to know exactly where you and your people are—say again exactly.”

“Starbase, there are two secondary summits on this hill, about three miles west of hill 1064. We are on the northern one, repeat northern one. My group is all within five-zero feet of the top of that hill. Anything that moves is the enemy, we are all sitting tight. The mortar is on hill 1064, and we need that taken out quick.”

There was a long pause. “Okay, Beagle, they’ve been told where you are. Get your head down, they’re one minute away, approaching from the south. Good luck. Out.”

“Two hundred yards,” Nichols said. Edwards joined him and leveled his M-16. Three men rose at once, both men fired, but Edwards couldn’t tell if he’d hit anyone or not. Bullets kicked up dirt and stone chips a few feet away, and the whistle of more mortar rounds came down again. The group of five landed right on the crest as Edwards caught the shape of a haze-gray fighter-bomber diving from his right.

The stubby A-7E Corsair pulled out a thousand feet above the mountaintop three miles away. Four canisters of cluster bombs fell, splitting open in the air. A small cloud of bomblets cascaded on the Russian observation post. From three miles, it sounded like a loud string of firecrackers as the hilltop

disappeared in a cloud of dust and sparks. A second aircraft repeated the maneuver twenty seconds later. There could be nothing left alive on the hilltop.

The attacking Russians stopped cold in their tracks and turned to see what had happened to their base camp. Then they saw that more aircraft were circling only two thousand yards away. It was clear to everyone that their best chance to stay alive another five minutes was to get as close to the Americans as they could. As one man, the Russian squads rose firing their weapons and ran up the hill. Two more Corsairs wheeled in the sky and darted in, their pilots drawn by the movement. They swept in level only a hundred feet above the slopes and loosed pairs of cluster bombs. Edwards heard the screams over the thunder of the explosives, but could see nothing through the cloud of dust that rose before his eyes.

"Christ, they can't drop much closer than that."

"They can't drop *any* closer than that," Nichols said, wiping blood from his face.

They could still hear rifle fire from within the dust. The wind blew it away, and at least five Russians were still up and moving toward them. The Navy Corsairs made another run in but broke off, unable to drop so close to friendly troops. They curved back in seconds, firing their cannon. The shells scattered wildly, with some exploding ten yards from Edwards's face.

"Where'd they go?"

"The left, I think," Nichols answered. "You can't talk directly to the fighters?"

Edwards shook his head. "Not that kind of radio, Sarge."

The A-7s circled overhead while their pilots watched the ground for movement. Edwards tried to wave at them, but couldn't tell if they recognized the gesture or not. One of them dove to his left and fired a cannon burst into the rocks. Edwards heard a scream, but saw nothing.

"Stalemate." Edwards turned to look at his satellite radio. The last set of mortar rounds had sent a fragment through the backpack.

"Down!" Nichols grabbed the lieutenant as a grenade arced through the air. It exploded a few feet away. "Here they come again."

Edwards turned and put a fresh magazine in his rifle. He saw two Russians fifty feet away and fired a long burst. One went down on his face. The other returned fire and dodged left. He felt a weight on his legs and saw Nichols down on his back with a trio of red holes in his shoulder. Edwards put the last magazine in his rifle and moved awkwardly across the hill to the left, unable to put much weight on his right leg.

"Michael . . ."

"Go the other way," Edwards replied. "Look out!"

He saw a face and a rifle—and a flash. Edwards dove right, too late to keep from being hit in the chest. Only shock kept the pain from becoming unbearable. He fired a few rounds into the air to keep the man's head down as he backpedaled his feet to get away. Where was everyone? There was rifle fire to his right. Why wasn't anybody helping him? He heard the roar of jet engines as the A-7s continued to circle, unable to do anything but watch in frustration. He cursed them as he bled. His wounded leg revolted at being

used this way, and his left arm was useless. Edwards held the rifle like an oversized handgun as he waited for the Russian to appear. He felt hands under his arms dragging him backwards.

"Drop me, Vigdis, for Christ's sake, drop me and run."

She said nothing. Her breathing was heavy as she struggled, stumbling, to pull him over the rocks. He was losing consciousness from the blood loss, and looked up to see the A-7s drawing off. There was another sound that didn't seem to make much sense. Dust rose around him with a sudden wind and there was another long burst of machine-gun fire as a huge green-black shape appeared overhead. Men jumped out, and it was all over. He closed his eyes. The Russian commander had gotten through to Keflavik. Here was the Mi-24 to reinforce the outpost . . . Edwards was too drained to react. He'd run a good race and lost. There was more chattering rifle fire, then silence as the helicopter moved off. How did the Russians treat prisoners who'd killed helpless men?

"Your name Beagle?"

It required the greatest effort of his life to open his eyes. He saw a black man standing over him.

"Who're you?"

"Sam Potter. I'm a lieutenant with Second Force Recon. You're Beagle, right?" He turned. "We need a corpsman over here!"

"My people are all hurt."

"We're working on it. We'll have you outa here in five minutes. Hang in there, Beagle. I gotta go do some work. Okay, people," he called loudly. "Let's get those Russians checked out. If we got any live ones, we wanna move them the hell off this rock right now!"

"Michael?" Edwards was still confused. Her face was right above his when he lost consciousness.

"Just who the hell is this guy?" Lieutenant Potter asked five minutes later.

"Wing-wiper. He done good," Smith said, wincing with his own injuries.

"How'd you get here?" Potter waved for his radio operator.

"We fucking walked all the way from Keflavik, sir."

"Quite a trip, Sarge." Potter was impressed. He gave a short radio order. "Chopper's on the way in now. I guess the lady goes out too."

"Yes, sir. Welcome to Iceland, sir. We been waiting for you."

"Take a look, Sarge." Potter's arm swept to the west. A series of gray bumps on the horizon headed east toward Stykkisholmur.

USS *CHICAGO*

They were still out there, McCafferty was sure—but where? After killing the last Tango, contact had never been reestablished with the other two Russian submarines. Eight hours of relative peace rewarded his evasive maneuvering. The Russian ASW aircraft were still overhead, still dropping sonobuoys, but something had gone wrong for them. They weren't coming very close now.

He'd had to maneuver clear only four times. That would have been a lot in peacetime, but after the past few days it seemed like a vacation.

The captain had taken the chance to rest himself and his crew. Though they would all have gratefully accepted a month in bed, the four or six hours of sleep they'd all had were like a cup of water for a man in the desert, enough to get them a little farther. And there was only a little farther to go: exactly one hundred miles to the jagged edge of the arctic ice. Sixteen hours or so.

Chicago was about five miles ahead of her sisters. Every hour, McCafferty would maneuver his sub to an easterly course and allow his towed-array sonar to get a precise fix on them. That was hard enough: *Boston* and *Providence* were difficult to pick up even at this distance.

He wondered what the Russians were thinking. The mobbing tactics of the Krivak-Grisha teams had failed. They'd learned that it was one thing to use those ships for barrier operations against the Keypunch team, but something very different to rush after a submarine with long-range weapons and computerized fire-control. Their dependence on active sonobuoys had reduced the effectiveness of their ASW patrol aircraft, and the one thing that had nearly worked—placing a diesel sub between two sonobuoy lines, then spooking their target into moving with a randomly dropped torpedo—had failed also. *Thank God they didn't know how close they came with that,* McCafferty thought to himself. Their Tango-class subs were formidable opponents, quiet and hard to locate, but the Russians were still paying for their unsophisticated sonars. All in all, McCafferty was more confident now than he'd been in weeks.

"Well?" he asked his plotting officer. "Looks like they're steaming as before, sir, about ten thousand yards behind us. I think this one's *Boston.* She's maneuvering a lot more. *Providence* here is plodding along pretty straight. We got a good fix on her."

"Left ten degrees rudder, come to new course three-five-five," McCafferty ordered.

"Left ten degrees rudder, aye, coming to new course three-five-five. Sir, my rudder is left ten degrees."

"Very well." The captain sipped at a cup of hot cocoa. It made a nice change of pace from coffee. *Chicago* turned slowly north. In the engine spaces aft, the submarine's engineer crew kept watch on their instruments as the reactor plant turned out an even 10-percent power.

About the only bad news was the storm on the surface. For some reason a series of squalls was parading around the top of the world, and this one was a real growler. The sonar crew estimated fifteen-foot waves and forty-knot winds, unusual for the arctic summer. It knocked 10 to 20 percent off their sonar performance, but would make for ideal conditions as they approached the icepack. The sea conditions would be grinding acre-sized ice floes into ice chips, and that much noise would make the American subs very hard to detect in the ice. Sixteen hours, McCafferty told himself. *Sixteen hours and we're out of here.*

"Conn, sonar, we have a contact bearing three-four-zero. Not enough data to classify at this time."

McCafferty went forward to sonar.

"Show me."

"Right here, skipper." The chief tapped the display. "I can't give you a blade-count yet, too sketchy for anything, Well, it smells like a nuclear boat," the chief allowed.

"Put up your model."

The chief pushed a button and a secondary screen displayed the predicted sonar range, generated by computer from known local water conditions. Their direct-path sonar range was just over thirty thousand yards. The water was not deep enough yet for convergence zones, and they were beginning to get low-frequency background noise from the icepack. It would impede their ability to discriminate sonar contacts in the same way bright sunlight lessens the apparent intensity of an electric light.

"Getting a slow bearing change here. Going left-to-right, bearing to target is now three-four-two . . . fading out a little bit. What's this?" The chief looked at a new fuzzy line on the bottom of the display. "Possible new contact bearing zero-zero-four." The line faded out and stayed out for two minutes, then came back on bearing zero-zero-six.

McCafferty debated whether to go to battle stations. On one hand he might need to engage a target very soon . . . but probably not. Wouldn't it be better to give his crew a few more minutes' rest? He decided to wait.

"Firming up. We now have two possible submarine contacts, bearing three-four-zero and zero-zero-four."

McCafferty went back to control and ordered a turn east, which would track his towed array on the new targets, plus give a cross bearing on each from which to compute range. It gave him more than he bargained for.

"Boston is maneuvering west, sir. I can't detect anything out that way, but she's definitely heading west."

"Sound general quarters," McCafferty ordered.

It was no way to wake up from needed sleep, the captain knew. In berthing spaces all over the boat, men snapped instantly awake and rolled out of their bunks, some dropping to the deck, others climbing upright in the crowded spaces. They ran to stations, relieving the routine watch-standers to head for their own battle stations.

"All stations report manned and ready, sir."

Back to work. The captain stood over the plotting table and considered the tactical situation. Two possible enemy submarines were astride his course to the ice. If *Boston* was moving, Simms probably had something also, maybe to the west, maybe aft. In twenty short minutes, McCafferty had gone from coolly confident to paranoid again. What were they doing? Why were two subs almost directly in his path?

"Take her up to periscope depth." *Chicago* rose slowly from her cruising depth of seven hundred feet. It took five minutes. "Raise the ESM."

The slender mast went up on hydraulic power, feeding information to the electronic-warfare technician.

"Skipper, I got three J-band aircraft search sets." He read off the bearings. *Bears or Mays,* McCafferty thought.

"Look around. Up scope." He had to let the periscope go all the way up to see over the wave tops. "Okay, I got a May bearing one-seven-one, low on the

horizon, heading west—she's dropping buoys! Down scope. Sonar, you have anything to the south?"

"Nothing but the two friendly contacts. Boston is fading out on us, sir."

"Take her back down to six hundred." *The Russians are supposed to depend almost exclusively on active sonobuoys, dammit.* He ordered a turn back to the north once they reached the ordered depth, and slowed to five knots. So they're trying to track us *passively now. They must have gotten a twitch somewhere . . . or maybe nowhere.* Passive sonar tracking was technically very demanding, and even the sophisticated signal-processing equipment in Western navies made for many false contacts . . . *On the other hand, we've pretty well telegraphed our course. They could flood the area. Why didn't we try something different? But what?* The only other passage north was even narrower than this. The western route between Bear Island and the North Cape of Norway was wider, but half of the Soviet Northern Fleet had a barrier there. He wondered if *Pittsburgh* and the rest had escaped safely. Probably. They should have been able to run faster than Ivan was able to hunt. As opposed to us.

This is how we hunt the Russians, McCafferty thought. *They can't hear our passive buoys, and they never know when they're being tracked or not.* The captain leaned against the rail surrounding the periscope pedestal. *The good news,* he told himself, *is that we're damned hard to hear. Maybe Ivan got a twitch, maybe not. Probably not. If they heard us for sure, we'd have a torpedo in the water after us right now. But we don't, so they don't.*

"Bearings are firming up on both forward contacts."

In open ocean water, they'd have a layer to fool with, but there was none here. The combination of fairly shallow water and the overhead storm eliminated any chance of that. *Good news and bad news,* McCafferty thought.

"Conn, sonar, new contact, bearing two-eight-six, probable submarine. Trying to get a blade count now."

"Come left to three-four-eight. Belay that!" McCafferty changed his mind. Better to be cautious than bold here. "Come right to zero-one-five." Then he ordered *Chicago* down to one thousand feet. The farther he got from the surface, the better the sonar conditions he would have. If the Russians were near the surface to communicate with their aircraft, their sonar performance would suffer accordingly. He'd play every card he had before committing to battle. But what if—

He faced the possibility that one or more of the contacts were friendly. What if *Sceptre* and *Superb* had received new orders because of the damage to *Providence?* The new contact at two-eight-six could be friendly, too, for that matter.

Damn! No provision had been made for that. The Brits said they'd leave as soon as the boats reached the pack, that they had other things to do—but how often had *his* orders been changed since May? McCafferty asked himself.

Come on, Danny! You're the captain, you're supposed to know what to do . . . even when you don't.

The only thing he could do was try to establish the range to and identity of his three contacts. It took another ten minutes for sonar to work on the contacts.

"They're all three single-screw boats," the chief said finally.

McCafferty grimaced. That told him more about what they weren't than what they were. The British submarines were all of a single-propeller design. So were the Russian Victor and Alfa classes.

"Machinery signatures?"

"They're all running at very low power settings, skipper. Not enough for a classification. I got steam noises on all three, that makes 'em nues, but if you look here you can see that we're just not getting enough signal for anything else. Sorry, sir, that's the best I got."

The farther we go east, McCafferty knew, the less signal his sonar would have to work on. He ordered a turn to reverse course, coming to a southwesterly heading.

At least he had range. The northerly targets were eleven and thirteen miles away respectively. The western one was nine miles off. All were within range of his torpedoes.

"Conn, sonar, we have an explosion bearing one-nine-eight . . . something else, a possible torpedo at two-zero-five, very faint, comes in and out. Nothing else in that area, sir. Maybe some breaking-up noises at one-nine-eight. Sorry, sir, these signals are very weak. Only thing I'm really sure of is the explosion." The captain was back in sonar yet again.

"Okay, Chief. If it was easy, I wouldn't need you." McCafferty watched the screen. The torpedo was still running, with a slowly changing bearing. It was no danger to Chicago. "Concentrate on the three submarine contacts."

"Aye, Cap'n."

You'd think with all the practice I've had that I would have learned patience by now.

Chicago continued southwest. McCafferty was stalking his western target now. He thought it the least likely to be friendly. The range closed to eight miles, then seven.

"Captain, classify the target at two-eight-zero as an Alfaclass!"

"You sure?"

"Yes, sir. That is an Alfa-type engine plant. I have it clearly now."

"Set it up! We'll run one fish in deep, dogleg it at low speed, then pop it up right underneath him."

His fire-control crew was getting better by the day. It almost seemed that they were working faster than the computer support.

"Skipper, if we shoot from this deep, it'll take a lot of our reserve high-pressure air," the exec warned.

"You're right. Take her to one hundred feet." McCafferty winced. *How the hell did you let yourself forget that?*

"Fifteen-degree rise on the planes!"

"Set—solution set, sir."

"Stand by." The captain watched the depth-gauge needle turn counterclockwise.

"One hundred feet, sir."

"Fire-control?"

"Set!"

"Match generated bearings and shoot!"

"Two fired, sir."

The Alfa might hear the air blast or he might not, McCafferty knew. The torpedo moved off at forty knots on a heading of three-five-zero, well off the bearing to the target. Three thousand yards out, a command sent down the control wires told the torpedo to turn and go deep. McCafferty was being very cagey with this shot, more than he would have preferred. When the Alfa detected the incoming fish, it would be from a bearing that *Chicago* wasn't at —if he fired a return shot, it would not come toward them. The disadvantage of this was the increased chance of losing the control wires and getting a clean miss. The torpedo was running deep to take advantage of the water pressure that reduced cavitation noise, hence reducing the range at which the Alfa could detect it. They had to play some extra angles on this because the Soviet sub had a top speed of more than forty knots and was almost as fast as the torpedo itself. *Chicago* continued to move southwest, putting as much distance as possible between herself and the torpedo.

"Torpedo continues to run normal, sir," sonar reported.

"Range to target?" McCafferty asked.

"About six thousand yards, sir. Recommend that we bring her up at four thousand and go to high-speed," the weapons officer suggested.

"Very well."

The tracking party plotted the course of the torpedo and its target—

"Conn, sonar, the Alfa just increased engine power."

"He hears it. Bring the fish up now, full speed, switch on the sonar."

"Hull-popping noises, sir. The Alfa is changing depth," the sonar chief called, excitement in his voice. "I have the torpedo sonar on my scope. Our unit is pinging. The target seems to be pinging also."

"Sir, we lost the wires, the fish has lost the wires."

"Shouldn't matter now. Sonar, give me a blade count on the Alfa."

"Doing turns for forty-two knots, sir, lots of cavitation noise. Seems to be turning. He may have just deployed a noisemaker."

"Anybody ever shoot at an Alfa before?" the executive officer asked.

"Not that I know about."

"Miss! Conn, sonar, the fish has passed aft of the target. Target appears to be heading east. The fish is still—no, it's turning now. The torpedo is still pinging, sir. Torpedo also heading east—turning again, I have a bearing change on the fish. Skipper, I think it's chasing after the noisemaker. I show an opening bearing between the fish and target."

"Damn, I thought we had that one locked in," the weapons officer growled.

"How far are we from launch point?"

"About seven thousand yards, sir."

"Bearing to the Alfa?"

"Three-four-eight, target bearing is moving east, machinery noises are down, blade count shows about twenty knots."

"He'll keep putting distance between himself and the torpedo," McCafferty said. As long as it was running and pinging, nobody wanted to get near it. The fish would circle until it ran out of fuel, but anything that came within its four-thousand-yard sonar radius risked detection. "What about the other two contacts?"

"No change, sir." The plotting officer said, "They seem to be pretty much holding their positions."

"That means they're Russians." McCafferty looked down at the plot. If they were Brits, they would have maneuvered and fired their own fish as soon as they'd heard the Alfa, and probably everyone in twenty miles had heard the Alfa.

Three to one, and they're alerted now. McCafferty shrugged. *At least I know what I'm up against.* Sonar reported another contact to the south. *It should be* Boston, Danny thought. If it wasn't, *Providence* would have done something. He ordered Chicago south. If he had to blast a hole through three submarines, he wanted help. He rendezvoused with *Boston* an hour later.

"I heard an Alfa."

"We missed. What did you get?"

"It had twin screws, and it's dead," Simms answered. Their gertrude phones were on a very low power setting.

"Three boats ahead about fourteen miles. One's the Alfa. I don't know about the others." McCafferty outlined his plan quickly. The submarines would proceed north, ten miles apart, and would try to engage the targets from their flanks. Even if they missed, *Providence* should be able to go straight through when the Russians split to pursue. Simms agreed, and the boats split up yet again.

McCafferty noted that he was still about sixteen hours from the ice. There were probably still Soviet patrol aircraft overhead. He'd wasted a torpedo—*no,* he told himself, *that was a well-planned attack.* It just hadn't worked, as sometimes happened.

A line of sonobuoys appeared—active ones this time—to his northeast. He wished angrily that the Russians would select one set of tactics and stick to it. Hell, all he wanted to do was leave! Of course he had launched missiles at the Soviet homeland and they were probably still angry about that. Nobody had ever told him whether the mission was successful or not. McCafferty commanded himself to stop this random thinking. He had trouble enough right here.

Chicago moved northwest. As she did so, the bearing to all of her sonar contacts changed to the right. The Alfa was still there, her machinery noise fading in and out. Technically speaking, he could shoot at her, but he'd just seen that her speed and maneuverability were enough to beat a Mark-48 torpedo. He wondered what the Alfa's skipper had done. Surprisingly, he hadn't fired a torpedo of his own down the bearing of the incoming fish. What did that mean? It was an American tactic, and was supposed to be a Soviet tactic also. Was it because he knew that "friendly" boats were in the area? McCafferty filed it away, yet another case where the Russians were not acting the way they were expected to act.

The northwest course closed the distance markedly to one of the contacts. The Alfa and the other unknown maneuvered east themselves, maintaining the ten-plus mile range—unknowingly, the captain thought. He stood over the plot. A fire-control solution was already set on the nearest contact. Range was down to eight miles. McCafferty went to the sonar room again.

"What can you tell me about this one?"

"Starting to look like a Type-2 reactor plant, the new version. He may be a Victor-III. Give me five more minutes and I'll know for sure, sir. The closer we get, the clearer he looks."

"Power output?"

"Pretty low, sir. I thought I might have a blade count a few minutes ago, but it didn't work out. He's probably just making steerage."

McCafferty leaned back against the bulkhead separating the room from the monstrous computer used to process signals. The line on the waterfall display that would show the unique frequency pattern of the machinery on the Victor-III was fuzzy but narrowing. Three minutes later it was a fairly sharp vertical stroke of light.

"Captain, I can now call target Sierra-2 a Victor-III-class Russian sub."

McCafferty went aft to control. "Range to target Sierra-2?"

"Fourteen thousand five hundred yards, sir."

"Solution is set, sir," the weapons officer reported. "Ready for tube one. Tube one is flooded, outer door is closed."

"Right ten degrees rudder," McCafferty said. *Chicago* turned to unmask her ready torpedo. He checked depth: two hundred feet. On firing, he'd run east rapidly and dive to a thousand feet. The submarine turned slowly at six knots; bearing to the target was three-five-one, and *Chicago's* midship torpedo tubes were angled slightly outward from her center line. "Solution?"

"Set!"

"Open outer door." The petty officer on the torpedo board pushed the proper button and waited for the status light to change.

"Outer door is open, sir."

"Match bearings and shoot!" The seven thousand tons of USS *Chicago* shuddered again with the torpedo launch.

"One fired, sir."

McCafferty gave orders to change course and depth, increasing speed to ten knots.

Another exercise in patience. *How soon will he hear the fish coming in?* This one ran in at shallow depth. McCafferty hoped that its propulsion sounds might be lost in the surface noise. *How good is Victor's sonar?* he wondered.

"One minute." The weapons officer held a stopwatch. The Mark-48 ran thirteen hundred yards per minute at this speed setting. About ten minutes to go. It was like watching some perverse sports event, McCafferty thought, a two-minute drill in a football game, two minutes of playing time that could stretch to half an hour if the quarterback knew his stuff. Except that they weren't trying to score points. "Three minutes. Seven minutes to go."

Chicago leveled out at one thousand feet and the captain ordered speed cut back to six knots again. Already he had fire-control solutions set on the other two targets. But they'd have to wait.

"Five minutes. Five to go."

"Conn, sonar, target Sierra-2 has just increased power. Cavitation sounds, blade count shows twenty knots and increasing."

"Kick the fish to full speed," McCafferty ordered. The Mark-48 accelerated to a speed of forty-eight knots: sixteen hundred yards per minute.

"Target is turning east, her blade count shows thirty-one knots. Sir, I'm

getting a funny signal slightly aft of the target. Target bearing is now three-five-eight. The new signal is three-five-six."

"Noisemaker?"

"Doesn't sound like that. Sounds like something different . . . not a nixie, but something like that, sir. Target is continuing to turn, sir, bearing now three-five-seven. I believe she may be reversing course."

"Take her up to two hundred feet," the captain said.

"What the hell's he doing?" the exec wondered as the submarine rose again.

"Sir, that new signal has masked the target," sonar announced.

"The fish is now pinging, sir."

"If he has a decoy deployed—he put it between himself and the fish," the captain said quietly. "Fire-control, I want another fish on target Sierra-2, and update the solution for Sierra-1."

Range and bearing figures were re-input into the computer.

"Set for tube three on target Sierra-2 and tube two for target Sierra-1." The submarine passed through three hundred feet.

"Match bearings and shoot." McCafferty gave the order quietly, then took his submarine down again. "That pod on the Victor-III that we thought was a towed-array housing, what if it's a decoy like our nixie?" *We don't use them on submarines,* McCafferty thought, but *Ivan does things his own way.*

"The fish might still ignore it."

"He doesn't think so. He thinks it'll work—then he can turn behind the noise of the explosion and get one off at us." McCafferty walked over to the plot. The other new fish was running toward what was probably another Victor-class. The second target was maneuvering east now. The Alfa was also. The obvious tactical move: clear the danger area, turn, and begin your own stalk. While both were turned away, their sonar would be ineffective along the route of the advancing torpedo. Sonar called out.

"Captain, I have an explosion bearing three-five-four. We have lost contact with target Sierra-2. I don't know if the fish hit her or not. The other two fish seem to be running normally."

"Patience," the captain breathed.

"Conn, sonar, we show some sonobuoys dropping aft." The bearings were plotted. They were in a north-south line two miles aft of *Chicago.*

"One of the other boats got a message out to his friends," the exec suggested.

"Good bet. These cooperative tactics'll be a cast-iron bitch if they ever figure out how to do it right."

"Sierra-2 is back, sir. I have a Type-2 machinery signature at three-four-nine. Some possible hull-popping noises. Sierra-2 is changing depth."

The weapons officer commanded one of the running torpedoes to turn left a few degrees. McCafferty picked up a pen and started chewing on it.

"Okay, probably his sonar is a little messed up. I'll bet he's trying to get an antenna up to tell his friends where we fired from. All ahead two-thirds."

"Torpedoes in the water bearing zero-three-one!"

"Do we have anything else on that bearing?"

"No, sir, I show nothing else."

McCafferty checked his plot. It was working, by God. He'd spooked the

Russians into moving east toward Todd Simms in the *Boston!*

"Conn, sonar, torpedo in the water aft, bearing two-eight-six!"

"Make your depth twelve hundred feet," the captain said instantly. "Right full rudder, come to new course one-six-five. Our friend the Victor got word out to his airedale friends."

"Sir, we lost the wires to both fish," Weapons reported.

"Estimated range to Sierra-2?"

"The fish should be about six thousand yards out; it's programmed to start pinging in another minute."

"Mr. Victor made a mistake this time. He should have covered his ass before he went topside to radio the airplanes. Sonar, what's the position of the torpedo on our stern?"

"Bearing changing—sir, I'm losing sonar performance due to flow noise. Last bearing on the Russian fish is two-seven-eight."

"All ahead one-third!" McCafferty brought his submarine back to slow, quiet speed. In two minutes they realized that the air-dropped torpedo was well clear of them, and that their second shot at the Victor was close to its target.

By this time the sonar display was totally confused. Target Sierra-2 had picked up the incoming fish late, but was racing directly away from it at full speed now. Their shot at the other Victor was still running, but that target was maneuvering to avoid another fish from *Boston.* The Alfa was at full power heading due north, another Mark-48 in pursuit. Two more Russian torpedoes were in the water to the east, probably heading after *Boston,* but *Chicago* didn't have her sister ship on sonar. Five submarines were racing around, four of them chased by smart-weapons.

"Sir, I have another decoy deployed on Sierra-2. Sierra-1 has one deployed also. Our fish is pinging on -2. Somebody's fish is pinging on -1, and one of the Russian fish is pinging at zero-three-five—sir, I have an explosion at bearing three-three-nine."

Dad wanted me to be an accountant, McCafferty thought. *Maybe then I could keep all these damned numbers straight.* He walked over to the plot.

The paper plot wasn't much clearer. The pencil lines that designated sonar contacts and running torpedoes looked like electrical wire dropped at random on the chart.

"Captain, I have very loud machinery noises at bearing three-three-nine. Sounds like something's broke, sir, lots of metallic noise. Getting some air noise now, he's blowing tanks. No breakup noises yet."

"Left full rudder, come to new course zero-one-zero."

"We didn't kill the Victor?"

"I'll settle for a small piece of him, if it sends him home. We'll score that one as a damage. What's going on with the other two?"

"The fish after Sierra-1 is pinging, and so's *Boston's*—I guess it's from *Boston."*

The slight abatement of the confusion lasted ten minutes. The second target put her stern on both torpedoes and ran northwest. More sonobuoy lines appeared across *Chicago's* path. Another air-dropped torpedo was detected to the west, but they didn't know what it had been dropped on—just that it wasn't close enough to worry about. The torpedo they'd put in pursuit of the

second Victor-class sub was struggling to catch a target running directly away as fast as it could go, and another fish was angling in from the opposite direction. Possibly *Boston* had fired at the Alfa too, but the Alfa was racing away at a speed almost as great as the torpedo's. McCafferty reestablished sonar contact with *Providence* and continued north. Chaos worked in his favor, and he took maximum advantage of it. He hoped *Boston* could evade the torpedoes that had been launched in her direction, but that was out of his hands.

"Two explosions bearing zero-zero-three, sir." That was the last bearing to the second Victor, but sonar detected nothing more. Had the fish killed the sub, the decoy, or had they homed in on each other?

Chicago continued north, increasing speed to ten knots as she zig-zagged through the sonobuoy lines to increase her distance from the injured *Providence.* The attack-center crew was emotionally exhausted, as drained as their captain from the frantic tracking and shooting exercise. The technical aspects of the work had been handled well in pre-war workups, but nothing could simulate the tension of firing live weapons. The captain sent them in pairs to the galley for food and a half-hour's rest. The cooks brought up a platter of sandwiches for the ones who couldn't leave. McCafferty sat behind the periscope, eyes closed, head back against something metallic while he munched on a ham sandwich. He remembered seeing the cans loaded aboard. The Navy had gotten a good price earlier in the year on canned Polish hams. *Polish hams,* he thought. *Crazy.*

He allowed his crew to go off battle stations an hour later. Half his men were allowed to go off duty. They didn't head for the galley and a meal. They all preferred sleep. The captain knew that he needed it at least as badly as they. *After we get to the ice,* he promised himself. *I'll sleep for a month.*

They picked up *Boston* on sonar, a ghostly trace on the sonar screens due east of them. *Providence* was still aft, still cruising along at six knots, and still making too much noise from her battered sail. Time passed more rapidly now. The captain remained seated, forgetting his dignity and listening to reports of . . . nothing.

McCafferty's head came up. He checked his watch and realized he'd been dozing for half an hour. Five more hours to the ice. It came up clearly on sonar now, a low-frequency growl of noise that covered thirty degrees on either side of the bow.

Where did the Alfa go? McCafferty was in sonar ten seconds after asking himself that question.

"What was your last bearing on the Alfa?"

"Sir, we lost him three hours ago. Last we had him, he was at flank speed on a steady northeasterly bearing. Faded out and he hasn't come back, sir."

"What's the chance he's hiding in the ice, waiting for us?"

"If he does, we'll pick him up before he picks us up, sir. If he's moving, his engine plant turns out a lot of medium- and high-frequency noise," the sonar chief explained. McCafferty knew all that, but wanted to hear it again anyway. "All the low-frequency ice noise'll ruin his chance to detect us at long range, but we should be able to hear him a good ways off if he's moving." The captain nodded and went aft.

"XO, if you were driving that Alfa, where would you be?"

"Home!" The exec smiled. "He has to know there are at least two boats out here. Those are awful short odds. We crippled that one Victor, and *Boston* probably killed the other one. What's he going to think? Ivan's brave, but he's not crazy. If he has any sense at all, he'll report a lost contact and leave it at that."

"I don't buy it. He beat our fish, and he probably beat one from *Boston,"* the captain said quietly.

"You could be right, skipper, but he ain't on sonar."

McCafferty had to concede that point. "We'll be very careful approaching the ice."

"Agreed, sir. We're being paranoid enough."

McCafferty didn't think so, but he didn't know why. *What am I missing?*

Their fix on the edge of the icepack was old. Currents and wind would have moved the ice a few miles south as increasing summer temperatures weakened the thick white roof on the ocean. *Maybe an hour's worth?* the captain wondered hopefully.

The plot showed Boston fifteen miles to the east, and Providence eight miles southeast. Three more hours to the ice. Eighteen nautical miles, maybe less, and they'd be safe. *Why should there be anything else out here? They can't send their whole fleet after us. They have plenty of other problems to worry about.* McCafferty dozed off again.

"Conn, sonar!" McCafferty's head came up.

"Conn, aye," the exec answered.

"Providence has speeded up somewhat, sir. Estimate she's doing ten knots."

"Very well."

"How long was I out?" the captain asked.

"About an hour and a half. You've been awake quite a while, sir, and you weren't snoring loud enough to bother anybody. Sonar is still blank except for our friends."

McCafferty got up and stretched. *That wasn't enough. It's catching up with me. Much more of this and I'm more dangerous to my own crew than I am to the Russians.*

"Distance to the ice?"

"About twelve thousand yards, near as we can make out."

McCafferty went to look at the chart. *Providence* had caught up and was even with him now. He didn't like that.

"Go to twelve knots and come right to zero-four-five. He's getting too eager."

"You're right," the exec said after giving the proper orders, "but who can blame him?"

"I can. What the hell does another few minutes matter after all the time it's taken to get this far?"

"Conn, sonar, we have a possible contact bearing zero-six-three. Sounds like machinery noise, very faint. Fading out now. We're getting flow noise that's blanking it out."

"Slow down?" the executive officer asked. The captain shook his head.

"All ahead two-thirds." *Chicago* accelerated to eighteen knots. McCafferty

stared down at the chart. There was something important here that he wasn't seeing. The submarine was still deep, at one thousand feet. *Providence* still had her tail working, but she was running close to the surface, and that made trouble for her sonar performance. Was *Boston* running shallow, too? The quartermasters on the fire-control tracking party kept advancing the positions of the two American subs in keeping with the known course and speed of each. *Chicago* rapidly closed the distance. After half an hour she was broad on *Providence's* port bow, and McCafferty ordered speed reduced to six knots again. As the submarine slowed, the exterior flow noise abated and her sonars returned to full performance.

"Sonar contact bearing zero-nine-five!"

The plotting team ran a line across the chart. It intersected the previous bearing line . . . almost exactly between *Boston* and *Providence!* McCafferty bent down to check the depth there—nineteen hundred feet. Deeper than a 688-class sub could dive . . .

. . . but not too deep for an Alfa . . .

"Holy shit!"

He couldn't fire at the contact. The bearing to the target was too close to *Providence.* If the control wires broke, the fish would go into automatic mode and not care a whit that *Providence* was a friendly.

"Sonar, go active, Yankee-search on bearing zero-nine-five!"

It took a moment to power-up the system. Then the deep *ba-wah* sound shook the ocean. McCafferty had meant to alert his comrades. He'd also alerted the Alfa.

"Conn, sonar, I have hull-popping noises and increased machinery noise at bearing zero-nine-five. No target on the scope yet."

"Come on, Todd!" the captain urged.

"Transients, transients! *Boston* just increased power, sir—there goes *Providence.* Torpedoes in the water, bearing zero-nine-five ! Multiple torpedoes in the water at zero-nine-five!"

"All ahead full!" McCafferty looked at the plot. The Alfa was perilously close to both subs, behind both, and *Providence* couldn't run, couldn't dive, couldn't do a Goddamned thing! He could only watch as his fire-control team readied two torpedoes. The Alfa had fired four fish, two at each American boat. *Boston* changed course west, as did *Providence.* McCafferty and the exec went to the sonar room.

He watched the contact lines swing left and right across the screen. The thick ones denoted the submarines; the thinner, brighter lines each of the four torpedoes. The two aimed at *Providence* closed rapidly. The wounded sub was up to twenty knots, and made noise like a gravel truck trying to run. It was clear that she'd never make it. Three noisemakers appeared on the screen, but the torpedoes ignored them. The lines converged to a single point that blossomed bright on the screen.

"They got her, sir," the chief said quietly.

Boston had a better chance. Simms was at full speed now, with the torpedoes less than a thousand yards behind. He, too, deployed noisemakers and made radical changes in course and depth. One torpedo went wild, diving after a decoy and exploding on the bottom. The other locked on *Boston* and

slowly ate up the distance. Another bright dot appeared, and that was that.

"Yankee-search the Alfa," McCafferty said, his voice low with rage. The submarine vibrated with the powerful sonar pulses.

"Bearing one-zero-nine, range thirteen thousand."

"Set!"

"Match and *shoot!"*

The Alfa didn't wait to hear the incoming torpedoes. Her skipper knew that there was a third sub out there, knew that he'd been pinged. The Soviet sub went to maximum speed and turned cast. Chicago's weapons officer tried to move the torpedoes on a closing course, but they had a scant five-knot advantage on the Alfa, and the math was clear: they'd come up two thousand yards short at the end of their fuel. McCafferty was past caring. He too went to flank speed and chased after her for half an hour, coming down to five knots three minutes before the torpedoes ran out of fuel. The flow noise cleared off his sonars just in time to hear the Alfa decelerate safely.

"Okay, now we'll try again." They were three miles from the ice now, and *Chicago* was quiet. The Alfa turned west, and McCafferty's tracking party gathered data to compute her range. The turn west was a mistake. He evidently expected *Chicago* to run for the pack and safety.

"Conn, sonar. New contact, bearing zero-zero-three."

Now what? Another Russian trap?

"I need information!"

"Very faint, but I got a bearing change, just moved to zero-zero-four."

A quartermaster looked up from his slide rule. "Range has to be under ten thousand yards, sir!"

"Transients, transients!—*torpedo in the water bearing zero-zero-five!"*

"Left full rudder, all ahead flank!"

"Bearing change! Torpedo bearing now zero-zero-eight!"

"Belay that order!" McCafferty shouted. The new contact was shooting at the Alfa.

"Jesus, what is this thing?" the sonar chief asked.

The Alfa heard the new fish and reversed course. Again they heard and saw the thunder of the Alfa's engines . . . but the torpedo closed the distance rapidly.

"It's a Brit. That's one of their new Spearfish. I didn't know they had any in the fleet yet."

"How fast?" the sonar chief asked.

"Sixty or seventy knots."

"Gawd! Let's buy some."

The Alfa ran straight for three miles, then turned north to head for the ice. She didn't make it. The Spearfish cut the corner. The lines on the display merged again, and a final bright dot appeared.

"Bring her around north," McCafferty told the exec. "Go to eighteen knots. I want to be sure he knows who we are."

"We are HMS *Torbay.* Who are you?"

"Chicago. "

"We heard the commotion earlier. Are you alone?" Captain James Little

asked.

"Yes. The Alfa ambushed us—we're alone."

"We will escort you."

"Understood. Do you know if the mission was successful?"

"Yes, it was."

40

The Killing Ground

STYKKISHOLMUR, ICELAND

There was much to do, and time was short.

Lieutenant Potter and his team of Force Recon commandos found eight Russian troops in the town. They were trying to escape down the only road south when they ran into an ambush which killed or wounded five of their number. Those were the last who could have warned Keflavik of the ships on the horizon.

The first regular troops came by helicopter. Platoon- or company-sized units were placed on every hilltop overlooking the bay. Particular care was taken to keep the aircraft below the radar horizon from Keflavik, where a single Russian transmitter remained in operation despite all efforts to the contrary. A CH-53 Super Stallion helicopter airlifted the components of a mobile radar transmitter to a hill on the island's northwest coast, and a team of Army technicians went to work at once to get it operational. By the time the ships entered the rock-filled nightmare called Stykkisholmur harbor, five thousand troops were already in position over the handful of roads leading into the town.

The captain of one big LST—Landing Ship, Tank—had tried to count the rocks and shoals on the trip up from Norfolk. He'd stopped on reaching five hundred and concentrated on memorizing his particular area of responsibility, known as Green-Two-Charlie. The daylight and low tide helped. Many of the rocks were exposed by low water, and helicopter crews relieved of their immediate duties of landing troops dropped radar-reflectors and lighted beacons on most of them, which improved matters greatly. The remaining task was marginally safer than crossing a highway blindfolded. The LSTs went first, winding through the rocks at the recklessly high speed of ten knots, relying on their auxiliary bow thrusters to assist rudder movements to steer the ships through the lethal maze.

Again, Lieutenant Potter's team of commandos helped matters. They went from house to house, locating the captains and mates of local fishing boats. The skilled seamen were flown to the lead ships to help pilot the big gray amphibs through the tightest of the passages. By noon the first LST had her ramp on land, and the first Marine tanks rolled onto the island. Right behind

them were trucks loaded with steel, pierced-plank runway material, which was dispatched east to a flat piece of ground preselected as a base for Marine helicopters and Harrier jump-jet fighters.

Once the fleet helicopters had completed their task of marking the rocks and shoals, they returned to moving troops. The troop carriers were escorted by SeaCobra gunships and Harriers as they extended the Marine perimeter to the hills overlooking the Hvita River. There contact was made with outlying Russian observation posts and the first real fighting began.

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

"So much for our intelligence reports," General Andreyev muttered. From his headquarters he could see the massive shapes steaming slowly into view. They were the battleships *Iowa* and *New Jersey,* accompanied by missile cruisers for air defense.

"We can engage them now," the artillery chief said.

"Then do so." *While you can.* He turned to his communications officer. "Has word gotten out to Severomorsk?"

"Yes, Northern Fleet will sortie its aircraft today and submarines are being sent as well."

"Tell them their primary targets are the American amphibious ships at Stykkisholmur."

"But we are not sure they are there. The harbor is too dangerous for—"

"Where the hell else would they be?" Andreyev demanded. "Our observation posts there do not answer us, and we have reports of enemy helicopters moving south and east from that direction. Think, man!"

"Comrade General, the Navy's primary objective will be the enemy carrier force."

"Then explain to our comrades in blue that carrier aircraft cannot take Iceland away from us, but their fucking Marines *can!"*

Andreyev saw smoke rise from one of his heavy gun batteries. The sound followed a few seconds later. The first Russian salvo landed several thousand yards short.

"Fire mission!"

Iowa had not fired her guns in anger since Korea, but now the massive sixteen-inch rifles turned slowly to starboard. In the central gunnery control station, a technician worked the joystick controls for a Mastiff remotely piloted vehicle. The miniature airplane purchased a few years earlier from Israel circled eight thousand feet above the Russian gun battery, its television camera shifting from one emplacement to another.

"I count six guns, look like one-fifty-five or so. Call ' em sixinch.

The precise location of the Russian battery was plotted. Next the computer analyzed data on air density, barometric pressure, relative humidity, wind direction and speed, and a dozen other factors. The gunnery officer watched

his status board for the solution light to come up.

"Commence firing."

The center gun of the number two turret loosed a single round. A millimeter-band radar atop the after director-tower tracked the shell, comparing its flight path with the one predicted by the fire-control computer. Not surprisingly, there were some errors in predicted wind velocity. The radar's own computer forwarded the new empirical readings to the master system, and the remaining eight main-battery guns altered position slightly. They fired even before the first round landed.

"Mother of God!" Andreyev whispered. The orange flash obscured the ship momentarily. Someone to his left shouted, perhaps thinking that one of the Russian artillery rounds had struck home. Andreyev had no such illusions. His artillerymen were out of practice and had not yet bracketed their target. He turned his field glasses to his gun battery, four kilometers away.

The first round landed fifteen hundred meters southeast of the nearest gun. The next eight landed two hundred meters behind them.

"Get that battery moved right now!"

"Drop two hundred and fire for effect!"

Already the guns were going through their thirty-second reload cycle. Inert gas ejected scraps of the silk propellant-bags out the muzzles to clear the bores, then the breeches opened and loading ramps unfolded into place. The bores were checked for dangerous residue, then elevators from the handling rooms rose to the back edge of the ramps and the shells were rammed into the waiting gun barrels. The heavy power bags were dropped onto the ramps and rammed behind the shells. The ramp came up, the breeches closed hydraulically, and the guns elevated. The turret crews moved out of the loading compartments and held their hands over their muff-style ear-protectors. In fire-control fingers depressed the keys and the breeches surged backwards once more. The cycle began again, the teenage seamen performing the same tasks that their grandfathers had done forty years before.

Andreyev stepped outside to watch in ghastly fascination. He could hear the sound of ripping linen that announced the passage of the monstrous projectiles, and turned to look at the battery. Trucks were pulling up to the guns as the crews fired off their last rounds and began frantic preparations for relocating their guns. The battery had six 152mm pieces and many trucks for the crews and ammunition. A curtain of dirt and rock appeared, followed by three secondary explosions, then four more salvos as New Jersey joined her older sister in the bombardment.

"What's that?" A lieutenant pointed to a dot in the sky.

The artillery commander tore his eyes away from what had been a third of his heavy guns and identified the remotely piloted vehicle. "I can have it shot down."

"No!" Andreyev shouted. "You want to tell them where our last SAM launchers are?" The General had faced mortar and rocket fire in Afghanistan. This was his first experience on the receiving end of heavy guns.

"My other batteries are all camouflaged."

"I want at least three new alternate positions prepared for every gun you have, fully camouflaged, all of them." The General went back inside the building. He felt confident that the Americans would not shell the city of Keflavik, at least not soon. The map room contained wall-sized charts of the western Icelandic coast. Already his intelligence staff was placing flags to denote the position of suspected American units.

"What do we have on the Hvita?" he asked his operations chief.

"One battalion. Ten BMD infantry carriers; the rest of the transport is trucks and commandeered vehicles. They have mortars, antitank missiles, and hand-held SAMs. They are deployed to cover the highway bridge above Bogarnes."

"The Americans are already looking down at them from this hill. What sort of aircraft have we seen?"

"The Americans have several carriers within striking distance of us. Twenty-four fighters and thirty-four attack aircraft per carrier. If they also landed a full division of Marines, we are facing a significant number of helicopters, plus fixed-wing Harriers. These can operate off their amphibious aviation ships or from land bases set up for the purpose—with the right materials it can be done in four to six hours. A Marine division is about double our strength in men, one heavy battalion of tanks, stronger in artillery, but not so many mortars. It's their mobility that worries me. They can dance all around us, using helicopters and landing craft to place troops anywhere they choose—"

"Just as we did when we landed. Yes," the General agreed soberly. "How good are they?"

"The American Marines regard themselves as elite troops, just as we do. Some of their senior officers and NCOs doubtless have combat experience, but few company officers and squad sergeants will have seen any real action."

"How bad is it?" A new man came into the room. It was the KGB station chief.

"You *chekista* bastard! You told me the Marine division was going to Europe! They're killing my men while we speak." The distant thunder of heavy guns punctuated Andreyev's words. The battleships were shifting fire to a supply dump. Fortunately not much was left there.

"Comrade General, I—"

"Get out of here! I have work to do." Andreyev was already wondering if his mission might be hopeless, but he was a general of paratroops and not accustomed to failure. He had ten attack helicopters, all dispersed and hidden after the attack on the Keflavik airfield. "What's our chance of getting someone in to look at this harbor?"

"We are under continuous surveillance from the American radar aircraft. Our helicopter would have to fly over enemy positions to get there. The Americans have their own armed helicopters and jet fighters—it's a suicide mission, and it would take a miracle for our man to get close enough to see anything, much less live long enough to tell us something useful."

"Then see if you can get us a reconnaissance aircraft from the mainland or satellite support. I must know what we're pitted against. If we can smash their invasion beach, we stand a good chance of defeating the troops they have on the ground, and to hell with their naval aircraft!"

It was complicated to do, but a Flash information request from the Commander Northern Fleet cut through most of the bureaucracy. One of the two real-time-capable Soviet reconnaissance satellites burned a quarter of its maneuvering fuel to alter its orbit and came low over Iceland two hours later. Minutes later, the last Soviet RORSAT was launched south from the Baikonor Kosmodrome, and its first revolution took it within radar range of Iceland. Four hours after Andreyev's message, the Russians had a clear picture of what was arrayed at Iceland.

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

"Are they ready?" SACEUR asked.

"Another twelve hours would be better, but they're ready." The operations officer checked his watch. "They go off on the hour. Ten minutes." The hours spent getting the new division in place had been used profitably. Several additional brigades had been assembled into a pair of new polyglot divisions. The front had been almost entirely stripped of reserves to do it, while a hastily thought-out cover and deception plan had radio units all over the front, broadcasting radio messages to simulate the presence of the relocated formations. NATO had deliberately limited its own "maskirovka" until now, allowing SACEUR to bet all of Western Europe on a pair of fives.

HUNZEN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

It was a stimulating exercise. Alekseyev had to move his A exploitation forces forward while a battered B motor-rifle division bled to force a crossing of the Weser. All the while the General waited nervously for news from his shaky right flank. There was none. CINC-West was as good as his word, and launched a covering attack against Hamburg to draw off NATO forces from the latest Soviet breakthrough.

That was no easy maneuver. Antiaircraft missile and gun units had been drawn from other sectors. When NATO appreciated what was in the offing, they would break every effort to prevent a Soviet advance on the Ruhr. Resistance so far had been light. Perhaps they didn't understand what was happening, or perhaps, Alekseyev thought, they really were at the end of their personnel and logistical string.

The first A unit was 120th Motor-Rifle, the famous Rogachev Guards, whose leading elements were just now crossing at Rühle, and right behind was 8th Guards Tank. Two more tank divisions were bunched on the roads to Rühle, while an engineer regiment labored to erect seven bridges. Intelligence estimated two, perhaps three, NATO regiments coming to meet them. *Not*

enough, Alekseyev thought. *Not this time.* Even their air power was depleted. His frontal aviation groups reported minor opposition only around Rühle. *Perhaps my superior was right after all.*

"Heavy enemy air activity at Salzhemmendorf," an Air Force communications officer reported.

That's where 40th Tanks is, Alekseyev thought. The B unit had been badly chewed up by the German spoiling attack—

"Fortieth Tanks reports a major enemy attack under way on its front."

"What do they mean by 'major'?"

"The report comes from the alternate command post. I can't reach the divisional HQ. The assistant commander reports American and German tanks advancing in brigade force."

Brigade force? Another spoiling attack?

"Enemy attack in progress at Dunsen."

"Dunsen? That's close to Gronau. How the hell did they get there?" Alekseyev snapped. "Confirm that report! Is it an air or ground attack?"

"Hundred twentieth Motor-Rifle has a full regiment across the Weser. They are advancing on Brökeln. Eighth Tanks' leading elements have the Weser in sight. SAM units are setting up to cover the crossing point."

It was like having people read different parts of the paper to him simultaneously, Alekseyev thought. General Beregovoy was at the front, coordinating traffic control and setting final assignments for the post-crossing maneuver. Pasha knew that was his proper place, but, as before, he was annoyed to be far from the real action, giving orders like a Party boss instead of a fighting commander. The artillery from all the advancing divisions was well forward to protect the crossing against counterattack.

My rear areas are awfully weak . . .

"Comrade General, the attack at Dunsen is composed of enemy tank and motorized troops with heavy tactical air support. The regimental commander at Dunsen estimates brigade strength."

A brigade at Dunsen, and a brigade at Salzhemmendorf?

Those are B unit commanders. Out of practice, inexperienced. If they were really effective officers, they'd be in A units, not shepherding out-of-shape reservists.

"Enemy ground units at Bremke, strength unknown."

That's only fifteen kilometers from here! Alekseyev reached for some maps. It was cramped in the command vehicle, so he went outside and spread them on the ground with his intelligence officer beside him.

"What the hell's going on here?" His hand moved across the map. "That's an attack on a twenty-kilometer front."

"The new enemy division is not supposed to be in place yet, and Theater Intelligence says it will be broken up for spot-reinforcement use all over the northern front area."

"Headquarters at Fölziehausen reported a heavy air attack and went off the air!"

As if to emphasize this latest report, there was a massive explosion to the north in the direction of Bremke, where 24th Tanks had its main fuel and ordnance dump. Suddenly aircraft began to appear low on the horizon. The mobile command post was in woods overlooking the small town of Hunzen.

The town was largely deserted, and the unit's radio transmitters were there. NATO aircraft had so far shown a reluctance to damage civilian buildings unless they had to—

Not today. Four tactical fighters leveled the center of the town, where the transmitters were, with high-explosive bombs.

"Get Alternate One going immediately," Alekseyev ordered.

More aircraft swept overhead, heading southwest toward Highway 240, where Alekseyev's A units were moving toward Rühle. The General found a working radio and called CINC-West at Stendal.

"We have a major enemy attack coming southeast from Springe. I would estimate at least two-division strength."

"Impossible, Pasha—they don't have two reserve divisions!"

"I have reports of enemy ground units at Bremke, Salzhemmendorf, and Dunsen. It is my opinion that my right flank is in jeopardy, and I must reorient my forces to meet it. I request permission to suspend the attack at Rühle to meet this threat."

"Request denied."

"Comrade General, I am the commander at the scene. The situation can be managed if I have authority to handle it properly."

"General Alekseyev, your objective is the Ruhr. If you are not able to achieve that objective, I will find a commander who is."

Alekseyev looked at the radiotelephone receiver in disbelief. He had worked for this man—two years. They were friends. *He's always trusted my judgment.*

"You order me to continue the attack regardless of enemy action?"

"Pasha, they make another spoiling attack—nothing more serious than that. Get those four divisions across the Weser," the man said more gently. "Out."

"Major Sergetov!" Alekseyev called. The young officer appeared a moment later. "Get yourself a vehicle and head for Dunsen. I want your personal observations on what you find. Be careful, Ivan Mikhailovich. I want you back here in less than two hours. Move."

"You will do nothing else?" the intelligence officer asked.

Pasha watched Sergetov board a light truck. He could not face his officer. "I have my orders. The operation to cross the Weser continues. We have an antitank battalion at Holle. Tell them to move north and be alert for enemy forces on the road from Bremke. General Beregovoy knows what he's supposed to do."

If I warn him, he'll change his dispositions. Then Beregovoy will be blamed for violating orders. That's a safe move. I prudently pass on a warning, and—no! If I can't violate orders, I cannot co-opt someone else into doing so.

What if they're right? This could be another spoiling attack. The Ruhr is a strategic objective of vast importance.

Alekseyev looked up. "The battle orders stand."

"Yes, Comrade General."

"The report of enemy tanks at Bremke was incorrect." A junior officer came over. "The observer saw our tanks coming south and misidentified them!"

"And this is good news?" Alekseyev demanded.

"Of course, Comrade General," the captain answered lamely.

"Did it occur to you to inquire why our tanks were heading *south*? Goddamn

it, *must I do all the thinking here?"* He couldn't scream at the right person. He had to scream at somebody. The captain wilted before his eyes. Part of Alekseyev was ashamed, but another part needed the release.

They had the job because they had more battle experience than anyone else. It had never occurred to anyone that they had no experience at all in this sort of operation. They were *advancing.* Except for local counterattacks, no NATO unit had done very much of that, but Lieutenant—he still thought like a sergeant—Mackall knew that they were best suited to it. The M-1 tank had an engine governor that limited its speed to about forty-three miles per hour. It was always the first thing the crews removed.

His M-1 was going south at fifty-seven miles per hour.

The ride was enough to rattle the brain loose inside his skull, but he'd never known such exhilaration. His life was balanced on the knife-edge of boldness and lunacy. Armed helicopters flew ahead of his company, scouting the route, and pronounced it clear all the way to Alfeld. The Russians weren't using this route for anything. It wasn't a road at all, but the right-of-way for an underground pipeline, a grassy strip one hundred feet wide that took a straight line through the forests. The tank's wide treads threw off dirt like the roostertail from a speedboat as the vehicle raced south.

The driver slowed for a sweeping turn while Mackall squinted ahead, trying to see whatever enemy vehicle the helicopters missed. It didn't have to be a vehicle. It just could be three guys with a missile launcher, and Mrs. Mackall would get The Telegram, regretting to inform her that her son . . .

Thirty kilometers, he thought. Damn! Only a half-hour since the German grenadiers had punched a hole in the Russian lines, and *zoom!* goes the Black Horse Cav! It was crazy, but hell, it was crazy to have stayed alive ever since his first engagement—an hour after the war started. Ten klicks to go.

"Look at that! More of our tanks southbound. What the hell is going on?" Sergetov snarled to his driver, even talking like his general now.

"Are they our tanks?" the driver asked.

The new major shook his head. Another one passed through the gap in the trees—the turret had a flat top, not the usual dome shape of Soviet tanks!

A helicopter appeared over the gap and pivoted in the sky. Sergetov didn't mistake this for a Russian, and the stubby wings on either side of the fuselage marked it as an armed attack-chopper. The driver lurched to the right just before the nose-mounted machine gun flashed at them. Sergetov jumped clear as the tracers reached out. He landed on his back and rolled toward the treeline. His head was down, but he could feel the heat blast when the machine-gun tracers ignited the spare gas tank on the back of the truck. The young officer scampered into the trees and looked around the edge of a tall pine. The American helicopter flew to within a hundred meters of his vehicle to ensure its destruction, then spun off to the south. His radio was in the overturned, burning truck.

"Buffalo Three-One, this is Comanche, over."

"Comanche, this is Three-One. Report, over."

"We just popped a Russian truck. Everything else looks clear. Roll 'em, cowboy!" the helicopter pilot urged.

Mackall laughed at that. He had to remind himself that this wasn't really fun. Quite a few tank drivers had gotten into trouble by getting just a little too unwound on the German countryside, and now they were being *ordered* to! Two more minutes and three kilometers passed.

Here's where it gets tricky.

"Buffalo Three-One, we show three Russian vehicles standing guard on the hilltop. Look like Bravo-Tango-Romeos. All the bridge traffic seems to be trucks. The repair shop is on the east bank north of the town."

The tank slowed as they came to the last turn. Mackall ordered his "track" off the road, onto the meadow grass, as it edged ponderously around a stand of trees.

"Target BTR, eleven o'clock, twenty-seven hundred! Fire when ready, Woody!"

The first of the eight-wheel vehicles exploded before any of their crews knew a tank was near. They were looking for aircraft, not enemy tanks forty kilometers in the rear. The next two died within a minute, and Mackall's platoon of four tanks dashed forward.

They all reached the ridge three minutes later. One by one, the huge Abrams tanks crested the hill overlooking what had once been a small city. Many days of continuous air attacks and artillery fire had ended that. Four ribbon bridges were in operation, with numerous trucks crossing or waiting to cross.

First the tanks located and engaged anything that looked even vaguely dangerous. Machine-gun fire began working on the trucks, while the main guns reached into the tank-repair yard established in the fields north of the town. By this time, two full troops were in place, and infantry vehicles took on the trucks with their light 25mm cannon. Within fifteen minutes, over a hundred trucks were burning, along with enough supplies to keep a whole Russian division in business for a hard day of combat. But the supplies were incidental. The rest of the squadron was catching up with the advance party, and their job was to hold this Russian communications nexus until relieved. The Germans already had Gronau, and the Russian forces east of the Leine were now cut off from their supplies. Two of the Russian bridges were clear, and a company of M-2 Bradley infantry carriers darted across to take up position on the eastern edge of the town.

Ivan Sergetov crawled to the edge of the grassy road—he didn't know what it was—and watched the units pass while his stomach contracted into an icy ball. They were Americans, at least a battalion in strength, he estimated, traveling light. No trucks, just their tracked vehicles. He kept his wits enough to begin a count of the tanks and personnel carriers that raced before him at a speed that he'd never really appreciated before. It was the noise that was most impressive. The turbine-driven M-1 tanks did not make the roar of diesel-powered tanks. Until they were a few hundred meters away, you couldn't even know they were there—the combination of low noise and high speed . . . *They're heading toward Alfeld!*

I have to report this. But how? His radio was gone, and Sergetov had to think for a minute to determine where he was . . . *two kilometers from the Leine, right across that wooded ridge.* His choice was a difficult one. If he returned to the command post, it was a walk of twenty kilometers. If he ran to the rear, he might find friendly units in half the time and get the alarm out. But running that way was cowardice, wasn't it?

Cowardice or not, he had to go east. Sergetov had the sickening feeling that the alarm had not been sounded. He moved to the edge of the trees and waited for a gap in the American column. It was only thirty meters to the far side. *Five seconds to cross the gap,* he told himself. *Less.*

Another M-1 blazed past him. He looked left and saw that the next was nearly three hundred meters away. Sergetov took a deep breath and ran into the open.

The tank commander saw him, but couldn't get to his machine gun fast enough. Besides, one man on foot without even a rifle wasn't worth stopping for. He reported the sighting on his radio and returned to the mission at hand.

Sergetov didn't stop running until he was a hundred meters into the trees. Such a short distance, but he felt as if his heart would spring from his chest. He sat down with his back against a tree to catch his breath and continued to watch the vehicle pass. It took several minutes before he could move again, then it was up the steep hill, and soon he was once more looking down at the Leine.

The shock of seeing the American tanks was bad enough. What he saw here was far worse. The Army tank-repair yard was a smoking ruin. Everywhere there were burning trucks. At least it was downhill. He ran down the east side of the ridge right up to the river. Quickly stripping off his pistol belt, Sergetov leaped into the swift current.

"What's that? Hey, I see a Russian swimming!" A machine gunner swiveled his .50 caliber around. The vehicle commander stopped him.

"Save it for the MiGs, soldier!"

He climbed up the east bank and turned to look back. The American vehicles were digging into defensive positions. He ran to cover and stopped again to make a count before proceeding. There was a traffic-control point at Sack. Sergetov ran all the way.

After the first hour, things settled down. Lieutenant Mackall got out of his tank to inspect his platoon's positions. One of the few ammunition carriers to accompany the troop stopped briefly at each tank, its crew tossing out fifteen rounds each. Not enough to replace what they'd fired, but not bad. The air attacks would be next. Crews were out chopping down trees and shrubs to camouflage their vehicles. The accompanying infantry set out their Stinger crews, and Air Force fighters were already circling overhead. Intelligence said that eight Russian divisions were on the west side of this river. Mackall was sitting on their supply route. That made it a very important plot of real estate.

USS *INDEPENDENCE*

Quite a change from the last time, Toland thought. The Air Force had an E-3 Sentry operating out of Sondrestrom to protect the fleet, and four of their own E-2C Hawkeyes were also up. There was even an Army-manned ground radar just coming up on Iceland. Two Aegis cruisers were with the carriers, and a third with the amphibious force.

"You think they'll hit us first, or the 'phibs?" Admiral Jacobsen asked.

"That's a coin-toss, Admiral," Toland replied. "Depends on who gives the orders. Their navy will want to kill us first. Their army will want to kill the 'phibs."

Jacobsen crossed his arms and stared at the map display. "This close, they can come in from any direction they want."

They expected no more than fifty Backfires, but there were still plenty of the older Badgers, and the fleet was only fifteen hundred miles from the Soviet bomber bases: they could come out with nearly their maximum ordnance loads. To stop the Russians, the Navy had six squadrons of Tomcats, and six more of Hornets, nearly a hundred forty fighters in all. Twenty-four were aloft now, supported by tankers while the ground-attack aircraft pounded Russian positions continuously. The battleships had ended their first visit to the Keflavik area and were now in Hvalfjördur—Whale Bay—providing fire support to the Marines north of Bogarnes. The entire operation had been planned with the likelihood of a Russian air-to-surface missile attack in mind. There would be more vampires.

The loss of northern Norway had eliminated the utility of Realtime. The submarine was still on station gathering signal intelligence, but the task of spotting the outbound Russian bomber streams passed on to British and Norwegian patrol aircraft operating out of Scotland. One of the latter spotted a three-plane Vic of Badgers heading southwest and radioed a warning. The Russian aircraft were roughly seventy minutes from the fleet.

Toland's station in CIC was immediately below the flight deck, and he listened to the roar of jet engines overhead as the fighters catapulted off. He was nervous. Toland knew that the tactical situation was very different now from that on the second day of the war, but he also remembered that he was one of the two men who'd escaped alive from a compartment just like this. A flood of information came into the room. The land-based radar, the Air Force E-3, and the Navy E-2s all linked their data to the carriers. There was enough electromagnetic energy in the sky to cook the birds in flight. The display showed the fighters proceeding to their stations. The Tomcats reached out to the northern Icelandic shore, curving into loitering circles as they awaited the Russian bombers.

"Ideas, Toland. I want ideas!" the Admiral said quietly.

"If they're after us, they'll approach from the east. If they're going for the 'phibs, they'll come straight in. There's just no percentage in deceptive tactics if they're heading for Stykkisholmur."

Jacobsen nodded. “That’s how I see it.”

The pounding on the flight deck continued overhead as strike aircraft landed to rearm for new bombing strikes. Aside from the expected material effect, they hoped to wreck the morale of the Soviet paratroopers by violent and continuous air attacks. Marine Harriers were also in action, along with attack helicopters. Initial progress was somewhat better than expected. The Russians did not have their troops as widely dispersed as they’d thought, and the known concentrations were being subjected to a hurricane of bombs and rockets.

“Starbase, this is Hawk-Blue-Three. I’m getting some jamming, bearing zero-two-four . . . more jamming now.” The data was linked directly to the carrier, and the thick yellow strobes came up on the electronic display. The other Hawkeyes quickly reported the same information.

The fleet air-ops officer smiled thinly as he lifted his microphone. His units were fully in place, and this gave him several options.

“Plan Delta.”

Hawk-Green-One carried *Independence’s* air-wing commander. A fighter pilot who would have much preferred riding his Tomcat for the mission, he directed two fighters from each Tomcat squadron to seek out the Russian jamming aircraft. The converted Badgers were spread on a wide front to cover the approach of the missile-armed bombers and advanced at five hundred knots, three hundred miles now from the line of radar-picket aircraft. The Tomcats homed in on them at five hundred knots as well.

Each jammer created a “strobe,” an opaque wedge shape on the U.S. radar screens, so that they looked like the spokes of a wagon wheel. Since every such spoke was particular to each of the radar transmitters, the controllers were able to compare data, triangulate, and plot the position of the jammers. The Tomcats closed in quickly while the radar-intercept officers in the back seat of each fighter flipped the Phoenix missile seekers to home-on-jam guidance mode. Instead of depending on the aircraft’s own radar for guidance, the missiles would seek out the noise transmitted from the Badgers.

Twenty jamming aircraft were plotted. Eighteen fighters headed for them, targeting at least two missiles at each.

“Delta—execute!”

The Tomcats launched on orders forty miles from their targets. Once more, Phoenix missiles streaked through the air. Flight time was a mere fifty-six seconds. Sixteen of the Badger jammers went off the air. The surviving four all switched off when they saw the smoke trails of missiles and dove for the deck with Tomcats in pursuit.

“Numerous radar contacts. Raid One is fifty aircraft, bearing zero-zero-nine, range three-six-zero, speed six hundred knots, altitude three-zero thousand. Raid Two—” the talker went on as the enemy aircraft were plotted.

“We have the main raid, probably Badgers going for the ’phibs. This one will be Backfires. They’ll try to launch on us, probably far out to draw our fighters off,” Toland said.

Jacobsen spoke briefly to his operations officer. Hawk-Green-One would control the defense of the amphibious force. Hawk-Blue-Four from *Nimitz*

would defend the carrier groups. The fighters divided according to plan and went to work. Toland noted that Jacobsen was leaving control of the air action to the officers in the control aircraft. The fleet air-defense officer on USS *Yorktown* controlled the SAM ships, all of which went to full alert but left their radar transmitters on standby.

"The only thing that worries me is they might try that drone crap again," Jacobsen murmured.

"It worked once," Toland agreed. "But we didn't have them this far out before."

The Tomcats divided into four-plane divisions, each controlled by radar. They, too, had been briefed about the drones that had fooled *Nimitz.* The fighters kept their radars off until they were within fifty miles of their targets, then used the radars to locate targets for their on-board TV systems.

"Hawk-Blue-Four," one called. "Tallyho, I got eyeballs on a Backfire. Engaging now. Out."

The Russian plan of attack had anticipated that the American fighters would try to burn through the jamming aircraft to the north, then be caught off balance by the appearance of the Backfires to the east. But the jammers were gone, and the Backfires did not yet have the American carrier fleet on radar and could not launch their missiles on the basis of hours-old satellite photographs. Neither could they run away. The supersonic Russian bombers went to afterburner and activated their radars in a contest with time, distance, and American interceptors.

Again it was like watching a video game. The symbols designating the Backfires changed as the planes switched on their own protective jammers. The jamming reduced the effectiveness of the Phoenix missiles, but Russian losses were already serious. The Backfires were three hundred miles away. Their radars had an effective range of only half that, and already fighters swarmed over their formations. "Tallyho" calls cluttered the radio circuits as the Tomcats converged to engage the Russian bombers, and the symbols started dropping off the radar screens. The Backfires closed at seventeen miles per minute, their radars searching desperately for the American fleet.

"Going to get some leakers," Toland said.

"Six or eight," Jacobsen agreed.

"Figure three missiles each."

By now the Tomcats had fired all of their missiles, and drew off for the Hornets to join the action with Sparrows and Sidewinders. It wasn't easy for the fighters to keep up with their targets. The Backfires' speed made for difficult pursuit curves, and the fighters were notoriously short on fuel. Their missiles continued to score, however, and no amount of jinking and jamming could defeat all of them. Finally one aircraft got a surface radar contact and radioed a position. The seven remaining Backfires fired their missiles and turned north at Mach 2. Three more fell to missiles before the fighters had to turn away.

Again the Vampire call came in, and again Toland cringed. Twenty incoming missiles were plotted. The formation activated jammers and SAM systems, with a pair of Aegis cruisers on the threat axis. In seconds they were launching missiles, and the other SM2-equipped SAM ships added their own

missiles to the "basket," allowing their birds to be guided by the Aegis computer systems. The twenty incoming missiles had ninety SM2s targeted on them. Only three got through the SAM cloud, and only one of them headed for a carrier. *America's* three-point-defense guns tracked the AS-6 and destroyed it a thousand feet from the ship. The other two missiles both found the cruiser *Wainwright* and exploded her four miles from *Independence*.

"Damn." Jacobsen's face took a hard set. "I thought we had that one beat. Let's start recovering aircraft. We got some dry fighters up there."

Everyone's attention turned to the Badgers. The northern Tomcat groups were just coming within range of the older bombers. The Badger crews had expected to follow their jammers in, reversing earlier tactics. Some were slow to realize that they had no electronic wall to hide behind, but none had a choice. They detected incoming fighters while still five minutes from their launch points. The Badgers held course and increased to full speed to lessen their time of vulnerability while their crews looked anxiously for missiles.

The Tomcat pilots were surprised that their incoming targets were not altering course, which made the possibility of drones seem even more likely. They closed to get visual identification of their targets for fear of being tricked again into shooting at drones.

"Tallyho! Badger at twelve o'clock and level." The first Tomcat loosed a pair of missiles from forty miles out.

Unlike the Backfires, the Badgers had a location fix for their targets, which enabled them to launch their AS-4s from maximum range. One by one, the twenty-year-old bombers launched and turned as tight as their pilots dared to escape. Their escape mancuvers allowed half to survive, since the Navy fighters were unable to pursue. Aboard the radar aircraft, kills were being tallied even as the missiles flew toward Stykkisholmur. Soviet Naval Aviation had just taken fearful losses.

USS *NASSAU*

Edwards was still in the twilight of anesthesia when he heard the electronic gonging of the General Quarters alarm. He was only vaguely aware of where he was. He seemed to remember the helicopter ride, but his next impression was that of lying in a bunk with needles and tubes stuck in various parts of his body. He knew what the alarm meant, and knew intellectually that he should be afraid. But he couldn't quite work his emotions up through the drug-induced haze. He succeeded in raising his head. Vigdis was sitting on a chair next to his bed, holding his right hand. He squeezed it, not knowing that she was asleep. A moment later he was, too.

Five levels up, *Nassau's* captain was standing on the bridge wing. His normal battle station was in CIC, but the ship was not moving, and he figured that this was as good a place as any to watch. Over a hundred missiles were inbound from the northeast. As soon as raid warning had been received an hour earlier, all of his boat crews had set to lighting off the smoke pots set on

the rocks in this so-called anchorage. That was his best defense, he knew, hardly believing it himself. The point-defense guns at the corners of the flight deck were in automatic mode. Called R2D2s for their shape, the Close-In-Weapons-System Gatling guns were elevated twenty degrees, pointing off to the threat axis. That was all he could do. It had been decided by the air-defense experts that even firing off their chaff rockets would do more harm than good. The captain shrugged. One way or another, he'd know in five minutes.

He watched the cruiser *Vincennes* to the east, steaming in slow circles. Suddenly four smoke-trails erupted from her missile launchers, and the missile-firing cycle began. Soon the north-eastern sky was a solid mass of gray smoke. Through his binoculars he began to pick out the sudden black puffs of successful intercepts. They seemed to be coming closer, and he noticed that the missiles were, too. And the Aegis cruiser could not get them all. *Vincennes* emptied her magazines in four minutes, then bent on full speed to race between a pair of rocky islands. The captain was amazed to see it. Someone was taking a billion-dollar cruiser into a rock garden at twenty-five knots! Even off Guadalcanal—

An explosion rocked the island of Hrappsey, four miles away. Then another on Seley. It was working!

Ten miles up, the Russian missiles switched on their radar seeker heads and found their target windows crammed with blips. Overloaded, they automatically scanned the largest for infrared signatures. Many of the blips gave off heat, and the missiles automatically selected the largest for their attention as they made their final Mach 3 dives. They had no way of knowing that they were attacking volcanic rocks. Thirty missiles got through the SAM defenses. Only five of them actually aimed themselves at ships.

Two of *Nassau's* R2D2s swiveled together and fired at a missile traveling too fast to see. The captain looked in the direction of the barrels just in time to see a white flash a thousand feet overhead. The sound that followed nearly deafened him, and he realized how foolish it was to be exposed when fragments *dinged* off the pilothouse next to him. Two more missiles fell into the town to his west. Then the sky cleared. A fireball to the west told him that at least one ship had been hit. *But not mine!*

"Son of a bitch." He lifted the phone to the Combat Information Center. "Combat, Bridge, two missiles fell into Stykkisholmur. Let's get a helo over there, there's gonna be some casualties."

As Toland watched, the tapes of the air engagement were replayed at fast speed. A computer tallied the kills. Everything was automated now.

"Wow," the intelligence officer said to himself.

"Not like before, was it, son?" Jacobsen observed."Spaulding, I want word on the 'phibs!"

"Just coming in now, sir. *Charleston* took a hit and broke in half. We have minor damage to Guam and *Ponce*—and that's it, Admiral!"

"Plus *Wainwright."* Jacobsen took a deep breath. Two valuable ships and fifteen hundred men were gone, yet he had to call it a success.

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

"The attack should be over by now."

Andreyev didn't expect rapid information. The Americans had finally succeeded in damaging his last radar, and he had no way of tracking the air battle. His radio-intercept crews had copied numerous voice transmissions, but they'd been too faint and too fast for any conclusion other than that a battle had in fact been fought.

"The last time we caught a NATO carrier force, we smashed it," the operations officer said hopefully.

"Our troops above Bogarnes are still under heavy fire," another reported. The American battleships had been hitting them for over an hour. "They are taking serious losses."

"Comrade General, I have a—you'd better listen to this, it's on our command circuit."

The message repeated four times, in Russian: "Commander Soviet Forces Iceland, this is Commander Strike Fleet Atlantic. If you don't get this, somebody will get it to you. Tell your bombers better luck next time. We'll be seeing you soon. Out."

SACK, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

Sergetov staggered up to the traffic-control point in time to see a battalion of tanks move down the road toward Alfeld. He stood slumped over, hands on his knees, as he watched the tanks roll off.

"Identify yourself!" It was a KGB lieutenant. The KGB had taken over traffic management. The authority to shoot violators came easy to the KGB.

"Major Sergetov. I must see the area commander at once."

"Attached to what unit, Sergetov?"

Ivan stood up straight. Not *Comrade Major, not Comrade,* just *Sergetov.*

"I am personal aide to General Alekseyev, Deputy Commander West. Now get me the hell to your commander!"

"Papers." The lieutenant held out his hand, a coldly arrogant look on his face.

Sergetov smiled thinly. His identification documents were in a waterproof plastic envelope. He handed the top card over to the KGB officer. It was something his father had managed to get for him before mobilization.

"And what might you be doing with a Class-1-Priority pass?" The lieutenant was wary now.

"And who the fuck are you to ask?" The son of a Politburo member brought his face to within a centimeter of the other man's. "Get me to your commander *now* or we'll see who gets shot here today!"

The *chekist* deflated abruptly and led him to a farm cottage. The commander of the traffic-control station was a major. Good.

"I need a radio on the Army command circuit," Sergetov snapped.

"All I have is regimental and division," the major answered.

"Nearest division headquarters?"

"Fortieth Tanks at—"

"It's destroyed. Damn, I need a vehicle. Now! There is an American force at Alfeld."

"We just sent off a battalion—"

"I know. Call them back."

"I have no such authority."

"You damned fool, they're heading into a trap! Call them *now!"*

"I don't have the auth—"

"Are you a German agent? Haven't you seen what's going on there?"

"It was an air attack, wasn't it?"

"There are American tanks in Alfeld, you idiot. We must launch a counterattack, but one battalion isn't enough. We—" The first explosions started, six kilometers away. "Major, I want one of two things. Either you give me transport right now or you give me your name and service number so that I can denounce you properly."

The two KGB officers shared a look of incredulity. *Nobody* talked that way to them, but anyone who did . . . Sergetov got his vehicle and raced off. Half an hour later he was in the supply base at Holle. There he found a radio.

"Where are you, Major?" Alekseyev demanded.

"Holle. The Americans got through our lines. They have at least one battalion of tanks at Alfeld."

"What?" The radio was silent for a moment. "Are you certain?"

"Comrade General, I had to swim the damned river to get here. I counted a column of twenty-five armored vehicles a few kilometers north of the town. They shot up the tank-repair station and massacred a column of trucks. I repeat, General, there is an American force at Alfeld in at least battalion strength."

"Get transport to Stendal and report personally to Commander-in-Chief West."

USS *INDEPENDENCE*

"Good evening, Major Chapayev. How's the leg?" Toland asked, sitting down beside the hospital bunk. "Are you being treated properly?"

"I have no complaints. Your Russian is—fair."

"I do not often get to practice with a Soviet citizen. Perhaps you can help me somewhat." *Major Alexandr Georgiveyich Chapayev,* the computer printout read. *Age 30. Second son of General Georgiy Konstantinovich Chapayev, commander of the Moscow Air Defense District. Married to the youngest daughter of a Central Committee member, Ilya Nikolayevich Govorov.* And therefore probably a young man with access to lots of under-the-counter information...

"With your grammar?" Chapayev snorted.

"You were the commander of the MiGs? Be at ease, Major, they're all

finished now. You know that."

"I was the senior flying officer, yes."

"I've been told to compliment you. I am not a flyer myself, but they tell me your tactics over Keflavik were excellent. I believe you had five MiGs. We lost a total of seven aircraft yesterday, three to MiGs, two to missiles, and two to ground fire. Considering the odds, we were disagreeably surprised."

"I had my duty."

"Da. We all have our duty," Toland agreed. "If you are concerned at how we will treat you, you should not be. You will be treated properly in all respects. I don't know what you have been told to expect, but probably you have noticed once or twice that not everything the Party says is completely true. I see from your identification papers that you have a wife and two children. I have a family, too. We'll both live to see them again, Major. Well, probably."

"And when our bombers attack you?"

"That happened three hours ago. Didn't anyone tell you?"

"Ha! The first time—"

"I was on *Nimitz.* We took two hits." Toland described the attack briefly. "This time things worked out differently. We're conducting rescue operations now. You'll know for sure when we bring some survivors in. Your air force is no longer a threat to us. Submarines are another matter, but there is no sense asking a fighter pilot about that. In fact, this isn't really an interrogation."

"So why are you here?"

"I will be asking you some questions later. I just wanted to come down and say hello. Is there anything I can get you, anything you need?"

Chapayev did not know what to make of this. Aside from the possibility the Americans would shoot him outright, he didn't know what to expect. He'd had the usual lectures about trying to escape, but clearly these did not apply to being aboard a ship in the middle of the ocean.

"I do not believe you," he said finally.

"Comrade Major, there is no point in asking you about the MiG-29, because none are left on Iceland. All the others in the Soviet Air Force are in Central Europe, but we're not going there. There is no point in asking you about ground-defense positions on Iceland; you're a pilot and you don't know anything about that. The same is true of the remaining threat against us: submarines. What do you know about submarines, eh? Think, Major, you are an educated man. Do you think you have information that we need? I doubt it. You will be exchanged in due course for our prisoners—a political question, for our political masters. Until then we will treat you properly." Toland paused. *Talk to me, Major* . . .

"I'm hungry," Chapayev said after a moment.

"Dinner should be in about thirty minutes."

"You will just send me home, after—"

"We don't have labor camps and we don't kill prisoners. If we were going to mistreat you, why did the surgeon sew up your leg and prescribe pain medications?"

"The pictures I had with me?"

"Almost forgot." Toland handed the Russian's wallet over. "Isn't it against the rules to take this up with you?"

"I carry it for luck," he said. Chapayev pulled out the black-and-white shot of his wife and twin daughters. *I will see you again. It may be some months, but I will see you again.*

Bob chuckled. "It worked, Comrade Major. Here are mine."

"Your wife is too skinny, but you are a lucky man also." Chapayev paused as his eyes teared up for a moment. He blinked them away. "I would like a drink," he said hopefully.

"Me, too. Not allowed on our ships." He looked at the photos. "Your daughters are beautiful, Major. You know, we have to be crazy to leave them."

"We have our duty," Chapayev said. Toland gestured angrily.

"It's the damned politicians. They just tell us to go—and we go, like idiots! Hell, we don't even know why the Goddamned war started!"

"You mean you do not know?"

Bingo. Codeine and sympathy . . . The tape recorder he had in his pocket was already turned on.

HUNZEN, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

"If I continue the attack, we'll be destroyed here!" Alekseyev protested. "I have two full divisions on my flank, and I have a report that American tanks are at Alfeld."

"Impossible!" CINC-West replied angrily.

"The report came from Major Sergetov. He saw them arrive. I have ordered him to Stendal to make his report to you personally."

"I have 26th Motor-Rifle approaching Alfeld now. If any Americans are present, they'll handle matters."

That's a Category-C unit, Alekseyev thought. Reservists, short on equipment, out-of-date training.

"What progress have you made on the crossing?"

"Two regiments across, a third moving now. Enemy air activity has picked up—dammit! I have enemy units in my rear!"

"Get back to Stendal, Pasha. Beregovoy is in command at Hunzen. I need you here."

I'm being relieved. I'm being relieved *of my command!*

"Understood, Comrade General," Alekseyev replied. He switched off the radio. *Can I leave my troops this vulnerable to counterattack? Can I forgo warning my commanders?* Alekseyev slammed his fist on the worktable. "Get me General Beregovoy!"

ALFELD, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

It was too far for artillery support from the NATO lines, and they'd been

forced to leave their own guns behind. Mackall trained his gunsights through the haze and saw the advancing Russian formations. He estimated two regiments. That made it a division-sized attack in the classic two-up, one-back fashion. *Hmm. I don't see any SAM launchers up front.* The colonel in overall command started giving his orders over the command circuit. Friendly air was coming in.

Apache attack choppers popped up right behind the Cav's positions. They moved south to flank the advancing Russian vehicles, jinking and skidding as they launched their Hellfire missiles into the leading echelon of tanks. Their pilots sought out missile-launch vehicles but found none. Next came the A-10s. The ugly twin-engine aircraft swooped low, free for once of the SAM threat. Their rotary cannon and cluster bombs continued the job of the Apaches.

"They're coming in dumb, boss," the gunner commented.

"Maybe they're green, Woody."

"Okay by me."

The Bradleys on the eastern edge of the town engaged next with their missiles. The leading Soviet ranks were savaged even before they came into range of the tanks over the river. The attack began to falter. The Russian tanks stopped to shoot. They popped smoke and shot wildly from inside it. A few wild rounds landed close to Mackall's position, but they were not aimed shots. The attack was stopped two kilometers short of the town.

"Head north," Alekseyev said over the headset.

"Comrade General, if we head north—" the pilot started to say.

"I said head north! Keep low," he added.

The heavily armed Mi-24 swooped low abruptly. Alekseyev's gorge rose in his throat as the pilot tried to get even with him for giving the stupid, dangerous order. He sat in the back, hanging on to the seatbelt and leaning out the left-side door to see what he could. The helicopter jinked violently left and right, up and down—the pilot knew the dangers here.

"There!" Alekseyev called. "Ten o'clock. I see—American or German? Tanks at ten o'clock."

"I see some missile vehicles, too, Comrade General. Do you wish to see them more closely?" the pilot inquired acidly. He brought the chopper down a wooded road, barely two meters above the pavement as he dipped out of sight.

"That was at least a battalion," the General said.

"I'd say more," the pilot commented. He was at full power, his nose low for maximum speed, and his eyes scanned ahead for enemy aircraft.

The General fumbled with his map. He had to sit down and strap in to use both hands on it. "My God, this far south?"

"As I told you," the pilot answered over the intercom, "they have staged a breakthrough."

"How close can you go to Alfeld?"

"That depends on how much the General wishes to be alive tonight." Alekseyev noted the fear and anger in the words, and reminded himself that the captain flying this helicopter was already twice a Hero of the Soviet Union for his daring over the battlefield.

“As close as you think safe, Comrade Captain. I must see for myself what the enemy is doing.”

“Understood. Hang on, it will be a very rough ride.” The Mi-24 jumped up to avoid some power lines, then dropped again like a stone. Alekseyev winced at how close to the ground they stopped. “Enemy aircraft overhead. Look like the Devil’s Cross . . . four of them heading west.”

They passed over a—not a road, Alekseyev thought, a grassy strip with tracked vehicles on it. The grass had been churned to bare dirt. He checked his map. This route led to Alfeld.

“I will cross over the Leine and approach Alfeld from the east. That way we’ll be over friendly troops if anything happens,” the pilot advised. Immediately thereafter the aircraft jumped up and down again. Alekseyev caught a glimpse of tanks on the ridge as they raced past. Many of them. A few strings of tracer bullets reached out at the chopper, but fell behind. “Quite a few tanks there, Comrade General. I’d say a regimental force. The tank-repair yard is to the south—what’s left of it—shit! Enemy helicopters to the south!”

The aircraft stopped and pivoted in the air. There was a roar as an air-to-air missile leaped off the wingtip, then the Mi-24 started moving again. It jinked up, then down hard, and the General saw a smoke trail go overhead.

“That was close.”

“Did you get him?”

“Does the General wish me to stop and see? What’s that? That wasn’t here before.”

The chopper stopped briefly. Alekseyev saw burning vehicles and running men. The tanks were old T-55s . . . this was the counterattack he’d been told about! Smashed. A minute later he saw vehicles assembling for another effort.

“I’ve seen enough. Straight to Stendal as fast as you can.” The General leaned back with his maps and tried to formulate a clear picture of what he’d seen. Half an hour later the helicopter flared and landed.

“You were right, Pasha,” CINC-West said as soon as he walked into the operations room. He held three reconnaissance photographs.

“Twenty-Sixth Motor-Rifle’s initial attack was crushed two kilometers in front of enemy lines. When I flew over, they were re-forming for another. This is a mistake,” Alekseyev said with quiet urgency. “If we want that position back, we have to attack with full preparation.”

“We must have that bridgehead back in our hands as quickly as possible.”

“Fine. Tell Beregovoy to detach two of his units and drive back east.”

“We can’t abandon the Weser crossing!”

“Comrade General, either we pull those units back or we let NATO destroy them in place. That is the only choice we have at the moment.”

“No. Once we get Alfeld back, we can reinforce. That will defeat the counterattack on their flank and allow us to continue the advance.”

“What do we have to strike Alfeld with?”

“Three divisions are en route now—”

Alekseyev scanned the unit designations on the map. “They’re all C formations!”

“Yes. I had to divert most of my B units north. NATO counterattacked at

Hamburg as well. Cheer up, Pasha, we have many C units coming onto the front."

Wonderful. All these old, fat, out-of-practice reservists are marching to a front held by battle-seasoned troops.

"Wait until all three divisions are in place. Get their artillery up front first so that we can pound the NATO positions. What about Gronau?"

"The Germans crossed the Leine there, but we have them contained. Two divisions are moving to attack there also."

Alekseyev walked over to the main map display and looked for changes in the tactical situation since he'd last been here. The battle lines in the north had not changed appreciably, and the NATO counterattack on the Alfeld-Ruhle salient was only now being posted. Blue flags were at Gronau, and Alfeld. There was the counterattack at Hamburg.

We've lost the initiative. How do we get it back?

The Soviet Army had started the war with twenty A divisions based in Germany, with another ten moved in at the start, and more since. All of them had now been committed to battle, many pulled off the line due to losses. The last reserve of the full-strength formations was at Ruhle, and they were about to be trapped. Beregovoy was too good a soldier to violate orders, even though he knew his forces had to be pulled back before they were irretrievably cut off.

"We must abandon the attack. If we press on, those divisions will be trapped behind two rivers, not just one."

"The attack is a political and military necessity," CINC-West answered. "If they push forward, NATO will have to draw forces off this attack to defend the Ruhr. Then we'll have them."

Alekseyev didn't argue further. The thought that came to him felt like a blast of cold air on exposed skin. *Have we failed?*

USS *INDEPENDENCE*

"Admiral, I need to see somebody in the MAF."

"Who?"

"Chuck Lowe—he's a regimental commander. Before he took it over, we worked together on CINCLANT's intelligence staff."

"Why not—"

"He's good, Admiral, very good at this stuff."

"You think the information is that hot?" Jacobsen asked.

"I sure do, sir, but I need a second opinion. Chuck's the best guy who's handy."

Jacobsen lifted his phone. "Get me General Emerson, quick . . . Billy? Scott. You have a Colonel Chuck Lowe serving with you? Where? Okay, one of my intel people needs to see him right now . . . important enough, Billy. Very well, he'll be on his way in ten minutes." The Admiral set the phone down. "Have you copied that tape?"

"Yes, sir. This is one of the copies. The original's in the safe."

"There'll be a helo waiting for you."

It was a one-hour flight to Stykkisholmur. From there a Marine chopper took him southeast. He found Chuck Lowe in a tent looking over some maps.

"You get around pretty good. I heard about *Nimitz,* Bob. Glad to see you made it. What's up?"

"I want you to listen to this tape. It'll take you about twenty minutes." Toland explained who the Russian was. He handed over a small Japanese personal tape player with earphones. The two officers walked out of the tent to a relatively quiet place. Twice Lowe rewound the tape to repeat a section.

"Son of a bitch," he said quietly when it was finished.

"He thought we already knew."

Colonel Lowe stooped down and picked up a rock. He hefted it in his hand for a moment, then hurled it as hard as he could. "Why not? We assume the KGB is competent, why should they assume that we're not! We had the information all along . . . and we *blew it!"* His voice was full of wonder and disgust. "You sure this isn't a cock-and-bull story?"

"When we pulled him out of the water, he had a nasty cut on the leg. The docs sewed that up and gave him pain pills. I caught him weak from blood loss, and pretty well juiced on codeine. Kinda hard to lie well when you're drunk, isn't it? Chuck, I really need your opinion."

"Trying to land me back in the intel business?" Lowe smiled briefly. "Bob, it makes a hell of a lot of sense. This should go up the ladder fast."

"I think SACEUR should get it."

"You can't just call up for an appointment, Bob."

"I can go through COMEASTLANT. The original goes to Washington. CIA will want to use a voice-stress-analysis machine on it. But I saw the man's eyes, Chuck."

"I agree. It should go to the top as fast as you can get it there—and SACEUR can make the fastest use of it."

"Thanks, Colonel. How do I call the chopper back?"

"I'll handle that. Welcome to Iceland, by the way."

"How's it going?" Toland followed the colonel back to the tent.

"We're up against good troops, but they have a tough defensive problem here, and we have all the firepower we need. We got 'em by the ass!" The colonel paused. "Nice work, Squid!"

Two hours later, Toland was aboard a plane bound for Heath-row.

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

The briefing was given by Marshal Fyodr Borissovich Bukharin. The KGB had arrested Marshals Shavyrin and Rozhkov the day before, a move that told Minister Sergetov more than this briefing ever would.

"The attack west from Alfeld has bogged down due to poor planning and

execution by Commander-in-Chief West. We need to regain the initiative. Fortunately we have the troops available, and nothing changes the fact that NATO has suffered grievous losses.

"I propose replacement of the Western Theater command staff and—"

"Wait. I wish to say something," Sergetov interrupted.

"Make your point, Mikhail Eduardovich," the Defense Minister said, his annoyance clear.

"Marshal Bukharin, you propose complete staff replacement?" *The practical consequences to the replacees was unspoken,* Sergetov thought, *but plain enough.*

"My son is on the staff of the Deputy Commander West, General Alekseyev. This general is the one who led the breakthrough at Alfeld, *and* the one at Rühle! He's been wounded twice and had his helicopter shot down by enemy fighters—after which he commandeered a truck and raced to the front to lead yet another successful attack. He's the only effective general we have that I know of, and you want to replace him with someone unfamiliar with the situation—what madness is this?" he asked angrily. The Minister of the Interior leaned forward.

"Just because your son is on his staff—"

Sergetov's face went beet-red. *" 'Just because my son,'* you say? *My* son is at the front, serving the State. He's been wounded, and barely escaped death when he was shot down at his general's side. Who else at this table can say that, Comrades? Where are your sons?" He pounded on the table in rage. Sergetov concluded in a softer voice, wounding his colleagues in a way that mattered, really mattered: "Where are the Communists here?"

There was a brief but deadly silence. Sergetov knew that he had either ended his political career or boosted it beyond measure. His fate would be decided by whoever spoke next.

"In the Great Patriotic War," Pyotr Bromkovskiy said with an old man's dignity, "Politburo members lived at the front. Many lost sons. Even Comrade Stalin gave his sons to the State, serving alongside the sons of ordinary workers and peasants. Mikhail Eduardovich speaks well. Comrade Marshal, your evaluation of General Alekseyev, if you please? Is Comrade Sergetov correct in his assessment?"

Bukharin looked uneasy. "Alekseyev is a young, bright officer, and, yes, he has done fairly well at his present post."

"But you wish to replace him with one of your own people?" Bromkovskiy didn't wait for an answer. "It is amazing, the things we learn and the things we forget. We forget that it is necessary for all Soviet citizens to share the burden together—but we *remember* the mistakes made in 1941, arresting good officers because their superiors erred, and replacing them all with political cronies who could lead us to disaster! If Alekseyev is a bright young officer who knows how to fight, why do you replace him?"

"Perhaps we were hasty," the Defense Minister admitted, watching the mood around the table shift dramatically. *I'll get you for this, Mikhail Eduardovich. If you wish to ally yourself with our oldest member, it is fine with me. He won't live forever. Neither will you.*

"That is decided then," the Party Chairman said. "Next, Bukharin, what of the situation on Iceland?"

"There are reports that some enemy troops have landed, but we immediately attacked the NATO fleet. We are waiting now for an assessment of the losses we inflicted. We have to wait for satellite reconnaissance before we can be sure of that." Bukharin knew only what Soviet losses were, and he would not reveal those until he could report favorable strike results.

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

They arrived just after dark, the KGB officers in battle dress. Alekseyev was working on deployments of newly arrived C divisions and didn't see them enter CINC-West's office. Five minutes later he was summoned.

"Comrade General Alekseyev, you are now Commander-in-Chief of the Western Theater of Military Operations," his superior said simply. "I wish you luck."

Alekseyev felt the hair rise up on his neck at the General's tone. The man was flanked by a pair of KGB colonels wearing the standard KGB battle dress, camouflage cloth tailored in the pattern of a class-A uniform, the "State Security" GB emblem shoulder boards. It was an institutional form of arrogance that suited the KGB as perfectly as the look on the colonels' faces.

What do I say? What can I do? This is my friend.

The former Commander-in-Chief of the Western Theater of Military Operations said it for him: "Good-bye, Pasha."

They took the General out. Alekseyev watched him go, then stop at the door. He turned with a look of hopeless fatalism before proceeding. Alekseyev's last sight was of the General's pistol belt, the leather flap loose over an empty holster. He turned away and saw on the desk a telex confirming his command status. It told him that he had the complete confidence of the Party, the Politburo, and the People. He crumpled it and threw it against the wall. He had seen the same words on the same form a few brief weeks before. The recipient of that message of confidence was now in a car heading east.

How long do I have? Alekseyev summoned his communications officer.

"Get me General Beregovoy!"

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

SACEUR allowed himself a meal. He'd lost ten pounds since the war had begun by subsisting on coffee and sandwiches and stomach acid. Alexander had commanded armies in his teens and twenties—maybe that's why he did so well, the General thought. He was young enough to stand it.

It was working. The Cav was at Alfeld. The Germans were firmly in control of Gronau and Brüggen, and unless Ivan reacted quickly, his divisions on the Weser were in for a very nasty surprise. The door to his office opened. It was

his German intelligence officer.

"Excuse me, Herr General, I have a naval intelligence officer here."

"Is it important, Joachim?"

"Ja."

SACEUR looked down at his plate. "Show him in."

The General was not impressed. The man was dressed in his shipboard khakis. Only a very sharp eye could see where the creases used to be.

"General, I'm Commander Bob Toland. Until a few hours ago, I was on the threat team with Strike Fleet Atlantic—"

"How's it going on Iceland?"

"The air attack on the fleet was chewed up, sir. There's still the submarine problem to deal with, but the Marines are moving. I think we'll win this one, General."

"Well, the more subs they send after the carriers, the fewer go after my convoys."

That's one way to look at it, Toland thought. "Admiral, we captured a Russian fighter pilot. He comes from an important family. I interrogated him; here's the tape. I think we know why the war started."

"Joachim, did you check his data?"

"No, sir. He has already briefed COMEASTLANT, and Admiral Beattie wanted the data to come directly to you."

SACEUR's eyes narrowed. "Let's hear it, son."

"Oil."

41

Targets of Opportunity

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

Three copies were made of the tape. One went to one of SACEUR's intelligence staff for a separate translation to be checked against Toland's. Another was taken to French intelligence for electronic analysis. The third was analyzed by a Belgian psychiatrist who was fluent in Russian. While that was going on, half of the intelligence officers at NATO headquarters updated all their information about Soviet fuel consumption to date. CIA and other national intelligence services began a frantic investigation into Soviet oil production and utilization. Toland predicted the outcome hours before it came in: *insufficient data.* The range of possible conclusions predicted that the Russians had enough fuel for several months—or had already run out!

SACEUR took his time before accepting the data at face value. Prisoner interrogations had given his intelligence people a wealth of information—most of it patently false or contradictory. Since supply officers naturally lagged behind the fighting troops, few of them had been captured. It was the Air Force that bought the story first. They knew that enemy fuel-supply dumps were smaller than expected. Instead of the One Big Facility so prevalent throughout Russian society (and after the big dump at Wittenburg had been blown up), the Russians had gone to small ones, accepting the price of increased air-defense and security requirements. NATO's deep-strike air missions had been concentrating on airfields, munitions dumps, transport junctions, and the tank columns approaching the front... more lucrative targets than the smaller-than-expected fuel depots, which were also harder to spot. The traffic signatures associated with the large fuel-posts usually showed hundreds of trucks cycling in and out. The small ones, with fewer trucks involved, were harder for the look-down radar aircraft to locate. All these factors militated to a different targeting priority.

After fifteen minutes' discussion with his Air Chief, SACEUR changed all that.

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

"I can't do both things," Alekseyev whispered to himself. He'd spent the last twelve hours trying to find a way, but it wasn't there. It was a marvel what it meant finally to be in command himself, no longer the aggressive subordinate. He was now *responsible* for success or failure. A mistake was *his* mistake. A failure was his failure. It had been much more comfortable the other way. Like his predecessor, Alekseyev had to mark his orders, even though his orders were impossible. He had to maintain the salient and continue the advance. He had the resources to do one or the other, but not both. *You will advance northwest from the Weser, cutting off the forces on the right flank of the advancing troops and preparing the way for a decisive attack into the Ruhr Valley.* Whoever issued the orders either didn't know or didn't care that this was impossible.

But NATO knew. Their air power had smashed convoys on every road between Rühle and Alfeld. The two B tank divisions guarding Beregovoy's northern flank had been caught off-balance and routed. Battalion-sized blocking forces occupied the major crossroads while the NATO commanders reinforced the regiment at Alfeld. Probably two full tank divisions lurked in the forests north of Rühle, but for the present they had not attacked Beregovoy. Instead their inaction both *dared* him to cross and invited him to counterattack north.

Alekseyev remembered an important lesson from the Frunze Academy: the Kharkov Offensive of 1942. The Germans had allowed the advancing Red Army forces to penetrate deep—then cut them off and chewed them up. *High Command* [meaning Stalin] *ignored the objective realities of the situation (hence violating the Second Law of Armed Combat), concentrating instead on subjective perceptions of apparent progress that unfortunately proved false,* the lesson concluded. The General wondered if this battle would be an object lesson for some future class of captains and majors who would then write their test answers and essays in bluebooks, pointing out what an ass General Colonel Pavel Leonidovich Alekseyev was!

Or he could pull them back . . . and admit defeat, and perhaps be shot, and then be remembered, if at all, as a traitor to the Motherland. It was so fitting. After sending so many thousands of boys into fire, now he faced death as well, though from an unexpected direction.

"Major Sergetov, I want you to go back to Moscow to tell them in person what I am up to. I am going to detach one division from Beregovoy and drive it east to open the way at Alfeld again. The attack on Alfeld will be from two directions, and after it succeeds, we will be able to continue the Weser crossing without fear of having our spearhead cut off."

"A skillful compromise," the major said hopefully.

That's just the thing I need to hear!

BITBURG, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

Twelve Frisbees were left. Twice they'd been pulled out of action briefly to determine what new tactics would lessen the hazards—with some success,

Colonel Ellington told himself. A few of the Soviet systems had proved to have unsuspected capabilities, but half of his losses were unexplained. Were they the kind of accidents that accompanied flying heavily loaded aircraft at minimum altitude or simply the laws of probability catching up with everyone? A pilot might think a 1-percent chance of being shot down on a given mission acceptable, then realize that fifty such missions made it a 40-percent chance.

His flight crews were unnaturally quiet. The elite Frisbee squadron was a tight family of men, a third of whom were gone. The professionalism that allowed them to shut this out and do their weeping in private had its limits. That limit had been passed. Mission performance was down. But combat requirements were not, and Ellington knew that sentiment's place in the great military scheme of things fell below the need to hit targets.

He rotated the aircraft off the pavement and headed east alone. Tonight he carried no weapons save Sidewinders and antiradar missiles for self-defense. His F-19A was burdened with fuel tanks instead of bombs. He settled to an initial flight altitude of three thousand feet and checked his instruments, making a slight adjustment in the aircraft's trim before starting a slow descent to five hundred feet. That was his altitude on crossing the Weser.

"Got some activity on the ground, Duke," Eisly reported. "Looks like a column of tanks and troop carriers heading northeast on Highway 64."

"Report it in." In this sector, everything that moved was a target. A minute later, they crossed the Leine north of Alfeld. They could see the distant flashes of artillery, and Ellington banked left to keep clear. A six-inch shell in its ballistic arc didn't care if the Frisbee was invisible or not.

This ought to be safer than a strike mission, Ellington told himself. They flew east, two miles from a secondary road that Eisly kept under surveillance with their nose-mounted television camera. The threat-warning receiver was lit up from SAM radars sweeping the sky for intruders.

"Tanks," he said quietly. "Lots of 'em."

"Moving?"

"Don't think so. Looks like they're sitting alongside the road near the treeline. Wait—missile—launch warning! SAM three o'clock!"

Ellington pushed the stick down and to the left. In a matter of seconds he had to dive his aircraft one way, turn his head the other to see the incoming missile, then turn back to make sure he didn't plow a furrow in the dirt with his fifty-million-dollar aircraft. All he saw of the SAM was a yellow-white gout of flame, and it was heading for him. As soon as he leveled out, he wrenched the Frisbee into a hard right turn. In the back Eisly had his eyes on the missile.

"Veering off, Duke—yeah!" The missile leveled out at the treetops behind the F-19, then dipped and exploded in the woods. "The instruments say that was a SA-6. The search radar is one o'clock and very close."

"Okay," Ellington said. He activated a single Sidearm antiradar missile and fired it at the transmitter from a range of four miles. The Russians were slow to detect it. Ellington saw the detonation. *Take that, Darth Vader!*

"I think you're right on how they're getting us, Duke."

"Yeah." The Frisbee was designed to defeat overhead radars. Something looking up had a much better chance of detecting them. They could defeat

that by flying very low, but then they couldn't see as well as they wanted to see. He turned for another look at the tanks. "How many you think, Don?"

"Lots, over a hundred."

"Tell 'em." Ellington turned back north while Major Eisly made his report. In minutes some German Phantom jets would visit the tank assembly point. That many tanks sitting still probably meant a fueling point, he thought. Either the fuel trucks were already there or they were en route. Fuel trucks were now his primary targets, a surprising change after weeks of going for supply dumps and moving columns . . . *Whats that?*

"Trucks dead ahead!" The Duke watched the enhanced view on his Head-Up Display. A long line of . . . fuel trucks, traveling in a tight column, blacked out and moving fast. The curved metal tops made the identification easy. He turned the fighter again to circle two miles from the road. Eisly's infrared picture showed the glow of engines and exhaust piping, hotter than the cool night air. It was like a procession of ghosts down the tree-lined road.

"I count fifty or so, Duke, and they're heading for that tank park."

Five thousand gallons per truck, Ellington thought. *Two hundred fifty thousand gallons of diesel fuel . . . enough to fill every tank in two Soviet divisions.* Eisly called that one in also.

"Shade Three," the AWACS controller radioed back. "We have eight birds en route, ETA four minutes. Orbit and evaluate."

Ellington did not acknowledge. He put his aircraft right down on the treetops for several minutes, wondering how many trees had Russian soldiers standing nearby with their SA-7 hand-held missiles.

A long time since he'd flown over Vietnam, a long time since he'd first realized that random chance could reach up into the sky and end his life despite all his skill. His years of peacetime flying had allowed him to forget that—Ellington never thought an accident could kill him. But one man with an SA-7 could, and there was no way to know when he was flying over one . . . *Stop thinking about that, Duke.*

The Royal Air Force Tornados swept in from the east. The lead aircraft dropped his cluster bombs in front of the column. The rest swept over the road at a shallow angle, raining the bomblets on the convoy. Trucks exploded, sending burning fuel high into the air. Ellington saw the silhouettes of two fighter-bombers against the orange flames as they headed west for home. The fuel spread out on both sides of the road, and he watched the undamaged trucks stop and turn, desperately trying to escape the conflagration. Some were abandoned by their drivers. Others steered clear of the fire and tried to continue south. A few succeeded. Most bogged down, too heavily loaded to move on the soft earth.

"Tell em they got about half. Not bad at all."

A minute later, the Frisbee was ordered northeast again.

In Brussels the radar signals downlinked from the ground-search radar aircraft plotted the fuel convoy's path. A computer was now programmed to perform the function of the videotape recorder, and it traced the convoy's movements back to its point of origin. Eight more attack aircraft headed toward this patch of woods. The Frisbee got there first.

“I show SAM radars, Duke,” Eisly said. “I’ll call it one battery of SA-6 and another of SA-11. They must think this place is important.”

“And a hundred little bastards with hand-held SAMs,” Ellington added. “ETA on the strike?”

“Four minutes.”

Two batteries of SAMs would be very bad news for the strike aircraft. “Let’s cut those odds down some.”

Eisly singled out the SA-11 search/acquisition radar. Ellington headed toward it at four hundred knots, using a road to travel below the trees until he was two miles away. Another Sidearm dropped off the airframe and rocketed toward the radar transmitter. At the same moment, two missiles came their way. The Duke applied maximum power and turned hard to the east, dropping chaff and flares as he did so. One missile went for the chaff and exploded harmlessly. The other locked onto the fuzzy radar signal reflected from the Frisbee and wouldn’t let go. Ellington jinked up hard, then pulled the aircraft into a maximum-g turn in hope of outmaneuvering the missile. But the SA-11 was too fast. It exploded a hundred feet behind the Frisbee. The two crewmen ejected from the distintegrating aircraft a moment later, their parachutes opening a scarce four hundred feet off the ground.

Ellington landed at the edge of a small clearing. He quickly detached himself from the chute and activated his rescue radio before drawing his revolver. He caught a glimpse of Eisly’s chute dropping into the trees and ran in that direction.

“Fuckin’ trees!” Eisly said. His feet were dangling off the ground. Ellington climbed up and cut him down. The major’s face was bleeding.

Explosions thundered to the north.

“They got it!” Ellington said.

“Yeah, but who’s got us?” Eisly said. “I hurt my back.”

“Can you move, Don?”

“Hell, yes!”

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

The dispersal of fuel reserves into small depots had reduced NATO attacks on them nearly to zero. The resulting sense of security had lasted nearly a month. The attacks on tank columns and munitions stores were serious, but there were plenty of replacements for both. Fuel was a different story.

“Comrade General, NATO has changed its pattern of air attacks.”

Alekseyev turned from the map display to listen to his air-intelligence officer. Five minutes later, his supply chief came in.

“How bad is it?”

“Overall, perhaps as much as ten percent of our forward supplies. In the Alfeld sector, over thirty percent.”

The phone rang next. It was the general whose divisions were to attack

Alfeld in five hours.

"My fuel is gone! The convoy was attacked and destroyed twenty kilometers from here."

"Can you attack with what you have?" Alekseyev asked.

"I can, but I won't be able to maneuver my units worth a damn!"

"You must attack with what you have."

"But—"

"There are four divisions of Soviet soldiers who will die if you do not relieve them. The attack will go as scheduled!" Alekseyev set the phone down. Beregovoy was also short on fuel. A tank could have enough fuel to drive three hundred kilometers in a straight line, but they almost never traveled in a straight line, and despite orders, the crews invariably left the engines running when sitting still. The time needed to start their diesels could mean death if a sudden air attack fell on them. Beregovoy had been forced to give all of his reserve fuel to his eastbound tanks so that they could hit Alfeld in conjunction with the westbound C divisions. The two divisions on the left bank of the Weser were essentially immobilized. Alekseyev was gambling the offensive on his ability to reestablish his supply routes. He told his supply chief to get more fuel. If his attack succeeded he'd need more still.

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

The transition was ridiculous—less than two hours from Stendal to Moscow by jet, from war to peace, from danger to safety. His father's chauffeur, Vitaly, met him at the military airport and drove at once to the Minister's official dacha in the birch forests outside the capital. He entered the front room to see a stranger with his father.

"So this is the famous Ivan Mikhailovich Sergetov, Major of the Soviet Army."

"Excuse me, Comrade, but I do not think we have met before."

"Vanya, this is Boris Kosov."

The young officer's face betrayed just a fraction of his emotions on being introduced to the Director of the KGB. He leaned back into the easy chair and observed the man who had ordered the bombing of the Kremlin—after arranging for children to be there. It was two in the morning. KGB troops loyal—thought to be loyal, Minister Sergetov corrected himself—to Kosov patrolled outside to keep this meeting a secret.

"Ivan Mikhailovich," Kosov said genially, "what is your assessment of the situation at the front?"

The young officer suppressed a desire to look to his father for guidance. "The success or failure of the operation hangs in the balance—remember that I am a junior officer and I lack the expertise for a reliable evaluation. But as I see things, the campaign could now go either way. NATO is short on manpower but they've had a sudden infusion of supplies."

"About two weeks' worth."

“Probably less,” Sergetov said. “One thing we’ve learned at the front is that supplies get used up much faster than expected. Fuel, ordnance, everything seems almost to evaporate. So our friends in the Navy must keep hitting the convoys.”

“Our ability to do this is seriously reduced,” Kosov said. “I would not expect —the truth is that the Navy has been defeated. Iceland will soon be back in NATO hands.”

“But Bukharin didn’t say that!” the elder Sergetov objected.

“He didn’t tell us that Northern Fleet’s long-range aircraft were nearly exterminated either, but they were. The fool thinks he can keep me from learning this! The Americans have a full division on Iceland now, with massive support from their fleet. Unless our submarines can defeat this collection of ships—and remember that while they are there, they cannot strike at the convoys—Iceland will be lost within a week. That will obviate the Navy’s strategy for isolating Europe. If NATO can resupply at will, then what?”

Ivan Sergetov shifted nervously in his chair. He could see where the conversation was leading. “Then possibly we have lost.”

“Possibly?” Kosov snorted. “Then we are doomed. We will have lost our war against NATO, we still have only a fraction of our energy needs, and our armed forces are a shadow of their former selves. And what will the Politburo do then?”

“But if the Alfeld offensive succeeds . . .” Both Politburo men ignored this statement.

“What of the secret German negotiations in India?” Minister Sergetov asked.

“Ah, you noted that the Foreign Minister glossed over that?” Kosov smiled wickedly. He was a man born to conspiracy. “They have not changed their bargaining position a dot. At most it was a hedge against the collapse of NATO forces. It might also have been a trick from the beginning. We’re not sure.” The KGB Chief poured himself a glass of mineral water. “The Politburo meets in eight hours. I will not be there. I feel an angina attack coming on from my damaged heart.”

“So Larionov will deliver your report?”

“Yes.” Kosov grinned. “Poor Josef. He is trapped by his own intelligence estimates. He will report that things are not going according to plan, but still going. He will say that NATO’s current attack is a desperate attempt to forestall the Alfeld offensive, and that the German negotiations still hold promise. I should warn you, Major, that one of his men is on your staff. I know his name, but I have not seen his reports. It was probably he who provided the information that got the former commander arrested and put your general in his place.”

“What will happen to him?” the officer asked.

“That is not your concern,” Kosov answered coldly. A total of seven senior officers had been arrested in the past thirty-six hours. All were now in Lefortovo Prison, and Kosov could not have altered their fates even if he’d had the mind to.

“Father, I need to know the fuel situation.”

“We are down to minimum national reserves—you have a week’s fuel delivered or being shipped now, and roughly one week’s supply is available

for the forces deployed in Germany, plus a week for the armies detailed to go into the Persian Gulf."

"So tell your commander that he has two weeks to win the war. If he fails, it will mean his head. Larionov will blame the Army for his own intelligence mistakes. Your life will be in danger too, young man."

"Who is the KGB spy on our staff?"

"The Theater Operations Officer. He was co-opted years ago, but his control officer is in the Larionov faction. I don't know exactly what he is reporting."

"General Alekseyev is—technically he's violating orders by taking a unit on the Weser and sending it east to relieve Alfeld."

"Then he is already in danger, and I cannot help him." Not *without tipping my hand.*

"Vanya, you should return now. Comrade Kosov and I have other things to discuss." Sergetov embraced his son and walked him to the door. He watched the red taillights disappear behind the birch trees.

"I don't like using my own son in this!"

"Whom else can you trust, Mikhail Eduardovich? The *Rodina* faces possible destruction, the Party leadership has gone mad, and I don't even have full control of the KGB. Don't you see: we have *lost!* We must now save what we can."

"But we still hold enemy territory—"

"Yesterday does not matter. Today does not matter. What matters is one week from today. What will our Defense Minister do when it becomes obvious even to him that we have failed? Have you considered that? When desperate men realize they have failed—and those desperate men have control of atomic weapons, then what?"

Then what, indeed? Sergetov wondered. He pondered two *more questions. What do I—we?—do about* it? Then he looked at Kosov and asked himself the second.

ALFELD, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

The Russians were not responding very fast, Mackall was surprised to see. There had been air attacks and several vicious artillery bombardments during the night, but the expected ground assault hadn't materialized. For the Russians this was a crucial mistake. More ammunition had arrived, bringing them to full loads for the first time in weeks. Better still, a full brigade of German Panzer Grenadiers had reinforced the depleted troopers of the 11th Cav, and Mackall had learned to trust these men as he trusted his tank's composite armor. Their defensive positions were arrayed in depth to the east and west. The armored forces pushing down from the north could now support Alfeld with their long-range guns. Engineers had repaired the Russian bridges on the Leine, and Mackall was about to move his tanks east to support the mechanized troops guarding the rubble that was Alfeld.

It was strange crossing the Soviet ribbon bridge—it was strange to be

moving east at all! Mackall thought—and his driver was nervous, crossing the narrow, flimsy-looking structure at five miles per hour. Once across, they moved north along the river, swinging around the town. It was raining lightly, with fog and low-hanging clouds, typical European summer weather that cut visibility to under a thousand yards. He was met by troops who guided the arriving tanks to selected defensive positions. The Soviets had helped for once. In their constant efforts to clear the roads of rubble, they'd given the Americans neat piles of brick and stone about two meters high, almost exactly the right size for tanks to hide behind. The lieutenant dismounted from his vehicle to check the placement of his four tanks, then conferred with the commander of the infantry company he was detailed to support. There were two battalions of infantry dug in deep and hard on the outskirts of Alfeld, supported by a squadron of tanks. He heard the overhead whistling of artillery shells, the new kind that dropped mines on the fog-shrouded battlefield ahead of him. The whistling changed as he mounted his tank. Incoming.

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

"It's taken too long to get them moving," Alekseyev growled to his operations officer.

"It's still three divisions, and they are moving now."

"But how many reinforcements have arrived?"

The operations man had warned Alekseyev against trying to coordinate a two-pronged attack, but the General had stuck to the plan. Beregovoy's A tank division was now in place to strike from the west, while the three C reserve divisions hit from the east. The regular tank force had no artillery—they'd had to move too fast to bring it—but three hundred tanks and six hundred personnel carriers were a formidable force all by themselves, the General thought... but what were they up against, and how many vehicles had been destroyed or damaged by air attack on the approach march?

Sergetov arrived. His class-A uniform was rumpled from his traveling.

"And how was Moscow?" Alekseyev asked.

"Dark, Comrade General. The attack, how did it go?"

"Just starting now."

"Oh?" The major was surprised at the delay. He looked rather closely at the Theater Operations Officer, who hovered over the map table, frowning at the dispositions while the plotting officers prepared to mark the progress of the attack.

"I have a message from high command for you, Comrade General." Sergetov handed over an official-looking form. Alekseyev scanned it—and stopped reading. His fingers went taut on the paper briefly before he regained self-control.

"Come to my office." The General said nothing more until the door was closed. "Are you sure of this?"

"I was told by Director Kosov himself."

Alekseyev sat on the edge of his desk. He lit a match and burned the message form, watching the flame march across the paper almost to his fingertips as he twisted it in his hand.

"That fucking weasel. *Stukach!" An informer on my own staff!* "What else?"

Sergetov related the other information he'd learned. The General was silent for a minute, computing his fuel requirements against fuel reserves.

"If today's attack fails . . . we've—" He turned away, unwilling, unable, to make himself say it aloud. *I have not trained my whole life to* fail! He remembered the first notice he'd had of the campaign against NATO. *I told them to attack at once. I told them that we needed strategic surprise, and that we'd have difficulty achieving it if we waited so long.* I told *them that we'd have to close the North Atlantic to prevent resupply of the NATO forces. So. Now that we've accomplished none of these, my friend is in a KGB prison and my own life is in jeopardy because I may fail to do what I told them we could not do—because I was right all along!*

Come now, Pasha. Why should the Politburo listen to its soldiers when it can just as easily shoot them?

The Theater Operations Officer stuck his head through the door. "The troops are moving."

"Thank you, Yevgeny Ilych," Alekseyev answered amiably. He rose from the desk. "Come, Major, let's see how quickly we can smash through the NATO lines!"

ALFELD, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

"Bar fight," Woody said from his gunner's position.

"Looks like it," Mackall agreed.

They'd been told to expect two or three Soviet reserve divisions. Together they had perhaps the artillery strength of two regular units, and they were firing at both sides of the river. The miserable visibility hurt both sides. The Russians could not direct their artillery fire well, and the NATO troops would have minimal air support. As usual, the worst part of the preliminary bombardment was the rockets, which lasted two minutes, the unguided missiles falling like hail. Though men died and vehicles exploded, the defending force was well prepared and casualties were light.

Woody switched on his thermal-imaging sights. It allowed him to see roughly a thousand yards, double the visual range. On the left side of the turret, the loader sat nervously, his foot resting lightly on the pedal that controlled the doors to the ammo compartment. The driver in his coffin-sized box under the main gun drummed his fingers on the control bar.

"Heads up. Friendlies coming in," Mackall told his crew. "Movement reported to the east."

"I see 'em," Woody acknowledged. Just a few infantrymen were returning from their forward listening posts. Not as many as there should have been, Mackall thought. So many casualties over the past—

"Target tank, twelve o'clock," Woody said. He squeezed the triggers on his yoke, and the tank seemed to leap from its first shot.

The spent round ejected from the breech. The loader stomped his foot on the pedal. The door slid clear of the ammo compartment and he pulled out another sabot round, turning it in a narrow circle to slam it in the breech.

"Ready!"

Woody already had another target. He was largely on his own while Mackall watched out for the whole platoon's front. The troop commander was calling in artillery fire. Immediately behind the first row of tanks, they saw dismounted infantrymen running to keep up with the tanks. Eight-wheeled infantry carriers were mixed in as well. The Bradleys engaged them with their 25mm guns as proximity-fused artillery rounds began to detonate twenty feet off the ground, showering the infantrymen with fragments.

They couldn't miss. The Russian tanks advanced at half the normal hundred-yard interval, concentrating on a narrow front. They were old T-55s, Woody saw, with obsolete 100mm guns. He killed three before they could even see the NATO positions. One shell landed in the stone pile ahead of their tank, sending a mix of steel fragments and stone chips over the vehicle. Woody dispatched that tank with a HEAT round. Smoke rounds began falling—they didn't help the Russians at all. The electronic sights on the NATO vehicles saw right through it. More artillery fire landed on the Cav now that the Russians could see well enough to direct fire in on their positions, and that began an artillery duel as NATO guns searched for the Russian batteries.

"Antenna tank! Sabot!" The gunner locked his sights on the T-55 and fired. The round missed this time and they reloaded another round. The second shot blew the turret into the sky. The thermal sight showed the bright dots of antitank missiles running downrange, and the fountaining explosions of the vehicles they hit. Suddenly the Russians stopped. Most of the vehicles died in place, but some turned and ran off.

"Cease fire, cease fire!" Mackall told his platoon. "Report in."

"Three-two has a track blown off," one replied. The others were intact, protected by their stone revetments.

"Nine rounds fired, boss," Woody said. Mackall and the loader opened their hatches to vent the acrid propellant smell out of the turret. The gunner pulled off his leather helmet and shook his head. His sandy hair was filthy. "You know, there's one thing I miss from the M-60."

"What's that, Woody?"

"We ain't got no hatch in the bottom. Nice to be able to take a piss without climbing outside."

"Did you have to say that!" the driver moaned.

Mackall laughed. It was a moment before he realized why. For the first time they'd stopped Ivan cold, without having to pull back at all—a good thing since their current position didn't allow for that possibility! And how did the crew react? They were making *jokes.*

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

O'Malley lifted off again. He was averaging ten flight hours per day. Three ships had been torpedoed, two more hit by submarine-launched missiles in the past four days, but the Russians had paid dearly for that. They'd sent perhaps as many as twenty submarines into Icelandic waters. Eight had died trying to get through the picket line of submarines that was the fleet's outer defense. More had fallen to the line of towed-array ships whose helicopters were now backed up by those of HMS *Illustrious.* A bold Tango skipper had actually penetrated one of the carrier groups and put a fish into *America's* tough hide, only to be pounced on and sunk by the destroyer Caron. The carrier could now make only twenty-five knots, barely enough to conduct flight operations, but she was still there.

Mike Force—*Reuben James, Battleaxe,* and *Illustrious*—was escorting a group of amphibs south for another landing. There were still bears in the woods, and Ivan would go for the amphibious-warfare ships as soon as he had the chance. From a thousand feet, O'Malley could see *Nassau* and three others to the north. Smoke rose from Keflavik. The Russian troops were getting no rest at all.

"Won't be easy for them to track in on us," Ralston thought aloud.

"You suppose those Russian troops have radios?" O'Malley asked.

"Sure."

"You suppose maybe they can see us from those hills—and maybe radio a submarine what they see?"

"I didn't think of that," the ensign admitted.

"That's all right. I'm sure Ivan did." O'Malley looked north again. There were three thousand Marines on those ships. The Marines had saved his ass in Vietnam more than once.

Reuben James and O'Malley had the inshore side of the small convoy while the British ships and helos guarded to seaward. It was relatively shallow water. Their towed-array sonars were reeled in.

"Willy, drop—now, now, now!" The first active sonobuoy was ejected into the water. Five more were deployed in the next few minutes. The passive buoys used for open-ocean search were the wrong choice here. Stealth was not in the cards if the Russian subs were being informed where to go. Better to scare them off than to try finesse.

Three hours, O'Malley thought.

"Hammer, this is Romeo," Morris called. "Bravo and India are working a possible contact to seaward, two-nine miles bearing two-four-seven."

"Roger that, Romeo." O'Malley acknowledged. To Ralston: "Bastard's within missile range. That oughta make the Marines happy."

"Contact! Possible contact on buoy four," Willy said, watching the sonar display. "Signal is weak."

O'Malley turned his helo and moved back up the line.

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

"Where do you suppose they are?" Andreyev asked his naval liaison officer. The position of the formation had been plotted on the map from the reports of several mountaintop lookout stations.

The man shook his head. "Trying to get to the targets."

The General remembered his own time aboard ship, how vulnerable he'd felt, how dangerous it had been. A distant part of his consciousness felt sympathy for the American Marines. But gallantry was a luxury the General could not afford. His paratroopers were heavily engaged, and he didn't need more enemy troops and heavy equipment—of course!

His division was deployed to keep the Americans away from the Reykjavik-Keflavik area as long as possible. His original orders remained operative: deny the Keflavik Air Base to NATO. That he could do, though it would mean the probable annihilation of his elite troopers. His problem was that Reykjavik airport would be equally useful to the enemy, and one light division wasn't enough to cover both places.

So now the Americans trailed their coats in plain view of his observers—a full regiment of troops plus heavy weapons and helicopters that they could land anywhere they wished. If he redeployed to meet this threat, he risked disaster when he disengaged his forward units. If he moved his reserves, they would be in the open where naval guns and aircraft could massacre them. This unit was being moved, not to join the others deployed against his airborne infantrymen, but to exploit a weakness within minutes instead of hours. Once in place, the landing ships could wait for relative darkness or a storm and race unseen across the water to landbound troops. How could he deploy his own forces to deal with that? His radars were finished, he had a single remaining SAM launcher, and the battleships had systematically exterminated most of his artillery.

"How many submarines out there?"

"I don't know, Comrade General."

USS *REUBEN JAMES*

Morris watched the sonar plot. The sonobuoy contact had faded off after a few minutes. A school of herring, perhaps. The ocean waters abounded with fish, and enough of them on active sonar looked like a sub. His own sonar was virtually useless as his ship struggled just to keep up with the 'phibs. A possible submarine to seaward—every sub contact was a possible cruise-missile sub—was all the Commodore needed to go to full speed.

O'Malley was dipping his sonar now, trying to reacquire the lost contact. He was the only one who could keep up with things.

"Romeo, this is Bravo. Be advised we are prosecuting a possible missile-carrying submarine." Doug Perrin had to assume the worst case.

"Roger that, Bravo." According to the data-link picture, three helicopters were backing *Battleaxe* up, and the British frigate had interposed herself on the line from the contact to the amphibious ships. *Be careful, Doug.*

“Contact!” Willy said. “I have an active sonar contact bearing three-zero-three, range two three hundred.”

O’Malley didn’t have to look at his tactical display. The submarine was between him and the ’phibs.

“Up dome!” The pilot hovered while the sonar transducer was winched in. The contact was alerted now. That made it harder. “Romeo, Hammer, we have a possible contact here.”

“Roger, understood.” Morris was looking at the display. He ordered the frigate to close at flank speed. Not a smart tactic, he had no choice but to pounce on the contact before it got within range of the ’phibs. “Signal *Nassau* we’re working a possible contact.”

“Down dome!” O’Malley ordered. “Drop it to four hundred and hammer!”

Willy activated the sonar as soon as the proper depth was reached. He got a screenful of echoes. The transducer was so close to the rocky bottom that nearly twenty rocky spires showed up. A swiftly running tide didn’t help matters. Flow noise around the rocks gave numerous false readings on the passive plot also.

“Sir, I got a whole lot of nothing here.”

“I can feel him, Willy. The last time we pinged, I bet we had him at periscope depth and he ducked down deep while we came over.”

“That fast?” Ralston asked.

“That fast.”

“Skipper, one of these things might be moving a little.”

O’Malley keyed his radio and got permission to launch from Morris. Ralston set the torpedo for circular search, and the pilot dropped it into the sea. The pilot keyed the sonar into his headphones. He heard the whine of the torpedo’s propellers, then the high-frequency ping of its homing sonar. It continued to circle for five minutes, then switched over to continuous pinging —and exploded.

“Explosion sounded funny, sir,” Willy said.

“Hammer, Romeo—report.”

“Romeo, Hammer, I think we just killed a rock.” O’Malley paused. “Romeo, there’s a sub here, but I can’t prove it just yet.”

“What makes you think that, Hammer?”

“Because it’s one damned fine place to hide, Romeo.”

“Concur.” Morris had learned to trust O’Malley’s hunches. He called up the amphibious commander on *Nassau.* “November, this is Romeo, we have a possible contact. Recommend you maneuver north while we prosecute.”

“Negative, Romeo,” the Commodore replied at once. “India is working a probable, repeat probable contact that’s acting like a missile boat. We’re heading for our objective at max speed. Get him for us, Romeo.”

“Roger. Out.” Morris set the phone back in place. He looked at his tactical action officer. “Continue to close the datum point.”

“Isn’t this dangerous, rushing after a submarine contact?” Calloway asked. “Don’t you have your helicopter to keep them at arm’s length?”

“You’re learning, Mr. Calloway. It’s dangerous, all right. I think they

mentioned that the job could get that way when I was at Annapolis . . .”

Both her jet turbines were running flat-out, and the frigate’s knife-edge bow sliced through the water at over thirty knots. The torque from her single screw gave the ship a four-degree list to port as she raced to close the submarine.

“This is getting nasty.” O’Malley could see the frigate’s mast clearly now, the distinctive crosstrees well above the horizon as he covered fifty feet over the water. “Talk to me, Willy!”

“Lots of bottom echoes, sir. The bottom must look like a city, all these damned things sticking up. We got eddies—we got too many things here, sir. Sonar conditions suck!”

“Go passive.” The pilot reached up and flipped the switch to listen in. Willy was right. Too much flow noise. *Think!* he told himself. The pilot looked at his tactical display. The amphibs were a scant ten miles away. He couldn’t hear them on his sonar, but there was about a 30-percent chance that a submarine could. *If we had him at antenna depth before, he probably has a fair idea where they are . . . but not good enough to shoot.*

“Romeo, Hammer, can you warn the ’phibs off? Over.”

“Negative, Hammer. They are running away from a probable contact to seaward.”

“Great!” O’Malley growled over the intercom. “Prepare to raise dome, Willy.” A minute later they were heading west.

“This sub-driver’s got real balls,” the pilot said. “He’s got brains, too . . .” O’Malley keyed his radio.

“Romeo, Hammer, put November’s course track on your tactical display and transmit to my gadget.”

It took a minute. O’Malley blessed the unknown engineer who’d built this feature into the Seahawk’s tactical computer. The pilot drew an imaginary line from their only contact on the sub and Nassau’s projected course. *Figure the sub is going at twenty- to twenty-five knots* . . . The pilot reached down and stabbed his finger on the glass tube.

“That’s where the bastard is!”

“How do you know?” Ralston asked. O’Malley already had the Seahawk heading that way.

“ ’Cause if I was him, that’s where *I’d* be! Willy, next time we dip, keep the dome at exactly one hundred feet. Tell you one other thing, Mr. Ralston—this guy thinks he’s beat us.” *Nobody beats the Hammer!* O’Malley circled over the spot he’d selected and brought the Seahawk into hover.

“Down dome, Willy. Passive search only.”

“One hundred feet, listening, skipper.” Seconds stretched out into minutes while the pilot worked his controls to keep the helicopter stationary. “Possible contact bearing one-six-two.”

“Go active?” Ralston asked.

“Not yet.”

“Bearing is changing slowly, now one-five-nine.”

“Romeo, Hammer, we have a possible submarine contact.” The helicopter’s on-board computer transmitted the data to *Reuben James.* Morris altered course to bear down on the contact. O’Malley raised his sonar dome and

deployed a sonobuoy to mark the position and hold the contact while he moved to another position. The frigate was now four miles from the helicopter.

"Down dome!" Another minute's wait.

"Contact, bearing one-nine-seven. Buoy six shows contact bearing one-four-two."

"Gotcha, sucker! Up dome, let's go get him!"

Ralston worked the attack system as O'Malley moved south to get right behind the target. He set their last torpedo for a search depth of two hundred feet, and a snake course.

"Down dome!"

"Contact, bearing two-nine-eight."

"Hammer!"

Willy punched the active sonar button. "Positive contact, bearing two-nine-eight, range six hundred."

"Set!" Ralston said immediately, and the pilot jammed his thumb on the red release button. The burnished green torpedo dropped into the water.

And nothing happened.

"Skipper, the torp didn't activate—dead torp, sir."

There wasn't time to curse. "Romeo, Hammer, we just dropped on a positive contact—bad torpedo, negative function on the torp."

Morris clenched his fist on the radiotelephone receiver. He gave course and rudder orders. "Hammer, Romeo, can you continue to track the target?"

"Affirmative, he's running hard on course two-two-zero—wait, turning north . . . seems to be slowing down now."

Reuben James was now six thousand yards from the submarine. The ships were on converging courses, with each in firing range of the other.

"Crash stop!" Morris ordered. In seconds the entire ship was vibrating from the reverse power. The frigate slowed to five knots inside a minute, and Morris ordered a speed of three knots, bare steerageway. "Prairie/Masker?"

"Operating, sir," the ship control officer confirmed.

Calloway had kept out of the way with his mouth shut—but this was too much. "Captain Morris, aren't we a sitting duck?"

"Yep." Morris nodded. "But we can stop faster than he can. His sonar should just be coming back on line—and we're not making enough noise to hear. Sonar conditions are bad for everybody. It's a gamble," the captain admitted. He radioed for another helicopter. *Illustrious* would have one to him in fifteen minutes.

Morris watched O'Malley's helicopter on radar. The Russian sub had slowed and gone deep again.

"Vampire, vampire!" the radar technician called. "Two missiles in the air—"

"Bravo reports her helo just dropped on an SSGN, sir!" the ASW officer sang out.

"This is getting complicated," Morris observed coolly. "Weapons free."

"Bravo has splashed one missile, sir! The other one's heading for the India!"

Morris's eyes focused on the main display. A symbol was marching toward HMS *Illustrious*—moving very fast.

"Evaluate vampire as SS-N-19—Bravo evaluates her contact as Oscar-class. She reports a hit, sir." Four helicopters were swarming around the v submarine-contact symbol now.

"Romeo, Hammer, the bastard's right underneath us—bearing just reversed on us."

"Sonar, Yankee-search on bearing one-one-three!" Morris lifted the radiotelephone. "November, turn north now!" he ordered the *Nassau.*

"India is hit, sir. The vampire scored on India . . . wait, India helo reports he dropped another torp on the contact!"

Illustrious would have to look out after herself, Morris thought.

"Sonar contact, sir, bearing one-one-eight, range fifteen hundred." The data went into the fire-control director. The solution light blinked on.

"Set!"

"Shoot!" Morris paused for a moment. "Bridge, combat: all ahead flank! Come right to zero-one-zero."

"Bloody hell," observed Mr. Calloway.

On the frigate's starboard side, the triple torpedo tube mount swung out and loosed a single fish. Below, the engineers listened to their engines go from idle to maximum power. The frigate settled at the stern as the propeller churned the water to foam. The powerful jet turbines accelerated the ship almost like an automobile.

"Romeo, Hammer: warning, warning, the target just fired a fish at you!"

"Nixie?" Morris asked. The ship was moving too fast for her own sonar to work.

"One in the water and another ready to stream, sir," a petty officer responded.

"That's it, then," Morris said. He reached into his pocket for a cigarette, looked at it, then tossed the whole pack into a waste can.

"Romeo, Hammer, this contact is a Type-Two engine plant. I evaluate this contact as a Victor-class. Now at full speed, turning north. Your torp is pinging the target. We've lost the fish he sent your way."

"Roger, stick with the sub, Hammer."

"Aren't you one cool bastard!" O'Malley said into the intercom. He could see smoke rising from HMS Illustrious. *Idiot,* the pilot said to himself. *You shouldn't have dropped the first torp!* All he could do now was ping.

"Skipper, the torp just went to continuous ping. It seems to be closing the target, ping interval is shortening. Hull-popping noise, the sub is changing depth again, coming up, I think."

O'Malley saw a disturbance in the water. Suddenly the spherical bow of the Victor came through the surface—the submarine had lost depth control trying to evade the fish. What followed a moment later was the first warhead explosion O'Malley had ever really seen. The submarine was sliding back down when a plume of water appeared a hundred feet from where the bow had poked up.

"Romeo, Hammer, that was a hit—I *saw* the sonuvabitch! Say again, that's a hit!"

Morris checked with his sonar officer. They hadn't picked up the Russian

torpedo's homing sonar. It had missed.

Captain Perrin scarcely believed it. The Oscar had taken three torpedo hits so far and still there were no breaking-up noises. But the machinery noise had stopped, and he had the submarine on his active sonar. *Battleaxe* closed at fifteen knots when the black shape appeared amid a mass of bubbles on the surface. The captain ran to the bridge and put his binoculars on the Russian ship. The sub was a bare mile away. A man appeared atop the submarine's sail, waving wildly.

"Check fire! Check fire!" he screamed. "Ship Control, bring us alongside quick as you can!"

He didn't believe it. The Oscar showed a pair of jagged rents on her upper hull and floated with a 30-degree list from the ruptured ballast tanks. Men were scrambling out of the sail and the forward deck hatch.

"Bravo, Romeo. We just killed a Victor-class inshore. Please advise your situation, over."

Perrin lifted the phone. "Romeo, we have a wounded Oscar on the surface, the crew is abandoning ship. He fired two missiles. Our Sea Wolves splashed one. The other hit India in the bows. We are preparing to conduct rescue operations. Tell November that he may continue his promenade. Over."

"Way to go, Bravo! Out." He switched channels. "November, this is Romeo, did you copy Bravo's last transmission, over?"

"Affirmative, Romeo. Let's get this parade to the beach."

General Andreyev took the report from the observation post himself before handing the radiophone to his operations officer. The American landing ships were now five kilometers from Akranes lighthouse. They'd proceed probably to the old whaling station in Hvalfjördur to wait their chance.

"We will resist to the end," the KGB colonel said. "We'll show them how Soviet soldiers can fight!"

"I admire your spirit, Comrade Colonel." He walked over to the corner and picked up a rifle. "Here, you may take this to the front yourself."

"But—"

"Lieutenant Gasporenko, get the colonel a driver. He's going to the front to show the Americans how Soviet soldiers fight." Andreyev watched with dark amusement. The *chekist* could not back down. After he was gone, the General summoned his divisional communications officer. All long-range radio transmitters except for two would be destroyed. Andreyev knew he could not surrender yet. His troopers would have to pay a bill in blood first, and the General would suffer for every drop. But he knew it would soon reach a point at which further resistance was futile, and he would not sacrifice his men for nothing.

ALFELD, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

It was over for a while. The second attack had nearly done it, Mackall thought. The Russians had run their tanks fiat-out and gotten to within fifty yards of the American positions, close enough that their old, obsolete cannon had destroyed half of the troop's tanks. But that attack had faltered on the brink of success, and the third attack at dusk was a halfhearted affair executed by men too tired to advance into the kill zone. He could hear the noise behind him of another action under way. The Germans west of the town were under heavy attack.

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

"General Beregovoy reports a heavy counterattack from the north—toward Alfeld."

Alekseyev accepted the news impassively. His gamble had failed. *That's why it's called gambling, Pasha.*

Now what?

It was very quiet in the map room. The junior officers who plotted the movements of friendly and enemy forces had never talked much, and now were not even looking over to the other map sectors. It was no longer a race to see whose forces got to their objectives first.

The word you're looking for is gloom, *Pasha.* The General stood next to his operations officer.

"Yevgeny Ilych, I am open to suggestions."

He shrugged. "We must continue. Our troops are tired. So are theirs."

"We're throwing inexperienced troops against veterans. We have to change that. We will take officers and NCOs from the A units that are off the line and use them to beef up the C units now arriving. These reservists must have experienced combat soldiers to leaven their ranks, else we send them like cattle to the slaughter. Next, we will temporarily suspend offensive operations —"

"Comrade General, if we do that—"

"We have enough strength for one last hard push. That push will be at the time and place of my choosing, and it will be a fully prepared attack. I will order Beregovoy to escape the best way he can—I cannot trust that order to the radio. Yevgeny Ilych, I want you to fly to Beregovoy's headquarters tonight. He'll need a good operational brain to assist him. That will be your assignment." *I'll give you a chance to redeem yourself, you traitorous bastard. Use it well.* More importantly, it got the KGB informer out of the way. The operations officer walked off to arrange transport. Alekseyev took Sergetov back into his office.

"You're going back to Moscow."

42

The Resolution of Conflict

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

"Amazing what a pair of fives can do . . ."

"What's that, General?" his intelligence chief inquired. SACEUR shook his head, looking at the map with confidence for once. Alfeld held—a couplet, the General thought. The Germans to the west had taken a murderous pounding, but while their lines had bent, they hadn't broken. More help was on the way. A tank brigade was en route to reinforce them. The newly arrived armored division was pressing south now to isolate this Russian division from those on the Weser. The farthest-advanced Russian divisions had shot out their supply of surface-to-air missiles, and NATO air power was blasting their positions with grim regularity.

Aerial reconnaissance showed the open ground east of Alfeld to be a charnel house of burned-out tanks. Reinforcements were heading there also. Ivan would be back, but skies were clearing again. The full weight of NATO aircraft was coming into play.

"Joachim, I think we've stopped them."

"Ja, Herr General! Now we'll begin to drive them back."

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

"Father, General Alekseyev has ordered me to tell you that he does not think it possible to defeat NATO."

"You are certain?"

"Yes, father." The young man sat down in the Minister's office. "We failed to achieve strategic surprise. We underestimated NATO's air power—too many things. We failed to prevent NATO's resupply. Except for that last counterattack it might have worked, but . . . There is one more chance. The General is suspending offensive operations in preparation for a final attack. To do this—"

"If all is lost, what is this you're talking about?"

"If we can damage the NATO forces sufficiently to forestall a major counteroffensive, we will hold on to our gains, enabling you—enabling the Politburo to negotiate from a position of strength. Even this is uncertain, but it is the best option the General sees. He asks that you put it to the Politburo that a diplomatic settlement is necessary, and quickly, before NATO recovers its strength sufficiently for their own offensive."

The Minister nodded. He turned in his chair to look out the window for a few minutes while his son waited for a response.

"Before that is possible," the Minister said finally, "they will order Alekseyev's arrest. You know what's happened to the others they arrested, don't you?" It took his son a moment to grasp the father's words.

"They couldn't have!"

"Last night, all seven of them, including your former Commander-in-Chief."

"But he was an effective commander—"

"He failed, Vanya," the elder Sergetov said quietly. "The State does not suffer failure gladly, and I have allied myself, for your sake, with Alekseyev . . ." His voice trailed off. *I have no choice now. I must cooperate with Kosov, bastard or not, consequences or not. And I must risk your life also, Vanya.* "Vitaly will take you to the dacha. You will change into civilian clothes and wait for me. You will not go outside, you will not allow yourself to be seen by anyone."

"But surely you are being watched!"

"Of course." His father smiled briefly. "I am being watched by officers of the Committee for State Security, officers of Kosov's personal staff."

"And if he plays you for a fool?"

"Then I am a dead man, Vanya, and so are you. Forgive me, I never dreamed that something like this would—you have made me very proud these last few weeks." He rose and embraced his son. "Go now, you must trust me."

After his son left, Sergetov lifted his phone and dialed KGB headquarters. Director Kosov was out, and the Petroleum Minister left a message that the figures Kosov had requested on oil production in the Gulf States were ready.

The meeting requested by the Minister's use of the code phrase took place soon after sunset. By midnight, Ivan Mikhailovich was again on a plane bound for Germany.

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

"Director Kosov applauds your method for dealing with the traitor. He said that killing him, even accidentally, would have aroused suspicion, but now that he is safely behind enemy lines and doing his duty, they will be certain that he is not under suspicion."

"The next time you see the bastard, tell him thank you."

"Your friend was shot thirty-six hours ago," Sergetov said next. The General snapped to rigid attention.

"What?"

"The former Commander-in-Chief West was shot, along with Marshal Shavyrin, Rozhkov, four others."

"And that fucking Kosov congratulates me for—"

"He said there was nothing he could do about it and offers his condolences."

Condolences from the Committee for State Security, Alekseyev thought. *There will come a time, Comrade Kosov . . .*

"I am next, of course."

"You were right to have me float your rationale for future operations with my father. He and Kosov both feel that for you to propose this to STAVKA would mean your instant arrest. The Politburo still feels that victory is possible. When they lose that belief, anything can happen."

Alekseyev knew exactly what *anything* meant.

"Go on."

"Your idea to put experienced troops in the arriving C divisions has merit—anyone will see that. A number of such divisions are cycling through Moscow every day." Sergetov halted to allow his general to draw his own conclusions.

The General's whole body appeared to shudder. "Vanya, you are talking treason."

"We are talking about the survival of the Motherland—"

"Do not confuse the importance of your own skin with the importance of our country! You are a soldier, Ivan Mikhailovich, as am I. Our lives are expendable pawns—"

"For our political leadership?" Sergetov scoffed. "Your respect for the Party comes late, Comrade General."

"I hoped that your father could persuade the Politburo to a more moderate course of action. I did not intend to incite a rebellion."

"The time for moderation is long passed," Sergetov replied, speaking like a young Party chieftain. "My father spoke against the war, as did others, to no avail. If you propose a diplomatic solution, you will be arrested and shot, first for failing to achieve your assigned objective, second for daring to propose political policy to the Party hierarchy. With whom would you be replaced, and what would be the result? My father fears that the Politburo will lean toward a nuclear resolution of the conflict." *My father was right,* Sergetov thought, *for all* his *anger at the Party, Alekseyev has served the State too long and too well to allow himself to think realistically of treason.*

"The Party and the Revolution have been betrayed, Comrade General. If we do not save them, both are lost. My father says that you must decide whom and what you serve."

"And if I decide wrongly?"

"Then I will die, and my father, and others. And you will not have saved yourself."

He's right. He's right on all things. The Revolution has been betrayed. The idea of the Party has been betrayed—but—

"You try to manipulate me like a child! Your father told you that I would not cooperate unless you convinced me of the idealistic" —the General sputtered for a moment, seeking the right word—"rightness, rightness of your action."

"My father told me that you have been conditioned, just as the *science* of

Communism says men can be conditioned. You have been told all your life that the Army serves the Party, that you are the guardian of the State. He told me to remind you that you are a man of the Party, that it is time for the people to reclaim the Party for themselves."

"Ah, this is why he conspires with the Director of the KGB!"

"Perhaps you would prefer that we have some bearded priests from the Orthodox Church, or some dissident Jews from the Gulag to make the revolution a pure one? We must fight with what we have." It was heady wine indeed for Sergetov to talk this way to a man with whom he had served under fire, but he knew that his father was right. Twice in fifty years, the Party had broken the Army to its will. For all their pride and power, the generals of the Soviet Army had as much instinct for rebellion as a lapdog. *But once the decision is made,* his father had told him . . . "The *Rodina* cries out for rescue, Comrade General."

"Don't tell me about the Motherland!" *The Party is the soul of the people.* Alekseyev remembered the slogan for a thousand repetitions.

"Then what of the children of Pskov?"

"The KGB did that!"

"Do you blame the sword for the hand that wields it? If so, what does that make you?"

Alekseyev wavered. "It is not an easy thing to overturn the State, Ivan Mikhailovich."

"Comrade General, is it your duty to carry out orders that will only bring about its destruction? We do not seek to overturn the State," Sergetov said gently. "We seek to restore the State."

"We will probably fail." Alekseyev took a perverse comfort in the statement. He sat down at his desk. "But if I must die, better that it should be as a man than a dog." The General took out a pad of paper and a pencil. He began to formulate a plan to ensure that they would not fail, and that he would not die until he had accomplished at least one thing.

HILL 914, ICELAND

They were good troops up there, Colonel Lowe knew. Nearly all of the division's artillery was lashing the hill, plus continuous air attacks, plus the battleships' five-inch guns. He watched his troops advancing up the steep slopes under fire from the remaining Russians. The battlewagons were close inshore, delivering VT proximity rounds from their secondary batteries. The shells exploded twenty feet or so from the ground in ugly black puffs that sprayed the hill with fragments, while the Marines' own heavy guns plowed up the hilltop. Every few minutes the artillery would stop for a moment to allow the aircraft to swoop in with napalm and cluster bombs—and still the Russians fought back.

"Now—move the choppers now!" Lowe ordered.

Ten minutes later, he heard the stuttering sound of rotors as fifteen

helicopters passed his command post to the east, curving around the back side of the hill. His artillery coordinator called to halt the fire briefly as the two companies of men landed on the hill's southern rim. They were supported by SeaCobra attack choppers and advanced at a run toward the Russian positions on the northern crests.

The Russian commander was wounded, and his second in command was slow to realize that he had enemy troops in his rear. When he did, a hopeless situation became one of despair. The word got out slowly. Many of the Russian radios were destroyed. Some of the troopers never got the word and had to be killed in their holes. But they were the exceptions. Most heard the diminishing fire and saw the raised hands. With a mixture of shame and relief, they disabled their weapons and waited for capture. The battle for the hill had lasted four hours.

"Hill 914 does not answer, Comrade General," the communications officer said.

"It's hopeless," Andreyev muttered to himself. His artillery was destroyed, his SAMs were gone. He'd been ordered to hold the island for only a few weeks, been promised seaborne reinforcement, been told that the war in Europe would last two weeks, four at the most. He'd held longer than that. One of his regiments had been destroyed north of Reykjavik, and now that the Americans had hill 914, they could see into the island's capital. Two thousand of his men were dead or missing, another thousand wounded. It was enough.

"See if you can raise the American commander on the radio. Say that I request a cease-fire and desire to meet with him at a place of his choosing."

USS *NASSAU*

"So, you're Beagle?"

"Yes, General." Edwards tried to sit up a little straighter in the bed. The tubes in his arm and the cast on his leg didn't help. The landing ship's hospital was full of wounded men.

"And this must be Miss Vigdis. They told me you were pretty. I have a daughter about your age."

The Navy corpsmen had gotten her clothes that nearly fit. A doctor had examined her and pronounced her pregnancy normal and healthy. She was rested and bathed; to Mike and everyone else who had seen her she was a reminder of better times and better things.

"Except for Michael, I would be dead."

"So I've heard. Is there anything you need, miss?"

She looked down at Edwards, and that answered the question.

"You've done pretty well for a weatherman, Lieutenant."

"Sir, all we did was keep out of the way."

"No. You told us what Ivan had on this rock, and where they were—well, at least where they weren't. You and your people did a lot more than just keep

out of the way, son." The General pulled a small box out of his pocket. "Well done, Marine!"

"Sir, I'm Air Force."

"Oh, yeah? Well, this here says you're a Marine." The General pinned a Navy Cross to his pillow. A major approached the General and handed him a message form. The General pocketed it and looked down the rows of hospital beds.

"About time," he breathed. "Miss Vigdis, would you please look after this man for us?"

SVERDLOVSK, R.S.F.S.R.

Two more days and they'd be leaving for the front. The 77th Motor-Rifle Division was a Category-C unit, and like all such units was composed of reservists in their thirties and possessed a little over a third of its normal outlay of equipment. Since mobilization they had been training incessantly, the older men with military experience passing along their knowledge to the newly inducted conscripts. It was a strange match. The young arrivals were physically fit but ignorant of military life. The older men remembered much of their own military service, but had softened with age. The young men had the ardor of youth, and as much as they naturally feared exposure to danger on the battlefield, they would not hesitate to defend their country. The older men with families had much more to lose. Lectures to their officers from a veteran combat officer had filtered down to the ranks. Germany would not be pleasant. A sergeant from communications receipted the message, and the word got out quickly: experienced combat officers and NCOs would join them at Moscow. The experienced reservists knew that they'd need such men to teach them the lessons hard-won at the front.

They knew something else it meant: the 77th Motor-Rifle Division would be committed to action within a week. It was quiet that night in the encampment. Men stood outside the unheated barracks, looking at the pine forests on the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains.

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

"Why are we not attacking?" the General Secretary demanded.

"General Alekseyev has informed me that he is preparing for a major attack now. He says he needs time to organize his forces for a weighted blow," Bukharin answered.

"You tell Comrade General Alekseyev," the Defense Minister said, "that we want action, not words!"

"Comrades," Sergetov said, "I seem to recall from my own military service

that one should not attack until one has a decisive advantage in men and weapons. If we order Alekseyev to attack before he is ready, we condemn our army to failure. We must give him time to do his job properly."

"And now you are an expert on defense matters?" the Defense Minister inquired. "A pity you are not so expert in your own field, or we should not be in this predicament!"

"Comrade Minister, I told you that your projections for oil use at the front were overly optimistic, and I was correct. You said 'Give us the fuel, and we'll see it is properly used,' did you not? You said a two-week campaign, four at the worst, did you not?" Sergetov looked around the table. "Such expertise as this has brought us to disaster!"

"We will not fail! We will defeat the West."

"Comrades," Kosov walked into the room. "Forgive me for being late. I just received notification that our forces on Iceland are surrendering. The general in command cites thirty-percent casualties and a hopeless tactical situation."

"Have him arrested at once!" Defense roared. "And arrest the family of the traitor."

"Our Comrade Defense Minister seems far more efficient in arresting our own people than in defeating our enemies," Sergetov observed dryly.

"You young whelp!" The Defense Minister went white with rage.

"I do not say that we have been defeated, but it is clear that we have not yet been victorious. It is time that we seek a political conclusion to this war."

"We could accept the German terms," the Foreign Minister said hopefully.

"I regret to inform you that this is no longer a possibility," Kosov replied. "I have reason to believe that this was a sham—a German *maskirovka.*"

"But your deputy said only the day before yesterday—"

"I warned him and you that I had my doubts. A story appeared today in the French newspaper *Le Monde* that the Germans have rejected a *Soviet* offer for a political settlement to the war. They give the correct times and location that the meetings took place—the story could only have come from official German channels, and the clear implication is that this was all along a NATO effort to affect our strategic thinking. They are sending us a message, Comrades. They say that they are prepared to fight the war to the finish."

"Marshal Bukharin, what is the strength of the NATO forces?" the General Secretary asked.

"They have taken massive losses in men and materiel. Their armies are exhausted. They must be, else they would have counterattacked in strength already."

"One more push, then," Defense said. He looked to the head of the table for support. "One more very very hard push. Perhaps Alekseyev is right—we need to coordinate a single massive attack to smash their lines."

Now you are grasping at other men's straws, Sergetov thought.

"The Defense Council will consider this in private," the General Secretary said.

"No!" Sergetov objected. "This is now a political question for the entire Politburo. The fate of the country will not be decided by five men only!"

"You have no place to object, Mikhail Eduardovich. You have no vote at this table." Sergetov was stunned to hear these words from Kosov.

"Perhaps he should," Bromkovskiy said.

"That is not a question to be decided now," the General Secretary announced.

Sergetov watched the faces arrayed around the oak table. No one had the courage to speak up now. He had almost altered the power balance of the Politburo, but until it was clear which faction was stronger, the old rules would prevail. The meeting adjourned. The members filed out except for the five Defense Council members, who kept Bukharin with them.

The candidate member lingered outside looking for allies. His fellow chieftains filed past. Several met his eyes, then looked away.

"Mikhail Eduardovich?" It was the Minister for Agriculture. "How much fuel will be available for food distribution?"

"How much food will there be?" Sergetov asked. *How much food can there be?*

"More than you think. We have tripled the size of private plots throughout the Russian Republic—"

"What?"

"Yes, the old people on the farms are growing plenty of food now—at least enough to feed us for the time being. The problem is now one of distribution."

"No one told me." *Some* good *news?* Sergetov wondered.

"Do you know how many times I have proposed this? No, you weren't here last July, were you? I've said for years that by doing this we could solve many problems, and finally they listened to me! We have food, Mikhail Eduardovich —I just hope we will have people to eat it! I need fuel to transport it to the cities. Will I have the fuel?"

"I will see what I can do, Filip Moiseyevich."

"You have spoken well, Comrade. I hope some will listen."

"Thank you."

"Your son is well?"

"The last I heard from him, yes."

"I am ashamed that my son is not there, too." The Minister for Agriculture paused. "We must—well, we have no time for that now. Get me the fuel figures as quickly as you can."

A convert? Or an agent provocateur?

STENDAL, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Alekseyev held the message in his hand: FLY AT ONCE TO Moscow FOR CONSULTATIONS. Was it his death sentence? The General summoned his deputy.

"Nothing new. We have some probes around Hamburg, and what looks like preparations for an attack north of Hannover, but nothing we should not be able to handle."

"I have to go to Moscow." Alekseyev saw the concern on the man's face. "Don't worry, Anatoliy, I haven't been in command long enough to be shot.

We will have to arrange our personnel transfers in a systematic way if we have any hope of transforming these C divisions into a fighting force. I should be back in twenty-four hours or less. Tell Major Sergetov to get my map case and meet me outside in ten minutes."

Alekseyev handed his aide the message form in the back of the staff car, along with an ironic look.

"What does this mean?"

"We'll find out in a few hours, Vanya."

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

"They are truly mad."

"You should choose your words with greater care, Boris Georgiyevich," Sergetov said. "What has NATO done now?"

The KGB Chief shook his head in surprise. "I mean the Defense Council, you young fool!"

"This young fool has no vote on the Politburo. You pointed that out yourself." Sergetov had held the fleeting hope that the Politburo might be brought to its senses.

"Mikhail Eduardovich, I have worked very hard to protect you to this point. Please do not make me regret this. If you had managed to force a Politburo decision in the open, you would have lost and possibly destroyed yourself. As it is"—Kosov paused for another of his grins—"as it is, they have asked me to discuss their decision with you in hope of getting your support.

"They are doubly mad," Kosov went on. "First, the Defense Minister wishes to initiate the use of a few small tactical nuclear warheads. Second, he hopes for your support. They propose the *maskirovka* all over again. They will explode a small tactical device in the DDR, forcing us to retaliate while proclaiming that NATO has violated the no-first-use agreement. But it could be worse. They've summoned Alekseyev to Moscow to seek his assessment of the plan and how best to implement it. He should be on his way here now."

"The Politburo will never agree to this. We're not all crazy, are we? Have you told them how NATO will react?"

"Of course. I've told them that NATO will not react at all at first, they will be too confused."

"You encouraged them?"

"I wish you would keep in mind that they prefer Larionov's opinions to my own."

Comrade Kosov, Sergetov thought to himself, *you care less about the danger to the* Rodina *than you do for your own future. You'd be quite satisfied to bring the whole country down if you bring them down first, wouldn't you?*

"The votes on the Politburo . . ."

"Will support the Defense Council. Think. Bromkovskiy will vote no, perhaps Agriculture also, though I doubt it. They want you to speak in favor of the plan. This will reduce the opposition to old Petya. Petya is a good old

man, but no one really listens to him anymore."

"I will never do this!"

"But you must. And Alekseyev must agree." Kosov got up and looked out the window. "There is nothing to fear—no nuclear bombs will be used. I have already seen to that."

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you know who controls the nuclear weapons in this country?"

"Certainly, the strategic rocket forces, the Army's artillerymen—"

"Excuse me, I phrased my question poorly. Yes, they control the rockets. It is *my* people who control the *warheads,* and Josef Larionov's faction does not include that segment of the KGB! This is why you must play along."

"Very well. Then we must warn Alekseyev."

"With caution now. No one seems to have noticed that your son has made several trips to Moscow, but if you are seen with General Alekseyev before he meets with them . . ."

"Yes, I can understand that." Sergetov thought for a moment. "Perhaps Vitaly can meet them at the airport and pass a message?"

"Very good! I will make a *chekist* of you yet!"

The Minister's driver was summoned and handed a written note. He departed at once, taking the Minister's Zil out toward the airport. A military convoy of wheeled armored personnel carriers held him up. Forty minutes later, he noticed that his gas gauge was down. Odd, he'd just filled the car up the day before—the Politburo members were never short of anything. But it kept dropping. Then the engine stopped. Vitaly pulled the car over, seven kilometers from the airport, got out, and opened the hood. The chauffeur checked belts and electrical connections. Everything seemed as it should. He got back in and tried to start the car, and nothing happened. He figured out a moment later that the alternator had gone bad, and the car had been running off battery power. He tried the car phone. The battery was completely flat.

* * *

Alekseyev's transport was just arriving. A staff car provided by the commander of the Moscow Military District motored up to the plane, and the General and his aide got in at once for the ride to the Kremlin. For Alekseyev the most frightening part of the flight was getting out of the aircraft—he halfway expected to see KGB troops waiting for him instead of the staff car. It would almost have been a relief to be arrested.

The General and his aide rode in silence—all their talking had been done on the noisy aircraft where listening devices could not possibly have worked. Alekseyev noted the empty streets, the absence of trucks—most of them now at the front—even the shorter-than-usual lines outside the food stores. *A country at war,* he thought.

Alekseyev had expected the ride to the Kremlin to seem slow. The reverse was true. Seemingly in the blink of an eye the car pulled through the Kremlin gates. A sergeant outside the Council of Ministers building pulled open the

door, saluting smartly. Alekseyev returned it and walked up the steps to the door, where another sergeant waited. Alekseyev walked like a soldier, back straight, his face set in a stern mien. His newly polished boots glistened, and his eyes caught the flashing reflection of the ceiling lights as he walked into the lobby. The General disdained the elevator, preferring the stairs for the trip to the conference room. He noted that the building had been repaired since the bombing incident.

A captain of the Taman Guards, the ceremonial unit stationed at Alabino outside Moscow, met the General at the top of the stairs and escorted him to the double doors of the conference room. Alekseyev ordered his aide to wait as he entered, his visored cap tucked tightly under his arm.

"Comrades: General Colonel P. L. Alekseyev reports as ordered!"

"Welcome to Moscow, Comrade General," the Defense Minister said. "What is the situation in Germany?"

"Both sides are exhausted but still fighting. The current tactical situation is one of stalemate. We have more troops and weapons available, but we are critically short of fuel."

"Can you win?" the General Secretary asked.

"Yes, Comrade Secretary! Given several days to organize my forces, and if I can do some crucial work with the arriving reserve formations, I think it likely that we can sunder the NATO front."

"Likely? Not certain?" the Defense Minister asked.

"In war there is no certainty," Alekseyev answered simply.

"We have learned that," the Foreign Minister answered dryly. "Why have we not won yet?"

"Comrades, we failed initially to achieve strategic and tactical surprise. Surprise is the most important variable factor in war. With it we would probably—almost certainly—have succeeded in two or three weeks."

"To achieve certain success now, what else will you need?"

"Comrade Defense Minister, I need the support of the people and the Party, and I need a little time."

"You evade the question!" Marshal Bukharin said.

"We were never allowed to use our chemical weapons in the initial assault. That could have been a decisive advantage—"

"The political cost of those weapons was deemed too great," the Foreign Minister said defensively.

"Could you make profitable use of them now?" the General Secretary asked.

"I think not. Those weapons should have been used from the first on equipment-storage depots. The depots are now mainly empty, and hitting them would have only a limited effect. Use of chemicals at the front is no longer a viable option. The newly arriving C formations lack the modern equipment necessary to operate efficiently in a chemical environment."

"Again I ask the question," the Defense Minister repeated. "What do you need to make victory certain?"

"To achieve a decisive breakthrough, we need to be able to blast a hole in NATO lines at least thirty kilometers wide and twenty kilometers in depth. To do that, I need ten full-strength divisions on line, ready to advance. I need several days to prepare that force."

"How about tactical nuclear weapons?" Alekseyev's face did not change. *Are you mad, Comrade General Secretary?*

"The risks are high." *There's a prize understatement.*

"And if we can prevent, politically, NATO retaliation?" Defense asked.

"I do not know how that is possible." *And neither do you.*

"But if we can make it possible?"

"Then it would increase our chances measurably." *Alekesyev* paused, inwardly chilled at what he saw in those faces. *They want to use nuclear weapons at the front—and when NATO responds in kind and vaporizes my troops, then what? Will it stop with a single exchange or will more and more be used, the explosions advancing west and east? If I tell them they are crazy, they will find a general who will not.* "The problem is one of control, Comrades."

"Explain."

If he were to stay alive and prevent this . . . Alekseyev spoke carefully, mixing truth and lies and guesses. Dissimulation did not come easily to the General, but at least this was an issue he had discussed with his peers for over a decade. "Comrade General Secretary, nuclear weapons are, foremost, political weapons for both sides, controlled by political leaders. This limits their battlefield utility. A decision to use an atomic warhead in a tactical environment must be passed on by those leaders. By the time approval is granted, the tactical situation will almost certainly have changed, and the weapon is no longer useful. NATO never has seemed to grasp this. The weapons they have are mainly designed to be used by battlefield commanders, yet I have never thought myself that NATO's political leadership would lightly give use authority to those battlefield commanders. Because of this, the weapons they would more probably use against us are actually strategic weapons aimed at strategic targets, not the tactical weapons in the field."

"That is not what they say," Defense objected.

"You will note that when we made our breakthroughs at Alfeld and Rühle, nuclear weapons were not used on the bridgeheads even though some pre-war NATO writings would seem to suggest they should have been. I conclude that there are more variable factors in the equation than were fully appreciated. We have learned ourselves that the reality of war can be different from the theory of war."

"So you support our decision to use tactical nuclear weapons?" the Foreign Minister asked.

No! The lie rolled off his lips. "If you are certain that you can prevent retaliation, of course I support it. I caution you, however, that my reading of NATO's response might be very different from what we might otherwise expect. I would expect retaliation to fall some hours later than we think, and against strategic rather than tactical targets. They are more likely to hit road and rail junctions, airfields, and supply facilities. These do not move. Our tanks do." *Think on what I just said, Comrades: things will quickly go out of control. Make peace, you fools!*

"So you think we could use tactical weapons with impunity if we simultaneously threaten strategic targets of our own?" the General Secretary asked hopefully.

"That is essentially the NATO pre-war doctrine. It overlooks the fact that the

use of nuclear weapons over friendly territory is not something undertaken lightly. Comrades, I warn you that the prevention of a NATO response will not be an easy exercise."

"You worry about the battlefield, Comrade General," the Defense Minister suggested lightly. "We will worry about the political questions."

There was only one more thing he could say to discourage them. "Very well. In that case I will need direct control of the weapons."

"Why?" the General Secretary demanded.

So they won't be fired, you fucking idiot! "We have here a question of practicality. Targets will appear and disappear on a minute-to-minute basis. If you want me to blast a hole in NATO lines with atomic arms, I will not have the time to get your approval."

Alekseyev was horrified to see that even this did not dissuade them.

"How many would you need?" the Defense Minister wanted to know.

"That is a question contingent upon the time and place of the breakthrough operation, and we would use small weapons against discrete point targets—not population centers. I would say a maximum of thirty weapons in the five- to ten-kiloton range. We would launch them with free-flight artillery rockets."

"How soon will you be ready for your attack?" Marshal Bukharin asked.

"That depends on how quickly I can get veteran troops into the new divisions. If these reservists are to survive on the battlefield, we must get experienced men to firm up their ranks."

"A good idea, Comrade General," the Defense Minister approved. "We will not detain you further. In two days, I want to see detailed plans for your breakthrough."

The five members of the Defense Council watched Alekseyev salute, pivot on his heels, and depart. Kosov looked up at Marshal Bukharin.

"And you wanted to replace this man?"

The General Secretary agreed. "That's the first real fighting soldier I've seen in years."

Alekseyev waved for Major Sergetov to follow him. Only he felt the cold lead weight in his belly. Only he knew how weak his knees were as they trod down the marble steps. Alekseyev didn't believe in God, but he knew that he had just seen the door to hell cracked open.

"Major," he said casually as they entered the staff car, "since we're in Moscow, perhaps you would like to visit your father the Minister before we return to the front?"

"That is very kind of you, Comrade General."

"You have earned it, Comrade Major. Besides, I want figures on our oil supply."

The driver would report what he'd heard, of course.

"They want me to use nuclear weapons at the front!" Alekseyev whispered as soon as the Minister's door was closed.

"Yes, I was afraid of that."

"They must be stopped! There is no predicting what catastrophe this could bring about."

"The Defense Minister says that a tactical nuclear environment could easily

be controlled."

"He's talking like one of those NATO idiots! There is no wall between a tactical and a strategic nuclear exchange, just a fuzzy line in the imagination of the amateurs and academics who advise their political leaders. The only thing that would then stand between us and a nuclear holocaust—our survival would be at the mercy of whichever NATO leader is the *least* stable."

"What did you tell them?" the Minister asked. Had Alekseyev retained his wits enough to say the right thing?

"I must be alive to stop them—I told them it's a wonderful idea!" The General sat down. "I also told them that I must have tactical control of the weapons. I think they will agree to that. I'll make sure those weapons are never used. I have just the man on my staff to do that, too."

"You agree then that the Defense Council must be stopped?"

"Yes." The General looked down at the floor, then back up. "Otherwise—I don't know. It is possible that their plan might start something that no one could stop. If we die, we die in a good cause."

"How do we stop them?"

"When does the Politburo meet?"

"Every day now. We usually meet at nine-thirty."

"Whom can we trust?"

"Kosov is with us. There will be a few others, Politburo members, but I do not know whom I can approach."

Wonderful—our only certain ally is the KGB!

"I need some time."

"Perhaps this will help." Sergetov handed over a file he'd gotten from Kosov. "Here is a list of officers in your command who are suspected of political unreliability."

Alekseyev scanned the list. He recognized the names of three men who had served with distinction in battalion and regimental commands . . . one good staff officer and one terrible one. Even *when my men fight a war for the Motherland, they are under suspicion!*

"I'm supposed to formulate my attack plan before I return to the front. I will be at Army Headquarters."

"Good luck, Pavel Lconidovich."

"And to you, Mikhail Eduardovich." The General watched father and son embrace. He wondered what his own father would think of this. *To whom do I turn for guidance?*

KEFLAVIK, ICELAND

"Good afternoon, I am Major General William Emerson. This is Colonel Lowe. He will act as interpreter."

"General Major Andreyev. I speak English."

"Do you propose a surrender?" Emerson asked.

"I propose that we negotiate," Andreyev answered.

"I require that your forces cease hostilities at once and surrender their weapons."

"And what will become of my troops?"

"They will be interned as prisoners of war. Your wounded will receive proper medical attention and your men will be treated in accordance with the usual international conventions."

"How do I know you speak truly?"

"You do not."

Andreyev noted the blunt, honest answer. *But what choice do I have?*

"I propose a cease-fire"—he checked his watch—"at fifteen hours."

"Agreed."

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

"How long?" SACEUR asked.

"Three days. We'll be able to attack with four divisions."

What's left of four divisions, SACEUR thought. *We've stopped them, all right, but what do we have to drive them back with?*

They did have confidence. NATO had begun the war with an advantage only in its technology, which was even more pronounced now. The Russian stocks of new tanks and guns had been ravaged, and the divisions coming into the line now had twenty-year-old castoffs. They still had numbers, though, and any offensive SACEUR planned would have to be carefully planned and executed. Only in the air did he have an important advantage, and air power had never won a war. The Germans were pushing hard for a counterstrike. Too much of their land, and too many of their citizens, were on the wrong side of the line. Already the *Bundeswehr* was probing aggressively on several fronts, but they'd have to wait. The German Army was not strong enough to push forward alone. They'd taken too many losses in their prime role of stopping the Soviet advance.

KAZAN, R.S.F.S.R.

The youngsters were too excited to sleep. The older men were too worried to sleep. Conditions didn't help. The men of the 77th Motor-Rifle Division were crammed into passenger cars, and while all had seats, it was at the cost of rubbing against their comrades even as they breathed. The troop trains moved along at a speed of a hundred kilometers per hour. The tracks were set in the Russian way, with the rail segments ending together instead of offset; so, instead of the clickity-click familiar to Western riders, the men of this C division heard only a series of thuds. It tested nerves already raw.

The interval between the jarring sounds slowed. A few soldiers looked out

to see that their train was stopping at Kazan. The officers were surprised. They weren't supposed to stop until they got to Moscow. The mystery was soon solved. No sooner had the twenty-car train stopped than new men filed into the carriages.

"Attention," called one loud voice. "Combat soldiers arriving!"

Though they had been issued new uniforms, their boots showed the weeks of abuse. Their swagger marked them as veterans. About twenty got onto each passenger car, and rapidly secured comfortable seating for themselves. Those displaced would have to stand. There were officers, too, and they found their counterparts. The officers of the 77th began to get firsthand information of NATO doctrine and tactics, what worked and what didn't work, all the lessons paid for in blood by the soldiers who did not join the division at Kazan. The enlisted men got no such lessons. They watched men who were able to sleep even as they rode to the fighting front.

FASLANE, SCOTLAND

Chicago was alongside the pier, loading torpedoes and missiles for her next mission. Half her crew was ashore stretching their legs and buying drinks for the crew of *Torbay*.

Their boat had acquired quite a reputation for her work in the Barents Sea, enough so that they'd be heading back as soon as she was ready, to escort the carrier battle groups now in the Norwegian Sea, heading for the Soviet bases on the Kola Peninsula.

McCafferty sat alone in his stateroom, wondering why a mission that had ended in disaster was considered successful, hoping that he wouldn't be sent out again—but knowing that he would . . .

MOSCOW, R.S.F.S.R.

"Good news, Comrade General!" A colonel stuck his head in the office Alekseyev had taken for himself. "Your people were able to join up with the 77th at Kazan."

"Thank you." Alekseyev's head went back to his maps when the colonel withdrew.

"It's amazing."

"What's that, Vanya?"

"The men you selected for the 77th, the paperwork, the orders—they went through just like that!"

"A routine transfer of personnel—why shouldn't it go through?" the General asked. "The Politburo approved the procedure."

"But this is the only group of men flown out."

"They had the farthest to go." Alekseyev held up a message form he'd just filled out. Captain—no, now he was Major Arkady Semyonovich Sorokin of the 76th Guards Airborne Division was ordered to report to Moscow immediately. He would fly also. A pity he could not have the captain bring some of his men along, but they were where no Soviet general could reach.

* * *

"So, Mikhail Eduardovich, what does General Alekseyev plan?"

Sergetov handed over some notes. Kosov leafed through the pages in a few minutes.

"If he succeeds, at least an Order of Lenin from us, yes?" *That general is overly smart. Too bad for him.*

"We are far from that point. What about the timing? We depend on you to set the stage."

"I have a colonel who specializes in this sort of thing."

"I'm sure."

"One other thing we should do," Kosov said. He explained for several minutes before taking his leave. Sergetov shredded the notes he had from Alekseyev and had Vitaly burn them.

The trouble light and buzzer caught the dispatcher's attention at once. Something was wrong with the trackage on the Elektrozavodskaya Bridge, three kilometers east of Kazan Station.

"Get an inspector out there."

"There's a train half a kilometer away," his assistant warned.

"Tell it to stop at once!" The dispatcher flipped the switch controlling the tower signal.

The deputy dispatcher lifted his radiotelephone. "Train eleven ninety-one, this is Kazan Central Dispatch. Trouble on the bridge ahead, stop immediately!"

"I see the signal! Stopping now," the engineer replied. "We won't make it!"

And he couldn't. Eleven ninety-one was a hundred-car unit, flatcars loaded with armored vehicles and boxcars loaded with munitions. Sparks flew in the pre-dawn light as the engineer applied the brakes on every car, but he needed more than a few hundred meters to halt the train. He peered ahead looking for the problem—a bad signal, he hoped.

No! A track was loose just at the west side of the bridge. The engineer shouted a warning to his crew and cringed. The locomotive jumped the track and ground sideways to a halt. This could not prevent the three engines behind it and eight flatcars from surging forward. They too jumped off the track, and only the bridge's steel framework prevented them from spilling into the Yauza River. The track inspector arrived a minute later. He cursed all the way to the telephone box.

"We need two big wreckers here!"

"How bad?" the dispatcher asked.

"Not as bad as the one last August. Twelve hours, perhaps sixteen."

"What went wrong?"

"All the traffic on this bridge—what do you think?"

"Anyone hurt?"

"Don't think so—they weren't going very fast."

"I'll have a crew out there in ten minutes." The dispatcher looked up at the blackboard list of arriving trains.

"Damn! What are we going to do with these?"

"We can't split them up, it's a whole Army division traveling as a unit. They were supposed to go around the north side. We can't send them around to the south either. Novodanilovskiy Bridge is packed solid for hours."

"Reroute them into Kursk Station. I'll call the Rzhevskaya dispatcher and see if he can get us a routing on his track."

The trains arrived at seven-thirty. One by one they were shunted onto the sidings at Kursk Station and stopped. Many of the troops aboard had never been to Moscow before, but except for those on the outermost sidings, all they could see were the trains of their fellow soldiers.

"A deliberate attempt to sabotage the State railroads!" the KGB colonel said.

"More probably it was worn trackage, Comrade," the Kazan dispatcher said. "But you are correct to be prudent."

"Worn trackage?" the colonel snarled. He knew for certain that it had been a different cause. "I think perhaps you do not take this seriously enough."

The dispatcher's blood chilled at that statement. "I have my responsibilities, too. For the moment that means clearing the wreckage off that damned bridge and getting my trains rolling again. Now, I have a seven-train unit sitting at Kursk, and unless I can get them moving north—"

"From what I see of your map, moving all the traffic around the city's northern perimeter depends on a single switch."

"Well, yes, but that's the responsibility of the Rzhevskaya dispatcher."

"Has it ever occurred to you that saboteurs are not assigned in the same way as dispatchers? Perhaps the same man could operate in a different district! Has anyone checked that switch?"

"I don't know."

"Well, find out! No, no, I will send my own people to check before you railroad fools wreck anything else."

"But, my scheduling . . ." The dispatcher was a proud man, but he knew that he had pressed his luck too far already.

"Welcome to Moscow," Alekseyev said genially.

Major Arkady Semyonovich Sorokin was short, like most paratroop officers. A handsome young man with light brown hair, his blue eyes burned for a reason that Alekseyev understood better than the major did. He limped slightly from two bullets he'd taken in the leg during the initial assault on the Keflavik air base on Iceland. On his breast was the ribbon of the Order of the Red Banner, earned for leading his company into enemy fire. Sorokin and most of the early casualties had been flown out for medical treatment. He and they were now awaiting new assignment since their division had been

captured on Iceland.

"How may I serve the General?" Sorokin asked.

"I need a new aide, and I prefer officers with combat experience. More than that, Arkady Semyonovich, I will need you to perform a delicate task. But before we discuss that, there is something I need to explain to you. Please sit down. Your leg?"

"The doctors advised me not to run on it for another week. They were right. I tried to do my ten kilometers yesterday and pulled up lame after only two." He didn't smile. Alekseyev imagined that the boy hadn't smiled at all since May. The General explained to him for the first time why this was true. Five minutes later, Sorokin's hand was opening and closing beside the arm of the leather chair, about where his pistol holster would be if he'd been standing.

"Major, the essence of a soldier is discipline," Alekseyev concluded. "I have brought you here for a reason, but I must know that you will carry out your orders exactly. I will understand if you cannot."

There was no emotion on his face at all, but the hand relaxed. "Yes, Comrade General, and I thank you from my soul for bringing me here. It will be exactly as you say."

"Come, then. We have work to do."

The General's car was already waiting. Alekseyev and Sorokin drove to the inner ring road around central Moscow that changes its name every few kilometers. It is called Chkalova where it passes the Star Theater toward the Kursk Railroad Station.

The commander of the 77th Motor-Rifle Division was dozing. He had a new deputy commander, a brigadier from the front to replace the overaged colonel who had held the post. They had talked for ten hours on NATO tactics, and now the Generals were taking advantage of their unexpectedly extended stop in Moscow to get some sleep.

"What the hell is this!"

The 77th's commander opened his eyes to see a four-star general staring down at him. He jumped to attention like a cadet.

"Good morning, Comrade General!"

"And good morning to you! *What the hell is a division of the Soviet Army doing asleep on a Goddamned railroad siding while men are dying in Germany!"* Alekseyev nearly screamed at the man.

"We—we can't make the trains move, there is some problem with the tracks."

"There is a problem with the tracks? You have your vehicles, don't you?"

"The train goes to Kiev Station, where we switch locomotives for the trip to Poland."

"I'll arrange transport for you. We don't have time," Alekseyev explained as though to a wayward child, "to have a fighting division sit on its ass. If the train can't move, you can! Roll your vehicles off the flatcars, we'll take you through Moscow, and you can get to Kiev Station yourself. Now rub the sleep out of your eyes and get this division rolling before I find someone else who can!"

It never failed to amaze the General what a little screaming could do.

Alekseyev watched the division commander scream at his regimental commanders, who went off to scream at their battalion commanders. In ten minutes the screaming was done at the squad level. Ten minutes after that, the tie-down chains were being stripped off the BTR-60 infantry carriers and the first of them rolled off the back of the train for assembly in Korskogo Square in front of the station. The infantrymen mounted their vehicles, looking very dangerous in battle dress, their weapons in their hands.

"You got your new communications officers?" Alekseyev asked.

"Yes, they have completely replaced my own people," the division commander nodded.

"Good. We've learned the hard way about communications security at the front. Your new men will serve you well. And the new riflemen?"

"One company of veterans in each regiment, plus others spread individually throughout the rifle companies." The commander was also pleased to have some new combat officers to replace a few of his less-well-regarded subordinates. Alekseyev had clearly sent him good ones.

"Good, get your division formed up in columns of regiments. Let's show the people something, Comrade. Show them what a Soviet Army division is supposed to look like. They need it."

"How do we proceed through the city?"

"I have gotten some KGB border guards for traffic control. Keep your people in proper order, I don't want anyone to get lost!"

A major came running up. "Ready to move in twenty minutes."

"Fifteen!" the commander insisted.

"Very good," Alekseyev observed. "General, I will accompany you. I want to see how familiar your men are with their equipment."

Mikhail Sergetov arrived early for the Politburo meeting, as was his habit. The usual complement of Kremlin guards was about, one company of infantry with light arms. They were from the Taman Guards division, ceremonial troops with minimal weapons training—a praetorial guard without teeth, like many ceremonial units they practiced parading and boot-shining and looking like soldiers, though at Alabino they did have a full divisional set of tanks and guns. The real Kremlin guardians were the KGB border guards and the division of MVD troops garrisoned outside Moscow. It was typical of the Soviet system that there would be three armed formations loyal to three separate ministries. The Taman division had the best weapons but the least training. The KGB had the best training but only light weapons. The MVD, which answered to the Ministry of the Interior, was also short on weapons and trained mainly as a paramilitary police force, but they were composed of Tartars, troops of known ferocity and antipathy toward the ethnic Russian people. The relationship among the three was more than merely complex.

"Mikhail Eduardovich?"

"Ah." It was the Agriculture Minister. "Good morning, Filip Moiseyevich."

"I am worried," the man said quietly.

"About what?"

"I fear they—the Defense Council—may be thinking about atomic weapons."

"They cannot be so desperate." *If you are an agent provocateur, Comrade, you know that I've been told this. Better that I should know now what you are.*

The man's open Slavic face did not change. "I hope you are right. I have not managed to feed this country for once to see someone blow it up!"

An ally! Sergetov told himself. "If they put it to a vote, what then?"

"I don't know, Misha, I wish I did. Too many of us are being swept away by events."

"Will you speak out against this madness?"

"Yes! I will soon have a grandchild, and he will have a country to grow up in even if it means my life!"

Forgive me, Comrade, forgive me for all the things I have thought of you before.

"Always the early bird, Mikhail Eduardovich?" Kosov and the Defense Minister arrived together.

"Filip and I had to discuss fuel allocations for food transport."

"You worry about my tanks! Food can wait." Defense walked past them into the conference room. Sergetov and his compatriot shared a look.

The meeting came to order ten minutes later. The General Secretary began it, immediately turning over discussions to Defense.

"We must make a decisive move in Germany."

"You have been promising us one of those for weeks!" Bromkovskiy said.

"This time it will work. General Alekseyev will be here in an hour to present his plan. For the moment, we will discuss the use of tactical nuclear weapons at the front and how to prevent a NATO nuclear response."

Sergetov's was one of the impassive faces at the table. He counted four who displayed obvious horror. The discussion that followed was spirited.

Alekseyev rode with the division commander for the first few kilometers, past the Indian Embassy and the Justice Ministry. The latter drew an ironic look from the General. *How fitting that I should pass that building today!* The command vehicle was essentially a radio with eight wheels. Six communications officers rode in the back to allow the commander to run his division right from here. The communications officers were from the front, and loyal to the combat officers who'd brought them back.

Progress was slow. The combat vehicles were designed for speed, but speed also made for breakdowns, and at anything over twenty kilometers per hour the tanks would tear the pavement apart. As it was, they motored along placidly, attracting small knots of people who watched and waved and cheered as the soldiers passed. The procession was not as precise as one of the parades for which the Taman Guards practiced every day. If anything this made the people more enthusiastic. Here were real soldiers going to the front. KGB officers stood along the route, "advising" the officers of the Moscow Militia to let the division pass—they'd explained the reason, the foulup in the eastern rail network, and the traffic policemen were only too happy to make way for the soldiers of the Motherland.

Alekseyev stood up in the gunner's hatch as the column reached Nogina Square.

"You've done well to get your men to this level of training," he told the divisional commander. "I want to dismount and see how the rest of your

troops are doing. I will see you again at Stendal." Alekseyev told the driver not to stop. He jumped off the command vehicle carrier with the agility of a young corporal and stood in the street, waving the vehicles past, saluting the officers who rode proudly in their vehicles. It was five minutes until the second regiment reached him, and he waited for its second battalion. Major Sorokin was in the battalion command vehicle, and leaned over to grasp the General's hand and pull him up off the street.

"An old man like you could get hurt that way, Comrade General," Sorokin warned.

"You young buck!" Alekseyev was proud of his physical condition. He looked at the battalion commander, a man newly arrived from the front. "Ready?"

"I am ready, Comrade General."

"Remember your orders and keep control of your men." Alekseyev pulled the flap loose on his holster. Sorokin had himself an AK-47 rifle.

He could see St. Basil's now, the collection of towers and onion domes at the end of Razina Street. One by one the procession of vehicles turned right past the old cathedral. Behind him the soldiers in the infantry carriers all had their heads up, looking at the sights. This was the oldest model of the BTR, and lacked overhead cover.

There! Alekseyev said to himself. The gate built by Ivan the Terrible that led right to the Council of Ministers building. Just through the gate under the clock tower. The time was ten-twenty. He was ten minutes early for his appointment with the Politburo.

"Are we all crazy?" the Agriculture Minister asked. "Do we think we can gamble with atomic arms like so many firecrackers?"

A good man, Sergetov thought, *but he has never been an eloquent one.* The Petroleum Minister rubbed sweaty hands over his trouser legs.

"Comrade Defense Minister, you have led us to the brink of destruction," Bromkovskiy said. "Now you wish us to leap in after you!"

"It is too late to stop," the General Secretary said. "The decision has been made."

An explosion gave the lie to that statement.

"Now!" Alekseyev said. In the back of the command vehicle the communications officers activated the divisional radio net and announced an explosion in the Kremlin. A battalion of riflemen under General Alekseyev's personal command was going in to investigate.

Alekseyev was already moving. Three BTRs ran through the smashed gate, stopping at the front steps of the Council of Ministers building.

"What the hell's going on here?" Alekseyev screamed at the captain of the Taman Guards.

"I don't know—you can't be here, you are not allowed, you must—"

Sorokin cut him down with a three-round burst. He jumped down off the vehicle, nearly collapsing on his bad leg, and raced for the building, with the General in pursuit. Alekseyev turned at the door.

"Secure the area, there is a plot to kill the Politburo!" The order was relayed

to the arriving troops. Taman Guard troops were running across the open spaces from the old Arsenal Building. A few warning shots were fired. The Guards wavered, then a lieutenant fired a full magazine from his rifle, and a firefight began within the Kremlin walls. Two bodies of Soviet soldiers, only ten of whom really knew what was happening, began exchanging fire while members of the Politburo watched from the windows.

Alekseyev hated Sorokin for taking the lead, but the major knew whose life was more profitably risked. He encountered a Guards captain on the second-floor landing and killed him. He kept going up, with Alekseyev and the battalion commander behind, remembering the diagram of the building's fourth floor. Another soldier—this one a major—was there with a rifle. He managed to get one burst off, missing high as his target dove, but the major of paratroops rolled clear and killed him. The conference room was only twenty meters away. They found a colonel of the KGB who held his hands out in the clear.

"Where is Alekseyev?"

"Here!" The General had his pistol in his hand.

"No more Guards alive on this floor," the chekist said. He'd just killed four with a silenced automatic hidden under his tunic.

"Door." Alekseyev motioned Sorokin. He didn't kick it down, it was unlocked, and led into an anteroom. The double oak doors beyond led to the Politburo.

Sorokin went through first.

They found twenty-one old and middle-aged men, mainly standing at the windows watching a small infantry engagement that had about run its course. The Taman Guards stationed throughout the Kremlin grounds were not organized for this sort of assault, and had not the smallest chance of overwhelming a company of experienced riflemen.

Alekseyev came in next, holstering his pistol.

"Comrades, please go back to your seats. Evidently there is a plot to seize the Kremlin. Fortunately, I was just arriving for my appointment when this column of troops passed by. Sit down, Comrades!" the General ordered.

"What the hell is going on here?" the Defense Minister asked.

"When I entered military school thirty-four years ago I swore an oath to defend the State and the Party from all enemies," Alekseyev said coldly. "Including those who would kill my country because they don't know what the hell else to do! Comrade Sergetov?" The Petroleum Minister pointed to two men. "You Comrades and Comrade Kosov will stay. The others will be leaving with me in a few minutes."

"Alekseyev, you have signed your own death warrant," the Minister of the Interior said. He reached for a telephone. Major Sorokin lifted his rifle and destroyed the phone with a single round.

"Do not make that mistake again. We can very easily kill you all. That would be much more convenient than what we have in mind." Alekseyev waited for a moment. Another officer ran into the room and nodded. "We will now leave, Comrades. If one of you attempts to speak to anyone, you will all be killed immediately. Two-by-two—start moving!" The KGB colonel who had just set off his second Kremlin bomb took out the first group.

After they left, Sergetov and Kosov came up to the General.

"Well done," said the Director of the KGB. "Things are ready at Lefortovo. The men on duty are all mine."

"We're not going to Lefortovo. A change in plans," Alekseyev said. "They go to the old airport, and after that I helicopter them to a military camp commanded by someone *I* trust."

"But I have it all arranged!"

"I'm sure you do. This is my new aide, Major Sorokin. Major Sergetov is at that camp right now, making final arrangements. Tell me, Comrade Director, does Sorokin look familiar to you?"

He *did* look vaguely familiar, but Kosov couldn't place him.

"He was a captain—since promoted for bravery—in the 76th Guards Airborne Division."

"Yes?" Kosov sensed the danger but not the reason.

"Major Sorokin had a daughter in the Young Octobrists. Seventy-sixth Airborne is home-based at Pskov," Alekseyev explained.

"For my little Svetlana," Sorokin said, "who died without a face." All Kosov had time to see was a rifle and a white flash.

Sergetov leaped out of the way and looked to Alekseyev in shock.

"Even if you were right to trust the *chekist,* I will not take orders from one. I leave you with a company of loyal troops. I must get control of the Army. Your job is to get control of the Party apparatus."

"How can we trust you now?" Agriculture asked.

"By now we should be on our way to control of the communications lines. All will be done in accordance with our plan. They will announce an attempt to topple the government, prevented by loyal troops. Later today one of you will appear on television. I must go. Good luck."

Directed by their KGB guides, the motorized battalions headed for the television and radio stations, and the main telephone exchanges. They moved rapidly now, responding to emergency calls to secure the city against an unknown number of counterrevolutionaries. In fact they had not the least idea what they were doing, only that they had orders from a four-star general. That was enough for the officers of the 77th Motor-Rifle. The communications teams had done well. The division political officer appeared at the Council of Ministers building to find four Politburo members on the telephones giving orders. All was not as it should be, but the Party men seemed to have things under control. The other members, he learned, had all been killed or wounded in a vicious attack by the Kremlin Guards themselves! The director of the KGB had detected the plot barely in time to summon loyal troops, but died heroically resisting the attackers. None of this made much sense to the divisional *zampolit,* but it didn't have to. His orders made perfectly good sense, and he radioed instructions to the divisional commander.

Sergetov was surprised at how easy it was. The number of people who actually knew what had happened was under two hundred. The fighting had all taken place within the Kremlin walls, and while many had heard the noise, the cover story explained it well enough for the moment. He had several friends in the Central Committee, and they did what they were told in the emergency. By the end of the day, the reins of power were shared among

three Party men. The other Politburo members were under armed guard outside the city, with Major Sorokin in charge of their care. Without instructions from the Minister of the Interior, the MVD troops took their orders from the Politburo, while the KGB wavered leaderless. It was the final irony of the Soviet system that, headless, it could not save itself. The Politburo's pervasive control of all aspects of Soviet life prevented people now from asking the questions that had to be asked before any organized resistance could begin, and every hour gave Sergetov and his clique more time to consolidate their rule. He had the aged but distinguished Pyotr Bromkovskiy to head the Party apparatus and act as Defense Minister. Remembered in the Army as a commissar who cared about the men he served with, Petya was able to anoint Alekseyev as Deputy Defense Minister and Chief of the General Staff. Filip Moiseyevich Krylov retained Agriculture and acquired Internal Affairs. Sergetov would be acting General Secretary. The three men formed a troika, which would appeal to their countrymen until more of their people could be brought in. One paramount task remained.

43

A Walk in the Woods

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

There is no more natural fear than of the unknown, and the greater the unknown, the greater had to be the fear. SACEUR had four intelligence reports side by side on his desk. The only thing they agreed on was that they did not know what was happening, but that it might be bad.

For that I need an expert? SACEUR thought.

A snippet of information from a ferret satellite had given him the word that there was some fighting in Moscow, and told him of the movement of troops to communications centers, but State television and radio had kept to a normal schedule for twelve hours until a news broadcast at five in the morning, Moscow time, had broken the official word.

An attempted coup d' état by the Defense Minister? That would not be good news, and the fact that it had been put down was only marginally better. The monitoring stations had just heard a brief speech by Pyotr Bromkovskiy, known as the last of the Stalinist hard-liners: maintain calm and keep your faith in the Party.

What the hell did that mean? SACEUR wondered.

"I need information," he told his intelligence chief. "What do we know about the Russian command structure?"

"Alekseyev, the new Commander-West, is evidently not at his command post. Good news for us, since we have our attack scheduled in ten hours."

SACEUR's phone buzzed. "I told you no calls—go ahead, Franz . . . Four hours? Potsdam. No reply yet. I'll be back to you in a little while." He hung up. "We just received an open radio message that the Soviet Chief of Staff urgently wishes to meet with me in Potsdam."

" 'Urgently' wishes, Herr General?"

"That's what the message said. I can come by helicopter and they'll provide a helicopter escort to a meeting place." SACEUR leaned back. "You suppose they want to shoot me down because I've done such a great job?" The Supreme Allied Commander Europe allowed himself an ironic smile.

"We have their troops massing northeast of Hannover," the Chief of Intelligence pointed out.

"I know, Joachim."

"Don't go," the intel Chief said. "Send a representative."

"Why didn't he ask for that?" SACEUR wondered. "That's the way it's normally done."

"He's in a hurry," Joachim said. "They haven't won. They haven't really lost anything yet, but their advance has been stopped and they still have their fuel problems. What if a wholly new power bloc has taken over in Moscow? They shut down the news media while they try to consolidate power, and they will want to terminate hostilities. They don't need the distraction. A good time to push hard," he concluded.

"When they're desperate?" SACEUR asked. "They still have plenty of nukes. Any unusual patterns of Soviet activity, anything that even looks unusual?"

"Aside from the newly arriving reserve divisions, no."

What if I can stop this damned war?

"I'm going." SACEUR lifted his phone and informed the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Council of his decision.

It was easy to be nervous with a pair of Russian attack choppers flying in close formation. SACEUR resisted the temptation to look out the windows at them, and concentrated instead on the intelligence folders. He had the official NATO intel dossiers for five senior Soviet commanders. He didn't know who it might be that he was meeting. His aide sat across from the General. He was looking out the windows.

POTSDAM, GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Alekseyev paced the ground, nervous to have to be away from Moscow, where the new Party bosses—but Party bosses nonetheless, he reminded himself—were trying to pull things together. *That idiot asked how they could trust* me! he thought. He reviewed the briefing information on his NATO counterpart. Age fifty-nine. Son and grandson of a soldier. Father a paratroop officer killed by the Germans west of St. Vith during the Battle of the Bulge. West Point, fifteenth in his class. Vietnam, four tours of duty, last as commander of the 101st Airborne; regarded by the North Vietnamese as an unusually dangerous and innovative tactician—he'd proved that, Alekseyev grunted to himself. University masters degree in international relations, supposed to be gifted in languages. Married, two sons and a daughter, none of them in uniform—someone decided that three generations was enough, Alekseyev thought—four grandchildren. *Four grandchildren . . . when a man has grandchildren . . .* Enjoys gambling with cards, only known vice. Moderate drinker. No known sexual deviations, the report said. Alekseyev smiled at that. We're both too old for that nonsense! And who has the time?

The sound of helicopter rotors filtered through the trees. Alekseyev stood in a small clearing next to a command vehicle. The crew was in the trees, along with a platoon of riflemen. It was unlikely, but NATO could seize this opportunity to attack and kill—no, we're not that crazy and neither are they, the General told himself.

It was one of their new Blackhawks. The helicopter flared and settled gracefully to the grassy meadow, with the pair of Mi-24s circling overhead. The door didn't open at once. The pilot killed his engines, and the rotor took two minutes to slow to a complete stop. Then the door slid open and the General stepped out hatless.

Tall for a paratrooper, Alekseyev thought.

SACEUR could have brought the bone-handled .45 Colt that he'd been given in Vietnam, but he judged it better to impress the Russian by coming unarmed in ordinary fatigues. Four black stars adorned his collar, and the badges of a master parachutist and combat infantrymen were sewn on his left breast. On the right side was a simple nametag: ROBINSON. *I don't have to show off, Ivan. I've won.*

* * *

"Tell the men in the woods to stand down and withdraw."

"But, Comrade General!" It was a new aide and he didn't know his general yet.

"Quickly. If I need an interpreter I will wave." Alekseyev walked toward the NATO commander. The aides gravitated together.

Salutes were exchanged, but neither wanted to offer a hand first.

"You are Alekseyev," General Robinson said. "I expected someone else."

"Marshal Bukharin is in retirement—your Russian is excellent, General Robinson."

"Thank you, General Alekseyev. Some years ago I got interested in the plays of Chekhov. You can really understand a play only in its original language. Since then I have read a good deal of Russian literature."

Alekseyev nodded. "The better to understand your enemy." He went on in English. "Very sensible of you. Shall we take a walk?"

"How many men do you have in the trees?"

"A platoon of motor-riflemen." Alekseyev switched back to his native language. Robinson's mastery of Russian was better than his of English, and Pasha had made his point. "How were we to know what would come out of the helicopter?"

"True," SACEUR conceded. *Yet you were standing out in the open—to show me that you are fearless.* "What shall we talk about?"

"A termination of hostilities, perhaps."

"I am listening."

"You know of course that I had no part in starting this madness."

Robinson's head turned. "What soldier ever does, General? We merely shed the blood and get the blame. Your father was a soldier, was he not?"

"A tanker. He was luckier than your father."

"That's often what it is, isn't it? Luck."

"We should not tell our political leaders that." Alekseyev almost ventured a

smile until he saw that he'd given Robinson an opening.

"Who are your political leaders? If we are to reach a workable agreement, I must be able to tell mine who is in charge."

"The General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union is Mikhail Eduardovich Sergetov."

Who? SACEUR wondered. He did not remember the name. He'd refreshed his memory on all the full Politburo members, but that name wasn't on the list. He temporized. "What the hell happened?"

Alekseyev saw the puzzlement on Robinson's face, and this time he did venture a smile. *You do not know who he is, do you, Comrade General? There is an unknown for you to ponder.* "As you Americans are fond of saying, it was time for a change."

Who taught you to play poker, son? SACEUR wondered. *But I'm holding aces over kings. What are you holding?*

"What is your proposal?"

"I do not know how to be a diplomat, only how to be a soldier," Alekseyev said. "We propose a cease-fire in place, followed by a phased withdrawal to pre-war positions over a period of two weeks."

"In two weeks I can achieve that without a cease-fire," Robinson said coldly.

"At great cost—and greater risk," the Russian pointed out.

"We know that you are short of fuel. Your entire national economy could come apart."

"Yes, General Robinson, and if our army comes apart, as you say, we have only one defense option to safeguard the State."

"Your country has launched a war of aggression against the NATO alliance. Do you suppose that we can let you return to *status quo ante,* nothing else?" SACEUR asked quietly. He was keeping close rein on his emotions. He'd already made one slip, and that was two too many. "And don't tell me about the Kremlin Bomb Plot—you know sure as hell we had no part of that."

"I have told you that I had no part in this. I follow orders—but did you expect the Politburo to sit still while our national economy ground to a halt? What political pressure would you have put on us, eh? If you knew about our oil shortage—"

"We didn't until a few days ago."

The maskirovka worked?

"Why didn't you tell us you needed oil?" Robinson asked.

"And you would have given it to us? Robinson, I do not have your degree in international relations, but I am not so much of a fool as that."

"We would have demanded and gotten concessions of some kind—but don't you think we would have tried to prevent all this?"

Alekseyev tore a leaf off a tree. He stared at it for a moment, the marvelous networking of veins, everything interconnected with everything else. *You have just killed another living thing, Pasha.*

"I suppose the Politburo never thought about that."

"They launched a war of aggression," Robinson repeated. "How many are dead because of them?"

"The men who made that decision are under arrest. They will be tried in a People's Court for crimes against the State. Comrade Sergetov spoke against

the war, and has risked his life, as have I, to bring it to a just end."

"We want them. We will reconvene the Nürnberg Tribunal and try them for crimes against humanity."

"You may have them only after we are finished with them—it will be a dull trial, General Robinson," Alekseyev added. Both men were now talking like soldiers, not diplomats. "You think your countries have suffered? Someday I will tell about the suffering we have endured from these corrupt men!"

"And your junta will change that?"

"How should I know? But we will try. In any case, that is not your concern!"

The hell it isn't! "You talk with great confidence for the representative of a new and very shaky government."

"And you, Comrade General, talk very confidently for a man who less than two weeks ago was on the brink of defeat! Remember what you said of luck? Push us hard if you wish. The Soviet Union can no longer win, but both sides can still lose. You know how close it was. We nearly defeated you. If those damned invisible bombers of yours hadn't hit our bridges on the first day, or if we had managed to smash three or four more of your convoys, you would be offering me terms."

Make that one or two more convoys, Robinson reminded himself. *It was that close.*

"I offer you a cease-fire in place," Alekseyev repeated. "It could begin as early as midnight. After that, in two weeks, we return to our pre-war lines, and the killing will stop."

"Exchange of prisoners?"

"We can work that out later. For the moment, I think Berlin is the obvious place." Berlin, as expected, had remained largely untouched by the war.

"What about the German civilians behind your lines?"

Alekseyev thought that one over. "They may leave freely after the cease-fire —better than that, I will allow supplies of food to pass through our lines to them, under our supervision."

"And mistreatment of German civilians?"

"That is my affair. Anyone who has violated field service regulations will be court-martialed."

"How do I know that you will not use your two weeks to prepare a new offensive?"

"How do I know that you will not launch the counterattack you have scheduled for tomorrow?" Alekseyev countered.

"Actually a few hours from now." Robinson wanted to accept. "Will your political leaders abide by your terms?"

"Yes. Will yours?"

"I must present it to them, but I do have the authority to honor a cease-fire."

"Then the decision is yours, General Robinson."

The Generals' aides were standing uneasily together at the edge of the trees. Also watching was the platoon of Soviet infantrymen and the crew of the helicopter. General Robinson extended his hand.

"Thank God," said the Soviet aide.

"Da," agreed his American counterpart.

Alekseyev pulled a half-liter bottle of vodka from his back pocket. "I have not had a drink in several months, but we Russians cannot have an agreement without one."

Robinson took a swig and handed it back. Alekseyev did the same, and threw the bottle against a tree. It didn't break. Both men laughed out loud as the relief of what they had just agreed to swept over each like a wave.

"You know, Alekseyev, if we were diplomats instead of soldiers—"

"Yes, that is why I am here. It is easier for men who understand war to stop one."

"You have that right."

"Tell me, Robinson." Alekseyev paused, remembering SACEUR's first name, Eugene; father's name Stephen. "Tell me, Yevgeni Stepanovich, when we made the breakthrough at Alfeld, how close—"

"Very close. Close enough that even I don't know for sure. We were down to five days' of supplies at one point, but a couple of convoys got through nearly intact, and that kept us going." Robinson stopped walking. "What will you do with your country?"

"I cannot say; I do not know; Comrade Sergetov does not know. But the Party must answer to the people. The leaders must be responsible to someone, we have learned that."

"I must go. Pavel Leonidovich, I wish you luck. Perhaps later . . ."

"Yes, perhaps later." They shook hands again.

Alekseyev watched SACEUR summon his aide, who shook hands with his Russian counterpart. Together they boarded the helicopter. The turbine engines whined into life, the four-bladed main rotor turned, and it lifted off from the grass. The Blackhawk circled the field once to give the escorting choppers a chance to form up, then headed west.

You will never know, Robinson. Alekseyev smiled to himself, standing alone in the field. *You will never know that when Kosov died we were unable to find his personal codes for control of our nuclear weapons. It would have been at least another day until we could have made use of them.* The General and his aide walked to their command vehicle, where Alekseyev made a terse radio broadcast that would be relayed to Moscow.

SACK, FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

Colonel Ellington helped Eisly through the trees. Both men had been through escape and evasion training, a course so tough that Ellington once swore that if he had to go through it again, he'd turn in his wings. Which was why he remembered the lessons, he knew. Fourteen hours they'd waited to cross just one damned road. He figured fifteen miles from where they'd crashed to friendly lines. A walk in the country that had turned into a week of hiding, drinking water from streams like animals and moving from tree to tree.

Now they were on the edge of some open ground. It was dark and surprisingly quiet. Had the Russians pulled back here?

"Let's give it a try, Duke," Eisly said. His back had gotten worse, and he could walk only with assistance.

"Okay." They moved forward as quickly as they could. They'd gotten a hundred yards when shadows moved around them.

"Shit!" Eisly whispered. "Sorry, Duke."

"Me, too," the colonel agreed. He didn't even think about reaching for his revolver. He counted at least eight men, and they all seemed to be carrying rifles. They converged quickly on the two Americans.

"Wer sind Sie?" a voice asked.

"Ich bin Amerikaner," Ellington answered. *Thank God—they're Germans.* They weren't. The shape of the helmets told him that a moment later.

Shit! We've come so close!

The Russian lieutenant examined his face with a flashlight. Strangely, he didn't take Ellington's revolver. Then something even stranger happened. The lieutenant flung his arms around both men and kissed them. He pointed west.

"That way, two kilometer."

"Don't argue with the man, Duke," Eisly whispered. As they walked off, the Russian eyes were a physical weight on their backs. The two flyers reached friendly lines an hour later, where they learned of the cease-fire.

USS INDEPENDENCE

The battle group was heading southwest. In another day they would have been in position to hit the Russian bases around Murmansk, and Toland was going over estimates of Russian fighter and SAM strengths when the recall order came. He closed the folder and tucked it back in the security cabinet, then went below to tell Major Chapayev that they would indeed live to see their families again.

NORTH ATLANTIC

The C-9 Nightingale hospital plane cruised southwest also, heading for Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington, D.C. It was filled with Marine casualties from the last fighting on Iceland, one Air Force lieutenant, and a civilian. The plane's crew had objected to the civilian until a two-star general of Marines explained to them over the radio that the Corps would take it as a personal matter if *anyone* took the lady away from the lieutenant's side. Mike was awake most of the time now. His leg needed further surgery—the Achilles tendon was torn—but none of that mattered. In another four and a half months he'd be a father. After that they could plan a child of his, too.

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

O'Malley had already flown to the beach, taking the reporter with him. Morris hoped the Reuters correspondent would be able to file his last story on the war before he moved on to something else—an after-the-war story, no doubt. *Reuben James* had escorted the damaged *America* to Norfolk for repairs. He looked down from the bridge wing at the harbor he knew so well, mindful of the tide and the wind as he docked his frigate. One part of his mind pondered by itself What It All Meant.

A ship lost, friends gone, the deaths he had caused, and those he had seen himself . . .

"Rudder amidships," Morris ordered. A puff of southerly wind helped *Reuben James* up to the pier.

Aft, a seaman tossed a messenger line to the men on the pier. The officer in charge of the special sea-detail waved to a petty officer, who keyed the announcing system.

What It All Means, Morris decided, is that it's over.

A crackle of static emerged, and then the petty officer's voice.

"Mooring."

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PATRIOT GAMES

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When bad men combine, the good must associate;
else they will fall one by one, an
unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.

—EDMUND BURKE

Behind all the political rhetoric being hurled at us from abroad, we are bringing home one unassailable fact—[terrorism is] a crime by any civilized standard, committed against innocent people, away from the scene of political conflict, and must be dealt with as a crime....

[I]n our recognition of the nature of terrorism as a crime lies our best hope of dealing with it....

[L]et us use the tools that we have. Let us invoke the cooperation we have the right to expect around the world, and with that cooperation let us shrink the dark and dank areas of sanctuary until these cowardly marauders are held to answer as criminals in an open and public trial for the crimes they have committed, and receive the punishment they so richly deserve.

—WILLIAM H. WEBSTER, Director,
Federal Bureau of Investigation,
October 15, 1985

1

A Sunny Day in Londontown

Ryan was nearly killed twice in half an hour. He left the taxi a few blocks short of his destination. It was a fine, clear day, the sun already low in the blue sky. Ryan had been sitting for hours in a series of straight-back wooden chairs, and he wanted to walk a bit to work the kinks out. Traffic was relatively light on the streets and sidewalks. That surprised him, but he looked forward to the evening rush hour. Clearly these streets had not been laid out with automobiles in mind, and he was sure that the afternoon chaos would be something to behold. Jack's first impression of London was that it would be a fine town to walk in, and he moved at his usual brisk pace, unchanged since his stint in the Marine Corps, marking time unconsciously by tapping the edge of his clipboard against his leg.

Just short of the comer the traffic disappeared, and he moved to cross the street early. He automatically looked left, right, then left again as he had since childhood, and stepped off the curb—

And was nearly crushed by a two-story red bus that screeched past him with a bare two feet to spare.

"Excuse me, sir." Ryan turned to see a police officer—they call them constables over here, he reminded himself—in uniform complete to the Mack Sennett hat. "Please do be careful and cross at the comers. You might also mind the painted signs on the pavement to look right or left. We try not to lose too many tourists to the traffic."

"How do you know I'm a tourist?" He would now, from Ryan's accent.

The cop smiled patiently. "Because you looked the wrong way, sir, and you dress like an American. Please be careful, sir. Good day." The bobby moved off with a friendly nod, leaving Ryan to wonder what there was about his brand-new three-piece suit that marked him as an American.

Chastened, he walked to the comer. Painted lettering on the blacktop warned him to LOOK RIGHT, along with an arrow for the dyslexic. He waited for the light to change, and was careful to stay within the painted lines. Jack remembered that he'd have to pay close attention to the traffic, especially when he rented the car Friday. England was one of the last places in the world where the people drove on the wrong side of the road. He was sure it would take some getting used to.

But they did everything else well enough, he thought comfortably, already drawing universal observations one day into his first trip to Britain. Ryan was

a practiced observer, and one can draw many conclusions from a few glances. He was walking in a business and professional district. The other people on the sidewalk were better dressed than their American counterparts would be—aside from the punkers with their spiked orange and purple hair, he thought. The architecture here was a hodgepodge ranging from Octavian Augustus to Mies van der Rohe, but most of the buildings had an old, comfortable look that in Washington or Baltimore would long since have been replaced with an unbroken row of new and soulless glass boxes. Both aspects of the town dovetailed nicely with the good manners he'd encountered so far. It was a working vacation for Ryan, but first impressions told him that it would be a very pleasant one nonetheless.

There were a few jarring notes. Many people seemed to be carrying umbrellas. Ryan had been careful to check the day's weather forecast before setting out on his research trip. A fair day had been accurately predicted—in fact it had been called a hot day, though temperatures were only in the upper sixties. A warm day for this time of year, to be sure, but "hot"? Jack wondered if they called it Indian summer here. Probably not. Why the umbrellas, though? Didn't people trust the local weather service? Was that how the cop knew I was an American?

Another thing he ought to have anticipated was the plethora of Rolls-Royces on the streets. He hadn't seen more than a handful in his entire life, and while the streets were not exactly crowded with them, there were quite a few. He himself usually drove around in a five-year-old VW Rabbit. Ryan stopped at a newsstand to purchase a copy of The Economist, and had to fumble with the change from his cab fare for several seconds in order to pay the patient dealer, who doubtless also had him pegged for a Yank. He paged through the magazine instead of watching where he was going as he went down the street, and presently found himself halfway down the wrong block. Ryan stopped dead and thought back to the city map he'd inspected before leaving the hotel. One thing Jack could not do was remember street names, but he had a photographic memory for maps. He walked to the end of the block, turned left, proceeded two blocks, then right, and sure enough there was St. James's Park. Ryan checked his watch; he was fifteen minutes early. It was downhill past the monument to a Duke of York, and he crossed the street near a longish classical building of white marble.

Yet another pleasant thing about London was the profusion of green spaces. The park looked big enough, and he could see that the grass was tended with care. The whole autumn must have been unseasonably warm. The trees still bore plenty of leaves. Not many people around, though. Well, he shrugged, it's Wednesday. Middle of the week, the kids were all in school, and it was a normal business day. So much the better, he thought. He'd deliberately come over after the tourist season. Ryan did not like crowds. The Marine Corps had taught him that, too.

"Daddee!" Ryan's head snapped around to see his little daughter running toward him from behind a tree, heedless as usual of her safety. Sally arrived with her customary thump against her tall father. Also as usual, Cathy Ryan trailed behind, never quite able to keep up with their little white tornado.

Jack's wife did look like a tourist. Her Canon 35mm camera was draped over one shoulder, along with the camera case that doubled as an oversized purse when they were on vacation.

"How'd it go, Jack?"

Ryan kissed his wife. Maybe the Brits don't do that in public either, he thought. "Great, babe. They treated me like I owned the place. Got all my notes tucked away." He tapped his clipboard. "Didn't you get anything?" Cathy laughed.

"The shops here deliver." She smiled in a way that told him she'd parted with a fairish bit of the money they had allocated for shopping. "And we got something really nice for Sally."

"Oh?" Jack bent over to look his daughter in the eye. "And what might that be?"

"It's a surprise, Daddy." The little girl twisted and giggled like a true four-year-old. She pointed to the park. "Daddy, they got a lake with swans and peccalins!"

"Pelicans," Jack corrected.

"Big white ones!" Sally loved peccalins.

"Uh-huh," Ryan observed. He looked up to his wife. "Get any good pictures?"

Cathy patted her camera. "Oh, sure. London is already Canonized-or would you prefer that we spent the whole day shopping?" Photography was Cathy Ryan's only hobby, and she was good at it.

"Ha!" Ryan looked down the street. The pavement here was reddish, not black, and the road was lined with what looked like beech trees. The Mall, wasn't it? He couldn't remember, and would not ask his wife, who'd been to London many times. The Palace was larger than he'd expected, but it seemed a dour building, three hundred yards away, hidden behind a marble monument of some sort. Traffic was a little thicker here, but moved briskly. "What do we do for dinner?"

"Catch a cab back to the hotel?" She looked at her watch. "Or we can walk."

"They're supposed to have a good dining room. Still early, though. These civilized places make you wait until eight or nine. " He saw another Rolls go by in the direction of the Palace. He was looking forward to dinner, though not really to having Sally there. Four-year-olds and four-star restaurants didn't go well together. Brakes squealed off to his left. He wondered if the hotel had a baby-sitting—

BOOM!

Ryan jumped at the sound of an explosion not thirty yards away. *Grenade,* something in his mind reported. He sensed the whispering sound of fragments in the air and a moment later heard the chatter of automatic weapons fire. He

spun around to see the Rolls turned crooked in the street. The front end seemed lower than it should be, and its path was blocked by a black sedan. There was a man standing at its right front fender, firing an AK-47 rifle into the front end, and another man was racing around to the car's left rear.

"Get down!" Ryan grabbed his daughter's shoulder and forced her to the ground behind a tree, yanking his wife roughly down beside her. A dozen cars were stopped raggedly behind the Rolls, none closer than fifty feet, and these shielded his family from the line of fire. Traffic on the far side was blocked by the sedan. The man with the Kalashnikov was spraying the Rolls for all he was worth.

"Sonuvabitch!" Ryan kept his head up, scarcely able to believe what he saw. "It's the goddamned IRA—they're killing somebody right—" Ryan moved slightly to his left. His peripheral vision took in the faces of people up and down the street, turning and staring, in each face the black circle of a shock-opened mouth. *This is really happening!* he thought, *right in front of me, just like that, just like some Chicago gangster movie. Two bastards are committing murder. Right here. Right now. Just like* that. "Son of a *bitch*!"

Ryan moved farther left, screened by a stopped car. Covered by its front fender, he could see one man standing at the left rear of the Rolls, just standing there, his pistol hand extended as though expecting someone to bolt from the passenger door. The bulk of the Rolls screened Ryan from the AK gunner, who was crouched down to control his weapon. The near gunman had his back to Ryan. He was no more than fifty feet away. He didn't move, concentrating on the passenger door. His back was still turned. Ryan would never remember making any conscious decision.

He moved quickly around the stopped car, head down, keeping low and accelerating rapidly, his eyes locked on his target—the small of the man's back—just as he'd been taught in high school football. It took only a few seconds to cover the distance, with Ryan's mind reaching out, willing the man to stay dumb just a moment longer. At five feet Ryan lowered his shoulder and drove off both legs. His coach would have been proud.

The blind-side tackle caught the gunman perfectly. His back bent like a bow and Ryan heard bones snap as his victim pitched forward and down. A satisfying *klonk* told him that the man's head had bounced off the bumper on the way to the pavement. Ryan got up instantly—winded but full of adrenaline—and crouched beside the body. The man's pistol had dropped from his hand and lay beside the body. Ryan grabbed it. It was an automatic of some sort he had never handled. It looked like a 9mm Makarov or some other East Bloc military issue. The hammer was back and the safety off. He fitted the gun carefully in his right hand—his left hand didn't seem to be working right, but Ryan ignored that. He looked down at the man he'd just tackled and shot him once in the hip. Then he brought the gun up to eye level and moved to the right rear corner of the Rolls. He crouched lower still and peeked around the edge of the bodywork.

The other gunman's AK was lying on the street and he was firing into the car with his own pistol, something else in his other hand. Ryan took a deep

breath and stepped from behind the Rolls, leveling his automatic at the man's chest. The other gunman turned his head first, then swiveled off-balance to bring his own gun around. Both men fired at the same instant. Ryan felt a fiery thump in his left shoulder and saw his own round take the man in the chest. The 9mm slug knocked the man backward as though from a hard punch. Ryan brought his own pistol down from recoil and squeezed off another round. The second bullet caught the man under the chin and exploded out the back of his head in a wet, pink cloud. Like a puppet with severed strings, the gunman fell to the pavement without a twitch. Ryan kept his pistol centered on the man's chest until he saw what had happened to his head.

"Oh, God!" The surge of adrenaline left him as quickly as it had come. Time slowed back down to normal, and Ryan found himself suddenly dizzy and breathless. His mouth was open and gasping for air. Whatever force had been holding his body erect seemed to disappear, leaving his frame weak, on the verge of collapse. The black sedan backed up a few yards and accelerated past him, racing down the street, then turning left up a side street. Ryan didn't think to take the number. He was stunned by the flashing sequence of events with which his mind had still not caught up.

The one he'd shot twice was clearly dead, his eyes open and surprised at fate, a foot-wide pool of blood spreading back from his head. Ryan was chilled to see a grenade in his gloved left hand. He bent down to ensure that the cotter pin was still in place on the wooden stick handle, and it was a slow, painful process to straighten up. Next he looked to the Rolls.

The first grenade had torn the front end to shreds. The front wheels were askew, and the tires flat on the blacktop. The driver was dead. Another body was slumped over in the front seat. The thick windshield had been blasted to fragments. The driver's face was—gone, a red spongy mass. There was a red smear on the glass partition separating the driver's seat from the passenger compartment. Jack moved around the car and looked in the back. He saw a man lying prone on the floor, and under him the corner of a woman's dress. He tapped the pistol butt against the glass. The man stirred for a moment, then froze. At least he was alive.

Ryan looked at his pistol. It was empty, the slide locked back on a dry clip. His breath was coming in shudders now. His legs were wobbling under him and his hands were beginning to shake convulsively, which gave his wounded shoulder brief, sharp waves of intense pain. He looked around and saw something to make him forget that—

A soldier was running toward him, with a police officer a few yards behind. One of the Palace guards, Jack thought. The man had lost his bearskin shako but still had an automatic rifle with a half foot of steel bayonet perched on the muzzle. Ryan quickly wondered if the rifle might be loaded and decided it might be expensive to find out. This was a guardsman, he told himself, a professional soldier from a crack regiment who'd had to prove he had real balls before they sent him to the finishing school that made windup toys for tourists to gawk at. Maybe as good as a Sea Marine. *How did you get here so fast?*

Slowly and carefully, Ryan held the pistol out at arm's length. He thumbed the clip-release button, and the magazine clattered down to the street. Next he twisted the gun so that the soldier could see it was empty. Then he set it down on the pavement and stepped away from it. He tried to raise his hands, but the left one wouldn't move. The guardsman all the time ran smart, head up, eyes tracing left and right but never leaving Ryan entirely. He stopped ten feet away with his rifle at low-guard, its bayonet pointed right at Jack's throat, just like it said in the manual. His chest was heaving, but the soldier's face was a blank mask. The policeman hadn't caught up, his face bloody as he shouted into a small radio.

"At ease, Trooper," Ryan said as firmly as he could. It was not impressive. "We got two bad guys down. I'm one of the good guys."

The guardsman's face didn't change a whit. The boy was a pro, all right. Ryan could hear his thinking—how easy to stick the bayonet right out his target's back. Jack was in no shape to avoid that first thrust.

"DaddeeDaddeeDaddee!" Ryan turned his head and saw his little girl racing past the stalled cars toward him. The four-year-old stopped a few feet away from him, her eyes wide with horror. She ran forward to wrap both arms around her father's leg and screamed up at the guardsman: *"Don't you hurt my daddy!"*

The soldier looked from father to daughter in amazement as Cathy approached more carefully, hands in the open.

"Soldier," she announced in her voice of professional command, "I'm a doctor, and I'm going to treat that wound. So you can put that gun down, right now!"

The police constable grabbed the guardsman's shoulder and said something Jack couldn't make out. The rifle's angle changed fractionally as the soldier relaxed ever so slightly. Ryan saw more cops running to the scene, and a white car with its siren screaming. The situation, whatever it was, was coming under control.

"You lunatic." Cathy surveyed the wound dispassionately. There was a dark stain on the shoulder of Ryan's new suit jacket that turned the gray wool to purple-crimson. His whole body was shaking now. He could barely stand and the weight of Sally hanging on his leg was forcing him to weave. Cathy grabbed his right arm and eased him down to the pavement, sitting him back against the side of the car. She moved his coat away from the wound and probed gently at his shoulder. It didn't feel gentle at all. She reached around to his back pocket for a handkerchief and pressed it against the center of the wound.

"That doesn't feel right," she remarked to no one.

"Daddy, you're all bloody!" Sally stood an arm's length away, her hands fluttering like the wings of a baby bird. Jack wanted to reach out to her, to tell her everything was all right, but the three feet of distance might as well have been a thousand miles—and his shoulder was telling him that things were

definitely not all right.

There were now about ten police officers around the car, many of them panting for breath. Three had handguns out, and were scanning the gathering crowd. Two more red-coated soldiers appeared from the west. A police sergeant approached. Before he could say anything Cathy looked up to bark an order.

"Call an ambulance *right now*!"

"On the way, mum," the Sergeant replied with surprising good manners. "Why don't you let us look after that?"

"I'm a doctor," she answered curtly. "You have a knife?"

The Sergeant turned to remove the bayonet from the first guardsman's rifle and stooped down to assist. Cathy held the coat and vest clear for him to cut away, then both cut the shirt free from his shoulder. She tossed the handkerchief clear. It was already blood-sodden. Jack started to protest.

"Shut up, Jack." She looked over to the Sergeant and jerked her chin toward Sally. "Get her away from here."

The Sergeant gestured for a guardsman to come over. The Private scooped Sally up in his arms. He took her a few feet away, cradling her gently to his chest. Jack saw his little girl crying pitifully, but somehow it all seemed to be very far away. He felt his skin go cold and moist—shock?

"Damn," Cathy said gruffly. The Sergeant handed her a thick bandage. She pressed it against the wound and it immediately went red as she tried to tie it in place. Ryan groaned. It felt as though someone had taken an ax to his shoulder.

"Jack, what the hell were you trying to do?" she demanded through clenched teeth as she fumbled with the cloth ties.

Ryan snarled back, the sudden anger helping to block out the pain. "I didn't try—I fucking did it!" The effort required to say that took half his strength away with it.

"Uh-huh," Cathy grunted. "Well, you're bleeding like a pig, Jack."

More men ran in from the other direction. It seemed that a hundred sirens were converging on the scene with men—some in uniform, some not—leaping out to join the party. A uniformed policeman with more ornate shoulder boards began to shout orders at the others. The scene was impressive. A separate, detached part of Ryan's brain catalogued it. There he was, sitting against the Rolls, his shirt soaked red as though blood had been poured from a pitcher. Cathy, her hands covered with her husband's blood, was still trying to arrange the bandage correctly. His daughter was gasping out tears in the arms of a burly young soldier who seemed to be singing to her in a language that Jack couldn't make out. Sally's eyes were locked on him, full of desperate anguish. The detached part of his mind found all this very amusing until another wave of pain yanked him back to reality.

The policeman who'd evidently taken charge came up to them after first

checking the perimeter. “Sergeant, move him aside.”

Cathy looked up and snapped angrily: “Open the other side, dammit, I got a bleeder here!”

“The other door’s jammed, ma’am. Let me help.” Ryan heard a different kind of siren as they bent down. The three of them moved him aside a foot or so, and the senior officer made to open the car door. They hadn’t moved him far enough. When the door swung open, its edge caught Ryan’s shoulder. The last thing he heard before passing out was his own scream of pain.

Ryan’s eyes focused slowly, his consciousness a hazy, variable thing that reported items out of place and out of time. For a moment he was inside a vehicle of some sort. The lateral movements of its passage rippled agony through his chest, and there was an awful atonal sound in the distance, though not all that far away. He thought he saw two faces he vaguely recognized. Cathy was there, too, wasn’t she—no, there were some people in green. Everything was soft and vague except the burning pain in his shoulder and chest, but when he blinked his eyes all were gone. He was someplace else again.

The ceiling was white and nearly featureless at first. Ryan knew somehow that he was under the influence of drugs. He recognized the feelings, but could not remember why. It required several minutes of lazy concentration for him to determine that the ceiling was made of white acoustical tiles on a white metal framework. Some of the tiles were waterstained and served to give him a reference. Others were translucent plastic for the soft fluorescent lighting. There was something tied under his nose, and after a moment he began to feel a cool gas tracing into his nostrils—oxygen? His other senses began to report in one at a time. Expanding radially down from his head, they began to explore his body and reported reluctantly to his brain. Some unseen things were taped to his chest. He could feel them pulling at the hairs that Cathy liked to play with when she was drunk. His left shoulder felt ... didn’t really feel at all. His whole body was far too heavy to move even an inch.

A hospital, he decided after several minutes. *Why am I in a hospital ... ?* It took an indeterminate period of concentration for Jack to remember why he was here. When it came to him, it was just as well that he could contemplate the taking of a human life from within the protective fog of drugs.

I was shot, too, wasn’t I? Ryan turned his head slowly to the right. A bottle of IV fluids was hanging on a metal stand next to the bed, its rubber hose trailing down under the sheet where his arm was tied down. He tried to feel the prick of the catheter that had to be inside the right elbow, but couldn’t. His mouth was cottony dry. *Well, I wasn’t shot on the right side...* Next he tried to turn his head to the left. Something soft but very firm prevented it. Ryan wasn’t able to care very much about it. Even his curiosity for his condition was a tenuous thing. For some reason his surroundings seemed much more interesting than his own body. Looking directly up, he saw a TV-like instrument, along with some other electronic stuff, none of which he could make out at the acute

angle. *EKG readout? Something like that,* he decided. It all figured. He was in a surgical recovery room, wired up like an astronaut while the staff decided if he'd live or not. The drugs helped him to consider the question with marvelous objectivity.

"Ah, we're awake." A voice other than the distant, muffled tone of the PA system. Ryan dropped his chin to see a nurse of about fifty. She had a Bette Davis face crinkled by years of frowns. He tried to speak to her, but his mouth seemed glued shut. What came out was a cross between a rasp and a croak. The nurse disappeared while he tried to decide what exactly the sound was.

A man appeared a minute or so later. He was also in his fifties, tall and spare, dressed in surgical greens. There was a stethoscope hanging from his neck, and he seemed to be carrying something that Ryan couldn't quite see. He seemed rather tired, but wore a satisfied smile.

"So," he said, "we're awake. How are we feeling?" Ryan managed a full-fledged croak this time. The doctor-?-gestured to the nurse. She came forward to give Ryan a sip of water through a glass straw.

"Thanks." He sloshed the water around his mouth. It was not enough to swallow. His mouth tissues seemed to absorb it all at once. "Where am I?"

"You are in the surgical recovery unit of St. Thomas's Hospital. You are recovering from surgery on your upper left arm and shoulder. I am your surgeon. My team and I have been working on you for, oh, about six hours now, and it would appear that you will probably live," he added judiciously. He seemed to regard Ryan as a successful piece of work.

Rather slowly and sluggishly Ryan thought to himself that the English sense of humor, admirable as it might otherwise be, was a little too dry for this sort of situation. He was composing a reply when Cathy came into view. The Bette Davis nurse moved to head her off.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ryan, but only medical person—"

"I'm a doctor." She held up her plastic ID card. The man took it.

"Wilmer Eye Institute, Johns Hopkins Hospital." The surgeon extended his hand and gave Cathy a friendly, colleague-to-colleague smile. "How do you do, Doctor? My name is Charles Scott. "

"That's right," Ryan confirmed groggily. "She's the surgeon doctor. I'm the historian doctor." No one seemed to notice.

"Sir Charles Scott? Professor Scott?"

"The same." A benign smile. *Everyone likes to be recognized,* Ryan thought as he watched from his back.

"One of my instructors knows you—Professor Knowles."

"Ah, and how is Dennis?"

"Fine, Doctor. He's associate professor of orthopedics now." Cathy shifted gears smoothly, back to medical professional. "Do you have the X-rays?"

"Here." Scott held up a manila envelope and extracted a large film. He held

it up in front of a lighting panel. “We took this prior to going in.”

“Damn.” Cathy’s nose wrinkled. She put on the half-glasses she used for close work, the ones Jack hated. He watched her head move slowly from side to side. “I didn’t know it was *that* bad.”

Professor Scott nodded. “Indeed. We reckon the collarbone was broken before he was shot, then the bullet came crashing through here—just missed the brachial plexus, so we expect no serious nerve damage—and did all this damage.” He traced a pencil across the film. Ryan couldn’t see any of it from the bed. “Then it did this to the top of the humerus before stopping here, just inside the skin. Bloody powerful thing, the nine millimeter. As you can see, the damage was quite extensive. We had a jolly time finding all these fragments and jigsawing them back into proper place, but—we were able to accomplish this.” Scott held a second film up next to the first. Cathy was quiet for several seconds, her head swiveling back and forth.

“That is nice work, Doctor!”

Sir Charles’ smile broadened a notch. “From a Johns Hopkins surgeon, yes, I think I’ll accept that. Both these pins are permanent, this screw also, I’m afraid, but the rest should heal rather nicely. As you can see, all the large fragments are back where they belong, and we have every reason to expect a full recovery.”

“How much impairment?” A detached question. Cathy could be maddeningly unemotional about her work.

“We’re not sure yet,” Scott said slowly. “Probably a little, but it should not be overly severe. We can’t guarantee a complete restoration of function—the damage was far too extensive for that.”

“You mind telling me something?” Ryan tried to sound angry, but it hadn’t come out right.

“What I mean, Mr. Ryan, is that you’ll probably have some permanent loss of use of your arm—precisely how much we cannot determine as yet—and from now on you’ll have a permanent barometer. Henceforth, whenever the weather is about to change for the worse, you’ll know it before anyone else.”

“How long in this cast?” Cathy wanted to know.

“At least a month.” The surgeon seemed apologetic. “It is awkward, I know, but the shoulder must be totally immobilized for at least that long. After that we’ll have to reevaluate the injury and we can probably revert to a normal cast for another ... oh, another month or so, I expect. I presume he heals well, no allergies. Looks to be in good health, decent physical shape.”

“Jack’s in good physical shape, except for a few loose marbles in his head,” Cathy nodded, an edge on her weary voice. “He jogs. No allergies except ragweed, and he heals rapidly.”

“Yeah,” Ryan confirmed. “Her teethmarks go away in under a week, usually.” He thought this uproariously funny, but no one laughed.

“Good,” Sir Charles said. “So, Doctor, you can see that your husband is in

good hands. I will leave the two of you together for five minutes. After that, I wish that he should get some rest, and you look as though you could use some also." The surgeon moved off with Bette Davis in his wake.

Cathy moved closer to him, changing yet again from cool professional to concerned wife. Ryan told himself for perhaps the millionth time how lucky he was to have this girl. Caroline Ryan had a small, round face, short butter-blond hair, and the world's prettiest blue eyes. Behind those eyes was a person with intelligence at least the equal of his own, someone he loved as much as a man could. He would never understand how he'd won her. Ryan was painfully aware that on his best day his own undistinguished features, a heavy beard and a lantern jaw, made him look like a dark-haired Dudley Do-Right of the Mounties. She played pussy-cat to his crow. Jack tried to reach out for her hand, but was foiled by straps. Cathy took his.

"Love ya, babe," he said softly.

"Oh, Jack." Cathy tried to hug him. She was foiled by the cast that he couldn't even see. "Jack, why the hell did you do that?"

He had already decided how to answer that. "It's over and I'm still alive, okay? How's Sally?"

"I think she's finally asleep. She's downstairs with a policeman." Cathy did look tired. "How do you think she is, Jack? Dear God, she saw you killed almost. You scared us both to death." Her china-blue eyes were rimmed in red, and her hair looked terrible, Jack saw. Well, she never was able to do much of anything with her hair. The surgical caps always ruined it.

"Yeah, I know. Anyway, it doesn't look like I'll be doing much more of that for a while," he grunted. "Matter of fact, it doesn't look like I'll be doing much of anything for a while." That drew a smile. It was good to see her smile.

"Fine. You're supposed to conserve your energy. Maybe this'll teach you a lesson-and don't tell me about all those strange hotel beds going to waste." She squeezed his hand. Her smile turned impish. "We'll probably work something out in a few weeks. How do I look?"

"Like hell." Jack laughed quietly. "I take it the doc was a somebody?"

He saw his wife relax a little. "You might say that. Sir Charles Scott is one of the best orthopods in the world. He trained Professor Knowles—he did a super job on you. You're lucky to have an arm at all, you know—my God!"

"Easy, babe. I'm going to live, remember?"

"I know, I know."

"It's going to hurt, isn't it?"

Another smile. "Just a bit. Well. I've got to put Sally down. I'll be back tomorrow." She bent down to kiss him. Skin full of drugs, oxygen tube, dry mouth, and all, it felt good. God, he thought, *God, how I love this girl.* Cathy squeezed his hand one more time and left.

The Bette Davis nurse came back. It was not a satisfactory trade.

“I’m ‘Doctor’ Ryan, too, you know,” Jack said warily.

“Very good, Doctor. It is time for you to get some rest. I’ll be here to look after you all night. Now sleep, Doctor Ryan.”

On this happy note Jack closed his eyes. Tomorrow would be a real bitch, he was sure. It would keep.

2

Cops and Royals

Ryan awoke at 6:35 A.M. He knew that because it was announced by a radio disc-jockey whose voice faded to an American Country & Western song of the type which Ryan avoided at home by listening to all-news radio stations. The singer was admonishing mothers not to allow their sons to become cowboys, and Ryan's first muddled thought of the day was, *Surely they don't have that problem over here ... do they?* His mind drifted along on this tangent for half a minute, wondering if the Brits had C&W bars with sawdust on the floors, mechanical bull rides, and office workers who strutted around with pointy-toed boots and five-pound belt buckles.... *Why not?* he concluded. *Yesterday I saw something right out of a Dodge City movie.*

Jack would have been just as happy to slide back into sleep. He tried closing his eyes and willing his body to relax, but it was no use. The flight from Dulles had left early in the morning, barely three hours after he'd awakened. He hadn't slept on the plane—it was something he simply could not do—but flying always exhausted him, and he'd gone to bed soon after arriving at the hotel. Then how long had he been unconscious in the hospital? Too long, he realized. Ryan was all slept out. He would have to begin facing the day.

Someone off to his right was playing a radio just loudly enough to hear. Ryan turned his head and was able to see his shoulder—

Shoulder, he thought, *that's why I'm here.* But where's *here?* It was a different room. The ceiling was smooth plaster, recently painted. It was dark, the only illumination coming from a light on the table next to the bed, perhaps enough to read by. There seemed to be a painting on the watt—at least a rectangle darker than the wall, which wasn't white. Ryan took this in, consciously delaying his examination of his left arm until no excuses remained. He turned his head slowly to the left. He saw his arm first of all. It was sticking up at an angle, wrapped in a plaster and fiberglass cast that went all the way to his hand. His fingers stuck out like an afterthought, about the same shade of gray as the plaster-gauze wrappings. There was a metal ring at the back of the wrist, and in the ring was a hook whose chain led to a metal frame that arced over the bed like a crane.

First things first. Ryan tried to wiggle his fingers. It took several seconds before they acknowledged their subservience to his central nervous system. Ryan let out a long breath and closed his eyes to thank God for that. About where his elbow was, a metal rod angled downward to join the rest of the cast, which, he finally appreciated, began at his neck and went diagonally to

his waist. It left his arm sticking out entirely on its own and made Ryan look like half a bridge. The cast was not tight on his chest, but touched almost everywhere, and already he had itches where he couldn't scratch. The surgeon had said something about immobilizing the shoulder, and, Ryan thought glumly, he hadn't been kidding. His shoulder ached in a distant sort of way with the promise of more to come. His mouth tasted like a urinal, and the rest of his body was stiff and sore. He turned his head the other way.

"Somebody over there?" he asked softly.

"Oh, hello." A face appeared at the edge of the bed. Younger than Ryan, mid-twenties or so, and lean. He was dressed casually, his tie loose in his collar, and the edge of a shoulder holster showed under his jacket. "How are you feeling, sir?"

Ryan attempted a smile, wondering how successful it was. "About how I look, probably. Where am I, who are you—first, is there a glass of water in this place?"

The policeman poured ice water from a plastic jug into a plastic cup. Ryan reached out with his right hand before he noticed that it wasn't tied down as it had been the last time he awoke. He could now feel the place where the IV catheter had been. Jack greedily sucked the water from the straw. It was only water, but no beer ever tasted better after a day's yardwork. "Thanks, pal."

"My name is Anthony Wilson. I'm supposed to look after you. You are in the VIP suite of St. Thomas's Hospital. Do you remember why you're here, sir?"

"Yeah, I think so," Ryan nodded. "Can you unhook me from this thing? I have to go." The other reminder of the IV.

"I'll ring the sister—here." Wilson squeezed the button that was pinned to the edge of Ryan's pillow.

Less than fifteen seconds later a nurse came through the door and flipped on the overhead lights. The blaze of light dazzled Jack for a moment before he saw it was a different nurse. Not Bette Davis, this one was young and pretty, with the eager, protective look common to nurses. Ryan had seen it before, and hated it.

"Ah, we're awake," she observed brightly. "How are we feeling?"

"Great," Ryan grumped. "Can you unhook me? I have to go to the john."

"We're not supposed to move just yet, Doctor Ryan. Let me fetch you something." She disappeared out the door before he could object. Wilson watched her leave with an appraising look. Cops and nurses, Ryan thought. His dad had married a nurse; he'd met her after bringing a gunshot victim into the emergency room.

The nurse—her name tag said KITTIWAKE—returned in under a minute bearing a stainless steel urinal as though it were a priceless gift, which under the circumstances, it was, Ryan admitted to himself. She lifted the covers on the bed and suddenly Jack realized that his hospital gown was not really on, but just tied loosely around his neck—worse, the nurse was about to make the

necessary adjustments for him to use the urinal. Ryan's right hand shot downward under the covers to take it away from her. He thanked God for the second time this morning that he was able, barely, to reach down far enough.

"Could you, uh, excuse me for a minute?" Ryan willed the girl out of the room, and she went, smiling her disappointment. He waited for the door to close completely before continuing. In deference to Wilson he stifled his sigh of relief. Kittiwake was back through the door after counting to sixty.

"Thank you." Ryan handed her the receptacle and she disappeared out the door. It had barely swung shut when she was back again. This time she stuck a thermometer in his mouth and grabbed his wrist to take his pulse. The thermometer was one of the new electronic sort, and both tasks were completed in fifteen seconds. Ryan asked for the score, but got a smile instead of an answer. The smile remained fixed as she made the entries on his chart. When this task was fulfilled, she made a minor adjustment in the covers, beaming at Ryan. *Little Miss Efficiency,* Ryan told himself. *This girl is going to be a real pain in the ass.*

"Is there anything I might get you, Doctor Ryan?" she asked. Her brown eyes belied the wheat-colored hair. She was cute. She had that dewy look. Ryan was unable to remain angry with pretty women, and hated them for it. Especially young nurses with that dewy look.

"Coffee?" he asked hopefully.

"Breakfast is not for another hour. Can I fetch you a cup of tea?"

"Fine." It wasn't, but it would get rid of her for a little while. Nurse Kittiwake breezed out the door with her ingenuous smile.

"Hospitals!" Ryan snarled when she was gone.

"Oh, I don't know," Wilson observed, the image of Nurse Kittiwake fresh in his mind.

"You ain't the one getting your diapers changed." Ryan grunted and leaned back into the pillow. It was useless to fight it, he knew. He smiled in spite of himself. *Useless to fight it.* He'd been through this twice before, both times with young, pretty nurses. Being grumpy only made them all the more eager to be overpoweringly nice—they had time on their side, time and patience enough to wear anyone down. He sighed out his surrender. It wasn't worth the waste of energy. "So, you're a cop, right? Special Branch?"

"No, sir. I'm with C-13, Anti-Terrorist Branch."

"Can you fill me in on what happened yesterday? I kinda missed a few things."

"How much do you remember, Doctor?" Wilson slid his chair closer. Ryan noted that he remained halfway facing the door, and kept his right hand free.

"I saw—well, *I heard* an explosion, a hand grenade, I think—and when I turned I saw two guys shooting the hell out of a Rolls-Royce. IRA, I guess. I took two of them out, and another one got away in a car. The cavalry arrived, and I passed out and woke up here. "

"Not IRA. ULA—Ulster Liberation Army, a Maoist offshoot of the Provos. Nasty buggers. The one you killed was John Michael McCrory, a very bad boy from Londonderry—one of the chaps who escaped from the Maze last July. This is the first time he's surfaced since. And the last"—Wilson smiled coldly—"we haven't identified the other chap yet. That is, not as of when I came on duty three hours ago."

"ULA?" Ryan shrugged. He remembered hearing the name, though he couldn't talk about that. "The guy I—killed. He had an AK, but when I came around the car he was using a pistol. How come?"

"The fool jammed it. He had two full magazines taped end to end, like you see all the time in the movies, but like they trained us specifically *not* to do in the paras. We reckon he bashed it, probably when he came out of the car. The second magazine was bent at the top end—wouldn't feed the rounds properly, you see. Damn good luck for you. You *knew* you were going after a chap with a Kalashnikov?" Wilson examined Ryan's face closely.

Jack nodded. "Doesn't sound real smart, does it?"

"You bloody fool." Wilson said this just as Kittiwake came through the door with a tea tray. The nurse flashed the cop an emphatically disapproving look as she set the tray on the bedstand and wheeled it over. Kittiwake arranged things just so, and poured Ryan a cup with delicacy. Wilson had to do his own.

"So who was in the car, anyway?" Ryan asked. He noted strong reactions.

"You didn't know?" Kittiwake was dumbfounded.

"There wasn't much time to find out." Ryan dropped two packets of brown sugar into his cup. His stirring stopped abruptly when Wilson answered his question.

"The Prince and Princess of Wales. And their new baby."

Ryan's head snapped around. "What?"

"You really didn't know?" the nurse asked.

"You're serious," Ryan said quietly. *They wouldn't kid about this, would they?*

"Too bloody right, I'm serious," Wilson went on, his voice very even. Only his choice of words betrayed how deeply the affair disturbed him. "Except for you, they would all three be quite dead, and that makes you a bloody hero, Doctor Ryan." Wilson sipped his tea neatly and fished out a cigarette.

Ryan set his cup down. "You mean you let them drive around here without a police or secret service—whatever you call it—without an escort?"

"Supposedly it was an unscheduled trip. Security arrangements for the Royals are not my department in any case. I would speculate, however, that those whose department it is will be rethinking a few things," Wilson commented.

"They weren't hurt?"

"No, but their driver was killed. So was their security escort from DPG—

Diplomatic Protection Group—Charlie Winston. I knew Charlie. He had a wife, you know, and four children, all grown."

Ryan observed that the Rolls should have had bulletproof glass.

Wilson grunted. "It *did* have bulletproof glass. Actually plastic, a complex polycarbonate material. Unfortunately, no one seems to have read what it said on the box. The guarantee is only for a year. Turns out that sunlight breaks the material down somehow or other. The windshield was no more use than ordinary safety glass. Our friend McCrory put thirty rounds into it, and it quite simply shattered, killing the driver first. The interior partition, thank God, had not been exposed to sunlight, and remained intact. The last thing Charlie did was push the button to put it up. That probably saved them, too—didn't do Charlie much good, though. He had enough time to draw his automatic, but we don't think he was able to get a shot off."

Ryan thought back. There had been blood in the back of the Rolls—not just blood. The driver's head had been blown apart, and his brains had scattered into the passenger compartment. Jack winced thinking about it. The escort had probably leaned over to push the button before defending himself.... *Well,* Jack thought, *that's what they* pay *them for. What a hell of a way to earn a living.*

"It was fortunate that you intervened when you did. They both had hand grenades, you know."

"Yeah, I saw one." Ryan sipped away the last of his tea. "What the hell was I thinking about?" *You weren't thinking at all, Jack. That's what you were thinking about.*

Kittiwake saw Ryan go pale. "You feel quite all right?" she asked.

"I guess." Ryan grunted in wonderment. "Dumb as I was, I must feel pretty good—I ought to be dead."

"Well, that most emphatically will not happen here." She patted his hand. "Please ring me if you need anything." Another beaming smile and she left.

Ryan was still shaking his head. "The other one got away?"

Wilson nodded. "We found the car near a tube station a few blocks away. It was stolen, of course. No real problem for him to get clean away. Disappear into the underground. Go to Heathrow, perhaps, and catch a plane to the continent—Brussels, say—then a plane to Ulster or the Republic, and a car the rest of the way home. That's one route; there are others, and it's impossible to cover them all. He was drinking beer last night, watching the news coverage on television in his favorite pub, most likely. Did you get a look at him?"

"No, just a shape. I didn't even think to get the tag number—dumb. Right after that the redcoat came running up to me." Ryan winced again. "Christ, I thought he'd put that pigsticker right through me. For a second there I could see it all—I do something right, then get wasted by a good guy."

Wilson laughed. "You don't know how lucky you were. The current guard force is from the Welsh Guards."

"So?"

“His Royal Highness’s own regiment, as it were. He’s their colonel-in-chief. There you were with a pistol—how would you expect him to react?” Wilson stubbed out his cigarette. “Another piece of good luck, your wife and daughter came running up to you, and the soldier decides to wait a bit, just long enough for things to sort themselves out. Then our chap catches up with him and tells him to stand easy. And a hundred more of my chaps come swooping in.

“I hope you can appreciate this, Doctor. Here we were with three men dead, two others wounded, a Prince and Princess looking as though they’d been shot—your wife examined them on the scene, by the way, and pronounced them fit just before the ambulance arrived—a baby, a hundred witnesses each with his own version of what had just taken place. A bloody Yank—an Irish-American to boot!—whose wife claims he’s the chap in the white hat.” Wilson laughed again. “Total chaos!

“First order of business, of course, was to get the Royals to safety. The police and guardsmen handled that, probably praying by this time that someone would make trouble. They’re still in an evil mood, they tell me, angrier even than from the bandstand bombing incident. Not hard to understand. Anyway, your wife flatly refused to leave your side until you were under doctor’s care here. Quite a forceful woman, they tell me.”

“Cathy’s a surgeon,” Ryan explained. “When she plays doc, she’s used to having her own way. Surgeons are like that.”

“After she was quite satisfied we drove her down to the Yard. Meanwhile we had a merry time identifying you. They called your Legal Attaché at the American Embassy and he ran a check through your FBI, plus a backup check through the Marine Corps.” Ryan stole a cigarette from Wilson’s pack. The policeman lit it with a butane lighter. Jack gagged on the smoke, but he needed it. Cathy would give him hell for it, he knew, but one thing at a time. “Mind you, we never really thought you were one of them. Have to be a maniac to bring the wife and child along on this sort of job. But one must be careful.”

Ryan nodded agreement, briefly dizzy from the smoke. *How’d they know to check through the Corps... oh, my Marine Corps Association card....*

“In any event we have things pretty well sorted out. Your government are sending us everything we need—probably here by now, actually.” Wilson checked his watch.

“My family’s all right?”

Wilson smiled in rather an odd way. “They are being very well looked after, Doctor Ryan. You have my word on that.”

“The name’s Jack.”

“Fine. I’m known to my friends as Tony.” They finally got around to shaking hands. “And as I said, you’re a bloody hero. Care to see what the press have to say?” He handed Ryan a *Daily Mirror* and *a Times.*

“Dear God!”

The tabloid *Mirror's* front page was almost entirely a color photograph of himself, sitting unconscious against the Rolls. His chest was a scarlet mass.

ATTEMPT ON HRH—MARINE TO THE RESCUE

A bold attempt to assassinate Their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales within sight of Buckingham Palace was thwarted today by the courage of an American tourist.

John Patrick Ryan, an historian and formerly a lieutenant in the United States Marines, dashed barehanded into a pitched battle on The Mall as over a hundred Londoners watched in shocked disbelief. Ryan, 31, of Annapolis, Maryland, successfully disabled one gunman and, taking his weapon, shot another dead. Ryan himself was seriously wounded in the exchange. He was taken by ambulance to St. Thomas's Hospital, where emergency surgery was successfully performed by Sir Charles Scott.

A third terrorist is reported to have escaped the scene, by running east on The Mall, then turning north on Marlborough Road.

Senior police officials were unanimous in their opinion that, but for Ryan's courageous intervention, Their Highnesses would certainly have been slain.

Ryan turned the page to see another color photograph of himself in happier circumstances. It was his graduation photo from Quantico, and he had to smile at himself, resplendent, then, in blue high-necked blouse, two shiny gold bars, and the Mamaluke sword. It was one of the few decent photographs ever taken of him.

"Where did they get this?"

"Oh, your Marine chaps were most helpful. In fact, one of your Marine ships—helicopter carrier, or something like that—is at Portsmouth right now. I understand that your former colleagues are getting all the free beer they can swill."

Ryan laughed at that. Next he picked up the *Times,* whose headline was marginally less lurid.

The Prince and Princess of Wales escaped certain death this afternoon. Three, possibly four terrorists armed with hand grenades and Kalashnikov assault rifles lay in wait for their Rolls-Royce; only to have their carefully-laid plans foiled by the bold intervention of J. P. Ryan, formerly a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps, and now an historian....

Ryan flipped to the editorial page. The lead item, signed by the publisher, screamed for vengeance while praising Ryan, America, and the United States Marine Corps, and thanked Divine Providence with a flourish worthy of a Papal Encyclical.

"Reading about yourself?" Ryan looked up. Sir Charles Scott was standing at the foot of his bed with an aluminum chart.

"First time I ever made the papers." Ryan set them down.

"You've earned it, and it would seem that the sleep did you some good. How do you feel?"

"Not bad, considering. How am I?" Ryan asked.

"Pulse and temperature normal—almost normal. Your color isn't bad at all. With luck we might even avoid a postoperative infection, though I should not wish to give odds on that," the doctor said. "How badly does it hurt?"

"It's there, but I can live with it," Ryan answered cautiously.

"It is only two hours since your last medication. I trust you are not one of those thickheaded fools who do not want pain medications?"

"Yes, I am," Ryan said. He went on slowly. "Doctor, I've been through this twice before. The first time, they gave me too much of the stuff, and coming off was—I'd just as soon not go through that again, if you know what I mean."

Ryan's career in the Marine Corps had ended after a mere three months with a helicopter crash on the shores of Crete during a NATO exercise. The resulting back injury had sent Ryan to Bethesda Naval Medical Center, outside Washington, where the doctors had been a little too generous with their pain medications, and Ryan had taken two weeks to get over them. It was not an experience he wanted to repeat.

Sir Charles nodded thoughtfully. "I think so. Well, it's your arm." The nurse came back in as he made some notations on the chart. "Rotate the bed a bit."

Ryan hadn't noticed that the rack from which his arm hung was actually circular. As the head of the bed came up, his arm dropped to a more comfortable angle. The doctor looked over his glasses at Ryan's fingers.

"Would you wiggle them, please?" Ryan did so. "Good, that's very good. I didn't think there'd be any nerve damage. Doctor Ryan, I am going to prescribe something mild, just enough to keep the edge off it. I will require that you take the medications which I prescribe." Scott's head came around to face Ryan directly. "I've never yet got a patient addicted to narcotics, and I do not propose to start with you. Don't be pigheaded: pain, discomfort will retard your recovery—unless, that is, you *want* to remain in hospital for several months?"

"Message received, Sir Charles."

"Right." The surgeon smiled. "If you should feel the need for something stronger, I shall be here all day. Just ring nurse Miss Kittiwake here." The girl beamed in anticipation.

"How about something to eat?"

"You think you can keep something down?"

If not, Kittiwake will probably love to help me throw up. "Doc, in the last thirty-six hours I've had a continental breakfast and a light lunch."

"Very well. We'll try some soft foods." He made another notation on the chart and flashed a look to Kittiwake: *Keep an eye on him.* She nodded.

"Your charming wife told me that you are quite obstinate. We'll see about

that. Still and all you are doing rather nicely. You can thank your physical condition for that—and my outstanding surgical skill, of course." Scott chuckled to himself. "After breakfast an orderly will help you freshen up for your more, ah, official visitors. Oh, don't expect to see your family soon. They were quite exhausted last night. I gave your wife something to help her sleep; I hope she took it. Your darling little daughter was all done in." Scott gave Ryan a serious look. "I was not misleading you earlier. Discomfort *will* slow your recovery. Do what I tell you and we'll have you out of that bed in a week, and discharged in two—perhaps. But you must do exactly as I say."

"Understood, sir. And thanks. Cathy said you did a good job on the arm."

Scott tried to shrug it off. The smile showed only a little. "One must take proper care of one's guests. I'll be back late this afternoon to see how you are progressing." He left, mumbling instructions to the nurse.

The police arrived in force at 8:30. By this time Ryan had been able to eat his hospital breakfast and wash up. Breakfast had been a huge disappointment, with Wilson collapsing in laughter at Ryan's comment on its appearance—but Kittiwake had been so downcast from this that Ryan had felt constrained to eat all of it, even the stewed prunes that he'd loathed since childhood. Only after finishing had he realized that her demeanor had probably been a sham, a device to get him to eat all the slop. *Nurses,* he reminded himself, *are tricky.* At eight the orderly had arrived to help him clean up. Ryan shaved himself, with the orderly holding the mirror and clucking every time he nicked himself. Four nicks—Ryan customarily used an electric shaver, and hadn't faced a bare blade in years. By 8:30 Ryan felt and looked human again. Kittiwake had brought in a second cup of coffee. It wasn't very good, but it was still coffee.

There were three police officers, very senior ones, Ryan thought, from the way Wilson snapped to his feet and scurried about to arrange chairs for them before excusing himself out the door.

James Owens appeared to be the most senior, and inquired as to Ryan's condition—politely enough that he probably meant it. He reminded Ryan of his own father, a craggy, heavyset man, and, judging from his large, gnarled hands, one who had earned his way to commander's rank after more than a few years of walking the streets and enforcing the law the hard way.

Chief Superintendent William Taylor was about forty, younger than his Anti-Terrorist Branch colleague, and neater. Both senior detectives were well dressed, and both had the red-rimmed eyes that came from an uninterrupted night's work.

David Ashley was the youngest and best-dressed of the three. About Ryan's size and weight, perhaps five years older. He described himself as a representative of the Home Office, and he looked a great deal smoother than either of the others.

"You're quite certain you're up to this?" Taylor asked.

Ryan shrugged. “No sense waiting.”

Owens took a cassette tape recorder from his portfolio and set it on the bedstand. He plugged in two microphones, one facing Ryan, the other toward the officers. He punched the record button and announced the date, time, and place.

“Doctor Ryan,” Owens asked formally, “do you know that this interview is being recorded?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And do you have any objection to this?”

“No, sir. May I ask a question?”

“Certainly,” Owens answered.

“Am I being charged with anything? If so, I would like to contact my embassy and have an attor—” Ryan was more than a little uneasy to be the focus of so much high-level police attention, but was cut off by the chuckles of Mr. Ashley. He noted that the other police officers deferred to him for the answer.

“Doctor Ryan, you may just have things the wrong way ’round. For the record, sir, we have no intention whatever of charging you with anything. Were we to do so, I dare say we’d be looking for new employment by day’s end.”

Ryan nodded, not showing his relief. He’d not yet been sure of this, sure only that the law doesn’t have to make sense. Owens began reading his questions from a yellow pad.

“Can you give us your name and address, please?”

“John Patrick Ryan. Our mailing address is Annapolis, Maryland. Our home is at Peregrine Cliff, about ten miles south of Annapolis on the Chesapeake Bay.”

“And your occupation?” Owens checked off something on his pad.

“I guess you could say I have a couple of jobs. I’m an instructor in history at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. I lecture occasionally at the Naval War College in Newport, and from time to time I do a little consulting work on the side.”

“That’s all?” Ashley inquired with a friendly smile—or was it friendly? Ryan asked himself. Jack wondered just how much they’d managed to find out about him in the past—what? fifteen hours or so—and exactly what Ashley was hinting at. *You’re no cop,* Ryan thought. *What exactly are you?* Regardless, he had to stick to his cover story, that he was a part-time consultant to the Mitre Corporation.

“And the purpose of your visit to this country?” Owens went on.

“Combination vacation and research trip. I’m gathering data for a new book, and Cathy needed some time off. Sally is still a preschooler, so we decided to head over now and miss the tourist season.” Ryan took a cigarette from the

pack Wilson had left behind. Ashley lit it from a gold lighter. “In my coat—wherever that is—you’ll find letters of introduction to your Admiralty and the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth.”

“We have the letters,” Owens replied. “Quite illegible, I’m afraid, and I fear your suit is a total loss also. What the blood did not ruin, your wife and our sergeant finished off with a knife. So when did you arrive in Britain?”

“It’s still Thursday, right? Well, we got in Tuesday night from Dulles International outside Washington. Arrived about seven-thirty, got to the hotel about nine-thirty or so, had a snack sent up, and went right to sleep. Flying always messes me up—jet lag, whatever. I conked right out.” That was not exactly true, but Ryan didn’t think they needed to know *everything.*

Owens nodded. They had already learned why Ryan hated flying. “And yesterday?”

“I woke up about seven, I guess, had breakfast and a paper sent up, then just kinda lazed around until about eight-thirty. I arranged to meet Cathy and Sally in the park around four, then caught a cab to the Admiralty building—close, as it turned out, I could have walked it. As I said, I had a letter of introduction to see Admiral Sir Alexander Woodson, the man in charge of your naval archives—he’s retired, actually. He took me down to a musty sub-sub-basement. He had the stuff I wanted all ready for me.

“I came over to look at some signal digests. Admiralty signals between London and Admiral Sir James Somerville. He was commander of your Indian Ocean fleet in the early months of 1942, and that’s one of the things I’m writing about. So I spend the next three hours reading over faded carbon copies of naval dispatches and taking notes.”

“On this?” Ashley held up Ryan’s clipboard. Jack snatched it from his hands.

“Thank God!” Ryan exclaimed. “I was sure it got lost.” He opened it and set it up on the bedstand, then typed in some instructions. “Ha! It still works!”

“What exactly is that thing?” Ashley wanted to know. All three got out of their chairs to look at it.

“This is my baby.” Ryan grinned. On opening the clipboard he revealed a typewriter-style keyboard and a yellow Liquid Crystal Diode display. Outwardly it looked like an expensive clipboard, about an inch thick and bound in leather. “It’s a Cambridge Datamaster Model-C Field Computer. A friend of mine makes them. It has an MC-68000 microprocessor, and two megabytes of bubble memory.”

“Care to translate that?” Taylor asked.

“Sorry. It’s a portable computer. The microprocessor is what does the actual work. Two megabytes means that the memory stores up to two million characters—enough for a whole book—and since it uses bubble memory, you don’t lose the information when you switch it off. A guy I went to school with set up a company to make these little darlings. He hit on me for some start-up capital. I use an Apple at home, this one’s just for carrying around. ”

“We knew it was some sort of computer, but our chaps couldn’t make it work,” Ashley said.

“Security device. The first time you use it, you input your user’s code and activate the lockout. Afterward, unless you type in the code, it doesn’t work—period.”

“Indeed?” Ashley observed. “How foolproof?”

“You’d have to ask Fred. Maybe you could read the data right off the bubble chips. I don’t know how computers work. I just use ’em,” Ryan explained. “Anyway, here are my notes.”

“Getting back to your activities of yesterday,” Owens said, giving Ashley a cool look. “We now have you to noon.”

“Okay. I broke for lunch. A guy on the ground floor directed me to a—a pub, I guess, two blocks away. I don’t remember the name of the place. I had a sandwich and a beer while I played with this thing. That took about half an hour. I spent another hour at the Admiralty building before I checked out. Left about quarter of two, I suppose. I thanked Admiral Woodson—very good man. I caught a cab to—don’t remember the address, it was on one of my letters. North of—Regent’s Park, I think. Admiral Sir Roger De-Vere. He served under Somerville. He wasn’t there. His house-keeper said he got called out of town suddenly due to a death in the family. So I left a message that I’d been there and flagged another cab back downtown. I decided to get out a few blocks early and walk the rest of the way.”

“Why?” Taylor asked.

“Mainly I was stiff from all the sitting—in the Admiralty building, the flight, the cab. I needed a stretch. I usually jog every day, and I get restless when I miss it.”

“Where did you get out?” Owens asked.

“I don’t know the name of the street. If you show me a map I can probably point it out.” Owens nodded for him to go on. “Anyway, I nearly got run over by a double-decker bus, and one of your uniformed cops told me not to jaywalk—” Owens looked surprised at that and scribbled some notes. Perhaps they hadn’t learned of that encounter. “I picked up a magazine at a street stand and met Cathy about, oh, three-forty or so. They were early, too. ”

“And how had she spent her day?” Ashley inquired. Ryan was certain that they had this information already.

“Shopping, mainly. Cathy’s been over here a few times, and likes to shop in London. She was last here about three years ago for a surgical convention, but I couldn’t make the trip.”

“Left you with the little one?” Ashley smiled thinly again. Ryan sensed that Owens was annoyed with him.

“Grandparents. That was before her mom died. I was doing comps for my doctorate at Georgetown, couldn’t get out of it. As it was I got my degree in two and a half years, and I sweated blood that last year between the university

and seminars at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. This was supposed to be a vacation." Ryan grimaced. "The first real vacation since our honeymoon. "

"What were you doing when the attack took place?" Owens got things back on track. All three inquisitors seemed to lean forward in their seats.

"Looking the wrong way. We were talking about what we'd do for dinner when the grenade went off."

"You knew it was a grenade?" Taylor asked.

Ryan nodded. "Yeah. They make a distinctive sound. I hate the damned things, but that's one of the little toys the Marines trained me to use at Quantico. Same thing with the machine-gunner. At Quantico we were exposed to East Bloc weapons. I've handled the AK-47. The sound it makes is different from our stuff, and that's a useful thing to know in combat. How come they didn't both have AKs?"

"As near as we can determine," Owens said, "the man you wounded disabled the car with a rifle-launched antitank grenade. Forensic evidence points to this. His rifle, therefore, was probably one of the new AK-74s, the small-caliber one, fitted to launch grenades. Evidently he didn't have time to remove the grenade-launcher assembly and decided to press on with his pistol. He had a stick grenade also, you know." Jack didn't know about the rifle grenade, but the type of hand grenade he'd seen suddenly leaped out of his memory.

"The antitank kind?" Ryan asked.

"You know about that, do you?" Ashley responded.

"I used to be a Marine, remember? Called the RKG-something, isn't it? Supposed to be able to punch a hole in a light armored vehicle or rip up a truck pretty good." *Where the hell did they get those little rascals—and why didn't they use them ... ? You're missing something, Jack.*

"Then what?" Owens asked.

"First thing, I got my wife and kid down on the deck. The traffic stopped pretty quick. I kept my head up to see what was happening."

"Why?" Taylor inquired.

"I don't know," Ryan said slowly. "Training, maybe. I wanted to see what the hell was going on—call it stupid curiosity. I saw the one guy hosing down the Rolls and the other one hustling around the back, like he was trying to bag anyone who tried to jump out of the car. I saw that if I moved to my left I could get closer. I was screened by the stopped cars. All of a sudden I was within fifty feet or so. The AK gunner was screened behind the Rolls, and the pistolero had his back to me. I saw that I had a chance, and I guess I took it."

"Why?" It was Owens this time, very quiet.

"Good question. I don't know, I really don't." Ryan was silent for half a minute. "It made me mad. Everyone I've met over here so far has been pretty

nice, and all of a sudden I see these two cocksuckers committing murder right the hell in front of me."

"Did you guess who they were?" Taylor asked.

"Doesn't take much imagination, does it? That pissed me off, too. I guess that's it—anger. Maybe that's what motivates people in combat," Ryan mused. "I'll have to think about that. Anyway, like I said, I saw the chance and I took it.

"It was easy—I was very lucky." Owens' eyebrows went up at that understatement. "The guy with the pistol was dumb. He should have checked his back. Instead he just kept looking at his kill zone—*very* dumb. You always 'check-six.' I blindsided him." Ryan grinned. "My coach would have been proud—I really stuck him good. But I guess I ought to have had my pads on, 'cause the doc says I broke something up here when I hit him. He went down pretty hard. I got his gun and shot him—you want to know why I did that, right?"

"Yes," Owens replied.

"I didn't want him to get up."

"He was unconscious—he didn't wake up for two hours, and had a nasty concussion when he did."

If I'd known he had that grenade, I wouldn't have shot him in the ass! "How was I supposed to know that?" Ryan asked reasonably. "I was about to go up against somebody with a light machine gun, and I didn't need a bad guy behind me. So I neutralized him. I could have put one through the back of his head—at Quantico when they say 'neutralize,' they mean *kill.* My dad was the cop. Most of what I know about police procedures comes from watching TV, and I *know* most of that's wrong. All I knew was that I couldn't afford to have him come at me from behind. I can't say I'm especially proud of it, but at the time it seemed like a good idea.

"I moved around the right-rear corner of the car and looked around. I saw the guy was using a pistol. Your man Wilson explained that to me—that was lucky, too. I wasn't real crazy about taking an AK on with a dinky little handgun. He saw me come around. We both fired about the same time—I just shot straighter, I guess."

Ryan stopped. He hadn't meant it to sound like that. *Is that how it was? If* you *don't know, who does?* Ryan had learned that in a crisis, time compresses and dilates—seemingly at the same time. *It also fools your memory, doesn't it? What else could I have done?* He shook his head.

"I don't know," he said again. "Maybe I should have tried something else. Maybe I should have said, 'Drop it!' or 'Freeze!' like they do on TV—but there just wasn't time. Everything was *right now*—him or me—do you know what I mean? You don't ... you don't reason all this out when you only have half a second of decision time. I guess you go on training and instinct. The only training I've had was in the Green Machine, the Corps. They don't teach you to arrest people—Christ's sake, I didn't *want* to kill anybody, I just didn't have

a hell of a choice in the matter." Ryan paused for a moment.

"Why didn't he—quit, run away, something! He saw I had him. He must have known I had him cold." Ryan slumped back into the pillow. Having to articulate what had happened brought it back all too vividly. *A man is dead because of you, Jack. All the way dead. He had his instincts, too, didn't he? But yours worked better—so why doesn't that make you feel good?*

"Doctor Ryan," Owens said calmly, "we three have personally interviewed six people, all of whom had a clear view of the incident. From what they have told us, you have related the circumstances to us with remarkable clarity. Given the facts of the matter, I—we—do not see that you had any choice at all. It is as certain as such things can possibly be that you did precisely the right thing. And your second shot did not matter, if that is troubling you. Your first went straight through his heart."

Jack nodded. "Yeah, I could see that. The second shot was completely automatic, like my hand did it without being told. The gun came back down and zap! No thought at all ... funny how your brain works. It's like one part does the doing and another part does the watching and advising. The 'watching' part saw the first round go right through his ten-ring, but the 'doing' part kept going till he went down. I might have tried to squeeze off another round for all I know, but the gun was empty."

"The Marines taught you to shoot very well indeed," Taylor observed.

Ryan shook his head. "Dad taught me when I was a kid. The Corps doesn't make a big deal about pistols anymore—they're just for show. If the bad guys get that close, it's time to leave. I carried a rifle. Anyway, the guy was only fifteen feet away." Owens made some more notes.

"The car took off a few seconds later. I didn't get much of a look at the driver. It could have been a man or a woman. He or she was white, that's all I can say. The car went whippin' up the street and turned, last I saw of it."

"It was one of our London taxis—did you notice that?" Taylor asked.

Ryan blinked. "Oh, you're right. I didn't really think about that—that's dumb! Hell, you have a million of the damned things around. No wonder they used one of those."

"Eight thousand six hundred seventy-nine, to be exact," Owens said. "Five thousand nine hundred nineteen of which are painted black."

A light went off in Ryan's head. "Tell me, was this an assassination attempt or were they trying to kidnap them?"

"We're not sure about that. You might be interested to know that Sinn Fein, the political wing of the PIRA, released a statement completely disowning the incident."

"You believe that?" Ryan asked. With pain medications still coursing through his system, he didn't quite notice how skillfully Taylor had parried his question.

"Yes, we are leaning in that direction. Even the Provos aren't this crazy, you

know. Something like this has far too high a political price. They learned that much from killing Lord Mountbatten—wasn't even the PIRA who did that, but the INLA, the Irish National Liberation Army. Regardless, it cost them a lot of money from their American sympathizers," Taylor said.

"I see from the papers that your fellow citizens—"

"Subjects," Ashley corrected.

"Whatever, your people are pretty worked up about this."

"Indeed they are, Doctor Ryan. It is rather remarkable how terrorists can always seem to find a way to shock us, no matter what horrors have gone before," Owens noted. His voice was wholly professional, but Ryan sensed that the chief of Anti-Terrorist Branch was willing to rip the head right off the surviving terrorist with his bare hands. They looked strong enough to do just that. "So what happened next?"

"I made sure the guy I shot—the second one—was dead. Then I checked the car. The driver—well, you know about that, and the security officer. One of your people, Mr. Owens?"

"Charlie was a friend of mine. He's been with the Royal Family's security detail for three years now...." Owens spoke almost as though the man were still alive, and Ryan wondered if they had ever worked together. Police make especially close friendships, he knew.

"Well, you guys know the rest. I hope somebody gives that redcoat a pat on the head. Thank God he took the time to think it all out—at least long enough for your guy to show up and calm him down. Would have been embarrassing for everybody if he'd stuck that bayonet out my back."

Owens grunted agreement. "Indeed it would."

"Was that rifle loaded?" Ryan asked.

"If it was," Ashley replied, "why didn't he shoot?"

"A crowded street isn't the best place to use a high-powered rifle, even if you're sure of your target," Ryan answered. "It was loaded, wasn't it?"

"We cannot discuss security matters," Owens said. *I* knew *it was loaded,* Ryan told himself. "Where the hell did he come from, anyway? The Palace is a good ways off."

"Clarence House—the white building adjoining St. James's Palace. The terrorists picked a bad time—or perhaps a bad place—for their attack. There is a guard post at the southwest comer of the building. The guard changes every two hours. When the attack took place, the change was just under way. That meant that four soldiers were there at the time, not just one. The police on duty at the Palace heard the explosion and automatic fire. The Sergeant in charge ran to the gate to see what was going on and yelled for a guardsman to follow."

"He's the one who sounded the alarm, right? That's how the rest of them arrived so fast?"

"Charlie Winston," Owens said. "The Rolls has an electronic attack alarm—you don't need to tell anyone that. That alerted headquarters. Sergeant Price acted entirely on his own initiative. Unfortunately for him, the guardsman was a hurdler—the lad runs track and field—and vaulted the barriers there. Price tried to do it also, but he fell down and broke his nose. He had a devil of a time catching up, plus sending out his own alarm on his portable radio."

"Well, I'm glad he caught up when he did. That trooper scared the hell out of me. I hope your Sergeant gets a pat on the head, too."

"The Queen's Police Medal for starters, and the thanks of Her Majesty," Ashley said. "One thing that has confused us, Doctor Ryan. You left the military with a physical disability, yet you evidenced none of this yesterday."

"You know that after I left the Corps, I went into the brokerage business. I made something of a name for myself, and Cathy's father came down to talk to me. That's when I met Cathy. I passed on the invitation to move to New York, but Cathy and I hit it right off. One thing led to another, and pretty soon we were engaged. I wore a back brace then, because every so often my back would go bad on me. Well, it happened again right after we got engaged, and Cathy took me into Johns Hopkins to have one of her teachers check me out. One was Stanley Rabinowisz, professor of neurosurgery there. He ran me through three days of tests and said he could fix me good as new.

"It turned out that the docs at Bethesda had goofed my myelogram. No reflection on them, they were sharp young docs, but Stan's about the best there is. Good as his word, too. He opened me up that Friday, and two months later I *was* almost as good as new," Ryan said. "Anyway, that's the story of Ryan's back. I just happened to fall in love with a pretty girl who was studying to be a surgeon."

"Your wife is certainly a most versatile and competent woman," Owens agreed.

"And you found her pushy," Ryan observed.

"No, Doctor Ryan. People under stress are never at their best. Your wife also examined Their Royal Highnesses on the scene, and that was most useful to us. She refused to leave your side until you were under competent medical care; one can hardly fault her for that. She did find our identification procedures a touch long-winded, I think, and she was quite naturally anxious about you. We might have moved things along more quickly—"

"No need to apologize, sir. My dad was a cop. I know the score. I understand you had trouble identifying us."

"Just over three hours—a timing problem, you see. We had your passport out of your coat, and your driving license, which, we were glad to see, had your photograph. Our initial request to your Legal Attaché was just before five, and that made it noon in America. Lunchtime, you see. He called the FBI's Baltimore field office, who in turn called their Annapolis office. The identification business is fairly straightforward—first they had to find some chaps at your Naval Academy who knew who you were, when you came over,

and so forth. Next they found the travel agent who booked your flight and hotel. Another agent went to your motor vehicle registration agency. Many of these people were off eating lunch, and we reckon that cost us roughly an hour. Simultaneously he—the Attaché—sent a query to your Marine Corps. Within three hours we had a fairly complete history on you—including fingerprints. We had your fingerprints from your travel documents and the hotel registration, and they matched your military records, of course."

"Three hours, eh?" *Dinnertime here, and lunchtime at home, and they did it all in three hours. Damn.*

"While all that was going on we had to interview your wife several times to make sure that she related everything she saw—"

"And she gave it to you exactly the same way every time, right?" Ryan asked.

"Correct," Owens said. He smiled. "That is quite remarkable, you know."

Ryan grinned. "Not for Cathy. Some things, medicine especially, she's a real machine. I'm surprised she didn't hand you a roll of film."

"She said that herself," Owens replied. "The photographs in the paper are from a Japanese tourist—that's a cliché, isn't it?—half a block away with a telephoto lens. You might be interested to know that your Marine Corps thinks rather highly of you, by the way." Owens consulted his notes. "Tied for first in your class at Quantico, and your fitness reports were excellent."

"So, you're satisfied I'm a good guy?"

"We were convinced of that from the first moment," Taylor said. "One must be thorough in major felony cases, however, and this one obviously had more than its share of complications."

"There's one thing that bothers me," Jack said. There was more than one, but his brain was working too slowly to classify them all.

"What's that?" Owens asked.

"What the hell were they—the Royals, you call them?—doing out on the street with only one guard—wait a minute." Ryan's head cocked to one side. He went on, speaking rather slowly as his mind struggled to arrange his thoughts. "That ambush was planned—this wasn't any accidental encounter. But the bad guys caught 'em on the fly.... They had to hit a particular car in a particular place. Somebody timed this one out. There were some more people involved in this, weren't there?" Ryan heard a lot of silence for a moment. It was all the answer he needed. "Somebody with a radio ... those characters had to know that they were coming, the route they'd take, and exactly when they got into the kill zone. Even then it wouldn't be all that easy, 'cause you have to worry about traffic...."

"Just an historian, Doctor Ryan?" Ashley asked.

"They teach you how to do ambushes in the Marines. If you want to ambush a specific target ... first, you have to have intelligence information; second, you choose your ground; third, you put your own security guys out to tell you

when the target is coming—that's just the bare-bones requirements. Why here—why St. James's Park, The Mall?" *The terrorist is a political creature. The target and the place are chosen for political effect,* Ryan told himself. "You didn't answer my question before: was this an assassination or an attempted kidnapping?"

"We are not entirely sure," Owens answered.

Ryan looked over his guests. He'd just touched an open nerve. *They disabled the car with an antitank rifle-grenade, and both of them had the hand-thrown kind, too. If they just wanted to kill ... the grenades would defeat any armor on the car, why use guns at all? No, if this was a straight assassination attempt, they would not have taken so long, would they? You just fibbed to me, Mr. Owens. This was definitely a kidnap attempt and you know it.*

"Why just the one security officer in the car, then? You have to protect your people better than that." *What was it Tony said? An unscheduled trip? The first requirement for a successful ambush is good* intelligence.... *You can't pursue this, idiot!* The Commander solved the problem for Jack.

"Well, I believe we covered everything rather nicely. We'll probably be back tomorrow," Owens said.

"How are the terrorists—the one I wounded, I mean."

"He has not been terribly cooperative. Won't speak to us at all, not even to tell us his name—old story dealing with this lot. We've only identified him a few hours ago. No previous criminal record at all—his name appeared as a possible player in two minor cases, but nothing more than that. He is recovering quite nicely, and in three weeks or so," Taylor said coldly, "he will be taken before the Queen's Bench, tried before a jury of twelve good men and true, convicted, and sentenced to spend the remainder of his natural life at a secure prison."

"Only three weeks?" Ryan asked.

"The case is clear-cut," Owens said. "We have three photographs from our Japanese friend that show this lad holding his gun behind the car, and nine good eyewitnesses. There will be no mucking about with this lad."

"And I'll be there to see it," Ryan observed.

"Of course. You will be our most important witness, Doctor. A formality, but a necessary one. And no claim of lunacy like the chap who tried to kill your President. This boy is a university graduate, with honors, and he comes from a good family."

Ryan shook his head. "Ain't that a hell of a thing? But most of the really bad ones are, aren't they?"

"You know about terrorists?" Ashley asked.

"Just things I've read," Ryan answered quickly. *That was a mistake, Jack. Cover it.* "Officer Wilson said the ULA were Maoists."

"Correct." Taylor said.

"That really is crazy. Hell, even the Chinese aren't Maoists anymore, at least the last time I checked they weren't. Oh—what about my family?"

Ashley laughed. "About time you asked, Doctor. We couldn't very well leave them at the hotel, could we? It was arranged for them to be put up at a highly secure location."

"You need not be concerned," Owens agreed. "They are quite safe. My word on it."

"Where, exactly?" Ryan wanted to know.

"A security matter, I'm afraid," Ashley said. The three inquisitors shared an amused look. Owens checked his watch and shot a look to the others.

"Well," Owens said. He switched off the tape recorder. "We do not wish to trouble you further the day after surgery. We will probably be back to check a few additional details. For the moment, sir, you have the thanks of all of us at the Yard for doing our job for us."

"How long will I have Mr. Wilson here?"

"Indefinitely. The ULA are likely to be somewhat annoyed with you," Owens said. "And it would be most embarrassing for us if they were to make an attempt on your life and find you unprotected. We do not regard this as likely, mind, but one must be careful."

"I can live with that," Ryan agreed. *I make a hell of a target here, don't I? A third-grader could kill me with a Popsicle stick.*

"The press want to see you," Taylor said.

"I'm thrilled." *Just what I need,* Ryan thought. "Could you hold them off a bit?"

"Simple enough," Owens agreed. "Your medical condition does not permit it at the moment. But you should get used to the idea. You are now something of a public figure."

"Like hell!" Ryan snorted. "I like being obscure." *Then you should have stayed behind the tree, dumbass! Just what have you got yourself into?*

"You can't refuse to see them indefinitely, you know," Taylor said gently.

Jack let out a long breath. "You're correct, of course. But not today. Tomorrow is soon enough." *Let the hubbub die down some first,* Ryan thought stupidly.

"One cannot always stay in the shadows, Doctor Ryan," Ashley said, standing. The others took their cue from him.

The cops and Ashley—Ryan now had him pegged as some kind of spook, intelligence or counterintelligence—took their leave. Wilson came back in, with Kittiwake trailing behind.

"Did they tire you out?" the nurse asked.

"I think I'll live," Ryan allowed. Kittiwake thrust a thermometer in his mouth to make sure.

Forty minutes after the police had left, Ryan was typing happily away on his computer-toy, reviewing notes and drafting some fresh copy. Cathy Ryan's most frequent (and legitimate) complaint about her husband was that while he was reading—or worse, writing—the world could end around him without his taking notice. This was not entirely true. Jack did notice Wilson jumping to attention out the comer of his eye, but he did not look up until he had finished the paragraph. When he did, he saw that his new visitors were Her Majesty, the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh. His first coherent thought was a mental curse that no one had warned him. His second, that he must look very funny with his mouth hanging open.

"Good morning, Doctor Ryan," the Queen said agreeably. "How are you feeling?"

"Uh, quite well, thank you, uh, Your Majesty. Won't you, uh, please sit down?" Ryan tried to sit more erect in his bed, but was halted by a flash of pain from his shoulder. It helped to center his thoughts and reminded him that his medication was nearly due.

"We have no wish to impose," she said. Ryan sensed that she didn't wish to leave right away, either. He took a second to frame his response.

"Your Majesty, a visit from a head of state hardly qualifies as an imposition. I would be most grateful for your company." Wilson hustled to get two chairs and excused himself out the door as they sat.

The Queen was dressed in a peach-colored suit whose elegant simplicity must have made a noteworthy dent even in her clothing budget. The Duke was in a dark blue suit which finally made Ryan understand why his wife wanted him to buy some clothes over here.

"Doctor Ryan," she said formally, "on our behalf, and that of our people, we wish to express to you our most profound gratitude for your action of yesterday. We are very much in your debt."

Ryan nodded soberly. He wondered just how awful he looked. "For my own part, ma'am, I am glad that I was able to be of service—but the truth of the matter is that I didn't really do all that much. Anyone could have done the same thing. I just happened to be the closest."

"The police say otherwise," the Duke observed. "And after viewing the scene myself, I am inclined to agree with them. I'm afraid you're a hero whether you like it or not." Jack remembered that this man had once been a professional naval officer—probably a good one. He had the look.

"Why did you do it, Doctor Ryan?" the Queen asked. She examined his face closely.

Jack made a quick guess. "Excuse me, ma'am, but are you asking why I took the chance, or why an Irish-American would take the chance?" Jack was still ordering his own thoughts, examining his own memories. *Why did you do it?*

Will you ever know? He saw that he'd guessed right and went on quickly.

"Your Majesty, I cannot speak to your Irish problem. I'm an American citizen, and my country has enough problems of its own without having to delve into someone else's. Where I come from we—that is, Irish-Americans—have made out pretty well. We're in all the professions, business, and politics, but your prototypical Irish-American is still a basic police officer or firefighter. The cavalry that won the West was a third Irish, and there are still plenty of us in uniform—especially the Marine Corps, as a matter of fact. Half of the local FBI office lived in my old neighborhood. They had names like Tully, Sullivan, O'Connor, and Murphy. My dad was a police officer for half his life, and the priests and nuns who educated me were mostly Irish, probably.

"Do you see what I mean, Your Majesty? In America we are the forces of order, the glue that holds society together—so what happens?

"Today, the most famous Irishmen in the world are the maniacs who leave bombs in parked cars, or assassins who kill people to make some sort of political point. I don't like that, and I know my dad wouldn't like it. He spent his whole working life taking animals like that off the street and putting them in cages where they belong. We've worked pretty hard to get where we are—too hard to be happy about being thought of as the relatives of terrorists." Jack smiled. "I guess I understand how Italians feel about the Mafia. Anyway, I can't say that all this stuff paraded through my head yesterday, but I did kind of figure what was going on. I couldn't just sit there like a dummy and let murder be committed before my eyes and not do *something.* So I saw my chance and I took it."

The Queen nodded thoughtfully. She regarded Ryan with a warm, friendly smile for a few moments and turned to look at her husband. The two communicated without words. They'd been married long enough for that, Ryan thought. When she turned back, he could see that a decision had been reached.

"So, then. How shall we reward you?"

"Reward, ma'am?" Ryan shook his head. "Thank you very much, but it's not necessary. I'm glad I was able to help. That's enough."

"No, Doctor Ryan, it is not enough. One of the nicer things about being Queen is that one is permitted to recognize meritorious conduct, then to reward it properly. The Crown cannot appear to be ungrateful." Her eyes sparkled with some private joke. Ryan found himself captivated by the woman's humanity. He'd read that some people found her to be less than intelligent. He already knew they were far off the mark. There was an active brain behind those eyes, and an active wit as well. "Accordingly, it has been decided that you shall be invested as a Knight Commander of the Victorian Order."

"What—er, I beg your pardon, ma'am?" Ryan blinked a few times as his brain tried to catch up with his ears.

"The Victorian Order is a recent development intended to reward those

persons who have rendered personal service to the Crown. Certainly you qualify. This is the first case in many years that an heir to the throne has been saved from almost certain death. As an historian yourself, you might be interested to learn that our own scholars are in disagreement as to when was our most recent precedent—in any event, you will henceforth be known as Sir John Ryan."

Again Jack thought that he must look rather funny with his mouth open.

"Your Majesty, American law—"

"We know," she interrupted smoothly. "The Prime Minister will be discussing this with your President later today. We believe that in view of the special nature of this case, and in the interest of Anglo-American relations, the matter will be settled amicably."

"There is ample precedent for this," the Duke went on. "After the Second World War a number of American officers were accorded similar recognition. Your Fleet Admiral Nimitz, for example, became a Knight Commander of the Bath, along with Generals Eisenhower, Bradley, Patton, and a number of others.

"For the purposes of American law, it will probably be considered honorary—but for our purposes it will be quite real."

"Well." Ryan fumbled for something to say. "Your Majesty, insofar as this does not conflict with the laws of my country, I will be deeply honored to accept." The Queen beamed.

"That's settled, then. Now, how are you feeling—really feeling?"

"I've felt worse, ma'am. I have no complaints—I just wish I'd moved a little faster."

The Duke smiled. "Being wounded makes you appear that much more heroic—nothing like a little drama."

Especially if it's someone else's shoulder, my Lord Duke, Ryan thought. A small bell went off in his head. "Excuse me, this knighthood, does it mean that my wife will be catted—"

"Lady Ryan? Of course." The Queen flashed her Christmas-tree smile again.

Jack grinned broadly. "You know, when I left Merrill Lynch, Cathy's father was madder than—he was very angry with me, said I'd never amount to anything writing history books. Maybe this will change his mind." He was sure that Cathy would not mind the title—*Lady Ryan.* No, she wouldn't mind that one little bit.

"Not so bad a thing after all?"

"No, sir, and please forgive me if I gave that impression. I'm afraid you caught me a little off balance." Ryan shook his head. *This whole damned affair has me a lot off balance.* "Might I ask a question, sir?"

"Certainly. "

"The police wouldn't tell me where they're keeping my family." This drew a

hearty laugh. The Queen answered.

“It is the opinion of the police that there might exist the possibility of a reprisal against you or your family. Therefore it was decided that they should be moved to a more secure location. Under the circumstances, we decided that they might most easily be moved to the Palace—it was the least thing we could do. When we left, your wife and daughter were fast asleep, and we left strict instructions that they should not be disturbed.”

“The Palace?”

“We have ample room for guests, I assure you,” the Queen replied.

“Oh, Lord!” Ryan muttered.

“You have an objection?” the Duke asked.

“My little girl, she—”

“Olivia?” the Queen said, rather surprised. “She’s a lovely child. When we saw her last night she was sleeping like an angel. ”

“Sally”—Olivia had been a peace offering to Cathy’s family that hadn’t worked; it was the name of her grandmother—“is a little angel, asleep, but when she wakes up she’s more like a little tornado, and she’s very good at breaking things. Especially valuable things.”

“What a dreadful thing to say!” Her Majesty feigned shock. “That lovely little girl. The police told us that she broke hearts throughout Scotland Yard last evening. I fear you exaggerate, Sir John.”

“Yes, ma’am.” There was no arguing with a queen.

3

Flowers and Families

Wilson had been mistaken in his assessment. The escape had taken longer than anyone at the Yard had thought. Six hundred miles away, a Sabena flight was landing outside of Cork. The passenger in seat 23-D of the Boeing 737 was entirely unremarkable; his sandy hair was cut medium-close, and he was dressed like a middle-level executive in a neat but rumpled suit that gave the entirely accurate impression of a man who'd spent a long day on the job and gotten too little sleep before catching a flight home. An experienced traveler to be sure, with one carry-on flight bag. If asked, he could have given a convincing discourse on the wholesale fish business in the accent of Southwestern Ireland. He could change accents as easily as most men changed shirts; a useful skill, since TV news crews had made the patois of his native Belfast recognizable the world over. He read the *London Times* on the flight, and the topic of discussion in his seat row, as with the rest of the aircraft, was the story which covered the front page.

"A terrible thing, it is," he'd agreed with the man in 23-E, a Belgian dealer in machine tools who could not have known how an event might be terrible in more than one way.

All the months of planning, the painstakingly gathered intelligence, the rehearsals carried out right under the Brit noses, the three escape routes, the radiomen—all for nothing because of this bloody meddler. He examined the photo on the front page.

Who are you, Yank? he wondered. *John Patrick Ryan. Historian—a bloody academic! Ex-Marine-trust a damned bootneck to stick his nose where it doesn't belong! John Patrick Ryan. You're a bloody Catholic, aren't you? Well, Johnny nearly put paid on your account.... Too bad about Johnny. Good man Johnny was, dependable, loved his guns, and true to the Cause.*

The plane finally came to a stop at the Jetway. Forward, the stewardess opened the door, and the passengers rose to get their bags from the overhead stowage. He got his, and joined the slow movement forward. He tried to be philosophical about it. In his years as a "player," he'd seen operations go awry for the most ridiculous of reasons. But this op was so important. So *much* planning. He shook his head as he tucked the paper under his arm. *We'll just have to try again, that's all. We can afford to be patient.* One failure, he told himself, didn't matter in the great scheme of things. The other side had been lucky this time. *We only have to* be *lucky once.* The men in the H-blocks weren't going anywhere.

What about Sean? A mistake to have taken him along. He'd helped plan the operation from the beginning. Sean knows a great deal about the Organization. He set that worry aside as he stepped off the aircraft. *Sean would never talk. Not Sean, not with his girl in her grave these past five years, from a para's stray bullet.*

He wasn't met, of course. The other men who had been part of the operation were already back, their equipment left behind in rubbish bins, wiped clean of fingerprints. Only he had the risk of exposure, but he was sure that this Ryan fellow hadn't got a good look at his face. He thought back again to be sure. No. The look of surprise on his face, the look of pain he'd seen there. The American couldn't have gotten much of a look—if he had, an identikit composite picture would be in the press already, complete with the moppy wig and fake glasses.

He walked out of the terminal building to the parking lot, his travel bag slung over his shoulder, searching in his pocket for the keys that had set off the airport metal detector in Brussels—what a laugh that was! He smiled for the first time in nearly a day. It was a clear, sunny day, another glorious Irish fall it was. He drove his year-old BMW—a man with a business cover had to have a full disguise, after all—down the road to the safehouse. He was already planning two more operations. Both would require a lot of time, but time was the one thing he had in unlimited quantity.

It was easy enough to tell when it was time for another pain medication. Ryan was unconsciously flexing his left hand at the far end of the cast. It didn't reduce the pain, but did seem to move it about somewhat as the muscles and tendons changed place slightly. It bothered his concentration however much he tried to shut it out. Jack remembered all the TV shows in which the detective or otherwise employed hero took a round in the shoulder but recovered fully in time for the last commercial. The human shoulder—his, at any rate—was a solid collection of bones that bullets—*one* bullet—all too easily broke. As the time for another medication approached it seemed that he could feel every jagged edge of every broken bone grating against its neighbor as he breathed, and even the gentle tapping of his right-hand fingers on the keyboard seemed to ripple across his body to the focus of his pain until he had to stop and watch the wall clock—for the first time he wanted Kittiwake to appear with his next installment of chemical bliss.

Until he remembered his fear. The pain of his back injury had made his first week at Bethesda a living hell. He knew that his present injury paled by comparison, but the body does not remember pain, and the shoulder was *here and now.* He forced himself to remember that pain medications had made his back problem almost tolerable ... except that the doctors had gotten just a little too generous with his dosages. More than the pain, Ryan dreaded withdrawal from morphine sulphate. That had lasted a week, the wanting that seemed to draw his entire body into some vast empty place, someplace where his innermost self found itself entirely alone and *needing*.... Ryan shook his head. The pain rippled through his left arm and shoulder and he forced himself to welcome it. *I'm not going to go through that again. Never again.*

The door opened. It wasn't Kittiwake—the med was still fourteen minutes away. Ryan had noticed a uniform outside the door when it had opened before. Now he was sure. A thirtyish uniformed officer came in with a floral arrangement and he was followed by another who was similarly loaded. A scarlet and gold ribbon decorated the first, a gift from the Marine Corps, followed by another from the American Embassy.

"Quite a few more, sir," one uniformed officer said.

"The room isn't all that big. Can you give me the cards and spread these around some? I'm sure there's people around who'd like them." *And who wants to live in a jungle?* Within ten minutes Ryan had a pile of cards, notes, and telegrams. He found that reading the words of others was better than reading his own when it came to blocking out the ache of his damaged shoulder.

Kittiwake arrived. She gave the flowers only a fleeting glance before administering Ryan's medication, and hustled out with scarcely a word. Ryan learned why five minutes later.

His next visitor was the Prince of Wales. Wilson snapped to his feet again, and Jack wondered if the kid's knees were tiring of this. The med was already working. His shoulder was drifting farther away, but along with this came a slight feeling of light-headedness as from a couple of stiff drinks. Maybe that was part of the reason for what happened next.

"Howdy." Jack smiled. "How are you feeling, sir?"

"Quite well, thank you." The answering smile contained no enthusiasm. The Prince looked very tired, his thin face stretched an extra inch or so, with a lingering sadness around the eyes. His shoulders drooped within the conservative gray suit.

"Why don't you sit down, sir?" Ryan invited. "You look as though you had a tougher night than I did."

"Yes, thank you, Doctor Ryan." He made another attempt to smile. It failed. "And how are you feeling?"

"Reasonably well, Your Highness. And how is your wife—excuse me, how is the Princess doing?"

The Prince's words did not come easily, and he had trouble looking up to Ryan from his chair. "We both regret that she could not come with me. She's still somewhat disturbed—in shock, I believe. She had a very ... bad experience."

Brains splattered over her face. I suppose you might call that a bad experience. "I saw. I understand that neither of you was physically injured, thank God. I presume your child also?"

"Yes, all thanks to you, Doctor."

Jack tried another one-armed shrug. The gesture didn't hurt so much this time. "Glad to help, sir—I just wish I hadn't got myself shot in the process." His attempt at levity died on his lips. He'd said the wrong thing in the wrong way. The Prince looked at Jack very curiously for a moment, but then his eyes

went flat again.

"We would all have been killed except for you, you know—and on behalf of my family and myself—well, thank you. It's not enough just to say that—" His Highness went on, then halted again and struggled to find a few more words. "But it's the best I can manage. I wasn't able to manage very much yesterday, come to that," he concluded, staring quietly at the foot of the bed.

Aha! Ryan thought. The Prince stood and turned to leave. *What do I do now?*

"Sir, why don't you sit down and let's talk this one over for a minute, okay?"

His Highness turned back. For a moment he looked as though he would say something, but the drawn face changed again and turned away.

"Your Highness, I really think ..." No effect. *I can't let him go out of here like this. Well, if* good *manners won't work*—Jack's voice became sharp.

"Hold it!" The Prince turned with a look of great surprise. *"Sit down, goddammit!"* Ryan pointed to the chair. *At least I have his attention now. I wonder if they can take a knighthood back....*

By this time the Prince flushed a bit. The color gave his face life that it had lacked. He wavered for a moment, then sat with reluctance and resignation.

"Now," Ryan said heatedly, "I think I know what's eating at you, sir. You feel bad because you didn't do a John Wayne number yesterday and handle those gunmen all by yourself, right?" The Prince didn't nod or make any other voluntary response, but a hurt expression around his eyes answered the question just as surely.

"Aw, crap!" Ryan snorted. In the corner, Tony Wilson went pale as a ghost. Ryan didn't blame him.

"You oughta have better sense ... sir," Ryan added hastily. "You've been through the service schools, right? You've qualified as a pilot, parachuted out of airplanes, and even had command of your own ship?" He got a nod. Time to step it up. "Then you've got no excuse, you damned well ought to have better sense than to think like that! You're not really that dumb, are you?"

"What exactly do you mean?" *A trace of anger,* Ryan thought. *Good.*

"Use your head. You've been trained to think this sort of thing out, haven't you? Let's critique the exercise. Examine what the tactical situation was yesterday. You were trapped in a stopped car with two or three bad guys outside holding automatic weapons. The car is armor-plated, but you're stuck. What can you do? The way I see it, you had three choices:

"One. You can just freeze, just sit there and wet your pants. Hell, that's what most normal people would do, caught by surprise like that. That's probably the normal reaction. But you didn't do that.

"Two. You can try to get out of the car and *do something,* right?"

"Yes, I should have."

"Wrong!" Ryan shook his head emphatically. "Sorry, sir, but that's not a real

good idea. The guy I tackled was waiting for you to do just that. That guy could have put a nine-millimeter slug in your head before you had both feet on the pavement. You look like you're in pretty good shape. You probably move pretty good—but ain't nobody yet been able to outrun a bullet, sir! That choice might have gotten you killed, and the rest of your family along with you.

"Three. Your last choice, you tough it out and pray the cavalry gets there in time. You know you're close to home. You know there's cops and troops around. So you know that time is on your side if you can survive for a couple of minutes. In the meantime you try to protect your family as best you can You get them down on the floor of the car and get overtop of them so the only way the terrorists can get them is to go through you first. And *that,* my friend, is what you did." Ryan paused for a moment to let him absorb this.

"You did *exactly* the right thing, dammit!" Ryan leaned forward until his shoulder pulled him back with a gasp. It wasn't all that much of a pain medication. "Jesus, this hurts. Look, sir, you were stuck out in the open—with a lousy set of alternatives. But you used your head and took the best one you had. From where I sit, you could not have done any better than you did. So there is nothing, repeat *nothing,* for you to feel bad about. And if you don't believe me, ask Wilson. He's a cop." The Prince turned his head.

The Anti-Terrorist Branch officer cleared his throat. "Excuse me, Your Royal Highness, but Doctor Ryan is quite correct. We were discussing this, this problem yesterday, and we reached precisely the same conclusion."

Ryan looked over to the cop. "How long did you fellows kick the idea around, Tony?"

"Perhaps ten minutes," Wilson answered.

"That's six *hundred* seconds, Your Highness. But you had to think and act in —what? Five? Maybe three? Not much time to make a life-and-death decision is it? Mister, I'd say you did damned well. All that training you've picked up along the line worked. And if you were evaluating someone else's performance instead of your own, you'd say the same thing, just like Tony and his friends did."

"But the press—"

"Oh, screw the press!" Ryan snapped back, wondering if he'd gone too far. "What do reporters know about anything? They don't *do* anything, for crying out loud, they just report what other people do. You can fly an airplane, you've jumped out of them—flying scares the hell out of me; I don't even want to think about jumping out of one—and commanded a ship. Plus you ride horses and keep trying to break your neck—and now, finally, you're a father, you got a kid of your own now, right? Isn't that enough to prove to the world that you've got balls? You're not some dumb kid, sir. You're a trained pro. Start acting like one."

Jack could see his mind going over what he'd just been told. His Highness was sitting a little straighter now. The smile that began to form was an austere

one, but at least it had some conviction behind it.

"I am not accustomed to being addressed so forcefully."

"So cut my head off." Ryan grinned. "You looked like you needed a little straightening out—but I had to get your attention first, didn't I? I'm not going to apologize, sir. Instead, why don't you look in that mirror over there. I bet the guy you see now looks better than the one who shaved this morning."

"You really believe what you said?"

"Of course. All you have to do is look at the situation from the outside, sir. The problem you had yesterday was tougher than any exercise I had to face at Quantico, but you gutted it out. Listen, I'll tell you a story.

"My first day at Quantico, first day of the officer's course. They line us up, and we meet our Drill Instructor, Gunnery Sergeant Willie King—humongous black guy, we called him Son of Kong. Anyway, he looks us up and down and says, 'Girls, I got some good news, and I got some bad news. The good news is, if you prove that you're good enough to get through this here course, you ain't got nothin' left to prove as long as you live.' And he waits for a couple of seconds. 'The bad news is, you gotta prove it to *me*!' "

"You were top in your class," the Prince said. He'd been briefed, too.

"I was third in that one. I tied for first in the Basic Officer's Course later on. Yeah, I did okay. That course was a gold-plated sonuvabitch. The only easy thing was sleeping—by the time your day was finished, falling asleep was easy enough. But, you know, Son of Kong was almost right.

"If you make it through Quantico, you know you've done something. After that there *was* only one more thing left for me to prove, and the Corps didn't have anything to do with that." Ryan paused for a moment. "Her name is Sally. Anyway, you and your family are alive, sir. Okay, I helped—but so did you. And if any reporter-expert says different, you still have the Tower of London, right? I remember that stuff in the press about your wife last year. Damn, if anybody'd talked that way about Cathy I'd have changed his voice for him."

"Changed his voice?" His Highness asked.

"The *hard* way!" Ryan laughed. "I guess that's a problem with being important—you can't shoot back. Too bad. People in that business could use some manners, and people in your business are entitled to some privacy, just like the rest of us."

"And what of your manners, Sir John?" A real smile now.

"Mea maxima culpa, my Lord Prince, you got me there."

"Still, we might not be here except for you."

"I couldn't just sit there and watch some people get murdered. If situations had been reversed, I'll bet you'd have done the same thing I did."

"You really think so?" His Highness was surprised.

"Sir, are you kidding? Anybody dumb enough to jump out of an airplane is

dumb enough to try anything."

The Prince stood and walked over to the mirror on the wall. Clearly he liked what he saw there. "Well," he murmured to the mirror. He turned back to voice his last self-doubt.

"And if you had been in my place?"

"I'd probably just've wet my pants," Ryan replied. "But you have an advantage over me, sir. You've thought about this problem for a few years, right? Hell, you practically grew up with it, and you've been through basic training—Royal Marines, too, maybe?"

"Yes, I have."

Ryan nodded. "Okay, so you had your options figured out beforehand, didn't you? They caught you by surprise, sure, but the training shows. You did all right. Honest. Sit back down, and maybe Tony can pour us some coffee."

Wilson did so, though he was clearly uneasy to be close to the heir. The Prince of Wales sipped at his cup while Ryan lit up one of Wilson's cigarettes. His Highness looked on disapprovingly.

"That's not good for you, you know," he pointed out.

Ryan just laughed. "Your Highness, since I arrived in this country, I nearly got run over by one of those two-story buses, I almost got my head blown off by a damned Maoist, then I nearly get myself shish-kabobed by one of your redcoats." Ryan waved the cigarette in the air. "This is the *safest* damned thing I've done since I got here! What a vacation this's turned out to be."

"You do have a point," the Prince admitted. "And quite a sense of humor, Doctor Ryan."

"I guess the valium—or whatever they're giving me—helps. And the name's Jack." He held out his hand. The Prince took it.

"I was able to meet your wife and daughter yesterday—you were unconscious at the time. I gather that your wife is an excellent physician. Your little daughter is quite wonderful."

"Thanks. How do you like being a daddy?"

"The first time you hold your newborn child ..."

"Yeah," Jack said. "Sir, that's what it's all about." He stopped talking abruptly.

Bingo, Ryan thought. *Afour-month-old baby. If they kidnap the Prince and Princess, well, no government can cave in to terrorism. The politicians and police have to have a contingency plan already set up for this, don't they? They'd take this town apart one brick at a time, but they wouldn't—couldn't—negotiate anything, and that was just too bad for the grown-ups, but a little baby ... damn, there's a bargaining chip! What kind of people would—*

"Bastards," Ryan whispered to himself. Wilson blanched, but the Prince suspected what Jack was thinking about.

“Excuse me?”

“They weren’t trying to kill you. Hell, I bet you weren’t even the real objective....” Ryan nodded slowly. He searched his mind for the data he’d seen on the ULA. There hadn’t been much—it hadn’t been his area of focus in any case—a few tidbits of shadowy intelligence reports, mixed with a lot of pure conjecture. “They didn’t want to kill you at all, I bet. And when you covered the wife and kid, you burned their plan ... maybe, or maybe you just—yeah, maybe you just threw them a curve, and that blew their timing a little bit.”

“What do you mean?” the Prince asked.

“Goddamned medications slow your brain down,” Ryan said mainly to himself. “Have the police told you what the terrorists were up to?”

His Highness sat upright in the chair. “I can’t—”

“You don’t have to,” Ryan cut him off. “Did they tell you that what you did definitely—*definitely*—saved all of you?”

“No, but—”

“Tony?”

“They told me you were a very clever chap, Jack,” Wilson said. “I’m afraid I can’t comment further. Your Royal Highness, Doctor Ryan may be correct in his assessment.”

“What assessment?” The Prince was puzzled.

Ryan explained. It only took a few minutes.

“How did you arrive at this conclusion, Jack?”

Ryan’s mind was still chuming through the hypothesis. “Sir, I’m an historian. My business is figuring things out. Before that I was a stockbroker—doing essentially the same thing. It’s not all that hard when you think about it. You look for apparent inconsistencies and then you try to figure out why they’re not really inconsistent.” He concluded, “It’s all speculation on my part, but I’m willing to bet that Tony’s colleagues are pursuing it.” Wilson didn’t say anything. He cleared his throat—which was answer enough.

The Prince looked deep into his coffee cup. His face was that of a man who had recovered from fear and shame. Now he contemplated cold anger at what might have been.

“Well, they’ve had their chance, haven’t they?”

“Yes, sir. I imagine if they ever try again, it’ll be a lot harder. Right, Tony?”

“I seriously doubt that they will ever try again,” Wilson replied. “We should develop some rather good intelligence from this incident. The ULA have stepped over an invisible line. Politically, success might have enhanced their position, but they didn’t succeed, did they? This will harm them, harm their ‘popular’ support. Some people who know them will now consider talking—not to us, you understand, but some of what they say will get to us in due course. They were outcasts before, they will be outcasts even more now.”

Will they learn from this? Ryan wondered. *If so, what will they have learned? There's a question.* Jack knew that it had only two possible answers, and that those answers were diametrically opposed. He made a mental note. He'd follow up on this when he got home. It wasn't a merely academic exercise now. He had a bullet hole in his shoulder to prove that.

The Prince rose to his feet. "You must excuse me, Jack. I'm afraid I have rather a full day ahead."

"Going back out, eh?"

"If I hide, they've won. I understand that fact better now than when I came in here. And I have something else to thank you for."

"You would have figured it out sooner or later. Better it should be sooner, don't you think?"

"We must see more of each other."

"I'd like that, sir. Afraid I'm stuck here for a while, though."

"We are traveling out of the country soon—the day after tomorrow. It's a state visit to New Zealand and the Solomon Islands. You may be gone before we get back."

"Is your wife up to it, Your Highness?"

"I think so. A change of scenery, the doctor said, is just the ticket. She had a very bad experience yesterday, but"—he smiled—"I think it was harder on me than on her."

I'll buy that, Ryan thought. *She's young, she'll bounce back, and at least she has something good to remember. Putting your body between your family and the bullets ought to firm up any relationship.* "Hey, she sure as hell knows you love her, sir."

"I do, you know," the Prince said seriously.

"It's the customary reason to get married, sir," Jack replied, "even for us common folk."

"You're a most irreverent chap, Jack."

"Sorry about that." Ryan grinned. So did the Prince.

"No, you're not." His Highness extended his hand. "Thank you, Sir John, for many things."

Ryan watched him leave with a brisk step and a straight back.

"Tony, you know the difference between him and me? I can say that I used to be a Marine, and that's enough. But that poor guy's got to prove it every damned day, to everybody he meets. I guess that's what you have to do when you're in the public eye all the time." Jack shook his head. "There's no way in hell they could pay me enough to take his job."

"He's born to it," Wilson said.

Ryan thought about that. "That's one difference between your country and

mine. You think people are born to something. We know that they have to grow into it. It's not the same thing, Tony."

"Well, you're part of it now, Jack."

"I think I should go." David Ashley looked at the telex in his hand. The disturbing thing was that he'd been requested by name. The PIRA knew who he was, and they knew that he was the Security Service executive on the case. *How the hell did they know* that*!*

"I agree," James Owens said. "If they're this anxious to talk with us, they might be anxious enough to tell us something useful. Of course, there is an element of risk. You could take someone with you."

Ashley thought about that one. There was always the chance that he'd be kidnapped, but ... The strange thing about the PIRA was that they did have a code of conduct. Within their own definitions, they were honorable. They assassinated their targets without remorse, but they wouldn't deal in drugs. Their bombs would kill children, but they'd never kidnapped one. Ashley shook his head.

"No, people from the Service have met with them before and there's never been a problem. I'll go alone." He turned for the door.

"Daddy!" Sally ran into the room and stopped cold at the side of the bed as she tried to figure a way to climb high enough to kiss her father. She grabbed the side rails and set one foot on the bedframe as if it were the monkey bars at her nursery school and sprang upward. Her diminutive frame bent over the edge of the mattress as she scrambled for a new foothold, and Ryan pulled her up.

"Hi, Daddy." Sally kissed him on the cheek.

"And how are you today?"

"Fine. What's that, Daddy?" She pointed.

"It's called a cast," Cathy Ryan answered. "I thought you had to go to the bathroom."

"Okay." Sally jumped back off the bed.

"I think it's in there," Jack said. "But I'm not sure."

"I thought so," Cathy said after surveying Jack's attachment to the bed. "Okay, come on, Sally."

A man had entered behind his family, Ryan saw. Late twenties, very athletic, and nicely dressed, of course. He was also rather good-looking, Jack reflected.

"Good afternoon, Doctor Ryan," he said. "I'm William Greville."

Jack made a guess. "What regiment?"

"Twenty-second, sir."

"Special Air Service?" Greville nodded, a proud but restrained smile on his lips.

"When you care enough to send the very best," Jack muttered. "Just you?"

"And a driver, Sergeant Michaelson, a policeman from the Diplomatic Protection Group."

"Why you and not another cop?"

"I understand your wife wishes to see a bit of the countryside. My father is something of an authority on various castles, and Her Majesty thought that your wife might wish to have an, ah, escort familiar with the sights. Father has dragged me through nearly every old house in England, you see."

"Escort" is the right word, Ryan thought, remembering what the "Special Air Service" really was. The only association they had with airplanes was jumping out of them—or blowing them up.

Greville went on. "I am also directed by my colonel to extend an invitation to our regimental mess."

Ryan gestured at his suspended arm. "Thanks, but that might have to wait a while."

"We understand. No matter, sir. Whenever you have the chance, we'll be delighted to have you in for dinner. We wanted to extend the invitation before the bootnecks, you see." Greville grinned. "What you did was more our sort of op, after all. Well, I had to extend the invitation. You want to see your family, not me."

"Take good care of them ... Lieutenant?"

"Captain," Greville corrected. "We will do that, sir." Ryan watched the young officer leave as Cathy and Sally emerged from the bathroom.

"What do you think of him?" Cathy asked.

"His daddy's a count, Daddy!" Sally announced. "He's nice. "

"What?"

"His father's Viscount-something-or-other," his wife explained as she walked over. "You look a lot better."

"So do you, babe." Jack craned his neck up to meet his wife's kiss.

"Jack, you've been smoking." Even before they'd gotten married, Cathy had bullied him into stopping.

Her damned sense of smell, Jack thought. "Be nice, I've had a hard day."

"Wimp!" she observed disgustedly.

Ryan looked up at the ceiling. *To the whole world I'm a hero, but I smoke a couple of cigarettes and to Cathy that makes me a*

wimp. He concluded that the world was not exactly overrun with justice.

"Gimme a break, babe."

"Where'd you get them?"

"I have a cop baby-sitting me in here—he had to go someplace a few minutes ago."

Cathy looked around for the offending cigarette pack so that she could squash it. Jack had it stashed under his pillow. Cathy Ryan sat down. Sally climbed into her lap.

"How do you feel?"

"I know it's there, but I can live with it. How'd you make out last night?"

"You know where we are now, right?"

"I heard."

"It's like being Cinderella." Caroline Muller Ryan, MD, grinned.

John Patrick Ryan, PhD, wiggled the fingers of his left hand. "I guess I'm the one who turned into the pumpkin. I guess you're going to make the trips we planned. Good."

"Sure you don't mind?"

"Half the reason for the vacation was to get you away from hospitals, Cathy, remember? No sense taking all the film home unused, is it?"

"It'd be a lot more fun with you."

Jack nodded. He'd looked forward to seeing the castles on the list, too. Like many Americans, Ryan could not have abided the English class system, but that didn't stop him from being fascinated with its trappings. *Or something like that,* he thought. His knighthood, he knew, might change that perspective if he allowed himself to dwell on it.

"Look on the bright side, babe. You've got a guide who can tell you everything you ever wanted to know about Lord Jones's castle on the coast of whatever. You'll have plenty of time for it, too."

"Yeah," she said, "the police said we'd be staying over a while longer than we planned. I'll have to talk to Professor Lewindowski about that." She shrugged. "They'll understand."

"How do you like the new place? Better than the hotel?"

"You're going to have to see—no, you'll have to *experience* it." She laughed. "I think hospitality is the national sport over here. They must teach it in the schools, and have quarterly exams. And guess who we're having dinner with tonight?"

"I don't have to guess."

"Jack, they're so *nice."*

"I noticed. Looks like you're really getting the VIP treatment."

"What's the Special Air Service—he's some kind of pilot?"

“Something like that,” Jack said diffidently. Cathy might feel uncomfortable sitting next to a man who had to be carrying a gun. And was trained to use it with as little compunction as a wolf might use his teeth. “You’re not asking how I feel.”

“I got hold of your chart on the way in,” Cathy explained.

“And?”

“You’re doing okay, Jack. I see you can move your fingers. I was worried about that.”

“How come?”

“The brachial plexus—it’s a nerve junction inside your shoulder. The bullet missed it by about an inch and a half. That’s why you can move your fingers. The way you were bleeding, I thought the brachial artery was cut, and that runs right next to the nerves. It would have put your arm out of business for good. But”—she smiled—“you lucked out. Just broken bones. They hurt but they heal.”

Doctors are so wonderfully objective, Ryan told himself, even the ones you marry. *Next thing, she’ll say the pain is good for me.*

“Nice thing about pain,” Cathy went on. “It tells you the nerves are working.”

Jack closed his eyes and shook his head. He opened them when he felt Cathy take his hand.

“Jack, I’m so proud of you.”

“Nice to be married to a hero?”

“You’ve always been a hero to me.”

“Really?” She’d never said *that* before. What was heroic about being an historian? Cathy didn’t know the other stuff he did, but that wasn’t especially heroic either.

“Ever since you told Daddy to—well, you know. Besides, I love you, remember?”

“I seem to recall a reminder of that the other day.”

Cathy made a face. “Better get your mind off that for a while. ”

“I know.” Ryan made a face of his own. “The patient must conserve his energy—or something. What ever happened to that theory about how a happy attitude speeds recovery?”

“That’s what I get for letting you read my journals. Patience, Jack.”

Nurse Kittiwake came in, saw the family, and made a quick exit.

“I’ll try to be patient,” Jack said, and looked longingly at the closing door.

“You turkey,” Cathy observed. “I know you better than that.”

She did, Jack knew. He couldn’t even make that threat work. *Oh, well*—

that's what you get for loving your wife.

Cathy stroked his face. "What did you shave with this morning, a rusty nail?"

"Yeah—I need my razor. Maybe my notes, too?"

"I'll bring them over or have somebody do it." She looked up when Wilson came back in.

"Tony, this is Cathy, my wife, and Sally, my daughter. Cathy, this is Tony Wilson. He's the cop who's baby-sitting me."

"Didn't I see you last night?" Cathy never forgot a face—so far as Jack could tell, she never forgot much of anything.

"Possibly, but we didn't speak—rather a busy time for all of us. You are well, Lady Ryan?"

"Excuse me?" Cathy asked. "Lady Ryan?"

"They didn't tell you?" Jack chuckled.

"Tell me what?"

Jack explained. "How do you like being married to a knight?"

"Does that mean you have to have a horse, Daddy?" Sally asked hopefully. "Can I ride it?"

"Is it legal, Jack?"

"They told me that the Prime Minister and the President would discuss it today."

"My God," Lady Ryan said quietly. After a moment, she started smiling.

"Stick with me, kid." Jack laughed.

"What about the horse, Daddy!" Sally insisted.

"I don't know yet. We'll see." He yawned. The only practical use Ryan acknowledged for horses was running at tracks—or maybe tax shelters. *Well, I already have a sword,* he told himself.

"I think Daddy needs a nap," Cathy observed. "And I have to buy something for dinner tonight."

"Oh, God!" Ryan groaned. "A whole new wardrobe."

Cathy grinned. "Whose fault is that, Sir John?"

They met at Flanagan's Steakhouse on O'Connell Street in Dublin. It was a well-regarded establishment whose tourist trade occasionally suffered from being too close to a McDonald's. Ashley was nursing a whiskey when the second man joined him. A third and fourth took a booth across the room and watched. Ashley had come alone. This wasn't the first such meeting, and Dublin was recognized—most of the time—as neutral ground. The two men on the other side of the room were to keep a watch for members of the Garda, the

Republic's police force.

"Welcome to Dublin, Mr. Ashley," said the representative of the Provisional Wing of the Irish Republican Army.

"Thank you, Mr. Murphy," the counterintelligence officer answered. "The photograph we have in the file doesn't do you justice."

"Young and foolish, I was. And very vain. I didn't shave very much then," Murphy explained. He picked up the menu that had been waiting for him. "The beef here is excellent, and the vegetables are always fresh. This place is full of bloody tourists in the summer—those who don't want French fries—driving prices up as they always do. Thank God they're all back home in America now, leaving so much money behind in this poor country."

"What information do you have for us?"

"Information?"

"You asked for the meeting, Mr. Murphy," Ashley pointed out.

"The purpose of the meeting is to assure you that we had no part in that bloody fiasco yesterday."

"I could have read that in the papers—I did, in fact."

"It was felt that a more personal communique was in order, Mr. Ashley."

"Why should we believe you?" Ashley asked, sipping at his whiskey. Both men kept their voices low and level, though neither man had the slightest doubt as to what they thought of each other.

"Because we are not as crazy as that," Murphy replied. The waiter came, and both men ordered. Ashley chose the wine, a promising Bordeaux. The meal was on his expense account. He was only forty minutes off the flight from London's Gatwick airport. The request for a meeting had been made before dawn in a telephone call to the British Ambassador in Dublin.

"Is that a fact?" Ashley said after the waiter left, staring into the cold blue eyes across the table.

"The Royal Family are strictly off limits. As marvelous a political target as they all are"—Murphy smiled—"we've known for some time that an attack on them would be counterproductive."

"Really?" Ashley pronounced the word as only an Englishman can do it. Murphy flushed angrily at this most elegant of insults.

"Mr. Ashley, we are enemies. I would as soon kill you as have dinner with you. But even enemies can negotiate, can't they, now?"

"Go on."

"We had no part of it. You have my word."

"Your word as a Marxist-Leninist?" Ashley inquired with a smile.

"You are very good at provoking people, Mr. Ashley." Murphy ventured his own smile. "But not today. I am here on a mission of peace and

understanding."

Ashley nearly laughed out loud, but caught himself and grinned into his drink.

"Mr. Murphy, I would not shed a single tear if our lads were to catch up with you, but you are a worthy adversary, I'll say that. And a charming bastard."

Ah, the English sense of fair play, Murphy reflected. *That's why we'll win eventually,* Mr. Ashley.

No, you won't. Ashley had seen that look before.

"How can I make you believe me?" Murphy asked reasonably.

"Names and addresses," Ashley answered quietly.

"No. We cannot do that and you know it."

"If you wish to establish some sort of quid pro quo, that's how you must go about it."

Murphy sighed. "Surely you know how we are organized. Do you think we can punch up a bloody computer command and print out our roster? We're not even sure ourselves who they are. Some men, they just drop out. Many come south and simply vanish, more afraid of us than of you, they are—and with reason," Murphy added. "The one you have alive, Sean Miller—we've never even heard the name."

"And Kevin O'Donnell?"

"Yes, he's probably the leader. He dropped off the earth four years ago, as you well know, after—ah, you know the story as well as I."

Kevin Joseph O'Donnell, Ashley reminded himself. Thirty-four now. Six feet, one hundred sixty pounds, unmarried—this data was old and therefore suspect. The all-time Provo champion at "own-goals." Kevin had been the most ruthless chief of security the Provos had ever had, thrown out after it had been proven that he'd used his power as counterintelligence boss to purge the Organization of political elements he disapproved of. What was the figure—ten, fifteen solid members that he'd had killed or maimed before the Brigade Commander'd found him out? The amazing thing, Ashley thought, was that he'd escaped alive at all. But Murphy was wrong on one thing, Ashley didn't know what had finally tipped the Brigade that O'Donnell was outlaw.

"I fail to see why you feel the urge to protect him and his group." He knew the reason, but why not prod the man when he had the chance?

"And if we turn 'grass,' what becomes of the Organization?" Murphy asked.

"Not my problem, Mr. Murphy, but I do see your point. Still and all, if you want us to believe you—"

"Mr. Ashley, you demonstrate the basis of the entire problem we have, don't you? Had your country ever dealt with Ireland in mutual good faith, surely we would not be here now, would we?"

The intelligence officer reflected on that. It took no more than a couple of seconds, so many times had he examined the historical basis of the Troubles. Some deliberate policy acts, mixed with historical accidents—who could have known that the onset of the crisis that erupted into World War I would prevent a solution to the issue of "Home [or "Rome"] Rule," that the Conservative Party of the time would use this issue as a hammer that would eventually crush the Liberal Party—and who was there to blame now? They were all dead and forgotten, except by hard-core academics who knew that their studies mattered for nothing. It was far too late for that. *Is there a way out of this bloody quagmire?* he wondered. Ashley shook his head. That was not his brief. That was something for politicians. The same sort, he reminded himself, who'd built the Troubles, one small brick at a time.

"I'll tell you this much, Mr. Ashley—" The waiter showed up with dinner. It was amazing how quick the service was here. The waiter uncorked the wine with a flourish, allowing Ashley to smell the cork and sample a splash in his glass. The Englishman was surprised at the quality of the restaurant's cellar.

"This much you will tell me ..." Ashley said after the waiter left.

"They get very good information. So good, you would not believe it. And their information comes from your side of the Irish Sea, Mr. Ashley. We don't know who, and we don't know how. The lad who found out died, four years ago, you see." Murphy sampled the broccoli. "There, I told you the vegetables were fresh. "

"Four years?"

Murphy looked up. "You don't know the story, then? That is a surprise, Mr. Ashley. Yes. His name was Mickey Baird. He worked closely with Kevin. He's the lad who—well, you can guess. He was talking with me over a jar in Derry and said that Kevin had a bloody good new intelligence source. Next day he was dead. The day after, Kevin managed to escape us by an hour. We haven't seen him since. If we find Kevin again, Mr. Ashley, we'll do your work for you, and leave the body for your SAS assassins to collect. Would that be fair enough, now? We cannot exactly tout to the enemy, but he's on our list, too, and if you manage to find the lad, and you don't wish to bring him in yourselves, we'll handle the job for you—assuming, of course, that you don't interfere with the lads who do the work. Can we agree on that?"

"I'll pass that along," Ashley said. "If I could approve it myself, I would. Mr. Murphy, I think we can believe you on this."

"Thank you, Mr. Ashley. That wasn't so painful, was it?" Dinner was excellent.

4

Players

Ryan tried to blink away the blue dots that swirled around his eyes as the television crews set up their own lights. Why the newspaper photographers couldn't wait for the powerful TV lights, he didn't know, and didn't bother asking. Everyone was kind enough to ask how he felt—but nothing short of respiratory arrest would have gotten them out of the room.

It could have been worse, of course. Dr. Scott had told the newspeople rather forcefully that his patient needed rest to recover speedily, and Nurse Kittiwake was there to glower at the intruders. So press access to Ryan was being limited to no more than the number of people who would fit into his room. This included the TV crew. It was the best sort of bargain Jack could get. The cameramen and sound technicians took up space that would otherwise be occupied by more inquisitorial reporters.

The morning papers—Ryan had been through the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*—had carried reports that Ryan was a former (or current) employee of the Central Intelligence Agency, something that was technically not true, and that Jack had not expected to become public in any case. He found himself remembering what the people at Langley said about leaks, and how pleased they'd been with his offhand invention of the Canary Trap. *A pity they couldn't use it in my case,* Ryan told himself wryly. *I really need this complication to my life, don't I? For crying out loud, I turned their offer down. Sort of.*

"All ready here," the lighting technician said. A moment later he proved this was true by turning on the three klieg lights that brought tears to Jack's squinted eyes.

"They are awfully bright, aren't they?" a reporter sympathized, while the still photographers continued to snap-and-whir away with their strobe-equipped Nikons.

"You might say that," Jack replied. A two-headed mike was clipped to his robe.

"Say something, will you?" the sound man asked.

"And how are you enjoying your first trip to London, Doctor Ryan?"

"Well, I better not hear any complaints about how American tourists are staying away due to panic over the terrorism problem!" Ryan grinned. *You jerk.*

"Indeed," the reporter laughed. "Okay?"

The cameraman and sound man pronounced themselves ready.

Ryan sipped at his tea and made certain that the ashtray was out of sight. One print journalist shared a joke with a colleague. A TV correspondent from NBC was there, along with the London correspondent of the *Washington Post,* but all the others were British. Everything would be pooled with the rest of the media, it had been agreed. There just wasn't room here for a proper press conference. The camera started rolling tape.

They ran through the usual questions. The camera turned to linger on his arm, hanging from its overhead rack. They'd run that shot with the voice-over of Jack's story on when he was shot, he was sure. Nothing like a little drama, as he'd already been told. He wiggled his fingers for the camera.

"Doctor Ryan, there are reports in the American and British press that you are an employee of the Central Intelligence Agency."

"I read that this morning. It was as much a surprise to me as it was to anyone else." Ryan smiled. "Somebody made a mistake. I'm not good-looking enough to be a spy."

"So you deny that report?" asked the *Daily Mirror.*

"Correct. It's just not true. I teach history at the Naval Academy, in Annapolis. That ought to be easy enough to check out. I just gave an exam last week. You can ask my students." Jack waved his left hand at the camera again.

"The report comes from some highly placed sources," observed the *Post.*

"If you read a little history, you'll see that highly placed folks have been known to make mistakes. I think that's what happened here. I teach. I write books. I lecture—okay, I did give a lecture at CIA once, but that was just a repeat of one I delivered at the Naval War College and one other symposium. It wasn't even classified. Maybe that's where the report comes from. Like I said, check it out. My office is in Leahy Hall, at the Naval Academy. I think somebody just goofed." *Somebody goofed, all right.* "I can get you guys a copy of the lecture. It's no big deal."

"How do you like being a public figure, now?" one of the Brit TV people asked.

Thanks for changing the subject. "I think I can live without it. I'm not a movie star, either—again, not good-looking enough."

"You're far too modest, Doctor Ryan," a female reporter observed.

"Please be careful how you say that. My wife will probably see this." There was general laughter. "I suppose I'm good-looking enough for her. That's enough. With all due respect, ladies and gentlemen, I'll be perfectly glad to descend back into obscurity."

"Do you think that likely?"

"That depends on how lucky I am, ma'am. And on whether you folks will let me."

"What do you think we should do with the terrorist, Sean Miller?" the *Times* asked.

"That's for a judge and jury to decide. You don't need me for that. "

"Do you think we should have capital punishment?"

"We have it where I live. For your country, that is a question for your elected representatives. We both live in democracies, don't we? The people you elect are supposed to do what the voters ask them to do." *Not that it always works that way, but that's the theory....*

"So you support the idea?" the *Times* persisted.

"In appropriate cases, subject to strict judicial review, yes. Now you're going to ask me about this case, right? It's a moot point. Anyway, I'm no expert on criminal justice. My dad was a cop but I'm just a historian."

"And what of your perspective, as an Irish-American, on the Troubles?" the *Telegraph* wanted to know.

"We have enough problems of our own in America without having to borrow yours."

"So you say we should solve it, then?"

"What do you think? Isn't that what problems are for?"

"Surely you have a suggestion. Most Americans do."

"I think I teach history. I'll let other people make it. It's like being a reporter." Ryan smiled. "I get to criticize people long after they make their decisions. That doesn't mean I know what to do today."

"But you knew what to do on Tuesday," the *Times* pointed out. Ryan shrugged.

"Yeah, I guess I did," Ryan said on the television screen.

"You clever bastard," Kevin Joseph O'Donnell muttered into a glass of dark Guinness beer. His base of operations was much farther from the border than any might have suspected. Ireland is a small country, and distances are but relative things—particularly to those with all the resources they need. His former colleagues in the PIRA had extensive safehouses along the border, convenient to a quick trip across from either direction. Not for O'Donnell. There were numerous practical reasons. The Brits had their informers and intelligence people there, always creeping about—and the SAS raiders, who were not averse to a quick snatch—or a quiet kill—of persons who had made the mistake of becoming too well known. The border could be a convenience to either side. A more serious threat was the PIRA itself, which also watched the border closely. His face, altered as it was with some minor surgery and a change in hair color, might still be recognizable to a former colleague. But not here. And the border wasn't all that far a drive in a country barely three hundred miles long.

He turned away from the Sony television and gazed out the leaded-glass windows to the darkness of the sea. He saw the running lights of a car ferry inbound from Le Havre. The view was always a fine one. Even in the limited visibility of an ocean storm, one could savor the fundamental force of nature as the gray waves battered the rocky cliff. Now, the clear, cold air gave him a view to the star-defined horizon, and he spied another merchant ship heading eastward for an unknown port. It pleased O'Donnell that this stately house on the headlands had once belonged to a British lord. It pleased him more that he'd been able to purchase it through a dummy corporation; that there were few questions when cash and a reputable solicitor were involved. So vulnerable this society—all societies were when you had the proper resources ... and a competent tailor. So shallow they were. So lacking in political awareness. *One must know who one's enemies are,* O'Donnell told himself at least ten times every day. Not a liberal "democratic" society, though. Enemies were people to be dealt with, compromised with, to be civilized, brought into the fold, co-opted.

Fools, self-destructive, ignorant fools who earned their own destruction.

Someday they would all disappear, just as one of those ships slid beneath the horizon. History was a science, an inevitable process. O'Donnell was sure of that.

He turned again to stare into the fire burning under the wide, stone mantel. There had once been stag heads hanging over it, perhaps the lord's favorite fowling piece—from Purdey's, to be sure. And a painting or two. Of horses, O'Donnell was sure—they had to be paintings of horses. The country gentleman who had built this house, he mused, would have been someone who'd been given everything he had. No ideology would have intruded in his empty, useless head. He would have sat in a chair very like this one and sipped his malt whiskey and stared into the fire—his favorite dog at his feet—while he chatted about the day's hunting with a neighbor and planned the hunting for the morrow. *Will it be birds again, or fox, Bertie? Haven't had a goodfox hunt in weeks, time we did it again, don't you think?* Or something like that, he was sure. O'Donnell wondered if there was a seasonal aspect to it, or had the lord just done whatever suited his mood. The current owner of the country house never hunted animals. What was the point of killing something that could not harm you or your cause, something that had no ideology? Besides, that was something the Brits did, something the local gentry still did. He didn't hunt the local Irish gentry, they weren't worth his contempt, much less his action. At least, not yet. *You don't hate trees,* he told himself. *You ignore the things until you have to cut them down.* He turned back to the television.

That Ryan fellow was still there, he saw, talking amiably with the press idiots. Bloody hero. *Why did you stick your nose in where it doesn't belong?* Reflex, sounds like, O'Donnell judged. *Bloody meddling fool. Don't even know what's going on, do you? None of you do.*

Americans. The Provo fools still like to talk it up with your kind, telling their lies and pretending that they represent Ireland. What do you Yanks know about anything? *Oh, but we can't afford to offend the Americans,* the Provos still

said. Bloody Americans, with all their money and all their arrogance, all their ideas on right and wrong, their childish vision of Irish destiny. Like children dressed up for First Communion. So pure. So naive. So useless with their trickle of money—for all that the Brits complained about NORAID, O'Donnell knew that the PIRA had not netted a million dollars from America in the past three years. All the Americans knew of Ireland came from a few movies, some half-remembered songs for St. Paddy's Day, and the occasional bottle of whiskey. What did they know of life in Ulster, of the imperialist oppression, the way all Ireland was still enslaved to the decaying British Empire, which was, in turn, enslaved to the American one? What did they know about anything? *But we can't offend the Americans.* The leader of the ULA finished off his beer and set it on the end table.

The Cause didn't require much, not really. A clear ideological objective. A few good men. Friends, the right friends, with access to the right resources. That was all. Why clutter things up with bloody Americans? And a public political wing—Sinn Fein electing people to Parliament, what rubbish! They were waiting, hoping to be co-opted by the Brit imperialists. Valuable political targets declared off-limits. And people wondered why the Provos were getting nowhere. Their ideology was bankrupt, and there were too many people in the Brigade. When the Brits caught some, a few were bound to turn tout and inform on their comrades. The kind of commitment needed for this sort of job demanded an elite few. O'Donnell had that, all right. *And you need to have the right plan,* he told himself with a wispy smile. O'Donnell had his plan. This Ryan fellow hadn't changed that, he reminded himself.

"Bastard's bloody pleased with himself, isn't he?"

O'Donnell turned to see a fresh bottle of Guinness offered. He took it and refilled his glass. "Sean should have watched his back. Then this bloody hero would be a corpse." *And the mission would have been successful. Damn!*

"We can still do something about that, sir."

O'Donnell shook his head. "We do not waste our energy on the insignificant. The Provos have been doing that for ten years and look where it has gotten them."

"What if he is CIA? What if we've been infiltrated and he was there—"

"Don't be a bloody fool," O'Donnell snapped. "If they'd been tipped, every peeler in London would have been there in plain clothes waiting for us." *And I would have known beforehand,* he didn't say. Only one other member of the Organization knew of his source, and he was in London. "It was luck, good for them, bad for us. Just luck. We were lucky in your case, weren't we, Michael?" Like any Irishman he still believed in luck. Ideology would never change that.

The younger man thought of his eighteen months in the H-Blocks at Long Kesh prison, and was silent. O'Donnell shrugged at the television as the news program changed to another story. Luck. That was all. Some monied Yank with too long a nose who'd gotten very lucky. Any random event, like a punctured tire, a defective radio battery, or a sudden rainstorm, could have made the operation fail, too. And his advantage over the other side was that

they had to be lucky all the time. O'Donnell only had to be lucky once. He considered what he had just seen on the television and decided that Ryan wasn't worth the effort.

Mustn't offend the Americans, he thought to himself again, this *time with surprise. Why? Aren't they the enemy, too? Patrick, me boy, now you're thinking like those idiots in the PIRA. Patience is the most important quality in the true revolutionary. One must wait for the proper moment—and then strike decisively.*

He waited for his next intelligence report.

The rare book shop was in the Burlington Arcade, a century-old promenade of shops off the most fashionable part of Piccadilly. It was sandwiched between one of London's custom tailors—this one catered mainly to the tourists who used the arcade to shelter from the elements—and a jeweler. It had the sort of smell that draws bibliophiles as surely as the scent of nectar draws a bee, the musty, dusty odor of dried-out paper and leather binding. The shop's owner-operator was contrastingly young, dressed in a suit whose shoulders were sprinkled with dust. He started every day by running a feather duster over the shelves, and the books were ever exuding new quantities of it. He had grown to like it. The store had an ambience that he dearly loved. The store did a small but lucrative volume of business, depending less on tourists than on a discreet number of regular customers from the upper reaches of London society. The owner, a Mr. Dennis Cooley, traveled a great deal, often flying out on short notice to participate in an auction of some deceased gentleman's library, leaving the shop to the custody of a young lady who would have been quite pretty if she'd worked at it a little harder. Beatrix was off today.

Mr. Cooley had an ancient teak desk in keeping with the rest of the shop's motif, and even a cushionless swivel chair to prove to the customers that nothing in the shop was modern. Even the bookkeeping was done by hand. No electronic calculators here. A battered ledger book dating back to the 1930s listed thousands of sales, and the shop's book catalog was made of simple filing cards in small wooden boxes, one set listing books by title, and another by author. All writing was done with a gold-nibbed fountain pen. A no-smoking sign was the only modem touch. The smell of tobacco might have ruined the shop's unique aroma. The store's stationery bore the "by appointment to" crests of four Royal Family members. The arcade was but a ten-minute uphill walk from Buckingham Palace. The glass door had a hundred-year-old silver bell hanging on the top of the frame. It rang.

"Good morning, Mr. Cooley."

"And to you, sir," Dennis answered one of his regulars as he stood. He had an accent so neutral that his customers had him pegged as a native of three different regions. "I have the first-edition Defoe. The one you called about earlier this week. Just came in yesterday."

"Is this the one from that collection in Cork you spoke about?"

“No, sir. I believe it’s originally from the estate of Sir John Claggett, near Swaffham Prior. I found it at Hawstead’s in Cambridge. ”

“A first edition?”

“Most certainly, sir.” The book dealer did not react noticeably. The code phrase was both constant and changing. Cooley made frequent trips to Ireland, both north and south, to purchase books from the estates of deceased collectors or from dealers in the country. When the customer mentioned any county in the Irish Republic, he indicated the destination for his information. When he questioned the edition of the book, he also indicated its importance. Cooley pulled the book off the shelf and set it on his desk. The customer opened it with care, running his finger down the title page.

“In an age of paperbacks and half-bound books. ...”

“Indeed.” Cooley nodded. Both men’s love for the art of bookbinding was genuine. Any good cover becomes more real than its builders expect. “The leather is in remarkable shape.” His visitor grunted agreement.

“I must have it. How much?”

The dealer didn’t answer. Instead Cooley removed the card from the box and handed it to his customer. He gave the card only a cursory look.

“Done.” The customer sat down in the store’s only other chair and opened his briefcase. “I have another job for you. This is an early copy of *The Vicar of Wakefield.* I found it last month at a little shop in Cornwall.” He handed the book over. Cooley needed only a single look at its condition.

“Scandalous. ”

“Can your chap restore it?”

“I don’t know. ...” The leather was cracked, some of the pages had been dog-eared, and the binding was frayed almost to nonexistence.

“I’m afraid the attic in which they found it had a leaky roof,” the customer said casually.

“Oh?” *Is the information that important?* Cooley looked up. “A tragic waste.”

“How else can you explain it?” The man shrugged.

“I’ll see what I can do. He’s not a miracle worker, you know.” *Is it that important?*

“I understand. Still, the best you can arrange.” *Yes, it’s that* important.

“Of course, sir.” Cooley opened his desk drawer and withdrew the cashbox.

This customer always paid cash. Of course. He removed the wallet from his suitcoat and counted out the fifty-pound notes. Cooley checked the amount, then placed the book in a stout cardboard box, which he tied with string. No plastic bags for this shop. Seller and buyer shook hands. The transfer was complete. The customer walked south toward Piccadilly, then turned right, heading west toward Green Park and downhill to the Palace.

Cooley took the envelope that had been hidden in the book and tucked it

away in a drawer. He finished making his ledger entry, then called his travel agent to book a flight to Cork, where he would meet a fellow dealer in rare books and have lunch at the Old Bridge restaurant before catching a flight home. Beatrix would have to manage the shop tomorrow. It did not occur to him to open the envelope. That was not his job. The less he knew, the less was vulnerable if he were caught. Cooley had been trained by professionals, and the first rule pounded into his head had been *need-to*-know. He ran the intelligence operation, and he needed to know how to do that. He didn't always need to know what specific information he gathered.

"Hello, Doctor Ryan." It was an American voice, with a South Bay Boston accent that Jack remembered from his college days. It sounded good. The man was in his forties, a wiry, athletic frame, with thinning black hair. He had a flower box tucked under his arm. Whoever he was, the cop outside had opened the door for him.

"Howdy. Who might you be?"

"Dan Murray. I'm the Legal Attaché at the embassy. FBI," he explained. "Sorry I couldn't get down sooner, but things have been a little busy." Murray showed his ID to the cop sitting in with Ryan—Tony Wilson was off duty. The cop excused himself. Murray took his seat.

"Lookin' good, ace."

"You could have left the flowers at the main desk." Ryan gestured around the room. Despite all his efforts to spread the flowers about, he could barely see the walls for all the roses.

"Yeah, I figured that. How's the grub?"

"Hospital food is hospital food."

"Figured that, too." Murray removed the red ribbon and opened the box. "How does a Whopper and fries grab you? You have a choice of vanilla or chocolate shakes."

Jack laughed—and grabbed.

"I've been over here three years," Murray said. "Every so often I have to hit the fast-food joints to remind myself where I come from. You can get tired of lamb. The local beer's pretty good, though. I'd have brought a few of those but—well, you know."

"You just made a friend for life, Mr. Murray, even without the beer. "

"Dan."

"Jack." Ryan was tempted to wolf down the burger for fear of having a nurse come through the door and throw an immediate institutional fit. *No,* he decided, *I'll enjoy this one.* He selected the vanilla shake. "The local guys say you broke records identifying me."

"No big deal." Murray poked a straw into the chocolate one. "By the way, I bring you greetings from the Ambassador—he wanted to come over, but they

have a big-time party for later tonight. And my friends down the hall send their regards, too."

"Who down the hall?"

"The people you have never worked for." The FBI agent raised his eyebrows.

"Oh." Jack swallowed a few fries. "Who the hell broke that story?"

"Washington. Some reporter was having lunch with somebody's aide—doesn't really matter whose, does it? They all talk too much. Evidently he remembered your name in the back of the final report and couldn't keep his trap shut. Apologies from Langley, they told me to tell you. I saw the TV stuff. You dodged that pretty good."

"I told the truth—barely. All my checks came through Mitre Corporation. Some sort of bookkeeping thing, and Mitre had the consulting contract."

"I understand all your time was at Langley, though."

"Yeah, a little cubbyhole on the third floor with a desk, a computer terminal, and a scratchpad. Ever been there?"

Murray smiled. "Once or twice. I'm in the terrorism business, too. The Bureau has a much nicer decorator. Helps to have a PR department, don't you know?" Murray affected a caricatured London accent. "I saw a copy of the report. Nice work. How much of it did you do?"

"Most. It wasn't all that hard. I just came up with a new angle to look at it from."

"It's been passed along to the Brits—I mean, it came over here two months ago for the Secret Intelligence Service. I understand they liked it."

"So their cops know."

"I'm not sure—well, you can probably assume they do now. Owens is cleared all the way on this stuff."

"And so's Ashley."

"He's a little on the snotty side, but he's damned smart. He's 'Five.' "

"What?" Ryan didn't know that one.

"He's in MI-5, the Security Service. We just call it Five. Has a nice insider feel that way." Murray chuckled.

"I figured him for something like that. The other two started as street cops. It shows."

"It struck a few people as slightly curious—the guy who wrote *Agents and Agencies* gets stuck in the middle of a terrorist op. That's why Ashley showed up." Murray shook his head. "You wouldn't believe all the coincidences you run into in my business. Like you and me."

"I know you come from New England—oh, don't tell me. Boston College?"

"Hey, I always wanted to be an FBI agent. It was either BC or Holy Cross, right?" Murray grinned. That in-house FBI joke went back two generations,

and was not without a few grains of truth. Ryan leaned back and sucked the shake up the straw. It tasted wonderful.

"How much do we know about these ULA guys?" Jack asked. "I never saw very much at Langley."

"Not a hell of a lot. The boss-man's a chap named Kevin O'Donnell. He used to be in the PIRA. He started throwing rocks in the streets and supposedly worked his way up to head counterintelligence man. The Provos are pretty good at that. Have to be. The Brits are always working to infiltrate the Organization. The word is that he got a little carried away cleansing the ranks, and barely managed to skip out before they gave him Excedrin Headache number three-five-seven. Just plain disappeared and hasn't been spotted since. A few sketchy reports, like maybe he spent some time in Libya, like maybe he's back in Ulster with a new face, like maybe he has a lot of money—want to guess where from?—to throw around. All we know for sure is that he's one malignant son of a bitch.

"His organization?" Murray set the milkshake down. "It's gotta be small, probably less than thirty. We think he had part of the breakout from Long Kesh last summer. Eleven hard-core Provos got out. The RUC bagged one of 'em two days later and he said that six of the eleven went south, probably to Kevin's outfit. He was a little pissed by that. They were supposed to come back to the PIRA fold, but somebody convinced them to try something different. Some very bad boys—they had a total of fifteen murders among them. The one you killed is the only one to show up since. "

"Are they that good?" Ryan asked.

"Hey, the PIRA are the best terrorists in the world, unless you count those bastards in Lebanon, and those are mostly family groups. Hell of a way to describe them, isn't it? But they are the best. Well organized, well trained, and they *believe,* if you know what I mean. They really care about what they're doing. The level of commitment these characters have to the Cause is something you have to see to believe."

"You've been in on it?"

"Some. I've been able to sit in on interrogations—the other side of the two-way mirror, I mean. One of these guys wouldn't talk—wouldn't even give 'em his name!—for a week. Just sat there like a sphinx. Hey, I've chased after bank robbers, kidnappers, mob guys, spies, you name it. These fellows are real pros—and that's the PIRA, maybe five hundred real members, not even as big as a New York Mafia family, and the RUC—that's the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the local cops—is lucky to convict a handful in a year. They have a law of *omertà* up there that would impress the old-time Sicilians. But at least the cops have a handle on who the bastards are. The ULA—we got a couple of names, a few pictures, and that's it. It's almost like the Islamic Jihad bums. You only know them from what they do."

"What do they do?" Ryan asked.

"They seem to specialize in high-risk, high-profile operations. It took over a

year to confirm that they exist at all; we thought they were a special-action group of the PIRA. They're an anomaly within the terrorist community. They don't make press releases, they don't take public credit for what they do. They go for the big-time stuff and they cover their tracks like you wouldn't believe. It takes resources to do that. Somebody is bankrolling them in a pretty big way. They've been identified for nine jobs we're sure of, maybe two others. They've only had three operations go bad—quite a track record. They missed killing a judge in Londonderry because the RPG round was a dud—it still took his body-guard out. They tried to hit a police barracks last February. Somebody saw them setting up and phoned in—but the bastards must have been monitoring the police radio. They skipped before the cavalry arrived. The cops found an eighty-two-millimeter mortar and a box of rounds—high-explosive and white phosphorus, to be exact. And you got in the way of the last one.

"These suckers are getting pretty bold," Murray said. "On the other hand, we got one now."

"We?" Ryan said curiously. "It's not our fight."

"We're talking terrorists, Jack. Everybody wants them. We swap information back and forth with the Yard every day. Anyway, the guy they have in the can right now, they'll keep talking at him. They have a hook on this one. The ULA is an outcast outfit. He is going to be a pariah and he knows it. His colleagues from PIRA and INLA won't circle wagons around him. He'll go to a maximum-security prison, probably to one on the Isle of Wight, populated with some real bad boys. Not all of them are political types, and the ordinary robbers.and murderers will probably—well, it's funny how patriotic these guys are. Spies, for example, have about as much fun in the joint as child molesters. This guy went after the Royal Family, the one thing over here that everybody loves. We're talking some serious hard time with this kid. You think the guards are going to bust their ass looking out for his well-being? He's going to learn a whole new sport. It's called *survival.* After he has a taste of it, people will talk to him. Sooner or later that kid's going to have to decide just how committed he is. He just might break down a little. Some have. That's what we play for, anyway. The bad guys have the initiative, we have organization and procedures. If they make a mistake, give us an opportunity, we can act on it."

Ryan nodded. "Yeah, it's all intelligence."

"That's right. Without the right information we're crippled. All we can do is plod along and hope for a break. But give us one solid fact and we'll bring the whole friggin' world down on 'em. It's like taking down a brick wall. The hard part's getting that first brick loose."

"And where do they get their information?"

"They told me you tumbled to that," Murray observed with a smile.

"I don't think it was a chance encounter. Somebody had to tip them. They hit a moving target making an unscheduled trip."

"How the hell did you know that?" the agent demanded.

"Doesn't matter, does it? People talk. Who knew that they were coming in?"

"That is being looked at. The interesting thing is what they were coming in for. Of course, that could just be a coincidence. The Prince gets briefed on political and national security stuff, same as the Queen does. Something happened with the Irish situation, negotiations between London and Dublin. He was coming in for the briefing. All I can tell you."

"Hey, if you checked me out, you know how I'm cleared," Ryan sniffed.

Murray grinned. "Nice try, ace. If you weren't cleared TS, I wouldn't have told you this much. We're not privy to it yet anyway. Like I said, it might just have been a coincidence, but you guessed right on the important part. It was an unscheduled trip and somebody got the word out for the ambush. Only way it could have happened. You will consider that classified information, Doctor Ryan. It doesn't go past that door." Murray was affable. He was also very serious about his job.

Jack nodded agreement. "No problem. It was a kidnap, too, wasn't it?"

The FBI agent grimaced and shook his head. "I've handled about a half-dozen kidnappings and closed every case with a conviction. We only lost one hostage—they killed that kid the first day. Those two were executed. I watched," Murray said coldly. "Kidnapping is a high-risk crime all the way down the line. They have to be at a specific place to get their money—that's usually what gets 'em caught. We can track people like you wouldn't believe, then bring in the cavalry hard and fast. In this case ... we're talking some impressive bargaining chips, and there would not be a money transfer—the public release of some 'political' prisoners is the obvious objective. The evidence does lean that way, except that these characters have never done one of those. It makes the escape procedures a lot more complex, but these ULA characters have always had their escape routes well planned beforehand. I'd say you're probably right, but it's not as clear-cut as you think. Owens and Taylor aren't completely sure, and our friend isn't talking. Big surprise."

"They've never made a public announcement, you said? Was this supposed to be their break into the big time? Their first public announcement, they might as well do it with something spectacular," Ryan said thoughtfully.

"That's a fair guess." Murray nodded. "It certainly would have put them on the map. Like I said, our intel on these chaps is damned thin; almost all of it's secondhand stuff that comes through the PIRA—which is why we thought they were actually part of it. We haven't exactly figured what they're up to. Every one of their operations has—how do I say this? There seems to be a pattern there, but nobody's ever figured it out. It's almost as though the political fallout isn't aimed at us at all, but that doesn't make any sense—not that it has to make sense," the agent grunted. "It's not easy trying to psychoanalyze the terrorist mind."

"Any chance they'll come after me, or—"

Murray shook his head. "Unlikely, and the security's pretty tight. You know who they have taking your wife and kid around?"

"SAS—I asked."

"That youngster's on their Olympic pistol team, and I hear that he has some field experience that never made the papers. The DPG escort is also one of the varsity, and they'll have a chase car everywhere they go. The security on you is pretty impressive, too. You have some big-league interest in your safety. You can relax. And after you get home it's all behind you. None of these groups has ever operated in the U.S. We're too important to them. NORAID means more to them psychologically than financially. When they fly to Boston, it's like crawling back into the womb, all the beers people buy for them, it tells them that they're the good guys. No, if they started raising hell out our side of the pond—I don't think they could take being persona non grata in Boston. It's the only real weak point the PIRA and the rest have, and unfortunately it's not one that we can exploit all that well. We've pretty much cut down on the weapons pipeline, but, hell, they get most of their stuff from the other side now. Or they make their own. Like explosives. All you need is a bag of ammonia-based fertilizer and you can make a respectable bomb. You can't arrest a farmer for carrying fertilizer in his truck, can you? It's not as sexy as some good plastique, but it's a hell of a lot easier to get. For guns and heavier stuff—anybody can get AK-47s and RPGs, they're all over the place. No, they depend on us for moral support, and there's quite a few people who'll give it, even in Congress. Remember the fight over the extradition treaty? It's amazing. These bastards kill people.

"Both sides." Murray paused for a moment. "The Protestant crazies are just as bad. The Provisionals waste a prod. Then the Ulster Volunteer Force sends a car through a Catholic neighborhood and pops the first convenient target. A lot of the killing is purely random now. Maybe a third of the kills are people who were walking down the wrong street. The process feeds on itself, and there's not much of a middle ground left anymore. Except the cops—I know, the RUC used to be the bad guys, too, but they've just about ended that crap. The Law has got to be the Law for everyone—but that's too easy to forget sometimes, like in Mississippi back in the sixties, and that's essentially what happened in Northern Ireland. Sir Jack Hermon is trying to turn the RUC into a professional police force. There are plenty of people left over from the bad old days, but the troops are coming around. They must be. The cops are taking casualties from both sides, the last one was killed by prods. They firebombed his house." Murray shook his head. "It's amazing. I was just over there two weeks ago. Their morale's great, especially with the new kids. I don't know how they do it—well, I do know. They have their mission, too. The cops and the courts have to reestablish justice, and the people have to see that they're doing it. They're the only hope that place has, them and a few of the church leaders. Maybe common sense'll break out someday, but don't hold your breath. It's going to take a long time. Thank God for Tom Jefferson and Jim Madison, bub. Sometimes I wonder how close we came to that sectarian stuff. It's like a Mafia war that everybody can play in."

"Well, Judge?" Admiral James Greer hit the off switch on the remote

control as the Cable News Network switched topics. The Director of Central Intelligence tapped his cigar on the cut-glass ashtray.

“We know he’s smart, James, and it looks like he knows how to handle himself with reporters, but he’s impetuous,” Judge Arthur Moore said.

“Come on, Arthur. He’s young. I want somebody in here with some fresh ideas. You going to tell me now that you didn’t like his report? First time at bat, and he turns out something that good!”

Judge Moore smiled behind his cigar. It was drizzling outside the seventh-floor window of the office of the Deputy Director, Intelligence, of the Central Intelligence Agency. The rolling hills of the Potomac Valley prevented his seeing the river, but he could spy the hills a mile or so away on the far side. It was a far prettier view than that of the parking lots.

“Background check?”

“We haven’t done a deep one yet, but I’ll bet you a bottle of your favorite bourbon that he comes up clean.”

“No bet, James!” Moore had already seen Jack’s service record from the Marine Corps. Besides, he hadn’t come to the Agency. They had gone to him and he’d turned them down on the first offer. “You think he can handle it, eh?”

“You really ought to meet the kid, Judge. I had him figured out the first ten minutes he was in here last July.”

“You arranged the leak?”

“Me? Leak?” Admiral Greer chuckled. “Nice to know how he can handle himself, though, isn’t it? Didn’t even blink when he fielded the question. The boy takes his clearance seriously, and”—Greer held up the telex from London—“he’s asking good questions. Emil says his man Murray was fairly impressed, too. It’s just a damned shame to waste him teaching history.”

“Even at your alma mater?”

Greer smiled. “Yes, that does hurt a little. I want him, Arthur. I want to teach him, I want to groom him. He’s our kind of people. ”

“But he doesn’t seem to think so.”

“He will.” Greer was quietly positive.

“Okay, James. How do you want to approach him?”

“No hurry. I want a very thorough background check done first—and who knows? Maybe he’ll come to us.”

“No chance,” Judge Moore scoffed.

“He’ll come to us requesting information on this ULA bunch,” Greer said.

The Judge thought about that one. One thing about James Greer, Moore knew, was his ability to see into things and people as though they were made of crystal. “That makes sense.”

“You bet it does. It’ll be a while—the Attaché says he has to stay over for the trial and all—but he’ll be in this office two weeks after he gets back, asking for a chance to research this ULA outfit. If he does, I’ll pop the offer—if you agree, Arthur. I also want to talk to Emil Jacobs at FBI and compare files on these ULA characters. ”

“Okay.”

They turned to other matters.

5

Perqs and Plots

The day Ryan was released from the hospital was the happiest in his life, at least since Sally had been born at Johns Hopkins, four years before. It was after six in the evening when he finally finished dressing himself—the cast made that a very tricky exercise—and plopped down in the wheelchair. Jack had groused about that, but it was evidently a rule as inviolable in British hospitals as in American ones: patients are not allowed to walk out—somebody might think they were cured. A uniformed policeman pushed him out of the room into the hall. Ryan didn't look back.

Virtually the whole floor staff was lined up in the hall, along with a number of the patients Ryan had met the past week and a half as he'd relearned how to walk up and down the drab corridors—with a ten-degree list from the heavy cast. Jack flushed red at the applause, the more so when people reached out to shake his hand. *I'm not an Apollo astronaut,* he thought. *The Brits are supposed to be more dignified than this.*

Nurse Kittiwake gave a little speech about what a model patient he was. *What a pleasure and an honor ...* Ryan blushed again when she finished, and gave him some flowers, to take to his lovely wife, she said. Then she kissed him, on behalf of everyone else. Jack kissed back. It was the least he could do, he told himself, and she really was a pretty girl. Kittiwake hugged him, cast and all, and tears started running out of her eyes. Tony Wilson was at her side and gave Jack a surreptitious wink. That was no surprise. Jack shook hands with another ten or so people before the cop got him into the elevator.

"Next time you guys find me wounded in the street," Ryan said, "let me die there."

The policeman laughed. "Bloody ungrateful fellow you are."

"True."

The elevator opened at the lobby and he was grateful to see that it had been cleared except for the Duke of Edinburgh and a gaggle of security people.

"Good evening, My Lord." Ryan tried to stand, but was waved back down.

"Hello, Jack! How are you feeling?" They shook hands, and for a moment he was afraid that the Duke himself would wheel him out the door. That would have been intolerable, but the police officer resumed his pushing as the Duke walked alongside. Jack pointed forward.

"Sir, I will improve at least fifty percent when we make it through that

door."

"Hungry?"

"After hospital food? I just might eat one of your polo horses."

The Duke grinned. "We'll try to do a little better than that."

Jack noticed seven security people in the lobby. Outside was a Rolls-Royce ... and at least four other cars, along with a number of people who did not look like ordinary passersby. It was too dark to see anyone prowling the roofs, but they'd be there, too. *Well,* Ryan thought, they've learned their lessons on security. *Still a damned shame, though, and it means the terrorists have won a victory. If they make society change, even a little, they've won something.* Bastards. The cop brought him right to the Rolls.

"Can I get up now?" The cast was so heavy that it ruined his balance. Ryan stood a little too fast and nearly smashed into the car, but caught himself with an angry shake of the head before anyone had to grab for him. He stood still for a moment, his left arm sticking out like the big claw on a fiddler crab, and tried to figure how to get into the car. It turned out that the best way was to stick the cast in first, then rotate clockwise as he followed it. The Duke had to enter from the other side, and it turned out to be rather a snug fit. Ryan had never been in a Rolls before, and found that it wasn't all that spacious.

"Comfortable?"

"Well—I'll have to be careful not to punch a window out with this damned thing." Ryan leaned back and shook his head with an eyes-closed smile.

"You really are glad to be out of hospital."

"My Lord, on that you can wager one of your castles. This makes three times I've been in the body and fender shop, and that's enough." The Duke motioned for the driver to pull out. The convoy moved slowly into the street, two lead cars and two chase cars surrounding the Rolls-Royce. "Sir, may I ask what's happening this evening?"

"Very little, really. A small party in your honor, with just a few close friends."

Jack wondered what "a few close friends" meant. Twenty? Fifty? A hundred? He was going to dinner at ... *Scotty, beam me up!* "Sir, you know that you've really been too kind to us."

"Bloody rubbish. Aside from the debt we owe you—not exactly what one would call a small debt, Jack. Aside from that, it's been entirely worthwhile to meet some new people. I even finished your book Sunday night. I thought it was excellent; you must send me a copy of your next one. And the Queen and your wife have got on marvelously. You are a very lucky chap to have a wife like that—and that little imp of a daughter. She's a gem, Jack, a thoroughly wonderful little girl."

Ryan nodded. He often wondered what he had done to be so lucky. "Cathy says that she's seen about every castle in the realm, and thanks a lot for the people you put with her. It made me feel much better about having them run

all over the place."

The Duke waved his hand dismissively. It wasn't worth talking about. "How did the research go on your new book?"

"Quite well, sir." The one favorable result of his being in the hospital was that he'd had the time to sift through all of it in detail. His computer had two hundred new pages of notes stored in its bubble chips, and Ryan had a new perspective on judging the actions of others. "I guess I've learned one thing from my little escapade. Sitting in front of a keyboard isn't quite the same as looking into the front end of a gun. Decisions are a little different from that perspective." Ryan's tone made a further statement.

The Duke clapped him on the knee. "I shouldn't think that anyone will fault yours."

"Maybe. The thing is, my decision was made on pure instinct. If I'd known what I was doing—what if I had done the *wrong* thing on instinct?" He looked out the window. "Here I am, supposed to be an expert on naval history, with special emphasis on how decisions are made under stress, and I'm still not satisfied with my own. Damn." Jack concluded quietly: "Sir, you don't forget killing somebody. You just don't."

"You oughtn't to dwell on it, Jack."

"Yes, sir." Ryan turned back from the window. The Duke was looking at him much the same way his father had, years before. "A conscience is the price of morality, and morality is the price of civilization. Dad used to say that many criminals don't have a conscience, not much in the way of feelings at all. I guess that's what makes us different from them."

"Exactly. Your introspection is a fundamentally healthy thing, but you should not overdo it. Put it behind you, Jack. It was my impression of Americans that you prefer to look to the future rather than the past. If you cannot do that professionally, at least try to do it personally."

"Understood, sir. Thank you." *Now if I could just make the dreams stop.* Nearly every night Jack relived the shoot-out on The Mall. Almost three weeks now. Something else they didn't tell you about on TV. The human mind has a way of punishing itself for killing a fellow man. It remembers and relives the incident again and again. Ryan hoped it would stop someday.

The car turned left onto Westminster Bridge. Jack hadn't known exactly where the hospital was, just that it was close to a railway station and close enough to Westminster to hear Big Ben toll the hours. He looked up at the gothic stonework. "You know, besides the research I wanted to do, I actually wanted to see part of your country, sir. Not much time left for that."

"Jack, do you really think that we will let you return to America without experiencing British hospitality?" The Duke was greatly amused. "We are quite proud of our hospitals, of course, but tourists don't come here to see those. Some small arrangements have been made."

"Oh. "

Ryan had to think a moment to figure where they were, but the maps he'd studied before coming over came back to him. It was called Birdcage Walk—he was only three hundred yards from where he'd been shot ... there was the lake that Sally liked. He could see Buckingham Palace past the head of the security officer in the left front seat. Knowing that he was going there was one thing, but now the building loomed in front of him and the emotional impact started to take hold.

They entered the Palace grounds at the northeast gate. Jack hadn't seen the Palace before except from a distance. The perimeter security didn't seem all that impressive, but the Palace's hollow-square design hid nearly everything from outside view. There could easily be a company of armed troops inside—and who could tell? More likely civilian police, Ryan knew, backed up by a lot of electronic hardware. But there would be some surprises hidden away, too. After the scares in the past, and this latest incident, he imagined that this place was as secure as the White House—or even better, given greater space in and around the buildings.

It was too dark to make out many details, but the Rolls pulled through an archway into the building's courtyard, then under a canopy, where a sentry snapped to present-arms in the crisp three-count movement the Brits used. As the car stopped, a footman in livery pulled the door open.

Getting out was the reverse of getting in. Ryan turned counterclockwise, stepped out backwards, and pulled his arm out behind. The footman grabbed his arm to help. Jack didn't want the help, but this wasn't a good time to object.

"You'll need a little practice on that," the Duke observed.

"I think you're right, sir." Jack followed him to the door, where another servant did his duty.

"Tell me, Jack—the first time we visited you, you seemed far more intimidated by the presence of the Queen than of me. Why is that?"

"Well, sir, you used to be a naval officer, right?"

"Of course." The Duke turned and looked rather curious.

Ryan grinned. "Sir, I work at Annapolis. The Academy crawls with naval officers, and remember I used to be a Marine. If I let myself get intimidated by every swabbie who crossed my path, the Corps would come and take my sword back."

"You cheeky bugger!" They both had a laugh.

Ryan had expected to be impressed by the Palace. Even so, it was all he could manage to keep from being overwhelmed. Half the world had once been run from this house, and in addition to what the Royal Family had acquired over the centuries had come gifts from all over the world. Everywhere he looked the wide corridors were decorated with too many masterpieces of painting and sculpture to count. The walls were mainly covered with ivory-colored silk brocaded with gold thread. The carpets, of course, were imperial scarlet over marble or parquet hardwood. The money manager that Jack had

once been tried to calculate the value of it all. He overloaded after about ten seconds. The paintings alone were so valuable that any attempt to sell them off would distort the world market in fine art. The gilt frames alone.... Ryan shook his head, wishing he had the time to examine every painting. *You could live here five years and not have time to appreciate it all.* He almost fell behind, but managed to control his gawking and kept pace with the older man. Ryan's discomfiture was growing. To the Duke this was home—perhaps one so large as to be something of a nuisance, but nonetheless home, routine. The Rubens masterpieces on the wall were part of the scenery, as familiar to him as the photographs of wife and kids on any man's office desk. To Ryan the impact of where he was, an impact made all the more crushing by the trappings of wealth and power, made him want to shrink away to nothingness. It was one thing to take his chance on the street—the Marines, after all, had prepared and trained him for that—but ... this.

Get off it, Jack, he told himself. *They're a royal family, but they're not your royal family.* This didn't work. They were a royal family. That was enough to lacerate most of his ego.

"Here we are," the Duke said after turning right through an open door. "This is the Music Room."

It was about the size of the living/dining room in Ryan's house, the only thing he had seen thus far that could be so compared with any part of his $300,000 home on Peregrine Cliff. The ceiling was higher here, domed with gold-leaf trim. There were about thirty people, Ryan judged, and the moment they entered all conversation stopped. Everyone turned to stare at Ryan—Jack was sure they'd seen the Duke before—and his grotesque cast. He had a terrible urge to slink away. He needed a drink.

"If you'll excuse me for a moment, Jack, I must be off. Back in a few minutes."

Thanks a lot, Ryan thought as he nodded politely. *Now what do I do?*

"Good evening, Sir John," said a man in the uniform of a vice admiral of the Royal Navy. Ryan tried not to let his relief show. Of course, he'd been handed off to another custodian. He realized belatedly that lots of people came here for the first time. Some would need a little support while they got used to the idea of being in a palace, and there would be a procedure to take care of them. Jack took a closer look at the man's face as they shook hands. There was something familiar about it. "I'm Basil Charleston."

Aha! "Good evening, sir." His first week at Langley he'd seen the man, and his CIA escort had casually noted that this was "B.C." or just "C," the chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service, once known as MI-6. *What are you doing here?*

"You *must* be thirsty." Another man arrived with a glass of champagne. "Hello. I'm Bill Holmes."

"You gentlemen work together?" Ryan sipped at the bubbling wine.

"Judge Moore told me you were a clever chap," Charleston observed.

"Excuse me? Judge who?"

"Nicely done, Doctor Ryan," Holmes smiled as he finished off his glass. "I understand that you used to play football—the American kind, that is. You were on the junior varsity team, weren't you?"

"Varsity and junior varsity, but only in high school. I wasn't big enough for college ball," Ryan said, trying to mask his uneasiness. "Junior Varsity" was the project name under which he'd been called in to consult with CIA.

"And you wouldn't happen to know anything about the chap who wrote *Agents and Agencies?"* Charleston smiled. Jack went rigid.

"Admiral, I cannot talk about that without—"

"Copy number sixteen is sitting on my desk. The good judge told me to tell you that you were free to talk about the 'smoking word-processor.'"

Ryan let out a breath. The phrase must have come originally from James Greer. When Jack had made the Canary Trap proposal to the Deputy Director, Intelligence, Admiral James Greer had made a joke about it, using those words. Ryan was free to talk. Probably. His CIA security briefing had not exactly covered this situation.

"Excuse me, sir. Nobody ever told me that I was free to talk about that."

Charleston went from jovial to serious for a moment. "Don't apologize, lad. One is supposed to take matters of classification seriously. That paper you wrote was an excellent bit of detective work. One of our problems, as someone doubtless told you, is that we take in so much information now that the real problem is making sense of it all. Not easy to wade through all the muck and find the gleaming nugget. For the first time in the business, your report was first-rate. What I didn't know about was this thing the Judge called the Canary Trap. He said you could explain it better than he." Charleston waved for another glass. A footman, or some sort of servant, came over with a tray. "You know who I am, of course."

"Yes, Admiral. I saw you last July at the Agency. You were getting out of the executive elevator on the seventh floor when I was coming out of the DDI's office, and somebody told me who you were."

"Good. Now you know that all of this remains in the family. What the devil is this Canary Trap?"

"Well, you know about all the problems CIA has with leaks. When I was finishing off the first draft of the report, I came up with an idea to make each one unique."

"They've been doing that for years," Holmes noted. "All one must do is misplace a comma here and there. Easiest thing in the world. If the newspeople are foolish enough to print a photograph of the document, we can identify the leak."

"Yes, sir, and the reporters who publish the leaks know that, too. They've learned not to show photographs of the documents they get from their sources, haven't they?" Ryan answered. "What I came up with was a new twist

on that. *Agents and Agencies* has four sections. Each section has a summary paragraph. Each of those is written in a fairly dramatic fashion."

"Yes, I noticed that," Charleston said. "Didn't read like a CIA document at all. More like one of ours. We use people to write our reports, you see, not computers. Do go on."

"Each summary paragraph has six different versions, and the mixture of those paragraphs is unique to each numbered copy of the paper. There are over a thousand possible permutations, but only ninety-six numbered copies of the actual document. The reason the summary paragraphs are so—well, lurid, I guess—is to entice a reporter to quote them verbatim in the public media. If he quotes something from two or three of those paragraphs, we know which copy he saw and, therefore, who leaked it. They've got an even more refined version of the trap working now. You can do it by computer. You use a thesaurus program to shuffle through synonyms, and you can make every copy of the document totally unique."

"Did they tell you if it worked?" Holmes asked.

"No, sir. I had nothing to do with the security side of the Agency." *And thank God for that.*

"Oh, it worked." Sir Basil paused for a moment. "That idea is bloody simple—and bloody brilliant! Then there was the substantive aspect of the paper. Did they tell you that your report agreed in nearly every detail with an investigation we ran last year?"

"No, sir, they didn't. So far as I know, all the documents I worked with came from our own people."

"Then you came up with it entirely on your own? Marvelous."

"Did I goof up on anything?" Ryan asked the Admiral.

"You should have paid a bit more attention to that South African chap. That is more our patch, of course, and perhaps you didn't have enough information to fiddle with. We're giving him a very close look at the moment."

Ryan finished off his glass and thought about that. There had been a good deal of information on Mr. Martens ... *What did I miss?* He couldn't ask that, not now. Bad form. But he could ask—

"Aren't the South African people—"

"I'm afraid the cooperation they give us isn't quite as good now as it once was, and Erik Martens is quite a valuable chap for them. One can hardly blame them, you know. He does have a way of procuring what their military need, and that rather limits the pressure his government are willing to put on him," Holmes pointed out. "There is also the Israeli connection to be considered. They occasionally stray from the path, but we—SIS and CIA—have too many common interests to rock the boat severely." Ryan nodded. The Israeli defense establishment had orders to generate as much income as possible, and this occasionally ran contrary to the wishes of Israel's allies. *I remember Martens' connections, but I must have missed something important ...*

what?

"Please don't take this as criticism," Charleston said. "For a first attempt your report was excellent. The CIA must have you back. It's one of the few Agency reports that didn't threaten to put me to sleep. If nothing else, perhaps you might teach their analysts how to write. Surely they asked if you wanted to stay on?"

"They asked, sir. I didn't think it was a very good idea for me."

"Think again," Sir Basil suggested gently. "This Junior Varsity idea was a good one, like the Team-B program back in the seventies. We do it also—get some outside academics into the shop—to take a new look at all the data that cascades in the front door. Judge Moore, your new DCI, is a genuine breath of fresh air. Splendid chap. Knows the trade quite well, but he's been away from it long enough to have some new ideas. You are one of them, Doctor Ryan. You belong in the business, lad."

"I'm not so sure about that, sir. My degree's history and—"

"So is mine," Bill Holmes said. "One's degree doesn't matter. In the intelligence trade we look for the right sort of mind. You appear to have it. Ah, well, *we* can't recruit you, can we? I would be rather disappointed if Arthur and James don't try again. Do think about it."

I have, Ryan didn't say. He nodded thoughtfully, mulling over his own thoughts. *But I like teaching history.*

"The hero of the hour!" Another man joined the group.

"Good evening, Geoffrey," Charleston said. "Doctor Ryan, this is Geoffrey Watkins of the Foreign Office."

"Like David Ashley of the 'Home Office'?" Ryan shook the man's hand.

"Actually I spend much of my time right here," Watkins said.

"Geoff's the liaison officer between the Foreign Office and the Royal Family. He handles briefings, dabbles in protocol, and generally makes a nuisance of himself," Holmes explained with a smile. "How long now, Geoff?"

Watkins frowned as he thought that over. "Just over four years, I think. Seems like only last week. Nothing like the glamour one might expect. Mainly I carry the dispatch box and try to hide in comers." Ryan smiled. He could identify with that.

"Nonsense," Charleston objected. "One of the best minds in the Office, else they wouldn't have kept you here."

Watkins made an embarrassed gesture. "It does keep me rather busy. "

"It must," Holmes observed. "I haven't seen you at the tennis club in months."

"Doctor Ryan, the Palace staff have asked me to express their appreciation for what you have done." He droned on for a few more seconds. Watkins was an inch under Ryan's height and pushing forty. His neatly trimmed black hair was going gray at the sides, and his skin was pale in the way of people who

rarely saw the sun. He looked like a diplomat. His smile was so perfect that he must have practiced it in front of a mirror. It was the sort of smile that could have meant anything. Or more likely, nothing. There was interest behind those blue eyes, though. As had happened many times in the past few weeks, this man was trying to decide what Dr. John Patrick Ryan was made of. The subject of the investigation was getting very tired of this, but there wasn't much Jack could do about it.

"Geoff is something of an expert on the Northern Ireland situation," Holmes said.

"No one's an 'expert,'" Watkins said with a shake of his head. "I was there at the beginning, back in 1969. I was in uniform then, a subaltern with—well, that hardly matters now, does it? How do you think we should handle the problem, Doctor Ryan?"

"People have been asking me that question for three weeks, Mr. Watkins. How the hell should I know?"

"Still looking for ideas, Geoff?" Holmes asked.

"The right idea is out there somewhere," Watkins said, keeping his eyes on Ryan.

"I don't have it," Jack said. "And even if someone did, how would you know? I teach history, remember, I don't make it."

"Just a history teacher, and these two chaps descend on you?"

"We wanted to see if he really works for CIA, as the papers say," Charleston responded.

Jack took the signal from that. Watkins wasn't cleared for everything, and was not to know about his past association with the Agency—not that he couldn't draw his own conclusions, Ryan reminded himself. Regardless, rules were rules. *That's why I turned Greer's offer down, Jack remembered. All those idiot rules. You can't talk to anybody about this or that, not even to your wife. Security. Security. Security... Crap! Sure, some things have to stay secret, but if nobody gets to see them, how is anyone supposed to make use of them—and what good is a secret you can't use?*

"You know, it'll be nice to get back to Annapolis. At least the mids believe I'm a teacher!"

"Quite," Watkins noted. *And the head of SIS is asking you for an opinion on Trafalgar. What exactly are you,* Ryan? After leaving military service in 1972 and joining the Foreign Office, Watkins had often played the foreign service officer's embassy game: *Who's the spook?* He was getting mixed signals from Ryan, and this made the game all the more interesting. Watkins loved games. All sorts.

"How do you keep yourself busy now, Geoff?" Holmes asked.

"You mean, aside from the twelve-hour days? I do manage to read the occasional book. I just started going through *Moll Flanders* again."

“Really?” Holmes asked. “I just started *Robinson Crusoe a* few days ago. One sure way of getting one’s mind off the world is to return to the classics.”

“Do you read the classics, Doctor Ryan?” Watkins asked.

“Used to. Jesuit education, remember? They don’t let you avoid the old stuff.” Is Moll Flanders *a classic?* Jack wondered. *It’s not in Latin or Greek, and it’s not Shakespeare….*

“‘Old stuff.’ What a terrible attitude!” Watkins laughed.

“Did you ever try to read Virgil in the original?” Ryan asked.

“Arma virumque cano, trojae qui primus ab oris… ?”

“Geoff and I attended Winchester together,” Holmes explained. *“Contiquere omnes, intenteque ora tenebant….”* Both public school graduates had a good chuckle.

“Hey, I got good marks in Latin, I just don’t remember any of it,” Ryan said defensively.

“Another colonial philistine,” Watkins observed.

Ryan decided that he didn’t like Mr. Watkins. The foreign-service officer was deliberately hitting him to get reactions, and Ryan had long since tired of this game. Ryan was happy with what he was, and didn’t need a bunch of amateur pshrinks, as he called them, to define his personality for him.

“Sorry. Where I live we have slightly different priorities.”

“Of course,” Watkins replied. The smile hadn’t changed a whit. This surprised Jack, though he wasn’t sure why.

“You live not far from the Naval Academy, don’t you? Wasn’t there some sort of incident there recently?” Sir Basil asked. “I read about it in some report somewhere. I never did get straight on the details.”

“It wasn’t really terrorism—just your basic crime. A couple of midshipmen saw what looked like a drug deal being made in Annapolis, and called the police. The people who got arrested were members of a local motorcycle gang. A week later, some of the gang members decided to take the mids out. They got past the Jimmy Legs—the civilian security guards—about three in the morning and sneaked into Bancroft Hall. They must have assumed that it was just another college dorm—not hardly. The kids standing midwatch spotted them, got the alarm out, and then everything came apart. The intruders got themselves lost—Bancroft has a couple of miles of corridors—and cornered. It’s a federal case since it happened on government property, and the FBI takes a very dim view of people who try to tamper with witnesses. They’ll be gone for a while. The good news is that the Marine guard force at the Academy has been beefed up, and it’s a lot easier to get in and out now.

“Easier?” Watkins asked. “But—”

Jack smiled. “With Marines on the perimeter, they leave a lot more gates open—a Marine guard beats a locked gate any day.”

“Indeed. I—” Something caught Charleston’s eye. Ryan was facing the

wrong way to see what it was, but the reactions were plain enough. Charleston and Holmes began to disengage, with Watkins making his way off first. Jack turned in time to see the Queen appear at the door, coming past a servant.

The Duke was at her side, with Cathy trailing a diplomatically defined distance behind and to the side. The Queen came first to him.

"You are looking much better."

Jack tried to bow—he thought he was supposed to—without endangering the Queen's life with his cast. The main trick was standing still, he'd learned. The weight of the thing tended to induce a progressive lean to the left. Moving around helped him stay upright.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I feel much better. Good evening, sir."

One thing about shaking hands with the Duke, you knew there was a man at the other end. "Hello again, Jack. Do try to be at ease. This is completely informal. No receiving line, no protocol. Relax. "

"Well, the champagne helps."

"Excellent," the Queen observed. "I think we'll let you and Caroline get reacquainted for the moment." She and the Duke moved off.

"Easy on the booze, Jack." Cathy positively glowed in a white cocktail dress so lovely that Ryan forgot to wonder what it had cost. Her hair was nicely arranged and she had makeup on, two things that her profession regularly denied her. Most of all, she was Cathy Ryan. He gave his wife a quick kiss, audience and all.

"All these people—"

"Screw 'em," Jack said quietly. "How's my favorite girl?"

Her eyes sparkled with the news, but her voice was deadpan-professional :

"Pregnant."

"You sure—*when*?"

"I'm sure, darling, because, A, I'm a doctor, and B, I'm two weeks late. As to when, Jack, remember when we got here, as soon as we put Sally down to bed.... It's those strange hotel beds, Jack." She took his hand. "They do it every time."

There wasn't anything for Jack to say. He wrapped his good arm around her shoulders and squeezed as discreetly as his emotions would allow. If she was two weeks late—well, he knew Cathy to be as regular as her Swiss watch. *I'm going to be a daddy—again!*

"We'll try for a boy this time," she said.

"You know that's not important, babe."

"I see you've told him." The Queen returned as quietly as a cat. The Duke, Jack saw, was talking to Admiral Charleston. About what? he wondered. "Congratulations, Sir John."

“Thank you, Your Majesty, and thank you for a lot of things. We’ll never be able to repay you for all your kindness.”

The Christmas-tree smile again. “It is we who are repaying you. From what Caroline tells me, you will now have at least one positive reminder of your visit to our country.”

“Indeed, ma’am, but more than one.” Jack was learning how the game was played.

“Caroline, is he always so gallant?”

“As a matter of fact, ma’am, no. We must have caught him at a weak moment,” Cathy said. “Or maybe being over here is a civilizing influence.”

“That is good to know, after all the horrid things he said about your little Olivia. Do you know that she refused to go to bed without kissing me goodnight? Such a lovely, charming little angel. And *he* called her a menace!”

Jack sighed. It wasn’t hard for him to get the picture. After three weeks in this environment, Sally was probably doing the cutest curtsies in the history of Western Civilization. By this time the Palace staff was probably fighting for the right to look after her. Sally was a true daddy’s girl. The ability to manipulate the people around her came easily. She’d practiced on her father for years.

“Perhaps I exaggerated, ma’am.”

“Libelously.” The Queen’s eyes flared with amusement. “She has not broken a single thing. Not one. And I’ll have you know that she’s turning into the best equestrienne we have seen in years. ”

“Excuse me?”

“Riding lessons,” Cathy explained.

“You mean on a horse?”

“What else would she ride?” the Queen asked.

“Sally, on a horse?” Ryan looked at his wife. He didn’t like that idea very much.

“And doing splendidly.” The Queen sprang to Cathy’s defense. “It’s quite safe, Sir John. Riding is a fine skill for a child to learn. It teaches discipline, coordination, and responsibility.”

Not to mention a fabulous way to break her pretty little neck, Ryan thought. Again he remembered that one does not argue with a queen, especially under her own roof.

“You could even try to ride yourself,” the Queen said. “Your wife rides.”

“We have enough land now, Jack,” Cathy said. “You’d love it. ”

“I’d fall off,” Ryan said bleakly.

“Then you climb back on again until you get it right,” said a woman with over fifty years of riding behind her.

It's the same with a bike, except you don't fall as far off a bike, and Sally's too little for a bike, Ryan told himself. He got nervous watching Sally move her Hotwheel trike around the driveway. *For God's sake, she's so little the horse wouldn't even know if she was there or not.* Cathy read his mind.

"Children do have to grow up. You can't protect her from everything," his wife pointed out.

"Yes, dear, I know." *The hell I can't. That's my job.*

A few minutes later everyone headed out the room for dinner. Ryan found himself in the Blue Drawing Room, a breathtaking pillared hall, and then passed through mirrored double doors into the State Dining Room.

The contrast was incredible. From a room of muted blue they entered one ablaze with scarlet, fabric-covered walls. Overhead the vaulted ceiling was ivory and gold, and over the snow-white fireplace was a massive portrait—of whom? Ryan wondered. It had to be a king, of course, probably 18th or 19th century, judging by his white ... pantyhose, or whatever they'd called them then, complete with garter. Over the door they'd entered was the royal cipher of Queen Victoria, VR, and he wondered how much history had passed through—or been made right in this single room.

"You will sit at my right hand, Jack," the Queen said.

Ryan took a quick look at the table. It was wide enough that he didn't have to worry about clobbering Her Majesty with his left arm. That wouldn't do.

The worst thing about the dinner was that Ryan would be forever unable to remember—and too proud to ask Cathy—what it was. Eating one-handed was something he'd had a lot of practice at, but never had he had such an audience, and Ryan was sure that everyone was watching him. After all, he was a Yank and would have been something of a curiosity even without his arm. He constantly reminded himself to be careful, to go easy on the wine, to watch his language. He shot the occasional glance at Cathy, sitting at the other end of the table next to the Duke and clearly enjoying herself. It made her husband slightly angry that she was more at ease than he was. *If there was ever a pig in the manger,* Ryan thought while chewing on something he immediately forgot, *it's me.* He wondered if he would be here now, had he been a rookie cop or a private in the Royal Marines who just happened to be at the right place. Probably not, he thought. *And why is that?* Ryan didn't know. He did know that something about the institution of nobility went against his American outlook. At the same time, being knighted—even honorarily—was something he liked. It was a contradiction that troubled him in a way he didn't understand. All this attention was too seductive, he told himself. *It'll be good to get away from it. Or will it?* He sipped at a glass of wine. I *know I don't belong here, but do I* want *to belong here? There's a good question.* The wine didn't give him an answer. He'd have to find it somewhere else.

He looked down the table to his wife, who did seem to fit in very nicely. She'd been raised in a similar atmosphere, a monied family, a big house in Westchester County, lots of parties where people told one another how important they all were. It was a life he'd rejected, and that she had walked

away from. They were both happy with what they had, each with a career, but did her ease with this mean that she missed ... Ryan frowned.

“Feeling all right, Jack?” the Queen asked.

“Yes, ma’am, please excuse me. I’m afraid it will take me a while to adjust to all of this.”

“Jack,” she said quietly, “the reason everyone likes you—and we all do, you know—is because of who and what you are. Try to keep that in mind.”

It struck Ryan that this was probably the kindest thing he’d ever been told. Perhaps nobility was supposed to be a state of mind rather than an institution. His father-in-law could learn from that, Ryan thought. His father-in-law could learn from a lot of things.

Three hours later Jack followed his wife into their room. There was a sitting room off to the right. In front of him the bed had already been turned down. He pulled the tie loose from his collar and undid the button, then let out a long, audible breath.

“You weren’t kidding about turning into pumpkins.”

“I know,” his wife said.

Only a single dim light was lit, and his wife switched it off. The only illumination in the room was from distant streetlights that filtered through the heavy curtains. Her white dress stood out in the darkness, but her face showed only the curve of her lips and the sparkle of her eyes as she turned away from the light. Her husband’s mind filled in the remaining details. Jack wrapped his good arm around his wife and cursed the monstrosity of plaster that encased his left side as he pulled her in close. She rested her head on his healthy shoulder, and his cheek came down to the softness of her fine blond hair. Neither said anything for a minute or two. It was enough to be alone, together in the quiet darkness.

“Love ya, babe.”

“How are you feeling, Jack?” The question was more than a simple inquiry.

“Not bad. Pretty well rested. The shoulder doesn’t hurt very much anymore. Aspirin takes care of the aches.” This was an exaggeration, but Jack was used to the discomfort.

“Oh, I see how they did it.” Cathy was exploring the left side of his jacket. The tailors had put snap closures on the underside so that it would not so much conceal the cast as make it look dressed. His wife removed the snaps quickly and pulled the coat off. The shirt went next.

“I am able to do this myself, you know.”

“Shut up, Jack. I don’t want to have to wait all night for you to undress.” He next heard the sound of a long zipper.

“Can I help?”

There was laughter in the darkness. “I might want to wear this dress again. And be careful where you put that arm.”

“I haven’t crunched anyone yet.”

“Good. Let’s try to keep a perfect record.” A whisper of silk. She took his hand. “Let’s get you sitting down.”

After he sat on the edge of the bed, the rest came easy. Cathy sat beside him. He felt her, cool and smooth at his side, a hint of perfume in the air. He reached around her shoulder, down to the soft skin of her abdomen.

It’s happening right now, growing away while we sit here. “You’re going to have my baby,” Jack said softly. *There really is a God, and there really are miracles.*

Her hand came across his face. “That’s right. I can’t have anything to drink after tonight—but I wanted to enjoy tonight.”

“You know, I really do love you.”

“I know,” she said. “Lie back.”

6

Trials and Troubles

Preliminary testimony lasted for about two hours while Ryan sat on a marble bench outside Old Bailey's number two courtroom. He tried to work on his computer, but he couldn't seem to keep his mind on it, and found himself staring around the hundred-sixty-year-old building.

Security was incredibly tight. Outside, numerous uniformed police constables stood about in plain sight, small zippered pistol cases dangling from their hands. Others, uniformed and not, stood on the buildings across Newgate Street like falcons on the watch for rabbits. Except rabbits don't carry machine guns and RPG-7 bazookas, Ryan thought. Every person who entered the building was subjected to a metal detector sensitive enough to ping on the foil inside a cigarette pack, and nearly everyone was given a pat-down search. This included Ryan, who was surprised enough at the intimacy of the search to tell the officer that he went a bit far for a first date. The grand hall was closed off to anyone not connected with the case, and less prominent trials had been switched among the building's nineteen courtrooms to accommodate *Crown* v *Miller*.

Ryan had never been in a courthouse before. He was amused by the fact that he'd never even had a speeding ticket, his life had been so dull until now. The marble floor—nearly everything in sight was marble—gave the hall the aspect of a cathedral, and the walls were decorated with aphorisms such as Cicero's THE WELFARE OF THE PEOPLE IS THE HIGHEST LAW, a phrase he found curiously—or at least potentially—expedient in what was certainly designed as a temple to the idea of law. He wondered if the members of the ULA felt the same way, and justified their activities in accordance with their view of the welfare of the people. *Who doesn't?* Jack asked himself. *What tyrant ever failed to justify his crimes?* Around him were a half-dozen other witnesses. Jack didn't talk with them. His instructions were quite specific: even the appearance of conversation might give cause to the defense attorneys to speculate that witnesses had coached one another. The prosecution team had bent every effort to make their case a textbook example of correct legal procedure.

The case was being handled on a contradictory basis. The ambush had taken place barely four weeks ago, and the trial was already under way—an unusually speedy process even by British standards. Security was airtight. Admittance to the public gallery (visitors entered from another part of the building) was being strictly controlled. But at the same time, the trial was being handled strictly as a criminal matter. The name "Ulster Liberation

Army" had not been mentioned. The prosecutor had not once used the word terrorist. The police ignored—publicly—the political aspects of the case. Two men were dead, and this was a trial for first-degree murder—period. Even the press was playing along, on the theory that there was no more contemptuous way to treat the defendant than to call him a simple criminal, and not sanctify him as a creature of politics. Jack wondered about additional political or intelligence-related motives in this treatment, but no one was talking along those lines, and the defense attorney certainly couldn't defend his client better by calling him a member of a terrorist group. In the media, and in the courtroom, this was a case of murder.

The truth was different, of course, and everyone knew it. But Ryan knew enough about the law to remember that lawyers rarely concern themselves with truth. The rules were far more important. There would therefore be no official speculation on the goal of the criminals, and no involvement of the Royal Family, aside from depositions that they could not identify the living conspirator and hence had no worthwhile evidence to offer.

It didn't matter. From the press coverage of the evidence it seemed clear enough that the trial was as airtight as was possible without a videotape of the entire event. Similarly, Cathy was not to testify. In addition to forensic experts who had testified the day before, the Crown had eight eyewitnesses. Ryan was number two. The trial was expected to last a maximum of four days. As Owens had told him in the hospital, there would be no mucking about with this lad.

"Doctor Ryan? Would you please follow me, sir?" The VIP treatment continued here also. A bailiff in short sleeves and tie came over and led him into the courtroom through a side door. A police officer took his computer after opening the door. "Show-time," Ryan whispered to himself.

Old Bailey #2 was an extravagance of 19th-century woodworking. The large room was paneled with so much solid oak that the construction of a similar room in America would draw a protest from the Sierra Club for all the trees it required. The actual floorspace was surprisingly small, scarcely as much as the dining room in his house, a similarity made all the more striking by a table set in the center. The judge's bench was a wooden fortress adjacent to the witness box. The Honorable Mr. Justice Wheeler sat in one of the five high-backed chairs behind it. He was resplendent in a scarlet robe and sash, and a horsehair wig, called a "peruke," Ryan had been told, that fell to his narrow shoulders and clearly looked like something from another age. The jury box was to Ryan's left. Eight women and four men sat in two even rows, each face full of anticipation. Above them was the public gallery, perched like a choir loft and angled so that Ryan could barely see the people there. The barristers were to Ryan's right, across the small floorspace, wearing black robes, 18th-century cravats, and their own, smaller wigs. The net effect of all this was a vaguely religious atmosphere that made Ryan slightly uneasy as he was sworn in.

William Richards, QC, the prosecutor, was a man of Ryan's age, similar in height and build. He began with the usual questions: your name, place of residence, profession, when did you arrive, for what purpose? Richards

predictably had a flair for the dramatic, and by the time the questions carried them to the shooting, Ryan could sense the excitement and anticipation of the audience without even looking at their faces.

"Doctor Ryan, could you describe in your own words what happened next?"

Jack did exactly this for ten minutes, without interruption, all the while half-facing the jury. He tried to avoid looking into their faces. It seemed an odd place to get stage fright, but this was precisely what Ryan felt. He focused his eyes on the oak panels just over their heads as he ran through the events. It was almost like living it again, and Ryan could feel his heart beating faster as he concluded.

"And, Doctor Ryan, can you identify for us the man whom you first attacked?" Richards finally asked.

"Yes, sir." Ryan pointed. "The defendant, right there, sir."

It was Ryan's first really good look at him. His name was Sean Miller—not a particularly Irish name to Ryan's way of thinking. He was twenty-six, short, slender, dressed neatly in a suit and tie. He was smiling up at someone in the visitors' gallery, a family member perhaps, when Ryan pointed. Then his gaze shifted, and Ryan examined the man for the first time. What sort of person, Jack had wondered for weeks, could plan and execute such a crime? What was missing in him, or what terrible thing lived in him that most civilized people had the good fortune to lack? The thin, acne-scarred face was entirely normal. Miller could have been an executive trainee at Merrill Lynch or any other business concern. Jack's father had spent his life dealing with criminals, but their existence was a puzzlement to Ryan. *Why are you different? What makes you what you are?* Ryan wanted to ask, knowing that even if there were an answer the question would remain. Then he looked at Miller's eyes. He looked for ... something, a spark of life, humanity—something that would say that this was indeed another human being. It could only have been two seconds, but for Ryan the moment seemed to linger into minutes as he looked into those pale gray eyes and saw ...

Nothing. Nothing at all. And Jack began to understand a little.

"The record will show," the Lord Justice intoned to the court reporter, "that the witness identified the defendant, Sean Miller."

"Thank you, My Lord," Richards concluded.

Ryan took the opportunity to blow his nose. He'd acquired a head cold over the preceding weekend.

"Are you quite comfortable, Doctor Ryan?" the judge inquired. Jack realized that he'd been leaning on the wooden rail.

"Excuse me, your hon—My Lord. This cast is a little tiring." Every time Sally came past her father, she had taken to singing, "I'm a little teapot ..."

"Bailiff, a stool for the witness," the judge ordered.

The defense team was seated adjacent to the prosecution, perhaps fifteen feet farther away in the same row of seats, green leather cushions on the oak

benches. In a moment the bailiff arrived with a simple wooden stool, and Ryan settled down on it. What he really needed was a hook for his left arm, but he was gradually becoming used to the weight. It was the constant itching that drove him crazy, though there was nothing anybody could do about that.

The defense attorney—barrister—rose with elegant deliberation. His name was Charles Atkinson, more commonly known as Red Charlie, a lawyer with a penchant for radical causes and radical crimes. He was supposed to be an embarrassment to the Labour Party, which he had served until recently in Parliament. Red Charlie was about thirty pounds overweight, his wig askew atop a florid, strangely thin face for the ample frame. Defending terrorists must have paid well enough, Ryan thought. *There's a question Owens must be looking into,* Ryan told himself. *Where is your money coming from, Mr. Atkinson?*

"May it please Your Lordship," he said formally to the bench. He walked slowly towards Ryan, a sheaf of notes in his hand.

"Doctor Ryan—or should I say Sir John?"

Jack waved his hand. "Whatever is convenient to you, sir," he answered indifferently. They had warned him about Atkinson. A *very clever bastard,* they'd said. Ryan had known quite a few clever bastards in the brokerage business.

"You were, I believe, a leftenant in the United States Marine Corps?"

"Yes, sir, that is correct."

Atkinson looked down at his notes, then over at the jury. "Bloodthirsty mob, the U.S. Marines," he muttered.

"Excuse me, sir? Bloodthirsty?" Ryan asked. "No, sir. Most of the Marines I know are beer drinkers."

Atkinson spun back at Ryan as a ripple of laughter came down from the gallery. He gave Jack a thin, dangerous smile. They'd warned Jack most of all to beware his word games and tactical skill in the courtroom. *To hell with it,* Ryan told himself. He smiled back at the barrister. *Go for it,* asshole....

"Forgive me, Sir John. A figure of speech. I meant to say that the U.S. Marines have a reputation for aggressiveness. Surely this is true?"

"Marines are light infantry troops who specialize in amphibious assault. We were pretty well trained, but when you get down to it we weren't all that different from any other kind of soldier. It's just a matter of specialization in a particularly tough field," Ryan answered, hoping to throw him a little off balance. Marines were supposed to be arrogant, but that was mostly movie stuff. If you're really good, they'd taught him at Quantico, you don't have to be arrogant. Just letting people know you're a Marine was usually enough.

"Assault troops?"

"Yes, sir. That's basically correct."

"So, you commanded assault troops, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Try not to be too modest, Sir John. What sort of man is selected to lead such troops. Aggressive? Decisive? Bold? Certainly he would have more of these qualities than the average foot soldier?"

"As a matter of fact, sir, in my edition of *The Marine Officer's Guide,* the foremost of the qualities that the Corps looks for in an officer is *integrity."* Ryan smiled again. Atkinson hadn't done his homework on that score. "I commanded a platoon, sure, but as my captain explained to me when I came aboard, my principal job was to carry out the orders he gave me, and to lean on my gunny—my platoon sergeant—for his practical experience. The job I was in was supposed to be as much a learning experience as a command slot. I mean, in business it's called an entry-level position. You don't start shaking the world your first day on the job in any business."

Atkinson frowned a bit. This was not going as he'd expected.

"Ah, then, Sir John, a *lef*tenant of American Marines is really a leader of Boy Scouts. Surely you don't mean that?" he asked, a sarcastic edge on his voice.

"No, sir. Excuse me, I did not mean to give that impression, but we're not a bunch of hyperaggressive barbarians either. My job was to carry out orders, to be as aggressive as the situation called for, and to exercise some amount of judgment, like any officer. But I was only there three months, and I was still learning how to be an officer when I was injured. Marines follow orders. Officers give orders, of course, but a second lieutenant is the lowest form of officer. You take more than you give. I guess you've never been in the service," Ryan tagged on the barb at the end.

"So, what sort of training did they give you?" Atkinson demanded, either angry or feigning it.

Richards looked up to Ryan, a warning broadcast from his eyes. He'd emphasized several times that Jack shouldn't cross swords with Red Charlie.

"Really, basic leadership skills. They taught us how to lead men in the field," Ryan replied. "How to react to a given tactical situation. How to employ the platoon's weapons, and to a lesser extent, the weapons in a rifle company. How to call in outside support from artillery and air assets—"

"To react?"

"Yes, sir, that is part of it." Ryan kept his answers as long as he thought he could get away with, careful to keep his voice even, friendly, and informative. "I've never been in anything like a combat situation—unless you count this thing we're talking about, of course—but our instructors were very clear about telling us that you don't have time to think very much when bullets are flying. You have to know what to do, and you have to do it fast—or you get your own people killed."

"Excellent, Sir John. You were trained to react quickly and decisively to tactical stimuli, correct?"

"Yes, sir." Ryan thought he saw the ambush coming.

"So, in the unfortunate incident before this court, when the initial explosion

took place, you have testified that you were looking in the wrong direction?"

"I was looking away from the explosion, yes, sir."

"How soon afterwards did you turn to see what was happening?"

"Well, sir, as I said earlier, the first thing I did was to get my wife and daughter down under cover. Then I looked up. How long did that take?" Ryan cocked his head. "At least one second, sir, maybe as many as three. Sorry, but as I said earlier, it's hard to recall that sort of thing—you don't have a stopwatch on yourself, I mean."

"So, when you *finally* did look up, you had not seen what had immediately transpired?"

"Correct, sir." *Okay, Charlie, ask the next question.*

"You did not, therefore, see my client fire his pistol, nor throw a hand grenade?"

Cute, Ryan thought, surprised that he'd try this ploy. *Well, he has to try something, doesn't he?* "No, sir. When I first saw him, he was running around the comer of the car, from the direction of the other man, the one who was killed—the one with the rifle. A moment later he was at the right-rear comer of the Rolls, facing away from me, with the pistol in his right hand, pointed forward and down, as if—"

"Assumption on your part," Atkinson interrupted. "As if what? It could have been any one of several things. But what things? How could you tell what he was doing there? You did not see him get out of the car, which later drove off. For all you know he might have been another pedestrian racing to the rescue, just as you did, mightn't he?"

Jack was supposed to be surprised by this.

"Assumption, sir? No, I'd call it a judgment. For him to have been racing to the rescue as you suggest, he would have had to come from across the street. I doubt that anyone could have reacted anywhere near fast enough to do that at all, not to mention the fact that there was a guy there with a machine gun to make you think twice about it. Also, the direction I saw him running from was directly away from the guy with the AK-47. If he was running to the rescue, why away from him? If he had a gun, why not shoot him? At the time I never considered this possibility, and it seems pretty unlikely now, sir."

"Again, a *conclusion,* Sir John," Atkinson said as though to a backward child.

"Sir, you asked me a question, and I tried to answer it, with the reasons to back up my answer."

"And you expect us to believe that all this flashed through your mind in a brief span of seconds?" Atkinson turned back to the jury.

"Yes, sir, it did," Ryan said with conviction. "That's all I can say—it did."

"I don't suppose you've been told that my client has never been arrested, or accused of any crime?"

"I guess that makes him a first offender."

“It’s for the jury to decide that,” the lawyer snapped back. “You did not see him fire a single shot, did you?”

“No, sir, but his automatic had an eight-shot clip, and there were only three rounds in it. When I fired my third shot, it was empty. ”

“So what? For all you know someone else could have fired that gun. You did not see him fire, did you?”

“No, sir.”

“So it might have been dropped by someone in the car. My client might have picked it up and, I repeat, been doing the same thing you were doing—this could all be true, but you have no way of knowing this, do you?”

“I cannot testify about things I didn’t see, sir. However, *I did* see the street, the traffic, and the other pedestrians. If your client did what you say, where did he come from?”

“Precisely—you don’t know, do you?” Atkinson said sharply.

“When I saw your client, sir, he was coming from the direction of the stopped car.” Jack gestured to the model on the evidence table. “For him to have come off the sidewalk, then gotten the gun, and then appeared where I saw him—there’s just no way unless he’s an Olympic-class sprinter.

“Well, we’ll never know, will we—you fixed that. You reacted precipitously, didn’t you? You reacted as you were trained to by the U.S. Marines, never stopping to assess the situation. You raced into the fray quite recklessly, attacked my client and knocked him unconscious, then tried to kill him.”

“No, sir, I did not try to kill your client. I’ve already—”

“Then why did you shoot an unconscious, helpless man?”

“My Lord,” prosecutor Richards said, standing up, “we have already asked that question.”

“The witness may answer on further reflection,” Justice Wheeler intoned. No one would say that this trial was unfair.

“Sir, I did not know he was unconscious, and I didn’t know how long it would be before he got up. So, I shot to disable him. I just didn’t want him to get back up for a while.”

“I’m sure that’s what they said at My Lai.”

“That wasn’t the Marines, Mr. Atkinson,” Ryan shot back.

The lawyer smiled up at Jack. “I suppose your chaps were better trained at keeping quiet. Indeed, perhaps you yourself have been trained in such things....”

“No, sir, I have not.” *He’s making you angry, Jack.* He took his handkerchief out and blew his nose again. The two deep breaths helped. “Excuse me, I’m afraid the local weather has given me a bit of a head cold. What you just said—if the Marines trained people in that sort of stuff, the newspapers would have plastered it on their front pages years ago. No, moral issues aside for the

moment, the Corps has a much better sense of public relations than that, Mr. Atkinson."

"Indeed." The barrister shrugged. "And what about the Central Intelligence Agency?"

"Excuse me?"

"What of the press reports that you've worked for the CIA?"

"Sir, the only times I've been paid by the U.S. government," Jack said, choosing his words very carefully, "the money came from the Navy Department, first as a Marine, then later—now, that is, as an instructor at the United States Naval Academy. I have never been employed by any other government agency, period. "

"So you are not an agent of the CIA? I remind you that you are under oath."

"No, sir. I am not now, and I never have been any kind of agent—unless you count being a stockbroker. I don't work for the CIA. "

"And these news reports?"

"I'm afraid that you'll have to ask the reporters. I don't know where that stuff comes from. I teach history. My office is in Leahy Hall on the Naval Academy grounds. That's kind of a long way from Langley."

"Langley? You know where CIA is, then?"

"Yes, sir. It's on record that I have delivered a lecture there. It was the same lecture I delivered the month before at the Naval War College at Newport, Rhode Island. My paper dealt with the nature of tactical decision-making. I have never worked for the Central Intelligence Agency, but I did, once, give a lecture there. Maybe that's where all these reports started."

"I think you're lying, Sir John," Atkinson observed.

Not quite, Charlie. "I can't help what you think, sir. I can only answer your questions truthfully."

"And you never wrote an official report for the government entitled *Agents and Agencies?"*

Ryan did not allow himself to react. *Where did you get that bit of data, Charlie?* He answered the question with great care.

"Sir, last year—that is, last summer, at the end of the last school year—I was asked to be a contract consultant to a private company that does government work. The company is the Mitre Corporation, and I was hired on a temporary basis as part of one of their consulting contracts with the U.S. government. The work involved was classified, but it obviously had nothing at all to do with this case."

"Obviously? Why don't you let the jury decide that?"

"Mr. Atkinson," Justice Wheeler said tiredly, "are you suggesting that this work in which the witness was involved has a direct connection with the case before the court?"

“I think we might wish to establish that, My Lord. It is my belief that the witness is misleading the court.”

“Very well,” The judge turned. “Doctor Ryan, did this work in which you were engaged have anything whatever to do with a case of murder in the city of London, or with any of the persons involved in this case?”

“No, sir.”

“You are quite certain?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you now or have you ever been an employee of any intelligence or security agency of the American government?”

“Except for the Marine Corps, no, sir.”

“I remind you of your oath to tell the truth—the whole, complete truth. Have you misled the court in any way, Doctor Ryan?”

“No, sir, absolutely not.”

“Thank you, Doctor Ryan. I believe that question is now set-tied.” Mr. Justice Wheeler turned back to his right. “Next question, Mr. Atkinson.”

The barrister had to be angry at that, Ryan thought, but he didn’t let it show. He wondered if someone had briefed the judge.

“You say that you shot my client merely in the hope that he would not get up?”

Richards stood. “My Lord, the witness has already—”

“If His Lordship will permit me to ask the next question, the issue will be more clear,” Atkinson interrupted smoothly.

“Proceed. ”

“Doctor Ryan, you said that you shot my client in the hope that he would not get up. Do the U.S. Marine Corps teach one to shoot to disable, or to kill?”

“To kill, sir.”

“And you are telling us, therefore, that you went against your training?”

“Yes, sir. It is pretty clear that I was not on a battlefield. I was on a city street. It never occurred to me to kill your client.” *I wish* it had, *then I probably wouldn’t be here,* Ryan thought, wondering if he really meant it.

“So you reacted in accordance with your training when you leaped into the fray on The Mall, but then you *disregarded* your training a moment later? Do you think it reasonable that all of us here will believe *that?”*

Atkinson had finally succeeded in confusing Ryan. Jack had not the slightest idea where this was leading.

“I haven’t thought of it that way, sir, but, yes, you are correct,” Jack admitted. “That is pretty much what happened.”

“And next you crept to the corner of the automobile, saw the second person

whom you had seen earlier, and instead of trying to disable him, you shot him dead without warning. In this case, it is clear that you reverted again to your Marine training, and shot to kill. Don't you find this inconsistent?"

Jack shook his head. "Not at all, sir. In each case I used the force necessary to—well, the force I had to use, as I saw things."

"I think you are wrong, Sir John. I think that you reacted like a hotheaded officer of the United States Marines throughout. You raced into a situation of which you had no clear understanding, attacked an innocent man, and tried then to kill him while he lay helpless and unconscious on the street. Next you coldly gunned down someone else without the first thought of trying to disarm him. You did not know then, and you do not know now what was really happening, do you?"

"No, sir, I do not believe that was the case at all. What was I supposed to have done with the second man?"

Atkinson saw an opening and used it. "You just told the court that you only wished to disable my client—when in fact you tried to kill him. How do you expect us to believe that when your next action had not the first thing to do with such a *peaceful* solution?"

"Sir, when I saw McCrory, the second gunman, for the first time, he had an AK-47 assault rifle in his hands. Going up against a light machine gun with a pistol—"

"But by this time you saw that he didn't have the Kalashnikov, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir, that's true. If he'd still had it—I don't know, maybe I wouldn't have stepped around the car, maybe I would have shot from cover, from behind the car, that is."

"Ah, I see!" Atkinson exclaimed. "Instead, here was your chance to confront and kill the man in true cowboy fashion." His hands went up in the air. "Dodge City on The Mall!"

"I wish you'd tell me what you think I should have done," Jack said with some exasperation.

"For someone able to shoot straight through the heart on his first shot, why not shoot the gun from his hand, Sir John?"

"Oh, I see." Atkinson had just made a mistake. Ryan shook his head and smiled. "I wish you'd make up your mind."

"What?" The barrister was caught by surprise.

"Mr. Atkinson, a minute ago you said that I tried to kill your client. I was at arm's-length range, but I *didn't* kill him. So I'm a pretty lousy shot. But you expect me to be able to hit a man in the hand at fifteen or twenty feet. It doesn't work that way, sir. I'm either a good shot or a bad shot, sir, but not both. Besides, that's just TV stuff, shooting a gun out of somebody's hand. On TV the good guy can do that, but TV isn't real. With a pistol, you aim for the center of your target. That's what I did. I stepped out from behind the car to get a clear shot, and I aimed. If McCrory had not turned his gun towards me—

I can't say for sure, but probably I would not have shot. But he did turn and fire, as you can see from my shoulder—and I did return fire. It is true that I might have done things differently. Unfortunately I did not. I had—I didn't have much time to take action. I did the best I could. I'm sorry the man was killed, but that was his choice, too. He saw I had the drop on him, but he turned and fired—and he fired first, sir."

"But you never said a word, did you?"

"No, I don't think I did," Jack admitted.

"Don't you wish you'd done things differently?"

"Mr. Atkinson, if it makes you feel any better, I have gone over that again and again for the past four weeks. If I'd had more time to think, perhaps I would have done something different. But I'll never know, because I didn't have more time." Jack paused. "I suppose the best thing for all concerned would be if all this had never happened. But I didn't make it happen, sir. He did." Jack allowed himself to look at Miller again.

Miller was sitting in a straight-back wooden chair, his arms crossed in front of him, and head cocked slightly to the left. A smile started to take shape at one corner of his mouth. It didn't go very far, and wasn't supposed to. It was a smile for Ryan alone ... or maybe not me alone, Jack realized. Sean Miller's gray eyes didn't blink—he must have practiced that—as they bored in on him from thirty feet away. Ryan returned the stare, careful to keep his face without expression, and while the court reporter finished up his transcription of Jack's testimony, and the visitors in the overhead gallery shared whispered observations, Ryan and Miller were all alone, testing each other's wills. *What's behind those eyes?* Jack wondered again. No weakling, to be sure. This was a game—Miller's game that he'd practiced before, Ryan thought with certainty. There was strength in there, like something one might encounter in a predatory animal. But there was nothing to mute the strength. There was none of the softness of morality or conscience, only strength and will. With four police constables around him, Sean Miller was as surely restrained as a wolf in a cage, and he looked at Ryan as a wolf might from behind the bars, without recognition of his humanity. He was a predator, looking at a ... thing—and wondering how he might reach it. The suit and the tie were camouflage, as had been his earlier smile at his friends in the gallery. He wasn't thinking about them now. He wasn't thinking about what the court would decide. He wasn't thinking about prison, Jack knew. He was thinking only about something named Ryan, something he could see just out of his reach. In the witness box, Jack's right hand flexed in his lap as though to grasp the pistol which lay in sight on the evidence table a few feet away.

This wasn't an animal in a cage, after all. Miller had intelligence and education. He could think and plan, as a human could, but he would not be restrained by any human impulses when he decided to move. Jack's academic investigation of terrorists for the CIA had dealt with them as abstractions, robots that moved about and did things, and had to be neutralized one way or another. He'd never expected to meet one. More important, Jack had never expected to have one look at him in this way. Didn't he know that Jack was

just doing his civic duty?

You could care less about that. *I'm something that got in your way. I hurt you, killed your friend, and defeated your mission. You want to get even, don't you? A wounded animal will always seek out its tormentor,* Jack told himself. *And this wounded animal has a brain. This one has a memory.* Out of sight to anyone else, he wiped a sweaty hand on his pants. This one is thinking.

Ryan was frightened in a way that he'd never known before. It lasted several seconds before he reminded himself that Miller was surrounded by four cops, that the jury would find him guilty, that he would be sentenced to prison for the remainder of his natural life, and that prison life would change the person or thing that lived behind those pale gray eyes.

And I used to be a Marine, Jack told himself. *I'm not afraid of you. I can handle you, punk. I took you out once, didn't I?* He smiled back at Sean Miller, just a slight curve at the corner of his own mouth. *Not a wolf*—a *weasel. Nasty, but not that much to worry about,* he told himself. Jack turned away as though from an exhibit in the zoo. He wondered if Miller had seen through his quiet bravado.

"No further questions," Atkinson said.

"The witness may step down," Mr. Justice Wheeler said.

Jack stood up from the stool and turned to find the way out. As he did so, his eyes swept across Miller one last time, long enough to see that the look and the smile hadn't changed.

Jack walked back out to the grand hall as another witness passed in the other direction. He found Dan Murray waiting for him.

"Not bad," the FBI agent observed, "but you want to be careful locking horns with a lawyer. He almost tripped you up."

"You think it'll matter?"

Murray shook his head. "Nah. The trial's a formality, the case is airtight."

"What'll he get?"

"Life. Normally over here 'life' doesn't mean any more than it does stateside —six or eight years. For this kid, 'life' means life. Oh, there you are, Jimmy."

Commander Owens came down the corridor and joined them. "How did our lad perform?"

"Not an Oscar winner, but the jury liked him," Murray said.

"How can you tell that?"

"That's right, you've never been through this, have you? They sat perfectly still, hardly even breathed while you were telling your story. They believed everything you said, especially the part about how you've thought and worried about it. You come across as an honest guy."

"I am," Ryan said. "So?"

"Not everybody is," Owens pointed out. "And juries are actually quite good

at noticing it. That is, some of the time."

Murray nodded. "We both have some good—well, not so good—stories about what a jury can do, but when you get down to it, the system works pretty well. Commander Owens, why don't we buy this gentleman a beer?"

"A fine idea, Agent Murray." Owens took Ryan's arm and led him to the staircase.

"That kid's a scary little bastard, isn't he?" Ryan said. He wanted a professional opinion.

"You noticed, eh?" Murray observed. "Welcome to the wonderful world of the international terrorist. Yeah, he's a tough little son of a bitch, all right. Most of 'em are, at first."

"A year from now he'll have been changed a bit. He's a hard one, mind, but the hard ones are often rather brittle," Owens said. "They sometimes crack. Time is very much on our side, Jack. And even if he doesn't, that's one less to worry about."

"A very confident witness," the TV news commentator said. "Doctor Ryan fended off a determined attack by the defense counsel, Charles Atkinson, and identified defendant Sean Miller quite positively in the second day of The Mall Murder trial in Old Bailey Number Two." The picture showed Ryan walking down the hill from the courthouse with two men in attendance. The American was gesturing about something, then laughed as he passed the TV news camera.

"Our old friend Owens. Who's the other one?" O'Donnell asked.

"Daniel E. Murray, FBI representative at Grosvenor Square," replied his intelligence officer.

"Oh. Never saw his face. So that's what he looks like. Going out for a jar, I'll wager. The hero and his coat-holders. Pity we couldn't have had a man with an RPG right there...." They'd scouted James Owens once, trying to figure a way to assassinate him, but the man always had a chase car and never used the same route twice. His house was always watched. They could have killed him, but the getaway would have been too risky, and O'Donnell was not given to sending his men on suicide missions. "Ryan goes home either tomorrow or next day."

"Oh?" The intelligence officer hadn't learned that. *Where does Kevin get all his special information ...* ?

"Too bad, isn't it? Wouldn't it be grand to send him home in a coffin, Michael?"

"I thought you said he was not a worthwhile target," Mike McKenney said.

"Ah, but he's a proud one, isn't he? Crosses swords with our friend Charlie and prances out of the Bailey for a pint of beer. Bloody American, so sure of everything." *Wouldn't it be nice to ...* Kevin O'Donnell shook his head. "We

have other things to plan. Sir John can wait, and so can we."

"I practically had to hold a gun on somebody to get to do this," Murray said over his shoulder. The FBI agent was driving his personal car, with a Diplomatic Protection Group escort on the left front seat, and a chase car of C-13 detectives trying to keep up.

Keep your eyes on the damned road, Ryan wished as hard as he could. His exposure to London traffic to this point had been minimal, and only now did he appreciate that the city's speed limit was considered a matter of contempt by the drivers. Being on the wrong side of the road didn't help either.

"Tom Hughes—he's the Chief Warder—told me what he had planned, and I figured you might want an escort who talks right."

And drives right, Ryan thought as they passed a truck—terry—on the wrong side. *Or was it the right side? How do you tell?* He could tell that they'd missed the truck's taillights by about eighteen inches. English roads were not impressive for their width.

"Damned shame you didn't get to see very much."

"Well, Cathy did, and I caught a lot of TV."

"What did you watch?"

Jack laughed. "I caught a lot of the replays of the cricket championships. "

"Did you ever figure out the rules?" Murray asked, turning his head again.

"It has rules?" Ryan asked incredulously. "Why spoil it with rules?"

"They say it does, but damn if I ever figured them out. But we're getting even now."

"How's that?"

"Football is becoming pretty popular over here. Our kind, I mean. I gave Jimmy Owens a big runaround last year on the difference between offside and illegal procedure."

"You mean encroachment and false start, don't you?" the DPG man inquired.

"See? They're catching on."

"You mean I could have gotten football on TV, and nobody told me!"

"Too bad, Jack," Cathy observed.

"Well, here we are." Murray stood on the brakes as he turned downhill toward the river. Jack noticed that he seemed to be heading the wrong way down a one-way street, but at least he was going more slowly now. Finally the car stopped. It was dark. The sunset came early this time of year.

"Here's your surprise." Murray jumped out and got the door, allowing Ryan to repeat his imitation of a fiddler crab exiting from a car. "Hi, there, Tom!"

Two men approached, both in Tudor uniforms of blue and red. The one in the lead, a man in his late fifties, came directly to Ryan.

"Sir John, Lady Ryan, welcome to Her Majesty's Tower of London. I am Thomas Hughes, this is Joseph Evans. I see that Dan managed to get you here on time." Everyone shook hands.

"Yeah, we didn't even have to break mach-1. May I ask what the surprise is?"

"But then it wouldn't be a surprise," Hughes pointed out. "I had hoped to conduct you around the grounds myself, but there's something I must attend to. Joe will see to your needs, and I will rejoin you shortly. The Chief Warder walked off with Dan Murray in his wake.

"Have you been to the Tower before?" Evans asked. Jack shook his head.

"I have, when I was nine," Cathy said. "I don't remember very much."

Evans motioned for them to come along with him. "Well, we'll try to implant the knowledge more permanently this time. "

"You guys are all soldiers, right?"

"Actually, Sir John, we are all ex-sergeant majors—well, two of us were warrant officers. I was sergeant major in 1 Para when I retired. I had to wait four years to get accepted here. There is quite a bit of interest in this job, as you might imagine. The competition is very keen."

"So, you were what we call a command sergeant-major, sir?"

"Yes, I think that's right."

Ryan gave a quick look to the decorations on Evans' coat—it looked more like a dress, but he had no plans to say that. Those ribbons didn't mean that Evans had come out of the dentist's office with no cavities. It didn't take much imagination to figure what sort of men got appointed to this job. Evans didn't walk; he marched with the sort of pride that took thirty years of soldiering to acquire.

"Is your arm troubling you, sir?"

"My name's Jack, and my arm's okay."

"I had a cast just like that one back in sixty-eight, I think it was. Training accident," Evans said with a rueful shake of his head. "Landed on a stone fence. Hurt like the very devil for weeks. "

"But you kept jumping." *And did your push-ups one-handed, didn't you?*

"Of course." Evans stopped. "Right, now this imposing edifice is the Middle Tower. There used to be an outer structure right there where the souvenir shop is. They called it the Lion Tower, because that's where the royal menagerie was kept until 1834."

The speech was delivered as perfectly as Evans had done, several times per day, for the past four years. *My first castle,* Jack thought, looking at the stone walls.

"Was the moat for-real?"

"Oh, yes, and a very unpleasant one at that. The problem, you see, was that it was designed so that the river would wash in and out every day, thereby keeping it fresh and clean. Unfortunately the engineer didn't do his sums quite right, and once the water came in, it stayed in. Even worse, everything that got thrown away by the people living here was naturally enough thrown into the moat—and stayed there, and rotted. I suppose it served a tactical purpose, though. The smell of the moat alone must have been sufficient to keep all but the most adventurous chaps away. It was finally drained in 1843, and now it serves a really useful purpose—the children can play football there. On the far side are swings and jungle gyms. Do you have children?"

"One and a ninth," Cathy answered.

"Really?" Evans smiled in the darkness. "Bloody marvelous! I suppose that's one Yank who will be forever—at least a little—British! Moira and I have two, both of them born overseas. Now this is the Byward Tower."

"These things all had drawbridges, right?" Jack asked.

"Yes, the Lion and Middle towers were essentially islands with twenty or so feet of smelly water around them. You'll also notice that the path into the grounds has a right-angle turn. The purpose of that, of course, was to make life difficult for the chaps with the battering ram."

Jack looked at the width of the moat and the height of the walls as they passed into the Tower grounds proper. "So nobody ever took this place?"

Evans shook his head. "There has never been a serious attempt, and I wouldn't much fancy trying today."

"Yeah," Ryan agreed. "You sweat having somebody come in and bomb the place?"

"That's happened, I am sorry to say, in the White Tower, over ten years ago —terrorists. Security is somewhat tighter now," Evans said.

In addition to the Yeoman Warders there were uniformed guards like those Ryan had encountered on The Mall, wearing the same red tunics and bearskin hats, and carrying the same kind of modem rifle. It was rather an odd contrast to Evans' period uniform, but no one seemed to notice.

"You know, of course, that this facility served many purposes over the years. It was the royal prison, and as late as World War Two, Rudolf Hess was kept here. Now, do you know who was the first Queen of England to be executed here?"

"Anne Boleyn," Cathy answered.

"Very good. They teach our history in America?" Evans asked.

"Masterpiece Theater," Cathy explained. "I saw the TV show. "

"Well, then you know that all the private executions were carried out with an ax—except hers. King Henry had a special executioner imported from France; he used a sword instead of an ax."

“He didn’t want it to hurt?” Cathy asked with a twisted smile. “Nice of him.”

“Yes, he was a considerate chap, wasn’t he? And this is Traitor’s Gate. You might be interested to know that it was originally called the Water Gate.”

Ryan laughed. “Lucky for you guys too, eh?”

“Indeed. Prisoners were taken through this gate by boat to Westminster for trial. ”

“Then back here for their haircuts?”

“Only the really important ones. Those executions—they were private instead of pubtic—were done on the Tower Green. The public executions were carried out elsewhere.” Evans led them through the gate in the Bloody Tower, after explaining its history. Ryan wondered if anyone had ever put all this place’s history into one book, and if so, how many volumes it required.

The Tower Green was far too pleasant to be the site of executions. Even the signs to keep people off the grass said Please. Two sides were lined with Tudor-style (of course) houses, but the northern edge was the site where the scaffolding was erected for the high-society executions. Evans went through the procedure, which included having the executionee pay the headsman—in advance—in the hope that he’d do a proper job.

“The last woman to be executed here,” Evans went on, “was Jane, Viscountess Rochford, 13 February, 1542.”

“What did she do?” Cathy asked.

“What she didn’t do, actually. She neglected to tell King Henry the Eighth that his fifth wife, Catherine Howard, was, uh, amorously engaged with someone other than her husband,” Evans said delicately.

“That was a real historic moment,” Jack chuckled. “That’s the last time a woman was ever executed for keeping her mouth shut. ”

Cathy smiled at her husband. “Jack, how about I break your other arm?”

“And what would Sally say?”

“She’d understand,” his wife assured him.

“Sergeant major, isn’t it amazing how women stick together?”

“I did not survive thirty-one years as a professional soldier by being so foolish as to get involved in domestic disputes,” Evans said sensibly.

I lose, Ryan told himself. The remainder of the tour lasted about twenty minutes. The Yeoman led them downhill past the White Tower, then left toward an area roped off from the public. A moment later Ryan and his wife found themselves in another of the reasons that men applied for the job.

The Yeoman Warders had their own little pub hidden away in the 14th-century stonework. Plaques from every regiment in the British Army—and probably gifts from many others—lined the walls. Evans handed them off to yet another man. Dan Murray reappeared, a glass in his hand.

“Jack, Cathy, this is Bob Hallston.”

“You must be thirsty,” the man said.

“You could talk me into a beer,” Jack admitted. “Cathy?”

“Something soft.”

“You’re sure?” Hallston asked.

“I’m not a temperance worker, I just don’t drink when I’m pregnant,” Cathy explained.

“Congratulations!” Hallston took two steps to the bar and returned with a glass of lager for Jack, and what looked like ginger ale for his wife. “To your health, and your baby’s.”

Cathy beamed. There was something about pregnant women, Jack thought. His wife wasn’t just pretty anymore. She glowed. He wondered if it was only for him.

“I understand you’re a doctor?”

“I’m an ophthalmic surgeon.”

“And you teach history, sir?”

“That’s right. I take it you work here, too.”

“Correct. There are thirty-nine of us. We are the ceremonial guardians of the Sovereign. We have invited you here to thank you for doing our job, and to join us in a small ceremony that we do every night.”

“Since 1240,” Murray said.

“The year 1240?” Cathy asked.

“Yeah, it’s not something they cooked up for the tourists. This is the real thing,” Murray said. “Right, Bob?”

“Quite real. When we lock up for the night, this museum collection becomes the safest place in England.”

“I’ll buy that,” Jack tossed off half his beer. “And if they get past those kids out there, the bad guys have you fellows to worry about. ”

“Yes.” Hallston smiled. “One or two of us might remember our basic skills. I was in the original SAS, playing hare and hounds with Rommel in the Western Desert. Dreadful place, the desert. Left me with a permanent thirst.”

They never lose it, Ryan thought. They never lose the look, not the real professionals. They get older, add a few pounds, mellow out a little, but beneath all that you can still see the discipline and the essential toughness that makes them different. And the pride, the understated confidence that comes from having done it all, and not having to talk about it very much, except among themselves. It never goes away.

“Do you have any Marines in here?”

“Two,” Hallston said. “We try to keep them from holding hands. ”

"Right! Be nice, I used to be a Marine."

"No one's perfect," Hallston sympathized.

"So, what's this Key Ceremony?"

"Well, back in the year 1240, the chap whose job it was to lock up for the night was set upon by some ruffians. Thereafter, he refused to do his duty without a military escort. Every night since, without interruption, the Chief Warder locks the three principal gates, then places the keys in the Queen's House on the Tower Green. There's a small ceremony that goes along with this. We thought that you and your wife might like to see it." Hallston sipped his beer. "You were in court today, I understand. How did it go?"

"I'm glad it's behind me. Dan says I did all right." Ryan shrugged. "When Mr. Evans showed us the block topside—I wonder if it still works," Ryan said thoughtfully, remembering the look on that young face. *Is Miller sitting in his cell right now, thinking about me?* Ryan drank the last of his beer. *I'll bet he is.*

"Excuse me?"

"That Miller kid. It's a shame you can't take him up there for a short haircut."

Hallston smiled coldly. "I doubt anyone here would disagree with you. We might even find a volunteer to swing the ax."

"You'd have to hold a lottery, Bob." Murray handed Ryan another glass. "You still worrying about him, Jack?"

"I've never seen anybody like that before."

"He's in jail, Jack," Cathy pointed out.

"Yeah, I know." *So why are you still thinking about him?* Jack asked himself. *The hell with it. The hell with him.* "This is great beer, Sar-major."

"That's the real reason they apply for the job," Murray chuckled.

"One of the reasons." Hallston finished his glass. "Almost time. "

Jack finished off his second glass with a gulp. Evans reappeared, now wearing street clothes, and led them back out to the chilled night air. It was a clear night, with a three-quarters moon casting muted shadows on the stone battlements. A handful of electric lights added a few isolated splashes of light. Jack was surprised how peaceful it was for being in the center of a city, like his own home over the Chesapeake. Without thinking, he took his wife's hand as Evans led them west toward the Bloody Tower. A small crowd was already there, standing by Traitor's Gate, and a Warder was giving them instructions to be as quiet as possible, and not, of course, to take any photographs. A sentry was posted there, plus four other men under arms, their breath illuminated by the blue-white floodlights. It was the only sign of life. Otherwise they might have been made of stone.

"Right about now," Murray whispered.

Jack heard a door close somewhere ahead. It was too dark to see very much, and the few lights that were turned on only served to impair his night vision.

He heard the sound of jingling keys first of all, like small bells rattling to the measured tread of a walking man. Next he saw a point of light. It grew into a square lantern with a candle inside, carried by Tom Hughes, the Chief Warder. The sound of his footsteps was as regular as a metronome as he approached, his back ramrod-straight from a lifetime of practice. A moment later the four soldiers formed up on him, the warder between them, and they marched off, back into the tunnel-like darkness to the fading music of the rattling keys and cleated shoes clicking on the pavement, leaving the sentry at the Bloody Tower.

Jack didn't hear the gates close, but a few minutes later the sound of the keys returned, and he glimpsed the returning guards in the irregular splashes of light. For some reason the scene was overpoweringly romantic. Ryan reached around his wife's waist and pulled her close. She looked up.

Love you, he said with his lips as the keys approached again. Her eyes answered.

To their right, the sentry snapped to on-guard: "Halt! Who goes there?" His words reverberated down the corridor of ancient stone.

The advancing men stopped at once, and Tom Hughes answered the challenge: "The keys!"

"Whose keys?" the sentry demanded.

"Queen Anne's keys!"

"Pass, Queen Anne's keys!" The sentry brought his rifle to present-arms.

The sentries, with Hughes in their midst, resumed their march and turned left, up the slope to the Tower Green. Ryan and his wife followed close behind. At the steps that capped the upward slope waited a squad of riflemen. Hughes and his escort stopped. The squad on the steps came to present-arms, and the Chief Warder removed his uniform bonnet.

"God preserve Queen Anne!"

"Amen!" the guard force replied.

Behind them, a bugler stood. He blew Last Post, the British version of Taps. The notes echoed against the stones in a way that denoted the end of day, and when necessary, the end of life. Like the circular waves that follow a stone's fall into the water, the last mournful note lingered until it faded to nothingness in the still air. Ryan bent down to kiss his wife. It was a magical moment that they would not soon forget.

The Chief Warder proceeded up the steps to secure the keys for the night, and the crowd withdrew.

"Every night since 1240, eh?" Jack asked.

"The ceremony was interrupted during the Blitz. A German bomb fell into the Tower grounds while things were under way. The warder was bowled over by the blast, and the candle in his lantern was extinguished. He had to relight it before he could continue," Evans said. That the man had been wounded was

irrelevant. Some things are more important than that. “Shall we return to the pub?”

“We don’t have anything like this at home,” Cathy said quietly.

“Well, America isn’t old enough, is she?”

“It would be nice if we had something like this, maybe at Bunker Hill or Fort McHenry,” Jack said quietly.

Murray nodded agreement. “Something to remind us why we’re here.”

“Tradition is important,” Evans said. “For a soldier, tradition is often the reason one carries on when there are so many reasons not to. It’s more than just yourself, more than just your mates—but it’s not just something for soldiers, is it? It is true—or should be true—of any professional community.”

“It is,” Cathy said. “Any good medical school beats that into your head. Hopkins sure did.”

“So does the Corps,” Jack agreed. “But we don’t express it as well as you just did.”

“We’ve had more practice.” Evans opened the door to the pub. “And better beer to aid in our contemplation.”

“Now, if you guys could only learn how to fix beef properly....” Jack said to Evans.

“That’s telling ’em, ace,” the FBI agent chuckled.

“Another beer for a brother Marine.” A glass was handed to Ryan by another of the warders. “Surely you’ve had enough of this para prima donna by now.”

“Bert’s one of the Marines I told you about,” Evans explained.

“I never say bad things about somebody who buys the drinks,” Ryan told Bert.

“That is an awfully sensible attitude. Are you sure you were only a lieutenant?”

“Only for three months.” Jack explained about the helicopter crash.

“That *was* bad luck. Bloody training accidents,” Evans said. “More dangerous than combat.”

“So you guys work as tour guides here?”

“That’s part of it,” the other warder said. “It’s a good way to keep one’s hand in, and also to educate the odd lieutenant. Just last week I spoke to one of the Welsh Guards chaps—he was having trouble getting things right, and I gave him a suggestion.”

“The one thing you really miss,” Evans agreed. “Teaching those young officers to be proper soldiers. Who says the best diplomats work at Whitehall?”

“I never got the feeling that I was completely useless as a second

lieutenant," Jack observed with a smile.

"All depends on one's point of view," the other yeoman said. "Still and all, you might have worked out all right, judging by what you did on The Mall."

"I don't know, Bert. A lieutenant with a hero complex is not the sort of chap you want to be around. They keep doing the damnedest things. But I suppose the ones who survive, and learn, do work out as you say. Tell me, Lieutenant Ryan, what have you learned?"

"Not to get shot. The next time I'll just shoot from cover."

"Excellent." Bob Hallston rejoined them. "And don't leave one alive behind you," he added. The SAS wasn't noted for leaving people alive by accident.

Cathy didn't like this sort of talk. "Gentlemen, you can't just kill people like that. "

"The Lieutenant took rather a large chance, ma'am, not the sort of chance that one will walk away from very often. If there is ever a next time—and there won't be, of course. But if there is, you can act like a policeman or a soldier, but not both. You're very lucky to be alive, young man. You have that arm to remind you just how lucky you are. It is good to be brave, Lieutenant. It is better to be smart, and much less painful for those around you," Evans said. He looked down at his beer. "Dear God, how many times have I said that!"

"How many times have we all said it?" Bert said quietly. "And the pity is, so many of them didn't listen. Enough of that. This lovely lady doesn't want to hear the ramblings of tired old men. Bob tells me that you are expecting another child. In two months, I shall be a grandfather for the first time."

"Yes, he can hardly wait to show us the pictures." Evans laughed. "A boy or a girl this time?"

"Just so all the pieces are attached, and they all work." There was general agreement on the point. Ryan finished off his third beer of the evening. It was pretty strong stuff, and he was getting a buzz from it. "Gentlemen, if any of you come to America, and happen to visit the Washington area, I trust you will let us know."

"And the next time you are in London, the bar is open," Tom Hughes said. The Chief Warder was back in civilian clothes, but carrying his uniform bonnet, a hat whose design went back three or four centuries. "And perhaps you'll find room in your home for this. Sir John, with the thanks of us all."

"I'll take good care of this." Ryan took the hat, but couldn't bring himself to put it on. He hadn't earned that right.

"Now, I regret to say that if you don't leave now, you'll be stuck here all night. At midnight all the doors are shut, and that is that. "

Jack and Cathy shook hands all around, then followed Hughes and Murray out the door.

The walk between the inner and outer walls was still quiet, the air still cold,

and Jack found himself wondering if ghosts walked the Tower Grounds at night. It was almost—

"What's that?" He pointed to the outer wall. A spectral shape was walking up there.

"A sentry," Hughes said. "After the Ceremony of the Keys, the guards don their pattern-disruptive clothing." They passed the sentry at the Bloody Tower, now dressed in camouflage fatigues, with web gear and ammo pouches.

"Those rifles are loaded now, aren't they?" Jack asked.

"Not very much use otherwise, are they? This is a very safe place," Hughes replied.

Nice to know that some places are, Ryan thought. *Now why did I think that?*

7

Speedbird Home

The Speedway Lounge at Heathrow Airport's Terminal 4 was relaxing enough, or would have been had Jack not been nervous about flying. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows he could see the Concorde he'd be taking home in a few minutes. The designers had given their creation the aspect of a living creature, like some huge, merciless bird of prey, a thing of fearful beauty. It sat there at the end of the Jetway atop its unusually high landing gear, staring at Ryan impassively over its daggerlike nose.

"I wish the Bureau would let me commute back and forth on that baby," Murray observed.

"It's pretty!" Sally Ryan agree.

It's just another goddamned airplane, Jack told himself. *You can't see what holds it up.* Jack didn't remember whether it was Bernoulli's Principle or the Venturi Effect, but he knew that it was something *inferred,* not actually seen, that enabled aircraft to fly He remembered that something had interrupted the Principle or Effect over Crete and nearly killed him, and that nineteen months later that same something had reached up and killed his parents five thousand feet short of the runway at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. Intellectually he knew that his Marine helicopter had died of a mechanical failure, and that commercial airliners were simpler and easier to maintain than CH-46s. He also knew that bad weather had been the main contributing factor in his parents' case—and the weather here was clear—but to Ryan there was something outrageous about flying, something unnatural.

Fine, Jack. Why not go back to living in caves and hunting bear with a pointed stick? *Whats* natural about teaching history, or watching TV, or driving a car? Idiot.

But I hate to fly, Ryan reminded himself.

"There has never been an accident in the Concorde," Murray pointed out. "And Jimmy Owens's troops gave the bird a complete checkout." The possibility of a bomb on that pretty white bird was a real one. The explosives experts from C-13 had spent over an hour that morning making sure that nobody had done that, and now police dressed as British Airways ground crewmen stood around the airliner. Jack wasn't worried about a bomb. Dogs could find bombs.

"I know," Jack replied with a wan smile. "Just a basic lack of guts on my part."

“It’s only lack of guts if you don’t go, ace,” Murray pointed out. He was surprised that Ryan was so nervous, though he concealed it well, the FBI agent thought. Murray enjoyed flying. An Air Force recruiter had almost convinced him to become a pilot, back in his college days.

No, it’s lack of brains if I do, Jack told himself. *You really are a wimp,* another part of his brain informed *him. Some Marine you turned out to be!*

“When do we blast off, Daddy?” Sally asked.

“One o’clock,” Cathy told her daughter. “Don’t bother Daddy. ”

Blast off, Jack thought with a smile. *Dammit, there is* nothing *to be afraid of and you know it!* Ryan shook his head and sipped at his drink from the complimentary bar. He counted four security people in the lounge, all trying to look inconspicuous. Owens was taking no chances on Ryan’s last day in England. The rest was up to British Airways. He wasn’t even being billed for the extra cost. Ryan wondered if that was good luck or bad.

A disembodied female voice announced the flight. Jack finished off the drink and rose to his feet.

“Thanks for everything, Dan.”

“Can we go now, Daddy?” Sally asked brightly. Cathy took her daughter’s hand.

“Wait a minute!” Murray stooped down to Sally. “Don’t I get a hug and a kiss?”

“Okay.” Sally obliged with enthusiasm. “G‘bye, Mr. M’ray. ”

“Take good care of our hero,” the FBI man told Cathy.

“He’ll be all right,” she assured him.

“Enjoy the football, ace!” Murray nearly crushed Jack’s hand. That’s the one thing I really miss.”

“I can send you tapes.”

“It’s not the same. Back to teaching history, eh?”

“That’s what I do,” Ryan said.

“We’ll see,” Murray observed cryptically. “How the hell do you walk with that thing on?”

“Badly,” Ryan chuckled. “I think the doc installed some lead weights, or maybe he left some tools in there by mistake. Well, here we are.” They reached the entrance to the Jetway.

“Break a leg.” Murray smiled and moved off.

“Welcome aboard, Sir John,” a flight attendant said. “We have you in 1-D. Have you flown Concorde before?”

“No.” It was all Jack could muster. Ahead of him, Cathy turned and grinned. The tunnel-like Jetway looked like the entrance to the grave.

"Well, you are in for the thrill of your life!" the stewardess assured him.

Thanks a lot! Ryan nearly choked at the outrage, and remembered that he couldn't strangle her with one hand. Then he laughed. There wasn't anything else to do.

He had to duck to avoid crunching his head at the door. It was tiny inside; the cabin was only eight or nine feet across. He looked forward quickly and saw the flight crew in impossibly tight quarters—getting into the pilot's left seat must have been like putting on a boot, it seemed so cramped. Another attendant was hanging up coats. He had to wait until she saw him, and walked sideways, his plaster-encased arm leading the way into the passenger cabin.

"Right here," his personal guide said.

Jack got into the right-side window seat in the front row. Cathy and Sally were already in their seats on the other side. Jack's cast stuck well over seat 1-C. No one could have sat there. It was just as well that British Airways wasn't charging the difference between this and their L-1011 tickets; there would have been an extra seat charge. He immediately tried to snap on his seat belt and found that it wasn't easy with only one hand. The stewardess was ready for this, and handled it for him.

"You are quite comfortable?"

"Yes," Jack lied. *I am* quite *terrified.*

"Excellent. Here is your Concorde information kit." She pointed toward a gray vinyl folder. "Would you like a magazine?"

"No, thank you, I have a book in my pocket."

"Fine. I'll be back after we take off, but if you need anything, please ring."

Jack pulled the seat belt tighter as he looked forward and left at the airplane's door. It was still open. He could still escape. But he knew he wouldn't do that. He leaned back. The seat was gray, too, a little on the narrow side but comfortable. His placement in the front row gave him all the legroom he needed. The airplane's inside wall—or whatever they called it—was off-white, and he had a window to look out of. Not a very large one, about the size of two paperback books, but better than no window at all. He looked around. The flight was about three-quarters full. These were seasoned travelers, and wealthy ones. Business types mostly, Jack figured, many were reading their copies of the *Financial Times.* And none of them were afraid of flying. You could tell from their impassive faces. It never occurred to Jack that his face was set exactly the same.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Nigel Higgins welcoming you aboard British Airways Flight 189, Concorde Service to Washington, D.C., and Miami, Florida. We'll begin taxiing in approximately five minutes. Weather at our first stop, Washington's Dulles International Airport, is excellent, clear, with a temperature of fifty-six degrees. We will be in the air a total of three hours and twenty-five minutes. Please observe that the no-smoking sign is lighted, and we ask that while you are seated you keep your seat belts fastened. Thank you," the clipped voice concluded.

The door had been closed during the speech, Ryan noted sourly. A clever distraction, as their only escape route was eliminated. He leaned back and closed his eyes, resigning himself to fate. One nice thing about being up front was that no one could see him except Cathy—Sally had the window seat—and his wife understood, or at least pretended to. Soon the cabin crew was demonstrating how to put on and inflate life jackets stowed under the seats. Jack watched without interest. Concorde's perfect safety record meant that no one had the first idea on how to ditch one safely, and his position near the nose, so far from the delta-shaped wing, ensured that if they hit the water he'd be in the part of the fuselage that broke off and sank like a cement block. Not that this would matter. The impact itself would surely be fatal.

Asshole, if this bird was dangerous, they would have lost one by now.

The whine of the jet turbines came next, triggering the acid glands in Jack's stomach. He closed his eyes again. *You can't run* away. He commanded himself to control his breathing and relax. That was strangely easy. Jack had never been a white-knuckled flier. He was more likely to be limp.

Some unseen tractor-cart started pushing the aircraft backward. Ryan looked out of the window and watched the scenery move slowly forward. Heathrow was quite a complex. Aircraft from a dozen airlines were visible, mainly sitting at the terminal buildings like ships at a dock. *Wish we could take a ship home,* he thought, forgetting that he'd been one seasick Marine on *Guam,* years ago. The Concorde stopped for a few seconds, then began moving under its own power. Ryan didn't know why the landing gear was so high, but this factor imparted an odd sort of movement as they taxied. The captain came on the intercom again and said something about taking off on afterburners, but Ryan didn't catch it, instead watching a Pan Am 747 lift off. The Concorde was certainly prettier, Ryan thought. It reminded him of the models of fighter planes he'd assembled as a kid. *We're going first* class.

The plane made a sweeping turn at the end of the runway and stopped, bobbing a little on the nose gear. Here we go.

"Departure positions," the intercom announced. Somewhere aft the cabin crew strapped into their jump seats. In 1-D, Jack fitted himself into his seat much like a man awaiting electrocution. His eyes were open now, watching out the window.

The engine sounds increased markedly, and Speedbird started to roll. A few seconds later the engine noise appeared to pick up even more, and Ryan was pressed back into the fabric and vinyl chair. *Damn,* he told himself. The acceleration was impressive, about double anything he'd experienced before. He had no way of measuring it, but an invisible hand was pressing him backward while another pushed at his cast and tried to turn him sideways. The stew had been right. It was a thrill. The grass was racing by his window, then the nose came up sharply. A final bump announced that the main gear was off the ground. Jack listened for its retraction into the airframe, but the sheer power of the takeoff blocked it out. Already they were at least a thousand feet off the ground and rocketing upward at what seemed an impossible angle. He looked over to his wife. Wow, Cathy mouthed at him.

Sally had her nose against the plastic inside window.

The angle of climb eased off slightly. Already the cabin attendants were at work, with a drink cart. Jack got himself a glass of champagne. He wasn't in a celebrating mood, but bubbly wines always affected him fast. Once Cathy had offered to prescribe some Valium for his flying jitters. Ryan had an ingrained reluctance to take drugs. But booze was different, he told himself. He looked out the window. They were still going up. The ride was fairly smooth, no bumps worse than going over the tar strip on a concrete highway.

Jack felt every one, mindful of the fact that he was several thousand feet over—he checked—still the ground.

He fished the paperback out of his pocket and started reading. This was his one sure escape from flying. Jack slouched to his right, his head firmly wedged into the place where the seat and white plastic wall met. He was able to rest his left arm on the aisle seat, and that took the weight off the place on his waist where the cast dug in hard. His right elbow was planted on the armrest, and Ryan made himself a rigid part of the airframe as he concentrated on his book. He'd selected well for the flight, one of Alistair Home's books on the Franco-German conflicts. He soon found another reason to hate his cast. It was difficult to read and turn pages one-handed. He had to set the book down first to do it.

A brief surge of power announced that first one, then the other pair of afterburners had been activated on the Concorde's Olympus engines. He felt the new acceleration, and the aircraft began to climb again as she passed through mach-1, and the airliner gave meaning to her call sign prefix: "Speedbird." Jack looked out the window—they were over water now. He checked his watch: less than three hours to touchdown at Dulles. *You can put up with anything for three hours, can't you?*

Like you have a choice. A light caught his eye. *How did I miss that before?* On the bulkhead a few feet from his head was a digital speed readout. It now read 1024, the last number changing upward rapidly.

Damn! I'm going a thousand miles per hour. What would Robby say about this? I wonder how Robby's doing.... He found himself mesmerized by the number. Soon it was over 1300. The rate of change dropped off nearly to zero, and the display stopped at 1351. *One thousand three hundred fifty-one miles per hour.* He did the computation in his head: nearly two thousand feet per second, almost as fast as a bullet, about twenty miles per minute. Damn. He looked out the window again. *But why is it still noisy? If we're going supersonic, how come the sound isn't all behind us? I'll ask Robby. He'll know.*

The puffy, white, fair-weather clouds were miles below and sliding by at a perceptible rate nevertheless. The sun glinted off the waves, and they stood out like shiny blue furrows. One of the things that annoyed Jack about himself was the dichotomy between his terror of flying and his fascination with what the world looked like from up here. He pulled himself back to the book and read of a period when a steam locomotive was the leading edge of human technology, traveling at a thirtieth of what he was doing now. *This may be*

terrifying, but at least it gets you from place to place.

Dinner arrived a few minutes later. Ryan found that the champagne had given him an appetite. Jack was rarely hungry on an airplane, but much to his surprise he was now. The menu carried on the annoying, and baffling, English habit of advertising their food in French, as if language had any effect on taste. Jack soon found that the taste needed no amplification. Salmon gave way to a surprisingly good steak—something the Brits have trouble with—a decent salad, strawberries and cream for dessert, and a small plate of cheese. A good port replaced the champagne, and Ryan found that forty minutes had slipped by. Less than two hours to home.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking. We are now cruising at fifty-three thousand feet, with a ground speed of thirteen hundred fifty-five miles per hour. As we burn off fuel, the aircraft will float up to a peak altitude of roughly fifty-nine thousand feet. The outside air temperature is sixty degrees below zero Celsius, and the aircraft skin temperature is about one hundred degrees Celsius, this caused by friction as we pass through the air. One side effect of this is that the aircraft expands, becoming roughly eleven inches longer in midnight—"

Metal fatigue! Ryan thought bleakly. *Did you* have to *tell me that?* He touched the window. It felt warm, and he realized that one could boil water on the outside aluminum skin. He wondered what effect that had on the airframe. *Back to the 19th century,* he commanded himself again. Across the aisle his daughter was asleep, and Cathy was immersed in a magazine.

The next time Jack checked his watch there was less than an hour to go. The captain said something about Halifax, Nova Scotia, to his right. Jack looked but saw only a vague dark line on the northern horizon. *North America —we're getting there.* That was good news. As always, his tension and the airliner seat conspired to make his back stiff, and the cast didn't help at all. He felt a need to stand up and walk a few steps, but that was something he tried not to do on airplanes. The steward refilled his port glass, and Jack noticed that the angle of the sun through the window had not changed since London. They were staying even, the aircraft keeping up with the earth's rotation as it sped west. They would arrive at Dulles at about noon, the pilot informed them. Jack looked at his watch again: forty minutes. He stretched his legs and went back to the book.

The next disturbance was when the cabin crew handed out customs and immigration forms. As he tucked his book away, Jack watched his wife go to work listing all the clothes she'd bought. Sally was still asleep, curled up with an almost angelic peace on her face. They made landfall a minute later somewhere over the coast of New Jersey, heading west into Pennsylvania before turning south again. The aircraft was lower now. He'd missed the transonic deceleration, but the cumulus clouds were much closer than they'd been over the ocean. *Okay, Captain Higgins, let's get this bird back on the ground in one solid piece.* He found a silver luggage tag that he was evidently supposed to keep. In fact, he decided to keep the whole package, complete with a certificate that identified him as a Concorde passenger—*or veteran,* he thought

wryly. *I survived the British Airways Concorde.*

Dumbass, if you'd flown the 747 back home, you'd still be over the ocean.

They were low enough to see roads now. The majority of aircraft accidents came at landing, but Ryan didn't see it that way. They were nearly home. His fear was nearly at an end. That was good news as he looked out the window at the Potomac. Finally the Concorde took a large nose-high angle again, coming in awfully fast, Jack thought, as she dropped gently toward the ground. A second later he saw the airport perimeter fence. The heavy bumps on the airliner's main gear followed at once. They were down. They were safe. Anything that happened now was a vehicle accident, not an aircraft one, he told himself. Ryan felt safe in cars, mainly because he was in control. He remembered that Cathy would have to drive today, however.

The seat belt sign came off a moment after the aircraft stopped, and the forward door was opened. Home. Ryan stood and stretched. It was good to be stationary. Cathy had their daughter in her lap, running a brush through her hair as Sally rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"Okay, Jack?"

"Are we home *already?"* Sally asked.

Her father assured her that they were. He walked forward. The stewardess who'd led him aboard asked if he'd enjoyed the ride, and Jack replied, truthfully, that he had. Now that it's over. He found a seat in the mobile lounge, and his family joined him.

"Next time we go across, that's how we do it," Ryan announced quietly.

"Why? Did you like it?" Cathy was surprised.

"You better believe I like it. You only have to be up there half as long." Jack laughed, mainly at himself. As with every flight he took, being back on the ground alive carried its own thrill. He had survived what was patently an unnatural act, and the exhilaration of being alive, and home, gave him a quiet glow of his own. The stride of passengers off an airplane is always jauntier than the stride on. The lounge pulled away. The Concorde looked very pretty indeed as they drew away from it and turned toward the terminal.

"How much money did you spend on clothes?" Jack asked as the lounge stopped at the arrival gate. His wife just handed him the form. "That much?"

"Well, why not?" Cathy grinned. "I can pay for it out of my money, can't I?"

"Sure, babe."

"And that's three suits for you, too, Jack," his wife informed him.

"What? How did you—"

"When the tailor set you up for the tux, I had him do three suits. Your arms are the same length, Jack. They'll fit, as soon as we get that damned cast off you, that is."

Another nice thing about the Concorde: the airliner carried so few people, compared to a wide-body, that getting the luggage back was a snap. Cathy got

a wheeled cart—which Sally insisted on pushing—while Jack retrieved their bags. The last obstacle was customs, where they paid over three hundred dollars' worth of penance for Cathy's purchases. Less than thirty minutes after leaving the aircraft, Jack proceeded to his left out the door, helping Sally with the luggage cart.

"Jack!" It was a big man, taller than Jack's six-one, and broader across the shoulders. He walked badly due to a prosthetic leg that extended above where he had once had a left knee, a gift from a drunken driver. His artificial left foot was a squared-off aluminum band instead of something that looked human. Oliver Wendell Tyler found it easier to walk on. But his hand was completely normal, if rather large. He grabbed Ryan's and squeezed. "Welcome home, buddy!"

"How's it goin', Skip?" Jack disengaged his hand from the grip of a former offensive tackle and mentally counted his fingers. Skip Tyler was a close friend who never fully appreciated his strength.

"Good. Hi, Cathy." His wife got a kiss. "And how's Sally?"

"Fine." She held up her arms, and got herself picked up as desired. Only briefly, though; Sally wriggled free to get back to the luggage cart.

"What are you doing here?" Jack asked. *Oh, Cathy must have called....*

"Don't worry about the car," Dr. Tyler said. "Jean and I retrieved it for you, and dropped it off home. We decided we'd pick you up in ours—more room. She's getting it now."

"Taking a day off, eh?"

"Something like that. Hell, Jack, Billings has been covering your classes for a couple of weeks. Why can't I take an afternoon off?" A skycap approached them, but Tyler waved him off.

"How's Jean?" Cathy asked.

"Six more weeks."

"It'll be a little longer for us," Cathy announced.

"Really?" Tyler's face lit up. "Outstanding!"

It was cool, with a bright autumn sun, as they left the terminal. Jean Tyler was already pulling up with the Tyler family's full-size Chevy wagon. Dark-haired, tall, and willowy, Jean was pregnant with their third and fourth children. The sonogram had confirmed the twins right before the Ryans had left for England. Her otherwise slender frame would have seemed grotesque with the bulge of the babies except for the glow on her face. Cathy went right to her as she got out of the car and said something. Jack knew what it was immediately—their wives immediately hugged: Me, too. Skip wrenched the tailgate open and tossed the luggage inside like so many sheets of paper.

"I gotta admire your timing, Jack. You made it back almost in time for Christmas break," Skip observed as everyone got in the car.

"I didn't exactly plan it that way," Jack objected.

"How's the shoulder?"

"Better'n it was, guy."

"I believe it," Tyler laughed as he pulled away from the terminal. "I was surprised they got you on the Concorde. How'd you like it?"

"It's over a lot faster."

"Yeah, that's what they say."

"How are things going at school?"

"Ah, nothing ever changes. You heard about The Game?" Tyler's head came around.

"No, as a matter of fact." How did *I* ever forget about that?

"Absolutely great. Five points down with three minutes left, we recover a fumble on our twelve. Thompson finally gets it untracked and starts hitting sideline patterns—boom, boom, boom, eight-ten yards a pop. Then he pulls a draw play that gets us to the thirty. Army changes its defense, right? So we go to a spread. I'm up in the press box, and I see their strong-side safety is favoring the outside—figures we gotta stop the ctock—and we call a post for the tight end. Like a charm! Thompson couldn't have *handed* him the ball any better! Twenty-one to nineteen. What a way to end the season."

Tyler was an Annapolis graduate who'd made second-string All-American at offensive tackle before entering the submarine service. Three years before, when he'd been on the threshold of his own command a drunk driver had left him without half his leg. Amazingly, Skip hadn't looked back. After taking his doctorate in engineering from MIT, he'd joined the faculty at Annapolis, where he was also able to scout and do a little coaching in the football program. Jack wondered how much happier Jean was now. A lovely girl who had once worked as a legal secretary, she must have resented Skip's enforced absences on submarine duty. Now she had him home—surely he wasn't straying far; it seemed that Jean was always pregnant—and they were rarely separated. Even when they walked in the shopping malls, Skip and Jean held hands. If anyone found it humorous, he kept his peace about it.

"What are you doing about a Christmas tree, Jack?"

"I haven't thought about it," Ryan admitted.

"I found a place where we can cut 'em fresh. I'm going over tomorrow. Wanna come?"

"Sure. We have some shopping to do, too," he added quietly.

"Boy, you've really been out of it. Cathy called last week. Jean and I finished up the, uh, the important part. Didn't she tell you?"

"No. " Ryan turned to see his wife smile at him. Gotcha! "Thanks, Skip."

"Ah." Tyler waved his hand as they pulled onto the D.C. beltway. "We're going up to Jean's family's place—last chance for her to travel before the twins arrive. And Professor Billings says you have a little work waiting for you."

A little, Ryan thought. *More like two months' worth.*

"When are you going to be able to start back to work?"

"It'll have to wait until he gets the cast off," Cathy answered for Jack. "I'll be taking Jack to Baltimore tomorrow to see about that. We'll get Professor Hawley to check him out."

"No sense hurrying with that kind of injury," Skip acknowledged. He had ample personal experience with that sort of thing. "Robby says hi. He couldn't make it. He's down at Pax River today on a flight simulator, learning to be an airedale again. Rob and Sissy are doing fine, they were just over the house night before last. You picked a good weather day, too. Rained most of last week."

Home, Jack told himself as he listened. Back to the mundane, day-to-day crap that grates on you so much—until somebody takes it away from you. It was so nice to be back to a situation where rain was a major annoyance, and one's day was marked by waking up, working, eating, and going back to bed. Catching things on television, and football games. The comics in the daily paper. Helping his wife with the wash. Curling up with a book and a glass of wine after Sally was put to bed. Jack promised himself that he'd never find this a dull existence again. He'd just spent over a month on the fast track, and was grateful that he'd left it three thousand miles behind him.

"Good evening, Mr. Cooley." Kevin O'Donnell looked up from his menu.

"Hello, Mr. Jameson. How nice to see you," the book dealer replied with well-acted surprise.

"Won't you join me?"

"Why, yes. Thank you."

"What brings you into town?"

"Business. I'm staying overnight with friends at Cobh." This was true; it also told O'Donnell—known locally as Michael Jameson—that he had the latest message with him.

"Care to look at the menu?" O'Donnell handed it over. Cooley inspected it briefly, closed it, and handed it back. No one could have seen the transfer. "Jameson" let the small envelope inside the folder drop to his lap. The conversation which ensued over the next hour drifted through various pleasantries. There were four Gardai in the next booth, and in any case Mr. Cooley did not concern himself with operational matters. His job was that of contact agent and cutout. A weak man, O'Donnell thought, though he'd never told this to anyone. Cooley didn't have the right qualities for real operations; he was better suited to the role of intelligence. Not that he'd ever asked, and surely the smaller man had passed through training well enough. His ideology was sound, but O'Donnell had always sensed within him a weakness of character that accompanied his cleverness. No matter. Cooley was a man with no record in any police station. He'd never even thrown a rock, much less a

cocktail, at a Saracen. He'd preferred to watch and let his hate fester without an emotional release. Quiet, bookish, and unobtrusive, Dennis was perfect for his job. If Cooley was unable to shed blood, O'Donnell knew, he was also unlikely to shed tears. *You bland little fellow, you can organize a superb intelligence-gathering operation, and so long as you don't have to do any of the wet-work yourself, you can—you have helped cause the death of... ten or twelve, wasn't it?* Did the man have any emotions at all? Probably not, the leader judged. Perfect. He had his own little Himmler, O'Donnell told himself—or maybe Dzerzhinsky would be a more apt role model. Yes, "Iron Feliks" Dzerzhinsky: that malignant, effective little man. It was only the round, puffy face that reminded him of the Nazi Himmler—and a man couldn't choose his looks, could he? Cooley had a future in the Organization. When the time came, they'd need a real Dzerzhinsky.

They finished their talking over after-dinner coffee. Cooley picked up the check. He insisted: business was excellent. O'Donnell pocketed the envelope and left the restaurant. He resisted the urge to read the report. Kevin was a man to whom patience came hard, and as a consequence he forced himself to it. Impatience had ruined more operations than the British Army ever had, he knew. Another lesson from his early days with the Provos. He drove his BMW through the old streets at the legal limit, leaving the town behind as he entered the narrow country roads to his home on the headlands. He did not take a direct route, and kept an eye on his mirror. O'Donnell knew that his security was excellent. He also knew that continued vigilance was the reason it remained so. His expensive car was registered to his corporation's head office in Dundalk. It was a real business, with nine blue-water trawlers that dragged purse-seine nets through the cold northern waters that surrounded the British Isles. The business had an excellent general manager, a man who had never been involved in the Troubles and whose skills allowed O'Donnell to live the life of a country gentleman far to the south. The tradition of absentee ownership was an old one in Ireland—like O'Donnell's home, a legacy from the English.

It took just under an hour to reach the private driveway marked by a pair of stone pillars, and another five minutes to reach the house over the sea. Like any common man, O'Donnell parked his car in the open; the carriage house that was attached to the manor had been converted to offices by a local contractor. He went at once to his study. McKenney was waiting for him there, reading a recent edition of Yeats' poetry. Another bookish lad, though he did not share Cooley's aversion to the sight of blood. His quiet, disciplined demeanor concealed an explosive capacity for action. A man very like O'Donnell himself, Michael was. Like the O'Donnell often or twelve years before, his youth needed tempering; hence his assignment as chief of intelligence so that he could learn the value of deliberation, of gathering all the information he could get before he committed himself to action. The Provos never really did that. They used tactical intelligence, but not the strategic kind—a fine explanation, O'Donnell thought, for the mindlessness of their overall strategy. Another of the reasons he had left the Provisionals—but he would return to the fold. Or more properly, the fold would return to him.

Then he would have his army. Kevin already had his plan, though not even his closest associates knew it—at least not all of it.

O'Donnell sat in the leather chair behind the desk and took the envelope from his coat pocket. McKenney discreetly went to the comer bar and got his superior a glass of whiskey. With ice, a taste Kevin had acquired in hotter climes several years before. He set the glass on the desk, and O'Donnell took it, sipping off a tiny bit without a word.

There were six pages to the document, and O'Donnell read through the single-spaced pages as slowly and deliberately as McKenney had just been doing with the words of Yeats. The younger man marveled at the man's patience. For all his reputation as a fighter capable of ruthless action, the chief of the ULA often seemed a creature made of stone, the way he would assemble and process data. Like a computer, but a malignant one. He took fully twenty minutes to go through the six pages.

"Well, our friend Ryan is back in America, where he belongs. Flew the Concorde home, and his wife arranged for a friend to meet them at the airport. Next Monday I expect he'll be back teaching those fine young men and women at their Naval Academy." O'Donnell smiled at the humor of his words. "His Highness and his lovely bride will be back home two days late. It seems that their aircraft developed electrical problems, and a new instrument had to be flown in all the way from England—or so the public story will go. In reality, it would seem that they like New Zealand so much that they wanted some additional time to enjoy their privacy. Security on their arrival will be impressive.

"In fact, looking this over, it would seem that their security for the next few months at least will be impenetrable."

McKenney snorted. "No security's impenetrable. We've proven that ourselves."

"Michael, we do not wish to kill them. Any fool can do that," he said patiently. "Our objective demands that we take them alive."

"But—"

Would they never learn? "No buts, Michael. If I wanted to kill them, they would already be dead, and this Ryan bastard along with them. It is easy to kill, but that will not achieve what we wish."

"Yes, sir." McKenney nodded his submission. "And Sean?"

"They will be processing him in Brixton Prison for another two weeks or so —our friends in C-13 don't want him far from their reach for the moment."

"Does that mean that Sean—"

"Most unlikely," O'Donnell cut him off. "Still and all, I think the Organization is stronger with him than without him, don't you?"

"But how will we know?"

"There is a great deal of high-level interest in our comrade," O'Donnell half-

explained.

McKenney nodded thoughtfully. He concealed his annoyance that the Commander would not share his intelligence source with his own intelligence chief. McKenney knew how valuable the information was, but where it came from was the deepest of all the ULA's secrets. The younger man shrugged it off. He had his own information sources, and his skill at using their information was growing on a daily basis. Having always to wait so long to act on it chafed on him, but he admitted to himself—grudgingly at first, but with increasing conviction—that full preparation had allowed several tricky operations to go perfectly. Another operation that had not gone so well had landed him in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh prison. The lesson he'd learned from this miscued op was that the revolution needed more competent hands. He'd come to hate the PIRA leadership's ineffectiveness even more than he did the British Army. The revolutionary often had more to fear from friends than enemies.

"Anything new with our colleagues?" O'Donnell asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact," McKenney answered brightly. *Our colleagues* were the Provisional Wing of the Irish Republican Army. "One of the cells of the Belfast Brigade is going to go after a pub, day after tomorrow. Some UVF chaps have been using it of tate—not very smart of them, is it?"

"I think we can let that one pass," O'Donnell judged. It would be a bomb, of course, and it would kill a number of people, some of whom might be members of the Ulster Volunteer Force, whom he regarded as the reactionary forces of the ruling bourgeoisie—no more than thugs, since they lacked any ideology at all. So much the better that some UVF would be killed, but really any prod would suffice, since then other UVF gunmen would slink into a Catholic neighborhood and kill one or two people on the street. And the detectives of the RUC's Criminal Investigation Division would investigate, as always, and no one would admit to having seen much of anything, as usual, and the Catholic neighborhoods would retain their state of revolutionary instability. Hate was such a useful asset. Even more than fear, hate was what sustained the Cause. "Anything else?"

"The bombmaker, Dwyer, has dropped out of sight again," McKenney went on.

"The last time that happened... yes, England, wasn't it? Another campaign?"

"Our man doesn't know. He's working on it, but I have told him to be careful."

"Very good." O'Donnell would think about this one. Dwyer was one of the best PIRA bombers, a genius with delayed fuses, someone Scotland Yard's C-13 branch wanted as badly as they wanted anyone. Dwyer's capture would be a serious blow to the PIRA leadership.... "We want our chap to be very careful indeed, but it would be useful to know where Dwyer is."

McKenney got the message loud and clear. It was too bad about Dwyer, but that colleague had picked the wrong side. "And the Belfast brigadier?"

“No.” The chief shook his head.

“But he’ll slip away again. We needed a month to—”

“No, Michael. Timing—remember the importance of timing. The operation is an integrated whole, not a mere collection of events.” The commander of the PIRA’s Belfast Brigade—*Brigade, less than two hundred men,* O’Donnell thought wryly—was the most wanted man in Ulster. Wanted by more than one side, though for the moment the Commander perforce had to let the Brits have him. *Too bad. I will dearly love to make you pay personally for casting me out, Johnny Doyle, for putting a price on my head. But on this I, too, must be patient. After all, I want more than your head.* “You might also keep in mind that our chaps have their own skins to protect. The reason timing is so important is that what we have planned can only work once. That is why we must be patient. We must wait for exactly the right moment. ”

What right moment? *What plan?* McKenney wanted to know. Only weeks before, O’Donnell had announced that “the moment” was at hand, only to call things off with a last-second telephone call from London. Sean Miller knew, as did one or two others, but McKenney didn’t even know who those privileged fellows were. If there was anything the Commander believed in, it was security. The intelligence officer acknowledged its importance, but his youth chafed at the frustration of knowing the importance of what was happening without knowing *what it was.*

“Difficult, isn’t it, Mike?”

“Yes, sir, it is,” McKenney admitted with a smile.

“Just keep in mind where impatience has gotten us,” the leader said.

8

Information

"I guess that about covers it, Jimmy. Thanks from the Bureau for tracking that guy down."

"I really don't think he's the sort of tourist we need, Dan," Owens replied. A Floridian who'd embezzled three million dollars from an Orlando bank had made the mistake of stopping off in Britain on his way to another European country, one with slightly different banking laws. "I think the next time we'll let him do some shopping on Bond Street before we arrest him, though. You can call that a fee—a fee for apprehending him."

"Ha!" The FBI representative closed the last folder. It was six o'clock local time. Dan Murray leaned back in his chair. Behind him, the brick Georgian buildings across the street paled in the dusk. Men were discreetly patrolling the roofs there, as with all the buildings on Grosvenor Square. The American Embassy was not so much heavily guarded as minorly fortified, so many terrorist threat warnings had come and gone over the past six years. Uniformed police officers stood in front of the building, where North Audley Street was closed off to traffic. The sidewalk was decorated with concrete "flowerpots" that a tank could surmount only with difficulty, and the rest of the building had a sloped concrete glacis to fend off car bombs. Inside, behind bullet-resistant glass, a Marine corporal stood guard beside a wall safe containing a .357 Magnum Smith & Wesson revolver. *A hell of* a *thing,* Murray thought. *A hell of a thing. The wonderful world of the international terrorist.* Murray hated working in a building that seemed part of the Maginot Line, hated wondering if there might be some Iranian, or Palestinian, or Libyan, or whatever madman of a terrorist, with an RPG-7 rocket launcher in a building across the street from his office. It wasn't fear for his life. Murray had put his life at risk more than once. He hated the injustice, the insult to his profession, that there were people who would kill their fellow men as a part of some form of political expression. *But they're not madmen at all, are they? The behavioral specialists say that they're not. They're romantics—believers, people willing to commit themselves to an ideal, and to commit any crime to further it.* Romantics*!*

"Jimmy, remember the good old days when we hunted bank bandits who were just in the business for a fast buck?"

"I've never done any of those. I was mainly concerned with ordinary thievery until they sent me to handling murders. But terrorism does make one nostalgic for the day of the common thug. I can even remember when *they* were fairly civilized." Owens refilled his glass with port. A growing problem

for the Metropolitan Police was that the criminal use of firearms was no longer so rare as it had once been, this new tool made more popular by the evening news reports on terrorism within the U.K. And while the streets and parks of London were far safer than their American counterparts, they were not as safe as they'd only recently been. The times were changing in London, too, and Owens didn't like it at all.

The phone rang. Murray's secretary had just left for the night, and the agent lifted it.

"Murray. Hi, Bob. Yeah, he's right here. Bob Highland for you, Jimmy." He handed the phone over.

"Commander Owens here." The officer sipped at his port, then set the glass down abruptly and waved for a pen and pad. "Where exactly? And you've already—good, excellent. I'm coming straightaway."

"What gives?" Murray asked quickly.

"We've just had a tip on a certain Dwyer. Bomb factory in a flat on Tooley Street."

"Isn't that right across from the river from the Tower?"

"Too bloody right. I'm off." Owens rose and grabbed for his coat.

"You mind if I tag along?"

"Dan, you must remember—"

"To keep out of the way." Murray was already on his feet. One hand unconsciously checked his left hip, where his service revolver would be, had the agent not been in a foreign country. Owens had never carried a gun. Murray wondered how you could be a cop and not be armed with something. Together they left Murray's office and trotted up the corridor, turning left for the elevators. Two minutes later they were in the Embassy's basement parking garage. The two officers from Owens' chase car were already in their vehicle, and the Commander's driver followed them out.

Owens was on the radio the instant the car hit the street, with Murray in the back seat.

"You have people rolling?" Murray asked.

"Yes. Bob will have a team there in a few minutes. Dwyer, by God! The description fits perfectly." As much as he tried to hide it, Owens was as excited as a kid on Christmas morning.

"Who tipped you?"

"Anonymous. A male voice, claimed to have seen wiring, and something that was wrapped up in small blocks, when he looked in the window."

"I love it! Peeping Tom cues the cops—probably afraid his wife'll find out what he's been up to. Well, you take what you get." Murray grinned. He'd had cases break on slimmer stuff than this.

The evening traffic was curb-to-curb, and the police siren could not change

that. It took fully twenty frustrating minutes to travel the five miles to Tooley Street, with Owens listening to the radio, his fist beating softly on the front door's armrest while his men arrived at the suspect house. Finally the car darted across the Tower Bridge and turned right. The driver parked it on the sidewalk alongside two other police cars.

It was a three-story building of drab, dirty brick, in a working class neighborhood. Next door was a small pub with its daily menu scrawled on a blackboard. Several patrons were standing at the door, pints in their fists as they watched the police, and more stood across the street. Owens ran to the door. A plainclothes detective was waiting for him.

"All secure, sir. We have the suspect in custody. Top floor, in the rear."

The Commander trotted up the stairs with Murray on his heels. Another detective met him on the top-floor landing. Owens proceeded the last thirty feet with a cruel, satisfied smile on his face.

"It's all over, sir," Highland said. "Here's the suspect."

Maureen Dwyer was stark naked, spread-eagled on the floor. Around her was a puddle of water, and a trail of wet footprints coming from the adjacent bathroom.

"She was taking a bath," Highland explained. "And she'd left her pistol on the kitchen table. No trouble at all."

"Do you have a female detective on the way?"

"Yes, sir. I'm surprised she's not here already."

"Traffic is bloody awful," Owens noted.

"Any evidence of a companion?"

"No, sir. None at all," Highland answered. "Only this."

The bottom drawer of the only bureau in the shabby apartment was lying on the floor. It contained several blocks of what looked like plastic explosive, some blasting caps, and what were probably electronic timers. Already a detective was doing a written inventory while another was busily photographing the entire room with a Nikon camera and strobe. A third was breaking open an evidence kit. Everything in the room would be tagged, dropped in a clear plastic bag, and stored for use in yet another terrorist trial in the Old Bailey. There were smiles of satisfaction everywhere—except for Maureen Dwyer's face, which was pressed to the floor. Two detectives stood over the girl, their service revolvers holstered as they watched the naked, wet figure without a trace of sympathy.

Murray stood in the doorway to keep out of everyone's way while his eyes took in the way Owens' detectives handled the scene. There wasn't much to criticize. The suspect was neutralized, the area secured, and now evidence was being collected; everything was going by the book. He noted that the suspect was kept stationary. A woman officer would perform a cavity search to ensure that she wasn't "holding" something that might be dangerous. This was a little hard on Miss Dwyer's modesty, but Murray didn't think a judge would object.

Maureen Dwyer was a known bomber, with at least three years' work behind her. Nine months before, she'd been seen leaving the site of a nasty one in Belfast that minutes later had killed four people and maimed another three. No, there wouldn't be all that much sympathy for Miss Dwyer. After another several minutes, a detective took the sheet off the bed and draped it over her, covering her from her knees to her shoulders. Through it all, the suspect didn't move. She was breathing rapidly, but made no sound.

"This is interesting," one man said. He pulled a suitcase from under the bed. After checking it for booby traps, he opened it and extracted a theatrical makeup case complete with four wigs.

"Goodness, I could use one of those myself." The female detective squeezed past Murray and approached Owens. "I came as fast as I could, Commander."

"Carry on." Owens smiled. He was too happy to let something this minor annoy him.

"Spread 'em, dearie. You know the drill." The detective put on a rubber glove for her search. Murray didn't watch. This was one thing he'd always been squeamish about. A few seconds later, the glove came off with a snapping sound. A detective handed Dwyer some clothes to put on. Murray watched the suspect dress herself as unselfconsciously as if she'd been alone—no, he thought, alone she'd show more emotion. As soon as her clothes were on, a police officer snapped steel handcuffs on her wrists. The same man informed Dwyer of her rights, not very differently from the way American cops did it. She did not acknowledge the words. Maureen Dwyer looked about at the police, no expression at all on her face, not even anger, and was taken out without having said a single word.

That's a cold piece of work, Murray told himself. Even with her hair wet, with no makeup, she was pretty enough, he thought. Nice complexion. It wouldn't hurt her to knock off eight or ten pounds, but in nice clothes that wouldn't matter very much. *You could pass her on the street, or sit next to her in a bar and offer to buy her a drink, and you'd never suspect that she was carrying two pounds of high explosives in her purse. Thank God we don't have anything like that at home....* He wondered how well the Bureau would do against such a threat. Even with all their resources, the scientific and forensic experts who back up the special agents in the field, this was no easy crime to deal with. For any police force, the name of the game was wait for the bad guys to make a mistake. You had to play for the breaks, just like a football team waited for a turnover. The problem was, the crooks kept getting better, kept learning from their mistakes. It was like any sort of competition. Both sides became increasingly sophisticated. But the criminals always had the initiative. The cops were always playing catchup ball.

"Well, Dan, any critique? Do we measure up to FBI standards?" Owens inquired with the slightest amount of smugness.

"Don't give me that crap, Jimmy!" Murray grinned. Things were settled down now. The detectives were fully engaged in cataloging the physical evidence in the confidence that they already had a solid criminal case. "I'd say

you have this one pretty cold. You know how lucky you are not to have our illegal-search-and-seizure rules?" *Not to mention some of our judges.*

"Finished," the photographer said.

"Excellent," replied Sergeant Bob Highland, who was running the crime scene.

"How'd you get here so fast, Bob?" Murray wanted to know. "You take the tube, or what?"

"Why didn't I think of that?" Highland laughed. "Perhaps we caught the traffic right. We were here within eleven minutes. You weren't that far behind us. We booted the door and had Dwyer in custody in under five seconds. Isn't it amazing how easy it can be—if you have the bloody information you need!"

"Can I come in now?"

"Certainly." Owens waved him into the apartment.

Murray went right to the bureau drawer with the explosives. The FBI man was an expert on explosive devices. He and Owens crouched over the collection.

"Looks like Czech," Murray muttered.

"It is," another detective said. "From Skoda works, you can tell from the wrapping. These are American, though. California Pyronetics, model thirty-one electronic detonator." He tossed one—in a plastic bag—to Murray.

"Damn! They're turning up all over the place—a shipment of these little babies got hijacked a year and a half ago. They were heading for an oil field in Venezuela, and got taken outside Caracas," Murray explained. He gave the small black device a closer look. "The oil field guys love 'em. Safe, reliable, and damned near foolproof. This is as good as the stuff the Army uses. State of the art."

"Where else have they turned up?" Owens asked.

"We're sure about three or four. The problem is, they're so small that it's not always possible to identify what's left. A bank in Puerto Rico, a police station in Peru—those were political. The other one—maybe two—were drug related. Until now they've all been on the other side of the Atlantic. As far as I know, this is the first time they've showed up here. These detonators have lot numbers. You'll want to check them against the stolen shipment. I can get a telex off tonight, have you an answer inside an hour."

"Thank you, Dan."

Murray counted five one-kilo blocks of explosive. The Czech plastique had a good reputation for quality. It was as potent as the stuff Du Pont made for American military use. One block, properly placed, could take a building down. With the Pyronetics timers, Miss Dwyer could have placed five separate bombs, set them for delayed detonation—as much as a month—and been a thousand miles away when they went off.

"You saved some lives tonight, gentlemen. Good one." Murray looked up.

The apartment had a single window facing to the rear. The window had a pull-down blind that was all the way down, and some cheap, dirty curtains. Murray wondered what this flat cost to rent. Not much, he was sure. The heat was turned way up, and the room was getting stuffy. “Anybody mind if I let some air in here?”

“Excellent idea, Dan,” Owens answered.

“Let me do it, sir.” A detective with gloves on put up the blind and then the window. Everything in the room would be dusted for fingerprints also, but opening the window wouldn’t harm anything. A breeze cooled things off in an instant.

“That’s better.” The FBI representative took a deep breath, scarcely noticing the smell of diesel exhaust from the London cabs....

Something was wrong.

It hit Murray as a surprise. Something was wrong. What? He looked out the window. To the left was a—probably a warehouse, a blank four-story wall. Past it on the right, he could see the outline of the Tower of London, standing over the River Thames. That was all. He turned his head to see Owens, also staring out the window. The Commander of C-13 turned his head and looked at Murray, a question on his face also.

“Yes,” Owens said.

“What was it that guy on the phone said?” Murray muttered.

Owens’ head bobbed. “Exactly. Sergeant Highland?”

“Yes, Commander?”

“The voice on the phone. What exactly did it say, and what exactly did it sound like?” Owens kept looking out the window.

“The voice had... a Midlands accent, I should think. A man’s voice. He said that he was looking in the window, and saw explosives and some wires. We have it all on tape, of course.”

Murray reached through the open window and ran a finger along the outside surface of the glass. It came back dirty. “It sure wasn’t a window-washer who called in.” He leaned out the window. There was no fire escape.

“Someone atop the warehouse, perhaps—no,” Owens said at once. “The angle isn’t right, unless she had the material spread out on the floor. That is rather odd.”

“Break-in? Maybe someone got in here, saw the stuff, and decided to call in like a good citizen?” Murray asked. “That doesn’t sound very likely.”

Owens shrugged. “No telling, is there? A boyfriend she dumped—I think for the moment we can be content with counting our blessings, Dan. There are five bombs that will never hurt anyone. Let’s get out of everyone’s way and send that telex off to Washington. Sergeant Highland, gentlemen, this was well done! Congratulations to you all for some splendid police work. Carry on.”

Owens and Murray left the building quietly. Outside they found a small

crowd being restrained by about ten uniformed constables. A TV news crew was on the scene with its bright lights. These were enough to keep them from seeing across the street. This block had three small pubs. In the doorway of one stood a soft-looking man with a pint of bitter in his hand. He showed no emotion, not even curiosity, as he looked across the street. His memory recorded the faces he saw. His name was Dennis Cooley.

Murray and Owens drove to New Scotland Yard headquarters, where the FBI agent made his telex to Washington. They didn't discuss the one anomaly that the case had unexpectedly developed, and Murray left Owens to his work. C-13 had broken yet another bomb case—and done so in the best way, without a single casualty. It meant that Owens and his people would have a sleepless night of paperwork, and preparing reports for the Home Office bureaucracy, and press releases for Fleet Street, but that was something they would gladly accept.

Ryan's first day back at work was easier than he had expected. His prolonged absence had forced the History Department to reassign his classes, and in any case it was almost time for Christmas break, and nearly all of the mids were looking forward to being home for the holidays. Class routine was slightly relaxed, and even the plebes enjoyed a respite from the upperclassmen's harassment in the wake of the win over Army. For Ryan, the result was a fairish collection of letters and documents piled on his In tray, and a quiet day with which to deal with them. He'd arrived in his office at 7:30; by quarter to five he'd dealt with most of his paperwork, and Ryan felt that he'd delivered an honest day's work. He was finishing a series of test questions for the semester's final exam when he smelled cheap cigar smoke and heard a familiar voice.

"Did you enjoy your vacation, boy?" Lieutenant Commander Robert Jefferson Jackson was leaning against the door frame.

"It had a few interesting moments, Robby. The sun over—or under—the yardarm yet?"

"Damn straight!" Jackson set his white cap on top of Ryan's filing cabinet and collapsed unceremoniously into the leather chair opposite his friend's desk.

Ryan closed the file folder on his draft exam and shoved it into a desk drawer. One of the personal touches in his office was a small refrigerator. He opened it and took out a two-liter bottle of 7-Up, along with an empty bottle of Canada Dry ginger ale, then removed a bottle of Irish whiskey from his desk. Robby got two cups from the table by the door and handed them to Jack. Ryan mixed two drinks to the approximate color of ginger ale. It was against Academy policy to have liquor in one's office—a stance Ryan found curious, given the naval orientation of the institution—but drinking "ginger ale" was a winked-upon subterfuge. Besides, everyone recognized that the Officer and Faculty Club was only a minute's walk away. Jack handed one drink over and replaced everything but the empty ginger ale bottle.

“Welcome home, pal!” Robby held his drink up.

“Nice to be back.” The two men clicked their cups together.

“Glad you made it, Jack. You kind of worried us. How’s the arm?” Jackson gestured with his cup.

“Better than it was. You oughta see the cast I started out with. They took it off at Hopkins last Friday. I learned one thing today, though, driving a stick shift through Annapolis with one arm is a bitch. ”

“I’ll bet,” Robby chuckled. “Damn if you ain’t crazy, boy.”

Ryan nodded agreement. He’d met Jackson the previous March at a faculty tea. Robby wore the gold wings of a naval aviator. He’d been assigned to the nearby Patuxent River Naval Air Test Center, Maryland, as an instructor in the test pilot school until a faulty relay had unexpectedly blasted him clear of the Buckeye jet trainer he’d been flying one fine, clear morning. Unprepared for the event, he’d broken his leg badly. The injury had been serious enough to take him off flight status for six months, and the Navy had assigned him to temporary duty as an instructor in Annapolis, where he was currently in the engineering department. It was an assignment which Jackson regarded as one step above pulling oars in a galley.

Jackson was shorter than Ryan, and much darker. He’ was the fourth son of a Baptist preacher in southern Alabama. When they’d first met, the officer was still in a cast, and Jackson had asked Ryan if he might want to try his hand at kendo. It was something that Ryan had never tried, the Japanese fencing sport in which bamboo staves are used in place of samurai swords. Ryan had used pugil sticks in the Marines and figured it wouldn’t be too different. He’d accepted the invitation, thinking that his longer reach would be a decisive advantage, particularly on top of Jackson’s reduced mobility. It hadn’t occurred to him that Jackson would first have asked a brother officer for a kendo match. In fact, Ryan later learned, he had. He’d also learned by then that Robby had the blinding quickness and killer instinct of a rattlesnake. By the time the bruises had faded, they were fast friends.

For his part, Ryan had introduced the pilot to the smoky flavor of good Irish whiskey, and they’d evolved the tradition of an afternoon drink or two in the privacy of Jack’s office.

“Any news on campus?” Ryan asked.

“Still teachin’ the boys and girls,” Jackson said comfortably.

“And you’ve started to like it?”

“Not exactly. The leg’s finally back in battery, though. I’ve been spending my weekends down at Pax River to prove I still know how to fly. You know, you made one hell of a flap hereabouts.”

“When I was shot?”

“Yeah, I was in with the Superintendent when the call came in. The ‘soop’ put it on speaker, and we got this FBI-guy askin’ if we got a nut-case teacher in London playing cops and robbers. I said, sure, I know the jerk, but they

wanted somebody in the History Department to back me up—mainly they wanted the name of your travel agent, I suppose. Anyway, everybody was out to lunch, and I had to track Professor Billings down in the O-Club, and the superintendent did some runnin' around, too. You almost ruined the boss's last golf day with the Governor."

"Damned near ruined my day, too."

"Was it like they said in the papers?"

"Probably. The Brit papers got it pretty straight."

Jackson nodded as he tapped the cigar on Ryan's ashtray. "You're lucky you didn't come home parcel post, boy," he said.

"Don't you start, Robby. One more guy tells me I'm a hero, and I'll flatten him—"

"Hero? Hell, no! If all you honkies were that dumb, my ancestors would have imported yours." The pilot shook his head emphatically. "Didn't anybody ever tell you, that hand-to-hand stuff is *dangerous?"*

"If you'd been there, I bet you'd have done the same—"

"No chance! God Almighty, is there anything dumber than a Marine? This hand-to-hand stuff, Jeez, you get blood on your clothes, mess up the shine on your shoes. No way, boy! When I do my killin', it'll be with cannon shells and missiles—you know, the civilized way." Jackson grinned. "The safe way."

"Not like flying an airplane that decides to blast you loose without warning you first," Ryan scoffed.

"I dinged my leg some, sure, but when I got my Tomcat strapped to my back, I'm hummin' along at six hundred-plus knots. Anybody who wants to put a bullet in me, fella, he can do it, but he's gonna have to work at it."

Ryan shook his head. He was hearing a safety lecture from someone who just happened to be in the most dangerous business there was—a carrier aviator *and* a test pilot.

"How's Cathy and Sally?" Robby asked, more seriously. "We meant to come over Sunday, but we had to drive up to Philadelphia on short notice."

"It was kinda tough on them, but they came through all right."

"You got a family to worry about, Jack," Jackson pointed out. "Leave that rescue stuff to the professionals." The funny thing about Robby, Jack knew, was his caution. For all the down-home bantering about his life as a fighter pilot, Jackson never took a risk he didn't have to. He'd known pilots who had. Many were dead. There was not a single man wearing those gold wings who had not lost a friend, and Jack wondered how deeply that had affected Jackson over the years. Of one thing he was sure, though Robby was in a dangerous business, like all successful gamblers he thought things over before he moved his chips. Wherever his body went, his mind had already gone.

"It's all over, Rob. It's all behind me, and there won't be a next time."

"We'll put a big roger on that. Who else am I gonna drink with? So how'd

you like it over there?"

"I didn't see very much, but Cathy had a great time, all things considered. I think she saw every castle in the country—plus the new friends we made."

"That must have been right interesting," Robby chuckled. The flyer stubbed out his cigar. They were cheap, crooked, evil-smelling little things, and Jack figured that Jackson puffed on them only as part of the Image of the Fighter Pilot. "Not hard to understand why they took a liking to you."

"They took a liking to Sally, too. They got her started riding horses," Jack added sourly.

"Oh, yeah? So what are they like?"

"You'd like 'em," Ryan assured him.

Jackson smiled. "Yeah, I imagine I would. The Prince used to drive Phantoms, so he must be a right guy, and his dad's supposed to know his way around a cockpit, too. I hear you took the Concorde back. How'd you like it?"

"I meant to ask you about that. How come it was so noisy? I mean, if you're doing mach-2-plus, why isn't all the noise behind you?"

Jackson shook his head sadly. "What's the airplane made out of?"

"Aluminum, I suppose."

"You suppose the speed of sound is faster in metal than it is in air, maybe?" Jackson asked.

"Oh. The sound travels through the body of the airplane."

"Sure, engine noise, noise from the fuel pumps, various other things. "

"Okay." Ryan filed that away.

"You didn't like it, did you?" Robby was amused at his friend's attitude toward flying.

"Why does everybody pick on me for that?" Ryan asked the ceiling.

"Because it's so funny, Jack. You're the last person in the world who's afraid to fly."

"Hey, Rob, I do it, okay? I get aboard, and strap in, and do it."

"I know. I'm sorry." Jackson eased off. "It's just that it's so easy to needle you on this—I mean, what are friends for? You done good, Jack. We're proud of you. But for Christ's sake, be careful, okay? This hero shit gets people killed."

"I hear you."

"Is it true about Cathy?" Robby asked.

"Yep. The doc confirmed it the same day they took the cast off."

"Way to go, pop! I'd say that calls for another—a light one." Robby held his cup out, and Jack poured. "Looks like the bottle's about had it, too."

"It's my turn to buy the next one, isn't it?"

“It’s been so long, I don’t remember,” Robby admitted. “But I’ll take your word for it.”

“So they have you back in airplanes?”

“Next Monday they’ll let me back in a Tomcat,” Jackson replied. “And come summer, it’s back to the work they pay me for.”

“You got orders?”

“Yeah, you’re looking at the prospective XO of VF-41.” Robby held his cup up in the air.

The executive officer of Fighter Squadron 41, Ryan translated. “That’s all right, Rob!”

“Yeah, it’s not bad, considering I’ve been a black shoe for the past seven months.”

“Right out on carriers?”

“No, we’ll be on the beach for a while, down at Oceana, Virginia. The squadron’s deployed now on *Nimitz*. When the boat comes back for refit, the fighters stay on the beach for refresher training. Then we’ll probably redeploy on *Kennedy*. They’re reshuffling the squadron assignments. Jack, it’ll be good to strap that fighter back on! I’ve been here too long.”

“We’re gonna miss you and Sissy.”

“Hey, we don’t leave till summer—they’re making me finish out the school year—and Virginia Beach isn’t all that far away. Come on down and visit, for crying out loud. You don’t have to fly, Jack. You can drive,” Jackson pointed out.

“Well, you’ll probably be around for the new kid.”

“Good.” Jackson finished off his drink.

“Are you and Sissy going anywhere for Christmas?”

“Not that I know of. I can’t, really; most of the holidays I’m gonna be flying down at Pax.”

“Okay, come on over to our place for dinner—three-ish.”

“Cathy’s family isn’t—”

“No,” Ryan said as he tucked everything back where it belonged. Robby shook his head.

“Some folks just don’t catch on,” the pilot observed.

“Well, you know how it is. I don’t worship at the temple of the Almighty Dollar anymore.”

“But you managed to do a job on the collection basket.”

Jack grinned. “Yeah, you might say that.”

“That reminds me. There’s a little outfit outside Boston that’s gonna hit it big.”

“Oh?” Jack’s ears perked up.

“It’s called Holoware, Ltd., I think. They came up with new software for the computers on fighter planes—really good stuff, cuts a third off the processing time, generates intercept solutions like magic. It’s set up on the simulator down at Pax, and the Navy’s going to buy it real soon.”

“Who knows?”

Jackson laughed as he got his things. “The company doesn’t know yet. Captain Stevens down at Pax just got the word from the guys out at Topgun. Bill May out there—I used to fly with Bill—ran the stuff for the first time a month ago, and he liked it so much that he almost got the Pentagon boys to cut through all the bullshit and just buy the stuff. It got hung up, but DCNO-Air is on it now, and they say Admiral Rendall is really hot for it. Thirty more days, and that little company is going to get a Christmas present. A little late,” Robby said, “but it’ll fill one big stocking. Just for the hell of it, I checked the paper this morning, and sure enough, they’re listed on the American Exchange. You might want to check it out.”

“What about you?”

The pilot shook his head. “I don’t play the market, but you still fool around there, right?”

“A little. Is this classified or anything?” Jack asked.

“Not that I know of. The classified part is how the software is written, and they got a real good classification system on that—nobody understands it. Maybe Skip Tyler could figure it out, but I never will. You have to be a nuc to think in ones and zeros. Pilots don’t think digital. We’re analog.” Jackson chuckled. “Gotta run. Sissy’s got a recital tonight.”

“ ’Night, Rob.”

“Low and slow, Jack.” Robby closed the door behind him. Jack leaned back in his chair for a moment. He smiled to himself, then rose and packed some papers into his briefcase.

“Yeah,” he said to himself. “Just to show him that I still know how.”

Ryan got his coat on and left the building, walking downhill past the Preble Memorial. His car was parked on Decatur Road. Jack drove a five-year-old VW Rabbit. It was a very practical car for the narrow streets of Annapolis, and he refused to have a Porsche like his wife used for commuting back and forth to Baltimore. It was dumb, he’d told Cathy about a thousand times, for two people to have three cars. A Rabbit for him, a 911 for her, and a station wagon for the family. Dumb. Cathy’s suggestion that he should sell the Rabbit and drive the wagon was, of course, unacceptable. The little gas engine fired up at once. It sounded too noisy. He’d have to check the muffler. Jack pulled out, turning right, as always, onto Maryland Avenue through Gate Three in the grimly undecorous perimeter wall that surrounded the Academy. A Marine guard saluted him on the way out. Ryan was surprised by that—they’d never done it before.

Driving wasn't easy. When he shifted, Ryan twisted his left hand inside the sling to grab the wheel while his right hand worked the gearshift. The rush-hour traffic didn't help. Several thousand state workers were disgorging themselves from various government buildings, and the crowded streets gave Ryan plenty of opportunity to stop and restart from first gear. His Rabbit had five, plus reverse, and by the time he got to the Central Avenue light he was asking himself why he hadn't gotten the Rabbit with an automatic. Fuel efficiency was the answer—is *this worth an extra two miles per gallon?* Ryan laughed at himself as he headed east toward the Chesapeake Bay, then right onto Falcon's Nest Road.

There was rarely any traffic back here. Falcon's Nest Road came to a dead end not too far down from Ryan's place, and on the other side of the road were several farms, also dormant at the beginning of winter. The stubby remains of cornstalks lay in rows on the brown, hard fields. He turned left into his driveway. Ryan had thirty acres on Peregrine Cliff. His nearest neighbor, an engineer named Art Palmer, was half a mile away through heavily wooded slopes and across a murky stream. The cliffs on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay were nearly fifty feet high where Jack lived—those farther south got a little higher, but not much—and made of crumbly sandstone. They were a paleontologist's delight. Every so often a team from a local college or museum would scour at the base and find fossilized shark teeth that had once belonged to a creature as large as a midget submarine, along with the bones of even more unlikely creatures that had lived here a hundred million years earlier.

The bad news was that the cliffs were prone to erosion. His house was built a hundred feet back from the edge, and his daughter was under strict orders—twice enforced with a spanking—not to go anywhere near the edge. In an attempt to protect the cliff face, the state environmental-protection people had persuaded Ryan and his neighbors to plant kudzu, a prolific weed from the American South. The weed had thoroughly stabilized the cliff face, but it was now attacking the trees near the cliff, and Jack periodically had to go after them with a weed-eater to save the trees from being smothered. But that wasn't a problem this time of year.

Ryan's lot was half open and half wooded. The part near the road had once been farmed, though not easily, as the ground was not flat enough to drive a tractor across it safely. As he approached his house, the trees began, some gnarled old oaks, and other deciduous trees whose leaves were gone now, leaving skeletal branches to reach out into the thin, cold air. As he approached the carport, he saw that Cathy was already home, her Porsche and the family wagon parked in the carport. He had to leave his Rabbit in the open.

"Daddy!" Sally yanked open the door and ran out without her jacket to meet her father.

"It's too cold out here," Jack told his daughter.

"No, isn't," Sally replied. She grabbed his briefcase and carried it with two hands, puffing as she climbed up the three steps into the house.

Ryan got out of his coat and hung it in the entry closet. As with everything else, it was hard to do with one hand. He was cheating a little now. As with steering the car, he was starting to use his left hand, careful to avoid putting any strain on his shoulder. The pain was completely gone now, but Ryan was sure that he could bring it back quickly enough if he did something dumb. Besides which, Cathy would yell at him. He found his wife in the kitchen. She was looking at the pantry and frowning.

"Hi, honey."

"Hi, Jack. You're late."

"So are you." Ryan kissed his wife. Cathy smelled his breath. Her nose crinkled.

"How's Robby?"

"Fine—and I just had two very light ones."

"Uh-huh." She turned back to the pantry. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Surprise me," Jack suggested.

"You're a big help! I ought to let you fix it."

"It's not my turn, remember?"

"I knew I should have stopped at the Giant," Cathy groused.

"How was work?"

"Only one procedure. I assisted Bernie on a cornea transplant, then I had to take the residents around for rounds. Dull day. Tomorrow'll be better. Bernie says hi, by the way. How does franks and beans grab you?"

Jack laughed. Ever since they came back, their diet had consisted mainly of basic American staples, and it was a little late for something fancy.

"Okay. I'm going to change and punch up something on the computer for a few minutes."

"Careful with the arm, Jack."

Five times a day *she* warns me. Jack sighed. Never marry a doctor. The Ryan home was a deckhouse design. The living /dining room had a cathedral ceiling that peaked sixteen feet over the carpeted floor with an enormous wood beam. A wall of triple-paned windows faced the bay, with a large deck beyond the sliding glass doors. Opposite the glass was a massive brick fireplace that reached through the roof. The master bedroom was half a level above the living room, with a window that enabled one to look down into it. Ryan trotted up the steps. The house design accommodated large closets. Ryan selected casual clothes, and went through the annoying ritual of changing himself one-handed. He was still experimenting, trying to find an efficient way to do it.

Finished, he went back down, and curved around the stairs to the next level down, his library. It was a large one. Jack read a lot, and also purchased books he didn't have time to read, banking against the time when he would. He had

a large desk up against the windows on the bay side of the house. Here was his personal computer, an Apple, and all of its peripheral equipment. Ryan flipped it on and started typing in instructions. Next he put his modem on line and placed a call into CompuServe. The time of day guaranteed easy access, and he selected MicroQuote II from the entry menu.

A moment later he was looking at Holoware, Ltd.'s stock performance over the past three years. The stock was agreeably unimpressive, fluctuating from two dollars to as much as six, but that was two years back—it was a company which had once held great promise, but somewhere along the way investors had lost confidence. Jack made a note, then exited the program and got into another, Disclosure II, to look at the company's SEC filings and last annual report. *Okay,* Ryan told himself. The company was making money, but not very much. One problem with hi-tech issues was that so many investors wanted big returns very quickly, or they'd move on to something else, forgetting that things didn't necessarily happen that way. This company had found a small though somewhat precarious niche, and was ready to try something bold. Ryan made a mental estimate of what the Navy contract would be worth and compared it with the company's total revenues....

"Okay!" he told himself before exiting the system completely and shutting his computer down. Next he called his broker. Ryan worked through a discount brokerage firm that had people on duty around the clock. Jack always dealt with the same man.

"Hi, Mort, it's Jack. How's the family?"

"Hello again, Doctor Ryan. Everything's fine with us. What can we do for you tonight?"

"An outfit called Holoware, one of the hi-tech bunch on Highway 128 outside Boston. It's on the AMEX."

"Okay." Ryan heard tapping on a keyboard. Everyone used computers. "Here it is. Going at four and seven-eighths, not a very active issue... until lately. There has been some modest activity over the past month."

"What kind?" Ryan asked. This was another sign to look for.

"Oh, I see. The company is buying itself back a little. No big deal, but they're buying their own stock out."

Bingo! Ryan smiled to himself. *Thank you, Robby. You gave me a tip on a real live one.* Jack asked himself if this constituted trading on inside information. His initial tip might be called that, but his decision to buy was based on confirmation made legally, on the basis of his experience as a stock trader. *Okay, it's legal.* He could do whatever he wanted.

"How much do you think you can get for me?"

"It's not a very impressive stock."

"How often am I wrong, Mort?"

"How much do you want?"

“At least twenty-K, and if there’s more, I want all of it you can find.” There was no way he’d get hold of more than fifty thousand shares, but Ryan made a snap decision to grab all he could. If he lost, it was only money, and it had been over a year since he’d last had a hunch like this one. If they got the Navy contract, that stock would increase in value tenfold. The company must have had a tip, too. Buying back their own stock on the slim resources they had would, if Ryan was guessing right, dramatically increase the firm’s capital, enabling a rapid expansion of operations. Holoware was betting on the future, and betting big.

There was five seconds of silence on the phone.

“What do you know, Jack?” the broker asked finally.

“I’m playing a hunch.”

“Okay... twenty-K plus... I’ll call you at ten tomorrow. You think I should... ?”

“It’s a toss of the dice, but I think it’s a good toss.”

“Thanks. Anything else?”

“No. I have to go eat dinner. Good night, Mort.”

“See ya.” Both men hung up. At the far end of the phone, the broker decided that he’d go in for a thousand shares, too. Ryan was occasionally wrong, but when he was right, he tended to be very right.

“Christmas Day,” O’Donnell said quietly. “Perfect.”

“Is that the day they’re moving Sean?” McKenney asked.

“He leaves London by van at four in the morning. That’s bloody good news. I was afraid they’d use a helicopter. No word on the route they’ll use....” He read on. “But they’re going to take him across on the Lymington ferry at eight-thirty Christmas morning. Excellent timing, when you think about it. Too early for heavy traffic. Everyone’ll be opening his presents and getting dressed for church. The van might even have the ferry to itself—who’d expect a prisoner transfer on Christmas Day?”

“So, we are going to break Sean out, then?”

“Michael, our men do us little good when they’re inside, don’t they? You and I are flying over tomorrow morning. I think we’ll drive down to Lymington and look at the ferry.”

9

A Day for Celebration

“God, it’ll be nice to have two arms again,” Ryan observed.

“Two more weeks, maybe three,” Cathy reminded him. “And keep your hand still inside the damned sling!”

“Yes, dear.”

It was about two in the morning, and things were going badly—and well. Part of the Ryan family tradition—a tradition barely three years old, but a tradition nevertheless—was that after Sally was in bed and asleep, her parents would creep down to the basement storage area—a room with a padlocked door—and bring the toys upstairs for assembly. The previous two years, this ceremony had been accompanied by a couple of bottles of champagne. Assembling toys was a wholly different sort of exercise when the assemblers were half blasted. It was their method of relaxing into the Christmas spirit.

So far things had gone well. Jack had taken his daughter to the seven o‘clock children’s mass at St. Mary’s, and gotten her to bed a little after nine. His daughter had slid her head around the fireplace wall only twice before a loud command from her father had banished her to her bedroom for good, her arm clasping an overly talkative AG Bear to her chest. By midnight it was decided that she was asleep enough for her parents to make a little noise. This had begun the toy trek, as Cathy called it. Both parents removed their shoes to minimize noise on the hardwood steps and went downstairs. Of course, Jack forgot the key to the padlock, and had to climb back upstairs to the master bedroom to search for it. Five minutes later the door was opened and the two of them made four trips each, setting up a lavish pile of multicolored boxes near the tree, next to Jack’s tool kit.

“You know what the two most obscene words in the English language are, Cathy?” Ryan asked nearly two hours later.

“‘Assembly required,’ ” his wife answered with a giggle. “Honey, last year I said that.”

“A small Phillips.” Jack held his hand out. Cathy smacked the screwdriver into his hand like a surgical instrument. Both of them were sitting on the rug, fifteen feet from the eight-foot tree. Around them was a crescent of toys, some in boxes, some already assembled by the now-exasperated father of a little girl.

“You ought to let me do that.”

“This is man’s work,” her husband said. He sat the screwdriver down and sipped at a glass of champagne.

“You chauvinist pig! If I let you do this by yourself, you wouldn’t be finished by Easter.”

She was right, Jack told himself. Doing it half-drunk wasn’t all that hard. Doing it one-handed was hard but not insurmountable. Doing it one-handed *and* half-drunk was.... The damned screws didn’t want to stay in the plastic, and the instructions for putting a V-8 engine together had to be easier than this!

“Why is it that a doll needs a house?” Jack asked plaintively. “I mean, the friggin’ doll’s already *in* a house, isn’t she?”

“It must be hard, being a chauvinist pig. You dodos just don’t understand anything,” Cathy noted sympathetically. “I guess men never get over baseball bats—all those simple, one-piece toys. ”

Jack’s head turned slowly. “Well, the least you could do is have another glass of wine.”

“One’s the weekly limit, Jack. I did have a big glass,” she reminded him.

“And made me drink the rest.”

“You bought the bottle, Jack.” She picked it up. “Big one, too.”

Ryan turned back to the Barbie Doll house. He thought he remembered when the Barbie Doll had been invented, a simple, rather curvy doll, but still just a damned doll, something that girls played with. It hadn’t occurred to him then that he might someday have a little girl of his own. *The things we do for our kids,* he told himself. Then he laughed quietly at himself. *Of course we do, and we enjoy it. Tomorrow this will be a funny memory, like the Christmas morning last year when I nearly put this very screwdriver through the palm of my hand.* If he didn’t enlist his wife’s assistance, Ryan told himself, Santa would be planning next year’s flight before he finished. Jack took a deep breath and swallowed his pride.

“Help.”

Cathy checked her watch. “That took about forty minutes longer than I expected.”

“I must be slowing down.”

“Poor baby, having to drink all that champagne all by himself.” She kissed him on the forehead. “Screwdriver.”

He handed it to her. Cathy took a quick look at the plans. “No wonder, you dummy. You’re using a short screw when you’re supposed to use a long one.”

“I keep forgetting that I’m married to a high-priced mechanic.”

“That’s real Christmas spirit, Jack.” She grinned as she turned the screw into place.

“A very pretty, smart, and extremely lovable high-priced mechanic.” He ran

a finger down the back of her neck.

"That's a *little* better."

"Who's better with tools than I am, one-handed."

Her head turned to reveal the sort of smile a wife saves only for the husband she loves. "Give me another screw, Jack, and I'll forgive you."

"Don't you think you should finish the doll house first?"

"Screw, dammit!" He handed her one. "You have a one-track gutter, but I forgive you anyway."

"Thanks. If it didn't work, though, I had something else planned."

"Oh, did Santa come for me, too?"

"I'm not sure. I'll check in a few minutes."

"You didn't do bad, considering," his wife said, finishing off the orange plastic roof. "That's it, isn't it?"

"Last one," Jack confirmed. "Thanks for the assist, babe."

"Did I ever tell you what—no, I didn't. It was one of the ladies-in-waiting. I never did find out what they were waiting for. Anyway, this one countess... she was right out of *Gone With the Wind,"* Cathy said with a chuckle. It was his wife's favorite epithet for useless women. "She asked me if I did needlepoint."

Not the sort of thing you ask my wife. Jack grinned at the windows. "And you said..."

"Only on eyeballs." A sweet, nasty smile.

"Oooh. I hope that wasn't over lunch."

"Jack! You know me better than that. She was nice enough, and she played a pretty good piano."

"Good as yours?"

"No." His wife smiled at him. Jack reached out to squeeze the tip of her nose.

"Caroline Ryan, MD, liberated woman, instructor in ophthalmic surgery, world-famous player of classical piano, wife and mother, takes no crap off anybody."

"Except her husband."

"When's the last time I ever won an exchange with you?" Jack asked.

"Jack, we're not in competition. We're in love." She leaned toward him.

"I won't argue with you on that," he said quietly before kissing his wife's offered lips. "How many people do you suppose are still in love after all the time we've been married?"

"Just the lucky ones, you old fart. 'All the time we've been married'!"

Jack kissed her again and rose. He walked carefully around the sea of toys

toward the tree and returned with a small box wrapped in green Christmas paper. He sat down beside his wife, his shoulder against hers as he dropped the box in her lap.

"Merry Christmas, Cathy."

She opened the box as greedily as a child, but neatly, using her nails to slit the paper. She found a white cardboard box, and inside it, a felt-covered one. This she opened slowly.

It was a necklace of fine gold, more than a quarter-inch wide, designed to fit closely around the neck. You could tell the price by the workmanship and the weight. Cathy Ryan took a deep breath. Her husband held his. Figuring out women's fashions was not his strongest point. He'd gotten advice from Sissy Jackson, and a very patient clerk at the jewelry store. *Do you like it?*

"I better not swim with this on."

"But you won't have to take it off when you scrub," Jack said. "Here." He took it from the box and put it around her neck. He managed to clasp it one-handed on the first try.

"You practiced." One hand traced over the necklace while her eyes looked deeply into his. "You practiced, just so you could put it on me yourself, didn't you?"

"For a week at the office." Jack nodded. "Wrapping it was a bitch, too."

"It's wonderful. Oh, Jack!" Both her arms darted around his neck, and he kissed the base of hers.

"Thanks, babe. Thanks for being my wife. Thanks for having my kids. Thanks for letting me love you."

Cathy blinked away a tear or two. They gave her blue eyes a gleam that made him happier than any man on earth. *Let me count the ways ...*

"Just something I saw," he explained casually, lying. It was something he'd seen after looking for nine hours, through seven stores in three shopping malls. "And it just said to me, 'I was made for her.' "

"Jack, I didn't get you anything like—"

"Shut up. Every morning I wake up, and I see you next to me, I get the best present there is."

"You are a sentimental jerk right out of some book—but I don't mind."

"You do like it?" he asked carefully.

"You dummy—I love it!" They kissed again. Jack had lost his parents years before. His sister lived in Seattle, and most of the rest of his relations were in Chicago. Everything he loved was in this house: a wife, a child—and a third of another. He'd made his wife smile on Christmas, and now this year went into the ledger book as a success.

About the time Ryan started assembling the doll house, four identical blue

vans left the Brixton Prison at five-minute intervals. For each, the first thirty minutes involved driving through the side streets of suburban London. In each, a pair of police officers sat looking out the small windows in the rear doors, watching to see if there might be a car trailing the truck on its random path through the city.

They'd picked a good day for it. It was a fairly typical morning for the English winter. The vans drove through patches of fog and cold rain. There was a moderate storm blowing in from the Channel, and best of all, it was dark. The island's northern latitude guaranteed that the sun would not be up for some hours yet, and the dark blue vans were invisible in the early morning.

Security was so strict that Sergeant Bob Highland of C-13 didn't even know that he was in the third van to leave the jail. He did know that he was sitting only a few feet from Sean Miller, and that their destination was the small port of Lymington. They had a choice of three ports to take them to the Isle of Wight, and three different modes of transport: ordinary ferry, hovercraft, and hydrofoil. They might also have chosen a Royal Navy helicopter out of Gosport, but Highland needed only a quick look at the starless sky to rule that one out. *Not a good idea,* he thought to himself. Besides, security is airtight. Not more than thirty people knew that Miller was being moved this morning. Miller himself hadn't known until three hours before, and he still didn't know what prison he was heading to. He'd only learn when he got to the island.

Embarrassments to the British prison system had accumulated over the years. The old, forbidding structures that inhabited such desolate places as Dartmoor in Cornwall had turned out to be amazingly easy to escape from, and as a result two new maximum-security facilities, Albany and Parkhurst, had been built on the Isle of Wight. There were many advantages to this. An island by definition was easier to secure, and this one had only four regular entry points. More importantly, this island was a clannish place even by English standards, and any stranger on the loose would at least be noticed, and might even be commented upon. The new prisons were somewhat more comfortable than those constructed in the previous century. It was an accident, but one to which Highland did not object. Along with the better living conditions for the prisoners came facilities designed to make escape very difficult—nothing made them impossible, but these new prisons had television cameras to cover every inch of wall, electronic alarms in the most unlikely of places, and guards armed with automatic weapons.

Highland stretched and yawned. With luck he'd get home by early afternoon and still salvage something of Christmas Day with his family.

"I don't see anything at all to concern us," the other constable said, his nose against the small glass rectangle in the door. "Only a handful of vehicles on the street, and none are following us."

"I shouldn't complain," Highland observed. He turned around to look at Miller.

The prisoner sat all the way forward on the left-hand bench. His hands were

manacled, a chain running from the cuffs to a similar pair on his ankles. With luck and a little assistance, a man so restrained might be able to keep pace with a crawling infant, but he'd have little chance of outracing a two-year-old. Miller just sat there, his head back against the wall of the van, his eyes closed as the vehicle bounced and jolted over the road. He looked to be asleep, but Highland knew better. Miller had withdrawn into himself again, lost in some kind of contemplation.

What are you thinking about, Mr. Miller? the policeman wanted to ask. It wasn't that he'd failed to ask questions. Almost every day since the incident on The Mall, Highland and several other detectives had sat across a rugged wood table from this young man arid tried to start some kind of conversation. He was a strong one, Highland admitted to himself. He had spoken but one unnecessary word, and that only nine days before. A jailer with more indignation than professionalism had used the excuse of a plumbing problem in Miller's cell to move him temporarily to another. In the other were two ODCs, as they were called: Ordinary Decent Criminals, as opposed to the political kind that C-13 dealt with. One was awaiting sentencing for a series of vicious street robberies, the other for the gun-murder of a shop owner in Kensington. Both knew who Miller was, and hated him enough to look at the small young man as a way to atone for the crimes which they little regretted in any case. When Highland had shown up for yet another fruitless interrogation session, he'd found Miller facedown on the floor of the cell, his pants gone, and the robber sodomizing him so brutally that the policeman had actually felt sympathy for the terrorist.

The Ordinary Decent Criminals had withdrawn at Highland's command, and when the cell door was opened, Highland had himself picked Miller up and helped him to the dispensary. And there Miller had actually spoken to him as though to another human being. A single word from the puffy, split lips: "Thanks."

Cop rescues terrorist, Highland thought to himself, *some headline that would be.* The jailer had pleaded innocence, of course. There was a problem with the plumbing in Miller's cell—somehow the work order had got mislaid, you see—and the jailer had been called to quell a disturbance elsewhere. Hadn't heard a sound from that end of the cell block. Not a sound. Miller's face had been beaten to a bloody pulp, and certainly he'd have no toilet problems for a few more days. His sympathy for Miller had been short-lived. Highland was still angry with the jailer. It was his professionalism that was offended. What the jailer had done was, quite simply, wrong, and potentially the first step on a path that could lead back to the rack and hot pincers. The law was not so much designed to protect society from the criminals, but more profoundly to protect society from itself. This was a truth that not even all policemen understood fully, but it was the single lesson that Highland had learned from five years in the Anti-Terrorist Branch. It was a hard lesson to believe when you'd seen the work of the terrorists.

Miller's face still bore some of the marks, but he was a young man and he was healing quickly. Only for a brief few minutes had he been a victim, a human victim. Now he was an animal again. Highland was hard-pressed to

think of him as a fellow man—but that was what his professionalism was for. *Even for the likes of you.* The policeman looked back out the rear window.

It was a boring drive, as it had to be with no radio, no conversation, only vigilance for something that almost certainly wasn't out there. Highland wished that he'd put coffee in his thermos instead of tea. They watched the truck pass out of Woking, then Aldershot and Farnham. They were in the estate country of Southern England now. All around them were stately homes belonging to the horse crowd, and the less stately homes of those whom they employed. It was a pity it was dark, Highland thought, this could be a very pleasant drive. As it was, the fog hung in the numerous valleys, and rain pelted the flat metal top of the van, and the van's driver had to be especially careful as he negotiated the narrow, twisting roads that characterize the English countryside. The only good news was the near-total absence of traffic. Here and there Highland saw a solitary light over some distant door, but there was little more than that.

An hour later, the van used the M-27 motorway to bypass Southampton, then turned south on a secondary—"Class A"—road for Lymington. Every few miles they passed through a small village. There were the beginnings of life here and there. A few bakeries had cars parked outside while their owners got fresh, hot bread for the day's dinner. Early church services were under way already, but the real traveling wouldn't start until the sun was up, and that was still over two hours off. The weather was worsening. They were only a few miles from the coast now, and the wind was gusting at thirty miles per hour. It blew away the fog, but also drove sheets of cold rain and rocked the van on its wheels.

"Miserable bloody day to take a boat ride," the other cop in the back commented.

"Only supposed to be thirty minutes," Highland said, his own stomach already queasy at the thought. Born in a nation of seamen, Bob Highland detested traveling on the water.

"On a day like this? An hour, more like." The man started humming "A Life on the Rolling Wave" while Highland started regretting the large breakfast he'd fixed before leaving home.

Nothing for it, he told himself. *After we deliver young Mr. Miller, it's home for Christmas and two days off. I've bloody earned it.* Thirty minutes later they arrived in Lymington.

Highland had been there once before, but he remembered more than he could see. The wind off the water was now a good forty miles per hour, a full gale out of the southwest. He remembered from the map that most of the boat ride to the Isle of Wight was in sheltered waters—a relative term, but something to depend on nonetheless. The ferry *Cenlac* waited at the dock for them. Only half an hour before, the boat's captain had been told that a special passenger was en route. That explained the four armed officers who stood or sat in various places around the ferry. A low-profile operation, to be sure, and it didn't interfere with the ferry's other passengers, many of them carrying

bundles whose identity didn't need to be guessed at.

The Lymington to Yarmouth ferry cast off her lines at 8:30 exactly. Highland and the other officer remained in the van while the driver and another armed constable who'd ridden in front stood outside. *Another hour,* he told himself, *then a few more minutes to deliver Miller to the prison, and then a leisurely drive back to London. I might even stretch out and get a few winks.* Christmas Dinner was scheduled for four in the afternoon—his contemplation of that event stopped abruptly.

The *Cenlac* entered the Solent, the channel between the English mainland and the Isle of Wight. If these waters were sheltered, Highland didn't want to think what the open ocean was like. The *Cenlac* wasn't all that large, and the ferry lacked the weatherly lines of a blue-water craft. The channel gale was broad on her starboard beam, as were the seas, and the boat was already taking fifteen-degree rolls.

"Bloody hell," the Sergeant observed to himself. He looked at Miller. The terrorist's demeanor hadn't changed a whit. He sat there like a statue, head still against the van's wall, eyes still closed, hands in his lap. Highland decided to try the same thing. There was nothing to be gained by staring out the back window. There wasn't any traffic to worry about now. He sat back and propped his feet on the left-side bench. Somewhere he'd once read that closing one's eyes was an effective defense against motion sickness. He had nothing to fear from Miller. Highland was not carrying a gun, of course, and the keys to the prisoner's manacles were in the driver's pocket. So he did close his eyes, and let his inner ear come to terms with the rolling motion of the ferry without the confusion that would come from staring at the unmoving interior of the truck. It helped a little. His stomach soon started to inform him of its dissatisfaction with the current scheme of things, but it didn't get too bad. Highland hoped that the rougher seas farther out wouldn't change this. They wouldn't.

The sound of automatic weapons fire jerked his head up a moment later. The screams came next, from women and children, followed by the rough shouts of men. Somewhere an automobile horn started blaring and didn't stop. More guns started. Highland recognized the short bark of some detective's service automatic—answered at once by the staccato of a submachine gun. It couldn't have lasted more than a minute. The *Cenlac's* own horn started blowing short, loud notes, then stopped after a few seconds while the auto's horn kept going. The screams diminished. No longer shrill cries of alarm, they were now the deeper cries of comprehended terror. A few more bursts of machine-gun fire crashed out, then stopped. Highland feared the silence more than the noise. He looked out the window and saw nothing but a car and the dark sea beyond. There would be more, and he knew what it would be. Uselessly his hand went inside his jacket for the pistol that wasn't there.

How did they know—how did the bastards know we'd be here!

Now came more shouts, the sound of orders that would not be disobeyed by anyone who wanted to live through this Christmas Day. Highland's hands balled into fists. He turned to look again at Miller. The terrorist was staring at

him now. The Sergeant would have preferred a cruel smile to the empty expression he saw on that young, pitiless face.

The metal door shook to the impact of an open hand.

"Open the bloody door or we'll blow it off!"

"What do we do?" the other cop asked.

"We open the door."

"But—"

"But *what?* Wait for them to hold a gun at some baby's head? They've won." Highland twisted the handles. Both doors were yanked open.

There were three men there, ski masks pulled down over their faces. They held automatic weapons.

"Let's see your guns," the tall one said. Highland noted the Irish accent, not that he was very surprised by it.

"We are both unarmed," the Sergeant answered. He held both hands up.

"Out. One at a time, and flat on the deck." The voice didn't bother to make any threats.

Highland stepped out of the truck and got to his knees, then was kicked down on his face. He felt the other cop come down beside him.

"Hello, Sean," another voice said. "You didn't think we'd forget you, did you now?"

Still Miller didn't say anything, Highland thought in wonderment. He listened to the flat jingle of his chains as he hobbled out of the van. He saw the shoes of a man step to the doors, probably to help him down.

The driver must be dead, Highland thought. The gunmen had his keys. He heard the manacles come off, then a pair of hands lifted Miller to his feet. Miller was rubbing his wrists, finally showing a little emotion. He smiled at the deck before looking up at the Sergeant.

There wasn't much point in looking at the terrorist. Around them he saw at least three men dead. One of the black-clad gunmen pulled a shattered head off a car's wheel, and the horn finally stopped. Twenty feet away a man was grasping at a bloody stomach and moaning, a woman—probably his wife—trying to minister to him. Others lay about on the deck in small knots, each watched by an armed terrorist as their hands sweated on the backs of their necks. There was no unnecessary noise from the gunmen, Highland noted. They were trained men. All the noise came from the civilians. Children were crying, and their parents were faring better than the childless adults. Parents had to be brave to protect their kids, while the single had only their own lives to fear for. Several of these were whimpering.

"You are Robert Highland," the tall one said quietly. "Sergeant Highland of the famous C-13?"

"That's right," the policeman answered. He knew that he was going to die. It

seemed a terrible thing to die on Christmas Day. But if he was going to die, there was nothing left to lose. He wouldn't plead, he wouldn't beg. "And who might you be?"

"Sean's friends, of course. Did you really think that we'd abandon him to your kind?" The voice sounded educated despite the simple diction. "Do you have anything to say?"

Highland wanted to say something, but he knew that nothing would really matter. He wouldn't even entertain them with a curse—and it came to him that he understood Miller a little better now. The realization shocked him out of his fear. Now he knew why Miller hadn't spoken. *What damned fool things go through your head at a time like this,* he thought. It was almost funny, but more than that it was disgusting.

"Get on with it and be on your way."

He could only see the tall one's eyes, and was robbed of the satisfaction he might have had from seeing the man's reactions. Highland became angry at that. Now that death was certain, he found himself enraged by the irrelevant. The tall one took an automatic pistol from his belt and handed it to Miller.

"This one's yours, Sean."

Sean took the gun in his left hand and looked one last time at Highland.

I might as well be a rabbit for all that little fucker cares.

"I should have left you in that cell," Highland said, his own voice now devoid of emotion.

Miller considered that for a moment, waiting for a fitting reply to spring from his brain as he held the gun at his hip. A quote from Josef Stalin came to mind. He raised his gun. "Gratitude, Mr. Highland... is a disease of dogs." He fired two rounds from a distance of fifteen feet.

"Come on," O'Donnell said from behind his mask. Another black-clad man appeared on the vehicle deck. He trotted to the leader.

"Both engines are disabled."

O'Donnell checked his watch. Things had gone almost perfectly. A good plan, it was—except for the bloody weather. Visibility was under a mile, and —

"There it is, coming up aft," one man called.

"Patience, lads."

"Just who the hell are you?" the cop at their feet asked.

O'Donnell fired a short burst for an answer, correcting this oversight. Another chorus of screams erupted, then trailed quickly away into the shriek of the winds. The leader took a whistle from inside his sweater and blew it. The assault group formed up on the leader. There were seven of them, plus Sean. Their training showed, O'Donnell noted with satisfaction. Every man of them stood facing outward around him, gun at the ready in case one of these terrified civilians might be so foolish as to try something. The ferry's captain

stood on the ladder sixty feet away, clearly worrying about his next hazard, handling his craft in a storm without engine power. O'Donnell had considered killing all aboard and sinking the boat, but rejected the idea as counterproductive. Better to leave survivors behind to tell the tale, otherwise the Brits might not know of his victory.

"Ready!" the man at the stem announced.

One by one the gunmen moved aft. There was an eight-foot sea rolling, and it would get worse farther out beyond the shelter of Sconce Point. It was a hazard that O'Donnell could accept more readily than the *Cenlac's* captain.

"Go!" he ordered.

The first of his men jumped into the ten-meter Zodiac. The man at the controls of the small boat took alee from the ferry and used the power of his twin outboards to hold her in close. The men had all practiced that in three-foot seas, and despite the more violent waves, things went easily. As each man jumped aboard, he rolled to starboard to clear a path for the next. It took just over a minute. O'Donnell and Miller went last, and as they hit the rubber deck, the boat moved alee, and the throttles cracked open to full power. The Zodiac raced up the side of the ferry, out of her wind shadow, and then southwest toward the English Channel. O'Donnell looked back at the ferry. There were perhaps six people watching them pull away. He waved to them.

"Welcome back to us, Sean," he shouted to his comrade.

"I didn't tell them a bloody thing," Miller replied.

"I know that." O'Donnell handed the younger man a flask of whiskey. Miller lifted it and swallowed two ounces. He'd forgotten how good it could taste, and the cold sheets of rain made it all the better.

The Zodiac skimmed over the wavetops, almost like a hovercraft, driven by a pair of hundred-horsepower engines. The helmsman stood at his post 'midships, his knees bent to absorb the mild buffeting as he piloted the craft through the wind and rain toward the rendezvous. O'Donnell's fleet of trawlers gave him a wide choice of seamen, and this wasn't the first time he'd used them in an operation. One of the gunmen crawled around to pass out life jackets. In the most unlikely event that someone saw them, they would look like a team from the Royal Marines' Special Boat Service, running an exercise on Christmas morning. O'Donnell's operations always covered the angles, were always planned down to the last detail. Miller was the only man he'd ever had captured; and now his perfect record was reestablished. The gunmen were securing their weapons in plastic bags to minimize corrosion damage. A few were talking to each other, but it was impossible to hear them over the howl of wind and outboard motors.

Miller had hit the boat pretty hard. He was rubbing his backside.

"Bloody faggots!" he snarled. It was good to be able to talk again.

"What's that?" O'Donnell asked over the noise. Miller explained for a minute. He was sure it had all been Highland's idea, something to soften him up, make him grateful to the cop. That was why both his shots had gone into

Highland's guts. There was no sense in letting him die fast. But Miller didn't tell his boss that. That sort of thing was not professional. Kevin might not approve.

"Where's that Ryan bastard?" Sean asked.

"Home in America." O'Donnell checked his watch and subtracted six hours. "Fast asleep in his bed, I wager."

"He set us back a year, Kevin," Miller pointed out. "A whole bloody year!"

"I thought you'd say that. Later, Sean."

The younger man nodded and took another swig of whiskey. "Where are we going?"

"Someplace warmer than this!"

The *Cenlac* drifted before the wind. As soon as the last terrorist had left, the captain had sent his crew below to check for bombs. They'd found none, but the Captain knew that could just mean they were hidden, and a ship was the perfect place to hide anything. His engineer and another sailor were trying to repair one of his diesels while his three deckhands rigged a sea anchor that now streamed over the stem to steady the ferry on the rolling seas. The wind drove the boat closer to land. That did give them more moderate seas, but to touch the coast in this weather was death for all aboard. He thought he might launch one of his lifeboats, but even that entailed dangers that he prayed he might yet avoid.

He stood alone in the pilothouse and looked at his radios—smashed. With them he could call for help, a tug, a merchantman, anything that could put a line on his bow and pull him to safe harbor. But all three of his radio transmitters were wrecked beyond repair by a whole clip of machine gun bullets.

Why did the bastards leave us alive? he asked himself in quiet, helpless rage. His engineer appeared at the door.

"Can't fix it. We just don't have the tools we need. The bastards knew exactly what to break."

"They knew exactly what to do, all right," the Captain agreed.

"We're late for Yarmouth. Perhaps—"

"They'll write it off to the weather. We'll be on the rocks before they get their thumbs out." The Captain turned and opened a drawer. He withdrew a flare pistol and a plastic box of star shells. "Two-minute intervals. I'm going to see to the passengers. If nothing happens in ... forty minutes, we launch the boats."

"But we'll kill the wounded getting them in—"

"We'll lose bloody everyone if we don't!" The Captain went below.

One of the passengers was a veterinarian, it turned out. Five people were

wounded, and the doctor was trying to treat them, assisted by a member of the crew. It was wet and noisy on the vehicle deck. The ferry was rolling twenty degrees, and a window had been smashed by the seas. One of his deck crew was struggling to put canvas over the hole. The Captain saw that he would probably succeed, then went to the wounded.

"How are they?"

The veterinarian looked up, the anguish plain on his face. One of his patients was going to die, and the other four...

"We may have to move them to the lifeboats soon."

"It'll kill them. I—"

"Radio," one of them said through his teeth.

"Lie still," the doctor said.

"Radio," he persisted. The man's hands were clasping bandages to his abdomen, and it was all he could do not to scream out his agony.

"The bastards wrecked them," the Captain said. "I'm sorry—we don't have one."

"The truck—a radio in the fucking truck!"

"What?"

"Police," Highland gasped. "Police van—prisoner transport ...*radio....*"

"Holy Jesus!" He looked at the van—the radio might not work from inside the ferry. The Captain ran back to the pilothouse and gave an order to his engineer.

It was an easy enough task. The engineer used his tools to remove the VHF radio from the truck. He was able to hook it up to one of the ferry's antennas, and the Captain was using it within five minutes.

"Who is this?" the police dispatcher asked.

"This is the *Cenlac,* you bloody fool. Our marine radios are out. We are disabled and adrift, three miles south of Lisle Court, and we need assistance at once!"

"Oh. Very well. Stand by." The desk sergeant in Lymington was no stranger to the sea. He lifted his telephone and ran his finger down a list of emergency numbers till he found the right one. Two minutes later he was back to the ferry.

"We have a tugboat heading towards you right now. Please confirm your position three miles south of Lisle Court."

"That is correct, but we are drifting northeast. Our radar is still operating. We can guide the tug in. For Christ's good sake, tell him to hurry. We have wounded aboard."

The Sergeant bolted upright in his chair. "Say again—repeat your last."

The Captain explained in as few words as possible now that help was en

route to his ship. Ashore, the Sergeant called his superior, then the local superintendent. Another call went to London. Fifteen minutes later, a Royal Navy flight crew was warming up a Sea King rescue helicopter at Gosport. They flew first to the naval hospital at Portsmouth to pick up a doctor and a medical orderly, then reversed course into the teeth of the gale. It took twenty dreadful minutes to find her, the pilot fighting his aircraft through the buffeting winds while the copilot used the look-down radar to pick the ferry's profile out from the sea return on the scope. That was the easy part.

He had to give his aircraft more than forty knots of forward speed just to hold her steady over the boat—and the wind never stayed the same for more than a few seconds, veering a few degrees in direction, changing ten knots in speed as he struggled with the controls to maintain something like a hover over her. Aft, the crew chief wrapped the rescue sling around the doctor first, holding him at the open door. Over the intercom, the pilot told the chief to lower away. At least they had a fairly large target. Two crewmen waited on the top deck of the ferry to receive the doctor. They'd never done it before, but the helicopter crew had, dropping him rapidly to ten feet over the rocking deck, then more easily the last few feet. One crewman tackled the doctor and detached the collar. The medical orderly came next, cursing fate and nature all the way down. He too arrived safely, and the helicopter shot upward to get away from the dangerous surface.

"Surgeon Lieutenant Dilk, Doctor."

"Welcome. I'm afraid my practice is usually limited to horses and dogs," the vet replied at once. "One sucking chest, the other three are belly wounds. One died—I did my best, but—" there wasn't much else to say. "Fucking murderers!"

The sound of a diesel horn announced the arrival of the tugboat. Lieutenant Dilk didn't bother looking while the Captain and crew caught the messenger line and hauled in a towing wire. Together, the doctors administered morphine and worked to stabilize the wounded.

The helicopter was already gone southwest, a grimmer purpose to their second mission for the day. Another helicopter, this one with armed Marines aboard, was lifting off from Gosport while the first searched the surface with radar and eyes for a black ten-meter zodiac-type rubber boat. Orders had come from the Home Office with record speed, and for once they were orders that men in uniform were trained and equipped to handle: Locate and destroy.

"The radar's hopeless," the copilot reported over the intercom.

The pilot nodded agreement. On a calm day they'd have a good chance to pick the rubber boat out, but the return from the confused seas and the flying spray made radar detection impossible.

"They can't have gone too far, and visibility isn't all that bad from up here. We'll do a quartering search and eyeball the bastards. "

"Where do we start?"

"Off the Needles, then inward to Christchurch Bay, then we'll work west if

we have to. We'll catch the bastards before they make landfall and have the bootnecks meet them on the beach. You heard the orders."

"Indeed." The copilot activated his tactical navigation display to set up the search pattern. Ninety minutes later it was plain that they'd searched in the wrong place. Surprised—baffled—the helicopters returned to Gosport empty-handed. The pilot went into the ready shack and found two very senior police officers.

"Well?"

"We searched from the Needles to Poole Bay—we didn't miss a thing." The pilot traced his flight path on the chart. "That type of boat can make perhaps twenty knots in these sea conditions—at most, and then only with an expert crew. We should not have missed them." The pilot sipped at a mug of tea. He stared at the chart and shook his head in disbelief. "No way we could have missed them! Not with two machines up."

"What if they went seaward, what if they went south?"

"But where? Even if they carried enough fuel to cross the Channel, which I doubt, only a madman would try it. There will be twenty-foot seas out there, and the gale is still freshening. Suicide," the pilot concluded.

"Well, we know that they're not madmen, they're too damned smart for that. No way they could have gotten past you, made landfall before you caught up with them?"

"Not a chance. None." The flyer was emphatic.

"Then where the hell are they?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I haven't a clue. Perhaps they sank."

"Do you believe that?" the cop demanded.

"No, sir."

Commander James Owens turned away. He looked out the windows. The pilot was right; the storm was worsening. The phone rang.

"For you, sir." A petty officer held it up.

"Owens. Yes?" His face changed from sadness to rage and back. "Thank you. Please keep us posted. That was the hospital. Another of the wounded died. Sergeant Highland's in surgery now. One of the bullets hit his spine. That's a total of nine dead, I believe. Gentlemen, is there anything you can suggest to us? I'd be quite willing to hire a gypsy fortune teller at the moment."

"Perhaps they made south from the Needles, then curved east and made landfall on the Isle of Wight."

Owens shook his head. "We have people there. Nothing."

"Then they might have rendezvoused with a ship. There is the usual amount of traffic in the Channel."

"Any way to check that?"

The pilot shook his head. “No. There’s a ship-traffic-control radar at Dover Strait, but not here. We can’t board every ship, can we?”

“Very well. Gentlemen, thank you for your efforts, particularly getting your surgeon out as quickly as you did. I was told that this action saved several lives.” Commander Owens walked out of the building. Those left behind marveled at his self-control. Outside, the senior detective looked up into the leaden sky and swore a mental curse at fortune, but he was too consumed by anger to show what he felt. Owens was a man accustomed to concealing what he thought and felt. Emotions, he often lectured his men, had no place in police work. Of course that was false, and like many cops Owens only succeeded in turning his rage inward. That accounted for the packet of antacid pills always in his coat pocket, and the quiet spells at home that his wife had learned to live with. He reached in his shirt pocket for a cigarette that wasn’t there, then snorted to himself—*how did you ever break that habit, Jimmy?* He stood alone in the parking lot for a moment, as though the cold rain would dampen his anger. But it only gave him a chill, and he couldn’t afford that. He’d have to answer for this, answer to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, answer to the Home Office. Someone—*not me, thank God*—would also have to answer to the Crown.

That thought hammered home. He had failed *them.* He’d failed them twice. He had failed to detect and prevent the original attack on The Mall, and only the incredible luck of that Yank’s intervention had saved the day. Then, when everything had subsequently gone right, this failure. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Owens was responsible. It had all happened on his watch. He had personally set up the transport scheme. The method was of his choosing. He had established the security procedures. Picked the day. Picked the routes. Picked the men, all dead now, except for Bob Highland.

How did they know? Owens demanded of himself. *They knew when, they knew where. How did they know? Well,* he told himself, *that’s one place to start looking.* The number of people who had this information was known to Owens. Somehow it had been leaked. He remembered the report Ashley had brought back from Dublin. “So good, you would not believe it,” that PIRA bastard had said of O’Donnell’s intelligence source. Murphy was wrong, the detective thought. Everyone will believe it now.

“Back to London,” he told the driver.

“Great day, Jack,” Robby observed on the couch.

“Not bad at all,” Ryan agreed. *Of course the house looks like a Toys ’ Я Us that got nuked....*

In front of them, Sally was playing with her new toys. She particularly liked the doll house, Jack was gratified to see. His daughter was winding down, having gotten her parents up at seven that morning. Jack and Cathy were winding down also after only five hours of sleep. That was a little tough on a pregnant wife, Jack had thought an hour earlier, and he and Robby had cleared away the dishes, now being processed by the dishwasher in the

kitchen. Now their wives were on the other couch talking while the menfolk sipped at some brandy.

"Not flying tomorrow?"

Jackson shook his head. "The bird went tits-up, take another day or so to fix. Besides, what's Christmas without a good brandy? I'll be back in the simulator tomorrow, and regs don't prevent me from drinking before I do that. I don't strap in until three tomorrow, I ought to be fairly sober by then." Robby'd had one glass of wine with dinner, and had limited himself to only one Hennessy.

"God, I need a stretch." Jack stood up and beckoned his friend to the stairs.

"How late were you up last night, sport?"

"I think we hit the sack a little after two."

Robby checked to see that Sally was out of earshot. "Being Santa is a bitch, isn't it? If you can put all those toys together, maybe I ought to turn you loose on my broke airplane."

"Wait till I have both arms back." Jack pulled his arm out of the sling and moved it around as they went down to the library level.

"What's Cathy say about that?"

"What docs always say—hell, if you get well too soon, they lose money!" He moved his wrist around. "This thing knots up like you wouldn't believe."

"How's it feel?"

"Pretty good. I think I might get full use back. At least I haven't had it quit on me yet." Jack checked his watch. "Want to catch the news?"

"Sure."

Ryan flipped on the small TV on his deck. Cable had finally made it down his road, and he was already hooked on CNN. It was so nice to get the national and world news whenever you wanted. Jack dropped into his swivel chair while Robby selected another in the corner. It was a few minutes short of the hourly headlines. Jack left the sound down.

"How's the book coming?"

"Getting there. I have all the information in line, finally. Four more chapters to write, and two I have to change around some, and it's done."

"What did you change?"

"Turned out that I got bum data. You were right about that deck-spotting problem on the Japanese carriers."

"I didn't think that sounded right," Robby replied. "They were pretty good, but they weren't that good—I mean, we took 'em at Midway, didn't we?"

"What about today?"

"The Russians? Hey, Jack, anybody wants to fool with me and my Tomcat better have his will fixed up. They don't pay me to lose, son." Jackson grinned

like a sleepy lion.

“Nice to see such confidence.”

“There’s better pilots than me,” Robby admitted. “Three, as a matter of fact. Ask me again in a year, when I’m back in the groove. ”

“Oh, yeah!” Jack laughed. The laugh died when he saw the picture on the TV screen. “That’s him—I wonder why—” He turned the sound up.

“... killed, including five police officers. An intensive land, sea, and air search is under way for the terrorists who snatched their convicted comrade while en route to a British prison on the Isle of Wight. Sean Miller was convicted only three weeks before in the daring attack on the Prince and Princess of Wales within sight of Buckingham Palace. Two police officers and one of the terrorists were killed before the attack was broken up by American tourist Jack Ryan of Annapolis, Maryland.”

The picture changed to show the weather on the Channel and a Royal Navy helicopter, evidently searching for something. It changed again to a file tape of Miller being taken out of the Old Bailey. Just before he was put in the police van, Miller turned to face the camera, and now weeks later his eyes stared again into those of John Patrick Ryan.

“Oh, my God ...” Jack muttered.

10

Plans and Threats

"You shouldn't blame yourself, Jimmy," Murray said. "And Bob's going to make it. That's something."

"Certainly," Owens replied sardonically. "There's even a fifty-percent chance that he'll learn to walk again. What of the others, Dan? Five good men gone, and four civilians along with them. "

"And maybe the terrorists, too," Murray pointed out.

"You don't believe that any more than I do!"

It had come as a piece of blind luck. A Royal Navy mine-hunter ship conducting an ongoing sonar survey of the English Channel had found a new object on the bottom and immediately sent a camera sled down to classify it. The videotape showed the remains of a ten-meter zodiac-type inflatable boat, with two hundred-horse outboard motors. It had clearly sunk as the result of an explosion near the gas tanks, but there was no evidence of the men who'd been aboard, or their weapons. The vessel's skipper had immediately grasped the importance of the discovery and informed his superiors. A salvage crew was preparing now to go out and raise the wreck.

"It's a possibility. One of them might have screwed up, the boat blew, the bad guys get dumped in the drink..."

"And the bodies?"

"Fish food." Murray smirked. "Makes a nice image, doesn't it?"

"You are so fond of punting, Dan. Just what percentage of your salary would you wager on that hypothesis?" Owens wasn't in the mood for humor. Murray could see that the head of C-13 still looked on this as a very personal defeat.

"Not very much," the FBI representative conceded. "So you think a ship picked them up."

"It's the only thing that makes the least bit of sense. Nine merchant vessels were close enough to have been involved. We have the list."

So did Murray. It had already been forwarded to Washington, where the FBI and CIA would both work on it. "But why not recover the boat, too?"

"Obvious, isn't it? What if one of our helicopters saw them doing it? Or it might have been too difficult for the weather conditions. Or they might just not have wished to trouble themselves. They do have ample financial

resources, don't they?"

"When will the Navy raise the wreck?"

"If the weather holds, day after tomorrow," Owens said. That was the one thing to be happy about. Then they'd have physical evidence. Everything made in the world carried trademarks and serial numbers. Somewhere there would be records of sale. That was how many successful investigations had started—a single sales slip in a single shop had often led to the conviction of the most dangerous criminals. From the videotape, the outboards on the boat looked like American Mercury motors. The Bureau had already been alerted to run that lead down as soon as the engine numbers were in. Murray had already learned that Mercury motors were a favorite all over the world. It would make matters harder, but it was still something; and something was always better than nothing. The resources of the Metropolitan Police and the Bureau were designed for precisely such a task.

"Any breaks on the leak?" Murray asked. This touched the rawest nerve of all.

"He'd better pray we don't find him," Owens said quietly. There was as yet no danger that this would happen. There had been a total of thirty-one people who'd known the time and route for the prisoner transfer, and five of them were dead—even the driver of the van hadn't known beforehand. That left twenty-six, ranging from a few members of C-13, two more high officials in the Metropolitan Police, ten in the Home Office, a few more in MI-5, the Security Service, and various others. Every one of them had a top-drawer security clearance. *Not that a clearance matters a damn,* Owens told himself again. *By definition a leak had to come from some bastard with a top-drawer clearance.*

But this was different. This was treason—it was *worse* than treason—a concept that Owens hadn't even thought possible until the last week. Whoever had leaked this had also to have been involved in the attack on the Royal Family. To betray national security secrets to a foreign power was sufficiently heinous to make the Commander think in unprofessional terms. But deliberately to endanger the Royal Family itself was so incomprehensible a crime that Owens had scarcely been able to believe it possible. This wasn't someone of dubious mental state. This was a person with intelligence and considerable skill at dissimulation, someone who had betrayed a trust both personal and national. There had been a time in his country when such people died by torture. It was not a fact that Owens was proud of, but now he understood why it had happened, how easily one might countenance such punishment. The Royal Family served so many functions for the United Kingdom, was so greatly loved by the people. And someone, probably someone very close to them, was quite willing to betray them to a small band of terrorists. Owens wanted that person. Wanted to see him dead, wanted to watch him die. There could be no other punishment for this kind of crime.

His professionalism returned after the few seconds of grim revelry. *We won't find the bastard by wishing him dead. Finding him means police work—careful, painstaking, thorough investigation.* Owens knew how to do that. Neither he nor

the elite team of men on the investigation would rest until they succeeded. But none of them doubted that they would ultimately succeed.

"That's two breaks you have, Jimmy," Murray said after reading his friend's mind. It wasn't hard to do. Both men had handled hard cases, and police differ little over the world.

"Indeed," Owens said, almost smiling. "They ought not to have tipped their hand. They should have bent every effort to protect their source. We can compare the lists of who knew that His Highness was coming in that afternoon, and who knew that young Mr. Miller was going to Lymington."

"And the telephone operators who put the calls through," Murray reminded him. "And the secretaries and co-workers who might have overheard, and the girlfriends, or boyfriends, who might have heard during some horizontal conversation."

"Thank you ever so much for that, Dan. One needs encouragement at a time like this." The Englishman walked over to Murray's cabinet and found a bottle of whiskey—a Christmas present, still unopened on New Year's Eve.

"You're right that they should have protected their intel source. I know you'll get him, Jimmy. I will put some money down on that. "

Owens poured the drinks. It was gratifying to see that the American had finally learned to drink his whiskey decently. In the past year Owens had broken Murray of the need to put ice in everything. It was shameful to contaminate single-malt Scotch whiskey. He frowned at another recurring thought. "What does that tell us about Sean Miller?"

Murray stretched his arms out. "More important than you thought, maybe? Maybe they were afraid you'd break information out of him. Maybe they just wanted to keep their perfect record. Maybe something else?"

Owens nodded. In addition to the close working relationship Scotland Yard had with the FBI, Owens valued the opinions of his colleague. Though both were experienced cops, Murray could always be trusted to have a slightly different slant on things. Two years before Owens had been surprised to learn how valuable this might be. Though he never had thought about it, Murray had used his colleague's brain the same way on several occasions.

"So what might that make Miller?" Owens wondered aloud.

"Who can say? Chief of operations?" Murray waved his glass.

"Awfully young for that."

"Jimmy, the guy who dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima was a full colonel in the Air Force, and twenty-nine years old. Hell, how old is this O'Donnell character?"

"That's what Bob Highland thinks." Owens stared into his glass for a moment, frowning again.

"Bob's a smart kid, too. God, I hope you can put him back on the street."

"If not, we can still use him in the office," Commander Owens said

positively. “He does have a fine brain for the business of investigations—too good to be lost now. Well, must be off. New Year’s Eve, Dan. What do we drink to?”

“That’s obvious. A successful investigation. You’re going to get that source, Jimmy, and he’s going to give you the information you need.” Murray held his glass up. “To a closed case.”

“Yes.” Both men emptied their glasses.

“Jimmy, do yourself a favor and give it a night off. Clear the old head out and start fresh in the morning.”

Owens smiled. “I’ll try.” He picked up his overcoat and walked toward the door. “One last thing. It hit me on the drive over. These chaps, the ULA, have broken all the rules, haven’t they?”

“That’s true enough,” Murray replied as he locked up his files.

“There’s only one rule they haven’t broken.”

Murray turned. “Oh? What’s that?”

“They’ve never done anything in America.”

“None of them do that.” Murray dismissed the idea.

“None have had much of a reason before.”

“So?”

“Dan, the ULA might have a reason now—and they’ve never been reticent about breaking the rules. It’s just a feeling, no more than that.” Owens shrugged. “Well. Good night, and a happy new year to you, Special Agent Murray.”

They shook hands ceremonially. “And to you, Commander Owens. Give my love to Emily.”

Dan saw him to the door, locked it, and returned to his office to make sure all his secure files were locked up properly. It was pitch dark outside at—he checked his watch—quarter to six.

“Jimmy, why did you say that?” Murray asked the darkness. He sat back down in his swivel chair.

No Irish terrorist group had ever operated in the United States. Sure, they raised money there, in the Irish neighborhoods and saloons of Boston and New York, made the odd speech about their vision for the future of a free, united Ireland—never bothering to say that as committed Marxist-Leninists, their vision of Ireland was of another Cuba. They had always been shrewd enough to know that Irish-Americans might not feel comfortable with that little detail. And there was the gun-running. That was largely something in the past. The PIRA and INLA currently got most of their weapons on the open world market. There were also reports that some of their people had gotten training in Soviet military camps—you couldn’t tell a man’s nationality from a satellite photograph, nor could you recognize a specific face. These reports had never been confirmed sufficiently to be released to the press. The same was true of

the camps in Libya, and Syria, and Lebanon. Some people, fair-skinned people, were being trained there—but who? The intelligence got a little confused on this point. It was different with the European terrorists. The Arabs who got caught often sang like canaries, but the captured members of the PIRA and INLA, and the Red Army Faction, and *Action-Directe* of France, and all the other shadowy groups gave up their information far more grudgingly. A cultural thing, or maybe they could simply be more certain that their captors would not—could not—use interrogation measures still common in the Middle East. They'd all been raised under democratic rules, and knew precisely the weaknesses of the societies they sought to topple. Murray thought of them as strengths, but recognized the inconveniences that they imposed on law-enforcement professionals....

The bottom line was still that PIRA and INLA had never committed a violent crime in America. Never. Not once.

But Jimmy's right. The ULA has never hesitated to break a rule. The Royal Family was off-limits to everyone else, but not the ULA. The PIRA and INLA never hesitated to advertise its operations —every terrorist group advertises its operations. But not the ULA. He shook his head. There wasn't any evidence to suggest that they'd break this rule. It was simply the one thing that they hadn't done ... yet. Not the sort of thing to start an investigation with.

"But what are they up to?" he said aloud. Nobody knew that. Even their name was an anomaly. Why did they call themselves the Ulster Liberation Army? The nationalist movement always focused on its Irishness, it was an Irish nationalist movement, but the ULA's very name was a regional expression. "Ulster" was invariably the prefix of the reactionary Protestant groups. Terrorists didn't have to make all that much sense in what they did, but they did have to make some sense. Everything about the ULA was an anomaly. They did the things no one else would do, called themselves something no else would.

They did the things no one else would. That's what was chewing on Jimmy, Murray knew. Why did they operate that way? There had to be a reason. For all the madness of their actions, terrorists were rational by their own standards. However twisted their reasoning appeared to an outsider, it did have its own internal logic. The PIRA and INLA had such logic. They had even announced their rationales, and their actions could be seen to fit with what they said: To make Northern Ireland ungovernable. If they succeeded, the British would finally have enough of it and leave. Their objective, therefore, was to sustain a low-level conflict indefinitely and wait for the other side to walk away. It did make conceptual sense.

But the ULA has never said what it's up to. Why not? Why should their objective be a secret? Hell, why should the existence of a terrorist group be a secret—if they're running operations, how can it be a secret; then why have they never even announced their existence, except within the PIRA/INLA community itself? This can't be completely unreasoned action, he reminded himself. They can't be acting completely without reason and still be as effective as they've been.

"Damn!" The answer was there. Murray could feel it floating at the edge of

his consciousness, but his mind couldn't quite reach that far. The agent left his office. Two Marines were already patrolling the corridors, checking that the doors were locked. Dan waved to them on the way to the elevator, his mind still trying to assemble the pieces into a unified picture. He wished that Owens hadn't left so soon. He wanted to talk this one over with Jimmy. Maybe the two of them could make sense of it all. No, he told himself, not "maybe." They'd find it. It was there, waiting to be found.

I bet Miller knew, Murray thought.

"What a dreadful place," Sean Miller said. The sunset was magnificent, almost like one at sea. The sky was clear of the usual urban pollution, and the distant dunes gave a crisp, if crenelated, line for the sun to slide behind. The odd thing was the temperature range, of course. The noon temperature had reached ninety-two—and the locals thought of this as a cool day!—but now as the sun sank, a cool wind came up, and soon the temperature would drop to freezing. The sand couldn't hold the heat, and with the clear, dry air, it would just radiate away, back to the stars.

Miller was tired. It had been that sort of day: refresher training. He hadn't touched a weapon in nearly two months. His reactions were off, his marksmanship abysmal, his physical condition little better. He'd actually gained a few pounds on prison food, something that had come as quite a surprise. In a week he'd have that run off. The desert was good for that. Like most men born in the higher latitudes, Miller had trouble tolerating this sort of climate. His physical activity made him thirsty, but he found it difficult to eat when it was so hot. So he drank water and allowed his body to turn in on itself. He'd lose the weight and harden his body more quickly here than anywhere else. But that didn't make him like the place.

Four more of their men were here also, but the remainder of the rescue force had immediately flown home via Rome and Brussels, putting a new string of entry stamps on their "travel" passports.

"It's not Ireland," O'Donnell agreed. His nose crinkled at the smell of dust, and his own sweat. Not like home. No smell of the mist over the peat, or coke fires on the hearths, or the alcoholic ambience of the local pub.

That was an annoying development: no liquor. The locals had got another attack of Allah and decided that even the fellow members of the international revolutionary community could not break God's law. *What a bloody nuisance.*

It wasn't much of a camp. Six buildings, one of them a garage. An unused helicopter pad, a road half-covered with sand from the last storm. One deep well for water. A firing range. Nothing else. In the past as many as fifty people had cycled through here at a time. Not now. This was the ULA's own camp, well separated from camps used by other groups. Every one of them had learned the importance of security. On a blackboard in hut #1 was a schedule provided by other fair-skinned friends that gave the passover times for American reconnaissance satellites; everyone knew when to be out of sight, and the camp's vehicles were under cover.

Two headlights appeared on the horizon, heading south toward the camp. O'Donnell noted their appearance, but said nothing about it. The horizon was far away. He put his arms into the sleeves of his jacket to ward off the gathering chill as he watched the lights slide left and right, their conical beams tracing over the dunes. The driver was taking his time, Kevin saw. The lights weren't bouncing about. The climate made it hard for a man to push himself hard. Things would get done tomorrow, God willing. *Insh'Allah,* a Latin colleague had once told him, meant the same thing as mañana—but without the urgency.

The vehicle was a Toyota Land Cruiser, the four-wheel-drive that had replaced the Land-Rover in most places. The driver took it right into the garage before getting out. O'Donnell checked his watch. The next satellite pass was in thirty minutes. Close enough. He rose and walked into hut #3. Miller followed, waving to the man who'd just come into the camp. A uniformed soldier from the camp's permanent force closed the garage door, and otherwise ignored them.

"Glad to see you got out, Sean," the visitor said. He carried a small satchel.

"Thank you, Shamus."

O'Donnell held open the door. He was not one to stand on ceremony.

"Thank you, Kevin."

"You're just in time for dinner," the chief of the ULA said.

"Well, one can't always be lucky," Shamus Padraig Connolly said. He looked around the inside of the hut. "No wogs about?"

"Not in here," O'Donnell assured him.

"Good." Connolly opened his satchel and brought out two bottles. "I thought you might like a drop of the pure."

"How did you get it past the bastards?" Miller asked.

"I heard about the new rule. I told them I was bringing in a gun, of course." Everyone laughed as Miller fetched three glasses and ice. You always used ice in this place.

"When are you supposed to arrive at the camp?" O'Donnell referred to the one forty miles away used by the PIRA.

"I'm having some car trouble, and staying the night with our uniformed friends. The bad news is that they've confiscated my whiskey."

"Bloody heathens!" Miller laughed. The three men toasted one another.

"How was it inside, Sean?" Connolly asked. The first round of drinks was already gone.

"Could have been worse. A week before Kevin came for me, I had a bad time with some thugs—the peelers put them up to it, of course, and they had a merry time. Bloody faggots. Aside from that, ah, it is so entertaining to sit there and watch them talk and talk and talk like a bunch of old women."

“You didn’t think that Sean would talk, did you?” O’Donnell asked reprovingly. The smile covered his feelings—of course they had all worried about that; they had worried most of all what might happen when the PIRA and INLA lads in Parkhurst Prison got hold of him.

“Good lad!” Connolly refilled the glasses.

“So, what’s the news from Belfast?” the chief asked.

“Johnny Doyle is not very pleased with having lost Maureen. The men are becoming restless—not much, mind, but there is talk. Your op in London, Sean, in case you’ve not been told, had glasses filled and raised throughout the Six Counties.” That most citizens in Northern Ireland, Protestant and Catholic, had been disgusted by the operation mattered not to Connolly. His small community of revolutionaries was the entire world.

“One does not get drunk for a failure,” Miller observed sourly. *That bastard Ryan!*

“But it was a splendid attempt. It is clear enough that you were unlucky, no more than that, and we are all slaves to fortune.”

O’Donnell frowned. His guest was too poetic for Kevin’s way of thinking, despite the fact, as Connolly was fond of pointing out, that Mao himself had written poetry.

“Will they try to spring Maureen?”

Connolly laughed at that one. “After what you did with Sean here? Not bloody likely. How ever did you pull that off, Kevin?”

“There are ways.” O’Donnell let it go at that. His intelligence source was under strict orders not to do a thing for two months. Dennis’s bookstore was closed so far as he was concerned. The decision to use him to get information for the rescue operation hadn’t come easy. That was the problem with good intelligence, his teachers had hammered into his head years before. The really valuable stuff was always a risk to the source itself. It was a paradox. The most useful material was often too dangerous to use, but at the same time intelligence information that could not be used had no value at all.

“Well, you’ve gotten everyone’s attention. The reason I’m here is to brief our lads on your operation. ”

“Really!” Kevin laughed. “And what does Mr. Doyle think of us?”

The visitor crooked a comically accusing finger. “You are a counterrevolutionary influence whose objective is to wreck the movement. The op on The Mall has had serious repercussions on the other side of the Atlantic. We’ll—excuse me, they’ll be sending some of their chaps to Boston in another month or so to set things right, to tell the Yanks that they had nothing to do with it,” Connolly said.

“Money—we don’t need their bloody money!” Miller objected. “And they can put their ‘moral support’ up—”

“Mustn’t offend the Americans,” Connolly pointed out.

O'Donnell raised his glass for a toast: "The devil with the bloody Americans."

As he drank off the last of his second whiskey, Miller's eyes snapped open sharply enough to make a click.

"Kevin, we won't be doing much in the U.K. for a while...."

"Nor in the Six Counties," O'Donnell said thoughtfully. "This is a time to lie low, I think. We'll concentrate on our training for the moment and await our next opportunity."

"Shamus, how effective might Doyle's men be in Boston?"

Connolly shrugged his shoulders. "Get enough liquor into them and they'll believe anything they're told, and toss their dollars into the hat as always."

Miller smiled for a moment. He refilled his own glass this time as the other two talked on. His own mind began assembling a plan.

Murray had had a number of assignments in the Bureau over his many years of service, ranging from junior agent involved in chasing down bank robbers to instructor in investigation procedures at the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia. One thing he'd always told the youngsters in the classroom was the importance of intuition. Law enforcement was still as much art as science. The Bureau had immense scientific resources to process evidence, had written procedures for everything, but when you got down to it, there was never a substitute for the mind of an experienced agent. It was mostly experience, Murray knew, the way you fitted evidence together, the way you got a feel for the mind of your target and tried to predict his next move. But more than experience, there was intuition. The two qualities worked together until you couldn't separate them in your own mind.

That's the hard part, Murray told himself on the drive home from the embassy. *Because intuition can run a little wild if* there's *not enough evidence to hold on to.*

"You will learn to trust your instincts," Murray told the traffic, quoting from his memorized class notes. "Instinct is never a substitute for evidence and procedure, but it can be a very useful tool in adapting one to another—oh, Dan, you would have made a hell of a Jesuit." He chuckled to himself, oblivious of the stare he was getting from the car on his right.

If it's so damned funny, why does it bother you?

Murray's instinct was ringing a quiet but persistent bell. Why had Jimmy said that? Obviously it was bothering him, too—but what the hell was it?

The problem was, it wasn't just one thing. He saw that now. It was several things, and they were interrelated like some kind of three-dimensional crossword puzzle. He didn't know the number of blanks, and he didn't have any of the clues to the words, but he did know roughly the way they fitted together. That was something. Given time, it might even be enough, but—

"Damn!" His hands gripped tight on the steering wheel as good humor again gave way to renewed frustration. He could talk it over with Owens tomorrow

or the next day, but the bell told him that it was more urgent than that.

Why is it so damned urgent? There is no evidence of anything to get excited about.

Murray reminded himself that the first case that he'd broken more or less on his own, ten months after hitting the street as a special agent, had begun with a feeling like this one. In retrospect the evidence had seemed obvious enough once he'd put the right twist on it, but that twist hadn't occurred to anyone else. And with Murray himself it had begun as nothing more than the same sort of intellectual headache he was suffering through in his car. Now he was really mad at himself.

Fact: The ULA broke all the rules. Fact: No Irish terrorist organization had ever run an operation in the U.S. There were no more Facts. If they ran an op in America ... well, they were undoubtedly mad at Ryan, but they hadn't made a move against him over here, and that would have been a hell of a lot easier than staging one in the U.S. What if Miller really was their chief of operations —no, Murray told himself, terrorists don't usually take things personally. It's unprofessional, and the bastards *are* professional. They'd have to have a better reason than that.

Just because you don't know what the reason is doesn't mean they don't have one, Danny. Murray found himself wondering if his intuition hadn't transformed itself into paranoia with increasing age. *What if there's more than one reason to do it?*

"There's a thought," he said to himself. One could be an excuse for the other —but what's the it that they want to do? *Motive,* all the police procedure manuals said, was the main thing to look for. Murray didn't have a clue on their motive. "I could go crazy doing this."

Murray turned left off Kensington Road, into the upscale neighborhood of flats where he had his official residence. Parking was the usual problem. Even when he'd been assigned to the counterespionage section of the New York City Field Office, parking hadn't been this bad. He found a space perhaps two feet longer than his car and spent nearly five minutes fitting the vehicle into it.

Murray hung his coat on the peg beside the door and walked right into the living room. His wife found him dialing the phone, a ferocious scowl on his face. She wondered what was wrong.

It took a few seconds for the overseas call to go into the proper office.

"Bill, this is Dan Murray ... we're fine," his wife heard him say. "I want you to do something. You know that guy Jack Ryan? Yeah, that's the one. Tell him —hell, how do I say this? Tell him that maybe he should watch his back.... I know that, Bill.... I can't say, something's bothering me, and I can't— something like that, yeah.... I know they've never done it before, Bill, but it's still bothering me.... No, nothing specific that I can point to, but Jimmy Owens brought it up, and now he's got me worrying about it. Oh, you got the report already? Good, then you know what I mean."

Murray leaned back and stared at the ceiling for a moment. "Call it feeling,

or instinct—call it anything you want, it's bothering me. I want somebody to act on it.... Good man. How's the family? Oh, yeah? Great! Well, I guess it'll be a happy new year for you. Okay. Take care. 'Bye." He set the phone down. "Well, that feels a little better," he said quietly to himself.

"The party starts at nine," his wife said. She was used to his bringing work home. He was used to having her remind him of his social obligations.

"I guess I better get dressed, then. " Murray rose and kissed his wife. He did feel better now. He'd done *something*—probably no more than having people in the Bureau wonder what was happening to him over here, but he could live with that. "Bill's oldest is engaged. He's going to marry her off to a young agent in the D.C. Field Office."

"Anyone we know?"

"New kid."

"We have to leave soon."

"Okay, okay." He walked to the master bedroom and started to change for the big embassy party.

11

Warnings

"As you see, ladies and gentlemen, the decision Nelson made in this case had the long-term effect of finally putting an end to the stultifying influence of the Royal Navy's formal tactics." Ryan closed his note folder. "There is nothing like a decisive victory to teach people a lesson. Questions?"

It was Jack's first day back at teaching class. The room had forty students, all third classmen (that title included the six female mids in the class), or sophomores in civilian terms, taking Ryan's introductory course in naval history. There were no questions. He was surprised. Jack knew he was a pretty good teacher, but not that good. After a moment, one of the students stood up. It was George Winton, a football player from Pittsburgh.

"Doctor Ryan," he said stiffly, "I've been asked to make a presentation on behalf of the class."

"Uh-oh." Jack took half a step backward and scanned the body of students theatrically for the advancing threat.

Mid/3 Winton walked forward and produced a small box from behind his back. There was a typed sheet on the top. The young man stood at attention.

"Attention to orders: For service above and beyond the duty of a tourist—even a brainless Marine—the class awards Doctor John Ryan the Order of the Purple Target, in the hope that he will duck the next time, lest he become a part of history rather than a teacher of it."

Winton opened the box and produced a purple ribbon three inches across on which was inscribed in gold: SHOOT ME. Below it was a brass bull's-eye of equal size. The mid pinned it to Ryan's shoulder so that the target portion almost covered where he'd been shot. The class stood and applauded as Ryan shook hands with the class spokesman.

Jack fingered the "decoration" and looked up at his class. "Did my wife put you up to this?" They started converging on him.

"Way to go, Doc!" said an aspiring submarine driver.

"Semper fi!" echoed a would-be Marine.

Ryan held up his hands. He was still getting used to the idea of having his left arm back. The shoulder ached now that he was really using it, but the surgeon at Hopkins had told him that the stiffness would gradually fade away, and the net impairment to his left shoulder would be less than five percent.

“Thank you, people, but you still have to take the exam next week!”

There was general laughter as the kids filed out of the room to their next class. This was Ryan’s last for the day. He gathered up his books and notes and trailed out of the room for the walk uphill to his office in Leahy Hall.

There was snow on the ground this frigid January day. Jack had to watch for patches of ice on the brick sidewalk. Around him the campus of the Naval Academy was a beautiful place. The immense quadrangle bordered by the chapel to the south, Bancroft Hall to the east, and classroom buildings on the other sides, was a glistening white blanket with pathways shoveled from one place to another. The kids—Ryan thought of them as kids—marched about as they always did, a little too earnest and serious for Jack’s liking. They saved their smiles for places where no outsiders might notice. Each of them had his (or her) shoes spit-shined, and they moved about with straight backs, books tucked under the left arm so as not to interfere with saluting. There was a lot of that here. At the top of the hill, at Gate #3, a Marine lance corporal stood with the “Jimmy Legs” civilian guard. A normal day at the office, Jack told himself. It was a good place to work. The mids were easily the equal of the students of any school in the country, always ready with questions, and, once you earned their trust, capable of some astonishing horseplay. This was something a visitor to the Academy might never suspect, so serious was the kids’ public demeanor.

Jack got into the steam-heated warmth of Leahy Hall and bounded up the steps to his office, laughing to himself at the absurd award that dangled from his shoulder. He found Robby sitting opposite his desk.

“What in the hell is that?” the pilot inquired. Jack explained as he set his books down. Robby started laughing.

“It’s nice to see the kids can unwind a little, even in exam season. So what’s new with you?” Jack asked his friend.

“Well, I’m a Tomcat driver again,” Robby announced. “Four hours over the weekend. Oh, man! Jack, I’m telling you, I had that baby talking to me. Took her offshore, had her up to mach one-point-four, did a midair refueling, then I came back for some simulated carrier landings, and—it was good, Jack,” the pilot concluded. “Two more months and I’ll be back where I belong.”

“That long, Rob?”

“Flying this bird is not supposed to be easy or they wouldn’t need people of my caliber to do it,” Jackson explained seriously.

“It must be hard to be so humble.”

Before Robby could respond, there came a knock on the opened door and a man stuck his head in. “Doctor Ryan?”

“That’s right. Join us.”

“I’m Bill Shaw, FBI.” The visitor came all the way in and held up his ID card. About Robby’s height, he was a slender man in his mid-forties with eyes so deep set that they almost gave him the look of a raccoon, the kind of eyes

that got that way from sixteen-hour days. A sharp dresser, he looked like a very serious man. “Dan Murray asked me to come over to see you.”

Ryan rose to take his hand. “This is Lieutenant Commander Jackson.”

“Howdy.” Robby shook his hand, too.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Not at all—we’re both finished teaching for the day. Grab a chair. What can I do for you?”

Shaw looked at Jackson but didn’t say anything.

“Well, if you guys have to talk, I can mosey on over to the O-Club—”

“Relax, Rob. Mr. Shaw, you’re among friends. Can I offer you anything?”

“No, thank you.” The FBI agent pulled the straight-back chair from next to the door. “I work in the counterterrorism unit at FBI headquarters. Dan asked me to—well, you know that the ULA rescued their man Miller from police custody.”

Now Ryan was completely serious. “Yeah—I caught that on TV. Any idea where they took him to?”

Shaw shook his head. “They just disappeared.”

“Quite an operation,” Robby noted. “They escaped to seaward, right? Some ship pick them up maybe?” This drew a sharp look. “You notice my uniform, Mr. Shaw? I earn my living out there on the water.”

“We’re not sure, but that is a possibility.”

“Whose ships were out there?” Jackson persisted. This wasn’t a law-enforcement problem to Robby. It was a naval matter.

“That’s being looked at.”

Jackson and Ryan traded a look. Robby fished out one of his cigars and lit it.

“I got a call last week from Dan. He’s a tittle—I wish to emphasize this, only a little—concerned that the ULA might ... well, they don’t have much of a reason to like you, Doctor Ryan. ”

“Dan said that none of these groups has ever operated over here,” Ryan said cautiously.

“That’s entirely correct. ” Shaw nodded. “It’s never happened. I imagine Dan explained why this is true. The Provisional IRA continues to get money from over here, I am sorry to say, not much, but some. They still get some weapons. There is even reason to believe that they have some surface-to-air missiles—”

“What the hell!” Jackson’s head snapped around.

“There have been several thefts of Redeye missiles—the man-portable one the Army’s phasing out now. They were stolen from a couple of National Guard armories. This isn’t new. The RUC has captured M-60 machine guns that got over to Ulster the same way. These weapons were either stolen or

bought from some supply sergeants who forgot who they were working for. We've convicted several of them in the past year, and the Army's setting up a new system to keep track of things. Only one missile has turned up. They—the PIRA—tried to shoot down a British Army helicopter a few months back. It never made the papers over here, mainly because they missed, and the Brits were able to hush it up.

"Anyway," Shaw went on, "if they were to conduct actual terrorist operations over here, the money and the weapons would probably dry up quite a bit. The PIRA knows that, and it stands to reason that the ULA does, too."

"Okay," Jack said. "They've never operated over here. But Murray asked you to come here and warn me. How come?"

"There isn't any reason. If this had come from anyone except Dan, I wouldn't even be here, but Dan's a very experienced agent, and he's a little bit concerned that maybe you should be made aware of his—it's not even enough to be a suspicion, Doctor Ryan. Call it insurance, like checking the tires on your car before a long drive."

"Then what the hell are you telling me?" Ryan said testily.

"The ULA has dropped out of sight—that's not saying much, of course. I guess it's the way they dropped out of sight. They pulled a pretty bold operation, and"—he snapped his fingers—"disappeared back under their rock."

"Intel," Jack muttered.

"What's that?" Shaw asked.

"It happened again. The thing in London that I got in the way of, it resulted from very good intelligence information. This did, too, didn't it? They were moving Miller secretly, but the bad guys penetrated Brit security, didn't they?"

"I honestly don't know the specifics, but I'd say you probably had that one figured out pretty well," Shaw conceded.

Jack picked up a pencil in his left hand and started twirling it. "Do we know anything about what we're up against here?"

"They're professionals. That's bad news for the Brits and the RUC, of course, but it's good news for you."

"How's that?" Robby asked.

"Their disagreement with Doctor Ryan here is more or less a 'personal' matter. To take action against him would be unprofessional. "

"In other words," the pilot said, "when you tell Jack that there's nothing for him to really worry about, you're betting on the 'professional' conduct of terrorists."

"That's one way to put it, Commander. Another way is to say that we have long experience dealing with this type of person."

"Uh-huh." Robby stabbed out his cigar. "In mathematics that's called

inductive reasoning. It's a conclusion inferred, rather than deduced from specific evidence. In engineering we call it a WAG."

"Wag?" Shaw shook his head.

"A Wild-Ass Guess." Jackson turned to stare into the FBI man's eyes. "Like most operational intelligence reports—you can't tell the good ones from the bad ones until it's too damned late. Excuse me, Mr. Shaw, I'm afraid that we operators aren't always impressed with the stuff we get from the intelligence community. "

"I knew it was a mistake to come here," Shaw observed. "Look, Dan told me over the phone that he doesn't have a single piece of evidence to suggest that there is any chance something unusual will happen. I've spent the last couple of days going over what we have on this outfit, and there just isn't any real evidence. He's responding to instinct. When you're a cop, you learn to do that."

Robby nodded at that one. Pilots trust their instinct, too. Now, his were telling him something.

"So," Jack leaned back. "What should I do?"

"The best defense against terrorists—what the security schools teach business executives, for example—is to avoid patterns. Take a slightly different route to work every day. Alter your time of departure somewhat. When you drive in, keep an eye on the mirror. If you see the same vehicle three or more days in a row, take the tag number and call me. I'll be glad to have it run through the computer—no big deal. It's probably nothing to be worried about, just be a little bit more alert. With luck, in a few days or weeks we'll be able to call you and tell you to forget the whole thing. What I am almost certainly doing is alarming you unnecessarily, but you know the rule about how it's better to be safe than sorry, right?"

"And if you get any information the other way?" Jack asked.

"I'll be on the phone to you five minutes later. The Bureau doesn't like the idea of having terrorists operate here. We work damned hard to keep it from happening, and we've been very effective so far."

"How much of that is luck?" Robby asked.

"Not as much as you think," Shaw replied. "Well, Doctor Ryan, I'm really sorry to have worried you about what is probably nothing at all. Here's my card. If there is anything we can do for you, don't hesitate to call me."

"Thank you, Mr. Shaw." Jack took the card and watched the man leave. He was silent for a few seconds. Then he flipped open his phone list and dialed 011-44-1-499-9000. It took a few seconds for the overseas call to get through.

"American Embassy," the switchboard operator answered after the first ring.

"Legal Attaché, please."

"Thank you. Wait, please." Jack waited. The operator was back in fifteen seconds. "No answer. Mr. Murray has gone home for the day—no, excuse me,

he's out of town for the remainder of the week. Can I take a message?"

Jack frowned for a moment. "No, thank you. I'll call back next week."

Robby watched his friend hang up. Jack drummed his fingers on the phone and again remembered what Sean Miller's face had looked like. *He's three thousand miles away, Jack,* Ryan told himself. "Maybe," he breathed aloud.

"Huh?"

"I never told you about the one I ... captured, I guess."

"The one they sprung? The one we saw on TV?"

"Rob, you ever seen—how do I say it? You ever see somebody that you're just automatically afraid of?"

"I think I know what you mean," Robby said to avoid the question. Jackson didn't know how to answer that. As a pilot, he'd known fear often enough, but always there was training and experience to deal with it. There was no *man* in the world he'd ever been afraid of.

"At the trial, I looked at him, and I just knew that—"

"He's a terrorist, and he kills people. That would bother me, too." Jackson stood up and looked out the window. "Jesus, and they call 'em professionals! *I'm* a professional. I have a code of conduct, I train, I practice, I adhere to standards and rules."

"They're real good at what they do," Jack said quietly. "That's what makes them dangerous. And this ULA outfit is unpredictable. That's what Dan Murray told me." Jackson turned away from the window.

"Let's go see somebody."

"Who?"

"Just come along, boy." Jackson's voice had the ring of command when he wanted it to. He set his white officer's cap on his head just so.

They took the stairs down and walked east, past the chapel and Bancroft Hall's massive, prisonlike bulk. Ryan liked the Academy campus except for that. He supposed it was necessary for all the mids to experience the corporate identity of military life, but Jack would not have cared to live that way as a college student. The odd mid snapped a salute at Robby, who returned each with panache as he proceeded in total silence with Jack trying to keep up. Ryan could almost hear the thoughts whirring through the aviator's head. It took five minutes to reach the new LeJeune Annex across from the Halsey field house.

The large glass and marble edifice contrasted with Bancroft's stolid gray stone. The United States Naval Academy was a government complex, and hence exempt from the normal standards of architectural good taste. They entered the ground floor past a gaggle of midshipmen in jogging suits, and Robby led him down a staircase into the basement. Jack had never been here before. They ended up in a dimly lit corridor whose block walls led to a dead end. Ryan imagined he heard the crack of small-bore pistol fire, and it was

confirmed when Jackson opened a heavy steel door to the Academy's new pistol range. They saw a lone figure standing in the center lane, a .22 automatic steady in his extended right hand.

Sergeant Major Noah Breckenridge was the image of the Marine noncommissioned officer. Six-three, the only fat on his two-hundred-pound frame was in the hot dogs he'd had for lunch in the adjacent Dalgren Hall. He was wearing a short-sleeved khaki shirt. Ryan had seen but never met him, though Breckenridge's reputation was well known. In twenty-eight years as a Marine, he had been everywhere a Marine can go, done everything a Marine can do. His "salad bar" of decorations covered five even rows, topmost among them the Navy Cross, which he'd won while a sniper in Vietnam, part of 1st Force Recon. Beneath the ribbons were his marksmanship medals—"shooting iron"—the least of which was a "Master" rating. Breckenridge was known for his weapons proficiency. Every year he went to the national championships at Camp Perry, Ohio, and in two of the past five years he had won the President's Cup for his mastery of the .45 Colt automatic. His shoes were so shiny that one could determine only with difficulty that the underlying leather was actually black. His brass shone like stainless steel, and his hair was cut so close that if any gray were in there, the casual observer could never have seen it. He had begun his career as an ordinary rifleman, been an Embassy Marine and a Sea Marine. He had taught marksmanship at the sniper school, been a drill instructor at Parris Island and an officer instructor at Quantico.

When the Marine detail at the Academy had been augmented, Breckenridge had been the divisional Sergeant Major at Camp LeJeune, and it was said that when he left Annapolis, he would complete his thirty-year tour of duty as Sergeant Major of the Corps, with an office adjoining that of the Commandant. His presence at Annapolis was no accident. As he walked about the campus, Breckenridge was himself an eloquent and unspoken challenge to whichever midshipman might still be undecided on his career goals: *Don't even think about being a Marine officer unless you are fit to command a man like this.* It was the sort of challenge that few mids could walk away from. The Marine force that backed up the civilian guards was technically under the command of a captain. In fact, as was so often the case with the Corps, the Captain had the good sense to let Breckenridge run things. The traditions of the Corps were not passed on by officers, but rather by the professional NCOs who were the conservators of it all.

As Ryan and Jackson watched, the Sergeant Major took a fresh pistol from a cardboard box and slipped a clip into it. He fired two rounds, then checked his target through a spotting scope. Frowning, he pulled a tiny screwdriver from his shirt pocket and made an adjustment to the sights. Two more rounds, check, another adjustment. Two more shots. The pistol was now perfectly sighted, and went back into the manufacturer's box.

"How's it going, Gunny?" Robby asked.

"Good afternoon, Commander," Breckenridge said agreeably. His southern Mississippi accent spilled across the naked concrete floor. "And how are you today, sir?"

“No complaints. I got somebody I want you to meet. This here’s Jack Ryan.”

They shook hands. Unlike Skip Tyler, Breckenridge was a man who understood and disciplined his strength.

“Howdy. You’re the guy was in the papers.” Breckenridge examined Ryan like a fresh boot.

“That’s right.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir. I know the guy who ran you through Quantico. ”

Ryan laughed. “And how is Son of Kong?”

“Willie’s retired now. He runs a sporting goods store down in Roanoke. He remembers you. Says you were pretty sharp for a college boy, and I imagine you remember mosta what he taught you.” Breckenridge gazed down at Jack with a look of benign satisfaction, as though Ryan’s action in London was renewed proof that everything the Marine Corps said and did, everything to which he had dedicated his life, really meant something. He would not have believed otherwise in any case, but incidents like this further enhanced his belief in the image of the Corps. “If the papers got things straight, you did right well, Lieutenant.”

“Not all that well, Sergeant Major—”

“Gunny,” Breckenridge corrected. “Everybody calls me Gunny. ”

“After it was all over,” Ryan went on, “I shook like a baby’s rattle. ”

Breckenridge was amused by this. “Hell, sir, we all do that. What counts is gettin’ the job done. What comes after don’t matter a damn. So, what can I do for you gentlemen? You want a few rounds of small-bore practice?”

Jackson explained what the FBI agent had said. The Sergeant Major’s face darkened, the jaw set. After a moment he shook his head.

“You’re sweatin’ this, eh? Can’t say that I blame you, Lieutenant. ‘Terrorists!’ ” he snorted. “A ‘terrorist’ is a punk with a machine gun. That’s all, just a well-armed punk. It doesn’t take much to shoot somebody in the back or hose down an airport waiting room. So. Lieutenant, you’ll be thinkin’ about carrying some protection, right? And maybe something at home.”

“I don’t know ... but I guess you’re the man to see.” Ryan hadn’t thought about it yet, but it was clear that Robby had.

“How’d you do at Quantico?”

“I qualified with the .45 automatic and the M-16. Nothing spectacular, but I qualified.”

“Do you do any shootin’ now, sir?” Breckenridge asked with a frown. Just qualifying wasn’t a very hopeful sign to a serious marksman.

“I usually get my quota of ducks and geese. I missed out this season, though,” Jack admitted.

“Uplands game?”

“I had two good afternoons after dove in September. I’m a pretty fair wing-shot, Gunny. I use a Remington I 100 automatic, 12-gauge.”

Breckenridge nodded. “Good for a start. That’s your at-home gun. Nothing beats a shotgun at close range—short of a flamethrower, that is.” The Sergeant Major smiled. “You have a deer/slug barrel? No? Well, you’re gonna get one of those. It’s twenty inches or so, with a cylinder bore and rifle-type sights. You pull the magazine plug, and you got five-round capacity. Now most people’ll tell you to use double-ought buck, but I like number four better. More pellets, and you’re not giving any range away. You can still hit out to eighty, ninety yards, and that’s all you’ll ever need. The important thing is, anything you hit with buckshot’s goin’ down—period.” He paused. “As a matter of fact, I might be able to get you some flechette rounds.”

“What’s that?” Ryan asked.

“It’s an experimental thing they foolin’ with down at Quantico for military police use, and maybe at the embassies. Instead of lead pellets, you shoot sixty or so darts, about three-caliber diameter, like little arrows. You gotta see what those little buggers do to believe it. Nasty. So that’ll take care of home. Now, you gonna want to carry a handgun with you?”

Ryan thought about that. It would mean getting a permit. He thought he could apply to the state police for one ... or maybe to a certain federal agency. Already his mind was mulling over that question.

“Maybe,” he said finally.

“Okay. Let’s do a little experiment.” Breckenridge walked into his office. He returned a minute later with a cardboard box.

“Lieutenant, this here’s a High-Standard target pistol, a .22 built on a .45 frame.” The Sergeant Major handed it over. Ryan took it, ejected the magazine, and pulled the slide back to make sure the pistol was unloaded. Breckenridge watched and nodded approvingly. Jack had been taught range safety by his father twenty years before. After that he fitted the weapon in his hand, then sighted down the range to get used to the feel. Every gun is a little different. This was a target pistol, with nice balance and pretty good sights.

“Feels okay,” Ryan said. “Little lighter than a Colt, though.”

“This’ll make it heavier.” Breckenridge handed over a loaded clip. “That’s five rounds. Insert the clip in the weapon, but do not chamber a round until I tell you, sir.” The Sergeant Major was accustomed to giving orders to officers, and knew how to do so politely. “Step to lane four. Relax. It’s a nice day in the park, okay?”

“Yeah. That’s how this whole mess started,” Ryan observed wryly.

The Gunny walked over to the switch panel and extinguished most of the lights in the room.

“Okay, Lieutenant, let’s keep the weapon pointed downrange and at the floor, if you please, sir. Chamber your first round, and relax. ”

Jack pulled the slide back with his left hand, then let it snap forward. He

didn't turn around. He told himself to relax and play the game. He heard a cigarette lighter snap shut. Maybe Robby was lighting up one of his cigars.

"I saw a picture of your little girl in the papers, Lieutenant. She's a pretty little thing."

"Thank you, Gunny. I've seen one of yours on campus, too. Cute, but not very little. I heard she's engaged to a mid."

"Yes, sir. That's my little baby," Breckenridge said, like a father rather than a Marine. "The last of my three. She'll be married—"

Ryan nearly jumped out of his skin as a string of firecrackers began exploding at his feet. He started to turn when Breckenridge screamed at him:

"There, there, there's your target!"

A light snapped on to illuminate a silhouette target fifty feet away. One small part of Ryan's mind knew this was a test—but most of him didn't care. The .22 came up and seemed to aim itself at the paper target. He loosed all five rounds in under three seconds. The noise was still echoing when his trembling hands set the automatic down on the table.

"Jesus Christ, Sar-major!" Ryan nearly screamed.

The rest of the lights came back on. The room stank of gun-powder, and paper fragments from the firecrackers littered the floor. Robby, Jack saw, was standing safely at the entrance to the Gunny's office, while Breckenridge was right behind him, ready to grab Ryan's gun hand if he did anything foolish.

"One of the other things I do is moonlight as an instructor for the Annapolis City Police. You know, it's a real pain in the ass trying to figure a way to simulate the stress of combat conditions. This here's what I came up with. Okay, let's get a look at the target." Breckenridge punched a button, and a hidden electric motor turned the pulley for lane four.

"Damn!" Ryan growled, looking at the target.

"Not so bad," Breckenridge judged. "We got four rounds on the paper. Two snowbirds. Two in the black, both in the chest. Your target is on the ground, Lieutenant, and he's hurt pretty bad."

"Two rounds out of five—must be the last two. I settled down on them and took some more time."

"I noticed that." Breckenridge nodded. "Your first round was high and to the left, missed the card. Your next two came in here and here. The last two were on the money fairly well. That's not too bad, Lieutenant."

"I did a hell of a lot better in London." Ryan was not convinced. The two holes outside the black target silhouette mocked at him, and one round hadn't even found the target at all....

"In London, if the TV got it right, you had a second or two to figure out what you were gonna do," the Gunny said.

"That's pretty much the way it was," Ryan admitted.

“You see, Lieutenant, that’s the real important part. That one or two seconds makes all the difference, because you have a little time to think things over. The reason so many cops get killed is because they don’t have that little bit of time to think it out—but the crooks have done that already. That one second lets you figure what’s happening, select your target, and decide what you’re gonna do about it. Now, what I just made you do was go through all three steps, all at once. Your first round went wild. The second and third were better, and your last two were good enough to put the target on the ground. That’s not bad, son. That’s about as well as a trained cop does—but you gotta do better than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“A cop’s job is to keep the peace. Your job is just staying alive, and that’s a little easier. That’s the good news. The bad news is, those bad guys ain’t gonna give you two seconds to think unless you make them, or you’re real lucky.” Breckenridge waved for the men to follow him into his office. The Sergeant Major plopped down in his cheap swivel chair. Like Jackson, he was a cigar smoker. He lit up something better than what Robby smoked, but it still stank up the room.

“Two things you gotta do. One, I want to see you here every day for a box of .22; that’s every day for a month, Lieutenant. You have to learn to shoot better. Shootin’ is just like golf. You want to be good at it, you gotta do it every day. You have to work at it, and you need somebody to teach you right.” The Gunny smiled. “That’s no problem; I’ll teach you right. The second thing, you have to buy time for yourself if the bad guys come lookin’ for you.”

“The FBI told him to drive like the embassy guys do,” Jackson offered.

“Yeah, that’s good for starters. Same as in Nam—you don’t settle into patterns. What if they try to hit you at home?”

“Pretty isolated, Gunny,” Robby said.

“You got an alarm?” Breckenridge asked Ryan.

“No, but I can fix that pretty easy,” Ryan said.

“It’s a good idea. I don’t know the layout of your place, but if you can buy yourself a few seconds, and you got that shotgun, Lieutenant, you can make ’em wish they never came calling—at least you can hold them off till the police come. Like I said, the name of the game’s just staying alive. Now, what about your family?”

“My wife’s a doc, and she’s pregnant. My little girl—well, you saw her on TV, I guess.”

“Does your wife know how to shoot?”

“I don’t think she’s ever touched a gun in her life.”

“I teach a class in firearms safety for women—part of the work I do with the local police.”

Ryan wondered how Cathy would react to all this. He put that one off.

“What sort of handgun you think I oughta get?”

“If you come by tomorrow, I’ll try you out on a couple of ’em. Mainly you want something you’re comfortable with. Don’t go out and get a 44 Magnum, okay? I like automatics, myself. The springs eat up a lot of the recoil, so they’re easier to get comfortable with. You want to buy something that’s fun to shoot, not something that beats up on your hand and wrist. Me, I like the .45 Colt, but I been shooting that little baby for twenty-some years.” Breckenridge grabbed Ryan’s right hand and flexed it around roughly. “I think I’ll start you off on a 9-millimeter Browning. Your hand looks big enough to hold it right—the Browning’s got a thirteen-shot clip, you need a fair-sized hand to control it proper. Got a nice safety, too. If you have a kid in the house, Lieutenant, you’d better think about safety, okay?”

“No problem,” Ryan said. “I can keep it where she can’t reach it—we got a big closet, and I can keep them there, seven feet off the floor. Can I practice with a big-bore handgun in here?”

The Sergeant Major laughed. “That backstop we got used to be the armor plate on a heavy cruiser. Mainly we use .22’s in here, but my guards practice with .45’s all the time. Sounds to me like you know shotgunnin’ pretty good. Once you have that skill with pistol too, you’ll be able to do it with any gun you pick up. Trust me, sir, this is what I do for a living.”

“When do you want me here?”

“Say about four, every afternoon?”

Ryan nodded. “Okay.”

“About your wife—look. just bring her over some Saturday maybe. I’ll sit her down and talk to her about guns. Lots of women, they’re just afraid of the noise—and there’s all that crap on TV. If nothing else, we’ll get her used to shotgunning. You say she’s a doc, so she’s gotta be pretty smart. Hell, maybe she’ll like it. You’d be surprised how many of the gals I teach really get into it.”

Ryan shook his head. Cathy had never once touched his shotgun, and whenever he cleaned it, kept Sally out of the room. Jack hadn’t thought much about it, and hadn’t minded having Sally out of the way. Little kids and firearms were not a happy mixture. At home he usually had the Remington disassembled and the ammunition locked away in the basement. How would Cathy react to having a loaded gun in the house?

What if you start carrying a gun around? How will she react to that? What if the bad guys are interested in going after them, too ... ?

“I know what you’re thinkin’, Lieutenant,” Breckenridge said. “Hey, the Commander said the FBI didn’t think any of this crap was gonna happen, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So what you’re doin’ is buyin’ insurance, okay?”

“He said that, too,” Ryan replied.

"Look—we get intel reports here, sir. Yeah, that's right. Ever since those bike bums broke in, we get stuff from the cops and the FBI, and from some other places—even the Coast Guard. Some of their guys come here for firearms training, 'cause of the drug stuff they got 'em doing now. I'll keep an ear out, too," Breckenridge assured him.

Information—it's all a battle for information. You have to know what's happening if you're going to do anything about it. Jack turned back to look at Jackson while he made a decision that he'd been trying to avoid ever since he got back from England. He still had the number in his office.

"And if they tell you those bike bums are coming back?" Ryan asked with a smile.

"They'll wish they didn't," the Sergeant Major said seriously. "This is a U.S. Navy reservation, guarded by the United States Marine Corps."

And that's the name of that tune, Ryan thought. "Well, thanks, Gunny. I'll get out of your way."

Breckenridge saw them to the door. "Sixteen hundred tomorrow, Lieutenant. How about you, Commander Jackson?"

"I'll stick to missiles and cannons, Gunny. Safer that way. G'night."

"Good night, sir."

Robby walked Jack back to his office. They had to pass on the daily drinks. Jackson had to do some shopping on the way home. After his friend left, Jack stared at his telephone for several minutes. Somehow he'd managed to avoid doing this for several weeks despite his wish to track down information on the ULA. But it wasn't just curiosity anymore. Ryan flipped open his telephone book and turned to the "G" page. He was able to call the D.C. area direct, though his finger hesitated before it jabbed down on each button.

"This is Mrs. Cummings," a voice answered after the first ring. Jack took a deep breath.

"Hello, Nancy, this is Doctor Ryan. Is the boss in?"

"Let me check. Can you hold for a second?"

"Yes. "

They didn't have one of the new musical hold buttons there, Ryan noted. There was just the muted chirp of electronic noise for him to listen to. *Am I doing the right thing?* he wondered. He admitted to himself that he didn't know.

"Jack?" a familiar voice said.

"Hello, Admiral."

"How's the family?"

"Fine, thank you, sir."

"They came through all the excitement all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I understand that your wife's expecting another baby. Congratulations. "

And how did you know that, Admiral? Ryan did not ask. He didn't have to. The DDI was supposed to know everything, and there were at least a million ways he might have found out.

"Thank you, sir."

"So, what can I do for you?"

"Admiral, I ..." Jack hesitated. "I want to look into this ULA bunch."

"Yeah, I thought you might. I have here on my desk a report from the FBI's terrorism unit about them, and we've been coordinating lately with the SIS. I'd like to see you back here, Jack. Maybe even on a more permanent basis. Have you thought our offer over any more since we last spoke?" Greer inquired innocently.

"Yes, sir, I have, but ... well, I am committed to the end of the school year." Jack temporized. He didn't want to have to face that particular question. If forced, he'd just say no, and that would kill his chance to get into Langley.

"I understand. Take your time. When do you want to come over?"

Why are you making it so easy? "Could I come over tomorrow morning? My first class isn't until two in the afternoon."

"No problem. Be at the main gate at eight in the morning. They'll be waiting for you. See ya."

"Goodbye, sir." Jack hung up.

Well, that was easy. Too easy, Jack thought. *What's he up to?* Ryan dismissed the thought. He wanted to look at what CIA had. They might have stuff the FBI didn't; at the least he'd get a look at more data than he had now, and Jack wanted to do that.

Nevertheless the drive home was a troubled one. Jack watched his rearview mirror after remembering that he'd left the Academy the same way he always did. The hell of it was, he *did see* familiar cars. That was a problem with making your commute about the same time every day. There were at least twenty cars that he had learned to recognize. There was someone's secretary driving her Camaro Z-28. She had to be a secretary. She was dressed too well to be anything else. Then there was the young lawyer in his BMW—the car made him a lawyer, Ryan thought, wondering how he had ever assigned tags to his fellow commuters. *What if* a *new one shows up?* he wondered. *Will you be able to tell which one is a terrorist?* Fat chance, he knew. Miller, for all the danger that lay on his face, would look ordinary enough with a jacket and tie, just another state employee fighting his way up Route 2 into Annapolis....

"Paranoid, all this is paranoid," Ryan murmured to himself. Pretty soon he'd check the rear seat in his car before he got in, to see if someone might be lurking back there like on TV, with a pistol or garrote! He wondered if the whole thing might be a stupid, paranoid waste of time. What if Dan Murray just had a bug up his ass or was simply being cautious? The Bureau probably

taught its men to be cautious on these things, he was sure. Do I scare Cathy over this? What if that's all there is to it?

What if it's not?

That's why I'm going to go to Langley tomorrow, Ryan answered himself.

They sent Sally to bed at 8:30, dressed in her bunny-rabbit sleeper, the flannel pajamas with feet that keep kids warm through the night. She was getting a little old for that, Jack thought, but his wife insisted on them, since their daughter had a habit of kicking the blankets on the floor in the middle of the night.

"How was work today?" his wife asked.

"The mids gave me a medal," he said, and explained on for a few minutes. Finally he pulled the Order of the Purple Target out of his briefcase. Cathy found it amusing. The smiling stopped when he related the visit from Mr. Shaw of the FBI. Jack ran through the information, careful to include everything the agent had said.

"So, he doesn't really think it'll be a problem?" she asked hopefully.

"We can't ignore it."

Cathy turned away for a moment. She didn't know what to make of this new information. Of *course,* her husband thought. *Neither do I.*

"So what are you going to do?" she asked finally.

"For one thing I'm going to call an alarm company and have the house wired. Next, I've already put my shotgun back together, and it's loaded—"

"No, Jack, not in this house, not with Sally around," Cathy said at once.

"It's on the top shelf in my closet. It's loaded, but it doesn't have a round chambered. She can't possibly get to it, not even with a stool to stand on. It stays loaded, Cathy. I'm also going to start practicing some with it, and maybe get a pistol, too. And"—he hesitated—"I want you to start shooting, too."

"No! I'm a doctor, Jack. I don't use guns."

"They don't bite," Jack said patiently. "I just want you to meet a guy I know who teaches women to shoot. Just meet the guy. "

"No." Cathy was adamant. Jack took a deep breath. It would take an hour to persuade her, that was the usual time required for her common sense to overcome her prejudices. The problem was, he didn't want to spend an hour on the subject right now.

"So you're going to call the alarm company tomorrow morning?" she asked.

"I have to go somewhere."

"Where? You don't have any classes until after lunch."

Ryan took a deep breath. "I'm going over to Langley."

“What’s at Langley?”

“The CIA,” Jack answered simply.

“What?”

“Remember last summer? I got that consulting money from Mitre Corporation?”

“Yeah.”

“All the work was at CIA headquarters.”

“But—you said over in England that you never—”

“That’s where the checks came from. That’s who I was working for. But CIA was where I was working at.”

“You lied?” Cathy was astounded. “You lied in a courtroom?”

“No. I said that I was never employed by CIA, and I wasn’t.”

“But you never told me.”

“You didn’t need to know,” Jack replied. *I knew this wasn’t a good idea....*

“I’m your wife, dammit! What were you doing there?”

“I was part of a team of academics. Every few years they bring in outsiders to look at some of their data, just as sort of a check on the regular people who work there. I’m not a spy or anything. I did all the work sitting at a little desk in a little room on the third floor. I wrote a report, and that was that.” There was no sense in explaining the rest to her.

“What was the report about?”

“I can’t say.”

“Jack!” She was really mad now.

“Look, babe, I signed an agreement that I would never discuss the work with anybody who wasn’t cleared—I gave my word, Cathy.” That calmed her down a bit. She knew that her husband was a real stickler for keeping his word. It was actually one of the things she loved about him. It annoyed her that he used this as a defense, but she knew that it was a wall she couldn’t breach. She tried another tack.

“So why are you going back?”

“I want to see some information they have. You ought to be able to figure out what that information is.”

“About these ULA people, then.”

“Well, let’s just say that I’m not worried about the Chinese right now.”

“You really are worried about them, aren’t you?” She was starting to worry, finally.

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“But why? You said the FBI said they weren’t—”

“I don’t know—hell, yes, I do know. It’s that Miller bastard, the one at the trial. He wants to kill me.” Ryan looked down at the floor. It was the first time he’d said it aloud.

“How do you know that?”

“Because I saw his face, Cathy. I saw it, and I’m scared—not just for me.”

“But Sally and I—”

“Do you really think he cares about that?” Ryan snapped angrily. “These bastards kill people they don’t even know. They almost do it for fun. They want to change the world into something they like, and they don’t give a damn who’s in the way. *They just don’t care.”*

“So why go to the CIA? Can they protect you—us—I mean....”

“I want a better feel for what these guys are all about.”

“But the FBI knows that, don’t they?”

“I want to see the information for myself. I did pretty good when I worked there,” Jack explained. “They even asked me to, well, to take a permanent position there. I turned them down.”

“You never told me any of this,” Cathy grumped.

“You know now.” Jack went on for a few minutes, explaining what Shaw had told him. Cathy would have to be careful driving to and from work. She finally started smiling again. She drove a six-cylinder bomb of a Porsche 911. Why she never got a speeding ticket was always a source of wonderment to her husband. Probably her looks didn’t hurt, and maybe she flashed her Hopkins ID card, with a story that she was heading to emergency surgery. However she did it, she was in a car with a top speed of over a hundred twenty miles per hour and the maneuverability of a jackrabbit. She’d been driving Porsches since her sixteenth birthday, and Jack admitted to himself that she knew how to make the little green sports car streak down a country road—enough to make him hold on pretty tight. This, Ryan told himself, was probably a better defense than carrying a gun.

“So, you think you can remember to do that?”

“Do I really have to?”

“I’m sorry I got us into this. I never—I never knew that anything like this would happen. Maybe I just should have stayed put.”

Cathy ran her hand across his neck. “You can’t change it now. Maybe they’re wrong. Like you said, probably they’re just acting paranoid. ”

“Yeah.”

12

Homecoming

Ryan left home well before seven. First he drove to U.S. Route 50 and headed west toward D.C. The road was crowded, as usual, with the early morning commuters heading to the federal agencies that had transformed the District of Columbia from a picturesque plot of real estate into a pseudo-city of transients. He got off onto I-495, the beltway that surrounds the town, heading north through even thicker traffic whose more congested spots were reported on by a radio station's helicopter. It was nice to know why the traffic was moving at fifteen miles per hour on a road designed for seventy.

He wondered if Cathy was doing what she was supposed to do. The problem was that there weren't that many roads for her to use to get to Baltimore. The nursery school that Sally attended was on Ritchie Highway, and that precluded use of the only direct alternate route. On the other hand, Ritchie Highway was always a crowded and fast-moving road, and intercepting her wouldn't be easy there. In Baltimore itself, she had a wide choice of routes into Hopkins, and she promised to switch them around. Ryan looked out at the traffic in front of him and swore a silent curse. Despite what he'd told Cathy, he didn't worry overly much about his family. He was the one who'd gotten in the way of the terrorists, and if their motivation was really personal, then he was the only target. Maybe. Finally he crossed the Potomac River and got on the George Washington Parkway. Fifteen minutes later he took the CIA exit.

He stopped his Rabbit at the guard post. A uniformed security officer came out and asked his name, though he'd already checked Ryan's license plate against a computer-generated list on his clipboard. Ryan handed his driver's license to the guard, who scrupulously checked the photograph against Jack's face before giving him a pass.

"Sir, the visitors' parking lot is to the left, then the second right—"

"Thanks, I've been here before."

"Very well, sir." The guard waved him on.

The trees were bare. CIA headquarters was built behind the first rank of hills overlooking the Potomac Valley, in what had once been a lush forest. Most of the trees remained, to keep people from seeing the building. Jack took the first left and drove uphill on a curving road. The visitor parking lot was also attended by a guard—this one was a woman—who waved him to an open slot and made another check of Ryan before directing him toward the

canopied main entrance. To his right was "the Bubble," an igloo-shaped theater that was connected to the building by a tunnel. He'd once delivered a talk there, a paper on naval strategy. Before him, the CIA building was a seven-story structure of white stone, or maybe prestressed concrete. He'd never checked that closely. As soon as he got inside, the ambience of spook-central hit him like a club. He saw eight security officers, all in civilian clothes now, their jackets unbuttoned to suggest the presence of sidearms. What they really carried was radios, but Jack was sure that men with guns were only a few feet away. The walls had cameras that fed into some central monitoring room—Ryan didn't know where that was; in fact, the only parts of the building he actually knew were the path to his erstwhile cubbyhole of an office, from there to the men's room, and the route to the cafeteria. He'd been to the top floor several times, but each time he'd been escorted since his security pass didn't clear him for that level.

"Doctor Ryan." A man approached. He looked vaguely familiar, but Jack couldn't put a name on the face. "I'm Marty Cantor—I work upstairs."

The name came back as they shook hands. Cantor was Admiral Greer's executive assistant, a preppy type from Yale. He gave Jack a security pass.

"I don't have to go through the visitor room?" Jack waved to his left.

"All taken care of. You can follow me."

Cantor led him to the first security checkpoint. He took the pass from the chain around his neck and slid it into a slot. A small gate with orange and yellow stripes, like those used for parking garages, snapped up, then down again as Ryan stuck his card in the slot. A computer in a basement room checked the electronic code on the pass and decided that it could safely admit Ryan to the building. The gate went back up. Already Jack was uncomfortable here. *Just like before,* he thought, *like being in* a *prison—no, security in a prison is nothing compared to this.* There was something about this place that made Jack instantly paranoid.

Jack slung the pass around his neck. He gave it a quick look. It had a color photograph, taken the previous year, and a number, but no name. None of the CIA passes had names on them. Cantor led off at a brisk walk to the right, then left toward the elevators. Ryan noticed the kiosk where you could buy a Coke and a Snickers bar. It was staffed by blind workers, yet another of the oddly sinister things about the CIA. Blind people were less likely to be security risks, he supposed, though he wondered how they drove in to work every day. The building was surprisingly shabby, the floor tile never quite shiny, the walls a drab shade of yellow-beige ; even the murals were second-rate. It surprised a lot of people that the Agency spent little on the outward trappings of importance. The previous summer Jack had learned that the people here took a perverse pride in the place's seediness.

Everywhere people walked about with anonymous haste. They walked so fast in the building that most corners had hubcapshaped mirrors to warn you of possible collision with a fellow spook ... or to alert you that someone might be lurking and listening around the corner.

Why did you come here?

Jack shook the thought off as he entered the elevator. Cantor pushed the button for the seventh floor. The door opened a minute later to expose yet another drab corridor. Ryan vaguely remembered the way now. Cantor turned left, then right, as Ryan watched people walking about with a speed that would impress a recruiter for the Olympic Team's heel-and-toe crew. He had to smile at it until he realized that none of them were smiling. A serious place, the Central Intelligence Agency.

The executive row of CIA had its own private corridor—this one had a rug—that paralleled the main one and led to offices facing the east. As always, there were people just standing about and watching. They inspected Ryan and his pass, but showed no reaction, which was good enough news for Jack. Cantor took his charge to the proper door and opened it.

Admiral James Greer was in civilian clothes, as usual, leaning back in a high-backed swivel chair, reading an inevitable folder and sipping at inevitable coffee. Ryan had never seen him otherwise. He was in his middle sixties, a tall, patrician-looking man whose voice could be as courtly or harsh as he wished. His accent was that of Maine, and for all his sophistication, Ryan knew him to be a farmer's son who'd earned his way into the Naval Academy, then spent forty years in uniform, first as a submarine officer, then as a full-time intelligence specialist. Greer was one of the brightest people Ryan had ever met. And one of the trickiest. Jack was convinced that this gray-haired old gentleman could read minds. Surely that was part of the job description for the Deputy Director, Intelligence, of the Central Intelligence Agency. All the data gathered by spies and satellites, and God only knew what else, came across his desk. If Greer didn't know it, it wasn't worth knowing. He looked up after a moment.

"Hello, Doctor Ryan." The Admiral rose and came over. "I see you're right on time."

"Yes, sir. I remembered what a pain the commute was last summer." Without being asked, Marty Cantor got everyone coffee as they sat on chairs around a low table. One nice thing about Greer was that he always had good coffee, Jack remembered.

"How's the arm, son?" the Admiral asked.

"Almost normal, sir. I can tell you when it's going to rain, though. They say that may go away eventually, but it's like arthritis."

"And how's your family?"

The man doesn't miss a trick, Jack thought. But Jack had one of his own. "A little tense at the moment, sir. I broke the news to Cathy last night. She's not real happy about it, but then neither am I." *Let's get down to business, Admiral.*

"So what exactly can we do for you?" Greer's demeanor changed from pleasant old gentleman to professional intelligence officer.

"Sir, I know this is asking a lot, but I'd like to see what the Agency has on these ULA characters."

“Not a hell of a lot.” Cantor snorted. “These boys cover their tracks like real pros. They’re being bankrolled in a pretty big way—that’s inferred, of course, but it has to be true.”

“Where does your data come from?”

Cantor looked over to Greer and got a nod. “Doctor, before we go any further, we have to talk about classification.”

Resignedly: “Yeah. What do I have to sign?”

“We’ll take care of that before you leave. We’ll show you just about everything we’ve got. What you have to know now is that this stuff is classified SI-codeword.”

“Well, that’s no surprise.” Ryan sighed. Special-Intelligence-Codeword was a level of classification higher than top secret. People had to be individually cleared for the data, which was identified by a special codeword. Even the codeword itself was secret. Ryan had only twice before seen data of this sensitivity. *But now they’re going to lay it all out in front of me,* he thought as he looked at Cantor. *Greer must really want me back to open a door like this.* “So, like I said, where does it come from?”

“Some from the Brits—actually from the PIRA via the Brits. Some new stuff from the Italians—”

“Italians?” Ryan was surprised for a moment, then realized what the implications of that were. “Oh. Okay, yeah, they have a lot of people down in sand-dune country, don’t they?”

“One of them ID’d your friend Sean Miller last week. He was getting off a certain ship that was, miraculously enough, in the English Channel on Christmas Day,” Greer said.

“But we don’t know where he is?”

“He and an unknown number of associates headed south.” Cantor smiled. “Of course the whole country is south of the Med, so that’s not much of a help.”

“The FBI has everything we have, and so do the Brits,” Greer said. “It’s not much to go on, but we do have a team sifting through it. ”

“Thanks for letting me take a look, Admiral.”

“We’re not doing this out of charity, Doctor Ryan,” the Admiral pointed out. “I’m hoping that you might find something useful. And this thing has a price for you, too. If you want in, you will be an Agency employee by the end of the day. We can even arrange for you to have a federal pistol permit.”

“How did you know—”

“It’s my job to know, sonny.” The old man grinned at him. Ryan didn’t think this situation was the least bit funny, but he granted the Admiral his points.

“When can I start?”

“How does your schedule look?”

“I can work on that,” Jack said cautiously. “I can be here Tuesday morning, and maybe work one full day per week, plus two half-days. In the mornings. Most of my classes are in the afternoon. Semester break is coming up, and then I can give you a full week.”

“Very well. You can work out the details with Marty. Go take care of the paperwork. Nice to see you again, Jack.”

Jack shook his hand once more. “Thank you, sir.”

Greer watched the door close before he went back to the desk. He waited a few seconds for Ryan and Cantor to clear the corridor, then walked out to the comer office that belonged to the Director of Central Intelligence.

“Well?” Judge Arthur Moore asked.

“We got him,” Greer reported.

“How’s the clearance procedure going?”

“Clean. He was a little too sharp doing his stock deals a few years back, but, hell, he was supposed to be sharp.”

“Nothing illegal?” Judge Moore asked. The Agency didn’t need someone who might be investigated by the SEC. Greer shook his head.

“Nah, just very smart.”

“Fine. But he doesn’t see anything but this terrorist stuff until the clearance procedures are complete.”

“Okay, Arthur!”

“And I don’t have Deputy Directors to do our recruiting,” the DCI pointed out.

“You’re taking this awfully hard. Does a bottle of bourbon put that much of a dent in your bank account?”

The Judge laughed. The day after Miller had been sprung from British custody, Greer had made the gentlemanly wager. Moore didn’t like losing at anything—he’d been a trial lawyer before becoming a jurist—but it was nice to know that his DDI had a head for prognostication.

“I’m having Cantor get him a gun permit, too,” Greer added.

“You sure that’s a good idea?”

“I think so.”

“So it’s decided, then?” Miller asked quietly.

O’Donnell looked over at the younger man, knowing why the plan had been formulated. It was a good plan, he admitted to himself, an effective plan. It had elements of brilliance in its daring. But Sean had allowed personal feelings to influence his judgment. That wasn’t so good.

He turned toward the window. The French countryside was dark, thirty

thousand feet below the airliner. All those peaceful people, sleeping in their homes, safe and secure. They were on a red-eye flight, and the plane was nearly empty. The stewardess dozed a few rows aft, and there was no one about to hear what they were saying. The whine of the jet engines would keep any electronic listening device from working, and they'd been very careful to cover their tracks. First the flight to Bucharest, then to Prague, then to Paris, and now the flight home to Ireland, with only French entry stamps on their passports. O'Donnell was a careful man, to the point of carrying notes on his fictitious business meetings in France. They'd get through customs easily enough, O'Donnell was sure. It was late, and the clerks at passport control were scheduled to go home right after this flight arrived.

Sean had a completely new passport, with the proper stamps, of course. His eyes were now brown, courtesy of some contact lenses, his hair changed in color and style, a neatly trimmed beard changing the shape of his face. Sean hated the beard for its itching. O'Donnell smiled at the darkness. Well, he'd have to get used to that.

Sean didn't say anything else. He sat back and pretended to read through the magazine he'd found in the seat pocket. The pretended patience was gratifying to his chief. The young man had gone through his refresher training (O'Donnell thought in military terms for this sort of thing) with a passion, trimming off the excess weight, reacquainting himself with his weapons, conferring with the intelligence officers from other fair-skinned nations, and living through their critique of the failed operation in London. These "friends" had not acknowledged the luck factor, and pointed out that another car of men had been needed to ensure success. Through all of it, Sean had kept his peace and listened politely. And now he waited patiently for the decision on his proposed operation. Perhaps the young man had learned something in that English jail.

"Yes."

Ryan signed the form, acknowledging receipt of the cartful of information. He was back in the same cubbyhole office he'd had the previous summer, a windowless, closet-sized room on the third floor of CIA's main building. His desk was about the smallest size made—in federal prison workshops—for office use, and the swivel chair was a cheap one. CIA chic.

The messenger stacked the documents on the comer of Ryan's desk and wheeled the cart back out of the room. Jack went to work. He took the top off a Styrofoam cup of coffee bought at the kiosk around the corner, dumped in the whole container of creamer and two envelopes of sugar, and stirred it with a pencil as he often did. It was a habit his wife loathed.

The pile was about nine inches high. The files were in oversized envelopes, each of which had an alpha-numeric code stamped on in block figures. The file folders he removed from the top envelope were trimmed with red tape so as to look important—the visual cues were designed to be noticed, to stand out visually. Such files had to be locked up in secure cabinets every night,

never left on a desk where someone might take an unauthorized look at them. The papers inside each were held in place with Acco fasteners, and all had numbers. The cover of the first file had its codeword neatly typed on a paper label: FIDELITY. Ryan knew that the code names were assigned at random by a computer, and he wondered how many such files and names there were, if the dictionary of the English language that resided in the computer's memory had been seriously depleted by the elimination of words for the thousands of secret files that sat in cabinets throughout the building. He hesitated for a moment before opening it, as though doing so would irrevocably commit him to employment at CIA; as though the first step on that path had not already been taken....

Enough of that, he told himself, and opened the file. It was the first official CIA report on the ULA, barely a year old.

"Ulster Liberation Army," the title of the report read. "Genesis of an Anomaly."

"Anomaly." That was the word Murray had used, Ryan remembered. The first paragraph of the report stated with disarming honesty that the information contained in the following thirty single-spaced pages was more speculation than fact, based principally on data gotten from convicted PIRA members—specifically on denials they'd made. *That wasn't* our *operation,* some of them had said after being caught for another. Ryan frowned. Not exactly the most reliable of evidence. The two men who'd done the report, however, had done a superb job of cross-referencing. The most unlikely story, heard from four separate sources, changed to something else. It was particularly true since the PIRA was, technically speaking, a professional outfit. Jack knew from his own research the previous year that the Provisional Wing of the Irish Republican Army was superbly organized, along the classic cellular lines. It was just like any intelligence agency. With the exception of a handful of top people, the specifics of any particular operation were compartmentalized: known only to those who really needed to know. "Need-to-know" was the catch phrase in any intelligence agency.

Therefore, if the details of an operation are widely known, the report argued, it can only be because it was not a PIRA op. Otherwise they would not have known or talked about the details, even among themselves. This was twisted logic, Jack thought, but fairly convincing nonetheless. The theory held insofar as the PIRA's main rival, the less well organized Irish National Liberation Army, the gang that had killed Lord Louis Mountbatten, had often had its operations identified in the same way. The rivalry between PIRA and INLA had turned vicious often enough, though the latter, with its lack of internal unity and generally amateurish organization, was not nearly as effective.

It was barely a year since the ULA had emerged from the shadows to take some kind of shape. For the first year they'd operated, it was thought by the British that they were a PIRA Special Action Group, a Provo hit squad, a theory broken when a captured PIRA member had indignantly denied complicity in what had turned out to be a ULA assassination. The authors of the report then examined suspected ULA operations, pointing to operational

patterns. These, Ryan saw, were quite real. For one thing, they involved more people, on average, than PIRA ops.

That's interesting.... Ryan walked out of the room, heading down the corridor to the kiosk, where he bought a pack of cigarettes. In under a minute he was back to his office, fumbling with the cipher lock on the door.

More people per operation. Ryan lit one of the low-tar smokes. That was a violation of ordinary security procedures. The more people involved in an operation, the greater the risk of its being blown. What did this mean? Ryan examined three separate operations, looking for his own patterns.

It was clear after ten minutes of examination. The ULA was more of a military organization than PIRA. Instead of the small, independent groups typical of urban terrorists, the ULA organized itself more on classic military lines. The PIRA often depended on a single "cowboy" assassin, less often on the special action groups. There were many cases Ryan knew of, where the one "designated hitter"—a term popular in CIA the previous year—had his own special gun, and lay in wait like a deer hunter, often for days, to kill a specific target. But the ULA was different. For one thing they didn't generally go for individual targets. They relied, it seemed, on a reconnaissance team and an assault team that worked in close cooperation—the operative word here was "seemed," Ryan read, since this, again, was something inferred from scanty evidence. When they did something, they usually got away cleanly. Planning and resources.

Classic military lines. That implied a great deal of confidence by the ULA in its people—and in its security. Jack started making notes. The actual facts in the report were thin—he counted six—but the analysis was interesting. The ULA showed a very high degree of professionalism in its planning and execution of operations, more so than the PIRA, which was itself proficient enough. Instead of a small number of really sharp operatives, it appeared that weapons expertise was uniform throughout the small organization. The uniformity of expertise was interesting.

Military training? Ryan wrote down. *How good? Where done?* What *source?* He looked at the next report. It was dated some months after "Genesis" and showed a greater degree of institutional interest. CIA had begun to take a closer look at the ULA, starting seven months previously. *Right after I left here,* Jack noted. *Coincidence.*

This one concentrated on Kevin O'Donnell, the suspected leader of the ULA. The first thing Ryan saw was a photograph taken from a British intelligence-gathering team. The man was fairly tall, but otherwise ordinary. The photo was dated years before, and the next thing Jack read was that the man had reportedly had plastic surgery to change his face. Jack studied the photo anyway. He'd been at a funeral for a PIRA member killed by the Ulster Defense Regiment. The face was solemn enough, with a hardness around the eyes. He wondered how much he could draw from a single photo of a man at a funeral for a comrade, and set the picture aside to read the biography of the man.

A working-class background. His father had been a truck driver. His mother had died when he was nine. Catholic schools, of course. A copy of his college transcript showed him to be bright enough. O'Donnell had graduated from university with honors, and his degree was in political science. He'd taken every course on Marxism that the institution had offered, and been involved on the fringes of civil-rights groups in the late sixties and early seventies. This had earned him attention from the RUC and British intelligence agencies. Then, after graduating, he'd dropped out of sight for a year, reappearing in 1972 after the Bloody Sunday fiasco when British Army paratroopers had gotten out of control and fired into a crowd of demonstrators, killing fourteen people, none of whom had been proven to have a gun.

"There's a coincidence," Ryan whispered to himself. The paratroopers still claimed that they'd been fired upon from someone in the crowd and merely returned fire to defend themselves. An official government report done by the British backed this up—of course, what else could they say? Ryan shrugged. It might even have been true. The biggest mistake the English had ever made was to send troops into Northern Ireland. What they'd needed was good cops to reestablish law and order, not an army of occupation. But with the RUC out of control then, and supplemented by the B-Special thugs, there hadn't been a real alternative. So soldiers had been sent in, to a situation for which they were unsuited by training ... and vulnerable to provocation.

Ryan's antennae twitched at that.

Political-science major, heavy course-load in Marxism. O'Donnell had dropped out of sight, then reappeared about a year later immediately after the Bloody Sunday disaster, and soon thereafter was identified by an informer as the PIRA's chief of internal security. He didn't get that job on the basis of college classwork. He'd had to work to earn that. Terrorism, like any other profession, has its apprenticeship. Somehow this Kevin Joseph O'Donnell had earned his spurs. *How did you do that? Were you one of the guys who stage-managed the provocations? If so, where did you learn how, and does that missing year have anything to do with it? Were you trained in urban insurgency tactics... in the Crimea maybe ... ?*

Too much of a coincidence, Jack told himself. The idea of Soviet training for the hard-core members of the PIRA and INLA had been bandied about so much that it had lost credibility. Besides, it didn't have to be something that dramatic. They might just have figured out the proper tactics for themselves, or read them in books. There were plenty of books on the subject of how to be an urban guerrilla. Jack had read several of them.

He flipped forward in time to O'Donnell's second disappearance. Here the information from British sources was fairly complete for once. O'Donnell had been remarkably effective as chief of internal security. Nearly half the people he'd killed really had been informers of one sort or another, not a bad percentage in this sort of business. He found a couple of new pages at the end of the report, and read the information that David Ashley had gathered a few months before in Dublin.... *He got a little carried away....* O'Donnell had used his position to eliminate Provos whose politics didn't quite agree with his. It

had been discovered, and he'd vanished for a second time. Again the data was speculative, but it tracked with what Murray had told him in London. O'Donnell *had* gone somewhere.

Surely he'd convinced someone to provide his nascent organization with financing, training, and support. *His nascent organization,* Ryan thought. *Where had it come from?* There was a lapse of two years before O'Donnell's disappearance from Ulster and the first positively identified operation of the ULA. Two complete years. The Brit intel data suggested plastic surgery. Where? Who paid for it? *He didn't do that in some jerkwater third-world country,* Ryan told himself. He wondered if Cathy could ask her colleagues at Hopkins about the availability of good face-cutters. *Two years to change his face, get financial backing, recruit his troops, establish a base of operations, and begin to make his impact.... Not bad,* Ryan thought with grudging admiration. All that in two years.

Another year before the name of the outfit surfaces....

Ryan turned when he heard someone working the lock on his office door. It was Marty Cantor.

"I thought you stopped smoking." He pointed at the cigarette.

Ryan crushed it out. "So does my wife. Have you seen all this stuff?"

"Yeah." Cantor nodded. "The boss had me run through it over the weekend. What do you think?"

"I think this O'Donnell character is one formidable son of a bitch. He's got his outfit organized and trained like a real army. It's small enough that he knows every one of them. His ideological background tells me he's a careful recruiter. He has an unusually high degree of trust in his troops. He's a political animal, but he knows how to think and plan like a soldier. Who trained him?"

"Nobody knows," Cantor replied. "I think you can overestimate that factor, though."

"I know that," Ryan agreed. "What I'm looking for is ... flavor, I guess. I'm trying to get a feel for how he thinks. It would also be nice to know who's bankrolling him." Ryan paused, and something else leaped into his mind. "What are the chances that he has people inside the PIRA?"

"What do you mean?"

"He runs for his life when he finds out that the PIRA leadership is out for his ass. Two years later, he's back in business with his own organization. Where did the troops come from?"

"Some pals from inside the PIRA, obviously," Cantor said.

"Sure." Jack nodded. "People he knew to be reliable. But we also know that he's a counterintelligence type, right?"

"What do you mean?" Cantor hadn't been down this road yet.

"Who's the main threat to O'Donnell?"

"Everybody wants him—"

"Who wants to kill him?" Jack refocused the question. "The Brits don't have capital punishment—but the PIRA does."

"So?"

"So if you were O'Donnell, and you recruited people from inside the PIRA, and you knew that the PIRA was interested in having your head on a wall plaque, you think you'd leave people inside to cue you in?"

"Makes sense," Cantor said thoughtfully.

"Next, who is the ULA's political target?"

"We don't know that."

"Don't give me that crap, Marty!" Ryan snapped. "Most of the information in these documents comes from inside the Provos, doesn't it? How the hell do these people know what the ULA is up to? How does the data get to them?"

"You're pushing, Jack," Cantor warned. "I've seen the data, too. It's mainly negative. The Provos who had the information sweated out of them mainly said that certain operations weren't theirs. The conclusion that ULA did 'em is inferential—circumstantial. I don't think that this stuff is as clear as you do."

"No, the two guys who did this report make a good case for putting the ULA fingerprint on these ops. What the ULA has is its own *style,* Marty! We can identify that, can't we?"

"You've constructed a circular argument," Cantor pointed out. "O'Donnell comes from the Provos, therefore he must have recruited from there, therefore he must have people in there, et cetera. Your basic arguments are logical, but try to remember that they're based on a very shaky foundation. What if the ULA really is a special-action group of the Provisionals? Isn't it in their interest to have something like that?" Cantor was a splendid devil's advocate, one of the reasons he was Greer's executive assistant.

"Okay, there is some truth to that," Ryan admitted. "Still, everything I say makes sense, assuming that the ULA is real."

"Granted that it's logical. But not proven."

"So it's the first logical thing we have for these characters. What else does that tell us?"

Cantor grinned. "Let me know when you figure it out."

"Can I talk to anybody about this?"

"Like who—I just want to ask before I say no."

"The Legal Attaché in London—Dan Murray," Ryan said. "He's supposed to be cleared all the way on this material, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he is, and he works with our people, too. Okay, you can talk with him. That keeps it in the family."

"Thanks."

Five minutes later Cantor was sitting across from Admiral Greer's desk.

"He really knows how to ask the right questions."

"So what did he tumble to?" the Admiral asked.

"The same questions that Emil Jacobs and his team have been asking: What's O'Donnell up to? Does he have the PIRA infiltrated? If so, why?"

"And Jack says ... ?"

"Same as Jacobs and the FBI evaluation: O'Donnell is a counterintelligence type by training. The Provos want his hide on the barn door, and the best way to keep his hide where it belongs is to have people inside to warn him if they get too close."

The Admiral nodded agreement, then looked away for a moment. That was only part of an answer, his instincts told him. There had to be more. "Anything else?"

"The training stuff. He hasn't sifted through all the data yet. I think we should give him some time. But you were right, sir. He's pretty sharp."

Murray lifted his phone and pushed the right button without paying much attention. "Yeah?"

"Dan? This is Jack Ryan," the voice on the phone said.

"How's it going, teacher?"

"Not bad. Something I want to talk over with you."

"Shoot."

"I think the ULA has the PIRA infiltrated."

"What?" Murray snapped upright in his chair. "Hey, ace, I can't—" He looked at the telephone. The line he was talking on was—"What the hell are you doing on a secure line?"

"Let's say that I'm back in government service," Ryan replied coyly.

"Nobody told me."

"So what do you think?"

"I think it's a possibility. Jimmy came up with the idea about three months back. The Bureau agrees that it makes sense. There is no objective evidence to support the theory, but everybody thinks it's a togical—I mean, it would be a smart thing for our friend Kevin to do, if he can. Remember that the PIRA has very good internal security, Jack."

"You told me that most of what we know about the ULA comes from PIRA sources. How do they get the info?" Ryan asked rapidly.

"What? You lost me."

“How does the PIRA find out what the ULA is doing?”

“Oh, okay. That we don’t know.” It was something that bothered Murray, and James Owens, but cops deal all the time with anonymous information sources.

“Why would they be doing that?”

“Telling the Provos what they’re up to? We have no idea. If you have a suggestion, I’m open to it.”

“How about recruiting new members for his team?” Ryan asked.

“Why don’t you think that one over for a few seconds,” Murray replied immediately. Ryan had just rediscovered the flat earth theory.

There was a moment of silence. “Oh—then he’d risk being infiltrated by the Provisionals.”

“Very good, ace. If O’Donnell’s got them infiltrated as a security measure to protect himself, why invite members of the group that wants his ass into his own fold? If you want to kill yourself, there’re simpler ways, Jack.” Murray had to laugh. He could hear Ryan deflate over the phone.

“Okay, I guess I had that coming. Thanks.”

“Sorry to rain on your parade, but we buried that idea a couple of months ago.”

“But he must have recruited his people from the Provisionals to begin with,” Ryan objected belatedly. He cursed himself for being so slow, but remembered that Murray had been an expert on this subject for years.

“Yeah, I’ll buy that, but he kept the numbers very low,” Murray said. “The bigger the organization gets, the greater the risk that the Provos will infiltrate —and destroy—him. Hey, they really want his ass on a platter, Jack.” Murray stopped short of revealing the deal David Ashley had cut with the PIRA. CIA didn’t know about that yet.

“How’s the family?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Fine.”

“Bill Shaw says he talked to you last week....” Murray said.

“Yeah. That’s why I’m here now. You’ve got me looking over my shoulder, Dan. Anything else that you’ve cued in on?”

It was Murray’s turn to deflate. “The more I think about it, the more it looks like I got worried over nothing. No evidence at all, Jack. It was just instinct, you know, like from an old woman. Sorry. I think I just overreacted to something Jimmy said. Hope I didn’t worry you too much.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Jack replied. “Well, I have to clear out of here. See ya.”

“Yeah. ’Bye, Jack.” Murray replaced the phone in the holder and went back to his paperwork.

Ryan did much the same. He had to leave by noon in order to make his first class of the day. The messenger came back with his cart and took the files away, along with Jack's notes, which, of course, were also classified. He left the building a few minutes later, his mind still sifting through the data he'd read.

What Jack didn't know was that in the new annex to the CIA headquarters building was the headquarters of the National Reconnaissance Office. This was a joint CIA-Air Force agency that managed the data from satellites and, to a lesser degree, high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft.

The new generation of satellites used television-type scanning cameras instead of photographic film. One consequence of this was that they could be used almost continuously instead of husbanding their film for coverage of the Soviet Union and its satellites. This allowed the NRO to assemble a much better data base on world trends and events, and had generated scores of new projects for hundreds of new analysts—explaining the newly built annex behind the original CIA building.

One junior analyst's brief was coverage on camps suspected to be used for the training of terrorists. The project had not yet shown enough results to be treated more importantly, though the data and photographs were passed on to the Task Force on Combating Terrorism. TFCT used the satellite photos, as was the norm in government circles. The staffers *oohed* and *ahhed* over the clarity of the shots, were briefed on the new charge-coupled devices that enabled the cameras to get high-resolution pictures despite atmospheric disturbances, noted that, despite all the hoopla, you really couldn't read the numbers on a license plate—and promptly forgot about them as anything more than pictures of camps where terrorists might be training. Photoreconnaissance interpretation had always been a narrow field for experts only. The analysis work was simply too technical.

And as was so often the case, here was the rub. The junior analyst was better described as a technician. He collected and collated data, but didn't really analyze it. That was someone else's job, for when the project was finished. In this particular case the data being processed noted infrared energy. The camps he examined on a daily basis—there were over two hundred—were mainly in deserts. That was remarkably good luck. While everyone knew that deserts suffer from blistering daylight heat, it was less appreciated that they can get quite cold at night—falling below freezing in many cases. So the technician was trying to determine the occupancy of the camps from the number of buildings that were heated during the cool nights. These showed up quite well on the infrared: bright blobs of white on a cold, black background.

A computer stored the digital signals from the satellite. The technician called up the camps by code number, noted the number of heated buildings in each, and transferred the data to a second data file. Camp 11-5-18, located at 28° 32' 47" North Latitude, 19° 07' 52" East Longitude, had six buildings, one of which was a garage. This one had at least two vehicles in it; though the building was unheated, the thermal signatures of two internal-combustion

engines radiated clearly through the corrugated steel roofs. Of the other five buildings, only one had its heater on, the technician noted. The previous week—he checked—three had been warm. The warm one now, the data sheet said, was occupied by a small guard and maintenance group, thought to be five men. It evidently had its own kitchen, since one part of the building was always a little warmer than the rest. Another building was a full-sized dining hall. That and the dormitories were now empty. The technician made the appropriate notations, and the computer assigned them to a simple line graph that peaked when occupancy was high and fell when it was low. The technician didn't have the time to check the patterns on the graph, but he assumed, wrongly, that someone else did.

"You remember, Lieutenant," Breckenridge said. "Deep breath, let it half out, and squeeze gently."

The 9mm Browning automatic had excellent sights. Ryan centered them on the circular target and did what the Gunny said. He did it right. The flash and sound of the shot came almost as a surprise to him. The automatic ejected the spent round and was ready to fire again as Jack brought the pistol down from recoil. He repeated the procedure four more times. The pistol locked open on the empty clip and Ryan set it down. Next he took off the muff-type ear protectors. His ears were sweaty.

"Two nines, three tens, two of them in the X-ring." Breckenridge stood away from the spotting scope. "Not as good as the last time."

"My arm's tired," Ryan explained. The pistol weighed almost forty ounces. It didn't seem like much weight until you had to hold it stone-steady at arm's length for an hour.

"You can get some wrist weights—you know, like joggers use. It'll build up your forearm and wrist muscles." Breckenridge slipped five rounds into the clip of Ryan's pistol and stepped to the line to aim at a fresh target.

The Sergeant Major fired all five in under three seconds. Ryan looked in the spotting scope. There were five holes within the target's X-ring, clustered like the petals on a flower.

"Damn, I forgot how much fun a nice Browning could be." He ejected the clip and reloaded. "The sights are right on, too."

"I noticed," Jack replied lamely.

"Don't feel too bad, Lieutenant," Breckenridge said. "I've been doin' this since you were in diapers." Five more rounds and the center was effectively removed from the target, fifty feet away.

"Why are we doing round targets anyway?" Jack asked.

"I want you to get used to the idea of placing your shots exactly where you want them to go," the Gunny explained. "We'll sweat the fancy stuff later. For now we'll work on basic skills. You look a little looser today, Lieutenant."

"Yeah, well, I talked to the FBI guy who originated the warning. Now he

says he might have overreacted—maybe I did, too."

Breckenridge shrugged. "You never been in combat, Lieutenant. I have. One thing you learn: the first twitch you have is usually right. Keep that in mind."

Jack nodded, not believing it. He'd accomplished much today. His look at the ULA data told him a lot about the organization, but there was not the first inkling that they had ever operated at all in America. The Provisional IRA had plenty of American connections, but no one believed that the ULA did. Even if they planned to do something here, Ryan judged, they'd need the connections. It was possible that O'Donnell might call on some of his previous PIRA friends, but that seemed most unlikely. He was a dangerous man, but only on his own turf. And America wasn't his turf. That's what the data said. Jack knew that this was too broad a conclusion to base on one day's work, of course. He'd keep looking—it seemed that his investigation would last two or three weeks, the way he was going. If nothing else, he wanted to look into the relationship between O'Donnell and the Provos. He did have a feeling that something odd was going on, just as Murray evidently did, and he wanted to examine the data fully, in the hope of coming up with a plausible theory. He owed CIA something for its courtesy.

The storm was magnificent. Miller and O'Donnell stood by the leaded-glass windows and watched as the Atlantic gale beat the sea to foaming waves that slammed against the base of the cliff on which the house stood. The crash of the breaking waves provided the bass notes, while the wind howled and whistled through the trees and raindrops beat their tattoo against the house itself.

"Not a day to be sailing, Sean," O'Donnell said as he sipped at a whiskey.

"When do our colleagues go to America?"

"Three weeks. Not much time. Do you still want to do it?" The chief of the ULA thought the timing marginal for what Sean planned.

"This is not an opportunity to be missed, Kevin," Miller answered evenly.

"Do you have another motive?" O'Donnell asked. Better to get it in the open, he decided.

"Consider the ramifications. The Provisionals go over to proclaim their innocence and—"

"Yes, I know. It is a fine opportunity. Very well. When do you want to leave?"

"Wednesday morning. We must move quickly. Even with our contacts, it won't be easy."

13

Visitors

The two men hunched over the blow-up of the map, flanked by several eight-by-ten photographs.

"This is going to be the hard one," Alex said. "This one I can't help you with."

"What's the problem?" Sean could see it, but by asking the question he could also gauge the skill of his new associate. He'd never worked with a black before, and though he'd met Alex and members of his group the year before, both were unknown quantities, at least in an operational sense.

"He always comes out by Gate Three, here. This street, as you see, is a dead end. He has to go straight west or turn north coming out. He has done both. This street here is wide enough to do the job from a car, but this one—too narrow, and it leads the wrong way. That means the only sure spot is right here, at the corner. Traffic lights here and here." Alex pointed. "Both these streets are narrow and always have cars parked on both sides. This building is apartments. These are houses—expensive ones. There isn't much pedestrian traffic here, oddly enough. One man can probably get by. Two or more, uh-uh. " He shook his head. "And it's a white area. A black man would be conspicuous. Your guy has to wing this one alone, pal, and he's gotta be on foot. Probably inside this door is the best place, but he'll have to be on his toes or the target will get away."

"How does he get out?" Sean asked.

"I can park a car around this corner, or this one. Timing for that is not a concern. We can wait all day for the right slot. We have a choice of escape routes. That's no problem either. At rush hour the streets are crowded. That actually works for us. The cops will have trouble responding, and we can use a car that looks ordinary, like a state-owned one. They can't stop all of them. Getaway is easy. The problem is your man. He has to be right here."

"Why not catch him in his car at a different place?"

Alex shook his head. "Too hard. The roads are too crowded to be sure, and it'd be too easy to lose him. You've seen the traffic, Sean, and he never goes exactly the same way twice. If you want my opinion, you should split the operation, do it one part at a time."

"No." Miller was adamant. "We'll do it the way I want."

"Okay, man, but I'm telling you, this man is exposed."

Miller thought that one over for a moment. Finally he smiled. “I have just the right man for it.

“The other part?”

Alex switched maps. “Easy. The target can take any route at all, but they all come to this place here at exactly four forty-five. We’ve checked six days in the past two weeks, never been off by more than five minutes. We’ll do the job right along here, close to the bridge. Anybody could handle this one. We can even rehearse it for you.”

“When?”

“This afternoon good enough?” Alex smiled.

“Indeed. Escape route?”

“We’ll show you. We might as well make it a real rehearsal.”

“Excellent.” Miller was well pleased. Getting here had been complicated enough. Not difficult, just complicated, involving six separate flights. It hadn’t been without humor, though. Sean Miller was traveling on a British passport at the moment, and the immigration clerk at Miami had taken his Belfast accent for Scottish. It hadn’t occurred to him that to an American ear there isn’t much difference between a brogue and a burr. *If that’s the skill level in American law-enforcement officials,* Miller told himself, *this op should go easily enough.*

They’d do the run-through today. If it looked good he’d summon the team, and they’d go in ... four days, he judged. The weapons were already in place.

“Conclusions?” Cantor asked.

Ryan picked up a sixty-page sheaf of paper. “Here’s my analysis, for what it’s worth—not much,” Jack admitted. “I didn’t turn up anything new. The reports you already have are pretty good, given the lack of real evidence to go on. The ULA is a really kinky bunch. On one hand their operations don’t seem to have a real purpose that we can discern—but this kind of skill.... They’re too professional to be operating without an objective, dammit!”

“True enough,” Cantor said. They were in his office, across the hall from the DDI’s. Admiral Greer was out of town. “You come up with anything at all?”

“I’ve mapped their operations geographically and against time. No pattern there that I can see. The only visible pattern is in the type of operation, and the execution, but that doesn’t mean anything. They like high-profile targets, but—hell, what terrorist doesn’t? That’s the whole point of being a terrorist, going after the really big game, right? They mostly use East Bloc weapons, but most of the groups do. We infer that they’re well financed. That’s logical, given the nature of their activity, but again there isn’t any substantive evidence to confirm it.

“O’Donnell has a real talent for dropping out of sight, both personally and professionally. There are three whole years we can’t account for, one before he

turned up around the time of Bloody Sunday and two years after the Provos tried to punch his ticket. They're both complete blanks. I talked to my wife about the plastic surgery angle—"

"What?" Cantor didn't react favorably to that.

"She doesn't know why I wanted the information. Give me a break, Marty. I'm married to a surgeon, remember? One of her classmates is a reconstructive surgeon, and I had Cathy ask her where you can get a new face. Not many places that can really do it—I was surprised. I have a list of where they are in here. Two are behind the Curtain. It turns out that some of the real pioneering work was done in Moscow before World War Two. Hopkins people have been to the institute—it's named for the guy, but I can't recall the name—and they found a few odd things about the place."

"Like what?" Cantor asked.

"Like two floors that you can't get onto. Annette DiSalvi—Cathy's classmate—was there two years ago. The top two floors of the place can be reached only by special elevators, and the stairways have barred gates. Odd sort of thing for a hospital. I thought that was a funny bit of information. Maybe it'll be useful to somebody else."

Cantor nodded. He knew something about this particular clinic, but the closed floors were something new. It was amazing, he thought, how new bits of data could turn up so innocently. He also wondered why a surgical team from Johns Hopkins had been allowed into the place. He made a mental note to check that out.

"Cathy says this 'getting a new face' thing isn't what it's cracked up to be. Most of the work is designed to correct damage from trauma—car accidents and things like that. The job isn't so much to change as to repair. There is a lot of cosmetic work—I mean aside from nose jobs and face-lifts—but that you can accomplish almost as well with a new hair style and a beard. They can change chins and cheekbones pretty well, but if the work is too extensive it leaves scars. This place in Moscow is good, Annette says, almost as good as Hopkins or even UCLA. A lot of the best reconstructive surgeons are in California," Jack explained. "Anyway, we're not talking a face-lift or a nose job here. Extensive facial surgery involves multiple procedures and takes several months. If O'Donnell was gone for two years, a lot of the time was spent in the body shop."

"Oh." Cantor got the point. "He really is a fast worker, then?"

Jack grinned. "That's what I was really after. He was out of sight for two years. At least six months of that time must have been spent in some hospital or other. So in the other eighteen months, he recruited his people, set up a base of operations, started collecting operational intelligence, and ran his first op."

"Not bad," Cantor said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. So he had to have recruited people from in the Provos. They must have brought some stuff with them, too. I'll bet that his initial operations were

things the PIRA had already looked at and set aside for one reason or another. That's why the Brits thought they were actually part of the PIRA to begin with, Marty."

"You said you didn't find anything important," Cantor said. "This sounds like pretty sharp analysis to me."

"Maybe. All I did was reorder stuff you already had. Nothing new is in here, and I still haven't answered my own question. I don't have much of an idea what they're really up to." Ryan's hand flipped through the pages of manuscript. His voice showed his frustration. Jack was not accustomed to failure. "We still don't know where these bastards are coming from. They're up to something, but damned if I know what it is."

"American connections?"

"None—none at all that we know of. That makes me feel a lot better. There's no hint of a contact with American organizations, and lots of reasons for them not to have any. O'Donnell is too slick to play with his old PIRA contacts."

"But his recruiting—" Cantor objected. Jack cut him off.

"Over here, I mean. As chief of internal security, he could know who was who in Belfast and Londonderry. But the American connections to the Provisionals all run through Sinn Fein, the Provos' political wing. He'd have to be crazy to trust them. Remember, he did his best to restructure the political leanings in the outfit and failed."

"Okay. I see what you mean. Possible connections with other groups?"

Ryan shook his head. "No evidence. I wouldn't bet against contact with some of the European groups, maybe some of the Islamic ones even, but not over here. O'Donnell's a smart cookie. To come over here means too many complications—hey, they don't like me, I can dig that. The good news is that the FBI's right. We're dealing with professionals. I am not a politically significant target. Coming after me has no political value, and these are political animals," Jack observed confidently. "Thank God."

"Did you know that the PIRA—well, Sinn Fein—has a delegation coming over day after tomorrow?"

"What for?"

"The thing in London hurt them in Boston and New York. They've denied involvement about a hundred times, and they have a bunch coming over for a couple of weeks to tell the local Irish communities in person."

"Aw, crap!" Ryan snarled. "Why not keep the bastards out of the friggin' country?"

"Not that easy. The people coming over aren't on the Watch List. They've been here before. They're clean, technically. We live in a free democracy, Jack. Remember what Oliver Wendell Holmes said: the Constitution was written for people of fundamentally differing views—or something like that. The short name is Freedom of Speech."

Ryan had to smile. The outside view of the Central Intelligence Agency people was often one of bumbling fascists, threats to American freedom, corrupt but incompetent schemers, a cross between the Mafia and the Marx brothers. In fact, Ryan had found them to be politically moderate—more so than he was. If the truth ever got out, of course, the press would think it was a sinister ruse. Even he found it very odd.

"I hope somebody will keep an eye on them," Jack observed.

"The FBI will have people in every bar, swilling their John Jameson and singing 'The Men Behind the Wire.' And keeping an eye on everything. The Bureau's pretty good at that. They've just about ended the gun-running. The word's gotten out on that—must be a half-dozen people who got sent up the river for sending guns and explosives over."

"Fine. So now the bad guys use Kalashnikovs, or Armalites made in Singapore."

"That," Cantor said, "is not our responsibility."

"Well, this here's all that I was able to come up with, Marty. Unless there's other data around, that's all I can give you." Jack tossed the report in Cantor's lap.

"I'll read this over and get back to you. Back to teaching history?"

"Yep." Ryan stood and got his coat from the back of the chair. He paused. "What if something about these guys turns up in a different place?"

"This is the only compartment you can see, Jack—"

"I know that. What I'm asking is, the way this place is set up, how do you connect things from different compartments?"

"That's why we have supervisory oversight teams, and computers," Cantor answered. *Not that the system always works....*

"If anything new turns up—"

"It's flagged," Cantor said. "Both here and at the FBI. If we get any sort of twitch on these fellows, you'll be warned the day we get it."

"Fair enough." Ryan made sure his pass was hanging in plain view before going out into the corridor. "Thanks—and please thank the Admiral for me. You guys didn't have to do this. I wouldn't feel this good if somebody else had told me what I saw for myself. I owe you."

"You'll be hearing from us," Cantor promised him.

Ryan nodded and went out the door. He'd be hearing from them, all right. They'd make the offer again, and he'd turn it down again—with the greatest reluctance, of course. He'd gone out of his way to be humble and polite with Cantor. In truth, he thought his sixty-page report did a pretty good job of organizing what data they did have on the ULA. That squared matters. He didn't really think he owed anybody.

Caroline Muller Ryan, MD, FACS, lived a very controlled and structured life. She liked it that way. In surgery she always worked with the same team of doctors, nurses, and technicians. They knew how she liked to work, how she liked her instruments arranged. Most surgeons had their peculiarities, and the ophthalmic specialists were unusually fastidious. Her team tolerated it because she was one of the best technical surgeons of her age group and also one of the easiest to like. She rarely had problems with her temper, and got along well with her nurses—something that female doctors often had trouble with. Her current problem was her pregnancy, which forced her to limit her exposure to certain operating-room chemicals. Her swelling abdomen was beginning to alter her stance at the table—actually eye surgeons usually sit, but the principle was the same. Cathy Ryan had to reach a little farther now, and joked about it constantly.

These traits carried over to her personal life also. She drove her Porsche with mechanistic precision, always shifting the gears at exactly the right RPM setting, taking comers on a line as regular as a Formula One driver's. Doing things the same way every time wasn't a rut for Cathy Ryan; it was perfection. She played the piano that way also. Sissy Jackson, who played and taught professionally, had once remarked that her playing was too perfect, lacking in soul. Cathy took that as a compliment. Surgeons don't autograph their work; they do it the right way, every time.

Which was why she was annoyed with life at the moment. It was a minor annoyance having to take a slightly different route to work every day—in fact it was something of a challenge, since she gave herself the goal of not allowing it to affect her schedule. Driving to and from work never took more than fifty-seven minutes, nor less than forty-nine (unless she came in on a weekend, when different traffic rules applied). She always picked up Sally at exactly quarter to five. Taking new routes, mainly inside Baltimore, threatened to change this segment of her life, but there weren't many driving problems that a Porsche 911 couldn't solve.

Her route this day was down state Route 3, then across a secondary road. That brought her out onto Ritchie Highway, six miles above the Giant Steps Nursery School. She caught the light just right and took the turn in second gear, working quickly up to third, then fourth. The feline growl of the six-cylinder engine reached through the sound insulation as a gentle purr. Cathy Ryan loved her Porsche. She'd never driven anything else until after she was married—a station wagon was useful for shopping and family drives, unfortunately—and wondered what she'd do when her second child arrived. That, she sighed, would be a problem. It depended on where the sitter was, she decided. Or maybe she could finally convince Jack to get a nanny. Her husband was a little too working-class in that respect. He'd resisted the idea of hiring a part-time maid to help with the housework—that was all the more crazy since Cathy knew her husband tended to be something of a slob, slow to hang up his clothing. Getting the maid had changed that a little. Now, nights before the maid was due in, Jack scurried around picking things up so that she wouldn't think the Ryans were a family of slovens. Jack could be so funny. *Yes,* she thought, *we'll get a nanny. After all, Jack's a knight now.* Cathy smiled

at the traffic. Pushing him in the right direction wouldn't be all that hard. Jack was very easy to manipulate. She changed lanes and darted past a dump truck in third gear. The Porsche made it so easy to accelerate around things.

She turned right into the Giant Steps parking lot two minutes later. The sports car bumped over the uneven driveway and she brought it to a stop in the usual spot. Cathy locked the car on getting out, of course. Her Porsche was six years old, but meticulously maintained. It had been her present to herself on getting through her intern year at Hopkins. There wasn't a single scratch on the British Racing Green finish, and only a Hopkins parking sticker marred the gleaming chrome bumper.

"Mommy!" Sally met her at the door.

Cathy bent to pick her up. It was getting harder to bend over, and harder still to stand up with Sally around her neck. She hoped that their daughter would not feel threatened by the arrival of the baby. Some kids were, she knew, but she had already explained to the little girl what was going on, and Sally seemed to like the idea of a new brother or sister.

"So what did my big girl do today?" Dr. Ryan asked. Sally liked being called a Big Girl, and this was Cathy's subterfuge for ensuring that sibling rivalry would be minimized by the arrival of a "little" boy or girl.

Sally wriggled free to drop back to the floor, and held up a finger painting done on what looked like wide-carriage computer paper. It was a credible abstract work of purple and orange. Together, mother and daughter went to the back and got her coat and lunch box. Cathy made sure that Sally's coat was zipped and the hood up—it was only a few degrees above freezing outside, and they didn't want Sally to get another cold. It took a total of five minutes from the time Cathy stopped the car until she was back out the door, walking toward it again.

She didn't really notice the routineness of her daily schedule. Cathy unlocked the door, got Sally into her seat, and made sure the seat belt was fastened snugly before closing and locking the door and going around to the left side of the car.

She looked up briefly. Across Ritchie Highway was a small shopping center, a 7-Eleven Store, a cleaners, a video store, and a hardware dealer. There was a blue van parked at the 7-Eleven again. She'd noticed it twice the previous week. Cathy shrugged it off. 7-Eleven was a convenience store, and lots of people made it a regular stop on the way home.

"Hello, Lady Ryan," Miller said inside the van. The two windows in the rear doors—they reminded Miller of the police transport van; he smiled to himself at that—were made of coated glass so that an outsider couldn't see in. Alex was in the store getting a six-pack of Cokes, as he'd done on a fairly regular basis the previous two weeks.

Miller checked his watch: She'd arrived at 4:46 and was leaving at 4:52. Next to him, a man with a camera was shooting away. Miller raised

binoculars. The green Porsche would be easy to spot, plus it had a customized license plate, CR-SRGN. Alex had explained how license plates in Maryland could be bought to individual specifications, and Sean wondered who'd be using that code next year. Surely there was another surgeon with the initials CR.

Alex got back in and started the engine. The van left the parking lot just as the target's Porsche did. Alex did his own driving. He went north on Ritchie Highway, hung a quick U-turn, and raced south to keep the Porsche in sight. Miller joined him in the right-side seat.

"She takes this road south to Route 50, across the Severn River bridge, then gets off 50 onto Route 2. We want to hit her before she does that. We'll proceed, take the same exit, and switch cars where I showed you. Too bad," Alex said. "I was beginning to like this here van."

"You can buy another with what we're paying you."

A grin split the black face. "Yeah, I 'spect so. Have a better interior on the next one, too." He turned right, taking the exit onto Route 50. It was a divided, multilane highway. Traffic was moderate to heavy. Alex explained that this was normal.

"No problem getting the job done," he assured Miller.

"Excellent," Miller agreed. "Good work, Alex." *Even if you do have a big mouth.*

Cathy always drove more sedately with Sally aboard. The little girl craned her neck to see over the dashboard, her left hand fiddling with the seat belt buckle as it usually did. Her mother was relaxing now. It generally took her about this length of time to settle down from a hard day—there were few easy ones—at the Wilmer Eye Institute. It wasn't stress so much. She'd had two procedures today and would have two more the next day. She loved her work. There were a lot of people now who could see only because of her professional skill, and the satisfaction of that was not something easily communicated, even to Jack. The price of it was that her days were rarely easy ones. The minute precision demanded by ophthalmic surgery denied her coffee—she couldn't risk the slight tremor in her hands that might come from caffeine—and imposed a degree of concentration on her that few professions demanded. There were more difficult medical skills, but not many. This was the main reason she drove her 911. It was as though in pushing through the air, or taking a tight corner at twenty-five in second gear, the car drained the excess energy from the driver and spread it into the environment. She almost always got home in a good mood. Tonight would be better still since it was Jack's turn to fix dinner. If the car had been built with a brain, it would have noticed the reduced pressure on accelerator and brakes as they took the Route 2 exit. It was being pampered now, like a faithful horse that had jumped all the fences properly.

"Okay?" Alex asked, keeping west on Route 50 toward Washington.

The other man in the back handed Miller the clipboard with the new time notation. There was a total of seven entries, all but the last complete with photographs. Sean looked at the numbers. The target was on a beautifully regular schedule.

"Fine," he said after a moment.

"I can't give you a precise spot for the hit—traffic can make things go a little funny. I'd say we should try on the east side of the bridge."

"Agreed."

Cathy Ryan walked into her house fifteen minutes later. She unzipped Sally's coat and watched her little—"big"—girl struggle out of the sleeves, a skill she was just beginning to acquire. Cathy took it and hung it up before getting out of her coat. Mother and daughter then proceeded to the kitchen, where they heard the unmistakable noise of a husband trying to fix dinner and a television tuned to the *MacNeil-Lehrer Report.*

"Daddy, look what I did!" Sally said first.

"Oh, great!" Jack took the picture and examined it with great care. "I think we'll hang this one up." All of them got hung up. The art gallery in question was the front of the family refrigerator. A magnetized holder gave the finger painting a semipermanent place over the ice and cold-water dispenser. Sally never noticed that there was a new hanging spot every day. Nor did she know that every such painting was saved, tucked away in a box in the foyer closet.

"Hi, babe." Jack kissed his wife next. "How were things today?"

"Two cornea replacements. Bernie assisted on the second one—it was a bear. Tomorrow, I'm scheduled for a vitrectomy. Bernie says hi, by the way."

"How's his kid?" Jack asked.

"Just an appendectomy, she'll be climbing the monkey bars next week," Cathy replied, surveying the kitchen. She often wondered if having Jack fix dinner was worth the wreckage he made of her room. It appeared that he was fixing pot roast, but she wasn't sure. It wasn't that Jack was a bad cook—with some things he was pretty good—he was just so damned sloppy about it. Never kept his utensils neat. Cathy always had her knives, forks, and everything else arranged like a surgical instrument tray. Jack would just set them anywhere and spent half of his time looking for where they were.

Sally left the room and found a TV that didn't have a news show on.

"Good news," Jack said.

"Oh?"

"I finished up at CIA today."

"So what are you smiling about?"

"There just isn't anything I see to make me suspect that we have anything to worry about." Jack explained for several minutes, keeping within the bounds

of classification—mostly. “They’ve never operated over here. They don’t have any contacts over here that we know of. The real thing is that we’re not good targets for them.”

“Why?”

“We’re not political. The people they go after are soldiers, police, judges, mayors, stuff like that—”

“Not to mention the odd prince,” Cathy observed.

“Yeah, well, we’re not one of those either, are we?”

“So what are you telling me?”

“They’re a scary bunch. That Miller kid—well, we’ve talked about that. I’ll feel a little better when they have him back in the can. But these guys are pros. They’re not going to mount an op three thousand miles from home for revenge.”

Cathy took his hand. “You’re sure?”

“Sure as I can be. The intelligence biz isn’t like mathematics, but you get a feel for the other guy, the way his head works. A terrorist kills to make a political point. We ain’t political fodder.”

Cathy gave her husband a gentle smile. “So I can relax now?”

“I think so. Still, keep an eye on the mirror.”

“And you’re not going to carry that gun anymore,” she said hopefully.

“Babe, I like shooting. I forgot what fun a pistol can be. I’m going to keep shooting at the Academy, but, no, I won’t be wearing it anymore.”

“And the shotgun?”

“It hasn’t hurt anybody.”

“I don’t like it, Jack. At least unload it, okay?” She walked off to the bedroom to change.

“Okay.” It wasn’t that important. He’d keep the box of shells right next to the gun, on the top shelf of the closet. Sally couldn’t reach it. Even Cathy had to stretch. It would be safe there. Jack reconsidered all his actions over the past three and a half weeks and decided that they had been worthwhile, really. The alarm system on the house wasn’t such a bad idea, and he liked his new 9mm Browning. He was getting pretty good scores. If he kept at it for a year, maybe he could give Breckenridge a run for his money.

He checked the oven. Another ten minutes. Next he turned up the TV. The current segment on the *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour* was—*I’ll be damned.*

“Joining us from our affiliate WGBH in Boston is Padraig—did I pronounce that right?—O‘Neil, a spokesman for Sinn Fein and an elected member of the British Parliament. Mr. O’Neil, why are you visiting America at this time?”

“I and many of my colleagues have visited America many times, to inform the American people of the oppression inflicted upon the Irish people by the

British government, the systematic denial of economic opportunity and basic civil rights, the total abrogation of the judicial process, and the continuing brutality of the British army of occupation against the people of Ireland," O'Neil said in a smooth and reasonable voice. He had done all this before.

"Mr. O'Neil," said someone from the British Embassy in Washington, "is the political front-man for the Provisional Wing of the so-called Irish Republican Army. This is a terrorist organization that is illegal both in Northern Ireland and in the Irish Republic. His mission in the United States is, as always, to raise money so that his organization can buy arms and explosives. This source of income for the IRA was damaged by the cowardly attack against the Royal Family in London last year, and his reason for being here is to persuade Irish-Americans that the IRA had no part in that."

"Mr. O'Neil," MacNeil said, "how do you respond to that?"

The Irishman smiled at the camera as benignly as Bob Keeshan's Captain Kangaroo. "Mr. Bennett, as usual, skirts over the legitimate political issues here. Are Northern Ireland's Catholics denied economic and political opportunity—yes, they are. Have the legal processes in Northern Ireland been subverted for political reasons by the British government—yes, they have. Are we any closer to a political settlement of this dispute that goes back, in its modern phase, to 1969—no, I regret to say we are not. If I am a terrorist, why have I been allowed into your country? I am, in fact, a member of the British Parliament, elected by the people of my parliamentary district."

"But you don't take your seat in Parliament," MacNeil objected.

"And join the government that is killing my constituents?"

"Jesus," Ryan said, "what a mess." He turned the TV off.

"Such a reasonable man," Miller said. Alex's house was outside the D.C. beltway. "Tell your friends how reasonable you are, Paddy. And when you get to the pubs tonight, be sure to tell your friends that you have never hurt anyone who was not a genuine oppressor of the Irish people." Sean watched the whole segment, then placed an overseas call to a pay phone outside a Dublin pub.

The next morning—only five hours later in Ireland—four men boarded a plane for Paris. Neatly dressed, they looked like young executives traveling with their soft luggage to business appointments overseas. At Charles de Gaulle International Airport they made connections to a flight to Caracas. From there they flew Eastern Air Lines to Atlanta, and another Eastern flight to National Airport, just down the Potomac from the memorial to Thomas Jefferson. The four were jet-lagged out and sick of airliner seats when they arrived. They took an airport limousine to a local hotel to sleep off their travel shock. The young businessmen checked out the next morning and were met by a car.

14

Second Chances

There ought to be a law against Mondays, Ryan thought. He stared at what had to be the worst way to start any day: a broken shoelace that dangled from his left fist. Where were the spares? he asked himself. He couldn't ask Cathy; she and Sally had left the house ten minutes before on the way to Giant Steps and Hopkins. Damn. He started rummaging through his dresser drawers. Nothing. The kitchen. He walked downstairs and across the house to the kitchen drawer that held everything that wasn't someplace else. Hidden beneath the notepads and magnets and scissors he found a spare pair—no, one white lace for a sneaker. He was getting warmer. Several minutes of digging later, he found something close enough. He took one and left the other. After all, shoelaces broke one at a time.

Next Jack had to select a tie for the day. That was never easy, though at least he didn't have his wife around to tell him he'd picked the wrong one. He was wearing a gray suit, and picked a dark blue tie with red stripes. Ryan was still wearing white, button-down shirts made mostly of cotton. Old habits die hard. The suit jacket slid on neatly. It was one of the suits Cathy had bought in England. It was painful to admit that her taste in clothing was far better than his. That London tailor wasn't too bad, either. He smiled at himself in the mirror—*you handsome devil!*—before heading downstairs. His briefcase was waiting on the foyer table, full of the draft quizzes he'd be giving today. Ryan took his overcoat from the closet, checked to see his keys were in the right pocket, got the briefcase, and went out the door.

"Oops!" He unlocked the door and set the burglar alarm before going back outside.

Sergeant Major Breckenridge walked down the double line of Marines, and his long-practiced eyes didn't miss a thing. One private had lint on his blue, high-necked blouse. Another's shoes needed a little more work, and two needed haircuts; you could barely see their scalps under the quarter-inch hair. All in all, there wasn't much to be displeased with. Every one would have passed a normal inspection, but this wasn't a normal post, and normal rules didn't apply. Breckenridge was not a screamer. He'd gotten past that. His remonstrations were more fatherly now. They carried the force of a command from God nevertheless. He finished the inspection and dismissed the guard detail. Several marched off to their gate posts. Others rode in pickups to the more remote posts to relieve the current watch standers at eight o'clock

exactly. Each Marine wore his dress blues and a white pistol belt. Their pistols were kept at the posts. They were unloaded, in keeping with the peaceful nature of their duty, but full clips of .45 ACP cartridges were always nearby, in keeping with the nature of the Marines.

Did I really look forward to this? It took all of Ryan's energy just to think that question of himself. But he didn't have any further excuses. In London his injuries had prevented him from doing it. The same had been true of the first few weeks at home. Then he'd spent the early mornings traveling to CIA. That had been his last excuse. None were left.

Rickover Hall, he told himself. *I'll stop when I get to Rickover Hall.* He had to stop soon. Breathing the cold air off the river was like inhaling knives. His nose and mouth were like sandpaper and his heart threatened to burst from his chest. Jack hadn't jogged in months, and he was paying the price for his sloth.

Rickover Hall seemed a thousand miles away, though he knew it was only a few hundred more yards. As recently as the previous October, he'd been able to make three circuits of the grounds and come away with nothing more than a good sweat. Now he was only at the halfway mark of his first lap, and death seemed amazingly attractive. His legs were already rubbery with fatigue. His stride was off; Ryan was weaving slightly, a sure sign of a runner who was beyond his limit.

Another hundred yards. About fifteen seconds more, he told himself. All the time he'd spent on his back, all the time sitting down, all the cigarettes he'd sneaked at CIA were punishing him now. The runs he'd had to do at Quantico had been nothing like this. *You were a lot younger then,* Ryan's mind pointed out gleefully.

He turned his head left and saw that he was lined up on the building's east wall. Ryan leaned back and slowed to a walk, hands supported on his hips as his chest heaved to catch up on the oxygen it needed.

"You okay, Doc?" A mid stopped—his legs still pumping in double-time—to look Jack over. Ryan tried to hate him for his youth and energy, but couldn't summon enough energy.

"Yeah, just out of training," Jack gasped out over three breaths.

"You gotta work back into it slowly, sir," the twenty-year-old pointed out, and sped off, leaving his history teacher scornfully in his dust. Jack started laughing at himself, but it gave him a coughing fit. The next one to pass him was a girl. Her grin really made things worse.

Don't sit down. Whatever you do, don't sit down.

He turned and moved away from the seawall. Just walking on his wobbly legs was an effort. He took the towel from around his neck to wipe the sweat from his face before he got too much of a chill. Jack held the towel taut between his hands and stretched his arms high. He'd caught his breath by

now. A renewed supply of oxygen returned to his limbs, and most of the pain left. The rubberiness would go next, he knew. In another ten minutes he'd feel pretty good. Tomorrow he'd make it a little farther—to the Nimitz Library, he promised himself. By May he wouldn't have the mids—at least not the girls—racing past him. Well, not all of the girls, anyway. He was spotting a minimum of ten years to the midshipmen, something that would only get worse. Jack had already passed thirty. Next stop: forty.

Cathy Ryan was in her greens, scrubbing at the special basin outside the surgical suite. The elastic waistband of the pants was high, above the curve of her abdomen, and that made the pants overly short, like the clamdiggers that had been fashionable in her teenage years. A green cap was over her hair, and she wondered yet again why she bothered to brush it out every morning. By the time the procedure was finished, her hair would look like the snaky locks of the Medusa.

"Game time," she said quietly to herself. She hit the door-opening switch with her elbow, keeping her hands high, just like it was done in the movies. Bernice, the circulating nurse, had her gloves ready, and Cathy reached her hands into the rubber until the tops of the gloves came far up on her forearms. Because of this, she was rarely able to wear her engagement ring, though her simple wedding band posed no problem. "Thanks."

"How's the baby?" Bernice asked. She had three of her own.

"At the moment he's learning to jog." Cathy smiled behind her mask. "Or maybe he's lifting weights."

"Nice necklace."

"Christmas present from Jack."

Dr. Terri Mitchell, the anesthesiologist, hooked the patient up to her various monitors and went to work as the surgeons looked on. Cathy gave the instruments a quick look, knowing that Lisa-Marie always got things right. She was one of the best scrub nurses in the hospital and was picky on the doctors she'd work with.

"All ready, Doctor?" Cathy asked the resident. "Okay, people, let's see if we can save this lady's eyesight." She looked at the clock. "Starting at eight forty-one."

Miller assembled the submachine gun slowly. He had plenty of time. The weapon had been carefully cleaned and oiled after being test fired the night before at a quarry twenty miles north of Washington. This one would be his personal weapon. Already he liked it. The balance was perfect, the folding stock, when extended, had a good, solid feel to it. The sights were easy to use, and the gun was fairly steady on full-automatic fire. All in all, a nice combination of traits for such a small, deadly weapon. He palmed back the bolt and squeezed the trigger to get a better feel for where it broke. He figured

it at about twelve pounds—perfect, not too light and not too heavy. Miller left the bolt closed on an empty chamber and loaded the magazine of thirty 9mm rounds. Then he folded the stock and tried the hanging hook inside his topcoat. A standard modification to the Uzi, it allowed a person to carry it concealed. That probably wouldn't be necessary, but Miller was a man who planned for all the contingencies. He'd learned that lesson the hard way.

"Ned?"

"Yes, Sean?" Eamon Clark, known as Ned, hadn't stopped going over the maps and photographs of his place since arriving in America. One of the most experienced assassins in Ireland, he was one of the men the ULA had broken from Long Kesh Prison the previous year. A handsome young man, Clark had spent the previous day touring the Naval Academy grounds, carrying his own camera as he'd photographed the statue of Tecumseh ... and carefully examined Gate Three. Ryan would drive straight uphill, giving him roughly fifteen seconds to get ready. It would demand vigilance, but Ned had the necessary patience. Besides, they knew the target's schedule. His last class ended at three that afternoon and he hit the gate at a predictable time. Alex was even now parking the getaway car on King George Street. Clark had misgivings, but kept them to himself. Sean Miller had master-minded the prison break that had made him a free man. This was his first real operation with the ULA. Clark decided that he owed them loyalty. Besides, his look at the Academy's security had not impressed him. Ned Clark knew that he was not the brightest man in the room, but they needed a man able to work on his own, and he did know how to do that. He'd proven this seven times.

Outside the house were three cars, the van and two station wagons. The van would be used for the second part of the operation, while the station wagons would take everyone to the airport when the operation was finished.

Miller sat down in an overstuffed chair and ran over the entire operation in his mind. As always, he closed his eyes and visualized every event, then he inserted variables. What if the traffic were unusually heavy or unusually light? What if ...

One of Alex's men came through the front door. He tossed Miller a Polaroid.

"Right on time?" Sean Miller asked.

"You got it, man."

The photograph showed Cathy Ryan leading her daughter by the hand into —what was the name of the place? Oh, yes, Giant Steps. Miller smiled at that. Today would be a giant step indeed. Miller leaned back again, eyes closed, to make sure.

"But there wasn't a threat," a mid objected.

"That's correct. Which is to say we know that *now*. But how did it look to Spruance? He knew what the Japanese fleet had in surface ships. What if they *had* come east, what if the recall order had never been issued?" Jack pointed

to the diagram he'd drawn on the blackboard. "There would have been contact at about oh-three-hundred hours. Who do you think would have won that one, mister?"

"But he blew his chance for a good air strike the next day," the midshipman persisted.

"With what? Let's look at the losses in the air groups. With all the torpedo craft lost, just what losses do you think he could have inflicted?" Jack asked.

"But—"

"You remember the Kenny Rogers song: You have to know when to walk away, and know when to run. Buck fever is a bad thing in a hunter. In an admiral commanding a fleet it can be disastrous. Spruance looked at his information, looked at his capabilities, and decided to call it a day. A secondary consideration was—what?"

"To cover Midway?" another mid asked.

"Right. What if they had carried on with the invasion? That was gamed out at Newport once and the invasion was successful. Please note that this is a manifestation of logic overpowering reality, but it was a possibility that Spruance could not afford to dismiss. His primary mission was to inflict damage on a superior Japanese fleet. His secondary mission was to prevent the occupation of Midway. The balance he struck here is a masterpiece of operational expertise...." Ryan paused for a moment. What was it that he'd just said? *Logic overcoming reality.* Hadn't he just come to the logical conclusion that the ULA wouldn't—no, no, a different situation entirely. He shook off the thought and kept going on the lessons from the Battle of Midway. He had the class going now, and ideas were crackling across the room like lightning.

"Perfect," Cathy said as she pulled her mask down around her neck. She stood up from the stool and stretched her arms over her head. "Nice one, folks."

The patient was wheeled out to the recovery room while Lisa-Marie made a final check of her instruments. Cathy Ryan pulled off her mask and rubbed her nose. Then her hands went down to her belly. The little guy really was kicking up a storm.

"Football player?" Bernice asked.

"Feels like a whole backfield. Sally wasn't this active. I think this one's a boy," Cathy judged, knowing that there was no such correlation. It was good enough that the baby was very active. That was always a positive sign. She smiled, mostly to herself, at the miracle and the magic of motherhood. Right there inside her was a brand-new human being waiting to be born, and by the feel of it, rather impatient. "Well. I have a family to talk to."

She walked out of the operating room, not bothering to change out of her greens. It always looked more dramatic to keep them on. The waiting room

was a mere fifty feet away. The Jeffers famiiy—the father and one of their daughters—was waiting on the inevitable couch, staring at the inevitable magazines but not reading them. The moment she came through the swinging door, both leaped to their feet. She gave them her best smile, always the quickest way to convey the message.

"Okay?" the husband asked, his anxiety a physical thing.

"Everything went perfectly," Cathy said. "No problems at all. She'll be fine."

"When will she be able—"

"A week. We have to be patient on this. You'll be able to see her in about an hour and a half. Now, why don't you get yourselves something to eat. There's no sense having a healthy patient if the family is worn out, I—"

"Doctor Ryan," the public address speaker said. "Doctor Caroline Ryan."

"Wait a minute." Cathy walked to the nurses' station and lifted the phone. "This is Doctor Ryan."

"Cathy, this is Gene in the ER. I've got a major eye trauma. Ten-year-old black male, he took his bike through a store window," the voice said urgently. "His left eye is badly lacerated."

"Send him up to six." Cathy hung up and went back to the Jeffers family. "I have to run, there's an emergency case coming up. Your wife will be fine. I'll be seeing you tomorrow." Cathy walked as quickly as she could to the OR.

"Heads up, we have an emergency coming in from ER. Major eye trauma to a ten-year-old." Lisa-Marie was already moving. Cathy walked to the wall phone and punched the number for surgeons' lounge. "This is Ryan in Wilmer six. Where's Bernie?"

"I'll get him." A moment later: "Doctor Katz."

"Bernie, I have a major eye trauma coming into six. Gene Wood in ER says it's a baddie."

"On the way." Cathy Ryan turned.

"Terri?"

"All ready," the anesthesiologist assured her.

"Give me another two minutes," Lisa-Marie said.

Cathy went into the scrub room to rewash her hands. Bernie Katz arrived before she started. He was a thoroughly disreputable-looking man, only an inch taller than Cathy Ryan, with longish hair and a Bismarck mustache. He was also one of the best surgeons at Hopkins.

"You'd better lead on this one," she said. "I haven't done a major trauma in quite a while."

"No problem. How's the baby coming?"

"Great." A new sound arrived, the high-pitched shrieks of a child in agony. The doctors moved into the OR. They watched dispassionately as two orderlies

were strapping the child down. *Why weren't you in school?* Cathy asked him silently. The left side of the boy's face was a mess. The reconstructive teams would have to work on that later. Eyes came first. The child had already tried to be brave, but the pain was too great for that. Terri did the first medication, with both orderlies holding the child's arm in place. Cathy and Bernie hovered over the kid's face a moment later.

"Bad," Dr. Katz observed. He looked to the circulating nurse. "I have a procedure scheduled for one o'clock. Have to bump it. This one's going to take some time."

"All ready on this side," the scrub nurse said.

"Two more minutes," the anesthesiologist advised. You had to be careful medicating kids.

"Gloves," Cathy said. Bernie came over with them a moment later. "What happened?"

"He was riding his bike down the sidewalk on Monument Street," the orderly said. "He hit something and went through an appliance-store window."

"Why wasn't he in school?" she asked, looking back at the kid's left eye. She saw hours of work and an uncertain outcome.

"President's Day, Doc," the orderly replied.

"Oh. That's right." She looked at Bernie Katz. His grimace was visible around the mask.

"I don't know, Cathy." He was examining the eye through the magnifying-glass headset. "Must have been a cheap window—lots of slivers. I count five penetrations. Jeez, look at how that one's extended into the cornea. Let's go."

The Chevy pulled into one of Hopkins' high-rise parking garages. From the top level the driver had a perfect view of the door leading from the hospital to the doctors' parking area. The garage was guarded, of course, but there was plenty of traffic in and out, and it was not unusual for someone to wait in a car while another visited a family member inside. He settled back and lit a cigarette, listening to music on the car radio.

Ryan put roast beef on his hard roll and selected iced tea. The Officer and Faculty Club had an unusual arrangement for charging: he set his tray on a scale and the cashier billed him by weight. Jack paid up his two dollars and ten cents. The price for lunch was hardly exorbitant, but it did seem an odd way to set the price. He joined Robby Jackson in a corner booth.

"Mondays!" he observed to his friend.

"Are you kidding? I can relax today. I was up flying Saturday and Sunday."

"I thought you liked that."

“I do,” Robby assured him. “But both days I got off before seven. I actually got to sleep until six this morning. I needed the extra two hours. How’s the family?”

“Fine. Cathy had a big procedure today—had to be up there early. The one bad thing about being married to a surgeon, they always start early. Sometimes it’s a little hard on Sally.”

“Yeah, early to bed, early to rise—might as well be dead,” Robby agreed. “How’s the baby coming?”

“Super.” Jack smiled. “He’s an active little bugger. I never figured how women can take that—having the kid kick, turn and like that, I mean.”

“Mind if I join you?” Skip Tyler slipped into the booth.

“How are the twins?” Jack asked at once.

The reply was a low moan, and a look at the circles under Tyler’s eyes provided the answer. “The trick is getting both of them asleep. You just get one quieted down, then the other one goes off like a damned fire alarm. I don’t know how Jean does it. Of course”—Tyler grinned—“she can walk the floor with them. When I do it it’s step-*thump*, step-*thump.”*

All three men laughed. Skip Tyler had never been the least sensitive about losing his leg.

“How’s Jean holding up?” Robby asked.

“No problem—she sleeps when they do and I get to do all the housework.”

“Serves you right, turkey,” Jack observed. “Why don’t you give it a rest?”

“Can I help it if I’m hot-blooded?” Skip demanded.

“No, but your timing sucks,” Robby replied.

“My timing,” Tyler said with raised eyebrows, “is perfect.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it,” Jack agreed.

“I heard you were out jogging this morning.” Tyler changed subjects.

“So did I.” Robby laughed.

“I’m still alive, guys.”

“One of my mids said tomorrow they’re going to follow you around with an ambulance just in case.” Skip chuckled. “I suppose it’s nice for you to remember that most of the kids know CPR.”

“Why are Mondays always like this?” Jack asked.

Alex and Sean Miller made a final run along Route 50. They were careful to keep just under the speed limit. The State Police radar cars were out in force today for some reason or other. Alex assured his colleague that this would end around 4:30. Rush hour had too many cars on the road for efficient law enforcement. Two other men were in the back of the van, each with his

weapon.

“Right about here, I think,” Miller said.

“Yeah, it’s the best place,” Alex agreed.

“Escape route.” Sean clicked on a stopwatch.

“Okay.” Alex changed lanes and kept heading west. “Remember, it’s gonna be slower tonight.”

Miller nodded, getting the usual pre-op butterflies in his stomach. He ran through his plan, thinking over each contingency as he sat in the right-front seat of the van, watching the way traffic piled up at certain exits off the highway. The road was far better than the roads he was accustomed to in Ireland, but people drove on the wrong side here, he thought, though with pretty good traffic manners compared to Europe. Especially France and Italy ... he shook off the thought and concentrated on the situation at hand.

Once the attack was completed, they would reach the getaway vehicles in under ten minutes. The way it was timed, Ned Clark would be waiting for them. Miller completed his mental run-through, satisfied that his plan, though a hasty one, was effective.

“You’re early,” Breckenridge said.

“Yeah, well, I have a couple of mids coming in this afternoon to go over their term papers. Any problem?” Jack took the Browning from his briefcase.

The Sergeant Major grabbed a box of 9mm rounds. “Nope. Mondays are supposed to be screwed up.”

Ryan walked to lane three and pulled the gun from the holster. First he ejected the empty clip and pulled the slide back. Next he checked the barrel for obstructions. He knew the weapon was fine mechanically, of course, but Breckenridge had range-safety rules that were inviolable. Even the Superintendent of the Academy had to follow them.

“Okay, Gunny.”

“I think today we’ll try rapid fire.” The Sergeant Major clipped the appropriate target on the rack, and the motorized pulley took it fifty feet downrange. Ryan loaded five rounds into the clip.

“Get your ears on, Lieutenant.” Breckenridge tossed the muff-type protectors. Ryan put them on. He slid the clip into the pistol and thumbed down the slide release. The weapon was now “in battery,” ready to fire. Ryan pointed it downrange and waited. A moment later the light over the target snapped on. Jack brought the gun up and set the black circle right on the top of his front sight blade before he squeezed. Rapid-fire rules gave him one second per shot. This was more time than it sounded like. He got the first round off a little late, but most people did. The gun ejected the spent case and Ryan pulled it down for the next shot, concentrating on the target and his sights. By the time he counted to five, the gun was locked open. Jack pulled

off the ear protectors.

"You're getting there, Lieutenant," Breckenridge said at the spotting scope. "All in the black: a nine, four tens, one of 'em in the X-ring. Again."

Ryan reloaded with a smile. He'd allowed himself to forget how much fun a pistol could be. This was a pure physical skill, a man's skill that carried the same sort of satisfaction as a just-right golf shot. He had to control a machine that delivered a .357-inch bullet to a precise destination. Doing this required coordination of eye and hand. It wasn't quite the same as using a shotgun or a rifle. Pistol was much harder than either of those, and hitting the target carried a subintellectual pleasure that was not easily described to someone who hadn't done it. His next five rounds were all tens. He tried the two-hand Weaver stance, and placed four out of five in the X-ring, a circle half the diameter of the ten-ring, used for tie-breaking in competition shoots.

"Not bad for a civilian," Breckenridge said. "Coffee?"

"Thanks, Gunny." Ryan took the cup.

"I want you to concentrate a little more on your second round. You keep letting that one go off to the right some. You're rushing it a little." The difference, Ryan knew, was barely two inches at fifty feet. Breckenridge was a stone perfectionist. It struck him that the Sergeant Major and Cathy had very similar personalities: either you were doing it exactly right or you were doing it completely wrong. "Doc, it's a shame you got hurt. You would have made a good officer, with the right sergeant to bring you along—they all need that of course."

"You know something, Gunny? I met a couple of guys in London that you'd just love." Jack slipped the magazine back into his automatic.

"Ryan is rather a clever lad, isn't he?" Owens handed the document back to Murray.

"Nothing really new in here," Dan admitted, "but at least it's well organized. Here's the other thing you wanted."

"Oh, our friends in Boston. How is Paddy O'Neil doing?" Owens was more than just annoyed at this. Padraig O'Neil was an insult to the British parliamentary system, an elected mouthpiece for the Provisional IRA. In ten years of trying, however, neither Owens' Anti-Terrorist Branch nor the Royal Ulster Constabulary had ever linked him to an illegal act.

"Drinking a lot of beer, talking to a lot of folks, and raising a little money, just like always." Murray sipped at his port. "We have agents following him around. He knows they're there, of course. If he spits on the sidewalk, we'll put him on the next bird home. He knows that, too. He hasn't broken a single law. Even his driver—the guy's a teetotaler. I hate to say it, Jimmy, but the bum's clean, and he's making points."

"Oh, yes, he's a charming one, Paddy is." Owens flipped a page and looked up. "Let me see that thing your Ryan fellow did again. "

“The guys at Five glommed your copy. I expect they’ll give it to you tomorrow.”

Owens grunted as he flipped to the summary at the back of the document. “Here it is.... Good God above!”

“What?” Murray snapped forward in his chair.

“The link, the bloody link. It’s right here!”

“What are you talking about, Jimmy? I’ve read the thing twice myself.”

“‘The fact that ULA personnel seem to have been drawn almost entirely from “extreme” elements within the PIRA itself,’ ” he read aloud, “‘must have a significance beyond that established by existing evidence. It seems likely that since the ULA membership has been so recruited, some ULA ”defectors-in-place” remain within the PIRA, serving as information sources to their actual parent organization. It follows that such information may be of an operational nature in addition to its obvious counterintelligence value.’ *Operational,”* Owens said quietly. “We’ve always assumed that O’Donnell was simply trying to protect himself ... but he could be playing another game entirely.”

“I still haven’t caught up with you, Jimmy.” Murray set his glass down and frowned for a moment. “Oh. Maureen Dwyer. You never did figure out that tip, did you?”

Owens was thinking about another case, but Murray’s remark exploded like a flashbulb in front of his eyes. The detective just stared at his American colleague for a moment while his brain raced down a host of ideas.

“But why?” Murray asked. “What do they gain?”

“They can do great embarrassment to the leadership, inhibit operations. ”

“But what material good does that do for the ULA? O’Donnell’s too professional to screw his old friends just for the hell of it. The INLA might, but they’re just a bunch of damned-fool cowboys. The ULA is too sophisticated for that sort of crap.”

“Yes. We’ve just surmounted one wall to find another before us. Still, that’s one more wall behind us. It gives us something to question young Miss Dwyer about, doesn’t it?”

“Well, it’s an idea to run down. The ULA has the PIRA penetrated, and sometimes they feed information to you to make the Provos look bad.” Murray shook his head. *Did I just say that one terrorist outfit was trying to make another one look bad?* “Do you have enough evidence to back that idea up?”

“I can name you three cases in the last year where anonymous tips gave us Provos who were at the top of our list. In none of the three did we ever learn who the source was.”

“But if the Provos suspect it—oh, scratch that idea. They want O‘Donnell anyway, and that’s straight revenge for all the people he did away with within the organization. Okay, embarrassing the PIRA leadership may be an objective in itself—*if* O’Donnell was trying to recruit some new members. But you’ve

already discarded that idea."

Owens swore under his breath. Criminal investigation, he often said, was like doing a jigsaw puzzle when you didn't have all the pieces and never really knew their shapes. But telling that to his subordinates wasn't the same thing as experiencing it himself. If only they hadn't lost Sean Miller. Maybe they might have gotten something from him by now. His instinct told him that one small, crucial fact would make a complete picture of all the rubbish he was sorting through. Without that fact, his reason told Owens, everything he thought he knew was nothing more than speculation. But one thought kept repeating itself in his mind:

"Dan, if you wanted to embarrass the Provisionals' leadership politically, how and where would you do it?"

"Hello, this is Doctor Ryan."

"This is Bernice Wilson at Johns Hopkins. Your wife asked me to tell you that she's in an emergency procedure and she'll be about a half hour late tonight."

"Okay, thank you." Jack replaced the phone. *Mondays,* he told himself. He went back to discussing the term paper projects with his two mids. His desk clock said four in the afternoon. Well, there was no hurry, was there?

The watch changed at Gate Three. The civilian guard was named Bob Riggs. He was a retired Navy chief master at arms, past fifty, with a beer belly that made it hard for him to see his shoes. The cold affected him badly, and he spent as much time as possible in the guardhouse. He didn't see a man in his late twenties approach the opposite corner and disappear into a doorway. Neither did Sergeant Tom Cummings of the Marine guard force, who was checking some paperwork just after relieving the previous watch-stander. The Academy was good duty for the young Marine NCO. There were a score of good saloons within easy walking distance, and plenty of unattached womenfolk to be sampled, but the duty at Annapolis was pretty boring when you got down to it, and Cummings was young enough to crave some action. It had been a typical Monday. The previous guard had issued three parking citations. He was already yawning.

Fifty feet away, an elderly lady approached the entrance to the apartment building. She was surprised to see a handsome young man there and dropped her shopping bag while fumbling for her key.

"Can I help you with that, now?" he asked politely. His accent made him sound different, but rather kind, the lady thought. He held the bag while she unlocked the door.

"I'm afraid I'm a little early—waiting to meet my young lady, you see," he explained with a charming smile. "I'm sorry if I startled you, ma'am—just trying to keep out of this bitter wind."

"Would you like to wait inside the door?" she offered.

"That's very kind indeed, ma'am, but no. I might miss her and it's a bit of a surprise, you see. Good day to you." His hand relaxed around the knife in his coat pocket.

Sergeant Cummings finished going over the papers and walked outside. He noticed the man in the doorway for the first time. Looked like he was waiting for someone, the Sergeant judged, and trying to keep out of the cold north wind. That seemed sensible enough. The Sergeant checked his watch. Four-fifteen.

"I think that does it," Bernie Katz said.

"We did it," Cathy Ryan agreed. There were smiles all around the OR. It had taken over five hours, but the youngster's eye was back together. He might need another operation, and certainly he'd wear glasses for the rest of his life, but that was better than having only one eye.

"For somebody who hasn't done one of these in four months, not bad, Cath. This kid will have both his eyes. You want to tell the family? I have to go to the john."

The boy's mother was waiting exactly where the Jeffers family had been, the same look of anxiety on her face. Beside her was someone with a camera.

"We saved the eye," Cathy said at once. After she sat down beside the woman, the photographer—he said he was from the *Baltimore Sun*—fired away with his Nikon for several minutes. The surgeon explained the procedure to the mother for several minutes, trying to calm her down. It wasn't easy, but Cathy'd had lots of practice.

Finally someone from Social Services arrived, and Cathy was able to head for the locker room. She pulled off her greens, tossing them in the hamper. Bernie Katz was sitting on the bench, rubbing his neck.

"I could use some of that myself," Cathy observed. She stood there in her Gucci underwear and stretched. Katz turned to admire the view.

"Getting pretty big, Cath. How's the back?"

"Stiff. Just like it was with Sally. Avert your gaze, Doctor, you're a married man."

"Can I help it if pregnant women look sexy?"

"I'm glad I look it, 'cause I sure as hell don't feel like it at the moment." She dropped to the bench in front of her locker. "I didn't think we could do that one, Bernie."

"We were lucky," Katz admitted. "Fortunately the dear Lord looks after fools, drunks, and little children. Some of the time, anyway."

Cathy pulled open the locker. In the mirror she had inside, she saw that her hair did indeed look like the Medusa's. She made a face at herself. "I need

another vacation."

"But you just had one," Katz observed.

"Right," Dr. Ryan snorted. She slid her legs into her pants and reached for her blouse.

"And when that fetus decides to become a baby, you'll have another. "

The jacket came, next. "Bemie, if you were in OB, your patients would kill you for that sort of crap."

"What a loss to medicine that would be," Katz thought aloud.

Cathy laughed. "Nice job, Bern. Kiss Annie for me."

"Sure, and you take it a little easy, eh, or I'll tell Madge North to come after you."

"I see her Friday, Bernie. She says I'm doing fine." Cathy breezed out the door. She waved to her nurses, complimenting them yet again for a superb job in the OR. The elevator was next. Already she had her car keys in her hand.

The green Porsche was waiting for her. Cathy unlocked the door and tossed her bag in the back before settling in the driver's seat. The six-cylinder engine started in an instant. The tachymeter needle swung upward to the idle setting. She let the engine warm up for a minute while she buckled her seat belt and slipped off the parking brake. The throaty rumble of the engine echoed down the concrete walls of the parking garage. When the temperature needle started to move, she shifted into reverse. A moment later she dropped the gear lever into first and moved toward Broadway. She checked the clock on the dashboard and winced—worse, she had to make a stop at the store on the way home. Well, she did have her 911 to play catch-up with.

"The target is moving," a voice said into a radio three levels up. The message was relayed by telephone to Alex's safehouse, then by radio again.

"About bloody time," Miller growled a few minutes later. "Why the hell is she late?" The last hour had been infuriating for him. First thirty minutes of waiting for her to be on time, then another thirty minutes while she wasn't. He told himself to relax. She had to be at the day-care center to pick up the kid.

"She's a doc. It happens, man," Alex said. "Let's roll."

The pickup car led off first, followed by the van. The Ford would be at the 7-Eleven across from Giant Steps in exactly thirty minutes.

"He must be waiting for somebody pretty," Riggs said when he got back into the guard shack.

"Still there?" Cummings was surprised. Three weeks before, Breckenridge had briefed the guard force about the possible threat to Dr. Ryan. Cummings knew that the history teacher always went out this gate—he was late today, though. The Sergeant could see that the light in his office was still on. Though

the duty here was dull, Cummings was serious about it. Three months in Beirut had taught him everything he would ever need to know about that. He walked outside and took a place on the other side of the road.

Cummings watched the cars leaving. Mostly they were driven by civilians, but those driven by naval officers got a regulation Marine salute. The wind only got colder. He wore a sweater under his blouse. This kept his torso warm, but the white kid gloves that went with the dress-blue uniform were the next thing to useless. He made a great show of clapping his hands together as he turned around periodically. He never stared at the apartment building, never acted as though he knew anybody were there. It was getting dark now, and it wasn't all that easy to see him anyway. But somebody was there.

"That was fast," the man in the pickup car said. He checked his watch. She'd just knocked five minutes off her fastest time. *Damn, he thought, must be nice to have one of those little Porsches.* He checked the tag: CR-SRGN. Yep, that was the one. He grabbed the radio.

"Hi, Mom, I'm home," he said.

"It's about time," a male voice answered. The van was half a mile away, sitting on Joyce Lane, west of Ritchie Highway.

He saw the lady come out of the day-care center less than two minutes later. She was in a hurry.

"Rolling."

"Okay," came the answer.

"Come on, Sally, we're late. Buckle up." Cathy Ryan hated to be late. She restarted the engine. She hadn't been this late in over a month, but she could still make it home before Jack if she hustled.

The rush hour was under way in earnest, but the Porsche was small, fast, and agile. In a minute from sitting in the parking lot she was doing sixty-five, weaving through traffic like a race driver at Daytona.

For all their preparation, Alex almost missed her. An eighteen-wheeler was laboring up the hill in the right lane when the distinctive shape of the Porsche appeared next to it. Alex floored the van and darted out onto the road, causing the semi to jam his brakes and horn at the same time. Alex didn't look back. Miller got out of the right-front seat and went back to the window on the sliding door.

"Whooee, this lady's in a hurry tonight!"

"Can you catch her?" Miller asked.

Alex just smiled. "Watch."

"Damn, look at that Porsche!" Trooper First Class Sam Waverly was driving

J-30, a State Police car coming off an afternoon of pursuit-radar work on U.S. Route 50. He and Larry Fontana of J-19 were heading back to the Annapolis police barracks off Rowe Boulevard after a long day's work when they saw the green sports car take the entrance ramp off Ritchie Highway. Both troopers were driving about sixty-five miles per hour, a privilege that accrued only to police officers. Their cars were unmarked. This made them and their radar guns impossible to spot until it was too late. They usually worked in pairs, and took turns, with one working his radar gun and the other a quarter mile down the road to wave the speeders over for their tickets.

"Another one!" Fontana said over the radio. A van swerved into the highway's left lane, forcing somebody in a Pontiac to jam on his brakes. "Let's get 'em." They were both young officers and while, contrary to legend, the State Police didn't assign ticket quotas to its officers, everyone knew that one sure way to promotion was to write a lot of them. It also made the roads safer, and that was their mission as state troopers. Neither officer really enjoyed giving out traffic citations, but they enjoyed responding to major accidents far less.

"Okay, I got the Porsche."

"You get all the fun," Fontana noted. He'd gotten a quick look at the driver.

It was a lot harder than one might imagine. First they had to clock the speeding vehicles to establish how far over the limit they were going—the greater the speed, the greater the fine, of course—then they had to close and switch on their lights to pull them over. Both subject vehicles were two hundred yards ahead of the police cruisers now.

Cathy checked her clock again. She'd managed to cut nearly ten minutes off her trip time. Next she checked her rearview mirror for a police car. She didn't want to get a ticket. There was nothing that looked like a cop car, only ordinary cars and trucks. She had to slow as the traffic became congested approaching the Severn River bridge. She debated getting over into the left lane, but decided against it. Sometimes it was hard to get back into the right lane in time to take the Route 2 exit. Beside her, Sally was craning her neck to see over the dash, as usual, and playing with the seat-belt buckle. Cathy didn't say anything this time, but concentrated on the traffic as she eased off the pedal.

Miller slipped the door latch and moved the door an inch backward. Another man took hold of the door as he knelt and thumbed the safety forward on his weapon.

He couldn't get her for speeding now, Trooper Waverly noted sourly. She'd slowed before he could establish her speed. He was a hundred yards back. Fontana could, however, ticket the van for improper lane-changing, and one out of two wasn't bad. Waverly checked his mirror. J-19 was catching up, about to pull even with his J-30. There was something odd about the blue van,

he saw ... like the side door wasn't quite right.

"Now!" Alex called.

Cathy Ryan noted that a van was pulling up on her left side. She took a casual look in time to see the van's door slide back. There was a man kneeling, holding something. There came a chilling moment of realization. She stomped her foot on the brake a fraction of a second before she saw the white flash.

"What!" Waverly saw a foot-long tongue of flame spit out from the side of the van. The windshield of the Porsche went cloudy and the car swerved sideways, straightened out, then slammed into the bridge's concrete work at over fifty miles per hour. Instantly cars in both lanes slammed on their brakes. The van kept going.

"Larry, shots fired—shots fired from the van. The Porsche was hit!" Waverly flipped on his lights and stood on his brakes. The police car skidded right and nearly slid sideways into the wrecked Porsche. "Get the van, get the van!"

"I'm on him," Fontana replied. He suddenly realized that the gout of flame he'd seen could only mean some kind of machine gun. "Holy shit," he said to himself.

Waverly returned his attention to the Porsche. Steam poured from the rear engine compartment. "J-30, Annapolis, officer reports shots fired—looked like automatic weapons fire—and a PI accident westbound Route 50 on Severn River bridge. Appears to be serious PI. J-19 in pursuit of vehicle 2. Stand by."

"Standing by," the dispatcher acknowledged. *What the hell* ...

Waverly grabbed his fire extinguisher and ran the fifteen feet to the wreck. Glass and metal were scattered as far as he could see. The engine, thank God, wasn't on fire. He checked the passenger compartment next.

"Oh, Jesus!" He ran back to his car. "J-30, Annapolis. Call fireboard, officer requests helicopter response. Serious PI, two victims, a white female adult and a white female child, repeat we have a serious PI accident westbound Route 50 east side of Severn River bridge. Officer requests helicopter response."

"J-19, Annapolis," Fontana called in next. "I am in pursuit of a dark van, with handicap tag number Henry Six-Seven-Seven-Two. I am westbound on Route 50 just west of the Severn River bridge. Shots fired from this vehicle. Officer requests assistance," he said coolly. He decided against turning his lights on for the moment. Holy shit ...

"You get her?" Alex called back.

Miller was breathing heavily. He wasn't sure—he wasn't sure about his shots. The Porsche had slowed suddenly just as he squeezed the trigger, but he saw the car hit the bridge and spring up into the air like a toy. No way they

could walk away from that sort of accident, he was sure of that.

"Yes."

"Okay, let's boogie." Alex didn't let his emotions interfere with his work. This job meant weapons and money for his movement. It was too bad about the woman and the kid, but it wasn't his fault that they made the wrong kind of enemies.

The Annapolis dispatcher was already on his UHF radio to the State Police helicopter. Trooper-1, a Bell JetRanger-II was just lifting off from a refueling stop at Baltimore-Washington International Airport.

"Roger that," the helicopter pilot replied, turning south and twisting the throttle control to full power. The paramedic in the left seat leaned forward to change the transponder "squawk" setting from 1200 to 5101. This would inform air traffic controllers that the helicopter was on an emergency medivac mission.

"Trooper-1, J-30, we are en route to your position, ETA four minutes. "

Waverly didn't acknowledge. He and two civilians were prying the driver's side window off the car with a tire iron. The driver and passenger were both unconscious, and there was blood all over the interior of the car. She was probably pretty, Waverly thought, looking at the driver, but her head was covered with glistening blood. The child lay like a broken doll, half on the seat, half on the floor. His stomach was a tight cold ball just below his pounding heart. *Another dead kid,* he thought. *Please, God, not another one.*

"Trooper-2, Annapolis," came the next call to the dispatcher.

"Annapolis, Trooper-2, where are you?"

"We are over Mayo Beach, northbound. I copied your medivac call. I have the Governor and Attorney General aboard. Can we help, over."

The dispatcher made a quick decision. Trooper-1 would be at the accident scene in three more minutes. J-19 needed backup in a hurry. This was real luck. Already he had six state vehicles converging on the area, plus three more from the Anne Arundel County Police station at Edgewater. "Trooper-2, contact J-19."

"Trooper-2, J-19, please advise your location," the radio squawked in Fontana's car.

"Westbound Route 50, just passing Rowe Boulevard. I am in pursuit of a dark van with a handicap tag. J-30 and I observed automatic weapons fire from this vehicle, repeat automatic weapons fire. I need some help, people."

It was easy to spot. The Sergeant flying Trooper-2 saw the other helicopter circling over the accident to the east, and Route 50 was nearly bare of cars from west of the accident to Rowe Boulevard. The police car and the van were on the back edge of the moving traffic.

"What gives?" the Governor asked from the back. The paramedic in the left-front seat filled them in as the pilot continued his visual search for ... there! *Okay, sucker ...*

"J-19, this is Trooper-2, I got you and the subject car visual." The pilot dropped altitude to five hundred feet. "Trooper-2, Annapolis, I got 'em. Black, or maybe blue van westbound on 50, with an unmarked car in pursuit."

Alex was wondering who the car was. It was unmarked, but a cheap-body car, with dull, monocolor paintwork. *Uh-oh.*

"That's a cop behind us!" he shouted. One of Miller's men looked out the window. Unmarked cars were nothing new where they came from.

"Get rid of him!" Alex snarled.

Fontana held at fifty yards from the van. This was far enough, he thought, to keep himself out of danger. The trooper was listening to continuous chatter on his radio as additional cars announced that they were inbound on the call. The distraction of the radio made him a second late on seeing the van's door fly open. Fontana blanched and hit the brakes.

Miller handled this one too. The moment the door was open, he leveled his machine gun and loosed ten rounds at the police car. He saw it dip when the driver tried to panic-stop, swerve sideways in the road, and flip over. He was too excited even to smile, though inwardly he was awash with glee. The door came back shut as Alex changed lanes.

Fontana felt the bullet hit his chest before he realized that the car's windshield was shattering around him. His right arm jerked down, turning the car too rapidly to the right. The locked-up rear wheels gave the car a broadside skid, a tire blew out, and the car flipped over. Fontana watched in fascination the world rotate around him as the car's top crumpled. Like most policemen he never bothered with his seat belt, and he fell on his neck. The collapsing car top broke it. It didn't matter. A car that had been following his crashed into the police cruiser, finishing the work begun by Miller's submachine gun.

"Shit!" the pilot of Trooper-2 cursed. "Trooper-2, Annapolis, J-19 is wrecked with serious PI on 50 west of the Route 2 exit. Where the hell are the other

cars!"

"Trooper-2, advise condition of J-19."

"He's dead, man—I'm on that fucking van! Where's the goddamned backup!"

"Trooper-2, be advised we have eleven cars converging. We have a roadblock setting up now on 50 at South Haven Road. There are three cars westbound on 50 about half a mile back of you and two more eastbound approaching the exit to General's Highway."

"Roger that, I am on the van," the pilot responded.

"Come on, Alex!" Miller shouted.

"Almost there, man," the black man said, changing to the right lane exit. About a mile ahead he saw the blue and red flashing lights of two police cars coming east toward him, but there was no eastbound exit here. *Tough luck, pigs.* He didn't feel very happy about doing the Porsche, but a dead cop was always something to feel good about. "Here we go!"

"Annapolis, Trooper-2," the pilot called, "the subject van is turning north off of Route 50." It took a moment to register. "Oh, no!" He gave a quick order. The eastbound police cars slowed, then darted across the grass median strip into the westbound lanes. These were clear, blocked by a second major accident, but the median was uneven. One car bogged down in the grass and mud while the other bounded up onto the pavement and ran the wrong way on the highway toward the exit.

Alex hit the traffic light exactly right, crossing West Street and heading north. His peripheral vision caught a county police car stuck in the rush-hour traffic on West Street two hundred yards to his right, despite his lights and siren. *Too late, pig.* He proceeded two hundred yards and turned left.

The Sergeant flying Trooper-2 started cursing, oblivious to the Governor and Attorney General in the back. As he watched, the van pulled into the hundred-acre parking lot that surrounded Annapolis Mall. The vehicle proceeded toward the inner ring of parking spaces as three cars turned off West Street in pursuit.

"Son of a *bitch!"* He pushed down on his collective control and dove at the parking lot.

Alex pulled into a handicap parking slot and stopped the van. His passengers were ready, and opened the doors as soon as the vehicle stopped. They walked slowly and normally to the entrance to the mall. The driver

looked up in surprise when he heard the whine and flutter of the helicopter. It hovered at about a hundred feet. Alex made sure his hat was in place and waved as he went through the door.

The helicopter pilot looked at the paramedic in the left seat, whose hand was clenched in rage at his shoulder-holstered .357 revolver while the pilot needed both of his on the controls.

“They’re gone,” the paramedic said quietly over the intercom.

“What do you mean they’re gone!” the Attorney General demanded.

Below them, a county and a State Police car screeched to a halt outside the entrance. But inside those doors were about three thousand shoppers, and the police didn’t know what the suspects looked like. The officers stood there, guns drawn, not knowing what to do next.

Alex and his men were inside a public rest room. Two members of Alex’s organization were waiting there with shopping bags. Each man from the van got a new coat. They broke up into pairs and walked out into the shopping concourse, heading for an exit at the west end of the mall. They took their time. There was no reason to hurry.

“He waved at us,” the Governor said. “Do something!”

“What?” the pilot asked. “What do you want us to do? Who do we stop? They’re gone, they might as well be in California now.”

The Governor was slow to catch on, though faster than the Attorney General, who was still blubbering. What had begun as a routine political meeting in Salisbury, on Maryland’s eastern shore, had turned into an exciting pursuit, but one with a most unsatisfactory ending. He’d watched one of his state troopers killed right before his eyes, and neither he nor his people could do a single thing about it. The Governor swore, finally. The voters would have been shocked at his language.

Trooper-1 was sitting on the Severn River bridge, its rotor turning rapidly to stay above the concrete barriers. The paramedic, Trooper Waverly, and a motorist who turned out to be a volunteer fireman, were loading the two accident victims into Stokes litters for transport on the helicopter. The other motorist who had assisted was standing alone by the police car, over a puddle of his own vomit. A fire engine was pulling up to the scene, and two more state troopers were preparing to get traffic moving, once the helicopter took off. The highway was already backed up at least four miles. As they prepared to start directing traffic, they heard on their radios what had happened to J-19 and its driver. The police officers exchanged looks, but no words. They would come later.

As first officer on the scene, Waverly took the driver’s purse and started

looking for identification. He had lots of forms to fill out, and people to notify. Inside the purse, he saw, was some kind of finger painting. He looked up as the little girl's litter was loaded into the top rack of the helicopter's passenger bay. The paramedic went in behind it, and less than thirty seconds later, Waverly's face stung with the impact of gravel, thrown up by the helicopter's rotor. He watched it lift into the air, and whispered a prayer for the little girl who'd done a painting of something that looked like a blue cow. *Back to work,* he told himself. The purse had a red address book. He checked the driver's license to get a name, then looked in the book under the same letter. Someone with the first name of Jack, but no last name written in, had a number designated "work." It was probably her husband's. Somebody had to call him.

"Baltimore Approach, this is Trooper-1 on a medivac inbound to Baltimore."

"Trooper-1, roger, you are cleared for direct approach, come left to course three-four-seven and maintain current altitude," the air controller at Baltimore-Washington International responded. The 5101 squawk number was clear on his scope, and medical emergencies had unconditional priority.

"Hopkins Emergency, this is Trooper-1, inbound with a white female child accident victim."

"Trooper-1, Hopkins. Divert to University. We're full up here."

"Roger. University, Trooper-1, do you copy, over."

"Trooper-1, this is University, we copy, and we're ready for you. "

"Roger, ETA five minutes. Out."

"Gunny, this is Cummings at Gate Three," the Sergeant called on the telephone.

"What is it, Sergeant?" Breckenridge asked.

"There's this guy, he's been standing on the comer across the street for about forty-five minutes. It just feels funny, you know? He's off the grounds, but it doesn't feel right."

"Call the cops?" the Sergeant Major asked.

"What for?" Cummings asked reasonably. "He ain't even spit far as I can tell. "

"Okay, I'll walk on up." Breckenridge stood. He was bored anyway. The Sergeant Major donned his cap and walked out of the building, heading north across the campus. It took five minutes, during which he saluted six officers and greeted a larger number of mids. He didn't like the cold. It had never been like this during his childhood on a Mississippi dirt farm. But spring was coming. He was careful not to look too obviously out of the gate as he crossed the street.

He found Cummings in the guardhouse, standing inside the door. A good

young sergeant, Cummings was. He had the new look of the Corps. Breckenridge was built along the classic John Wayne lines, with broad shoulders and imposing bulk. Cummings was a black kid, a runner who had the frame of a Frank Shorter. The boy could run all day, something that the Gunny had never been able to do. But more than all of that, Cummings was a lifer. He understood what the Marine Corps was all about. Breckenridge had taken the young man under his wing, imparting a few important lessons along the way. The Sergeant Major knew that he would soon be part of the Corps' past. Cummings was its future, and he told himself that the future looked pretty good.

"Hey, Gunny," the Sergeant greeted him.

"The guy in the doorway?"

"He's been there since a little after four. He don't live here." Cummings paused for a moment. He was, after all, only a "buck" sergeant with no rockers under his stripes, talking to a man whom generals addressed with respect. "It just feels funny."

"Well, let's give him a few minutes," Breckenridge thought aloud.

"God, I hate grading quizzes."

"So go easy on the boys and girls," Robby chuckled.

"Like you do?" Ryan asked.

"I teach a difficult, technical subject. I have to give quizzes."

"Engineers! Shame you can't read and write as well as you multiply. "

"You must have taken a tough-pill this afternoon, Jack."

"Yeah, well—" The phone rang. Jack picked it up. "Doctor Ryan. Yes—who?" His face changed, his voice became guarded.

"Yes, that's right." Robby saw his friend go stiff in the chair. "Are you sure? Where are they now? Okay—ah, okay, thank you ... I, uh, thank you." Jack stared at the phone for a second or two before hanging it up.

"What's the matter, Jack?" Robby asked.

It took him a moment to answer. "That was the police. There's been an accident."

"Where are they?" Robby said immediately.

"They flew them—they flew them to Baltimore." Jack stood shakily. "I have to get there." He looked down at his friend. "God, Robby..."

Jackson was on his feet in an instant. "Come on, I'll take you up there."

"No, I'll—"

"Stuff it, Jack. I'm driving." Robby got his coat and tossed Jack's over the desk. "Move it, boy!"

“They took them by helicopter ...”

“Where? Where to, Jack?”

“University,” he said.

“Get it together, Jack.” Robby grabbed his arm. “Settle down some.” The flyer led his friend down the stairs and out of the building. His red Corvette was parked a hundred yards away.

“Still there,” the civilian guard reported when he came back in.

“Okay.” Breckenridge said, standing. He looked at the pistol holster hanging in the comer, but decided against that. “This is what we’re going to do.”

Ned Clark hadn’t liked the mission from the first moment. Sean was too eager on this one. But he hadn’t said so. Sean had master-minded the prison break that had made him a free man. If nothing else, Ned Clark was loyal to the Cause. He was exposed here and didn’t like that either. His briefing had told him that the guards at the Academy gate were lax, and he could see that they were unarmed. They had no authority at all off the grounds of the school.

But it was taking too long. His target was thirty minutes late. He didn’t smoke, didn’t do anything to make himself conspicuous, and he knew that he’d be hard to spot. The doorway of the tired old apartment building had no light—one of Alex’s people had taken care of that with a pellet gun the previous night.

Ought to call this one off, Clark told himself. But he didn’t want to do that. He didn’t want to fail Sean. He saw a pair of men leave the Academy. Bootnecks, bloody Marines in their Sunday clothes. They looked so pretty without their guns, so vulnerable.

“So the Captain, he says,” the big one was saying loudly, “get that goddamned gook off my chopper!” And the other one started laughing.

“I love it!”

“How about a couple of beers?” the big one said next. They crossed the street, heading his way.

“Okay by me, Gunny. You buyin’?”

“My turn, isn’t it? I have to get some money first.” The big one reached in his pocket for some keys and turned toward Clark. “Excuse me, sir, can I help you?” His hand came out of his pocket without any keys.

Clark reacted quickly, but not quickly enough. The right hand inside his overcoat started moving up, but Breckenridge’s own right grabbed it like a vise.

“I asked if I could help you, sir,” the Sergeant Major said pleasantly. “What do you have in that hand?” Clark tried to move, but the big man pushed him against the brick wall.

“Careful, Tom,” Breckenridge warned.

Cummings’ hand searched downward and found the metallic shape of a pistol. “Gun,” he said sharply.

“It better not go off,” the Gunny announced, his left arm across Clark’s throat. “Let the man have it, sonny, real careful, like.”

Clark was amazed at his stupidity, letting them get so close to him. His head tried to turn to look up the street, but the man waiting for him in the car was around the corner. Before he could think of anything to do, the black man had disarmed him and was searching his pockets. Cummings removed the knife next.

“Talk to me,” Breckenridge said. Clark didn’t say anything, and the forearm slid roughly across his throat. “*Please* talk to me, sir. ”

“Get your bloody hands off of me! Who do you think you are?”

“Where you from, boy?” Breckenridge didn’t need an answer to that one. The Sergeant wrenched Clark’s arm out of the pocket and twisted it behind his back. “Okay, sonny, we’re going to walk through that gate over yonder, and you’re gonna sit down and be a good boy while we call the police. If you make any trouble, I’m going to tear this arm off and shove it right up your ass. Let’s go, boy.”

The driver who’d been waiting for Clark was standing at the far comer. He took one look at what had happened and walked to his car. Two minutes later he was blocks away.

Cummings handcuffed the man to a chair while Breckenridge established that he carried no identification—aside from an automatic pistol, which was ID enough. First he called his captain, then the Annapolis City police. It started there, but, though the Gunny didn’t know, it wouldn’t stop there.

15

Shock and Trauma

If Jack had ever doubted that Robby Jackson really was a fighter pilot, this would have cured him. Jackson's personal toy was a two-year-old Chevrolet Corvette, painted candy-apple red, and he drove it with a sense of personal invincibility. The flyer raced out the Academy's west gate, turned left, and found his way to Rowe Boulevard. The traffic problems on Route 50 west were immediately apparent, and he changed lanes to head east. In a minute he was streaking across the Severn River bridge. Jack was too engrossed in his thoughts to see much of anything, but Robby saw what looked like the remains of a Porsche on the other side of the roadway. Jackson's blood went cold as he turned away. He cast the thoughts aside and concentrated on his driving, pushing the Corvette past eighty. There were too many cops on the other side of the road for him to worry about a ticket. He took the Ritchie Highway exit a minute later and curved around north toward Baltimore. Rush-hour traffic was heavy, though most of it was heading in the other direction. This gave him gaps to exploit, and the pilot used every one. He worked up and down through the gears, rarely touching the brakes.

To his right, Jack simply stared straight ahead, not seeing much of anything. He managed to wince when Robby paused behind two tractor-trailers running side by side—then shot up right between them with scant inches of clearance on either side. The outraged screams of the two diesel horns faded irrelevantly behind the racing 'Vette, and Jack returned to the emptiness of his thoughts.

Breckenridge allowed his captain, Mike Peters, to handle the situation. He was a pretty good officer, the Sergeant Major thought, who had the common sense to let his NCOs run things. He'd managed to get to the guard shack about two minutes ahead of the Annapolis City police, long enough for Breckenridge and Cummings to fill him in.

"So what gives, gentlemen?" the responding officer asked. Captain Peters nodded for Breckenridge to speak.

"Sir, Sergeant Cummings here observed this individual to be standing over at the comer across the street. He did not look like a local resident, so we kept an eye on him. Finally Cummings and I walked over and asked if we might be of assistance to him. He tried to pull this on us"—the Gunny lifted the pistol carefully, so as not to disturb the fingerprints—"and he had this knife in his pocket. Carrying a concealed weapon is a violation of local law, so Cummings and I made a citizen's arrest and called you. This character does not have any

identification on him, and he declined to speak with us."

"What kind of gun is that?" the cop asked.

"It's an FN nine-millimeter," Breckenridge answered. "It's the same as the Browning Hi-Power, but a different trademark, with a thirteen-round magazine. The weapon was loaded, with a live round in the chamber. The hammer was down. The knife is a cheap piece of shit. Punk knife."

The cop had to smile. He knew Breckenridge from the department firearms training unit.

"Can I have your name, please," the cop said to Eamon Clark. The "suspect" just stared at him. "Sir, you have a number of constitutional rights which I am about to read to you, but the law does not allow you to withhold your identity. You have to tell me your name."

The cop stared at Clark for another minute. At last he shrugged and pulled a card from his clipboard. "Sir, you have the right to remain silent...." He read the litany off the card. "Do you understand these rights?"

Still Clark didn't say anything. The police officer was getting irritated. He looked at the other three men in the room. "Gentlemen, will you testify that I read this individual his rights?"

"Yes, sir, we certainly will," Captain Peters said.

"If I may make a suggestion, officer," Breckenridge said. "You might want to check this boy out with the FBI."

"How come?"

"He talks funny," the Sergeant Major explained. "He don't come from here."

"Great—two crazy ones in one day."

"What do ya mean?" Breckenridge asked.

"Little while ago a car got machine-gunned on 50, sounds like some kind of drug hit. A trooper got killed by the same bunch a few minutes later. The bad guys got away. " The cop leaned down to look Clark in the face. "You better start talkin', sir. The cops in this town are in a mean mood tonight. What I'm tellin' you, man, is that we don't want to put up with some unnecessary shit. You understand me?"

Clark didn't understand. In Ireland carrying a concealed weapon was a serious crime. In America it was rather less so since so many citizens owned guns. Had he said he was waiting for someone and carried a gun because he was afraid of street criminals, he might have gotten out on the street before identification procedures were complete. Instead, his intransigence was only making the policeman angry and ensuring that the identification procedures would be carried out in full before he was arraigned.

Captain Peters and Sergeant Major Breckenridge exchanged a meaningful look.

"Officer," the Captain said, "I would most strongly recommend that you check this character's ID with the FBI. We've, uh, we had a sort of an informal

warning about terrorist activity a few weeks back. This is still your jurisdiction since he was arrested in the city, but..."

"I hear you, Cap'n," the cop said. He thought for a few seconds and concluded that there was something more here than met the eye. "If you gentlemen will come to the station with me, we'll find out who Mr. Doe here really is."

Ryan charged through the entrance of the Shock-Trauma Center and identified himself to the reception desk, whose occupant directed him to a waiting room where, she said firmly, he would be notified as soon as there was anything to report. The sudden change from action to inaction disoriented Jack enormously. He stood at the entrance to the waiting room for some minutes, his mind a total blank as it struggled with the situation. By the time Robby arrived from parking his car, he found his friend sitting on the cracked vinyl of an old sofa, mindlessly reading through a brochure whose stiff paper had become as soft as chamois from the numberless hands of parents, wives, husbands, and friends of the patients who had passed through this building.

The brochure explained in bureaucratic prose how the Maryland Institute for Emergency Medical Services was the first and best organization of its kind, devoted exclusively to the most sophisticated emergency care for trauma victims. Ryan knew all this. Johns Hopkins managed the more recent pediatric unit and provided many of the staff surgeons for eye injuries. Cathy had spent some time doing that during her residency, an intense two months that she'd been happy to leave behind. Jack wondered if she were now being treated by a former colleague. *Would he recognize her? Would it matter?*

The Shock-Trauma Center—so known to everyone but the billing department—had begun as the dream of a brilliant, aggressive, and supremely arrogant heart surgeon who had bludgeoned his way through a labyrinth of bureaucratic empires to build this 21st-century emergency room.

It had blossomed into a dazzling, legendary success. Shock-Trauma was the leading edge of emergency medical technology. It had already pioneered many techniques for critical care, and in doing so had overthrown many historical precepts of conventional medicine—which had not endeared its founder to his medical brethren. That would have been true in any field, and Shock-Trauma's founder had not helped the process with his brutally outspoken opinions. His greatest—but unacknowledged—crime, of course, was being right in nearly all details. And while this prophet was without honor in the mainstream of his profession, its younger members were easier to convert. Shock-Trauma attracted the best young surgical talent in the world, and only the finest of them were chosen.

But will they be good enough? Ryan asked himself.

He lost all track of time, waiting, afraid to look at his watch, afraid to speculate on the significance of time's flight. Alone, completely alone in his circumscribed world, he reflected that God had given him a wife he loved and a child he treasured more than his own life; that his first duty as husband and

father was to protect them from an often hostile world; that he had failed; that, because of this, their lives were now in strangers' hands. All his knowledge, all his skills were useless now. It was worse than impotence, and some evil agency in his mind kept repeating over and over the thoughts that made him cringe as he retreated further and further into catatonic numbness. For hours he stared at the floor, then the wall, unable even to pray as his mind sought the solace of emptiness.

Jackson sat beside his friend, silent, in his own private world. A naval aviator, he had seen close friends vanish from a trivial mistake or a mechanical glitch—or seemingly nothing at all. He'd felt death's cold hand brush his own shoulder less than a year before. But this wasn't a danger to a mature man who had freely chosen a dangerous profession. This was a young wife and an innocent child whose lives were at risk. He couldn't joke about how "old Dutch" would luck this one out. He knew nothing at all he could say, no encouragement he could offer other than just sitting there, and though he gave no sign of it, Robby was sure that Jack knew his friend was close at hand.

After two hours Jackson quietly left the waiting room to call his wife and check discreetly at the desk. The receptionist fumbled for the names, then identified them as: a Female, Blond, Age Thirty or so, Head; and a Female, Blond, Age Four or so, Flailed Chest. The pilot was tempted to throttle the receptionist for her coldness, but his discipline was sufficient to allow him to turn away without a word. Jackson rejoined Ryan a moment later, and together they stared at the wall through the passage of time. It started to rain outside, a cold rain that perfectly matched what they both felt.

Special Agent Shaw was walking through the door of his Chevy Chase home when the phone rang. His teen-age daughter answered it and just held it out to him. This sort of thing was not the least unusual.

"Shaw here."

"Mr. Shaw, this is Nick Capitano from the Annapolis office. The city police here have in custody a man with a pistol, a knife, but no ID. He refuses to talk at all, but earlier he did speak to a couple of Marines, and he had an accent."

"That's nice, he has an accent. What kind?" Shaw asked testily.

"Maybe Irish," Capitano replied. "He was apprehended just outside Gate Three of the U.S. Naval Academy. There's a Marine here who says that some teacher named Ryan works there, and he got some sort of warning from the Anti-Terrorism Office."

What the hell. "Have you ID'd the suspect yet?"

"No, sir. The local police just fingerprinted him, and they faxed a copy of the prints and photo to the Bureau. The suspect refuses to say anything. He just isn't talking at all, sir."

"Okay," Shaw thought for a moment. So much for dinner. "I'll be back in

my office in thirty minutes. Have them send a copy of the mug shot and the prints there. You stay put, and have somebody find Doctor Ryan and stay with him."

"Right."

Shaw hung up and dialed his office at the Bureau. "Dave, Bill. Call London, and tell Dan Murray I want him in his office in half an hour. We may have something happening over here."

" 'Bye, Daddy," his daughter said. Shaw hadn't even had time to take off his coat.

He was at his desk twenty-seven minutes later. First he called Nick Capitano in Annapolis.

"Anything new?"

"No, sir. The security detail at Annapolis can't find this Ryan guy. His car is parked on the Academy grounds, and they've got people looking for him. I've asked the Anne Arundel County Police to send a car to his home in case he got a ride—car broke down, or something like that. Things are a little wild here at the moment. Something crazy happened about the same time this John Doe gunman got picked up. A car got hosed down with a machine gun just outside the city."

"What the hell was that?"

"The State Police are handling it. We haven't been called in," Capitano explained.

"Get a man over there!" Shaw said at once. A secretary came into the office and handed him a folder. Inside was a facsimile copy of the suspect's mug shot. It showed full face and profile.

"Hold it!" He caught the secretary before the door was closed. "I want this faxed to London right now."

"Yes, sir."

Shaw next dialed the tie line to the embassy in London.

"I just got to sleep," the voice answered after the first ring.

"Hi, Dan. I just missed dinner. It's a tough world. I have a photo being faxed to you now." Shaw filled Murray in on what had happened.

"Oh, my God." Murray gulped down some coffee. "Where's Ryan?"

"We don't know. Probably just wandering around somewhere. His car's still parked in Annapolis—at the Academy, I mean. The security guys are looking for him. He's gotta be all right, Dan. If I read this right, the suspect in Annapolis was probably waiting for him. "

The photograph of Eamon Clark was already in the embassy. The Bureau's communications unit worked on the same satellite net used by the intelligence services. The embassy communications officers were actually employees of the

National Security Agency, which never slept. The facsimile had arrived with a FLASH-priority header, and a messenger ran it up to the Legal Attaché's office. But the door was locked. Murray had to set the phone down to open it.

"I'm back," Murray said. He opened the folder. The photo had suffered somewhat from twice being broken into electronic bits and broadcast, but for all of that it was recognizable. "This one's familiar. I can't put a name on him, but he's a bad guy."

"How fast can you ID him?"

"I can call Jimmy Owens real quick. You in your office?"

"Yeah," Shaw answered.

"I'll be back." Murray changed buttons on his phones. He didn't have Owens' home number memorized and had to look it up.

"Yes?"

"Hi, Jimmy, it's Dan." Murray's voice was actually chipper now. *Have I got something for you.*

Owens didn't know that yet. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Our guys have somebody in custody that you may be interested in."

"Who?" Owens asked.

"I got a picture but no name. He was arrested in Annapolis, outside the Naval Academy—"

"Ryan?"

"Maybe." Murray was worried about that.

"Meet me at the Yard," Owens said.

"On the way." Murray headed downstairs for his car.

It was easier for Owens. His house was always watched by a pair of armed detectives in a police car. All he had to do was step outside and wave, and the Land-Rover came to his door. He beat Murray by five minutes. By the time the FBI agent arrived, Owens had already consumed a cup of tea. He poured two more.

"This guy look familiar?" The FBI agent tossed the photo over. Owens' eyes went wide.

"Ned Clark," he breathed. "In America, you say?"

"I thought he looked familiar. He got picked up in Annapolis."

"This is one of the lads who broke out of Long Kesh, a very bad boy with several murders to his name. Thank you, Mr. Murray."

"Thank the Marines." Murray grabbed a cup of tea. He really needed the caffeine. "Can I make a call?" Within a minute he was back to FBI headquarters. The desk phone was on speaker so that Owens could listen in.

"Bill, the suspect is one Ned Clark, a convicted murderer who escaped from

prison last year. He used to be a big-time assassin with the Provos."

"I got some bad news, Dan," Shaw replied. "It appears that there was an attack on this Ryan fellow's family. The State Police are investigating what looks like a machine-gun attack on a car belonging to Doctor Caroline Ryan, MD. The suspects were in a van and made a clean escape after killing a state trooper."

"Where is Jack Ryan?" Murray asked.

"We don't know yet. He was seen leaving the Naval Academy grounds in the car of a friend. The troopers are looking for the car now. "

"What about his family?" It was Owens this time.

"They were flown to the Shock-Trauma Center in Baltimore. The local police have been notified to keep an eye on the place, but it's usually guarded anyway. As soon as we find Ryan we'll put some people with him. Okay, on this Clark kid, I'll have him in federal custody by tomorrow morning. I expect that Mr. Owens wants him back?"

"Yes." Owens leaned back in his chair. He had his own call to make now. As often happened in police work, there was bad news to accompany the good.

"Mr. Ryan?" It was a doctor. Probably a doctor. He wore a pink paper gown and strange-looking pink booties over what were probably sneakers. The gown was bloodstained. He couldn't be much over thirty, Ryan judged. The face was tired and dark. DR. BARRY SHAPIRO, the name tag announced, DEPUTY TRAUMA-SURGEON-IN-CHIEF. Ryan tried to stand but found that his legs would not work. The doctor waved for him to remain seated. He came over slowly and fell into the chair next to the sofa

What news do you bring me? Ryan thought. His mind both screamed for information and dreaded learning what had happened to his family.

"I'm Barry Shapiro. I've been working on your daughter." He spoke quickly, with a curious accent that Ryan noted but discarded as irrelevant. "Okay, your wife is fine. She had a broken and lacerated upper left arm and a nasty cut on her head. When the helicopter paramedic saw the head wound—heads bleed a lot—he brought her here as a precaution. We ran a complete head protocol on her, and she's fine. A mild concussion, but nothing to worry about. She'll be fine."

"She's pregnant. Do—"

"We noticed." Shapiro smiled. "No problem with that. The pregnancy has not been compromised in any way."

"She's a surgeon. Will there be any permanent damage?"

"Oh? I didn't know that. We don't bother very much with patient identification," Shapiro explained. "No, there should be no problem. The damage to her arm is extensive but routine. It should heal completely."

Ryan nodded, afraid to ask the next question. The doctor paused before

going on. *Does the bad news come next....*

"Your daughter is a very sick little girl."

Jack nearly choked with his next breath. The iron fist that had clutched his stomach relaxed a millimeter. *At least she's alive.* Sally's alive!

"Apparently she wasn't wearing her seat belt. When the car hit she was thrown forward, very hard." Jack nodded. Sally liked to play with her seat belt buckle—*we thought it was cute,* Ryan reminded himself bitterly. "Okay, tib and fib are broken in both legs, along with the left femur. All of the left-side ribs are broken, and six on the right side—a classic flailed chest. She can't breathe for herself, but she's on respirator; that is under control. She arrived with extensive internal injuries and hemorrhaging, severe damage to the liver and spleen, and the large bowel. Her heart stopped right after she got here, probably—almost certainly—from loss of blood volume. We got it restarted at once and immediately started replacing the blood loss." Shapiro went on quickly. "That problem is also behind us.

"Doctor Kinter and I have been working on her for the best part of five hours. We had to remove the spleen—that's okay, you can live without a spleen." Shapiro didn't say that the spleen was an important part of the body's defense against infections. "The liver had a moderately extensive stellate fracture and damage to the main artery that feeds blood into the organ. We had to remove about a quarter of the liver—again no problem with that—and I *think* we fixed the arterial damage, and I *think* the repair will hold. The liver is important. It has a great deal to do with blood formation and the body's biochemical balance. You can't live without it. If liver function is maintained ... she'll probably make it. The damage to the bowel was easy to repair. We removed about thirty centimeters. The legs are immobilized. We'll repair them later. The ribs—well, that's painful but not life-threatening. And the skull is relatively minor. I guess her chest took the main impact. She has a concussion, but there's no sign of intercranial bleeding." Shapiro rubbed his hands over his heavily-bearded face.

"The whole thing revolves around her liver function. If the liver continues to work, she will probably recover fully. We're keeping a very close watch on her blood chemistry, and we'll know something in, oh, maybe eight or nine hours."

"Not till then?" Ryan's face twisted into an agonized mass. The fist tightened its grip yet again. *She still might die* ... ?

"Mr. Ryan," Shapiro said slowly, "I know what you are going through. If it hadn't been for the helicopter bringing your little girl in, well, right now I'd be telling you that she had died. Another five minutes getting here—maybe not that long—and she would not have made it this far. That's how close it was. But she is alive now, and I promise you that we're doing our very best to keep her that way. And our best is the best there is. My team of doctors and nurses is the best of its kind in the world—period. Nobody comes close. If there's a way, we'll find it." *And if there's not,* he didn't *say, we won't.*

"Can I see them?"

"No." Shapiro shook his head. "Right now both of them are in the CCRU—the Critical Care Recovery Unit. We keep that as clean as an OR. The smallest infection can be lethal for a trauma patient. I'm sorry, but it would be too dangerous to them. My people are watching them constantly. A nurse—an experienced trauma nurse—is with each of them every second, with a team of doctors and nurses thirty feet away."

"Okay." He almost gasped the word. Ryan leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. Eight more hours? But *you have no choice. You have to wait. You have to do what they say.* "Okay."

Shapiro left and Jackson followed after him, catching him by the elevator.

"Doc, can't Jack see his little girl? She—"

"Not a chance." Shapiro half fell against the wall and let out a long breath. "Look, right now the little girl—what's her name anyway?"

"Sally."

"Okay, right now she's in a bed, stark naked, with IV tubes running into both arms and one leg. Her head's partially shaved. She's wired up to a half-dozen monitors, and we have an Engstrom respirator breathing for her. Her legs are wrapped—all you can see of her is one big bruise from her hips to the top of her head." Shapiro looked down at the pilot. He was too tired to show any emotion. "Look, she might die. I don't think so, but there's no way we can be sure. With liver injuries, you can't tell until the blood-chemistry readings come in, you just can't. If she does die, would you want your friend to see her like that? Would you want him to remember her like that, for the rest of his life?"

"I guess not," Jackson said quietly, surprised at how much he wanted this little girl to live. His wife could not have children, and somehow Sally had become like their own. "What are her chances?"

"I'm not a bookie, I don't quote odds. Numbers don't mean a thing in a case like this. Sorry, but either she makes it or she doesn't. Look, that wasn't a song and dance I gave—Jack, you said? She could not be in a better place." Shapiro's eyes focused on Jackson's chest. He jabbed a finger at the wings of gold. "You a pilot?"

"Yeah. Fighters."

"Phantoms?"

"No, the F-14. Tomcat."

"I fly." Shapiro smiled. "I used to be a flight surgeon in the Air Force. Last year I got a sailplane. Nice and peaceful up there. When I can get away from this madhouse, I go up every time I can. No phones. No hassles. Just me and the clouds." The doctor was not talking to Jackson so much as himself. Robby set his hand on the surgeon's arm.

"Doc, tell you what—you save that little girl, and I'll get you a checkride in any bird you want. Ever been up in a T-38?"

"What's that?" Shapiro was too tired to remember that he'd seen them before.

"A spiffy little supersonic trainer. Two seats, dual controls, and she handles like a wet dream. I can disguise you as one of ours and get you up, no sweat. Ever been past mach-1?"

"No. Can you do some aerobatics?" Shapiro smiled like a tired little boy.

"Sure, Doc." Jackson grinned, knowing that he could do maneuvers to make a quail lose its lunch.

"I'll take you up on that. We work the same way with every patient, but I'll take you up on that anyway. Keep an eye on your friend. He looks a little rocky. That's normal. This sort of thing can be harder on the family than it is on the victims. If he doesn't come around some, tell the receptionist. We have a staff psychiatrist who specializes in working with—the *other* victims, he calls 'em." Yet another new idea at Shock-Trauma was a specialist in helping people cope with the injuries to family and friends.

"Cathy's arm. She's an eye surgeon, lots of fine work, you know? You sure there's no problem with that?"

Shapiro shook his head. "No big deal. It was a clean break to the humerus. Must have been a jacketed slug. The bullet went in clean, went out clean. Pretty lucky, really."

Robby's hand clamped shut on the doctor's arm as the elevator arrived. *"Bullet?"*

"Didn't I say that? God, I must be tireder than I thought. Yeah, it was a gunshot wound, but very clean. Hell, I wish they were all that clean. A nine-millimeter, maybe a thirty-eight, 'bout that size. I have to get back to work." The doctor went into the elevator.

"Shit," Jackson said to the wall. He turned when he heard a man with an English accent—two of them, it turned out—whom the receptionist directed to the waiting room. Robby followed them in.

The taller one approached Ryan and said, "Sir John?"

Ryan looked up. *Sir John?* Robby thought. The Brit drew himself to attention and went on briskly.

"My name is Geoffrey Bennett. I am Chargé d'Affaires at the British Embassy." He produced an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Ryan. "I am directed by Her Majesty to deliver this personally into your hand and to await your reply."

Jack blinked his eyes a few times, then tore open the envelope and extracted a yellow message form. The cable was brief, kind, and to the point. *What time is it over there?* Ryan wondered. Two *in the morning? Three? Something like that.* That meant that she'd been awakened with the news, probably, and cared enough to send a personal message. And was waiting for a reply.

How about that.

Ryan closed his eyes and told himself that it was time to return to the world of the living. Too drained for the tears he needed to shed, he swallowed a few times and rubbed his hands across his face before standing.

"Please tell Her Majesty that I am most grateful for her concern. My wife is expected to recover fully, but my daughter is in critical condition and we will have no definitive word on her for another eight or nine hours. Please tell Her Majesty that ... that I am deeply touched by her concern, and that all of us value her friendship very highly indeed."

"Thank you, Sir John." Bennett made some notes. "I will cable your reply immediately. If you have no objection, I will leave a member of the embassy staff here with you." Jack nodded, puzzled, as Bennett made his exit.

Robby took all this in with a raised eyebrow and a dozen unasked questions. *Who was this guy?* He introduced himself as Edward Wayson, and took a seat in the corner facing the doorway. He looked over at Jackson. Their eyes met briefly and each man evaluated the other. Wayson had cool, detached eyes, and a wispy smile at the corners of his mouth. Robby gave him a closer look. There was a slight bulge under his left arm. Wayson affected to read a paperback novel, which he held in his left hand, but his eyes kept flickering to the door every few seconds, and his right hand stayed free in his lap. He caught Jackson's glance and nodded. So, Robby concluded, a spook, or at least a security officer. *So that's what this is all about.* The realization came as a blast of cold air. The pilot's hands flexed as he considered the type of person who would deliberately attempt to murder a woman and her child.

Five minutes later three State Police officers made their belated arrival. They talked to Ryan for ten minutes. Jackson watched with interest and saw his friend's face go pale with anger as he stammered answers to numerous questions. Wayson didn't look but heard it all.

"You were right, Jimmy," Murray said. He .was standing at the window, watching the early morning traffic negotiate the corner of Broadway and Victoria.

"Paddy O'Neil in Boston likes to say what wonderful chaps Sinn Fein are," Owens said speculatively. "And our friend O' Donnell decides to embarrass them. We could not have known, Dan. A possibility of a suspicion is not evidence and you know it. There was no basis in fact for giving them a more serious warning than what you did. And you *did* warn them, Dan."

"She's a pretty little girl. Gave me a hug and a kiss before they flew home." Murray looked at his watch again and subtracted five hours. "Jimmy, there are times ... Fifteen years ago we arrested this—this person who went after kids, little boys. I interrogated him. Sang like a canary, he couldn't be happier with himself. He copped to six cases, gave me all the details with a big shit-eatin' grin. It was right after the Supreme Court struck down all the death-penalty laws, so he knew that he'd live to a ripe old age. Do you know how

close I came to—" He stopped for a moment before going on. "Sometimes we're too damned civilized."

"The alternative, Dan, is to become like them."

"I know that's true, Jimmy, but I just don't like it right now."

When Barry Shapiro next checked his watch it was five in the morning. *No wonder I feel so tired,* he thought. *Twenty hours on duty. I'm too old for this.* He was senior staff. He was supposed to know better.

The first sign was staying on duty too long, taking on too much personal responsibility, taking too keen an interest in patients who in the final analysis were nothing more or less than bruised and broken pieces of meat. Some of them died. No matter how great his skill, how refined his technique, how determined the efforts of his team, some would always die. And when you got this tired, you couldn't sleep. Their injuries—and worse, their faces—were too fresh in your memory, too haunting to go away. Doctors need sleep more than most men. Persistent loss of sleep was the last and most dangerous warning. That was when you had to leave—or risk a breakdown, as had happened all too often to the Shock-Trauma staffers.

It was their grimmest institutional joke: how their patients arrived with broken bodies and mostly went home whole—but the staff doctors and nurses who came in with the greatest energy and highest personal ideals would so often leave broken in spirit. It was the ultimate irony of his profession that success would engender the expectation of still greater success; that failure in this most demanding of medical disciplines could leave almost as much damage on the practitioner as the patient. Shapiro was cynic enough to see the humor of it.

The surgeon reread the print-out that the blood-analyzer unit had spat out a minute before, and handed it back to the nurse-practitioner. She attached it to the child's chart, then sat back down, stroking her dirty hair outside the oxygen mask.

"Her father is downstairs. Get relief here and go down and tell him. I'm going upstairs for a smoke." Shapiro left the CCRU and got his overcoat, fishing in his pockets for his cigarettes.

He wandered down the hall to the fire stairs, then climbed slowly up the six flights to the roof. God, he thought. Dear God, *I'm tired.* The roof was flat, covered with tar and gravel, spotted here and there with the UHF antennas for the center's SYSCOM communications net, and a few air-conditioning condensers. Shapiro lit a cigarette in the lee of the stairway tower, cursing himself for his inability to break the noxious habit. He rationalized that, unlike most of his colleagues, he never saw the degenerative effects of smoking. Most of his patients were too young for chronic diseases. Their injuries resulted from the miracles of a technical society: automobiles, motorcycles, firearms, and industrial machinery.

Shapiro walked to the edge of the roof, rested his foot on the parapet as

though on a bar rail, and blew smoke into the early-morning air. It wafted away to appear and disappear as a gentle morning breeze carried it past the rooftop lights. The doctor stretched his tired arms and neck. The night's rain had washed the sky clean of its normal pollution, and he could see stars overhead in the pre-dawn darkness.

Shapiro's curious accent resulted from his background. His early childhood had been spent in the Williamsburg section of New York, the son of a rabbi who had taken his family to South Carolina. Barry had had good private schooling there, but emerged from it with a mixture of Southern drawl and New York quip. It was further damaged by a prairie twang acquired during his medical training at Baylor University in Texas. His father was a distinguished man of letters in his own right, a frequent lecturer at the University of South Carolina at Columbia. An expert in 19th-century American literature, Rabbi Shapiro's specialty was the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Barry Shapiro loathed Poe. A scribbler of death and perversity, the surgeon called him whenever the subject came up, and he'd been surprised to learn that Poe had died in Baltimore long before, after falling asleep, drunk, in a gutter; and that Poe's home was only a few blocks from the University Hospital complex, a demi-shrine for the local literati.

It seemed to the surgeon that everything about Poe was dark and twisted, always expecting the inevitability of death—violent, untimely death, Shapiro's own very personal enemy. He had come to think of Poe as the embodiment of that enemy, sometimes beaten, sometimes not. It was not something he talked about to the staff psychiatrist, who also kept a close eye on the hospital staff—but now, alone, he looked north to the Poe house.

"You son of a bitch," he whispered. To himself. To Poe. To no one. *"You son of a bitch!* Not this time—you don't get this one! This one goes home." He flicked the cigarette away and watched the point of orange light fall all the way to the shining, empty street. He turned back to the stairs. It was time to get some sleep.

16

Objectives and Patriots

Like most professional officers, Lieutenant Commander Robby Jackson had little use for the press. The irony of it was that Jack had tried many times to tell him that his outlook was wrong, that the press was as important to the preservation of American democracy as the Navy was. Now, as he watched, reporters were hounding his friend with questions that alternated between totally inane and intrusively personal. Why did everyone need to know how Jack felt about his daughter's condition? What would *any* normal person feel about having his child hovering near death—did they need such feelings explained? How was Jack supposed to know who'd done the shooting—if the police didn't know, how could he?

"And what's *your* name?" one finally asked Robby. He gave the woman his name and rank, but not his serial number.

"What are you doing here?" she persisted.

"We're friends. I drove him up here." *You dumbass.*

"And what do you think of all this?"

"What do you think I think? If that was your friend's little girl up there, what the hell would you think?" the pilot snapped back at her.

"Do you know who did it?"

"I fly airplanes for a living, I'm not a cop. Ask them."

"They're not talking."

Robby smiled thinly. "Well, score one for the good guys. Lady, why don't you leave that man alone? If you were going through what he is, do you think you would want a half-dozen strangers asking you these kind of questions? That's a human being over there, y'know? And he's my friend and I don't like what you people are doing to him."

"Look, Commander, we know that his wife and daughter were attacked by terrorists—"

"Says who?" Jackson demanded.

"Who else would it be? Do you think we're stupid?" Robby didn't answer that. "This is news—it's the first attack by a foreign terrorist group on American soil, if we're reading this right. That is important. The people have a right to know what happened and why," the reporter said reasonably.

She's right, Robby admitted reluctantly to himself. He didn't like it, but she

was right. *Damn.*

"Would it make you feel any better to know that I do have a kid about that age? Mine's a boy," she said. The reporter actually seemed sympathetic.

Jackson searched for something to dislike about her. "Answer me this: if you have a chance to interview the people who did this, would you do it?"

"That's my job. We need to know where they're coming from. "

"Where they're comin' from, lady, is they kill people for the fun of it. It's all part of their game." Robby remembered intelligence reports he'd seen while in the Eastern Med. "Back a couple of years ago—you never heard this from me, okay?"

"Off the record," she said solemnly.

"I was on a carrier off Beirut, okay? We had intelligence reports—and pictures—of people from Europe who flew in to do some killing. They were mainly kids, musta been from good families—I mean, from the way they dressed. No shit, this is for-real, I saw the friggin' pictures. They joined up with some of the crazies, got guns, and just started blasting away, at random, for the pure hell of it. They shot from those high-rise hotels and office buildings into the streets. With a rifle you can hit from a thousand yards away. Something moves—boom, they blast it with automatic weapons fire. Then they got to go home. They were killing people, for fun! Maybe some of them grew up to be real terrorists, I don't know. It was pretty sickening stuff, not the sort of thing you forget. That's the kind of people we're talking about here, okay?

"I don't give a good goddamn about their point of view, lady! When I was a little kid in Alabama, we had problems with people like that, those assholes in the Klan. I don't give a damn about their point of view, either. The only good thing about the Klan was they were idiots. The terrorists we got running around now are a lot more efficient. Maybe that makes them more legitimate in your eyes, but not mine."

"That thing in Beirut never made the papers," the reporter said.

"I know for a fact that one reporter saw it. Maybe he figured that nobody would believe it. I don't know that I would have without the photos. But I saw 'em. You got my word on that, lady. "

"What kind of pictures?"

"That I can't say—but they were good enough to see their shiny young faces." The photos had been made by U.S. and Israeli reconnaissance aircraft.

"So what do you do about it?"

"If you could arrange to have all these bastards in one place, I think we and the Marines could figure something out," Robby replied, voicing a wish common to professional soldiers throughout the world. "We might even invite you newsies to the wake. Who the hell is that?" Two new people came into the room.

Jack was too tired to be fully coherent. The news that Sally was out of immediate danger had been like a giant weight leaving his shoulders, and he was waiting for the chance to see his wife, who would soon be moved to a regular hospital floor. A few feet away, Wayson, the British security officer, watched with unconcealed contempt, refusing even to give his name to the reporters who asked. The State Police officers were unable to keep the press away, though hospital personnel flatly refused to let the TV equipment in the front door, and were able to make that stick. The question that kept repeating was, Who did it? Jack said he didn't know, though he thought he did. It was probably the people he'd decided not to worry about.

It could have been worse, he told himself. At least it was now probable that Sally would be alive at the end of the week. His daughter was not dead because of his misjudgment. That was some consolation.

"Mr. Ryan?" one of the new visitors asked.

"Yeah?" Jack was too exhausted to look up. He was awake only because of adrenaline now. His nerves were too ragged to allow him sleep, much as he needed it.

"I'm Special Agent Ed Donoho, Boston Field Office of the FBI. I have somebody who wants to say something to you."

Nobody ever said that Paddy O'Neil was stupid, Donoho thought. As soon as the report had made the Eleven O'Clock News, the man from Sinn Fein had asked his FBI "escort" if he might fly down to Baltimore. Donoho was in no position to deny him the right, and had been co-opted into bringing the man himself on the first available plane into BWI.

"Mr. Ryan," O'Neil said with a voice that dripped sympathy, "I understand that the condition of your child has been upgraded. I hope that my prayers had something to do with it, and ..."

It took Ryan over ten seconds to recognize the face that he'd seen a few days before on TV. His mouth slowly dropped open as his eyes widened. For some reason he didn't hear what the man was saying. The words came through his ears, but, as though they were in some unknown tongue, his brain did not assemble them into speech. All he saw was the man's throat, five feet away. *Just about five feet,* was what his brain told him.

"Uh-oh," Robby said on the other side of the room. He stood as his friend went beet-red. Two seconds later, Ryan's face was as pale as the collar on his white cotton shirt. Jack's feet shifted, sliding straight beneath his body as he leaned forward on the couch.

Robby pushed past the FBI agent as Ryan launched himself from the couch, hands stretching out for O'Neil's neck. Jackson's shoulder caught his friend's chest, and the pilot wrapped Jack up in a bear hug, trying to push him backward as three photographers recorded the scene. Jack didn't make a sound, but Robby knew exactly what he wanted to do. Jackson had leverage going for him, and pushed Ryan back, hurling him onto the couch. He turned quickly.

“Get that asshole outa here before *I* kill him!” Jackson was four inches shorter than the Irishman, but his rage was scarcely less than Ryan’s. “Get that terrorist bastard out of here!”

“Officer!” Special Agent Donoho pointed to a state trooper, who grabbed O‘Neil and dragged him from the room in an instant. For some reason the reporters followed as O’Neil loudly protested his innocence.

“Are you out of your fucking mind!” Jackson snarled at the FBI agent.

“Cool down, Commander. I’m on your side, okay? Cool it down some.”

Jackson sat down beside Ryan, who was breathing like a horse at the end of a race while he stared at the floor. Donoho sat down on the other side.

“Mr. Ryan, I couldn’t keep him from coming down. I’m sorry, but we can’t do that. He wanted to tell you—shit, all the way down on the plane, he told me that his outfit had nothing to do with this; that it would be a disaster for them. He wanted to extend his sympathy, I guess.” The agent hated himself for saying that, even though it was true enough. He hated himself even more because he’d almost started to like Paddy O’Neil over the past week. The front man for Sinn Fein was a person of considerable charm, a man with a gift for presenting his point of view in a reasonable way. Ed Donoho asked himself why he’d been assigned to this job. *Why couldn’t they have picked an Italian?* He knew the answer to that, of course, but just because there was a reason didn’t mean that he had to like it. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t bother you anymore.”

“You do that,” Robby said.

Donoho went back into the hall, and unsurprisingly found O’Neil giving his spiel to the reporters. *Mr. Ryan is distraught,* he was saying, *as any family man would be in similar circumstances.* His first exposure to the man the previous week had given him a feeling of distaste. Then he’d started to admire his skill and charm. Now Donoho’s reaction to the man’s words was one of loathing. An idea blinked on in his head. He wondered if the Bureau would approve and decided it was worth the risk. First the agent grabbed a state trooper by the arm and made sure that the man wouldn’t get close to Ryan again. Next he got hold of a photographer and talked to him briefly. Together they found a doctor.

“No, absolutely not,” the surgeon replied to the initial request.

“Hey, Doc,” the photojournalist said. “My wife’s pregnant with our first. If it’ll help this guy, I’m for it. This one doesn’t make the papers. You got my word, Doc.”

“I think it’ll help,” the FBI agent said. “I really do.”

Ten minutes later Donoho and the photographer stripped off their scrub clothing. The FBI agent took the film cassette and tucked it in his pocket. Before he took O’Neil back to the airport, he made a call to headquarters in Washington, and two agents drove out to Ryan’s home on Peregrine Cliff. They didn’t have any problem with the alarm system.

Jack had been awake for more than twenty-four hours now. If he'd been able to think about it, he would have marveled at the fact that he was awake and functional, though the latter observation would have been a matter of dispute to anyone who saw him walking. He was alone now. Robby was off attending to something that he couldn't remember.

He would have been alone in any case. Twenty minutes earlier, Cathy had been moved into the main University Hospital complex, and Jack had to go see her. He walked like a man facing execution down a drab corridor of glazed institutional brick. He turned a corner and saw what room it had to be. A pair of state troopers was standing there. They watched him approach, and Jack watched their eyes for a sign that they knew all of this was his fault, that his wife and daughter had nearly died because he'd decided that there was nothing to worry about. Not once in his life had Jack experienced failure, and its bitter taste made him think that the whole world would hold him in the same contempt he felt for himself.

You're so fucking smart.

It seemed to his senses that he did not so much approach the door—it approached him, looming ever larger in his sight. Behind the door was the woman he loved. The woman who had nearly died because of his confidence in himself. What would she say to him? Did he dare to find out? Jack stood at the door for a moment. The troopers tried not to stare at him. Perhaps they felt sympathy, Jack thought, knowing that he didn't deserve it. The doorknob was cold, accusing metal in his hand as he entered the room.

Cathy was lying in her single-bed room. Her arm was in a cast. An enormous purple bruise covered the right side of her face and there was a bandage over half her forehead. Her eyes were open but almost lifeless, staring at a television that wasn't on. Jack moved toward her as though asleep. A nurse had set a chair alongside the bed. He sat in it, and took his wife's hand while he tried to think of something he could say to the wife he had failed. Her face turned toward his. Her eyes were blackened and full of tears.

"I'm sorry, Jack," she whispered.

"What?"

"I knew she was fooling with the seat belt, but I didn't do anything because I was in a hurry—and then that truck came, and I didn't have time to—if I had made sure she was strapped in, Sally would be fine ... but I was in a hurry," she finished, and looked away. "Jack, I'm so sorry."

My God, she thinks it's her *fault ... what do I say now?*

"She's going to be okay, babe," Ryan managed to say, stunned at what he'd just heard. He held Cathy's hand to his face and kissed it. "And so are you. That's the only thing that matters now."

"But—" She stared at the far wall.

"No 'buts.' "

Her face turned back. Cathy tried to smile but tears were rolling from her eyes. “I talked to Doctor Ellingstone at Hopkins—he came over and saw Sally. He says—he says she’ll be okay. He says that Shapiro saved her life.”

“I know.”

“I haven’t even seen her—I remember seeing the bridge and then I woke up two hours ago, and—*oh, Jack*!” Her hand closed on his like a claw. He leaned forward to kiss her, but before their lips touched, both started weeping.

“It’s okay, Cathy,” Jack said, and he started to believe that it really was, or at least that it would be so again. His world had not ended, not quite.

But someone else’s will, Ryan told himself. The thought was a quiet, distant one, voiced in a part of his mind that was already looking at the future while the present occupied his sight. Seeing his wife weeping tears caused by someone else started a cold rage in him which only that someone’s death could ever warm.

The time for grief was already ending, carried away by his own tears. Though it had not yet happened, Ryan’s intellect was already beginning to think of the time when his emotions would be at rest—most of them. One would remain. He would control it, but it would also control him. He would not feel like a whole man again until he was purged of it.

One can only weep for so long; it is as though each tear carries a finite amount of emotion away with it. Cathy stopped first. She used her hand to wipe her husband’s face. She managed a real smile now. Jack hadn’t shaved. It was like rubbing sandpaper.

“What time is it?”

“Ten-thirty.” Jack didn’t have to check his watch.

“You need sleep, Jack,” she said. “You have to stay healthy, too.”

“Yeah.” Jack rubbed his eyes.

“Hi, Cathy,” Robby said as he came through the door. “I’ve come to take him away from you.”

“Good.”

“We’re checked into the Holiday Inn over on Lombard Street.”

“We? Robby, you don’t—”

“Stuff it, Jack,” Robby said. “How are you, Cathy?”

“I have a headache you wouldn’t believe.”

“Good to see you smile,” Robby said softly. “Sissy’ll be up after lunch. Is there anything she can get for you?”

“Not right now. Thanks, Rob.”

“Hang in there, Doc.” Robby took Jack’s arm and hauled him to his feet. “I’ll have him back to you later today.”

Twenty minutes later Robby led Jack into their motel room. He pulled a pill

container from his pocket. “The doc said you should take one of these.”

“I don’t take pills.”

“You’re taking one of these, sport. It’s a nice yellow one. That’s not a request, Jack, it’s an order. You need sleep. Here.” Robby tossed them over and stared until Jack swallowed one. Ryan was asleep in ten minutes. Jackson made certain that the door was secured before settling down on the other bed. The pilot dreamed of seeing the people who had done all this. They were in an airplane. Four times he fired a missile into their bird and watched their bodies spill out of the hole it made so that he could blast them with his cannon before they fell into the sea.

The Patriots Club was a bar across the street from Broadway Station in one of South Boston’s Irish enclaves. Its name harkened not back to the revolutionaries of the 1770s, but rather to the owner’s image of himself. John Donoho had served in the First Marine Division on the bitter retreat from the Chosin Reservoir. Wounded twice, he’d never left his squad on the long, cold march to the port of Hungnam. He still walked with a slight limp from the four toes that frostbite had taken from his right foot. He was prouder of this than of his several decorations, framed under a Marine Corps standard behind the bar. Anyone who entered the bar in a Marine uniform always got his first drink free, along with a story or two about the Old Corps, which Corporal John Donoho, USMC (ret.), had served at the ripe age of eighteen.

He was also a professional Irishman. Every year he took an Aer Lingus flight from Boston’s Logan International Airport to the old sod, to brush up on his roots and his accent, and sample the better varieties of whiskey that somehow were never exported to America in quantity. Donoho also tried to keep current on the happenings in the North, “the Six Counties,” as he called them, to maintain his spiritual connection with the rebels who labored courageously to free their people from the British yoke. Many a dollar had been raised in his bar, to aid those in the North, many a glass raised to their health and to the Cause.

“Hello, Johnny!” Paddy O’Neil called from the door.

“And good evening to you, Paddy!” Donoho was already drawing a beer when he saw his nephew follow O‘Neil through the door. Eddie was his dead brother’s only son, a good boy, educated at Notre Dame, where he’d played second string on the football team before joining up with the FBI. It wasn’t quite as good as being a Marine, but Uncle John knew that it paid a lot better. He’d heard that Eddie was following O’Neil around, but was vaguely sad to see that it was true. Perhaps it was to protect Paddy from a Brit assassin, the owner rationalized.

John and Paddy had a beer together before the latter joined a small group waiting for him in the back room. His nephew stayed alone at the end of the bar, where he drank a cup of coffee and kept an eye on things. After ten minutes O’Neil went back to give his talk. Donoho went to say hello to his nephew.

“Hi, Uncle John,” Eddie greeted him.

“Have you set the date yet, now?” John asked, affecting an Irish accent, as he usually did when O’Neil was around.

“Maybe next September,” the younger man allowed.

“And what would your father say, you living with the girl for almost a year? And the good fathers at Notre Dame?”

“Probably the same thing they’d say to you for raising money for terrorists,” the young agent replied. Eddie was sick and tired of being told how to live his life.

“I don’t want to hear any of that in my place.” He’d heard that line before, too.

“That’s what O’Neil does, Uncle John.”

“They’re freedom fighters. I know they bend some of our laws from time to time, but the English laws they break are no concern of mine—or yours,” John Donoho said firmly.

“You watch TV?” The agent didn’t need an answer to that. A wide-screen TV in the opposite comer was used for baseball and football games. The bar’s name had also made it an occasional watering hole for the New England Patriots football players. Uncle John’s interest in TV was limited to the Patriots, Red Sox, Celtics, and Bruins. His interest in politics was virtually nil. He voted for Teddy Kennedy every six years and considered himself a staunch proponent of national defense. “I want to show you a couple of pictures.”

He set the first one on the bar. “This is a little girl named Sally Ryan. She lives in Annapolis.”

His uncle picked it up and smiled. “I remember when my Kathleen looked like that.”

“Her father is a teacher at the Naval Academy, used to be a Marine lieutenant. He went to Boston College. His father was a cop.”

“Sounds like a good Irishman. Friend of yours?”

“Not exactly,” Eddie said. “Paddy and I met him earlier today. This is what his daughter looked like then.” The second photo was laid on the bar.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.” It wasn’t easy to discern that there was a child under all the medical equipment. Her feet stuck out from heavy wrappings. An inch-wide plastic pipe was in her mouth, and what parts of her body were visible formed a horribly discolored mass that the photographer had recorded with remarkable skill.

“She’s the lucky one, Uncle John. The girl’s mother was there, too.” Two more photos went onto the bar.

“What happened, car accident—what are you showing me?” John Donoho asked. He really didn’t know what this was all about.

“She’s a surgeon—she’s pregnant, too, the pictures don’t show that. Her car

was machine-gunned yesterday, right outside of Annapolis, Maryland. They killed a State Police officer a few minutes later." Another picture went down.

"What? Who did it?" the older man asked.

"Here's the father, Jack Ryan." It was the same picture that the London papers had used, Jack's graduation shot from Quantico. Eddie knew that his uncle always looked at Marine dress blues with pride.

"I've seen him before somewhere ..."

"Yeah. He stopped a terrorist attack over in London a few months back. It looks like he offended the terrorists enough that they came after him and his family. The Bureau is working on that. "

"Who did it?"

The last photo went down on the bar. It showed Ryan's hands less than a foot from Paddy O'Neil, and a black man holding him back.

"Who's the jig?" John asked. His nephew almost lost his temper.

"Goddammit, Uncle John! That *man* is a Navy fighter pilot."

"Oh." John was briefly embarrassed. He had little use for blacks, though one who wore a Marine uniform into his bar got his first drink free, too. It was different with the ones in uniform, he told himself. Anyone who served the flag as he had done was okay in his book, John Donoho always said. *Some of my best friends* in *the* Corps.... He remembered how Navy strike aircraft had supported his outfit all the way back to the sea, holding the Chinese back with rockets and napalm. Well, maybe this one was different, too. He stared at the rest of the picture for a few seconds. "So, you say Paddy had something to do with this?"

"I've been telling you for years who the bastard fronts for. If you don't believe me, maybe you want to ask Mr. Ryan here. It's bad enough that O'Neil spits on our whole country every time he comes over here. His friends damned near killed this whole family yesterday. We got one of 'em. Two Marine guards at the Naval Academy grabbed him, waiting to shoot Ryan. His name's Eamon Clark, and we know that he used to work for the Provisional Wing of the IRA—we *know* it, Uncle John, he's a convicted murderer. They caught him with a loaded pistol in his pocket. You still think they're good guys? Dammit, they're going after Americans now! If you don't believe me, believe this!" Eddie Donoho rearranged the photos on the wooden surface. "This little girl, and her mother, and a kid not even bom yet almost died yesterday. This state trooper did. He left a wife and a kid behind. That friend of yours in the back room raises the money to buy the guns, he's connected with the people who did this."

"But why?"

"Like I said, this girl's dad got in the way of a murder over in London. I guess the people he stopped wanted to get even with him—not just him, though, they went for his whole family," the agent explained slowly.

"The little girl didn't—"

“Goddammit,” Eddie swore again. “That’s why they’re called terrorists!” It was getting through. He could see that he was finally getting the message across.

“You’re sure that Paddy is part of this?” his uncle asked.

“He’s never lifted a gun that we know of. He’s their mouthpiece, he comes over here and raises money so that they can do things like this at home. Oh, he never gets his hands bloody. He’s too smart for that. But this is what the money goes for. We are absolutely sure of that. And now they’re playing their games over here.” Agent Donoho knew that the money-raising was secondary to the psychological reasons for coming over, but now wasn’t the time to clutter the issue with details. He watched his uncle stare at the photos of the little girl. His face showed the confusion that always accompanies a completely new thought.

“You’re sure? Really sure?”

“Uncle John, we have over thirty agents on the case now, plus the local police. You bet we’re sure. We’ll get ‘em, too. The Director’s put the word out on this case. We want ’em. Whatever it takes, we’ll get these bastards,” Edward Michael Donoho, Jr., said with cold determination.

John Donoho looked at his nephew, and for the first time he saw a man. Eddie’s FBI post was a source of family pride, but John finally knew why this was so. He wasn’t a kid anymore. He was a man with a job about which he was deadly serious. More than the photographs, it was this that decided things. John had to believe what he’d been told.

The owner of the Patriots Club stood up straight and walked down the bar to the folding gate. He lifted it and made for the back room, with his nephew trailing behind.

“But our boys are fighting back,” O’Neil was telling the fifteen men in the room. “Every day they fight back to—joining us, Johnny?”

“Out,” Donoho said quietly.

“What—I don’t understand, John,” O’Neil said, genuinely puzzled.

“You must think I’m pretty stupid. I guess maybe I was. Leave.” The voice was more forceful now, and the feigned accent was gone. “Get out of my club and don’t ever come back.”

“But, Johnny—what are you talking about?”

Donoho grabbed the man by his collar and lifted him off his chair. O’Neil’s voice continued to protest as he was propelled all the way out the front door. Eddie Donoho waved to his uncle as he followed his charge out onto the street.

“What was that all about?” one of the men from the back room asked. Another of them, a reporter for the Boston Globe, started making notes as the bar owner stumbled through what he had finally learned.

To this point no police agency had implicated any terrorist group by name,

and in fact neither had Special Agent Donoho done so. His instructions from Washington on that score had been carefully given and carefully followed. But in the translation through Uncle John and a reporter, the facts got slightly garbled—as surprised no one—and within hours the story was on the AP wire that the attack on Jack Ryan and his family had been made by the Provisional Wing of the Irish Republican Army.

Sean Miller's mission in America had been fully accomplished by an agency of the United States government.

Miller and his party were already back home. As many people in this line of work had done before, Sean reflected on the value of rapid international air travel. In this case it had been off to Mexico from Washington's Dulles International, from there to the Netherlands Antilles, to Schiphol International Airport on a KLM flight, and then to Ireland. All one needed were correct travel documents and a little money. The travel documents in question were already destroyed, and the money untraceable cash. He sat across from Kevin O'Donnell's desk, drinking water to compensate for the dehydration normal to flying.

"What about Eamon?" One rule of ULA operations was that no overseas telephone calls ever came to his house.

"Alex's man says he was picked up." Miller shrugged. "It was a risk I felt worth taking. I selected Ned for it because he knows very little about us." He knew that O'Donnell had to agree with that. Clark was one of the new men brought into the Organization, and more of an accident than a recruit. He'd come south because one of his friends from the H-blocks had come. O'Donnell had thought him of possible use, since they had no experienced work-alone assassins. But Clark was stupid. His motivations came from emotion rather than ideology. He was, in fact, a typical PIRA thug, little different from those in the UVF for that matter, useful in the same sense that a trained dog was useful, Kevin told himself. He knew but a few names and faces within the Organization. Most damning of all, he had failed. Clark's one redeeming characteristic was his doglike loyalty. He hadn't broken in Long Kesh prison and he probably wouldn't break now. He lacked the imagination.

"Very well," Kevin O'Donnell said after a moment's reflection. Clark would be remembered as a martyr, gaining greater respect in failure than he had managed to earn in success. "The rest?"

"Perfect. I saw the wife and child die, and Alex's people got us away cleanly." Miller smiled and poured some whiskey to follow his liter of ice water.

"They're not dead, Sean," O'Donnell said.

"What?" Miller had been on an airplane less than three hours after the shooting, and hadn't seen or heard a snippet of news since. He listened to his boss's explanation in incredulous silence.

"But it doesn't matter," O'Donnell concluded. He explained that, too. The AP story that had originated in the *Boston Globe* had been picked up by the

Irish Times of Dublin. “It was a good plan after all, Sean. Despite everything that went wrong, the mission is accomplished.”

Sean didn’t allow himself to react. Two operations in a row had gone wrong for him. Before the fiasco in London, he’d never failed at all. He’d written that off to random chance, pure luck, nothing more. He didn’t even think of that in this case. Two in a row, that wasn’t luck. He knew that Kevin would not tolerate a third failure. The young operations officer took a deep breath and told himself to be objective. He’d allowed himself to think of Ryan as a personal target, not a political one. That had been his first mistake. Though Kevin hadn’t said it, losing Ned had been a serious mistake. Miller reviewed his plan, rethinking every aspect of the operation. Just going after the wife and child would have been simple thuggery, and he’d never approved of that; it was not professional. Just going after Ryan himself, however, would not have carried the same political impact, which was the whole point of the operation. The rest of the family was—had been necessary. So his objectives had been sound enough, but ...

“I should have taken more time on this one,” he said finally. “I tried to be too dramatic. Perhaps we should have waited.”

“Yes,” his boss agreed, pleased that Sean saw his errors.

“Any help we can give you,” Owens said, “is yours. You know that, Dan.”

“Yeah, well, this has attracted some high-level interest.” Murray held a cable from Director Emil Jacobs himself. “Well, it was only a matter of time. It had to happen sooner or later.” *And if we don’t bag these sons of bitches,* he thought, *it’ll happen again. The ULA just proved that terrorists could operate in the U.S.* The emotional shock of the event had come as a surprise to Murray. As a professional in the field, he knew that it was mere luck that it hadn’t happened already. The inept domestic terrorist groups had set off some bombs and murdered a few people, but the Bureau had experienced considerable success running them to ground. None of them had ever gotten much in the way of foreign support. But that had changed, too. The helicopter pilot had identified one of the escaping terrorists as black, and there weren’t many of them in Ireland.

It was a new ball game, and for all his experience in the FBI, Murray was worried about how well the Bureau would be able to handle it. Director Jacobs was right on one thing: this was a top-priority mission. Bill Shaw would run the case personally, and Murray knew him to be one of the best intellects in the business. The thirty agents initially assigned to the case would treble in the next few days, then treble again. The only way to keep this from happening again was to demonstrate that America was too dangerous a place for terrorists. In his heart, Murray knew that this was impossible. No place was too dangerous, certainly no democracy.

But the Bureau did have formidable resources, and it wouldn’t be the only agency involved.

17

Recriminations and Decisions

Ryan awoke to find Robby waving a cup of coffee under his nose. Jack had managed to sleep without dreams this time, and the oblivion of undisturbed slumber had worked wonders on him.

"Sissy was over the hospital earlier. She says Cathy looks all right, considering. It's all set up so you can get in to see Sally. She'll be asleep, but you can see her."

"Where is she?"

"Sissy? She's out runnin' some errands."

"I need a shave."

"Me, too. She's getting what we need. First I'm gonna get some food in ya'," Robby said.

"I owe you, man," Jack said as he stood.

"Give it a rest, Jack. That's what the Lord put us here for, like my pappy says. Now, eat!" Robby commanded.

Jack realized that he'd not eaten anything for a long time, and once his stomach reminded itself of this, it cried out for nourishment. Within five minutes he'd disposed of two eggs, bacon, hash-browns, four slices of toast, and two cups of coffee.

"Shame they don't have grits here," Robby observed. A knock came to the door. The pilot answered it. Sissy breezed in with a shopping bag in one hand and Jack's briefcase in the other.

"You better freshen up, Jack," she said. "Cathy looks better than you do."

"Nothing unusual about that," Jack replied—cheerfully, he realized with surprise. Sissy had baited him into it.

"Robby?"

"Yeah?"

"What the hell are grits?"

"You don't want to know," Cecilia Jackson answered.

"I'll take your word for it." Jack walked into the bathroom and started the shower. By the time he got out, Robby had shaved, leaving the razor and cream on the sink. Jack scraped his beard away and patched the bloody spots

with toilet paper. A new toothbrush was sitting there too, and Ryan emerged from the room looking and feeling like a human being.

"Thanks, guys," he said.

"I'll take you home tonight," Robby said. "I have to teach class tomorrow. You don't. I fixed it with the department."

"Okay."

Sissy left for home. Jack and Robby walked over to the hospital. Visiting hours were under way and they were able to walk right up to Cathy's room.

"Well, if it isn't our hero!" Joe Muller was Cathy's father. He was a short, swarthy man—Cathy's hair and complexion came from her mother, now dead. A senior VP with Merrill Lynch, he was a product of the Ivy League, and had started in the brokerage business much as Ryan had, though his brief stint in the military had been two years of drafted service in the Army that he'd long since put behind him. He'd once had big plans for Jack and had never forgiven him for leaving the business. Muller was a passionate man who was also well aware of his importance in the financial community. He and Jack hadn't exchanged a civil word in over three years. It didn't look to Jack as though that was going to change.

"Daddy," Cathy said, "we don't need that."

"Hi, Joe." Ryan held out his hand. It hung there for five seconds, all by itself. Robby excused himself out the door, and Jack went to kiss his wife. "Lookin' better, babe."

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Muller demanded.

"The guy who wanted to kill me was arrested yesterday. The FBI has him," Jack said carefully. He amazed himself by saying it so calmly. Somehow it seemed a trivial matter compared with his wife and daughter.

"This is all your fault, you know." Muller had been rehearsing this for hours.

"I know," Jack conceded the point. He wondered how much more he could back up.

"Daddy—" Cathy started to say.

"You keep out of this," Muller said to his daughter, a little too sharply for Jack.

"You can say anything you want to me, but don't snap at her," he warned.

"Oh, you want to protect her, eh? So where the hell were you yesterday!"

"I was in my office, just like you were."

"You had to stick your nose in where it didn't belong, didn't you? You had to play hero—and you damned near got your family killed," Muller went on through his lines.

"Look, Mr. Muller." Jack had told himself all these things before. He could accept the punishment from himself. But not from his father-in-law. "Unless you know of a company on the exchange that makes a time machine, we can't

very well change that, can we? All we can do now is help the authorities find the people who did this."

"Why didn't you think about all this before, dammit!"

"Daddy, that's enough!" Cathy rejoined the conversation.

"Shut up—this is between us!"

"If you yell at her again, mister, you'll regret it." Jack needed a release. He hadn't protected his family the previous day, but he could now.

"Calm down, Jack." His wife didn't know that she was making things worse, but Jack took the cue after a moment. Muller didn't.

"You're a real big guy now, aren't you?"

Keep going, Joe, and you might find out. Jack looked over to his wife and took a deep breath. "Look, if you came down here to yell at me, that's fine, we can do that by ourselves, okay?—but that's your daughter over there, and maybe she needs you, too." He turned to Cathy. "I'll be outside if you need me."

Ryan left the room. There were still two very serious state troopers at the door, and another at the nurses' station down the hall. Jack reminded himself that a trooper had been killed, and that Cathy was the only thing they had that was close to being a witness. She was safe, finally. Robby waved to his friend from down the hall.

"Settle down, boy," the pilot suggested.

"He has a real talent for pissing me off," Jack said after another deep breath.

"I know he's an asshole, but he almost lost his kid. Try to remember that. Taking it out on him doesn't help things."

"It might," Jack said with a smile, thinking about it. "What are you, a philosopher?"

"I'm a PK, Jack. Preacher's Kid. You can't imagine the stuff I used to hear from the parlor when people came over to talk with the old man. He isn't so much mad at you as scared by what almost happened," Robby said.

"So am I, pal." Ryan looked down the hall.

"But you've had more time to deal with it."

"Yeah." Jack was quiet for a moment. "I still don't like the son of a bitch."

"He gave you Cathy, man. That's something."

"Are you sure you're in the right line of work? How come you're not a chaplain?"

"I am the voice of reason in a chaotic world. You don't accomplish as much when you're pissed off. That's why we train people to be professionals. If you want to get the job done, emotions don't help. You've already gotten even with the man, right?"

"Yeah. If he'd had his way, I'd be living up in Westchester County, taking

the train in every day, and—crap!" Jack shook his head. "He still makes me mad."

Muller came out of the room just then. He looked around for a moment, spotted Jack, and walked down. "Stay close," Ryan told his friend.

"You almost killed my little girl." Joe's mood hadn't improved.

Jack didn't reply. He'd told himself that about a hundred times, and was just starting to consider the possibility that he was a victim, too.

"You ain't thinking right, Mr. Muller," Robby said.

"Who the hell are you!"

"A friend," Robby replied. He and Joe were about the same height, but the pilot was twenty years younger. The look he gave the broker communicated this rather clearly. The voice of reason didn't like being yelled at. Joe Muller had a talent for irritating people. On Wall Street he could get away with it, and he assumed that meant that he could do it anywhere he liked. He was a man who had not learned the limitations of his power.

"We can't change what has happened," Jack offered. "We can work to see that it doesn't happen again."

"If you'd done what I wanted, this never would have happened!"

"If I'd done what *you* wanted, I'd be working with you every day, moving money from Column A to Column B and pretending it was important, like all the other Wall Street wimps—and hating it, and turning into another miserable bastard in the financial world. I proved that I could do that as well as you, but I made my pile, and so now I do something I like. At least we're trying to make the world a better place instead of trying to take it over with leveraged buyouts. It's not my fault that you don't understand that. Cathy and I are doing what we like to do."

"Something you *like,"* Muller snapped, rejecting the concept that making money wasn't something to be enjoyed in and of itself. "Make the world a better place, eh?"

"Yeah, because I'm going to help catch the bastards who did this."

"And how is a punk history teacher going to do that!"

Ryan gave his father-in-law his best smile. "That's something I can't tell you, Joe."

The stockbroker swore and stalked away. *So much for reconciliation,* Jack told himself. He wished it had gone otherwise. His estrangement with Joe Muller was occasionally hard on Cathy.

"Back to the Agency, Jack?" Robby asked.

"Yeah."

Ryan spent twenty minutes with his wife, long enough to learn what she'd told the police and to make sure that she really was feeling better. She was dozing off when he left. Next he went across the street to the Shock-Trauma

Center.

Getting into scrubs reminded him of the only other time he'd done so, the night Sally was born. A nurse took him into the Critical Care Recovery Unit, and he saw his little girl for the first time in thirty-six hours, a day and a half that had stretched into an eternity. It was a thoroughly ghastly experience. Had he not been told positively that her survival chances were good, he might have broken down on the spot. The bruised little shape was unconscious from the combination of drugs and injuries. He watched and listened as the respirator breathed for her. She was being fed from bottles and tubes that ran into her veins. A doctor explained that her condition looked far worse than it was. Sally's liver was functioning well, under the circumstances. In two or three more days the broken legs would be set.

"Is she going to be crippled?" Jack asked quietly.

"No, there isn't any reason to worry about that. Kids' bones—what we say is, if the broken pieces are in the same room, they'll heal. It looks far worse than it is. The trick with cases like this is getting them through the first hour—in her case, the first twelve or so. Once we get kids through the initial crisis, once we get the system working again, they heal fast. You'll have her home in a month. In two months, she'll be running around like it never happened. As crazy as that sounds, it's true. Nothing heals like a kid. She's a very sick little girl right now, but she's going to get well. Hey, I was here when she arrived."

"What's your name?"

"Rich Kinter. Barry Shapiro and I did most of the surgery. It was close—God, it was so close! But we won. Okay? We won. You will be taking her home."

"Thanks—that doesn't cover it, Doc." Jack stumbled over a few more words, not knowing what to say to the people who had saved his daughter's life.

Kinter shook his head. "Bring her back sometime and we're even. We have a party for ex-patients every few months. Mr. Ryan, there is nothing you can do that comes close to what we all feel when we see our little patients come back—walk back. That's why we're here, man, to make sure they come back for cake and juice. Just let us bounce her on our knees after she's better."

"Deal." Ryan wondered how many people were alive because of the people in this room. He was certain that this surgeon could be a rich man in private practice. Jack understood him, understood why he was here, and knew that his father-in-law wouldn't. He sat for a few minutes at Sally's side, listening to the machine breathe for her through the plastic tube. The nurse-practitioner overseeing the case smiled at him around her mask. He kissed Sally's bruised forehead before leaving. Jack felt better now, better about almost everything. But one item remained. The people who had done this to his little girl.

"It had wheelchair tags," the clerk in the 7-Eleven was saying, "but the dude who drove it didn't look crippled or anything."

“You remember what he looked like?” Special Agent Nick Capitano and a major from the Maryland State Police were interviewing the witness.

“Yeah, he was ’bout as black as me. Tall dude. He wore sunglasses, the mirror kind. Had a beard, too. There was always at least one other dude in the truck, but I never got a look at him—black man, that’s all I can say.”

“What did he wear?”

“Jeans and a brown leather jacket, I think. You know, like a construction worker.”

“Shoes or boots?” the Major asked.

“Never did see that,” the clerk said after a moment.

“How about jewelry, T-shirt with a pattern, anything special or different about him?”

“No, nothin’ I remember.”

“What did he do here?”

“He always bought a six-pack of Coke Classic. Once or twice he got some Twinkies, but he always got hisself the Cokes.”

“What did he sound like? Anything special?”

The clerk shook her head. “Nah, just a dude, y’know?”

“Do you think you could recognize him again?” Capitano asked.

“Maybe—we get a lot of folks through here, lotta regulars, lotta strangers, y’know?”

“Would you mind looking through some pictures?” the agent went on.

“Gotta clear it with the boss. I mean, I need the job, but you say this chump tried to kill a little girl—yeah, sure, I’ll help ya.”

“We’ll clear it with the boss,” the Major assured her. “You won’t lose pay over it.”

“Gloves,” she said, looking up. “Forgot to say that. He wore work gloves. Leather ones, I think.” *Gloves,* both men wrote in their notebooks.

“Thank you, ma’am. We’ll call you tonight. A car will pick you up tomorrow morning so you can look at some pictures for us,” the FBI agent said.

“Pick me up?” The clerk was surprised.

“You bet.” Manpower was not a factor on this case. The agent who picked her up would pick her brain again on the drive into D.C. The two investigators left. The Major drove his unmarked State Police car.

Capitano checked his notes. This wasn’t bad for a first interview. He, the Major, and fifteen others had spent the day interviewing people in stores and shops up and down five miles of Ritchie Highway. Four people thought they remembered the van, but this was the first person who had seen one of its occupants closely enough for a description. It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

They already had the shooter ID'd. Cathy Ryan had recognized Sean Miller's face—thought she did, the agent corrected himself. If it had been Miller, he had a beard now, on the brown side of black and neatly trimmed. An artist would try to re-create that.

Twenty more agents and detectives had spent their day at the three local airports, showing photos to every ticket agent and gate clerk. They'd come up blank, but they hadn't had a description of Miller then. Tomorrow they would try again. A computer check was being made of international flights that connected to flights to Ireland, and domestic flights that cpnnected to international ones. Capitano was happy that he didn't have to run all of those down. It would take weeks, and the chance of getting an ID from an airport worker diminished measurably every hour.

The van had been identified for more than a day, off the FBI's computer. It had been stolen a month before in New York City, repainted—professionally, by the look of it—and given new tags. Several sets of them, since the handicap tags found on it yesterday had been stolen less than two days before from a nursing home's van in Hagerstown, Maryland, a hundred miles away. Everything about the crime said it was a professional job from start to finish. Switching cars at the shopping center had been a brilliant finale to a perfectly planned and executed operation. Capitano and the Major were able to restrain their admiration, but they had to make an objective assessment of the people they were after. These weren't common thugs. They were professionals in every perverted sense of the word.

"You suppose they got the van themselves?" Capitano asked the Major.

The State Police investigator grunted. "There's some outfit in Pennsylvania that steals them from all over the Northeast, paints them, reworks the interior, and sells 'em. You guys are looking for them, remember?"

"I've heard a few things about the investigation, but that's not my territory. It's being looked at. Personally, I think they did it themselves. Why risk a connection with somebody else?"

"Yeah," the Major agreed reluctantly. The van had already been checked out by state and federal forensic experts. Not a single fingerprint had been found. The vehicle had been thoroughly cleaned, down to the knobs on the window handles. The technicians found nothing that could lead them to the criminals. Now the dirt and fabric fibers vacuumed from the van's carpet were being analyzed in Washington, but this was the sort of clue that worked reliably only on TV. If the people had been smart enough to clean out the van, they were almost certainly smart enough to burn the clothing they'd worn. Everything was being checked out anyway, because even the smartest people did make mistakes.

"You heard anything on the ballistics yet?" the Major asked, turning the car onto Rowe Boulevard.

"Oughta be waiting for us." They'd found almost twenty nine-millimeter cartridge cases to go along with the two usable bullets recovered from the Porsche, and the one that had gone through Trooper Fontana's chest and

lodged in the back seat of his wrecked car. These had gone directly to the FBI laboratory in Washington for analysis. The evidence would tell them that the weapon was a submachine gun, which they already knew, but might give them a type, which they didn't yet know. The cartridge cases were Belgian-made, from the Fabrique Nationale at Liège. They might be able to identify the lot number, but FN made so many millions of such rounds per year, which were shipped and reshipped all over the world, that the lead was a slim one. Very often such shipments simply disappeared, mainly from sloppy—or creative—bookkeeping.

"How many black groups are known to have contact with these ULA characters?"

"None," Capitano replied. "That's something we are going to have to establish."

"Great."

Ryan arrived home to find an unmarked car and a liveried State Police cruiser in his driveway. Jack's own FBI interview wasn't a long one. It hadn't taken long to confirm the fact that he quite simply knew nothing about the attempt on his family or himself.

"Any idea where they are?" he asked finally.

"We're checking airports," the agent answered. "If these guys are as smart as they look, they're long gone."

"They're smart, all right," Ryan noted sourly. "What about the one you caught?"

"He's doing one hell of a good imitation of a clam. He has a lawyer now, of course, and the lawyer is telling him to keep his mouth shut. You can depend on lawyers for that."

"Where'd the lawyer come from?"

"Public defender's office. It's a rule, remember. You hold a suspect for any length of time, he has to have a lawyer. I don't think it matters. He probably isn't talking to the lawyer either. We have him on a state weapons violation and federal immigration laws. He goes back to the U.K. as soon as the paperwork gets done. Maybe two weeks or so, depending on if the attorney contests things." The agent closed his notebook. "You never know, maybe he'll start talking, but don't count on it. The word we get from the Brits is that he's not real bright anyway. He's the Irish version of a street hood, very good with weapons but a little slow upstairs."

"So if he's dumb, how come—"

"How come he's good at what he does? How smart do you have to be to kill somebody? Clark's a sociopathic personality. He has very little in the way of feelings. Some people are like that. They don't relate to the people around them as being real people. They see them as objects, and since they're only objects, whatever happens to them is not important. Once I met a hit man who

killed four peopte—just the ones we know about—and didn't bat an eye, far as I could tell; but he cried like a baby when we told him his cat died. People like that don't even understand why they get sent to prison; they really don't understand," he concluded. "Those are the scary ones."

"No," Ryan said. "The scary ones are the ones with brains, the ones who believe in it."

"I haven't met one of those yet," he admitted.

"I have." Jack walked him to the door and watched him pull away. The house was an empty, quiet place without Sally running around, without the TV on, without Cathy talking about her friends at Hopkins. For several minutes Jack wandered around aimlessly, as though expecting to find someone. He didn't want to sit down, because that would somehow be an admission that he was all alone. He walked into the kitchen and started to fix a drink, but before he was finished, he dumped it all down the sink. He didn't want to get drunk. It was better to keep his mind unimpaired. Finally he lifted the phone and dialed.

"Yes," a voice answered.

"Admiral, Jack Ryan."

"I understand that your girl's going to be all right," James Greer said. "I'm glad to hear that, son."

"Thank you, sir. Is the Agency involved in this?"

"This is an unsecure line, Jack," the Admiral replied.

"I want in," Ryan said.

"Be here tomorrow morning."

Ryan hung up and went looking for his briefcase. He opened it and took out the Browning automatic pistol. After setting it on the kitchen table, he got out his shotgun and cleaning kit. He spent the next hour cleaning and oiling first the pistol, then the shotgun. When he was satisfied, he loaded both.

He left for Langley at five the next morning. Ryan had managed to get four more hours of sleep before rising and going through the usual morning ritual of coffee and breakfast. His early departure allowed him to miss the worst of the traffic, though the George Washington Parkway was never really free of the government workers heading to and from the agencies that were always more or less awake. After getting into the CIA building, he reflected that he had never called here and found Admiral Greer absent. Well, he told himself, *that's one thing in this world that I can depend on.* A security officer escorted him to the seventh floor.

"Good morning, sir," Jack said on entering the room.

"You look better than I expected," the DDI observed.

"It's an illusion mostly, but I can't solve my problem by hiding in a corner,

can I? Can we talk about what's going on?"

"Your Irish friends have gotten a lot of attention. The President himself wants action on this. We've never had international terrorists play games in our country—at least, not things that ever made the press," Greer said cryptically. "It is now a high-priority case. It's getting a lot of resources."

"I want to be one of them," Ryan said simply.

"If you think that you can be part of an operation—"

"I know better than that, Admiral."

Greer smiled at the younger man. "That's good to see, son. I thought you were smart. So what do you want to do for us?"

"We both know that the bad guys are part of the network. The data you let me look at was pretty limited. Obviously you're going to be trying to collate data on all the groups, searching for leads on the ULA. Maybe I can help."

"What about your teaching?"

"I can be here when I'm not teaching. There isn't much to hold me at home at the moment, sir."

"It isn't good practice to use people who are personally involved in the investigation," Greer pointed out.

"This isn't the FBI, sir. I'm not going out into the field. You just told me that. I know you want me back here on a permanent basis, Admiral. If you really want me, let me start off doing something that's important to both of us." Jack paused, searching for another point. "If I'm good enough, let's find out now."

"Some people aren't going to like it."

"There's things happening to me that I don't like very much, sir, and I have to live with it. If I can't fight back somehow, I might as well stay at home. You're the only chance I have to do something to protect my family, sir."

Greer turned to refill his coffee cup from the drip machine behind his desk. He'd liked Jack almost from the first moment he'd met him. This was a young man accustomed to having his way, though he was not arrogant about it. That was a point in his favor: Ryan knew what he wanted, but wasn't overly pushy. He wasn't a person driven by ambition, another point in his favor. Finally, he had a lot of raw talent to be shaped and trained and directed. Greer was always looking for talent. The Admiral turned back.

"Okay, you're on the team. Marty's coordinating the information. You'll work directly with him. I hope you don't talk in your sleep, son, because you're going to see stuff that you're not even allowed to dream about."

"Sir, there's only one thing that I'm going to dream about."

It had been a very busy month for Dennis Cooley. The death of an earl in East Anglia had forced his heirs to sell off a massive collection of books to pay

the death duties, and Cooley had used up nearly all of his available capital to secure no less than twenty-one items for his shop. But it was worth it: among them was a rare first-folio of Marlowe's plays. Better still, the dead earl had been assiduous in protecting his treasures. The books had been deep-frozen several times to kill off the insects that desecrated these priceless relics of the past. The Marlowe was in remarkably good shape, despite the waterstained cover that had put off a number of less perceptive buyers. Cooley was stooped over his desk, reading the first act of *The Jew of Malta,* when the bell rang.

"Is that the one I heard about?" his visitor asked at once.

"Indeed." Cooley smiled to cover his surprise. He hadn't seen this particular visitor for some time, and was somewhat disturbed that he'd come back so soon. "Printed in 1633, forty years after Marlowe's death. Some parts of the text are suspect, of course, but this is one of the few surviving copies of the first printed edition."

"It's quite authentic?"

"Of course," Cooley replied, slightly put off at the question. "In addition to my own humble expertise, it has authentication papers from Sir Edmund Grey of the British Museum."

"One cannot argue with that," the customer agreed.

"I'm afraid I have not yet decided upon a price for it." *Why are you here?*

"Price is not an object. I understand that you may wish to enjoy it for yourself, but I must have it." This told Cooley why he was here. He leaned to look over Cooley's shoulder at the book. "Magnificent," he said, placing a small envelope in the book dealer's pocket.

"Perhaps we can work something out," Cooley allowed. "In a few weeks, perhaps." He looked out the window. A man was window-shopping at the jewelry store on the opposite side of the arcade. After a moment he straightened up and walked away.

"Sooner than that, please," the man insisted.

Cooley sighed. "Come see me next week and we may be able to discuss it. I do have other customers, you know."

"But none more important, I hope."

Cooley blinked twice. "Very well."

Geoffrey Watkins continued to browse the store for another few minutes. He selected a Keats that had also come from the dead earl's estate and paid six hundred pounds for it before leaving. On leaving the arcade he failed to notice a young lady at the newsstand outside and could not have known that another was waiting at the arcade's other end. The one who followed him was dressed in a manner guaranteed to garner attention, including orange hair that would have fluoresced if the sun had been out. She followed him west for two blocks and kept going in that direction when he crossed the street. Another police officer was on the walk down Green Park.

That night the daily surveillance reports came to Scotland Yard where, as always, they were put on computer. The operation being run was a joint venture between the Metropolitan Police and the Security Service, once known as MI-5. Unlike the American FBI, the people at "Five" did not have the authority to arrest suspects, and had to work through the police to bring a case to a conclusion. The marriage was not entirely a happy one. It meant that James Owens had to work closely with David Ashley. Owens entirely concurred with his FBI colleague's assessment of the younger man: "a snotty bastard."

"Patterns, patterns, patterns," Ashley said, sipping his tea while he looked at the print-out. They had identified a total of thirty-nine people who knew, or might have known, information common to the ambush on The Mall and Miller's transport to the Isle of Wight. One of them had leaked the information. Every one of them was being watched. Thus far they had discovered a closet homosexual, two men and one woman who were having affairs not of state, and a man who got considerable enjoyment watching pornographic movies in the Soho theaters. Financial records gotten from Inland Revenue showed nothing particularly interesting, nor did living habits. There was the usual spread of hobbies, taste in theatrical plays, and television shows. Several of the people had wide collections of friends. A few had none at all. The investigators were grateful for these sad, lonely people—many of the other people's friends had to be checked out, too, and this took time and manpower. Owens viewed the entire operation as something necessary but rather distasteful. It was the police equivalent of peering through windows. The tapes of telephone conversations—especially those between lovers—made him squirm on occasion. Owens was a man who appreciated the individual's need for privacy. No one's life could survive this sort of scrutiny. He told himself that one person's life wouldn't, and that was the point of the exercise.

"I see Mr. Watkins visited a rare book shop this afternoon," Owens noted, reading over his own print-out.

"Yes. He collects them. So do I," Ashley said. "I've been in that shop once or twice myself. There was an estate sale recently. Perhaps Cooley bought a few things that Geoffrey wants for himself. " The security officer made a mental note to look at the shop for himself. "He was in there for ten minutes, spoke with Dennis—"

"You know him?" Owens looked up.

"One of the best men in the trade," Ashley said. He smiled at his own choice of words: *the Trade.* "I bought a Brontë there for my wife, Christmas two years ago, I think. He's a fat little poof, but he's quite knowledgeable. So Geoffrey spoke with him for about ten minutes, made a purchase, and left. I wonder what he bought." Ashley rubbed his eyes. He'd been on a strict regimen of fourteen-hour days for longer than he cared to remember.

"The first new person Watkins has seen in several weeks," Owens noted. He thought about it for a moment. There were better leads than this to follow up

on, and his manpower was limited.

"So can we deal on this immigration question?" the public defender asked.

"Not a chance," Bill Shaw said from the other side of the table. *You think we're going to give him political asylum?*

"You're not offering us a thing," the lawyer observed. "I bet I can beat the weapons charge, and there's no way you can make the conspiracy stick."

"That's fine, counselor. If it will make you any happier we'll cut him loose and give him a plane ticket, and even an escort, home. "

"To a maximum-security prison." The public defender closed his file folder on the case of Eamon Clark. "You're not giving me anything to deal with."

"If he cops to the gun charge and conspiracy, and if he helps us, he gets to spend a few years in a much nicer prison. But if you think we're going to let a convicted murderer just walk, mister, you are kidding yourself. What do you think you have to deal with?"

"You might be surprised," the attorney said cryptically.

"Oh, yeah? I'm willing to bet that he hasn't said anything to you either," the agent challenged the young attorney, and watched closely for his reaction. Bill Shaw, too, had passed the bar exam, though he devoted his legal expertise to the safety of society rather than the freedom of criminals.

"Conversations between attorney and client are privileged." The lawyer had been practicing for exactly two and a half years. His understanding of his job was limited largely to keeping the police away from his charges. At first he'd been gratified that Clark hadn't said much of anything to the police and FBI, but he was surprised that Clark wouldn't even talk to him. After all, maybe he could cut a deal, despite what this FBI fellow said. But he had nothing to deal with, as Shaw had just told him. He waited a few moments for a reaction from the agent and got nothing but a blank stare. The public defender admitted defeat to himself. Well, there hadn't been much of a chance on this.

"That's what I thought." Shaw stood. "Tell your client that unless he opens up by the day after tomorrow, he's flying home to finish out a life sentence. Make sure you tell him that. If he wants to talk after he gets back, we'll send people to him. They say the beer's pretty good over there, and I wouldn't mind flying over myself to find out." The only thing the Bureau could use over Clark was fear. The mission he'd been part of had hurt the Provos, and young, dumb Ned might not like the reception he got. He'd be safer in a U.S. penitentiary than he would be in a British one, but Shaw doubted that he understood this, or that he'd crack in any case. Maybe after he got back, something might be arranged.

The case was not going well; not that he'd expected otherwise. This sort of thing either cracked open immediately, or took months—or years. The people they were after were too clever to have left an immediate opening to be exploited. What remained to him and his men was the day-by-day grind. But

that was the textbook definition of investigative police work. Shaw knew this well enough: he had written one of the standard texts.

18

Lights

Ashley entered the bookshop at four in the afternoon. A true bibliophile, he paused on opening the door to appreciate the aroma.

"Is Mr. Cooley in today?" he asked the clerk.

"No, sir," Beatrix replied. "He's abroad on business. May I help you?"

"Yes. I understand that you've made some new acquisitions."

"Ah, yes. Have you heard about the Marlowe first folio?" Beatrix looked remarkably like a mouse. Her hair was exactly the proper drab shade of brown and ill-kept. Her face was puffy, whether from too much food or too much drink, Ashley couldn't say. Her eyes were hidden behind thick glasses. She dressed in a way that fitted the store exactly—everything she had on was old and out of date. Ashley remembered buying his wife the Brontë here, and wondered if those two sad, lonely sisters had looked like this girl. It was too bad, really. With a little effort she might actually have been attractive.

"A Marlowe?" the man from "Five" asked. "First folio, you said?"

"Yes, sir, from the collection of the late Earl of Crundale. As you know, Marlowe's plays were not actually printed until forty years after his death." She went on, displaying something that her appearance didn't begin to hint at. Ashley listened with respect. The mouse knew her business as well as an Oxford don.

"How do you find such things?" Ashley asked when she'd finished her discourse.

She smiled. "Mr. Dennis can smell them. He is always traveling, working with other dealers and lawyers and such. He's in Ireland today, for example. It's amazing how many books he manages to obtain over there. Those horrid people have the most marvelous collections." Beatrix did not approve of the Irish.

"Indeed," David Ashley noted. He didn't react to this bit of news at all. At least not physically, but a switch in the back of his head flipped on. "Well, that is one of the contributions our friends across the water have made. A few rather good writers, and whiskey."

"And bombers," Beatrix noted. "I shouldn't want to travel there so much myself."

"Oh, I take my holiday there quite often. The fishing is marvelous. "

"That's what Lord Louis Mountbatten thought," the clerk observed.

"How often does Dennis go over?"

"At least once a month."

"Well, on this Marlowe you have—may I see it?" Ashley asked with an enthusiasm that was only partially feigned.

"By all means." The girl took the volume from a shelf and opened it with great care. "As you see, though the cover is in poor condition, the pages are in a remarkable state of preservation."

Ashley hovered over the book, his eyes running down the opened page. "Indeed they are. How much for this one?"

"Mr. Dennis hasn't set a price yet. I believe another customer is already very interested in it, however."

"Do you know who that is?"

"No, sir, I do not, and I would not be able to reveal his name in any case. We respect our customers' confidentiality," Beatrix said primly.

"Quite so. That is entirely proper," Ashley agreed. "So when will Mr. Cooley be back? I want to talk to him about this myself."

"He'll be back tomorrow afternoon."

"Will you be here also?" Ashley asked with a charming smile.

"No, I'll be at my other job."

"Too bad. Well, thank you very much for showing me this." Ashley made for the door.

"My pleasure, sir."

The security officer walked out of the arcade and turned right. He waited for the afternoon traffic to clear before crossing the street. He decided to walk back to Scotland Yard instead of taking a cab, and went downhill along St. James's Street, turning left to go around the Palace to the east, then down Marlborough Road to The Mall.

It happened right there, he thought. *The getaway car turned here to make its escape. The ambush was a mere hundred yards*

west of where I'm standing now. He stood and looked for a few seconds, remembering.

The personality of a security officer is much the same all over the world. They do not believe in coincidences, though they do believe in accidents. They lack any semblance of a sense of humor where their work is concerned. This comes from the knowledge that only the most trusted of people have the ability to be traitors; before betraying their countries, they must first betray the people who trust them. Beneath all his charm, Ashley was a man who hated traitors beyond all things, who suspected everyone and trusted no one.

Ten minutes later Ashley got past the security checkpoint at Scotland Yard

and took the elevator to James Owens' office.

"That Cooley chap," he said.

"Cooley?" Owens was puzzled for a moment. "Oh, the book dealer Watkins visited yesterday. Is that where you were?"

"A fine little shop. Its owner is in Ireland today," Ashley said deadpan.

Commander Owens nodded thoughtfully at that. What had been unimportant changed with a word. Ashley outlined what he had learned over several minutes. It wasn't even a real lead yet, but it was something to be looked at. Neither man said anything about how significant it might be—there had been many such things to run down, all of which to date had ended at blank walls. Many of the walls had also been checked out in every possible detail. The investigation wasn't at a standstill. People were still out on the street, accumulating information—none of which was the least useful to the case. This was something new to be looked at, nothing more than that; but for the moment that was enough.

* * *

It was eleven in the morning at Langley. Ryan was not admitted to the meetings between CIA and FBI people coordinating information on the case. Marty Cantor had explained to him that the FBI might be uneasy to have him there. Jack didn't mind. He'd get the information summaries after lunch, and that was enough for the moment. Cantor would come away both with the information FBI had developed, plus the thoughts and ideas of the chief investigators. Ryan didn't want that. He preferred to look at the raw data. His unprejudiced outsider's perspective had worked before and it might work again, he thought—hoped.

The wonderful world of the international terrorist, Murray had said to him outside the Old Bailey. It wasn't very wonderful, Jack thought, but it was a fairly complete world, including all of what the Greeks and Romans thought the civilized world was. He was going over satellite reconnaissance data at the moment. The bound report he was looking at contained no less than sixteen maps. In addition to the cities and roads shown on them were little red triangles designating suspected terrorist training camps in four countries. These were being photographed on almost a daily basis by the photoreconnaissance satellites (Jack was not allowed to know their number) orbiting the globe. He concentrated on the ones in Libya. They did have that report from an Italian agent that Sean Miller had been seen leaving a freighter in Bengazi harbor. The freighter had been of Cypriot registry, owned by a network of corporations sufficiently complex that it didn't really matter, since the ship was under charter to yet another such network. An American destroyer had photographed the ship in what certainly seemed a chance encounter in the Straits of Sicily. The ship was old but surprisingly well maintained, with modern radar and radio gear. She was regularly employed on runs from Eastern European ports to Libya and Syria, and was known to

carry arms and military equipment from the East Bloc to client states on the Mediterranean. This data had already been set aside for further use.

Ryan found that the CIA and National Reconnaissance Office were looking at a number of camps in the North African desert. A simple graph accompanied the dated photos of each, and Ryan was looking for a camp whose apparent activity had changed the day that Miller's ship had docked at Bengazi. He was disappointed to find that four had done so. One was known to be used by the Provisional Wing of the IRA—this datum had come from the interrogation of a convicted bomber. The other three were unknowns. The people there—aside from the maintenance staff provided by the Libyan armed forces—could be identified from the photos as Europeans from their fair skin, but that was all. Jack was disappointed to see that you couldn't recognize a face from these shots, just color of skin, and if the sun was right, color of hair. You could also determine the make of a car or truck, but not its identifying tag numbers. Strangely, the clarity of the photos was better at night. The cooler night air was less roiled and did not interfere with imaging as much as in the shimmering heat of the day.

The pictures in the heavy binder that occupied his attention were of camps 11-5-04, 11-5-18, and 11-5-20. Jack didn't know how the number designators had been arrived at and didn't really care. The camps were all pretty much the same; only the spacing of the huts distinguished one from another.

Jack spent the best part of an hour looking over the photos, and concluded that this miracle of modern technology told him all sorts of technical things, none of which were pertinent to his purpose. Whoever ran those camps knew enough to keep people out of sight when a reconsat was overhead—except for one which was not known to have photographic capability. Even then, the number of people visible was almost never the same, and the actual occupancy of the camps was therefore a matter for uncertain estimation. It was singularly frustrating.

Ryan leaned back and lit another low-tar cigarette bought from the kiosk on the next floor down. It went well with the coffee that was serving to keep him awake. He was up against another blank wall. It made him think of the computer games he occasionally played at home when he was tired of writing—Zork and Ultima. The business of intelligence analysis was so often like those computer "head games." You had to figure things out, but you never quite knew what it was that you were figuring out. The patterns you had to deduce could be very different from anything one normally dealt with, and the difference could be significant or mere happenstance.

Two of the suspected ULA camps were within forty miles of the known IRA outpost. *Less than an hour's drive,* Jack thought. If they only knew. He would have settled for having the Provos clean out the ULA, as they evidently wanted to do. There were indications that the Brits were thinking along similar lines. Jack wondered what Mr. Owens thought of that one and concluded that he probably didn't know. It was a surprising thought that he now had information that some experienced players did not. He went back to the pictures.

One, taken a week after Miller had been seen in Bengazi, showed a car—it looked like a Toyota Land Cruiser—about a mile from 11-5-18, heading away. Ryan wondered where it was going. He wrote down the date and time on the bottom of the photo and checked the cross-reference table in the front. Ten minutes later he found the same car, the next day, at Camp 11-5- 09, a PIRA camp forty miles from 11-5-18.

Jack told himself not to get overly excited: 11-5-18 could belong to the Red Army Faction of West Germany, Italy's resurgent Red Brigade, or any number of other organizations with which the PIRA cross-pollinated. He still made some notes. It was a "datum," a bit of information that was worth checking out.

Next he checked the occupancy graph for the camp. This showed the number of camp buildings occupied at night, and went back for over two years. He compared it with a list of known ULA operations, and discovered ... nothing, at first. The instances where the number of occupied buildings blipped up did not correlate with the organization's known activities ... but there was some sort of pattern, he saw.

What kind of pattern? Jack asked himself. Every three months or so the occupancy went up by one. Regardless of the number of the people at the camp, the number of huts being used went up by one, for a period of three days. Ryan swore when he saw that the pattern didn't quite hold. Twice in two years the number didn't change. *And what does that mean?*

"You are in a maze of twisty passages, all alike," Jack murmured to himself. It was a line from one of his computer games. Pattern-recognition was not one of his strong points. Jack left the room to get a can of Coke, but more to clear his head. He was back in five minutes.

He pulled the occupancy graphs from the three "unknown" camps to compare the respective levels of activity. What he really needed to do was to make Xerox copies of the graphs, but CIA had strict rules on the use of copying machines. Doing it would take time that he didn't want to lose at the moment. The other two camps showed no recognizable pattern at all, while Camp -18 did seem to lean in that direction. He spent an hour doing this. By the end of it he had all three graphs memorized. He had to get away from it. Ryan tucked the graphs back where they belonged and returned to examining the photographs themselves.

Camp 11-5-20, he saw, showed a girl in one photo. At least there was someone there wearing a two-piece bathing suit. Jack stared at the image for a few seconds, then turned away in disgust. He was playing voyeur, trying to discern the figure of someone who was probably a terrorist. There were no such attractions at camps -04 and -18, and he wondered at the significance of this until he remembered that only one satellite was giving daylight photos with people in them. Ryan made a note to himself to check at the Academy's library for a book on orbital mechanics. He decided that he needed to know how often a single satellite passed over a given spot in a day.

"You're not getting anywhere," he told himself aloud.

“Neither is anybody else,” Marty Cantor said. Ryan spun around.

“How did you get in here?” Jack demanded.

“I’ll say one thing for you, Jack, when you concentrate you really concentrate. I’ve been standing here for five minutes.” Cantor grinned. “I like your intensity, but if you want an opinion, you’re pushing a little hard, fella.”

“I’ll survive.”

“You say so,” Cantor said dubiously. “How do you like our photo album?”

“The people who do this full-time must go nuts.”

“Some do,” Cantor agreed.

“I might have something worth checking out,” Jack said, explaining his suspicions on Camp -18.

“Not bad. By the way, number -20 may be Action-Directe, the French group that’s picked up lately. DGSE—the French foreign intelligence service—thinks they have a line on it.”

“Oh. That may explain one of the photos.” Ryan flipped to the proper page.

“Thank God Ivan doesn’t know what that bird does,” Cantor nodded. “Hmm. We may be able to ID from this.”

“How?” Jack asked. “You can’t make out her face.”

“You can tell her hair length, roughly. You can also tell the size of her tits.” Cantor grinned ear to ear.

“What?”

“The guys in photointerpretation are—well, they’re very technical. For cleavage to show up in these photos, a girl has to have C-cup breasts—at least that’s what they told me once. I’m not kidding, Jack. Somebody actually worked the math out, because you can identify people from a combination of factors like hair color, length, and bust size. *Action-Directe* has lots of female operatives. Our French colleagues might find this interesting.” *If they’re willing to deal, he didn’t say.*

“What about -18?”

“I don’t know. We’ve never really tried to identify that one. The thing about the car may count against it, though.”

“Remember that our ULA friends have the Provos infiltrated,” Jack said.

“You’re still on that, eh? Okay, it’s something to be considered,” Cantor conceded. “What about this pattern thing you talked about?”

“I haven’t got anything to point to yet,” Jack admitted.

“Let’s see the graph.”

Jack unfolded it from the back of the binder. “Every three months, mostly, the occupancy rate picks up.”

Cantor frowned at the graph for a moment. Then he flipped through the

photographs. On only one of the dates did they have a daylight photo that showed anything. Each of the camps had what looked like a shooting range. In the photo Cantor selected, there were three men standing near it.

"You might have something, Jack."

"What?" Ryan had looked at the photo and made nothing of it.

"What's the distinguishing feature of the ULA?"

"Their professionalism," Ryan answered.

"Your last paper on them said they were more militarily organized than some of the others, remember? Every one of them, as far as we can tell, is skilled with weapons."

"So?"

"Think!" Cantor snapped. Ryan gave him a blank look. "Periodic weapons-refresher training, maybe?"

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that. How come nobody ever—"

"Do you know how many satellite photos come through here? I can't say exactly, but you may safely assume that it's a fairly large number, thousands per month. Figure it takes a minimum of five minutes to examine each one. Mostly we're interested in the Russians—missile silos, factories, troop movements, tank parks, you name it. That's where most of the analytical talent goes, and they can't keep up with what comes in. The guys we have on this stuff here are technicians, not analysts." Cantor paused. "Camp -18 looks interesting enough that we might try to figure a way to check it out, see who really lives there. Not bad. "

"He's violated security," Kevin O'Donnell said by way of greeting. He was quiet enough that no one in the noisy pub would have heard him.

"Perhaps this is worth it," Cooley replied. "Instructions?"

"When are you going back?"

"Tomorrow morning, the early flight."

O'Donnell nodded, finishing off his drink. He left the pub and walked directly to his car. Twenty minutes later he was home. Ten minutes after that, his operations and intelligence chiefs were in his study.

"Sean, how did you like working with Alex's organization?"

"They're like us, small but professional. Alex is a very thorough technician, but an arrogant one. He hasn't had a great deal of formal training. He's clever, very clever. And he's hungry, as they say over there. He wants to make his mark."

"Well, he may just have his chance next summer." O'Donnell paused, holding up the letter Cooley had delivered. "It would seem that His Royal Highness will be visiting America next summer. The Treasure Houses exhibit was such a success that they are going to stage another one. Nearly ninety percent of the works of Leonardo Da Vinci belong to the Royal Family, and

they'll be sending them over to raise money for some favored charities. The show opens in Washington on August the first, and the Prince of Wales will be going over to start things off. This will not be announced until July, but here is his itinerary, including the proposed security arrangements. It is as yet undecided whether or not his lovely bride will accompany His Highness, but we will proceed on the assumption that she will."

"The child?" Miller asked.

"I rather suspect not, but we will allow for that possibility also." He handed the letter to Michael McKenney. The intelligence officer for the ULA skimmed over the data.

"The security at the official functions will be airtight. The Americans have had a number of incidents, and they've learned from each of them," McKenney said. Like all intelligence officers, he saw his potential opponents as overwhelmingly powerful. "But if they go forward with this one ..."

"Yes," O'Donnell said. "I want you two to work together on this. We have plenty of time and we'll use all of it." He took the letter back and reread it before giving it to Miller. After they left, he wrote his instructions for their agent in London.

At the airport the next morning Cooley saw his contact and walked into the coffee shop. He was early for his flight, seasoned traveler that he was, and had a cup while he waited for it to be announced. Finished, he walked outside. His contact was just walking in. The two men brushed by each other, and the message was passed, just as was taught in every spy school in the world.

"He does travel about a good deal," Ashley observed. It had taken Owens' detectives less than an hour to find Cooley's travel agent and to get a record of his trips for the past three years. Another pair was assembling a biographical file on the man. It was strictly routine work. Owens and his men knew better than to get excited about a new lead. Enthusiasm all too easily got in the way of objectivity. His car—parked at Gatwick Airport—had considerable mileage on the clock for its age, and that was explained by his motoring about buying books. This was the extent of the data assembled in eighteen hours. They would patiently wait for more.

"How often does he travel to Ireland?"

"Quite frequently, but he does business in English-language books, and we are the only two countries in Europe that speak English, aren't we?" Ashley, too, was able to control himself.

"America?" Owens asked.

"Once a year, looks like. I rather suspect it's to an annual trade show. I can check that myself."

"They speak English, too."

Ashley grinned. “Shakespeare didn’t live or print books there. There aren’t many examples of American publishing old enough to excite a person like Cooley. What he might do is buy up books of ours that have found their way across the water, but more likely he’s looking for buyers. No, Ireland fits beautifully with his cover—excuse me, if it is that. My own dealer, Samuel Pickett and Sons, travel there often also ... but not as much, I should think,” he added.

“Perhaps his biography will tell us something,” Owens noted.

“One can hope.” Ashley was looking for a light at the end of this tunnel, but saw only more tunnel.

“It’s okay, Jack,” Cathy said.

He nodded. Ryan knew that his wife was right. The nurse-practitioner had positively beamed at the news she gave them on their arrival. Sally was bouncing back like any healthy child should. The healing process had already begun.

Yet there was a difference between the knowledge of the mind and the knowledge of the heart. Sally had been awake this time. She was unable to speak, of course, with the respirator hose in her mouth, but the murmurs that tried to come out could only have meant: *It hurts.* The injuries inflicted on the body of his child did not appear any less horrific, despite his knowledge that they would heal. If anything they seemed worse now that she was occasionally conscious. The pain would eventually go away—but his little girl was in pain now. Cathy might be able to tell herself that only the living could feel pain, that it was a positive sign for all the discomfort it gave. Jack could not. They stayed until she dozed off again. He took his wife outside.

“How are you?” he asked her.

“Better. You can take me home tomorrow night.”

Jack shook his head. He hadn’t thought about that. Stupid, Ryan told himself. Somehow he’d assumed that Cathy would stay here, close to Sally.

“The house is pretty empty without you, babe,” he said after a moment.

“It’ll be empty without her,” his wife answered, and the tears started again. She buried her face in her husband’s shoulder. “She’s so little ...”

“Yeah.” Jack thought of Sally’s face, the two little blue eyes surrounded by a sea of bruises, the hurt there, the pain there. “She’s going to get better, honey, and I don’t want to hear any more of that ‘it’s my fault’ crap.”

“But it is!”

“No, it isn’t. Do you know how lucky I am to have you both alive? I saw the FBI’s data today. If you hadn’t stomped on the brakes when you did, you’d both be dead.” The supposition was that this had thrown off Miller’s aim by a few inches. At least two rounds had missed Cathy’s head by a whisker, the forensic experts said. Jack could close his eyes and recite that information

word for word. “You saved her life and yours by being smart.”

It took Cathy a moment to react. “How did you find that out?”

“CIA. They’re cooperating with the police. I asked to be part of the team and they let me join up.”

“But—”

“A lot of people are working on this, babe. I’m one of them,” Jack said quietly. “The only thing that matters now is finding them.”

“Do you think ...”

“Yeah, I do.” *Sooner or later.*

Bill Shaw had no such hopes at the moment. The best potential lead they had was the identity of the black man who’d driven the van. This was being kept out of the media. As far as the TV and newspapers were concerned, all the suspects were white. The FBI hadn’t so much lied to the press as allowed them to draw a false conclusion from the partial data that had been released—as happened frequently enough. It might keep the suspect from being spooked. The only person who’d seen him at close range was the 7-Eleven clerk. She had spent several hours going over pictures of blacks thought to be members of revolutionary groups and come up with three possibles. Two of these were in prison, one for bank robbery, the other for interstate transport of explosives. The third had dropped out of sight seven years before. He was only a picture to the Bureau. The name they had for him was known to be an alias, and there were no fingerprints. He’d cut himself loose from his former associates—a smart move, since most of them had been arrested and convicted for various criminal acts—and simply disappeared. The best bet, Shaw told himself, was that he was now part of society, living a normal life somewhere with his past activities no more than a memory.

The agent looked over the file once again. “Constantine Duppens,” his alias had been. Well-spoken on the few occasions when he’d spoken at all, the informant had said of him. Educated, probably. Attached to the group the Bureau had been watching, but never really part of it, the file went on. He’d never participated in a single illegal act, and had drifted away when the leaders of the little band had started talking about supporting themselves with bank robberies and drug trafficking. Maybe a dilettante, Shaw thought, a student with a radical streak who’d gotten a look at one of the groups and recognized them for what they were—what Shaw thought they were: ineffective dolts, street hoods with a smattering of Marxist garbage or pseudo-Hitlerism.

A few fringe groups occasionally managed to set off a bomb somewhere, but these cases were so rare, so minor, that the American people scarcely knew that they’d happened at all. When a group robbed a bank or armored car to support itself, the public remembered that one need not be politically motivated to rob a bank; greed was enough. From a high of fifty-one terrorist incidents in 1982, the number had been slashed to seven in 1985. The Bureau

had managed to run down many of these amateurish groups, preventing more than twenty incidents the previous year, with good intelligence followed by quick action. Fundamentally, the small cells of crazies had been done in by their own amateurism.

America didn't have any ideologically motivated terrorist groups, at least not in the European sense. There were the Armenian groups whose main objective was murdering Turkish diplomats, and the white-supremacist people in the Northwest, but in both cases the only ideology was hatred—of Turks, blacks, Jews, or whatever. These were vicious but not really dangerous to society, since they lacked a shared vision of their political objective. To be really effective, the members of such a group had to believe in something more than the negativity of hate. The most dangerous terrorists were the idealists, of course, but America was a hard place to see the benefits of Marxism or Nazism. When even welfare families had color televisions, how much attraction could there be to collectivism? When the country lacked a system of class distinctions, what group could one hate with conviction? And so most of the small groups found that they were guerrilla fish swimming not in a sea of peasants, but rather a sea of apathy. Not a single group had been able to overcome that fact before being penetrated and destroyed by the Bureau—then to learn that their destruction was granted but a few column inches on page eleven, their defiant manifesto not printed at all. They were judged by faceless editors not to be newsworthy. In so many ways this was the perfect conclusion to a terrorist trial.

In that sense the FBI was a victim of its own success. So well had the job been done that the possibility of terrorist activity in America was not a matter of general public concern. Even the Ryan Case, as it was now being called, was regarded as nothing more than a nasty crime, not a harbinger of something new in America. To Shaw it was both. As a matter of institutional policy, the FBI regarded terrorism as a crime without any sort of political dimension that might lend a perverted respectability to the perpetrators. The importance of this distinction was not merely semantic. Since by their nature, terrorists struck at the foundations of civilized society, to grant them the thinnest shred of respectability was the equivalent of a suicide note for the targeted society. The Bureau recognized, however, that these were not mere criminals chasing after money. Their objective was far more dangerous than that. For this reason, crimes that otherwise would have been in the domain of local police departments were immediately taken under charge by the federal government.

Shaw returned to the photo of "Constantine Duppens" one more time. It was expecting too much for a convenience-store clerk to remember one face from the hundred she saw every day, or at least to remember it well enough to pick out a photo that might be years old. She'd certainly tried to help, and had agreed to tell no one of what she'd done. They had a description of the suspect's clothing—almost certainly burned—and the van, which they had. It was being dismantled piece by piece not far from Shaw's office. The forensic experts had identified the type of gun used. For the moment, that was all they had. All Inspector Bill Shaw could do was wait for his agents in the field to

come up with something new. A paid informant might overhear something, or a new witness might turn up, or maybe the forensics team would discover something unexpected in the van. Shaw told himself to be patient. Despite twenty-two years in the FBI, patience was something he still had to force on himself.

"Aw, I was starting to like the beard," a co-worker said.

"Damned thing itched too much." Alexander Constantine Dobbens was back at his job. "I was spending half my time just scratching my face."

"Yeah, same thing when I was on subs," his roommate agreed. "Different when you're young."

"Speak for yourself, grandpop!" Dobbens laughed. "You old married turkey. Just because you're chained doesn't mean I have to be."

"You oughta settle down, Alex."

"The world is full of interesting things to do, and I haven't done them all yet." *Not hardly.* He was a field engineer for Baltimore Gas and Electric Company and usually worked nights. The job forced him to spend much of his time on the road, checking equipment and supervising line crews. Alex was a popular fellow who didn't mind getting his hands dirty, who actually enjoyed the physical work that many engineers were too proud to do. A man of the people, he called himself. His pro-union stance was a source of irritation to management, but he was a good engineer, and being black didn't hurt either. A man who was a good engineer, popular with his people, *and* black was fireproof. He'd done a good deal of minority recruiting, moreover, having brought a dozen good workers into the company. A few of them had shaky backgrounds, but Alex had brought them around.

It was often quiet working nights, and as was usually the case, Alex got the first edition of the *Baltimore Sun.* The case was already off the front page, now back in the local news section. The FBI and State Police, he read, were continuing to investigate the case. He was still amazed that the woman and kid had survived—testimony, his training told him, to the efficacy of seat belts, not to mention the work of the Porsche engineers. *Well,* he decided, *that's okay.* Killing a little kid and a pregnant woman wasn't exactly something to brag about. They had wasted the state trooper, and that was enough for him. Losing that Clark boy to the cops continued to rankle Dobbens, though. *I told the dumb fuck that the man was too exposed there, but no, he wanted to waste the whole family at once.* Alex knew why that was so, but saw it as a case of zeal overcoming realism. *Damned political-science majors, they think you can make something happen if you wish hard enough.* Engineers knew different.

Dobbens took comfort from the fact that all the known suspects were white. Waving to the helicopter had been his mistake. Bravado had no place in revolutionary activity. It was his own lesson to be learned, but this one hadn't hurt anyone. The gloves and hat had denied the pigs a description. The really funny thing was that despite all the screwups, the operation had been a

success. That IRA punk, O-something, had been booted out of Boston with his honky tail between his legs. At least the operation had been politically sound. And that, he told himself, was the real measure of success.

From his point of view, success meant earning his spurs. He and his people had provided expert assistance to an established revolutionary group. He could now look to his African friends for funding. They really weren't African to his way of thinking, but they liked to call themselves that. There were ways to hurt America, to get attention in a way that no revolutionary group ever had. What, for example, if he could turn out the lights in fifteen states at once? Alex Dobbens knew how. The revolutionary had to know a way of hitting people where they lived, and what better way, he thought, than to make unreliable something that they took for granted? If he could demonstrate that the corrupt government could not even keep their lights on reliably, what doubts might he put in people's heads next? America was a society of things, he thought. What if those things stopped working? What then would people think? He didn't know the answer to that, but he knew that something would change, and change was what he was after.

19

Tests and Passing Grades

"He is an odd duck," Owens observed. The dossier was the result of three weeks of work. It could have gone faster, of course, but when you don't want the news of an inquiry to reach its subject, you had to be more circumspect.

Dennis Cooley was a Belfast native, born to a middle-class Catholic family, although neither of his deceased parents had been churchgoers, something decidedly odd in a region where religion defines both life and death. Dennis had attended church—a necessity for one who'd been educated at the parish school—until university, then stopped at once and never gone back. No criminal record at all. None. Not even a place in a suspected associates file. As a university student he'd hung around the fringes of a few activist groups, but never joined, evidently preferring his studies in literature. He'd graduated with the highest honors. A few courses in Marxism, a few more in economics, always with a teacher whose leanings were decidedly left of center, Owens saw. The police commander snorted to himself. There were enough of those at the London School of Economics, weren't there?

For two years all they had were tax records. He'd worked in his father's bookshop, and so far as the police were concerned, simply did not exist. That was a problem with police work—you noticed only the criminals. A few very discreet inquiries made in Belfast hadn't turned up anything. All sorts of people had visited the shop, even soldiers of the British Army, who'd arrived there about the time Cooley had graduated university. The shop's window had been smashed once or twice by marauding bands of Protestants—the reason the Army had been called in in the first place—but nothing more serious than that. Young Dennis hadn't frequented the local pubs enough that anyone had noticed, hadn't belonged to any church organization, nor any political club, nor any sports association. "He was always reading something," someone had told one of the detectives. *There's a bloody revelation,* Owens told himself. *A bookshop owner who reads ...*

Then his parents had died in an auto accident.

Owens was struck by the fact that they'd died in a completely ordinary way. A lorry's brakes had failed and smashed into their Mini one Saturday afternoon. It was hard to remember that some people in Ulster actually died "normally," and were just as dead as those blown up or shot by the terrorists who prowled the night. Dennis Cooley had taken the insurance settlement and continued to operate the store as before after the quiet, ill-attended funeral ceremony at the local church. Some years later he'd sold out and moved to

London, first setting up a shop in Knightsbridge and soon thereafter taking over a shop in the arcade where he continued to do business.

Tax records showed that he made a comfortable living. A check of his flat showed that he lived within his means. He was well-regarded by his fellow dealers. His one employee, Beatrix, evidently liked working with him part-time. Cooley had no friends, still didn't frequent local pubs—rarely drank at all, it seemed—lived alone, had no known sexual preferences, and traveled a good deal on business.

"He's a bloody cipher, a zero," Owens said.

"Yes," Ashley replied. "At least it explains where Geoff met him—he was a lieutenant with one of the first regiments to go over, and probably wandered into the shop once or twice. You know what a talker Geoff Watkins is. They probably started talking books—can't have been much else. I doubt that Cooley has any interest beyond that."

"Yes, I believe he's what the Yanks call a nerd. Or at least it's an image he's cultivating. What about his parents?"

Ashley smiled. "They are remembered as the local Communists. Nothing serious, but decidedly bolshie until the Hungarian uprising of 1956. That seems to have disenchanted them. They remained outspokenly left-wing, but their political activities effectively ended then. Actually they're remembered as rather pleasant people, but a little odd. Evidently they encouraged the local children to read—made good business sense, if nothing else. Paid their bills on time. Other than that, nothing."

"This girl Beatrix?"

"Somehow she got an education from our state schools. Didn't attend university, but self-taught in literature and the history of publishing. Lives with her elderly father—he's a retired RAF sergeant. She has no social life. She probably spends her evenings watching the telly and sipping Dubonnet. She rather intensely dislikes the Irish, but doesn't mind working with 'Mr. Dennis' because he's an expert in his field. Nothing there at all."

"So, we have a dealer in rare books with a Marxist family, but no known ties with any terrorist group," Owens summarized. "He was in university about the same time as our friend O'Donnell, wasn't he?"

"Yes, but nobody remembers if they ever met. In fact, they lived only a few streets apart, but again no one remembers if Kevin ever frequented the bookshop." Ashley shrugged. "That goes back before O'Donnell attracted any serious attention, remember. If there were a lead of some sort then, it was never documented. They shared this economics instructor. That might have been a useful lead, but the chap died two years ago—natural causes. Their fellow students have scattered to the four winds, and we've yet to find one who knew both of them."

Owens walked to the comer of his office to pour a cup of tea. A *chap with a Marxist background who attended the same school at the same time as O'Donnell.* Despite the total lack of a connection with a terrorist group, it was enough to

follow up. If they could find something to suggest that Cooley and O'Donnell knew each other, then Cooley was the likely bridge between Watkins and the ULA. That did not mean there was any evidence to suggest the link was real, but in several months they had discovered nothing else even close.

"Very well, David, what do you propose to do?"

"We'll plant microphones in his shop and his home, and tap all of his telephone calls, of course. When he travels, he'll have a companion. "

Owens nodded approval. That was more than he could do legally, but the Security Service didn't operate under the same rules as did the Metropolitan Police. "How about watching his shop?"

"Not easy, when you remember where it is. Still, we might try to get one of our people hired in one of the neighboring shops."

"The one opposite his is a jewelry establishment, isn't it?"

"Nicholas Reemer and Sons," Ashley nodded. "Owner and two employees."

Owens thought about that. "I could find an experienced burglary detective, someone knowledgeable in the field...."

"Morning, Jack," Cantor said.

"Hi, Marty."

Ryan had given up on the satellite photographs weeks before. Now he was trying to find patterns within the terrorist network. Which group had connections with which other? Where did their arms come from? Where did they train? Who helped with the training? Who provided the money? Travel documents? What countries did they use for safe transits?

The problem with these questions was not a lack of information, but a glut of it. Literally thousands of CIA field officers and their agents, plus those of every other Western intelligence service, were scouring the world for such information. Many of the agents—foreign nationals recruited and paid by the Agency—would make reports on the most trivial encounter in the hope of delivering The One Piece of Information that would crack open Abu Nidal, or Islamic Jihad, or one of the other high-profile groups, for a substantial reward. The result was thousands of communiques, most of them full of worthless garbage that was indistinguishable from the one or two nuggets of real information. Jack had not realized the magnitude of the problem. The people working on this were all talented, but they were being overwhelmed by a sea of raw intelligence data that had to be graded, collated, and cross-referenced before proper analysis could begin. The difficulty of finding any single organization was inversely proportional to its size, and some of these groups were composed of a mere handful of people—in extreme cases composed of family members only.

"Marty," Jack said, looking away from the papers on his desk, "this is the closest thing to impossible I've ever seen."

"Maybe, but I've come to deliver a well-done," Cantor replied.

"What?"

"Remember that satellite photo of the girl in the bikini? The French think they've ID'd her: Françoise Theroux. Long, dark hair, a striking figure, and she was thought to be out of the country when the photo was made. That confirms that the camp belongs to *Action-Directe."*

"So who's the girl?"

"An assassin," Marty replied. He handed Jack a photograph taken at closer range. "And a good one. Three suspected kills, two politicians and an industrialist, all with a pistol at close range. Imagine how it's done: you're a middle-aged man walking down the street; you see a pretty girl; she smiles at you, maybe asks for directions or something; you stop, and the next thing you know, there's a pistol in her hand. Goodbye, Charlie."

Jack looked at the photograph. She didn't look dangerous—she looked like every man's fantasy. "Like we used to say in college, not the sort of girl you'd kick out of bed. Jesus, what sort of world do we live in, Marty?"

"You know that better than I do. Anyway, we've been asked to keep an eye on the camp. If we spot her there again, the French want us to real-time the photo to them."

"They're going to go in after her?"

"They didn't say, but you might recall that the French have troops in Chad, maybe four hundred miles away. Airborne units, with helicopters. "

Jack handed the picture back. "What a waste."

"Sure is." Cantor pocketed the photo and the issue. "How's it going with your data?"

"So far I have a whole lot of nothing. The people who do this full-time ... "

"Yeah, for a while there they were working around the clock. We had to make them stop, they were burning out. Computerizing it was a little helpful. Once we had the head of one group turn up at six airports in one day, and we knew the data was for crap, but every so often we get a live one. We missed that guy by a half hour outside Beirut last March. Thirty goddamned minutes," Cantor said. "You get used to it."

Thirty minutes, Jack thought. *If I'd left my office thirty minutes earlier, I'd be dead. How am I supposed to get used to that?*

"What would you have done to him?"

"We wouldn't have read him his constitutional rights," Cantor replied. "So, any connections that you've been able to find?"

Ryan shook his head. "This ULA outfit is so goddamned small. I have sixteen suspected contacts between the IRA and other groups. Some of them could be our boys, but how can you tell? The reports don't have pictures, the written descriptions could be anybody. Even when we have a reported IRA contact with a bunch they're not supposed be talking to—one that might actually be

the ULA—then, A, our underlying information could easily be wrong, and B, it could be the first time they talked with the IRA! Marty, how in the hell is somebody supposed to make any sense out of this garbage?"

"Well, the next time you hear somebody ask what the CIA is doing about terrorism—you won't be able to tell him." Cantor actually smiled at that. "These people we're looking for aren't dumb. They know what'll happen if they get caught. Even if we don't do it ourselves—which we might not want to do—we can always tip the Israelis. Terrorists are tough, nasty bastards, but they can't stand up to real troops and they know it.

"That's the frustrating part. My brother-in-law's an Army major, part of the Delta Force down at Fort Bragg. I've seen them operate. They could take out this camp you looked at in under two minutes, kill everybody there, and be gone before the echo fades. They're deadly and efficient, but without the right information, they don't know *where* to be deadly and efficient at. Same with police work. Do you think the Mafia could survive if the cops knew exactly where and when they did their thing? How many bank robberies would be successful if the SWAT team was waiting inside the doors? But you gotta know where the crooks are. It's all about intelligence, and intelligence comes down to a bunch of faceless bureaucrats sifting through all this crap. The people who gather the intel give it to us, and we process it and give it to the operations teams. The battle is fought here, too, Jack. Right here in this building, by a bunch of GS-9s and -10s who go home to their families every night."

But the battle is being lost, Jack told himself. *It sure as hell isn't being won.*

"How's the FBI doing?" he asked.

"Nothing new. The black guy—well, he might as well not exist so far as anyone can tell. They have a crummy picture that's several years old, an alias with no real name or prints to check, and about ten lines of description that mainly says he's smart enough to keep his mouth shut. The Bureau's checking through people who used to be in the radical groups—funny how they have mostly settled down—without any success so far."

"How about the bunch who flew over there two years back?" Not so long ago members of several radical American groups had flown to Libya to meet with "progressive elements" of the third-world community. The echoes of that event still reverberated through the antiterrorism community.

"You've noticed that we don't have any pictures from Bengazi, right? Our agent got picked up—one of those horrible accidents. It cost us the photos and it cost him his neck. Fortunately they never found out he was working for us. We know some of the names of the people who were there, but not all."

"Passport records?"

Cantor leaned against the doorframe. "Let's say Mr. X flew to Europe, an American on vacation—we're talking tens of thousands of people per month. He makes contact with someone on the other side, and they get him the rest of the way without going through the usual immigration-control procedures. It's

easy—hell, the Agency does it all the time. If we had a name we could see if he was out of the country at the right time. That would be a start—but we don't have a name to check."

"We don't have anything!" Ryan snapped.

"Sure we do. We have all that"—he waved at the documents on Ryan's desk —"and lots more where that came from. Somewhere in there is the answer."

"You really believe that?"

"Every time we crack one of these things, we find that all the information was under our nose for months. The oversight committees in Congress always hammer us on that. Sitting in that pile right now, Jack, is a crucial lead. That's almost a statistical certainty. But you probably have two or three hundred such reports sitting there, and only one matters."

"I didn't expect miracles, but I did expect to make some progress," Jack said quietly, the magnitude of the problem finally sinking in.

"You did. You saw something that no one else did. You may have found Françoise Theroux. And now if a French agent sees something that might be useful to us, maybe they'll pass it along. You didn't know this, but the intel business is like the old barter economy. We give them, and then they give us, or we'll never give to them again. If this pans out, they'll owe us big-time. They really want that gal. She popped a close friend of their President, and he took it personally.

"Anyway, you get a well-done from the Admiral and the DGSE. The boss says you should take it a little easier, by the way. "

"I'll take it easy when I find the bastards," Ryan replied.

"Sometimes you have to back off. You look like hell. You're tired. Fatigue makes for errors. We don't like errors. No more late hours, Jack, that comes from Greer, too. You're out of here by six." Cantor left, denying Jack a chance to object.

Ryan turned back toward his desk, but stared at the wall for several minutes. Cantor was right. He was working so late that half the time he couldn't drive up to Baltimore to see how his daughter was doing. Jack rationalized that his wife was with her every day, frequently spending the night at Hopkins to be close to their daughter. *Cathy has her job and I have mine.*

So, he told the wall, *at least I managed to get something right.* He remembered that it had been an accident, that Marty had made the real connection; but it was also true that he'd done what an analyst was supposed to do, find something odd and bring it to someone's attention. He could feel good about that. He'd found a terrorist maybe, but certainly not the right one.

It's a start. His conscience wondered what the French would do if they found that pretty girl, and how he'd feel about it if he found out. It would be better, he decided, if terrorists were ugly, but pretty or not, their victims were just as dead. He promised himself that he wouldn't go out of his way to find out if

anyone got her. Jack went back into the pile, looking for that one piece of hard information. The people he was looking for were somewhere in the pile. He had to find them.

"Hello, Alex," Miller said as he entered the car.

"How was the trip?" He still had his beard, Dobbens saw. Well, nobody had gotten much of a look at him. This time he'd flown to Mexico, driven across the border, then taken a domestic flight into D.C., where Alex had met him.

"Your border security over here's a bloody joke."

"Would it make you happy if they changed it?" Alex inquired. "Let's talk business." The abruptness of his tone surprised Miller.

Aren't you a proud one, with one whole operation under your belt, Miller thought. "We have another job for you."

"You haven't paid me for the last one yet, boy."

Miller handed over a passbook. "Numbered account, Bahamian bank. I believe you'll find the amount correct."

Alex pocketed the book. "That's more like it. Okay, we have another job. I hope you don't expect to go with it as fast as before."

"We have several months to plan it," Miller replied.

"I'm listening." Alex sat through ten minutes of information.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Dobbens asked when he was finished.

"How hard would it be to gather the information we need?"

"That's not the problem, Sean. The problem is getting your people in and out. No way I could handle that."

"That is my concern."

"Bullshit! If my people are involved, it's my concern, too. If that Clark turkey broke to the cops, it would have burned a safehouse—and me!"

"But he didn't break, did he? That's why we chose him."

"Look, what you do with your people, I don't give a rat's ass. What happens to my people, I do. That last little game we played for you was bush league, Sean."

Miller figured out what "bush league" meant from context. "The operation was politically sound, and you know it. Perhaps you've forgotten that the objective is always political. Politically, the operation was a complete success."

"I don't need you to tell me that!" Alex snapped back in his best intimidating tone. Miller was a proud little twerp, but Alex figured he could pinch his head off with one good squeeze. "You lost a troop because you were playing this personal, not professional—and I know what you're thinking. It was our first big play, right? Well, son, I think we proved that we got our shit

together, didn't we? And I warned you up front that your man was too exposed. If you'd listened to me, you wouldn't have a man on the inside. I know your background is pretty impressive, but this is my turf, and I know it."

Miller knew that he had to accept that. He kept his face impassive. "Alex, if we were in any way displeased, we would not have come back to you. Yes, you do have your shit together," *you bloody nigger,* he didn't say. "Now, can you get us the information we need?"

"Sure, for the right price. You want us in the op?"

"We don't know yet," Miller replied honestly. *Of course the only issue here is money. Bloody Americans.*

"If you want us in, I'm part of the planning. Number one, I want to know how you get in and out. I might have to go with you. If you shitcan my advice this time, I walk and I take my people with me."

"It's a little early to be certain, but what we hope to arrange is really quite simple...."

"You think you can set that up?" For the first time since he'd arrived, Sean had Alex nodding approval. "Slick. I'll give you that. It's slick. Now let's talk price."

Sean wrote a figure on a piece of paper and handed it to Alex. "Fair enough?" People interested in money were easy to impress.

"I sure would like an account at *your* bank, brother."

"If this operation comes off, you will."

"You mean that?"

Miller nodded emphatically. "Direct access. Training facilities, help with travel documents, the lot. Your skill in helping us last time attracted attention. Our friends like the idea of an active revolutionary cell in America." *If they really want to do business with you, it's their problem.* "Now, how quickly can you get the information?"

"End of the week good enough?"

"Can you do it that fast without attracting attention?"

"Let me worry about that," Alex replied with a smile.

"Anything new on your end?" Owens asked.

"Not much," Murray admitted. "We have plenty of forensic evidence, but only one witness who got a clear look at one face, and she can't give us a real ID. "

"The local help?"

"That's who we almost ID'd. Nothing yet. Maybe they've learned from the ULA. No manifesto, no announcement claiming credit for the job. The people we have inside some other radical groups—that is, those that still exist—have

drawn a big blank. We're still working on it, and we have a lot of money out on the street, but so far we haven't got anything to show for it." Murray paused. "That'll change. Bill Shaw is a genius, one of the real brains we have in the Bureau. They switched him over from counterintelligence to terrorism a few years back, and he's done really impressive work. What's new on your end?"

"I can't go into specifics yet," Owens said. "But we might have a small break. We're trying to decide now if it's real or not. That's the good news. The bad is that His Royal Highness is traveling to America this coming summer. A number of people were informed of his itinerary, including six on our list of possible suspects."

"How the hell did you let that happen, Jimmy?"

"No one asked me, Dan," Owens replied sourly. "In several cases, if the people hadn't been informed it would have told them that something odd was happening—you can't simply stop trusting people, can you? For the rest, it was just another balls-up. Some secretary put out the plans on the normal list without consulting the security officers." This wasn't a new story for either man. There was always someone who didn't get the word.

"Super. So call it off. Let him get the flu or something when the time comes," Murray suggested.

"His Highness won't do that. He's become quite adamant on the subject. He won't allow a terrorist threat to affect his life in any way."

Murray grunted. "You gotta admire the kid's guts, but—"

"Quite so," Owens agreed. He didn't really care for having his next king referred to as "the kid," but he'd long since gotten used to the American way of expressing things. "It doesn't make our job any easier."

"How firm are the travel plans?" Murray asked, getting back to business.

"Several items on the itinerary are tentative, of course, but most are set in stone. Our security people will be meeting with yours in Washington. They're flying over next week."

"Well, you know that you'll get all the cooperation you want, Secret Service, the Bureau, local police, everything. We'll take good care of him for you," Murray assured him. "He and his wife are pretty popular back home. Will they be taking the baby with them?"

"No. We were able to prevail on him about that."

"Okay. I'll call Washington tomorrow and get things rolling. What's happening with our friend Ned Clark?"

"Nothing as yet. His colleagues are evidently giving him rather a bad time, but he's too bloody stupid to break."

Murray nodded. He knew the type.

Well, they wanted me to take off early, Ryan thought. He decided to accept an invitation to a lecture at Georgetown University. Unfortunately, it was something of a disappointment. Professor David Hunter was Columbia's *enfant terrible,* America's ranking authority on political affairs in Eastern Europe. His book of the previous year, *Revolution Postponed,* had been a penetrating study of the political and economic problems of the Soviet's unsteady empire, and Ryan, like others, had been eager to hear his new information on the subject. The speech had turned out to be little more than a rehash of the book, with the rather startling suggestion at the end that the NATO countries should be more aggressive in trying to separate the Soviet Union from her captives. Ryan considered that to be lunacy, even if it did guarantee lively discussions at the reception.

At the end of the talk, Ryan moved quickly to the reception. He'd skipped dinner to make it here on time. There was a wide table of hors d'oeuvres, and Jack filled his plate as patiently as he could before drifting off to a sedate corner by the elevators. He let others form knots of conversation around Professor Hunter. On the whole, it was nice to be back at Georgetown, if only for a few hours. The "Galleria" in the Intercultural Center was quite a contrast to the CIA institutional drab. The four-story atrium of the language building was lined with the glass windows of offices, and a pair of potted trees reached toward the glass roof. The plaza outside was paved with bricks, and known to the students as Red Square. To the west was the old quadrangle, and the cemetery where rested the priests who had taught here for nearly two hundred years. It was a thoroughly civilized setting, except for the discordant shriek of jets coming out of National Airport, a few miles downriver. Someone jostled Ryan just as he was finishing his snacks.

"Excuse me, Doctor." Ryan turned to see a man shorter than himself. He had a florid complexion and was dressed in a. cheap-looking suit. His blue eyes seemed to sparkle with amusement. His voice had a pronounced accent. "Did you enjoy the lecture?"

"It was interesting," Ryan said diffidently.

"So. I see that capitalists can lie as well as we poor socialists." The man had a jolly, overpowering laugh, but Jack decided that his eyes were sparkling with something other than amusement. They were measuring eyes, playing yet another variation of the game he'd been part of in England. Already Ryan disliked him.

"Have we met?"

"Sergey Platonov." They shook hands after Ryan set his plate on a table. "I am Third Secretary of the Soviet Embassy. Perhaps my photograph at Langley does not do me justice."

A Russian—Ryan tried not to look too surprised—*who knows I've been working at CIA.* Third Secretary could easily mean that he was KGB, perhaps a diplomatic intelligence specialist, or maybe a member of the CPSU's Foreign Department—as though it made a difference. A "legal" intelligence officer with a diplomatic cover. *What do I do now?* For one thing, he knew that he'd

have to write up a contact report for CIA tomorrow, explaining how they'd met and what they'd talked about, perhaps an hour's work. It took an effort to remain polite.

"You must have the wrong guy, Mr. Platonov. I'm a history teacher. I work at the Naval Academy in Annapolis. I was invited to this because I got my degree here."

"No, no." The Russian shook his head. "I recognize you from the photograph on your book jacket. You see, I purchased ten copies of it last summer."

"Indeed." Jack was surprised again and unable to conceal it. "My publisher and I thank you, sir."

"Our Naval Attaché was much taken by it, Doctor Ryan. He felt that it should be brought to the attention of the Frunze Academy, and, I think, the Grechko Naval Academy in Leningrad." Platonov applied his considerable charm. Ryan knew it for what it was, but ... "To be honest, I merely skimmed the book myself. It seemed quite well organized, and the Attaché said that your analysis of the way decisions are made in the heat of battle was highly accurate."

"Well." Jack tried not to be overly flattered, but it was hard. Frunze was the Soviet staff academy, the finishing school for young field-grade officers who were tagged for stardom. The Grechko Academy was only slightly less prestigious.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch," boomed a familiar voice, "it is not *kulturny* to prey upon the vanity of helpless young authors." Father Timothy Riley joined them. A short, plump Jesuit priest, Riley had headed the history department at Georgetown while Ryan had gotten his doctorate. He was a brilliant intellect with a series of books to his credit, including two penetrating works on the history of Marxism—neither of which, Ryan was certain, had found their way into the library at Frunze. "How's the family, Jack?"

"Cathy's back to work, Father. They moved Sally over to Hopkins. With luck we'll have her home early next week."

"She will recover fully, your little daughter?" Platonov asked. "I read about the attack on your family in the newspaper."

"We think so. Except for losing her spleen, there seems to be no permanent damage. The docs say she's recovering nicely, and with her at Hopkins, Cathy's able to see her every day," Ryan said more positively than he felt. Sally was a different child. Her legs weren't fully healed yet, but worst of all, his bouncing little girl was a sad thing now. She'd learned a lesson that Ryan had hoped to hold off for at least ten more years—that the world is a dangerous place even when you have a mother and a father to take care of you. A hard lesson for a child, it was harder still for a parent. *But she's alive,* Jack told himself, unaware of the expression on his face. *With time and love, you can recover from anything, except death.* The doctors and nurses at Hopkins were taking care of her like one of their own. That was a tangible advantage of having a doctor in the family.

“A terrible thing.” Platonov shook his head in what seemed to be genuine disgust. “A terrible thing to attack innocent people for no reason.”

“Indeed, Sergey,” Riley said in the astringent voice that Ryan had known so well. When he wanted, “Father Tim” had a tongue that could saw through wood. “I seem to recall that V. I. Lenin said the purpose of terrorism is to terrorize, and that sympathy in a revolutionary is as reprehensible as cowardice on the field of battle.”

“Those were hard times, good Father,” Platonov said smoothly. “My country has no business with those IRA madmen. They are not revolutionaries, however much they pretend to be. They have no revolutionary ethic. It is madness, what they do. The working classes should be allies, contesting together against the common enemy that exploits them both, instead of killing one another. Both sides of the conflict are victimized by bosses who play them off against each other, but instead of recognizing this they kill one another like mad dogs, and with as little point. They are bandits, not revolutionaries,” he concluded with a distinction lost on the other two.

“Maybe so, but if I ever get my hands on them, I’ll give them a lesson in revolutionary justice.” It was good to let his hatred out in the open for once.

“You have no sympathy for them, either of you?” Platonov baited them. “After all, you are both related to the victims of British imperialism. Did not both your families flee to America to escape it?”

Ryan was caught very short by that remark. It seemed an incredible thing to say until he saw that the Russian was watching for his reaction.

“Or perhaps the direct victim of Soviet imperialism,” Jack responded with his own look. “Those two guys in London had Kalashnikov rifles. So did the ones who attacked my wife,” he lied. “You don’t buy one of those at the local hardware store. Whether you choose to admit it or not, most of the terrorists over there profess to be Marxists. That makes them your allies, not mine, and it makes it appear more than a coincidence that they use Soviet arms.”

“Do you know how many countries manufacture weapons of Soviet design? It is sadly inevitable that some will fall into the wrong hands.”

“In any case, my sympathy for their aim is, shall we say, limited by their choice of technique. You can’t build a civilized country on a foundation of murder,” Ryan concluded. “Much as some people have tried.”

“It would be well if the world worked in more peaceful ways.” Platonov ignored the implicit comment on the Soviet Union. “But it is an historical fact that nations are born in blood, even yours. As countries grow, they mature beyond such conduct. It is not easy, but I think we can all see the value of peaceful coexistence. For myself, Doctor Ryan, I can sympathize with your feelings. I have two fine sons. We once had a daughter also, Nadia. She died long ago, at age seven, from leukemia. I know it is a hard thing to see your child in pain, but you are more fortunate than I. Your daughter will live.” He allowed his voice to soften. “We disagree on many things, but no man can fail to love his children.

"So." Platonov changed gears smoothly. "What did you really think of Professor Hunter's little speech? Should America seek to foment counterrevolution in the socialist states of Europe?"

"Why don't you ask the State Department? That's not my part of the world, remember? I teach naval history. But if you want a personal opinion, I don't see how we can encourage people to rebel if we have no prospect of helping them directly when your country reacts."

"Ah, good. You understand that we must act to protect our fraternal socialist brothers from aggression."

The man was good, Ryan saw, but he'd had a lot of practice at this. "I wouldn't call the encouragement of people to seek their own freedom a form of aggression, Mr. Platonov. I was a stockbroker before I got my history degree, and that doesn't make me much of a candidate for sympathizing with your political outlook. What I am saying is that your country used military force to crush democratic feelings in Czechoslovakia and Hungary. To encourage people toward their own suicide is both immoral and counterproductive."

"Ah, but what does your government think?" the Russian asked with another jolly laugh.

"I'm a historian, not a soothsayer. In this town they all work for the *Post.* Ask them."

"In any case," the Russian went on, "our Naval Attaché is most interested to meet you and discuss your book. We are having a reception at the embassy on the twelfth of next month. The good Father is coming, he can watch over your soul. Might you and your wife attend?"

"For the next few weeks I plan to be at home with my family. My girl needs me there for a while."

The diplomat was not to be put off. "Yes, I can understand that. Some other time, perhaps?"

"Sure, give me a call sometime this summer." *Are you kidding?*

"Excellent. Now if you will excuse me, I wish to speak to Professor Hunter." The diplomat shook hands again and walked off to the knot of historians who were hanging on Hunter's every word.

Ryan turned to Father Riley, who'd watched the exchange in silence while sipping at his champagne.

"Interesting guy, Sergey," Riley said. "He loves to hit people for reactions. I wonder if he really believes in his system or if he's just playing the game for points ... ?"

Ryan had a more immediate question. "Father, what in the hell was that all about?"

Riley chuckled. "You're being checked out, Jack."

"Why?"

“You don’t need me to answer that. You’re working at CIA. If I guess right, Admiral Greer wants you on his personal staff. Marty Cantor is taking a job at the University of Texas next year, and you’re one of the candidates for his job. I don’t know if Sergey’s aware of that, but you probably looked like the best target of opportunity in the room, and he wanted to get a feel for you. Happens all the time.”

“Cantor’s job? But—nobody told me that!”

“The world’s full of surprises. They probably haven’t finished the full background check on you yet, and they won’t pop the offer until they do. I presume the information you’re looking at is still pretty limited?”

“I can’t discuss that, Father.”

The priest smiled. “Thought so. The work you’ve done over there has impressed the right people. If I have things right, they’re going to bring you along like a good welterweight prospect.” Riley got another glass of champagne. “If I know James Greer, he’ll just sort of ease you into it. What did it, you see, was that Canary Trap thing. It really impressed some folks.”

“How do you know all this?” Ryan asked, shocked at what he’d just heard.

“Jack, how do you think you got over there in the first place? Who do you think got you that Center for Strategic and International Studies fellowship? The people there liked your work, too. Between what I said and what they said, Marty thought you were worth a look last summer, and you worked out better than anyone expected. There are some people around town who respect my opinion. ”

“Oh.” Ryan had to smile. He’d allowed himself to forget the first thing about the Society of Jesus: they know everyone, from whom they can learn nearly everything. The President of the university belonged to both the Cosmos and University clubs, with which came access to the most important ears and mouths in Washington. That’s how it would start. Occasionally a man would need advice on something, and being unable to consult the people he worked with, he might try to discuss it with a clergyman. No one was better qualified for this than a Jesuit, meticulously educated, well versed in the ways of the world, but not spoiled by it—most of the time. Like any clergyman, each was a good listener. So effective was the Society at gathering information that the State Department’s code-breakers had once been tasked to break the Jesuits’ own cipher systems; the assignment had started a small revolt in the “Black Chamber” ... until they’d realized what sort of information was finding its way to them.

When Saint Ignatius Loyola had founded the order, the ex-soldier set it on a path to do only two things: to send out missionaries and to build schools. Both had been done extraordinarily well. The influence passed on by the schooling would never be lost on the men who’d graduated. It wasn’t Machiavellian, not really. The colleges and universities plied its students with philosophy and ethics and theology—all required courses—to mute their baser tendencies and sharpen their wits. For centuries the Jesuits had built “men for others,” and wielded a kind of invisible temporal power, mainly for the good. Father

Riley's intellectual credentials were widely known, and his opinions would be sought, just as from any distinguished academic, added to which was his moral authority as a graduate theologian.

"We're good security risks, Jack," Riley said benignly. "Can you imagine one of us being a Communist agent? So, are you interested in the job?"

"I don't know." Ryan looked at his reflection in a window. "It would mean more time away from the family. We're expecting another one this summer, you know."

"Congratulations, that's good news. I know you're a family man, Jack. The job would mean some sacrifices, but you're a good man for it. "

"Think so?" *I haven't exactly set the world on fire yet.*

"I'd rather see people like you over there than some others I know. Jack, you're plenty smart enough. You know how to make decisions, but more importantly, you're a pretty good fellow. I know you're ambitious, but you've got ethics, values. I'm one of those people who thinks that still matters for something in the world, regardless of how nasty things get."

"They get pretty nasty, Father," Ryan said after a moment.

"How close are you to finding them?"

"Not very close at—" Jack stopped himself too late. "You did that one pretty well."

"I didn't mean it that way," Father Tim said very sincerely. "It would be a better world if they were off the street. There must be something wrong with the way they think. It's hard to understand how anyone could deliberately hurt a child."

"Father, you really don't have to understand them. You just have to know where to find them."

"That's work for the police, and the courts, and a jury. That's why we have laws, Jack," Riley said gently.

Ryan turned to the window again. He examined his own image and wondered what it was that he saw. "Father, you're a good man, but you've never had kids of your own. I can forgive somebody who comes after me, maybe, but not anyone who tries to hurt my little girl. If I find him—hell, I won't. But I sure would like to," Jack told the image of himself. *Yes,* it agreed.

"It's not a good thing, hate. It might do things to you that you'll regret, things that can change you from the person you are."

Ryan turned back, thinking about the person he'd just looked at. "Maybe it already has."

20

Data

It was a singularly boring tape. Owens was used to reading police reports, transcripts of interrogations, and, worst of all, intelligence documents, but the tape was even more boring than that. The microphone which the Security Service had hidden in Cooley's shop was sound-activated and sensitive enough to pick up any noise. The fact that Cooley hummed a lot made Owens regret this feature. The detective whose job it was to listen to the unedited tape had included several minutes of the awful, atonal noise to let his commander know what he had to suffer through. The bell finally rang.

Owens heard the clatter, made metallic by the recording system, of the door opening and closing, then the sound of Cooley's swivel chair scraping across the floor. It must have had a bad wheel, Owens noted.

"Good morning, sir!" It was Cooley's voice.

"And to you," said the second. "Well, have you finished the Marlowe?"

"Yes, I have."

"So what's the price?"

Cooley didn't say it aloud, but Ashley had told Owens that the shop owner never spoke a price. He handed it to his customers on a file card. That, Owens thought, was one way to keep from haggling.

"That is quite steep, you know," Watkins' voice observed.

"I could get more, but you are one of our better clients," Cooley replied.

The sigh was audible on the tape. "Very well, it is worth it."

The transaction was made at once. They could hear the rasping sound of new banknotes being counted.

"I may soon have something new from a collection in Kerry," Cooley said next.

"Oh?" There was interest in the reply.

"Yes, a signed first edition of *Great Expectations*. I saw it on my last trip over. Might you be interested in that?"

"Signed, eh?"

"Yes, sir, 'Boz' himself. I realize that the Victorian period is rather more recent than most of your acquisitions, but the author's signature ..."

“Indeed. I would like to see it, of course.”

“That can be arranged.”

“At this point,” Owens told Ashley, “Watkins leaned over, and our man in the jewelry shop lost sight of him.”

“So he could have passed a message.”

“Possibly.” Owens switched off the tape machine. The rest of the conversation had no significance.

“The last time he was in Ireland, Cooley didn’t go to County Kerry. He was in Cork the whole time. He visited three dealers in rare books, spent the night in a hotel, and had a few pints at a local pub,” Ashley reported.

“A pub?”

“Yes, he drinks in Ireland, but not in London.”

“Did he meet anyone there?”

“Impossible to tell. Our man wasn’t close enough. His orders were to be discreet, and he did well not to be spotted.” Ashley was quiet for a moment as he tried to pin down something on the tape. “It sounded to me as though he paid cash for the book.”

“He did, and it is out of pattern. Like most of us he uses checks and credit cards for the majority of his transactions, but not for this. His bank records show no checks to this shop, though he does occasionally make large cash withdrawals. They may or may not match with his purchases there.”

“How very odd,” Ashley thought aloud. “Everyone—well, someone must know that he goes there.”

“Checks have dates on them,” Owens suggested.

“Perhaps.” Ashley wasn’t convinced, but he’d done enough investigations of this kind to know that you never got all the answers. Some details were always left hanging. “I took another look at Geoff’s service record last night. Do you know that when he was in Ireland, he had four men killed in his platoon?”

“What? That makes him a fine candidate for our investigation!” Owens didn’t think this was good news.

“That’s what I thought,” Ashley agreed. “I had one of our chaps in Germany —his former regiment’s assigned to the BAOR at the moment—interview one of Watkins’s mates. Had a platoon in the same company, the chap’s a half-colonel now. He said that Geoff took it quite hard, that he was quite vociferous on the point that they were in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing, and losing people in the process. Rather puts a different spin on things, doesn’t it?”

“Another lieutenant with the solution to the problem.” Owens snorted.

“Yes—we leave and let the bloody Irish sort things out. That’s not exactly a rare sentiment in the Army, you know.”

It wasn't exactly a rare sentiment throughout England, Commander Owens knew. "Even so, it's not much of a basis for motive, is it?"

"Better than nothing at all."

The cop grunted agreement. "What else did the Colonel tell your chap?"

"Obviously Geoff had a rather busy tour of duty in the Belfast area. He and his men saw a lot. They were there when the Army was welcomed in by the Catholics, and they were there when the situation reversed. It was a bad time for everyone," Ashley added unnecessarily.

"It's still not very much. We have a former subaltern, now in the striped-pants brigade, who didn't like being in Northern Ireland; he happens to buy rare books from a chap who grew up there and now runs a completely legitimate business in central London. You know what any solicitor would say: pure coincidence. We don't have one single thing that can remotely be called evidence. The background of each man is pure enough to qualify him for sainthood."

"These are the people we've been looking for," Ashley insisted.

"I know that." Owens almost surprised himself when he said it for the first time. His professionalism told him that this was a mistake, but his instincts told him otherwise. It wasn't a new feeling for the Commander of C-13, but one that always made him uneasy. If his instincts were wrong, he was looking in the wrong place, at the wrong people. But his instincts were almost never wrong. "You know the rules of the game, and by those rules, I don't even have enough to go to the Commissioner. He'd boot me out of the office, and be right to do so. We have nothing but unsupported suspicions." The two men stared at each other for several seconds.

"I never wanted to be a policeman." Ashley smiled and shook his head.

"I didn't get my wish, either. I wanted to be an engine driver when I was six, but my father said there were enough railway people in the family. So I became a copper." Both men laughed. There wasn't anything else to do.

"I'll increase the surveillance on Cooley's trips abroad. I don't think there's much more to be done on your side," Ashley said finally.

"We have to wait for them to make a mistake. Sooner or later they all do, you know."

"But soon enough?" That was the question.

"Here we are," Alex said.

"How did you get these?" Miller asked in amazement.

"Routine, man. Power companies shoot aerial photographs of their territory all the time. They help us plan the surveys we have to do. And here"—he reached into his briefcase—"is a topographic map. There's your target, boy." Alex handed him a magnifying glass borrowed from his company. It was a color shot, taken on a bright sunny day. You could tell the makes of the cars.

It must have been done the previous summer—the grass had just been cut....

"How tall is the cliff?"

"Enough that you don't want to fall off it. Tricky, too. I forget what it's made of, sandstone or something crumbly, but you want to be careful with it. See that fence here? The man knows to keep away from the edge. We have the same problem at our reactor plant at Calvert Cliff. It's the same geological structure, and a lot of work went into giving the plant a solid foundation."

"Only one road in," Miller noted.

"Dead end, too. That is a problem. We have these gullies here and here. Notice that the power line comes in cross-country, from this road over here. It looks like there was an old farm road that connected with this one, but they let it go to seed. That's going to be helpful."

"How? No one can use it."

"I'll tell you later. Friday, you and me are going fishing."

"What?" Miller looked up in surprise.

"You want to eyeball the cliff, right? Besides, the blues are running. I love bluefish."

Breckenridge had silhouette targets up, finally. Jack's trips to the range were less frequent now, mainly in the mornings before class. If nothing else, the incident outside the gate had told the Marine and civilian guards that their jobs were valuable. Two Marines and one of the civilians were also firing their service pieces. They didn't just shoot to qualify now. They were all shooting for scores. Jack hit the button to reel his target in. His rounds were all clustered in the center of the target.

"Pretty good, Doc." The Sergeant Major was standing behind him. "If you want, we can run a competition string. I figure you'll qualify for a medal now."

Ryan shook his head. He still had to shower after his morning jog. "I'm not doing this for score, Gunny."

"When does the little girl come home?"

"Next Wednesday, I hope."

"That's good, sir. Who's going to look after her?"

"Cathy's taking a few weeks off."

"My wife asked if y'all might need any help," Breckenridge said.

Jack turned in surprise. "Sissy—Commander Jackson's wife—will be over most of the time. Please thank your wife for us, Gunny, that's damned nice of her."

"No big deal. Any luck finding the bastards?" Ryan's day-hops to CIA were not much of a secret.

“Not yet.”

“Good morning, Alex,” the field superintendent said. “You’re staying in a little late. What can I do for you?” Bert Griffin was always in early, but he rarely saw Dobbens before he went home at seven every morning.

“I’ve been looking over the specifications on that new Westinghouse transformer. ”

“Getting dull working nights?” Griffin asked with a smile. This was a fairly easy time of year for the utility company. In the summer, with all the air conditioners up and running, things would be different, of course. Spring was the time of year for new ideas.

“I think we’re ready to give it a try.”

“Have they ironed the bugs out?”

“Pretty much, enough for a field test, I think.”

“Okay.” Griffin sat back in his chair. “Tell me about it.”

“Mainly, sir, I’m worried about the old ones. The problem’s only going to get worse as we start retiring the old units. We had that chemical spill last month—”

“Oh, yeah.” Griffin rolled his eyes. Most of the units in use contained PBBs, polybrominated biphenyls, as a cooling element within the power transformer. These were dangerous to the line-men, who were supposed to wear protective clothing when working on them, but, despite company rules, often didn’t bother. PBBs were a serious health hazard to the men. Even worse, the company had to dispose of the toxic liquid periodically. It was expensive and ran the risk of spills, the paperwork for which was rapidly becoming as time-consuming as that associated with the company’s nuclear reactor plant. Westinghouse was experimenting with a transformer that used a completely inert chemical in place of the PBBs. Though expensive, it held great promise for long-term economies—and would help get the environmentalists off their backs, which was even more attractive than the monetary savings. “Alex, if you can get those babies up and working, I will personally get you a new company car!”

“Well, I want to try one out. Westinghouse will lend us one for free. ”

“This is really starting to sound good,” Griffin noted. “But have they really ironed the bugs out yet?”

“They say so, except for some occasional voltage fluctuations. They’re not sure what causes that, and they want to do some field tests.”

“How bad are the fluctuations?”

“Marginal.” Alex pulled out a pad and read off the numbers. “It seems to be an environmental problem. Looks like it only happens when the ambient air temperature changes rapidly. If that’s the real cause, it shouldn’t be too hard to beat.”

Griffin considered that for a few seconds. “Okay, where do you want to set it up?”

“I have a spot picked out down in Anne Arundel County, south of Annapolis.”

“That’s a long ways away. Why there?”

“It’s a dead-end line. If the transformer goes bad, it won’t hurt many houses. The other thing is, one of my crews is only twenty miles away, and I’ve been training them on the new unit. We’ll set up the test instrumentation, and I can have them check it every day for the first few months. If it works out, we can make our purchase order in the fall and start setting them up next spring.”

“Okay. Where exactly is this?”

Dobbens unfolded his map on Griffin’s table. “Right here.”

“Expensive neighborhood,” the field superintendent said dubiously.

“Aw, come on, boss!” Alex snorted. “How would it look in the papers if we did all our experiments on poor folk? Besides”—he smiled—“all those environmental freaks are rich, aren’t they?”

Dobbens had chosen his remark with care. One of Griffin’s personal hobbyhorses was the “Park Avenue Environmentalist.” The field superintendent owned a small farm, and didn’t like having some condo-owning dilettante tell him about nature.

“Okay, you can run with it. How soon can you set it up?”

“Westinghouse can have the unit to us the end of next week. I can have it up and running three days after that. I want my crew to check the lines—in fact, I’ll be going down myself to set it up if you don’t mind.”

Griffin nodded approval. “You’re my kind of engineer, son. Most of the schoolboys we get now are afraid to get their hands dirty. You’ll keep me posted?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Keep up the good work, Alex. I’ve been telling management about you.”

“I appreciate that, Mr. Griffin.”

Dobbens left the building and drove home in his two-year-old company Plymouth. Most of the rush-hour traffic was heading in while he headed out. He was home in under an hour. Sean Miller was just waking up, drinking tea and watching television. Alex wondered how anyone could start the day with tea. He made some instant coffee for himself.

“Well?” Miller asked.

“No problem.” Alex smiled, then stopped. It occurred to him that he’d miss his job. After all the talk in college about bringing Power to the People, he’d realized with surprise after starting with BG&E that a utility company engineer did exactly that. In a funny sort of way, he was now serving the ordinary people, though not in a manner that carried much significance. Dobbens

decided that it was good training for his future ambitions. He'd remember that even those who served humbly still served. An important lesson for the future. "Come on, we'll talk about it in the boat."

Wednesday was a special day. Jack was away from both his jobs, carrying the bear while Cathy wheeled their daughter out. The bear was a gift from the midshipmen of his history classes, an enormous monster that weighed sixty pounds and was nearly five feet tall, topped off with a Smokey Bear hat—actually that of a Marine drill instructor courtesy of Breckenridge and the guard detail. A police officer opened the door for the procession. It was a windy March day, but the family wagon was parked just outside. Jack scooped up his daughter in both arms while Cathy thanked the nurses. He made sure she was in her safety seat and buckled the belt himself. The bear had to go in the back.

"Ready to go home, Sally?"

"Yes." Her voice was listless. The nurses reported that she still cried out in her sleep. Her legs were fully healed, finally. She could walk again, badly and awkwardly, but she could walk. Except for the loss of her spleen, she was whole again. Her hair was trimmed short to compensate for what had been shaved, but that would grow out soon enough. Even the scars, the surgeons said, would fade, and the pediatricians assured him that in a few months the nightmares would end. Jack turned to run his hand along the little face, and got a smile for his efforts. It wasn't the smile he was accustomed to getting. Behind his own smile, Ryan's mind boiled with rage yet again, but he told himself that this wasn't the time. Sally needed a father now, not an avenger.

"We have a surprise waiting for you," he said.

"What?" Sally asked.

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise," her father pointed out.

"Daddy!" For a moment his little girl was back.

"Wait and see."

"What's that?" Cathy asked on getting in the car.

"The surprise."

"What surprise?"

"See," Jack told his daughter. "Mommy doesn't know either."

"Jack, what's going on?"

"Doctor Schenk and I had a little talk last week," was all Ryan would say. He released the parking brake and headed off onto Broadway.

"I want my bear," Sally said.

"He's too big to sit there, honey," Cathy responded.

"But you can wear his Smokey hat. He said it was okay." Jack handed it back. The wide-brimmed campaign hat dropped over her head.

"Did you thank the people for the bear?" Cathy asked.

"You bet." Ryan smiled for a moment. "Nobody flunks this term. But don't tell anybody that." Jack had a reputation as a tough marker. That might not survive this semester. *Principles be damned,* he told himself. The mids in his classes had sent Sally a steady stream of flowers, toys, puzzles, and cards that had entertained his little girl, then circulated around the pediatric floor and brightened the days of fifty more sick kids. Smokey Bear was the crowning achievement. The nurses had told Cathy that it had made a difference. The monster toy had often sat at the top of Sally's bed, with the little girl clinging to it. It would be a tough act to follow, but Jack had that one figured out. Skip Tyler was making the final arrangements now.

Jack took his time, driving as though he were carrying a cargo of cracked eggs. His recent habits at CIA made him yearn for a cigarette, but he knew that he'd have to stop that now, with Cathy home all the time. He was careful to avoid the route Cathy had taken the day that—His hands tightened on the wheel as they had for weeks now. He knew he had to stop thinking about it so much. It had become an obsession, and that wasn't going to help anything.

The scenery had changed since the ... accident. What had been bare trees now had the green edges of buds and leaves with the beginning of spring. Horses and cows were out on the farms. Some calves and colts were visible, and Sally's nose pressed against the car window as she looked at them. As it did every year, life was renewing itself, Ryan told himself. His family was whole again, and he'd keep it that way. The last turn onto Falcon's Nest Road finally came. Jack noted that the utility trucks were still around, and he wondered briefly what they had been up to as he turned left into his driveway.

"Skip's here?" Cathy asked.

"Looks like it," Jack replied with a suppressed grin.

"They're home," Alex said.

"Yeah," Louis noted. Both men were perched at the top of the utility pole, ostensibly stringing new power lines to accommodate the experimental transformer. "You know, the day after the job," the lineman said, "there was a picture of the lady in the papers. Some kid went through a window and got his face all cut up. It was a little brother, Alex. The lady saved his eyes, man."

"I remember, Louis." Alex raised his camera and snapped off a string of shots.

"An' I don't like fucking with kids, man," Louis said. "A cop's a different thing," he added defensively. He didn't have to say that so was the kid's father. That was business. Like Alex, he had a few remaining scruples, and hurting children was not something he could do without some internal turmoil.

"Maybe we were all lucky." Alex knew objectively that this was a stupid way for a revolutionary to think. Sentimentality had no place in his mission; it got in the way of what he had to do, prolonging the task and causing more deaths in the process. He also knew that the taboos against injuring children

were part of the genetic programming of any human being. Mankind had progressed in its knowledge since Marx and Lenin. So whenever possible he'd avoid injuring kids. He rationalized that this would enhance his sympathy in the community he was seeking to liberate.

"Yeah."

"So what have you seen?"

"They got a maid—black o'course. Fine-lookin' woman, drives a Chevy. There's somebody else in there now. He's a white dude, big guy, an' he walks funny."

"Right." Alex made note of the former and dismissed the latter. The man was probably a family friend.

"The cops—state cops—are back here every two hours minimum. One of them asked me what we were doing yesterday afternoon. They're keeping an eye on this place. There's an extra phone line into the house—gotta be for an alarm company. So they got a house alarm and the cops are always close."

"Okay. Keep your eyes open but don't be too obvious."

"You got it."

"Home," Ryan breathed. He stopped the car and got out, walking around to Sally's door. He saw that the little girl wasn't playing with the seat-belt buckle. He took care of it himself, then lifted his daughter out of the car. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and for a moment life was perfect again. He carried Sally to the front door, both arms clasping her to his chest.

"Welcome back." Skip had the door open already.

"Where's my surprise?" Sally demanded.

"Surprise?" Tyler was taken aback. "I don't know about any surprise."

"Daddy!" Her father got an accusing look.

"Come on in," Tyler said.

Mrs. Hackett was there, too. She'd gotten lunch ready for everyone. A single mother of two sons, she worked hard to support them. Ryan set his girl down, and she walked to the kitchen. Skip Tyler and her father watched her stiff legs negotiate the distance.

"God, it's amazing how kids heal," Tyler observed.

"What?" Jack was surprised.

"I broke a leg playing ball once—damned if I bounced back that fast. Come on," Tyler beckoned Jack out the door. First he checked out the stuffed animal in the car. "I heard it was some kind of bear. That one must have played in Chicago!"

Then they went into the trees north of Ryan's house. Here they found the surprise, tied to a tree. Jack loosed the chain and picked him up.

“Thanks for bringing him over.”

“Hey, no big deal. It’s good to see her home, pal.”

The two men walked back into the house. Jack peeked around the comer and saw that Sally was already demolishing a peanut-butter sandwich.

“Sally ...” he said. His wife was already looking at him with an open mouth. His daughter’s head came around just as Jack set the puppy on the floor.

It was a black Labrador, just old enough to be separated from his mother. The puppy needed a single look to know to whom he belonged. He scampered across the floor, mostly sideways, with his tail gyrating wildly. Sally was on the floor, and grabbed him. A moment later, the dog was cleaning her face.

“She’s too little for a puppy,” Cathy said.

“Okay, you can take him back this afternoon,” Jack replied quietly. The remark got him an angry look. His daughter squealed when the dog started chewing on the heel of one shoe. “She’s not big enough for a pony yet, but I think this is just the right thing.”

“You train it!”

“That’ll be easy. He comes from good stock. Champion Chesapeake’s Victor Hugo Black for a father, would you believe? The Lab’s got a soft mouth, and they like kids,” Jack went on. “I’ve already scheduled him for classes.”

“Classes in what?” Cathy was really befuddled now.

“The breed is called the Labrador *Retriever,”* Jack noted.

“How big does it get?”

“Oh, maybe seventy pounds.”

“That’s bigger than she is!”

“Yeah, they love to swim, too. He can look after her in the pool.”

“We don’t have a pool.”

“They start in three weeks.” Jack smiled again. “Doctor Schenk also said that swimming is good therapy for this kind of injury. ”

“You’ve been busy,” his wife observed. She was smiling now.

“I was going to get a Newfoundland, but they’re just too big—one-fifty.” Jack didn’t say that his first wish had been to get a dog big and tough enough to tear the head off anyone who came close to his daughter, but that his common sense had prevented it.

“Well, there’s your first job,” Cathy pointed. Jack got a paper towel to clean up the puddle on the tile. Before he could do it, his daughter nearly strangled him with a ferocious hug. It was all he could do to control himself, but he had to. Sally would not have understood why her daddy was crying. The world was back in its proper shape. *Now if we can just keep it that way.*

“I’ll have the pictures tomorrow. I wanted to get them done before the trees fill in. When they do, you won’t be able to see the house from the road very well.” Alex summarized the results of his reconnaissance.

“What about the alarm?”

Alex read off the data from his notes.

“How the bloody hell did you get that?”

Dobbens chuckled as he popped open the beer. “It’s easy. If you want the data for any kind of burglar alarm, you call the. company that did it and say you work for an insurance company. You give them a policy number—you make that up, of course—and they give you all the information you want. Ryan has a perimeter system, and a backup intruder system ‘with keys,’ which means that the alarm company has keys to the house. Somewhere on the property they have infrared beams. Probably on the driveway in the trees. This guy isn’t dumb, Sean.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Okay, I’m just telling you. One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“The kid doesn’t get hurt this time, not the wife either if we can help it.”

“That is not part of the plan,” Miller assured him. *You bloody wimp.* Sean had learned a new word in America. *What sort of revolutionary do you think you are?* he didn’t say.

“That’s from my people,” Alex continued, telling only part of the truth. “You gotta understand, Sean, child abuse looks bad over here. It’s not the kind of image we want to have, you dig?”

“And you want to come out with us?”

Dobbens nodded. “It might be necessary.”

“I think we can avoid that. It just means eliminating all the people who see your faces.”

You’re a cold little cocksucker, Dobbens thought, though his words made perfect sense. Dead men told no tales.

“Very well. All we have to do now is find a way to make the security people relax a bit,” the Irishman said. “I’d prefer to avoid brute force.”

“I’ve been thinking about that.” Alex took a moment before going on. “How do armies succeed?”

“What do you mean?” Miller asked.

“I mean, the great plans, the ones that really work. They all work because you show the other guy something he expects to see, right? You make him go for the fake, but it’s gotta be a really good fake. We have to make them look for the wrong thing in the wrong place, and they have to put the word out.”

“And how do we do that?” After two minutes: “Ah.”

Alex retired to his bedroom a few minutes later, leaving Miller in front of the television to go over his material. On the whole, it had been a very useful trip. The plan was already beginning to take shape. It would require a lot of people, but that came as no surprise.

Curiously, his respect for Alex was now diminished. The man was competent, certainly, even brilliant in his plan for a diversion—but that absurd sentimentality! It was not that Miller reveled in the idea of hurting children, but if that was what the revolution took, then it was a necessary price to pay. Besides, it got people's attention. It told them that he and his organization were serious. Until Alex got over that, he'd never be successful. But that wasn't Miller's problem. Part One of the operation was now outlined in his mind. Part Two was already drawn up, already had been aborted once. *But not this time,* Miller promised himself.

By noon the following day, Alex had handed him the photos and driven him to an outlying station of the D.C. Metro. Miller took the subway train to National Airport to catch the first of four flights that would take him home.

Jack walked into Sally's bedroom just before eleven. The dog—his daughter had named him Ernie—was an invisible shape in the corner. This was one of the smartest things he had ever done. Sally was too much in love with Ernie to dwell on her injuries, and she chased after him as fast as her weakened legs would allow. That was enough to make her father overlook the chewed shoes and occasional mistakes with which the dog was littering the house. In a few weeks she'd be back to normal. Jack adjusted the covers slightly before leaving. Cathy was already in bed when he got there.

"Is she okay?"

"Sleeping like an angel," Jack replied as he slid in beside her.

"And Ernie?"

"He's in there somewhere. I could hear his tail hitting the wall." He wrapped his arms around her. It was hard getting close to her now. He ran one hand down to her abdomen, feeling the shape of his unborn child. "How's the next one?"

"Quiet, finally. God, he's an active one. Don't wake him up."

It struck Jack as an absurd idea that babies were awake before they were born, but you couldn't argue with a doctor. "He?"

"That's what Madge says."

"What's she say about you?" He felt her ribs next. They were too prominent. His wife had always been slender, but this was too much.

"I'm gaining the weight back," Cathy answered. "You don't have to worry. Everything's fine."

"Good." He kissed her.

"Is that all I get?" he heard from the darkness.

“You think you can handle more?”

“Jack, I don’t have to go to work tomorrow,” she pointed out.

“But some of us do,” he protested, but soon found that his heart wasn’t in it.

21

Plans

"He is thorough," O'Donnell observed. Miller had returned with the aerial photographs that Dobbens had copied, topographic maps, and photos of Ryan's home from the land and water sides. Added to these were typed notes of the observations made by his people and other data thought to be of interest.

"Unfortunately he allows his personal feelings to interfere with his activities," Miller observed coolly.

"And you don't, Sean?" O'Donnell chided gently.

"It won't happen again," his operations officer promised.

"That's good. The important thing about mistakes is that we learn from them. So let's go over your proposed operation."

Sean took out two other maps and spent twenty minutes running through his ideas. He concluded with Dobbens' suggestion for a diversion.

"I like it." He turned to his intelligence chief. "Michael?"

"The opposition will be formidable, of course, but the plan allows for that. The only thing that worries me is that it will take nearly all of our people to do it."

"Nothing else looks feasible," Miller replied. "It's not so much a question of getting close enough, but of leaving the area after the mission is accomplished. Timing is crucial—"

"And when timing is crucial, simplicity is a must." O'Donnell nodded. "Is there anything else that the opposition might try?"

"I think not," McKenney said. "This is the worst-case expectation. "

"Helicopters," Miller said. "They nearly did for us the last time. No real problem if we're prepared for it, but we must be prepared."

"Very well," O'Donnell said. "And the second part of the operation?"

"Obviously we need to know where all the targets will be," McKenney said. "When do you want me to activate our people?" On orders, the intelligence chief's penetration agents had been quiescent for some weeks.

"Not just yet," the Commander replied thoughtfully. "Again a question of timing. Sean?"

"I think we should wait until the mission is fully accomplished before

moving."

"Yes, it proved to be a good idea the last time," the Commander agreed. "How many people are needed for your operation?"

"No less than fifteen. I think we can depend on Alex for three trained men, himself included. More than that—no, we should limit his participation as much as possible."

"Agreed," McKenney said.

"And training?" O'Donnell asked.

"The most we've ever done."

"To start when?"

"A month beforehand," Miller answered. "Any more time would be a waste of resources. For the moment I have quite a lot of work to do."

"So here are the plans," Murray said. "You can either let them stay at your embassy or we'll put them in Blair House, right across the street from the President."

"With all due respect to your Secret Service chaps—" The head of the Diplomatic Protection Group didn't have to go on. Their safety was his responsibility and he wouldn't trust it to foreigners any more than he had to.

"Yeah, I understand. They'll get a full security detail from the Secret Service plus a couple of FBI liaison people and the usual assistance from the local police. Finally we'll have two HRT groups on alert the whole time they're over, one in D.C., and a backup team at Quantico."

"How many people know?" Ashley asked.

"The Secret Service and Bureau people are already fully briefed. When your advance men go over, they ought to have most of the events scouted for you already. The local cops will not be notified until they have to know."

"You said most of the locations have been scouted, but not all?" Owens asked.

"Do you want us to check out the unannounced points this early, too?"

"No." The man from DPG shook his head. "It's bad enough that the public functions have to be exposed this early. It's still not official that they're going, you know. The element of surprise is our best defense."

Owens looked at his colleague, but didn't react. The head of the DPG was on his suspects list, and his orders were not to allow anyone to know the details of his investigation. Owens thought him to be in the clear, but his detectives had discovered a few irregularities in the man's personal life that had somehow gotten past all the previous security screenings. Until it was certain that he was not a possible blackmail risk, he would not be allowed to know that some possible suspects had already seen the itinerary. The Commander of C-13 gave Murray an ironic look.

“I think you’re overdoing this, gentlemen, but that’s your business,” the FBI man said as he stood. “Your people are flying over tomorrow?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay, Chuck Avery of the Secret Service will meet your people at Dulles. Tell them not to be bashful about asking for things. You will have our total cooperation.” He watched them leave. Five minutes later Owens was back.

“What gives, Jimmy?” Murray wasn’t surprised.

“What further progress have you made on the chaps who attacked Ryan?”

“Not a thing for the past two weeks,” Murray admitted. “You?”

“We have a possible link—let me be precise, we suspect that there might be a possible link.”

The FBI man grinned. “Yeah, I know what that’s like. Who is it?”

“Geoffrey Watkins.” That got a reaction.

“The foreign-service guy? Damn! Anybody else on the list that I know?”

“The chap you were just talking to. Ashley’s people discovered that he’s not entirely faithful to his wife.”

“Boys or girls?” Murray took a cue from the way Owens had said that. “You mean that he doesn’t know, Jimmy?”

“He doesn’t know that the itinerary has been leaked, possibly to the wrong people. Watkins is among them, but so is our DPG friend. ”

“Oh, that’s real good! The plans may be leaked, and you can’t tell the head of the security detail because he may be the one—”

“It’s most unlikely, but we must allow for the possibility.”

“Call the trip off, Jimmy. If you have to break his leg, call it the hell off.”

“We can’t. He won’t. I spoke with His Highness day before yesterday and told him the problem. He refuses to allow his life to be managed that way.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Murray rolled his eyes.

“I must tell someone, Dan. If I can’t tell my chaps, then ...” Owens waved his hands.

“You want us to call the trip off for you, is that it?” Murray demanded. He knew that Owens couldn’t answer that one. “Let’s spell this one out nice and clear. You want our people to be alert to the chance that an attack is a serious possibility, and that one of the good guys might be a bad guy.”

“Correct.”

“This isn’t going to make our folks real happy.”

“I’m not terribly keen on it myself, Dan,” Owens replied.

“Well, it gives Bill Shaw something else to think about.” Another thought struck him. “Jimmy, that’s one expensive piece of live bait you have dangling on the hook.”

“He knows that. It’s our job to keep the sharks away, isn’t it?”

Murray shook his head. The ideal solution would be to find a way to cancel the trip, thereby handing the problem back to Owens and Ashley. That meant involving the State Department. The boys at Foggy Bottom would spike that idea, Murray knew. You couldn’t un-invite a future chief of state because the FBI and Secret Service didn’t think they could guarantee his safety—the reputation of American law-enforcement would be laid open to ridicule, they’d say, knowing that his protection wasn’t the responsibility of the people at State.

“What do you have on Watkins?” he asked after a moment. Owens outlined his “evidence.”

“That’s all?”

“We’re still digging, but so far there is nothing more substantive. It could all be coincidence, of course ...”

“No, it sounds to me like you’re right.” Murray didn’t believe in coincidences either. “But there’s nothing that I could take to a grand jury at home. Have you thought about flushing the game?”

“You mean running through a change in the schedule? Yes, we have. But then what? We could do that, see if Watkins goes to the shop, and arrest both men there—if we can confirm that what is happening is what we think it to be. Unfortunately, that means throwing away the only link we’ve ever had with the ULA, Dan. At the moment, we’re watching Cooley as closely as we dare. He is still traveling. If we can find out whom he is contacting, then perhaps we can wrap up the entire operation. What you suggest is an option, but not the best one. We do have time, you know. We have several months before we need to do something so drastic as that. ”

Murray nodded, not so much in agreement as in understanding. The possibility of finding and destroying O’Donnell’s bunch had to be tantalizing to Scotland Yard. Bagging Cooley now would quash that. It wasn’t something that they’d simply toss off. He knew that the Bureau would think much the same way.

“Jack, I want you to come along with me,” Marty Cantor said. “No questions.”

“What?” Ryan asked, and got an accusing look. “All right, all right.” He took the files he was working on and locked them in his file cabinet, then grabbed his jacket. Cantor led him around the comer to the elevator. After arriving on the first floor, he walked rapidly west into the annex behind the headquarters building. Once in the new structure, they passed through five security checkpoints. This was an all-time record for Ryan, and he wondered if Cantor had had to reprogram the pass-control computer to get him into this building. After ten minutes he was on the fourth floor in a room identified only by its number.

"Jack, this is Jean-Claude. He's one of our French colleagues."

Ryan shook hands with a man twenty years older than himself, whose face was the embodiment of civilized irony. "What gives, Marty?"

"Professor Ryan," Jean-Claude said. "I am informed that you are the man we must thank."

"What for—" Ryan stopped. *Uh-oh.* The Frenchman led him to a TV monitor.

"Jack, you never saw this," Cantor said as a picture formed on the screen. It had to be satellite photography. Ryan knew it at once from the viewing angle, which changed very slowly.

"When?" he asked.

"Last night, our time, about three A.M. local."

"Correct." Jean-Claude nodded, his eyes locked on the screen.

It was Camp -20, Ryan thought. The one that belonged to *Action-Directe.* The spacing of the huts was familiar. The infrared picture showed that three of the huts had their heaters on. The brightness of the heat signals told him that ground temperature must have been about freezing. South of the camp, behind a dune, two vehicles were parked. Jack couldn't tell if they were jeeps or small trucks. On closer inspection, faint figures were moving on the cold background: men. From the way they moved: soldiers. He counted eight of them split into two equal groups. Near one of the huts was a brighter light. There appeared to be a man standing there. *Three in the morning, when one's body functions are at the lowest ebb.* One of the camp guards was smoking on duty, doubtlessly trying to stay awake. That was a mistake, Ryan knew. The flare of the match would have destroyed his night vision. *Oh, well....*

"Now," Jean-Claude said.

There was a brief flash from one of the eight intruders; it was strange to see but not hear it. Ryan couldn't tell if the guard moved as a result, but his cigarette did, flying perhaps two yards, after which both images remained stationary. *That's a kill,* he told himself. *Dear God, what am I watching?* The eight pale shapes closed on the camp. First they entered the guard hut—it was always the same one. A moment later they were back outside. Next, they redeployed into the two groups of four, each group heading toward one of the "lighted" huts.

"Who are the troops?" Jack asked.

"Paras," Jean-Claude answered simply.

Some of the men reappeared thirty seconds later. After another minute, the rest emerged—more than had gone in, Ryan saw. Two seemed to be carrying something. Then something else entered the picture. It was a bright glow that washed out other parts of the picture, but the new addition was a helicopter, its engines blazing in the infrared picture. The picture quality deteriorated and the camera zoomed back. Two more helicopters were in the area. One landed near the vehicles, and the jeeps were driven into it. After that helicopter lifted

off, the other skimmed the ground, following the vehicle tracks for several miles and erasing them with its downdraft. By the time the satellite lost visual lock with the scene, everyone was gone. The entire exercise had taken less than ten minutes.

"Quick and clean," Marty breathed.

"You got her?" Jack had to ask.

"Yes," Jean-Claude replied. "And five others, four of them alive. We removed all of them, and the camp guards who, I regret to say, did not survive the evening." The Frenchman's regrets were tossed in for good manners only. His face showed what he really felt.

"Any of your people hurt?" Cantor asked.

An amused shake of his head: "No. They were all asleep, you see. One slept with a pistol next to his cot, and made the mistake of reaching for it."

"You pulled everybody out, even the camp guards?"

"Of course. All are now in Chad. The living are being questioned."

"How did you arrange the satellite coverage?" Jack asked.

This answer came with a Gallic shrug. "A fortunate coincidence."

Right, Jack thought. *Some coincidence. I just watched the instant-replay of the death of three or four people.* Terrorists, he corrected himself. *Except for the camp guards, who only helped terrorists. The timing could not have been an accident. The French wanted us to know that they were in counterterrorist operations for-real.*

"Why am I here?"

"But you made this possible," Jean-Claude said. "It is my pleasure to give you the thanks of my country."

"What's going to happen to the people you captured?" Jack wanted to know.

"Do you know how many people they have assassinated? For those crimes they will answer. Justice, that will happen to them."

"You wanted to see a success, Jack," Cantor said. "You just did. "

Ryan thought that one over. Removing the bodies of the camp guards told him how the operation would end. No one was supposed to know what had happened. Sure, some bullet holes were left behind, and a couple of bloodstains, but no bodies. The raiders had quite literally covered their tracks. The whole operation was "deniable." There was nothing left behind that would point to the French. In that sense it had been a perfect covert operation. And if that much effort had gone into making it so, then there was little reason to suspect that the *Action-Directe* people would ever face a jury. *You wouldn't go to that much trouble and then go through the publicity of a trial,* Ryan told himself. *Goodbye, Françoise* Theroux....

I condemned these people to death, he realized finally. Just the one of them

was enough to trouble his conscience. He remembered the police-style photograph he'd seen of her face and the fuzzy satellite image of a girl in a bikini.

"She's murdered at least three people," Cantor said, reading Jack's face.

"Professor Ryan, she has no heart, that one. No feelings. You must not be misled by her face," Jean-Claude advised. "They cannot all look like Hitler."

But that was only part of it, Ryan knew. Her looks merely brought into focus that hers was a human life whose term was now unnaturally limited. *As she has limited those of others,* Jack told himself. He admitted to himself that he would have no qualms at all if her name had been Sean Miller.

"Forgive me," he said. "It must be my romantic nature."

"But of course," the Frenchman said generously. "It is something to be regretted, but those people made their choice, Professor, not you. You have helped to avenge the lives of many innocent people, and you have saved those of people you will never know. There will be a formal note of thanks—a secret one, of course—for your assistance."

"Glad to help, Colonel," Cantor said. Hands were shaken all around, and Marty led Jack back to the headquarters building.

"I don't know that I want to see anything like that again," Ryan said in the corridor. "I mean, I don't want to know their faces. I mean—hell, I don't know what I mean. Maybe—it's just ... different when you're detached from it, you know? It was too much like watching a ball game on TV, but it wasn't a ball game. Who was that guy, anyway?"

"Jean-Claude's the head of the DGSE's Washington Station, and he was the liaison man. We got the first new picture of her a day and a half ago. They had the operation all ready to roll, and he got things going inside of six hours. Impressive performance."

"I imagine they wanted us to be impressed. They're not bringing 'em in, are they?"

"No. I seriously doubt those people are going back to France to stand trial. Remember the problem they had the last time they tried a public trial of *Action-Directe* members? The jurors started getting midnight phone calls, and the case got blown away. Maybe they don't want to put up with the hassle again." Cantor frowned. "Well, it's not our call to make. Their system isn't the same as ours. All we did was forward information to an ally."

"An American court could call that accessory to murder."

"Possibly," Cantor admitted. "Personally, I prefer what Jean-Claude called it."

"Then why are you leaving in August?" Ryan asked.

Cantor delivered his answer without facing him. "Maybe you'll find out someday, Jack."

Back alone in his office, Ryan couldn't get his mind off what he'd seen. Five

thousand miles away, agents of the DGSE's "action" directorate were now questioning that girl. If this had been a movie, their techniques would be brutal. What they used in real life, Ryan didn't want to know. He told himself that the members of *Action-Directe* had brought it on themselves. First, they had made a conscious choice to be what they were. Second, in subverting the French legal system the previous year, they'd given their enemies an excuse to bypass whatever constitutional guarantees ... but was that truly an excuse?

"What would Dad think?" he murmured to himself. Then the next question hit him. Ryan lifted his phone and punched in the right number.

"Cantor."

"Why, Marty?"

"Why what, Jack?"

"Why did you let me see that?"

"Jean-Claude wanted to meet you, and he also wanted you to see what your data accomplished."

"That's bull, Marty! You let me into a real-time satellite display—okay, taped, but essentially the same thing. There can't be many people cleared for that. I don't need-to-know how good the real-time capability is. You could have told him I wasn't cleared for it and that would have been that."

"Okay, you've had some time to think it over. Tell me what you think."

"I don't like it."

"Why?" Cantor asked.

"It broke the law."

"Not ours. Like I told you twenty minutes ago, all we did was provide intelligence information to a friendly foreign nation."

"But they used it to kill people."

"What do you think intel is *for*, Jack? What should they have done? No, answer this first: what if they were foreign nationals who had murdered French nationals in—in Liechtenstein, say, and then boogied back to their base?"

"That's not the same thing. That's more ... more like an act of war—like doing the guards at the camp. The people they *were* after were their own citizens who committed crimes in their own country, and—and are subject to French law."

"And what if it had been a different camp? What if those paratroopers had done a job for us, or the Brits, and taken out your ULA friends?"

"That's different!" Ryan snapped back. *But why?* he asked himself a moment later. "It's personal. You can't expect me to feel the same way about that."

"Can't I?" Cantor hung up the phone.

Ryan stared at the telephone receiver for several seconds before replacing it

in the cradle. What was Marty trying to tell him? Jack reviewed the events in his own mind, trying to come to a conclusion that made sense.

Did any of it make sense? Did it make sense for political dissidents to express themselves with bombs and machine guns? Did it make sense for small nations to use terrorism as a short-of-war weapon to change the policies of larger ones? Ryan grunted. That depended on which side of the issue you were on—or at least there were people who thought that way. Was this something completely new?

It was, and it wasn't. State-sponsored terrorism, in the form of the Barbary pirates, had been America's first test as a nation. The enemy objective then had been simple greed. The Barbary states demanded tribute before they would give right of passage to American-flag trading ships, but it had finally been decided that enough was enough. Preble took the infant U.S. Navy to the Mediterranean Sea to put an end to it—no, to put an end to America's victimization by it, Jack corrected himself.

God, it was even the same place, Ryan thought. "To the shores of Tripoli," the Marine Hymn said, where First Lieutenant Presley O'Bannon, USMC, had attacked the fort at Derna. Jack wondered if the place still existed. Certainly the problem did.

The violence hadn't changed. What had changed were the rules under which the large nations acted, and the objectives of their enemies. Two hundred years earlier, when a small nation offended a larger one, ships and troops would settle matters. No longer was this simple wog-bashing, though. The smaller countries now had arsenals of modern weapons that could make such punitive expeditions too expensive for societies that had learned to husband the lives of their young men. A regiment of troops could no longer settle matters, and moving a whole army was no longer such a simple thing. Knowing this, the small country could inflict wounds itself, or even more safely, sponsor others to do so—"deniably"—in order to move its larger opponent in the desired direction. There wasn't even much of a hurry. Such low-level conflict could last years, so small were the expenditures of resources and so different the perceived value of the human lives taken and lost.

What was new, then, was not the violence, but the safety of the nation that either performed or sponsored it. Until that changed, the killing would never stop.

So, on the international level, terrorism was a form of war that didn't even have to interrupt normal diplomatic relations. America itself had embassies in some of the nations, even today. Nearer to home, however, it was being treated as a crime. He'd faced Miller in the Old Bailey, Ryan remembered, not a military court-martial. *They can even use that against us.* It was a surprising realization. *They can fight their kind of war, but we can't recognize it as such without giving up something our society needs. If we treat terrorists as politically motivated activists, we give them an honor they don't deserve. If we treat them as soldiers, and kill them as such, we both give them legitimacy and violate our own laws.* By a small stretch of the imagination, organized crime could be thought of as a form of terrorism, Ryan knew. The terrorists' only weakness was their

negativity. They were a political movement with nothing to offer other than their conviction that their parent society was unjust. So long as the people in that society felt otherwise, it was the terrorists who were alienated from it, not the population as a whole. The democratic processes that benefited the terrorists were also their worst political enemy. Their prime objective, then, had to be the elimination of the democratic process, converting justice to injustice in order to arouse members of the society to sympathy with the terrorists.

The pure elegance of the concept was stunning. Terrorists could fight a war and be protected by the democratic processes of their enemy. If those processes were obviated, the terrorists would win additional political support, but so long as those processes were not obviated, it was extremely difficult for them to lose. They could hold a society hostage against itself and its most important precepts, daring it to change. They could move around at will, taking advantage of the freedom that defined a democratic state, and get all the support they needed from a nation-state with which their parent society was unwilling or unable to deal effectively.

The only solution was international cooperation. The terrorists had to be cut off from support. Left to their own resources, terrorists would become little more than an organized-crime network.... But the democracies found it easier to deal with their domestic problems singly than to band together and strike a decisive blow at those who fomented them, despite all the rhetoric to the contrary. Had that just changed? The CIA had given data on terrorists to someone else, and action had been taken as a result. What he had seen earlier, therefore, was a step in the right direction, even if it wasn't necessarily the right kind of step. Ryan told himself that he'd just witnessed one of the world's many imperfections, but at least one aimed in the proper direction. That it had disturbed him was a consequence of his civilization. That he was now rationalizing it was a result of ... what?

Cantor walked into Admiral Greer's office.

"Well?" the DDI asked.

"We'll give him a high B, maybe an A-minus. It depends on what he learns from it."

"Conscience attack?" the DDI asked.

"Yeah."

"It's about time he found out what the game's really like. Everybody has to learn that. He'll stay," Greer said.

"Probably. "

The pickup truck tried to pull into the driveway that passed under the Hoover building, but a guard waved him off. The driver hesitated, partly in frustration, partly in rage while he tried to figure something else out. The

heavy traffic didn't help. Finally he started circling the block until he was able to find a way into a public parking garage. The attendant held up his nose at the plebeian vehicle—he was more accustomed to Buicks and Cadillacs—and burned rubber on the way up the ramp to show his feelings. The driver and his son didn't care. They walked downhill and across the street, going by foot on the path denied their truck. Finally they got to the door and walked in.

The agent who had desk duty noted the entrance of two people somewhat disreputably dressed, the elder of whom had something wrapped in his leather jacket and tucked under his arm. This got the agent's immediate and full attention. He waved the visitors over with his left hand. His right was somewhere else.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"Hi," the man said. "I got something for you." The man raised the jacket and pulled out a submachine gun. He quickly learned that this wasn't the way to get on the FBI's good side.

The desk agent snatched the weapon and yanked it off the desk, standing and reaching for his service revolver. The panic button under the desk was already pushed, and two more agents in the room converged on the scene. The man behind the desk immediately saw that the gun's bolt was closed—the gun was safe, and there wasn't a magazine in the pistol grip.

"I found it!" the kid announced proudly.

"What?" one of the arriving agents said.

"And I figured I'd bring it here," the lad's father said.

"What the hell?" the desk agent observed.

"Let's see it." A supervisory agent arrived next. He came from a surveillance room whose TV cameras monitored the entrance. The man behind the desk rechecked to make sure the weapon was safe, then handed it across.

It was an Uzi, the 9mm Israeli submachine gun used all over the world because of its quality, balance, and accuracy. The cheap-looking (the Uzi is anything but cheap, though it does look that way) metal stampings were covered with red-brown rust, and water dripped from the receiver. The agent pulled open the bolt and stared down the barrel. The gun had been fired and not cleaned since. It was impossible to tell how long ago that had been, but there weren't all that many FBI cases pending in which a weapon of this type had been used.

"Where did you find this, sir?"

"In a quarry, about thirty miles from here," the man said.

"*I* found it!" the kid pointed out.

"That's right, he found it," his father conceded. "I figured this was the place to bring it."

"You thought right, sir. Will both of you come with me, please?"

The agent on the desk gave both of them "visitor" passes. He and the other

two agents on entrance-guard duty went back to work, wondering what the hell that had been all about.

On the building's top floor, those few people in the corridor were surprised to see a man walking around with a machine gun, but it would not have been in keeping with Bureau chic to pay too much attention—the man with the gun did have an FBI pass, and he was carrying it properly. When he walked into an office, however, it did get a reaction from the first secretary he saw.

"Is Bill in?" the agent asked.

"Yes, I'll—" Her eyes didn't leave the gun.

The man waved her off, motioned for the visitors to follow him, and walked toward Shaw's office. The door was open. Shaw was talking with one of his people. Special Agent Richard Alden went straight to Shaw's desk and set the gun on the blotter.

"Christ, Richie!" Shaw looked up at the agent, then back down at the gun. "What's this?"

"Bill, these two folks just walked in the door downstairs and gave it to us. I thought it might be interesting."

Shaw looked at the two people with visitor passes and invited them to sit on the couch against the wall. He called for two more agents to join them, plus someone from the ballistics laboratory. While things were being organized, his secretary got a cup of coffee for the father and a Dr Pepper for the son.

"Could I have your names, please?"

"I'm Robert Newton and this here's my son Leon." He gave his address and phone number without being asked.

"And where did you find the gun?" Shaw asked while his subordinates were taking notes.

"It's called Jones Quarry. I can show you on a map."

"What were you doing there?"

"I was fishing. I found it," Leon reminded them.

"I was getting in some firewood," his father said.

"This time of year?"

"Beats doing it during the summer, when it's hot, man," Mr. Newton pointed out reasonably. "Also lets the wood season some. I'm a construction worker. I walk iron, and it's a little slow right now, so I went out for some wood. The boy's off from school today, so I brought him along. While I cut the wood, Leon likes to fish. There's some big ones in the quarry," he added with a wink.

"Oh, okay." Shaw grinned. "Leon, you ever catch one?"

"No, but I got close last time," the youngster responded.

"Then what?"

Mr. Newton nodded for his son.

“My hook got caught on sumthin’ heavy, you know, an’ I pulled and pulled and pulled. It come loose, and I tried real hard, but I couldn’t reel it up. So I called my daddy.”

“I reeled it in,” Mr. Newton explained. “When I saw it was a gun, I almost crapped my drawers. The hook was snagged on the trigger guard. What kinda gun is that, anyway?”

“Uzi. It’s made in Israel, mostly,” the ballistics expert said, looking up from the weapon. “It’s been in the water at least a month.”

Shaw and another agent shared a look at that bit of news.

“I’m afraid I handled it a lot,” Newton said. “Hope I didn’t mess up any fingerprints.”

“Not after being in the water, Mr. Newton,” Shaw replied. “And you brought it right here?”

“Yeah, we only got it, oh”—he checked his watch—“an hour and a half ago. Aside from handling it, we didn’t do anything. It didn’t have no magazine in it.”

“You know guns?” the ballistics man asked.

“I spent a year in Nam. I was a grunt with the 173rd Airborne. I know M-16s pretty good.” Newton smiled. “And I used to do a little hunting, mostly birds and rabbits.”

“Tell us about the quarry,” Shaw said.

“It’s off the main road, back maybe three-quarters of a mile, I guess. Lots of trees back there. That’s where I get my firewood. I don’t really know who owns it. Lots of cars go back there. You know, it’s a parking spot for kids on Saturday nights, that sorta place. ”

“Have you ever heard shooting there?”

“No, except during hunting season. There’s squirrels in there, lotsa squirrels. So what’s with the gun? Does it mean anything to ya?”

“It might. It’s the kind of gun used in the murder of a police officer, and—”

“Oh, yeah! That lady and her kid over Annapolis, right?” He paused for a moment. “Damn.”

Shaw looked at the boy. He was about nine, the agent thought, and the kid had smart eyes, scanning the items Shaw had on his walls, the memorabilia from his many cases and posts. “Mr. Newton, you have done us a very big favor.”

“Oh, yeah?” Leon responded. “What you gonna do with the gun?”

The ballistics expert answered. “First we’ll clean it and make sure it’s safe. Then we’ll fire it.” He looked at Shaw. “You can forget any other forensic stuff. The water in the quarry must be chemically active. This corrosion is pretty fierce.” He looked at Leon. “If you catch any fish there, son, you be sure

you don't eat them unless your dad says it's all right."

"Okay," the boy assured him.

"Fibers," Shaw said.

"Yeah, maybe that. Don't worry. If they're there, we'll find 'em. What about the barrel?"

"Maybe," the man replied. "By the way, this gun comes from Singapore. That makes it fairly new. The Israelis just licensed them to make the piece eighteen months ago. It's the same outfit that makes the M-16 under license from Colt's." He read off the number. It would be telexed to the FBI's Legal Attaché in Singapore in a matter of minutes. "I want to get to work on this right now. "

"Can I watch?" Leon asked. "I'll keep out of the way."

"Tell you what," Shaw said. "I want to talk to your dad a little longer. How about I have one of our agents take you through our museum. You can see how we caught all the old-time bad guys. If you wait outside, somebody will come and take you around."

"Okay!"

"We can't talk about this, right?" Mr. Newton asked after his son had left.

"That's correct, sir." Shaw paused. "That's important for two reasons. First, we don't want the perpetrators to know that we've had a break in the case—and this could be a major break, Mr. Newton; you've done something very important. The other reason is to protect you and your family. The people involved in this are very dangerous. Put it this way: you know that they tried to kill a pregnant woman and a four-year-old girl."

That got the man's attention. Robert Newton, who had five children, three of them girls, didn't like hearing that.

"Now, have you ever seen people around the quarry?" Shaw asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Anybody."

"There's maybe two or three other folks who cut wood back there. I know the names—I mean their first names, y'know? And like I said, kids like to go parking back there." He laughed. "Once I had to help one out. I mean, the road's not all that great, and this one kid was stuck in the mud, and ..." Newton's voice trailed off. His face changed. "Once, it was a Tuesday ... I couldn't work that day 'cause the crane was broke, and I didn't much feel like sitting around the house, y'know? So I went out to chop some wood. There was this van coming outa the road. He was having real trouble in the mud. I had to wait like ten minutes 'cause he blocked the whole road, slippin' and slidin', like."

"What kind of van?"

"Dark, mostly. The kind with the sliding door—musta been customized some, it had that dark stuff on the windows, y'know?"

Bingo! Shaw told himself. “Did you see the driver or anybody inside?”

Newton thought for a moment. “Yeah ... it was a black dude. He was—yeah, I remember, he was yellin‘, like. I guess he was pissed at getting stuck like that. I mean, I couldn’t hear him, but you could tell he was yelling, y’know? He had a beard, and a leather jacket like the one I wear to work.”

“Anything else about the van?”

“I think it made noise, like it had a big V-8. Yeah, it must have been a custom van to have that.”

Shaw looked at his men, too excited to smile as they scribbled their notes.

“The papers said all the crooks were white,” Newton said.

“The papers don’t always get things right,” Shaw noted.

“You mean the bastard who killed that cop was black?” Newton didn’t like that. So was he. “And he tried to do that family, too.... Shit!”

“Mr. Newton, that is secret. Do you understand me? You can’t tell anybody about that, not even your son—was he there then?”

“Nah, he was in school.”

“Okay, you can’t tell anyone. That is to protect you and your family. We’re talking about some very dangerous people here.”

“Okay, man.” Newton looked at the table for a moment. “You mean we got people running around with machine guns, killing people—here? Not in Lebanon and like that, but here?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“Hey, man, I didn’t spend a year in the Nam so we could have that shit where I live.”

Several floors downstairs, two weapons experts had already detail-stripped the Uzi. A small vacuum cleaner was applied to every part in the hope there might be cloth fibers that matched those taken from the van. A final careful look was taken at the parts. The damage from water immersion had done no good to the stampings, made mostly of mild steel. The stronger, corrosion-resistant ballistic steel of the barrel and bolt were in somewhat better shape. The lab chief reassembled the gun himself, just to show his technicians that he still knew how. He took his time, oiling the pieces with care, finally working the action to make sure it functioned properly.

“Okay,” he said to himself. He left the weapon on the table, its bolt closed on an empty chamber. Next he pulled an Uzi magazine from a cabinet and loaded twenty 9-millimeter rounds. This he stuck in his pocket.

It always struck visitors as somewhat incongruous. The technicians usually wore white laboratory coats, like doctors, when they fired the guns. The man donned his ear protectors, stuck the muzzle into the slot, and fired a single round to make certain that the gun really worked. It did. Then he held the

trigger down, emptying the magazine in a brief span of seconds. He pulled out the magazine, checked that the weapon was safe, and handed it to his assistant.

"I'm going to wash my hands. Let's get those bullets checked out." The chief ballistics technician was a fastidious person.

By the time he was finished drying his hands, he had a collection of twenty spent bullets. The metal jacket on each showed the characteristic marks made by the rifling of the machine gun's barrel. The marks were roughly the same on each bullet, but slightly different, since the gun barrel expanded when it got hot.

He took a small box from the evidence case. This bullet had gone completely through the body of a police officer, he remembered. It seemed such a puny thing to have taken a life, he thought, not even an ounce of lead and steel, hardly deformed at all from its deadly passage. It was hard not to dwell on such thoughts. He placed it on one side of the comparison microscope and took another from the set he'd just fired. Then he removed his glasses and bent down to the eyepieces. The bullets were ... close. They'd definitely been fired by the same kind of gun.... He switched samples. Closer. The third bullet was closer still. He carefully rotated the sample, comparing it with the round that was kept in the evidence case, and it ...

"We got a match." He backed away from the 'scope and another technician bent down to check.

"Yeah, that's a match. One hundred percent," the man agreed. The boss ordered his men to check other rounds and walked to the phone.

"Shaw."

"It's the same gun. One-hundred-percent sure. I have a match on the round that killed the trooper. They're checking the ones from the Porsche now."

"Good work, Paul!"

"You bet. I'll be back to you in a little while."

Shaw replaced the phone and looked at his people. "Gentlemen, we just had a break in the Ryan case."

22

Procedures

Robert Newton took the agents to the quarry that night. By dawn the next day a full team of forensic experts was sifting through every speck of dirt at the site. A pair of divers went into the murky water, and ten agents were posted in the woods to watch for company. Another team located and interviewed Newton's fellow woodcutters. More spoke with the residents of the farms near the road leading back into the woods. Dirt samples were taken to be matched with those vacuumed from the van. The tracks were photographed for later analysis.

The ballistics people had already made further tests on the Uzi. The ejected cartridge cases were compared with those recovered from the van and the crime scene, and showed perfect matches in extractor marks and firing-pin penetrations. The match of the gun with the crime and the van was now better than one hundred percent. The serial number had been confirmed with the factory in Singapore, and records were being checked to determine where the gun had been shipped. The name of every arms dealer in the world was in the Bureau's computer.

The whole purpose of the FBI's institutional expertise was to take a single piece of information and develop it into a complete criminal case. What it could not entirely prevent was having someone see them. Alex Dobbens drove past the quarry road on his way to work every day. He saw a pair of vehicles pulling out onto the highway from the dirt and gravel path. Though both the car and van from the FBI laboratory were unmarked, they had federal license plates, and that was all he needed to see.

Dobbens was not an excitable man. His professional training permitted him to look at the world as a collection of small, discrete problems, each of which had a solution; and if you solved enough of the small ones, then the large ones would similarly be solved, one at a time. He was also a meticulous person. Everything he did was part of a larger plan, both part of, and isolated from, the next planned step. It was not something that his people had easily come to understand, but it was hard to argue with success, and everything Dobbens did was successful. This had earned him respect and obedience from people who had once been too passionate for what Alex deemed their mission in life.

It was unusual, Dobbens thought, for two cars at once to come out of that road. It was out of the ordinary realm of probability that both should have government license plates. Therefore he had to assume that somehow the feds had learned that he'd used the quarry for weapons training. How had it been

blown? he wondered. A hunter, perhaps, one of the rustics who went in there after squirrels and birds? Or one of the people who chopped wood, maybe? Or some kid from a nearby farm? How big a problem was this?

He'd taken his people to shoot there only four times, the most recent being when the Irish had come over. *Hmm, what does that tell me?* he asked the road in front of his car. *That was weeks ago.* Each time, they'd done all the shooting during rush hour, mostly in the morning. Even this far from D.C., there were a lot of cars and trucks on the road in the morning and late afternoon, enough to add quite a bit of noise to the environment. It was therefore unlikely that anyone had heard them. *Okay.*

Every time they had shot there, Alex had been assiduous about picking up the brass, and he was certain that they'd left nothing behind, not even a cigarette butt, to prove that they'd been there. They could not avoid leaving tire marks, but one of the reasons he'd picked the place was that kids went back there to park on weekends—there were plenty of tire marks.

They had dumped the gun there, he remembered, but who could have discovered that? The water in the quarry was over eighty feet deep—he'd checked—and looked about as uninviting as a rice paddy, murky from dirt that washed in, and whatever kind of scum it was that formed on the surface. Not a place to go swimming. They had dumped only the gun that had been fired, but as unlikely as it seemed, he had to assume they'd found it. How that had happened didn't matter for the moment. *Well, we have to dispose of the others too, now, Alex told himself. You can always get new guns.*

What is the most the cops can learn? he asked himself. He was well versed on police procedures. It seemed only reasonable that he should know his enemy, and Alex owned a number of texts on investigative techniques, the books used to train cops in their various academies, like Snyder's *Homicide Investigation* and the *Law Enforcement Bible.* He and his people studied them as carefully as the would-be cops with their shiny young faces....

There could be no fingerprints on the gun. After being in water, the skin oil that makes the marks would long since have been gone. Alex had handled and cleaned it, but he didn't need to worry about that.

The van was gone. It had been stolen to begin with, then customized by one of Alex's own people, and had used four different sets of tags. The tags were long gone, underneath a telephone/power pole in Anne Arundel County. If something had resulted from that, he'd have known it long before now, Alex thought. The van itself had been fully sanitized, everything had been wiped clean, the dirt from the quarry road ... that was something to think about, but the van still led to a dead end. They'd left nothing in it to connect it with his group.

Had any of his people talked, perhaps a man with an aching conscience because of the kid who'd almost died? Again, had that happened, he would have awakened this afternoon to see a badge and gun in front of his face. So that was out. Probably. He'd talk to his people about that, remind them that they could never talk with anyone about what they did.

Might his face have been seen? Alex chided himself again for having waved at the helicopter. But he'd been wearing a hat, sunglasses, and a beard, all of which were now gone, along with the jacket, jeans, and boots that he'd worn. He still had the work gloves, but they were so common an item that you could buy them in any hardware store. *So dump 'em and buy another pair, asshole!* he said to himself. *Make sure they're the same color, and keep the sales receipt.*

His mind ran through the data again. He might even be overreacting, he thought. The feds could be investigating some totally unrelated thing, but it was stupid to take any unnecessary risks. Everything that they'd used at the quarry would be disposed of. He'd make a complete list of possible connections and eliminate every one of them. They'd never go back there again. Cops had their rules and procedures, and he'd unhesitatingly copied the principle to deny its advantage to his opponents. He had established the rules for himself after seeing what catastrophes resulted from having none. The radical groups he'd hovered around in his college days had died because of their arrogance and stupidity, their underestimation of the skill of their enemies. Fundamentally, they'd died because they were unworthy of success. *Victory comes only to those prepared to make it, and take it,* Alex thought. He was even able to keep from congratulating himself on spotting the feds. It was simple prudence, not genius. His route had been chosen with an eye to taking note of such things. He already had another promising site for weapons training.

"Erik Martens," Ryan breathed. "We meet again."

All of the FBI's data had been forwarded to the Central Intelligence Agency's working group within hours of its receipt. The Uzi that had been recovered—Ryan marveled at how that had happened!—had, he saw, been fabricated in Singapore, at a plant that also made a version of the M-16 rifle that he'd carried in the Corps, and a number of other military arms, both East and West, for sale to third-world countries ... and other interested parties. From his work the previous summer, Ryan knew that there were quite a few such factories, and quite a few governments whose only measure for the legitimacy of an arms purchaser was his credit rating. Even those who paid lip-service to such niceties as "end-user certificates" often turned a blind eye to the reputation of a dealer who never quite proved to be on the wrong side of the shadowy line that was supposed to distinguish the honest from the others. Since it was the dealer's government that generally made this determination, yet another variable was added to an already inexact equation.

Such was the case with Mr. Martens. A very competent man in his business, a man with remarkable connections, Martens had once worked with the CIA-backed UNITA rebels in Angola until a more regular pipeline had been established. His principal asset, however, was his ability to obtain items for the South African government. His last major coup had been obtaining the manufacturing tools and dies for the Milan antitank missile, a weapon that could not be legally shipped to the Afrikaner government due to the Western embargo. After three months' creative effort on his part, the government's own

armaments factories would be making it themselves. His fee for that had doubtless been noteworthy, Ryan knew, though the CIA had been unable to ascertain just how noteworthy. The man owned his own business jet, a Grumman G-3 with intercontinental range. To make sure that he could fly it anywhere he wished, Martens had obtained weapons for a number of black African nations, and even missiles for Argentina. He could go to any comer of the world and find a government that was in his debt. The man would have been a sensation on Wall Street or any other marketplace, Ryan smiled to himself. He could deal with anyone, could market weapons the way that people in Chicago traded wheat futures.

The Uzis from Singapore had come to him. Everyone loved the Uzi. Even the Czechs had tried to copy it, but without great commercial success. The Israelis sold them by the thousands to military and security forces, always—most of the time—following the rules that the United States insisted upon. Quite a few had found their way to South Africa, Ryan read, until the embargo had made it rather more difficult. *Is that the reason they finally let someone make the gun under license?* Jack wondered. *Let someone else broaden the market for you, and just keep the profits....*

The shipment had been five thousand units ... about two million dollars, wholesale. Not very much, really, enough to equip a city police force or a regiment of paratroopers, depending on the receiving government's orientation. Large enough to show a profit for Mr. Martens, small enough not to attract a great deal of attention. One truckload, Ryan wondered, maybe two? The pallets of boxes would be tucked into a comer of his warehouse, technically supervised by his government, but more likely in fact to be Martens' private domain....

That's what Sir Basil Charleston told me at the dinner, Ryan reminded himself. *You didn't pay enough attention to that South African chap....* So the Brits think he deals to terrorists ... directly? No, his government wouldn't tolerate that. *Probably wouldn't,* Ryan corrected himself. The guns might find their way to the African National Congress, which might not be very good news for the government they were pledged to destroy. So now Ryan had to find an intermediary. It took thirty minutes to get that file, involving a call to Marty Cantor.

The file was a disaster. Martens had eight known and fifteen suspected intermediary agents ... one or two in every country he sold to—of course! Ryan punched Cantor's number again.

"I take it we've never talked to Martens?" Ryan asked.

"Not for a few years. He ran some guns into Angola for us, but we didn't like the way he handled things."

"How so?"

"The man's something of a crook," Cantor replied. "That's not terribly unusual in the arms business, but we try to avoid the type. We set up our own pipeline after the Congress took away the restriction on those operations."

“I got twenty-three names here,” Ryan said.

“Yeah, I’m familiar with the file. We thought he was passing arms to an Iranian-sponsored group last November, but it turned out he wasn’t. It took us a couple of months to clear him. It would have been a whole lot easier if we’d been able to talk to him.”

“What about the Brits?” Jack asked.

“Stone wall,” Marty said. “Every time they try to talk with him, some big ol’ Afrikaner soldier says no. You can’t blame them, really, if the West treats them like pariahs, they’re sure as hell going to act like pariahs. The other thing to remember is, pariahs stick together.”

“So we don’t know what we need to know about this guy and we’re not going to find out.”

“I didn’t say that exactly. ”

“Then we’re sending people in to check a few things out?” Ryan asked hopefully.

“I didn’t say that either.”

“Dammit, Marty!”

“Jack, you are not cleared to know anything about field operations. In case you haven’t noticed, not one of the files you’ve seen tells you how the information gets in here.”

Ryan had noticed that. Informants weren’t named, meeting places weren’t specified, and the methods used to pass the information were nowhere to be found. “Okay, may I safely assume that we will, by some unknown means, get more data on this gentleman?”

“You may safely assume that the possibility is being considered.”

“He may be the best lead we have,” Jack pointed out.

“I know.”

“This can be pretty frustrating stuff, Marty,” Ryan said, getting that off his chest.

“Tell me about it,” Cantor chuckled. “Wait till you get involved with something really important—sorry, but you know what I mean. Like what the Politburo people really think about something, or how powerful and accurate their missiles are, or whether they have somebody planted in this building.”

“One problem at a time.”

“Yeah, that must be nice, sport, just to have one problem at a time. ”

“When can I expect something on Martens?” Ryan asked.

“You’ll know when it comes in,” Cantor promised. “Bye.”

“Great.” Jack spent the rest of the day and part of another looking through the list of people Martens had dealt with. It was a relief to have to go back to teaching class the next two days, but he did find one possible connection. The

Mercury motors found on the Zodiac used by the ULA had probably—the bookkeeping had broken down in Europe—gone through a Maltese dealer with whom Martens had done a little business.

The good news of the spring was that Ernie was a quick study. The dog got the hang of relieving himself outside within the first two weeks, which relieved Jack of a message from his daughter, “Daaaaddy, there’s a little proooblem ...” invariably followed by a question from his wife: “Having fun, Jack?” In fact, even his wife admitted that the dog was working out nicely. Ernie could only be separated from their daughter with a hard tug on his leash. He now slept in her bed, except when he patrolled the house every few hours. It was somewhat unnerving at first to see the dog—rather, to see a black mass darker than the night a few inches from one’s face—when Ernie seemed to be reporting that everything was clear before he headed back to Sally’s room for two more hours of protective slumber. He was still a puppy, with impossibly long legs and massive webbed feet, and he still liked to chew things. When that had included the leg of one of Sally’s Barbie dolls, it resulted in a furious scolding from his owner that ended when he started licking Sally’s face by way of contrition.

Sally was finally back to normal. As the doctors had promised her parents, her legs were fully healed, and she was running around now as she had before. This day would mark her return to Giant Steps. Her way of knocking glasses off tables as she ran past them was the announcement that things were right again, and her parents were too pleased by this to bring themselves to scold the girl for her unladylike behavior. For her part, Sally endured an abnormally large number of spontaneous hugs which she didn’t really understand. She’d been sick and she was now better. She’d never really known that an attack had happened, Jack was slow to realize. The handful of times she referred to it, it had always been “the time the car broke.” She still had to see the doctors every few weeks for tests. She both hated and dreaded these, but children adapt to a changing reality far more readily than their parents.

One of these changes was her mother. The baby was really growing now. Cathy’s petite frame seemed poorly suited to such abuse. After every morning shower, she looked at herself, naked, in a full-length mirror that hung on the back of the closet door and came away with an expression that was both proud and mournful as her hands traced over the daily alterations.

“It’s going to get worse,” her husband told her as he emerged from the shower next.

“Thanks, Jack, I really need to hear that.”

“Can you see your feet?” he asked with a grin.

“No, but I can feel them.” They were swelling, too, along with her ankles.

“You look great to me, babe.” Jack stood behind her, reaching his arms around to hold her bulging abdomen. He rested his cheek on the top of her head. “Love ya.”

“That’s easy for you to say!” She was still looking in the mirror. Jack saw her face in the glass, a tiny smile on her lips. An invitation? He moved his hands upward to find out. “Ouch! I’m sore.”

“Sorry.” He softened his grip to provide nothing more than support. “Hmph. Has something changed here?”

“It took you this long to notice?” The smile broadened a tad. “It’s a shame that I have to go through this for that to happen.”

“Have you ever heard me complain? Everything about you has always been A-plus. I guess pregnancy drops you to a B-minus. But only in one subject,” he added.

“You’ve been teaching too long, Professor.” Her teeth were showing now. Cathy leaned back, rubbing her skin against her husband’s hairy chest. For some reason she loved to do that.

“You’re beautiful,” he said. “You glow.”

“Well, I have to glow my way to work.” Jack didn’t move his hands. “I have to get dressed, Jack.”

“‘How do I love thee, let me count the ways ...’” he murmured into her damp hair. “One ... two ... three ...”

“Not now, you lecher!”

“Why?” His hands moved very gently.

“Because I have to operate in three hours, and you have to go to spook city.” She didn’t move, though. There weren’t all that many moments that they could be alone.

“I’m not going there today. I got stuck with a seminar at the Academy. I’m afraid the department is a little miffed with me.” He kept looking in the mirror. Her eyes were closed now. *Screw the department...* “God, I love you!”

“Tonight, Jack.”

“Promise?”

“You’ve sold me on the idea, okay? Now I—” She reached up to grab his hands, pulled them downward, and pressed them against the taut skin of her belly.

He—the baby was definitely a he, insofar as that was what they called him —was wide awake, rolling and kicking, pushing at the dark envelope that defined his world.

“Wow,” his father observed. Cathy’s hands were over his, moving them about every few seconds to follow the movements of the baby. “What does that feel like?”

Her head leaned back a fraction. “It feels good—except when I’m trying to sleep or when he kicks my bladder during a procedure.”

“Was Sally this—this strong?”

"I don't think so." She didn't say that it wasn't the sort of thing you remember in terms of strength. It was just the singular feeling that your baby is alive and healthy, something that no man would ever understand. Not even Jack. Cathy Ryan was a proud woman. She knew that she was one of the best eye surgeons around. She knew that she was attractive, and worked hard to keep herself that way; even now, misshapen by her pregnancy, she knew that she was carrying it well. She could tell that from her husband's biological reaction, in the small of her back. But more than that, she knew that she was a woman, doing something that Jack could neither duplicate nor fully comprehend. Well, she told herself, *Jack does things I don't much understand either.* "I have to get dressed."

"Okay." Jack kissed the base of her neck. He took his time. It would have to last until this evening. "I'm up to eleven," he said as he stepped back.

She turned. "Eleven what?"

"Counting the ways," Jack laughed.

"You turkey!" She swung her bra at him. *"Only* eleven?"

"It's early. My brain isn't fully functional yet."

"I can tell it doesn't have enough of a blood supply." The funny thing, she thought, was that Jack didn't think he was very good-looking. She liked the strong jaw, except when he forgot to shave it, and his kind, loving eyes. She looked at the scars on his shoulder, and remembered her horror as she'd watched her husband run into harm's way, then her pride in him for what he had accomplished. Cathy knew that Sally had almost died as a direct result, but there was no way Jack could have foreseen it. It was her fault, too, she knew, and Cathy promised herself that Sally would never play with her seat belt again. Each of them had paid a price for the turns their lives had taken. Sally was almost fully recovered from hers, as was she. Cathy knew it wasn't true of her husband, who'd been awake through it all while she slept.

When that happened, at least I had the blessing of unconsciousness. Jack had to live through it. He's still paying that price for it, she thought. Working two jobs now, his face always locked into a frown of concentration, worrying over something he can't talk about. She didn't know exactly what he was doing, but she was certain that it was not yet done.

The medical profession had unexpectedly given her a belief in fate. Some people simply had their time. If it was not yet that time, chance or a good surgeon would save the life in question, but if the time had come, all the skilled people in the world could not change it. Caroline Ryan, MD, knew that this was a strange way for a physician to think, and she balanced the belief with the professional certainty that she was the instrument which would thwart the force that ruled the world—but she had also chosen a field in which life-and-death was rarely the issue. Only she knew that. A close friend had gone into pediatric oncology, the treatment of children stricken with cancer. It was a field that cried out for the best people in medicine, and she'd been tempted, but she knew that the effect on her humanity would be intolerable. How could she carry a child within her while she watched other

children die? How could she create life while she was unable to prevent its loss? Her belief in fate could never have made that leap of imagination, and the fear of what it might have done to her psyche had turned her to a field that was demanding in a different way. It was one thing to put your life on the line—quite another to wager your soul.

Jack, she knew, had the courage to face up to that. This, too, had its price. The anguish she occasionally saw in him could only be that kind of question. She was sure that his unspoken work at CIA was aimed at finding and killing the people who had attacked her. She felt it necessary, and she would shed no tears for those who had nearly killed her little girl, but it was a task which, as a physician, she could not herself contemplate. Clearly it wasn't easy for her man. Something had just happened a few days ago. He was struggling with whatever it was, unable to discuss it with anyone while he tried to retain the rest of his world in an undamaged state, trying to love his family while he labored ... to bring others to their death? It could not have come easily to him. Her husband was a genuinely good man, in so many ways the ideal man—*at least for me,* she thought. He'd fallen in love with her at their first meeting, and she could recount every step of their courtship. She remembered his clumsy—in retrospect, hilarious—proposal of marriage, the terror in his eyes as she'd hesitated over the answer, as though he felt himself unworthy of her, the idiot. Most of all, she remembered the look on his face when Sally had been born. The man who had turned his back on the dog-eat-dog world of investments—the world that since the death of her mother had made her father into a driven, unhappy man—who had returned to teaching eager young minds, was now trapped in something he didn't like. But she knew that he was doing his best, and she knew just how good his best was. She'd just experienced that. Cathy wished that she could share it, as he occasionally had to share with her the depression following a failed procedure. As much as she had needed him a few painful weeks past, now he needed her. She couldn't do that—or could she?

"What's been bothering you? Can I help?"

"I can't really talk about it," Jack said as he knotted his tie. "It was the right thing, but not something you can feel very good about. "

"The people who—"

"No, not them. If it was them ..." He turned to face his wife. "If it was them, I'd be all smiles. There's been a break. The FBI—I shouldn't be telling you this, and it doesn't go any farther than this room—they found the gun. That might be important, but we don't know for sure yet. The other thing—well. I can't talk about that at all. Sorry. I wish I could."

"You haven't done anything wrong?" His face changed at that question.

"No. I've thought that one over the past few days. Remember the time you had to take that lady's eye out? It was necessary, but you still felt pretty bad about it. Same thing." He looked in the mirror. *Sort of the same thing.*

"Jack, I love you and I believe in you. I know that you'll do the right thing."

"I'm glad, babe, because sometimes I'm not so sure." He held out his arms and she came to him. At some French military base in Chad, another young woman was experiencing something other than a loving embrace, Ryan thought. *Whose fault is that? One* thing for sure, she isn't the same as my wife. She's not like this girl of mine.

He felt her against himself, felt the baby move again, and finally he was sure. As his wife had to be protected, so did all the other wives, and all the children, and all the living people who were judged as mere abstractions by the ones who trained in those camps. Because they weren't abstractions, they were real. It was the terrorists who had cast themselves out of the civilized community and had to be hunted down one way or another. *If we can do it by civilized rules, well and good—but if not, then we have to do the best we can, and rely on our consciences to keep us from going over the edge.* He thought that he could trust his conscience. He was holding it in his arms. Jack kissed his wife gently on the cheek.

"Thanks. That's twelve."

The seminar led to the final two weeks of classes which led in turn to final exams and Commissioning Week: yet another class of midshipmen graduated to join the fleet, and the Corps. The plebes were plebes no longer, and were finally able to smile in public once or twice per day. The campus became quiet, or nearly so, as the underclassmen went home for brief vacations before taking cruises with the fleet, and preparing for Plebe Summer, the rough initiation for a new class of mids. Ryan was incongruously trapped in his real job for a week, finishing up a mountain of paperwork. Neither the Academy's history department nor the CIA was very happy with him now. His attempt to serve two masters had not been a total success. Both jobs, he realized, had suffered somewhat, and he knew that he'd have to choose between them. It was a decision that he consciously tried to avoid while the proof of its necessity piled up around him.

"Hey, Jack!" Robby came in wearing his undress whites.

"Grab a seat, Commander. How's the flying business?"

"No complaints. The kid is back in the saddle," Jackson said, sitting down. "You should have been up in the Tomcat with me last week. Oh, man, I'm finally back in the groove. I was hassling with a guy in an A-4 playing aggressor, and I ruined his day. It was so fine." He grinned like a lion surveying a herd of crippled antelope. "I'm ready!"

"When do you leave?"

"I report for duty 5 August. I guess I'll be heading out of here on the first."

"Not before we have you and Sissy over for dinner." Jack checked his calendar. "The thirtieth is a Friday. Seven o'clock. Okay?"

"Aye aye, sir."

"What's Sissy going to do down there?"

“Well, they have a little symphony in Norfolk. She’s going to be their number-two piano soloist, plus doing her teachin’ on the side.”

“You know they have the in-vitro center down there. Maybe you guys can have a kid after all.”

“Yeah, Cathy told her about that. We’re thinking about it, but—well, Sissy’s had a lot of disappointments, you know?”

“You want Cathy to talk to her about it some more?”

Robby thought about that. “Yeah, she knows how. How’s she making out with this one?”

“She’s bitching about her figure a lot,” Jack chuckled. “Why is it that they never understand how pretty they look pregnant?”

“Yeah.” Robby grinned his agreement, wondering if Sissy would ever look the same way to him. Jack felt guilty for touching a sensitive topic, and changed the subject.

“By the way, what’s with all the boats? I saw a bunch of yardbirds parked on the waterfront this morning.”

“That’s ‘moored,’ you dumb jarhead,” Robby corrected his friend. “They’re replacing the pilings over at the naval station across the river. It’s supposed to take two months. Something went wrong with the old ones—the preservative didn’t work or some such bullcrap. Your basic government-contractor screwup. No big deal. The job’s supposed to be finished in time for the next school year—not that I care one way or another, of course. By that time, boy, I’ll be spending my mornings at twenty-five thousand feet, back where I belong. What are you going to be doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re either gonna be here or at Langley, right?”

Ryan looked out the window. “Damned if I know. Rob, we got a baby on the way and a bunch of other things to think about.”

“You haven’t found ’em yet?”

Jack shook his head. “We thought we had a break, but it didn’t work out. These guys are pros, Robby.”

Jackson reacted with surprising passion. “Bull-shit, man! Professionals don’t hurt kids. Hey, they want to take a shot at a soldier or a cop, okay, I can understand that—it ain’t right, but I can understand it, okay?—soldiers and cops have guns to shoot back with, and they got training. So it’s an even match, surprise on one side and procedure on the other, and that makes it a fair game. Going after noncombatants, they’re just fucking street hoods, Jack. Maybe they’re clever, but they sure as hell ain’t professionals! Professionals got balls. Professionals put it on the line for-real.”

Jack shook his head. Robby was wrong, but he knew of no way to persuade his friend otherwise. His code was that of the warrior, who had to live by civilized rules. Rule Number One was: You don’t deliberately harm the

helpless. It was bad enough when that happened by accident. To do so on purpose was cowardly, beneath contempt; those who did so merited only death. They were beyond the pale.

"They're playing a goddamned game, Jack," the pilot went on. "There's even a song about it. I heard it at Riordan's on St. Patrick's Day. 'I've learned all my heroes and wanted the same/To try out my hand at the patriot game.' Something like that." Jackson shook his head in disgust. "War isn't a game, it's a profession. They play their little *games,* and call themselves patriots, and go out and kill little kids. Bastards. Jack, out in the fleet, when I'm driving my Tomcat, we play *our* games with the Russians. Nobody gets killed, because both sides are professionals. I don't much like the Russians, but the boys that fly the Bears know their stuff. We know our stuff, and both sides respect the other. There's rules, and both sides play by 'em. That's the way it's supposed to be."

"The world isn't that simple, Robby," Jack said quietly.

"Well, it damned well ought to be!" Jack was surprised at how worked up his friend was about this. "You tell those guys at CIA: find 'em for us, then get somebody to give the order, and I'll escort the strike in."

"The last two times we did that we lost people," Ryan pointed out.

"We take our chances. That's what they pay us for, Jack."

"Yeah, but before you toss the dice again, we want you over for dinner."

Jackson grinned sheepishly. "I won't bring my soap box with me, I promise. Dressy?"

"Robby, am I ever dressy?"

"I told 'em it wasn't dressy," Jack said afterward.

"Good," his wife agreed.

"I thought you'd say that." He looked up at his wife, her skin illuminated by moonlight. "You really are pretty."

"You keep saying that—"

"Don't move. Just stay where you are." He ran his hand across her flanks.

"Why?"

"You said this is the last time for a while. I don't want it to be over yet."

"The next time you can be on top," she promised.

"It'll be worth waiting for, but you won't be as beautiful as you are now."

"I don't feel beautiful at the moment."

"Cathy, you are talking to an expert," her husband pronounced. "I am the one person in this house who can give out a dispassionate appraisal of the pulchritude of any female human being, living or dead, and *I* say that you are beautiful. End of discussion. "

Cathy Ryan took her own appraisal. Her belly was disfigured by gross-looking stretch marks, her breasts were bloated and sore, her feet and ankles swollen, and her legs were knotting up from her current position. “Jack, you are a dope.”

“She never listens,” he told the ceiling.

“It’s just pheromones,” she explained. “Pregnant women smell different and it must tickle your fancy somehow or other.”

“Then how come you’re beautiful when my nose is stuffy? Answer me that!”

She reached down to twist her fingers in the hair on his chest. Jack started squirming. It tickled. “Love is blind.”

“When I kiss you, my eyes are always open.”

“I didn’t know that!”

“I know,” Jack laughed quietly. “Your eyes are always closed. Maybe your love is blind, but mine isn’t.” He ran his fingertips over her abdomen. It was still slick from the baby oil she used to moisturize her skin. Jack found this a little kinky. His fingertips traced circles on the taut, smooth surface.

“You’re a throwback. You’re something out of a thirties movie.” She started squirming now. “Stop that.”

“Errol Flynn never did this in the movies,” Jack noted, without stopping that.

“They had censors then.”

“Spoilsports. Some people are just no fun.” His hands expanded their horizons. The next target was the base of her neck. It was a long reach, but worth the effort. She was shivering now. “Now, I, on the other hand ...”

“Mmmmm. ”

“I thought so.”

“Uh-oh. He’s awake again.”

Jack felt him almost as soon as his wife. He—she, it—was rotating. Jack wondered how a baby could do that, without anything to latch on to, but the evidence was clear, his hands felt a lump shift position. The lump was his child’s head, or the opposite end. Moving. Alive. Waiting to be born. He looked up to see his wife, smiling down at him and knowing what he felt.

“You’re beautiful, and I love you very much. Whether you like it or not.” He was surprised to find that there were tears in his eyes. He was even more surprised by what happened next.

“Love you, too, Jack—again?”

“Maybe that wasn’t the last time for a while after all....”

23

Movement

"We got these last night." Priorities had changed somewhat at CIA. Ryan could tell. The man going over the photos with him was going gray, wore rimless glasses and a bow tie. Garters on his sleeves would not have seemed out of place. Marty stood in the comer and kept his mouth shut. "We figure it's one of these three camps, right?"

"Yeah, the others are identified." Ryan nodded. This drew a snort.

"You say so, son."

"Okay, these two are active, this one as of last week, and this one two days ago."

"What about -20, the *Action-Directe* camp?" Cantor asked.

"Shut down ever since the Frenchies went in. I saw the tape of that." The man smiled in admiration. "Anyway, here."

It was one of the rare daylight photographs, even in color. The firing range adjacent to the camp had six men standing in line. The angle prevented them from seeing if the men held guns or not.

"Weapons training?" Ryan asked cautiously.

"Either that or they're taking a leak by the numbers." This was humor.

"Wait a minute, you said these came in last night."

"Look at the sun angle," the man said derisively.

"Oh. Early morning."

"Around midnight our time. Very good," the man observed. *Amateurs,* he thought. *Everybody thinks he can read a recon photo!* "You can't see any guns, but see these little points of light here? That might be sunlight reflecting off ejected cartridge brass. Okay, we have six people here. Probably Northern Europeans because they're so pale—see this one here with the sunburn, his arm looks a little pink? All appear to be male, from the short hair and style of dress. Okay, now the question is, who the hell are they?"

"They're not *Action-Directe,"* Marty said.

"How do you know that?" Ryan asked.

"The ones who got picked up are no longer with us. They were given trials by military tribunal and executed two weeks ago."

"Jesus!" Ryan turned away. "I didn't want to know that, Marty."

"Those who asked had clergy in attendance. I thought that was decent of our colleagues." He paused for a moment, then went on: "It turns out that French law allows for that sort of trial under very special circumstances. So despite what we both thought all the time, it was all done by the book. Feel better?"

"Some," Ryan admitted on reflection. It might not have made a great deal of difference to the terrorists, but at least the formality of law had been observed, and that was one of the things "civilization" meant.

"Good. A couple sang like canaries beforehand, too. DGSE was able to bag two more members outside of Paris—this hasn't made the papers yet—plus a barnful of guns and explosives. They may not be out of business, but they've been hurt."

"All right," the man in the bow tie acknowledged. "And this is the guy who tumbled to it?"

"All because he likes to see tits from three hundred miles away," Cantor replied.

"How come nobody else saw that first?" Ryan would have preferred that someone else had done all this.

"Because there aren't enough people in my section. I just got authority to hire ten new ones. I've already got them picked out. They're people who're leaving the Air Force. Pros."

"Okay, what about the other camp?"

"Here." A new photo came into view. "Pretty much the same thing. We have two people visible—"

"One's a girl," Ryan said at once.

"One appears to have shoulder-length hair," the photo expert agreed. He went on: "That doesn't necessarily mean it's a girl." Jack thought about that, looking at the figure's stance and posture.

"If we assume it's a girl, what does that tell us?" he asked Marty.

"You tell me."

"We have no indication that the ULA has female members, but we known that the PIRA does. This is the camp—remember that jeep that was driving from one to the other and was later seen parked at this camp?" Ryan paused before going on. *Oh, what the hell...* He grabbed the photo of the six people on the gun range. "This is the one."

"And what the hell are you basing that on?" the photo-intel man asked.

"Call it a strong hunch," Ryan replied.

"That's fine. The next time I go to the track I'll bring you along to pick my horses for me. Listen, the thing about these photos is, what you see is all you got. If you read too much into these photos, you end up making mistakes. Big

ones. What you have here is six people lined up, *probably* firing guns. That's all."

"Anything else?" Cantor asked.

"We'll have a night pass at about 2200 local time—this afternoon our time. I'll have the shots to you right after they come in."

"Very good. Thanks," Cantor said. The man left the room to go back to his beloved photo equipment.

"I believe you call that sort of person an empiricist," Ryan observed after a moment.

Cantor chuckled. "Something like that. He's been in the business since we had U-2s flying over Russia. He's a real expert. The important thing about that is, he doesn't say he's sure about something until he's *really* sure. What he said's true, you can easily read too much into these things."

"Fine, but you agree with me."

"Yeah." Cantor sat on the desk next to Ryan and examined the photo through a magnifying glass.

The six men lined up on the firing line were not totally clear. The hot air rising off the desert even in early morning was disturbed enough to ruin the clarity of the image. It was like looking through the shimmering mirage on a flat highway. The satellite camera had a very high "shutter" speed—actually the photoreceptors were totally electronic—that cancelled most of the distortion, but all they really had was a poorly focused, high-angle image that showed man-shapes. You could tell what they were wearing—tan short-sleeved shirts and long pants—and the color of their hair with total certainty. A glimmer off one man's wrist seemed to indicate a watch or bracelet. The face of one man was darker than it should have been—his uncovered forearm was quite pale—and that probably indicated a short beard.... *Miller has a beard now,* Ryan reminded himself.

"Damn, if this was only a little better ..."

"Yeah," Marty agreed. "But what you see here is the result of thirty years of work and God only knows how much money. In cold climates it comes out a little better, but you can't ever recognize a face."

"This is it, Marty. This is the one. We have to have something that confirms that, or at least confirms something."

" 'Fraid not. Our French colleagues asked the people they captured. The answer they got was that the camps are totally isolated from one another. When the groups meet, it's almost always on neutral ground. They didn't even know for sure that there was a camp here."

"That tells us something!"

"The thing about the car? It could have been somebody from the Army, you know. The guy who oversees the guards, maybe. It didn't have to be one of the players who drove from this one to the Provisionals' camp. In fact, there is

ample reason to believe that it wasn't. Compartmentalization is a logical security measure. It makes sense for the camps to be isolated from one another. These people know about the importance of security, and even if they didn't before, the French op was a gilt-edge reminder."

Ryan hadn't thought about that. The raid on the *Action-Directe* camp had to have an effect on the others, didn't it?

"You mean we shot ourselves in the foot?"

"No, we sent a message that was worth sending. So far as we can determine, nobody knows what actually happened there. We have reason to believe that the suspicion on the ground is that a rival outfit settled a score—not all of these groups like each other. So, if nothing else, we've fostered some suspicions among the groups themselves, and vis-à-vis their hosts. That sort of thing could break some information loose for us, but it'll take time to find out."

"Anyway, now that we know that this camp is likely to be the one we want, what are we going to do about it?"

"We're working on that. I can't say any more."

"Okay." Ryan gestured to his desk. "You want some coffee, Marty?"

Cantor's face took on a curious expression. "No, I'm off coffee for a while."

What Cantor didn't say was that a major operation had been laid on. It was fairly typical in that very few of the participants actually knew what was going on. A Navy carrier battle group centered on USS *Saratoga* was due to sail west out of the Mediterranean Sea, and would pass north of the Gulf of Sidra in several days. As was routine, the formation was being trailed by a Soviet AGI—a fishing trawler that gathers electronic intelligence instead of mackerel—which would give information to the Libyans. When the carrier was directly north of Tripoli, in the middle of the night, a French-controlled agent would interrupt electrical power to some radar installations soon after the carrier started conducting nighttime flight operations. This was expected to get some people excited, although the carrier group Commander had no idea that he was doing anything other than routine flight ops. It was hoped that the same team of French commandos that had raided Camp -20 would also be able to slip into Camp -18. Marty couldn't tell Ryan any of this, but it was a measure of how well *Action-Directe* had been damaged that the French were willing to give the Americans such cooperation. While it hadn't exactly been the first example of international cooperation, it was one of three such operations that had actually been successful. The CIA had helped to avenge the murder of a friend of the French President. Whatever the differences between the two countries, debts of honor were still paid in full. It appealed to Cantor's sense of propriety, but was something known to only twenty people within the Agency. The op was scheduled to run in four days. A senior case officer from the Operations Directorate was even now working with the French paratroopers who, he reported, were eager to demonstrate their prowess yet again. With luck, the terrorist group that had had the temerity to commit murder within the United States and the United Kingdom would be hurt by the troops of yet

another nation. If successful, the precedent would signal a new and valuable development in the struggle against terrorism.

Dennis Cooley was working on his ledger book. It was early. The shop wasn't open for business yet, and this was the time of day for him to set his accounts straight. It wasn't very hard. His shop didn't have all that many transactions. He hummed away to himself, not knowing what annoyance this habit caused for the man listening to the microphone planted behind one of his bookshelves. Abruptly his humming stopped and his head came up. What was wrong ... ?

The little man nearly leaped from his chair when he smelled the acrid smoke. He scanned the room for several seconds before looking up. The smoke was coming from the ceiling light fixture. He darted to the wall switch and slapped his hand on it. A blue flash erupted from the wall, giving him a powerful electric shock that numbed his arm to the elbow. He stared at his arm in surprise, flexing his fingers and looking at the smoke that seemed to be trailing off. He didn't wait to see it stop. Cooley had a fire extinguisher in the back room. He got it and came back, pulled the safety pin, and aimed the device at the switch. No smoke there anymore. Next he stood on his chair to get close to the ceiling fixture, but already the smoke was nearly gone. The smell remained. Cooley stood on the chair for over a minute, his knees shaking as the chair moved slightly under him, holding the extinguisher and trying to decide what to do. Call the fire brigade? But there wasn't any fire—was there? All his valuable books.... He'd been trained in many things, but fighting fires was not one of them. He was breathing heavily now, nearly panicked until he finally decided that there wasn't anything to be panicked about. He turned to see three people staring at him through the glass with curious expressions.

He lowered the extinguisher with a shamefaced grin and gestured comically to the spectators. The light was off. The switch was off. The fire, if it had been a fire, was gone. He'd call the building's electrician. Cooley opened the door to explain what was wrong to his fellow shop owners. One remarked that the wiring in the arcade was horribly out of date. It was something Cooley hadn't ever thought about. Electricity was electricity. You flipped the switch and the light went on, and that was that. It annoyed him that something so reliable, wasn't. A minute later he called the building manager, who promised that an electrician would be there in half an hour.

The man arrived forty minutes later, apologizing for being held up in traffic. He stood for a moment, admiring the bookshelves.

"Smells like a wire burned out," he judged next. "You're lucky, sir. That frequently causes a fire."

"How difficult will it be to fix?"

"I expect that I'll have to replace the wiring. Ought to have been done years ago. This old place—well, the electric service is older than I am, and that's too old by half." He smiled.

Cooley showed him to the fuse box in the back room, and the man went to work. Dennis was unwilling to use his table lamp, and sat in the semidarkness while the tradesman went to work.

The electrician flipped off the outside master switch and examined the fuse box. It still had the original inspection tag, and when he rubbed off the dust, he read off the date: 1919. The man shook his head in amazement. Almost seventy bloody years! He had to remove some items to get at the wall, and was surprised to see that there was some recent plasterwork. It was as good a place to start as any. He didn't want to damage the wall any more than he had to. With hammer and chisel he broke into the new plaster, and there was the wire....

But it wasn't the right one, he thought. It had plastic insulation, not the gutta-percha used in his grandfather's time. It wasn't in quite the right place, either. Strange, he thought. He pulled on the wire. It came out easily.

"Mr. Cooley, sir?" he called. The shop owner appeared a moment later. "Do you know what this is?"

"Bloody hell!" the detective said in the room upstairs. "Bloody fucking hell!" He turned to his companion, a look of utter shock on his face. "Call Commander Owens!"

"I've never seen anything like this." He cut off the end and handed it over. The electrician did not understand why Cooley was so pale.

Neither had Cooley, but he knew what it was. The end of the wire showed nothing, just a place where the polyvinyl insulation stopped, without the copper core that one expects to see in electrical circuitry. Hidden in the end was a highly sensitive microphone. The shop owner composed himself after a moment, though his voice was somewhat raspy.

"I have no idea. Carry on."

"Yes, sir." The electrician resumed his search for the power line.

Cooley had already lifted his telephone and dialed a number.

"Hello?"

"Beatrix?"

"Good morning, Mr. Dennis. How are you today?"

"Can you come into the shop this morning? I have a small emergency. "

"Certainly." She lived only a block from the Holloway Road tube station. The Piccadilly Line ran almost directly to the shop. "I can be there in fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, Beatrix. You're a love," he added before he hung up. By this time Cooley's mind was racing at mach-1. There was nothing in the shop or his home that could incriminate him. He lifted the phone again and hesitated.

His instructions under these circumstances were to call a number he had memorized—but if there were a microphone in his office, his phone ... and his home phone ... Cooley was sweating now despite the cool temperature. He commanded himself to relax. He'd never said anything compromising on either phone—had he? For all his expertise and discipline, Cooley had never faced danger, and he was beginning to panic. It took all of his concentration to focus on his operational procedures, the things he had learned and practiced for years. Cooley told himself that he had never deviated from them. Not once. He was sure of that. By the time he stopped shaking, the bell rang.

It was Beatrix, he saw. Cooley grabbed his coat.

"Will you be back later?"

"I'm not sure. I'll call you." He went right out the door, leaving his clerk with a very curious look.

It had taken ten minutes to locate James Owens, who was in his car south of London. The Commander gave immediate orders to shadow Cooley and to arrest him if it appeared that he was attempting to leave the country. Two men were already watching the man's car and were ready to trail him. Two more were sent to the arcade, but the detectives arrived just as he walked out, and were on the wrong side of the street. One hopped out of the car and followed, expecting him to turn onto Berkeley Street toward his travel agent. Instead, Cooley ducked into the tube station. The detective was caught off guard and raced down the entrance on his side of the street. The crowd of morning commuters made spotting his short target virtually impossible. In under a minute, the officer was sure that his quarry had caught a train that he had been unable to get close to. Cooley had escaped.

The detective ran back to the street and put out a radio call to alert the police at Heathrow airport, where this underground line ended—Cooley always flew, unless he drove his own car—and to get cars to all the underground stations on the Piccadilly Line. There simply wasn't enough time.

Cooley got off at the next station, as his training had taught him, and took a cab to Waterloo Station. There he made a telephone call.

"Five-five-two-nine," the voice answered.

"Oh, excuse me, I was trying to get six-six-three-zero. Sorry." There followed two seconds of hesitation on the other side of the connection.

"Oh ... That's quite all right," the voice assured him in a tone that was anything but all right.

Cooley replaced the phone and walked to a train. It was everything he could do not to look over his shoulder.

"This is Geoffrey Watkins," he said as he lifted the phone.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," the voice said. "I was trying to get Mr. Titus. Is

this six-two-nine-one?" *All contacts are broken until further notice,* the number told him. *Not known if you are in danger. Will advise if possible.*

"No, this is six-two-one-nine," he answered. *Understood.* Watkins hung the phone up and looked out his window. His stomach felt as though a ball of refrigerated lead had materialized there. He swallowed twice, then reached for his tea. For the rest of the morning, it was hard to concentrate on the Foreign Office white paper he was reading. He needed two stiff drinks with lunch to settle himself down.

By noon, Cooley was in Dover, aboard a cross-channel ferry. He was fully alert now, and sat in a corner seat on the upper deck, looking over the newspaper in his hands to see if anyone was watching him. He'd almost boarded the hovercraft to Calais, but decided against it at the last moment. He had enough cash for the Dover-Dunkerque ferry, but not the more expensive hovercraft, and he didn't want to leave a paper trail behind. It was only two and a quarter hours in any case. Once in France, he could catch a train to Paris, then start flying. He started to feel secure for the first time in hours, but was able to suppress it easily enough. Cooley had never known this sort of fear before, and it left a considerable aftertaste. The quiet hatred that had festered for years now ate at him like an acid. They had made him run. They had spied on *him!* Because of all his training, all the precautions that he'd followed assiduously, and all the professional skill that he'd employed, Cooley had never seriously considered the possibility that he would be turned. He had thought himself too skillful for that. That he was wrong enraged him, and for the first time in his life, he wanted to lash out himself. He'd lost his bookshop and with it all the books he loved, and this, too, had been taken from him by the bloody Brits! He folded the paper neatly and set it down in his lap while the ferry pulled into the English Channel, placid with the summer sun overhead. His bland face stared out at the water with a gaze as calm as a man in contemplation of his garden while he fantasized images of blood and death.

Owens was as furious as anyone had ever seen him. The surveillance of Cooley had been so easy, so routine—but that was no excuse, he told his men. That harmless-looking little poof, as Ashley had called him, had slipped away from his shadowers as adroitly as someone trained at Moscow Center itself. There were men at every international airport in Britain clutching pictures of Cooley, and if he used his credit card to purchase any kind of ticket, the computers would notify Scotland Yard at once, but Owens had a sickening feeling that the man was already out of the country. The Commander of C-13 dismissed his people.

Ashley was in the room, too, and his people had been caught equally off guard. He and Owens shared a look of anger mixed with despair.

A detective had left the tape of a phone call to Geoffrey Watkins made less than an hour after Cooley disappeared. Ashley played it. It lasted all of twenty seconds. And it wasn't Cooley's voice. If it had been, they would have arrested Watkins then and there. For all their effort, they still did not have a single usable piece of evidence on Geoffrey Watkins.

“There is a Mr. Titus in the building. The voice even gave the correct number. By all rights it could have been a simple wrong number. ”

“But it wasn’t, of course.”

“That is how it’s done, you know. You have pre-set messages that are constructed to sound entirely harmless. Whoever trained these chaps knew what they were about. What about the shop?”

“The girl Beatrix knows absolutely nothing. We have people searching the shop at this moment, but so far they’ve found nothing but old bloody books. Same story at his flat.” Owens stood and spoke in a voice full of perverse wonder. “An electrician.... Months of work, gone because he yanks the wrong wire. ”

“He’ll turn up. He could not have had a great deal of cash. He must use his credit card.”

“He’s out of the country already. Don’t say he isn’t. If he’s clever enough for what we know he’s done—”

“Yes.” Ashley nodded reluctant agreement. “One doesn’t always win, James.”

“It is so nice to hear that!” Owens snapped out his reply. “These bastards have outguessed us every step of the way. The Commissioner is going to ask me how it is that we couldn’t get our thumbs out in time, and there is no answer to that question.”

“So what’s the next step, then?”

“At least we know what he looks like. We ... we share what we know with the Americans, all of it. I have a meeting scheduled with Murray this evening. He’s hinted that they have something operating that he’s not able to talk about, doubtless some sort of CIA op.”

“Agreed. Is it here or there?”

“There.” Owens paused. “I am getting sick of this place.”

“Commander, you should measure your successes against your failures,” Ashley said. “You’re the best man we’ve had in this office in some years.”

Owens only grunted at that remark. He knew it was true. Under his leadership, C-13 had scored major coups against the Provisionals. But in this job, as in so many others, the question one’s superiors always asked was, *What have you accomplished* today? Yesterday was ancient history.

“Watkins’ suspected contact has flown,” he announced three hours later.

“What happened?” Murray closed his eyes halfway through the explanation and shook his head sadly. “We had the same sort of thing happen to us,” he said after Owens finished. “A renegade CIA officer. We were watching his place, and let things settle into a comfortable routine, and then—zip! He snookered the surveillance team. He turned up in Moscow a week later. It

happens, Jimmy."

"Not to me," Owens almost snarled. "Not until now, that is."

"What's he look like?" Owens handed a collection of photographs across the desk. Murray flipped through them. "Mousy little bastard, isn't he? Almost bald." The FBI man considered this for a moment, then lifted his phone and punched in four numbers. "Fred? Dan. You want to come down to my office for a minute?"

The man arrived a minute later. Murray didn't identify him as a member of the CIA and Owens didn't ask. He didn't have to. He'd given over two copies of each photo.

Fred—one of the men from "down the hall"—took his photos and looked at them. "Who's he supposed to be?"

Owens explained briefly, ending, "He's probably out of the country by now."

"Well, if he turns up in any of our nets, we'll let you know," Fred promised, and left.

"Do you know what they're up to?" Owens asked Murray.

"No. I know something is happening. The Bureau and the Agency have a joint task force set up, but it's compartmented, and I don't need to know all of it yet."

"Did your chaps have a part in the raid on *Action-Directe?"*

"I don't know what you're talking about," Murray said piously. *How the hell did you hear about that, Jimmy?*

"I thought as much," Owens replied. *Bloody security!* "Dan, we are concerned here with the personal safety of—"

Murray held his hands up like a man at bay. "I know, I know. And you're right, too. We ought to cut your people in on this. I'll call the Director myself."

The phone rang. It was for Owens.

"Yes?" The Commander of C-13 listened for a minute before hanging up. "Thank you." A sigh. "Dan, he's definitely on the continent. He used a credit card to purchase a railway ticket. Dunkerque to Paris, three hours ago."

"Have the French pick him up?"

"Too late. The train arrived twenty minutes ago. He's completely gone now. Besides, we have nothing to arrest him for, do we?"

"And Watkins has been warned off."

"Unless that was a genuinely wrong number, which I rather doubt, but try to prove *that* in a court of law!"

"Yeah." Judges didn't understand any instinct but their own.

"And don't tell me that you can't win them all! That's what they pay me to do." Owens looked down at the rug, then back up. "Please excuse me for that."

“Aah!” Murray waved it off. “You’ve had bad days before. So have I. It’s part of the business we’re in. What we both need at a time like this is a beer. Come on downstairs, and I’ll treat you to a burger.”

“When will you call your Director?”

“It’s lunchtime over there. He always has a meeting going over lunch. We’ll let it wait a few hours.”

Ryan had lunch with Cantor that day in the CIA cafeteria. It could have been the eating place in any other government building. The food was just as unexciting. Ryan decided to try the lasagna, but Marty stuck with fruit salad and cake. It seemed an odd diet until Jack watched him take a tablet before eating. He washed it down with milk.

“Ulcers, Marty?”

“What makes you say that?”

“I’m married to a doc, remember? You just took a Tagamet. That’s for ulcers.”

“This place gets to you after a while,” Cantor explained. “My stomach started acting up last year and didn’t get any better. Everyone in my family comes down with it sooner or later. Bad genes, I guess. The medication helps some, but the doctor says that I need a less stressful environment.” A snort.

“You do work long hours,” Ryan observed.

“Anyway, my wife got offered a teaching position at the University of Texas —she’s a mathematician. And to sweeten the deal they offered me a place in the Political Science Department. The pay’s better than it is here, too. I’ve been here twelve years,” he said quietly. “Long time.”

“So what do you feel bad about? Teaching’s great. I love it, and you’ll be good at it. You’ll even have a good football team to watch. ”

“Yeah, well, she’s already down there, and I leave in a few weeks. I’m going to miss this place.”

“You’ll get over it. Imagine being able to walk into a building without getting permission from a computer. Hey, I walked away from my first job.”

“But this one’s important.” Cantor drank his milk and looked across the table. “What are you going to do?”

“Ask me after the baby is born.” Ryan didn’t want to dwell on this question.

“The Agency needs people like you, Jack. You’ve got a feel for things. You don’t think and act like a bureaucrat. You say what you think. Not everyone in this building does that, and that’s why the Admiral likes you.”

“Hell, I haven’t talked to him since—”

“He knows what you’re doing.” Cantor smiled.

“Oh.” Ryan understood. “So that’s it.”

“That’s right. The old man really wants you, Jack. You still don’t know how important that photo you tripped over was, do you?”

“All I did was show it to you, Marty,” Ryan protested. “You’re the one who really made the connection.”

“You did exactly the right thing, exactly what an analyst is supposed to do. There was more brains in that than you know. You have a gift for this sort of work. If you can’t see it, I can.” Cantor examined the lasagna and winced. How could anybody eat that greasy poison? “Two years from now you’ll be ready for my job.”

“One bridge at a time, Marty.” They let it go at that.

An hour later Ryan was back in his office. Cantor came in.

“Another pep talk?” Jack smiled. *Full-court press time* ...

“We have a picture of a suspected ULA member and it’s only a week old. We got it in from London a couple of hours ago.”

“Dennis Cooley.” Ryan examined it and laughed. “He looks like a real wimp. What’s the story?”

Cantor explained. “Bad luck for the Brits, but maybe good luck for us. Look at the picture again and tell me something important.”

“You mean ... he’s lost most of his hair. Oh! We can ID the guy if he turns up at one of the camps. None of the other people are bald.”

“You got it. And the boss just cleared you for something. There’s an op laid on for Camp -18.”

“What kind?”

“The kind you watched before. Is that still bothering you?”

“No, not really.” *What bothers me is that it doesn’t bother me,* Ryan thought. *Maybe it should....* “Not with these guys, I don’t. When?”

“I can’t tell you, but soon.”

“So why did you let me know—nice one, Marty. Not very subtle, though. Does the Admiral want me to stay that bad?”

“Draw your own conclusions.”

An hour after that the photo expert was back. Another satellite had passed over the camp at 2208 local time. The infrared image showed eight people standing at line on the firing range. Bright tongues of flame marked two of the shapes. They were firing their weapons at night, and there were now at least eight of them there.

“What happened?” O’Donnell asked. He’d met Cooley at the airport. A cutout had gotten word out that Cooley was on the run, but the reason for it had had to wait until now.

“There was a bug in my shop.”

“You’re sure?” O’Donnell asked.

Cooley handed it over. The wire had been in his pocket for thirty hours. O’Donnell pulled the Toyota Land Cruiser over to examine it.

“Marconi make these for intelligence use. Quite sensitive. How long might it have been there?”

Cooley could not remember having anyone go into his back room unsupervised. “I’ve no idea.”

O’Donnell put the vehicle back into gear, heading out into the desert. He pondered the question for over a mile. Something had gone wrong, but what ... ?

“Did you ever think you were being followed?”

“Never.”

“How closely did you check, Dennis?” Cooley hesitated, and O’Donnell took this for an answer. “Dennis, did you ever break tradecraft—*ever?*”

“No, Kevin, of course not. It isn’t possible that—for God’s sake, Kevin, it’s been weeks since I’ve been in contact with Watkins.”

“Since your last trip to Cork.” O’Donnell squinted in the bright sun.

“Yes, that’s right. You had a security man watching me then—was there anyone following me?”

“If there were, he must have been a damnably clever one, and he could not have been too close....” The other possibility that O’Donnell was considering, of course, was that Cooley had turned traitor. *But if he’d done that, he wouldn’t have come here, would he?* the chief of the ULA thought. *He knows me, knows where I live, knows McKenney, knows Sean Miller, knows about*

the fishing fleet at Dundalk. O’Donnell realized that Cooley knew quite a lot. No, if he’d gone tout, he wouldn’t be here. Cooley was sweating despite the air conditioning in the car. Dennis didn’t have the belly to risk his life that way. He could see that.

“So, Dennis, what are we to do with you?”

Cooley’s heart was momentarily irregular, but he spoke with determination. “I want to be part of the next op.”

“Excuse me?” O’Donnell’s head came around in surprise.

“The fucking Brits—Kevin, they came after *me!”*

“That is something of an occupational hazard, you know.”

“I’m quite serious,” Cooley insisted.

It wouldn’t hurt to have another man.... “Are you in shape for it?”

“I will be.”

The chief made his decision. “Then you can start this afternoon.”

“What is it, then?”

O'Donnell explained.

"It would seem that your hunch was correct, Doctor Ryan," the man with the rimless glasses said the next afternoon. "Maybe I will take you to the track."

He was standing outside one of the huts, a dumpy little man with a head that shone from the sunlight reflecting off his sweaty, hairless dome. Camp -18 was the one.

"Excellent," Cantor observed. "Our English friends have really scored on this one. Thanks," he said to the photo expert.

"When's the op?" Ryan asked after he left.

"Early morning, day after tomorrow. Our time ... eight in the evening, I think."

"Can I watch in real time?"

"Maybe. "

"This is a secret that's hard to keep," he said.

"Most of the good ones are," Cantor agreed. "But—"

"Yeah, I know." Jack put his coat on and locked up his files. "Tell the Admiral that I owe him one."

Driving home, Ryan thought about what might be happening. He realized that his anticipation was not very different from ... Christmas? No, that was not the right way to think about this. He wondered how his father had felt right before a big arrest after a lengthy investigation. It was something he'd never asked. He did the next best thing. He forgot about it, as he was supposed to do with everything that he saw at Langley.

There was a strange car parked in front of the house when he got there, just beyond the nearly completed swimming pool. On inspection he saw that it had diplomatic tags. He went inside to find three men talking to his wife. He recognized one but couldn't put a name on him.

"Hello, Doctor Ryan, I'm Geoffrey Bennett from the British Embassy. We met before at—"

"Yeah, I remember now. What can we do for you?"

"Their Royal Highnesses will be visiting the States in a few weeks. I understand that you offered an invitation when you met, and they wish to see if it remains open."

"Are you kidding?"

"They're not kidding, Jack, and I already said yes," his wife informed him. Even Ernie was wagging his tail in anticipation.

"Of course. Please tell them that we'd be honored to have them down. Will they be staying the night?"

“Probably not. It was hoped that they could come in the evening.”

“For dinner? Fine. What day?”

“Friday, 30th July.”

“Done.”

“Excellent. I hope you won’t mind if our security people—plus your Secret Service chaps—conduct a security sweep in the coming week.”

“Do I have to be home for that?”

“I can do it, Jack. I’m off work now, remember?”

“Oh, of course,” Bennett said. “When is the baby due?”

“First week of August—that might be a problem for this,” Cathy realized belatedly.

“If something unexpected happens, you may be sure that Their Highnesses will understand. One more thing. This is a private matter, not one of the public events for the trip. We must ask that you keep this entirely confidential.”

“Sure, I understand,” Ryan said.

“If they’re going to be here for dinner, is there anything we shouldn’t serve?” Cathy asked.

“What do you mean?” Bennett responded.

“Well, some people are allergic to fish, for example.”

“Oh, I see. No, I know of nothing along those lines.”

“Okay, the basic Ryan dinner,” Jack said. “I—uh-oh.”

“What’s the matter?” Bennett asked.

“We’re having company that night.”

“Oh,” Cathy nodded. “Robby and Sissy.”

“Can’t you cancel?”

“It’s a going-away party. Robby—he’s a Navy fighter pilot, we both teach at the Academy—is transferring back to the fleet. Would they mind?”

“Doctor Ryan, His Highness—”

“His Highness is a good guy. So’s Robby. He was there that night we met. I can’t cancel him out, Mr. Bennett. He’s a friend. The good news is, His Highness will like him. He used to fly fighter planes, too, right?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Do you remember the night we met? Without Robby I might not have gotten through it. Look, this guy’s a lieutenant commander in the United States Navy who happens to fly a forty-million-dollar fighter airplane. He probably is not a security risk. His wife plays one hell of a piano.” Ryan saw that he hadn’t quite gotten through yet. “Mr. Bennett, check Rob out through

your attaché and ask His Highness if it's all right."

"And if he objects?"

"He won't. I've met him. Maybe he's a better guy than you give him credit for," Jack observed. *He won't object, you dummy. It's the security pukes who'll throw a fit.*

"Well." That remark took him somewhat aback. "I cannot fault your sense of loyalty, Doctor. I will pass this through His Highness's office. But I must insist that you do not tell Commander Jackson anything."

"You have my word." Jack nearly laughed. He couldn't wait to see the look on Robby's face. This would finally even the score for that kendo match.

"Contraction peaks," Jack said that night. They were practicing the breathing exercises in preparation for the delivery. His wife started panting. Jack knew that this was a serious business. It merely looked ridiculous. He checked the numbers on his digital watch. "Contraction ends. Deep, cleansing breath. I figure steaks on the grill, baked potatoes, and fresh corn on the cob, with a nice salad."

"It's too plain," Cathy protested.

"Everywhere they go over here, people will be hitting them with that fancy French crap. Somebody ought to give them a decent American meal. You know I do a mean steak on the grill, and your spinach salad is famous from here to across the road."

"Okay." Cathy started laughing. It was becoming uncomfortable for her to do so. "If I stand over a stove for more than a few minutes, I get nauseous anyway."

"It must be tough, being pregnant."

"You should try it," she suggested.

Her husband went on: "It's the *only* hard thing women have to do, of course."

"What!" Cathy's eyes nearly popped out.

"Look at history. Who has to go out and kill the buffalo? The man. Who has to carry the buffalo back? The man. Who has to drive off the bear? The man. We do all the hard stuff. I still have to take out the garbage every night! Do I ever complain about that?" He had her laughing again. He'd read her mood right. She didn't want sympathy. She was too proud of herself for that.

"I'd hit you on the head, but there's no sense in breaking a perfectly good club over something worthless."

"Besides, I was there the last time, and it didn't look all that hard."

"If I could move, Jack, I'd kill you for that one!"

He moved from opposite his wife to beside her. "Nah, I don't think so. I want you to form a picture in your mind."

“Of what?”

“Of the look on Robby’s face when he gets here for dinner. I’m going to jiggle the time a little.”

“I’ll bet you that Sissy handles it better than he does.”

“How much?”

“Twenty. ”

“Deal.” He looked at his watch. “Contraction begins. Deep breath.” A minute later, Jack was amazed to see that he was breathing the same way as his wife. That got them both laughing.

24

Connections Missed and Made

There were no new pictures of Camp -18 the day of the raid. A sandstorm had swept over the area at the time of the satellite pass, and the cameras couldn't penetrate it, but a geosynchronous weather satellite showed that the storm had left the site. Ryan was cued after lunch that day that the raid was on, and spent his afternoon in fidgety anticipation. Careful analysis of the existing photos showed that between twelve and eighteen people were at the camp, over and above the guard force. If the higher number were correct, and the official estimate of the ULA's size was also accurate, that represented more than half of its membership. Ryan worried a little about that. If the French were sending in only eight paratroopers ... but then he remembered his own experiences in the Marine Corps. They'd be hitting the objective at three in the morning. Surprise would be going for them. The assault team would have its weapons loaded and locked—and aimed at people who were asleep. The element of surprise, in the hands of elite commandos, was the military equivalent of a Kansas tornado. Nothing could stand up to it.

They're in their choppers now, Ryan thought. He remembered his own experience in the fragile, ungainly aircraft. *There you are, all your equipment packed up, clean utilities, your weapons ready, and despite it all you're as vulnerable as a baby in the womb.* He wondered what sort of men they were, and realized that they wouldn't be too very different from the Marines he'd served with: all would be volunteers, doubly so since you also had to volunteer for parachute training. They'd opted a third time to be part of the antiterror teams. It would be partly for the extra pay they got and partly for the pride that always came with membership in a small, very special force—like the Marine Corps' Force Recon—but mostly they'd be there because they knew that this was a mission worth doing. To a man, professional soldiers despised terrorists, and each would dream about getting them in an even-up-battle—the idea of the Field of Honor had never died for the real professionals. It was the place where the ultimate decision was made on the basis of courage and skill, on the basis of manhood itself, and it was this concept that marked the professional soldier as a romantic, a person who truly believed in the rules.

They'd be nervous in their helicopter. Some would fidget and be ashamed of it. Others would make a great show of sharpening their knives. Some would joke quietly. Their officers and sergeants would sit quietly, setting an example and going over the plans. All would look about the helicopter and silently hate being trapped within it. For a moment Jack was there with them.

"Good luck, guys," he whispered to the wall. *"Bonne chance."*

The hours crept by. It seemed to Ryan that the numbers on his digital watch were reluctant to change at all, and it was impossible for him to concentrate on his work. He was going over the photos of the camp again, counting the man-figures, examining the ground to predict for himself how the final approach would be made. He wondered if their orders were to take the terrorists alive. He couldn't decide on that question. From a legal perspective, he didn't think it really mattered. If terrorism were the modem manifestation of piracy—the analogy seemed apt enough—then the ULA was fair game for any nation's armed forces. On the other hand, taken alive, they could be put on trial and displayed. The psychological impact on other such groups might be real. If it didn't put the fear of God in them, it would at least get their attention. It would frighten them to know that they were not safe even in their most remote, most secure sanctuary. Some members might drift away, and maybe one or two of them would talk. It didn't take much intelligence information to hammer them. Ryan had seen that clearly enough. You needed to know where they were, that was all. With that knowledge you could bring all the forces of a modem nation to bear, and for all their arrogance and brutality, they couldn't hope to stand up to that.

Marty came into the office. "Ready to go over?"

"Hell, yes!"

"Did you have dinner?"

"No. Maybe later."

"Yeah." Together they walked to the annex. The corridors were nearly empty now. For the most part, CIA worked like any other place. At five the majority of the workers departed for home and dinner and evening television.

"Okay, Jack, this is real-time. Remember that you can't discuss any aspect of this." Cantor looked rather tired, Jack thought.

"Marty, if this op is successful, I will tell my wife that the ULA is out of business. She has a right to know that much."

"I can understand that. Just so she doesn't know how it happens."

"She wouldn't even be interested," Jack assured him as they entered the room with the TV monitor. Jean-Claude was there again.

"Good evening, Mr. Cantor, Professor Ryan," the DGSE officer greeted them both.

"How's the op going?"

"They are under radio silence," the Colonel replied.

"What I don't understand is how they can do it the same way twice," Ryan went on.

"There is a risk. A little disinformation has been used," Jean-Claude said cryptically. "In addition, your carrier now has their full attention."

"Saratoga has an alpha-strike up," Marty explained. "Two fighter squadrons

and three attack ones, plus jamming and radar coverage. They're patrolling that 'Line of Death' right now. According to our electronics listening people, the Libyans are going slightly ape. Oh, well."

"The satellite comes over the horizon in twenty-four minutes," the senior technician reported. "Local weather looks good. We ought to get some clear shots."

Ryan wished he had a cigarette. They made the waiting easier, but every time Cathy smelled them on his breath, there was hell to pay. At this point the raiding force would be crawling across the last thousand yards. Ryan had done the drill himself. They'd come away with bloody hands and knees, sand rubbed into the wounds. It was an incredibly tiring thing to do, made more difficult still by the presence of armed soldiers at the objective. You had to time your moves for when they were looking the other way, and you had to be quiet. They'd be carrying the bare minimum of gear, their personal weapons, maybe some grenades, a few radios, slinking across the ground the way a tiger did, watching and listening.

Everyone was staring at the blank TV monitor now, each of them bewitched by his imagination's picture of what was happening.

"Okay," the technician said, "cameras coming on line, attitude and tracking controls in automatic, programming telemetry received. Target acquisition in ninety seconds."

The TV picture lit up. It showed a test pattern. Ryan hadn't seen one of those in years.

"Getting a signal."

Then the picture appeared. Disappointingly, it was in infrared again. Somehow Ryan had expected otherwise. The low angle showed very little of the camp. They could discern no movement at all. The technician frowned and increased the viewing field. Nothing more, not even the helicopters.

The viewing angle changed slowly, and it was hard to believe that the reconnaissance satellite was racing along at over eighteen thousand miles per hour. Finally they could see all of the huts. Ryan blinked. Only one was lit up on the infrared picture. *Uh-oh.* Only one hut—the guards' one—had had its heater on. What did that mean? They're *gone—nobody's home ... and the assault force isn't there either.*

Ryan said what the others didn't want to say: "Something's gone wrong."

"When can they tell us what happened?" Cantor asked.

"They cannot break silence for several hours."

Two more hours followed. They were spent in Marty's office. Food was sent up. Jean-Claude didn't say anything, but he was clearly disappointed by it. Cantor didn't touch his at all. The phone rang. The Frenchman took the call, and spoke in his native tongue. The conversation lasted four or five minutes. Jean-Claude hung up and turned.

"The assault force came upon a regular army unit a hundred kilometers

from the camp, apparently a mechanized unit on an exercise. This was not expected. Coming in low, they encountered them quite suddenly. It opened fire on the helicopters. Surprise was lost, and they had to turn back." Jean-Claude didn't have to explain that, at best, operations like this were successful barely more than half the time.

"I was afraid of that." Jack stared at the floor. He didn't need to have anyone tell him that the mission could not be repeated. They had run a serious risk, trying a covert mission the same way twice. There would be no third attempt. "Are your people safe?"

"Yes, one helicopter was damaged, but managed to return to base. No casualties."

"Please thank your people for trying, Colonel." Cantor excused himself and walked to his private bathroom. Once in there, he threw up. His ulcers were bleeding again. Marty tried to stand, but found himself faint. He fell against the door with a hard rap on the head.

Jack heard the noise and went to see what it was. It was hard to open the door, but he finally saw Marty lying there. Ryan's first instinct was to tell Jean-Claude to call for a doctor, but Jack himself didn't know how to do that here. He helped Marty to his feet and led him back into his office, setting him in a chair.

"What's the matter?"

"He just tossed up blood—how do you call ..." Ryan said the hell with it and dialed Admiral Greer's line.

"Marty's collapsed—we need a doctor here."

"I'll take care of it. Be there in two minutes," the Admiral answered.

Jack went into the bathroom and got a glass of water and some toilet paper. He used this to wipe Cantor's mouth, then held up the glass. "Wash your mouth out."

"I'm okay," the man protested.

"Bullshit," Ryan replied. "You jerk. You've been working too damned late, trying to finish up all your stuff before you leave, right?"

"Got—got to."

"What you got to do, Marty, is get the hell out of here before it eats you up."

Cantor gagged again.

You weren't kidding, Marty, Jack thought. *The war is being fought here, too, and you're one of the casualties. You wanted that mission to score as much as I did.*

"What the hell!" Greer entered the room. He even looked a little disheveled.

"His ulcers let go," Jack explained. "He's been puking blood."

"Aw, Jesus, Marty!" the Admiral said.

Ryan hadn't known that there was a medical dispensary at Langley. Someone identifying himself as a paramedic arrived next. He examined Cantor quickly, then he and a security guard loaded the man on a wheelchair. They took him out, and the three men left behind stared at each other.

"How hard is it to die from ulcers?" Ryan asked his wife just before midnight.

"How old is he?" she asked. Jack told her. Cathy thought about it for a moment. "It can happen, but it's fairly rare. Somebody at work?"

"My supervisor at Langley. He's been on Tagamet, but he vomited blood tonight."

"Maybe he tried going without it. That's one of the problems. You give people medications, and as soon as they start feeling better, they stop taking the meds. Even smart people," Cathy noted. "Is it that stressful over there?"

"I guess it was for him."

"Super." It was the kind of remark that should have been followed by a roll-over, but Cathy hadn't been able to do that for some time. "He'll probably be all right. You really have to work at it to be in serious trouble from ulcers nowadays. Are you sure you want to work there?"

"No. They want me, but I won't decide until you lose a little weight."

"You'd better not be that far away when I go into labor."

"I'll be there when you need me."

"Almost got 'em," Murray reported.

"The same mob who raided *Action-Directe,* eh? Yes, I've heard that was a nicely run mission. What happened?" Owens asked.

"The assault group was spotted seventy miles out and had to turn back. On reexamination of the photos, it may be that our friends were already gone anyway."

"Marvelous. I see our luck is holding. Where did they go, you reckon?"

Murray grunted. "I've got to make the same assumption you have, Jimmy."

"Quite." He looked out the window. The sun would be rising soon. "Well, we've cleared the DPG man and told him the story. "

"How'd he take it?"

"He immediately offered his resignation, but the Commissioner and I prevailed upon him to withdraw it. We all have our little foibles," Owens said generously. "He's a very good chap at what he does. You'll be pleased to learn that his reaction was precisely the same as yours. He said we should arrange for His Highness to fall off one of his polo ponies and break his leg. Please don't quote either of us on that!"

“It’s a hell of a lot easier to protect cowards, isn’t it? It’s the brave ones who complicate our lives. You know something? He’s going to be a good king for you someday. If he lives long enough,” Murray added. It was impossible not to like the kid, he thought. And his wife was dynamite. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, the security on ’em in the States will be tight. Just like what we give the President. Even some of the same people are involved.”

That’s supposed to make me feel happy? Owens asked himself silently, remembering how close several American Presidents had come to death at the hands of madmen, not to mention John F. Kennedy. It could be, of course, that the ULA was back wherever it lived, but all his instincts told him otherwise. Murray was a close friend, and he also knew and respected the Secret Service agents who’d formed the security detail. But the security of Their Highnesses was properly the responsibility of the Yard, and he didn’t like the fact that it was now largely in others’ hands. Owens had been professionally offended the last time the American President had been in the U.K., when the Secret Service had made a big show of shoving the locals as far aside as they dared. Now he understood them a little better.

“How much is the rent?” Dobbens asked.

“Four-fifty a month,” the agent answered. “That’s furnished. ”

“Uh-huh.” The furnishings weren’t exactly impressive, Alex saw. They didn’t have to be.

“When can my cousin move in?”

“It’s not for you?”

“No, it’s my cousin. He’s in the same business I am,” Alex explained. “He’s new to the area. I’ll be responsible for the rent, of course. A three-month deposit, you said?”

“Okay.” The agent had specified two months’ rent up-front.

“Cash all right?” Dobbens asked.

“Sure. Let’s go back to the office and get the paperwork done.”

“I’m running a little late, I’m afraid. Don’t you have the contract with you?”

The agent nodded. “Yeah, I can do it right here.” He walked out to his car and came back with a clipboard and a boilerplate rental contract. He didn’t know that he was condemning himself to death, that no one else from his office had seen this man’s face.

“My mail goes to a box—I get it on the way into work.” That took care of the address.

“What sort of work, did you say?”

“I work at the Applied Physics Laboratory, electrical engineer. I’m afraid I can’t be more specific than that. We do a lot of government work, you understand.” Alex felt vaguely sorry for the man. He was pleasant enough, and

hadn't given him a runaround like many real estate people did. It was too bad. *That's life.*

"You always deal in cash?"

"That's one way to make sure you can afford it," Alex chuckled.

"Could you sign here, please?"

"Sure thing." Alex did so with his own pen, left-handed as he'd practiced. "And that's thirteen-fifty." He counted off the bills.

"That was easy," the agent said as he handed over the keys and a receipt.

"It sure was. Thank you, sir." Alex shook his hand. "He'll probably be moving in next week, certainly by the week after that. "

The two men walked out to their cars. Alex wrote down the agent's tag number: he drove his own car, not one belonging to the brokerage. Alex noted his description anyway, just to be sure that his people didn't kill the wrong man. He was glad he hadn't drawn a woman agent. Alex knew that he'd have to overcome that prejudice sooner or later, but for the moment it was an issue he was just as happy to avoid. He followed the agent for a few blocks, then turned off and doubled back to the house.

It wasn't exactly perfect, but close enough. Three small bedrooms. The eat-in kitchen was all right, though, as was the living room. Most important, it had a garage, and sat on nearly an acre of ground. The lot was bordered by hedges, and sat in a semirural working-class neighborhood where the houses were separated by about fifty feet. It would do just fine as a safehouse.

Finished, he drove to Washington National Airport, where he caught a flight to Miami. There was a three-hour layover until he took another airplane to Mexico City. Miller was waiting for him in the proper hotel.

"Hello, Sean."

"Hello, Alex. Drink?"

"What do you have?"

"Well, I brought a bottle of decent whiskey, or you can have some of the local stuff. The beer isn't bad, but I personally stop short of drinking something with a worm in the bottle."

Alex selected a beer. He didn't bother with a glass.

"So?"

Dobbens drained the beer in one long pull. It was good to be able to relax—really relax. Play-acting all the time at home could be a strain. "I got the safehouse all set up. Did that this morning. It'll do fine for what we want. What about your people?"

"They're on the way. They'll arrive as planned."

Alex nodded approval as he got a second beer. "Okay, let's see how the operation's going to run."

“In a very real sense, Alex, you inspired this.” Miller opened his briefcase and extracted the maps and charts. They went on the coffee table. Alex didn’t smile. Miller was trying to stroke him, and Dobbens didn’t like being stroked. He listened for twenty minutes.

“Not bad, that’s pretty fair, but you’re going to have to change a few things.”

“What?” Miller asked. He was already angered by Dobbens’ tone.

“Look, man, there’s going to be at least fifteen security guys right here.” Alex tapped the map. “And you’re going to have to do them right quick, y’know? We’re not talking street cops here. These guys are trained and well-armed. They’re not exactly dumb, either. If you want this to work, man, you have to land the first punch harder. Your timing is off some, too. No, we have to tighten this up some, Sean.”

“But they’ll be in the wrong place!” Miller objected as dispassionately as he could manage.

“And you want them to be running around loose? No way, boy! You’d better think about taking them out in the first ten seconds. Hey, think of them as soldiers. This ain’t no snatch-and-run job. We’re talking combat here.”

“But if the security is going to be as tight as you say—”

“I can handle that, man. Don’t you pay attention to what I’m doing? I can put your shooters in exactly the right spot at exactly the right time.”

“And how the hell will you do that!” Miller was unable to calm himself anymore. There was just something about Alex that set him off.

“It’s easy, man.” Dobbens smiled. He enjoyed showing this hotshot how things were done. “All you gotta do ...”

“And you really think you can get past them just like that!” Miller snapped after he finished.

“Easy. I can write my own work orders, remember?”

Miller struggled with himself again, and this time he won. He told himself to view Alex’s idea dispassionately. He hated admitting to himself that the plan made sense. This amateur black was telling him how to run an op, and the fact that he was right just made it worse.

“Hey, man, it’s not just better, it’s easier to do.” Alex backed off somewhat. Even arrogant whities needed their pride. This boy was used to having his own way. He was smart enough, Dobbens admitted to himself, but too inflexible. Once he got himself set on an idea, he didn’t want to change a thing. He never would have made a good engineer, Alex knew. “Remember the last op we ran for you? Trust me, man. I was right then, wasn’t I?”

For all his technical expertise, Alex did not have tremendous skills for handling people. This last remark almost set Miller off again, but the Irishman took a deep breath as he continued to stare at the map. *Now I know why the Yanks love their niggers so much.*

"Let me think about it."

"Sure. Tell you what. I'm going to get some sleep. You can pray over the map all you want."

"Who else besides the security and the targets?"

Alex stretched. "Maybe they're going to cater it. Hell—I don't know. I imagine they'll have their maid. I mean, you don't have that kind of company without one servant, right? She doesn't get hurt either, man. She's a sister, handsome woman. And remember what I said about the lady and the kid. If it's necessary, I can live with it, but if you pop 'em for fun, Sean, you'll answer to me. Let's try to keep this one professional. You have three legitimate political targets. That's enough. The rest are bargaining chips, we can use 'em to show good will. That might not be important to you, boy, but it's fucking well important to me. You dig?"

"Very well, Alex." Sean decided then and there that Alex would not see the end of this operation. It shouldn't be too hard to arrange. With his absurd sentimentality, he was unfit to be a revolutionary. *You'll die a brave death. At least we can make a martyr of you.*

Two hours later Miller admitted to himself that this was unfortunate. The man did have a flair for operations.

The security people were late enough that Ryan pulled into the driveway right behind them. There were three of them, led by Chuck Avery of the Secret Service.

"Sorry, we got held up," Avery said as he shook hands. "This is Bert Longley and Mike Keaton, two of our British colleagues."

"Hello, Mr. Longley," Cathy called from the door.

His eyes went wide as he saw her condition. "My goodness, perhaps we should bring a physician in with us! I'd no idea you were so far along."

"Well, this one will be part English." Jack explained. "Come on in."

"Mr. Longley arranged our escort when you were in the hospital," Cathy told her husband. "Nice to see you again."

"How are you feeling?" Longley asked.

"A little tired, but okay," Cathy allowed.

"Have you cleared the problem about Robby?" Jack asked.

"Yes, we have. Please excuse Mr. Bennett. I'm afraid he took his instructions a bit too literally. We have no problems with a naval officer. In fact, His Highness is looking forward to meeting him. So, may we look around?"

"If it's all right with you, I want to see that cliff of yours," Avery said.

"Follow me, gentlemen." Jack led the three through the sliding-glass doors onto the deck that faced Chesapeake Bay.

“Magnificent!” Longley observed.

“The only thing we did wrong is that the living and dining room aren’t separated, but that’s how the design was drawn, and we couldn’t figure a graceful way to change it. But all those windows do give us a nice view, don’t they?”

“Indeed, also one that gives our chaps good visibility,” Keaton observed, surveying the area.

Not to mention decent fields of fire, Ryan thought.

“How many people will you be bringing?” Jack asked.

“I’m afraid that’s not something we can discuss,” Longley replied.

“More than twenty?” Jack persisted. “I plan to have coffee and sandwiches for your troops. Don’t worry, I haven’t even told Robby.”

“Enough for twenty will be more than ample,” Avery said after a moment. “Just coffee will be fine.” They’d be drinking a lot of coffee, the Secret Service man thought.

“Okay, let’s see the cliff.” Jack went down the steps from the deck to the grass. “You want to be very careful here, gentlemen.”

“How unstable is it?” Avery asked.

“Sally has been past where the fence is twice. Both times she got smacked for it. The problem’s erosion. The cliff’s made out of something real soft—sandstone, I think. I’ve been trying to stabilize it. The state conservation people talked me into planting this damned kudzu, and—stop right there!”

Keaton had stepped over the low fence.

“Two years ago I watched a twenty-square-foot piece drop off. That’s why I planted these vines. You don’t think somebody’s going to climb that, do you?”

“It’s one possibility,” Longley answered.

“You’d think different if you looked at it from a boat. The cliff won’t take the weight. A squirrel can make it up, but that’s all.”

“How high is it?” Avery asked.

“Forty-three feet over there, almost fifty here. The kudzu vines just make it worse. The damned stuff’s nearly impossible to kill, but if you try grabbing onto it, you’re in for a big surprise. Like I said, if you want to check it, do it from a boat,” Ryan said.

“We’ll do that,” Avery replied.

“Coming in, that driveway must be three hundred yards,” Keaton said.

“Just over four hundred, counting the curves. It cost an arm and a leg to pave it.”

“What about the swimming pool people?” It was Longley this time.

“The pool’s supposed to be finished next Wednesday.”

Avery and Keaton walked around the north side of the house. There were trees twenty yards from there, and a swarm of brambles that went on forever. Ryan had planted a long row of shrubs to mark the border. Sally didn't go in there either.

"This looks pretty secure," Avery said. "There's two hundred yards of open space between the road and the trees, then more open ground between the pool and the house."

"Right." Ryan chuckled. "You can set up your heavy machine guns in the treeline and put the mortars over by the pool."

"Doctor Ryan, we are quite serious about this," Longley pointed out.

"I'm sure. But it's an unannounced trip, right? They can't—" Jack stopped short. He didn't like the look on their faces.

Avery said, "We always assume that the other side knows what we're up to."

"Oh." *Is that all of it, or is there more?* He knew it wouldn't do any good to ask. "Well, speaking as a has-been Marine, I wouldn't want to hit this place cold. I know a little about how you guys are trained. I wouldn't want to mess with you."

"We try," Avery assured him, still looking around. The way the driveway came through the trees, he could use his communications van to block vehicles out entirely. He reminded himself that there would be ten people from his agency, six Brits, a liaison guy from the Bureau, and probably two or three State Police for traffic control on the road. Each of his men would have both a service revolver and a submachine gun. They practiced at least once a week.

Avery still was not happy, not with the possibility of an armed terrorist group running around loose. But all the airports were being watched, all the local police forces alerted. There was only one road in here. The surrounding terrain would be difficult even for a platoon of soldiers to penetrate without making all kinds of noise, and as nasty as terrorists were, they'd never fought a set-piece battle. This wasn't London, and the potential targets weren't driving blithely about with a single armed guard.

"Thank you, Doctor Ryan. We will check the cliff out from the water side. If you see a Coast Guard cutter, that'll be us."

"You know how to get to the station at Thomas Point? You take Forest Drive east to Arundel-on-the-Bay and hang a right. You can't miss it."

"Thanks, we'll do that."

The real estate agent came out of the office just before ten. It was his turn to shut down. In his briefcase was an envelope for the bank's night depository and some contracts he'd go over the next morning before going into work. He set the case on the seat beside him and started the car. Two headlights pulled right in behind him.

“Can I talk to you?” a voice called in the darkness. The agent turned to see a shape coming toward him.

“I’m afraid we’re closed. The office opens at—” He saw that he was looking at a gun.

“I want your money, man. Just be cool, and everything’ll be okay,” the gunman said. There was no sense terrifying the man. He might do something crazy, and he might get lucky.

“But I don’t have any—”

“The briefcase and the wallet. Slow and easy and you’ll be home in half an hour.”

The man got his wallet first. It took three attempts to loose the button on his hip pocket, and his hands were quivering as he handed it over. The briefcase came next.

“It’s just checks—no cash.”

“That’s what they all say. Lie down on the seat and count to one hundred. Don’t stick your head up till you finish, and everything’ ll be just fine. Out loud, so’s I can hear you.” *Let’s see, the heart’s right about there....* He reached his gun hand inside the open window. The man got to seven. When it went off, the sound of the silenced automatic was further muffled by being inside the car. The body jerked a few times, but not enough to require a second round. The gunman opened the door and wound up the window, then killed the engine and the lights before going back to his car. He pulled back onto the road and drove at the legal limit. Ten minutes later the empty briefcase and wallet were tossed into a shopping center dumpster. He got back onto the highway and drove in the opposite direction. It was dangerous to hold on to the gun, but that had to be disposed of more carefully. The gunman drove the car back to where it belonged—the family that owned it was on vacation—and walked two blocks to get his own. Alex was *right,* as always, the gunman thought. *If you plan everything, think it all out, and most important, don’t leave any evidence behind, you can kill all the people you want. Oh,* he remembered, *one more thing: you don’t talk about it.*

“Hi, Emie,” Jack said quietly. The dog showed up as a dark spot on the light-colored carpet in the living room. It was four in the morning. Ernie had heard a noise and come out of Sally’s room to see what it was. One thing about dogs, they never slept the way people did. Ernie looked at him for several minutes, his tail gyrating back and forth until he got a scratch between his ears, then he moved off, back to Sally’s room. It was amazing, Jack thought. The dog had entirely supplanted AG Bear. He found it hard to believe that anything could do that.

They’re coming back, aren’t they? he asked the night. Jack rose off the leather couch and walked to the windows. It was a clear night. Out on the Chesapeake Bay, he could see the running lights of ships plying their way to or from the Port of Baltimore, and the more ornate displays of tug-barge combinations

that plodded along more slowly.

He didn't know how he could have been so slow on the uptake. Perhaps because the activity at Camp -18 almost tracked with the pattern that he'd tried repeatedly to discern. It was about the right time for them to show up for refresher training. But it was equally likely that they were planning something big. *Like maybe right here....*

"Jesus. You were too close to the problem, Jack," he whispered. It was public knowledge—had been for a couple of weeks—that they were coming over, and the ULA had already demonstrated its ability to operate in America, he remembered. *And we're bringing known targets into our home! Real smart,* Jack. In retrospect it was amazing enough. They'd accepted the backward invitation without the first thought ... and even when the security people had been here the previous day, he'd made jokes. *You asshole!*

He thought over the security provisions, taking himself back again to his time in the Corps. As an abstract battle problem, his house was a tough objective. You couldn't do anything from the east—the cliff was a more dangerous obstacle than a minefield. North and south, the woods were so thick and tangled that even the most skilled commando types would be hard-pressed to come through without making a horrendous racket—and they sure as hell couldn't practice that kind of skill in a barren, treeless desert! So they had to come from the west. *How many people did Avery say—well, he didn't say, but I got the impression of about twenty.*

Twenty security people, armed and trained. He remembered the days from the Basic Officer's Course at Quantico, and the nights. Twenty-two years old, invincible and immortal, drinking beer at local bars. There'd been one night at a place called the Command Post, the one with a picture of Patton on the wall, when he'd started talking to a couple of instructors from the FBI Academy, just south of the Marine base. They were every bit as proud as his brother Marines. *They never bothered to say "we are the best." They simply assumed that everyone knew it. Just like us.* The next day he'd accepted the invitation to shoot on their range and settle a gentlemanly wager. It had cost him ten dollars to learn that one of them was the chief firearms instructor. *God, I wonder if Breckenridge could beat him!* The Secret Service wouldn't be very different, given their mission. *Would you want to tangle with them? Hell, no!*

If I assume that the ULA is as smart as it seems to be ... and it is an unannounced trip, a private sort of thing.... They won't know to come here, and even if they did, if they're too smart to take this one on ... it should be safe, shouldn't it?

But that was a word whose meaning was forever changed. Safe. It was something no longer real.

Jack walked around the fireplace into the house's bedroom wing. Sally was sleeping, with Ernie curled up on the foot of the bed. His head came up when Jack entered the room, as if to say, "Yes?"

His little girl was lying there, at peace, dreaming a child's dreams while her father contemplated the nightmare that still hovered over his family, the one he'd allowed himself to forget for a few hours. He straightened the covers and

patted the dog on the head before leaving the room.

Jack wondered how public figures did it. They lived with the nightmare all the time. He remembered congratulating the Prince for not letting such a threat dominate his life: *Well done, old boy, that'll show them! Be a fearless target!* It was a very different thing when you were yourself the target, Ryan admitted to the night, when your family was the target. You put on the brave face, and followed your instructions, and wondered if every car on the street could hold a man with a machine gun who was bent on making *your* death into a very special political statement. You could keep your mind off it during the day when you had work to do, but at night, when the mind wanders and dreams begin ...

The dualism was incredible. You couldn't dwell on it, but neither could you allow yourself to forget it. You couldn't let your life be dominated by fear, but you couldn't ever lapse into a feeling of security. A sense of fatalism would have helped, but Ryan was a man who had always deemed himself the master of his fate. He would not admit that anything else could be true. He wanted to lash out, if not at *them,* then at destiny, but both were as far beyond his reach as the ships whose lights passed miles from his windows. The safety of his family had almost been assured—

We came so close! he cried silently to the night.

They'd almost done it. They'd almost won that one battle, and they had helped others win another. He *could* fight back, and he knew that he could do it best by working at that desk in Langley, by joining the team full-time. He would not be the master of his fate, but at least he could play a part. He had played a part. It had been important enough—if only an accident—to Françoise Theroux, that pretty, malignant thing now dead. And so the decision was made. The people with guns would play their part, and the man behind the desk would play his. Jack would miss the Academy, miss the eager young kids, but that was the price he'd have to pay for getting back into the game. Jack got a drink of water before going back to bed.

Plebe Summer started on schedule. Jack watched with impassive sympathy as the recently graduated high school seniors were introduced to the rigors of military life. The process was consciously aimed at weeding out the weak as early as possible, and so it was largely in the hands of upperclassmen who had only recently been through the same thing. The new youngsters were at the debatable mercy of the older ones, running around with their closely cropped hair to the double-time cadence of students only two years their senior.

"Morning, Jack!" Robby came over to watch with him from the parking lot.

"You know, Rob, Boston College was never like this."

"If you think this is a Plebe Summer," Jackson snorted, "you should have seen what it was like when I was here!"

"I bet they've been saying that for a hundred years," Jack suggested.

"Probably so." The white-clad plebes passed like a herd of buffalo, all gasping for air on the hot, humid morning. "We kept better formations, though."

"The first day?"

"The first few days were a blur," Jackson admitted.

"Packing up?"

Jackson nodded. "Most of the gear's already in boxes. I have to get my relief settled in."

"Me, too."

"You're leaving?" Robby was surprised.

"I told Admiral Greer that I wanted in."

"Admiral—oh, the guy at CIA. You're going to do it, eh? How did the department take it?"

"I think you can say that they managed to restrain their tears. The boss isn't real happy about all the time I missed this year. So it looks like we're both having a going-away dinner."

"Jeez, it's this Friday, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Can you show up about eight-fifteen?"

"You got it. You said not dressy, right?"

"That's right." Jack smiled. *Gotcha.*

The RAF VC-10 aircraft touched down at Andrews Air Force Base at eight in the evening and taxied to the same terminal used by Air Force One. The reporters noted that security was very tight, with what looked to be a full company of Air Police in view, plus the plainclothes Secret Service agents. They told themselves that security at this particular part of the base was always strict. The plane came to a halt at exactly the right place, and the stairs were rolled to the forward door, which opened after a moment.

At the foot of the stairs waited the Ambassador and officials from the State Department. Inside the aircraft, security men made a final check out the windows. Finally His Highness appeared in the doorway, joined by his young wife, waving to the distant spectators, and descending the stairs gingerly despite legs that were stiff from the flight. At the bottom a number of military officers from two nations saluted, and the State Department protocol officer curtsied. This would earn her a reprimand from the *Washington Post's* arbiter of manners in the morning edition. The six-year-old granddaughter of the base commander presented Her Highness with a dozen yellow roses. Strobes flashed, and both royal personages smiled dutifully at the cameras while they took the time to say something pleasant to everyone in the receiving line. The Prince shared a joke with a naval officer who had once commanded him, and the Princess said something about the oppressive, muggy weather that had persisted into the evening. The Ambassador's wife pointed out that the climate here was such that Washington D.C. had once been considered a hazardous-

duty station. The malarial mosquitoes were long gone, but the climate hadn't changed very much. Fortunately, everyone had air conditioning. Reporters noted the color, style, and cut of the Princess's outfit, especially her "daring" new hat. She stood with the poise of a professional model while her husband looked as casual as a Texas cowboy, as incongruous as that might have seemed, one hand in his pocket and a relaxed grin on his face. The Americans who'd never met the couple before found him wonderfully easy-going, and of course every man there had long since fallen in love with the Princess, along with most of the Western world.

The security people saw none of this. They all had their backs to the scene, their eyes scanning the crowd, their faces stamped into the same serious expression while each with various degrees of emphasis thought: *Please, God, not while I'm on duty.* Every one had a radio earpiece constantly providing information that their brains monitored while their eyes were otherwise occupied.

Finally they moved to the embassy's Rolls-Royce, and the motorcade formed up. Andrews had a number of gates, and the one they took had been decided upon only an hour before. The route into town was its own traffic jam of marked and unmarked cars. Two additional Rolls-Royce automobiles, of exactly the same model and color, were dispersed through the procession, each with a lead- and chase-car, and a helicopter was overhead. If anyone had taken the time to count the firearms present, the total would have been nearly a hundred. The arrival had been timed to allow swift passage through Washington, and twenty-five minutes later the motorcade got to the British Embassy. A few minutes after that, Their Highnesses were safely in the building, and for the moment the responsibility of someone else. Most of the local security people dispersed, heading back to their homes or stations, but ten men and women stayed around the building, most invisibly hidden in cars and vans, while a few extra uniformed police walked the perimeter.

"America," O'Donnell said. "The land of opportunity." The television news coverage came on at eleven, and had tape of the arrival.

"What do you suppose they're doing now?" Miller asked.

"Working on their jet lag, I imagine," his chief observed. "Getting a good night's sleep. So, all ready here?"

"Yes, the safehouse is all prepared for tomorrow. Alex and his people are ready, and I've gone over the changes in the plan."

"They're from Alex, too?"

"Yes, and if I hear one more bit of advice from that arrogant bastard—"

"He is one of our revolutionary brethren," O'Donnell noted with a smile. "But I know what you mean."

"Where's Mike?"

"Belfast. He'll run Phase Two."

"The timing is all set?"

"Yes. Both brigade commanders, and the whole Army Council. We should be able to get them all...." O'Donnell finally revealed his plan in toto. McKenney's penetration agents either worked closely with all of the senior PIRA people or knew those who did. On command from O'Donnell, they would assassinate them all, completely removing the Provisionals' military leadership. There would be no one left to run the Organization ... except one man whose masterstroke mission would catapult him back to respectability with rank-and-file Provos. With his hostages, he'd get the release of all the men "behind the wire" even if it meant mailing the Prince of Wales to Buckingham Palace one cubic centimeter at a time. O'Donnell was certain of this. For all the brave, pious talk in Whitehall, it was centuries since an English king had faced death, and the idea of martyrdom sat better with revolutionaries than with those in power. Public pressure would see to that. They would *have* to negotiate to save the life of the heir to the throne. The scope of this operation would enliven the Movement, and Kevin Joseph O'Donnell would lead a revolution reborn in boldness and blood....

"Changing of the guard, Jack?" Marty observed. He, too, had packed up his things. A security officer would check the box before he left.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better, but you can get tired of watching daytime TV."

"Taking all your pills?" Ryan asked.

"I'll never forget again, Mom," was the answer.

"I see there's nothing new on our friends."

"Yeah. They dropped back into that black hole they live in. The FBI is worried that they're over here, of course, but there hasn't even been a hint of it. Of course, whenever anybody's felt secure dealing with these bastards, they've gotten bit on the ass. Still, about the only outfit that isn't on alert is the Delta Force. All kinds of assets are standing by. If they're over here and they show anybody a whisker, the whole world is going to come crashing in on them. 'Call in the whole world.' We used to say that in Vietnam." Cantor grunted. "I'll be in Monday and Tuesday. You don't have to say goodbye yet. Have a good weekend."

"You too." Ryan walked out, with a new security pass hanging around his neck and his jacket draped over his shoulder. It was hot outside, and his Rabbit didn't have air conditioning. The drive home along Route 50 was complicated by all the people heading to Ocean City for the weekend, anything to get away from the heat that had covered the area like an evil spell for two weeks. They were in for a surprise, Jack thought. A cold front was supposed to come through.

"Howard County Police," the Desk Sergeant said. "Can I help you?"

“This is 911, right?” It was a male voice.

“Yes, sir. What seems to be the problem?”

“Hey, uh, my wife said I shouldn’t get involved, you know, but—”

“Can you give me your name and phone number, please?”

“No way—look, this house, uh, down the street. There’s people there with guns, you know? Machine guns.”

“Say that again.” The Sergeant’s eyes narrowed.

“Machine guns—no shit, I saw an M-60 machine gun, like in the Army—y’know, thirty caliber, feeds off a belt, heavy bitch to pack along, a real friggin’ machine gun. I saw some other stuff, too.”

“Where?”

The voice became rapid. “Eleven-sixteen Green Cottage Lane. There’s maybe—I mean I saw four of ‘em, one black and three white. They were unloading the guns from a van. It was three in the morning. I had to get up an’ take a leak, and I looked out the bathroom window, y’know? The garage door was open, and the light was on, and when they passed the gun across, it was in the light, like, and I could tell it was a sixty. Hey, I used to carry one in the Army, y’know? Anyway, that’s it, man, you wanna do something about it, that’s your lookout.” The line clicked off. The Sergeant called his captain at once.

“What is it?” The Sergeant handed over his notes. “Machine gun? M-60?”

“He said it was—he said it was a thirty-caliber that feeds off a belt. That’s the M-60. That alert we got from the FBI, Captain...”

“Yeah.” The Station Commander had visions of promotion dangling before his eyes—but also visions of his men in a pitched battle where the perpetrators had better weapons. “Get a car out there. Tell them to keep out of sight and take no action. I’m going to request a SWAT callup and get hold of the feds.”

Less than a minute later a police car was heading to the area. The responding officer was a six-year veteran of the county police who very much wanted to be a seven-year veteran. It took him almost ten minutes to reach the scene. He parked his car a block away, behind a large shrub, and was able to watch the house without exposing himself as a police officer. The shotgun that usually hung under the dashboard was in his sweating hands now, with a double-ought buck round chambered. Another car was four minutes behind his, and two more officers joined him. Then the whole world really did seem to arrive. First a patrol sergeant, then a lieutenant, then two captains, and finally, two agents from the FBI’s Baltimore office. The officer who had first responded was now one of the Indians in a tribe top-heavy with chiefs.

The FBI Special Agent in Charge for the Baltimore office set up a radio link with the Washington headquarters, but left the operation in the hands of the local police. The county police had its own SWAT team, like most local forces did, and they quickly went to work. The first order of business was to evacuate the people from the area’s homes. To everyone’s relief, they were able to do that from the rear in every case. The people removed from their

homes were immediately interviewed. Yes, they had seen people in that house. Yes, they were mostly white, but there had been at least one black person. No, they hadn't seen any guns—in fact, they hardly saw the people at all. One lady thought they had a van, but if so, it was usually kept in the garage. The interviews went on while the SWAT team moved in. The neighborhood houses were all of the same style and design, and the men made a quick check through one to establish its layout. Another set up a scope-sighted rifle in the house directly across the street and used his sight to examine the target home's windows.

The SWAT team might have waited, but the longer they did that, the greater was the risk of alerting their quarry. They moved in slowly and carefully, skillfully using cover and concealment until they were within fifty feet of the target house. Anxious, sharp eyes scanned the windows for movement and saw none. *Could they all be asleep?* The team leader went in first, sprinting across the yard and stopping under a window. He held up a stick-on microphone and attached it to the corner of the window, listening to an earpiece for a sign of occupancy. The second-in-command watched the man's head cock almost comically to one side, then he spoke into a radio that all his team members could hear: "The TV's on. No conversation, I—something else, can't make it out." He motioned for his team to approach, one at a time, while he crouched under the window, gun at the ready. Three minutes later the team was ready.

"Team leader," the radio crackled. "This is Lieutenant Haber. We have a young man here who says a van went tearing out of that house about quarter to five—that's about the time the police radio call went out."

The team leader waved acknowledgment and treated the message as something that mattered not a bit. The team executed a forced entry maneuver. Two simultaneous shotgun blasts blew the hinges off the windowless side door and it hadn't even hit the floor before the team leader was through the opening, training his gun around the kitchen. Nothing. They proceeded through the house in movements that looked like a kind of evil ballet. The entire exercise was over in a minute. The radio message went out: "The building is secure."

The team leader emerged on the front porch, his shotgun pointed at the floor, and pulled off his black mask before he waved the others in. His hands moved back and forth across his chest in the universal wave-off signal. The Lieutenant and the senior FBI agent ran across the street as he wiped the sweat away from his eyes.

"Well?"

"You're gonna love it," the team leader said. "Come on."

The living room had a small-screen color TV on, sitting on a table. The floor was covered with wrappers from McDonald's, and the kitchen sink held what looked like fifty neatly stacked paper cups. The master bedroom—it was a few square feet larger than the other two—was the armory. Sure enough, there was an American M-60 machine gun, with two 250-round ammo boxes, along with a dozen AK-47 assault rifles, three of them stripped down for cleaning,

and a bolt-action rifle with a telescopic sight. On the oaken dresser, however, was a scanner radio. Its indicator lights skipped on and off. One of them was on the frequency of the Howard County Police. Unlike the FBI, the local police did not use secure—that is, scrambled—radio circuits. The FBI agent walked out to his vehicle and got Bill Shaw on the radio.

"So they monitored the police call and split," Shaw said after a couple of minutes.

"Looks like it. The locals have a description of the van out. At least they bugged out so fast that they had to leave a bunch of weapons behind. Maybe they're spooked. Anything new coming in at your end?"

"Negative." Shaw was in the FBI's emergency command center, Room 5005 of the J. Edgar Hoover Building. He knew of the French attempt to hit their training camp. *Twice now they've escaped by sheer luck.* "Okay, I'll get talking to the State Police forces. The forensic people are on the way. Stay put and coordinate with the locals."

"Right. Out."

The security people were already setting up. Discreetly, he saw, their cars were by the pool, which had been filled up only a couple of days before, and there was a van which evidently contained special communications gear. Jack counted eight people in the open, two of them with Uzis. Avery was waiting for him when he pulled into the carport.

"Good news for a change—well, good and bad."

"How so?" Ryan asked.

"Somebody phoned the cops and said he saw some people with guns. They rolled on it real quick. The suspects split—they were monitoring the police radio—but we captured a bunch of guns. Looks like our friends had a safehouse set up. Unfortunately for them it didn't quite work out. We may have 'em on the run. We know what kind of car they're using, and the local cops have this area completely sealed off, and we're sweeping the whole state. The Governor has even authorized the use of helicopters from the National Guard to help with the search."

"Where were they?"

"Howard County, a little community south of Columbia. We missed them by a whole five minutes, but we have them moving and out in the open. Just a matter of time."

"I hope the cops are careful," Ryan said.

"Yes, sir."

"Any problems here?"

"No, everything's going just fine. Your guests should be here about quarter to eight. What's for dinner?" Avery asked.

“Well, I picked up some fresh white corn on the way home—you passed the place coming in. Steaks on the grill, baked potatoes, and Cathy’s spinach salad. We’ll give ’em some good, basic American food.” Jack opened the hatch on the Rabbit and pulled out a bag of freshly picked corn.

Avery grinned. “You’re making me hungry.”

“I got a caterer coming in at six-thirty. Cold cuts and rolls. I’m not going to let you guys work all that time without food, okay?” Ryan insisted. “You can’t stay alert if you’re hungry.”

“We’ll see. Thanks.”

“My dad was a cop.”

“By the way, I tried the lights around the pool, but they don’t work. ”

“I know, the electricity’s been acting up the last couple of days. The power company says they have a new transformer up, and it needs work—something like that.” Ryan shrugged. “Evidently it damaged the breaker on the pool line, but so far nothing’s gone bad in the house. You weren’t planning to go swimming, were you?”

“No. We wanted to use one of the plugs here, but it’s out too.”

“Sorry. Well, I have some stuff to do.”

Avery watched him leave, and went over his own deployment plans one last time. A pair of State Police cars would be a few hundred yards down the road to stop and check anyone coming back here. The bulk of his men would be covering the road. Two would watch each side of the clearing—the woods looked too inhospitable to penetrate, but they’d watch them anyway. This was called Team One. The second team would consist of six men. There would be three people in the house. Three more, one of them a communicator in the radio van, in the trees by the pool.

The speed trap was well known to the locals. Every weekend a car or two was set up on this stretch of Interstate 70. There had even been something about it in the local paper. But people from out of state didn’t read that, of course. The trooper had his car just behind a small crest, which allowed cars heading up to Pennsylvania to fly by, right past his radar gun before they knew it. The pickings were so good that he never bothered chasing after anyone who did under sixty-five, and at least twice a night he nailed people for doing over eighty.

Be on the lookout for a black van, make and year unknown, the all-points call had said a few minutes before. The trooper estimated that there were at least five thousand such vans in the state of Maryland, and they’d all be on the road on a Friday night. Somebody else would have to worry about that. *Approach with extreme caution.*

His patrol car rocked like a boat crossing a wake as a vehicle zoomed past. The radar gun readout said 83. Business. The trooper dropped his car into gear and started moving after it before he saw that it was a black van. *Approach*

with extreme caution.... They didn't give a tag number....

"Hagerstown, this is Eleven. I am following a van, black in color, that I clocked at eighty-three. I am westbound on I-70, about three miles east of exit thirty-five."

"Eleven, get the tag number but do not—repeat do *not*—attempt to apprehend. Get the number, back off, and stay in visual contact. We'll get some backup for you."

"Roger. Moving in now." *Damn.*

He floored his accelerator and watched his speedometer go to ninety. The van had slowed a little, it seemed. He was now two hundred yards back. His eyes squinted. He could see the plate but not the number. He closed the distance more slowly now. At fifty yards he could make out the plate—it was a handicap one. The trooper lifted his radio microphone to call in the tag numbers when the rear doors flew open.

It all hit him in a moment: *This was how Larry Fontana got it!* He slammed on his brakes and tried to turn the wheel, but the microphone cable got caught on his arm. The police officer cringed and slid down behind the dashboard as the car slowed, and then he saw the flash, a sun-white tongue of flame that reached directly at him. As soon as he understood what that was, he heard the impacting rounds. One of his tires blew, and his radiator exploded, sending a shower of steam and water into the air. More rounds walked up the hood into the right side of the car, and the trooper dived under the steering wheel while the car bounced up and down on the flattened tire. Then the noise stopped. The State Police officer stuck his head up and saw the van was a hundred yards away, accelerating up the hill. He tried to make a call on the radio, but it didn't work. He discovered soon after that two bullets had blasted through the car's battery, now leaking acid on the pavement. He stood there for several minutes, wondering why he was alive, before another police car arrived.

The trooper was shaking badly enough that he had to hold the microphone in both hands. "Hagerstown, the bastard machine-gunned my car! It's a Ford van, looks like an eighty-four, handicap tag Nancy two-two-nine-one, last seen westbound on I-70 east of exit thirty-fi-five."

"Were you hit?"

"Negative, but the car's b-beat to shit. They used a goddamned machine gun on me!"

That really got things rolling. The FBI was again notified, and every available State Police helicopter converged on the Hagerstown area. For the first time, the choppers held men with automatic weapons. In Annapolis, the Governor wondered if he should use National Guard units. An infantry company was put on alert—it was already engaged in its weekend drill—but for the moment, he limited the Guard's active involvement to helicopter support of the State Police. The hunt was on in the central Maryland hill country. Warnings went out over commercial radio and TV stations for people to be on the alert. The President was spending the weekend in the country,

and that was another major complication. Marines at nearby Camp David and a few other highly secret defense installations tucked away in the rolling hills hung up their usual dress blues and pistol belts. They substituted M-16 rifles and camouflage greens.

25

Rendezvous

They arrived exactly on time. A pair of State Police cars remained on the road, and three more loaded with security people accompanied the Rolls up the driveway to the Ryan house. The chauffeur, one of the security force, pulled right to the front and jumped out to open the passenger door. His Highness came out first, and helped his wife. The security people were already swarming all over the place. The leader of the British contingent conferred with Avery, and the detail dispersed to their predetermined stations. As Jack came down the steps to greet his guests, he had the feeling that his home had been subjected to an armed invasion.

"Welcome to Peregrine Cliff."

"Hello, Jack!" The Prince took his hand. "You're looking splendid."

"You, too, sir." He turned to the Princess, whom he'd never actually met. "Your Highness, this is a great pleasure."

"And for us, Doctor Ryan."

He led them into the house. "How's your trip been so far?"

"Awfully hot," the Prince answered. "Is it always like this in the summer?"

"We've had two pretty bad weeks," Jack answered. The temperature had hit ninety-five a few hours earlier. "They say that's going to change by tomorrow. It isn't supposed to go much past eighty for the next few days." This did not get an enthusiastic response.

Cathy was waiting inside with Sally. The weather was especially hard on her, this close to delivery. She shook hands, but Sally remembered how to curtsy from England, and performed a beautiful one, accompanied by a giggle.

"Are you quite all right?" Her Highness asked Cathy.

"Fine, except for the heat. Thank God for air conditioning!"

"Can we show you around?" Jack led the party into the living /dining room.

"The view is marvelous," the Prince observed.

"Okay, the first thing is, nobody wears a coat in my house," Ryan pronounced. "I think you call this 'Planter's Rig' over in England."

"Excellent idea," said the Prince. Jack took his jacket and hung it in the foyer closet next to his old Marine parka, then got rid of his own. By this time Cathy had everyone seated. Sally perched next to her mother, her feet high off

the floor as she tried to keep her dress down on her knees. Cathy found it almost impossible to sit comfortably.

"How much longer?" the Princess asked.

"Eight days—of course with number two, that means any time. "

"I shall find that out myself in seven more months."

"Really? Congratulations!" Both women beamed.

"Way to go, sir," Ryan observed.

"Thank you, Jack. How have you been?"

"I suppose you know the work I'm doing?"

"Yes, I heard last night from one of our security people. I've been told that you located and identified a terrorist camp that has since been ... neutralized," the Prince said quietly.

Ryan nodded discreetly. "I'm afraid that I'm not able to discuss that. "

"Understood. And how has your little girl done after ..."

"Sally?" Jack turned. "How's my little girl?"

"I'm a *big* girl!" she replied forcefully.

"What do you think?"

"I think you've been damned lucky."

"I'd settle for a little bit more. I presume you've heard?"

"Yes." He paused. "I hope your chaps are careful."

Jack voiced agreement, then rose as he heard a car pull up. He opened the door to see Robby and Sissy Jackson getting out of the pilot's Corvette. The Secret Service's communications van moved to block the driveway behind them. Robby stormed up the steps.

"What gives? Who's here, the President?"

Cathy must have warned them, Jack saw. Sissy was dressed in a simple but very nice blue dress, and Robby had a tie on. Too bad.

"Come on in and join the party," Jack said with a nasty grin.

Robby looked at the two men by the pool, their jackets unbuttoned, and gave Jack a puzzled look, but followed. As they came around the brick fireplace, the pilot's eyes went wide.

"Commander Jackson, I presume." His Highness rose.

"Jack," Robby whispered. "I'm going to kill you!" Louder: "How do you do, sir. This is my wife, Cecilia." As usually happened, the people immediately split into male and female groups.

"I understand you're a naval aviator."

"Yes, sir. I'm going back to a fleet squadron now. I fly the F-14." Robby struggled to keep his voice under control. He was successful, mostly.

“Yes, the Tomcat. I’ve flown the Phantom. Have you?”

“I have a hundred twenty hours in them, sir. My squadron transitioned into fourteens a few months after I joined up. I was just getting the Phantom figured out when they took ’em away. I—uh—sir, aren’t you a naval officer also?”

“Yes, Commander, I have the rank of captain,” His Highness answered.

“Thank you. Now I know what to call you, Captain,” Robby said with visible relief. “That’s okay, isn’t it?”

“Of course. You know, it does get rather tiresome when people act so awkwardly around one. This friend of yours here actually read me off some months ago.”

Robby smiled finally. “You know Marines, sir. Long on mouth and short on brains.”

Jack realized that it was going to be that kind of night. “Can I get anyone something to drink?”

“I gotta fly tomorrow, Jack,” Robby answered. He checked his watch. “I’m under the twelve-hour rule.”

“You really take that so seriously?” the Prince asked.

“You bet you do, Captain, when the bird costs thirty or forty mil. If you break one, booze better not be the reason. I’ve been through that once.”

“Oh? What happened?”

“An engine blew when I put her in burner. I tried to get back but I lost hydraulic pressure five miles from the boat and had to punch out. That’s twice I’ve ejected, and that’s by-God enough.”

“Oh?” This question got Robby started on how his test-pilot days at Pax River had ended. *There I was at ten thousand ...* Jack went into the kitchen to get everyone some iced tea. He found two security types, an American and a Brit.

“Everything okay?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah. It looks like our friends got spotted near Hagerstown. They blasted a State Police car and split. The trooper’s okay, they missed this one. Anyway, they were last seen heading west.” The Secret Service agent seemed very pleased by that. Jack looked outside to see another one standing on the outside deck.

“You sure it’s them?”

“It was a van, and it had handicap tags. They usually fall into patterns,” the agent explained. “Sooner or later it catches up with them. The area’s been sealed off. We’ll get ’em.”

“Good.” Jack lifted a tray of glasses.

By the time he got back, Robby was discussing some aspect of flying with the Prince. He could tell since it involved elaborate hand movements.

“So if you fire the Phoenix inside that radius, he just can’t evade it. The missile can pull more gees than any pilot can,” Jackson concluded.

“Ah, yes, the same thing with the Sparrow, isn’t it?”

“Right, Cap’n, but the radius is smaller.” Robby’s eyes really lit up. “Have you ever been up in a Tomcat?”

“No, I wish I could.”

“For crying out loud, that’s no big deal. Hell, we take *civilians* up all the time—I mean it has to be cleared and all that, but we’ve even had Hollywood actors up. Getting you a hop ought to be a snap. I mean, it’s not like you’re a security risk, is it?” Robby laughed and grabbed a glass of tea. “Thanks, Jack. Captain, if you’ve got the time, I’ve got the bird.”

“I’d love to be there. We do have a little free time. ...”

“Then let’s do it,” Jackson said.

“I see you two are getting along.”

“Indeed,” the Prince replied. “I’ve wanted to meet an F-14 pilot for years. Now, you say that telescopic camera arrangement is really effective?”

“Yes, sir! It’s not that big a deal. It’s a ten-power lens on a dinky little TV camera. You can identify your target fifty miles out, and it’s Phoenix time. If you play it right, you can splash the guy before he knows you’re in the same county, and that’s the idea, isn’t it?”

“So you try to avoid the dogfight?”

“ACM, you mean—air-combat maneuvering, Jack,” Robby explained to the ignorant bystander. “That’ll change when we get the new engines, Cap’n, but, yeah, the farther away you can take him, the better, right? Sometimes you have to get wrapped up in the fur-ball, but if you do that you’re giving away your biggest advantage. Our mission is to engage the other guy as far from the boat as we can. That’s why we call it the Outer Air Battle.”

“It would have been rather useful at the Falklands,” His Highness observed.

“That’s right. If you engage the enemy over your own decks, he’s already won the biggest part of the battle. We want to start scoring three hundred miles out, and hammer their butts all the way in. If your Navy’d had a full-size carrier, that useless little war never would have happened. Excuse me, sir. That wasn’t your fault.”

“Can I show you around the house?” Jack asked. It always seemed to happen. You worked to have one of your guests meet another, and all of a sudden you were cut out of the conversation.

“How old is it, Jack?”

“We moved in a few months before Sally was born.”

“The woodwork is marvelous. Is that the library down there?”

“Yes, sir.” The way the house was laid out, you could look down from the living room into the library. The master bedroom was perched over it. There

had been a rectangular hole in the wall, which allowed someone in there to see into the living room, but Ryan had placed a print over it. The picture was mounted on a rail and could be slid aside, Jackson noticed. The purpose of that was clear enough. Jack led them to his library next. Everyone liked that the only window was over his desk and looked out over the bay.

"No servants, Jack?"

"No, sir. Cathy's talking about getting a nanny, but she hasn't sold me on that idea yet. Is everyone ready for dinner?"

The response was enthusiastic. The potatoes were already in the oven, and Cathy was ready to start the corn. Jack took the steaks from the refrigerator and led the menfolk outside.

"You'll like this, Cap'n. Jack does a mean steak."

"The secret's in the charcoal," Ryan explained. He had six gorgeous-looking sirloins, and a hamburger for Sally. "It helps to have good meat, too."

"I know it's too late to ask, Jack, but where do you get those?"

"One of my old stock clients has a restaurant-supply business. These are Kansas City strips." Jack transferred them to the grill with a long-handled fork. A gratifying sizzle rose to their ears. He brushed some sauce on the meat.

"The view is spectacular," His Highness observed.

"It's nice to be able to watch the boats go by," Jack agreed. "Looks a little thin now, though."

"They must be listening to the radio," Robby observed. "There's a severe-thunderstorm warning on for tonight."

"I didn't hear that."

"It's the leading edge of that cold front. They develop pretty fast over Pittsburgh. I'm going up tomorrow, like I said, and I called Pax Weather right before we left. They told me that the storms look pretty ferocious on radar. Heavy rain and gusts. Supposed to hit around ten or so."

"Do you get many of those here?" His Highness asked.

"Sure do, Captain. We don't get tornadoes like in the Midwest, but the thunder-boomers we get here'll curl your hair. I was bringing a bird back from Memphis last—no, two years ago, and it was like being on a pogo stick. You just don't have control of the airplane. Those suckers can be scary. Down at Pax, they're taking all the birds they can inside the hangars, and they'll be tying the rest down tight."

"It'll be worth it to cool things off," Jack said as he turned the steaks.

"Roger that. It's just your basic thunderstorm, Captain. We get the big ones three or four times a year. It'll knock down some trees, but as long as you're not in the air or out in a small boat, it's no big deal. Down in Alabama with this kind of storm coming across, we'd be sweating tornadoes. Now that's scary!"

"You've seen one?"

"More 'n one, Cap'n. You get those mostly in the spring down home. When I was ten or so, I watched one come across the road, pick up a house like it was part of a Christmas garden, and drop it a quarter mile away. They're weird, though. It didn't even take the weathervane off my pappy's church. They're like that. It's something to see, all right—but you want to do it from a safe distance. "

"Turbulence is the main flying hazard, then?"

"Right. But the other thing is water. I know of cases where jets have ingested enough water through the intakes to snuff the engines right out." Robby snapped his fingers. "All of a sudden you're riding in a glider. Definitely not fun. So you keep away from them when you can."

"And when you can't?"

"Once, Cap'n, I had to land on a carrier in one—at night. That's about as close as I've come to wetting my pants since I was two." He even threw in a shudder.

"Your Highness, I have to thank you for getting all of this out of Robby. I've known him for over a year and he's never admitted to being mildly nervous up there." Jack grinned.

"I didn't want to spoil the image," Jackson explained. "You have to put a gun to Jack's head to get him aboard a plane, and I didn't want to scare him any more than he already is." *Zing!* And Robby took the point.

It helped that the deck was now in the shade, and there was a slight northerly breeze. Jack manipulated the steaks over the coals. There were a few boats out on the bay, but most of them seemed to be heading back to harbor. Jack nearly jumped out of his skin when a jet fighter screamed past the cliff. He turned in time to see the white-painted aircraft heading south.

"Robby, what the hell is that all about? They've been doing that for two weeks."

Jackson watched the plane's double tail vanish in the haze. "They're testing a new piece of gear on the F-18. What's the big deal?"

"The noise!" Ryan flipped the steaks over.

Robby laughed. "Aw, Jack, that's not noise. That's the sound of freedom."

"Not bad, Commander," His Highness judged.

"Well, how about the sound of dinner?" Ryan asked.

Robby grabbed the platter, and Jack piled the meat on it. The salads were already on the table. Cathy made a superb spinach salad, with homemade dressing. Jack noted that Sissy was bringing the corn and potatoes out, wearing an apron to protect her dress. He distributed the steaks and put Sally's hamburger on a roll. Next he got their daughter in a booster seat. The one awkward thing was that nobody was drinking. He'd gotten four bottles of a choice California red to go with the steaks, but it seemed that everyone was in

a teetotaling mood.

“Jack, the electricity is acting up again,” his wife reported. “For a while there I didn’t think we’d get the corn finished.”

The Secret Service agent stood in the middle of the road, forcing the van to stop.

“Yes, sir?” the driver said.

“What are you doing here?” The agent’s coat was unbuttoned. No gun was visible, but the driver knew it was there somewhere. He counted six more men within ten yards of the van and another four readily visible.

“Hey, I just told the cop.” The man gestured backward. The two State Police cars were only two hundred yards away.

“Could you tell me, please?”

“There’s a problem with the transformer at the end of the road. I mean, you can see this is a BG and E truck, right?”

“Could you wait here, please?”

“Okay with me, man.” The driver exchanged a look with the man in the right-front seat. The agent returned with another. This one held a radio.

“What seems to be the problem?”

The driver sighed. “Third time. There’s a problem with the electrical transformer at the end of the road. Have the people here been complaining about the electricity?”

“Yeah,” the second man, Avery, said. “I noticed, too. What gives?”

The man in the right seat answered. “I’m Alex Dobbens, field engineer. We have a new, experimental transformer on this line. There’s a test monitor on the box, and it’s been sending out some weird signals, like the box is going to fail. We’re here to check it out. ”

“Could we see some ID, please?”

“Sure.” Alex got out of the truck and walked around. He handed over his BG&E identification card. “What the hell’s going on here?”

“Can’t say.” Avery examined the pass and handed it back. “You have a work order?”

Dobbens gave the man his clipboard. “Hey, if you want to check it out, you can call that number up top. That’s the field-operations office at company headquarters in Baltimore. Ask for Mr. Griffin.”

Avery talked into his radio, ordering his men to do just that. “Do you mind if we look at the truck?”

“Be my guest,” Dobbens replied. He led the two agents around. He noted also that four men were keeping a very close eye on things, and that they were widely separated, with their hands free. Others were scattered across the yard.

He yanked open the sliding door and waved the two agents inside.

The agents saw a mass of tools and cables and test equipment. Avery let his subordinate do the searching. “Do you have to go back there now?”

“The transformer might go out, man. I could let it, but the folks in the neighborhood might be upset if the lights went off. People are like that, you know? Do you mind if I ask who you are?”

“Secret Service.” Avery held up his ID. Dobbens was taken aback.

“Jeez! You mean the President’s back there?”

“I can’t say,” Avery replied. “What’s the problem with the transformer—you said it was new?”

“Yeah, it’s an experimental model. It uses an inert cooling agent instead of PBBs, and it has a built-in surge-suppressor. That’s probably the problem. It looks like the unit’s temperature-sensitive for some reason. We’ve adjusted it several times, but we can’t seem to get it dialed in right. I’ve been on the project for a couple of months. Usually I let my people do it, but this time the boss wanted me to eyeball it myself.” He shrugged. “It’s my project.”

The other agent came out of the van and shook his head. Avery nodded. Next the chief agent called the radio van, whose occupants had called Baltimore Gas & Electric and confirmed what Alex had told them.

“You want to send a guy to watch us?” Dobbens asked.

“No, that’s okay. How long will it take?” Avery asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine, sir. It’s probably something simple, but we haven’t figured it out yet. The simple ones are the ones that kill you.”

“There’s a storm coming in. I wouldn’t want to be up on a pole in one of those,” the agent observed.

“Yeah, well, while we’re sitting here, we’re not getting much work done. Everything okay with you guys?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“You really can’t tell me who’s in the neighborhood?”

Avery smiled. “Sorry.”

“Well, I didn’t vote for him anyway.” Dobbens laughed.

“Hold it!” the second agent called.

“What’s the matter?”

“That left-front tire.” The man pointed.

“Goddammit, Louis!” Dobbens growled at the driver. The steel belt was showing on part of the tire.

“Hey, boss, it’s not my fault. They were supposed to change it this morning. I wrote it up Wednesday,” the driver protested. “I got the order slip right here.”

“All right, just take it easy.” Dobbens looked over to the agent. “Thanks, man.”

“Can’t you change it?”

“We don’t have a jack. Somebody lifted it. That’s a problem with company trucks. Something is always missing. It’ll be all right. Well, we got a transformer to fix. See ya.” Alex reboarded the truck and waved as the vehicle pulled off.

“Good one, Louis.”

The driver smiled. “Yeah, I thought the tire was a nice touch. I counted fourteen.”

“Right. Three in the trees. Figure four more in the house. They’re not our problem.” He paused, looking at the clouds that were building on the horizon. “I hope Ed and Willy made out all right. ”

“They did. All they had to do was hose down one pigmobile and switch cars. The pigs here were more relaxed than I expected,” Louis observed.

“Why not? They think we’re someplace else.” Alex opened a toolbox and removed his transceiver. The agent had seen it and not questioned it. He couldn’t tell that the frequency range had been altered. There were no guns in the van, of course, but radios were far deadlier. He radioed what he’d learned and got an acknowledgment. Then he smiled. The agents hadn’t even asked about the two extension ladders on the roof. He checked his watch. Rendezvous was scheduled in ninety minutes....

“The problem is, there really isn’t a civilized way to eat corn on the cob,” Cathy said. “Not to mention buttering it.”

“It was excellent, though,” the Prince noted. “From a local farm, Jack?”

“Picked ’em off the stalk this afternoon,” Ryan confirmed. “That’s the best way to get it.”

Sally’d become a slow eater of late. She was still laboring at her food, but nobody seemed anxious to leave the table.

“Jack, Cathy, that was a wonderful dinner,” His Highness pronounced.

His wife agreed. “And no after-dinner speechmaking!”

“I guess all that formal stuff gets to be tiresome,” Robby noted, trying to ask a question that he couldn’t voice: *What’s it like to be a prince?*

“It wouldn’t be so bad if the speeches could be original, but I’ve been listening to the same one for years!” he said wryly. “Excuse me. I mustn’t say such things, even around friends.”

“It’s not all that different at a History Department meeting,” Jack said.

At Quantico, Virginia, the phone rang. The FBI’s Hostage Rescue Team had its own private building, located at the end of the long line of firing ranges that served the Bureau’s training center. An engineless DC-4 sat behind it, and

was used to practice assault techniques on hijacked aircraft. Down the hill was the “Hostage House” and other facilities used every day for the team members to hone their skills. Special Agent Gus Werner picked up the phone.

“Hi, Gus,” Bill Shaw said.

“Have they found ’em yet?” Werner asked. He was thirty-five, a short, wiry man with red hair and a brushy mustache that never would have been allowed under Hoover’s directorship.

“No, but I want you to assemble an advance team and fly them up. If something breaks, we may have to move fast.”

“Fair enough. Where are we going, exactly?”

“Hagerstown, the State Police barracks. S-A-C Baltimore will be waiting for you.”

“Okay, I’ll take six men. We can probably get moving in thirty or forty minutes, as soon as the chopper gets here. Buzz me if anything happens.”

“Will do. See ya.” Shaw hung up.

Werner switched buttons on the phone and alerted the helicopter crew. Next he walked across the building to the classroom on the far side. The five men of his ready-response group were lounging about, mostly reading. They’d been on alert status for several days. This had increased their training routines somewhat, but it was mainly to defend against boredom that came from waiting for something that probably wouldn’t happen. Nighttimes were devoted to reading and television. The Red Sox were playing the Yankees on TV. These were not Brooks Brothers FBI agents. The men were in baggy jumpsuits lavishly equipped with pockets. In addition to being experienced field agents, nearly all were veterans of combat or peacetime military service, and each man was a match-quality marksman who fired several boxes of ammunition per week.

“Okay, listen up,” Werner said. “They want an advance team in Hagerstown. The chopper’ll be here in half an hour.”

“There’s a severe thunderstorm warning,” one objected lightly.

“So take your airsick pills,” Werner advised.

“They find ’em yet?” another asked.

“No, but people are getting a little nervous.”

“Right.” The questioner was a long-rifleman. His custom-made sniper rifle was already packed in a foam-lined case. The team’s gear was in a dozen duffle bags. The men buttoned their shirts. Some headed off to the bathroom for a preflight pitstop. None were especially excited. Their job involved far more waiting than doing. The Hostage Rescue Team had been in existence for years, but it had yet to rescue a single hostage. Instead its members were mainly used as a special SWAT team, and they had earned a reputation as awesome as it was little known, except within the law-enforcement community.

“Wow,” Robby said. “Here it comes. This one’s going to be a beauty.” In the space of ten minutes, the wind had changed from gentle breezes to gusts that made the high-ceilinged house resonate.

“It was a dark and stormy night,” Jack chuckled. He went into the kitchen. Three agents were making sandwiches to take out to the men by the road. “I hope you guys have raincoats.”

“We’re used to it,” one assured him.

“At least it will be a warm rain,” his British colleague thought. “Thank you very much for the food and coffee.” The first rumble of distant thunder rolled through the house.

“Don’t stand under any trees,” Jack suggested. “Lightning can ruin your whole day.” He returned to the dining room. Conversation was still being made around the table. Robby was back to discussing flying. The current war-story was about catapults.

“You never get used to the thrill,” he was saying. “In a couple of seconds you go from a standstill to a hundred fifty knots.”

“And if something goes wrong?” the Princess asked.

“You go swimming,” Robby answered.

“Mr. Avery,” the hand-held radio squawked.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Washington’s on the line.”

“Okay, I’ll be there in a minute.” Avery walked down the driveway toward the communications van. Longley, the leader of the British contingent, tagged along. Both had left their raincoats there anyway, and they’d need them in a few minutes. They could see lightning flashes a few miles away, and the jagged strokes of light were approaching fast.

“So much for the weather,” Longley said.

“I was hoping it would miss us.” The wind lashed at them again, blowing dust from the plowed field on the other side of Falcon’s Nest Road. They passed the two men carrying a covered plate of sandwiches. A black puppy trotted along behind in the hope that they’d drop one.

“This Ryan fellow’s a decent chap, isn’t he?”

“He’s got a real nice kid. You can tell a lot about a man from his kids,” Avery thought aloud. They got to the van just as the first sprinkles started. The Secret Service agent got on the radiophone.

“Avery here.”

“Chuck, this is Bill Shaw at the Bureau. I just got a call from our forensics people at that house in Howard County.”

"Okay."

At the other end of the connection, Shaw was looking at a map and frowning. "They can't find any prints, Chuck. They have guns, they have ammo, some of the guns were being cleaned, but no prints. Not even on the hamburger wrappers. Something feels bad."

"What about the car that got shot up in western Maryland?"

"Nothing, not a damned thing. Like the bad guys jumped in a hole and pulled it in behind them."

That was all Shaw had to say. Chuck Avery had been a Secret Service agent all of his adult life, and was normally on the Presidential detail. He thought exclusively in terms of threats. This was an inevitable consequence of his job. He guarded people whom other people wanted to kill. It had given him a limited and somewhat paranoid outlook on life. Avery's mind reviewed his threat briefing. *The enemy here is extremely clever....*

"Thanks for the tip, Bill. We'll keep our eyes open." Avery got into his coat and picked up his radio. "Team One, this is Avery. Heads up. Assemble at the entrance. We have a possible new threat." *The full explanation will have to wait.*

"What's the matter?" Longley asked.

"There's no real evidence at the house, the lab people haven't found any prints."

"They couldn't have had time to wipe everything before they left." Longley didn't need much of a hint either. "It might all have been planned to—"

"Exactly. Let's get out and talk to the troops. First thing, I'm going to get the perimeter spread out some. Then I'll call for more police backup." The rain was pelting the van now. "I guess we're all going to get wet."

"I want two more people at the house," Longley said.

"Agreed, but let's brief the people first." He slid the door open and both men went back up the driveway.

The agents on perimeter duty came together where the driveway met the road. They were alert, but it was hard to see with the wind-driven rain in their faces and the stinging dust blowing from the field on the other side of the road. Several were trying to finish sandwiches. One agent did a head count and came up one short. He sent a fellow agent to fetch the man whose radio was evidently out. Ernie tagged along with him; this agent had given him half a sandwich.

"You want to retire to the living room?" Cathy waved at the seats a few feet away. "I'd like to clear these dishes away."

"I'll do it, Cath," Sissy Jackson said. "You go sit down." She went into the kitchen and got the apron. Ryan knew for certain that Cathy had warned the Jacksons—Sissy at least, since she was wearing what on further inspection seemed an expensive dress. Everyone stood, and Robby walked off to the

bathroom for a head call.

"Here we go," Alex said. He was at the wheel now. "All ready?"

"Go!" O'Donnell said. Like Alex, he wanted to be out in front with his troops. "Thank God for the weather!"

"Right," Alex agreed. He flipped the van's headlights to high-beam. He saw two groups of agents, standing a few yards apart.

The security force saw the approaching lights, and, being trained men, they kept a close eye on it despite knowing who it was and what it had been doing. Thirty yards from them there was a flash and a bang. Some men reached instinctively for their guns, then stopped when they saw that the vehicle's left-front tire had blown and was fluttering on the road as the driver struggled to get the truck back under control. It stopped right in front of the driveway. No one had commented on the ladders before. No one noticed their absence now. The driver got out and looked at the wheel.

"Aw, shit!"

Two hundred yards away, Avery saw the truck sitting on the road, and his instincts set off an alarm. He started running.

The van's door slid back, revealing four men with automatic weapons.

The agents a few feet away reacted in a moment, but too late. Barely had the door moved when the first weapon fired. A cylindrical silencer hung on the muzzle, which muffled the noise, but not the tongue of white flame that hovered in the darkness, and five men were down in the first second. The other gunmen had already joined in, and the first group of agents was wiped out without having fired a single return shot. The terrorists leaped out of the side and back doors of the van and engaged the second group. One Secret Service agent got his Uzi up and fired a short burst that killed the first man out of the back of the van, but the man behind him killed the agent with his weapon. Two more of the guards were now dead, and the other four of the group dropped to the ground and tried to return fire.

"What the hell is that?" Ryan said. The sound was hard to distinguish through the noise of the rain and the recurring thunder. Heads throughout the room turned. There was a British security officer in the kitchen and two Secret Service agents on the deck outside the room. Their heads had already turned, and one man was reaching for his radio.

Avery's service revolver was out. As team leader he didn't bother carrying anything but his Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum. His other hand was in any case busy with his radio.

“Call Washington, we are under attack! We need backup right the hell now! Unknown gunmen on the west perimeter. Officers down, officers need help!”

Alex reached back into the truck and pulled out an RPG-7 rocket launcher. He could just make out the two State Police cars two hundred yards down the road. He couldn’t see the cops, but they had to be there. He elevated the weapon to the proper mark on the steel sight and squeezed the trigger, adding yet another thundering noise to the flashing sky. The round fell a few feet short of the target, but its explosion lanced hot fragments through one gas tank. It exploded, bathing both cars in burning fuel.

“Hot damn!”

Behind him, the gunmen had spread out and flanked the Secret Service officers. Only one was still shooting back. Two more of the ULA shooters were down, Alex saw, but the rest closed in on the agent from behind and finished him with a barrage of fire.

“Oh, God!” Avery saw it, too. He and Longley looked at each other and each knew what the other thought. *They won’t get them, not while I’m alive.*

“Shaw.” The radio-telephone circuit crackled with static.

“We are under attack. We have officers down,” the wall speaker said. “Unknown number of—it sounds like a fucking war out there! We need help and we need it now.”

“Okay, stand by, we’re working on it.” Shaw gave quick orders and phone lines started lighting up. The first calls to go out went to the nearest state and county police stations. Next, the Hostage Rescue Team group on alert in Washington was ordered out. Their Chevy Suburban was sitting in the garage. He checked the wall clock and called Quantico on the direct line.

“The chopper’s just landing now,” Gus Werner answered.

“Do you know where the Ryan house is?” Shaw asked.

“Yeah, it’s on the map. That’s where our visitors are now, right?”

“It’s under attack. How fast can you get there?”

“What’s the situation?” Werner watched his men out the window, loading their gear into the helicopter.

“Unknown—we just rolled the team from here, but you may be the first ones in. The communications guy just called in, says they’re under attack, officers down.”

“If there’s any additional information, get it to us. We’ll be up in two minutes.” Werner ran outside to his men. He had to shout at them to be heard under the turning rotor, then ran back to the building, where the watch officers were ordered to summon the rest of the team to the HRT headquarters. By the time he got back in the chopper, his men had their

weapons out of their duffles. Then the helicopter lifted off into the approaching storm.

Ryan noted the flurry of activity outside as the British officer from the kitchen ran outside and conferred briefly with the Secret Service agents. He was just coming back inside when a series of lightning flashes illuminated the deck. One of the agents turned and brought his gun out—then fell backward. The glass behind him shattered. The other two men both dived for the deck. One rose up to fire and fell beside his comrade. The last came inside and shouted for everyone to lie flat. Jack had barely enough time to be horrified when another window shattered and the last security man was down. Four armed figures appeared where the broken glass was. They were all dressed in black, except for the mud on their boots and chests. One pulled off his mask. It was Sean Miller.

Avery and Longley were alone, lying in the middle of the yard. The Brit watched as a number of armed men checked the bodies of the fallen agents. Then they formed into two groups and started moving toward the house.

"We're too bloody exposed here," Longley said. "If we're to do any good at all, we must be back in the trees."

"You go first." Avery held his revolver in both hands and sighted on a black-clad figure visible only when the lightning flashed. They were still over a hundred yards away, very long range for a handgun. The next flash gave him a target, and Avery fired, missing and drawing a storm of fire at himself. Those rounds missed, too, but the sound of thuds in the wet ground was far too close. The fire shifted. Perhaps they saw Longley running back to the trees. Avery fired another carefully aimed shot and saw a man go down with a leg wound. The return fire was more accurate this time. The Secret Service agent emptied his gun. He thought he might have hit another of them when everything stopped.

Longley made it to the trees and looked back. Avery's prone figure didn't move despite the gunmen fifty yards away. The British security officer shouted a curse and gathered the remaining people. The FBI liaison agent had only his revolver, the three British officers had automatic pistols, and the one Secret Service agent had an Uzi with two spare magazines. Even if there weren't people to protect, there wasn't anyplace to run.

"So we meet again," Miller said. He held an Uzi submachine gun and bent down to pick up another from one of the fallen guards. Five more men came in behind him. They spread out in a semicircle to cover Ryan and his guests. "Get up! Hands where we can see them."

Jack stood, with the Prince next to him. Cathy came up next, holding Sally in her arms, and finally Her Highness. Three men spun around when the

kitchen door swung open. It was Sissy Jackson, trying to hold some plates while a gunman held on to her arm. Two plates fell to the floor and broke when he jerked her arm up.

They have a maid, Miller remembered, seeing the dark dress and the apron. *Black, handsome woman.* He was smiling now. The disgrace of his failed missions was far behind him. He had all his targets before him, and in his hands was the instrument to eliminate them.

"You get over here with the rest," he ordered.

"What the hell—"

"Move, nigger!" Another of the gunman, the shortest of the bunch, roughly propelled her toward the others. Jack's eyes fixed on him for a moment—where had he seen that face before....

"You trash!" Sissy's eyes flared in outrage at that, her fear momentarily forgotten as she wheeled to snap back at the man.

"You should be more careful who you work for," Miller said. He gestured with his weapon. "Move."

"What are you going to do?" Ryan asked.

"Why spoil the surprise?"

Forty feet away, Robby was in the worst part of the house to hear anything. He'd been washing his hands, ignoring the thunder when the gunfire had erupted at the home's deck. Jackson slipped out of the bathroom and peered down the corridor to the living room, but saw nothing. What he heard was enough. He turned and went upstairs to the master bedroom. His first instinct was to call the police on the telephone, but the line was dead. His mind searched for something else to do. This wasn't like flying a fighter plane.

Jack has guns ... but where the hell does he keep them ... ? It was dark in the bedroom and he didn't dare to flip on a light.

Outside, the line of gunmen advanced toward the woods. Longley deployed his men to meet them. His military service was too far in the past, and his work as a security officer hadn't prepared him for this sort of thing, but he did his best. They had good cover in the trees, some of which were thick enough to stop a bullet. He ordered his only automatic weapon to the left.

"FBI, this is Patuxent River Approach. Squawk four-zero-one-niner, over."

Aboard the helicopter, the pilot turned the transponder wheels until the proper code number came up. Next he read off the map coordinates of his destination. He knew what it looked like from aerial photographs, but they'd been taken in daylight. Things could look very different at night, and there was also the problem of controlling the aircraft. He was flying with a forty-

knot crosswind, and weather conditions deteriorated with every mile. In the back the HRT members were trying to get into their night-camouflage clothing.

"Four-zero-one-niner, come left to heading zero-two-four. Maintain current altitude. Warning, it looks like a pretty strong thunder cell is approaching your target," the controller said. "Recommend you do not exceed one thousand feet. I'll try to steer you around the worst of it."

"Roger." The pilot grimaced. It was plain that the weather ahead was even worse than he'd feared. He lowered his seat as far as it would go, pulled his belts tighter, and turned on his storm lights. The only other thing he could do was sweat, and that came automatically. "You guys in back, strap down tight!"

O'Donnell called for his men to stop. The treeline was a hundred yards ahead, and he knew that it held guns. One group moved left, the other right. They'd attack by echelons, with each group alternately advancing and providing fire support for the other. All his men wore black and carried submachine guns, except for one man who trailed a few yards behind the rest. He found himself wishing that they'd brought heavier weapons. There was still much to do, including removing the bodies of his fallen men. One was dead and two more wounded. But first—he lifted his radio to order one of his squads in.

On O'Donnell's right, the single remaining Secret Service agent tucked his left side against an oak tree and shouldered his Uzi. For him and his comrades in the trees, there was no retreat. The black metal sights were hard to use in the dark, and his targets were nearly invisible. Lightning again played a part, strobe-lighting the lawn for an instant that showed the green grass and black-clad men. He selected a target and fired a short burst, but missed. Both groups of attackers returned fire, and the agent cringed as he heard a dozen rounds hit the tree. The whole countryside seemed alive with the flashes of gunfire. The Secret Service agent came around again and fired. The group that had been approaching him directly was running to his left into the brambles. He was going to be flanked—but then they reappeared, firing their weapons into the bushes, and there were flashes firing *out.* Everyone was surprised by that, and suddenly no one had control of the situation.

O'Donnell had planned to advance his teams on either side of the clearing, but unexpectedly there was fire coming from the woodline to the south, and one of his squads was exposed and flanked from two directions. He evaluated the new tactical situation in an instant and started giving orders.

* * *

Ryan watched in mute rage. The gunmen knew exactly what they were doing, and that reduced his number of options to exactly zero. There were six guns on him and his guests, and not a chance that he could do anything about

it. To his right, Cathy held on to their daughter, and even Sally kept quiet. Neither Miller nor his men made any unnecessary sound.

"Sean, this is Kevin," Miller's radio crackled with static. "We have opposition in the treeline. Do you have them?"

"Yes, Kevin, the situation is under control."

"I need help out here."

"We're coming." Miller pocketed his radio. He pointed to his comrades. "You three, get them ready. If they resist, kill them all. You two come with me." He led them out the broken glass doors and disappeared.

"Come on." The remaining three gunmen had their masks off now. Two were tall, about Ryan's height, one with blond hair, the other black. The other was short and going bald—*I know you, but from where?* He was the most frightening. His face was twisted with emotions that Jack didn't want to guess at. Blondie threw him a bundle of rope. An instant later it was plain that it was a collection of smaller pieces already cut and meant to tie them up.

Robby, where the hell are you? Jack looked over to Sissy, who was thinking the same thing. She nodded imperceptibly, and there was still hope in her eyes. The short one noticed.

"Don't worry," Shorty said. "You'll get paid." He set his weapon on the dinner table and moved forward while Blondie and Blackie backed off to cover them all. Dennis Cooley took the rope to the Prince first, yanking his hands down behind his back.

There! Robby looked up. Jack had set his shotgun on the top shelf of the walk-in closet, along with a box of shells. He had to reach to get them, and when he did so, a holstered pistol dropped to the floor. Jackson winced at the sound it made, but grabbed it from the holster and tucked it into his belt. Next he checked the shotgun, pulling back the bolt—there was a round in the chamber and the gun was on safe. *Okay.* He filled his pockets with additional rounds and went back into the bedroom.

Now what? This wasn't like flying his F-14, with radar to track targets a hundred miles away and a wingman to keep the bandits off his tail.

The *picture* ... You had to kneel on the bed to see out of it—*Why the hell did Jack arrange his furniture like this!* the pilot raged. He set the shotgun down and used both hands to slide the picture aside. He moved it only a few inches, barely enough to see out. *How many ... one, two ... three. Are there any others ... ? What if I leave one alive ...* ?

As he watched, Jack was being tied up. The Prince—*the Captain,* Robby thought—already was tied, and was sitting with his back to the pilot. The short one finished Jack next and pushed him back onto the couch. Jackson next watched the man put hands on his wife.

"What are you going to do with us?" Sissy asked.

"Shut up, nigger!" Shorty replied.

Even Robby knew that this was a trivial thing to get angry about; the problem at hand was far worse than some white asshole's racist remark, but his blood turned to fire as he watched the woman he loved being handled by that ... *little white shit!*

Use your head, boy, something in the back of his brain said. *Take your time. You have to get it right on the first try. Cool down.*

Longley was beginning to hope. There were friendlies in the trees to his left. Perhaps they'd come from the house, he thought. At least one of them had an automatic weapon, and he counted three of the terrorists dead, or at least not moving on the grass. He had fired five rounds and missed with every one—the range was just too great for a pistol in the dark—but they'd stopped the terrorists cold. And help was coming. It had to be. The radio van was empty, but the FBI agent to his right had been there. All they had to do was wait, hold on for a few more minutes....

"I got flashes on the ground ahead," the pilot said. "I—"

Lightning revealed the house for a brief moment in time. They couldn't see people on the ground, but that was the right house, and there were flashes that had to be gunfire, half a mile off as the helicopter buffeted through the wind and rain. It was about all the pilot could see. His instrument lights were turned up full-white, and the lightning had decorated his vision with a stunning collection of blue and green spots.

"Jesus," Gus Werner said over the intercom. "What are we getting into?"

"In Vietnam," the pilot replied coolly, "we called it a hot LZ." *And I was scared then, too.*

"Get Washington." The copilot switched frequencies on the radio and waved to the agent in the back while both men orbited the helicopter. "This is Werner."

"Gus, this is Bill Shaw. Where are you?"

"We have the house in sight, and there's a goddamned battle going on down there. Do you have contact with our people?"

"Negative, they're off the air. The D.C. team is still thirty minutes away. The state and county people are close but not there yet. The storm's knocking trees down all over the place and traffic is tied up something fierce. You're the man on the scene, Gus, you'll have to call it."

The mission of the Hostage Rescue Team was to take charge of an existing situation, stabilize it, and rescue the hostages—peacefully if possible, by force if not. They were not assault troops; they were special agents of the FBI. But there were brother agents down there.

"We're going in now. Tell the police that federal officers are on the scene.

We'll try to keep you informed."

"Right. Be careful, Gus."

"Take us in," Werner told the pilot.

"Okay. I'll skirt the house first, then come around in and land you to windward. I can't put you close to the house. The wind's too bad, I might lose it down there."

"Go." Werner turned. Somehow his men had all their gear on. Each carried an automatic pistol. Four had MP-5 machine guns, as did he. The long-rifleman and his spotter would be the first men out the door. "We're going in." One of the men gave a thumbs-up that looked a lot jauntier than anyone felt.

The helicopter lurched toward the ground when a sudden downdraft hammered at it. The pilot wrenched upward on his collective and bottomed the aircraft out a scant hundred feet from the trees. The house was only a few hundred yards away now. They skimmed over the southern edge of the clearing, allowing everyone a close look at the situation.

"Hey, the spot between the house and the cliff might be big enough after all," the pilot said. He increased power as the chopper swept to windward.

"Helicopter!" someone screamed to O'Donnell's right. The chief looked up, and there it was, a spectral shape and a fluttering sound. That was a hazard he'd prepared for.

Back near the road, one of his men pulled the cover off a Redeye missile launcher purchased along with the rest of their weapons.

"I have to use landing lights—my night vision is wasted," the pilot said over the intercom. He turned the aircraft half a mile west of the Ryan house. He planned to head straight past the house; then he'd drop and turn into the wind and slide up behind what he hoped was a wind shadow in its lee. *God,* he thought, *this* is *like Vietnam.* From the pattern of the flashes on the ground, it seemed that the house was in friendly hands. The pilot reached down and flipped on his landing lights. It was a risk, but one he had to accept.

Thank God I can see again, he told himself. The ground was visible through a shimmering curtain of rain. He realized that the storm was still worsening. He had to approach from windward. Flying into the rain would reduce his visibility to a few feet. At least this way he could see a couple of hundred or so —*what the hell!*

He saw a man standing all alone in the center of the field, aiming something. The pilot pushed down on the collective just as a streak of red light rocketed toward the helicopter, his eyes locked on what could only be a surface-to-air missile. The two seconds it took seemed to stretch into an hour as the missile passed through his rotor blades and disappeared overhead—he immediately pulled back on the control, but there was no time to recover from

his evasion maneuver. The helicopter slammed into the middle of a plowed field, four hundred yards from the Ryan house. It wouldn't move again until a truck came to collect the wreckage.

Miraculously, only two men were hurt. Werner was one of them. It felt as though he'd been shot in the back. The rifleman pulled the door open and ran out with his spotter behind. The others went next, one of them helping Werner while another hobbled on a sprained ankle.

The Princess was next. She was taller than Cooley, and managed a look that contained more than mere contempt. The little man spun her around roughly to tie her hands.

"We have big plans for you," he promised when he finished.

"You little scum, I bet you don't even know how," Sissy said. It earned her a vicious slap. Robby watched, waiting for the blond-haired one to get in the clear. Finally he did, moving back toward the others....

26

The Sound of Freedom

Pellets fired from a shotgun disperse radially at a rate of one inch per yard of linear travel. A lightning flash blazed through the windows, and Ryan cringed on hearing the thunder immediately after—then realized it had followed too quickly to be thunder. The shot pattern had missed his head by three feet, and before he understood what had passed by him, Blondie's head snapped back, exploding into a cloud of red as his body fell backward to crash against a table leg. Blackie was looking out the window in the corner and turned to see his comrade go down without knowing how or why. His eyes searched frantically for a second, then a red circle the size of a 45-rpm record appeared in his chest and he was flung against the wall. Shorty was tying up Cathy's hands and concentrating a little too much. He hadn't recognized the first shot for what it was. He did with the second—too late.

The Prince sprang at him, knocking him down with a lowered shoulder before himself falling on the floor. Jack leaped over the coffee table and kicked wildly at Shorty's head. He connected, but lost his balance doing so and fell backward. Shorty was stunned for a moment, then shook it off and moved toward the dinner table, where his gun was. Ryan lurched to his feet too, and threw himself on the terrorist's legs. The Prince was back up now. Shorty threw a wild punch at him and tried to kick Ryan off his legs—then stopped when the warm muzzle of a shotgun pressed against his nose.

"You hold it right there, sucker, or I'll blow your head off."

Cathy already had the ropes shucked off her hands, and untied Jack first. He went over to Blondie. The body was still twitching. Blood was still pumping from the surreal nightmare that had been a human face thirty seconds before. Jack took the Uzi from his hands, and a spare magazine. The Prince did the same with Blackie, whose body was quite still.

"Robby," Jack said as he examined the safety-selector switch on the gun. "Let's get the hell away from here."

"Second the motion, Jack, but where to?" Jackson pushed Shorty's head against the floor. The terrorist's eyes crossed almost comically on the business end of the Remington shotgun. "I expect he might know something useful. How'd you plan to get away, boy?"

"No." It was all Cooley could muster at the moment. He realized that he was, after all, the wrong man for this kind of job.

"That the way it is?" Jackson asked, his voice a low, angry rasp. "You listen

to me, boy. That lady over there, the one you called *niggah*—that's my wife, boy, that's my lady. I saw you hit her. So, I already got one good reason to kill you, y'dig?" Robby smiled wickedly, and let the shotgun trace a line down to Shorty's crotch. "But I ain't gonna kill ya. I'll do somethin' lots worse—

"I'll make a girl outa you, punk." Robby pushed the muzzle against the man's zipper. "Think fast, boy."

Jack listened to his friend in amazement. Robby never talked like this. But it was convincing. Jack believed that he'd do it.

So did Cooley: "Boats ... boats at the base of the cliff."

"That's not even clever. Say goodbye to 'em, boy." The angle of the shotgun changed fractionally.

"Boats! Two boats at the base of the cliff. There are two ladders—"

"How many watching them?" Jack demanded.

"One, that's all."

Robby looked up. "Jack?"

"People, I suggest we go steal some boats. That firefight outside is getting closer." Jack ran to his closet and got coats for everyone. For Robby he picked up his old Marine field jacket that Cathy hated so much. "Put this on, that white shirt is too damned visible. "

"Here." Robby handed over Jack's automatic. "I got a box of rounds for the shotgun." He started transferring them from his pants to the jacket pockets and then hefted the last Uzi over his shoulder. "We're leaving friendlies behind, Jack," he added quietly.

Ryan didn't like it either. "I know, but if they get him, they win—and this ain't no place for women and kids, man."

"Okay, you're the Marine." Robby nodded. That was that.

"Let's get outa here. I have the point. I'm going to take a quick look-see. Rob, you take Shorty for now. Prince, you take the women." Jack reached down and grabbed Dennis Cooley by the throat. "You screw up, you're dead. No fartin' around with him, Robby, just waste him."

"That's a rog." Jackson backed away from the terrorist. "Up slow, punk."

Jack led them through the shattered doors. The two dead agents lay crumpled on the wood deck, and he hated himself for not doing something about it, but Ryan was proceeding on some sort of automatic control that the Marine Corps had programmed into him ten years before. It was a combat situation, and all the lectures and field exercises were flooding back into his consciousness. In a moment he was drenched by the falling sheets of rain. He trotted down the stairs and looked around the house.

Longley and his men were too busy dealing with the threat to their front to notice what was approaching from behind. The British security officer fired

four rounds at an advancing black figure and had the satisfaction of seeing him react from at least one hit when a hammering impact hurled him against a tree. He rebounded off the rough bark and half turned to see yet another black-clad shape holding a gun ten feet away. The gun flashed again. Within seconds the woodline was quiet.

"Dear God," the rifleman muttered. Running in a crouch, he passed the bodies of five agents, but there wasn't time for that. He and his spotter went down next to a bush. The rifleman activated his night scope and tracked on the woodline a few hundred yards ahead. The green picture he got on the imaging tube showed men dressed in dark clothes heading into the woodline.

"I count eleven," the spotter said.

"Yeah," the rifleman agreed. His bolt-action sniper rifle was loaded with .308 caliber match rounds. He could hit a moving three-inch target the first time, every time, at over two hundred yards, but his mission for the moment was reconnaissance, to gather information and forward it to the team leader. Before the team could act, they had to know what the hell was going on, and all they had now was chaos.

"Werner, this is Paulson. I count what looks like eleven bad guys moving into the trees between us and the house. They appear to be armed with light automatic weapons." He pivoted the rifle around. "Looks like six of them down in the yard. Lots of good guys down—Jesus, I hope there's ambulances on the way."

"Do you see any friendlies around?"

"Negative. Recommend that you move in from the other side. Can you give me a backup here?"

"Sending one now. When he gets there, move in carefully. Take your time, Paulson."

"Right."

To the south, Werner and two other men advanced along the treeline. Their night-camouflage clothing was a hatchwork of light green, designed by computer, and even in the lightning they were nearly invisible.

Something had just happened. Jack saw a sudden flurry of fire, then nothing. Despite what he'd told Robby, he didn't like running away from the scene. But what else could he do? There was an unknown number of terrorists out there. He had only three armed men to protect three women and a child, with their backs to a cliff. Ryan swore and returned to the others.

"Okay, Shorty, show me the way down," Ryan said, pressing the muzzle of his Uzi against the man's chest.

"Right there." The man pointed, and Ryan swore again.

In all the time they'd lived here, Jack's only concern with the cliff was to

keep away from it, lest it crumble under him or his daughter. The view from his house was magnificent enough, but the cliff's height meant that from the house there was an unseen dead zone a thousand yards wide which the terrorists had used to approach. And they'd used ladders to climb up—*of course, that's what ladders are for!* Their placements were marked the way it said in every field manual in the world, with wooden stakes wrapped with white gauze bandaging, to be seen easily in the dark.

"Okay, people," Ryan began, looking around. "Shorty and I go first. Your Highness, you come next with the women. Robby, stay ten yards back and cover the rear."

"I am adept with light weapons," the Prince said.

Jack shook his head emphatically. "No, if they get you, they win. If something goes wrong, I'm depending on you to take care of my wife and kid, sir. If something happens, go south. About half a mile down you'll find a gully. Take that inland and don't stop till you find a hard-surface road. It's real thick cover, you should be okay. Robby, if anything gets close, blast it."

"But what if—"

"But, hell! Anything that moves is the enemy." Jack looked around one last time. *Give me five trained men, maybe Breckenridge and four others, and I could set up one pisser of an ambush ... and if pigs had wings ...* "Okay, Shorty, you go down first. If you fuck us up, the first thing happens, I'll cut you in half. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"Then move."

Cooley moved to the ladder and proceeded down backward, with Ryan several feet above him. The aluminum rungs were slippery with the rain, but at least the wind was blocked by the body of the cliff. The extension ladder—*how the hell did they get that here?*—wobbled under him. Ryan tried to keep an eye on Shorty and slipped once halfway down. Above him, the second group was beginning its descent. The Princess had taken charge of Sally, and was coming down with Ryan's daughter between her body and the ladder to keep her from falling. He could hear his little girl whimpering anyway. Jack had to ignore it. There wasn't room in his consciousness for anger or pity now. He had to do this one right the first time. There would be no second. A flash of lightning revealed the two boats a hundred yards to the north. Ryan couldn't tell if anyone was there or not. Finally they reached the bottom. Cooley moved a few feet to the north and Ryan jumped down the next few feet, gun at the ready.

"Let's just stay put for a minute."

The Prince arrived next, then the women. Finally Robby started down, his Marine parka making him invisible against the black sky. He came down quickly, also jumping the last five feet.

"They got to the house just as I started down. Maybe this'll slow them some." He held the white-wrapped stakes. It might make the ladders harder to

find.

"Good one, Rob." Jack turned. The boats were out there, invisible again in the rain and shadows. Shorty had said that only one man was guarding them. *What if he's lying?* Ryan asked himself. *Is this guy willing to die for his cause? Will he sacrifice himself to shout a warning and get us killed? Does it make a difference—do we have a choice? No!*

"Move out, Shorty." Ryan gestured with his gun. "Just remember who dies first."

It was high tide, and the water came to within a few feet of the base of the cliff. The sand was wet and hard under his feet as Ryan stayed three feet behind the terrorist. *How far were they—a hundred yards? How far can one hundred yards be?* Ryan asked himself. He was discovering that now. The people behind him kept close to the kudzu-covered cliff. That made them extremely hard to see, though if there was someone in the boat, he'd know that people were coming toward him.

Krak!

Everyone's heart stopped for a moment. A lightning stroke had shattered a tree on the cliff's edge not two hundred yards behind them. For a brief instant he saw the boats again—and there was a man in each.

"Just one, eh?" Jack muttered. Shorty hesitated, then proceeded, hands at his side. With the return of darkness, he again lost sight of the boats, and Jack reasoned that everyone's night vision was equally ruined by the lightning. His mind returned to the image he'd just seen. The man in the near boat was standing at the near side, amidships, and appeared to be holding a weapon—one that needed two hands. Ryan was enraged that Shorty had lied to him. It seemed absurd as he watched the emotion flare and fade in his consciousness.

"What's the password?"

"There isn't one," Dennis Cooley replied, his voice unsteady as he contemplated the situation from rather a different perspective. He was between the loaded guns of two sides, each of which was likely to shoot. Cooley's mind was racing, too, looking for something he could do to turn the tables.

Was he telling the truth now? Ryan wondered, but there wasn't time to puzzle that one out. "Keep moving."

The boat reappeared now. At first it was just something different from the darkness and the beach. In five more yards it was a shape. The rain was pouring down hard enough to distort everything he saw, but there was a white, almost rectangular shape ahead. Ryan guessed the range at fifty yards. He prayed for the lightning to hold off now. If they were lighted, the men in the boats might be able to recognize a face, and if they saw that Shorty was in front ...

How do I do this ...?

You can be a policeman or a soldier, but not both. Joe Evans' words at the

Tower came back, and told him what he had to do.

Forty yards to go. There were rocks on the beach, too, and Jack had to be careful not to trip over one. He reached forward with his left hand and unscrewed the bulky silencer. He stuck it in his belt. He didn't like what it did to the gun's balance.

Thirty yards. He searched for and found the stock release switch on the Uzi. Jack extended the stock, planting the metal buttplate in his armpit and snugging the weapon in tight. *Just a few more seconds ...*

Twenty-five yards. He could see the boat clearly now, twenty feet or so, with a blunt bow, and another just like it perhaps twenty yards beyond. There was definitely a man in the near boat, standing amidships on its port side, looking straight at the people approaching him. Jack's right thumb pushed the Uzi's selector switch all the way forward, to full automatic fire, and he tightened his fist on the pistol grip. He hadn't fired an Uzi since a brief familiarization at Quantico. It was small but nicely balanced. The black metal sights were nearly useless in the dark, though, and what he had to do ...

Twenty yards. *The first burst has to be right on, Jack, right the hell on ...*

Ryan took half a step to his right and dropped to one knee. He brought the weapon up, placing the front sight low and left of his target before he held the trigger down for a four-round burst. The gun jerked up and to the right as the bullets left, tracing a diagonal line across the target's outline. The man dropped instantly from sight, and Ryan was again dazzled, this time by his own muzzle flashes. Shorty had dived to the ground at the sound.

"Come on!" Ryan yanked Cooley up and threw him forward, but Jack stumbled in the sand and recovered to see that the terrorist was indeed running for the boat—*where there was a gun to turn against them all!* He was yelling something Ryan couldn't understand.

Jack had nearly caught up when Shorty got there first—

And died. The man in the other boat fired a long, wild burst in their direction just as Cooley was leaping aboard. Ryan saw his head snap over and Shorty fell into the boat like a sack of groceries. Jack knelt at the gunnel and fired his own burst, and the other man went down. Hit or not, Ryan couldn't tell. It was just like the exercises at Quantico, he told himself, total chaos, and the side that makes the fewest mistakes wins.

"Get aboard!" He stayed up, holding his gun on the other boat. He didn't turn his head, but felt the others board. Lightning flashed, and Ryan saw the man he'd shot, three red spots on his chest, his eyes and mouth agape in surprise. Shorty was beside him, the side of his head horribly opened. Between the two it seemed a gallon of blood had been poured onto the fiberglass deck. Robby finally arrived and jumped aboard. A head appeared in the other boat, and Ryan fired again, then clambered aboard.

"Robby, get us the hell outa here!" Jack moved on hands and knees to the other side, making sure that everyone's head was down.

Jackson moved into the driver's seat and searched for the ignition. If was set

up just like a car, and the keys were in. He turned them, and the engine coughed to life as yet another burst of fire came from the other boat. Ryan heard the sound of bullets hitting the fiberglass. Robby cringed but didn't move as his hand found the shift lever. Jack brought the gun up and fired again.

"Men on the cliff!" the Prince shouted.

O'Donnell gathered his men quickly and gave out new orders. All the security men were dead, he was sure, but that helicopter had probably landed to the west. He didn't think the missile had hit, though it was impossible to be sure.

"Thanks for the help, Sean, they were better than I expected. You have them in the house?"

"I left Dennis and two others. I think we should leave."

"You got that right!" Alex said. He pointed west. "I think we have some more company."

"Very well. Sean, you collect them and bring them to the cliff."

Miller got his two men and ran back to the house. Alex and his man tagged along. The front door was open, and all five raced inside, turned around the fireplace, and stopped cold.

Paulson, his spotter, and another agent were running too. He led them along the woodline to where the driveway turned, and dropped again, setting his rifle up on the bipod. There were sirens in the distance now, and he wondered what had taken so goddamned long as he tracked his night-sight in a search for targets. He caught a glimpse of men running around the northern side of the house.

"Something feels wrong about this," the sniper said.

"Yeah," his spotter agreed. "They sure as hell didn't plan to leave by the road—but what else is there?"

"Somebody better find out," Paulson thought aloud, and got on his radio.

Werner struggled forward on the south side of the yard, trying his best to ignore his throbbing back as he led his group forward. The radio squawked again, and he ordered his other team to advance with extreme caution.

"Well, where are they, man?" Alex asked.

Miller looked around in stunned amazement. Two of his men were dead on the floor, their guns were gone—and so were ...

"Where the hell are they!" Alex repeated.

"Search the house!" Miller screamed. He and Alex stayed in the room. The

black man looked at him with an unforgiving stare.

"Did I go through all this to watch you fuck up again?"

The three men returned a few seconds later and reported the house empty. Miller had already determined that his men's guns were gone. Something had gone wrong. He took his people outside.

Paulson had a new spot and finally could see his targets again. He counted twelve, then more joined from the house. They seemed to be confused as he watched the images on his night-sight gesture at one another. Some men were talking while others just milled around waiting for orders. Several appeared to be hurt, but he couldn't tell for sure.

"They're gone." Alex said it before Miller had a chance.

O'Donnell couldn't believe it. Sean explained in a rapid, halting voice while Dobbens looked on.

"Your boy fucked up," Dobbens said.

It was just too much. Miller slipped his own Uzi behind his back and retrieved the one he'd taken from the Secret Service agent. He brought it up in one smooth motion and fired into Alex's chest from a distance of three feet. Louis looked at his fallen boss for a second, then tried to bring his pistol up, but Miller cut him down, too.

"What the hell!" the spotter said.

Paulson flipped the rifle's safety off and centered his sight on the man who had just fired, killing two men—but whom had he killed? He could shoot only to save the lives of friendlies, and the dead men had almost certainly been bad guys. There weren't any hostages to be saved, as far as he could tell. *Where the hell are they?* One of the men near the cliff's edge appeared to shout something, and the others ran to join him. The marksman had his choice of targets, but without positive identification, he couldn't dare to fire a shot.

"Come on, baby," Jackson said to the engine. The motor was still cold and ran unevenly as he shifted to reverse. The boat moved slowly backward, away from the beach. Ryan had his Uzi trained on the other boat. The man there appeared again, and Ryan fired three rounds before the gun stopped. He cursed and switched magazines before firing a number of short bursts again to keep his head down.

"Men on the cliff," the Prince repeated. He'd taken the shotgun and had it aimed, but didn't fire. He didn't know who it was up there, and the range was too great in any case. Then flashes appeared. Whoever it was, they were firing at the boat. Ryan turned when he heard bullets hitting the water, and two thudded into the boat itself. Sissy Jackson screamed and grabbed at herself, while the Prince fired three rounds back.

Robby had the boat thirty yards from the beach now, and savagely brought the wheel around as he shifted the selector back into drive. When he rammed the throttle forward, the engine coughed again for one long, terrible moment, but then it caught and the boat surged forward.

"All right!" the aviator hooted. "Jack—where to? How about Annapolis?"

"Do it!" Ryan agreed. He looked aft. There were men coming down the ladder. Some were still shooting at them but missing wildly. Next he saw that Sissy was holding her foot.

"Cathy, see if you can find a first-aid kit," His Highness said. He'd already inspected the wound, but was now in the stern, facing aft with the shotgun at the ready. Jack saw a white plastic box under the driver's seat and slid it toward his wife.

"Rob, Sissy took a round in the foot," Jack said.

"I'm okay, Rob," his wife said at once. She didn't sound okay.

"How is it, Sis?" Cathy asked, moving to take a look.

"It hurts, but it's no big deal," she said through her teeth, trying to smile.

"You sure you're okay, honey?" Robby asked.

"Just go, Robby!" she gasped. Jack moved aft and looked. The bullet had gone straight through the top of her foot, and her light-colored shoe was bathed in dark blood. He looked around to see if anyone else was hurt, but aside from the mere terror that each felt, everyone else seemed all right.

"Commander, do you want me to take the wheel for you?" the Prince asked.

"Okay, Cap'n, come on forward." Robby slid away from the controls as His Highness joined him. "Your course is zero-three-six magnetic. Watch it, it's going to get rough when we're out of the cliff's lee, and there's lots of merchant traffic out there." They could already see four feet of chop building a hundred yards ahead, driven by the gusting winds.

"Right. How do I know when we've arrived at Annapolis?" The Prince settled behind the wheel and started checking out the controls.

"When you see the lights on the Bay Bridges, call me. I know the harbor, I'll take her in."

The Prince nodded agreement. He throttled back to half power as they entered the heavy chop, and kept moving his eyes from the compass to the water. Jackson moved to check his wife.

Sissy waved him away. "You worry about *them!"*

In another moment they were roller-coastering over four- and five-foot waves. The boat was a nineteen-foot cathedral-hull lake boat of a type favored by local fishermen for her good calm-seas speed and shallow draft. Her blunt nose didn't handle the chop very well. They were taking water over the bow, but the forward snap-on cover was in place, and the windshield deflected most of the water over the side. That water which did get into the back emptied down a self-bailing hole next to the engine box. Ryan had never been in a boat

like this, but knew what it was. Its hundred-fifty-horse engine drove an inboard-outdrive transmission whose movable propeller eliminated the need for a rudder. The bottom and sides of the boat were filled with foam for positive flotation. You could fill it with water and it wouldn't sink—but more to the point, the fiberglass and the foam would probably stop the bullets from a submachine gun. Jack checked his fellow passengers again. His wife was ministering to Sissy. The Princess held his daughter. Except for himself, Robby, and the Prince at the wheel, everyone's head was down. He started to relax slightly. They were away, and their fate was back in their own hands. Jack promised himself that this would never change again.

"They're coming after us," Robby said as he fed two rounds into the bottom of the shotgun. " 'Bout three hundred yards back. I saw them in the lightning, but they'll lose us in this rain if we're lucky."

"What would you call the visibility?"

"Except for the lightning"—Robby shrugged—"maybe a hot hundred yards, tops. We're not leaving a wake for them to follow, and they don't know where we're going." He paused. "God, I wish we had a radio! We could get the Coast Guard in on this, or maybe somebody else, and set up a nice little trap for them."

Jack sat all the way down, facing aft on the opposite side of the engine box from his friend. He saw that his daughter was asleep in the arms of the Princess. *It must be nice to be a kid,* he reflected.

"Count your blessings, Commander."

"Bet your ass, boy! I guess I picked a good time to take a leak."

Ryan grunted agreement. "I didn't know you could handle a shotgun."

"Back when I was a kid, the Klan had this little hobby. They'd get boozed up every Tuesday night and burn down a nigger church—just to keep us in line, y'know? Well, one night, the sheetheads decided to burn my pappy's church. We got word—a liquor-store owner called; not all rednecks are assholes. Anyway, Pappy and me were waiting for them. Didn't kill any, but we must have scared them as white as their sheets. I blew the radiator right out of one car. " Robby chuckled at the memory. "They never did come back for it. The cops didn't arrest anybody, but that's the last time anybody tried to burn a church in our town, so I guess they learned their lesson." He paused again. When he went on, his voice was more sober. "That's the first time I ever killed a man, Jack. Funny, it doesn't feel like anything, not anything at all."

"It will tomorrow."

Robby looked over at his friend. "Yeah."

Ryan looked aft, his hands tight on the Uzi. There was nothing to be seen. The sky and water merged into an amorphous gray mass, and the wind-driven rain stung at his face. The boat surged up and down on the breaking swells, and for a moment Jack wondered why he wasn't seasick. Lightning flashed again, and still he saw nothing, as though they were under a gray dome on a sparkling, uneven floor.

They were gone. After the sniper team reported that all the terrorists had disappeared over the cliff, Werner's men searched the house and found nothing but dead men. The second HRT group was now on the scene, plus over twenty police, and another crowd of firemen and paramedics. Three of the Secret Service agents were still alive, plus a terrorist who'd been left behind. All were being transported to hospitals. That made for seventeen security people dead, and a total of four terrorists, two of them apparently killed by their own side.

"They all crowded into the boat and took off that way," Paulson said. "I could have taken a few out, but there just wasn't any way to figure who was who." He'd done the right thing. The sniper knew it, and so did Werner. You don't shoot without knowing what your target is.

"So now what the hell do we do?" This question came from a captain of the State Police. It was a rhetorical question insofar as there was no immediate answer.

"Do you suppose the good guys got away?" Paulson asked. "I didn't see anything that looked like a friendly, and the way the bad guys were acting ... something went wrong," he said. "Something went wrong for everybody."

Something went wrong, all right, Werner thought. A *goddamned battle was fought here. Twenty-some people dead and nobody in sight.*

"Let's assume that the friendlies escaped somehow—no, let's just assume that the bad guys got away in a boat. Okay. Where would they go?" Werner asked.

"Do you know how many boatyards there are around here?" the State Police Captain asked. "Jesus, how many houses with private slips? Hundreds—we can't check them all out!"

"Well, we have to do something!" Werner snapped back, his anger amplified by his sprained back. A black dog came up to them. He looked as confused as everyone else.

"I think they lost us."

"Could be," Jackson replied. The last lightning flash had revealed nothing. "The bay's right big, and visibility isn't worth a damn—but the way the rain's blowing, they can see better than we can. Twenty yards, maybe, just enough to matter."

"How about we go farther east?" Jack asked.

"Into the main ship channel? It's a Friday night. There'll be a bunch of ships coming out of Baltimore, knocking down ten-twelve knots, and as blind as we are." Robby shook his head. "Uh-uh, we didn't make it this far to get run down by some Greek rustbucket. This is hairy enough."

"Lights ahead," the Prince reported.

“We’re home, Jack!” Robby went forward. The lights of the twin Chesapeake Bay Bridges winked at them unmistakably in the distance. Jackson took the wheel, and the Prince took up his spot in the stem. All were long since soaked through by the rain, and they shivered in the wind. Jackson brought the boat around to the west. The wind was on the bow now, coming straight down the Severn River valley, as it usually did here. The waves moderated somewhat as he steered past the Annapolis town harbor. The rain was still falling in sheets, and Robby navigated the boat mostly by memory.

The lights along the Naval Academy’s Sims Drive were a muted, linear glow through the rain and Robby steered for them, barely missing a large can buoy as he fought the boat through the wind. In another minute they could see the line of gray YPs—Yard Patrol boats—still moored to the concrete seawall while their customary slips were being renovated across the river. Robby stood to see better, and brought the boat in between a pair of the wood-hulled training craft. He actually wanted to enter the Academy yacht basin, but it was too full at the moment. Finally he nosed the boat to the seawall, holding her to the concrete with engine power.

“Y‘all stop that!” A Marine came into view. His white cap had a plastic cover over it, and he wore a raincoat. “Y’all can’t tie up here. ”

“This is Lieutenant Commander Jackson, son,” Robby replied. “I work here. Stand by. Jack, you get the bowline.”

Ryan ducked under the windshield and unsnapped the bow cover. A white nylon line was neatly coiled in the right place, and Ryan stood as Robby used engine power to bring the boat’s port side fully against the seawall. Jack jumped up and tied the line off. The Prince did the same at the stem. Robby killed the engine and went up to face the Marine.

“You recognize me, son?”

The Marine saluted. “Beg pardon, Commander, but—” He flashed his light into the boat. “Holy Christ!”

About the only good thing that could be said about the boat was that the rain had washed most of the blood down the self-bailing hole. The Marine’s mouth dropped open as he saw two bodies, three women, one of them apparently shot, and a sleeping child. Next he saw a machine gun draped around Ryan’s neck. A dull, wet evening of walking guard came to a screeching end.

“You got a radio, Marine?” Robby asked. He held it up and Jackson snatched it away. It was a small Motorola CC unit like those used by police. “Guardroom, this is Commander Jackson.”

“Commander? This is Sergeant Major Breckenridge. I didn’t know you had the duty tonight, sir. What can I do for you?”

Jackson took a long breath. “I’m glad it’s you, Gunny. Listen up: Alert the command duty officer. Next, I want some armed Marines on the seawall west of the yacht basin *immediately!* We got big trouble here, Gunny, so let’s shag it!”

“Aye aye, sir!” The radio squawked. Orders had been given. Questions could wait.

“What’s your name, son?” Robby asked the Marine next.

“Lance Corporal Green, sir!”

“Okay, Green, help me get the womenfolk out of the boat.” Robby reached out his hand. “Let’s go, ladies.”

Green leaped down and helped Sissy out first, then Cathy, then the Princess, who was still holding Sally. Robby got them all behind the wood hull of one of the YPs.

“What about them, sir?” Green gestured at the bodies.

“They’ll keep. Get back up here, Corporal!”

Green gave the bodies a last look. “Reckon so,” he muttered. He already had his raincoat open and the flap loose on his holster.

“What’s going on here?” a woman’s voice asked. “Oh, it’s you, Commander.”

“What are you doing here, Chief?” Robby asked her.

“I have the duty section out keeping an eye on the boats, sir. The wind could beat ‘em to splinters on this seawall if we don’t—” Chief Bosun’s Mate Mary Znamirowski looked at everyone on the dock. “Sir, what the hell ...”

“Chief, I suggest you get your people together and put them under cover. No time for explanations.”

A pickup truck came next. It halted in the parking lot just behind them. The driver jumped out and sprinted toward them with three others trailing behind. It was Breckenridge. The Sergeant Major gave the women a quick look, then turned to Jackson and asked the night’s favorite question—

“What the hell is going on, sir?”

Robby gestured to the boat. Breckenridge gave it a quick look that lingered into four or five seconds. “Christ!”

“We were at Jack’s place for dinner,” Robby explained. “And some folks crashed the party. They were after him—” Jackson gestured to the Prince of Wales, who turned and smiled. Breckenridge’s eyes went wide in recognition. His mouth flapped open for a moment, but he recovered and did what Marines always do when they don’t know what else—he saluted, just as prescribed in the *Guide Book*. Robby went on: “They killed a bunch of security troops. We got lucky. They planned to escape by boat. We stole one and came here, but there’s another boat out there, full of the bastards. They might have followed us.”

“Armed with what?” the Sergeant Major asked.

“Like this, Gunny.” Ryan held up his Uzi.

The Sergeant Major nodded and reached into his coat. His hand came out with a radio. “Guardroom, this is Breckenridge. We have a Class-One Alert: Wake up all the people. Call Captain Peters. I want a squad of riflemen on the

seawall in five minutes. Move out!"

"Roger," the radio answered. "Class-One Alert."

"Let's get the women the hell outa here," Ryan urged.

"Not yet, sir," Breckenridge replied. He looked around, his professional eye making a quick evaluation. "I want some more security here first. Your friends might have landed upriver and be coming overland—that's how I'd do it. In ten minutes I'll have a platoon of riflemen sweepin' the grounds, maybe a full squad here in five. If my people ain't too drunked out," he concluded quietly, reminding Ryan that it was indeed a Friday night—Saturday morning—and Annapolis had many bars. "Cummings and Foster, look after the ladies. Mendoza, get on one of these boats and keep a lookout. Y'all heard the man, so stay awake!"

Breckenridge walked up and down the seawall for a minute, checking fields of view and fields of fire. The .45 Colt automatic looked small in his hands. They could see in his face that he didn't like the situation, and wouldn't until he had more people here and the civilians tucked safely away. Next he checked the women out.

"You ladies all right—oh, sorry, Mrs. Jackson. We'll get you to the sick bay real quick, ma'am."

"Any way to turn the lights off?" Ryan asked.

"Not that I know of—I don't like being under 'em either. Settle down, Lieutenant, we got all this open ground behind us, so nobody's going to sneak up this way. Soon as I get things organized, we'll get the ladies off to the dispensary and put a guard on 'em. You ain't as safe as I'd like, but we're gettin' there. How did you get away?"

"Like Robby said, we got lucky. He did two of them with the shotgun. I got one in the boat. The other one got popped by his own man." Ryan shivered, this time not from wind or rain. "It was kinda hairy there for a while."

"I believe it. These guys any good?"

"The terrorists? You tell me. They had surprise going for them before, and that counts for a lot."

"We'll see about that." Breckenridge nodded.

"There's a boat out there!" It was Mendoza, up on one of the YPs.

"Okay, boys," the Sergeant Major breathed, holding his .45 up alongside his head. "Just wait another couple of minutes, till we get some real weapons here."

"They're coming in slow," the Marine called.

Breckenridge's first look was to make sure the women were safely behind cover. Then he ordered everyone to spread out and pick an open spot between the moored boats. "And for Christ's sake keep your damned heads down!"

Ryan picked a spot for himself. The others did the same, at intervals of from ten to over a hundred feet apart. He felt the reinforced-concrete seawall with

his hand. He was sure it would stop a bullet. The four sailors from the YP duty section stayed with the women, with a Marine on either side. Breckenridge was the only one moving, crouching behind the seawall, following the white shape of the moving boat. He got to Ryan.

"There, about eighty yards out, going left to right. They're trying to figure things out, *too. Just give me a couple more minutes, people,"* he whispered.

"Yeah." Ryan thumbed off the safety, one eye above the lip of the concrete. It was just a white outline, but he could hear the muted sputter of the engine. The boat turned in toward where Robby had tied up the one they'd stolen. It was their first real mistake, Jack thought.

"Great." The Sergeant Major leveled his automatic, shielded by the stern of a boat. "Okay, gentlemen. Come on if you're coming...."

Another pickup truck approached on Sims Drive. It came up without lights and stopped right by the women. Eight men jumped off the back. Two Marines ran along the seawall, and were illuminated by a light between two of the moored YPs. Out on the water, the small boat lit up with muzzle flashes, and both Marines went down. Bullets started hitting the moored boats around them. Breckenridge turned and yelled.

"Fire!" The area exploded with noise. Ryan spotted on the flashes and depressed his trigger with care. The submachine gun fired four rounds before locking open on an empty magazine. He cursed and stared stupidly at the weapon before he realized that he had a loaded pistol in his belt. He got the Browning up and fired a single shot before he realized that the target wasn't there anymore. The noise from the boat's motor increased dramatically.

"Cease fire! Cease fire! They're buggin' out," Breckenridge called. "Anybody hit?"

"Over here!" someone called to the right, where the women were.

Ryan followed the Sergeant Major over. Two Marines were down, one with a flesh wound in the arm, but the other had taken a round right through the hip and was screaming like a banshee. Cathy was already looking at him.

"Mendoza, what's happening?" Breckenridge called.

"They're heading out—wait—yeah, they're moving east!"

"Move your hands, soldier," Cathy was saying. The Private First-Class had taken a painful hit just below the belt on his left side. "Okay, okay, you're going to be all right. It hurts, but we can fix it." Breckenridge reached down to take the man's rifle. He tossed it to Sergeant Cummings.

"Who's in command here?" demanded Captain Mike Peters.

"I guess I am," Robby said.

"Christ, Robby, what's going on?"

"What the hell does it look like!"

Another truck arrived, carrying another six Marines. They took one collective look at the wounded men and yanked at the charging handles on

their rifles.

"Goddammit, Robby—sir!" Captain Peters yelled.

"Terrorists. They tried to get us at Jack's place. They were trying to get—well, look!"

"Good evening, Captain," the Prince said after checking his wife. "Did we get any? I didn't have a clear shot." His voice showed real disappointment at that.

"I don't know, sir," Breckenridge answered. "I saw some rounds go short, and pistol stuff won't penetrate a boat like that." Another series of lightning flashes illuminated the area.

"I see 'em, they're going out to the bay!" Mendoza called.

"Damn!" Breckenridge growled. "You four, get the ladies over to the dispensary." He bent down to help the Princess to her feet as Robby lifted his wife. "You want to give the little girl to the Private, ma'am? They're going to take you to the hospital and get you all dried off."

Ryan saw that his wife was still trying to help one of the wounded Marines, then looked at the patrol boat in front of him. "Robby?"

"Yeah, Jack?"

"Does this boat have radar?"

Chief Znamirowski answered. "They all do, sir."

A Marine lowered the tailgate on the one pickup and helped Jackson load his wife aboard. "What are you thinking, Jack?"

"How fast are they?"

"About thirteen—I don't think they're fast enough."

Chief Bosun's Mate Znamirowski looked over the seawall at the boat Robby had steered in. "In the seas we got now, you bet I can catch one of those little things! But I need someone to work the radar. I don't have an operator in my section right now."

"I can do that," the Prince offered. He was tired of being a target, and no one would keep him out of this. "It would be a pleasure in fact."

"Robby, you're senior here," Jack said.

"Is it legal?" Captain Peters asked, fingering his automatic.

"Look," Ryan said quickly, "we just had an armed attack by *foreign* nationals on a U.S. government reservation—that's an act of war and posse commitatus doesn't apply." *At least I don't think it does,* he thought. "Can you think of a good reason not to go after them?"

He couldn't. "Chief Z, you have a boat ready?" Jackson asked.

"Hell, yes, we can take the seventy-six boat."

"Crank her up! Captain Peters, we need some Marines."

“Sar-Major Breckenridge, secure the area, and bring along ten men.”

The Sergeant Major had left the officers to their arguments while getting the civilians loaded onto the truck. He grabbed Cummings.

“Sergeant, take charge of the civilians, get ‘em to sick bay, and put a guard on ’em. Beef up the guard force, but your primary mission is to take care of these people here. Their safety is your responsibility—and you ain’t relieved till *I* relieve you! Got it?”

“Aye, Gunny.”

Ryan helped his wife to the truck. “We’re going after them.”

“I know. Be careful, Jack. Please.”

“I will, but we’re going to get ’em this time, babe.” He kissed his wife. There was a funny sort of look on her face, something more than concern. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine. You worry about you. Be careful!”

“Sure, babe. I’ll be back.” *But they won’t!* Jack turned away to jump aboard the boat. He went inside the deckhouse and found the ladder to the bridge.

“I am Chief Znamirowski, and I have the conn,” she announced. Mary Znamirowski didn’t look like a chief bosun’s mate, but the young seaman—was seawoman the proper term for her? Jack wondered—on the wheel jumped as though she were. “Starboard back two thirds, port back one third, left full rudder.”

“Stern line is in,” a seaman—this one was a man—reported.

“Very well,” she acknowledged, and continued her terse commands to get the YP away from the dock. Within seconds they were clear of the seawall and the other boats.

“Right full rudder, all ahead full! Come to new course one-three-five.” She turned. “How’s the radar look?”

The Prince was looking over the controls on the unfamiliar set. He found the clutter-suppression switch and bent down to the viewing hood. “Ah! Target bearing one-one-eight, range thirteen hundred, target course northeasterly, speed ... about eight knots. ”

“That’s about right, it can get choppy by the point,” Chief Z thought. “What’s our mission, Commander?”

“Can we stay with them?”

“They shot up *my* boats! I’ll ram the turkeys if you want, sir,” the chief replied. “I can give you thirteen knots as long as you want. I doubt they can do more than ten in the seas we got.”

“Okay. I want us to follow as close as we can without being spotted. ”

The chief opened one of the pilothouse doors and looked at the water. “We’ll close to three hundred. Anything else?”

“Go ahead and close up. For the rest of it, I am open to ideas,” Robby replied.

“How about we see where they’re going?” Jack suggested. “Then we can call in the cavalry.”

“That makes sense. If they try to run for shore ... Christ, I’m a fighter pilot, not a cop.” Robby lifted the radio microphone. The set showed the boat’s call sign: NAEF. “Naval Station Annapolis, this is November Alfa Echo Foxtrot. Do you read, over.” He had to repeat the call twice more before getting an acknowledgment.

“Annapolis, give me a phone patch to the Superintendent.”

“He just called us, sir. Stand by.” A few clicks followed, plus the usual static.

“This is Admiral Reynolds, who is this?”

“Lieutenant Commander Jackson, sir, aboard the seventy-six boat. We are one mile southeast of the Academy in pursuit of the boat that just shot up our waterfront.”

“Is that what happened? All right, who do you have aboard?”

“Chief Znamirowski and the duty boat section, Captain Peters and some Marines, Doctor Ryan, and, uh, Captain Wales, sir, of the Royal Navy,” Robby answered.

“Is *that* where he is? I have the FBI on the other phone—Christ, Robby! Okay, the civilians are under guard at the hospital, and the FBI and police are on the way here. Repeat your situation and then state your intentions.”

“Sir, we are tracking the boat that attacked the dock. Our intentions are to close and track by radar to determine its destination, then call in the proper law-enforcement agencies, sir.” Robby smiled into the mike at his choice of words. “My next call is to Coast Guard Baltimore, sir. Looks like they’re heading in that direction at the moment.”

“Roger that. Very well, you may continue the mission, but the safety of your guests is your responsibility. Do not, repeat do not take any unnecessary chances. Acknowledge.”

“Yes, sir, we will not take any unnecessary chances.”

“Use your head, Commander, and report as necessary. Out.”

“Now there’s a vote of confidence,” Jackson thought aloud. “Carry on.”

“Left fifteen degrees rudder,” Chief Z ordered, rounding Greenbury Point. “Come to new course zero-two-zero.”

“Target bearing zero-one-four, range fourteen hundred, speed still eight knots,” His Highness told the quartermaster on the chart table. “They took a shorter route around this point.”

“No problem,” the chief noted, looking at the radar plot. “We have deep water all the way up from here.”

“Chief Z, do we have any coffee aboard?”

“I got a pot in the galley, sir, but I don’t have anybody to work it. ”

“I’ll take care of that,” Jack said. He went below, then to starboard and below again. The galley was a small one, but the coffee machine was predictably of the proper size. Ryan got it started and went back topside. Breckenridge was passing out life jackets to everyone aboard, which seemed a sensible enough precaution. The Marines were deployed on the bridgewalk outside the pilothouse.

“Coffee in ten minutes,” he announced.

“Say again, Coast Guard,” Robby said into the microphone.

“Navy Echo Foxtrot, this is Coast Guard Baltimore, do you read, over.”

“That’s better.”

“Can you tell us what’s going on?”

“We are tracking a small boat, about a twenty-footer—with ten or more armed terrorists aboard.” He gave position, course, and speed. “Acknowledge that.”

“Roger, you say a boat full of bad guys and machine guns. Is this for real? Over.”

“That’s affirmative, son. Now let’s cut the crap and get down to it.”

The response was slightly miffed. “Roger that, we have a forty-one boat about to leave the dock and a thirty-two-footer’ll be about ten minutes behind it. These are small harbor-patrol boats. They are not equipped to fight a surface gun action, mister.”

“We have ten Marines aboard,” Jackson replied. “Do you request assistance?”

“Hell, yes—that’s affirmative, Echo Foxtrot. I have the police and the FBI on the phone, and they are heading to this area.”

“Okay, have your forty-one boat call us when they clear the dock. Let’s have your boat track from in front and we’ll track from behind. If we can figure where the target is heading, I want you to call in the cops.”

“We can do that easy enough. Let me get some things rolling here, Navy. Stand by.”

“A ship,” the Prince said.

“It’s gotta be,” Ryan agreed. “The same way they did it when they rescued that Miller bastard.... Robby, can you get the Coast Guard to give us a list of the ships in the harbor?”

Werner and both Hostage Rescue groups were already moving. He wondered what had gone wrong—and right—tonight, but that would be determined later. For the moment he had agents and police heading toward the Naval Academy to protect the people he was supposed to have rescued, and his men were split between an FBI Chevy Suburban and two State Police

cars, all heading north on Ritchie Highway toward Baltimore. If only they could use helicopters, he thought, but the weather was too bad, and everyone had had enough of that for one night. They were back to being a SWAT team, a purpose for which they were well suited. Despite everything that had gone wrong tonight, they now had a large group of terrorists flushed and in the open....

"Here's the list of the ships in port," the Coast Guard Lieutenant said over the radio. "We had a lot of them leave Friday night, so the list isn't too long. I'll start off at the Dundalk Marine Terminal. *Nissan Courier,* Japanese registry, she's a car carrier out of Yokohama delivering a bunch of cars and trucks. *Wilhelm Schörner,* West German registry, a container boat out of Bremen with general cargo. *Costanza,* Cypriot registry, out of Valetta, Malta—"

"Bingo!" Ryan said.

"—scheduled to sail in about five hours, looks like. *George McReady,* American, arrived with a cargo of lumber from Port-land, Oregon. That's the last one there."

"Tell me about the *Costanza,"* Robby said, looking at Jack.

"She arrived in ballast and loaded up a cargo mainly of farm equipment and some other stuff. Sails before dawn, supposed to be headed back for Valetta."

"That's probably our boy," Jack said quietly.

"Stand by, Coast Guard." Robby turned away from the radio. "How do you know, Jack?"

"I don't *know,* but it's a solid guess. When these bastards pulled that rescue on Christmas Day, they were probably picked up in the Channel by a Cypriot-registered ship. We think their weapons get to them through a Maltese dealer who works with a South African, and a lot of terrorists move back and forth through Malta—the local government's tight with a certain country due south of there. The Maltese don't get their own hands dirty, but they're real good at looking the other way if the money's right." Robby nodded and keyed his mike.

"Coast Guard, have you gotten things straightened out with the local cops?"

"That's a rog, Navy."

"Tell them that we believe the target's objective is the *Costanza."*

"Roger that. We'll have our thirty-two boat stake her out and call in the cops."

"Don't let them see you, Coast Guard!"

"Understood, Navy. We can handle that part easy enough. Stand by.... Navy, be advised that our forty-one boat reports radar contact with you and the target, rounding Bodkin Point. Is this correct? Over."

"Yes!" called the Quartermaster at the chart table. He was making a precise

record of the course tracks from the radar plot.

"That's affirm, Coast Guard. Tell your boat to take station five hundred yards forward of the target. Acknowledge."

"Roger, five-zero-zero yards. Okay, let's see if we can get the cops moving. Stand by."

"We got 'em," Ryan thought aloud.

"Uh, Lieutenant, keep your hands still, sir." It was Breckenridge. He reached into Ryan's belt and extracted the Browning automatic. Jack was surprised to see that he'd stuck it in there with the hammer back and safety off. Breckenridge lowered the hammer and put the pistol back where it was. "Let's try to think 'safe,' sir, okay? Otherwise you might lose something important. "

Ryan nodded rather sheepishly. "Thanks, Gunny."

"Somebody has to protect the lieutenants." Breckenridge turned. "Okay, Marines—let's stay awake out there!"

"You got a man on the Prince?" Jack asked.

"Even before the Admiral said so." The Sergeant Major gestured to where a corporal was standing, rifle in hand, three feet from His Highness, with orders to stay between him and the gunfire.

Five minutes later a trio of State Police cars drove without lights to Berth Six of the Dundalk Marine Terminal. The cars were parked under one of the gantry cranes used for transferring cargo containers, and five officers walked quietly to the ship's accommodation ladder. A crewman stationed there stopped them—or tried to. A language barrier prevented proper communications. He found himself accompanying the troopers, with his hands cuffed behind his back. The senior police officer bounded up three more ladders and arrived at the bridge.

"What is this!"

"And who might you be?" the cop inquired from behind a shotgun.

"I am the master of this ship!" Captain Nikolai Frenza proclaimed.

"Well, Captain, I am Sergeant William Powers of the Maryland State Police, and I have some questions for you."

"You have no authority on my ship!" Frenza answered. His accent was a mixture of Greek and some other tongue. "I will talk to the Coast Guard and no one else."

"I want to make this real clear." Powers walked the fifteen feet to the Captain, his hands tight around the Ithaca 12-gauge shotgun. "That shore you're tied to is the State of Maryland, and this shotgun says I got all the authority I need. Now we have information that a boatload of terrorists is coming here, and the word is they've killed a bunch of people, including three state troopers." He planted the muzzle against Frenza's chest. "Captain, if they

do come here, or if you fuck with me any more tonight, *you are in a whole shitpot full of trouble-do you understand me!"*

The man wilted before his eyes, Powers saw. *So the information is correct. Good.*

"You would be well advised to cooperate, 'cause pretty soon we're going to have more cops here 'n you ever saw. You just might need some friends, mister. If you have something to tell me, I want to hear it right now."

Frenza hesitated, his eyes shifting toward the bow and back. He was in deep trouble, more than his advance payment would ever cover. "There are four of them aboard. They are forward, starboard side, near the bow. We didn't know __"

"Shut up." Powers nodded to a corporal, who got on his portable radio. "What about your crew?"

"The crew is below, preparing to take the ship to sea."

"Sarge, the Coast Guard says they're three miles off and heading in."

"All right." Powers pulled a set of handcuffs from his belt. He and his men took the four men standing bridge watch and secured them to the ship's wheel and two other fittings. "Captain, if you or your people make any noise at all, I'll come back here and splatter you all over this ship. I am not kidding."

Powers took his men down to the main deck and forward on the port side. The *Costanza's* superstructure was all aft. Forward of it, the deck was a mass of cargo containers, each the size of a truck-trailer, piled three- and four-high. Between each pile was an artificial alleyway, perhaps three feet wide, which allowed them to approach the bow unobserved. The Sergeant had no SWAT experience, but all of his men had shotguns and he did know something of infantry tactics.

It was like walking alongside a building, except that the street was made of rusty steel. The rain had abated, finally, but it still made noise, clattering on the metal container boxes. They passed the last of these to find that the ship's forward hold was open and a crane was hanging over the starboard side. Powers peeked around the corner and saw two men standing at the far side of the deck. They appeared to be looking southeast, toward the entrance to the harbor. There was no easy way to approach. He and his men crouched and went straight toward them. They'd gotten halfway when one turned.

"Who are you?"

"State Police!" Powers noted the accent and brought his gun up, but he tripped on a deck fitting and his first shot went into the air. The man on the starboard side came up with a pistol and fired, also missing, then ducked behind the container. The fourth state trooper went forward around the deck hatch and fired at the container edge, covering his comrades. Powers heard a flurry of conversation and the sound of running feet. He took a deep breath and ran to the starboard side.

No one was in sight. The men who'd run aft were nowhere to be seen. There

was an accommodation ladder leading from an opening in the rail down to the water, and nothing else but a radio that someone had dropped.

"Oh, shit." The tactical situation was lousy. He had armed criminals close by but out of sight and a boatload of others on the way. He sent one of his men to the port side to watch that line of approach, and another to train his shotgun down the starboard side. Then he got on the radio and learned that plenty more help was on the way. Powers decided to sit tight and take his chances. He'd known Larry Fontana, helped carry his coffin out of the church, and he was damned if he'd pass up the chance to get the people who'd killed him.

A State Police car had taken the lead. The FBI was now on the Francis Scott Key Bridge, crossing over Baltimore Harbor. The next trick was to get from the expressway to the marine terminal. A trooper said he knew a shortcut, and he led the procession of three cars. A twenty-foot boat was going under the bridge at that very moment.

"Target coming right, appears to be heading towards a ship tied to the quay, bearing three-five-two," His Highness reported.

"That's it," Ryan said. "We got 'em."

"Chief, let's close up some," Jackson ordered.

"They might spot us, sir—the rain's slacking off. If they're heading to the north, I can close up on their port side. They're heading for that ship—you want us to hit them right when they get there?" Chief Znamirowski asked.

"That's right."

"Okay. I'll get somebody on the searchlight. Captain Peters, you'll want to get your Marines on the starboard side. Looks like surface action starboard," Chief Z noted. Navy regulations prohibited her from serving on a combatant ship, but she'd beaten the game after all!

"Right." Peters gave the order and Breckenridge got the Marines in place. Ryan left the pilothouse and went to the main deck aft. He had already come to his decision. Sean Miller was out there.

"I hear a boat," one of the troopers said quietly.

"Yeah." Powers fed a round into his shotgun. He looked aft. There were people there with guns. He heard footsteps behind him—more police!

"Who's in charge here?" a corporal asked.

"I am," Powers replied. "You stay here. You two, move aft. If you see a head come out from behind a container, blow it the hell off."

"I see it!" So did Powers. A white fiberglass boat appeared a hundred yards off, coming slowly up to the ship's ladder.

"Jesus." It seemed full of people, and every one, he'd been told, had an automatic weapon. Unconsciously he felt the steel plating on the ship's side. He wondered if it would stop a bullet. Most troopers now wore protective body armor, but Powers didn't. The Sergeant flipped off the safety on his shotgun. It was just about time.

The boat approached like a car edging into a parking space. The helmsman nosed the boat to the bottom of the accommodation ladder and someone in the bow tied it off. Two men got out onto the small lower platform. They helped someone off the boat, then started to carry him up the metal staircase. Powers let them get halfway.

"*Freeze!* State Police!" He and two others pointed shotguns straight down at the boat. "Move and you're dead," he added, and was sorry for it. It sounded too much like TV.

He saw heads turn upward, a few mouths open in surprise. A few hands moved, too, but before anything that looked like a weapon moved in his direction, a two-foot searchlight blazed down on the boat from seaward.

Powers was thankful for the light. He saw their heads snap around, then up at him. He could see their expressions now. They were trapped and knew it.

"Hi, there." A voice came across the water. It was a woman's voice on a loudspeaker. "If anybody moves, I have ten Marines to blow you to hell-and-gone. Make my day," the voice concluded. Sergeant Powers winced at that.

Then another light came on. "This is the U.S. Coast Guard. You are all under arrest."

"Like hell!" Powers screamed. "I got 'em!" It took another minute to establish what was going on to everyone's satisfaction. The big, gray Navy patrol boat came right alongside the smaller boat, and Powers was relieved to see ten rifles pointed at his prisoners.

"Okay, let's put all the guns down, people, and come up one at a time." His head jerked around as a single pistol shot rang out, followed by a pair of shotgun blasts. The Sergeant winced, but ignored it as best he could and kept his gun zeroed on the boat.

"I seen one!" a trooper said. "About a hundred feet back of us!"

"Cover it," Powers ordered. "Okay, you people get the hell up here and flat down on the deck."

The first two arrived, carrying a third man who was wounded in the chest. Powers got them stretched out, facedown on the deck, forwards of the front rank of containers. The rest came up singly. By the time the last was up, he'd counted twelve, several more of them hurt. They'd left behind a bunch of guns and what looked like a body.

"Hey, Marines, we could use a hand here!"

It was all the encouragement he needed. Ryan was standing on the YP's afterdeck, and jumped down. He slipped and fell on the deck. Breckenridge arrived immediately behind him and looked at the body the terrorists had left

behind. A half-inch hole had been drilled in the man's forehead.

"I thought I got off one good round. Lead on, Lieutenant." He gestured at the ladder. Ryan charged up the steps, pistol in hand. Behind him, Captain Peters was screaming something at him, but Jack simply didn't care.

"Careful, we have bad guys down that way in the container stacks," Powers warned.

Jack went around the front rank of metal boxes and saw the men facedown on the deck, hands behind their necks, with a pair of troopers standing over them. In a moment there were six Marines there, too.

Captain Peters came up and went to the police Sergeant, who seemed to be in command.

"We have at least two more, maybe four, hiding in the container rows," Powers said.

"Want some help flushing them out?"

"Yeah, let's go do it." Powers grinned in the darkness. He assembled all of his men, leaving Breckenridge and three Marines to guard the men on the deck. Ryan stayed there, too. He waited for the others to move aft.

Then he started looking at faces.

Miller was looking, too, still hoping to find a way out. He turned his head to the left and saw Ryan staring at him from twenty feet away. They recognized each other in an instant, and Miller saw something, a look that he had always reserved for his own use.

I am Death, Ryan's face told him.

I have come for you.

It seemed to Ryan that his body was made of ice. His fingers flexed once around the butt of his pistol as he walked slowly to port, his eyes locked on Miller's face. He still looked like an animal to Jack, but he was no longer a predator on the loose. Jack reached him and kicked Miller's leg. He gestured with the pistol for him to stand, but didn't say a word.

You don't talk to snakes. You kill snakes.

"Lieutenant ..." Breckenridge was a little slow to catch on.

Jack pushed Miller back against the metal wall of a container, his forearm across the man's neck. He savored the feel of the man's throat on his wrist.

This is the little bastard who nearly killed my family. Though he didn't know it, his face showed no emotion at all.

Miller looked into his eyes and saw ... nothing. For the first time in his life, Sean Miller knew fear. He saw his own death, and remembered the long-past lessons in Catholic school, remembered what the sisters had taught him, and his fear was that they might have been right. His face broke out in a sweat and his hands trembled as, despite all his contempt for religion, he feared the eternity in hell that surely awaited him.

Ryan saw the look in Miller's eyes, and knew it for what it was. *Goodbye, Sean. I hope you like it there....*

"Lieutenant!"

Jack knew that he had little time. He brought up the pistol and forced it into Miller's mouth as his eyes bored in on Sean's. He tightened his finger on the trigger just as he'd been taught. A gentle squeeze, so you never know when the trigger will break....

But nothing happened, and a massive hand came down on the gun.

"He ain't worth it, Lieutenant, he just ain't worth it." Breckenridge withdrew his hand, and Ryan saw that the gun's hammer was down. He'd have to cock it before the weapon could fire. "Think, son."

The spell was broken. Jack swallowed twice and took a breath. What he saw now was something less monstrous than before. Fear had given Miller the humanity that he'd lacked before. He was no longer an animal, after all. He was a human being, an evil example of what could happen when a man lost something that all men needed. Miller's breath was coming in gasps as Ryan pulled the gun out of his mouth. He gagged, but couldn't bend over with Jack's arm across his throat. Ryan backed away and the man fell to the deck. The Sergeant Major put his hand on Ryan's right arm, forcing the gun downward.

"I know what you're thinking, what he did to your little girl, but it isn't worth what you'd have to go through. I could tell the cops you shot him when he tried to run. My boys would back me up. You'd never go to trial, but it ain't worth what it would do to you, son. You're not cut out to be a murderer," Breckenridge said gently. "Besides, look what you did to him. I don't know what that is down there, but it's not a man, not anymore."

Jack nodded, as yet unable to speak. Miller was still on all fours, looking down at the deck, unable to meet Ryan's eyes. Jack could feel his body again; the blood coursing through his veins told him that he was alive and whole. *I've won,* he thought, as his mind regained control of his emotions. *I've won. I've defeated him and I haven't destroyed myself doing it.* His hands relaxed around the pistol grip.

"Thanks, Gunny. If you hadn't—"

"If you'd really wanted to kill him, you would have remembered to cock it. Lieutenant, I had you figured out a long time ago." Breckenridge nodded to reinforce his words. "Back on the deck, you," he told Miller, who slowly complied.

"Before any of you people think you're lucky, I got a hot flash for you," the Sergeant Major said next. "You have committed murder in a place that has a gas chamber. You can die by the numbers over here, people. Think about it."

The Hostage Rescue Team arrived next. They found the Marines and state troopers on the deck, working their way aft. It took a few minutes to

determine that no one was in the container stacks. The remaining four ULA members had used an alleyway to head aft, and were probably in the superstructure. Werner took over. He had a solid perimeter. Nobody was going anywhere. Another group of FBI agents went forward to collect the terrorists.

Three TV news trucks arrived on the scene, adding their lights to the ones turning night into day on the dock. The police were keeping them back, but already live news broadcasts were being sent worldwide. A colonel of the State Police was giving out a press release at the moment. The situation, he told the cameras, was under control, thanks to a little luck and a lot of good police work.

By this time all the terrorists forward were handcuffed and had been searched. The agents read off their constitutional rights while three of their number went into the boat to collect their weapons and other evidence. The Prince finally came up the ladder, with a heavy guard. He came to where the terrorists were sitting, now. He looked at them for a minute or so but didn't say a word. He didn't have to.

"Okay, we have things contained aft. There seems to be four of them. That's what the crew says," one of the HRT people said. "They're below somewhere, and we'll have to talk them out. It shouldn't be too hard, and we have all the time in the world."

"How do we get these characters off?" Sergeant Powers asked.

"We haven't worked that out yet, but let's get the civilians off. We'd prefer you did it from here. It might be a little dangerous to use the aft ladder. That means the Marines, too. Thanks for the assist, Captain."

"I hope we didn't screw anything up, joining in, I mean."

The agent shook his head. "You didn't break any laws that I know of. We got all the evidence we need, too."

"Okay, then we head back to Annapolis."

"Fine. There'll be a team of agents waiting to interview you there. Please thank the boat crew for us."

"Sar-Major, let's get the people moving."

"Okay, Marines, saddle up," Breckenridge called. Two minutes later everyone was aboard the patrol boat, heading out of the harbor. The rain had finally ended and the sky was clearing, the cooler Canadian air finally breaking the heat wave that had punished the area. The Marines took the opportunity to climb into the boat's bunks. Chief Znamirowski and her crew handled the driving. Ryan and the rest congregated in the galley and started drinking the coffee that no one had touched to this point.

"Long day," Jackson said. He checked his watch. "I'm supposed to fly in a few hours. Well, I was, anyway."

"Looks like we finally won a round," Captain Peters observed.

"It wasn't cheap." Ryan stared into his cup.

"It's never cheap, sir," Breckenridge said after a few seconds.

The boat rumbled with increased engine power. Jackson lifted a phone and asked why they were speeding up. He smiled at the answer, but said nothing.

Ryan shook his head to clear it and went topside. Along the way he found a crewman's pack of cigarettes on a table and stole one. He proceeded out onto the fantail. Baltimore Harbor was already low on the horizon, and the boat was turning south toward Annapolis, chugging along at thirteen knots—about fifteen miles per hour, but on a boat it seemed fast enough. The smoke he blew out made its own trail as he stared aft. *Was Breckenridge right?* he asked the sky. The answer came in a moment. *He got one part right. I'm not cut out to be a murderer. Maybe he was right on the other part, too. I sure hope so....*

"Tired, Jack?" the Prince asked, standing beside him.

"I ought to be, but I guess I'm still too pumped up."

"Indeed," His Highness observed quietly. "I wanted to ask them why. When I went up to look at them, I wanted—"

"Yeah." Ryan took a last drag and flipped the butt over the side. "You could ask, but I doubt the answer would mean much of anything."

"Then how are we supposed to solve the problem?"

We did solve my *problem,* Jack thought. *They won't be coming after my family anymore. But that's not the answer you want, is it?* "I guess maybe it comes down to justice. If people believe in their society, they don't break its rules. The trick's making them believe. Hell, we can't always accomplish that." Jack turned. "But you try your best, and you don't quit. Every problem has a solution if you work at it long enough. You have a pretty good system over there. You just have to make it work for everybody, and do it well enough that they believe. It's not easy, but I think you can do it. Sooner or later, civilization always wins over barbarism." *I just proved that, I think.* I hope.

The Prince of Wales looked aft for a moment. "Jack, you're a good man."

"So are you, pal. That's why we'll win."

It was a grisly scene, but not one to arouse pity in any of the men who surveyed it. Geoffrey Watkins' body was quite warm, and his blood was still dripping from the ceiling. After the photographer finished up, a detective took the gun from his hands. The television remained on, and "Good Morning, Britain" continued to run its live report from America. All the terrorists were now in custody. *That's what must have done it,* Murray thought.

"Bloody fool," Owens said. "We didn't have a scrap of usable evidence. "

"We do now." A detective held three sheets of paper in his hand. "This is quite a letter, Commander." He slid the sheets into a plastic envelope.

Sergeant Bob Highland was there, too. He was still learning to walk again, with a leg brace and a cane, and looked down at the body of the man whose information had almost made orphans of his children. Highland didn't say a

word.

"Jimmy, you've closed the case," Murray observed.

"Not the way I would have liked," Owens replied. "But now I suppose Mr. Watkins is answering to a higher authority."

The boat arrived in Annapolis forty minutes later. Ryan was surprised when Chief Znamirowski passed the line of moored boats and proceeded straight to Hospital Point. She conned the boat expertly alongside the seawall, where a couple of Marines were waiting. Ryan and everyone but the boat's crew jumped off.

"All secure," Sergeant Cummings reported to Breckenridge. "We got a million cops and feds here, Gunny. Everybody's just fine."

"Very well, you're relieved."

"Doctor Ryan, will you come along with me? You want to hustle, sir," the young Sergeant said. He led off at a slow trot.

It was well that the pace was an easy one. Ryan's legs were rubbery with fatigue as the Sergeant led him up the hill and into the old Academy hospital.

"Hold it!" A federal agent took the pistol from Ryan's belt. "I'll keep this for you, if that's okay."

"Sorry," Jack said with embarrassment.

"It's all right. You can go in." There was no one in sight. Sergeant Cummings motioned for him to follow.

"Where is everybody?"

"Sir, your wife's in the delivery room at the moment." Cummings turned to grin at him.

"Nobody told me!" Ryan said in alarm.

"She said not to worry you, sir." They reached the proper floor. Cummings pointed. "Down there. Don't toss your cookies, Doc. "

Jack ran down the corridor. A corpsman stopped him and waved Ryan into a dressing room, where Ryan tore off his clothes and got into surgical greens. It took a few minutes. Ryan was clumsy from fatigue. He walked to the waiting room and saw that all his friends were there. Then the corpsman walked him into the delivery room.

"I haven't done this in a long time," the doctor was saying.

"It's been a few years for me, too," Cathy reproached him. "You're supposed to inspire confidence in your patient." Then she started blowing again, fighting off the impulse to push. Jack grabbed her hand.

"Hi, babe."

"Your timing is pretty good," the doctor observed.

“Five minutes earlier would have been better. Are you all right?” she asked. As it had been the last time, her face was bathed in sweat, and very tired. And she looked beautiful.

“It’s all over. *All* over,” he repeated. “I’m fine, how about you?”

“Her water broke two hours ago, and she’d be in a hurry if we weren’t all waiting for you to get back from your boat ride. Otherwise everything looks good,” the doctor answered. He seemed far more nervous than the mother. “Are you ready to push?”

“Yes!”

Cathy squeezed his hand. Her eyes closed and she summoned her strength for the effort. Her breath came out slowly.

“There’s the head. Everything’s fine. One more push and we’re home,” the doctor said. His gloved hands were poised to make the catch.

Jack turned as the rest of the newborn appeared. His position allowed him to tell even before the doctor did. The infant had already started screaming, as a healthy baby should. *And that, too,* Jack thought*, is the sound of freedom.*

“Boy,” John Patrick Ryan Sr. told his wife just before he kissed her, “I love you.”

The nearest corpsman assisted the doctor as he clamped off the cord and swaddled the infant in a white blanket to take him away a few feet. The placenta came next with an easy push.

“A little tearing,” the doctor reported. He reached for a painkiller before he started the stitching.

“I can tell,” Cathy replied with a slight grimace. “Is he okay?”

“Looks okay to me,” the corpsman said. “Eight pounds even, and all the pieces are in the right places. Airway’s fine, and the kid’s got a great little heart.”

Jack picked up his son, a small, noisy package of red flesh with an absurd little button of a nose.

“Welcome to the world. I’m your father,” he said quietly. *And your father isn’t a murderer. That might not sound like much, but it’s a lot more than most people think.* He cradled the newborn to his chest for a moment and reminded himself that there really was a God. After a moment he looked down at his wife. “Do you want to see your son?”

“I’m afraid he doesn’t have much of a mother left.”

“She looks pretty good to me.” Jack placed his son in Cathy’s arms. “Are you all right?”

“Except for Sally, I think I have everything here that I need, Jack.”

“Finished,” the doctor said. “I may not be much of an OB, but I do one hell of a good stitch.” He looked up to see the usual aftermath of a birth, and he wondered why he’d decided against obstetrics. It had to be the happiest

discipline of them all. But the hours were lousy, he reminded himself.

The corpsman reclaimed the infant, and took John Patrick Ryan Jr. to the nursery, where he'd be the only baby for a while. It would give the pediatric people something to do.

Jack watched his wife drift off to sleep after—he checked his watch—a twenty-three-hour day. She needed it. So did he, but not quite yet. He kissed his wife one more time before another corpsman wheeled her away to the recovery room. There was one thing left for him to do.

Ryan walked out to the waiting room to announce the birth of his son, a handsome young man who would have two complete, but very different, sets of godparents.

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SSN: Strategies of Submarine Warfare

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Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Operation Barracuda
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Checkmate
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Fallout

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THE CARDINAL OF THE KREMLIN

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For Colonel and Mrs. F. Carter Cobb

. . . Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixèd mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken . . .

Sonnet 116
William Shakespeare

[T]he operations of spies, saboteurs and secret agents are generally regarded as outside the scope of national and international law. They are therefore anathema to all accepted standards of conduct. Nevertheless history shows that no nation will shrink from such activities if they further its vital interests.

—*Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein*

The difference between a good man and a bad one is the choice of cause.

—*William James*

Prologue:

Threats—Old, New, and Timeless

THEY called him the Archer. It was an honorable title, though his countrymen had cast aside their reflex bows over a century before, as soon as they had learned about firearms. In part, the name reflected the timeless nature of the struggle. The first of the Western invaders—for that was how they thought of them—had been Alexander the Great, and more had followed since. Ultimately, all had failed. The Afghan tribesmen held their Islamic faith as the reason for their resistance, but the obstinate courage of these men was as much a part of their racial heritage as their dark pitiless eyes.

The Archer was a young man, and an old one. On those occasions that he had both the desire and opportunity to bathe in a mountain stream, anyone could see the youthful muscles on his thirty-year-old body. They were the smooth muscles of one for whom a thousand-foot climb over bare rock was as unremarkable a part of life as a stroll to the mailbox.

It was his eyes that were old. The Afghans are a handsome people whose forthright features and fair skin suffer quickly from wind and sun and dust, too often making them older than their years. For the Archer, the damage had not been done by wind. A teacher of mathematics until three years before, a college graduate in a country where most deemed it enough to be able to read the holy Koran, he'd married young, as was the custom in his land, and fathered two children. But his wife and daughter were dead, killed by rockets fired from a Sukhoi-24 attack-fighter. His son was gone. Kidnapped. After the Soviets had flattened the village of his wife's family with air power, their ground troops had come, killing the remaining adults and sweeping up all the orphans for shipment to the Soviet Union, where they would be educated and trained in other modern ways. All because his wife had wanted her mother to see the grandchildren before she died, the Archer remembered, all because a Soviet patrol had been fired upon a few kilometers from the village. On the day he'd learned this—a week after it had actually happened—the teacher of algebra and geometry had neatly stacked the books on his desk and walked out of the small town of Ghazni into the hills. A week later he'd returned to the town after dark with three other men and proved that he was worthy of his heritage by killing three Soviet soldiers and taking their arms. He still carried that first Kalashnikov.

But that was not why he was known as the Archer. The chief of his little band of *mudjaheddin*—the name means "Freedom Fighter"—was a perceptive leader who did not look down upon the new arrival who'd spent his youth in classrooms, learning foreign ways. Nor did he hold the young man's initial lack of faith against him. When the teacher joined the group, he'd had only

the most cursory knowledge of Islam, and the headman remembered the bitter tears falling like rain from the young man's eyes as their imam had counseled him in Allah's will. Within a month he'd become the most ruthless—and most effective—man in the band, clearly an expression of God's own plan. And it was he whom the leader had chosen to travel to Pakistan, where he could use his knowledge of science and numbers to learn the use of surface-to-air missiles. The first SAMs with which the quiet, serious man from *Amerikastan* had equipped the *mudjaheddin* had been the Soviets' own SA-7, known by the Russians as *strela,* "arrow." The first "man-portable" SAM, it was not overly effective unless used with great skill. Only a few had such skill. Among them the arithmetic teacher was the best, and for his successes with the Russian "arrows," the men in the group took to calling him the Archer.

He waited with a new missile at the moment, the American one called Stinger, but all of the surface-to-air missiles in this group—indeed, throughout the whole area—were merely called arrows now: tools for the Archer. He lay on the knife-edge of a ridge, a hundred meters below the summit of the hill, from which he could survey the length of a glacial valley. Beside him was his spotter, Abdul. The name appropriately meant "servant," since the teenager carried two additional missiles for his launcher and, more importantly, had the eyes of a falcon. They were burning eyes. He was an orphan.

The Archer's eyes searched the mountainous terrain, especially the ridgelines, with an expression that reflected a millennium of combat. A serious man, the Archer. Though friendly enough, he was rarely seen to smile; he showed no interest in a new bride, not even to join his lonely grief to that of a newly made widow. His life had room for but a single passion.

"There," Abdul said quietly, pointing.

"I see it."

The battle on the valley noor—one of several that day—had been under way for thirty minutes, about the proper time for the Soviet soldiers to get support from their helicopter base twenty kilometers over the next line of mountains. The sun glinted briefly off the Mi-24's glass-covered nose, enough for them to see it, ten miles off, skirting over the ridgeline. Farther overhead, and well beyond his reach, circled a single Antonov-26 twin-engine transport. It was filled with observation equipment and radios to coordinate the ground and air action. But the Archer's eyes followed only the Mi-24, a Hind attack helicopter loaded with rockets and cannon shells that even now was getting information from the circling command aircraft.

The Stinger had come as a rude surprise to the Russians, and their air tactics were changing on a daily basis as they struggled to come to terms with the new threat. The valley was deep, but more narrow than the rule. For the pilot to hit the Archer's fellow guerrillas, he had to come straight down the rocky avenue. He'd stay high, at least a thousand meters over the rocky floor for fear that a Stinger team might be down there with the riflemen. The Archer watched the helicopter zigzag in flight as the pilot surveyed the land and chose his path. As expected, the pilot approached from leeward so that the wind would delay the sound of his rotor for the few extra seconds that might be crucial. The radio in the circling transport would be tuned to the frequencies known to be used by the *mudjaheddin* so that the Russians could

detect a warning of its approach, and also an indication where the missile team might be. Abdul did indeed carry a radio, switched off and tucked in the folds of his clothing.

Slowly, the Archer raised the launcher and trained its two-element sight on the approaching helicopter. His thumb went sideways and down on the activation switch, and he nestled his cheekbone on the conductance bar. He was instantly rewarded with the warbling screech of the launcher's seeker unit. The pilot had made his assessment, and his decision. He came down the far side of the valley, just beyond missile range, for his first firing run. The Hind's nose was down, and the gunner, sitting in his seat in front of and slightly below the pilot, was training his sights on the area where the fighters were. Smoke appeared on the valley floor. The Soviets used mortar shells to indicate where their tormentors were, and the helicopter altered course slightly. It was almost time. Flames shot out of the helicopter's rocket pods, and the first salvo of ordnance streaked downward.

Then another smoke trail came *up*. The helicopter lurched left as the smoke raced into the sky, well clear of the Hind, but still a positive indication of danger ahead; or so the pilot thought. The Archer's hands tightened on the launcher. The helicopter was sideslipping right at him now, expanding around the inner ring of the sight. It was now in range. The Archer punched the forward button with his left thumb, "uncaging" the missile and giving the infrared seeker-head on the Stinger its first look at the heat radiating from the Mi-24's turboshaft engines. The sound carried through his cheekbone into his ear changed. The missile was now tracking the target. The Hind's pilot decided to hit the area from which the "missile" had been launched at him, bringing the aircraft farther left, and turning slightly. Unwittingly, he turned his jet exhaust almost right at the Archer as he warily surveyed the rocks from which the rocket had come.

The missile screamed its readiness at the Archer now, but still he was patient. He put his mind into that of his target, and judged that the pilot would come closer still before his helicopter had the shot he wanted at the hated Afghans. And so he did. When the Hind was only a thousand meters off, the Archer took a deep breath, superelevated his sight, and whispered a brief prayer of vengeance. The trigger was pulled almost of its own accord.

The launcher bucked in his hands as the Stinger looped slightly upward before dropping down to home on its target. The Archer's eyes were sharp enough to see it despite the almost invisible smoke trail it left behind. The missile deployed its maneuvering fins, and these moved a few fractions of a millimeter in obedience to the orders generated by its computer brain—a microchip the size of a postage stamp. Aloft in the circling An-26, an observer saw a tiny puff of dust and began to reach for a microphone to relay a warning, but his hand had barely touched the plastic instrument before the missile struck.

The missile ran directly into one of the helicopter's engines and exploded. The helicopter was crippled instantly. The driveshaft for the tail rotor was cut, and the Hind began spinning violently to the left while the pilot tried to autorotate the aircraft down, frantically looking for a flat place while his gunner radioed a shrill call for rescue. The pilot brought the engine to idle,

unloading his collective to control torque, locked his eyes on a flat space the size of a tennis court, then cut his switches and activated the onboard extinguishing system. Like most fliers he feared fire above all things, though he would learn the error soon enough.

The Archer watched the Mi-24 hit nose-down on a rocky ledge five hundred feet below his perch. Surprisingly, it didn't burn as the aircraft came apart. The helicopter cartwheeled viciously, the tail whipping forward and over the nose before it came to rest on its side. The Archer raced down the hill with Abdul right behind. It took five minutes.

The pilot fought with his straps as he hung upside down. He was in pain, but he knew that only the living felt pain. The new model helicopter had had improved safety systems built in. Between those and his own skill he'd survived the crash. Not his gunner, he noticed briefly. The man in front hung motionless, his neck broken, his hands limply reaching for the ground. The pilot had no time for that. His seat was bent, and the chopper's canopy had shattered, its metal frame now a prison for the flyer. The emergency release latch was jammed, the explosive release bolts unwilling to fire. He took his pistol from the shoulder holster and started blasting at the metal framework, one piece at a time. He wondered if the An-26 had gotten the emergency call. Wondered if the rescue helicopter at his base was on the way. His rescue radio was in a pants pocket, and he'd activate it as soon as he got away from his broken bird. The pilot cut his hands to ribbons as he prised the metal away, giving himself a clear path out. He thanked his luck again that he was not ending his life in a pillar of greasy smoke as he released his straps and climbed out of the aircraft to the rocky ground.

His left leg was broken. The jagged end of a white bone stuck clear of his flight suit; though he was too deeply in shock to feel it, the sight of the injury horrified him. He holstered his empty pistol and grabbed a loose piece of metal to serve as a cane. He had to get away. He hobbled to the far end of the ledge and saw a path. It was three kilometers to friendly forces. He was about to start down when he heard something and turned. Hope changed to horror in an instant, and the pilot realized that a fiery death would have been a blessing.

The Archer blessed Allah's name as he withdrew his knife from its sheath.

There couldn't be much left of her, Ryan thought. The hull was mainly intact—at least superficially—but you could see the rough surgery made by the welders as clearly as the stitches made on Frankenstein's monster. An apt-enough comparison, he thought silently. Man had made these things, but they could one day destroy their makers in the space of an hour.

"God, it's amazing how big they look on the outside . . ."

"And so small on the inside?" Marko asked. There was a wistful sadness in his voice. Not so long before, Captain Marko Ramius of the Voyenno Morskoi Flot had conned his ship into this very drydock. He hadn't been there to watch U.S. Navy technicians dissect her like pathologists over a cadaver, removing the missiles, the reactor plant, the sonars, the onboard computers and communications gear, the periscopes, and even the galley stoves for analysis at bases spread all over the United States. His absence had been at his own

request. Ramius' hatred for the Soviet system did not extend to the ships that system built. He'd sailed this one well—and *Red October* had saved his life.

And Ryan's. Jack fingered the hairline scar on his forehead and wondered if they'd ever cleaned his blood off the helmsman's console. "I'm surprised you didn't want to take her out," he observed to Ramius.

"No." Marko shook his head. "I only want to say goodbye. He was good ship."

"Good enough," Jack agreed quietly. He looked at the half-repaired hole that the Alfa's torpedo had made in the port side and shook his head in silence. *Good enough to save my ass when that torpedo hit.* The two men watched in silence, separated from the sailors and Marines who'd secured the area since the previous December.

The drydock was flooding now, the filthy water from the Elizabeth River rushing into the concrete box. They'd take her out tonight. Six American fast-attack submarines were even now "sanitizing" the ocean east of the Norfolk Navy Base, ostensibly part of an exercise that would also involve a few surface ships. It was nine o'clock on a moonless night. It would take an hour to flood the drydock. A crew of thirty was already aboard. They'd fire up the ship's diesel engines and sail her out for her second and final voyage, to the deep ocean trench north of Puerto Rico, where she would be scuttled in twenty-five thousand feet of water.

Ryan and Ramius watched as the water covered the wooden blocks that supported the hull, wetting the submarine's keel for the first time in nearly a year. The water came in more quickly now, creeping up the plimsoll marks painted fore and aft. On the submarine's deck, a handful of seamen wearing bright orange lifejackets for safety paced around, making ready to slip the fourteen stout mooring lines that held her steady.

The ship herself remained quiet. *Red October* gave no sign of welcome for the water. Perhaps she knew the fate that awaited her, Ryan said to himself. It was a foolish thought—but he also knew that for millennia sailors had imputed personalities to the ships they served.

Finally she started to move. The water buoyed the hull off the wooden blocks. There was a muted series of thuds, more felt than heard as she rose off them ever so slowly, rocking back and forth a few inches at a time.

A few minutes later the ship's diesel engine rumbled to life, and the line handlers on the ship and the drydock began to take in the lines. At the same time, the canvas that covered the seaward end of the drydock was taken down, and all could see the fog that hung on the water outside. Conditions were perfect for the operation. Conditions had to be perfect; the Navy had waited six weeks for them, a moonless night and the thick seasonal fog that plagued the Chesapeake Bay region this time of year. When the last line was slipped, an officer atop the submarine's sail raised a hand-held air horn and blew a single blast.

"Under way!" his voice called, and the sailors at the bow struck the jack and put down the staff. For the first time, Ryan noticed that it was the Soviet jack. He smiled. It was a nice touch. On the sail's aft end, another seaman ran up the Soviet naval ensign, its bright red star emblazoned with the shield of the Red Banner Northern Fleet. The Navy, ever mindful of traditions, was saluting

the man who stood at his side.

Ryan and Ramius watched the submarine start to move under her own power, her twin bronze propellers turning gently in reverse as she backed out into the river. One of the tugs helped her turn to face north. Within another minute she was gone from sight. Only the lingering rumble of her diesel came across the oily water of the navy yard.

Marko blew his nose once and blinked a half-dozen times. When he turned away from the water, his voice was firm.

"So, Ryan, they fly you home from England for this?"

"No, I came back a few weeks ago. New job."

"Can you say what job is?" Marko asked.

"Arms control. They want me to coordinate the intelligence side for the negotiations team. We have to fly over in January."

"Moscow?"

"Yes, it's a preliminary session—setting the agenda and doing some technical stuff, that sort of thing. How about you?"

"I work at AUTEC in Bahamas. Much sun and sand. You see my tan?" Ramius grinned. "I come to Washington every two-three months. I fly back in five hours. We work on new quieting project." Another smile. "Is classified."

"Great! I want you to come over to my house then. I still owe you a dinner." Jack handed over a card. "Here's my number. Call me a few days before you fly in, and I'll set things up with the Agency." Ramius and his officers were under a very strict protection regime from CIA security officers. The really amazing thing, Jack thought, was that the story hadn't leaked. None of the news media had gotten word, and if security really was that tight, probably the Russians also didn't know the fate of their missile submarine *Krazny Oktyabr.* She'd be turning east about now, Jack thought, to pass over the Hampton Roads tunnel. Roughly an hour after that she'd dive and head southeast. He shook his head.

Ryan's sadness at the submarine's fate was tempered by the thought of what she'd been built for. He remembered his own reaction, in the sub's missile room a year before, the first time he'd been so close to the ghastly things. Jack accepted the fact that nuclear weapons kept the peace—if you could really call the world's condition *peace*—but like most of the people who thought about the subject, he wished for a better way. Well, this was one less submarine, twenty-six less missiles, and one hundred eighty-two less warheads. Statistically, Ryan told himself, it didn't count for much.

But it was something.

Ten thousand miles away and eight thousand feet above sea level the problem was unseasonable weather. The place was in the Tadzhik Soviet Socialist Republic, and the wind came from the south, still bearing moisture from the Indian Ocean that fell as miserably cold drizzle. Soon it would be the real winter that always came early here, usually on the heels of the blazing, airless summer, and all that fell would be cold and white.

The workers were mostly young, eager members of the Komsomol. They had been brought in to help finish a construction project that had been begun in 1983. One of them, a masters candidate at Moscow State University's school of

physics, rubbed the rain from his eyes and straightened to ease a crick in his back. This was no way to utilize a promising young engineer, Morozov thought. Instead of playing with this surveyor's instrument, he could be building lasers in his laboratory, but he wanted full membership in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and wanted even more to avoid military service. The combination of his school deferment and his Komsomol work had helped mightily to this end.

"Well?" Morozov turned to see one of the site engineers. A civil engineer, he was, who described himself as a man who knew concrete.

"I read the position as correct, Comrade Engineer."

The older man stooped down to look through the sighting scope. "I agree," the man said. "And that's the last one, the gods be praised." Both men jumped with the sound of a distant explosion. Engineers from the Red Army obliterating yet another rocky outcropping outside of the fenced perimeter. You didn't need to be a soldier to understand what that was all about, Morozov thought to himself.

"You have a fine touch with optical instruments. Perhaps you will become a civil engineer, too, eh? Build useful things for the State?"

"No, Comrade. I study high-energy physics—mainly lasers." *These, too, are useful things.*

The man grunted and shook his head. "Then you might come back here, God help you."

"Is this—"

"You didn't hear anything from me," the engineer said, just a touch of firmness in his voice.

"I understand," Morozov replied quietly. "I suspected as much."

"I would be careful voicing that suspicion," the other said conversationally as he turned to look at something.

"This must be a fine place to watch the stars," Morozov observed, hoping for the right response.

"I wouldn't know," the civil engineer replied with an insider's smile. "I've never met an astronomer."

Morozov smiled to himself. He'd guessed right after all. They had just plotted the position of the six points on which mirrors would be set. These were equidistant from a central point located in a building guarded by men with rifles. Such precision, he knew, had only two applications. One was astronomy, which collected light coming down. The other application involved light going up. The young engineer told himself that here was where he wanted to come. This place would change the world.

1.

The Reception of the Party

BUSINESS was being conducted. All kinds of business. Everyone there knew it. Everyone there was part of it. Everyone there needed it. And yet everyone there was in one way or another dedicated to stopping it. For every person there in the St. George Hall of the Great Kremlin Palace, the dualism was a normal part of life.

The participants were mainly Russian and American, and were divided into four groups.

First, the diplomats and politicians. One could discern these easily enough from their better-than-average clothing and erect posture, the ready, robotic smiles, and careful diction that endured even after the many alcoholic toasts. They were the masters, knew it, and their demeanor proclaimed it.

Second, the soldiers. One could not have arms negotiations without the men who controlled the arms, maintained them, tested them, pampered them, all the while telling themselves that the politicians who controlled the *men* would never give the order to launch. The soldiers in their uniforms stood mainly in little knots of homogeneous nationality and service branch, each clutching a half-full glass and napkin while blank, emotionless eyes swept the room as though searching for a threat on an unfamiliar battlefield. For that was precisely what it was to them, a bloodless battlefield that would define the real ones if their political masters ever lost control, lost temper, lost perspective, lost whatever it is in man that tries to avoid the profligate waste of young life. To a man the soldiers trusted none but one another, and in some cases trusted their enemies in different-colored uniforms more than their own soft-clothed masters. At least you knew where another soldier stood. You couldn't always say the same of politicians, even your own. They talked with one another quietly, always watching to see who listened, stopping occasionally for a quick gulp from the glass, accompanied by another look about the room. They were the victims, but also the predators—the dogs, perhaps, kept on leashes by those who deemed themselves the masters of events.

The soldiers had trouble believing that, too.

Third, the reporters. These could also be picked out by their clothing, which was always wrinkled by too many packings and unpackings in airline suitcases too small for all they carried. They lacked the polish of the politicians, and the fixed smiles, substituting for it the inquisitive looks of children, mixed with the cynicism of the dissolute. Mainly they held their glasses in their left hands, sometimes with a small pad instead of the paper napkin, while a pen was half-hidden in the right. They circulated like birds of prey. One would find

someone who would talk. Others would notice and come over to drink in the information. The casual observer could tell how interesting the information was by how quickly the reporters moved off to another source. In this sense the American and other Western reporters were different from their Soviet counterparts, who for the most part hung close to their masters like favored earls of another time, both to show their loyalty to the Party and to act as buffers against their colleagues from elsewhere. But together, they were the audience in this performance of theater in the round.

Fourth came the final group, the invisible one, those whom no one could identify in any easy way. These were the spies, and the counterespionage agents who hunted them. They could be distinguished from the security officers, who watched everyone with suspicion, but from the room's perimeter, as invisible as the waiters who circulated about with heavy silver trays of champagne and vodka in crystal glasses that had been commissioned by the House of Romanov. Some of the waiters were counterespionage agents, of course. Those had to circulate through the room, their ears perked for a snippet of conversation, perhaps a voice too low or a word that didn't fit the mood of the evening. It was no easy task. A quartet of strings in a corner played chamber music to which no one appeared to listen, but this too is a feature of diplomatic receptions and doing without it would be noticed. Then there was the volume of human noise. There were well over a hundred people here, and every one of them was talking at least half the time. Those close to the quartet had to speak loudly to be heard over the music. All the resulting noise was contained in a ballroom two hundred feet long and sixty-five wide, with a parquet floor and hard stucco walls that reflected and reverberated the sound until it reached an ambient level that would have hurt the ears of a small child. The spies used their invisibility and the noise to make themselves the ghosts of the feast.

But the spies were here. Everyone knew it. Anyone in Moscow could tell you about spies. If you met with a Westerner on anything approaching a regular basis, it was the prudent thing to report it. If you did so only once, and a passing police officer of the Moscow Militia—or an Army officer strolling around with his briefcase—passed by, a head would turn, and note would be taken. Perhaps cursory, perhaps not. Times had changed since Stalin, of course, but Russia was still Russia, and distrust of foreigners and their ideas was far older than any ideology.

Most of the people in the room thought about it without really thinking about it—except those who actually played this particular game. The diplomats and politicians had practice guarding their words, and were not overly concerned at the moment. To the reporters it was merely amusing, a fabulous game that didn't really concern them—though each Western reporter knew that he or she was *ipso facto* thought an agent of espionage by the Soviet government. The soldiers thought about it most of all. They knew the importance of intelligence, craved it, valued it—and despised those who gathered it for the slinking things they were.

Which ones are the spies?

Of course there was a handful of people who fitted into no easily identified category—or fitted into more than one.

"And how did you find Moscow, Dr. Ryan?" a Russian asked. Jack turned from his inspection of the beautiful St. George clock.

"Cold and dark, I'm afraid," Ryan answered after a sip of his champagne. "It's not as though we have had much chance to see anything." Nor would they. The American team had been in the Soviet Union only for a little over four days, and would fly home the next day after concluding the technical session that preceded the plenary one.

"That is too bad," Sergey Golovko observed.

"Yes," Jack agreed. "If all of your architecture is this good, I'd love to take a few days to admire it. Whoever built this house had style." He nodded approvingly at the gleaming white walls, the domed ceiling, and the gold leaf. In fact he thought it overdone, but he knew that the Russians had a national tendency to overdo a lot of things. To Russians, who rarely had enough of anything, "having enough" meant having more than anyone else—preferably more than *everyone* else. Ryan thought it evidence of a national inferiority complex, and reminded himself that people who feel themselves inferior have a pathological desire to disprove their own perceptions. That one factor dominated all aspects of the arms-control process, displacing mere logic as the basis for reaching an agreement.

"The decadent Romanovs," Golovko noted. "All this came from the sweat of the peasants." Ryan turned and laughed.

"Well, at least some of their tax money went for something beautiful, harmless—and immortal. If you ask me, it beats buying ugly weapons that are obsolete ten years later. There's an idea, Sergey Nikolay'ch. We will redirect our politicalmilitary competition to beauty instead of nuclear weapons."

"You are satisfied with the progress, then?"

Business. Ryan shrugged and continued to inspect the room. "I suppose we've settled on the agenda. Next, those characters over by the fireplace have to work out the details." He stared at one of the enormous crystal chandeliers. He wondered how many man-years of effort had gone into making it, and how much fun it must have been to hang something that weighed as much as a small car.

"And you are satisfied on the issue of verifiability?"

That confirms it, Ryan thought with a thin smile. *Golovko* is *GRU*. "National Technical Means," a term that denoted spy satellites and other methods of keeping an eye on foreign countries, were mainly the province of CIA in America, but in the Soviet Union they belonged to the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence agency. Despite the tentative agreement in principle for on-site inspection, the main effort of verifying compliance on an agreement would lie with the spy satellites. That would be Golovko's turf.

It was no particular secret that Jack worked for CIA. It didn't have to be; he wasn't a field officer. His attachment to the arms-negotiation team was a logical matter. His current assignment had to do with monitoring certain strategic weapons systems within the Soviet Union. For any arms treaty to be signed, both sides first had to satisfy their own institutional paranoia that no serious tricks could be played on them by the other. Jack advised the chief negotiator along these lines; when, Jack reminded himself, the negotiator troubled himself to listen.

"Verifiability," he replied after another moment, "is a very technical and difficult question. I'm afraid I'm not really that conversant on it. What do your people think about our proposal to limit land-based systems?"

"We depend on our land-based missiles more than you," Golovko said. His voice became more guarded as they discussed the meat of the Soviet position.

"I don't understand why you don't place as much emphasis on submarines as we do."

"Reliability, as you well know."

"Aw, hell. Submarines are reliable," Jack baited him as he reexamined the clock. It was magnificent. Some peasantlooking fellow was handing a sword to another chap, and waving him off to battle. *Not exactly a new idea,* Jack thought. *Some old fart tells a young kid to go off and get killed.*

"We have had some incidents, I regret to say."

"Yeah, that Yankee that went down off Bermuda."

"And the other."

"Hmph?" Ryan turned back. It took a serious effort not to smile.

"Please, Dr. Ryan, do not insult my intelligence. You know the story of *Krazny Oktyabr* as well as I."

"What was that name? Oh, yeah, the Typhoon you guys lost off the Carolinas. I was in London then. I never did get briefed on it."

"I think the two incidents illustrate the problem we Soviets face. We cannot trust our missile submarines as completely as you trust yours."

"Hmm." *Not to mention the drivers,* Ryan thought, careful not to let his face show a thing.

Golovko persisted. "But may I ask a substantive question?" "Sure, so long as you don't expect a substantive answer." Ryan chuckled.

"Will your intelligence community object to the draft treaty proposal?"

"Now, how am I supposed to know the answer to that?" Jack paused. "What about yours?"

"Our organs of State security do what they are told," Golovko assured him.

Right, Ryan told himself. "In our country, if the President decides that he likes an arms treaty, and he thinks he can get it through the Senate, it doesn't matter what the CIA and Pentagon think—"

"But your military-industrial complex—" Golovko cut Jack off.

"God, you guys really love to beat on that horse, don't you? Sergey Nikolayevich, you should know better."

But Golovko was a *military* intelligence officer, and might not, Ryan remembered too late. The degree to which America and the Soviet Union misunderstood each other was at one and the same time amusing and supremely dangerous. Jack wondered if the intelligence community over here tried to get the truth out, as CIA usually did now, or merely told its masters what they wanted to hear, as CIA had done all too often in the past. Probably the latter, he thought. The Russian intel agencies were undoubtedly politicized, just as CIA used to be. One good thing about Judge Moore was that he'd worked damned hard to put an end to that. But the Judge had no particular wish to be President; that made him different from his Soviet counterparts. One director of the KGB had made it to the top over here, and at least one other tried to. That made KGB a political creature, and that affected

its objectivity. Jack sighed into his drink. The problems between the two countries wouldn't end if all the false perceptions were laid to rest, but at least things could be more manageable.

Maybe. Ryan admitted to himself that this might be as false a panacea as all the others; it had never been tried, after all.

"May I make a suggestion to you?"

"Certainly," Golovko answered.

"Let's drop the shop talk, and you tell me about this room while I enjoy the champagne." *It'll save us both a lot of time when we write up our contact reports tomorrow.*

"Perhaps I could get you some vodka?"

"No, thanks, this bubbly stuff is great. Local?"

"Yes, from Georgia," Golovko said proudly. "I think it is better than the French."

"I wouldn't mind taking a few bottles home," Ryan allowed.

Golovko laughed, a short bark of amusement and power. "I will see to it. So. The palace was finished in 1849, at the cost of eleven million rubles, quite a sum at the time. It's the last grand palace ever built, and, I think, the best . . ."

Ryan wasn't the only one touring the room, of course. Most of the American delegation had never seen it. Russians bored with the reception led them around, explaining as they went. Several people from the embassy tagged along, keeping a casual eye on things.

"So, Misha, what do you think of American women?" Defense Minister Yazov asked his aide.

"Those coming this way are not unattractive, Comrade Minister," the Colonel observed.

"But so skinny—ah, yes, I keep forgetting, your beautiful Elena was also thin. A fine woman she was, Misha."

"Thank you for remembering, Dmitri Timofeyevich."

"Hello, Colonel!" one of the American ladies said in Russian.

"Ah, yes, Mrs. . . ."

"Foley. We met at the hockey game last November."

"You know this lady?" the Minister asked his aide.

"My nephew—no, my grand-nephew Mikhail, Elena's sister's grandson—plays junior-league hockey, and I was invited to a game. It turned out that they allowed an imperialist on the team," he replied with a raised eyebrow.

"Your son plays well?" Marshal Yazov asked.

"He is the third-leading scorer in the league," Mrs. Foley replied.

"Splendid! Then you must stay in our country, and your son can play for Central Army when he grows up." Yazov grinned. He was a grandfather four times over. "What do you do here?"

"My husband works for the embassy. He's over there, shepherding the reporters around—but the important thing is, I got to come here tonight. I've never seen anything like this in my whole life!" she gushed. Her glistening eyes spoke of several glasses of something. Probably champagne, the Minister thought. She looked like the champagne type, but she was attractive enough, and she had bothered to learn the language reasonably well, unusual for Americans. "These floors are so pretty, it seems a crime to walk on them. We

don't have anything like this at home."

"You never had the czars, which was your good fortune," Yazov replied like a good Marxist. "But as a Russian I must admit that I am proud of their artistic sense."

"I haven't seen you at any other games, Colonel," she said, turning back to Misha.

"I don't have the time."

"But you're good luck! The team won that night, and Eddie got a goal and an assist."

The Colonel smiled. "All our little Misha got was two penalties for high-sticking."

"Named for you?" the Minister asked.

"Yes."

"You didn't have those on when I saw you." Mrs. Foley pointed to the three gold stars on his chest.

"Perhaps I didn't take off my topcoat—"

"He always wears them," the Marshal assured her. "One *always* wears his Hero of the Soviet Union medals."

"Is that the same as our Medal of Honor?"

"The two are roughly equivalent," Yazov said for his aide. Misha was unaccountably shy about them. "Colonel Filitov is the only man living who has ever won three in battle."

"Really? How does someone win *three*?"

"Fighting Germans," the Colonel said tersely.

"Killing Germans," Yazov said even more bluntly. When Filitov had been one of the Red Army's brightest stars, he'd been a mere lieutenant. "Misha is one of the best tank officers who ever lived."

Colonel Filitov actually blushed at that. "I did my duty, as did many soldiers in that war."

"My father was decorated in the war, too. He led two missions to rescue people from prison camps in the Philippines. He didn't talk about it very much, but they gave him a bunch of medals. Do you tell your children about those bright stars of yours?"

Filitov went rigid for a moment. Yazov answered for him.

"Colonel Filitov's sons died some years ago."

"Oh! Oh, Colonel, I am so sorry," Mrs. Foley said, and she really was.

"It was long ago." He smiled. "I remember your son well from the game, a fine young man. Love your children, dear lady, for you will not always have them. If you will excuse me for a moment." Misha moved off in the direction of the rest rooms. Mrs. Foley looked to the Minister, anguish on her pretty face.

"Sir, I didn't mean—"

"You could not have known. Misha lost his sons a few years apart, then his wife. I met her when I was a very young man—lovely girl, a dancer with the Kirov Ballet. So sad, but we Russians are accustomed to great sadnesses. Enough of that. What team does your son play for?" Marshal Yazov's interest in hockey was amplified by the pretty young face.

Misha found the rest room after a minute. Americans and Russians were

sent to different ones, of course, and Colonel Filitov was alone in what had been the private water closet of a prince, or perhaps a czar's mistress. He washed his hands and looked in the gilt-edged mirror. He had but one thought: *Again. Another mission.* Colonel Filitov sighed and tidied himself up. A minute later he was back out in the arena.

"Excuse me," Ryan said. Turning around, he'd bumped into an elderly gentleman in uniform. Golovko said something in Russian that Ryan didn't catch. The officer said something to Jack that sounded polite, and walked over, Ryan saw, to the Defense Minister.

"Who's that?" Jack asked his Russian companion.

"The Colonel is personal aide to the Minister," Golovko replied.

"Little old for a colonel, isn't he?"

"He is a war hero. We do not force all such men to retire."

"I guess that's fair enough," Jack commented, and turned back to hear about this part of the room. After they had exhausted the St. George Hall, Golovko led Jack into the adjacent St. Vladimir Hall. He expressed the hope that he and Ryan would next meet here. St. Vladimir Hall, he explained, was set aside for the signing of treaties. The two intelligence officers toasted one another on that.

The party broke up after midnight. Ryan got into the seventh limousine. Nobody talked on the ride back to the embassy. Everyone was feeling the alcohol, and you didn't talk in cars, not in Moscow. Cars were too easy to bug. Two men fell asleep, and Ryan came close enough himself. What kept him awake was the knowledge that they'd fly out in another five hours, and if he was going to have to do that, he might as well keep tired enough to sleep on the plane, a skill he had only recently acquired. He changed his clothes and went down to the embassy's canteen for coffee. It would be enough to keep himself going for a few hours while he made his own notes.

Things had gone amazingly well these past four days. Almost too well. Jack told himself that averages are made up of times when things went well and times they went poorly. A draft treaty was on the table. Like all draft treaties of late, it was intended by the Soviets to be more a negotiating tool than a negotiating document. Its details were already in the press, and already certain members of Congress were saying on the floor how fair a deal it was—and why don't we just agree to it?

Why not, indeed? Jack wondered with an ironic smile. Verifiability. That was one reason. The other . . . was there another? Good question. Why had they changed their stance so much? There was evidence that General Secretary Narmonov wanted to reduce his military expenditures, but despite all the public perceptions to the contrary, nuclear arms were not the place you did that. Nukes were cheap for what they did; they were a very cost-effective way of killing people. While a nuclear warhead and its missile were expensive gadgets, they were far cheaper than the equivalent destructive power in tanks and artillery. Did Narmonov genuinely want to reduce the threat of nuclear war? But that threat didn't come from the weapons; as always it came from the politicians and their mistakes. Was it all a symbol? Symbols, Jack reminded himself, were far easier for Narmonov to produce than substance. If

a symbol, at whom was it aimed?

Narmonov had charm, and power—the sort of visceral presence that came with his post, but even more from his personality. What sort of man was this? What was he after? Ryan snorted. That wasn't his department. Another CIA team was examining Narmonov's political vulnerability right here in Moscow. His far easier job was to figure out the technical side. Far easier, perhaps, but he didn't yet know the answer to his own questions.

Golovko was already back at his office, making his own notes in a painful longhand. Ryan, he wrote, would uneasily support the draft proposal. Since Ryan had the ear of the Director, that probably meant that CIA would, too. The intelligence officer set down his pen and rubbed his eyes for a moment. Waking up with a hangover was bad enough, but having to stay awake long enough to welcome it with the sunrise was above and beyond the duty of a Soviet officer. He wondered why his government had made the offer in the first place, and why the Americans seemed so eager. Even Ryan, who should have known better. What did the Americans have in mind? Who was outmaneuvering whom?

Now there was a question.

He turned back to Ryan, his assignment of the previous evening. Well along for a man of his years, the equivalent of a colonel in the KGB or GRU and only thirty-five. What had he done to rise so quickly? Golovko shrugged. Probably connected, a fact of life as important in Washington as in Moscow. He had courage—the business with the terrorists almost five years before. He was also a family man, something Russians respected more than their American counterparts would have believed—it implied stability, and that in turn implied predictability. Most of all, Golovko thought, Ryan was a thinker. Why, then, was he not opposed to a pact that would benefit the Soviet Union more than it benefited America? *Is our evaluation incorrect?* he wrote. Do the Americans know something we do not? That was a question, or better still: Did Ryan know something that Golovko did not? The Colonel frowned, then reminded himself what *he* knew that Ryan did not. That drew a half-smile. It was all part of the grand game. The grandest game there was.

"You must have walked all night."

The Archer nodded gravely and set down the sack that had bowed his shoulders for five days. It was almost as heavy as the one Abdul had packed. The younger man was near collapse, the CIA officer saw. Both men found pillows to sit on.

"Have something to drink." The officer's name was Emilio Ortiz. His ancestry was sufficiently muddled that he could have passed for a native of any Caucasian nation. Also thirty years of age, he was of medium height and build, with a swimmer's muscles, which was how he'd won a scholarship to USC, where he'd won a degree in languages. Ortiz had a rare gift in this area. With two weeks' exposure to a language, a dialect, an accent, he could pass for a native anywhere in the world. He was also a man of compassion, respectful of the ways of the people with whom he worked. This meant that the drink he offered was not—could not be—alcoholic. It was apple juice.

Ortiz watched him drink it with all the delicacy of a wine connoisseur sampling new bordeaux.

"Allah's blessings upon this house," the Archer said when he finished the first glass. That he had waited until drinking the apple juice was as close as the man ever came to making a joke. Ortiz saw the fatigue written on the man's face, though he displayed it no other way. Unlike his young porter, the Archer seemed invulnerable to such normal human concerns. It wasn't true, but Ortiz understood how the force that drove him could suppress his humanity.

The two men were dressed almost identically. Ortiz considered the Archer's clothing and wondered at the ironic similarity with the Apache Indians of America and Mexico. One of his ancestors had been an officer under Terrazas when the Mexican Army had finally crushed Victorio in the Tres Castillos Mountains. The Afghans, too, wore rough trousers under their loincloths. They, too, tended to be small, agile fighters. And they, too, treated captives as noisy amusements for their knives. He looked at the Archer's knife and wondered how it was used. Ortiz decided he didn't want to know.

"Do you wish something to eat?" he asked.

"It can wait," the Archer replied, reaching for his pack. He and Abdul had brought out two loaded camels, but for the important material, only his backpack would do. "I fired eight rockets. I hit six aircraft, but one had two engines and managed to escape. Of the five I destroyed, two were helicopters, and three were bombing-fighters. The first helicopter we killed was the new kind of twenty-four you told us about. You were correct. It did have some new equipment. Here is some of it."

It was ironic, Ortiz thought, that the most sensitive equipment in military aircraft would survive treatment guaranteed to kill its crew. As he watched, the Archer revealed six green circuit boards for the laser-designator that was now standard equipment on the Mi-24. The U.S. Army Captain who'd stayed in the shadows and kept his mouth shut to this point now came forward to examine them. His hands fairly trembled as he reached for the items.

"You have the laser, too?" the Captain asked in accented Pashtu.

"It was badly damaged, but, yes." The Archer turned. Abdul was snoring. He nearly smiled until he remembered that he had a son also.

For his part, Ortiz was saddened. To have a partisan with the Archer's education under his control was rare enough. He'd probably been a skilled teacher but he could never teach again. He could never go back to what he'd been. War had changed the Archer's life as fully and certainly as death. Such a goddamned waste.

"The new rockets?" the Archer asked.

"I can give you ten. A slightly improved model, with an additional five-hundred-meter range. And some more smoke rockets, too."

The Archer nodded gravely, and the corners of his mouth moved in what, in different times, might have been the beginnings of a smile.

"Perhaps now I can go after their transports. The smoke rockets work very well, my friend. Every time, they push the invaders close to me. They have not yet learned about that tactic."

Not a *trick,* Ortiz noted. He called it a *tactic. He wants to go after transports*

now, he wants to kill a hundred Russians at a time. Jesus, what have we made of this man? The CIA officer shook his head. That wasn't his concern.

"You are weary, my friend. Rest. We can eat later. Please honor my house by sleeping here."

"It is true," the Archer acknowledged. He was asleep within two minutes.

Ortiz and the Captain sorted through the equipment brought to them. Included was the maintenance manual for the Mi-24's laser equipment, and radio code sheets, in addition to other things they'd seen before. By noon he had it all fully catalogued and began making arrangements to ship it all to the embassy; from there it would be flown immediately to California for a complete evaluation.

The Air Force VC-137 lifted off right on time. It was a customized version of the venerable Boeing 707. The "V" prefix on its designation denoted that it was designed to carry VIP passengers, and the aircraft's interior reflected this. Jack lay back on the couch and abandoned himself to the fatigue that enveloped him. Ten minutes later a hand shook his shoulder.

"The boss wants you," another member of the team said.

"Doesn't he ever sleep?" Jack growled.

"Tell me about it."

Ernest Allen was in the VIP-est accommodations on the aircraft, a cabin set exactly atop the wing spar with six plush swivel chairs. A coffeepot sat on the table. If he didn't have some coffee he'd soon be incoherent. If he did, he'd be unable to go back to sleep. Well, the government wasn't paying him to sleep. Ryan poured himself some coffee.

"Yes, sir?"

"Can we verify it?" Allen skipped the preliminaries.

"I don't know yet," Jack replied. "It's not just a question of National Technical Means. Verifying the elimination of so many launchers—"

"They're giving us limited on-site inspection," noted a junior member of the team.

"I'm aware of that," Jack replied. "The question is, does that really mean anything?" *The other question is, why did they suddenly agree to something we've wanted for over thirty years . . . ?*

"What?" the junior member asked.

"The Soviets have put a lot of work into their new mobile launchers. What if they have more of them than we know about? Do you think we can find a few hundred mobile missiles?"

"But we have surface-scanning radar on the new birds, and—"

"And they know it, and they can avoid it if they want to—wait a minute. We know that our carriers can and do evade Russian radar-ocean-recon satellites. If you can do it with a ship, you can damned sure do it with a train," Jack pointed out. Allen looked on without comment, allowing his underling to pursue the line in his stead. A clever old fox, Ernie Allen.

"So, CIA is going to recommend against—damn it, this is the biggest concession they've ever made!"

"Fine. It's a big concession. Everyone here knows that. Before we accept it, maybe we ought to make sure that they haven't conceded something that

they've made irrelevant to the process. There are other things, too."

"So you're going to oppose—"

"I'm not opposing anything. I'm saying we take our time and use our heads instead of being carried away by euphoria."

"But their draft treaty is—it's almost too good to be true." The man had just proved Ryan's point, though he didn't see it quite that way.

"Dr. Ryan," Allen said, "if the technical details can be worked out to your satisfaction, how do you view the treaty?"

"Sir, speaking from a technical point of view, a fifty-percent reduction in deliverable warheads has no effect at all on the strategic balance. It's—"

"That's crazy!" objected the junior member.

Jack extended his hand toward the man, pointing his index finger like the barrel of a gun. "Let's say I have a pistol pointed at your chest right now. Call it a nine-millimeter Browning. That has a thirteen-round clip. I agree to remove seven rounds from the clip, but I still have a loaded gun, with six rounds, pointed at your chest—do you feel any safer now?" Ryan smiled, keeping his "gun" out.

"Personally, I wouldn't. That's what we're talking about here. If both sides reduce their inventories by half, that still leaves five *thousand* warheads that can hit our country. Think about how big that number is. All this agreement does is to reduce the overkill. The difference between five thousand and ten thousand only affects how far the rubble flies. If we start talking about reducing the number to one thousand warheads on either side, then *maybe* I'll start thinking we're on to something."

"Do you think the thousand-warhead limit is achievable?" Allen asked.

"No, sir. Sometimes I just wish it were, though I've been told that a thousand-warhead limit could have the effect of making nuclear war 'winnable,' whatever the hell that means." Jack shrugged and concluded: "Sir, if this current agreement goes through, it'll look better than it is. Maybe the symbolic value of the agreement has value in and of itself; that's a factor to be considered, but it's not one within my purview. The monetary savings to both sides will be real, but fairly minor in terms of gross military expenditures. Both sides retain half of their current arsenals—and that means keeping the newest and most effective half, of course. The bottom line remains constant: in a nuclear war, both sides would be equally dead. I do not see that this draft treaty reduces the 'threat of war,' whatever that is. To do that, we either have to eliminate the damned things entirely or figure something to keep them from working. If you ask me, we have to do the latter before we can attempt the former. Then the world becomes a safer place—maybe."

"That's the start of a whole new arms race."

"Sir, that race started so long ago that it isn't exactly new."

2.

Tea Clipper

"**M**ORE photos of Dushanbe coming in," the phone told Ryan.

"Okay, I'll be over in a few minutes." Jack rose and crossed the hall to Admiral Greer's office. His boss had his back to the blazing white blanket that covered the hilly ground outside the CIA headquarters building. They were still clearing it off the parking lot, and even the railed walkway outside the seventh-floor windows had about ten inches' worth.

"What is it, Jack?" the Admiral asked.

"Dushanbe. The weather cleared unexpectedly. You said you wanted to be notified."

Greer looked at the TV monitor in the corner of his office. It was next to the computer terminal that he refused to use—at least when anyone might watch his attempts to type with his index fingers and, on good days, one thumb. He could have the real-time satellite photos sent to his office "live," but of late he'd avoided that. Jack didn't know why. "Okay, let's trot over."

Ryan held open the door for the Deputy Director for Intelligence, and they turned left to the end of the executive corridor on the building's top floor. Here was the executive elevator. One nice thing about it was that you didn't have to wait very long.

"How's the jet lag?" Greer asked. Ryan had been back for nearly a day now.

"Fully recovered, sir. Westbound doesn't bother me very much. It's the eastbound kind that still kills me." *God, it's nice to be on the ground.*

The door opened and both men walked across the building to the new annex that housed the Office of Imagery Analysis. This was the Intelligence Directorate's own private department, separate from the National Photographic Intelligence Center, a joint CIA-DIA effort which served the whole intelligence community.

The screening room would have done Hollywood proud. There were about thirty seats in the mini-theater, and a twentyfoot-square projection screen on the wall. Art Graham, the chief of the unit, was waiting for them.

"You timed that pretty well. We'll have the shots in another minute." He lifted a phone to the projection room and spoke a few words. The screen lit up at once. It was called "Overhead Imagery" now, Jack reminded himself.

"Talk about luck. That Siberian high-pressure system took a sharp swing south and stopped the warm front like a brick wall. Perfect viewing conditions. Ground temp is about zero, and relative humidity can't be much higher than that!" Graham chuckled. "We maneuvered the bird in specially to take advantage of this. It's within three degrees of being right overhead, and I don't think Ivan has had time to figure out that this pass is under way."

"There's Dushanbe," Jack breathed as part of the Tadzhik SSR came into view. Their first look was from one of the wide-angle cameras. The orbiting KH-14 reconnaissance satellite had a total of eleven. The bird had been in orbit for only three weeks, and this was the first of the newest generation of spy satellites. Dushanbe, briefly known as Stalinabad a few decades earlier—*that* must have made the local people happy! Ryan thought—was probably one of the ancient caravan cities. Afghanistan was less than a hundred miles away. Tamurlane's legendary Samarkand was not far to the northwest . . . and perhaps Scheherazade had traveled through a thousand years earlier. He wondered why was it that history worked this way. The same places and the same names always seemed to show up from one century to the next.

But CIA's current interest in Dushanbe did not center on the silk trade.

The view changed to one of the high-resolution cameras. It peered first into a deep, mountainous valley where a river was held back by the concrete and stone mass of a hydroelectric dam. Though only fifty kilometers southeast of Dushanbe, its power lines did not serve that city of 500,000. Instead they led to a collection of mountaintops almost within sight of the facility.

"That looks like footings for another set of towers," Ryan observed.

"Parallel to the first set," Graham agreed. "They're putting some new generators into the facility. Well, we knew all along that they were only getting about half the usable power out of the dam."

"How long to bring the rest on-stream?" Greer asked.

"I'd have to check with one of our consultants. It won't take more than a few weeks to run the power lines out, and the top half of the powerhouse is already built. Figure the foundations for the new generators are already done. All they have to do is rig the new equipment. Six months, maybe eight if the weather goes bad."

"That fast?" Jack wondered.

"They diverted people from two other hydro jobs. Both of them were 'Hero' projects. This one has never been talked about, but they pulled construction troops off two high-profile sites to do this one. Ivan does know how to focus his effort when he wants to. Six or eight months is conservative, Dr. Ryan. It may be done quicker," Graham said.

"How much power'll be available when they finish?"

"It's not all that big a structure. Total peak output, with the new generators? Figure eleven hundred megawatts."

"That's a lot of power, and all going to those hilltops," Ryan said almost to himself as the camera shifted again.

The one the Agency called "Mozart" was quite a hill, but this area was the westernmost extension of the Himalayan Range, and by those standards it was puny. A road had been blasted to the very top—there wasn't a Sierra Club in the USSR—along with a helicopter pad for bringing VIPs out from Dushanbe's two airports. There were sixteen buildings. One was for apartments, the view from which must have been fantastic, though it was a prototypical Russian apartment building, as stylish and attractive as a cinderblock, finished six months before. A lot of engineers and their families lived in it. It seemed strange to see such a building there, but the message of the building was: The people who lived here were privileged. Engineers and academicians, people

with enough skill that the State wanted to look after them and their needs. Food was trucked up the new mountain road—or, in bad weather, flown in. Another of the buildings was a theater. A third was a hospital. Television programming came in via satellite earth-station next to a building that contained a few shops. That sort of solicitude was not exactly common in the Soviet Union. It was limited to high Party officials and people who worked in essential defense projects. This was not a ski resort.

That was also obvious from the perimeter fence and guard towers, both of which were recent. One of the identifiable things about Russian military complexes was the guard towers; Ivan had a real fixation for the things. Three fences, with two ten-meter spaces enclosed. The outer space was usually mined, and the inner one patrolled by dogs. The towers were on the inner perimeter, spaced two hundred meters apart. The soldiers who manned the towers were housed in a better-than-average new concrete barracks—

"Can you isolate one of the guards?" Jack asked.

Graham spoke into his phone, and the picture changed. One of his technicians was already doing this, as much to test camera calibration and ambient air conditions as for the purpose Ryan intended.

As the camera zoomed in, a moving dot became a man-shape in greatcoat and probably a fur hat. He was walking a big dog of uncertain breed and had a Kalashnikov rifle slung over his right shoulder. Man and dog left puffs of vapor in the air as they breathed. Ryan leaned forward unconsciously, as though this would give him a better view.

"That guy's shoulder boards look green to you?" he asked Graham.

The reconnaissance expert grunted. "Yep. He's KGB, all right."

"That close to Afghanistan?" the Admiral mused. "They know we have people operating there. You bet they'll take their security provisions seriously."

"They must have really wanted those hilltops," Ryan observed. "Seventy miles overland are a few million people who think killing Russians is God's will. This place is more important than we thought. It isn't just a new facility, not with that kind of security. If that's all it was, they wouldn't have had to put it here, and they for damned sure wouldn't have picked a place where they had to build a new power supply and risk exposure to hostiles. This may be an R and D facility now, but they must have bigger plans for it."

"Like what?"

"Going after my satellites, maybe." Art Graham thought of them as his.

"Have they tickled any of 'em recently?" Jack asked.

"No, not since we rattled their cage last April. Common sense broke out for once."

That was an old story. Several times in the past few years, American reconnaissance and early-warning satellites had been "tickled"—laser beams or microwave energy had been focused on the satellites, enough to dazzle their receptors but not enough to do serious harm. Why had the Russians done it? That was the question. Was it merely an exercise to see how we'd react, to see if it caused a ruckus at the North American Aerospace Defense Command —NORAD—at Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado? An attempt to determine for themselves how sensitive the satellites were? Was it a demonstration, a

warning of their ability to destroy the satellites? Or was it simply what Jack's British friends called bloodymindedness? It was so hard to tell what the Soviets were thinking.

They invariably protested their innocence, of course. When one American satellite had been temporarily blinded over Sary Shagan, they said that a natural-gas pipeline had caught fire. The fact that the nearby Chimkent-Pavlodar pipeline carried mostly oil had escaped the Western press.

The satellite pass was complete now. In a nearby room a score of videotape recorders were rewound, and now the complete camera coverage would be reviewed at leisure.

"Let's have a look at Mozart again, and Bach also, please," Greer commanded.

"Hell of a commute," Jack noted. The residential and industrial site on Mozart was only one kilometer or so from the emplacement on Bach, the next mountaintop over, but the road looked frightful. The picture froze on Bach. The formula of fences and guard towers was repeated, but this time the distance between the outermost perimeter fence and the next was at least two hundred meters. Here the ground surface appeared to be bare rock. Jack wondered how you planted mines in that—or maybe they didn't, he thought. It was obvious that the ground had been leveled with bulldozers and explosives to the unobstructed flatness of a pool table. From the guard towers, it must have looked like a shooting gallery.

"Not kidding, are they?" Graham observed quietly.

"So that's what they're guarding . . ." Ryan said.

There were thirteen buildings inside the fence. In an area perhaps the size of two football fields—which had also been leveled—were ten holes, in two groups. One was a group of six arranged hexagonally, each hole about thirty feet across. The second group of four was arrayed in a diamond pattern, and the holes were slightly smaller, perhaps twenty-five feet. In each hole was a concrete pillar about fifteen feet across, planted in bedrock, and every hole was at least forty feet deep—you couldn't tell from the picture on the screen. Atop each pillar was a metal dome. They appeared to be made of crescent-shaped segments.

"They unfold. I wonder what's in them?" Graham asked rhetorically. There were two hundred people at Langley who knew of Dushanbe, and every one wanted to know what was under those metal domes. They'd been in place for only a few months.

"Admiral," Jack said, "I need to kick open a new compartment."

"Which one?"

"Tea Clipper."

"You're not asking much!" Greer snorted. *"I'm* not cleared for that."

Ryan leaned back in his chair. "Admiral, if what they're doing in Dushanbe is the same thing we're doing with Tea Clipper, we sure as hell ought to know. Goddammit, how are we supposed to know what to look for if we're not told what one of these places looks like!"

"I've been saying that for quite a while." The DDI chuckled. "SDIO won't like it. The Judge will have to go to the President for that."

"So he goes to the President. What if the activity here is connected with the

arms proposal they just made?"

"Do you think it is?"

"Who can say?" Jack asked. "It's a coincidence. They worry me."

"Okay, I'll talk to the Director."

Ryan drove home two hours later. He drove his Jaguar XJS out onto the George Washington Parkway. It was one of the many happy memories from his tour of duty in England. He loved the silky-smooth feeling of the twelve-cylinder engine enough that he'd put his venerable old Rabbit into semiretirement. As he always tried to do, Ryan set his Washington business aside. He worked the car up through its five gears and concentrated on his driving.

"Well, James?" the Director of Central Intelligence asked.

"Ryan thinks the new activity at Bach and Mozart may be related to the arms situation. I think he might be correct. He wants into Tea Clipper. I said you'd have to go to the President." Admiral Greer smiled.

"Okay, I'll get him a written note. It'll make General Parks happier, anyway. They have a full-up test scheduled for the end of the week. I'll set it up for Jack to see it." Judge Moore smiled sleepily. "What do you think?"

"I think he's right: Dushanbe and Tea Clipper are essentially the same project. There are a lot of coarse similarities, too many to be a pure coincidence. We ought to upgrade our assessment."

"Okay." Moore turned away to look out the windows. *The world is going to change again. It may take ten or more years, but it's going to change. Ten years from now it won't be my problem, Moore told himself. But it sure as hell will be Ryan's problem*. "I'll have him flown out there tomorrow. And maybe we'll get lucky on Dushanbe. Foley got word to CARDINAL that we're very interested in the place."

"CARDINAL? Good."

"But if something happens . . ."

Greer nodded. "Christ, I hope he's careful," the DDI said.

Ever since the death of Dmitri Fedorovich, it has not been the same at the Defense Ministry, Colonel Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov wrote into his diary left-handed. An early riser, he sat at a hundred-year-old oak desk that his wife had bought for him shortly before she'd died, almost—what was it? Thirty years, Misha told himself. Thirty years this coming February. His eyes closed for a moment. *Thirty years.*

Never a single day passed that he did not remember his Elena. Her photograph was on the desk, the sepia print faded with age, its silver frame tarnished. He never seemed to have time to polish it, and didn't wish to be bothered with a maid. The photo showed a young woman with legs like spindles, arms high over her head, which was cocked to one side. The round, Slavic face displayed a wide, inviting smile that perfectly conveyed the joy she'd felt when dancing with the Kirov Company.

Misha smiled also as he remembered the first impression of a young armor officer given tickets to the performance as a reward for having the best-maintained tanks in the division: *How can they do that*? Perched up on the tips

of their toes as though on needle-point stilts. He'd remembered playing on stilts as a child, *but to be so graceful!* And then she'd smiled at the handsome young officer in the front row. For the briefest moment. Their eyes had met for almost as little time as it takes to blink, he thought. Her smile had changed ever so slightly. Not for the audience any longer, for that timeless instant the smile had been for him alone. A bullet through the heart could not have had a more devastating effect. Misha didn't remember the rest of the performance—to this day he couldn't even remember which ballet it had been. He remembered sitting and squirming through the rest of it while his mind churned over what he'd do next. Already Lieutenant Filitov had been marked as a man on the move, a brilliant young tank officer for whom Stalin's brutal purge of the officer corps had meant opportunity and rapid promotion. He wrote articles on tank tactics, practiced innovative battle drills in the field, argued vociferously against the false "lessons" of Spain with the certainty of a man born to his profession.

But what do I do now? he'd asked himself. The Red Army hadn't taught him how to approach an artist. This wasn't some farm girl who was bored enough by work on the *kolkhoz* to offer herself to anyone—especially a young Army officer who might take her away from it all. Misha still remembered the shame of his youth—not that he'd thought it shameful at the time—when he'd used his officer's shoulder boards to bed any girl who'd caught his eye.

But I don't even know her name, he'd told himself. *What do I do?* What he'd done, of course, was to treat the matter as a military exercise. As soon as the performance had ended, he'd fought his way into the rest room and washed hands and face. Some grease that still remained under his fingernails was removed with a pocketknife. His short hair was wetted down into place, and he inspected his uniform as strictly as a general officer might, brushing off dust and picking off lint, stepping back from the mirror to make sure his boots gleamed as a soldier's should. He hadn't noticed at the time that other men in the men's room were watching him with barely suppressed grins, having guessed what the drill was for, and wishing him luck, touched with a bit of envy. Satisfied with his appearance, Misha had left the theater and asked the doorman where the artists' door was. That had cost him a ruble, and with the knowledge, he'd walked around the block to the stage entrance, where he found another doorman, this one a bearded old man whose greatcoat bore ribbons for service in the revolution. Misha had expected special courtesy from the doorman, one soldier to another, only to learn that he regarded all the female dancers as his own daughters—not wenches to be thrown at the feet of soldiers, certainly! Misha had considered offering money, but had the good sense not to imply the man was a pimp. Instead, he'd spoken quietly and reasonably—and truthfully—that he was smitten with a single dancer whose name he didn't know, and merely wanted to meet her.

"Why?" the old doorman had asked coldly.

"Grandfather, she smiled at me," Misha had answered in the awed voice of a little boy.

"And you are in love." The reply was harsh, but in a moment the doorman's face turned wistful. "But you don't know which?"

"She was in—the line, not one of the important ones, I mean. What do they

call that?—I will remember her face until the day I die." Already he'd known that.

The doorman looked him over and saw that his uniform was properly turned out, and his back straight. This was not a swaggering pig of an NKVD officer whose arrogant breath stank of vodka. This was a soldier, and a handsome young one at that. "Comrade Lieutenant, you are a lucky man. Do you know why? You are lucky because I was once young, and old as I am, I still remember. They will start to come out in ten minutes or so. Stand over there, and make not a sound."

It had taken thirty minutes. They came out in twos and threes. Misha had seen the male members of the troupe and thought them—what any soldier would think of a man in a ballet company. His manhood had been offended that they held hands with such pretty girls, but he'd set that aside. When the door opened, his vision was damaged by the sudden glare of yellow-white light against the near blackness of the unlit alley, and he'd almost missed her, so different she looked without the makeup.

He saw the face, and tried to decide if she were the right one, approaching his objective more carefully than he would ever do under the fire of German guns.

"You were in seat number twelve," she'd said before he could summon the courage to speak. *She had a voice!*

"Yes, Comrade Artist," his reply had stammered out.

"Did you enjoy the performance, Comrade Lieutenant?" A shy, but somehow beckoning smile.

"It was wonderful!" Of course.

"It is not often that we see handsome young officers in the front row," she observed.

"I was given the ticket as a reward for performance in my unit. I am a tanker," he said proudly. *She called me handsome!*

"Does the Comrade Tanker Lieutenant have a name?"

"I am Lieutenant Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov."

"I am Elena Ivanova Makarova."

"It is too cold tonight for one so thin, Comrade Artist. Is there a restaurant nearby?"

"Restaurant?" She'd laughed. "How often do you come to Moscow?"

"My division is based thirty kilometers from here, but I do not often come to the city," he'd admitted.

"Comrade Lieutenant, there are few restaurants even in Moscow. Can you come to my apartment?"

"Why—yes," his reply had stuttered out as the stage door opened again.

"Marta," Elena said to the girl who was just coming out. "We have a military escort home!"

"Tania and Resa are coming," Marta said.

Misha had actually been relieved by that. The walk to the apartment had taken thirty minutes—the Moscow subway hadn't yet been completed, and it was better to walk than to wait for a tram this late at night.

She was far prettier without her makeup, Misha remembered. The cold winter air gave her cheeks all the color they ever needed. Her walk was as

graceful as ten years of intensive training could make it. She'd glided along the street like an apparition, while he gallumped along in his heavy boots. He felt himself a tank, rolling next to a thoroughbred horse, and was careful not to go too close, lest he trample her. He hadn't yet learned of the strength that was so well hidden by her grace.

The night had never before seemed so fine, though for—what was it?—twenty years there had been many such nights, then none for the past thirty. *My God*, he thought, *we would have been married fifty years this . . . July 14th.* My God. Unconsciously he dabbed at his eyes with a handkerchief.

Thirty years, however, was the number that occupied his mind.

The thought boiled within his breast, and his fingers were pale around the pen. It still surprised him that love and hate were emotions so finely matched. Misha returned to his diary . . .

An hour later he rose from the desk and walked to the bedroom closet. He donned the uniform of a colonel of tank troops. Technically he was on the retired list, and had been so before people on the current colonel's list had been born. But work in the Ministry of Defense carried its own perks, and Misha was on the personal staff of the Minister. That was one reason. The other three reasons were on his uniform blouse, three gold stars that depended from claret-colored ribbons. Filitov was the only soldier in the history of the Soviet Army who'd won the decoration of Hero of the Soviet Union three times on the field of battle, for personal bravery in the face of the enemy. There were others with such medals, but so often these were political awards, the Colonel knew. He was aesthetically offended by that. This was not a medal to be granted for staff work, and certainly not for one Party member to give to another as a gaudy lapel decoration. Hero of the Soviet Union was an award that ought to be limited to men like himself, who had risked death, who'd bled—and all too often, died—for the *Rodina.* He was reminded of this every time he put his uniform on. Beneath his undershirt were the plastic-looking scars from his last gold star, when a German 88 round had lanced through the armor of his tank, setting the ammo racks afire while he'd brought his 76mm gun around for one last shot and extinguished that Kraut gun crew while his clothing burned. The injury had left him with only fifty percent use of his right arm, but despite it, he'd led what was left of his regiment nearly two more days in the Kursk Bulge. If he'd bailed out with the rest of his crew—or been evacuated from the area at once as his regimental surgeon had recommended—perhaps he would have recovered fully, but, no, he knew that he could not have *not* fired back, could not have abandoned his men in the face of battle. And so he'd shot, and burned. But for that Misha might have made General, perhaps even Marshal, he thought. *Would it have made a difference?* Filitov was too much a man of the real, practical world to dwell on that thought for long. Had he fought in many more campaigns, he might have been killed. As it was, he'd been given more time with Elena than could otherwise have been the case. She'd come nearly every day to the burn institute in Moscow; at first horrified by the extent of his wounds, she'd later become as proud of them as Misha was. No one could question that her man had done his duty for the *Rodina.*

But now, he did his duty for his Elena.

Filitov walked out of the apartment to the elevator, a leather briefcase dangling from his right hand. It was about all that side of his body was good for. The *babushka* who operated the elevator greeted him as always. They were of an age, she the widow of a sergeant who'd been in Misha's regiment, who also had the gold star, pinned on his breast by this very man.

"Your new granddaughter?" the Colonel asked.

"An angel," was her reply.

Filitov smiled, partly in agreement—was there any such thing as an ugly infant?—and partly because terms like "angel" had survived seventy years of "scientific socialism."

The car was waiting for him. The driver was a new draftee, fresh from sergeant school and driving school. He saluted his Colonel severely, the door held open in his other hand.

"Good morning, Comrade Colonel."

"So it is, Sergeant Zhdanov," Filitov replied. Most officers would have done little more than grunt, but Filitov was a combat soldier whose success on the battlefield had resulted from his devotion to the welfare of his men. A lesson that few officers ever understood, he reminded himself. Too bad.

The car was comfortably warm, the heater had been turned all the way up fifteen minutes ago. Filitov was becoming ever more sensitive to cold, a sure sign of age. He'd just been hospitalized again for pneumonia, the third time in the past five years. One of these times, he knew, would be the last. Filitov dismissed the thought. He'd cheated death too many times to fear it. Life came and went at a constant rate. One brief second at a time. When the last second came, he wondered, would he notice? Would he care?

The driver pulled the car up to the Defense Ministry before the Colonel could answer that question.

Ryan was sure that he'd been in government service too long. He had come to—well, not actually to *like* flying, but at least to appreciate the convenience of it. He was only four hours from Washington, flown by an Air Force C-21 Learjet whose female pilot, a captain, had looked like a high-school sophomore.

Getting old, Jack, he told himself. The flight from the airfield to the mountaintop had been by helicopter, no easy feat at this altitude. Ryan had never been to New Mexico before. The high mountains were bare of trees, the air thin enough that he was breathing abnormally, but the sky was so clear that for a moment he imagined himself an astronaut looking at the unblinking stars on this cloudless, frigid night.

"Coffee, sir?" a sergeant asked. He handed Ryan a thermos cup, and the hot liquid steamed into the night, barely illuminated by a sliver of new moon.

"Thanks." Ryan sipped at it and looked around. There were few lights to be seen. There might have been a housing development behind the next set of ridges; he could see the halolike glow of Santa Fe, but there was no way to guess how far off it might be. He knew that the rock he stood on was eleven thousand feet above sea level (the nearest level sea was hundreds of miles away), and there is no way to judge distance at night. It was altogether beautiful, except for the cold. His fingers were stiff around the plastic cup.

He'd mistakenly left his gloves at home.

"Seventeen minutes," somebody announced. "All systems are nominal. Trackers on automatic. AOS in eight minutes."

"AOS?" Ryan asked. He realized that he sounded a little funny. It was so cold that his cheeks were stiff.

"Acquisition of Signal," the Major explained.

"You live around here?"

"Forty miles that way." He pointed vaguely. "Practically next door by local standards." The officer's Brooklyn accent explained the comment.

He's the one with the doctorate from State University of New York at Stony Brook, Ryan reminded himself. At only twenty-nine years old, the Major didn't look like a soldier, even less like a field-grade officer. In Switzerland he'd be called a gnome, barely over five-seven, and cadaverously thin, acne on his angular face. Right now, his deep-set eyes were locked on the sector of horizon where the space shuttle *Dis-covery* would appear. Ryan thought back to the documents he'd read on the way out and knew that this major probably couldn't tell him the color of the paint on his living-room wall. He really lived at Los Alamos National Laboratory, known locally as the Hill. Number one in his class at West Point, and a doctorate in high-energy physics only two years after that. His doctor's dissertation was classified Top Secret. Jack had read it, and didn't understand why they had bothered—despite a doctorate of his own, the two-hundred-page document might as well have been written in Kurdish. Alan Gregory was already being talked of in the same breath as Cambridge's Stephen Hawking, or Princeton's Freeman Dyson. Except that few people knew his name. Jack wondered if anyone had thought of classifying *that.*

"Major Gregory, all ready?" an Air Force lieutenant general asked. Jack noted his respectful tone. Gregory was no ordinary major.

A nervous smile. "Yes, sir." The Major wiped sweaty hands—despite a temperature of fifteen below zero—on the pants of his uniform. It was good to see that the kid had emotions.

"You married?" Ryan asked. The file hadn't covered that.

"Engaged, sir. She's a doctor in laser optics, on the Hill. We get married June the third." The kid's voice had become as brittle as glass.

"Congratulations. Keeping it in the family, eh?" Jack chuckled.

"Yes, sir." Major Gregory was still staring at the southwest horizon.

"AOS!" someone announced behind them. "We have signal."

"Goggles!" The call came over the metal speakers. "Everyone put on their eye-protection."

Jack blew on his hands before taking the plastic goggles from his pocket. He'd been told to stash them there to keep them warm. They were still cold enough on his face that he noticed the difference. Once in place, however, Ryan was effectively blinded. The stars and moon were gone.

"Tracking! We have lock. Discovery has established the downlink. All systems are nominal."

"Target acquisition!" another voice announced. "Initiate interrogation sequencing . . . first target is locked . . . auto firing circuits enabled."

There was no sound to indicate what had happened. Ryan didn't see anything—*or did I?* he asked himself. There had been the fleeting impression

of . . . what? *Did I imagine it?* Next to him he felt the Major's breath come out slowly.

"Exercise concluded," the speaker said. Jack tore off his goggles.

"That's all?" What had he just seen? What had they just done? Was he so far out of date that even after being briefed he didn't understand what was happening before his eyes?

"The laser light is almost impossible to see," Major Gregory explained. "This high up, there isn't much dust or humidity in the air to reflect it."

"Then why the goggles?"

The young officer smiled as he took his off. "Well, if a bird flies over at the wrong time, the impact might be, well, kind of spectacular. That could hurt your eyes some."

Two hundred miles over their heads, *Discovery* continued toward the horizon. The shuttle would stay in orbit another three days, conducting its "routine scientific mission," mainly oceanographical studies this time, the press was told, something secret for the Navy. The papers had been speculating on the mission for weeks. It had something to do, they said, with tracking missile submarines from orbit. There was no better way to keep a secret than to use another "secret" to conceal it. Every time someone asked about the mission, a Navy public-affairs officer would do the "no comments."

"Did it work?" Jack asked. He looked up, but he couldn't pick out the dot of light that denoted the billion-dollar space plane.

"We have to see." The Major turned and walked to the camouflage-painted truck van parked a few yards away. The three-star General followed him, with Ryan trailing behind.

Inside the van, where the temperature might have been merely at freezing, a chief warrant officer was rewinding a videotape.

"Where were the targets?" Jack asked. "That wasn't in the briefing papers."

"About forty-five south, thirty west," the General replied. Major Gregory was perched in front of the TV screen.

"That's around the Falklands, isn't it? Why there?"

"Closer to South Georgia, actually," the General replied. "It's a nice, quiet, out-of-the-way sort of place, and the distance is about right."

And the Soviets had no known intelligence-gathering assets within three thousand miles, Ryan knew. The Tea Clipper test had been timed precisely for a moment when all Soviet spy satellites were under the visible horizon. Finally, the shooting distance was exactly the same as the distance to the Soviet ballistic missile fields arrayed along the country's main east-west railway.

"Ready!" the warrant officer said.

The video picture wasn't all that great, taken from sea level, specifically the deck of the *Observation Island,* a rangeinstrumentation ship returning from Trident missile tests in the Indian Ocean. Next to the first TV screen was another. This one showed the picture from the ship's "Cobra Judy" missile-tracking radar. Both screens showed four objects, spaced in a slightly uneven line. A timer box in the lower right-hand corner was changing numbers as though in an Alpine ski race, with three digits to the right of the decimal point.

"Hit!" One of the dots disappeared in a puff of green light.

"Miss!" Another one didn't.

"Miss!" Jack frowned. He'd half-expected to see the beams of light streaking through the sky, but that happened only in movies. There wasn't enough dust in space to denote the energy's path.

"Hit!" A second dot vanished.

"Hit!" Only one was left.

"Miss."

"Miss." The last one didn't want to die, Ryan thought.

"Hit!" But it did. "Total elapsed time, one point eight-zero-six seconds."

"Fifty percent," Major Gregory said quietly. "And it corrected itself." The young officer nodded slowly. He managed to keep from smiling, except around the eyes. "It works."

"How big were the targets?" Ryan asked.

"Three meters. Spherical balloons, of course." Gregory was rapidly losing control. He looked like a kid whom Christmas had taken by surprise.

"Same diameter as an SS-18."

"Something like that." The General answered that one.

"Where's the other mirror?"

"Ten thousand kilometers up, currently over Ascension Island. Officially it's a weather satellite that never made its proper orbit." The General smiled.

"I didn't know you could send it that far."

Major Gregory actually giggled. "Neither did we."

"So you sent the beam from over there to the shuttle's mirror, from *Discovery* to this other one over the equator, and from there to the targets?"

"Correct," the General said.

"Your targeting system is on the other satellite, then?"

"Yes," the General answered more grudgingly.

Jack did some numbers in his head. "Okay, that means you can discriminate a three-meter target at . . . ten thousand kilometers. I didn't know we could do that. How do we?"

"You don't need to know," the General replied coldly.

"You had four hits and four misses—eight shots in under two seconds, and the Major said the targeting system corrected for misses. Okay, if those had been SS-18s launched off of South Georgia, would the shots have killed them?"

"Probably not," Gregory admitted. "The laser assembly only puts out five megajoules. Do you know what a joule is?"

"I checked my college phyzzies book before I flew down. A joule is one newton-meter per second, or zero-point-seven foot-pounds of energy, plus change, right? Okay, a megajoule is a million of them . . . seven hundred thousand foot-pounds. In terms I can understand—"

"A megajoule is the rough equivalent of a stick of dynamite. So we just delivered five sticks. The actual energy transferred is like a kilogram of explosives, but the physical effects are not exactly comparable."

"What you're telling me is that the laser beam doesn't actually burn through the target—it's more of a shock effect." Ryan was stretching his technical knowledge to the limit.

“We call it an ‘impact kill,’ ” the General answered. “But, yeah, that’s about it. All the energy arrives in a few millionths of a second, a lot faster than any bullet does.”

“So all that stuff I’ve heard about how polishing the missile body, or rotating it, will prevent a burn-through—”

Major Gregory giggled again. “Yeah, I like that one. A ballet dancer can pirouette in front of a shotgun and it’ll do her about as much good. What happens is that the energy has to go somewhere, and that can only be into the missile body. The missile body is full of storable liquids—nearly all of their birds are liquid fueled, right? The hydrostatic effect alone will be to rupture the pressure tanks—*ka-boom!* no more missile.” The Major smiled as though describing a trick played on his high-school teacher.

“Okay, now, I want to know how it all works.”

“Look, Dr. Ryan—” the General started to say. Jack cut him off.

“General, I am cleared for Tea Clipper. You know that, so let’s stop screwing around.”

Major Gregory got a nod from the General. “Sir, we have five one-megajoule lasers—”

“Where?”

“You’re standing right on top of one of them, sir. The other four are buried around this hilltop. The power rating is per pulse, of course. Each one puts out a pulse-chain of a million joules in a few microseconds—a few millionths of a second.”

“And they recharge in . . . ?”

“Point zero-four-six seconds. We can deliver twenty shots per second, in other words.”

“But you didn’t shoot that fast.”

“We didn’t have to, sir,” Gregory replied. “The limiting factor at present is the targeting software. That’s being worked on. The purpose of this test was to evaluate part of the software package. We know that these lasers work. We’ve had them here for the past three years. The laser beams are converged on a mirror about fifty meters that way”—he pointed—“and converted into a single beam.”

“They have to be—I mean, the beams all have to be exactly in tune, right?”

“Technically it’s called a Phased-Array Laser. All the beams have to be perfectly in phase,” Gregory answered.

“How the hell do you do that?” Ryan paused. “Don’t bother, I probably wouldn’t understand it anyway. Okay, we have the beam hitting the downside mirror . . .”

“The mirror is the special part. It’s composed of thousands of segments, and every segment is controlled by a piezoelectric chip. That’s called ‘adaptive optics.’ We send an interrogation beam to the mirror—this one was on the shuttle—and get a reading on atmospheric distortion. The way the atmosphere bends the beam is analyzed by computer. Then the mirror corrects for the distortion, and we fire the real shot. The mirror on the shuttle also has adaptive optics. It collects and focuses the beam, and sends it off to the ‘Flying Cloud’ satellite mirror. That mirror refocuses the beam on the targets. Zap!”

“That simple?” Ryan shook his head. It was simple enough that over the

previous nineteen years, forty billion dollars had gone into basic research, in twenty separate fields, just to run this one test.

"We did have to iron out a few little details," Gregory acknowledged. These little details would take another five or more years, and he neither knew nor cared how many additional billions. What mattered to him was that the goal was now actually in sight. Tea Clipper wasn't a blue-sky project anymore, not after this system test.

"And you're the guy who made the breakthrough on the targeting system. You figured a way for the beam to provide its own targeting information."

"Something like that," the General answered for the kid. "Dr. Ryan, that part of the system is classified highly enough that we will not discuss it further without written authorization."

"General, the purpose in my being here is to evaluate this program relative to Soviet efforts along similar lines. If you want my people to tell you what the Russians are up to, I have to know what the hell we're supposed to look for!"

This did not elicit a reply. Jack shrugged and reached inside his coat. He handed the General an envelope. Major Gregory looked on in puzzlement.

"You still don't like it," Ryan observed after the officer folded the letter away.

"No, sir, I don't."

Ryan spoke with a voice colder than the New Mexico night. "General, when I was in the Marine Corps, they never told me that I was supposed to like my orders, just that I was supposed to obey them." That almost set the General off, and Jack added: "I really am on your side, sir."

"You may continue, Major Gregory," General Parks said after a moment.

"I call the algorithm 'Fan Dance,' " Gregory began. The General almost smiled in spite of himself. Gregory could not have known anything about Sally Rand.

"That's all?" Ryan said again when the youngster finished, and he knew that every computer expert in Project Tea Clipper must have asked himself the same thing: Why didn't I think of that! No wonder they all say that Gregory is a genius. He'd made a crucial breakthrough in laser technology at Stony Brook, *then* one in software design. "But that's simple!"

"Yes, sir, but it took over two years to make it work, and a Cray-2 computer to make it work fast enough to matter. We still need a little more work, but after we analyze what went wrong tonight, another four or five months, maybe, and we got it knocked."

"Next step, then?"

"Building a five-megajoule laser. Another team is close to that already. Then we gang up twenty of them, and we can send out a hundred-megajoule pulse, twenty times per second, and hit any target we want. The impact energy then will be on the order of, say, twenty to thirty kilograms of explosives."

"And that'll kill any missile anybody can make . . ."

"Yes, sir." Major Gregory smiled.

"What you're telling me is, the thing—Tea Clipper works."

"We've validated the system architecture," the General corrected Ryan. "It's been a long haul since we started looking at this system. Five years ago there were eleven hurdles. There are three technical hurdles left. Five years from

now there won't be any. Then we can start building it."

"The strategic implications . . ." Ryan said, and stopped. "Jesus."

"It's going to change the world," the General agreed.

"You know that they're playing with the same thing at Dushanbe."

"Yes, sir," Major Gregory answered. "And they might know something that we don't."

Ryan nodded. Gregory was even smart enough to know that someone else might be smarter. This was some kid.

"Gentlemen, out in my helicopter is a briefcase. Could you have somebody bring it in? There are some satellite photos that you might find interesting."

"How old are these shots?" the General asked five minutes later as he leafed through the photos.

"A couple of days," Jack replied.

Major Gregory peered at them for a minute or so. "Okay, we have two slightly different installations here. It's called a 'sparse array.' The hexagonal array—the six-pillar one—is a transmitter. The building in the middle here is probably designed to house six lasers. These pillars are optically stable mounts for mirrors. The laser beams come out of the building, reflect off the mirrors, and the mirrors are computer-controlled to concentrate the beam on a target."

"What do you mean by optically stable?"

"The mirrors have to be controlled with a high degree of accuracy, sir," Gregory told Ryan. "By isolating them from the surrounding ground you eliminate vibration that might come from having a man walk nearby, or driving a car around. If you jiggle the mirrors by a small multiple of the laser-light frequency, you mess up the effect you're trying to get. Here we use shock mountings to enhance the isolation factor. It's a technique originally developed for submarines. Okay? This other diamond-shaped array is . . . oh, of course. That's the receiver."

"What?" Jack's brain had just met another stone wall.

"Let's say you want to make a really good picture of something. I mean, *really* good. You use a laser as your strobe light."

"But why four mirrors?"

"It's easier and cheaper to make four small mirrors than one big one," Gregory explained. "Hmph. I wonder if they're trying to do a holographic image. If they can really lock their illuminating beams in phase . . . theoretically it's possible. There are a couple of things that make it tricky, but the Russians like the brute-force approach . . . Damn!" His eyes lit up. "That's one hell of an interesting idea! I'll have to think about that one."

"You're telling me that they built this place just to take pictures of our satellites?" Ryan demanded.

"No, sir. They can use it for that, no sweat. It makes a perfect cover. And a system that can image a satellite at geosynchronous altitude might be able to clobber one in low earth orbit. If you think of these four mirrors here as a telescope, remember that a telescope can be a lens for a camera, or part of a gunsight. It could also make a damned efficient aiming system. How much power runs into this lab?"

Ryan set down a photo. "The current power output from this dam is something like five hundred megawatts. But—"

"They're stringing new power lines," Gregory observed. "How come?"

"The powerhouse is two stories—you can't tell from this angle. It looks like they're activating the top half. That'll bring their peak power output to something like eleven hundred megawatts."

"How much comes into this place?"

"We call it 'Bach.' Maybe a hundred. The rest goes to 'Mozart,' the town that grew up on the next hill over. So they're doubling their available power."

"More than that, sir," Gregory noted. "Unless they're going to double the size of that town, why don't you assume that the increased power is just going to the lasers?"

Jack nearly choked. *Why the hell didn't you think of that!* he growled at himself.

"I mean," Gregory continued, "I mean . . . that's like five hundred megawatts of new power. Jesus, what if they just made a breakthrough? How hard is it to find out what's happening there?"

"Take a look at the photos and tell me how easy you think it would be to infiltrate the place," Ryan suggested.

"Oh." Gregory looked up. "It would be nice to know how much power they push out the front end of their instruments. How long has this place been there, sir?"

"About four years, and it's not finished yet. Mozart is new. Until recently the workers were housed in this barracks and support facility. We took notice when the apartment building went up, same time as the perimeter fence. When the Russians start pampering the workers, you know that the project has a really high priority. If it has a fence and guard towers, we know it's military."

"How did you find it?" Gregory asked.

"By accident. The Agency was redrawing its meteorological data on the Soviet Union, and one of the technicians decided to do a computer analysis of the best places over there for astronomical observation. This is one of them. The weather over the last few months has been unusually cloudy, but on average the skies are about as clear there as they are here. The same is true of Sary Shagan, Semipalatinsk, and another new one, Storozhevaya." Ryan set out some more photographs. Gregory looked at them.

"They sure are busy."

"Good morning, Misha," Marshal of the Soviet Union Dmitri Timofeyevich Yazov said.

"And to you, Comrade Defense Minister," Colonel Filitov replied.

A sergeant helped the Minister off with his coat while another brought in a tray with a tea setting. Both withdrew when Misha opened his briefcase.

"So, Misha, what does my day look like?" Yazov poured two cups of tea. It was still dark outside the Council of Ministers building. The inside perimeter of the Kremlin walls was lit with harsh blue-white floods, and sentries appeared and disappeared in the splashes of light.

"A full one, Dmitri Timofeyevich," Misha replied. Yazov wasn't the man that Dmitri Ustinov was, but Filitov had to admit to himself that he did put in a full day's work as a uniformed officer should. Like Filitov, Marshal Yazov was

by background a tank officer. Though they had never met during the war, they did know one another by reputation. Misha's was better as a combat officer—purists claimed that he was an old-fashioned cavalryman at heart, though Filitov cordially hated horses—while Dmitri Yazov had won a reputation early on as a brilliant staff officer and organizer—and a Party man, of course. Before everything else, Yazov was a Party man, else he would never have made the rank of Marshal. "We have that delegation coming in from the experimental station in the Tadzhik SSR."

"Ah, 'Bright Star.' Yes, that report is due today, isn't it?"

"Academicians," Misha snorted. "They wouldn't know what a real weapon was if I shoved it up their asses."

"The time for lances and sabers is past, Mikhail Semyonovich," Yazov said with a grin. Not the brilliant intellect that Ustinov had been, neither was Yazov a fool like his predecessor, Sergey Sokolov. His lack of engineering expertise was balanced by an uncanny instinct for the merits of new weapons systems, and rare insights into the people of the Soviet Army. "These inventions show extraordinary promise."

"Of course. I only wish that we had a real soldier running the project instead of these starry-eyed professors."

"But General Pokryshkin—"

"He was a fighter pilot. I said a *soldier,* Comrade Minister. Pilots will support anything that has enough buttons and dials. Besides, Pokryshkin has spent more time in universities of late than in an aircraft. They don't even let him fly himself anymore. Pokryshkin stopped being a soldier ten years ago. Now he is the procurer for the wizards." A*nd he is building his own little empire down there, but that's an issue we'll save for another day.*

"You wish a new job assignment, Misha?" Yazov inquired slyly.

"Not that one!" Filitov laughed, then turned serious. "What I am trying to say, Dmitri Timofeyevich, is that the progress assessment we get from Bright Star is—how do I say this?—warped by the fact that we don't have a real military man on the scene. Someone who understands the vagaries of combat, someone who knows what a weapon is supposed to be."

The Defense Minister nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I see 'weapons,' that is true. The complexity of the project concerns me."

"Just how many moving parts does this new assembly have?"

"I have no idea—thousands, I should think."

"An instrument does not become a weapon until it can be handled reliably by a private soldier—well, at least a senior lieutenant. Has anyone outside the project ever done a reliability assessment?" Filitov asked.

"No, not that I can recall."

Filitov picked up his tea. "There you are, Dmitri Timofeyevich. Don't you think that the Politburo will be interested in that? Until now, they have been willing to fund the experimental project, of course, but"—Filitov took a sip—"they are coming here to request funding to upgrade the site to operational status, and we have no independent assessment of the project."

"How would you suggest we get that assessment?"

"Obviously I cannot do it. I am too old, and too uneducated, but we have some bright new colonels in the Ministry, especially in the signals section.

They are not combat officers, strictly speaking, but they are soldiers, and they are competent to look at these electronic marvels. It is only a suggestion." Filitov didn't press. He had planted the seed of an idea. Yazov was far easier to manipulate than Ustinov had ever been.

"And what of the problems at the Chelyabinsk tank works?" Yazov asked next.

Ortiz watched the Archer climbing the hill half a mile away. Two men and two camels. They probably wouldn't be mistaken for a guerrilla force the way that twenty or so would have. Not that this had to matter, Ortiz knew, but the Soviets were to the point now that they attacked almost anything that moved. *Vaya con Dios.*

"I sure could use a beer," the Captain observed.

Ortiz turned. "Captain, the thing that allowed me to deal with these people effectively is that I live the way they do. I observe their laws and respect their ways. That means no booze, no pork; that means I don't fool with their women."

"Shit." The officer snorted. "These ignorant savages—" Ortiz cut him off.

"Captain, the next time I hear you say that, or even think it real loud, will be your last day here. These people are working for us. They're bringing us stuff that we can't get any place else. You will, repeat *will* treat them with the respect they deserve. *Is that clear!"*

"Yes, sir." *Christ, this guy's turned into a sand nigger himself.*

3.

The Weary Red Fox

"IT'S impressive—if you can figure out what they're doing." Jack yawned. He'd taken the same Air Force transport back to Andrews from Los Alamos, and was behind in his sleep again. For all the times this had happened to him, he'd never quite learned to deal with it. "That Gregory kid is smart as hell. He took about two seconds to identify the Bach installation, practically word for word with the NPIC assessment." The difference was that the photointerpreters at the National Photographic Intelligence Center had taken four months and three written reports to get it right.

"You think he belongs in the assessment team?"

"Sir, that's like asking if you want to have surgeons in the operating room. Oh, by the way, he wants us to infiltrate somebody into Bach." Ryan rolled his eyes.

Admiral Greer nearly dropped his cup. "That kid must watch ninja movies."

"It is nice to know that somebody believes in us." Jack chuckled, then turned serious. "Anyway, Gregory wants to know if they've made a breakthrough in laser power output—excuse me, I think the new term is 'throughput.' He suspects that most of the new power from the hydroelectric dam will go to Bach."

Greer's eyes narrowed. "That's an evil thought. Do you think he's right?"

"They've got a lot of good people in lasers, sir. Nikolay Bosov, remember, won the Nobel Prize, and he's been in laser-weapons research ever since, along with Yevgeniy Velikhov, noted peace activist, and the head of the Laser Institute is Dmitri Ustinov's son, for God's sake. Site Bach is almost certainly a sparse array laser. We need to know what kind of lasers, though—could be gas-dynamic, free-electron, chemical. He thinks it'll be the free-electron kind, but that's just a guess. He gave me figures to establish the advantage of putting the laser assembly on this hilltop, where it's above about half of the atmosphere, and we know how much energy it takes to do some of the things they want to do. He said he'd try to do some backwards computations to estimate the total power of the system. The figures will be on the conservative side. Between what Gregory said, and the establishment of the residential facilities at Mozart, we have to assume that this site is intended to go into formal test and evaluation in the near future, maybe operational in two or three years. If so, Ivan may soon have a laser that can snuff one of our satellites right out of business. Probably a soft kill, the Major says—it'll smoke the camera receptors and the photovoltaic cells. But the next step—"

"Yeah. We're in a race, all right."

"What are the chances that Ritter and the Operations people can find out

something inside one of those Bach-site buildings?"

"I suppose we can discuss the possibility," Greer said diffidently, and changed the subject. "You look a little ragged."

Ryan got the message: he didn't need to know what Operations had in mind. He could talk like a normal person now. "All this traveling around has been pretty tiring. If you don't mind, sir, I'd just as soon take the rest of the day off."

"Fair enough. See you tomorrow. But first—Jack? I got a call about you from the Securities and Exchange Commission."

"Oh." Jack bowed his head. "I forgot all about that. They called me right before I flew to Moscow."

"What gives?"

"One of the companies I own stock in, the officers are being investigated for insider trading. I bought some of it right when they did, and SEC wants to know how I decided to buy it just then."

"And?" Greer asked. CIA had had enough scandals, and the Admiral didn't want one in his office.

"I got a tip that it might be an interesting company, and when I checked it out I saw that the company was buying itself back. So what got me to buy in was that I saw they were buying in. That's legal, boss. I have all the records at home. I do all this by computer—well, I *don't* since I came to work here—and I have hard copies of everything. I didn't break any rules, sir, and I can prove it."

"Let's try to settle that in the next few days," Greer suggested.

"Yes, sir."

Jack was in his car five minutes later. The drive home to Peregrine Cliff was easier than usual, taking only fifty minutes instead of the usual seventy-five. Cathy was at work, as usual, and the kids were at school—Sally at St. Mary's and Jack at kindergarten. Ryan poured himself a glass of milk in the kitchen. Finished, he wandered upstairs, kicked off his shoes, and collapsed into bed without even bothering to take off his pants.

Colonel of Signal Troops Gennady Iosifovich Bondarenko sat across from Misha, straight of back and proud, as so young a field-grade officer should be. He did not show himself to be the least intimidated by Colonel Filitov, who was old enough to be his father, and whose background was a minor legend in the Defense Ministry. *So this was the old war-horse who fought in nearly every tank battle in the first two years of the Great Patriotic War*. He saw the toughness around the eyes that age and fatigue could never erase, noted the impairment to the Colonel's arm, and remembered how that had happened. It was said that Old Misha still went out to the tank factories with some of the men from his old regiment, to see for himself if quality control was up to standards, to make certain that his hard blue eyes could still hit a target from the gunner's seat. Bondarenko was somewhat in awe of this soldier's soldier. More than anything else, he was proud to wear the same uniform.

"How may I serve the Colonel?" he asked Misha.

"Your file says that you are very clever with electronic gadgets, Gennady Iosifovich." Filitov waved at the file folder on his desk.

"That is my job, Comrade Colonel." Bondarenko was more than just "clever," and both knew it. He had helped develop laser range-finders for battlefield use, and until recently had been engaged in a project to use lasers in place of radios for secure front-line communications.

"What we are about to discuss is classified Most Secret." The young Colonel nodded gravely and Filitov went on. "For the past several years the Ministry has been financing a very special laser project called Bright Star—the name itself is also classified, of course. Its primary mission is to make highquality photographs of Western satellites, though when fully developed, it may be able to blind them—at a time when such action is politically necessary. The project is run by academicians and a former fighter pilot from Voyska PVO—this sort of installation comes under the authority of the air-defense forces, unfortunately. I would have preferred myself that a real soldier was running it, but—" Misha stopped and gestured at the ceiling. Bondarenko smiled in agreement. *Politics,* they both communicated silently. *No wonder we never get anything done.*

"The Minister wants you to fly down there and evaluate the weapons potential of the site, particularly from a reliability standpoint. If we are to bring this site to operational status, it would be well to know if the damned-fool thing will work when we want it to."

The young officer nodded thoughtfully while his mind raced. This was a choice assignment—much more than that. He would report to the Minister through his most trusted aide. If he did well, he would have the personal stamp of the Minister in his personnel jacket. That would guarantee him general's stars, a bigger apartment for his family, a good education for his children, so many of the things he'd worked all these years for.

"Comrade Colonel, I presume that they know of my coming?"

Misha laughed derisively. "Is that the way the Red Army does it now? We *tell* them when they are to be inspected! No, Gennady Iosifovich, if we are to evaluate reliability, we do it by surprise. I have a letter for you here from Marshal Yazov himself. It will be sufficient to get you past security—site security comes under our KGB colleagues," Misha said coolly. "It will give you free access to the entire facility. If you have any difficulty at all, call me at once. I can always be reached through this number. Even if I am in the *banya,* my driver will come and fetch me."

"How detailed an evaluation is required, Comrade Colonel?"

"Enough that a weary old tanker like me can understand what their witchcraft is all about," Misha said humorlessly. "Do you think you can understand it all?"

"If not, I will so inform you, Comrade Colonel." It was a very good answer, Misha noted. Bondarenko would go far.

"Excellent, Gennady Iosifovich. I would much rather have an officer tell me what he does not know than try to impress me with a truckload of *mudnya."* Bondarenko got that message loud and clear. It was said that the carpet in this office was rust-red from the blood of officers who'd tried to bullshit their way past this man. "How soon can you leave?"

"This is an extensive installation?"

"Yes. It houses four hundred academicians and engineers, and perhaps six

hundred other support personnel. You can take up to a week doing your evaluation. Speed here is less important than thoroughness."

"Then I'll have to pack another uniform. I can be on my way in two hours."

"Excellent. Off with you." Misha opened a new file.

As was generally the case, Misha worked a few minutes later than his Minister. He locked his personal documents in secure files and had the rest picked up by a messenger whose cart wheeled them to Central Files a few meters down the main corridor from his office. The same messenger handed over a note saying that Colonel Bondarenko had taken the 1730 Aeroflot flight to Dushanbe, and that ground transport from the civil airport to Bright Star had been arranged. Filitov made a mental note to congratulate Bondarenko for his cleverness. As a member of the Ministry's in-house General Inspectorate, he could have requisitioned special transport and flown directly to the city's military airfield, but the security office at Bright Star undoubtedly had some of its people there to report the arrival of such a flight. This way, however, a colonel from Moscow could just as easily be mistaken for what colonels in Moscow usually were—messenger boys. That fact offended Filitov. A man who had worked hard enough to attain the rank of a regimental commander—which really was the best job in any army—should not be a staff slave who fetched drinks for his general. But he was sure that this was a fact in any military headquarters. At least Bondarenko would have a chance to try out his teeth on the feather merchants down in Tadzhikistan.

Filitov rose and reached for his coat. A moment later, briefcase dangling from his right hand, he walked out of the office. His secretary—a warrant officer—automatically called downstairs for his car to be ready. It was waiting when Misha walked out the front door.

Forty minutes later, Filitov was in soft clothes. The television was on, broadcasting something mindless enough to have been imported from the West. Misha sat alone at his kitchen table. There was an open half-liter bottle of vodka beside his evening meal. Misha ate sausage, black bread, and pickled vegetables, not very different from what he'd eaten in the field with his men, two generations before. He'd found that his stomach dealt more easily with rough foods than the fancy ones, a fact that had thoroughly confused the hospital staff during his last bout of pneumonia. After every other bite, he'd take a brief sip of vodka, staring out the windows, whose blinds were adjusted just so. The city lights of Moscow burned brightly, along with the numberless yellow rectangles of apartment windows.

He could remember the smells at will. The verdant odor of good Russian earth, the fine, green smell of meadow grass, along with the stink of diesel fuel and above all the acidic reek of propellant from the tank's guns that stayed in the cloth of your coveralls no matter how many times you tried to wash it out. For a tanker, that was the smell of combat, that and the uglier smell of burning vehicles, and burning crews. Without looking, he lifted the sausage and cut off a piece, bringing it to his mouth atop the knife. He was staring out the window, but as though it were a television screen, what he saw was the vast, distant horizon at sunset, and columns of smoke rising along the perimeter of green and blue, orange and brown. Next, a bite of the rich,

thickly textured black bread. And as always on the nights before he committed treason, the ghosts came back to visit.

We showed them, didn't we, Comrade Captain? a weary voice asked.

We still had to retreat, Corporal, he heard his own voice answer. *But, yes, we showed the bastards not to trifle with our T-34s. This is good bread you stole.*

Stole? But, Comrade Captain, it is heavy work defending these farmers, is it not?

And thirsty work? was the Captain's next question.

Indeed, Comrade. The corporal chuckled. From behind, a bottle was handed down. Not State-produced vodka, this was Samogan, the Russian bootleg liquor that Misha himself knew well. Every true Russian claimed to love the taste, though not one would touch it if vodka was handy. Nevertheless, for this moment Samogan was the drink he craved, out here on Russian soil, with the remains of his tank troop standing between a State farm and the leading elements of Guderian's panzers.

They'll be coming again tomorrow morning, the driver thought soberly.

And we'll kill some more slug-gray tanks, the loader said.

After which, Misha did not say aloud, *we'll withdraw another ten kilometers. Ten kilometers only—if we're lucky again, and if regimental headquarters manages to control things better than they did this afternoon. In either case, this farm will be behind German lines when tomorrow's sun sets. More ground lost.*

It was not a thought on which to dwell. Misha wiped his hands carefully before unbuttoning the pocket on his tunic. It was time to restore his soul.

A delicate one, the corporal observed as he looked over his Captain's shoulder at the photograph for the hundredth time, and as always, with envy. *Delicate like crystal glass. And such a fine son you have. Lucky for you, Comrade Captain, that he has his mother's looks. She is so tiny, your wife, how can she have had such a big boy as that and not be hurt by it?*

God knows, was his unconscious reply. So strange that after a few days of war even the most adamant atheist invoked the name of God. Even a few of the commissars, to the quiet amusement of the troops.

I will come home to you, he'd promised the photograph. *I* will *come home to you. Through all the German Army, through all the fires of hell, I will come home to you, Elena.*

Just then mail had come, a rare-enough occurrence at the front. Only one letter for Captain Filitov, but the texture of the paper and the delicate handwriting told him of its importance. He slit the envelope open with the bright edge of his combat knife and extracted the letter as carefully as his haste allowed so as not to soil the words of his love with grease from his battle tank. Seconds later he leaped to his feet and screamed at the stars in the twilight sky.

I will be a father again in the spring! It must have been that last night on leave, three weeks before this brutal madness began . . .

I am not surprised, the corporal observed lightly, *after the fucking we gave the Germans today. Such a man leads this troop! Perhaps our Captain should stand at stud.*

You are nekulturny*, Corporal Romanov. I am a married man.*

Then perhaps I can stand in the Comrade Captain's stead? he asked hopefully, then handed the bottle down again. *To another fine son, my Captain, and to the*

health of your beautiful wife. There were tears of joy in the young man's eyes, along with the grief that came with the knowledge that only the greatest good fortune would ever allow him to be a father. But he would never say such a thing. A fine soldier Romanov was, and a fine comrade, ready for command of his own tank.

And Romanov had gotten his own tank, Misha remembered, staring at the Moscow skyline. At Vyasma, he'd defiantly placed it between his Captain's disabled T-34 and an onrushing German Mark-IV, saving his Captain's life as his own ended in red-orange flames. Aleksey Il'ych Romanov, Corporal of the Red Army, won an Order of the Red Banner that day. Misha wondered if it was fair compensation to his mother for her blue-eyed, freckled son.

The vodka bottle was three-quarters empty now, and as he had so many times, Misha was sobbing, alone at his table.

So many deaths.

Those fools at High Command! Romanov killed at Vyasma. Ivanenko lost outside Moscow. Lieutenant Abashin at Kharkov—Mirka, the handsome young poet, the slight, sensitive young officer who had the heart and balls of a lion, killed leading the fifth counterattack, but clearing the way for Misha to extract what was left of his regiment across the Donets before the hammer fell.

And his Elena, the last victim of all . . . All of them killed not by an external enemy, but by the misguided, indifferent brutality of their own Motherland—

Misha took a long last swallow from the bottle. No, not the Motherland. Not the *Rodina,* never the *Rodina.* By the inhuman bastards who . . .

He rose and staggered toward the bedroom, leaving on the lights in his sitting room. The clock on the nightstand said quarter of ten, and some distant part of Misha's brain took comfort in the fact that he'd get nine hours' sleep to recover from the abuse that he inflicted on what had once been a lean, hard body, one that had endured—even thrived on—the ghastly strain of prolonged combat operations. But the stress Misha endured now made combat seem a vacation, and his subconscious rejoiced in the knowledge that this would soon end, and rest would finally come.

About a half hour later, a car drove down the street. In the passenger's seat, a woman was driving her son home from a hockey game. She looked up and noted that the lights in certain windows were on, and the shades adjusted just so.

The air was thin. Bondarenko arose at 0500, as he always did, put on his sweatsuit, and took the elevator downstairs from his guest quarters on the tenth floor. It took him a moment to be surprised—the elevators were operating. So the technicians travel back and forth to the facility round the clock. *Good,* the Colonel thought.

He walked outside, a towel wrapped around his neck, and checked his watch. He frowned as he began. He had a regular morning routine in Moscow, a measured path around the city blocks. Here he couldn't be sure of the distance, when his five kilometers ended. Well—he shrugged—that was to be expected. He started off heading east. The view, he saw, was breathtaking. The sun would soon rise, earlier than Moscow because of the lower latitude, and the jagged spires of mountains were outlined in red, like dragons' teeth,

he smiled to himself. His youngest son liked to draw pictures of dragons.

The flight in had ended spectacularly. The full moon had illuminated the Kara Kum desert flatlands under the aircraft—and then these sandy wastes had ended as though at a wall built by the gods. Within three degrees of longitude, the land had changed from three-hundred-meter lowlands to five-thousand-meter peaks. From his vantage point he could see the glow of Dushanbe, about seventy kilometers to the northwest. Two rivers, Kafirnigan and Surkhandarya, bordered the city of half a million, and like a man halfway around the world, Colonel Bondarenko wondered why it had grown here, what ancient history had caused it to grow between the two mountain-fed rivers. Certainly it seemed an inhospitable place, but perhaps the long caravans of Bactrian camels had rested here, or perhaps it had been a crossroads, or—He stopped his reverie. Bondarenko knew that he was merely putting off his morning exercise. He tied the surgical mask over his mouth and nose as a protection against the frigid air. The Colonel began his deep knee-bends to loosen up, then stretched his legs against the building wall before he started off at an easy, double-time pace.

Immediately he noticed that he was breathing more heavily than usual through the cloth mask over his face. The altitude, of course. Well, that would shorten his run somewhat. The apartment building was already behind him, and he looked to his right, passing what his map of the facility indicated to be machine and optical shops.

"Halt!" a voice called urgently.

Bondarenko growled to himself. He didn't like having his exercise interrupted. Especially, he saw, by someone with the green shoulder boards of the KGB. Spies—thugs—playing at soldiers. "Well, what is it, Sergeant!"

"Your papers, if you please, Comrade. I do not recognize you."

Fortunately, Bondarenko's wife had sewn several pockets onto the Nike jogging suit that she'd managed to get on the gray market in Moscow, a present for his last birthday. He kept his legs pumping as he handed over his identification.

"When did the Comrade Colonel arrive?" the sergeant asked. "And what do you think you are doing so early in the morning?"

"Where is your officer?" Bondarenko replied.

"At the main guard post, four hundred meters that way." The sergeant pointed.

"Then come along with me, Sergeant, and we will speak with him. A colonel of the Soviet Army does not explain himself to sergeants. Come on, you need exercise, too!" he challenged and moved off.

The sergeant was only twenty or so, but wore a heavy greatcoat and carried a rifle and ammo belt. Within two hundred meters, Gennady heard him puffing.

"Here, Comrade Colonel," the young man gasped a minute later.

"You should not smoke so much, Sergeant," Bondarenko observed.

"What the hell is going on here?" a KGB lieutenant asked from behind his desk.

"Your sergeant challenged me. I am Colonel G. I. Bondarenko, and I am doing my morning run."

"In Western clothing?"

"What the hell do you care what clothes I wear when I exercise?" *Idiot, do you think spies jog?*

"Colonel, I am the security watch officer. I do not recognize you, and my superiors have not made me aware of your presence."

Gennady reached into another pocket and handed over his special visitors pass, along with his personal identification papers. "I am a special representative of the Ministry of Defense. The purpose of my visit is not your concern. I am here on the personal authority of Marshal of the Soviet Union D. T. Yazov. If you have any further questions, you may call him directly at that number!"

The KGB Lieutenant scrupulously read the identification documents to make sure they said what he'd been told.

"Please excuse me, Comrade Colonel, but we have orders to take our security provisions seriously. Also, it is out of the ordinary to see a man in Western clothes running at dawn."

"I gather that it is out of the ordinary for your troops to run at all," Bondarenko noted dryly.

"There is hardly room on this mountaintop for a proper regime of physical training, Comrade Colonel."

"Is that so?" Bondarenko smiled as he took out a notebook and pencil. "You claim to take your security duties seriously, but you do not meet norms for physical training of your troops. Thank you for that piece of information, Comrade Lieutenant. I will discuss that matter with your commanding officer. May I go?"

"Technically, I have orders to provide escort for all official visitors."

"Excellent. I like to have company when I run. Will you be so kind as to join me, Comrade Lieutenant?"

The KGB officer was trapped, and knew it. Five minutes later, he was puffing like a landed fish.

"What is your main security threat?" Bondarenko asked him—maliciously, since he did not slow down.

"The Afghan border is one hundred eleven kilometers that way," the Lieutenant said between wheezes. "They have occasionally sent some of their bandit raiders into Soviet territory, as you may have heard."

"Do they make contact with local citizens?"

"Not that we have established, but that is a concern. The local population is largely Muslim." The Lieutenant started coughing. Gennady stopped.

"In air this cold, I have found that wearing a mask helps," he said. "It warms the air somewhat before you breathe it. Straighten up and breathe deeply, Comrade Lieutenant. If you take your security provisions so seriously, you and your men should be in proper physical shape. I promise you that the Afghans are. Two winters ago I spent time with a *Spetznaz* team that chased them over a half dozen miserable mountains. We never did catch them." *But they caught us,* he didn't say. Bondarenko would never forget that ambush . . .

"Helicopters?"

"They cannot always fly in bad weather, my young Comrade, and in my case we were trying to establish that we, too, could fight in the mountains."

"Well, we have patrols out every day, of course."

It was the way he said it that bothered Bondarenko, and the Colonel made a mental note to check that out. "How far have we run?"

"Two kilometers."

"The altitude does make things difficult. Come, we will walk back."

The sunrise was spectacular. The blazing sphere edged above a nameless mountain to the east, and its light marched down the nearer slopes, chasing the shadows into the deep, glacial valleys. This installation was no easy objective, even for the inhuman barbarians of the *mudjaheddin.* The guard towers were well sited, with clear fields of fire that extended for several kilometers. They didn't use searchlights out of consideration for the civilians who lived here, but night-vision devices were a better choice in any case, and he was sure that the KGB troops used those. And—he shrugged—site security wasn't the reason he'd been sent down, though it was a fine excuse to needle the KGB security detail.

"May I ask how you obtained your exercise clothing?" the KGB officer asked when he was able to breathe properly.

"Are you a married man, Comrade Lieutenant?"

"Yes, I am, Comrade Colonel."

"Personally, I do not question my wife on where she buys her birthday presents for me. Of course, I am not a *chekist."* Bondarenko did a few deep knee-bends to show that he was, however, a better man.

"Colonel, while our duties are not quite the same, we both serve the Soviet Union. I am a young, inexperienced officer, as you have already made quite clear. One of the things that disturbs me is the unnecessary rivalry between the Army and the KGB."

Bondarenko turned to look at the Lieutenant. "That was well said, my young Comrade. Perhaps when you wear general's stars, you will remember the sentiment."

He dropped the KGB Lieutenant back at the guard post and walked briskly back to the apartment block, the morning breeze threatening to freeze the sweat on his neck. He went inside and took the elevator up. Not surprisingly, there was no hot water for his shower this early in the morning. The Colonel endured it cold, chasing away the last vestiges of sleep, shaved and dressed before walking over to the canteen for breakfast.

He didn't have to be at the Ministry until nine, and on the way was a steam bath. One of the things Filitov had learned over the years was that nothing could chase away a hangover and clear your head like steam. He'd had enough practice. His sergeant drove him to the Sandunovski Baths on Kuznetskiy Most, six blocks from the Kremlin. It was his usual Wednesday morning stop in any case. He was not alone, even this early. A handful of other probably important people trudged up the wide marble steps to the second floor's first-class (not called that now, of course) facilities, since thousands of Moscovites shared with the Colonel both his disease and its cure. Some of them were women, and Misha wondered if the female facilities were very different from those he was about to use. It was strange. He'd been coming here since he joined the Ministry in 1943, and yet he'd never gotten a

peek into the women's section. *Well, I am too old for that now.*

His eyes were bloodshot and heavy as he undressed. Naked, he took a heavy bath towel from the pile at the end of the room, and a handful of birch branches. Filitov breathed the cool, dry air of the dressing room before opening the door that led to the steam rooms. The once-marble floor was largely replaced now with orange tiles. He could remember when the original floor had been nearly intact.

Two men in their fifties were arguing about something, probably politics. He could hear their rasping voices above the hiss of steam coming off the hotbox that occupied the center of the room. Misha counted five other men, their heads stooped over, each of them enduring a hangover in grumpy solitude. He selected a seat in the front row, and sat.

"Good morning, Comrade Colonel," a voice said from five meters away.

"And to you, Comrade Academician," Misha greeted his fellow regular. His hands were wrapped tightly around his bundle of branches while he waited for the sweat to begin. It didn't take long—the room temperature was nearly one hundred forty degrees Fahrenheit. He breathed carefully, as the experienced ones did. The aspirins he'd taken with his morning tea were beginning to work, though his head was still heavy and the sinuses around his eyes swollen. He swatted the branches across his back, as though to exorcize the poisons from his body.

"And how is the Hero of Stalingrad this morning?" the academic persisted.

"About as well as the genius of the Ministry of Education." This drew a painful laugh. Misha never could remember his name . . . Ilya Vladimirovich Somethingorother. What sort of fool could laugh during a hangover? The man drank because of his wife, he said. *You drink to be free of her, do you? You boast of the times you've fucked your secretary, when I would trade my soul for one more look at Elena's face.* And my sons' faces, he told himself. My two handsome sons. It was well to remember these things on such mornings.

"Yesterday's *Pravda* spoke of the arms negotiations," the man persisted. "Is there hope for progress?"

"I have no idea," Misha replied.

An attendant came in. A young man, perhaps twenty-five or so and short. He counted heads in the room.

"Does anyone wish a drink?" he asked. Drinking was absolutely forbidden in the baths, but as any true Russian would say, that merely made the vodka taste better.

"No!" came the reply in chorus. No one was the least interested in the hair of the dog this morning, Misha noted with mild surprise. Well, it was the middle of the week. On a Saturday morning it would be very different.

"Very well," the attendant said on the way out the door. "There will be fresh towels outside, and the pool heater has been repaired. Swimming is also fine exercise, Comrades. Remember to use the muscles that you are now baking, and you will be refreshed all day."

Misha looked up. *So this is the new one.*

"Why do they have to be so damned cheerful?" asked a man in the corner.

"He is cheerful because he is *not* a foolish old drunk!" another answered. That drew a few chuckles.

“Five years ago vodka didn’t do this to me. I tell you, quality control is not what it used to be,” the first went on.

“Neither is your liver, Comrade!”

“A terrible thing to get old.” Misha turned around to see who said that. It was a man barely fifty, whose swollen belly was the color of dead fish and who smoked a cigarette, also in violation of the rules.

“A more terrible thing not to, but you young men have forgotten that!” he said automatically, and wondered why. Heads came up and saw the burn scars on his back and chest. Even those who did not know who Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov was knew that this was not a man to be trifled with. He sat quietly for another ten minutes before leaving.

The attendant was outside the door when he emerged. The Colonel handed over his branches and towel, then walked off to the cold-water showers. Ten minutes later he was a new man, the pain and depression of the vodka gone, and the strain behind him. He dressed quickly and walked downstairs to where his car was waiting. His sergeant noted the change in his stride and wondered what was so curative about roasting yourself like a piece of meat.

The attendant had his own task. On asking again a few minutes later, it turned out that two people in the steam room had changed their minds. He trotted out the building’s back door to a small shop whose manager made more money selling drink “on the left” than he did by dry-cleaning. The attendant returned with a half-liter bottle of “Vodka”—it had no brand name as such; the premium Stolychnaya was made for export and the elite—at a little over double the market price. The imposition of sales restrictions on alcohol had begun a whole new—and extremely profitable—part of the city’s black market. The attendant had also passed along a small film cassette that his contact had handed over with the birch branches. For his part, the bath attendant was also relieved. This was his only contact. He didn’t know the man’s name, and had spoken the code phrase with the natural fear that this part of the CIA’s Moscow network had long since been compromised by the KGB’s counterintelligence department, the dreaded Second Chief Directorate. His life was already forfeit and he knew it. But he had to do something. Ever since his year in Afghanistan, the things he’d seen, and the things he’d been forced to do. He wondered briefly who that scarred old man was, but reminded himself that the man’s nature and identity were not his concern.

The dry-cleaning shop catered mainly to foreigners, providing service to reporters, businessmen, and a few diplomats, along with the odd Russian who wished to protect clothing purchased abroad. One of these picked up an English overcoat, paid the three rubles, and left. She walked two blocks to the nearest Metro station, taking the escalator down to catch her train on the Zhdanovsko-Krasnopresnenskaya line, the one marked in purple on the city maps. The train was crowded, and no one could have seen her pass the cassette. In fact, she herself didn’t see the face of the man. He in turn made his way off the train at the next station, Pushkinskaya, and crossed over to Gor’kovskaya Station. One more transfer was made ten minutes later, this one to an American who was on his way to the embassy a little late this morning, having stayed long at a diplomatic reception the previous night.

His name was Ed Foley; he was the press attaché at the embassy on Ulitsa

Chaykovskogo. He and his wife, Mary Pat, another CIA agent, had been in Moscow for nearly four years, and both were looking forward to putting this grim, gray town behind them once and for all. They had two children, both of whom had been denied hot dogs and ball games long enough.

It wasn't that their tour of duty hadn't been successful. The Russians knew that CIA had a number of husband-wife teams in the field, but the idea that spies would take their children abroad wasn't something that the Soviets could accept easily. There was also the matter of their cover. Ed Foley had been a reporter with the *New York Times* before joining the State Department—because, as he explained it, the money wasn't much different and a police reporter never traveled farther than Attica. His wife stayed home with the children for the most part—though she did substitute-teach when needed at the Anglo-American School at 78 Leninsky Prospekt—often taking them out in the snow. Their older son played on a junior hockey team, and the KGB officers who trailed them around had it written up in their file that Edward Foley II was a pretty good wingman for a seven-year-old. The Soviet government's one real annoyance with the family was the elder Foley's inordinate curiosity about street crime in their capital, which was at its worst a far cry from what he had written about in New York City. But that proved that he was relatively harmless. He was far too obviously inquisitive to be any kind of intelligence officer. They, after all, did everything possible to be inconspicuous.

Foley walked the last few blocks from the Metro station. He nodded politely to the militiaman who guarded the door to the grimly decorous building, then to the Marine sergeant inside before going to his office. It wasn't much. The embassy was officially described in the State Department's USSR Post Report as "cramped and difficult to maintain." The same writer might call the burned-out shell of a South Bronx tenement a "fixer-upper," Foley thought. In the building's last renovation, his office had been remade from a storage room and broom closet into a marginally serviceable cubicle about ten feet square. The broom closet, however, was his private darkroom, and that was why the CIA station had had one of its people in this particular room for over twenty years, though Foley was the first station chief to be housed there.

Only thirty-three, tall but very thin, Foley was an Irishman from Queens whose intellect was mated to an impossibly slow heart rate and a pokerface that had helped him earn his way through Holy Cross. Recruited by CIA in his senior year, he'd spent four years with the *Times* to establish his own personal "legend." He was remembered in the city room as an adequate, if rather lazy reporter who turned out workmanlike copy but never would really go anywhere. His editor hadn't minded losing him to government service, since his departure made room for a youngster from Columbia's School of Journalism with hustle and a real nose for what was happening. The current *Times* correspondent in Moscow had described him to his own colleagues and contacts as a nebbish, and rather a dull one at that, and in doing so gave Foley the most sought-after compliment in the business of espionage: *Him? He's not smart enough to be a spy.* For this and several other reasons, Foley was entrusted with running the Agency's longest-lived, most productive agent-in-place, Colonel Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov, code name CARDINAL. The name

itself, of course, was sufficiently secret that only five people within the Agency knew that it meant more than a red-caped churchman with princely diplomatic rank.

Raw CARDINAL information was classified Special Intelligence /Eyes Only-Δ, and there were only six Δ-cleared officials in the entire American government. Every month the code word for the data itself was changed. This month's name was SATIN, for which less than twenty others were cleared. Even under that title, the data was invariably paraphrased and subtly altered before going outside the Δ fraternity.

Foley took the film cassette from his pocket and locked himself in the darkroom. He could go through the developing process drunk and half-asleep. In fact, a few times, he had. Within six minutes, the job was done, and Foley cleaned up after himself. His former editor in New York would have found his neatness in Moscow surprising.

Foley followed procedures that had been unchanged for nearly thirty years. He reviewed the six exposed frames through a magnifying glass of the type used to inspect 35mm slides. He memorized each frame in a few seconds, and began typing a translation on his personal portable typewriter. It was a manual whose well-worn cloth ribbon was too frayed to be of use to anyone, particularly the KGB. Like many reporters, Foley was not a good typist. His pages bore strikeovers and X-outs. The paper was chemically treated, and you couldn't use an eraser on it. It took nearly two hours for him to finish the transcription. When done, he made a final check of the film to guarantee that he hadn't left anything out, nor made any serious grammatical mistakes. Satisfied, but with a tremor that he never quite got over, he crumpled the film into a ball and set it in a metal ashtray, where a wooden kitchen match reduced the only direct evidence of CARDINAL's existence to ashes. He then smoked a cigar to disguise the distinctive smell of burning celluloid. The folded typescript pages went into his pocket, and Foley walked upstairs to the embassy's communications room. Here he drafted an innocuous dispatch to Box 4108, State Department, Washington: "Reference your 29 December. Expense report en route via pouch. Foley. Ends." As press attaché, Foley had to pick up a lot of bar bills for former colleagues who held him in contempt that he didn't bother returning; he had to do quite a few expense reports for the cookie-pushers at Foggy Bottom, and it amused him greatly that his press brethren worked so hard at maintaining his cover for him.

Next he checked with the embassy's courier-in-residence. Though little known, this was one aspect of life at the Moscow post that hadn't changed since the 1930s. There was always a courier to take the bag out, though nowadays he had other duties, too. The courier was also one of four people in the embassy who knew which government agency Foley really worked for. A retired Army warrant officer, he had a DSC and four Purple Hearts for flying casualties out of Vietnam battlefields. When he smiled at people, he did so in the Russian way, with the mouth but almost never the eyes.

"Feel like flying home tonight?"

The man's eyes lit up. "With the Super Bowl this Sunday? You're kidding. Stop by your office around four?"

"Right." Foley closed the door and returned to his office. The courier

booked himself on the British Airways 5:40 P.M. flight to Heathrow.

The difference in time zones between Washington and Moscow virtually guaranteed that Foley's messages reached D.C. early in the morning. At six, a CIA employee walked into the State Department mail room and extracted the message forms from a dozen or so boxes, then resumed his drive to Langley. A senior field officer in the Operations Directorate, he was barred from any further overseas duty due to an injury sustained in Budapest—where a street hoodlum had fractured his skull, and been locked up for five years by the irate local police. *If only they'd known,* the agent thought*, they'd have given him a medal.* He delivered the messages to the appropriate offices, and went to his own office.

The message form was lying on Bob Ritter's desk when he got to work at 7:25. Ritter was the Agency's Deputy Director for Operations. His turf, technically known as the Directorate of Operations, included all of the CIA's field officers and all of the foreign citizens they recruited and employed as agents. The message from Moscow—as usual there was more than one, but this one counted the most—was immediately tucked into his personal file cabinet, and he prepared himself for the 8:00 brief, delivered every day by the night-watch officers.

"It's open." Back in Moscow, Foley looked up when the knock came at the door. The courier stepped in.

"The plane leaves in an hour. I have to hustle."

Foley reached into his desk and pulled out what looked like an expensive silver cigarette case. He handed it over, and the courier handled it carefully before tucking it into his breast pocket. The typed pages were folded inside, along with a tiny pyrotechnic charge. If the case were improperly opened, or subjected to a sudden acceleration—like being dropped to a hard floor—the charge would go off and destroy the flash paper inside. It might also set fire to the courier's suit, which explained his care in handling it.

"I should be back Tuesday morning. Anything I can get you, Mr. Foley?"

"I hear there's a new *Far Side* book out . . ." That got a laugh.

"Okay, I'll check. You can pay me when I get back."

"Safe trip, Augie."

One of the embassy's drivers took Augie Giannini to Sheremetyevo Airport, nineteen miles outside of Moscow, where the courier's diplomatic passport enabled him to walk past the security checkpoints and right onto the British Airways plane bound for Heathrow Airport. He rode in the coach section, on the right side of the aircraft. The diplomatic pouch had the window seat, with Giannini in the middle. Flights out of Moscow were rarely crowded, and the seat on his left was also vacant. The Boeing started rolling on schedule. The Captain announced the time of flight and destination, and the airliner started moving down the runway. The moment it lifted off Soviet soil, as often happened, the hundred and fifty passengers applauded. It was something that always amused the courier. Giannini pulled a paperback from his pocket and started reading. He couldn't drink on the flight, of course, nor sleep, and he decided to wait for dinner until his next flight. The stewardess did manage to

get a cup of coffee into him, however.

Three hours later, the 747 thumped down at Heathrow. Again he was able to clear customs perfunctorily. A man who spent more time in the air than most commercial pilots, he had access to the first-class waiting rooms still allowed in most of the world's airports. Here he waited an hour for a 747 bound for Washington's Dulles International.

Over the Atlantic, the courier enjoyed a Pan Am dinner, and a movie that he hadn't seen before, which happened rarely enough. By the time he'd finished his book, the plane was swooping into Dulles. The courier ran his hand over his face and tried to remember what time it was supposed to be in Washington. Fifteen minutes later he climbed into a nondescript government Ford that headed southeast. He got into the front seat because he wanted the extra leg room.

"How was the flight?" the driver asked.

"Same as always: borrr-inggg." On the other hand, it beat flying medivac missions in the Central Highlands. The government was paying him twenty grand a year to sit on airplanes and read books, which, combined with his retirement pay from the Army, gave him a fairly comfortable life. He never bothered himself wondering what he carried in the diplomatic bag, or in this metal case in his coat. He figured it was all a waste of time anyway. The world didn't change very much.

"Got the case?" the man in the back asked.

"Yeah." Giannini took it from his inside pocket and handed it back, with both hands. The CIA officer in the back took it, using both hands, and tucked it inside a foam-lined box. The officer was an instructor in the CIA's Office of Technical Services, part of the Directorate of Science and Technology. It was an office that covered a lot of bureaucratic ground. This particular officer was an expert on booby traps and explosive devices in general. At Langley, he took the elevator to Ritter's office and opened the cigarette case on the latter's desk, then returned to his own office without looking at the contents.

Ritter walked to his personal Xerox machine and made several copies of the flash-paper pages, which were then burned. It was not so much a security measure as a simple safety precaution. Ritter didn't want a sheaf of highly flammable material in his personal office. He started reading the pages even before all the copies were done. As usual, his head started moving left and right by the end of the first paragraph. The Deputy Director for Operations walked to his desk and punched the line to the Director's office.

"You busy? The bird landed."

"Come on over," Judge Arthur Moore replied at once. Nothing was more important than data from CARDINAL.

Ritter collected Admiral Greer on the way, and the two of them joined the Director of Central Intelligence in his spacious office.

"You gotta love this guy," Ritter said as he handed the papers out. "He's conned Yazov into sending a colonel into Bach to do a 'reliability assessment' of the whole system. This Colonel Bondarenko is supposed to report back on how everything works, in layman's terms, so that the Minister can understand it all and report to the Politburo. Naturally, he detailed Misha to play gofer, so the report goes across his desk first."

"That kid Ryan met—Gregory, I think—wanted us to get a man into Dushanbe," Greer noted with a chuckle. "Ryan told him it was impossible."

"Good," Ritter observed. "Everybody knows what screw-ups the Operations Directorate is." The entire CIA took perverse pride in the fact that only its failure made the news. The Directorate of Operations in particular craved the public assessment that the press constantly awarded them. The foulups of the KGB never got the attention that CIA's did, and the public image, so often reinforced, was widely believed even in the Russian intelligence community. It rarely occurred to anyone that the leaks were purposeful.

"I wish," Judge Moore observed soberly, "that somebody would explain to Misha that there are old spies and bold spies, but very few old *and* bold ones."

"He's a very careful man, boss," Ritter pointed out.

"Yeah, I know." The DCI looked down at the pages.

Since the death of Dmitri Fedorovich, it is not the same at the Defense Ministry, the DCI read. *Sometimes I wonder if Marshal Yazov takes these new technological developments seriously enough, but to whom can I report my misgivings? Would KGB believe me? I must order my thoughts. Yes, I must organize my thoughts before I make any accusations. But can I break security rules . . .*

But what choice do I have? If I cannot document my misgivings, who will take me seriously? It is a hard thing to have to break an important rule of security, but the safety of the State supersedes such rules. It must.

As the epic poems of Homer began with the invocation of the Muse, so CARDINAL's messages invariably began like this. The idea had developed in the late 1960s. CARDINAL's messages began as photographs of his personal diary. Russians are inveterate diarists. Each time he began one, it would be as a Slavic *cri de coeur,* his personal worries about the policy decisions made in the Defense Ministry. Sometimes he would express concern with the security on a specific project or the performance of a new tank or aircraft. In each case, the technical merits of a piece of hardware or a policy decision would be examined at length, but always the focus of the document would be a supposed bureaucratic problem within the Ministry. If Filitov's apartment were ever searched, his diary would be easily found, certainly not hidden away as a spy was expected to do, and while he was definitely breaking rules of security, and would certainly be admonished for it, there would at least be a chance that Misha could successfully defend himself. Or, that was the idea.

When I have Bondarenko's report, in another week or two, perhaps I can persuade the Minister that this project is one of truly vital importance to the Motherland, it ended.

"So, it looks like they made a breakthrough on laser power output," Ritter said.

" 'Throughput' is the current term," Greer corrected. "At least that's what Jack tells me. This is not very good news, gentlemen."

"Your usual keen eye for detail, James," Ritter said. "God, what if they get there first?"

"It's not the end of the world. Remember that it'll take ten years to deploy the system even after the concept is validated, and they haven't come close to doing that yet," the DCI pointed out. "The sky is not falling. This could even work to our benefit, couldn't it, James?"

"If Misha can get us a usable description of their breakthrough, yes. In most areas we're further along than they are," the DDI replied. "Ryan will need this for his report."

"He's not cleared for this!" Ritter objected.

"He had a look at Delta information before," Greer noted.

"Once. Only once, and there was a good reason for it— and, yes, he did damned well for an amateur. James, there's nothing here he can use except that we have reason to suspect Ivan has made a power—throughput?—breakthrough, and that Gregory kid already suspects it. Tell Ryan we've confirmed the suspicion through other assets. Judge, you can tell the President yourself that something's up, but it'll have to wait a few weeks. It shouldn't go any farther than that for a while."

"Makes sense to me." The Judge nodded. Greer conceded the point without argument.

There was the temptation to voice the opinion that this was CARDINAL's most important mission, but that would have been too dramatic for any of the three senior executives, and besides, CARDINAL had provided CIA with a good deal of important data over the years. Judge Moore reread the report after the others had left. Foley had tagged onto the end that Ryan had literally bumped into CARDINAL after Mary Pat had given him the new assignment—and right in front of Marshal Yazov. Judge Moore shook his head. *What a pair, the Foleys.* And how remarkable that Ryan had, after a fashion, made contact with Colonel Filitov. Moore shook his head. It was a crazy world.

4.

Bright Stars and Fast Ships

JACK didn't bother asking which "asset" had confirmed Major Gregory's suspicions. Field operations were something that he struggled—successfully for the most part—to keep at arm's length. What mattered was that the information was graded as Class-1 for reliability—CIA's newly adopted grading system used numbers 1—5 instead of letters A—E, surely the result of six months' hard work by some deputy-assistant-to educated at Harvard Business School.

"What about specific technical information?"

"I'll let you know when it comes in," Greer replied.

"I got two weeks to deliver, boss," Ryan pointed out. Deadlines were never fun. This was especially true when the document being prepared was for the President's eyes.

"I do seem to recall reading that somewhere or other, Jack," the Admiral noted dryly. "The people at ACDA are calling me every day for the damned thing, too. I think what we'll do is have you run over to brief them in person."

Ryan winced. The whole point of his Special National Intelligence Estimate was to help set the stage for the next session of arms negotiations. The Arms Control and Disarmament Agency needed it also, of course, so that they'd know what to demand and how much they could safely concede. That was quite a bit of additional weight on his shoulders, but as Greer liked to tell him, Ryan did his best work under pressure. Jack wondered if maybe he should screw one up sometime, just to disprove that idea.

"When will I have to go over?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"Can I have a couple of days' warning?"

"We'll see."

Major Gregory was actually at home. This was fairly unusual; even more so, he was taking the day off. But that wasn't his doing. His General had decided that all work and no play were beginning to take their toll on the young man. It hadn't occurred to him that Gregory could work at home as well.

"Don't you ever stop?" Candi asked.

"Well, what are we supposed to do in between?" He smiled up from the keyboard.

The housing development was called Mountain View. It wasn't a rousing bit of originality. In that part of the country the only way not to see mountains was to close your eyes. Gregory had his own personal computer—a very powerful Hewlett-Packard provided by the Project—and occasionally wrote

some of his "code" there. He had to be careful about the security classification of his work, of course, though he often joked that he himself wasn't cleared for what he was doing. That was not an unknown situation inside government.

Dr. Candace Long was taller than her fiance at nearly five-ten, willowy, with short, dark hair. Her teeth were a little crooked because she'd never wanted to suffer through braces, and her glasses were even thicker than Alan's.

She was thin because like many academics she was so enthralled with her work that she often forgot to eat. They'd first met at a seminar for doctoral candidates at Columbia University. She was an expert in optical physics, specifically in adaptive-optics mirrors, a field she'd selected to complement her life-long hobby, astronomy. Living in the New Mexico highlands, she was able to do her own observations on a $5,000 Meade telescope, and, on occasion, to use the instruments at the Project to probe the heavens—because, she pointed out, it was the only effective way to calibrate them. She had little real interest in Alan's obsession with ballistic-missile defense, but she was certain that the instruments they were developing had all kinds of "real" applications in her field of interest.

Neither of them was wearing very much at the moment. Both young people cheerfully characterized themselves as nerds, and as is often the case, they had awakened feelings in one another—feelings that their more attractive college fellows would have not thought possible.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"It's the misses we had. I think the problem's in the mirror-control code."

"Oh?" It was *her* mirror. "You're sure it's software?"

"Yeah." Alan nodded. "I have the readouts from the Flying Cloud at the office. It was focusing just fine, but it was focusing on the wrong place."

"How long to find it?"

"Couple of weeks." He frowned at the screen, then shut it down. "The hell with it. If the General finds out that I'm doing this, he might never let me back in the door."

"I keep telling you." She wrapped her hands around the back of his neck. He leaned back, resting his head between her breasts. They were rather nice ones, he thought. For Alan Gregory it had been a remarkable discovery, how nice girls were. He'd dated occasionally in high school, but for the most part his life at West Point, then at Stony Brook, had been a monastic existence, devoted to studies and models and laboratories. When he'd met Candi, his initial interest had been in her ideas for configuring mirrors, but over coffee at the Student Union, he'd noticed in a rather clinical way that she was, well, attractive—in addition to being pretty swift with optical physics. The fact that the things they frequently discussed in bed could be understood by less than one percent of the country's population was irrelevant. *They* found it as interesting as the things that they did in bed—or almost so. There was a lot of experimentation to do there, too, and like good scientists, they'd purchased textbooks—that's how they thought of them—to explore all the possibilities. Like any new field of study, they found it exciting.

Gregory reached up to grasp Dr. Long's head, and pulled her face down to his.

"I don't feel like working anymore for a while."

"Isn't it nice to have a day off?"
"Maybe I can arrange one for next week . . ."

Boris Filipovich Morozov got off the bus an hour after sunset. He and fourteen other young engineers and technicians recently assigned to Bright Star—though he didn't even know the project name yet—had been met at the Dushanbe airport by KGB personnel who'd scrupulously checked their identity papers and photographs, and on the bus ride a KGB captain had given them a security lecture serious enough to get anyone's attention. They could not discuss their work with anyone outside their station; they could not write about what they did, and could not tell anyone where they were. Their mailing address was a post-office box in Novosibiirsk—over a thousand miles away. The Captain didn't have to say that their mail would be read by the base security officers. Morozov made a mental note not to seal his envelopes. His family might be worried if they saw that his letters were being opened and resealed. Besides, he had nothing to hide. His security clearance for this posting had taken a mere four months. The KGB officers in Moscow who'd done the background check had found his background beyond reproach, and even the six interviews that he'd gone through had ended on a friendly note.

The KGB Captain finished his lecture on a lighter note as well, describing the social and sport activities at the base, and the time and place for the biweekly Party meetings, which Morozov had every intention of attending as regularly as his work allowed. Housing, the Captain went on, was still a problem. Morozov and the other new arrivals would be placed in the dormitory—the original barracks put up by the construction gangs who'd blasted the installation into the living rock. They would not be crowded, he said, and the barracks had a game room, library, and even a telescope on the roof for astronomical observation; a small astronomy club had just formed. There was hourly bus service to the main residential facility, where there was a cinema, coffee shop, and a beer bar. There were exactly thirty-one unmarried females on the base, the Captain concluded, but one of them was engaged to him, "and any one of you who trifles with her *will be shot!"* That drew laughter. It wasn't very often that you met a KGB officer with a sense of humor.

It was dark when the bus pulled through the gate into the facility, and everyone aboard was tired. Morozov was not terribly disappointed at the housing. All the beds were two-level bunks. He was assigned the top berth in a corner. Signs on the wall demanded silence in the sleeping area, since the workers here worked three shifts around the clock. The young engineer was perfectly content to change his clothes and go to sleep. He was assigned to the Directional Applications Section for a month of project orientation, after which he'd receive a permanent job assignment. He was wondering what "directional applications" meant when he drifted off to sleep.

The nice thing about vans was that lots of people owned them, and the casual observer couldn't see who was inside, Jack thought as the white one pulled into his carport. The driver was CIA, of course, as was the security man in the right seat. He dismounted and surveyed the area for a moment before pulling the side door open. It revealed a familiar face.

"Hello, Marko," Ryan said.

"So, this is house of spy!" Captain First Rank Marko Aleksandrovich Ramius, Soviet Navy (retired), said boisterously. His English was better, but like many Russian émigrés he often forgot to use articles in his speech. "No, house of helmsman!"

Jack smiled and shook his head. "Marko, we can't talk about that."

"Your family does not know?"

"Nobody knows. But you can relax. My family's away."

"Understand." Marko Ramius followed Jack into the house. On his passport, Social Security card, and Virginia driver's license he was now known as Mark Ramsey. Yet another piece of CIA originality, though it made perfect sense; you wanted people to remember their names. He was, Jack saw, a little thinner now that he was eating a less starchy diet. And tan. When they'd first met, at the forward escape trunk of the missile submarine *Red October,* Marko —Mark!—had worn the pasty-white skin of a submarine officer. Now he looked like an ad for Club Med.

"You seem tired," "Mark Ramsey" observed.

"They fly me around a lot. How do you like the Bahamas?"

"You see my tan, yes? White sand, sun, warm every day. Like Cuba when I went there, but nicer people."

"AUTEC, right?" Jack asked.

"Yes, but I cannot discuss this," Marko replied. Both men shared a look. AUTEC—Atlantic Underwater Test and Evaluation Center—was the Navy's submarine test range, where men and ships engaged in exercises called miniwars. What happened there was classified, of course. The Navy was very protective of its submarine operations. So Marko was at work developing tactics for the Navy, doubtless playing the role of a Soviet commander in the war games, lecturing, teaching. Ramius had been known as "the Schoolmaster" in the Soviet Navy. The important things never change.

"How do you like it?"

"Tell this to nobody, but they let me be captain of American submarine for a week—the real Captain he let me do everything, yes? I kill carrier! Yes! I kill *Forrestal.* They would be proud of me at Red Banner Northern Fleet, yes?"

Jack laughed. "How'd the Navy like that?"

"Captain of submarine and me get very drunk. *Forrestal* Captain angry, but —good sport, yes? He join us next week and we discuss exercise. He learn something, so good for all of us." Ramius paused. "Where is family?"

"Cathy's visiting her father. Joe and I don't get along very well."

"Because you are spy?" Mark/Marko asked.

"Personal reasons. Can I get you a drink?"

"Beer is good," he replied. Ramius looked around while Jack went into the kitchen. The house's cathedral ceiling towered fifteen feet—five meters, he thought—above the lush carpeting. Everything about the house testified to the money spent to make it so. He was frowning when Ryan returned.

"Ryan, I am not fool," he said sternly. "CIA does not pay so good as this."

"Do you know about the stock market?" Ryan asked with a chuckie.

"Yes, some of my money is invested there." All of the officers from *Red October* had enough money salted away that they'd never need to work again.

"Well, I made a lot of money there, and then I decided to quit and do something else."

That was a new thought for Captain Ramius. "You are not—what is word? Greed. You have no more greed?"

"How much money does one man need?" Ryan asked rhetorically. The Captain nodded thoughtfully. "So, I have some questions for you."

"Ah, business." Marko laughed. "This you have not forgotten!"

"In your debriefing, you mentioned that you ran an exercise in which you fired a missile, and then a missile was fired at you."

"Yes, years ago—was 1981 . . . April, yes, it was twenty April. I command Delta-class missile submarine, and we fire two rockets from White Sea, one into Okhotsk Sea, other at Sary Shagan. We test submarine rockets, of course, but also the missile defense radar and counterbattery system—they simulated firing a missile at my submarine."

"You said it failed."

Marko nodded. "Submarine rockets fly perfectly. The Sary Shagan radar work, but too slow to intercept—was computer problem, they say. They say get new computer, last thing I hear. Third part of test almost work."

"The counterfire part. That's the first we heard of it," Ryan noted. "How did they actually run the test?"

"They not fire land rocket, of course," Marko said. He held up a finger. "They do this, and you understand nature of test, yes? Soviets are not so stupid as you think. Of course you know that entire Soviet border covered with radar fence. These see rocket launch and compute where submarine is—very easy thing to do. Next they call Strategic Rocket Force Headquarters. Strategic Rocket Force have regiment of old rockets on alert for this. They were ready to shoot back three minutes after detecting my missile on radar." He stopped for a moment. "You not have this in America?"

"No, not that I know of. But our new missiles fire from much farther away."

"Is true, but still good thing for Soviets, you see."

"How reliable is the system?"

That drew a shrug. "Not very. Problem is how alert the people are. In time of—how you say?—time of crisis, yes? In time of crisis, everyone is alert, and system may work some of time. But every time system works, many, many bombs do not explode in Soviet Union. Even one could save hundred thousand citizens. This is important to Soviet leadership. Hundred thousand more slaves to have after war end," he added to show his distaste for the government of his former homeland. "You have nothing like this in America?"

"Not that I have ever heard about," Ryan said truthfully.

Ramius shook his head. "They tell us you do. When we fire our rockets, then we dive deep and race at flank speed, straight line in any direction."

"Right now I'm trying to figure out how interested the Soviet government is in copying our SDI research."

"Interested?" Ramius snorted. "Twenty million Russians died in Great Patriotic War. You think they want to have this happen again? I tell you, Soviets are more intelligent about this than Americans—we have harder lesson, and we learn better. Someday I tell you about my home city after war, destruction of everything. Yes, we have very good lesson in protect *Rodina."*

That's the other thing to remember about the Russians, Jack reminded himself. It wasn't so much that they had abnormally long memories; they had things in their history that no one would forget. To expect the Soviets to forget their losses in the Second World War was as futile as asking Jews to forget the Holocaust, and just as unreasonable.

So, a little over three years ago, the Russians staged a major ABM exercise against submarine-launched ballistic missiles. The acquisition and tracking radar worked, but the system failed due to a computer problem. That was important. But —

"The reason the computer didn't work well enough—"

"That is all I know. All I can say is was honest test."

"What do you mean?" Jack asked.

"Our first . . . yes, our original orders were to fire from known location. But the orders were changed just as submarine left dock. Eyes-only to Captain, new orders signed by aide to Defense Minister. Was Red Army colonel, I think. Do not remember name. Orders from Minister, but Colonel sign them, yes? He wanted the test to be—how you say?"

"Spontaneous?"

"Yes! Not spontaneous. Real test should be surprise. So my orders sent me to different place and said to shoot at different time. We have general aboard from Voyska PVO, and when see new orders he is banana. Very, very angry, but what kind of test is it without no surprise? American missile submarines do not call on telephone and tell Russians day that they shoot. You either are ready or not ready," Ramius noted.

"We did not know that you were coming," General Pokryshkin noted dryly.

Colonel Bondarenko was careful to keep his face impassive. Despite having written orders from the Defense Minister, and despite belonging to a completely different uniformed service, he was dealing with a general officer with patrons of his own in the Central Committee. But the General, too, had to be wary. Bondarenko was wearing his newest and best-tailored uniform, complete with several rows of ribbons, including two awards for bravery in Afghanistan and the special badge worn by Defense Ministry staff officers.

"Comrade General, I regret whatever inconvenience I have caused you, but I do have my orders."

"Of course," Pokryshkin noted with a broadening smile. He gestured to a silver tray. "Tea?"

"Thank you."

The General poured two cups himself instead of summoning his orderly. "Is that a Red Banner I see? Afghanistan?"

"Yes, Comrade General, I spent some time there."

"And how did you earn it?"

"I was attached to a *Spetznaz* unit as a special observer. We were tracking a small band of bandits. Unfortunately, they were smarter than the unit commander believed, and he allowed us to follow them into an ambush. Half the team was killed or wounded, including the unit commander." *Who earned his death,* Bondarenko thought. "I assumed command and called in help. The bandits withdrew before we could bring major forces to bear, but they did

leave eight bodies behind."

"How did a communications expert—"

"I volunteered. We were having difficulties with tactical communications, and I decided to take the situation in hand myself. I am not a real combat soldier, Comrade General, but there are some things you have to see for yourself. That is another concern I have with this post. We are perilously close to the Afghan border, and your security seems . . . not lax, but perhaps overly comfortable."

Pokryshkin nodded agreement. "The security force is KGB, as you have doubtless noted. They report to me, but are not strictly under my orders. For early warning of possible threats, I have an arrangement with Frontal Aviation. Their aerialreconnaissance school uses the valleys around here as a training area. A classmate of mine at Frunze has arranged coverage of this entire area. If anyone approaches this installation from Afghanistan, it's a long walk, and we'll know about it long before they get here."

Bondarenko noted this with approval. Procurer for wizards or not, Pokryshkin hadn't forgotten everything, as too many general officers tended to do.

"So, Gennady Iosifovich, exactly what are you looking for?" the General asked. The atmosphere was somewhat milder now that both men had established their professionalism.

"The Minister wishes an appraisal of the effectiveness and reliability of your systems."

"Your knowledge of lasers?" Pokryshkin asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I am familiar with the applications side. I was on the team with Academician Goremykin that developed the new laser communications systems."

"Really? We have some of them here."

"I didn't know that," Bondarenko said.

"Yes. We use them in our guard towers, and to link our laboratory facilities with the shops. It's easier than stringing telephone lines, and is more secure. Your invention has proven very useful indeed, Gennady Iosifovich. Well. You know our mission here, of course."

"Yes, Comrade General. How close are you to your goal?"

"We have a major system test coming up in three days."

"Oh?" Bondarenko was very surprised by that.

"We received permission to run it only yesterday. Perhaps the Ministry hasn't been fully informed. Can you stay for it?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

"Excellent." General Pokryshkin rose. "Come, let's go to see my wizards."

The sky was clear and blue, the deeper blue that comes from being above most of the atmosphere. Bondarenko was surprised to see that the General did his own driving in a UAZ-469, the Soviet equivalent of a jeep.

"You do not have to ask, Colonel. I do my own driving because we do not have room up here for unnecessary personnel, and—well, I was a fighter pilot. Why should I trust my life to some beardless boy who barely knows how to shift gears? How do you like our roads?"

Not *at all,* Bondarenko didn't say as the General speeded down a slope. The

road was barely five meters wide, with a precipitous drop on the passenger side of the car.

"You should try this when it's icy!" The General laughed. "We've been lucky on weather lately. Last autumn we had nothing but rain for two weeks. Most unusual here; the monsoon's supposed to drop all the water on India, but the winter has been agreeably dry and clear." He shifted gears as the road bottomed out. A truck was coming from the other direction, and Bondarenko did all he could not to cringe as the jeep's right-side tires spun through rocks at the road's uneven edge. Pokryshkin was having some fun with him, but that was to be expected. The truck swept past with perhaps a meter of clearance, and the General moved back to the center of the blacktopped road. He shifted gears again as they came to an upslope.

"We don't even have room for a proper office here—for me at any rate," Pokryshkin noted. "The academicians have priority."

Bondarenko had seen only one of the guard towers that morning as he ran around the residential facility, and as the jeep climbed the last few meters, the Bright Star test area became visible.

There were three security checkpoints. General Pokryshkin stopped his vehicle and showed his pass at each of them.

"The guard towers?" Bondarenko asked.

"All manned round the clock. It is hard on the *chekisti.* I had to install electric heaters in the towers." The General chuckled. "We have more electrical power here than we know how to use. We originally had guard dogs running between the fences, too, but we had to stop that. Two weeks ago several of them froze to death. I didn't think that would work. We still have a few, but they walk about with the guards. I'd just as soon get rid of them."

"But—"

"More mouths to feed," Pokryshkin explained. "As soon as it snows, we have to bring food in by helicopter. To keep guard dogs happy, they must eat meat. Do you know what it does for camp morale to have dogs on a meat diet when our scientists don't have enough? Dogs aren't worth the trouble. The KGB commander agrees. He's trying to get permission to dispense with them altogether. We have starlight-scopes in all the towers. We can see an intruder long before a dog would smell or hear one."

"How big is your guard force?"

"A reinforced rifle company. One hundred sixteen officers and men, commanded by a lieutenant colonel. There are at least twenty guards on duty round the clock. Half here, half on the other hill. Right here, two men in each of the towers at all times, plus four on roving patrol, and of course the people at the vehicle checkpoints. The area is secure, Colonel. A full rifle company with heavy weapons on top of this mountain—to be sure, we had a *Spetznaz* team run an assault exercise last October. The umpires ruled them all dead before they got to within four hundred meters of our perimeter. One of them almost was, as a matter of fact. One pink-faced lieutenant damned near fell off the mountain." Pokryshkin turned. "Satisfied?"

"Yes, Comrade General. Please excuse my overly cautious nature."

"You didn't get those pretty ribbons from being a coward," the General observed lightly. "I am always open to new ideas. If you have something to

say, my door is never locked."

Bondarenko decided that he was going to like General Pokryshkin. He was far enough from Moscow not to act like an officious ass, and unlike most generals, he evidently didn't see a halo in the mirror when he shaved. Perhaps there was hope for this installation after all. Filitov would be pleased.

"It is like being a mouse, with a hawk in the sky," Abdul observed.

"Then do what a mouse does," the Archer replied evenly. "Stay in the shadows."

He looked up to see the An-26. It was five thousand meters overhead, and the whine of its turbine engines barely reached them. Too far for a missile, which was unfortunate. Other *mudjaheddin* missileers had shot the Antonovs down, but not the Archer. You could kill as many as forty Russians that way. And the Soviets were learning to use the converted transports for ground surveillance. That made life harder on the guerrillas.

The two men were following a narrow path along the side of yet another mountain, and the sun hadn't reached them yet, though most of the valley was fully lit under the cloudless winter sky. The bombed-out ruins of a village lay next to a modest river. Perhaps two hundred people had lived there once, until the high-altitude bombers came. He could see the craters, laid out in uneven lines two or three kilometers in length. The bombs had marched through the valley, and those who had not been killed were gone—to Pakistan—leaving only emptiness behind. No food to be shared with the freedom fighters, no hospitality, not even a mosque in which to pray. Part of the Archer still wondered why war had to be so cruel. It was one thing for men to fight one another; there was honor in that, at times enough to be shared with a worthy enemy. But the Russians didn't fight that way. *And they call us savages . . .*

So much was gone. What he had once been, the hopes for the future he'd once held, all of his former life slipped further away with the passage of every day. It seemed that he only thought of them when asleep now—and when he awoke, the dreams of a peaceful, contented life wafted away from his grasp like the morning mist. But even those dreams were fading away. He could still see his wife's face, and his daughter's, and his son's, but they were like photographs now, flat, lifeless, cruel reminders of times that would not return. But at least they gave his life purpose. When he felt pity for his victims, when he wondered if Allah really approved of what he did—of the things that had sickened him at first—he could close his eyes for a moment and remind himself why the screams of dying Russians were as sweet to his ears as the passionate cries of his wife.

"Going away," Abdul noted.

The Archer turned to look. The sun glinted off the plane's vertical rudder as it passed beyond the far ridges. Even if he'd been atop that rocky edge, the An-26 would have been too high. The Russians weren't fools. They flew no lower than they had to. If he really wanted to get one of those, he'd have to get close to an airfield . . . or perhaps come up with a new tactic. That was a thought. The Archer started ordering the problem in his mind as he walked along the endless rocky path.

"Will it work?" Morozov asked.

“That is the purpose of the test, to see if it works,” the senior engineer explained patiently. He remembered when he’d been young and impatient. Morozov had real potential. His documents from the university had shown that clearly enough. The son of a factory worker in Kiev, his intelligence and hard work had won him an appointment at the Soviet Union’s most prestigious school, where he had won the highest honors—enough to be excused from military service, which was unusual enough for someone without political connections.

“And this is new optical coating . . .” Morozov looked at the mirror from a distance of only a few centimeters. Both men wore overalls, masks, and gloves so that they would not damage the reflecting surface of the number-four mirror.

“As you have guessed, that is one element of the test.” The engineer turned. “Ready!”

“Get clear,” a technician called.

They climbed down a ladder fixed to the side of the pillar, then across the gap to the concrete ring that surrounded the hole.

“Pretty deep,” he observed.

“Yes, we have to determine how effective our vibration-isolation measures are.” The senior man was worried about that. He heard a jeep motor and turned to see the base commander lead another man into the laser building. Another visitor from Moscow, he judged. *How do we ever get work done with all those Party hacks hanging over our shoulders?*

“Have you met General Pokryshkin?” he asked Morozov.

“No. What sort of man is he?”

“I’ve met worse. Like most people, he thinks the lasers are the important part. Lesson number one, Boris Filipovich: it’s the mirrors that are the important part—that and the computers. The lasers are useless unless we can focus their energy on a specific point in space.” This lesson told Morozov which part of the project came under this man’s authority, but the newly certified engineer already knew the real lesson—the entire system had to work perfectly. One faulty segment would convert the most expensive piece of hardware in the Soviet Union into a collection of curious toys.

5.

Eye of the Snake/ Face of the Dragon

THE converted Boeing 767 had two names. Originally known as the Airborne Optical Adjunct, it was now called Cobra Belle, which at least sounded better. The aircraft was little more than a platform for as large an infrared telescope as could be made to fit in the wide-bodied airliner. The engineers had cheated somewhat, of course, giving the fuselage an ungainly humpback immediately aft of the flight deck that extended half its length, and the 767 did look rather like a snake that had just swallowed something large enough to choke on.

What was even more remarkable about the aircraft, however, was the lettering on its vertical tail: u.s. ARMY. This fact, which infuriated the Air Force, resulted from unusual prescience or obstinacy on the part of the Army, which even in the 1970s had never shut down its research into ballistic-missile defense, and whose "hobby shop" (as such places were known) had invented the infrared sensors on the AOA.

But it was now part of an Air Force program whose coverall name was Cobra. It worked in coordination with the Cobra Dane radar at Shemya, and often flew in conjunction with an aircraft called Cobra Ball—a converted 707—because Cobra was the code name for a family of systems aimed at tracking Soviet missiles. The Army was smugly satisfied that the Air Force needed its help, though wary of ongoing attempts to steal its program.

The flight crew went through its checklist casually, since they had plenty of time. They were from Boeing. So far the Army had successfully resisted attempts by the Air Force to get its own people on the flight deck. The copilot, who was ex-Air Force, ran his finger down the paper list of things to do, calling them off in a voice neither excited nor bored while the pilot and flight engineer/navigator pushed the buttons, checked the gauges, and otherwise made their aircraft ready for a safe flight.

The worst part of the mission was the weather on the ground. Shemya, one.of the western Aleutians, is a small island, roughly four miles long by two wide, whose highest point is a mere two hundred thirty-eight feet above the slate-gray sea. What passed for average weather in the Aleutians would close most reputable airports, and what they called bad weather here made the Boeing crew wish for Amtrak. It was widely believed on the base that the only reason the Russians sent their ICBM tests to the Sea of Okhotsk was to make life as miserable as possible for the Americans who monitored them. Today the weather was fairly decent. You could see almost to the far end of the runway, where the blue lights were surrounded by little globes of mist. Like most flyers, the pilot preferred daylight, but in winter that was the exception

here. He counted his blessings: there was supposed to be a ceiling at about fifteen hundred feet, and it wasn't raining yet. The crosswinds were a problem, too, but the wind never blew where you wanted up here—or more correctly, the people who laid out the runway hadn't known or cared that wind was a factor in flying airplanes.

"Shemya Tower, this is Charlie Bravo, ready to taxi."

"Charlie Bravo, you are cleared to taxi. Winds are two-five-zero at fifteen." The tower didn't have to say that Cobra Belle was number one in line. At the moment, the 767 was the only aircraft on the base. Supposedly in California for equipment tests, it had been rushed here only twenty hours earlier.

"Roger. Charlie Bravo is rolling." Ten minutes later the Boeing started down the runway, to begin what was expected to be yet another routine mission.

Twenty minutes later the AOA reached its cruising altitude of 45,000 feet. The ride was the same smooth glide known by airline passengers, but instead of downing their first drinks and making their dinner selections, the people aboard this aircraft had already unbuckled and gone to work.

There were instruments to activate, computers to recycle, data links to set up, and voice links to check out. The aircraft was equipped with every communications system known to man, and would have had a psychic aboard if that Defense Department program—there was one—had progressed as well as originally hoped. The man commanding it was an artilleryman with a masters in astronomy, of all things, from the University of Texas. His last command had been of a Patriot missile battery in Germany. While most men looked at airplanes and wished to fly them, his interest had always been in shooting them out of the sky. He felt the same way about ballistic missiles, and had helped develop the modification that enabled the Patriot missile to kill other missiles in addition to Soviet aircraft. It also gave him an intimate familiarity with the instruments used to track missiles in flight.

The mission book in the Colonel's hands was a facsimile print-out from the Washington headquarters of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) telling him that in four hours and sixteen minutes the Soviets would conduct a test firing of the SS-25 ICBM. The book didn't say how DIA had obtained that information, though the Colonel knew that it wasn't from reading an ad in *Izvestia.* Cobra Belle's mission was to monitor the firing, intercept all telemetry transmissions from the missile's test instruments, and, most important, to take pictures of the warheads in flight. The data collected would later be analyzed to determine the performance of the missile, and most particularly the accuracy of its warhead delivery, a matter of the greatest interest to Washington.

As mission commander, the Colonel didn't have a great deal to do. His control board was a panel of colored lights that showed the status of various onboard systems. Since the AOA was a fairly new item in the inventory, everything aboard worked reasonably well. Today the only thing currently "down" was a backup data link, and a technician was working to put that back on line while the Colonel sipped his coffee. It was something of an effort for him to look interested while he had nothing in particular to do, but if he started looking bored, it would set a bad example for his people. He reached in the zippered sleeve pocket of his flight suit for a butterscotch candy. These

were healthier than the cigarettes he'd smoked as a lieutenant, though not so good for his teeth, the base dentist liked to point out. The Colonel sucked on the candy for five minutes before he decided that he had to do *something.* He unstrapped from his command chair and went to the flight deck forward.

" 'Morning, people." It was now 0004-Lima, or 12:04 A.M., local time.

"Good morning, Colonel," the pilot replied for his crew. "Everything working in back, sir?"

"So far. How's the weather in the patrol area?"

"Solid undercast at twelve-to-fifteen thousand," the navigator answered, holding up a satellite photograph. "Winds three-two-five at thirty knots. Our nav systems check out with the track from Shemya," she added. Ordinarily the 767 operates with a crew of two flight officers. Not this one. Since the Korean Air 007 flight had been shot down by the Soviets, every flight over the Western Pacific was especially careful with its navigation. This was doubly true of Cobra Belle; the Soviets hated all intelligence-gathering platforms. They never went within fifty miles of Soviet territory, nor into the Russian Air Defense Identification Zone, but twice the Soviets had sent fighters to let the AOA know they cared.

"Well, we aren't supposed to get very close," the Colonel observed. He leaned between the pilot and copilot to look out the windows. Both turbofans were performing well. He would have preferred a four-engined aircraft for extended over-water flight, but that hadn't been his decision. The navigator raised an eyebrow at the Colonel's interest and got a pat on the shoulder by way of apology. It was time to leave.

"Time to observation area?"

"Three hours, seventeen minutes, sir; three hours thirtynine minutes to orbit point."

"Guess I have time for a nap," the Colonel said on his way to the door. He closed it and walked aft, past the telescope assembly to the main cabin. Why was it that the crews doing the flying now were so damned young? They probably think I *need* a nap instead of being bored to death.

Forward, the pilot and copilot shared a look. *Old fart doesn't trust us to fly the goddamned airplane, does he?* They adjusted themselves in their seats, letting their eyes scan for the blinking lights of other aircraft while the autopilot controlled the aircraft.

* * *

Morozov was dressed like the other scientists in the control room, in a white laboratory coat adorned with a security pass. He was still going through orientation, and his assignment to the mirror-control team was probably temporary, though he was beginning to appreciate just how important this part of the program was. In Moscow, he'd learned how lasers work, and done some impressive lab work with experimental models, but he'd never truly appreciated the fact that when the energy came out the front of the instruments the task had only begun. Besides, Bright Star had already made its breakthrough in laser power.

"Recycle," the senior engineer said into his headset.

They were testing the system calibration by tracking their mirrors on a distant star. It didn't even matter which star. They picked one at random for each test.

"Makes one hell of a telescope, doesn't it?" the engineer noted, looking at his TV screen.

"You were concerned about the stability of the system. Why?"

"We require a very high degree of accuracy, as you might imagine. We've never actually tested the complete system. We can track stars easily enough, but . . ." He shrugged. "This is still a young program, my friend. Just like you."

"Why don't you use radar to select a satellite and track on that?"

"That's a fine question!" The older man chuckled. "I've asked that myself. It has to do with arms-control agreements or some such nonsense. For the moment, they tell us, it is enough that they feed us coordinates of our targets via landline. We do not have to acquire them ourselves. Rubbish!" he concluded.

Morozov leaned back in his chair to look around. On the other side of the room, the laser-control team were shuffling about busily, with a flock of uniformed soldiers behind them whispering to themselves. Next he checked the clock—sixtythree minutes until the test began. One by one, the technicians were drifting off to the rest room. He didn't feel the need, nor did the section chief, who finally pronounced himself satisfied with his systems, and placed everything on standby.

At 22,300 miles over the Indian Ocean, an American Defense Support Program satellite hung in geosynchronous orbit over a fixed point on the Indian Ocean. Its huge cassegrainfocus Schmidt telescope was permanently aimed at the Soviet Union, and its mission was to provide first warning that Russian missiles had been launched at the United States. Its data was downlinked via Alice Springs, Australia, to various installations in the United States. Viewing conditions were excellent at the moment. Almost the entire visible hemisphere of the earth was in darkness, and the cold, wintry ground easily showed the smallest heat source in precise definition.

The technicians who monitored the DSPS in Sunnyvale, California, routinely amused themselves by counting industrial facilities. There was the Lenin Steel Plant at Kazan, and there was the big refinery outside Moscow, and there—

"Heads up," a sergeant announced. "We have an energy bloom at Plesetsk. Looks like one bird lifting off from the ICBM test facility."

The Major who had the duty this night immediately got on the phone to "Crystal Palace," the headquarters of the North American Aerospace Defense Command—NORAD—under Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado, to make sure that they were copying the satellite data. They were, of course.

"That's the missile launch they told us about," he said to himself.

As they watched, the bright image of the missile rocket exhaust started turning to an easterly heading as the ICBM arced over into the ballistic flight path that gave the missile its name. The Major had the characteristics of all Soviet missiles memorized. If this were an SS-25, the first stage would separate right about . . . now.

The screen bloomed bright before their eyes as a fireball six hundred yards in diameter appeared. The orbiting camera did the mechanical equivalent of a blink, altering its sensitivity after its sensors were dazzled by the sudden burst of heat energy. Three seconds later it was able to track on a cloud of heated fragments, curving down to earth.

"Looks like that one blew," the sergeant observed unnecessarily. "Back to the drawing board, Ivan . . ."

"Still haven't licked the second-stage problem," the Major added. He wondered briefly what the problem was, but didn't care all that much. The Soviets had rushed the -25 into production and had already begun deploying them on railcars for mobility, but they were still having problems with the solid-fuel bird. The Major was glad for it. It didn't take a great degree of unreliability in missiles to make their use a very chancy thing. And that uncertainty was still the best guarantee of peace.

"Crystal Palace, we call that test a failure at fifty-seven seconds after launch. Is Cobra Belle up to monitor the test?"

"That's affirmative," the officer on the other end replied. "We'll call them off."

"Right. 'Night, Jeff."

Aboard Cobra Belle, ten minutes later, the mission commander acknowledged the message and cut off the radio channel. He checked his watch and sighed. He didn't feel like heading back to Shemya yet. The Captain in charge of the mission hardware suggested that they could always use the time to calibrate their instruments. The Colonel thought about that one and nodded approval. The aircraft and crew were new enough that everyone needed the practice. The camera system was put in the MTI-mode. A computer that registered all the energy sources the telescope found began to search only for targets that were moving. The technicians on the screens watched as the Moving-Target Indicator rapidly eliminated the stars and began to find a few low-altitude satellites and fragments of orbiting space junk. The camera system was sensitive enough to detect the heat of a human body at a range of one thousand miles, and soon they had their choice of targets. The camera locked on them one by one and made its photographic images in digital code on computer tape. Though mainly a practice drill, this data would automatically be forwarded to NORAD, where it would update the register of information of orbiting objects.

"The power-output breakthrough you've made is breathtaking," Colonel Bondarenko said quietly.

"Yes," General Pokryshkin agreed. "Amazing how that happens, isn't it? One of my wizards notices something and tells another, who tells another, and the third says something that works its way back to the first, and so on. We have the best minds in the country here, and still the discovery process seems about as scientific as stubbing your toe on a chair! That's the odd part. But that's what makes it so exciting. Gennady Iosifovich, this is the most exciting thing I've done since I won my wings! This place will change the world. After thirty years of work, we may have discovered the basis of a system to protect the

Rodina against enemy missiles."

Bondarenko thought that was an overstatement, but the test would demonstrate just how much of an overstatement. Pokryshkin was the perfect man for this job, however. The former fighter pilot was a genius at directing the efforts of the scientists and engineers, many of whom had egos as large as a battle tank, though far more fragile. When he had to bully, he bullied. When he had to cajole, he cajoled. He was by turns the father, uncle, and brother to all of them. It took a man with a large Russian heart to do that. The Colonel guessed that commanding fighter pilots had been good training for this task, and Pokryshkin must have been a brilliant regimental commander. The balance between pressure and encouragement was so hard to strike, but this man managed it as easily as breathing. Bondarenko was watching how he did it very closely. There were lessons here that he could use in his own career.

The control room was separate from the laser building itself, and too small for the men and equipment it held. There were over a hundred engineers—sixty doctorates in physics—and even those called technicians could have taught the sciences at any university in the Soviet Union. They sat or hovered at their consoles. Most smoked, and the air-conditioning system needed to cool the computers struggled mightily to keep the air clear. Everywhere were digital counters. Most showed the time: Greenwich Mean Time, by which the satellites were tracked; local time; and, of course, Moscow Standard Time. Other counters showed the precise coordinates of the target satellite, Cosmos-1810, which bore the international satellite designator 1986-102A. It had been launched from the Cosmodrome at Tyuratam on December 26, 1986, and was still up because it had failed to deorbit with its film. Telemetry showed that its electrical systems were still functioning, though its orbit was slowly decaying, with a current perigee—the lowest point in its orbit—of one hundred eighty kilometers. It was now approaching perigee, directly over Bright Star.

"Powering up!" the chief engineer called over the intercom headsets. "Final system check."

"Tracking cameras on line," one technician reported. The wall speakers filled the room with his voice. "Cryogen flows nominal."

"Mirror tracking controls in automatic mode," reported the engineer sitting next to Morozov. The young engineer was on the edge of his swivel chair, eyes locked to a television screen that was as yet blank.

"Computer sequencing in automatic," a third said.

Bondarenko sipped at his tea, trying and failing to calm himself. He'd always wanted to be present for a space rocket launch, but never been able to arrange it. This was the same sort of thing. The excitement was overpowering. All around him machines and men were uniting into a single entity to make something happen as one after another announced the readiness of himself and his equipment. Finally:

"All laser systems are fully powered and on-line."

"We are ready to shoot," the chief engineer concluded the litany. All eyes turned to the right side of the building, where the team on the tracking cameras had their instruments trained on a section of the horizon to the northwest. A white dot appeared, coming upward into the black dome of the

night sky. . .

"Target acquisition!"

Next to Morozov, the engineer lifted his hands from the control panel to ensure that he wouldn't inadvertently touch a button. The "automatic" light was blinking on and off.

Two hundred meters away, the six mirrors arrayed around the laser building twisted and turned together, coming almost vertical with the ground as they tracked after a target sitting above the jagged, mountainous horizon. On the next knoll over, the four mirrors of the imaging array did the same. Outside, alarm klaxons sounded, and rotating hazard lights warned everyone in the open to turn away from the laser building.

On the TV screen next to the chief engineer's console sat a photograph of Cosmos-1810. As the final assurance against mistakes, he and three others had to make positive visual identification of their target.

"That one's Cosmos-1810," the Captain was telling the Colonel aboard Cobra Belle. "Broken recon bird. Must have had a reentry-motor failure—it didn't come back down when they told it to. It's in degenerating orbit, should have about four more months left. The satellite's still sending routine telemetry data out. Nothing important, far as we can tell, just telling Ivan that it's still up there."

"The solar panels must still be working," the Colonel observed. The heat came from internal power.

"Yeah. I wonder why they didn't just turn it off . . . Anyway, the onboard temperature reads out at, oh, fifteen degrees Celsius or so. Nice cold background to read it against. In sunlight we might not have been able to pick out the difference between onboard and solar heating . . ."

The mirrors in the laser-transmitter array tracked slowly, but the movement was discernible on the six television screens that monitored them. A low-power laser reflected off one mirror, reaching out to find the target . . . In addition to aiming the whole system, it made a high-resolution image on the command console. The identity of the target was now confirmed. The chief engineer turned the key that "enabled" the entire system. Bright Star was now fully out of human hands, controlled wholly by the site's main computer complex.

"There's target lock," Morozov observed to his senior.

The engineer nodded agreement. His range readout was rapidly dropping as the satellite came toward them, circling its way to destruction at 18,000 miles per hour. The image they had was of a slightly oblong blob, white with internal heat against a sky devoid of warmth. It was exactly in the center of the targeting reticle, like a white oval in a gunsight.

They didn't hear anything, of course. The laser building was fully insulated against temperature and sound. Nor did they see anything on ground level. But, watching the television screens in the control building, a hundred men balled hands into fists at the same instant.

"What the hell!" the Captain exclaimed. The image of Cosmos-1810

suddenly went as bright as the sun. The computer instantly adjusted its sensitivity, but for several seconds failed to keep pace with the change in the target's temperature.

"What in hell hit . . . Sir, that can't be internal heat." The Captain punched up a command on his keyboard and got a digital readout of the satellite's apparent temperature. Infrared radiation is a fourth-power function. The heat given off by an object is the *square of the square* of its temperature. "Sir, the target temperature went from fifteen-C to . . . looks like eighteen hundred-C in under two seconds. Still climbing . . . wait, it's dropping—no, it's climbing again. Rate of rise is irregular, almost like . . . Now it's dropping. What in the hell was that?"

To his left, the Colonel started punching buttons on his communications console, activating an encrypted satellite link to Cheyenne Mountain. When he spoke, it was in the matter-of-fact tone that professional soldiers save for only the worst nightmares. The Colonel knew exactly what he'd just seen.

"Crystal Palace, this is Cobra Belle. Stand by to copy a Superflash message."

"Standing by."

"We have a high-energy event. I say again, we are tracking a high-energy event. Cobra Belle declares a Dropshot. Acknowledge." He turned to the Captain, and his face was pale.

At NORAD headquarters, the senior watch officer had to quickly check his memory to remember what a Dropshot was. Two seconds later, a "Jesus" was spoken into his headset. Then: "Cobra Belle, we acknowledge your last. We acknowledge your Dropshot. Stand by while we get moving here. Jesus," he said again, and turned to his deputy. "Transmit a Dropshot Alert to the NMCC and tell them to stand by for hard data. Find Colonel Welch and get him in code here." The watch officer next lifted a phone and punched the code for his ultimate boss, Commander in Chief of North American Aerospace Defense Command, CINC-NORAD.

"Yes," a gruff voice said over the phone.

"General, this is Colonel Henriksen. Cobra Belle has declared a Dropshot Alert. They say they have just seen a high-energy event."

"Have you informed NMCC?"

"Yes, sir, and we're calling Doug Welch in also."

"Do you have their data yet?"

"It'll be ready when you get here."

"Very well, Colonel. I'm on the way. Get a bird up to Shemya to fly that Army guy down."

* * *

The Colonel aboard Cobra Belle was now talking to his communications officer, ordering him to send everything they had via digital link to NORAD and Sunnyvale. This was accomplished in under five minutes. Next the mission commander told the flight crew to return to Shemya. They still had enough fuel for two more hours of patrolling, but he figured that nothing else would

be happening tonight. What had taken place to this point was enough. The Colonel had just had the privilege of witnessing something that few men in human history ever saw. He had just seen the world change, and unlike most men, he understood the significance of it. It was an honor, he told himself, that he would just as soon have never seen.

"Captain, they got there first." *Dear God.*

Jack Ryan was just about to take the cloverleaf exit off I-495 when his car phone rang.

"Yes?"

"We need you back here."

"Right." The line clicked off. Jack took the exit and stayed in the curb lane, continuing to take another of the sweeping cloverleaf exits back onto the Washington Beltway, and back to CIA. It never failed. He'd taken the afternoon off to meet with the SEC people. It had turned out that the company officers had been cleared of any wrongdoing, and that cleared him, too—or would, if the SEC investigators ever closed their file. He'd hoped to call it a day and drive home. Ryan grumbled as he headed back toward Virginia, wondering what today's crisis was.

Major Gregory and three members of his software team were all standing by a blackboard, diagramming the flow of their mirror-control program package when a sergeant entered the room.

"Major, you're wanted on the phone."

"I'm busy; can it wait?"

"It's General Parks, sir."

"His master's voice," Al Gregory grumbled. He tossed the chalk to the nearest man and walked out of the room. He was on the phone in a minute.

"There's a helicopter on its way to pick you up," the

General said without any pleasantries.

"Sir, we're trying to nail down—"

"There'll be a Lear waiting for you at Kirtland. Not enough time to get you here on a commercial bird. You won't need to pack. Get moving, Major!"

"Yessir."

"What went wrong?" Morozov asked. The engineer stared at his console, an angry frown on his face.

"Thermal blooming. Damn! I thought we'd put that one behind us."

Across the room, the low-powered laser system was making another image of the target. The monocolor image was like a close-up black-and-white photograph, though what would have been black was maroon instead. The television technicians made up a split-screen image to compare before and after.

"No holes," Pokryshkin noted sourly.

"So what?" Bondarenko said in surprise. "My God, man, you melted the thing! That looks like it was dipped in a ladle of molten steel." And indeed it

did. What had been flat surfaces were now rippled from the intense heat that was still radiating away. The solar cells arrayed on the body of the satellite—which were designed to absorb light energy—appeared to be burned off entirely. On closer inspection, the entire satellite body was distorted from the energy that had blasted it.

Pokryshkin nodded, but his expression hadn't changed. "We were supposed to have chopped a hole right through it. If we can do that, it would look as though a piece of orbiting space junk had impacted the satellite. That's the kind of energy concentration we were looking for."

"But you can now destroy any American satellite you wish!"

"Bright Star wasn't built to destroy satellites, Colonel. We can already do that easily enough."

And Bondarenko got the message. Bright Star had, in fact, been built for that specific purpose, but the power breakthrough that had justified the funding for the installation exceeded expectations by a factor of four, and Pokryshkin wanted to make two leaps at once, to demonstrate an antisatellite capability *and* a system that could be adapted to ballistic-missile defense. This was an ambitious man, though not in the usual sense.

Bondarenko set that aside and thought about what he'd seen. What had gone wrong? It must have been thermal blooming. As the laser beams chopped through the air, they'd transferred a fractional amount of their power as heat in the atmosphere. This had roiled the air, disturbing the optical path, moving the beam on and off the target and also spreading the beam wider than its intended diameter.

But despite that, it had still been powerful enough to melt metal one hundred eighty kilometers away! the Colonel told himself. This was no failure. It was a giant leap toward a wholly new technology.

"Any damage to the system?" the General asked the project director.

"None, otherwise we'd not have gotten the follow-up image. It would appear that our atmospheric-compensation measures are sufficient for the imaging beam but not for the high-power transmission. Half a success, Comrade General."

"Yes." Pokryshkin rubbed his eyes for a moment and spoke more firmly. "Comrades, we have demonstrated great progress tonight, but there is still more work to be done."

"And that's my job," Morozov's neighbor said. "We'll solve this son of a bitch!"

"Do you need another man for your team?"

"It's part mirrors and part computers. How much do you know about those?"

"That is for you to decide. When do we begin?"

"Tomorrow. It'll take twelve hours for the telemetry people to organize their data. I'm going to catch the next bus back to my flat and have a drink. My family is away for another week. Care to join me?"

"What do you think that was?" Abdul asked.

They had just gotten to the top of a ridge when the meteor had appeared. At least, it had looked like a meteor's fiery track across the sky at first. But the

thin golden line had hung there, and actually marched upward—very quickly, but it had been discernible.

A thin golden line, the Archer thought. The air itself had glowed. What made the air do that? He forgot where and who he now was for a moment, thinking back to his university days. *Heat* made air do that. Only heat. When a meteor came down, the friction of its passage . . . but this line could not have been a meteor. Even if the upward stroke had been an illusion—and he wasn't sure of that; eyes could play tricks—the golden line had lasted for nearly five seconds. Perhaps longer, the Archer reflected. Your mind couldn't measure time either. Hmph. He sat down abruptly and pulled out his note pad. The CIA man had given him that and told him to keep a diary of events. A useful thing to do; it hadn't ever occurred to him. He wrote down the time, date, place, and approximate direction. In a few more days he'd be heading back to Pakistan, and perhaps the CIA man would find this interesting.

6.

One if by Land

IT was dark when he arrived. Gregory's driver came off the George Washington Parkway toward the Pentagon's Mall entrance. The guard raised the gate, allowing the nondescript government Ford—the Pentagon was buying Fords this year—to proceed up the ramp, loop around the handful of parked cars, and drop him off at the steps right behind a shuttle bus. Gregory knew the routine well enough: show the guard the pass, walk through the metal detector, then down the corridor filled with state flags, past the cafeteria, and down the ramp to the shopping arcade lit and decorated in the style of a 12th-century dungeon. In fact, Gregory had played Dungeons and Dragons in high school, and his first trip to the dreary polygon of a building had convinced him that the authors' inspiration had come from this very place.

The Strategic Defense Initiative Office was beneath the Pentagon's shopping concourse (its entrance, in fact, directly under the pastry shop), a space about a thousand feet long that had previously been the bus and taxi stand—before the advent of car bombs had persuaded the nation's defense community that automobiles were not all that fine a thing to have under the E-ring. This portion of the building, therefore, was the newest and most secure office—for the nation's newest and least secure military program. Here Gregory took out his other pass. He showed it to the four people at the security desk, then held it against the wall panel that interrogated its electromagnetic coding and decided that the Major could enter. This took him through a waiting room to double glass doors. He smiled at the receptionist as he went through, then at General Parks's secretary. She nodded back, but was annoyed to be staying so late and was not in a smiling mood.

Neither was Lieutenant General Bill Parks. His spacious office included a desk, a low table for coffee and intimate talks, and a larger conference table. The walls were covered with framed photographs of various space activities, along with numerous models of real and imagined space vehicles . . . and weapons. Parks was usually a genial man. A former test pilot, he'd marched through a career so accomplished that one would expect a bluff-hearty handshaker to have done it. Instead, Parks was an almost monkish person, with a smile that was at once engagingly shy and quietly intense. His many ribbons did not adorn his short-sleeved shirt, only a miniature of his command-pilot's wings. He didn't have to impress people with what he'd done. He could do so with what he was. Parks was one of the brightest people in government, certainly in the top ten, perhaps in the top one. Gregory saw that the General had company tonight.

"We meet again, Major," Ryan said, turning. In his hands was a ring binder of perhaps two hundred pages that he was halfway through.

Gregory came to attention—for Parks—and reported-asordered, sir.

"How was the flight?"

"Super. Sir, is the soda machine in the same place? I'm a little dried out."

Parks grinned for half a second. "Go ahead, we're not in that much of a hurry.

"You have to love the kid," the General said after the door closed behind him.

"I wonder if his mom knows what he's doing after school." Ryan chuckled, then turned serious. "He hasn't seen any of this yet, right?"

"No, we didn't have time, and the Colonel from the Cobra Belle won't be here for another five hours."

Jack nodded. That was why the only CIA people here were himself and Art Graham from the satellite unit. Everyone else would get a decent night's sleep while they prepared the full briefing for tomorrow morning. Parks could have skipped it himself and left the work to his senior scientists, but he wasn't that sort of man. The more Ryan saw of Parks, the more he liked him. Parks fulfilled the first definition of a leader. He was a man with a vision—and it was a vision with which Ryan agreed. Here was a senior man in uniform who hated nuclear weapons. That wasn't terribly unusual—people in uniform tend to be rather tidy, and nuclear weapons make for a very untidy world. Quite a few soldiers, sailors, and airmen had swallowed their opinions and built careers around weapons that they hoped would never be used. Parks had spent the last ten years of his career trying to find a way to eliminate them. Jack liked people who tried to swim against the tide. Moral courage was more rare a commodity than the physical kind, a fact as true of the military profession as any other.

Gregory reappeared with a can of Coca-Cola from a machine near the door. Gregory didn't like coffee. It was time for work.

"What gives, sir?"

"We have a videotape from Cobra Belle. They were up to monitor a Soviet ICBM test. Their bird—it was an SS-25-blew, but the mission commander decided to stay up and play with his toys. This is what he saw." The General lifted the remote-control for the VCR and thumbed the Play button.

"That's Cosmos-1810," Art Graham said, handing over a photograph. "It's a recon bird that went bad on them."

"Infrared picture on the TV, right?" Gregory asked, sipping at his Coke. "God!"

What had been a single dot of light blossomed like an exploding star in a science-fiction movie. But this wasn't science fiction. The picture changed as the computerized imaging system fought to keep up with the energy burst. At the bottom of the screen a digital display appeared, showing the apparent temperature of the glowing satellite. In a few seconds the image faded, and again the computer had had to adjust to keep track on the Cosmos.

There was a second or two of static on the screen, then a new image began to form.

"This is ninety minutes old. The satellite went over Hawaii a few orbits

later," Graham said. "We have cameras there to eyeball the Russian satellites. Look at the shot I gave you."

" 'Before' and 'After,' right?" Gregory's eyes flicked from one image to another. "Solar panels are gone . . . wow. What's the body of the satellite made of?"

"Aluminum, for the most part," Graham said. "The Russians go in for ruggeder construction than we do. The internal frames may be made of steel, but more likely titanium or magnesium."

"That gives us a top-end figure for the energy transfer," Gregory said. "They killed the bird. They got it hot enough to fry the solar cells right off, and probably enough to disrupt the electrical circuitry inside. What height was it at?"

"One hundred eighty kilometers."

"Sary Shagan or that new place Mr. Ryan showed me?"

"Dushanbe," Jack said. "The new one."

"But the new power lines aren't finished yet."

"Yeah," Graham observed. "They can at least double the power we just saw demonstrated. Or at least they think they can." His voice was that of a man who had just discovered a fatal disease at work on a family member.

"Can I see the first sequence again?" Gregory said. It was almost an order. Jack noted that General Parks carried it out at once.

This continued for another fifteen minutes, with Gregory standing a bare three feet from the television monitor, drinking his Coke and staring at the screen. The last three times, the picture was advanced frame by frame while the young Major took notes at every one. Finally he'd had enough.

"I can have you a power figure in half an hour, but for the moment, I think they've got some problems."

"Blooming," General Parks said.

"And aiming difficulty, sir. At least, it looks like that, too. I need some time to work, and a good calculator. I left mine at work," he admitted sheepishly. There was an empty pouch on his belt, next to his beeper. Graham tossed one over, an expensive Hewlett-Packard programmable.

"What about the power?" Ryan asked.

"I need some time to give you a good number," Gregory said as though to a backward child. "Right now, at least eight times anything we can do. I need a quiet place to work. Can I use the snack room?" he asked Parks. The General nodded, and he left.

"*Eight* times . . ." Art Graham observed. "Christ, they might be able to smoke the DSPS birds. It's for damned sure they can wreck any communications satellite they want. Well, there are ways to protect them . . ."

Ryan felt a little left out. His education was in history and economics, and he hadn't quite learned the language of the physical sciences yet.

"Three years," General Parks breathed as he poured some coffee. "At least three years ahead of us."

"Only in power throughput," Graham said.

Jack looked from one to another, knowing the significance of what they were worried about, but not its substance. Gregory came back in twenty minutes.

“I make their peak power output something between twenty-five and thirty million watts,” he announced. “If we assume six lasers in the transmission assembly, that’s—well, that’s enough, isn’t it? It’s just a matter of racking enough of them together and directing them at a single target.

“That’s the bad news. The good news is, they definitely had blooming problems. They only delivered peak power on target for the first few thousandths of a second. Then it started blooming out on them. Their average power delivery was between seven and nine megawatts. And it looks like they had an aiming problem on top of the blooming. Either the mounts aren’t shock-mounted properly or they can’t correct for the earth’s rotational jitter. Or maybe both. Whatever the actual reason, they have trouble aiming more accurately than three seconds of arc. That means they’re only going to accurate plus or minus two hundred forty meters for a geostationary satellite —of course, those targets are pretty stationary, and the movement factor could count either way.”

“How’s that?” Ryan asked.

“Well, on one hand, if you’re hitting a moving target—and low-earth-orbit birds move across the sky pretty fast; something like eight thousand meters per second—there are fourteen hundred meters per degree of arc; so we’re tracking a target that’s moving about five degrees per second. Okay so far? Thermal blooming means that the laser is giving up a lot of its energy to the atmosphere. If you’re tracking across the sky rapidly, you keep having to drill a new hole in the air. But it takes time for the bloom to get real bad—and that helps you. On the other hand, if you’ve got vibration problems, every time you change your aiming point, you add a new variable into your targeting geometry, and that makes things a lot worse. Shooting at a fairly stationary target, like a communications satellite, you simplify your aiming problem, but you keep shooting up the same thermal bloom until you lose almost all your energy into the air. See what I mean?”

Ryan grunted agreement, though his mind had again reached beyond its limit. He barely understood the language the kid was speaking, and the information Gregory was trying to communicate was in a field that he simply didn’t understand. Graham jumped in.

“Are you telling me we don’t have to worry about this?”

“No, sir! If you got the power, you can always figure out how to deliver it. Hell, we’ve already done that. That’s the easy part.”

“As I told you,” the engineer told Morozov, “the problem isn’t getting the lasers to put the power out—that’s the easy part. The hard part is delivering the energy to the target.”

“Your computer cannot correct for—what?”

“It must be a combination of things. We’ll be going over that data today. The main thing? Probably the atmospheric-compensation programming. We’d thought that we could adjust the aiming process to eliminate blooming—well, we didn’t. Three years of theoretical work went into yesterday’s test. My project. And it didn’t work.” He stared off at the horizon and frowned. The operation on his sick child hadn’t quite been successful but, the doctors said, there was still hope.

"So the increase in laser output came from this?" Bondarenko asked.

"Yes. Two of our younger people—he's only thirty-two and she's twenty-eight—came up with a way to increase the diameter of the lasing cavity. What we still need to do, however, is come up with better control of the wiggler magnets," Pokryshkin said.

The Colonel nodded. The whole point of the free-electron laser that both sides were working on was that one could "tune" it much like a radio, choosing the light frequency that one wished to transmit—or that was the theory. As a practical matter, the highest power output was always in about the same frequency range—and it was the wrong one. If they'd been able to put out a slightly different frequency the day before—one that penetrated the atmosphere more efficiently—the thermal blooming might have been reduced by fifty percent or so. But that meant controlling the superconducting magnets better. They were called wigglers because they induced an oscillating magnetic field through the charged electrons in the lasing cavity. Unfortunately, the breakthrough that made the lasing cavity larger had also had an unexpected effect on their ability to control magnetic-field flux. There was no theoretical explanation for this as yet, and the thinking of the senior scientists was that there was a minor, though undiscovered, engineering problem in the magnet design. The senior engineers, of course, said that there was something wrong in the theorists' explanation for what was happening, because *they* knew the magnets worked properly. The arguments that had already rocked the conference rooms were spirited but cordial. A number of very bright people were struggling together to find Truth—the scientific kind that did not depend on human opinion.

Bondarenko's mind reeled at the details even as he scribbled down his notes. He'd thought himself knowledgeable on lasers—he had, after all, helped to design a wholly new application for them—but looking at the work that had been done here, he thought himself a toddling child wandering through a university laboratory and wondering at the pretty lights. The principal breakthrough, he wrote, was in the lasing-cavity design. It allowed the enormous increase in power output, and had been made over a table in the canteen when an engineer and a physicist had jointly stumbled across a piece of Truth. The Colonel smiled to himself. *Pravda* was actually the word they used. "Truth" was the exact translation, and the two young academicians had spoken it so artlessly. Indeed, that was a word that had gained currency at Bright Star, and Bondarenko wondered how much of that was an inside joke of some sort or another. "But is it *pravilno*," they would ask of a fact. "Is it truthful?"

Well, he told himself, one thing was truthful enough. Those two people who'd met to discuss their love life—Bondarenko had already heard the story in greater detail—over a canteen table had combined to make a colossal leap forward in laser power. The rest would come in good time, Bondarenko told himself. It always did.

"So it appears that your main problem is computer control, both of your magnetic flux field and the mirror array."

"Correct, Colonel." Pokryshkin nodded agreement. "And we need some

additional funding and support to correct these difficulties. You must tell them in Moscow that the most important work has already been done, and proven to work."

"Comrade General, you have won me over."

"No, Comrade Colonel. You merely have the intelligence to perceive the *truth!"* Both men had a good laugh as they shook hands. Bondarenko couldn't wait for the flight back to Moscow. The time had long passed when a Soviet officer needed to fear at the delivery of bad news, but the delivery of good news was always good for one's career.

"Well, they can't be using adaptive optics," General Parks said. "What I want to know is where their optical coatings came from."

"That's the second time I heard about that one." Ryan stood and walked around the table to get his circulation going. "What's the big deal about the mirror? It's a glass mirror, isn't it?"

"Not glass—can't handle the energy. Right now we're using copper or molybdenum," Gregory said. "A glass mirror has its reflecting surface at the back. This kind of mirror, the reflecting surface is on the front. There's a cooling system on the back."

"Huh?" *You should have taken more science courses at BC, Jack.*

"Light doesn't reflect off the bare metal," Graham said. It seemed to Ryan that he was the only dummy in the room. And he, of course, was the one tapped to write the Special National Intelligence Estimate. "It reflects off an optical coating. For really precise applications—an astronomical telescope, for example—what's on the face of the mirror looks like a skim of gasoline on a puddle."

"Then why use metal at all?" Jack objected. The Major answered.

"You use metal to keep the reflecting surface as cool as possible. We're trying to get away from it, as a matter of fact. Project ADAMANT: Accelerated Development of Advanced Materials and New Technologies Group. We're hoping the next mirror will be made out of diamond."

"What?"

"Artificial diamond made from pure Carbon-12—that's an isotopic form of regular carbon, and it's perfect for us. The problem is energy absorption," Gregory went on. "If the surface retains much of the light, the heat energy can blast the coating right off the glass, then the mirror blows apart. I watched a half-meter mirror let go once. Sounded like God snapping His fingers. With C-12 diamond you have a material that's almost a superconductor of heat. It permits increased power density, and a smaller mirror. General Electric just learned how to make gemstone-quality diamond out of Carbon-12. Candi's already working to see how we can make a mirror out of it."

Ryan looked through his thirty pages of notes, then rubbed his eyes.

"Major, with the General's permission, you're coming up to Langley with me. I want you to brief our Science and Technology people, and I want you to see everything we've got on the Soviet project. Okay with you, sir?" Jack asked Parks. The General nodded.

Ryan and Gregory left together. It turned out that you needed a pass to get out of here, too. The guards had changed shifts, but looked at everyone just as

seriously. On reaching the parking lot, the Major thought Jack's XJS was "boss." *Do they still say that?* Jack asked himself.

"How does a Marine get to work for the Agency?" Gregory asked as he admired the interior leather. *And where does he get the coin to afford this?*

"They invited me. Before that, I taught history at Annapolis." *Nothing like being the famous Sir John Ryan. Well, I don't suppose they have me listed in any laser textbooks . . .*

"Where'd you go to school?"

"Bachelor's at Boston College, and I got my doctorate right across the river there, at Georgetown."

"You didn't say you were a doctor," the Major observed.

Ryan laughed at that. "Different field, pal. I have a lot of trouble understanding what the hell you're up to, but they stuck me with the job of explaining what it all means to—well, to the people who do the arms negotiations. I've been working with them on the intelligence side for the last six months." This drew a grunt.

"That bunch wants to put me out of business. They want to trade it all away."

"They have their job, too," Jack allowed. "I need your help to persuade them that what you do is important."

"The Russians think it's important."

"Yeah, well, we just saw that, didn't we?"

Bondarenko got off the plane and was agreeably surprised to find an official car waiting for him. It was a Voyska PVO car. General Pokryshkin had called ahead. The working day was over, and the Colonel instructed the driver to take him home. He'd write up his report tomorrow and present it to Colonel Filitov and later, perhaps, brief the Minister himself. He asked himself over a glass of vodka whether Pokryshkin had handled—he didn't know the Western expression "stroked"—him enough to create a false impression. Not enough, he told himself. The General had done quite a job of selling both his program and himself, but this was not mere *pokazhuka.* They hadn't faked the test, and they'd been honest in detailing their problems. All they were asking for was what was really needed. No, Pokryshkin was a man with a mission, willing to put his career—well, if not behind it, then at least alongside it; and that was all anyone could reasonably ask. If he was building his own empire, it was an empire worth building.

The pickup was made in a way that was both unique and routine. The shopping mall was quite ordinary, a roofed-over promenade of ninety-three shops, plus a cluster of five smallscreen theaters. There were six shoe stores, and three for jewelry. In keeping with the western location of the place, there was a sporting-goods store that catered to sportsmen, and had a wall full of Winchester Model 70 hunting rifles, something one does not often see in the East. Three up-scale men's clothing establishments dotted the concourse, along with seven for women. One of the latter adjoined the gunshop.

That suited the owner of Eve's Leaves, since the gunshop had an elaborate burglar-alarm system; this, combined with the mall's own security staff,

allowed her to maintain a sizable stock of exclusive women's fashions without an overly expensive insurance package. The shop had started shakily enough —the fashions of Paris, Rome, and New York do not translate well west of the Mississippi River, except perhaps along the Pacific Coast—but much of the academic community came from both coasts, and clung to their ways. It didn't take much exposure at the country clubs for Anne Klein II to become a hot item even in the Rocky Mountains.

Ann strolled into the shop. She was a very easy customer to fit, the owner knew. A perfect six, she put the clothing on only to see how it looked. She never needed any alterations, which made life easy on everyone and allowed the owner to discount what she bought by five percent. In addition to being easy to fit, she also spent a lot of her money here, never less than $200 per visit. She was a regular, coming in every six weeks or so. The owner didn't know what she did, though she looked and acted like a doctor. So precise, so careful about everything. Oddly, she paid cash, the other reason for the discount she got, since credit card companies got a percentage of the sales figure in return for a guarantee of payment. This returned the five percent to the owner, and then some. It was a pity, she thought, that all of her customers couldn't be like this. Ann had brown bedroom eyes and hair, the latter shoulder-length and slightly wavy. Willowy, with a petite figure. The other odd thing was that she didn't ever seem to use perfume of any kind; that's what made the owner think she was a doctor. That and the hours she came in —never when it was crowded, as though she were entirely her own boss. That had to be true, and the "doctor" dressed the part. This appealed to the owner. Every time she moved about, you could see the purpose in her stride.

She picked up the skirt and blouse combination, leaving for the dressing rooms in the back. Though the store owner didn't know it, Ann always used the same dressing cubicle. While in there, she unzipped her skirt, unbuttoned her blouse, but before she put the new set on, she reached under the plain wooden shelf that you could sit on and removed a cassette of microfilm that had been taped there the evening before. This went into her purse. Next she dressed and paraded outside to the mirrors.

How can American women wear this garbage? Tania Bisyarina asked her smiling image in the mirror. A captain in Directorate S of the First Chief (also known as the "Foreign") Directorate of the KGB, she reported to Directorate T, which oversees scientific espionage and works in cooperation with the State Committee for Science and Technology. Like Edward Foley, she "ran" a single agent. That agent's code name was Livia.

The cost of the outfit was two hundred seventy-three dollars, and Captain Bisyarina paid in cash. She told herself that she'd have to remember to wear this outfit the next time she came back, even if it did look like rubbish.

"See you soon, Ann," the shop owner called to her. That was the only name by which she was known in Santa Fe. The Captain turned and waved back. The owner was a pleasantenough woman, for all her stupidity. Like any good intelligence officer, the Captain looked and acted quite ordinary. In the context of this area, that meant dressing in what passed for a moderately fashionable way, driving a decent but not flashy car, and living in a style that denoted comfort short of actual wealth. In this sense, America was an easy

target. If you had the right lifestyle, nobody questioned where it came from. Getting across the border had been almost a comic exercise. All the time she'd spent getting her documents and background "legend" exactly right, and all the Border Patrol had done was to have a dog sniff the car for drugs—she'd come in over the Mexican border at El Paso—and wave her through with a smile. *And for that*—she smiled to herself eight months later now—*I actually got excited.*

It took forty minutes for her to drive home, checking as always to be sure that she didn't have anyone following her, and once there she developed the film and made her copies; not quite the same way Foley did, but close enough not to matter. In this case she had photographs of actual government documents. She placed the developed film in a small projector and focused the frame on the white paint of her bedroom wall. Bisyarina had a technical education, one of the reasons for her current assignment, and knew a little about how to evaluate what she'd just received. She was sure it would make her seniors happy.

The next morning she made her drop, and the photographs traveled across the border into Mexico on a tractor-trailer rig belonging to a long-haul concern based in Austin. It was delivering oil-drilling machinery. By the end of the day the photos would be in the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City. The day after that, in Cuba, where they would be placed on an Aeroflot flight direct to Moscow.

7.

Catalysts

"**S**o, Colonel, what is your assessment?" Filitov asked.

"Comrade, Bright Star may be the most important program in the Soviet Union," Bondarenko said with conviction. He handed over forty handwritten pages. "Here is the first draft of my report. I did that on the airplane. I'll have a proper copy typed today, but I thought that you'd—" "You thought correctly. I understand that they ran a test . . ."

"Thirty-six hours ago. I saw the test, and I was allowed to inspect much of the equipment both before and after. I was profoundly impressed with the installation and the people who run it. If I may be permitted, General Pokryshkin is an outstanding officer, and the perfect man for that post. He is decidedly not a careerist, but rather a progressive officer of the finest type. To manage the academics on that hilltop is no easy task—"

Misha grunted agreement. "I know about academicians. Are you telling me he has them organized like a military unit?"

"No, Comrade Colonel, but Pokryshkin has learned how to keep them relatively happy and productive at the same time. There is a sense of . . . a sense of mission at Bright Star that one rarely encounters even in the officer corps. I do not say this lightly, Mikhail Semyonovich. I was most impressed by all aspects of the operation. Perhaps it is the same at the space facilities. I have heard such, but having never been there, I cannot draw the comparison."

"And the systems themselves?"

"Bright Star is not yet a weapon. There are still technical difficulties. Pokryshkin identified and explained them at length to me. For the moment, this is still nothing more than an experimental program, but the most important breakthroughs have been made. In several years, it will be a weapon of enormous potential."

"What of its cost?" Misha asked. That drew a shrug.

"Impossible to estimate. It will be costly, but the expensive part of the program, the research and development phase, is largely completed. The actual production and engineering costs should be less than one might expect —for the weapon itself, that is. I cannot evaluate the costs of the support equipment, the radars, and surveillance satellites. That was not part of my brief in any case." Besides, like soldiers all over the world, he thought in terms of mission, not cost.

"And the system reliability?"

"That will be a problem, but a manageable one. The individual lasers are complex and difficult to maintain. On the other hand, by building more than the site actually needs, we could easily cycle them through a regular

maintenance program, and always have the necessary number on-line. In fact, this is the method proposed by the chief project engineer."

"So they've solved the power-output problem, then?"

"My draft report describes that in rough terms. My final paper will be more specific."

Misha allowed himself a smile. "So that even I can understand it?"

"Comrade Colonel," Bondarenko replied seriously, "I know that you have a better understanding of technical matters than you care to admit. The important aspects of the power breakthrough are actually quite simple—in theory, that is. The precise engineering details are rather complex, but can easily be deduced from the redesign of the lasing cavity. As with the first atomic bomb, once the theory is described, the engineering can be worked out."

"Excellent. You can finish your report by tomorrow?"

"Yes, Comrade Colonel."

Misha stood. Bondarenko did the same. "I will read over your preliminary report this afternoon. Get me the complete report tomorrow and I will digest it over the weekend. Next week we will brief the Minister."

Allah's ways were surely mysterious, the Archer thought. As much as he'd wanted to kill a Soviet transport aircraft, all he had to do was return to his home, the river town of Ghazni. It had been only a week since he'd left Pakistan. A local storm had grounded Russian aircraft for the past several days, allowing him to make good time. He arrived with his fresh supplies of missiles and found his chieftain planning an attack on the town's outlying airport. The winter weather was hard on everyone, and the infidels left the outer security posts to Afghan soldiers in the service of the traitorous government in Kabul. What they did not know, however, was that the Major commanding the battalion on perimeter duty worked for the local *mudjaheddin.* The perimeter would be open when the time came, allowing three hundred guerrillas to attack straight into the Soviet camp.

It would be a major assault. The freedom fighters were organized into three companies of one hundred men each. All three were committed to the attack; the chieftain understood the utility of a tactical reserve, but had too much front to cover with too few men. It was a risk, but he and his men had been running risks since 1980. What did one more matter? As usual, the chieftain would be in the place of greatest danger, and the Archer would be nearby. They were heading for the airfield and its hated aircraft from windward. The Soviets would try to fly their craft off at the first sign of trouble, both to get them out of the way and allow them to provide defensive support. The Archer inspected four Mi-24 helicopters through his binoculars, and all had ordnance hanging on their stubby wings. The *mudjaheddin* had but a single mortar with which to damage them on the ground, and because of this the Archer would be slightly behind the assault wave to provide support. There was no time to set up his usual trap, but at night this was not likely to matter.

A hundred yards ahead, the chieftain met at the appointed place with the Major of the Afghan Army. They embraced and praised Allah's name. The prodigal son had returned to the Islamic fold. The Major reported that two of

his company commanders were ready to act as planned, but the commander of Three Company remained loyal to the Soviets. A trusted sergeant would kill this officer in a few minutes, allowing that sector to be used for the withdrawal. All around them, men waited in the bone-chilling wind. When the sergeant had accomplished his mission, he'd fire off a flare.

The Soviet Captain and the Afghan Lieutenant were friends, which in reflective moments surprised them both. It helped that the Soviet officer had made a real effort to be respectful of the ways of the local people, and that his Afghan counterpart believed Marxism-Leninism was the way of the future. Anything had to be better than the tribal rivalries and vendettas that had characterized this unhappy country for all of remembered history. Spotted early on as a promising candidate for ideological conversion, he'd been flown to the Soviet Union and shown how good things were there—compared to Afghanistan—especially the public health services. The Lieutenant's father had died fifteen years before of infection from a broken arm, and because he had never found favor with the tribal chief, his only son had not led an idyllic youth.

Together the two men were looking at a map and deciding on patrol activities for the coming week. They had to keep patrolling the area to keep the *mudjaheddin* bandits away. Today the patrols were being handled by Two Company.

A sergeant entered the command bunker with a message form. His face didn't show the surprise he felt at finding two officers there instead of one. He handed the envelope over to the Afghan Lieutenant with his left hand. In his right palm was the hilt of a knife, now held vertically up the baggy sleeve of his Russian-style tunic. He tried to be impassive as the Russian Captain stared at him, and merely watched the officer whose death was his responsibility. Finally the Russian turned away to look out of the bunker's weapon slit. Almost on cue, the Afghan officer tossed the message on the map table and framed his reply.

The Russian turned back abruptly. Something had alerted him, and he knew that something was wrong before he'd had time to wonder why. He watched the sergeant's arm come up in a rapid underhand movement toward his friend's throat. The Soviet Captain dove for his rifle as the Lieutenant threw himself backward to avoid the first lunge. He succeeded only because the sergeant's knife caught in the overly long sleeve of his tunic. Cursing, he freed it and lunged forward, slashing his target across the abdomen. The Lieutenant screamed, but managed to grab the sergeant's wrist before the knife reached his vital organs. The faces of the two men were close enough that each could smell the other's breath. One face was too shocked to be afraid, the other too angry. In the end, the Lieutenant's life was saved by the cloth of an ill-fitting tunic sleeve, as the Soviet flipped the safety off his rifle and fired ten rounds into the assassin's side. The sergeant fell without a sound. The Lieutenant held a bloody hand to his eyes. The Captain shouted the alarm.

The distinctive metallic chatter of the Kalashnikov rifle carried the four hundred meters to where the *mudjaheddin* waited. The same thought rippled through everyone's mind: the plan had been blown. Unfortunately, there was

no planned alternative. To their left, the positions of Three Company were suddenly alight with the flashes of gunfire. They were firing at nothing—there were no guerrillas there—but the noise could not help but alert the Russian positions three hundred meters ahead. The chieftain ordered his men forward anyway, supported by nearly two hundred Afghan Army troops for whom the change of side had come as a relief. The additional men did not make as much of a difference as one might expect. These new *mudjaheddin* had no heavy weapons other than a few crew-served machine guns, and the chieftain's single mortar was slow setting up.

The Archer cursed as he watched lights go off at the airfield, three kilometers away. They were replaced with the wiggling dots of flashlights as flight crews raced to their aircraft. A moment later parachute flares began turning night to day. The harsh southeast wind blew them rapidly away, but more kept appearing. There was nothing he could do but activate his launcher. He could see the helicopters . . . and the single An-26 transport. With his left hand the Archer lifted his binoculars and saw the twin-engine, high-wing aircraft sitting there like a sleeping bird in an unprotected nest. A number of people were running to it as well. He turned his glasses back to the helicopter area.

An Mi-24 helicopter lifted off first, struggling with the thin air and howling wind to gain altitude, as mortar rounds began to drop within the airfield perimeter. A phosphorus round fell within a few meters of another Hind, its searing white flash igniting the Mi-24's fuel, and the crew leaped out, one of them aflame. They'd barely gotten clear when the aircraft exploded, taking a second Hind with it. The last one lifted off a moment later, rocking backward and disappearing into the black night, its flying lights off. They'd both be back—the Archer was sure of that—but they'd gotten two on the ground, and that was better than he'd expected.

Everything else, he saw, was going badly. Mortar rounds were falling in front of the assault troops. He saw flashes of guns and explosives. Above the noises came the other sound of the battlefield: the battle cries of warriors and the screams of the wounded. At this distance it was hard to distinguish Russian from Afghan. But that was not his concern.

The Archer didn't need to tell Abdul to scan the sky for the helicopters. He tried using the missile launcher to search for the invisible heat of their engines. He found nothing, and returned his eyes to the one aircraft he could still see. There were mortar rounds falling near the An-26 now, but the flight crew already had the engines turning. In a moment he saw some lateral movement. The Archer gauged the wind and decided that the aircraft would try coming into the wind, then flare left over the safest portion of the perimeter. It would not be easy to climb in this thin air, and when the pilot turned, he'd rob his wings of lift in the quest for speed. The Archer tapped Abdul on the shoulder and began running to the left. He made it a hundred meters when he stopped and looked again for the Soviet transport. It was moving now, through the black showers of dirt, bouncing across the frozen, uneven ground as it accelerated.

The Archer stood to give the missile a better look at the target, and immediately the seeker chirped on finding the hot engines against the cold,

moonless night.

"V-One," the copilot shouted over the noise of battle and engines. His eyes were locked on the instruments while the pilot fought to hold the aircraft straight. "V-R—*rotate!*"

The pilot eased back on the yoke. The nose came up, and the An-26 took a final bounce off the hard dirt strip. The copilot instantly retracted the landing gear to reduce drag, allowing the plane to speed up that much quicker. The pilot brought the aircraft into a gentle right turn to avoid what seemed to be the heaviest concentration of ground fire. Once clear, he'd come back to the north for Kabul and safety. Behind him, the navigator wasn't looking at his charts. Rather, he was deploying parachute flares every five seconds. These were not to help the troops on the ground, though they did have that effect. They were to fool ground-launched missiles. The manual said to deploy one every five seconds.

The Archer timed the flares carefully. He could hear the change in the seeker's tone when they fell clear of the aircraft's cargo hatch and ignited. He needed to lock on to the plane's left-side engine and to time his shot carefully if he wanted to hit his target. In his mind he had already measured the point of closest approach—about nine hundred meters—and just before reaching it, the aircraft ejected another flare. A second later, the seeker returned to its normal acquisition tone, and he squeezed the trigger.

As always, it was almost a sexual release when the launcher tube bucked in his hands. The sounds of battle around him vanished as he concentrated on the speeding dot of yellow flame.

The navigator had just released another flare when the Stinger impacted on the left-side engine. His first thought was one of outrage—the manual was wrong! The flight engineer had no such thoughts. Automatically, he punched the "emergency-kill" switch to the number-one turbine. That shut down the fuel flow, cut off all electrical power, feathered the propeller, and activated the fire extinguisher. The pilot pushed the rudder pedal to compensate for left yaw induced by the loss of portside power and pushed the nose down. That was a dangerous call, but he had to measure speed against altitude, and he decided that he needed speed most of all. The engineer reported that the left-side fuel tank was punctured, but it was only a hundred kilometers to Kabul. What came next was worse:

"Fire warning light on number one!"

"Pull the bottle!"

"Already done! Everything's off."

The pilot resisted the temptation to look around. He was only a hundred meters above the ground now, and couldn't allow anything to interfere with his concentration. His peripheral vision caught a flash of yellow-orange flame, but he shut it out. His eyes went from the horizon to his airspeed and altimeter and back again.

"Losing altitude," the copilot reported.

"Ten degrees more flaps," the pilot ordered. He reckoned that he had

enough speed now to risk it. The copilot reached down to deploy them ten degrees farther, and so doomed the aircraft and its passengers.

The missile explosion had damaged the hydraulic lines to the left-side flaps. The increased pressure needed to change the setting ruptured both the lines, and the flaps on the left wing retracted without warning. The loss of left-lift nearly snap-rolled the aircraft, but the pilot caught it and leveled out. Too many things were going wrong at once. The aircraft started sinking, and the pilot screamed for more power, knowing that the right-side engine was already firewalled. He prayed that getting into the ground effect might save his bird, but just holding her straight was nearly impossible, and he realized that they were sinking too fast in the thin air. He had to put her down. At the last moment the pilot switched on his landing lights to find a flat spot. He saw only a field of rocks, and used his last vestige of control to aim his falling bird between the two biggest. A second before the aircraft hit the ground he snarled a curse, not a cry of despair, but one of rage.

For a moment the Archer thought that the aircraft might escape. The flash of the missile was unmistakable, but for several seconds there was nothing. Then came the trailing tongue of flame that told him that his target was fatally injured. Thirty seconds after that, there was an explosion on the ground, perhaps ten kilometers away, not far from the planned escape route. He'd be able to see what he'd done before dawn. But he turned back now, hearing the sputtering whine of a helicopter overhead. Abdul had already discarded the old launch tube and attached the acquisition/guidance package to a new tube with a speed that would have done a trained soldier proud. He handed the unit over, and the Archer searched the skies for yet another target.

Though he didn't know it, the attack on Ghazni was falling apart. The Soviet commander had reacted instantly to the sound of gunfire—the Afghan Army Three Company was still shooting at nothing at all, and the Soviet officer there couldn't get things going right—and gotten his men into their positions in a matter of two hectic minutes. The Afghans now faced a fully alerted battalion of regular troops, supported by heavy weapons and hidden in protective bunkers. Withering machine-gun fire halted the attack wave two hundred meters from the Soviet positions. The chieftain and the defecting Major tried to get things going again by personal example. A ferocious war cry echoed down the line, but the chieftain stood directly into a line of tracers that transfixed him for nearly a second before he was thrown aside like a child's toy. As generally happens with primitive troops, the loss of their leader broke the heart of the attack. Word spread throughout the line almost before the radio call was received by the unit leaders. At once, the *mudjaheddin* disengaged, firing their weapons wildly as they pulled back. The Soviet commander recognized this for what it was, but did not pursue. He had helicopters for that.

The Archer knew something was wrong when the Russian mortars started deploying flares in a different place. Already a helicopter was firing rockets and machine guns at the guerrillas, but he couldn't lock on to it. Next he heard the shouts of his comrades. Not the reckless howls of the advance, they

were the warning cries of men in retreat. He settled down and concentrated on his weapon. His services would really be needed now. The Archer ordered Abdul to attach his spare seeker unit to another missile tube. The teenager had it done in under a minute.

"There!" Abdul said. "To the right."

"I see it." A series of linear flashes appeared in the sky. A Hind was firing its rocket pods. He trained his launcher on the spot and was rewarded with the acquisition sound. He didn't know the range—one cannot judge distances at night—but he'd have to risk it. The Archer waited until the sound was completely steady and fired off his second Stinger of the night.

The pilot of the Hind saw this one. He'd been hovering a hundred meters above the burning parachute flares, and pushed his collective control all the way down to dive among them. It worked. The missile lost lock and ran straight at one, missing the helicopter by a bare thirty meters. The pilot immediately pivoted his aircraft and ordered his gunner to salvo ten rockets back down the missile's flight path.

The Archer fell to the ground behind the boulder he'd selected for his perch. The rockets all fell within a hundred meters of his position. So it was man against man this time . . . and this pilot was a clever one. He reached for the second launcher. The Archer regularly prayed for this situation.

But the helicopter was gone now. Where would he be?

The pilot swept to leeward, using the wind, as he'd been taught, to mask his rotor noise. He called in for flares on this side of the perimeter and got a response almost instantly. The Soviets wanted every missile-shooter they could get. While the other airborne helicopter pounded the retreating *mudjaheddin,* this one would track down their SAM support. Despite the danger involved, it was a mission for which the pilot lusted. The missileers were his personal enemy. He kept clear of the known range of the Stinger and waited for the flares to light the ground.

The Archer was again using his seeker to search for the helicopter. It was an inefficient way to search, but the Mi-24 would be somewhere in an arc that his knowledge of Soviet tactics could easily predict. Twice he got chirps and lost them as the helicopter danced left and right, altering altitude in a conscious effort to make the Archer's job impossible. This was truly a skilled enemy, the guerrilla told himself. His death would be all the more satisfying. Flares were dotting the sky above him, but he knew that the flickering light made for poor viewing conditions as long as he kept still.

"I see movement," the Hind's gunner reported. "Ten o'clock."

"Wrong place," the pilot said. He brought his cyclic control to the right and slid horizontally as his eyes searched the ground. The Soviets had captured several of the American Stingers, and had tested them exhaustively to determine their speed, range, and sensitivity. He figured himself to be at least three hundred meters beyond its range, and if fired upon, he'd use the missile's track to fix his target, then rush in to get the missileer before he could shoot again.

"Get a smoke rocket," the Archer said.

Abdul had only one of those. It was a small, finned plastic device, little more than a toy. It had been developed for the training of U.S. Air Force

pilots, to simulate the feel—the terror—of having missiles shot at them. At a cost of six dollars, all it could do was fly in a fairly straight line for a few seconds while leaving a trail of smoke. They'd been given to the *mudjaheddin* merely as a means to scare Soviet flyers when their SAMs had run out, but the Archer had found a real use for them. Abdul ran a hundred meters and set it up on the simple steel-wire launcher. He came back to his master's side, trailing the launching wire behind him.

"Now, Russian, where are you?" the Archer asked the night.

"Something to our front, something moved, I am sure of it," the gunner said.

"Let's see." The pilot activated his own controls and fired two rockets. They hit the ground two kilometers away, well to the Archer's right.

"Now!" the Archer shouted. He'd seen where the Russian had launched from, and had his seeker on the spot. The infrared receiver began chirping.

The pilot cringed as he saw the moving flame of a rocket, but before he could maneuver, it was clear that the missile would miss him. It had been launched close to where he'd fired before.

"I have you now!" he shouted. The gunner started pouring machine-gun fire at the spot.

The Archer saw the tracers and heard the bullets sprinkling the ground to his right. This one was good. His aim was nearly perfect, but in firing his own guns, he gave the Archer a perfect point of aim. And the third Stinger was launched.

"Two of them!" the gunner shouted over the intercom.

The pilot was already diving and veering, but he had no flares around him this time. The Stinger exploded against a rotor blade and the helicopter fell like a stone. The pilot managed to slow his descent, but still hit the ground hard. Miraculously there was no fire. A moment later armed men appeared at his window. One, the pilot saw, was a Russian captain.

"Are you all right, Comrade?"

"My back," the pilot gasped.

The Archer was already moving. He had tested Allah's favor enough for one night. The two-man missile team left the empty launcher tubes behind and ran to catch up with the retreating guerrillas. If the Soviet troops had pursued, they might have caught them. As it was, their commander kept them in place, and the sole surviving helicopter was content to circle the encampment. Half an hour later he learned that his chieftain was dead. The morning would bring Soviet aircraft to catch them in the open, and the guerrillas had to reach the rockfields quickly. But there was one more thing to do. The Archer took Abdul and three men to find the transport that he'd killed. The price of the Stinger missiles was the inspection of every downed aircraft for items in which the CIA might have interest.

Colonel Filitov finished the diary entry. As Bondarenko had pointed out, his knowledge of technical material was far better than one might suspect from his academic credentials. After over forty years in the higher echelons of the Defense Ministry, Misha was self-taught in a number of technical fields ranging from gas-protection suits to communications-encryption equipment to . . . lasers. Which was to say that while he didn't always comprehend the

theory as well as he might have wished, he could describe the working equipment as well as the engineers who assembled it. It had taken four hours to transcribe it all into his diary. This data had to go out. The implications were too frightening.

The problem with a strategic-defense system was simply that no weapon had ever been "offensive" or "defensive" in and of itself. The nature of any weapon, like the beauty of any woman, lay in the eye of the beholder—or the direction in which it was pointed—and throughout history, success in warfare was determined by the proper balance of offensive and defensive elements.

Soviet nuclear strategy, Misha thought to himself, made far more sense than that of the West. Russian strategists did not consider nuclear war unthinkable. They were taught to be pragmatic: The problem, while complex, did have a solution—while not a perfect one, unlike many Western thinkers they acknowledged that they lived in an imperfect world. Soviet strategy since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962—the event had killed Filitov's recruiter, Colonel Oleg Penkovskiy—was based on a simple phrase: "Damage Limitation." The problem wasn't destroying one's enemy with nuclear weapons. With nuclear weapons, it was more a question of not destroying so much that there would be nothing left with which to negotiate the "war-termination" phase. The problem that occupied Soviet minds was preventing enemy nuclear weapons from destroying the Soviet Union. With twenty million dead in *each* of two world wars, the Russians had tasted enough destruction, and craved no more.

This task was not viewed as an easy one, but the reason for its necessity was as much political as technical. Marxism-Leninism casts history as a process: not a mere collection of past events, but a scientific expression of man's social evolution that will—must—culminate in mankind's collective recognition that Marxism-Leninism is the ideal form for all human society. A committed Marxist, therefore, believed in the ultimate ascendancy of his creed as surely as Christian, Jew, and Muslim believed in an afterlife. And just as religious communities throughout history have shown a willingness to spread their good news with fire and sword, so it was the duty of the Marxist to make his vision a reality as quickly as possible.

The difficulty here, of course, was that not everyone in the world had the Marxist-Leninist view of history. Communist doctrine explained this away as the reactionary forces of imperialism, capitalism, the bourgeoisie, and the rest of their pantheon of enemies, whose resistance was predictable—but whose *tactics* were not. As a gambler who has rigged his gaming table, the communists "knew" that they would win, but like a gambler, in their darker moments they reluctantly admitted that luck—or more scientifically, random chance—could alter their equation. In lacking the proper scientific outlook, the Western democracies also lacked a common ethos, and that made them unpredictable.

More than any other reason, that was why the East feared the West. Ever since Lenin had assumed control of—and renamed—the Soviet Union, the communist government had invested billions in spying on the West. As with all intelligence functions, its prime purpose was to predict what the West would and could do.

But despite countless tactical successes, the fundamental problem remained:

Time and again the Soviet government had gravely misread Western actions and intentions; and in a nuclear age unpredictability could mean that an unbalanced American leader—and, to a lesser extent, English or French—could even spell the end of the Soviet Union and the postponement of World Socialism for generations. (To a Russian, the former was more grave, since no ethnic Russian wanted to see the world brought to Socialism under Chinese leadership.) The Western nuclear arsenal was the greatest threat to Marxism-Leninism; countering that arsenal was the prime task of the Soviet military. But unlike the West, the Soviets did not see the prevention of its use as simply the prevention of war. Since the Soviets viewed the West as politically unpredictable, they felt that they could not depend on deterring it. They needed to be able to eliminate, or at least degrade, the Western nuclear arsenal if a crisis threatened to go beyond the point of mere words.

Their nuclear arsenal was designed with precisely this task in mind. Killing cities and their millions of inhabitants would always be a simple exercise. Killing the missiles that their countries owned was not. To kill the American missiles had meant developing several generations of highly accurate—and hugely expensive—rockets like the SS-18, whose sole mission was to reduce America's Minuteman missile squadrons to glowing dust, along with the submarine and bomber bases. All but the last were to be found well distant from population centers; consequently, a strike aimed at disarming the West might be carried off without necessarily resulting in world holocaust. At the same time, the Americans did not have enough really accurate warheads to make the same threat against the Soviet missile force. The Russians, then, had an advantage in a potential "counterforce" attack—the sort aimed at weapons rather than people.

The shortcoming was naval. More than half of the American warheads were deployed on nuclear submarines. The U.S. Navy thought that its missile submarines had never been tracked by their Soviet counterparts. That was incorrect. They had been tracked exactly three times in twenty-seven years, and then never more than four hours. Despite a generation of work by the Soviet Navy, no one predicted that this mission would ever be accomplished. The Americans admitted that *they* couldn't track their own "boomers," as the missile submarines were known. On the other hand, the Americans *could* track Soviet missile submarines, and for this reason the Soviets had never placed more than a fraction of their warheads at sea, and until recently neither side could base accurate counterforce weapons in submarines.

But the game was changing yet again. The Americans had fabricated another technical miracle. Their submarine-launched weapons would soon be Trident D-5 missiles with a hard-target-kill capability. This threatened Soviet strategy with a mirror-image of its own potential, though a crucial element of the system was the Global Positioning Satellites, without which the American submarines would be unable to determine their own locations accurately enough for their weapons to kill hardened targets. The twisted logic of the nuclear balance was again turning on itself—as it had to do at least once per generation.

It had been recognized early on that missiles were offensive weapons with a defensive mission, that the ability to destroy the opponent was the classical

formula both to prevent war and achieve one's goals in peace. The fact that such power, accrued to both sides, had transformed the historically proven formula of unilateral intimidation into bilateral deterrence, however, made that solution unpalatable.

Nuclear Deterrence: preventing war by the threat of mutual holocaust. Both sides told the other in substance, *If you kill our helpless civilians, we will kill yours.* Defense was no longer protection of one's own society, but the threat of senseless violence against another. Misha grimaced. No tribe of savages had ever formulated such an idea—even the most uncivilized barbarians were too advanced for such a thing, but that was precisely what the world's most advanced peoples had decided—or stumbled—upon. Although deterrence could be said to work, it meant that the Soviet Union—and the West—lived under a threat with more than one trigger. No one thought that situation satisfactory, but the Soviets had made what they considered the best of a bad bargain by designing a strategic arsenal that could largely disarm the other side if a world crisis demanded it. In achieving the ability to eliminate much of the American arsenal, they had the advantage of dictating how a nuclear war would be fought; in classical terms that was the first step toward victory, and in the Soviet view, Western denial that "victory" was a possibility in a nuclear war was the first step toward Western defeat. Theorists on both sides had always recognized the unsatisfactory nature of the entire nuclear issue, however, and quietly worked to deal with it in other ways.

As early as the 1950s, both America and the Soviet Union had begun research in ballistic-missile defense, the latter at Sary Shagan in southwestern Siberia. A workable Soviet system had almost been deployed in the late 1960s, but the advent of MIRVs had utterly invalidated the work of fifteen years—perversely, for both sides. The struggle for ascendancy between offensive and defensive systems always tended to the former.

But no longer. Laser weapons and other high-energy-projection systems, mated to the power of computers, were a quantum jump into a new strategic realm. A workable defense, Bondarenko's report told Colonel Filitov, was now a real possibility. And what did that mean?

It meant that the nuclear equation was destined to return to the classic balance of offense *and* defense, that both elements could now be made part of a single strategy. The professional soldiers found this a more satisfying system in the abstract—what man wishes to think of himself as the greatest murderer in history?—but now tactical possibilities were raising their ugly heads. Advantage and disadvantage; move and countermove. An *American* strategic-defense system could negate all of Soviet nuclear posture. If the Americans could prevent the SS-18s from taking out their land-based missiles, then the disarming first strike that the Soviets depended upon to limit damage to the *Rodina* was no longer possible. And that meant that all of the billions that had been sunk into ballistic-missile production were now as surely wasted as though the money had been dumped into the sea.

But there was more. Just as the *scutum* of the Roman legionnaire was seen by his barbarian opponent as a weapon that enabled him to stab with impunity, so today SDI could be seen as a shield from behind which an enemy could first launch his own disarming first strike, then use his defenses to

reduce or even eliminate the effect of the resulting retaliatory strike.

This view, of course, was simplistic. No system would ever be footproof—and even if the system worked, Misha knew, the political leaders would find a way to use it to its greatest *dis*advantage; you could always depend on politicians for that. A workable strategic defense scheme would have the effect of adding a new element of uncertainty to the equation. It was unlikely that any country could eliminate all incoming warheads, and the death of as "few" as twenty million citizens was too ghastly a thing to contemplate, even for the Soviet leadership. But even a rudimentary SDI system might kill enough warheads to invalidate the whole idea of counterforce.

If the Soviets had such a system first, the meager American counterforce arsenal could be countered more easily than the Soviet one, and the strategic situation for which the Soviets had worked thirty years would remain in place. The Soviet government would have the best of both worlds, a far larger force of accurate missiles with which to eliminate American warheads, and a shield to kill most of the retaliatory strike against their reserve missile fields—and the American seabased systems could be neutralized by elimination of their GPS navigation satellites, without which they could still kill cities, but the ability to attack missile silos would be irretrievably gone.

The scenario Colonel Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov envisaged was the standard Soviet case study. Some crisis erupted (the Middle East was the favorite, since nobody could predict what would happen there), and while Moscow moved to stabilize matters, the West interfered—clumsily and stupidly, of course—and started talking openly in the press about a nuclear confrontation. The intelligence organs would flash word to Moscow that a nuclear strike was a real possibility. Strategic Rocket Force's SS-18 regiments would secretly go to full alert, as would the new ground-based laser weapons. While the Foreign Ministry airheads—no military force is enamored of its diplomatic colleagues—struggled to settle things down, the West would posture and threaten, perhaps attacking a Soviet naval force to show its resolve, certainly mobilizing the NATO armies to threaten invasion of Eastern Europe. Worldwide panic would begin in earnest. When the tone of Western rhetoric reached its culmination, the launch orders would be issued to the missile force, and 300 SS-18s would launch, allocating three warheads to each of the American Minuteman silos. Smaller weapons would go after the submarine and bomber bases to limit collateral casualties as much as possible—the Soviets had no wish to exacerbate the situation more than necessary. Simultaneously, the lasers would disable as many American reconnaissance and navigation satellites as possible but leave the communications satellites intact—a gamble calculated to show "good" intent. The Americans would not be able to respond to the attack before the Soviet warheads struck. (Misha worried about this, but information from KGB and GRU said that there were serious flaws in the American command-and-control system, plus the psychological factors involved.) Probably the Americans would keep their submarine weapons in reserve and launch their surviving Minutemen at Soviet missile silos, but it was expected that no more than two to three hundred warheads would survive the first strike; many of those would be aimed at empty holes anyway, and the defense system would kill most of the incoming

weapons.

At the end of the first hour, the Americans would realize that the usefulness of their submarine missiles was greatly degraded. Constant, carefully prepared messages would be sent via the Moscow-Washington Hot Line: WE CANNOT LET THIS GO ANY FURTHER. And, probably, the Americans would stop and think. That was the important part—to make people stop and think. A man might attack cities on impulse or in a state of rage, but not after sober reflection.

Filitov was not concerned that either side would see its defense systems as a rationale for an offensive strike. In a crisis, however, their existence could mitigate the fear that prevented its launch—if the other side had no defenses. Both sides, therefore, had to have them. That would make a first strike far less likely, and *that* would make the world a safer place. Defensive systems could not be stopped now. One might as easily try to stop the tide. It pleased this old soldier that intercontinental rockets, so destructive to the ethic of the warrior, might finally be neutralized, that death in war would be returned to armed men on the field of battle, where it belonged . . .

Well, he thought, you're tired, and it's too late for that sort of deep thinking. He'd finish up this report with the data from Bondarenko's final draft, photograph it, and get the film to his cutout.

8.

Document Transfer

IT was almost dawn when the Archer found the wreckage of the airplane. He had ten men with him, plus Abdul. They'd have to move fast. As soon as the sun rose over the mountains the Russians would come. He surveyed the wreck from a knoll. Both wings had been sheered off at the initial impact, and the fuselage had rocketed forward, up a gentle slope, tumbling and breaking apart until only the tail was recognizable. He had no way of knowing that it had taken a brilliant pilot to accomplish this much, that getting the airplane down under any kind of control was a near miracle. He gestured to his men, and moved quickly toward the main body of wreckage. He told them to look for weapons, then any kind of documents. The Archer and Abdul went to what was left of the tail.

As usual, the scene of the crash was a contradiction. Some of the bodies were torn apart, while others were superficially intact, their deaths caused by internal trauma. These bodies looked strangely at peace, stiff but not yet frozen by the low temperature. He counted six who'd been in the after section of the aircraft. All, he saw, were Russians, all in uniform. One wore the uniform of a KGB captain and was still strapped in his seat. There was a pink froth around his lips. He must have lived a little after the crash and coughed up blood, the Archer thought. He kicked the body over and saw that handcuffed to the man's left hand was a briefcase. That was promising. The Archer bent down to see if the handcuff could be taken off easily, but he wasn't that lucky. Shrugging, he took out his knife. He'd just have to cut it off the body's wrist. He twisted the hand around and started—

—when the arm jerked and a high-pitched scream made the Archer leap to his feet. Was this one alive? He bent down to the man's face and was rewarded by a coughing spray of blood. The blue eyes were now open, wide with shock and pain. The mouth worked, but nothing intelligible came out.

"Check to see if any more are still living," the Archer ordered his assistant. He turned back to the KGB officer and spoke in Pashtu: "Hello, Russian." He waved his knife within a few centimeters of the man's eyes.

The Captain started coughing again. The man was fully awake now, and in considerable pain. The Archer searched him for weapons. As his hands moved, the body writhed in agony. Broken ribs at the least, though his limbs seemed intact. He spoke a few tortured words. The Archer knew some Russian but had trouble making them out. It should not have been hard—the message the officer was trying to convey was the obvious one, though it took the Archer nearly half a minute to recognize it.

"Don't kill me . . ."

Once the Archer understood it, he continued his search. He removed the Captain's wallet and flipped through its contents. It was the photographs that stopped him. The man had a wife. She was short, with dark hair and a round face. She was not beautiful, except for the smile. It was the smile a woman saved for the man she loved, and it lit up her face in a way that the Archer himself had once known. But what got his attention were the next two. The man had a son. The first photo had been taken at age two perhaps, a young boy with tousled hair and an impish smile. You could not hate a child, even the Russian child of a KGB officer. The next picture of him was so different that it was difficult to connect the two. His hair was gone, his skin tightly drawn across the face . . . and transparent like the pages of an old Koran. The child was dying. Three now, maybe four? he wondered. A dying child whose face wore a smile of courage and pain and love. *Why must Allah visit his anger on the little ones?* He turned the photo to the officer's face.

"Your son?" he asked in Russian.

"Dead. Cancer," the man explained, then saw that this bandit didn't understand. "Sickness. Long sickness." For the briefest moment his face cleared of pain and showed only grief. That saved his life. He was amazed to see the bandit sheathe his knife, but too deeply in pain to react in a visible way.

No. I will not visit another death upon this woman. The decision also amazed the Archer. It was as though the voice of Allah Himself reminded him that mercy is second only to faith in the human virtues. That was not enough by itself—his fellow guerrillas would not be persuaded by a verse of scripture—but next the Archer found a key ring in the man's pants pocket. He used one key to unlock the handcuffs and the other to open the briefcase. It was full of document folders, each of which was bordered in multicolored tape and stamped with some version of SECRET. That was one Russian word he knew.

"My friend," the Archer said in Pashtu, "you are going to visit a friend of mine. If you live long enough," he added.

"How serious is this?" the President asked.

"Potentially very serious," Judge Moore answered. "I want to bring some people over to brief you."

"Don't you have Ryan doing the evaluation?"

"He'll be one of them. Another's this Major Gregory you've heard about."

The President flipped open his desk calendar. "I can give you forty-five minutes. Be here at eleven."

"We'll be there, sir." Moore hung up the phone. He buzzed his secretary next. "Send Dr. Ryan in here."

Jack came through the door a minute later. He didn't even have time to sit down.

"We're going in to see The Man at eleven. How ready is your material?"

"I'm the wrong guy to talk about the physics, but I guess Gregory can handle that end. He's talking to the Admiral and Mr. Ritter right now. General Parks coming, too?" Jack asked.

"Yeah."

"Okay. How much imagery do you want me to get together?"

Judge Moore thought that one over for a moment. "We don't want to razzle-

dazzle him. A couple of background shots and a good diagram. You really think it's important, too?"

"It's not any immediate threat to us by any stretch of the imagination, but it's a development we could have done without. The effect on the arms-control talks is hard to gauge. I don't think there's a direct connec—"

"There isn't, we're certain of that." The DCI paused for a grimace. "Well, we think we're certain."

"Judge, there is data on this issue floating around here that I haven't seen yet."

Moore smiled benignly. "And how do you know that, son?"

"I spent most of last Friday going over old files on the Soviet missile-defense program. Back in '81 they ran a major test out of the Sary Shagan site. We knew an awful lot about it—for example, we knew that the mission parameters had been changed from within the Defense Ministry. Those orders were sealed in Moscow and hand-delivered to the skipper of the missile sub that fired the birds—Marko Ramius. He told me the other side of the story. With that and a few other pieces I've come across, it makes me think that we have a man inside that place, and pretty high up."

"What other pieces?" the Judge wanted to know.

Jack hesitated for a moment, but decided to go ahead with his guesses. "When *Red October* defected, you showed me a report that had to come from deep inside, also from the Defense Ministry; the code name on the file was WILLOW, as I recall. I've only seen one other file with that name, on a different subject entirely, but also defense-related. That makes me think there's a source with a rapidly changing codename cycle. You'd only do that with a very sensitive source, and if it's something I'm not cleared for, well, I can only conclude that it's something closely held. Just two weeks ago you told me that Gregory's assessment of the Dushanbe site was confirmed through 'other assets,' sir." Jack smiled. "You pay me to see connections, Judge. I don't mind being cut out of things I don't need to know, but I'm starting to think that there's something going on that's part of what I'm trying to do. If you want me to brief the President, sir, I should go in with the right information."

"Sit down, Dr. Ryan." Moore didn't bother asking if Jack had discussed this with anyone. Was it time to add a new member to the Δ fraternity? After a moment he delivered his own sly smile.

"You've met him." The Judge went on for a couple of minutes.

Jack leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. After a moment's thought, he could see the face again. "God. And he's getting us the information . . . But will we be able to use it?"

"He's gotten us technical data before. Most of it we've put to use."

"Do we tell the President this?" Jack asked.

"No. That's his idea, not ours. He told us some time ago that he didn't want the details of covert operations, just the results. He's like most politicians—he talks too much. At least he's smart enough to know that. We've had agents lost because presidents talked too much. Not to mention the odd member of Congress."

"So when do we expect this report to come in?"

"Soon. Maybe this week, maybe as long as three—"

"And if it works, we can take what they know and add it to what we know . . ." Ryan looked out the window at the bare limbs of trees. "Ever since I've been here, Judge, I've asked myself at least once a day—what's most remarkable about this place, the things we know or the things we don't?"

Moore nodded agreement. "The game's like that, Dr. Ryan. Get your briefing notes together. No reference to our friend, though. I'll handle that if I have to."

Jack walked back to his office, shaking his head. He'd suspected a few times that he was cleared for things the President never saw. Now he was sure. He asked himself if this was a good idea and admitted that he didn't know. What filled his mind was the importance of this agent and his information. There were precedents. The brilliant agent Richard Sorge in Japan in 1941, whose warnings to Stalin were not believed. Oleg Penkovskiy, who'd given the West information on the Soviet military that might have prevented nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. And now another. He didn't reflect on the fact that alone in CIA, he knew the agent's face but not his name or code name. It never occurred to him that Judge Moore didn't know CARDINAL's face, had for years avoided looking at the photograph for reasons that he could never have explained even to his deputy directors.

The phone rang, and a hand reached out from under a blanket to grab it. "H'lo."

" 'Morning, Candi," Al Gregory said in Langley.

Two thousand miles away, Dr. Candace Long twisted around in her bed and stared at the clock. "You at the airport?"

"Still in Washington, honey. If I'm lucky, I'll fly back later today." He sounded tired.

"What's happening anyway?" she asked.

"Oh, somebody ran a test, and I have to explain what it means to some people."

"Okay. Let me know when you're coming in, Al. I'll come out to get you." Candi Long was too groggy to realize that her fiancé had bent a rule of security to answer her question.

"Sure. Love ya."

"Love you, too, honey." She replaced the phone and rechecked the clock. There was time for another hour's sleep. She made a mental note to ride into work with a friend. Al had left his car at the lab before flying east, and she'd ride that one out to pick him up.

Ryan got to drive Major Gregory again. Moore took General Parks in his Agency limo.

"I asked you before: what are the chances that we'll find out what Ivan is doing at Dushanbe?"

Jack hesitated before answering, then realized that Gregory would hear it all in the Oval Office. "We have assets that are working to find out what they did to increase their power output."

"I'd love to know how you do that," the young Major observed.

"No, you don't. Trust me." Ryan looked away from the traffic for a moment.

“If you know stuff like that, and you make a slip, you could kill people. It’s happened before. The Russians come down pretty hard on spies. There’s still a story floating around that they cremated one—I mean they slid him into a crematorium alive.”

“Aw, come on! Nobody’s that—”

“Major, one of these days you ought to get out of your lab and find out just how nasty the world can really be. Five years ago, I had people try to kill my wife and kid. They had to fly three thousand miles to do it, but they came anyway.”

“Oh, right! You’re the guy—”

“Ancient history, Major.” Jack was tired of telling the story.

“What’s it like, sir? I mean, you’ve actually been in combat, the real thing, I mean—”

“It’s not fun.” Ryan almost laughed at himself for putting it that way. “You just have to perform, that’s all. You either do it right or you lose it. If you’re lucky, you don’t panic until it’s all over.”

“You said out at the lab that you used to be a Marine . . .”

“That helped some. At least somebody bothered to teach me a little about it, once upon a time.” *Back when you were in high school or so,* Jack didn’t say. Enough of that. “Ever meet the President?”

“No, sir.”

“The name’s Jack, okay? He’s a pretty good guy, pays attention and asks good questions. Don’t let the sleepy look fool you. I think he does that to fool politicians.”

“They fool easy?” Gregory wondered.

That got a laugh. “Some of them. The head arms-control guy’ll be there, too. Uncle Ernie. Ernest Allen, old-time career diplomat, Dartmouth and Yale; he’s smart.”

“He thinks we ought to bargain my work away. Why does the President keep him?”

“Ernie knows how to deal with the Russians, and he’s a pro. He doesn’t let personal opinions interfere with his job. I honestly don’t know what he thinks about the issues. It’s like with a doc. A surgeon doesn’t have to like you personally. He just has to fix whatever’s wrong. With Mr. Allen, well, he knows how to sit through all the crap that the negotiations entail. You’ve never learned anything about that, have you?” Jack shook his head and smiled at the traffic. “Everybody thinks it’s dramatic, but it’s not. I’ve never seen anything more boring. Both sides say exactly the same thing for hours—they repeat themselves about every fifteen or twenty minutes, all day, every day. Then after a week or so, one side or the other makes a small change, and keeps repeating that for hours. The other side checks with its capital, and makes a small change of its own, and keeps repeating that. It goes on and on that way for weeks, months, sometimes years. But Uncle Ernie is good at it. He finds it exciting. Personally, after about a week, I’d be willing to start a war just to put an end to the negotiation process”—another laugh—“don’t quote me on that. It’s about as exciting as watching paint dry, tedious as hell, but it’s important and it takes a special kind of mind to do it. Ernie’s a dry, crusty old bastard, but he knows how to get the job done.”

"General Parks says that he wants to shut us down."

"Hell, Major, you can ask the man. I wouldn't mind finding out myself." Jack turned off Pennsylvania Avenue, following the CIA limousine. Five minutes later, he and Gregory were sitting in the west wing's reception room under a copy of the famous painting of Washington crossing the Delaware while the Judge was talking to the President's national security advisor, Jeffrey Pelt. The President was finishing up a session with the Secretary of Commerce. Finally, a Secret Service agent called to them and led the way through the corridors.

As with TV studio sets, the Oval Office is smaller than most people expect. Ryan and Gregory were directed to a small sofa along the north wall. Neither man sat down yet; the President was standing by his desk. Ryan noted that Gregory appeared a little pale now, and remembered his own first time here. Even White House insiders would occasionally admit to being intimidated by this room and the power it contained.

"Hello again, Jack!" The President strode over to take his hand. "And you must be the famous Major Gregory."

"Yes, sir." Gregory nearly strangled on that, and had to clear his throat. "I mean, yes, Mr. President."

"Relax, sit down. You want some coffee?" He waved to a tray on the corner of his desk. Gregory's eyes nearly bugged out when the President got him a cup. Ryan did his best to suppress a smile. The man who'd made the presidency "imperial" again—whatever that meant—was a genius for putting people at ease. Or appearing to, Jack corrected himself. The coffee routine often made them even more uneasy, and maybe that was no accident. "Major, I've heard some great things about you and your work. The General says you're his brightest star." Parks shifted in his chair at that. The President sat down next to Jeff Pelt. "Okay, let's get started."

Ryan opened his portfolio and set a photograph on the low table. Next came a diagram. "Mr. President, this is a satellite shot of what we call sites Bach and Mozart. They're on a mountain southeast of the city of Dushanbe in the Tadzhik Soviet Socialist Republic, about seventy miles from the Afghan border. The mountain is about seventy-six hundred feet high. We've had it under surveillance for the past two years. This one"—another photo went down—"is Sary Shagan. The Russians have had ballistic-missile-defense work going on here for the past thirty years. This site right here is believed to be a laser test range. We believe that the Russians made a major breakthrough in laser power here two years ago. They then changed the activity at Bach to accommodate it. Last week they ran what was probably a full-power test.

"This array here at Bach is a laser transmitter."

"And they blasted a satellite with it?" Jeff Pelt asked.

"Yes, sir," Major Gregory answered. "They 'slagged it down,' as we say at the lab. They pumped enough energy into it to, well, to melt some of the metal and destroy the solar power cells entirely."

"We can't do that yet?" the President asked Gregory.

"No, sir. We can't put that much power out the front end."

"How is it that they got ahead of us? We're putting a lot of money into lasers, aren't we, General?"

Parks was uncomfortable with the recent developments, but his voice was dispassionate. “So are the Russians, Mr. President. They’ve made quite a few leaps because of their efforts in fusion. They’ve been investing in high-energy physics research for years as part of an effort to get fusion-power reactors. About fifteen years ago that effort was mated with their missile-defense program. If you put that much time and effort into basic research, you can expect a return, and they’ve gotten plenty. They invented the RFQ—the radio-frequency quadrapole—that we use in our neutral-particle beam experiments. They invented the Tokamak magnetic-containment device that we copied up at Princeton, and they invented the Gyrotron. Those are three major breakthroughs in high-energy physics that we know about. We’ve used some of them in our own SDI research, and it’s for sure that they’ve figured out the same applications.”

“Okay, what do we know about this test they ran?”

It was Gregory’s turn again. “Sir, we know that it came from Dushanbe because the only other high-energy laser sites, at Sary Shagan and Semipalatinsk, were under the visible horizon—I mean, they couldn’t see the satellite from there. We know that it wasn’t an infrared laser, because the beam would have been seen by the sensors on the Cobra Belle aircraft. If I had to guess, sir, I’d say that the system uses the free-electron laser—”

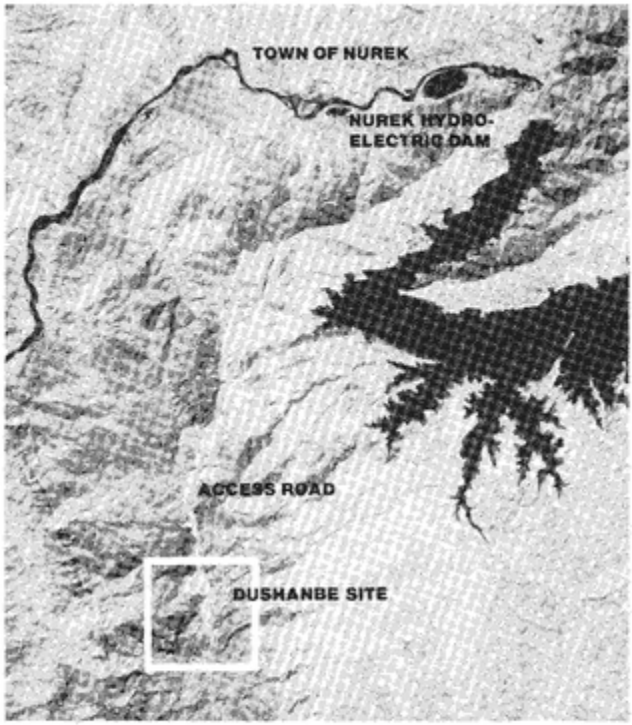
TOWN OF NUREK
NUREK HYDRO-
ELECTRIC DAM
ACCESS ROAD
DUSHANBE SITE

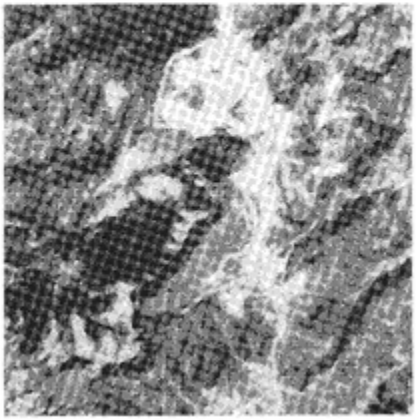

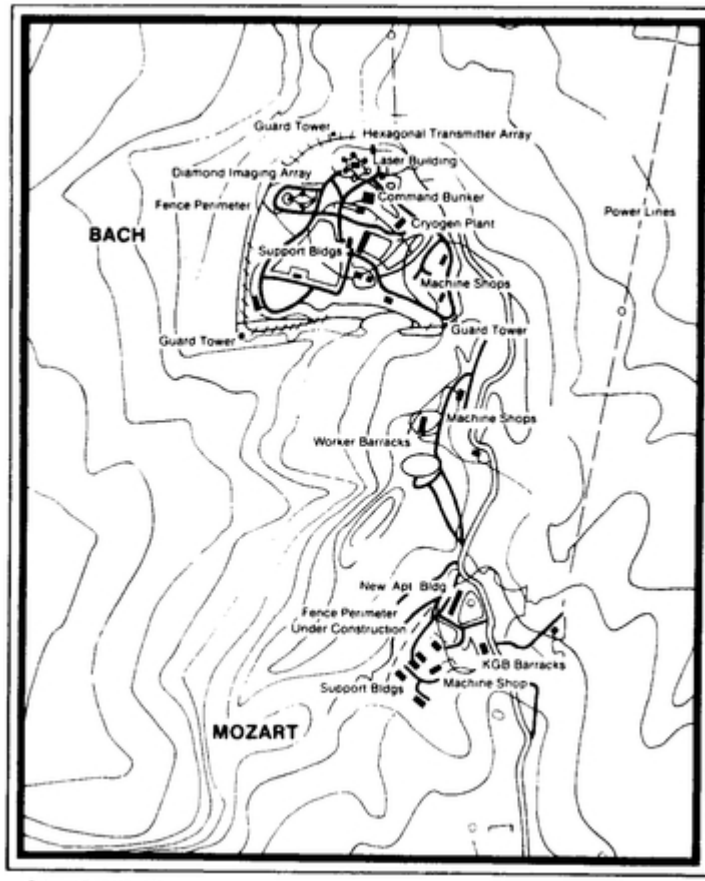

Detail of Dushanbe site

“It does,” Judge Moore noted. “We just confirmed that.”

“That’s the one we’re working on at Tea Clipper. It seems to offer the best potential for weapons applications.”

“Can I ask why, Major?” the President asked.

“Power efficiency, sir. The actual lasing occurs in a stream of free electrons —that means they’re not attached to atoms like they usually are, sir—in a vacuum. You use a linear accelerator to produce a stream of the electrons and shoot them into the cavity, which has a low-energy laser shining along its axis. The idea is that you can use electromagnets to oscillate the electrons crosswise to their path. What you get is a beam of light coincident with the oscillation frequency of the wiggler magnets—that means you can tune it, sir, like a radio. By altering the energy of the beam, you can select the exact light frequency you generate. Then you can recycle the electrons back into the linear accelerator and shoot them back into the lasing cavity again. Since the electrons are already in a high-energy state, you gain a lot of power efficiency right there. The bottom line, sir, is that you can theoretically pump out forty

percent of the energy you pump in. If you can achieve that reliably, you can kill anything you can see—when we talk about high energy levels, sir, we're speaking in relative terms. Compared to the electrical power that this country uses to cook food, the amount needed for a laser defense system is negligible. The trick is making it really work. We haven't done that yet."

"Why not?" The President was interested now, leaning forward slightly in his chair.

"We're still learning how to make the laser work, sir. The fundamental problem is in the lasing cavity—that's where the energy comes off the electrons and turns into a beam of light. We haven't been able yet to make a very wide one. If the cavity is too narrow, then you have such a high power density that you fry the optical coatings both in the cavity itself and on the mirrors that you use to aim the beam."

"But they've beaten the problem. How do you think they did it?"

"I know what we're trying to do. As you draw energy into the laser beam, the electrons become less energetic, okay? That means you have to taper the magnetic field that contains them—and remember that at the same time you have to continue the wiggling action of the field, too. We haven't figured that out yet. Probably they have, and that probably came from their research into fusion power. All the ideas for getting energy out of controlled fusion are concerned with using a magnetic field to contain a mass of high-energy plasma—in principle the same thing we're trying to do with the free electrons. Most of the basic research in that field comes from Russia, sir. They're ahead of us because they've spent more time and money in the most important place."

"Okay, thank you, Major." The President turned to Judge Moore. "Arthur, what does CIA think?"

"Well, we're not going to disagree with Major Gregory—he just spent a day briefing our Science and Technology people. We have confirmed that the Soviets do have six free-electron lasers at this place. They have made a breakthrough in power output and we're trying to find out exactly what the breakthrough was."

"Can you do that?" General Parks asked.

"I said we're trying, General. If we're very lucky, we'll have an answer by the end of the month."

"Okay, we know they can build a very powerful laser," the President said. "Next question: is it a weapon?"

"Probably not, Mr. President," General Parks said. "At least not yet. They still have a problem with thermal blooming because they haven't learned how to copy our adaptive optics. They've gotten a lot of technology from the West, but so far they don't have that. Until they do, they can't use the ground-based laser as we have, that is, relaying the beam by orbiting mirror to a distant target. But what they have now can probably do great damage to a satellite in low-earth orbit. There are ways to protect satellites against that, of course, but it's the old battle between heavier armor and heavier warheads. The warhead usually wins in the end."

"Which is why we should negotiate the weapons out of existence." Ernie Allen spoke for the first time. General Parks looked over to him with

unconcealed irritation. “Mr. President, we are now getting a taste—just a taste—of how dangerous and destabilizing these weapons might be. If we merely consider this Dushanbe place to be an antisatellite weapon, look at the implications it has for verification of arms-treaty compliance, and for intelligence-gathering in general. If we don’t try to stop these things now, all we’ll get is chaos.”

“You can’t stop progress,” Parks observed.

Allen snorted. “Progress? Hell, we have a draft treaty on the table now to reduce weapons by half. *That’s* progress, General. In the test you just ran over the South Atlantic, you missed with half your shots—I can take out as many missiles as you can.”

Ryan thought the General might come off his chair at that one, but instead he adopted his intellectual guise. “Mr. Allen, that was the first test of an experimental system, and half of its shots did hit. In fact, *all* of the targets were eliminated in under a second. Major Gregory here will have that targeting problem beaten by summer—won’t you, son?”

“Yes, sir!” Gregory piped up. “All we have to do is rework the code some.”

“Okay. If Judge Moore’s people can tell us what the Russians have done to increase their laser power, we have most of the rest of the system architecture already tested and validated. In two or three years, we’ll have it all—and then we can start thinking seriously about deployment.”

“And if the Soviets start shooting your mirrors out of space?” Allen asked dryly. “You could have the best laser system ever made on the ground, but it won’t do much more than defend New Mexico.”

“They’ll have to find ’em first, and that’s a much harder problem than you think. We can put ’em pretty high up, between three hundred and a thousand miles. We can use stealth technology to make them hard to locate on radar—you can’t do that with most satellites, but we can do it with these. The mirrors will be relatively small, and light. That means we can deploy a lot of them. Do you know how big space is, and how many *thousands* of pieces of junk are orbiting up there? They’d never get them all,” Parks concluded with confidence.

“Jack, you’ve been looking at the Russians. What do you think?” the President asked Ryan.

“Mr. President, the main force we’re going against here is the Soviet fixation on defending their country—and I mean actually *defending* it against attack. They’ve invested thirty years of work and quite a pile of money in this field because they think it’s something worth doing. Back in the Johnson administration, Kosygin said, ’Defense is moral, offense is immoral.’ That’s a Russian talking, sir, not just a communist. To be honest, I find that a hard argument to disagree with. If we do enter a new phase of competition, at least it would be defensive instead of offensive. Kind of hard to kill a million civilians with a laser,” Jack noted.

“But it will change the whole balance of power,” Ernest Allen objected.

“The current balance of power may be fairly stable, but it’s still fundamentally crazy,” Ryan said.

“It works. It keeps the peace.”

“Mr. Allen, the peace we have is one continuous crisis. You say we can

reduce inventories by half—again, so what? You could cut Soviet inventories by two thirds and still leave them with enough warheads to turn America into a crematorium. The same thing is true of our inventory. As I said coming back from Moscow, the reduction agreement now on the table is cosmetic only. It does not provide any degree of additional safety. It is a symbol—maybe an important one, but only a symbol with very little substance."

"Oh, I don't know," General Parks observed. "If you reduce my target load by half, I wouldn't mind all that much." That earned him a nasty look from Allen.

"If we can find out what the Russians are doing different, where does that leave us?" the President asked.

"If the CIA gives us data that we can use? Major?" Parks turned his head.

"Then we'll have a weapons system that we can demonstrate in three years, and deploy over the five to ten years after that," Gregory said.

"You're sure," the President said.

"As sure as I can be, sir. Like with the Apollo Program, sir, it's not so much a question of inventing a new science as learning how to engineer technology we already have. It's just working out the nuts and bolts."

"You're a very confident young man, Major," Allen said professorially.

"Yes, sir, I am. I think we can do it. Mr. Allen, our objective isn't all that different from yours. You want to get rid of the nukes, and so do we. Maybe we can help you, sir."

Zing! Ryan thought with a hastily concealed smile. A discreet knock came at the door. The President checked his watch.

"I have to cut this one short. I have to go over some antidrug programs over lunch with the Attorney General. Thank you for your time." He took one last look at the Dushanbe photo and stood. Everyone else did the same. They filed out by the side door, the one concealed in the white plaster walls.

"Nice going, kid," Ryan observed quietly to Gregory.

Candi Long caught the car outside her house. It was driven by a friend from Columbia, Dr. Beatrice Taussig, another optical physicist. Their friendship went back to undergraduate days. She was flashier than Candi. Taussig drove a Nissan 300Z sports car, and had the traffic citations to prove it. The car fitted well with her clothes, however, and the Clairoled hairstyle, and the brash personality that turned men off like a light switch.

" 'Morning, Bea." Candi Long slipped into the car and buckled the seat belt before she closed the door. Driving with Bea, you always buckled up—though she never seemed to bother.

"Tough night, Candi?" This morning it was a severe, not quite mannish wool suit, topped by a silk scarf at the neck. Long could never see the point. When you spent your day covered in a cheap white lab coat, who gave a damn what was under it—except Al, of course, but he was interested in what was under what was under, she thought to herself, smiling.

"I sleep better when he's here."

"Where'd he go?" Taussig asked.

"Washington." She yawned. The rising sun cast shadows on the road ahead.

"How come?" Bea downshifted as she accelerated the car up the freeway on-ramp. Candi felt herself pressed sideways against the seat belt. Why did her

friend have to drive this way? This wasn't the Grand Prix of Monaco.

"He said that somebody ran a test, and he has to explain it to somebody or other."

"Hmph." Beatrice looked at her mirror and left the car in third as she selected a slot in the rush-hour traffic. She matched velocities expertly and slid into a space only ten feet longer than her Z-car. That earned her an angry beep from the car behind. She just smiled. The nondriving part of her psyche took note of the fact that whatever test Al was explaining hadn't been American. And there weren't too many people doing tests that this particular little geek had to explain. Bea didn't understand what Candi saw in Al Gregory. Love, she told herself, is blind, not to mention deaf and dumb—especially dumb. Poor, plain Candi Long, she could have done so much better. If only she'd been able to room with Candi at school . . . if only there were a way to let her know . . . "When's Al going to be back?"

"Maybe tonight. He's going to call. I'll take his car. He left it at the lab."

"Put a towel over the seat before you sit in it." She chuckled. Gregory drove a Chevy Citation. The perfect car for a geek, Bea Taussig thought. It was filled with the cellophane wrappers from Hostess Twinkies, and he washed it once a year whether the car needed it or not. She wondered what he was like in bed, but stifled the thought. Not in the morning, not after you just woke up. The thought of her friend . . . involved with *that* made her skin crawl. Candi was just so naive, so innocent—so *dumb!* about some things. Well, maybe she'd come around. There was still hope. "How's the work on your diamond mirror coming?"

"ADAMANT? Give us another year and we'll know. I wish you were still working with my team," Dr. Long said.

"I can see more on the administrative side," Bea answered with remarkable honesty. "Besides, I know I'm not as smart as you."

"Just prettier," Candi noted wistfully.

Bea turned to look at her friend. Yes, there was still hope.

Misha had the finished report by four. It was delayed, Bondarenko explained, because all the most-secret-cleared secretaries were busy with other material. It was forty-one pages long, including the diagrams. The young Colonel was as good as his word, Filitov saw. He'd translated all of the engineering gobbledygook into plain, clear language. Misha had spent the previous week reading everything he could find in the files on lasers. While he didn't really understand the principles of their operation all that clearly, he had the engineering details committed to his trained memory. It made him feel like a parrot. He could repeat the words without comprehending their significance. Well, that was enough.

He read slowly, memorizing as he went. For all his peasant voice and gruff words, his mind was an even sharper razor than Colonel Bondarenko believed. And as things turned out, it didn't have to be. The important part of the breakthrough appeared simple enough, not a matter of increasing the size of the lasing cavity, but of adapting its shape to the magnetic field. With the proper shape, size could be increased almost at will . . . and the new limiting factor became a part of the superconducting magnetic-pulse-control assembly.

Misha sighed. The West had done it yet again. The Soviet Union did not have the proper materials. So, as usual, the KGB had secured them in the West, this time shipped through Czechoslovakia via Sweden. Wouldn't they ever learn?

The report concluded that the other remaining problem was in the optical and computer systems. *I'll have to see what our intelligence organs are doing about that,* Filitov told himself. Finally, he spent twenty minutes going over the diagram of the new laser. When he got to the point at which he could close his eyes and recall every single detail, he put the report back in its folder. He checked his watch and punched the button for his secretary. The warrant officer appeared at the door in a few seconds.

"Yes, Comrade Colonel?"

"Take this down to Central Files—Section 5, maximum security. Oh, and where's today's burn-bag?"

"I have it, Comrade."

"Get it for me." The man went back to the anteroom and returned a moment later with the canvas bag that went daily to the document-destruction room. Misha took it and started putting papers into it. "Dismissed. I'll drop this off on the way out."

"Thank you, Comrade Colonel."

"You work hard enough, Yuri Il'ych. Good night." When the door closed behind his secretary, Misha produced some additional pages, documents that had not originated at the Ministry. Every week or so he took care of the burn-bag himself. The warrant officer who handled Filitov's clerical work assumed that it was because of his Colonel's kindness, and perhaps also because there were some especially sensitive papers to be destroyed. In any case, it was a habit that long predated his own service to the Colonel, and the security services viewed it as routine. Three minutes later, on the way to his car, Misha walked into the destruct room. A young sergeant greeted the Colonel as he might have greeted his grandfather, and held open the chute to the incinerator. He watched as the Hero of Stalingrad set down his briefcase and used his crippled arm to open the bag as the good arm elevated it, dumping perhaps a kilogram of classified documents into the gas-fed fire in the Ministry's basement.

He could not have known that he was helping a man destroy evidence of high treason. The Colonel signed off in the log for having destroyed the documents from his section. With a friendly nod, Misha left the burn-bag on its hook and walked out the door to his waiting staff car.

Tonight the ghosts would come again, Misha knew, and tomorrow he'd take steam again, and another package of information would go to the West. On the way to his apartment, the driver stopped off at a special grocery store that was open only to the elite. Here the lines were short. Misha bought some sausage and black bread, and a half-liter bottle of Stolychnaya vodka. In a gesture of comradeliness, he even got one for his driver. For a young soldier, vodka was better than money.

In his apartment fifteen minutes later, Misha extracted his diary from its drawer, and first of all reproduced the diagram appended to Bondarenko's report. Every few minutes he'd spend a second or two looking at the framed photograph of his wife. For the most part, the formal report had tracked with

the handwritten one; he had to write only ten new pages, carefully inserting the critical formulae as he went. CARDINAL reports were always models of brevity and clarity, something that came from a lifetime of writing operational directives. When he was finished, he put on a pair of gloves and walked into the kitchen. Magnetically attached to the back side of the steel panel at the bottom of his West German—made refrigerator was a small camera. Misha operated the camera with ease, despite the inconvenience of the gloves. It took only a minute for him to photograph the new diary pages, after which he rewound the film and extracted the film cassette. He pocketed this and replaced the camera in its hiding place before removing the gloves. Next he adjusted the window shades. Misha was nothing if not careful. Close examination of his apartment's door would show scratches on the lock, indicating that it had been picked open by an expert. In fact, anyone could make the scratches. When it was confirmed that his report had reached Washington—tire scuff marks on a predetermined section of curb—he'd tear the pages out of the diary, take them to the Ministry in his pocket, put them in the burn-bag, and dump them down the chute himself. Misha had supervised the installation of the document-destruction system twenty years before.

When the task was complete, Colonel Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov looked again at Elena's picture and asked if he'd done the right thing. But Elena merely smiled as she had always done. *All these years*, he thought, *and it still troubles my conscience.* He shook his head. The final part of the ritual followed. He ate sausage and bread while his long-dead comrades of the Great Patriotic War came to visit, but he couldn't bring himself to ask those who had died for their country if he was justified in betraying it. He thought they would understand even better than his Elena, but was afraid to find out. The half-liter of vodka didn't provide the answer either. At least it drugged his brain to insensibility, and he staggered off to bed just after ten, leaving the lights on behind him.

Just after eleven, a car drove by the wide boulevard that fronted the apartment block, and a pair of blue eyes checked the Colonel's windows. It was Ed Foley this time. He noted the shades. On the way to his own flat, another covert message was passed. A Moscow sanitation worker set up a collection of signals. They were innocuous things, a chalk mark on a lamp post, for example, each of which would tell a part of the cutout team to be at their assigned posts. Another member of the CIA Moscow Station staff would check the cues at dawn, and if anything was amiss, Foley himself could abort everything.

As tense as his job was, Ed Foley found many aspects of it amusing. For one thing, the Russians themselves had made it easier by giving CARDINAL an apartment on a heavily traveled street. For another, in making such a hash of the new embassy building, they prevented him and his family from living in the new compound, and that forced Foley or his wife to drive down this boulevard every night. And they were so glad to have his son on their hockey team. That was one thing he'd miss on leaving this place, Foley told himself as he got out of the car. He now liked junior-league hockey better than baseball. Well, there was always soccer. He didn't want his son to play football. Too many kids got hurt, and he'd never be big enough. But that was in the future,

and he still had the present to worry about.

He had to be careful saying things aloud in his own apartment. Every room in every flat occupied by Americans was assumed to be more heavily bugged than an ant farm, but over the years, Ed and Mary Pat had made a joke of that, too. After he came in and hung up his coat, he kissed his wife, then tickled her ear at the same time. She giggled in recognition, though both were thoroughly tired of the stress that came with this post. Just a few more months.

"So how was the reception?" she asked for the benefit of the wall microphones.

"The usual crap," was the recorded answer.

9.

Opportunities

BEATRICE Taussig didn't make up a report, though she considered the slip Candi had made significant. Cleared for nearly everything that happened at Los Alamos National Laboratory, she hadn't been told about an unscheduled test, and while some SDI work was being done in Europe and Japan, none of it required Al Gregory as an interpreter. That made it Russian, and if they'd flown the little geek to Washington—and, she remembered, he'd left his car at the lab; so they'd sent him a helicopter, too—it had to have been something big. She didn't like Gregory, but she had no reason to doubt the quality of his brain. She wondered what the test was, but she wasn't cleared for what the Russians were up to, and her curiosity was disciplined. It had to be. What she was doing was dangerous.

But that was part of the fun, wasn't it? She smiled to herself.

"That leaves three unaccounted for." Behind the Afghans, the Russians were sifting through the wreckage of the An-26. The man talking was a KGB major. He'd never seen an air crash before, and only the cold air on his face had kept him from losing his breakfast.

"Your man?" The infantry Captain of the Soviet Army—until very recently a battalion advisor to the puppet Afghan Army—looked around to make sure his troops were manning the perimeter properly. His stomach was as settled as it could be. Watching his friend nearly gutted before his eyes had been the greatest shock of his life, and he was wondering if his Afghan comrade would survive emergency surgery.

"Still missing, I think." The aircraft's fuselage had broken into several pieces. Those passengers in the forward section had been bathed in fuel when the plane had hit the ground, and were burned beyond recognition. Still, the troops had assembled the pieces for nearly all the bodies. All but three, that is, and the forensic experts would have to determine who was surely dead and who was still missing. They were not normally so solicitous for the victims of an airline crash—the An-26 had technically been part of Aeroflot rather than the Soviet Air Force—but a full effort was being made in this case. The missing Captain was part of the KGB's Ninth "Guards" Directorate, an administrative officer who'd been making a tour of the region, checking up on personnel and security activities at certain sensitive areas. His travel documents included some highly sensitive papers, but, more important, he had intimate knowledge of numerous KGB personnel and activities. The papers could have been destroyed—the remains of several briefcases had been found, burned to ashes, but until the death of the Captain could be confirmed there

would be some very unhappy people at Moscow Center.

"He left a family—well, a widow. His son died last month, they tell me. Some kind of cancer," the KGB Major noted quietly.

"I hope you will take proper care of his wife," the Captain replied.

"Yes, we have a department to manage that. Might they have dragged him off?"

"Well, we know they were here. They always loot crash sites, looking for weapons. Documents?" The Captain shrugged. "We're fighting ignorant savages, Comrade Major. I doubt that they have much interest in documents of any kind. They might have recognized his uniform as that of a KGB officer, then dragged him off to mutilate the body. You wouldn't believe what they do to captives."

"Barbarians," the KGB man muttered. "Shooting down an unarmed airliner." He looked around. "Loyal" Afghan troops—that was an optimistic adjective for them, he grumbled—were putting the bodies, and the pieces, into rubber bags to be helicoptered back to Ghazni, then flown to Moscow for identification. "And if they dragged my man's body off?"

"We'll never find it. Oh, there's some chance, but not a good one. Every circling vulture we see, we'll send a helicopter out, but . . ." The Captain shook his head. "The odds are that you already have the body, Comrade Major. It will just require some time to confirm the fact."

"Poor bastard—desk man. Wasn't even his territory, but the man assigned here is in the hospital with gallbladder problems, and he took this job in addition to his own."

"What's his usual territory?"

"The Tadzhik SSR. I suppose he wanted the extra work to get his mind off his troubles."

"How are you feeling, Russian?" the Archer asked his prisoner. They couldn't provide much in the way of medical attention. The nearest medical team, made up of French doctors and nurses, was in a cave near Hasan Khél. Their own walking casualties were heading there now. Those more seriously hurt . . . well, what could they do? They had a goodly supply of painkillers, morphine ampuls manufactured in Switzerland, and injected the dying to ease their pain. In some cases the morphine helped them along, but anyone who showed hope of recovery was placed on a litter and carried southeast toward the Pakistani border. Those who survived the sixty-mile journey would receive care in something that passed for a real hospital, near the closed airfield at Miram Shah. The Archer led this party. He'd successfully argued with his comrades that the Russian was worth more alive than dead, that the *Americastani* would give them much for a member of the Russian political police and his documents. Only the tribal headman could have defeated this argument, and he was dead. They'd given the body as hasty a burial as their faith permitted, but he was now in Paradise. That left the Archer now as the most senior and trusted warrior of the band.

Who could have told from his flint-hard eyes and cold words that for the first time in three years there was pity in his heart? Even he was bemused by it. Why had those thoughts entered his head? Was it the will of Allah? *It had to*

be, he thought. *Who else could stop me from killing a Russian?*

"Hurt," the Russian answered finally. But the Archer's pity didn't stretch that far. The morphine the *mudjaheddin* carried was only for their own. After looking to be sure that no one saw, he passed the Russian the photographs of his family. For the briefest instant his eyes softened. The KGB officer looked at him in surprise that overcame the pain. His good hand took the photographs, cupping them to his chest. There was gratitude on his face, gratitude and puzzlement. The man thought of his dead son, and contemplated his own fate. The worst thing that could happen, he decided within the cloud of pain, was that he'd rejoin his child, wherever he was. The Afghans could not hurt him worse than he already was in body and soul. The Captain was already to the point that the pain had become like a drug, so familiar that the agony had become tolerable, almost comfortable. He'd heard that this was possible, but not believed it until now.

His mental processes were still not fully functional. In his twilight state he wondered why he hadn't been killed. He'd heard enough stories in Moscow about how the Afghans treated captives . . . *and was that why you volunteered to handle this tour in addition to your own . . . ?* He wondered now at his fate, and how he'd brought it about.

You cannot die, Valeriy Mikhailovich, you must live. You have a wife, and she has suffered enough, he told himself. *Already she is going through . . .* The thought stopped of its own accord. The Captain slid the photo into a breast pocket and surrendered himself to the beckoning unconsciousness as his body labored to heal itself. He didn't wake as he was bound to a board and placed aboard a travois. The Archer led his party off.

Misha woke with the sounds of battle reverberating through his head. It was still dark outside—the sun would not rise for some time—and his first considered action was to go into the bathroom, where he splashed cold water on his face and washed down three aspirin. Some dry heaves followed, over the toilet, but all that came out was yellow bile, and he rose to look in the mirror to see what treason had done to a Hero of the Soviet Union. He could not—would not—stop, of course, but . . . *but look what it is doing to you, Misha.* The once clear-blue eyes were bloodshot and lifeless, the ruddy complexion gray like a corpse. His skin sagged, and the gray stubble on his cheeks blurred a face that had once been called handsome. He stretched his right arm, and as usual the scar tissue was stiff, looking like plastic. Well. He washed out his mouth and trudged off to the kitchen to make some coffee.

At least he had some of that, also bought in a store that catered to the members of the *nomenklatura,* and a Western-made machine with which to brew it. He debated over eating something, but decided to stick with coffee alone. He could always have some bread at his desk. The coffee was ready in three minutes. He drank a cup straight down, ignoring the damaging heat of the liquid, then lifted his phone to order his staff car. He wanted to be picked up early, and though he didn't say that he wanted to visit the baths this morning, the sergeant who answered the phone at the motor pool knew what the reason was.

Twenty minutes later Misha emerged from the front of his building. His eyes

were already watering, and he squinted painfully into the cold northwest wind that tried to sweep him back through the doors. The sergeant thought to reach out and steady his Colonel, but Filitov shifted his weight slightly to fight against the invisible hand of nature that held him back and got into the car as he always did, as though he were boarding his old T-34 for combat.

"The baths, Comrade Colonel?" the driver asked after getting back in front.

"Did you sell the vodka I gave you?"

"Why, yes, Comrade Colonel," the youngster answered.

"Good for you, that's healthier than drinking it. The baths. Quickly," the Colonel said with mock gravity, "and I might yet live."

"If the Germans couldn't kill you, my Colonel, I doubt that a few drops of good Russian vodka can," the boy said cheerfully.

Misha allowed himself a laugh, accepting the flash in his head with good humor. The driver even looked like his Corporal Romanov. "How would you like to be an officer someday?"

"Thank you, Comrade Colonel, but I wish to return to the university to study. My father is a chemical engineer and I plan to follow him."

"He is a lucky man, then, Sergeant. Let's get moving."

The car pulled up to the proper building in ten minutes. The sergeant let his Colonel out, then parked in the reserved spaces from which he could see the doors. He lit a cigarette and opened a book. This was very good duty, better than tromping around in the mud with a motor-rifle company. He checked his watch. Old Misha wouldn't be back for nearly an hour. Poor old bastard, he thought, to be so lonely. What miserable luck that a hero should come to this.

Inside, the routine was so fixed that Misha could have done it asleep. After undressing, he got his towels, and slippers, and birch branches, and moved off to the steam room. He was earlier than usual. Most of the regulars hadn't shown up yet. So much the better. He increased the flow of water onto the firebricks and sat down to allow his pounding head to clear. Three others were scattered about the room. He recognized two of them, but they weren't acquaintances, and none seemed in the mood to talk. That was fine with Misha. The mere act of moving his jaw hurt, and the aspirin were slow today.

Fifteen minutes later the sweat poured off the white body. He looked up to see the attendant, heard the usual cant about a drink—nobody wanted one just yet—plus the line about the swimming pool. It seemed the likely thing for a man in this job to say, but what the precise wording meant was: *All secure. I am ready for the transfer.* By way of reply, Misha wiped the sweat off his brow in an exaggerated gesture common to elderly men. *Ready.* The attendant left. Slowly, Misha began counting to three hundred. When he got to two hundred and fifty-seven, one of his fellow alcoholics stood and walked out. Misha took note of this, but didn't worry about it. He had far too much practice. When he got to three hundred he rose with a jerking movement of his knees and left the room without a word.

The air was much cooler in the robing room, but he saw that the other man hadn't left yet. He was talking to the attendant about something or other. Misha waited patiently for the attendant to notice him, which he did. The young man came over, and the Colonel took a few steps to meet him. Misha stumbled on a loose tile and nearly fell. His good arm went forward. The

attendant caught him, or nearly did. The birch sticks fell to the floor.

The young man swept them up in an instant and helped Misha to his feet. In another few seconds he'd given him a fresh towel for his shower and sent him on his way.

"Are you all right, Comrade?" the other man asked from the far end of the room.

"Yes, thank you. My old knees, and these old floors. They should pay more attention to the floor."

"Indeed they should. Come, we can shower together," the man said. He was about forty, and nondescript except for his bloodshot eyes. Another drinker, Misha observed at once. "You were in the war, then?"

"Tanker. The last German gun got me—but I got him, too, at the Kursk Bulge."

"My father was there. He served in the Seventh Guards Army under Konev."

"I was on the other side: Second Tanks, under Konstantin Rokossovskiy. My last campaign."

"I can see why, Comrade . . ."

"Filitov, Mikhail Semyonovich, Colonel of Tank Troops."

"I am Klementi Vladimirovich Vatutin, but I am no one's hero. It is a pleasure to meet you, Comrade."

"It is good for an old man to be shown respect."

Vatutin's father had served in the Kursk Campaign, but as a political officer. He'd retired a colonel in the NKVD, and his son had followed in his footsteps, in the agency later redesignated KGB.

Twenty minutes later, the Colonel was off to his office, and the bath attendant had slipped out the rear door again and entered that of the dry-cleaners. The store manager had to be called from the machine room, where he'd been oiling a pump. As a matter of simple security, the man who took the cassette from his hand was supposed to know neither the man's name nor where he worked. He pocketed the cassette, passed over three half-liter bottles of liquor, and returned to finish oiling the pump, his heart rate up as it always was on these days. He was quietly amused that his cover assignment as a CIA "agent"—a Soviet national working for the American intelligence agency—worked very much to his personal fiscal benefit. The under-the-counter marketing of alcohol paid him in "certificate" rubles that could be used to buy Western goods and premium foodstuffs at the hard-currency stores. He balanced that against the tension of his assignment as he washed the machine oil off his hands. He'd been part of this line of cutouts for six months, and though he didn't know it, his work along this line would soon be ended. He'd still be used to pass along information, but not for CARDINAL. Soon thereafter the man at the baths would seek another job, and this link of nameless agents would be dissolved—and untraceable even to the relentless counterintelligence officers of the KGB's Second Chief Directorate.

Fifteen minutes later, a regular customer appeared with one of her English coats. It was an Aquascutum with the zippered-in liner removed. As always, she said something about taking special care to use the gentlest process on the coat, and as always he nodded and protested that this was the best cleaning shop in all of the Soviet Union. But it didn't have pre-printed check forms, and

he wrote out three by hand on carbon-sets. The first was attached to the coat with a straight pin, the second went into a small box, and the third—but first he checked the pockets.

"Comrade, you've left some change. I thank you, but we do not need the extra money." He handed this, and the receipt, over. Plus something else. It was so easy. Nobody ever checked the pockets, just as in the West.

"Ah, truly you are an honorable man," the lady said with an odd formalism common in the Soviet Union. "Good day, Comrade."

"And to you," the man replied. "Next!"

The lady—her name was Svetlana—walked off to the Metro station as usual. Her schedule allowed for a leisurely walk in case of problems at either end of her exchange. The streets of Moscow were invariably crowded with bustling, unsmiling people, many of whom looked at her coat with brief glances of envy. She had a wide selection of English clothing, having traveled to the West many times as part of her job at GOSPLAN, the Soviet economics planning ministry. It was in England that she'd been recruited by the British Secret Intelligence Service. She was used in the CARDINAL chain because the CIA didn't have all that many agents in Russia who could be used, and she was carefully given jobs only in the center of the chain, never at either end. The data she herself gave the West was low-level economic information, and her occasional services as a courier were actually more useful than the information of which she was so proud. Her case officers never told her this, of course; every spy deems him- or herself to possess the most vital intelligence ever to make its way out. It made the game all the more interesting, and for all their ideological (or other) motivations, spies view their craft as the grandest of all games, since they must invariably outsmart the most formidable resources of their own countries. Svetlana actually enjoyed living on the jagged edge of life and death, though she did not know why. She also believed that her highly placed father—a senior Central Committee member—could protect her from anything. After all, his influence enabled her to travel to Western Europe two or three times a year, didn't it? A pompous man, her father, but Svetlana was his only child, the mother of his only grandchild, and the center of his universe.

She entered the Kuznetskiy Most station in time to see one train leave. Timing was always the tricky part. In rush hour, the Moscow Metro trains run a mere thirty seconds apart. Svetlana checked her watch, and again she had timed her arrival perfectly. Her contact would be on the next one. She walked along the platform to the exact spot for the forward door on the second car of that train, ensuring that she'd be the first one aboard. Her clothing helped. She was often mistaken for a foreigner, and Moscovites treated foreigners with deference ordinarily reserved for royalty—or the gravely ill. She didn't have to wait long. Soon she heard the rumble of an approaching train. Heads turned, as they always did, to see the lights of the lead car, and the sound of brakes filled the vaulted station with high-pitched noise. The door opened, and a rush of people emerged. Then Svetlana stepped in and took a few steps toward the back of the car. She grabbed the overhead bar—all the seats were filled, and no man offered his—and faced forward before the train lurched forward again. Her ungloved left hand was in her coat pocket.

She'd never seen the face of her contact on this train, but she knew that he'd seen hers. Whoever he was, he appreciated her slim figure. She knew that from his signal. In the crush of the crowded train, a hand hidden by a copy of *Izvestia* ran along her left buttock and stopped to squeeze gently. That was new, and she fought off the impulse to see his face. Might he be a good lover? She could use another one. Her former husband was such a . . . but, no. It was better this way, more poetic, more Russian, that a man whose face she'd never know found her beautiful and desirable. She clasped the film cassette between her thumb and forefinger, waiting the next two minutes for the train to stop at Pushkinskaya. Her eyes were closed, and a millimeter of smile formed on her lips as she contemplated the identity and attributes of the cutout whose hand caressed her. It would have horrified her case officer, but she gave no other outward sign of anything.

The train slowed. People rose from their seats, and those standing shuffled about in preparation to leave. Svetlana took her hand out of the pocket. The cassette was slippery, whether from water or some oily substance from the cleaners she didn't know. The hand left her hip—a last, lingering trail of gentle pressure—and came upward to receive the small metal cylinder as her face turned to the right.

Immediately behind her, an elderly woman tripped on her own feet and bumped into the cutout. His hand knocked the cassette from Svetlana's. She didn't realize it for a moment, but the instant the train stopped, the man was on all fours grabbing for it. She looked down more in surprise than horror to see the back of his head. He was going bald, and the shroud of hair about his ears was gray—he was an old man! He had the cassette in a moment and sprang back to his feet. Old, but spry, she thought, catching the shape of his jaw. A strong profile—yes, he'd be a good lover, and perhaps a patient one, the best kind of all. He scurried off the train, and she cleared her mind. Svetlana didn't notice that a man sitting on the left side of the car was up and moving, exiting the car against traffic a second before the doors closed again.

His name was Boris, and he was a night-watch officer at KGB headquarters now on his way home to sleep. Ordinarily he read the sports newspaper—known originally as *Sovietskiy Sport*—but today he'd forgotten to get one at the kiosk in the headquarters building, and he'd accidentally happened to see on the dirty black floor of the subway car what could only be a film cassette, and one too small to come from an ordinary camera. He hadn't seen the attempted pass, and didn't know who'd dropped it. He assumed that the fiftyish man had, and noted the skill with which the man had retrieved it. Once off the car, he realized that a pass must have taken place, but he'd been too surprised to respond properly, too surprised and too tired after a long night's duty.

He was a former case officer who'd operated in Spain before being invalided home after a heart attack and set on the night desk in his section. His rank was major. He felt he deserved a colonelcy for the work he'd done, but this thought, too, was not in his mind at the moment. His eyes searched the platform for the gray-haired man in the brown coat. *There!* He moved off, feeling a small twinge in his left chest as he walked after the man. He ignored that. He'd quit smoking a few years before, and the KGB doctor said that he was doing well. He got within five meters of the man, and closed no more.

This was the time for patience. He followed him through the crossover to the Gor'kovskaya Station and onto the platform. Here things got tricky. The platform was crowded with people heading to their offices, and he lost visual contact with his quarry. The KGB officer was a short man and had trouble in crowds. Could he dare to close farther? It would mean pushing through the crowd . . . and calling attention to himself. That was dangerous.

He'd been trained in this, of course, but that was over twenty years behind him, and he frantically searched his mind for procedures. He knew fieldcraft, knew how to identify and shake a tail, but he was a First Directorate man, and the shadowing skills used by the ferrets of the Second Directorate were not part of his repertoire. *What do I do now?* he raged at himself. Such a chance this was! The First Directorate men naturally hated their counterparts in the Second, and to catch one of them at—but what if there might be a "Two" man here? Might he be observing a training exercise? Might he now be the subject of curses from a "Two" man who had a case running on this courier? Could he be disgraced by this? *What do I do now?* He looked around, hoping to identify the counterintelligence men who might be working this courier. He couldn't hope to discern which face it was, but he might get a wave-off signal. He thought he remembered those. Nothing. *What do I do now?* He was sweating in the cold subway station, and the pain in his chest increased to add another factor to his dilemma. There was a system of covert telephone lines built into every segment of the Moscow subway system. Every KGB officer knew how to use them, but he knew he didn't have time to find and activate the system.

He had to follow the man. He had to run the risk. If it turned out to be the wrong decision, well, he was an experienced field officer in his own right, and he *had* looked for the wave-off. The "Two" people might tongue-lash him, but he knew he could depend on his First Directorate supervisors to protect him. The decision now made, the chest pain subsided. But there was still the problem of seeing him. The KGB officer wormed his way through the crowd, enduring grumbles as he did so, but finally finding his way blocked by a gang of laborers who were talking about something or other. He craned his neck to get a look at his quarry—*yes! still standing there, looking to the right* . . . The sound of the subway train came as a relief.

He stood there, trying not to look too often at his target. He heard the subway doors open with a hiss, heard the sudden change in noise as the people got off, then the rasping shuffle of feet as people crowded forward toward the doors.

The car was full! His man was inside, but the doors overflowed with bodies. The KGB officer raced to the rear door and fought his way in a moment before it shut. He realized with a chill that he might have been too obvious, but there was nothing he could do about that. As the train began moving, he worked his way forward. The people seated and standing noticed this untoward movement. As he watched, a hand adjusted a hat. Three or four newspapers rattled—any of these signals could be a warning to the courier.

One of them was. Ed Foley was looking away after adjusting his glasses with a right hand that wore one glove and held another. The courier turned back forward and went over his escape procedures. Foley went over his own. The courier would dispose of the film, first exposing it by pulling it out of the

metal cylinder, then dumping it in the nearest trash receptacle. That had happened twice before that he knew of, and in both cases the cutout had gotten away cleanly. *They're trained how,* Foley told himself. *They know how.* CARDINAL would be warned, and another film would be made, and . . . but this had never happened on Foley's watch, and it took all of his discipline to keep his face impassive. The courier didn't move at all. He got off at the next stop anyway. He'd done nothing unusual, nothing that didn't appear normal. He would say that he'd found this funny little thing with the—*was it film, Comrade?*—stuff pulled out on the floor of the train, and thought it merely trash to be disposed of. In his pocket, the man was trying to pull the film out of the cassette. Whoever took it always left a few millimeters out so that you could yank all of it—or so they'd told him. But the cassette was slippery and he couldn't quite get a grip on the exposed end. The train stopped again and the courier moved out. He didn't know who was trailing him. He knew nothing other than that he'd gotten his wave-off signal, and that signal also told him to destroy what he had in the prescribed way—but he'd never had to do it before. He tried not to look around, and moved out of the station as quickly as anyone else in the crowd. For his part, Foley didn't even look out of the train's windows. It was nearly inhuman but he managed it, fearing above all that he might endanger his cutout.

The courier stood alone on a moving step of the escalator. Just a few more seconds and he'd be on the street. He'd find an alley to expose the film, and a sewer to dump it in, along with the cigarette he'd just lit. One smooth motion of the hand, and even if he were picked up, there would be no evidence, and his story, drilled into his head and practiced there every day, was good enough to make the KGB wonder. His career as a spy was now over. He knew that, and was surprised at the wave of relief that enveloped him like a warm, comfortable bath.

The air was a cold reminder of reality, but the sun was rising, and the sky was beautifully clear. He turned right and walked off. There was an alley half a block away, and a sewer grate that he could use. His cigarette would be finished just as he got there, yet another thing that he'd practiced. Now, if only he could get the film out of the cassette and exposed to sunlight . . . Damn. He slipped off his other glove and rubbed his hands together. The courier used his fingernails to get the film. Yes! He crumpled the film and put the cassette back into his pocket, and—

"Comrade." The voice was strong for a man of his age, the courier thought. The brown eyes sparkled with alertness, and the hand at his pocket was a strong one. The other, he saw, was in the man's pocket. "I wish to see what is in your hand."

"Who are you?" the courier blustered. "What is this?"

The right hand jerked in the pocket. "I am the man who will kill you, here on the street, unless I see what is in your hand. I am Major Boris Churbanov." Churbanov knew that this would soon be false. From the look on the man's face, he knew that he had his colonelcy.

Foley was in his office ten minutes later. He sent one of his men—actually a woman—out on the street to look for the signal that the dump had been made

successfully, and his hope was that he'd simply goofed, that he'd overreacted to a commuter who was trying too hard to get to work. But . . . but there was something about that face that had said *professional*. Foley didn't know what, but it had been there. He had his hands flat on the desk and stared at them for several minutes.

What did I do wrong? he asked himself. He'd been trained to do that, too, to analyze his actions step by step, looking for flaws, for mistakes, for . . . Had he been followed? He frequently was, of course, like all Americans on the embassy staff. His personal tail was a man he thought of as "George." But George wasn't there very often. The Russians didn't know who Foley was. He was sure of that. That thought caught in his throat. Being certain about anything in the intelligence business was the surest route to disaster. That was why he'd never broken craft, why he never deviated from the training that had been drilled into him at Camp Peary, on the York River in Virginia, then practiced all over the world.

Well. The next thing he had to do was predetermined. He walked to the communications room and sent a telex to Foggy Bottom. This one, however, went to a box number whose traffic was never routine. Within a minute of its receipt, a night-watch officer from Langley drove to State to retrieve it. The wording of the message was innocuous, but its meaning was not: TROUBLE ON THE CARDINAL LINE. FULL DATA TO FOLLOW.

They didn't take him to Dzerzhinskiy Square. KGB headquarters, so long used as a prison—a dungeon for all that happened there—was now exclusively an office building since, in obedience to Parkinson's Law, the agency had expanded to absorb all its available space. Now the interrogations were done at Lefortovo Prison, a block from the Sputnik Cinema. There was plenty of room here.

He sat alone in a room with a table and three chairs. It had never occurred to the courier to resist, and even now he didn't realize that if he'd run away or fought the man who'd arrested him, he might still be free. It wasn't the idea that Major Churbanov had had a gun—he hadn't—but simply that Russians, in lacking freedom, often lack the concepts needed for active resistance. He'd seen his life end. He accepted that. The courier was a fearful man, but he feared only what had to be. You cannot fight against destiny, he told himself.

"So, Churbanov, what do we have?" The questioner was a Captain of the Second Chief Directorate, about thirty years old.

"Have someone develop this." He handed over the cassette. "I think this man is a cutout." Churbanov described what he'd seen and what he'd done. He didn't say that he'd rewound the film into the cassette. "Pure chance that I spotted him," he concluded.

"I didn't think you 'One' people knew how, Comrade Major. Well done!"

"I was afraid that I'd blundered into one of your operations and—"

"You would have known by now. It is necessary for you to make a full report. If you will accompany the sergeant here, he'll take you to a stenographer. Also, I will summon a full debriefing team. This will take some hours. You may wish to call your wife."

"The film," Churbanov persisted.

"Yes. I will walk that down to the lab myself. If you'll go with the sergeant, I'll rejoin you in ten minutes."

The laboratory was in the opposite wing of the prison. The Second Directorate had a small facility here, since much of its work centered on Lefortovo. The Captain caught the lab technician between jobs, and the developing process was started at once. While he waited, he called his Colonel. There was as yet no way to measure what this "One" man had uncovered, but it was almost certainly an espionage case, and those were all treated as matters of the utmost importance. The Captain shook his head. That old war-horse of a field officer, just stumbling into something like that.

"Finished." The technician came back. He'd developed the film and printed one blow-up, still damp from the process. He handed back the film cassette, too, in a small manila envelope. "The film has been exposed and rewound. I managed to save part of one frame. It's interesting, but I have no idea what it actually is."

"What about the rest?"

"Nothing can be done. Once film is exposed to sunlight, the data is utterly destroyed."

The Captain scanned the blow-up as the technician said something else. It was mainly a diagram, with some caption printed in block letters. The words at the top of the diagram read: BRIGHT STAR COMPLEX #1, and one of the other captions was LASER ARRAY. The Captain swore and left the room at a run.

Major Churbanov was having tea with the debrief team when the Captain returned. The scene was comradely. It would get more so.

"Comrade Major, you may have discovered something of the highest importance," the Captain said.

"I serve the Soviet Union," Churbanov replied evenly. It was the perfect reply—the one recommended by the Party. Perhaps he might leap over the rank of lieutenant colonel and become a full colonel . . .

"Let me see," the chief debriefer said. He was a full colonel, and examined the photographic print carefully. "This is all?"

"The rest was destroyed."

The Colonel grunted. That would create a problem, but not all that much of one. The diagram would suffice to identify the site, whatever it was. The printing looked to be the work of a young person, probably a woman because of its neatness. The Colonel paused and looked out the window for a few seconds. "This has to go to the top, and quickly. What is described in here is—well, I have never heard of it, but it must be a matter of the greatest secrecy. You comrades begin the debrief. I'm going to make a few calls. You, Captain, take the cassette to the lab for fingerprints and—"

"Comrade, I touched it with my bare hands," Churbanov said ashamedly.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Comrade Major, your vigilance was more than exemplary," the Colonel said generously. "Check for prints anyway."

"The spy?" the Captain asked. "What about interrogating him?"

"We need an experienced man. I know just the one." The Colonel rose. "I'll call him, too."

Several pairs of eyes watched him, measuring him, his face, his determination, his intelligence. The courier was still alone in the interrogation room. The laces had been taken from his shoes, of course, and his belt, and his cigarettes, and anything else that might be used as a weapon against himself, or to settle him down. There was no way for him to measure time, and the lack of nicotine made him fidgety and even more nervous than he might have been. He looked about the room and saw a mirror, which was two-way, but he didn't know that. The room was completely soundproofed to deny him even the measure of time from footsteps in the outside corridor. His stomach growled a few times, but otherwise he made no sound. Finally the door opened.

The man who entered was about forty and well dressed in civilian clothes. He carried a few sheets of paper. The man walked around to the far side of the table and didn't look at the courier until he sat down. When he did look at him, his eyes were disinterested, like a man at the zoo examining a creature from a distant land. The courier tried to meet his gaze impassively, but failed. Already the interrogator knew that this one would be easy. After fifteen years, he could always tell.

"You have a choice," he said after another minute or so. His voice was not hard, but matter-of-fact. "It can go easily for you or it can go very hard. You have committed treason against the Motherland. I do not need to tell you what happens to traitors. If you wish to live, you will tell me now, today, everything you know. If you do not do this, we will find out anyway, and you will die. If you tell us today, you will be allowed to live."

"You will kill me anyway," the courier observed.

"This is not true. If you cooperate, today, you will at worst be sentenced to a lengthy term in a labor camp of strict regime. It is even possible that we can use you to uncover more spies. If so, you will be sent to a camp of moderate regime, for a lesser term. But for that to happen, you must cooperate, today. I will explain. If you return to your normal life at once, the people for whom you work may not know that we have arrested you. They will, therefore, continue to make use of you, and this will enable us to use you to catch them in the act of spying against the Soviet Union. You would testify in the trial against them, and this will allow the State to show mercy. To show such mercy in public is also useful to the State. But for all this to happen, to save your life, and to atone for your crimes, you must cooperate, today." The voice paused for a beat, and softened further.

"Comrade, I take no pleasure in bringing pain to people, but if my job requires it, I will give the order without hesitation. You cannot resist what we will do to you. No one can. No matter how brave you may be, your body has its limits. So does mine. So does anyone's. It is only a matter of time. Time is important to us only for the next few hours, you see. After that, we can take all the time we wish. A man with a hammer can break the hardest stone. Save yourself the pain, Comrade. Save your life," the voice concluded, and the eyes, which were oddly sad and determined at the same time, stared into the courier's.

The interrogator saw that he'd won. You could always tell from the eyes.

The defiant ones, the hard ones, didn't shift their eyes. They might stare straight into yours, or more often at a fixed point of the wall behind you, but the hard ones would fix to a single place and draw their strength from it. Not this one. His eyes flickered around the room, searching for strength and finding none. Well, he'd expected this one to be easy. Perhaps one more gesture . . .

"Would you like a smoke?" The interrogator fished out a pack and shook one loose on the table.

The courier picked it up, and the white paper of the cigarette was his flag of surrender.

10.

Damage Assessment

"WHAT do we know?" Judge Moore asked.

It was a little after six in the morning at Langley, before dawn, and the view outside the windows matched the gloom that the Director and his two principal subordinates felt.

"Somebody was trailing cutout number four," Ritter said. The Deputy Director for Operations riffled through the papers in his hand. "He spotted the tail just before the pass was made and waved the guy off. The tail probably didn't see his face, and took off after the cutout. Foley said he looked clumsy —that's pretty strange, but he went with his instincts, and Ed's pretty good at that. He put an officer on the street to catch the shake-off signal from our agent, but it wasn't put up. We have to assume that he's been burned, and we have to assume that the film is in their hands, too, until we can prove otherwise. Foley has broken the chain. CARDINAL will be notified never to use his pickup man again. I'm going to tell Ed to use the routine data-lost signal, not the emergency one."

"Why?" Admiral Greer asked. Judge Moore answered.

"The information he had en route is pretty important, James. If we give him the scramble signal, he may—hell, we've told him that if that happens he's to destroy everything that might be incriminating. What if he can't re-create the information? We need it."

"Besides, Ivan has to do a lot to get back to him," Ritter went on. "I want Foley to get the data restored and out, and then—then I want to bust CARDINAL out once and for all. He's paid his dues. After we get the data, then we'll give him the emergency signal, and if we're lucky it'll scare him enough that we can get him to come out."

"How do you want to do it?" Moore asked.

"The wet way, up north," the DDO answered.

"Opinions, James?" Moore asked the DDI.

"Makes sense. Take a little time to set up. Ten to fourteen days."

"Then let's do that today. You call the Pentagon and make the request. Make sure they give us a good one."

"Right." Greer nodded, then smiled. "I know which one to ask for."

"As soon as we know which, I'll send our man to her. We'll use Mr. Clark," Ritter said. Heads nodded. Clark was a minor legend in the Operations Directorate. If anybody could do it, he could.

"Okay, get the message off to Foley," the Judge said. "I'll have to brief the President on this." He wasn't looking forward to that.

"Nobody lasts forever. CARDINAL's beat the odds three times over," Ritter

said. “Make sure you tell him that, too.”

“Yeah. Okay, gentlemen, let’s get to it.”

Admiral Greer went immediately to his office. It was just before seven, and he called the Pentagon, OP-02, the office of the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Undersea Warfare). After identifying himself, he asked his first question: “What’s *Dallas* up to?”

Captain Mancuso was already at work, too. His last deployment on USS *Dallas* would begin in five hours. She’d sail on the tide. Aft, the engineers were already bringing the nuclear reactor on line. While his executive officer was running things, the Captain was going over the mission orders again. He was heading “up north” one last time. In the U.S. and Royal navies, up north meant the Barents Sea, the Soviet Navy’s backyard. Once there, he’d conduct what the Navy officially termed *oceanographic research,* which in the case of USS *Dallas* meant that she’d spend all the time possible trailing Soviet missile submarines. It wasn’t easy work, but Mancuso was an expert at it, and he had, in fact, once gotten a closer look at a Russian “boomer” than any other American sub skipper. He couldn’t discuss that with anyone, of course, not even a fellow skipper. His second Distinguished Service Medal, awarded for that mission, was classified and he couldn’t wear it; though its existence did show in the confidential section of his personnel file, the actual citation was missing. But that was behind him, and Mancuso was a man who always looked forward. If he had to make one final deployment, it might as well be up north. His phone rang.

“Captain speaking,” he answered.

“Bart, Mike Williamson,” said the Submarine Group Two commander. “I need you here, right now.”

“On the way, sir.” Mancuso hung up in surprise. Within a minute he was up the ladder, off the boat, and walking along the blacktopped quay in the Thames, where the Admiral’s car was waiting. He was in the Group Two office four minutes after that.

“Change in orders,” Rear Admiral Williamson announced as soon as the door was closed.

“What’s up?”

“You’re making a high-speed run for Faslane. Some people will be meeting you there. That’s all I know, but the orders originated at OP-02 and came through SUBLANT in about thirty seconds.” Williamson didn’t have to say anything else. Something very hot was up. Hot ones came to *Dallas* quite often. Actually, they came to Mancuso, but then, he was *Dallas.*

“My sonar department’s still a little thin,” the Captain said. “I’ve got some good young ones, but my new chief’s in the hospital. If this is going to be especially hairy . . .”

“What do you need?” Admiral Williamson asked, and got his answer.

“Okay, I’ll get to work on that. You have five days to Scotland, and I can work something out on this end. Drive her hard, Bart.”

“Aye aye, sir.” He’d find out what was happening when he got to Faslane.

“How are you, Russian?” the Archer asked.

He was better. The previous two days, he'd been sure that he'd die. Now he wasn't so sure. False hope or not, it was something he hadn't had before. Churkin wondered now if there might really be a future in his life, and if it were something he might have to fear. Fear. He'd forgotten that. He'd faced death twice in a small expanse of time. Once in a falling, burning airplane, hitting the ground and seeing the instant when his life ended; then waking up from death to find an Afghan bandit over him with a knife, and seeing death yet again, only to have it stop and leave. Why? This bandit, the one with the strange eyes, both hard and soft, pitiless and compassionate, wanted him to live. Why? Churkin had the time and energy to ask the question now, but they didn't give him an answer.

He was riding in something. Churkin realized that he was lying on a steel deck. A truck? No, there was a flat surface overhead, and that, too, was steel. Where am I? It had to be dark outside. No light came through the gunports in the side of—he was in an armored personnel carrier! Where did the bandits get one of those? Where were they—

They were taking him to Pakistan! They would turn him over to . . . Americans? And hope changed yet again to despair. He coughed again, and fresh blood erupted from his mouth.

For his part, the Archer felt lucky. His group had met up with another, taking two Soviet BTR-60 infantry carriers out to Pakistan, and they were only too happy to carry the wounded of his band out with them. The Archer was famous, and it could not hurt to have a SAM-shooter protect them if Russian helicopters showed up. But there was little danger of that. The nights were long, the weather had turned foul, and they averaged almost fifteen kilometers per hour on the flat places, and no less than five on the rocky ones. They'd be to the border in an hour, and this segment was held by the *mudjaheddin.* The guerrillas were starting to relax. Soon they'd have a week of relative peace, and the Americans always paid handsomely for Soviet hardware. This one had night-vision devices that the driver was using to pick his way up the mountain road. For that they could expect rockets, mortar shells, a few machine guns, and medical supplies.

Things were going well for the *mudjaheddin.* There was talk that the Russians might actually withdraw. Their troops no longer craved close combat with the Afghans. Mainly the Russians used their infantry to achieve contact, then called in artillery and air support. Aside from a few vicious bands of paratroopers and the hated *Spetznaz* forces, the Afghans felt that they had achieved moral ascendancy on the battlefield—due, of course, to their holy cause. Some of their leaders actually talked about winning, and the talk had gotten to the individual fighters. They, too, now had hope of something other than continued holy war.

The two infantry carriers reached the border at midnight. From there the going was easier. The road down into Pakistan was now guarded by their own forces. The APC drivers were able to speed up and actually enjoy what they were doing. They reached Miram Shah three hours later. The Archer got out first, taking with him the Russian prisoner and his wounded.

He found Emilio Ortiz waiting for him with a can of apple juice. The man's eyes nearly bugged out when he realized that the man the Archer was carrying

was a Russian.

"My friend, what have you brought me?"

"He is badly hurt, but here is what he is." The Archer handed over one of the man's shoulder boards, then a briefcase. "And this is what he was carrying."

"Son of a bitch!" Ortiz blurted in English. He saw the crusted blood around the man's mouth and realized that his medical condition was not promising, but . . . what a catch this was! It took another minute of following the wounded to the field hospital before the next question came to the case officer: *What the hell do we do with him?*

The medical team here, too, was composed mainly of Frenchmen, with a leavening of Italians and a few Swedes. Ortiz knew most of them, and suspected that many of them reported to the DGSE, the French foreign intelligence agency. What mattered, however, was that there were some pretty good doctors and nurses here. The Afghans knew that, too, and protected them as they might have protected the person of Allah. The surgeon who had triage duty put the Russian third on the operating schedule. A nurse medicated him, and the Archer left Abdul to keep an eye on things. He hadn't brought the Russian this far to have him killed. He and Ortiz went off to talk.

"I heard what happened at Ghazni," the CIA officer said.

"God's will. This Russian, he lost a son. I could not—perhaps I had killed enough for one day." The Archer let out a long breath. "Will he be useful?"

"These are." Ortiz was already riffling through the documents. "My friend, you do not know what you have done. Well, shall we talk about the last two weeks?"

The debrief took until dawn. The Archer took out his diary and went over everything he'd done, pausing only while Ortiz changed tapes in his recorder.

"That light you saw in the sky."

"Yes . . . it seemed very strange," the Archer said, rubbing his eyes.

"The man you brought out was going there. Here is the base diagram."

"Where is it, exactly—and what is it?"

"I don't know, but it's only about a hundred kilometers from the Afghan border. I can show you on the map. How long will you be staying on this side?"

"Perhaps a week," the Archer answered.

"I must report this to my superiors. They may want to see you. My friend, you will be greatly rewarded. Make a list of what you need. A long list."

"And the Russian?"

"We will talk to him, too. If he lives."

The courier walked down Lazovskiy Pereulok, waiting for his contact. His own hopes were both high and low. He actually believed his interrogator, and by later afternoon he'd taken the chalk that he used and made the proper mark in the proper place. He knew that he'd done so five hours later than he was supposed to, but hoped that his controller would put that off to the evasion process. He hadn't made the false mark, the one that would warn the CIA officer that he'd been turned. No, he was playing too dangerous a game now. So he walked along the dreary sidewalk, waiting for his handler to show

up for the clandestine meet.

What he didn't know was that his handler was sitting in his office at the American Embassy, and would not travel to this part of Moscow for several weeks. There were no plans to contact the courier for at least that long. The CARDINAL line was gone. So far as CIA was concerned, it might never have existed.

"I think we're wasting our time," the interrogator said. He and another senior officer of the Second Directorate sat by the window of an apartment. At the next window was another "Two" man with a camera. He and the other senior officer had learned this morning what Bright Star was, and the General who commanded the Second Chief Directorate had given this case the highest possible priority. A leak of colossal proportions had been uncovered by that broken-down war-horse from "One."

"You think he lied to you?"

"No. This one was easy to break—and, no, it was not too easy. He broke," the interrogator said confidently. "I think we failed to get him back on the street quickly enough. I think they know, and I think they've broken off the line."

"But what went wrong—I mean from their point of view, it might have been routine."

"*Da.*" The interrogator nodded agreement. "But we know that the information is highly sensitive. So, too, must be its source. They have therefore taken extraordinary measures to protect it. We cannot do things the easy way now."

"Bring him in, then?"

"Yes." A car drove up to the man. They watched him get in before they walked to their own vehicle.

Within thirty minutes they were all back in Lefortovo Prison. The interrogator's face was sad.

"Tell me, why is it I think that you have lied to me?" the man asked.

"But I have not! I did everything I was supposed to do. Perhaps I was late, but I told you that."

"And the signal you left, was it the one to tell them that we had you?"

"No!" The courier nearly panicked. "I explained all of that, too."

"The problem, you see, is that we cannot tell the difference between one chalk mark and another. If you are being clever, you may have deceived us." The interrogator leaned forward. "Comrade, you *can* deceive us. Anyone can—for a time. But not a very long time." He paused to let that thought hover in the air for a minute. It was so easy, interrogating the weak ones. Give hope, then take it away; restore it, and remove it yet again. Take their spirits up and down until they no longer knew which was which—and, lacking a measure of their own feelings, those feelings became yours to use.

"We begin again. The woman you meet on the train—who is she?"

"I do not know her name. She is over thirty, but young for her age. Fair hair, slim and pretty. She is always dressed well, like a foreigner, but she is not a foreigner."

"Dressed like a foreigner—how?"

"Her coat is usually Western. You can tell from the cut and the cloth. She is

pretty, as I have said, and she—"

"Go on," the interrogator said.

"The signal is that I put my hand on her rump. She likes it, I think. Often she presses back against my hand."

The interrogator hadn't heard that detail before, but he immediately deemed it the truth. Details like that one were never made up, and it fitted the profile. The female contact was an adventuress. She was not a true professional, not if she reacted like that. And that probably—almost certainly—made her a Russian.

"How many times have you met her like this?"

"Only five. Never the same day of the week, and not on a regular schedule, but always on the second car of the same train."

"And the man you pass it to?"

"I never see his face, not all of it, I mean. He is always standing with his hand on the bar, and he moves his face to keep his arm between it and me. I have seen some of it, but not all. He is foreign, I think, but I don't know what nationality."

"Five times, and you have never seen his face!" the voice boomed, and a fist slammed down on the table. "Do you take me for a fool!"

The courier cringed, then spoke rapidly. "He wears glasses; they are Western, I am sure of it. He usually wears a hat. Also, he has a paper folded, *Izvestia,* always *Izvestia.* Between that and his arm, you cannot see more than a quarter of his face. His go-ahead signal is to turn the paper slightly, as though to follow a story, then he turns away to shield his face."

"How is the pass made, again!"

"As the train stops, he comes forward, as though to get ready to leave at the next station. I have the thing in my hand, and he takes it from behind as I start to leave."

"So, you know her face, but she does not know yours. He knows your face, but you do not know his . . ." *The same method that this one uses to make his pickup. That's a nice piece of fieldcraft, but why do they use the same technique twice on the same line?* The KGB used this one too, of course, but it was harder than other methods, doubly so on the Metro's crowded, frantic rush-hour schedule. He was beginning to think that the most common means of transferring information, the dead-drop, wasn't part of this line. That, too, was very curious. There should have been at least one dead-drop, else the KGB could roll up the line—maybe . . .

They were already trying to identify the source of the leak, of course, but they had to be careful. There was always the possibility that the spy was himself (or herself?) a security officer. That was, indeed, the ideal post for an intelligence agent, since with the job came access to everything, plus foreknowledge of any counterintelligence operations under way. It had happened before—the investigation of a leak had itself alerted the spy, a fact not discovered until some years after the investigation had been terminated. The other really odd thing was that the one photographic frame they had was not of a real diagram, but rather of a hand-drawn one . . .

Handwriting—was that the reason that there,were no dead-drops? The spy could be identified that way, couldn't he? What a foolish way to—

But there was nothing foolish here, was there? No, and there wasn't anything accidental either. If the techniques on this line were odd, they were also professional. There was another level to this, something that the interrogator didn't have yet.

"I think that tomorrow, you and I will ride the Metro."

Colonel Filitov woke up without a pounding in his head, which was pleasure enough. His "normal" morning routine was not terribly different from the other sort, but without the pain and the trip to the baths. He checked the diary tucked away in the desk drawer after he dressed, hoping that he'd be able to destroy it, as per his usual procedure. He already had a new blank diary that he'd begin with when this one was destroyed. There had been hints of a new development on the laser business the previous day, plus a paper on missile systems that he'd be seeing the following week.

On entering the car, he settled back, more alert than usual, and looked out the window during the drive into work. There were a number of trucks on the street, early as it was, and one of them blocked his view of a certain piece of curb. That was his "data-lost" signal. He was slightly annoyed that he couldn't see where it was, but his reports were rarely lost, and it didn't trouble him greatly. The "transfer successful" signal was in a different place, and was always easy to see. Colonel Filitov settled back in his seat, gazing out the window as he approached the spot . . . there. His head turned to track on the spot, looking for the mark . . . but it wasn't there. Odd. Had the other marker been set? He'd have to check that on the trip home tonight. In his years of work for CIA, several of his reports had been lost one way or another, and the danger signal hadn't been set, nor had he gotten the telephone call asking for Sergey that would tell him to leave his apartment at once. So there was probably no danger. Just an annoying inconvenience. Well. The Colonel relaxed and contemplated his day at the Ministry.

This time the Metro was fully manned. Fully a hundred Second Directorate men were in this one district, most dressed like ordinary Moscovites, some like workmen. These latter were operating the "black" phone lines installed along with electrical service panels throughout the system. The interrogator and his prisoner were riding trains back and forth on the "purple" and "green" lines, looking for a well-dressed woman in a Western coat. Millions of people traveled the Metro every day, but the counterintelligence officers were confident. They had time working for them, and their profile of the target—an adventuress. She was probably not disciplined enough to separate her daily routine from her covert activities. Such things had happened before. As a matter of faith—shared with their counterparts throughout the world—the security officers held that people who spied on their homeland were defective in some fundamental way. For all their cunning, such traitors would sooner or later connive at their own destruction.

And they were right, at least in this case. Svetlana came onto the station platform holding a bundle wrapped in brown paper. The courier recognized her hair first of all. The style was ordinary, but there was something about the way she held her head, something intangible that made him point, only to

have his hand yanked down. She turned and the KGB Colonel got a look at her face. The interrogator saw that she was relaxed, more so than the other commuters who displayed the grim apathy of the Moscovite. His first impression was of someone who enjoyed life. That would change.

He spoke into a small radio, and when the woman got on the next train, she had company. The "Two" man who got on with her had a radio earpiece, almost like a hearing aid. Behind them at the station, the men working the phone circuit alerted agents at every station on the line. When she got off, a full shadow team was ready. They followed her up the long escalator onto the street. Already a car was here, and more officers began the surveillance routine. At least two men always had visual contact with the subject, and the close-in duty rotated rapidly among the group as more and more men joined in the chase. They followed her all the way to the GOSPLAN Building on Marksa Prospekt, opposite the Hotel Moscow. She never knew that she was being followed, and never even attempted to look for evidence of it. Within half an hour, twenty photographs were developed and were shown to the prisoner, who identified her positively.

The procedure after that was more cautious. A building guard gave her name to a KGB officer who admonished him not to discuss the inquiry with anyone. With her name, a full identity was established by lunchtime, and the interrogator, who was now running all aspects of the case, was appalled to learn that Svetlana Vaneyeva was the child of a senior Central Committee member. That would be a complication. Quickly, the Colonel assembled another collection of photographs and reexamined his prisoner, but yet again he selected the right woman from a collection of six. The family member of a Central Committee man was not someone to—but they had identification, and they had a major case. Vatutin went to confer with the head of his directorate.

What happened next was tricky. Though deemed all-powerful by the West, the KGB has always been subservient to the Party apparatus; even the KGB needed permission to trifle with a family member of so powerful an official. The head of the Second Directorate went upstairs to the KGB Chairman. He returned thirty minutes later.

"You may pick her up."

"The Secretary of the Central Committee—"

"Has not been informed," the General said.

"But—"

"Here are your orders." Vatutin took the handwritten sheet, personally signed by the Chairman.

"Comrade Vaneyeva?"

She looked up to see a man in civilian clothes—GOSPLAN was a civilian agency, of course—who stared at her oddly. "Can I help you?"

"I am Captain Klementi Vladimirovich Vatutin of the Moscow Militia. I would like you to come with me." The interrogator watched closely for a reaction, but got nothing.

"Whatever for?" she asked.

"It is possible that you can help us in the identification of someone. I cannot elaborate further here," the man said apologetically.

"Will it take long?"

"Probably a few hours. We can have someone drive you home afterward."

"Very well. I have nothing critical on my desk at the moment." She rose without another word. Her look at Vatutin betrayed a certain sense of superiority. The Moscow Militia was not an organization that was lavished with respect by local citizens, and the mere rank of captain for a man of his age told her much of his career. Within a minute she had her coat on and the bundle under her arm, and they headed out of the building. At least the Captain was *kulturny,* she saw, holding the door open for her. Svetlana assumed from this that Captain Vatutin knew who she was—more precisely, who her father was.

A car was waiting and drove off at once. She was surprised at the route, but it wasn't until they drove past Khokhlovskaya Square that she was sure.

"We're not going to the Ministry of Justice?" she asked.

"No, we're going to Lefortovo," Vatutin replied offhandedly.

"But—"

"I didn't want to alarm you in the office, you see. I am actually *Colonel* Vatutin of the Second Chief Directorate." There was a reaction to that, but Vaneyeva recovered her composure in an instant.

"And what is it that I am to help you with, then?"

She was good, Vatutin saw. This one would be a challenge. The Colonel was loyal to the Party, but not necessarily to its officials. He was a man who hated corruption almost as much as treason. "A small matter—you'll doubtless be home for dinner."

"My daughter—"

"One of my people will pick her up. If things run a little late, your father will not be upset to see her, will he?"

She actually smiled at that. "No, Father loves to spoil her."

"It probably won't take that long anyway," Vatutin said, looking out the window. The car pulled through the gates into the prison. He helped her out of the car, and a sergeant held the door open for both of them. *Give them hope, then take it away*. He took her gently by the arm. "My office is this way. You travel to the West often, I understand."

"It is part of my work." She was on guard now, but no more than anyone would be here.

"Yes, I know. Your desk deals with textiles." Vatutin opened his door and waved her in.

"That's her!" a voice called. Svetlana Vaneyeva stopped dead, as though frozen in time. Vatutin took her arm again and directed her to a chair.

"Please sit down."

"What is this!" she said, finally in alarm.

"This man here was caught carrying copies of secret State documents. He has told us that you gave them to him," Vatutin said as he sat behind his desk.

Vaneyeva turned and stared at the courier. "I have never seen that face in my life! Never!"

"Yes," Vatutin said dryly. "I know that."

"What—" She searched for words. "But this makes no sense."

"You've been very well trained. Our friend here says that his signal to pass

on the information is that he runs his hand across your rump."

She turned to face her accuser. "*Govnoed! This thing* said that! This"—she sputtered for another moment—"worthless person. Rubbish!"

"So you deny the charge?" Vatutin inquired. Breaking this one would really be a pleasure.

"Of course! I am a loyal Soviet citizen. I am a Party member. My father—"

"Yes, I know about your father."

"He will hear of this, *Colonel* Vatutin, and if you threaten me—"

"We do not threaten you, Comrade Vaneyeva, we ask for information. Why were you on the Metro yesterday? I know that you have your own car."

"I often ride the Metro. It is simpler than driving, and I had to make a stop." She picked her package up off the floor. "Here. I dropped off the coat for cleaning. It is inconvenient to park the car, go in, and then drive on. So I took the underground. Same thing today, when I picked it up. You can check at the cleaners."

"And you did not pass this to our friend here?" Vatutin held up the film cassette.

"I don't even know what that is."

"Of course." Colonel Vatutin shook his head. "Well, there we are." He pressed a button on his intercom set. The office's side door opened a moment later. Three people came in. Vatutin waved to Svetlana. "Prepare her."

Her reaction was not so much panic as disbelief. Svetlana Vaneyeva tried to bolt from the chair, but a pair of men grabbed her by the shoulders and held her in place. The third rolled up the sleeve on her dress and stuck a needle in her arm before she had the presence of mind to shout. "You can't," she said, "you can't . . ."

Vatutin sighed. "Ah, but we can. How long?"

"That'll keep her under for at least two hours," the doctor replied. He and his two orderlies picked her out of the chair. Vatutin came around and got the parcel. "She'll be ready for you as soon as I do the medical check, but I anticipate no problems. Her medical file is clean enough."

"Excellent. I'll be down after I have something to eat." He gestured to the other prisoner. "You can take him away. I think we're done with him."

"Comrade, I—" the courier began, only to be cut off.

"Do not dare to use that word again." The reprimand was all the harsher for its soft delivery.

Colonel Bondarenko now ran the Ministry's laser-weapons desk. It was by the decision of Defense Minister Yazov, of course, as recommended by Colonel Filitov.

"So, Colonel, what news do you bring us?" Yazov asked.

"Our colleagues at KGB have delivered to us partial plans for the American adaptive-optics mirror." He handed over two separate copies of the diagrams.

"And we cannot do this ourselves?" Filitov asked.

"The design is actually quite ingenious, and, the report says, an even more advanced model is in the design stages right now. The good news is that it requires fewer actuators—"

"What is that?" Yazov asked.

"The actuators are the mechanisms which alter the contours of the mirror. By lowering the number of them you also reduce the requirements of the computer system that operates the mirror assembly. The existing mirror—this one here—requires the services of an extremely powerful supercomputer, which we cannot yet duplicate in the Soviet Union. The new mirror is projected to require only a fourth as much computer power. This allows both a smaller computer to operate the mirror and also a simpler control program." Bondarenko leaned forward. "Comrade Minister, as my first report indicated, one of the principal difficulties with Bright Star is the computer system. Even if we were able to manufacture a mirror like this one, we do not as yet have the computer hardware and software to operate it at maximum efficiency. I believe we could do so if we had this new mirror."

"But we don't have the new mirror plans yet?" Yazov asked.

"Correct. The KGB is working on that."

"We can't even replicate these 'actuators' yet," Filitov groused. "We've had the specifications and diagrams for several months and still no factory manager has delivered—"

"Time and funds, Comrade Colonel," Bondarenko chided. Already he was learning to speak with confidence in this rarest of atmospheres.

"Funding," Yazov grunted. "Always funding. We can build an invulnerable tank—with enough funds. We can catch up with Western submarine technology—with enough funding. Every pet project of every academician in the Union will deliver the ultimate weapon—if only we can provide enough funding. Unfortunately there is not enough for all of them." *There's one way in which we've caught up with the West!*

"Comrade Minister," Bondarenko said, "I have been a professional soldier for twenty years. I have served on battalion and divisional staffs, and I have seen close combat. Always I have served the Red Army, only the Red Army. Bright Star belongs to another service branch. Despite this, I tell you that if necessary we should deny funds for tanks, and ships, and airplanes in order to bring Bright Star to completion. We have enough conventional weapons to stop any NATO attack, but we have nothing to stop Western missiles from laying waste to our country." He drew back. "Please forgive me for stating my opinion so forcefully."

"We pay you to think," Filitov observed. "Comrade Minister, I find myself in agreement with this young man."

"Mikhail Semyonovich, why is it that I sense a palace coup on the part of my colonels?" Yazov ventured a rare smile, and turned to the younger man. "Bondarenko, within these walls I expect you to tell me what you think. And if you can persuade this old cavalryman that your science-fiction project is worthwhile, then I must give it serious thought. You say that we should give this program crash status?"

"Comrade Minister, we should consider it. Some basic research remains, and I feel that its funding priority should be increased dramatically." Bondarenko stopped just short of what Yazov suggested. That was a political decision, one into which a mere colonel ought not stick his neck. It occurred to the CARDINAL that he had actually underestimated this bright young colonel.

"Heart rate's coming up," the doctor said almost three hours later. "Time zero, patient conscious." A reel-to-reel tape recorder took down his words.

She didn't know the point at which sleep ended and consciousness began. The line is a fuzzy one for most people, particularly so in the absence of an alarm or the first beam of sunlight. She was given no signals. Svetlana Vaneyeva's first conscious emotion was puzzlement. *Where am I?* she asked herself after about fifteen minutes. The lingering aftereffects of the barbiturates eased away, but nothing replaced the comfortable relaxation of dreamless sleep. She was . . . floating?

She tried to move, but . . . couldn't? She was totally at rest, every square centimeter of her body was evenly supported so that no muscle was stretched or strained. Never had she known such wonderful relaxation. *Where am I?*

She could see nothing, but that wasn't right, either. It was not black, but . . . gray . . . like a night cloud reflecting the city lights of Moscow, featureless, but somehow textured.

She could hear nothing, not the rumble of traffic, not the mechanical sounds of running water or slamming doors . . .

She turned her head, but the view remained the same, a gray blankness, like the inside of a cloud, or a ball of cotton, or—

She breathed. The air had no smell, no taste, neither moist nor dry, not even a temperature that she could discern. She spoke . . . but incredibly she heard nothing. *Where am I!*

Svetlana began to examine the world more carefully. It took about half an hour of careful experimentation. Svetlana kept control of her emotions, told herself forcefully to be calm, to relax. It had to be a dream. Nothing untoward could really be happening, not to her. Real fear had not yet begun, but already she could feel its approach. She mustered her determination and fought to hold it off. *Explore the environment.* Her eyes swept left and right. There was only enough light to deny her blackness. Her arms were there, but seemed to be away from her sides, and she could not move them inward, though she tried for what seemed like hours. The same was true of her legs. She tried to ball her right hand into a fist . . . but she couldn't even make her fingers touch one another.

Her breathing was more rapid now. It was all she had. She could feel the air come in and out, could feel the movement of her chest, but nothing else. Closing her eyes gave her the choice of a black nothing over a gray one, but that was all. *Where* am *I!*

Movement, she told herself, more movement. She rolled around, searching for resistance, searching for any tactile feeling outside her own body. She was rewarded with nothing at all, just the same slow, fluid resistance—and whichever way she turned, the sensation of floating was the same. It mattered not—she could tell not—whether gravity had her up or down, left side or right. It was all the same. She screamed as loudly as she could, just to hear something real and close, just to be sure that she at least had herself for company. All she heard was the distant, fading echo of a stranger.

The panic started in earnest.

"Time twelve minutes . . . fifteen seconds," the doctor said into the tape

recorder. The control booth was five meters above the tank. “Heart rate rising, now one forty, respiration forty-two, acute anxiety reaction onset.” He looked over to Vatutin. “Sooner than usual. The more intelligent the subject . . .”

“The greater the need for sensory input, yes,” Vatutin said gruffly. He’d read the briefing material on this procedure, but was skeptical. This was brand-new, and required a kind of expert assistance that he’d never needed in his career.

“Heart rate appears to have peaked at one seventy-seven, no gross irregularities.”

“How do you mute her own speech?” Vatutin asked the doctor.

“It’s new. We use an electronic device to duplicate her voice and repeat it back exactly out of phase. That neutralizes her sound almost completely, and it’s as though she were screaming in a vacuum. It took two years to perfect.” He smiled. Like Vatutin he enjoyed his work, and he had here a chance to validate years of effort, to overturn institutional policy with something new and better, that had his name on it.

Svetlana hovered on the edge of hyperventilation, but the doctor altered the gas mixture going into her. He had to keep a very close watch on her vital signs. This interrogation technique left no marks on the body, no scars, no evidence of torture—it was, in fact, not a form of torture at all. At least, not physically. The one drawback to sensory deprivation, however, was that the terror it induced could drive people into tachycardia—and that could kill the subject.

“That’s better,” he said, looking at the EKG readout. “Heart rate stabilized at one thirty-eight, a normal but accelerated sinus rhythm. Subject is agitated but stable.”

Panic didn’t help. Though her mind was still frantic, Svetlana’s body drew back from damaging itself. She fought to assert control and again felt herself become strangely calm.

Am I alive or dead? She searched all her memories, all her experiences, and found nothing . . . but . . .

There *was* a sound.

What is it?

Lub-dub, lub-dub . . . what was it . . . ?

It was a heart! Yes!

Her eyes were still open, searching the blankness for the source of the sound. There was something out there, if only she could find it. Her mind searched for a way. *I have to get to it. I must grab hold of it.*

But she was trapped inside something that she couldn’t even describe. She started moving again. Again she found nothing to grab, nothing to touch.

She was only beginning to understand how alone she was. Her senses cried out for data, for input, for *something*! The sensory centers of her brain were seeking sustenance and finding only a vacuum.

What if I am dead? she asked herself.

Is this what happens when you’re dead . . . Nothingness . . . ? Then a more troubling thought:

Is this hell?

But there was something. There was that sound. She concentrated on it, only to find that the harder she tried to listen, the harder it was to hear. It was like trying to grab for a cloud of smoke, it was only there when she didn't try to—but she had to grab it!

And so she tried. Svetlana screwed her eyes shut and concentrated all of her will on the repeating sound of a human heart. All she accomplished was to blank the sound out of her own senses. It faded away, until it was only her imagination that heard it and then that, too, became bored.

She moaned, or thought she did. She heard almost nothing. How could she speak and not hear it?

Am I dead? The question had an urgency that demanded an answer, but the answer might be too dreadful to contemplate. There had to be something . . . but did she dare? Yes!

Svetlana Vaneyeva bit her tongue as hard as she could. She was rewarded with the salty taste of blood.

I am alive! she told herself. She reveled in this knowledge for what seemed a very long time. But even long times had to end:

But where am I? Am I buried . . . alive? BURIED ALIVE!

"Heart rate increasing again. Looks like the onset of the secondary anxiety period," the doctor observed for the recording. It really was too bad, he thought. He'd assisted in preparing the body. A very attractive woman, her smooth belly marred only by a mother's stretchmarks. Then they'd oiled her skin and dressed her in the specially made wetsuit, one made of the best-quality Nomex rubber, so smooth that you could barely feel it when dry—and when filled with water, it hardly seemed there at all. Even the water in the tank was specially formulated, heavy in salt content so that she was neutrally buoyant. Her gyrations around the tank had twisted her upside down and she hadn't known. The only real problem was that she might tangle the air lines, but a pair of divers in the tank prevented this, always careful not to touch her or to allow the hose to do so. Actually, the divers had the hardest job in the unit.

The doctor gave Colonel Vatutin a smug look. Years of work had gone into this most secret part of Lefortovo's interrogation wing. The pool, ten meters wide and five deep, the specially salted water, the custom-designed suits, the several man-years of experimentation to back up the theoretical work—all these went to devise a means of interrogation that was in all ways better than the antiquated methods KGB had used since the revolution. Except for the one subject that had died of an anxiety-induced heart attack . . . The vital signs changed again.

"There we go. Looks like we're into the second stage. Time one hour, six minutes." He turned to Vatutin. "This is usually the long phase. It will be interesting to see how long it lasts with this subject."

It seemed to Vatutin that the doctor was a child playing an elaborate, cruel game; as much as he wanted what this subject knew, part of him was horrified by what he watched. He wondered if it came from fear that one day it might be tried on him . . .

Svetlana was limp. Tremors from the extended hours of terrors had exhausted her limbs. Her breaths now came in shallow pants, like a woman holding off the urge to deliver her child. Even her body had deserted her now, and her mind sought to escape its confines and explore on its own. It seemed to her consciousness that she separated from the useless sack of flesh, that her spirit, soul, whatever it was, was alone now, alone and free. But the freedom was no less a curse than what had gone before.

She could move freely now, she could see the space around her, but it was all empty. She moved as though swimming or flying in a three-dimensional space whose limits she could not discern. She felt her arms and legs moving effortlessly, but when she looked to see her limbs, she found that they were out of her field of view. She could feel them move, but . . . they weren't there. The part of her mind that was still rational told her that this was all an illusion, that she was swimming toward her own destruction—but even that was preferable to being alone, wasn't it?

This effort lasted for an eternity. The most gratifying part was the lack of fatigue in her invisible limbs. Svetlana shut out her misgivings and reveled in the freedom, in being able to see the space around her. Her pace speeded up. She imagined that the space ahead of her was brighter than that behind her. If there were a light she would find it, and a light would make all the difference. Part of her remembered the joy of swimming as a child, something she hadn't done in . . . fifteen years, wasn't it? She was the school champion at swimming underwater, could hold her breath far longer than all the others. The memories made her young again, young and spry and prettier and better-dressed than all the others. Her face took on an angelic smile and ignored the warnings from the remaining shreds of her intellect.

She swam for days, it seemed, for weeks, always toward the brighter space ahead. It took a few more days to realize that the space never got any brighter, but she ignored this last warning of her consciousness. She swam harder, and felt fatigue for the first time. Svetlana Vaneyeva ignored that, too. She had to use her freedom to advantage. She had to find where she was, or better yet find a way out of this place. This horrible place.

Her mind moved yet again, traveling away from her body, and when it had reached a sufficient height, it looked back down at the distant, swimming figure. Even from its great height it could not see the edges of this wide, amorphous world, but she could see the tiny figure below her, swimming alone in the void, moving its spectral limbs in futile rhythm . . . going nowhere.

The scream from the wall speaker almost made Vatutin bolt from his chair. Perhaps Germans had heard that once, the scream of the victims of their death camps when the doors were shut and the gas crystals had sprinkled down. But this was worse. He'd seen executions. He'd seen torture. He had heard cries of pain and rage and despair, but he had never heard the scream of a soul condemned to something worse than hell.

"There . . . that ought to be the beginning of the third stage."

"What?"

"You see," the doctor explained, "the human animal is a *social* animal. Our

beings and our senses are designed to gather data that allow us to react both to our environment and our fellow human beings. Take away the human company, take away all sensory input, and the mind is totally alone with itself. There is ample data to demonstrate what happens. Those Western idiots who sail around the world alone for example. A surprising number go insane, and many disappear; probably suicides. Even those who survive, those who use their radios on a daily basis—they often need physicians to monitor them and warn them against the psychological hazards of such solitude. And they can see the water around. They can see their boats. They can feel the motion of the waves. Take all that away . . .” The doctor shook his head. “They’d last perhaps three days. We take everything away, as you see.”

“And the longest they’ve lasted in here?”

“Eighteen hours—he was a volunteer, a young field officer from the First Directorate. The only problem is that the subject cannot know what is happening to him. That alters the effect. They still break, of course, but not as thoroughly.”

Vatutin took a breath. That was the first good news that he’d heard here. “And this one, how much longer?”

The doctor merely looked at his watch and smiled. Vatutin wanted to hate him, but recognized that this physician, this healer, was merely doing what he’d been doing for years, more quickly, and with no visible damage that might embarrass the State at the public trials that the KGB now had to endure. Then, there was the added benefit that even the doctor hadn’t expected when he’d begun the program . . .

“So . . . what is this third stage?”

Svetlana saw them swimming around her form. She tried to warn it, but that would mean getting back inside, and she didn’t dare. It was not so much something she could see, but there *were* shapes, predatory shapes plying the space around her body. One of them closed in, but turned away. Then it turned back again. And so did she. She tried to fight against it, but something drew her back into the body that was soon to be extinguished. She got there just in time. As she told her limbs to swim faster, it came up from behind. The jaws opened and enveloped her entire body, then closed slowly around her. The last thing she saw was the light toward which she’d been swimming—the light, she finally knew, that was never there. She knew her protest was a vain one, but it exploded from her lips.

“*No!*” She didn’t hear it, of course.

She returned now, condemned to go back to her useless real body, back to the gray mass before her eyes and the limbs that could move only without purpose. She somehow understood that her imagination had tried to protect her, to get her free—and had failed utterly. But she couldn’t turn her imagination off, and now its efforts turned destructive. She wept without sound. The fear she felt now was worse than mere panic. At least panic was an escape, a denial of what she faced, a retreat into herself. But there was no longer a self that she could find. She’d watched that die, had been there when it happened. Svetlana was without a present, certainly without a future. All she had now was a past, and her imagination selected only the worst parts of

that . . .

"Yes, we're in the final stage now," the doctor said. He lifted the phone and ordered a pot of tea. "This was easier than I expected. She fits the profile better than I realized."

"But she hasn't told us anything yet," Vatutin objected.

"She will."

She watched all the sins of her life. That helped her to understand what was happening. This was the hell whose existence the State denied, and she was being punished. That had to be it. And she helped. She had to. She had to see it all again and understand what she'd done. She had to participate in the trial within her own mind. Her weeping never stopped. Her tears ran for days as she watched herself doing things that she ought never to have done. Every transgression of her life played out before her eyes in fullest detail. Especially those of the past two years . . . Somehow she knew that those were the ones that had brought her here. Svetlana watched every time she had betrayed her Motherland. The first coy flirtations in London, the clandestine meetings with serious men, the warnings not to be frivolous, and then the times she had used her importance to breeze through customs control, playing the game and enjoying herself as she committed her most heinous crimes. Her moans took on a recognizable timbre. Over and over she said it without knowing.

"I'm sorry . . ."

"Now comes the tricky part." The doctor put on his headset. He had to make some adjustments on his control board. "Svetlana . . ." he whispered into the microphone.

She didn't hear it at first, and it was some time before her senses were able to tell her that there was *something* crying out to be noticed.

Svetlana . . . the voice called to her. Or was it her imagination . . . ?

Her head twisted around, looking for whatever it was.

Svetlana . . . it whispered again. She held her breath as long as she could, commanded her body to be still, but it betrayed her yet again. Her heart raced, and the pounding blood in her ears blanked out the sound, if it was a sound. She let out a despairing moan, wondering if she had imagined the voice, wondering if it was only getting worse . . . or might there be some hope . . . ?

Svetlana . . . Slightly more than a whisper, enough to detect emotional content. The voice was so sad, so disappointed. *Svetlana, what have you done?*

"I didn't, I didn't—" she sputtered, and still could not hear her own voice as she called out from the grave. She was rewarded with renewed silence. After what seemed an hour she screamed: "Please, *please* come back to me!"

Svetlana, the voice repeated finally, *what have you done . . . ?*

"I'm sorry . . ." she repeated in a voice choked with tears.

"What have you done?" it asked again. "What about the film . . . ?"

"Yes!" she answered, and in moments she told all.

“Time eleven hours, forty-one minutes. The exercise is concluded.” The doctor switched off the tape recorder. Next he flicked the lights in the pool room on and off a few times. One of the divers in the tank waved acknowledgment and jabbed a needle into Subject Vaneyeva’s arm. As soon as her body went completely limp, she was taken out. The doctor left the control room and went down to see her.

She was lying on a gurney when he got there, the wetsuit already taken off. He sat beside the unconscious form and held her hand as the technician jabbed her with a mild stimulant. She was a pretty one, the doctor thought as her breathing picked up. He waved the technician out of the room, leaving the two of them alone.

“Hello, Svetlana,” he said in his gentlest voice. The blue eyes opened, saw the lights on the ceiling, and the walls. Then her head turned toward him.

He knew he was indulging himself, but he’d worked long into the night and the next day on this case, and this was probably the most important application of his program to date. The naked woman leaped off the table into his arms and nearly strangled him with a hug. It wasn’t because he was particularly good-looking, the doctor knew, just that he was a human being, and she wanted to touch one. Her body was still slick with oil as her tears fell on his white laboratory coat. She would never commit another crime against the State, not after this. It was too bad that she’d have to go to a labor camp. Such a waste, he thought as he examined her. Perhaps he could do something about that. After ten minutes she was sedated again, and he left her asleep.

“I gave her a drug called Versed. It’s a new Western one, an amnesiac.”

“Why one of those?” Vatutin asked.

“I give you another option, Comrade Colonel. When she wakes up later this morning, she will remember very little. Versed acts like scopolamine, but is more effective. She will remember no firm details, and very little else that happened to her. It will all seem to be a fearful dream. Versed is also an hypnotic. For example, I can go back to her now and make a suggestion that she will not remember anything, but that she may never betray the State again. There is roughly an eighty-percent probability that both suggestions will never be violated.”

“You’re joking!”

“Comrade, one effect of this technique is that she has condemned herself more forcefully than the State ever could. She feels more remorse now for her actions than she would before a firing squad. Surely you have read *1984*? It might have been a dream when Orwell wrote it, but with modern technology, we can do it. The trick is not breaking the person from without, but doing it from within.”

“You mean we can use her now . . . ?”

11.

Procedures

"**H**E'S not going to make it." Ortiz had gotten the embassy doctor, an Army surgeon whose real job was to assist in the treatment of wounded Afghans. Churkin's lungs were too badly damaged to fight off the pneumonia that had developed during his transit. "He probably won't last out the day. Sorry, just too much damage. A day sooner and maybe we might have saved him, but . . ." The doctor shook his head. "I'd like to get a preacher to him, but that's probably a waste of time."

"Can he talk?"

"Not much. You can try. It won't hurt him any more than he already is. He'll be conscious for a few more hours, then he's just going to fade out."

"Thanks for the try, doc," Ortiz said. He almost sighed with relief, but the shame of such a gesture stopped him cold. What would they have done with a live one? Give him back? Keep him? Trade him? he asked himself. He wondered why the Archer had brought him out at all. "Well," he said to himself, and entered the room.

Two hours later he emerged. Then Ortiz drove down to the embassy, where the canteen served beer. He made his report to Langley, then over the next five hours, sitting alone at a corner table he left only for refills, he got himself thoroughly and morosely drunk.

Ed Foley could not allow himself that luxury. One of his couriers had disappeared three days earlier. Another had left her desk at GOSPLAN and returned two days later. Then, only this morning, his man in the dry-cleaners had called in sick. He'd sent a warning to the kid at the baths, but didn't know if it had gotten to him or not. This was not mere trouble in his CARDINAL network, it was a disaster. The whole point of using Svetlana Vaneyeva was her supposed immunity from KGB's more forceful measures, and he'd depended on several days' resistance from her to get his people moved. Warning orders for the CARDINAL breakout had arrived but were still awaiting delivery. There was no sense in spooking the man before things were fully ready. After that, it should be a simple matter for Colonel Filitov to come up with an excuse to visit the Leningrad Military District headquarters—something he did every six months or so—and get him out.

If that works, Foley reminded himself. It had been done only twice that he knew of, and as well as it had gone before . . . there were no certainties, were there? *Not hardly.* It was time to leave. He and his wife needed time off, time away from all this. Their next post was supposed to be on the training staff at "the Farm" on the York River. But these thoughts didn't help him with his

current problem.

He wondered if he should alert CARDINAL anyway, warn him to be more careful—but then he might destroy the data that Langley was screaming for, and the data was paramount. That was the rule, a rule that Filitov knew and understood, supposedly as well as Foley did. But spies were more than objects that provided information, weren't they?

Field officers like Foley and his wife were supposed to regard them as valuable but expendable assets, to distance themselves from their agents, to treat them kindly when possible but ruthlessly when necessary. To treat them like children, really, with a mixture of indulgence and discipline. But they weren't children. CARDINAL was older than his own father, had been an agent when Foley was in second grade! Could he *not* show loyalty to Filitov? Of course not. He had to protect him.

But how?

Counterespionage operations were often nothing more than police work, and as a result of this, Colonel Vatutin knew as much about the business of investigation as the best men in the Moscow Militia. Svetlana had given him the manager of the dry-cleaning shop, and after two perfunctory days of surveillance, he'd decided to bring the man in for interrogation. They didn't use the tank on him. The Colonel still did not trust the technique, and besides, there was no need to go easy on him. It annoyed Vatutin that Vaneyeva now had a chance to remain free—free, after working for enemies of the State! Somebody wanted to use her as a bargaining chip for something or other with the Central Committee, but that was not the Colonel's concern. Now the dry-cleaner had given him a description of another member of this endless chain.

And the annoying part was that Vatutin thought he knew the boy! The dry-cleaner had soon told him of his suspicion that he worked at the baths, and the description matched the attendant whom he himself had talked to! Unprofessional as it was, it enraged Vatutin that he'd met a traitor that morning last week and not recognized him for what . . .

What was that colonel's name? he asked himself suddenly. The one who'd tripped? Filitov—Misha Filitov? Personal aide to Defense Minister Yazov?

I must have really been hung over not to make the connection! Filitov of Stalingrad, the tanker who'd killed Germans while he burned within a knocked-out tank. Mikhail Filitov, three times Hero of the Soviet Union . . . It had to be the same one. Could he be the—

Impossible, he told himself.

But nothing was impossible. If he knew anything, Vatutin knew that. He cleared out his mind and considered the possibilities coldly. The good news here was that everyone of consequence in the Soviet Union had a file at 2 Dzerzhinskiy Square. It was a simple thing to get Filitov's.

The file was a thick one, he saw fifteen minutes later. Vatutin realized that he actually knew little about the man. As with most war heroes, exploits performed in a brief span of minutes had expanded to cover a whole life. But no life was ever that simple. Vatutin started reading the file.

Little of it had to do with his war record, though that was covered in full, including the citations for all of his medals. As personal aide to three

successive defense ministers, Misha had been through rigorous security screenings, some of which Filitov knew about, some of which not. These papers were also in order, of course. He turned to the next bundle.

Vatutin was surprised to see that Filitov had been involved in the infamous Penkovskiy case. Oleg Penkovskiy had been a senior officer in the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence command; recruited by the British, then "run" jointly by the SIS and CIA, he'd betrayed his country as thoroughly as any man could. His penultimate treason had been to leak to the West the state of preparedness—or lack thereof—of the Strategic Rocket Forces during the Cuban Missile Crisis; this information had enabled American President Kennedy to force Khrushchev to withdraw the missiles that he'd so recklessly placed on that wretched island. But Penkovskiy's twisted loyalty to foreigners had forced him to take too many risks in delivering that data, and a spy could take only so many risks. He'd already been under suspicion. You could usually tell when the other side was getting just a little too clever, but . . . Filitov had been the one who provided the first real accusation . . .

Filitov was the one who'd denounced Penkovskiy? Vatutin was astounded. The investigation had been fairly advanced at that point. Continuous surveillance had shown Penkovskiy to be doing some unusual things, including at least one possible dead-drop, but—Vatutin shook his head. *The coincidences you encounter in this business*. Old Misha had gone to the senior security officer and reported a curious conversation with his GRU acquaintance, one that might have been innocent, he'd said, but it made his antennae twitch in an odd way, and so he felt constrained to report it. On instructions from KGB, he'd followed it up, and the next conversation hadn't been quite so innocent. By this time the case against Penkovskiy had been firmed up, and the additional proof hadn't really been needed, though it had made everyone involved feel a little better . . .

It was an odd coincidence, Vatutin thought, but hardly one to cast suspicion on the man. The personal section of the file showed that he was a widower. A photo of his wife was there, and Vatutin took his time admiring it. There was also a wedding picture, and the Second Chief Directorate man smiled when he saw that the old war-horse had indeed been young once, and a raffishly handsome bastard at that! On the next page was information on two sons—both dead. That got his attention. One born immediately before the war, the other soon after it began. But they hadn't died as a result of the war . . . What, then? He flipped through the pages.

The elder had died in Hungary, Vatutin saw. Because of his political reliability he'd been taken from his military academy, along with a number of cadets, and sent to help suppress the 1956 counterrevolution. A crewman in a tank—following in his father's footsteps, he'd died when his vehicle had been destroyed. Well, soldiers took their chances. Certainly his father had. The second—also a tanker, Vatutin noted—died when the breech on the gun in his T-55 had exploded. Poor quality-control at the factory, the bane of Soviet industry, had killed the whole crew . . . and when had his wife died? The following July. Broken heart, probably, whatever the medical explanation had been. The file showed both sons had been models of young Soviet manhood. All the hopes and dreams that just have died with them, Vatutin thought, and

then to lose your wife, too.

Too bad, Misha. I guess you used up all your family's good luck against the Germans, and the other three had to pay the bill . . . So sad that a man who has done so much should be . . .

Should be given a reason to betray the Rodina? Vatutin looked up, and out the window of his office. He could see the square outside, the cars curving around the statue of Feliks Dzerzhinskiy. "Iron Feliks," founder of the *Cheka.* By birth a Pole and a Jew, with his odd little beard and ruthless intellect, Dzerzhinskiy had repelled the earliest efforts by the West to penetrate and subvert the Soviet Union. His back was to the building, and wags said that Feliks was condemned to perpetual isolation out there, as Svetlana Vaneyeva had been isolated . . .

Ah, Feliks, what would you advise me right now? Vatutin knew that answer easily enough. Feliks would have had Misha Filitov arrested and interrogated ruthlessly. The merest possibility of suspicion had been enough back then, and who knew how many innocent men and women had been broken or killed for no reason? Things were different now. Now even the KGB had rules to follow. You couldn't just snatch people off the street and torture whatever you wanted out of them. And that was better, Vatutin thought. KGB was a professional organization. They had to work harder now to do their job, and that made for well-trained officers, and better performance . . . His phone rang.

"Colonel Vatutin."

"Come up here. We're going to brief the Chairman in ten minutes." The line clicked off.

KGB headquarters is an old building, built around the turn of the century to be the home office of the Rossiya Insurance Company. The exterior walls were of rust-colored granite, and the inside was a reflection of the age in which it had been built, with high ceilings and oversized doors. The long, carpeted corridors of the building, however, were not terribly well lit, since one was not supposed to take too great an interest in the faces of the people who walked them. There were many uniforms in evidence. These officers were members of the Third Directorate, which kept an eye on the armed services. One thing that set the building apart was its silence. Those walking about did so with serious faces and closed mouths, lest they inadvertently let loose one of the million secrets that the building held.

The Chairman's office also faced the square, though with a far better view than Colonel Vatutin's. A male secretary rose from his desk and took the two visitors past the pair of security guards who always stood in the corners of the reception room. Vatutin took a deep breath as he walked through the opened door.

Nikolay Gerasimov was in his fourth year as Chairman of the Committee for State Security. He was not a spy by profession, but rather a Party man who'd spent fifteen years within the CPSU bureaucracy before being appointed to a middle-level post in the KGB's Fifth Chief Directorate, whose mission was the suppression of internal dissent. His delicate handling of this mission had earned him steady promotion and finally appointment as First Deputy Chairman ten years earlier. There he had learned the business of foreign intelligence from the administrative side, and performed well enough to gain

the respect of professional field officers for his instincts. First and foremost, however, he was a Party man, and that explained his chairmanship. At fifty-three he was fairly young for his job, and looked younger still. His youthful face had never been lined by contemplation of failure, and his confident gaze looked forward to further promotion. For a man who already had a seat both on the Politburo and the Defense Council, further promotion meant that he considered himself in the running for the top post of all: General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. As the man who wielded the "sword and shield" of the Party (that was indeed the official motto of the KGB), he knew all there was to know about the other men in the running. His ambition, though never openly expressed, was whispered about the building, and any number of bright young KGB officers worked every day to tie their own fortunes to this rising star. A charmer, Vatutin saw. Even now he rose from his desk and waved his visitors to chairs opposite the massive oak desk. Vatutin was a man who controlled his thoughts and emotions; he was also too honest a man to be impressed by charmers.

Gerasimov held up a file. "Colonel Vatutin, I have read the report of your ongoing investigation. Excellent work. Can you bring me up to date?"

"Yes, Comrade Chairman. We are currently looking for one Eduard Vassilyevich Altunin. He is an attendant in the Sandunovski Baths. Interrogation of the dry-cleaner revealed to us that he is the next step in the courier chain. Unfortunately he disappeared thirty-six hours ago, but we should have him by the end of the week."

"I've gone to the baths myself," Gerasimov noted with irony. Vatutin added his own.

"I still do, Comrade Chairman. I have myself seen this young man. I recognized the photograph in the file we're putting together. He was a corporal in an ordnance company in Afghanistan. His Army file shows that he objected to certain weapons being used there—the ones we use to discourage the civilians from helping the bandits." Vatutin referred to the bombs that were disguised as toys and designed to be picked up by children. "His unit political officer wrote up a report, but the first verbal warning shut him up, and he finished his tour of duty without further incident. The report was enough to deny him a factory job, and he's floated from one menial assignment to another. Co-workers describe him as ordinary but fairly quiet. Exactly what a spy should be, of course. He has never once referred to his 'troubles' in Afghanistan, even when drinking. His flat is under surveillance, as are all of his family members and friends. If we don't have him very quickly, we'll know he's a spy. But we'll get him, and I will talk to him myself."

Gerasimov nodded thoughtfully. "I see you used the new interrogation technique on this Vaneyeva woman. What do you think of it?"

"Interesting. Certainly it worked in this case, but I must say that I have misgivings about placing her back on the street."

"That was my decision, in case no one told you," Gerasimov said offhandedly. "Given the sensitivity of this case, and the doctor's recommendation, I think that the gamble is one worth taking for the moment. Do you agree that we shouldn't call too much attention to the case? Charges against her remain open."

Oh, and you can use it against her father, can't you? Her disgrace is his also, and what father would want to see his only child in the GULAG? Nothing like a little blackmail, is there, Comrade Chairman? "The case is certainly sensitive, and is likely to get more so," Vatutin replied carefully.

"Go on."

"The one time I saw this Altunin fellow, he was standing beside Colonel Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov."

"Misha Filitov, Yazov's aide?"

"The same, Comrade Chairman. I reviewed his file this morning."

"And?" This question came from Vatutin's boss.

"Nothing at all that I can point to. I hadn't known of his involvement in the Penkovskiy case . . ." Vatutin stopped, and for once his face showed something.

"Something is troubling you, Colonel," Gerasimov observed. "What is it?"

"Filitov's involvement in the Penkovskiy matter came soon after the death of his second son and his wife." Vatutin shrugged after a moment. "An odd coincidence."

"Wasn't Filitov the first witness against him?" asked the head of the Second Directorate. He'd actually worked on the fringes of the case.

Vatutin nodded. "That's right, but it was after we already had the spy under surveillance." He stopped for another moment. "As I said, an odd coincidence. We are *now* after a suspected courier who was running defense data. I saw him standing next to a senior Defense Ministry official, who was involved in another similar case almost thirty years ago. On the other hand, Filitov was the man who first reported Penkovskiy, and he is a distinguished war hero . . . who lost his family under unfortunate circumstances . . ." It was the first time he had strung all his thoughts together.

"Has there ever been a hint of suspicion against Filitov?" the Chairman asked.

"No. His career could scarcely be more impressive. Filitov was the only aide who stayed with the late Minister Ustinov throughout his career, and he's hung on there ever since. He functions as a personal inspector-general for the Minister."

"I know," Gerasimov said. "I have here a request over Yazov's signature for our file on American SDI efforts. When I called about it, the Minister told me that colonels Filitov and Bondarenko are assembling data for a full report to the Politburo. The code word on that photographic frame you recovered was Bright Star, was it not?"

"Yes, Comrade Chairman."

"Vatutin, we now have three coincidences," Gerasimov observed. "Your recommendation?"

That was simple enough: "We should place Filitov under surveillance. Probably this Bondarenko fellow also."

"Very carefully, but with the utmost thoroughness." Gerasimov closed the file. "This is a fine report, and it would seem that your investigative instincts are as sharp as ever, Colonel. You will keep me posted on this case. I expect to see you three times a week from now until its conclusion. General," he said to the head of "Two," "this man will get all the support he needs. You may

requisition resources from any part of the Committee. If you run into objections, please refer them to me. We may be certain that there is a leak at the highest level of the Defense Ministry. Next: this case is classified to my eyes and yours. No one—I repeat, *no one* will know of this. Who can say where the Americans have managed to place their agents? Vatutin, run this one to earth and you will have general's stars by summer. But"—he held up a finger —"I think you should cease drinking until you are finished with this one. We need your head clear."

"Yes, Comrade Chairman."

The corridor was nearly empty outside the Chairman's office when Vatutin and his boss left. "What about Vaneyeva?" the Colonel asked *sotto voce.*

"It's her father, of course. General Secretary Narmonov will announce his election to the Politburo next week," the General replied in a neutral, quiet voice.

And it won't hurt to have another friend of the KGB at court, Vatutin thought to himself. Might Gerasimov be making some sort of move?

"Remember what he said about drinking," the General said next. "I've heard that you're hitting the bottle very hard of late. That's one area of agreement between the Chairman and the General Secretary, in case no one ever told you."

"Yes, Comrade General," Vatutin replied. *Of course, it's probably the only area of agreement.* Like any good Russian, Vatutin thought that vodka was as much a part of life as air. It occurred to him to note that his hangover had encouraged him to take steam that morning and notice the crucial coincidence, but he refrained from pointing out the irony involved. Back at his desk a few minutes later, Vatutin took out a pad and began planning the surveillance on two colonels of the Soviet Army.

Gregory took usual commercial flights home, changing planes at Kansas City after a two-hour layover. He slept through most of the transit and walked straight into the terminal without having to chase after any baggage. His fiancée was waiting for him.

"How was Washington?" she asked after the usual welcome-home kiss.

"Never changes. They ran me all over the place. I guess they figure scientific types don't ever sleep." He took her hand for the walk out to the car.

"So what happened?" she asked when they were outside.

"The Russians ran a big test." He stopped to look around. This was a technical violation of security—but Candi was part of the team, wasn't she? "They slagged down a satellite with the ground-based lasers at Dushanbe. What's left looks like a plastic model that got put in the oven."

"That's bad," Dr. Long observed.

"Sure is," Dr. Gregory agreed. "But they have optical problems. Blooming and jitter both. It's for sure they don't have anybody like you over there to build mirrors. They must have some good folks on the laser end, though."

"How good?"

"Good enough that they're doing something we haven't figured out yet," Al grumped as they reached his Chevy. "You drive, I'm still a little dopey."

"Will we figure it out?" Candi asked as she unlocked the door.

"Sooner or later." He couldn't go any further than that, fiancée or not.

Candi got in and reached to unlock the right-side door. As soon as Al was seated and strapped in, he opened the glove compartment and extracted a Twinkie. He always had a stash. It was a little stale, but he didn't mind. Sometimes Candi wondered if his love for her resulted from the fact that her nickname reminded him of junk food.

"How's work on the new mirror going?" he asked after snapping down half of the Twinkie.

"Marv has a new idea that we're modeling out. He thinks we should thin out the coating instead of thickening it. We're going to try it next week."

"Marv's pretty original for an old guy," Al observed. Dr. Marv Greene was forty-two.

Candi laughed. "His secretary thinks he's pretty original, too."

"He should know better than to fool around with somebody at work," Gregory said seriously. He winced a moment later.

"Yeah, honey." She turned to look at him, and they both laughed. "How tired are you?"

"I slept on the flight."

"Good."

Just before reaching around her, Gregory crumbled the Twinkie wrapper and tossed it on the floor, where it joined about thirty others. He flew around quite a bit, but Candi had a sure cure for jet lag.

"Well, Jack?" Admiral Greer asked.

"I'm worried," Ryan admitted. "It was pure dumb luck that we saw the test. The timing was cute. All of our recon birds were well below the optical horizon. We weren't supposed to notice—which is hardly surprising, since it's a technical violation of the ABM treaty. Well, probably." Jack shrugged. "Depends on how you read the treaty. Now you get into the 'strict' or 'loose' interpretation argument. If we pulled something like this, the Senate would go nuts."

"They wouldn't like the test that you saw." Very few people knew how far along Tea Clipper was. The program was "black." More classified than top secret, "black" programs simply did not exist.

"Maybe. But we were testing the aiming system, not an actual weapon."

"And the Soviets were testing a system to see if it was—" Greer chuckled and shook his head. "It's like talking metaphysics, isn't it? How many lasers can dance on the head of a pin?"

"I'm sure Ernie Allen could give us an opinion on that." Jack smiled. He didn't agree with Allen, but he had to like the man. "I hope our friend in Moscow can deliver."

12.

Success and Failure

ONE of the problems with surveillance of any individual is that one must determine how he or she spends an ordinary day before one can establish what resources are needed for the operation. The more solitary the person or the activity, the harder it generally is to keep a covert eye on him. Already, for example, the KGB officers trailing Colonel Bondarenko hated him thoroughly. His daily jogging routine was an ideal activity for a spy, they all thought. He ran about entirely alone on city streets that were largely vacant—vacant enough that everyone out at that time was undoubtedly known to him by sight, and vacant enough that he would immediately notice anything out of the ordinary. As he ran around the residential blocks in this part of Moscow, the three agents assigned to keep an eye on him lost visual contact with him no less than five times. The sparse trees they might hide behind were bare of leaves, and the apartment buildings stood like tombstones on flat, open land. In any of those five times, Bondarenko might have stopped to retrieve something from a dead-drop or could have made one himself. It was more than frustrating, and added to this was the fact that this Soviet Army Colonel had a service record that was as immaculate as a field of freshly fallen snow: exactly the cover that any spy would contrive to acquire for himself, of course.

They spotted him again turning the corner for home, his legs pumping vigorously, his breath marked in the air behind him as small clouds of vapor. The man in charge of this part of the case decided that half a dozen "Two" officers would be needed just to shadow the subject for his morning runs. And they'd have to be here an hour earlier than he was expected to run, enduring the dry, bitter cold of the Moscow dawn. People from the Second Chief Directorate never considered themselves fully appreciated for the hardships of their job.

Several kilometers away, another team of three was quite satisfied with their subject. In this case, an eighth-floor apartment in the building opposite the subject's was obtained—the diplomat who lived there was abroad. A pair of telephoto lenses was focused on Misha's windows, and he was not a man who troubled to lower his shades or even to adjust them properly. They watched him go through the morning routine of a man who'd had too much to drink the night before, and that was familiar enough to the "Two" men who watched in heated comfort from across the street.

Misha was also sufficiently senior at the Defense Ministry that he rated a car and driver. It was an easy thing to reassign the sergeant and to substitute a shiny young face fresh from the KGB's counterintelligence school. A tap on his phone recorded his request for an early pickup.

Ed Foley left his apartment earlier than usual. His wife drove him over today, with the kids in the back of the car. The Soviet file on Foley noted with amusement that she kept the car on most days to run the kids around and generally socialize with the wives of other Western diplomats. A Soviet husband would keep the car for his own use. At least she wasn't making him take the Metro today, they observed; decent of her. The militiaman at the entrance to the diplomatic compound—he was really KGB, as everyone knew—noted the time of departure and the occupancy of the car. It was slightly out of the ordinary, and the gate guard looked around to see if Foley's KGB shadow was here today. He wasn't. The "important" Americans got much more regular surveillance.

Ed Foley had a Russian-style fur hat, and his overcoat was sufficiently old and worn that it didn't look terribly foreign. A wool scarf clashed slightly with it, protecting his neck and hiding his striped tie. The Russian security officers who knew him by sight noted that, as with most foreigners, local weather was the great equalizer. If you lived through a Russian winter, you soon started dressing and acting like a Russian, even to the point of looking slightly downward when you walked.

First the kids were dropped off at school. Mary Pat Foley drove normally, her eyes flicking back and forth to the mirror every three or four seconds. Driving here wasn't all that bad, compared to American cities. Although Russian drivers could do the most extraordinary things, the streets weren't terribly crowded, and having learned to drive in New York City, she could handle nearly anything. As with commuters all over the world, she had a route composed of indirect shortcuts that avoided the handful of traffic bottlenecks and saved a few minutes each day at the cost of an extra liter or two of *benzin*.

Immediately after turning a corner, she moved expertly to the curb and her husband hopped out. The car was already moving as he slammed the door shut and moved off, not too quickly, toward the side entrance of the apartment block. For once Ed Foley's heart was beating fast. He'd done this only once before and didn't like it at all. Once inside, he avoided the elevators and bounded up the eight flights of stairs, looking at his watch.

He didn't know how his wife did it. It pained his male ego to admit that she drove so much more precisely than he did, and could place her car at any spot she wished with an accuracy of five seconds, plus or minus. He had two minutes to get to the eighth floor. Foley accomplished it with seconds to spare. He opened the fire door, and anxious eyes scanned the corridor. Wonderful things, corridors. Especially the straight, bare ones in high-rise apartment buildings. Nowhere for people to lurk with their cameras, with a bank of elevators in the middle, and fire stairs at both ends. He walked briskly past the elevators, heading toward the far end. He could measure the time with his heartbeats now. Twenty yards ahead, a door opened, and a man in uniform came out. He turned to set the lock on his apartment door, then picked up the briefcase and headed toward Foley. A passerby, if there had been one, might have thought it odd that neither man moved to avoid the other.

It was over in an instant. Foley's hand brushed against CARDINAL's, taking the film cassette and passing back a tiny rolled slip of paper. He thought he

noted a look of irritation in the agent's eyes, but nothing more than that, not even a "Please excuse me, Comrade," as the officer continued toward the elevators. Foley walked straight into the fire stairs. He took his time going down.

Colonel Filitov emerged from the building at the appointed time. The sergeant holding the door of his car noted that his mouth was working on something, perhaps a crumb of bread caught between his teeth.

"Good morning, Comrade Colonel."

"Where's Zhdanov?" Filitov asked as he got in.

"He took ill. An appendix, they think." This drew a grunt.

"Well, move off. I want to take steam this morning."

Foley came out of the building's back entrance a minute later and walked past two other apartment blocks as he made his way to the next street over. He was just reaching the curb when his wife pulled over, picked him up almost without stopping. Both took a few deep breaths as she headed toward the embassy.

"What are you doing today?" she asked, her eyes still checking the mirror.

"The usual," was the resigned reply.

Misha was already in the steam room. He noted the absence of the attendant and the presence of a few unfamiliar faces. That explained the special pickup this morning. His face gave nothing away as he traded a few friendly words with the regulars. It was a pity that he'd run out of film in his camera. Then there was the warning from Foley. If he were under surveillance again—well, every few years some security officer or other would get a bug up his ass and recheck everyone at the Ministry. CIA had noticed and broken up the courier chain. It was amusing, he thought, to see the look on that young man's face in the corridor. So few people were left who knew what combat was like. People were so easy to frighten. Combat taught a man what to fear and what to ignore, Filitov told himself.

Outside the steam room, a "Two" man was riffling through Filitov's clothing. In the car, his briefcase was being searched. In each case, the job was done quickly and thoroughly.

Vatutin himself supervised the search of Filitov's apartment. It was a job for experts whose hands were in surgical gloves, and they spent much of their time looking for "telltales." It could be the odd scrap of paper, a crumb, even a single human hair placed in a specific spot whose removal would tell the man who lived in the flat that somebody had been here. Numerous photographs were taken and rushed off for developing, and then the searchers went to work. The diary was found almost at once. Vatutin leaned down to look at the simple book that sat openly in the desk drawer to be sure that its placement wasn't secretly marked. After a minute or two, he picked it up and started reading.

Colonel Vatutin was irritable. He hadn't slept well the previous night. Like most heavy drinkers, he needed a few drinks to sleep, and the excitement of the case added to the lack of a proper sedative had given him a fitful night of

tossing and turning; it showed enough on his face to warn his team to keep their mouths shut.

"Camera," he said curtly. A man came over and started photographing the pages of the diary as Vatutin turned them.

"Somebody's tried to pick the door lock," a major reported. "Scratches around the keyhole. If we dismantle the lock, I think we'll see scratches on the tumblers also. Somebody's probably been in here."

"I have what they were after," Vatutin said crossly. Heads turned throughout the apartment. The man checking the refrigerator popped off the front panel, looked underneath the appliance, then put the panel back in place after the interruption. "This man keeps a fucking diary! Doesn't anybody read security manuals anymore?"

He could see it now. Colonel Filitov used personal diaries to sketch out official reports. Somehow, someone had learned this, and got into his flat to make copies of . . .

But how likely is that? Vatutin asked himself. About as likely as a man who writes out his memories of official documents when he could just as easily copy them at his desk in the Defense Ministry.

The search took two hours, and the team left in ones and twos, after replacing everything exactly the way they'd found it.

Back at his office, Vatutin read the photographed diary in full. At the apartment he'd merely skimmed it. The fragment from the captured film exactly matched a page at the beginning of Filitov's journal. He spent an hour going through the photographs of the pages. The data itself was impressive enough. Filitov was describing Project Bright Star in considerable detail. In fact, the old Colonel's explanation was better than the brief he'd been given as part of the investigation directive. Tossed in were details of Colonel Bondarenko's observations about site security and a few complaints on the way priorities were assigned at the Ministry. It was evident that both colonels were very enthusiastic about Bright Star, and Vatutin already agreed with them. But Minister Yazov, he read, was not yet sure. Complaining about funding problems—well, that was an old story, wasn't it?

It was clear that Filitov had violated security rules by having records of top-secret documents in his home. That was itself a matter sufficiently serious that any junior or middle-level bureaucrat would lose his job for it, but Filitov was as senior as the Minister himself, and Vatutin knew all too well that senior people regarded security rules as inconveniences to be ignored in the Interest of the State, of which they viewed themselves as the ultimate arbiters. He wondered if the same were true elsewhere. Of one thing he was sure: before he or anyone else at KGB could accuse Filitov of anything, he needed something more serious than this. Even if Misha were a foreign agent—*Why am I looking for ways to deny that?* Vatutin asked himself in some surprise. He took himself back to the man's flat, and remembered the photographs on the walls. There must have been a hundred of them: Misha standing atop the turret of his T-34, binoculars to his eyes; Misha with his men in the snows outside Stalingrad; Misha and his tank crew pointing to holes in the side armor of a German tank . . . and Misha in a hospital bed, with Stalin himself

pinning his third Hero of the Soviet Union medal to his pillow, his lovely wife and both children at his side. These were the memorabilia of a patriot and a hero.

In the old days that wouldn't have mattered, Vatutin reminded himself. In the old days we suspected everyone.

Anyone could have scratched the door lock. He'd leaped to the assumption that it was the missing bath attendant. A former ordnance technician, he probably knew how. *What if that is a coincidence?*

But if Misha were a spy, why not photograph the official documents himself? In his capacity as aide to the Defense Minister, he could order up any documents he wanted, and smuggling a spy camera into the Ministry was a trivial exercise.

If we'd gotten the film with a frame from such a document, Misha would already be in Lefortovo Prison . . .

What if he's being clever? What if he wants us to think that someone else is stealing material from his diary? I can take what I have to the Ministry right now, but we can accuse him of nothing more than violating in-house security rules, and if he answers that he was working at home, and admits to breaking the rule, and the Minister defends his aide—would the Minister defend Filitov?

Yes. Vatutin was sure of that. For one thing, Misha was a trusted aide and a distinguished professional soldier. For another, the Army would always close ranks to defend one of its own against the KGB. *The bastards hate us worse than they hate the West.* The Soviet Army had never forgotten the late 1930s, when Stalin had used the security agency to kill nearly every senior uniformed officer, and then as a direct result nearly lost Moscow to the German Army. No, if we go to them with no more than this, they'll reject all our evidence and launch their own investigation with the GRU.

Just how many irregularities are going to show up in this case? Colonel Vatutin wondered.

Foley was wondering much the same thing in his cubbyhole a few miles away. He had had the film developed and was reading it over. He noted with irritation that CARDINAL had run out of film and hadn't been able to reproduce the entire document. The part he had before him, however, showed that the KGB had an agent inside an American project that was called Tea Clipper. Evidently Filitov deemed this of more immediate interest to the Americans than what his own people were up to, and on reading the data, Foley was tempted to agree. Well. He'd get CARDINAL some more film cassettes, get the full document out, and then let him know that it was time to retire. The breakout wasn't scheduled for another ten days or so. Plenty of time, he told himself despite a crawly feel at the back of his neck that was telling him something else.

For my next trick, how do we get the new film to CARDINAL? With the usual courier chain destroyed, it would take several weeks to establish a new one, and he didn't want to risk a direct contact again.

It had to happen eventually, he knew. Sure, everything had gone smoothly the whole time he'd run this agent, but sooner or later something happened. Random chance, he told himself. Eventually the dice would come up the

wrong way. When he'd first been assigned here and learned the operational history of CARDINAL, he'd marveled that the man had lasted so long, that he'd rejected at least three offers for breakout. How far could one man push his luck? The old bastard must have thought he was invincible. *Those whom the gods would destroy, they first make proud*, Foley thought.

He put it aside and continued with the task of the day. By evening, the courier was heading west with a new CARDINAL report.

"It's on the way," Ritter told the Director of Central Intelligence.

"Thank God." Judge Moore smiled. "Now let's concentrate on getting him the hell out of there."

"Clark's being briefed. He flies over to England tomorrow, and he meets the submarine the day after that."

"That's another one who's pushed his luck," the Judge observed.

"The best we got," Ritter replied.

"It's not enough to move with," Vatutin told the Chairman after outlining the results of his surveillance and search. "I'm assigning more people to the operation. We've also placed listening devices in Filitov's apartment—"

"And this other colonel?"

"Bondarenko? We were unable to get in there. His wife does not work and stays home all day. We learned today that the man runs a few kilometers every morning, and some additional men have been assigned to this case also. The only information we have at present is a clean record—indeed, an exemplary one—and a goodly portion of ambition. He is now the official Ministry representative to Bright Star, and as you see from the diary pages, an enthusiastic supporter of the project."

"Your feeling for the man?" The Chairman's questions were delivered in a curt but not menacing voice. He was a busy man who guarded his time.

"So far, nothing that would lead us to suspect anything. He was decorated for service in Afghanistan; he took command of a *Spetznaz* group that was ambushed and fought off a determined bandit attack. While at this Bright Star place, he upbraided the KGB guard force for laxness, but his formal report to the Ministry explained why, and it is hard to fault his reasons."

"Is anything being done about it?" Gerasimov asked.

"The officer who was sent out to discuss the matter was killed in a plane crash in Afghanistan. Another officer will be sent out shortly, they tell me."

"The bath attendant?"

"We are still looking for him. No results as yet. Everything is covered: airports, train stations, everything. If anything breaks, I'll report to you immediately."

"Very well. Dismissed, Colonel." Gerasimov went back to the papers on his desk.

The Chairman of the Committee for State Security allowed himself a smile after Vatutin left. He was amazed at how well things were going. The masterstroke was the Vaneyeva matter. It wasn't often that you uncovered a spy ring in Moscow, and when you did so, the congratulations were always mixed with the question: *Why did it take you so long*? That wouldn't happen

this time. No, not with Vaneyeva's father about to be appointed to the Politburo. And Secretary Narmonov thought that he'd be loyal to the man who'd arranged the promotion. Narmonov, with all his dreams of reducing arms, of loosening the grip of the Party on the life of the nation, of "liberalizing" what had been bequeathed to the Party . . . Gerasimov was going to change all that.

It wouldn't be easy, of course. Gerasimov had only three firm allies on the Politburo, but among them was Alexandrov, the ideologue whom the Secretary had been unable to retire after he'd changed allegiance. And now he had another, one quite unknown to the Comrade General Secretary. On the other hand, Narmonov had the Army behind him.

That was a legacy of Mathias Rust, the German teenager who'd landed his rented Cessna in Red Square. Narmonov was a shrewd operator. Rust had flown into the Soviet Union on Border Guards Day, a coincidence that he could not explain—and Narmonov had denied KGB the opportunity to interrogate the hooligan properly! Gerasimov still growled about that. The young man had staged his flight on the only day in the year when one could be sure that the KGB's vast force of border guards would be gloriously drunk. That had got him across the Gulf of Finland undetected. Then the air defense command, Voyska PVO, had failed to detect him, and the child had landed right in front of St. Basil's!

General Secretary Narmonov had acted quickly after that: firing the chief of Voyska PVO and Defense Minister Sokolov after a stormy Politburo session where Gerasimov had been unable to raise any objections, lest he endanger his own position. The new Defense Minister, D. T. Yazov, was the Secretary's man, a nobody from far down the numerical list of senior officers; a man who, having failed to earn his post, depended on the Secretary to stay there. That had covered Narmonov's most vulnerable flank. The complication it added now was that Yazov was still learning his job, and he obviously depended on old hands like Filitov to teach it to him.

And Vatutin thinks that this is merely a counterespionage case, Gerasimov grunted to himself.

The security procedures that revolved around CARDINAL data precluded Foley from sending any information in the normal way. Even one-time-pad ciphers, which were theoretically unbreakable, were denied him. So the cover sheet on the latest report would warn the Δ fraternity that the data being dispatched wasn't quite what was expected.

That realization lifted Bob Ritter right off his chair. He made his photocopies and destroyed the originals before walking to Judge Moore's office. Greer and Ryan were already there.

"He ran out of film," the DDO said as soon as the door was closed.

"What?" Moore asked.

"Something new came in. It seems that our KGB colleagues have an agent inside Tea Clipper who just gave them most of the design work on this new gollywog mirror gadget, and CARDINAL decided that that was more important. He didn't have enough film left for everything, so he prioritized on what the KGB is up to. We only have half of what their laser system looks

like."

"Half might be enough," Ryan observed. That drew a scowl. Ritter was not the least bit happy that Ryan was now Δcleared.

"He discusses the effects of the design change, but there's nothing about the change itself."

"Can we identify the source of the leak on our side?" Admiral Greer asked.

"Maybe. It's somebody who really understands mirrors. Parks has to see this right quick. Ryan, you've actually been there. What do you think?"

"The test I watched validated the performance of the mirror and the computer software that runs it. If the Russians can duplicate it—well, we know they have the laser part down pat, don't we?" He stopped for a moment. "Gentlemen, this is scary. If the Russians get there first, it blows away all the arms-control criteria, and it faces us with a deteriorating strategic situation. I mean, it would take several years before the problem manifests itself, but . . ."

"Well, if our man can get another goddamned film cassette," the Deputy Director for Operations said, "we can get to work on it ourselves. The good news is that this Bondarenko guy that Misha selected to run the laser desk at the Ministry will report to our man regularly on what's happening. The bad news—"

"Well, we don't have to go into that now," Judge Moore said. Ryan didn't need to know any of that, his eyes told Ritter, who nodded instant agreement. "Jack, you said you had something else?"

"There's going to be a new appointment to the Politburo Monday—Ilya Arkadyevich Vaneyev. Age sixty-three, widower. One daughter, Svetlana, who works at GOSPLAN; she's divorced, with one child. Vaneyev is a pretty straight guy, honest by their standards, not much in the way of dirty laundry that we know about. He's moving up from a Central Committee slot. He's the guy who took over the agricultural post that Narmonov held and did fairly well at it. The thinking is that he's going to be Narmonov's man. That gives him four full voting members of the Politburo who belong to him, one more than the Alexandrov faction, and—" He stopped when he saw the pained looks on the other three faces in the office. "Something wrong?"

"That daughter of his. She's on Sir Basil's payroll," Judge Moore told him.

"Terminate the contract," Ryan said. "It would be nice to have that kind of source, but that kind of scandal now would endanger Narmonov. Put her into retirement. Reactivate her in a few years, maybe, but right now shut her the hell off."

"Might not be that easy," Ritter said, and let it go at that. "How's the evaluation coming?"

"Finished it yesterday."

"It's for the President's eyes plus a few others, but this one's going to be tightly held."

"Fair enough. I can have it printed up this afternoon. If that's all . . . ?" It was. Ryan left the room. Moore watched the door close before speaking.

"I haven't told anyone yet, but the President is concerned about Narmonov's political position again. Ernie Allen is worried that the latest change in the Soviet position indicates a weakening in Narmonov's support at home, and he's convinced the boss that this is a bad time to push on a few issues. The

implication of that is, if we bring CARDINAL out, well, it might have an undesired political effect."

"If Misha gets caught, we get the same political effect," Ritter pointed out. "Not to mention the slightly deleterious effect it'll have on our man. Arthur, they are after him. They may have gotten to Vaneyev's daughter already—"

"She's back at work in GOSPLAN," the DCI said.

"Yeah, and the man at the cleaners has disappeared. They got to her and broke her," the DDO insisted. "We have to break him out once and for all. We can't leave him flapping in the breeze, Arthur. We owe this man."

"I cannot authorize the extraction without presidential approval."

Ritter came close to exploding. "Then get it! Screw the politics—in this case, screw the politics. There is a practical side to this, Arthur. If we let a man like this go down, and we don't lift a finger to protect him, the word will get out—hell, the Russians'll make a TV miniseries out of it! It will cost us more in the long term than this temporary political garbage."

"Hold it for a minute," Greer said. "If they broke this Party guy's daughter, how come she's back to work?"

"Politics?" Moore mused. "You suppose the KGB's unable to hurt this guy's family?"

"Right!" the DDO snorted. "Gerasimov's in the opposing faction, and he'd pass the opportunity to deny a Politburo seat to Narmonov's man? It smells like politics, all right, but not that kind. More likely our friend Alexandrov has the new boy in his back pocket and Narmonov doesn't know about it."

"So, you think they've broken her, but let her go and are using her as leverage on the old man?" Moore asked. "It does make sense. But there's no evidence."

"Alexandrov's too old to go after the post himself, and anyway the ideologue never seems to get the top spot—more fun to play kingmaker. Gerasimov's his fair-haired boy, though, and we know that he's got enough ambition to have himself crowned Nicholas the Third."

"Bob, you've just come up with another reason not to rock the boat right now." Greer sipped at his coffee for a moment. "I don't like the idea of leaving Filitov in place either. What are the chances that he can just lay low? I mean, the way things are set up, he might just talk his way out of anything they can bring against him."

"No, James." Ritter shook his head emphatically. "We can't have him lay low, because we need the rest of this report, don't we? If he runs the risk of getting it out despite the attention he's getting, we can't then leave him to fate. It's not right. Remember what this man's done for us over the years." Ritter argued on for several minutes, demonstrating the ferocious loyalty to his people that he'd learned as a young case officer. Though agents often had to be treated like children, encouraged, supported, and often disciplined, they became like your own children, and danger to them was something to be fought.

Judge Moore ended the discussion. "Your points are well taken, Bob, but I still have to go to the President. This isn't just a field operation anymore."

Ritter stood his ground. "We put all the assets in place."

"Agreed, but it won't be carried out until we get approval."

The weather at Faslane was miserable, but at this time of year it usually was. A thirty-knot wind was lashing the Scottish coast with snow and sleet when *Dallas* surfaced. Mancuso took his station atop the sail and surveyed the rocky hills on the horizon. He'd just completed a speed run, zipping across the Atlantic at an average of thirty-one knots, about as hard as he cared to push his boat for any extended period of time, not to mention his running submerged far closer to the coast than he would have preferred. Well, he was paid to follow orders, not to love them.

The seas were rolling about fifteen feet, and his submarine rolled with them, wallowing her way forward at twelve knots. The seas came right over the spherical bow and splashed high on meeting the blunt face of the sail. Even the foul-weather gear didn't help much. Within a few minutes he was soaked and shivering. A Royal Navy tug approached and took station off *Dallas*' port bow, leading her in to the loch while Mancuso came to terms with the rolling. One of his best-kept professional secrets was an occasional touch of seasickness. Being on the sail helped, but those inside the submarine's cylindrical hull were now regretting the heavy lunch served a few hours earlier.

Within an hour they were in sheltered waters, taking the S-turns into the base that supported British and American nuclear submarines. Once there, the wind helped, easing the slate-gray bulk of the submarine up to the pier. People were already waiting there, sheltered in a few cars as the lines were passed and secured by the submarine's deck crew. As soon as the brow was passed, Mancuso went below to his cabin.

His first visitor was a commander. He'd expected a submarine officer, but this one had no service badges at all. That made him an intelligence type.

"How was the crossing, Captain?" the man asked.

"Quiet." *Well, get on with it!*

"You sail in three hours. Here are your mission orders." He handed over a manila envelope with wax seals, and a note on the front that told Mancuso when he could open it. Though often a feature in movies, it was the first time this had happened to him as a CO. You were supposed to be able to discuss your mission with the people who gave it to you. But not this time. Mancuso signed for them, locked them in his safe under the watchful eyes of the spook, and sent him back on his way.

"Shit," the Captain observed to himself. Now his guests could come aboard.

There were two of them, both in civilian clothes. The first came down the torpedo-loading hatch with the aplomb of a real sailor. Mancuso soon saw why.

"Howdy, skipper!"

"Jonesy, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Admiral Williamson gave me a choice: either be recalled to temporary active duty or come aboard as a civilian tech-rep. I'd rather be a tech-rep. Pay's better." Jones lowered his voice. "This here's Mr. Clark. He doesn't talk much."

And he didn't. Mancuso assigned him to the spare bunk in the engineer's stateroom. After his gear came down the hatch, Mr. Clark walked into the room, closed the door behind him, and that was that.

"Where do you want me to stash my stuff?" Jones asked.

"There's a spare bunk in the goat locker," Mancuso replied.

"Fine. The chiefs eat better anyway."

"How's school?"

"One more semester till my masters. I'm already getting nibbles from some contractors. And I'm engaged." Jones pulled out his wallet and showed the Captain a photo. "Her name's Kim, and she works in the library."

"Congratulations, Mr. Jones."

"Thanks, skipper. The Admiral said you really needed me. Kim understands. Her dad's Army. So, what's up? Some kind of spec-op, and you couldn't make it without me, right?" "Special Operations" was a euphemism that covered all sorts of things, most of which were dangerous.

"I don't know. They haven't told me yet."

"Well, one more trip 'up north' wouldn't be too bad," Jones observed. "To be honest, I kind of missed it."

Mancuso didn't think they were going there, but refrained from saying so. Jones went aft to get settled. Mancuso went into the engineer's stateroom.

"Mr. Clark?"

"Yes, sir." He'd hung up his jacket, revealing that he wore a short-sleeved shirt. The man was a little over forty, Mancuso judged. On first inspection, he didn't look all that special, perhaps six-one, and slim, but then Mancuso noted that the man didn't have the normal middle-age roll at the waist, and his shoulders were broader than they looked on the tall frame. It was the second glance at an arm that added a piece to the jigsaw. Half hidden under the black hair on his forearm was a tattoo, a red seal, it seemed to be, with a wide, impudent grin.

"I knew a guy with a tattoo like that. Officer—he's with Team-Six now."

"Once upon a time, Captain. I'm not supposed to talk about that, sir."

"What's this all about?"

"Sir, your mission orders will—"

"Humor me." Mancuso smiled out the order. "They just took in the brow."

"It involves making a pickup."

My God. Mancuso nodded impassively. "Will you need any additional support?"

"No, sir. Solo shot. Just me and my gear."

"Okay. We can go over it in detail after we sail. You'll eat in the wardroom. Right down the ladder outside, then a few feet aft, on the starboard side. One other thing: is time a problem?"

"Shouldn't be, unless you mind waiting. Part of this is still up in the air—and that's all I can say for now, Captain. Sorry, but I have my orders, too."

"Fair enough. You take the top bunk. Get some sleep if you need it."

"Thank you, sir." Clark watched the Captain leave, but didn't smile until the door closed. He'd never been on a Los Angeles–class submarine before. Most intelligence missions were conducted by the smaller, more maneuverable Sturgeons. He always slept in the same place, always in the upper bunk in the engineer's stateroom, the only spare bed on the ship. There was the usual problem stowing his gear, but "Clark" had done it enough to know all the tricks. When he'd finished that, he climbed up into the bunk. He was tired

from the flight and needed a few hours to relax. The bunk was always the same, hard against the curved hull of the submarine. It was like being in a coffin with the lid half-open.

"One must admire the Americans for their cleverness," Morozov said. It had been a busy several weeks at Dushanbe. Immediately after the test—more precisely, immediately after their visitor from Moscow had left—two of the six lasers had been defrosted and disassembled for service, and it was found that their optics had been badly scorched. So there was still a problem with the optical coating, after all. More likely quality-control, his section chief had observed, dismissing the problem to another team of engineers. What they had now was far more exciting. Here was the American mirror design that they'd heard about for years.

"The idea came from an astronomer. He wanted a way to make stellar photographs that didn't suffer from 'twinkling.' Nobody bothered to tell him that it was impossible, so he went ahead and did it. I knew the rough idea, but not the details. You are right, young man. This is very clever. Too clever for us," the man growled briefly as he flipped to the page on computer specifications. "We don't have anything that can duplicate this performance. Just building the actuators—I don't know if we can even do that."

"The Americans are building the telescope—"

"Yes, at Hawaii. I know. But the one at Hawaii is far behind this one, technically speaking. The Americans have made a breakthrough that has not yet found its way into the general scientific community. Note the date on the diagram. They may actually have this one operating now." He shook his head. "They're ahead of us."

"You have to leave."

"Yes. Thank you for protecting me this long." Eduard Vassilyevich Altunin's gratitude was genuine. He'd had a floor on which to sleep, and several warm meals to sustain him while he made his plans.

Or attempted to. He couldn't even appreciate the disadvantages under which he labored. In the West he could easily have obtained new clothing, a wig to disguise his hair, even a theatrical makeup kit that came with instructions on how to alter his features. In the West he could hide in the back seat of a car, and be driven two hundred miles in under four hours. In Moscow he had none of those options. The KGB would have searched his flat by now, and determined what clothing he wore. They'd know his face and hair color. The only thing they evidently did not know was his small circle of friends from military service in Afghanistan. He'd never talked to anyone about them.

They offered him a different sort of coat, but it didn't fit, and he had no wish to endanger these people further. He already had his cover story down: he'd hidden out with a criminal group a few blocks away. One fact about Moscow little known in the West was its crime situation, which was bad and getting worse. Though Moscow had not yet caught up with American cities of comparable size, there were districts where the prudent did not walk alone at night. But since foreigners didn't often visit such areas, and since the street criminals rarely troubled foreigners—doing so guaranteed a vigorous response from the Moscow Militia—the story was slow getting out.

He walked out onto Trofimovo, a dingy thoroughfare near the river. Altunin

marveled at his stupidity. He'd always told himself that if he needed to escape from the city, he'd do so on a cargo barge. His father had worked on them all his life, and Eduard knew hiding places that no one could find—but the river was frozen, and barge traffic was at a stop, and he hadn't thought of it! Altunin raged at himself.

There was no sense worrying about that now, he told himself. There had to be another way. He knew that the Moskvich auto plant was only a kilometer away, and the trains ran year round. He'd try to catch one going south, perhaps hide in a freight car filled with auto parts. With luck he'd make it to Soviet Georgia, where no one would inspect his new papers all that closely. People could disappear in the Soviet Union. After all, it was a country of 280,000,000, he told himself. People were always losing or damaging their papers. He wondered how many of these thoughts were realistic and how many were simply an attempt to cheer himself up.

But he couldn't stop now. It had started in Afghanistan and he wondered if it would ever stop.

He'd been able to shut it out at first. A corporal in an ordnance company, he worked with what the Soviet military euphemistically referred to as "counterterrorist devices." These were distributed by air, or most often by Soviet soldiers completing a sweep through a village. Some were the prototypical Russian *matryoshka* dolls, a bandanaed figure with a rolypoly bottom; or a truck; or a fountain pen. Adults learned fast, but children were cursed both with curiosity and the inability to learn from the mistakes of others. Soon it was learned that children would pick up anything, and the number of doll-bombs distributed was reduced. But one thing remained constant: when picked up, a hundred grams of explosive would go off. His job had been assembling the bombs and teaching the soldiers how to use them properly.

Altunin hadn't thought about it much at first. It had been his job, the orders for which came from on high; Russians are neither inclined by temperament nor conditioned by education to question orders from on high. Besides, it had been a safe, easy job. He hadn't had to carry a rifle and go walking in the bandit country. The only dangers to him had been in the bazaars of Kabul, and he'd always been careful to walk about in groups of five or more. But on one such trip he'd seen a young child—boy or girl, he didn't know—whose right hand was now a claw, and whose mother stared at him and his comrades in a way he would never forget. He'd known the stories, how the Afghan bandits took particular delight in flaying captured Soviet pilots alive, how their women often handled the matter entirely. He'd thought it clear evidence of the barbarism of these primitive people—but a child wasn't primitive. Marxism said that. Take any child, give it proper schooling and leadership, and you'd have a communist for life. Not that child. He remembered it, that cold November day two years ago. The wound was fully healed, and the child had actually been smiling, too young to understand that its disfigurement would last forever. But the mother knew, and knew how and why her child had been punished for being . . . born. And after that, the safe, easy job hadn't been quite the same. Every time he screwed the explosives section onto the mechanism, he saw a small, pudgy child's hand. He started seeing them in his

sleep. Drink, and even an experiment with hashish hadn't driven the images away. Speaking with his fellow technicians hadn't helped—though it had earned him the wrathful attention of his company *zampolit.* It was a hard thing he had to do, the political officer had explained, but necessary to prevent greater loss of life, you see. Complaining about it would not change matters, unless Corporal Altunin wanted transfer to a rifle company, where he might see for himself why such harsh measures were necessary.

He knew now that he should have taken that offer, and hated himself for the cowardice that had prevented the impulse. Service in a line company might have restored his self-image, might have—might have done a lot of things, Altunin told himself, but he hadn't made the choice and it hadn't made the difference. In the end, all he'd earned for himself was a letter from the *zampolit* that would travel with him for the rest of his life.

So now he tried to expiate that wrong. He told himself that perhaps he already had—and now, if he were very lucky, he could disappear, and perhaps he could forget the toys that he'd prepared for their evil mission. That was the only positive thought that his mind had room for, this cold, cloudy night.

He walked north, keeping off the dirt sidewalks, staying in shadows, away from the streetlamps. Shift workers coming home from the Moskvich plant made the streets agreeably crowded, but when he arrived at the railyard outside the plant, all the commuting was over. Snow started to fall heavily, reducing visibility to a hundred meters or so, with small globes of flakes around each of the lights over the stationary freight cars. A train seemed to be forming up, probably heading south, he told himself. Switching locomotives were moving back and forth, shunting boxcars from one siding to another. He spent a few minutes huddled by a car to make sure that he knew what was happening. The wind picked up as he watched, and Altunin looked for a better vantage point. There were some boxcars fifty or so meters away, from which he could observe better. One of them had an opened door, and he'd need to inspect the locking mechanism if he wanted to break inside one. He walked over with his head down to shield his face from the wind. The only thing he could hear, other than the crunch of snow under his boots, was the signal whistles of the switch engines. It was a friendly sound, he told himself, the sound that would change his life, perhaps lead the way to something like freedom.

He was surprised to see that there were people in the boxcar. Three of them. Two held cartons of auto parts. The third's hands were empty, until he reached into his pocket and came out with a knife.

Altunin started to say something. He didn't care if they were stealing parts for sale on the black market. He wasn't concerned at all, but before he could speak, the third one leaped down on him. Altunin was stunned when his head struck a steel rail. He was conscious, but couldn't move for a second, too surprised even to be afraid. The third one turned and said something. Altunin couldn't make out the reply, but knew it was sharp and quick. He was still trying to understand what was happening when his assailant turned back and slashed his throat. There wasn't even any pain. He wanted to explain that he wasn't . . . concerned . . . didn't care . . . just wanted to . . . one of them stood over him, two cartons in his arms, and clearly he was afraid, and Altunin

thought this very odd, since he was the one who was dying . . .

Two hours later, a switch engine couldn't stop in time when its engineer noted an odd, snow-covered shape on the rails. On seeing what he'd run over, he called for the yardmaster.

13.

Councils

"**B**EAUTIFUL job," Vatutin commented. "The bastards." *They've broken the rule,* he said to himself. The rule was unwritten but nevertheless very real: CIA does not kill Soviets in the Soviet Union; KGB does not kill Americans, or even Soviet defectors, in the United States. So far as Vatutin knew, the rule had never been broken by either side—at least not obviously so. The rule made sense: the job of intelligence agencies was to gather intelligence; if KGB and CIA officers spent their time killing people—with the inevitable retaliation and counterretaliation—the primary job would not get done. And so the business of intelligence was a civilized, *predictable* business. In third-world countries, different rules applied, of course, but in America and the Soviet Union, the rules were assiduously followed.

Until now, that is—unless I'm supposed to believe that this poor, sad bastard was murdered by auto-parts thieves! Vatutin wondered if CIA might have contracted the job out to a criminal gang—he suspected that the Americans used Soviet criminals for some things too sensitive for their own lily-white hands. *That would not be a technical violation of the rules, would it?* He wondered if the First Directorate men ever used a similar dodge . . .

All he knew right now was that the next step in the courier chain was dead at his feet, and with it his only hope of linking the microfilm to the American spy in the Defense Ministry. Vatutin corrected himself: He also knew that he'd have to report this to the Chairman in about six hours. He needed a drink. Vatutin shook his head and looked down at what was left of his suspect. The snow was falling so rapidly that you couldn't see the blood anymore.

"You know, if they'd only been a little bit more clever putting his body on the tracks, we might have written it off to an accident," another KGB officer observed. Despite the horrendous work done to the body by the wheels of the locomotive, it was clear that Altunin's throat had been expertly sliced by a narrow-bladed knife. Death, the responding physician reported, could not have taken longer than a minute. There were no signs of a struggle. The victim's—the traitor's! —hands were not bruised or cut. He hadn't fought back against whoever had killed him. Conclusion: His killer was probably known to him. Might it have been an American?

"First thing," Vatutin said. "I want to know if any Americans were away from their flats between eighteen and twenty-three hours." He turned. "Doctor!"

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Time of death again?"

"Judging by the temperature of the larger pieces, between twenty-one and

midnight. Earlier rather than later, I think, but the cold and snow cover complicate matters." *Not to mention the state of the remains,* he didn't add.

Vatutin turned back to his principal assistant. "Any who were away from quarters, I want to know who, where, when, and why."

"Step up surveillance of all the foreigners?" the man wondered aloud.

"I'll have to go to the Chairman for that, but I'm thinking about it. I want you to speak to the chief Militia investigator. This is to be classified most-secret. We don't need a mob of fumbling policemen messing this affair up."

"Understood, Comrade Colonel. They'd only be interested in recovering the auto parts anyway," the man noted sourly. *This* perestroika *business is turning everyone into a capitalist!*

Vatutin walked over to the locomotive driver. "It's cold, isn't it?"

The message was received. "Yes, Comrade. Perhaps you'd like something to take away the chill?"

"That would be very kind of you, Comrade Engineer."

"My pleasure, Comrade Colonel." The engine driver produced a small bottle. As soon as he'd seen that the man was a colonel of the KGB, he'd thought himself doomed. But the man seemed decent enough. His colleagues were businesslike, their questions had been reasonable ones, and the man was almost at ease—until he realized that he could be punished for having a bottle on the job. He watched the man take a long pull, then hand the bottle back.

"Spasibo," the KGB man said, and walked off into the snow.

Vatutin was waiting in the Chairman's anteroom when he arrived. He'd heard that Gerasimov was a serious worker, always at his desk by seven-thirty. The stories were right. He came through the door at seven twenty-five and waved for the "Two" man to follow him into his office.

"Well?"

"Altunin was killed late last night in the railyards outside the Moskvich Auto Factory. His throat was cut and his body left on the tracks, where a switch engine ran over it."

"You're sure it's him?" Gerasimov asked with a frown.

"Yes, he was positively identified. I recognized the face myself. He was found next to a railcar that had ostensibly been broken into, and some auto parts were missing."

"Oh, so he stumbled upon a gang of black marketeers and they conveniently killed him?"

"So it is meant to appear, Comrade Chairman." Colonel Vatutin nodded. "I find the coincidence unconvincing, but there is no physical evidence to contradict it. Our investigations are continuing. We are now checking to see if any of Altunin's comrades from his military service live in the area, but I am not hopeful along these lines."

Gerasimov rang for tea. His secretary appeared in an instant, and Vatutin realized that this had to be part of the regular morning routine. The Chairman was taking things more easily than the Colonel had feared. Party man or not, he acted like a professional:

"So, to this point, we have three confessed document couriers, and one more positively identified, but unfortunately dead. The dead one was seen in close

physical proximity to the senior aide of the Defense Minister, and one of the live ones has identified his contact as a foreigner, but cannot positively identify his face. In short, we have the middle of this line, but neither end."

"That is correct, Comrade Chairman. Surveillance of the two Ministry colonels continues. I propose that we step up surveillance of the American Embassy community."

Gerasimov nodded. "Approved. It's time for my morning brief. Keep pushing for a break in the case. You look better now that you've cut back on your drinking, Vatutin."

"I feel better, Comrade Chairman," he admitted.

"Good." Gerasimov rose, and his visitor did the same. "Do you really think that our CIA colleagues killed their own man?"

"Altunin's death was most convenient for them. I realize that this would be a violation of our—our agreement along these lines, but—"

"But we are probably dealing with a highly placed spy, and they are undoubtedly most interested in protecting him. Yes, I understand that. Keep pushing, Vatutin," Gerasimov said again.

Foley was already at his office also. On his desk were three film cassettes for CARDINAL. The next problem was delivering the damned things. The business of espionage was a mass of interlocking contradictions. Some parts of it were devilishly hard. Some carried the sort of danger that made him wish he'd stayed with the *New York Times*. But others were so simple that he could have had one of his kids handle it. That very thought had occurred to him several times—not that he'd ever entertain it seriously, but in moments when his mind was affected by a few stiff drinks, he'd muse that Eddie could take a piece of chalk and make a certain mark in a certain place. From time to time, embassy personnel would walk about Moscow doing things that were just slightly out of the ordinary. In summer, they'd wear flowers in buttonholes, and remove them for no apparent reason—and the KGB officers watching them would anxiously scan the sidewalks for the person at whom the "signal" was aimed. Year round, some would wander about, taking photographs of ordinary street scenes. In fact, they scarcely needed to be told. Some of the embassy people merely had to act like their eccentric American selves to drive the Russians nuts. To a counterespionage officer, *anything* could be a secret sign: a turned-down sun visor in a parked car, a package left on its front seat, the way the wheels were pointed. The net effect of all these measures, some deliberate, some merely random, had "Two" men scurrying all over the city running down things that simply didn't exist. It was something Americans did better than Russians, who were too regimented to act in a truly random fashion, and it was something that made life thoroughly miserable for the counterspies of the Second Chief Directorate.

But there were thousands of them, and only seven hundred Americans (counting dependents) assigned to the embassy.

And Foley still had the film to deliver. He wondered why it was that CARDINAL had always refused to use dead-drops. It was the perfect expedient for this. A dead-drop was typically an object that looked like an ordinary stone, or anything else common and harmless, hollowed out to hold the thing

to be transferred. Bricks were especially favored in Moscow, as the city was mainly one of brick, many of which were loose due to the uniformly poor workmanship found here, but the variety of such devices was endless.

On the other hand, the variety of ways to make a brush-pass was limited, and depended upon the sort of timing to be found in a wishbone backfield. Well, the Agency hadn't given him this job because it was easy. He couldn't risk it again himself. Perhaps his wife could make the transfer . . .

"So, where's the leak?" Parks asked his security chief.

"It could be any one of a hundred or so people," the man answered.

"That's good news," Pete Wexton observed dryly. He was an inspector in the FBI's counterintelligence office. "Only a hundred."

"Could be one of the scientific people, or somebody's secretary, or someone in the budget department—that's just in the program itself. There are another twenty or so here in the D.C. area who're into Tea Clipper deep enough to have seen this stuff, but they're all very senior folks." SDIO's security chief was a Navy captain who customarily wore civilian clothes. "More likely, the person we're looking for is out West."

"And they're mostly scientific types, mostly under forty." Wexton closed his eyes. *Who live inside computers and think the world's just one big videogame.* The problem with scientists, especially the young ones, was simply that they lived in a world very different from that understood and appreciated by the security community. To them, progress depended on the free transfer of information and ideas. They were people who got excited about new things, and talked about them among themselves, unconsciously seeking the synergism that made ideas sprout like weeds in the disordered garden of the laboratory. To a security officer the ideal world was one where nobody talked to anyone else. The problem with that, of course, was that such a world rarely did anything worth securing in the first place. The balance was almost impossible to strike, and the security people were always caught exactly in the middle, hated by everyone.

"What about internal security on the project documents?" Wexton asked.

"You mean canary traps?"

"What the hell is that?" General Parks asked.

"All these papers are done on word processors. You use the machine to make subtle alterations in each copy of the important papers. That way you can track every one, and identify the precise one that's being leaked to the other side," the Captain explained. "We haven't done much of that. It's too time-intensive."

"CIA has a computer subroutine that does it automatically. They call it Spookscribe, or something like that. It's closely held, but you should be able to get it if you ask."

"Nice of 'em to tell us about it," Parks groused. "Would it matter in this case?"

"Not at the moment, but you play all the cards you got," the Captain observed to his boss. "I've heard about the program. It can't be used on scientific documents. The way they use language is too precise. Anything more than inserting a comma—well, it can screw up what they're trying to say."

"Assuming anyone can understand it in the first place," Wexton said with a rueful shake of the head. "Well, it's for damned sure that the Russians can." He was already thinking about the resources that this case would require—possibly hundreds of agents. They'd be conspicuous. The community in question might be too small to absorb a large influx of people without someone's notice.

The other obvious thing to do was restrict access to information on the mirror experiments, but then you ran the risk of alerting the spy. Wexton wondered why he hadn't stuck to simple things like kidnappings and Mafia racketeering. But he'd gotten his brief on Tea Clipper from Parks himself. It was an important job, and he was the best man for it. Wexton was sure of this: Director Jacobs had said so himself.

Bondarenko noticed it first. He'd had an odd feeling a few days previously while doing his morning run. It was something he'd always had, but those three months in Afghanistan had taken a latent sixth sense and made it blossom fully. There were eyes on him. *Whose?* he wondered.

They were good. He was sure of that. He also suspected that there were five or more of them. That made them Russian . . . probably. Not certainly. Colonel Bondarenko was one kilometer into his run, and decided to perform a small experiment. He altered his route, taking a right where he normally took a left. That would take him past a new apartment block whose first-floor windows were still polished. He grinned to himself, but his right hand unconsciously slapped down on his hip, searching for his service automatic. The grin ended when he realized what his hand had done, and felt the gnawing disappointment that he did not have the wherewithal to defend himself with anything other than bare hands. Bondarenko knew how to do that quite well, but a pistol has longer reach than a hand or foot. It wasn't fear, not even close to it, but Bondarenko was a soldier, accustomed to knowing the limits and rules of his own world.

His head swiveled, looking at the reflection of the windows. There was a man a hundred meters behind him, holding a hand to his face, as though speaking on a small radio. Interesting. Bondarenko turned and ran backward for a few meters, but by the time his head had come around, the man's hand was at his side, and he was walking normally, seemingly uninterested in the jogging officer. Colonel Bondarenko turned and resumed his normal pace. His smile was now thin and tight. He'd confirmed it. But what had he confirmed? Bondarenko promised himself that he'd know that an hour after getting to his office.

Thirty minutes later, home, showered, and dressed, he read his morning paper—for him it was *Krasnaya Zvesda,* "Red Star," the Soviet military daily—while he drank a mug of tea. The radio was playing while his wife prepared the children for school. Bondarenko didn't hear either, and his eyes merely scanned the paper while his mind churned. *Who are they? Why are they watching me? Am I under suspicion? If so, suspicion of what?*

"Good morning, Gennady Iosifovich," Misha said on entering his office.

"Good morning, Comrade Colonel," Bondarenko answered.

Filitov smiled. “Call me Misha. The way you’re going, you will soon outrank this old carcass. What is it?”

“I’m being watched. I had people following me this morning when I did my run.”

“Oh?” Misha turned. “Are you sure?”

“You know how it is when you know you’re being watched—I’m certain *you* know, Misha!” the young Colonel observed.

But he was wrong. Filitov had noticed nothing unusual, nothing to arouse his instincts until this moment. Then it hit him that the bath attendant wasn’t back yet. What if the signal was about something more than a routine security check? Filitov’s face changed for an instant before he got it back under control.

“You’ve noticed something, too, then?” Bondarenko asked.

“Ah!” A wave of the hand, and an ironic look. “Let them look; they will find this old man more boring than Alexandrov’s sex life.” The reference to the Politburo’s chief ideologue was becoming a popular one in the Defense Ministry. A sign, Misha wondered, that General Secretary Narmonov was planning to ease him out?

They ate in the Afghan way, everyone taking food barehanded from a common plate. Ortiz had a virtual banquet laid out for lunch. The Archer had the place of honor, with Ortiz at his right hand to act as translator. Four very senior CIA people were there, too. He thought they were overdoing things, but then, the place that put the light in the sky must have been important. Ortiz opened the talking with the usual ceremonial phrases.

“You do me too much honor,” the Archer replied.

“Not so,” the senior CIA visitor said through Ortiz. “Your skill and courage are well known to us, and even among our soldiers. We are ashamed that we can give you no more than the poor help that our government allows.”

“It is our land to win back,” the Archer said with dignity. “With Allah’s help it will be ours again. It is well that Believers should strive together against the godless ones, but the task is that of my people, not yours.”

He doesn’t know, Ortiz thought. *He doesn’t know that he’s being used.*

“So,” the Archer went on. “Why have you traveled around the world to speak with this humble warrior?”

“We wish to talk with you about the light you saw in the sky.”

The Archer’s face changed. He was surprised at that. He’d expected to be asked about how well his missiles worked.

“It was a light—a strange light, yes. Like a meteor, but it seemed to go up instead of down.” He described what he had seen in detail, giving the time, where he’d been, the direction of the light, and the way it had sliced across the sky.

“Did you see what it hit? Did you see anything else in the sky?”

“Hit? I don’t understand. It was a light.”

Another of the visitors spoke. “I am told that you were a teacher of mathematics. Do you know what a laser is?”

His face changed at the new thought. “Yes, I read of them when I was in university. I—” The Archer sipped at a glass of juice. “I know little of lasers.

They project a beam of light, and are used mainly for measuring and surveying. I have never seen one, only read of them."

"What you saw was a test of a laser weapon."

"What is its purpose?"

"We do not know. The test you saw used the laser system to destroy a satellite in orbit. That means—"

"I know of satellites. A laser can be used for this purpose?"

"Our country is working on similar things, but it would seem that the Russians are ahead of us."

The Archer was surprised by that. Was not America the world's leader in technical things? Was not the Stinger proof of that? Why had these men flown twelve thousand miles—merely because he'd seen a light in the sky?

"You are fearful of this laser?"

"We have great interest," the senior man replied. "Some of the documents you found gave us information about the site which we did not have, and for this we are doubly in your debt."

"I, too, have interest now. Do you have the documents?"

"Emilio?" The senior visitor gestured at Ortiz, who produced a map and a diagram.

"This site has been under construction since 1983. We were surprised that the Russians would build so important a facility so near to the borders of Afghanistan."

"In 1983, they still thought they would win," the Archer observed darkly. The idea that they'd felt that way was taken as an insult. He noted the position on the map, the mountaintop nearly surrounded by a sweeping loop of the Vakhsh River. He saw immediately why it was there. The power dam at Nurek was only a few kilometers away. The Archer knew more than he let on. He knew what lasers were, and a little of how they operated. He knew that their light was dangerous, that it could blind . . .

It destroyed a satellite? Hundreds of kilometers up in space, higher than airplanes could fly . . . what could it do to people on the ground . . . perhaps they'd built so close to his country for another reason . . .

"So you merely saw the light? You have heard no stories about such a place, no stories of strange lights in the sky?"

The Archer shook his head. "No, only the one time." He saw the visitors exchange looks of disappointment.

"Well, that does not matter. I am permitted to offer you the thanks of my government. Three truckloads of weapons are coming to your band. If there is anything else you need, we will try to get it for you."

The Archer nodded soberly. He'd expected a great reward for the delivery of the Soviet officer, then been disappointed at his death. But these men had not visited him about that. It was all about the documents and the light—was this place so important that the death of the Russian was considered trivial? Were the Americans actually afraid of it?

And if they were fearful, how should he feel?

"No, Arthur, I don't like it," the President said tentatively. Judge Moore pressed the attack.

"Mr. President, we are aware of Narmonov's political difficulties. The disappearance of our agent will not have any more of an effect than his arrest by the KGB, possibly less. After all, the KGB can't very well raise too much of a ruckus if they let him slip away," the DCI pointed out.

"It's still too great a risk," Jeffrey Pelt said. "We have a historic opportunity with Narmonov. He really wants to make fundamental changes in their system —hell, your people are the ones who made the assessment."

We had this chance before and blew it, during the Kennedy Administration, Moore thought. But Khrushchev fell, and we had twenty years of Party hacks. Now there may be another chance. You're afraid we might never get another opportunity as good as this one. Well, that's one way to look at it, he admitted to himself.

"Jeff, his position will not be affected any more by extracting our man than by his capture—"

"If they're on to him, why haven't they grabbed him already?" Pelt demanded. "What if you're overreacting?"

"This man has been working for us over thirty years—thirty years! Do you know the risks he's run for us, the information we've gotten from him? Can you appreciate the frustration he's felt the times we ignored his advice? Can you imagine what it's like to live with a death sentence for thirty years? If we abandon the man, what's this country all about?" Moore said with quiet determination. The President was a man who could always be swayed by arguments based on principle.

"And if we topple Narmonov in the process?" Pelt demanded. "What if Alexandrov's clique does take over, and it's back to the bad old days all over again—more tension, more arms races? How do we explain to the American people that we sacrificed this opportunity for the life of one man?"

"For one thing, they'd never know unless somebody leaked it," the DCI replied coldly. "The Russians wouldn't make it all public, and you know that. For another, how would we explain throwing this man away like a used Kleenex?"

"They wouldn't know that either, unless somebody leaked it," Pelt answered in an equally cold voice.

The President stirred. His first instinct had been to put the extraction operation on hold. How could he explain any of this? Either by an act of commission or omission, they were discussing the best way to prevent something unfavorable from happening to America's principal enemy. *But you can't even say that in public,* the President reflected. *If you said out loud that the Russians are our enemy, the papers would throw a fit. The Soviets have thousands of nuclear warheads aimed at us, but we can't risk offending their sensibilities . . .*

He remembered his two face-to-face meetings with the man, Andrey Il'ych Narmonov, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Younger than he was, the President reflected. Their initial conversations had been cautious, each man feeling out the other, looking both for weaknesses and common ground, for advantage and compromise. A man with a mission, a man who probably did wish to change things, the President thought—

But is that a good thing? What if he did decentralize their economy, introduce market forces, give them a little freedom—not much, of course, but enough to get things moving? Quite a few people were warning him about that

possibility: Imagine a country with the Soviets' political will, backed up by an economy that could deliver quality goods both in the civilian and military sectors. Would it make the Russian people believe again in their system; would it revive the sense of mission that they'd had in the 1930s? *We might be faced with a more dangerous enemy than ever before.*

On the other side, he was told that there is no such thing as a little freedom —one could ask Duvalier of Haiti, Marcos of the Philippines, or the ghost of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. The momentum of events could bring the Soviet Union out of the dark ages and into the 20th-century era of political thought. It might take a generation, perhaps two, but what if the country did start to evolve into something approaching a liberal state? There was another lesson of history: Liberal democracies don't make war on one another.

Some choice I have, the President thought. I can be remembered as the regressive idiot who reinstated the Cold War in all its grim majesty—or the Pollyanna who expected the leopard to change its spots, only to find that it had grown bigger, sharper fangs. Jesus, he told himself as he stared at his two interlocutors, I'm not thinking about success at all, only the consequences of failure.

That's one area in which America and Russia have paralleled their history—our postwar governments have never lived up to the expectations of our people, have they? I'm the President, I'm supposed to know what the Right Thing is. That's why the people elected me. That's what they're paying me for. God, if they only knew what frauds we all are. We're not talking about how to succeed. We're talking about who'll leak the reason for the failure of policy. Right here in the Oval Office, we're discussing who'll get the blame if something we haven't yet decided upon doesn't work.

"Who knows about this?"

Judge Moore held his hands out. "Admiral Greer, Bob Ritter, and me at CIA. A few field personnel know about the proposed operation—we had to send out the heads-up signal—but they do not know the political issues, and never will. They don't need to know. Aside from that, only we three at the Agency have the entire picture. Add you, sir, and Dr. Pelt, and that makes five."

"And already we're talking about leaks! Goddamn it!" the President swore with surprising passion. "How did we ever get so screwed up as this!"

Everyone sobered up. There was nothing like a presidential curse to settle people down. He looked at Moore and Pelt, his chief intelligence advisor, and his national-security advisor. One was pleading for the life of a man who had served America faithfully and well, at peril of his life; the other took the long, cold look at the *realpolitik* and saw a historic opportunity more important than any single human life.

"Arthur, you're saying that this agent—and I don't even want to know his name—has been giving us critically important data for thirty years, up to and including this laser project that the Russians have operating; you say that he is probably in danger, and it's time to run the risk of getting him out of there, that we have a moral obligation to do so."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"And you, Jeff, you say that the timing's bad, that the revelation of a leak so high up in their government could endanger Narmonov politically, could topple him from his leadership position and replace him with a government

less attractive to us."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"And if this man dies because we haven't helped him?"

"We would lose important information," Moore said. "And it might have no tangible difference in its effect on Narmonov. And we'd be betraying a trust to a man who has served us faithfully and well for thirty years."

"Jeff, can you live with that?" the President asked his national-security advisor.

"Yes, sir, I can live with that. I don't like it but I can live with it. With Narmonov we have already gotten an agreement on intermediate nuclear arms, and we have a chance at one on strategic forces."

It's like being a judge. Here I have two advocates who believe fully in their positions. I wonder if their principles would be quite so firm if they were in my chair, if they had to make the decision?

But they didn't run for President.

This agent's been serving the United States since I was a junior prosecutor handling whores in night court.

Narmonov may be the best chance we've had for world peace since God knows when.

The President stood and walked to the windows behind his desk. They were very thick, to protect him from people with guns. They could not protect him against the duties of his office. He looked at the south lawn, but found no answers. He turned back.

"I don't know. Arthur, you can get your assets in place, but I want your word that nothing will happen without my authorization. No mistakes, no initiative, no action at all without my say-so. I'm going to need time on this one. We have time, don't we?"

"Yes, sir. It will take several more days before we have the pieces in place."

"I'll let you know when I make my decision." He shook hands with both men and watched them leave. The President had five more minutes before his next appointment, and used the time to visit the bathroom that adjoins the office. He wondered if there were any underlying symbolism in the act of washing his hands, or did he just want the excuse to look at himself in the mirror? *And you're supposed to be the man with all the fucking answers! the image told him. You don't even know why you went to the bathroom!* The President smiled at that. It was funny, funny in a way that few other men would ever understand.

"So what the hell do I tell Foley?" Ritter snapped twenty minutes later.

"Back off, Bob," Moore warned. "He's thinking about it. We don't need an immediate decision, and a 'maybe' beats hell out of a 'no.' "

"Sorry, Arthur. It's just that—damn it, I've tried to get him to come out before. We can't let this man go down."

"I'm sure he won't make a final decision until I've had a chance to talk with him again. For the moment, tell Foley to continue the mission. And I want a fresh look at Narmonov's political vulnerability. I get the impression that Alexandrov may be on the way out—he's too old to take over from the current man; the Politburo wouldn't stand for replacing a relatively young man with

an old one, not after the death parade they had a few years back. Who does that leave?"

"Gerasimov," Ritter said at once. "Two others may be in the running, but he's the ambitious one. Ruthless, but very, very smooth. The Party bureaucracy likes him because he did such a nice job on the dissidents. And if he wants to make a move, it'll have to be pretty soon. If the arms agreement goes through, Narmonov gains a lot of prestige, and the political clout that goes with it. If Alexandrov isn't careful, he'll miss the boat entirely, get moved out himself, and Narmonov will have his seat nice and safe for years."

"That'll take at least five years to accomplish," Admiral Greer noted, speaking for the first time. "He may not have five years. We do have those indications that Alexandrov may be on the way out. If that's more than a rumor, it might force his hand."

Judge Moore looked up at the ceiling. "It sure would be easier to deal with the bastards if they had a predictable way of running things." *Of course, we have it, and they can't predict us.*

"Cheer up, Arthur," Greer said. "If the world made sense, we'd all have to find honest work."

14.

Changes

PASSAGE through the Kattegat is a tricky affair for a submarine, doubly so when it is necessary to be covert. The water is shallow there, too shallow to run submerged. The channels can be tricky in daylight. They are worse at night, and worse still without a pilot. Since *Dallas'* passage was supposedly a secret one, a pilot was out of the question.

Mancuso rode the bridge. Below, his navigator sweated at the chart table while a chief quartermaster manned the periscope and called out bearings to various landmarks. They couldn't even use radar to help with navigation, but the periscope had a low-light amplifier, which didn't quite turn night to day, but at least made the starless darkness look like twilight. The weather was a gift, with low clouds and sleet that restricted visibility just enough that the low, dark shape of the 688-class submarine would be difficult to spot from land. The Danish Navy knew of the submarine's transit, and had a few small craft out to ward off any possible snoopers—there were none—but aside from that, *Dallas* was on her own.

"Ship on the port bow," a lookout called.

"I got him," Mancuso answered at once. He held a pistollike light-amplifying scope and saw the medium-sized container ship. The odds, he thought, made it an East Bloc vessel. Within a minute, the course and speed of the inbound ship were plotted, with a CPA—Closest Point of Approach—of seven hundred yards. The Captain swore and gave his orders.

Dallas had her running lights on—the Danes had insisted on it. The rotating amber one above the masthead light marked her positively as a submarine. Aft, a seaman struck down the American flag and replaced it with a Danish one.

"Everybody look Scandinavian," Mancuso noted wryly.

"Ja-ja, Kept'n," a junior officer chuckled in the darkness. It would be hard for him. He was black. "Slow bearing change on our friend. He isn't altering course that I can tell, sir. Look—"

"Yeah, I see 'em." Two of the Danish craft were racing forward to interpose themselves between the container ship and *Dallas.* Mancuso thought that would help. All cats are gray at night, and a submarine on the surface looks like . . . a submarine on the surface, a black shape with a vertical sail.

"I think she's Polish," the Lieutenant observed. "Yeah, I got the funnel now. Maersk Line."

The two ships closed at a rate of a half a mile per minute. Mancuso turned to watch, keeping his scope on the ship's bridge. He saw no special activity. Well, it was three in the morning. The bridge crew had a tough navigating job

to do, and probably their interest in his submarine was the same as his main interest in their merchantman—*please don't hit me, you idiot*. It was over surprisingly fast, and then he was staring at her stern light. It occurred to Mancuso that having the lights on was probably a good idea. If they'd been blacked out and then spotted, greater notice might have been taken.

They were in the Baltic Sea proper an hour later, on a course of zero-six-five, using the deepest water they could find as *Dallas* picked her way east. Mancuso took the navigator into his stateroom and together they plotted the best approach to, and the safest place on, the Soviet coast. When they'd selected it, Mr. Clark joined them, and together the three discussed the delicate part of the mission.

In an ideal world, Vatutin thought wryly, they would take their worries to the Defense Minister, and he would cooperate fully with the KGB investigation. But the world was not ideal. In addition to the expected institutional rivalries, Yazov was in the pocket of the General Secretary and knew of the differences of opinion between Gerasimov and Narmonov. No, the Defense Minister would either take over the entire investigation through his own security arm, or use his political power to close the case entirely, lest KGB disgrace Yazov himself for having a traitor for an aide, and so endanger Narmonov.

If Narmonov fell, at best the Defense Minister would go back to being the Soviet Army's chief of personnel; more likely, he'd be retired in quiet humiliation after the removal of his patron. Even if the General Secretary managed to survive the crisis, Yazov would be the sacrificial goat, just as Sokolov had been so recently. What choice did Yazov have?

The Defense Minister was also a man with a mission. Under the cover of the "restructuring" initiative of the General Secretary, Yazov hoped to use his knowledge of the officer corps to remake the Soviet Army—in the hope, supposedly, of professionalizing the entire military community. Narmonov said that he wanted to save the Soviet economy, but no less an authority than Alexandrov, the high priest of Marxism-Leninism, said that he was destroying the purity of the Party itself. Yazov wanted to rebuild the military from the ground up. It would also have the effect, Vatutin thought, of making the Army personally loyal to Narmonov.

That worried Vatutin. Historically, the Party had used the KGB to keep the military under control. After all, the military had all the guns, and if it ever awoke to its power and felt the loosening of Party control . . . it was too painful a concept on which to dwell. An army loyal exclusively to the General Secretary rather than the Party itself was even more painful to Vatutin, since it would change the relationship the KGB had to Soviet society as a whole. There could then be no check on the General Secretary. With the military behind him, he could break KGB to his will and use it to "restructure" the entire Party. He would have the power of another Stalin.

How did I ever start along this line? Vatutin asked himself. *I'm a counterintelligence officer, not a Party theorist*. For all his life, Colonel Vatutin had never dwelt on the Big Issues of his country. He'd trusted his superiors to handle the major decisions and allow him to handle the small details. No

longer. By being taken into Chairman Gerasimov's confidence he was now inextricably allied with the man. It had happened so easily! Virtually overnight—*you have to be noticed to get general's stars,* he thought with a sardonic smile. *You always wanted to get noticed. So, Klementi Vladimirovich, you got yourself noticed all right. Now look where you are!*

Right in the middle of a power play between the KGB Chairman and the General Secretary himself.

It was actually quite funny, he told himself. He knew it would be less so if Gerasimov miscalculated—but the crowning irony of all was that if the KGB Chairman fell, then the liberal influences already put in place by Narmonov would protect Vatutin, who was, after all, merely doing the job assigned him by his duly appointed superiors. He didn't think that he'd be imprisoned, much less shot, as had once been the case. His advancement would be at an end. He'd find himself demoted, running the KGB regional office at Omsk, or the least pleasant opening they could find, never again to return to Moscow Center.

That wouldn't be so bad, he thought. On the other hand, if Gerasimov succeeded . . . head of "Two" perhaps? And that wouldn't be very bad at all.

And you actually believed that you could advance your career without becoming "political." But that was no longer an option. If he tried to get out, he'd be disgraced. Vatutin was trapped, and knew it. The only way out was to do his job to the best of his ability.

The revery ended as he turned back to his reports. Colonel Bondarenko was totally clean, he thought. His record had been examined and reexamined, and there was nothing to indicate that he was anything less than a patriot and an aboveaverage officer. Filitov is the one, Vatutin thought. As insane as it seemed on the surface, this decorated hero was a traitor.

But how the hell do we prove that? How do we even investigate it properly without the cooperation of the Defense Minister? That was the other rub. If he failed in his investigation, then Gerasimov would not look kindly upon his career; but the investigation was hindered by political constraints imposed by the Chairman. Vatutin remembered the time he'd almost been passed over for promotion to major and realized how unlucky he'd been when the promotion board had changed its mind.

Oddly, it did not occur to him that all his problems resulted from having a KGB Chairman with political ambition. Vatutin summoned his senior officers. They arrived in a few minutes.

"Progress on Filitov?" he asked.

"Our best people are shadowing him," a middle-level officer answered. "Six of them round the clock. We're rotating schedules so that he doesn't see the same faces very often, if at all. We now have continuous television surveillance all around his apartment block, and half a dozen people check the tapes every night. We've stepped up coverage of suspected American and British spies, and of their diplomatic communities in general. We're straining our manpower and risking counterdetection, but there's no avoiding that. About the only new thing I have to report is that Filitov talks in his sleep occasionally—he's talking to somebody named Romanov, it sounds like. The words are too distorted to understand, but I have a speech pathologist working

on it, and we may get something. In any case, Filitov can't fart without our knowing it. The only thing we can't do is maintain continuous visual contact without getting our people in too close. Every day, turning a corner or entering a shop, he's out of sight for five to fifteen seconds—tong enough to make a brush-pass or a dead-drop. Nothing I can do about that unless you want us to risk alerting him."

Vatutin nodded. Even the best surveillance had its limitations.

"Oh, there is one odd thing," the Major said. "Just learned about it yesterday. About once a week or so, Filitov takes the burn-bag down to the incinerator chute himself. It's so routine there that the man in the destruct room forgot to tell us until last evening. He's a youngster, and came in himself to report it—after hours, and in civilian clothes. Bright boy. It turns out that Filitov looked after the installation of the system, years back. I checked the plans myself, nothing out of the way. Completely normal installation, just like what we have here. And that's all. For all practical purposes the only unusual thing about the subject is that he ought to be retired by now."

"What of the Altunin investigation?" Vatutin asked next.

Another officer opened his notebook. "We've no idea where he was before being killed. Perhaps he was hiding out alone somewhere, perhaps he was protected by friends whom we have been unable to identify. We've established no correlation between his death and the movement of foreigners. He was carrying nothing incriminating except some false papers that looked amateurishly done, but probably good enough for the outlying republics. If he was murdered by CIA, it was a remarkably complete job. No loose ends. None."

"Your opinions?"

"The Altunin case is a dead end," the Major answered. "There are still a half-dozen things that we have to check out, but none has the least promise of an important break." He paused for a moment. "Comrade . . ."

"Go on."

"I believe this was a coincidence. I think Altunin was the victim of a simple murder, that he tried to get aboard the wrong railcar at the wrong time. I have no evidence to point to, but that is how it feels to me."

Vatutin considered that. It took no small amount of moral courage for an officer of the Second Chief Directorate to say that he was *not* on a counterespionage case.

"How sure are you?"

"We'll never be sure, Comrade Colonel, but if CIA had done the murder, would they not have disposed of the body—or, if they were trying to use his death to protect a highly placed spy, why not leave evidence to implicate him as a totally separate case? There were no false flags left behind, even though this would seem the place to do so."

"Yes, we would have done that. A good point. Run down all your leads anyway."

"Of course, Comrade Colonel. Four to six days, I think."

"Anything else?" Vatutin asked. Heads shook negatively. "Very well, return to your sections, Comrades."

She'd do it at the hockey game, Mary Pat Foley thought. CARDINAL would be there, alerted by a wrong-number telephone call from a pay phone. She'd make the pass herself. She had three film cassettes in her purse, and a simple handshake would do it. Her son played on this junior-league team, as did Filitov's grand-nephew, and she went to every game. It would be unusual if she didn't go, and the Russians depended on people to stick to their routines. She was being followed. She knew it. Evidently the Russians had stepped up surveillance, but the shadow she rated wasn't all that good—or at least they were using the same one on her, and Mary Pat knew when she saw a face more than once in a day.

Mary Patricia Kaminskiy Foley had typically muddled American ancestry, though some aspects of it had been left off her passport documents. Her grandfather had been an equerry to the House of Romanov, had taught the Crown Prince Aleksey to ride—no small feat since the youngster was tragically stricken with hemophilia, and the utmost caution had needed to be exercised. That had been the crowning achievement of an otherwise undistinguished life. He'd been a failure as an Army officer, though friends at court had ensured his advancement to colonel. All that had accomplished was the utter destruction of his regiment in the Tannenberg Forests, and his capture by the Germans—and his survival past 1920. Upon learning that his wife had died in the revolutionary turmoil that followed the First World War, he'd never returned to Russia—he always called it *Russia*and eventually drifted to the United States, where he'd settled in the suburbs of New York and remarried after establishing a small business. He'd lived to the ripe old age of ninetyseven, outliving even a second wife twenty years his junior, and Mary Pat never forgot his rambling stories. On entering college and majoring in history, she learned better, of course. She learned that the Romanovs were hopelessly inept, their court irredeemably corrupt. But one thing she'd never forget was the way her grandfather wept when he got to the part about how Aleksey, a brave, determined young man, and his entire family had been shot like dogs by the Bolsheviks. That one story, repeated to her a hundred times, gave Mary Pat a view of the Soviet Union which no amount of time or academic instruction or political realism could ever erase. Her feelings for the government which ruled her grandfather's land were completely framed by the murder of Nicholas II, his wife, and his five children. Intellect, she told herself in reflective moments, had very little to do with the way people feel.

Working in Moscow, working against that same government, was the greatest thrill of her life. She liked it even more than her husband, whom she'd met while a student at Columbia. Ed had joined CIA because she had decided very early in life to join CIA. Her husband was good at it, Mary Pat knew, with brilliant instincts and administrative skills—but he lacked the passion she gave to the job. He also lacked the genes. She had learned the Russian language at her grandfather's knee—the richer, more elegant Russian that the Soviets had debased into the current patois—but more importantly she understood the people in a way that no number of books could relate. She understood the racial sadness that permeates the Russian character, and the oxymoronic private openness, the total exposure of self and soul displayed only to the closest friends and denied by a Moscovite's public demeanor. As a

result of this talent, Mary Pat had recruited five well-placed agents, only one shy of the all-time record. In the CIA's Directorate of Operations, she was occasionally known as Supergirl, a term she didn't care for. After all, Mary Pat was the mother of two, with the stretchmarks to prove it. She smiled at herself in the mirror. *You've done it all, kid.* Her grandfather would be proud.

And the best part of all: nobody had the least suspicion of what she really was. She made a final adjustment in her clothing. Western women in Moscow were supposed to be more conscious of their dress than Western men. Hers were always just a touch overdone. The image she projected to the public was carefully conceived and exquisitely executed. Educated but shallow, pretty but superficial, a good mother but little more, quick with her Western display of emotions but not to be taken very seriously. Scurrying about as she did, substitute teaching occasionally at the kids' school, attending various social functions, and endlessly wandering about like a perpetual tourist, she fitted perfectly the preconceived Soviet notion of an American female bubblehead. One more smile in the mirror: *If the bastards only knew.*

Eddie was already waiting impatiently, his hockey stick jerking up and down at the drab carpet in the living room. Ed had the TV on. He kissed his wife goodbye, and told Eddie to kick ass—the senior Foley had been a Rangers fan before he learned to read.

It was a little sad, Mary Pat thought on the elevator. Eddie had made some real friends here, but it was a mistake to get too friendly with people in Moscow. You might forget that they were the enemy. She worried that Eddie was getting the same sort of indoctrination that she'd gotten, but from the wrong direction. Well, that was easily remedied, she told herself. In storage at home she had a photograph of the Czarevich Aleksey, autographed to his favorite teacher. All she really had to do was explain how he'd died.

The drive to the arena was the routine one, with Eddie getting ever more hyper as game time approached. He was tied as the league's third leading scorer, only six points behind the lead center for the team they were playing tonight, and Eddie wanted to show Ivan Whoeverhewas that Americans could beat Russians at their own game.

It was surprising how crowded the parking lot was, but then it wasn't a very large parking lot and ice hockey is the closest thing to religion permitted in the Soviet Union. This game would decide the playoff standings for the league championship, and quite a few people had come to see it. That was fine with Mary Pat. She'd barely set the parking brake when Eddie tore open the door, lifted his dufflebag, and waited impatiently for his mother to lock the car. He managed to walk slowly enough for his mother to keep up, then raced into the locker room as she went up to the rink.

Her place was predetermined, of course. Though reluctant to be overly close to foreigners in public, at a hockey game the rules were different. A few parents greeted her, and she waved back, her smile just a little too broad. She checked her watch.

"I haven't seen a junior-league game in two years," Yazov said as they got out of the staff car.

"I don't go much either, but my sister-in-law said that this one is important,

and little Misha demanded my presence." Filitov grinned. "They think I am good luck—perhaps you will be too, Comrade Marshal."

"It is good to do something a little different," Yazov conceded with mock gravity. "The damned office will still be there tomorrow. I played this game as a boy, you know."

"No, I didn't. Were you any good?"

"I was a defenseman, and the other children complained that I checked too hard." The Defense Minister chuckled, then waved for his security people to go ahead.

"We never had a rink out where I grew up—and the truth is I was too clumsy as a child. Tanks were perfect for me—you're expected to destroy things with them." Misha laughed.

"So how good is this team?"

"I like the junior league better than the real ones," Colonel Filitov answered. "More—more exuberant. I suppose I just like to see children having a good time."

"Indeed."

There weren't many seats around the rink—and besides, what real hockey fan wanted to sit? Colonel Filitov and Marshal Yazov found a convenient place near some of the parents. Their Soviet Army greatcoats and glistening shoulder boards guaranteed them both a good view and breathing space. The four security people hovered about, trying not to look too obviously at the game. They were not terribly concerned, since the trip to the game had been a spur-of-the-moment decision on the Minister's part.

The game was an exciting one from the first moment. The center for the other team's first line moved like a weasel, handling the puck with skillful passes and adroit skating. The home team—the one with the American and Misha's grandnephew—was pressed back into its own zone for most of the first period, but little Misha was an aggressive defenseman, and the American boy stole a pass, taking it the length of the rink only to be foiled by a dazzling save that evoked cheers of admiration from supporters of both sides. Though as contentious a people as any on earth, the Russians have always been imbued with generous sportsmanship. The first period ended zero-zero.

"Too bad," Misha observed while people hustled off to the rest rooms.

"That was a beautiful breakaway, but the save was marvelous," Yazov said. "I'll have to get them this child's name for Central Army. Misha, thanks for inviting me to this. I'd forgotten how exciting a school game could be."

"What do you suppose they're talking about?" the senior KGB officer asked. He and two other men were up in the rafters, hidden by the lights that illuminated the rink.

"Maybe they're just hockey fans," the man with the camera replied. "Shit, it sounds like quite a game we're missing. Look at those security guards—fucking idiots are watching the ice. If I wanted to kill Yazov . . ."

"Not a terribly bad idea, I hear," observed the third man. "The Chairman—"

"That is not our concern," the senior man snapped, ending the conversation.

"Come on, Eddieeee!" Mary Pat screamed as the second period began. Her

son looked up in embarrassment. His mom always got too excited at these things, he thought.

"Who was that?" Misha asked, five meters away.

"Over there, the skinny one—we met her, remember?" Yazov said.

"Well, she's a fan," Filitov noted as he watched the action swing to the other end. *Please, Comrade Minister, you do it . . .* He got his wish.

"Let's go over and say hello." The crowd parted before them, and Yazov sidled up on her left.

"Mrs. Foley, I believe?"

He got a quick turn and a quicker smile before she turned back to the action. "Hello, General—"

"Actually, my rank is Marshal. Your son is number twelve?"

"Yes, and did you see how the goalie robbed him!"

"It was a fine save," Yazov said.

"Then let him do it to somebody else!" she said as the other team started moving into Eddie's end.

"Are all American fans like you?" Misha asked.

She turned again, and her voice showed a little embarrassment. "It's terrible, isn't it? Parents are supposed to act—"

"Like parents?" Yazov laughed.

"I'm turning into a little-league mom," Mary Pat admitted. Then she had to explain what that was.

"It is enough that we've taught your son to be a proper hockey wingman."

"Yes, perhaps he'll be on the Olympic team in a few years," she replied with a wicked, though playful smile. Yazov laughed. That surprised her. Yazov was supposed to be a tight, serious son of a bitch.

"Who's the woman?"

"American. Her husband's the press attaché. Her son's on this team. We have a file on both of them. Nothing special."

"Pretty enough. I didn't know Yazov was a lady's man."

"Do you suppose he wants to recruit her?" the photographer suggested, snapping away.

"I wouldn't mind."

The game had unexpectedly settled down into a defense struggle that hovered around center ice. The children lacked the finesse necessary for the precise passing that marked Soviet hockey, and both teams were coached not to play an overly physical game. Even with their protective equipment, they were still children whose growing bones didn't need abuse. That was a lesson the Russians could teach Americans, Mary Pat thought. Russians had always been highly protective of their young. Life for adults was difficult enough that they always tried to shield their children from it.

Finally, in the third period, things broke loose. A shot on goal was stopped, and the puck rebounded out from the goalie. The center took it and turned, racing directly for the opposite goal, with Eddie twenty feet to his right. The center passed an instant before being poke-checked, and Eddie swept around to the corner, unable to take a shot at the goal and blocked from approaching

it himself by a charging defenseman.

"Center it!" his mother screamed. He didn't hear her, but didn't need to. The center was now in place, and Eddie fired the puck to him. The youthful center stopped it with his skate, stepped back, and sent a blazing shot between the legs of the opposing goalie. The light behind the cage flashed, and sticks went soaring into the air.

"Fine centering pass," Yazov noted with genuine admiration. He continued on in a chiding tone. "You realize that your son now possesses State secrets, and we cannot allow him to leave the country."

Mary Pat's eyes widened in momentary alarm, persuading Yazov that she was indeed a typical bubbleheaded Western female, though she was probably quite a handful in bed. *Too bad that I'll never find out.*

"You're joking?" she asked quietly. Both the soldiers broke out into laughter.

"The Comrade Minister is most certainly joking," Misha said after a moment.

"I thought so!" she said rather unconvincingly before she turned back to the game. *"Okay, let's get another one!"*

Heads turned briefly, mainly in amusement. Having this American at the game was always good for a laugh. Russians find the exuberance of Americans immensely entertaining.

"Well, if she's a spy, I'll eat this camera."

"Think on what you just said, Comrade," the officer in charge whispered. The amusement in his voice died in an instant. *Think on what he just said,* the man told himself. *Her husband, Edward Foley, is regarded by the American press as a dolt, not smart enough to be a proper reporter, certainly not good enough to be on the staff of the* New York Times. The problem was, while that was the sort of cover that every real intelligence officer dreamed of, it was one naturally shared by all the government-service dolts serving every nation in the world. He himself knew that his cousin was a cretin, and *he* worked for the Foreign Ministry.

"Are you sure you have enough film?"

Eddie got his chance with forty seconds left. A defenseman fanned on a shot from the point, and the puck skittered back to center ice. The center flipped it to the right as the flow of the game changed. The other team had been on the verge of pulling its goalie, and the youngster was out of position when Eddie took the pass and streaked in from his left. Edward Foley II turned sharply and fired behind the goalie's back. The puck *clang*ed on the post, but fell right on the goal line and dribbled across.

"Score!" Mary Pat howled, jumping up and down like a cheerleader. She threw her arms around Yazov, much to the consternation of his security guards. The Defense Minister's amusement was tempered by the realization that he'd have to write up a contact report on this tomorrow. Well, he had Misha as a witness that they'd discussed nothing untoward. She grabbed Filitov next.

"I *told* you you were good luck!"

"My God, are all American hockey fans like this?" Misha asked, disengaging

himself. Her hand had touched his for a half-imaginary fraction of a second, and the three film cassettes were inside the glove. He felt them there and was amazed that it had been done so skillfully. Was she a professional magician?

"Why are you Russians so grim all the time—don't you know how to have a good time?"

"Maybe we should have more Americans around," Yazov conceded. *Hell, I wish my wife were as lively as this one!* "You have a fine son, and if he plays against us in the Olympics, I will forgive him." He was rewarded with a beaming smile.

"That's such a nice thing to say." *I hope he kicks your commie asses all the way back to Moskva.* If there was anything she couldn't stand, it was being patronized. "Eddie got two more points tonight, and that Ivan Somebody didn't get any!"

"Are you really that competitive, even with children's games?" Yazov asked.

Mary Pat slipped, just a little, so fast that her brain couldn't keep up with the automatic reply: "Show me a good loser, and I'll show you a loser." She paused, then covered the mistake. "Vince Lombardi, a famous American coach, said that. Excuse me, you must think me *nekulturny*. You're right, this is just a game for children." She smiled broadly. *In your face!*

"Did you see anything?"

"A foolish woman who gets overly excited," the photographer replied.

"How quickly will you have the film developed?"

"Two hours."

"Get moving," the senior man said.

"Did *you* see anything?" the remaining officer asked his boss.

"No, I don't think so. We've watched her for nearly two hours, and she acts like a typical American parent who gets too worked up at an athletic match, but just happens to attract the attention of the Defense Minister and the main suspect of a treason case. I think that's enough, Comrade, don't you?" *What a grand game this is . . .*

Two hours later, over a thousand black-and-white photographs were laid on the officer's desk. The camera was a Japanese one that put a time reference on the lower edge, and the KGB photographer was as good as any newspaper professional. He'd shot almost continuously, stopping only long enough to replace the oversized film magazines on the autodriven camera. At first he'd wished to use a portable TV camera, but the photographer had talked him out of it. The resolution wasn't as good, nor was the speed. A still camera was still the best for catching something quick and small, though you couldn't read lips from its record as you could with a videotape.

Each frame required a few seconds as the officer used a magnifying glass to examine the subjects of his interest. When Mrs. Foley entered the sequence of photos, he needed a few more seconds. He examined her clothing and jewelry at some length, and her face. Her smile was particularly mindless, like something in a Western television commercial, and he remembered hearing her screams over the crowd. Why were Americans so damned noisy?

Good dresser, though, he admitted to himself. *Like most American women in a*

Moscow scene, she stood out like a pheasant in a barnyard—he snorted annoyance at the thought. So what that the Americans spend more money on clothing? What did clothing matter to anyone? *Through my binoculars, she looked like she had the brains of a bird . . . but not in these photos—why?*

It was the eyes, he thought. In the still photos her eyes sparkled with something different from what he'd watched in person. Why was that?

In the photographs, her eyes—they were blue, he remembered—were always focused on something. The face, he noticed, had vaguely Slavic cheekbones. He knew that Foley was an Irish name, and assumed that her ancestry was Irish, too. That America was a country of immigrants, and that immigrants cross ethnic lines in marriage, were foreign concepts to the Russians. Add a few kilograms, change her hair and clothing, and she could be any face encountered on a street in Moscow . . . or Leningrad. The latter was more likely, he thought. She looked more like a Leningrader. Her face proclaimed the slight arrogance affected by people from that city. *I wonder what her ancestry really is*.

He kept flipping through the photos, and remembered that the Foleys had never been given this sort of scrutiny. The file on both was a relatively thin one. They were regarded by "Two" as nonentities. Something told him that this was a mistake, but the voice in the back of his head wasn't yet loud enough. He approached the last of the photographs, checking his watch. Three in the damned morning! he grumbled to himself and reached for another cup of tea.

Well, that must have been the second score. She was jumping like a gazelle. Nice legs, he saw for the first time. As his colleagues had noted up in the rafters, she was probably very entertaining in bed. Only a few more frames till the end of the game and . . . yes, there she was, embracing Yazov—that randy old goat!—then hugging Colonel Filitov—

He stopped dead. The photograph caught something that he hadn't seen through the binoculars. While giving Filitov a hug, her eyes were locked on one of the four security guards, the only one not watching the game. Her hand, her left hand, was not wrapped around Filitov at all, but rather down by his right one, hidden from view. He flipped back a few frames. Right before the embraces her hand had been in her coat pocket. Around the Defense Minister, it was balled into a fist. After Filitov, it was open again, and still her eyes were on the security guard, a smile on her face that was very Russian indeed, one that stopped at the lips—but in the next frame, she was back to her normal, flighty self. In that moment he was sure.

"Son of a bitch," he whispered to himself.

How long have the Foleys been here? He searched his weary memory but couldn't dredge it up. *Over two years at least—and we didn't know, we didn't even suspect . . . what if it's only her?* That was a thought—what if she were a spy and her husband were not? He rejected the idea out of hand, and was correct, but for the wrong reason. He reached for the phone and called Vatutin's home.

"Yes," the voice answered after only half a ring.

"I have something of interest," the officer said simply.

"Send a car."

Vatutin was there twenty-five minutes later, unshaven and irritable. The Major merely set out the crucial series of photographs.

"We never suspected her," he said while the Colonel examined the pictures through a magnifying glass.

"A fine disguise," Vatutin observed sourly. He'd been asleep only for an hour when the phone rang. He was still learning how to sleep without a few stiff drinks beforehand—trying to learn, he corrected himself. The Colonel looked up.

"Can you believe it? Right in front of the Defense Minister and four security guards! The *balls* of this woman! Who's her regular shadow?"

The Major merely handed over the file. Vatutin leafed through it and found the proper sheet.

"That old fart! He couldn't follow a child to school without being arrested as a pervert. Look at this—a lieutenant for twenty-three years!"

"There are seven hundred Americans attached to the embassy, Comrade Colonel," the Major observed. "We have only so many really good officers—"

"All watching the wrong people." Vatutin walked to the window. "No more! Her husband, too," he added.

"That will be my recommendation, Comrade Colonel. It would seem likely that they both work for CIA."

"She passed something to him."

"Probably—a message, perhaps something else."

Vatutin sat down and rubbed his eyes. "Good work, Comrade Major."

It was already dawn at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The Archer was preparing to return to his war. His men had packed their new weapons while their leader—now that was a new thought, the Archer told himself—reviewed his plans for the coming weeks. Among the things he'd received from Ortiz was a complete set of tactical maps. These were made from satellite photographs, and were updated to show current Soviet strongpoints and areas of heavy patrol activity. He had a long-range radio now on which he could tune to weather forecasts—including Russian ones. Their journey wouldn't start until nightfall.

He looked around. Some of his men had sent their families to this place of safety. The refugee camp was crowded and noisy, but a far happier place than the deserted villages and towns bombed flat by the Russians. There were children here, the Archer saw, and children were happy anywhere they had their parents, and food, and friends. The boys were already playing with toy guns—and with the older ones, they were not toys. He accepted that with a degree of regret that diminished on every trip. The losses among the *mudjaheddin* demanded replacements, and the youngest were the bravest. If freedom required their deaths—well, their deaths came in a holy cause and Allah was beneficent to those who died for Him. The world was indeed a sad place, but at least here a man could find a time for amusement and rest. He watched one of his riflemen helping his firstborn son to walk. The baby could not do it alone, but with each tottering step he looked up at the smiling, bearded face of a father he'd seen only twice since birth. The new chief of the band remembered doing the same for his son . . . now being taught to walk a

very different path . . .

The Archer returned to his own work. He couldn't be a missileer anymore, but he'd trained Abdul well. Now the Archer would lead his men. It was a right that he'd earned, and, better still, his men thought him lucky. It would be good for morale. Though he had never in his life read books on military theory, the Archer felt that he knew their lessons well enough.

There was no warning—none at all. The Archer's head snapped around as he heard the crackling sound of exploding cannon shells, then he saw the dart-shapes of the Fencers, barely a hundred meters high. He hadn't yet reached for his rifle when he watched the bombs falling free of the ejector racks. The black shapes wobbled slightly before the fins stabilized them, their noses tipping down in slow motion. The engine noise of the Soviet Su-24 attack-bombers came next, and he turned to follow them as his rifle came up to his shoulder, but they were too fast. There was nothing left to do but dive to the ground, and it seemed that everything was happening very, very slowly. He was almost hovering in the air, the earth reluctant to come to meet him. His back was turned to the bombs, but he knew they were there, heading down. His eyes snapped up to see people running, his rifleman trying to cover the infant son with his body. The Archer turned to look up and was horrified to see that one bomb seemed to come straight at him, a black circle against the clear morning sky. There was no time even to say Allah's name as it passed over his head, and the earth shook.

He was stunned and deafened by the blast, and felt wobbly when he stood. It seemed strange to see and feel noise, but not to hear it. Instinct alone flipped the safety off his rifle as he looked around for the next plane. There it was! The rifle came up and fired of its own accord, but made no difference. The next Fencer dropped its load a hundred meters farther on and raced away before a trail of black smoke. There were no more.

The sounds came back slowly, and seemed distant, like the noises of a dream. But this was no dream. The place where his man and the baby had been was now a hole in the ground. There was no trace of the freedom fighter or his son, and even the certainty that both now stood righteously before their God could not mask the blood-chilling rage that coursed through his body. He remembered showing mercy to the Russian, feeling some regret at his death. No more. He'd never show mercy to an infidel again. His hands were chalk-white around the rifle.

Too late, a Pakistani F-16 fighter streaked across the sky, but the Russians were already across the border, and a minute later, the F-16 circled over the camp twice before heading back to its base.

"Are you all right?" It was Ortiz. His face had been cut by something or other, and his voice was far away.

There was no verbal answer. The Archer gestured with his rifle as he watched a newly made widow scream for her family. Together the two men looked for wounded who might be saved. Luckily, the medical section of the camp was unhurt. The Archer and the CIA officer carried a half-dozen people there, to see a French doctor cursing with the fluency of a man accustomed to such things, his hands already bloody from his work.

They found Abdul on their next trip. The young man had a Stinger up and

armed. He wept as he confessed that he'd been asleep. The Archer patted his shoulder and said it wasn't his fault. There was supposed to be an agreement between the Soviets and the Pakistanis that prohibited cross-border raids. So much for agreements. A television news crew—French—appeared, and Ortiz took the Archer to a place where neither could be seen.

"Six," the Archer said. He didn't mention the noncombatant casualties.

"It is a sign of weakness that they do this, my friend," Ortiz replied.

"To attack a place of women and children is an abomination before God!"

"Have you lost any supplies?" To the Russians this was a guerrilla camp, of course, but Ortiz didn't bother voicing their view of things. He'd been here too long to be objective about such matters.

"Only a few rifles. The rest is outside the camp already."

Ortiz had no more to say. He'd run out of comforting observations. His nightmare was that his operation to support the Afghans was having the same effect as earlier attempts to aid the Hmong people of Laos. They'd fought bravely against their Vietnamese enemies, only to be virtually exterminated despite all their Western assistance. The CIA officer told himself that this situation was different, and, objectively, he thought that this was true. But it tore at what was left of his soul to watch these people leave the camp, armed to the teeth, and then to count the number that returned. Was America really helping the Afghans to redeem their own land, or were we merely encouraging them to kill as many Russians as possible before they, too, were wiped out?

What is the right policy? he asked himself. Ortiz admitted that he didn't know.

Nor did he know that the Archer had just made a policy decision of his own. The old-young face turned west, then north, and told himself that Allah's will was no more restricted by borders than was the will of His enemies.

15.

Culmination

"**A**LL we need to do now is spring the trap," Vatutin told his Chairman. His voice was matter-of-fact, his face impassive as he gestured to the evidence laid out on Gerasimov's desk.

"Excellent work, Colonel!" The Chairman of the KGB allowed himself a smile. Vatutin saw that there was more in it than the satisfaction of closing a difficult and sensitive case. "Your next move?"

"Given the unusual status of the subject, I believe we should attempt to compromise him at the time of document transfer. It would seem that the CIA knows that we have broken the courier chain from Filitov to them. They took the unusual step of using one of their own officers to make this transfer—and make no mistake, this was an act of desperation despite the skill with which it was done. I would like to expose the Foleys at the same time. They must be a proud pair for having deceived us this long. To catch them in the act will destroy that pride and be a major psychological blow to CIA as a whole."

"Approved." Gerasimov nodded. "It is your case to run, Colonel. Take all the time you want." Both men knew that he meant less than a week.

"Thank you, Comrade Chairman." Vatutin returned at once to his office, where he briefed his section chiefs.

The microphones were very sensitive. Like most sleepers, Filitov tossed and turned quite a bit in his sleep, except when dreaming, and the reel-to-reel tape recorders kept a record of the rustle of linen and the barely intelligible murmurs. Finally a new sound came through and the man with the headphones gestured to his comrades. It sounded like a sail filling with wind, and it meant that the subject was tossing the covers off the bed.

Next came the coughing. The old man had lung problems, his medical file said. He was particularly vulnerable to colds and respiratory infections. Evidently he was coming down with something. Next he blew his nose, and the KGB men smiled at one another. It sounded like a locomotive whistle.

"Got him," the man on the TV camera said. "Heading toward the bathroom." The next set of sounds was predictable. There were two television cameras whose powerful lenses were framed on the apartment's two windows. Special settings allowed them to see into the apartment despite the glare of morning light.

"You know, doing this to someone is enough," a technician observed. "If you showed anyone a tape of one of us right after waking, we'd die of simple embarrassment."

"This one's death will be of another cause," the senior officer noted coldly.

That was one problem with these investigations. You started identifying too closely with the subject, and had to remind yourself periodically just how loathsome traitors were. *Where did you go wrong*? the Major wondered. *A man with your war record!* He was already wondering how the case would be handled. A public trial? Could they dare to go public with so famous a war hero? That, he told himself, was a political question.

The door opened and closed, indicating that Filitov had gotten the copy of *Red Star* dropped off daily by a Defense Ministry messenger. They heard the gurgling of his coffee machine, and shared a look—this bastard traitor drinks good coffee every morning!

He was visible now, sitting at the small kitchen table and reading his paper. He was a note-taker, they saw, scratching on a pad or marking the paper itself. When the coffee was ready he rose to get milk from the small refrigerator. He sniffed at it before adding it to the cup to be sure it hadn't gone bad. He had enough butter to spread it lavishly on his black bread, which they knew was his usual breakfast.

"Still eats like a soldier," the cameraman said.

"He was a good one once," another officer observed. "You foolish old man, how could you do it?"

Breakfast was over soon thereafter, and they watched Filitov walk toward the bathroom, where he washed and shaved. He returned to view to dress. On the videoscreen, they saw him take out a brush to polish his boots. He always wore his boots, they knew, which was unusual for Ministry officers. But so were the three gold stars on his uniform blouse. He stood before the bureau mirror, inspecting himself. The paper went into his briefcase, and Filitov walked out the door. The last noise they heard was the key setting the lock on the apartment door. The Major got on the phone.

"Subject is moving. Nothing unusual this morning. Shadow team is in place."

"Very well," Vatutin replied and hung up.

One of the cameramen adjusted his instrument to record Filitov's emergence from the building. He took the salute from the driver, got into the car, and disappeared down the street. A completely unremarkable morning, they all agreed. They could afford to be patient now.

The mountains to the west were sheathed in clouds, and a fine drizzle was falling. The Archer hadn't left yet. There were prayers to be said, people to console. Ortiz was off having his face attended to by one of the French doctors, while his friend was riffling through the CIA officer's papers.

It made him feel guilty, but the Archer told himself that he was merely looking for records that he himself had delivered to the CIA officer. Ortiz was a compulsive note-taker, and, the Archer knew, a map fancier. The map he wanted to see was in its expected place, and clipped to it were several diagrams. These he copied by hand, quickly and accurately, before replacing all as it had been.

"You guys are so square," Bea Taussig laughed.

"It would be a shame to spoil the image," Al replied, a smile masking his

distaste for their guest. He never understood why Candi liked this . . . whatever the hell she was. Gregory didn't know why she rang bells in the back of his head. It wasn't the fact that she didn't like him—Al didn't give a damn one way or the other about that. His family and his fiancée loved him, and all his co-workers respected him. That was enough. If he didn't fit into somebody's notion of what an Army officer was supposed to be, screw 'em. But there was *something* about Bea that—

"Okay, we'll talk business," their guest said with amusement. "I have people from Washington asking me how soon—"

"Somebody ought to tell those bureaucrats that you don't just turn things like this on and off," Candi growled.

"Six weeks, tops." Al grinned. "Maybe less."

"When?" Candi asked.

"Soon. We haven't had a chance to run it on the simulator yet, but it feels right. It was Bob's idea. He was about due, and it streamlined the software package even better than what I was trying. We don't have to use as much AI as I thought."

"Oh?" The use of AI—artificial intelligence—was supposed to be crucial to mirror performance and target discrimination.

"Yeah, we were overengineering the problem, trying to use reason instead of instinct. We don't have to tell the computer how to think everything out. We can reduce the command load twenty percent by putting pre-set options in the program. It turns out to be quicker and easier than making the computer make most judgments off a menu."

"What about the anomalies?" Taussig asked.

"That's the whole point. The AI routines were actually slowing things down more than we thought. We were trying to make the thing so flexible that it had trouble doing anything. The expected laser performance is good enough that it can take the fire-option faster than the AI program can decide whether to aim it—so why not take the shot? If it doesn't fit the profile, we pop it anyway."

"Your laser specs have changed," Bea observed.

"Well, I can't talk about that."

Another grin from the little geek. Taussig managed to smile back. *I know something you don't know!,* is it? Just looking at him made her skin crawl, but what was worse was the way Candi looked at him, like he was Paul Newman or something! Sallow complexion, even zits, and she loved this thing. Bea didn't know whether to laugh or cry . . .

"Even us admin pukes have to be able to plan ahead," Taussig said.

"Sorry, Bea. You know the security rules."

"Makes you wonder how we get anything done." Candi shook her head. "If it gets any worse, Al and I won't be able to talk to each other between . . ." She smiled lecherously at her lover.

Al laughed. "I have a headache."

"Bea, do you believe this guy?" Candi asked.

Taussig leaned back. "I never have."

"When are you going to let Dr. Rabb take you out? You know he's been mooning over you for six months."

"The only mooning I expect out of him is from a car. God, that's a ghastly thought." Her look at Candi masked her feelings exquisitely well. She also realized that the programming information that she'd gotten out was now invalid. Damn the little geek for changing it!

"That's something. Question is, what?" Jones keyed his microphone. "Conn, Sonar, we have a contact bearing zero-nine-eight. Designate this contact Sierra-Four."

"You sure it's a contact?" the young petty officer asked.

"See this?" Jones ran his finger along the screen. The "waterfall display" was cluttered with ambient noise. "Remember that you're looking for nonrandom data. This line ain't random." He typed in a command to alter the display. The computer began processing a series of discrete frequency bands. Within a minute the picture was clear. At least Mr. Jones thought so, the young sonarman noted. The stroke of light on the screen was irregularly shaped, bowing out and narrowing down, covering about five degrees of bearing. The "tech-rep" stared at the screen for several more seconds, then spoke again.

"Conn, Sonar, classify target Sierra-Four as a Krivak-class frigate, bearing zero-nine-six. Looks like he's doing turns for fifteen or so knots." Jones turned to the youngster. He remembered his own first cruise. This nineteen-year-old didn't even have his dolphins yet. "See this? That's the high-frequency signature from his turbine engines, it's a dead giveaway and you can hear it a good ways off, usually, 'cause the Krivak doesn't have good sound-isolation."

Mancuso came into the compartment. *Dallas* was a "firstflight" 688, and didn't have direct access from the control room to sonar as the later ones did. Instead, you had to come forward and step around a hole in the deck that led below. Probably the overhaul would change that. The Captain waved his coffee mug at the screen.

"Where's the Krivak?"

"Right here, bearing still constant. We have good water around us. He's probably a good ways off."

The skipper smiled. Jones was always trying to guess range. The hell of it was that in the two years that Mancuso had had him aboard as a member of the crew he'd been right more often than not. Aft in the control room, the fire-control tracking party was plotting the position of the target against *Dallas'* known track to determine range and course of the Soviet frigate.

There wasn't much activity on the surface. The other three sonar contacts plotted were all single-screw merchantmen. Though the weather was decent today, the Baltic Sea—an oversized lake to Mancuso's way of thinking—was rarely a nice place in the winter. Intelligence reports said that most of the opposition's ships were tied alongside for repairs. That was good news. Better still, there wasn't much in the way of ice. A really cold season could freeze things solid, and that would put a crimp in their mission, the Captain thought.

Thus far only their other visitor, Clark, knew what that mission was.

"Captain, we have a posit on Sierra-Four," a lieutenant called from control.

Jones folded a slip of paper and handed it to Mancuso.

"I'm waiting."

"Range thirty-six thousand, course roughly two-nine-zero."

Mancuso unfolded the note and laughed. “Jones, you’re still a fucking witch!” He handed it back, then went aft to alter the submarine’s course to avoid the Krivak.

The sonarman at Jones’s side grabbed the note and read it aloud. “How did you know? You aren’t supposed to be able to do that.”

“Practice, m’boy, practice,” Jones replied in his best W. C. Fields accent. He noted the submarine’s course change. It wasn’t like the Mancuso he remembered. In the old days, the skipper would close to get photos through the periscope, run a few torpedo solutions, and generally treat the Soviet ship like a real target in a real war. This time they were opening the range to the Russian frigate, creeping away. Jones didn’t think Mancuso had changed all that much, and started wondering what the hell this new mission was all about.

He hadn’t seen much of Mr. Clark. He spent a lot of time aft in the engine room, where the ship’s fitness center was—a treadmill jammed between two machine tools. The crew was already murmuring that he didn’t talk very much. He just smiled and nodded and went on his way. One of the chiefs noted the tattoo on Clark’s forearm and was whispering some stuff about the meaning of the red seal, specifically that it stood for the real SEALs. *Dallas* had never had one of those aboard, though other boats had, and the stories, told quietly except for the occasional “no shit!” interruptions, had circulated throughout the submarine community but nowhere else. If there was anything submariners knew how to do, it was keeping secrets.

Jones stood and walked aft. He figured he’d taught enough lessons for one day, and his status as a civilian technical representative allowed him to wander about at will. He noted that *Dallas* was taking her own sweet time, heading east at nine knots. A look at the chart told him where they were, and the way the navigator was tapping his pencil on it told him how much farther they’d be going. Jones started to do some serious thinking as he went below for a Coke. He’d come back for a really tense one after all.

“Yes, Mr. President?” Judge Moore answered the phone with his own tense look. *Decision time?*

“That thing we talked about in here the other day . . .”

“Yes, sir.” Moore looked at the phone. Aside from the handset that he held, the “secure” phone system was a three-foot cube, cunningly hidden in his desk. It took words, broke them into digital bits, scrambled them beyond recognition, and sent them out to another similar box which put them back together. One interesting sidelight of this was that it made for very clear conversations, since the encoding system eliminated all the random noise on the line.

“You may go ahead. We can’t—well, I decided last night that we can’t just leave him.” This had to be his first call of the morning, and the emotional content came through, too. Moore wondered if he’d lost sleep over the life of the faceless agent. Probably he had. The President was that sort of man. He was also the sort, Moore knew, to stick with a decision once made. Pelt would try to change it all day, but the President was getting it out at eight in the morning and would have to stick with it.

"Thank you, Mr. President. I'll set things in motion." Moore had Bob Ritter in his office two minutes later:

"The CARDINAL extraction is a 'go'!"

"Makes me glad I voted for the man," Ritter said as he smacked one hand into the other. "Ten days from now we'll have him in a nice safehouse. Jesus, the debrief'll take *years!"* Then came the sober pause. "It's a shame to lose his services, but we owe it to him. Besides, Mary Pat has recruited a couple of real live ones for us. She made the film pass last night. No details, but I gather that it was a hairy one."

"She always was a little too—"

"More than a little, Arthur, but all field officers have some cowboy in them." The two Texas natives shared a look. "Even the ones from New York."

"Some team. With those genes, you gotta wonder what their kids'll be like," Moore observed with a chuckle. "Bob, you got your wish. Run with it."

"Yes, sir." Ritter went off to send his message, then informed Admiral Greer.

The telex went via satellite and arrived in Moscow only fifteen minutes later: TRAVEL ORDERS APPROVED. KEEP ALL RECEIPTS FOR ROUTINE REIMBURSEMENT.

Ed Foley took the decrypted message into his office. *So, whatever desk-sitter got cold feet on us found his socks after all,* he thought. *Thank God.*

Only one more transfer to go! We'll pass the message at the same time, and Misha'll catch a flight to Leningrad, then just follow the plan. One good thing about CARDINAL was that he'd practiced his escape routine at least once a year. His old tank outfit was now assigned to the Leningrad Military District, and the Russians understood that kind of sentiment. Misha had also seen to it over the years that his regiment was the first to get new equipment and to train in new tactics. After his death, it would be designated the Filitov Guards —or at least that's what the Soviet Army was planning to do. It was too bad, Foley thought, that they'd have to change that plan. On the other hand, maybe CIA would make some other sort of memorial to the man . . .

But there was still that one more transfer to make, and it would not be an easy one. One step at a time, he told himself. First we have to alert him.

Half an hour later, a nondescript embassy staffer left the building. At a certain time he'd be standing at a certain place. The "signal" was picked up by someone else who was not likely to be shadowed by "Two." This person did something else. He didn't know the reason, only where and how the mark was to be made. He found that very frustrating. Spy work was supposed to be exciting, wasn't it?

"There's our friend." Vatutin was riding in the car, wanting to see for himself that things were going properly. Filitov entered his car, and the driver took him off. Vatutin's car followed for half a kilometer, then turned off as a second car took over, racing over to a parallel street to keep pace.

He kept track of events by radio. The transmissions were crisp and businesslike as the six cars rotated on and off surveillance, generally with one ahead of the target vehicle and one behind. Filitov's car stopped at a grocery store that catered to senior Defense Ministry officials. Vatutin had a man

inside—Filitov was known to stop there two or three times per week—to see what he bought and whom he talked to.

He could tell that things were going perfectly, as was not unexpected once he'd explained to everybody on the case that the Chairman had personal interest in this one. Vatutin's driver raced ahead of their quarry, depositing the Colonel across the street from Filitov's apartment building. Vatutin walked inside and went up to the apartment that they had taken over.

"Good timing," the senior officer said as Vatutin came in the door.

The "Two" man looked discreetly out the window and saw Filitov's car come to a halt. The trailing car motored past without a pause as the Army Colonel walked into the building.

"Subject just entered the building," a communications specialist said. Inside, a woman with a string-bag full of apples would get on the elevator with Filitov. Up on Filitov's floor, two people who looked young enough to be teenagers would stroll past the elevator as he got out, continuing down the corridor with overly loud whispers of undying love. The surveillance mikes caught the end of that as Filitov opened the door.

"Got him," the cameraman said.

"Let's keep away from the windows," Vatutin said unnecessarily. The men with binoculars stood well back from them, and so long as the lights in the apartment were left off—the bulbs had been removed from the fixtures—no one could tell that the rooms were occupied.

One thing they liked about the man was his aversion to pulling down the shades. They followed him into the bedroom, where they watched him change into casual clothes and slippers. He returned to the kitchen and fixed himself a simple meal. They watched him tear the foil top off a half-liter bottle of vodka. The man was sitting and staring out the window.

"An old, lonely man," one officer observed. "Do you suppose that's what did it?"

"One way or another, we'll find out."

Why is it that the State can betray us? Misha asked Corporal Romanov two hours later.

Because we are soldiers, I suppose. Misha noted that the corporal was avoiding the question, and the issue. Did he know what his Captain was trying to ask?

But if we betray the State . . . ?

Then we die, Comrade Captain. That is simple enough. We earn the hatred and contempt of the peasants and workers, and we die. Romanov stared across time into his officer's eyes. The corporal now had his own question. He lacked the will to ask it, but his eyes seemed to proclaim: *What have you done, my Captain?*

Across the street, the man on the recording equipment noted sobbing, and wondered what caused it.

"What're you doing, honey?" Ed Foley asked, and the microphones heard.

"Starting to make lists for when we leave. So many things to remember, I'd better start now."

Foley bent over her shoulder. She had a pad and a pencil, but she was writing on a plastic sheet with a marker pen. It was the sort of arrangement that hung on many refrigerators, and could be wiped clean with a swipe of a damp cloth.

I'LL DO IT, she'd written. I HAVE A PERFECT DODGE. Mary Pat smiled and held up a team photo of Eddie's hockey squad. Each player had signed it, and at the top in scrawling Russian, Eddie had put, with his mother's coaching: "To the man who brings us luck. Thanks, Eddie Foley."

Her husband frowned. It was typical of his wife to use the bold approach, and he knew that she'd used her cover with consummate skill. But . . . he shook his head. But what? The only man in the CARDINAL chain who could identify him had never seen his face. Ed may have lacked her *panache*, but he was more circumspect. He felt that he was better than his wife at countersurveillance. He acknowledged Mary Pat's passion for the work, and her acting skill, but—damn it, she was just too bold sometimes. *Fine—why don't you tell her?* he asked himself.

He knew what would happen—she'd go practical on him. There wasn't time to establish another series of cutouts. They both knew that her cover was a solid one, that she hadn't even come close to suspicion yet.

But—Goddamn it, this business is one continuous series of fucking BUTs!

OK BUT COVER YOUR CUTE LITTLE ASS!!!! he wrote on the plastic pad. Her eyes sparkled as she wiped it clean. Then she wrote her own message:

LET'S GIVE THE MICROPHONES A HARD-ON!

Ed nearly strangled trying not to laugh. *Every time before a job*, he thought. It wasn't that he minded. He did find it a little odd, though.

Ten minutes later, in a room in the basement of the apartment building, a pair of Russian wiretap technicians listened with rapt attention to the sounds generated in the Foley bedroom.

Mary Pat Foley woke up at her customary six-fifteen. It was still dark outside, and she wondered how much of her grandfather's character had been formed by the cold and the dark of the Russian winters . . . and how much of hers. Like most Americans assigned to Moscow, she thoroughly hated the idea of listening devices in her walls. She occasionally took perverse pleasure in them, as she had the previous night, but then there was also the thought that the Soviets had placed them in the bathroom, too. That seemed like something they'd do, she thought, looking at herself in the mirror. The first order of business was to take her temperature. They both wanted another child, and had been working on it for a few months—which beat watching Russian TV. Professionally, of course, pregnancy made one hell of a cover. After three minutes she noted the temperature on a card she kept in the medicine cabinet. *Probably not yet*, she thought. *Maybe in a few more days*. She dropped the remains of an Early Pregnancy Test kit in the waste can anyway.

Next, there were the children to rouse. She got breakfast going, and shook everyone loose. Living in an apartment with but a single bathroom imposed a rigid schedule on them. There came the usual grumbles from Ed, and the customary whines and groans from the kids.

God, it'll be nice to get home, she told herself. As much as she loved the

challenge of working in the mouth of the dragon, living here wasn't exactly fun for the kids. Eddie loved his hockey, but he was missing a normal childhood in this cold, barren place. Well, that would change soon enough. They'd load everyone aboard the Pan Am clipper and wing home, leaving Moscow behind—if not forever, at least for five years. Life in Virginia's tidewater country. Sailing on the Chesapeake Bay. *Mild winters! You had to bundle kids up here like Nanook of the fucking North, she thought. I'm always fighting off colds.*

She got breakfast on the table just as Ed vacated the bathroom, allowing her to wash and dress. The routine was that he managed breakfast, then dressed while his wife got the kids going.

In the bathroom, she heard the TV go on, and laughed into the mirror. Eddie loved the morning exercise show—the woman who appeared on it looked like a longshoreman, and he called her Workerwom*mannn!* Her son yearned for mornings of the Transformers—"More than meets the eye!" he still remembered the opening song. Eddie would miss his Russian friends some, she thought, but the kid was an American and nothing would ever change that. By seven-fifteen everyone was dressed and ready to go. Mary Pat tucked a wrapped parcel under her arm.

"Cleaning day, isn't it?" Ed asked his wife.

"I'll be back in time to let her in," Mary Pat assured him.

"Okay." Ed opened the door and led the procession to the elevator. As usual, his family was the first one to get moving in the morning. Eddie raced forward and punched the elevator button. It arrived just as the rest of the family reached the door. Eddie jumped onto it, enjoying the usual springiness of Soviet elevator cables. To his mother, it always seemed as though the damned thing was going to fall all the way to the basement, but her son thought it entertaining when the car dropped a few inches. Three minutes later they got into the car. Ed took the wheel this morning. On the drive out, the kids waved at the militiaman, who was really KGB, and who waved back with a smile. As soon as the car had turned onto the street, he lifted the phone in his booth.

Ed kept his eye on the rearview mirror, and his wife had already adjusted the outside one so that she could see aft also. The kids got into a dispute in the back, which both parents ignored.

"Looks like a nice day," he said quietly. *Nothing following us.*

"Uh huh." *Agreed.* They had to be careful what they said around the kids, of course. Eddie could repeat anything they said as easily as the opening ditty of the Transformers cartoon. There was always the chance of a radio bug in the car, too.

Ed drove to the school first, allowing his wife to take the kids in. Eddie and Katie looked like teddy bears in their cold-weather clothing. His wife looked unhappy when she came out.

"Nikki Wagner called in sick. They want me to take over her class this afternoon," she told him on reentering the car. Her husband grunted. Actually, it was perfect. He dropped the Volkswagen into gear and pulled back onto Leninskiy Prospekt. *Game time.*

Now their checks of the mirrors were serious.

Vatutin hoped that they'd never thought of this before. Moscow streets are always full of dumptrucks, scurrying from one construction site to another. The high cabs of the vehicles made for excellent visibility, and the meanderings of the lookalike vehicles appeared far less sinister than would those of unmarked sedans. He had nine of them working for him today, and the officers driving them communicated via encrypted military radios.

Colonel Vatutin himself was in the apartment next door to Filitov's. The family who lived there had moved into the Hotel Moscow two days before. He'd watched the videotapes of his subject, drinking himself to insensibility, and used the opportunity to get three other "Two" officers in. They had their own spike-microphones driven into the party wall between the two flats, and listened intently to the Colonel's staggering through his morning routine. Something told him that this was the day.

It's the drinking, he told himself while he sipped tea. That drew an amused grimace. Perhaps it takes one drinker to understand another. He was sure that Filitov had been working himself up to something, and he also remembered that the time he'd seen the Colonel with the traitorous bath attendant, he'd come into the steam room with a hangover . . . *just as I had*. It fitted, he decided. Filitov was a hero who'd gone bad—but a hero still. It could not have been easy for him to commit treason, and he probably needed the drink to sleep in the face of a troubled conscience. It pleased Vatutin that people felt that way, that treason was still a hard thing to do.

"They're heading this way," a communications man reported over the radio.

"Right here," Vatutin told his subordinates. "It will happen within a hundred meters of where we stand."

Mary Pat ran over what she had to do. Handing over the wrapped photo would allow her to recover the film that she would slip inside her glove. Then there was the signal. She'd rub the back of her gloved hand across her forehead as though wiping off sweat, then scratch her eyebrow. That was the danger-breakout signal. She hoped he'd pay attention. Though she'd never done the signal herself, Ed had once offered a breakout, only to be rejected. It was something she understood better than her husband had—after all, her work with CIA was based more on passion than reason—but enough was enough. This man had been sending data West when she'd learned to play with dolls.

There was the building. Ed headed for the curb, jostling over the potholes as her hand gripped the parcel. As she grabbed the door handle, her husband patted her on the leg. *Good luck, kid.*

* * *

"Foleyeva just got out of the car and is headed to the side entrance," the radio squawked. Vatutin smiled at the Russification of the foreign name. He debated drawing the service automatic in his belt, but decided against it. Better to have his hands free, and a gun might go off accidentally. This was no time for accidents.

"Any ideas?" he asked.

"If it was me, I'd try a brush-pass," one of his men offered.

Vatutin nodded agreement. It worried him that they'd been unable to establish camera surveillance of the corridor itself, but technical factors had militated against it. That was the problem with the really sensitive cases. The smart ones were the wary ones. You couldn't risk alerting them, and he was sure that the Americans were alerted already. Alerted enough, he thought, to have killed one of their own agents in that railyard.

Fortunately, most Moscow apartments had peepholes installed in them now. Vatutin found himself grateful for the increase in burglaries, because his technicians had been able to replace the regular lens with one that allowed them to see most of the corridor. He took this post himself.

We should have put microphones on the stairwells, he told himself. Make a note of that for the next time. Not all enemy spies use elevators.

Mary Pat was not quite the athlete her husband was. She paused on the landing, looking up and down the stairwell and listening for any sound at all as her heart rate slowed somewhat. She checked her digital watch. Time.

She opened the firedoor and walked straight down the middle of the corridor.

Okay, Misha. I hope you remembered to set your watch last night.

Last time, Colonel. Will you for Christ's sake take the breakout signal this time, and maybe they'll do the debrief on the Farm, and my son can meet a real Russian hero . . . ?

God, I wish my grandfather could see me now . . .

She'd never been here before, never done a pass in this building. But she knew it by heart, having spent twenty minutes going over the diagram. The CARDINAL's door was . . . that one!

Time! Her heart skipped a beat as she saw the door open, thirty feet away.

What a pro! But what came next was as cold as a dagger made of ice.

Vatutin's eyes widened in horror at the noise. The deadbolt on the apartment door had been installed with typical Russian workmanship, about half a millimeter out of line. As he slipped it in preparation to leap from the room, it made an audible *click*.

Mary Pat Foley scarcely broke stride. Her training took over her body like a computer program. There was a peephole on the door that went from dark to light:

—there was somebody there
—that somebody just moved
—that somebody just slipped the door lock.

She took half a step to her right and rubbed the back of her gloved hand across her forehead. She wasn't pretending to wipe sweat away.

Misha saw the signal and stopped cold, a curious look on his face that began to change to amusement until he heard the door wrenched open. He knew in an instant that the man who emerged was not his neighbor.

"You are under arrest!" Vatutin shouted, then saw that the American woman and the Russian man were standing a meter apart, and both had their hands at their sides. It was just as well that the "Two" officers behind him couldn't see the look on his face.

"Excuse me?" the woman said in excellent Russian.

"What!" Filitov thundered with the rage only possible to a hung-over professional soldier.

"You"—he pointed to Mrs. Fotey—"up against the wall."

"I'm an American citizen, and you can't—"

"You're an American spy," a captain said, pushing her against the wall.

"What?" Her voice contained panic and alarm, not the least amount of professionalism here, the Captain thought, but then his mind nearly choked on the observation. "What are you talking about? What is this? Who are you?" Next she started screaming: *"Police—somebody call the police. I'm being attacked! Somebody help me, please!"*

Vatutin ignored her. He had already grabbed Filitov's hand, and as another officer pushed the Colonel against the wall, he took a film cassette. For a flicker of time that seemed to stretch into hours, he'd been struck with the horrible thought that he'd blown it, that she really wasn't CIA. With the film in his hand, he swallowed and looked into Filitov's eyes.

"You are under arrest for treason, *Comrade Colonel."* His voice hissed out the end of the statement. "Take him away."

He turned to look at the woman. Her eyes were wide with fear and outrage. Four people now had their heads out of doors, staring into the hall.

"I am Colonel Vatutin of the Committee for State Security. We have just made an arrest. Close your doors and go about your business." He noted that compliance with his order took under five seconds. Russia was still Russia.

"Good morning, Mrs. Foley," he said next. He saw her struggle to gain control of herself.

"Who are you—and what is this all about?"

"The Soviet Union does not look kindly upon its guests stealing State secrets. Surely they told you that in Washington—excuse me, Langley."

Her voice trembled as she spoke. "My husband is an accredited member of the U.S. diplomatic mission to your country. I wish to be put in contact with my embassy at once. I don't know what you're jabbering about, but I do know that if you make the pregnant wife of a diplomat lose her baby, you'll have a diplomatic incident big enough to make the TV news! I didn't talk to that man. I didn't touch him, and he didn't touch me—and you know it, mister. What they warned me about in Washington is that you clowns love to embarrass Americans with your damned-fool little spy games."

Vatutin took all of the speech impassively, though the word "pregnant" did get his attention. He knew from the reports of the maid who cleaned their apartment twice a week that Foleyeva had been testing herself. And if—there would be a larger incident over this than he wanted. Again the political dragon raised its head. Chairman Gerasimov would have to rule on this.

"My husband is waiting for me."

"We'll tell him that you are being detained. You will be asked to answer some questions. You will not be mistreated."

Mary Pat already knew that. Her horror at what had just happened was muted by her pride. She'd performed beautifully and knew it. As part of the diplomatic community, she was fundamentally safe. They might hold on to her for a day, even two, but any serious mistreatment would result in having a half-dozen Russians shipped home from Washington. Besides, she wasn't really pregnant.

All that was beside the point. She didn't shed any tears, showed no emotion other than what was expected, what she'd been briefed and trained to show. What mattered was that her most important agent was blown, and with him, information of the highest importance. She wanted to cry, needed to cry, but she wouldn't give the fuckers the satisfaction. The crying would come on the plane ride home.

16.

Damage Assessment

"IT says a lot about the man that the first thing he did was to get to the embassy and send the telex," Ritter said at last. "The Ambassador delivered his protest note to their Foreign Ministry before they went public on the arrest 'for conduct incompatible with diplomatic status.'"

"Some consolation," Greer noted gloomily.

"We ought to have her back in a day or less," Ritter went on. "They're already PNG'd, and they're going on the next Pan Am flight out."

Ryan squirmed in his chair. *What about CARDINAL? he wondered. Jesus, they tell me about this superagent, and a week later . . . They sure as hell don't have a Supreme Court over there that makes it hard to execute people.*

"Any chance we can do a trade for him?" Jack asked.

"You are kidding, boy." Ritter rose and walked to the window. At three in the morning, the CIA parking lot was nearly empty, only a loose handful of cars sitting among the piles of plowed snow. "We don't even have anybody big enough to trade for a mitigation of sentence. No way in hell they'll let him out, even for a chief of station, which we don't have."

"So he's dead and the data is lost with him."

"That's what the man's saying," Judge Moore agreed.

"Help from the allies?" Ryan asked. "Sir Basil might have something hopping that can help us."

"Ryan, there is nothing we can do to save the man." Ritter turned to take out his anger on the nearest target of opportunity. "He's dead—sure, he's still breathing, but he's dead all the same. A month, or two, or three from now, the announcement will be made, and we'll confirm it through other assets, and then we'll pry open a bottle and have a few to his memory."

"What about *Dallas?"* Greer asked.

"Huh?" Ryan turned.

"You don't need to know about that," Ritter said, now grateful to have a target. "Give her back to the Navy."

"Okay." Greer nodded. "This is likely to have some serious consequences." That earned the Admiral a baleful look from Judge Moore. He now had to go to the President.

"What about it, Ryan?"

"On the arms-control talks?" Jack shrugged. "Depends on how they handle it. They have a wide range of options, and anybody who tells you he can predict which one they'll choose is a liar."

"Nothing like an expert opinion," Ritter observed.

"Sir Basil thinks Gerasimov wants to make a move on the top spot. He could

conceivably use this toward that end," Ryan said coolly, "but I think Narmonov has too much political clout now that he has that fourth man on the Politburo. He can, therefore, choose to go forward toward the agreement and show the Party how strong he is by moving forward for peace, or if he senses more political vulnerability than I see in the picture, he can consolidate his hold on the Party by trashing us as the incorrigible enemies of Socialism. If there's a way to put a probability assessment on that choice that's anything more than a wild-ass guess, I haven't seen it yet. "

"Get to work on it," Judge Moore ordered. "The President' ll want something hard enough to grab hold of before Ernie Allen starts talking about putting SDI on the table again."

"Yes, sir." Jack stood. "Judge, do we expect the Sovs to go public on CARDINAL's arrest?"

"There's a question," Ritter said.

Ryan headed for the door and stopped again. "Wait a minute."

"What is it?" Ritter asked.

"You said that the Ambassador delivered his protest before their Foreign Ministry said anything, right?"

"Yeah, Foley worked real fast to beat them to the punch."

"With all due respect to Mr. Foley, nobody's that fast," Ryan said. "They should have had their press release already printed before they made the pickup."

"So?" Admiral Greer asked.

Jack walked back toward the other three. "So the Foreign Minister is Narmonov's man, isn't he? So's Yazov at the Defense Ministry. They didn't know," Ryan said. "They were as surprised as we were."

"No chance," Ritter snorted. "They don't do things like that."

"Assumption on your part, sir." Jack stood his ground. "What evidence backs up that statement?"

Greer smiled. "None that we know of right now."

"Damn it, James, I know he's—"

"Keep going, Dr. Ryan," Judge Moore said.

"If those two ministers didn't know what was going down, it puts a different spin on this case, doesn't it?" Jack sat on the back of a chair. "Okay, I can see cutting Yazov out—CARDINAL was his senior aide—but why cut out the Foreign Minister? This sort of thing, you want to move fast, catch the newsies with the breaking story—for damned sure you don't want the other side to get the word out first."

"Bob?" the DCI asked.

The Deputy Director for Operations never had liked Ryan very much—he thought that he'd come too far too fast—but, for all that, Bob Ritter was an honest man. The DDO sat back down and sipped at his coffee for a moment. "Boy may have a point. We'll have to confirm a few details, but if they check out . . . then it's as much a political operation as a simple 'Two' case."

"James?"

The Deputy Director for Intelligence nodded agreement. "Scary."

"We may not be talking about just losing a good source," Ryan went on, speculating as he spoke. "KGB might be using this for political ends. What I

don't see is his power base. The Alexandrov faction has three solid members. Narmonov now has four, counting the new guy, Vaneyev—"

"Shit!" This was Ritter. "We assumed that when his daughter was picked up and let go that they either didn't break her—hell, they say she looks okay—or her father was too important for them to—"

"Blackmail." Now it was Judge Moore's turn. "You were right, Bob. And Narmonov doesn't know. You have to hand it to Gerasimov, the bastard has some beautiful moves . . . If all this is true, Narmonov is outnumbered and doesn't know it." He paused for a frown. "We're speculating like a bunch of amateurs."

"Well, it makes for one hell of a scenario." Ryan almost smiled until he reached the logical conclusion. "We may have brought down the first Soviet government in thirty years that wanted to liberalize their own country." *What will the papers make of that? Jack asked himself. And you know that it'll get out. Something like this is too juicy to stay secret long . . .*

"We know what you've been doing, and we know how long you've been doing it. Here is the evidence." He tossed the photographs onto the table.

"Nice pictures," Mary Pat said. "Where's the man from my embassy?"

"We don't have to let anyone talk with you. We can keep you here as long as we wish. Years, if necessary," he added ominously.

"Look, mister, I'm an American, okay? My husband is a diplomat. He has diplomatic immunity and so do I. Just because you think I'm a dumb American housewife, you think you can push me around and scare me into signing that damned-fool confession that I'm some kind of idiot spy. Well, I'm not, and I won't, and my government will protect me. So as far as I'm concerned you can take that confession and spread mustard on it and eat it. God knows the food over here is so bad you could use the fiber in your diet," she observed. "And you're saying that that nice old man I was taking the picture to was arrested too, eh? Well, I think you're just crazy."

"We know that you have met him many times."

"Twice. I saw him at a game last year, too—no, excuse me, I met him at a diplomatic reception a few weeks ago. That's three times, but only the hockey matters. That's why I brought the picture. The boys on the team think he's good luck for them—ask them, they all signed the picture, didn't they? Both times he came, we won big games and my son scored a couple of goals. And you think he's a spy just because he went to a junior-league hockey game? My God, you guys must think American spies are under every bed."

She was actually enjoying herself. They treated her carefully. Nothing like a threatened pregnancy, Mary Pat told herself, as she broke yet another time-honored rule in the spy business: *Don't say anything.* She jabbered on, as would any outraged private citizen—with the shield of diplomatic immunity, of course—at the rank stupidity of the Russians. She watched her interrogator closely for a reaction. If there was anything Russians hated, it was to be looked down on, and most of all by the Americans, to whom they had a terminal inferiority complex.

"I used to think the security people at the embassy were a pain," she huffed after a moment. "Don't do this, don't do that, be careful taking pictures of

things. I wasn't taking a picture, I was *giving* him a picture! And the kids in it are Russian kids—except for Eddie." She turned away, looking into the mirror. Mary Pat wondered if the Russians had thought that touch up themselves or if they had gotten the idea from American cop shows.

"Whoever trained that one knew his business," Vatutin observed, looking through the mirror from the next room. "She knows we're here but doesn't let on. When are we turning her loose?"

"Late this afternoon," the head of the Second Chief Directorate answered. "Holding her isn't worth the effort. Her husband is already packing up the apartment. You should have waited a few more seconds," the General added.

"I know." There was no point in explaining the faulty door lock. The KGB didn't accept excuses, even from colonels. That was beside the point in any case, Vatutin and his boss knew. They'd caught Filitov—not quite in the act, but he was still caught. That was the objective of the case, at least so far as they were concerned. Both men knew the other parts of it, but treated them as though they didn't exist. It was the smartest course for both.

"Where is my man!" Yazov demanded.

"He is in Lefortovo Prison, of course," Gerasimov answered.

"I want to see him. At once." The Defense Minister hadn't even paused to take off his cap, standing there in his calflength greatcoat, his cheeks still pink from the chilly February air—or perhaps with anger, Gerasimov thought. Maybe even with fear . . .

"This is not a place to make demands, Dmitri Timofeyevich. I, too, am a Politburo member. I, too, sit on the Defense Council. And it may be that you are implicated in this investigation." Gerasimov's fingers played with a file on the desktop.

That changed Yazov's complexion. He went pale, definitely not from fear. Gerasimov was surprised that the soldier didn't lose control, but the Marshal made a supreme effort and spoke as though to a new draftee:

"Show me your evidence here and now if you have the balls for it!"

"Very well." The KGB Chairman flipped open the folder and removed a series of photographs, handing them over.

"You had *me* under surveillance?"

"No, we've been watching Filitov. You just happened to be there."

Yazov tossed the prints back with contempt. "So what? Misha was invited to a hockey game. I accompanied him. It was a good game. There is an American boy on the team—I met the mother at some reception or other—oh, yes, it was in George Hall when the American negotiators were last over. She was at this game, and we said hello. She is an amusing woman, in an empty-headed sort of way. The next morning I filled out a contact report. So did Misha."

"If she is so empty-headed, why did you bother?" Gerasimov inquired.

"Because she is an American, and her husband is a diplomat of some kind or other, and I was foolish enough to allow her to touch me, as you see. The contact report is on file. I will send you a copy of mine, and Colonel Filitov's." Yazov was speaking with more confidence now. Gerasimov had miscalculated somewhat.

"She is an agent of the American CIA."

"Then I am confident that Socialism will prevail, Nikolay Borissovich. I didn't think that you employed such fools—not until today, that is."

Defense Minister Yazov allowed himself to calm down. Though new to the Moscow scene—until very recently he'd been commander of the Far East Military District, where Narmonov had spotted him—he knew what the real struggle here was all about. He did not, could not believe that Filitov was a traitor—did not believe because of the man's record; could not believe because the scandal would destroy one of the most carefully planned careers in the Soviet Army. His.

"If you have real evidence against my man, I want my own security people to review it. You, Nikolay Borissovich, are playing a political game with my Ministry. I will not have KGB interference in the way I run my Army. Someone from GRU will be here this afternoon. You will cooperate with him or I will take this to the Politburo myself."

Gerasimov showed no reaction at all as the Defense Minister left the room, but realized that he'd made an error of his own. He'd overplayed his hand—no, he told himself, you played it a day too soon. You expected Yazov to collapse, to bend to the pressure, to accept a proposal not yet made.

And all because that fool Vatutin hadn't gotten positive evidence. Why couldn't he have waited one more second!

Well, the only thing to do is to get a full confession from Filitov.

Colin McClintock's official job was in the commercial office at Her Britannic Majesty's Embassy, just across the Moscow River from the Kremlin, a location that predated the revolution and had annoyed the Soviet leadership since Stalin's time. But he, too, was a player in the Great Game. He was, in fact, the case officer who "ran" Svetlana Vaneyeva and had seconded her to the CIA for a purpose which had never been explained, but the orders for which had come direct from London's Century House, the headquarters of the SIS. At the moment, he was taking a group of British businessmen through GOSPLAN, introducing them to some of the bureaucrats with whom they'd have to negotiate the contracts for whatever they hoped to sell to the local barbarians, McClintock thought. An "Islander" from Whalsay off the Scottish coast, he regarded anyone from south of Aberdeen as a barbarian, but worked for the Secret Intelligence Service anyway. When he spoke in English, he used a lilting accent laced with words spoken only in Northern Scotland, and his Russian was barely comprehensible, but he was a man who could turn accents on and off as though with a switch. And his ears had no accent at all. People invariably think that a person who has trouble speaking a language also has trouble hearing it. It was an impression that McClintock assiduously cultivated.

He'd met Svetlana this way, had reported her to London as a possible target for recruitment, and a senior SIS officer had done just that in the second-floor dining room of Langan's Brasserie on Stratton Street. Since then McClintock had seen her only on business, only with other British subjects and Russians around. Other SIS officers in Moscow handled her dead-drops, though he was actually responsible for her operations. The data that she'd gotten out was disappointing but occasionally useful in a commercial sense. With intelligence

agents you tended to take what you got, and she did forward insider gossip that she picked up from her father.

But something had gone wrong with Svetlana Vaneyeva. She'd disappeared from her desk, then returned, probably after interrogation at Lefortovo, the CIA had said. That made little sense to McClintock. Once they got you into Lefortovo, they had you for more than a day or two. Something very strange had happened, and he'd waited for a week to figure a way to find out exactly what it might have been. Her drops were untouched now, of course. Nobody from SIS would ever go near them except to see if they'd been disturbed, from a discreet distance.

Now, however, he had his chance, taking his trade delegation across the room that held the textile section of the planning agency. She looked up and saw the foreigners walking by. McClintock gave the routine interrogation signal. He didn't know which reply he'd get, nor what the reply would really mean. He had to assume that she'd been broken, totally compromised, but she had to react some way. He gave the signal, a brush of his hands against his hair as natural as breathing, as all such signals were. Her reply was to open a desk drawer and extract either a pencil or a pen. The former was the "all clear" signal, the latter a warning. She did neither, and merely returned to the document she was reading. It almost surprised the young intelligence officer enough to stare, but he remembered who and where he was, and turned away, scanning other faces in the room as his hands fluttered nervously about, doing various things that could have meant anything to whoever was watching.

What stuck in his mind was the look on her face. What had once been animated was now blank. What had once been lively was now as emotionless as any face on a Moscow street. The person who'd once been the privileged daughter of a very senior Party man was different now. It wasn't an act. He was sure of it; she didn't have the skill for that.

They got to her, McClintock told himself. *They got to her and let her go*. He didn't have a clue why they'd let her go, but that wasn't his concern. An hour later he drove the businessmen back to their hotel and returned to his office. The report he dashed off to London was only three pages long. He had no idea of the firestorm it would ignite. Nor did he know that another SIS officer had sent another report the same day, in the same pouch.

"Hello, Arthur," the voice on the phone said.

" 'Morning—excuse me, good afternoon, Basil. How's the weather in London?"

"Cold, wet, and miserable. Thought I might come over to your side of the pond and get some sun."

"Be sure to stop over to the shop."

"I planned to do that. First thing in the morning?"

"I always have room on the calendar for you."

"See you tomorrow, then."

"Great. See ya." Judge Moore hung up.

That was some day, the Director of Central Intelligence thought. *First we lose CARDINAL, now Sir Basil Charleston wants to come over here with something he can't talk about over the most secure phone system NSA and GCHQ ever came up*

with! It was still before noon and he'd already been in his office for nine hours. *What the hell else is going wrong?*

"You call this evidence?" General Yevgeniy Ignat'yev was in charge of the counterespionage office of the GRU, the Soviet military's own intelligence arm. "To these tired old eyes it looks as though your people have jumped onto thin ice looking for a fish."

Vatutin was amazed—and furious—that the KGB Chairman had sent this man into *his* office to review *his* case.

"If you can find a plausible explanation for the film, the camera, and the diary, perhaps you would be so kind as to share it with me, Comrade."

"You say you took it from his hand, not the woman's." A statement, not a question.

"A mistake on my part for which I make no excuses," Vatutin said with dignity, which struck both men as slightly odd.

"And the camera?"

"It was found attached magnetically to the inside of the service panel on his refrigerator."

"You didn't find it the first time you searched the apartment, I see. And it had no fingerprints on it. And your visual record of Filitov does not show him using it. So if he tells me that you planted both the film and the camera on him, how am I supposed to convince the Minister that he's the one doing the lying?"

Vatutin was surprised by the tone of the question. "You believe that he is a spy after all?"

"What I believe is of no importance. I find the existence of the diary troubling, but you would not believe the breaches of security I have to deal with, especially at the higher levels. The more important people become, the less important they think the rules are. You know who Filitov is. He's more than just a hero, Comrade. He is famous throughout the Soviet Union—Old Misha, the Hero of Stalingrad. He fought at Minsk, at Vyasma, outside Moscow when we stopped the fascists, the Kharkov disaster, then the fighting retreat to Stalingrad, then the counterattack—"

"I have read his file," Vatutin said neutrally.

"He is a symbol to the entire Army. You cannot execute a symbol on evidence as equivocal as this, Vatutin. All you have are these photographic frames, with no objective evidence that he shot them."

"We have not yet interrogated him."

"And you think that will be easy?" Ignat'yev rolled his eyes. His laugh was a harsh bark. "Do you know how tough this man is? This man killed Germans while he was on fire! This man looked at death a thousand times and pissed on it!"

"I can get what I want out of him," Vatutin insisted quietly.

"Torture, is it? Are you mad? Keep in mind that the Taman Guards Motor-Rifle Division is based a few kilometers from here. You think the Red Army will sit still while you torture one of its heroes? Stalin is dead, Comrade Colonel, and so is Beriya."

"We can extract the information without doing physical harm," Vatutin said.

That was one of KGB's most closely guarded secrets.

"Rubbish!"

"In that case, General, what do you recommend?" Vatutin asked, knowing the answer.

"Let me take over the case. We'll see to it that he never betrays the *Rodina* again, you can be sure of that," Ignat'yev promised.

"And save the Army the embarrassment, of course."

"We would save embarrassment for everyone, not the least you, Comrade Colonel, for fucking up this so-called investigation."

Well, that's about what I expected. A little bluster and a few threats, mixed with a little sympathy and comradeliness. Vatutin saw that he had a way out, but that the safety it promised also promised to end his advancement. The handwritten message from the Chairman had made that clear enough. He was trapped between two enemies, and though he could still win the approval of one, the largest goal involved the largest risk. He could retreat from the true objective of the investigation, and stay a colonel the rest of his life, or he could do what he'd hoped to do when he began—without any political motives, Vatutin remembered bleakly—and risk disgrace. The decision was paradoxically an easy one. Vatutin was a "Two" man—

"It is my case. The Chairman has given it to me to run, and I will run it in my way. Thank you for your advice, Comrade General."

Ignat'yev appraised the man and the statement. It wasn't often that he encountered integrity, and it saddened him in a vague, distant way that he could not congratulate the man who demonstrated this rarest of qualities. But loyalty to the Soviet Army came first.

"As you wish. I expect to be kept informed of all your activities." Ignat'yev left without another word.

Vatutin sat at his desk for a few minutes, appraising his own position. Then he called for his car. Twenty minutes later he was at Lefortovo.

"Impossible," the doctor told him before he had even asked the question.

"What?"

"You want to put this man into the sensory-deprivation tank, don't you?"

"Of course."

"It would probably kill him. I don't think you want to do that, and I am sure that I will not risk my project on something like this."

"It's my case, and I'll run it—"

"Comrade Colonel, the man in question is over seventy years old. I have his medical file here. He has all the symptoms of moderate cardiovascular disease—normal at this age, of course—and a history of respiratory problems. The onset of the first anxiety period would explode his heart like a balloon. I can almost guarantee it."

"What do you mean—explode his heart—"

"Excuse me—it's difficult to explain medical terms to the layman. His coronary arteries are coated with moderate amounts of plaque. It happens to all of us; it comes from the food we eat. His arteries are more blocked than yours or mine because of his age, and also, because of his age, the arteries are less flexible than those of a younger person. If his heart rate goes too high, the plaque deposits will dislodge and cause a blockage. That's what a heart attack

is, Colonel, a blockage of a coronary artery. Part of the heart muscle dies, the heart stops entirely or becomes arrhythmic; in either case it ceases to pump blood, and the whole patient dies. Is that clear? Use of the tank will almost certainly induce a heart attack in the subject, and that attack will almost certainly be fatal. If not a heart attack, there is the somewhat lesser probability of a massive stroke—or both could happen. No, Comrade Colonel, we cannot use the tank for this man. I do not think that you wish to kill him before you get your information."

"What about other physical measures?" Vatutin asked quietly. *My God, what if I can't . . . ?*

"If you're certain that he's guilty, you can shoot him at once and be done with it," the physician observed. "But any gross physical abuse is likely to kill the patient."

And all because of a goddamned door lock, Colonel Vatutin told himself.

* * *

It was an ugly rocket, the sort of thing that a child might draw or a fireworks company might build, though either would know better than to put it on top of an airplane instead of its proper place, underneath. But it was atop the airplane, as the runway's perimeter lights showed in the darkness.

The airplane was the famous SR-71 Blackbird, Lockheed's Mach-three reconnaissance aircraft. This one had been flown in from Kadena Air Force Base on the western rim of the Pacific two days before. It rolled down the runway at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, before the twin flames of its afterburning engines. Fuel that leaked from the SR-71's tanks—the Blackbird leaked a lot—was ignited by the heat, much to the entertainment of the tower crew. The pilot pulled back on the stick at the appropriate time, and the Blackbird's nose came up. He held the stick back for longer than usual, pointing the bird into a steep forty-five-degree climb on full burner, and in a moment all that was left on the ground was a thundering memory. The last view the people had was of the twin angry dots of the engines, and soon these disappeared through the clouds that wafted by at ten thousand feet.

The Blackbird kept going up. The air-traffic controllers at Las Vegas noted the blip on their screens, saw that it was barely moving laterally, though its altitude readout was changing as rapidly as the wheels of the slot machines on the airport concourse. They shared a look—another Air Force hot dog—then they went back to work.

The Blackbird was now passing through sixty thousand feet, and leveled off to head southeast toward the White Sands Missile Range. The pilot checked his fuel—there was plenty—and relaxed after the exhilarating climb. The engineers had been right. The missile sitting on the aircraft's back hadn't mattered at all. By the time he'd gotten to fly the Blackbird, the purpose of the back mount had been overtaken by events. Designed to hold a single-engine photoreconnaissance drone, the fittings had been removed from nearly all the SR-71s, but not this one, for reasons that were not clear from the aircraft's maintenance book. The drone had originally been designed to go places the

Blackbird could not, but it had become redundant on discovery of the fact that there was nowhere the SR-71 could not go in safety, as the pilot regularly proved on flights from Kadena. The only limit on the aircraft was fuel, and that didn't play today.

* * *

"Juliet Whiskey, this is Control. Do you read, over," the sergeant said into the headset.

"Control, this is Juliet Whiskey. All systems go. We are nominal to profile."

"Roger. Commence launch sequence on my mark. Five, four, three, two, one: *mark!"*

A hundred miles away, the pilot punched burners again and hauled back on the stick. The Blackbird performed as beautifully as always, standing on her tail and rocketing into the sky before nearly a hundred thousand pounds of thrust. The pilot's eyes were locked on his instruments as the altimeter spun around like a maddened clock. His speed was now thirteen hundred miles per hour and increasing, while the SR-71 showed her contempt for gravity.

"Separation in twenty seconds," the systems operator in the back seat told the pilot. The Blackbird was now passing through a hundred thousand feet. The target was one-twenty. The controls were already mushy. There wasn't enough air up here to control the aircraft properly, and the pilot was being even more careful than usual. He watched his speed hit nineteen hundred several seconds early, then:

"Standby for separation . . . breakaway, breakaway!" the man in back called. The pilot dropped the nose and started a gentle turn to the left that would take him right across New Mexico before heading back to Nellis. This was much easier than flying along the Soviet border—and, occasionally, across it. . . . The pilot wondered if he could drive down to Vegas to catch a show after he landed.

The target kept going up for a few more seconds, but surprisingly did not ignite its rocket motor. It was now a ballistic object, traveling in obedience to the laws of physics. Its oversized fins provided enough aerodynamic drag to keep it pointed in the proper direction as gravity began to reclaim the object for its own. The rocket tipped over at one hundred thirty thousand feet, reluctantly pointing its nose at the earth.

Then its motor fired. The solid-fuel engine burned for only four seconds, but that was enough to accelerate its conical nose to a speed that would have terrified the Blackbird's pilot.

"Okay," an Army officer said. The point-defense radar went from standby to active. It immediately saw the inbound. The target rocket was pushing itself down through the atmosphere at roughly the same speed as an ICBM warhead. He didn't have to give a command. The system was fully automated. Two hundred yards away a fiberglass cover exploded off a concrete hole drilled in the gypsum flats, and a FLAGE erupted skyward. The Flexible Lightweight Agile Guided Experiment looked more like a lance than a rocket, and was

nearly that simple. Millimeter-wave radar tracked the inbound, and the data was processed through an onboard microcomputer. The remarkable part of this was that all the parts had been taken off the shelf from existing high-tech weaponry.

Outside, men watched from behind a protective earthen berm. They saw the upward streak of yellow light and heard the roar of the solid rocket motor, then nothing for several seconds.

The FLAGE homed in on its target, maneuvering a few fractions of degrees with tiny attitude-control rockets. The nosecap blew off, and what unfolded would have looked to an outsider like a collapsing umbrella's framework, perhaps ten yards across . . .

It looked just like a Fourth of July rocket, but without the noise. A few people cheered. Though both the target and the FLAGE "warhead" were totally inert, the energy of the collision converted metal and ceramic to incandescent vapor.

"Four for four," Gregory said. He tried not to yawn. He'd seen fireworks before.

"You're not going to get all the boosters, Major," General Parks chided the younger man. "We still need the midcourse systems, and the terminal-defense ones."

"Yes, sir, but you don't need me here. It works."

For the first three tests, the target rocket had been fired from a Phantom fighter, and people in Washington had claimed that the test series had underestimated the difficulty of intercepting the inbound warheads. Using the SR-71 as the launch platform had been Parks's idea. Launching the drone from higher altitude, and with a higher initial speed, had made for a much faster reentry target. This test had actually made things slightly harder than was expected, and the FLAGE hadn't cared a bit. Parks had been a little worried about the missile-guidance software, but, as Gregory had noted, it worked.

"Al," Parks said, "I'm starting to think that this whole program is going to work."

"Sure. Why not?" *If those Agency pukes can get us the plans for the Russian laser . . .*

CARDINAL sat alone in a bare cell, one and a half meters wide, two and a half meters long. There was a bare light bulb overhead, a wooden cot with a bucket underneath, but not a window except the spy hole in the rusted iron door. The walls were solid concrete, and there was no sound at all. He couldn't hear the pacing of the corridor guard, nor even the rumble of traffic on the street outside the prison. They'd taken his uniform blouse, and belt, and his polished boots, replacing the last with cheap slippers. The cell was in the basement. That was all he knew, and he could tell from the damp air. It was cold.

But not so cold as his heart. The enormity of his crime came to him as it never had. Colonel Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov, three times Hero of the Soviet Union, was alone with his treason. He thought of the magnificent, broad land in which he lived, whose distant horizons and endless vistas were peopled with his fellow Russians. He'd served them all his life with pride and

honor, and with his own blood, as the scars on his body proclaimed. He remembered the men with whom he'd served, so many of whom had died under his command. And how they had died, defiantly cursing the German tanks and guns as they burned alive in T-34s, retreating only when forced to, preferring to attack even when they knew it to be doomed. He remembered leading his troops in a hundred engagements, the frantic exhilaration that accompanied the roar of the diesel engines, the reeking clouds of smoke, the determination even unto the death that he had cheated so many times.

And he'd betrayed it all.

What would my men say of me now? He stared at the blank concrete wall opposite his cot.

What would Romanov say?

I think we both need a drink, my Captain, the voice chimed in. Only Romanov could be both serious and amused at the same time. *Such thoughts are more easily considered with vodka or Samogan.*

Do you know why? Misha asked.

You've never told us why, my Captain. And so Misha did. It took but a brief flicker of time.

Both your sons, and your wife. Tell me, Comrade Captain, for what did we die?

Misha didn't know that. Even during the shooting he hadn't known. He'd been a soldier, and when a soldier's country is invaded, the soldier fights to repel the enemy. So much the easier when the enemy is as brutal as the Germans were . . .

We fought for the Soviet Union, Corporal.

Did we, now? I seem to remember fighting for Mother Russia, but mainly I remember fighting for you, Comrade Captain.

But—

A soldier fights for his comrades, my Captain. I fought for my family. You and our troop, they were my only family. I suppose you also fought for your family, the big one and the little one. I always envied you that, my Captain, and I was proud that you made me part of both in the way that you did.

But I killed you. I shouldn't have—

We all have our destiny, Comrade Captain. Mine was to die young at Vyasma without a wife, without children, but even so I did not die without a family.

I avenged you, Romanov. I got the Mark-IV that killed you.

I know. You avenged all the dead of your family. Why do you think we loved you? Why do you think we died for you?

You understand? Misha asked in surprise.

The workers and peasants may not, but your men will. We understand destiny now, as you cannot.

But what shall I do?

Captains do not ask such questions of corporals. Romanov laughed. You had all the answers to our *questions.*

Filitov's head jerked up as the latch slipped on the door of his cell.

Vatutin expected to find a broken man. The isolation of the cell, the prisoner stripped of identity and alone with his fears and his crimes, always had the proper effect. But while he looked at a tired, crippled old man, he saw the eyes and mouth change.

Thank you, Romanov.

"Good morning, Sir Basil," Ryan said as he reached for the man's bags.

"Hello, Jack! I didn't know they were using you as a gofer."

"Depends on who I'm going-fer, as they say. The car's over this way." He waved. It was parked fifty yards away.

"Constance sends her love. How is the family?" Sir Basil Charleston asked.

"Fine, thanks. How's London?"

"Surely you haven't forgotten our winters already."

"No." Jack laughed as he wrenched open the door. "I remember the beer, too." A moment later both doors were closed and locked.

"They sweep the wheels every week," Jack said. "How bad is it?"

"How bad? That's what I came over here to find out. Something very odd is happening. You chaps had an op go wrong, didn't you?"

"I can say yes to that, but the rest'll have to come from the Judge. Sorry, but I was just cleared for part of it."

"Recently, I'll wager."

"Yep." Ryan shifted up as he took the turn off the airport road.

"Then let's see if you can still put two and two together, Sir John."

Jack smiled as he changed lanes to pass a truck. "I was doing the intelligence estimate on the arms talks when I broke into it. Now I'm supposed to be looking at Narmonov's political vulnerability. Unless I'm wrong, that's why you've flown over."

"And unless I'm very far off the mark, your op has triggered something very serious indeed."

"Vaneyev?"

"Correct."

"Jesus." Ryan turned briefly. "I hope you have some ideas,'cause we sure as hell don't." He took the car to seventy-five. Fifteen minutes later he pulled into Langley. They parked in the underground garage and took the VIP elevator to the seventh floor.

"Hello, Arthur. It's not often I have a knight chauffeur me about, even in London." The head of SIS took a chair while Ryan summoned Moore's department chiefs.

"Hi, Bas'," Greer said on entering. Ritter just waved. It was his operation that had triggered this crisis. Ryan took the least comfortable chair available.

"I'd like to know exactly what went wrong," Charleston said simply, not even waiting for the coffee to be passed around.

"An agent got arrested. A very well-placed agent."

"Is that why the Foleys are flying out today?" Charleston smiled. "I didn't know who they were, but when two people get ejected from that delightful country, we generally assume—"

"We don't know what went wrong yet," Ritter said. "They should be landing at Frankfurt right about now, then ten more hours till we have them here for the debrief. They were working an agent who—"

"Who was an aide to Yazov—Colonel M. S. Filitov. We've deduced that much. How long have you had him?"

"It was one of your folks who recruited him for us," Moore replied. "He was

a colonel, too."

"You don't mean . . . Oleg Penkovskiy . . . ? Bloody hell!" Charleston was amazed for once, Ryan saw. It didn't happen often. *"That* long?"

"That long," Ritter said. "But the numbers caught up with us."

"And the Vaneyeva woman we seconded to you for courier service was part of that—"

"Correct. She never came close to either end of the chain, by the way. We know that she was probably picked up, but she's back at work. We haven't checked her out yet, but—"

"We have, Bob. Our chap reported that she'd—changed somehow. He said it was hard to describe but impossible to miss. Like the hoary tales of brainwashing, Orwell and all that. He noted that she was free—or what passes for it over there—and related that to her father. Then we learned of something big in the Defense Ministry—that a senior aide to Yazov had been arrested." Charleston paused to stir his coffee. "We have a source inside the Kremlin that we guard rather closely. We have learned that Chairman Gerasimov spent several hours with Alexandrov last week and under fairly unusual circumstances. This same source has warned us that Alexandrov has a considerable urge to sidetrack this *perestroika* business.

"Well, it's clear, isn't it?" Charleston asked rhetorically. It was quite clear to everyone. "Gerasimov has suborned a Politburo member thought to be loyal to Narmonov, at the very least compromised the support of the Defense Minister, *and* been spending a good deal of time with the man who wants Narmonov out. I'm afraid that your operation may have triggered something with the most unpleasant consequences."

"There's more," the DCI said. "Our agent was getting us material on Soviet SDI research. Ivan may have made a breakthrough."

"Marvelous," Charleston observed. "A return to the bad old days, but this time the new version of the 'missile gap' is potentially quite real, I take it? I am awfully old to change my politics. Too bad. You know, of course, that there is a leak in your program?"

"Oh?" Moore asked with a poker face.

"Gerasimov told Alexandrov that. No details, unfortunately, except that KGB think it highly important."

"We've had some warnings. It's being looked at," Moore said.

"Well, the technical matters can sort themselves out. They generally do. The political question, on the other hand, has created a bit of a bother with the PM. There's trouble enough when we bring down a government that we wish to bring down, but to do so by accident . . ."

"We don't like the consequences any more than you do, Basil," Greer noted. "But there's not a hell of a lot we can do about it from this end."

"You can accept their treaty terms," Charleston suggested. "Then our friend Narmonov would have his position sufficiently strengthened that he might be able to tell Alexandrov to bugger off. That, in any case, is the unofficial position of Her Majesty's government."

And that's the real purpose of your visit to us, Sir Basil, Ryan thought. It was time to say something:

"That means putting unreasonable restrictions on our SDI research and

reducing our warhead inventory in the knowledge that the Russians are racing forward with their own program. I don't think that's a very good deal."

"And a Soviet government headed by Gerasimov is?"

"And what if we end up with that anyway?" Ryan asked. "My estimate is already written. I recommend against additional concessions."

"One can always change a written document," Charleston pointed out.

"Sir, I have a rule. If something goes out with my name on the front, it says what I think, not what somebody else tells me to think," Ryan said.

"Do remember, gentlemen, that I am a friend. What is likely to happen to the Soviet government would be a greater setback to the West than a temporary restriction on one of your defense programs."

"The President won't spring for it," Greer said.

"He might have to," Moore replied.

"There has to be another way," Ryan observed.

"Not unless you can bring Gerasimov down." It was Ritter this time. "We can't offer any direct help to Narmonov. Even if we assume that he'd take a warning from us, which he probably wouldn't, we'd be running an even greater risk by involving ourselves in their internal politics. If the rest of the Politburo got one whiff of that . . . I suppose it might start a little war."

"But what if we can?" Ryan asked.

"What if we can *what?"* Ritter demanded.

17.

Conspiracy

"**A**NN" came back to Eve's Leaves earlier than expected, the owner noted. With her usual smile, she selected a dress off the rack and took it to the dressing room. She was out by the full-length mirrors only a minute later, and accepted the customary compliments on how it looked rather more perfunctorily than usual. Again she paid cash, leaving with yet another engaging smile.

Out in the parking lot, things were a little different. Captain Bisyarina broke tradecraft by opening the capsule and reading the contents. That evoked a brief but nasty curse. The message was but a single sheet of notepaper. Bisyarina lit a cigarette with a butane lighter, then burned the paper in her car's ashtray.

All that work wasted! And it was already in Moscow, was already being analyzed. She felt like a fool. It was doubly annoying that her agent had been completely honest, had forwarded what she'd thought was highly classified material, and on learning that it had been rendered invalid, had gotten that word out quickly. She would not even have the satisfaction of forwarding a small portion of the reprimand that she would surely get for wasting Moscow Center's time.

Well, they warned me about this. It may be the first time, but it will not be the last. She drove home and dashed off her message.

The Ryans weren't known for their attendance on the Washington cocktail circuit, but there were a few that they couldn't avoid. The reception was intended to raise money for D.C. Children's Hospital, and Jack's wife was a friend of the chief of surgery. The evening's entertainment was the big draw. A prominent jazz musician owed his granddaughter's life to the hospital, and he was paying off that debt with a major benefit performance at the Kennedy Center. The reception was intended to give the D.C. elite a chance to meet him "up close and personal" and hear his sax in greater privacy. Actually, as with most "power" parties, it was really for the elite to see and be seen by one another, confirming their importance. As was true in most parts of the world, the elite felt the need to pay for the privilege. Jack understood the phenomenon, but felt that it made little sense. By eleven o'clock the elite of Washington had proved that they could talk just as inanely about just as little, and get just as drunk, as anyone else in the world. Cathy had held herself to one glass of white wine, however; Jack had won the toss tonight: he could drink and she had to drive. He'd indulged himself tonight, despite a few warning looks from his wife, and was basking in a mellow, philosophical glow

that made him think he'd overdone the act a little bit—but then it wasn't supposed to look like an act. He just hoped to God everything went as planned tonight.

The amusing part was the way in which Ryan was treated. His position at the Agency had always been a sketchy one. The opening comments went something like, "How are things at Langley?" usually in an affected conspiratorial tone, and Jack's reply that CIA was just another government bureaucracy, a large building that contained lots of moving paper, surprised most questioners. The CIA was thought to have thousands of active field spooks. The actual figure was classified, of course, but far lower.

"We work normal business hours," Jack explained to a well-dressed woman whose eyes were slightly dilated. "I even have tomorrow off."

"Really?"

"Yes, I killed a Chinese agent on Tuesday and you always get a day off with pay for that sort of thing," he said seriously, then grinned.

"You're kidding!"

"That's right, I'm kidding. Please forget that I ever said it." *Who is this overaged bimbo?* he wondered.

"What about the reports that you're under investigation?" another person asked.

Jack turned in surprise. "And who might you be?"

"Scott Browning, *Chicago Tribune*." He didn't offer to shake hands. The game had just begun. The reporter didn't know that he was a player, but Ryan did.

"Could you run that one by me again?" Jack said politely.

"My sources tell me that you're being investigated for illegal stock transactions."

"It's news to me," Jack replied.

"I know that you've met with investigators from the SEC," the reporter announced.

"If you know that, then you also know that I gave them the information they wanted, and they left happy."

"You're sure of that?"

"Of course I am. I didn't do anything wrong and I have the records to prove it," Ryan insisted, perhaps a little too forcefully, the reporter thought. He loved it when people drank too much. *In vino veritas*.

"That's not what my sources tell me," Browning persisted.

"Well, I can't help that!" Ryan said. There was emotion in his voice now, and a few heads turned.

"Maybe if it wasn't for people like you, we might have an intelligence agency that worked," observed a newcomer.

"And who the fuck are you!" Ryan said before he turned. *Act I, Scene 2*.

"Congressman Trent," the reporter said. Trent was on the House Select Committee.

"I think an apology is owed," Trent said. He looked drunk.

"What for?" Ryan asked.

"How about for all the screw-ups across the river?"

"As opposed to the ones on this side?" Jack inquired. People were drifting over. Entertainment is where you find it.

"I know what you people just tried to pull off, and you fell right on your ass. You didn't let us know, as the law requires. You went ahead anyway, and I'm telling you, you're going to pay, you're going to pay big."

"If we have to pay your bar bill, we'll have to pay big." Ryan turned, dismissing the man.

"Big man," Trent said behind his back. "You're heading for a fall, too."

Perhaps twenty people were watching and listening now. They saw Jack take a glass of wine off a passing tray. They saw a look that could kill, and a few people remembered that Jack Ryan was a man who had killed. It was a fact and a reputation that gave him a sort of mystery. He took a measured sip of the chablis before turning back around.

"What sort of fall might that be, Mr. Trent?"

"You might be surprised."

"Nothing you do would surprise me, pal."

"That may be, but you've surprised us, Dr. Ryan. We didn't think you were a crook, and we didn't think you were dumb enough to be involved in that disaster. I guess we were wrong."

"You're wrong about a lot of things," Jack hissed.

"You know something, Ryan? For the life of me I can't figure just what the hell kind of a man you are."

"That's no surprise."

"So, what kind of man are you, Ryan?" Trent inquired.

"You know, Congressman, this is a unique experience for me," Jack observed lightheartedly.

"How's that?"

Ryan's manner changed abruptly. His voice boomed across the room. "I've never had my manhood questioned by a *queer* before!" *Sorry, pal . . .*

The room went very quiet. Trent made no secret of his orientation, had gone public six years before. That didn't prevent him from turning pale. The glass in his hand shook enough to spill some of its contents onto the marble floor, but the Congressman regained his control and spoke almost gently.

"I'll break you for that."

"Take your best shot, sweetie." Ryan turned and walked out of the room, the eyes heavy on his back. He kept going until he stared at the traffic on Massachusetts Avenue. He knew that he'd drunk too much, but the cold air started to clear his head.

"Jack?" His wife's voice.

"Yeah, babe?"

"What was that all about?"

"Can't say."

"I think it's time for you to go home."

"I think you're right. I'll get the coats." Ryan walked back inside and handed over the claim check. He heard the silence happen when he returned. He could feel the looks at his back. Jack shrugged into his overcoat and slung his wife's fur over his arm, before turning to see the eyes on him. Only one pair held any interest for him. They were there.

Misha was not an easy man to surprise, but the KGB succeeded. He'd steeled

himself for torture, for the worst sort of abuse, only to be . . . disappointed? he asked himself. That certainly wasn't the right word.

He was kept in the same cell, and so far as he could determine he was alone on this cellblock. That was probably wrong, he thought, but there was no evidence that anyone else was near him, no sounds at all, not even taps on the concrete walls. Perhaps they were too thick for that. The only "company" he had was the occasional metallic rasp of the spy hole in his cell's door. He thought that the solitude was supposed to do something to him. Filitov smiled at that. *They think I'm alone. They don't know about my comrades.*

There was only one possible answer: this Vatutin fellow was afraid that he might actually be innocent—but that *wasn't* possible, Misha told himself. That chekist bastard had taken the film from his hand.

He was still trying to figure that one out, staring at the blank concrete wall. None of it made any sense.

But if they expected him to be afraid, they would have to live with their disappointment. Filitov had cheated death too many times. Part of him even yearned for it. Perhaps he would be reunited with his comrades. He talked to them, didn't he? Might they still be . . . well, not exactly alive, but not exactly gone either? What *was* death? He'd reached the point in life where the question was an intellectual one. Sooner or later he'd find out, of course. The answer to that question had brushed past him many times, but his grasp—and its—had never quite been firm enough . . .

The key rattled in the door, and the hinges creaked.

"You should oil that. Machinery lasts longer if you maintain it properly," he said as he stood.

The jailer didn't reply, merely waving him out of the cell. Two young guards stood with the turnkey, beardless boys of twenty or so, Misha thought, their heads tilted up with the arrogance common to the KGB. Forty years earlier and he might have done something about that, Filitov told himself. They were unarmed, after all, and he was a combat soldier for whom the taking of life was as natural as breathing. They were not effective soldiers. One look confirmed it. It was fine to be proud, but a soldier should also be wary . . .

Was that it? he thought suddenly. *Vatutin treats me with wariness despite the fact that he knows . . .*

But why?

"What does this mean?" Mancuso asked.

"Kinda hard for me to tell," Clark answered. "Probably some candyass in D.C. can't make up his mind. Happens all the time."

The two signals had arrived within twelve hours of one another. The first had aborted the mission and ordered the submarine back to open waters, but the second told *Dallas* to remain in the western Baltic and await further orders.

"I don't like being put on hold."

"Nobody does, Captain."

"How does it affect you?" Mancuso asked.

Clark shrugged eloquently. "A lot of this is mental. Like you work up to play

a ball game. Don't sweat it, Cap'n. I teach this sort of thing—when I'm not actually doing it."

"How many?"

"Can't say, but most of them went pretty well."

"Most—not all? But when they don't—"

"It gets real exciting for everybody." Clark smiled. "Especially me. I have some great stories, but I can't tell 'em. Well, I expect you do, too."

"One or two. Does take some of the fun out of life, doesn't it?" The two men traded an insider's look.

Ryan was shopping alone. His wife's birthday was coming up—it would happen during his next Moscow trip—and he had to get everything out of the way early. The jewelry stores were always a good place to start. Cathy still wore the heavy gold necklace he'd given her a few years before, and he was looking for earrings that would go with it. The problem was that he had trouble remembering the exact pattern . . . His hangover didn't help, nor did his nervousness. What if they didn't bite?

"Hello, Dr. Ryan," a familiar voice said. Jack turned with some surprise.

"I didn't know they let you guys come out this far." *Act II, Scene 1*. Jack didn't let his relief show. In that respect the hangover helped.

"The travel radius cuts right through Garfinckels, if you examine the map carefully," Sergey Platonov pointed out. "Shopping for your wife?"

"I'm sure my file gave you all the necessary clues."

"Yes, her birthday." He looked down at the display case. "A pity that I cannot afford such things for mine . . ."

"If you were to make the appropriate overtures, the Agency could probably arrange something, Sergey Nikolay'ch."

"But the *Rodina* might not understand," Platonov said. "A problem with which you are becoming familiar, are you not?"

"You're remarkably well informed," Jack muttered.

"That is my function. I am also hungry. Perhaps you might use some of your fortune to buy me a sandwich?"

Ryan looked up and down the mall with professional interest.

"Not today." Platonov chuckled. "A few of my fellow . . . a few of my comrades are busy today, more than usual, and I fear your FBI is undermanned for its surveillance task."

"A problem the KGB does not have," Jack observed as they moved away from the store.

"You might be surprised. Why do Americans assume that our intelligence organs are any different from yours?"

"If by that you mean screwed up, I suppose it's a comforting thought. How does a hot dog grab you?"

"If it's kosher," Platonov answered, then explained. "I'm not Jewish, as you know, but I prefer the taste."

"You've been here too long," Jack said with a grin.

"But the Washington area is such a nice place."

Jack walked into a fast-food shop that specialized in bagels and corned beef, but also served other fare. Service was quick, and the men took a white plastic

table that sat by itself in the center of the mall's corridor. Cleverly done, Jack thought. People could walk past and not hear more than a few random words. But he knew Platonov was a pro.

"I have heard that you face some rather unfortunate legal difficulties." With every word, Platonov smiled. It was supposed to appear that they were discussing ordinary pleasantries, Jack supposed, with the added dimension that his Russian colleague was enjoying himself.

"Do you believe that little prick last night? You know, one thing I actually admire about Russia is the way you handle—"

"Antisocial behavior? Yes—five years in a camp of strict regime. Our new openness does not extend to condoning sexual perversion. Your friend Trent made an acquaintance on his last trip to the Soviet Union. The young . . . *man* in question is now in such a camp." Platonov didn't say that he had refused to cooperate with the KGB, and so earned his sentence. Why confuse the issue? he thought.

"You can have him with my blessings. We have enough of them over here," Jack growled. He felt thoroughly awful; his eyes were pounding to escape from his head as a result of all the wine and insufficient sleep.

"So I have noticed. And may we have the SEC also?" Platonov asked.

"You know, I didn't do anything wrong. Not a damned thing! I got a tip from a friend and I followed up on it. I didn't go looking for it, it just happened. So I made a few bucks—so what? I write intelligence briefs for the President! I'm good at it—and they're coming after *me!* After all the—" Ryan stopped and stared painfully into Platonov's eyes. "So what the hell do you care?"

"Ever since we first met at Georgetown some years ago, frankly I have admired you. That business with the terrorists. I do not agree with your political views, as you plainly do not agree with mine. But as one man to another, you took some vermin off the street. You may choose to believe this or not, but I have argued against State support for such animals. True Marxists who want to free their peoples—yes, we should support them in any way we can—but bandits are murderers, they are mere scum who view us as a source of arms, nothing more. My country gains nothing by it. Politics aside, you are a man of courage and honor. Of course I respect that. It is a pity that your country does not. America only places its best men on pedestals so that lesser ones can use them as targets."

Ryan's wary look was replaced briefly with one of measurement. "You have that one right."

"So, my friend—what will they do to you?"

Jack let out a long breath as he focused his eyes down the corridor. "I have to get a lawyer this week. I suppose he'll know. I'd hoped to avoid that. I thought I could talk my way out of it, but—but this new bastard in SEC, a pansy that Trent—" Another breath. "Trent used his influence to get the job for him. How much you want to bet that the two of them . . . I find myself in agreement with you. If one must have enemies, they should at least be enemies you can respect."

"And CIA cannot help you?"

"I don't have many friends there—well, you know that. Moved up too fast,

richest kid on the block, Greer's fair-haired boy, my connections with the Brits. You make enemies that way, too. Sometimes I wonder if one of them might have . . . I can't prove it, but you wouldn't believe the computer network we have at Langley, and all my stock transactions are stored in computer systems . . . and you know what? Computer records can be changed by someone who knows how . . . But try to prove that one, pal." Jack took two aspirins from a small tin and swallowed them.

"Ritter doesn't like me at all, never has. I made him look bad on something a few years back, and he isn't the sort of man to forget that sort of thing. Maybe one of his people . . . he has some good ones. The Admiral wants to help, but he's old. The Judge is on his way out, supposed to have left a year ago, but he's hanging on somehow—he couldn't help me if he wanted to."

"The President likes your work. We know that."

"The President's a lawyer, a prosecutor. He gets even a whiff that you might have bent a law, and—it's amazing how quick you can get lonely. There's a bunch in the State Department who're after my ass, too. I don't see things quite their way. This is a bitch of a town to be honest in."

It's correct, then, Platonov thought. They'd gotten the report first from Peter Henderson, code-named Cassius, who'd been feeding data to the KGB for over ten years, first as special assistant to the retired Senator Donaldson of the Senate's intelligence committee, now an intelligence analyst for the General Accounting Office. KGB knew Ryan to be the bright, rising star of the CIA's Intelligence Directorate. His evaluation at Moscow Center had at first called him a wealthy dilettante. That had changed a few years ago. He'd done something to earn him presidential attention, and now wrote nearly half of the special intelligence briefing papers that went to the White House. It was known from Henderson that he had assembled a massive report on the strategic-arms situation, one that had raised hackles at Foggy Bottom. Platonov had long since formed his own impression. A good judge of character, from their first meeting at Georgetown's Galleria he'd deemed Ryan a bright opponent, and a brave one—but a man too accustomed to privilege, too easily outraged at personal attack. Sophisticated, but strangely naive. What he saw over lunch confirmed it. Fundamentally, Ryan was too American. He saw things in blacks and whites, goods and bads. But what mattered today was that Ryan had felt himself invincible, and was only now learning that this was not the case. Because of that, Ryan was an angry man.

"All that work wasted," Jack said after a few seconds. "They're going to trash my recommendations."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Ernest *Fucking* Allen has talked the President into putting SDI on the table." It required all of Platonov's professionalism not to react visibly to that statement. Ryan went on: "It's all been for nothing. They've discredited my analysis because of this idiot stock thing. The Agency isn't backing me up like they should. They're throwing me to the fucking dogs. Not a damned thing I can do about it, either." Jack finished off the hot dog.

"One can always take action," Platonov suggested.

"Revenge? I've thought of that. I could go to the papers, but the *Post* is going to run a story about the SEC thing. Somebody on the Hill is

orchestrating the hanging party. Trent, I suppose. I bet he put that reporter on me last night, too, the bastard. If I try to get the real word out, well, who'll listen? Christ, I'm putting my tight little ass on the line just sitting here with you, Sergey."

"Why do you say that?"

"Why don't you guess?" Ryan allowed himself a smile that ended abruptly. "I'm not going to go to jail. I'd rather die than have to disgrace myself like that. God damn it, I've risked my life—I've put it all on the line. Some things you know about, and one that you don't. I have risked my life for this country, and they want to send me to prison!"

"Perhaps we can help." The offer finally came across.

"Defect? You have to be joking. You don't really expect me to live in your workers' paradise, do you?"

"No, but for the proper incentive, perhaps we could change your situation. There will be witnesses against you. They could have accidents . . ."

"Don't give me that shit!" Jack leaned forward. "You don't do jobs like that in our country and we don't do them in yours."

"Everything has a price. Surely you understand that better than I." Platonov smiled. "For example, the 'disaster' Mr. Trent referred to last night. What might that have been?"

"And how do I know who you're really working for?" Jack asked.

"What?" That surprised him. Ryan saw past the pain in his sinuses.

"You want an incentive? Sergey, I am about to put my life on the line. Just because I've done it before, don't you think that it's easy. We have somebody inside Moscow Center. Somebody big. You tell me now what that name would buy me."

"Your freedom," Platonov said at once. "If he's as high as you say, we would do very much indeed." Ryan didn't say a word for over a minute. The two men stared at each other as though over cards, as though they were gambling for everything each man owned—and as though Ryan knew that he held the lesser hand. Platonov matched the power of the American's stare, and was gratified to see that it was his power that prevailed.

"I'm flying to Moscow the end of the week, unless the story breaks before then, in which case I'm fucked. What I just told you, pal, it doesn't go through channels. The only person I'm sure it *isn't* is Gerasimov. It goes to the Chairman himself, direct to him, no intermediaries, or you risk losing the name."

"And why am I supposed to believe you know it?" The Russian pressed his advantage, but carefully.

It was Jack's turn to smile. His hole card had turned out to be a good one. "I don't know the *name*, but I know the data. With the four things that I know came from CON-DUCTOR—that's the code name—your troops can handle the rest. If your letter goes through channels, probably I don't get on the airplane. That's how far up the chain he is—if it's a he, but it probably is. How do I know you'll keep your word?"

"In the intelligence business one must keep one's promises," Platonov assured him.

"Then tell your Chairman that I want to meet him if he can arrange it. Man

to man. No bullshit."

"The Chairman? The Chairman doesn't—"

"Then I'll make my own legal arrangements and take my chances. I'm not going to jail for treason either, if I can help it. That's the deal, Comrade Platonov," Jack concluded. "Have a nice drive home."

Jack rose and walked away. Platonov did not follow. He looked around and found his own security man, who signaled that they had not been observed.

And he had his own decision to make. Was Ryan genuine? Cassius said so.

He had run Agent Cassius for three years. Peter Henderson's data had always checked out. They'd used him to track down and arrest a colonel in Strategic Rocket Forces who'd been working for CIA, had gotten priceless strategic and political intelligence, and even inside American analysis of that *Red October* business of the previous—no, it was two years now, wasn't it, right before Senator Donaldson had retired—and now that he worked in the GAO, he had the best of all possible worlds: direct access to classified defense data and all his political contacts on the Hill. Cassius had told them some time before that Ryan was under investigation. At the time it had been merely a tidbit, no one had taken it seriously. The Americans were always investigating one another. It was their national sport. Then a second time he'd heard the same story, then the scene with Trent. Was it really possible . . . ?

A leak high up in KGB, Platonov thought. There was a protocol, of course, for getting important data directly to the Chairman. The KGB allowed for any possibility. Once that message was sent, it would have to be followed up. Just the hint that CIA had an agent high in the KGB hierarchy . . .

But that was only one consideration.

Once we set the hook, we will own Dr. Ryan. Perhaps he is foolish enough to think that a one-time exchange of information for services is possible, that he will never again . . . more likely that he is so desperate that he does not care at the moment. What kind of information might we get from him?

Special assistant to the Deputy Director for Intelligence! Ryan must see nearly everything! To recruit so valuable an agent—that hadn't been done since Philby, and *that* was over fifty years ago!

But is it important enough to break the rules? Platonov asked himself as he finished off his drink. Not in living memory had the KGB committed an act of violence in the United States—there *was* a gentlemen's agreement on that. But what were rules against this sort of advantage? Perhaps an American or two might have an auto accident, or an unexpected heart attack. That would also have to be approved by the Chairman. Platonov would give his recommendation. It would be followed. He was sure of that.

The diplomat was a fastidious man. He wiped his face with the paper napkin, put all the trash in the paper drink cup, and deposited it in the nearest receptacle. He left nothing behind to suggest that he'd ever been there.

The Archer was sure that they were winning. On announcing his mission to his subordinates, the reaction could not have been better. Grim, amused smiles, sideways looks, nods. The most enthusiastic of all had been their new member, the former Major of the Afghan Army. In their tent, twenty kilometers inside Afghanistan, the plans had been put together in five tense

hours.

The Archer looked down at phase one, already complete. Six trucks and three BTR-60 infantry carriers were in their hands. Some were damaged, but that was not unexpected. The dead soldiers of the puppet army were being stripped of their uniforms. Eleven survivors were being questioned. They would not join in this mission, of course, but if they proved to be reliable, they would be allowed to join allied guerrilla bands. For the others . . .

The former Army officer recovered maps and radio codes. He knew all the procedures that the Russians had so assiduously taught to their Afghan "brothers."

There was a battalion base camp ten kilometers away, due north on the Shékábád road. The former Major contacted it on the radio, indicating that "Sunflower" had repulsed the ambush with moderate losses and was heading in. This was approved by the battalion commander.

They loaded a few of the bodies aboard, still in their bloody uniforms. Trained former members of the Afghan Army manned the heavy machine guns on the BTR carriers as the column moved out, keeping proper tactical formation on the gravel road. The base camp was just on the far side of the river. Twenty minutes later they could see it. The bridge had long since been wrecked, but Russian engineers had dumped enough gravel to make a ford. The column halted at the guard post on the east side.

This was the tense part. The Major made the proper signal, and the guard post waved them through. One by one the vehicles moved across the river. The surface was frozen and the drivers had to follow a line of sticks across to keep from becoming trapped in the deep water that lay under the crackling ice. Another five hundred meters.

The base camp was on a small rise. It was surrounded by low-lying bunkers made of sandbags and logs. None were fully manned. The camp was well sited, with wide fields of fire in all directions, but they'd only man their weapons pits fully at night. Only a single company of troops was actually in the post, while the remainder were out patrolling the hills around the camp. Besides, the column was coming in at mealtime. The battalion motor pool was in sight.

The Archer was in the front of the lead truck. He wondered to himself why he trusted the defected Major so fully, but decided that this was not a good time for that particular worry.

The battalion commander came out of his bunker, his mouth working on some food as he watched the soldiers jump out of the trucks. He was waiting for the unit commander, and showed some annoyance as the side door on the BMP opened slowly, and a man in an officer's uniform appeared.

"Who the devil are you?"

"Allahu akhbar!" the Major screamed. His rifle cut down the questioner. The heavy machine guns on the infantry carriers ripped into the mass of men eating their noon meal while the Archer's men raced to the half-manned bunkers. It took ten minutes before all resistance ceased, but there was never a chance for the defenders, not with nearly a hundred armed men inside the camp. Twenty prisoners were taken. The only Russians in the post—two lieutenants and a communications sergeant—were killed out of hand and the

rest were placed under guard as the Major's men ran to the motor pool.

They got two more BTRs there and four trucks. That would have to be enough. The rest they burned. They burned everything they couldn't carry. They took four mortars, half a dozen machine guns, and every spare uniform they could find. The rest of the camp was totally destroyed—especially the radios, which were first smashed with rifle butts, then burned. A small guard force was left behind with the prisoners, who would also be given the chance to join the *mudjaheddin*—or die for their loyalty to the infidel.

It was fifty kilometers to Kabul. The new, larger vehicle column ran north. More of the Archer's men linked up with it, hopping aboard the vehicles. His force now numbered two hundred men, dressed and equipped like regular soldiers of the Afghan Army, rolling north in Russian-built army vehicles.

Time was their most dangerous enemy. They reached the outskirts of Kabul ninety minutes later, and encountered the first of several checkpoints.

The Archer's skin crawled to be near so many Russian soldiers. When dusk came, the Russians returned to their laagers and bunkers, he knew, leaving the streets to the Afghans, but even the setting sun did not make him feel secure. The checks were more perfunctory than he expected, and the Major talked his way through all of them, using travel documents and code words from the base camp so recently extinguished. More to the point, their route of travel kept them away from the most secure parts of the city. In less than two hours the city was behind them, and they rolled forward under the friendly darkness.

They went until they began to run out of fuel. At this point the vehicles were rolled off the roads. A Westerner would have been surprised that the *mudjaheddin* were happy to leave their vehicles behind, even though it meant carrying weapons on their backs. Well rested, the guerrillas moved at once into the hills, heading north.

The day had held nothing but bad news, Gerasimov noted, as he stared at Colonel Vatutin. "What do you mean, you cannot break him?"

"Comrade Chairman, our medical people advise me that both the sensory-deprivation procedure, or any form of physical abuse"—*torture* was no longer a word used at KGB headquarters—"might kill the man. In view of your insistence on a confession, we must use . . . primitive interrogation methods. The subject is a difficult man. Mentally, he is far tougher than any of us expected," Vatutin said as evenly as he could. He would have killed for a drink at the moment.

"All because you bungled the arrest!" Gerasimov observed coldly. "I had high hopes for you, *Colonel*. I thought you were a man with a future. I thought you were ready for advancement. Was I mistaken, Comrade Colonel?" he inquired.

"My concern with this case is limited to exposing a traitor to the Motherland." It required all of Vatutin's discipline not to flinch. "I feel that I have already done this. We know that he has committed treason. We have the evidence—"

"Yazov will not accept it."

"Counterintelligence is a KGB matter, not one for the Defense Ministry."

"Perhaps you would be so kind as to explain that to the Party General Secretary," Gerasimov said, letting his anger out a bit too far. "Colonel Vatutin, I must have this confession."

Gerasimov had hoped to score another intelligence coup today, but the FLASH report from America had invalidated it—worse still, Gerasimov had delivered the information a day before he'd learned that it was valueless. Agent Livia was apologetic, the report said, but the computer-program data so recently transmitted through Lieutenant Bisyarina was, unfortunately, obsolete. Something that might have helped to smooth the water between KGB and the Defense Ministry's darling new project was now gone.

He had to have a confession, and it had to be a confession that was not extracted by torture. Everyone knew that torture could yield anything that the questioners wanted, that most subjects would have enough incentive in their pain to say whatever was required of them. He needed something good enough to take to the Politburo itself, and the Politburo members no longer held KGB in so much fear that they would take Gerasimov's words at face value.

"Vatutin, I need it, and I need it soon. When can you deliver?"

"Using the methods to which we are now limited, no more than two weeks. We can deprive him of sleep. That takes time, more so since the elderly need less sleep than the young. He will gradually become disoriented and crack. Given what we have learned of this man, he will fight us with all of his courage—this is a brave man. But he is only a man. Two weeks," Vatutin said, knowing that ten more days ought to be sufficient. Better to deliver early.

"Very well." Gerasimov paused. It was time for encouragement. "Comrade Colonel, objectively speaking you have handled the investigation well, despite the disappointment at the final phase. It is unreasonable to expect perfection in all things, and the political complications are not of your making. If you provide what is required, you will be properly rewarded. Carry on."

"Thank you, Comrade Chairman." Gerasimov watched him leave, then called for his car.

The Chairman of the KGB did not travel alone. His personal Zil—a handmade limousine that looked like an oversized American car of thirty years before—was followed by an even uglier Volga, full of bodyguards selected for their combat skills and absolute loyalty to the office of chairman. Gerasimov sat alone in the back, watching the buildings of Moscow flash by as the car was routed down the center lane of the wide avenues. Soon he was out of the city, heading into the forests where the Germans had been stopped in 1941.

Many of those captured—those who had survived typhus and poor food—had built the dachas. As much as the Russians still hated the Germans, the *nomenklatura*—the ruling class of this classless society—was addicted to German workmanship. Siemens electronics and Blaupunkt appliances were as much a part of their homes as the copies of *Pravda* and the uncensored "White TASS" news. The frame dwellings in the pine forests west of Moscow were as well built as anything left behind by the czars. Gerasimov often wondered what had happened to the German soldiers who had labored to make them. Not that it mattered.

The official dacha of Academician Mikhail Petrovich Alexandrov was no different from the rest, two stories, its wood siding painted cream, and a steeply pitched roof that might have been equally at home in the Black Forest. The driveway was a twisty gravel path through the trees. Only one car was parked there. Alexandrov was a widower, and past the age when he might crave young female company. Gerasimov opened his own door, checking briefly to see that his security entourage was dispersing as usual into the trees. They paused only to pull cold-weather gear from the trunk of their car, thickly insulated white anoraks and heavy boots to keep their feet warm in the snow.

"Nikolay Borissovich!" Alexandrov got the door himself. The dacha had a couple who did the cooking and cleaning, but they knew when to stay out of the way. This was such a time. The academician took Gerasimov's coat and draped it on a peg by the door.

"Thank you, Mikhail Petrovich."

"Tea?" Alexandrov gestured toward the table in the sitting room.

"It is cold out there," Gerasimov admitted.

The two men sat on opposite sides of the table in old overstuffed chairs. Alexandrov enjoyed being a host—at least to his associates. He poured the tea, then dished out a small amount of white-cherry preserves. They drank their tea in the traditional way, first putting some of the sweetened cherries into their mouths, then letting the tea wash around them. It made conversation awkward, but it was Russian. More to the point, Alexandrov liked the old ways. As much as he was married to the ideals of Marxism, the Politburo's chief ideologue kept to the ways of his youth in the small things.

"What news?"

Gerasimov gestured annoyance. "The spy Filitov is a tough old bird. It will take another week or two to get the confession."

"You should shoot that Colonel of yours who—"

The KGB Chairman shook his head. "No, no. One must be objective. Colonel Vatutin has done very well. He ought to have left the actual arrest to a younger man, but I told him that it was his case, and he doubtless took my instructions too literally. His handling of the rest of the case was nearly perfect."

"You grow generous too soon, Kolya," Alexandrov observed. "How hard is it to surprise a seventy-year-old man?"

"Not him. The American spy was a good one—as one might expect. Good field officers have sharp instincts. If they were not so skilled, World Socialism would have been realized by now," he added offhandedly. Alexandrov lived within his academic world, the Chairman knew, and had little understanding of how things worked in the real one. It was hard to respect a man like that, but not so hard to fear him.

The older man grunted. "I suppose we can wait a week or two. It troubles me to do this while the American delegation is here—"

"It will be after they leave. If agreement is reached, we lose nothing."

"It is madness to reduce our arms!" Alexandrov insisted. Mikhail Petrovich still thought nuclear weapons were like tanks and guns: the more, the better. Like most political theorists, he didn't bother learning facts.

"We will retain the newest and the best of our rockets," Gerasimov

explained patiently. “More importantly, our Project Bright Star is progressing well. With what our own scientists have already accomplished, and what we are learning about the American program, in less than ten years we will have the ability to protect the *Rodina* against foreign attack.”

“You have good sources within the American effort?”

“Too good,” Gerasimov said, setting down his tea. “It seems that some data we just received was sent out too soon. Part of the American computer instructions were sent to us before they were certified, and turned out to be faulty. An embarrassment, but if one must be embarrassed, better that it should result from being too effective than not effective enough.”

Alexandrov dismissed the subject with a wave of the hand. “I spoke to Vaneyev last night.”

“And?”

“He is ours. He cannot bear the thought of that darling slut of a daughter in a labor camp—or worse. I explained what is required of him. It was very easy. Once you have the confession from the Filitov bastard, we will do everything at the same time. Better to accomplish everything at once.” The academician nodded to reinforce his words. He was the expert on political maneuvering.

“I am troubled by possible reactions from the West . . .” Gerasimov noted cautiously.

The old fox smiled into his tea. “Narmonov will have a heart attack. He is of the proper age. Not a fatal one, of course, but enough to make him step aside. We will assure the West that his policies will continue—I can even live with the arms agreement if you insist.” Alexandrov paused. “It does make sense to avoid alarming them unduly. All that concerns me is the primacy of the Party.”

“Naturally.” Gerasimov knew what was to follow, and leaned back to hear it yet again.

“If we don’t stop Narmonov, the Party is doomed! The fool, casting away all we have worked for. Without the leadership of the Party, a *German* would be living in this house! Without Stalin to put steel in the people’s backbone, where would we be, and Narmonov condemns our greatest hero—after Lenin,” the academician added quickly. “This country needs a strong hand, *one* strong hand, not a thousand little ones! Our people understand that. Our people *want* that.”

Gerasimov nodded agreement, wondering why this doddering old fool always had to say the same thing. The Party didn’t want one strong hand, much as Alexandrov denied the fact. The Party itself was composed of a thousand little, grabbing, grasping hands: the Central Committee members, the local *apparatchiki* who had paid their dues, mouthed their slogans, attended the weekly meetings until they were sick to death of everything the Party said, but still stayed on because that was the path to advancement, and advancement meant privilege. Advancement meant a car, and trips to Sochi . . . and Blaupunkt appliances.

All men had their blind spots, Gerasimov knew. Alexandrov’s was that so few people really believed in the Party anymore. Gerasimov did not. The Party was what ran the country, however. The Party was what nurtured ambitions. Power had its own justification, and for him, the Party was the path to power.

He'd spent all of his working life protecting the Party from those who wished to change the power equation. Now, as Chairman of the Party's own "sword and shield," he was in the best possible position to take the Party's reins. Alexandrov would have been surprised, scandalized to learn that his young student saw power as his only goal, and had no plan other than *status quo ante.* The Soviet Union would plod along as before, secure behind its borders, seeking to spread its own form of government into whatever country offered the opportunity. There would be progress, partly from internal changes, partly from what could be obtained from the West, but not enough to raise expectations too much, or too rapidly, as Narmonov threatened to do. But best of all, Gerasimov would be the man with the reins. With the power of the KGB behind him, he need not fear for his security—certainly not after breaking the Defense Ministry. So he listened to Alexandrov's ranting about Party theory, nodding when appropriate. To an outsider it would look like the thousands of old pictures—nearly all of them fakes—of Stalin listening with rapt attention to the words of Lenin, and like Stalin, he would use the words to his own advantage. Gerasimov believed in Gerasimov.

18.

Advantages

"**B**UT I just finished eating!" Misha said. "Rubbish," the jailer responded. He held out his watch. "Look at the time, you foolish old man. Eat up, it'll be time for your interrogation soon." The man bent forward. "Why don't you tell them what they want to hear, Comrade?"

"I am not traitor! I'm not!"

"As you wish. Eat hearty." The cell door hit its frame with a metallic rattle.

"I am not a traitor," Filitov said after the door closed. "I'm not," the microphone heard. "I'm not."

"We're getting there," Vatutin said.

What was happening to Filitov was little different in net effect from what the doctor was trying to achieve in the sensory-deprivation tank. The prisoner was losing touch with reality, though much more slowly than the Vaneyeva woman had. His cell was in the interior of the building, denying the prisoner the march of day and night. The single bare light bulb never went off. After a few days Filitov lost all track of what time was. Next his bodily functions began to show some irregularity. Then they started altering the interval between meals. His body knew that something was wrong, but it sensed that so many things were wrong, and was so unsuccessful in dealing with the disorientation, that what happened to the prisoner was actually akin to mental illness. It was a classic technique, and it was a rare individual indeed who could withstand it for more than two weeks, and then it was generally discovered that the successful resister had depended on some outside register unknown to his interrogators, such as traffic or plumbing sounds, sounds that followed regular patterns. Gradually "Two" had learned to isolate out all of these. The new block of special cells was sound-isolated from the rest of the world. Cooking was done on a floor above to eliminate smells. This part of Lefortovo reflected generations of clinical experience in the business of breaking the human spirit.

It was better than torture, Vatutin thought. Torture invariably affected the interrogators, too. That was the problem. Once a man—and in rare cases, a woman—became too good at it, that person's mind changed. The torturer would gradually go mad, resulting in unreliable interrogation results and a useless KGB officer who would then have to be replaced, and, occasionally, hospitalized. In the 1930s such officers had often been shot when their political masters realized what they had created, only to be replaced with new ones until interrogators looked for more creative, more intelligent methods. Better for everyone, Colonel Vatutin knew. The new techniques, even the abusive ones, inflicted no permanent physical harm. Now it almost seemed

that they were treating the mental illnesses that they inflicted, and the physicians who managed the affair for the KGB could now confidently observe that treason against the Motherland was itself a symptom of a grave personality disorder, something that demanded decisive treatment. It made everyone feel better about the job. While one could feel guilty inflicting pain on a brave enemy, one need only feel good about helping to cure a sick mind.

This one is sicker than most, Vatutin thought wryly. He was a touch too cynical to believe all the folderol that the new crop of "Two" people got today in Training-and-Orientation. He remembered the nostalgic stories of the men who'd trained him almost thirty years before—the good old days under Beriya . . . Though his skin had crawled to hear those madmen speak, at least they were honest about what they did. Though he was grateful that he had not become like them, he didn't delude himself by believing that Filitov was mentally ill. He was, in fact, a courageous man who had chosen of his own free will to betray his country. An evil man, to be sure, because he had violated the rules of his parent society, he was a worthy adversary for all that. Vatutin looked into the fiber-optic tube that ran into the ceiling of Filitov's cell, watching him as he listened to the sound pickup from the microphone.

How long have you been working for the Americans? Since your family died? That *long? Nearly thirty years . . . is it possible?* the Colonel of the Second Chief Directorate wondered. It was an awesome amount of time. Kim Philby hadn't lasted nearly so long. Richard Sorge's career, though brilliant, had been a brief one.

But it made sense. There was also homage to pay to Oleg Penkovskiy, the treasonous GRU Colonel whose capture was one of "Two's" greatest cases—but now poisoned by the thought that Penkovskiy had used his own death to elevate the career of an even greater spy . . . whom he himself had probably recruited. That was courage, Vatutin told himself. *Why must such virtue be invested in treason!* he raged at himself. *Why can they not love their Motherland as I do?* The Colonel shook his head. Marxism demanded objectivity of its adherents, but this was too much. There was always the danger of identifying too closely with one's subject. He rarely had the problem, but then he had never handled a case like this one. Three times Hero of the Soviet Union! A genuine national icon whose face had been on the covers of magazines and books. Could we ever let it be known what he had done? How would the Soviet people react to the knowledge that Old Misha, Hero of Stalingrad, one of the most courageous warriors of the Red Army . . . had turned traitor to the *Rodina?* The effect on national morale was something to be considered.

Not my problem, he told himself. He watched the old man through the hi-tech peephole. Filitov was trying to eat his food, not quite believing that it was time to eat, but not knowing that his breakfast—all meals were the same, for obvious reasons—had been only ninety minutes before.

Vatutin stood and stretched to ease the ache in his back. A side effect of this technique was the way it disrupted the lives of the interrogators themselves. His own schedule was wrecked. It was just past midnight, and he'd gotten a bare seven hours of sleep in the past thirty-six. But at least he knew the time, and the day, and the season. Filitov, he was sure, did not. He bent back down to see his subject finishing off his bowl of kasha.

“Get him,” Colonel Klementi Vladimirovich Vatutin ordered. He walked into the washroom to splash some cold water on his face. He peered into the mirror and decided that he didn’t need to shave. Next he made sure that his uniform was perfectly turned out. The one constant factor in the prisoner’s disrupted world had to be the face and image of his interrogator. Vatutin even practiced his look in the mirror: proud, arrogant, but also compassionate. He was not ashamed of what he saw. That is a professional, he told himself of the reflection in the mirror. Not a barbarian, not a degenerate, but only a skilled man doing a difficult, necessary job.

Vatutin was seated in the interrogation room, as always, when the prisoner came in. He invariably appeared to be doing something when the door opened, and his head always had to come up in semisurprise as though to say, *Oh, is it time for you again?* He closed the folder before him and placed it in his briefcase as Filitov sat in the chair opposite his. That was good, Vatutin noted without looking. The subject doesn’t have to be told what he must do. His mind was fixing upon the only reality he had: Vatutin.

“I hope you slept well,” he told Filitov.

“Well enough,” was the answer. The old man’s eyes were clouded. The blue no longer had the luster that Vatutin had admired in their first session.

“You are being properly fed, I trust?”

“I have eaten better.” A weary smile, still some defiance and pride behind it, but not as much as its wearer thought. “But I have also eaten worse.”

Vatutin dispassionately gauged the strength in his prisoner; it had diminished. *You know*, the Colonel thought, *you know that you must lose. You know that it is only a matter of time. I can see it*, he said with his eyes, looking for and finding weakness under his stare. Filitov was trying not to wilt under the strain, but the edges were frayed, and something else was coming loose as Vatutin watched. *You know you’re losing, Filitov.*

What is the point, Misha? part of him asked. *He has time-he* controls *time. He’ll use all he needs to break you. He’s winning. You know that*, despair told him.

Tell me, Comrade Captain, why do you ask yourself such foolish things? Why do you need to explain to yourself why you are a man? asked a familiar voice. *All the way from Brest-Litovsk to Vyasma we knew we were losing, but I never quit, and neither did you. If you can defy the German Army, certainly you can defy this city-soft slug of a chekist!*

Thank you, Romanov.

How did you ever get on without me, my Captain? the voice chuckled. *For all your intelligence, you can be a most foolish man.*

Vatutin saw that something had changed. The eyes blinked clear, and the weary old back straightened.

What is sustaining you? Hate? Do you so detest the State for what happened to your family . . . or is it something else entirely . . . ?

“Tell me,” Vatutin said. “Tell me why you hate the Motherland.”

“I do not,” Filitov replied. “I have killed for the Motherland. I have bled for the Motherland. I have *burned* for the Motherland. But I did not do these things for the likes of you.” For all his weakness, the defiance blazed in his

eyes like a flame. Vatutin was unmoved.

I was close, but something changed. If I can find what that is, Filitov, I will have you! Something told Vatutin that he already had what he needed. The trick was to identify it.

The interrogation continued. Though Filitov would successfully resist this time, and the next time, and even the time after that, Vatutin was drawing down on the man's physical and emotional energy. Both knew it. It was just a matter of time. But on one issue both men were wrong. Both thought that Vatutin controlled time, even though time is man's final master.

Gerasimov was surprised by the new FLASH dispatch from America, this one from Platonov. It arrived by cable, alerting him to an Eyes-Only-Chairman message en route in the diplomatic pouch. That was truly unusual. The KGB, more than other foreign-intelligence agencies, still depended on one-time-pad cipher systems. These were unbreakable, even in a theoretical sense, unless the code sequence itself were compromised. It was slow, but it was sure, and the KGB wanted "sure." Beyond that level of transmission, however, was another protocol. For each major station, there was a special cipher. It didn't even have a name, but ran directly from the *rezident* to the Chairman. Platonov was more important than even CIA suspected. He was the *rezident* for Washington, the chief of station.

When the dispatch arrived, it was brought directly to Gerasimov's office. His personal code clerk, a captain with impeccable credentials, was not called. The Chairman deciphered the first sentence himself, to learn that this was a mole warning. The KGB did not have a stock term for a traitor within its own ranks, but the higher ranks knew the Western word.

The dispatch was a lengthy one and took Gerasimov fully an hour to decode, cursing all the while at his clumsiness as he deciphered the random transpositions in the thirty-threeletter Russian alphabet.

An agent-in-place inside KGB? Gerasimov wondered. *How high?* He summoned his personal secretary and ordered the files on Agent Cassius, and Ryan, I.P., of CIA. As with all such orders, it didn't take long. He set Cassius aside for the moment and opened the file on Ryan.

There was a six-page biographical sketch, updated only six months previously, plus original newspaper clippings and translations. He didn't need the latter. Gerasimov spoke acceptable though accented English. Age thirty-five, he saw, with credentials in the business world, academia, and the intelligence community. He'd advanced rapidly within CIA. Special liaison officer to London. His first short-form evaluation at Dzerzhinskiy Square had been colored by some analyst's political views, Gerasimov saw. A rich, soft dilettante. No, that was not right. He'd advanced too rapidly for that, unless he had political influence that appeared absent from the profile. Probably a bright man—an author, Gerasimov saw, noting that there were copies of two of his books in Moscow. Certainly a proud one, accustomed to comfort and privilege.

So you broke American money-exchange laws, did you? The thought came easily to the KGB Chairman. Corruption was the way to wealth and power in any society. Ryan had his flaw, as did all men. Gerasimov knew that his own

flaw was a lust for power, but he deemed the desire for anything less the mark of a fool. He turned back to Platonov's dispatch.

"Evaluation," the message concluded. "The subject is motivated neither by ideological nor by monetary considerations, but by anger and ego. He has a genuine fear of prison, but more of the personal disgrace. I. P. Ryan probably has the information which he claims. If CIA does have a highly placed mole in Moscow Center, it is likely that Ryan has seen data from him, though not the name or face. The data should be sufficient to identify the leak.

"Recommendation: The offer should be accepted for two reasons. First, to identify the American spy. Second, to make use of Ryan in the future. The unique opportunity offered has two faces. If we eliminate witnesses against the subject, he is in our debt. If this action is discovered, it can be blamed on CIA, and the resulting inquiries will damage the American intelligence service severely."

"Hmm," Gerasimov murmured to himself as he set the file aside.

Agent Cassius's file was far thicker. He was on his way to becoming one of KGB's best sources in Washington. Gerasimov had already read this one several times, and merely skimmed until he reached the most recent information. Two months earlier, Ryan had been investigated, details unknown—Cassius had reported it as unsubstantiated gossip. That was a point in its favor, the Chairman thought. It also disconnected Ryan's overtures from anything else that had developed recently . . .

Filitov?

What if the highly placed agent whom Ryan could identify was the one we just arrested? Gerasimov wondered.

No. Ryan was himself sufficiently high in CIA that he would not confuse one ministry with another. The only bad news was that a leak high in KGB wasn't something Gerasimov needed at the moment. Bad enough that it existed at all, but to let the word get outside the building . . . That could be a disaster. *If we launched a real investigation, word will get out. If we don't find the spy in our own midst . . . and if he's placed as highly as this Ryan says . . . what if CIA discovered what Alexandrov and I . . . ?*

What would they do?

What if this . . . ?

Gerasimov smiled and looked out the window. He'd miss this place. He'd miss the game. Every fact had at least three sides, and every thought had six. No, if he were to believe that, then he had to believe that Cassius was under CIA control, and that this had all been planned before Filitov had been arrested. That was plainly impossible.

The Chairman of the Committee for State Security checked his calendar to see when the Americans were coming over. There would be more social affairs this time. If the Americans had really decided to put their Star Wars systems on the table—it would make General Secretary Narmonov look good, but how many Politburo votes would that sway? *Not many, so long as I can keep Alexandrov's obstinacy in control. And if I can show that I've recruited an agent of our own that high in CIA . . . if I can predict that the Americans will trade away their defense programs, then I can steal a march on Narmonov's peace initiative myself . . .*

The decision was made.

But Gerasimov was not an impulsive man. He sent a signal to Platonov to verify some details through Agent Cassius. This signal he could send via satellite.

That signal arrived in Washington an hour later. It was duly copied from the Soviet Raduga-19 communications bird both by the Soviet Embassy and by the American National Security Agency, which put it on a computer tape along with thousands of other Russian signals that the Agency worked round the clock to decipher.

It was easier for the Soviets. The signal was taken to a secure section of the embassy, where a KGB lieutenant converted the scrambled letters into clear text. Then it was locked up in a guarded safe until Platonov arrived in the morning.

That happened at 6:30. The usual newspapers were on his desk. The American press was very useful to the KGB, he thought. The idea of a free press was so alien to him that he never even considered its true function. But other things came first. The night-watch officer came in at 6:45 and briefed him on the events of the previous night, and also delivered messages from Moscow, where it was already after lunch. At the top of the message list was a notice of an eyes-only-*rezident*. Platonov knew what that had to be, and walked to the safe at once. The young KGB officer who guarded this part of the embassy checked Platonov's ID scrupulously—his predecessor had lost his job by being so bold as to assume that he knew Platonov by sight after a mere nine months. The message, properly labeled in a sealed envelope, was in its proper cubbyhole, and Platonov tucked it in his pocket before closing and locking the door.

The KGB's Washington station was larger than that of CIA in Moscow, though not large enough to suit Platonov, since the number of people in the mission had been reduced to numerical equivalence with the American Embassy staff in the Soviet Union, something the Americans had taken years to do. He usually summoned his section chiefs at 7:30 for their morning conference, but today he called one of his officers early.

"Good morning, Comrade Colonel," the man said correctly. The KGB is not known for its pleasantries.

"I need you to get some information from Cassius on this Ryan business. It is imperative that we confirm his current legal difficulties as quickly as possible. That means today if you can manage it."

"Today?" the man asked in some discomfort as he took the written instructions. "There is risk in moving so rapidly."

"The Chairman is aware of that," Platonov observed dryly.

"Today," the man nodded.

The *rezident* smiled inwardly as his man left. That was as much emotion as he'd shown in a month. This one had a real future.

"There's Butch," an FBI agent observed as the man came out of the embassy compound. They knew his real name, of course, but the first agent who'd shadowed him had noted that he looked like a Butch, and the name had stuck.

His normal morning routine was ostensibly to unlock a few embassy offices, then to run errands before the senior diplomatic personnel appeared at nine. That involved catching breakfast at a nearby coffee shop, buying several newspapers and magazines . . . and frequently leaving a mark or two in one of several places. As with most counterintelligence operations, the really hard part was getting the first break. After that it was straight police work. They'd gotten the first break on Butch eighteen months before.

He walked the four blocks to the shop, well dressed for the cold—he probably found Washington winters pretty mild, they all agreed—and turned into the place right on schedule. As with most coffee shops, this one had a regular trade. Three of them were FBI agents. One was dressed like a businesswoman, always reading her *Wall Street Journal* by herself in a corner booth. Two wore the toolbelts of carpenters, and swaggered to the counter either before or after Butch entered. Today they were waiting for him. They were not always there, of course. The woman, Special Agent Hazel Loomis, coordinated her schedule with a real business, careful to miss work holidays. It was a risk, but a close surveillance, no matter how carefully planned, could not be too regular. Similarly, they appeared at the café on days when they knew Butch was away, never altering their routine to show that their interest was in their subject.

Agent Loomis noted his arrival time on the margin of an article—she was always scribbling on the paper—and the carpenters watched him in the mirrored wall behind the counter as they savaged their way through their hash-browns and traded a few boisterous jokes. As usual, Butch had gotten four different papers from a newsstand right outside the coffee shop. The magazines he got all hit the stands on Tuesdays. The waitress poured his coffee without being asked. Butch lit his customary cigarette—an American Marlboro, the favorite of the Russians—and drank his first cup of coffee as he scanned the first page of the *Washington Post*, which was *his* usual paper.

Refills were free here, and his arrived on schedule. He took a scant six minutes, which was about right, everyone noted. Finished, he picked up his papers and left some money on the table. When he moved away from the plate, they could all see that he'd crumpled his paper napkin to a ball and set it in the saucer next to the empty coffee cup.

Business, Loomis noted at once. Butch took his bill to the register at the end of the counter, paid it, and left. He was good, Loomis noted yet again. She knew where and how he made the drop, but still she rarely caught him planting it.

Another regular came in. He was a cabdriver who usually got a cup of coffee before beginning his day, and sat alone at the end of the counter. He opened his paper to the sports page, looking around the café as he usually did. He could see the napkin on the saucer. He wasn't quite as good as Butch. Setting the paper in his lap, he reached under the counter and retrieved the message, tucking it in the Style section.

After that, it was pretty easy. Loomis paid her bill and left, hopping into her Ford Escort and driving to the Watergate apartments. She had a key to Henderson's apartment.

"You're getting a message today from Butch," she told Agent Cassius.

"Okay." Henderson looked up from his breakfast. He didn't at all enjoy having this girl "running" him as a double agent. He especially didn't like the fact that she was on the case because of her looks, that the "cover" for their association was a supposed affair which, of course, was pure fiction. For all her sweetness, her syrupy Southern accent—and her stunning good looks! he grumped—Henderson knew all too well that Loomis viewed him as half a step above a microbe. "Just remember," she'd told him once, "there's a room waiting for you." She was referring to the United States Penitentiary—not "correctional facility"—at Marion, Illinois, the one that had replaced Alcatraz as the home of the worst offenders. No place for a Harvard man. But she'd only done that once, and otherwise treated him politely, even occasionally grabbing his arm in public. That only made it worse.

"You want some good news?" Loomis asked.

"Sure."

"If this one goes through the way we hope, you might be clear. All the way out." She'd never said that before.

"What gives?" Agent Cassius asked with interest.

"There's a CIA officer named Ryan—"

"Yeah, I heard the SEC's checking him out—well, they did, a few months back. You let me tell the Russians about that . . ."

"He's dirty. Broke the rules, made half a million dollars on insider information, and there's a grand jury meeting in two weeks that's going to burn his ass, big-time." Her profanity was all the more vivid from the sweet, Southern-Belle smile. "The Agency's going to hang him out to dry. No help from anybody. Ritter hates his guts. You don't know why, but you heard it from Senator Fredenburg's aide. You get the impression that's he's a sacrificial goat for something that went wrong, but you don't know what. Something a few months back in Central Europe, maybe, but that's all you heard. Some of it you tell right off. Some you make them wait till this afternoon. One more thing—you've heard a rumor that SDI may actually be on the table. You think it's bad information, but you heard a senator say something about it. Got it?"

"Yeah." Henderson nodded.

"Okay." Loomis walked off to the bathroom. Butch's favorite coffee shop was too greasy for her system.

Henderson went to his bedroom and selected a tie. *Out?* he wondered as he knotted it partway, then changed his mind. If that were true—he had to admit that she'd never lied to him. *Treated me like scum, but never lied to me,* he thought. *Then I can get out . . . ?* Then what? he asked himself. *Does it matter?*

It mattered, but it mattered more that he'd get out.

"I like the red one better," Loomis observed from the door. She smiled sweetly. "A 'power' tie for today, I think."

Henderson dutifully reached for the red one. It never occurred to him to object. "Can you tell me . . . ?"

"I don't know—and you know better. But they wouldn't let me say this unless everybody figured that you paid some back, Mr. Henderson."

"Can't you call me Peter, just once?" he asked.

"My father was the twenty-ninth pilot shot down over North Vietnam. They got him alive—there were pictures of him, alive—but he never came out."

"I didn't know."

She spoke as evenly as though discussing the weather. "You didn't know a lot of things, Mr. Henderson. They won't let me fly airplanes like Daddy did, but in the Bureau I make life as hard on the bastards as I can. They let me do that. I just hope that it hurts 'em like they've hurt me." She smiled again. "That's not very professional, is it?"

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I don't know what else to say."

"Sure you do. You'll tell your contact what I told you to say." She tossed him a miniature tape recorder. It had a special computerized timer and an antitamper device. While in the taxicab, he'd be under intermittent surveillance. If he tried to warn his contact in any way, there was a chance—how great or small he did not know—that he'd be detected. They didn't like him and they didn't trust him. He knew that he'd never earn affection or trust, but Henderson would settle for getting out.

He left his apartment a few minutes later and walked downstairs. There was the usual number of cabs circulating about. He didn't gesture, but waited for one to come to him. They didn't start talking until it pulled into the traffic on Virginia Avenue.

The cab took him to the General Accounting Office headquarters on G Street, Northwest. Inside the building, he handed the tape recorder over to another FBI agent. Henderson suspected that it was a radio as well, though actually it was not. The recorder went to the Hoover Building. Loomis was waiting when it got there. The tape was rewound and played.

"CIA got it right for once," she observed to her supervisor. Someone even more senior was here. This was more important than she'd thought, Loomis knew at once.

"It figures. A source like Ryan doesn't come along real often. Henderson got his lines down pretty good."

"I told him that this may be his ticket out." Her voice said more than that.

"You don't approve?" the Assistant Director asked. He ran all of the FBI's counterintel operations.

"He hasn't paid enough, not for what he did."

"Miss Loomis, after this is all over, I'll explain to you why you're wrong. Put that aside, okay? You've done a beautiful job handling this case. Don't blow it now."

"What'll happen to him?" she asked.

"The usual, into the witness-protection program. He may end up running the Wendy's in Billings, Montana, for all I know." The AD shrugged. "You're getting promoted and sent to the New York Field Office. We have another one we think you're ready for. There's a diplomat attached to the UN who needs a good handler."

"Okay." The smile this time was not forced.

"They bit. They bit hard," Ritter told Ryan. "I just hope you're up to it, sonny boy."

"No danger involved." Jack spread his hands. "This ought to be real civilized."

Only the parts you know about. "Ryan, you are still an amateur so far as field

ops are concerned. Remember that."

"I have to be for this to work," Jack pointed out.

"Those whom the gods would destroy, they first make proud," the DDO said.

"That's not the way Sophocles said it." Jack grinned.

"My way's better. I even had a sign put up at the Farm that quotes me."

Ryan's idea for the mission had been a simple one—too simple, and Ritter's people had refined it over a period of ten hours into a real operation. Simple in concept, it would have its complications. They all did, but Ritter didn't like that fact.

Bart Mancuso had long since gotten used to the idea that sleeping wasn't included in the list of things that submarine skippers were expected to do, but what he especially hated was a knock on the door fifteen minutes after he *was* able to lie down.

"Come!" *And die!* he didn't say.

"FLASH traffic, eyes-only-captain," the Lieutenant said apologetically.

"It better be good!" Mancuso snarled, snapping the covers off the bunk. He walked aft in his skivvies to the communications room, to port and just aft of the attack center. Ten minutes later he emerged and handed a slip of paper to the navigator.

"I want to be there in ten hours."

"No sweat, Cap'n."

"The next person who bothers me, it better be a grave national emergency!" He walked forward, barefoot on the tile deck.

"Message delivered," Henderson told Loomis over dinner.

"Anything else?" *Candlelight and all,* she thought.

"Just wanted to confirm. They didn't want new info, just to back up what they already had from some different sources. At least, that's the way I read it. I have another delivery for them."

"Which one's that?"

"The new battlefield air-defense report. I never could understand why they bother. They can read it in *Aviation Week* before the end of the month anyway."

"Let's not blow the routine now, Mr. Henderson."

This time the message could be handled as routine intelligence traffic. It would be flagged to the Chairman's attention because it was "personal" information on a senior enemy intelligence official. Gerasimov was known in the higher echelons of KGB to be a man interested as much in Western gossip as Russian.

It was waiting when he arrived the next morning. The KGB Chairman hated the eight-hour time differential between Moscow and Washington—it made things so damned inconvenient! For Moscow Center to order any immediate action automatically risked having his field officers cue the Americans as to who they were. As a result, few real "immediateaction" signals were ever sent out, and it offended the KGB Chairman that his personal power could be

undone by something as prosaic as longitudinal lines.

"Subject P," the dispatch began, the English "R" being a "P" in the Cyrillic alphabet, "is now the target of a secret criminal investigation as part of a nonintelligence matter. It is suspected, however, that interest in P is politically based, probably an effort on the part of progressive congressional elements to damage CIA because of an unknown operational failure—possibly involving Central Europe, but this is not RPT not confirmed. P's criminal disgrace will be damaging to higher CIA officials due to his placement. This station grades the intelligence reliability of the case as A. Three independent sources now confirm the allegations dispatched in my 88(B)531-C/EOC. Full details to follow via pouch. Station recommends pursuing. *Rezident* Washington. Ends."

Gerasimov tucked the report away in his desk.

"Well," the Chairman murmured to himself. He checked his watch. He had to be at the regular Thursday-morning Politburo meeting in two hours. How would it go? One thing he knew: it would be an interesting one. He planned to introduce a new variant on his game—the Power Game.

His daily operational briefing was always a little longer on Thursdays. It never hurt to drop a few harmless tidbits at the meetings. His fellow Politburo members were all men to whom conspiracy came as easily as breathing, and there hadn't been a government anywhere in the last century whose senior members did not enjoy hearing about covert operations. Gerasimov made a few notes, careful to choose only things that he could discuss without compromising important cases. His car came around at the appointed time, as always accompanied by a lead car of bodyguards, and sped off to the Kremlin.

Gerasimov was never the first to arrive, and never the last. This time he walked in just behind the Defense Minister.

"Good morning, Dmitri Timofeyevich," the Chairman said without a smile, but cordially enough for all that.

"And to you, Comrade Chairman," Yazov said warily. Both men took their seats. Yazov had more than one reason to be wary. In addition to the fact that Filitov was hanging over his head like a sword out of myth, he was not a full voting member of the supreme Soviet council. Gerasimov was. That gave KGB more political power than Defense, but the only times in recent history that the Defense Minister had had a vote in this room, he'd been a Party man first —like Ustinov had been. Yazov was a soldier first. A loyal Party member for all that, his uniform was not the costume it had been for Ustinov. Yazov would never have a vote at this table.

Andrey Il'ych Narmonov came into the room with his usual vigor. Of all the Politburo members, only the KGB Chairman was younger than he, and Narmonov felt the need to show bustling energy whenever he appeared before the older men who were arrayed around "his" conference table. The strain and stress of his job were telling on him. Everyone could see it. The black bush of hair was beginning to gray rapidly, and it also seemed that his hairline was receding. But that was hardly unusual for a man in his fifties. He gestured for everyone to sit.

"Good morning, Comrades," Narmonov said in a businesslike voice. "The initial discussion will concern the arrival of the American arms-negotiations team."

"I have good news to report," Gerasimov said at once.

"Indeed?" Alexandrov asked before the General Secretary could, staking out his own position.

"We have information that suggests that the Americans are willing in principle to place their strategic-defense program on the table," the KGB Chairman reported. "We do not know what concessions they will demand for this, nor the extent of the concessions in their program that they are willing to make, but this is nevertheless a change in the American posture."

"I find that difficult to believe," Yazov spoke up. "Their program is well along—as you yourself told me last week, Nikolay Borissovich."

"There are some political dissenters within the American government, and possibly a power struggle under way within CIA itself at the moment, we have just learned. In any case, that is our information, and we regard it to be fairly reliable."

"That is quite a surprise." Heads turned to where the Foreign Minister was sitting. He looked skeptical. "The Americans have been totally adamant on this point. You say 'fairly reliable,' but not totally so?"

"The source is highly placed, but the information has not been adequately confirmed as yet. We will know more by the weekend."

Heads nodded around the table. The American delegation would arrive noon Saturday, and negotiations would not begin until Monday. The Americans would be given thirty-six hours to overcome their jet lag, during which there would be a welcoming dinner at the Academy of Sciences Hotel, and little else.

"Such information is obviously a matter of great interest to my negotiating team, but I find it most surprising, particularly in view of the briefings we've been given here on our Bright Star Program, and their counterpart to it."

"There is reason to believe that the Americans have learned of Bright Star," Gerasimov replied smoothly. "Perhaps they have found our progress sobering."

"Bright Star penetrated?" another member asked. "How?"

"We're not sure. We're working on it," Gerasimov replied, careful not to look in Yazov's direction. *Your move, Comrade Defense Minister.*

"So the Americans might really be more interested in shutting our program down than in curtailing theirs," Alexandrov observed.

"And they think that our efforts have been the reverse of that." The Foreign Minister grunted. "It would be nice for me to be able to tell my people what the real issues are!"

"Marshal Yazov?" Narmonov said. He didn't know that he was putting his own man on the spot.

Until now, Gerasimov hadn't been sure about Yazov, about whether he might not feel safe taking his political vulnerability over the Filitov matter to his master. This would give him the answer. *Yazov was afraid of the possibility —CER-TAINTY* , he corrected himself, *Yazov has to know that by now—that we can disgrace him. He's also afraid that Narmonov won't risk his own position to save him. So have I co-opted both Yazov and Vaneyev? If so, I wonder if it might be worth keeping Yazov on after I replace the General Secretary . . . Your decision, Yazov . . .*

"We have overcome the problem of laser power output. The remaining problem is in computer control. Here we are far behind American techniques due to the superiority of their computer industry. Only last week, Comrade Gerasimov furnished us with some of the American control program, but we had not even begun to examine it when we learned that the program was itself overtaken by events.

"I do not mean this to be criticism of the KGB, of course—"

Yes! In that moment Gerasimov was sure. *He's making his own overture to me. And the best part—no other man in the room, not even Alexandrov, understands what just happened.*

"—actually, it illustrates the technical problem rather clearly. But it is only a technical problem, Comrades. This one, too, can be overcome. My opinion is that we are ahead of the Americans. If they know this, they will be fearful of it. Our negotiating position to this point has been to object to spacebased programs only, never ground-based, since we have known all along that our ground-based systems have greater promise than their American counterparts. Possibly the change in the American position confirms this. If so, I would recommend against trading Bright Star for anything."

"That is a defensible opinion," Gerasimov commented after a moment. "Dmitri Timofeyevich has raised a thoughtful issue here." Heads nodded around the table—knowingly, they all thought, but more wrongly than any would dare guess—as the Chairman of the Committee for State Security and the Minister of Defense consummated their bargain with nothing more than a glance and a raised eyebrow.

Gerasimov turned back to the head of the table as the discussion went on around him. General Secretary Narmonov watched the debate with interest, making a few notes, not noticing the gaze of his KGB Chairman.

I wonder if that chair is more comfortable than mine.

19.

Travelers

EVEN the 89th Military Airlift Wing worried about security, Ryan was glad to see. The sentries who guarded the "President's Wing" at Andrews Air Force Base carried loaded rifles and wore serious looks to impress the "Distinguished Visitors"—the U.S. Air Force eschews the term Very Important Persons. The combination of armed troops and the usual airport rigamarole made it certain that no one would hijack the airplane and take it to . . . Moscow. They had a flight crew to accomplish that.

Ryan always had the same thought before flying. As he waited to pass through the doorway-shaped magnetometer, he imagined that someone had engraved on the lintel: ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE. He'd just about overcome his terror of flying; his anxiety now was of something else entirely, he told himself. It didn't work. Fears are additive, not parallel, he discovered as he walked out of the building.

They were taking the same plane as the last time. The tail number was 86971. It was a 707 that had rolled out of Boeing's Seattle plant in 1958 and had been converted to the VC-137 configuration. More comfortable than the VC-135, it also had windows. If there was anything Ryan hated, it was being aboard a windowless aircraft. There was no level jetway to traverse into the bird. Everyone climbed up an old-fashioned wheeled stairway. Once inside, the plane was a curious mix of the commonplace and the unique. The forward washroom was in the usual place, just across from the front door, but aft of that was the communications console that gave the plane instantaneous, secure satellite-radio links with anyplace in the world. Next came the relatively comfortable crew accommodations, and then the galley. Food aboard the airplane was pretty good. Ryan's seat was in the almost-DV area, on one of two couches set on either side of the fuselage, just forward of the six-seat space for the really important folks. Aft of that was the five-across seating for reporters, Secret Service, and other people considered less distinguished by whoever made such decisions. It was mainly empty for this trip, though some junior members of the delegation would be back there, able to stretch out a bit for a change.

The only really bad thing about the VC-137 was its limited range. It couldn't one-hop all the way to Moscow, and usually stopped off for refueling at Shannon before making the final leg. The President's aircraft—actually there were *two* Air Force Ones—were based on the longer-range 707-320, and would soon be replaced with ultramodern 747s. The Air Force was looking forward to having a presidential aircraft that was younger than most of its flight crew. So was Ryan. This one had rolled out of the factory door when he'd been in

second grade, and it struck him as odd that it should be so. But what should have happened? he wondered. Should his father have taken him to Seattle, pointed to the airplane and said, *See, you'll fly to Russia on that one someday . . . ?*

I wonder how you predict fate? I wonder how you predict the future . . . At first playful, in a moment the thought chilled him.

Your business is *predicting the future, but what makes you think that you can really do it? What have you guessed wrong on this time, Jack?*

Goddamn it! he raged at himself. *Every time I get on a fucking airplane . . .* He strapped himself in, facing across the airplane some State Department technical expert who loved to fly.

The engines started a minute later, and presently the airplane started to roll. The announcements over the intercom weren't very different from that on an airliner, just enough to let you know that the ownership of the plane was not corporate. Jack had already deduced that. The stewardess had a mustache. It was something to chuckle about as the aircraft taxied to the end of runway One-Left.

The winds were northerly, and the VC-137 took off into them, turning right a minute after it lifted off. Jack turned, too, looking down at U.S. Route 50. It was the road that led to his home in Annapolis. He lost sight of it as the aircraft entered the clouds. The impersonal white veil had often seemed a beautiful curtain, but now . . . but now it just meant that he couldn't see the way home. Well, there wasn't much he could do about that. Ryan had the couch to himself, and decided to take advantage of the fact. He kicked off his shoes and stretched out for a nap. One thing he'd need would be rest. He was sure of that.

Dallas had surfaced at the appointed time and place, then been told of a hitch in the plans. Now she surfaced again. Mancuso was the first one up the ladder to the control station atop the sail, followed by a junior officer and a pair of lookouts. Already the periscope was up, scanning the surface for traffic, of course. The night was calm and clear, the sort of sky you get only at sea, ablaze with stars, like gemstones on a velvet sheet.

"Bridge, conn."

Mancuso pressed the button. "Bridge, aye."

"ESM reports an airborne radar transmitter bearing one-four-zero, bearing appears steady."

"Very well." The Captain turned. "You can flip on the running lights."

"All clear starboard," one lookout said.

"All clear port," echoed the other.

"ESM reports contact is still steady on one-four-zero. Signal strength is increasing."

"Possible aircraft fine on the port bow!" a lookout called.

Mancuso raised his binoculars to his eyes and started searching the blackness. If it was here already, it didn't have his running lights on . . . but then he saw a handful of stars disappear, occulted by something . . .

"I got him. Good eye, Everly! Oh, there go his flying lights."

"Bridge, conn, we have a radio message coming in."

"Patch it," Mancuso replied at once.

"Done, sir."

"Echo-Golf-Nine, this is Alfa-Whiskey-Five, over."

"Alfa-Whiskey-Five, this is Echo-Golf-Nine. I read you loud and clear. Authenticate, over."

"Bravo-Delta-Hotel, over."

"Roger, thank you. We are standing by. Wind is calm. Sea is flat." Mancuso reached down and flipped on the lights for the control station instruments. Not actually needed at the moment—the Attack Center still had the conn—they'd give the approaching helicopter a target.

They heard it a moment later, first the flutter of the rotor blades, then the whine of the turboshaft engines. Less than a minute later they could feel the downdraft as the helicopter circled twice overhead for the pilot to orient himself. Mancuso wondered if he'd turn on his landing lights . . . or hot-dog it.

He hot-dogged it, or more properly, he treated it as what it was, a covert personnel transfer: a "combat" mission. The pilot fixed on the submarine's cockpit lights and brought the aircraft to a hover fifty yards to port. Next he reduced altitude and sideslipped the helo toward the submarine. Aft, they saw the cargo door slide open. A hand reached out and grabbed the hook-end of the winch cable.

"Stand by, everybody," Mancuso told his people. "We've done it before. Check your safety lines. Everybody just be careful."

The prop wash from the helicopter threatened to blow them all down the ladder into the Attack Center as it hovered almost directly overhead. As Mancuso watched, a man-shape emerged from the cargo door and was lowered straight down. The thirty feet seemed to last forever as the shape came down, twirling slightly from the torsion of the steel winch cable. One of his seamen reached and grabbed a foot, pulling the man toward them. The Captain got his hand and both men pulled him inboard.

"Okay, we got ya," Mancuso said. The man slipped from the collar and turned as the cable went back up.

"Mancuso!"

"Son of a bitch!" the Captain exclaimed.

"Is this any way to greet a comrade?"

"Damn!" But business came first. Mancuso looked up. The helicopter was already two hundred feet overhead. He reached down and blinked the sub's running lights on and off three times: TRANSFER COMPLETE. The helicopter immediately dropped its nose and headed back toward the German coast.

"Get on below." Bart laughed. "Lookouts below. Clear the bridge. Son of a bitch," he said to himself. The Captain watched his men go down the ladder, switched off the cockpit lights, and made a final safety check before heading down behind them. A minute later he was in the Attack Center.

"Now do I request permission to come aboard?" Marko Ramius asked.

" 'Gator?"

"All systems aligned and checked for dive. We are rigged for dive," the navigator reported. Mancuso turned automatically to check the status boards.

"Very well. Dive. Make your depth one hundred feet, course zero-seven-one, one-third." He turned. "Welcome aboard, Captain."

"Thank you, Captain." Ramius wrapped Mancuso in a ferocious bear-hug and kissed him on the cheek. Next he slipped off the backpack he was wearing. "Can we talk?"

"Come on forward."

"First time I come aboard your submarine," Ramius observed. A moment later a head poked out of the sonar room.

"Captain Ramius! I thought I recognized your voice!" Jones looked at Mancuso. "Beg pardon, sir. We just got a contact, bearing zero-eight-one. Sounds like a merchant. Single screw, slow-speed diesels driving it. Probably a ways off. Being reported to the ODD now, sir."

"Thanks, Jonesy." Mancuso took Ramius into his stateroom and closed the door.

"What the hell was that?" a young sonarman asked Jones a moment later.

"We just got some company."

"Didn't he have an accent, sort of?"

"Something like that." Jones pointed to the sonar display. "That contact has an accent, too. Let's see how fast you can decide what kinda merchie he is."

It was dangerous, but all life was dangerous, the Archer thought. The Soviet-Afghan border here was a snow-fed river that snaked through gorges it had carved through the mountains. The border was also heavily guarded. It helped that his men were all dressed in Soviet-style uniforms. The Russians have long put their soldiers in simple but warm winter gear. Those they had on were mainly white to suit the snowy background, with just enough stripes and spots to break up their outline. Here they had to be patient. The Archer lay athwart a ridge, using Russian-issue binoculars to sweep the terrain while his men rested a few meters behind and below him. He might have gotten a local guerrilla band to provide help, but he'd come too far to risk that. Some of the northern tribes had been co-opted by the Russians, or at least that was what he'd been told. True or not, he was running enough risks.

There was a Russian guard post atop the mountain to his left, six kilometers away. A large one, perhaps a full platoon lived there, and those KGB soldiers were responsible for patrolling this sector. The border itself was covered with a fence and minefields. The Russians loved their minefields . . . but the ground was frozen solid, and Soviet mines often didn't work well in frozen ground, although occasionally they'd set themselves off when the frost heaved around them.

He'd chosen the spot with care. The border here looked virtually impassable —on a map. Smugglers had used it for centuries, however. Once across the river, there was a snaky path formed by centuries of snowmelt. Steep, and slippery, it was also a mint-canyon hidden from any view except direct overhead. If Russians guarded it, of course, it would be a deathtrap. That would be Allah's will, he told himself, and consigned himself to destiny. It was time.

He saw the flashes first. Ten men with a heavy machine gun and one of his precious mortars. A few yellow tracer streaks cut across the border into the Russian base camp. As he watched, a few of the bullets caromed off the rocks, tracing erratic paths in the velvet sky. Then the Russians started returning fire.

The sound reached them soon after that. He hoped that his men would get away as he turned and waved his group forward.

They ran down the forward slope of the mountain, heedless of safety. The only good news was that winds had swept the snow off the rocks, making for decent footing. The Archer led them down toward the river. Amazingly enough, it was not frozen, its path too steep for the water to stop, even in subzero temperatures. There was the wire!

A young man with a two-handed pair of cutters made a path, and again the Archer led them through. His eyes were accustomed to the darkness, and he went more slowly now, looking at the ground for the telltale humps that indicated mines in the frozen ground. He didn't need to tell those behind him to stay in single file and walk on rocks wherever possible. Off to the left flares now decorated the sky, but the firing had died down somewhat.

It took over an hour, but he got all of his men across and into the smugglers' trail. Two men would stay behind, each on a hilltop overlooking the wire. They watched the amateur sapper who'd cut the wire make repairs to conceal their entry. Then he, too, faded into the darkness.

The Archer didn't stop until dawn. They were on schedule as they all paused a few hours for rest and food. All had gone well, his officers told him, better than they had hoped.

The stopover in Shannon was a brief one, just long enough to refuel and take aboard a Soviet pilot whose job it was to talk them through the Russian air-traffic-control system. Jack awoke on landing and thought about stretching his legs, but decided that the duty-free shops could wait until the return leg. The Russian took his place in the cockpit jump seat, and 86971 started rolling again.

It was night now. The pilot was in a loquacious mood tonight, announcing their next landfall at Wallasey. All of Europe, he said, was enjoying clear, cold weather, and Jack watched the orange-yellow city lights of England slide beneath them. Tension on the aircraft increased—or perhaps anticipation was a better word, he thought, as he listened to the pitch of the voices around him increase somewhat, though their volume dropped. You couldn't fly toward the Soviet Union without becoming a little conspiratorial. Soon all the conversations were in raspy whispers. Jack smiled thinly at the plastic windows, and his reflection asked what was so damned funny. Water appeared below them again as they flew across the North Sea toward Denmark.

The Baltic came next. You could tell where East and West met. To the south, the West German cities were all gaily lit, each surrounded by a warm glow of light. Not so on the eastern side of the wire-minefield barrier. Everyone aboard noticed the difference, and conversations grew quieter still.

The aircraft was following air route G-24; the navigator in front had the Jeppesen chart partially unfolded on his table. Another difference between East and West was the dearth of flight routes in the former. Well, he told himself, not many Pipers and Cessnas here—of course, there was that one Cessna . . .

"Coming up on a turn. We'll be coming to new heading zero-seven-eight, and entering Soviet control."

"Right," the pilot—"aircraft commander"—responded after a moment. He was tired. It had been a long day's flying. They were already at Flight Level 381—38,100 feet, or 11,600 meters as the Soviets preferred to call it. The pilot didn't like meters, even though his instruments were calibrated both ways. After executing the turn, they flew for another sixty miles before crossing the Soviet border at Ventspils.

"We're heeere," somebody said a few feet from Ryan. From the air, at night, Soviet territory made East Germany look like New Orleans at Mardi Gras. He remembered night satellite shots. It was so easy to pick out the camps of the GULAG. They were the only lighted squares in the whole country . . . what a dreary place that only the prisons are well lighted . . .

The pilot marked the entry only as another benchmark. Eighty-five more minutes, given the wind conditions. The Soviet air-traffic-control system along this routing—called G-3 now—was the only one in the country that spoke English. They didn't really need the Soviet officer to complete the mission—he was an air-force intelligence officer, of course—but if something went wrong, things might be different. The Russians liked the idea of positive control. The orders he got now for course and altitude were far more exact than those given in American air space, as though he didn't know what to do unless some jerk-off on the ground told him. Of course there was an element of humor to it. The pilot was Colonel Paul von Eich. His family had come to America from Prussia a hundred years before, but none of them had been able to part with the "von" that had once been so important to family status. Some of his ancestors had fought down there, he reflected, on the flat, snow-covered Russian ground. Certainly a few more recent relatives had. Probably a few lay buried there while he whizzed overhead at six hundred miles per hour. He wondered vaguely what they'd think of his job while his pale blue eyes scanned the sky for the lights of other aircraft.

Like most passengers, Ryan judged his height above the ground by what he could see, but the dark Soviet countryside denied him that. He knew they were close when the aircraft commenced a wide turn to the left. He heard the mechanical whine as the flaps went down and noted the reduced engine noise. Soon he could just pick out individual trees, racing by. The pilot's voice came on, telling smokers to put them out, and that it was time for seat belts again. Five minutes later they returned to ground level again at Sheremetyevo Airport. Despite the fact that airports all over the world look exactly alike, Ryan could be sure of this one—the taxiways were the bumpiest anywhere.

The cabin talk was more lively now. The excitement was beginning as the airplane's crew started moving about. What followed went in a blur. Ernie Allen was met by a welcoming committee of the appropriate level and whisked off in an embassy limousine. Everyone else was relegated to a bus. Ryan sat by himself, still watching the countryside outside the German-made vehicle.

Will Gerasimov bite—really bite?

What if he doesn't?

What if he does? Ryan asked himself with a smile.

It had all seemed pretty straightforward in Washington, but here, five thousand miles away . . . well. First he'd get some sleep, aided by a single

government-issue red capsule. Then he'd talk to a few people at the embassy. The rest would have to take care of itself.

20.

The Key of Destiny

IT was bitterly cold when Ryan awoke to the beeping sound of his watch alarm. There was frost on the windows even at ten in the morning, and he realized that he hadn't made sure the heat in his room was operating. His first considered action of the day was to pull on some socks. His seventh-floor room—it was called an "efficiency apartment"—overlooked the compound. Clouds had moved in, and the day was leaden gray with the threat of snow.

"Perfect," Jack observed to himself on the way to the bathroom. He knew that it could have been worse. The only reason he had this room was that the officer who ordinarily lived here was on honeymoon leave. At least the plumbing worked, but he found a note taped to the medicine cabinet mirror admonishing him not to mess the place up the way the last transient had. Next he checked the small refrigerator. Nothing: *Welcome to Moscow.* Back in the bathroom, he washed and shaved. One other oddity of the embassy was that to get down from the seventh floor, you first had to take an elevator up to the ninth floor and another one down from there to the lobby. Jack was still shaking his head over that one when he got into the canteen.

"Don't you just love jet lag?" a member of the delegation greeted him. "Coffee's over there."

"I call it travel shock." Ryan got himself a mug and came back. "Well, the coffee's decent. Where's everybody else?"

"Probably still sacked out, even Uncle Ernie. I caught a few hours on the flight, and thank God for the pill they gave us."

Ryan laughed. "Yeah, me too. Might even feel human in time for dinner tonight."

"Feel like exploring? I'd like to take a walk, but—"

"Travel in pairs." Ryan nodded. The rule applied only to the arms negotiators. This phase of negotiations would be sensitive, and the rules for the team were much tighter than usual. "Maybe later. I have some work to do."

"Today and tomorrow's our only chance," the diplomat pointed out.

"I know," Ryan assured him. He checked his watch and decided that he'd wait to eat until lunchtime. His sleep cycle was almost in synch with Moscow, but his stomach wasn't quite sure yet. Jack walked back to the chancery.

The corridors were mainly empty. Marines patrolled them, looking very serious indeed after the problems that had occurred earlier, but there was little evidence of activity on this Saturday morning. Jack walked to the proper door and knocked. He knew it was locked.

"You're Ryan?"

"That's right." The door opened to admit him, then was closed and relocked.

"Grab a seat." His name was Tony Candela. "What gives?"

"We have an op laid on."

"News to me—you're not operations, you're intelligence," Candela objected.

"Yeah, well, Ivan knows that, too. This one's going to be a little strange." Ryan explained for five minutes.

" 'A little strange,' you say?" Candela rolled his eyes.

"I need a keeper for part of it. I need some phone numbers I can call, and I may need wheels that'll be there when required."

"This could cost me some assets."

"We know that."

"Of course, if it works . . ."

"Right. We can put some real muscle on this one."

"The Foleys know about this?"

" 'Fraid not."

"Too bad, Mary Pat would have loved it. She's the cowboy. Ed's more the button-down-collar type. So, you expect him to bite Monday or Tuesday night?"

"That's the plan."

"Let me tell you something about plans," Candela said.

They were letting him sleep. The doctors had warned him again, Vatutin growled. How was he supposed to accomplish anything when they kept—

"There's that name again," the man with the headphones said tiredly. "Romanov. If he must talk in his sleep, why can't he confess . . . ?"

"Perhaps he's talking with the Czar's ghost," another officer joked. Vatutin's head came up.

"Or perhaps someone else's." The Colonel shook his head. He'd been at the point of dozing himself. Romanov, though the name of the defunct royal family of the Russian Empire, was not an uncommon one—even a Politburo member had had it. "Where's his file?"

"Here." The joker pulled open a drawer and handed it over. The file weighed six kilograms, and came in several different sections. Vatutin had committed most of it to memory, but had concentrated on the last two parts. This time he opened the first section.

"Romanov," he breathed to himself. "Where have I seen that . . . ?" It took him fifteen minutes, flipping through the frayed pages as speedily as he dared.

"I have it!" It was a citation, scrawled in pencil. "Corporal A. I. Romanov, killed in action 6 October 1941, '. . . defiantly placed his tank between the enemy and his disabled troop commander's, allowing the commander to withdraw his wounded crew . . .' Yes! This one's in a book I read as a child. Misha got his crew on the back deck of a different tank, jumped inside, and personally killed the tank that got Romanov's. He'd saved Misha's life and was posthumously awarded the Red Banner—" Vatutin stopped. He was calling the subject *Misha,* he realized.

"Almost fifty years ago?"

"They were comrades. This Romanov fellow had been part of Filitov's own

tank crew through the first few months. Well, he was a hero. He died for the Motherland, saving the life of his officer," Vatutin observed. *And Misha still talks to him . . .*

I have you now, Filitov.

"Shall we wake him up and—"

"Where's the doctor?" Vatutin asked.

It turned out that he was about to leave for home and was not overly pleased to be recalled. But he didn't have the rank to play power games with Colonel Vatutin.

"How should we handle it?" Vatutin asked after outlining his thoughts.

"He should be weary but wide awake. That is easily done."

"So we should wake him up now and—"

"No." The doctor shook his head. "Not in REM sleep—"

"What?"

"Rapid Eye Movement sleep—that's what it's called when the patient is dreaming. You can always tell if the subject is in a dream by the eye movement, whether he talks or not."

"But we can't see that from here," another officer objected.

"Yes, perhaps we should redesign the observation system," the doctor mused. "But that doesn't matter too much. During REM sleep the body is effectively paralyzed. You'll notice that he's not moving now, correct? The mind does that to prevent injury to the body. When he starts moving again, the dream is over."

"How long?" Vatutin asked. "We don't want him to get too rested."

"Depends on the subject, but I would not be overly concerned. Have the turnkey get a breakfast ready for him, and as soon as he starts moving, wake him up and feed him."

"Of course." Vatutin smiled.

"Then we just keep him awake . . . oh, eight hours or so more. Yes, that should do it. Is it enough time for you?"

"Easily," Vatutin said with more confidence than he should have. He stood and checked his watch. The Colonel of "Two" called the Center and gave a few orders. His system, too, cried out for sleep. But for him there was a comfortable bed. He wanted to have all of his cleverness when the time came. The Colonel undressed fastidiously, calling for an orderly to polish his boots and press his uniform while he slept. He was tired enough that he didn't even feel the need for a drink. "I have you now," he murmured as he faded into sleep.

"G'night, Bea," Candi called from the door as her friend opened up her car. Taussig turned one last time and waved before getting in. Candi and the Geek couldn't have seen the way she stabbed the key into the ignition. She drove only half a block, turning a corner before pulling to the curb and staring at the night.

They're doing it already, she thought. *All the way through dinner, the way he looked at her—the way* she *looked at* him! *Already those wimpy little hands are fumbling with the buttons on her blouse . . .*

She lit a cigarette and leaned back, picturing it while her stomach tightened

into a rigid, acid-filled ball. Zit-face and Candi. She'd endured three hours of it. Candi's usual beautifully prepared dinner. For twenty minutes while the finishing touches had been under way, she'd been stuck in the living room with *him,* listening to his idiot jokes, having to smile back at him. It was clear enough that Alan didn't like her either, but because she was Candi's friend he'd felt obligated to be nice to her, nice to poor Bea, who was heading toward old-maidhood, or whatever they called it now—she'd seen it in his stupid eyes. To be patronized by him was bad enough, but to be pitied . . .

And now he was touching her, kissing her, listening to her murmurs, whispering his stupid, disgusting endearments—and Candi liked it! How was that *possible?*

Candace was more than just pretty, Taussig knew. She was a free spirit. She had a discoverer's mind mated to a warm, sensitive soul. She had real feelings. She was so wonderfully feminine, with the kind of beauty that begins at the heart and radiates out through a perfect smile.

But now she's giving herself to that thing! He's probably doing it already. That geek doesn't have the first idea of taking his time and showing real love and sensitivity. I bet he just does it, *drooling and giggling like some punk fifteen-year-old football jock.* How can she!

"Oh, Candace." Bea's voice broke. She was swept with nausea, and had to fight to control herself. She succeeded, and sat alone in her car for twenty minutes of silent tears before she managed to drive on.

"What do you make of that?"

"I think she's a lesbian," Agent Jennings said after a moment.

"Nothing like that in her file, Peggy," Will Perkins observed.

"The way she looks at Dr. Long, the way she acts around Gregory . . . that's my gut feeling."

"But—"

"Yeah, but what the hell can we do about that?" Margaret Jennings noted as she drove away. She toyed briefly with the idea of going after Taussig, but the day had been long enough already. "No evidence, and if we got it, and acted on it, there'd be hell to pay."

"You suppose the three of them . . . ?"

"Will, you've been reading those magazines again." Jennings laughed, breaking the spell for a moment. Perkins was a Mormon, and had never been seen to touch pornographic material. "Those two are so much in love they don't have the first idea of what's going on around them—except work. I bet their pillow talk is classified. What's happening, Will, is that Taussig is being cut out of her friend's life and she's unhappy about it. Tough."

"So how do we write this one up?"

"Zip. A whole lot of nothing." Their assignment for the evening had been to follow up a report that strange cars were occasionally seen at the Gregory-Long residence. It had probably originated, Agent Jennings thought, from a local prude who didn't like the idea of the two young people living together without the appropriate paperwork. She was a little old-fashioned about that herself, but it didn't make either one of them a security risk. On the other hand—

"I think we ought to check out Taussig next."

"She lives alone."

"I'm sure." It would take time to look at every senior staffer at Tea Clipper, but you couldn't rush this kind of investigation.

"You shouldn't have come here," Tania observed at once. Bisyarina's face didn't show her rage. She took Taussig's hand and brought her inside.

"Ann, it's just so awful!"

"Come sit down. Were you followed?" *Idiot! Pervert!* She'd just gotten out of the shower, and was dressed in a bathrobe, with a towel over her hair.

"No, I watched all the way."

Sure, Bisyarina thought. She would have been surprised to learn that it was true. Despite the lax security at Tea Clipper—it allowed someone like this inside!—her agent had broken every rule there was in coming here.

"You cannot stay long."

"I know." She blew her nose. "They've about finished the first draft of the new program. The Geek has cut it down by eighty thousand lines of code—taking out all that AI stuff really made a difference. You know, I think he has the new stuff memorized—I know, I know, that's impossible, even for *that*."

"When will you be able—"

"I don't know." Taussig smiled for a second. "You ought to have him working for you. I think he's the only one who really understands the whole program—I mean, the whole project."

Unfortunately all we have is you, Bisyarina didn't say. What she did was very hard. She reached out and took Taussig's hand.

The tears started again. Beatrice nearly leaped into Tania's arms. The Russian officer held her close, trying to feel sympathy for her agent. There had been many lessons at the KGB school, all of them intended to help her in handling agents. You had to have a mixture of sympathy and discipline. You had to treat them like spoiled children, mixing favors and scoldings to make them perform. And Agent Livia was more important than most.

It was still hard to turn her face toward the head on her shoulder and kiss the cheek that was salty with tears both old and new. Bisyarina breathed easier at the realization that she needed go no further than this. She'd never yet needed to go further, but lived in fear that "Livia" would one day demand it of her—certainly it would happen if she ever realized that her intended lover had not the slightest interest in her advances. Bisyarina marveled at that. Beatrice Taussig was brilliant in her way, certainly brighter than the KGB officer who "ran" her, but she knew so little about people. The crowning irony was that she was very much like that Alan Gregory man she so detested. Prettier, more sophisticated though Taussig was, she lacked the capacity to reach out when she needed to. Gregory had probably done it only once in his life, and that was the difference between him and her. He had gotten there first because Beatrice had lacked the courage. It was just as well, Bisyarina knew. The rejection would have destroyed her.

Bisyarina wondered what Gregory was really like. Probably another academic—what was it the English called them? Boffins. A brilliant boffin—well, everyone attached to Tea Clipper was brilliant in one way or another.

That frightened her. In her way, Beatrice was proud of the program, though she deemed it a threat to world peace, a point on which Bisyarina agreed. Gregory was a boffin who wanted to change the world. Bisyarina understood the motivation. She wanted to change it, too. Just in a different way. Gregory and Tea Clipper were a threat to that. She didn't hate the man. If anything, she thought, she'd probably like him. But personal likes and dislikes had absolutely nothing to do with the business of intelligence.

"Feel better?" she asked when the tears stopped.

"I have to leave."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes. I don't know when I'll be able to—"

"I understand." Tania walked her to the door. At least she'd had the good sense to park her car on a different block, "Ann" noticed. She waited, holding the door cracked open, to hear the distinctive sound of the sports car. After closing the door, she looked at her hands and went back to the bathroom to wash them.

Night came early in Moscow, the sun hidden by clouds that were starting to shed their load of snow. The delegation assembled in the embassy's foyer and filed off into their assigned cars for the arrival dinner. Ryan was in car number three—a slight promotion from the last trip, he noted wryly. Once the procession started moving, he remembered a driver's remark from the last time, that Moscow had street names mainly to identify the pothole collections. The car jolted its way east through the city's largely empty streets. They crossed the river right at the Kremlin, and motored past Gorkiy Park. He could see that the place was gaily lit, with people ice-skating in the falling snow. It was nice to see real people having real fun. Even Moscow was a city, he reminded himself, full of ordinary people living fairly ordinary lives. It was a fact too easy to forget when your job forced you to concentrate on a narrow group of enemies.

The car turned off October Square, and after an intricate maneuver, pulled up to the Academy of Sciences Hotel. It was a quasi-modern building that in America might have been taken for an office block. A forlorn string of birch trees sat between the gray concrete wall and the street, their bare, lifeless branches reaching into the speckled sky. Ryan shook his head. Given a few hours of snowfall, and it might actually be a beautiful scene. The temperature was zero or so—Ryan thought in Fahrenheit, not Celsius—and the wind almost calm. Perfect conditions for snow. He could feel the air heavy and cold around him as he walked into the hotel's main entrance.

Like most Russian buildings, it was overheated. Jack removed his overcoat and handed it over to an attendant. The Soviet delegation was already lined up to greet their American counterparts, and the Americans shuffled down the rank of Soviets, ending at a table of drinks of which everyone partook. There would be ninety minutes of drinking and socializing before the actual dinner. Welcome to Moscow. Ryan approved of the plan. Enough alcohol could make any meal seem a feast, and he'd yet to experience a Russian meal that rose above the ordinary. The room was barely lit, allowing everyone to watch the falling snow through the large plate-glass windows.

"Hello again, Dr. Ryan," a familiar voice said.

"Sergey Nikolayevich, I hope you are not driving tonight," Jack said, gesturing with his wineglass to Golovko's vodka. His cheeks were already florid, his blue eyes sparkling with alcoholic mirth.

"Did you enjoy the flight in last night?" the GRU Colonel asked. He laughed merrily before Ryan could reply. "You still fear flying?"

"No, it's hitting the ground that worries me." Jack grinned. He had always been able to laugh at his own pet fear.

"Ah, yes, your back injury from the helicopter crash. One can sympathize."

Ryan waved at the window. "How much snow are we supposed to get tonight?"

"Perhaps half a meter, perhaps more. Not a very large storm, but tomorrow the air will be fresh and clear, and the city will sparkle with a clean blanket of white." Golovko was almost poetic in his description.

Already he's drunk, Ryan told himself. Well, tonight was supposed to be a social occasion, nothing more, and the Russians could be hospitable as hell when they wanted to be. Though one man was experiencing something very different, Jack reminded himself.

"Your family is well?" Golovko asked within earshot of another American delegate.

"Yes, thank you. Yours?"

Golovko gestured for Ryan to follow him over to the drink table. The waiters hadn't come out yet. The intelligence officer selected another glass of clear liquor. "Yes, they are all well." He smiled broadly. Sergey was the very image of Russian good fellowship. His face didn't change a whit as he spoke his next sentence: "I understand that you want to meet Chairman Gerasimov."

Jesus! Jack's expression froze in place; his heart skipped a beat or two. "Really? How did you ever get that idea?"

"I'm not GRU, Ryan, not really. My original assignment was in Third Directorate, but I have since moved on to other things," he explained before laughing again. This laugh was genuine. He'd just invalidated CIA's file on himself—and, he could see, Ryan's own observation. His hand reached out to pat Ryan on the upper arm. "I will leave you now. In five minutes you will walk through the door behind you and to the left as though looking for the men's room. After that, you will follow instructions. Understood?" He patted Ryan's arm again.

"Yes."

"I will not see you again tonight." They shook hands and Golovko moved off.

"Oh, shit," Ryan whispered to himself. A troupe of violins came into the reception room. There must have been ten or fifteen of them, playing gypsy airs as they circulated about. They must have practiced hard, Jack thought, to play in perfect synchronization despite the dark room and their own random meanderings. Their movement and the relative darkness would make it hard to pick out individuals during the reception. It was a clever, professional touch aimed at making it easier for Jack to slip away.

* * *

"Hello, Dr. Ryan," another voice said. He was a young Soviet diplomat, a gofer who kept notes and ran errands for the senior people. Now Jack knew that he was also KGB. Gerasimov was not content with a single surprise for the evening, he realized. He wanted to dazzle Ryan with KGB's prowess. *We'll see about that,* Jack thought, but the bravado seemed hollow even to himself. Too soon. Too soon.

"Good evening—we've never met." Jack reached into his pants pocket and felt for his keychain. He hadn't forgotten it.

"My name is Vitaliy. Your absence will not be noticed. The men's room is that way." He pointed. Jack handed over his glass and walked toward the door. He nearly stopped dead on leaving the room. No one inside could have known it, but the corridor had been cleared. Except for one man at the far end, who gestured once. Ryan walked toward him.

Oh, shit. Here we go . . .

He was a youngish man, on the short side of thirty. He looked like the physical type. Though his build was concealed by an overcoat, he moved in the brisk, efficient way of an athlete. His facial expression and penetrating eyes made him a bodyguard. The best thought that came to Ryan was that he was supposed to appear nervous. It didn't require much in the way of talent to do so. The man took him around the corner and handed him a Russian-made overcoat and fur hat, then spoke a single word:

"Come."

He led Ryan down a service corridor and out into the cold air of an alley. Another man was waiting outside, watching. He nodded curtly to Ryan's escort, who turned once and waved for Jack to hurry. The alley ended on Shabolovka Street, and both men turned right. This part of town was old, Jack saw at once. The buildings were mostly pre-revolution. The center of the street had trolley tracks embedded in cobblestones, and overhead were the catenary wires that supplied power to the streetcars. He watched as one rumbled past—actually it was two trams linked together, the colors white over red. Both men sprinted across the slippery street toward a red brick building with what looked like a metal roof. Ryan wasn't sure what it was until they turned the corner.

The car barn, he realized, remembering similar places from his boyhood in Baltimore. The tracks curved in here, then diverged to the various bays in the barn. He paused for a moment, but his escort waved him forward urgently, moving to the left-most service bay. Inside it, of course, were streetcars, lined up like sleeping cattle in the darkness. It was totally still in there, he realized with surprise. There should have been people working, the sound of hammers and machine tools, but there was none of that. Ryan's heart pounded as he walked past two motionless trams. His escort stopped at the third. Its doors were open, and a third bodyguard-type stepped down and looked at Ryan. He immediately patted Jack down, seeking weapons but finding none in a quick but thorough search. A jerk of the thumb directed him up and into the tram.

It had evidently just come in, and there was snow on the first step. Ryan

slipped and would have fallen had not one of the KGB men caught his arm. He gave Jack a look that in the West would have been accompanied by a smile, but the Russians are not a smiling people except when they want to be. He went up again, his hands firm on the safety rails. *All you have to do . . .*

"Good evening," a voice called. Not very loudly, but it didn't have to be. Ryan squinted in the darkness and saw the glowing orange light of a cigarette. He took a deep breath and walked toward it.

"Chairman Gerasimov, I presume?"

"You do not recognize me?" A trace of amusement. The man flicked his Western-made butane lighter to illuminate his face. It was Nikolay Borissovich Gerasimov. The flame gave his face exactly the right sort of look. The Prince of Darkness himself . . .

"I do now," Jack said, struggling to control his voice.

"I understand that you wish to speak with me. How may I be of service?" he asked in a courtly voice that belied the setting.

Jack turned and gestured to the two bodyguards who were standing at the front of the car. He turned back but didn't have to say anything. Gerasimov spoke a single word in Russian, and both men left.

"Please excuse them, but their duty is to protect the Chairman, and my people take their duties seriously." He waved to the seat opposite his. Ryan took it.

"I didn't know your English was so good."

"Thank you." A courteous nod followed by a businesslike observation: "I caution you that time is short. You have information for me?"

"Yes, I do." Jack reached inside his coat. Gerasimov tensed for a moment, then relaxed. Only a madman would try to kill the chief of the KGB, and he knew from Ryan's dossier that he was not mad. "I have something for you," said Ryan.

"Oh?" Impatience. Gerasimov was not a man who liked to be kept waiting. He watched Ryan's hands fumble with something, and was puzzled to hear the rasp of metal scraping against metal. Jack's clumsiness disappeared when the key came off the ring, and when he spoke, he was a man claiming another's pot.

"Here." Ryan handed it over.

"What is this?" Suspicion now. Something was very badly wrong, wrong enough that his voice betrayed him.

Jack didn't make him wait. He spoke in a voice he'd been rehearsing for a week. Without knowing it, he spoke faster than he'd planned. "That, Chairman Gerasimov, is the warhead-control key from the Soviet ballistic-missile submarine *Krasny Oktyabr.* It was given to me by Captain Marko Aleksandrovich Ramius when he defected. You will be pleased to know that he likes his new life in America, as do all of his officers."

"The submarine was—"

Ryan cut him off. There was scarcely enough light to see the outline of his face, but that was enough to see the change in the man's expression.

"Destroyed by her own scuttling charges? No. The spook aboard whose cover was ship's cook, Sudets, I think his name was—well, no sense in hiding it. I killed him. I'm not especially proud of that, but it was either him or me.

For what it's worth, he was a very courageous young man," Jack said, remembering the ten horrible minutes in the submarine's missile room. "Your file on me doesn't say anything about operations, does it?"

"But—"

Jack cut him off again. It was not yet the time for finesse. They had to jolt him, had to jolt him hard.

"Mr. Gerasimov, there are some things we want from you."

"Rubbish. Our conversation is ended." But Gerasimov didn't rise, and this time Ryan made him wait for a few beats.

"We want Colonel Filitov back. Your official report to the Politburo on *Red October* stated that the submarine was positively destroyed, and that a defection had probably never been planned, but rather that GRU security had been penetrated and that the submarine had been issued bogus orders after her engines had been sabotaged. That information came to you through Agent Cassius. He works for us," Jack explained. "You used it to disgrace Admiral Gorshkov and to reinforce your control over the military's internal security. They're still angry about that, aren't they? So, if we do not get Colonel Filitov back, this coming week in Washington a story will be leaked to the press for the Sunday editions. It will have some of the details of the operation, and a photograph of the submarine sitting in a covered drydock in Norfolk, Virginia. After that we will produce Captain Ramius. He'll say that the ship's political officer—one of your Department Three men, I believe—was part of the conspiracy. Unfortunately, Putin died after arriving, of a heart attack. That's a lie, but try proving it."

"You cannot blackmail me, Ryan!" There was no emotion at all now.

"One more thing. SDI is not on the bargaining table. Did you tell the Politburo that it was?" Jack asked. "You're finished, Mr. Gerasimov. We have the ability to disgrace you, and you're just too good a target to pass up. If we don't get Filitov back, we can leak all sorts of things. Some will be confirmed, but the really good ones will be denied, of course, while the FBI launches an urgent investigation to identify the leakers."

"You did not do all this for Filitov," Gerasimov said, his voice measured now.

"Not exactly." Again he made him wait for it: "We want you to come out, too."

Jack walked out of the tram five minutes later. His escort walked him back to the hotel. The attention to detail was impressive. Before rejoining the reception, Jack's shoes were wiped dry. On reentering the room he walked at once to the drink table, but found it empty. He spotted a waiter with a tray, and took the first thing he could reach. It turned out to be vodka, but Ryan gunned it down in a single gulp before reaching for another. When he finished that one, he started wondering where the men's room really was. It turned out to be exactly where he'd been told. Jack got there just in time.

It was as worked up as anyone had ever been with a computer simulation. They'd never run one quite this way before, of course, and that was the purpose of the test. The ground-control computer didn't know what it was doing, nor did any of the others. One machine was programmed to report a

series of distant radar contacts. All it did was to receive a collection of signals like those generated by an orbiting Flying Cloud satellite, cued in turn by one of the DSPS birds at geosynchronous height. The computer relayed this information to the ground-control computer, which examined its criteria for weapons-free authority and decided that they had been met. It took a few seconds for the lasers to power up, but they reported being ready a few seconds later. The fact that the lasers in question did not exist was not pertinent to the test. The ground mirror did, and it responded to instructions from the computer, sending the imaginary laser beam to the relay mirror eight hundred kilometers overhead. This mirror, so recently carried by the space shuttle and actually in California, received its own instructions and altered its configuration accordingly, relaying the laser beam to the battle mirror. This mirror was at the Lockheed factory rather than in orbit, and received its instructions via landline. At all three mirrors a precise record was kept of the ever-changing focal-length and azimuth settings. This information was sent to the score-keeping computer at Tea Clipper Control.

There had been several purposes to the test that Ryan had observed a few weeks before. In validating the system architecture, they had also received priceless empirical data on the actual functioning characteristics of the hardware. As a result they could simulate real exercises on the ground with near-absolute confidence in the theoretical results.

Gregory was rolling a ballpoint pen between his hands as the data came up on the video-display terminal. He'd just stopped chewing on it for fear of getting a mouth full of ink.

"Okay, there's the last shot," an engineer observed. "Here comes the score . . ."

"Wow!" Gregory exclaimed. "Ninety-six out of a hundred! What's the cycle time?"

"Point zero-one-six," a software expert replied. "That's point zero-zero-four *under* nominal—we can double-check every aim-command while the laser cycles—"

"And that increases the Pk thirty percent all by itself," Gregory said. "We can even try doing shoot-look-shoot instead of shoot-shoot-look and still save time on the back end. *People!*"—he jumped to his feet—"*we have done it!* The software is in the fuckin' can!" *Four months sooner than promised!*

The room erupted with cheering that no one outside the team of thirty people could possibly have understood.

"Okay, you laser pukes!" someone called. "Get your act together and build us a death ray! The gunsight is *finished!*"

"Be nice to the laser pukes." Gregory laughed. "I work with them too."

Outside the room, Beatrice Taussig was merely walking past the door on her way to an admin meeting when she heard the cheering. She couldn't enter the lab—it had a cipher lock, and she didn't have the combination—but didn't have to. The experiment that they'd hinted at over dinner the night before had just been run. The result was obvious enough. Candi was in there, probably standing right next to the Geek, Bea thought. She kept walking.

"Thank God there's not much ice," Mancuso observed, looking through the

periscope. “Call it two feet, maybe three.”

“There will be a clear channel here. The icebreakers keep all the coastal ports open,” Ramius said.

“Down ’scope,” the Captain said next. He walked over to the chart table. “I want you to move us two thousand yards south, then bottom us out. That’ll put us under a hard roof and ought to keep the Grishas and Mirkas away.”

“Aye, Captain,” the XO replied.

“Let’s go get some coffee,” Mancuso said to Ramius and Clark. He led them down one deck and to starboard into the wardroom. For all the times he’d done things like this in the past four years, Mancuso was nervous. They were in less than two hundred feet of water, within sight of the Soviet coast. If detected and then localized by a Soviet ship, they would be attacked. It had happened before. Though no Western submarine had ever suffered actual damage, there was a first time for everything, especially if you started taking things for granted, the Captain of USS *Dallas* told himself. Two feet of ice was too much for the thin-hulled Grisha-class patrol boats to plow through, and their main antisubmarine weapon, a multiple rocket launcher called an RBU-6000, was useless over ice, but a Grisha could call in a submarine. There were Russian subs about. They’d heard two the previous day.

“Coffee, sir?” the wardroom attendant asked. He got a nod and brought out a pot and cups.

“You sure this is close enough?” Mancuso asked Clark.

“Yeah, I can get in and out.”

“It won’t be much fun,” the Captain observed.

Clark smirked. “That’s why they pay me so much. I—”

Conversation stopped for a moment. The submarine’s hull creaked as it settled on the bottom, and the boat took on a slight list. Mancuso looked at the coffee in his cup and figured it for six or seven degrees. Submariner machismo prevented him from showing any reaction, but he’d never done this, at least not with *Dallas.* A handful of submarines in the U.S. Navy were specially designed for these missions. Insiders could identify them at a glance from the arrangement of a few hull fittings, but *Dallas* wasn’t one of them.

“I wonder how long this is going to take?” Mancuso asked the overhead.

“May not happen at all,” Clark observed. “Almost half of them don’t. The longest I’ve ever had to sit like this was . . . twelve days, I think. Seemed like an awfully long time. That one didn’t come off.”

“Can you say how many?” Ramius asked.

“Sorry, sir.” Clark shook his head.

Ramius spoke wistfully. “You know, when I was a boy, I fished here—right here many times. We never knew that you Americans came here to fish also.”

“It’s a crazy world,” Clark agreed. “How’s the fishing?”

“In the summer, very good. Old Sasha took me out on his boat. This is where I learned the sea, where I learned to be a sailor.”

“What about the local patrols?” Mancuso asked, getting everyone back to business.

“There will be a low state of readiness. You have diplomats in Moscow, so the chance of war is slight. The surface patrol ships are mainly KGB. They guard against smugglers—and spies.” He pointed to Clark. “Not so good

against submarines, but this was changing when I left. They were increasing their ASW practice in Northern Fleet, and, I hear, in Baltic Fleet also. But this is bad place for submarine detection. There is much fresh water from the rivers, and the ice overhead—all makes for difficult sonar conditions."

That's good to hear, Mancuso thought. His ship was in an increased state of readiness. The sonar equipment was fully manned and would remain so indefinitely. He could get *Dallas* moving in a matter of two minutes, and that should be ample, he thought.

Gerasimov was thinking, too. He was alone in his office. A man who controlled his emotions even more than most Russians, his face displayed nothing out of the way, even though there was no one else in the room to notice. In most people that would have been remarkable, for few can contemplate their own destruction with objectivity.

The Chairman of the Committee for State Security assessed his position as thoroughly and dispassionately as he examined any aspect of his official duties. *Red October*. It all flowed out from that. He had used the *Red October* incident to his advantage, first suborning Gorshkov, then disposing of him; he'd also used it to strengthen the position of his Third Directorate arm. The military had begun to manage its own internal security—but Gerasimov had seized upon his report from Agent Cassius to convince the Politburo that the KGB alone could ensure the loyalty and security of the Soviet military. That had earned him resentment. He'd reported, again via Cassius, that *Red October* had been destroyed. Cassius had told KGB that Ryan was under criminal suspicion, and—

And we—I!—*walked into the trap*.

How could he explain that to the Politburo? One of his best agents had been doubled—but when? They'd ask that, and he didn't know the answer; therefore all the reports received from Cassius would become suspect. Despite the fact that much good data had come from the agent, knowledge that he'd been doubled at an unknown time tainted all of it. And that wrecked his vaunted insights into Western political thought.

He'd wrongly reported that the submarine hadn't defected, and not discovered the error. The Americans had gotten an intelligence windfall, but KGB didn't know of it. Neither did GRU, but that was little comfort.

And he'd reported that the Americans had made a major change in their arms-negotiation strategy, and that, too, was wrong.

Could he survive all three disclosures at once? Gerasimov asked himself.

Probably not.

In another age he would have faced death, and that would have made the decision all the easier. No man chooses death, at least not a sane one, and Gerasimov was coldly sane in everything he did. But that sort of thing didn't happen now. He'd end up with a subministerial job somewhere or other, shuffling papers. His KGB contacts would be useless to him beyond such meaningless favors as access to decent groceries. People would watch him walking on the street—no longer afraid to look him in the face, no longer fearful of his power, they'd point and laugh behind his back. People in his office would gradually lose their deference, and talk back, even shout at him

once they knew that his power was well and truly gone. No, he said to himself, I will not endure that.

To defect, then? To go from being one of the world's most powerful men to becoming a hireling, a mendicant who traded what he knew for money and a comfortable life? Gerasimov accepted the fact that his life would become more comfortable in physical terms—but to lose his *power!*

That was the issue, after all. Whether he left or stayed, to become just another man . . . *that would be like death, wouldn't it?*

Well, what do you do now?

He had to change his position, had to change the rules of the game, had to do something so dramatic . . . but what?

The choice was between disgrace and defection? To lose everything he'd worked for—within sight of his goal—and face a choice like this?

The Soviet Union is not a nation of gamblers. Its national strategy has always been more reflective of the Russians' national passion for chess, a series of careful, pre-planned moves, never risking much, always protecting its position by seeking small, progressive advantages wherever possible. The Politburo had almost always moved in that way. The Politburo itself was largely composed of similar men. More than half were *apparatchiks* who had spoken the appropriate words, filled the necessary quotas, taking what advantages they could, and who had won advancement through a stolidness whose perfection they could display around the table in the Kremlin. But the function of those men was to provide a moderating influence on those who aspired to rule, and these men were the gamblers. Narmonov was a gambler. So was Gerasimov. He'd play his own game, allying himself with Alexandrov to establish his ideological constituency, blackmailing Vaneyev and Yazov to betray their master.

And it was too fine a game to quit so easily. He had to change the rules again, but the game did not really have any rules—except for the one: Win.

If he won—the disgraces would not matter, would they?

Gerasimov took the key from his pocket and examined it for the first time in the light of his desk lamp. It looked ordinary enough. Used in the designed manner, it would make possible the deaths of—fifty million? A hundred? More? The Directorate Three men on the submarines and in the land-based rocket regiments held that power—the *zampolit,* the political officer alone had the authority to activate the warheads without which the rockets were mere fireworks. Turn this key in the proper way at the proper time, he knew, and the rockets were transformed into the most frightening instruments of death yet devised by the mind of man. Once launched, nothing could stop them . . .

But that rule was going to be changed, too, wasn't it?

What was it worth to be the man who could do that?

"Ah." Gerasimov smiled. It was worth more than all the other rules combined, and he remembered that the Americans had broken a rule, too, in killing their courier in the Moskvich railyard. He lifted his phone and called for a communications officer. For once the longitudinal lines worked in his favor.

Dr. Taussig was surprised when she saw the signal. One thing about "Ann"

was that she never altered her routine. Despite the fact that she'd impulsively visited her contact, heading to the shopping center was her normal Saturday routine. She parked her Datsun fairly far out, lest some klutz in a Chevy Malibu smash his door against hers. On the way in, she saw Ann's Volvo, and the driver's side visor was down. Taussig checked her watch and increased her pace to the entrance. On going in, she turned left.

* * *

Peggy Jennings was working alone today. They were spread too thin to get the job done as fast as Washington wanted, but that wasn't exactly a new story, was it? The setting was both good and bad. Following her subject to the shopping mall was fairly easy, but once inside it was damned near impossible to trail a subject properly, unless you had a real team of agents operating. She got to the door only a minute behind Taussig, already knowing that she'd lost her. Well, this was only a preliminary look at her. Routine, Jennings told herself on opening the door.

Jennings looked up and down the mall and failed to see her subject. Frowning for a moment, she commenced a leisurely stroll from shop to shop, gazing in the windows and wondering if Taussig had gone to a movie.

"Hello, Ann!"

"Bea!" Bisyarina said inside Eve's Leaves. "How are you?"

"Keeping busy," Dr. Taussig replied. "That looks wonderful on you."

"She's so easy to fit," the shop owner observed.

"Easier than me," Taussig agreed glumly. She lifted a suit from the nearest rack and walked to a mirror. Severely cut, it suited her present mood. "Can I try this one on?"

"Surely," the owner said at once. It was a three-hundred-dollar outfit.

"Need a hand?" "Ann" asked.

"Sure—you can tell me what you're up to." Both women walked back to the dressing rooms.

Within the booth, both women chatted away, discussing the everyday things that differ little between women and men. Bisyarina handed over a slip of paper, which Taussig read. The latter's conversation stuttered for a moment before she nodded agreement. Her face switched from shock to acceptance, then switched again to something that Bisyarina did not like at all—but the KGB didn't pay her to like her job.

The suit fitted rather nicely, the owner saw when they came out. Taussig paid the way most people did, with a credit card. Ann waved and left, turning to walk past the gun shop on her way out the mall.

Jennings saw her subject come out of the shop a few minutes later, carrying a clear plastic garment bag. *Well, that's what it was,* she told herself. *Whatever was bothering her the other night, she went shopping to make herself feel better and got another one of those suits*. Jennings followed her for another hour before breaking off the surveillance. Nothing there.

“He’s one cool dude,” Ryan told Candela. “I didn’t expect him to jump into my lap and thank me for the offer, but I expected *some* reaction!”

“Well, if he bites, he’ll get word to you easy enough.”

“Yeah.”

21.

Knave's Gambit

THE Archer tried to tell himself that the weather was no man's ally, but surely this was not true. The skies were clear, the winds cold and from the northeast, sweeping down from the frigid center of Siberia. He wanted clouds. They could move only in darkness now. That made progress slow, and the longer they were here in Soviet territory, the greater the chance that someone would notice them, and if they were noticed . . .

There was little need to speculate about that. All he had to do was raise his head to watch the armored vehicles motoring along the Dangara road. There was at least a battalion stationed around here, possibly a whole regiment of motor-rifle troops who constantly patrolled the roads and tracks. His force was large and formidable by *mudjaheddin* standards, but against Russians in regimental force on their own land, only Allah Himself could save them. *And perhaps not even Him?* the Archer wondered, then chastised himself for the unspoken blasphemy.

His son was not far away, probably less than the distance they'd traveled to be here—but where? A place he would never find. The Archer was certain of that. He'd given up hope long ago. His son would be raised in the alien, infidel ways of the Russians, and all he could do was pray that Allah would come to his son before it was too late. To steal children, surely that was the most heinous of all crimes. To rob them of their parents and their faith . . . well, there was no need to dwell on that.

Every one of his men had reason enough to hate the Russians. Families killed or scattered, homes bombed. His men did not know that this was the usual business of modern war. As "primitives," they felt that battles were affairs for warriors alone. Their leader knew that this had stopped being true long before any of them was born. He didn't understand why the "civilized" nations of the world had changed this sensible rule, but he only needed to know that it was. With this knowledge had come the awareness that his destiny was not the one he'd selected for himself. The Archer wondered if any man truly chose his fate, or was it not all in greater hands than those which held book or rifle? But that was another complex, useless thought, since for the Archer and his men, the world had distilled itself to a few simple truths and a few deep hates. Perhaps that would someday change, but for the *mudjaheddin* the world was limited to what they could see and feel now. To search further was to lose sight of what mattered, and that meant death. The only great thought held by his men was their faith, and for the moment that was enough.

The last vehicle in the column disappeared around the bend in the road. The

Archer shook his head. He'd had enough of thinking for the present. The Russians he'd just watched had all been inside their tracked BMP infantry carriers, inside where they could be kept warm by the fighting vehicle's heater; inside where they could not see out very well. That was what mattered. He raised his head to see his men, well camouflaged by their Russian-issue clothing and hidden behind rocks, lying in crevices, paired off, which allowed one to sleep while the other, like their leader, watched and kept guard.

The Archer looked up to see the sun now in decline. Soon it would slide behind the mountain ridge, and his men could resume their march north. He saw the sun glint off the aluminum skin of an aircraft as it turned in the air high overhead.

Colonel Bondarenko had a window seat and was staring down at the forbidding mountains. He remembered his brief tour of duty in Afghanistan, the endless, leg-killing mountains where one could travel in a perfect circle and seem to go uphill all the way. Bondarenko shook his head. That, at least, was behind him. He'd served his time, tasted combat, and now he could go back to applied engineering science which was, after all, his first love. Combat operations were a young man's game, and Gennady Iosifovich was over forty now. Having once proven that he could climb the rocks with the young bucks, he was resolved never to do so again. Besides, there was something else on his mind.

What's happening with Misha? he asked himself. When the man had disappeared from the Ministry, he'd naturally assumed that the older man was ill. When the absence had lasted several days, he took it to be serious and asked the Minister if Colonel Filitov had been hospitalized. The reply at the time had been reassuring—but now he wondered. Minister Yazov had been a little too glib—then Bondarenko had gotten orders to return to Bright Star for an extended evaluation of the site. The Colonel felt that he was being shuffled out of the way—but why? Something about the way Yazov had reacted to his innocent inquiry? Then there was the matter of the surveillance he'd spotted. Could the two things be connected? The connection was so obvious that Bondarenko ignored it without conscious consideration. It was simply impossible that Misha could have been the target of a security investigation, and even less possible that the investigation should develop substantive evidence of misdeeds. The most likely thing, he concluded, was that Misha was off on a top-secret job for Yazov. Surely he did a lot of that. Bondarenko looked down at the massive earthwork of the Nurek power dam. The second string of power lines was almost done, he noted, as the airliner dropped flaps and wheels for a landing at Dushanbe-East. He was the first man to leave the aircraft after landing.

"Gennady Iosifovich!"

"Good morning, Comrade General," Bondarenko said in some surprise.

"Come with me," Pokryshkin said, after returning the Colonel's salute. "You don't want to ride that damned bus." He waved to his sergeant, who wrested away Bondarenko's bag.

"You didn't need to come yourself."

"Rubbish." Pokryshkin led the parade to his personal helicopter, whose rotor was already turning. "One day I must read that report you drafted. I just had three *ministers* here yesterday. Now everyone understands how important we are. Our funding is being increased twenty-five percent—I wish *I* could write that kind of report!"

"But I—"

"Colonel, I don't want to hear it. You have seen the truth and communicated it to others. You are now part of the Bright Star family. I want you to think about coming to us full time after your Moscow tour is finished. According to your file, you have excellent engineering and administrative credentials, and I need a good second-in-command." He turned with a conspiratorial look. "I don't suppose I could talk you into an air-force uniform?"

"Comrade General, I—"

"I know, once a soldier of the Red Army, always a soldier of the Red Army. We will not hold it against you. Besides, you can help me with those KGB boneheads on perimeter guard. They can bluster their expertise at a broken-down fighter pilot, but not against a man with the Red Banner for close combat." The General waved for the pilot to take off. Bondarenko was surprised that the commander wasn't flying the aircraft himself. "I tell you, Gennady, in a few years this will be a whole new service branch. 'Cosmic Defense Troops,' perhaps. There will be room for you to create a whole new career, and plenty of room for advancement. I want you to give that some serious thought. You will probably be a general in three or four years anyway, but I can guarantee you more stars than the Army can."

"For the moment, however . . . ?" He'd think about that, but not in a helicopter.

"We're looking at the mirror and computer plans the Americans are using. The chief of our mirror group thinks he can adapt their designs to our hardware. It will take about a year to come up with the plans, he says, but he doesn't know about the actual engineering. Meanwhile we're assembling some reserve lasers and trying to simplify the design to make maintenance easier."

"That's another two years' work," Bondarenko observed.

"At least," General Pokryshkin agreed. "This program will not come to fruition before I leave. That's inevitable. If we have one more major test success, I will be recalled to Moscow to head the Ministry office, and at best the system will not be deployed before I retire." He shook his head sadly. "It's a hard thing to accept, how long these projects take now. That's why I want you here. I need a young man who will carry this project all the way through. I've looked at a score of officers. You're the best of them, Gennady Iosifovich. I want you here to take over from me when the time comes."

Bondarenko was stunned. Pokryshkin had selected him, doubtless in preference to men from his own service branch. "But you hardly know me—"

"I did not get to be a general officer by being ignorant of people. You have the qualities that I look for, and you are at just the right part of your career—ready for an independent command. Your uniform is less important than the type of man you are. I've already telexed the Minister to this effect."

Well. Bondarenko was still too surprised to be pleased. *And all because Old Misha decided that I was the best man to make an inspection tour. I hope he's not*

too ill.

"He's been going over nine hours now," one of the officers said almost accusingly to Vatutin. The Colonel bent to look in the fiber-optic tube and watched the man for several minutes. He was lying down at first, tossing and turning fitfully as he tried willing himself to sleep, but that effort was doomed to failure. After that came the nausea and diarrhea from the caffeine that denied him sleep. Next he rose and resumed the pacing he'd been doing for hours, trying to tire himself into the sleep that part of his body demanded while the remainder objected.

"Get him up here in twenty minutes." The KGB Colonel looked at his subordinate with amusement. He'd slept only seven hours and spent the last two making sure that the orders he'd given before turning in had been carried out in full. Then he'd showered and shaved. A messenger had fetched a fresh uniform from his apartment while an orderly had polished his boots to a mirrorlike luster. Vatutin finished off his own breakfast and treated himself to an extra cup of coffee brought down from the senior-officers' mess. He ignored the looks he was getting from the other members of his interrogation team, not even giving them a cryptic smile to indicate that he knew what he was doing. If they didn't know that by now, then the hell with them. Finished, he wiped his mouth with the napkin and walked to the interrogation room.

Like most such rooms, the bare table it held was more than it appeared to be. Under the lip where the tabletop overlapped the supporting frame were several buttons that he could press without anyone's noticing. Several microphones were set in the apparently blank walls, and the single adornment on them, a mirror, was actually two-way, so that the subject could be observed and photographed from the next room.

Vatutin sat down and got out the folder that he'd be putting away when Filitov arrived. His mind went over what he'd do. He already had it fully planned, of course, including the wording of his verbal report to Chairman Gerasimov. He checked his watch, nodded to the mirror, and spent the next several minutes composing himself for what was to come. Filitov arrived right on time.

He looked strong, Vatutin saw. Strong but haggard. That was the caffeine with which his last meal had been laced. The façade he projected was hard, but brittle and thin. Filitov showed irritation now. Before, he'd shown only resolve.

"Good morning, Filitov," Vatutin said, hardly looking up.

"Colonel Filitov to you. Tell me, when will this charade be over?"

He probably believes that, too, Vatutin told himself. The subject had so often repeated the story of how Vatutin had placed the film cassette in his hand that he might have halfway believed it now. That was not unusual. He took his chair without asking permission, and Vatutin waved the turnkey out of the room.

"When did you decide to betray the Motherland?" Vatutin asked.

"When did you decide to stop buggering little boys?" the old man replied angrily.

"Filitov—excuse me, *Colonel* Filitov—you know that you were arrested with

a microfilm cassette in your hand, only two meters from an American intelligence officer. On that microfilm cassette was information about a highly secret State defense-research installation, which information you have been giving for years to the Americans. There is no question of this, in case you have forgotten," Vatutin explained patiently. "What I am asking is, how long you have been doing this?"

"Go bugger yourself," Misha suggested. Vatutin noticed a slight tremor in his hands. "I am three times Hero of the Soviet Union. I was killing the enemies of this country while you were an ache in your father's crotch, and you have the balls to call me traitor?"

"You know, when I was in grammar school, I read books about you. Misha, driving the *fascisti* back from the gates of Moscow. Misha, the demon tankist. Misha, the Hero of Stalingrad. Misha, killer of Germans. Misha, leading the counterattack at the Kursk Bulge. Misha," Vatutin said finally, "traitor to the Motherland."

Misha waved his hand, looking in annoyance at the way it shook. "I have never had much respect for the *chekisti.* When I was leading my men, they were there—behind us. They were very efficient at shooting prisoners—prisoners that real soldiers had taken. They were also rather good at murdering people who'd been forced to retreat. I even remember one case where a *chekist* lieutenant took command of a tank troop and led it into a fucking swamp. At least the Germans I killed were men, fighting men. I hated them, but I could respect them for the soldiers they were. Your kind, on the other hand . . . perhaps we simple soldiers never really understood who the enemy was. Sometimes I wonder who has killed more Russians, the Germans—or people like you?"

Vatutin was unmoved. "The traitor Penkovskiy recruited you, didn't he?"

"Rubbish! I reported Penkovskiy myself." Filitov shrugged. He was surprised at the way he felt, but was unable to control it. "I suppose your kind does have its use. Oleg Penkovskiy was a sad, confused man who paid the price that such men have to pay."

"As will you," Vatutin said.

"I cannot prevent you from killing me, but I have seen death too many times. Death has taken my wife and my sons. Death has taken so many of my comrades—and death has tried to take me often enough. Sooner or later death will win, whether from you or someone else. I have forgotten how to fear that."

"Tell me, what do you fear?"

"Not you." This was delivered not with a smile, but with a cold, challenging glare.

"But all men fear something," Vatutin observed. "Did you fear combat?" *Ah, Misha, you're talking too much now. Do you even know that?*

"Yes, at first. The first time a shell hit my T-34, I wet my pants. But only that first time. After that I knew that the armor would stop most hits. A man can get accustomed to physical danger, and as an officer you are often too busy to realize that you're supposed to be afraid. You fear for the men under your command. You fear failure in a combat assignment, because others depend on you. You always fear pain—not death, but pain." Filitov surprised

himself by talking this much, but he'd had enough of this KGB slug. It was almost like the frenetic excitement of combat, sitting here and dueling with this man.

"I have read that all men fear combat, but that what sustains them is their self-image. They know that they cannot let their comrades perceive them to be less than what they are supposed to be. Men, therefore, fear cowardice more than danger. They fear betraying their manhood, and their fellow soldiers." Misha nodded slightly. Vatutin pressed one of the buttons under the table. "Filitov, you have betrayed your men. Can't you see that? Don't you understand that in giving defense secrets to the enemy, you have betrayed all the men who served with you?"

"It will take more than your words to—"

The door opened quietly. The young man who entered wore dirty, greasy coveralls, and wore the ribbed helmet of a tank crewman. All the details were right: there was a trailing wire for the tank's interphones, and the powerful smell of powder came into the room with the young man. The coverall was torn and singed. His face and hands were bandaged. Blood dripped down from the covered eye, clearing a trail through the grime. And he was the living image of Aleksey Il'ych Romanov, Corporal of the Red Army, or as close to it as the KGB could manage in one frantic night's effort.

Filitov didn't hear him enter, but turned as soon as he noticed the smell. His mouth dropped open in shock.

"Tell me, Filitov," Vatutin said. "How do you think your men would react if they learned what you have done?"

The young man—he was in fact a corporal who worked for a minor functionary in the Third Directorate—did not say a word. The chemical irritant in his right eye was making it water, and while the youngster struggled not to grimace at the pain it caused him, the tears ran down his cheeks. Filitov didn't know that his meal had been drugged—so disoriented was he by his stay in Lefortovo that he no longer had the ability to register the things that were being done to him. The caffeine had induced the exact opposite of a drunken state. His mind was as wide awake as it had been in combat, all his senses sought input, noticed everything that was happening around him—but all through the night there had been nothing to report. Without data to pass on, his senses had begun making things up, and Filitov had been hallucinating when the guards had come to fetch him. In Vatutin he had a target on which to fix his psyche. But Misha was also tired, exhausted by the routine to which he had been subjected, and the combination of wakefulness and bone-crushing fatigue had placed him in a dreamlike state where he no longer had the ability to distinguish the real from the imaginary.

"Turn *around,* Filitov!" Vatutin boomed. "Look at me when I address you! I asked you a question: *What of all the men who served you?"*

"Who—"

"Who? The men you led, you old fool!"

"But—" He turned again, and the figure was gone.

"I've been looking through your file, all those citations you wrote for your men—more than most commanders. Ivanenko here, and Pukhov, and this Corporal Romanov. All the men who died for you, what would they think

now?"

"They would understand!" Misha insisted as the anger took over completely.

"What would they understand? Tell me now, what is it that they would understand?"

"Men like you killed them—not I, not the Germans, but men like you!"

"And your sons, too, eh?"

"Yes! My two handsome sons, my two strong, brave boys, they went to follow in my footsteps and—"

"Your wife, too?"

"That above all!" Filitov snarled back. He leaned forward across the table. "You have taken everything from me, you *chekist* bastard—and you wonder that I needed to fight back at you? No man has served the State better than I, and look at my reward, look at the gratitude of the Party. All that was my world you have taken away, and you say that I have betrayed the *Rodina,* do you? *You* have betrayed her, and you have betrayed me!"

"And because of that, Penkovskiy approached you, and because of that you have been feeding information to the West—you've fooled us all these years!"

"It is no great thing to fool the likes of you!" He pounded his fist on the table. "Thirty years, Vatutin, thirty years I have—I have—" He stopped, a curious look on his face, wondering what he had just said.

Vatutin took his time before speaking, and when he did so, his voice was gentle. "Thank you, Comrade Colonel. That is quite enough for now. Later we will talk about exactly what you have given the West. I despise you for what you have done, Misha. I cannot forgive or understand treason, but you're the bravest man I have ever met. I hope that you can face what remains of your life with equal bravery. It is important now that you face yourself and your crimes as courageously as you faced the *fascisti*, so that your life can end as honorably as you lived it." Vatutin pressed a button and the door opened. The guards took Filitov away, still looking back at the interrogator, more surprised than anything else. Surprised that he'd been tricked. He'd never understand how it had been done, but then they rarely did, the Colonel of the Second Chief Directorate told himself. He rose, too, after a minute, collecting his files in a businesslike way before he walked out of the room and upstairs.

"You would have been a fine psychiatrist," the doctor observed first of all.

"I hope the tape machines got all of that," Vatutin said to his technicians.

"All three, plus the television record."

"That was the hardest one I've ever come across," a major said.

"Yes, he was a hard one. A brave one. Not an adventurer, not a dissident. That one was a patriot—or that's what the poor bastard thought he was. He wanted to save the country from the Party." Vatutin shook his head in wonderment. "Where do they get such ideas?"

Your *Chairman,* he reminded himself, *wants to do much the same thing—or more accurately to save the country* for *the Party.* Vatutin leaned against the wall for a moment while he tried to decide how similar or how different the motivation was. He concluded quickly that this was not a proper thought for a simple counterintelligence officer. At least not yet. *Filitov got his ideas from the clumsy way the Party treated his family. Well, even though the Party says it never makes mistakes, we all know differently. What a pity that Misha couldn't make that*

allowance. After all, the Party is all we have.

"Doctor, make sure he gets some rest," he said on the way out. There was a car waiting for him.

Vatutin was surprised to see that it was morning. He'd allowed himself to focus too fully these last two days, and he'd thought that it would be nighttime. So much the better, though: he could see the Chairman right now. The really amazing part was that he was actually on a fairly normal schedule. He could go home tonight and get a normal night's sleep, reacquaint himself with wife and family, watch some television. Vatutin smiled to himself. He could also look forward to a promotion, he told himself. After all, he'd broken the man earlier than promised. That ought to make the Chairman happy.

Vatutin caught him between meetings. He found Gerasimov in a pensive mood, staring out his window at the traffic on Dzerzhinskiy Square.

"Comrade Chairman, I have the confession," Vatutin announced. Gerasimov turned.

"Filitov?"

"Why, yes, Comrade Chairman." Vatutin allowed his surprise to show.

Gerasimov smiled after a moment. "Excuse me, Colonel. There is an operational matter on my mind at the moment. You do have his confession?"

"Nothing detailed yet, of course, but he did admit that he was sending secrets to the West, and that he has been doing so for thirty years."

"Thirty years—and all that time we didn't detect it . . ." Gerasimov noted quietly.

"That is correct," Vatutin admitted. "But we have caught him, and we will spend weeks learning all that he has compromised. I think we will find that his placement and operational methods made detection difficult, but we will learn from this, as we have learned from all such cases. In any event, you required the confession and now we have it," the Colonel pointed out.

"Excellent," the Chairman replied. "When will your written report be ready?"

"Tomorrow?" Vatutin asked without thinking. He nearly cringed awaiting the reply. He expected to have his head snapped off, but Gerasimov thought for an infinity of seconds before nodding.

"That is sufficient. Thank you, Comrade Colonel. That will be all."

Vatutin drew himself to attention and saluted before leaving.

Tomorrow? he asked himself in the corridor. *After all that, he's willing to wait until tomorrow?*

What the hell? It didn't make any sense. But Vatutin had no immediate explanation, either, and he did have a report to file. The Colonel walked to his office, pulled out a lined pad, and started drafting his interrogation report.

"So that's the place?" Ryan asked.

"That's it. Used to be they had a toy store right across from it, over there. Called Children's World, would you believe? I suppose somebody finally noticed how crazy that was, and they just moved it. The statue in the middle is Feliks Dzerzhinskiy. That was a cold bloody piece of work—next to him Heinrich Himmler was a boy scout."

"Himmler wasn't as smart," Jack observed.

"True enough. Feliks broke at least three attempts to bring Lenin down, and

one of them was pretty serious. The full story on that never has gotten out, but you can bet the records are right in there," the driver said. He was an Australian, part of the company contracted to handle perimeter security for the embassy, and a former commando of the Aussie SAS. He never performed any actual espionage activities—at least not for America—but he often played the part, doing strange things. He'd learned to spot and shake tails along the way, and that made the Russians certain that he was CIA or some sort of spook. He made an excellent tour guide, too.

He checked the mirror. "Our friends are still there. You don't expect anything, do you?"

"We'll see." Jack turned. They weren't being very subtle, but he hadn't expected that they would. "Where's Frunze?"

"South of the embassy, mate. You should have told me that you wanted to go there, we'd have hit it first." He made a legal U-turn while Ryan kept looking back. Sure enough, the Zhiguli—it looked like an old Fiat—did the same, following them like a faithful dog. They went past the American compound again on the way, past the former Greek Orthodox church known to embassy wags as Our Lady of the Microchips for all the surveillance devices it surely contained.

"What exactly are we doing?" the driver asked.

"We're just driving around. The last time I was here, all I saw was the way to and from the Foreign Ministry and the inside of a palace."

"And if our friends get any closer?"

"Well, if they want to talk with me, I suppose I might oblige," Ryan answered.

"Are you serious?" He knew Ryan was CIA.

"You bet." Jack chuckled.

"You know I have to do a written report on things like that?"

"You have your job. I have mine." They drove around for another hour, but nothing happened. That was to Ryan's disappointment, and the driver's relief.

They arrived the usual way. Though the crossing points were shuffled at random, the car—it was a Plymouth Reliant, about four years old, with Oklahoma tags—stopped at the Border Patrol control booth. There were three men inside, one of whom appeared to be asleep and had to be roused.

"Good evening," the Border Patrolman said. "Could I see some identification, please?" All three men handed over driver's licenses, and the photographs matched. "Anything to declare?"

"Some booze. Two quarts—I mean liters—for each of us." He watched with interest as a dog sniffed around the car. "You want us to pull over and pop the trunk?"

"Why were you in Mexico?"

"We represent Cummings-Oklahoma Tool and Die. Pipeline and refinery equipment," the driver explained. "Mainly large-diameter control valves and like that. We're trying to sell some to Pemex. The sales stuff is in the trunk, too."

"Any luck?" the Border Patrolman asked.

"First try. It'll take a few more. They usually do."

The dog handler shook his head negatively. His Labrador wasn't interested in the car. No smell of drugs. No smell of nitrates. The men in the car didn't fit the profile. They looked fairly clean-cut, but not overly so, and had not chosen a busy time to make the crossing.

"Welcome back," the patrolman said. "Safe trip home."

"Thank you, sir." The driver nodded and dropped the car into drive. "See ya."

"I don't believe it," the man in the back said, once they were a hundred meters away from the control point. He spoke in English. "They don't have the first idea of security."

"My brother's a major in the Border Guards. I think he'd have a heart attack if he saw how easy that was," the driver observed. He didn't laugh. The hard part would be getting out, and as of now they were in enemy territory. He drove right at the posted speed limit while local drivers whizzed by him. He liked the American car. Though it lacked power, he'd never driven a car with more than four cylinders and didn't really know the difference. He'd been in the United States four times before, but never for a job like this, and never with so little preparation.

All three spoke perfect American English, with a prairie twang to coincide with their identification papers—that's how they all thought of their driver's licenses and Social Security cards, even though they could hardly be called proper "papers." The odd thing was that he liked America, especially the easy availability of inexpensive, wholesome food. He'd stop at a fast-food place on the way to Santa Fe, preferably a Burger King, where he'd indulge his love for a charcoalcooked hamburger served with lettuce, tomatoes, and mayonnaise. That was one of the things Soviets found most amazing about America, the way anyone could get food without standing in a block-long line. And it was usually good food. How could Americans be so good at difficult tasks like food production and distribution, he wondered, and be so stupid about simple things like proper security? They just didn't make any sense at all, but it was wrong—dangerous—to be contemptuous of them. He understood that. The Americans played by a set of rules so different as to be incomprehensible . . . and there was so much *randomness* here. That frightened the KGB officer in a fundamental way. You couldn't tell which way they'd jump any more than you could predict the behavior of a driver on a highway. More than anything else, it was that unpredictability that reminded him that he was on the enemy's ground. He and his men had to be careful, had to keep to their training. Being at ease in an alien environment was the surest route to disaster—that lesson had been pounded home all the way through the academy. There were just too many things that training could not do. The KGB could scarcely predict what the American government would do. There was no way they could be prepared for the individual actions of two hundred-plus million people who bounced from decision to decision.

That was it, he thought. They have to make so many *decisions* every day. Which food to buy, which road to take, which car to drive. He wondered how his countrymen would handle such a huge load of decisions, forced upon you every day. Chaos, he knew. It would result in anarchy, and that was historically the greatest fear of Russians.

"I wish we had roads like this at home," the man next to him said. The one in the back was asleep, for real this time. For both of them it was the first time in America. The operation had been laid on too fast. Oleg had done several jobs in South America, always covered as an American businessman. A Moscovite, he remembered that there, once you were twenty kilometers beyond the outer ring road, all the roads were gravel, or simply dirt. The Soviet Union did not have a single paved road that led from one border to another.

The driver—his name was Leonid—thought about that. "Where would the money come from?"

"True," Oleg agreed tiredly. They'd been driving for ten hours. "But you'd think we could have roads as good as Mexico."

"Hmph." *But then people would have to choose where they wanted to go, and no one had ever bothered to train them how.* He looked at the clock on the dashboard. Six more hours, maybe seven.

Captain Tania Bisyarina came to much the same conclusion as she checked the dashboard clock in her Volvo. The safe house in this case wasn't a house at all, but an old housetrailer that looked more like the sort used as mobile offices by contractors and engineers. It had started life as the former, but ended as the latter when an engineering firm had abandoned it a few years before, after half-completing their project in the hills south of Santa Fe. The drainage lines and sewers they'd been installing for a new housing development had never been finished. The developer had lost his financing, and the property was still tied up in court battles. The location was perfect, close to the interstate, close to the city, but hidden away behind a ridge and marked only by a dirt access road that even the local teenagers hadn't discovered yet for their post-dance parking. The visibility question was both good and bad news. Scrub pines hid the trailer from view, but also allowed clandestine approach. They'd have to post an outside guard. Well, you couldn't have everything. She'd driven in without lights, having carefully timed her arrival for a time when the nearest road was effectively deserted. From the back of her Volvo, she unloaded two bags of groceries. The trailer had no electricity, and all the food had to be nonperishable. That meant the meat was plastic-wrapped sausage, and she had a dozen cans of sardines. Russians love them. Once the groceries were in, she got a small suitcase from her car and set it next to the two jerricans of water in the nonfunctional bathroom.

She would have preferred curtains on the windows, but it was not a good idea to alter the appearance of the trailer too much. Nor was it a very good idea to have a car there. After the team arrived, they'd find a heavily wooded spot a hundred meters up the dirt road to leave it. That was also a minor annoyance, but one for which they had to prepare. Setting up safe houses was never as easy as people thought, certainly not the covert kind, even in places as open as America. It would have been somewhat easier if she'd had decent warning, but this operation had been laid on virtually overnight, and the only place she had was the rough-and-ready spot she'd picked out soon after arriving. It wasn't intended for anything other than a place for her to hole up,

or perhaps safeguard her agent should it ever become necessary. It had never been intended for the mission at hand, but there wasn't time to make any other arrangements. The only other alternative was her own home, and that was definitely out. Bisyarina wondered if she'd be disciplined for not having scouted out a better location, but knew that she'd followed her instructions to the letter in all of her field activities.

The furniture was functional, though dirty. With nothing better to do, she wiped it off. The team leader coming in was a senior officer. She didn't know his name or face, but he had to have more rank than she did for this kind of job. When the trailer's single couch was reasonably presentable, she stretched out for a nap, having first set a small alarm clock to wake her in several hours. It seemed that she'd just lain down when the bell startled her off the vinyl cushions.

They arrived an hour before dawn. The road signs made it easy, and Leonid had the route completely memorized. Five miles—he had to think in miles now—off the interstate, he turned right onto a side road. Just past a road sign advertising a cigarette, he saw the dirt road that seemingly led nowhere. He switched off the car's lights and coasted up to it, careful to keep his foot off the brake lest his taillights betray him in the trees. Over the first small ridge, the road dropped and curved to the right. There was the Volvo. Next to it was a figure.

This was always the tense part. He was making contact with a fellow KGB officer, but he knew of cases where things hadn't gone quite right. He set the parking brake and got out.

"Lost?" the woman's voice asked.

"I'm looking for Mountain View," he replied.

"That's on the other side of town," she said.

"Oh, I must have taken the wrong exit." He could see her relax when he completed the sequence.

"Tania Bisyarina. Call me Ann."

"I'm Bob," Leonid said. "In the car are Bill and Lenny."

"Tired?"

"We've been driving since dawn yesterday," Leonid/Bob answered.

"You can sleep inside. There's food and drink. No electricity, no running water. There are two flashlights and a gasoline lantern—you can use that to boil water for coffee."

"When?"

"Tonight. Get your people inside and I'll show you where to move the car."

"How about getting out?"

"I don't know yet. What we have to do later today is complex enough." That launched her into a description of the operation. What surprised her, though it shouldn't have, was the professionalism of the three. Each of them had to be wondering what Moscow Center had in its head when it ordered this operation. What they were doing was insane enough, much less the timing. But none of the four allowed their personal feelings to interfere with business. The operation was ordered by Moscow Center, and Moscow knew what it was doing. The manuals all said so, and the field officers believed it, even when

they knew they shouldn't.

Beatrice Taussig awoke an hour later. The days were getting longer, and now the sun didn't shine in her face when she drove to work. Instead it stared right through her bedroom window like an accusing eye. Today, she told herself, the dawn marked what was supposed to be a really new day, and she prepared herself to meet it. She started off with a shower and blow-dried her hair. Her coffee machine had already switched on, and she drank her first cup while she decided what she'd wear today. She told herself that it was an important decision, and found that it required more of a breakfast than a cup of coffee and a muffin. Such things require energy, she told herself gravely, and fixed eggs to go along. with the rest. She'd have to remind herself to go light on lunch as a result. Taussig had kept to a constant weight for the past four years, and was very careful of her figure.

Something frilly, she decided. She didn't have many outfits like that, but maybe the blue one . . . She switched on the TV as she ate her breakfast, catching the CNN Headline News blurb about the arms negotiations in Moscow. Maybe the world would become a safer place. It was good to think that she was working for something. A fastidious person, she put all her dishes in the dishwasher rack before returning to her bedroom. The blue outfit with the frills was a year out of date, but few at the project would notice—the secretaries would, but who cared about them? She added a paisley scarf around her neck to show that Bea was still Bea.

Taussig pulled into her reserved parking place at the normal time. Her security pass came out of her purse and went around her neck, suspended by a gold chain, and she breezed in the door, past the security checkpoints.

" 'Mornin', doc," said one of the guards. It had to be the outfit, Bea thought. She gave him a smile anyway, which made it an unusual morning for both of them, but didn't say anything, not to some high-school dropout.

She was the first one in her office, as usual. That meant that she fixed the coffee machine the way she liked, very strong. While it was perking, she opened her secure file cabinet and took out the package that she'd been working on the previous day.

Surprisingly, the morning went much more quickly than she had expected. The work helped. She had to deliver a cost-projection analysis by the end of the month, and to do that she had to shuffle through reams of documents, most of which she'd already photographed and forwarded to Ann. It was so convenient to have a private office with a door, and a secretary who always knocked before entering. Her secretary didn't like her, but Taussig didn't much care for her, either, a born-again jerk whose idea of a good time was practicing hymns. Well, a lot of things would change, she told herself. This *was* the day. She'd seen the Volvo on the drive in, parked in the appropriate place.

"Eight-point-one on the dyke-meter," Peggy Jennings said. "You ought to see the clothes she buys."

"So she's eccentric," Will Perkins observed tolerantly. "You see something I don't, Peg. Besides, I saw her coming in this morning, and she looked fairly

decent, except for the scarf."

"Anything unusual?" Jennings asked. She put her personal feelings aside.

"No. She gets up awfully early, but maybe she takes time to get untracked in the morning. I don't see any special reason to extend the surveillance." The list was long, and manpower was short. "I know you don't like gays, Peg, but you haven't even got a confirmation on that yet. Maybe you just don't like the gal," he suggested.

"The subject is flamboyant in mannerisms but conservative in dress. Outspoken on most things, but she doesn't talk at all about work. She's a collection of contradictions." A*nd that fits the profile*, she didn't have to add.

"So maybe she doesn't talk about work because she's not supposed to, like the security weenies tell them. She drives like an Easterner, always in a hurry, but she dresses in conservative clothes—maybe she likes the way she looks in clothes like that? Peg, you can't be suspicious about everything."

"I thought that was our job," Jennings snorted. "Explain what we watched the other night."

"I can't explain it, but you're putting your own spin on it. There's no evidence, Peg, not even enough to intensify the surveillance. Look, after we get through the people on the list, we'll take another look at her."

"This is crazy, Will. We have a supposed leak in a topsecurity project, and we have to pussyfoot around like we're afraid we might offend somebody." Agent Jennings stood and walked over to her desk for a moment. It wasn't much of a walk. The local FBI office was crowded with arrivals from the Bureau's counterintel office, and the headquarters people had usurped the lunchroom. Their "desks" were actually lunch tables.

"Tell you what—we can take the people who have access to the leaked material and put 'em all on the box." *On the box* meant subjecting everyone to a lie-detector test. The last time that had been done here, it had nearly started a revolution at Tea Clipper. The scientists and engineers were not intelligence types who understood that such things were necessary, but academics who considered the whole process an insult to their patriotism. Or a game: one of the software engineers had even tried using biofeedback techniques to screw up the test results. The main result from this effort, eighteen months before, had been to show that the scientific staff had a great deal of hostility to the security weenies, which was not much of a surprise. What had finally stopped the testing was a wrathful paper from a senior scientist who'd shown that a few deliberate lies he'd told went undetected. That, and the disruption it had caused within the various sections, had ended things before the program had been completed.

"Taussig didn't go on the box the last time," Jennings noted. She'd checked. "None of the admin people did. The revolt stopped things before they got that far. She was one of the people who—"

"Because the software bunch brought their protests to her. She's admin, remember, she's *supposed* to keep all the scientific people happy." Perkins had checked, too. "Look, if you feel this strongly about it, we can come back to her later. I don't see anything myself, but I'll trust your instincts—*but* for now, we have all these others to check out."

Margaret Jennings nodded her surrender. Perkins was right, after all. They

had nothing solid to point to. It was just her—*what?* Jennings wondered. She thought Taussig was gay, but that wasn't such a big thing anymore—the courts had said so in enough cases—and there was no proof to support her suspicion anyway. That's what it was, she knew. Three years earlier, right before she'd joined the counterintelligence office, she'd handled a kidnapping involving a couple of . . .

She also knew that Perkins was being more professional about it. Even though a Mormon, and straighter than most arrows, he didn't let his personal feelings interfere with business. What she couldn't shake was the gut feeling that despite everything logic and experience told her, she was still right. Right or wrong, she and Will had six reports to fill out before they went back into the field. You couldn't spend more than half your time in the field anymore. The rest was always stuck at a desk—or a converted lunch table—explaining to people what it was that you did when you weren't stuck at a desk.

"Al, this is Bea. Could you come over to my office?"

"Sure. Be over in five minutes."

"Great. Thanks." Taussig hung up. Even Bea admired Gregory for his punctuality. He came through the door exactly on time.

"I didn't interrupt anything, did I?"

"No. They're running another target-geometry simulation, but they don't need me for that. What's up?" Major Gregory asked, then said, "I like the outfit, Bea."

"Thanks, Al. I need you to help me with something."

"What?"

"It's a birthday present for Candi. I'm picking it up this afternoon and I need somebody to help me with it."

"Eek, you're right. It is in three weeks, isn't it?"

Taussig smiled at Al. He even made geeky noises. "You're going to have to start remembering those things."

"So what are you getting her?" He grinned like a little boy.

"It's a *surprise*, Al." She paused. "It's something Candi needs. You'll see. Candi drove herself in today, didn't she?"

"Yeah, she has to see the dentist after work."

"And don't tell her anything, please? It's a big surprise," Bea explained.

He could see that it was all she could do to keep her face straight. It must be some surprise, he smiled. "Okay, Bea. I'll see you at five."

They woke after noon. "Bob" trudged to the bathroom first before he remembered that there was no running water. He checked the windows for signs of activity before he went outside. By the time he was back, the others had water boiling. They only had instant coffee, but Bisyarina had gotten them a decent brand, and the breakfast food was all typically American, loaded with sugar. They knew that they'd need it. When each had finished his "morning" routine, they got out their maps and their tools and went over the operation's details. Over a period of three hours, they walked through them mentally until each man knew exactly what had to happen.

And there it was, the Archer told himself. Mountains made for long views. In this case, the objective was still two nights' march away, despite the fact that they could see it now. While his subordinates tucked their men into hiding places, he rested his binoculars on a rock and examined the site, still . . . twenty-five kilometers away? he wondered, then checked his map. Yes. He'd have to take his men downhill, cross a small stream, then up the slopes on a man-killing climb, and they would make their last camp . . . there. He concentrated his viewing on that spot. Five kilometers from the objective itself, shielded from view by the mountain's contours . . . the final climb would be a hard one. But what choice was there? He might give his people an hour's rest before the actual assault. That would help, and he'd also be able to brief his men on their individual missions, and give them all time to pray. His eyes went back to the objective.

Clearly, construction was still under way, but on this sort of place, they'd never stop building. It was well that they were here now. In a few more years it would be impregnable. As it was . . .

His eyes strained to make out the details. Even with binoculars he couldn't make out anything smaller than the guard towers. In the first light of dawn he could see the individual bumps that marked buildings. He'd have to be closer to make out items on which the last-minute details of his plan would depend, but for the moment his interest was in the lay of the land. How best to approach the place? How to use the mountain to their advantage? If this place were guarded by KGB troops, as the CIA documents he'd inspected had said, he knew that they were as lazy as they were cruel.

Guard towers, three, north side. There will be a fence there. Mines? he wondered. Mines or not, those guard towers would have to go fast. They'd hold heavy machine guns, and the view from them commanded the terrain. How to do that?

"So that is the place?" The former Army Major came down beside him.

"The men?"

"All hidden," the Major answered. He spent a minute examining the place in silence. "Remember the stories about the Assassins' stronghold in Syria?"

"Oh." The Archer turned sharply. That's what it reminded him of! "And how was that fortress taken?"

The Major smiled, keeping his eyes to the objective. "With more resources than we have, my friend . . . if they ever fortify the whole hilltop, it would take a regiment with helicopter support even to get inside the perimeter. So how do you plan to do it?"

"Two groups."

"Agreed." The Major didn't agree with any of this. His training—all of it supplied by the Russians—totd him that this mission was madness for so small a force, but before he could contradict a man like the Archer he would have to show his combat skills. That meant running mad risks. In the meantime, the Major would try to nudge his tactics in the right direction.

"The machines are on the slopes to the north. The people are on the knoll to the south." As they watched, the headlights of buses were moving from one place to the other. It was shift-change. The Archer considered that, but he had to make his attack in darkness and leave in darkness, else they'd never get

away.

"If we can get in close without being detected . . . may I make a suggestion?" the Major asked quietly.

"Go on."

"Take everything in together to the high ground in the center, then attack downhill against both places."

"It's dangerous," the Archer noted at once. "There is much open ground to be covered on both sides."

"It's also easier to reach the jump-off point unobserved. An approach by one group is less likely to be spotted than one by two groups. Place our heavy weapons there, and they can observe and support both assault teams . . ."

Here was the difference between an instinctive warrior and a trained soldier, the Archer admitted to himself. The Major knew better than he how to measure hazards one against the other. "I don't know about the guard towers, though. What do you think?"

"I'm not sure. I—" The Major pushed his commander's head down. A moment later an airplane streaked down the valley.

"That was a MiG-21, reconnaissance version. We are not dealing with fools." He looked to make sure that all his men were under cover. "We may just have had our pictures taken."

"Did they—"

"I don't know. We'll have to trust in God for that, my friend. He has not let us come this far to fail," the Major said, wondering if that were true or not.

"So where are we going?" Gregory asked in the parking lot.

"Meet me at the mall, south side of the lot, okay? I just hope it'll fit in the car."

"See you there." Gregory walked to his car and drove off.

Bea waited a few minutes before following. There was no sense in having anyone notice that they left at the same time. She was excited now. To combat this, she tried driving slowly, but it was so out of character that it merely fed her excitement, and as though by its own accord the Datsun seemed to work its way up through the gears and change lanes. She arrived in the mall parking lot twenty minutes later.

Al was waiting. He'd parked his car two spaces away from a station wagon, well out from the nearest store. He'd even picked more or less the right place, Bea Taussig noticed as she pulled in alongside his car and got out.

"What kept you?" he asked.

"No real hurry."

"So now what?"

Bea didn't really know. She knew what was to happen, but not how they planned to do it—in fact, she didn't even know for sure that it was a *they* doing it. Perhaps Ann was going to handle the thing all by herself. She laughed to cover her nervousness.

"Come on," she said, waving for him to follow.

"This must be some birthday present," Gregory noted. Off to his right, he noted a car backing out of its place.

Bea noted that the lot was crowded with cars but not people. The afternoon

shoppers had gone home for dinner, the new arrivals were just beginning their activity, and the movie crowd wouldn't come for another hour or so. Even so, she was tense as her eyes scanned left and right. She was to be one lane over from the movie entrance. The time was right. If anything went wrong, she almost giggled to herself, she'd have to pick out a large, bulky present. But she didn't have to. Ann was walking toward her. She carried nothing but a large purse.

"Hi, Ann!" Taussig called.

"Hello, Bea—oh, it's Major Gregory."

"Hi," Al said, while he tried to remember if he knew this woman or not. Al didn't have much of a memory for faces, so occupied was his brain with numbers.

"We met last summer," Ann said, confusing him all the more.

"What are you doing here?" Taussig asked her controller.

"Just some quick shopping. I have a date tonight, and I needed—well, I'll show you."

She reached into her purse and pulled out what to Gregory looked like a perfume dispenser—or whatever they called those little spray gadgets, he thought while he waited. He was glad Candi wasn't like this. Ann seemed to spray some of the stuff on her wrist and held it up to Bea's nose as a car came down the lane.

"Candi would love it—what do you think, Al?" Bea asked as the dispenser came up toward his face.

"Huh?" At that moment he got a face full of chemical Mace.

Ann had timed it perfectly, spraying Gregory just as he was taking a breath, and aimed it to get under the glasses into his eyes. It seemed that his face had been set afire, and the searing pain went down into his lungs. In a moment he was on his knees, hands to his face. He couldn't make a sound, and couldn't see the car stop right beside him. The door opened, and the driver only had to take half a step before chopping him on the side of the neck.

Bea watched him go limp—so perfect, she thought. The car's rear door opened and hands came out to grab his shoulders. Bea and Ann helped with the legs as the driver got back in. Just as the rear door closed, Gregory's car keys flew out the window to them, and the Plymouth rolled away, having hardly stopped at all.

Instantly, Ann looked around. No one had seen them. She was sure of it as she and Bea walked back away from the stores to where the cars were.

"What are you going to do with him?" Bea asked.

"What do you care?" Bisyarina replied quickly.

"You're not going—"

"No, we're not going to kill him." Ann wondered if that were true or not. She didn't know, but suspected that a murder was not in the cards. They'd broken one inviolable rule. That was enough for one day.

22.

Active Measures

LEONID, whose current cover required him to say, "Call me Bob," headed for the far end of the parking lot. For an operation with virtually no planning, its most dangerous phase had gone smoothly enough. Lenny, in back, had the job of controlling the American officer they'd just kidnapped. A physical type, he'd once been part of the Soviet "special-purpose" forces, known by the abbreviation *Spetznaz.* Bill, next to him, had been assigned to the mission because he was a scientific intelligence specialist; the fact that his area of expertise was chemical engineering hadn't mattered to Moscow. The case called for a scientific specialist, and he was the closest.

In the back, Major Gregory started to moan and move. The chop on his neck had been enough to stun, but not enough to produce any injury more serious than a blinding headache. They hadn't gone to all this trouble to kill the man by accident, something that had happened before. For the same reason, he hadn't been drugged. An exercise much more dangerous than most people might think, it had once accidentally killed a Soviet defector whose mind, as a result, had never been picked by the people of the Second Chief Directorate. To Lenny he seemed much like an infant coming out of a long sleep. The smell of chemical Mace was thick enough in the car that all of the windows were down a few inches to keep it from overpowering the KGB officers. They wanted to use physical restraints on their prisoner, but those might be troublesome if spotted. Lenny was able to control the American, of course. It was just that caution, the distillation of experience, taught them to take nothing for granted. For all they knew, Gregory's hobby might have been unarmed combat—stranger things had happened. When he became vaguely conscious, the first thing he saw was an automatic pistol's silencer pressed against his nose.

"Major *Gregoriy,"* Lenny said, using the Russian pronunciation for a purpose, "we know that you are a bright young man, and perhaps a courageous one also. If you resist, you will be killed," he lied. "I am very skilled in this. You will say nothing at all, and you will be still. If you do these things, no harm will come to you. Do you understand—just nod if you do."

Gregory was fully conscious. He'd never quite been out, merely stunned by the blow that still made his head as taut as a swollen balloon. His eyes were shedding tears as though from a leaky faucet, and every breath seemed to light a fire in his chest. He'd commanded himself to move as they pulled him into the car, but his limbs had ignored his frantic wishes while his mind raged at them. It had come to him in an instant: *That's why I hate Bea!* It wasn't her snotty manner and her weird way of dressing at all. But he set that one far

aside. There were more important things to worry about, and his mind was racing as it had never raced before. He nodded.

"Very good," the voice said, and strong arms lifted him off the floor and onto the rear seat. The metallic prod of the pistol was against his chest, hidden under the other man's left arm.

"The effect of the chemical irritant will pass in about an hour," Bill told him. "There will be no permanent effect."

"Who are you?" Al asked. His voice was a mere whisper, as raspy as sandpaper.

"Lenny told you to be still," the driver replied. "Besides, someone as bright as you must already know who we are. Am I correct?" Bob looked in the mirror and was rewarded with a nod.

Russians! Al told himself in a combination of amazement and certainty. *Russians here, doing this . . . why do they want me? Will they kill me?* He knew that he could not believe a thing they said. They'd say anything to keep him under control. He felt like a fool. He was supposed to be a man, an officer, and he was as helpless as a four-year-old girl—and crying like one, he realized, hating every tear that dripped from his eyes. Never in his life had Gregory felt such a killing rage. He looked to his right and realized that he didn't have the smallest chance. The man with the gun was almost twice his weight, and besides, he did have the gun pressed right against his chest. Gregory's eyes were blinking now almost like the windshield wipers of a car. He couldn't see well, but he could tell that the man with the gun was watching him with clinical interest, no emotion at all in his eyes. The man was a professional in the application of violence. *Spetznaz,* Gregory thought at once. Al took a deep breath, or tried to. He nearly exploded in a convulsion of coughs.

"You don't want to do that," the man in the right-front seat cautioned. "Take shallow breaths. The effect will pass in time." Wonderful stuff, this chemical Mace, Bill thought. And anyone could buy it in America. Amazing.

Bob was now out of the enormous parking lot and driving back to the safe house. He had the route memorized, of course, though he was not entirely at ease. He hadn't had the chance to drive it beforehand, to practice travel times and plot out alternative routes, but he had spent enough time in America that he knew how to drive lawfully and carefully. Driving habits here were better than in the Northeast—except on the interstates, where every Westerner felt the God-given right to race like a maniac. But he wasn't on the interstate, and on this four-lane highway the late rush-hour traffic moved placidly from light to light. He realized that his time estimate had been overly optimistic, but that didn't matter. Lenny would have no problem controlling their guest. It was quite dark, there were few streetlights, and theirs was just one more car driving home from work.

Bisyarina was already five miles away, heading in the opposite direction. The inside of the car was worse than she'd expected. A neat person, she was appalled to see that the young man had virtually covered the floor with plastic wrappers of some sort, and she wondered why the Chevy wasn't full of ants. The very thought made her skin crawl. She checked her mirror to make sure that Taussig was there. Ten minutes later she pulled into a working-class

neighborhood. All of the houses had driveways, but even here most families had more than one car, and the extra ones were parked on the street. She found a vacant spot by a corner and pulled over to it. Taussig's Datsun appeared beside the Chevy, and she left it there, just another car parked at the curb. When Taussig halted at the next stop sign, Bisyarina rolled down her window and tossed Gregory's keys into a sewer. With that ended what was the most dangerous part of the mission for her. Without being told, Taussig drove back toward the shopping mall, where Bisyarina would retrieve her Volvo.

"You're sure you won't kill him," Bea said again after another minute.

"Quite positive, Bea," Ann replied. She wondered why Taussig had suddenly acquired a conscience. "If I guess correctly, he might even be given the chance to continue his work . . . elsewhere. If he cooperates, then he will be treated very well."

"You'll even assign him a girlfriend, won't you?"

"It's one way of keeping men happy," Bisyarina admitted. "Happy people work better."

"Good," Taussig said, surprising her controller quite a bit. Taussig explained after a moment: "I don't want him hurt. What he knows will help both sides make the world safer." *And I just want him out of my way!* she didn't say.

"He's too valuable to hurt," Ann observed. *Unless things go wrong, in which case other orders might apply . . . ?*

Bob was surprised when the traffic backed up. He was right behind a mini-van. Like many American drivers, he hated the things because he couldn't see around them. He opened the ashtray and pushed in the cigarette lighter while he frowned in frustration. Bill, next to him, fished out a smoke also. If nothing else, it helped to mask the acrid stink of the Mace which still permeated the cloth upholstery of the car. Bob decided that he'd leave all the windows open when he parked tonight, just to get rid of the smell. His own eyes were watering, now that there was no blowing air to carry the chemical vapors out of the car. It almost made him feel sorry about the straight dose they'd given their prisoner, but at least it was preferable to a drug that might kill, or a blow that could break his scrawny little neck. At least he was behaving himself. If all went according to plan, by the end of the week he'd be in Moscow. They'd wait a day or so before heading into Mexico. A different crossing point would be used, and a diversion, not yet set up, would probably be used to ensure their speedy crossing into that convenient country, where one could catch a plane to Cuba, and from there a direct flight to Moscow. After that, this team of the First Chief Directorate would have a month's rest. It would be good, Bob told himself, to see his family again. It was always lonely abroad. So lonely that once or twice he'd been unfaithful to his wife, which was also a violation of standing orders. Though not a violation that many officers took seriously, it was something of which he wasn't proud. Perhaps he could get a new posting at the KGB Academy. He had the seniority now, and with a mission like this under his belt . . .

Traffic started moving again. He was surprised to see the mini-van's blinkers go on. Two minutes later he was horrified to see why. A jackknifed tractor-trailer blocked the entire road, with the remains of a small car crushed

beneath its front wheels. What looked like a score of rotating ambulance lights illuminated the efforts of police officers and firemen to extricate whatever fool had been driving the small import. Bob couldn't even tell what sort of car it had been, but like the majority of the other drivers, he stared at the wreckage with fascination for a few seconds, until he reminded himself who and where he was. A black-clad police officer was replacing flares on the pavement and waving all southbound traffic onto a side road. Bob reverted to intelligence officer in a moment. He waited until there was a clear path around the cop, and shot past. That earned him an angry look, but nothing more. Most important, the policeman hadn't gotten much of a look at the car. Bob raced up a hill before he realized that another effect of his hesitation was that he couldn't see where the detoured traffic was heading.

I didn't bring the map, he thought next. He'd destroyed it because of all the markings on it. In fact, the car held no maps at all. Maps were dangerous things to have, and besides, he knew how to memorize all the information he needed for his missions. But he hadn't been here long enough to learn the area, and knew only one route back to the safe house.

Goddamn these "immediate-priority" operations!

He took a left at the first crossroads, onto a curving street into a residential development. It took several minutes for him to realize that the land here was so hilly that all the roads curved back and forth upon themselves to the point where he didn't know which direction he was heading. For the first time, he began to lose his composure, but only for an instant. One mental curse in his native language reminded him that he couldn't even think in Russian. Bob lit another cigarette and drove slowly as he tried to orient himself. The tears in his eyes didn't help.

He's lost, Gregory realized after a moment. He'd read enough spy novels to know that they were taking him to a safe house—or a clandestine airfield?—or another vehicle that would carry him . . . where?—but as soon as he recognized the same car that they'd passed a few minutes before, he had to stop himself from smiling. They'd actually done something wrong. The next turn they took went downhill, and Gregory confirmed his suspicion when he again saw the rotating lights at the car wreck. He noted the curses as the driver pulled into a driveway and had to back up before they could climb the hill again.

Everything Russians hated about America flooded back into Bob's consciousness. Too many roads, too many cars—some damned fool of an American had run a stop sign and—*I hope he's dead!* the driver raged at the parked cars on the residential street. *I hope he died screaming in agony.* It felt better to get that thought out from the back of his mind.

Now what?

He continued on a different route, taking the road over the crest of the hill, where he was able to look down and see another highway. Perhaps if he went south on this one, it might connect with the road he'd been on . . . It was worth a try, he thought. To his right, Bill gave him a questioning look, but Lenny in the back was too busy with the prisoner to know that anything was badly wrong. As they picked up speed, at least the air through the windows allowed his eyes to clear. There was a traffic light at the bottom of the hill—

but there was also a sign that said NO LEFT TURN.

Govno! Bob thought to himself as he turned right. This four-lane road was divided by a concrete barrier.

You should have spent more time studying the map. You should have taken a few hours to drive around the area. But it was too late for that now, and he knew that he hadn't had the time. That left them heading back north. Bob checked his watch, forgetting that there was a clock on the dashboard. He'd already lost fifteen minutes. He was out in the open and vulnerable, on enemy ground. What if someone had seen them in the parking lot? What if the policeman at the wreck had taken down their number?

Bob didn't panic. He was too well trained for that. He commanded himself to take a deep breath and mentally examined all the maps he'd seen of the area. He was west of the interstate highway. If he could find that, he still remembered the exit he'd used earlier in the day—was it still the same day?—and get to the safe house blindfolded. If he were west of the interstate, all he had to do was find a road that went east. Which way was east—right. Another deep breath. He'd head north until he saw what looked like a major east-west road, and he'd turn right. Okay.

It took nearly five minutes, but he found an east-west highway—he didn't bother to look for the name. Five minutes after that he was grateful to see the red, white, and blue shield that informed him the interstate was half a mile ahead. Now he breathed easier.

"What's the trouble?' Lenny finally asked from the back. Bob replied in Russian.

"Had to change routes," he said in a tone far more relaxed than he'd felt only a few minutes earlier. In turning to reply, he missed a sign.

There was the overpass. The green signs announced that he could go north or south. He wanted to go south, and the exit ramp would be—

In the wrong place. He was in the right lane, but the exit went to the left, and was only fifty meters ahead. He swerved across the highway without looking. Immediately behind him, an Audi driver stood on his brakes and jammed his hand on the horn. Bob ignored the irrelevancy as he took the left turn onto the ramp. He was on the upward, sweeping curve and was looking at the traffic on the interstate when he saw lights flashing in the grille of the black car behind him. The headlights blinked at him, and he knew what would come next.

Don't panic, he told himself. He didn't have to say anything to his comrades. Bob didn't even consider making a run for it. They'd been briefed on this, too. American police are courteous and professional. They didn't demand payment on the spot, as the Moscow traffic police did. He also knew that American cops were armed with Magnum revolvers.

Bob pulled his Plymouth over just beyond the overpass and waited. As he watched his mirror, the police car stopped behind his, slightly more to the left. He could see the officer getting out, carrying a clipboard in his left hand. That left the right one free, Bob knew, and that was the gun hand. In the back, Lenny told the prisoner what would happen if he made a noise.

"Good evening, sir," the police officer said. "I don't know what the rules are in Oklahoma, but here we prefer that you don't change lanes like that. Could I

have your driver's license and registration, please?" His black uniform and silver trim made Leonid think of the SS, but this wasn't the time for such thoughts. *Just be polite,* he told himself calmly, *take the ticket and move on*. He handed over the proper cards and waited as the police officer started filling out the ticket blank. Perhaps an apology was due now . . . ?

"Sorry, officer, I thought the exit was on the right side, and—"

"That's why we spend all that money on signs, Mr. Taylor. Is this your correct address?"

"Yes, sir. Like I said, I'm sorry. If you have to give me a ticket, I guess I deserve it."

"I wish everybody was that cooperative," the officer observed. Not everyone was, and he decided to see what this polite fellow looked like. He looked at the photograph on the license and bent down to make sure it was the right person. He shined the light in Bob's face. It was the same face, but . . . "What the hell is that smell?"

Mace, the officer knew an instant later. The light swiveled. The people in the car looked normal enough, two in the front, two in the back, and . . . one of the people in the back was wearing what looked like a uniform jacket . . .

Gregory wondered if his life was really on the line. He decided that he'd find out, and prayed the policeman was alert.

In back, the one on the left side—the one in the jacket—mouthed a single word: *Help.* That merely made the policeman more curious, but the one in the right-front seat saw him do it and stirred. The cop's instincts all lit off at once. His right hand slid down to his service revolver, flipping the safety strap off the hammer.

"Out of the car, one at a time, and *right now!"*

He was horrified to see a gun. It appeared as though by magic from the guy in the right-rear, and before he could get his own revolver out—

Gregory's right hand didn't get there in time, but his elbow did, spoiling Lenny's aim.

The officer was surprised that he didn't hear anything except a shout in a language he couldn't understand, but by the time that occurred to him, his jaw had already exploded in a puff of white more heard than felt. He fell backward, his gun out now and shooting of its own accord.

Bob cringed and dropped the car into gear. The front wheels spun on the loose gravel, but caught, hauling the Plymouth all too slowly away from the noise of the gun. In the back, Lenny, who'd gotten off the one shot, slammed the butt of his automatic on Gregory's head. His perfectly aimed shot should have gone straight through the policeman's heart, but he'd gotten the face instead, and he didn't know how good the shot had been. He shouted something that Bob didn't bother listening to.

Three minutes later the Plymouth went off the interstate. Below the accident that still blocked the highway, the road was nearly clear. Bob took the dirt road off it, lights out, and was at the trailer before the prisoner regained consciousness.

Behind them, a passing motorist saw the policeman on the shoulder and pulled over to assist him. The man was in agony, with a bloody wound to his

face and nine missing teeth. The motorist ran to the police car and put out a radio call. It took a minute before the dispatcher got things straight, but three minutes after that a second radio car was there, then five more in as many minutes. The wounded officer was unable to speak, but handed up his clipboard, which had the car's description and tag number written down. He also still had "Bob Taylor's" driver's license. That was message enough for the other officers. An immediate call was put out over all local police frequencies. Someone had shot a police officer. The actual crime that had been committed was far more serious than that, but the police did not know, nor would they have cared.

Candi was surprised to see that Al wasn't home. Her jaw was still numb from the Xylocaine shots, and she decided on soup. *But where's Al? Maybe he had to stay late for something.* She knew that she could call, but it wasn't that big a deal, and with the way her mouth felt, there wasn't much in the way of talking she could have done anyway.

At police headquarters on Cerrillos Road, the computers were already humming. A telex was dispatched at once to Oklahoma, where brother police officers took immediate note of the magnitude of the crime and punched up their own computer records. They learned at once that there was no license for Robert J. Taylor of 1353 N.W. 108th Street, Oklahoma City, OK 73210, nor was there a Plymouth Reliant with tag number XSW-498. The tag number, in fact, did not exist. The sergeant who ran the computer section was more than surprised. To be told that there was no record of a tag wasn't all that unusual, but to get a no-hit on a tag and a license, *and* in a case with an officer-involved shooting was pushing the laws of probability too hard. He lifted the phone for the senior watch officer.

"Captain, we have something really crazy here on the Mendez shooting."

The state of New Mexico is filled with areas belonging to the federal government, and has a long history of highly sensitive activities. The Captain didn't know what had happened, but he knew at once that this wasn't a traffic incident. One minute after that, he was on the phone to the local FBI office.

Jennings and Perkins were there before Officer Mendez came out of surgery. The waiting room was so crowded with policemen that it was fortunate the hospital had no other surgical patients at the moment. The Captain running the investigation was there, as were the state police chaplain and half a dozen other officers who worked the same watch as Mendez, plus Mrs. Mendez, who was seven months pregnant. Presently the doctor came out and announced that he'd be fine. The only major blood vessel damaged had been easily repaired. The officer's jaw and teeth had taken most of the damage, and a maxillary surgeon would start repairing that damage in a day or two. The officer's wife cried a bit, then was taken to see her husband before two of his fellows drove her home. Then it was time for everyone to get to work.

"He must have had the gun in the poor bastard's back," Mendez said slowly, his words distorted by the wires holding his jaw together. He'd already refused a pain medication. He wanted to get the information out quickly, and was

willing to suffer a little to do it. The state police officer was a very angry man. "Only way he coulda got it out so fast."

"The photo on the license, is it accurate?" Agent Jennings asked.

"Yes, ma'am." Pete Mendez was a young officer, and managed to make Jennings feel her age with that remark. He next got out rough descriptions of the other two. Then came the victim: "Maybe thirty, skinny, glasses. He was wearing a jacket—tike a uniform jacket. I didn't see any insignia, but I didn't get much of a look. He had his hair cut like he was in the service, too. Don't know the eye color, either, but there was something funny . . . his eyes were shiny, like—oh, the Mace smell. Maybe that was it. Maybe they Maced him. He didn't say anything, but, like, he mouthed the words, you know? I thought that was funny, but the guy in the right-front reacted real strong to that. I was slow. I shoulda reacted faster. Too damned slow."

"You said that one of them said something?" Perkins asked.

"The bastard who shot me. I don't know what it was. Not English, not Spanish. I just remember the last word . . . *maht*, something like that."

"*Yob' tvoyu mat'!*" Jennings said at once.

"Yeah, that's it." Mendez nodded. "What's it mean?"

"It means 'fuck your mother.' Excuse me," Perkins said, his Mormon face fairly glowing scarlet. Mendez went rigid on his bed. One doesn't say such things to an angry man with a Hispanic name.

"What?" the state police Captain asked.

"It's Russian, one of their favorite curses." Perkins looked at Jennings.

"Oh, boy," she breathed, scarcely able to believe it. "We're calling Washington right now."

"We have to identify the—wait a minute!—Gregory?" Perkins said. "God almighty. You call Washington. I'll call the project office."

It turned out that the state police could move the fastest. Candi answered a knock on the door and was surprised to see a policeman standing there. He asked politely if he could see Major Al Gregory, and was told that he wasn't home by a young woman whose numbed jaw was coming back to normal as the world around her began to shatter. She'd scarcely gotten the news when Tea Clipper's security chief pulled up. She was a mere spectator as a radio call was sent out to look for Al's car, too shocked even to cry.

The license photo of "Bob Taylor" was already in Washington, being examined by members of the FBI's counterintelligence branch, but it wasn't in their file of identified Soviet officers. The Assistant Director who ran counterintel ops was called in from his Alexandria home by the senior watch officer. The AD in turn called FBI Director Emil Jacobs, who arrived at the Hoover Building at two in the morning. They could scarcely believe it, but the wounded police officer positively identified the photograph of Major Alan T. Gregory. The Soviets had never committed a violent crime in the United States. This rule was so well established that the most senior Soviet defectors, if they wished, were able to live openly and without protection. But this was even worse than the elimination of a person who was, under Soviet law, a condemned traitor. An American citizen had been kidnapped; to the FBI,

kidnapping is a crime hardly different from murder.

There was, of course, a plan. Even though it had never happened, the operations experts whose job it was to think about unthinkable happenings had a pre-set protocol of things that had to be done. Before dawn thirty senior agents were taking off from Andrews Air Force Base, among them members of the elite Hostage Rescue Team. Agents from field offices throughout the Southwest briefed Border Patrol officers on the case.

Bob/Leonid sat by himself, drinking tepid coffee. *Why didn't I just keep going and make a U-turn down the street?* he asked himself. *Why was I in a hurry? Why was I excited when I didn't have to be?*

It was time to be excited now. His car had three bullet holes in it, two on the left side and one in the trunk lid. His driver's license was in the hands of the police, and that carried his photograph.

You won't get a teaching post at the academy this way, Tovarishch. He smiled to himself grimly.

He was in a safe house. He had that much consolation. It might even be safe for a day or two. This was clearly Captain Bisyarina's bolt-hole, never intended to be any more than a place where the officer could hide out if forced to run. Because of that, it had no telephone, and he had no way of communicating with the local resident officer. *What if she doesn't come back?* That was clear enough. He'd have to risk driving a car with known license tags —and bullet notes!—far enough to steal another. He had visions of thousands of police officers patrolling the roads with a single thought: find the maniacs who shot their comrade. How could he have let things go so bad, so fast!

He heard a car approach. Lenny was still guarding their prisoner. Bob and Bill picked up their pistols and peered around the edge of the single window that faced on the dirt road to the trailer. Both breathed easier when they saw it was Bisyarina's Volvo. She got out and made the proper allclear gesture, then came toward the trailer, holding a large bag.

"Congratulations: you've made the television news," she said on entering. *Idiot.* That part didn't need to be said. It hung in the air like a thundercloud.

"It's a long story," he said, knowing it to be a lie.

"I'm sure." She set the bag on the table. "Tomorrow I'll rent you a new car. It's too dangerous to move yours. Where did you—"

"Two hundred meters up the road, in the thickest trees we could squeeze it into, covered with branches. It will be hard to spot, even from the air."

"Yes, keep that in mind. The police here have some helicopters. Here." She tossed Bob a black wig. Next came some glasses, one pair set with clear lenses, and the other, a pair of mirror-type sunglasses. "Are you allergic to makeup?"

"What?"

"Makeup, you fool—"

"Captain . . ." Bob began with some heat. Bisyarina cut him off with a look.

"Your skin is pale. In case you haven't noticed, a large number of the people in this area are Spanish. This is my territory and you will now do exactly as I say." She paused for a beat. "I'll get you out of here."

"The American woman, she knows you by sight—"

"Obviously. I suppose you want her eliminated? After all, we've broken one

rule, why not another? What fucking *madman* ordered this operation?"

"The orders came from very high," Leonid replied.

"*How* high?" she demanded, and got only a raised eyebrow that spoke volumes. "You're joking."

"The nature of the order, the 'immediate action' prefix—what do you think?"

"I think all of our careers are ruined, and that assumes that we—well, we will. But I will not agree to the murder of my agent. We have as yet not killed anyone, and I do not think that our orders contemplated—"

"That is correct," Bob said aloud, while his head shook emphatically from side to side. Bisyarina's mouth dropped open.

"This could start a war," she said quietly, in Russian. She didn't mean a real war, but rather something almost as bad, open conflict between KGB and CIA officers, something that almost never happened, even in third-world countries, where it usually involved surrogates killing other surrogates, and for the most part never knowing why—and even that was rare enough. The business of intelligence services was to gather information. Violence, both sides tacitly agreed, got in the way of the real mission. But if both sides began killing the strategic assets of their opponents . . .

"You should have refused the order," she said after a moment.

"Certainly," Bob observed. "I understand that the Kolyma camps are lovely this time of year, all glistening white with their blanket of snow." The odd thing—at least it would seem so to a Westerner—was that neither officer bothered considering surrendering with a request of political asylum. Though it would have ended their personal dangers, it would mean betraying their country.

"What you do here is your account, but I will not kill my agent," "Ann" said, ending discussion of the issue. "I'll get you out."

"How?"

"I don't know yet. By car, I think, but I will have to come up with something new. Perhaps not a car. Perhaps a truck," she mused. There were lots of trucks out here, and it was not the least unusual for a woman to drive one. Take a van across the border, perhaps? A van with boxes in it . . . Gregory in a box, drugged or gagged . . . perhaps all of them . . . what are customs procedures like for such things? She'd never had to worry about that before. With a week's warning, as she would have had for a proper operation, she'd have had time to answer a lot of questions.

Take your time, she told herself. *We've had enough of hurrying, haven't we?*

"Two days, perhaps three."

"That's a long time," Leonid observed.

"I may need that long to evaluate the countermeasures that we are likely to face. For the moment, don't bother shaving."

Bob nodded after a moment. "It is your territory."

"When you get back, you can write this up as a case study in why operations need proper preparation," Bisyarina said. "Anything else you need?"

"No."

"Very well. I will see you again tomorrow afternoon."

"No," Beatrice Taussig told the agents. "I saw Al this afternoon. I"—she glanced uneasily at Candi—"I wanted him to help me with—well, with picking up a birthday present for Candace tomorrow. I saw him in the parking lot, too, but that was it. You really think—I mean, the *Russians* . . . ?"

"That's what it looks like," Jennings said.

"My God."

"Does Major Gregory know enough that—" Jennings was surprised that Taussig answered instead of Dr. Long.

"Yes, he does. He's the only one who really understands the whole project. Al's a very bright guy. And a friend," she added. That earned her a warm smile from Candi. There were real tears in Bea's eyes now. It hurt her to see her friend in pain, even though she knew that it was all for the best.

"Ryan, you're going to love this." Jack had just gotten back from the latest round of negotiations at the Foreign Ministry building, twenty stories of Stalinesque wedding cake on Smolenskiy Bul'var. Candela handed over the dispatch.

"That son of a bitch," Ryan breathed.

"You didn't expect him to cooperate, did you?" the officer asked sardonically, then changed his mind. "I beg your pardon, doc. I wouldn't have expected this either."

"I know this kid. I've driven him around Washington myself, when he came east to brief us . . ." *It's your fault, Jack. It was your move that caused this to happen . . . wasn't it?* He asked a few questions.

"Yeah, that's a virtual certainty," Candela said. "They screwed things up, looks like. That sounds like an overnighter. Hey, the KGB officers aren't supermen either, pal, but they follow their orders, just like we do."

"You have some ideas?"

"Not much we can do from this end but hope the local cops can straighten things out."

"But if it goes public—"

"Show me some evidence. You don't accuse a foreign government of something like this without evidence. Hell, there's half a dozen engineers in Europe who've been murdered by left-wing terrorist gangs in the last two years, all working on the fringes of the SDI program, not to mention a few 'suicides.' We haven't made a public issue of that, either."

"But this breaks the *rules*, damn it!"

"When you get down to it, there's only one rule, doc: Win."

"Does USIA still have that global TV operation going?"

"Worldnet, you mean? Sure. It's a hell of a program."

"If we don't get him back, I will personally break the *Red October* story world-wide, and fuck the consequences!" Ryan swore. "If it costs my career, I'll do it."

"Red October?" Candela had no idea what he was talking about.

"Trust me, it's a good one."

"Tell your KGB friends—hell, it might even work."

"Even if it doesn't," Ryan said, more in control now. *It's your fault, Jack*, he

told himself again. Candela agreed; Jack could see it.

The funny part, the state police thought, was that the press wasn't given the real meat of the case. As soon as the FBI team arrived, the rules were established. For the moment, this was a simple case of a police shooting. The federal involvement was to be kept secret, and if it broke, the word would be that an international drug-trafficker was on the loose and that federal assistance had been requested. The Oklahoma authorities were told to tell any inquiring journalist that they'd merely provided identification help to a fellow police force. Meanwhile, the FBI took over the case, and federal assets began to flood the area. Citizens were told that nearby military bases were conducting routine exercises—special search-and-rescue drills—which explained the abnormal helicopter activity. People at Project Tea Clipper were briefed on what had happened and told to keep this secret as close as all of the others.

Gregory's car was located in a matter of hours. No fingerprints were found—Bisyarina had worn gloves, of course—nor was any other useful evidence, though the placement of his car and the location of the shooting merely confirmed the professionalism of the event.

Gregory had been the Washington guest of men more important than Ryan. The President's first appointment of the morning was with General Bill Parks, FBI Director Emil Jacobs, and Judge Moore.

"Well?" the President asked Jacobs.

"These things take time. I've got some of our best investigative minds out there, Mr. President, but looking over their shoulder only slows things down."

"Bill," the President asked next, "how important is the boy?"

"He's priceless," Parks answered simply. "He's one of my top three men, sir. People like that cannot be replaced very easily."

The President took this information seriously. Next he turned to Judge Moore. "We caused this, didn't we?"

"Yes, Mr. President, in a manner of speaking. Obviously, we hit Gerasimov in a very tender spot. My estimate agrees with the General's. They want what Gregory knows. Gerasimov probably thinks that if he can get information of this magnitude, he can overcome the political consequences of the *Red October* disclosure. That's a hard call to make from this side of the ocean, but certainly there's a good chance that his evaluation is correct."

"I knew we shouldn't have done this . . ." the President said quietly, then shook his head. "Well, that's my responsibility. I authorized it. If the press . . ."

"Sir, if the press gets wind of this, it sure as hell won't be from CIA. Second, we can always say that this was a desperate—I'd prefer to say 'vigorous'—attempt to save the life of our agent. It doesn't have to go any further than that, and such action is expected of intelligence services. They go to great lengths to protect their agents. So do we. That's one of the rules of the game."

"Where does Gregory fit into the rules?" Parks asked. "What if they think we might have a chance of rescuing him?"

"I don't know," Moore admitted. "If Gerasimov succeeds in saving himself,

he'll probably get word to us that we forced him into it, he's sorry, and it won't happen again. He'd expect us to retaliate once or twice, but it would probably stop at that, because neither KGB nor CIA wants to start a war. To answer your question directly, General, my opinion is that they may have orders to eliminate the asset entirely."

"You mean murder him?" the President asked.

"That is a possibility. Gerasimov must have ordered this mission very quickly. Desperate men make for desperate orders. It would be incautious of us to assume otherwise."

The President considered that for a minute. He leaned back in his chair and sipped at his coffee. "Emil, if we can find where he is . . . ?"

"The Hostage Rescue Team is standing by. I have the men in place. Their vehicles are being flown out by the Air Force, but for the moment all they can do is sit and wait."

"If they move in, what are the chances that they'll save him?"

"Pretty good, Mr. President," Jacobs replied.

" 'Pretty good' doesn't cut it," Parks said. "If the Russians have orders to take him out—"

"My people are as well trained as anyone in the world," the FBI Director said.

"What are their rules of engagement?" Parks demanded.

"They are trained to use deadly force in the protection of themselves or any innocent person. If any subject appears to be threatening a hostage, he's a dead man."

"That's not good enough," Parks said next.

"What do you mean?" the President asked.

"How long does it take to turn around and blow somebody's head off? What if they're willing to die to accomplish their mission? We expect our people to be, don't we?"

"Arthur?" Heads turned to Judge Moore.

The DCI shrugged. "I can't predict the dedication of Soviets. Is it possible? Yes, I suppose it is. Is it certain? I don't know that. Nobody does."

"I used to drive fighter planes for a living. I know what human reaction times are," Parks said. "If a guy does decide to turn and shoot, even if your man has a gun on him, he might not be fast enough to keep Al alive."

"What do you want me to do, tell my people just to kill everybody in sight?" Jacobs asked quietly. "We don't do that. We *can't* do that."

Parks turned to the President next. "Sir, even if the Russians don't get Gregory, if we lose him, they win. It might be years before we can replace him. I submit, sir, that Mr. Jacobs' people are trained to deal with criminals, not folks like this, and not for this situation. Mr. President, I recommend that you call in the Delta Force from Fort Bragg."

"They don't have jurisdiction," Jacobs noted at once.

"They have the right kind of training," the General said.

The President was quiet for another minute. "Emil, how good are your people at following orders?"

"They will do what you say, sir. But it will have to be your order, in writing."

"Can you get me in touch with them?"

"Yes, Mr. President." Jacobs picked up the phone and routed a call through his own office in the Hoover Building. Along the way it was scrambled.

"Agent Werner, please . . . Agent Werner, this is Director Jacobs. I have a special message for you. Stand by." He handed the phone over. "This is Gus Werner. He's been the team leader for five years. Gus passed on a promotion to stay with the HRT."

"Mr. Werner, this is the President. Do you recognize my voice? Good. Please listen closely. In the event that you are able to attempt the rescue of Major Gregory, your only mission is to get him out. All other considerations are secondary to that objective. The arrest of the criminals in question is not, I repeat, not a matter of concern. Is that clear? Yes, even the possibility of a threat to the hostage is sufficient grounds for the use of deadly force. Major Gregory is an irreplaceable national asset. His survival is your only mission. I will put that in writing and hand it to the Director. Thank you. Good luck." The President replaced the phone. "He says that they've considered this possibility."

"He would." Jacobs nodded. "Gus has a good imagination. Now the note, sir."

The President took a small sheet of writing paper from his desk and made the order official. It wasn't until he was finished that he realized what he'd done. This was not an intellectual exercise. He'd just handwritten a death warrant. It turned out to be a depressingly easy thing to do.

"General, are you satisfied?"

"I hope these people are as good as the Director says," was all Parks was willing to say.

"Judge, any repercussions from the other side?"

"No, Mr. President. Our Soviet colleagues understand this sort of thing."

"Then that's it." *And may God have mercy on my soul.*

No one had slept. Candi hadn't gone to work, of course. With the arrival of the investigative team from Washington, Jennings and Perkins were baby-sitting her. There was the remote possibility that Gregory would escape, and in this event, it was deemed that he'd call here first. There was another reason, of course, but that wasn't official yet.

Bea Taussig was a veritable tornado of energy. She'd spent the night straightening the house and brewing coffee for everyone. Odd as it seemed, it gave her something to do besides sitting with her friend. She did a lot of that, too, which no one thought especially odd. It was one of the things friends do.

Jennings took several hours to note that she was wearing an outfit that actually looked feminine. She had, in fact, gone to the trouble the previous day to make herself look rather nice. Most of that was wreckage now. Once or twice she'd shed tears herself when she and Candi cried together, and what had been a properly decorated face now showed streaks. Her clothes were wrinkled and the paisley scarf was in the closet, wrapped around the same hanger that held her coat. But the most interesting thing about Taussig, Jennings thought from her chair, was her mental state. There was tenseness there. The bustling activity of the long night had alleviated it to some degree,

but . . . there was more to it than just being helpful, the agent thought. She didn't say this to Perkins.

Taussig didn't notice or care about what the agent thought. She looked out the window, expecting to see the sun rising for the second time since she'd last slept, and wondered where all her energy was coming from. Maybe the coffee, she thought to herself with an inward smile. It was always funny when you lied to yourself. She wondered at the danger that she herself might face, but put that worry aside. She trusted Ann's professionalism. One of the first things she'd been told on starting her second career was that she would be protected, even to the death. Such promises had to be real, Ann had said, because they had a practical dimension. It was a business, Bea thought, and she felt confident that those in it knew how to handle themselves. The worst thing that could happen was that the police and FBI would rescue Al, but they were probably already gone, she told herself. Or maybe they'd kill him, despite what Ann had told her the previous night. That would be too bad. She wanted him out of the way. Not dead, just out of the way. She remembered the table talk at the project about how some German, Italian, and British people working in SDI-related projects had died mysteriously. So there was a precedent, wasn't there? If Al got back alive . . . well, that was that, wasn't it? She had to trust her controller to run things. Too late now. She turned her attention to her friend.

Candi was staring blankly at the far wall. There was a picture there, a laser-print of the space shuttle lifting off from Cape Canaveral. Not a proper picture, but something Al had picked up for free from one contractor or another and decided to hang on the wall. Bea's thoughts returned to Candace. Her eyes were puffy from all the tears.

"You have to get some rest," Bea told her. Candace didn't even turn her head, hardly reacted at all, but Bea put her arm around her friend's shoulder and lifted her from the couch. "Come on."

Candi rose as though in a dream, and Bea guided her out of the living room and up the steps toward the bedroom. Once inside, she closed the door.

"Why, Bea? Why did they do it?" Candi sat on the bed, and her stare was merely at a different wall.

"I don't know," Bea said, more honestly than she knew. She really didn't know, but then, she really didn't care.

The tears started again, and the gasping breaths, and the running nose as she watched her friend contemplate a world that someone else had torn apart. She felt momentary guilt that she was one of those who'd done it, but knew that she would make it whole again. A timid person despite all her flamboyance, Bea had found unexpected courage in herself by working for a foreign government, and more courage still in doing something that she had never expected them to ask. One more thing remained. She sat down next to her friend and held her close, bringing her head down on the offered shoulder. It was so hard for Bea. Her previous experiences had been passing college affairs. She'd tried to find in herself something different, but the men she'd dated had not satisfied. Her first sexual experience at the clumsy hands of a teenage football player had been so awful . . . but she wasn't one to psychoanalyze herself. With strangers or mere acquaintances it was one thing,

but now she had to face herself, to face her own image in the eyes of a friend. A friend in pain. A friend who needed. A friend, she reminded herself coldly, whom she'd betrayed. It wasn't that she hated Gregory any the less, but she could not ignore the fact that he meant something to her friend, and in that sense he was still between them even here, alone in the bedroom. That worthless little caricature of a man who had on this very bed . . .

Will you ever replace him? she asked herself.

Will you even try?

If you were willing to remove him, and hurt her, and then not even take the risk . . . what does that make you?

She wrapped her arms tight around her friend, and was rewarded with a returning grasp. Candi was merely trying to hold on to part of her shattering world, but Bea didn't know that. She kissed her friend on the cheek, and Candi's grip grew stronger still.

She needs you.

It took all of Bea's courage. Already her heart was beating fast, and she ridiculed herself as she had for years. Bea the Confident. Bea the Tough, who snarled back at whomever she wished, who drove her kind of car, and wore her kind of clothes, and to hell with what anyone thought. Bea the Coward, who even after she had risked everything lacked the courage to reach out to the one person in all the world who mattered. One more hesitant step. She kissed her friend again, tasting the salt of her tears and feeling the desperate need in the arms that wrapped around her chest. Taussig took a deep breath and moved one hand down to her friend's breast.

Jennings and Perkins came through the door less than five seconds after hearing the scream. They saw the horror on Long's face, and something both similar and very different on Taussig's.

23.

Best-Laid Plans

"IT is the position of the United States government," Ernest Allen said from his side of the table, "that systems designed to defend innocent civilians from weapons of mass destruction are neither threatening nor destabilizing, and that restrictions on the development of such systems serve no useful purpose. This position has been consistently stated for the past eight years, and we have absolutely no reason to change it. We welcome the initiative of the government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to reduce offensive weapons by as much as fifty percent, and we will examine the details of this proposal with interest, but a reduction of offensive weapons is not relevant to defensive weapons, which are not an issue for negotiation beyond their applicability to existing agreements between our two countries.

"On the question of on-site inspections, we are disappointed to note that the remarkable progress made only so recently should be . . ."

You had to admire the man, Ryan thought. He didn't agree with what he was saying, but it was the position of his country, and Ernie Allen was never one to let personal feelings out of whatever secret compartment he locked up before beginning these sessions.

The meeting officially adjourned when Allen finished his discourse, which had just been delivered for the third time today. The usual courtesies were exchanged. Ryan shook hands with his Soviet counterpart. In doing so, he passed over a note, as he'd been taught to do at Langley. Golovko gave no reaction at all, which earned him a friendly nod at the conclusion of the handshake. Jack had no particular choice. He had to continue with the plan. He knew that he'd learn in the next few days just how much of a high-roller Gerasimov was. For him to run the risk of the CIA disclosures, especially with the threat of a few even more spectacular than Jack had promised . . . But Ryan could not admire the man. His view was that Gerasimov was the chief thug in the main thug agency of a country that allowed itself to be controlled by thugs. He knew that it was a simplistic, dangerous way to think, but he was not a field officer, though he was now acting like one, and hadn't yet learned that the world which he ordinarily viewed from the air-conditioned safety of his desk on CIA's seventh floor was not so well defined as his reports about it. He'd expected that Gerasimov would cave in to his demand—after taking time to evaluate his position, of course, but still cave in. It hit him that he'd thought like a chess master because that's how he'd expected the KGB Chairman to think, only to be confronted with a man who was willing to throw the dice—as Americans were wont to do. The irony should have been entertaining, Jack told himself in the marble lobby of the Foreign Ministry.

But it wasn't.

Jennings had never seen anyone so thoroughly destroyed as Beatrice Taussig had been. Beneath the brittle, confident exterior had beaten what was after all a lonely human heart, consumed by solitary rage at a world that hadn't treated her in the way that she desired, but was unable to make happen. She almost felt sorry for the woman in handcuffs, but sympathy did not extend to treason, and certainly not to kidnapping, the highest—or lowest—crime in the FBI's institutional pantheon.

Her collapse was agreeably complete, however, and that's what mattered right now, that and the fact that she and Will Perkins had gotten the information out of her. It was still dark when they took her outside to a waiting FBI car. They left her Datsun in the driveway to suggest that she was still there, but fifteen minutes later she came in the back door of the Santa Fe FBI office and gave her information to the newly arrived investigators. It wasn't all that much, really, just a name, an address, and a type of car, but it was the beginning the agents needed. A Bureau car drove by the house soon thereafter and noted that the Volvo was in place. Next, a crisscross telephone directory enabled them to call the family directly across the street, giving them one minute's warning that two FBI agents were about to knock on their back door. The two agents set up surveillance in the family's living room, which was both frightening and exciting to the young couple who owned the tract house. They told the agents that "Ann," as she was known, was a quiet lady whose profession was unknown to the family, but who had caused no trouble in the neighborhood, though she did occasionally keep eccentric hours, like quite a few single people. Last night, for example, she hadn't gotten home until rather late, the husband noted, about twenty minutes before the Carson show ended. A heavy date, he thought. Odd that they'd never seen her bring anyone home, though . . .

"She's up. There go some lights." One agent picked up binoculars, hardly needed to see across the street. The other one had a long-lens camera and high-speed film. Neither man could see anything more than a moving shadow through the drawn curtains. Outside, they watched a man in a tubular bicycle helmet ride past her car on his ten-speed, getting his morning exercise. From their vantage point they could see him place the radio beeper on the inside surface of the Volvo's rear bumper, but only because they knew what to look for.

"Who teaches them to do that," the man with the camera asked, "David Copperfield?"

"Stan something—works at Quantico. I played cards with him once," the other chuckled. "He gave the money back and showed me how it's done. I haven't played poker for money since."

"Can you tell us what this is all about?" the homeowner asked.

"Sorry. You'll find out, but no time for it now. Bingo!"

"Got it." The camera started clicking and winding.

"We timed that one close!" The man with the binoculars lifted his radio. "Subject is moving, getting in the car."

"We're ready," the radio replied.

"There she goes, heading south, about to lose visual contact. That's it. She's yours now."

"Right. We got her. Out."

No fewer than eleven cars and trucks were assigned to the surveillance, but more important were the helicopters orbiting four thousand feet above the ground. One more helicopter was on the ground at Kirtland Air Force Base. A UH-1N, the two-engine variant of the venerable Huey of Vietnam fame, it had been borrowed from the Air Force and was now being fitted with rappelling ropes.

Ann drove her Volvo in what appeared to be a grossly ordinary fashion, but behind her sunglasses her eyes returned to her mirrors every few seconds. She needed all her skills now, all her training, and despite a mere five hours of sleep she kept to her professional standards. Next to her on the seat was a thermos of coffee. She'd already had two cups for herself, and would give the rest to her three colleagues.

Bob was moving too. Dressed in work clothes and boots, he was jogging cross-country through the woods, pausing only to look at a compass on a two-mile path through the pines. He'd given himself forty minutes to make the trip, and realized that he needed all of it. The high altitude and thin air had him gasping for breath even before he had to deal with the slopes here. He had put all the recriminations behind. All that mattered now was the mission. Things had gone wrong for field operations before, though not any of his, and the mark of a real field officer was the ability to deal with adversity and fulfill his task. At ten minutes after seven he could see the road, and on the near side of it was the convenience store. He stopped twenty yards inside the woodline and waited.

Ann's path was a random one, or seemingly so. Her driving took her on and off the main road twice before she settled down to the final part of the trip. At seven-fifteen she pulled into the parking lot of the small store and went inside.

The FBI was down to two cars now, so skillful had the subject been at evading the surveillance. Every random turn she made had forced a car off her tail—it was assumed that she could identify any car seen more than once—and a frantic call had been sent out for additional vehicles. She'd even chosen the convenience store with care. It could not be watched from anyplace on the road itself; traffic flow would not permit it. Car number ten went into the same parking lot. One of its two occupants went inside, while the other stayed with the vehicle.

The inside man got the Bureau's first real look at Ann, while she bought some donuts and decided to get some more coffee in large Styrofoam cups, plus some soft drinks, all of them high in caffeine content, though the agent didn't take note of that. He checked out right behind her with a paper and two large coffees. He watched her go out the door, and saw that a man joined her, getting into the car as naturally as the fiance of a woman who liked to drive her own car. He hustled out of the door to his car, but still they almost lost her.

"Here." Ann handed over a paper. Bob's picture was on the front page. It

had even been done in color, though the picture quality from the tiny license frame was not exciting. “I’m glad you remembered to wear the wig,” she observed.

“What is the plan?” Leonid asked.

“First I will rent you a new car to get you back to the safe house. Next I will purchase some makeup so that all of you can alter your complexions. After that, I think we will get a small truck for the border crossing. We’ll also need some packing crates. I don’t know about those yet, but I will by the end of the day.”

“And the crossing?”

“Tomorrow. We’ll leave before noon and make the crossing about dinnertime.”

“So fast?” Bob asked.

“Da. The more I think about it—they will flood the area with assets if we linger too much.” They drove the rest of the way in silence. She went back into the city and parked her car in a public lot, leaving Leonid there as she crossed the street and walked half a block to a rental car agency right across the street from a large hotel. There she went through the proper procedures in less than fifteen minutes, and soon thereafter parked a Ford beside her Volvo. She tossed the keys to Bob and told him to follow her to the interstate, after which he’d be on his own.

By the time they got to the freeway, the FBI was nearly out of cars. A decision had to be made, and the agent in charge of the surveillance guessed right. An unmarked state police vehicle took up the coverage on the Volvo while the last FBI car followed the Ford onto the highway. Meanwhile five cars from the early part of the morning’s surveillance of “Ann” raced to catch up with “Bob” and his Ford. Three of them took the same exit, then followed him along the secondary road leading to the safe house. As he matched his driving to the posted speed limit, two of the cars were forced to pass him, but the third was able to lay back—until the Ford pulled to the shoulder and stopped. This section of the road was as straight as an arrow for over a mile, and he’d stopped right in the middle of it.

“I got him, I got him,” a helicopter observer reported, watching the car from three miles away through a pair of stabilized binoculars. He saw the minuscule figure of a man open the hood, then bend down and wait for several minutes before closing it and driving on. “This boy is a pro,” the observer told the pilot.

Not pro enough, the pilot thought, his own eyes locked on the distant white dot of a car’s roof. He could see the Ford turn off the road onto a dirt track that disappeared in the trees.

“Bingo!”

It had been expected that the safe house would be isolated. The geography of the area easily lent itself to that. As soon as the site was identified, an RF-4C Phantom of the 67th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing lifted off from Bergstrom Air Force Base in Texas. The two-man crew of the aircraft thought it was all something of a joke, but they didn’t mind the trip, which took less than an hour. As a mission, it was simple enough that anyone could have done

it. The Phantom made a total of four high-altitude passes over the area, and after shooting several hundred feet of film through its multiple camera systems, the Phantom landed at Kirtland Air Force Base, just outside Albuquerque. A cargo plane had brought additional ground crew and equipment a few hours earlier. While the pilot shut down his engines, two groundcrewmen removed the film canister and drove it to the trailer that served as an air-portable photolab. Automatic processing equipment delivered the damp frames to the photointerpreters half an hour after the plane had stopped moving.

"There you go," the pilot said when the right frame came up. "Good conditions for it: clear, cold, low humidity, good sun angle. We didn't even leave any contrails."

"Thank you, Major," the sergeant said as she examined the film from the KA-91 panoramic camera. "Looks like we have a dirt road coming off this highway here, snakes over the little ridge . . . and looks like a house trailer, car parked about fifty yards—another one, covered up some. Two cars, then. Okay, what else . . . ?"

"Wait a minute—I don't see the second car," an FBI agent said.

"Here, sir. The sun's reflecting off something, and it's too big to be a Coke bottle. Car windshield, probably. Maybe a back window, but I think it's the front end."

"Why?" the agent asked. He just had to know.

She didn't look up. "Well, sir, if it was me, and I was hiding a car, like, I'd back it in so's I could get out quick, y'know?"

It was all the man could do not to laugh. "That's all right, Sarge."

She cranked to a new frame. "There we go—here's a flash off the bumper, and that's probably the grille, too. See how they covered it up? Look by the trailer. That might be a man there in the shadows . . ." She went to the next frame. "Yep, that's a person." The man was about six feet, athletic, with dark hair and a shadow on his face suggesting that he'd neglected to shave today. No gun was visible.

There were thirty usable frames of the site, eight of which were blown up to poster size. These went to the hangar with the UH-1N. Gus Werner was there. He didn't like rush jobs any more than the people in that trailer did, but his choices were as limited as theirs had been.

"So, Colonel Filitov, we now have you to 1976."

"Dmitri Fedorovich brought me with him when he became Defense Minister. It simplified things, of course."

"And increased your opportunities," Vatutin observed.

"Yes, it did."

There were no recriminations now, no accusations, no comments on the nature of the crime that Misha had committed. They were past that for the moment. The admission had come first as it always did, and that was always hard, but after that, once they'd been broken or tricked into confessing, then came the easy part. It could last for weeks, and Vatutin had no idea where this one would end. The initial phase was aimed at outlining what he'd done. The detailed examination of each episode would follow, but the two-phase nature

of the interrogation was crucial to establishing a cross-referencing index, lest the subject later try to change or deny particular things. Even this phase, glossing over the details as they went, horrified Vatutin and his men. Specifications for every tank and gun in the Soviet Army, including the variations never sent to the Arabs—which was as good as giving them to the Israelis, therefore as good as giving them to the Americans—or even the other Warsaw Pact countries, had gone out to the West even before the design prototypes had entered full production. Aircraft specifications. Performance on both conventional and nuclear warheads of every description. Reliability figures for strategic missiles. Inside squabbling in the Defense Ministry, and now, entering the time when Ustinov had become a full voting member of the Politburo, political disputes at the highest level. Most damaging of all, Filitov had given the West everything he knew of Soviet strategy—and he knew all there was to know. As sounding board and confidant for Dmitri Ustinov, and in his capacity as a legendary combat soldier, he'd been the bureaucrat's eyepiece onto the world of actual war-fighting.

And so, Misha, what do you think of this . . . ? Ustinov must have asked that same question a thousand times, Vatutin realized, but he'd never suspected . . .

"What sort of man was Ustinov?" the Colonel of "Two" asked.

"Brilliant," Filitov said at once. "His administrative talents were unparalleled. His instincts for manufacturing processes, for example, were like nothing I've seen before or since. He could smell a factory and tell if it was doing proper work or not. He could see five years in the future and determine which weapons would be needed and which would not. His only weakness was in understanding how they were actually used in combat, and as a result we fought occasionally when I tried to change things to make them easier to use. I mean, he looked for easier manufacturing methods to speed production while I looked at the ease with which the end product could be used on the battlefield. Usually I won him over, but sometimes not."

Amazing, Vatutin thought as he made a few notes. *Misha never stopped fighting to make the weapons better even though he was giving everything to the West . . . why?* But he couldn't ask that now, nor for a very long time. He couldn't let Misha see himself as a patriot again until all of his treason was fully documented. The details of this confession, he knew now, would take months.

"What time is it in Washington?" Ryan asked Candela.

"Coming up on ten in the morning. You had a short session today."

"Yeah. The other side wanted an early recess for something or other. Any word from D.C. on the Gregory matter?"

"Nothing," Candela replied gloomily.

"You told us they would put their defense systems on the table," Narmonov said to his KGB chief. The Foreign Minister had just reported otherwise. They'd actually learned that the day before, but now they were totally sure that it wasn't mere gamesmanship. The Soviets had hinted at reneging on the verification section of the proposal that had already been settled in principle,

hoping this would shake the Americans loose, even a little, on the SDI question. That gambit had met a stone wall.

"It would seem that our source was incorrect," Gerasimov admitted. "Or perhaps the expected concession will take more time."

"They have not changed their position, nor will they change it. You've been misinformed, Nikolay Borissovich," the Foreign Minister said, defining his position to be in firm alliance with the Party's General Secretary.

"Is this possible?" Alexandrov inquired.

"One of the problems gathering intelligence on the Americans is that they themselves often do not know what their position is. Our information came from a well-placed source, and this report coincided with that from another agent. Perhaps Allen wished to do this, but was forbidden to."

"That is possible," the Foreign Minister allowed, unwilling to push Gerasimov too hard. "I've long felt that he has his own thoughts on the issue. But that does not matter now. We will have to change our approach somewhat. Might this signal that the Americans have made another technical breakthrough?"

"Possibly. We're working on that right now. I have a team trying to bring out some rather sensitive material." Gerasimov didn't dare to go further. His operation to snatch the American Major was more desperate than Ryan himself guessed. If it became public, he'd stand accused within the Politburo of trying to destroy important negotiations—and to have done so without first consulting his peers. Even Politburo members were supposed to discuss what they did, but he couldn't do that. His ally Alexandrov would want to know why, and Gerasimov could not risk revealing his entrapment to anyone. On the other hand, he was certain that the Americans would not do anything to reveal the kidnapping. For them to do so would run an almost identical risk—political elements in Washington would try to accuse conservatives of using the incident to scuttle the talks for reasons of their own. The game was as grand as it had ever been, and the risks Gerasimov was running, though grave, merely added spice to the contest. It was too late to be careful. He was beyond that, and even though his own life was on the line, the scope of the contest was worthy of its goal.

"We don't know that he's there, do we?" Paulson asked. He was the senior rifleman on the Hostage Rescue Team. A member of the Bureau's "Quarter-Inch Club," he could place three aimed shots within a circle less than half an inch in diameter at two hundred yards—and of that half-inch, .308 inches was the diameter of the bullet itself.

"No, but it's the best we got," Gus Werner admitted. "There's three of them. We know for sure that two of them are there. They wouldn't leave one man guarding the hostage while they were someplace else—that's unprofessional."

"It all makes sense, Gus," Paulson agreed. "But we don't *know*. We go with this, then." That part wasn't a question.

"Yeah, and fast."

"Okay." Paulson turned and looked at the wall. They were using a pilot's ready room. The cork on the walls, put there for sound-absorption, was also perfect for hanging maps and photos. The trailer, they all saw, was a cheap-o.

Only a few windows, and of the two original doors, one had been boarded over. They assumed that the room near the remaining door was occupied by the "bad guys" while the other held the hostage. The one good thing about the case was that their opponents were professionals, and therefore somewhat predictable. They'd do the sensible thing in most cases, unlike common criminals, who only did things that occurred to them at the time.

Paulson switched his gaze to a different photo, then to the topographical map, and started picking his approach route. The high-resolution photographs were a godsend. They showed one man outside, and he was watching the road, the most likely route of approach. He'd walk around some, Paulson thought, but mostly he'd watch the road. So, the observer/ sniper team would approach overland from the other side.

"You think they're city folks?" he asked Werner.

"Probably."

"I'll come in this way. Marty and I can approach to within four hundred yards or so behind this ridge, then come down along here parallel to the trailer."

"Where's your spot?"

"There." Paulson tapped the best of the photos. "I'd say we should bring the machine gun in with us." He explained why, and everyone nodded.

"One more change," Werner announced. "We have new Rules of Engagement. If anybody even thinks that the hostage might be in danger, the bad guys go down. Paulson, if there's one near him when we make the move, you take him down with the first shot, whether he's got a weapon out or not."

"Hold it, Gus," Paulson objected. "There's sure as hell going to be—"

"The hostage is important, and there is reason to suspect that any attempt to rescue him will result in his death—"

"Somebody's been watching too many movies," another team member observed.

"Who?" Paulson asked both quietly and pointedly.

"The President. Director Jacobs was on the phone, too. He's got it in writing."

"I don't like it," the rifleman said. "They will have somebody in there baby-sitting him, and you want me to blow him away whether he is threatening the hostage or not."

"That's exactly right," Werner agreed. "If you can't do it, tell me now."

"I have to know why, Gus."

"The President called him a priceless national asset. He's the key man in a project important enough that he briefed the President himself. That's why they kidnapped him, and the thinking is that if they see that they can't have him, they won't want us to have him either. Look at what they've done already," the team leader concluded.

Paulson weighed this for a moment and nodded agreement. He turned to his backup man, Marty, who did the same.

"Okay. We have to go through a window. It's a two-rifle job."

Werner moved to a blackboard and sketched out the assault plan in as much detail as he could. The interior arrangement of the trailer was unknown, and much would depend on last-minute intelligence to be gathered on the scene by

Paulson's ten-power gunsight. The details of the plan were no different from a military assault. First of all, Werner established the chain of command—everyone knew it, but it was precisely defined anyway. Next came the composition of the assault teams and their parts of the mission. Doctors and ambulances would be standing by, as would an evidence team. They spent an hour, and still the plan was not as complete as any of them would like, but their training allowed for this. Once committed, the operation would depend on the expertise and judgment of the individual team members, but in the final analysis, such things always did. When they were finished, everyone started moving.

She decided on a small U-Haul van, the same-size vehicle as that used for mini-buses or small business deliveries. A larger truck, she thought, would take too long to fill with the proper boxes. These she picked up an hour later from a business called the Box Barn. It was something she'd never had to do before—all of her information transfers had been done with film cassettes that fitted easily into one's pocket—but all she'd needed to do was look through the Yellow Pages and make a few calls. She purchased ten shipping crates made with wood edges and plastic-covered cardboard sides, all neatly broken down for easy assembly. The same place sold her labels to indicate what was inside, and polystyrene shipping filler to protect her shipment. The salesperson insisted on the latter. Tania watched as two men loaded her truck, and drove off.

"What do you suppose that is all about?" an agent asked.

"I suppose she wants to take something someplace." The driver followed her from several hundred yards back while his partner called in agents to talk to the shipping company. The U-Haul van was far easier to track than a Volvo.

Paulson and three other men stepped out of the Chevy Suburban at the far end of a housing development about two thousand yards from the trailer. A child in the front yard stared at the men—two carrying rifles, a third carrying an M-60 machine gun as they walked into the woods. Two police cars stayed there after the Suburban drove off, and officers knocked on doors to tell people not to discuss what they had—or in most cases, hadn't—seen.

One nice thing about pine trees, Paulson thought one hundred yards into the treeline, was that they dropped needles, not the noisy leaves that coated the western Virginia hills which he trudged every autumn looking for deer. He hadn't gotten one this year. He'd had two good opportunities, but the bucks he'd seen were smaller than what he preferred to bring home, and he'd decided to leave them for next year while waiting for another chance that had never presented itself.

Paulson was a woodsman, born in Tennessee, who was never happier than when in the back country, making his way quietly through ground decorated with trees and carpeted with the fallen vegetation that covered the untended ground. He led the other three, slowly and carefully, making as little noise as possible—like the revenuers who'd finally convinced his grandfather to discontinue the production of mountainbrewed White Lightning, he thought

without smiling. Paulson had never killed anyone in his fifteen years of service. The Hostage Rescue Team had the best-trained snipers in the world, but they'd never actually applied their craft. He himself had come close half a dozen times, but always before, he'd had a reason not to shoot. It would be different today. He was almost certain of that, and that made his mood different. It was one thing to go into a job knowing that a shooting was possible. In the Bureau that chance was always there. You planned for it, always hoping that it would not be necessary—he knew all too well what happened when a cop killed someone, the nightmares, the depression that rarely seemed to appear on TV cop shows. The doc was already flying out, he thought. The Bureau kept a psychiatrist on retainer to help agents through the time after a shooting, because even when you knew that there'd been no choice at all, the human psyche quails before the reality of unnecessary death and punishes the survivor for being alive when his victim is not. That was one price of progress, Paulson thought. It hadn't always been so, and with criminals in most cases it still wasn't. That was the difference between one community and the other. But what community did his target belong to? Criminal? No, they'd be trained professionals, patriots after the fashion of their society. People doing a job. *Just like me.*

He heard a sound. His left hand went up, and all four men dropped behind cover. Something was moving . . . over to the left. It kept going left, away from their path. Maybe a kid, he thought, a kid playing in the woods. He waited to be sure it was heading away, then started moving again. The shooter team wore standard military camouflage clothing over their protective gear, the woodland pattern's blend of greens and browns. After half an hour, Paulson checked his map.

"Checkpoint One," he said into his radio.

"Roger," Werner answered from three miles away. "Any problems?"

"Negative. Ready to move over the first ridge. Should have the objective in sight in fifteen minutes."

"Roger. Move in."

"Okay. Out." Paulson and his team formed line abreast to get to the first ridge. It was a small one, with the second two hundred yards beyond it. From there they'd be able to see the trailer, and now things went very slowly. Paulson handed his rifle to the fourth man. The agent moved forward alone, looking ahead to pick out the path that promised the quietest passage. It was mainly a question of looking where you walked rather than how, after all, something lost on city people who thought a forest floor was an invariably noisy place. Here there were plenty of rocky outcroppings, and he snaked his way among them and reached the second ridge in five minutes of nearly silent travel. Paulson snuggled up next to a tree and pulled out his binoculars—even these were coated with green plastic.

" 'Afternoon, folks," he said to himself. He couldn't see anyone yet, but the trailer blocked his view of where he expected the outside man to be, and there were also plenty of trees in the way. Paulson searched his immediate surroundings for movement. He took several minutes to watch and listen before waving for his fellow agents to come forward. They took ten minutes. Paulson checked his watch. They'd been in the woods for ninety minutes, and

were slightly ahead of schedule.

"Seen anyone?" the other rifleman asked when he came down at Paulson's side.

"Not yet."

"Christ, I hope they haven't moved," Marty said. "Now what?"

"We'll move over to the left, then down the gully over there. That's our spot." He pointed.

"Just like on the pictures."

"Everybody ready?" Paulson asked. He decided to wait a minute before setting off, allowing everyone a drink of water. The air was thin and dry here, and throats were getting raspy. They didn't want anyone to cough. *Cough drops*, the lead sniper thought. *We ought to include those in the gear . . .*

It took another half hour to get to their perches. Paulson selected a damp spot next to a granite boulder that had been deposited by the last glacier to visit the area. He was about twenty feet above the level of the trailer, about what he wanted for the job, and not quite at a ninety-degree angle to it. He had a direct view of the large window on its back end. If Gregory were there, this was where they expected him to be kept. It was time to find out. Paulson unfolded the bipod legs on his rifle, flipped off the scope covers, and went to work. He grabbed for his radio again, fitting the earpiece. He spoke in a whisper lower than that of the wind in the pine branches over his head.

"This is Paulson. We're in place, looking now. Will advise."

"Acknowledged," the radio replied.

"Jeez," Marty said first. "There he is. Right side."

Al Gregory was sitting in an armchair. He had little choice in the matter. His wrists were cuffed in his lap—that concession had been made to his comfort—but his upper arms and lower legs were roped in place. His glasses had been taken away, and every object in the room had a fuzzy edge. That included the one who called himself Bill. They were taking turns guarding him. Bill sat at the far end of the room, just beyond the window. There was an automatic pistol tucked in his belt, but Gregory couldn't tell the type, merely the unmistakable angular shape.

"What—"

"—will we do with you?" Bill completed the question. "Damned if I know, Major. Some people are interested in what you do for a living, I suppose."

"I won't—"

"I'm sure," Bill said with a smile. "Now, we told you to be quiet or I'll have to put the gag back. Just relax, kid."

"What did she say the crates were for?" the agent asked.

"She said that her company was shipping a couple of statues. Some local artist, she said—a show in San Francisco, I think."

There's a Soviet consulate in San Francisco, the agent thought at once. *But they can't be doing that . . . could they?*

"Man-sized crates, you said?"

"You could put two people in the big ones, easy, and a bunch of little ones."

"How long?"

"You don't need special tools. Half an hour, tops."

Half an hour . . . ? One of the agents left the room to make a phone call. The information was relayed by radio to Werner.

"Heads up," the radio earpiece announced. "We got a U-Haul truck—make that a small van—coming in off the main road."

"We can't see it from here," Paulson groused quietly to Marty at his left. One problem with their location was that they couldn't see all of the trailer, and could only catch glimpses of the road that led to it. The trees were too thick for that. To get a better view meant moving forward, but that meant a risk that they were unwilling to run. The laser rangefinder placed them six hundred and eleven feet from the trailer. The rifles were optimized for two-hundred-yard range, and their camouflage clothing made them invisible, so long as they didn't move. Even with binoculars, the trees so cluttered the view that there were simply too many things for the human eye to focus on.

He heard the van. Bad muffler, he thought. Then he heard a metal door slam and the squeak of another opening. Voices came next, but though he could tell that people were talking, he couldn't make out a single word.

"This should be big enough," Captain Bisyarina told Leonid. "I have two of these and three of the smaller ones. We'll use these to stack on top."

"What are we shipping?"

"Statuary. There's an art show three days from now, and we're even going to make the crossing at the point nearest to it. If we leave in two hours, we'll hit the border at about the right time."

"You're sure—"

"They search parcels coming north, not going south," Bisyarina assured him.

"Very well. We'll assemble the boxes inside. Tell Oleg to come out."

Bisyarina went inside. Lenny was stationed outside since he knew more about working in the wilderness than the other two officers. While Oleg and Leonid carried the crates inside, she went into the back of the trailer to check on Gregory.

"Hello, Major. Comfortable?"

"I got another one," Paulson said the moment she came into view. "Female, that's the one from the photos—the Volvo one," he said into the radio. "She's talking to the hostage."

"Three men now visible," the radio said next. Another agent had a perch on the far side of the trailer. "They're carrying crates inside the trailer. Say again, three male subjects. Female subject inside and out of sight."

"That should be all of the subjects. Tell me about the crates." Werner stood by the helicopter in a field several miles away, holding a diagram of the trailer.

"They're broken down, not assembled. I guess they're going to put 'em together."

"Four's all we know about," Werner said to his men. "And the hostage is there . . ."

"That ought to tie up two of them, assembling the crates," one of the assault team said. "One outside, one with the hostage . . . sounds good to me, Gus."

"Attention, this is Werner. We're moving. Everybody stand by." He gestured to the helicopter pilot, who began the engine-start sequence. The HRT leader made his own mental check while his men boarded the helicopter. If the Russians tried to drive him away, his men could try to take them on the move, but that kind of van had windows only for the driver and passenger . . . that meant that two or three of them would be out of sight . . . and perhaps able to kill the hostage before his men could prevent it. His first instinct was right: They had to go now. The team's Chevy Suburban with four men pulled onto the main road leading to the site.

Paulson flipped the safety off his rifle, and Marty did the same. They agreed on what would happen next. Ten feet from them, the machine-gunner and his loader readied their weapon slowly, to mute the metallic sounds of the gun's action.

"Never goes according to plan," the number-two rifleman noted quietly.

"That's why they train us so much." Paulson had his crosshairs on the target. It wasn't easy because the glass window reflected much light from the surrounding woods. He could barely make out her head, but it was a woman, and it was someone positively identified as a target. He estimated the wind to be about ten knots from his right. Applied over two hundred yards, that would move his bullet about two inches to the left, and he'd have to allow for that. Even with a ten-power scope, a human head is not a large target at two hundred yards, and Paulson swiveled the rifle slightly to keep her head transfixed on the crosshairs of his sight as she walked about. He wasn't so much watching his target as the crosshair reticle of the sight itself, keeping it aligned with the target rather than the other way around. The drill he followed was automatic. He controlled his breathing, positioned himself on his elbows, and snugged the rifle in tight.

"Who are you?" Gregory asked.

"Tania Bisyarina." She walked about to work the stiffness out of her legs.

"Are your orders to kill me?" Tania admired the way he'd asked that. Gregory wasn't exactly the image of a soldier, but the important part was always hidden from view.

"No, Major. You will be taking a little trip."

* * *

"There's the truck," Werner said. *Sixty seconds from the road to the trailer*. He lifted his radio. "Go go go!" The doors on the helicopter slid back and coiled ropes were readied. Werner crashed his fist down on the pilot's shoulder hard enough to hurt, but the flyer was too busy to notice. He pushed down on the collective and dove the helicopter toward the trailer, now less than a mile away.

They heard it before they saw it, the distinctive *whopwhop-whop* of the twin-

bladed rotor. There was enough helicopter traffic over the area that the danger it brought was not immediately obvious. The one outside came to the edge of the trailer and looked through the treetops, then turned when he thought he heard the sound of an approaching vehicle. Inside, Leonid and Oleg looked up from their halfassembled crate in irritation rather than concern, but that changed in an instant when the sound of the helicopter became a roar as the chopper came into a hover directly overhead. In the back of the trailer, Bisyarina went to the window and saw it first. It was the last thing she would ever see.

"On target," Paulson said.

"On target," the other rifleman agreed.

"Shoot!"

They fired at nearly the same moment, but Paulson knew the other shot had gone first. That one broke the thick window, and the bullet went wild, deflected by the breaking glass. The second hollow-point match bullet was a split-second behind it, and struck the Soviet agent in the face. Paulson saw it, but it was the instant of firing that was locked in his mind, the crosshairs on the target. To their left, the machine-gunner was already firing when Paulson called his shot: "Centerhead."

"Target is down," the second rifleman said into the radio. "Female target is down. Hostage in view." Both reloaded their rifles and searched for new targets.

Weighted ropes dropped from the helicopter, and four men rappelled down. Werner was in front, and swung his way through the broken window, his MP-5 submachine gun in hand. Gregory was there, shouting something. Werner was joined by another team member, who threw the chair on its side and knelt between it and the rest of the structure. Then a third man came through, and all three trained their weapons the other way.

Outside, the Chevy Suburban arrived in time to see one of the KGB men firing a pistol at an agent who'd landed atop the trailer and was caught on something, unable to bring his weapon around. Two agents leaped from the vehicle and fired three rounds each, dropping the man in his tracks. The agent atop the trailer freed himself and waved.

Inside, Leonid and Oleg were reaching for their weapons. One looked back to see a constant stream of machine-gun bullets chewing through the metal sides of the trailer, clearly to keep them from approaching Gregory. But those were their orders.

"Hostage is safe, hostage is safe. Female target is down," Werner called over the radio.

"Outside target is down," another agent called. From the outside. He watched another team member put a small explosive charge on the door. The man backed up and nodded. "Ready!"

"Machine-gunner, cease fire, cease fire," Werner ordered.

The two KGB officers inside heard it stop and went toward the back. The front door of the trailer was blown off its hinges as they did so. The blast was supposed to be sufficient to disorient, but both men were too alert for that. Oleg turned, bringing his weapon up in two hands to cover Leonid. He fired at

the first figure through the door, hitting the man in the arm. That agent fell, trying to bring his weapon around. He fired and missed, but drew Oleg's attention to himself. The second man in the door had his MP-5 cradled in his arm. His gun fired two rounds. Oleg's last impression was one of surprise: he hadn't heard them shoot. He understood when he saw the canlike silencers.

"Agent wounded and bad guy down. Another bad guy heading back. Lost him turning the corner." The agent ran after him, but tripped on a packing case.

They let him come through the door. One agent, his torso protected with a bullet-resistant vest, was between the door and the hostage. They could take the chance now. It was the one who'd gotten the rent-a-car, Werner knew at once, and his weapon wasn't pointed at anybody yet. The man saw three HRT members dressed in black Nomex jump suits and obviously protected with body armor. His face showed the beginnings of hesitation.

"Drop the gun!" Werner screamed. "*Don't—"*

Leonid saw where Gregory was and remembered his orders. The pistol started coming around.

Werner did what he'd always told his people not to do, but would never remember why. He loosed half a dozen rounds at the man's arm, going for the gun—and miraculously enough, it worked. The gun hand jerked like a puppet's and the pistol fell free in a cloud of spraying blood. Werner leaped forward, knocking the subject down and placing the muzzle of his silenced gun right on his forehead.

"Number three is down! Hostage safe! Team: check in!"

"Outside, number one down and dead."

"Trailer, number two down and dead! One agent hit in the arm, not serious."

"Female down and dead," Werner called. "One subject wounded and in custody. Secure the area! Ambulances, now!" From the time of the sniper shots, it had taken a total of twenty-nine seconds.

Three agents appeared at the window through which Werner and the other two had arrived. One of the agents inside pulled out his combat knife and cut through the ropes that held Gregory, then practically threw him out the window, where he was caught and carried off like a rag doll. Al was put in the back of the HRT truck and rushed off. On the highway, an Air Force helicopter landed. As soon as Gregory was tossed inside, it lifted off.

All HRT members have medical training, and two on the assault team had trained with firemen-paramedics. One of them was wounded in the arm, and directed the bandaging done by the man who'd shot Oleg. The other trained paramedic came back and started working on Leonid.

"He'll make it. The arm's gonna need some surgery, though. Radius, ulna, and humerus all fractured, boss."

"You should have dropped the gun," Werner told him. "You didn't have much of a chance."

"Jesus." It was Paulson. He stood at the window and looked to see what his single bullet had done. An agent was searching the body, looking for a weapon. He stood up, shaking his head. That told the rifleman something he would have preferred not to know. In that moment, he knew that he'd never

hunt again. The bullet had entered just below the left eye. Most of the rest of her head was on the wall opposite the window. Paulson told himself that he should never have looked. The rifleman turned away after five long seconds and unloaded his weapon.

The helicopter took Gregory directly to the project. Six armed security people were waiting when it landed, and hustled him inside. He was surprised when someone snapped some pictures. Someone else tossed Al a can of Coke, and he anointed himself with carbonated spray when he worked the pop-top. After taking a drink, he spoke: “What the hell was all that?”

“We’re not even sure ourselves,” the chief of project security replied. It took a few more seconds for Gregory’s mind to catch up with what had happened. That’s when he started shaking.

Werner and his people were outside the trailer while the evidence team took over. A dozen New Mexico State Police officers were there also. The wounded agent and the wounded KGB officer were loaded into the same ambulance, though the latter was handcuffed to his stretcher and doing his best not to scream with the pain of three shattered bones in his arm.

“Where you taking him?” a state police captain asked.

“The base hospital at Kirtland—both of them,” Werner replied.

“Long ways.”

“Orders are to keep this one under wraps. For what it’s worth, the guy who popped your officer is that one over there—from the description he gave us, it’s him anyway.”

“I’m surprised you took one alive.” That earned the Captain a curious look. “I mean, they were all armed, right?”

“Yeah,” Werner agreed. He smiled in an odd sort of way. “I’m surprised, too.”

24.

The Rules of the Game

THE amazing thing was that it didn't make the news. Only a handful of unmuffled shots had been fired, and gunfire is not all that unusual a thing in the American West. An inquiry to the New Mexico State Police had gotten the reply that the investigation into the shooting of Officer Mendez was still continuing, with a break expected at any time, but that the helicopter activity was merely part of a routine search-and-rescue exercise conducted jointly by the state police and Air Force personnel. It wasn't all that good a story, but good enough to keep reporters off everyone's back for a day or two.

The evidence team sifted through the trailer and not surprisingly found little of note. A police photographer took the requisite pictures of all the victims—he called himself a professional ghout—and handed over the film to the senior FBI agent on the scene. The bodies were bagged and driven to Kirtland, from which they were flown to Dover Air Force Base, where there was a special receiving center staffed by forensic pathologists. The developed photos of the dead KGB officers were sent electronically to Washington. The local police and FBI began talking about how the case against the surviving KGB agent would be handled. It was determined that he'd broken at least a dozen statutes, evenly divided between federal and state jurisdiction, and various attorneys would have to sort that mess out, even though they knew that the real decision would be made in Washington. They were wrong in that assessment, however. Part of it would be decided elsewhere.

It was four in the morning when Ryan felt a hand on his shoulder. He rolled over and looked in time to see Candela flip on the bedstand light.

"What?" Ryan asked as coherently as he could manage.

"The Bureau pulled it off. They have Gregory and he's fine," Candela said. He handed over some photos. Ryan's eyes blinked a few times before going very wide.

"That's a hell of a thing to wake up to," Jack said, even before seeing what had happened to Tania Bisyarina. "Holy shit!" He dropped the photos on the bed and walked into the bathroom. Candela heard the sound of running water, then Ryan emerged and walked to the refrigerator. He pulled out a can of soda and popped it open.

"Excuse me. You want one?" Jack gestured at the refrigerator.

"It's a little early for me. You made the pass to Golovko yesterday?"

"Yeah. The session starts this afternoon. I want to see our friend about eight. I was planning to get up about five-thirty."

"I thought you'd want to see these right away," Candela said. That elicited a

grunt.

"Sure. It beats the morning paper . . . We got his ass," Ryan noted, staring at the carpet. "Unless . . ."

"Unless he wants to die real bad," the CIA officer agreed.

"What about his wife and daughter?" Jack asked. "If you got opinions, I sure as hell want to hear them."

"The meet's where I suggested?"

"Yep."

"Push him as hard as you can." Candela lifted the pictures off the bed and tucked them in an envelope. "Make sure you show him these. I don't think it'll trouble his conscience much, but it'll damned well show him we're serious. If you want an opinion, I thought you were crazy before. Now"—he grinned—"I think you're just about crazy enough. I'll be back when you're all woke up."

Ryan nodded and watched him leave before heading into the shower. The water was hot, and Jack took his time, in the process filling the small room with steam that he had to wipe off the mirror. When he shaved, he made a conscious effort to stare at his beard rather than his eyes. It wasn't a time for self-doubt.

It was dark outside his windows. Moscow was not lit the same way as an American city. Perhaps it was the near-total absence of cars at this hour. Washington always had people moving about. There was always the unconscious certainty that somewhere people were up and about their business, whatever that might be. The concept didn't translate here. Just as the words of one language never exactly, never quite correspond to those of another, so Moscow was to Ryan just similar enough to other major cities he'd visited to seem all the more alien in its differences. People didn't go about *their* business here. For the most part they went about the business assigned to them by someone else. The irony was that he would soon be one of the people giving orders, to a person who'd forgotten how to take them.

Morning came slowly to Moscow. The traffic sounds of trolley cars and the deeper rumble of truck diesels were muted by the snow cover, and Ryan's window didn't face in the proper direction to catch the first light of dawn. What had been gray began to acquire color, as though a child were playing with the controls on a color television. Jack finished his third cup of coffee, and set down the book he'd been reading at seven-thirty. Timing was everything on occasions like this, Candela told him. He made a final trip to the bathroom before dressing for his morning walk.

The sidewalks had been swept clean of the Sunday-night snowstorm, though there were still piles at the curbs. Ryan nodded to the security guards, Australian, American, and Russian, before turning north on Chaykovskogo. The bitter northerly wind made his eyes water, and he adjusted the scarf around his neck slightly as he walked toward Vosstaniya Square. This was Moscow's embassy district. The previous morning he'd turned right at the far side of the square and seen half a dozen legations mixed together randomly, but this morning he turned left on Kudrinskiy Pereulok—the Russians had at least nine ways of saying "street," but the nuances were lost on Jack—then right, then left again on Barrikadnaya.

"Barricade" seemed an odd name for both a street and a movie theater. It

looked odder still in Cyrillic lettering. The B was recognizable, though the Cyrillic "B" is actually a V, and the Rs in the word looked like Roman Ps. Jack altered his course somewhat, walking as close to the buildings as possible as he approached. Just as expected, a door opened and he turned into it. Again he was patted down. The security man found the sealed envelope in the coat pocket, but didn't open it, to Ryan's relief.

"Come." The same thing he'd said the first time, Jack noted. Perhaps he had a limited vocabulary.

Gerasimov was sitting on an aisle seat, his back confidently to Ryan as Jack walked down the slope to see the man.

"Good morning," he said to the back of the man's head.

"How do you like our weather?" Gerasimov asked, waving the security man away. He stood and led Jack down toward the screen.

"Wasn't this cold where I grew up."

"You should wear a hat. Most Americans prefer not to, but here it is a necessity."

"It's cold in New Mexico, too," Ryan said.

"So I'm told. Did you think I would do nothing?" the KGB Chairman asked. He did so without emotion, like a teacher to a slow student. Ryan decided to let him enjoy the feeling for a moment.

"Am I supposed to negotiate with you for Major Gregory's freedom?" Jack asked neutrally—or tried to. The extra morning coffee had put an edge on his emotions.

"If you wish," Gerasimov replied.

"I think you will find this to be of interest." Jack handed over the envelope.

The KGB Chairman opened it and took out the photographs. He didn't display any reaction as he flipped through the three frames, but when he turned to look at Ryan his eyes made the morning's wind seem like the breath of spring.

"One's alive," Jack reported. "He's hurt, but he'll recover. I don't have his picture. Somebody screwed up on that end. We have Gregory back, unhurt."

"I see."

"You should also see that your options are now those which we intended. I need to know which choice you will make."

"It is obvious, is it not?"

"One of the things I have learned in studying your country is that nothing is as obvious as we would like." That drew something that was almost a smile.

"How will I be treated?"

"Quite well." *A hell of lot better than you deserve*.

"My family?"

"Them also."

"And how do you propose to get the three of us out?"

"I believe your wife is Estonian by birth, and that she often travels to her home. Have them there Friday night," Ryan said, continuing with some details.

"Exactly what—"

"You do not need that information, Mr. Gerasimov."

"Ryan, you cannot—"

"Yes, sir, I can," Jack cut him off, wondering why he'd said "sir."

"And for me?" the Chairman asked. Ryan told him what he'd have to do. Gerasimov agreed. "I have one question."

"Yes?"

"How did you fool Polatonov? He's a very clever man."

"There really was a minor flap with the SEC, but that wasn't the important part." Ryan got ready to leave. "We couldn't have done it without you. We had to stage a really good scene, something that you don't fake. Congressmen Trent was over here six months ago, and he met a fellow named Valeriy. They got to be very close friends. He found out later that you gave Valeriy five years for 'antisocial activity.' Anyway, he wanted to get even. We asked for his help and he jumped at it. So I suppose you could say that we used your own prejudices against you."

"What would have have us do with such people, Ryan?" the Chairman demanded. "Do you—"

"I don't make laws, Mr. Gerasimov." Ryan walked out. It was nice, he thought on the return to the embassy compound, to have the wind at his back for a change.

"Good morning, Comrade General Secretary."

"You need not be so formal, Ilyra Arkadyevich. There are Politburo members more senior to you who do not have the vote, and we have been comrades too . . . long. What is troubling you?" Narmonov asked cautiously. The pain in his colleague's eyes was evident. They were scheduled to talk about the winter wheat crop, but—

"Andrey Il'ych, I do not know how to begin." Vaneyev nearly choked on the words, and tears began to stream from his eyes. "It is my daughter . . ." He went on for ten fitful minutes.

"And?" Narmonov asked, when it seemed that he'd finally stopped—but as was obvious, there had to be more. There was.

"Alexandrov and Gerasimov, then." Narmonov leaned back in his chair and stared at the wall. "It took great courage indeed for you to come to me with this, my friend."

"I cannot let them—even if it means my career, Andrey, I cannot let them stop you now. You have too many things to do, we—you have too many things to change. I must leave. I know that. But you must stay, Andrey. The people need you here if we are to accomplish anything."

It was noteworthy that he'd said *people* rather than *Party*, Narmonov thought. The times really were changing. No. He shook his head. It wasn't that, not yet. All he had accomplished was to create the atmosphere within which the times might have the possibility of change. Vaneyev was one who understood that the problem was not so much goals as process. Every Politburo member knew—had known for years—the things that needed to be changed. It was the method of change that no one could agree on. It was like turning a ship to a new course, he thought, but knowing that the rudder might break if you did so. Continuing in the same path would allow the ship to plow on into . . . what? Where was the Soviet Union heading? They didn't even know that. But to change course meant risk, and if the rudder broke—if the

Party lost its ascendancy—then there would be only chaos. That was a choice that no rational man would wish to face, but it was a choice whose necessity no rational man could deny.

We don't even know what our country is doing, Narmonov thought to himself. For at least the past eight years all figures on economic performance had been false in one way or another, each compounding itself on the next until the economic forecasts generated by the GOSPLAN bureaucracy were as fictitious as the list of Stalin's virtues. The ship he commanded was running deeper and deeper into an enveloping fog of lies told by functionaries whose careers would be destroyed by the truth. That was how he spoke of it at the weekly Politburo meetings. Forty years of rosy goals and predictions had merely plotted a course on a meaningless chart. Even the Politburo itself didn't know the state of the Soviet Union—something the West hardly suspected.

The alternative? That was the rub, wasn't it? In his darker moments, Narmonov wondered if he or anyone else could really change things. The goal of his entire political life had been to achieve the power that he now held, and only now did he fully understand how circumscribed that power was. All the way up the ladder of his career he'd noted things that had to change, never fully appreciating how difficult that would be. The power he wielded wasn't the same as Stalin's had been. His more immediate predecessors had seen to that. Now the Soviet Union wasn't so much a ship to be guided, as a huge bureaucratic spring that absorbed and dissipated energy and vibrated only to its own inefficient frequency. Unless that changed . . . the West was racing into a new industrial age while the Soviet Union still could not feed itself. China was adopting the economic lessons of Japan, and in two generations might become the world's third economy: *a billion people with a strong, driving economy, right on our border, hungry for land, and with a racial hatred of all Russians that could make Hitler's fascist legions seem like a flock of football hooligans*. That was a strategic threat to his country that made the nuclear weapons of America and NATO shrivel to insignificance—and still the Party bureaucracy didn't see that it had to change or risk being the agent of its own doom!

Someone has to try, and that someone is me.

But in order to try, he first had to survive himself, survive long enough to communicate his vision of national goals, first to the Party, then to the people—or perhaps the other way around? Neither would be easy. The Party had its ways, resistant to change, and the people, the *narod,* no longer gave a moment's thought to what the Party and its leader said to them. That was the amusing part. The West—the enemies of his nation—held him in higher esteem than his own countrymen.

And what does that mean? he asked himself. If they are enemies, does their favor mean that I am proceeding on the right path—right for whom? Narmonov wondered if the American President were as lonely as he. But before facing that impossible task, he still had the day-to-day tactical problem of personal survival. Even now, even at the hands of a trusted colleague. Narmonov sighed. It was a very Russian sound.

"So, Ilya, what will you do?" he asked a man who could not commit an act of treason more heinous than his daughter's.

"I will support you if it means my disgrace. My Svetlana will have to face the consequences of her action." Vaneyev sat upright and wiped his eyes. He looked like a man about to face a firing squad, assembling his manhood for one last act of defiance.

"I may have to denounce you myself," Narmonov said.

"I will understand, Andrushka," Vaneyev replied, his voice laden with dignity.

"I would prefer not to do this. I need you, Ilya. I need your counsel. If I can save your place, I will."

"I can ask for no more than that."

It was time to build the man back up. Narmonov stood and walked around his desk to take his friend's hand. "Whatever they tell you, agree to it without reservation. When the time comes, you will show them what kind of *man* you are."

"As will you, Andrey."

Narmonov walked him to the door. He had another five minutes till his next scheduled appointment. His day was full of economic matters, decisions that came to him because of indecision in men with ministerial rank, seeking him for his blessing as though from the village priest . . . *As though I don't have troubles enough,* the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union told himself. He spent his five minutes counting votes. It should have been easier for him than for his American counterpart—in the Soviet Union only full Politburo members had the right to vote, and there were only thirteen of them—but each man represented a collection of interests, and Narmonov was asking each of them to do things never before contemplated. In the final analysis, power still counted for more than anything else, he told himself, and he could still count on Defense Minister Yazov.

"I think you will like it here," General Pokryshkin said as they walked the perimeter fence. The KGB guards saluted as they passed, and both men returned the halfhearted gestures. The dogs were gone now, and Gennady thought that a mistake, food problems or no.

"My wife will not," Bondarenko replied. "She's followed me from one camp to another for almost twenty years, and finally to Moscow. She likes it there." He turned to look outside the fence and smiled. *Could a man ever tire of this view? But what will my wife say when I tell her this?* But it was not often that a Soviet soldier had the chance to make this sort of choice, and she would understand that, wouldn't she?

"Perhaps general's stars will change her mind—and we are working to make the place more hospitable. Do you have any idea how hard I had to fight for that? Finally I told them that my engineers were like dancers, and that they had to be happy to perform. I think that Central Committeeman is a devotee of the Bolshoy, and that finally made him understand. That's when the theater was authorized, and that's when we started getting decent food trucked in. By next summer the school will be finished, and all the children will be here. Of course"—he laughed—"we'll have to put up another block of apartments, and the next Bright Star commander will also have to be a schoolmaster."

"In five years we may not have room for the lasers. Well, you left the

highest point for them, I see."

"Yes, that argument lasted nine months. Just to convince them that we might eventually want to build something more powerful than the one we already have."

"The real Bright Star," Bondarenko noted.

"You will build it, Gennady Iosifovich."

"Yes, Comrade General, I will build it. I will accept the appointment if you still want me." He turned to survey the terrain again. *Someday this will all be mine . . .*

"Allah's will," the Major said with a shrug.

He was getting tired of hearing that. The Archer's patience and even his faith were being tested by the forced change in plans. The Soviets had been running troops along the valley road on and off for the last thirty-six hours. He'd gotten half his force across when it had begun, then suffered while his men had been divided, each side watching the rolling trucks and personnel carriers and wondering if the Russians would halt and hop out, and climb the hills to find their visitors. There would be a bloody fight if they tried that, and many Russians would die—but he wasn't here merely to kill Russians. He was here to hurt them in a way that the simple loss of soldiers could never do.

But there was a mountain to climb, and he was now grossly behind schedule, and all the consolation anyone could offer was Allah's will. *Where was Allah when the bombs fell on my wife and daughter? Where was Allah when they took my son away? Where was Allah when the Russians bombed our refugee camp . . . ? Why must life be so cruel?*

"It is hard to wait, isn't it?" the Major observed. "Waiting is the hardest thing. The mind has nothing to occupy it, and the questions come."

"And your questions?"

"When will the war end? There is talk . . . but there has been talk for years. I am tired of this war."

"You spent much of it on the other—"

The Major's head snapped around. "Do not say that. I have been giving your band information for years! Didn't your leader tell you this?"

"No. We knew that he was getting something, but—"

"Yes, he was a good man, and he knew that he had to protect me. Do you know how many times I sent my troops on useless patrols so that they'd miss you, how many times I was shot at by my own peopte—knowing that they wanted to kill me, knowing how they cursed my name?" The sudden flood of emotion amazed both men. "Finally I could bear it no more. Those of my troops who wanted to work for the Russians—well, it was not hard to send them into your ambushes, but I couldn't merely send those, could I? Do you know, my friend, how many of my troops—my good men—I consigned to death at your hands? Those I had left were loyal to me, and loyal to Allah, and it was time to join the freedom fighters once and for all. May God forgive me for all those who did not live long enough for this." Each man had his tale to tell, the Archer reflected, and the only consistent thread made but a single sentence:

"Life is hard."

"It will be harder still for those atop this mountain." The Major looked around. "The weather is changing. The wind blows from the south now. The clouds will bring moisture with them. Perhaps Allah has not deserted us after all. Perhaps He will let us continue this mission. Perhaps we are His instrument, and He will show them through us that they should leave our country lest we come to visit them."

The Archer grunted and looked up the mountain. He could no longer see the objective, but that didn't matter because, unlike the Major, he couldn't see the end to the war either.

"We'll bring the rest across tonight."

"Yes. They will all be well rested, my friend."

"Mr. Clark?" He'd been on the treadmill for nearly an hour. Mancuso could tell from the sweat when he flipped the off switch.

"Yes, Captain?" Clark took off the headphones.

"What sort of music?"

"That sonar kid, Jones, lent me his machine. All he has is Bach, but it does keep the brain occupied."

"Message for you." Mancuso handed it over. The slip of paper merely had six words. They were code words, had to be, since they didn't actually mean anything.

"It's a go."

"When?"

"It doesn't say that. That'll be the next message."

"I think it's time you tell me how this thing goes," the Captain observed.

"Not here," Clark said quietly.

"My stateroom is this way." Mancuso waved. They went forward past the submarine turbine engines, then through the reactor compartment with its annoyingly noisy door, and finally through the Attack Center and into Mancuso's cabin. It was about as far as anyone could walk on a submarine. The Captain tossed Clark a towel to wipe the sweat from his face.

"I hope you didn't wear yourself out," he said.

"It's the boredom. All your people have jobs to do. Me, I just sit around and wait. Waiting is a bitch. Where's Captain Ramius?"

"Asleep. He doesn't have to be in on the thing this soon, does he?"

"No," Clark agreed.

"What exactly is the job? Can you tell me now?"

"I'm bringing two people out," Clark replied simply.

"Two Russians? You're not picking up a *thing*? Two *people?"*

"That's right."

"And you're going to say that you do it all the time?" Mancuso asked.

"Not exactly *all* the time," Clark admitted. "I did one three years ago, another one a year before that. Two others never came off, and I never found out why. 'Need-to-know,' you know."

"I've heard the phrase before."

"It's funny," Clark mused. "I bet the people who make those decisions have never had their ass hanging out in the breeze . . ."

"The people you're picking up—do they know?"

"Nope. They know to be at a certain place at a certain time. My worry is that they're going to be surrounded by the KGB version of a SWAT team." Clark lifted a radio. "Your end is real easy. I don't say the right thing in the right way, on the right schedule, you and your boat get the hell out of here."

"Leave you behind." It wasn't a question.

"Unless you'd prefer to join me at Lefortovo Prison. Along with the rest of the crew, of course. It might look bad in the papers, Captain."

"You struck me as a sensible man, too."

Clark laughed. "It's a real long story."

"Colonel Eich?"

"Von Eich," the pilot corrected Jack. "My ancestors were Prussians. You're Dr. Ryan, right? What can I do for you?" Jack took a seat. They were sitting in the Defense Attaché's office. The attaché, an Air Force general, was letting them use it.

"You know who I work for?"

"I seem to recall you're one of the intel guys, but I'm just your driver, remember? I leave the important stuff to the folks in soft clothes," the Colonel said.

"Not anymore. I have a job for you."

"What do you mean, a job?"

"You'll love it." Jack was wrong. He didn't.

* * *

It was hard to keep his mind on his official job. Part of that was the mind-numbing boredom of the negotiating process, but the largest part was the heady wine of his unofficial job, and his mind was locked on that while he fiddled with his earpiece to get all of the simultaneous translation of the Soviet negotiator's second rendition of his current speech. The hint of the previous day, that on-site inspections would be more limited than previously agreed, was gone now. Instead they were asking for broader authority to inspect American sites. That would make the Pentagon happy, Jack thought with a concealed smile. Russian intelligence officers climbing over factories and descending into silos to get looks at American missiles, all under the watchful eyes of American counterintel officers and Strategic Air Command guards—who'd be fingering their new Beretta pistols all the while. And the submarine boys, who often regarded the rest of their own Navy as potential enemies, what would they think of having Russians aboard? It sounded as though they wouldn't get any further than standing on the deck while the technicians inside opened the tube doors under the watchful eyes of the boats' crews and the Marines who guarded the boomer bases. The same would happen on the Soviet side. Every officer sent to be on the inspection teams would be a spook, perhaps with the odd line-officer thrown in to take note of things that only an operator would notice. It was amazing. After thirty years of U.S. demands, the Soviets had finally accepted the idea that both sides should allow officially recognized spying. When that happened, during the previous round of talks on intermediate weapons, the American reaction had

been stunned suspicion—*Why were the Russians agreeing to our terms? Why did they say yes? What are they really trying to do?*

But it was progress, once you got used to the idea. Both sides would have a way of knowing what the other did and what the other had. Neither side would trust the other. Both intelligence communities would see to that. Spies would still be prowling about, looking for indications that the other side was cheating, assembling missiles at a secret location, hiding them in odd places for a surprise attack. They'd find such indications, write interim warning reports, and try to run the information down. Institutional paranoia would last longer than the weapons themselves. Treaties wouldn't change that, despite all the euphoria in the papers. Jack shifted his eyes to the Soviet who was doing the talking.

Why? Why did you guys change your mind? Do you know what I said in my National Intelligence Estimate? It hasn't made the papers yet, but you might have seen it. I said that you finally realized (1) how much the goddamned things cost, (2) that ten thousand warheads was enough to fry all of America eight times over when three or four times was probably enough, and (3) that you'd save money by eliminating all your old missiles, the ones that you can't maintain very well anymore. It's just business, I told them, not a change in your outlook. Oh, yes: (4) it's very good public relations, and you still love to play PR games, even though you screw it up every time.

Not that we mind, of course.

Once the agreement went through—and Jack thought it would—both sides would save about three percent of their defense outlays; maybe as much as five percent for the Russians because of their more diverse missile systems, but it was hard to be sure. A small fraction of total defense outlays, it would be enough for the Russians to finance a few new factories, or maybe build some roads, which was what they really needed. How would they reallocate their savings? For that matter, how would America? Jack was supposed to make an assessment of that, too, another Special National Intelligence Estimate. Rather a high-sounding title for what was, after all, nothing more than an official guess, and at the moment, Ryan didn't have a clue.

The Russian speech concluded, and it was time for a coffee break. Ryan closed his leather-bound folder and trooped out of the room with everyone else. He selected a cup of tea, just to be different, and decorated his saucer with finger food.

"So, Ryan, what do you think?" It was Golovko.

"Is this business or socializing?" Jack asked.

"The latter, if you wish."

Jack walked to the nearest window and looked out. *One of these days, he promised himself, I will see something of Moscow. They must have something here that's worth snapping a few pictures. Maybe peace will break out someday and I'll be able to bring the family over . . . He turned. But not today, not this year, nor the year after that. Too bad.*

"Sergey Nikolayevich, if the world made sense, people like you and me would sit down and hammer all this crap out in two or three days. Hell, you and I know that both sides want to cut inventories by half. The issue we've been fighting over all week is how many hours of notice there'll be before the

surprise-inspection team arrives, *but* because neither side can get its act together on the answer, we're talking about stuff that we've *already* come to terms on instead of getting on with it. If it was just between you and me, I'd say one hour, and you'd say eight, and we'd eventually talk down to three or four—"

"Four or five." Golovko laughed.

"Four, then." Jack did, too. "You see? We'd *settle* the son of a bitch, wouldn't we?"

"But we are not diplomats," Golovko pointed out. "We know how to strike bargains, but not in the accepted way. We are too direct, you and I, too practical. Ah, Ivan Emmetovich, we will make a Russian of you yet." He'd just Russianized Jack's name. Ivan Emmetovich. John, son of Emmet.

Business time again, Ryan thought. He changed gears and decided to yank the other man's chain in turn. "No, I don't think so. It gets a little too cool here. Tell you what, you go to your chief talker, and I'll go to Uncle Ernie, and we'll tell them what we decided on inspection-warning time—four hours. Right now. How 'bout it?"

That rattled him, Jack saw. For the briefest fraction of a second, Golovko thought that he was serious. The GRU/ KGB officer recovered his composure in a moment, and even Jack barely noticed the lapse. The smile was hardly interrupted, but while the expression remained fixed around the mouth, it faded momentarily about the man's eyes, then returned. Jack didn't know the gravity of the mistake he had just made.

You should be very nervous, Ivan Emmetovich, but you are not. Why? You were before. You were so tense at the reception the other night that I thought you would explode. And yesterday when you passed the note, I could feel the sweat on your palm. But today, you make jokes. You try to unnerve me with your banter. Why the difference, Ryan? You are not a field officer. Your earlier nervousness proved that, but now you are acting like one. Why? he asked himself as everyone filed back into the conference room. Everyone sat for the next round of monologues, and Golovko kept an eye on his American counterpart.

Ryan wasn't fidgeting now, he noted with some surprise. On Monday and Tuesday he had been. He merely looked bored, no more uncomfortable than that. *You should be uncomfortable , Ryan,* Golovko thought.

Why did you need to meet with Gerasimov? Why twice? Why were you nervous before and after the first . . . and before but not after the second?

It didn't make much sense. Golovko listened to the droning words in his earpiece—it was the American's turn to ramble on about things that had already been decided—but his mind was elsewhere. His mind was in Ryan's KGB file. Ryan, John Patrick. Son of Emmet William Ryan and Catherine Burke Ryan, both deceased. Married, two children. Degrees in economics and history. Wealthy. Brief service in U.S. Marine Corps. Former stockbroker and history teacher. Joined CIA on a part-time basis four years before, after a consulting job the year before that. Soon thereafter became a full-time officer-analyst. Never trained at the CIA's field school at Camp Peary, Virginia. Ryan had been involved in two violent incidents, and in both cases deported himself well—the Marine training, Golovko supposed, plus his innate qualities as a man, which the Russian respected. Very bright, brave when he had to be: a

dangerous enemy. Ryan worked directly for the DDI, and was known to have prepared numerous special intelligence evaluations . . . but a special intelligence mission . . . ? He had no training for that. He was probably the wrong sort of personality. Too open, Golovko thought; there was little guile in the man. When he was hiding something, you would never know what, but you would know that he was hiding something . . .

You were hiding something before, but not now, are you?

And what does that mean, Ivan Emmetovich? What the hell kind of name is Emmet? Golovko wondered irrelevantly.

Jack saw the man looking at him and saw the question in his eyes. The man was no dummy, Jack told himself, as Ernest Allen spoke on about some technical issue or other. We thought he was GRU, and he really turned out to be KGB—or so it would seem, Jack corrected himself. Is there something else about him that we don't know?

* * *

At parking position number nine at Sheremetyevo Airport, Colonel von Eich was standing at the aft passenger door of his aircraft. In front of him, a sergeant was fiddling with the door seal, an impressive array of tools spread out before him. Like most airliner doors, it opened outward only after opening inward, allowing the airtight seal to unseat itself and slide out of the way so that it would not be damaged. Faulty door seals had killed aircraft before, the most spectacular being the DC-10 crash outside Paris a decade before. Below them, a uniformed KGB guard stood with loaded rifle outside the aircraft. His own flight crew had to pass security checks. All Russians took security very seriously indeed, and the KGB were outright fanatics on the subject.

"I don't know why you're getting the warning light, Colonel," the sergeant said after twenty minutes. "The seal's perfect, the switch that goes to the light seems to be in good shape—anyway, the door is fine, sir. I'll check the panel up front next."

You get that? Paul von Eich wanted to ask the KGB guard fifteen feet below, but couldn't.

His crew was already readying the plane for its return trip. They'd had a couple of days to see the sights. This time it had been an old monastery about forty miles outside the city—the last ten miles of which had been over roads that were probably dirt in summertime but were a mixture of mud and snow now. They'd had their guided, guarded tour of Moscow, and now the airmen were ready to go home. He hadn't briefed his men on what Ryan had told him yet. The time for that would come tomorrow evening. He wondered how they would react.

The session ended on schedule, with a hint from the Soviets that they'd be willing to talk over inspection times tomorrow. They'd have to talk fast, Ryan thought, because the delegation would be leaving tomorrow night, and they had to have something to take back home from this round of talks. After all, the summit meeting was already scheduled informally. This one would be in

Moscow. Moscow in the spring, Jack thought. I wonder if they'll bring me along for the signing ceremony? I wonder if there'll be a treaty to sign? There had better be, Ryan concluded.

Golovko watched the Americans leave, then waved for his own car, which took him to KGB headquarters. He walked directly to the Chairman's office.

"So what did our diplomats give away today?" Gerasimov asked without preamble.

"I think tomorrow we'll make our amended proposal for inspection timing." He paused before going on. "I spoke with Ryan today. He seems to have changed somewhat and I thought I should report it."

"Go on," the Chairman said.

"Comrade Chairman, I do not know what the two of you discussed, but the change in his demeanor is such that I thought you should know of it." Golovko went on to explain what he'd seen.

"Ah, yes. I cannot discuss our conversations because you are not cleared for that compartment, but I would not be concerned, Colonel. I am handling this matter personally. Your observation is noted. Ryan will have to learn to control his emotions better. Perhaps he is not Russian enough." Gerasimov was not a man who made jokes, but this was an exception. "Anything else on the negotiations?"

"My notes will be written up and on your desk tomorrow morning."

"Good. Dismissed." Gerasimov watched the man leave. His face didn't change until the door clicked shut. Bad enough to lose, he thought, and to lose to a nonprofessional . . . But he had lost, and, he reminded himself, he wasn't a professional either, merely the Party man who gave them orders. That decision was behind him. It was too bad about his officers in—wherever the place was—but they had failed, and earned their fates. He lifted his phone and ordered his private secretary to arrange for his wife and daughter to fly the following morning to Talinn, the capital of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. Yes, they would need a car and a driver also. No, just one. The driver would double as their security guard. Not many people knew who his wife was, and the trip was unscheduled, just to see old friends. Very good. Gerasimov hung up his phone and looked around his office. He'd miss it. Not so much the office itself: the power. But he knew that he'd miss his life more.

"And this Colonel Bondarenko?" Vatutin asked.

"A fine young officer. Very bright. He'll make a good general when the time comes."

Vatutin wondered how his final report would handle that issue. There was no suspicion about that man, except for his association with Filitov. But there had been no suspicion about Filitov, despite his connection with Oleg Penkovskiy. Colonel Vatutin shook his head in amazement. That fact would be talked about in security classes for a generation. Why didn't they see? the young officer-trainees would demand. How could anyone be so stupid? Because only the most trusted people can be spies—you don't give classified information to someone you cannot trust. The lesson was as it had always been: Trust no one. Coming back to Bondarenko, he wondered what would happen to him. If he were the loyal and exceptional officer he seemed to be,

then he should not be tainted by this affair. But—there was always a *but,* wasn't there?—there were also some additional questions to ask, and Vatutin went to the bottom of his list. His initial interrogation report was due on Gerasimov's desk the following day.

The climb took all night in total darkness. The clouds that had swept in from the south covered both moon and stars, and the only illumination was from the perimeter lights of their objective, reflected off the clouds. Now they were within easy sight of it. Still a sizable march, they were close enough that the individual units could be briefed on their tasks, and could see what they had to do. The Archer picked for himself a high spot and rested his binoculars on a rock to steady them as he surveyed the site. There seemed to be three encampments. Only two of them were fenced, though at the third he could make out piles of posts and fencing material near an orange-white light atop the sort of pole used in cities to illuminate the streets. The extent of the construction surprised him. To do all this—on the top of a mountain! How important could such a place be to deserve all the effort, all the expense? Something that sent a laser beam into the sky . . . to what end? The Americans had asked him if he'd seen what the light-beam had hit. They knew it had hit something, then? Something in the sky. Whatever it was, it had frightened the Americans, had frightened the same people who made the missiles with which he had killed so many Russian pilots . . . What could frighten people so clever as that? The Archer could see the place, but did not see anything more frightening than the guard towers that held machine guns. One of those buildings held armed soldiers who would have heavy weapons. That was something to be frightened about. Which building? He had to know that, because that building had to be attacked first. His mortars would put their shells on that one first of all. But which one was it?

After that . . . ? He'd deploy his men into two sections of almost a hundred each. The Major would take one and go left. He'd take the other and go right. The Archer had selected his objective as soon as he saw the mountaintop. That building, he told himself, was where the people were. That was where the Russians lived. Not the soldiers, but those the soldiers guarded. Some of the windows were lighted. An apartment building built atop a mountain, he thought. What sort of people would they be that the Russians would put up a building of the sort found only in cities? People who needed comfort. People who had to be guarded. People who worked on something the Americans were afraid of. People he would kill without mercy, the Archer told himself.

The Major came down to lie at his side.

"All the men are well hidden," the man said. He trained his own binoculars on the objective. It was so dark that the Archer barely saw the man's outline, only the contours of his face and the vague shadow of his bristling mustache. "We misjudged the ground from the other hilltop. It will take three hours to close in."

"Closer to four, I think."

"I don't like those guard towers," the Major noted. Both men shivered with the cold. The wind had picked up, and they no longer were sheltered from it by the bulk of the mountain. It would be a difficult night for all of the men.

“One or two machine guns in each of them. They can sweep us off the mountainside as we make the final assault.”

“No searchlights,” the Archer noted.

“Then they’ll be using night-vision devices. I’ve used them myself.”

“How good?”

“Their range is limited because of the way they work. They can see large things, like trucks, out to this distance. A man on a broken background like this one . . . perhaps three thousand meters. Far enough for their purposes, my friend. The towers must go first. Use the mortars on them.”

“No.” The Archer shook his head. “We have less than a hundred shells. They must go on the guard barracks. If we can kill all of the sleeping soldiers, so much the easier for us when we get inside.”

“If the machine-gunners in those towers see us coming, half of our men will be dead before the guards wake up,” the Major pointed out.

The Archer grunted. His comrade was right. Two of the towers were sited in a way that would allow the men in them to sweep the steep slope that they’d have to climb before getting to the mountain’s flat summit. He could counter that with his own machine guns . . . but duels of that sort were usually won by the defender. The wind gusted at them, and both men knew that they’d have to find shelter soon or risk frostbite.

“Damn this cold!” the Major swore.

“Do you think the towers are cold also?” the Archer asked after a moment.

“Even worse. They are more exposed than we.”

“How will the Russian soldiers be dressed?”

The Major chuckled. “The same as we—after all, we’re all wearing their clothing, are we not?”

The Archer nodded, searching for the thought that hovered at the edge of his consciousness. It came to him through his cold-numbed brain, and he left his perch, telling the Major to remain. He came back carrying a Stinger missile launcher. The metal tube was cold to the touch as he assembled it. The acquisition units were all carried inside his men’s clothing, to protect the batteries from the cold. He expertly assembled and activated the weapon, then rested his cheek on the metal conductance bar and trained it on the nearest guard tower . . .

“Listen,” he said, and handed the weapon over. The officer took it and did as he was directed.

“Ah.” His teeth formed a Cheshire-cat grin in the black night.

Clark was busy, too. Obviously a careful man, Mancuso noted as he watched, he was laying out and checking all of his equipment. The man’s clothing looked ordinary, though shabby and not well made.

“Bought in Kiev,” Clark explained. “You can’t exactly wear Hart, Schaffner, and Marx and expect to look like a local.” He also had a coverall to put over it, with camouflage stripes. There was a complete set of identity papers—in Russian, which Mancuso couldn’t read—and a pistol. It was a small one, barely larger than the silencer that sat next to it.

“Never seen one of these before,” the Captain said.

“Well, that’s a Qual-A-Tec baffle-type silencer with no wipes and a slide-lock

internal to the can," Clark said.

"What—"

Mr. Clark chuckled. "You guys have been hitting me with subspeak ever since I got aboard, skipper. Now it's my turn."

Mancuso lifted the pistol. "This is only a twenty-two."

"It's damned near impossible to silence a big round unless you want a silencer as long as your forearm, like the FBI guys have on their toys. I have to have something that'll fit in a pocket. This is the best Mickey can do, and he's the best around."

"Who?"

"Mickey Finn. That's his real name. He does the design work for Qual-A-Tec, and I wouldn't use anybody else's silencer. It isn't like TV, Cap'n. For a silencer to work right, it has to be a small caliber, you have to use a subsonic round, and you have to have a sealed breech. And it helps if you're out in the open. In here, you'd hear it 'cause of the steel walls. Outside, you'd hear something out to thirty feet or so, but you wouldn't know what it was. The silencer goes on the pistol like this, and you twist it"—he demonstrated—"and now the gun's a single shot. The silencer locks the action. To get off another round, you have to twist it back and cycle the action manually."

"You mean you're going in there with a twenty-two singleshot?"

"That's how it's done, Captain."

"Have you ever—"

"You really don't want to know. Besides, I can't talk about it." Clark grinned. "I'm not cleared for that myself. If it makes you feel any better, yeah, I'm scared, too, but this is what they pay me for."

"But if—"

"You get the hell out of here. I have the authority to give you that order, Captain, remember? It hasn't happened yet. Don't worry about it. I do enough worrying for the both of us."

25.

Convergence

MARIA and Katryn Gerasimov always got the sort of VIP treatment that they deserved as the immediate family of a Politburo member. A KGB car took them from their guarded eight-room apartment on Kutuzovskiy Prospekt to Vnukovo Airport, which was used mainly for domestic flights, where they waited in the lounge reserved for the *vlasti.* It was staffed by more people than ever seemed to use the facility at any one time, and this morning the only others present kept to themselves. An attendant took their hats and coats while another walked them to a couch, where a third asked if they wanted anything to eat or drink. Both ordered coffee and nothing more. The lounge staff eyed their clothing with envy. The cloak-room attendant ran her hands over the silky texture of their furs, and it struck her that her ancestors might have looked upon the czarist nobility with the same degree of envy that she felt toward these two. They sat in regal isolation, with only the distant company of their bodyguards as they sipped at their coffee and gazed out the plate-glass windows at the parked airliners.

Maria Ivanovna Gerasimova was not actually an Estonian, though she'd been born there fifty years before. Her family was composed entirely of ethnic Russians, since the small Baltic state had been part of the Russian Empire under the czars, only to experience a brief "liberation"—as the troublemakers called it—between the world wars, during which the Estonian nationalists had not made life overly easy for ethnic Russians. Her earliest childhood memories of Talinn were not all that pleasant, but like all children she had made friends who would be friends forever. They'd even survived her marriage to a young Party man who had, to everyone's surprise—most especially hers—risen to command the most hated organ of the Soviet government. Worse, he'd made his career on repressing dissident elements. That her childhood friendships had withstood this fact was testimony to her intelligence. Half a dozen people had been spared sentences in labor camps, or been transferred from one of strict regime to a milder place due to her intercession. The children of her friends had attended universities because of her influence. Those who had taunted her Russian name as a child did less well, though she'd helped one of them a little, enough to appear merciful. Such behavior was enough to keep her part of the small Talinn suburb despite her long-past move to Moscow. It also helped that her husband had only once accompanied her to her childhood home. She was not an evil person, merely one who used her vicarious power as a princess of an earlier age might have done, arbitrarily but seldom maliciously. Her face had the sort of regal composure that fitted the image. A beautiful catch twenty-five years ago, she was still a handsome woman, if

somewhat more serious now. As an ancillary part of her husband's official identity, she had to play her part in the game—not as much as the wife of a Western politician, of course, but her behavior had to be proper. The practice stood her in good stead now. Those who watched her could never have guessed her thoughts.

She wondered what was wrong, knowing only that it was gravely serious. Her husband had told her to be at a specific place at a specific time, to ask no questions of him, only to promise that she would do exactly as she was told, regardless of consequences. The order, delivered in a quiet, emotionless monotone while the water was running in their kitchen, was the most frightening thing she had heard since the German tanks had rumbled into Talinn in 1941. But one legacy of the German occupation was that she knew just how important survival was.

Her daughter knew nothing of what they were doing. Her reactions could not be trusted. Katryn had never known danger in her life as her mother had, only the rare inconvenience. Their only child was in her first year at Moscow State University, where she majored in economics and traveled with a crowd of similarly important children of similarly important people, all of ministerial rank at least. Already a Party member—eighteen is the earliest age permitted—she played her role, too. The previous fall she'd traveled with some of her classmates and helped harvest wheat, mainly for a photograph that had been displayed on the second page of *Komsomolskaya Pravda,* the paper of the Young Communist League. Not that she'd liked it, but the new rules in Moscow "encouraged" the children of the powerful at least to appear to be doing their fair share. It could have been worse. She'd returned from the ordeal with a new boyfriend, and her mother wondered if they'd been intimate, or had the young man been frightened off by the bodyguards and the knowledge of who her father was? Or did he see her as a chance to enter the KGB? Or was he one of the new generation that simply didn't care? Her daughter was one of these. The Party was something you joined to secure your position, and her father's post put her on the inside track for a comfortable job. She sat beside her mother in silence, reading a West German fashion magazine that was now sold in the Soviet Union and deciding what new Western fashions she would like to wear to classes. She would have to learn, her mother thought, remembering that at eighteen the world is a place with horizons both near and far, depending on one's mood.

About the time they finished their coffee, the flight was called. They waited. The plane wouldn't leave without them. Finally, when the last call came, the attendant brought their coats and hats, and another led them and their guards down the stairs to their car. The other passengers had already ridden out to the aircraft on a bus—the Russians haven't quite discovered jetways yet—and when their car arrived, they were able to walk right up the stairs. The stewardess guided them solicitously to their first-class seats in the forward cabin. They weren't called first class, of course, but they were wider, they had greater leg room, and they were reserved. The airliner lifted off at ten o'clock, Moscow time, stopped first at Leningrad, then proceeded to Talinn, where it landed just after one.

* * *

"So, Colonel, you have your summary of the subject's activity?" Gerasimov asked casually. He seemed preoccupied, Vatutin noted at once. He should have been more interested, particularly with a Politburo meeting only an hour away.

"Books will be written about this one, Comrade Chairman. Filitov had access to virtually all of our defense secrets. He even helped make defense policy. I needed thirty pages merely to summarize what he's done. The full interrogation will require several months."

"Speed is less important than thoroughness," Gerasimov said offhandedly.

Vatutin did not react. "As you wish, Comrade Chairman."

"If you will excuse me, the Politburo is meeting this morning."

Colonel Vatutin came to attention, pivoted on his heels, and left. He found Golovko in the anteroom. The two knew each other casually. They'd been a year apart at the KGB Academy, and their careers had advanced at roughly the same rate.

"Colonel Golovko," the Chairman's secretary said. "The Chairman must leave now, and suggests that you return tomorrow morning at ten."

"But—"

"He's leaving now," the secretary said.

"Very well," Golovko replied and stood. He and Vatutin left the room together.

"The Chairman is busy," Vatutin observed on the way out.

"Aren't we all?" the other man replied after the door closed. "I thought he wanted this. I arrived here at four to write this goddamned report! Well, I think I'll have some breakfast. How go things in 'Two,' Klementi Vladimirovich?"

"Also busy—the people do not pay us to sit on our backsides." He'd also arrived early to complete his paperwork, and his stomach was growling audibly.

"You must be hungry, too. Care to join me?"

Vatutin nodded, and both men made for the canteen. Senior officers—colonel and above—had a separate dining room and were served by white-coated waiters. The room was never empty. The KGB worked round the clock, and odd schedules made for irregular meals. Besides, the food was good, especially for senior officers. The room was a quiet place. When people talked here, even if they were discussing sports, they did so almost in whispers.

"Aren't you attached to the arms negotiations now?" Vatutin asked as he sipped his tea.

"Yes—nursemaiding diplomats. You know, the Americans think I'm GRU." Golovko arched his eyebrows, partly in amusement at the Americans, partly to show his not-quite classmate how important his cover was.

"Really?" Vatutin was surprised. "I would have thought that they were better informed—at least . . . well . . ." He shrugged to indicate that he couldn't go any further. *I, too, have things that I cannot discuss, Sergey Nikolayevich.*

"I suppose the Chairman is preoccupied by the Politburo meeting. The rumors—"

"He's not ready yet," Vatutin said with the quiet confidence of an insider.

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Where do you stand?" Golovko asked.

"Where do *you* stand?" Vatutin replied. Both traded a look of amusement, but then Golovko turned serious.

"Narmonov needs a chance. The arms agreement—if the diplomats ever get their thumbs out and execute it—will be a good thing for us."

"You really think so?" Vatutin didn't know one way or the other.

"Yes, I do. I've had to become an expert on the arms of both camps. I know what we have, and I know what they have. Enough is enough. Once a man is dead, you do not need to shoot him again and again. There are better ways to spend the money. There are things that need changing."

"You should be careful saying that," Vatutin cautioned. Golovko had traveled too much. He had seen the West, and many KGB officers came back with tales of wonder—if only the Soviet Union could do this, or that, or the other thing . . . Vatutin sensed the truth of that, but was inherently a more cautious man. He was a "Two" man, who looked for dangers, while Golovko, of the First Chief Directorate, looked for opportunities.

"Are we not the guardians? If we cannot speak, who can?" Golovko said, then backed off. "Carefully, of course, with the guidance of the Party at all times—but even the Party sees the need for change." They had to agree on that. Every Soviet newspaper proclaimed the need for a new approach, and every such article had to be approved by someone important, and of political purity. The Party was never wrong, both men knew, but it certainly did change its *kollektiv* mind a lot.

"A pity that the Party does not see the importance of rest for its guardians. Tired men make mistakes, Sergey Nikolayevich."

Golovko contemplated his eggs for a moment, then lowered his voice even further. "Klementi . . . let us assume for a moment I know that a senior KGB officer is meeting with a senior CIA officer."

"How senior?"

"Higher than directorate head," Golovko replied, telling Vatutin exactly who it was without using a name or a title. "Let us assume that I arrange the meetings, and that he tells me I do not need to know what the meetings are about. Finally, let us assume that this senior officer is acting . . . strangely. What am I to do?" he asked, and was rewarded with an answer right from the book:

"You should write up a report for the Second Directorate, of course."

Golovko nearly choked on his breakfast. "A fine idea. Immediately afterward I can slash my throat with a razor and save everyone the time and trouble of an interrogation. Some people are above suspicion—or have enough power that no one dares to suspect them."

"Sergey, if there is anything I have learned in the past few weeks, it is that there is no such thing as 'above suspicion.' We've been working a case so high in the Defense Ministry . . . you would not believe it. I scarcely do." Vatutin

waved for a waiter to bring a fresh pot of tea. The pause gave the other man a chance to think. Golovko had intimate knowledge of that ministry because of his work on strategic arms. Who could it be? There were not many men whom the KGB was unable to suspect—that was hardly a condition the agency encouraged—and fewer still high in the Ministry of Defense, which the KGB is supposed to regard with the utmost suspicion. But . . .

"Filitov?"

Vatutin blanched, and made a mistake: "Who told you?"

"My God, he briefed *me* last year on intermediate arms. I heard he was sick. You're not joking, are you?"

"There is nothing the least bit amusing about this. I cannot say much, and it may not go beyond this table, but—yes, Filitov was working for . . . for someone outside our borders. He's confessed, and the first phase of the interrogation is complete."

"But he knows everything! The arms-negotiation team should know of this. It alters the whole basis for the talks," Golovko said.

Vatutin hadn't considered that, but it wasn't his place to make policy decisions. He was, after all, nothing more than a policeman with a very special beat. Golovko might have been right in his assessment, but rules were rules.

"The information is being closely held for the moment, Sergey Nikolayevich. Remember that."

"Compartmentalization of information can work both for and against us, Klementi," Golovko warned, wondering if he should warn the negotiators.

"That's true enough," Vatutin agreed.

"When did you arrest your subject?" Golovko asked, and got his reply. *The timing* . . . He took a breath, and forgot about the negotiations. "The Chairman has met at least twice with a senior CIA officer—"

"Who, and when?"

"Sunday night and yesterday morning. His name is Ryan. He's my counterpart on the American team, but he's an intelligence type, not a field officer as I once was. What do you make of that?"

"You're sure he's not an operations man?"

"Positive. I can even tell you the room he works in. This is not a matter of uncertainty. He's an analyst, a senior one, but only a desk man. Special assistant to their Deputy Director for Intelligence, before that he was part of a high-level liaison team in London. He's never been in the field."

Vatutin finished his tea and poured another cup. Next he buttered a piece of bread. He took his time thinking about this. There was ample opportunity to delay a response, but—

"All we have here is unusual activity. Perhaps the Chairman has something going that is so sensitive—"

"Yes—or perhaps that is how it's supposed to appear," Golovko observed.

"For a 'One' man, you seem to have our way of thinking, Sergey. Very well. What we would do ordinarily—not that a case like this is ordinary, but you know what I mean—is that we assemble information and take it to the Director of the Second Chief Directorate. The Chairman has bodyguards. They would be taken aside and questioned. But such a thing would have to be handled very, very carefully. My chief would have to go to—who?" Vatutin

asked rhetorically. “A Politburo member, I suppose, or perhaps the Secretary of the Central Committee, but . . . the Filitov matter is being handled very quietly. I believe the Chairman may wish to use it as political leverage against both the Defense Minister and Vaneyev . . .”

“What?”

“Vaneyev’s daughter was acting as a spy for the West—well, a courier to be precise. We broke her, and—”

“Why has this not become public knowledge?”

“The woman is back at her job, by order of the Chairman,” Vatutin replied.

“Klementi, do you have any idea what the hell is going on here?”

“No, not now. I assumed that the Chairman was seeking to strengthen his political position, but the meetings with a CIA man . . . you’re *sure* of this?”

“I arranged the meetings myself,” Golovko repeated. “The first must have been agreed upon before the Americans arrived, and I merely handled the details. Ryan requested the second. He passed a note to me—about as well as a traineeofficer on his first job. They met at the Barricade Theater yesterday, as I told you. Klementi, something very strange is happening.”

“It would seem so. But we have nothing—”

“What do you mean—”

“Sergey, investigation is *my* job. We have nothing but disparate bits of information that might easily be explained. Nothing queers an investigation like moving too rapidly. Before we can act, we must assemble and analyze what we have. Then we can go to see my chief, and *he* can authorize further action. Do you think two colonels can act on this without clearing it with higher authority? You have to write up everything you know and bring it to me. How soon can you do that?”

“I have to be at the negotiating session in”—he checked his watch—“two hours. That will last until sixteen hours, followed by a reception. The Americans leave at twenty-two hours.”

“Can you skip the reception?”

“It will be awkward, but yes.”

“Be in my office at sixteen-thirty,” Vatutin said formally. Golovko, who was the senior officer by a year, smiled for the first time.

“By your order, Comrade Colonel.”

“Marshal Yazov, what is the position of the Ministry?” Narmonov asked.

“No less than six hours,” the Defense Minister said. “In that time we should be able to conceal most of the highly sensitive items. As you know, we would prefer not to have our sites inspected at all, though examining American facilities does offer some intelligence advantages.”

The Foreign Minister nodded. “The Americans will ask for less, but I think we can settle on that number.”

“I disagree.” Heads of the Politburo members turned to Alexandrov’s chair. The ideologue’s florid complexion was displaying itself again. “It is bad enough to reduce our arsenals at all, but to have Americans examine the factories, to get all our secrets, this is madness.”

“Mikhail Petrovich, we have been through this,” General Secretary Narmonov said patiently. “Further discussion?” He looked around the table.

Heads nodded. The General Secretary checked off the item on his note pad. He waved to the Foreign Minister.

"Six hours, nothing less."

The Foreign Minister whispered instruction to an aide, who left the room at once to call the chief negotiator. Next he leaned forward. "That leaves only the question of which arms will be eliminated—the hardest question of all, of course. That will require another session—a long one."

"We are scheduled to have our summit in three months . . ." Narmonov observed.

"Yes. It should be decided by then. Preliminary excursions into this question have not met any serious obstacles."

"And the American defensive systems?" Alexandrov asked. "What of them?" Heads turned again, now to the KGB Chairman.

"Our efforts to penetrate the American Tea Clipper program continue. As you know, it corresponds very closely to our Project Bright Star, though it would seem that we are further along in the most important areas," Gerasimov said, without looking up from his scratch pad.

"We cut our missile force in half while the Americans learn to shoot our missiles down," Alexandrov groused.

"And they will cut their force in half while we work to the same end," Narmonov went on. "Mikhail Petrovich, we've been working along these lines for over thirty years, and much harder than they have."

"We are also further along in testing," Yazov pointed out. "And—"

"They know of it," Gerasimov said. He referred to the test the Americans had observed from the Cobra Belle aircraft, but Yazov didn't know about that, and even the KGB hadn't discovered how the test had been observed, merely that the Americans knew of it. "They have intelligence services too, remember."

"But they haven't said anything about it," Narmonov observed.

"The Americans have occasionally been reticent to discuss such things. They complain about some technical aspects of our defense activity, but not all of them, for fear of compromising their intelligence-gathering methods," Gerasimov explained casually. "Possibly they have conducted similar tests, though we have not learned of it. The Americans, too, are able to maintain secrecy when they wish." Taussig had never gotten that information out either. Gerasimov leaned back to let others speak.

"In other words, both sides will continue as before," Narmonov concluded.

"Unless we are able to win a concession," the Foreign Minister said. "Which is unlikely to happen. Is there anyone at this table who thinks we should restrict our missile-defense programs?" There wasn't. "Then why should we realistically expect the Americans to feel any differently?"

"But what if they get ahead of us!" Alexandrov demanded.

"An excellent point, Mikhail Petrovich," Narmonov seized the opportunity. "Why do the Americans always seem to get ahead of us?" he asked the assembled chieftains of his country.

"They do so not because they are magicians, but because we allow them to —because we cannot make our economy perform as it should. That denies Marshal Yazov the tools our men in uniform need, denies our people the good

things of life that they are coming to expect, and denies us the ability to face the West as equals."

"Our weapons make us equals!" Alexandrov objected.

"But what advantage do they give us when the West has weapons, too? Is there anyone around this table who is content to be equal to the West? Our rockets do that for us," Narmonov said, "but there is more to national greatness than the ability to kill. If we are to defeat the West, it cannot be with nuclear bombs—unless you want the Chinese to inherit our world." Narmonov paused. "Comrades, if we are to prevail we have to get our economy moving!"

"It is moving," Alexandrov said.

"Where? Do any of us know that?" Vaneyev asked, igniting the room's atmosphere.

The discussion turned boisterous for several minutes before settling down to the collegial sort of discussion normal to the Politburo. Narmonov used it to measure the strength of his opposition. He deemed his faction more than equal to that of Alexandrov's. Vaneyev hadn't tipped his hand—Alexandrov expected him to *pretend* to be on the Secretary's side, didn't he? And the General Secretary still had Yazov. Narmonov had also used the session to defuse the political dimension of his country's economic problems by couching the need for reforms as a means of improving the country's military power—which was true, of course, but was also an issue difficult for Alexandrov and his clique to deny. By taking the initiative, Narmonov judged, he'd been able to evaluate the other side's strength yet again, and by putting the argument in the open, he'd put them on the psychological defensive at least temporarily. It was all he could hope for at the moment. He'd lived to fight another day, Narmonov told himself. Once the arms-control treaty went through, his power at this table would increase another notch. The *people* would like that—and for the first time in Soviet history, the feelings of the people were beginning to matter. Once it had been decided which arms would be eliminated, and over what sort of schedule, they'd know how much additional money there would be to spend. Narmonov could control that discussion from his seat, using the funds to barter for additional power in the Politburo as members vied for it in pursuit of their own pet projects. Alexandrov could not interfere with that, since his power base was ideological rather than economic. It occurred to Narmonov that he would probably win out. With Defense at his back, and with Vaneyev in his pocket, he would win the confrontation, break KGB to his will, and put Alexandrov out to pasture. It was only a matter of deciding when to force the issue. There had to be agreement on the treaty, and he would gladly trade away small advantages on that score in order to secure his position at home. The West would be surprised by that, but someday it would be more surprised to see what a viable economy would do for its principal rival. Narmonov's immediate concern was his political survival. After that came the task of bringing life back into his country's economy. There was a further objective, one that hadn't changed in three generations, though the West was always discovering new ways to ignore it. Narmonov's eyes weren't fixed on it, but it was still there.

Last session, Ryan told himself. *Thank God.* The nervousness was back. There was no reason that everything shouldn't go well—the odd part was that Ryan had no idea what would happen with Gerasimov's family. "Need-to-know" had again raised its wearisome head on that score, but the part about getting Gerasimov and CARDINAL out was so breathtakingly simple that he would never have come up with it. That part was Ritter's doing, and the crusty old bastard did have a flair.

The Russians spoke first this time, and five minutes into the speech, they proposed a warning time for surprise on-site inspections. Jack would have preferred zero-time, but that was unreasonable. It wasn't necessary to see what the insides of the birds looked like, desirable as that would be. It was enough to count the launchers and the warheads, and anything under ten hours was probably enough for that—especially if the snap visits were coordinated with satellite passes to catch any attempt at sleight-of-hand. The Russians offered ten hours. Ernest Allen, in his reply, demanded three. Two hours later the respective figures were seven and five. Two hours after that, much to everyone's surprise, the Americans said six, and the chief Russian delegate nodded consent. Both men rose and leaned across the table to shake hands. Jack was glad it was all over, but would have held out for five. After all, he and Golovko had agreed on four, hadn't they?

Four and a half hours to settle on one damned number, Jack thought. *And that may be an all-time record.* There was even some applause when everyone stood, and Jack joined the line for the nearest men's room. A few minutes later he returned. Golovko was there.

"Your people let us off easy," the KGB officer said.

"I guess you're lucky it wasn't my job," Jack agreed. "This is a hell of a lot of work for two or three little things."

"You think them little?"

"In the Great Scheme of Things . . . well, they're significant, but not overly so. Mainly what this means is that we can fly home," Jack observed, and some unease crept into his voice. *It isn't over yet.*

"You look forward to this?" Golovko asked.

"Not exactly, but there you are." *It isn't the flight that makes me nervous this time, sport.*

The flight crew had stayed at the Hotel Ukrania, just on the Moscow River, doubling up in the huge rooms, shopping in the "friendship store" for souvenirs, and generally seeing what they could while maintaining a guard team on the aircraft. Now they checked out together and boarded a fiftypassenger tourist bus that crossed over the river and headed east on Kalinina Prospekt on its way to the airport, a halfhour drive in the light traffic.

When Colonel von Eich arrived, the British Airways ground crew that provided maintenance support was finishing up the fueling under the watchful eyes of his crew chief—the chief master sergeant who "owned" the aircraft—and the Captain who'd serve as copilot in the VC-137's right seat. The members of the crew checked through the KGB control point, whose officers were assiduously thorough in verifying everyone's identity. Finished, the crew filed aboard, stowed its gear, and began getting the converted 707 ready for

its flight back to Andrews Air Force Base. The pilot gathered five of his people together in the cockpit, and under the covering noise of somebody's boombox, informed them of what they'd be doing tonight that was "a little different."

"Christ, sir," the crew chief noted, "that's different all right."

"What's life without a little excitement?" von Eich asked. "Everybody clear on your duties?" He got nods. "Then let's get to work, people." The pilot and copilot picked up their checklists and went outside with the crew chief to preflight the aircraft. It would be good to get back home, they all agreed—assuming that they could unstick the tires from the pavement. It was, the crew chief observed, as cold as a witch's tit. Their hands gloved, and dressed now in Air Force-issue parkas, they took their time as they walked around the aircraft. The 89th Military Airlift Wing had a spotless safety record ferrying "DVs" all over the world, and the way they maintained that was through uncompromising attention to every detail. Von Eich wondered if their 700,000 hours of accident-free flying would be undone tonight.

Ryan was already packed. They'd be leaving right from the reception to the airport. He decided to shave and brush his teeth again before putting his shaving kit in one of the pockets of his two-suiter. He was wearing one of his English suits. It was almost warm enough for the local climate, but Jack promised himself that if he ever again came to Moscow in the winter, he'd remember to bring long johns. It was almost time when a knock came at the door. It was Tony Candela.

"Enjoy the flight home," he said.

"Yeah." Ryan chuckled.

"Thought I'd give you a hand." He hefted the two-suiter, and Jack merely had to grab his briefcase. Together they walked to the elevator, which took them from the seventh floor up to the ninth, where they waited for another elevator to take them down to the lobby.

"Do you know who designed this building?"

"Obviously someone with a sense of humor," Candela replied. "They hired the same fellow to handle construction of the new embassy." Both men laughed. That story was worthy of a Hollywood disaster epic. There were enough electronic devices in that building to cobble up a mainframe computer. The elevator came a minute later, taking both men to the lobby. Candela handed Ryan his suitcase.

"Break a leg," he said before walking away.

Jack walked out to where the cars were waiting and dropped his case in the open trunk. The night was clear. There were stars in the sky, and the hint of the aurora borealis on the northern horizon. He'd heard that this natural phenomenon was occasionally seen from Moscow, but it was something that he'd never witnessed.

The motorcade left ten minutes later and made its way south to the Foreign Ministry, repeating the route that nearly encapsulated Ryan's slim knowledge of this city of eight million souls. One by one the cars curved onto the small traffic circle and their occupants were guided into the building. This reception was not nearly as elaborate as the last one in the Kremlin had been, but this

session had not accomplished quite as much. The next one would be a bear, as the summit deadline approached, but the next session was scheduled to be in Washington. The reporters were already waiting, mainly print, with a few TV cameras present. Someone approached Jack as soon as he handed off his topcoat.

"Dr. Ryan?"

"Yeah?" He turned.

"Mike Paster, *Washington Post.* There's a report in Washington that your SEC problems have been settled."

Jack laughed. "God, it's nice not to talk about the arms business for a change! As I said earlier, I didn't do anything wrong. I guess those—jerks, but don't quote me on that—folks finally figured it out. Good. I didn't want to have to hire a lawyer."

"There's talk that CIA had a hand in—" Ryan cut him off.

"Tell you what. Tell your Washington bureau that if they give me a couple days to unwind from this business, I'll show them everything I did. I do all my transactions by computer, and I keep hard copies of everything. Fair enough?"

"Sure—but why didn't—"

"You tell me," Jack said, reaching for a glass of wine as a waiter went past. He had to have one, but tonight it would be one only. "Maybe some people in D.C. have a hard-on for the Agency. For Christ's sake don't quote me on that, either."

"So how'd the talks go?" the reporter asked next.

"You can get the details from Ernie, but off the record, pretty good. Not as good as last time, and there's a lot left to handle, but we settled a couple of tough ones, and that's about all we expected for this trip."

"Will the agreement go through in time for the summit?" Paster inquired next.

"Off the record," Jack said immediately. The reporter nodded. "I'd call the chances better than two out of three."

"How's the Agency feel about it?"

"We're not supposed to be political, remember? From a technical point of view, the fifty-percent reduction is something I think we can live with. It doesn't really change anything, does it? But it is 'nice.' I grant you that."

"How do you want me to quote this?" Paster asked.

"Call me a Very Junior Administration Official." Jack grinned. "Fair enough? Uncle Ernie can speak on the record, but I'm not allowed to."

"What about the effect this will have on Narmonov's remaining in power?"

"Not my turf," Ryan lied smoothly. "My opinions on that are private, not professional."

"So . . ."

"So ask somebody else about that," Jack suggested. "Ask me the really important things, like who the 'Skins ought to draft in the first round."

"Olson, the quarterback at Baylor," the reporter said at once.

"I like that defensive end at Penn State myself, but he'll probably go too early."

"Good trip," the reporter said as he closed his note pad.

"Yeah, you enjoy the rest of the winter, pal." The reporter made to go away,

then paused. “Can you say anything, completely off the record, about the Foley couple that the Russians sent home last—”

“Who? Oh, the ones they accused of spying? Off the record, and you never heard this from me, it’s bullshit. Any other way, no comment.”

“Right.” The reporter walked off with a smile.

Jack was left standing alone. He looked around for Golovko, but couldn’t find him. He was disappointed. Enemy or not, they could always talk, and Ryan had come to enjoy their conversations. The Foreign Minister showed up, then Narmonov. All the other fixtures were there: the violins, the tables laden with snacks, the circulating waiters with silver trays of wine, vodka, and champagne. The State Department people were knotted in conversation with their Soviet colleagues. Ernie Allen was laughing with his Soviet counterpart. Only Jack was standing alone, and that wouldn’t do. He walked over to the nearest group and hung on the periphery, scarcely noticed as he checked his watch from time to time and took tiny sips of the wine.

“Time,” Clark said.

Getting to this point had been difficult enough. Clark’s equipment was already set in the watertight trunk that ran from the Attack Center to the top of the sail. It had hatches at both ends and was completely watertight, unlike the rest of the sail, which was free-flooding. One more sailor had volunteered to go in with him, and then the bottom hatch was closed and dogged down tight. Mancuso lifted a phone.

“Communications check.”

“Loud and clear, sir,” Clark replied. “Ready whenever you are.”

“Don’t touch the hatch until I say so.”

“Aye aye, Cap’n.”

The Captain turned around. “I have the conn,” he announced.

“Captain has the conn,” the officer of the deck agreed.

“Diving Officer, pump out three thousand pounds. We’re taking her off the bottom. Engine room, stand by to answer bells.”

“Aye.” The diving officer, who was also Chief of the Boat, gave the necessary orders. Electric trim pumps ejected a ton and a half of saltwater, and *Dallas* slowly righted herself. Mancuso looked around. The submarine was at battle stations. The fire-control tracking party stood ready. Ramius was with the navigator. The weapons-control panels were manned. Below in the torpedo room, all four tubes were loaded, and one was already flooded.

“Sonar, conn. Anything to report?” Mancuso asked next.

“Negative, conn. Nothing at all, sir.”

“Very well. Diving Officer, make your depth nine-zero feet.”

“Nine-zero feet, aye.”

They had to get off the bottom before giving the submarine any forward movement. Mancuso watched the depth gauge change slowly as the Chief of the Boat, also known as the Cob, slowly and skillfully adjusted the submarine’s trim.

“Depth nine-zero feet, sir. It’ll be very hard to hold.”

“Maneuvering, give me turns for five knots. Helm, right fifteen degrees rudder, come to new heading zero-three-eight.”

"Right fifteen degrees rudder, aye, coming to new heading zero-three-eight," the helmsman acknowledged. "Sir, my rudder is right fifteen degrees."

"Very well." Mancuso watched the gyrocompass click around to the northeasterly course. It took five minutes to get out from under the ice. The Captain ordered periscope depth. Another minute.

"Up 'scope!" Mancuso said next. A quartermaster twisted the control wheel, and the Captain met the rising instrument as the eyepiece cleared the deck. "Hold!"

The periscope stopped a foot below the surface. Mancuso looked for shadows and possible ice, but saw nothing. "Up two feet." He was on his knees now. "Two more and hold."

He used the slender attack periscope, not the larger search one. The search periscope had better light-gathering capacity, but he didn't want to risk the larger radar cross-section, and the submarine for the past twelve hours had been using red internal lights only. It made the food look odd, but it also gave everyone better night vision. He made a slow sweep of the horizon. There was nothing to be seen but drifting ice on the surface.

"Clear," he announced. "All clear. Raise the ESM." There was the hiss of hydraulics as the electronic-sensor mast went up. The thin reed of fiberglass was only half an inch wide, and nearly invisible on radar. "Down 'scope."

"I got that one surface-surveillance radar, bearing zero-three-eight," the ESM technician announced, giving frequency and pulse characteristics. "Signal is weak."

"Here we go, people." Mancuso lifted a phone to the bridge tube. "You ready?"

"Yes, sir," Clark replied.

"Stand by. Good luck." The Captain replaced the phone and turned. "Put her on the roof and stand by to take her down fast."

It took a total of four minutes. The top of *Dallas'* black sail broached the surface, pointing directly at the nearest Soviet radar to minimize its radar cross-section. It was more than tricky to hold depth.

"Clark, go!"

"Right."

With all the drifting ice on the water, the screen for that radar should be heavily cluttered, Mancuso thought. He watched the indicator light for the hatch change from a dash, meaning closed, to a circle, meaning open.

The bridge trunk ended on a platform a few feet below the bridge itself. Clark wrenched open the hatch and climbed up. Next he hauled out his raft with the help of the seaman below on the ladder. Alone now in the submarine's tiny bridge—the control station atop the sail—he set the thing athwart the top of the sail and pulled the rope that inflated it. The high-pitched rasp of the rushing air seemed to scream into the night, and Clark winced to hear it. As soon as the rubberized fabric became taut, he called to the sailor to close the trunk hatch, then grabbed the bridge phone.

"All ready here. The hatch is closed. See you in a couple of hours."

"Right. Good luck," Mancuso said again.

Aloft, Clark climbed smoothly into the raft as the submarine sank beneath him, and started the electric motor. Below, the bottom hatch of the bridge

tube was opened only long enough for the sailor to leap down, then he and the Captain levered it shut.

"Straight board shut, we are rigged for dive," the Cob reported when the last indicator light changed back to a dash.

"That's it," Mancuso noted. "Mr. Goodman, you have the conn, and you know what to do."

"I have the conn," the OOD replied as the Captain went forward to the sonar room. Lieutenant Goodman immediately dived the boat, heading her for the bottom.

It was like old times, Mancuso thought, with Jones as lead sonarman. The submarine came right, pointing her bowmounted sonar array at the path that Clark was taking. Ramius arrived a minute later to observe.

"How come you didn't want to use the 'scope?" Mancuso asked.

"A hard thing to see one's home and know that one cannot—"

"There he goes." Jones tapped his finger on the video display. "Doing turns for eighteen knots. Pretty quiet for an outboard. Electric, eh?"

"Right."

"I sure hope he's got good batteries, skipper."

"Rotating-anode lithium. I asked."

"Cute." Jones grunted. He tapped a cigarette out of his pack and offered one to the Captain, who forgot for the moment that he'd quit, again. Jones lit it and took on a contemplative expression.

"You know, sir, now I remember why I retired . . ." His voice trailed off as Jonesy watched the sonar trail stretch off in the distance. Aft, the fire-control party updated the range, just to have something to do. Jones craned his neck and listened. *Dallas* was about as quiet as she ever got, and the tension filled the air far more thickly than cigarette smoke ever could.

Clark lay nearly flat in the boat. Made of rubberized nylon, its color scheme was green and gray stripes, not very different from the sea. They'd thought of some white patches because of the ice to be found in the area in winter, but then it was realized that the channel here was always tended by an icebreaker, and a rapidly moving white spot on a dark surface might not be a terribly good idea. Mainly Clark was concerned about radar. The submarine's sail might not have been picked up through all the clutter, but if the Russian radar sets had a moving-target-indicator setting, the simple computer that monitored the returning signals might well lock in on something traveling at twenty miles per hour. The boat itself was only a foot out of the water, the motor a foot higher than that and coated with radar-absorbing material. Clark kept his head level with the motor and wondered again if the half-dozen metal fragments that decorated his anatomy were large enough to be seen. He knew that this was irrational—they didn't even set off an airport metal-detector-but lonely men in dangerous places tended to develop unusually active minds. It was better, really, to be stupid, he told himself. Intelligence only allowed you to realize how dangerous things like this were. After such missions were over, after the shakes went away, after the hot shower, you could bask in the glow of how brave and clever you were, but not now. Now it just seemed dangerous, not to say crazy, to be doing something like this.

The coastline was clearly visible, a clean series of dots that covered the visible horizon. It seemed ordinary enough, but it was enemy territory. That knowledge was far more chilling than the clean night air.

At least the seas were calm, he told himself. Actually a few feet of chop would have made for more favorable radar conditions, but the smooth, oily surface made for speed, and speed always made him feel better. He looked aft. The boat didn't make much of a wake, and he'd reduce it further by slowing when he got close to the harbor.

Patience, he told himself uselessly. He hated the idea of patience. Who likes to wait for anything? Clark asked himself. *If it has to happen, let it happen and be done with it*. That wasn't the safe way, rushing into things, but at least when you were up and moving, you were doing something. But when he taught people how to do this sort of thing, which was his normal occupation, he always told them to be patient. *You friggin' hypocrite!* he observed silently.

The harbor buoys told him the distance from the coast. He cut his speed to ten knots, then to five, and finally to three. The electric motor made a barely audible hum. Clark turned the handle and steered the boat to a ramshackle pier. It had to have been an old one; its piles had been splintered and abraded by the harbor ice of many winters. Ever so slowly, he pulled out a low-light 'scope and examined the area. There was no movement he could see. He could hear things now, mainly traffic sounds that carried across the water to him, along with some music. It was Friday night, after all, and even in the Soviet Union there were parties going on at restaurants. People were dancing. In fact his plan depended on the presence of nightlife here—Estonia is livelier than most of the country—but the pier was derelict, as his briefers said it would be. He moved in, tying the boat off to a piling with considerable care—if it drifted away, he'd have real problems. Next to the pile was a ladder. Clark slipped out of his coverall and climbed up, pistol in hand. For the first time he noted the harbor smell. It was little different from its American equivalent, heavy with bilge oil and decorated with rotting wood from the piers. To the north, a dozen or so fishing boats were tied to another pier. To the south was yet another, that one piled up with lumber. So the harbor was being rebuilt. That explained the condition of this one, Clark thought. He checked his watch—it was a battered Russian "Pilot"—and looked around for a place to wait. Forty minutes until he had to move. He'd allowed for choppier seas for his trip in, and all the calm had really done for him was to give him the additional time to meditate on how much a lunatic he was for taking on another of these extraction jobs.

Boris Filipovich Morozov walked outside the barracks where he still lived, staring upward. The lights at Bright Star made the sky into a feathery dome of descending flakes. He loved moments like this.

"Who's there?" a voice asked. It had authority in it.

"Morozov," the young engineer answered as the figure came into the light. He saw the wide-brimmed hat of a senior Army officer.

"Good evening, Comrade Engineer. You're on the mirror-control team, aren't you?" Bondarenko asked.

"Have we met?"

"No." The Colonel shook his head. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, Comrade Colonel."

Bondarenko gestured at the sky. "Beautiful, isn't it? I suppose that's one consolation for being at the far end of nothing."

"No, Comrade Colonel, we are at the leading edge of something very important," Morozov pointed out.

"That is good for me to hear! Do all of your team feel that way?"

"Yes, Comrade Colonel. I asked to come here."

"Oh? And how did you know of this place?" the Colonel wondered.

"I was here last fall with the Komsomol. We assisted the civil engineers in the blasting, and siting the mirror-pillars. I was a graduate student in lasers, and I guessed what Bright Star was. I did not tell anyone, of course," Morozov added. "But I knew this was the place for me."

Bondarenko regarded the youngster with visible approval. "How goes the work?"

"I had hoped to join the laser team, but my section chief press-ganged me into joining his group." Morozov laughed.

"You are unhappy with this?"

"No—no, please excuse me. You misunderstand. I didn't know how important the mirror group was. I've learned. Now we're trying to adapt the mirror systems to more precise computer control—I may soon be an assistant section leader," Morozov said proudly. "I am also familiar with computer systems, you see."

"Who's your section chief—Govorov, isn't it?"

"Correct. A brilliant field engineer, if I may say so. May I ask a question?"

"Certainly."

"It is said that you—you're the new Army colonel they've been talking about, correct? They say that you may be the new deputy project officer."

"There may be some substance to those rumors," Bondarenko allowed.

"Then may I make a suggestion, Comrade?" Morozov asked.

"Certainly."

"There are many single men here . . ."

"And not enough single women?"

"There is a need for laboratory assistants."

"Your observation is noted, Comrade Engineer," Bondarenko replied with a chuckle. "We also plan a new apartment block to relieve the crowding. How are the barracks?"

"The atmosphere is comradely. The astronomy and chess clubs are very active."

"Ah. It has been time since I played chess seriously. How tough is the competition?" the Colonel asked.

The younger man laughed. "Murderous—even savage."

* * *

Five thousand meters away, the Archer blessed his God's name. Snow was falling, and the flakes gave the air the magical quality so beloved by poets . . .

and soldiers. You could hear—you could *feel* the hushed silence as the snow absorbed all sound. All around them, as far up and down as they could see, was the curtain of white that cut visibility to under two hundred meters. He assembled his subunit commanders and began organizing the assault. They moved out in a few minutes. They were in tactical formation. The Archer was with the lead section of the first company, while his second-in-command stayed with the other.

The footing was surprisingly good. The Russians had dumped the spoil from their blasting all over the area, and even though coated with snow, the rock chips were not slippery. This was well, since their path took them perilously close to a sheer wall at least a hundred meters high. Navigating was difficult. The Archer was going from memory, but he'd spent hours examining the objective and knew every curve of the mountain—or so he'd thought. The doubts came now, as they always did, and it took all his concentration to keep his mind on the mission. He had mapped out a dozen checkpoints in his memory before setting out. A boulder here, a dip there, this the place where the path turned to the left, and that one where it went to the right. At first progress seemed maddeningly slow, but the closer they came to the objective, the more rapid became the pace. They were guided at all times by the glow of the lights. How confident the Russians were, to have lights here, he thought. There was even a moving vehicle, a bus, by the sound of it, with its headlights lit. The small, moving points of light shone through the enveloping white cloud. Within the larger bubble of light, those on guard duty would be at a disadvantage now. Ordinarily the outwardly aimed spotlights would serve to dazzle and blind an intruder, but now the reverse was true. Little of their glow penetrated the snow, and much was reflected back, ruining the night vision of the armed troops. Finally the lead party reached the last checkpoint. The Archer deployed his men and waited for the rest to catch up. It took half an hour. His men were grouped in knots of three or four, and the *mudjaheddin* took the time to drink some water and commit their souls to Allah, preparing both for the battle and for its possible aftermath. Theirs was the warrior's creed. Their enemy was also the enemy of their God. Whatever they did to the people who had offended Allah would be forgiven them, and every one of the Archer's men reminded himself of friends and family who had died at Russian hands.

"This is amazing," the Major whispered as he arrived.

"Allah is with us, my friend," the Archer replied.

"He must be." They were now only five hundred meters from the site, and still unseen. *We might actually survive . . .*

"How much closer can we—"

"One hundred meters. The low-light equipment they have will penetrate snow to about four hundred. The nearest tower is six hundred meters that way." He pointed unnecessarily. The Archer knew exactly where it was, and the next one, two hundred meters farther down.

The Major checked his watch and thought for a moment.

"The guard will change in another hour if they follow the same pattern here as in Kabul. Those on duty will be tired and cold, and the relief troops aren't yet awake. This is the time."

"Good luck," the Archer said simply. Both men embraced.

" ' "Why should we refuse to fight for the cause of Allah, when we and our children have been driven from our dwellings?"' "

" 'When they met Goliath and his warriors they cried: "Lord fill our hearts with steadfastness. Make us firm of foot and help us against the unbelievers." ' "

The quote was from the Koran, and neither man thought it strange that the passage actually referred to the Israelites' battle against the Philistines. David and Saul were known to the Muslims, too, as was their cause. The Major smiled one last time before running off to join his men.

The Archer turned and waved to his missile team. Two of them shouldered their Stingers and followed the leader as he continued his way across the mountain. One more knoll and they were looking down at the guard towers. He was surprised that he could actually see three of them from here, and a third missile was brought out. The Archer gave his instructions and left them to rejoin the main body. On the knoll, the target-acquisition units sang their deadly song to each missileer. The guard towers were heated—and the Stinger searches only for heat.

Next the Archer ordered his mortar team in close—closer than he would have preferred, but the miserable visibility was not entirely on the side of the *mudjaheddin.* He watched the Major's company slide down to the left, disappearing into the snow. They would assault the laser test facility itself, while he and his eighty men went for the place where most of the people lived. Now it was their turn. The Archer led them forward as far as he dared, just to the edge of where the floodlights penetrated the snow. He was rewarded with the sight of a sentry, bundled up for the cold, his breath left behind in a series of small white clouds that drifted in the wind. Ten more minutes. The Archer pulled out his radio. They had only four of them, and hadn't dared to use them until now for fear of being detected by the Russians.

We should never have gotten rid of the dogs, Bondarenko told himself. *First thing I do when I get settled here, get the dogs back.* He was walking around the camp, enjoying the cold and the snow and using the quiet atmosphere to order his thoughts. There were things that needed changing here. They needed a real soldier. General Pokryshkin was too confident in the security scheme, and the KGB troops were too lazy. For example, they did not have night patrols out. Too dangerous on this terrain, their commander said, our day patrols will detect anyone who tries to get close, the guard towers have low-light scanners, and the rest of the site is floodlit. But low-light devices had their effectiveness cut eighty percent by this sort of weather. What if there was a group of Afghans out there right now? he wondered. First *thing,* Bondarenko told himself, *I'll call Colonel Nikolayev at* Spetznaz *headquarters, and* I'll *lead a practice assault on this place to show those KGB idiots how vulnerable they are.* He looked up the hill. There was a KGB sentry, flapping his arms to keep warm, rifle slung over his shoutder—it would take him four seconds to get it unslung, aimed, and taken off safety. *Four seconds, for the last three of which he'd be dead if there were anyone competent out there right now . . .* Well, he told himself, the assistant commander of any post is supposed to be a ruthless son of a bitch,

and if those chekisti want to play at soldiers they'll damned well have to act like soldiers. The Colonel turned to walk back to the apartment block.

Gerasimov's car pulled up to Lefortovo Prison's administrative entrance. His driver stayed with the car while the bodyguard followed him in. The KGB Chairman showed his ID card to the guard and walked by without breaking stride. The KGB was careful with security, but all its members knew the face of the Chairman and knew even better the power that it represented. Gerasimov turned left and headed for the administration offices. The prison superintendent wasn't there, of course, but one of his deputies was. Gerasimov found him filling out some forms.

"Good evening." The man's eyes were saved from bugging out by the glasses he wore.

"Comrade Chairman! I was not—"

"You weren't supposed to be."

"How may I—"

"The prisoner Filitov. I need him immediately," Gerasimov said gruffly. "Immediately," he repeated for effect.

"At once!" The second deputy prison superintendent leaped to his feet and ran to another room. He was back in under a minute. "It will take five minutes."

"He must be properly dressed," Gerasimov said.

"His uniform?" the man asked.

"Not that, you idiot!" the Chairman snarled. "Civilian clothes. He must be presentable. You have all his personal effects here, don't you?"

"Yes, Comrade Chairman, but—"

"I do not have all night," he said quietly. There was nothing more dangerous than a quiet KGB Chairman. The second deputy superintendent fairly flew from the room. Gerasimov turned to his bodyguard, who smiled in amusement. Nobody liked jailers. "How long do you think?"

"Less than ten minutes, Comrade Chairman, even though they have to find his clothes. After all, that pipsqueak knows what a wonderful place this is to live in. I know him."

"Oh?"

"He was originally a 'One' man, but he performed poorly on his first assignment and has been a jailer ever since." The bodyguard checked his watch.

It took eight minutes. Filitov appeared with his suit most of the way on, though his shirt was not buttoned, and his tie merely draped around his neck. The second deputy superintendent was holding a threadbare topcoat. Filitov never had been one to buy a lot of civilian clothes. He was a Colonel of the Red Army, and was never comfortable out of his uniform. The old man's eyes were confused at first, then he saw Gerasimov.

"What is this?" he asked.

"You are coming with me, Filitov. Button your shirt. At least try to look like a man!"

Misha nearly said something, but bit it off. The look he gave the Chairman was enough to make the bodyguard move his hand a centimeter. He buttoned

his shirt and tied his tie. It ended up crooked in his collar because he didn't have a mirror.

"Now, Comrade Chairman, if you will sign this—"

"You give me custody of a criminal like this?"

"What—"

"Handcuffs, man!" Gerasimov boomed.

Unsurprisingly, the second deputy superintendent had a pair in his desk. He got them, put them on Filitov, and nearly pocketed the key before he saw Gerasimov's outstretched hand.

"Very good. I'll have him back to you tomorrow night."

"But I need you to sign—" The second deputy superintendent found that he was talking to a receding back.

"Well, with all the people under me," Gerasimov observed to his bodyguard, "there have to be a few . . . "

"Indeed, Comrade Chairman." The bodyguard was an immensely fit man of forty-two, a former field officer who was an expert in all forms of armed and unarmed combat. His firm grip on the prisoner told Misha all of these things.

"Filitov," the Chairman observed over his shoulder, "we are taking a brief trip, a flight that is. You will not be harmed. If you behave yourself, we might even allow you a decent meal or two. If you do not behave, Vasiliy here will make you wish you did. Is that clear?"

"Clear, Comrade *Chekist."*

The guard snapped to attention, then pushed open the door. The outside guards saluted and were rewarded with nods. The driver held open the back door. Gerasimov stopped and turned.

"Put him in back with me, Vasiliy. You should be able to cover things from the front seat."

"As you wish, Comrade."

"Sheremetyevo," Gerasimov told the driver. "The cargo terminal on the south side."

There was the airport, Ryan thought. He stifled a belch that tasted of wine and sardines. The motorcade entered the airport grounds, then curved to the right, bypassing the regular entrance to the terminal and heading out onto the aircraft parking area. Security, he noted, was *tight.* You could always depend on the Russians for that. Everywhere he looked were rifle-toting soldiers in KGB uniforms. The car drove right past the main terminal, then past a recent addition. It was unused, but looked like the alien spaceship in Spielberg's *Close Encounters.* He'd meant to ask somebody why it had been built, but wasn't yet in use. Maybe next time, Ryan thought.

The formal goodbyes had been made at the Foreign Ministry. A few junior officials stood at the bottom of the stairs to shake hands, and nobody was in a hurry to leave the heated comfort of the limousines. Progress was correspondingly slow. His car lurched forward and stopped, and the man to Ryan's right opened the door as the driver popped the trunk open. He didn't want to go outside either. It had taken most of the drive to get the car warm. Jack got his bag and his briefcase and headed for the stairs.

"I hope you enjoyed your visit," the Soviet official said.

"I would like to come back and see the city sometime," Jack replied as he shook the man's hand.

"We would be delighted."

Sure you would, Jack thought as he went up the stairs. Once in the aircraft, he looked forward. A Russian officer was in the cockpit jump seat to assist with traffic control. His eyes were on the curtained-off communications console. Ryan nodded at the pilot through the door and got a wink.

* * *

"The political dimension scares the hell out of me," Vatutin said. At 2 Dzerzhinskiy Square, he and Golovko were comparing their written notes.

"This isn't the old days. They can't shoot us for following our training and procedures."

"Really? What if Filitov was being run with the knowledge of the Chairman?"

"Ridiculous," Golovko observed.

"Oh? What if his early work on the dissidents put him in contact with the West? We know that he personally intervened in some cases—mainly from the Baltic region, but some others, too."

"You're really thinking like a 'Two' man now!"

"Think for a minute. We arrest Filitov and immediately thereafter the Chairman meets personally with a CIA man. Has that ever happened before?"

"I've heard stories about Philby, but—no, that was only after he came over."

"It's one hell of a coincidence," Vatutin said as he rubbed his eyes. "They do not train us to believe in coincidences, and—"

"Tvoyu mat'!" Golovko said. Vatutin looked up in annoyance to see the other man roll his eyes. "The last time the Americans were over—how could I forget this! Ryan spoke with Fititov—they collided as though by accident, and—"

Vatutin lifted his phone and dialed. "Give me the night superintendent . . . This is Colonel Vatutin. Wake up the prisoner Filitov. I want to see him within the hour . . . What was that? Who? Very well. Thank you." The Colonel of the Second Chief Directorate stood. "Chairman Gerasimov just took Filitov out of Lefortovo fifteen minutes ago. He said that they were taking a special trip."

"Where's your car?"

"I can order—"

"No," Golovko said. "Your personal car."

26.

Black Operations

THERE was no hurry, yet. While the cabin crew got everybody settled in, Colonel von Eich ran down the pre-flight checklist. The VC-137 was taking electrical power from a generator truck that would also allow them to start their engines more easily than internal systems allowed. He checked his watch and hoped everything would go as planned.

Aft, Ryan walked past his normal place, just forward of Ernie Allen's midships cabin, and took a seat in the back row of the after part of the aircraft. It looked much like part of a real airliner, though the seating was five-across, and this space handled the overflow from the "distinguished visitor" areas forward. Jack picked one on the left side, where the seats were in pairs, while ten or so others entered the cabin and kept as far forward as possible for the smoother ride, as advised by another crew member. The aircraft's crew chief would be across the aisle to his right instead of in the crew quarters forward. Ryan wished for another man to help, but they couldn't be too obvious. They had a Soviet officer aboard. That was part of the regular routine, and diverging from it would attract attention. The whole point of this was that everyone would be comfortably secure in the knowledge that everything was exactly as it should be.

Forward, the pilot got to the end of the checklist page.

"Everybody aboard?"

"Yes, sir. Ready to close the doors."

"Keep an eye on the indicator light for the crew door. It's been acting funny," von Eich told the flight engineer.

"A problem?" the Soviet pilot asked from the jump seat. Sudden depressurization is something every flyer takes seriously.

"Every time we check the door it looks fine. Probably a bad relay in the panel, but we haven't found the sucker yet. I've checked the goddamned door-seal myself," he assured the Russian. "It has to be an electrical fault."

"Ready to start," the flight engineer told him next.

"Okay." The pilot looked to make sure the stairs were away while the flight crew donned their headsets. "All clear left."

"All clear right," the copilot said.

"Turning one." Buttons were pushed, switches were toggled, and the left-outboard engine began to rotate its turbine blades. The needles on several indicator dials started moving and were soon in normal idling range. The generator truck withdrew now that the plane could supply its own electric power.

"Turning four," the pilot said next. He toggled his microphone to the cabin

setting. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is Colonel von Eich. We’re getting the engines started, and we should be moving in about five minutes. Please buckle your seat belts. Those of you who smoke, try to hang in there another few minutes.”

At his seat in the back row, Ryan would have killed for a smoke. The crew chief glanced over to him and smiled. He certainly seemed tough enough to handle it, Jack thought. The chief master sergeant looked to be pushing fifty, but he also looked like a man who could teach manners to an NFL linebacker. He was wearing leather work gloves with the adjustment straps pulled in tight.

“All ready?” Jack asked. There was no danger of being heard. The engine noise was hideous back here.

“Whenever you say, sir.”

“You’ll know when.”

“Hmph,” Gerasimov noted. “Not here yet.” The cargo terminal was closed, and dark except for the security floodlights.

“Should I make a call?” the driver asked.

“No hurry. What—” A uniformed guard waved for them to stop. They’d already come through one checkpoint. “Oh, that’s right. The Americans are getting ready to leave. That must be screwing things up.”

The guard came to the driver’s window and asked for passes. The driver just waved to the back.

“Good evening, Corporal,” Gerasimov said. He held up his identification card. The youngster snapped to attention. “A plane will be here in a few minutes for me. The Americans must be holding things up. Is the security force out?”

“Yes, Comrade Chairman! A full company.”

“While we’re here, why don’t we do a fast inspection? Who is your commander?”

“Major Zarudin, Com—”

“What the hell is—” A lieutenant came over. He got as far as the corporal before he saw who was in the car.

“Lieutenant, where is Major Zarudin?”

“In the control tower, Comrade Chairman. That is the best place to—”

“I’m sure. Get him on your radio and tell him that I am going to inspect the guard perimeter, then I will come to see him and tell him what I think. Drive on,” he told the driver. “Go right.”

“Sheremetyevo Tower, this is niner-seven-one requesting permission to taxi to runway two-five-right,” von Eich said into his microphone.

“Nine-seven-one, permission granted. Turn left onto main taxiway one. Wind is two-eight-one at forty kilometers.”

“Roger, out,” the pilot said. “Okay, let’s get this bird moving.” The copilot advanced the throttles and the aircraft started to roll. On the ground in front of them, a man with two lighted wands gave them unneeded directions to the taxiway—but the Russians always assumed that everyone needed to be told what to do. Von Eich left the parking pad and headed south on taxiway nine,

then turned left. The small wheel that controlled the steerable nose-gear was stiff, as always, and the aircraft came around slowly, pushed by the outboard engine. He always took things easy here. The taxiways were so rough that there was always the worry of damaging something. He didn't want that to happen tonight. It was the best part of a mile to the end of the number-one main taxiway, and the bumps and rolls were enough to make one motion-sick. He finally turned right onto taxiway five.

"The men seem alert," Vasiliy observed as they crossed runway twenty-five-left. The driver had his lights off and kept to the edge. There was an airplane coming, and both driver and bodyguard were keeping their eyes on that hazard. They didn't see Gerasimov take the key from his pocket and unlock the handcuffs of an amazed prisoner Filitov. Next the Chairman pulled an automatic pistol from inside his coat.

"Shit—there's a car there," Colonel von Eich said. "What the hell is a car doing here?"

"We'll clear it easy," the copilot said. "He's way over on the edge."

"Great." The pilot turned right again to the end of the runway. "Fucking Sunday drivers."

"You're not going to like this either, Colonel," the flight engineer said. "I got a light on the rear door again."

"God damn it!" von Eich swore over the intercom. He flipped his mike to the cabin setting again, but had to adjust his voice before speaking. "Crew chief, check the rear door."

"Here we go," the sergeant said. Ryan flipped off his seat belt and moved a few feet as he watched the sergeant work the door handle.

"We got a short in here someplace," the flight engineer said on the flight deck, forward. "Just lost the aft cabin lights. The breaker just popped and I can't get it to reset."

"Maybe it's a bad breaker?" Colonel von Eich asked.

"I can try a spare," the engineer said.

"Go ahead. I'll tell the folks in back why the lights just went out." It was a lie, but a good enough one, and with everyone buckled in, it wasn't all that easy to turn around and see the back of the cabin.

"Where's the Chairman?" Vatutin asked the Lieutenant.

"He's conducting an inspection—who are you?"

"Colonel Vatutin—this is Colonel Golovko. Where's the fucking Chairman, you young idiot!"

The Lieutenant sputtered for a few seconds, then pointed.

* * *

"Vasiliy," the Chairman said. It was too bad really. His bodyguard turned to see the muzzle of a pistol. "Your gun, please."

"But—"

"No time for talking." He took the gun and pocketed it. Next he handed over the cuffs. "Both of you, and put your hands through the steering wheel."

The driver was aghast, but both men did as they were told. Vasiliy snapped one ring on his left wrist and reached through the steering wheel to attach the other to the driver. While they did so, Gerasimov detached the receiver from his car's radiophone and pocketed that.

"The keys?" Gerasimov asked. The driver handed them over with his free left hand. The nearest uniformed guard was a hundred meters away. The airplane was a mere twenty. The Chairman of the Committee for State Security opened the car door himself. He hadn't done that in months. "Colonel Filitov, will you come with me, please?"

Misha was as surprised as everyone else, but did as he was told. In full view of everyone at the airport—at least, those few who were bothering to watch the routine departure—Gerasimov and Filitov walked toward the VC-137's red, white, and blue tail. As though on command, the after door opened.

"Let's hustle, people." Ryan tossed out a rope ladder.

Filitov's legs betrayed him. The wind and blast from the jet engines made the ladder flutter like a flag in the breeze, and he couldn't get both feet on it despite help from Gerasimov.

"My God, look!" Golovko pointed. "Move!"

Vatutin didn't say anything. He floored his car and flipped on the high-beam lights.

"Trouble," the crew chief said when he saw the car. There was a man with a rifle running this way, too. *"Come on, pop!"* he urged the Cardinal of the Kremlin.

"Shit!" Ryan pushed the sergeant aside and jumped down. It was too far, and he landed badly, twisting his right ankle and ripping his pants at his left knee. Jack ignored the pain and leaped to his feet. He took one of Filitov's shoulders while Gerasimov took the other, and together they got him up the ladder far enough that the sergeant at the door was able to haul him aboard. Gerasimov went next, with Ryan's help. Then it was Jack's turn—but he had the same problem Filitov had. His left knee was already stiff, and when he tried to climb up on his sprained ankle, his right leg simply refused to work. He swore loudly enough to be heard over the sound of the engines and tried to do it hand over hand, but he lost his grip and fell to the pavement.

"Stoi, stoi!" somebody with a gun shouted from ten feet away. Jack looked up at the aircraft door.

"Go!" he screamed. "Close the fucking door and go!"

The crew chief did exactly that without a moment's hesitation. He reached around to pull the door shut, and Jack watched it seat itself in a matter of seconds. Inside, the sergeant lifted the interphone and told the pilot that the door was properly sealed.

"Tower, this is niner-seven-one, rolling now. Out." The pilot advanced the throttles to takeoff power.

The force of the engine blast hurled all four men—the rifleman had just

arrived at the scene, too—right off the end of the icy runway. Jack watched from flat on his belly as the blinking red light atop the aircraft's tall rudder diminished in the distance, then rose. His last view of it was the glow of the infrared jammers that protected the VC-137 against surface-to-air missiles. He almost started laughing, when he was rolled over and saw a pistol against his face.

"Hello, Sergey," Ryan said to Colonel Golovko.

"Ready," the radio told the Archer. He raised a flare pistol and fired a single star-shell round that burst directly over one of the shops.

Everything happened at once. To his left, three Stinger missiles were launched after a long and boring wait. Each streaked toward a guard tower—or more precisely, to the electric heaters inside them. The paired sentries in each had time enough only to see and be surprised by the signal round over the central region of the installation, and only one of the six saw an inbound streak of yellow, too fast to permit a reaction. All three of the missiles hit—they could hardly miss a stationary target—and in each case the six-pound warhead functioned as designed. Less than five seconds after the first round had been fired, the towers were eliminated, and with them also the machine guns that protected the laser facility.

The sentry to the Archer's front died next. He hadn't a chance. Forty rifles fired on him at once, with half of the bursts connecting. Next the mortars fired ranging rounds, and the Archer used his radio to adjust the fire onto what he thought was the guards' barracks.

The sound of automatic-weapons fire cannot be mistaken for anything else. Colonel Bondarenko had just decided that he'd spent enough time communing with a cold though beautiful nature and was walking back to his quarters when the sound stopped him in his tracks. His first thought was that one of the KGB guards had accidentally discharged his weapon, but that impression lasted less than a second. He heard a *crack!* overhead and looked up to see the star shell, then heard the explosions from the laser site, and as though a switch had been thrown, he changed from a startled man to a professional soldier under attack. The KGB barracks were two hundred meters to his right, and he ran there as fast as he could.

Mortar rounds were falling, he saw. They were falling on the big new machine shop just beyond the barracks. Men were stumbling out the door of the latter when he arrived, and he had to stop and hold up his arms to avoid being shot.

"I am Colonel Bondarenko! Where is your officer?"

"Here!" A lieutenant came out. "What—" Someone had just learned of his mistake. The next mortar round hit the back of the barracks.

"Follow me!" Bondarenko screamed, leading them away from the most obvious target in sight. All around them was the deadly chatter of rifles—Soviet rifles; the Colonel noted at once that he couldn't use sound to identify who was who. *Wonderful!* "Form up!"

"What is—"

"We're under attack, Lieutenant! How many men do you have?"

He turned and counted. Bondarenko did it faster still. There were forty-one, all with rifles, but there were no heavy weapons, and no radios. The machine guns he could do without, but radios were vital.

The dogs, he told himself stupidly, *they should have kept the dogs . . .*

The tactical situation was appallingly bad, and he knew that it would only get worse. A series of explosions sundered the night.

"The lasers, we must—" the Lieutenant said, but the Colonel grabbed his shoulder.

"We can rebuild the machines," Bondarenko said urgently, "but we cannot rebuild the scientists. We're going to get to the apartment building and hold that until relieved. Send a good sergeant to the bachelor quarters and get them to the apartments."

"No, Comrade Colonel! My orders are to protect the lasers, and I must—"

"I am ordering you to get your men—"

"No!" the Lieutenant screamed back at him.

Bondarenko knocked him down, took his rifle, flipped off the safety, and fired two rounds into his chest. He turned. "Who's the best sergeant?"

"I am, Colonel," a young man said shakily.

"I am Colonel Bondarenko, and I am in command!" the officer announced as forcefully as a command from God. "You take four men, get to the bachelor barracks, and bring everyone up the hill to the apartment building. Fast as you can!" The sergeant pointed to four others and ran off. "The rest of you, follow me!" He led them into the falling snow. There wasn't time for him or them to wonder what awaited. Before they'd gone ten meters, every light in the camp went out.

At the gate of the laser site a GAZ jeep sat, with a heavy machine gun aboard. General Pokryshkin ran from the control building when he heard the explosions, and was stunned to see that only blazing stumps remained of his three guard towers. The commander of the KGB detachment raced down to him on his vehicle.

"We're under attack," the officer said unnecessarily.

"Get your men together—right here." Pokryshkin looked up to see running men. They were dressed in Soviet uniforms, but somehow he knew that they were not Russians. The General climbed into the back of the jeep and brought the machine gun around over the head of the astonished KGB officer. The first time he pressed the trigger nothing happened, and he had to ratchet a round into the chamber. The second time, Pokryshkin had the satisfaction of watching three men fall. The guard force commander needed no further encouragement. He barked rapid orders into his radio. The battle under way degenerated at once into confusion, as it had to—both sides were wearing identical uniforms and using identical weapons. But there were more Afghans than Russians.

Morozov and several of his unmarried friends had stepped outside when they heard the noise. Most of them had military experience, though he did not. It didn't matter—nobody had the first idea what they should do. Five men came running out of the darkness. They were wearing uniforms and carrying

rifles.

"Come! All of you come, follow us!" More weapons started firing close by, and two of the KGB troops went down, one dead, one wounded. He fired back, emptying his rifle in one long burst. There was a scream in the darkness, followed by shouts. Morozov ran inside and called for people to make for the door. The engineers needed little prompting.

"Up the hill," the sergeant said. "To the apartment block. Fast as you can!" The four KGB troops waved them along, looking for targets, but seeing only flashes. Bullets were flying everywhere now. Another of the troops went down screaming out his last breath, but the sergeant got the one who killed him. When the last engineer left the room, he and a private grabbed the spare rifles and helped their comrade back up the hill.

It was too big a mission for eighty men, the Archer realized too late. Too much ground to cover, too many buildings, but there were many unbelievers running around, and that was why he'd brought his men here. He watched one of them explode a bus with an RPG-7 antitank round. It burst into flames and slid off the road, rolling down the side of the mountain while those inside screamed. Teams of men with explosives went into the buildings. They found machine tools bathed in oil and set their charges quickly, running out before the explosions could begin the fires. The Archer had realized a minute too late which building was the guard barracks, and now that was ablaze as he led his section in to mop up the men who'd been kept there. He was too late, but didn't know it yet. A stray mortar round had cut the power line that handled all of the site's lighting, and all of his men were robbed of their night vision by the flashes of their own weapons.

"Well done, Sergeant!" Bondarenko told the boy. He'd already ordered the engineers upstairs. "We'll set our perimeter around the building. They may force us back. If so, we'll make our stand on the first floor. The walls are concrete. RPGs can hurt us, but the roof and walls will stop bullets. Pick one man to go inside and find men with military experience. Give them those two rifles. Whenever a man goes down, retrieve his weapon and get it to someone who knows how to use it. I'm going inside for a moment to see if I can get a telephone to work—"

"There's a radiotelephone in the first-floor office," the sergeant said. "All the buildings have them."

"Good! Hold the perimeter, Sergeant. I'll be back to you in two minutes." Bondarenko ran inside. The radiotelephone was hanging on a wall hook, and he was relieved to see it was a military type, powered by its own battery. The Colonel shouldered it and ran back outside.

The attackers—who were they? he wondered—had planned their attack poorly. First they had failed to identify the KGB barracks before launching their assault; second, they hadn't hit the residential area as quickly as they should have. They were moving in now, but they found a line of Border Guards lying in the snow. They were only KGB troops, Bondarenko knew, but they did have basic training, and most of all they knew that there was no place to run. That young sergeant was a good one, he saw. He moved from

point to point along the perimeter, not using his weapon but encouraging the men and telling them what to do. The Colonel activated the radio.

"This is Colonel G. I. Bondarenko at Project Bright Star. We are under attack. I repeat, Bright Star is under attack. Any unit on this net respond at once, over."

"Gennady, this is Pokryshkin at the laser site. We're in the control building. What is your situation?"

"I'm at the apartments. I have all the civilians we could find inside. I have forty men, and we're going to try to hold this place. What about help?"

"I'm trying. Gennady, we cannot get you any help from here. Can you hold?"

"Ask me in twenty minutes."

"Protect my people, Colonel. Protect my people!" Pokryshkin shouted into the microphone.

"To the death, Comrade General. Out." Bondarenko kept the radio on his back and hefted his rifle. "Sergeant!"

"Here, Colonel!" The young man appeared. "They're probing now, not really attacking yet—"

"Looking for weaknesses." Bondarenko got back down to his knees. The air seemed alive with gunfire, but it was not yet concentrated. Above and behind the two, windows were shattering. Bullets pounded into the pre-cast concrete sections that formed the building wall, spraying everyone outside with chips. "Position yourself at the corner opposite this one. You'll command the north and east walls. I'll handle these two. Tell your men to fire only when they have targets—"

"Already done, Comrade."

"Good!" Bondarenko punched the young man on the shoulder. "Don't fall back until you have to, but tell me if you do. The people in this building are priceless assets. They must survive. Go!" The Colonel watched the sergeant run off. Perhaps the KGB did train some of its people. He ran to this corner of the building.

He now had twenty—no, he counted eighteen men. Their camouflage clothing made them hard to spot. He ran from man to man, his back bowed by the weight of the radio, spacing them out, telling them to husband their rounds. He was just finishing the line on the west side when there came a chorus of human voices from the darkness.

"Here they come!" a private screamed.

"*Hold your fire!"* the Colonel bellowed.

The running figures appeared as though by magic. One moment the scene was empty of anything but falling snow—the next, there was a line of men firing Kalashnikov rifles from the hip. He let them get to within fifty meters.

"Fire!" He saw ten of them go down in an instant. The rest wavered and stopped, then fell back, leaving two more bodies behind. There was more firing from the opposite side of the building. Bondarenko wondered if the sergeant had held, but that was not in his hands. Some nearby screams told him that his men had taken casualties, too. On checking the line he found that one had made no noise at all. He was down to fifteen men.

The climb-out was routine enough, Colonel von Eich thought. A few feet behind him, the Russian in the jump seat was giving the electrical panel an occasional look.

"How's the electricity doing?" the pilot asked in some irritation.

"No problem with engine and hydraulic power. Seems to be in the lighting system," the engineer replied, quietly turning off the tail and wingtip anticollision lights.

"Well . . ." The cockpit instrument lights were all on, of course, and there was no additional illumination for the flight crew. "We'll fix it when we get to Shannon."

"Colonel." It was the voice of the crew chief in the pilot's headset.

"Go ahead," the engineer said, making sure that the Russian's headset was not on that channel.

"Go ahead, Sarge."

"We have our two . . . our two new passengers, sir, but Mr. Ryan—he got left behind, Colonel."

"Repeat that?" von Eich said.

"He said to move out, sir. Two guys with guns, sir, they—he said to move out, sir," the crew chief said again.

Von Eich let out a breath. "Okay. How are things back there?"

"I got them in the back row, sir. I don't think anybody noticed, even, what with the engine noise and all."

"Keep it that way."

"Yes, sir. I have Freddie keeping the rest of the passengers forward. The aft can is broke, sir."

"Pity," the pilot observed. "Tell 'em to go forward if they gotta go."

"Right, Colonel."

"Seventy-five minutes," the navigator advised.

Christ, Ryan, the pilot thought. *I hope you like it there . . .*

* * *

"I should kill you here and now!" Golovko said.

They were in the Chairman's car. Ryan found himself facing four very irate KGB officers. The maddest seemed to be the guy in the right-front seat. Gerasimov's bodyguard, Jack thought, the one who worked close in. He looked like the physical type, and Ryan was glad that there was a seatback separating them. He had a more immediate problem. He looked at Golovko and thought it might be a good idea to calm him down.

"Sergey, that would set off an international incident like you would not believe," Jack said calmly. The next conversations he heard were in Russian. He couldn't understand what they were saying, but the emotional content was clear enough. They didn't know what to do. That suited Ryan just fine.

Clark was walking along a street three blocks from the waterfront when he saw them. It was eleven forty-five. They were right on time, thank God. This part of the city had restaurants and, though he scarcely believed it, some

discos. They were walking out of one when he spotted them. Two women, dressed as he'd been told to expect, with a male companion. The bodyguard. Only one, also as per orders. It was an agreeable surprise that so far everything had gone according to plan. Clark counted another dozen or so other people on the sidewalk, some in loud groups, some in quiet couples, many of them weaving from too much drink. But it was a Friday night, and that's what people all over the world did on Friday night. He maintained visual contact with the three people who concerned him, and closed in.

The bodyguard was a pro. He stayed on their right, keeping his gun hand free. He was ahead of them, but that didn't keep his head from scanning in all directions. Clark adjusted the scarf on his neck, then reached in his pocket. The pistol was there as he increased his pace to catch up. It wasn't hard. The two women seemed to be in no hurry as they approached the corner. The older one seemed to be looking around at the city. The buildings looked old, but weren't. The Second World War had swept through Talinn in two explosive waves, leaving behind nothing but scorched stones. But whoever made such decisions had opted to rebuild the city much as it had been, and the town had a feel very different from the Russian cities Clark had visited before. It made him think of Germany somehow, though he couldn't imagine why. That was his last frivolous thought of the night. He was now thirty feet behind them, just another man walking home on a cold February night, his face lowered to avoid the wind and a fur hat pulled down over his head. He could hear their voices now, and they were speaking Russian. Time.

"Russkiy," Clark said with a Moscow accent. "You mean not everyone in this city is an arrogant Balt?"

"This is an old and lovely city, Comrade," the older woman answered. "Show some respect."

Here we go . . . Clark told himself. He walked forward with the curving steps of a man in his cups.

"Your pardon, lovely lady. Have a good evening," he said as he passed. He moved around the women and bumped into the bodyguard. "Excuse me, Comrade—" The man found that there was a pistol aimed at his face. "Turn left and go into the alley. Hands out where I can see them, Comrade."

The shock on the poor bastard's face was amusing as hell, Clark thought, reminding himself that this was a skilled man with a gun in *his* pocket. He grabbed the back of the man's collar and kept him out at arm's length, with his gun held in tight.

"Mother . . ." Katryn said in quiet alarm.

"Hush and do as I say. Do as this man says."

"But—"

"Against the wall," Clark told the man. He kept the gun aimed at the center of the bodyguard's head while he switched hands, then he chopped hard on the side of his neck with his right hand. The man fell stunned, and Clark put handcuffs on his wrists. Next he gagged him, tied up his ankles, and dragged him to the darkest spot he could find.

"Ladies, if you will come with me, please?"

"What is this?" Katryn asked.

"I don't know," her mother admitted. "Your father told me to—"

"Miss, your father has decided that he wants to visit America, and he wants you and your mother to join him," Clark said in flawless Russian.

Katryn did not reply. The lighting in the alley was very poor, but he could see her face lose all of the color it had. Her mother looked little better.

"But," the young girl said finally. "But that's treason . . . I don't believe it."

"He told me . . . he told me to do whatever this man says," Maria said. "Katryn—we must."

"But—"

"Katryn," her mother said. "What will happen to your life if your father defects and you remain behind? What will happen to your friends? What will happen to you? They will use you to get him back, anything they have to do, Katusha . . ."

"Time to leave, folks." Clark took both women by the arm.

"But—" Katryn gestured at the bodyguard.

"He'll be fine. We don't kill people. It's bad for business." Clark led them back to the street, turning left toward the harbor.

The Major had divided his men into two groups. The smaller one was setting explosive charges on everything they could find. A light pole or a laser, it didn't matter to them. The large group had cut down most of the KGB troops who'd tried to come here, and was arrayed around the control bunker. It wasn't actually a bunker, but whoever had made the construction plans for the place had evidently thought that the control room should have the same sort of protection as those at the Leninsk Cosmodrome, or maybe he'd thought that the mountain might someday be subjected to a nuclear airburst attack. Most likely was that someone had decided the manual prescribed this sort of structure for this sort of place. What had resulted was a building with reinforced-concrete walls fully a meter thick. His men had killed the KGB commander and taken his vehicle, with the heavy machine gun, and were pouring fire into the vision slits cut in the structure. In fact, no one used them for looking, and their rounds had long since pounded through the thick glass and were chewing into the room's computers and control gear.

Inside, General Pokryshkin had taken command by default. He had thirty or so KGB troops, armed only with light weapons and what little ammunition they'd been carrying when the attack had begun. A lieutenant was handling the defense as best he could, while the General was trying to get help by radio.

"It will take an hour," a regimental commander was saying. "My men are moving out right now!"

"Fast as you can!" Pokryshkin said. "People are dying here." He'd already thought of helicopters, but in this weather they'd accomplish nothing at all. A helicopter assault would not even have been a gamble, just suicide. He set down the radio and picked up his service automatic. He could hear the noise from the outside. All the site's equipment was being blown up. He could live with that now. As great a catastrophe as that was, the people mattered more. Nearly a third of his engineers were in the bunker. They'd been finishing up a lengthy conference when the attack began. Had that not been the case, fewer

would be here, but those would have been out working on the equipment. At least here they had a chance.

On the other side of the bunker's concrete walls, the Major was still trying to figure this one out. He'd hardly expected to find this sort of structure. His RPG antitank rounds merely chipped the wall, and aiming them at the narrow slits was difficult in the darkness. His machine-gun rounds could be guided to them with tracers, but that wasn't good enough.

Find the weak points, he told himself. *Take your time and think it out.* He ordered his men to maintain a steady rate of fire and started moving around the building. Whoever was inside had his weapons equally dispersed, but buildings like this one always had at least one blind spot . . . The Major merely had to find it.

"What is happening?" his radio squawked.

"We have killed perhaps fifty. The rest are in a bunker and we're trying to get them, too. What of your target?"

"The apartment building," the Archer replied. "They're all in there, and—" The radio transmitted the sound of gunfire. "We will have them soon."

"Thirty minutes and we must leave, my friend," the Major said.

"Yes!" The radio went silent.

The Archer was a good man, and a brave one, the Major thought as he examined the bunker's north face, but with just a week's formal training he'd be so much more effective . . . just a week to codify the things that he was learning on his own . . . and to pass on the lessons that others had shed blood for . . .

There was the place. There was a blind spot.

The last mortar rounds were targeted on the roof of the apartment block. Bondarenko smiled as he watched. Finally the other side had done something really foolish. The 82-millimeter shells didn't have a chance of breaking through the concrete roof slabs, but if they'd spread them around the building's periphery he'd have lost many of his men. He was down to ten, two of them wounded. The rifles of the fallen were inside the building now, being fired from the second floor. He counted twenty bodies outside his perimeter, and the attackers—they were Afghans, he was sure of that now—were milling about beyond his vision, trying to decide what to do. For the first time Bondarenko felt that they just might survive after all. The General had radioed to say that a motorized regiment was on the way down the road from Nurek, and though he shuddered to think what it would be like driving BTR infantry carriers over snow-covered mountain roads, the loss of a few infantry squads was as nothing compared to the corporate expertise that he was trying to protect now.

The incoming rifle fire was sporadic now, just harassment fire while they decided what to do next. With more people he'd try a counterattack, just to throw them off balance, but the Colonel was tied to his post. He couldn't risk it, not with a mere squad left to cover two sides of the building.

Do I pull back now? The longer I can keep them away from the building, the better, but should I do my withdrawal now? His thoughts wavered at that decision. Inside the building his troops would have far better protection, but

he'd lose the ability to control them when each man was separated from the next by the interior walls. If they pulled inside and withdrew to the upper floors, they'd allow the Afghan sappers to drop the building with explosive charges—no, that was the counsel of despair. Bondarenko listened to the scattered rifle shots that punctuated the sounds of wounded and dying men and couldn't make up his mind.

Two hundred meters away, the Archer was about to do that for him. Mistaking the casualties he'd taken here to mean that this part of the building was the most heavily defended, he was leading what was left of his men to the other side. It required five minutes to do so, while those he left behind kept up a steady drumbeat of fire into the Russian perimeter. Out of mortar rounds, out of RPG projectiles, the only thing left to him besides rifles were a few grenades and six satchel charges. All around him fires blazed into the night, separate orange-red flames reaching upward to melt the falling snow. He heard the cries of his own wounded as he formed up the fifty men he had left. They'd attack as one mass, behind the leader who'd brought them here. The Archer flipped the safety off his AK-47, and remembered the first three men he'd killed with it.

Bondarenko's head snapped around when he heard the screams from the other side of the building. He turned back and saw that nothing was happening. It was time to do something, and he hoped that it was the right thing:

"Everyone back to the building. Move!" Two of his remaining ten were wounded, and each had to be helped. It took over a minute as the night shattered yet again with volleys of rifle fire. Bondarenko took five and ran down the building's main first-floor corridor and out the other side.

He couldn't tell if there'd been a breakthrough, or if the men here were also falling back—again he had to hold fire because both sides were identically uniformed. Then one of those running toward the building fired, and the Colonel went to one knee and dropped him with a five-round burst. More appeared, and he nearly fired until he heard their shouts.

"Nashi, nashi!" He counted eight. The last of them was the sergeant, wounded in both legs.

"Too many, we couldn't—"

"Get inside," Bondarenko told him. "Can you still fight?"

"Fuck, yes!" Both men looked around. They couldn't fight from the individual rooms. They'd have to make their stand in the corridors and stairwells.

"Help is on the way. A regiment is coming down from Nurek if we can hold on!" Bondarenko told his men. He didn't tell them how long it was supposed to take. It was the first good news in over half an hour. Two civilians came downstairs. Both carried rifles.

"You need help?" Morozov asked. He'd avoided military service, but he had just learned that a rifle wasn't all that hard to use.

"How are things up there?" Bondarenko asked.

"My section chief is dead. I took this from him. Many people are hurt, and the rest are as terrified as I am."

"Stay with the sergeant," the Colonel told him. "Keep your head, Comrade Engineer, and we may yet live through this. Help's on the way."

"I hope the bastards hurry." Morozov helped the sergeant—who was even younger than the engineer—go to the far end of the corridor.

Bondarenko put half of his men at the stairwell and the other half by the elevators. It was quiet again. They could hear the jabbering of voices outside, but the shooting had died down for the moment.

"Down the ladder. Carefully," Clark said. "There's a crossmember at the bottom. You can stand on that."

Maria looked with disgust at the slimy wood, doing as she was told like a person in a dream. Her daughter followed. Clark went last, stepped around them, and got into the boat. He untied the ropes and moved the boat by hand underneath where the women were standing. It was a three-foot drop.

"One at a time. You first, Katryn. Step down slowly and I'll catch you." She did so, her knees wobbling with doubt and fear. Clark grabbed her ankle and pulled it toward him. She fell into the boat as elegantly as a sack of beans. Maria came next. He gave the same instructions, and she followed them, but Katryn tried to help, and in doing so moved the boat. Maria lost her grip and fell into the water with a scream.

"What is that?" someone called from the landside end of the pier.

Clark ignored it, grabbing the woman's splashing hands and pulling her aboard. She was gasping from the cold, but there wasn't much Clark could do about that. He heard the sound of running feet along the pier as he turned on the boat's electric motor and headed straight out.

"Stoi!" a voice called. It was a cop, Clark realized, it would have to be a damned cop. He turned to see the glimmer of a flashlight. It couldn't reach the boat, but it was fixed on the wake he'd left behind. Clark lifted his radio.

"Uncle Joe, this is Willy. On the way. The sun is out!"

"They may have been spotted," the communications officer told Mancuso.

"Great." The Captain went forward. "Goodman, come right to zero-eight-five. Move her in toward the coast at ten knots."

"Conn, sonar, contact bearing two-nine-six. Diesel engine," Jones's voice announced. "Twin screws."

"Will be KGB patrol frigate—Grisha, probably," Ramius said. "Routine patrol."

Mancuso didn't say anything, but he pointed to the fire-control tracking party. They'd work up a position on the seaward target while *Dallas* moved into the coast at periscope depth, keeping her radio antenna up.

"Nine-seven-one, this is Velikiye Luki Center. Turn right to new course one-zero-four," the Russian voice told Colonel von Eich. The pilot squeezed the microphone trigger on his wheel.

"Say again, Luki. Over."

"Nine-seven-one, you are ordered to turn right to new heading one-zero-four and return to Moscow. Over."

"Ah, thank you, Luki, negative, we are proceeding on a heading of two-

eight-six as per our flight plan. Over."

"Nine-seven-one, you are ordered to return to Moscow!" the controller insisted.

"Roger. Thank you. Out." Von Eich looked down to see that his autopilot was on the proper heading, then resumed his outside scanning for other aircraft.

"But you are not turning back," the Russian said over the intercom.

"No." Von Eich turned to look at the man. "We didn't leave anything behind that I know of." *Well …*

"But they ordered you—"

"Son, I am in command of this aircraft, and my orders are to fly to Shannon," the pilot explained.

"But—" The Russian unsnapped his straps and started to stand up.

"Sit down!" the pilot ordered. "Nobody leaves my flight deck without my permission, mister! You are a guest on my airplane, and you'll goddamned well do what I say!" *Damn, it was supposed to be easier than this!* He gestured to the engineer, who toggled off another switch. That shut off all the cabin lights in the aircraft. The VC-137 was now totally blacked out. Von Eich keyed his radio again. "Luki, this is niner-seven-one. We have some electrical problems aboard. I don't want to make any radical course changes until we have them figured out. Do you copy? Over."

"What is your problem?" the controller asked. The pilot wondered what he'd been told as he gave out the next set of lies.

"Luki, we don't know just yet. We're losing electrical power. All our lights have gone bad. The bird is blacked out at the moment, say again we are running without lights. I'm a little worried, and I don't need any distractions right now." That bought him two minutes of silence, and twenty miles of westward progress.

"Nine-seven-one, I have notified Moscow of your problems. They advise that you return at once. They will clear you for an emergency approach," the controller offered.

"Roger, thank you, Luki, but I don't want to risk a course change right now, if you know what I mean. We're working to fix the problem. Please stand by. Will advise. Out." Colonel von Eich checked the clock in his instrument panel. Thirty more minutes to the coast.

"What?" Major Zarudin asked. "Who got on the airplane?"

"Chairman Gerasimov and an arrested enemy spy," Vatutin said.

"On an American airplane? You tell me that the *Chairman* is defecting on an American airplane!" The officer commanding the airport security detail had taken charge of the situation, as his orders allowed him to do. He found that he had two colonels, a lieutenant colonel, a driver, and an American in the office he used here—along with the craziest damned story he'd ever heard. "I must call for instructions."

"I am senior to you!" Golovko said.

"You are not senior to my commander!" Zarudin pointed out as he reached for the phone. He'd been able to have the air traffic controllers try to recall the American plane, but it had not come as a surprise to his visitors that it had

decided not to turn.

Ryan sat perfectly still, barely breathing, not even moving his head. He told himself that as long as they didn't get too excited he would be completely safe. Golovko was too smart to do anything crazy. He knew who Jack was, and he knew what would happen if an accredited member of a diplomatic mission to his country was so much as scratched. Ryan had been scratched, of course. His ankle hurt like hell, and his knee was oozing blood, but he'd done that to himself. Golovko glared at him from five feet away. Ryan didn't return the look. He swallowed his fear and tried to look exactly as harmless as he was right now.

"Where's his family?" Vatutin asked.

"They flew to Talinn yesterday," Vasiliy answered lamely. "She wanted to see some friends . . ."

Time was running out for everyone. Bondarenko's men were down to less than half a magazine each. Two more were dead from grenades that had been tossed in. The Colonel had watched a private leap on one, ripped to shreds to save his comrades. The boy's blood covered the tile floor like paint. Six Afghans were piled up at the door. It had been like this at Stalingrad, the Colonel told himself. No one excelled the Russian soldier at house-to-house fighting. How far away was that motorized regiment? An hour was such a short period of time. Half a movie, a television show, a pleasant night's stroll . . . such a short time, unless people were shooting at you. Then every second stretched before your eyes, and the hands of your watch seemed frozen, and the only thing that went fast was your heart. It was only his second experience with close combat. He'd been decorated after the first, and he wondered if he'd be buried after the second. But he couldn't let that happen. On the floors above him were several hundred people, engineers and scientists, their wives and their children, all of whose lives rested on his ability to hold the Afghan invaders off for less than an hour.

Go away, he wished at them. Do you think that we wanted to come and be shot at in that miserable rockpile you call a country? If you want to kill those who are responsible, why don't you go to Moscow? But that wasn't the way things were in war, was it? The politicians never seemed to come close enough to see what they had wrought. They never really knew what they did, and now the bastards had nuclear-tipped missiles. They had the power to kill millions, but they didn't even have the courage to see the horror on a simple, old-fashioned battlefield.

The nonsense you think at times like this! he raged at himself.

He'd failed. His men had trusted him with command, and he'd failed them, the Archer told himself. He looked around at the bodies in the snow and each seemed to accuse him. He could kill individuals, could pluck aircraft from the sky, but he'd never learned how to lead a large body of men. Was this Allah's curse on him for torturing the Russian flyers? No! There were still enemies to kill. He gestured to his men to enter the building through several broken, ground-floor windows.

The Major was leading from the front, as the *mudjaheddin* expected. He had gotten ten of them right up to the side of the bunker, then led them along the wall toward the main door, covered by fire from the rest of his company. It was going well, he thought. He'd lost five men, but that was not very many for a mission like this . . . *Thank you for all the training you gave me, my Russian friends* . . .

The main door was steel. He personally set a pair of satchel charges at both lower corners and set the fuses before crawling back around the corner. Russian rifles blazed over his head, but those inside the building didn't know where he was. That would change. He set the charges, pulled the fuse cords, and dashed back around the corner.

Pokryshkin cringed as he heard it happen. He turned to see the heavy steel door flying across the room and smashing into a control console. The KGB Lieutenant was killed instantly by the blast, and as Pokryshkin's men raced to cover the breach in the wall, three more explosive packs flew in. There was nowhere to run. The Border Guards kept firing, killing one of the attackers at the door, but then the charges went off.

It was a strangely hollow sound, the Major thought. The force of the explosions was contained by the stout concrete walls. He led his men in a second later. Electrical circuits were sparking, and fires would soon begin in earnest, but everyone he could see inside was down. His men moved swiftly from one to another, seizing weapons and killing those merely unconscious. The Major saw a Russian officer with general's stars. The man was bleeding from his nose and ears, trying to bring up his pistol when the Major cut him down. In another minute they were all dead. The building was rapidly filling with thick, acrid smoke. He ordered his men out.

"We're finished here," he said into his radio. There was no answer. "Are you there?"

The Archer was against a wall next to a half-open door. His radio was switched off. Just outside his room was a soldier, facing down the corridor. It was time. The freedom fighter threw the door aside with the barrel of his rifle and shot the Russian before the man had had a chance to turn. He screamed a command, and five other men emerged from their rooms, but two were killed before they got a chance to shoot. He looked up and down the corridor and saw nothing but gun flashes and half-hidden silhouettes.

Fifty meters away, Bondarenko reacted to the new threat. He shouted an order for his men to stay under cover, and then with murderous precision, the Colonel identified and engaged the targets moving in the open, identified by the emergency lighting in the corridor. The corridor was exactly like a shooting gallery, and he got two men with as many bursts. Another ran toward him, screaming something unintelligible and firing his weapon in a single extended burst. Bondarenko's shots missed, to his amazement, but someone else got him. There was more shooting, and the sound of it reverberating off the concrete walls completely deafened everyone. Then, he saw, there was only one man left. The Colonel watched two more of his men fall, and the last Afghan chipped concrete only centimeters from his face.

Bondarenko's eyes stung from it, and the right side of his face recoiled at the sudden pain. The Colonel pulled back from the line of fire, flipped his weapon to full automatic, took a deep breath, and jumped into the corridor. The man was less than ten meters away.

The moment stretched into eternity as both men brought their weapons to bear. He saw the man's eyes. It was a young face there, immediately below the emergency light, but the eyes . . . the rage there, the hatred, nearly stopped the Colonel's heart. But Bondarenko was a soldier before all things. The Afghan's first shot missed. His did not.

The Archer felt shock, but not pain in his chest as he fell. His brain sent a message to his hands to bring the weapon to the left, but they ignored the command and dropped it. He fell in stages, first to his knees, then on his back, and at last he was staring up at a ceiling. It was finally over. Then the man stood by his side. It was not a cruel face, the Archer thought. It was the enemy, and it was an infidel, but he was a man, too, wasn't he? There was curiosity there. He wants to know who I am, the Archer told him with his last breath.

"Allahu akhbar!" God is great.

Yes, I suppose He is, Bondarenko told the corpse. He knew the phrase well enough. *Is that why you came?* He saw that the man had a radio. It started to make noise, and the Colonel bent down to grab it.

"Are you there?" the radio asked a moment later. The question was in Pashtu, but the answer was delivered in Russian.

"It is all finished here," Bondarenko said.

The Major looked at his radio for a moment, then blew his whistle to assemble what was left of his men. The Archer's company knew the way to the assembly point, but all that mattered now was getting home. He counted his men. He'd lost eleven and had six wounded. With luck he'd get to the border before the snow stopped. Five minutes later his men were heading off the mountain.

"Secure the area!" Bondarenko told his remaining six men. "Collect weapons and get them handed out." It was probably over, he thought, but "over" would not truly come until that motor-rifle regiment got here.

"Morozov!" he called next. The engineer appeared a moment later.

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Is there a physician upstairs?"

"Yes, several—I'll get one."

The Colonel found that he was sweating. The building still held some warmth. He dropped the field radio off his back and was stunned to see that two bullets had hit it—and even more surprised to see blood on one of the straps. He'd been hit and hadn't known it. The sergeant came over and looked at it.

"Just a scratch, Comrade, like those on my legs."

"Help me off with this coat, will you?" Bondarenko shrugged out of the knee-length greatcoat, exposing his uniform blouse. With his right hand he reached inside, while his left removed the ribbon that designated the Red Banner. This he pinned to the young man's collar. "You deserve better,

Sergeant, but this is all I can do for the present."

"Up 'scope!" Mancuso used the search periscope now, with its light-amplifying equipment. "Still nothing . . ." He turned to look west. "Uh-oh, I got a masthead light at two-sevenzero—"

"That's our sonar contact," Lieutenant Goodman noted unnecessarily.

"Sonar, conn, do you have an ident on the contact?" Mancuso asked.

"Negative," Jones replied. "We're getting reverbs from the ice, sir. Acoustic conditions are pretty bad. It's twin screw and diesel, but no ident."

Mancuso turned on the 'scope television camera. Ramius needed only one look at the picture. "Grisha."

Mancuso looked at the tracking party. "Solution?"

"Yes, but it's a little shaky," the weapons officer replied. "The ice isn't going to help," he added. What he meant was that the Mark 48 torpedo in surface-attack mode could be confused by floating ice. He paused for a moment. "Sir, if that's a Grisha, how come no radar?"

"New contact! Conn, sonar, new contact bearing zero-eight-six—sounds like our friend, sir," Jones called. "Something else near that bearing, high-speed screw . . . definitely something new there, sir, call it zero-eight-three."

"Up two feet," Mancuso told the quartermaster. The periscope came up. "I see him, just on the horizon . . . call it three miles. There's a light behind them!" He slapped the handles up and the 'scope went down at once. "Let's get there fast. All ahead two-thirds."

"All ahead two-thirds, aye." The helmsman dialed up the engine order.

The navigator plotted the position of the inbound boat and ticked off the yards.

Clark was looking back toward the shore. There was a light sweeping left and right across the water. Who was it? He didn't know if the local cops had boats, but there had to be a detachment of KGB Border Guards: they had their own little navy, *and* their own little air force. But how alert were they on a Friday night? Probably better than they were when that German kid decided to fly into Moscow . . . right through this sector, Clark remembered. *This area's probably pretty alert . . . where are you,* Dallas? He lifted his radio.

"Uncle Joe, this is Willy. The sun is rising, and we're far from home."

"He says he's close, sir," communications reported.

" 'Gator?" Mancuso asked.

The navigator looked up from his table. "I gave him fifteen knots. We should be within five hundred yards now."

"All ahead one-third," the Captain ordered. "Up 'scope!" The oiled steel tube hissed up again—all the way up.

"Captain, I got a radar emitter astern, bearing two-sixeight. It's a Don-2," the ESM technician said.

"Conn, sonar, both the hostile contacts have increased speed. Blade count looks like twenty knots and coming up on the Grisha, sir," Jones said. "Confirm target ident is Grisha-class. Easterly contact still unknown, one screw, probably a gas engine, doing turns for twenty or so."

"Range about six thousand yards," the fire-control party said next.

"This is the fun part," Mancuso observed. "I have them. Bearing—*mark!"*

"Zero-nine-one."

"Range." Mancuso squeezed the trigger for the 'scope's laser-rangefinder. *"Mark!"*

"Six hundred yards."

"Nice call, 'Gator. Solution on the Grisha?" he asked fire control.

"Set for tubes two and four. Outer doors are still closed, sir."

"Keep 'em that way." Mancuso went to the bridge trunk's lower hatch. "XO, you have the conn. I'm going to do the recovery myself. Let's get it done."

"All stop," the executive officer said. Mancuso opened the hatch and went up the ladder to the bridge. The lower hatch was closed behind him. He heard the water rushing around him in the sail, then the splashes of surface waves. The intercom told him he could open the bridge hatch. Mancuso spun the locking wheel and heaved against the heavy steel cover. He was rewarded with a faceful of cold, oily saltwater, but ignored it and got to the bridge.

He looked aft first. There was the Grisha, its masthead light low on the horizon. Next he looked forward and pulled the flashlight from his hip pocket. He aimed directly at the raft and tapped out the Morse letter D.

"A light, a light!" Maria said. Clark turned back forward, saw it, and steered for it. Then he saw something else.

The patrol boat behind Clark was a good two miles off, its searchlight looking in the wrong place. The Captain turned west to see the other contact. Mancuso knew in a distant sort of way that Grishas carried searchlights, but had allowed himself to disregard the fact. After all, why should searchlights concern a submarine? *When she's on the surface,* the Captain told himself. The ship was still too far away to see him, light or not, but that would change in a hurry. He watched it sweep the surface aft of his submarine, and realized too late that they probably had *Dallas* on radar now.

"Over here, Clark, move your ass!" he screamed across the water, swinging the light left and right. The next thirty seconds seemed to last into the following month. Then it was there.

"Help the ladies," the man said. He held the raft against the submarine's sail with his motor. *Dallas* was still moving, had to be to maintain this precarious depth, not quite surfaced, not quite dived. The first one felt and moved like a young girl, the skipper thought as he brought her aboard. The second one was wet and shivering. Clark waited a moment, setting a small box atop the motor. Mancuso wondered how it stayed balanced there until he realized that it was either magnetic or glued somehow.

"Down the ladder," Mancuso told the ladies.

Clark scrambled aboard and said something—probably the same thing—in Russian. To Mancuso he spoke in English. "Five minutes before it blows."

The women were already halfway down. Clark went behind them, and finally Mancuso, with a last look at the raft. The last thing he saw was the harbor patrol boat, now heading directly toward him. He dropped down and pulled the hatch behind himself. Then he punched the intercom button. "Take

her down and move the boat!"

The bottom hatch opened underneath them all, and he heard the executive officer. "Make your depth ninety feet, all ahead two-thirds, left full rudder!"

A petty officer met the ladies at the bottom of the bridge tube. The astonishment on his face would have been funny at any other time. Clark took them by the arm and led them forward to his stateroom. Mancuso went aft.

"I have the conn," he announced.

"Captain has the conn," the XO agreed. "ESM says they got some VHF radio traffic, close in, probably the Grisha talking to the other one."

"Helm, come to new course three-five-zero. Let's get her under the ice. They probably know we're here—well, they know something's here. 'Gator, how's the chart look?"

"We'll have to turn soon," the navigator warned. "Shoal water in eight thousand yards. Recommend come to new course two-nine-one." Mancuso ordered the change at once.

"Depth now eight-five feet, leveling out," the diving officer said. "Speed eighteen knots." A small bark of sound announced the destruction of the raft and its motor.

"Okay, people, now all we have to do is leave," Mancuso told his Attack Center crew. A high-pitched snap of sound told them that this would not be easy.

"Conn, sonar, we're being pinged. That's a Grisha deathray," Jones said, using the slang term for the Russian set. "Might have us."

"Under the ice now," the navigator said.

"Range to target?"

"Just under four thousand yards," the weapons officer replied. "Set for tubes two and four."

The problem was, they couldn't shoot. *Dallas* was inside Russian territorial waters, and even if the Grisha shot at them, shooting back wasn't self-defense, but an act of war. Mancuso looked at the chart. He had thirty feet of water under his keel, and a bare twenty over his sail—minus the thickness of the ice . . .

"Marko?" the Captain asked.

"They will request instructions first," Ramius judged. "The more time they have, the better chance they will shoot."

"Okay. All ahead full," Mancuso ordered. At thirty knots he'd be in international waters in ten minutes.

"Grisha is passing abeam on the portside," Jones said. Mancuso went forward to the sonar room.

"What's happening?" the Captain asked.

"The high-frequency stuff works pretty good in the ice. He's searchlighting back and forth. He knows something's here, but not exactly where yet."

Mancuso lifted a phone. "Five-inch room, launch two noisemakers."

A pair of bubble-making decoys was ejected from the portside of the submarine.

"Good, Mancuso," Ramius observed. "His sonar will fix on those. He cannot maneuver well with the ice."

"We'll know for sure in the next minute." Just as he said it, the submarine

was rocked by explosions aft. A very feminine scream echoed through the forward portion of the submarine.

"All ahead flank!" the Captain called aft.

"The decoys," Ramius said. "Surprising that he fired so quickly . . ."

"Losing sonar performance, skipper," Jones said as the screen went blank with flow noise. Mancuso and Ramius went aft. The navigator had their course track marked on the chart.

"Uh-oh, we have to transit this place right here where the ice stops. How much you want to bet he knows it?" Mancuso looked up. They were still being pinged, and he still couldn't shoot back. And that Grisha might get lucky.

"Radio—Mancuso, let me speak on radio!" Ramius said.

"We don't do things that way—" Mancuso said. American doctrine was to evade, never to let them be sure there was a submarine there at all.

"I know that. But we are not American submarine, Captain Mancuso, we are Soviet submarine," Ramius suggested. Bart Mancuso nodded. He'd never played this card before.

"Take her to antenna depth!"

A radio technician dialed in the Soviet guard frequency, and the slender VHF antenna was raised as soon as the submarine cleared the ice. The periscope went up, too.

"There he is. Angle on the bow, zero. Down 'scope!"

"Radar contact bearing two-eight-one," the speaker proclaimed.

The Captain of the Grisha was coming off a week's patrolling on the Baltic Sea, six hours late, and had been looking forward to four days off. Then first came a radio transmission from the Talinn harbor police about a strange craft seen leaving the docks, followed by something from the KGB, then a small explosion near the harbor police boat, next several sonar contacts. The twenty-nine-year-old senior lieutenant with all of three months in command had made his estimate of the situation and fired at what his sonar operator called a positive submarine contact. Now he was wondering if he'd made a mistake, and how ghastly it might be. All he knew was that he had not the smallest idea what was happening, but if he were chasing a submarine, it would be heading west.

And now he had a radar contact forward. The speaker for the guard radio frequency started chattering.

"Cease fire, you idiot!" a metallic voice screamed at him three times.

"Identify!" the Grisha's commander replied.

"This is *Novosibiirsk Komsomolets!* What the hell do you think you're doing firing live ammunition in a practice exercise! *You* identify!"

The young officer stared at his microphone and swore. *Novosibiirsk Komsomolets* was a special-ops boat based at Kronshtadt, always playing *Spetznaz* games . . .

"This is *Krepkiy."*

"Thank you. We will discuss this episode the day after tomorrow. Out!"

The Captain looked around at the bridge crew. "What exercise . . . ?"

"Too bad," Marko said as he replaced the microphone. "He reacted well.

Now he will take several minutes to call his base, and . . .”

“And that’s all we need. And they still don’t know what happened.” Mancuso turned. “ ’Gator, shortest way out?”

“Recommend two-seven-five, distance is eleven thousand yards.”

At thirty-four knots, the remaining distance was covered quickly. Ten minutes later the submarine was back in international waters. The anticlimax was remarkable for all those in the control room. Mancuso changed course for deeper water and ordered speed reduced to one-third, then went back to sonar.

“That should be that,” he announced.

“Sir, what was this all about?” Jones asked.

“Well, I don’t know that I can tell you.”

“What’s her name?” From his seat Jones could see into the passageway.

“I don’t even know that myself. But I’ll find out.” Mancuso went across the passageway and knocked on the door of Clark’s stateroom.

“Who is it?”

“Guess,” Mancuso said. Clark opened the door. The Captain saw a young woman in presentable clothes, but wet feet. Then an older woman appeared from the head. She was dressed in the khaki shirt and pants of *Dallas’* chief engineer, though she carried her own things, which were wet. These she handed to Mancuso with a phrase of Russian.

“She wants you to have them cleaned, skipper,” Clark translated, and started laughing. “These are our new guests. Mrs. Gerasimov, and her daughter, Katryn.”

“What’s so special about them?” Mancuso asked.

“My father is head of KGB!” Katryn said.

The Captain managed not to drop the clothes.

“We got company,” the copilot said. They were coming in from the right side, the strobe lights of what had to be a pair of fighter planes. “Closing fast.”

“Twenty minutes to the coast,” the navigator reported. The pilot had long since spotted it.

“Shit!” the pilot snapped. The fighters missed his aircraft by less than two hundred yards of vertical separation, little more in horizontal. A moment later, the VC-137 bounced through their wake turbulence.

“Engure Control, this is U.S. Air Force flight niner-seven-one. We just had a near miss. What the hell is going on down there?”

“Let me speak to the Soviet officer!” the voice answered. It didn’t sound like a controller.

“I speak for this aircraft,” Colonel von Eich replied. “We are cruising on a heading of two-eight-six, flight level eleven thousand six hundred meters. We are on a correctly filed flight plan, in a designated air corridor, and we have electrical problems. We don’t need to have some hardrock fighter jocks playing tag with us—this is an American aircraft with a diplomatic mission aboard. You want to start World War Three or something? Over!”

“Nine-seven-one, you are ordered to turn back!”

“Negative! We have electrical problems and cannot repeat cannot comply. This airplane is flying without lights, and those crazy MiG drivers damned

near rammed us! Are you trying to kill us, over!"

"You have kidnapped a Soviet citizen and you must return to Moscow!"

"Repeat that last," von Eich requested.

But the Captain couldn't. A fighter ground-intercept officer, he'd been rushed to Engure, the last air-traffic-control point within Soviet borders, quickly briefed by a local KGB officer, and told to force the American aircraft to turn back. He should not have said what he had just said in the clear.

"You must stop the aircraft!" the KGB General shouted.

"Simple, then. I order my MiGs to shoot it down!" the Captain replied in kind. "Do you give me the order, Comrade General?"

"I do not have the authority. You have to make it stop."

"It cannot be done. We can shoot it down, but we cannot make it *stop*."

"Do you wish to be shot?" the General asked.

"Where the hell is it now?" the Foxbat pilot asked his wingman. They'd only seen it once, and that for a single ghastly instant. They could track the intruder—except that it was leaving, and wasn't really an intruder, they both knew—on radar, and kill it with radar-guided missiles, but to close on the target in darkness . . . Even in the relatively clear night, the target was running without lights, and trying to find it meant running the risk of what American fighter pilots jokingly called a Fox-Four: midair collision, a quick and spectacular death for all involved.

"Hammer Lead, this is Toolbox. You are ordered to close on the target and force it to turn," the controller said. "Target is now at your twelve o'clock and level, range three thousand meters."

"I know that," the pilot said to himself. He had the airliner on radar, but he did not have it visually, and his radar could not track precisely enough to warn him of an imminent collision. He also had to worry about the other MiG on his wing.

"Stay back," he ordered his wingman. "I'll handle this alone." He advanced his throttles slightly and moved the stick a hair to the right. The MiG-25 was heavy and sluggish, not a very maneuverable fighter. He had a pair of air-to-air missiles hanging from each wing, and all he had to do to stop this aircraft was . . . But instead of ordering him to do something he was trained to do, some jackass of a KGB officer was—

There. He didn't so much see the aircraft, but saw something ahead disappear. *Ah!* He pulled back on the stick to gain a few hundred meters of altitude and . . . yes! He could pick the Boeing out against the sea. Slowly and carefully, he moved forward until he was abeam of the target and two hundred meters higher.

"I got lights on the right side," the copilot said. "Fighter, but I don't know what kind."

"If you were him, what would you do?" von Eich asked.

"Defect!" *Or shoot us down . . .*

Behind them in the jump seat, the Russian pilot, whose only job was to talk Russian in case of an emergency, was strapped down in his seat and had not

the first idea what to do. He'd been cut out of the radio conversations and had only intercom now. Moscow wanted them to turn the aircraft back. He didn't know why, but—but what? he asked himself.

"Here he comes, sliding over toward us."

As carefully as he could, the MiG pilot maneuvered his fighter to the left. He wanted to get over the Boeing's cockpit, from which position he could gently reduce altitude and force it downward. To do this required as much skill as he could muster, and the pilot could only pray that the American was equally adept. He positioned himself so that he could see . . . but—

The MiG-25 was designed as an interceptor, and the cockpit gave the pilot very restricted visibility. He could no longer see the airplane with which he was flying formation. He looked ahead. The shore was only a few kilometers away. Even if he were able to make the American reduce altitude, he'd be over the Baltic before it would matter to anyone. The pilot pulled back on his stick and climbed off to the right. Once clear, he reversed course.

"Toolbox, this is Hammer Lead," he reported. "The American will not change course. I tried, but I will not collide with his airplane without orders."

The controller had watched the two radar blips merge on his scope, and was now amazed that his heart hadn't stopped. What the hell was going on? This was an American plane. They couldn't force it to stop, and if there were an accident, who would be blamed for it? He made his decision.

"Return to base. Out."

"You will pay for this!" the KGB General promised the ground-intercept officer. He was wrong.

"Thank God," von Eich said as they passed over the coastline. He called up the chief cabin steward next. "How are the folks in back?"

"Mainly asleep. They must have had a big party tonight. When are we getting the electricity back?"

"Flight engineer," the pilot said, "they want to know about the electrical problems."

"Looks like it was a bad breaker, sir. I think . . . Yeah, I fixed it."

The pilot looked out his window. The wingtip lights were back on, as were the cabin lights, except in back. Passing Ventspils, they turned left to a new heading two-five-nine. He let out a long breath. Two and a half hours to Shannon. "Some coffee would be nice," he thought aloud.

Golovko hung up the phone and spat out a few words that Jack didn't understand exactly, though their message seemed rather clear.

"Sergey, could I clean my knee up?"

"What exactly have you done, Ryan?" the KGB officer asked.

"I fell out of the airplane and the bastards left without me. I want to be taken to my embassy, but first, my knee hurts."

Golovko and Vatutin stared at each other and both wondered several things. What had actually happened? What would happen to them? What to do with

Ryan?

“Who do we even call?” Golovko asked.

27.

Under Wraps

VATUTIN decided to call his directorate chief, who called the KGB's First Deputy Chairman, who called someone else, and then called back to the airport office where they were all waiting. Vatutin noted the instructions, took everyone to Gerasimov's car, and gave directions that Jack didn't understand. The car headed straight through Moscow's empty early-morning streets—it was just after midnight, and those who had been out to the movies or the opera or the ballet were now at home. Jack was nestled between the two KGB colonels, and hoped that they'd be taking him to the embassy, but they kept going, crossing the city at a high rate of speed, then up into the Lenin Hills and beyond to the forests that surround the city. Now he was frightened. Diplomatic immunity seemed a surer thing at the airport than it did in the woods.

The car slowed after an hour, turning off the paved main road onto a gravel path that meandered through trees. There were uniforms about, he saw through the windows. Men with rifles. That sight made him forget the pain from his ankle and knee. Exactly where was he? Why was he being brought here? Why the people with guns . . . ? The phrase that came to him was a simple, ominous one: Take him for a ride . . .

No! They can't be doing that, reason told him. *I have a diplomatic passport. I was seen alive by too many people. Probably the Ambassador is already*—But he wouldn't be. He wasn't cleared for what had happened, and unless they got word off the plane . . . Regardless, they couldn't possibly . . . But in the Soviet Union, the saying went, things happened that simply *didn't* happen. The car's door flew open. Golovko got out and pulled Ryan with him. The only thing Jack was sure of now was that there was no point in resistance.

It was a house, a quite ordinary frame house in the woods. The windows glowed yellow from lights behind the curtains. Ryan saw a dozen or so people standing around, all with uniforms, all with rifles, all staring at him with the same degree of interest given a paper target. One, an officer, came over and frisked Ryan with considerable thoroughness, eliciting a grunt of pain when he got to the bloody knee and torn trousers. He surprised Ryan with what might have been a perfunctory apology. The officer nodded to Golovko and Vatutin, who handed over their automatics and led Ryan into the house.

Inside the door, a man took their coats. Two more men in civilian clothes were obvious police or KGB types. They wore unzipped jackets, and they had to be packing pistols from the way they stood, Jack knew. He nodded politely to them, and got no response other than another frisking from one while the other watched from a safe shooting distance. Ryan was astonished when the

two KGB officers were frisked as well. When this was complete, the other one motioned them through a doorway.

General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Andrey Il'ych Narmonov was sitting in an overstuffed chair in front of a newly built fire. He rose when the four men entered the room, and gestured for them to sit on the sofa opposite his place. The bodyguard took position standing behind the head of the Soviet government. Narmonov spoke in Russian. Golovko translated.

"You are?"

"John Ryan, sir," Jack said. The General Secretary pointed him to a chair opposite his own, and noted that Ryan favored his leg.

"Anatoliy," he said to the bodyguard, who took Ryan's arm and walked him to a first-floor bathroom. The man dampened a washcloth with warm water and handed it over. Back in the sitting room, he could hear people talking, but Ryan's knowledge of Russian was too thin to catch any of it. It was good to wash off the leg, but it looked as though the pants were finished, and the nearest change of clothes—he checked his watch—was probably near Denmark by now. Anatoliy watched him the whole time. The bodyguard pulled a gauze bandage from the medicine cabinet and helped Jack tape it in place, then walked him back as gracefully as Ryan's aches and pains allowed.

Golovko was still there, though Vatutin had left, and the empty chair was still waiting. Anatoliy took his former place behind Narmonov.

"The fire feels good," Jack said. "Thank you for letting me wash the knee off."

"Golovko tells me that we did not do that to you. Is this correct?"

It seemed an odd question to Jack, since Golovko was handling the translating. *So Andrey Ily'ch speaks a little English, does he?*

"No, sir, I did it to myself. I have not been mistreated in any way." *Just had the piss scared out of me,* Ryan thought to himself. *But that's my own damned fault.* Narmonov looked at him with silent interest for perhaps half a minute before speaking again.

"I did not need your help."

"I do not know what you mean, sir," Ryan lied.

"Did you really think that Gerasimov could remove me?"

"Sir, I don't know what you are talking about. My mission was to save the life of one of our agents. To do this meant compromising Chairman Gerasimov. It was just a matter of fishing with the proper bait."

"And fishing for the proper fish," Narmonov commented. The amusement in his voice did not show on his face. "And your agent was Colonel Filitov?"

"Yes, sir. You know that."

"I just learned it."

Then you know that Yazov was compromised also. Just how close might they have come, Comrade General Secretary? Ryan did not say. Probably Narmonov didn't know either.

"Do you know why he turned traitor?"

"No, I don't. I was briefed only on what I needed to know."

"And therefore you do not know about the attack on our Project Bright Star?"

"What?" Jack was very surprised, and showed it.

"Don't insult me, Ryan. You do know the name."

"It's southeast of Dushanbe. I know it. Attacked?" he asked.

"As I thought. You know that was an act of war," Narmonov observed.

"Sir, KGB officers kidnapped an American SDI scientist several days ago. That was ordered by Gerasimov himself. His name is Alan Gregory. He's a major in the U.S. Army, and he was rescued."

"I don't believe it," Golovko said before translating. Narmonov was annoyed by the interruption, but shocked by the substance of Ryan's statement.

"One of your officers was captured. He's alive. It is true, sir," Jack assured him.

Narmonov shook his head and rose to toss another log on the fire. He maneuvered it into place with a poker. "It's madness, you know," he said at the hearth. "We have a perfectly satisfactory situation now."

"Excuse me? I don't understand," Ryan asked.

"The world is stable, is it not? Yet your country wishes to change this, and forces us to pursue the same goal." That the ABM test site at Sary Shagan had been operating for over thirty years was, for the moment, beside the point.

"Mr. Secretary, if you think the ability to turn every city, every home in my country into a fire like the one you have right there—"

"My country, too, Ryan," Narmonov said.

"Yes, sir, your country, too, and a bunch of others. You can kill most every civilian in my country, and we can murder almost every person in your country, in sixty minutes or less from the time you pick up the phone—or my President does. And what do we call that? We call it *'stability.' "*

"It is stability, Ryan," Narmonov said.

"No, sir, the technical name we use is MAD: Mutual Assured Destruction, which isn't even good grammar, but it's accurate enough. The situation we have now is mad, all right, and the fact that supposedly intelligent people have thought it up doesn't make it any more sensible."

"It works, doesn't it?"

"Sir, why is it stabilizing to have several hundred million people less than an hour away from death? Why do we view weapons that might protect those people to be dangerous? Isn't that backwards?"

"But if we never use them . . . Do you think that I could live with such a crime on my conscience?"

"No, I don't think that any man could, but someone might screw up. He'd probably blow his brains out a week after the fact, but that might be a little late for the rest of us. The damned things are just too easy to use. You push a button, and they go, and they'll work, probably, because there's nothing to stop them. Unless something stands in their way, there's no reason to think that they won't work. And as long as somebody thinks they might work, it's too easy to use them."

"Be realistic, Ryan. Do you think that we'll ever rid ourselves of atomic arms?" Narmonov asked.

"No, we'll never get rid of all the weapons. I know that. We'll both always have the ability to hurt each other badly, but we can make that process more complicated than it is now. We can give everybody one more reason not to push the button. That's not destabilizing, sir. That's just good sense. That's just

something more to protect your conscience."

"You sound like your President." This was delivered with a smile.

"He's right." Ryan returned it.

"It is bad enough that I must argue with one American. I will not do so with another. What will you do with Gerasimov?" the General Secretary asked.

"It will be handled very quietly, for the obvious reason," Jack said, hoping that he was right.

"It would be very damaging to my government if his defection became public. I suggest that he died in a plane crash . . . "

"I will convey that to my government if I am permitted to do so. We can also keep Filitov's name out of the news. We have nothing to gain by publicity. That would just complicate things for your country and mine. We both want the arms treaty to go forward—all that money to save, for both of us."

"Not so much," Narmonov said. "A few percentage points of the defense budgets on both sides."

"There is a saying in our government, sir. A billion here and a billion there, pretty soon you're talking about some real money." That earned Jack a laugh. "May I ask a question, sir?"

"Go on."

"What will you do with the money on your side? I'm supposed to figure that one out."

"Then perhaps you can offer me suggestions. What makes you think that I know?" Narmonov asked. He rose, and Ryan did the same. "Back to your embassy. Tell your people that it is better for both sides if this never becomes public."

Half an hour later Ryan was dropped off at the front door of the embassy. The first one to see him was a Marine sergeant. The second was Candela.

The VC-137 landed at Shannon ten minutes late, due to headwinds over the North Sea. The crew chief and another sergeant herded the passengers out the front way, and when all had left the aircraft, came back to open the rear door. While cameras flashed in the main terminal, steps were rolled to the Boeing's tail and four men left wearing the uniform parkas of U.S. Air Force sergeants. They entered a car and were driven to a far end of the terminal, where they boarded another plane of the 89th Military Airlift Wing, a VC-20A, the military version of the Gulfstream-III executive jet.

"Hello, Misha." Mary Pat Foley met him at the door and took him forward. She hadn't kissed him before. She made up for it now. "We have food and drink, and another plane ride home. Come, Misha." She took his arm and led him to his seat.

A few feet away, Robert Ritter greeted Gerasimov.

"My family?" the latter asked.

"Safe. We'll have them in Washington in two days. At this moment they are aboard a U.S. Navy ship in international waters."

"I am supposed to thank you?"

"We expect you to cooperate."

"You were very lucky," Gerasimov observed.

“Yes,” Ritter agreed. “We were.”

The embassy car drove Ryan to Sheremetyevo the following day to catch the regular Pan Am 727 flight to Frankfurt. The ticket they provided him was tourist, but Ryan upgraded it to first class. Three hours later he connected with a 747 for Dulles, also Pan Am. He slept most of the way.

* * *

Bondarenko surveyed the carnage. The Afghans had left forty-seven bodies behind, with evidence of plenty more. Only two of the site’s laser assemblies had survived. All of the machine shops were wrecked, along with the theater and bachelor quarters. The hospital was largely intact, and full of wounded people. The good news was that he’d saved three-quarters of the scientific and engineering personnel and nearly all of their dependents. Four general officers were there already to tell him what a hero he was, promising medals and promotion, but he’d already gotten the only reward that mattered. As soon as the relief force had arrived, he’d seen that the people were safe. Now, he just looked from the roof of the apartment block.

“There is much work to do,” a voice noted. The Colonel, soon to be a General, turned.

“Morozov. We still have two of the lasers. We can rebuild the shops and laboratories. A year, perhaps eighteen months.”

“That’s about right,” the young engineer said. “The new mirrors and their computer control equipment will take at least that long. Comrade Colonel, the people have asked me to—”

“That is my job, Comrade Engineer, and I had my own ass to save, remember? This will never happen again. We’ll have a battalion of motorized infantry here from now on, from a guards regiment. I’ve already seen to that. By summer this installation will be as safe as any place in the Soviet Union.”

“Safe? What does that mean, Colonel?”

“That is my new job. And yours,” Bondarenko said. “Remember?”

Epilogue:

Common Ground

IT didn't surprise Ortiz when the Major came in alone. The report of the battle took an hour, and again the CIA officer was given a few rucksacks of equipment. The Archer's band had fought its way out, and of the nearly two hundred who had left the refugee camp, fewer than fifty returned on this first day of spring. The Major went immediately to work making contact with other bands, and the prestige of the mission which his group had carried out enabled him to deal with older and more powerful chieftains as a near equal. Within a week he had made good his losses with eager new warriors, and the arrangement the Archer had made with Ortiz remained in force.

"You're going back already?" the CIA officer asked the new leader.

"Of course. We're winning now," the Major said with a degree of confidence that even he did not understand.

Ortiz watched them leave at nightfall, a single file of small, ferocious warriors, led now by a trained soldier. He hoped it would make a difference.

Gerasimov and Filitov never saw each other again. The debriefings lasted for weeks, and were conducted at separate locations. Filitov was taken to Camp Peary, Virginia, where he met a spectacled U.S. Army major and told what he remembered of the Russian breakthrough in laser power. It seemed curious to the old man that this boy could be so excited about things that he'd memorized but never fully understood.

After that came the routine explanations of the second career that had joined and paralleled his first. A whole generation of field officers visited him for meals and walks, and drinking sessions that worried the doctors but which no one could deny the Cardinal. His living quarters were closely guarded, and even bugged. Those who listened to him were surprised that he occasionally spoke in his sleep.

One CIA officer who was six months from his retirement paused from reading the local paper when it happened again. He smiled at the noise in his headphones and set down the article he was reading about the President's visit to Moscow. *That sad, lonely old man,* he thought as he listened. *Most of his friends dead, and he only sees them in his sleep. Was that why he went to work for us?* The murmuring stopped, and in the quarters next door, the Cardinal's baby-sitter went back to his paper.

"Comrade Captain," Romanov said.

"Yes, Corporal?" It seemed more real than most of his dreams, Misha noted. A moment later he knew why.

They were spending their honeymoon under the protection of security officers, all four days of it—which was as long as Al and Candi were willing to stay away from work. Major Gregory got the phone when it rang.

"Yeah—I mean, yes, sir," Candi heard him say. A sigh. A shake of the head in the darkness. "Not even anyplace to send flowers, is there? Can Candi and I —Oh . . . I understand. Thanks for calling, General." She heard him replace the phone and let out another breath.

"Candi, you awake?"

"Yeah."

"Our first kid, his name's going to be Mike."

Major General Grigoriy Dalmatov's post of Defense Attache at the Soviet Embassy in Washington carried a number of ceremonial duties that conflicted with his primary mission, intelligence gathering. He was slightly annoyed when the telephone call from the Pentagon had come, asking him to drive over to the American military headquarters—and to his great surprise, to do so in full uniform. His car dropped him off at the River entrance, and a young paratroop captain had escorted him inside, then to the office of General Ben Crofter, Chief of Staff, United States Army.

"May I ask what is going on?"

"Something that we thought you should see, Grigoriy," Crofter answered cryptically. They walked across the building to the Pentagon's own helicopter pad, where to Dalmatov's astonishment they boarded a Marine helicopter of the Presidential Fleet. The Sikorsky lifted off at once, heading northwest into the Maryland hills. Twenty minutes later they were descending. Dalmatov's mind registered yet another surprise. The helicopter was landing at Camp David. A member of the Marine guard force in dress blues saluted at the foot of the stairs as they left the aircraft and escorted them into the trees. Several minutes later they came to a clearing. Dalmatov hadn't known there were birch trees here, perhaps half an acre of them, and the clearing was near a hilltop that offered a fine view of the surrounding country.

And there was a rectangular hole in the ground, exactly six feet deep. It seemed strange that there was no headstone, and that the sod had been carefully cut and set aside for replacement.

Around the scene, Dalmatov could make out more Marines in the treeline. These wore camouflage fatigues and pistol belts. Well, it was no particular surprise that there was heavy security here, and the General found it rather comforting that in the past hour one unsurprising thing had taken place.

A jeep appeared first. Two Marines—in dress blues again—got out and erected a prefabricated stand around the hole. They must have practiced, the General thought, since it took them only three minutes by his watch. Then a three-quarter-ton truck came through the trees, followed by some more jeeps. Cradled in the back of the truck was a polished oak coffin. The truck pulled to within a few meters of the hole and stopped. An honor guard assembled.

"May I ask why I am here?" Dalmatov asked when he couldn't stand it any longer.

"You came up in tanks, right?"

"Yes, General Crofter, as did you."

"That's why."

The six men of the honor guard set the coffin on the stand. The gunnery sergeant in command of the detail removed the lid. Crofter walked toward it. Dalmatov gasped when he saw who was inside.

"Misha."

"I thought you knew him," a new voice said. Dalmatov spun around.

"You are Ryan." Others were there, Ritter of CIA, General Parks, and a young couple, in their thirties, Dalmatov thought. The wife seemed to be pregnant, though rather early along. She was weeping silently in the gentle spring breeze.

"Yes, sir."

The Russian gestured to the coffin. "Where—how did you—"

"I just flew back from Moscow. The General Secretary was kind enough to give me the Colonel's uniform and decorations. He said that—he said that in the case of this man, he prefers to remember the reason he got those three gold stars. We hope that you will tell your people that Colonel Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov, three times Hero of the Soviet Union, died peacefully in his sleep."

Dalmatov went red. "He was a traitor to his country—I will not stand here and—"

"General," Ryan said harshly, "it should be clear that your General Secretary does not agree with that sentiment. That man may be a greater hero than you know, for your country and for mine. Tell me, General, how many battles have you fought? How many wounds have you received for your country? Can you really look at that man and call him traitor? In any case . . ." Ryan gestured to the sergeant, who closed the coffin. When he'd finished, another Marine draped a Soviet flag over it. A team of riflemen appeared and formed at the head of the grave. Ryan took a paper from his pocket and read off Misha's citations for bravery. The riflemen brought up their weapons and fired off their volleys. A trumpeter played Taps.

Dalmatov came to rigid attention and saluted. It seemed a pity to Ryan that the ceremony had to be secret, but its simplicity made for dignity, and that at least was fitting enough.

"Why here?" Dalmatov asked when it was finished.

"I would have preferred Arlington, but then someone might notice. Right over those hills is the Antietam battlefield. On the bloodiest day in our Civil War, the Union forces repelled Lee's first invasion of the North after a desperate battle. It just seemed like the right place," Ryan said. "If a hero must have an unmarked grave, it should at least be close to where his comrades fell."

"Comrades?"

"One way or another we all fight for the things we believe in. Doesn't that give us some common ground?" Jack asked. He walked off to his car, leaving Dalmatov with the thought.

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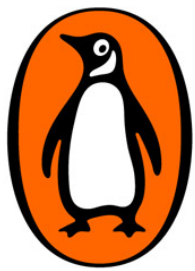

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CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

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To the memory of John Ball,
Friend and teacher,
The professional who took the last plane out

Law, without force, is impotent.—PASCAL

It is the function of police to exercise force, or to threaten it, in execution of the state's purpose, internally and under normal conditions. It is the function of armed forces to exercise force, or the threat of it, externally in normal times and internally only in times that are abnormal....

[T]he degree of force which the state is prepared to apply in the execution of its purpose ... is as much as the government of the day considers it necessary or expedient to use to avoid a breakdown in its function and a surrender of its responsibilities.

—GENERAL SIR JOHN HACKETT

Prologue:

Situation

THE ROOM WAS still empty. The Oval Office is in the southeast corner of the White House West Wing. Three doors lead into it, one from the office of the President's personal secretary, another from a small kitchen which leads in turn to the President's study, and a third into a corridor, directly opposite the entrance to the Roosevelt Room. The room itself is of only medium size for a senior executive, and visitors always remark afterward that it seemed smaller than they expected. The President's desk, set just in front of thick windows of bullet-resistant polycarbonate that distort the view of the White House lawn, is made from the wood of HMS *Resolute,* a British ship that sank in American waters during the 1850s. Americans salvaged and returned it to the United Kingdom, and a grateful Queen Victoria ordered a desk made from its oaken timbers by way of official thanks. Made in an age when men were shorter than today, the desk was increased somewhat in height during the Reagan presidency. The President's desk was laden with folders and position papers capped with a printout of his appointment schedule, plus an intercom box, a conventional push-button multiline telephone, and another ordinary-looking but highly sophisticated secure instrument for sensitive conversations.

The President's chair was custom-made to fit its user, and its high back included sheets of DuPont Kevlar—lighter and tougher than steel—as additional protection against bullets that some madman might fire through the heavy windows. There were, of course, about a dozen Secret Service agents on duty in this part of the Presidential Mansion during business hours. To get here most people had to pass through a metal detector—in fact all did, since the obvious ones were a little *too* obvious—and everyone had to pass the quite serious scrutiny of the Secret Service detail, whose identity was plain from the flesh-toned ear-pieces that coiled out from under their suit jackets, and whose politeness was secondary to their real mission of keeping the President alive. Beneath the jacket of each was a powerful hand-gun, and each of these agents was trained to view everyone and everything as a potential threat to WRANGLER, which was the President's current code-name. It had no meaning beyond being easy to say and easily recognizable on a radio circuit.

Vice Admiral James Cutter, USN, was in an office on the opposite, northwest corner of the West Wing and had been since 6:15 that morning. The job of Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs requires a man to be an early riser. At a quarter to eight he finished off his second cup of morning coffee—it was good here—and tucked his briefing papers into a leather folder. He walked through the empty office of his vacationing deputy,

turned right down the corridor past the similarly vacant office of the Vice President, who was in Seoul at the moment, and turned left past the office of the President's Chief of Staff. Cutter was one of the handful of real Washington insiders—the Vice President was not among them—who didn't need the permission of the Chief of Staff to walk into the Oval Office whenever he felt the need, though he'd generally call ahead first to give the secretaries a heads-up. The Chief of Staff didn't like anyone to have that privilege, but that made his unlimited access all the more pleasant for Cutter to exercise. Along the way four security personnel nodded good morning to the Admiral, who returned the gestures as he would greet any skilled menial. Cutter's official code-name was LUMBERJACK, and though he knew that the Secret Service agents called him something else among themselves, Cutter was past caring what little people thought of him. The secretaries' anteroom was already up and running, with three secretaries and a Secret Service agent sitting in their appointed places.

"Chief on time?" he asked.

"WRANGLER is on the way down, sir," Special Agent Connor said. He was forty, a section chief of the Presidential Detail, didn't give a goddamn who Cutter was, and could care less what Cutter thought of him. Presidents and aides came and went, some liked, some loathed, but the professionals of the Secret Service served and protected them all. His trained eyes swept over the leather folder and Cutter's suit. No guns there today. He was not being paranoid. A king of Saudi Arabia had been killed by a family member, and a former prime minister of Italy had been betrayed by a daughter to the terrorist kidnappers who'd ultimately murdered him. It wasn't just kooks he had to worry about. Anyone could be a threat to the President. Connor was fortunate, of course, that he only had to worry about physical security. There were other sorts; those were the concerns of others less professional than he.

Everyone stood when the President arrived, of course, followed by his personal bodyguard, a lithe, thirtyish woman whose dark tresses neatly concealed the fact that she was one of the best pistol shots in government service. "Daga"—her Service nickname—smiled good morning at Pete. It would be an easy day. The President wasn't going anywhere. His appointment list had been thoroughly checked—the Social Security numbers of all nonregulars are run through the FBI's crime computers—and the visitors themselves would, of course, be subjected to the most thorough searches that can be made without an actual pat-down. The President waved for Admiral Cutter to follow him in. The two agents went over the appointment list again. It was routine, and the senior agent didn't mind that a man's job had been taken by a woman. Daga had earned her job on the street. If she were a man, everyone agreed, she'd have two big brass ones, and if any would-be assassin mistook her for a secretarial type, that was his bad luck. Every few minutes, until Cutter left, one or the other of the agents would peer through the spy-hole in the white-painted door to make sure that nothing untoward was happening. The President had held office for over three years, and was used to the constant observation. It hardly occurred to the agents that a normal man might find it oppressive. It was their job to know everything there was to

know about the President, from how often he visited the bathroom to those with whom he slept. They didn't call the agency the Secret Service for nothing. Their antecedents had concealed all manner of peccadillos. The President's wife was not entitled to know what he did every hour of the day—at least, some presidents had so decided—but his security detail was.

Behind the closed door, the President took his seat. From the side door a Filipino mess steward carried in a tray with coffee and croissants and came to attention before leaving. With this the morning's preliminary routine was complete, and Cutter began his morning intelligence briefing. This had been delivered from CIA to his Fort Myer, Virginia, home before dawn, which allowed the Admiral to paraphrase it. The brief didn't take long. It was late spring, and the world was a relatively quiet place. Those wars underway in Africa and elsewhere were not of great import to American interests, and the Middle East was as tranquil as it ever seemed to be. That left time for other issues.

"What about SHOWBOAT?" the President asked while buttering his croissant.

"It's underway, sir. Ritter's people are already at work," Cutter replied.

"I'm still worried about security on the operation."

"Mr. President, it's as tight as one could reasonably expect. There are risks—you can't avoid them all—but we're keeping the number of people involved to an absolute minimum, and those people have been carefully selected and recruited."

That earned the National Security Adviser a grunt. The President was trapped—and as with nearly every president, it had come about from his own words. Presidential promises and statements ... the people had this annoying way of remembering them. And even if they didn't there were journalists and political rivals who never passed on a chance to make the necessary reminders. So many things had gone right in this presidency. But so many of those were secret—and, annoyingly to Cutter, those secrets had somehow been kept. Well, they had to be, of course. Except that in the political arena no secret was truly sacred, most especially in an election year. Cutter wasn't supposed to be concerned with that. He was a professional naval officer, and therefore supposed to be apolitical in his outlook on the ins and outs of national security, but whoever had formulated that particular guideline must have been a monk. Members of the senior executive service did not take vows of poverty and chastity, however—and obedience was also a sometime thing.

"I promised the American people that we'd do something about this problem," the President observed crossly. "And we haven't accomplished shit."

"Sir, you cannot deal with threats to national security through police agencies. Either our national security is threatened or it is not." Cutter had been hammering that point for years. Now, finally, he had a receptive audience.

Another grunt: "Yeah, well, I said that, too, didn't I?"

"Yes, Mr. President. It's time they learned a lesson about how the big boys play." That had been Cutter's position from the beginning, when he'd been Jeff Pelt's deputy, and with Pelt now gone it was his view that had finally prevailed.

"Okay, James. It's your ball. Run with it. Just remember that we need results."

"You'll get 'em, sir. Depend on that."

"It's time those bastards were taught a lesson," the President thought aloud. He was certain that the lessons would be hard ones. On that he was correct. Both men sat in a room in which was focused and from which emanated the ultimate power of the most powerful nation in the history of civilization. The people who selected the man who occupied that room did so above all for their protection. Protection against the vagaries of foreign powers and domestic bullies, against all manner of enemies. Those enemies came in many forms, some of which the founding fathers had not quite anticipated. But one sort that had been anticipated existed in this very room ... though it was not the one the President had in mind.

The sun rose an hour later on the Caribbean coast, and unlike the climate-controlled comfort of the White House, here the air was thick and heavy with humidity on what promised to be yet another sultry day under a lingering high-pressure system. The forested hills to the west reduced the local winds to a bare whisper, and the owner of *Empire Builder* was past being ready to go to sea, where the air was cooler and the breezes unrestricted.

His crewmen arrived late. He didn't like their looks, but he didn't have to. Just so long as they behaved themselves. After all, his family was aboard.

"Good morning, sir. I am Ramón. This is Jesús," the taller one said. What troubled the owner was that they were so obviously tidied-up versions of ... of what? Or had they merely wanted to look presentable?

"You think you can handle this?" the owner asked.

"Sí. We have experience with large motor craft." The man smiled. His teeth were even and brushed. This was a man who took care with his appearance at all times, the owner thought. He was probably being overly cautious. "And Jesus, you will see, is a fine cook."

Charming little bastard. "Okay, crew quarters are forward. She's tanked up, and the engines are already warm. Let's get out where it's cool."

"Muy bien, Capitán." Ramón and Jesus unloaded their gear from the jeep. It took several trips to get it all stowed, but by nine in the morning, MY *Empire Builder* slipped her mooring lines and stood out to sea, passing a handful of party boats heading out with *yanqui* tourists and their fishing rods. Once in open waters, the yacht turned north. It would take three days.

Ramón already had the wheel. That meant he sat in a wide, elevated chair while the autopilot—"George"—handled the steering. It was an easy ride. The

Rhodes had fin stabilizers. About the only disappointment was in the crew accommodations, which the owner had neglected. So typical, Ramón thought. A multimillion-dollar yacht with radar and every possible amenity, but the crew who operated it didn't have so much as a television set and VCR to amuse themselves when off duty....

He moved forward on the seat, craning his neck to look on the fo'c'sle. The owner was there, asleep and snoring, as though the work of taking the yacht out to sea had exhausted him. Or perhaps his wife had tired him out? She was beside her husband, lying facedown on her towel. The string for her bikini top was untied so as to give her back an even tan. Ramón smiled. There were many ways for a man to amuse himself. But better to wait. Anticipation made it all the better. He heard the sound of a taped movie in the main salon, aft of the bridge, where their children were watching some movie or other. It never occurred to him to feel pity for any of the four. But he was not completely heartless. Jesus was a good cook. They both approved of giving the condemned a hearty meal.

It was just light enough to see without the night-vision goggles, the dawn twilight that the helicopter pilots hated because the eye had to adapt itself to a lightening sky and ground that was still in shadows. Sergeant Chavez's squad was seated and strapped in with four-point safety belts, and between the knees of each was a weapon. The UH-60A Blackhawk helicopter swooped high over one of the hills and then dropped hard when past the crest.

"Thirty seconds," the pilot informed Chavez over the intercom.

It was supposed to be a covert insertion, which meant that the helicopters were racing up and down the valleys, careful that their operational pattern should confuse any possible observer. The Blackhawk dove for the ground and pulled up short as the pilot eased back on the cyclic control stick, which gave the aircraft a nose-up attitude, signaling the crew chief to slide the right-side door open and the soldiers to twist the release dials on their safety-belt buckles. The Blackhawk could touch down only for a moment.

"Go!"

Chavez went out first, moving perhaps ten feet from the door before he fell flat to the ground. The squad did the same, allowing the Blackhawk to lift off immediately, and rewarding each of its former passengers with a faceful of flying grit as it clawed its way back into the sky. It would reappear around the southern end of a hill as though it had never stopped. Behind it, the squad assembled and moved out into the treeline. Its work had just begun. The sergeant gave his commands with hand motions and led them off at a dead run. It would be his last mission, then he could relax.

At the Navy's weapons testing and development facility, China Lake, California, a team of civilian technicians and some Navy ordnance experts hovered over a new bomb. Built with roughly the same dimensions as the old

two-thousand-pounder, it weighed nearly seven hundred pounds less. This resulted from its construction. Instead of a steel skin, the bombcase was made of Kevlar-reinforced cellulose—an idea borrowed from the French, who made shell casings from the naturally produced fibers—with only enough metal fittings to allow attachment of fins, or the more extensive hardware that would convert it into an "LGB," able to track in on a specific point target. It was little known that a smart-bomb is generally a mere iron bomb with the guidance equipment bolted on.

"You're not going to get fragments worth a damn," a civilian objected.

"What's the point of having a Stealth bomber," another technician asked, "if the bad guys get a radar return off the ordnance load?"

"Hmph," observed the first. "What's the point of a bomb that just pisses the other guy off?"

"Put it through his front door and he won't live long enough to get pissed, will he?"

"Hmph." But at least he knew what the bomb was actually for. It would one day hang on the ATA, the Advanced Tactical Aircraft, a carrier-based attack bomber with stealth technology built in. Finally, he thought, the Navy's getting on board that program. About time. For the moment, however, the job at hand was to see if this new bomb with a different weight and a different center of gravity would track in on a target with a standard LGB guidance pack. The bomb hoist came over and lifted the streamlined shape off its pallet. Next the operator maneuvered it under the center-line hard-point of an A-6E Intruder attack bomber.

The technicians and officers walked over to the helicopter that would take them to the bombing range. There was no rush. An hour later, safely housed in a bunker that was clearly marked, one of the civilians trained an odd-looking device at a target four miles away. The target was an old five-ton truck that the Marines had given up on, and which would now, if everything went according to plan, die a violent and spectacular death.

"Aircraft is inbound over the range. Start the music."

"Roger," the civilian replied, squeezing the trigger on the GLD. "On target."

"Aircraft reports acquisition—stand by ..." the communicator said.

At the other end of the bunker, an officer was watching a television camera locked onto the inbound Intruder. "Breakaway. We have a nice, clean release off the ejector rack." He'd check that view later with one off an A-4 Skyhawk fighter-bomber that was flying chase on the A-6. Few people realized that the mere act of dropping a bomb off an airplane was a complex and potentially dangerous exercise. A third camera followed the bomb down.

"Fins are moving just fine. Here we go ..."

The camera on the truck was a high-speed one. It had to be. The bomb was falling too fast for anyone to catch it on the first run-through, but by the time the crushing bass note of the detonation reached the bunker, the operator had

already started rewinding the tape. The replay was done one frame at a time.

"Okay, there's the bomb." Its nose appeared forty feet over the truck. "How was it fused?"

"VT," one of the officers answered. VT stood for variable time. The bomb had a miniradar transceiver in its nose, and was programmed to explode within a fixed distance of the ground; in this case, five feet, or almost the instant it hit the truck. "Angle looks just fine."

"I thought it would work," an engineer observed quietly. He'd suggested that since the bomb was essentially a thousand pounder, the guidance equipment could be programmed for the lighter weight. Though it was slightly heavier than that, the reduced density of the cellulose bombcase made for a similar ballistic performance. "Detonation."

As with any high-speed photos of such an event, the screen flashed white, then yellow, then red, then black, as the expanding gasses from the high-explosive filler cooled in the air. Just in front of the gas was the blast wave: air compressed to a point at which it was denser than steel, moving faster than any bullet. No machine press could duplicate the effect.

"We just killed another truck." It was a wholly unnecessary observation. Roughly a quarter of the truck's mass was pounded straight down into a shallow crater, perhaps a yard deep and twenty across. The remainder was hurled laterally as shrapnel. The gross effect was not terribly different, in fact, from a large car bomb of the sort delivered by terrorists, but a hell of a lot safer for the deliverymen, one of the civilians thought.

"Damn—I didn't think it'd be that easy. You were right, Ernie, we don't even have to reprogram the seeker," a Navy commander observed. They'd just saved the Navy over a million dollars, he thought. He was wrong.

And so began something that had not quite begun and would not soon end, with many people in many places moving off in directions and on missions which they all mistakenly thought they understood. That was just as well. The future was too fearful for contemplation, and beyond the expected, illusory finish lines were things fated by the decisions made this morning—and, once decided, best unseen.

1.

The King of SAR

YOU COULDN'T LOOK at her and not be proud, Red Wegener told himself. The Coast Guard cutter *Panache* was one of a kind, a design mistake of sorts, but she was his. Her hull was painted the same gleaming white found on an iceberg—except for the orange stripe on the bow that designated the ship as part of the United States Coast Guard. Two hundred eighty feet in length, *Panache* was not a large ship, but she was his ship, the largest he'd ever commanded, and certainly the last he would ever have. Wegener was the oldest lieutenant-commander in the Coast Guard, but Wegener was The Man, the King of Search-and-Rescue missions.

His career had begun the same way many Coast Guard careers had. A young man from a Kansas wheat farm who'd never seen the sea, he'd walked into a Coast Guard recruiting station the day after graduating from high school. He hadn't wanted to face a life driving tractors and combines, and he'd sought out something as different from Kansas as he could find. The Coast Guard petty officer hadn't made much of a sales pitch, and a week later he'd begun his career with a bus ride that ended at Cape May, New Jersey. He could still remember the chief petty officer that first morning who'd told them of the Coast Guard creed. "You have to go out. You don't have to come back."

What Wegener found at Cape May was the last and best true school of seamanship in the Western world. He learned how to handle lines and tie sailor knots, how to extinguish fires, how to go into the water after a disabled or panicked boater, how to do it right the first time, every time—or risk not coming back. On graduation he was assigned to the Pacific Coast. Within a year he had his rate, Boatswain's Mate Third Class.

Very early on it was recognized that Wegener had that rarest of natural gifts, the seaman's eye. A catch-all term, it meant that his hands, eyes, and brain could act in unison to make his boat perform. Guided along by a tough old chief quartermaster, he soon had "command" of his "own" thirty-foot harbor patrol boat. For the really tricky jobs, the chief would come along to keep a close eye on the nineteen-year-old petty officer. From the first Wegener had shown the promise of someone who only needed to be shown things once. His first five years in uniform now seemed to have passed in the briefest instant as he learned his craft. Nothing really dramatic, just a succession of jobs that he'd done as the book prescribed, quickly and smoothly. By the time he'd considered and opted for re-enlistment, it was evident that when a tough job had to be done, his name was the one that came up first. Before the end of his second hitch, officers routinely asked his opinion of things. By this time he

was thirty, one of the youngest chief bosun's mates in the service, and he was able to pull a few strings, one of which ended with command of *Invincible,* a forty-eight-footer which had already garnered a reputation for toughness and dependability. The stormy California coast was her home, and it was here that Wegener's name first became known outside of his service. If a fisherman or a yachtsman got into trouble, *Invincible* always seemed to be there, often roller-coastering across thirty-foot seas with her crewmen held in place with ropes and safety belts—but there and ready to do the job with a red-haired chief at the wheel, an unlit briar pipe in his teeth. In that first year he saved the lives of at least fifteen people.

The number grew to fifty before he'd ended his tour of duty at the lonely station. After a couple of years, he was in command of his own station, and the holder of a title craved by all seamen—Captain—though his rate was that of Senior Chief. Located on the banks of a small stream that fed into the world's largest ocean, he ran his station as tautly as any ship, and inspecting officers had come there not so much to see how Wegener ran things as to see how things should be run.

For good or ill, Wegener's career plan had changed with one epic winter storm on the Oregon Coast. Commanding a larger rescue station now near the mouth of the Columbia River and its infamous bar, he'd received a frantic radio call from a deep-sea fisherman named *Mary-Kat:* engines and rudder disabled, being driven toward a lee shore that devoured ships. His personal flagship, the eighty-two-foot *Point Gabriel,* was away from the dock in ninety seconds, her mixed crew of veterans and apprentices hooking their safety belts into place while Wegener coordinated the rescue efforts on his own radio channels.

It had been an epic battle. After a six-hour ordeal, Wegener had rescued the *Mary-Kat's* six fishermen, but just barely, his ship assaulted by wind and furious seas. Just as the last man had been brought in, the *Mary-Kat* had grounded on a submerged rock and snapped in half.

As luck would have it, Wegener had had a reporter on board that day, a young feature writer for the *Portland Oregonian* and an experienced yachtsman, who thought he knew what there was to know about the sea. As the cutter had tunneled through the towering breakers at the Columbia bar, the reporter had vomited on his notebook, then wiped it on his Mustang suit and kept writing. The series of articles that had followed was entitled "The Angel of the Bar," and won the journalist a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing.

The following month, in Washington, the senior United States Senator from the State of Oregon, whose nephew had been a crewman on the *Mary-Kat,* wondered aloud why someone as good as Red Wegener was not an officer, and since the commandant of the Coast Guard was in that room to discuss the service's budget, it was an observation to which a four-star admiral had decided to pay heed. By the end of the week Red Wegener was commissioned as lieutenant—the senator had also observed that he was a little too old to be an ensign. Three years later he was recommended for the next available command.

There was only one problem with that, the commandant considered. He did have an available command—*Panache*—but it might seem a mixed blessing. The cutter was nearly completed. She was to have been the lead ship for a new class, but funding had been cut, the yard had gone bankrupt, and the commissioning skipper had been relieved for bungling his job. That left the Coast Guard with an unfinished ship whose engines didn't work, in an out-of-business shipyard. But Wegener was supposed to be a miracle worker, the commandant decided at his desk. To make it a fair chance, he made sure that Wegener got some good chiefs to back up the inexperienced wardroom.

His arrival at the shipyard gate had been delayed by the picket line of disgruntled workers, and by the time he'd gotten through that, he was sure things couldn't get worse. Then he'd seen what was supposed to have been a ship. It was a steel artifact, pointed at one end and blunt at the other, half painted, draped with cables, piled with crates, and generally looking like a surgical patient who'd died on the table and been left there to rot. If that hadn't been bad enough, *Panache* couldn't even be towed from her berth—the last thing a worker had done was to burn out the motor on a crane, which blocked the way.

The previous captain had already left in disgrace. The commissioning crew, assembled on the helicopter deck to receive him, looked like children forced to attend the funeral of a disliked uncle, and when Wegener tried to address them, the microphone didn't work. Somehow that broke the evil spell. He waved them toward himself with a smile and a chuckle.

"People," he'd said, "I'm Red Wegener. In six months this will be the best ship in the United States Coast Guard. In six months you will be the best crew in the United States Coast Guard. I'm not the one who's going to make that happen. You will—and I'll help a little. For right now, I'm cutting everybody as much liberty as we can stand while I get a handle on what we have to do. Have yourselves a great time. When you get back, we all go to work. Dismissed."

There was a collective "oh" from the assembled multitude, which had expected shouts and screams. The newly arrived chiefs regarded one another with raised eyebrows, and the young officers who'd been contemplating the abortion of their service careers retired to the wardroom in a state of bemused shock. Before meeting with them, Wegener took his three leading chiefs aside.

"Engines first," Wegener said.

"I can give you fifty-percent power all day long, but when you try to use the turbochargers, everything goes to hell in fifteen minutes," Chief Owens announced. "An' I don't know why." Mark Owens had been working with marine diesels for sixteen years.

"Can you get us to Curtis Bay?"

"As long as you don't mind taking an extra day, Cap'n."

Wegener dropped the first bomb. "Good—'cause we're leaving in two weeks, and we'll finish the fitting-out up there."

“It’ll be a month till the new motor’s ready for that crane, sir,” Chief Boatswain’s Mate Bob Riley observed.

“Can the crane turn?”

“Motor’s burned out, Cap’n.”

“When the time comes, we’ll snake a line from the bow to the back end of the crane. We have seventy-five feet of water in front of us. We set the clutch on the crane and pull forward real gentle-like, and turn the crane ourselves, then back out,” the captain announced. Eyes narrowed.

“Might break it,” Riley observed after a moment.

“That’s not my crane, but, by God, this is my ship.”

Riley let out a laugh. “Goddamn, it’s good to see you again, Red—excuse me, Captain Wegener!”

“Mission Number One is to get her to Baltimore for fitting-out. Let’s figure out what we have to do, and take it one job at a time. I’ll see you oh-seven-hundred tomorrow. Still make your own coffee, Portagee?”

“Bet your ass, sir,” Chief Quartermaster Oreza replied. “I’ll bring a pot.”

And Wegener had been right. Twelve days later, *Panache* had indeed been ready for sea, though not much else, with crates and fittings lashed down all over the ship. Moving the crane out of the way was accomplished before dawn, lest anyone notice, and when the picket line showed up that day, it had taken a few minutes to notice that the ship was gone. Impossible, they’d all thought. She hadn’t even been fully painted yet.

The painting was accomplished in the Florida Strait, as was something even more important. Wegener had been on the bridge, napping in his leather chair during the forenoon watch when the growler phone rang, and Chief Owens invited him to the engine room. Wegener arrived to find the only worktable covered with plans, and an engineman-apprentice hovering over them, with his engineering officer standing behind him.

“You ain’t gonna believe it,” Owens announced. “Tell him, sonny.”

“Seaman Obrecki, sir. The engine isn’t installed right,” the youngster said.

“What makes you think that?” Wegener asked.

The big marine diesels were of a new sort, perversely designed to be very easy to operate and maintain. To aid in this, small how-to manuals were provided for each engine-room crewman, and in each manual was a plastic-coated diagram that was far easier to use than the builder’s plans. A blow-up of the manual schematic, also plastic-coated, had been provided by the drafting company, and was the laminated top of the worktable.

“Sir, this engine is a lot like the one on my dad’s tractor, bigger, but—”

“I’ll take your word for it, Obrecki.”

“The turbocharger ain’t installed right. It matches with these plans here, but the oil pump pushes the oil through the turbocharger backwards. The plans

are wrong, sir. Some draftsman screwed up. See here, sir? The oil line's supposed to come in here, but the draftsman put it on the wrong side of this fitting, and nobody caught it, and—"

Wegener just laughed. He looked at Chief Owens: "How long to fix?"

"Obrecki says he can have it up and running this time tomorrow, Cap'n."

"Sir." It was Lieutenant Michelson, the engineering officer. "This is all my fault. I should have—" The lieutenant was waiting for the sky to fall.

"The lesson from this, Mr. Michelson, is that you can't even trust the manual. Have you learned that lesson, Mister?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Fair enough. Obrecki, you're a seaman-first, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wrong. You're a machinist-mate third."

"Sir, I have to pass a written exam ..."

"You think Obrecki's passed that exam, Mr. Michelson?"

"You bet, sir."

"Well done, people. This time tomorrow I want to do twenty-three knots."

And it had all been downhill from there. The engines are the mechanical heart of any ship, and there is no seaman in the world who prefers a slow ship to a fast one. When *Panache* had made twenty-five knots and held that speed for three hours, the painters painted better, the cooks took a little more time with the meals, and the technicians tightened their bolts just a little more. Their ship was no longer a cripple, and pride broke out in the crew like a rainbow after a summer shower—all the more so because one of their own had figured it out. One day early, *Panache* came into the Curtis Bay Coast Guard Yard with a bone in her teeth. Wegener had the conn and pushed his own skill to the limit to make a fast "one-bell" approach to the dock. "The Old Man," one line handler noted on the fo'c'sle, "really knows how to drive this fuckin' boat!"

The next day a poster appeared on the ship's bulletin board: PANACHE: DASHING ELEGANCE OF MANNER OR STYLE. Seven weeks later, the cutter was brought into commission and she sailed south to Mobile, Alabama, to go to work. Already she had a reputation that exactly matched her name.

It was foggy this morning, and that suited the captain, even though the mission didn't. The King of SAR was now a cop. The mission of the Coast Guard had changed more than halfway through his career, but it wasn't something that you noticed much on the Columbia River bar, where the enemy was still wind and wave. The same enemies lived in the Gulf of Mexico, but added to them was a new one. Drugs. Drugs were not something that Wegener thought a great deal about. For him drugs were something a doctor

prescribed, that you took in accordance with the directions on the bottle until they were gone, and then you tossed the bottle. When Wegener wanted to alter his mental state, he did so in the traditional seaman's way—beer or hard liquor—though he found himself doing so less now that he was approaching fifty. He'd always been afraid of needles—every man has his private dread—and the idea that people would voluntarily stick needles into their arms had always amazed him. The idea of sniffing a white powder into one's nose—well, that was just too much to believe. His attitude wasn't so much naïveté as a reflection of the age in which he'd grown up. He knew that the problem was real. Like everyone else in uniform, every few months he had to provide a urine sample to prove that he was not using "controlled substances." Something that the younger crewmen accepted as a matter of course, it was a source of annoyance and insult to people of his age group.

The people who ran the drugs were his more immediate concern, but the most immediate of all was a blip on his radar screen.

They were a hundred miles off the Mexican coast, far from home. And the Rhodes was overdue. The owner had called in several days earlier, saying that he was staying out a couple of days extra ... but his business partner had found that odd, and called the local Coast Guard office. Further investigation had determined that the owner, a wealthy businessman, rarely went more than three hours offshore. The Rhodes cruised at fifteen knots.

The yacht was sixty-two-feet long, big enough that you'd want a few people to help you sail it ... but small enough that real master's papers were not required by law. The big motor-yacht had accommodation for fifteen, plus two crewmen, and was worth a couple of million dollars. The owner, a real-estate developer with his own little empire outside Mobile, was new to the sea, and a cautious sailor. That made him smart, Wegener thought. Too smart to stray this far offshore. He knew his limitations, which was rare in the yachting community, especially the richer segment. He'd gone south two weeks earlier, tracing the coast and making a few stops, but he was late coming back, and he'd missed a business meeting. His partner said that he would not have missed it unnecessarily. A routine air patrol had spotted the yacht the day before, but not tried to contact it. The district commander had decided that something smelled about this one. *Panache* was the closest cutter and Wegener got the call.

"Sixteen thousand yards. Course zero-seven-one," Chief Oreza reported from the radar plot. "Speed twelve. He ain't heading for Mobile, Cap'n."

"Fog's going to burn off in another hour, maybe hour and a half," Wegener decided. "Let's close in now. Mr. O'Neil, all ahead full. Intercept course, Chief?"

"One-six-five, sir."

"That's your course. If the fog holds, we'll adjust when we get within two or three miles and come up dead astern."

Ensign O'Neil gave the proper rudder orders. Wegener went to the chart table.

“Where do you figure he’s headed, Portagee?”

The chief quartermaster projected the course, which appeared to go nowhere in particular. “He’s on his most economical speed setting ... not any port on the Gulf, I’ll bet.” The captain picked up a pair of dividers and started walking them across the chart.

“That yacht has bunkerage for ...” Wegener frowned. “Let’s say he topped off at the last port. He can get to the Bahamas easily enough. Refill there, and then anyplace he wants to go on the East Coast.”

“Cowboys,” O’Neil opined. “First one in a long time.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Sir, if I owned a boat that big, I sure wouldn’t run it through fog with no radar. His isn’t operating.”

“I hope you’re wrong, son,” the captain said. “How long since the last one, Chief?”

“Five years? Maybe more. I thought that sort of thing was all behind us.”

“We’ll know in an hour.” Wegener turned to look at the fog again. Visibility was under two hundred yards. Next he looked into the hooded radar display. The yacht was the closest target. He thought for a minute, then flipped the set from active to standby. Intelligence reports said that druggies now had ESM gear to detect radar transmissions.

“We’ll flip it back on when we get within, oh, say, four miles or so.”

“Aye, Cap’n,” the youngster nodded.

Wegener settled in his leather chair and extracted the pipe from his shirt. He found himself filling it less and less now, but it was part of an image he’d built. A few minutes later the bridge watch had settled down to normal. In keeping with tradition, the captain came topside to handle two hours of the morning watch—the one with the youngest junior officer of the watch—but O’Neil was a bright young kid and didn’t need all that much supervision, at least not with Oreza around. “Portagee” Oreza was the son of a Gloucester fisherman and had a reputation approaching his captain’s. With three tours at the Coast Guard Academy, he’d helped educate a whole generation of officers, just as Wegener had once specialized in bringing enlisted men along.

Oreza was also a man who understood the importance of a good cup of coffee, and one thing about coming to the bridge when Portagee was around was that you were guaranteed a cup of his personal brew. It came right on time, served in the special mug the Coast Guard uses, shaped almost like a vase, wide at the rubber-coated bottom, and narrowed down near the top to prevent tipping and spillage. Designed for use on small patrol craft, it was also useful on *Panache,* which had a lively ride. Wegener hardly noticed.

“Thanks, Chief,” the captain said as he took the cup.

“I figure an hour.”

“ ’Bout right,” Wegener agreed. “We’ll go to battle stations at zero-seven-

forty. Who's on the duty boat section?"

"Mr. Wilcox. Kramer, Abel, Dowd, and Obrecki."

"Obrecki done this yet?"

"Farm boy. He knows how to use a gun, sir. Riley checked him out."

"Have Riley replace Kramer."

"Anything wrong, sir?"

"Something feels funny about this one," Wegener said.

"Probably just a busted radio. There hasn't been one of those since—jeez, I don't even remember when that was, but, yeah. Call Riley up here?"

The captain nodded. Oreza made the call, and Riley appeared two minutes later. The two chiefs and the captain conferred out on the bridge wing. It only took a minute by Ensign O'Neil's watch. The young officer thought it very odd that his captain seemed to trust and confide in his chiefs more than his wardroom, but mustang officers had their own ways.

Panache rumbled through the waves at full speed. She was rated at twenty-three knots, and though she'd made just over twenty-five a few times, that was in light-ship conditions, with a newly painted bottom on flat seas. Even with the turbochargers pounding air into the diesels, top speed now was just over twenty-two knots. It made for a hard ride. The bridge crew compensated for this by standing with their feet a good distance apart, and in O'Neil's case by walking around as much as possible. Condensation from the fog cluttered up the bridge windows. The young officer flipped on the wipers. Back out on the bridge wing, he stared out into the fog. He didn't like traveling without radar. O'Neil listened, but heard nothing more than the muted rumblings of *Panache's* own engines. Fog did that. Like a wet shroud, it took away your vision and absorbed sound. He listened for another minute, but in addition to the diesels, there was only the whisper of the cutter's hull passing through the water. He looked aft just before going back into the wheelhouse. The cutter's white paint job would help her disappear from view.

"No foghorns out there. Sun's burning through," he announced. The captain nodded.

"Less than an hour until it's gone. Gonna be a warm one. Weather forecast in yet?"

"Storms tonight, sir. The line that went through Dallas around midnight. Did some damage. Couple of tornadoes clobbered a trailer park."

Wegener shook his head. "You know, there must be something about trailers that attract the damned things...." He stood and walked to the radar. "Ready, Chief?"

"Yes, sir."

Wegener flipped the set from standby to active, then bent his eyes down to the top of the rubber hood. "You called it close, Chief. Contact bearing one-six-zero, range six thousand. Mr. O'Neil, come right to one-eight-five. Oreza,

give me a time to come left up behind him."

"Aye, Cap'n. Take a minute."

Wegener flipped the radar off and stood back up. "Battle stations."

As planned, the alarm got people moving after everyone had had a chance to eat breakfast. The word was already out, of course. There was a possible druggie out in the fog. The duty boat section assembled at the rubber Zodiac. Everyone had a weapon of some sort: one M-16 automatic rifle, one riot shotgun, and the rest Beretta 9mm automatics. Forward, a crew manned the 40mm gun on the bow. It was a Swedish-designed Bofors that had once sat on a Navy destroyer and was older than anyone aboard except the captain. Just aft of the bridge, a sailor pulled the plastic cover off an M-2 .50-caliber machine gun that was almost as old.

"Recommend we come left now, sir," Chief Oreza said.

The captain flipped the radar on again. "Come left to zero-seven-zero. Range to target is now three-five-zero-zero. We'll want to approach from the target's port side."

The fog was thinning out. Visibility was now at about five hundred yards, a little more or a little less as the mist became visibly patchy. Chief Oreza got on the radar as the bridge filled up with the normal battle watch. There was a new target twenty miles out, probably a tanker inbound for Galveston. Its position was plotted as a matter of course.

"Range to our friend is now two thousand yards. Bearing constant at zero-seven-zero. Target course and speed are unchanged."

"Very well. Should have him visual in about five minutes." Wegener looked around the wheelhouse. His officers were using their binoculars. It was a waste of energy, but they didn't know that yet. He walked out on the starboard bridge wing and looked aft to the boat station. Lieutenant Wilcox gave him a thumbs-up gesture. Behind him, Chief Boatswain's Mate Riley nodded agreement. An experienced petty officer was at the winch controls. Launching the Zodiac into these sea conditions was no big deal, but the sea had a way of surprising you. The .50-caliber was pointed safely skyward, a box of ammo hanging on its left side. Forward he heard the metallic clash as a round was racked into the 40mm cannon.

Used to be we pulled alongside to render assistance. Now we load up, Wegener thought. *Goddamned drugs ...*

"I see him," a lookout said.

Wegener looked forward. The white-painted yacht was hard to pick out within the fog, but a moment later the squared-off transom stern was clearly visible. Now he used his glasses to read the name. *Empire Builder.* That was the one. No flag at the staff, but that wasn't unusual. He couldn't see any people yet, and the yacht was motoring along as before. That was why he'd approached from dead astern. For as long as men had gone to sea, he thought, no lookout ever bothered looking aft.

"He's in for a surprise," O'Neil thought, coming out to join the captain. "The Law of the Sea."

Wegener was annoyed for a moment, but shook it off. "Radar isn't turning. Of course, maybe he broke it."

"Here's the picture of the owner, sir."

The captain hadn't looked at it before. The owner was in his middle forties. Evidently he'd married late, because he reportedly had two children aboard, ages eight and thirteen, in addition to his wife. Big man, six-three or so, bald and overweight, standing on some dock or other next to a fair-sized swordfish. *He must have had to work hard for that one,* Wegener thought, judging by the sunburn around the eyes and below the shorts.... The captain brought the glasses back up.

"You're coming in too close," he observed. "Bear off to port, Mister."

"Aye aye, sir." O'Neil went back into the wheelhouse.

Idiots, Wegener thought. *You ought to have* heard *us by now.* Well, they had a way to make sure of that. He poked his head into the wheelhouse: "Wake 'em up!"

Halfway up *Panache's* mast was a siren of the sort used on police cars and ambulances, but quite a bit larger. A moment later its whooping sound nearly made the captain jump. It did have the expected effect. Before Wegener had counted to three a head appeared out of the yacht's wheelhouse. It wasn't the owner. The yacht began a hard right turn.

"You jackass!" the captain growled. "Close up tight!" he ordered next.

The cutter turned to the right, as well. The yacht settled a bit at the stern as more power was applied, but the Rhodes didn't have a prayer of outrunning *Panache.* In another two minutes the cutter was abeam of the yacht, which was still trying to turn. They were too close to use the Bofors. Wegener ordered the machine gun to fire across the *Empire Builder's* bow.

The .50-caliber crackled and thundered for a five-round burst. Even if they hadn't seen the splashes, the noise was unmistakable. Wegener went inside to get the microphone for his ship's loud-hailer.

"This is the United States Coast Guard. Heave to immediately and prepare to be boarded!"

You could almost see the indecision. The yacht came back left, but the speed didn't change for a minute or two. Next a man appeared at the stern and ran up a flag—the Panamanian flag, Wegener saw with amusement. Next the radio would say that he didn't have authority to board. His amusement stopped short of that point.

"Empire Builder, this is the U.S. Coast Guard. You are a U.S.-flag ship, and we are going to board you. Heave to—*now!"*

And she did. The yacht's stern rose as engine power dropped off. The cutter had to back down hard to avoid surging past the Rhodes. Wegener went back

outside and waved at the boat crew. When he had their attention, he mimicked pulling back the slide on an automatic pistol. That was his way of telling the crew to be careful. Riley patted his holster twice to let the captain know that the boat crew wasn't stupid. The Zodiac was launched. The next call on the loud-hailer told the yacht's crew to get into the open. Two people came out. Again, neither looked like the owner. The cutter's machine gun was trained on them as steadily as the rolling allowed. This was the tense part. The only way *Panache* could protect the boat crew was to fire first, but that was something they couldn't do. The Coast Guard hadn't lost anyone that way yet, but it was only a matter of time, and waiting for it only made it worse.

Wegener kept his glasses fixed on the two men while the Zodiac motored across. A lieutenant did the same next to the machine gun. Though no obvious weapons were visible, a pistol wasn't that hard to hide under a loose shirt. Someone would have to be crazy to fight it out under these conditions, but the captain knew that the world was full of crazy people—he'd spent thirty years rescuing them. Now he arrested them, the ones whose craziness was more malignant than simple stupidity.

O'Neil came to his side again. *Panache* was dead in the water, with her engines turning at idle, and with the seas now on the beam she took on a heavier but slower roll. Wegener looked aft to the machine gun again. The sailor had it aimed in about the right direction, but his thumbs were well off the firing switch, just the way they were supposed to be. He could hear the five empty cases rolling around on the deck. Wegener frowned for a moment. The empties were a safety hazard. He'd have someone rig a bag to catch them. The kid on the gun might stumble on one and shoot by mistake....

He turned back. The Zodiac was at the yacht's stern. Good. They were going aboard there. He watched Lieutenant Wilcox go aboard first, then wait for the rest. The coxswain pulled back when the last was aboard, then scooted forward to cover their advance. Wilcox went forward on the portside, with Obrecki backing him up, the shotgun pointed safely at the sky. Riley went inside with his backup. The lieutenant got to the two men in under a minute. It was odd to see them talking, but not to hear what they were saying....

Somebody said something. Wilcox's head turned quickly one way, then back the other. Obrecki stepped to the side and brought the shotgun down. Both men went down on their faces, dropping from view.

"Looks like a bust, sir," Ensign O'Neil noted. Wegener took one step into the wheelhouse.

"Radio!" A crewman tossed him a Motorola portable. Wegener listened but didn't make a call. Whatever his people had just found, he didn't want to distract them. Obrecki stayed with the two men while Wilcox went inside the yacht. Riley had sure as hell found something. The shotgun was definitely aimed at them, and the tension in the boy's arms radiated across the water to the cutter. The captain turned to the machine-gunner, whose weapon was still aimed at the yacht.

"Safe that gun!"

“Aye!” the sailor answered at once, and dropped his hands to point it at the sky. The officer next to him winced with embarrassment. Another lesson learned. A few words would accompany it in an hour or two. This had been a mistake with a gun.

Wilcox reappeared a moment later, with Chief Riley behind him. The bosun handed over two pairs of handcuffs to the officer, who bent down to work them. They had to be the only two aboard; Riley holstered his pistol a moment later, and Obrecki’s shotgun went up to the sky again. Wegener thought he saw the youngster reset the safety. The farm boy knew his guns, all right, had learned to shoot the same way his skipper had. Why had he taken the safety off ... ? The radio crackled just as Wegener’s mind asked the question.

“Captain, this is Wilcox.” The lieutenant stood to speak, and both men faced each other, a hundred yards apart.

“I’m here.”

“It’s a bad one, sir ... sir, there’s blood all over the place. One of ’em was scrubbing the salon down, but—it’s a real mess here, sir.”

“Just the two of them?”

“Affirmative. Only two people aboard. We’ve cuffed ’em both.”

“Check again,” Wegener ordered. Wilcox read the captain’s mind: he stayed with the prisoners and let Chief Riley do the search. The bosun appeared three minutes later, shaking his head. His face looked pale through the binoculars, Wegener saw. What would make Bob Riley go pale?

“Just these two, sir. No ID on them. I don’t think we want to do much of a search, I think—”

“Correct. I’ll send you another man and leave you Obrecki. Can you get the yacht to port?”

“Sure, Captain. We got plenty of fuel.”

“There’s going to be a little blow tonight,” Wegener warned.

“I checked the weather this morning. No sweat, sir.”

“Okay, let me call this one in and get things organized. Stand by.”

“Roger that. Sir, I recommend that you send the TV camera across for a permanent record to back up the stills.”

“Okay, it’ll be over in a few minutes.”

It took half an hour for the Coast Guard base to get the FBI and DEA agreed on things. While they waited for word, the Zodiac took another crewman over with a portable TV camera and tape recorder. One of the boarding party shot off sixty frames with a Polaroid camera, while the TV recorded everything on half-inch tape. The Coast Guardsmen restarted *Empire Builder’s* engines and headed northwest for Mobile, with the cutter holding station on her portside. It was finally decided that Wilcox and Obrecki could take the yacht back to Mobile, and that a helicopter would pick up the two “yachtsmen” that afternoon—weather permitting. It was a long way to the helicopter base.

Panache was supposed to have her own helicopter, but the Coast Guard didn't have the funding to buy enough. A third seaman was landed on the yacht, and it was time to bring the prisoners back to *Panache.*

Chief Riley took the prisoners aft. Wegener watched the bosun fairly throw them into the Zodiac. Five minutes later it was hoisted aboard. The yacht headed northwest, and the cutter turned away to continue her patrol. The first man from the boarding party to reach the bridge was the seaman who'd worked the Polaroid. He handed over half a dozen of the color frames.

"The chief collected some stuff for you to look at, Cap'n. It's worse'n it looks here. Wait till you see the TV tape. It's already set up for copying."

Wegener handed the photos back. "Okay—it all goes into the evidence locker. You join up with the others. Have Myers set up a new tape in the VCR, and I want you all to tell the camera what you saw. You know how it goes. Let's make sure we get it all right."

"Yes, sir!"

Riley appeared a minute later. Robert Timothy Riley was a man in the traditional pattern of the chief boatswain's mate. Six-two and over two hundred pounds, he had the hairy arms of a gorilla, the gut of a man who knew his way around a beer can, and the rumbling voice to outscream a winter gale. His oversized right hand grasped a couple of plastic food bags. His face showed that anger was now replacing the shock.

"It's a fuckin' slaughterhouse, sir. Like somebody exploded a couple cans of brown paint—'cept it ain't paint. Jesus." One bag came up. "The little one was cleaning up when we pulled 'em over. There's a trash can in the saloon with maybe a half dozen cartridge cases. I pulled these two off the rug—just like they taught us, Cap'n. Picked 'em up with my ball-point and shuffled 'em into the baggie. Two guns I left aboard. I bagged them, too. That ain't the worst of it."

The next baggie contained a small, framed photograph. It had to be the yacht's owner and his family. The baggie after that contained a ...

"Found it under a table. Rape, too. She must've been havin' her period, but they didn't let that stop 'em. Maybe just the wife. Maybe the little girl, too. In the galley there's some butcher knives, all bloodied up. I figure they carved the bodies up and tossed 'em over the side. These four people are shark-shit now."

"Drugs?"

"Twenty or so keys of white powder stowed in the crew's quarters. Some marijuana, too, but that just looks like a personal stash." Riley shrugged. "I didn't even bother using the test kit, sir. Don't matter. This is straight piracy-and-murder. I saw one bullet hole in the deck, a through-and-through. Red, I ain't seen nothing like this in my whole life. Like something in a movie, but worse." He let out a long breath. "You have to have been there, sir."

"What do we know about the prisoners?"

“Nothing. They ain’t done nothing more’n grunt, leastways not when I was around. No ID on them, and I didn’t want to go messing around things looking for passports an’ stuff. Figured I’d leave that for the real cops. The wheelhouse is clean. So’s one of the heads. Mr. Wilcox won’t have much trouble taking her back, and I heard him tell Obrecki and Brown not to touch anything. Plenty of fuel aboard, he can run her at full speed. He’ll have her in Mobile ’fore midnight if the weather holds off. Nice boat.” Another shrug.

“Bring ’em up here,” Wegener said after a moment.

“Aye aye.” Riley went aft.

Wegener filled his pipe, then had to remember where he’d left his matches. The world had changed while he’d been off doing other things, and Wegener didn’t like it. It was dangerous enough out here. Wind and wave were as deadly an enemy as man needed. The sea was always waiting for her chance. It didn’t matter how good you thought you were; you only had to forget once, just once, that you could never trust her. Wegener was a man who never forgot, and devoted his life to protecting those who had. Remembering that one hazard, and protecting those who forgot, had given him a full and satisfying life. He liked being the guardian angel in the snow-white boat. You were never lost if Red Wegener was around. You always had a chance, a good chance, that he could reach into the wet, stormy grave and pull you out with his bare hands ... but sharks were feasting on four people now. Wegener loved the sea for all her moods, but sharks were something to loathe, and the thought that they were now eating people that he might have saved ... four people who’d forgotten that not all sharks live in the sea, Wegener told himself. That’s what had changed. Piracy. He shook his head. That’s what you called it on the water. Piracy. Something that Errol Flynn had made movies about in Wegener’s boyhood. Something that had ended two centuries earlier. Piracy and murder, the part that the movies had usually left out. Piracy and murder and rape, each of them a capital offense in the old days....

“Stand up straight!” Riley snarled. He had both by the arm. Both were still cuffed, and Riley’s hands kept them from straying. Chief Oreza had come along to keep an eye on things.

Both were in their mid-twenties, both were thin. One was tall, about six feet, and arrogant, which struck the captain as odd. He had to know the trouble he was in, didn’t he? His dark eyes burned at Wegener, who regarded the younger man dispassionately from behind his pipe. There was something odd about his eyes, but Wegener didn’t know what it was.

“What’s your name?” the captain asked. There was no reply. “You have to tell me your name,” Wegener pointed out quietly.

Then something very unusual happened. The tall one spat on Wegener’s shirt. There was a strangely long fragment of time in which the captain refused to believe what had happened, his face not even showing surprise. Riley was the first to react to the blasphemy.

“You son of a bitch!” The bosun lifted the prisoner up like a rag doll, spinning him in the air and smashing him down on the bridge rail. The young

man landed on his belt, and for a second it seemed that he'd break in half. The air whooshed out of his mouth, and his legs kicked, trying to find the deck before he dropped into the water.

"Christ, Bob!" Wegener managed to say as Riley picked him back up. The bosun spun him around, his left hand clamped on the man's throat as he lifted him clear of the deck with one arm. "Put him down, Riley!"

If nothing else, Riley had broken through the arrogance. For a moment there was genuine fear in those eyes as the prisoner fought for breath. Oreza had the other one on the deck already. Riley dropped his man beside him. The pirate —Wegener was already thinking of him in those terms—pitched forward until his forehead touched the deck. He gagged and struggled for breath while Chief Riley, just as pale, rediscovered his self-control.

"Sorry, Captain. Guess I just lost it for a second." The bosun made it clear that he was apologizing only for embarrassing his commanding officer.

"Brig," Wegener said. Riley led both aft.

"Damn." Oreza observed quietly. The quartermaster fished out his handkerchief and wiped his captain's shirt. "Jesus, Red, what's the world comin' to?"

"I don't know, Portagee. I think we're both too old to answer that one." Wegener finally found his matches and managed to light his pipe. He stared out at the sea for several seconds before finding the right words. "When I joined up I got broke in by an old chief who told stories about Prohibition. Nothing nasty like this—he made it all sound like a great big game."

"Maybe people were more civilized back then," Oreza thought.

"More likely you couldn't carry a million bucks' worth of booze on a motorboat. Didn't you ever watch 'The Untouchables'? The gang wars they had back then were as nasty as the ones we read about now. Maybe worse. Hell, I don't know. I didn't join up to be a cop, Chief."

"Me neither, Cap'n." Oreza grunted. "We went an' got old, and the world went an' changed on us. One thing I wish didn't change, though."

"What's that, Portagee?"

The master chief quartermaster turned to look at his commanding officer. "Something I picked up at New London a few years back. I used to sit in on some classes when I had nothing better to do. In the old days when they caught a couple of pirates, they had the option of doing a court-martial on the spot and settlin' things right then an' there—and you know something? It worked." Oreza grunted again. "I s'pose that's why they stopped doin' it that way."

"Give 'em a fair trial—then hang 'em?"

"Hell, why not, sir?"

"That's not the way we do things anymore. We're civilized now."

"Yeah, civilized." Oreza opened the door to the wheelhouse. "I can tell. I

seen the pictures."

Wegener smiled, then wondered why. His pipe had gone out. He wondered why he didn't just quit entirely as he fished for his matches again, but the pipe was part of the image. The old man of the sea. He'd gotten old, all right, Wegener thought. A puff of wind caught the match as he tried to toss it, dropping it on the deck. How did you ever forget to check the wind? he asked himself as he bent down to retrieve it.

There was a pack of cigarettes there, halfway out the scupper. Wegener was a fanatic on ship-cleanliness and was ready to snarl at whoever had tossed the empty pack when he realized that it hadn't come from one of his crewmen. The name on the pack was "Calvert," and that, he remembered vaguely, was a Latin American brand-name from a U.S. tobacco company. It was a hard pack, with a flip-top, and out of simple curiosity he opened it.

They weren't cigarettes. At least, they weren't tobacco cigarettes. Wegener fished one out. They weren't hand-rolled, but neither were they as neatly manufactured as something from a real American cancer factory. The captain smiled in spite of himself. Some clever entrepreneur had come up with a cute way of disguising—joints, wasn't it?—as real cigarettes. Or maybe it was just more convenient to carry them this way. It must have pitched out of his shirt when Riley flipped him around, Wegener realized belatedly. He closed the pack and pocketed it. He'd turn it over to the evidence locker when he got a chance. Oreza returned.

"Weather update. That squall line'll be here no later'n twenty-one hundred. The squalls are upgraded some. We can expect gusts up to forty knots. Gonna be a fair blow, sir."

"Any problem for Wilcox and the yacht?" There was still time to recall him.

"Shouldn't be, sir. It turned south. A high-pressure system is heading down from Tennessee. Mr. Wilcox oughta have it pretty smooth all the way in, Cap'n, but it might be a little dicey for the helicopter. They didn't plan to get it to us until eighteen hundred, and that's cutting it a little close. They'll be bucking the front edge of the line on the way back."

"What about tomorrow?"

"Supposed to clear off about dawn, then the high-pressure system takes over. We're in for some rollin' tonight, but then we got four days of good weather." Oreza didn't actually voice his recommendation. He didn't have to. The two old pros communicated with glances.

Wegener nodded agreement. "Advise Mobile to put the pickup off until noon tomorrow."

"Aye aye, Cap'n. No sense risking a helicopter to haul garbage."

"Right on that, Portagee. Make sure Wilcox gets the word on the weather in case that system changes course." Wegener checked his watch. "Time for me to get my paperwork done."

"Pretty full day already, Red."

"True enough."

Wegener's stateroom was the largest aboard, of course, and the only private accommodation aboard, since privacy and loneliness were the traditional luxuries accorded a skipper. But *Panache* wasn't a cruiser, and Wegener's room was barely over a hundred square feet, albeit with a private head, which on any ship was something worth fighting for. Throughout his Coast Guard career, paperwork was something Wegener had avoided whenever possible. He had an executive officer, a bright young lieutenant whom the captain stuck with as much of it as his conscience could justify. That left him with two or three hours' worth per day. The captain attacked it with the enthusiasm of a man on his way to a hanging. Half an hour later he realized that it seemed harder than usual. The murders were pulling at his consciousness. Murder at sea, he thought, as he looked at the porthole on the starboard bulkhead. It wasn't unknown, of course. He'd heard of a few during his thirty years, though he'd never been directly involved. There had been a case off the Oregon coast when a crewman had gone berserk and nearly killed a mate—turned out that the poor guy had developed a brain tumor and he'd later died from it, Red remembered. *Point Gabriel* had gone out and collected the man, already hog-tied and sedated. That was the extent of Wegener's experience with violence at sea. At least the man-made kind. The sea was dangerous enough without the need for that sort of thing. The thought came back to him like the recurring theme of a song. He tried to get back to his work, but failed.

Wegener frowned at his own indecision. Whether he liked paperwork or not, it was part of the job. He relit the pipe in the hope that it would aid his concentration. That didn't work either. The captain muttered a curse at himself, partly in amusement, partly in annoyance, as he walked into his head for a drink of water. The paperwork still beckoned. He looked at himself in the mirror and realized that he needed a shave. And the paperwork wasn't getting done.

"You're getting old, Red," he told the face in the mirror. "Old and senile."

He decided that he had to shave. He did it in the old-fashioned way, with a shaving cup and brush, the disposable razor his only concession to modernity. He had his face lathered and halfway shaved when someone knocked at the door.

"Come!" It opened to reveal Chief Riley.

"Sorry, Cap'n, didn't know you were—"

"No problem, Bob, what's up?"

"Sir, I got the first-draft of the boarding report. Figured you'd want to go over it. We got everyone's statement on tape, audio, and TV. Myers made a copy of the tape from the boarding. The original's in with the evidence, in a lockbox inside the classified-materials safe, as per orders. I got the copy if you wanna see it."

"Okay, just leave it. Anything from our guests?"

"No, sir. Turned into a pretty day outside."

"And me stuck with all this damned paper."

"A chief may work from sun to sun, but the skipper's work is never done," Riley observed.

"You're not supposed to pick on your commanding officer, Master Chief." Wegener managed to stop himself from laughing only because he still had the razor to his throat.

"I humbly beg the captain's pardon. And, by your leave, sir, I also have work to do."

"The kid we had on the fifty-cal this morning was part of the deck division. He needs a talk about safety. He was slow taking his gun off the yacht this morning. Don't tear his head all the way off," Wegener said as he finished shaving. "I'll talk to Mr. Peterson myself."

"We sure don't need people fucking around with those things. I'll talk with the lad, sir, right after I do my walk-around."

"I'm going to do one after lunch—we have some weather coming in tonight."

"Portagee told me. We'll have everything lashed down tight."

"See you later, Bob."

"Aye." Riley withdrew.

Wegener stowed his shaving gear and went back to his desk. The preliminary draft of the boarding and arrest report was on the top of his pile. The full version was being typed now, but he always liked to see the first version. It was generally the most accurate. Wegener scanned it as he sipped at some cold coffee. The Polaroid shots were tucked into pockets on a plastic page. They hadn't gotten any better. Neither had the paperwork. He decided to slip the videotape into his personal VCR and view it before lunch.

The quality of the tape was several steps down from anything that could be called professional. Holding the camera still on a rolling yacht was nearly impossible, and there hadn't been enough light for decent picture quality. For all that, it was disturbing. The sound caught snippets of conversations, and the screen occasionally flared when the Polaroid's flash went off.

It was plain that four people had died aboard *Empire Builder,* and all they had left behind were bloodstains. It didn't seem very much of a legacy, but imagination supplied the rest. The bunk in what had probably been the son's cabin was sodden with blood—a lot of it—at the top end of the bed. Head shot. Three other sets of bloodstains decorated the main salon. It was the part of the yacht with the most space, the place where the entertainment had gone on. *Entertainment,* Wegener thought. Three sets of bloodstains. Two close together, one distant. The man had an attractive wife, and a daughter of thirteen ... they'd made him watch, hadn't they?

"Jesus," Wegener breathed. That had to be it, didn't it? *They made him*

watch, and then they killed them all ... carved up the bodies and tossed them over the side.

"Bastards."

2.

Creatures of the Night

THE NAME ON this passport said J. T. Williams, but he had quite a few passports. His current cover was as a representative for an American pharmaceuticals firm, and he could give a lengthy discourse on various synthetic antibiotics. He could similarly discuss the ins and outs of the heavy-equipment business as a special field representative for Caterpillar Tractor, and had two other "legends" that he could switch in and out of as easily as he changed his clothes. His name was not Williams. He was known in CIA's Operations Directorate as Clark, but his name wasn't Clark either, even though that was the name under which he lived and raised his family. Mainly he was an instructor at CIA's school for field officers, known as "The Farm," but he was an instructor because he was pretty good at what he did, and for the same reason he often returned to the field.

Clark was a solidly built man, over six feet tall, with a full head of black hair and a lantern jaw that hinted at his ancestry, along with the blue eyes that twinkled when he wanted them to, and burned when he did not. Though well over forty, Clark did not have the usual waistline flab that went along with a desk job, and his shoulders spoke volumes about his exercise program. For all that, in an age of attention to physical fitness he was unremarkable enough, save for one distinguishing mark. On his forearm was the tattoo of a grinning red seal. He ought to have had it removed, but sentiment did not allow it. The seal was part of the heritage he'd once chosen for himself. When asked about it during a flight, he'd reply, honestly, that he'd once been in the Navy, then go on to lie about how the Navy had financed his college education in pharmaceuticals, mechanical engineering, or some other field. Clark actually had no college or graduate degree, though he'd accumulated enough special knowledge along the way to qualify for a half dozen of them. The lack of a degree would have—should have—disqualified him for the position which he held in the Agency, but Clark had a skill that is curiously rare in most of the Western intelligence agencies. The need for it was also rare, but the need was occasionally real, and a senior CIA official had once recognized that someone like Clark was useful to have on the payroll. That he'd blossomed into a very effective field officer—mainly for special, short, dangerous jobs—was all the better for the Agency. Clark was something of a legend, though only a handful of people at Langley knew why. There was only one Mr. Clark.

"What brings you to our country, Señor Williams?" the immigration official asked.

"Business. And I'm hoping to do a little fishing before I go home," Clark replied in Spanish. He was fluent in six languages, and could pass for a native with three of them.

"Your Spanish is excellent."

"Thank you. I grew up in Costa Rica," Clark lied. He was particularly good at that, too. "My father worked there for years."

"Yes, I can tell. Welcome to Colombia."

Clark went off to collect his bags. The air was thin here, he noted. His daily jogging helped him with that, but he reminded himself to wait a few days before he tried anything really strenuous. It was his first time in this country, but something told him that it wouldn't be the last. All the big ones started with reconnaissance. That was his current mission. Exactly what he was supposed to recon told him what the real mission would probably be. He'd done such things before, Clark told himself. In fact, one such mission was the reason that CIA had picked him up, changed his name, and given him the life that he'd led for nearly twenty years.

One of the singular things about Colombia was that the country actually allowed people to bring firearms in with very little in the way of hassle. Clark had not bothered this time. He wondered if the next time might be a little different. He knew that he couldn't work through the chief of station for that. After all, the chief of station didn't even know that he was here. Clark wondered why, but shrugged it off. That didn't concern him. The mission did.

The United States Army had reinstituted the idea of the Infantry Division (Light) only a few years before. The units had not been all that hard to make. It was simply a matter of selecting an Infantry Division (Mechanized) and removing all of its (Mechanized) equipment. What then remained behind was an organization of roughly 10,500 people whose TOE (Table of Organization and Equipment) was even lighter than that of an airborne division, traditionally the lightest of them all, and therefore able to be air-transported by a *mere* five hundred flights of the Air Force's Military Airlift Command. But the light infantry divisions, or "LIDs" as they came to be known, were not as useless as the casual observer might imagine, however. Far from it.

In creating the "light-fighters," the Army had decided to return to the timeless basics of history. Any thinking warrior will testify that there are two kinds of fighters: the infantry, and those who in one way or another support the infantry. More than anything else, the LIDs were postgraduate institutions for advanced infantry skills. Here was where the Army grew its sergeants the old-fashioned way. In recognizing this, the Army had carefully assigned some of its best officers to command them. The colonels commanding the brigades, and the generals commanding the divisions, were veterans of Vietnam whose memories of that bitter conflict included admiration for their enemies—most especially the way in which the Viet Cong and NVA had converted their lack of equipment and firepower into an asset. There was no reason, the Army's thinkers decided, that American soldiers should not have the same degree of

skill in fieldcraft that Vo Nguyen Giap's soldiers had developed; better still that those skills should be mated to America's traditional fascination with equipment and firepower. What had resulted were four elite divisions, the 7th in the green hills of Fort Ord, California, the 10th Mountain at Fort Drum, New York, the 25th at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, and the 6th at Fort Wainwright, Alaska. Perversely, each had problems holding on to its sergeants and company-grade officers, but that was part of the overall plan. Light-fighters live a strenuous life, and on reaching thirty even the best of them would think longingly of being able to ride to battle in a helicopter or an armored personnel carrier, and maybe being able to spend a reasonable amount of time with their young wives and children instead of climbing hills. Thus the best of them, the ones that stayed and completed the difficult NCO schools that each division ran, having learned that sergeants must occasionally act without their lieutenants' direction, then joined the heavy formations that comprised the rest of the Army, bringing with them skills that they'd never quite forget. The LIDs were, in short, factory institutions, where the Army built sergeants with exceptional leadership ability and mastery of the unchanging truths of warfare—it always came down to a few people with muddy boots and smelly uniforms who could use the land and the night as allies to visit death on their fellowmen.

Staff Sergeant Domingo Chavez was one of these. Known as "Ding" by his squad, he was twenty-six. Already a nine-year veteran—he'd begun as a gang kid in Los Angeles whose basic common sense had overcome his ineffectual education—he'd decided that there was no future in the *Bandidos* when a close friend had died in a drive-by shooting whose purpose he'd never quite figured out. The following Monday morning he'd taken the bus to the nearest Army Recruiting Office after the Marines had turned him down. Despite his near illiteracy, the recruiting sergeant had signed him up in a moment—his quota had been short, and the kid had expressed a willingness to go infantry, thus fulfilling two blank spots on the sergeant's monthly reporting sheet. Most of all, the youngster wanted to go right in. It could not have been better for the recruiter.

Chavez hadn't had many ideas what military service would be like, and most of those had turned out to be wrong. After losing his hair and a rat-faced beard, he'd learned that toughness is worthless without discipline, and that the Army doesn't tolerate insolence. That lesson had come behind a white-painted barracks at the hands of a drill sergeant whose face was as black as a jungle night. But Chavez's life had never known an easy lesson; as a result he hadn't learned to resent the hard ones. Having discovered that the Army was also a hierarchy with strict hierarchical rules, he stayed within them and gradually turned into an above-average recruit. Former gang kid that he was, he'd already known about camaraderie and teamwork, and redirecting these traits into positive directions had come easily enough. By the time basic training had ended, his small frame was as lean and taut as a steel cable, his physical appearance was something in which he took inordinate pride, and he was already well on his way to mastering every weapon that an infantryman can carry. Where else, he asked himself once a day, do they give you a

machine gun and pay you to shoot it?

But soldiers are grown, not born. Chavez's first posting was to Korea, where he learned about hills, and just how deadly enemy gangs could be, since duty on the DMZ has never been anything that one might call safe. Discipline, he learned there once and for all, had a real purpose. It kept you alive. A small team of North Korean infiltrators had picked a rainy night to go through his unit's piece of the line for purposes known only to their commanders. On the way they'd stumbled on an unmarked listening post whose two American occupants had decided to sleep through the night, and never awoke. ROK units had later intercepted and killed the invaders, but Chavez was the one who'd discovered the men from his own platoon, throats cut in the same way he'd seen in his own neighborhood. Soldiering, he'd decided then and there, was a serious business, and one which he wanted to master. The platoon sergeant noticed first, then the lieutenant. Chavez paid attention to lectures, even trying to take notes. On realizing his inability to read and write beyond things he'd carefully memorized in advance, the platoon leader had gotten the young PFC help. Working hard on his own time, before the end of the year Chavez had passed a high-school equivalency test—on his first try! he told everyone who would listen that night—and made Specialist Fourth Class, which earned him an extra $58.50 per month. His lieutenant didn't fully understand, though the platoon sergeant did, that Domingo Chavez had been forever changed by that combination of events. Though he'd always had the Latino's deep pride, part of the eighteen-year-old soldier now understood that he had truly done something to be proud about. For this he deemed himself to be in the Army's debt, and with the deep sense of personal honor which was also part of his cultural heritage, it was a debt that he would forever after work to repay.

Some things never left. He cultivated physical toughness. Part of that came from his small size—just five-eight—but he also came to understand that the real world was not a football field: the tough ones who made the long haul were most often the compact, lean fighters. Chavez came to love running, and enjoyed a good sweat. Because of this, assignment to the 7th Infantry Division (Light) was almost inevitable. Though based at Fort Ord, near Monterey on the California coast, the 7th trains farther down the coast at Hunter-Liggett Military Reservation, once the sprawling rancho of the Hearst family. A place of magnificent green hills in the moist winters, Hunter-Liggett becomes a blistering moonscape in the California summer, a place of steep, topless hills, gnarled, shapeless trees, and grass that crumbles to dust under one's boots. For Chavez it was home. He arrived as a brand-new buck sergeant E-5, and was immediately sent to the division's two-week Combat Leaders Course, a prep school for squad sergeants that also paved the way for his entry into Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia. On his return from that most rigorous of Army training courses, Chavez was leaner and more confident than ever. His return to Fort Ord coincided with the arrival of a new "cohort" of recruits for his battalion. Ding Chavez was assigned to command a squad of slick-sleeved privates fresh from Advanced Infantry Training. It was the first payback time for the young sergeant. The Army had invested considerable time and training

in him, and now it was time for him to pass it along to nine raw recruits—and also time for the Army to see if Chavez had the stuff that leaders are made of. He took command of his squad as a stepfather of a large and unruly family faces his newly acquired children. He wanted them to turn out properly because they were his, and because they were his, he was damned sure going to see that they did.

At Fort Ord, he'd also learned the real art of soldiering, for infantry tactics are precisely that for the light-fighters-an art form. Assigned to Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion of the 17th Infantry Regiment, whose somewhat ambitious motto was "Ninja! We Own the Night!" Chavez went into the field with his face coated in camouflage paint—in the 7th LID even the helicopter pilots wear camouflage paint—and learned his profession in full even while he taught his men. Most of all, he came to love the night. Chavez learned to move himself and his squad through cover as quietly as a whispering breeze. The objective of such missions was generally the same. Unable to match a heavy formation force-on-force, Chavez trained to do the close, nasty work that has always characterized light infantrymen: raids and ambushes, infiltration and intelligence gathering. Stealth was their means, and surprise was their tool, to appear where least expected, to strike with close-quarter ferocity, then to escape into the darkness before the other side could react. Such things had been tried on Americans once, and it was only fair that Americans should learn to return the favor. All in all, SSG Domingo Chavez was a man whom the Apaches or the Viet Cong would have recognized as one of their own—or one of their most dangerous enemies.

"Hey, Ding!" the platoon sergeant called. "The ell-tee wants you."

It had been a long one at Hunter-Liggett, ending at the dawn now two hours old. The exercise had lasted nearly nine days, and even Chavez was feeling it. He wasn't seventeen anymore, his legs were telling him with some amusement. At least it was his last such job with the Ninjas. He was rotating out, and his next assignment was to be a drill sergeant with the Army's basic-training school at Fort Benning, Georgia. Chavez was immensely proud of that. The Army thought enough of him that he would now be an example to young recruits. The sergeant got to his feet, but before walking over to where the lieutenant was, he reached into his pocket and took out a throwing star. Ever since the colonel had taken to calling his men Ninjas, the nasty little steel projectiles had become *de rigueur* to the men—somewhat to the concern of the powers-that-were. But there was always a little slack cut for the good ones, and Chavez was one of these. He flipped the star with a deceptively powerful flick of the wrist and buried it an inch deep in a tree fifteen feet away. He collected it on the way to see the boss.

"Yes, sir!" Chavez said, standing at attention.

"At ease, Sergeant," Lieutenant Jackson said. He was sitting against a tree to take the strain off his blistered feet. A West Point graduate and only twenty-three, he was learning how hard it could be to keep up with the soldiers he was supposed to lead. "Got a call. They need you back at headquarters. Something to do with the paperwork on your transfer. You can go in on a

resupply flight out of battalion trains. The chopper'll be down there in an hour. Nice work last night, by the way. I'm going to be sorry to lose you, Ding."

"Thank you, sir." Jackson wasn't bad for a young officer, Chavez thought. Green, of course, but he tried pretty hard and learned fast. He saluted the younger man snappily.

"You take care of yourself, Sergeant." Jackson rose to return it properly.

"We own the night, sir!" Chavez replied in the manner of the Ninjas, 3rd Battalion, 17th Infantry. Twenty-five minutes later he climbed aboard a Sikorsky UH-60A Blackhawk helicopter for the fifty-minute ride back to Ord. The battalion sergeant-major handed him a message as he got aboard. Chavez had an hour to get cleaned up before appearing at the divisional G-1 or personnel office. It took a long shower to erase the salt and "war paint," but he managed to arrive early in his best set of BDU camouflage fatigues.

"Hey, Ding," said another staff sergeant, who was working in G-1 while his broken leg healed. "The man's waiting for you in the conference room, end of the hall on the second floor."

"What's it all about, Charlie?"

"Damned if I know. Some colonel asked to see you is all."

"Damn—I need a haircut, too," Chavez muttered as he trotted up the wooden stairs. His boots could have used a little more work also. Hell of a way to appear before some friggin' colonel, but then Chavez was entitled to a little more warning than he'd been given. That was one of the nice things about the Army, the sergeant thought. The rules applied to everyone. He knocked on the proper door, too tired to be worried. He wouldn't be around much longer, after all. His orders for Fort Benning were already cut, and he was wondering what the loose womenfolk in Georgia were like. He'd just broken up with a steady girlfriend. Maybe the more stable life-style that went with a drill sergeant would allow him to—

"Come!" a voice boomed in reply to his knock.

The colonel was sitting behind a cheap wooden desk. He was dressed in a black sweater over a lime-green shirt, and had a name tag that said SMITH. Ding came to attention.

"Staff Sergeant Domingo Chavez reporting as ordered, sir."

"Okay, relax and sit down, Sergeant. I know you've been on the go for a while. There's coffee in the corner if you want."

"No, thank you, sir." Chavez sat down and almost relaxed a bit until he saw his personnel jacket lying on the desk. Colonel Smith picked it up and flipped it open. Having someone rip through your personnel file was usually worrisome, but the colonel looked up with a relaxed smile. Chavez noticed that Colonel Smith had no unit crest above his name tag, not even the hourglass-bayonet symbol of the 7th LID. Where did he come from? Who was this guy?

"This looks pretty damned good, Sergeant. I'd say you're a good bet for E-7 in two or three years. You've been down south, too, I see. Three times, is it?"

"Yes, sir. We been to Honduras twice and Panama once."

"Did well all three times. It says here your Spanish is excellent."

"It's what I was raised with, sir." As his accent told everyone he met. He wanted to know what this was all about, but staff sergeants do not ask such questions of bird-colonels. He got his wish in any case.

"Sergeant, we're putting a special group together, and we want you to be part of it."

"Sir, I got new orders, and—"

"I know that. We're looking for people with a combination of good language skills and—hell, we're looking for the best light-fighters we can find. Everything I see about you says you're one of the best in the division." There were other criteria that "Colonel Smith" did not go into. Chavez was unmarried. His parents were both dead. He had no close family members, or at least was not known to write or call anyone with great frequency. He didn't fit the profile perfectly—there were some other things that they wished he had—but everything they saw looked good. "It's a special job. It might be a little dangerous, but probably not. We're not sure yet. It'll last a couple of months, six at the most. At the end, you make E-7 and have your choice of assignments."

"What's this special job all about, sir?" Chavez asked brightly. The chance of making E-7 a year or two early got his full and immediate attention.

"That I can't say, Sergeant. I don't like recruiting people blind," "Colonel Smith" lied, "but I have my orders, too. I can say that you'll be sent somewhere east of here for intensive training. Maybe it'll stop there, maybe not. If it does stop there, the deal holds on the promotion and the assignment. If it goes farther, you will probably be sent somewhere to exercise your special kind of skills. Okay, I *can* say that we're talking some covert intelligence-gathering. We're not sending you to Nicaragua or anything like that. You're not being sent off to fight a secret war." That statement was technically not a lie. "Smith" didn't know exactly what the job was all about, and he wasn't being encouraged to speculate. He'd been given the mission requirements, and his nearly completed job was to find people who could do it—whatever the hell it was.

"Anyway, that's all I can say. What we have discussed to this point does not leave the room—meaning that you do not discuss it with anybody without my authorization, understood?" the man said forcefully.

"Understood, sir!"

"Sergeant, we've invested a lot of time and money in you. It's payback time. The country needs you. We need what you know. We need what you know how to do."

Put that way, Chavez knew he had little choice. "Smith" knew that, too. The

young man waited about five seconds before answering, which was less than expected.

"When do I leave, sir?"

Smith was all business now. He pulled a large manila envelope from the desk's center drawer. CHAVEZ was scrawled on it in Magic Marker. "Sergeant, I've taken the liberty of doing a few things for you. In here are your medical and finance records. I've already arranged to clear you through most of the post agencies. I've also scratched in a limited power of attorney form so that you can have somebody ship your personal effects—where 'to' shows on the form."

Chavez nodded, though his head swam slightly. Whoever this Colonel Smith was, he had some serious horsepower to run paperwork through the Army's legendary bureaucracy so quickly. Clearing post ordinarily took five days of sitting and waiting. He took the envelope from the colonel's hand.

"Pack your gear and be back here at eighteen hundred. Don't bother getting a haircut or anything. You're going to let it grow for a while. I'll handle things with the people downstairs. And remember: you do not discuss this with anybody. If someone asks, you got orders to report to Fort Benning a little early. That's your story, and I expect you to stick to it." "Colonel Smith" stood and extended his hand while he told another lie, mixed with some truth. "You did the right thing. I knew we could count on you, Chavez."

"We own the night, sir!"

"Dismissed."

"Colonel Smith" replaced the personnel folder in his briefcase. That was that. Most of the men were already on their way to Colorado. Chavez was one of the last. "Smith" wondered how things would work out. His real name was Edgar Jeffries, and he had once been an Army officer, long since seconded to, then hired by, the Central Intelligence Agency. He found himself hoping that things would go as planned, but he'd been with the Agency too long to place much store in that train of thought. This wasn't his first recruiting job. Not all of them had gone well, and fewer still had gone as planned. On the other hand, Chavez and all the rest had volunteered to join the country's military service, had voluntarily re-enlisted, and had voluntarily decided to accept his invitation to do something new and different. The world was a dangerous place, and these forty men had made an informed decision to join one of its more dangerous professions. It was some consolation to him, and because Edgar Jeffries still had a conscience, he needed the consolation.

"Good luck, Sarge," he said quietly to himself.

Chavez had a busy day. First changing into civilian clothes, he washed his field uniform and gear, then assembled all of the equipment which he'd be leaving behind. He had to clean the equipment also, because you were supposed to give it back better than you got it, as Sergeant First Class Mitchell expected. By the time the rest of the platoon arrived from Hunter-Liggett at 1300, his tasks were well underway. The activity was noted by the returning

NCOs, and soon the platoon sergeant appeared.

"Why you packed up, Ding?" Mitchell asked.

"They need me at Benning early—that's, uh, that's why they flew me back this morning."

"The lieutenant know?"

"They musta told him—well, they musta told the company clerk, right?" Chavez was a little embarrassed. Lying to his platoon sergeant bothered him. Bob Mitchell had been a friend and a teacher for his nearly four years at Fort Ord. But his orders came from a colonel.

"Ding, one thing you still have to learn about is paperwork. Come on, son. The ell-tee's in his office."

Lieutenant Timothy Washington Jackson, Infantry, hadn't cleaned up yet, but was almost ready to leave for his place in the bachelor officers' quarters, called the BOQ, or merely The Q. He looked up to see two of his senior NCOs.

"Lieutenant, Chavez here's got orders to skip off to Fort Benning PDQ. They're picking him up this evening."

"So I hear. I just got a call from the battalion sergeant major. What the hell gives? We don't do things this way," Jackson growled. "How long?"

"Eighteen hundred, sir."

"Super. I gotta go and get cleaned up before I see the S-3. Sergeant Mitchell, can you handle the equipment records?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, I'll be back at seventeen hundred to finish things up. Chavez, don't leave before I get back."

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly. Mitchell was willing to handle shipping—there wasn't that much to ship—and squared the younger man away, with a few lessons tossed in on the better ways to expedite paperwork. Lieutenant Jackson was back on time, and brought both men into his office. It was quiet. Most of the platoon was already gone for a well-deserved night on the town.

"Ding, I ain't ready to lose you yet. We haven't decided who takes the squad over. You were talking about Ozkanian, Sergeant Mitchell?"

"That's right, sir. What d'you think, Chavez?"

"He's about ready," Ding judged.

"Okay, we'll give Corporal Ozkanian a shot at it. You're lucky, Chavez," Lieutenant Jackson said next. "I got caught up on all my paperwork right before we went into the field. You want me to go over your evaluation with you?"

"Just the high spots'll be fine, sir." Chavez grinned. The lieutenant liked

him, and Chavez knew it.

“Okay, I say you’re damned good, which you are. Sorry to lose you this quick. You going to need a lift?” Jackson asked.

“No problem, sir. I was planning to walk over.”

“Crap. We all did enough walking last night. Load your stuff into my car.” The lieutenant tossed him the keys. “Anything else, Sergeant Mitchell?”

“Nothin’ that can’t wait until Monday, sir. I figure we earned ourselves a nice restful weekend.”

“As always, your judgment is impeccable. My brother’s in town, and I’m gone till 0600 Monday morning.”

“Roger that. Have a good one, sir.”

Chavez didn’t have much in the way of personal gear, and, unusually, didn’t even have a car. In fact he was saving his money to buy a Chevy Corvette, the car that had fascinated him since boyhood, and was within five thousand dollars of being able to pay cash for one. His baggage was already loaded into the back of Jackson’s Honda CVCC when the lieutenant emerged from the barracks. Chavez tossed him the keys back.

“Where they picking you up?”

“Division G-1 is what the man said, sir.”

“Why there? Why not Martinez Hall?” Jackson asked as he started up. Martinez was the customary processing facility.

“Lieutenant, I just go where they tell me.”

Jackson laughed at that. “Don’t we all?”

It only took a couple of minutes. Jackson dropped Chavez off with a handshake. There were five other soldiers there, the lieutenant noted briefly. All sergeants, which was something of a surprise. All looked Hispanic, too. He knew two of them. León was in Ben Tucker’s platoon, 4th of the 17th, and Muñoz was with divisional recon. Those were two good ones, too. Lieutenant Jackson shrugged it off as he drove away.

3.

The *Panache* Procedure

WEGENER'S INSPECTION CAME before lunch instead of after. There wasn't much to complain about. Chief Riley had been there first. Except for some paint cans and brushes that were actually in use—painting a ship is something that never begins or ends; it just is—there was no loose gear in view. The ship's gun was properly trained in and secured, as were the anchor chains. Lifelines were taut, and hatches dogged down tight in anticipation of the evening storm. A few off-duty sailors lounged here and there, reading or sunning themselves. These leapt to their feet at Riley's rumbling "Attention on deck!" One third-class was reading a *Playboy*. Wegener informed him good-naturedly that he'd have to watch out for that on the next cruise, as three female crewmen were scheduled to join the ship in less than two weeks' time, and it wouldn't do to offend their sensibilities. That *Panache* had none aboard at the moment was a statistical anomaly, and the change didn't trouble the captain greatly, though his senior chiefs were skeptical to say the least. There was also the problem of who got to use the plumbing when, since female crewmen had not been anticipated by the cutter's designers. It was the first time today that Red Wegener had had something to smile about. The problems of taking women to sea ... and the smile died again as the images from the videotape came back to him. Those two women—no, a woman and a little girl—had gone to sea, too, hadn't they ... ?

It just wouldn't go away.

Wegener looked around and saw the questions forming on the faces of the men around him. The skipper was pissed about something. They didn't know what it was, but knew that you don't want to be around the captain when he was mad about something. Then they saw his face change. The captain had just asked himself a question, they thought.

"Looks all right to me, people. Let's make sure we keep it that way." He nodded and walked forward to his stateroom. Once there he summoned Chief Oreza.

The quartermaster arrived within a minute. *Panache* wasn't big enough to allow a longer walk than that. "You called, Captain?"

"Close the door, Portagee, and grab a seat."

The master chief quartermaster was of Portuguese extraction, but his accent was New England. Like Bob Riley he was a consummate seaman, and like his

captain he was also a gifted instructor. A whole generation of Coast Guard officers had learned the use of the sextant from this swarthy, overweight professional. It was men like Manuel Oreza who really ran the Coast Guard, and Wegener occasionally regretted leaving their ranks for officer status. But he hadn't left them entirely, and in private Wegener and Oreza still communicated on a first-name basis.

"I saw the tape of the boarding, Red," Oreza said, reading his captain's mind. "You shoulda let Riley snap the little fucker in half."

"That's not the way we're supposed to do things," Wegener said somewhat lamely.

"Piracy, murder, and rape—toss in the drugs for fun." The quartermaster shrugged his shoulders. "I know what we oughta do with people like that. Problem is, nobody ever does."

Wegener knew what he meant. Although there was a new federal death-penalty law to deal with drug-related murders, it had only rarely been invoked. The problem was simply that every drug dealer arrested knew someone bigger who was even more desirable a target—the really big ones never placed themselves in a position where the supposed long arm of the law could reach. Federal law-enforcement agencies might have been omnipotent within U.S. borders, and the Coast Guard might have plenipotentiary powers at sea—even to the point where they were allowed to board and search numerous foreign-flag ships at will—but there were always limits. There had to be. The enemy knew what those limits were, and it was really a simple thing to adapt to them. This was a game whose fixed rules applied only to one side; the other was free to redefine its own rules at will. It was simple for the big boys in the drug trade to keep clear, and there were always plenty of smaller fry to take their chances on the dangerous parts—especially since their pay exceeded that of any army in history. These foot soldiers were dangerous and clever enough to make the contest difficult—but even when you caught them, they were always able to trade their knowledge for partial immunity.

The result was that nobody ever seemed to pay in full. Except the victims, of course. Wegener's train of thought was interrupted by something even worse.

"You know, Red, these two might get off entirely."

"Hold it, Portagee, I can't—"

"My oldest girl is in law school, skipper. You want to know the really bad news?" the chief asked darkly.

"Go on."

"We get these characters to port—well, the helo brings them in tomorrow—and they ask for a lawyer, right? Anybody who watches American TV knows that much. Let's say that they keep their mouths shut till then. Then their lawyer says that his clients saw a drifting yacht yesterday morning and boarded it. The boat they were on headed back to wherever it came from, and they decide to take it to port to claim the salvage rights. They didn't use the radio because they didn't know how to work it—you see that on the tape? It

was one of those gollywog computer-driven scanners with the hundred-page manual—and our friends don't reada da Eenglish so good. Somebody on the fishing boat will corroborate part of the story. It's all a horrible misunderstanding, see? So the U.S. Attorney in Mobile decides that he might not have a good-enough case, and our friends cop to a lesser charge. That's how it works." He paused.

"That's hard to believe."

"We got no bodies. We got no witnesses. We have weapons aboard, but who can say who fired them? It's all circumstantial evidence." Oreza smiled for a grim moment. "My daughter gave me a good brief last month on how all this stuff works. They whistle up someone to back up their version of how they got aboard—somebody clean, no criminal record—and all of a sudden the only real witnesses are on the other side, and we got shit, Red. They cop to some little piddly-ass charge, and that's it."

"But if they're innocent, why don't they—"

"Talk very much? Oh, hell, that's the easy part. A foreign-flag warship pulls up alongside and puts an armed boarding party aboard. The boarding party points a bunch of guns at them, roughs them up a bit, and they're so scared that they didn't say anything—that's what the lawyer'll say. Bet on it. Oh, they prob'ly won't walk, but the prosecutor will be so afraid of losing the case that he'll look for an easy way out. Our friends will get a year or two in the can, then they get a free plane ticket home."

"But they're murderers."

"Sure as hell," Portagee agreed. "To get off, all they have to be is smart murderers. And there might even be some other things they can say. What my girl taught me, Red, is that it's never as simple as it looks. Like I said, you shoulda let Bob handle it. The kids would have backed you up, Captain. You oughta hear what they're saying about this thing."

Captain Wegener was quiet for a moment. That made sense, didn't it? Sailors didn't change much over the years, did they? On the beach they'd work mightily to get into every pair of female pants in sight, but on the question of murder and rape, the "kids" felt the same way the old-timers did. Times hadn't changed all that much after all. Men were still men. They knew what justice was, courts and lawyers to the contrary.

Red thought about that for a few seconds. Then he rose and walked to his bookshelf. Next to his current copy of the *Uniform Code of Military Justice* and *The Manual of Courts Martial* was a much older book better known by its informal title, "Rocks and Shoals." It was the old reference book of regulations whose ancestry went back to the 18th century, and which had been replaced by the UCMJ soon after World War II. Wegener's copy was an antique. He'd found it gathering dust in a cardboard box fifteen years before at an old boat station on the California coast. This one had been published in 1879, when the rules had been very different. It had been a safer world then, the captain told himself. It wasn't hard to understand why. All you had to do was read what the rules had once been....

“Thanks, Portagee. I’ve got a little work to do. I want you and Riley here at fifteen hundred.”

Oreza stood. “Aye aye, sir.” The quartermaster wondered for a moment what the captain had thanked him for. He was skilled at reading the skipper’s mind, but it didn’t work this time. He knew that something was going on in there. He just didn’t know what it was. He also knew that he’d find out at fifteen hundred. He could wait.

Wegener had lunch with his officers a few minutes later. He sat quietly at the end of the table reading over some message traffic. His wardroom was young and informal. Table talk was as lively as usual. The talk today was on the obvious subject, and Wegener allowed it to go on as he flipped through the yellow sheets generated by the ship’s printer. The thought that had come to him in his stateroom was taking shape. He weighed the pluses and minuses in silence. What could they really do to him? Not much, he judged. Would his people go along with him?

“I heard Oreza say that in the old days, they knew what to do about bastards like this,” a lieutenant (j.g.) observed at the far end of the table. There were affirmative grunts all around the table.

“Ain’t ‘progress’ a bitch?” another noted. The twenty-four-year-old officer didn’t know that he had just made a decision for his commanding officer.

It would work, Wegener decided. He glanced up from his messages to look at the faces of his officers. He’d trained them well, the captain thought. He’d had them for ten months now, and their performance was as nearly perfect as any commander could ask. They’d been a sorry, dejected lot when he’d arrived at the shipyard, but now they sparkled with enthusiasm. Two had grown mustaches, the better to look like the seamen they’d become. All of them lounged in their hard-backed chairs, radiating competence. They were proud of their ship and proud of their captain. They’d back him up. Red joined the conversation, just to make sure, just to test the waters, just to decide who would play a part and who would not.

He finished his lunch and returned to his cabin. The paperwork was still there, and he raced through it as quickly as he could, then opened his “Rocks and Shoals.” At fifteen hundred Oreza and Riley arrived, and he outlined his plan. The two master chiefs were surprised at first, but fell into line quickly.

“Riley, I want you to take this down to our guests. One of ’em dropped it on the bridge.” Wegener fished the cigarette pack out of his pocket. “There’s a vent in the brig, isn’t there?”

“Sure is, skipper,” the bosun answered in some surprise. He didn’t know about the “Calverts.”

“We start at twenty-one hundred,” the captain said.

“About the time the weather gets here,” Oreza observed. “Fair enough, Red. You know you wanna be real careful how you—”

“I know, Portagee. What’s life without a few risks?” he asked with a smile.

Riley left first. He walked forward to a ladder, then down two levels and aft until he got to the brig. The two were there, inside the ten-foot-square cage. Each lay on a bunk. They might have been speaking before, but stopped when the door to the compartment opened. It seemed to the bosun that someone might have included a microphone in the brig, but the district legal officer had once explained that such an installation would be a violation of constitutional rights, or a violation of search-and-seizure, or some such legalistic bullshit, the chief thought.

"Hey, Gomer," he said. The one on the lower bunk—the one he'd cracked across the bridge rail—looked around to see who it was. He was rewarded with widening eyes. "You guys get lunch?" the bosun asked.

"Yes." There was an accent there, but a funny one, the master chief thought.

"You dropped your smokes on the bridge awhile back." Riley tossed the pack through the bars. They landed on the deck, and Pablo—the chief thought he looked like a Pablo—snatched them up with a surprised look on his face.

"Thank you," the man said.

"Uh-huh. Don't you boys go anywhere without letting me know, hear?" Riley chuckled and walked away. It was a real brig. The designers had gotten that part right, the master chief thought. Even had its own head. That offended Riley. A prison cell on a Coast Guard cutter. Hmph. But at least that meant you didn't have to detail a couple of men to guard the gomers. At least not yet, Riley smiled to himself. *Are you boys in for a surprise.*

Weather at sea is always impressive. Perhaps it looks that way sweeping across a uniform surface, or maybe the human mind simply knows that weather has a power at sea that it lacks on land. There was a three-quarter moon tonight, allowing Wegener to watch the line squalls approach at over twenty knots. There were sustained twenty-five-knot winds in there, and gusts almost double that. Experience told him that the gentle four-foot swells that *Panache* rode through would soon be whipped to a maniacal series of breaking waves and flying spray. Not all that much, really, but enough to give his cutter an active ride. Some of his younger crewmen would presently regret dinner. Well, that was something you had to learn about the sea. She didn't like people to overeat.

Wegener welcomed the storm. In addition to giving him the atmosphere he wanted, it also gave him an excuse to fiddle with his watch bill. Ensign O'Neil had not yet conned the ship through heavy weather and tonight would be his chance.

"Any problems, Mister?" the skipper asked the junior officer.

"No, sir."

"Okay, just remember that if anything comes up, I'll be in the wardroom." One of Wegener's standing orders read: No *watch officer will ever be reprimanded for calling the captain to the bridge. Even if you only want to check*

the correct time: CALL ME! It was a common hyperbole. You had to say such things, lest your junior officers be so afraid to bother the skipper that they rammed a tanker by way of protecting his sleep—and ending his career. The mark of a good officer, Wegener repeatedly told his youngsters, was willingness to admit he had something yet to learn.

O'Neil nodded. Both men knew that there was nothing to worry about. It was just that the kid had never learned first-hand that a ship handles a little differently with sea and wind on the beam. Besides, Chief Owens was standing by. Wegener walked aft, and the boatswain's mate of the watch announced, "Captain off the bridge."

In the crew's mess the enlisted men were settling down to watch a movie. It was a new tape, with a "Hard R" notation on the plastic box. Riley had seen to that. Lots of T&A to keep their attention. The same movie was available to the wardroom TV; young officers had the same hormonal drives, but they wouldn't be exercised tonight.

The onrushing storm would serve to keep people off the weather decks, and the noise wouldn't hurt either. Wegener smiled to himself as he pulled open the door to the wardroom. He couldn't have planned it any better.

"Are we ready?" the captain asked.

The initial enthusiasm for the plan was gone. The reality of things had sunk in a little. That was to be expected, Wegener thought. The youngsters were sober, but they weren't backing away either. They needed someone to say something, and they got it.

"Ready here, sir," Oreza said from his seat at the far end of the table. The officers all nodded agreement. Red walked to his seat in the center of the mess table. He looked at Riley.

"Bring 'em up here."

"Aye aye, sir."

The bosun left the room and proceeded down to the brig. On opening the door again, he caught the acrid stink that made him think at first that there was a fire in the rope locker—but an instant later the truth sprang on him.

"Shit," he growled disgustedly. *On my ship!* "Stand up, Gomer!" his voice boomed, adding, "Both of ya'!"

The one on the lower bunk flipped his butt into the toilet and stood slowly, an arrogant smile on his face. Riley answered it, and produced a key. That changed Pablo's smile, but didn't erase it.

"We're taking a little walk, children." The bosun also produced a pair of handcuffs. He figured that he could handle both of them easily enough, especially stoned, but the skipper had been clear on his instructions. Riley reached through the bars to yank one toward him. On a rough order to turn around, the man complied, and allowed himself to be cuffed. So did the other. The lack of resistance surprised the master chief. Next Riley unlocked the brig door and waved them out. As "Pablo" passed, Riley removed the pack from his

pocket and for want of something better, tossed it back on the lower bunk.

"Come on." Riley grabbed each by the arm and led them forward. They walked unevenly—the increased rolling of the ship didn't help, but there was more to it than that. It took three or four minutes to reach the wardroom.

"The prisoners will be seated," Wegener announced when they arrived. "The court is called to order."

Both of them stopped cold on hearing that, which told everybody something. Riley steered them to their seats at the defense table after a moment. It is hard for a person to endure the stares of his fellowman in silence, particularly when one knows that something is going on, but not quite what it is. The big one broke the silence after a minute or so.

"What's happening?"

"Sir," Wegener replied evenly, "we are holding a summary court-martial." That only earned him a curious look, and he went on, "The trial judge advocate will read the charges."

"Mr. President, the defendants are charged under the Eleventh Article of War with piracy, rape, and murder. Each of these is a capital offense. Specifications: that on or about the fourteenth of this month, the defendants did board the motor yacht *Empire Builder;* that while aboard they did murder the four people aboard the vessel, that is, the owner and master, his wife, and their two minor children; further, that in the course of these events the defendants did rape the wife and daughter of the owner and master; further that the defendants did dismember and dispose of the bodies of the victims prior to our boarding the vessel on the morning of the fifteenth. The prosecution will show that these actions took place in the course of drug-running operations. Murder in the course of drug-related activities is a capital offense under United States Code, Annotated. Further, murder in the course of piracy, and rape in the course of piracy, are capital crimes under the Articles of War. As the court is aware, piracy is a crime under the doctrine of *jus gentium,* and falls under the jurisdiction of any interested warship. Further, murder attending piracy is, as I have stated, a capital crime. Although as a ship of the United States Coast Guard we have de jure rights to board and seize any American-flag vessel, that authority is not strictly necessary in a case of this kind. Therefore, this court has full jurisdiction to try and, if necessary, execute the prisoners. The prosecution announces herewith its intention to request the death penalty in this case."

"Thank you," Wegener said, turning to the defense table. "Do you understand the charges?"

"Huh?"

"What the trial judge advocate just said was that you are being tried for piracy, rape, and murder. If you are found guilty, the court will then decide whether or not to execute you. You have the right to legal counsel. Lieutenant Alison, sitting there at the table with you, is your defending officer. Do you understand?" It took a few more seconds for things to sink in, but he

understood all right. “Does the defense waive full reading of charges and specifications?”

“Yes, Mr. President. Sir, the defense moves that the cases be tried individually, and begs the indulgence of the court to confer with his clients.”

“Sir, the prosecution objects to splitting the cases.”

“Argument?” the captain asked. “Defense first.”

“Sir, since, as the trial judge advocate has told us, this is to be a capital case, I beg the court’s indulgence to allow me to defend my clients as best I can under the circumstances, and—”

Wegener stopped him with a wave of the hand. “The defense correctly points out that, since this is a capital case, it is customary to grant the utmost leeway to the defense. The court finds this a persuasive argument and grants the motion. The court also grants the defense five minutes to confer with his clients. The court suggests that the defense might instruct his clients to identify themselves properly to the court.”

The lieutenant took them to a corner of the room, still in handcuffs, and started talking to them quietly.

“Look, I’m Lieutenant Alison, and I’m stuck with the job of keeping you two characters alive. For starters, you’d better damned sight tell me who the hell you are!”

“What is this bullshit?” the tall one asked.

“This bullshit is a court-martial. You’re at sea, mister, and in case nobody ever told you, the captain of an American warship can do any goddamned thing he wants. You shouldn’t have pissed him off.”

“So?”

“So, this is a *trial,* you asshole! You know, a judge, a jury. They can sentence you to death and they can do it right here aboard the ship.”

“Bullshit!”

“What’s your name, for God’s sake?”

“Yo’ mama,” the tall one said contemptuously. The other one looked somewhat less sure of himself. The lieutenant scratched the top of his head. Eighteen feet away, Captain Wegener took note of it.

“What the hell did you do aboard that yacht?”

“Get me a real lawyer!”

“Mister, I’m all the lawyer you’re gonna get,” the lieutenant said. “Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

The man didn’t believe him, which was precisely what everyone had expected. The defending officer led his clients back to their table.

“The court is back in session,” Wegener announced. “Do we have a statement for the defense?”

“May it please the court, neither defendant chooses to identify himself.”

“That does not please the court, but we must take that fact at face value. For the purposes of the trial, we will identify your clients as John Doe and James Doe.” Wegener pointed to designate which was which. “The court chooses to try John Doe first. Is there any objection? Very well, the trial judge advocate will begin presenting his case.”

Which he did over the next twenty minutes, calling only one witness, Master Chief Riley, who recounted the boarding and gave a color commentary to the videotape record of the boarding.

“Did the defendant say anything?”

“No, sir.”

“Could you describe the contents of this evidence bag?” the prosecutor asked next.

“Sir, I think that’s called a tampon. It appears to be used, sir,” Riley said with some embarrassment. “I found that under the coffee table in the yacht’s main salon, close to a bloodstain—actually these two on the photograph, sir. I don’t use the things myself, you understand, sir, but in my experience women don’t leave them around on the floor. On the other hand, if someone was about to rape a lady, this thing would be in the way, sort of, and he might just remove it and toss it out of the way so’s he could get on with it, like. If you see where I picked it up, and where the bloodstains are, well, it’s pretty obvious what happened there, sir.”

“No further questions. The prosecution rests.”

“Very well. Before the defense begins its case, the court wishes to ask if the defense intends to call any witnesses other than the defendant.”

“No, Mr. President.”

“Very well. At this point the court will speak directly to the defendant.” Wegener shifted his gaze and leaned forward slightly in his chair. “In your own defense, sir, you have the right to do one of three things. First, you can choose not to make any statement at all, in which case the court will draw no inferences from your action. Second, you are allowed to make a statement not under oath and not subject to cross-examination. Third, you may make a statement under oath and subject to cross-examination by the trial judge advocate. Do you understand these rights, sir?”

“John Doe,” who had watched the preceding hour or so in amused silence, came awkwardly to his feet. With his hands cuffed behind his back, he leaned slightly forward, and since the cutter was now rolling like a log in a flume, he had quite a bit of trouble keeping his feet.

“What is all this shit?” he demanded, again making people wonder about his accent. “I want to go back to my room and be left alone till I can get my own fucking lawyer.”

“Mr. Doe,” Wegener replied, “in case you haven’t figured it out yet, you are on trial for piracy, rape, and murder. This book”—the captain lifted his “Rocks

and Shoals"—"says I can try you here and now, and this book says that if we find you guilty, we can decide to hang you from the yardarm. Now, the Coast Guard hasn't done this in over fifty years, but you better believe that I can damned well do it if I want to! They haven't bothered changing the law. So now things are different from what you expected, aren't they? You want a lawyer—you have Mr. Alison right there. You want to defend yourself? Here's your chance. But, Mr. Doe, there is no appeal from this court, and you'd better think about that real hard and real fast."

"I think this is all bullshit. Go fuck yourself!"

"The court will disregard the defendant's statement," Wegener said, struggling to keep his face straight and sober, as befitting the presiding officer in a capital case.

Counsel for the defense spoke for fifteen minutes, making a valiant but futile attempt to counter the weight of evidence already presented by the trial judge advocate. Case summaries took five minutes each. Then it was time for Captain Wegener to speak again.

"Having heard the evidence, the members of the court will now vote on the verdict. This will be by secret written ballot. The trial judge advocate will pass out the voting papers, and collect them."

This took less than one minute. The prosecutor handed each of the five members a slip of note paper. The members of the court all looked at the defendant before and after marking their votes. The prosecutor then collected the ballots, and after shuffling them in his hand about as adroitly as a five-year-old with his Old Maid cards, handed them to the captain. Wegener unfolded the ballots and set them on the table in front of him. He made a note in his yellow pad before speaking.

"Defendant will stand and face the court. Mr. Doe, do you have anything to say before sentence is passed?"

He didn't, an amused, disbelieving smirk on his face.

"Very well. The court having voted, two-thirds of the members concurring, finds the defendant guilty, and sentences him to death by hanging. Sentence to be carried out within the hour. May God have mercy on your soul. Court is adjourned."

"Sorry, sir," the defense counsel said to his client. "You didn't give me much to work with."

"Now get me a lawyer!" Mr. Doe snarled.

"Sir, you don't need a lawyer just now. You need a priest." As if to emphasize that fact, Chief Riley took him by the arm.

"Come on, sweetheart. You got a date with a rope." The master chief led him out of the room.

The other prisoner, known as James Doe, had watched the entire proceeding in fascinated disbelief. The disbelief was still there, everyone saw, but it was more the sort of disbelief that you'd expect to see on the face of a

man stuck in front of an onrushing train.

"Do you understand what's going on here?" the lieutenant asked.

"This ain't real, man," the prisoner said, his voice lacking much of the conviction it might have held an hour or so earlier.

"Hey, man, aren't you paying attention? Didn't they tell you guys that some of your kind just sort of disappear out here? We've been doing this for almost six months. The prisons are all full up, and the judges just don't want to be bothered. If we bag somebody and we have the evidence we need, they let us handle things at sea. Didn't anybody tell you that the rules have changed some?"

"You can't do this!" he almost screamed in reply.

"Think so? Tell you what. In about ten minutes I'll take you topside, and you can watch. I'm telling you, if you don't cooperate, we are not going to fuck around with you, pal. We're tired of that. Why don't you just sit quiet and think it over, and when the time comes, I'll let you see how serious we are." The lieutenant helped himself to a cup of coffee to pass the time, not speaking at all to his client. About the time he finished, the door opened again.

"Hands topside to witness punishment," Chief Oreza announced.

"Come on, Mr. Doe. You'd better see this." The lieutenant took him by the arm and led him forward. Just outside the wardroom door was a ladder that led upward. At the top of it was a narrow passageway, and both men headed aft toward the cutter's vacant helicopter deck.

The lieutenant's name was Rick Alison. A black kid from Albany, New York, and the ship's navigator, Alison thanked God every night for serving under Red Wegener, who was far and away the best commander he'd ever met. He'd thought about leaving the service more than once, but now planned on staying in as long as he could. He led Mr. Doe aft, about thirty feet from the festivities.

The seas were really rough now, Alison noted. He gauged the wind at over thirty knots, and the seas at twelve or fourteen feet. *Panache* was taking twenty-five-degree rolls left and right of the vertical, snapping back and forth like a kids' seesaw. Alison remembered that O'Neil had the conn, and hoped that Chief Owens was keeping an eye on the boy. The new ensign was a good enough kid, but he still had a lot to learn about ship handling, thought the navigator, who was a bare six years older himself. Lightning flashed occasionally to starboard, flash-lighting the sea. Rain was falling in solid sheets, the drops flying across the deck at a sharp angle and driven hard enough by the wind to sting the cheeks. All in all it was the sort of night to make Edgar Allan Poe salivate at its possibilities. There were no lights visible, though the cutter's white paint gave them a sort of ghostly outline as a visual reference. Alison wondered if Wegener had decided to do this because of the weather, or was it just a fortunate coincidence?

Captain, you've pulled some crazy shit since you came aboard, but this one really takes it.

There was the rope. Someone had snaked it over the end of the cutter's radio/radar mast. That must have been fun, Alison thought. Had to have been Chief Riley. Who else would be crazy enough to try?

Then the prisoner appeared. His hands were still behind his back. The captain and XO were there, too. Wegener was saying something official, but they couldn't hear it. The wind whistled across the deck, and through the mast structure with its many signal halyards—oh, that's what Riley did, Alison realized. He'd used a halyard as a messenger line to run the one-inch hemp through the block. Even Riley wasn't crazy enough to crawl the mast top in this weather.

Then some lights came on. They were the deck floods, used to help guide a helo in. They had the main effect of illuminating the rain, but did give a slightly clearer picture of what was happening. Wegener said one more thing to the prisoner, whose face was still set in an arrogant cast. He still didn't believe it, Alison thought, wondering if that would change. The captain shook his head and stepped back. Riley then placed the noose around his neck.

John Doe's expression changed at that. He still didn't believe it, but all of a sudden things were slightly more serious. Five people assembled on the running end of the line. Alison almost laughed. He'd known that was how it was done, but hadn't quite expected the skipper to go that far....

The final touch was the black hood. Riley turned the prisoner to face aft toward Alison and his friend—there was another reason, as well—before surprising him with it. And finally it got through to Mr. Doe.

"Noooooo!" The scream was perfect, a ghostly sort of cry that matched the weather and the wind better than anyone might have hoped. His knees buckled as expected, and the men on the running end of the line took the strain and ran aft. The prisoner's feet rose clear of the black no-skid deck as the body jerked skyward. The legs kicked a few times, then were still before the line was tied off on a stanchion.

"Well, that's that," Alison said. He took the other Mr. Doe by the arm and led him forward. "Now it's your turn, sport."

Lightning flashed close aboard just as they reached the door leading back into the superstructure. The prisoner stopped cold, looking up one last time. There was his companion, body limp, swinging like a pendulum below the yard, hanging there dead in the rain.

"You believe me now?" the navigator asked as he pulled him inside. Mr. Doe's trousers were already soaked from the falling rain, but they were wet for another reason as well.

The first order of business was to get dried off. When the court reconvened, everyone had changed to fresh clothing. James Doe was now in a set of blue Coast Guard coveralls. His handcuffs had been taken off and left off, and he found a hot cup of coffee waiting for him on the defense table. He failed to note that Chief Oreza was no longer at the head table, nor was Chief Riley in the wardroom at the moment. The entire atmosphere was more relaxed than it

had been, but the prisoner scarcely noticed that. James Doe was anything but calm.

"Mr. Alison," the captain intoned, "I would suggest that you confer with your client."

"This one's real simple, sport," Alison said. "You can talk or you can swing. The skipper doesn't give a shit one way or the other. For starters, what's your name?"

Jesus started talking. One of the officers of the court picked up a portable TV camera—the same one used in the boarding, in fact—and they asked him to start again.

"Okay—do you understand that you are not required to say anything?" someone asked. The prisoner scarcely noticed, and the question was repeated.

"Yeah, right, I understand, okay?" he responded without turning his head. "Look, what do you want to know?"

The questions were already written down, of course. Alison, who was also the cutter's legal officer, ran down the list as slowly as he could, in front of the video camera. His main problem was in slowing the answers down enough to be intelligible. The questioning lasted forty minutes. The prisoner spoke rapidly, but matter-of-factly, and didn't notice the looks he was getting from the members of the court.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Wegener said when things were concluded. "We'll try to see that things go a little easier for you because of your cooperation. We won't be able to do much for your colleague, of course. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Too bad for him, I guess," the man answered, and everyone in the room breathed a little easier.

"We'll talk to the U.S. Attorney," the captain promised. "Lieutenant, you can return the prisoner to the brig."

"Aye aye, sir." Alison took the prisoner out of the room as the camera followed. On reaching the ladder to go below, however, the prisoner tripped. He didn't see the hand that caused it, and didn't have time to look, as another unseen hand crashed down on the back of his neck. Next Chief Riley broke the unconscious man's forearm, while Chief Oreza clamped a patch of ether-soaked gauze over his mouth. The two chiefs carried him to sick bay, where the cutter's medical corpsman splinted the arm. It was a simple green-stick fracture and required no special assistance. His undamaged arm was secured to the bunk in sick bay, and he was allowed to sleep there.

The prisoner slept late. Breakfast was brought in to him from the wardroom, and he was allowed to clean himself up before the helicopter arrived. Oreza came to collect him, leading him topside again, and aft to the helo deck, where he found Chief Riley, who was delivering the other prisoner to the helicopter. What James Doe—his real name had turned out to be Jesus Castillo—found remarkable was the fact that John Doe—Ramón José Capati—was alive. A pair of DEA agents seated them as far apart as possible, and had

instructions to keep the prisoners separate. One had confessed, the captain explained, and the other might not be overly pleased with that. Castillo couldn't take his eyes off Capati, and the amazement in his eyes looked enough like fear that the agents—who liked the idea of a confession in a capital case—resolved to keep the prisoners as far apart as circumstances allowed. Along with them went all the physical evidence and several videotape cassettes. Wegener watched the Coast Guard Dolphin helo power up, wondering how the people on the beach would react. The sober pause that always follows a slightly mad act had set in, but Wegener had anticipated that also. In fact, he figured that he'd anticipated everything. Only eight members of the crew knew what had taken place, and they knew what they were supposed to say. The executive officer appeared at Wegener's side.

"Nothing's ever quite what it seems, is it?"

"I suppose not, but three innocent people died. Instead of four." *Sure as hell the owner wasn't any angel,* the captain reflected. *But did they have to kill his wife and kids, too?* Wegener stared out at the changeless sea, unaware of what he had started or how many people would die because of it.

4.

Preliminaries

CHAVEZ'S FIRST INDICATION of how unusual this job really was came at San José airport. Driven there in an unmarked rental van, they ended up in the general-aviation part of the facility and found a private jet waiting for them. Now, that was really something. "Colonel Smith" didn't board. He shook every man's hand, told them that they'd be met, and got back into the van. The sergeants all boarded the aircraft which, they saw, was less an executive jet than a mini-airliner. It even had a stewardess who served drinks. Each man stowed his gear and availed himself of a drink except Chavez, who was too tired even to look at the young lady. He barely noted the plane's takeoff, and was asleep before the climb-out was finished. Something told him that he ought to sleep while he had the time. It was a common instinct for soldiers, and usually a correct one.

Lieutenant Jackson had never been at the Monterey facility, but his older brother had given him the necessary instructions, and he found the O-Club without difficulty. He felt suddenly lonely. As he locked his Honda he realized that his was the only Army uniform in view. At least it wasn't hard to figure out whom to salute. As a second lieutenant, he had to salute damned near everybody.

"Yo, Timmy!" his brother called, just inside the door.

"Hiya, Rob." The two men embraced. Theirs was a close family, but Timmy hadn't seen his big brother, Commander Robert Jefferson Jackson, USN, in almost a year. Robby's mother had died years before. Only thirty-nine, she'd complained of a headache, decided to lie down for a few minutes, and never stirred again, the victim of a massive stroke. It had later been determined that she was an undiagnosed hypertensive, one of many American blacks cursed by the symptomless malady. Her husband, the Reverend Hosiah Jackson, mourned her loss along with the community in which both had raised their family. But pious man that Reverend Jackson was, he was also a father whose children needed a mother. Four years later he'd remarried, to a twenty-three-year-old parishioner, and started afresh. Timothy was the first child of his second union. His fourth son had followed a path similar to the first's. An Annapolis graduate, Robby Jackson flew fighter aircraft for the Navy. Timmy had won an appointment at West Point, and looked forward to a career in the infantry. Another brother was a physician, and the fourth was a lawyer with political ambitions. Times had changed in Mississippi.

It would have been hard for an observer to determine which brother was prouder of the other. Robby, with three gold stripes on his shoulder boards, bore on his breast pocket the gold star that denoted a former command at sea —in his case, VF-41, a squadron of F-14 Tomcat fighters. Now working in the Pentagon, Robby was on his way to command of a Carrier Air Wing, and after that perhaps his own carrier. Timothy, on the other hand, had been the family runt for quite a few years, but West Point had changed that with a vengeance. He had two solid inches on his older brother, and at least fifteen more pounds of muscle. There was a Ranger flash on his shoulder above the hourglass insignia of his division. Another boy had been turned into a man, the old-fashioned way.

"Lookin' good, boy," Robby observed. "How 'bout a drink?"

"Not too many, I've been up for a while."

"Long day?"

"Long week, as a matter of fact," Tim replied, "but I did get a nap yesterday."

"Nice of'em," the elder Jackson observed with some fraternal concern.

"Hey, if I wanted an easy life, I woulda joined the Navy." The brothers had a good laugh on the way to the bar. Robby ordered John Jameson, a taste introduced to him by a friend. Tim settled for a beer. Conversation over dinner, of course, began with catching up on family matters, then turned to shop talk.

"Not real different from what you do," Timmy explained. "You try to get in close and smoke a guy with a missile before he knows you're there. We try to get in close and shoot him in the head before he knows where we are. You know about that, don't you, big brother?" Timmy asked with a smile that was touched with envy. Robby had been there once.

"Once was enough," Robby answered soberly. "I leave that close-quarter crap to idiots like you."

"Yeah, well, last night we were the forward element for the battalion. My lead squad went in beautiful. The OPFOR—excuse me, Opposing Force—was a bunch from the California Guard, mainly tanks. They got careless about how they set up, and Sergeant Chavez was inside the laager before they knew about it. You oughta see this guy operate. I swear, Rob, he's nearly invisible when he wants to be. It's going to be a bitch to replace him."

"Huh?"

"Just transferred out this afternoon. I was going to lose him in a couple weeks anyway, but they lifted him early to go to Fort Benning. Whole bunch of good sergeants moved out today." Tim paused for a moment. "All Spanish ones. Coincidence." Another pause. "That's funny, wasn't León supposed to go to Fort Benning, too?"

"Who's León?"

"Sergeant E-6. He was in Ben Tucker's platoon—Ben and I played ball

together at the Point. Yeah, he was supposed to be going to Ranger School as an instructor in a couple of weeks. I wonder why him and Chavez left together? Ah, well, that's the Army for you. So how do you like the Pentagon?"

"Could be worse," Robby allowed. "Twenty-five more months, and thank God Almighty, I'll be free at last. I'm in the running for a CAG slot," the elder brother explained. He was at the career stage where things got really sticky. There were more good men than jobs to be filled. As with combat operations, one of the determining factors now was pure luck. Timmy, he saw, didn't know about that yet.

The jet landed after a flight of just under three hours. Once on the ground it taxied to the cargo terminal at the small airport. Chavez didn't know which one. He awoke still short of the sleep he needed when the plane's door was wrenched open. His first impression was that there wasn't much air here. It seemed an odd observation to make, and he wrote it off to the usual confusion following a nap.

"Where the hell are we?" another sergeant asked.

"They'll tell you outside," the attendant replied. "Y'all have a nice time here." The smile that accompanied the answer was too charming to merit a further challenge.

The sergeants collected their bags and shuffled out of the aircraft, finding yet another van waiting for them. Chavez got his question answered before he boarded it. The air was very thin here, all right, and in the west he saw why. The last glow of sunset illuminated the jagged outline of mountains to the west. Easterly course, three hours' flight time, and mountains: he knew at once they were somewhere in the Rockies, even though he'd never really been there. His last view of the aircraft as the van rolled off showed a fueling truck moving toward it. Chavez didn't quite put it together. The aircraft would be leaving in less than thirty minutes. Few people would have noticed that it had even been there, much less trouble themselves to wonder why.

Clark's hotel room was a nice one, befitting his cover. There was an ache at the back of his head to remind him that he was still not fully adjusted to the altitude, but a couple of Tylenol caplets went to work on that, and he knew that his job didn't involve much in the way of physical activity. He ordered breakfast sent up and went through some setting-up exercises to work the kinks out of his muscles. The morning jog was definitely out, however. Finished, he showered and shaved. Service was good here. Just as he got his clothes on, breakfast arrived, and by nine o'clock he was ready for work. Clark took the elevator down to the lobby, then went outside. The car was waiting. He got in the front.

"Buenos días," the driver said. "There may be rain this afternoon."

"If so, I have my coat."

“A cold rain, perhaps.”

“The coat has a liner,” Clark said, finishing the code sequence.

“Whoever thought that one up was bright enough,” the man said. “There is rain in the forecast. The name’s Larson.”

“Clark.” They didn’t shake hands. It just wasn’t done. Larson, which probably wasn’t his real name either, Clark thought, was about thirty, with dark hair that belied his vaguely Nordic surname. Locally, Carlos Larson was thought to be the son of a Danish father and a Venezuelan mother, and he ran a flying school, a service much in demand. He was a skilled pilot who taught what he knew and didn’t ask many questions, which appealed to his clientele. He didn’t really need to ask questions—pilots, especially student pilots, talk a good deal—and he had a good memory for every sort of detail, plus the sort of professional expertise that invited lots of requests for advice. It was also widely believed that he’d financed his business by making a few highly illegal flights, then semiretired to a life of luxury. This legend created bona fides for the people in whom he had interest, but did so without making him any sort of adversary. He was a man who’d done what was needed to get what he wanted, and now lived the sort of life that he’d wanted to live. That explained the car, which was the most powerful BMW made, and the expensive apartment, and the mistress, a stewardess for Avianca whose real job was as a courier for CIA. Larson thought it all a dream assignment, the more so because the stewardess really was his lover, a fringe benefit that might not have amused the Agency’s personnel directorate. The only thing that bothered him was that his placement in Colombia was also unknown to the station chief. A relatively inexperienced agent, Larson—Clark would have been surprised to learn that that was his real name—knew enough about how the Agency worked to realize that separate command loops generally denoted some sort of special operation. His cover had been established over a period of eighteen months, during which he’d been required to do not very much in return. Clark’s arrival was probably the signal that all of that was about to change. Time to earn his pay.

“What’s the plan of the day?” Clark asked.

“Do a little flying. We’ll be down before the weather goes bad,” Larson added.

“I know you have an instrument rating.”

“I will take that as a vote of confidence,” the pilot said with a smile as he drove toward the airport. “You’ve been over the photos, of course.”

“Yeah, about three days’ worth. I’m just old-fashioned enough that I like to eyeball things myself. Maps and photos don’t tell you everything.”

“They told me the mission profile is just to fly around straight and level, no buzzing or circling to get people mad.” The nice thing about having a flying school was that its aircraft were expected to be all over the place, but if one showed specific interest in specific people, they might take note of your registration number, and they might come down to the airport to ask why.

The people who lived in Medellin were not known to ask such questions politely. Larson was not afraid of them. So long as he maintained his cover, he knew that he had little to worry about. At the same time, he was a pro, and pros are careful, especially if they want to last.

"Sounds okay to me." Clark knew the same things. He'd gotten old in a dangerous business by taking only the necessary risks. Those were bad enough. It wasn't very different from playing the lottery. Even though the odds were against one's hitting the number, if you played the game long enough, the right—or wrong—number would appear, no matter how careful you were. Except in this lottery the prize wasn't money. It was an unmarked, shallow grave, and you got that only if the opposition remembered something about religion.

He couldn't decide if he liked the mission or not. On the one hand, the objective was worthy enough. On the other ... But Clark wasn't paid to make that sort of evaluation. He was paid to do, not to think very much about it. That was the main problem with covert operations. You had to risk your life on the judgment of others. It was nice to know why, but the decision-makers said knowing why often had the effect of making the job all the more dangerous. The field operators didn't always believe that. Clark had that problem right now.

The Twin-Beech was parked in the general-aviation section of El Dorado International Airport. It didn't require too much in the way of intelligence to make an accurate assessment of what the aircraft were used for. There were too many expensive cars, and far too many expensive aircraft to be explained by the Colombian gentry. These were toys for the newly rich. Clark's eyes swept over them, his face showing neutral interest.

"Wages of sin ain't bad, are they?" Larson chuckled.

"What about the poor bastards who're paying the wages?"

"I know about that, too. I'm just saying that they're nice airplanes. Those Gulfstreams—I'm checked out on 'em—that's one sweet-handlin' bird."

"What do they cost?" Clark asked.

"A wise man once said, if you have to ask the price, you can't afford it."

"Yeah." Clark's mouth twisted into a smile. *But some things carry a price that's not measured in dollars.* He was already getting into the proper frame of mind for the mission.

Larson preflighted the Beech in about fifteen minutes. He'd just flown in ninety minutes earlier, and few private pilots would have bothered to run through the whole checklist, but Larson was a good pilot, which meant he was before all things a careful one. Clark took the right-side cockpit seat, strapping in as though he were a student pilot on his first hop. Commercial traffic was light at this hour, and it was easy to taxi into the takeoff pattern. About the only surprise was the long takeoff roll.

"It's the altitude," Larson explained over the intercom headset as he rotated off the runway. "It makes the controls a little mushy at low speed, too. No

problem. Like driving in the snow—you just have to pay attention." He moved the lever to bring the gear up, leaving the aircraft at full power to claw up to altitude as quickly as possible. Clark scanned the instruments and saw nothing obviously awry, though it did seem odd to show nine thousand feet of altitude when you could still pick out individual people on the ground.

The aircraft banked to the left, taking a northwesterly heading. Larson backed off on the throttles, commenting that you also had to pay close attention to engine temperatures here, though the cooling systems on the twin Continental engines were beefed up to allow for it. They were heading toward the country's mountainous spine. The sky was clear and the sun was bright.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"It is that," Clark agreed. The mountains were covered with emerald-green trees whose leaves shimmered with moisture from the night's rain. But Clark's trained eyes saw something else. Walking these hills would be a cast-iron bitch. About the only good thing to be said was that there was good cover under which people could conceal themselves. The combination of steep hills and thin air would make this place an arduous one. He hadn't been briefed on what exactly was going to happen, but he knew enough to be glad that the hard part of the job would not be his.

The mountain ranges in Colombia run on a southwest-to-northeast vector. Larson picked a convenient pass to fly over, but the winds off the nearby Pacific Ocean made the crossing bumpy.

"Get used to it. Winds are picking up today because of the weather front that's moving in. They really boil around these hills. You ought to see what real bad weather is like."

"Thanks, but no thanks! Not much in the way of places to land in case things—"

"Go bad?" Larson asked. "That's why I pay attention to the checklist. Besides, there are more little strips down there than you might imagine. Of course, you don't always get a welcome when you decide to use one. Don't sweat it. I just put new engines on this bird a month ago. Sold the old ones to one of my students for his old King Air. It belongs to the Bureau of Customs now," Larson explained.

"Did you have any part in that?"

"Negative! Look, they expect me to know why all these kids are taking lessons. I'm not supposed to be dumb, right? So I also teach them standard evasion tactics. You can read them in any decent book, and they expect me to be able to do that. Pablo wasn't real big on reading. Hell of a natural pilot, though. Too bad, really, he was a nice enough kid. They bagged him with fifty keys. I understand he didn't talk much. No surprise there. Gutsy little bastard."

"How well motivated are these folks?" Clark had seen lots of combat once, and he knew that the measure of an enemy is not to be found by counting his weapons.

Larson frowned at the sky. "Depends on what you mean. If you change the

word from ‘motivated’ to ‘macho,’ that about covers it. You know, the cult of manliness, that sort of thing. Part of it’s kinda admirable. These people have a funny sense of honor. For example, the ones I know socially treat me just fine. Their hospitality is impressive, especially if you show a little deference, which everyone does. Besides, I’m not a business rival. What I mean is, I know these people. I’ve taught a bunch of them to fly. If I had a money problem, I could probably go to them for help and get it. I’m talking like half a million in cash on a handshake—and I’d walk out of the hacienda with the cash in a briefcase. I’d have to make some courier flights to square things, of course. And I’d never have to pay the money back. On the other hand, if I screwed them, well, they’d make damned sure that I paid for that, too. They have rules. If you live by them, you’re fairly safe. If not, you’d better have your bags packed.”

“I know about the ruthlessness. What about the brains?”

“They’re as smart as they have to be. What smarts they don’t have, they buy. They can buy anything, anybody. Don’t underestimate them. Their security systems are state-of-the-art, like what we put on ICBM silos—shit, maybe better than that. They’re protected as tightly as we protect the President, except their shooters are less restrained by rules of engagement. I suppose the best indicator on how smart they are is the fact that they’ve banded together to form the cartel. They’re smart enough to know that gang wars cost everybody, so they formed a loose alliance. It ain’t perfect, but it works. People who try to break into the business mostly end up dead. Medellin is an easy town to die in.”

“Cops? Courts?”

“The locals have tried. Lots of dead cops, lots of dead judges to prove it,” Larson said with a shake of the head. “Takes a lot for people to keep plugging away when they can’t see any results. Then toss in the money angle. How often can a man walk away from a suitcase full of tax-free hundred-dollar bills? Especially when the alternative is certain death for himself and his family. The cartel is smart, my friend, and it’s patient, and it has all the resources it needs, and it’s ruthless enough to scare a veteran Nazi. All in all, that’s some enemy.” Larson pointed to a gray smudge in the distance. “There’s Medellin. Drugs ’R’Us, all in that one little city in the valley. One nuke could settle things, say about two megatons, air-burst four thousand feet AGL. I wonder if the rest of the country would really mind ... ?”

That earned Larson a glance from his passenger. Larson lived here, knew a lot of these people, and even liked some, as he’d just said. But his hatred for them occasionally peeked through his professional detachment. The best sort of duplicity. This kid had a real future in the Agency, Clark decided. Brains and passion both. If he knew how to maintain a proper balance of the two, he could go places. Clark reached into his bag for a camera and a pair of binoculars. His interest wasn’t in the city itself.

“Nice places, aren’t they?”

The drug chieftains were growing increasingly security-conscious. The hilltops around the city were all being cleared of trees. Clark counted over a

dozen new homes already. Homes, he thought with a snort. Castles was more like it. Walled fortresses. Enormous dwelling structures surrounded by low walls, surrounded in turn by hundreds of yards of clear, steep slopes. What people found picturesque about Italian villages and Bavarian castles was always the elegant setting. Always on the top of a hill or mountain. You could easily imagine the work that went into such a beautiful place—clearing the trees, hauling the stone blocks up the slopes, and ending up with a commanding view of the countryside that extended for miles. But the castles and villages hadn't been built in such places for fun, and neither had these houses. The heights meant that no one could approach them unobserved. The cleared ground around those houses was known in terse military nomenclature as a killing zone, a clear field of fire for automatic weapons. Each house had a single road up to a single gate. Each house had a helipad for a fast evacuation. The wall around each was made of stone that would stop any bullet up to fifty caliber. His binoculars showed that immediately inside each wall was a gravel or concrete path for guards to walk. A company of trained infantrymen would have no easy time assaulting one of these haciendas. *Maybe a helicopter assault, supported by mortars and gunships ... Christ,* Clark thought to himself, *what am I thinking about?*

"What about house plans?"

"No problem. Three architectural firms have designed these places. Security isn't all that good there. Besides, I've been in that one for a party—just two weeks ago, as a matter of fact. I guess that's one area they're not too smart in. They like to show their places off. I can get you floor plans. The satellite overheads will show guard strength, vehicle garaging, all that sort of thing."

"They do." Clark smiled.

"Can you tell me exactly what you're here for?"

"Well, they want an evaluation of the physical characteristics of the terrain."

"I can see that. Hell, I could do that easy enough from memory." Larson's question was not so much curiosity as his slight offense at not being asked to do this job himself.

"You know how it is at Langley," was the statement Clark used to dismiss the observation.

You're a pilot, Clark didn't say. *You've never humped a field pack in the boonies. I have.* If Larson had known his background, he could have made an intelligent guess, but what Clark did for the Agency, and what he'd done before joining, were not widely known. In fact, they were hardly known at all.

"Need-to-know, Mr. Larson," Clark said after another moment.

"Roger that," the pilot agreed over the intercom.

"Let's do a photo pass."

"I'll do a touch-and-go at the airport first. We want to make it look good."

"Fair enough," Clark agreed.

“What about the refining sites?” Clark asked after they headed back to El Dorado.

“Mainly southwest of here,” Larson answered, turning the Beech away from the valley. “I’ve never seen one myself—I’m not in that part of the business, and they know it. If you want to scout them out, you go around at night with imaging IR equipment, but they’re hard to track in on. Hell, they’re portable, easy to set up, and easy to move. You can load the whole assembly on a medium truck and set it up ten miles away the next day.”

“Not that many roads....”

“What you gonna do, search every truck that comes along?” Larson asked. “Besides, you can man-pack it if you want. Labor’s cheap down here. The opposition is smart, and adaptable.”

“How much does the local army get involved?” Clark had been fully briefed, of course, but he also knew that a local perspective might not agree with Washington’s—and might be correct.

“They’ve tried. Biggest problem they have is sustaining their forces—their helicopters don’t spend twenty percent of their time in the air. That means they don’t do many ops. It means that if anyone gets hit he might not get medical attention very fast—and that hurts performance when they do run ops. Even then—you can guess what the government pays a captain, say. Now imagine that somebody meets that captain at a local bar, buys him a drink, and talks to him. He tells the captain that he might want to be in the southwestern corner of his sector tomorrow night—well, *anywhere* but the northeastern sector, okay? If he decides to patrol one part of his area, but not another, he gets a hundred thousand dollars. Okay, the other side has enough money that they can pay him up front just to see if he’ll cooperate. Seed money, kind of. Once he shows he can be bought, they settle down to a smaller but regular payment. Also, the other side has enough product that they can let him do some real seizures once in a while, once they know he’s theirs, to make him look good. Someday that captain grows up and becomes a colonel who controls a lot more territory.... It’s not because they’re bad people, it’s just that things are so fucking hopeless. Legal institutions are fragile down here and—hell, look at the way things are at home, for Christ’s sake. I—”

“I’m not criticizing anybody, Larson,” Clark said. “Not everybody can take on a hopeless mission and keep at it.” He turned to look out the side window and smiled to himself. “You have to be a little crazy to do that.”

5.

Beginnings

CHAVEZ AWOKE WITH the headache that accompanies initial exposure to a thin atmosphere, the sort that begins just behind the eyes and radiates around the circumference of one's head. For all that, he was grateful. Throughout his career in the Army, he'd never failed to awaken a few minutes before reveille. It allowed him an orderly transition from sleep to wakefulness and made the waking-up process easier to tolerate. He turned his head left and right, inspecting his environment in the orange twilight that came through the uncurtained windows.

The building would be called a barracks by anyone who did not regularly live in one. To Chavez it seemed more of a hunting camp, a guess that was wholly accurate. Perhaps two thousand square feet in the bunk room, he judged, and he counted a total of forty single metal-frame bunks, each with a thin GI mattress and brown GI blanket. The sheets, however, were fitted, with elastic at the corners; so he decided that there wouldn't be any of the bouncing-quarter bullshit, which was fine with him. The floor was bare, waxed pine, and the vaulted ceiling was supported by smoothed-down pine trunks in lieu of finished beams. It struck the sergeant that in hunting season people—rich people—actually paid to live like this: proof positive that money didn't automatically confer brains on anyone. Chavez didn't like barracks life all that much, and the only reason he'd not opted for a private apartment in or near Fort Ord was his desire to save up for that Corvette. To complete the illusion, at the foot of each bed was a genuine Army-surplus footlocker.

He thought about getting up on his elbows to look out the windows, but knew that the time for that would come soon enough. It had been a two-hour drive from the airport, and on arrival each man had been assigned a bunk in the building. The rest of the bunks had already been filled with sleeping, snoring men. Soldiers, of course. Only soldiers snored like that. It had struck him at the time as ominous. The only reason why young men would be asleep and snoring just after ten at night was fatigue. This was no vacation spot. Well, that was no surprise either.

Reveille came in the form of an electric buzzer, the kind associated with a cheap alarm clock. That was good news. No bugle—he hated bugles in the morning. Like most professional soldiers, Chavez knew the value of sleep, and waking up was not a cause for celebration. Bodies stirred around him at once, to the accompaniment of the usual wake-up grumbles and profanity. He tossed off the blanket and was surprised to learn how cold the floor was.

“Who’re you?” the man in the next bunk said while staring at the floor.

“Chavez, Staff Sergeant. Bravo, 3rd of the 17th.”

“Vega. Me, too. Headquarters Company, lst/22nd. Get in last night?”

“Yep. What gives here?”

“Well, I don’t really know, but they sure did run us ragged yesterday,” Staff Sergeant Vega said. He stuck his hand out. “Julio.”

“Domingo. Call me Ding.”

“Where you from?”

“L.A.”

“Chicago. Come on.” Vega rose. “One good thing about this place, you got all the hot water you want, and no Mickey Mouse on the housekeeping. Now, if they could just turn the fucking heat on at night—”

“Where the hell are we?”

“Colorado. I know that much. Not much else, though.” The two sergeants joined a loose trail of men heading for the showers.

Chavez looked around. Nobody was wearing glasses. Everybody looked pretty fit, even accounting for the fact that they were soldiers. A few were obvious iron-pumpers, but most, like Chavez, had the lean, wiry look of distance runners. One other thing that was so obvious it took him half a minute to notice it. They were all Latinos.

The shower helped. There was a nice, tall pile of new towels, and enough sinks that everyone had room to shave. And the toilet stalls even had doors. Except for the thin air, Chavez decided, this place had real possibilities. Whoever ran the place gave them twenty-five minutes to get it together. It was almost civilized.

Civilization ended promptly at 0630. The men got into their uniforms, which included stout boots, and moved outside. Here Chavez saw four men standing in a line. They had to be officers. You could tell from the posture and the expressions. Behind the four was another, older man, who also looked and acted like an officer, but ... not quite, Chavez told himself.

“Where do I go?” Ding asked Vega.

“You’re supposed to stick with me. Third squad, Captain Ramirez. Tough mother, but a good guy. Hope you like to run, *’mano.”*

“I’ll try not to crap out on ya’,” Chavez replied.

Vega turned with a grin. “That’s what I said.”

“Good morning, people!” boomed the voice of the older one. “For those of you who don’t know me, I am Colonel Brown. You newcomers, welcome to our little mountain hideaway. You’ve already gotten to your proper squads, and for everyone’s information, our TO and E is now complete. This is the whole team.”

It didn't surprise Chavez that Brown was the only obvious non-Latino to be seen. But he didn't know why he wasn't surprised. Four others were walking toward the assembly. They were PT instructors. You can always tell from the clean, white T-shirts and the confidence that they could work anyone into the ground.

"I hope everyone got a good night's sleep," Brown went on. "We will start our day with a little exercise—"

"Sure," Vega muttered, "might as well die before breakfast."

"How long you been here?" Ding asked quietly.

"Second day. Jesus, I hope it gets easier. The officers musta been here a week at least—they don't barf after the run."

"—and a nice little three-mile jog through the hills," Brown ended.

"That's no big deal," Chavez observed.

"That's what I said yesterday," Vega replied. "Thank God I quit smokin'."

Ding didn't know how to react to that. Vega was another light infantryman from the 10th Mountain, and like himself was supposed to be able to move around all day with fifty pounds of gear on his back. But the air was pretty thin, thin enough that Chavez wondered just how high they were.

They started off with the usual daily dozen, and the number of repeats wasn't all that bad, though Chavez found himself breaking a slight sweat. It was the run that told him how tough things would get. As the sun rose above the mountains, he got a feel for what sort of country it was. The camp was nestled in the bottom of a valley, and comprised perhaps fifty acres of almost flat ground. Everything else looked vertical, but on inspection proved to be slopes of less than forty-five degrees, dotted with scruffy-looking little pine trees that would never outgrow the height for Christmas decorations. The four squads, each led by an instructor and a captain, moved in different directions, up horse trails worn into the mountainside. In the first mile, Chavez reckoned, they had climbed over five hundred feet, snaking their way along numerous switchbacks toward a rocky knoll. The instructor didn't bother with the usual singing that accompanied formation running. There wasn't much of a formation anyway, just a single-file of men struggling to keep pace with a faceless robot whose white shirt beckoned them on toward destruction. Chavez, who hadn't run a distance less than three miles, every day for the last two years of his life, was gasping for breath after the first. He wanted to say something, like, "There isn't any fuckin' air!" But he didn't want to waste the oxygen. He needed every little molecule for his bloodstream. The instructor stopped at the knoll to make sure everyone was there, and Chavez, jogging doggedly in place, had the chance to see a vista worthy of an Ansel Adams photograph—all the better in the full light of a morning sun. But his only thought on being able to see over forty miles was terror that he'd have to run it all.

God, I thought I was in shape!

Hell, I am in shape!

The next mile traced a ridgeline to the east, and the sun punished eyes that had to stay alert. This was a narrow trail, and going off it could involve a painful fall. The instructor gradually picked up the pace, or so it seemed, until he stopped again at another knoll.

"Keep those legs pumpin'!" he snarled at those who'd kept up. There were two stragglers, both new men, Chavez thought, and they were only twenty yards back. You could see the shame on their faces, and the determination to catch up. "Okay, people, it's downhill from here."

And it was, mostly, but that only made it more dangerous. Legs rubbery from the fatigue that comes from oxygen deprivation had to negotiate a downward slope that alternated from gradual to perilously steep, with plenty of loose rocks for the unwary. Here the instructor eased off on the pace, for safety as everyone guessed. The captain let his men pass, and took up the rear to keep an eye on things. They could see the camp now. Five buildings. Smoke rose from a chimney to promise breakfast. Chavez saw a helipad, half a dozen vehicles—all four-wheel-drives—and what could only be a rifle range. There was no other sign of human habitation in sight, and the sergeant realized that even the wide view he'd had earlier hadn't shown any buildings closer than five or six miles. It wasn't hard to figure out why the area was sparsely settled. But he didn't have time or energy for deep thoughts at the moment. His eyes locked on the trail, Ding Chavez concentrated on his footing and the pace. He took up a position alongside one of the erstwhile stragglers and kept an eye on him. Already Chavez was thinking of this as his squad, and soldiers are supposed to look out for one another. But the man had firmed up. His head was high now, his hands balled into tight, determined fists, and his powerfully exhaled breaths had purpose in them as the trail finally flattened out and they approached the camp. Another group was coming in from the far side.

"Form up, people!" Captain Ramirez called out for the first time. He passed his men and took the place of the instructor, who peeled off to let them by. Chavez noted that the bastard wasn't even sweating. Third Squad formed into a double line behind their officer.

"Squad! Quick-time, march!" Everyone slowed to a regular marching pace. This took the strain off lungs and legs, told them that they were now the custody of their captain, and reminded them that they were still part of the Army. Ramirez delivered them in front of their barracks. The captain didn't order anyone to sing a cadence, though. That made him smart, Chavez thought, smart enough to know that nobody had enough breath to do so. Julio was right, probably. Ramirez might be a good boss.

"Squad, halt!" Ramirez turned. "At ease, people. Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Madre de Dios!" a voice noted quietly. From the back rank, a man tried to vomit but couldn't find anything to bring up.

"Okay." Ramirez grinned at his men. "The altitude is a real bitch. But I've been here two weeks. You get used to it right quick. Two weeks from now, we'll be running five miles a day with packs, and you'll feel just fine."

Bullshit. Chavez shared the thought with Julio Vega, knowing that the captain was right, of course. The first day at boot camp had been harder than this ... hadn't it?

"We're taking it easy on you. You have an hour to unwind and get some breakfast. Go easy on the chow: we'll have another little run this afternoon. At 0800 we assemble here for training. Dismissed."

"Well?" Ritter asked.

They sat on the shaded veranda of an old planter's house on the island of St. Kitts. Clark wondered what they'd planted here once. Probably sugarcane, though there was nothing now. What had once been a plantation manor was obviously supposed to look like the island retreat of a top-drawer capitalist and his collection of mistresses. In fact it belonged to CIA, which used it as an informal conference center, a particularly nice safe house for the debriefing of VIP defectors, and other, more mundane uses—like a vacation spot for senior executives.

"The background info was fairly accurate, but it underestimated the physical difficulties. I'm not criticizing the people who put the package together. You just have to see it to believe it. It's very tough country." Clark stretched in the wicker chair and reached for his drink. His personal seniority at the Agency was many levels below Ritter's, but Clark was one of a handful of CIA employees whose position was unique. That, plus the fact that he often worked personally for the Deputy Director (Operations), gave him the right to relax in the DDO's presence. Ritter's attitude toward the younger man was not one of deference, but he did show Clark considerable respect. "How's Admiral Greer doing?" Clark asked. It was James Greer who'd actually recruited him, many years before.

"Doesn't look very good. Couple of months at most," Ritter replied.

"Damn." Clark stared into his drink, then looked up. "I owe that man a lot. Like my whole life. They can't do anything?"

"No, it's spread too much for that. They can keep him comfortable, that's about all. Sorry. He's my friend, too."

"Yes, sir, I know." Clark finished off his drink and went back to work. "I still don't know exactly what you have in mind, but you can forget about going after them in their houses."

"That tough?"

Clark nodded. "That tough. It's a job for real infantry with real support, and even then you're going to take real casualties. From what Larson tells me, the security troops these characters have are pretty good. I suppose you might try to buy a few off, but they're probably well paid already, so that might just backfire." The field officer didn't ask what the real mission was, but he assumed it was to snatch some warm bodies and whisk them off stateside, where they'd arrive gift-wrapped in front of some FBI office, or maybe a U.S.

courthouse. Like everyone else, he was making an incorrect guess. “Same thing with bagging one on the move. They take the usual precautions—irregular schedules, irregular routes, and they have armed escorts everywhere they go. So bagging one on the fly means having good intel, which means having somebody on the inside. Larson is as close to being inside as anybody we’ve ever run, and he’s not close enough. Trying to get him in closer will get him killed. He’s gotten us some good data—Larson’s a pretty good kid—and the risks of trying that are just too great. I presume the local people have tried to—”

“They have. Six of them ended up dead or missing. Same thing with informers. They disappear a lot. The locals are thoroughly penetrated. They can’t run any sort of op for long without risking their own. You do that long enough and people stop volunteering.”

Clark shrugged and looked out to seaward. There was a white-hulled cruise ship inbound on the horizon. “I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised at how tough these bastards are. Larson was right, what brains they don’t already have they can buy. Where do they hire their consultants?”

“Open market, mainly Europe, and—”

“I mean the intel pros. They must have some real spooks.”

“Well, there’s Félix Cortez. That’s only a rumor, but the name’s come up half a dozen times in the past few months.”

“The DGI colonel who disappeared,” Clark observed. The DGI was Cuba’s intelligence service, modeled on the Soviet KGB. Cortez had been reported working with the Macheteros, a Puerto Rican terrorist group that the FBI had largely run to ground in the past few years. Another DGI colonel named Filiberto Ojeda had been arrested by the Bureau, after which Cortez had disappeared. So he’d decided to remain outside his country’s borders. Next question: had Cortez decided to opt for this most vigorous branch of the free-enterprise system or was he still working under Cuban control? Either way, DGI was Russian-trained. Its senior people were graduates of the KGB’s own academy. They were, therefore, opponents worthy of respect. Certainly Cortez was. His file at the Agency spoke of a genius for compromising people to get information.

“Larson know about this?”

“Yeah. He caught the name at a party. Of course, it would help if we knew what the hell Cortez looks like, but all we have is a description that fits half the people south of the Rio Grande. Don’t worry. Larson knows how to be careful, and if anything goes wrong, he’s got his own airplane to get out of Dodge with. His orders are fairly specific on that score. I don’t want to lose a trained field officer doing police work.” Ritter added, “I sent you down for a fresh appraisal. You know what the overall objective is. Tell me what you think is possible.”

“Okay. You’re probably right to go after the airfields and to keep it an intelligence-gathering operation. Given the necessary surveillance assets, we

could finger processing sites fairly easily, but there's a lot of them and their mobility demands a rapid reaction time to get there. I figure that'll work maybe a half-dozen times, max, before the other side wises up. Then we'll take casualties, and if the bad guys get lucky, we might lose a whole assault force—if you've got people thinking in those terms. Tracking the finished product from the processing sites is probably impossible without a whole lot of people on the ground—too many to keep it a covert op for very long—and it wouldn't buy us very much anyway. There are a lot of little airfields on the northern part of the country to keep an eye on, but Larson thinks that they may be victims of their own success. They've been so successful buying off the military and police in that district that they might be falling into a regular pattern of airfield use. If the insertion teams keep a low profile, they could conceivably operate for two months—that may be a little generous—before we have to yank them out. I need to see the teams, see how good they are."

"I can arrange that," Ritter said. He'd already decided to send Clark to Colorado. Clark was the best man to evaluate their capabilities. "Go on."

"What we're setting up will go all right for a month or two. We can watch their aircraft lift off and call it ahead to whoever else is wrapped up in this." This was the only part of the op that Clark knew about. "We can inconvenience them for that long, but I wouldn't hope for much more."

"You're painting a fairly bleak picture, Clark."

Clark leaned forward. "Sir, if you want to run a covert operation to gather usable tactical intelligence against an adversary who's this decentralized in his own operations—yes, it's possible, but only for a limited period of time and only for a limited return. If you increase the assets to try and make it more effective, you're going to get blown sure as hell. You can run an operation like that, but it can't be for long. I don't know why we're even bothering." That wasn't quite true. Clark figured, correctly, that the reason was that it was an election year, but that wasn't the sort of observation a field officer was allowed to make—especially when it was a correct one.

"Why we're bothering isn't strictly your concern," Ritter pointed out. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't have to, and Clark was not a man to be intimidated.

"Fine, but this is not a serious undertaking. It's an old story, sir. Give us a mission we can do, not one we can't. Are we serious about this or aren't we?"

"What do you have in mind?" Ritter asked.

Clark told him. Ritter's face showed little in the way of emotion at the answer to his question. One of the nice things about Clark, Ritter thought to himself, was that he was the only man in the Agency who could discuss these topics calmly and dispassionately—and really mean it. There were quite a few for whom such talk was an interesting intellectual exercise, unprofessional speculation, really, gotten consciously or subconsciously from reading spy fiction. *Gee, wouldn't it be nice if we could* ... It was widely believed in the general public that the Central Intelligence Agency employed a goodly number of expert professionals in this particular field. It didn't. Even the KGB had

gotten away from such things, farming this kind of work out to the Bulgarians—regarded by their own associates as uncouth barbarians—or genuine third-parties like terrorist groups in Europe and the Middle East. The political cost of such operations was too high, and despite the mania for secrecy cultivated by every intelligence service in the world, such things always got out eventually. The world had gotten far more civilized since Ritter had graduated from The Farm on the York River, and while he thought that a genuinely good thing, there were times when a return to the good old days beckoned with solutions to problems that hadn't quite gone away.

"How hard would it be?" Ritter asked, interested.

"With the proper backup and some additional assets—it's a snap." Clark explained what special assets were needed. "Everything they've done plays into our hands. That's the one mistake they've made. They're conventional in their defensive outlook. Same old thing, really. It's a matter of who determines the rules of the game. As things now stand, we both play by the same rules, and those rules, as applied here, give the advantage to the opposition. We never seem to learn that. We always let the other side set the rules. We can annoy them, inconvenience them, take away some of their profit margin, but, hell, given what they already make, it's a minor business loss. I only see one thing changing that."

"Which is?"

"How'd you like to live in a house like that one?" Clark asked, handing over one of his photographs.

"Frank Lloyd Wright meets Ludwig the Mad," Ritter observed with a chuckle.

"The man who commissioned that house is growing quite an ego, sir. They have manipulated whole governments. Everyone says that they *are* a government for all practical purposes. They said the same thing in Chicago during Prohibition, that Capone really ran the town—just one city, right? Well, these people are on their way to running their own *country,* and renting out others. So let's say that they do have the *de facto* power of a government. Factor ego into that. Sooner or later they're going to start acting like one. I know we won't break the rules. But it wouldn't surprise me if they stepped outside them once or twice, just to see what they might get away with. You see what I mean? They keep expanding their own limits, and they haven't found the brick wall yet, the one that tells them where to stop."

"John, you're turning into a psychologist," Ritter noted with a thin smile.

"Maybe so. These guys peddle addictive drugs, right? Mostly they do not use the stuff themselves, but I think they're getting themselves hooked on the most powerful narcotic there is."

"Power."

Clark nodded. "Sooner or later, they're going to OD. At that point, sir, somebody's going to think seriously about what I just proposed. When you get into the majors, the rules change some. That's a political decision, of course."

He was master of all he surveyed. At least that was the phrase that came to mind, and with all such aphorisms it could be both true and false at the same time. The valley into which he looked did not all belong to him; the parcel of land on which he stood was less than a thousand hectares, and his vista included a million. But not one person who lived within his view could continue to live were he to decide otherwise. That was the only sort of power that mattered, and it was a form of power that he had exercised on occasions too numerous to count. A flick of the wrist, a casual remark to an associate, and it was done. It wasn't that he had ever been casual about it—death was a serious business—but he knew that he could be. It was the sort of power that might make a man mad, he knew. He'd seen it happen among his own business associates, to their sorrow on several occasions. But he was a student of the world, and a student of history. Unusually, for someone in his chosen trade, he was the beneficiary of a good education, something forced on him by his late father, one of the pioneers. One of the greatest regrets of his life was that he'd never expressed his gratitude for it. Because of it he understood economics as well as any university professor. He understood market forces and trends. And he understood the historical forces that brought them about. He was a student of Marxism; though he rejected the Marxist outlook for a multiplicity of reasons, he knew that it contained more than one grain of truth intermixed with all the political gibberish. The rest of his professional education had been what Americans called "on-the-job training." While his father had helped invent a whole new way of doing business, he had watched and advised, and taken action. He'd explored new markets, under his father's direction, and formed the reputation of a careful, thorough planner, often sought after but never apprehended. He'd been arrested only once, but after two of the witnesses had died, the others had grown forgetful, ending his direct experience with police and courts.

He deemed himself a carry-over from another age—a classic robber-baron capitalist. A hundred years before, they'd driven railroads across the United States—he was a genuine expert on that country—and crushed anything in their path. Indian tribes—treated like a two-legged version of the plains buffalo and swatted aside. Unions—neutralized with hired thugs. Governments—bribed and subverted. The press—allowed to bray on ... until too many people listened. He'd learned from that example. The local press was no longer terribly outspoken, not after learning that its members were mortal. The railroad barons had built themselves palatial homes—winter ones in New York, and summer "cottages" at Newport. Of course, he had problems that they'd not faced, but any historical model broke down if you took it too far. He also chose to ignore the fact that the Goulds and the Harrimans had built something that was useful, not destructive, to their societies. One other lesson he had learned from the previous century was that cutthroat competition was wasteful. He had persuaded his father to seek out his competitors. Even then his powers of persuasion had been impressive. Cleverly, it had been done at a time when danger from outside forces made cooperation attractive. Better to cooperate, the argument had gone, than to waste time, money, energy, and

blood—and increase their own personal vulnerabilities. And it had worked.

His name was Ernesto Escobedo. He was one of many within the Cartel, but most of his peers would acknowledge that his was a voice to which all listened. They might not all agree, not all bend to his will, but his ideas were always given the attention they deserved because they had proven to be effective ones. The Cartel had no head as such, since the Cartel was not a single enterprise, but rather a collection of leaders who operated in close confederation—almost a committee, but not quite; almost friends, but not that either. The comparison to the American Mafia suggested itself, but the Cartel was both more civilized and more savage than that. Escobedo would have chosen to say that the Cartel was more effectively organized, and more vigorous, both attributes of a young and vital organization, as opposed to one that was older and feudal.

He knew that the sons of the robber barons had used the wealth accumulated by their antecedents to form a power elite, coming to rule their nation with their "service." He was unwilling to leave such a legacy to his sons, however. Besides, he himself was technically one of the second generation. Things moved more quickly now. The accumulation of great wealth no longer demanded a lifetime, and, therefore, Ernesto told himself, he didn't have to leave that to his sons. He could have it all. The first step in accomplishing any goal was deciding that it was possible. He had long since come to that decision.

It was his goal to see it done. Escobedo was forty, a man of uncommon vigor and confidence. He had never used the product which he provided for others, instead altering his consciousness with wine—and that rarely, now. A glass or two with dinner; perhaps some hard liquor at business meetings with his peers, but more often Perrier. This trait earned him more respect among his associates. Escobedo was a sober, serious man, they all knew. He exercised regularly, and paid attention to his appearance. A smoker in his youth, he'd broken the habit young. He watched his diet. His mother was still alive and vigorous at seventy-three; her mother was the same at ninety-one. His father would have been seventy-five last week, he knew, except for ... but the people who'd ended his father's life had paid a savage price for their crime, along with all of their families, mostly at Escobedo's own hand. It was something he remembered with filial pride, taking the last one's wife while her dying husband watched, killing her and the two little ones before his eyes closed for the last time. He took no pleasure in killing women and children, of course, but such things were necessary. He'd shown that one who was the better man, and as word of the feat spread, it had become unlikely that his family would ever be troubled again. He took no pleasure from it, but history taught that harsh lessons made for long memories. It also taught that those who failed to teach such lessons would not be respected. Escobedo demanded respect above all things. His personal involvement in settling that particular account, instead of leaving it to hirelings, had earned him considerable prestige within the organization. Ernesto was a thinker, his associates said, but he knew how to get things done.

His wealth was so great that counting it had no point. He had the godlike

power of life and death. He had a beautiful wife and three fine sons. When the marriage bed palled, he had a choice of mistresses. Every luxury that money could purchase, he had. He had homes in the city below him, this hilltop fortress, and ranches near the sea—both seas, in fact, since Colombia borders on two great oceans. At the ranches were stables full of Arabian horses. Some of his associates had private bull rings, but that sport had never interested him. A crack shot, he had hunted everything that his country offered—including men, of course. He told himself that he ought to be satisfied. But he was not.

The American robber barons had traveled the world, had been invited to the courts of Europe, had married off their progeny to that of noble houses—a cynical exercise, he knew, but somehow a worthy one that he fully understood. The freedoms were denied him, and though the reason for it was plain enough, he was nevertheless offended that a man of his power and wealth could be denied anything. Despite everything that he had accomplished, there were still limits on his life—worse still, the limits were placed there by others of lesser power. Twenty years earlier he had chosen his path to greatness, and despite his obvious success, the fact that he'd chosen that particular path denied him the fruits that he wanted, because lesser men did not approve of it.

It had not always been so. "Law?" one of the great railroad men had said once. "What do I care about law?" And he had gotten away with it, had traveled about at will, had been recognized as a great man.

So why not me? Escobedo asked himself. Part of him knew the answer, but a more powerful part rejected it. He was not a stupid man, far less a foolish one, but he had not come so far to have others set rules upon his life. Ernesto had, in fact, violated every rule he wished, and prospered from it. He had gotten here by making his own rules, the businessman decided. He would have to learn to make some new ones. They would learn to deal with him, on terms of his own choosing. He was tired of having to accommodate the terms of others. Having made the decision, he began to explore methods.

What had worked for others?

The most obvious answer was—success. That which one could not defeat, one had to acknowledge. International politics had as few rules as any other major enterprise, except for the only one that mattered—success. There was not a country in the world that failed to make deals with murderers, after all; it was just that the murderers in question had to be effective ones. Kill a few million people and one was a statesman. Did not every nation in the world kowtow to the Chinese—and had they not killed millions of their own? Didn't America seek to accommodate the Russians—and had they not killed millions of their own? Under Carter, the Americans had supported the regime of Pol Pot, which had killed millions of its own. Under Reagan, America had sought to reach a *modus vivendi* with the same Iranians who had killed so many of their own, including most of those who thought of America as a friend—and been abandoned. America befriended dictators with bloody hands—some on the right and some on the left—in the name of *realpolitik,* while refusing to

support moderates—left or right—because they might not be quite moderate enough. Any country so lacking in principle could come to recognize him and his associates, couldn't it? That was the central truth about America in Ernesto's view. While he had principles from which he would not deviate, America did not.

The corruption of America was manifest to Ernesto. He, after all, fed it. For years now, forces in his largest and most important market had lobbied to legalize his business there. Fortunately they had all failed. That would have been disaster for the Cartel, and was yet another example of how a government lacked the wit to act in its own self-interest. The American government could have made billions from the business—as he and his associates did—but lacked the vision and the good sense to do so. And they called themselves a great power. For all their supposed strength, the *yanquis* had no will, no manhood. He could regulate the goings-on where he lived, but they could not. They could range over oceans, fill the air with warplanes—but use them to protect their own interests? He shook his head with amusement.

No, the Americans were not to be respected.

6.

Deterrence

FELIX CORTEZ TRAVELED with a Costa Rican passport.

If someone noted his Cuban accent, he'd explain that his family had left that country when he was a boy, but by carefully selecting his port of entry, he avoided that notice. Besides, he was working on the accent. Cortez was fluent in three languages—English and Russian in addition to his native Spanish. A raffishly handsome man, his tropical complexion was barely different from a vacationer's tan. The neat mustache and custom-tailored suit proclaimed him a successful businessman, and the gleaming white teeth made him a pleasant one at that. He waited in the immigration line at Dulles International Airport, chatting with the lady behind him until he got to the INS inspector, as resignedly unhurried as any frequent traveler.

"Good afternoon, sir," the inspector said, barely looking up from the passport. "What brings you to America?"

"Business," Cortez replied.

"Uh-huh," the inspector grunted. He flipped through the passport and saw numerous entry stamps. The man traveled a lot, and about half his trips in the previous ... four years were to the States. The stamps were evenly split between Miami, Washington, and Los Angeles. "How long will you be staying?"

"Five days."

"Anything to declare?"

"Just my clothes, and my business notes." Cortez held up his briefcase.

"Welcome to America, Mr. Díaz." The inspector stamped the passport and handed it back.

"Thank you." He moved off to collect his bag, a large and well-used two-suiter. He tried to come through American airports at slack hours. This was less for convenience than because it was unusual for someone who had something to hide. At slack times the inspectors had all the time they needed to annoy people, and the sniffer dogs weren't rushed along the rows of luggage. It was also easier to spot surveillance when the airport concourses were uncrowded, of course, and Cortez/Diaz was an expert at countersurveillance.

His next stop was the Hertz counter, where he rented a full-size Chevy. Cortez had no love for Americans, but he did like their big cars. The routine

was down pat. He used a Visa card. The young lady at the counter asked the usual question about joining the Hertz Number One Club, and he took the proffered brochure with feigned interest. The only reason he used a rental car company more than once was that there weren't enough to avoid repetition. Similarly, he never used the same passport twice, nor the same credit cards. At a place near his home he had an ample supply of both. He had come to Washington to see one of the people who made that possible.

His legs were still stiff as he walked out to get his car—he could have taken the courtesy van, but he'd been sitting for too long. The damp heat of a late spring day reminded him of home. Not that he remembered Cuba all that fondly, but his former government had, after all, given him the training that he needed for his current job. All the school classes on Marxism-Leninism, telling people who scarcely had food to eat that they lived in paradise. In Cortez's case, they'd had the effect of telling him what he wanted out of life. His training in the DGI had given him the first taste of privilege, and the unending political instruction had only made his government look all the more grotesque in its claims and its goals. But he'd played the game, and learned what he'd needed to learn, exchanging his time for training and field work, learning how capitalist societies work, learning how to penetrate and subvert them, learning their strong points and weak ones. The contrast between the two was entertaining to the former colonel. The relative poverty in Puerto Rico had looked like paradise to him, even while working along with fellow Colonel Ojeda and the Machetero savages to overthrow it—and replace it with Cuba's version of socialist realism. Cortez shook his head in amusement as he walked toward the parking lot.

Twenty feet over the Cuban's head, Liz Murray dropped her husband off behind a vanload of travelers. There was barely time for a kiss. She had errands to run, and they'd call Dan's flight in another ten minutes.

"I ought to be back tomorrow afternoon," he said as he got out.

"Good," Liz replied. "Remember the movers."

"I won't." Dan closed the door and took three steps. "I mean, I won't forget, honey ..." He turned in time to see his wife laughing as she drove off; she'd done it to him again. "It's not fair," he grumbled to himself. "Bring you back from London, big promotion, and second day on the job they drop you in the soup." He walked through the self-opening doors into the terminal and found a TV monitor with his flight information. He had only one bag, and that was small enough to carry on. He'd already reviewed the paperwork—it had all been faxed to Washington by the Mobile Field Office and was the subject of considerable talk in the Hoover Building.

The next step was getting through the metal detector. Actually he bypassed it. The attendant gave out the usual, "Excuse me, sir," and Murray held up his ID folder, identifying himself as Daniel E. Murray, Deputy Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. There was no way he could have passed through the magnetometer, not with the Smith & Wesson automatic clipped to his belt, and people in airports tended to get nervous if he showed what he was carrying. Not that he shot that well with it. He hadn't even requalified

yet. That was scheduled for the next week. They weren't so strict about that with top-level FBI management—his main workplace hazard now came from staple pullers—but though Murray was a man with few vanities, shooting skill was one of them. For no particular reason, Murray was worried about that. After four years in London as the legal attaché, he knew that he needed some serious practice before he would shoot "expert" with either hand again, especially with a new gun. His beloved stainless-steel Colt Python .357 was in retirement. The Bureau was switching over to automatics, and on his arrival in his new office he'd found the engraved S&W gift-wrapped on his desk, a present arranged by his friend Bill Shaw, the newly appointed executive assistant director (Investigations). Bill always had been a class act. Murray switched the bag to his left hand and surreptitiously checked to see that the gun was in place, much as an ordinary citizen might check for his wallet. The only bad thing about his London duty was being unarmed. Like any American cop, Murray felt slightly naked without a gun, even though he'd never had cause to use one in anger. If nothing else, he could make sure that this flight didn't go to Cuba. He wouldn't have much chance to do hands-on law enforcement anymore, of course. Now he was part of management, another way of saying that he was too old to be useful, Murray told himself as he selected a seat close to the departure gate. The problem at hand was about as close as he was going to get to handling a real case, and it was happening only because the Director had got hold of the file and called in Bill Shaw who, in turn, had decided that he wanted someone he knew to take a look at it. It promised to be ticklish. They were really starting him off with a cute one.

The flight took just over two hours of routine boredom and a dry meal. Murray was met at the gate by Supervisory Special Agent Mark Bright, assistant special-agent-in-charge of the Mobile Field Office.

"Any other bags, Mr. Murray?"

"Just this one—and the name's Dan," Murray replied. "Has anybody talked to them yet?"

"Not in yet—that is, I don't think so." Bright checked his watch. "They were due in about ten, but they got called in on a rescue last night. Some fishing boat blew up and the cutter had to get the crew off. It made the morning TV news. Nice job, evidently."

"Super," Murray observed. "We're going in to grill a friggin' hero, and he's gone and done it again."

"You know this guy's background?" Bright asked. "I haven't had much chance to—"

"I've been briefed. Hero's the right word. This Wegener's a legend. Red Wegener's called the King of SAR—that means search-and-rescue. Half the people who've ever been to sea, he's saved at one time or another. At least that's the word on the guy. He's got some big-time friends on The Hill, too."

"Like?"

"Senator Billings of Oregon." Murray explained why briefly.

“Chairman of Judiciary. Why couldn’t he just have stayed with Transportation?” Bright asked the ceiling. The Senate Judiciary Committee had oversight duties for the FBI.

“How new are you on this case?”

“I’m here because DEA liaison is my job. I didn’t see the file until just before lunch. Been out of the office for a couple of days,” Bright said as he walked through the door. “We just had a baby.”

“Oh,” Murray noted. You couldn’t blame a man for that. “Congratulations. Everyone all right?”

“Brought Marianne home this morning, and Sandra is the cutest thing I ever saw. Noisy, though.”

Murray laughed. It had been quite a while since he’d had to handle an infant. Bright’s car turned out to be a Ford whose engine purred like a well-fed tiger. Some paperwork on Captain Wegener lay on the front seat. Murray leafed through it while Bright picked his way out of the airport parking lot. It fleshed out what he’d heard in Washington.

“This is some story.”

“How ’bout that.” Bright nodded. “You don’t suppose this is all true, do you?”

“I’ve heard some crazy ones before, but this one would be the all-time champ.” Murray paused. “The funny thing is—”

“Yeah,” the younger agent agreed. “Me, too. Our DEA colleagues believe it, but what broke loose out of this—I mean, even if the evidence is all tossed, what we got out of this is so—”

“Right.” Which was the other reason Murray was involved in the case. “How important was the victim?”

“Big-time political connections, directorships of banks, the University of Alabama, the usual collection of civic groups—you name it. This guy wasn’t just a solid member of the community, he was goddamned Stone Mountain.” Both men knew that was in Georgia, but the point was made. “Old family, back to a Civil War general. His grandfather was a governor.”

“Money?”

Bright grunted. “More than I’d ever need. Big place north of town, still a working farm—plantation, I guess you’d call it, but that’s not where it comes from. He put all the family money into real-estate development. Very successfully as far as we can tell. The development stuff is a maze of small corporations—the usual stuff. We’ve got a team working, but it’ll take awhile to sort through it. Some of the corporate veils are overseas, though, and we may never get it all. You know how that goes. We’ve barely begun to check things out.”

“ ‘Prominent local businessman tied to drug kingpins.’ Christ, he hid things real well. Never had a sniff?”

“Nary a one,” Bright admitted. “Not us, not DEA, not the local cops. Nothing at all.”

Murray closed the file and nodded at the traffic. This was only the opening crack in a case that could develop into man-years of investigative work. *Hell, we don’t even know exactly what we’re looking for yet,* the deputy assistant director told himself. *All we do know is that there was a cold million dollars in used twenties and fifties aboard the good ship* Empire Builder. So much cash could only mean one thing—but that wasn’t true. It could mean lots of things, Murray thought.

“Here we are.”

Getting onto the base was easy enough, and Bright knew the way to the pier. *Panache* looked pretty big from the car, a towering white cliff with a bright-orange stripe and some dark smudgemarks near midships. Murray knew that she was a small ship, but one needed a big ocean to tell. By the time he and Bright got out of the car, someone got on the phone at the head of the gangway, and another man appeared there within seconds. Murray recognized him from the file. It was Wegener.

The man had the muddy remains of what had once been red hair, but was now sprinkled with enough gray to defy an accurate description. He looked fit enough, the FBI agent thought as he came up the aluminum brow, a slight roll at the waist, but little else. A tattoo on his forearm marked him for a sailorman, and the impassive eyes marked the face of a man unaccustomed to questioning of any kind.

“Welcome aboard. I’m Red Wegener,” the man said with enough of a smile to be polite.

“Thank you, Captain. I’m Dan Murray and this is Mark Bright.”

“They told me you were FBI,” the captain observed.

“I’m a deputy assistant director, down from Washington. Mark’s the assistant special-agent-in-charge of the Mobile Office.” Wegener’s face changed a bit, Murray saw.

“Well, I know why you’re here. Let’s go to my cabin to discuss things.”

“What’s with all the scorching?” Dan asked as the captain led off. There was something about the way he’d said that. Something ... odd.

“Shrimp boat had an engine fire. Happened five miles away from us last night while we were on the way in. The fuel tanks blew just as we came alongside. Got lucky. Nobody killed, but the mate was burned some.”

“How about the boat?” Bright asked.

“Couldn’t save her. Getting the crew off was pretty tricky.” Wegener held open the door for his visitors. “Sometimes that’s the best you can do. You gentlemen want any coffee?”

Murray declined. His eyes really bored in on the captain now. More than anything else, Dan thought, he looked embarrassed. Wrong emotion. Wegener

got his guests seated, then took his chair behind the desk.

"I know why you're here," Red announced. "It's all my fault."

"Uh, Captain, before you go any further—" Bright tried to say.

"I've pulled some dumb ones in my time, but this time I really fucked up," Wegener went on as he lit his pipe. "You don't mind if I smoke, do you?"

"No, not at all," Murray lied. He didn't know what was coming, but he knew that it wasn't what Bright thought. He knew several other things that Bright didn't know, also. "Why don't you tell us about it?"

Wegener reached into his desk drawer and pulled something out. He tossed it to Murray. It was a pack of cigarettes.

"One of our friends dropped this on the deck and I had one of my people give this back to them. I figured—well, look at it. I mean, it looks like a pack of cigarettes, right? And when we have people in custody, we're supposed to treat 'em decent, right? So, I let 'em have their smokes. They're joints, of course. So, when we questioned them—especially the one who talked—well, he was high as a kite. That screws it all up, doesn't it?"

"That's not all, Captain, is it?" Murray asked innocently.

"Chief Riley roughed one of 'em up. My responsibility. I talked to the chief about it. The, uh, I forget his name—the obnoxious one—well, he spit on me, and Riley was there, and Riley got a little pissed and roughed him up some. He should not have done it, but this is a military organization, and when you spit on the boss, well, the troops might not like it. So Riley got a little out of hand—but it happened on my ship and it's my responsibility."

Murray and Bright exchanged a look. The suspects hadn't talked about that at all.

"Captain, that's not why we're here exactly," Murray said after a moment.

"Oh?" Wegener said. "Then why?"

"They say that you executed one of them," Bright replied. The stateroom was quiet for a moment. Murray could hear someone hammering on something, but the loudest noise came from the air-conditioning vent.

"They're both alive, aren't they? There were only two of them, and they're both alive. I sent that tape on the helicopter when we searched the yacht. I mean, if they're both alive, which one did we shoot?"

"Hanged," Murray said. "They say you hanged one."

"Wait a minute." He lifted the phone and punched a button. "Bridge, captain speaking. Send the XO to my stateroom. Thank you." The phone went back into place, and Wegener looked up. "If it's all right with you, I want my executive officer to hear this also."

Murray managed to keep his face impassive. *You should have known, Danny,* he told himself. *They've had plenty of time to work out the little details, and Mr. Wegener is nobody's fool. He's got a U.S. senator to hide behind, and he handed us two cold-blooded killers. Even without the confession, there's enough evidence for a*

capital murder case, and if you trash Wegener, you run the risk of losing that. The prominence of the victim—well, the U.S. Attorney won't go for it. No chance.... There wasn't a United States Attorney in all of America who lacked political ambition, and putting these two in the electric chair was worth half a million votes. Murray couldn't run the risk of screwing this case up. FBI Director Jacobs had been a federal prosecutor, and he'd understand. Murray decided that it might make things a lot easier.

The XO appeared a moment later, and after introductions were exchanged, Bright went on with his version of what the subjects had told the local FBI office. It took about five minutes during which Wegener puffed on his pipe and let his eyes go slightly wide.

"Sir," the XO told Bright when he was finished. "I've heard a couple of good sea stories, but that one's the all-time champ."

"It's my fault," Wegener grumbled with a shake of the head. "Lettin' 'em have their pot back."

"How come nobody noticed what they were smoking?" Murray asked, less with curiosity for the answer than for the skill with which it was delivered. He was surprised when the XO replied.

"There's an A/C return right outside the brig. We don't keep a constant watch on prisoners—these were our first, by the way—because that's supposed to be unduly intimidating or something. Anyway, it's in our procedure book that we don't. Besides, we don't have all that many people aboard that we can spare 'em. What with the smoke getting sucked out, nobody noticed the smell until that night. Then it was too late. When we brought them into the wardroom for questioning—one at a time; that's in the book, too—they were both kinda glassy-eyed. The first one didn't talk. The second one did. You have the tape, don't you?"

"Yes, I've seen it," Bright answered.

"Then you saw that we read them their rights, right off the card we carry, just like it says. But—hung 'em? Damn. That's crazy. I mean, that's really crazy. We don't—I mean, we can't. I don't even know when it was legal to do it."

"The last time I know about was 1843," the captain said. "The reason there's a Naval Academy at Annapolis is because some people got strung up on USS Somers. One of them was the son of the Secretary of War. Supposedly it was an attempted mutiny, but there was quite a stink about it. We don't hang people anymore," Wegener concluded wryly. "I've been in the service a long time, but I don't go that far back."

"We can't even have a general court-martial," the XO added. "Not by ourselves, I mean. The manual for that weighs about ten pounds. Gawd, you need a judge, and real lawyers, all that stuff. I've been in the service for almost nine years, and I've never even seen a real one—just the practice things in law classes at the Academy. All we ever do aboard is Captain's Mast, and not much of that."

“Not a bad idea, though. I wouldn’t have minded hanging those sons of bitches,” Wegener observed. It struck Murray as a very strange, and very clever, thing to say. He felt a little sorry for Bright, who’d probably never had a case go this way. In that sense Murray was grateful for his time as legal attaché in London. He understood politics better than most agents.

“Oh?”

“When I was a little kid, they used to hang murderers. I grew up in Kansas. And you know, there weren’t many murders back then. Course, we’re too civilized to do that now, and so we got murders every damned day. Civilized,” Wegener snorted. “XO, did they ever hang pirates like this?”

“I don’t think so. Blackbeard’s crew was tried at Williamsburg—ever been there?—the old courthouse in the tourist part of the place. I remember hearing that they were actually hung where one of the Holiday Inns is. And Captain Kidd was taken home to England for hanging, wasn’t he? Yeah, they had a place called Execution Dock or something like that. So—no, I don’t think they really did it aboard ship, even in the old days. Damn sure we didn’t do it. Christ, what a story.”

“So it never happened,” Murray said, not in the form of a question.

“No, sir, it did not,” Wegener replied. The XO nodded to support his captain.

“And you’re willing to say that under oath.”

“Sure. Why not?”

“If it’s all right with you, I also need to speak to one of your chiefs. It’s the one who ‘assaulted’ the—”

“Is Riley aboard?” Wegener asked the XO.

“Yeah. Him and Portagee were working on something or other down in the goat locker.”

“Okay, let’s go see ’em.” Wegener rose and waved for his visitors to follow.

“You need me, sir? I have some work to do.”

“Sure thing, XO. Thanks.”

“Aye aye. See you gentlemen later,” the lieutenant said, and disappeared around a corner.

The walk took longer than Murray expected. They had to detour around two work parties who were repainting bulkheads. The chiefs’ quarters—called the goat locker for reasons ancient and obscure—was located aft. Riley and Oreza, the two most senior chiefs aboard, shared the cabin nearest the small compartment where they and their peers ate in relative privacy. Wegener got to the open door and found a cloud of smoke. The bosun had a cigar clamped in his teeth while his oversized hands were trying to manipulate a ridiculously small screwdriver. Both men came to their feet when the captain appeared.

“Relax. What the hell you got there?”

“Portagee found it.” Riley handed it over. “It’s a real old one and we’ve been trying to fix it.”

“How does 1778 grab you, sir?” Oreza asked. “A sextant made by Henry Edgworth. Found it in an old junk shop. It might be worth a few bucks if we can get it cleaned up.”

Wegener gave it a close look. “1778, you said?”

“Yes, sir. That makes it one of the oldest-model sextants. The glass is all broke, but that’s easy to fix. I know a museum that pays top dollar for these—but then I might just keep it myself, of course.”

“We got some company,” Wegener said, getting back to business. “They want to talk about the two people we picked up.”

Murray and Bright held up their ID cards. Dan noticed a phone in the compartment. The XO, he realized, might have called to warn them what was coming. Riley’s cigar hadn’t dropped an ash yet.

“No problem,” Oreza said. “What are you guys going to do with the bastards?”

“That’s up to the U.S. Attorney,” Bright said. “We’re supposed to help put the case together, and that means we have to establish what you people did when you apprehended them.”

“Well, you want to talk to Mr. Wilcox, sir. He was in command of the boarding party,” Riley said. “We just did what he told us.”

“Lieutenant Wilcox is on leave,” the captain pointed out.

“What about after you brought them aboard?” Bright asked.

“Oh, that,” Riley admitted. “Okay, I was wrong, but that little cocksucker—I mean, he spit on the captain, sir, and you just don’t do that kinda shit, y’know? So I roughed him up some. Maybe I shouldn’t have done it, but maybe that little prick oughta have manners, too.”

“That’s not what we’re here about,” Murray said after a moment. “He says you hanged him.”

“Hung him? What from?” Oreza asked.

“I think you call it the yardarm.”

“You mean—hang, like in, well, *hang?* Around the neck, I mean?” Riley asked.

“That’s right.”

The bosun’s laugh rumbled like an earthquake. “Sir, if I ever hung somebody, he wouldn’t go around bitchin’ about it the next day.”

Murray repeated the story as he’d heard it, almost word for word. Riley shook his head.

“That’s not the way it’s done, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

“You say that the little one said that the last thing he saw was his friend swinging back and forth, right? That ain’t the way it’s done.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“When you hang somebody aboard ship, you tie his feet together and run a downhaul line—you tie that off to the rail or a stanchion so he don’t swing around. You gotta do that, sir. You have something that weight-well, over a hundred pounds—swinging around like that, it’ll break things. So what you do is, you two-block him—that means you run him right up to the block—that’s the pulley, okay?—and you got the downhaul to keep him in place real snug like. Otherwise it just ain’t shipshape. Hell, everybody knows that.”

“How do you know that?” Bright asked, trying to hide his exasperation.

“Sir, you lower boats into the water, or you rig stuff on this ship, and that’s my job. We call it seamanship. I mean, say you had some piece of gear that weighs as much as a man, okay? You want it swinging around loose like a friggin’ chandelier on a long chain? Christ, it’d eventually hit the radar, tear it right off the mast. We had a storm that night, too. Nah, the way they did it in the old days was just like a signal hoist—line on top of the hoist and a line on the bottom, tie it off nice and tight so it don’t go noplace. Hey, somebody in the deck division leaves stuff flapping around like that, I tear him a new asshole. Gear is expensive. We don’t go around breaking it for kicks, sir. What do you think, Portagee?”

“He’s right. That was a pretty good blow we had that night—didn’t the captain tell you?—the only reason we still had the punks aboard was that we waved off the helo pickup ’cause of the weather. We didn’t have any work parties out on deck that night, did we?”

“No chance,” Riley said. “We buttoned up tight that night. What I mean, sir, is we can go out and work even in a damned hurricane if we have to, but unless you gotta, you don’t go screwin’ around on the weather decks during a gale. It’s dangerous. You lose people that way.”

“How bad was it that night?” Murray asked.

“Some of the new kids spent the night with their heads in the thunderjugs. The cook decided to serve chops that night, too.” Oreza laughed. “That’s how we learned, ain’t it, Bob?”

“Only way,” Riley agreed.

“So there wasn’t a court-martial that night either?”

“Huh?” Riley appeared genuinely puzzled for a moment, then his face brightened. “Oh, you mean we gave ‘em a fair trial, then hung ’em, like in the old beer commercial?”

“Just one of them,” Murray said helpfully.

“Why not both? They’re both fuckin’ murderers, ain’t they? Hey, sir, I was aboard that yacht, all right? I seen what they did—have you? It’s a real mess. You see something like that all the time, maybe. I never have, and—well, I don’t mind tellin’ you, sir, it shook me up some. You want ‘em hung, yeah, I’ll

do it and they won't bitch about it the next day, either. Okay, maybe I shouldn't 'a snapped the one over the rail—lost my cool, and I shouldn't have—okay, I'm sorry about that. But those two little fucks took out a whole family, probably did some rapin', too. I got a family, too, y'know? I got daughters. So does Portagee. You want us to shed tears over those two fuckers, you come to the wrong place, sir. You sit 'em in the electric chair and I'll throw the switch for you."

"So you didn't hang him?" Murray asked.

"Sir, I wish I'd'a thought of it," Riley announced. It was, after all, Oreza who'd thought of it.

Murray looked at Bright, whose face was slightly pink by this time. It had gone even more smoothly than he'd expected. Well, he'd been told that the captain was a clever sort. You didn't give command of a ship to a jerk—at least you weren't supposed to.

"Okay, gentlemen, I guess that answers all the questions we have for the moment. Thank you for your cooperation." A moment later, Wegener was leading them away.

The three men stopped at the gangway for a moment. Murray motioned for Bright to head for the car, then turned to the captain.

"You actually operate helicopters off that deck up there?"

"All the time. I just wish we had one of our own."

"Could I see it before I leave? I've never been aboard a cutter before."

"Follow me." In less than a minute, Murray was standing in the center of the deck, directly on the crossed yellow lines painted on the black no-skid deck coating. Wegener was explaining how the lights at the control station worked, but Murray was looking at the mast, drawing an imaginary line from the yardarm to the deck. *Yeah,* he decided, *you could do it easy enough.*

"Captain, for your sake I hope you never do anything this crazy again."

Wegener turned in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"We both know what I mean."

"You believe what those two—"

"Yes, I do. A jury wouldn't—at least I don't think one would, though you can never really tell what a jury will believe. But you did it. I know—you can't say anything...."

"What makes you think—"

"Captain, I've been in the Bureau for twenty-six years. I've heard lots of crazy stories, some real, some made up. You gradually get a feel for what's real and what isn't. The way it looks to me, you could run a piece of rope from that pulley up there, down to here pretty easy, and if you're taking the seas right, having a man swing wouldn't matter much. It sure wouldn't hurt the radar antenna that Riley was so worried about. Like I said, don't do it again. This one's a freebie because we can prosecute the case without the evidence

you got for us. Don't push it. Well, I'm sure you won't. You found out that there was more to this one than you thought, didn't you?"

"I was surprised that the victim was—"

"Right. You opened a great big can of worms without getting your hands too dirty. You were lucky. Don't push it," Murray said again.

"Thank you, sir."

One minute after that, Murray was back in the car. Agent Bright was still unhappy.

"Once upon a time, when I was a brand-new agent fresh out of the Academy, I was assigned to Mississippi," Murray said. "Three civil-rights workers disappeared, and I was a very junior member of the team that cleared the case. I didn't do much of anything other than hold Inspector Fitzgerald's coat. Ever hear about Big Joe?"

"My dad worked with him," Bright answered.

"Then you know that Joe was a character, a real old-time cop. Anyway, the word got to us that the local Klukkers were mouthing off about how they were gonna kill a few agents—you know the stories, how they were harassing some families and stuff like that. Joe got a little pissed. Anyway, I drove him out to see—forget the mutt's name, but he was the Grand Kleagle of the local Klavern and he was the one with the biggest mouth. He was sitting under a shady tree in his front lawn when we pulled up. He had a shotgun next to the chair, and he was half in the bag from booze already. Joe walks up to him. The mutt starts to pick up the shotgun, but Joe just stared him down. Fitzgerald could do that; he put three guys in the ground and you could see in his face that he'd done it. I got a little worried, had my hand on my revolver, but Joe just stared him down and told him if there was any more talk about offing an agent, or any more shitty phone calls to wives and kids, Big Joe was going to come back and kill him, right there in his front yard. Didn't shout or anything, just said it like he was ordering breakfast. The Kleagle believed him. So did I. Anyway, all that loose talk ended.

"What Joe did was illegal as hell," Murray went on. "Sometimes the rules get bent. I've done it. So have you."

"I've never—"

"Don't get your tits in a flutter, Mark. I said 'bent,' not broken. The rules do not anticipate all situations. That's why we expect agents to exercise judgment. That's how society works. In this case, those Coasties broke loose some valuable information, and the only way we can use it is if we ignore how they got it. No real harm was done, because the subjects will be handled as murderers, and all the evidence we need is physical. Either they fry or they cop to the murders and cooperate by again giving us all the information that the good Captain Wegener scared out of 'em. Anyway, that's what they decided in D.C. It's too embarrassing to everyone to make an issue of what we discussed aboard the cutter. Do you really think a local jury would—"

"No," Bright admitted at once. "It wouldn't take much of a lawyer to blow it

apart, and even if he didn't—"

"Exactly. We'd just be spinning our wheels. We live in an imperfect world, but I don't think that Wegener will ever make that mistake again."

"Okay." Bright didn't like it, but that was beside the point.

"So what we do now is figure out exactly why this poor bastard and his family got themselves murdered by a sicario and his spear-carrier. You know, when I was chasing wise guys up in New York, nobody messed with families. You didn't even kill a guy in front of his family except to make a special kind of point."

"Not much in the way of rules for the druggies," Bright pointed out.

"Yeah—and I used to think terrorists were bad."

It was so much easier than his work with the Macheteros, Cortez thought. Here he was, sitting in the corner booth of a fine, expensive restaurant with a ten-page wine list in his hands—Cortez thought himself an authority on wines—instead of a rat-infested barrio shack eating beans and mouthing revolutionary slogans with people whose idea of Marxism was robbing banks and making heroic taped pronouncements that the local radio stations played between the rock songs and commercials. America had to be the only place in the world, he thought, where poor people drove their own cars to demonstrations and the longest lines they stood in were at the supermarket check-out.

He selected an obscure estate label from the Loire Valley for dinner. The wine steward clicked his ballpoint in approval as he retrieved the list.

Cortez had grown up in a place where the poor people—which category included nearly everyone—scrounged for shoes and bread. In America, the poor areas were the ones where people indulged drug habits that required hundreds of cash dollars per week. It was more than bizarre to the former colonel. In America drugs spread from the slums to the suburbs, bringing prosperity to those who had what others wanted.

Which was essentially what happened on the international scale also, of course. The yanquis, ever niggardly in their official aid to their less prosperous neighbors, now flooded them with money, but on what the Americans liked to call a people-to-people basis. That was good for a laugh. He didn't know or care how much the *yanqui* government gave to its friends, but he was sure that ordinary citizens—so bored with their comfortable lives that they needed chemical stimulation—gave far more, and did so without strings on "human rights." He'd spent so many years as a professional intelligence officer, trying to find a way to demean America, to damage its stature, lessen its influence. But he'd gone about it in the wrong way, Félix had come to realize. He'd tried to use Marxism to fight capitalism despite all the evidence that showed what worked and what did not. He could, however, use capitalism against itself, and fulfill his original mission while enjoying all the benefits of the very system that he was hurting. And the oddest part of all: his former employers

thought him a traitor because he had found a way that worked....

The man opposite him was a fairly typical American, Cortez thought. Overweight from too much good food, careless about cleaning his expensive clothing. Probably didn't polish his shoes either. Cortez remembered going barefoot for much of his youth, and thinking himself fortunate to have three shirts to call his own. This man drove an expensive car, lived in a comfortable flat, had a job that paid enough for ten DGI colonels—and it wasn't enough. That was America right there—whatever one had, it was never enough.

"So what do you have for me?"

"Four possible prospects. All the information is in my briefcase."

"How good are they?" Cortez asked.

"They all meet your guidelines," the man answered. "Haven't I always—"

"Yes, you are most reliable. That is why we pay you so much."

"Nice to be appreciated, Sam," the man said with a trace of smugness.

Félix—Sam to his dinner partner—had always appreciated the people with whom he worked. He appreciated what they could do. He appreciated the information they provided. But he despised them for the weaklings they were. Still, an intelligence officer—and that remained the way he thought of himself—couldn't be too picky. America abounded with people like this one. Cortez did not reflect on the fact that he, too, had been bought. He deemed himself a skilled professional, perhaps something of a mercenary, but that was in keeping with an honored tradition, wasn't it? Besides, he was doing what his former masters had always wanted him to do, more effectively than had ever been possible with the DGI, and someone else was doing the paying. In fact, ultimately the Americans themselves paid his salary.

Dinner passed without incident. The wine was every bit as excellent as he'd expected, but the meat was overdone and the vegetables disappointing. Washington, he thought, was overrated as a city of restaurants. On his way out he simply picked up his companion's briefcase and walked to his car. The drive back to his hotel took twenty leisurely minutes. After that, he spent several hours going over the documents. The man was reliable, Cortez reflected, and earned his appreciation. Each of the four was a solid prospect.

His recruiting effort would begin tomorrow.

7.

Knowns and Unknowns

IT HAD TAKEN a week to get accustomed to the altitude, as Julio had promised. Chavez eased out of the suspenders pack. It wasn't a fully loaded one yet, only twenty-five pounds, but they were taking their time, almost easing people into the conditioning program instead of using a more violent approach. That suited the sergeant, still breathing a little hard after the eight-mile run. His shoulders hurt some, and his legs ached in the usual way, but around him there was no sound of retching, and there hadn't been any dropouts this time around. Just the usual grumbles and curses.

"That wasn't so bad," Julio said without gasping. "But I still say that getting laid is the best workout there is."

"You got that one right," Chavez agreed with a laugh. "All those unused muscle groups, as the free-weight guys say."

The best thing about the training camp was the food. For lunch in the field they had to eat MRE packs—"Meal Ready to Eat," which was three lies for the price of one—but breakfast and supper selections were always well prepared in the camp's oversized kitchen. Chavez invariably selected as large a bowl of fresh fruits as he could get away with, heavily laced with white sugar for energy, along with the usual Army coffee whose caffeine content always seemed augmented to give you that extra wake-up punch. He laid into his bowl of diced grapefruit, oranges, and damned near everything else with gusto while his tablemates attacked their greasy eggs and bacon. Chavez went back to the line for some hash-browns. He'd heard that carbohydrates were also good for energy, and now that he was almost accustomed to the altitude, the thought of grease for breakfast didn't bother him that much.

Things were going well. Work here was hard, but there was nothing in the way of Mickey Mouse bullshit. Everyone here was an experienced pro, and they were being treated as such. No energy was being wasted on bed-making; the sergeants all knew how, and if a blanket corner wasn't quite tucked in, peer pressure set things right without the need for shouting from a superior officer. They were all young men, as serious about their work as they knew how to be, but there was a spirit of fun and adventure. They still didn't know exactly what they were training for. There was the inevitable speculation, whispering between bunks that gradually transformed to a symphony of snoring at night after agreement on some wildly speculative idea.

Though an uneducated man, Chavez was not a stupid one. Somehow he

knew that all of the theories were wrong. Afghanistan was all over; they couldn't be going there. Besides, everyone here spoke fluent Spanish. He mulled over it again while chewing a mouthful of kiwi fruit—a treat he hadn't known to exist a week before. High altitude—they weren't training them here for the fun of it. That eliminated Cuba and Panama. Nicaragua, perhaps. How high were the mountains there? Mexico and the other Central American nations had mountains, too. Everyone here was a sergeant. Everyone here had led a squad, and had done training at one level or other. Everyone here was a light infantryman. Probably they'd be dispatched on some special training mission, therefore, training other light-fighters. That made it counterinsurgency. Of course, every country south of the Rio Grande had one sort of guerrilla problem or other. They resulted from the inequities of the individual governments and economies, but to Chavez the explanation was simpler and to the point—those countries were all fucked up. He'd seen enough of that in his trips with his battalion to Honduras and Panama. The local towns were dirty—they'd made his home barrio seem paradise on earth. The police—well, he'd never thought that he would come to admire the LAPD. But it was the local armies that had earned his *especial* contempt. Bunch of lazy, incompetent bullies. Not much different from street gangs, as a matter of fact, except that they all carried the same sort of guns (the L.A. gangs tended toward individualism). Weapons skills were about the same. It didn't require very much for a soldier to butt-stroke some poor bastard with his rifle. The officers—well, he hadn't seen anyone to compare with Lieutenant Jackson, who loved to run with his men and didn't mind getting all dirty and smelly like a real soldier. But inevitably it was the sergeants down there who earned his fullest contempt. It had been that paddy Sergeant McDevitt in Korea who'd shown Ding Chavez the light—skill and professionalism equaled pride. And, when you got down to it, pride truly earned was all there was to a man. Pride was what kept you going, what kept you from caving in on those goddamned mountainside runs. You couldn't let down your friends. You couldn't let your friends see you for something less than you wanted to be. That was the short version of everything he had learned in the Army, and he knew that the same could be said of all the men in this room. What they were preparing for, therefore, was to train others to do the same. So their mission was a fairly conventional Army mission. For some reason or other—probably political, but Chavez didn't worry about political stuff; never made much sense anyway—it was a secret mission. He was smart enough to know that this kind of hush-hush preparation meant CIA. He was correct on that judgment. It was the mission he was wrong on.

Breakfast ended at the normal time. The men rose from their tables, taking their trays and dishes to the stacking table before proceeding outside. Most made pit stops and many, including Chavez, changed into clean, dry T-shirts. The sergeant wasn't overly fastidious, but he did prefer the crisp, clean smell of a newly washed shirt. There was an honest-to-God laundry service here. Chavez decided that he'd miss the camp, altitude and all. The air, if thin, was clean and dry. Each day they'd hear the lonely wail of diesel horns from the trains that entered the Moffat Tunnel, whose entrance they'd see on their twice-daily runs. Often in the evening they'd catch the distant sight of the

double-deck cars of an Amtrak train heading east to Denver. He wondered what hunting was like here. What did they hunt? Deer, maybe? They'd seen a bunch of them, big mule deer, but also the curious white shapes of mountain goats racing up sheer rock walls as the soldiers approached. Now, those fuckers were really in shape, Julio had noted the previous day. But Chavez dismissed the thought after a moment. The animals he hunted had only two legs. And shot back if you weren't careful.

The four squads formed up on time. Captain Ramirez called them to attention and marched them off to their separate area, about half a mile east of the main camp at the far end of the flat bottom of the high valley. Waiting for them was a black man dressed in T-shirt and dark shorts, both of which struggled to contain bulging muscles.

"Good morning, people," the man said. "I am Mr. Johnson. Today we will begin some real mission-oriented training. All of you have had training in hand-to-hand combat. My job is to see how good you are, and to teach you some new tricks that your earlier training may have left out. Killing somebody silently isn't all that hard. The tricky part is getting close enough to do it. We all know that." Johnson's hands slipped behind his back as he talked on for a moment. "This is another way to kill silently."

His hands came into view holding a pistol with a large, canlike device affixed to the front. Before Chavez had told himself that it was a silencer, Johnson brought it around in both hands and fired it three times. It was a very good silencer, Ding noted immediately. You could barely hear the metallic clack of the automatic's slide—quieter, in fact, than the tinkle of glass from the three bottles that disintegrated twenty feet away—and you couldn't hear the sound of the shot at all. Impressive.

Johnson gave them all a mischievous grin. "You don't get your hands all bruised, either. Like I said, you all know hand-to-hand, and we're going to work on that. But I've been around the block a few times, just like you people, and let's not dick around the issue. Armed combat beats unarmed any day of the week. So today we're going to learn a whole new kind of fighting: silent *armed* combat." He bent down and flipped the blanket off a submachine gun. It, too, appeared to have a silencer on the muzzle. Chavez reproached himself for his earlier speculation. Whatever the mission was, it wasn't about training.

Vice Admiral James Cutter, USN, was a patrician. At least he looked like one, Ryan thought—tall and spare, his hair going a regal silver, and a confident smile forever fixed on his pink-scrubbed face. Certainly he acted like one—or thought he did, Jack corrected himself. It was Ryan's view that truly important people didn't go out of their way to act like it. It wasn't as though being the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs was the same as a peerage. Ryan knew a few people who actually had them. Cutter came from one of those old swamp-Yankee families which had grown rocks on their New England farmsteads for generations, then turned to the mercantile trade, and, in Cutter's case, sent its surplus sons to sea. But Cutter was the sort of sailor for whom the sea was a means to an end. More than half of his career

had been spent in the Pentagon, and that, Ryan thought, was no place for a proper sailor. He'd had all the necessary commands, Jack knew. First a destroyer, then a cruiser. Each time he'd done his job well—well enough to be noticed, which must have been the important part. Plenty of outstanding officers' careers stopped cold at captain's rank because they'd failed to be noticed by a high-enough patron. What had Cutter done to make him stick out from the crowd ... ?

Polished up the knocker faithfully, perhaps? Jack wondered as he finished his briefing.

Not that it mattered now. The President had noticed him on Jeff Pelt's staff, and on Pelt's return to academia—the International Relations chair at the University of Virginia—Cutter had slipped into the job as neatly as a destroyer coming alongside the pier. He sat behind his desk in a neatly tailored suit, sipping his coffee from a mug with uss BELKNAP engraved on it, the better to remind people that he'd commanded that cruiser once. In case the casual visitor missed that one—there were few casual visitors to the National Security Adviser's office—the wall on the left was liberally covered with plaques of the ships he'd served on, and enough signed photographs for a Hollywood agent's office. Naval officers call this phenomenon the I LOVE ME! wall, and while most of them have one, they usually keep it at home.

Ryan didn't like Cutter very much. He hadn't liked Pelt either, but the difference was that Pelt was almost as smart as he thought he was. Cutter was not even close. The three-star Admiral was in over his head, but had not the sense to know it. The bad news was that while Ryan was also a Special Assistant To, it was not To the President. That meant he had to report to Cutter whether he liked it or not. With his boss in the hospital, that task would be a frequent occurrence.

"How's Greer?" the man asked. He spoke with a nasal New England accent that ought to have died a natural death long before, though it was one thing that Ryan didn't mind. It reminded him of his undergraduate days at Boston College.

"They're not through with the tests yet." Ryan's voice betrayed his worries. It looked like pancreatic cancer, the survival rate for which was just about zero. He'd checked with Cathy about that, and had tried to get his boss to Johns Hopkins, but Greer was Navy, which meant going to Bethesda. Though Bethesda Naval Medical Center was the Navy's number-one hospital, it wasn't Johns Hopkins.

"And you're going to take over for him?" Cutter asked.

"That is in rather poor taste, Admiral," Bob Ritter answered for his companion. "In Admiral Greer's absence, Dr. Ryan will represent him from time to time."

"If you handle that as well as you've handled this briefing, we ought to get along just fine. Shame about Greer. Hope things work out." There was about as much emotion in his voice as one needed to ask directions.

You're a warm person, aren't you? Ryan thought to himself as he closed his briefcase. *I bet the crew of the* Belknap *just loved you.* But Cutter wasn't paid to be warm. He was paid to advise the President. And Ryan was paid to brief him, not to love him.

Cutter wasn't a fool. Ryan had to admit that also. He was not an expert in the area of Ryan's own expertise, nor did he have Pelt's cardsharp's instinct for political wheeling and dealing behind the scene—and, unlike Pelt, Cutter liked to operate without consulting the State Department. He sure as hell didn't understand how the Soviet Union worked. The reason he was sitting in that high-back chair, behind that dark-oak desk, was that he was a reputed expert in other areas, and evidently those were the areas in which the President had most of his current interest. Here Ryan's intellect failed him. He came back to his brief on what KGB was up to in Central Europe instead of following that idea to its logical conclusion. Jack's other mistake was more basic. Cutter knew that he wasn't the man Jeff Pelt had been, and Cutter wanted to change all that.

"Nice to see you again, Dr. Ryan. Good brief. I'll bring that matter to the President's attention. Now if you'll excuse us, the DDO and I have something to discuss."

"See you back at Langley, Jack," Ritter said. Ryan nodded and left. The other two waited for the door to close behind him. Then the DDO presented his own brief on Operation SHOWBOAT. It lasted twenty minutes.

"So how do we coordinate this?" the Admiral asked Ritter.

"The usual. About the only good thing that came out of the Desert One fiasco was that it proved how secure satellite communications were. Ever see the portable kind?" the DDO asked. "It's standard equipment for the light forces."

"No, just the ones aboard ship. They're not real portable."

"Well, it has a couple of pieces, an X-shaped antenna and a little wire stand that looks like it's made out of a couple of used coat hangers. There's a new backpack only weighs fifteen pounds, including the handset, and it even has a Morse key in case the sender doesn't want to talk too loud. Single sideband, super-encrypted UHF. That's as secure as communications get."

"But what about keeping them covert?" Cutter was worried about that.

"If the region was heavily populated," Ritter explained tiredly, "the opposition wouldn't be using it. Moreover, they operate mainly at night for the obvious reason. So our people will belly-up during the day and only move around at night. They are trained and equipped for that. Look, we've been thinking about this for some time. These people are very well trained already, and we're—"

"Resupply?"

"Helicopter," Ritter said. "Special-ops people down in Florida."

"I still think we should use Marines."

“The Marines have a different mission. We’ve been over this, Admiral. These kids are better trained, they’re better equipped, most of them have been into areas like this one, and it’s a hell of a lot easier to get them into the program without anybody noticing,” Ritter explained for what must have been the twentieth time. Cutter wasn’t one to listen to the words of others. His own opinions were evidently too loud. The DDO wondered how the President fared, but that question needed no answer. A presidential whisper carried more weight than a scream from anyone else. The problem was, the President so often depended on idiots to make his wishes a reality. Ritter would not have been surprised to learn that his opinion of the National Security Adviser matched that of Jack Ryan; it was just that Ryan could not know why.

“Well, it’s your operation,” Cutter said after a moment. “When does it start?”

“Three weeks. Just had a report last night. Things are going along just fine. They already had all the basic skills we needed. It’s only a matter of honing a few special ones and adding a few refinements. We’ve been lucky so far. Haven’t even had anybody hurt up there.”

“How long have you had that place, anyway?”

“Thirty years. It was supposed to have been an air-defense radar installation, but the funding got cut off for some reason or other. The Air Force turned it over to us, and we’ve been using it to train agents ever since. It doesn’t show up on any of the OMB site lists. It belongs to an offshore corporation that we use for various things. During the fall we occasionally lease it out as a hunting camp, would you believe? It even shows a profit for us, which is another reason why it doesn’t show on the OMB list. Is that covert enough? Came in real useful during Afghanistan, though, doing the same thing we’re doing now, and nobody ever found out about it....”

“Three weeks.”

Ritter nodded. “Maybe a touch longer. We’re still working on coordinating the satellite intelligence, and our assets on the ground.”

“Will it all work?” Cutter asked rhetorically.

“Look, Admiral, I’ve told you about that. If you want some magical solution to give to the President, we don’t have it. What we can do is sting them some. The results will look good in the papers, and, hell, maybe we’ll end up saving a life or two. Personally, I think it’s worth doing even if we don’t get much of a return.”

The nice thing about Ritter, Cutter thought, was that he didn’t state the obvious. There would be a return. Everyone knew what that was all about. The mission was not an exercise in cynicism, though some might see it as such.

“What about the radar coverage?”

“There are only two aircraft coming on line. They’re testing a new system called LPI—Low Probability of Intercept—radar. I don’t know all the details, but because of a combination of frequency agility, reduced side-lobes, and

relatively low power output, it's damned hard to detect the emissions from the set. That will invalidate the ESM equipment that the opposition has started using. So we can use our assets on the ground to stake out between four and six of the covert airfields, and let us know when a shipment is en route. The modified E-2s will establish contact with them south of Cuba and pace them all the way in till they're intercepted by the F-15 driver I told you about. He's a black kid—hell of a fighter jock, they say. Comes from New York. His mother got mugged by a druggie up there. It was a bad one. She got all torn up, and eventually died. She was one of those ghetto success stories that you never hear about. Three kids, all of them turned out pretty well. The fighter pilot is a very angry kid at the moment. He'll work for us, and he won't talk."

"Right," Cutter said skeptically. "What about if he develops a conscience later on and—"

"The boy told me that he'd shoot all the bastards down if we wanted him to. A druggie killed his mother. He wants to get even, and he sees this as a good way. There are a lot of sensitive projects underway at Eglin. His fighter is cut loose from the rest as part of the LPI Radar project. It's two Navy airplanes carrying the radar, and we've picked the flight crews—pretty much the same story on them. And remember—after we have lock-on from the F-15, the radar aircraft shuts down and leaves. So if Bronco—that's the kid's name—does have to splash the inbound druggie, nobody'll know about it. Once we get them on the ground, the flight crews will have the living shit scared out of them. I worked out the details on that part myself. If some people have to disappear—I don't expect it—that can be arranged, too. The Marines there are all special-ops types. One of my people will pretend he's a fed, and the judge we take them to is the one the President—"

"I know that part." It was odd, Cutter thought, how ideas grow. First the President had made an intemperate remark after learning that the cousin of a close friend had died of a drug overdose. He'd talked about it with Ritter, gotten an idea, and mentioned it to the President. A month after that, a plan had started to grow. Two months more and it was finalized. A secret Presidential Finding was written and in the files—there were only four copies of it, each of which was locked up tight. Now things were starting to move. It was past the time for second thoughts, Cutter told himself weakly. He'd been involved in all the planning discussions, and still the operation had somehow leaped unexpectedly to full flower....

"What can go wrong?" he asked Ritter.

"Look, in field operations anything can go wrong. Just a few months ago a crash operation went bad because of an illegal turn—"

"That was KGB," Cutter said. "Jeff Pelt told me about that one."

"We are not immune. Shit happens, as they say. What we can do, we've done. Every aspect of the operation is compartmentalized. On the air part, for example, the fighter pilot doesn't know the radar aircraft or its people—for both sides it's just call signs and voices. The people on the ground don't know what aircraft are involved. The people we're putting in-country will get

instructions from satellite radios—they won't even know where from. The people who insert them won't know why they're going or where the orders come from. Only a handful of people will know everything. The total number of people who know anything at all is less than a hundred, and only ten know the whole story. I can't make it any tighter than that. Now, either it's a Go-Mission or it's not. That's your call, Admiral Cutter. I presume," Ritter added for effect, "that you've fully briefed the President."

Cutter had to smile. It was not often, even in Washington, that a man could speak the truth and lie at the same time: "Of course, Mr. Ritter."

"In writing," Ritter said next.

"No."

"Then I call the operation off," the DDO said quietly. "I won't be left hanging on this one."

"But I will?" Cutter observed. He didn't allow anger to creep into his voice, but his face conveyed the message clearly enough. Ritter made the obvious maneuver.

"Judge Moore requires it. Would you prefer that he ask the President himself?"

Cutter was caught short. His job, after all, was to insulate the President. He'd tried to pass that onus to Ritter and/or Judge Moore, but found himself outmaneuvered in his own office. Someone had to be responsible for everything; bureaucracy or not, it always came down to one person. It was rather like a game of musical chairs. Someone was always left standing. That person was called the loser. For all his skills, Vice Admiral Cutter had found himself without a seat on that last chair. His naval training, of course, had taught him to take responsibilities, but though Cutter called himself a naval officer, and thought of himself as one—without wearing the uniform, of course—responsibility was something he'd managed to avoid for years. Pentagon duty was good for that, and White House duty was better still. Now responsibility was his again. He hadn't been this vulnerable since his cruiser had nearly rammed a tanker during replenishment operations—his executive officer had saved him with a timely command to the helmsman, Cutter remembered. A pity that his career had ended at captain's rank, but Ed just hadn't had the right stuff to make Flag....

Cutter opened a drawer to his desk and pulled out a sheet of paper whose letterhead proclaimed "The White House." He took a gold Cross pen from his pocket and wrote a clear authorization for Ritter in his best Palmer Method penmanship. *You are authorized by the President...* The Admiral folded the sheet, tucked it into an envelope, and handed it across.

"Thank you, Admiral." Ritter tucked the envelope into his coat pocket. "I'll keep you posted."

"You be careful who sees that," Cutter said coldly.

"I do know how to keep secrets, sir. It's my job, remember?" Ritter rose and left the room, finally with a warm feeling around his backside. His ass was

covered. It was a feeling craved by many people in Washington. It was one he didn't share with the President's National Security Adviser, but Ritter figured it wasn't his fault that Cutter hadn't thought this one through.

Five miles away, the DDI's office seemed a cold and lonely place to Ryan. There was the credenza and the coffee machine where James Greer made his Navy brew, there the high-backed judge's chair in which the old man leaned back before making his professorial statements of fact and theory, and his jokes, Jack remembered. His boss had one hell of a sense of humor. What a fine teacher he might have made—but then he really was a teacher to Jack. What was it? Only six years since he'd started with the Agency. He'd known Greer for less than seven, and the Admiral had in large part become the father he'd lost in that airplane crash at Chicago. It was here he had come for advice, for guidance. How many times?

The trees outside the seventh-floor windows were green with the leaves of summer, blocking the view of the Potomac Valley. The really crazy things had all happened when there were no leaves, Ryan thought. He remembered pacing around on the lush carpet, looking down at the piles of snow left by the plows while trying to find answers to hard questions, sometimes succeeding, sometimes not.

Vice Admiral James Greer would not live to see another winter. He'd seen his last snow, his last Christmas. Ryan's boss lay in a VIP suite at Bethesda Naval Medical Center, still alert, still thinking, still telling jokes. But his weight was down by fifteen pounds in the last three weeks, and the chemotherapy denied him any sort of food other than what came through tubes stuck in his arms. And the pain. There was nothing worse, Ryan knew, than to watch the pain of others. He'd seen his wife and daughter in pain, and it had been far worse than his own hospital stays. It was hard to go and see the Admiral, to see the tightness around the face, the occasional stiffening of limbs as the spasms came and went, some from the cancer, some from the medications. But Greer was as much a part of his family as—God, Ryan thought, I am thinking of him like my father. And so he would, until the end.

"Shit," Jack said quietly, without knowing it.

"I know what you mean, Dr. Ryan."

"Hmph?" Jack turned. The Admiral's driver (and security guard) stood quietly by the door while Jack retrieved some documents. Even though Ryan was the DDI's special assistant and *de facto* deputy, he had to be watched when going over documents cleared DDI-eyes-only. CIA's security rules were tough, logical, and inviolable.

"I know what you mean, sir. I've been with him eleven years. He's as much a friend as a boss. Every Christmas he has something for the kids. Never forgets a birthday, either. You think there's any hope at all?"

"Cathy had one of her friends come down. Professor Gold-man. Russ is as good as they come, professor of oncology at Hopkins, consultant to NIH, and a

bunch of other things. He says one chance in thirty. It's spread too far, too fast, Mickey. Two months, tops. Anything else would be a miracle." Ryan almost smiled. "I got a priest working on that."

Murdock nodded. "I know he's tight with Father Tim over at Georgetown. He was just at the hospital for some chess last night. The Admiral took him in forty-eight moves. You ever play chess with him?"

"I'm not in his class. Probably never will be."

"Yes, sir, you are," Murdock said after a moment or two. "Leastways, that's what he says."

"He would." Ryan shook his head. Damn it, Greer wouldn't want either of them to talk like this. There was work to be done. Jack took the key and unlocked the file drawer in the desk. He set the key chain on the desk blotter for Mickey to retrieve and reached down to pull the drawer, but goofed. Instead he pulled out the sliding board you could use as a writing surface, though this one was marked with brown rings from the DDI's coffee mug. Near the inside end of it, Ryan saw, was a file card, taped in place. Written on the card, in Greer's distinctive hand, were two safe combinations. Greer had a special office safe and so did Bob Ritter. Jack remembered that his boss had always been clumsy with combination locks, and he probably needed the combination written down so he wouldn't forget it. He found it odd that the Admiral should have combinations for both his and Ritter's, but decided after a moment that it made sense. If somebody had to get into the DDO's safe in a hurry—for example, if Ritter were kidnapped, and someone had to see what really classified material was in the current file—it had to be someone very senior, like the DDI. Probably Ritter had the combination to the DDI's personal safe, as well. Jack wondered who else did. Shrugging off the thought, he slid the board back into place and opened the drawer. There were six files there. All related to long-term intelligence evaluations that the Admiral wanted to see. None were especially critical. In fact, they weren't all that sensitive, but it would give the Admiral something to occupy his mind. A rotating team of CIA security personnel guarded his room, with two on duty at all times, and he could still do work in the time he had left.

Damn! Jack snarled at himself. *Get your mind off of it. Hell, he does have a chance. Some chance is better than none at all.*

Chavez had never handled a submachine gun. His personal weapon had always been the M-16 rifle, often with an M-203 grenade launcher slung under the barrel. He also knew how to use the SAW—the Belgian-made squad automatic weapon that had recently been added to the Army's inventory—and had shot expert with pistol once. But submachine guns had long since gone out of favor in the Army. They just weren't serious weapons of the sort a soldier would need.

Which was not to say that he didn't like it. It was a German gun, the MP-5 SD2 made by Heckler & Koch. It was decidedly unattractive. The matte-black finish was slightly rough to the touch, and it lacked the sexy compactness of

the Israeli Uzi. On the other hand, it wasn't made to look good, he thought, it was made to shoot good. It was made to be reliable. It was made to be accurate. Whoever had designed this baby, Chavez decided as he brought it up for the first time, knew what shooting was all about. Unusually for a German-made weapon, it didn't have a huge number of small parts. It broke down easily and quickly for cleaning, and reassembly took less than a minute. The weapon nestled snugly against his shoulder, and his head dropped automatically into the right place to peer through the ring-aperture sight.

"Commence firing," Mr. Johnson commanded.

Chavez had the weapon on single-shot. He squeezed off the first round, just to get a feel for the trigger. It broke cleanly at about eleven pounds, the recoil was straight back and gentle, and the gun didn't jump off the target the way some weapons did. The shot, of course, went straight through the center of the target's silhouetted head. He squeezed off another, and the same thing happened, then five in rapid fire. The repeated shots rocked him back an inch or two, but the recoil spring ate up most of the kick. He looked up to see seven holes in a nice, tight group, like the nose carved into a jack-o'-lantern. Okay. Next he flipped the selector switch to the burst position—it was time for a little rock and roll. He put three rounds at the target's chest. This group was larger, but any of the three would have been fatal. After another one Chavez decided that he could hold a three-round burst dead on target. He didn't need full-automatic fire. Anything more than three rounds just wasted ammunition. His attitude might have seemed strange for a soldier, but as a light infantryman he understood that ammunition was something that had to be carried. To finish off his thirty-round magazine he aimed bursts at unmarked portions of the target card, and was rewarded with hits exactly where he'd wanted them.

"Baby, where have you been all my life?" Best of all, it wasn't much noisier than the rustle of dry leaves. It wasn't that it had a silencer; the barrel *was* a silencer. You heard the muted clack of the action, and the swish of the bullet. They were using a subsonic round, the instructor told them. Chavez picked one out of the box. The bullet was a hollow-point design; it looked like you could mix a drink in it, and on striking a man it probably spread out to the diameter of a dime. Instant death from a head shot, nearly as quick in the chest—but if they were training him to use a silencer, he'd be expected to go for the head. He figured that he could take head shots reliably from fifty or sixty feet—maybe farther under ideal circumstances, but soldiers don't expect ideal circumstances. On the face of it, he'd be expected to creep within fifteen or twenty yards of his target and drop him without a sound.

Whatever they were preparing for, he thought again, it sure as hell wasn't a training mission.

"Nice groups, Chavez," the instructor observed. Only three other men were on the firing line. There would be two submachine gunners per squad. Two SAWs—Julio had one of those—and the rest had M-16s, two of them with grenade launchers attached. Everyone had pistols, too. That seemed strange, but despite the weight Chavez didn't mind.

“This baby really shoots, sir.”

“It’s yours. How good are you with a pistol?”

“Just fair. I don’t usually—”

“Yeah, I know. Well, you’ll all get practice. Pistol ain’t really good for much, but there’s times when it comes in right handy.” Johnson turned to address the whole squad. “All right, you four come on up. We want everyone to know how all these here weapons work. Everybody’s gotta be an expert.”

Chavez relinquished his weapon to another squad member and walked back from the firing line. He was still trying to figure things out. Infantry combat is the business of death, at the personal level, where you could usually see what you were doing and to whom you were doing it. The fact that Chavez had not actually done it yet was irrelevant; it was still his business, and the organization of his unit told him what form the mission would take. Special ops. It had to be special ops. He knew a guy who’d been in the Delta Force at Bragg. Special operations were merely a refinement of straight infantry stuff. You had to get in real close, usually you had to chop down the sentries, and then you hit hard and fast, like a bolt of lightning. If it wasn’t over in ten seconds or less—well, then things got a little too exciting. The funny part to Chavez was the similarity with street-gang tactics. There was no fair play in soldiering. You sneaked in and did people in the back without warning. You didn’t give them a chance to protect themselves—none at all. But what was called cowardly in a gang kid was simply good tactics to a soldier. Chavez smiled to himself. It hardly seemed fair, when you looked at it like that. The Army was just better organized than a gang. And, of course, its targets were selected by others. The whole point to an Army, probably, was that what it did made sense to someone. That was true of gangs, too, but Army activity was supposed to make sense to someone important, someone who knew what he was really doing. Even if what he was doing didn’t make much sense to him—a frequent occurrence for soldiers—it did make sense to somebody.

Chavez wasn’t old enough to remember Vietnam.

Seduction was the saddest part of the job.

With this, as with all parts of his profession, Cortez had been trained to be coldly objective and businesslike. but there wasn’t a way to be coldly intimate—at least not if you wanted to accomplish anything. Even the KGB Academy had recognized that. There had been hours of lectures on the pitfalls, he remembered with an ironic smile—Russians trying to tell a Latin about romantic entanglements. Probably the climate worked against them. You adapted your approach to the individual peculiarities of your target subject, in this case a widow who at forty-six retained surprising good looks, who had enough remaining of her youth to need companionship after the children retired for the evening or went out on their own dates, whose bed was a lonely place of memories grown cold. It wasn’t his first such subject, and there was always something brave about them, as well as something pathetic. He was supposed to think—as his training had taught him—that their problems were their business and his opportunity. But how does a man become intimate

with such a woman without feeling her pain? The KGB instructors hadn't had an answer to that one, though they did give him the proper technique. He, too, had to have suffered a recent loss.

His "wife" had also died of cancer, he'd told her. He'd married late in life, the story went, after getting the family business back on track—all that time working, flying around to secure the business his father had spent his life founding—and then married his Maria only three years before. She'd become pregnant, but when she'd visited the doctor to confirm the joyous news, the routine tests ... only six months. The baby hadn't had a chance, and Cortez had nothing left of Maria. Perhaps, he'd told his wineglass, it was God's punishment on him for marrying so young a girl, or for his many dalliances as a foot-loose playboy.

At that point Moira's hand had come across the table to touch his. Of course it wasn't his fault, the woman told him. And he looked up to see the sympathy in the eyes of someone who'd asked herself questions not so different from those he'd just ostensibly addressed to himself. People were so predictable. All you had to do was press the right buttons—and have the proper feelings. When her hand had come to his, the seduction was accomplished. There had been a flush of warmth from the touch, the feeling of simple humanity. But if he thought of her as a simple target, how could he return the emotions—and how could he accomplish the mission? He felt her pain, her loneliness. He would be good to her.

And so he was, now two days later. It would have been comical except for how touching it was, how she'd prepared herself like a teenage girl on a date —something she hadn't done for over twenty years; certainly her children had found it entertaining, but there had been enough time since the death of their father that they didn't resent their mother's needs and had smiled bemused encouragement at her as she walked out to her car. A quick, nervous dinner, then the short ride to his hotel. Some more wine to get over the nerves that were real for both of them, if more so for her. But it had certainly been worth the wait. She was out of practice, but her responses were far more genuine than those he got from his usual bedmates. Cortez was very good at sex. He was proud of his abilities and gave her an above-average performance: an hour's work, building her up slowly, then letting her back down as gently as he knew how.

Now they lay side by side, her head on his shoulder, tears dripping slowly from her eyes in the silence. A fine woman, this one. Even dying young, her husband had been a lucky man to have a woman who knew that silence could be the greatest passion of all. He watched the clock on the end table. Ten minutes of silence before he spoke.

"Thank you, Moira ... I didn't know ... it's been." He cleared his throat. "This is the first time since ... since ..." Actually it had been a week since the last one, which had cost him thirty thousand pesos. A young one, a skilled one. But—

The woman's strength surprised him. He was barely able to take his next breath, so powerful was her embrace. Part of what had once been his

conscience told him that he ought to be ashamed, but the greater part reported that he'd given more than he'd taken. This was better than purchased sex. There were feelings, after all, that money couldn't buy; it was a thought both reassuring and annoying to Cortez, and one which amplified his sense of shame. Again he rationalized that there would be no shame without her powerful embrace, and the embrace would not have come unless he had pleased her greatly.

He reached behind himself to the other end table and got his cigarettes.

"You shouldn't smoke," Moira Wolfe told him.

He smiled. "I know. I must quit. But after what you have done to me," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "I must gather myself." Silence.

"Madre de Dios, " he said after another minute.

"What's the matter?"

Another mischievous smile. "Here I have given myself to you, and I hardly know who you are!"

"What do you want to know?"

A chuckle. A shrug. "Nothing important—I mean, what could be more important than what you have already done?" A kiss. A caress. More silence. He stubbed out the cigarette at the halfway point to show that her opinion was important to him. "I am not good at this."

"Really?" It was her turn to chuckle, his turn to blush.

"It is different, Moira. I—when I was a young man, it was understood that when—it was understood that there was no importance, but ... now I am grown, and I cannot be so ..." Embarrassment. "If you permit it, I wish to know about you, Moira. I come to Washington frequently, and I wish ... I am tired of the loneliness. I am tired of ... I wish to know you," he said with conviction. Then, tentatively, haltingly, hopeful but afraid, "If you permit it."

She kissed his cheek gently. "I permit it."

Instead of his own powerful hug, Cortez let his body go slack with relief not wholly feigned. More silence before he spoke again.

"You should know about me. I am wealthy. My business is machine tools and auto parts. I have two factories, one in Costa Rica, the other in Venezuela. The business is complicated and—not dangerous, but ... it is complicated dealing with the big assemblers. I have two younger brothers also in the business. So ... what work do you do?"

"Well, I'm an executive secretary. I've been doing that kind of work for twenty years."

"Oh? I have one myself."

"And you must chase her around the office ..."

"Consuela is old enough to be my mother. She worked for my father. Is that how it is in America? Does your boss chase you?" A hint of jealous outrage.

Another chuckle. “Not exactly. I work for Emil Jacobs. He’s the Director of the FBI.”

“I do not know the name.” A lie. “The FBI, that is your *federales,* this I know. And you are the chief secretary for them all, then?”

“Not exactly. Mainly my job is to keep Mr. Jacobs organized. You wouldn’t believe his schedule—all the meetings and conferences to keep straight. It’s like being a juggler.”

“Yes, it is that way with Consuela. Without her to watch over me ...” Cortez laughed. “If I had to choose between her and one of my brothers, I would choose her. I can always hire a factory manager. What sort of man is this—Jacobs, you say? You know, when I was a boy, I wanted to be a policeman, to carry the gun and drive the car. To be the chief police officer, that must be a grand thing.”

“Mainly his job is shuffling papers—I get to do a lot of the filing, and dictation. When you are the head, your job is mainly doing budgets and meetings.”

“But surely he gets to know the—the good things, yes? The best part of being a policeman—it must be the best thing, to know the things that other people do not. To know who are the criminals, and to hunt them.”

“And other things. It isn’t just police work. They also do counterespionage. Chasing spies,” she added.

“That is CIA, no?”

“No. I can’t talk about it, of course, but, no, that is a Bureau function. It’s all the same, really, and it’s not like television at all. Mainly it’s boring. I read the reports all the time.”

“Amazing,” Cortez observed comfortably. “All the talents of a woman, and also she educates me.” He smiled encouragement so that she would elaborate. That idiot who’d put him onto her, he remembered, suggested that he’d have to use money. Cortez thought that his KGB training officers would have been proud of his technique. The KGB was ever parsimonious with funds.

“Does he make you work so hard?” Cortez asked a minute later.

“Some of the days can go long, but really he’s pretty good about that.”

“If he makes you work too hard, we will speak, Mr. Jacobs and I. What if I come to Washington and I cannot see you because you are working?”

“You really want ... ?”

“Moira.” His voice changed its timbre. Cortez knew that he’d pressed too hard for a first time. It had gone too easily, and he’d asked too many questions. After all, lonely widow or not, this was a woman of substance and responsibility—therefore a woman of intellect. But she was also a woman of feelings, and of passion. He moved his hands and his head. He saw the question on her face: Again? He smiled his message: Again.

This time he was less patient, no longer a man exploring the unknown.

There was familiarity now. Having established what she liked, his ministrations had direction. Within ten minutes she'd forgotten all of his questions. She would remember the smell and the feel of him. She would bask in the return of youth. She would ask herself where things might lead, but not how they had started.

Assignations are conspiratorial by their nature. Just after midnight he returned her to where her car was parked. Yet again she amazed him with her silence. She held his hand like a school-girl, yet her touch was in no way so simple. One last kiss before she left the car—she wouldn't let him get out.

"Thank you, Juan," she said quietly.

Cortez spoke from the heart. "Moira, because of you I am again a man. You have done more for me. When next I come to Washington, we must—"

"We will."

He followed her most of the way home, to let her know that he wished to protect her, breaking off before getting so close to her home that her children —surely they were waiting up—would notice. Cortez drove back to the apartment with a smile on his face, only partly because of his mission.

Her co-workers knew at once. With little more than six hours' sleep, Moira bounced into the office wearing a suit she hadn't touched in a year. There was a sparkle in her eye that could not be hidden. Even Director Jacobs noticed, but no one said anything. Jacobs understood. He'd buried his wife only a few months after Moira's loss, and learned that such voids in one's life could never quite be filled with work. *Good for her,* he thought. She still had children at home. He'd have to go easier on her schedule. She deserved another chance at a real life.

8.

Deployment

THE AMAZING THING was how smoothly things had gone, Chavez thought. After all, they were all sergeants, but whoever had set this thing up had been a clever man because there had been no groping around for which man got which function. There was an operations sergeant in his squad to assist Captain Ramirez with planning. There was a medical corpsman, a good one from the Special Forces who already had his weapons training. Julio Vega and Juan Piscador had once been machine-gunners, and they got the SAWs. The same story applied to their radioman. Each member of the team fit neatly into a preselected slot, all were sufficiently trained that they respected the expertise of one another, and further cross-training enhanced that respect even more. The rugged regime of exercises had extended the pride with which each had arrived, and within two weeks the team had meshed together like a finely made machine. Chavez, a Ranger School graduate, was point man and scout. His job was to probe ahead, to move silently from one place of concealment to another, to watch and listen, then report his observations to Captain Ramirez.

"Okay, where are they?" the captain asked.

"Two hundred meters, just around that corner," Chavez whispered in reply. "Five of them. Three asleep, two awake. One's sitting by the fire. The other one's got an SMG, walking around some."

It was cool in the mountains at night, even in summer. A distant coyote howled at the moon. There was the occasional whisper from a deer moving through the trees, and the only sound associated with man was the distant noise of jets. The clear night made for surprisingly good visibility, even without the low-light goggles with which they were normally equipped. In the thin mountain air, the stars overhead didn't sparkle, but shone as constant, discrete points of light. Ordinarily Chavez would have noticed the beauty, but this was a work night.

Ramirez and the rest of the squad were wearing four-color camouflage fatigues of Belgian manufacture. Their faces were painted with matching tones from sticks of makeup (understandably the Army didn't call it that) so that they blended into the shadows as perfectly as Wells' invisible man. Most importantly, they were totally at home in the darkness. Night was their best and most powerful friend. Man was a day-hunter. All of his senses, all of his instincts, and all of his inventions worked best in the light. Primordial rhythms made him less efficient at night—unless he worked very hard to overcome them, as these soldiers had. Even American Indian tribes living in close

partnership with nature had feared the night, had almost never fought at night, had not even guarded their encampments at night—thus giving the U.S. Army its first useful doctrine for operations in darkness. At night man built fires as much for vision as for warmth, but in doing so reduced that vision to mere feet, whereas the human eye, properly conditioned, can see quite well in the darkness.

"Only five?"

"That's all I counted, sir."

Ramirez nodded and gestured for two more men to come forward. A few quiet orders were given. He went with the other two, moving to the right to get above the encampment. Chavez went back forward. His job was to take the sentry down, along with the one dozing at the fire. Moving quietly in the dark is harder than seeing. The human eye is better at spotting movement in the dark than in identifying stationary objects. He put each foot down carefully, feeling for something that might slide or break, thus making noise—the human ear is much underestimated. In daylight his method of moving would have appeared comical, but stealth has its price. Worst of all, he moved slowly, and Ding was no more patient than any man still in his twenties. It was a weakness against which he'd trained himself. He walked in a tight crouch. His weapon was up and ready to guard against surprise, and as the moment approached, his senses were fully alerted, as though an electric current ran across his skin. His head swiveled slowly left and right, his eyes never quite locking on anything, because when one stares at an object in the dark ness, it tends to disappear after a few seconds.

Something bothered Chavez, but he didn't know what it was He stopped for a moment, looking around, searching with al his senses over to his left for about thirty seconds. Nothing. For the first time tonight he found himself wishing for his night goggles. Ding shook it off. Maybe a squirrel or some other night forager. Not a man, certainly. No one could move in the dark as well as a Ninja, he smiled to himself, and got back to the business at hand. He reached his position several minutes later, just behind a scrawny pine tree, and eased down to a kneeling position. Chavez slid the cover off the green face of his digital watch watching the numbers march slowly toward the appointed moment. There was the sentry, moving in a circle around the fire never more than thirty feet from it, trying to keep his eyes turnec away from it to protect his night vision. But the light reflected off the rocks and the pines would damage his perceptions badly enough—he looked straight at Chavez twice, but saw nothing

Time.

Chavez brought up his MP-5 and loosed a single round intc the target's chest. The man flinched with the impact, graspec the spot where he'd been hit, and dropped to the ground with a surprised gasp. The MP-5 made only a slight metallic clack like a small stone rolling against another, but in the still mountain night, it was something out of the ordinary. The drowsy one by the fire turned around, but only made it halfway wher he too was struck. Chavez figured himself to be on a roll anc was taking aim on one of the sleeping men

when the distinctive ripping sound of Julio's squad automatic weapon jolted them from their slumber. All three leapt to their feet, and were deac before they got there.

"Where the hell did you come from?" the dead sentry demanded. The place on his chest where the wax bullet had struck was very sore, all the more so from surprise. By the time he was standing again, Ramirez and the others were in the camp.

"Kid, you are very good," a voice said behind Chavez, and a hand thumped down on his shoulder. The sergeant nearly jumped out of his skin as the man walked past him into the encampment. "Come on."

A rattled Chavez followed the man to the fire. He cleared his weapon on the way—the wax bullets could do real harm to a man's face.

"We'll score that one a success," the man said. "Five kills, no reaction from the bad guys. Captain, your machine-gunner got a little carried away. I'd go easier on the rock and roll; the sound of an automatic weapon carries an awful long way. I'd also try to move in a little closer, but—I guess that rock there was about the best you could do. Okay, forget that one. My mistake. We can't always pick the terrain. I liked your discipline on the approach march, and your movement into the objective was excellent. This point man you have is terrific. He almost picked me up." The last struck Chavez as faint praise indeed.

"Who the fuck are you!" Ding asked quietly.

"Kid, I was doing this sort of thing for-real when you were playing with guns made by Mattel. Besides, I cheated." Clark held up his night goggles. "I picked my route carefully, and I froze every time you turned your head. What you heard was my breathing. You almost had me. I thought I blew the exercise. Sorry. My name's Clark, by the way." A hand appeared.

"Chavez." The sergeant took it.

"You're pretty good, Chavez. Best I've seen in a while. I especially like the footwork. Not many have the patience you do. We could have used you in the 3rd SOG." It was Clark's highest praise, and rarely given.

"What's that?"

A grunt and a chuckle. "Something that never existed—don't worry about it."

Clark walked over to examine the two men Chavez had shot. Both were rubbing identical places on their flak jackets, right over their hearts.

"You know how to shoot, too."

"Anybody can hit with this."

Clark turned to look at the young man. "Remember, when it's for-real, it's not quite the same."

Chavez recognized genuine meaning in that statement. "What should I do different, sir?"

“That’s the hard part,” Clark admitted as the rest of the squad approached the fire. He spoke as a teacher to a gifted pupil. “Part of you has to pretend it’s the same as training. Another part has to remember that you don’t get many mistakes anymore. You have to know which part to listen to, ‘cause it changes from one minute to the next. You got good instincts, kid. Trust ’em. They’ll keep you alive. If things don’t feel right, they probably aren’t. Don’t confuse that with fear.”

“Huh?”

“You’re going to be afraid out there, Chavez. I always was. Get used to the idea, and it can work for you ’stead of against you. For Christ’s sake, don’t be ashamed of it. Half the problem out in Indian Country is people afraid of being afraid.”

“Sir, what the hell are we training for?”

“I don’t know yet. Not my department.” Clark managed to conceal his feelings on that score. The training wasn’t exactly in accord with what he thought the mission was supposed to be. Ritter might be having another case of the clevers. There was nothing more worrisome to Clark than a clever superior.

“You’re going to be working with us, though.”

It was an exceedingly shrewd observation, Clark thought. He’d asked to come out here, of course, but realized that Ritter had maneuvered him into asking. Clark was the best man the Agency had for this sort of thing. There weren’t many men with similar experience anywhere in government service, and most of those, like Clark, were getting a little old for the real thing. Was that all? Clark didn’t know. He knew that Ritter liked to keep things under his hat, especially when he thought he was being clever. Clever men outsmart themselves, Clark thought, and Ritter wasn’t immune from that.

“Maybe,” he admitted reluctantly. It wasn’t that he minded associating with these men, but Clark worried about the circumstances that might make it necessary, later on. *Can you still cut it, Johnny boy?*

“So?” Director Jacobs asked. Bill Shaw was there, too.

“So he did it, sure as hell,” Murray replied as he reached for his coffee. “But taking it to trial would be nasty. He’s a clever guy, and his crew backed him up. If you read up on his file, you’ll see why. He’s some officer. The day I went down, he rescued the crew of a burning fishing boat—talk about perfect timing. There were scorch marks on the hull, he went in so close. Oh, sure, we could get them all apart and interview them, but just figuring out who was involved would be tricky. I hate to say this, but it probably isn’t worth the hassle, especially with the senator looking over our shoulder, and the local U.S. Attorney probably won’t spring for it either. Bright wasn’t all that crazy about it, but I calmed him down. He’s a good kid, by the way.”

“What about the defense for the two subjects?” Jacobs asked.

"Slim. On the face of it the case against them is pretty damned solid. Ballistics has matched the bullet Mobile pulled out of the deck to the gun recovered on the boat, with both men's fingerprints on it—that was a real stroke of luck. The blood type around where the bullet was found was AB-positive, which matches the wife. A carpet stain three feet away from that confirms that she was having her period, which along with a couple of semen stains suggests rape rather strongly. Right now they're doing the DNA match downstairs on semen samples recovered from the rug—anybody here want to bet against a positive match? We have a half-dozen bloody fingerprints that match the subjects ten points' worth or more. There's a lot of good physical evidence. It's more than enough to convict already," Murray said confidently, "and the lab boys haven't got halfway through their material yet. The U.S. Attorney is going to press for capital punishment. I'll think he'll get it. The only question is whether or not we allow them to trade information for a lighter sentence. But it's not exactly my case." That earned Murray a smile from the Director.

"Pretend it is," Jacobs ordered.

"We'll know in a week or so if we need anything they can tell us. My instincts say no. We ought to be able to figure out who the victim was working for, and that'll be the one who ordered the hit—we just don't know why yet. But it's unlikely that the subjects know why either. I think we have a couple of *sicarios* who hoped to parlay their hit into an entrée to the marketing side of the business. I think they're throwaways. If that's correct, they don't know anything that we can't figure out for ourselves. I suppose we have to give them a chance, but I would recommend against mitigation of sentence. Four murders—bad ones at that. We have a death-penalty statute, and to this brick-agent, I think the chair would fit them just fine."

"Getting nasty in your old age?" Shaw asked. It was another inside joke. Bill Shaw was one of the Bureau's leading intellectuals. He had won his spurs cracking down on domestic terrorist groups, and had accomplished that mission by carefully rebuilding the FBI's intelligence-gathering and analysis procedures. A quintessential chess player with a quiet, organized demeanor, this tall, spare man was also a former field agent who advocated capital punishment in a quiet, organized, and well-reasoned way. It was a point on which police opinion was almost universal. All you had to do to understand capital punishment was to see a crime scene in all its vile spectacle.

"The U.S. Attorney agrees, Dan," Director Jacobs said. "These two druggies are out of the business for keeps."

As if it matters, Murray thought to himself. What mattered to him was that two murderers would pay the price. Because a sufficiently large stash of drugs had been found aboard the yacht, the government could invoke the statute that allowed the death penalty in drug-related murders. The relationship was probably a loose one in this case, but that didn't matter to the three men in the room. The fact of murder—brutal and premeditated—was enough. But to say, as both they and the United States Attorney for the Southern District of Alabama would tell the TV cameras, that this was a fight against the drug

trade, was a cynical lie.

Murray's education had been a classical one at Boston College, thirty years before. He could still recite passages in Latin from Virgil's *Aeneid,* or Cicero's opening salvo against Catiline. His study of Greek had been only in translation —foreign languages were one thing to Murray; different alphabets were something else—but he remembered the legend of the Hydra, the mythical beast that had seven or more heads. Each time you cut one off, two would grow to take its place. So it was with the drug trade. There was just too much money involved. Money beyond the horizon of greed. Money to purchase anything a simple man—most of them were—could desire. A single deal could make a man wealthy for life, and there were many who would willingly and consciously risk their lives for that one deal. Having decided to wager their lives on a toss of the dice—what value might they attach to the lives of others? The answer was the obvious one. And so they killed as casually and as brutally as a child might stamp down his foot on an anthill. They killed their competitors because they didn't wish to have competition. They killed their competitors' families whole because they didn't want a wrathful son to appear five, ten, twenty years later with vendetta on his mind; and also because, like nation-states armed with nuclear weapons, the principle of deterrence came into play. Even a man willing to wager his own life might quail before the prospect of wagering those of his children.

So in this case they'd cut off two heads from the Hydra. In three months or so the government would present its case in Federal District Court. The trial would probably last a week. The defense would do its best, but as long as the feds were careful with their evidence, they'd win. The defense would try to discredit the Coast Guard, but it wasn't hard to see what the prosecutor had already decided: the jury would look at Captain Wegener and see a hero, then look at the defendants and see scum. The only likely tactic of the defense would almost certainly be counterproductive. Next, the judge had to make the proper rulings, but this was the South, where even federal judges were expected to have simple, clear ideas about justice. Once the defendants had been found guilty, the penalty phase of the trial would proceed, and again, this was the South, where people read their Bibles. The jury would listen to the aggravating circumstances : mass murder of a family, probability of rape, murder of children, and drugs. But there was a million dollars aboard, the defense would counter. The principal victim was involved in the drug trade. What proof of that is there? the prosecutor would inquire piously—and what of the wife and children? The jury would listen quietly, soberly, almost reverently, would get their instructions from the same judge who had told them how to find the defendants guilty in the first place. They'd deliberate a reasonable period of time, going through the motions of thorough consideration for a decision made days earlier, and report back: death. The criminals, no longer defendants, would be remanded to federal custody. The case would automatically be appealed, but a reversal was unlikely so long as the judge hadn't made any serious procedural errors, which the physical evidence made unlikely. It would take years of appeals. People would object to the sentence on philosophical grounds—Murray disagreed but respected

them for their views. The Supreme Court would have to rule sooner or later, but the Supremes, as the police called them, knew that, despite earlier rulings to the contrary, the Constitution clearly contemplated capital punishment, and the will of the People, expressed through Congress, had directly mandated death in certain drug-related cases, as the majority opinion would make clear in its precise, dry use of the language. So, in about five years, after all the appeals had been heard and rejected, both men would be strapped into a wooden chair and a switch would be thrown.

That would be enough for Murray. For all his experience and sophistication, he was before all things a cop. He was an adult-hood beyond his graduation from the FBI Academy, when he'd thought that he and his classmates—mostly retired now—would really change the world. The statistics said that they had in many ways, but statistics were too dry, too remote, too inhuman. To Murray the war on crime was an endless series of small battles. Victims were robbed alone, kidnapped alone, or killed alone, and were individuals to be saved or avenged by the warrior-priests of the FBI. Here, too, his outlook was shaped by the values of his Catholic education, and the Bureau remained a bastion of Irish-Catholic America. Perhaps he hadn't changed the world, but he had saved lives, and he had avenged deaths. New criminals would arise as they always did, but his battles had all ended in victories, and ultimately, he had to believe, there would be a net difference for his society, and the difference would be a positive one. He believed as truly as he believed in God that every felon caught was probably a life saved, somewhere down the line.

In this case he had helped to do so again.

But it wouldn't matter a damn to the drug business. His new post forced him to assume a longer view that ordinary agents contemplated only over drinks after their offices closed. With these two out of circulation, the Hydra had already grown two new heads, Murray knew, perhaps more. His mistake was in not pursuing the myth to its conclusion, something others were already doing. Heracles had slain the Hydra by changing tactics. One of the people who had remembered that fact was in this room. What Murray had not yet learned was that at the policymaking level, one's perspective gradually changed one's views.

Cortez liked the view also, despite the somewhat thinner air of this eyrie. His newly acquired boss knew the superficial ways to communicate his power. His desk faced away from the wide window, making it hard for those opposite the massive desk to read the expression on his face. He spoke with the calm, quiet voice of great power. His gestures were economical, his words generally mild. In fact he was a brutal man, Cortez knew, and despite his education a less sophisticated man than he deemed himself to be, but that, Félix knew, was why he'd been hired. So the former colonel trained in Moscow Center adjusted the focus of his eyes to examine the green vista of the valley. He allowed Escobedo to play his eye-power games. He'd played them with far more dangerous men than this one.

"So?"

“I have recruited two people,” Cortez replied. “One will feed us information for monetary considerations. The other will do so for other reasons. I also examined two other potential prospects, but discarded them as unsuitable.”

“Who are they—who are the ones you will use?”

“No.” Cortez shook his head. “I have told you that the identity of my agents must remain secret. This is a principle of intelligence operations. You have informers within your organization, and loose talk would compromise our ability to gather the information which you require. *Jefe,”* he said fawningly. This one needed that sort of thing. *“Jefe,* you have hired me for my expertise and experience. You must allow me to do my work properly. You will know the quality of my sources from the information which I give you. I understand how you feel. It is normal. Castro himself has asked me that question, and I gave him the same answer. It must be so.”

That earned Cortez a grunt. Escobedo liked to be compared with a chief of state, better still one who had defied the *yanquis* so successfully for a generation. There would be a satisfied smile now on the handsome face, Félix knew without bothering to check for it. His answer was a lie for two reasons: Castro had never asked the question, and neither Félix nor anyone else on that island would ever have dared to deny him the information.

“So what have you learned?”

“Something is afoot,” he said in a matter-of-fact voice that was almost taunting. After all, he had to justify his salary. “The American government is putting together a new program designed to enhance their interdiction efforts. My sources have no specifics as yet, though what they have heard has come from multiple sources and is probably true. My other source will be able to confirm what information I receive from the first.” The lesson was lost on Escobedo, Félix knew. Recruiting two complementary sources on a single mission would have earned him a flowery commendation letter from any real intelligence service.

“What will the information cost us?”

Money. It is always money with him, Cortez told himself with a stifled sigh. No wonder he needed a professional with his security operations. Only a fool thinks that he can buy everything. On the other hand, there were times when money was helpful, and though he didn’t know it, Escobedo paid more money to his American hirelings and traitors than the entire Communist intelligence network.

“It is better to spend a great deal of money on one person at a high level than to squander it on a large number of minor functionaries. A quarter of a million dollars will do nicely to get the information which we require.” Cortez would be keeping most of that, of course. He had expenses of his own.

“That is all?” Escobedo asked incredulously. “I pay more than that to—”

“Because your people have never used the proper approach, *jefe.* Because you pay people on the basis of where they are, not what they know. You have never adopted a systematic approach to dealing with your enemies. With the

proper information, you can utilize your funds much more efficiently. You can act strategically instead of tactically," Cortez concluded by pushing the proper button.

"Yes! They must learn that we are a force to be reckoned with!"

Not for the first time, Félix thought that his main objective was to take the money and run ... perhaps a house in Spain ... or, perhaps, to supplant this egomaniacal buffoon. That was a thought.... But not for now. Escobedo was an egomaniac, but he was also a shrewd one, capable of rapid action. One difference between this man and those who ran his former agency was that Escobedo wasn't afraid to make a decision, and-do it quickly. No bureaucracy here, no multiplicity of desks for messages to pass. For that he respected *El Jefe*. At least he knew how to make a decision. KGB had probably been that way once, maybe even the American intelligence organs. But no longer.

"One more week," Ritter told the National Security Adviser.

"Nice to hear that things are moving," the Admiral observed. "Then what?"

"Why don't you tell me? Just to keep things clear," the DDO suggested. He followed it with a reminder. "After all, the operation was your idea in the first place."

"Well, I sold Director Jacobs on the idea," Cutter replied with a smile at his own cleverness. "When we're ready to proceed—and I mean ready to push the button—Jacobs will fly down there to meet with their Attorney General. The ambassador says that the Colombians will go along with almost anything. They're even more desperate than we are and—"

"You didn't—"

"No, Bob, the ambassador doesn't know. Okay?" *I'm not the idiot you take me for,* his eyes told the CIA executive. "If Jacobs can sell the idea to them, we insert the teams ASAP. One change I want to make."

"What's that?"

"The air side of it. Your report says that practice tracking missions are already turning up targets."

"Some," Ritter admitted. "Two or three per week."

"The wherewithal to handle them is already in place. Why not activate that part of the operation? I mean, it might actually help to identify the areas we want to send the insertion teams to, develop operational intelligence, that sort of thing."

"I'd prefer to wait," Ritter said cautiously.

"Why? If we can identify the most frequently used areas, it cuts down on the amount of moving around they'll have to do. That's your greatest operational risk, isn't it? This is a way to develop information that enhances the entire operational concept."

The problem with Cutter, Ritter told himself, was that the bastard knew just enough about operations to be dangerous. Worse, he had the power to enforce his will—and a memory of the Operations Directorate's recent history. What was it he'd said a few months back? *Your best operations in the last couple of years actually came out of Greer's department....* By which he meant Jack Ryan, James's bright rising star—possibly the new DDI the way things looked. That was too bad. Ritter was genuinely fond of his counterpart at the head of the Intelligence Directorate, but less so of Greer's ingratiating protégé. But it was nevertheless true that the Agency's two best coups in recent years had begun in the "wrong" department, and it was time for Operations to reassert its primacy. Ritter wondered if Cutter was consciously using that as a prod to move him to action. Probably not, he decided. Cutter didn't know enough about infighting yet. Not that he wouldn't learn, of course.

"Going too early is a classic error in field operations," the DDO offered lamely.

"But we're not. Essentially we have two separate operations, don't we?" Cutter asked. "The air part can operate independently of the in-country part. I admit it'll be less effective, but it can still operate. Doesn't this give us a chance to check out the less tricky side of the plan before we commit to the dangerous part? Doesn't it give us something to take to the Colombians to show that we're really serious?"

Too soon, the voice in Ritter's head said urgently, but his face showed indecision.

"Look, do you want me to take it to the President?" Cutter asked.

"Where is he today—California?"

"Political trip. I would prefer not to bother him with this sort of thing, but __"

It was a curious situation, the DDO thought. He had underestimated Cutter, while the National Security Adviser seemed quite able to overestimate himself. "Okay, you win. EAGLE EYE starts day after tomorrow. It'll take that long to get everyone up and running."

"And SHOWBOAT?"

"One more week to prep the teams. Four days to get them to Panama and meet up with the air assets, check communications systems and all that."

Cutter grinned as he reached for his coffee. It was time to smooth some ruffled feathers, he thought. "God, it's nice to work with a real pro. Look on the bright side, Bob. We'll have two full weeks to interrogate whatever turns up in the air net, and the insertion teams will have a much better idea of where they're needed."

You've already won, you son of a bitch. Do you have to rub it in? Ritter wanted to ask. He wondered what would have happened if he'd called Cutter's cards. What would the President have said? Ritter's position was a vulnerable one. He'd grumbled long and loud within the intelligence community that CIA hadn't run a serious field operation in ... fifteen years? It depended on what

you meant by “serious,” didn’t it? Now he was being given the chance, and what had been a nice line to be spoken at the coffee sessions during high-level government conferences was now a gray chicken come home to roost. Field operations like this were dangerous. Dangerous to the participants. Dangerous to those who gave the orders. Dangerous to the governments that sponsored them. He’d told Cutter that often enough, but like many, the National Security Adviser was mesmerized by the glamour of field ops. It was known in the trade as the *Mission: Impossible* Syndrome. Even professionals could confuse a TV drama with reality, and, throughout government, people tended to hear only that which they wished to hear, and to ignore the unpleasant parts. But it was somewhat late for Ritter to give out his warnings. After all, he’d complained for years that such a mission was possible, and occasionally a desirable adjunct to international policy. And he’d said often enough that his directorate still knew how to do it. The fact that he’d had to recruit field operatives from the Army and Air Force had escaped notice. Time had been when the Agency had been able to use its own private air force and its own private army ... and if this worked out, perhaps those times would come again. It was a capability the Agency and the country needed, Ritter thought. Here, perhaps, was his chance to make it all happen. If putting up with amateur power-vendors like Cutter was the price of getting it, then that was the price he’d have to pay.

“Okay, I’ll get things moving.”

“I’ll tell the boss. How soon do you expect we’ll have results ... ?”

“Impossible to say.”

“But before November,” Cutter suggested lightly.

“Yeah, probably by then.” Politics, too, of course. Well, that was what kept traffic circling around the beltway.

The 1st Special Operations Wing was based at Hurlburt Field, at the west end of the Eglin Air Force Base complex in Florida. It was a unique unit, but any military unit with “Special” in its name was unique by its very nature. The adjective was used for any number of meanings. “Special weapons” most often meant nuclear weapons, and here the word was used to avoid offending the sensibilities of those for whom “nuclear” connoted mushroom clouds and megadeaths; it was as though a change of wording could effect a change of substance, yet another characteristic of governments all over the world. “Special Operations,” on the other hand, meant something else. Generally it denoted covert business, getting people into places where they ought not to be, supporting them while they were there, and getting them out after concluding business that they ought not to have done in the first place. That, among other things, was the business of the 1st.

Colonel Paul Johns—“PJ”—didn’t know everything the wing did. The 1st was rather an odd grouping where authority didn’t always coincide with rank, where the troops provided support for the aircraft and crews without always knowing why they did so, where aircraft came and went on irregular

schedules, and where people weren't encouraged to speculate or ask questions. The wing was divided into individual fiefdoms that interacted with others on an *ad hoc* basis. PJ's fiefdom included half a dozen MH-53J "Pave Low III" helicopters. Johns had been around for quite a while, and somehow had managed to spend nearly all of his Air Force career in the air. It was a career path that guaranteed him both a fulfilling, exciting career, and precisely zero chance at ever wearing general's stars. But on that score he didn't give much of a damn. He'd joined the Air Force to fly; something generals don't get to do very much. He'd kept his part of the bargain, and the service had kept its, which wasn't quite as common an arrangement as some would imagine. Johns had early on eschewed fixed-wing aircraft, the fast-movers that dropped bombs or shot down other aircraft. A people-person all of his life, Johns had started off in the Jolly Green Giants, the HH-3 rescue helicopters of Vietnam fame, then graduated to the Super Jolly HH-53, part of the Air Rescue Service. As a brash young captain he'd flown in the Song Tay Raid, copilot of the aircraft that had deliberately crashed into the prison camp twenty miles west of Hanoi as part of the effort to rescue people who, it turned out, had been moved just a short time before. That had been one of the few failures in his life. Colonel Johns was not a man accustomed to such things. If you went down, PJ would come get you. He was the third-ranking all-time rescue specialist in the Air Force. The current Chief of Staff and two other general officers had been excused a stay in the Hanoi Hilton because of him and his crews. PJ was a man who only rarely had to buy himself a drink. He was also a man whom general officers saluted first. It was a tradition that went along with the Medal of Honor.

Like most heroes, he was grossly ordinary. Only five-six and a hundred thirty pounds, he looked like any other middle-aged man picking up a loaf of bread in the base exchange. The reading glasses he now had to wear made him look rather like a friendly suburban banker, and he did not often raise his voice. He cut his own grass when he had the time, and his wife did it when he didn't. His car was a fuel-efficient Plymouth Horizon. His son was studying engineering at Georgia Tech, and his daughter had won a scholarship to Princeton, leaving him and his wife an overly quiet house on post in which to contemplate the retirement that lay a few years in the future.

But not now. He sat in the left seat of the Pave Low helicopter checking out a bright young captain who, everyone thought, was ready to be a command pilot himself. The multimillion-dollar helicopter was skimming treetops at a hair under two hundred knots. It was a dark, cloudy night over the Florida panhandle, and this part of the Eglin complex wasn't brightly lit, but that didn't matter. Both he and the captain wore special helmets with built-in low-light goggles, not terribly unlike what Darth Vader wore in *Star Wars*. But these worked, converting the vague darkness ahead into a green and gray display. PJ kept his head moving around, and made sure that the captain did the same. One danger with the night-vision gear was that your depth perception—a matter of life and death to a low-level flyer—was degraded by the artificial picture generated by the masks. Perhaps a third of the squadron's operational losses, Johns thought, could be traced to that particular hazard,

and the technical wizards hadn't come up with a decent fix yet. One problem with the Pave Lows was that operational and training losses were relatively high. It was a price of the mission for which they trained, and there was no answer to that but more training.

The six-bladed rotor spun overhead, driven by the two turboshaft engines. Pave Low was about as big as helicopters got, with a full combat crew of six and room for over forty combat-equipped passengers. The nose bulged at various places with radar, infrared, and other instruments—the general effect was of an insect from another planet. At doors on each side of the airframe were mounts for rotary miniguns, plus another at the tail cargo door, because their primary mission, covert insertion and support of special-operations forces, was a dangerous business—as was the secondary role they practiced tonight, combat search-and-rescue. During his time in Southeast Asia, PJ had worked with A-1 Skyraider attack bombers, the Air Force's last piston-engine attack aircraft, called SPADs or Sandys. Exactly who would support them today was still something of an open question. To protect herself, in addition to the guns the aircraft carried flare and chaff pods, IR jamming and suppression gear ... and her crew of madmen.

Johns smiled within his helmet. This was real flying, and there wasn't much of that left. They had the option of flying with the aid of an autopilot-radar-computer system that hedgehopped automatically, but tonight they were simulating a system failure. Autopilot or not, the pilot was responsible for flying the airplane, and Willis was doing his best to keep the helicopter down on the treetops. Every so often Johns would have to stop himself from flinching as an errant tree branch seemed certain to slap against the chopper's underside, but Captain Willis was a competent young man, keeping the aircraft low, but not too low. Besides, as PJ knew from long experience, the top branches on trees were thin, fragile things that did nothing more than mar the paint. More than once he'd brought home a helicopter whose underside bore green stains like those on a child's jeans.

"Distance?" Willis asked.

Colonel Johns checked the navigation display. He had a choice of Doppler, satellite, or inertial, plus the old-fashioned plotting board that he still used, and still insisted that all his people learn.

"Two miles, zero-four-eight."

"Roger." Willis eased off on the throttle.

For this training mission, an honest-to-God fighter pilot had "volunteered" to be trucked out to the boonies, where another helicopter had draped a parachute over a tree to simulate a genuinely shot-down airman, who had in turn activated a genuine rescue-beacon radio. One of the new tricks was that the chute was coated with a chemical that fluoresced on ultraviolet light. Johns did the copilot's job of activating a low-power UV laser that scanned ahead, looking for the return signal. Whoever had come up with this idea deserved a medal, PJ thought. The worst, scariest, and always seemingly the longest part of any rescue mission was actually getting eyeballs on the victim.

That was when the gomers on the ground, who were also out hunting, would hear the sound of the rotor and decide that they might as well bag two aircraft on the same day.... His Medal of Honor had come on such a mission over eastern Laos, when the crew of an F-105 Wild Weasel had attracted a platoon of NVA. Despite aggressive support from the Sandy team, the downed air-men hadn't dared to reveal their position. But Johns had coldly decided not to go home empty, and his Jolly had absorbed two hundred rounds in a furious gunfight before getting both men out. Johns often wondered if he'd ever have the courage—lunacy—to try that again.

"I got a chute at two o'clock."

"X-Ray Two-Six, this is Papa Lima; we have your chute. Can you mark your position?"

"Affirmative, tossing smoke, tossing green smoke."

The rescuee was following proper procedure in telling the chopper crew what sort of smoke grenade he was using, but you couldn't tell in the dark. On the other hand, the heat of the pyrotechnic device blazed like a beacon on the infrared display, and they could see their man.

"Got him?"

"Yep," Willis answered, and spoke next to the crew chief. "Get ready, we have our victim."

"Standing by, sir." In the back the flight engineer, Senior Master Sergeant Buck Zimmer—he and the colonel went way back together—activated his winch controls. At the end of the steel cable was a heavy steel device called a penetrator. Heavy enough to fall through the foliage of any forest, its bottom unfolded like the petals of a flower, providing a seat for the victim, who would then be pulled back up through the branches, an experience which remarkably enough had never quite killed anyone. In the event that the victim was injured, it was the job of Sergeant Zimmer or a rescue paramedic to ride it down, attach the victim to the penetrator, and take the elevator ride himself. That job sometimes entailed physically searching for the victim, often under fire. It was for this reason that the people who flew the rescue choppers treated their crewmen with considerable respect. Nothing so horrifies a pilot as the idea of being on the ground, with people shooting at you.

But not this time. Since it was peacetime and safety rules applied, training or not, the pickup was being made from a small clearing. Zimmer worked the winch controls. The victim unfolded the seat-petals and hooked himself securely aboard, knowing what was to follow. The flight engineer started hoisting the cable, made sure that the victim was firmly attached, and so notified the flight crew.

On the flight deck, forward, Captain Willis immediately twisted the throttle control to full power and moved upward. Within fifteen seconds, the "rescued" fighter pilot was three hundred feet over the ground, hanging by a quarter-inch steel cable and wondering why in the hell he'd been so fucking idiotic to volunteer for this. Five seconds later, the burly arm of Sergeant Zimmer

yanked him into the aircraft.

“Recovery complete,” Zimmer reported.

Captain Willis pushed his cyclic control forward, diving the helicopter at the ground. He’d climbed too much on the extraction, he knew, and tried to compensate by showing Colonel Johns that he could get back down to the safety of the treetops very quickly. He accomplished this, but he could feel the eyes of his commander on the side of his head. He’d made a mistake. Johns did not tolerate mistakes. People died of mistakes, the colonel told them every goddamned day, and he was tired of having people die.

“Can you take it for a minute?” Willis asked.

“Copilot’s airplane,” Johns acknowledged, taking the stick and easing the Sikorsky down another foot or so. “You don’t want to climb so much winching the guy in, not with possible SAMs out there.”

“At night you’d expect more guns than SAMs.” Willis was right, sort of. It was a hard call. And he knew the answer that would come.

“We’re protected against small-caliber guns. The big ones are as dangerous as SAMs. You keep it closer to the ground next time, Captain.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Other than that, not bad. Arm a little stiff?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It might be the gloves. Unless your fingers fit in just right, you end up gripping too hard, and that translates back into the wrist and upper arm after a while. You end up with a stiff arm, stiff movements on the stick, and sloppy handling. Get yourself a good set of gloves. My wife makes mine for me special. You might not always have a copilot to take the airplane, and this sort of thing is tough enough that you don’t want any more distractions than you gotta have.”

“Yes, sir.”

“By the way, you passed.”

It wouldn’t do to thank the colonel, Captain Willis knew. He did the next best thing after flexing his hand for a minute.

“I got the airplane.”

PJ took his hand off the stick. “Pilot’s airplane,” he acknowledged. “By the way ...

“Yes, sir?”

“I’ve got a special job coming up in a week or so. Interested?”

“Doing what?”

“You’re not supposed to ask that,” the colonel told him. “A little TDY. Not too far away. We’ll be flying this bird down. Call it Spec-Ops.”

“Okay,” Willis said. “Count me in. Who’s cleared to—”

“In simple terms, nobody is. We’re taking Zimmer, Childs, and Bean, and a support team. Far as everybody knows, we’re TDY for some practice missions out on the California coast. That’s all you need to know for now.”

Inside his helmet, Willis’s eyebrow went up. Zimmer had worked with PJ all the way back to Thailand and the Jolly Green days, one of the few enlisted men left with real combat experience. Sergeant Bean was the squadron’s best gunner. Childs was right behind him. Whatever this TDY—temporary detached duty—assignment was, it was for-real. It also meant that Willis would remain a copilot for a little while longer, but he didn’t mind. It was always a treat flying with the champion of Combat Search and Rescue. That was where the colonel got his call sign. C-SAR, in PJ’s lexicon, it came out “Caesar.”

Chavez traded a look with Julio Vega: *Jesucristo!*

“Any questions?” the briefer asked.

“Yes, sir,” a radio operator said. “What happens after we call it in?”

“The aircraft will be intercepted.”

“For-real, sir?”

“That’s up to the flight crew. If they don’t do what they’re told, they’re going swimming. That’s all I can say. Gentlemen, everything you’ve heard is Top Secret. Nobody—I mean *nobody!* —ever hears what I just said. If the wrong folks ever learn about this, people will get hurt. The objective of this mission is to put a crimp in the way people move drugs into the United States. It may get a little rough.”

“About fucking time,” a quiet voice observed.

“Okay, now you know. I repeat, gentlemen, this mission is going to be dangerous. We are going to give each of you some time to think about it. If you want out, we’ll understand. We’re dealing with some pretty bad folks. Of course”—the man smiled and went on after a moment—“we got some pretty bad people here, too.”

“Fuckin’ A!” another voice said.

“Anyway, you have the rest of the night to think this one over. We move out at eighteen-hundred hours tomorrow. There is no turning back at that point. Everybody understand? Good. That is all for now.”

“Ten-Hut!” Captain Ramirez snapped. Everyone in the room jumped to attention as the briefer left. Then it was the captain’s turn: “Okay, you heard the man. Give this one a real good think, people. I want you to come along on this one—hell, I need every one of you—but if you’re not comfortable with the idea, I don’t want you. You got any questions for me?” There weren’t. “Okay. Some of you know people who got fucked up because of drugs. Maybe friends, maybe family, I don’t know. What we have here is a chance to get even. Those bastards are fucking up our country, and it’s time we taught ’em a little lesson. Think it over. If anyone has any problems, let me know right away. If anybody

wants out, that's okay." His face and tone said something else entirely. Anyone who opted out would be seen by his officer as something less than a man, and that would be doubly painful since Ramirez had led his men, shared every hardship, and sweated with them through every step of training. He turned and left.

"Damn," Chavez observed finally. "I figured this was going to be a strange one, but ... damn."

"I had a friend died of an OD," Vega said. "He was just playing around, y'know, not a regular user like, but I guess it was bad stuff. Scared the shit outa me. I never touched it again. I was pissed when that happened. Tomás was a friend, *'mano*. The fucker sold him the shit, man, I wouldn't mind introducin' him to my SAW."

Chavez nodded as thoughtfully as his age and education allowed. He remembered the gangs who had been vicious enough in his early childhood, but that activity seemed almost playful in retrospect. Now the turf fights were not the mere symbolism over who dwelt on what block. Now it was over marketing position. There was serious money involved, more than enough to kill for. That was what had transformed his old neighborhood from a zone of poverty to an area of open combat. Some people he knew were afraid to walk their own streets because of other people with drugs and guns. Wild rounds came through windows and killed people in front of televisions, and the cops were often afraid to visit the projects unless they came with the numbers and weapons of an invading army ... all because of drugs. And the people who caused it all were living high and safe, fifteen hundred miles away....

Chavez didn't begin to grasp how skillfully he and his fellows—even Captain Ramirez—had been manipulated. They were all soldiers who trained constantly to protect their country against its enemies, products of a system that took their youth and enthusiasm and gave it direction; that rewarded hard work with achievement and pride; that most of all gave their boundless energy purpose; that asked only for allegiance in return. Since enlisted soldiers most often come from the poorer strata of society, they all had learned that minority status did not matter—the Army rewarded performance without consideration to one's color or accent. All of these men were intimately aware of the social problems caused by drugs, and were part of a subculture in which drugs were not tolerated—the military's effort to expunge its ranks of drug users had been painful, but it had succeeded. Those who stayed in were people for whom the use of drugs was beyond the pale. They were the achievers from their neighborhoods. They were the success stories. They were the adventurous, the brave, the disciplined graduates of the mean streets for whom obstacles were things to be overcome, and for whom every instinct was to help others to do the same.

And that was the mission they all contemplated. Here was a chance to protect not only their country, but also the barrios from which they had all escaped. Already marked as achievers within the ranks of the Army's most demanding units, then given training to make them prouder still, they could no more decline participation in this mission than they could deny their

manhood. There was not a man here who had not once in his life contemplated taking down a drug dealer. But the Army was letting them do something even better. Of course they'd do it.

"Blow the fuckers right out of the sky!" the squad's radio operator said. "Put a Sidewinder missile right up his ass! You got the right to remain *dead,* sucker!"

"Yeah," Vega agreed. "I wouldn't mind seeing that. Hell, I wouldn't mind it if we got to go after the big shots where they fucking live! Think we could get them, Ding?"

Chavez grinned. "You shittin' me, Julio? Who you suppose they got working for them, soldiers? Shit. Punks with machine guns, probably don't even keep 'em clean. Against us? Shit. Maybe against what they got down there, maybe, but against us? No chance, man. I'm talking dead meat. I just get in close, pop the sentries nice an' quiet with my H and K, an' let you turkeys do the easy stuff."

"More Ninja shit," a rifleman said lightly.

Ding pulled one of his throwing stars from his shirt pocket and flicked it into the doorframe fifteen feet away.

"Smile when you say that, boy." Chavez laughed.

"Hey, Ding, could you teach me to do that?" the rifleman asked. There was no further discussion of the mission's dangers, only of its opportunities.

They called him Bronco. His real name was Jeff Winters, and he was a newly promoted captain in the United States Air Force, but because his job was flying fighter aircraft he had to have a special name, known as a call sign. His resulted from a nearly forgotten party in Colorado—he'd graduated from the United States Air Force Academy—at which he'd fallen from a horse so gentle that the animal had nearly died of fright. The six-pack of Coors had contributed to the fall, along with the laughter that followed from his amused classmates, and one of them—the asshole was flying trash-haulers now, Winters told himself with a tight smile—assigned him the name on the spot. The classmate knew how to ride horses, Bronco told the night, but he hadn't made the grade to fly F-15-Charlies. The world wasn't exactly overrun with justice, but there was some to be found.

Which was the whole purpose of his special mission.

Winters was a small man, and a young one. Twenty-seven, to be exact, he already had seven hundred hours in the McDonnell-Douglas fighter. As some men were born to play baseball, or to act, or to drive race cars, Bronco Winters had entered the world for the single purpose of flying fighter planes. He had the sort of eyesight to make an ophthalmologist despair, coordination that combined the best of a concert pianist and the man on the flying trapeze, and a much rarer quality known in his tight community as SA—situational awareness. Winters always knew what was happening around him. His

airplane was as natural a part of the young man as the muscles in his arm. He transmitted his wishes to the airplane and the F-15C complied at once, precisely mimicking the mental image in the pilot's mind. Where his mind went, the airplane followed.

At the moment he was orbiting two hundred miles off the Florida Gulf Coast. He'd taken off from Eglin Air Force Base forty minutes earlier, topped off his fuel from a KC-135 tanker, and now he had enough JP-5 aboard to fly for five hours if he took things easy, as he had every intention of doing. FAST-pack conformal fuel cells were attached along the sides of his aircraft. Ordinarily they were hung with missiles as well—the F-15 can carry as many as eight—but for this evening's mission the only ordnance aboard were the rounds for his 20mm rotary cannon, and these were always kept aboard the aircraft because their weight was a convenience in maintaining the Eagle's flying trim.

He flew in a racetrack pattern, his engines throttled down to loitering speed. Bronco's dark, sharp eyes swept continuously left and right, searching for the running lights of other aircraft but finding none among the stars. He wasn't the least bit bored. He was, rather, a man quietly delighted that the taxpayers of his country were actually foolish enough to give him over $30,000 per year to do something for which he would have been grateful to pay. Well, he told himself, I guess that's what I'm doing tonight.

"Two-Six Alpha, this is Eight-Three Quebec, do you read, over?" his radio crackled. Bronco squeezed the trigger on his stick.

"Eight-Three Quebec, this is Two-Six Alpha. I read you five by five, over." The radio channel was encrypted. Only the two aircraft were using the unique encoding algorithm for this evening; all that anyone trying to listen in would hear would be the warbling rasp of static.

"We have a target on profile, bearing one-nine-six, range two-one-zero your position. Angels two. Course zero-one-eight. Speed two-six-five. Over." There was no command to accompany this information. Despite the secure radios, chatter was kept to a minimum.

"Roger, copy. Out."

Captain Winters moved his stick left. The proper course and speed for his intercept sprang into his mind unbidden. The Eagle changed over to a southerly heading. Winters dropped the nose a touch as he brought the fighter to a course of one hundred eighty degrees and increased power a fraction to bring his speed up. It actually seemed that he was abusing the airplane to fly her this slow, but that was not actually the case.

It was a twin-engined Beech, Captain Winters saw, the most common aircraft used by the druggies. That meant cocaine rather than the bulkier marijuana, and that suited him, since it was probably a cokehead who'd mugged his mom. He pulled his F-15 level behind it, about half a mile back.

This was the eighth time he'd intercepted a drug runner, but it was the first time he'd be allowed to do something about it. On the previous occasions he'd

not even been allowed to call the information in to the Customs boys. Bronco verified the course of the target—for fighter pilots anything other than a friendly was a target—and checked his systems. The directional radio transmitter hanging in the streamlined container under the fighter's centerline slaved itself to the radar tracking Beech. He made his first radio call, and flipped on his landing lights, transfixing the small executive aircraft in the night. Immediately the Beech dived for the wave tops, and the Eagle followed it down. He called again, giving his order and getting no response. He moved the button on the top of his stick to the "guns" position. The next call was accompanied by a burst from his cannon. This started the Beech in a series of radical evasive turns. Winters decided that the target was not going to do what it was told.

Okay.

An ordinary pilot might have been startled by the lights and turned to evade a collision, but an ordinary pilot would not do what the druggies did. The Beech dived for the wave tops, reduced power, and popped his flaps, slowing the aircraft down to approach speed, which was far slower than the F-15 could do without stalling out. This maneuver often forced the DEA and Coast Guard planes to break contact. But Bronco's job wasn't to follow the guy in. As the Beech turned west to run for the Mexican coast, Captain Winters killed his lights, added power, and zoomed up to five thousand feet. There he executed a smart hammerhead turn and took a nose-down attitude, the Eagle's radar sweeping the surface of the sea. There: heading due west, speed 85 knots, only a few feet over the water. A gutsy pilot, Bronco thought, holding that close to a stall and that low. Not that it mattered.

Winters extended his own speed brakes and flaps, taking the fighter down. He felt to make sure that the selector button was still in the "guns" position and watched the Head-Up Display, bringing the pipper right on the target and holding it there. It might have been harder if the Beech had kept speed up and tried to maneuver, but it wouldn't really have mattered. Bronco was just too good, and in his Eagle, he was nearly invincible. When he got within four hundred yards, his finger depressed the button for a fraction of a second.

A line of green tracers lanced through the sky.

Several rounds appeared to miss the Beech ahead, but the rest hit right in the cockpit area. He heard no sound from the kill. There was only a brief flash of light, followed by a phosphorescent splash of white foam when the aircraft hit.

Winters reflected briefly that he had just killed one man, maybe two. That was all right. They wouldn't be missed.

9.

Meeting
Engagement

"So?" ESCOBEDO EYED Larson as coldly as a biology professor might look at a caged white rat. He had no special reason to suspect Larson of anything, but he was angry, and Larson was the nearest target for that anger.

But Larson was used to that. "So I don't know, *jefe.* Ernesto was a good pilot, a good student. So was the other one, Cruz. The engines in the aircraft were practically new—two hundred hours on each. The airframe was six years old, but that's nothing unusual; the aircraft was well maintained. Weather was okay all the way north, some scattered high clouds over the Yucatan Channel, nothing worse than that." The pilot shrugged. "Aircraft disappear, *jefe.* One cannot always know why."

"He is my cousin! What do I tell his mother?"

"Have you checked with any airfields in Mexico?"

"Yes! And Cuba, and Honduras, and Nicaragua!"

"No distress calls? No reports from ships or aircraft in the vicinity?"

"No, nothing." Escobedo moderated somewhat as Larson went through the possibilities, professional as ever.

"If it was some sort of electrical failure, he might be down somewhere, but ... I would not be hopeful, *jefe.* If they had landed safely, they would have let us know by now. I am sorry, *jefe.* He is probably lost. It has happened before. It will happen again."

One other possibility was that Ernesto and Cruz had made their own arrangements, had landed somewhere other than their intended destination, had sold their cargo of forty kilograms, and had decided to disappear, but that was not seriously considered. The question of drugs had not even been mentioned, because Larson was not really part of the operation, merely a technical consultant who had asked to be cut out of that aspect of the business. Escobedo trusted Larson to be honest and objective because he had always been so in the past, taking his money and doing his job well, and also because Larson was no fool—he knew the consequences of lying and double-dealing.

They were in Escobedo's expensive condominium in Medellin. It occupied the entire top floor of the building. The floor immediately under this was occupied by Escobedo's vassals and retainers. The elevator was controlled by

people who knew who could pass and who could not. The street outside the building was watched. Larson reflected that at least he didn't have to worry about somebody stealing the hubcaps off his car. He also wondered what the hell had happened to Ernesto. Was it simply an accident of some sort? Such things had happened often enough. One reason for his position as flying instructor was that past smuggling operations had lost quite a few airplanes, often through the most prosaic of causes. But Larson was not a fool. He was thinking about recent visitors and recent orders from Langley; training at The Farm didn't encourage people to believe in coincidences. Some sort of op was about to run. Might this have been the opening move?

Larson didn't think so. CIA was years past that sort of thing, which was too bad, he thought, but a fact nonetheless.

"He was a good pilot?" Escobedo asked again.

"I taught him myself, *jefe.* He had four hundred hours, good mechanical skills, and he was as good on instruments as a young pilot can be. The only thing that worried me about him was that he liked flying low."

"Yes?"

"Flying low over water is dangerous, especially at night. It is too easy to become disoriented. You forget where the horizon is, and if you keep looking out of the windows instead of checking your instruments.... Experienced pilots have driven their airplanes right into the water that way. Unfortunately, flying very low is fun and many pilots, especially the young ones, think that it is also a test of manhood. That is foolish, as pilots learn with time."

" 'A good pilot is a cautious pilot'?" Escobedo asked.

"That is what I tell every student," Larson replied seriously. "Not all of them believe me. It is true everywhere. You can ask instructors in any air force in the world. Young pilots make foolish mistakes because they are young and inexperienced. Judgment comes with experience—most often through a frightening experience. Those who survive learn, but some do not survive."

Escobedo considered that for a few seconds.

"He was a proud one, Ernesto." To Larson it sounded like an epitaph.

"I will recheck the maintenance log of the aircraft," the pilot offered. "And I will also review the weather data."

"Thank you for coming in so quickly, Señor Larson."

"I am at your service, *jefe.* If I learn anything, I will let you know."

Escobedo saw him to the door, then returned to his desk. Cortez entered the room from a side door.

"Well?"

"I like Larson," Cortez said. "He speaks the truth. He has pride, but not too much."

Escobedo nodded agreement. "A hireling, but a good one." ... *like you.* Cortez didn't react to the implied message. "How many flights have been lost

over the years?"

"We didn't even keep records until eighteen months ago. Since then, nine. That's one reason we took Larson on. I felt that the crashes were due to pilot error and poor maintenance. Carlos has proven to be a good instructor."

"But never wished to become involved himself?"

"No. A simple man. He has a comfortable life doing what he enjoys. There is much to be said for that," Escobedo observed lightly. "You have been over his background?"

"Sí. Everything checks out, but ..."

"But?"

"But if he were something other than what he appears to be, things would also check out." This was the point at which an ordinary man would say something like, *But you can't suspect everyone.* Escobedo did not, and that was a measure of his sophistication, Cortez noted. His employer had ample experience with conspiracy and knew that you had to suspect everyone. He wasn't exactly a professional, but he wasn't exactly a fool either.

"Do you. think—"

"No. He was nowhere near the place the flight left from, had no way of knowing that it was happening that night. I checked: he was in Bogotá with his lady friend. They had dinner alone and retired early. Perhaps it was a flying accident, but coming so soon after we learn that the *norteamericanos* are planning something, I do not think we should call it such a thing. I think I should return to Washington."

"What will you find out?"

"I will attempt to discover something of what they are doing."

"Attempt?"

"Señor, gathering sensitive intelligence information is an art—"

"You can buy anything you need!"

"There you are incorrect," Cortez said with a level stare. "The best sources of information are never motivated by money. It is dangerous—foolish—to assume that allegiance can be purchased."

"And what of you?"

"That is a question you must consider, but I am sure you already have." The best way to earn trust with this man was always to say that trust did not exist. Escobedo thought that whatever allegiance money could not buy could be maintained with fear instead. In that sense, his employer was foolish. He assumed that his reputation for violence could cow anyone, and rarely considered that there were those who could give him lessons in applied violence. There was much to admire about this man, but so much also to merit disdain. Fundamentally he was an amateur—though a gifted one—who learned from his mistakes readily enough, but lacked the formal training that might have enabled him to learn from the mistakes of others—and what was

intelligence training but the institutional memory of lessons from the mistakes of others? He didn't so much need an intelligence and security adviser as one in covert operations per se, but that was an area in which none of these men would solicit or accept advice. They came from generations of smugglers, and their expertise in corrupting and bribing was real enough. It was just that they'd never learned how to play the game against a truly organized and formidable adversary—the Colombians didn't count. That the *yanquis* had not yet discovered within themselves the courage to act in accordance with their power was nothing more than good fortune. If there was one thing the KGB had drilled into Cortez, it was that good fortune did not exist.

Captain Winters viewed his gunsight videotape with the men from Washington. They were in a corner office of one of the Special Ops buildings—Eglin had quite a few—and the other two wore Air Force uniforms, both bearing the rank of lieutenant colonel, a convenient middle grade of officer, many of whom came and went in total anonymity.

"Nice shooting, son," one observed.

"He could have made it harder," Bronco replied without much in the way of emotion. "But he didn't."

"How about traffic on the surface?"

"Nothing within thirty miles."

"Put up the Hawkeye tape," the senior man ordered. They were using three-quarter-inch tape, which was preferred by the military for its higher data capacity. The tape was already cued. It showed the inbound Beechcraft, marked as XX1 on the alphanumeric display, one of many contacts, most of which were clearly marked as airliners, and had been high over the shoot-down. There were also numerous surface contacts, but all of them were a good distance away from the area of the attack, and this tape ended prior to the shoot-down. The Hawkeye crew, as planned, had no direct knowledge of what had transpired after handing over the contact to the fighter. The guidelines for the mission were clear, and the intercept area was calculated to avoid frequently used shipping channels. The low-altitude path taken by the drug smugglers helped, of course, insofar as it limited the distance at which someone might see a flash or an explosion, neither of which had happened here.

"Okay," said the senior one. "That was well within mission parameters." They switched tapes again.

"How many rounds expended?" the junior one asked Winters.

"A hundred 'n eight," the captain replied. "With a Vulcan it's kinda hard to keep it down, y'know? The critter shoots right quick."

"It did that plane like a chainsaw."

"That's the idea, sir. I could have been a little faster on the trigger, but you want me to try 'n avoid the fuel tanks, right?"

"That's correct." The cover story, in case anyone saw a flash, was that there

was a Shoot-Ex out of Eglin—exercises killing target drones are not uncommon there—but so much the better if no one noticed at all.

Bronco didn't like the secrecy stuff. As far as he was concerned, shooting the bastards down made perfectly good sense. The point of the mission, they'd told him during the recruiting phase, was that drug trafficking was a threat to U.S. national security. That phrasing made everything legitimate. As an air-defense fighter pilot, he was trained to deal with threats to national security in this specific way—to shoot them out of the sky with as much emotion as a skeet-shooter dispatched clay birds thrown out from the traps. Besides, Bronco thought, if it's a real threat to national security, why shouldn't the people know about it? But that wasn't his department. He was only a captain, and captains are operators, not thinkers. Somebody up the line had decided that this was okay, and that was all he needed to know. Dispatching this Twin-Beech had been the next thing to murder, but that was as accurate a description of combat operations as any other. After all, giving people a fair chance was what happened at the Olympics, not where your life was on the line. If somebody was dumb enough to let his ass get killed, that wasn't Bronco's lookout, especially if he happened to be committing an act of war against Bronco's country. And *that* was what "threat to national security" meant, wasn't it?

Besides, he *had* given Juan—or whatever the bastard's name had been—a fair warning, hadn't he? If the asshole'd thought he could outfly the best fucking fighter plane in the whole world, well, he'd learned different. Tough.

"You got any problems to this point, Captain?" the senior one asked.

"Problems with what, sir?" *What a dumbass question!*

The airstrip at which they had arrived wasn't big enough for a proper military transport. The forty-four men of Operation SHOWBOAT traveled by bus to Peterson Air Force Base, a few miles east of the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs. It was dark, of course. The bus was driven by one of the "camp counselors," as the men had taken to calling them, and the ride was a quiet one, with many of the soldiers asleep after their last day's PT. The rest were alone with their own thoughts. Chavez watched the mountains slide by as the bus twisted its way down the last range. The men were ready.

"Pretty mountains, man," Julio Vega observed sleepily.

"Especially in a bus heading downhill."

"Fuckin' A!" Vega chuckled. "You know, someday I'm gonna come back here and do some skiing." The machine-gunner adjusted himself in the seat and faded out.

They were roused thirty-five minutes later after passing through the gate at Peterson. The bus pulled right up to the aft ramp of an Air Force C-141 Starlifter transport. The soldiers rose and assembled their gear in an orderly fashion, with each squad captain checking to make sure that everyone had everything he'd been issued as they filed off. A few looked around on the way

to the aircraft. There was nothing unusual about the departure, no special security guards, merely the ground crew fueling and preflighting the aircraft for an immediate departure. In the distance a KC-135 aerial tanker was lifting off, and though no one thought much about it, they'd be meeting that bird in a little while. The Air Force sergeant who was loadmaster for this particular aircraft took them aboard and seated them as comfortably as the spartan appointments allowed—this mainly involved giving everyone ear protectors.

The flight crew went through the usual startup procedures, and presently the Starlifter began moving. The noise was grating despite the earmuffs, but the aircraft had an Air Force Reserve crew, all airline personnel, who gave them a decent ride. Except for the midair refueling, that is. As soon as the C-141 had climbed to altitude, it rendezvoused with the KC-135 to replace the fuel burned off during the climb-out. For the passengers this involved the usual roller-coaster buffet which, amplified by the near total absence of windows, made a few stomachs decidedly queasy, though all looked quietly inured to it. Half an hour after lifting off, the C-141 settled down on a southerly course, and from a mixture of fatigue and sheer boredom, the soldiers drifted off to sleep for the remainder of the ride.

The MH-53J left Eglin Air Force Base at about the same time, all of its fuel tanks topped off after engine warm-up. Colonel Johns took it to one thousand feet and a course of two-one-five for the Yucatan Channel. Three hours out, an MC-130E Combat Talon tanker/support aircraft caught up with the Pave Low, and Johns decided to let the captain handle the midair refueling. They'd have to tank thrice more, and the tanker would accompany them all the way down, bringing a maintenance and support crew and spare parts.

"Ready to plug," PJ told the tanker commander.

"Roger," answered Captain Montaigne in the MC-130E, holding the aircraft straight and level.

Johns watched Willis ease the nose probe into the drogue. "Okay, we got plug."

In the cockpit of the -130E, Captain Montaigne took note of the indicator light and keyed the microphone. *"Ohhh!"* she said in her huskiest voice. *"Nobody* does it like you, Colonel!"

Johns laughed out loud and keyed his switch twice, generating a *click-click* signal, which meant Affirmative. He switched to intercom. "Why spoil it for her?" he asked Willis, who was regrettably straitlaced. The fuel transfer took six minutes.

"How long do you think we'll be down there?" Captain Willis wondered after it was done.

"They didn't tell me that, but if it goes too long, they say we'll get relief."

"That's nice," the captain observed. His eyes shifted back and forth from his flight instruments to the world outside the armored cockpit. The aircraft had

more than its full load of combat gear aboard—Johns was a firm believer in firepower—and the electronic countermeasures racks were gone. Whatever they'd be doing, they wouldn't have to worry about unfriendly radar coverage, and that meant that the job, whatever it was, didn't involve Nicaragua or Cuba. It also made for more passenger room in the aircraft and deleted the second flight engineer from the crew. "You were right about the gloves. My wife made up a set and it does make a difference."

"Some guys just fly without 'em, but I don't like to have sweaty hands on the stick."

"Is it going to be that warm?"

"There's warm, and there's warm," Johns pointed out. "You don't get sweaty hands just from the outside temperature."

"Oh. Yes, sir." *Gee, he gets scared, too—just like the rest of us?*

"Like I keep telling people, the more thinking you do before things get exciting, the less exciting things will be. And they get plenty exciting enough."

Another voice came onto the intercom circuit: "You keep talking like that, sir, and we might get a little scared."

"Sergeant Zimmer, how are things in the back?" Johns asked. Zimmer's regular spot was just aft of the two pilots, hovering over an impressive array of instruments.

"Coffee, tea, or milk, sir? The meals for this flight are Chicken Kiev with rice, Roast Beef au Jus with baked potato, and for the weight-watchers among us, Orange Ruffy and stir-fried veggies—and if you believe that, sir, you've been staring at the instrument panel too long. Why the hell don't we have a stewardess along with us?"

" 'Cause you and I are both too old for that shit, Zimmer!" **PJ** laughed.

"It ain't bad in a chopper, sir. What with all the vibration and all..."

"I've been trying to reform him since Korat," Johns explained to Captain Willis. "How old are the kids now, Buck?"

"Seventeen, fifteen, twelve, nine, six, five, and three, sir."

"Christ," Willis noted. "Your wife must be some gal, Sarge."

"She's afraid I'll run around, so she robs me of my energy," Zimmer explained. "I fly to get away from her. It's the only thing that keeps me alive."

"Her cooking must be all right, judging by your uniform."

"Is the colonel picking on his sergeant again?" Zimmer asked.

"Not exactly. I just want you to look as good as Carol does."

"No chance, sir."

"Roger that. Some coffee would be nice."

"On the way, Colonel, sir." Zimmer was on the flight deck in less than a minute. The instrument console for the Pave Low helicopter was large and

complex, but Zimmer had long since installed gimbaled cup holders suitable for the spillproof cups that Colonel Johns liked. PJ took a quick sip.

"She makes good coffee, too, Buck."

"Funny how things work out, isn't it?" Carol Zimmer knew that her husband would share it with his colonel. Carol wasn't her original given name. Born in Laos thirty-six years earlier, she was the daughter of a Hmong warlord who'd fought long and hard for a country that was no longer his. She was the only survivor of a family of ten. PJ and Buck had lifted her and a handful of others off a hilltop at the final stages of a North Vietnamese assault in 1972. America had failed that man's family, but at least it hadn't failed his daughter. Zimmer had fallen in love with her from the first moment, and it was generally agreed that they had the seven cutest kids in Florida.

"Yep."

It was late in Mobile, somewhere between the two southbound aircraft, and jails—especially Southern jails—are places where the rules are strictly applied. For lawyers, however, the rules are often rather lenient, and paradoxically they were very lenient indeed in the case of these two. These two had an as-yet-undetermined date with "Old Sparky," the electric chair at Admore Prison. The jailors at Mobile therefore didn't want to do anything to interfere with the prisoners' constitutional rights, access to counsel, or general comfort. The attorney, whose name was Edward Stuart, had been fully briefed going in, and was fully fluent in Spanish.

"How did they do it?"

"I don't know."

"You screamed and kicked, Ramón," Jesus said.

"I know. And you sang like a canary."

"It doesn't matter," the attorney told them. "They're not charging you with anything but drug-related murder and piracy The information Jesus gave them is not being used at all in this case."

"So do your lawyer shit and get us off!"

The look on Stuart's face was all the response either man needed.

"You tell our friends that if we don't get off on this one, we start talking."

The jail guards had already told both men in loving detail what fate had in store for them. One had even shown Ramór a poster of the chair itself with the caption REGULAR OR EXTRA CRISPY. Though a hard man and a brutal one, the idea of being strapped into a hard-backed wooden chair, then having a copper band affixed to his left leg, and a small metal cap set on a bale spot that the prison barber would shave on his head the day be fore, and the small sponge soaked in a saline solution to facilitate electrical conductivity, the leather mask to keep his eyes from flying out of his head ... Ramón was a brave man when he hac the upper hand, and that hand held a gun or a knife

directec at an unarmed or bound person. Then he was quite brave. In had never occurred to him that one day he might be the helpless one. Ramón had lost five pounds in the preceding week. His ap petite was virtually nil and he took an inordinate interest in light bulbs and wall sockets. He was afraid, but more than that he was angry, at himself for his fear, at the guards and police for giving him that fear, and at his former associates for not getting him free of this mess.

"I know many things, many useful things."

"It does not matter. I have spoken with the *federales,* and they do not care what you know. The U.S. Attorney claims to have no interest in what you might tell him."

"That is ridiculous. They always trade for information, they always—"

"Not here. The rules have changed."

"What do you tell us?"

"I will do my best for you." *I'm supposed to tell you to die like men,* Stuart could not say. "There are many things that can happen in the next few weeks."

The attorney was rewarded with skeptical expressions not entirely devoid of hope. He himself had no hope at all. The U.S. Attorney was going to handle this one himself, the better to get his face on the 5:30 and 11:00 Eyewitness News broadcasts. This would be a very speedy trial, and a U.S. Senate seat would be available in just over two years. So much the better that the prosecutor could point to his law-and-order record. Frying some druggie-pirate-rapist-murderers would surely appeal to the citizens of the sovereign state of Alabama, Stuart knew. The defense attorney objected to capital punishment on principle, and had spent much of his time and money working against it. He'd successfully taken one case to the Supreme Court and on a five-to-four decision managed to get his client a new trial, where the death sentence had been bargained down to life plus ninety-nine years. Stuart regarded that as a victory even though his client had survived precisely four months in the prison's general population until someone who disliked child-murderers had put a shank into his lumbar spine. He didn't have to like his clients—and most often he didn't. He was occasionally afraid of them, especially the drug runners. They quite simply expected that in return for however much cash—it was generally cash—they paid for his services they would get their freedom in return. They did not understand that in law there are no guarantees, especially for the guilty. And these two were guilty as hell. But they did not deserve death. Stuart was convinced that society could not afford to debase itself to the level of ... his clients. It was not a popular opinion in the South, but Stuart had no ambition to run for public office.

In any case, he was their lawyer, and his job was to provide them with the best possible defense. He'd already explored the chances of a plea-bargain; life imprisonment in exchange for information. He'd already examined the government's case. It was all circumstantial—there were no witnesses except his own clients, of course—but the physical evidence was formidable, and that Coast Guard crew had scrupulously left the crime scene intact except for

removing some evidence, all of which had been carefully locked up for a proper chain-of-evidence. Whoever had briefed and trained those people had done it right. Not much hope there. His only real hope, therefore, was to impeach their credibility. It was a slim hope, but it was the best he had.

Supervisory Special Agent Mark Bright was also working late The crew had been busy. For starters there had been an office and a home to search, a lengthy procedure that was just the opening move in a process to last months, probably, since all the documents found, all the phone numbers scribbled in any of eleven places, all the photographs on desks and walls, and everything else found would have to be investigated. Every business acquaintance of the deceased would be interviewed, along with neighbors, people whose offices adjoined his, members of his country club, and even parishioners at his church. For all that, the major break in the case had come in the second hour of the fourth home search, fully a month after the case had begun. Something had told them all that there *had to be* something else. In his den, the deceased had a floor safe—with nc record of its purchase or installation—neatly hidden by an un-tacked segment of the wall-to-wall carpeting. Discovering it had required thirty-two days. Tickling it open took nearly ninety minutes, but an experienced agent had done it by first experimenting with the birthdays of the deceased's whole family, then playing variations on the theme. It turned out that the three-element combination came from taking the month of the man's birth and adding one, taking the day of his birth and adding two, then taking the year of his birth and adding three. The door of the expensive Mosler came open with a whisper as it rubbed against the rug flap.

No money, no jewels, no letter to his attorney. Inside the safe had been five computer disks of a type compatible with the businessman's IBM personal computer. That told the agents all they wanted. Bright had at once taken the disks and the deceased's computer to his office, which was also equipped with IBM-COMPATIBLE machines. Mark Bright was a good investigator, which meant that he was a patient one. His first move had been to call a local computer expert who assisted the FBI from time to time. A free-lance software consultant, he'd first protested that he was busy, but he'd only needed to hear that there was a major criminal investigation underway to settle that. Like many such people who informally assist the FBI, he found police work most exciting, though not quite exciting enough to take a full-time job for the FBI Laboratory. Government service didn't come close to paying what he earned on the outside. Bright had anticipated his first instruction: bring in the man's own computer and hard-disk.

After first making exact copies of the five disks using a program called CHASTITY BELT, he had Bright store the originals while he went to work on the copies. The disks were encrypted, of course. There were many ways of accomplishing that, and the consultant knew them all. As he and Bright had anticipated, the encrypting algorithm was permanently stored on the deceased's hard disk. From that point it was merely a question of what option and what personal encrypting key had been used to secure the data on the

disks. That took nine nonstop hours, with Bright feeding coffee and sandwiches to his friend and wondering why he did it all for free.

"Gotcha!" A scruffy hand punched the PRINT command, and the office laser printer started humming and disgorging papers. All five disks were packed with data, totaling over seven hundred single-spaced pages of text. By the time the third one was printed, the consultant had left. Bright read it all, over a period of three days. Then he made six Xerox copies for the other senior agents in the case. They were now flipping through the pages around the conference table.

"Christ, Mark, this stuff is fantastic!"

"That's what I said."

"Three hundred million dollars!" another exclaimed. "Christ, I shop there myself ..."

"What's the total involved?" a third asked more soberly.

"I just skimmed through this stuff," Bright answered, "but I got close to seven hundred million. Eight shopping malls spread from Fort Worth to Atlanta. The investments go through eleven different corporations, twenty-three banks, and—"

"My life insurance is with this company! They do my IRA, and—"

"The way he set it up, he was the only one who knew. Talk about an artist, this guy was like Leonardo...."

"Sucker got greedy, though. If I read this right, he skimmed off about thirty million ... God almighty ..."

The plan, as with all great plans, was an elegantly simple one. There were eight real-estate-development projects. In each case the deceased had set up himself as the general partner representing foreign money—invariably described as Persian Gulf oil money or Japanese industrial money, with the funds laundered through an incredible maze of non-American banks. The general partner had used the "Oil Money"—the term was almost generic in the venture capital field—to purchase land and set the project in motion, then solicited further development funds from limited partners who had no say in the executive management of the individual projects, but whose profits were almost guaranteed by the syndicate's previous performance. Even the one in Fort Worth had made money, despite the recent slowdown in the local oil industry. By the time ground was broken on every project, actual ownership was further disguised by majority investment from banks, insurance companies, and wealthy private investors, with much of the original overseas investment fully recovered and gone back to the Bank of Dubai and numerous others—but with a controlling interest remaining in the project itself. In this way, the overseas investors speedily recouped their initial investment with a tidy profit, and continued to get much of the profits from the project's actual operations, further looking forward to the eventual sale of the project to local interests for more profit still. For each hundred million dollars invested, Bright estimated, one hundred fifty million fully laundered dollars were extracted.

And that was the important part. The hundred million put in, and the fifty million profit taken out were as clean as the marble on the Washington Monument.

Except for these computer disks.

"Every one of these projects, and every dime of investment and profits, went through IRS, SEC, and enough lawyers to fill the Pentagon, and nobody ever caught a sniff. He kept these records in case somebody ever burned him—but he must have expected to trade this information for a crack at the Witness Protection Program—"

"And he'd be the richest guy in Cody, Wyoming," Mike Schratz observed. "But the wrong people got a sniff. I wonder what tipped them off? What did our friends say?"

"They don't know. Just that they pulled the job of killing them all off and making it look like a disappearance. The bosses clearly anticipated losing them and compartmentalized the information. How hard is it to get one of these mutts to take a contract? It's like filling out a girl's dance card at the cotillion."

"Roger that. Headquarters know about this yet?"

"No, Mike, I wanted you guys to see it first," Bright said. "Opinions, gentlemen?"

"If we move fast ... we could seize a whole shitload of money ... unless they've moved the money on us," Schratz thought aloud. "I wonder if they have? As clever as this stuff is ... I got a buck says they haven't. Takers?"

"Not from me," another agent announced. This one was a CPA and a lawyer. "Why should they bother? This is the closest thing I've ever seen to—hell, it is a perfect plan. I suppose we ought to show some appreciation, what with all the help they're giving our balance-of-payments problem. In any case, folks, this money is exposed. We can bag it all."

"There's the Bureau's budget for the next two years—"

"And a squadron of fighters for the Air Force. This is big enough to sting them pretty good. Mark, I think you ought to call the Director," Schratz concluded. There was general agreement. "Where's Pete today?" Pete Mariano was the special-agent-in-charge of the Mobile Field Office.

"Probably Venice," an agent said. "He's going to be pissed he was away for this one."

Bright closed the ring binder. He was already booked on an early-morning flight to Dulles International Airport.

The C-141 landed ten minutes early at Howard Field. After the clean, dry air of the Colorado Rockies, and the cleaner, thinner, and drier air of the flight, the damp oven of the Isthmus of Panama was like walking into a door. The soldiers assembled their gear and allowed themselves to be herded off by the

loadmaster. They were quiet and serious. The change in climate was a physical sign that playtime was over. The mission had begun. They immediately boarded yet another green bus which took them to some dilapidated barracks on the grounds of Fort Kobbe.

The MH-53J helicopter landed several hours later at the same field, and was rolled unceremoniously into a hangar, which was surrounded with armed guards. Colonel Johns and the flight crew were taken to nearby quarters and told to stay put.

Another helicopter, this one a Marine CH-53E Super Stallion, lifted off the deck of USS *Guadalcanal* just before dawn. It flew west over the Bay of Panama to Corezal, a small military site near the Gaillard Cut, the most difficult segment of the original Panama Canal construction project. The helicopter-carrier's flight-deck crew attached a bulky item to a sling dangling from the helicopter's underside, and the CH-53E headed awkwardly toward shore. After a twenty-minute flight, the helicopter hovered over its predetermined destination. The pilot killed his forward speed and gently eased toward the ground, coached by instructions from the crew chief, until the communications van touched down on a concrete pad. The sling was detached and the helicopter flew off at once to make room for a second aircraft, a smaller CH-46 troop carrier which deposited four men before returning to its ship. The men went immediately to work setting up the van.

The van was quite ordinary, looking most of all like a cargo container with wheels, though it was painted in the mottled green camouflage scheme of most military vehicles. That changed rapidly as the communications technicians began erecting various radio antennas, including one four-foot satellite dish. Power cables were run in from a generator vehicle already in place, and the van's air-conditioning systems were turned on to protect the communications gear, rather than the technicians. They wore military-style dress, though none of them were soldiers. All the pieces were now in place.

Or almost all. At Cape Canaveral, a Titan-IIID rocket began its final countdown. Three senior Air Force officers and half a dozen civilians watched the hundred or so technicians go through the procedure. They were unhappy. Their cargo had been bumped at the last minute for this less important one (they thought). The explanation for the change was not to their collective satisfaction, and there weren't enough launch rockets to play this sort of game. But nobody had bothered telling them what the game actually was.

"Tallyho, tallyho. I have eyeballs on target," Bronco reported. The Eagle bottomed out half a mile astern and slightly below the target. It seemed to be a four-engined Douglas. A DC-4, -6, or -7, a big one—the biggest he'd yet intercepted. Four piston engines and a single rudder made it a Douglas product, certainly older than the man who was now chasing it. Winters saw the blue flames from the exhaust ports on the big radial engines, along with the moonlight shimmering from the propellers. The rest was mainly

guesswork.

The flying became harder now. He was closing on the target and had to slough off his airspeed lest he overtake it. Bronco throttled his Pratt & Whitney engines back and put on some flaps to increase both lift and drag as he watched his airspeed drop to a scant two-hundred forty knots.

He matched speed when he was a hundred yards aft of the target. The heavy fighter rocked slightly—only the pilot would have noticed—from the larger plane's wake turbulence. Time. He took a deep breath and flexed his fingers once around the stick. Captain Winters switched on his powerful landing lights. They were alert, he saw. The wingtips rocked a second after his lights transfixed the former airliner in the sky.

"Aircraft in view, please identify, over," he called over the guard frequency.

It started turning—it was a DC-7B, he thought now, the last of the great piston-engine liners, so quickly brushed aside by the advent of the jetliners in the late fifties. The exhaust flames grew brighter as the pilot added power.

"Aircraft in view, you are in restricted airspace. Identify immediately, over," Bronco called next. *Immediately* is a word that carries a special meaning for flyers.

The DC-7B was diving now, heading for the wave tops. The Eagle followed almost of its own accord.

"Aircraft in view, I repeat—you are in restricted airspace. Identify *at once!"*

Turning away now, heading east for the Florida peninsula. Captain Winters eased back on the stick and armed his gun system. He checked the surface of the ocean to make sure that there were no ships or boats about.

"Aircraft in view, if you do not identify I will open fire, over." No reaction.

The hard part now was that the Eagle's gun system, once armed, did everything possible to facilitate the pilot's task of hitting the target. But they wanted him to bring one in alive, and Bronco had to concentrate to make sure he'd miss, then squeezed the trigger for a fraction of a second.

Half the rounds in the magazine were tracers, and the six-barrel cannon spat them out at a rate of almost a hundred per second. What resulted was a streak of green-yellow light that looked like one of the laser beams in a science-fiction movie, and hung for a sizable portion of infinity a bare ten yards from the DC-7B's cockpit window.

"Aircraft in view: level out and identify or you'll eat the next burst. Over."

"Who is this? What the hell are you doing?" The DC-7B leveled out.

"Identify!" Winters commanded tersely.

"Carib Cargo—we're a special flight, inbound from Honduras."

"You are in restricted airspace. Come left to new course three-four-seven."

"Look, we didn't know about the restriction. Tell us where to go and we're out of here, okay? Over."

“Come left to three-four-seven. I will be following you in. You got some big-league explaining to do, Carib. You picked a bad place to be flying without lights. I hope you got a good story, ’cause the colonel is not pleased with you. Bring that fat-assed bird left—now!”

Nothing happened for a moment. Bronco was a little bit peeved that they were not taking him seriously enough. He eased his fighter over to the right and triggered off another burst to encourage the target.

And it came left to a heading of three-four-seven. And the anticollision lights came on.

“Okay, Carib, maintain course and altitude. Stay off your radio. I repeat, maintain radio silence until instructed otherwise. Don’t make it any worse than it already is. I’ll be back here to keep an eye on you. Out.”

It took nearly an hour—each second like driving a Ferrari in Manhattan rush-hour traffic. Clouds were rolling in from the north, he saw as they approached the coast, and there was lightning in them. They’d land first, Winters thought. On cue, a set of runway lights came on.

“Carib, I want you to land on that strip right in front of you. You do exactly what they tell you. Out.” Bronco checked his fuel state. Enough for several more hours. He indulged himself by throttling up and rocketing to twenty thousand as he watched the DC-7’s strobe lights enter the blue rectangle of the old airstrip.

“Okay, he’s ours,” the radio told the fighter pilot.

Bronco did not acknowledge. He brought the Eagle around for Eglin AFB, and figured that he’d beat the weather in. Another night’s work.

The DC-7B rolled to a stop at the end of the runway. As it halted, a number of lights came on. A jeep rolled to within fifty yards of the aircraft’s nose. On the back of the jeep was an M-2 .50-caliber machine gun, on the left side of which hung a large box of ammunition. The gun was pointed right at the cockpit.

“Out of the fuckin’ airplane, *amigo!”* an angry voice commanded over some loudspeakers.

The forward door opened on the left side of the aircraft. The man who looked down was white and in his forties. Blinded by the lights that were aimed at his face, he was still disoriented. Which was part of the plan, of course.

“Down on the pavement, *amigo,”* a voice said from behind a light.

“What’s gives? I—”

“Down on the fuckin’ pavement—right the fuck now!”

There were no stairs. The pilot was joined by another man, and one at a time they sat down on the doorsill, and stretched down to hang from their hands, then dropped the four feet or so to the cracked concrete. They were met by strong arms in rolled-up camouflage fatigues.

"Face on the cement, you fuckin' commie spy!" a young voice screamed at them.

"Hot diggity damn, we finally bagged one!" another voice called. "We got us a fuckin' Cuban spy plane!"

"What the hell—" one of the men on the cement started to say. He stopped talking when the three-pronged flash suppressor on an M-16 rifle came to rest on the back of his neck. Then he felt a hot breath on the side of his face.

"I want any shit out of you, *amigo,* I'll fuckin' blow it outa ya!" said the other voice. It sounded older than the first one. "Anybody else on the airplane, *amigo?"*

"No. Look, we're—"

"Check it out! And watch your ass!" the gunnery sergeant added.

"Aye aye, Gunny," answered the Marine corporal. "Give me some cover on the door."

"You got a name?" the gunnery sergeant asked. He punctuated the question by pressing his muzzle into the pilot's neck.

"Bert Russo. I'm—"

"You picked a bad time to spy on the exercise, R*oberto*. We was ready for y'all this time, boy! I wonder if Fidel'll want your ass back ... ?"

"He don't look Cuban to me, Gunny," a young voice observed. "You s'pose he's a Russian?"

"Hey, I don't know what you're talking about," Russo objected.

"Sure, *Roberto.* I—over here, Cap'n!" Footsteps approached. And a new voice started talking.

"Sorry I'm late, Gunny Black."

"We got it under control, sir. Putting people into the plane now. Finally bagged that Cuban snooper, we did. This here's Roberto. Ain't talked to the other one yet."

"Roll him over."

A rough hand flipped the pilot faceup like a rag doll, and he saw what the hot breath came from. The biggest German Shepherd dog he'd ever seen in his life was staring at him from a distance of three inches. When he looked at it, it started growling.

"Don't you go scarin' my dog, Roberto," Gunnery Sergeant Black warned him unnecessarily.

"You have a name?"

Bert Russo couldn't see any faces. Everyone was backlit by the perimeter lights. He could see the guns, and the dogs, one of which stood next to his copilot. When he started to speak, the dog over his face moved, and that froze the breath in his throat.

“You Cubans ought to know better. We warned you not to come snooping into our exercise last time, but you had to come bother us again, didn’t you?” the captain observed.

“I’m not a Cuban—I’m an American. And I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the pilot finally managed to say.

“You got some ID?” the captain asked.

Bert Russo started moving his hand toward his wallet, but then the dog really let loose a snarl.

“Don’t scare the dog,” the captain warned. “They’re a little high-strung, y’know?”

“Fuckin’ Cuban spies,” Gunny Black observed. “We could just waste them, sir. I mean, who really gives a damn?”

“Hey, Gunny!” a voice called from the airplane. “This ain’t no spy-bird. It’s full of drugs! We got us a drug runner!”

“Son of a bitch!” The gunny sounded disappointed for a moment. “Fuckin’ druggie is all? Shit!”

The captain just laughed. “Mister, you really picked the wrong place to drive that airplane tonight. How much, Corp?”

“A whole goddamned pisspot full, sir. Grass and coke both. Plane’s like full of it, sir.”

“Fuckin’ druggie,” the gunny observed. He was quiet for a moment. “Cap’n?”

“Yeah?”

“Sir, all the time, sir, these planes land, and the crew just bugs the hell out, and nobody ever finds ’em, sir.”

As though on cue, they all heard a guttural sound from the swamp that surrounded the old airstrip. Albert Russo came from Florida and knew what the sound was.

“I mean, sir, who’d ever know the difference? Plane landed, and the crew ran off‘fore we could catch up, and they got into the swamp over yonder, and like we heard some screams, y’know ... ?” A pause. “I mean, they’re just druggies. Who’s really gonna care, sir? Make the world a better place, y‘know? Hell, it even feeds them ’gators. They sound right hungry to me, sir.”

“No evidence ...” the captain mused.

“Ain’t nobody gonna give a good goddamn, sir,” the sergeant persisted. “Just us be out here, sir.”

“No!” the copilot screamed, speaking for the first time and startling the dog at the back of his neck.

“Y’all be quiet now, we be talking business here,” the gunny observed.

“Gentlemen, I find that the sergeant makes a pretty good case,” the captain

said after a moment's contemplation. "And the 'gators do sound hungry. Kill 'em first, Sergeant. No sense being cruel about it, and the 'gators don't care one way or the other. Be sure you take all their IDs, though."

"Aye aye, skipper," the gunnery sergeant replied. He and the remainder of the duty section—there were only eight of them—came from the Special Operations Center at MacDill. They were Recon Marines, for whom unusual activities were the rule rather than the exception. Their helicopter was half a mile away.

"Okay, sport," Black said as he bent down. He hoisted Russo to his feet with one brutal jerk. "You sure did pick the wrong time to run drugs, boy."

"Wait a minute!" the other one screamed. "We didn't—I mean, we can tell you—"

"You talk all you want, boy. I got my orders. Come on, now. Y'all want to pray or something, now be the time."

"We came in from Colombia—"

"That's a real surprise, ain't it?" Black observed as he frog-marched the man toward the trees. "You best be doing your talking to the Lord, boy. He might listen. Then again, He might not...."

"I can tell you everything," Russo said.

"I ain't *int'rested!"*

"But you can't—"

"Sure I can. What do you think I do for a livin', boy?" Black said with amusement. "Don't worry. It'll be quick and clean. I don't make people suffer like your kind does with drugs. I just do it."

"I have a family ..." Russo was whimpering now.

"Most people do," Black agreed. "They'll get along. You got insurance, I 'spect. Lookie there!"

Another Marine pointed his flashlight into the bushes. It was as large an alligator as Russo had ever seen, over twelve feet long. The large eyes blazed yellow in the darkness, while the rest of the reptile's body looked like a green log. With a mouth.

"This is far enough," Black judged. "Keep them dogs back, goddammit!"

The alligator—they called him Nicodemus—opened his mouth and hissed. It was a thoroughly evil sound.

"Please ..." Russo said.

"I can tell you everything!" the copilot offered again.

"Like *what?"* the captain asked disgustedly. *Why can't you just die like a man?* he seemed to ask instead.

"Where we came from. Who gave us the load. Where we're going. Radio codes. Who's supposed to meet us. Everything!"

“Sure,” the captain noted. “Get their IDs. Pocket change, car keys, everything. As a matter of fact, just strip ‘em naked before you shoot ’em. Let’s try to be neat.”

“I know everything!” Russo screamed.

“He knows everything,” Gunny Black said. “Isn’t that nice? Take off your clothes, boy.”

“Hold it a minute, Gunny.” The captain came forward and shined his light right in Russo’s face.

“What do you know that would interest us?” It was a voice they hadn’t heard before. Though dressed in fatigues, he was not a Marine.

Ten minutes later it was all on tape. They already knew most of the names, of course. The location of the airstrip was new information, however, as were the radio codes.

“Do you waive the right to counsel?” the civilian asked.

“Yes!”

“You willing to cooperate?”

“Yes!”

“Good.” Russo and the copilot, whose name was Bennett, were blindfolded and led to a helicopter. By noon the next day they’d be taken before a U.S. Magistrate, then a judge of the Federal District Court; by sundown to a remote part of Eglin Air Force Base, a newly built structure with a high fence. It was guarded by serious-looking men in uniform.

They didn’t know that they were the lucky ones. Five downed planes qualified a pilot as an ace. Bronco was well on his way there.

10.

Dry Feet

MARK BRIGHT CHECKED in with Deputy Assistant

Director Murray, just as a matter of courtesy, before going in to see the Director.

"You must have caught the first bird out. How's the case coming?"

"The Pirates Case—that's how the papers are treating it—is just fine. I'm up here because of what spun off of it. The victim was dirtier than we thought." Bright explained on for several minutes, pulling one of the ring binders from his briefcase.

"How much?"

"We're not sure. This one's going to take some careful analysis by people with expertise in the world of high finance, but ... well, probably on the order of seven hundred million dollars."

Murray managed to set down his coffee without spilling any. "Say that again?"

"You heard right. I didn't know that until day before yesterday, and I didn't finish reading this until about twenty-four hours ago. Christ, Dan, I just skimmed it. If I'm wrong, I'm off on the low side. Anyway, I figured the Director needed to see this PDQ."

"Not to mention the AG and the President. What time you going in to see Emil?"

"Half an hour. Want to tag along? You know this international shuffle better than I do."

The Bureau had a lot of deputy assistant directors, and Murray's post had a vague definition that he jokingly called "utility outfielder." The Bureau's leading authority on terrorism, Murray was also the agency's in-house expert on how various international groups moved people, arms, and money from point to point. That, added to his wide experience as a street agent, gave him the brief of overseeing certain important cases for the Director or for Bill Shaw, the executive assistant director (Investigations). Bright hadn't walked into this office entirely by accident.

"How solid is your information?"

"Like I said, it's not all collated yet, but I got a bunch of account numbers, transaction dates, amounts, and a solid trail all the way back to the point of

origin."

"And all of this because that Coast Guard—"

"No, sir." Bright hesitated. "Well, maybe. Knowing the victim was dirty made us search his background a little more thoroughly. We probably would have gotten this stuff eventually anyway. As it was, I kept going back to the house. You know how it is."

"Yeah." Murray nodded. One mark of a good agent was tenacity. Another was instinct. Bright had returned to the home of the victims for as long as his mind kept telling him that something else had to be there. "How'd you find the safe?"

"The guy had one of those Rubbermaid sheets for his swivel chair to ride on. You know how they tend to drift away when you move your chair back and forth? I must have sat at that desk for an hour, all told, and I noticed that it had moved. I rolled the chair away, so I could slide the mat back, and then it hit me—what a perfect hiding place. I was right." Bright grinned. He had every right to do so.

"You should write that one up for *The Investigator"*—that was the Justice Department's in-house newsletter—"so everybody' ll know to look for it."

"We have a good safe-man in the office. After that, it was just a matter of cracking the code on the disks. We have a guy in Mobile who helps us out on that—and, no, he doesn't know what's on the disks. He knows not to pay close attention, and he's not all that interested anyway. I figure we'll want to keep this one pretty tight until we move to seize the funds."

"You know, I don't think we've ever owned a shopping mall. I remember when we seized that topless bar, though." Murray laughed as he lifted his phone and tapped in the number for the Director's office. "Morning, Moira, this is Dan Murray. Tell the boss that we have something really hot for him. Bill Shaw will want to come in for this, too. Be there in two minutes." Murray hung up. "Come on, Agent Bright. It's not often that you hit a grand slam on your first major-league at-bat. You ever meet the Director?"

"Just to say hi to him twice at receptions."

"He's good people," Murray assured him on the way out the door. It was a short walk down the carpeted corridor. Bill Shaw met them on the way.

"Hi, Mark. How's your dad?"

"Catching a lot of fish."

"Living down in the Keys now, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're going to love this one, Bill," Murray observed as he opened the door. He led them in and stopped cold when he saw the Director's secretary. "My God, Moira, you're beautiful!"

"You watch that, Mr. Murray, or I'll tell your wife!" But there was no denying it. Her suit was lovely, her makeup was perfect, and her face

positively glowed with what could only be new love.

"I most humbly beg your pardon, ma'am," Murray said gallantly. "This handsome young man is Mark Bright."

"You're five minutes early, Agent Bright," Mrs. Wolfe noted without checking the appointment calendar. "Coffee?"

"No, thank you, ma'am."

"Very well." She checked to see that the Director wasn't on the phone. "You can go right in."

The Director's office was large enough for conferences. Emil Jacobs had come to the Bureau after a distinguished career as a United States Attorney in Chicago, and to take this job he'd declined a seat on the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals there. It went without saying that he could have held a partner's chair in any criminal-law firm in America, but from the day he'd passed the bar exam, Emil Jacobs had dedicated his life to putting criminals in jail. Part of that resulted from the fact that his father had suffered during the beer wars of Prohibition. Jacobs never forgot the scars his father bore for once having talked back to a South Side Gang enforcer. A small man, like his father, Emil Jacobs viewed his mission in life as protecting the weak from the evil. He pursued that mission with a religious fervor that hid behind a brilliant analytical mind. A rare Jew in a largely Irish-Catholic agency, he'd been made an honorary member of seventeen Hibernian lodges. While J. Edgar Hoover had been known in the field as "Director Hoover," to the current crop of agents, Director Jacobs was "Emil."

"Your dad worked for me once," Jacobs said as he extended his hand to Agent Bright. "He's down on Marathon Key, isn't he? Still fishing for tarpon?"

"Yes, sir. How'd you know?"

"Every year he sends me a Chanukah card." Jacobs laughed. "It's a long story. I'm surprised he hasn't told you that one. So what's the story?"

Bright sat down and opened his briefcase, handing out the bound copies of his documents. He started talking, awkwardly at first, but in ten minutes he was fully warmed to the subject. Jacobs was flipping rapidly through the binder, but didn't miss a spoken word.

"We're talking over half a billion dollars," Bright concluded.

"More than that from what I see here, son."

"I haven't had time to give it a detailed analysis, sir. I figured you'd want to see this right quick."

"You figured right," Jacobs replied without looking up. "Bill, who's the best guy at Justice to get in on this?"

"Remember the guy who headed the savings-and-loan thing? He's a whiz for following money from place to place. Marty something," Shaw said. "Young guy. He has a real nose for it. I think Dan ought to be involved also."

Jacobs looked up. "Well?"

“Fine with me. Shame we can’t get a commission on what we seize. We’re going to want to move fast on this. The first inkling they have ...”

“That might not matter,” Jacobs mused. “But there’s no reason to drag our feet. This sort of loss will sting them pretty good. And with the other things we’re ... excuse me. Right, Dan, let’s set this up to move fast. Any complications on the piracy case?”

“No, sir. The physical evidence is enough for a conviction. The U.S. Attorney tossed the confession entirely when the defense lawyer started grumbling about how it had been obtained. Says he smiled when he did it. Told the other guy no deals of any kind, that he had enough evidence to fry them, which is exactly what he plans to do. He’s pressing for an early trial date, going to try the case himself. The whole thing.”

“Sounds like we have a budding political career on our hands,” Jacobs observed. “How much show and how much substance?”

“He’s been pretty good to us down in Mobile, sir,” Bright said.

“You can never have too many friends on The Hill,” Jacobs agreed. “You’re fully satisfied with the case?”

“Yes, sir. It’s solid. What’s spun off of it can stand pretty much on its own.”

“Why was there so much money on the boat if they just planned to kill him?” Murray asked.

“Bait,” Agent Bright answered. “According to the confession that we trashed, they were actually supposed to deliver it to a contact in the Bahamas. As you can see from this document, the victim occasionally handled large cash transactions himself. That’s probably the reason he bought the yacht in the first place.”

Jacobs nodded. “Fair enough. Dan, you did tell that captain—”

“Yes, sir. He learned his lesson.”

“Fine. Back to the money. Dan, you coordinate with Justice and keep me informed through Bill. I want a target date to start the seizures—give you three days for that. Agent Bright and the Mobile Field Office are to get full credit for turning this one—*but,* this one is code-word until we’re ready to move.” Code-word meant that the case would be classified right up with CIA operations. It wasn’t all that unusual for the Bureau, which ran most of America’s counterintelligence operations. “Mark, pick a code-word.”

“Tarpon. Dad always has been crazy about chasing after them, and they’re good fighters.”

“I’m going to have to go down there and see. I’ve never caught anything bigger than a pike.” Jacobs was quiet for a moment. He was thinking about something, Murray thought, wondering what it was. Whatever it was, it gave Emil a very crafty look. “The timing couldn’t be better. Shame I can’t tell you why. Mark, say hi to your dad for me.” The Director stood, ending the meeting.

Mrs. Wolfe noted that everyone was smiling when they came out of the room. Shaw even gave her a wink. Ten minutes later she'd opened a new file in the secure cabinet, an empty folder with the name TARPON typed on the paper label. It went in the drug section, and Jacobs told her that further documentation would follow in a few days.

Murray and Shaw walked Agent Bright down to his car and saw him off.

"What's with Moira?" Dan asked as the car pulled out.

"They think she's got a boyfriend."

"About time."

At 4:45, Moira Wolfe placed the plastic cover over her computer keyboard and another over her typewriter. Before leaving the office, she checked her makeup one last time and then walked out with a spring in her step. The oddest thing was that she didn't realize that everyone else in the office was rooting for her. The other secretaries and executive assistants, even the Director's security detail, had avoided comment for fear of making her self-conscious. But tonight had to be a date. The signs were clear, even though Moira thought that she was concealing it all.

As a senior executive secretary, Mrs. Wolfe rated a reserved parking space, one of many things that made her life easier. She drove out a few minutes later onto 10th Street, Northwest, then turned right onto Constitution Avenue. Instead of her normal southward course toward Alexandria and home, she headed west across the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge into Arlington. It seemed as though the rush-hour traffic was parting before her, and twenty-five minutes later she pulled up to a small Italian restaurant in Seven Corners. Before going in she checked her makeup again in the rearview mirror. Her children would be getting dinner from McDonald's tonight, but they understood. She told them that she'd be working very late, and she was sure that they believed her, though she ought to have known that they saw through her lies as easily as she had once seen through theirs.

"Excuse me," she said to the hostess upon entering.

"You must be Mrs. Wolfe," the young lady replied at once. "Please come with me. Mr. Díaz is waiting for you."

Félix Cortez—Juan Diaz—was sitting in a corner booth at the rear of the restaurant. Moira was sure that he'd picked the dark place for privacy, and that he had his back to the wall so that he could see her coming. She was partially correct on both counts. Cortez was wary of being in this area. CIA headquarters was less than five miles away, thousands of FBI personnel lived in this area, and who could say whether a senior counterintelligence officer might also like this restaurant? He didn't think that anyone there knew what he looked like, but intelligence officers do not live to collect their pensions by assuming anything. His nervousness was not entirely feigned. On the other hand, he was unarmed. Cortez was in a business where firearms caused far more problems than they solved, public perceptions to the contrary.

Félix rose as she approached. The hostess departed as soon as she realized the nature of this "business dinner," leaving the two lovers—she thought it was kind of cute—to grab each other's hands and exchange kisses that were oddly passionate despite their being restrained for so public a place. Cortez seated his lady, pouring her a glass of white wine before resuming his place opposite her. His first words were delivered with sheepish embarrassment.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come."

"How long have you been waiting?" Moira asked. There were a half-dozen stubbed-out cigarettes in the ashtray.

"Almost an hour," he answered with a funny look. Clearly he was amused at himself, she thought.

"But I'm early."

"I know." This time he laughed. "You make me a fool, Moira. I do not act in such a way at home."

She misread what he was trying to say. "I'm sorry, Juan, I didn't mean—"

A perfect response, Cortez's mind reported. *Exactly right.* He took her hand across the table and his eyes sparkled. "Do not trouble yourself. Sometimes it is good for a man to be a fool. Forgive me for calling you so abruptly. A small business problem. I had to fly to Detroit on short notice, and since I was in the neighborhood, as you say, I wanted to see you before I went home."

"Problem ... ?"

"A change in the design for a carburetor. Something to do with fuel economy, and I must change some tools in my factories." He waved his hand. "The problem is solved. These things are not uncommon—and, it gave me an excuse to make an extra trip here. Perhaps I should thank your EPA, or whatever government office complains about air pollution."

"I will write the letter myself, if you wish."

His voice changed. "It is so good to see you again, Moira."

"I was afraid that—"

The emotion on his face was manifest. "No, Moira, it was I who was afraid. I am a foreigner. I come here so seldom, and surely there must be many men who—"

"Juan, where are you staying?" Mrs. Wolfe asked.

"At the Sheraton."

"Do they have room service?"

"Yes, but why—"

"I won't be hungry for about two hours," she told him, and finished off her wine. "Can we leave now?"

Félix dropped a pair of twenties on the table and led her out. The hostess was reminded of a song from *The King and I.* They were in the lobby of the

Sheraton in less than six minutes. Both walked quickly to the elevators, and both looked warily about, both hoping that they wouldn't be spotted, but for different reasons. His tenth-floor room was actually an expensive suite. Moira scarcely noticed on entering, and for the next hour knew of nothing but a man whose name she mistakenly thought was Juan Diaz.

"So wonderful a thing," he said at last.

"What's that?"

"So wonderful a thing that there was a problem with the new carburetor."

"Juan!"

"I must now create quality-control problems so that they call me every week to Detroit," he suggested lightly, stroking her arm as he did so.

"Why not build a factory here?"

"The labor costs are too high," he said seriously. "Of course, drugs would be less of a problem."

"There, too?"

"Yes. They call it *basuco,* filthy stuff, not good enough for export, and too many of my workers indulge." He stopped talking for a moment. "Moira, I try to make a joke, and you force me to speak of business. Have you lost interest in me?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I need to return to Venezuela while I can still walk."

Her fingers did some exploring. "I think you will recover soon."

"That is good to know." He turned his head to kiss her, and let his eyes linger, examining her body in the rays of the setting sun that spilled through the windows. She noticed his stares and reached for the sheet. He stopped her.

"I am no longer young," she said.

"Every child in all the world looks upon his mother and sees the most beautiful woman in the world, even though many mothers are not beautiful. Do you know why this is so? The child looks with love, and sees love returned. Love is what makes beauty, Moira. And, truly, you are beautiful to me."

And there it was. The word was finally out in the open. He watched her eyes go somewhat wider, her mouth move, and her breaths deepen for a moment. For the second time, Cortez felt shame. He shrugged it off. Or tried to. He'd done this sort of thing before, of course. But always with young women, young, single ones with an eye for adventure and a taste for excitement. This one was different in so many ways. Different or not, he reminded himself, there was work to be done.

"Forgive me. Do I embarrass you?"

"No," she answered softly. "Not now."

He smiled down at her. "And now, are you ready for dinner?"

"Yes."

"That is good."

Cortez rose and got the bathrobes from the back of the bathroom door. Service was good. Half an hour later, Moira stayed in the bedroom while the dinner cart was rolled into the sitting room. He opened the connecting door as soon as the waiter left.

"You make of me a dishonest man. The look he gave me!"

She laughed. "Do you know how long it's been since I had to hide in the other room?"

"And you didn't order enough. How can you live on this tiny salad?"

"If I grow fat, you will not come back to me."

"Where I come from, we do not count a woman's ribs," Cortez said. "When I see someone who grows too thin, I think it is the *basuco* again. Where I live, they are the ones who forget even to eat."

"Is it that bad?"

"Do you know what *basuco* is?"

"Cocaine, according to the reports I see."

"Poor quality, not good enough for the criminals to send to the *norteamericanos,* and mixed with chemicals that poison the brain. It is becoming the curse of my homeland."

"It's pretty bad here," Moira said. She could see that it was something that really worried her lover. Just like it was with the Director, she thought.

"I have spoken to the police at home. How can my workers do their jobs if their minds are poisoned by this thing? And what do the police do? They shrug and mumble excuses—and people die. They die from the *basuco.* They die from the guns of the dealers. And no one does anything to stop it." Cortez made a frustrated gesture. "You know, Moira, I am not merely a capitalist. My factories, they give jobs, they bring money into my country, money for the people to build houses and educate their children. I am rich, yes, but I help to build my country—with these hands, I do it. My workers, they come to me and tell me that their children—ah! I can do nothing. Someday, the dealers, they will come to me and try to take my factory," he went on. "I will go to the police, and the police will do nothing. I will go to the army, and the army will do nothing. You work for your *federales,* yes? Is there nothing anyone can do?" Cortez nearly held his breath, wondering what the answer would be.

"You should see the reports I have to type for the Director."

"Reports," he snorted. "Anyone can write reports. At home, the police write many reports, and the judges do their investigations—and nothing happens. If I ran my factory in this way, soon I would be living in a hillside shack and begging for money in the street! Do your *federales* do anything?"

"More than you might think. There are things going on right now that I cannot speak about. What they're saying around the office is that the rules are

changing. But I don't know what that means. The Director is flying down to Colombia soon to meet with the Attorney General, and—oh! I'm not supposed to tell anybody that. It's supposed to be a secret."

"I will tell no one," Cortez assured her.

"I really don't know that much anyway," she went on carefully. "Something new is about to start. I don't know what. The Director doesn't like it very much, whatever it is."

"If it hurts the criminals, why should he not like it?" Cortez asked in a puzzled voice. "You could shoot them all dead in the street, and I would buy your *federales* dinner afterwards!"

Moira just smiled. "I'll pass that along. That's what all the letters say—we get letters from all sorts of people."

"Your director should listen to them."

"So does the President."

"Perhaps he will listen," Cortez suggested. *This is an election year ...*

"Maybe he already is. Whatever just changed, it started there."

"But your director doesn't like it?" He shook his head. "I do not understand the government in my country. I should not try to understand yours."

"It is funny, though. This is the first time that I don't know—well, I couldn't tell you anyway." Moira finished her salad. She looked at her empty wineglass. Félix/Juan filled it for her.

"Can you tell me one thing?"

"What?"

"Call me when your director leaves for Colombia," he said.

"Why?" She was too taken aback to say no.

"For state visits one spends several days, no?"

"Yes, I suppose. I don't really know."

"And if your director is away, and you are his secretary, you will have little work to do, no?"

"No, not much."

"Then I will fly to Washington, of course." Cortez rose from his chair and took three steps around the table. Moira's bathrobe hung loosely around her. He took advantage of that. "I must fly home early tomorrow morning. One day with you is no longer enough, my love. Hmm, you are ready, I think."

"Are you?"

"We will see. There is one thing I will never understand," he said as he helped her from the chair.

"What is that?"

"Why would any fool use powder for pleasure when he can have a woman?"

It was, in fact, something that Cortez never would understand. But it wasn't his job to understand it.

"Any woman?" she said, heading for the door.

Cortez pulled the robe from her. "No, not any woman."

"My God," Moira said, half an hour later. Her chest glistened with perspiration, hers and his.

"I was mistaken," he gasped facedown at her side.

"What?"

"When your director of *federales* flies to Colombia, do not call me!" He laughed to show that he was kidding. "Moira, I do not know that I can do this for more than one day a month."

A giggle. "Perhaps you should not work so hard, Juan."

"How can I not?" He turned to look at her. "I have not felt like this since I was a boy. But I am no longer a boy. How can women stay young when men cannot?" She smiled with amusement at the obvious lie. He had pleased her greatly.

"I cannot call you."

"What?"

"I do not have your number." She laughed. Cortez leaped from the bed and pulled the wallet from his coat pocket, then muttered something that sounded profane.

"I have no cards—ah!" He took the pad from the night table and wrote the number. "This is for my office. Usually I am not there—I spend my days on the shop floor." A grunt. "I spend my nights in the factory. I spend weekends in the factory. Sometimes I sleep in the factory. But Consuela will reach me, wherever I might be."

"And I must leave," Moira said.

"Tell your director that he must make it a weekend trip. We will spend two days in the country. I know of a small, quiet place in the mountains, just a few hours from here."

"Do you think you can survive it?" she asked with a hug.

"I will eat sensibly and exercise," he promised her. A final kiss, and she left.

Cortez closed the door and walked into the bathroom. He hadn't learned all that much, but what he had found out might be crucial. "The rules are changing." Whatever they were changing to, Director Jacobs didn't like it, but was evidently going along. He was going to Colombia to discuss it with the Attorney General. Jacobs, he remembered, knew the Attorney General quite well. They had been classmates together in college, over thirty years before. The Attorney General had flown to America for the funeral of Mrs. Jacobs. Something with a presidential seal on it, also. Well. Two of Cortez's associates were in New Orleans to meet with the attorney for the two fools who'd

botched the killing on the yacht. The FBI had certainly played a part in that, and whatever had happened there would give him a clue.

Cortez looked up from washing his hands to see the man who had obtained those intelligence tidbits and decided that he didn't like the man who had done it. He shrugged off the feeling. It wasn't the first time. Certainly it wouldn't be the last.

The shot went off at 23:41 hours. The Titan-IIID's two massive solid-rocket boosters ignited at the appointed time, over a million pounds of thrust was generated, and the entire assembly leapt off the pad amid a glow that would be seen from Savannah to Miami. The solid boosters burned for 120 seconds before being discarded. At this point the liquid-fuel engines on the booster's center section ignited, hurling the remaining package higher, faster, and farther downrange. All the while onboard instruments relayed data from the booster to ground station at the Cape. In fact, they were also radioing their data to a Soviet listening post located on the northern tip of Cuba, and to a "fishing trawler" which kept station off Cape Canaveral, and also flew a red flag. The Titan-IIID was a bird used exclusively for military launches, and Soviet interest in this launch resulted from an unconfirmed GRU report that the satellite atop the launcher had been specially modified to intercept very weak electronic signals—exactly what kind the report didn't specify.

Faster and higher. Half of the remaining rocket dropped off now, the second-stage fuel expended, and the third stage lit off about a thousand miles downrange. In the control bunkers at the Cape, the engineers and technicians noted that everything was still going as planned, as befitted a launch vehicle whose ancestry dated back to the late 1950s. The third stage burned out on time and on profile. The payload, along with the fourth, or transstage, now awaited the proper time to ignite, kicking the payload to its intended geosynchronous height, from which it would hover over a specific piece of the earth's equator. The hiatus allowed the control-room crew to top off their coffee, make necessary pit stops, and review the data from the launch, which, they all agreed, had been about as perfect as an engineer had any right to expect.

The trouble came half an hour later. The transstage ignited early, seemingly on its own, boosting the payload to the required height, but not in the expected place; also, instead of being perfectly placed in a stationary position, the payload was left in an eccentric path, meandering in a lopsided figure-eight that straddled the equator. Even if it had been over the right longitude, the path would negate its coverage of the higher latitudes for brief but annoying periods of time. Despite everything that had gone right, all the thousands of parts that had functioned exactly as designed, the launch was a failure. The engineering crew who managed the lower stages shook their heads in sympathy with those whose responsibility had been the transstage, and who now surveyed launch control in evident dejection. The launch was a failure.

The payload didn't know that. At the appointed time, it separated itself from

the transstage and began to perform as it had been programmed. Weighted arms ten meters in length extended themselves. Gravity from an earth over twenty thousand miles away would act on them through tidal forces, keeping the satellite forever pointed downward. Next the solar panels deployed to convert sunlight into electricity, charging the onboard batteries. Finally, an enormous dish antenna began to form. Made of a special metal-ceramic-plastic material, its frame "remembered" its proper configuration, and on being heated by sunlight unfolded itself over a three-hour period until it formed a nearly perfect parabolic dish fully thirty meters in diameter. Anyone close enough to view the event would have noticed the builder's plate on the side of the satellite. Why this was done was itself an anachronism, since there would never be anyone close enough to notice, but it was the custom. The plate, made of gold foil, designated the prime contractor as TRW, and the name of the satellite as Rhyolite-J. The last of an obsolete series of such satellites, it had been built in 1981 and sat in storage—at the cost of over $100,000 per year—awaiting a launch that had never actually been expected, since CIA and NSA had developed newer, less cumbersome electronic-reconnaissance birds that used advanced signal-gathering equipment. In fact, some of the new equipment had been attached to this obsolete bird, made even more effective by the massive receiving dish. Rhyolite had been originally designed to eavesdrop on Soviet electronic emissions, telemetry from missile tests, side-lobes from air-defense radars, scatterings from microwave towers, even for signals from spy devices dropped off by CIA officers and agents at sensitive locations.

That didn't matter to the people at the Cape. An Air Force public affairs officer released a statement to the general effect that the (classified) launch had not achieved proper orbit. This was verified by the Soviets, who had fully expected the satellite to take a place over the Indian Ocean when, in fact, it was now oscillating over the Brazilian-Peruvian border, from which it couldn't even see the Soviet Union. Curious, they thought, that the Americans had even allowed it to switch itself on, but from yet another "fishing trawler" off the California coast, they monitored intermittent scatterings of encrypted transmissions from the satellite down to some earth station or other. Whatever it was sending down, however, was of little concern to the Soviet Union.

Those signals were received at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, where technicians in yet another nondescript communications van, with a satellite dish set outside, began calibrating their instruments. They didn't know that the launch was supposedly a failure. They just knew that everything about it was secret.

The jungle, Chavez thought. It smelled, but he didn't mind the smell so much as the snakes. Chavez had never told anyone about it, but he hated and feared snakes. All kinds of snakes. He didn't know why—and it troubled him that fear of snakes was associated with women, not men—but even the thought of the slithering, slimy things made his skin crawl, those legless lizards with flicking tongues and lidless eyes. They hung from branches and hid under fallen trees, waiting for him to pass so that they could strike at whatever part of his

anatomy offered itself. He knew that they would if they got the chance. He was sure that he would die if they did. So he kept alert. No snake would get him, not so long as he stayed alert. At least he had a silenced weapon. That way he could kill them without making noise. *Fuckin' snakes.*

He finally made the road, and he really ought to have stayed in the mud, but he wanted to lie down on a dry, clear place, which he first scanned with his AN/PVS-7 night scope. No snakes. He took a deep breath, then removed the plastic canteen from its holder. They'd been on the move for six hours, covering nearly five miles—which was really pushing it—but they were supposed to get to this road before dawn, and get there unseen by the OPFOR—the opposing force—who were warned of their presence. Chavez had spotted them twice, each time, he thought, a pair of American MPs, who weren't really soldiers, not to his way of thinking. Chavez had led his squad around them, moving through the swamp as quietly as ... as a snake, he told himself wryly. He could have double-tapped all four of them easily enough, but that wasn't the mission.

"Nice job, Ding." Captain Ramirez came down beside him. They spoke in whispers.

"Hell, they were asleep."

The captain grinned in the darkness. "I hate the fuckin' jungle. All these bugs."

"Bugs ain't so bad, sir. It's the snakes I don't like."

Both men scanned the road in both directions. Nothing. Ramirez clapped the sergeant on the shoulder and went to check on the rest of the squad. He'd scarcely left when a figure emerged from the treeline three hundred yards away. He was moving directly toward Chavez. *Uh-oh.*

Ding moved backward under a bush and set down his submachine gun. It wasn't loaded anyway, not even with the wax practice bullets. A second one came out, but he walked the other way. Bad tactics, Chavez thought. Pairs are supposed to support each other. Well, that was too bad. The last sliver of moon was dropping below the top level of the triple-canopy forest, and Chavez still had the advantage of his night scope as the figure walked toward him. The man walked quietly—at least he knew how to do that—and slowly, keeping his eyes on the edge of the road and listening as much as looking. Chavez waited, switching off the scope and removing it from his head. Then he removed his fighting knife from its sheath. Closer, only about fifty yards now, and the sergeant coiled up, drawing his legs under his chest. At thirty feet, he stopped breathing. If he could have willed his heart to stop, he'd have done that to reduce the noise. This was for fun. If this had been for-real, a 9mm bullet would now reside in the man's head.

The sentry walked right past Ding's position, looking but not seeing the form under the bush. He made it another step before he heard a swishing sound, but then it was too late. By that time, he was facedown on the gravel, and he felt the hilt of a knife at the back of his neck.

"Ninja owns the night, boy! You're history."

"You got me, sure as hell," the man whispered in reply.

Chavez rolled him over. It was a major, and his headgear was a beret. Maybe the OPFOR wasn't MPs after all.

"Who are you?" the victim asked.

"Staff Sergeant Domingo Chavez, sir."

"Well, you just killed a jungle-warfare instructor, Chavez. Good job. Mind if I get a drink? It's been a long night." Chavez allowed the man to roll into the bushes, where he, too, took a pull off his canteen. "What outfit you from—wait a minute, 3rd of the 17th, right?"

"We own the night, sir," Chavez agreed. "You been there?"

"Going there, for a battalion staff job." The major wiped some blood from his face. He'd hit the road a little hard.

"Sorry about that, sir."

"My fault, Sergeant, not yours. We have twenty guys out there. I never thought you'd make it this far without being spotted."

The sound of a vehicle came down the road. A minute later the wide-set lights of a Hummer—the new and larger incarnation of the venerable jeep—appeared, announcing that the exercise was over. The "dead" major marched off to collect his men, while Captain Ramirez did the same.

"That was the final exam, people," he told the squad. "Get a good day's sleep. We go in tonight."

"I don't believe it," Cortez said. He'd hopped the first flight from Dulles to Atlanta. There he met an associate in a rented car, and now they discussed their information in the total anonymity of an automobile driving at the posted limit on the Atlanta beltway.

"Call it psychological warfare," the man answered. "No plea-bargain, no nothing. It's being handled as a straight murder trial. Ramón and Jesus will not get any consideration."

Cortez looked at the passing traffic. He didn't give a damn about the two *sicarios,* who were as expendable as any other terrorists and who didn't know the reason for the killings. What he was considering now was a series of seemingly disjointed and unconnected bits of information on American interdiction operations. An unusual number of courier aircraft were disappearing. The Americans were treating this legal case in an unusual way. The Director of the FBI was doing something that he didn't like, and that his personal secretary didn't know about yet. "The rules are changing." That could mean anything at all.

Something fundamental. It had to be. But what?

There were a number of well-paid and highly reliable informants

throughout the American government, in Customs, DEA, the Coast Guard, none of whom had reported a single thing. The law-enforcement community was in the dark—except for the FBI Director, who didn't like it, but would soon go to Colombia....

Some sort of intelligence operation was—no. Active Measures? The phrase came from KGB, and could mean any of several things, from feeding disinformation to reporters to "wet" work. Would the Americans do anything like that? They never had. He glowered at the passing scenery. He was an experienced intelligence officer, and his profession was to determine what people were doing from bits and pieces of random data. That he was working for someone he detested was beside the point. This was a matter of pride and besides, he detested the Americans even more.

What were they doing now?

Cortez had to admit to himself that he didn't know, but in one hour he'd board a plane, and in six hours he'd have to tell his employer that he didn't know. That did not appeal to him.

Something fundamental. The rules are changing. The FBI Director didn't like it. His secretary didn't know. The trip to Colombia was clandestine.

Cortez relaxed. Whatever it was, it was not an immediate threat. The Cartel was too secure. There would be time to analyze and respond. There were many people in the smuggling chain who could be sacrificed, who would fight for the chance, in fact. And after a time, the Cartel would adapt its operations to the changing conditions as it always had. All he had to do was convince his employer of that simple fact. What did *el jefe* really care about Ramón and Jesus or any of the underlings who ran the drugs and did the killings that became necessary? It was continuing the supply of drugs to the consumers that mattered.

His mind came back to the vanishing airplanes. Historically, the Americans had managed to intercept one or two per month, that small a number despite all their radars and aircraft. But recently—four in the last two weeks, wasn't it?—had disappeared. What did that mean? Unknown to the Americans, there had always been "operational" losses, a military term that meant nothing more mysterious than flying accidents. One of the reasons that his boss had taken Carlos Larson on was to mitigate that wastage of resources, and it had, initially, shown promise—until very recently. Why the sudden jump in losses? If the Americans had somehow intercepted them, the air crews would have shown up in courtrooms and jails, wouldn't they? Cortez had to dismiss that thought.

Sabotage, perhaps? What if someone were placing explosives in the aircraft, like the Arab terrorists did ... ? Unlikely ... or was it? Did anyone check for that? It wouldn't take much. Even minor damage to a low-flying aircraft could face the pilot with a problem whose solution required more time than he had in altitude. Even a single blasting cap could do it, not even a cubic centimeter ... he'd have to check that out. But, then, who would be doing it? The Americans? But what if it became known that the Americans were placing

bombs on aircraft? Would they take that political risk? Probably not. Who else, then? The Colombians might. Some senior Colombian military officer, operating entirely on his own ... or in the pay of the *yanquis?* That was possible. It couldn't be a government operation, Cortez was sure. There were too many informants there, too.

Would it have to be a bomb? Why not contaminated gasoline? Why not minor tampering with an engine, a frayed control cable ... or a flight instrument. What was it that Larson had said about having to watch instruments at low level? What if some mechanic had altered the setting on the artificial horizon ... ? Or merely arranged for it to stop working ... something in the electrical system, perhaps? How hard was it to make a small airplane stop flying? Whom to ask? Larson?

Cortez grumbled to himself. This was undirected speculation, decidedly unprofessional. There were countless possibilities. He knew that *something* was probably happening, but not what it was. And only probably, he admitted to himself. The unusually large number of missing aircraft could merely be a statistical anomaly—he didn't believe that, but forced himself to consider the possibility. A series of coincidences—there was not an intelligence academy in the world that encouraged its students to believe in coincidences, and yet how many strange coincidences had he encountered in his professional career?

"The rules are changing," he muttered to himself.

"What?" the driver asked.

"Back to the airport. My Caracas flight leaves in less than an hour."

"Sí, jefe. "

Cortez lifted off on time. He had to travel to Venezuela first for the obvious reasons. Moira might get curious, might want to see his ticket, might ask his flight number, and besides, American agents would be less interested in people who flew there than those who flew directly to Bogotá. Four hours later he made his Avianca connection to El Dorado International Airport, where he met a private plane for the last hop over the mountains.

Equipment was issued as always, with a single exception. Chavez noted that nobody was signing for anything. That was a real break from routine. The Army always had people sign for their gear. If you broke it or lost it, well, though they might not make you pay for it, you had to account for it in one way or another.

But not now.

The load-outs differed slightly from one man to the next. Chavez, the squad scout, got the lightest load, while Julio Vega, one of the machine-gunners, got the heaviest. Ding got eleven magazines for his MP-5 submachine gun, a total of 330 rounds. The M-203 grenade launchers that two squad members had attached to their rifles were the only heavy firepower they'd be carrying in.

His uniform was not the usual stripe-and-splotch Army fatigue pattern, but rather rip-stop khaki because they weren't supposed to look like Americans to the casual observer, if any. Khaki clothing was not the least unusual in Colombia. Jungle fatigues were. A floppy green hat instead of a helmet, and a scarf to tie over his hair. A small can of green spray paint and two sticks of facial camouflage "makeup." A waterproof map case with several maps; Captain Ramirez got one also. Twelve feet of rope and a snaplink, issued to everyone. A short-range FM radio of an expensive commercial type that was nonetheless better and cheaper than the one the Army used. Seven-power compact binoculars, Japanese. American-style web gear of the type used by every Army in the world, actually made in Spain. Two one-quart canteens to hang on the web belt, and a third two-quart water bottle for his rucksack, American, commercial. A large supply of water-purification tablets—they'd resupply their own water, which wasn't a surprise.

Ding got a strobe light with an infrared cover lens because one of his jobs would be to select and mark helicopter landing zones, plus a VS-17 panel for the same purpose. A signaling mirror for times when a radio might not be appropriate (steel mirrors, moreover, do not break). A small flashlight; and a butane cigarette lighter, which was far better than carrying matches. A large bottle of extra-strength Tylenol, also known as "light-fighter candy." A bottle of prescription cough medicine, heavily laced with codeine. A small bottle of Vaseline petroleum jelly. A small squeeze bottle of concentrated CS tear gas. A weapons-cleaning kit, which included a toothbrush. Spare batteries for everything. A gas mask.

Chavez would travel light with but four hand grenades—Dutch NR-20 Cl type—and two smokes, also of Dutch manufacture. The rest of the squad got the Dutch frags, and some CS tear-gas grenades, also Dutch. In fact, all of the weapons carried by the squad and all of their ammunition had been purchased at Colon, Panama, in what was fast becoming the hemisphere's most convenient arms market. For anyone with cash there were weapons to be had.

Rations were the normal MREs. Water was the main hygienic concern, but they'd already been fully briefed about using their water-purification tablets. Whoever forgot had a supply of antidiarrhea pills that would follow a serious chewing from Captain Ramirez. Every man had gotten a new series of booster shots while still in Colorado against the spectrum of tropical diseases endemic to the area, and all carried an odorless insect repellent made for the military by the same company that produced the commercial product called "Off." The squad medic carried a full medical kit, and each rifleman had his own morphine Syrette and a plastic bottle of IV fluids for use as a blood-expander.

Chavez had a razor-sharp machete, a four-inch folding knife, and, of course, his three nonregulation throwing stars that Captain Ramirez didn't know about. With other sundry items, Chavez would be carrying a load of exactly fifty-eight pounds. That made his load the lightest in the squad. Vega and the other SAW gunner had the heaviest, with seventy-one pounds. Ding jostled the load around on his shoulders to get a feel for it, then adjusted the straps on his ruck to make it as comfortable as possible. It was a futile exercise. He was packing a third of his body weight, which is about as much as a man can carry

for any length of time without risking a physical breakdown. His boots were well broken-in, and he had extra pairs of dry socks.

"Ding, could you give me a hand with this?" Vega asked.

"Sure, Julio." Chavez took some slack in on one of the machine gunner's shoulder straps. "How's that?"

"Just right, *'mano.* Jeez, carrying the biggest gun do have a price."

"Roger that, *Oso."* Julio, who'd demonstrated the ability to pack more than anyone in the squad, had a new nickname, *Oso:* Bear.

Captain Ramirez came down the line, walking around each man to check the loads. He adjusted a few straps, bounced a few rucks, and generally made sure that every man was properly loaded, and that all weapons were clean. When he was finished, Ding checked the captain's load, and Ramirez took his place in front of the squad.

"Okay—anybody got aches, pains, or blisters?"

"No, sir!" the squad replied.

"We ready to go do it?" Ramirez asked with a wide grin that belied the fact that he was as nervous as everyone else in the squad bay.

"Yes, sir!"

One more thing left to do. Ramirez walked down the line and collected dog tags from each man. Each set went into a clear plastic bag along with wallets and all other forms of identification. Finished, he removed his own, counted the bags a last time, and left them on the table in the squad bay. Outside, each squad boarded a separate five-ton truck. Few waves were exchanged. Though friendships had sprouted up in training, they were mainly limited within the structure of the squads. Each eleven-man unit was a self-contained community. Every member knew every other, knew all there was to know, from stories of sexual performance to marksmanship skills. Some solid friendships had blossomed, and some even more valuable rivalries. They were, in fact, already closer than friends could ever be. Each man knew that his life would depend on the skill of his fellows, and none of them wished to appear weak before his comrades. Argue as they might among themselves, they were now a team; though they might trade barbed comments, over the past weeks they had been forged into a single complex organism with Ramirez as their brain, Chavez as their eyes, Julio Vega and the other machine-gunner as their fists, and all the others as equally vital components. They were as ready for their mission as any soldiers had ever been.

The trucks arrived together behind the helicopter and the troops boarded by squads. The first thing Chavez noticed was the 7.62mm minigun on the right side of the aircraft. There was an Air Force sergeant standing next to it, his green coveralls topped by a camouflage-painted flight helmet, and a massive feed line of shells leading to an even larger hopper. Ding had no particular love for the Air Force—a bunch of pansy truck drivers, he'd thought until now —but the man on that gun looked serious and competent as hell. Another such gun was unmanned on the opposite side of the aircraft, and there was a spot

for another at the rear. The flight engineer—his name tag said ZIMMER—moved them all into their places and made sure that each soldier was properly strapped down to his particular piece of floor. Chavez didn't trade words with him, but sensed that this man had been around the block a few times. It was, he belatedly realized, the biggest goddamned helicopter he'd ever seen.

The flight engineer made one final check before going forward and plugging his helmet into the intercom system. A moment later came the whine from the helicopter's twin turbine engines.

"Looking good," PJ observed over the headset. The engines had been pre-warmed and the fuel tanks topped off. Zimmer had repaired a minor hydraulic problem, and the Pave Low III was as ready as his skilled men could make it. Colonel Johns keyed his radio.

"Tower, this is Night Hawk Two-Five requesting permission to taxi. Over."

"Two-Five, tower, permission granted. Winds are one-zero-niner at six knots."

"Roger. Two-Five is rolling. Out."

Johns twisted the throttle grip on his collective control and eased the cyclic stick forward. Due to the size and engine power of the big Sikorsky, it was customary to taxi the aircraft toward the runway apron before actually lifting off. Captain Willis swiveled his neck around, checking for other ground traffic, but there was none this late at night. One ground crewman walked backward in front of them as a further safety measure, waving for them to follow with lighted wands. Five minutes later they were at the apron. The wands came together and pointed to the right. Johns gave the man a last look, returning the ceremonial salute.

"Okay, let's get this show on the road." PJ brought the throttle to full power, making a last check of his engine instruments as he did so. Everything looked fine. The helicopter lifted at the nose a few feet, then dipped forward as it began to move forward. Next it started to climb, leaving behind a small tornado of dust, visible only in the blue runway perimeter lights.

Captain Willis put the navigations systems on line, adjusting the electronic terrain display. There was a moving map display not unlike that used by James Bond in *Goldfinger*. Pave Low could navigate from a Doppler-radar system that interrogated the ground, from an inertial system using laser-gyroscopes, or from navigational satellites. The helicopter initially flew straight down the Canal's length, simulating the regular security patrol. They unknowingly flew within a mile of the SHOWBOAT's communications nexus at Corezal.

"Lot of pick-and-shovel work down there," Willis observed.

"Ever been here before?"

"No, sir, first time. Quite a job for eighty-ninety years ago," he said as they flew over a large container ship. They caught a little buffet from the hot stack-gas of the ship. PJ came to the right to get out of it. It would be a two-hour flight, and there was no sense in jostling the passengers any more than

necessary. In an hour their MC-130E tanker would lift off to refuel them for the return leg.

"Lot of dirt to move," Colonel Johns agreed after a moment. He moved a little in his seat. Twenty minutes later they went "feet wet," passing over the Caribbean Sea for the longest portion of the flight on a course of zero-nine-zero, due east.

"Look at that," Willis said half an hour later. On their night-vision sets, they spotted a twin-engine aircraft on a northerly heading, perhaps six miles away. They spotted it from the infrared glow of the two piston engines.

"No lights," PJ agreed.

"I wonder what he's carrying?"

"Sure as hell isn't Federal Express." *More to the point, he can't see us unless he's wearing the same goggles we got.*

"We could pull up alongside and take the miniguns—"

"Not tonight." *Too bad. I wouldn't especially mind....*

"What do you suppose our passengers—"

"If we were supposed to know, Captain, they would have told us," Johns replied. He was wondering, too, of course. *Christ, but they're loaded for bear,* the colonel thought. Not wearing standard-issue uniforms ... obviously a covert insertion—*hell, I've known that part of the mission for weeks—but* they were clearly planning to stay awhile. Johns hadn't heard that the government had ever done that. He wondered if the Colombians were playing ball ... *probably not. And we're staying down here for at least a month, so they're planning for us to support them, maybe extract them if things get a little hot ... Christ, it's Laos all over again,* he concluded. *Good thing I brought Buck along. We're the only real vets left.* Colonel Johns shook his head. Where had his youth gone?

You spent it with a helicopter strapped to your back, doing all sorts of screwy things.

"I got a ship target on the horizon at about eleven o'clock," the captain said, and altered course a few degrees to the right. The mission brief had been clear on that. Nobody was supposed to see or hear them. That meant avoiding ships, fishing boats, and inquisitive dolphins, staying well off the coast, no more than a thousand feet up, and keeping their anticollision lights off. The mission profile was precisely what they'd fly in wartime, with some flight-safety rules set aside. Even in the special-operations business, that last fact was somewhat out of the ordinary, Johns reminded himself. Hot guns and all.

They made the Colombian coast without further incident. As soon as it was in view, Johns alerted his crew. Sergeants Zimmer and Bean powered up their electrically driven miniguns and slid open the doors next to them.

"Well, we just invaded a friendly foreign country," Willis noted as they went "feet dry" north of Tolú. They used their low-light instruments to search for vehicular traffic, which they were also supposed to avoid. Their course track was plotted to avoid areas of habitation. The six-bladed rotor didn't make the

fluttering *whops* associated with smaller helicopters. Its sound, at a distance, wasn't terribly different from turbopowered aircraft; it was also directionally deceptive—even if you heard the noise, it was hard to figure where it came from. Once past the Pan American Highway, they curved north, passing east of Plato.

"Zimmer, LZ One in five minutes."

"Right, PJ," the flight engineer replied. It had been decided to leave Bean and Childs on the guns, while Zimmer handled the dropoff.

It must be a combat mission. Johns smiled to himself. *Buck only calls me that when he expects to get shot at.*

Aft, Sergeant Zimmer walked down the center of the aircraft, telling the first two squads to unbuckle their safety belts and holding up his hand to show how many more minutes there were. Both captains nodded.

"LZ One in sight," Willis said soon thereafter.

"I'll take her."

"Pilot's airplane."

Colonel Johns orbited the area, spiraling into the clearing selected from satellite photos. Willis scanned the ground for the least sign of life, but there was none.

"Looks clear to me, Colonel."

"Going in now," Johns said into the intercom.

"Get ready!" Zimmer shouted as the helicopter's nose came up.

Chavez stood up with the rest of his squad, facing aft to the opening cargo door. His knees buckled slightly as the Sikorsky touched down.

"Go!" Zimmer waved them out, patting each man on the shoulder to keep a proper count.

Chavez went out behind his captain, turning left to avoid the tail rotor as soon as his feet were on the dirt. He went ten steps and dropped to his face. Above his head, the rotor was still turning at full power, holding the lethal blades a safe fifteen feet off the ground.

"Clear, clear, clear!" Zimmer said when he'd seen them all off.

"Roger," Johns replied, twisting the throttle again to lift off.

Chavez turned his head as the whine of the engines increased. The blacked-out helicopter was barely visible, but he saw the spectral outline lift off and felt the dirt stinging his face as the hundred-knot downwash from the rotor subsided, and stopped. It was gone.

He ought to have expected it, but the feeling came to Chavez as a surprise. He was in enemy territory. It was real, not an exercise. The only way he had out—had just flown away, already invisible. Despite the fact that there were ten men around him, he was momentarily awash in a sense of loneliness. But he was a trained man, a professional soldier. Chavez grasped his loaded

weapon and took strength from it. He wasn't quite alone.

"Move out," Captain Ramirez told him quietly.

Chavez moved toward the treeline in the knowledge that behind him the squad would follow.

11.

In-Country

THREE HUNDRED MILES away from SSG Ding Chavez, Colonel Félix Cortez, formerly of the Cuban DGI, sat dozing in *el jefe's* office. *El jefe,* he'd been told on his arrival several hours before, was occupied at present—probably entertaining a mistress. *Maybe even his wife,* Cortez thought; unlikely but possible. He'd drunk two cups of the fine local coffee—previously Colombia's most valuable export crop—but it hadn't helped. He was tired from the previous night's exertions, from the travel, and now from readjusting yet again to the high altitude of the region. Cortez was ready for sleep, but had to stay awake to debrief his boss. Inconsiderate bastard. At least in the DGI he could have submitted a hastily written report and taken a few hours to freshen up before normal office hours began. But the DGI was composed of professionals, and he'd chosen to work for an amateur.

Just after 1:30 in the morning he heard feet coming down the corridor. Cortez stood and shook off the sleep. The door opened, and there was *el jefe,* his visage placid and happy. One of his mistresses.

"What have you learned?" Escobedo asked without preamble.

"Nothing specific as of yet," Cortez replied with a yawn. He proceeded to speak for about five minutes, going over what things he had discovered.

"I pay you for results, Colonel," Escobedo pointed out.

"That is true, but at high levels such results require time. Under the methods for gathering information which you had in place before I arrived, you would still know nothing other than the fact that some aircraft are missing, and that two of your couriers have been apprehended by the *yanquis."*

"Their story about the interrogation aboard the ship?"

"Most unusual, perhaps all a fabrication on their part." Cortez settled into his chair, wishing for another cup of coffee. "Or perhaps true, though I doubt it. I do not know either man and cannot evaluate the reliability of their claims."

"Two men from Medellin. Ramón's older brother served me well. He was killed in the battles with M-19. He died bravely. Ramón has also served me. I had to give him a chance," Escobedo said. "It was a matter of honor. He is not very intelligent, but he is faithful."

"And his death is not overly troublesome?"

Escobedo shook his head without a moment's pause. "No. He knew what the chances were. He did not know why it was necessary to kill the American. He can tell them nothing about that. As for the American-he was a thief, and a foolish thief. He thought that we would not discover his thievery. He was mistaken. So we eliminated him."

And his family, Cortez noted. Killing people was one thing. Raping children ... that was something else. But such things were not his concern.

"You are sure that they cannot tell the Americans—"

"They were told to get aboard the yacht, using the money as their bona fides and concealing their cache of drugs. Once the killings were accomplished, they were instructed to go to the Bahamas, turn the money over to one of my bankers, destroy the yacht discreetly, and then smuggle the drugs in normally, into Philadelphia. They knew that the American had displeased me, but not how he had done so."

"They must know that he was laundering money, and they must have told the Americans this," Cortez pointed out patiently.

"*Sí.* Fortunately, however, the American was very clever in how he did this. We were careful, Colonel. Beforehand we made sure that no one could learn exactly what the thief had done." Escobedo smiled, still in the afterglow of Pinta's services. "He was so very clever, that American."

"What if he left behind a record?"

"He did not. A police officer in that city searched his office and home for us —so carefully that the American *federales* never noticed that he had been there —*before* I authorized the killings."

Cortez took a deep breath before speaking. "Jefe, do you not understand that you *must tell me about such things as this beforehand!* Why do you employ me if you have no wish to make use of my knowledge?"

"We have been doing things such as this for years. We can manage our affairs without—"

"The Russians would send you to Siberia for such idiocy!"

"You forget your place, Señor Cortez!" Escobedo snarled back.

Félix bit off his own reply and managed to speak reasonably. "You think the *norteamericanos* are fools because they are unable to stop your smuggling. Their weakness is a political failing, not one of professional expertise. You do not understand that, and so I will explain it to you. Their borders are easy to violate because the Americans have a tradition of open borders. You confuse that with inefficiency. It is not. They have highly efficient police with the best scientific methods in the world—do you know that the Russian KGB reads American police textbooks? And copies their techniques? The American police are hamstrung because their political leadership does not allow them to act as they wish to act—and as they could act, in a moment, if those restrictions were ever eased. The American FBI—the *federales*—have resources beyond your comprehension. I know—they hunted me in Puerto Rico and came within

a hair of capturing me along with Ojeda—and I am a trained intelligence officer."

"Yes, yes," Escobedo said patiently. "So what are you telling me?"

"Exactly what did this dead American do for you?"

"He laundered vast sums of money for us, and it continues to generate clean income for us. He set up a laundering scheme that we continue to use and—"

"Get your money out at once. If this *yanqui* was as efficient as you say, it is very likely that he left evidence behind. If he did so, then it is likely that those records were found."

"If so, then why have the *federales* not acted? They've had over a month now." Escobedo turned around to grab a bottle of brandy. He rarely indulged, but this was a time for it. Pinta had been especially fine tonight, and he enjoyed telling Cortez that his expertise, while useful, was not entirely crucial.

"Jefe, perhaps it will not happen this time, but someday you will learn that chances such as you took in this case are foolish."

Escobedo waved the snifter under his nose. "As you say, Colonel. Now, what about these new rules you speak of?"

Chavez was already fully briefed, of course. They'd had a "walk-through /talk-through" on a sand table as part of their mission brief, and every man in the unit had the terrain and their way through it committed to memory. The objective was an airfield designated RENO. He'd seen satellite and low-oblique photos of the site. He didn't know that it had been fingered by someone named Bert Russo, confirming an earlier intelligence report. It was a gravel strip about five thousand feet long, easy enough for a twin-engine aircraft, and marginally safe for a larger one, if it were lightly loaded—with grass, for instance, which was bulky but not especially heavy. The sergeant navigated by the compass strapped to his wrist. Every fifty yards he'd check the compass, sight on a tree or other object on the proper line of bearing, and head for it, at which time the procedure would begin again. He moved slowly and quietly, listening for any vaguely human noise and looking around with the night-vision scope that he wore on his head. His weapon was loaded and locked, but the selector switch was on "safe." Vega, the second or "slack" man in the line, was the buffer between Chavez's point position and the main body of the unit, fifty meters behind Vega. His machine gun made for a formidable buffer. If contact were made, their first thought would be evasion, but if evasion proved impossible, then they were to eliminate whatever stood in their path as quickly and violently as possible.

After two hours and two kilometers, Ding picked a spot to rest, a preselected rally point. He raised his hand and twirled it around in a lasso-motion to communicate what he was doing. They could have pushed a little harder, but the flight, as all lengthy helicopter flights, had been tiring, and the captain hadn't wanted to press too hard. They were not in fact expected to reach the objective until the following night. Every other word in the mission brief had

been “Caution!” He remembered smirking every time he’d heard that. Now the amusement had left him. That guy Clark had been right. It was different in Indian Country. The price of failure here would not be the embarrassment of having your “MILES” beeper go off.

Chavez shook his head to clear away the thought. He had a job. It was a job for which he was fully trained and equipped, and it was a job which he wanted to do.

His rest spot was a small, dry knoll, which he scanned for snakes before sitting down. He made one last scan of the area before switching off his goggles to save battery time, and pulled out his canteen for a drink. It was hot, but not terribly so. High eighties, he thought, and the humidity was well up there also. If it was this hot at night, he didn’t want to think about the daytime heat. At least they’d be bellied up during daylight. And Chavez was accustomed to heat. At Hunter-Liggett he’d marched over hills through temperatures over a hundred-ten degrees. He didn’t much like it, but he could do it easily enough.

“How we doin’, Chavez?”

“Muy bien, Capitán,” Chavez replied. “I figure we’ve made two miles, maybe two and a half—three klicks. That’s Checkpoint WRENCH right over there, sir.”

“Seen anything?”

“Negative. Just birds and bugs. Not even a wild pig or anything ... you suppose people hunt here?”

“Good bet,” Ramirez said after a moment’s thought. “That’s something we’ll want to keep in mind, Ding.”

Chavez looked around. He could see one man, but the rest blended in with the ground. He’d worried about the khaki clothing—not as effective camouflage as what he was accustomed to—but in the field it seemed to disappear just fine. Ding took another drink, then shook his canteen to see how noisy it was. That was a nice thing about the plastic canteens. Water sloshing around wasn’t as noisy as with the old aluminum ones. It was still something to worry about. Any kind of noise was, in the bush. He popped a cough drop to keep his mouth moist and made ready to head out.

“Next stop, Checkpoint CHAINSAW. Captain, who thinks those dumbass names up?”

Ramirez chuckled quietly. “Why, I do, Sergeant. Don’t feel bad. My ex didn’t much like my taste either, so she went and married a real-estate hustler.”

“Ain’t broads a bitch?”

“Mine sure was.”

Even the captain, Chavez thought. *Christ, nobody has a girl or a family behind....* The thought was distantly troubling, but the issue at hand was getting past WRENCH to CHAINSAW in less than two hours.

The next hop involved crossing a road—what they called a road. It was a straight dirt-gravel track that stretched off to infinity in both directions. Chavez took his time approaching and crossing it. The rest of the squad halted fifty meters from the roadway, allowing the point man to move left and right of the crossing point to make sure it was secure. That done, he made a brief radio transmission to Captain Ramirez, in Spanish:

"The crossing is clear." His answer was a double click of static as the captain keyed the transmit key on his radio, but without saying anything. Chavez answered in kind and waited for the squad to cross.

The terrain here was agreeably flat, enough so that he was wondering why their training had been in towering, airless mountains. Probably because it was well hidden, he decided. The forest, or jungle, was thick, but not quite as bad as it had been in Panama. There was ample evidence that people occasionally farmed here, probably slash-and-burn operations, judging from the numerous small clearings. He'd seen half a dozen crumbling shacks where some poor bastard had tried to raise a family, or farm for beans, or something that hadn't worked out. The poverty that such evidence spoke of was depressing to Chavez. The people who lived in this region had names not unlike his, spoke a language differing only in accent from that spoken in his childhood home. Had his great-grandfather not decided to come to California and pick lettuce, might he have grown up in such a place? If so, how might he have turned out? Might Ding Chavez have ended up running drugs or being a shooter for the Cartel bigshots? That was a truly disturbing thought. His personal pride was too great to consider the possibility seriously, but its basic truth hovered at the edges of his conscious thoughts. There was poverty here, and poor people seized at whatever opportunity presented itself. How could you face your children and say that you could not feed them without doing something illegal? You could not, of course. What would a child understand other than an empty belly? Poor people had poor options. Chavez had found the Army almost by accident, and had found in it a true home of security and opportunity and fellowship and respect. But down here ... ?

Poor bastards. But what about the people from his own barrio? Their lives poisoned, their neighborhoods corrupted. Who was to blame for it all?

Less thinkin' and more workin' , 'mano, he told himself. Chavez switched on his night scope for the next part of the trek.

He moved standing straight up, not crouched as one would expect. His feet caressed the ground carefully, making sure that there wasn't a twig to snap, and he avoided bushes that might have leaves or thorns to grasp at his clothing and make their own rustling noise. Wherever possible he cut across clearings, skirting the treelines to keep from being silhouetted against the cloudy sky. But the main enemy at night was noise, not sight. It was amazing how acute your hearing got in the bush. He thought he could hear every bug, every birdcall, each puff of breeze in the leaves far over his head. But there were no human sounds. No coughs or mutters, none of the distinctive metallic noises that only men make. While he didn't exactly relax, he moved with confidence, just like on field-training exercises, he realized. Every fifty meters

he'd stop and listen for those behind him. Not a whisper, not even *Oso* with his machine gun and heavy load. In their quiet was safety.

How good was the opposition? he wondered. Well equipped, probably. With the sort of money they had, you could buy any sort of weapons—in America or anyplace else. But trained soldiers? No way.

So how good are they? Ding asked himself. Like the members of his old gang, perhaps. They'd cultivate physical toughness, but not in a structured way. They'd be bullies, tough when they had the edge in weapons or numbers. Because of that they wouldn't be skilled in weapons use or fieldcraft; they'd rely on intimidation, and they'd be surprised when people failed to be intimidated. Some might be good hunters, but they wouldn't know how to move as a team. They wouldn't know about overwatch, mutual support, and grazing fire. They might know ambushes, but the finer points of reconnaissance would be lost on them. They would not have proper discipline. Chavez was sure that when they got to their objective, he'd find men smoking on guard. The arts of soldiering took time to acquire—time and discipline and desire. No, he was up against bullies. And bullies were cowards. These were mercenaries who acted for money. Chavez, on the other hand, took great pride that he performed his *duties* for love of country and, though he didn't quite think of it in those terms, for love of his fellow soldiers. His earlier uneasiness at the departure of the helicopter faded away. Though his mission was reconnaissance—intelligence-gathering—he found himself hoping that he'd have his chance to use the MP-5 SD2.

He reached CHAINSAW right on schedule. There the squad rested again, and Chavez led off to the final objective for the night's march, Checkpoint RASP. It was a small wooded knoll, five kilometers from their objective. Ding took his time checking RASP out. He looked especially for evidence of animals that might be hunted, and the tracks of men who might be doing the hunting. He found nothing. The squad arrived twenty minutes after he called them in by radio, having "hooked" and reversed their path to make sure that there were no trailers. Captain Ramirez examined the site as carefully as Chavez had done and came to the same positive conclusion. The squad members paired off to find places to eat and sleep. Ding teamed with Sergeant Vega, taking a security position along the most likely threat axis—northeast—to site one of the squad's two SAW machine guns. The squad medic—Sergeant Olivero—took a man to a nearby stream to replenish canteens, taking special care that everyone used his water-purification tablets. A latrine site was agreed upon, and men used that as well to dump the trash left over from their daily rations. But cleaning weapons came first, even though they hadn't been used. Each pair of soldiers cleaned their weapons one at a time, then worried about food.

"That wasn't so bad," Vega said as the sun climbed over the trees.

"Nice and flat," Chavez agreed with a yawn. "Gonna be a hot fucker down here, though."

"Have one o' these, *'mano."* Vega passed over an envelope of Gatorade concentrate.

“All right!” Chavez loved the stuff. He tore open the envelope and dumped the contents into his canteen, swishing it around to get the powder mixed in properly. “Captain know about this?”

“Nah—why worry him?”

“Right.” Chavez pocketed the empty envelope. “Shame they don’t make instant beer, isn’t it?” They traded a chuckle. Neither man would do something so foolish, but both agreed that a cold beer wasn’t all that bad an idea in the abstract.

“Flip you for first sleep,” Vega said next. It turned out that he had a single U.S. quarter for the task. They’d each been issued five hundred dollars’ equivalent in local currency, but all in paper, since coins make noise. It came up heads. Chavez got to stand watch on the gun while Vega curled up for sleep.

Ding settled down in the position. Julio had selected a good one. It was behind a spreading bush of one kind or another, with a shallow berm of dirt in front of him that could stop bullets but didn’t obstruct his view, and the SAW had a good field of fire out to nearly three hundred meters. Ding checked that the weapon had a round chambered, but that the selector switch was also on “safe.” He took out his binoculars to survey the area.

“How do things look, Sergeant?” Captain Ramirez asked quietly.

“Nothing moving at all, sir. Why don’t you catch some Zs? We’ll keep watch for ya’.” Officers, Ding knew, have to be looked after. And if sergeants didn’t do it, who would?

Ramirez surveyed the position. It had been well selected. Both men had eaten and refreshed themselves as good soldiers do, and would be well rested by sundown—over ten hours away. The captain patted Chavez on the shoulder before returning to his own position.

“All ready, sir,” the communications sergeant—Ingeles—reported. The satellite-radio antenna was set up. It was only two bits of steel, about the size and shape of grade-school rulers, linked together in a cross, with a bit of wire for a stand. Ramirez checked his watch. It was time to transmit.

“VARIABLE, this is KNIFE, over.” The signal went twenty-two thousand miles to a geosynchronous communications satellite, which relayed it back down toward Panama. It took about one-third of a second, and two more seconds passed before the reply came down. The circuit was agreeably free of static.

“KNIFE, this is VARIABLE. Your signal is five by five. Over.”

“We are in position, Checkpoint RASP. All is quiet, nothing to report, over.”

“Roger, copy. Out.”

In the hilltop communications van, Mr. Clark occupied a seat in the corner by the door. He wasn’t running the operation—far from it—but Ritter wanted his

tactical expertise available in case it was needed. On the wall opposite the racks of communications gear was a large tactical map which showed the squads and their various checkpoints. All had made them on schedule. At least whoever had set this operation up had known—or listened to people who did—what men in the bush could and could not do. The expectations for time and distance were reasonable.

That's nice for a change, Clark thought. He looked around the van. Aside from the two communicators, there were two senior people from the Directorate of Operations, neither of whom had what Clark would call expertise in this particular sort of operation—though they were close to Ritter and dependable. *Well,* he admitted, *people with my sort of experience are mostly retired now.*

Clark's heart was out there in the field. He'd never operated in the Americas, at least not in the jungles of the Americas, but for all that he'd "been there"—out in the boonies, alone as a man could be, your only lifeline back to friendly forces a helicopter that might or might not show, tethered by an invisible thread of radio energy. The radios were far more reliable now; that was one positive change. For what it was worth. If something went wrong, these radios would not, however, bring in a flight of "fast-movers" whose afterburning engines rattled the sky and whose bombloads shook the ground fifteen minutes after you called for help. No, not this time.

Christ, do they know that? Do they really know what that fact means?

No, they don't. They can't. They're all too young. Kids. They're all little kids. That they were older, bigger, and tougher than his own children was for the moment beside the point. Clark was a man who'd operated in Cambodia and Vietnam—North and South. Always with small teams of men with guns and radios, almost always trying to stay hidden, looking for information and trying to get the hell away without being noticed. Mostly succeeding, but some of them had been very, very close.

"So far, so good," the senior Operations guy observed as he reached for a coffee mug. His companion nodded agreement.

Clark merely raised an eyebrow. *And what the hell do you two know about this?*

The Director, Moira saw, was excited about TARPON. As well he might be, she thought as she made her notes. It would take about a week, but already the seizure notices were being scratched in. Four Justice Department specialists had spent more than a day going through the report Mark Bright had delivered. Electronic banking, she realized, had made the job much easier. Somewhere in the Department of Justice there was someone who could access the computerized records of every bank in the world. Or maybe not in Justice. Maybe one of the intelligence agencies, or maybe a private contractor, because the legality of the matter was slightly vague. In any case, comparing records of the Securities and Exchange Commission with the numerous bank transactions, they had already identified the drug money used to finance the

projects in which the "victim"—at least his family had been real victims, Moira told herself—had sought to launder it. She'd never known the wheels of justice to turn so quickly.

What arrogant people they must be, thinking they can invest and launder their dirty money right here! Juan was right about them and their arrogance, Moira thought. Well, this would wipe the smiles off their faces. There was at least six hundred million dollars of equity that the government could seize, and that didn't count the profits that they expected to make when the properties were rolled over. Six hundred million dollars! The amount was astounding. Sure, she'd heard about how "billions" in drug money poured out of the country, but the actual estimates were about as reliable as weather reports. It was plain, the Director said in dictation, that the Cartel was unhappy with its previous laundering arrangements and/or found that bringing the cash directly back to their own country created as many problems as it solved. Therefore, it appeared that after laundering the primary funds—plus making a significant profit on their money—they were setting up their accounts in such a way as to establish an enormous investment trust fund which could legitimately begin to take over all commercial businesses in their home country or any other country in which they wished to establish a political or economic position. What made this interesting, Emil went on, was that it might presage an attempt to launder themselves—the old American criminal phraseology: "to go legit"—to a degree that would be fully acceptable in the local, Latin American political context.

"How soon do you need this, sir?" Mrs. Wolfe asked.

"I'm seeing the President tomorrow morning."

"Copies?"

"Five, all numbered. Moira, this is code-word material," he reminded her.

"Soon as I finish, I'll eat the computer disk," she promised. "You have Assistant Director Grady coming in for lunch, and the AG canceled on dinner tomorrow night. He has to go out to San Francisco."

"What does the Attorney General want in San Francisco?"

"His son decided to get married on short notice."

"That's short, all right," Jacobs agreed. "How far away are you from that?"

"Not very. Your trip to Colombia—do you know when yet, so I can rework your appointments?"

"Sorry, still don't know. It shouldn't hurt the schedule too much, though. It'll be a weekend trip. I'll get out early Friday, and I ought to be back by lunch on the following Monday. So it shouldn't hurt anything important."

"Oh, okay." Moira left the room with a smile.

"Good morning." The United States Attorney was a thirty-seven-year-old man named Edwin Davidoff. He planned to be the first Jewish United States

senator from Alabama in living memory. A tall, fit, two hundred pounds of former varsity wrestler, he'd parlayed a Presidential appointment into a reputation as a tough, effective, and scrupulously honest champion of the people. When handling civil-rights cases, his public statement always referred to the Law Of The Land, and all the things that America Stands For. When handling a major criminal case, he talked about Law And Order, and the Protection That The People Expect. He spoke a lot, as a matter of fact. There was scarcely a Rotary or Optimists group in Alabama to which he had not spoken in the past three years, and he hadn't missed any police departments at all. His post as the chief government lawyer for this part of Alabama was mainly administrative, but he did take the odd case, which always seemed to be a high-profile one. He'd been especially keen on political corruption, as three state legislators had discovered to their sorrow. They were now raking the sand traps at the Officers' Club Golf Course at Eglin Air Force Base.

Edward Stuart took his seat opposite the desk. Davidoff was a polite man, standing when Stuart arrived. Polite prosecutors worried Stuart.

"We finally got confirmation on your clients' identity," Davidoff said in a voice that might have feigned surprise, but instead was fully businesslike. "It turns out that they're both Colombian citizens with nearly a dozen arrests between them. I thought you said that they came from Costa Rica."

Stuart temporized: "Why did identification take so long?"

"I don't know. That factor doesn't really matter anyway. I've asked for an early trial date."

"What about the consideration the Coast Guard offered my client?"

"That statement was made after his confession—and in any case, we are not using the confession because we don't need it."

"Because it was obtained through flagrantly—"

"That's crap and you know it. Regardless, it will not play in this case. Far as I'm concerned, the confession does not exist, okay? Ed, your clients committed mass murder and they're going to pay for that. They're going to pay in full."

Stuart leaned forward. "I can give you information—"

"I don't care what information they have," Davidoff said. "This is a murder case."

"This isn't the way things are done," Stuart objected.

"Maybe that's part of the problem. We're sending a message with this case."

"You're going to try to execute my clients just to send a message." It was not a question.

"I know we disagree on the deterrent value of capital punishment."

"I'm willing to trade a confession to murder and all their information for life."

"No deal."

"Are you really that sure you'll win the case?"

"You know what our evidence is," Davidoff replied. Disclosure laws required the prosecution to allow the defense team to examine everything they had. The same rule was not applied in reverse. It was a structural means of ensuring a fair trial to the defendants, though it was not universally approved of by police and prosecutors. It was, however, a rule, and Davidoff always played by the rules. That, Stuart knew, was one of the things that made him so dangerous. He had never once lost a case or an appeal on procedural grounds. Davidoff was a brilliant legal technician.

"If we kill these two people, we've sunk to the same level that we say they live at."

"Ed, we live in a democracy. The people ultimately decide what the laws should be, and the people approve of capital punishment."

"I will do everything I can to prevent that."

"I would be disappointed in you if you didn't."

Christ, but you'll be a great senator. So evenhanded, so tolerant of those who disagree with you on principle. No wonder the papers love you.

"So that's the story on Eastern Europe for this week," Judge Moore observed. "Sounds to me like things are quieting down."

"Yes, sir," Ryan replied. "It does look that way for the present."

The Director of Central Intelligence nodded and changed subjects. "You were in to see James last night?"

"Yes, sir. His spirits are still pretty good, but he knows." Ryan hated giving these progress reports. It wasn't as though he were a physician.

"I'm going over tonight," Ritter said. "Anything he needs, anything I can take over?"

"Just work. He still wants to work."

"Anything he wants, he gets," Moore said. Ritter stirred slightly at that, Ryan saw. "Dr. Ryan, you are doing quite well. If I were to suggest to the President that you might be ready to become the next DDI—look, I know how you feel about James; remember that I've worked with him longer than you have, all right?—and—"

"Sir, Admiral Greer isn't dead," Jack objected. He'd almost said yet, and cursed himself for even having thought that word.

"He's not going to make it, Jack," Moore said gently. "I'm sorry about that. He's my friend, too. But our business here is to serve our country. That is more important than personalities, even James. What's more, James is a pro, and he would be disappointed in your attitude."

Ryan managed not to flinch at the rebuke. But it wounded him, all the more so because the Judge was correct. Jack took a deep breath and nodded

agreement.

"James told me last week that he wants you to succeed him. I think you might be ready. What do you think?"

"Judge, I think I am fitted technically, but I lack the political sophistication needed for the office."

"There's only one way to learn that part of the job—and, hell, politics aren't supposed to have much place in the Intelligence Directorate." Moore smiled to punctuate the irony of that statement. "The President likes you, and The Hill likes you. As of now you're acting Deputy Director (Intelligence). The slot won't be officially filled until after the election, but as of now the job is yours on a provisional basis. If James recovers, well and good. The additional seasoning you get from working under him won't hurt. But even if he recovers, it will soon be time for him to leave. We are all replaceable, and James thinks you're ready. So do I."

Ryan didn't know what to say. Still short of forty, he now had one of the premiere intelligence posts in the world. As a practical matter, he'd had it for several months—even for several years, some might say—but now it was official, and somehow that made it different. People would now come to him for opinions and judgments. That had been going on for a long time, but he'd always had someone to fall back on. Now he would not. He'd present his information to Judge Moore and await final judgment, but from this moment the responsibility for being right was his. Before, he'd presented opinions and options to his superiors. Beginning now, he'd present policy decisions directly to the ultimate decision-makers. The increase in responsibility, though subtle, was vast.

"Need-to-know still applies," Ritter pointed out.

"Of course," Ryan said.

"I'll tell Nancy and your department heads," Moore said. "James ginned up a letter I'll read. Here's your copy."

Ryan stood to take it.

"I believe you have work to do, Dr. Ryan," Moore said.

"Yes, sir." Jack turned and left the room. He knew that he should have felt elated, but instead felt trapped. He thought he knew why.

"Too soon, Arthur," Ritter said after Jack had left.

"I know what you're saying, Bob, but we can't have Intelligence go adrift just because you don't want him in on SHOWBOAT. We'll keep him out of that, at least isolated from what Operations is doing. He'll have to get in on the information that we're developing. For Christ's sake, his knowledge of finance will be useful to us. He just doesn't have to know how the information gets to us. Besides, if the President says 'go' on this, and he gets approval from The Hill, we're home free."

"So when do you go to The Hill?"

“I have four of them coming here tomorrow afternoon. We’re invoking the special- and hazardous-operations rule.”

SAHO was an informal codicil of the oversight rules. While Congress had the right under law to oversee all intelligence operations, in a case two years earlier, a leak from one of the select committees had caused the death of a CIA station chief and a high-ranking defector. Instead of going public, Judge Moore had approached the members of both committees and gotten written agreement that in special cases the chairman and co-chairman of each committee would alone be given access to the necessary information. It was then their responsibility to decide if it should be shared with the committees as a whole. Since members of both political parties were present, it had been hoped that political posturing could be avoided. In fact, Judge Moore had created a subtle trap for all of them. Whoever tried to decide that information had to be disseminated ran the risk of being labeled as having a political agenda. Moreover, the higher selectivity of the four SAHO-cleared members had already created an atmosphere of privilege that militated directly against spreading the information out. So long as the operation was not politically sensitive, it was a virtual guarantee that Congress would not interfere. The remarkable thing was that Moore had managed to get the committees to agree to this. But bringing the widow and children of the dead station chief to the executive hearings hadn’t hurt one bit. It was one thing to carp abstractly about the majesty of law, quite another to have to face the results of a mistake —the more so if one of them was a ten-year-old girl without a father. Political theater was not solely the domain of elected officials.

“And the Presidential Finding?” Ritter asked.

“Already done. ‘It is determined that drug-smuggling operations are a clear and present danger to U.S. national security. The President authorizes the judicious use of military force in accord with established operational guidelines to protect our citizens,’ *et cetera.”*

“The political angle is the one I don’t like.”

Moore chuckled. “Neither will the people from The Hill. So we have to keep it all secret, don’t we? If the President goes public to show that he’s ‘really doing something,’ the opposition will scream that he’s playing politics. If the opposition burns the operation, then the President can do the same thing. So both sides have a political interest in keeping this one under wraps. The election-year politics work in our favor. Clever fellow, that Admiral Cutter.”

“Not as clever as he thinks,” Ritter snorted. “But who is?” “Yeah. Who is? You know, it’s a shame that James never got in on this.”

“Gonna miss him,” Ritter agreed. “God, I wish there was something I could take him, something to make it a little easier.”

“I know what you mean,” Judge Moore agreed. “Sooner or later, Ryan has to get in on this.”

“I don’t like it.”

“What you don’t like, Bob, is the fact that Ryan’s been involved in two

highly successful field operations in addition to all the work he's done at his desk. Maybe he did poach on your territory, but in both cases he had your support when he did so. Would you like him better if he'd failed? Robert, I don't have Directorate chiefs so that they can get into pissing contests like Cutter and those folks on The Hill."

Ritter blinked at the rebuke. "I've been saying for a long time that we brought him along too fast—which we have. I'll grant you that he's been very effective. But it's also true that he doesn't have the necessary political savvy for this sort of thing. He's yet to establish the capacity needed for executive oversight. He has to fly over to Europe to represent us at the NATO intel conference. No sense dropping SHOWBOAT on him before he leaves, is there?"

Moore almost replied that Admiral Greer was out of the loop because of his physical condition, which was mainly, but only partly, true. The presidential directive mandated an extremely tight group of people who really knew what the counter-drug operations were all about. It was an old story in the intelligence game: sometimes security was so tight that people who might have had something important to offer were left out of the picture. It was not unknown, in fact, for those left out to have had knowledge crucial to the operation's successful conclusion. But it was equally true that history was replete with examples of the disasters that resulted from making an operation so broadly based as to paralyze the decision-making process and compromise its secrecy. Drawing the line between operational security and operational efficiency was historically the most difficult task of an intelligence executive. There were no rules, Judge Moore knew, merely the requirement that such operations must succeed. One of the most persistent elements of spy fiction was the supposition that intelligence chiefs had an uncanny, infallible sixth sense of how to run their ops. But if the world's finest surgeons could make mistakes, if the world's best test pilots most often died in crashes—for that matter, if a pro-bowl quarterback could throw interceptions—why should a spymaster be any different? The only real difference between a wise man and a fool, Moore knew, was that the wise man tended to make more serious mistakes—and only because no one trusted a fool with really crucial decisions; only the wise had the opportunity to lose battles, or nations.

"You're right about the NATO conference. You win, Bob. For now." Judge Moore frowned at his desk. "How are things going?"

"All four teams are within a few hours' march of their surveillance points. If everything goes according to plan, they'll be in position by dawn tomorrow, and the following day they'll begin feeding us information. The flight crew we bagged the other day coughed up all the preliminary information we need. At least two of the airfields we staked out are 'hot.' Probably at least one of the others is also."

"The President wants me over tomorrow. It seems that the Bureau has tumbled to something important. Emil's really hot about it. Seems that they've identified a major money-laundering operation."

"Something we can exploit?"

"It would seem so. Emil's treating it as code-word material."

"Sauce for the goose," Ritter observed with a smile. "Maybe we can put a real crimp in their operations."

Chavez awoke from his second sleep period an hour before sundown. Sleep had come hard. Daytime temperatures were well over a hundred, and the high humidity made the jungle seem an oven despite being in shade. His first considered act was to drink over a pint of water—Gatorade—from his canteen to replace what he'd sweated off while asleep. Next came a couple of Tylenol. Light-fighters lived off the things to moderate the aches and pains that came with their normal physical regimen of exertion. In this case, it was a heat-induced headache that felt like a low-grade hangover.

"Why don't we let 'em keep this fucking place?" he muttered to Julio.

"Roger that, *'mano."* Vega chuckled in return.

Sergeant Chavez wrenched himself to a sitting position, shaking off the cobwebs as he did so. He rubbed a hand over his face. The heavy beard he'd had since puberty was growing with its accustomed rapidity, but he wouldn't shave today. That merited a grunt. Normal Army routine was heavy on personal hygiene, and light infantrymen, as elite soldiers, were supposed to be "pretty" troops. Already he stank like a basketball team after double overtime, but he wouldn't wash, either. Nor would he don a clean uniform. But he would, of course, clean his weapon again. After making sure that Julio had already serviced his SAW, Chavez stripped his MP-5 down to six pieces and inspected them all visually. The matte-black finish resisted rust quite well. Regardless, he wiped everything down with oil, ran a toothbrush along all operation parts, checked to see that all springs were taut and magazines were not fouled with dirt or grit. Satisfied, he reassembled the weapon and worked the action quietly to make certain that it functioned smoothly. Finally, he inserted the magazine, chambered a round, and set the safety. Next he checked that his knives were clean and sharp. This included his throwing stars, of course.

"The captain's gonna be pissed if he sees them," Vega observed quietly.

"They're good luck," Chavez replied as he put them back in his pocket. "'Sides, you never know...." He checked the rest of his gear. Everything was as it should be. He was ready for the day's work. Next the maps came out.

"That where we're goin'?"

"RENO." Chavez pointed to the spot on the tactical map. "Just under five klicks." He examined the map carefully, making several mental notes and again committing the details to memory. The map had no marks on it, of course. If lost or captured, such marks would tell the wrong people things that they ought not to know.

"Here." Captain Ramirez joined the two, handing over a satellite photograph.

"These maps must be new, sir."

"They are. DMA"—he referred to the Defense Mapping Agency—"didn't have good maps of this area until recently. They were drawn up from the satellite photos. See any problems?"

"No, sir." Chavez looked up with a smile. "Nice and flat, lots of thinned-out trees—looks easier than last night, Cap'n."

"When we get in close, I want you to approach from this angle here into the objective rally point." Ramirez traced his hand across the photo. "I'll make the final approach with you for the 'leader's recon.' "

"You the boss, sir," Ding agreed.

"Plan the first break point right here, Checkpoint SPIKE."

"Right."

Ramirez stuck his head up, surveying the area. "Remember the briefing. These guys may have very good security, and be especially careful for booby traps. You see something, let me know immediately—as long as it's safe to do so. When in doubt, remember the mission is covert."

"I'll get us there, sir."

"Sorry, Ding," Ramirez apologized. "I must sound like a nervous woman."

"You ain't got the legs for it, sir," Chavez pointed out with a grin.

"You up to carrying that SAW another night, Oso?" Ramirez asked Vega.

"I carried heavier toothpicks, jefe. "

Ramirez laughed and made off to check the next pair.

"I've known worse captains than that one," Vega observed when he was gone.

"Hard worker," Chavez allowed. Sergeant Olivero appeared next.

"How's your water?" the medic asked.

"Both a quart low," Vega replied.

"Both of you, drink a quart down right now."

"Come on, doc," Chavez protested.

"No dickin' around, people. Somebody gets heatstroke and it's my ass. If you ain't gotta piss, you ain't been drinking enough. Pretend it's a Corona," he suggested as both men took out their canteens. "Remember that: if you don't have to piss, you need a drink. Damn it, Ding, you oughta know that, you spent time at Hunter-Liggett. This fucking climate'll dry your ass out in a heartbeat, and I ain't carrying your ass, dried-out or not."

Olivero was right, of course. Chavez emptied a canteen in three long pulls. Vega followed the medic off to the nearby stream to replenish the empty containers. He reappeared several minutes later. *Oso* surprised his friend with a couple more envelopes of Gatorade concentrate. The medic, he explained,

had his own supply. About the only bad news was that the water-purification pills did not mix well with the Gatorade, but that was for electrolytes, not taste.

Ramirez assembled his men just at sundown, repeating the night's brief already delivered to the individual guard posts. Repetition was the foundation of clarity—some manual said that, Chavez knew. The squad members were all dirty. The generally heavy beards and scraggly hair would enhance their camouflage, almost obviating the need for paint. There were a few aches and pains, mainly from the rough sleeping conditions, but everyone was fit and rested. And eager. Garbage was assembled and buried. Olivero sprinkled CS tear-gas powder before the dirt was smoothed over the hole. That would keep animals from scratching it up for a few weeks. Captain Ramirez made a final check of the area while there was still light. By the time Chavez moved out at point, there was no evidence that they'd ever been here.

Ding crossed the clearing as quickly as safety allowed, scanning ahead with his low-light goggles. Again using compass and landmarks, he was able to travel rapidly, now that he had a feel for the country. As before, there was no sound other than what nature provided, and better still, the forest wasn't quite as dense. He made better than a kilometer per hour. Best of all, he had yet to spot a snake.

He made Checkpoint SPIKE in under two hours, feeling relaxed and confident. The walk through the jungle had merely served to loosen up his muscles. He stopped twice along the way for water breaks, more often to listen, and still heard nothing unexpected. Every thirty minutes he checked in by radio with Captain Ramirez.

After Chavez picked a place to belly-up, it took ten minutes for the rest of the squad to catch up. Ten more minutes and he was off again for the final checkpoint, MALLET. Chavez found himself hoping that they'd run out of tool names.

He was more careful now. He had the map committed to memory, and the closer he got to the objective, the more likely that he'd encounter somebody. He slowed down almost without thinking about it. Half a klick out of SPIKE he heard something moving off to his right. Something quiet, but a land creature. He waved the squad to halt while he checked it out—Vega did the same, aiming his SAW in that direction—but whatever it was, it moved off heading southwest. Some animal or other, he was sure, though Ding waited another few minutes before he felt totally safe moving off. He checked the wind, which was blowing from his left rear, and wondered if his pungent odor was detectable to men—probably not, he decided. The rank smells of the jungle were pretty overpowering. On the other hand, maybe washing once in a while was worth the effort....

He arrived at MALLET without further incident. He was now one kilometer off the objective. Again the squad assembled. There was a creek less than fifty meters from the checkpoint, and water was again replenished. The next stop was the objective rally point, picked for its easy identifiability. Ding got them there in just under an hour. The squad formed yet another defensive perimeter

while the point man and commander got together.

Ramirez took out his map again. Chavez and his captain turned on the infrared lights that were part of the goggle-sets and traced ideas on the map and the accompanying photos. Also present was the operations sergeant, appropriately named Guerra. The road to the airfield came in from the opposite direction, looping around a stream that the squad had followed into the rally point. The only building visible on the photo was also on the far side of the objective.

"I like this way in, sir," Chavez observed.

"I think you're right," Ramirez replied. "Sergeant Guerra?"

"Looks pretty good to me, sir."

"Okay, people, if there's going to be contact, it'll be in this here neighborhood. It is now post time. Chavez, I'm going in with you. Guerra, you bring the rest of the squad in behind us if there's any trouble."

"Yes, sir," both sergeants replied.

Out of habit, Ding pulled out his camouflage stick and applied some green and black to his face. Next he put on his gloves. Though sweaty hands were a nuisance, the dark leather shells would darken his hands. He moved out, with Captain Ramirez close behind. Both men had their goggles on, and both moved very slowly now.

The stream they'd followed in for the last half a klick made for good drainage in the area, and that made for dry, solid footing—the same reason that someone had decided to bulldoze a landing strip here, of course. Chavez was especially wary for booby traps. With every step he checked the ground for wires, then up at waist and eye level. He also checked for any disturbance of ground. Again he wondered about game in the area. If there were some, it, too, would set off the booby traps, wouldn't it? So how would the bad guys react if one got set off? Probably they'd send somebody out to look ... that would be bad news regardless of what he expected to find, wouldn't it?

Let's be cool, 'mano, Chavez told himself.

Finally: noise. It carried against the breeze. The low, far-off murmuring of talking men. Though too sporadic and confused even to guess the language, it was human speech.

Contact.

Chavez turned to look at his captain, pointing to the direction from which it seemed to come and tapping his ear with a finger. Ramirez nodded and motioned for the sergeant to press on.

Not real smart, people, Chavez thought at his quarry. *Not real smart talking so's a guy can hear you a couple hundred meters away. You are making my job easier.* Not that the sergeant minded. Just being here was hard enough.

Next, a trail.

Chavez knelt down and looked for human footprints. They were here, all

right, coming out and going back. He took a very long step to pass over the narrow dirt path, and stopped. Ramirez and Chavez were now a tight two-man formation, far enough apart that the same burst wouldn't get both, close enough that they could provide mutual support. Captain Ramirez was an experienced officer, just off his eighteen-month tour in command of a light-infantry company, but even he was in awe of Chavez's woodcraft skills. It was now post time, as he'd told them a few minutes earlier, and his were the greatest worries of the unit. He was in command. That meant that the mission's success was his sole responsibility. He was similarly responsible for the lives of his men. He'd brought ten men in-country, and he was supposed to bring all ten men out. As the single officer, moreover, he was supposed to be at least as good as any of his men—preferably better—in every specialty. Even though that was not realistic, it was expected by everyone. Including Captain Ramirez, who was old enough to know better. But watching Chavez, ten meters ahead, in the gray-green image of his night goggles, moving like a ghost, as quietly as a puff of breeze, Ramirez had to shake off a feeling of inadequacy. It was replaced a moment later with one of elation. This was better than command of a company. Ten elite specialists, each one of them among the best the Army had, and they were his to command.... Ramirez distantly realized that he was experiencing the emotional roller-coaster common to combat operations. A bright young man, he was now learning another lesson that history talked about but never quite conveyed: it was one thing to talk and think and read about this sort of thing, but there would never be a substitute for doing it. Training could attenuate the stress of combat operations, but never remove it. It amazed the young captain that everything seemed so clear to him. His senses were as fully alert as they had ever been, and his mind was working with speed and clarity. He recognized the stress and danger, but he was ready for it. In that recognition came elation as the roller coaster rolled on. A far-off part of his intellect watched and evaluated his performance, noting that as in a contact sport, every member of the squad needed the shock of real contact before settling down fully to work. The problem was simply that they were supposed to avoid that contact.

Chavez's hand went up, Ramirez saw, and then the scout crouched down behind a tree. The captain passed around a thicket of bushes and saw why the sergeant had stopped.

There was the airfield.

Better yet, there was an aircraft, several hundred yards away, its engines off but glowing on the infrared image generated by the goggles.

"Looks like we be in business, Cap'n," Ding noted in a whisper.

Ramirez and Chavez moved left and right, well inside the treeline, to search for security forces. But there were none. The objective, RENO, was agreeably identical to what they'd been told to expect. They took their time making sure, of course, then Ramirez went back to the rally point, leaving Chavez to keep an eye on things. Twenty minutes later the squad was in place on a small hill just northwest of the airfield, covering a front of two hundred yards. This had probably once been some peasant's farm, with the burned-off fields merely

extended into the strip. They all had a clear view of the airstrip. Chavez was on the extreme right with Vega, Guerra on the far left with the other SAW gunner, and Ramirez stayed in the center, with his radio operator, Sergeant Ingeles.

12.

The Curtain on SHOWBOAT

"VARIABLE, THIS is KNIFE. Stand by to copy, over."

The signal off the satellite channel was as clear as a commercial FM station. The communications technician stubbed out his cigarette and keyed his headset.

"KNIFE, this is VARIABLE, your signal is five by five. We are ready to copy, over." Behind him, Clark turned in his swivel chair to look at the map.

"We are at Objective RENO, and guess what—there's a twin-engine aircraft in view with some people loading cardboard boxes into it. Over."

Clark turned to look in surprise at the radio rack. Was their operational intel *that good?*

"Can you read the tail number, over."

"Negative, the angle's wrong. But he's going to take off right past us. We are right in the planned position. No security assets are evident at this time."

"Damn," observed one of the Operations people. He lifted a handset. "This is VARIABLE. RENO reports bird in the nest, time zero-three-one-six Zulu ... Roger. Will advise. Out." He turned to his companion. "The stateside assets are at plus-one hour."

"That'll do just fine," the other man thought.

As Ramirez and Chavez watched through their binoculars, two men finished loading their boxes into the aircraft. It was a Piper Cheyenne, both men determined, a midsize corporate aircraft with reasonably long range, depending on load weights and flight profile. Local shops could fit it with ferry tanks, extending the range designed into the aircraft. The cargo flown into America by drug smugglers had little to do with weight or—except in the case of marijuana—bulk. The limiting factor was money. A single aircraft could carry enough refined cocaine, even at wholesale value, to wipe out the cash holdings of most federal reserve banks.

The pilots boarded the aircraft after shaking hands with the ground crews—that part seemed to their covert observers just as routine as any aircraft departure. The engines began turning, and their roar swept across the open land toward the light-fighters.

“Jesus,” Sergeant Vega noted with bemusement. “I could smoke the bird right here and now. Damn.” His gun was on “safe,” of course.

“Might make our life a little too exciting,” Chavez noted. “Yeah, that makes sense, *Oso.* The security guys were all around the airplane. They’re spreading out now.” He grabbed his radio. “Captain—”

“I see it. Heads up in case we have to move out.”

The Piper taxied to the end of the runway, moving like a crippled bird, bouncing and bobbing on the landing-gear shocks. The airstrip was illuminated by a mere handful of small flares, far fewer lights than were normally used to outline a real runway. It struck all who looked as dangerous, and suddenly Chavez realized that if the aircraft crashed on takeoff, some squad members would end up eating the thing....

The aircraft’s nose dropped as the pilot pushed the engines to full throttle preparatory to takeoff, then reduced power to make sure the motors wouldn’t quit when he did so. Satisfied, they ran up again, and the aircraft slipped its brakes and started moving. Chavez set his binoculars down to watch. Heavily loaded with fuel, it cleared the trees to his right by a mere twenty yards. Whoever the pilot was, he was a daredevil. The term that sprang into the sergeant’s mind seemed appropriate enough.

“Just took off now. It’s a Piper Cheyenne,” Ramirez’s voice read off the tail number. It had American registration. “Course about three-three-zero.” Which headed for the Yucatan Channel, between Cuba and Mexico. The communicator took the proper notes. “What can you tell me about RENO?”

“I count six people. Four carry rifles, can’t tell about the rest. One pickup truck and a shack, like on the satellite overheads. Truck’s moving now, and I think—yeah, they’re putting out the runway lights. They’re using flares, just putting dirt over on top of them. Stand by, we have a truck heading this way.”

Off to Ramirez’s left, Vega had his machine gun up on its bipod, the sight tracking the pickup as it moved down the east side of the runway. Every few hundred meters, it stopped, and the passenger jumped out and shoveled dirt on one of the sputtering flares.

“Reach out, reach out and touch someone ...” Julio murmured.

“Be cool, *Oso,”* Ding cautioned.

“No problem.” Vega’s thumb was on the selector switch—still set on “safe”—and his finger was on the trigger guard, not the trigger itself.

The flares went out one by one. The truck was briefly within one hundred fifty meters of the two soldiers, but never approached them directly. They merely happened to be in a place the truck had to pass by. Vega’s gun stayed on the truck until well after it turned away. As he set the buttstock back down on the dirt, he turned to his comrade.

“Aw, shit!” he whispered in feigned disappointment.

Chavez had to stifle a giggle. Wasn’t this odd, he thought. Here they were in enemy territory, loaded for fucking bear, and they were playing a game no

different from what children did on Christmas Eve, peeking around corners. The game was serious as hell, they all knew, but the form it took was almost laughable. They also knew that could change in an instant. There wasn't anything funny about training a machine gun on two men in a truck. Was there?

Chavez reactivated his night goggles. At the far end of the runway, people were lighting cigarettes. The faint images on his display flared white with the heat energy. That would kill their night vision, Ding knew. He could tell from the way they moved that they were just bullshitting around now. Their day's —night's—work was complete. The truck drove off, leaving two men behind. These, it would seem, were the security troops for this airstrip. Only two, and they smoked at night. Armed or not—they seemed to be carrying AK-47s or a close copy thereof—they were not serious opposition.

"What do you suppose they're smoking?" Vega asked.

"I didn't think about that," Chavez admitted with a grunt. "You don't suppose they're that dumb, do you?"

"We ain't dealing with soldiers, man. We coulda moved in and snuffed those fuckers no sweat. Maybe ten seconds' worth of firefight."

"Still gotta be careful," Chavez whispered in reply.

"Roge-o," Vega agreed. "That's where you get the edge."

"KNIFE, this is Six," Ramirez called on the radio net. "Fall back to the rally point."

"Move, I'll cover," Chavez told Vega.

Julio stood and shouldered his weapon. There was a slight but annoying tinkle from the metal parts as he did so—the ammo belt, Ding thought. *Have to keep that in mind.* He waited in place for several minutes before moving out.

The rally point was a particularly tall tree close to the stream. Again, people replenished their canteens at Olivero's persistent urging. It turned out that one man had had his face slashed by a low branch, requiring attention from the medic, but otherwise the squad was fully intact. They'd camp five hundred meters from the airfield, leaving two men at an observation point—the one Chavez had staked out for himself—around the clock. Ding took the first watch, again with Vega, and would be relieved at dawn by Guerra and another man armed with a silenced MP-5. Either a SAW or a soldier armed with a grenade launcher would always be at the OP in case the opposition got rambunctious. If there was to be a firefight, the idea was to end it as quickly as possible. Light-fighters weren't especially big on tanks and heavy guns, but American soldiers think in terms of firepower, which, after all, had been largely an American invention in the first place.

It amazed Chavez how easily one could slip into a routine. An hour before dawn, he and Vega surveyed the landing strip from their little knoll. Of the two men in the permanent security team, only one was moving around. The other was sitting with his back against the shack, still smoking something or other. The one up and moving didn't stray far.

“What’s happening, Ding?” the captain asked.

“I heard you coming, sir,” Chavez said.

“I tripped. Sorry.”

Chavez ran down the situation briefly. Ramirez put his binoculars on the enemy to check things for himself.

“Supposedly they aren’t being bothered by the local police and army,” the captain observed.

“Bought off?” Vega asked.

“No, just they got discouraged, mainly. So the druggies have settled down to a half-dozen or so regular airfields. Like this one. We’re gonna be here awhile.” A pause. “Anything happens—”

“We’ll call you right off, sir,” Vega promised.

“See any snakes?” Ramirez asked.

“No, thank God.” The captain’s teeth flared in the darkness. He clapped Chavez on the shoulder and disappeared back into the bushes.

“What’s wrong with snakes?” Vega asked.

Captain Winters felt the pangs of disappointment as he watched the Piper touch down. It was two in a row now. The big one from the other night was gone already. Exactly where they flew them off to, he didn’t know. Maybe the big boneyard in the desert. One more old piston bird would hardly be noticed. On the other hand, you could sell one of these Pipers easily enough.

The .50-caliber machine gun looked even more impressive at eye level, though with dawn coming up, the spotlights were less overpowering. They didn’t use the spy-plane ploy this time. The Marines treated the smugglers just as roughly as before, however, and their actions again had the desired effect. The CIA officer running the operation had formerly been with DEA, and he enjoyed the difference in interrogation methods. Both pilots were Colombians, the aircraft’s registration to the contrary. Despite their machismo, it took only one look at Nicodemus. To be brave in the face of a bullet, or even an attack dog, was one thing. To be brave before a living carnosaur was something else entirely. It took less than an hour for them to be processed, then taken off to the tame federal district judge.

“How many planes don’t make it here?” Gunnery Sergeant Black asked as they were driven away.

“What d’you mean, Gunny?”

“I seen the fighter, sir. It figures that he told the dude, ‘Fly this way or else!’ An’ we been called here more times ’n airplanes have showed up, right? What I’m saying, sir, is it stands to reason, like, that some folks didn’t take the hint, and the boy driving the fighter showed them the ‘or else.’ ”

“You don’t need to know that, Gunny Black,” the CIA officer pointed out.

“Fair enough. Either way, it’s cool with me, sir. My first tour in ‘Nam, I seen a squad get wiped because some of ’em were doped up. I caught a punk selling drugs in my squad, back in ’74-75, and I damned near beat the little fuck to death. Almost got in trouble over it, too.”

The CIA officer nodded as though that statement surprised him. It didn’t.

“ ‘Need-to-know,’ Gunny,” he repeated.

“Aye aye, sir.” Gunnery Sergeant Black assembled his men and walked off toward the waiting helicopter.

That was the problem with “black” operations, the CIA officer thought as he watched the Marines leave. You want good people, reliable people, smart people, to be part of the op. But the good, reliable, and smart people all had brains and imagination. And it really wasn’t all that hard for them to figure things out. After enough of that happened, “black” operations tended to become gray ones. Like the dawn that had just risen. Except that light wasn’t always a good thing, was it?

Admiral Cutter met Directors Moore and Jacobs in the lobby of the office wing, and took them straight to the Oval Office. Agents Connor and D’Agostino were on duty in the secretarial office and gave all three the usual once-over out of habit. Unusually, for the White House, they walked straight in to see WRANGLER.

“Good afternoon, Mr. President,” all three said in turn.

The President rose from his desk and took his place in an antique chair by the fireplace. This was where he usually sat for “intimate” conversations. The President regretted this. The chair he sat in was nowhere near as comfortable as the custom-designed one behind his desk, and his back was acting up, but even presidents have to play by the rules of others’ expectations.

“I take it that this is to be a progress report. You want to start off, Judge?”

“SHOWBOAT is fully underway. We’ve had a major stroke of luck, in fact. Just as we got a surveillance team in place, they spotted an aircraft taking off.” Moore favored everyone with a smile. “Everything worked exactly as planned. The two smugglers are in federal custody. That was luck, pure and simple, of course. We can’t expect that to happen too often, but we intercepted ninety kilos of cocaine, and that’s a fair night’s work. All four covert teams are on the ground and in place. None have been spotted.”

“How’s the satellite working out?”

“Still getting parts of it calibrated. That’s mainly a computer problem, of course. The thing we’re planning to use the Rhyolite for will take another week or so. As you know, that element of the plan was set up rather late, and we’re playing it by ear at the moment. The problem, if I can call it that, is setting up the computer software, and they need another couple of days.”

“What about The Hill?”

“This afternoon,” Judge Moore answered. “I don’t expect that to be a problem.”

“You’ve said that before,” Cutter pointed out.

Moore turned and examined him with a tired eye. “We’ve laid quite a bit of groundwork. I don’t invoke SAHO very often, and I’ve never had any problems from them when I did.”

“I don’t expect any active opposition there, Jim,” the President agreed. “I’ve laid some groundwork, too. Emil, you’re quiet this morning.”

“We’ve been over that aspect of the operation, Mr. President. I have no special legal qualms, because there really is no law on this issue. The Constitution grants you plenipotentiary powers to use military force to protect our national security once it is determined—by you, of course—that our security is, in fact, threatened. The legal precedents go all the way back to the Jefferson presidency. The political issues are something else, but that’s not really my department. In any case, the Bureau has broken what appears to be a major money-laundering operation, and we’re just about ready to move on it.”

“How major?” Admiral Cutter asked, annoying the President, who wanted to ask the same question.

“We can identify a total of five hundred eighty-eight million dollars of drug money, spread through twenty-two different banks all the way from Liechtenstein to California, invested in a number of real-estate ventures, all of which are here in the United States. We’ve had a team working ’round the clock all week on this.”

“How much?” the President asked, getting in first this time. He wasn’t the only person in the room who wanted that number repeated.

“Almost six hundred million,” the FBI Director repeated. “It was just over that figure two days ago, but a sizable block of funds was transferred on Wednesday—it looks like it was a routine transfer, but we are keeping an eye on the accounts in question.”

“And what will you be doing?”

“By this evening we’ll have complete documentation on all the accounts. Starting tomorrow, the legal attaches in all our embassies overseas, and the field divisions covering the domestic banks, will move to freeze the accounts and—”

“Will the Swiss and the Europeans cooperate?” Cutter interrupted.

“Yes, they will. The mystique about numbered accounts is overrated, as President Marcos found out a few years ago. If we can prove that the deposits result from criminal operations, the governments in question will freeze the funds. In Switzerland, for example, the money goes to the state—‘canton’—government for domestic applications. Aside from the moral issue, it’s simple self-interest, and we have treaties to cover this. It hardly hurts the Swiss

economy, for example, to keep that money in Switzerland, does it? If we're successful, as I have every right to expect, the total net loss to the Cartel will be on the order of one billion dollars. That figure is just an estimate on our part which includes loss of equity in the investments and the expected profits from rollover. The five eighty-eight, on the other hand, is a hard number. We're calling this Operation TARPON. Domestically, the law is entirely on our side, and on close inspection, it's going to be very hard for anyone to liberate the funds, ever. Overseas the legal issues are more muddied, but I think we can expect fairly good cooperation. The European governments are starting to notice drug problems of their own, and they have a way of handling the legal issues more ... oh, I guess the word is pragmatically," Jacobs concluded with a smile. "I presume you'll want the Attorney General to make the announcement."

You could see the sparkle in the President's eyes. The press release would be made in the White House Press Room. He'd let the Justice Department handle it, of course, but it would be done in the White House so that journalists could get the right spin. *Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I have just informed the President that we have made a major break in the continuing war against ...*

"How badly will this hurt them?" the President asked.

"Sir, exactly how much money they have has always been a matter of speculation on our part. What's really interesting about this whole scheme is that the laundering operation may actually be designed to legitimize the money once it gets into Colombia. That's hard to read, but it would seem that the Cartel is trying to find a less overtly criminal way in which to infiltrate their own national economy. Since that is not strictly necessary in economic terms, the presumptive goal of the operation would seem to be political. To answer your question, the monetary loss will sting them rather badly, but will not cripple them in any way. The political ramifications, however, may be an extra bonus whose scope we cannot as yet evaluate."

"A billion dollars...." the President said. "That really gives you something to tell the Colombians about, doesn't it?"

"I do not think they'll be displeased. The political rumblings they've been getting from the Cartel are very troubling to them."

"Not troubling enough to take action," Cutter observed.

Jacobs didn't like that at all. "Admiral, their Attorney General is a friend of mine. He travels with a security detail that's double the size of the President's, and he has to deal with a security threat that'd make most people duck for cover every time a car backfired. Colombia is trying damned hard to run a real democracy in a region where democracies are pretty rare—which historically happens to be our fault, in case you've forgotten—and you expect them to do —what? Trash what institutions they do have, do what Argentina did? For Christ's sake, the Bureau and DEA combined don't have the manpower to go after the drug rings that we already know about, and we have a thousand times their resources. So what the hell do you expect, that they'll go fascist again to hunt down the druggies just because it suits us? We *did* expect that

and we *got* that, for over a hundred years, and look where it's gotten *us!" This clown is supposed to be an expert on Latin America,* Jacobs didn't say out loud. *Says who? I bet you couldn't even drive boats worth a damn!*

The bottom line, Judge Moore noted, *is that Emil doesn't like this whole operation, does he?* On the other hand, it did rock Cutter back in his chair. A small man, Jacobs had dignity and moral authority measured in megaton quantities.

"You're trying to tell us something, Emil," the President said lightly. "Spit it out."

"Terminate this whole operation," the FBI Director said. "Stop it before it goes too far. Give me the manpower I need, and I can accomplish more right here at home, entirely within the law, than we'll ever accomplish with all this covert-operations nonsense. TARPON is the proof of that. Straight police work, and it's the biggest success we've ever had."

"Which happened only because some Coast Guard skipper got a little off the reservation," Judge Moore noted. "If that Coastie hadn't broken the rules himself, your case would have looked like simple piracy and murder. You left that part out, Emil."

"Not the first time something like that has happened, and the difference, Arthur, is that that wasn't planned by anyone in Washington."

"That captain isn't going to be hurt, is he?" the President asked.

"No, sir. That's already been taken care of," Jacobs assured him.

"Good. Keep it that way. Emil, I respect your point of view," the President said, "but we have to try something different. I can't sell Congress on the funding to double the size of the FBI, or DEA. You know that."

You haven't tried, Jacobs wanted to say. Instead he nodded submission.

"And I thought we had your agreement on this operation."

"You do, Mr. President." *How did I ever rope myself into this?* Jacobs asked himself. This road, like so many others, was paved with good intentions. What they were doing wasn't quite illegal; in the same sense that skydiving wasn't quite dangerous—so long as everything went according to plan.

"And when are you heading down to Bogotá?"

"Next week, sir. I've messengered a letter to the legal attaché, and he'll deliver it by hand to the AG. We'll have good security for the meeting."

"Good. I want you to be careful, Emil. I need you. I especially need your advice," the President said kindly. "Even if I don't always take it."

The President has to be the world's champ at setting people down easy, Moore told himself. But part of that was Emil Jacobs. He'd been a team player since he joined the U.S. Attorney's office in Chicago, lo, those thirty years ago.

"Anything else?"

"I've made Jack Ryan the acting DDI," Moore said. "James recommended

him, and I think he's ready."

"Will he be cleared for SHOWBOAT?" Cutter asked immediately.

"He's not that ready, is he, Arthur?" the President opined.

"No, sir, your orders were to keep this one tight."

"Any change with Greer?"

"It does not look good, Mr. President," Moore replied.

"Damned shame. I have to go into Bethesda to have my blood pressure looked at next week. I'll stop in to see him."

"That would be very kind of you, sir."

Everyone was supportive as hell, Ryan noted. He felt like a trespasser in this office, but Nancy Cummings—secretary to the DDI from long before the time Greer arrived here—did not treat him as an interloper, and the security detail that he now rated called him "sir" even though two of them were older than Jack was. The really good news, he didn't realize until someone told him, was that he now rated a driver also. The purpose of this was simply that the driver was a security officer with a Beretta Model 92-F automatic pistol under his left armpit (there was something even more impressive under the dash), but for Ryan it meant that he'd no longer have to make the fifty-eight-minute drive himself. From now on he'd be one of those Important People who sat in the back of the speeding car talking on a secure mobile phone, or reading over Important Documents, or, more likely, reading the paper on the way into work. The official car would be parked in CIA's underground garage, in a reserved space near the executive elevator, which would whisk him directly to the seventh floor without having to pass through the customary security-gate routine, which was such a damned nuisance. He'd eat in the executive dining room with its mahogany furniture and discreetly elegant silverware.

The increase in salary was also impressive, or would have been if it had matched what his wife, Cathy, was making from the surgical practice that supplemented her associate professorship at Johns Hopkins. But there was not a single government salary—not even the President's—that matched what a good surgeon made. Ryan also had the equivalent rank of a three-star general or admiral, even though his capacity in the job was merely "acting."

His first task of the day, after closing the office door, had been to open the DDI safe. There was nothing in it. Ryan memorized the combination, again noting that the DDO's combination was scribbled on the same sheet of paper. His office had that most precious of government perks: a private bathroom; a high-definition TV monitor on which he could watch satellite imagery come in without going to the viewing room in the building's new north wing; a secure computer terminal over which he could communicate to other offices if he so wished—there was dust on the keys; Greer had almost never used it. Most of all, there was *room.* He could get up and pace if he wanted. His job gave him unlimited access to the Director. When the Director was away—and even if he

were not—Ryan could call the White House for an immediate meeting with the President. He'd have to go through the Chief of Staff—bypassing Cutter, if he felt the need—but if Ryan now said, "I have to see the President, right now!" he'd get in, right now. Of course he'd have to have a very good reason for doing so.

Jack sat in the high-backed chair, facing away from the plate-glass windows, and realized that he had gotten there. This was as far as he had ever expected to rise in the Agency. Not even forty yet. He'd made his money in the brokerage business—and the money was still growing; he needed his CIA salary about as much as he needed a third shoe—gotten his doctor's degree, written his books, taught some history, made himself a new and interesting career, and worked his way to the top. Not even forty yet. He would have awarded himself a gentle, satisfied smile except for the fatherly gentleman who was now at Bethesda Naval Medical Center, dying the lingering and painful death that had put him in this chair, in this office, in this position.

It's not worth it. It sure as hell isn't worth that, Jack told himself. He'd lost his parents to an airliner crash at Chicago, and remembered the sudden, wrenching loss, the impact that had come like a thrown punch. For all that, it had come with merciful speed. He hadn't realized it at the time, but he did now. Ryan made a point of seeing Admiral Greer three times a week, watching his body shrink, draw in on itself like a drying plant, watching the pain lines deepen in his dignified face as the man fought valiantly in a battle he knew to be hopeless. He'd been spared the ordeal of watching his parents fade away, but Greer had become a new father to him, and Ryan was now observing his filial duty for his surrogate parent. Now he understood why his wife had chosen eye surgery. It was tough, technically demanding work in which a slip could cause blindness, but Cathy didn't have to watch people die. What could be harder than this—but Ryan knew that answer. He'd seen his daughter hover near death, saved by chance and some especially fine surgeons.

Where do they get the courage? Jack wondered. It was one thing to fight against people. Ryan had done that. But to fight against Death itself, knowing that they must ultimately lose, but still fighting. Such was the nature of the medical profession.

Jesus, you're a morbid son of a bitch this morning.

What would the Admiral say?

He'd say to get on with the goddamned job.

The point of life was to press on, to do the best you can, to make the world a better place. Of course, Jack admitted, CIA might seem to some a most peculiar place in which to do that, but not to Ryan, who had done some very odd but also very useful things here.

A smell got his attention. He turned to see that the coffee machine on the credenza was turned on. Nancy must have done it, he realized. But Admiral Greer's mugs were gone, and some "generic" CIA-logoed cups sat on the silver tray. Just then came a knock on the door. Nancy's head appeared.

"Your department-head meeting starts in two minutes, Dr. Ryan."

"Thanks, Mrs. Cummings. Who did the coffee?" Jack asked.

"The Admiral called in this morning. He said you would need some on your first day."

"Oh. I'll thank him when I go over tonight."

"He sounded a little better this morning," Nancy said hopefully.

"Hope you're right."

The department heads appeared right on schedule. He poured himself a cup of coffee, offering the same to his visitors, and in a minute was down to work. The first morning report, as always, concerned the Soviet Union, followed by the others as CIA's interests rotated around the globe. Jack had attended these meetings as a matter of routine for years, but now he was the man behind the desk. He knew how the meetings were supposed to be run, and he didn't break the pattern. Business was still business. The Admiral wouldn't have had it any other way.

With presidential approval, things moved along smartly. Overseas communications were handled, as always, by the National Security Agency, and only the time zones made things inconvenient. An earlier heads-up signal had been dispatched to the legal attaches in several European embassies, and at the appointed time, first in Bern, teletype machines operating off encrypted satellite channels began punching out paper. In the communications rooms in all the embassies, the commo-techs took note of the fact that the systems being used were the most secure lines available. The first, or register, sheet prepped the technicians for the proper one-time-pad sequence, which had to be retrieved from the safes which held the cipher keys.

For especially sensitive communications—the sort that might accompany notice that war was about to start, for example—conventional cipher machines simply were not secure enough. The Walker-Whitworth spy ring had seen to that. Those revelations had forced a rapid and radical change in American code policy. Each embassy had a special safe—actually a safe within yet another, larger safe—which contained a number of quite ordinary-looking tape cassettes. Each was encased in a transparent but color-coded plastic shrink-wrap. Each bore two numbers. One number—in this case 342—was the master registration number for the cassette. The other—in the Bern embassy; it was 68—designated the individual cassette within the 342 series. In the event that the plastic wrap on any of the cassettes, anywhere in the world, was determined to be split, scratched, or even distorted, all cassettes on that number series were immediately burned on the assumption that the cassette might have been compromised.

In this case, the communications technician removed the cassette from its storage case, examined its number, and had his watch supervisor verify that it had the proper number: "I read the number as three-four-two."

“Concur,” the watch supervisor confirmed. “Three-four-two.”

“I am opening the cassette,” the technician said, shaking his head at the absurd solemnity of the event.

The shrink-wrap was discarded in the low-tech rectangular plastic waste can next to his desk, and the technician inserted the cassette in an ordinary-looking but expensive player that was linked electronically to another teletype machine ten feet away.

The technician set the original printout on the clipboard over his own machine and started typing.

The message, already encrypted on the master 342 cassette at NSA headquarters, Fort Meade, Maryland, had been further encrypted for satellite transmission on the current maximum-security State Department cipher, called STRIPE, but even if someone had the proper keys to read STRIPE, all he would have gotten was a message that read DEERAMO WERAC KEWJRT, and so on, due to the super-encipherment imposed by the cassette system. That would at the least annoy anyone who thought that he’d broken the American communications systems. It certainly annoyed the communications technician, who had to concentrate as hard as he knew on how to type things like DEERAMO WERAC KEWJRT instead of real words that made some sort of sense.

Each letter passed through the cassette player, which took note of the incoming letter and treated it as a number from 1 (A) to 26 (Z), and then added the number on the tape cassette. Thus, if 1 (A) on the original text corresponded to another 1 (A) on the cassette, 1 was added to 1, making 2 (B) on the clear-text message. The transpositions on the cassette were completely random, having been generated from atmospheric radio noise by a computer at Fort Meade. It was a completely unbreakable code system, technically known as a One-Time Pad. There was, by definition, no way to order or predict random behavior. So long as the tape cassettes were uncompromised, no one could break this cipher system. The only reason that this system, called TAPDANCE, was not used for all communications was the inconvenience of making, shipping, securing, and keeping track of the thousands of cassettes that would be required, but that would soon be made easier when a laser-disc format replaced the tape cassettes. The code-breaking profession had been around since Elizabethan times, and this technical development threatened to render it as obsolete as the slide rule.

The technician pounded away on the keyboard, trying to concentrate as he grumbled to himself about the late hours. He ought to have been off work at six, and was looking forward to dinner in a nice little place a couple of blocks from the embassy. He could not, of course, see the clear-text message coming up ten feet away, but the truth was that he didn’t give a good goddamn. He’d been doing this sort of thing for nine years, and the only reason he stuck with it was the travel opportunity. Bern was his third posting overseas. It wasn’t as much fun as Bangkok had been, but it was far more interesting than his childhood home in Ithaca, New York.

The message had seventeen thousand characters, which probably corresponded to about twenty-five hundred words, the technician thought. He blazed through the message as quickly as he could.

"Okay?" he asked when he was finished. The last "word" had been ERYTPESM.

"Yep," the legal attaché replied.

"Great." The technician took the telex printout he'd just typed from and fed it into the code room's own shredder. It came out as flat pasta. Next he removed the tape cassette from the player and, getting a nod from the watch supervisor, walked to the corner of the room. Here, tied to a cable fixed to the wall—actually it was just a spiraled telephone cord—was a large horseshoe magnet. He moved this back and forth over the cassette to destroy the magnetic information encoded on the tape inside. Then the cassette went into the burn-bag. At midnight, one of the Marine guards, supervised by someone else, would carry the bag to the embassy's incinerator, where both would watch a day's worth of paper and other important garbage burned to ashes by a natural-gas flame. Mr. Bernardi finished scanning the message and looked up.

"I wish my secretary could type that fast, Charlie. I count two—only two!—mistakes. Sorry we kept you late." The legal attaché handed over a ten-franc note. "Have a couple of beers on me."

"Thank you, Mr. Bernardi."

Chuck Bernardi was a senior FBI agent, whose civil-service rank was equivalent to that of brigadier general in the United States Army, in which he had served as an infantry officer, long ago and far away. He had two more months to serve here, after which he'd rotate home to FBI Headquarters and maybe a job as special-agent-in-charge of a medium-sized field division. His specialty was in the Bureau's OC—Organized Crime—Directorate, which explained his posting to Switzerland. Chuck Bernardi was an expert on tracking mob money, and a lot of it worked its way through the Swiss banking system. His job, half police officer and half diplomat, put him in touch with all of the top Swiss police officials, with whom he had developed a close and friendly working relationship. The local cops were smart, professional, and damned effective, he thought. A little old lady could walk the streets of Bern with a shopping bag full of banknotes and feel perfectly secure. And some of them, he chuckled to himself on the walk to his office, probably did.

Once in his office, Bernardi flipped on his reading light and reached for a cigar. He hadn't shaken off the first ash when he leaned back in his chair to stare at the ceiling.

"Son of a *bitch!"* He reached for his telephone and called the most senior cop he knew.

"This is Chuck Bernardi. Could I speak to Dr. Lang, please? Thank you.... Hi, Karl, Chuck here. I need to see you ... right away if possible ... it's pretty important, Karl, honest.... In your office would be better.... Not over the

phone, Karl, if you don't mind.... Okay, thanks, pal. It's worth it, believe me. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

He hung up the phone. Next he walked out to the office Xerox machine and made a copy of the document, signing off that it was he who had used the machine and how many copies had been run off. Before leaving, he put the original in his personal safe and tucked the copy in his coat pocket. Karl might be pissed about missing dinner, he thought, but it wasn't every day that somebody enriched your national economy to the tune of two hundred million dollars. The Swiss would freeze the accounts. That meant that six of their banks would, by law, keep all the accrued interest—and maybe the principal also, as the identity of the government which was entitled to get the funds might never be clear, "forcing" the Swiss to keep the funds, which would ultimately be turned over to the canton governments. And people wondered why Switzerland was such a wealthy, peaceful, charming little country. It wasn't just the skiing and the chocolate.

Within an hour, six embassies had the word, and as the sun marched across the earth, special agents of the FBI also visited the executive suites of several American commercial—"full-service" —banks. They handed over the identifying numbers or names of several accounts, all of whose considerable funds would be immediately frozen by the simple expedient of putting a computer lock on them. In all cases, it was done quietly. No one had to know, and the importance of secrecy was conveyed in very positive terms—in America and elsewhere—by serious, senior government employees, to bank presidents who were fully cooperative in every instance. (After all, it wasn't their money, was it?) In nearly all cases, the police officials learned, the accounts were not terribly active, averaging two or three transactions per month; always large ones, of course. Deposits would still be accepted, and it was suggested by a Belgian official that if the FBI had the account information for other such accounts, transfers from one monitored account to another would be allowed—only within the same country, of course, the Belgian pointed out—to prevent tipping off the depositors. After all, he said, drugs were the common enemy of all civilized men, and most certainly of all police officers. That suggestion was immediately ratified by Director Jacobs, with the concurrence of the AG. Even the Dutch went along, despite the fact that the Netherlands government itself sold drugs in approved stores to its more jaded younger citizens. It was, all in all, a clear case of capitalism in action. There was dirty money around, money that had not been rightly earned, and governments did not approve of such money. Which was why they seized it for their own approved ends. In the case of the banks, the secrecy to which they were sworn was every bit as sacred as that by which they guarded the identity of their depositors.

By the close of business hours on Friday, all had been accomplished. The banks' computer systems stayed up and running. The law-enforcement people now had two full additional days to give the money trails further examination. If they found any more money related to the accounts already seized, those funds would also be frozen, and, in the case of the European banks, confiscated. The first hit here was in Luxembourg. Though Swiss banks are

those known internationally for their confidentiality laws, the only real difference in security between their operation and those of banks in most other European countries was the fact that Belgium, for example, wasn't surrounded by the Alps, and that Switzerland hadn't been overrun by foreign armies quite as recently as her European neighbors. Otherwise, the integrity of the banks was identical, and accordingly the non-Swiss bankers actually resented the Alps for giving their Swiss brethren such an additional and accidental business advantage. But in this case, international cooperation was the rule. By Sunday evening, six new "dirty" accounts had been identified, and one hundred thirty-five million additional dollars were put under computer lock.

Back in Washington, Director Jacobs, Deputy Assistant Director Murray, the specialists from the organized-crime office, and the Justice Department left their offices for a well-deserved dinner at the Jockey Club Restaurant. While the Director's security detail watched, the ten men proceeded to have themselves a superb meal at government expense. Perhaps a passing reporter or Common Cause staffer might have objected, but this one had been well and truly earned. Operation TARPON was the greatest single success in the War on Drugs. It would go public, they agreed, by the end of the week.

"Gentlemen," Dan Murray said, rising with his—he didn't remember how many glasses of Chablis had accompanied this fish—of course—dinner. "I give you the United States Coast Guard!"

They all rose with a chorus of laughter that annoyed the other customers in the restaurant. "The United States Coast Guard!" It was a pity, one of the Justice Department attorneys noted, that they didn't know the words to "Semper Paratus."

The party broke up about ten o'clock. The Director's security men shared looks. Emil didn't hold his liquor all that well, and he'd be a gruff, hungover little bear tomorrow morning—though he'd apologize to them all before lunch.

"We'll be flying down to Bogotá Friday afternoon," he told them in the sanctity of his official car, an Oldsmobile. "Make your plans but don't tell the Air Force until Wednesday. I don't want any leaks on this."

"Yes, sir," the chief of the detail answered. He wasn't looking forward to this one either. Especially now. The druggies were going to be pissed. But this visit would catch them unawares. The news stories would say that Jacobs was remaining in D.C. to work on the case, and they wouldn't expect him to show up in Colombia. Even so, the security for this one would be tight. He and his fellow agents would be spending some extra time in the Hoover Building's own weapons range, honing their skills with their automatic pistols and submachine guns. They couldn't let anything happen to Emil.

Moira found out Tuesday morning. By this time she, too, knew all about

TARPON, of course. She knew that the trip was supposed to be secret, and she had no doubt that it would also be dangerous. She wouldn't tell Juan until Thursday night. After all, she had to be careful. She spent the rest of the week wondering what special place he had in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

It no longer mattered that the uniform clothing was khaki instead of woodland pattern Battle Dress Uniform. Between the sweat stains and the dirt, the squad members were now exactly the same color as the ground on which they hid. They had all washed once in the stream from which they took their water, but no one had used soap for fear that suds or smell or something might alert someone downstream. Under the circumstances, washing without soap wasn't even as good as kissing your sister. It had cooled them off, however, and that for Chavez was a most pleasant memory. For—what was it?—ten glorious minutes he'd been comfortable. Ten minutes after which, he'd sweated again. The climate was beastly, with temperatures reaching to one hundred twenty degrees on one cloudless afternoon. If this was a goddamned jungle, Chavez asked himself, why the hell doesn't it rain? The good news was that they didn't have to move around a great deal. The two jerks who guarded this airstrip spent most of their time sleeping, smoking—probably grass, Chavez thought—and generally jerking off. They had, once, startled him by firing their weapons at tin cans that they'd set up on the runway. That might have been dangerous, but the direction of fire hadn't been toward the observation post, and Chavez had used the opportunity to evaluate the weapons skills of the opposition. Shitty, he'd told Vega at once. Now they were up to it again. They set up three bean cans—big ones—perhaps a hundred meters from the shack, and just blazed away, shooting from the hip like movie actors.

"Christ, what fuck-ups," he observed, watching through his binoculars.

"Lemme see." Vega got to watch just as one of them knocked a can down on his third try. "Hell, I could hit the damned things from here...."

"Point, this is Six, what the fuck is going on!" the radio squawked a moment later. Vega answered the call.

"Six, this is Point. Our friends are doing some plinkin' again. Their axis of fire is away from us, sir. They're punchin' holes in some tin cans. They can't shoot for shit, Cap'n."

"I'm coming over."

"Roger." Ding set down the radio. "The Cap'n's coming. I think the noise made him nervous."

"He sure does worry a lot," Vega noted.

"That's what they pay officers for, ain't it?"

Ramirez appeared three minutes later. Chavez made to hand over his binoculars, but the captain had brought his own pair this time. He fell to a prone position and got his glasses up just in time to watch another can go down.

"Oh."

"Two cans, two full magazines," Chavez explained. "They like to go rock-and-roll. I guess ammo's cheap down here."

Both of the guards were still smoking. The captain and the sergeant watched them laugh and joke as they shot. Probably, Ramirez thought, they're as bored as we are. After the first aircraft, there had been no activity at all here at RENO, and soldiers like boredom even less than ordinary citizens. One of them—it was hard to tell them apart since they were roughly the same size and wore the same sort of clothing—inserted another magazine into his AK-47 and blazed off a ten-round burst. The little fountains of dirt walked up to the remaining can, but didn't quite hit it.

"I didn't know it would be this easy, sir," Vega observed from behind the sights of his machine gun. "What a bunch of fuck-ups!"

"You think that way, Oso, you turn into one yourself," Ramirez said seriously.

"Roger that, Cap'n, but I can't help seein' what I'm seein'."

Ramirez softened his rebuke with a smile. "I suppose you're right."

The third can finally went down. They were averaging thirty rounds per target. Next the guards used their weapons to push the cans around the runway.

"You know," Vega said after a moment, "I ain't seen 'em clean their weapons yet." For the squad members, cleaning their weapons was as regular a routine as morning and evening prayers were for clergymen.

"The AK'll take a lot of abuse. It's good for that," Ramirez pointed out.

"Yes, sir."

Finally the guards, too, grew bored. One of them retrieved the cans. As he was doing so, a truck appeared. With little in the way of warning, Chavez was surprised to note. The wind was wrong, but even so it hadn't occurred to him that he wouldn't have at least a minute or two worth of warning. Something to remember. There were three people in the truck, one of whom was riding in the back. The driver dismounted and walked out to the two guards. In a moment he was pointing at the ground and yelling—they could hear it from five hundred yards away even though they hadn't heard the truck, which really seemed strange.

"What's that all about?" Vega asked.

Captain Ramirez laughed quietly. "FOD. He's pissed off at the FOD."

"Huh?" Vega asked.

"Foreign Object Damage. You suck one of those cartridge cases into an aircraft engine, like a turbine engine, and it'll beat the hell out of it. Yeah—look, they're picking up their brass."

Chavez turned his binoculars back to the truck. "I see some boxes there, sir. Maybe we got a pickup tonight. How come no fuel cans—yeah! Captain, last

time we were here, they didn't fuel the airplane, did they?"

"The flight originates from a regular airstrip twenty miles off," Ramirez explained. "Maybe they don't have to top off ... Does seem odd, though."

"Maybe they got fuel drums in the shack ... ?" Vega wondered.

Captain Ramirez grunted. He wanted to send a couple of men in close to check the area out, but his orders didn't permit that. Their only patrolling was to check the airfield perimeter for additional security troops. They never got closer than four hundred meters to the cleared area, and it was always done with an eye on the two guards. His operational orders were not to take the slightest risk of making contact with the opposition. So they weren't supposed to patrol the area even though it would have told them more about the opposition than they knew—would tell them things that they might need to know. That was just good basic soldiering, he thought, and the order not to do it was a dumb order, since it ran as many—or more—risks than it was supposed to avoid. But orders were still orders. Whoever had generated them didn't know much about soldiering. It was Ramirez's first experience with that phenomenon, since he, too, was not old enough to remember Vietnam.

"They're gonna be out there all day," Chavez said. It appeared that the truck driver was making them count their brass, and you never could find all of the damned things. Vega checked his watch.

"Sundown in two hours. Anybody wanna bet we'll have business tonight? I got a hundred pesos says we get a plane before twenty-two hundred."

"No bet," Ramirez said. "The tall one by the truck just opened a box of flares." The captain left. He had a radio call to make.

It had been a quiet couple of days at Corezal. Clark had just returned from a late lunch at the Fort Amador Officers' Club—curiously, the head of the Panamanian Army had an office in the same building; most curious, since he was not overly popular with the U.S. military at the moment—followed by a brief siesta. Local customs, he decided, made sense. Especially sleeping through the hottest part of the day. The cold air of the van—the air conditioning was to protect the electronics gear, mainly from the oppressive humidity here—gave him the wakeup shock he needed.

Team KNIFE had scored on their first night with a single aircraft. Two of the other squads had also had hits, but one of the aircraft had made it all the way to its destination when the F-15 had lost its radar ten minutes after takeoff, much to everyone's chagrin. But that was the sort of problem you had to expect with an operation this short of assets. Two for three wasn't bad at all, especially when you considered what the odds had been like a bare month before, when the Customs people were lucky to bag a single aircraft in a month. One of the squads, moreover, had drawn a complete blank. Their airfield seemed totally inactive, contradicting intelligence data that had looked very promising only a week before. That also was a hazard of real-world operations.

"VARIABLE, this is KNIFE, over," the speaker said without preamble.

“KNIFE, this is VARIABLE. We read you loud and clear. We are ready to copy, over.”

“We have activity at RENO. Possible pickup this evening. We will keep you advised. Over.”

“Roger, copy. We’ll be here. Out.”

One of the Operations people lifted the handset to another radio channel.

“EAGLE’S NEST, this is VARIABLE ... Stand to ... Roger. We’ll keep you posted. Out.” He set the instrument down and turned. “They’ll get everyone up. The fighter is back on line. Seems the radar was overdue for some part replacement or other. It’s up and running, and the Air Force offers its apology.”

“Damned well ought to,” the other Operations man grumbled.

“You guys ever think that maybe an operation can go too right?” Clark asked from his seat in the corner.

The senior one wanted to say something snotty, Clark saw, but knew better.

“They must know that something odd is happening. You don’t want to make it too obvious,” Clark explained for the other one. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes. Might as well get another piece of that siesta, he told himself. It might be a long night.

Chavez got his wish just after sundown. It started to rain lightly, and clouds moving in from the west promised an even heavier downpour. The airfield crew set out their flares—quite a few more than the last time, he saw—and the aircraft arrived soon after that.

Rain made visibility difficult. It seemed to Chavez that someone ran a fuel hose out from the shack. Maybe there were some fuel drums in there, and maybe a hand-crank pump, but his ability to see the five or six hundred yards came and went with the rain. Something else happened. The truck drove down the center of the strip, and the driver tossed out at least ten additional flares to mark the centerline. The aircraft took off twenty minutes after it arrived, and Ramirez was already on his satellite radio.

“Did you get the tail number?” VARIABLE asked.

“Negative,” the captain replied. “It’s raining pretty heavy now. Visibility is dogshit. But he got off at twenty-fifty-one Lima, heading north-northwest.”

“Roger, copy. Out.”

Ramirez didn’t like the effect that the reduced visibility might have on his unit. He took another pair of soldiers forward to the OP, but he just as well might not have bothered. The guards didn’t bother extinguishing the flares this time, letting the rain wet things down. The truck left soon after the aircraft took off, and the two chastised runway guards retired to the shack to keep dry. All in all, he thought, it couldn’t be much easier.

Bronco was bored, too. It wasn't that he minded what he was doing, but there really wasn't much challenge in it. And besides, he was stuck at four kills, and needed only one more to be an ace. The fighter pilot was sure that the mission was better accomplished with live prisoners—but, damn it, killing the sons of bitches was ... satisfying, even though there wasn't much challenge to it. He was flying an aircraft designed to mix it up with the best fighters the Russians could make. Taking out a Twin-Beech was about as difficult as driving to the O-Club for a couple of brews. Maybe tonight he'd do something different ... but what?

That gave him something to think about as he orbited north of the Yucatan Channel, just behind the E-2C, and of course out of normal airliner tracks. The contact call came in at about the right time. He turned south to get on the target, which took just over ten minutes.

"Tallyho," he told the Hawkeye. "I have eyeballs on target."

Another two-engine, therefore another coke smuggler. Captain Winters was still angry about the other night. Someone had forgotten to check the maintenance schedule on his Eagle, and sure enough, that damned widget had failed right when the contractor said it would, at five hundred three hours. Amazing that they could figure it that close. Amazing that an umpty-million-dollar fighter plane went tits-up because of a five-dollar widget, or diode, or chip, or whatever the hell it was. It cost five bucks. He knew that because the sergeant had told him.

Well, there he was. Twin engines, looked like a Beech King Air. No lights, cruising a lot lower than his most efficient cruise altitude.

Okay, Bronco thought, slowing his fighter down, then lighting him up and making the first radio call.

It was a druggie, all right. He did the same dumbass thing they all did, reducing power, lowering flaps, and diving for the deck. Winters had never gotten past the fourth level of Donkey Kong, but popping a real airplane under these circumstances was a hell of a lot easier than that, and you didn't even have to put in a quarter ... but he was bored.

Okay, let's try something different.

He let the aircraft go down, maintaining his own altitude and power setting to pass well ahead of it. He checked to make sure that all of his flying lights were off, then threw the Eagle into a tight left-hand turn. This brought his fire-control radar in on the target, and that allowed him to spot the King Air on his infrared scanner, which was wired in to a videotape recorder the same way his gun systems were.

You think you've lost me, don't you....

Now for the fun part. It was a really dark one tonight. No stars, no moon, solid overcast at ten or twelve thousand feet. The Eagle was painted in a blue-gray motif that was supposed to blend in with the sky anyway, and at night it

was even better than flat-matte black. He was invisible. The crew in the Beech must be looking all over creation for him, he knew. Looking everywhere but directly forward.

They were flying at fifty feet, and on his screen Captain Winters saw that their propwash was throwing up spray from the waves—five- or six-footers, he thought—just over a mile away. He came straight in at one hundred feet and five hundred knots. Exactly a mile from the target, he put on his lights again.

It was so predictable. The Beech pilot saw the incoming, sun-bright lights, seemingly dead-on, and instinctively did what any pilot would do. He banked hard right and dove—*exactly fifty feet*—cartwheeling spectacularly into the sea. Probably didn't even have time to realize what he'd done wrong, Bronco thought, then he laughed out loud as he yanked back on the stick and rolled to give it a last look. *Now that was a class kill,* Captain Winters told himself as he turned for home. The Agency people would really love that one. And best of all, he was now an ace. You didn't have to shoot them down for it to count. You just had to get the kill.

13.

The Bloody Weekend

IT REALLY WASN'T fair to make him wait, was it? Moira thought on her drive home Wednesday afternoon. What if he couldn't come? What if he needed notice in advance? What if he had something important scheduled in for the weekend? What if he couldn't make it?

She had to call him.

Mrs. Wolfe reached into the purse at her side and felt for the scrap of hotel stationery—it was still there in the zipper pocket—and the numbers written on it seemed to burn into her skin. She had to call him.

Traffic was confused today. Somebody had blown a tire on the 14th Street Bridge, and her hands sweated on the plastic steering wheel. What if he couldn't make it?

What about the kids? They were old enough to look after themselves, that was the easy part—but how to explain to them that their mother was going off for a weekend to—what was the phrase they used? To "get laid." *Their mother.* How would they react? It hadn't occurred to her that her horrible secret was nothing of the kind, not to her children, not to her co-workers, not to her boss, and she would have been dumbfounded to know that all of them were rooting for her ... *to get laid.* Moira Wolfe had missed the sexual revolution by only a year or two. She'd taken her fearful-hopeful-passionate-frightened virginity to the marriage bed, and always thought that her husband had done the same. He must have, she'd told herself then and later, because they'd both botched things so badly the first time. But within three days they'd had the basics figured out—youthful vigor and love could handle almost anything—and over the next twenty-two years the two newlyweds had truly become one.

The void left in her life by the loss of her husband was like an open sore that would not heal. His picture was at her bedside, taken only a year before his death, working on his sailboat. No longer a young man when it had been taken, love handles at his waist, much of his hair gone, but the smile. What was it Juan said? You look with love, and see love returned. *Such a fine way of putting it,* Moira thought.

My God, What would Rich think? She'd asked herself that question more than once. Every time she looked at the photograph before sleep. Every time she looked at her children on the way in or out of the house, hoping that they didn't suspect, knowing in a way conscious thought did not touch that they

must know. But what choice did she have? Was she supposed to wear widow's weeds—that was a custom best left in the distant past. She'd mourned for the appropriate time, hadn't she? She'd wept alone in her bed when a phrase crossed her mind, on the anniversaries of all the special dates that acquire meaning in the twenty-two years that two lives merge into one, and, often enough, just from looking at that picture of Rich on the boat that they'd saved years for....

What do people expect of me? she asked herself in sudden anguish. *I still have a life. I still have needs.*

What would Rich say?

He hadn't had time to say anything at all. He'd died on his way to work, two months after a routine physical that had told him that he should lose a few pounds, that his blood pressure was a touch high, but nothing to worry about really, that his cholesterol was pretty good for somebody in his forties, and that he should come back for the same thing next year. Then, at 7:39 in the morning, his car had just run off the road into a guardrail and stopped. A policeman only a block away had come and been puzzled to see the driver still in the car, and wondered whether or not someone might be driving drunk this early in the morning, then realized that there was no pulse. An ambulance had been summoned, its crew finding the officer pounding on Rich's chest, making the assumption of a heart attack that they'd made themselves, doing everything they'd been trained to do. But there had never been a chance. Aneurysm in the brain. A weakening in the wall of a blood vessel, the doctor had explained after the postmortem. Nothing that could have been done. Why did it happen ... ? Maybe hereditary, probably not. No, blood pressure had nothing to do with it. Almost impossible to diagnose under the best of circumstances. Did he complain of headaches? Not even that much warning? The doctor had walked away quietly, wishing he could have said more, not so much angry as saddened by the fact that medicine didn't have all the answers, and that there never was much you could say. *(Just one of those things,* was what doctors said among themselves, but you couldn't say that to the family, could you?) There hadn't been much pain, the doctor had said—not knowing if it were a lie or not—but that hardly mattered now, so he'd said confidently that, no, she could take comfort in the fact that there would not have been much pain. Then the funeral. Emil Jacobs there, already anticipating the death of his wife; she'd come from the hospital herself to attend the event with the husband she'd soon leave. All the tears that were shed....

It wasn't fair. Not fair that he'd been forced to leave without saying goodbye. A kiss that tasted of coffee on the way to the door, something about stopping at the Safeway on the way home, and she'd turned away, hadn't even seen him enter the car that last time. She'd punished herself for months merely because of that.

What would Rich say?

But Rich was dead, and two years was long enough.

The kids already had dinner going when she got home. Moira walked

upstairs to change her clothes, and found herself looking at the phone that sat on the night table. Right next to the picture of Rich. She sat down on the bed, looking at it, trying to face it. It took a minute or so. Moira took the paper from her purse, and with a deep breath began punching the number into the phone. There were the normal chirps associated with an international call.

"Díaz y Díaz," a voice answered.

"Could I speak to Juan Diaz, please?" Moira asked the female voice.

"Who is calling, please?" the voice asked, switching over to English.

"This is Moira Wolfe."

"Ah, Seiiora Wolfe! I am Consuela. Please hold for a *momento."* There followed a minute of static on the line. "Señora Wolfe, he is somewhere in the factory. I cannot locate him. Can I tell him to call you?"

"Yes. I'm at home."

"Sí, I will tell him—Señora?"

"Yes?"

"Please excuse me, but there is something I must say. Since the death of his María—Señor Juan, he is like my son. Since he has met you, Señora, he is happy again. I was afraid he would never—please, you must not say I tell you this, but, thank you for what you have done. It is a good thing you have done for Señor Juan. We in the office pray for both of you, that you will find happiness."

It was exactly what she needed to hear. "Consuela, Juan has said so many wonderful things about you. Please call me Moira."

"I have already said too much. I will find Señor Juan, wherever he is."

"Thank you, Consuela. Goodbye."

Consuela, whose real name was María—from which Félix (Juan) had gotten the name for his dead wife—was twenty-five and a graduate of a local secretarial school who wanted to make better money than that, and who, as a consequence, had smuggled drugs into America, through Miami and Atlanta, on half a dozen occasions before a close call had decided her on a career change. Now she handled odd jobs for her former employers while she operated her own small business outside Caracas. For this task, merely waiting for the phone to ring, she was being paid five thousand dollars per week. Of course, that was only one half of the job. She proceeded to perform the other half, dialing another number. There was an unusual series of chirps as, she suspected, the call was skipped over from the number she'd dialed to another she didn't know about.

"Yes?"

"Señor Diaz? This is Consuela."

"Yes?"

"Moira called a moment ago. She wishes for you to call her at home."

"Thank you." And the connection broke.

Cortez looked at his desk clock. He'd let her wait ... twenty-three minutes. His place was yet another luxury condominium in Medellin, two buildings down from that of his boss. Was this the call? he wondered. He remembered when patience had come hard to him, but it was a long time since he'd been a fledgling intelligence officer, and he went back to his papers.

Twenty minutes later he checked the time again and lit a cigarette, watching the hands move around the dial. He smiled, wondering what it was like for her to have to wait, two thousand miles away. What was she thinking? Halfway through the cigarette, it was time to find out. He lifted the phone and dialed in the number.

Dave got to the phone first. "Hello?" He frowned. "We have a bad connection. Could you repeat that? Oh, okay, hold on." Dave looked over to see his mother's eyes on him. "For you, Mom."

"I'll take it upstairs," she said at once, and moved toward the stairs as slowly as she could manage.

Dave put his hand over the receiver. "Guess who?" There were knowing looks around the dining room.

"Yes," Dave heard her say on the other phone. He discreetly hung up. *Good luck, Mom.*

"Moira, this is Juan."

"Are you free this weekend?" she asked.

"This weekend? Are you sure?"

"I'm free from lunch Friday to Monday morning."

"So ... let me think ... " Two thousand miles away, Cortez stared out the window at the building across the street. *Might it be a trap? Might the FBI Intelligence Division ... might the*

whole thing be a ... ? Of course not. "Moira, I must talk to someone here. Please hold for another minute. Can you?"

"Yes!"

The enthusiasm in her voice was unmistakable as he punched the hold button. He let her wait two minutes by his clock before going back on the line.

"I will be in Washington Friday afternoon."

"You'll be getting in about the time—about the right time."

"Where can we meet? At the airport. Can you meet me at the airport?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what flight I'll be on. I'll meet you at ... at the Hertz counter

at three o'clock. You will be there, yes?"

"I will be there."

"As will I, Moira. Goodbye, my love."

Moira Wolfe looked again at the photograph. The smile was still there, but she decided it was not an accusing smile.

Cortez got up from his desk and walked out of the room. The guard in the hall stood when he came out of the door.

"I am going to see *el jefe*," he said simply. The guard lifted his cellular phone to make the call.

The technical problems were very difficult. The most basic one was power. While the base stations cranked out about five hundred watts, the mobile stations were allowed less than seven, and the battery-powered hand-held sets that everyone likes to use were three hundred milliwatts, and even with a huge parabolic dish receiving antenna, the signals gathered were like whispers. But the Rhyolite-J was a highly sophisticated instrument, the result of uncounted billions of research-and-development dollars. Supercooled electronics solved part of the problem. Various computers worked on the rest. The incoming signals were broken down into digital code—ones and zeroes—by a relatively simple computer and downlinked to Fort Huachuca, where another computer of vastly greater power examined the bits of raw information and tried to make sense of them. Random static was eliminated by a mathematically simple but still massively repetitive procedure—an algorithm—that compared neighboring bits to one another and through a process of averaging numerical values filtered out over 90 percent of the noise. That enabled the computer to spit out a recognizable conversation from what it had downloaded from the satellite. But that was only the beginning.

The reason the Cartel used cellular phones for its day-to-day communications was security. There were roughly six hundred separate frequencies, all in the UHF band from 825 to 845 and 870 to 890 megahertz. A small computer at the base station would complete a call by selecting an available frequency at random, and in the case of a call from a mobile phone, changing that frequency to a better one when performance wavered. Finally, the same frequency could be used simultaneously for different calls on neighboring "cells" (hence the name of the system) of the same overall network. Because of this operating feature, there was not a police force in the world that could monitor phone calls made on cellular-phone equipment. Even without scrambling, the calls could be made in the clear, without even the need for code.

Or that's what everyone thought.

The United States government had been in the business of intercepting foreign radio communications since the days of Yardley's famous Black Chamber. Technically known as comint or sigint—for communications or signals intelligence—there was no better form of information possible than

your enemy's own words to his own people. It was a field in which America had excelled for generations. Whole constellations of satellites were deployed to eavesdrop on foreign nations, catching snippets of radio calls, side-lobe signals from microwave relay towers. Often encoded in one way or another, the signals were most often processed at the headquarters of the National Security Agency, on the grounds of Fort Meade, Maryland, between Washington and Baltimore, whose acres of basement held most of the supercomputers in the world.

The task here was to keep constant track of the six hundred frequencies used by the cellular phone net in Medellin. What was impossible for any police agency in the world was less than a light workout for NSA, which monitored literally tens of thousands of radio and other electronic channels on a continuous basis. The National Security Agency was far larger than CIA, far more secretive, and much better funded. One of its stations was on the grounds of Fort Huachuca, Arizona. It even had its own supercomputer, a brand-new Cray connected by fiberoptic cable to one of many communications vans, each of which performed functions that those in the loop knew not to ask about.

The next problem was making the computer work. The names and identities of many Cartel figures were fully known to the U.S. government, of course. Their voices had been recorded, and the programmers had started there. Using voiceprints of the known voices, they established an algorithm to recognize those voices, whichever cellular frequency they used. Next, those who called *them* had their voices electronically identified. Soon the computer was automatically keying and recording over thirty known voices, and the number of known voice-targets was expanding on a daily basis. Source-power considerations made voice identification difficult on occasion, and some calls were inevitably missed, but the chief technician estimated that they were catching over 60 percent, and that as their identification data-base grew larger, that their performance would grow to 85 percent.

Those voices that did not have names attached were assigned numbers. Voice 23 had just called Voice 17. Twenty-three was a security guard. He had been identified because he had called 17, who was also known to be a security guard for Subject ECHO, as Escobedo was known to the comint team. "He's coming over to see him," was all the recorded signal told them. Exactly who "he" was they didn't know. It was a voice they had either not yet heard or, more likely, not yet identified. The intelligence specialists were patient. This case had gone a lot quicker than normal. For all their sophistication, the targets never dreamed that someone could tap in on them in this way and as a consequence had taken no precautions against it. Within a month the comint team would have enough experience with the targets to develop all sorts of usable tactical intelligence. It was just a matter of time. The technicians wondered when actual operations would begin. After all, setting up the sigint side was always the precursor to putting assets in the field.

"What is it?" Escobedo asked as Cortez entered the room.

"The American FBI Director will be flying to Bogotá tomorrow. He leaves Washington sometime after noon. It is to be a covert visit. I would expect him to be using an official aircraft. The Americans have a squadron of such aircraft at Andrews Air Force Base. There will be a flight plan filed, probably covered as something else. Anything from four tomorrow afternoon to eight in the evening could be the flight. I expect it to be a twin-engine executive jet, the G-Three, although another type is possible. He will be meeting with the Attorney General, undoubtedly to discuss something of great importance. I will fly to Washington immediately to find out what I can. There is a flight to Mexico City in three hours. I'll be on it."

"Your source is a good one," Escobedo observed, impressed for once.

Cortez smiled. *"Sí, jefe.* Even if you are unable to determine what is being discussed here, I hope to find out over the weekend. I make no promises, but I will do my best."

"A woman," Escobedo observed. "Young and beautiful, I am sure."

"As you say. I must be off."

"Enjoy your weekend, Colonel. I will enjoy mine."

Cortez had been gone only an hour when a telex came in, informing him that last night's courier flight had failed to arrive at its destination in southwestern Georgia. The amusement that invariably accompanies receipt of top-secret information changed at once to anger. *El jefe* thought to call Cortez on his mobile phone, but remembered that his hireling refused to discuss substantive matters over what he called a "nonsecure" line. Escobedo shook his head. This *colonel* of the DGI—he was an old woman! *El jefe's* phone twittered its own signal.

"Bingo," a man said in a van, two thousand miles away.

VOX IDENT, his computer screen announced: SUBJECT BRAVO INIT CALL TO SUBJECT ECHO FRQ 848.970MHZ CALL INIT 2349z INTERCEPT IDENT 345.

"We may have our first big one here, Tony."

The senior technician, who'd been christened Antonio forty-seven years earlier, put on his headphones. The conversation was being taken down on high-speed tape—it was actually a three-quarter-inch videotape because of the nature of the system used to intercept the signal. Four separate machines recorded the signal. They were Sony commercial recorders, only slightly modified by the NSA technical staff.

"Ha! Señor Bravo is pissed!" Tony observed as he caught part of the conversation. "Tell Meade that we finally caught a frozen rope down the left-field line." A "frozen rope" was the current NSA nickname for a very important signal intercept. It was baseball season, and the Baltimore Orioles were coming back.

"How's the signal?"

“Clear as a church bell. Christ, why don’t I ever buy TRW stock?” Antonio paused, struggling not to laugh. “God, is he pissed!”

The call ended a minute later. Tony switched his headphone input to one of the tape machines and crab-walked his swivel chair to a teleprinter, where he started typing.

FLASH
TOP SECRET ***** CAPER
2358Z
SIGINT REPORT
INTERCEPT 345 INIT 2349Z FRQ 836.970 MHZ
INIT: SUBJECT BRAVO
RECIP: SUBJECT ECHO
B: WE’VE LOST ANOTHER DELIVERY. [AGITATION]
E: WHAT HAPPENED?
B: THE CURSED THING DIDN’T APPEAR. WHAT DO YOU THINK? [AGITATION].

E: THEY’RE DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT. I TOLD YOU THAT. WE’RE TRYING TO FIND OUT WHAT IT IS.
B: SO WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO KNOW?
E: WE’RE WORKING ON THAT. OUR MAN IS TRAVELING TO WASHINGTON TO FIND OUT. THERE ARE SOME OTHER THINGS HAPPENING ALSO.
B: WHAT? [AGITATION]
E: I PROPOSE WE MEET TOMORROW TO DISCUSS IT.
B: THE REGULAR MEETING IS TUESDAY.
E: THIS IS IMPORTANT, EVERYONE MUST HEAR IT, PABLO.
B: CAN’T YOU TELL ME ANYTHING?
E: THEY ARE CHANGING THE RULES, THE NORTH AMERICANS. EXACTLY HOW THEY ARE CHANGING THEM WE DO NOT YET KNOW.
B: WELL, WHAT ARE WE PAYING THAT CUBAN RENEGADE FOR? [AGITATION]
E: HE IS DOING VERY WELL. PERHAPS HE WILL LEARN MORE ON HIS TRIP TO WASHINGTON. BUT WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED TO THIS POINT WILL BE THE SUBJECT OF OUR MEETING.
B: VERY WELL. I WILL SET UP THE MEETING.
E: THANK YOU, PABLO.
END CALL. DISCONNECT SIGNAL. END INTERCEPT.

“What’s this ‘agitation’ business?”

“I can’t put ‘pissed’ in an official TWX,” Antonio pointed out. “This one’s hot. We have some operational intel here.” He pressed the transmit key on his

terminal. The signal was addressed to a code-word destination—CAPER—which was all anyone who worked in the van knew.

Bob Ritter had just left for home, and was only a mile up on the George Washington Parkway when his secure carphone made its distinctive and, to him, irritating noise.

"Yeah?"

"CAPER traffic," the voice said.

"Right," the Deputy Director (Operations) said with a suppressed sigh. To his driver: "Take me back."

"Yes, sir."

Getting back, even for a top CIA executive, meant finding a place to reverse course, and then fight the late D.C. rush-hour traffic which, in its majesty, allows rich, poor, and important to crawl at an equal twenty miles per hour. The gate guard waved the car through, and he was in his seventh-floor office five minutes after that. Judge Moore was already gone. There were only four watch officers cleared for this operation. That was the minimum number required merely to wait for and evaluate signal traffic on the operation. The current watch officer had just come on duty. He handed over the signal.

"We have something hot," the officer said.

"You're not kidding. It's Cortez," Ritter observed after scanning the message form.

"Good bet, sir."

"Coming here ... but we don't know what he looks like. If only the Bureau had gotten a picture of the bastard when he was in Puerto Rico. You know the description we have of him." Ritter looked up.

"Black and brown. Medium height, medium build, sometimes wears a mustache. No distinguishing marks or characteristics," the officer recited from memory. It wasn't hard to memorize nothing, and nothing was exactly what they had on Félix Cortez.

"Who's your contact at the Bureau?"

"Tom Burke, middle-level guy in the Intelligence Division. Pretty good man. He handled part of the Henderson case."

"Okay, get this to him. Maybe the Bureau can figure a way to bag the bastard. Anything else?"

"No, sir."

Ritter nodded and resumed his trip home. The watch officer returned to his own office on the fifth floor and made his call. He was in luck this night; Burke was still at his office. They couldn't discuss the matter over the phone, of course. The CIA watch officer, Paul Hooker, drove over to the FBI Building at 10th and Pennsylvania.

Though CIA and FBI are sometimes rivals in the intelligence business, and always rivals for federal budget funds, at the operational level their employees get along well enough; the barbs they trade are good-natured ones.

"There's a new tourist coming into D.C. in the next few days," Hooker announced once the door was closed.

"Like who?" Burke inquired, gesturing to his coffee machine.

Hooker declined. "Félix Cortez." The CIA officer handed over a Xerox of the telex. Portions of it had been blacked out, of course. Burke didn't take offense at this. As a member of the Intelligence Division, charged with catching spies, he was accustomed to "need-to-know."

"You're assuming that it's Cortez," the FBI agent pointed out. Then he smiled. "But I wouldn't bet against you. If we had a picture of this clown, we'd stand a fair chance of bagging him. As it is ..." A sigh. "I'll put people at Dulles, National, and BWI. We'll try, but you can guess what the odds are." If the *Agency had gotten a photo of this mutt while he was in the field—or while he was at the KGB Academy—it would make our job a hell of a lot easier....* "I'll assume that he's coming in over the next four days. We'll check all flights directly in from down there, and all connecting flights."

The problem was more one of mathematics than anything. The number of direct flights from Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, and other nearby countries directly into the D.C. area was quite modest and easy to cover. But if the subject made a connecting flight through Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, Mexico, or any number of other cities, including American ones, the number of possible connections increased by a factor of ten. If he made one more intermediary stop in the United States, the number of possible flights for the FBI to monitor took a sudden jump into the hundreds. Cortez was a KGB-trained pro, and he knew that fact as well as these two men did. The task wasn't a hopeless one. Police play for breaks all the time, because even the most skilled adversaries get careless or unlucky. But that was the game here. Their only real hope was a lucky break.

Which they would not get. Cortez caught an Avianca flight to Mexico City, then an American Airlines flight to Dallas-Fort Worth, where he cleared customs and made yet another American connection to New York City. He checked into the St. Moritz Hotel on Central Park South. By this time it was three in the morning, and he needed some rest. He left a wakeup call for ten and asked the concierge to have him a first-class ticket for the eleven o'clock Metroliner into Union Station, Washington, D.C. The Metroliners, he knew, had their own phones. He'd be able to call ahead if something went wrong. Or maybe ... no, he decided, he didn't want to call her at work; surely the FBI tapped its own phones. The last thing Cortez did before collapsing onto the bed was to shred his plane-ticket receipts and the baggage tags on his luggage.

The phone awoke him at 9:56. *Almost seven hours' sleep,* he thought. It seemed like only a few seconds, but there was no time to dawdle. Half an hour later he appeared at the desk, tossed in his express check-out form, and

collected his train ticket. The usual Manhattan midtown traffic nearly caused him to miss the train, but he made it, taking a seat in the last row of the three-across club-car smoking section. A smiling, red-vested attendant started him off with decaffeinated coffee and a copy of *USA Today,* followed by a breakfast that was no different—though a little warmer—from what he'd have gotten on an airliner. By the time the train stopped in Philadelphia, he was back asleep. Cortez figured that he'd need his rest. The attendant noted the smile on his sleeping face as he collected the breakfast tray and wondered what dreams passed through the passenger's head.

At one o'clock, while Metroliner 111 approached Baltimore, the TV lights were switched on in the White House Press Room. The reporters had already been prepped with a "deep background, not for attribution" briefing that there would be a major announcement from the Attorney General, and that it would have something to do with drugs. The major networks did not interrupt their afternoon soap operas—it was no small thing to cut away from "The Young and the Restless"—but CNN, as usual, put up their "Special Report" graphic. This was noticed at once by the intelligence watch officers in the Pentagon's National Military Command Center, each of whom had a TV on his desk tuned into CNN. That was perhaps the most eloquent comment possible on the ability of America's intelligence agencies to keep its government informed, but one on which the major networks, for obvious reasons, had never commented.

The Attorney General strode haltingly toward the lectern. For all his experience as a lawyer, he was not an effective public speaker. You didn't need to be if your practice was corporate law and political campaigning. He was, however, photogenic and a sharp dresser, and always good for a leak on a slow news day, which explained his popularity with the media.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, fumbling with his notes. "You will soon be getting handouts concerning Operation TARPON. This represents the most effective operation to date against the international drug cartel." He looked up, trying to see the reporters' faces past the glare of the lights.

"Investigation by the Department of Justice, led by the FBI, has identified a number of bank accounts both in the United States and elsewhere which were being used for money-laundering on an unprecedented scale. These accounts range over twenty-nine banks from Liechtenstein to California, and their deposits exceed, at our current estimates, over six hundred fifty million dollars." He looked up again as he heard a *Goddamn!* from the assembled multitude. That elicited a smile. It was never easy to impress the White House press corps. The autowind cameras were really churning away now.

"In cooperation with six foreign governments, we have initiated the necessary steps to seize all of those funds, and also to seize eight real-estate joint-venture investments here in the United States which were the primary agency in the actual laundering operation. This is being done under the RICO —the Racketeer-Influenced and Corrupt Organization—statute. I should emphasize on that point that the real-estate ventures involve the holdings of many innocent investors; their holdings will not—I repeat *not*—be affected in

any way by the government's action. They were used as dupes by the Cartel, and they will not be harmed by these seizures."

"Excuse me," Associated Press interrupted. "You did say six hundred fifty *million* dollars?"

"That is correct, more than half a *billion* dollars." The AG described generally how the information had been found, but not the way in which the first lead had been obtained, nor the precise mechanisms used to track the money. "As you know, we have treaties with several foreign governments to cover cases such as this. Those funds identified as drug-related and deposited in foreign banks will be confiscated by the governments in question. In Swiss accounts, for example, are approximately ... " He checked his notes again. "It looks like two hundred thirty-seven million dollars, all of which now belongs to the Swiss government."

"What's our take?" *The Washington Post* asked.

"We don't know yet. It's difficult to describe the complexity of this operation—just the accounting is going to keep us busy for weeks."

"What about cooperation from the foreign governments?" another reporter wanted to know.

You gotta be kidding, the journalist next to him thought.

"The cooperation we've received on this case is simply outstanding." The Attorney General beamed. "Our friends overseas have moved with dispatch and professionalism."

Not every day you can steal this much money and call it something for the Public Good, the quiet journalist told herself.

CNN is a worldwide service. The broadcast was monitored in Colombia by two men whose job it was to keep track of the American news media. They were journalists themselves, in fact, who worked for the Colombian TV network, Inravision. One of them excused himself from the control room and made a telephone call before returning.

Tony and his partner had just come back on duty in the van, and there was a telex clipped to the wall, telling them to expect some activity on the cellular-phone circuits at about 1800 Zulu time. They weren't disappointed.

"Can we talk to Director Jacobs about this?" a reporter asked.

"Director Jacobs is taking a personal interest in the case, but is not available for comment," the AG answered. "You'll be able to talk to him next week, but at the moment he and his team are all pretty busy." That didn't break any rules. It gave the impression that Emil was in town, and the reporters, recognizing exactly what the Attorney General had said and how he had said it, collectively decided to let it slide. It fact, Emil had taken off from Andrews Air Force Base twenty-five minutes earlier.

"Madre de *Dios!"* Escobedo observed. The meeting had barely gotten past the usual social pleasantries so necessary for a conference of cutthroats. All the members of the Cartel were in the same room, which happened rarely enough. Even though the building was surrounded with a literal wall of security people, they were nervous about their safety. The building had a satellite dish on the roof, and this was immediately tuned in to CNN. What was supposed to have been a discussion of unexpected happenings in their smuggling operations was suddenly side-tracked onto something far more troubling. It was especially troubling for Escobedo, moreover, since he'd been one of the three Cartel members who had urged this money-laundering scheme on his colleagues. Though all had complimented him on the efficiency of the arrangement over the last two years, the looks he was getting now were somewhat less supportive.

"There is nothing we can do?" one asked.

"It is too early to tell," replied the Cartel's equivalent of a chief financial officer. "I remind you that the money we have already taken completely through the arrangements nearly equals what our normal returns would be. So you can say that we have lost very little other than the gain we expected to reap from our investments." That sounded lame even to him.

"I think we have tolerated enough interference," Escobedo said forcefully. "The Director of the American *federales* will be here in Bogotá later today."

"Oh? And how did you discover this?"

"Cortez. I told you that hiring him would be to our benefit. I called this meeting to give you the information that he has gotten for us."

"This is too much to accept," another member agreed. "We should take action. It must be forceful."

There was general agreement. The Cartel had not yet learned that important decisions ought never to be taken in anger, but there was no one to counsel moderation. These men were not known for that quality in any case.

Train 111, Metroliner Service from New York, arrived a minute early at 1:48 P.M. Cortez walked off, carrying his two bags, and walked at once to the taxi stand at the front of the station. The cabdriver was delighted to have a fare to Dulles. The trip took just over thirty minutes, earning the cabbie what for Cortez was a decent tip: $2.00. He entered the upper level, walked to his left, took the escalator down, where he found the Hertz counter. Here he rented another large Chevy and took the spare time to load his bags. By the time he returned inside, it was nearly three. Moira was right on time. They hugged. She wasn't one to kiss in so public a place.

"Where did you park?"

"In the long-term lot. I left my bags in the car."

“Then we will go and get them.”

“Where are we going?”

“There is a place on Skyline Drive where General Motors occasionally holds important conferences. There are no phones in the rooms, no televisions, no newspapers.”

“I know it! How did you ever get a reservation at this late notice?”

“I’ve been reserving a suite for every weekend since we were last together,” Cortez explained truthfully. He stopped dead in his tracks. “That sounds ... that sounds improper?” He had the halting embarrassment down pat by this time.

Moira grabbed his arm. “Not to me.”

“I can tell that this will be a long weekend.” Within minutes they were on Interstate 66, heading west toward the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Four embassy security officers dressed in airline coveralls gave the area a final look, then one of them pulled out a sophisticated satellite-radio phone and gave the final clearance.

The VC-20A, the military version of the G-III executive jet, flew in with a commercial setting on its radar transponder, landing at 5:39 in the afternoon at El Dorado International Airport, about eight miles outside of Bogotá. Unlike most of the VC- 20As belonging to the 89th Military Airlift Wing at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, this one was specially modified to fly into high-threat areas and carried jamming gear originally invented by the Israelis to counter surface-to-air missiles in the hands of terrorists ... or businessmen. The aircraft flared out and made a perfect landing into gentle westerly winds, then taxied to a distant corner of the cargo terminal, the one the cars and jeeps were heading for. The aircraft’s identity was no longer a secret to anyone who’d bothered to look, of course. It had barely stopped when the first jeeps formed up on its left side. Armed soldiers dismounted and spread out, their automatic weapons pointed at threats that might have been imaginary, or might not. The aircraft’s door dropped down. There were stairs built into it, but the first man off the plane didn’t bother with them. He jumped, with one hand hidden in the right side of a topcoat. He was soon joined by another security guard. Each man was a special agent of the FBI, and the job of each was the physical safety of their boss, Director Emil Jacobs. They stood within the ring of Colombian soldiers, each of whom was a member of an elite counterinsurgency unit. Every man there was nervous. There was nothing routine about security in this country. Too many had died proving otherwise.

Jacobs came out next, accompanied by his own special assistant, and Harry Jefferson, Administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration. The last of the three stepped down just as the ambassador’s limousine pulled up. It didn’t stop for long. The ambassador did step out to greet his guests, but all of them were inside the car a minute later. Then the soldiers remounted their jeeps, which moved off to escort the ambassador. The aircraft’s crew chief closed the

Gulfstream's door, and the VC- 20A, whose engines had never stopped turning, immediately taxied to take off again. Its destination was the airfield at Grenada, thoughtfully built for the Americans by the Cubans only a few years before. It would be easier to guard it there.

"How was the flight, Emil?" the ambassador asked.

"Just over five hours. Not bad," the Director allowed. He leaned back on the velvet seat of the stretch limo, which was filled to capacity. In front were the ambassador's driver and bodyguard. That made a total of four machine guns in the car, and he was sure Harry Jefferson carried his service automatic. Jacobs had never carried a gun in his life, didn't wish to bother with the things. And besides, if his two bodyguards and his assistant—another crack shot—didn't suffice to protect him, what would? It wasn't that Jacobs was an especially courageous man, just that after nearly forty years of dealing with criminals of all sorts—the Chicago mob had once threatened him quite seriously—he was tired of it all. He'd grown as comfortable as any man can be with such a thing: it was part of the scenery now, and like a pattern in the wallpaper or the color of a room's paint, he no longer noticed it.

He did notice the altitude. The city of Bogotá sits at an elevation of nearly 8,700 feet, on a plain among towering mountains. There was no air to breathe here and he wondered how the ambassador tolerated it. Jacobs was more comfortable with the biting winter winds off Lake Michigan. Even the humid pall that visited Washington every summer was better than this, he thought.

"Tomorrow at nine, right?" Jacobs asked.

"Yep." The ambassador nodded. "I think they'll go along with nearly anything we want." The ambassador, of course, didn't know what the meeting was about, which did not please him. He'd worked as charge d'affaires at Moscow, and the security *there* wasn't as tight as it was here.

"That's not the problem," Jefferson observed. "I know they mean well—they've lost enough cops and judges proving that. Question is, will they play ball?"

"Would we, under similar circumstances?" Jacobs mused, then steered the conversation in a safer direction. "You know, we've never been especially good neighbors, have we?"

"How do you mean?" the ambassador asked.

"I mean, when it suited us to have these countries run by thugs, we let it happen. When democracy finally started to take root, we often as not stood at the sidelines and bitched if their ideas didn't agree fully with ours. And now that the druggies threaten their governments because of what our own citizens want to buy—we blame them."

"Democracy comes hard down here," the ambassador pointed out. "The Spanish weren't real big on—"

"If we'd done our job a hundred years ago—or even fifty years ago—we wouldn't have half the problems we have now. Well, we didn't do it then. We sure as hell have to do it now."

“If you have any suggestions, Emil—”

Jacobs laughed. “Hell, Andy, I’m a cop—well, a lawyer—not a diplomat. That’s your problem. How’s Kay?”

“Just fine.” Ambassador Andy Westerfield didn’t have to ask about Mrs. Jacobs. He knew Emil had buried his wife nine months earlier after a courageous fight with cancer. He’d taken it hard, of course, but there were so many good things to remember about Ruth. And he had a job to keep him busy. Everyone needed that, and Jacobs more than most.

In the terminal, a man with a 35mm Nikon and a long lens had been snapping pictures for the past two hours. When the limousine and its escorts started moving off the airport grounds, he removed the lens from the body, set both in his camera case, and walked off to a bank of telephones.

The limousine moved quickly, with one jeep in front and another behind. Expensive cars with armed escorts were not terribly unusual in Colombia, and they moved out from the airport at a brisk clip. You had to spot the license plate to know that the car was American. The four men in each jeep had not known of their escort job until five minutes before they left, and the route, though predictable, wasn’t a long one. There shouldn’t have been time for anyone to set up an ambush—assuming that anyone would be crazy enough to consider such a thing.

After all, killing an American ambassador was crazy; it had only happened recently in the Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan.... And no one had ever made a serious attempt on an FBI Director.

The car they drove in was a Cadillac Fleetwood chassis. Its special equipment included thick windows that could stop a machine-gun bullet, and Kevlar armor all around the passenger compartment. The tires were foam-filled against flattening, and the gas tank of a design similar to that used on military aircraft as protection against explosion. Not surprisingly, the car was known in the embassy motor pool as the Tank.

The driver knew how to handle it as skillfully as a NASCAR professional. He had engine power to race at over a hundred miles per hour; he could throw the three-ton vehicle into a boot-legger turn and reverse directions like a movie stunt driver. His eyes flickered between the road ahead and the rearview mirror. There had been one car following them, for two or three miles, but it turned off. Probably nothing, he judged. Somebody else coming home from the airport.... The car also had sophisticated radio gear to call for help. They were heading to the embassy. Though the ambassador had a separate residence, a pretty two-story house set on six sculpted acres of garden and woodland, it wasn’t secure enough for his visitors. Like most contemporary American embassies, this one looked to be a cross between a low-rise office block and part of the Siegfried Line.

VOX IDENT, his computer screen read, two thousand miles away: VOICE 34

INIT CALL TO UNKNOWN RECIP FRQ 889.980MHZ CALL INIT 2258z INTERCEPT IDENT 381.

Tony donned the headphones and listened in on the tape-delay system.

"Nothing," he said a moment later. "Somebody's taking a drive."

At the embassy, the legal attaché paced nervously in the lobby. Special Agent Pete Morales of the FBI should have been at the airport. It was *his* director coming in, but the security pukes said only one car because it was a surprise visit—and surprise, everyone knew, was better than a massive show of force. The every-bodies who knew did not include Morales, who believed in showing force. It was bad enough having to live down here. Morales was from California; though his surname was Hispanic, his family had been in the San Francisco area when Major Frémont had arrived, and he'd had to brush up on his somewhat removed mother tongue to take his current job, which job also meant leaving his wife and kids behind in the States. As his most recent report had told headquarters, it was dangerous down here. Dangerous for the local citizens, dangerous for Americans, and very dangerous indeed for American cops.

Morales checked his watch. About two more minutes. He started moving to the door.

"Right on time," a man noted three blocks from the embassy. He spoke into a hand-held radio.

Until recently, the RPG-7D had been the standard-issue Soviet light antitank weapon. It traces its ancestry to the German Panzerfaust, and was only recently replaced by the RPG-18, a close copy of the American M-72 LAW rocket. The adoption of the new weapon allowed millions of the old ones to be disposed of, adding to the already abundant supply in arms bazaars all over the world. Designed to punch holes in battle tanks, it is not an especially easy weapon to use. Which was why there were four of them aimed at the ambassador's limousine.

The car proceeded south, down Carrera 13 in the district known as Palermo, slowing now because of the traffic. Had the Director's bodyguards known the name of the district and designation of the street, they might have objected merely on grounds of superstition. The slow speed of the traffic here in the city itself made everyone nervous, especially the soldiers in the escort jeeps who craned their necks looking up into the windows of various buildings. It is a fact so obvious as to be misunderstood that one cannot ordinarily look into a window from outside. Even an open window is merely a rectangle darker than the exterior wall, and the eye adjusts to ambient light, not to light in a specific place. There was no warning.

What made the deaths of the Americans inevitable was something as prosaic

as a traffic light. A technician was working on a balky signal—people had been complaining about it for a week—and while checking the timing mechanism, he flipped it to red. Everyone stopped on the street, almost within sight of the embassy. From third-floor windows on both sides of the street, four separate RPG-7D projectiles streaked straight down. Three hit the car, two of them on the roof.

The flash was enough. Morales was moving even before the noise reached the embassy gates, and he ran with full knowledge of the futility of the gesture. His right hand wrenched his Smith & Wesson automatic from the waist holster, and he carried it as training prescribed, pointed straight up. It took just over two minutes.

The driver was still alive, thrown from the car and bleeding to death from holes that no doctor could ever patch in time. The soldiers in the lead jeep were nowhere to be seen, though there was blood on a rear seat. The trail jeep's driver was still at the wheel, his hands clutching at a face shredded with broken glass, and the man next to him was dead, but again the other two were gone—

Then Morales knew why. Automatic weapons fire erupted in a building to his left. It started, stopped, then began again. A scream came from a window, and that also stopped. Morales wanted to race into the building, but he had no jurisdiction, and was too much a professional to risk his life so foolishly. He moved up to the smashed limousine. He knew that this, too, was futile.

They'd all died instantly, or as quickly as any man might die. The Director's two bodyguards had worn Kevlar armor. That would stop bullets, but not fragments from a high-explosive warhead, and had proven no more effective than the armor in the Tank. Morales knew what had hit the car—weapons designed to destroy tanks. Real ones. For those inside, the only remarkable thing was that you could tell that they had once been human. There was nothing anyone could do, except a priest ... or rabbi. Morales turned away after a few seconds.

He stood alone in the street, still operating on his professional training, not letting his humanity affect his judgment. The one living soldier in view was too injured to move—probably had no idea where he was or what had happened to him. None of the people on the sidewalk had come to help ... but some of them, he saw, were hurt, too, and their injuries occupied the attention of the others. Morales realized that the damage to the car told everyone else in view where they might best spend their efforts. The agent turned to scan up and down the street. He didn't see the technician at the light-control box. The man was already gone.

Two soldiers came out of a building, one carrying what looked like an RPG-7 launcher unit. Morales recognized one of them, Captain Edmundo Garza. There was blood on his khaki shirt and pants, and in his eyes the wild look that Morales hadn't seen since his time in the Marine Corps. Behind him, two more men dragged yet another who'd been shot in the arms and the groin.

Morales holstered his automatic before going over, slowly, his hands visible until he was sure he'd been recognized.

"Capitán ... " Morales said.

"One more dead upstairs, and one of mine. Four teams. Get-away cars in the alleys." Garza looked at the blood on his upper arm with annoyance that was rapidly changing to appreciation of his wounds. But there was something more than shock to postpone the pain. The captain looked at the car for the first time in several minutes, hoping that his immediate impression might have been wrong and knowing that it could not be. His handsome, bloody face looked at the American and received a shake by way of reply. Garza was a proud man, a professional soldier dedicated to his country as thoroughly as any man could be, and he'd been chosen for this assignment for his combination of skill and integrity. A man who did not fear death, he had just suffered the thing all soldiers fear more. He had failed in his mission. Not knowing why only made it worse.

Garza continued to ignore his wounds, turning to their one prisoner. "We will talk," the captain promised him just before he collapsed into Morales' arms.

"Hi, Jack!" Dan and Liz Murray had just arrived at the Ryan house. Dan had to remove his automatic and holster, which he set on the shelf in the closet with something of a sheepish look.

"I figured you for a revolver," Jack said with a grin. It was the first time that they'd had the Murrays over.

"I miss my Python, but the Bureau's switching over to automatics. Besides, I don't chase bad guys anymore. I chase memos, and position papers, and budget estimates." A rueful shake of the head. "What fun."

"I know the feeling," Ryan agreed, leading Murray to the kitchen. "Beer?"

"Sounds good to me."

They'd first met in London, at St. Thomas's Hospital to be precise, some years earlier when Murray had been legal attaché to the American Embassy, and Ryan had been a shooting victim. Still tall and spare, his hair a little thinner but not yet gray, Murray was an affable, free-spirited man whom one would never pick for a cop, much less one of the best around. A gifted investigator, he'd hunted down every sort of criminal there was, and though he now chafed at his absence from hands-on police work, he was handling his administrative job as skillfully as all his others.

"What's this sting I heard about?" Jack asked.

"TARPON? The Cartel murdered a guy who was laundering money for them on a very big scale—and doing some major-league skimming, too. He left records behind. We found them. It's been a busy couple of weeks running all the leads down."

"I heard six-hundred-plus-million bucks."

“It’ll go higher. The Swiss cracked open a new account this afternoon.”

“Ouch.” Ryan popped open a couple of beers. “That’s a real sting, isn’t it?”

“I think they’ll notice this one,” Murray agreed. “What’s this I hear about your new job?”

“You probably heard right. It’s just that you don’t want to get a promotion this way.”

“Yeah. I’ve never met Admiral Greer, but the Director thinks a lot of him.”

“Two of a kind. Old-fashioned honorable gentlemen,” Jack observed. “Endangered species.”

“Hello, Mr. Murray,” Sally Ryan said from the door.

“Mister Murray?”

“Uncle Dan!” Sally raced up and delivered a ferocious hug. “Aunt Liz says that you and Daddy better get out there,” she said with a giggle.

“Why do we let them push us warriors around, Jack?”

“ ’Cause they’re tougher than we are?” Ryan wondered.

Dan laughed. “Yeah, that explains it. I—” Then his beeper went off. Murray pulled the small plastic box from his belt. In a moment the LCD panel showed the number he was supposed to call. “You know, I’d like to waste the bastard who invented these things.”

“He’s already dead,” Jack replied deadpan. “He came into a hospital emergency room with chest pains, and after the doc figured out who he was, they were a little slow getting around to treating him. The doc explained later that he had had an important phone call come in, and ... oh, well....” Ryan’s demeanor changed. “You need a secure line? I have one in the library.”

“Color me important,” Murray observed. “No. Can I use this one?”

“Sure, the bottom button’s a D.C. line.”

Murray punched in the number without referring to his beeper. It was Shaw’s office. “Murray here. You rang, Alice? Okay ... Hi, Bill, what gives?”

It was as though the room took a sudden chill. Ryan felt it before he understood the change in Murray’s face.

“No chance that—oh, yeah, I know Pete.” Murray checked his watch. “Be there in forty minutes.” He hung up.

“What happened?”

“Somebody killed the Director,” Dan answered simply.

“What—where?”

“Bogotá. He was down for a quiet meeting, along with the head of DEA. Flew down this afternoon. They kept it real quiet.”

“No chance that—”

Murray shook his head. “The attaché down there’s Pete Morales. Good

agent, I worked OC with him once. He said they were all killed instantly. Emil, Harry Jefferson, the ambassador, all the security guys." He stopped and read the look on Jack's face. "Yeah, somebody had some pretty good intel on this."

Ryan nodded. "This is where I came in...."

"I don't think there's a street agent in the Bureau who doesn't love that man." Murray set his beer down on the counter.

"Sorry, pal."

"What was it you said? Endangered species?" Murray shook his head and went to collect his wife. Ryan hadn't even closed the door behind them when his secure phone started ringing.

The Hideaway, located only a few miles from the Luray Caverns, was a modern building despite its deliberate lack of some modern amenities. While there was no in-room cable television, no pay-for-view satellite service, no complimentary paper outside the door every morning, there was air conditioning, running water, and the room-service menu was six pages long, supplemented by ten full pages of wine listings. The hotel catered to newlyweds who needed few distractions and to others trying to save their marriages from distractions. Service was on the European model. The guest wasn't expected to do anything but eat, drink, and rumple the linen, though there were saddle horses, tennis courts, and a swimming pool for those few whose suite didn't include a bathtub large enough for the purpose. Moira watched her lover tip the bellman ten dollars—far more than he ever tipped anyone—before she thought to ask the most obvious question.

"How did you register?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Juan Díaz." Another embarrassed look. "Forgive me, but I didn't know what else to say. I didn't think"— he lied haltingly. "And I didn't want—what could I say without embarrassing myself?" he finally asked with a frustrated gesture.

"Well, I need a shower. Since we are husband and wife, you may join me. It looks big enough for two." She walked from the room, dropping her silk blouse on the bed as she went.

Five minutes later, Cortez decided that the shower was easily big enough for four. But as things turned out, that was just as well.

The President had flown to Camp David for the weekend, and had barely showered himself when his junior military aide—a Marine lieutenant had the duty—brought him the cordless phone.

"Yes—what is it?"

The lieutenant's first reaction on seeing the President's expression was to wonder where his pistol was.

"I want the Attorney General, Admiral Cutter, Judge Moore, and Bob Ritter

flown here immediately. Tell the press secretary to call me in fifteen minutes to work on the statement. I'll be staying here for the time being. What about bringing them back home? Okay—we have a couple of hours to think about that. For now, the usual protocol. That's right. No, nothing from State. I'll handle it from here, then the secretary can have his say. Thank you." The President pushed the kill button on the phone and handed it back to the Marine.

"Sir, is there anything that the guard detail needs—"

"No." The President explained briefly what had happened. "Carry on, Lieutenant."

"Aye aye, sir." The Marine left.

The President put on his bathrobe and walked over to the mirror to comb his hair. He had to use the terrycloth of his sleeve to wipe the condensation off the glass. Had he noticed, he would have wondered why the look in his eyes didn't shatter it.

"Okay," the President of the United States told the mirror. "So you bastards want to play...."

The flight from Andrews to Camp David was made in one of the new VH-60 Blackhawk helicopters that the 89th Military Airlift Wing had just acquired. Plushly appointed to carry VIPs from place to place, it was still too noisy for anything approximating a normal conversation. Each of the four passengers stared out the windows on the sliding doors, watching the western Maryland hills slide beneath the aircraft, each alone with his grief and his anger. The trip took twenty minutes. The pilot had been told to hurry.

On touching down, the four men were loaded into a car for the short drive to the President's cabin on the grounds. They found him hanging up the phone. It had taken half an hour to locate his press secretary, further exacerbating the President's already stormy mood.

Admiral Cutter started to say something about how sorry everyone was, but the President's expression cut him short.

The President sat down on a couch opposite the fireplace. In front of him was what most people ordinarily took to be a coffee table, but now, with the top removed, it was a set of computer screens and quiet thermal printers that tapped into the major news wire services and other government information channels. Four television sets were in the next room, tuned into CNN and the major networks. The four visitors stared down at him, watching the anger come off the President like steam from a boiling pot.

"We will not let this one slip past with us standing by and deploring the event," the President said quietly as he looked up. "They killed my friend. They killed my ambassador. They have directly challenged the sovereign power of the United States of America. They want to play with the big boys," the President went on in a voice that was grotesquely calm. "Well, they're

going to have to play by the big boys' rules. Peter," he said to the AG, "there is now an informal Presidential Finding that the drug Cartel has initiated an undeclared war against the government of the United States. They have chosen to act like a hostile nation-state. We will treat them as we would treat a hostile nation-state. As President, I am resolved to carry the fight to the enemy as we would carry it to any other originator of state-sponsored terrorism."

The AG didn't like that, but nodded agreement anyway. The President turned to Moore and Ritter.

"The gloves come off. I just made the usual wimpy-ass statement for my press secretary to deliver, but the fucking gloves come off. Come up with a plan. I want these bastards hurt. No more of this 'sending a message' crap. I want them to get the message whether the phone rings or not. Mr. Ritter, you have your hunting license, and there's no bag limit. Is that sufficiently clear?"

"Yes, sir," the DDO answered. Actually, it wasn't. The President hadn't said "kill" once, as the tape recorders that were surely somewhere in this room would show. But there were some things that you didn't do, and one of them was that you did not force the President to speak clearly when clarity was something he wished to avoid.

"Find yourselves a cabin and come up with a plan. Peter, I want you to stay here with me for a while." The next message: the Attorney General, once having acceded to the President's desire to Do Something, didn't need to know exactly what was going to be done. Admiral Cutter, who was more familiar with Camp David than the other two, led the way to one of the guest cabins. Since he was in front, Moore and Ritter could not see the smile on his face.

Ryan was just getting to his office, having driven himself in, a habit which he had just unlearned. The senior intelligence watch officer was waiting for him in the corridor as Jack got off the elevator. The briefing took a whole four minutes, after which Ryan found himself sitting in the office with nothing at all to do. It was strange. He was now privy to everything the U.S. government knew about the assassination of its people—not much more than what he'd heard on the car radio coming in, actually, though he now had names to put on the "unnamed sources." Sometimes that was important, but not this time. The DCI and DDO, he learned at once, were up at Camp David with the President.

Why not me? Jack asked himself in surprise.

It should have occurred to him immediately, of course, but he was not yet used to being a senior executive. With nothing to do, his mind went along that tangent for several minutes. The conclusion was an obvious one. He didn't need to know what was being talked about—but that had to mean that something was *already* happening, didn't it ... ? If so, what? And for how long?

By noon the next day, an Air Force C-141B Starlifter transport had landed at

El Dorado International. Security was like nothing anyone had seen since the funeral of Anwar Sadat. Armed helicopters circled overhead. Armored vehicles sat with their gun tubes trained outward. A full battalion of paratroops ringed the airport, which was shut down for three hours. That didn't count the honor guard, of course, all of whom felt as though they had no honor at all, that it had been stripped away from their army and their nation by ... *them*.

Esteban Cardinal Valdéz prayed over the coffins, accompanied by the chief rabbi of Bogotá's small Jewish community. The Vice President attended on behalf of the American government, and one by one the Colombian Army handed the caskets over to enlisted pallbearers from all of the American uniformed services. The usual, predictable speeches were made, the most eloquent being a brief address by Colombia's Attorney General, who shed unashamed tears for his friend and college classmate. The Vice President boarded his aircraft and left, followed by the big Lockheed transport.

The President's statement, already delivered, spoke of reaffirming the rule of law to which Emil Jacobs had dedicated his life. But that statement seemed as thin as the air at El Dorado International even to those who didn't know better.

In the town of Eight Mile, Alabama, a suburb of Mobile, a police sergeant named Ernie Braden was cutting his front lawn with a riding mower. A burglary investigator, he knew all the tricks of the people whose crimes he handled, including how to bypass complex alarm systems, even the sophisticated models used by wealthy investment bankers. That skill, plus the information he picked up from office chatter—the narcs' bullpen was right next to the burglary section—enabled him to offer his services to people who had money with which to pay for the orthodonture and education of his children. It wasn't so much that Braden was a corrupt cop as that he'd simply been on the job for over twenty years and no longer gave much of a damn. If people wanted to use drugs, then the hell with them. If druggies wanted to kill one another off, then so much the better for the rest of society. And if some arrogant prick of a banker turned out to be a crook among crooks, then that also was too bad; all Braden had been asked to do was shake the man's house to make sure that he'd left no records behind. It was a shame about the man's wife and kids, of course, but that was called playing with fire.

Braden rationalized the damage done to society simply by continuing to investigate his burglaries, and even catching a real hood from time to time, though that was rare enough. Burglary was a pretty safe crime to commit. It never got the attention it deserved. Neither did the people whose job it was to track them down—probably the most unrewarded segment of the law-enforcement profession. He'd been taking the lieutenant's exam for nine years, and never quite made it. Braden needed or at least wanted the money that the promotion would bring, only to see the promotions go to the hotshots in Narcotics and Homicide while he slaved away ... and why not take the goddamned money? More than anything else, Ernie Braden was tired of it all. Tired of the long hours. Tired of the crime victims who took their frustration

out on him when he was just trying to do his job. Tired of being unappreciated within his own community of police officers. Tired of being sent out to local schools for the *pro forma* anticrime lectures that nobody ever listened to. He was even tired of coaching little-league baseball, though that had once been the single joy of his life. Tired of just about everything. But he couldn't afford to retire, either. Not yet, anyway.

The noise from the Sears riding mower crackled through the hot, humid air of the quiet street on which he and his family lived. He wiped a handkerchief across his sweaty brow and contemplated the cold beer he'd have as soon as he was finished. It could have been worse. Until three years ago he'd pushed a goddamned Lawn-Boy across the grass. At least now he could sit down as he did his weekly chore, cutting the goddamned grass. His wife had a real thing about the lawn and garden. As if it mattered, Braden grumbled.

He concentrated on the job at hand, making sure that the spinning blades had at least two sweeps over every square inch of the green crap that, this early in the season, grew almost as fast as you cut it. He didn't notice the Plymouth minivan coming down the street. Nor did he know that the people who paid him his supplementary income were most unhappy with a recent clandestine effort he'd made on their behalf.

Braden had several eccentricities, as do many men and most police officers. In his case, he never went anywhere unarmed. Not even to cut the grass. Under the back of his greasy shirt was a Smith & Wesson Chief's Special, a five-shot stainless steel revolver that was as close as he'd ever get to something with "chief" written on it. When he finally noticed the minivan pull up behind his Chevy Citation, he took little note of it, except that there were two men in it, and they seemed to be looking at him.

His cop's instinct didn't entirely fail him, however. They were looking real hard at him. That made him look back, mainly in curiosity. Who'd be interested in him on a Saturday afternoon? When the passenger-side door opened and he saw the gun, that question faded away.

When Braden rolled off the mower, his foot came off the brake pedal, which had the opposite effect as in a car. The mower stopped in two feet, its blades still churning away on the bluegrass-and-fescue mix of the policeman's front yard. Braden came off just at the ejection port of the mower assembly, and felt tiny bits of grit and sand peppering his knees, but that, too, was not a matter of importance at the moment. His revolver was already out when the man from the van fired his first round.

He was using an Ingram Mac-10, probably a 9-millimeter, and the man didn't know how to use it well. His first round was roughly on target, but the next eight merely decorated the sky as the notoriously unstable weapon jerked out of control, not even hitting the mower. Sergeant Braden fired two rounds back, but the range was over ten yards, and the Chiefs Special had only a two-inch barrel, which gave it an effective combat range measured in feet, not yards. With the instant and unexpected stress added to his poorly selected weapon, he managed to hit the van behind his target with only one round.

But machine-gun fire is a highly distinctive sound—not the least mistakable for firecrackers or any other normal noise—and the neighborhood immediately realized that something very unusual was happening. At a house across the street a fifteen-year-old boy was cleaning his rifle. It was an old Marlin .22 lever-action that had once belonged to his grandfather, and its proud owner had learned to play third base from Sergeant Braden, whom he thought to be a really neat guy. The young man in question, Erik Sanderson, set down his cleaning gear and walked to the window just in time to see his former coach shooting from behind his mower at somebody. In the clarity that comes in such moments, Erik Sanderson realized that people were trying to kill his coach, a police officer, that he had a rifle and cartridges ten feet away, and that it Would Be All Right for him to use the rifle to come to the aid of the policeman. The fact that he'd spent the morning plinking away at tin cans merely meant that he was ready. Erik Sanderson's main ambition in life was to become a U.S. Marine, and he seized the chance to get an early feel for what it was all about.

While the sound of gunfire continued to crackle around the wooded street, he grabbed the rifle and a handful of the small copper-colored rimfire cartridges and ran out to the front porch. First he twisted the spring-loaded rod that pushed rounds down the magazine tube which hung under the barrel. He pulled it out too far, dropping it, but the young man had the good sense to ignore that for the moment. He fed the .22 rounds into the loading slot one at a time, surprised that his hands were already sweaty. When he had fourteen rounds in, he bent down to get the rod, and two rounds fell out the front of the tube. He took the time to reload them, reinserted the rod, twisting it shut, then slammed his hand down and up on the lever, loading the gun and cocking the exposed hammer.

He was surprised to see that he didn't have a shot, and ran down the sidewalk to the street, taking a position across the hood of his father's pickup truck. From this point he could see two men, each firing a submachine gun from the hip. He looked just in time to see Sergeant Braden fire off his last round, which missed as badly as the first four had. The police officer turned to run for the safety of his house, but tripped over his own feet and had trouble getting up. Both gunmen advanced on Braden, loading new magazines into their weapons. Erik Sanderson's hands were trembling as he shouldered his rifle. It had old-fashioned iron sights, and he had to stop and remind himself how to line them up as he'd been taught in Boy Scouts, with the front-sight post centered in the notch of the rear-sight leaf, the top of the post even with the top of the leaf as he maneuvered it on a target.

He was horrified to be too late. Both men blew his little-league coach to shreds with extended bursts at point-blank range. Something snapped inside Erik's head at that moment. He sighted on the head of the nearer gunman and jerked off his round.

Like most young and inexperienced shooters, he immediately looked up to see what had happened. Nothing. He'd missed—with a rifle at a range of only thirty yards, he'd missed. Amazed, he sighted again and squeezed the trigger, but nothing happened. The hammer was down. He'd forgotten to cock the

rifle. Swearing something his mother would have slapped him to hear, he reloaded the Marlin .22 and took exquisitely careful aim, squeezing off his next shot.

The murderers hadn't heard his first shot, and with their ears still ringing from their own shots, they didn't hear the second, but one man's head jerked to the side with the wasp's-sting impact of the round. The man knew what had happened, turned to his left, and fired off a long burst despite the crushing pain that seized his head in an instant. The other one saw Erik and fired as well.

But the young man was now jacking rounds into the breech of his rifle as fast as he could fire them. He watched in rage as he kept missing, unconsciously flinching as bullets came his way, trying to kill both men before they could get back into their car. He had the satisfaction of seeing them duck behind cover, and wasted his last three rounds trying to shoot through the car body to get them. But a .22 can't accomplish that, and the minivan pulled away.

Erik watched it pull away, wishing he'd loaded more rounds into his rifle, wishing that he could try a shot through the back window before the car turned right and disappeared.

The young man didn't have the courage to go over and see what had happened to Sergeant Braden. He just stayed there, leaning across the truck, cursing himself for letting them get away. He didn't know, and would never believe, that he had, in fact, done better than many trained police officers could have done.

In the minivan, one of the gunmen took more note of the bullet in his chest than the one in his head. But it was the head shot that would kill him. As the man bent down, a lacerated artery let go completely and showered the inside of the car with blood, much to the surprise of the dying man, who had but a few seconds to realize what had happ—

Another Air Force flight, as luck had it, also a C-141B, took Mr. Clark out of Panama, heading for Andrews, where rapid preparations were being made for the arrival ceremony. Before the funeral flight arrived, Clark was in Langley talking to his boss, Bob Ritter. For the first time in a generation, the Operations Directorate had been granted a presidential hunting license. John Clark, carried on the personnel rolls as a case-officer instructor, was the CIA chief hunter. He hadn't been asked to exercise that particular talent in a very long time, but he still knew how.

Ritter and Clark didn't watch the TV coverage of the arrival. All that was part of history now, and while both men had an interest in history, it was mainly in the sort that is never written down.

"We're going to take another look at the idea you handed me at St. Kitts," the Deputy Director (Operations) said.

"What's the objective?" Clark asked carefully. It wasn't hard to guess why

this was happening, or the originator of the directive. That was the reason for his caution.

“The short version is revenge,” Ritter answered.

“Retribution is a more acceptable word,” Clark pointed out. Lacking in formal education though he was, he did read a good deal.

“The targets represent a clear and present danger to the security of the United States.”

“The President said that?”

“His words,” Ritter affirmed.

“Fine. That makes it all legal. Not any less dangerous, but legal.”

“Can you do it?”

Clark smiled in a distant, smoky way. “I run my side of the op my way. Otherwise, forget it. I don’t want to die from oversight. No interference from this end. You give me the target list and the assets I need. I do the rest, my way, my schedule.”

“Agreed,” Ritter nodded.

Clark was more than surprised by that. “Then I can do it. What about the kids we have running around in the jungle?”

“We’re pulling them out tonight.”

“To be reinserted where?” Clark asked.

Ritter told him.

“That’s really dangerous,” the case officer observed, though he was not surprised by the answer. It had probably been planned all along. But, if it had ...

“We know that.”

“I don’t like it,” Clark said after a moment’s thought. “It complicates things.”

“We don’t pay you to like it.”

Clark had to agree to that. He was honest enough with himself, though, to admit that part of it he did like. A job such as this, after all, had gotten him into the protective embrace of the Central Intelligence Agency in the first place, so many years before. But that job had been on a free-agent basis. This one was legal, but arguably. Once that would not have mattered to Mr. Clark, but with a wife and kids, it did now.

“Do I get to see the family for a couple of days?”

“Sure. It’ll take awhile to get things in place. I’ll have all the information you need messengered down to The Farm.”

“What do we call this one?”

“RECIPROCITY.”

“I guess that about covers it.” Clark’s face broke into a grin. He walked out of the room toward the elevator. The new DDI was there, Dr. Ryan, heading to Judge Moore’s office. They’d never quite met, Clark and Ryan, and this wasn’t the time, though their lives had already touched on two occasions.

14.

Snatch and Grab

"I MUST THANK your Director Jacobs," Juan said.

"Perhaps we will meet someday." He'd taken his time with this one. Soon, he judged, he'd be able to extract any information he wanted from her with the same intimate confidence that might be expected of husband and wife—after all, true love did not allow for secrets, did it?

"Perhaps," Moira replied after a moment. Already part of her was thinking that the Director would come to her wedding. It wasn't too much to hope for, was it?

"What did he travel to Colombia for, anyway?" he asked while his fingertips did some more exploring over what was now very familiar ground.

"Well, it's public information now. They called it Operation TARPON." Moira explained on for several minutes during which Juan's caresses didn't miss a beat.

Which was only due to his experience as an intelligence officer. He actually found himself smiling lazily at the ceiling. *The fool. I warned him. I warned him more than once in his own office, but no—he was too smart, too confident in his own cleverness to take my advice. Well, maybe the stupid bastard will heed my advice now....* It took another few moments before he found himself asking how his employer would react. That was when the smiling and the caresses stopped.

"Something wrong, Juan?"

"Your director picked a dangerous time to visit Bogotá. They will be very angry. If they discover that he is there—"

"The trip is a secret. Their attorney general is an old friend— I think they went to school together, and they've known each other for forty years."

The trip was a secret. Cortez told himself that they couldn't be so foolish as to —but they could. He was amazed that Moira didn't feel the chill that swept over his body. But what could he do?

As was true of the families of military people and sales executives, Clark's family was accustomed to having him away at short notice and for irregular intervals. They were also used to having him reappear without much in the way of warning. It was almost a game, and one, strangely enough, to which

his wife didn't object. In this case he took a car from the CIA pool and made the two-and-a-half-hour drive to Yorktown, Virginia, by himself to think over the operation he was about to undertake. By the time he turned off Interstate 64, he'd answered most of the procedural questions, though the exact details would wait until he'd had a chance to go over the intelligence package that Ritter had promised to send down.

Clark's house was that of a middle-level executive, a four-bedroom split-foyer brick dwelling set in an acre of the long-needled pines common to the American South. It was a ten-minute drive from The Farm, the CIA's training establishment whose post-office address is Williamsburg, Virginia, but which is actually closer to Yorktown, adjacent to an installation in which the Navy keeps both submarine-launched ballistic missiles and their nuclear warheads. The development in which he lived was mainly occupied by other CIA instructors, obviating the need for elaborate stories for the neighbors' benefit. His family, of course, had a pretty good idea what he did for a living. His two daughters, Maggie, seventeen, and Patricia, fourteen, occasionally called him "Secret Agent Man," which they'd picked up from the revival of the Patrick McGoohan TV series on one of the cable channels, but they knew not to discuss it with their schoolmates—though they would occasionally warn their boyfriends to behave as responsibly as possible around their father. It was an unnecessary warning. On instinct, most men watched their behavior around Mr. Clark. John Clark did not have horns and hooves, but it seldom took more than a single glance to know that he was not to be trifled with, either. His wife, Sandy, knew even more, including what he had done before joining the Agency. Sandy was a registered nurse who taught student nurses in the operating rooms of the local teaching hospital. As such she was accustomed to dealing with issues of life and death, and she took comfort from the fact that her husband was one of the few "laymen" who understood what that was all about, albeit from a reversed perspective. To his wife and children, John Terence Clark was a devoted husband and father, if somewhat overly protective at times. Maggie had once complained that he'd scared off one prospective "steady" with nothing more than a look. That the boy in question had later been arrested for drunken driving had only proved her father correct, rather to her chagrin. He was also a far easier touch than their mother on issues like privileges and had a ready shoulder to cry on, when he was home. At home, his counsel was invariably quiet and reasoned, his language mild, and his demeanor relaxed, but his family knew that away from home he was something else entirely. They didn't care about that.

He pulled into the driveway just before dinnertime, taking his soft two-suiter in through the kitchen to find the smells of a decent dinner. Sandy had been surprised too many times to overreact on the matter of how much food she'd prepared.

"Where have you been?" Sandy asked rhetorically, then went into her usual guessing game. "Not much work done on the tan. Someplace cold or cloudy?"

"Spent most of my time indoors," Clark replied honestly. *Stuck with a couple of clowns in a damned commo van on a hilltop surrounded by jungle. Just like the bad old days. Almost.* For

all her intelligence, she almost never guessed where he'd been. But then, she wasn't supposed to.

"How long ... ?"

"Only a couple of days, then I have to go out again. It's important."

"Anything to do with—" Her head jerked toward the kitchen TV.

Clark just smiled and shook his head.

"What do you think happened?"

"From what I see, the druggies got real lucky," he said lightly.

Sandy knew what her husband thought of druggies, and why. Everyone had a pet hate. That was his—and hers; she'd been a nurse too long, had too often seen the results of substance abuse, to think otherwise. It was the one thing he'd lectured the girls on, and though they were as rebellious as any pair of healthy adolescents, it was one line they didn't approach, much less cross.

"The President sounds angry."

"How would you feel? The FBI Director was his friend—as far as a politician has friends." Clark felt the need to qualify the statement. He was wary of political figures, even the ones he'd voted for.

"What is he going to do about it?"

"I don't know, Sandy." *I haven't quite figured it out yet.* "Where are the kids?"

"They went to Busch Gardens with their friends. There's a new coaster, and they're probably screaming their brains out."

"Do I have time to shower? I've been traveling all day."

"Dinner in thirty minutes."

"Fine." He kissed her again and headed for the bedroom with his bag. Before entering the bathroom, he emptied his dirty laundry into the hamper. Clark would give himself one restful day with the family before starting on his mission planning. There wasn't that much of a hurry. For missions of this sort, haste made death. He hoped the politicians would understand that.

Of course, they wouldn't, he told himself on the way to the shower. They never did.

"Don't feel bad," Moira told him. "You're tired. I'm sorry I've worn you out." She cradled his face to her chest. A man was not a machine, after all, and five times in just over one day's time ... what could she fairly expect of her lover? He had to sleep, had to rest. As did she, Moira realized, drifting off herself.

Within minutes, Cortez gently disengaged himself, watching her slow, steady breathing, a dreamy smile on her placid face while he wondered what the hell he could do. If anything. Place a phone call—risk everything for a brief conversation on a nonsecure line? The Colombian police or the Americans, or *somebody* had to have taps on all those phones. No, that was

more dangerous than doing nothing at all.

His professionalism told him that the safest course of action was to do nothing. Cortez looked down at himself. Nothing was precisely what he had just accomplished. It was the first time that had happened in a very long time.

Team KNIFE, of course, was completely—if not blissfully—unaware of what had transpired the previous day. The jungle had no news service, and their radio was for official use only. That made the new message all the more surprising. Chavez and Vega were again on duty at the observation post, enduring the muggy heat that followed a violent thunderstorm. There had been two inches of rain in the previous hour, and their observation point was now a shallow puddle, and there would be more rain in the afternoon before things cleared off.

Captain Ramirez appeared, without much in the way of warning this time, even to Chavez, whose woodcraft skills were a matter of considerable pride. He rationalized to himself that the captain had learned from watching him.

"Hey, Cap'n," Vega greeted their officer.

"Anything going on?" Ramirez asked.

Chavez answered from behind his binoculars. "Well, our two friends are enjoying their morning siesta." There would be another in the afternoon, of course. He was pulled away from the lenses by the captain's next statement.

"I hope they like it. It's their last one."

"Say again, Cap'n?" Vega asked.

"The chopper's coming in to pick us up tonight. That's the LZ right there, troops." Ramirez pointed to the airstrip. "We waste this place before we leave."

Chavez evaluated that statement briefly. He'd never liked druggies. Having to sit here and watch the lazy bastards go about their business as matter-of-factly as a man on a golf course hadn't mitigated his feelings a dot.

Ding nodded. "Okay, Cap'n. How we gonna do it, sir?"

"Soon as it's dark, you and me circle around the north side. Rest of the squad forms up in two fire teams to provide fire support in case we need it. Vega, you and your SAW stay here. The other one goes down about four hundred meters. After we do the two guards, we booby-trap the fuel drums in the shack, just as a farewell present. The chopper'll pick us up at the far end at twenty-three hundred. We bring the bodies out with us, probably dump 'em at sea."

Well, how about that, Chavez thought. "We'll need like thirty-forty minutes to get around to them, just to play it safe and all, but the way those two fuckers been actin', no sweat, sir." The sergeant knew that the killing would be his job. He had the silenced weapon.

"You're supposed to ask me if this is for-real," Captain Ramirez pointed out.

He had done just that over the satellite radio.

“Sir, you say do it, I figure it’s for-real. It don’t bother me none,” Staff Sergeant Domingo Chavez assured his commander.

“Okay—we’ll move out as soon as it’s dark.”

“Yes, sir.”

The captain patted both men on the shoulder and withdrew to the rally point. Chavez watched him leave, then pulled out his canteen. He unscrewed the plastic top and took a long pull before looking over at Vega.

“Fuck!” the machine-gunner observed quietly.

“Whoever’s runnin’ this party musta grown a pair o’ balls,” Ding agreed.

“Be nice to get back to a place with showers and air conditioning,” Vega said next. That two people would have to die to make that possible was, once it was decided, a matter of small consequence. It bemused both men somewhat that after years of uniformed service they were finally being told to do the very thing for which they’d trained endlessly. The moral issue never occurred to them. They were soldiers of their country. Their country had decided that those two dozing men a few hundred meters away were enemies worthy of death. That was that, though both men wondered what it would actually be like to do it.

“Let’s plan this one out,” Chavez said, getting back to his binoculars. “I want you to be careful with that SAW, Oso. ”

Vega considered the situation. “I won’t fire to the left of the shack unless you call in.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll come in from the direction of that big-ass tree. Shouldn’t be no big deal,” he thought aloud.

“Nah, shouldn’t be.”

Except that this time it was all real. Chavez stayed on the glasses, examining the men whom he would kill in a few hours.

Colonel Johns got his stand-to order at roughly the same time as all of the field teams, along with a whole new set of tactical maps that were for further study. He and Captain Willis went over the plan for this night in the privacy of their room. There was a snatch-and-grab tonight. The troops they’d inserted were coming back out far earlier than scheduled. PJ suspected that he knew why. Part of it, anyway.

“Right on the airfields?” the captain wondered.

“Yeah, well, either all four were dry holes, or our friends are going to have to secure them before we land for the snatch-and-grab.”

“Oh.” Captain Willis understood after a moment’s thought.

“Get ahold of Buck and have him check the miniguns out again. He’ll get the message from that. I want to take a look at the weather for tonight.”

“Pickup order reverse from the drop-off?”

“Yeah—we’ll tank fifty miles off the beach and then again after we make the pickup.”

“Right.” Willis walked out to find Sergeant Zimmer. PJ went in the opposite direction, heading for the base meteorological office. The weather for tonight was disappointing: light winds, clear skies, and a crescent moon. Perfect flying weather for everyone else, it was not what special-ops people hoped for. Well, there wasn’t much you could do about that.

They checked out of The Hideaway at noon. Cortez thanked whatever fortune smiled down on him that it had been her idea to cut the weekend short, claiming that she had to get back to her children, though he suspected that she had made a conscious decision to go easy on her weary lover. No woman had ever felt the need to take pity on him before, and the insult of it was balanced against his need to find out what the hell was going on.

They drove up Interstate 81, in silence as usual. He’d rented a car with an ordinary bench seat, and she sat in the center, leaning against him with his right arm wrapped warmly around her shoulder. Like teenagers, almost, except for the silence, and again he found himself appreciating her for it. But it wasn’t for the quiet passion now. His mind was racing far faster than the car, which he kept exactly at the posted limit. He could have turned on the car radio, but that would have been out of character. He couldn’t risk that, could he? If his employer had only exercised intelligence—and he had plenty of that, Cortez compelled himself to admit—then he still had his arm draped over a supremely valuable source of strategic intelligence. Escobedo took an appropriately long view of his business operations. He understood—but Cortez remembered the man’s arrogance, too. How easily he took offense—it wasn’t enough for him to win, Escobedo also felt the need to humiliate, crush, utterly destroy those who offended him in the slightest way. He had power, and the sort of money normally associated only with governments, but he lacked perspective. For all his intelligence, he was a man ruled by childish emotions, and that thought merely grew in Cortez’s mind as he turned onto I-66, heading east now, for Washington. It was so strange, he mused with a thin, bitter smile, that in a world replete with information, he was forced to speculate like a child when he could have all he needed merely from the twist of a radio knob, but he commanded himself to do without.

They reached the airport parking lot right on time. He pulled up to Moira’s car and got out to unload her bags.

“Juan ...”

“Yes?”

“Don’t feel badly about last night. It was my fault,” she said quietly.

He managed a grin. “I already told you that I am no longer a young man. I have proved it true. I will rest for the next time so that I will do better.”

"When—"

"I don't know. I will call you." He kissed her gently. She drove off a minute later, and he stood there in the parking lot watching her leave, as she would have expected. Then he got into his car. It was nearly four o'clock, and he flipped on the radio to get the hourly news broadcast. Two minutes after that he'd driven the car to the return lot, taken out his bags, and walked into the terminal, looking for the first plane anywhere. A United flight to Atlanta was the next available, and he knew that he could make the necessary connections at that busy terminal. He barely squeezed aboard at the last call.

Moira Wolfe drove home with a smile tinged with guilt. What had happened to Juan the previous night was one of the most humiliating things a man could experience, and it was all her fault. She'd demanded too much of him and he was, as he'd said himself, no longer young. She'd let her enthusiasm take charge of her own judgment, and hurt a man whom she—loved. She was certain now. Moira had thought she'd never know the emotion again, but there it was, with all the carefree splendor of her youth, and if Juan lacked the vigor of those years, he more than compensated with his patience and fantastic skill. She reached down and turned on her radio to an oldies FM channel, and for the remainder of her drive basked in the glow of the most pleasant of emotions, her memories of youthful happiness brought further to the fore by the sounds of the teenage ballads to which she'd danced thirty years before.

She was surprised to see what looked like a Bureau car parked across the street from her house, but it might just as easily have been a cheap rental or something else—except for the radio antenna, she realized. It was a Bureau car. That was odd, she thought. She parked against the curb and got out her bags, walking up the sidewalk, but when the door was opened, she saw Frank Weber, one of the Director's security detail.

"Hi, Frank." Special Agent Weber helped her with the bags, but his expression was serious. "Something wrong?"

There wasn't any easy way of telling her, though Weber felt guilty for spoiling what must have been a very special weekend for her.

"Emil was killed Friday evening. We've been trying to reach you since then."

"What?"

"They got him on the way to the embassy. The whole detail—everybody. Emil's funeral's tomorrow. The rest of'em are Tuesday."

"Oh, my God." Moira sat on the nearest chair. "Eddie—Leo?" She thought of the young agents on Emil's protection detail as her own kids.

"All of them," Weber repeated.

"I didn't know," she said. "I haven't seen a paper or turned on a TV in—since Friday night. Where—?"

"Your kids went out to the movies. We need you to come down to help us out with a few things. We'll have somebody here to look after them for you."

It was several minutes before she was able to go anywhere. The tears started as soon as the reality of Weber's words got past her newly made storehouse of other feelings.

Captain Ramirez didn't like the idea of accompanying Chavez. It wasn't cowardice, of course, but a question of what his part of the job actually was. His command responsibilities were muddled in some ways. As a captain who had recently commanded a company, he had learned that "commanding" isn't quite the same thing as "leading." A company commander is supposed to stay a short distance back from the front line and manage—the Army doesn't like that word—the combat action, maneuvering his units and keeping an overview of the battle underway so that he could control matters while his platoon leaders handled the actual fighting. Having learned to "lead from the front" as a lieutenant, he was supposed to apply his lessons at the next higher level, though there would be times when the captain was expected to take the lead. In this case he was commanding only a squad, and though the mission demanded circumspection and command judgment, the size of his unit demanded personal leadership. Besides, he could not very well send two men out on their first killing mission without being there himself, even though Chavez had far superior movement skills than Captain Ramirez ever expected to attain. The contradiction between his command and leadership responsibilities troubled the young officer, but he came down, as he had to, on the side of leading. He could not exercise command, after all, if his men didn't have confidence in his ability to lead. Somehow he knew that if this one went right, he'd never have the same problem again. Maybe that's how it always worked, he told himself.

After setting up his two fire teams, he and Chavez moved out, heading around the northern side of the airstrip with the sergeant in the lead. It went smoothly. The two targets were still lolling around, smoking their joints—or whatever they were—and talking loudly enough to be heard through a hundred meters of trees. Chavez had planned their approach carefully, drawing on previous nights' perimeter patrolling which Captain Ramirez had ordered. There were no surprises, and after twenty minutes they curved back in and again saw where the airstrip was. Now they moved more slowly.

Chavez kept the lead. The narrow trail that the trucks followed to get in here was a convenient guide. They stayed on the north side of it, which would keep them out of the fire lanes established for the squad's machine guns. Right on time, they sighted the shack. As planned, Chavez waited for his officer to close up from his approach interval of ten meters. They communicated with hand signals. Chavez would move straight in with the captain to his right front. The sergeant would do the shooting, but if anything went wrong, Ramirez would be in position to support him at once. The captain tapped out four dashes on the transmit key of his radio and got two signals back. The squad was in place on the far side of the strip, aware of what was about to

happen and ready to play its part in the action if needed.

Ramirez waved Ding forward.

Chavez took a deep breath, surprised at how rapidly his heart was beating. After all, he'd done this a hundred times before. He jerked his arms around just to get loose, then adjusted the fit of his weapon's sling. His thumb went down on the selector switch, putting the MP-5 on the three-round-burst setting. The sights were painted with small amounts of tritium, and glowed just enough to be visible in the near-total darkness of the equatorial forest. His night-vision goggles were stowed in a pocket. They'd just get in the way if he tried to use them.

He moved very slowly now, moving around trees and bushes, finding firm, uncluttered places for his feet or pushing the leaves out of his way with his toe before setting his boot down for the next step. It was all business. The obvious tension in his body disappeared, though there was something like a buzz in his ear that told him that this was not an exercise.

There.

They were standing in the open, perhaps two meters apart, twenty meters from the tree against which Chavez leaned. They were still talking, and though he could understand their words easily enough, for some reason it was as foreign to him as the barking of dogs. Ding could have gotten closer, but didn't want to take the chance, and twenty meters was close enough—sixty-six feet. It was a clear shot past another tree to both of them.

Okay.

He brought the gun up slowly, centering the ringed forward sight in the aperture rear sight, making sure that he could see the white circle all around, and putting the center post right on the black, circular mass that represented the back of a human head that was no longer part of a human being—it was just a target, just a thing. His finger squeezed gently on the trigger.

The weapon jerked slightly in his grip, but the double-looped sling kept it firmly in place. The target dropped. He moved the gun right even as it fell. The next target was spinning around in surprise, giving him a dull white circle of reflected moonlight to aim at. Another burst. There had hardly been any noise at all. Chavez waited, moving his weapon back and forth across the two bodies, but there was no movement.

Chavez darted out of the trees. One of the bodies clutched an AK-47. He kicked it loose and pulled a penlight from his breast pocket, shining it on the targets. One had taken all three rounds in the back of the head. The other had only caught two, but both through the forehead. The second one's face showed surprise. The first one no longer had a face. The sergeant knelt by the bodies and looked around for further movement and activity. Chavez's only immediate emotion was one of elation. Everything he'd learned and practiced —it all worked! Not exactly easy, but it wasn't a big deal, really.

Ninja really does *own the night.*

Ramirez came over a moment later. There was only one thing he could say.

“Nice work, Sergeant. Check out the shack.” He activated his radio. “This is Six. Targets down, move in.”

The squad was over to the shack in a couple of minutes. As was the usual practice with armies, they clustered around the bodies of the dead guards, getting their first sample of what war was really all about. The intelligence specialist went through their pockets while the captain got the squad spread out in a defensive perimeter.

“Nothing much here,” the intel sergeant told his boss.

“Let’s go see the shack.” Chavez had made sure that there was no additional guard whom they might have overlooked. Ramirez found four gasoline drums and a hand-crank pump. A carton of cigarettes was sitting on one of the gasoline drums, evoking a withering comment from the captain. There was some canned food on a few rough-cut shelves, and a two-roll pack of toilet paper. No books, documents, or maps. A well-thumbed deck of cards was the only other thing found.

“How you wanna booby-trap it?” the intelligence sergeant asked. He was also a former Green Beret, and an expert on setting booby traps.

“Three-way.”

“’Kay.” It was easily done. He dug a small depression in the dirt floor with his hands, taking some wood scraps to firm up the sides. A one-pound block of C-4 plastic explosive—the whole world used it—went snugly into the hole. He inserted two electrical detonators and a pressure switch like the one used for a land mine. The control wires were run along the dirt floor to switches at the door and window, and were set as to be invisible to outside inspection. The sergeant buried the wires under an inch of dirt. Satisfied, he rocked the drum around, bringing it down gently on the pressure switch. If someone opened the door or the window, the C-4 would go off directly underneath a fifty-five-gallon drum of aviation gasoline, with predictable results. Better still, if someone were very clever indeed and defeated the electrical detonators on the door and window, he would then follow the wires to the oil drums in order to recover the explosives for his own later use ... and that very clever person would be removed from the other team. Anyone could kill a dumb enemy. Killing the smart ones required artistry.

“All set up, sir. Let’s make sure nobody goes near the shack from now on, sir,” the intelligence sergeant told his captain.

“Roger that.” The word went out at once. Two men dragged the bodies into the center of the field, and after that, they all settled down to wait for the helicopter. Ramirez redeployed his men to keep the area secured, but the main object of concern now was to have every man inventory his gear to make sure that nothing was left behind.

PJ handled the refueling. The good visibility helped, but would also help if there were anyone on the surface looking for them. The drogue played out from the wing tank of the MC-130E Combat Talon on the end of a reinforced

rubber hose, and the Pave Low's refueling probe extended telescopically, stabbing into the center of it. Though it was often observed that having a helicopter refuel in this way seemed a madly unnatural act—the probe and drogue met twelve feet under the edge of the rotor arc, and contact between blade tips and hose meant certain death for the helicopter crew—the Pave Low crews always responded that it was a very natural act indeed, and one in which, of course, they had ample practice. That didn't alter the fact that Colonel Johns and Captain Willis concentrated to a remarkable degree for the whole procedure, and didn't utter a single unnecessary syllable until it was over.

"Breakaway, breakaway," PJ said as he backed off the drogue and withdrew his probe. He pulled up on the collective and eased back on the stick to pull his rotors up and away from the hose. On command, the MC-130E climbed to a comfortable cruising altitude, where it would circle until the helicopter returned for another fill-up. The Pave Low III turned for the beach, heading down to cross at an unpopulated point.

"Uh-oh," Chavez whispered to himself when he heard the noise. It was the laboring sound of a V-8 engine that needed service, and a new muffler. It was getting louder by the second.

"Six, this is Point, over," he called urgently.

"Six here. Go," Captain Ramirez replied.

"We got company coming in. Sounds like a truck, sir."

"KNIFE, this is Six," Ramirez reacted immediately. "Pull back to the west side. Take your covering positions. Point, fall back now!"

"On the way." Chavez left his listening post on the dirt road and raced back past the shack—he gave it a wide berth—and across the landing strip. There he found Ramirez and Guerra pulling the dead guards toward the far treeline. He helped the captain carry his burden into cover, then came back to assist the operations sergeant. They made the shelter of the trees with twenty seconds to spare.

The pickup traveled with lights ablaze. The glow snaked left and right along the trail, glowing through the underbrush before coming out just next to the shack. The truck stopped, and you could almost see the puzzlement even before the engine was switched off and the men dismounted. As soon as the lights were off, Chavez activated his night goggles. As before, there were four, two from the cab and two from the back. The driver was evidently the boss. He looked around in obvious anger. A moment later he shouted something, then pointed to one of the people who'd jumped out of the back of the truck. One of them walked straight to the shack—

—"Oh, shit!" Ramirez keyed his radio switch. "Everybody get down!" he ordered unnecessarily—

—and wrenched open the door.

A gasoline drum rocketed upward like a space launch, leaving a cone of white flame behind as it blasted through the top of the shack. Flames from the other drums spread laterally. The one who'd opened the door was a silhouette of black, as though he'd just opened the front door of hell, but only for an instant before he vanished in the spreading flames. Two of his companions vanished into the same white-yellow mass. The third was on the edge of the initial blast, and started running away, directly toward the soldiers, before the falling gasoline from the flying drum splashed on him and he became a stick figure made of fire who lasted only ten steps. The circle of flames was forty yards wide, its center composed of four men whose high-pitched screams were distinct above the low-frequency roar of the blaze. Next the truck's fuel tank added its own punctuation to the explosion. There were perhaps two hundred gallons of gasoline afire, sending up a mushroom cloud illuminated by the flames below. In less than a minute the ammunition in various firearms cooked off, sounding like firecrackers within the roaring flames. Only the afternoon's heavy rain prevented the fire from spreading rapidly into the forest.

Chavez realized that he was lying next to the intelligence specialist.

"Nice work on the booby trap."

"Wish the fuckers coulda waited." The screaming was over by now.

"Yeah."

"Everybody check in," Ramirez ordered over the radio. They all did. Nobody was hurt.

The fire died down quickly. The aviation gasoline had been spread thinly over a wide area, and burned rapidly. Within three minutes all that was left was a wide scorched area defined by a perimeter of burning grass and bushes. The truck was a blackened skeleton, its loadbed still alight from the box of flares. They'd continue to burn for quite a while.

"What the hell was that?" Captain Willis wondered in the left seat of the helicopter. They'd just made their first pickup, and on climbing back to cruising altitude, the glow on the horizon looked like a sunrise on their infrared vision systems.

"Plane crash, maybe—that's right on the bearing to the last pickup," Colonel Johns realized belatedly.

"Super."

"Buck, be advised we have possible hostile activity at Pickup Four."

"Right, Colonel," Sergeant Zimmer replied curtly.

With that observation, Colonel Johns continued the mission. He'd find out what he needed to know soon enough. One thing at a time.

Thirty minutes after the explosion, the fire was down enough that the

intelligence sergeant donned his gloves and moved in to try to recover his triggering devices. He found part of one, but the idea, though good, was hopeless. The bodies were left in place, and no attempt was made to search them. Though IDs might have been recovered—leather wallets resist fire reasonably well—their absence would have been noticed. Again the airfield guards were dragged to the center of the northern part of the runway, which was to have been the pickup point anyway. Ramirez redeployed his men to guard against the possibility that someone might have noticed the fire and reported it to someone else. The next concern was the courier flight that was probably heading in tonight. Their experience told them that it was still over two hours away—but they'd seen only one full cycle, and that was a thin basis for making any sort of prediction.

What if the airplane comes in? Ramirez asked himself. He'd already considered the possibility, but now it was an immediate threat.

The crew of that aircraft could not be allowed to report to anyone that they'd seen a large helicopter. On the other hand, leaving bullet holes in the airplane would be almost as clear a message of what had happened.

For that matter, Ramirez asked himself, *why the hell were we ordered to kill those two poor bastards and leave from here instead of the preplanned exfiltration point?*

So, what if an airplane comes in?

He didn't have an answer. Without the flares to mark the strip it wouldn't land. Moreover, one of the new arrivals had brought a small VHF radio. The druggies were smart enough that they'd have radio codes to assure the flight crew that the airfield was safe. So, what if the aircraft just orbited? Which it probably would do. Might the helicopter shoot it down? What if it tried and missed? What if? What if?

Before insertion, Ramirez had thought that the mission had been exquisitely planned, with every contingency thought out—as it had, but halfway through their planned stay they were being yanked out, and the plan had been trashed. What dickhead had decided to do that?

What the hell is going on? he demanded of himself. His men looked to him for information and knowledge and leadership and assurance. He had to pretend that everything was all right, that he was in control. It was all a lie, of course. His greater overall knowledge of the operation only increased his ignorance of the real situation. He was used to being moved around like a chess piece. That was the job of a junior officer—but this was *real.* There were six dead men to prove it.

"KNIFE, this is NIGHT HAWK, over," his high-frequency radio crackled.

"HAWK, this is KNIFE. LZ is the northern edge of RENO. Standing by for extraction, over."

"Bravo X-Ray, over."

Colonel Johns was interrogating for possible trouble. Juliet Zulu was the coded response indicating that they were in enemy hands and that a pickup

was impossible. Charlie Foxtrot meant that there was active contact, but that they could still be gotten out. Lima Whiskey was the all-clear signal.

"Lima Whiskey, over."

"Say again, KNIFE, over."

"Lima Whiskey, over."

"Roger, copy. We are three minutes out."

"Hot guns," PJ ordered his flight crew. Sergeant Zimmer left his instruments to take the right-side gun position. He activated the power to his six-barreled minigun. The newest version of the Gatling gun of yore began spinning, ready to draw shells from the hopper to Zimmer's left.

"Ready right," he reported over the intercom.

"Ready left," Bean said on the other side.

Both men scanned the trees with their night-vision goggles, looking for anything that might be hostile.

"I got a strobe light at ten o'clock," Willis told PJ.

"I see it. Christ—what happened here?"

As the Sikorsky slowed, the four bodies were clearly visible around what had once been a simple wooden shack ... and there was a truck, too. Team KNIFE was right where it was supposed to be, however. And they had two bodies as well.

"Looks clear, Buck."

"Roger, PJ." Zimmer left his gun on and headed aft. Sergeant Bean could jump to the opposite gun station if he had to, but it was Zimmer's job to get a count on the last pickup. He did his best to avoid stepping on people as he moved, but the soldiers understood when his feet landed on several of them. Soldiers are typically quite forgiving toward those who lift them out of hostile territory.

Chavez kept his strobe on until the helicopter touched down, then ran to join his squad. He found Captain Ramirez standing by the ramp, counting them off as they raced aboard. Ding waited his turn, then the captain's hand thumped down on his shoulder.

"Ten!" he heard as he leaped over several bodies on the ramp. He heard the number again from the big Air Force sergeant, then: "Eleven! Go-go-go!" as the captain came aboard.

The helicopter lifted off immediately. Chavez fell hard onto the steel deck, where Vega grabbed him. Ramirez came down next to him, then rose and followed Zimmer forward.

"What happened here?" PJ asked Ramirez a minute later. The infantry

officer filled him in quickly. Colonel Johns increased power somewhat and kept low, which he would have done anyway. He ordered Zimmer to stay at the ramp for two minutes, watching for a possible aircraft, but it never appeared. Buck came forward, killed power to his gun, and resumed his vigil with the flight instruments. Within ten minutes they were "feet-wet," over the water, looking for their tanker to top off for the flight back to Panama. In the back, the infantrymen buckled into place and promptly began dropping off to sleep.

But not Chavez and Vega, who found themselves sitting next to six bodies, lying together on the ramp. Even for professional soldiers—one of whom had done some of the killing—it was a grisly sight. But not as bad as the explosions. Neither had ever seen pictures of people burning to death, and even for druggies, they agreed, it was a bad way out.

The helicopter ride became rough as the Pave Low entered the propwash from the tanker, but it was soon over. A few minutes after that, Sergeant Bean —the little one, as Chavez thought of him—came aft, walking carefully over the soldiers. He clipped his safety belt to a fitting on the deck, then spoke into his helmet microphone. Nodding, he went aft to the ramp. Bean motioned to Chavez for a hand. Ding grabbed the man's belt at the waist and watched him kick the bodies off the edge of the ramp. It seemed kind of cold, but then, the scout reflected, it no longer mattered to the druggies. He didn't look aft to see them hit the water, but instead settled back down for a nap.

A hundred miles behind them, a twin-engined private plane circled over where the landing strip—known to the flight crew simply as Number Six—was still marked by a vaguely circular array of flames. They could see where the clearing was, but the airstrip itself wasn't marked with flares, and without that visual reference a landing attempt would have been madness. Frustrated, yet also relieved because they knew what had happened to a number of flights over the previous two weeks, they turned back for their regular airfield. On landing they made a telephone call.

Cortez had risked a direct flight from Panama to Medellín, though he did place the charge on an as-yet unused credit card so that the name couldn't be tracked. He drove his personal car to his home and immediately tried to contact Escobedo, only to discover that he was at his hilltop hacienda. Félix didn't have the energy to drive that far this, late on a long day, nor would he entrust a substantive conversation to a cellular phone, despite all the assurances about how safe those channels were. Tired, angry, and frustrated for a dozen reasons, he poured himself a stiff drink and went off to bed. All that effort wasted, he swore at the darkness. He'd never be able to use Moira again. Would never call her, never talk to her, never see her. And the fact that his last "performance" with her had ended in failure, caused by his fears at what he'd thought—correctly!—his boss had done, merely put more genuine emotion into his profanities.

Before dawn a half-dozen trucks visited a half-dozen different airfields. Two groups of men died fiery deaths. A third entered the airfield shack and found exactly what they'd expected to find: nothing. The other three found their airstrips entirely normal, the guards in place, content and bored with the monotony of their duties. When two of the trucks failed to return, others were sent out after them, and the necessary information quickly found its way to Medellin. Cortez was awakened by the phone and given new travel orders.

In Panama, all of the infantrymen were still asleep. They'd be allowed to stand down for a full day, and sleep in air-conditioned comfort—under heavy blankets-after hot showers and meals which, if not especially tasty, were at least different from the MREs they'd had for the preceding week. The four officers, however, were awakened early and taken elsewhere for a new briefing. Operation SHOWBOAT, they learned, had taken a very serious turn. They also learned why, and the source of their new orders was as exhilarating as it was troubling.

The new S-3, operations officer, for the 3rd Battalion of the 17th Infantry, which formed part of the First Brigade, 7th Infantry Division (Light), checked out his office while his wife struggled with the movers. Already sitting on his desk was a Mark-2 Kevlar helmet, called a Fritz for its resemblance to the headgear of the old German Wehrmacht. For the 7th LID, the camouflage cloth cover was further decorated with knotted shreds of the same material used for their battle-dress uniform fatigues. Most of the wives referred to it as the Cabbage Patch Hat, and like a cabbage, it broke up the regular outline of the helmet, making it harder to spot. The battalion commander was off at a briefing, along with the XO, and the new S-3 decided to meet with the S-1, or personnel officer. It turned out that they'd served together in Germany five years before, and they caught up on personal histories over coffee.

"So how was Panama?"

"Hot, miserable, and I don't need to fill you in on the political side. Funny thing—just before I left I ran into one of your Ninjas."

"Oh, yeah? Which one?"

"Chavez. Staff sergeant, I think. Bastard wasted me on an exercise."

"I remember him. He was a good one with, uh ... Sergeant Bascomb?"

"Yes, Major?" A head appeared at the office door.

"Staff Sergeant Chavez—who was he with?"

"Bravo Company, sir. Lieutenant Jackson's platoon ... second squad, I think. Yeah, Corporal Ozkanian took it over. Chavez transferred out to Fort Benning, he's a basic-training instructor now," Sergeant Bascomb remembered.

"You sure about that?" the new S-3 asked.

“Yes, sir. The paperwork got a little ruffled. He’s one of the guys who had to check out in a hurry. Remember, Major?”

“Oh, yeah. That was a cluster-fuck, wasn’t it?”

“Roge-o, Major,” the NCO agreed.

“What the hell was he doing running an FTX in the Canal Zone?” the operations officer wondered.

“Lieutenant Jackson might know, sir,” Bascomb offered.

“You’ll meet him tomorrow,” the S-1 told the new S-3.

“Any good?”

“For a new kid fresh from the Hudson, yeah, he’s doing just fine. Good family. Preacher’s kid, got a brother flies fighter planes for the Navy—squadron commander, I think. Bumped into him at Monterey awhile back. Anyway, Tim’s got a good platoon sergeant to teach him the ropes.”

“Well, that was one pretty good sergeant, that Chavez kid. I’m not used to having people sneak up on me!” The S-3 fingered the scab on his face. “Damn if he didn’t, though.”

“We got a bunch of good ones, Ed. You’re gonna like it here. How ’bout lunch?”

“Sounds good to me. When do we start PT in the morning?”

“Zero-six-fifteen. The boss likes to run.”

The new S-3 grunted on his way out the door. Welcome back to the real Army.

“Looks like our friends down there are a little pissed,” Admiral Cutter observed. He held a telex form that had emanated from the CAPER side of the overall operation. “Who was it came up with the idea of tapping into their communications?”

“Mr. Clark,” the DDO replied.

“The same one who—”

“The same.”

“What can you tell me about him?”

“Ex-Navy SEAL, served nineteen months in Southeast Asia in one of those special operations groups that never officially existed. Got shot up a few times,” Ritter explained. “Left the service as a chief bosun’s mate, age twenty-eight. He was one of the best they ever had. He’s the guy who went in and saved Dutch Maxwell’s boy.”

Cutter’s eyes went active at that. “I knew Dutch Maxwell, spent some time on his staff when I was a j.g. So, he’s the guy who saved Sonny’s ass? I never did hear the whole story on that.”

“Admiral Maxwell made him a chief on the spot. That’s when he was COMAIRPAC. Anyway, he left the service and got married, went into the commercial diving business—the demolitions side; he’s an expert with explosives, too. But his wife got killed in a car accident down in Mississippi. That’s when things started going bad for him. Met a new girl, but she was kidnapped and murdered by a local drug ring—seems she was a mule for them before they met. Our former SEAL decided to go big-game hunting on his own hook. Did pretty well, but the police got a line on him. Anyway, Admiral Maxwell was OP-03 by then. He caught a rumble, too. He knew James Greer from the old days, and one thing led to another. We decided that Mr. Clark had some talents we needed. So the Agency helped stage his ‘death’ in a boating accident. We changed his name—new identity, the whole thing, and now he works for us.”

“How—”

“It’s not hard. His service records are just gone. Same thing we did with the SHOWBOAT people. His fingerprints in the FBI file were changed—that was back when Hoover still ran things and, well, there were ways. He died and got himself reborn as John Clark.”

“What’s he done since?” Cutter asked, enjoying the conspiratorial aspects of this.

“Mainly he’s an instructor down at The Farm. Every so often we have a special job that requires his special talents,” Ritter explained. “He’s the guy who went on the beach to get Gerasimov’s wife and daughter, for example.”

“Oh. And this all started because of a drug thing?”

“That’s right. He has a special, dark place in his heart for druggies. Hates the bastards. It’s about the only thing he’s not professional about.”

“Not pro—”

“I don’t mean it that way. He’ll enjoy doing this job. It won’t affect how he does it, but he will enjoy it. I don’t want you to misunderstand me. Clark is a very capable field officer. He’s got great instincts, and he’s got brains. He knows how to plan it, and he knows how to run it.”

“So what’s his plan?”

“You’ll love it.” Ritter opened his portfolio and started taking papers out. Most of them, Cutter saw, were “overhead imagery” —satellite photographs.

“Lieutenant Jackson?”

“Good morning, sir,” Tim said to the new battalion operations officer after cracking off a book-perfect salute. The S-3 was walking the battalion area, getting himself introduced.

“I’ve heard some pretty good things about you.” That was always something that a new second lieutenant wanted to hear. “And I met one of your squad leaders.”

"Which one, sir?"

"Chavez, I think."

"Oh, you just in from Fort Benning, Major?"

"No, I was an instructor at the Jungle Warfare School, down in Panama."

"What was Chavez doing down there?" Lieutenant Jackson wondered.

"Killing me," the major replied with a grin. "All your people that good?"

"He was my best squad leader. That's funny, they were supposed to send him off to be a drill sergeant."

"That's the Army for you. I'm going out with Bravo Company tomorrow night for the exercise down at Hunter-Liggett. Just thought I'd let you know."

"Glad to have you along, sir," Tim Jackson told the Major. It wasn't strictly true, of course. He was still learning how to be a leader of men, and oversight made him uncomfortable, though he knew that it was something he'd have to learn to live with. He was also puzzled by the news on Chavez, and made a mental note to have Sergeant Mitchell check that out. After all, Ding was still one of "his" men.

"Clark." That was how he answered the phone. And this one came in on his "business" line.

"It's a Go. Be here at ten tomorrow morning."

"Right." Clark replaced the phone.

"When?" Sandy asked.

"Tomorrow."

"How long?"

"A couple of weeks. Not as long as a month." *Probably,* he didn't add.

"Is it—"

"Dangerous?" John Clark smiled at his wife. "Honey, if I do my job right, no, it's not dangerous."

"Why is it," Sandra Burns Clark wondered, "that I'm the one with gray hair?"

"That's because I can't go into the hair parlor and have it fixed. You can."

"It's about the drug people, isn't it?"

"You know I can't talk about that. It would just get you worried anyway, and there's no real reason to worry," he lied to his wife. Clark did a lot of that. She knew it, of course, and for the most part she wanted to be lied to. But not this time.

Clark returned his attention to the television. Inwardly he smiled. He hadn't gone after druggies for a long, long time, and he'd never tried to go this far up

the ladder—back then he hadn't known how, hadn't had the right information. Now he had everything he needed for the job. Including presidential authorization. There were advantages to working for the Agency.

Cortez surveyed the airfield—what was left of it—with a mixture of satisfaction and anger. Neither the police nor the army had come to visit yet, though eventually they would. Whoever had been here, he saw, had done a thorough, professional job.

So what am I supposed to think? he asked himself. Did the Americans send some of their Green Berets in? This was the last of five airstrips that he'd examined today, moved about by a helicopter. Though not a forensic detective by training, he had been thoroughly schooled in booby traps and knew exactly what to look for. Exactly what he would have done.

The two guards who'd been here, as at the other sites, were simply gone. That surely meant that they were dead, of course, but the only real knowledge he had was that they were gone. Perhaps he was supposed to think that they had set the explosives, but they were simple peasants in the pay of the Cartel, untrained ruffians who probably hadn't even patrolled around the area to make certain that ...

"Follow me." He left the helicopter with one of his assistants in trail. This one was a former police officer who did have some rudimentary intelligence; at least he knew how to follow simple orders.

If I wanted to keep watch of a place like this ... I'd think about cover, and I'd think about the wind, and I'd think about a quick escape....

One thing about military people was that they were predictable.

They'd want a place from which they could watch the length of the airstrip, and also keep an eye on the refueling shack. That meant one of two corners, Cortez judged, and he walked off toward the northwest one. He spent a half hour prowling the bushes in silence with a confused man behind him.

"Here is where they were," Félix said to himself. The dirt just behind the mound of dirt was smoothed down. Men had lain there. There was also the imprint from the bipod of a machine gun.

He couldn't tell how long they'd watched the strip, but he suspected that here was the explanation for the disappearing aircraft. Americans? If so, what agency did they work for? CIA? DEA? Some special-operations group from the military, perhaps?

And why were they pulled out?

And why had they made their departure so obvious?

What if the guards were not dead? What if the Americans had bought them off?

Cortez stood and brushed the mud off his trousers. They were sending a message. Of course. After the murder of their FBI Director—he hadn't had time to talk to *el jefe* about that act of lunacy yet—they wanted to send a

message so that such things were not to be repeated.

That the Americans had done anything at all was unusual, of course. After all, kidnapping and/or killing American citizens was about the safest thing any international terrorist could do. The CIA had allowed one of their station chiefs to be tortured to death in Lebanon—and done nothing. All those Marines blown up—and the Americans had done nothing. Except for the occasional attempt at sending a message. The Americans were fools. They'd tried to send messages to the North Vietnamese for nearly ten years, and failed, and *still* they hadn't learned better. So this time, instead of doing nothing at all, they'd done something that was less useful than nothing. To have so much power and have so little appreciation of it, Cortez thought. Not like the Russians. When some of their people had been kidnapped in Lebanon, the KGB's First Directorate men had snatched their own hostages off the street and returned them—one version said headless, another with more intimate parts removed—immediately after which the missing Russians had been returned with something akin to an apology. For all their crudeness, the Russians understood how the game was played. They were predictable, and played by all the classic rules of clandestine behavior so that their enemies knew what would not be tolerated. They were serious. And they were taken seriously.

Unlike the Americans. As much as he warned his employer to be wary of them, Cortez was sure that they wouldn't answer even something as outrageous as the murder of senior officials of their government.

That was too bad, Cortez told himself. He could have made it work for him.

"Good evening, boss," Ryan said as he took his seat.

"Hi, Jack." Admiral Greer smiled as much as he could. "How do you like the new job?"

"Well, I'm keeping your chair warm."

"It's your chair now, son," the DDI pointed out. "Even if I do get out of here, I think it's time to retire."

Jack didn't like the way he pronounced the word *if*.

"I don't think I'm ready yet, sir."

"Nobody's ever ready. Hell, when I was still a naval officer, about the time I actually learned how to do the job, it was time to leave. That's the way life is, Jack."

Ryan thought that one over as he surveyed the room. Admiral Greer was getting his nourishment through clear plastic tubes. A blue-green gadget that looked like a splint kept the needles in his arm, but he could see where previous IV lines had "infiltrated" and left ugly bruises. That was always a bad sign. Next to the IV bottle was a smaller one, piggybacked with the D5W. That was the medication he was being given, the chemotherapy. It was a fancy name for poison, and poison was exactly what it was, a biocide that was

supposed to kill the cancer a little faster than it killed the patient. He didn't know what this one was, some acronym or other that designated a compound developed at the National Institutes of Health instead of the Army's Chemical Warfare Center. Or maybe, Jack thought, they cooperated on such concoctions. Certainly Greer looked as though he were the victim of some dreadful, vicious experiment.

But that wasn't true. The best people in the field were doing everything they knew to keep him alive. And failing. Ryan had never seen his boss so thin. It seemed that every time he came—never less than three times per week—he'd lost additional weight. His eyes burned with defiant energy, but the light at the end of this painful tunnel was not recovery. He knew it. So did Jack. There was only one thing he could do to ease the pain. And this he did. Jack opened his briefcase and took out some documents.

"You want to look these over." Ryan handed them over.

They nearly tangled on the IV lines, and Greer grumbled his annoyance at the plastic spaghetti.

"You're leaving for Belgium tomorrow night, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Give my regards to Rudi and Franz from the BND. And watch the local beer, son."

Ryan laughed. "Yes, sir."

Admiral Greer scanned through the first folder. "The Hungarians are still at it, I see."

"They got the word to cool it down, and they have, but the underlying problem isn't going to go away. I think it's in the interests of everyone concerned that they should cool it. Our friend Gerasimov has given us some tips on how to get word to a few people ourselves."

Greer nearly laughed at that. "It figures. How is the former KGB Director adapting to life in America?"

"Not as well as his daughter is. Turns out that she always wanted a nose job. Well, she got her wish." Jack grinned. "Last time I saw her she was working on a tan. She restarts college next fall. The wife is still a little antsy, and Gerasimov is still cooperating. We haven't figured out what to do with him when we're finished, though."

"Tell Arthur to show him my old place up in Maine. He'll like the climate, and it ought to be easy to guard."

"I'll pass that along."

"How do you like being let in on all the Operations stuff?" James Greer asked.

"Well, what I've seen is interesting enough, but there's still 'need-to-know' to worry about."

"Says who?" the DDI asked in surprise.

“Says the Judge,” Jack replied. “They have a couple of things poppin’ that they don’t want me in on.”

“Oh, really?” Greer was quiet for a moment. “Jack, in case nobody ever told you, the Director, the Deputy Director—they still haven’t refilled that slot, have they?—and the directorate chiefs are cleared for everything. You are now a chief of directorate. There isn’t anything you aren’t supposed to know. You have to know. You brief Congress.”

Ryan waved it off. It wasn’t important, really. “Well, maybe the Judge doesn’t see things that way and—”

The DDI tried to sit up in bed. “Listen up, son. What you just said is bullshit! You *have* to know, and you tell Arthur I said so. That ‘need-to-know’ crap stops at the door to my office.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll take care of that.” Ryan didn’t want his boss to get upset. He was only an acting chief of directorate, after all, and he was accustomed to being cut out of operational matters which, for the past six years, he’d been quite content to leave to others. Jack wasn’t ready to challenge the DCI on something like this. His responsibility for the Intelligence Directorate’s output to Congress, of course, was something he would make noise over.

“I’m not kidding, Jack.”

“Yes, sir.” Ryan pointed to another folder. He’d fight that battle after he got back from Europe. “Now, this development in South Africa is especially interesting and I want your opinion....”

15.

Deliverymen

CLARK WALKED OFF the United flight in San Diego and rented a car for the drive to the nearby naval base. It didn't take very long. He felt the usual pang of nostalgia when he saw the towering gray-blue hulls. He'd once been a part of this team, and though he'd been young and foolish then, he remembered it fondly as a time in which things were simpler.

USS *Ranger* was a busy place. Clark parked his car at the far end of the area used by the enlisted crewmen and walked toward the quay, dodging around the trucks, cranes, and other items of mobile hardware that cycled in and out from their numerous tasks. The carrier was preparing to sail in another eight hours, and her thousands of sailors were on-loading all manner of supplies. Her flight deck was empty save for a single old F-4 Phantom fighter which no longer had any engines and was used for training new members of the flight-deck crew. The carrier's air wing was scattered among three different naval air stations and would fly out after the carrier sailed. That fact spared the pilots of the wing from the tumult normal to a carrier's departure. Except for one.

Clark walked up to the officer's brow, guarded by a Marine corporal who had his name written down on his clipboard list of official visitors. The Marine checked off the line on his list and lifted the dock phone to make the call that was mandated by his instructions. Clark just kept going up the steps, entering the carrier at the hangar-deck level, then looking around for a way topside. Finding one's way around a carrier is not easy for the uninitiated, but if you kept going up you generally found the flight deck soon enough. This he did, heading for the forward starboard-side elevator. Standing there was an officer whose khaki collar bore the silver leaf of a Commander, USN. There was also a gold star over one shirt pocket that denoted command at sea. Clark was looking for the CO of a squadron of Grumman A-6E Intruder medium attack bombers.

"Your name Jensen?" he asked. He'd flown down early to make this appointment.

"That's right, sir. Roy Jensen. And you are Mr. Carlson?"

Clark smiled. "Something like that." He motioned to the officer to follow him forward. The flight deck here was idle. Most of the loading activity was aft. They walked toward the bow across the black no-skid decking material, little different from the blacktop on any country road. Both men had to talk loudly to be heard. There was plenty of noise from the dock, plus a fifteen-knot onshore wind. Several people could see the two men talking, but with all

the activity on the carrier's flight deck, there was little likelihood that anyone would notice. And you couldn't bug a flight deck. Clark handed over an envelope and let Jensen read its contents before taking it back. By this time they were nearly at the bow, standing between the two catapult tracks.

"This for-real?"

"That's right. Can you handle it?"

Jensen thought for a moment, staring off into the naval base.

"Sure. Who's going to be on the ground?"

"Not supposed to tell you—but it's going to be me."

"The battle group's not supposed to be going down there, you know—"

"That's already been changed."

"What about the weapons?"

"They're being loaded aboard *Shasta* tomorrow. They'll be painted blue, and they're light for—"

"I know. I did one of the drops a few weeks ago over at China Lake."

"Your CAG will get the orders three days from now. But he won't know what's happening. Neither will anybody else. We'll have a 'tech-rep' flown aboard with the weapons. He'll baby-sit the mission from this side. Your BDA cassettes go to him. Nobody else sees them. He's bringing his own set, and they're color-coded with orange-and-purple tape so they don't get mixed up with anything else. You got a B/N you can trust to keep his mouth shut?"

"With these orders?" Commander Jensen asked. "No sweat."

"Fair enough. The 'tech-rep' will have the details when he gets aboard. He reports to the CAG first, but he'll ask to see you. From there on it's eyes-only. The CAG'll know that it's a quiet project. If he asks about it, just tell him it's a Drop-Ex to evaluate a new weapon." Clark raised an eyebrow. "It really is a Drop-Ex, isn't it?"

"The people we're—"

"What people? You do not need to know. You do not want to know," Clark said. "If you have a problem with that, I want you to tell me right now."

"Hey, I told you we could do it. I was just curious."

"You're old enough to know better." Clark delivered the line gently. He didn't want to insult the man, though he did have to get the message across.

"Okay."

USS *Ranger* was about to deploy for an extended battle-group exercise whose objective was work-ups: battle practice to prepare the group for a deployment to the Indian Ocean. They were scheduled for three weeks of intensive operations that involved everything from carrier landing practice to underway-replenishment drills, with a mock attack from another carrier battle group returning from WestPac. The operations would be carried out,

Commander Jensen had just learned, about three hundred miles from Panama instead of farther west. The squadron commander wondered who had the juice to reroute a total of thirty-one ships, some of them outrageous fuelhogs. That confirmed the source of the orders he'd just been given. Jensen was a careful man; though he'd gotten a very official telephone call, and the orders hand-delivered by Mr. Carlson said everything they needed to say, it was nice to have outside confirmation.

"That's it. You'll get notice when you need it. Figure eight hours or so of warning time. That enough?"

"No sweat. I'll make sure the ordies put the weapons in a convenient place. You be careful on the ground, Mr. Carlson."

"I'll try." Clark shook hands with the pilot and walked aft to find his way off the ship. He'd be catching another plane in two hours.

The Mobile cops were in a particularly foul mood. Bad enough that one of their own had been murdered in such an obvious, brutal way, Mrs. Braden had made the mistake of coming to the door to see what was wrong and caught two rounds herself. The surgeons had almost saved her, but after thirty-six hours that too was over, and all the police had to show for it was a kid not yet old enough to drive who claimed to have hit one of the killers with his granddad's Marlin '39, and some bloodstains that might or might not have supported the story. The police preferred to believe that Braden had scored for the points, of course, but the experienced homicide investigators knew that a two-inch belly gun was the next thing to useless unless the shoot-out were held inside a crowded elevator. Every cop in Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Louisiana was looking for a blue Plymouth Voyager minivan with two male Caucs, black hair, medium, medium, armed and dangerous, suspected cop-killers.

The van was found Monday afternoon by a concerned citizen—there really were some in Alabama—who called the local county sheriff's office, who in turned called the Mobile force.

"The kid was right," the lieutenant in charge of the case observed. The body on the back of the van was about as distasteful to behold as any cadaver would be after two days locked inside a car, in Alabama, in June, but for all that the hole near the base of the skull, just at the hairline, was definitely a .22. It was also clear that the killer had died in the right-front seat, hemorrhaging explosively from the head wound. There was one more thing.

"I've seen this guy. He's a druggie," another detective observed.

"So what was Ernie wrapped up with?"

"Christ knows. What about his kids?" the detective asked. "They lose their mom and dad—we gonna tell the whole fucking world that their dad was a dirty cop? Do that to a couple of orphaned kids?"

It merely required a single look for both men to agree that, no, you couldn't

do something like that. They'd find a way to make Ernie a hero, and damned sure somebody'd give the Sanderson kid a pat on the head.

"Do you realize what you have done?" Cortez asked. He'd steeled himself going in to restrain his temper. In an organization of Latins, his would be—had to be—the only voice of reason. They would respect that in the same sense that the Romans valued chastity: a rare and admirable commodity best found in others.

"I have taught the *norteamericanos* a lesson," Escobedo replied with arrogant patience that nearly defeated Félix's self-discipline.

"And what did they do in reply?"

Escobedo made a grand gesture with his hand, a gesture of power and satisfaction. "The sting of an insect."

"You also know, of course, that after all the effort I made to establish a valuable information source, you have pissed it away like—"

"What source?"

"The secretary of the FBI Director," Cortez answered with his own self-satisfied smile.

"And you cannot use her again?" Escobedo was puzzled.

Fool! "Not unless you wish me to be arrested, *jefe.* Were that to happen, my services would cease to be useful to you. We could have used information from this woman, carefully, over years. We could have identified attempts to infiltrate the organization. We could have discovered what new ideas the norteamericanos have, and countered them, again carefully and thoughtfully, protecting our operations while allowing them enough successes to think that they were accomplishing something." Cortez almost said that he'd just figured out why all those aircraft had disappeared, but didn't. His anger wasn't under that much control. Félix was just beginning to realize that he really could supplant the man who sat behind the desk. But first he would have to demonstrate his value to the organization and gradually prove to all of the criminals that he was more useful than this buffoon. Better to let them stew in their own juice for a while, the better to appreciate the difference between a trained intelligence professional and a pack of self-taught and over-rich smugglers.

Ryan gazed down at the ocean, forty-two thousand feet below him. The VIP treatment wasn't hard to get used to. As a directorate chief he also rated a special flight from Andrews direct to a military airfield outside of the NATO headquarters at Mons, Belgium. He was representing the Agency at a semiannual conference with his intelligence counterparts from the European Alliance. It would be a major performance. He had a speech to give, and favorable impressions to make. Though he knew many of the people who'd be there, he'd always been an upscale gofer for James Greer. Now he had to

prove himself. But he'd succeed. Ryan was sure of that. He had three of his own department heads along, and a comfortable seat on a VC- 20A to remind him how important he was. He didn't know that it was the same bird that had taken Emil Jacobs to Colombia. That was just as well. For all his education, Ryan remained superstitious.

As Executive Assistant Director (Investigations), Bill Shaw was the Bureau's senior official, and until a new Director was appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate, he'd be acting Director. That might last for a while. It was a presidential election year, and with the coming of summer, people were thinking about conventions, not appointments. Perversely, Shaw didn't mind a bit. That meant that he'd be running things, and for a case of this magnitude, the Bureau needed an experienced cop at the helm. "Political realities" were not terribly important to William Shaw. Crime cases were something that agents solved, and to him the case was everything. His first act on learning of the death of Director Jacobs had been to recall his friend, Dan Murray. It would be Dan's job to oversee the case from his deputy assistant director's office, since there were at least two elements to it: the investigation in Colombia and the one in Washington. Murray's experience as legal attaché in London gave him the necessary political sensitivity to understand that the overseas aspect of the case might not be handled to the Bureau's satisfaction. Murray entered Shaw's office at seven that morning. Neither had gotten much sleep in the previous two days, but they'd sleep on the plane. Director Jacobs would be buried in Chicago today, and they'd be flying out on the plane with the body to attend the funeral.

"Well?"

Dan flipped open his folder. "I just talked to Morales in Bogotá. The shooter they bagged is a stringer for M-19, and he doesn't know shit. Name is Hector Buente, age twenty, college dropout from the University of the Andes—bad marks. Evidently the locals leaned on him a little bit—Morales says they're pretty torqued about this—but the kid doesn't know much. The shooters got a heads-up for an important job several days ago, but they didn't know what or where until four hours before it actually took place. They didn't know who was in the car aside from the ambassador. There was another team of shooters, by the way, staked out on a different route. They have some names, and the local cops're taking the town apart looking for them. I think that's a dead end. It was a contract job, and the people who know anything are long gone."

"What about places they fired from?"

"Broke in both apartments. They undoubtedly had the places surveyed beforehand. When the time came, they got in, tied up—actually cuffed—the owners, and sat it out. A real professional job from beginning to end," Murray said.

"Four hours' warning?"

"Correct."

"That makes it after the time the plane lifted off Andrews," Shaw observed.

Murray nodded. "That makes it clear that the leak was on our side. The airplane's flight plan was filed for Grenada—where the bird actually ended up. That was changed two hours out from the destination. The Colombian Attorney General was the only guy who knew that Emil was going down, and he didn't spread the word until *three* hours before the landing. Other senior government members knew that something was up, and that could explain the alert order to our M-19 friends, but the timing just isn't right. The leak was here unless their AG himself blew the cover off. Morales says that's very unlikely. The man is supposed to be the local Oliver Cromwell, honest as God and the balls of a lion. No mistress to blab to or anything like that. The leak was on our end, Bill."

Shaw rubbed his eyes and thought about some more coffee, but he had enough caffeine in his system already to hyperactivate a statue. "Go on."

"We've interviewed everyone who knew about the trip. Needless to say, nobody claims to have talked. I've ordered a subpoena to check phone records, but I don't expect anything there."

"What about—"

"The guys at Andrews?" Dan smiled. "They're on the list. Maybe forty people, tops, who could have known that the Director was taking a flight. That includes people who found out up to an hour *after* the bird lifted off."

"Physical evidence?"

"Well, we have one of the RPG launchers and assorted other weapons. The Colombian Army troops reacted damned well—Christ, running into a building where you *know* there's heavy weapons, that's real balls. The M-19ers were carrying Soviet-bloc light weapons also, probably from Cuba, but that's incidental. I'd like to ask the Sovs to help us identify the RPG lot and shipment."

"You think we'll get any cooperation?"

"The worst thing they can say is no, Bill. We'll see if this *glasnost* crap is for-real or not."

"Okay, ask."

"The rest of the physical side is pretty straightforward. It'll confirm what we already know, but that's about it. Maybe the Colombians will be able to work their way back through M-19, but I doubt it. They've been working on that group for quite a while, and it's a tough nut."

"Okay."

"You look a little punked out, Bill," Murray observed. "We got young agents to burn both ends of the candle. Us old farts are supposed to know about pacing ourselves."

"Yeah, well, I have all this other stuff to get current with." Shaw waved at his desk.

"When's the plane leave?"

"Ten-thirty."

"Well, I'm going to go back to my office and grab a piece of the couch. I suggest you do the same."

Shaw realized that it wasn't such a bad idea. Ten minutes later, he'd done the same, asleep despite all the coffee he'd drunk. An hour after that, Moira Wolfe came to his door minutes ahead of the time his own executive secretary showed up. She knocked but got no answer. She didn't want to open the door, didn't want to disturb Mr. Shaw, even though there was something important that she wanted to tell him. It could wait until they were all on the airplane.

"Hi, Moira," Shaw's secretary said, catching her on the way out. "Anything wrong?"

"I wanted to see Mr. Shaw, but I think he's asleep. He's been working straight through since—"

"I know. You look like you could use some rest, too."

"Tonight, maybe."

"Want me to tell him—"

"No, I'll see him on the airplane."

There was a mixup on the subpoena. The agent who'd made the arrangements had gotten the name of the wrong judge from the U.S. Attorney, and found himself sitting in the anteroom until 9:30 because the judge was also late coming in this Monday morning. Ten minutes after that, he had everything he needed. The good news was that it was but a short drive to the phone company, and that the local Bell office could access all the billing records it needed. The total list was nearly a hundred names, with over two hundred phone numbers and sixty-one credit cards, some of which were not AT&T. It took an hour to get a hard copy of all the records, and the agent rechecked the numbers he had written down to make sure that there hadn't been any garbles or overlooks. He was a new agent, only a few months out of the Academy, on his first assignment to the Washington Field Division, essentially running an important errand for his supervisor as he learned the ropes, and he hadn't paid all that much attention to the data he'd just received. He didn't know, for example, that a 58 prefix on a certain telephone number denoted an overseas call to Venezuela. But he was young, and he'd know that before lunch.

The aircraft was a VC-135, the military version of the old 707. It was windowless, which the passengers always enjoyed, but had a large cargo door that was necessary for loading Director Jacobs aboard for his last trip to Chicago. The President was in another aircraft, scheduled to arrive at O'Hare International a few minutes ahead of this one. He would speak both at the temple and the graveside.

Shaw, Murray, and several other senior FBI officials rode in the second aircraft, which was often used for similar missions, and had the appropriate hardware to keep the casket in place in the forward section of the cabin. It gave them a chance to stare at the polished oak box for the entire flight, without even a small window to distract them. Somehow that brought it home more than anything else might have done. It was a very quiet flight, only the whine of the turbofan engines to keep the living and the dead company.

But the aircraft was part of the President's own fleet, and had all of the communications gear needed for that duty. An Air Force lieutenant came aft, asking for Murray, then led him forward to the communications console.

Mrs. Wolfe was in an aisle seat thirty feet aft of the senior executives. There were tears streaming down her face, and while she remembered that there was something she ought to tell Mr. Shaw, this wasn't the time or place, was it? It didn't really matter anyway—just that she'd made a mistake when the agent had interviewed her the previous afternoon. It was the shock of the event, really. It was so—hard. Her life had known too many losses in the past few years, and the mental whiplash of the weekend had ... what? Confused her? She didn't know. But this wasn't the right time. Today was a time to remember the best boss she'd ever had, a man who was every bit as thoughtful to her as he'd ever been to the agents who lionized him. She saw Mr. Murray walk forward for something or other, past the coffin that her hand had brushed on the way in, her last goodbye to the Director.

The call didn't take more than a minute. Murray emerged from the small radio compartment, his face as much under control as it ever was. He didn't look again at the casket, just looked aft, Moira saw, straight down the aisle before he took his place next to his wife.

"Oh, shit!" Dan muttered to himself after he was seated. His wife's head snapped around. It wasn't the sort of thing you say at a funeral. She touched his arm, but Murray shook his head. When he looked at his wife, the expression she saw was sadness, but not grief.

The flight lasted just over an hour. The honor guard came up from the rear of the aircraft to take charge of the Director, all polished and scrubbed in their dress uniforms. After they were out, the passengers exited to find the rest of the assembly waiting for them on the tarmac, watched by distant TV news cameras. The honor guard marched their burden behind two flags, that of their nation and the banner of the FBI, emblazoned with the "Fidelity—Bravery—Integrity" motto of the Bureau. Murray watched as the wind played with the flag, watched the words curl and flap in the breeze, and realized just how intangible such words really were. But he couldn't tell Bill just yet. It would be noticed.

"Well, now we know why we wasted the airfield." Chavez watched the ceremony in the squad bay of the barracks. It was all very clear to him now.

"But why'd they yank us out?" Vega asked.

"We're going back, *Oso*. An' the air's gonna be thin where we're goin' back to."

Larson didn't need to watch the TV coverage. He hovered over a map, plotting known and suspected processing sites southwest of Medellín. He knew the areas—who didn't?—but isolating individual locations ... that was harder, but, again, it was a technological question. The United States had invented modern reconnaissance technology and spent almost thirty years perfecting it. He was in Florida, having flown to the States ostensibly to take delivery of a new aircraft, which had unaccountably developed engine problems.

"How long have we been doing this?"

"Only a couple of months," Ritter answered.

Even with so thin a data base, it wasn't all that hard. All of the towns and villages in the area were plotted, of course, even individual houses. Since nearly all had electricity, they were easy to spot, and once identified, the computer simply erased them electronically. That left energy sources that were not towns, villages, and individual farmsteads. Of these, some were regular or fairly so. It had been arbitrarily decided that anything that appeared more than twice in a week was too obvious to be of real interest, and these, too, were erased. That left sixty or so locations that appeared and disappeared in accordance with a chart next to the map and photographs. Each was a possible site where raw coca leaves began the refining process. They were not encampments for the Colombian Boy Scouts.

"You can't track in on them chemically," Ritter said. "I checked. The ether and acetone concentrations released into the air aren't much more than you'd expect from the spillage of nail-polish remover, not to mention the usual biochemical processes in this sort of environment. It's a jungle, right? Lots of stuff rots on the ground, and they give off all sorts of chemicals when they do. So all we have off the satellite is the usual infrared. They still do all their processing at night? I wonder why?"

Larson grunted agreement. "It's a carry-over from when the Army was actively hunting them. They still do it mainly from habit, I suppose."

"Well, it gives us something, doesn't it?"

"What are we going to do with it?"

Murray had never been to a Jewish funeral. It wasn't very different from a Catholic one. The prayers were in a language he couldn't understand, but the message wasn't very different. *Lord, we're sending a good man back to You. Thanks for letting us have him for a while.* The President's eulogy was particularly impressive, having been drafted by the best White House speech-writer, quoting from the Torah, the Talmud, and the New Testament. Then he started talking about Justice, the secular god that Emil had served for all of his adult life. When, toward the end, he talked about how men should turn their

hearts away from vengeance, however, Murray thought that ... it wasn't the words. The speech was as poetically written as any he'd ever heard. It was just that the President started sounding like a politician at that point, Dan thought. *Is that my own cynicism talking?* the agent thought. He was a cop, and justice to him meant that the bastards who committed crimes had to pay. Evidently the President thought the same way, despite the statesmanlike stuff he was saying. That was fine with Murray.

The soldiers watched the TV coverage in relative silence. A few men worked knives across sharpening stones, but mainly they just sat there, listening to their President speak, knowing who had killed the man whose name few had heard until after he was dead. Chavez had been the first to make the correct observation, but it hadn't been all that great a leap of imagination, had it? They accepted the as-yet-unspoken news phlegmatically. Here was merely additional proof that their enemy had struck out directly against one of the most important symbols of their nation. There was their country's flag, draped across the coffin. There was the banner of the man's own agency, but this wasn't a job for cops, was it? So the soldiers traded looks in silence while their Commander-in-Chief had his say. When it was all over, the door to the squad bay opened, and there was their commander.

"We're going back in tonight. The good news is, it's going to be cooler where we're going," Captain Ramirez told his men. Chavez cocked an eyebrow at Vega.

USS *Ranger* sailed on the tide, assisted away from the dock by a flotilla of tugs while her escorts formed up, already out of the harbor and taking rolls from the broad Pacific swells. Within an hour she was clear of the harbor, doing twenty knots. Another hour, and it was time to begin flight operations. First to arrive were the helicopters, one of which refueled and took off again to take plane-guard station off the carrier's starboard quarter. The first fixed-wing aircraft aboard were the Intruder attack bombers, led, of course, by the skipper, Commander Jensen. On the way out he'd seen the ammunition ship, USS *Shasta,* just beginning to get up steam. She'd join the underway-replenishment group that was to sail two hours behind the battle group. *Shasta* had the weapons that he'd be dropping. He already knew the sort of targets. Not the exact places yet, but he had the rough idea, and that, he realized as he climbed down from his aircraft, was all the idea he wanted to have. Worrying about "Collateral Damage" wasn't strictly his concern, as somebody had told him earlier in the day. *What an odd term,* he thought. *Collateral Damage.* What an offhand way of condemning people whom fate had already selected to be in the wrong place. He felt sorry for them, but not all that sorry.

Clark arrived in Bogotá late that afternoon. No one met him, and he rented a car as he usually did. One hour out of the airport he stopped to park on a secondary road. He waited several annoying minutes for another car to pull up

alongside. The driver, a CIA officer assigned to the local station, handed him a package and drove off without a word. Not a large package, it weighed about twenty pounds, half of which was a stout tripod. Clark set it gently on the floor of the passenger compartment and drove off. He'd been asked to "deliver" quite a few messages in his time, but never quite so emphatically as this. It was all his idea. Well, he thought, mostly his idea. That made it somewhat more palatable.

The VC-135 lifted off two hours after the funeral. It was too bad they didn't have a wake in Chicago. That was an Irish custom, not one for the children of Eastern European Jews, but Emil would have approved, Dan Murray was sure. He would have understood that many a beer or whiskey would be lifted to his memory tonight, and somewhere, in his quiet way he'd laugh in the knowledge of it. But not now. Dan had gotten his wife to maneuver Mrs. Shaw onto the other side of the airplane so that he could sit next to Bill. Shaw noticed that immediately, of course, but waited until the aircraft leveled off to make the obvious question.

"What is it?"

Murray handed over the sheet he pulled off the aircraft's facsimile printer a few hours earlier.

"Oh, shit!" Shaw swore quietly. "Not Moira. Not her."

16.

Target List

I'M OPEN TO suggestions," Murray said. He regretted his tone at once.

"Christ's sake, Dan!" Shaw's face had gone gray for a moment, and his expression was now angry.

"Sorry, but—damn it, Bill, do we handle it straight or do we candy-ass our way around the issue?"

"Straight."

"One of the kids from WFO asked her the usual battery of questions, and she said that she didn't tell anybody ... well, maybe so, but who the hell did she call in Venezuela? They rechecked going back a year, no such calls ever before. The boy I left behind to run things did some further checking—the number she called is an apartment, and the phone there rang someplace in Colombia within a few minutes of Moira's call."

"Oh, God." Shaw shook his head. From anyone else he would merely have felt anger, but Moira had worked with the Director since before he'd returned to D.C., from his command of the New York Field Division.

"Maybe it's an innocent thing. Maybe even a coincidence," Murray allowed, but that didn't improve Bill's demeanor very much.

"Care to do a probability assessment of that statement, Danny?"

"No."

"Well, we're all going back to the office after we land. I'll have her into my place an hour after we get back. You be there, too."

"Right." It was time for Murray to shake his head. She'd shed as many tears at the graveside as anyone else. He'd seen a lifetime's worth of duplicity in his law-enforcement career, but to think that of Moira was more than he could stomach. It has to *be a coincidence. Maybe one of her kids has a pen pal down there. Or something like that, Dan told* himself.

The detectives searching Sergeant Braden's home found what they were looking for. It wasn't much, just a camera case. But the case had a Nikon F-3 body and enough lenses that the entire package had to be worth eight or nine thousand dollars. More than a Mobile detective sergeant could afford. While the rest of the officers continued the search, the senior detective called Nikon's home office and checked the number on the camera to see if the owner had

registered it for warranty purposes. He had. And with the name that was read off to him, the officer knew that he had to call the FBI office as well. It was part of a federal case, and he hoped that somehow they could protect the name of a man who had certainly been a dirty cop. Dirty or not, he did leave kids behind. Perhaps the FBI would understand that.

He was committing a federal crime to do this, but the attorney considered that he had a higher duty to his clients. It was one of those gray areas which decorate not so much legal textbooks, but rather the volumes of written court decisions. He was sure a crime had been committed, was sure that nothing was being done to investigate it, and was sure that its disclosure was important to the defense of his clients on a case of capital murder. He didn't expect to be caught, but if he were, he'd have something to take to the professional ethics panel of the state bar association. Edward Stuart's professional duty to his clients, added to his personal distaste for capital punishment, made the decision an inevitable one.

They didn't call it Happy Hour at the base NCO club anymore, but nothing had really changed. Stuart had served his time in the U.S. Navy as a legal officer aboard an aircraft carrier—even in the Navy, a mobile city of six thousand people needed a lawyer or two—and knew about sailors and suds. So he'd visited a uniform store and gotten the proper outfit of a Coast Guard chief yeoman complete with the appropriate ribbons and just walked onto the base, heading for the NCO club where, as long as he paid for his drinks in cash, nobody would take great note of his presence. He'd been a yeoman himself while aboard USS *Eisenhower,* and knew the lingo well enough to pass any casual test of authenticity. The next trick, of course, was finding a crewman from the cutter *Panache.*

The cutter was finishing up the maintenance period that always followed a deployment, preparatory to yet another cruise, and her crewmen would be hitting the club after working hours to enjoy their afternoon beers while they could. It was just a matter of finding the right ones. He knew the names, and had checked tape archives at the local TV stations to get a look at the faces. It was nothing more than good luck that the one he found was Bob Riley. He knew more about that man's career than the other chiefs.

The master chief boatswain's mate strolled in at 4:30 after ten hot hours supervising work on various topside gear. He'd had a light lunch and sweated off all of that and more, and now figured that a few mugs of beer would replace all the fluids and electrolytes that he'd lost under the hot Alabama sun. The bar-maid saw him coming and had a tall one of Samuel Adams all ready by the time he selected a stool. Edward Stuart got there a minute and half a mug later.

"Ain't you Bob Riley?"

"That's right," the bosun said before turning. "Who're you?"

"Didn't think you'd remember me. Matt Stevens. You near tore my head off on the *Mellon* awhile back—said I'd never get my shit together."

“Looks like I was wrong,” Riley noted, searching his memory for the face.

“No, you were right. I was a real punk back then, but you—well, I owe you one, Master Chief. I did get my shit together. Mainly ’causa what you said.” Stuart stuck out his hand. “I figure I owe you a beer at least.”

It wasn’t all that unusual a thing for Riley to hear. “Hell, we all need straigthenin’ out. I got bounced off a coupla bulkheads when I was a kid, too, y’know?”

“Done a little of it myself.” Stuart grinned. “You make chief an’ you gotta be respectable and responsible, right? Otherwise who keeps the officers straightened out?”

Riley grunted agreement. “Who you workin’ for?”

“Admiral Hally. He’s at Buzzard’s Point. Had to fly down with him to meet with the base commander. I think he’s off playing golf right now. Never did get the hang of that game. You’re on *Panache,* right?”

“You bet.”

“Captain Wegener?”

“Yep.” Riley finished off his beer and Stuart waved to the bar-maid for refills.

“Is he as good as they say?”

“Red’s a better seaman ’n I am,” Riley replied honestly.

“Nobody’s that good, Master Chief. Hey, I was there when you took the boat across—what was the name of that container boat that snapped in half ... ?”

“Arctic Star. ” Riley smiled, remembering. “Jesus, if we didn’t earn our pay that afternoon.”

“I remember watching. Thought you were crazy. Well, shit. All I do now is drive a word processor for the Admiral, but I did a little stuff in a forty-one boat before I made chief, working outa Norfolk. Nothing like *Arctic Star,* of course.”

“Don’t knock it, Matt. One of those jobs’s enough for a couple years of sea stories. I’ll take an easy one any day. I’m gettin’ a little old for that dramatic stuff.”

“How’s the food here?”

“Fair.”

“Buy you dinner?”

“Matt, I don’t even remember what I said to you.”

“I remember,” Stuart assured him. “God knows how I woulda turned out if you hadn’t turned me around. No shit, man. I owe you one. Come on.” He waved Riley over to a booth against the wall. They were quickly going through their third beer when Chief Quartermaster Oreza arrived.

“Hey, Portagee,” Riley called to his fellow master chief.

“I see the beer’s cold, Bob.”

Riley waved to his companion. “This here’s Matt Stevens. We were on the *Mellon* together. Did I ever tell you about the *Arctic Star* job?”

“Only about thirty times,” Oreza noted.

“You wanna tell the story, Matt?” Riley asked.

“Hey, I didn’t even see it all, you know—”

“Yeah, half the crew was puking their guts out. I’m talking a real gale blowing. No way the helo could take off, and this container boat—the after half of her, that is; the fo’ard part was already gone—look like she was gonna roll right there an’ then ...”

Within an hour, two more rounds had been consumed, and the three men were chomping their way through a disk of knockwurst and sauerkraut, which went well with beer. Stuart stuck with stories about his new Admiral, the Chief Counsel of the Coast Guard, in which legal officers are also line officers, expected to know how to drive ships and command men.

“Hey, what’s with these stories I been hearing about you an’ those two drug pukes?” the attorney finally asked.

“What d’ya mean?” Oreza asked. Portagee still had some remaining shreds of sobriety.

“Hey, the FBI guys went in to see Hally, right? I had to type up his reports on my Zenith, y’know?”

“What did them FBI guys say?”

“I’m not supposed—oh, fuck it! Look, you’re all in the clear. The Bureau isn’t doing a fuckin’ thing. They told your skipper ‘go forth and sin no more,’ okay? The shit you got outa those pukes—didn’t you hear? Operation TARPON. That whole sting operation came from you guys. Didn’t you know that?”

“What?” Riley hadn’t seen a paper or turned on a TV in days. Though he did know about the death of the FBI Director, he had no idea of the connection with his Hang-Ex, as he had taken to calling it in the goat locker.

Stuart explained what he knew, which was quite a lot.

“Half a billion dollars?” Oreza observed quietly. “That oughta build us a few new hulls.”

“Christ knows we need ’em,” Stuart agreed.

“You guys didn’t really—I mean, you didn’t really ... hang one of the fuckers, did you?” Stuart extracted a Radio Shack mini-tape recorder from his pocket and thumbed the volume switch to the top.

“Actually it was Portagee’s idea,” Riley said.

“Couldn’t have done it without you, Bob,” Oreza said generously.

“Yeah, well, the trick was how to do the hangin’,” Riley explained. “You see,

we had to make it look real if we was gonna scare the piss outa the little one. Wasn't really all that hard once I thought it over. After we got him alone, the pharmacist mate gave him a shot of ether to knock him out for a few minutes, and I rigged a rope harness on his back. When we took him topside, the noose had a hook on the back, so when I looped the noose around his neck, all I hadda do was attach the hook to an eye I put on the harness, so we was hoistin' him by the harness, not the neck. We didn't really wanna kill the fucker—well, I did," Riley said. "But Red didn't think it was a real good idea." The bosun grinned at the quartermaster.

"The other trick was baggin' him," Oreza said. "We put a black hood over his head. Well, there was a gauze pad inside soaked in ether. The bastard screamed bloody murder when he smelled it, but it had him knocked out as soon as we ran his ass up to the yardarm."

"The little one believed the whole thing. Fucker wet his pants, it was beautiful! Sang like a canary when they got him back to the wardroom. Soon as he was outa sight, of course, we lowered the other one and got him woke back up. They were both half in the bag from smokin' grass all day. I don't think they ever figured out what we did to them."

No, they didn't. "Grass?"

"That was Red's idea. They had their own pot stash—looked like real cigarettes. We just gave 'em back to 'em, and they got themselves looped. Throw in the ether and everything, and I bet they never figured out what really happened."

Almost right, Stuart thought, hoping that his tape recorder was getting this.

"I wish we really could have hung 'em," Riley said after a few seconds. "Matt, you ain't never seen anything like what that yacht looked like. Four people, man—butchered 'em like cattle. Ever smell blood? I didn't know you could. You can," the bosun assured him. "They raped the wife and the little girl, then cut 'em up like they was—God! You know, I been having nightmares from that? Nightmares—me! Jesus, that's one sea story I wish I could forget. I got a little girl that age. Those fuckers raped her an' killed her, and cut her up an' fed her to the fuckin' sharks. Just a little girl, not even big enough to drive a car or go out on a date.

"We're supposed to be professional cops, right? We're supposed to be cool about it, don't get personally involved. All that shit?" Riley asked.

"That's what the book says," Stuart agreed.

"The book wasn't written for stuff like this," Portagee said. "People who do this sort of thing—they ain't really people. I don't know what the hell they are, but people they ain't. You can't do that kinda shit and be people, Matt."

"Hey, what d'you want me to say?" Stuart asked, suddenly defensive, and not acting a part this time. "We got laws to deal with people like that."

"Laws ain't doin' much good, are they?" Riley asked.

The difference between the people he was obliged to defend and the people

he had to impeach, Stuart told himself through the fog of alcohol, was that the bad ones were his clients and the good ones were not. And now, by impersonating a Coast Guard chief, he too had broken a law, just as these men had done, and like them, he was doing it for some greater good, some higher moral cause. So he asked himself who was right. Not that it mattered, of course. Whatever was "right" was lost somewhere, not to be found in lawbooks or canons of ethics. Yet if you couldn't find it there, then where the hell was it? But Stuart was a lawyer, and his business was law, not right. Right was the province of judges and juries. Or something like that. Stuart told himself that he shouldn't drink so much. Drink made confused things clear, and the clear things confused.

The ride in was far rougher this time. Westerly winds off the Pacific Ocean hit the slopes of the Andes and boiled upward, looking for passes to go through. The resulting turbulence could be felt at thirty thousand feet, and here, only three hundred feet AGL—above ground level—the ride was a hard one, all the more so with the helicopter on its terrain-following autopilot. Johns and Willis were strapped in tight to reduce the effects of the rough ride, and both knew that the people in back were having a bad time indeed as the big Sikorsky jolted up and down in twenty-foot bounds at least ten times per minute. PJ's hand was on the stick, following the motions of the autopilot but ready to take instant command if the system showed the first sign of failure. This was real flying, as he liked to say. That generally meant the dangerous kind.

Skimming through this pass—it was more of a saddle, really—didn' t make it any easier. A ninety-six-hundred-foot peak was to the south, and one of seventy-eight hundred feet to the north, and a lot of Pacific air was being funneled through as the Pave Low roared at two hundred knots. They were heavy, having tanked only a few minutes earlier just off Colombia's Pacific Coast.

"There's Mistrato," Colonel Johns said. The computer navigation system had already veered them north to pass well clear of the town and any roads. The two pilots were also alert for anything on the ground that hinted at a man or a car or a house. The route had been selected off satellite photographs, of course both daylight and nighttime infrared shots, but there was always the chance of a surprise.

"Buck, LZ One in four minutes," PJ called over the intercom.

"Roger."

They were flying over Risaralda Province, part of the great valley that lay between two enormous ridgelines of mountains flung into the sky by a subductal fault in the earth's crust. PJ's hobby was geology. He knew how much effort it took to bring his aircraft to this altitude, and he boggled at the forces that could push mountains to the same height.

"LZ One in sight," Captain Willis said.

"Got it." Colonel Johns took the stick. He keyed his microphone. "One

minute. Hot guns."

"Right." Sergeant Zimmer left his position to head aft. Sergeant Bean activated his minigun in case there was trouble. Zimmer slipped and nearly fell on a pool of vomit. That wasn't unusual. The ride smoothed out now that they were in the lee of the mountains, but there were some very sick kids in back who would be glad to get on firm, unmoving ground. Zimmer had trouble understanding that. It was dangerous on the ground.

The first squad was up as the helicopter flared to make its first landing, and as before, the moment it touched down, they ran out the back. Zimmer made his count, watched to be certain that everyone got off safely, and notified the pilot to lift off as soon as they were clear.

Next time, Chavez told himself, *next time I fucking walk in and out!* He had had some rough chopper rides in his time, but nothing like that one. He led off to the treeline and waited for the remainder of the squad to catch up.

"Glad to be on the ground?" Vega asked as soon as he got there.

"I didn't know I ate that much," Ding groaned. Everything he'd eaten in the last few hours was still aboard the helicopter. He opened a canteen and drank a pint of water just to wash away the vile taste.

"I usta love roller coasters," *Oso* said. "No more, *'mano!"*

"Fuckin' A!" Chavez remembered standing in line for the big ones at Knott's Berry Farm and other California theme parks. Never again!

"You okay, Ding?" Captain Ramirez asked.

"Sorry, sir. That never happened to me—ever! I'll be okay in a minute," he promised his commander.

"Take your time. We picked a nice, quiet spot to land." *I hope.*

Chavez shook his head to clear it. He didn't know that motion sickness started in the inner ear, had never known what motion sickness was until half an hour earlier. But he did the right thing, taking deep breaths and shaking his head to get his equilibrium back. The ground wasn't moving, he told himself, but part of his brain wasn't sure.

"Where to, Cap'n?"

"You're already heading in the right direction." Ramirez clapped him on the shoulder. "Move out."

Chavez put on his low-light goggles and started moving off through the forest. God, but that was embarrassing. He'd never do anything that dumb again, the sergeant promised himself. With his head still telling him that he was probably moving in a way that his legs couldn't possibly cause, he concentrated on his footing and the terrain, rapidly moving two hundred meters ahead of the main body of the squad. The first mission into the swampy lowlands had just been practice, hadn't really been serious, he thought now. But this was the real thing. With that thought foremost in his

mind, he batted away the last remnants of his nausea and got down to work.

Everyone worked late that night. There was the investigation to run, and routine office business had to be kept current as well. By the time Moira came into Mr. Shaw's office, she'd managed to organize everything he'd need to know, and it was also time to tell him what she'd forgotten. She wasn't surprised to see Mr. Murray there, too. She was surprised when he spoke first.

"Moira, were you interviewed about Emil's trip?" Dan asked.

She nodded. "Yes. I forgot something. I wanted to tell you this morning, Mr. Shaw, but when I came in early you were asleep. Connie saw me," she assured him.

"Go on," Bill said, wondering if he should feel a little better about that or not.

Mrs. Wolfe sat down, then turned to look at the open door. Murray walked over to close it. On the way back he placed his hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay, Moira."

"I have a friend. He lives in Venezuela. We met ... well, we met a month and a half ago, and we—this is hard to explain." She hesitated, staring at the rug for a moment before looking up. "We fell in love. He comes up to the States on business every few weeks, and with the Director away, we wanted to spend a weekend—at The Hideaway, in the mountains near Luray Caverns?"

"I know it," Shaw said. "Nice place to get away from it all."

"Well, when I knew that Mr. Jacobs was going to be away and we had a chance for a long weekend, I called him. He has a factory. He makes auto parts—two factories, actually, one in Venezuela and one in Costa Rica. Carburetors and things like that."

"Did you call him at his home?" Murray asked.

"No. He works such long hours that I called him at his factory. I have the number here." She handed over the scrap of Sheraton note paper that he'd written it down on. "Anyway, I got his secretary—her name's Consuela—because he was out on the shop floor, and he called me back, and I told him that we could get together, so he came up—we met at the airport Friday afternoon. I left early after Mr. Jacobs did."

"Which airport?"

"Dulles."

"What's his name?" Shaw asked.

"Díaz. Juan Diaz. You can call him there at the factory and—"

"That phone number goes to an apartment, not a factory, Moira," Murray said. And it was that clear, that fast.

"But—but he—" She stopped. "No. No. He isn't—"

“Moira, we need a complete physical description.”

“Oh, no.” Her mouth fell open and wouldn’t close. She looked from Shaw to Murray and back again as the horror of it all closed in on her. She was dressed in black, of course, probably the same outfit she’d worn to bury her own husband. For a few weeks she’d been a bright, beautiful, happy woman again. No more. Both FBI executives felt her pain, hating themselves for having brought it to her. She was a victim, too. But she was also a lead, and they needed a lead.

Moira Wolfe summoned what little dignity she had left and gave them as complete a description as they had ever had of any man in a voice as brittle as crystal before she lost control entirely. Shaw had his personal assistant drive her home.

“Cortez,” Murray said as soon as the door closed behind her.

“That’s a pretty solid bet,” the Executive Assistant Director (Investigations) agreed. “The book on him says that he’s a real ace at compromising people. Jesus, did he ever prove that right.” Shaw’s head went from side to side as he reached for some coffee. “But he couldn’t have known what they were doing, could he?”

“Doesn’t make much sense to have come here if he did,” Murray said. “But since when are criminals logical? Well, we start checking immigration control points, hotels, airlines. See if we can track this cocksucker. I’ll get on it. What are we going to do about Moira?”

“She didn’t break any laws, did she?” That was the really odd part. “Find a place where she doesn’t have to see classified material, maybe in another agency. Dan, we can’t destroy her, too.”

“No.”

Moira Wolfe got home just before eleven. Her kids were all still up waiting for her. They assumed that her tears were a delayed reaction from the funeral. They’d all met Emil Jacobs, too, and mourned his passing as much as anyone else who worked for the Bureau. She didn’t say very much, heading upstairs for bed while they continued to sit before the television. Alone in the bathroom she stared in the mirror at the woman who’d allowed herself to be seduced and used like ... like a fool, something worse than a fool, a stupid, vain, lonely old woman looking for her youth. So desperate to be loved again that ... That she had condemned—how many? Seven people? She couldn’t remember, staring at her empty face in the glass. The young agents on Emil’s security detail had families. She’d knitted a sweater for Leo’s firstborn son. He was still too young—he’d never remember what a nice, handsome young man his father had been.

It’s all my fault.

I helped kill them.

She opened the mirrored door to the medicine cabinet. Like most people,

the Wolfes never threw out old medicine, and there it was, a plastic container of Placidyls. There were still—she counted six of them. Surely that would be enough.

"What brings you out this time?" Timmy Jackson asked his big brother.

"I gotta go out on *Ranger* to observe a Fleet-Ex. We're trying out some new intercept tactics I helped work up. And a friend of mine just got command of *Enterprise,* so I came out a day early to watch the ceremony. I go down to D'ego tomorrow and catch the COD out to *Ranger.* "

"COD?"

"The carrier's delivery truck," Robby explained. "Twin-engine prop bird. So how's life in the light infantry?"

"We're still humpin' hills. Got our clock cleaned on the last exercise. My new squad leader really fucked up. It isn't fair," Tim observed.

"What do you mean?"

Lieutenant Jackson tossed off the last of his drink. " 'A green lieutenant and a green squad leader is too much burden for any platoon to bear'—that's what the new S-3 said. He was out with us. Of course, the captain didn't exactly see it that way. Lost a little weight yesterday—he chewed off a piece of my ass for me. God, I wish I had Chavez back."

"Huh?"

"Squad leader I lost. He—that's the odd part. He was supposed to go to a basic-training center as an instructor, but seems he got lost. The S-3 says he was in Panama a few weeks ago. Had my platoon sergeant try to track him down, see what the hell was going on—he's still my man, you know?" Robby nodded. He understood. "Anyway, his paperwork is missing, and the clerks are runnin' in circles trying to find it. Fort Benning called to ask where the hell he was, 'cause they were still waiting for him. Nobody knows where the hell Ding got to. That sort of thing happen in the Navy?"

"When a guy goes missing, it generally means that he wants to be missing."

Tim shook his head. "Nah, not Ding. He's a lifer, I don't even think he'll stop at twenty. He'll retire as a command sergeant major. No, he's no bugout."

"Then maybe somebody dropped his file in the wrong drawer," Robby suggested.

"I suppose. I'm still new at this," Tim reminded himself. "Still, it is kind of funny, turning up down there in the jungle. Enough of that. How's Sis?"

About the only good thing to say was that it wasn't hot. In fact, it was pretty cool. Maybe there wasn't enough air to be hot, Ding told himself. The altitude was marginally less than they'd trained at in Colorado, but that was weeks behind them, and it would be a few days before the soldiers were

reacclimated. That would slow them down some, but on the whole Chavez thought that heat was more debilitating than thin air, and harder to get used to.

The mountains—nobody called these mothers hills—were about as rugged as anything he'd ever seen, and though they were well forested, he was paying particularly close attention to his footing. The thick trees made for limited visibility, which was good news. His night scope, hanging on his head like a poorly designed cap, allowed him to see no more than a hundred meters, and usually less than that, but he could see something, while the overhead cover eliminated the light needed for the unaided eye to see. It was scary, and it was lonely, but it was home for Sergeant Chavez.

He did not move in a straight line to the night's objective, following instead the Army's approved procedure of constantly veering left and right of the direction in which he was actually traveling. Every half hour he'd stop, double back, and wait until the rest of the squad was in view. Then it was their turn to rest for a few minutes, checking their own back for people who might take an interest in the new visitors to the jungle highlands.

The sling on his MP-5 was double-looped so that he could carry it slung over his head, always in firing position. There was electrician's tape over the muzzle to keep it from being clogged, and more tape was wrapped around the sling swivels to minimize noise. Noise was their enemy. Chavez concentrated on that, and seeing, and a dozen other things. This one was for-real. The mission brief had told them all about that. Their job wasn't reconnaissance anymore.

After six hours, the RON—remain overnight—site was in view. Chavez radioed back—five taps on the transmit key answered by three—for the squad to remain in place while he checked it out. They'd picked a real eyrie—he knew the word for an eagle's nest—from which, in daylight, they could look down on miles of the main road that snaked its way from Manizales to Medellin, and off of which the refining sites were located. Six of them, supposedly, were within a night's march of the RON site. Chavez circled it carefully, looking for footprints, trash, anything that hinted at human activity. It was too good a site for someone not to have used it for something or other, he thought. Maybe a photographer for *National Geographic* who wanted to take shots of the valley. On the other hand, getting here was a real bitch. They were a good three thousand feet above the road, and this wasn't the sort of country that you could drive a tank across, much less a car. He spiraled in, and still found nothing. Maybe it was too far out of the way. After half an hour he keyed his radio again. The rest of the squad had had ample time to check its rear, and if anyone had been following them, there would have been contact by now. The sun outlined the eastern wall of the valley in red by the time Captain Ramirez appeared. It was just as well that the covert insertion had shortened the night. With only half a night's march behind them they were tired, but not too tired, and would have a day to get used to the altitude all over again. They'd come five linear miles from the LZ—more like seven miles actually walked, and two thousand feet up.

As before, Ramirez spread his men out in pairs. There was a nearby stream, but nobody was dehydrated this time. Chavez and Vega took position over one of the two most likely avenues of approach to their perch, a fairly gentle slope with not too many trees and a good field of fire. Ding hadn't come in this way, of course.

"How you feelin', *Oso?"*

"Why can't we ever go to a place with plenty of air and it's cool and flat?" Sergeant Vega slipped out of his web gear, setting it in a place where it would make a comfortable pillow. Chavez did the same.

"People don't fight wars there, man. That's where they build golf courses."

"Fuckin' A!" Vega set up his Squad Automatic Weapon next to a rocky outcropping. A camouflage cloth was set across the muzzle. He could have torn up a shrub to hide the gun behind, but they didn't want to disturb anything they didn't have to. Ding won the toss this time, and fell off to sleep without a word.

"Mom?" It was after seven o'clock, and she was always up by now, fixing breakfast for her family of early risers. Dave knocked at the door, but heard nothing. That was when he started being afraid. He'd already lost a father, and knew that even parents were not the immortal, unchanging beings that all children need at the center of their growing universe. It was the constant nightmare that each of Moira's children had but never spoke about, even among themselves, lest their talk somehow make it more likely to happen. *What if something happens to Mom?* Even before his hand felt for the doorknob, Dave's eyes filled with tears at the anticipation of what he might find.

"Mom?" His voice quavered now, and he was ashamed of it, fearful also that his siblings would hear. He turned the knob and opened the door slowly.

The shades were open, flooding the room with morning light. And there she was, lying on the bed, still wearing her black mourning dress. Not moving.

Dave just stood there, the tears streaming down his cheeks as the reality of his personal nightmare struck him with physical force.

"... Mom?"

Dave Wolfe was as courageous as any teenager, and he needed all of it this morning. He summoned what strength he had and walked to the bedside, taking his mother's hand. It was still warm. Next he felt for a pulse. It was there, weak and slow, but there. That galvanized him into action. He lifted the bedside phone and punched 911.

"Police emergency," a voice answered immediately.

"I need an ambulance. My mom won't wake up."

"What is your address?" the voice asked. Dave gave it. "Okay, now describe your mother's condition."

"She's asleep, and she won't wake up, and—"

"Is your mother a heavy drinker?"

"No!" he replied in outrage. "She works for the FBI. She went right to bed last night, right after she got home from work. She—" And there it was, right on the night table. "Oh, God. There's a pill bottle here ..."

"Read the label to me!" the voice said.

"P-l-a-c-i-d-y-l. It's my dad's, and he—" That was all the operator needed to hear.

"Okay—we'll have an ambulance there in five minutes."

Actually, it was there in just over four minutes. The Wolfe house was only three blocks from a firehouse. The paramedics were in the living room before the rest of the family knew anything was wrong. They ran upstairs to find Dave still holding his mother's hand and shaking like a twig in a heavy wind. The leading fireman pushed him aside, checked the airway first, then her eyes, then the pulse.

"Forty and thready. Respiration is ... eight and shallow. It's Placidyl," he reported.

"Not that shit!" The second one turned to Dave. "How many were in there?"

"I don't know. It was my dad's, and—"

"Let's go, Charlie." The first paramedic lifted her by the arms. "Move it, kid, we gotta roll." There wasn't time to fool around with the Stokes litter. He was a big, burly man and carried Moira Wolfe out of the room like a baby. "You can follow us to the hospital."

"How—"

"She's still breathin', kid. That's the best thing I can tell you right now," the second one said on the way out the door.

What the hell is going on? Murray wondered. He'd come by to pick Moira up—her car was still in the FBI garage—and maybe help ease the guilt she clearly felt. She'd violated security rules, she'd done something very foolish, but she was also a victim of a man who'd searched and selected her for her vulnerabilities, then exploited them as professionally as anyone could have done. Everybody had vulnerabilities. That was another lesson he'd picked up over his years in the Bureau.

He'd never met Moira's kids, though he did know about them, and it wasn't all that hard to figure out who would be there, following the paramedic out of the house. Murray double-parked his Bureau car and hopped out.

"What gives?" he asked the second paramedic. Murray held up his ID so that he'd get an answer.

"Suicide attempt. Pills. Anything else you need?" the paramedic asked on his way to the driver's seat.

"Get moving." Murray turned to make sure he wasn't in the ambulance's

way.

When he turned back to look at the kids, it was plain that "suicide" hadn't yet been spoken aloud, and the ugliness of that word made them wilt before his eyes.

That fucker Cortez! You'd better hope that I never get my hands on you!

"Kids, I'm Dan Murray. I work with your mom. You want me to take you to the hospital?" The case could wait. The dead were dead, and they could afford to be patient. Emil would understand.

He let them off in front of the emergency entrance and went off to find a parking place and use his car phone. "Get me Shaw," he told the watch officer. It didn't take long.

"Dan, this is Bill. What gives?"

"Moira tried to kill herself last night. Pills."

"What are you going to do?"

"Somebody has to sit with the kids. Does she have any friends we can bring out?"

"I'll check."

"Until then I'm going to hang around, Bill. I mean—"

"I understand. Okay. Let me know what's happening."

"Right." Murray replaced the phone and walked over to the hospital. The kids were sitting together in the waiting room. Dan knew about emergency-room waiting. He also knew that the gold badge of an FBI agent could open nearly any door. It did this time, too.

"You just brought a woman in," he told the nearest doctor. "Moira Wolfe."

"Oh, she's the OD."

She's a person, not a goddamned OD! Murray didn't say. Instead he nodded. "Where?"

"You can't—"

Murray cut him off cold. "She's part of a major case. I want to see what's happening."

The doctor led him to a treatment cubicle. It wasn't pretty. Already there was a respirator tube down her throat, and IV lines in each arm—on second inspection, one of the tubes seemed to be taking her blood out and running it through something before returning it to the same arm. Her clothing was off, and EKG sensors were taped to her chest. Murray hated himself for looking at her. Hospitals robbed everyone of dignity, but life was more important than dignity, wasn't it?

Why didn't Moira know that?

Why didn't you catch the signal, Dan? Murray demanded of himself. *You should have thought to have somebody keep an eye on her. Hell, if you'd put her in*

custody, she couldn't have done this!

Maybe we should have yelled at her instead of going so easy. Maybe she took it the wrong way. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

Cortez, you are fucking dead. I just haven't figured out when yet.

"Is she going to make it?" Murray asked.

"Who the hell are you?" a doctor asked without turning.

"FBI, and I need to know."

The doctor still didn't look around. "So do I, sport. She took Placidyl. That's a pretty potent sleeping pill, not too many docs prescribe it anymore, 'cause it's too easy to OD on. LD-50 is anywhere from five to ten caps. LD-50 means the dose that'll kill half the people that take it. I don't know how much she took. At least she isn't completely gone, but her vitals are too goddamned low for comfort. We're dialyzing her blood to keep any more from getting into her, hope it's not a waste of time. We've put her on hundred-percent oxygen, then we'll zap her full of IV fluids and wait it out. She'll be out for at least another day. Maybe two, maybe three. Can't tell yet. I can't tell you what the odds are either. Now you know as much as I do. Get out of here, I got work to do."

"There are three kids in the waiting room, Doctor."

That turned his head around for about two seconds. "Tell'em we got a pretty good chance, but it's going to be tough for a while. Hey, I'm sorry, but I just don't know. The good news is, if she comes back, she'll come all the way back. This stuff doesn't usually do permanent damage. Unless it kills you," the doctor added.

"Thanks."

Murray left to tell the kids what he could. Within an hour, some neighbors showed up to take their place with the Wolfe children. Dan left quietly after an agent arrived to keep his own vigil in the waiting room. Moira was probably their only link with Cortez, and that meant that her life was potentially in danger from hands other than her own. Murray got to the office just after nine, his mood still quiet and angry when he arrived. There were three agents waiting for him, and he waved them to follow.

"Okay, what have you found out?"

" 'Mr. 'Díaz' used an American Express card at The Hideaway. We've identified the number at two airline ticket counters—thank God for those credit-checking computers. Right after he dropped Mrs. Wolfe off, he caught a flight out of Dulles to Atlanta, and from there to Panama. That's where he disappeared. He must have paid cash for the next ticket, 'cause there's no record of a Juan Diaz on any flight that evening. The counter clerk at Dulles remembers him—he was in a hurry to catch the Atlanta flight. The description matches the one we already have. However he got into the country last week, it wasn't Dulles. We're running computer records now, ought to have an answer later this morning—call it an even-money chance to figure his route in. I'm betting on one of the big hubs, Dallas-Fort Worth, Kansas City, Chicago,

one of them. But that's not the interesting thing we've discovered.

"American Express just discovered that it has a bunch of cards for Juan Diaz. Several have been generated recently, and they don't know how."

"Oh?" Murray poured some coffee. "How come they weren't noticed?"

"For one thing, the statements are paid on time and in full, so that dog didn't bark. The addresses are all slightly different, and the name itself isn't terribly unusual, so a casual look at the records won't tip anyone off. What it looks like is that somebody has a way to tap into their computer system—all the way into the executive programming, and that might be another lead for us to run down. He's probably been staying with the name in case Moira gets a look at the card. But what it has told us is that he's made five trips to the D.C. area in the past four months. Somebody is playing with the AmEx computer system, somebody good. Somebody," the agent went on, "good enough to tap into a lot of computers. This guy can generate complete credit lines for Cortez or anyone else. There ought to be a way to check that out, but I wouldn't be real hopeful about running him down fast."

There was a knock at the door, and another young agent came in. "Dallas-Fort Worth," he said handing over a fax sheet. "The signatures match. He came in there and took a late flight to New York-La Guardia, got in after midnight local time on Friday. Probably caught the Shuttle down to D.C. to meet Moira. They're still checking."

"Beautiful," Murray said. "He's got all the moves. Where'd he come in from?"

"Still checking, sir. He got the New York ticket at the counter. We're talking with Immigration to see when he passed through customs control."

"Okay, next?"

"We have prints on him now. We have what looks like a left forefinger on the note paper he left Mrs. Wolfe, and we've matched that with the credit receipt from the airline counter at Dulles. It was tough, but the lab guys used their lasers to bring 'em out. We sent a team to The Hideaway, but nothing yet. The cleanup crew there is pretty good—too damned good for our purposes, but our guys are still working on it."

"Everything but a picture on the bastard. Everything but a picture," Murray repeated. "What about after Atlanta?"

"Oh, thought I said that. He caught a flight to Panama after a short layover."

"Where's the AmEx card addressed to?"

"It's in Caracas, probably just a letterdrop. They all are."

"How come Immigration doesn't—oh." Murray grimaced. "Of course his passport is under a different name or he has a collection of them to go with his cards."

"We're dealing with a real pro. We're lucky to have gotten this much so

fast."

"What's new in Colombia?" he asked the next agent.

"Not much. The lab work is going nicely, but we're not developing anything we didn't already know. The Colombians now have names on about half of the subjects—the prisoner says he didn't know all of them, and that's probably the truth. They've launched a major operation to try an' find 'em, but Morales isn't real hopeful. They're all names of people the Colombian government's been after for quite a while. All M-19 types. It was a contract job, just as we thought."

Murray checked his watch. Today was the funeral for the two agents on Emil's protection detail. It would be held at the National Cathedral, and the President would be speaking there, too. His phone rang.

"Murray."

"This is Mark Bright down at Mobile. We have some additional developments."

"Okay."

"A cop got himself blown away Saturday. It was a contract job, Ingrams at close range, but a local kid popped a subject with his trusty .22, right in the back of the head. Killed him; they found the body and the vehicle yesterday. The shooter was positively ID'd as a druggie. The local cops searched the victim's—Detective Sergeant Braden—house and found a camera that belonged to the victim in the Pirates Case. The new victim is a burglary sergeant. I am speculating that he was working for the druggies and probably checked out the victim's place prior to the killings, looking for the records that we ultimately found."

Murray nodded thoughtfully. That added something to their knowledge. So they'd wanted to make sure that the victim hadn't left any records behind before they'd taken him and his family out, but their guy wasn't good enough, and they killed him for it. It was also part of the murder of Director Jacobs, additional fallout from Operation TARPON. *Those bastards are really flexing their muscles, aren't they?* "Anything *else?"*

"The local cops are in a pretty nasty mood about this. First time somebody's put a hit on a cop that way. It was a 'public' hit, and his wife got taken out by a stray round. Local cops are pretty pissed. A drug dealer got taken all the way out last night. It'll come out as a righteous shoot, but I don't think it was a coincidence. That's it for now."

"Thanks, Mark." Murray hung up. "The bastards have declared war on us, all right," he murmured.

"What's that, sir?"

"Nothing. Have you back-checked on the earlier trips Cortez made—hotels, car rentals?"

"We have twenty people out there on it. Ought to have some preliminary information in two hours."

"Keep me posted."

Stuart was the first morning appointment for the U.S. Attorney, and he looked unusually chipper this morning, the secretary thought. She couldn't see the hangover.

"Morning, Ed," Davidoff said without rising. His desk was a mass of papers. "What can I do for you?"

"No death penalty," Stuart said as he sat down. "I'll trade a guilty plea for twenty years, and that's the best deal you're going to get."

"See ya' in court, Ed," Davidoff replied, looking back down at his papers.

"You want to know what I've got?"

"If it's good, I'm sure you'll let me know at the proper time."

"May be enough to get my people off completely. You want 'em to walk on this?"

"Believe that when I see it," Davidoff said, but he was looking up now. Stuart was an overly zealous defense lawyer, the United States Attorney thought, but an honest one. He didn't lie, at least not in chambers.

Stuart habitually carried an old-fashioned briefcase, the wedge-shaped kind made of semistiff leather instead of the newer and trimmer attaché case that most lawyers toted now. From it he extracted a tape recorder. Davidoff watched in silence. Both men were trial lawyers and both were experts at concealing their feelings, able to say what they had to say, regardless of what they felt. But since both had this ability, like professional poker players they knew the more subtle signs that others couldn't spot. Stuart knew that he had his adversary worried when he punched the play button. The tape lasted several minutes. The sound quality was miserable, but it was audible, and with a little cleaning up in a sound laboratory—the defendants could afford it—it would be as clear as it needed to be.

Davidoff's ploy was the obvious one: "That has no relevance to the case we're trying. All of the information in the confession is excluded from the proceedings. We agreed on that."

Stuart eased his tone now that he had the upper hand. It was time for magnanimity. "You agreed. I didn't say anything. The government committed a gross violation of my clients' constitutional rights. A simulated execution constitutes mental torture at the very least. It's sure as hell illegal. You have to put these two guys on the stand to make your case, and I'll crucify those Coast Guard sailors when you do. It might be enough to impeach everything they say. You never know what a jury's going to think, do you?"

"They might just stand up and cheer, too," Davidoff answered warily.

"That's the chance, isn't it? One way to find out. We try the case." Stuart replaced the player in his briefcase. "Still want an early trial date? With this as background information I can attack your chain of evidence—after all, if they

were crazy enough to pull this number, what if my clients claim that they were forced to masturbate to give you the semen samples that you told the papers about, or were forced to hold the murder weapons to make prints—I haven't yet discussed any of those details with them, by the way—and I link all that in with what I know about the victim? I think I have a fighting chance to send them home alive and free." Stuart leaned forward, resting his arms on Davidoffs desk. "On the other hand, as you say, it's hard to predict how a jury'll react. So what I'm offering you is, they plead guilty to twenty years' worth of whatever charge you want, with no unseemly recommendation from the judge about how they have to serve all twenty—so they're out in, say, eight years. You tell the press that there's problems with the evidence, and you're pretty mad about that, but there's nothing you can do. My clients are out of circulation for a fairly long time. You get your conviction but nobody else dies. Anyway, that's my deal. I'll give you a couple of days to think it over." Stuart rose to his feet, picked up his briefcase, and left without another word. Once outside, he looked for the men's room. He felt an urgent need to wash his hands, but he wasn't sure why. He was certain that he'd done the right thing. The criminals—they really were criminals—would be found guilty, but they wouldn't die in the electric chair—and who knows, he thought, maybe they'll straighten out. That was the sort of lie that lawyers tell themselves. He wouldn't have to destroy the careers of some Coast Guard types who had probably stepped over the line only once and would never do so again. That was something he was prepared to do, but didn't relish. This way, he thought, everybody won something, and for a lawyer that was as successful an exercise as you generally got. But he still felt a need to wash his hands.

For Edwin Davidoff, it was harder. It wasn't just a criminal case, was it? The same electric chair that would deliver those two pirates to hell would deliver him to a suite in the Dirksen Senate Office Building. Since he had read *Advise and Consent* as a fresh-man in high school, Davidoff had lusted for a place in the United States Senate. And he'd worked very hard to earn it: top of his class at Duke Law School, long hours for which he was grossly underpaid by the Department of Justice, speaking engagements all over the state that had nearly wrecked his family life. He had sacrificed his own life on the altar of justice ... and ambition, he admitted to himself. And now when it was all within his grasp, when he could rightfully take the lives of two criminals who had forfeited their rights to them ... this could blow it all, couldn't it? If he wimped out on the prosecution, plea-bargaining down to a trifling twenty years, all his work, all his speeches about Justice would be forgotten. Just like that.

On the other hand, what if he disregarded what Stuart had just told him and took the case to trial—and risked being remembered as the man who lost the case entirely. He might blame the Coast Guardsmen for what they had done—but then he would be sacrificing their careers and possibly their freedom on what altar? Justice? Ambition? How about revenge? he asked himself. Whether he won or lost the Pirates Case, those men would suffer even though what they had done had also given the government its strongest blow yet

against the Cartel.

Drugs. It all came down to that. Their capacity to corrupt was like nothing he'd ever known. Drugs corrupted people, clouded their thoughts at the individual level, and ultimately ended their lives. Drugs generated the kinds of money to corrupt those who didn't partake. Drugs corrupted institutions at every level and in every way imaginable. Drugs corrupted whole governments. So what was the answer? Davidoff didn't have that answer, though he knew that if he ever ran for that Senate seat he'd prance about in front of the TV cameras and announce that he did—or at least part of it, if only the people of Alabama would trust him to represent them....

Christ, he thought. *So now what do I do?*

Those two pirates deserve to die for what they have done. What about my duty to the victims? It wasn't all a lie—in fact none of it was. Davidoff did believe in Justice, did believe that law was what men had built to protect themselves from the predators, did believe that his mission in life was to be an instrument of that justice. Why else had he worked so hard for so little? *It wasn't entirely ambition, after all, was it?*

No.

One of the victims had been dirty, but what of the other three? What did the military call that? "Collateral damage." That was the term when an act against an individual target incidentally destroyed the other things that happened to be close by. Collateral damage. It was one thing when the State did it in time of war. In this case it was simply murder.

No, it wasn't simple murder, was it? Those bastards took their time. They enjoyed themselves. Is eight years of time enough to pay for them?

But what if you lose the case entirely? Even if you win, can you sacrifice those Coasties to get justice? Is that "collateral damage, " too?

There had to be a way out. There usually was, anyway, and he had a couple of days to figure that one out.

They'd slept well, and the thin mountain air didn't affect them as badly as they'd expected. By sundown the squad was up and eager. Chavez drank his instant coffee as he went over the map, wondering which of the marked targets they'd stake out tonight. Throughout the day, squad members had kept a close eye on the road below, knowing more or less what they were looking for. A truck with containers of acid. Some cheap local labor would off-load the jars and head into the hills, followed by people with backpacks of coca leaves and some other light equipment. Around sundown a truck stopped. Light failed before they could see all of what happened, and their low-light goggles had no telescopic features, but the truck moved off rather soon, and it was within three kilometers of HOTEL, one of the locations on the target list, four miles away.

Show time. Each man sprayed a goodly bit of insect repellent onto his

hands, then rubbed it on face, neck, and ears. In addition to keeping the bugs off, it also softened the camouflage paint that went on next like some ghastly form of lipstick. The members of each pair assisted one another in putting it on. The darker shades went on forehead, nose, and cheekbones, while the lighter ones went to the normal shadow areas under the eyes and in the hollow of cheeks. It wasn't war paint, as one might think from watching movie representations of soldiers. The purpose was invisibility, not intimidation. With the naturally bright spots dulled, and the normally dark ones brightened, their faces no longer looked like faces at all.

It was time to earn their pay for real. Approach routes and rally points were preselected and made known to every member of the squad. Questions were asked and answered, contingencies examined, alternate plans made, and Ramirez had them up and moving while there was still light on the eastern wall of the valley, heading downhill toward their objective.

17.

Execution

THE STANDARD ARMY field order for a combat mission follows an acronym known as SMESSCS: Situation; Mission; Execution; Service and Support; Command and Signal.

Situation is the background information for the mission, what is going on that the soldiers need to know about.

Mission is a one-sentence description of the task at hand.

Execution is the methodology for *how* the mission is to be accomplished.

Service and Support covers the support functions that might aid the men in the performance of their job.

Command defines who gives the orders through every step of the chain, theoretically all the way back up to the Pentagon, and all the way down to the most junior member of the unit who in the final exigency would be commanding himself alone.

Signal is the general term for communications procedures to be followed.

The soldiers had already been briefed on the overall situation, which had hardly been necessary. Both that and their current mission had changed somewhat, but they already knew that, too. Captain Ramirez had briefed them on the execution of their current mission, also giving his men the other information they needed for this evening. There was no outside support; they were on their own. Ramirez was in tactical command, with subordinate leaders identified in case of his disablement, and he'd already issued radio codes. His last act before leading his men down from their perch was to radio his intentions to VARIABLE, whose location he didn't know, but whose approval he receipted.

As always Staff Sergeant Domingo Chavez had the point, now one hundred meters ahead of Julio Vega, again "walking slack" fifty meters ahead of the main body, whose men were spread out at ten-meter intervals for the approach. Going downhill made it tougher on the legs, but the men hardly noticed. They were too pumped up. Every few hundred meters Chavez angled for a clear spot from which they could look down at the objective—the place they were going to hit—and through his binoculars he could see the vague glow of gasoline lanterns. With the sun behind him he didn't have to worry about a reflection off the glasses. The spot was right where the map said it was—he wondered how that information had been developed—and they were following exactly the procedure that he'd been briefed about. Somebody, he

thought, had really done his homework on this job. They expected ten to fifteen people at HOTEL. He hoped they had that right, too.

The going wasn't so bad. The cover was not as dense as it had been in the lowlands, and there were fewer bugs. Maybe, he thought, the air was too thin for them, too. There were birds calling to one another, the usual forest chatter to mask the sounds of his unit's approach—but there was damned little of that. Chavez had heard one guy slip and fall a hundred meters back, but only a Ninja would have noticed. He was able to cover half the distance in under an hour, stopping at a preplanned rally point for the rest of the squad to catch up.

"So far, so good, *jefe*, "he told Ramirez. "I ain't seen nothing, not even a llama," he added to show that he was at ease. "Little over three thousand more meters to go."

"Okay. Stop at the next checkpoint. Remember there might be folks out taking a stroll."

"Roger that, Cap'n." Chavez took off at once. The rest started moving two minutes later.

Ding moved more slowly now. The probability of contact increased with every step he took toward HOTEL. The druggies couldn't be all that dumb, he warned himself. They had to have a little brains, and the people they used would be locals, people who'd grown up in this valley and knew its ways. And lots of them would have weapons. He was surprised how different it felt from the last time, but then he'd watched and evaluated his targets over a period of days. He didn't even have a proper count on them, didn't know how they were armed, didn't know how good they were.

Christ, this is real combat. We don't know shit.

But that's what Ninja are for! he told himself, taking small comfort in his bravado.

Time started doing strange things. Each single step seemed to take forever, but when he got to the final rally point, it hadn't been all that long at all, had it? He could see the glow of the objective now, a vague green semicircle on the goggle display, but still there was no movement to be seen or heard in the woods. When he got to the last checkpoint, Chavez picked a tree and stood beside it, keeping his head up, swiveling left and right to gather as much information as possible. He thought he could hear things now. It came and went, but occasionally there was an odd, not-natural sound from the direction of the objective. It worried him that he didn't really see anything as yet. Just that glow, but nothing else.

"Anything?" Captain Ramirez asked in a whisper.

"Listen."

"Yeah," the captain said after a moment.

The squad members dropped off their rucksacks and divided according to plan. Chavez, Vega, and Ingeles would advance directly toward HOTEL while

the rest circled around to the left. Ingeles, the communications sergeant, had an M-203 grenade launcher slung under his rifle, Vega had the machine gun, and Chavez still had his silenced MP-5. Their job was overwatch. They would get in as close as possible to provide fire support for the actual assault. If anyone was in the way, it was Chavez's job to drop him quietly. Ding led his group off first, while Captain Ramirez moved off a minute later. In the case of both groups, the interval between the men was tightened up to five meters. Another real danger now was confusion. If any of the soldiers lost contact with his comrades, or if an enemy sentry somehow got mixed up with their group, the results could be lethal to the mission and the men.

The last five hundred meters took over half an hour. Ding's overwatch position was clear on the map, but not so clear in the woods at night. Things always looked different at night, and even with the low-light goggles, things were just... different. In a distant sort of way, Chavez knew that he was having an attack of the jitters. It wasn't so much that he was afraid, just that he felt much less certain now. He told himself every two or three minutes that he knew exactly what he was doing, and each time it worked—but only for a few minutes before the uncertainty hit him again. Logic told him that he was having what the manuals called a normal anxiety reaction. Chavez didn't like it, but found that he could live with it. Just like the manuals said.

He saw movement and froze. His left hand swung around his back, palm perpendicular to warn the two behind him to stop also. Again he kept his head up, trusting to his training. The human eye sees only movement at night, the manuals and his experience told him. Unless the opposition had goggles....

And this one didn't. The man-shape was almost a hundred meters away, moving slowly and casually through the trees between Chavez and the place where Chavez wanted to be. So simple a thing as that gave the man an early death sentence. Ding waved for Ingeles and Vega to stay put while he moved right, opposite his target's current path to get behind him. Perversely, he moved quickly now. He had to be in place in another fifteen minutes. Using his goggles to select clear places, he set his feet as lightly as he could, moving almost at a normal walking speed. Pride surged past the anxiety now that he could see what he had to do. He made no sound at all, moving alone, crouched down, swiveling his head from his path to his target and back again. Within a minute he was in a good place. There was a worn path there. This was a path for the guard. The idiot stuck to a path, Chavez recognized. You didn't do things like that and expect to live.

He was coming back now, moving with slow, almost childish steps, his legs snapping out from the knees—but he moved quietly enough by walking on the worn path, Ding noticed belatedly. Maybe he wasn't a total fool. His head was looking uphill. But his rifle was slung over his shoulder. Chavez let him approach, taking off his goggles when the man was looking away. The sudden loss of the display made him lose his target for a few seconds, and the edges of panic appeared in his consciousness, but Ding commanded them to be still. The man would reappear presently as he walked back to the south.

He did, first as a spectral outline, then as a black mass walking down the

worn corridor in the jungle. Ding crouched at the base of a tree, his weapon aimed at the man's head, and let him come closer. Better to wait and get a sure kill. His selector switch was on the single-shot position. The man was ten meters away. Chavez wasn't even breathing now. He aimed for the center of the man's head and squeezed off a single round.

The metallic sound of the H&K's action cycling back and forth seemed incredibly loud, but the target dropped at once, just a muted clack from his own rifle as it hit the ground alongside the body. Chavez leaped forward, his submachine gun fixed on the target, but the man—it had been a man, after all—didn't move. With his goggles back on, he could see the single hole right in the center of the nose, and the bullet had angled upward, ripping through the bottom of the brain for an instant, noiseless kill.

Ninja! his mind exulted.

He stood beside the body and looked uphill, holding his weapon high. *All clear.* A moment later the shapes of Vega and Ingeles appeared on the green image display, heading downhill. He turned, found a spot from which to observe the objective, and waited for them.

There it was, seventy meters away. The glow from the gasoline lanterns blazed on his goggles, and he realized that he could take them off once and for all. There were more voices now. He could even catch the odd word. It was the bored, day-to-day talk of people doing a job. There was a splashing sound, almost like... what? Ding didn't know, and it didn't matter for the present. Their fire-support position was in view. There was just one little problem.

It was oriented the wrong way. The trees that should have provided cover to their right flank instead prevented them from covering the objective. They'd planned the overwatch position in the wrong place, he decided. Chavez grimaced and made other plans, knowing that the captain would do the same. They found a spot almost as good fifteen meters away and oriented in the proper direction. He checked his watch. Nearly time. It was time to make his final, vital inspection of the objective.

He counted twelve men. The center of the site was ... what looked like a portable bathtub. Two men were walking in it, crushing or stirring up or doing something to the curious-looking soup of coca leaves and... *what was it they told us?* he asked himself. *Water and sulfuric acid?* Something like that. *Christ,* he thought. *Walking in fucking acid!* The men doing that distasteful task took turns. He watched one change, and those who got out poured fresh water over their feet and calves. It must have hurt or burned or something, Ding realized. But their banter was good-natured enough, thirty meters away. One was talking about his girlfriend in rather crude terms, boasting of what she did for him and what he did to her.

There were six men with rifles, all AKs. *Christ, the whole world carries those goddamned things.* They stood at the perimeter of the site, watching inward, however, rather than outward. One was smoking. There was a backpack by the lantern. One of the walkers said something to one of the gunmen and pulled a beer bottle out of it for himself, and another for the one who'd given

him permission.

Idiots! Ding told himself. The radio earpiece made three rasping dashes of static. Ramirez was in place and asking if Ding was ready. He keyed his radio two times in reply, then looked left and right. Vega had his SAW up on the bipod, and the canvas ammo pouch unzipped. Two hundred rounds were all ready, and a second pouch lay next to the first.

Chavez again nestled himself as close to a thick tree as he could and selected the farthest target. He figured the range to him at about eighty meters, a touch long for his weapon, too long for a head shot, he decided. He thumbed the selector to the burst setting, tucked the weapon in tight, and took careful aim through the diopter sight.

Three rounds were ejected from the side of his weapon. The man's face was surprised when two of them struck his chest. His breath came out in a rasping scream that caused heads to turn in his direction. Chavez shifted aim to another rifleman, whose gun was already coming off his shoulder. This one also took two or three hits, but that didn't stop him from trying to get his weapon around.

As soon as it appeared that fire might be returned, Vega opened up, transfixing that man with tracers from his machine gun, then shifting fire to two more armed men. One of them got a couple of rounds off, but they went high. The other, unarmed men reacted more slowly than the guards. Two started to run but were cut down by Vega's stream of fire. The others fell to the ground and crawled. Two more armed men appeared—or their weapons did. The flaming signatures of automatic weapons appeared in the trees on the far side of the site, aimed up at the fire-support team. Exactly as planned.

The assault element, led by Captain Ramirez, opened up from their right flank. The distinctive chatter of M-16 fire tore through the trees as Chavez, Vega, and Ingeles continued to pour fire into the objective and away from the incoming assault element. One of the people firing from the trees must have been hit. The muzzle flash from his weapon changed direction, blazing straight up. But two others turned and fired into the assault element before they went down. The soldiers were shooting at anything that moved now. One of the men who'd been walking in the tub tried to pick up a discarded rifle and didn't make it. One stood and might have been trying to surrender, but his hands never got high enough before the squad's other SAW lanced a line of tracers through his chest.

Chavez and his team ceased fire to allow the assault element to enter the objective safely. Two of them finished off people who were still moving despite their wounds. Then everything stopped for a moment. The lantern still hissed and illuminated the area, but there was no other sound but the echoes of the shooting and the calls of outraged birds.

Four soldiers checked out the dead. The rest of the assault element would now have formed a perimeter around the objective. Chavez, Vega, and Ingeles safed their weapons, collected their things, and moved in.

What Chavez saw was thoroughly horrible. Two of the enemy were still

alive, but wouldn't be for long. One had fallen victim to Vega's machine gun, and his abdomen was torn open. Both of the other's legs had been nearly shot off and were bleeding rapidly onto the beaten dirt. The squad medic looked on without pity. Both died within a minute. The squad's orders were a little vague on the issue of prisoners. No one could lawfully order American soldiers not to take prisoners, and the circumlocutions had been a problem for Captain Ramirez, but the message had gotten through. It was too fucking bad. But these people were involved in killing American kids with drugs, and that wasn't exactly under the Rules of Land Warfare either, was it? It was too fucking bad. Besides, there were other things to worry about.

Chavez had barely gotten into the site when he heard something. Everyone did. Someone was running away, straight downhill. Ramirez pointed to Ding, who immediately ran after him.

He reached for his goggles and tried to hold them in his hand as he ran, then realized that running was probably a stupid thing to do. He stopped, held the goggles to his eyes, and spotted both a path and the running man. There were times for caution, and times for boldness. Instinct told him that this was one of the latter. Chavez raced down the path, trusting to his skills to keep his footing and rapidly catching up with the sound that was trying to get away. Inside three minutes he could hear the man's thrashing and falling through the cover. Ding stopped and used his goggles again. Only a hundred meters ahead. He started running again, the blood hot in his veins. Fifty meters now. The man fell again. Ding slowed his approach. More attention to noise now, he told himself. This guy wasn't going to get away. He left the path, moving at a tangent to his left, his movements looking like an elaborate dance step as he picked his way as quickly as he could. Every fifty yards he stopped and used his night scope. Whoever the man was, he'd tired and was moving more slowly. Chavez got ahead of him, curving back to his right and waiting on the path.

Ding had nearly miscalculated. He'd just gotten his weapon up when the shape appeared, and the sergeant fired on instinct from a range of ten feet into his chest. The man fell against Chavez with a despairing groan. Ding threw the body off and fired another burst into his chest. There was no other sound.

"Jesus," the sergeant said. He knelt to catch his breath. Whom had he killed? He put the scope back on his head and looked down.

The man was barefoot. He wore the simple cotton shirt and pants of... Chavez had just killed a peasant, one of those poor dumb bastards who danced in the coca soup. Wasn't that something to be proud of?

The exhilaration that often follows a successful combat operation left him like the air released from a toy balloon. Some poor bastard—didn't even have shoes on. The druggies hired 'em to hump their shit up the hills, paid 'em half of nothing to do the dirty, nasty work of pre-refining the leaves.

His belt was unbuckled. He'd been off in the bushes taking a dump when the shooting started, and only wanted to get away, but his half-mast pants had made it a futile effort. He was about Ding's age, smaller and more lightly built,

but puffy around the face from the starchy diet of the local peasant farmers. An ordinary face, it still bore the signs of the fear and panic and pain with which his death had come. He hadn't been armed. He'd been part of the casual labor. He'd died because he'd been in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

It was not something for Chavez to be proud of. He keyed his radio.

"Six, this is Point. I got him. Just one."

"Need help?"

"Negative. I can handle it." Chavez hoisted the body on his shoulder for the climb back to the objective. It took ten exhausting minutes, but that was part of the job. Ding felt the man's blood oozing from the six holes in his chest, staining the back of his khaki shirt. Maybe staining more than that.

By the time he got back, the bodies had all been laid side by side and searched. There were many sacks of coca leaves, several additional jars of acid, and a total of fourteen dead men when Chavez dumped his at the end of the line.

"You look a little punked out," Vega observed.

"Ain't as big as you, *Oso,"* Ding gasped out in reply.

There were two small radios, and various other personal things to catalog, but nothing of real military value. A few men cast eyes on the pack full of beers, but no one made the expected "Miller Time!" joke. If there had been radio codes, they were in the head of whoever had been the boss here. There was no way of telling who he might have been; in death all men look alike. The bodies were all dressed more or less the same, except for the webbed pistol belts of the armed men. All in all, it was rather a sad thing to see. Some people who had been alive half an hour earlier were no longer so. Beyond that, there wasn't much to be said about the mission.

Most importantly, there were no casualties to the squad, though Sergeant Guerra had gotten a scare from a close burst. Ramirez completed his inspection of the site, then got his men ready to leave. Chavez again took the lead.

It was a tough uphill climb, and it gave Captain Ramirez time to think. It was, he realized, something that he ought to have thought about a hell of a lot sooner:

What is this mission all about? To Ramirez, *mission* now meant the purpose for their being here in the Colombian highlands, not just the job of taking this place out.

He understood that watching the airfields had the direct effect of stopping flights of drugs into the United States. They'd performed covert reconnaissance, and people were making tactical use of the intelligence information which they'd developed. Not only was it simple—but it also made sense. But what the hell were they doing now? His squad had just executed a picture-perfect small-unit raid. The men could not have done better—aided by the inept performance of the enemy, of course.

That was going to change. The enemy was going to learn damned fast from this. Their security would be better. They would learn that much even before they figured out what was going on. A blown-away processing site was all the information they needed to learn that they had to improve their physical security arrangements.

What had the attack actually accomplished? A few hundred pounds of coca leaves would not be processed tonight. He didn't have instructions to cart the leaves away, and even if he had, there was no ready means of destroying them except by fire, and he wasn't stupid enough to light a fire on a mountainside at night, orders or not. What they had accomplished tonight was... nothing. Nothing at all, really. There were tons of coca leaves, and scores—perhaps hundreds—of refining sites. They hadn't made a dent in the trade tonight, not even a dimple.

So what the hell are we risking our lives for? he asked himself. He ought to have asked that question in Panama, but like his three fellow officers, he'd been caught up in the institutional rage accompanying the assassination of the FBI Director and the others. Besides, he was only a captain, and he was more an order-follower than an order-giver. As a professional officer, he was used to being given orders from battalion or brigade commanders, forty-or-so-year-old professional soldiers who knew what the hell they were doing, most of the time. But his orders now were coming from someplace else—where? Now he wasn't so sure—and he'd allowed himself to be lulled in the complacency that assumed whoever generated the orders knew what the hell *he* was doing.

Why didn't you ask more questions!

Ramirez had seen success in his mission tonight. Prior to it his thought had been directed toward a fixed goal. But he'd achieved that goal, and seen nothing beyond it. He ought to have realized that earlier. Ramirez knew that now. But it was too late now.

The other part of the trap was even more troubling. He had to tell his men that everything was all right. They'd done as well as any commander could have asked. But—

What the hell are we doing here? He didn't know, because no one had ever told him, that he was not the first young captain to ask that question all too late, that it was almost a tradition of American arms for bright young officers to wonder why the hell they were sent out to do things. But almost always they asked the question too late.

He had no choice, of course. He had to assume, as his training and experience told him to assume, that the mission really did make sense. Even though his reason—Ramirez was far from being a stupid man—told him otherwise, he commanded himself to have faith in his command leadership. His men had faith in him. He had to have the same faith in those above himself. An army could work no other way.

Two hundred meters ahead, Chavez felt the stickiness on the back of his shirt and asked himself other questions. It had never occurred to him that he'd have to carry the dead, bleeding body of an enemy halfway up a mountain.

He'd not anticipated how this physical reminder of what he had done would wear on his conscience. He'd killed a peasant. Not an armed man, not a real enemy, but some poor bastard who had just taken a job with the wrong side, probably just to feed his family, if he had one. But what else could Chavez have done? Let him get away?

It was simpler for the sergeant. He had an officer who told him what to do. Captain Ramirez knew what he was doing. He was an officer, and that was his job: to know what was going on and give the orders. That made it a little easier as he climbed back up the mountain to the RON site, but his bloodied shirt continued to cling to his back like the questions of a nagging conscience.

Tim Jackson arrived back at his office at 2230 hours after a short squad-training exercise right on the grounds of Fort Ord. He'd just sat down in his cheap swivel chair when the phone rang. The exercise hadn't gone well. Ozkanian was a little slow catching on in his leadership of second squad. This was the second time in a row that he'd screwed up and made his lieutenant look bad. That offended Sergeant Mitchell, who had hopes for the young officer. Both knew that you didn't make a good squad sergeant in less than four years, and only then if you had a man as sharp as Chavez had been. But it was Ozkanian's job to lead the squad, and Mitchell was now explaining a few things to him. He was doing so in the way of platoon sergeants, with vigor, enthusiasm, and a few speculative observations about Ozkanian's ancestry. If any.

"Lieutenant Jackson," Tim answered after the second ring.

"Lieutenant, this is Colonel O'Mara at Special Ops Command."

"Yes, sir!"

"I hear you've been making some noise about a staff sergeant named Chavez. Is that correct?" Jackson looked up to see Mitchell walk in, his cabbage-patch helmet tucked under his sweaty arm and a whimsical smile on his lips. Ozkanian had gotten the message this time.

"Yes, sir. He didn't show up where he's supposed to be. He's one of mine, and—"

"Wrong, Lieutenant! He's one of mine now. He's doing something that you do not need to know about, and you will not, repeat not burn up any more phone lines *fucking around into something that does not concern you. IS THAT CLEAR, LIEUTENANT?"*

"But, sir, excuse me, but I—"

"You got bad ears or something, son?" The voice was quieter now, and that was really frightening to a lieutenant who'd already had a bad day.

"No, sir. It's just that I got a call from—"

"I know about that. I took care of that. Sergeant Chavez is doing something that you do not need to know about. Period. End. Is that clear?"

“Yes, sir.”

The line clicked off.

“Shit,” Lieutenant Jackson observed.

Sergeant Mitchell hadn’t caught any words from the conversation, but the buzz from the phone line had made it to the doorway he was standing in.

“Chavez?”

“Yeah. Some colonel at Special Ops—Fort MacDill, I guess—says that they have him and he’s off doing something. And I don’t need to know about that. Says he took care of Fort Benning for us.”

“Oh, horseshit,” Mitchell observed, taking his place in the seat opposite the lieutenant’s desk, after which he asked: “Mind if I sit down, sir?”

“What do you suppose is going on?”

“Beats the hell outa me, sir. But I know a guy at MacDill. Think I’ll make a phone call tomorrow. I don’t like one of my guys getting lost like that. It’s not supposed to work like that. He didn’t have no place chewing your ass either, sir. You’re just doin’ your job, looking after your people that way, and you don’t come down on people for doing their job. In case nobody ever told you, sir,” Mitchell explained, “you don’t chew some poor lieutenant’s ass over something like this. You make a quiet call to the battalion commander, or maybe the S-1, and have him settle things nice ’n quiet. Lieutenants get picked on enough by their own colonels without needin’ to get chewed on by strange ones. That’s why things go through channels, so you know who’s chewing’ ya’.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Jackson said with a smile. “I needed that.”

“I told Ozkanian that he ought to concentrate a little more on leadin’ his squad instead of trying to be Sergeant Rock. I think this time he’ll listen. He’s a pretty good kid, really. Just needs a little seasoning.” Mitchell stood. “See you at PT tomorrow, sir. Good night.”

“Right. ‘Night, Sergeant.” Tim Jackson decided that sleep made more sense than paperwork and headed off to his car. On the drive to the BOQ, he was still pondering the call he’d gotten from Colonel O’Mara, whoever the hell he was. Lieutenants didn’t interact with bird-colonels very much—he’d made his (required) New Year’s Day appearance at the brigade commander’s home, but that was it. New lieutenants were supposed to maintain a low profile. On the other hand, one of the many lessons remembered from West Point was that he was responsible for his men. The fact that Chavez hadn’t arrived at Fort Benning, that his departure from Ord had been so ... irregular, and that his natural and responsible inquiry into his man’s situation had earned him nothing more than a chewing only made the young officer all the more curious. He’d let Mitchell make his calls, but he’d stay out of it for the moment, not wanting to draw additional attention to himself until he knew what the hell he was doing. In this Tim Jackson was fortunate. He had a big brother on Pentagon duty who knew how things were supposed to work and was pushing hard for O-6—captain’s or colonel’s—rank, even if he was a

squid. Robby could give him some good advice, and advice was what he needed.

It was a nice, smooth flight in the COD. Even so, Robby Jackson didn't like it much. He didn't like sitting in an aft-facing seat, but mainly he didn't like being in an airplane unless he had the stick. A fighter pilot, test pilot, and most recently commander of one of the Navy's elite Tomcat squadrons, he knew that he was about the best flyer in the world, and didn't like trusting his life to the lesser skills of another aviator. Besides, on Navy aircraft the stewardesses weren't worth a damn. In this case it was a pimply-faced kid from New York, judging by his accent, who'd managed to spill coffee on the guy next to him.

"I hate these things," the man said.

"Yeah, well, it ain't Delta, is it?" Jackson noted as he tucked the folder back in his bag. He had the new tactical scheme committed to memory. As well he might. It was mainly his idea.

The man wore khaki uniform clothing, with a "U.S." insignia on his collar. That made him a tech-rep, a civilian who was doing something or other for the Navy. There were always some aboard a carrier—electronics specialists or various sorts of engineers who either provided special service to a new piece of gear or helped train the Navy personnel who did. They were given the simulated rank of warrant officer, but treated more or less as commissioned officers, eating in the officers' mess and quartered in relative luxury—a very relative term on a U.S. Navy ship unless you were a captain or an admiral, and tech-reps did not rate that sort of treatment.

"What are you going out for?" Robby asked.

"Checking out performance on a new piece of ordnance. I'm afraid I can't say any more than that."

"One of them, eh?" "'Fraid so," the man said, examining the coffee stain on his knee.

"Do this a lot?"

"First time," the man said. "You?"

"I fly off boats for a living, but I'm serving time in the Pentagon now. OP-05's office, fighter-tactics desk."

"Never made a carrier landing," the man added nervously.

"Not so bad," Robby assured him. "Except at night."

"Oh?" The man wasn't too scared to know that it was dark outside.

"Yeah, well, carrier landings aren't all that bad in daylight. Flying into a regular airfield, you look ahead and pick the spot you're gonna touch on. Same thing on a carrier, just the runway's smaller. But at night you can't really see where you're gonna touch. So that makes it a little twitchy. Don't sweat it. The gal we got driving—"

"A girl?"

"Yeah, a lot of the COD drivers are girls. The one up front is pretty good, instructor pilot, they tell me." It always made people safer to think that the pilot was an instructor, except: "She's breaking in a new ensign tonight," Jackson added maliciously. He loved to needle people who didn't like flying. It was always something he bothered his friend Jack Ryan about.

"New ensign?"

"You know, a kid out of P-cola. Guess he wasn't good enough for fighters or attack bombers, so he flies the delivery truck. They gotta learn, right? Everybody makes a first night carrier landing. I did. No big deal," Jackson said comfortably. Then he checked to make sure his safety belts were nice and tight. Over the years he'd found that one sure way of alleviating fear was to hand it over to someone else.

"Thanks."

"You part of the Shoot-Ex?"

"Huh?"

"The exercise we're running. We get to shoot some real missiles at target drones. 'Shoot-Ex.' Missile-Firing Exercise."

"I don't think so."

"Oh, I was hoping you were a guy from Hughes. We want to see if the fix on the Phoenix guidance package really works or not."

"Oh, sorry—no. I work with something else."

"Okay." Robby pulled a paperback from his pocket and started reading. Now that he was sure there was somebody on the COD more uncomfortable than he was, he could concentrate on the book. He wasn't really frightened, of course. He just hoped that the new nugget sitting in the copilot's right seat wouldn't splatter the COD and its passengers all over the ramp. But there wasn't much that he could do about that.

The squad was tired when they got back to the RON site. They took their positions while the captain made his radio call. One of each pair immediately stripped his weapon down for cleaning, even those few who hadn't gotten a shot off.

"Well, *Oso* and his SAW got on the scoreboard tonight," Vega observed as he pulled a patch through the twenty-one-inch barrel. "Nice work, Ding," he added.

"They weren't very good."

"Hey, *'mano,* we do our thing right, they don't have the chance to be very good."

"It's been awful easy so far, man. Might change."

Vega looked up for a moment. "Yeah. That's right."

At geosynchronous height over Brazil, a weather satellite of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration had its low-resolution camera pointed forever downward at the planet it had left eleven months before and to which it would never return. It seemed to hover almost in a fixed position, twenty-two thousand six hundred miles over the emerald-green jungles of the Amazon valley, but in fact it was moving at a speed of about seven thousand miles per hour, its easterly orbital path exactly matching the rotation speed of the earth below. The satellite had other instruments, of course, but this particular color-TV camera had the simplest of jobs. It watched clouds that floated in the air like distant balls of cotton. That so prosaic a function could be important was so obvious as to be hard to recognize. This satellite and its antecedents had saved thousands of lives and were arguably the most useful and efficient segment of America's space program. The lives saved were those of sailors for the most part, sailors whose ships might otherwise stray into the path of an undetected storm. From its perch, the satellite could see from the great Southern Ocean girdling Antarctica to beyond the North Cape of Norway, and no storm escaped its notice.

Almost directly below the satellite, conditions still not fully understood gave birth to cyclonic storms in the broad, warm Atlantic waters off the West Coast of Africa, from which they were carried westward toward the New World, where they were known by the West Indian name, hurricane. Data from the satellite was downlinked to NOAA's National Hurricane Center at Coral Gables, Florida, where meteorologists and computer scientists were working as part of a multiyear project to determine how the storms began and why they moved as they did. The busy season for these scientists was just beginning. Fully a hundred people, some with their doctor's degrees years behind them, others summer interns from a score of universities, examined the photographs for the first storm of the season. Some hoped for many, that they might study and learn from them. The more experienced scientists knew that feeling, but also knew that those massive oceanic storms were the most destructive and deadly force of nature, and regularly killed thousands who lived too close to the sea. They also knew that the storms would come in their own good time, for no one had a provable model for explaining exactly why they formed. All man could do was see them, track them, measure their intensity, and warn those in their path. The scientists also named them. The names were chosen years in advance, always starting at the top of the alphabet and proceeding downward. The first name on the list for the current year was *Adele.*

As the camera watched, clouds grew skyward five hundred miles from the Cape Verde islands, cradle of hurricanes. Whether it would become an organized tropical cyclone or simply be just another large rainstorm, no one could say. It was still early in the season. But it had all the makings of a big season. The West African desert was unusually hot for the spring, and heat there had a demonstrable connection with birth of hurricanes.

The truck driver appeared at the proper time to collect the men and the paste

processed from the coca leaves, but they weren't there as expected. He waited an hour, and still they weren't there. There were two men with him, of course, and these he sent up to the processing site. The driver was the "senior" man of the group and didn't want to be bothered climbing those cursed mountains anymore. So while he smoked his cigarettes, they climbed. He waited another hour. There was quite a bit of traffic on the highway, especially big diesel trucks whose mufflers and pollution controls were less well attended to than was the case in other, more prosperous regions—besides, their removal made for improved fuel economy in addition to the greater noise and smoke. Many of the big tractor-trailer combinations roared past, vibrating the roadbed and rocking his own truck in the rush of air. That was why he missed the sound. After waiting a total of ninety minutes, it was clear that he'd have to go up himself. He locked the truck, lit yet another cigarette, and began his way up the path.

The driver found it hard going. Though he'd grown up in these hills, and could remember a boyhood in which a thousand-foot climb was just another footrace with his playmates, he'd been driving the truck for some time, and his leg muscles were more accustomed to pushing down pedals than this sort of thing. What would once have taken forty minutes now took over an hour, and with the place almost in sight he was venomously angry, too angry and too tired to pay attention to things that ought to have been obvious by now. He could still hear the traffic sounds on the road below, could hear the birds twittering in the trees around him, but nothing else when he should have been hearing something. He paused, bending over to catch his breath when he got his first warning. It was a dark spot on the trail. Something had turned the brown earth to black, but that could have been anything, and he was in a hurry to see what the problem was up the hill and didn't ponder it. After all, there hadn't been any problem lately with the army or the police, and he wondered why the refining work was done so far up the mountainside in any case. It was no longer necessary.

Five minutes more and he could see the little clearing, and only now he noticed that there were no sounds coming from it, though there was an odd, acrid smell. Doubtless the acid used in the prerefining process, he was sure. Then he made the last turn and saw.

The truck driver was not a man unaccustomed to violence. He'd been involved in the pre-Cartel fighting and had also killed a few M-19 sympathizers in the wars because of which the Cartel had actually been formed. He'd seen blood, therefore, and had spilled some himself.

But not like this. All fourteen of the men he'd driven in the previous night were lined up shoulder to shoulder in a neat little row on the ground. The bodies were already bloated, and animals had been picking at several of the open wounds. The two men he'd dispatched up the mountainside were more freshly dead. Though the driver didn't fathom it, they'd been killed by a claymore mine triggered when they'd examined the bodies, and their bodies were newly shredded, with major sections missing where the ball-bearing-sized fragments had struck, and with the blood still trickling out. One's face showed the surprise and shock. The other man was facedown, with a section

about the size of a shoe box messily removed from his back.

The driver stood still for a minute or so, afraid to move in any direction, his quivering hands reaching for another cigarette, then dropping two which he was too terrified to reach for. Before he could get a third, he turned and moved carefully down the path. A hundred meters after that, he was running for his life as every bird call and every breeze through the trees sounded to him like an approaching soldier. They had to be soldiers. He was sure of that. Only soldiers killed with that sort of precision. “That was a splendid paper you delivered this afternoon. We hadn’t considered the Soviet ‘nationalities’ question as thoroughly as you have. Your analytical skills are as sharp as ever.” Sir Basil Charleston raised his glass in salute. “Your promotion was well earned. Congratulations, Sir John.”

“Thanks, Bas’. I just wish it could have happened another way,” Ryan said.

“That bad?”

Jack nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

“And Emil Jacobs, too. Bloody bad time for your chaps.”

Ryan smiled rather grimly. “You might say that.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

“I’m afraid there’s not much I can say about that,” Jack replied carefully. *I don’t know, but I can’t exactly say* that, *can I?*

“Quite so.” The head of Her Majesty’s Secret Intelligence Service nodded sagely. “Whatever your response is, I’m sure it will be appropriate.”

At that moment he knew that Greer had been right. He had to know such things or risk being taken for a fool by his counterparts here and everywhere else in the world. He’d get home in a few more days and talk things over with Judge Moore. Ryan was supposed to have some bureaucratic muscle now. Might as well flex it a little to see if it worked.

Commander Jackson woke after six hours’ sleep. He, too, enjoyed that greatest of luxuries aboard a warship, privacy. His rank and former station as a squadron commander put him high on the list of VIPs, and there happened to be a spare one-man stateroom in this floating city. His was just under the flight deck forward. Close to the bow catapults by the sound of things, which explained why one of *Ranger*’s own squadron commanders didn’t want it. On arrival, he’d made the necessary courtesy calls, and he didn’t have any official duties to attend to for another... three hours. After washing and shaving and morning coffee, he decided to do a few things on his own. Robby headed below for the carrier’s magazine.

This was a large compartment with a relatively low ceiling where the bombs and missiles were kept. Several rooms, really, with nearby shops so that the “smart” weapons could be tested and repaired by ordnance technicians. Jackson’s personal concern was with the AIM-54C Phoenix air-to-air missiles. There had been problems with the guidance systems, and one purpose of the

battle-group exercise was to see if the contractor's fix really worked or not.

Entry into the space was restricted, for obvious reasons. Robby identified himself to a senior chief petty officer, and it turned out that they'd both served on the *Kennedy* a few years before. Together they entered a work space where some "ordies" were playing with the missiles, with an odd-looking box hanging on the pointed nose of one.

"What d'ya think?" one asked.

"Reads out okay to me, Duke," the one on the oscilloscope replied. "Let me try some simulated jamming."

"That's the bunch we're prepping for the Shoot-Ex, sir," the senior chief explained. "So far they seem to be working all right, but..."

"But wasn't it you who found the problem in the first place?" Robby asked.

"Me and my old boss, Lieutenant Frederickson." The chief nodded. The discovery had resulted in several million dollars in penalties to the contractor. And all the AIM-54C missiles in the fleet had been decertified for several months, taking away what should have been the most capable air-to-air missile in the Navy. He led Jackson to the rack of test equipment. "How many we supposed to shoot?"

"Enough to tell whether the fix works or not," Robby replied. The chief grunted.

"That could be quite a Shoot-Ex, sir."

"Drones are cheap!" Robby pointed out in a most outrageous lie. But the chief knew what he meant. It was cheaper than going to the Indian Ocean and maybe having a shoot-out with *Iranian* F-14A Tomcats (they had them, too) and then finding out that the goddamned missiles didn't work properly. That was a most efficient way of killing off pilots whose training went for a million dollars a pop. The good news was that the fix was working, at least as far as the test equipment could tell. To make sure, Robby told the chief, between ten and twenty of the Phoenix-Cs would be shot off, plus a larger number of Sparrows and Side-winders. Jackson started to leave. He'd seen what he needed to see, and the ordies all had work to do.

"Looks like we're really going to be emptying this here locker out, sir. You know about the new bombs we're checking out?"

"No. I met with a tech-rep on the COD flight in. He didn't talk a hell of a lot. So what the hell is new? Just a bomb, right?"

The senior chief laughed. "Come on, I'll show you the Hush-A-Bomb."

"What?"

"Didn't you ever watch Rocky and Bullwinkle, sir?"

"Chief, you have really lost me."

"Well, when I was a kid I used to watch Rocky the Flying Squirrel and Bullwinkle the Moose, and one of the stories was about how Boris and Natasha —they were the bad guys, Commander—were trying to steal something called

Hush-A-Boom. That was an explosive that blew stuff up without making any noise. Looks like the guys at China Lake came up with the next-best thing!"

The chief opened a door to the bomb-storage area. The streamlined shapes —they didn't have any fins or fuses attached until they were taken topside— sat on storage pallets securely chained down to the steel deck. On a pallet close to the rectangular elevator that delivered them topside was a group of blue-painted bombs. The blue color made them exercise units, but from the tag on the pallet it was clear that they were also loaded with the customary explosive filler. Robby Jackson was a fighter pilot, and hadn't dropped very many bombs, but that was just another side of his profession. The weapons he looked at appeared to be standard two-thousand-pound low-drag cases, which translated to nine hundred eighty-five pounds of high explosives, and just over a thousand pounds of steel bombcase. The only difference between a "dumb" or "iron" bomb and a guided "smart" bomb was the attachment of a couple of hardware items: a seeker head on the nose, and movable fins on the tail. Both units attached to the normal fusing points, and in fact the fuses were part of the guidance-package attachments. For obvious reasons these were kept in a different compartment. On the whole, however, the blue bombcases appeared grossly ordinary.

"So?" he asked.

The chief tapped the nearest bombcase with his knuckle. There was an odd sound. Odd enough that Robby did the same.

"That's not steel."

"Cellulose, sir. They made the friggin' things outa paper! How you like that?"

"Oh." Robby understood. "Stealth."

"These babies gotta be guided, though. They ain't gonna make fragments worth a damn." The purpose of the steel bombcase, of course, is to transform itself into thousands of high-speed razors, ripping into whatever lay within their ballistic range after detonation. It wasn't the explosion that killed people —which was, after all, the reason to build bombs— but rather the fragments they generated. "That's why we call it the Hush-A-Bomb. Fucker's gonna be right loud, sir, but after the smoke clears you're gonna wonder what the hell it was."

"New wonders from China Lake," Robby observed. What the hell good was a bomb that—but then, it was probably something for the new Stealth tactical bomber. He didn't know all that much about Stealth yet. It wasn't part of his brief in the Pentagon. Fighter tactics were, and Robby went off to go over his notes with the air-group commander. The first part of the battle-group exercise would begin in just over twenty-four hours.

The word got to Medellin fairly quickly, of course. By noon it was known that two refining operations had been eliminated and a total of thirty-one people killed. The loss of manpower was incidental. In each case more than half had

been local peasants who did the coolie work, and the rest had been scarcely more important permanent employees whose guns kept the curious away, generally by example rather than persuasion. What was troubling was the fact that if word of these events got out, there might be some difficulties in recruiting new people to do the refining.

But most troubling of all was the simple fact that nobody knew what was going on. Was the Colombian Army going back into the hills? Was it M-19, breaking its word, or FARC, doing the same thing? Or something else? No one knew. That was most annoying, since they paid a good deal of money to get information. But the Cartel was a group of people, and action was taken only after consensus was reached. It was agreed that there must be a meeting. But then people began to worry if that might be dangerous. After all, clearly there were armed people about, people with little regard for human life, and that was also troubling for the senior Cartel officials. Most of all, these people had heavy weapons and the skill to use them. It was decided, therefore, that the meeting should be held at the most secure location possible.

FLASH

TOP SECRET ***** CAPER

1914Z

SIGINT REPORT

INTERCEPT 1993 INIT 1904Z FRQ 887.020MHZ

INIT: SUBJECT FOXTROT

RECIP: SUBJECT UNIFORM

F: IT IS AGREED. WE'LL MEET AT YOUR HOUSE TOMORROW NIGHT AT [2000L].

U: WHO WILL COME?

F: [SUBJECT ECHO] CANNOT ATTEND, BUT PRODUCTION IS NOT HIS CONCERN ANYWAY. [SUBJECT ALPHA], [SUBJECT GOLF], AND [SUBJECT WHISKEY] WILL COME WITH ME. HOW IS YOUR SECURITY?

U: AT MY [EMPHASIS] CASTLE? [LAUGHTER.] FRIEND, WE COULD HOLD OFF A REGIMENT THERE, AND MY HELICOPTER IS ALWAYS READY. HOW ARE YOU COMING?

F: HAVE YOU SEEN MY NEW TRUCK?

U: YOUR GREAT FEET [MEANING UNKNOWN]? NO I HAVE NOT SEEN YOUR MARVELOUS NEW TOY.

F: I GOT IT BECAUSE OF YOU, PABLO. WHY DON'T YOU EVER REPAIR THE ROAD TO YOUR CASTLE?

U: THE RAIN KEEPS DESTROYING IT. YES, I SHOULD PAVE IT, BUT I USE A HELICOPTER TO GET HERE.

F: AND YOU COMPLAIN ABOUT MY TOYS! [LAUGHTER.] SEE YOU TOMORROW NIGHT, FRIEND.

U: GOODBYE.

END CALL. DISCONNECT SIGNAL. END INTERCEPT.

The intercept was delivered to Bob Ritter's office within minutes of its receipt. So here was the chance, the whole purpose of the exercise. He got his

own signals out at once, without checking with Cutter or the President. After all, he was the one with the hunting license.

Aboard *Ranger,* the "tech-rep" got the encrypted message less than an hour later. He immediately placed a telephone call to the office of Commander Jensen, then headed off to see him personally. It wasn't all that hard. He was an experienced field officer and particularly good with maps. That was very useful on a carrier where even experienced sailors got lost in the gray-painted maze all the time. Commander Jensen was surprised he got there so quickly, but already had his personal bombardier-navigator in his office for the mission briefing.

Clark got his signal about the same time. He linked up with Larson and immediately arranged a flight down the valley south of Medellin to make a final reconnaissance of the objective.

Whatever problems his conscience gave Ding Chavez washed out when he did his shirt. There was a nice little creek a hundred meters from their patrol base, and one by one the squad members washed their things out and cleaned themselves up as best they could without soap. After all, he reasoned, poor, dumb peasant or not, he was doing something that he shouldn't have been doing. To Chavez the main concern was that he'd used up a magazine and a half of ammo, and the squad was short one claymore mine which, they'd heard a few hours earlier, went off exactly as planned. Their intel specialist was a real whiz with booby traps. Finished with his abbreviated personal hygiene routine, Ding returned to the unit perimeter. They'd lay up tonight, putting a listening post out a few hundred meters and running a routine patrol to make sure that there was nobody hunting them, but this would be a night of rest. Captain Ramirez had explained that they didn't want to be too active in this area. It might spook the game sooner than they wanted.

18.

Force Majeure

THE EASIEST THING for Sergeant Mitchell to do was to call his friend at Fort MacDill. He'd served with Ernie Davis in the 101st Air Assault Division, lived right next to him in a duplex, and crumpled many an empty beer can after charcoaled franks and burgers in the backyard. They were both E-7s, well schooled in the ways of the Army, which was really run by the sergeants, after all. The officers got more money and all of the worries while the long-service NCOs kept things on an even keel. He had an Army-wide phone directory at his desk and called the proper AUTOVON number.

"Ernie? Mitch."

"Yo, how's life out in wine country?"

"Humpin' the hills, boy. How's the family?"

"Doing fine, Mitch. And yours?"

"Annie's turning into quite a little lady. Hey, the reason I called, I wanted to check up to make sure one of our people got out to you. Staff Sergeant named Domingo Chavez. You'd like him, Ernie, he's a real good kid. Anyway, the paperwork got fucked up on this end, and I just wanted to make sure that he showed up in the right place."

"No problem," Ernie said. "Chavez, you said?"

"Right." Mitchell spelled it.

"Don't ring a bell. Wait a minute. I gotta switch phones." A moment later Ernie's voice came back, accompanied by the clicking sound that denoted a computer keyboard. What was the world coming to? Mitchell wondered. Even infantry sergeants had to know how to use the goddamned things. "Run that name past me again?"

"Chavez, first name Domingo, E-6." Mitchell read off his service number, which was the same as his Social Security number.

"He ain't here, Mitch."

"Huh? We got a call from this Colonel O'Mara of yours—"

"Who?"

"Some bird named O'Mara. My ell-tee took the call and got a little flustered. New kid, still got a lot to learn," Mitchell explained.

"I never heard of no Colonel O'Mara. I think maybe you got the wrong post,

Mitch."

"No shit?" Mitchell was genuinely puzzled. "My ell-tee must have really booted this one. Okay, Ernie, I'll take it from here. You give my love to Hazel now."

"Roge-o, Mitch. You have a good one, son. 'Bye."

"Hmph." Mitchell stared at the phone for a moment. What the hell was going on? Ding wasn't at Benning, and wasn't at MacDill. So where the fuck was he? The platoon sergeant flipped to the number for the Military Personnel Center, located in Alexandria, Virginia. The sergeants' club is a tight one, and the community of E-7s was especially so. His next call was to Sergeant First Class Peter Stankowski. It took two tries to get him.

"Hey, Stan! Mitch here."

"You looking for a new job?" Stankowski was a detailer. His job was to assign his fellow sergeants to new jobs. As such, he was a man with considerable power.

"Nah, I just love being a light-fighter. What's this I hear about you turning track-toad on us?" Stankowski's next job, Mitchell had recently learned, was in the 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, where he'd lead his squad from inside an M-2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle.

"Hey, Mitch, my knees are goin'. Ever think it might be nice to fight sittin' down once in a while? Besides, that twenty-five-millimeter chain gun makes for a nice equalizer. What can I do for you?"

"Trying to track somebody down. One of my E-6s checked out a couple of weeks back, and we have to ship some shit to him, and he ain't where we thought he was."

"Oooo-kay. Wait while I punch up my magic machine and we'll find the lad for you. What's his name?" Stankowski asked. Mitchell gave him the information.

"Eleven-Bravo, right?" 11-B was Chavez's Military Occupation Specialty, or MOS. That designated Chavez as a light infantryman. Mechanized infantry was Eleven-Mike.

"Yep." Mitchell heard some more tapping.

"C-h-a-v-e-z, you said?"

"Right."

"Okay, he was supposed to go to Benning and wear the Smokey Bear hat—"

"That's the guy!" Mitchell said, somewhat relieved.

"—but they changed his orders an' sent him down to MacDill."

But he ain't at MacDill! Mitchell managed not to say.

"That's a spooky bunch down there. You know Ernie Davis, don't you? He's there. Why don't you give him a call?"

“Okay,” Mitchell said, really surprised by that one. *I just did!* “When you going to Hood?”

“September.”

“Okay, I’ll, uh, call Ernie. You take it easy, Stan.”

“Stay in touch, Mitch. Say hi to the family. ‘Bye.”

“Shit,” Mitchell observed after he hung up. He’d just proved that Chavez didn’t exist anymore. That was decidedly strange. The Army wasn’t supposed to lose people, at least not like this. The sergeant didn’t know what to do next, except maybe talk to his lieutenant about it.

“We had another hit last night,” Ritter told Admiral Cutter. “Our luck’s holding. One of our people got scratched, but nothing serious, and that’s three sites taken out, forty-four enemy KIAs—”

“And?”

“And tonight, four senior Cartel members are going to have a sit-down, right here.” Ritter handed over a satellite photograph, along with the text of the intercept. “All people on the production end: Fernández, d’Alejandro, Wagner, and Untiveros. Their ass is ours.”

“Fine. Do it,” Cutter said.

Clark was examining the same photo at that moment, along with a few obliques that he’d shot himself and a set of blueprints for the house.

“You figure this room, right here?”

“I’ve never been in this one, but that sure looks like a conference room to me,” Larson said. “How close you have to be?”

“I’d prefer under four thousand meters, but the GLD is good to six.”

“How about this hilltop right here? We’ve got a clear line of sight into the compound.”

“How long to get there?”

“Three hours. Two to drive, one to walk. You know, you could almost do this from an airplane....”

“Yours?” Clark asked with a sly grin.

“Not on a bet!” They’d use a four-wheel-drive Subaru for the drive. Larson had several different sets of plates, and the car didn’t belong to him anyway. “I got the phone number and I got a cellular phone.”

Clark nodded. He was really looking forward to this. He’d done jobs against people like this before, but never with official sanction, and never this high up the line. “Okay, I gotta get final approval. Pick me up at three.”

Murray hustled over from his office as soon as he got the news. Hospitals never made people look glamorous, but Moira appeared to have aged ten years in the past sixty hours. Hospitals weren't especially big on dignity, either. Her hands were in restraints. She was on suicide watch. Murray knew that it was necessary—could scarcely be more so—but her personality had taken enough battering already, and this didn't make things any better.

The room was already bedecked with flowers. Only a handful of FBI agents knew what had transpired, and the natural assumption at the office was that she'd taken Emil's death too hard. Which wasn't far off, after all.

"You gave us quite a scare, kiddo," he observed.

"It's all my fault." She couldn't bring her eyes to look at him for more than a few seconds at a time.

"You're a victim, Moira. You got taken in by one of the best in the business. It happens, even to the smarties. Trust me, I know."

"I let him use me. I acted like a whore—"

"I don't want to hear that. You made a mistake. That happens. You didn't mean to hurt anybody, and you didn't break any laws. It's not worth dying for. It's damned sure not worth dying over when you got kids to worry about."

"What'll they think? What'll they think when they find out...."

"You've already given them all the scare they need. They love you, Moira. Can anything erase that?" Murray shook his head. "I don't think so."

"They're ashamed of me."

"They're scared. They're ashamed of themselves. They think it's partly their fault." That struck a nerve.

"But it's not! It's all my fault—"

"I just told you it isn't. Moira, you got in the way of a truck named Félix Cortez."

"Is that his real name?"

"He used to be a colonel in the DGI. Trained at the KGB Academy, and he's very, very good at what he does. He picked you because you're a widow, a young, pretty one. He scouted you, figured out that you're lonely, like most widows, and he turned on the charm. He probably has a lot of inborn talent, and he was educated by experts. You never had a chance. You got hit by a truck you never saw coming. We're going to have a shrink come down, Dr. Lodge from Temple University. And he's going to tell you the same thing I am, but he's going to charge a lot more. Don't worry, though. It comes under Workers Comp."

"I can't stay with the Bureau."

"That's true. You're going to have to give up your security clearance," Dan told her. "That's no great loss, is it? You're going to get a job at the Department of Agriculture, right down the street, same pay grade and everything," Murray said gently. "Bill set it all up for you."

"Mr. Shaw? But—why?"

" 'Cause you're a good guy, Moira, not a bad guy. Okay?"

"So what exactly are we going to do?" Larson asked.

"Wait and see," Clark replied, looking at the road map. There was a place called Don Diego not too far from where they were going. He wondered if somebody named Zorro lived there. "What's your cover story in case somebody sees us together?"

"You're a geologist, and I've been flying you around looking for new gold deposits."

"Fine." It was one of the stock cover-stories Clark used. Geology was one of his hobbies, and he could discuss the subject well enough to fool a professor in the subject. In fact, that's exactly what he'd done a few times. That cover would also explain some of the gear in the back of the four-wheel-drive station wagon, at least to the casual or unschooled observer. The GLD, they'd explain, was a surveying instrument, which was pretty close.

The drive was not terribly unusual. The local roads lacked the quality of paving common in America, and there weren't all that many guard rails, but the main hazard was the way the locals drove, which was a little on the passionate side, Clark thought. He liked it. He liked South America. For all the social problems, the people down here had a zest for life and an openness that he found refreshing. Perhaps the United States had been this way a century before. The old West probably had. There was much to admire. It was a pity that the economy hadn't developed along proper lines, but Clark wasn't a social theorist. He, too, was a child of his country's working class, and in the important things working people are the same everywhere. Certainly the ordinary folk down here had no more love for the druggies than he did. Nobody likes criminals, especially the sort that flaunt their power, and they were probably angry that their police and army couldn't do anything about it. Angry and helpless. The only "popular" group that had tried to deal with them was M-19, a Marxist guerrilla group—actually more an elitist collection of city-bred and university-educated intellectuals. After kidnapping the sister of a major cocaine trafficker, the others in the business had banded together to get her back, killing over two hundred M-19 members and actually forming the Medellín Cartel in the process. That allowed Clark to admire the Cartel. Bad guys or not, they had made a Marxist revolutionary group back off by playing the urban guerrilla game by M-19's own rules. Their mistake—aside from being in a business which Clark abhorred—had been in assuming that they had the ability to play against another, larger enemy by the same set of rules, and that their new enemy wouldn't respond in kind. Turnabout was fair play, Clark thought. He settled back in his seat to catch a nap. Surely they'd understand.

Three hundred miles off the Colombian coast, USS *Ranger* turned into the wind

to commence flight operations. The battle group was composed of the carrier, the Aegis-class cruiser *Thomas S. Gates,* another missile cruiser, four missile-armed destroyers and frigates, and two dedicated antisubmarine destroyers. The underway replenishment group, with a fleet oiler, the ammunition ship *Shasta,* and three escorts, was fifty miles closer to the South American coast. Five hundred miles to seaward was another similar group returning from a lengthy deployment at "Camel Station" in the Indian Ocean. The returning fleet simulated an oncoming enemy formation—pretending to be Russians, though nobody said that anymore in the age of *glasnost.*

The first aircraft off, as Robby Jackson watched from Pri-Fly, the control position high up on the carrier's island structure, were F-14 Tomcat interceptors, loaded out to maximum takeoff weight, squatting at the catapults with cones of fire trailing from each engine. As always, it was exciting to watch. Like a ballet of tanks, the massive, heavily loaded aircraft were choreographed about the four acres of flight deck by teenaged kids in filthy, color-coded shirts who gave instructions in pantomime while keeping out of the way of the jet intakes and exhausts. It was for them a game more dangerous than racing across city streets at rush hour, and more stimulating. Crewmen in purple shirts fueled the aircraft, and were called "grapes." Other kids, red-shirted ordnancemen called "ordies," were loading blue-painted exercise weapons aboard aircraft. The actually shooting part of the Shoot-Ex didn't start for another day. Tonight they'd practice interception tactics against fellow Navy aviators. Tomorrow night, Air Force C-130s would lift out of Panama to rendezvous with the returning battle group and launch a series of target drones which, everyone hoped, the Tomcats would blast from the sky with their newly repaired AIM-54C Phoenix missiles. It was not to be a contractor's test. The drones would be under the control of Air Force NCOs whose job it was to evade fire as though their lives depended on it, for whom every successful evasion involved a stiff penalty to be paid in beer or some other medium of exchange by the flight crew who missed.

Robby watched twelve aircraft launch before heading down to the flight deck. Already dressed in his olive-green flight suit, he carried his personal flight helmet. He'd ride tonight in one of the E-2C Hawkeye airborne-early-warning aircraft, the Navy's own diminutive version of the larger E-3A AWACS, from which he'd see if his new tactical arrangement worked any better than current fleet procedures. It had in all the computer simulations, but computers weren't reality, a fact often lost upon people who worked in the Pentagon.

The E-2C crew met him at the door to the flight deck. A moment later the Hawkeye's plane captain, a First-Class Petty Officer who wore a brown shirt, arrived to take them to the aircraft. The flight deck was too dangerous a place for pilots to walk unattended, hence the twenty-five-year-old guide who knew these parts. On the way aft Robby noticed an A-6E Intruder being loaded with a single blue bombcase to which guidance equipment had been attached, converting it into a GBU-15 laser-guided weapon. It was, he saw, the squadron-skipper's personal bird. That, he thought, must be part of the system-validation test, called a Drop-Ex. It wasn't that often you got to drop a

real bomb, and squadron commanders like to have their fair share of fun. Robby wondered for a moment what the target was—probably a raft, he decided—but he had other things to worry about. The plane captain had them at their aircraft a minute later. He said a few things to the pilot, then saluted him smartly and moved off to perform his next set of duties. Robby strapped into the jump seat in the radar compartment, again disliking the fact that he was in an airplane as a passenger rather than a driver.

After the normal preflight ritual, Commander Jackson felt vibration as the turboprop engines fired up. Then the Hawkeye started moving slowly and jerkily toward one of the waist catapults. The engines were run up to full power after the nosewheel attachment was fixed to the catapult shuttle and the pilot spoke over the intercom to warn his crew that it was time. In three stunning seconds, the Grumman-built aircraft went from a standing start to one hundred forty knots. The tail sank as it left the ship, then the aircraft leveled out and tipped up again for its climb to twenty thousand feet. Almost immediately, the radar controllers in back started their systems checks, and in twenty minutes the E-2C was on station, eighty miles from the carrier, its rotodome turning, sending radar beams through the sky to start the exercise. Jackson was seated so as to observe the entire "battle" on the radar screens, his helmet plugged into the command circuit so that he could see how well the Ranger's air wing executed his plan, while the Hawkeye flew a racetrack pattern in the sky.

From their position they could also see the battle group, of course. Half an hour after taking off, Robby noted a double launch from the carrier. The radar-computer system tracked both new contacts as a matter of course. They climbed to thirty thousand feet and rendezvoused. A tanker exercise, he realized at once. One of the aircraft immediately returned to the carrier, while the other flew east-southeast. The intercept exercise began in earnest right about then, but every few seconds Robby noted the course of the new contact, until it disappeared off the screen, still heading toward the South American mainland.

"Yes, yes, I will go," Cortez said. "I am not ready yet, but I will go." He hung up his phone with a curse and reached for his car keys. Félix hadn't even had the chance to visit one of the smashed refining sites yet and they wanted him to address the—"The Production Committee," *el jefe* called it. That was amusing. The fools were so bent on taking over the national government that they were starting to use quasi-official terminology. He swore again on the way out the door. Drive all the way down to that fat, pompous lunatic's castle on the hill. He checked his watch. It would take two hours. And he would get there late. And he would not be able to tell them anything because he hadn't had time to learn anything. And they would be angry. And he would have to be humble again. Cortez was getting tired of abasing himself to these people. The money they paid him was incredible, but no amount of money was worth his self-respect. That was something he should have thought about before he signed up, Cortez reminded himself as he started his car. Then he swore again.

The newest CAPER intercept was number 2091 and was an intercept from a mobile phone to the home of Subject ECHO. The text came up on Ritter's personal computer printer. Then came 2092, not thirty seconds later. He handed both to his special assistant.

"Cortez... going right there? Christmas in June."

"How do we get the word to Clark?" Ritter wondered.

The man thought for a moment. "We can't."

"Why not?"

"We don't have a secure voice channel we can use. Unless—we can get a secure VOX circuit to the carrier, and from there to the A-6, and from the A-6 to Clark."

It was Ritter's turn to swear. No, they couldn't do that. The weak link was the carrier. The case officer they had aboard to oversee that end of the mission would have to approach the carrier's commanding officer—it might not start there, but it would sure as hell end there—and ask for a cleared radio compartment to handle the messages by himself on an ears-only basis. That would risk too much, even assuming that the CO went along. Too many questions would be asked, too many new people in the information loop. He swore again, then recovered his senses. Maybe Cortez would get there in time. Lord, wouldn't it be nice to tell the Bureau that they'd nailed the bastard! Or, more properly, that someone had, plausibly deniably. Or maybe not. He didn't know Bill Shaw very well, and didn't know how he might react.

Larson had parked the Subaru a hundred yards off the main road in a preselected spot that made detection unlikely. The climb to their perch was not a difficult one, and they arrived well before sundown. The photos had identified a perfect place, right on the crest of a ridge, with a direct line of sight toward a house that took their breath away. Twenty thousand square feet it was—a hundred-foot square, two stories, no basement—set within a fenced six-acre perimeter four kilometers away, perhaps three hundred feet lower than their position. Clark had a pair of seven-power binoculars and took note of the guard force while light permitted. He counted twenty men, all armed with automatic weapons. Two crew-served heavy machine guns were sited in built-for-the-purpose strongpoints on the wall. Bob Ritter had called it right on St. Kitts, he thought: *Frank Lloyd Wright meets Ludwig the Mad.* It was a beautiful house, if you went for the neoclassical-Spanish-modern style, fortified in hi-tech fashion to keep the unruly peasants away. There was also the *de rigueur* helicopter pad with a new Sikorsky S-76 sitting on it.

"Anything else I need to know about the house?" Clark asked.

"Pretty massive construction, as you can see. I'd worry about that. This is earthquake country, you know. Personally, I'd prefer something lighter, wood-post and beam, but they like concrete construction—to stop bullets and mortar

rounds, I suppose."

"Better and better," Clark observed. He reached into his backpack. First he removed the heavy tripod, setting it up quickly and expertly on solid ground. Then came the GLD, which he attached and sighted in. Finally, he removed a Varo Noctron-V night-sighting device. The GLD had the same capability, of course, but once it was set up he didn't want to fool with it. The Noctron had only five-power magnification—Clark preferred the binocular lens arrangement—but was small, light, and handy. It also amplified ambient light about fifty thousand times. This technology had come a long way since his time in Southeast Asia, but it still struck him as a black art. He remembered being out in the boonies with nothing better than a Mark-1 eyeball. Larson would handle the radio traffic, and had his unit all set up. Then there was nothing left to do but wait. Larson produced some junk food and both men settled down.

"Well, now you know what 'Great Feet' means," Clark chuckled an hour later. The cryppies should have known. He handed the Noctron over.

"Gawd! Only difference between a man and a boy..."

It was a Ford three-quarter-ton pickup with optional four-wheel drive. Or at least that was how it had left the factory. Since then it had visited a custom-car shop where four-foot-diameter tires had been attached. It wasn't quite grotesque enough to be called "Big Foot," after the monster trucks so popular at auto shows, but it had the same effect. It was also quite practical, and that was the really strange part. The road up to the *casa* did need some serious help, but this truck didn't notice—though the chieftain's security pukes did, struggling to keep up with their boss's new and wonderful toy.

"I bet the mileage sucks," Larson observed as it came through the gate. He handed the night-sight back.

"He can afford it." Clark watched it maneuver around the house. It was too much to hope for, but it happened. The dickhead parked the truck right next to the house, right next to the windows to the conference room. Perhaps he didn't want to take his eyes off his new toy.

Two men alighted from the vehicle. They were greeted at the veranda—Clark couldn't remember the Spanish name for that—by their host with handshakes and hugs while armed men stood about as nervously as the President's Secret Service detail. He could see them relax when their charges went inside, spreading out, mixing with their counterparts—after all, the Cartel was one big, happy family, wasn't it?

For now, anyway, Clark told himself. He shook his head in amazement at the placement of the truck.

"Here comes the last one." Larson pointed to headlights struggling up the gravel road.

This car was a Mercedes, a stretch job, doubtless armored like a tank—*Just like the ambassador's car,* Clark thought. How poetic. This VIP was also met with pomp and circumstance. There were now at least fifty guards visible. The

wall perimeter was fully manned, with other teams constantly patrolling the grounds. The odd thing, he thought, was that there were no guards outside the wall. There had to be a few, but he couldn't spot them. It didn't matter. Lights went on in the room behind the truck. That did matter.

"Looks like you guessed right, boy."

"That's what they pay me for," Larson pointed out. "How close do you think that truck—"

Clark had already checked, keying the laser in on both the house and the truck. "Three meters from the wall. Close enough."

Commander Jensen finished tanking his aircraft, disconnecting from the KA-6 as soon as his fuel gauges pegged. He recovered the refueling probe and maneuvered downward to allow the tanker to clear the area. The mission profile could hardly have been easier. He eased the stick to the right, taking a heading of one-one-five and leveling off at thirty thousand feet. His IFF transponder was switched off at the moment, and he was able to relax and enjoy the ride, something he almost always did. The pilot's seat in the Intruder is set rather high for good visibility during a bomb run—it did make you feel a little exposed when you were being shot at, he remembered. Jensen had done a few missions before the end of the Vietnam War, and he could vividly recall the 100-mm flak over Haiphong, like black cotton balls with evil red hearts. But not tonight. The seat placement now was like a throne in the sky. The stars were bright. The waning moon would soon rise. And all was right with the world. Added to that was his mission. It didn't get any better than this.

With only starlight to see by they could pick out the coast from over two hundred miles away. The Intruder was cruising along at just under five hundred knots. Jensen brought the stick to the right as soon as he was beyond the radar coverage from the E-2C, taking a more southerly heading toward Ecuador. On crossing the coast he turned left to trace along the spine of the Andes. At this point he flipped on his IFF transponder. Neither Ecuador nor Colombia had an air-defense radar network. It was an extravagance that neither country needed. As a result, the only radars that were now showing up on the Intruder's ESM monitors were the usual air-traffic-control type. They were quite modern. A little-known paradox of radar technology was that these new, modern radars didn't really detect aircraft at all. Instead they detected radar transponders. Every commercial aircraft in the world carried a small "black box"—as aircraft electronic equipment is invariably known—that noted receipt of a radar signal and replied with its own signal, giving aircraft identification and other relevant information which was then "painted" on the control scopes at the radar station—most often an airport down here—for the controllers to use. It was cheaper and more reliable than the older radars that did "skin-paints," detecting the aircraft merely as nameless blips whose identity, course, and speed then had to be established by the chronically overworked people on the ground. It was an odd footnote in the history of technology that the new scheme was a step both forward and backward.

The Intruder soon entered the air-control zone belonging to El Dorado International Airport outside Bogotá. A radar controller there called the Intruder as soon as its alphanumeric code appeared on his scope.

"Roger, El Dorado," Commander Jensen replied at once. "This is Four-Three Kilo. We are Inter-America Cargo Flight Six out of Quito, bound for LAX. Altitude three-zero-zero, course three-five-zero, speed four-nine-five. Over."

The controller verified the track with his radar data and replied in English, which is the language of international air travel. "Four-Three Kilo, roger, copy. Be advised no traffic in your area. Weather CAVU. Maintain course and altitude. Over."

"Roger, thank you, and good night, sir." Jensen killed the radio and spoke over his intercom to his bombardier-navigator. "That was easy enough, wasn't it? Let's get to work."

In the right seat, set slightly below and behind the pilot's, the naval flight officer got on his own radio after he activated the TRAM pod that hung on the Intruder's center-line hardpoint.

At T minus fifteen minutes, Larson lifted his cellular phone and dialed the proper number. *"Señor Wagner, por favor."*

"Momento," the voice replied. Larson wondered who it was.

"Wagner," another voice replied a moment later. "Who is this?"

Larson took the cellophane from off a pack of cigarettes and crumpled it over the receiver while he spoke garbled fragments of words, then finally: "I can't hear you, Carlos. I will call back in a few minutes." Larson pressed the kill button on the phone. This location was at the far edge of the cellular system anyway.

"Nice touch," Clark said approvingly. "Wagner?"

"His dad was a sergeant in the *Allgemeine-SS*—worked at Sobibor—came over in forty-six, married a local girl and went into the smuggling business, died before anyone caught up with him. Breeding tells," Larson said. "Carlos is a real prick, likes his women with bruises on them. His colleagues aren't all that wild about him, but he's good at what he does."

"Christmas," Mr. Clark observed. The radio made the next sound, five minutes later.

"Bravo Whiskey, this is Zulu X-Ray, over."

"Zulu X-Ray, this is Bravo Whiskey. I read you five-by-five. Over," Larson answered at once. His radio was the sort used by forward air controllers, encrypted UHF.

"Status report, over."

"We are in place. Mission is go. Say again, mission is go."

"Roger, copy, we are go-mission. We are ten minutes out. Start the music."

Larson turned to Clark. “Light her up.”

The GLD was already powered up. Mr. Clark flipped the switch from standby to active. The GLD was more fully known as the Ground Laser Designator. Designed for use by soldiers on the battlefield, it projected a focused infrared (hence invisible) laser beam through a complex but rugged series of lenses. Boresighted with the laser system was a separate infrared sensor that told the operator where he was aiming—essentially a telescopic sight. “Great Feet” had a fiberglass cargo box over its load area, and Clark trained the crosshairs on one of its small windows, using the fine-adjustment knobs on the tripod with some delicacy. The laser spot appeared as desired, but then he rethought his aiming point and took advantage of the fact that they were slightly higher than their target, respotting his aim on the center of the vehicle’s roof. Finally he turned on the videotape recorder that took its feed from the GLD. The big boys in D.C. wanted to count coup on this one.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “The target is lit.”

“The music is playing, and it sounds just fine,” Larson said over the radio.

Cortez was driving up the hill, having already passed a security checkpoint manned by two people drinking beer, he noted disgustedly. The road was about on a par with what he’d grown up with in Cuba, and the going was slow. They’d still blame him for being late, of course.

It was too easy, Jensen thought as he heard the reply. Tooling along at thirty thousand feet, clear night, no flak or missiles to evade. Even a contractor’s validation test wasn’t this easy.

“I got it,” the B/N noted, staring down at his own scope. You can see a very, very long way at thirty thousand feet on a clear night, especially with a multimillion-dollar system doing the looking. Underneath the Intruder, the Target Recognition and Attack Multisensor pod noted the laser dot that was still sixty miles away. It was a modulated beam, of course, and its carrier signal was known to the TRAM. They now had positive identification of the target.

“Zulu X-Ray confirms music sounds just fine,” Jensen said over the radio. Over intercom: “Next step.”

On the port inboard weapon station, the bomb’s seeker head was powered up. It immediately noted the laser dot as well. Inside the aircraft, a computer was keeping track of the aircraft’s position, altitude, course, and speed, and the bombardier-navigator programmed in the position of the target to an accuracy of two hundred meters. He could have dialed it in even closer, of course, but didn’t need to. The bomb release would be completely automatic, and at this altitude the laser “basket” into which the bomb had to be dropped was miles wide. The computer took note of all these facts and decided to make an optimum drop, right in the most favorable portion of the basket.

Clark's eyes were now fixed to the GLD. He was perched on his elbows, and no part of his body was touching the instrument except for his eyebrow on the rubber cup that protected the eyepiece.

"Any second now," the B/N said.

Jensen kept the Intruder straight and level, heading straight down the electronic path defined by various computer systems aboard. The entire exercise was now out of human hands. On the ejector rack, a signal was received from the computer. Several shotgun shells—that's precisely what was used—fired, driving down the "ejector feet" onto small steel plates on the upper side of the bombcase. The bomb separated cleanly from the aircraft.

The aircraft jerked upward a bit at the loss of just over eleven hundred pounds of weight.

"Breakaway, breakaway," Jensen reported.

There, finally. Cortez saw the wall. His car—he'd have to buy a jeep if he were going to come here very often—was still losing its grip on the gravel, but he'd be through the gate in a moment, and if he remembered right, the road inside the perimeter was paved decently—probably leftover materials from the helipad, he thought.

"On the way," Larson told Clark.

The bomb was still traveling at five hundred knots. Once clear of the aircraft, gravity took over, arcing it down toward the ground. It actually accelerated somewhat in the rarefied air as the seeker head moved fractionally to correct for wind drift. The seeker head was made of fiberglass and looked like a round-nose bullet with some small fins attached. When the laser dot on which it tracked moved out of the center of its field of view, the entire seeker body moved itself and the plastic tail fins in the appropriate direction to bring the dot back where it belonged. It had to fall exactly twenty-two thousand feet, and the microchip brain in the guidance package was trying to hit the target exactly. It had plenty of time to correct for mistakes.

Clark didn't know what to expect, exactly. It had been too long a time since he'd called air strikes in, and he'd forgotten some of the details—when you had to call in air support, you generally didn't have time to notice the small stuff. He found himself wondering if there'd be the whistle—something he never remembered from his war service. He kept his eye on the target, still careful not to touch the GLD lest he screw things up. There were several men standing close to the truck. One lit a cigarette, and it appeared that several were talking about something or other. On the whole, it seemed like this was

taking an awfully long time. When it happened, there was not the least warning. Not a whistle, not anything at all.

Cortez felt his front wheels bump upward as they got on solid pavement.

The GBU-15 laser-guided bomb had a "guaranteed" accuracy of under three meters, but that was under combat conditions, and this was a far easier test of the system. It landed within inches of its target point, striking the top of the truck. Unlike the first test shot, this bomb was impact-fused. Two detonators, one in the nose and one in the tail, were triggered by a computer chip within a microsecond of the instant when the seeker head struck the fiberglass top of the truck. There were mechanical backups to the electronic triggers. Neither proved necessary, but even explosives take time, and the bomb fell an additional thirty inches while the detonation process got underway. The bombcase had barely penetrated the cargo cover when the bomb filler was ignited by both detonators. Things happened more quickly now. The explosive filler was Octol, a very expensive chemical explosive also used to trigger nuclear weapons, with a detonation rate of over eight thousand meters per second. The combustible bombcase vaporized in a few microseconds. Then expanding gas from the explosion hurled fragments of the truck body in all directions—except up—immediately behind which was the rock-hard shock wave. Both the fragments and the shock wave struck the concrete-block walls of the house in well under a thousandth of a second. The effects were predictable. The wall disintegrated, transformed into millions of tiny fragments traveling at bullet speed, with the remainder of the shock wave still behind to attack other parts of the house. The human nervous system simply doesn't work quickly enough for such events, and the people in the conference room never had the first hint that their deaths were underway.

The low-light sensor on the GLD went white (with a touch of green). Clark cringed on instinct and looked away from the eyepiece to see an even whiter flash in the target area. They were too far away to hear the noise at once. It wasn't often that you could *see* sound, but large bombs make that possible. The compressed air of the shock wave was a ghostly white wall that expanded radially from where the truck had been, at a speed over a thousand feet per second. It took about twelve seconds for the noise to reach Clark and Larson. Everyone who had been in the conference room was dead by that time, of course, and the *crump* of the pressure wave sounded like the outraged cry of lost souls.

"Christ," Larson said, awed by the event.

"Think you used enough dynamite there, Butch?" Clark asked. It was all he could do not to laugh. That was a first. He'd killed his share of enemies, and never taken joy from it. But the nature of the target combined with the method of the attack made the whole thing seem like a glorious prank. *Son of a BITCH!* The sober pause followed a moment later. His "prank" had just ended the lives of over twenty people, only four of whom were listed targets, and that was no joke. The urge to laugh died. He was a professional, not a psychopath.

Cortez had been less than two hundred meters from the explosion, but being downhill from it saved his life since most of the fragments sailed well over his head. The blast wave was bad enough, hurling his windshield backward into his face, where it fractured but didn't shatter, held together by the polymer filler of the safety-glass sandwich. His car was flipped on its back, but he managed to crawl free even before his mind had decided what his eyes had just witnessed. It was fully six seconds before the word "explosion" occurred to him. At that his reactions were far more rapid than that of the security guards, half of whom were dead or dying in any case. His first considered action was to draw his pistol and advance toward the house.

Except that there wasn't a house there anymore. He was too deafened to hear the screams of the injured. Several guards wandered aimlessly about with their guns held ready—for what, they didn't know. The ones from the far corner of the perimeter wall were the least affected. The body of the house had absorbed most of the blast, protecting them from everything but the projectiles, which had been quite lethal enough.

"Bravo Whiskey, this is Zulu X-Ray requesting BDA, over." BDA was bomb-damage assessment. Larson keyed his microphone one last time.

"I evaluate CEP as zero, I repeat, zero, with high-order detonation. Score this one-four-point-oh. Over."

"Roger that. Out." Jensen switched his radio off again. "You know," he said over the intercom, "I can remember back when I was a lieutenant I made a Med cruise on *Kennedy* and us officers were afraid to go into some spaces because the troops were fuckin' around with drugs."

"Yeah," the bombardier/navigator answered. "Fuckin' drugs. Don't worry, skipper. I ain't likely to have a conscience attack. Hey, the White House says it's okay, that means that it's really okay."

"Yep." Jensen lapsed back into silence. He'd proceed on his current heading until he was out of El Dorado's radar coverage, then turn southwest for the *Ranger*. It really was a pretty night. He wondered how the air-defense exercise was going....

Cortez had little experience with explosions, and the vagaries of such events were new to him. For example, the fountain in front of the house was still running. The electrical power cables to the *casa* were buried and unharmed, and the breaker box inside hadn't been totally destroyed. He lowered his face into the water to clear it. When he came back up, he felt almost normal except for the ache in his head.

There had been a dozen or so vehicles inside the wall when the explosion

happened. About half of them were shredded, and their gas tanks had ruptured, illuminating the area with isolated fires. Untiveros' new helicopter was a smashed wreck against the fractured wall. There were other people rushing about. Cortez stood still and started thinking.

He remembered seeing a truck, one with huge wheels, parked right next to ... He walked over that way. Though the entire three-hectare area around the house was littered with rubble, here it was clear, he saw as he approached. Then he saw the crater, fully two meters deep and six meters wide.

Car bomb.

A big one. Perhaps a thousand kilos, he thought, looking away from the hole while his brain went to work.

"I think that's all we really need to see," Clark observed. He made a last look through the eyepiece of the GLD and switched it off. Repacking took less than three minutes.

"Who do you suppose that is?" Larson asked while he put his backpack on. He handed the Noctron over to Clark.

"Must be the guy who showed up late in the BMW. Suppose he's important or something?"

"Don't know. Maybe next time."

"Right." Clark led the way down the hill.

It was the Americans, of course. CIA, without doubt. They'd made some financial arrangements and somehow managed to place a ton of explosives in the back of that monstrous truck. Cortez admired the touch. It was Fernández's truck-he'd heard about it but never seen it. *Now I never will,* he thought. Fernández had loved his new truck and had kept it parked right in front of ... That had to be it. The Americans had gotten lucky. Okay, he thought, how did they do it? They wouldn't have gotten their own hands involved, of course. So they must have arranged for someone else ... who? Somebody—no, more than one, at least four or five from M-19 or FARC ... ? Again, that made sense. Might it have been indirect? Have the Cubans or KGB arrange it. With all the changes between East and West, might CIA have managed to get such cooperation? Unlikely, Félix thought, but possible. A direct attack on high government officials such as the Cartel had executed was the sort of thing to generate the most unlikely of bedfellows.

Was the bomb placement here an accident? Might the Americans have learned of the meeting?

There were voices from inside the rubble pile that had once been a castle. Security people were nosing around, and Cortez joined them. Untiveros' family had been here. His wife and two children, and a staff of eight or more people. Probably treated them like serfs, Cortez thought. The Cartel chieftains all did. Perhaps he'd offended one greatly—gone after a daughter, maybe. They all did that. *Droit du seigneur.* A French term, but one which the

chieftains understood. The fools, Cortez told himself. Was there no perversion beneath them?

Security guards were already scrambling through the rubble. It was amazing that anyone could be alive in there. His hearing was coming back now. He caught the shrill screams of some poor bastard. He wondered what the body count would be. Perhaps. Yes. He turned and walked back to his overturned BMW. It was leaking gasoline out the filler cap, but Cortez reached in and got his cellular phone. He walked twenty meters from the car before switching it on.

"*Jefe,* this is Cortez. There has been an explosion here."

It was ironic, Ritter thought, that his first notification of the mission's success should come from another CAPER intercept. The really good news, the NSA guys reported, was that they now had a voiceprint on Cortez. That greatly improved their chances of locating him. It was better than nothing, the DDO thought as his visitor arrived for the second time today.

"We missed Cortez," he told Admiral Cutter. "But we got d'Alejandro, Fernández, Wagner, and Untiveros, plus the usual collateral damage."

"What do you mean?"

Ritter looked again at the satellite photo of the house. He'd have to get a new one to quantify the damage. "I mean there were a bunch of security guards around, and we probably got a bunch of them. Unfortunately there was also Untiveros's family—wife, a couple of kids, and various domestic servants."

Cutter snapped erect in his chair. "You didn't tell me anything about that! This was supposed to be a surgical strike."

Ritter looked up in considerable annoyance. *"Well, for Christ's sake, Jimmy!* What the hell do you expect? You are still a naval officer, aren't you? Didn't anybody ever tell you that there are *always* extraneous people standing around? We used a *bomb,* remember? You don't do surgery with bombs, despite what all the 'experts' say. Grow up!" Ritter himself took no pleasure from the extraneous deaths, but it was a cost of doing business—as the Cartel's own members well understood.

"But I told the President—"

"The President told *me* that I had a hunting license, and no bag limit. This is my op to run, remember?"

"It wasn't supposed to be this way! What if the papers get hold of it? This is cold-blooded murder!"

"As opposed to taking out the druggies and their shooters? That's murder, too, isn't it? Or it would be, if the President hadn't said that the gloves were off. You said it's a war. The President told us to treat it as a war. Okay, we are. I'm sorry there were extraneous people around, but, damn it, there always are. If there were a way to bag these jokers without hurting innocent people, we'd

use it—but there isn't." To say that Ritter was amazed didn't begin to explain matters. This guy was supposed to be a professional military officer. The taking of human life was part of his job description. Of course, Ritter told himself, Cutter'd spent most of his career driving a desk in the Pentagon—he probably hadn't seen much blood since he learned how to shave. A pussycat hiding in tiger's stripes. No, Ritter corrected himself. Just a pussy. Thirty years in uniform and he'd allowed himself to forget that real weapons killed people somewhat less precisely than in the movies. Some professional officer. And he was advising the President on issues of national security. Great.

"Tell you what, Admiral. If you don't tell the newsies, neither will I. Here's the intercept. Cortez says it was a car bomb. Clark must have rigged it just the way we hoped."

"But what if the local police do an investigation?"

"First of all, we don't know if the local cops will even be allowed there. Second, what makes you think they have the resources to figure it out? I worked pretty hard setting this up to look like a car-bombing, and it looks like Cortez got faked out. Third, what makes you think that the local cops'll give a flying fuck one way or another?"

"But the media!"

"You've got media on the brain. You're the one who's been arguing for turning us loose on these characters. So now you're changing your mind? It's a little late for that," Ritter said disgustedly. This was the best op his Directorate had run in years, and the guy whose idea it had been was now wetting his pants.

Admiral Cutter wasn't paying enough attention to Ritter's invective to be angry. He'd promised the President a surgical removal of the people who had killed Jacobs and the rest. He hadn't bargained for the deaths of "innocent" people. More importantly, neither had WRANGLER.

Chavez was too far south to have heard the explosion. The squad was staked out on another processing site. Evidently the sites were set up in relays. As he watched, two men were erecting the portable bathtub under the supervision of several armed men, and he could hear the grunts and gripes of others who were climbing up the mountainside. Four peasants appeared, their backpacks containing jars of acid. They were accompanied by two more riflemen.

Probably the word hadn't gotten out yet, Ding thought. He'd been certain that what the squad had done the other night would discourage people from supplementing their income this way. The sergeant didn't consider the possibility that they had to run such risks to feed their families.

Ten minutes later the third relay of six brought the coca leaves, and five more armed men. The laborers all had collapsible canvas buckets. They went off to a nearby stream for water. The boss guard ordered two of his people to walk into the woods to stand sentry, and that's where things went wrong. One of them walked straight toward the assault element, fifty meters away.

"Uh-oh," Vega observed quietly.

Chavez tapped four dashes on his radio button, the danger signal.

I see it, the captain replied with two dashes. Then three dashes. *Get ready.*

Oso got his machine gun up and flipped off the safety.

Maybe they'll drop him quietly, Chavez hoped.

The guys with the buckets were just coming back when Chavez heard a scream over to his left. The riflemen below him reacted at once. Vega started firing then.

The sudden shooting from another direction confused the guards, but they reacted as people with automatic weapons invariably reacted to surprise—they started shooting in all directions.

"Shit!" Ingeles snarled, and fired his grenade into the objective. It landed among the jars and exploded, showering everyone in the area with sulfuric acid. Tracers flew everywhere, and people dropped, but it was too confused, too unplanned for the soldiers to keep track of what was happening. The shooting stopped in a few seconds. Everyone in view was down. The assault group appeared soon thereafter, and Chavez ran down to join them. He counted bodies and came up three short.

"Guerra, Chavez, find 'em!" Captain Ramirez ordered. He didn't have to say Kill *'em!*

But they didn't. Guerra stumbled across one and killed him on the spot. Chavez came up dry, neither seeing nor hearing anything. He found the stream and one bucket, three hundred meters from the objective. If they'd been right there when the shooting started, that meant they had four or five minutes head start in the country they'd grown up in. Both soldiers spent half an hour rushing and stopping, looking and listening, but two men were away clean.

When they got back to the objective they learned that this was the good news. One of their men was dead. Rocha, one of their riflemen, had taken a burst full in the chest from one of the guards and died instantly. The squad was very quiet.

Jackson was also in an angry mood. The aggressor force had beaten him. *Ranger's* fighters hadn't gotten it right. His tactical scheme had come apart when one of the squadrons turned the wrong way, and what should have been a masterful trap had turned into a clear avenue for the "Russians" to blaze in and get close enough to the carrier to launch missiles. That was embarrassing, if not completely unexpected. New ideas took time to work out, and maybe he had to rethink some of his arrangements. Just because it had all worked on the computer simulation didn't mean that the plan was perfect, Jackson reminded himself. He continued to stare at the radar screen, trying to remember the patterns and how they had moved. While he watched, a single blip reappeared on the screen, heading southwest toward the carrier. He

wondered who that was as the Hawkeye prepared for landing.

The E-2C made a perfect trap, catching the number-three wire and rolling forward to clear the deck for the next aircraft. Robby dismounted in time to see the next one land. It was an Intruder, the same one he'd noticed before boarding the Hawkeye a few hours earlier. The squadron commander's personal bird, he noticed. The one that had flown toward the beach. But that wasn't important. Commander Jackson immediately headed for the CAG's office to start the debrief.

Commander Jensen also taxied clear of the landing area. The Intruder's wings folded up to minimize its deck space as it took its parking place forward. By the time he and his B/N dismounted, his plane captain was there waiting for them. He'd already pulled the videotape from its compartment in the nose instrument bay. This he handed to the skipper—squadron commanders are given that title—before leading them into the island and safety. The "tech-rep" was there to meet them, and Jensen handed the tape over to him.

"Four-oh, the man said," the pilot reported. Jensen just kept walking.

The "tech-rep" carried the tape cassette to his cabin, where he put it in a metal container with a lock. He sealed it further with multicolored tape and affixed a Top Secret label to both sides. It was then placed in yet another shipping box, which the man carried to a compartment on the O-3 level. There was a COD flight scheduled out in thirty minutes. The box would go on it in a courier's pocket and get flown to Panama, where an Agency field officer would take custody of it and fly to Andrews Air Force Base for final delivery to Langley.

19.

Fallout

INTELLIGENCE SERVICES PRIDE themselves on getting information from Point A to Points B, C, D, and so forth with great speed. In the case of highly sensitive information, or data that can be gathered only by covert means, they are highly effective. But for data that is open for all the world to see, they generally fall well short of the commercial news media, hence the fascination of the American intelligence community—and probably many others—with Ted Turner's Cable News Network.

As a result, Ryan was not overly surprised to see that his first notice of the explosion south of Medellín was captioned as having been copied from CNN and other news services. It was breakfast time in Mons. His quarters were in the American VIP section of the NATO complex and had access to CNN's satellite service. He switched the set on halfway through his first cup of coffee to see a TV shot obviously taken from a helicopter with a low-light rig. The caption underneath said, MEDELLÍN, coLOMBIA.

"Lord," Jack breathed, setting his cup down. The chopper didn't get very close, probably worried about being shot at by the people milling about on the ground, but it didn't need to be all that clear. What had been a massive house was now a disordered array of rubble set next to a hole in the ground. The ground signature was unmistakable. Ryan had said *car bomb* to himself even before the voice-over of the reporter gave the same evaluation. That meant the Agency wasn't involved, Jack was sure. Car bombs were not the American way. Americans believed in single aimed bullets. Precision firepower was an American invention.

His feelings changed on reflection, however. First, the Agency had to have the Cartel leadership under some sort of surveillance by now, and surveillance was something that CIA was exceedingly good at. Second, if a surveillance operation was underway, he ought to have heard of the explosion through Agency channels, not as a copy of a news report. Something did not compute.

What was it Sir Basil had said? Our response would surely be appropriate. And what does that mean? The intelligence game had become rather civilized over the past decade. In the 1950s, toppling governments had been a standard exercise in the furtherance of national policy. Assassinations had been a rare but real alternative to more complex exercises of diplomatic muscle. In the case of CIA, the Bay of Pigs fiasco and bad press over some operations in Vietnam—which had been a war after all, and wars were violent enterprises at best—had largely terminated such things for everyone. It was odd but true.

Even the KGB rarely involved itself in "wet work" any longer—a Russian phrase from the thirties, denoting the fact that blood made one's hands wet—instead leaving it to surrogates like the Bulgarians, or more commonly to terrorist groups who performed such irregular services as a *quid pro quo* for arms and training assistance. And remarkably enough, that, too, was dying out. The funny part was that Ryan believed such vigorous action was occasionally necessary—and likely to become all the more so now that the world was turning away from open warfare and drifting to a twilight contest of state-sponsored terrorism and low-intensity conflict. "Special-operations" forces offered a real and semicivilized alternative to the more organized and destructive forms of violence associated with conventional armed forces. *If war is nothing more or less than sanctioned murder on an industrial scale, then was it not more humane to apply violence in a much more focused and discrete way?*

That was an ethical question that didn't need contemplation over breakfast.

But what *was* right and what was wrong at this level? Ryan asked himself. It was accepted in law, ethics, and religion that a soldier who killed in war was not a criminal. That only begged the question: What is war? A generation earlier that question had been an easy one. Nation-states would assemble their armies and navies and send them off to do battle over some damned-fool issue or other—afterward it would usually appear that there had been a peaceful alternative—and that was morally acceptable. But war itself was changing, wasn't it? And who decided what war was? Nation-states. So, could a nation-state determine what its vital interests were and act accordingly? How did terrorism enter into the equation? Years earlier, when he'd been a target himself, Ryan had determined that terrorism could be seen as the modern manifestation of piracy, whose practitioners had always been seen as the common enemies of mankind. So, historically, there was a not-quite-war situation in which military forces could be used directly.

And where did that put international drug traffickers? Was it a civil crime, to be dealt with as such? What if the traffickers could subvert a nation to their own commercial will? Did that nation then become mankind's common enemy, like the Barbary Pirates of old?

"Damn," Ryan observed. He didn't know what the law said. An historian by training, his degrees didn't help. The only previous experience with such trafficking had been at the hands of a powerful nation-state, fighting a "real" war to enforce its "right" to sell opium to people whose government objected—but who had lost the war and with it the right to protect its own citizens against illegal drug use.

That was a troubling precedent, wasn't it?

Jack's education compelled him to look for justification. He was a man who believed that Right and Wrong really existed as discrete and identifiable values, but since law books didn't always have the answers, he sometimes had to find his answers elsewhere. As a parent, he regarded drug dealers with loathing. Who could guarantee that his own children might not someday be tempted to use the goddamned stuff? Did he not have a duty to protect his own children? As a representative of his country's intelligence community,

what about extending that protective duty to all his nation's children? And what if the enemy started challenging his country directly? Did that change the rules? In the case of terrorism, he had already reached that answer: Challenge a nation-state in that way, and you run a major risk. Nation-states, like the United States, had capabilities that are almost impossible to comprehend. They had people in uniform who did nothing but practice the fine art of visiting death on their fellowman. They had the ability to deliver fearsome tools of that art. Everything from drilling a bullet into one particular man's chest from a thousand yards away to putting a two-thousand-pound smart-bomb right through somebody's bedroom window....

"Christ."

There was a knock at his door. Ryan found one of Sir Basil's aides standing there. He handed over an envelope and left.

When you get home, do tell Bob that the job was nicely done. Bas.

Jack folded the note back into the envelope and slid it into his coat pocket. He was correct, of course. Ryan was sure of it. Now he had to decide if it was *right* or not. He soon learned that it was much easier to second-guess such decisions when they were made by others.

They had to move, of course. Ramirez had them all doing something. The more work to be done, the fewer things had to be thought about. They had to erase any trace of their presence. They had to bury Rocha. When the time came, if it did, his family, if any, would get a sealed metal casket with one hundred fifty pounds of ballast inside to simulate the body that wasn't there. Chavez and Vega got the job of digging the grave. They went down the customary six feet, not liking the fact that they were going to leave one of their own behind like this. There was the hope that someone might come back to recover their comrade, but somehow neither expected that the effort would ever be made. Even coming from a peacetime army, neither was a stranger to death. Chavez remembered the two kids in Korea, and others killed in training accidents, helicopter crashes and the like. The life of the soldier is dangerous, even when there are no wars to fight. So they tried to rationalize it along the lines of an accidental death. But Rocha had not died by accident. He'd lost his life doing his job, soldiering at the behest of the country which he had volunteered to serve, whose uniform he'd worn with pride. He'd known what the hazards were, taken his chances like a man, and now he was being planted in the ground of a foreign land.

Chavez knew that he'd been irrational to assume that something like this would never happen. The surprise came from the fact that Rocha, like the rest of the squad members, had been a real pro, smart, tough, good with his weapons, quiet in the bush, an intense and very serious soldier who really liked the idea of going after druggies—for reasons he'd never explained to anyone. Oddly, that helped. Rocha had died doing his job. Ding figured that was a good enough epitaph for anyone. When the hole was finished, they lowered the body as gently as they could. Captain Ramirez said a few words,

and the hole was filled in partway. As always, Olivero sprinkled his CS tear-gas powder to keep animals from digging it up, and the sod was replaced to erase any trace of what had been done. Ramirez made a point of recording the position, however, in case anyone ever did come back for his man. Then it was time to move.

They kept moving past dawn, heading for an alternate patrol base five miles from the one that Rocha now guarded alone. Ramirez planned to rest his men, then lead them on another mission as soon as possible. Better to have them working than thinking too much. That's what the manuals said.

An aircraft carrier is as much a community as a warship, home for over six thousand men, with its own hospital and shopping center, church and synagogue, police force and videoclub, even its own newspaper and TV network. The men work long hours, and the services they enjoyed while off duty were nothing more than they deserved—and more to the point, the Navy had found that the sailors worked far better when they received them.

Robby Jackson rose and showered as he always did, then found his way to the wardroom for coffee. He'd be having breakfast with the captain today, but wanted to be fully awake before he did so. There was a television set mounted on brackets in the corner, and the officers watched it just as they did at home, and for the same reason. Most Americans start off the day with TV news. In this case the announcer wasn't paid half a million dollars per year, and didn't have to wear makeup. He did have to write his own copy, however.

"At about nine o'clock last night-twenty-one hundred hours to us on the *Ranger*—an explosion ripped through the home of one Esteban Untiveros. *Señor* Untiveros was a major figure in the Medellín Cartel. Looks like one of his friends wasn't quite as friendly as he thought. News reports indicate that a car bomb totally destroyed his expensive hilltop residence, along with everyone in it.

"At home, the first of the summer's political conventions kicks off in Chicago next week. Governor J. Robert Fowler, the leading candidate for his party's nomination, is still a hundred votes short of a majority and is meeting today with representatives from..."

Jackson turned to look around. Commander Jensen was thirty feet away, motioning to the TV and chuckling with one of his people, who grinned into his cup and said nothing.

Something in Robby's mind simply went click.

A Drop-Ex.

A tech-rep who didn't want to talk very much.

An A-6E that headed to the beach on a heading of one-one-five toward Ecuador and returned to *Ranger* on a heading of two-zero-five. The other side of that triangle must—might—have taken the bird over ... Colombia.

A report of a car bomb.

A bomb with a combustible case. A *smart*-bomb with a combustible case, Commander Jackson corrected himself.

Well, son of a bitch....

It was amusing in more than one way. Taking out a drug dealer didn't trouble his conscience very much. Hell, he wondered why they didn't just shoot those drug-courier flights down. All that loose politician talk about threats to national security and people conducting chemical warfare against the United States—well, shit, he thought, why not have a for-real Shoot-Ex? You wouldn't even have to spend money for target drones. There was not a man in the service who wouldn't mind taking a few druggies out. Enemies are where you find them—where National Command Authority said they were, that is—and dealing with his country's enemies was what Commander Robert Jefferson Jackson, USN, did for a living. Doing them with a smart-bomb, and making it look like something else, well, that was just sheer artistry.

More amusing was the fact that Robby thought he knew what had happened. That was the trouble with secrets. They were impossible to keep. One way or another, they always got out. He wouldn't tell anyone, of course. And that really was too bad, wasn't it?

But why bother keeping it a secret? Robby wondered. The way the druggies killed the FBI Director—that was a declaration of war. Why not just go public and say, *We're coming for you!* In a political year, too. When had the American people ever failed to support their President when he declared the necessity to go after people?

But Jackson's job was not political. It was time to see the skipper. Two minutes later he arrived at the CO's stateroom. The Marine standing guard opened the door for him, and Robby found the captain reading dispatches.

"You're out of uniform!" the man said sternly.

"What—excuse me, Cap'n?" Robby stopped cold, looking to see that his fly was zipped.

"Here." *Ranger*'s CO rose and handed over the message flimsy. "You just got frocked, Robby—excuse *me,* Captain Jackson. Congratulations, Rob. Sure beats coffee for startin' off the day, doesn't it?"

"Thank you, sir."

"Now if we can just get those charlie-fox fighter tactics of yours to work...."

"Yes, sir."

"Ritchie."

"Okay, Ritchie."

"You can still call me 'sir' on the bridge and in public, though," the captain pointed out. Newly promoted officers always got razzed. They also had to pay for the "wetting down" parties.

The TV news crews arrived in the early morning. They, too, had difficulty with the road up to the Untiveros house. The police were already there, and it didn't occur to any of the crews to wonder if these police officers might be of the "tame" variety. They wore uniforms and pistol belts and seemed to be acting like real cops. Under Cortez's supervision, the real search for survivors had been completed already, and the two people found taken off, along with most of the surviving security guards and almost all of the firearms. Security guards per se were not terribly unusual in Colombia, though fully automatic weapons and crew-served machine guns were. Of course, Cortez was also gone before the news crews arrived, and by the time they started taping, the police search was fully underway. Several of the crews had direct satellite feeds, though one of the heavy ground-station trucks had failed to make the hill.

The easiest part of the search, lovingly recorded for posterity by the portacams, began in what had been the conference room, now a three-foot pile of gravel. The largest piece of a Production Committee member found (that title was also not revealed to the newsies) was a surprisingly intact lower leg, from just below the knee to a shoe still laced on the right foot. It would later be established that this "remain" belonged to Carlos Wagner. Untiveros's wife and two young children had been in the opposite side of the house on the second floor, watching a taped movie. The VCR, still plugged in and on play, was found right before the bodies. Yet another TV camera followed the man—a security guard temporarily without his AK-47—who carried the limp, bloody body of a dead child to an ambulance.

"Oh, My God," the President said, watching one of the several televisions in the Oval Office. "If anybody figures this out ..."

"Mr. President, we've dealt with this sort of thing before," Cutter pointed out. "The Libyan bombing under Reagan, the air strikes into Lebanon and—"

"And we caught hell for it every time! Nobody cares why we did it, all they care about is that we killed the wrong people. Christ, Jim, that was a kid! What are we going to say? 'Oh, that's too bad, but he was in the wrong place'?"

"It is alleged," the TV reporter was saying, "that the owner of this house was a member of the Medellín Cartel, but local police sources tell us that he was never officially charged with any crime, and well ..." The reporter paused in front of the camera. "You saw what this car bomb did to his wife and children."

"Great," the President growled. He lifted the controller and punched off the TV set. "Those bastards can do whatever the hell they want to our kids, but if we go after them on their turf, all of a sudden *they're* the goddamned victims! Has Moore told Congress about this yet?"

"No, Mr. President. CIA doesn't have to tell them until forty-eight hours after such an operation begins, and, for administrative purposes, the operation didn't actually begin until yesterday afternoon."

“They don’t find out,” the President said. “If we tell ’em, then it’ll leak sure as hell. You tell Moore and Ritter that.”

“Mr. President, I can’t—”

“The hell you can’t! I just gave you an order, mister.” The President walked to the windows. “It wasn’t supposed to be this way,” he muttered.

Cutter knew what the real issue was, of course. The opposition’s political convention would begin shortly. Their candidate, Governor Bob Fowler of Ohio, was leading the President in the polls. That was normal, of course. The incumbent had run through the primaries without serious opposition, resulting in a dull, predetermined result, while Fowler had fought a tooth-and-nail campaign for his party’s nomination and was still an eyelash short of certain nomination. Voters always responded to the lively candidates, and while Fowler was personally about as lively as a dishrag, his contest had been the interesting one. And like every candidate since Nixon and the first war on drugs, he was saying that the President hadn’t made good on his promise to restrict drug traffic. That sounded familiar to the current occupant of the Oval Office. He’d said the same thing four years earlier, and ridden that issue, and others, into the house on Pennsylvania Avenue. So now he’d actually tried something radical. And this had happened. The government of the United States had just used its most sophisticated military weapons to murder a couple of kids and their mother. That’s what Fowler would say. After all, it was an election year.

“Mr. President, it would be unsound to terminate the operations we have running at this point. If you are serious about avenging the deaths of Director Jacobs and the rest, and serious about putting a dent in drug trafficking, you cannot stop things now. We’re just about to show results. Drug flights into the country are down twenty percent,” Cutter pointed out. “Add that to the money-laundering bust and we can say that we’ve achieved a real victory.”

“How do we explain the bombing?”

“I’ve been thinking about that, sir. What if we say that we don’t know, but it could be one of two things. First, it might be an attack by M-19. That group’s political rhetoric lately has been critical of the drug lords. Second, we could say that it results from an internecine dispute within the Cartel itself.”

“How so?” he asked without turning around. It was a bad sign when WRANGLER didn’t look you in the eye, Cutter knew. He was really worried about this. Politics were such a pain in the ass, the Admiral thought, but they were also the most interesting game in town.

“Killing Jacobs and the rest was an irresponsible action on their part. Everyone knows that. We can leak the argument that some parts of the Cartel are punishing their own peers for doing something so radical as to endanger their whole operation.” Cutter was rather proud of that argument. It had come from Ritter, but the President didn’t know that. “We know that the druggies aren’t all that reticent about killing off family members—it’s practically their trademark. This way we can explain what ‘they’ are doing. We can have our cake and eat it, too,” he concluded, smiling at the President’s back.

The President turned away from the windows. His mien was skeptical, but ... "You really think you can bring that off?"

"Yes, sir, I do. It also allows us at least one more RECIPROCITY attack."

"I have to show that we're doing *something,"* the President said quietly. "What about those soldiers we have running around in the jungle?"

"They have eliminated a total of five processing sites. We've lost two people killed, and have two more wounded, but not seriously. That's a cost of doing business, sir. These people are professional soldiers. They knew what the risks were going in. They are proud of what they are doing. You won't have any problems on that score, sir. Pretty soon the word's going to get out that the local peasants ought not to work for the druggies. That will put a serious dent in the processing operations. It'll be temporary—only a few months, but it'll be real. It'll be something you can point to. The street price of cocaine is going to go up soon. You can point to that, too. That's how we gauge success or failure in our interdiction operations. The papers will run that bit of news before we have to announce it."

"So much the better," the President observed with his first smile of the day. "Okay—let's just be more careful."

"Of course, Mr. President."

Morning PT for the 7th Division commenced at 0615 hours. It was one explanation for the puritanical virtue of the unit. Though soldiers, especially young soldiers, like to drink as much as any other segment of American society, doing physical training exercises with a hangover is one step down from lingering death. It was already warm at Fort Ord, and by seven o'clock, at the finish of the daily three-mile run, every member of the platoon had worked up a good sweat. Then it was time for breakfast.

The officers ate together this morning and table talk was on the same subject being contemplated all over the country.

"About fucking time," one captain noted.

"They said it was a car bomb," another pointed out.

"I'm sure the Agency knows how to arrange it. All the experience from Lebanon an' all," a company XO offered.

"Not as easy as you think," the battalion S-2, intelligence officer, observed. A former company commander in the Rangers, he knew a thing or two about bombs and booby traps. "But whoever did it, it was a pretty slick job."

"Shame we can't go down there," a lieutenant said. The junior officers grunted agreement. The senior ones were quiet. Plans for that contingency had been the subject of division and corps staff discussion for some years. Deploying units for war—and that's exactly what it was—was not to be discussed lightly, though the general consensus was that it could be done ... if the local governments approved. Which they would not, of course. That, the officers thought, was understandable but most unfortunate. It was difficult to

overstate the level of loathing in the Army for drugs. The senior battalion officers, major and above, could remember the drug problems of the seventies, when the Army had been every bit as hollow as critics had said it was, and it hadn't been unknown for officers to travel in certain places only with armed guards. Conquering that particular enemy had required years of effort. Even today every member of the American military was liable to random drug testing. For senior NCOs and all officers, there was no forgiveness. One positive test and you were gone. For E-5s and below, there was more leeway: one positive test resulted in an Article 15 and a very stern talking to; a second positive, and out they went. The official slogan was a simple one: NOT IN MY ARMY! Then there was the other dimension. Most of the men around this table were married, with children whom some drug dealer might approach sooner or later as a potential client. The general agreement was that if anyone sold drugs to the child of a professional soldier, that dealer's life was in mortal danger. Such events rarely took place because soldiers are above all disciplined people, but the desire was there. As was the ability.

And the odd dealer had disappeared from time to time, his death invariably ascribed to turf wars. Many of those murders went forever unsolved.

And that's where Chavez is, Tim Jackson realized. There were just too many coincidences. He and Muñoz and León. All Spanish-speakers. All checked out the same day. So they were doing a covert operation, probably at CIA bequest. It was dangerous work in all likelihood, but they were soldiers and that was their business. Lieutenant Jackson breathed easier now that he "knew" what he didn't need to know. Whatever Chavez was doing, it was okay. He wouldn't have to follow that up anymore. Tim Jackson hoped that he'd be all right. Chavez was damned good, he remembered. If anyone could do it, he could.

The TV crews soon got bored, leaving to write their copy and do their voice-overs. Cortez returned as soon as the last of their vehicles went up the road toward Medellín. This time he drove a jeep up the hill. He was tired and irritable, but more than that he was curious. Something very odd had happened and he wasn't sure what it was. He wouldn't be satisfied until he did. The two survivors from the house had been taken to Medellín, where they would be treated privately by a trusted physician. Cortez would be talking to them, but there was one more thing he had to do here. The police contingent at the house was commanded by a captain who had long since come to terms with the Cartel. Félix was certain that he'd shed no tears over the deaths of Untiveros and the rest, but that was beside the point, wasn't it? The Cuban parked his jeep and walked over to where the police commander was talking with two of his men.

"Good morning, *Capitán.* Have you determined what sort of bomb it was?"

"Definitely a car bomb," the man replied seriously.

"Yes, I suspected that myself," Cortez said patiently. "The explosive agent?"

The man shrugged. "I have no idea."

“Perhaps you might find out,” Félix suggested. “As a routine part of your investigation.”

“Fine. I can do that.”

“Thank you.” He walked back to his jeep for the ride north. A locally fabricated bomb might use dynamite—there was plenty of that available from local mining operations—or a commercial plastic explosive, or even something made from nitrated fertilizer. If made by M-19, however, Cortez would expect Semtex, a Czech-made variant of RDX currently favored by Marxist terrorists all over the world for its power and ready, cheap supply. Determining what had actually been used would tell him something, and it amused Cortez to have the police run that information down. It was one thing to smile about as he drove down the mountainside.

And there were others. The elimination of four senior Cartel chieftains did not sadden him any more than it had the policeman. After all, they were just businessmen, not a class of individual for which Cortez had great regard. He took their money, that was all. Whoever had done the bombing had done a marvelous, professional job. That started him thinking that it could not have been CIA. They didn’t know very much about killing people. Cortez was less offended than one might imagine that he’d come so close to being killed. Covert operations were his business, after all, and he understood the risks. Besides, if he had been the primary target of so elegant a plan, clearly he’d not be trying to analyze it now. In any case, the removal of Untiveros, Fernández, Wagner, and d’Alejandro meant that there were four openings at the top of the Cartel, four fewer people with the power and prestige to stand in his way if... If, he told himself. Well, why not? A seat at the table, certainly. Perhaps more than that. But there was work to do, and a “crime” to solve.

By the time he reached Medellin, the two survivors from Untiveros’ hilltop house had been treated and were ready for questioning, along with a half-dozen servants from the dead lord’s Medellin condominium. They were in a top-floor room of a sturdy, fire-resistive high-rise building, which was also quite soundproof. Cortez walked into the room to find the eight trusted servants all sitting, handcuffed to straight-back chairs.

“Which of you knew about the meeting last night?” he asked pleasantly.

There were nods. They all did, of course. Untiveros was a talker, and servants were invariably listeners.

“Very well. Which of you told, and whom did you tell?” he asked in a formal, literate way. “No one will leave this room until I know the answer to that,” he promised them.

The immediate response was a confused flood of denials. He’d expected that. Most of them were true. Cortez was sure of that, too.

It was too bad.

Félix looked to the head guard and pointed to the one in the left-most chair.

“We’ll start with her.”

Governor Fowler emerged from the hotel suite in the knowledge that the goal to which he had dedicated the last three years of his life was now in his grasp. *Almost,* he told himself, remembering that in politics there are no certainties. But a congressman from Kentucky who'd run a surprisingly strong campaign had just traded his pledged delegates for a cabinet post, and that put Fowler over the top, with a safety margin of several hundred votes. He couldn't say that, of course. He had to let the man from Kentucky make his own announcement, scheduled for the second day of the convention to give him one last day in the sun—or more properly the klieg lights. It would be leaked by people in both camps, but the congressman would smile in his aw-shucks way and tell people to speculate all they wanted—but that he was the only one who knew. Politics, Fowler thought, could be so goddamned phony. This was especially odd since above all things Fowler was a very sincere man, which did not, however, allow him to violate the rules of the game.

And he played by those rules now, standing before the bright TV lights and saying nothing at all for about six minutes of continuous talking. There had been "interesting discussions" of "the great issues facing our country." The Governor and the congressman were "united in their desire to see new leadership" for a country which, both were sure, though they couldn't say it, would prosper whichever man won in November, because petty political differences of presidents and parties generally got lost in the noise of the Capitol Building, and because American parties were so disorganized that every presidential campaign was increasingly a beauty contest. Perhaps that was just as well, Fowler thought, though it was frustrating to see that the power for which he lusted might really be an illusion, after all. Then it was time for questions.

He was surprised by the first one. Fowler didn't see who asked it. He was dazzled by the lights and the flashing strobes—after so many months of it, he wondered if his vision would ever recover—but it was a male voice who asked, from one of the big papers, he thought.

"Governor, there is a report from Colombia that a car bomb destroyed the home of a major figure in the Medellín Cartel, along with his family. Coming so soon after the assassination of the FBI Director and our ambassador to Colombia, would you care to comment?"

"I'm afraid I didn't get a chance to catch the news this morning because of my breakfast with the congressman. What are you suggesting?" Fowler asked. His demeanor had changed from optimistic candidate to careful politician who hoped to become a statesman—whatever the hell that was, he thought. It had seemed so clear once, too.

"There is speculation, sir, that America might have been involved," the reporter amplified.

"Oh? You know the President and I have many differences, and some of them are very serious differences, but I can't remember when we've had a President who was willing to commit cold-blooded murder, and I certainly

will not accuse our President of that," Fowler said in his best statesman's voice. He'd meant to say nothing at all—that's what statesmen's voices are for, after all, either nothing or the obvious. He'd kept a fairly high road for most of his presidential campaign. Even Fowler's bitterest enemies—he had several in his own party, not to mention the opposition's—said that he was an honorable, thoughtful man who concentrated on issues and not invective. His statement reflected that. He hadn't meant to change United States government policy, hadn't meant to trap his prospective opponent. But he had, without knowing it, done both.

The President had scheduled the trip well in advance. It was a customary courtesy for the chief executive to maintain a low profile during the opposition's convention. It was just as easy to work at Camp David—easier in fact since it was far easier to shoo reporters away. But you had to run the gauntlet to get there. With the Marine VH-3 helicopter sitting and waiting on the White House lawn, the President emerged from the ground-level door with the First Lady and two other functionaries in tow, and there they were again, a solid phalanx of reporters and cameras. He wondered if the Russians with their *glasnost* knew what they were in for.

"Mister President!" called a senior TV reporter. "*Governor Fowler says that he hopes we weren't involved in the bombing in COLOMBIA! Do you have any comment?"*

Even as he walked over to the roped enclosure of journalists, the President knew that it was a mistake, but he was drawn to them and the question as a lemming is drawn to the sea. He couldn't *not* do it. The way the question was shouted, everyone would know that he'd heard it, and no answer would itself be seen as an answer of sorts. *The President ducked the question of ...* And he couldn't leave Washington for a week of low-profile existence, leaving the limelight to the other side—not with that question lying unanswered behind him on the White House lawn, could he?

"The United States," the President said, "does not kill innocent women and children. The United States fights *against* people who do that. We do not sink down to their bestial level. Is that a clear enough answer?" It was delivered in a quiet, reasoned voice, but the look the President gave the reporter made that experienced journalist wilt before his eyes. It was good, the President thought, to see that his power occasionally reached the bastards.

It was the second major political lie of the day—a slow news day to be sure. Governor Fowler well remembered that John and Robert Kennedy had plotted the deaths of Castro and others with a kind of elitist glee born of Ian Fleming's novels, only to learn the hard way that assassination was a messy business. Very messy indeed, for there were usually people about whom you didn't especially want to kill. The current President knew all about "collateral damage," a term which he found distasteful but indicative of something both necessary and impossible to explain to people who didn't understand how the world really worked: terrorists, criminals, and all manner of cowards—brutal people are most often cowards, after all—regularly hid behind or among the

innocent, daring the mighty to act, using the altruism of their enemies as a weapon against those enemies. *You cannot touch me. We are the "evil" ones. You are the "good" ones. You cannot attack us without casting away your self-image.* It was the most hateful attribute of those most hateful of people, and sometimes —rarely, but sometimes—they had to be shown that it didn't work. And that was messy, wasn't it? Like some sort of international auto accident.

But how the hell do I explain that to the American people? In an election year? *Vote to re-elect the President who just killed a wife, two kids, and various domestic servants to protect your children from drugs ... ?* The President wondered if Governor Fowler understood just how illusory presidential power was—and about the awful noise generated when one principle crashed hard up against another. That was even worse than the noise of the reporters, the President thought. It was something to shake his head about as he walked to his helicopter. The Marine sergeant saluted at the steps. The President returned it —a tradition despite the fact that no sitting President had ever worn a uniform. He strapped in and looked back at the assembled mob. The cameras were still on him, taping the takeoff. The networks wouldn't run that particular shot, but just in case the chopper blew up or crashed, they wanted the cameras rolling.

The word got to the Mobile police a little late. The clerk of the court handled the paperwork, and when information leaks from a courthouse, that is usually the hole. In this case the clerk was outraged. He saw the cases come and go. A man in his middle fifties, he'd gotten his children educated and through college, managing to avoid the drug epidemic. But that had not been true of every child in the clerk's neighborhood. Right next door to his house, the family's youngest had bought a "rock" of crack cocaine and promptly driven his car into a bridge abutment at over a hundred miles per hour. The clerk had watched the child grow up, had driven him to school once or twice, and paid the child to mow his lawn. The coffin had been sealed for the funeral at Cypress Hill Baptist Church, and he'd heard that the mother was still on medications after having had to identify what was left of the body. The minister talked about the scourge of drugs like the scourging of Christ's own passion. He was a fine minister, a gifted orator in the Southern Baptist tradition, and while he led them in prayer for the dead boy's soul his personal and wholly genuine fury over the drug problem merely amplified the outrage already felt by his congregation....

The clerk couldn't understand it. Davidoff was a superb prosecuting attorney. Jew or not, this man was one of God's elect, a true hero in a profession of charlatans. How could this be? *Those two scum were going to get off!* the clerk thought. It was *wrong!*

The clerk was unaccustomed to bars. A Baptist serious about his religious beliefs, he had never tasted spiritous liquors, had tried beer only once as a boy on a dare, and was forever guilt-ridden for that. That was one of only two narrow aspects to this otherwise decent and honorable citizen. The other was justice. He believed in justice as he believed in God, a faith that had somehow survived his thirty years of clerking in the federal courts. Justice, he thought, came from God, not from man. Laws came from God, not from man. Were not

all Western laws based on Holy Scripture in one way or another? He revered his country's Constitution as a divinely inspired document, for freedom was surely the way in which God intended man to live, that man could learn to know and serve his God not as a slave, but as a positive choice for Right. That was the way things were supposed to be. The problem was that the Right did not always prevail. Over the years he'd gotten used to that idea. Frustrating though it was, he also knew that the Lord was the ultimate Judge, and His Justice would always prevail. But there were times when the Lord's Justice needed help, and it was well known that God chose His Instruments through Faith. And so it was this hot, sultry Alabama afternoon. The clerk had his Faith, and God had His Instrument.

The clerk was in a cop bar, half a block from police headquarters, drinking club soda so that he could fit in. The police knew who he was, of course. He appeared at all the cop funerals. He headed a civic committee that looked after the families of cops and firemen who died in the line of duty. Never asked for anything in return, either. Never even asked to fix a ticket—he'd never gotten one in his life, but no one had ever thought to check.

"Hi, Bill," he said to a homicide cop.

"How's life with the feds?" the detective lieutenant asked. He thought the clerk slightly peculiar, but far less so than most. All he really needed to know was that the clerk of the court took care of cops. That was enough.

"I heard something that you ought to know about."

"Oh?" The lieutenant looked up from his beer. He, too, was a Baptist, but wasn't *that* Baptist. Few cops were, even in Alabama, and like most he felt guilty about it.

"The 'pirates' are getting a plea-bargain," the clerk told him.

"What?" It wasn't his case, but it was a symbol of all that was going wrong. And the pirates were in the same jail in which his prisoners were guests.

The clerk explained what he knew, which wasn't much. Something was wrong with the case. Some technicality or other. The judge hadn't explained it very well. Davidoff was enraged by it all, but there was nothing he could do. That was too bad, they both agreed. Davidoff was one of the Good Guys. That's when the clerk told his lie. He didn't like to tell lies, but sometimes Justice required it. He'd learned that much in the federal court system. It was just a practical application of what his minister said: "God moves in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform."

The funny part was that it wasn't entirely a lie: "The guys who killed Sergeant Braden were connected with the pirates. The feds think that the pirates may have ordered his murder—and his wife's."

"How sure are you of that?" the detective asked.

"Sure as I can be." The clerk emptied his glass and set it down.

"Okay," the cop said. "Thanks. We never heard it from you. Thanks for what you guys did for the Braden kids, too."

The clerk was embarrassed by that. What he did for the families of cops and firemen wasn't done for thanks. It was Duty, pure and simple. His Reward would come from Him who assigned that Duty.

The clerk left, and the lieutenant walked to a corner booth to join a few of his colleagues. It was soon agreed that the pirates would not—could not—be allowed to cop a plea on this one. Federal case or not, they were guilty of multiple rape and murder—and, it would seem, guilty of another double murder in which the Mobile police had direct interest. The word was already on the street: the lives of druggies were at risk. It was another case of sending a message. The advantage that police officers had over more senior government officials was that they spoke in a language that criminals fully understood.

But who, another detective asked, would deliver the message?

"How about the Patterson boys?" the lieutenant answered.

"Ahh," the captain said. He considered the question for a moment, then: "Okay." It was, on the whole, a decision far more easily arrived at than the great and weighty decisions reached by governments. And far more easily implemented.

The two peasants arrived in Medellín around sundown. Cortez was thoroughly frustrated by this time. Eight bodies to be disposed of—not all that difficult a thing to do in Medellín—for no good reason. He was sure of that now. As sure as he'd been of the opposite thing six hours earlier. So where was the information leak? Three women and five men had just died proving that they weren't it. The last two had just been shot in the head, uselessly catatonic after watching the first six die under less merciful circumstances. The room was a mess, and Cortez felt soiled by it. All that effort wasted. Killing people for no good reason. He was too angry to be ashamed.

He met with the peasants in another room on another floor after washing his hands and changing his clothes. They were frightened, but not of Cortez, which surprised Félix greatly. It took several minutes to understand why. They told their stories in an overly rapid and disjointed manner, which he allowed, memorizing the details—some of them conflicting, but that was not unexpected since there were two of them—before he began asking his own, directed questions.

"The rifles were not AK-47s," one said positively. "I know the sound. It was not that one." The other shrugged. He didn't know one weapon from another.

"Did you see anyone?"

"No, señor. We heard the noise and the shouting, and we ran."

Very sensible of you, Cortez noted. "Shouting, you say? In what language?"

"Why, in our language. We heard them chasing after us, but we ran. They didn't catch us. We know the mountains," the weapons expert explained.

"You saw and heard nothing else?"

"The shooting, the explosions, lights—flashes from the guns, that is all."

"The place where it happened—how many times had you been there?"

"Many times, señor, it is where we make the paste."

"Many times," the other confirmed. "For over a year we have gone there."

"You will tell no one that you came here. You will tell no one anything that you know," Félix told them.

"But the families of—"

"You will tell no one," Cortez repeated in a quiet, serious voice. Both men knew danger when they saw it. "You will be well rewarded for what you have done, and the families of the others will be compensated."

Cortez deemed himself a fair man. These two mountain folk had served his purposes well, and they would be properly rewarded. He still didn't know where the leak was, but if he could get ahold of one of those—what? M-19 bands? Somehow he didn't think so.

Then who?

Americans?

If anything, the death of Rocha had only increased their resolve, Chavez knew. Captain Ramirez had taken it pretty hard, but that was to be expected from a good officer. Their new patrol base was only two miles from one of the many coffee plantations in the area, and two miles in a different direction from yet another processing site. The men were in their normal daytime routine. Half asleep, half standing guard.

Ramirez sat alone. Chavez was correct. He had taken it hard. In an intellectual sense, the captain knew that he should accept the death of one of his men as a simple cost of doing business. But emotions are not the same as intellect. It was also true, though Ramirez didn't think along these precise lines, that historically there is no way to predict which officers are suited for combat operations and which are not. Ramirez had committed a typical mistake for combat leaders. He had grown too close to his men. He was unable to think of them as expendable assets. His failure had nothing to do with courage. The captain had enough of that; risking his own life was a part of the job he readily accepted. Where he failed was in understanding that risking the lives of his men—which he also knew to be part of the job—inevitably meant that some would die. Somehow he'd forgotten that. As a company commander he'd led his men on countless field exercises, training them, showing them how to do their jobs, chiding them when their laser-sensing Miles gear went off to denote a simulated casualty. But Rocha hadn't been a simulation, had he? And it wasn't as though Rocha had been a slick-sleeved new kid. He'd been a skilled pro. That meant that he'd somehow failed his men, Ramirez told himself, knowing that it was wrong even as he thought it. If he'd deployed better, if he'd paid more attention, if, if, if. The young captain tried to shake it off but couldn't. But he couldn't quit either. So he'd be more careful next time.

The tape cassettes arrived together just after lunch. The COD flight from *Ranger,* unbeknownst to anyone involved, had been coordinated with a courier flight from Bogotá. Larson had handled part of it, flying the tape from the GLD to El Dorado where he handed it off to another CIA officer. Both cassettes were tucked in the satchel of an Agency courier who rode in the front cabin of the Air Force C-5A transport, catching a few hours' sleep in one of the cramped bunks on the right side of the aircraft, a few feet behind the flight deck. The flight came directly into Andrews, and, after its landing, the forty-foot ladder was let down into the cavernous cargo area and the courier walked out the opened cargo door to a waiting Agency car which sped directly to Langley.

Ritter had a pair of television sets in his office, each with its own VCR. He watched them alone, cueing the tapes until they were roughly synchronized. The one from the aircraft didn't show very much. You could see the laser dot and the rough outline of the house, but little else until the flash of the detonation. Clark's tape was far better. There was the house, its lighted windows flaring in the light-amplified picture, and the guards wandering about—those with cigarettes looked like lightning bugs; each time they took a drag their faces were lit brightly by the glow. Then the bomb. It was very much like watching a Hitch-cock movie, Ritter thought. He knew what was happening, but those on the screen did not. They wandered around aimlessly, unaware of the part they played in a drama written in the office of the Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency. But—

"That's funny ..." Ritter said to himself. He used his remote control to back up the tape. Seconds before the bomb went off, a new car appeared at the gate. "Who might you be?" he asked the screen. Then he fast-forwarded the tape past the explosion. The car he'd seen driving up—a BMW—had been flipped over by the shock wave, but seconds later the driver got out and pulled a pistol.

"Cortez ..." He froze the frame. The picture didn't tell him much. It was a man of medium dimensions. While everyone else around the wrecked house raced about without much in the way of purpose, this man just stood there for a little while, then revived himself at the fountain—wasn't it odd that it still worked! Ritter thought—and next went to where the bomb had gone off. He couldn't have been a retainer of one of the Cartel members. They were all plowing through the rubble by this time. No, this one was already trying to figure out what had happened. It was right before the tape changed over to blank noise that he got the best picture. That had to be Félix Cortez. Looking around, already thinking, already trying to figure things out. That was a real pro.

"Damn, that was close," Ritter breathed. "One more minute and you would have parked your car over with the others. One more damned minute!" Ritter pulled both tapes and tucked them in his office safe along with all of the EAGLE EYE, SHOWBOAT, and RECIPROCITY material. Next time, he promised the tape cassette. Then he started thinking. Was Cortez really involved in the

assassination?

"Gawd," Ritter said aloud in his office. He'd assumed that, but ... Would he have set up the crime and then come to America ... ? Why do such a thing? According to the statement that secretary had made, he'd not even pumped her very hard for information. Instead it had been a basic get-away-with-your-lover weekend. The technique was a classic one. First, seduce the target. Second, determine if you can get information from her (usually *him* the way Western intelligence services handled sexual recruitments, but the other way around for the Eastern bloc). Third, firm up the relationship—and then use it. If Ritter understood the evidence properly, Cortez hadn't yet gotten to the point ...

It wasn't Cortez at all, was it? He'd probably forwarded what information he had as a matter of course, not knowing about the FBI operation against the Cartel's money operations. He hadn't been there when the decision to whack the Director had been made. And he would have recommended against it. Why lash out when you have just developed a good intel source? No, that wasn't professional at all.

So, Félix, how do you feel about all this? Ritter would have traded much for the ability to ask that question, though the answer was plain enough. Intelligence officers were regularly betrayed by their political superiors. It wouldn't be the first time for him, but he'd be angry just the same. Just as angry as Ritter was with Admiral Cutter.

For the first time, Ritter found himself wondering what Cortez was really doing. Probably he had simply defected away from Cuba and made a mercenary of himself. The Cartel had hired him on for his training and experience, thinking that they were buying just another mercenary—a very good one to be sure, but a mercenary nonetheless. Just like they bought local cops—hell, American cops—and politicians. But a police officer wasn't the same thing as a professional spook educated at Moscow Center. He was giving them his advice, and he'd think they had betrayed him—well, acted very stupidly, because killing Emil Jacobs had been an act of emotion, not of reason.

Why didn't I see that before! Ritter growled at himself. The answer: because not seeing had given him an excuse to do something he'd always wanted to do. He hadn't thought because somehow he'd known that thinking would have prevented him from taking action.

Cortez wasn't a terrorist, was he? He was an intelligence officer. He'd worked with the Macheteros because he'd been assigned to the job. Before that his experience had been straight espionage, and merely because he'd worked with that loony Puerto Rican group, they'd just assumed ... That was probably one reason why he'd defected.

It was clearer now. The Cartel had hired Cortez for his expertise and experience. But in doing so they had adopted a pet wolf. And wolves made for dangerous pets, didn't they?

For the moment there was one thing he could do. Ritter summoned an aide

and instructed him to take the best frame they had of Cortez, run it through the photo-enhancing computer, and forward it to the FBI. That was something worth doing, so long as they isolated the figure from the background, but that was just another task for the imaging computer.

Admiral Cutter remained at his White House office while the President was away in the western Maryland hills. He'd fly up every day for his usual morning briefing—delivered at a somewhat later hour while the President was on his "vacation" regime—but for the most part he'd stay here. He had his own duties, one of which was being "a senior administration official." ASAO, as he thought of the title, was his name when he gave off-the-record press briefings. Such information was a vital part of presidential policymaking, all part of an elaborate game played by the government and the press: Official Leaking. Cutter would send up "trial balloons," what people in the consumer-products business called test-marketing. When the President had a new idea that he was not too sure about, Cutter—or the appropriate cabinet secretary, each of whom was also an ASAO—would speak on background, and a story would be written in the major papers, allowing Congress and others to react to the idea before it was given an official presidential *imprimatur*. It was a way for elected officials and other players in the Washington scene to dance and posture without the need for anyone to lose face—an Oriental concept that translated well inside the confines of the Capital Beltway.

Bob Holtzman, the senior White House correspondent for one of the Washington papers, settled into his chair opposite Cutter for the deep-background revelations. The rules were fully understood by both sides. Cutter could say anything he wished without fear that his name, title, or the location of his office would be used. Holtzman would feel free to write the story any way he wished, within reason, so long as he did not compromise his source to anyone except his editor. Neither man especially liked the other. Cutter's distaste for journalists was about the only thing he still had in common with his fellow military officers, though he was certain that he concealed it. He thought them all, especially the one before him now, to be lazy, stupid people who couldn't write and didn't think. Holtzman felt that Cutter was the wrong man in the wrong place—the reporter didn't like the idea of having a military officer giving such intimate advice to the President; more importantly, he thought Cutter was a shallow, self-serving apple-polisher with delusions of grandeur, not to mention an arrogant son of a bitch who looked upon reporters as a semiuseful form of domesticated vulture. As a result of such thoughts, they got along rather well.

"You going to be watching the convention next week?" Holtzman asked.

"I try not to concern myself with politics," Cutter replied. "Coffee?"

Right! the reporter told himself. "No, thanks. What the hell's going on down in coca land?"

"Your guess is as good as—well, that's not true. We've had the bastards under surveillance for some time. My guess is that Emil was killed by one

faction of the Cartel—no surprise—but without their having made a really official decision. The bombing last night might be indicative of a faction fight inside the organization."

"Well, somebody's pretty pissed," Holtzman observed, scribbling notes on his pad under his personal heading for Cutter. "A Senior Administration Official" was transcribed as *ASO'l.* "The word is that the Cartel contracted M-19 to do the assassination, and that the Colombians really worked over the one they caught."

"Maybe they did."

"How'd they know that Director Jacobs was going down?"

"I don't know," Cutter replied.

"Really? You know that his secretary tried to commit suicide. The Bureau isn't talking at all, but I find that a remarkable coincidence."

"Who's running the case over there? Believe it or not, I don't know."

"Dan Murray, a deputy assistant director. He's not actually doing the field work, but he's the guy reporting to Shaw."

"Well, that's not my turf. I'm looking at the overseas aspects of the case, but the domestic stuff is in another office," Cutter pointed out, erecting a stone wall that Holtzman couldn't breach.

"So the Cartel was pretty worked up about Operation TARPON, and some senior people acted without the approval of the whole outfit to take Jacobs out. Other members, you say, think that their action was precipitous and decided to eliminate those who put out the contract?"

"That's the way it looks now. You have to understand, our intel on this is pretty thin."

"Our intel is always pretty thin," Holtzman pointed out.

"You can talk to Bob Ritter about that." Cutter set his coffee mug down.

"Right." Holtzman smiled. If there were two people in Washington whom you could trust never to leak anything, it was Bob Ritter and Arthur Moore. "What about Jack Ryan?"

"He's just settling in. He's been in Belgium all week anyway, at the NATO intel conference."

"There are rumbles on The Hill that somebody ought to do something about the Cartel, that the attack on Jacobs was a direct attack on—"

"I watch C-SPAN, too, Bob. Talk is cheap."

"And what Governor Fowler said this morning ... ?"

"I'll leave politics to the politicians."

"You know that the price of coke is up on the street?"

"Oh? I'm not in that market. Is it?" Cutter hadn't heard that yet. *Already* ...

“Not much, but some. There’s word on the street that incoming shipments are off a little.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“But no comment?” Holtzman asked. “You’re the one who’s been saying that this is a for-real war and we ought to treat it as such.”

Cutter’s smile froze on his face for a moment. “The President decides about things like war.”

“What about Congress?”

“Well, that, too, but since I’ve been in government service there hasn’t been a congressional declaration along those lines.”

“How would you feel personally if we were involved in that bombing?”

“I don’t know. We weren’t involved.” The interview wasn’t going as planned. What did Holtzman know?

“That was a hypothetical,” the reporter pointed out.

“Okay. We go off the record—completely—at this point. Hypothetically, we could kill all the bastards and I wouldn’t shed many tears. How about you?”

Holtzman snorted. “Off the record, I agree with you. I grew up here. I can remember when it was safe to walk the streets. Now I look at the body count every morning and wonder if I’m in D.C. or Beirut. So it wasn’t us, then?”

“Nope. Looks more like the Cartel is shaking itself out. That’s speculation, but it’s the best we have at the moment.”

“Fair enough. I suppose I can make a story out of that.”

20.

Discoveries

IT WAS AMAZING. But it was also true. Cortez had been there for over an hour. There were six armed men with him, and a dog that sniffed around for signs of the people who had assaulted this processing site. The empty cartridge cases were mostly of the 5.56mm round now used by most of the NATO countries and their surrogates all over the world, but which had begun as the .223 Remington sporting cartridge. In America. There were also a number of 9mm cases, and a single empty hull from a 40mm grenade launcher. One of the attackers had been wounded, perhaps severely. The method of the attack was classic, a fire unit uphill and an assault group on the same level, to the north. They'd left hastily, not booby-trapping the bodies as had happened in two other cases. Probably because of the injured man, Cortez judged. Also because they knew—suspected? No, they probably knew—that two men had gotten away to summon help.

Definitely more than one team was roaming the mountains. Maybe three or four, judging by the number and location of sites that had so far been attacked. That eliminated M-19. There weren't enough trained men in that organization to do something like this—not without his hearing of it, he corrected himself. The Cartel had done more than suborn the local guerrilla factions. It also had paid informants in each unit, something the Colombian government had signally failed to do.

So, he told himself, *now you have probable American covert-action teams working in the hills. Who and what are they? Probably soldiers, or very high-quality mercenaries. More likely the former.* The international mercenary community wasn't what it had once been—and truthfully had never been especially effective. Cortez had been to Angola and seen what African troops were like. Mercenaries hadn't had to be all that effective to defeat them, though that was now changing along with everything else in the world.

Whoever they were, they'd be far away—far enough that he didn't feel uncomfortable at the moment, though he'd leave the hunting to others. Cortez was an intelligence officer, and had no illusions about being a soldier. For now, he gathered his evidence almost like a policeman. The rifle and machine-gun cartridges, he saw, came from a single manufacturer. He didn't have such information committed to memory, but he noted that the 9mm cases had the same lot codes—stamped on the case heads—as those he'd gotten from one of the airfields on Colombia's northern coast. The odds against that being a coincidence were pretty high, he thought. So whoever had been watching the airfields had moved here ... ? How would that have been done? The simple

way would be by truck or bus, but that was a little too simple; that's how M-19 would have done it. Too great a risk for Americans, however. The *yanquis* would use helicopters. Staging from where? A ship, perhaps, or more likely one of their bases in Panama. He knew of no American naval exercises within helicopter range of the coast. Therefore a large aircraft capable of midair refueling. Only the Americans did that. And it would have to be based in Panama. And he had assets in Panama. Cortez pocketed the cartridges and started walking down the hill. Now he had a starting place, and that was all someone with his training needed.

Ryan's VC-20A—thinking of it as his airplane still required a stretch of the imagination—lifted off from the airfield outside Mons in the early afternoon. His first official foray into the big leagues of the international intelligence business had gone well. His paper on the Soviets and their activities in Eastern Europe had met with general approval and agreement, and he'd been gratified to learn that the analysis chiefs of all the NATO intelligence agencies held exactly the same opinion of the changes in their enemy's policies as he did: nobody knew what the hell was going on. There were theories ranging all the way from the peace-is-breaking-out-and-now-what-do-we-do? view to the equally unlikely it's-all-a-trick opinion, but when it came down to doing a formal intelligence estimate, people who'd been in the business since before Jack was born just shook their heads and muttered into their beer—exactly what Ryan did some of the time. The really good news for the year, of course, was the signal success that the counterintelligence groups had had turning KGB operations throughout Europe, and while CIA had not told anyone (except Sir Basil, who'd been there when the plan had been hatched) exactly how that had come about, the Agency enjoyed considerable prestige for its work in that area. The bottom line that Jack had often cited in the investment business was fairly clear: militarily NATO was in its best-ever condition, its security services were riding higher than anyone thought possible—it was just that the alliance's overall mission was now in doubt politically. To Ryan that looked like success, so long as politicians didn't let things go to their heads, which was enough of a caveat for anyone.

So there was a lot to smile about as the Belgian countryside fell farther and farther below him until it looked like a particularly attractive quilt from Pennsylvania Dutch country. At least on the actual NATO side.

Possibly the truest testimony to NATO's present happy condition, however, was that talk around the banquet tables and over coffee in the break periods between the plenary sessions was not on "business" as most of the conference attendees normally viewed it. Intelligence analysts from Germany and Italy, Britain and Norway, Denmark and Portugal, all of them expressed their concern at the growing problems of drugs in their countries. The Cartel's activities were expanding eastward, no longer content with marketing their wares to America alone. The intelligence professionals had noted the assassination of Emil Jacobs and the rest and wondered aloud if international narcoterrorism had taken a wholly new and dangerous turn—and what had to

be done about it. The French, with their history of vigorous action to protect their land, were especially approving of the bomb blast outside Medellín, and nonplussed by Ryan's puzzled and somewhat exasperating response: *No comment. I don't know anything.* Their reaction to that was predictable, of course. Had an equivalent French official been so publicly murdered, DGSE would have mounted an immediate operation. It was something the French were especially good at. It was something that the French media and, more to the point, the French people understood and approved. And so the DGSE representatives had expected Ryan to respond with a knowing smile to accompany his lack of comment, not blank embarrassment. That wasn't part of the game as it was played in Europe, and just another odd thing about the Americans for their Old World allies to ponder. *Must they be so unpredictable?* they would ask themselves. Being that way to the Russians had strategic value, but not to one's allies.

And not to its own government officials, Ryan thought. *What the hell is going on?*

Being three thousand miles from home had given Jack a properly detached perspective to the affair. In the absence of a viable legal mechanism to deal with such crimes, maybe direct action was the right thing to do. Challenge directly the power of a nation-state and you risked a direct response from that nation-state. If we could bomb a foreign country for sponsoring action against American soldiers in a Berlin disco, then why not—

—kill people on the territory of a fellow American democracy?

What about that political dimension?

That was the rub, wasn't it? Colombia had its own laws. It wasn't Libya, ruled by a comic-opera figure of dubious stability. It wasn't Iran, a vicious theocracy ruled by a bitter testimonial to the skill of gerontologists. Colombia was a country with real democratic traditions, one that had put its own institutions at risk, fighting to protect the citizens of another land from—themselves.

What the hell are we doing?

Right and wrong assumed different values at this level of statecraft, didn't they? Or did they? What were the rules? What was the law? Were there any of either? Before he could answer those questions, Ryan knew that he'd have to learn the facts. That would be hard enough. Jack settled back into his comfortable seat and looked down at the English Channel, widening out like a funnel as the aircraft headed west toward Land's End. Beyond that lonely point of ship-killing rocks lay the North Atlantic, and beyond that lay home. He had seven hours to decide what he should do once he got there. *Seven whole hours,* Jack thought, wondering how many times he could ask himself the same questions, and how many times he'd only come up with new questions instead of answers.

Law was a trap, Murray told himself. It was a goddess to worship, a lovely bronze lady who held up her lantern in the darkness to show one the way. But what if the way led nowhere? They now had a dead-bang case against the one

"suspect" in the assassination of the Director. The Colombians had gotten the confession and its thirty single-spaced pages of text were lying on his desk. There was ample physical evidence, which had been duly processed through the Bureau's legendary forensic laboratories. There was just one little problem. The extradition treaty the United States had with Colombia was not operative at the moment. Colombia's Supreme Court—more precisely, those justices who remained alive after twelve of their colleagues had been murdered by M-19 raiders not so long ago; all of whom, coincidentally, had been supporters of the extradition treaty before their violent deaths—had decided that the treaty was somehow in opposition to their country's constitution. No treaty. No extradition. The assassin would be tried locally and doubtless sent away for a lengthy prison term, but at the very least Murray and the Bureau wanted him caged in Marion, Illinois—the maximum-security federal prison for really troublesome offenders; Alcatraz without the ambience—and the Justice Department thought it could make a case for invoking the death statute that related to drug-related murders. But—the confession the Colombians had gotten hadn't exactly followed with American rules of evidence, and, the lawyers admitted, might be thrown out by an American judge; which would eliminate the death penalty. And the guy who took out the Director of the FBI might actually become something of a celebrity at Marion, Illinois, most of whose prisoners did not regard the FBI with the same degree of affection accorded by most U.S. citizens. The same thing, he'd learned the day before, was true of the Pirates Case. Some tricky bastard of a defense lawyer had uncovered what the Coast Guard had pulled, blowing that death case away also. And the only good news around was that Murray was sure his government had struck back in a way that was highly satisfying, but fell under the general legal category of cold-blooded murder.

It worried Dan Murray that he did view that development as good news. It wasn't the sort of thing that they'd lectured him—and he had later lectured others—about during his stint as a student and later an instructor at the FBI Academy, was it? What happened when governments broke the law? The textbook answer was anarchy—at least that's what happened when it became known that the government was breaking its own laws. But that was the really operative definition of a criminal, wasn't it—one who got caught breaking the law.

"No," Murray told himself quietly. He'd spent his life following that light because on dark nights that one beacon of sanity was all society had. His mission and the Bureau's was to enforce the laws of his country faithfully and honestly. There was leeway—there had to be, because the written words couldn't anticipate everything—but when the letter of the law was insufficient one was guided by the principle upon which the law was based. Maybe the situation wasn't always a satisfying one, but it beat the alternative, didn't it? But what did you do when the law didn't work? Was that just part of the game, too? Was it, after all was said and done, just a game?

Clark held a somewhat different view. Law had never been his concern—at least not his immediate concern. To him "legal" meant that something was "okay," not that some legislators had drafted a set of rules, and that some

President or other had signed it. To him it meant that the sitting President had decided that the continued existence of someone or something was contrary to the best interests of his country. His government service had begun in the United States Navy as part of the SEALs, the Navy's elite, secretive commandos. In that tight, quiet community he'd made himself a name that was still spoken with respect: Snake, they'd called him, because you couldn't hear his footsteps. To the best of his knowledge, no enemy had ever seen him and lived to tell the tale. His name had been different then, of course, but only because after leaving the Navy he'd made the mistake—he truly thought of it as a mistake, but only in the technical sense—of applying his skills on a free-agent basis. And done quite well, of course, until the police had discovered his identity. The lesson from that adventure was that while people didn't really investigate happenings on the battlefield, they did elsewhere, requiring far greater circumspection on his part. A foolish error in retrospect, one result of his almost-discovery by a local police force was that he'd come to the attention of CIA, which occasionally needed people with his unique skills. It was even something of a joke: "When there's killing to be done, get someone who kills for a living." At least it had been funny back then, almost twenty years earlier.

Others decided who needed to die. Those others were the properly selected representatives of the American people, whom he'd served in one way or another for most of his adult life. The law, as he'd once bothered to find out, was that there was no law. If the President said "kill," then Clark was merely the instrument of properly defined government policy, all the more so now, since selected members of Congress had to agree with the executive branch. The rules which from time to time prohibited such acts were Executive Orders from the President's office, which orders the President could freely violate—or more precisely, redefine to suit the situation. Of course, Clark did very little of that. Mainly his jobs for the Agency involved his other skills—getting in and out of places without being detected, for example, at which he was the best guy around. But killing was the reason he'd been hired in the first place, and for Clark, who'd been baptized John Terrence Kelly at St. Ignatius Parish in Indianapolis, Indiana, it was simply an act of war sanctioned both by his country and also by his religion, about which he was moderately serious. Vietnam had never been granted the legal sanction of a declared war, after all, and if killing his country's enemies back then had been all right, why not now? Murder to the renamed John T. Clark was killing people without just cause. Law he left to lawyers, in the knowledge that his definition of just cause was far more practical, and far more effective.

His immediate concern was his next target. He had two more days of availability on the carrier battle group, and he wanted to stage another stealth-bombing if he could.

Clark was domiciled in a frame house in the outskirts of Bogotá, a safe house the CIA had set up a decade earlier, officially owned by a corporate front and generally rented out commercially to visiting American businessmen. It had no obvious special features. The telephone was ordinary until he attached a portable encrypting device—a simple one that wouldn't

have passed muster in Eastern Europe, but sufficient for the relatively low-intercept threat down here—and he also had a satellite dish that operated just fine through a not very obvious hole in the roof and also ran through an encrypting system that looked much the same as a portable cassette player.

So what to do next? he asked himself. The Untiveros bombing had been carefully executed to look like a car bomb. Why not another, a real one? The trick was setting it up to scare hell out of the intended targets, flushing them into a better target area. To accomplish that it had to appear an earnest attempt, but at the same time it couldn't be earnest enough to injure innocent people. That was the problem with car bombs.

Low-order detonation? he thought. That was an idea. Make the bomb look like an earnest attempt that fizzled. Too hard to do, he decided.

Best of all would be a simple assassination with a rifle, but that was too hard to set up. Just getting a perch overlooking the proper place would be difficult and dangerous. The Cartel overlords kept tabs on every window with a line of sight to their own domiciles. If an American rented one, and soon thereafter a shot was fired from it—well, that wouldn't exactly be covert, would it? The whole point was for them not to know exactly what was happening.

Clark's operational concept was an elegantly simple one. So elegant and so simple that it hadn't occurred to the supposed experts in "black" operations at Langley. What Clark wanted to do, simply, was to kill enough of the people on his list to increase the paranoia within his targeted community. Killing them all, desirable though it might be, was a practical impossibility. What he wanted to do was merely to kill enough of them, and to do so in such a way as to spark another reaction entirely.

The Cartel was composed of a number of very ruthless people whose intelligence was manifested in the sort of cunning most often associated with a skilled enemy on the battlefield. Like good soldiers they were always alert to danger, but unlike soldiers they looked for danger from within in addition to from without. Despite the success of their collaborative enterprise, these men were rivals. Flushed with money and power, they didn't and would never have enough. There was never enough of either for men like this, but power most of all. It seemed to Clark and others that their ultimate goal was to assume political control of their country, but countries are not run by committees, at least not by large ones. All Clark needed to accomplish was to make the Cartel chieftains think that there was a power grab underway within their own hierarchy, at which point they would merrily start killing one another off in a new version of the Mafia wars of the 1930s.

Maybe, he admitted to himself. He gave the plan about a 30 percent chance of total success. But even if it failed, some major players would be removed from the field, and that, too, counted as a tactical success if not a strategic one. Weakening the Cartel might increase Colombia's chances of dealing with it, which was another possible strategic outcome, but not the only one. There was also the chance that the war he was hoping to start could have the same result as the final act of the Castellammare Wars, remembered as the Night of

the Italian Vespers, in which scores of mafiosi had been killed by their own colleagues. What had grown out of that bloody night was a stronger, better-organized, and more dangerous organized-crime network under the far more sophisticated leadership of Carlo Luchiano and Vito Genovese. That was a real danger, Clark thought. But things couldn't get much worse than they already were. Or so Washington had decided. It was a gamble worth the taking.

Larson arrived at the house. He'd come here only once before, and while it was in keeping with Clark's cover as a visiting prospector of sorts—there were several boxes of rocks lying around the house—it was one aspect of the mission that bothered him.

"Catch the news?"

"Everyone says car bomb," Larson replied with a sly smile. "We won't be that lucky next time."

"Probably not. The next one has to be really spectacular."

"Don't look at me! You don't expect that I'm going to find out when the next meet is, do you?"

It would be nice, Clark told himself, but he didn't expect it, and would have disapproved any order requiring it. "No, we have to pray for another intercept. They have to meet. They have to get together and discuss what's happened."

"Agreed. But it might not be up in the mountains."

"Oh?"

"They all have places in the lowlands, too."

Clark had forgotten about that. It would make targeting very difficult. "Can we spot in the laser from an aircraft?"

"I don't see why not. But then I land, refuel, and fly the hell out of this country forever."

Henry and Harvey Patterson were twin brothers, twenty-seven years of age, and were proof of whatever social theory a criminologist might hold. Their father had been a professional, if not especially proficient, criminal for all of his abbreviated life—which had ended at age thirty-two when a liquor-store owner had shot him with a 12-gauge double at the range of eleven feet. That was important to adherents of the behavioral school, generally populated by political conservatives. They were also products of a one-parent household, poor schooling, adverse peer-group pressure, and an economically depressed neighborhood. Those factors were important to the environmental school of behavior, whose adherents are generally political liberals.

Whatever the reason for their behavior, they were career criminals who enjoyed their life-style and didn't give much of a damn whether their brains were preprogrammed into it or they had actually learned it in childhood. They were not stupid. Had intelligence tests not been biased toward the literate,

their IQs would have tested slightly above average. They had animal cunning sufficient to make their apprehension by police a demanding enterprise, and a street-smart knowledge of law that had allowed them to manipulate the legal system with remarkable success. They also had principles. The Patterson brothers were drinkers—each was already a borderline alcoholic—but not drug users. This marked them as a little odd, but since neither brother cared a great deal for law, the discontinuity with normal criminal profiles didn't trouble them either.

Together, they had robbed, burglarized, and assaulted their way across southern Alabama since their mid-teens. They were treated by their peers with considerable respect. Several people had crossed one or both—since they were identical twins, crossing one inevitably meant crossing both—and turned up dead. Dead by blunt trauma (a club), or dead by penetrating trauma (knife or gun). The police suspected them of five murders. The problem was, which one of them? The fact that they were identical twins was a technical complication to every case which their lawyer—a good one they had identified quite early in their careers—had used to great effect. Whenever the victim of a Patterson was killed, the police could bet their salaries on the fact that one of the brothers—generally the one who had the motive to kill the victim—would be ostentatiously present somewhere miles away. In addition, their victims were never honest citizens, but members of their own criminal community, which fact invariably cooled the ardor of the police.

But not this time.

It had taken fourteen years since their first officially recorded brush with the law, but Henry and Harvey had finally fucked up big-time, cops all over the state learned from their watch commanders: the police had finally gotten them on a major felony rap and, they noted with no small degree of pleasure, it was because of another pair of identical twins. Two whores, lovely ones of eighteen years, had smitten the hearts of the Patterson brothers. For the past five weeks Henry and Harvey had not been able to get enough of Noreen and Doreen Grayson, and as the patrol officers in the neighborhood had watched the romance blossom, the general speculation in the station was how the hell they kept one another straight—the behavioralist cops pronounced that it wouldn't actually matter, which observation was dismissed by the environmentalist cops as pseudoscientific bullshit, not to mention sexually perverse, but both sides of the argument found it roundly entertaining speculation. In either case, true love had been the downfall of the Patterson brothers.

Henry and Harvey had decided to liberate the Grayson sisters from their drug-dealing pimp, a very disreputable but even more formidable man with a long history of violence, and a suspect in the disappearance of several of his girls. What had brought it to a head was a savage beating to the sisters for not turning over some presents—jewelry—given them by the Pattersons as one-month anniversary presents. Noreen's jaw had been broken, and Doreen had lost six teeth, plus other indignities that had enraged the Pattersons and put both girls in the University of South Alabama Medical Center. The twin brothers were not people to bear offense lightly, and one week later, from the

unlit shadows of an alley, the two of them had used identical Smith & Wesson revolvers to end the life of Elrod MeIlvane. It was their misfortune that a police radio car had been half a block away at the time. Even the cops thought that, in this case, the Pattersons had rendered a public service to the city of Mobile.

The police lieutenant had both of them in an interrogation room. Their customary defiance was a wilted flower. The guns had been recovered less than fifty yards from the crime scene. Though there had been no usable fingerprints on either—fire—arms do not always lend themselves to this purpose—the four rounds recovered from McIlvane's body did match up with both; the Pattersons had been apprehended four blocks away; their hands bore powder signatures from having fired guns of some sort; and their motive for eliminating the pimp was well known. Criminal cases didn't get much better than that. The only thing the police didn't have was a confession. The twins' luck had finally run out. Even their lawyer had told them that. There was no hope of a plea-bargain-the local prosecutor hated them even more than the police did—and while they stood to do hard time for murder, the good news was that they probably wouldn't get the chair, since the jurors probably would not want to execute people for killing a drug-dealing pimp who'd put two of his whores in the hospital and probably killed a few more. This was arguably a crime of passion, and under American law such motives are generally seen as mitigating circumstances.

In identical prison garb, the Pattersons sat across the table from the senior police officer. The lieutenant couldn't even tell them apart, and didn't bother asking which was which, because they would probably have lied about it out of pure spite.

"Where's our lawyer?" Henry or Harvey asked.

"Yeah," Harvey or Henry emphasized.

"We don't really need him here for this. How'd you boys like to do a little favor for us?" the lieutenant asked. "You do us a little favor and maybe we can do you a little favor." That settled the problem of legal counsel.

"Bullshit!" one of the twins observed, just as a bargaining position, of course. They were at the straw-grasping stage. Prison beckoned, and while neither had ever served a serious stretch, they'd done enough county time to know that it wouldn't be fun.

"How do you like the idea of life imprisonment?" the lieutenant asked, unmoved by the show of strength. "You know how it works, seven or eight years before you're rehabilitated and they let you out. If you're lucky, that is. Awful long time, eight years. Like that idea, boys?"

"We're not fools. Watchu here for?" the other Patterson asked, indicating that he was ready to discuss terms.

"You do a job for us, and, well, something nice might happen."

"What job's that?" Already both brothers were amenable to the arrangement.

“You seen Ramón and Jesús?”

“The pirates?” one asked. “Shit.” In the criminal community as with any other, there is a hierarchy of status. The abusers of women and children are at the bottom. The Pattersons were violent criminals, but had never abused women. They only assaulted men—men much smaller than themselves for the most part, but men nonetheless. That was important to their collective self-image.

“Yeah, we seen the fucks,” the other said to emphasize his brother’s more succinct observation. “Actin’ like king shit last cupla days. Fuckin’ spics. Hey, man, we bad dudes, but we ain’t never raped no little girl, ain’t never killed no little girl neither— and they be gettin’ off, they say? Shit! We waste a fuckin’ pimp likes to beat on his ladies, and we lookin’ at life. What kinda justice you call that, mister po-liceman? Shit!”

“If something were to happen to Ramón and Jesus, something really serious,” the lieutenant said quietly, “maybe something else might happen. Something beneficial to you boys.”

“Like what?”

“Like you get to see Noreen and Doreen on a very regular basis. Maybe even settle down.”

“Shit!” Henry or Harvey said.

“That’s the best deal in town, boys,” the lieutenant told them.

“You want us to kill the motherfuckers?” It was Harvey who asked this question, disappointing his brother, who thought of himself as the smart one.

The lieutenant just stared at them.

“We hear you,” Henry said. “How we know you keep your word?”

“What word is that?” The lieutenant paused. “Ramón and Jesus killed a family of four, raped the wife and the little girl first, of course, and they probably had a hand in the murder of a Mobile police officer and his wife. But something went wrong with the case against them, and the most they’ll get is twenty years, walk in seven or eight, max. For killing six people. Hardly seems fair, does it?”

By this time both twins had gotten the message. The lieutenant could see the recognition, an identical expression in both pairs of eyes. Then came the decision. The two pairs of eyes were guarded for a moment as they considered how to do it. Then they became serene. Both Pattersons nodded, and that was that.

“You boys be careful now. Jail can be a very dangerous place.” The lieutenant rose to summon the jailer. If asked, he’d say that—after getting their permission to talk to them without a lawyer present, of course—he’d wanted to ask them about a robbery in which the Pattersons had not been involved, but about which they might have some knowledge, and that he had offered them some help with the DA in return for their assistance. Alas, they’d professed no knowledge of the robbery in question, and after less than five

minutes of conversation, he'd sent them back to their cell. Should they ever refer to the actual content of the conversation, it would be the word of two career criminals with an open-and-shut murder charge hanging over their heads against the word of a police lieutenant. At most that would result in a page-five story in the *Mobile Register,* which took rather a stern line on violent crime. And they could scarcely confess to a double murder whether done at police behest or not, could they?

The lieutenant was an honorable man, and immediately went to work to hold up his end of the bargain in anticipation of the fact that the Pattersons would do the same. Of the four bullets removed from the body of Elrod McIlvane, one was unusable for ballistic-matching purposes due to its distortion—unjacketed lead bullets are very easily damaged—and the others, though good enough for the criminal case, were borderline. The lieutenant ordered the bullets removed from evidence storage for re-examination, along with the examiner's notes and the photographs. He had to sign for them, of course, to maintain "chain of evidence." This legal requirement was written to ensure that evidence used in a trial, once taken from the crime scene or elsewhere and identified as significant, was always in a known location and under proper custody. It was a safeguard against the illicit manufacture of incriminating evidence. When a piece of evidence got lost, even if it were later recovered, it could never be used in a criminal case, since it was then tainted. He walked down to the laboratory area, but found the technicians leaving to go home. He asked the ballistics expert if he could recheck the Patterson Case bullets first thing Monday morning, and the man replied, sure, one of the matches was a little shaky, but, he thought, close enough for trial purposes. He didn't mind doing a recheck, though.

The policeman walked back to his office with the bullets. The manila envelope which held them was labeled with the case number, and since it was still in proper custody, duly signed for by the lieutenant, chain of evidence had not yet been violated. He made a note on his desk blotter that he didn't want to leave them in his desk over the weekend, and would take them home, keeping the whole package locked in his combination-locked briefcase. The lieutenant was fifty-three years old, and within four months of retirement with full benefits. Thirty years of service was enough, he thought, looking forward to getting full use from his fishing boat. He could scarcely retire in good conscience leaving two cop-killers with eight years of soft time.

The influx of drug money to Colombia has produced all manner of side effects and one of them, in a stunningly ironic twist, is that the Colombian police had obtained a new and very sophisticated crime lab. Residue from the Untiveros house was run through the usual series of chemical tests, and within a few hours it had been determined that the explosive agent had been a mixture of cyclotetramethylenetetranitramine and trinitrotoluene. Known more colloquially as HMX and TNT, when combined in a 70-30 mixture, the chemist wrote, they formed an explosive compound called Octol, which, he wrote on, was a rather expensive, very stable, and extremely violent high explosive

made principally in the United States, but available commercially from American, European, and one Asian chemical company. And that ended his work for the day. He handed over his report to his secretary, who faxed it to Medellín, where another secretary made a Xerox copy, which found its way twenty minutes later to Félix Cortez.

The report was yet another piece in the puzzle for the former intelligence officer. No local mining operation used Octol. It was too expensive, and simple nitrate-based explosive gels were all that commercial applications required. If you needed a larger explosive punch to loosen rocks, you simply drilled a wider hole and crammed in more explosives. The same option did not exist, however, for military forces. The size of an artillery shell was limited by the diameter of the gun barrel, and the size of a bomb was limited by the aerodynamic drag it imposed on the aircraft that carried it. Therefore, military organizations were always looking for more powerful explosives to get better performance from their size-limited weapons. Cortez lifted a reference book from his library shelf and confirmed the fact that Octol was almost exclusively a military explosive ... and was used as a triggering agent for nuclear devices. That evoked a short bark of a laugh.

It also explained a few things. His initial reaction to the explosion was that a ton of dynamite had been used. The same result could be explained by less than five hundred kilos of this Octol. He pulled out another reference book and learned that the actual explosive weight in a two-thousand-pound bomb was under one thousand pounds.

But why were there no fragments? More than half the weight of a bomb was in the steel case. Cortez set that aside for the moment.

An aircraft bomb explained much. He remembered his training in Cuba, when North Vietnamese officers had briefed his class on “smart-bombs” that had been the bane of their country’s bridges and electrical generating plants during the brief but violent Linebacker-II bombing campaign in 1972. After years of costly failures, the American fighter-bombers had destroyed scores of heavily defended targets in a matter of days, using their new precision-guided munitions.

If targeted on a truck, such a bomb would give every appearance of a car bomb, wouldn’t it?

But why were there no fragments? He reread the lab report. There had also been cellulose residue which the lab tech explained away as the cardboard containers in which the explosives had been packed.

Cellulose? That meant paper or wood fibers, didn’t it? Make a bomb out of paper? Cortez lifted one of his reference books—Jane’s Weapons Systems. It was a heavy book with a hard, stiff cover ... cardboard, covered with cloth. It really was that simple, wasn’t it? If you could make paper that strong for so prosaic a purpose as a book binding ...

Cortez leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette to congratulate himself—and the *norteamericanos.* It was brilliant. They’d sent a bomber armed with a special smart-bomb, targeted it on that absurd truck, and left nothing behind

that could remotely be called evidence. He wondered who had come up with this plan, amazed that the Americans had done something so intelligent. The KGB would have assembled a company of *Spetznaz* commandos and fought a conventional infantry battle, leaving all manner of evidence behind and "delivering the message" in a typically Russian way, which was effective but lacking in subtlety. The Americans for once had managed the sort of subtlety worthy of a Spaniard—of a Cortez, Félix chuckled. That was remarkable.

Now he had the "How." Next he had to figure out the "What For." But of course! There had been that American newspaper story about a possible gang war. There had been fourteen senior Cartel lords. Now there were ten. The Americans would try to reduce that number further by ... what? Might they assume that the single bombing incident would ignite a savage war of infighting? No, Cortez decided. One such incident wasn't enough. Two might be, but not one.

So the Americans had commando teams prowling the mountains south of Medellin, had dropped one bomb, and were doing something else to curtail the drug flights. That became clear as well. They were shooting the airplanes down, of course. They had people watching airfields and forwarding their intelligence information elsewhere for action. It was a fully integrated operation. The most incredible thing of all was that it was actually working. The Americans had decided to do something that worked. Now, *that* was miraculous. For all the time he had been an intelligence officer, CIA had been reasonably effective at gathering information, but not for actually doing something.

Félix rose from his desk and walked over to his office bar. This called for serious contemplation, and that meant a good brandy. He poured a triple portion into a balloon glass, swirling it around, letting his hand warm the liquid so that the aromatic vapors would caress his senses even before he took the first sip.

The Chinese language was ideographic—Cortez had met his share of Chinese intelligence types as well—and its symbol for "crisis" was a combination of the symbols denoting "danger" and "opportunity." The dualism had struck him the first time he'd heard it, and he'd never forgotten it. Opportunities like this one were exceedingly rare, and equally dangerous. The principal danger, he knew, was the simple fact that he didn't know how the Americans were developing their intelligence information. Everything he knew pointed to a penetration agent within the organization. Someone high up, but not as high as he wished to be. The Americans had compromised someone just as he had so often done. Standard intelligence procedure, and that was something CIA excelled at. Someone. Who? Someone who had been deeply offended, and wanted to get even while at the same time acquiring a seat around the table of chieftains. Quite a few people fell into that category. Including Félix Cortez. And instead of having to initiate his own operation to achieve that goal, he could now depend on the Americans to do it for him. It struck him as very odd indeed that he was trusting the Americans to do his work, but it was also hugely amusing. It was, in fact, almost the definition of the perfect covert operation. All he had to do was let the Americans carry out

their own plan, and stand by the sidelines to watch it work. It would require patience and confidence in his enemy—not to mention the degree of danger involved—but Cortez felt that it was worth the effort.

In the absence of knowing how to get the information to the Americans, he decided, he'd just have to trust to luck. No, not luck. They seemed to be getting the word somehow, and they'd probably get it this time, too. He lifted his phone and made a call, something very uncharacteristic for him. Then, on reflection, he made one other arrangement. After all, he couldn't expect that the Americans would do exactly what he wanted exactly when he wanted. Some things he had to do for himself.

Ryan's plane landed at Andrews just after seven in the evening. One of his assistants—it was so nice having assistants—took custody of the classified documents and drove them back to Langley while Jack tossed his bags in the back of his XJS and drove home. He'd get a decent night's sleep to slough off the effects of jet lag, and tomorrow he'd be back at his desk. First order of business, he told himself as he took the car onto Route 50, was to find out what the Agency was up to in South America.

Ritter shook his head in wonder and thanksgiving. CAPER had come through for them again. Cortez himself this time, too. They just hadn't twigged to the fact that their communications were vulnerable. It wasn't a new phenomenon, of course. The same thing had happened to the Germans and Japanese in World War II, and had been repeated time and again. It was just something that Americans were good at. And the timing could hardly have been better. The carrier was available for only thirty more hours, barely time enough to get the message to their man on *Ranger*. Ritter typed up the orders and mission requirements on his personal computer. They were printed, sealed in an envelope, and handed to one of his senior subordinates, who caught an Air Force supply flight to Panama.

Captain Robby Jackson was feeling a little better. If nothing else, he thought he could just barely feel the added weight of the fourth stripe on the shoulders of his undress-white shirt, and the silver eagle that had replaced the oak leaf on the collar of his khakis was so much nicer a symbol for a pilot, wasn't it? The below-the-zone promotion meant that he was seriously in the running for CAG, command of his own carrier air wing—that would be his last real flying job, Jackson knew, but it was the grandest of all. He'd have to check out in several different types of aircraft, and would be responsible for over eighty birds, their flight crews, and the maintenance personnel, without which the aircraft were merely attractive ornaments for a carrier's flight deck.

The bad news was that his tactical ideas hadn't worked out as well as planned, but he consoled himself with the knowledge that all new ideas take time. He'd seen that a few of his original ideas were flawed, and the fixes

suggested by one of *Ranger's* squadron commanders had almost worked—had actually improved the idea markedly. And that, too, was normal. The same could also be said of the Phoenix missiles, whose guidance-package fixes had performed fairly well; not quite as well as the contractor had promised, but that wasn't unusual either, was it?

Robby was in the carrier's Combat Information Center. No flight operations were underway at the moment. The battle group was in some heavy weather that would clear in a few hours, and while the maintenance people were tinkering with their airplanes, Robby and the senior air-defense people were reviewing tapes of the fighter engagements for the sixth time. The "enemy" force had performed remarkably well, diagnosing *Ranger's* defense plans and reacting to them quickly and effectively to get its missile-shooters within range. That *Ranger's* fighters had clobbered them on the way out was irrelevant. The whole point of the Outer Air Battle was to clobber the Backfires on the way in.

The tape recording had been made from the radar coverage of the E-2C Hawkeye which Robby had ridden for the first engagement, but six times really were enough. He'd learned all he could learn, and his mind was wandering now. There was the Intruder again, mating up with the tanker, then heading off toward Ecuador and disappearing off the screen just before it made the coast. Captain Jackson settled back in his chair while the discussion went on around him. They fast-forwarded the tape for the approach phase, spent over an hour replaying the actual battle—what there had been of it, Jackson noted with a frown—then fast-forwarded it again. *Ranger's* CAG was particularly annoyed with the lackadaisical manner in which his squadrons had re-formed for the return to the carrier. The poor organization of the fighters elicited some scathing comments from the captain who had the title that Robby now looked forward to. Listening to his remarks was a good education, though it was a touch profane. The ensuing discussion kept the tape running until—there, again, the A-6 reappeared, heading into the carrier after having done whatever the hell it had done. Robby knew that he was making an assumption, and for professional officers assumptions were dangerous things. But there it was.

"Cap'n Jackson, sir?"

Robby turned to see a yeoman with a clipboard. It was an action message for which he had to sign, which he did before accepting the form and reading it.

"What gives, Rob?" the carrier's operations officer asked.

"Admiral Painter is flying out to the PG School. He wants me to meet him there instead of flying back to D.C. I s'pose he wants an early reading on how my wonderful new tactics worked out," Jackson replied.

"Don't sweat it. They ain't going to take the shoulder boards back."

"I didn't think this all the way through," Robby replied, gesturing at the screen.

"Nobody ever does."

Ranger cleared the bad weather an hour later. The first plane off was the COD, which headed off to Panama to drop off mail and pick up various things. It returned in four hours. The "tech-rep" was waiting for it, already prepped by an innocuous signal over a clear channel. When he'd finished reading the message, he called Commander Jensen's stateroom.

Copies of the photo were being taken to The Hideaway, but the closest witness was in Alexandria, and he took it there himself.

Murray knew better than to ask where the photo had come from. That is, he knew that it came from CIA, and that it was some sort of surveillance photo, but the circumstances that surrounded it were things he didn't need to know—or so he would have been told had he asked, which he hadn't. It was just as well, since he might not have accepted the "need-to-know" explanation in this case.

Moira was improving. The restraints were off, but she was still being treated for some side effects of the sleeping pills she'd taken. Something to do with her liver function, he'd heard, but she was responding well to treatment. He found her sitting up, the motorized bed elevated at the command of a button. Visiting hours were over—her kids had been in tonight, and that, Murray figured, was the best treatment she could possibly get. The official story was an accidental OD. The hospital knew different, and that had leaked, but the Bureau took the public position that it had been an accident since she hadn't quite taken a lethal dose of the drug. The Bureau's own psychiatrist saw her twice a day, and his report was optimistic. The suicide attempt, while real, had been based on impulse, not prolonged contemplation. With care and counseling, she'd come around and would probably fully recover. The psychiatrist also thought that what Murray was about to do would help.

"You look a hell of a lot better," he told her. "How are the kids?"

"I'll never do this to them again," Moira Wolfe replied. "What a stupid, selfish thing to do."

"I keep telling you, you got hit by the truck." Murray took the chair by her bedside and opened the manila envelope he'd carried in. "Is this the truck?"

She took the photo from his hand and stared at it for a moment. It wasn't a very good photograph. Taken at a distance of over two miles, even with the high-power lens and computer enhancement of the image, it didn't show anything approaching the detail of an amateur photographer's action shot of his child. But there is more to a picture than the expression on a person's face. The shape of the head, the style of the hair, the posture, the way he held his hands, the tilt of the head....

"It's him," she said. "That's Juan Diaz. Where did you get it?"

"It came from another government agency," Murray replied, his choice of words telling her nothing—the exact nothing that meant CIA. "They had a

discreet surveillance of some place or other—I don't know where—and got this. They thought it might be our boy. For your information, this is the first confirmed shot we have of Colonel Félix Cortez, late of the DGI. At least now we know what the bastard looks like."

"Get him," Moira said.

"Oh, we'll get him," Murray promised her.

"I know what I'll have to do—testify and all that. I know what the lawyers will do to me. I can handle it. I can, Mr. Murray."

She isn't kidding, Dan realized. It wasn't the first time that revenge had been part of saving a life, and Murray was glad to see it. It was one more purpose, one more thing Moira had to live for. His job was to see that she and the Bureau got their revenge. The approved term at the FBI was retribution, but the hundreds of agents on the case weren't using that word now. Jack arrived at his office early the next morning to find the expected pile of work, on top of which was a note from Judge Moore.

"The convention closes tonight," it read. "You're booked on the last flight to Chicago. Tomorrow morning you will brief Gov. Fowler. This is a normal procedure for presidential candidates. Guidelines for your briefing are attached, along with a copy of the national-security brief done in the 1984 presidential campaign. 'Restricted' and 'Confidential' information may be discussed, but nothing 'Secret' or higher. I need to see your written presentation before five."

And that completely blew the day away. Ryan called home to let his family know that he'd be gone yet another night. Then he got to work. Now he wouldn't be able to quiz Ritter and Moore until the following Monday. And Ritter, he learned, would be spending most of the day over at the White House anyway. Jack's next call was to Bethesda, to check in with Admiral Greer and get some guidance. He was surprised to learn that Greer had done the last such briefing personally. He wasn't surprised that the old man's voice was measurably weaker than the last time they'd talked. The good cheer was still there, but, welcome sound that it was, the image in Jack's mind was of an Olympic skater giving a medal-winning performance on thin, brittle ice.

21.

Explanations

HE'D NEVER THOUGHT of the COD as the busiest aircraft in the carrier's air wing. It was, of course, and he'd always known it, but the machinations of the ugly, slow, prop-driven aircraft had hardly been a matter of interest to a pilot who'd been "born" in an F-4N Phantom-II and soon thereafter moved up in class to the F-14A Tomcat. He hadn't flown a fighter in weeks, and as he walked out toward the COD—officially the C-2A Greyhound, which was almost appropriate since it did indeed fly like a dog—he resolved that he'd sneak down to Pax River for a few hours of turnin' and burnin' in a proper airplane just as soon as he could. "I feel the need," he whispered to himself with a smile. "The need for speed." The COD was spotted for a shot off the starboard bow catapult, and as Robby headed toward it he again saw an A-6E Intruder, again the squadron commander's personal aircraft, parked next to the island. Outboard from the structure was a narrow area called the Bomb Farm, used for ordnance storage and preparation. It was a convenient spot, too small an area for airplanes to be parked and agreeably close to the edge of the deck so that bombs could easily be jettisoned over the side if the need arose. The bombs were moved about on small, low-slung carts, and just as he boarded the COD, he saw one, carrying a blue "practice" bomb toward the Intruder. On the bomb were the odd attachments for laser guidance.

So, another Drop-Ex tonight, eh? It was something else to smile about. *You put that one right down the pickle barrel, too, Jensen,* Robby thought. Ten minutes later he was off, heading for Panama, where he'd hop a ride with the Air Force for California.

Ryan was over West Virginia on a commercial flight, sitting in coach on an American Airlines DC-9. It was quite a comedown from the Air Force VIP group, but there hadn't been sufficient cause for that sort of treatment this time. He was accompanied by a security guard, which Jack was gradually getting used to. This one was a case officer who'd been injured on duty—he'd fallen off something and badly injured his hip. After recovering, he'd probably rotate back to Operations. His name was Roger Harris. He was thirty or so and, Jack thought, pretty smart.

"What did you do before you joined up?" he asked Harris.

"Well, sir, I—"

"Name's Jack. They don't issue a halo along with the job title."

“Would you believe? A street cop in Newark. I decided that I wanted to try something safer, so I came here. And then look what happened,” he chuckled.

The flight was only half booked. Ryan looked around and saw that no one was close, and listening devices invariably had trouble with the whine of the engines.

“Where’d it happen?”

“Poland. A meet went down bad—I mean, something just felt bad and I blew it off. My guy got away clean and I boogied the other way. Two blocks from the embassy I hopped over a wall. Tried to. There was a cat, just a plain old alley cat. I stepped on it, and it screeched, and I tripped and broke my fucking hip like some little old lady falling in the bathtub.” A rueful smile. “This spy stuff ain’t like the movies, is it?”

Jack nodded. “Sometime I’ll tell you about a time when the same sort of thing happened to me.”

“In the field?” Harris asked. He knew that Jack was Intelligence, not Operations.

“Hell of a good story. Shame I can’t tell it to anyone.”

“So what are you gonna tell J. Robert Fowler?”

“That’s the funny part. It’s all stuff he can get in the papers, but it isn’t official unless it comes from one of us.”

The stewardess came by. It was too short a flight for a meal, but Ryan ordered a couple of beers.

“Sir, I’m not supposed to drink on duty.”

“You just got a dispensation,” Ryan told him. “I don’t like drinking alone, and I always drink when I fly.”

“They told me you don’t like it up here,” Harris observed.

“I got over that,” Jack replied, almost truthfully.

“So what is going on?” Escobedo asked.

“Several things,” Cortez answered slowly, carefully, speculatively, to show *el jefe* that he was still somewhat in the dark, but working hard to use his impressive analytical talents to find the correct answer. “I believe the Americans have two or perhaps three teams of mercenaries in the mountains. They are, as you know, attacking some of the processing sites. The objective here would appear to be psychological. Already the local peasants have shown reluctance to assist us. It is not hard to frighten such people. Do it enough and we have problems producing our product.”

“Mercenaries?”

“A technical term, *jefe.* A mercenary, as you know, is anyone who performs services for money, but the term most often denotes paramilitary services. Exactly who are they? We know that they speak Spanish. They could be

Colombian citizens, disaffected Argentines—you know that the *norteamericanos* used people from the Argentine Army to train the *contras,* correct? Dangerous ones from the time of the Junta. Perhaps with all the turmoil in their home country, they have decided to enter American employ on a semipermanent basis. That is only one of many possibilities. You must understand, *jefe,* that operations such as this must be plausibly deniable. Wherever they come from, they may not even know that they are working for the Americans."

"Whoever they may be, what do you propose to do about them?"

"We will hunt them down and kill them, of course," Cortez said matter-of-factly. "We need about two hundred armed men, but certainly we can assemble such a force. I have people scouting the area already. I need your permission to gather the necessary forces together to sweep the hills properly."

"You'll get it. And what of the Untiveros bombing?"

"Someone loaded four hundred kilos of a very high-grade explosive into the back of his truck. Very cleverly done, *jefe.* In any other vehicle it would have been impossible, but that truck..."

"*Sí.* The tires each weighed more than that. Who did it?"

"Not the Americans, nor any of their hirelings," Cortez replied positively.

"But—"

"Jefe, think for a moment," Félix suggested. "Who could possibly have had access to the truck?"

Escobedo chewed on that one for a while. They were in the back of his stretch Mercedes. It was an old 600, lovingly maintained and in new-car condition. Mercedes-Benz is the type of car favored by people who need to worry about violent enemies. Already heavy, and with a powerful engine, it easily carried over a thousand pounds of Kevlar armor embedded in vital areas, and thick polycarbonate windows that would stop a .30-caliber machine-gun round. Its tires were filled with foam, not air, so that a puncture wouldn't flatten them—at least not very quickly. The fuel tank was filled with a honeycombed metal lattice that could not prevent a fire, but would prevent a more dangerous explosion. Fifty meters ahead and behind were BMW M3s, fast, powerful cars filled with armed men, much in the way that chiefs of state had lead- and chase-cars for security purposes.

"One of us, you think?" Escobedo asked after a minute's contemplation.

"It is possible, *jefe."* Cortez's tone of voice said that it was more than merely possible. He was pacing his disclosures carefully, keeping an eye on the roadside signs.

"But who?"

"That is a question for you to answer, is it not? I am an intelligence officer, not a detective." That Cortez got away with his outrageous lie was testimony to Escobedo's paranoia.

"And the missing aircraft?"

"Also unknown," Cortez reported. "Someone was watching the airfields, perhaps American paramilitary teams, but more likely the same mercenaries who are now in the mountains. They probably sabotaged aircraft somehow, possibly with the connivance of the airport guards. I speculate that when they left, they killed off the guards so that no one could prove what they had been doing, then booby-trapped the fuel dumps to make it appear to be something else entirely. A very clever operation, but one to which we could have adapted except for the assassinations in Bogotá." Cortez took a deep breath before going on.

"The attack on the Americans in Bogotá was a mistake, *jefe*. It forced the Americans to change what had been a nuisance operation to one which threatens our activities directly. They have suborned someone in the organization, executing their own wish for revenge through the ambition or anger of one of your own senior colleagues." Cortez spoke throughout in the same quiet, reasoned voice that he'd used to brief his seniors in Havana, like a tutor to an especially bright student. His method of delivery reminded people of a doctor, and was an exceedingly effective way of persuading people, particularly Latins, who are given to polemics but conversely respect those who control their passions. By reproaching Escobedo for the death of the Americans—Escobedo did not like to be reproached; Cortez knew it; Escobedo knew that Cortez knew it—Félix merely added to his own credibility. "The Americans have foolishly said so themselves, perhaps in a clumsy attempt to mislead us, speaking of a 'gang war' within the organization. That is a trick the Americans invented, by the way, to use the truth to deny the truth. It is clever, but they have used it too often. Perhaps they feel that the organization is not aware of this trick, but anyone in the intelligence community knows of it." Cortez was winging it, and had just made that up—but, he thought, it certainly sounded good. And it had the proper effect. Escobedo was looking out through the thick windows of the car, his mind churning over the new thought.

"Who, I wonder ..."

"That is something I cannot answer. Perhaps you and Señor Fuentes can make some progress on that tonight." The hardest part for Cortez was to keep a straight face. For all his cleverness, for all his ruthlessness, *el jefe* was a child to be manipulated once you knew the right buttons to push.

The road traced down the floor of a valley. There was also a rail line, and both followed a path carved into the rock by a mountain-fed river. From a strictly tactical point of view, it was not something to be comfortable with, Cortez knew. Though he had never been a soldier—aside from the usual paramilitary classes in the Cuban school system—he recognized the disadvantage of low ground. You could be seen a long way off from people on the heights. The highway signs assumed a new and ominous significance now. Félix knew everything he needed to know about the car. It had been modified by the world's leading provider of armored transport, and was regularly checked by technicians from that firm. The windows were replaced twice

annually, because sunlight altered the crystalline structure of the polycarbonate—all the faster near the equator and at high altitude. The windows would stop a 7.62 NATO machine-gun bullet, and the Kevlar sheets in the doors and around the engines could, under favorable circumstances, stop larger rounds than that. He was still nervous, but through force of will did not allow himself to react visibly to the danger.

"Who might it be ... ?" Escobedo asked as the car came around a sweeping turn.

There were five teams of two men each, gunners and loaders. They were armed with West German MG3 squad machine guns, which the Colombian Army had just adopted because it used the same 7.62mm round as their standard infantry weapon, the G3, also of German manufacture. These five had recently been "stolen"—actually purchased from a greedy supply sergeant—out of an army depot. Based on the earlier German MG-42 of World War II fame, the MG3 retained the older weapon's 1,200-round-per-minute cyclic rate of fire—twenty rounds per second. The gun positions were spaced thirty meters apart, with two guns tasked to engage the chase car, two on the lead car, but only one on the Mercedes. Cortez didn't trust the car's armor quite that much. He looked at the digital clock. They were exactly on time. Escobedo had a fine set of drivers. But then, Untiveros had had a fine set of servants, too.

On the muzzle of each gun was a cone-shaped extension called a flash-hider. Often misunderstood by the layman, its purpose was to shield the flash from the gunner—to prevent him from being blinded by his own shots. Hiding the flash from anyone else is a physical impossibility.

The gunners began firing at the same instant, and five separate yard-long cylinders of pure white flame appeared on the right side of the road. From each muzzle flash sprang a line of tracers, allowing the gunners to walk their fire right into their targets without the need to use the metal sights on their weapons.

None of the occupants of the cars heard the sound of the guns, but all did hear the sound of the impacts—at least those who lived long enough.

Escobedo's body went as rigid as a bar of steel when he saw the yellow line of tracers attach itself to the leading M-3. That car was not as heavily armored as his. The taillights wavered left, then right, and then the car left the road at an angle, rolling over like one of his son's toys. Before that had happened, both he and Cortez felt the impacts of twenty rounds on their own car. It sounded like hail on a tin roof. But it was 150-grain bullets, not hail, impacting steel and Kevlar, not tin. His driver, well trained and always nervously alert, fishtailed the long Mercedes for a moment to avoid the BMW ahead, at the same time flooring the accelerator. The six-liter Mercedes engine responded at once—it, too, was protected by armor—doubling both horsepower and torque in a second and hurling all of the passengers back in their seats. By this time Escobedo's head had turned to see the threat, and it seemed that the tracers were aimed straight at his face, stopped by some apparent miracle by the thick windows—which, he saw, were breaking under

the impact.

Cortez hurled his own body against Escobedo's, knocking him down to the floor. Neither man had time to speak a word. The car had been doing seventy miles per hour when the first round was fired. It was already approaching ninety, escaping from the kill zone more rapidly than the gunners could adjust fire as the car body absorbed a total of over forty hits. In two minutes, Cortez looked up.

He was surprised to see that two rounds had hit the left-side windows from the inside. The gunners had been a little too good; had managed to drive repeated rounds through the armored windows. There was no sign of either the lead- or the chase-car. Félix took a very deep breath. He had just won the most daring gamble of his life.

"Take the next turn anywhere!" he shouted at the driver.

"No!" Escobedo said an instant later. "Straight to—"

"Fool!" Cortez turned *el jefe* over. "Do you wish to find another ambush ahead of us! How do you suppose they knew to kill us! *Take the next turn!"* he shouted at the driver again.

The driver, who had a good appreciation of ambush tactics, stood on the brakes and took the next turn. It was a right, leading to a small network of side roads serving local coffee farms.

"Find a quiet place to stop," Cortez ordered next.

"But—"

"They will expect us to run, not to think. They will expect us to do what all the antiterrorist manuals say to do. Only a fool is predictable," Cortez said as he brushed polycarbonate fragments from his hair. His pistol was out now, and he ostentatiously replaced it in his shoulder holster. "José, your driving was magnificent!"

"Both cars are gone," the driver reported.

"I'm not surprised," Cortez replied. Quite honestly. *"Jesús María*—that was close."

Whatever Escobedo might have been, coward was not among them. He too saw the damage to the window that had been inches from his head. Two bullets had come through the car—they were half-buried in the glass. *El jefe* pried one loose and rattled it around in his hand. It was still warm.

"We must speak to the people who make the windows," Escobedo observed coolly. Cortez had saved his life, he realized.

The odd part was that he was right. But Cortez was more impressed with the fact that his reflexes—even forewarned, he had reacted with commendable speed—had saved his own life. It had been a long time since he'd had to pass the physical fitness test required by the DGI. It was moments like this that can make the most circumspect of men feel invincible.

"Who knew that we were going to see Fuentes?" he asked.

“I must—” Escobedo lifted the phone receiver and started to punch in a number. Cortez gently took it away from him and replaced it in the holder.

“Perhaps that would be a serious mistake, *jefe.* ” he said quietly. “With all respect, señor, please let me handle this. This is a professional matter.”

Escobedo had never been so impressed with Cortez than at that moment.

“You will be rewarded,” he told his faithful vassal. Escobedo reproached himself for having occasionally mistreated him, and worse, for having occasionally disregarded Cortez’s wise counsel. “What should we do?”

“José,” Cortez told the driver, “find a high spot from which we can see the Fuentes house.”

Within a minute, the driver found a switchback overlooking the valley. He pulled the car off the road and all three got out. José inspected the damage to the car. Fortunately neither the tires nor the engine had been damaged. Though the car’s body would have to be totally reworked, its ability to move and maneuver was unimpaired. José truly loved this car, and though he mourned for its defacement, he nearly burst with pride that it and his own skill had saved all their lives.

In the trunk were several rifles—German G3s like those the Army carried, but legally purchased—and a pair of binoculars. Cortez let the others have the rifles. He took the field glasses and trained them in on the well-lit home of Luis Fuentes, about six miles away.

“What are you looking for?” Escobedo asked.

“Jefe, if he had part in the ambush, he will know by now that it might have failed, and there will be activity. If he had no such knowledge, we will see no activity at all.”

“What of those who fired on us?”

“You think they know that we escaped?” Cortez shook his head. “No, they will not be sure, and first they will try to prove that they succeeded, that our car struggled on for a short while—so they will first of all try to find us. José, how many turns did you take to get us here?”

“Six, señor, and there are many roads,” the driver answered. He looked quite formidable with his rifle.

“Do you see the problem, *jefe?* Unless they have a great number of men, there are too many roads to check. We are not dealing with a police or military force. If we were, we’d still be moving. Ambushes like this one—no, *jefe*, once they fail, they fail completely. Here.” He handed the glasses over. It was time for a little machismo. He opened the car door and pulled out a few bottles of Perrier—Escobedo liked the stuff. He opened them by inserting the bottlecaps into bullet holes in the trunk lid and snapping down. Even José grunted with amusement at that, and Escobedo was one who admired such panache.

“Danger makes me thirsty,” Cortez explained, passing the other bottles around.

“It has been an exciting night,” Escobedo agreed, taking a long pull on his bottle.

But not for Commander Jensen and his bombardier/navigator. The first one, as with the first time for anything, had been a special occasion, but already it was routine. The problem was simply that things were too damned easy. Jensen had faced surface-to-air missiles and radar-directed flak in his early twenties, testing his courage and skill against that of North Vietnamese gunners with their own experience and cunning. This mission was about as exciting as a trip to the mailbox, but, he reminded himself, important things often go through the mail. The mission went exactly according to plan. The computer ejected the bomb right on schedule, and the B/N tracked his TRAM sight around to keep an eye on the target. This time Jensen let his right eye wander down to the TV screen.

“I wonder what held Escobedo up?” Larson asked.

“Maybe he got here early?” Clark thought aloud, his eye on the GLD.

“Maybe,” the other field officer allowed. “Notice how no cars are parked near the house this time?”

“Yeah, well, this one is fused for one-hundredth-of-a-second delay,” Clark told him. “Should go off just about the time it gets to the conference table.”

It was even more impressive from this distance, Cortez thought. He didn’t see the bomb fall, didn’t hear the aircraft that had dropped it—which, he told himself, was rather strange—and he saw the flash long before the sound reached him. *The Americans and their toys,* he thought. *They can be dangerous.* Most dangerous of all, whatever their intelligence source, it was a very, very good one, and Félix didn’t have a clue what it might be. That was a continuing source of concern.

“It would seem that Fuentes was not involved,” Cortez noted even before the sound reached them.

“That could have been us in there!”

“Yes, but it was not. I think we should leave, *jefe.* ”

“What’s that?” Larson asked. Two automobile headlights appeared on a hillside three miles away. Neither man had noticed the Mercedes pull into the overlook. They’d been concentrating on the target then, but Clark reproached himself for not remembering to check around further. That sort of mistake was often fatal, and he’d allowed himself to forget just how serious it was.

Clark put his Noctron on it as soon as the lights had turned away. It was a big—

“What kind of car does Escobedo have?”

“Take your pick,” Larson replied. “It’s like the horse collection at Churchill Downs. Porsches, Rolls, Benzes ...”

“Well, that looked like a stretch limo, maybe a big Mercedes. Kinda odd place for one, too. Let’s get the hell out of here. I think two trips to this particular well is enough. We’re out of the bomb business.”

Eighty minutes later their Subaru had to slow down. A collection of ambulances and police cars was parked on the shoulder while uniformed men appeared and disappeared in the pinkish light from hazard flares. A pair of black BMWs were lying on their sides just off the road. Whoever owned them, somebody didn’t like them, Clark saw. There wasn’t much traffic, but here as with every other place in the world where people drove cars, the drivers slowed down to give it all a look.

“Somebody blew the shit out of them,” Larson noted. Clark’s evaluation was more professional.

“Thirty-cal fire. Heavy machine guns at close range. Pretty slick ambush. Those are M3 BMWs.”

“The big, fast one? Somebody with big-time money, then. You don’t suppose ... ?”

“You don’t ‘suppose’ very often in this business. How fast can you get a line on what happened here?”

“Two hours after we get back.”

“Okay.” The police were looking at the passing cars, but not searching them. One shined his flashlight into the back of the Subaru. There were some curious things there, but not the right size and shape to be machine guns. He waved them on. Clark took that in and did some supposing. Had the gang war he’d hoped to start already begun?

Robby Jackson had a two-hour layover before boarding the Air Force C-141B, which with its refueling housing looked rather like a green, swept-wing snake. Also aboard were sixty or so soldiers with full gear. The fighter pilot looked at them with some amusement. This was what his little brother did for a living. A major sat down next to him after asking permission—Robby was two grades higher.

“What outfit?”

“Seventh Light.” The major leaned back, trying to get as much comfort as he could. His helmet rested on his lap. Robby lifted it. Shaped much like the German helmet of World War II, it was made of Kevlar, with a cloth camouflage cover around it, and around that, held in place by a green elasticized cloth band, was a medusa-like collection of knotted cloth strips.

“You know, my brother wears one of these things. Heavy enough. What the hell good is it?”

“The Cabbage Patch Hat?” The major smiled, his eyes closed. “Well, the

Kevlar's supposed to stop stuff from tearing your skull apart, and the mop we wrap around it breaks up your outline—makes you harder to see in the bush, sir. Your brother's with us, you said?"

"He's a new nugget—second lieutenant I guess you call him—in the, uh, they call it Ninja-something ... "

"Three-Seventeen. First Brigade. I'm brigade intel, Second Brigade. What do you do?"

"Serving two-to-three in the Pentagon at the moment. I fly fighter planes when I'm not driving a desk."

"Must be nice to do all your work sitting down," the major observed.

"No." Robby chuckled. "The best part is I can get the hell outa Dodge right quick if I got to."

"Roger that, Captain. What brings you to Panama?"

"We got a carrier group operating offshore. I was down to watch. You?"

"Regular training rotation for one of our battalions. Jungle and tight country is where we work. We hide a lot," the major explained.

"Guerrilla stuff?"

"Roughly similar tactics. This was mainly a reconnaissance exercise, trying to get inside to gather information, conduct a few raids, that sort of thing."

"How'd it go?"

The major grunted. "Not as well as we hoped. We lost some good people out of some important slots—same with you, right? People rotate in, rotate out, and it takes awhile to get the new ones up to speed. Anyway, the reconnaissance units in particular lost some good ones, and it cost us some. That's why we train," the major concluded. "Never stops."

"It's different with us. We deploy as a unit and usually don't lose anybody that way until we come back home."

"Always figured the Navy was smart, sir."

"Is it that bad? My brother told me he lost a really good—squad leader? Anyway, is it that big a deal?"

"Can be. I had a guy named Muñoz, really good man for going in the bushes and finding stuff out. Just disappeared one day, off doing some special-ops shit, they told me. The guy who's in his slot now just isn't that good. It happens. You live with it."

Jackson remembered the name Muñoz, but couldn't remember where from. "How do I arrange transport down to Monterey?"

"Hell, it's right next door. You want to catch a ride with us, Captain? We don't have all the amenities of the Navy, of course."

"We do occasionally rough it, Major. Hell, once I didn't even get my bedsheets changed for three whole days. Same week, they made us eat hot

dogs for dinner—never forget that cruise. Real bitch that one was. I presume your jeeps have air conditioning?" The two men looked at each other and laughed.

Ryan was given a suite of rooms one floor up from the Governor's entourage, actually paid for by the campaign, which was quite a surprise. That made security easier. Fowler now had a full Secret Service detail, and would keep it until November, and if he were successful, for four years after that. It was a very nice, modern hotel with thick concrete floors, but the sound of the parties down below made its way through.

There came a knock on Jack's door just as he got out of the shower. The hotel had a monogrammed robe hanging there. Ryan put it on to answer the door. It was a fortyish woman dressed to kill—in red, again the current "power" color. No expert on women's fashions, he wondered how the color of one's clothing imparted anything other than visibility.

"Are you Dr. Ryan?" she asked. It was the way she asked that Jack immediately disliked, rather as though he were a disease carrier.

"Yes. Who might you be?"

"I'm Elizabeth Elliot," she replied.

"Ms. Elliot," Jack said. She looked like a *Mizz*. "You have me at a disadvantage. I don't know who you are."

"I'm the assistant adviser for foreign policy."

"Oh. Okay. Come on in, then." Ryan pulled the door all the way open and waved her in. He should have remembered. This was "E.E.," professor of political science at Bennington, whose geopolitical views, Ryan thought, made Lenin look like Theodore Roosevelt. He'd walked several feet before he realized that she hadn't followed. "You coming in or aren't you?"

"Like *this?"* She just stood there for another ten seconds before speaking again. Jack continued to towel off his hair without saying anything, more curious than anything else.

"I know who you are," she said defiantly. What the hell she was defying, Jack didn't know. In any case, Ryan had had a long day and was still suffering jetlag from his European trip, added to which was one more hour of Central Time Zone. That partly explained his reply.

"Look, doc, you're the one who caught me coming out of the shower. I have two children, and a wife, who also graduated Bennington, by the way. I'm not James Bond and I don't fool around. If you want to say something to me, just be nice enough to say it. I've been on the go for the past week, and I'm tired, and I need my sleep."

"Are you always this impolite?"

Jesus! "Dr. Elliot, if you want to play with the big kids in D.C., Lesson Number One is, Business is Business. You want to tell me something, tell. You

want to ask me something, ask."

"What the hell are you doing in Colombia?" she snapped at him.

"What are you talking about?" Jack asked in a more moderate tone.

"You know what I'm talking about. I know that you know."

"In that case would you please refresh my memory?"

"Another drug lord just got blown up," she said, casting a nervous glance up and down the corridor as though a passerby might wonder if she was negotiating price with someone. There is a lot of that at political conventions, and E.E. was not physically unattractive.

"I have no knowledge of any such operation being conducted by the American government or any other. That is to say, I have zero information on the subject of your inquiry. I am not omniscient. Believe it or not, even when you are sanctified by employment in the Central Intelligence Agency, you do not automatically know everything that happens on every rock, puddle, and hilltop in the world. What does the news say?"

"But you're supposed to know," Elizabeth Elliot protested. Now she was puzzled.

"Dr. Elliot, two years ago you wrote a book about how pervasive we are. It reminded me of an old Jewish story. Some old guy on the *shtetl* in Czarist Russia who owned two chickens and a broken-down horse was reading the hate rag of the antisemites—you know, the Jews are doing *this,* the Jews are doing *that.* So a neighbor asked him why he got it, and the old guy answered that it was nice to see how powerful he was. That's what your book was, if you'll pardon me: about one percent fact and ninety-nine percent invective. If you really want to know what we can and cannot do, I can tell you a few things, within the limits of classification. I promise that you'll be as disappointed as I regularly am. I wish we were half as powerful as you think."

"But you've *killed* people."

"You mean me personally?"

"Yes!"

Maybe that explained her attitude, Jack thought. "Yes, I have killed people. Someday I'll tell you about the nightmares, too." Ryan paused. "Am I proud of it? No. Am I glad that I did it? Yes, I am. Why? you ask. My life, the lives of my wife and daughter, or the lives of other innocent people were at risk at the times in question, and I did what I had to do to protect my life and those other lives. You do remember the circumstances, don't you?"

Elliot wasn't interested in those. "The Governor wants to see you at eight-fifteen."

Six hours' sleep was what that meant to Ryan. "I'll be there."

"He is going to ask you about Colombia."

"Then you can make points with your boss by giving him the answer early: I do not know."

"If he wins, Dr. Ryan, you're—"

"Out?" Jack smiled benignly at her. "You know, this is like something from a bad movie, Dr. Elliot. If your man wins, maybe you will have the power to fire me. Let me explain to you what that means to me.

"You will then have the power to deny me a total of two and a half hours in a car every working day; the power to fire me from a difficult, stressful job that keeps me away from my family much more than I would like; and the power to compel me to live a life commensurate with the money that I earned ten or so years ago; the power to force me to go back to writing my history books, or maybe to teach again, which is why I got my doctorate in the first place. Dr. Elliot, I've seen loaded machine guns pointed at my wife and daughter, and I managed to deal with *that* threat. If you want to threaten me in a serious way, you'll need something better than taking my job away. I'll see you in the morning, I suppose, but you should know that my briefing is only for Governor Fowler. My orders are that no one else can be in the room." Jack closed, bolted, and chained the door. He'd had too many beers on the airplane, and knew it, but nobody had ever pushed Ryan's buttons that hard before.

Dr. Elliot took the stairs down instead of the elevator. Unlike most of the people in the entourage, Governor Fowler's chief aide was cold sober—he rarely drank in any case—and already at work planning a campaign that would start in a week instead of the customary wait until Labor Day. "Well?" he asked E.E.

"He says he doesn't know. I think he's lying."

"What else?" Arnold van Damm asked.

"He's arrogant, offensive, and insulting."

"So are you, Beth." They both laughed. They didn't really like each other, but political campaigns make for the strangest of bedfellows. The campaign manager was reading over a briefing paper about Ryan from Congressman Alan Trent, new chairman of the House Select Committee for Intelligence Oversight. E.E. hadn't seen it. She had told him, though he already knew (though neither of them knew what it had really all been about), that Ryan had confronted Trent in a Washington social gathering and called him a queer in public. Trent had never forgiven or forgotten an insult in his life. Nor was he one to give gratuitous praise. But Trent's report on Ryan used words like *bright, courageous,* and *honest.* Now what the hell, van Damm wondered, did *that* mean?

It was going to be their third no-hit night, Chavez was sure. They'd been out since sundown and had just passed through the second suspected processing site—the signs had been there. The discoloration of the soil from acid spills, the beaten earth, discarded trash, everything to show that men had been there and probably went there regularly—but not tonight, and not for the two preceding nights. Ding knew that he ought to have expected it. All the

manuals, all the lectures of his career, had emphasized the fact that combat operations were some crazy mixture of boredom and terror, boredom because for the most part nothing happened, terror because "it" could happen at any second. Now he understood how men got sloppy out in the field. On exercises you always knew what—well, you knew that something would happen. The Army rarely wasted time on no-contact exercises. Training time cost too much. And so he was faced with the irksome fact that real combat operations were less *exciting* than training, but infinitely more dangerous. The dualism was enough to give the young man a headache.

Aches were something he already had enough of. He was now gobbling a couple of his Tylenol caplets every four hours because of muscle aches and low-order sprains—and simple tension and stress. A young man, he was learning that the combination of strenuous exercise and real mental stress made you old in a hurry. In fact he was no more tired than an office worker after a slightly long day at his desk, but the mission and the environment combined to amplify everything he felt. Joy or sadness, elation or depression, fear or invincibility were all much greater down here. In a word, combat operations were not fun. But then, why did he—not like it, not that, really, but... what? Chavez shook the thought away. It was affecting his concentration.

And though he didn't know it, that was the answer. Ding Chavez was a born combat soldier. Just as a trauma surgeon took no pleasure from seeing the broken bodies of accident victims, Chavez would easily have preferred sitting on a barstool next to a pretty girl or watching a football game with his friends. But the surgeon knew that his skills at the table were crucial to the lives of his patients, and Chavez knew that his skills on point were crucial to the mission. This was his, place. On the mission, everything was so wonderfully clear—except when he was confused, and even *that* was clear in a different, very strange way. His senses searched out through the trees like radar, filtering out the twitters of birds and the rustle of animals—except when there was a special message in that sort of noise. His mind was a perfect balance of paranoia and confidence. He was a weapon of his country. That much he understood, and fearful though he was, fighting off boredom, struggling to keep alert, concerned for his comrades, Chavez was now a breathing, thinking machine whose single purpose was the destruction of his nation's enemies. The job was hard, but he was the man for it.

But there was still nothing out here to be found this night. The trails were cold. The processing sites unoccupied. Chavez stopped at a preplanned rally point and waited for the rest of the squad to catch up. He switched off his night goggles—you only used them about a third of the time in any case—and had himself a drink of water. At least the water was good here, coming off clear mountain streams.

"Whole lot of nothin', Captain," he told Ramirez when the officer arrived at his side. "Ain't seen nothing, ain't heard nothing."

"Tracks, trails?"

"Nothing less'n two, maybe three days old."

Ramirez knew how to determine the age of a trail, but couldn't do it as well as Sergeant Chavez. He breathed in a way that almost seemed relieved.

"Okay, we start heading back. Take a couple more minutes to relax, then lead off."

"Right. Sir?"

"Yeah, Ding?"

"This area's dryin' up on us."

"You may be right, but we'll wait a few more days to be sure," Ramirez said. Part of him was glad that there had been no contact since the death of Rocha, and that part was blanking out warning signals that he ought to have been getting. Emotion was telling him that something was good, while intelligence and analysis should have told him that something was bad.

Chavez didn't quite catch that one either. There was a distant rumble at the edge of his consciousness, like the strangely noticeable quiet that precedes an earthquake, or the first hint of clouds on a clear horizon. Ding was too young and inexperienced to notice. He had the talents. He was the right man in the right place, but he hadn't been there long enough. He didn't know that, either.

But there was work to do. He led off five minutes later, climbing back up the mountainside, avoiding all trails, taking a path different from any path they had taken to this point, alert to any present danger but oblivious to a danger that was distant but just as clear.

The C-141B touched down hard, Robby thought, though the soldiers didn't seem to notice. In fact, most of them were asleep and had to be roused. Jackson rarely slept on airplanes. It was, he thought, a bad habit for a pilot to acquire. The transport slowed and taxied around every bit as awkwardly as a fighter on the tight confines of a carrier's deck until finally the clamshell cargo doors opened at the tail.

"You come along with me, Captain," the major said. He stood and hefted his rucksack. It looked heavy. "I had the wife bring my personal car here."

"How'd she get home?"

"Car pool," the major explained. "This way the battalion commander and I can discuss the exercise some more on the way down to Ord. We'll drop you off at Monterey."

"Can you take me right into the Fort? I'll kick my little brother's door down."

"Might be out in the field."

"Friday night? I'll take the chance." Robby's real reason was that his conversation with the major had been his first talk with an Army officer in years. Now that he was a captain, the next step was making flag. If he wanted to make that—Robby was as confident as any other fighter pilot, but the step from captain to rear admiral (lower half) is the most treacherous in the Navy

—having a somewhat broader field of knowledge wouldn't hurt. It would make him a better staff officer, and after his CAG job, if he got it, he'd go back to being a staff puke again.

"Okay."

The two-hour drive down from Travis Air Force Base to Fort Ord—Ord has only a small airfield, not large enough for transports—was an interesting one, and Robby was in luck. After two hours of swapping sea stories for war stories and learning things that he'd never known about, he found that Tim was just arriving home from a long night on the town. The elder brother found that the couch was all he needed. It wasn't what he was used to, of course, but he figured he could rough it.

Jack and his bodyguard arrived at the Governor's suite right on time. He didn't know any of the Secret Service detail, but they'd been told to expect him, and he still had his CIA security pass. A laminated plastic ID about the size of a playing card with a picture and a number, but no name, it ordinarily hung around his neck on a chain like some sort of religious talisman. This time he showed it to the agents and tucked it back into his coat pocket.

The briefing was set up as that most cherished of political institutions, the working breakfast. Not as socially important as a lunch, much less a dinner, breakfasts were for some reason or other perceived to be matters of great import. Breakfasts were serious.

The Honorable J. (for Jonathan, which he didn't like) Robert (call me Bob) Fowler, Governor of Ohio, was a man in his middle fifties. Like the current President, Fowler was a former state's attorney with an impressive record of law enforcement behind him. He'd ridden the reputation of the man who'd cleaned up Cleveland into six terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, but you didn't go from that House to the White House, and the Senate seats in his state were too secure. So he'd become Governor six years before, and by all reports an effective one. His ultimate political goal had been formed over twenty years before, and now he'd made it to the finals.

He was a trim five-eleven, with brown eyes and hair showing the first signs of gray over the ears. And he was weary. America demands much of her presidential candidates. Marine Corps boot camp was a tryst by comparison. Ryan looked at a man almost twenty years his senior who for the past six months had lived on too much coffee and bad political-dinner food, yet somehow managed to smile at all the bad jokes told by people he didn't like and, most remarkably of all, to make a speech given no less than four times per day sound new and fresh and exciting to everyone who heard it. He also had about as much appreciation of foreign policy, Ryan thought, as Jack did of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, which wasn't a hell of a lot.

"You're Dr. John Ryan, I take it." Fowler looked up from his morning paper.

"Yes, sir."

"Excuse me for not getting up. I sprained my ankle last week, and it hurts

like a son of a bitch." Fowler waved to the cane beside him. Jack hadn't seen that on the morning news broadcasts. He'd given his acceptance speech, danced around the stage ... on a bum ankle. The man had sand. Jack walked over to shake hands with him.

"They tell me that you are the acting Deputy Director of Intelligence."

"Excuse me, Governor, but the title is Deputy Director (Intelligence). That means I currently head one of the Agency's principal directorates. The others are Operations, Science and Technology, and Administration. Admin is what it sounds like. The Ops guys gather data the old-fashioned way; they're the real field spooks. The S and T guys run the satellite programs and other scientific stuff. The Intel guys try to figure out what Ops and S and T deliver to us. That's what I try to do. The real DDI is Admiral James Greer, and he's—"

"I've heard. Too bad. I hear he is a fine man. Even his enemies say he's honest. That's probably the best compliment any man can have. How about some breakfast?" Fowler fulfilled the first requirement of political life. He was pleasant. He was charming.

"Sounds okay to me, sir. Can I give you a hand?"

"No, I can manage." Fowler used the cane to rise. "You are an ex-Marine, ex-broker, ex-history teacher. I know about the business with the terrorists a few years back. My people—my informants, I should say," he added with a grin as he sat back down, "tell me that you've moved up the ladder at CIA very quickly, but they will not tell me why. It's not in the press either. I find that puzzling."

"We do keep some secrets, sir. I am not at liberty to discuss all the things you might like to know, and in any case you'd have to depend on others to tell you about me. I'm not objective."

The Governor nodded pleasantly. "You and Al Trent had one pisser of a fight awhile back, but he says things about you that ought to make you blush. How come?"

"You'll have to ask Mr. Trent that, sir."

"I did. He won't say. He doesn't actually like you very much, either."

"I am not at liberty to discuss that at all. Sorry, sir. If you win in November, you can find that out." How to explain that Al Trent had helped CIA arrange the defection of the head of KGB—to get even with the people who had put a very close Russian friend of his in a labor camp. Even if he could tell the story, who would ever believe it?

"And you really pissed Beth Elliot off last night."

"Sir, do you want me to talk like a politician, which I am not, or like what I am?"

"Tell it straight, son. That's one of the rarest pleasures a man in my position has." Ryan missed that signal entirely.

"I found Dr. Elliot arrogant and abusive. I'm not used to being jacked

around. I may owe her an apology, but maybe she owes me one, too."

"She wants your ass, and the campaign hasn't even started yet." This observation was delivered with a laugh.

"It belongs to someone else, Governor. Maybe she can kick it, but she can't *have* it."

"Don't ever run for public office, Dr. Ryan."

"Don't get me wrong, sir, but there is no way in hell that I would ever subject myself to what people like you have to put up with."

"How do you like being a government employee? That's a question, not a threat," Fowler explained.

"Sir, I do what I do because I think it's important, and because I think I'm good at it."

"The country needs you?" the presidential candidate asked lightly. That one rocked the acting DDI back in his chair. "That's a tough answer to have to make, isn't it? If you say no, then you ought not to have the job because somebody can do it better. If you say yes, then you're an arrogant son of a bitch who thinks he's better than everybody else. Learn something from that, Dr. Ryan. That's my lesson for the day. Now let me hear yours. Tell me about the world—your version of it, that is."

Jack took out his notes and talked for just under an hour and just over two cups of coffee. Fowler was a good listener. The questions he asked were pointed ones.

"If I read you right, you say you do not know what the Soviets are up to. You've met the General Secretary, haven't you?"

"Well—" Ryan stopped cold. "Sir, I cannot—that is, I shook hands with him twice at diplomatic receptions."

"You've met him for more than a handshake, but you can't talk about it? That is most interesting. You're no politician, Dr. Ryan. You tell the truth before you think to lie. It would appear that you think the world is in pretty good shape at the moment."

"I can remember when it was in far worse shape, Governor," Jack said, grateful for having been let off the hook.

"So why not ease back, cut arms, like I propose?"

"I think it's too soon for that."

"I don't."

"Then we disagree, Governor."

"What is going on in South America?"

"I don't know."

"Does that mean that you do not know what we are doing, or that you do not know if we are doing anything, or that you do know and have been

ordered not to discuss it?"

He sure talks like a lawyer. "As I told Ms. Elliot last night, I have no knowledge on that subject. That is the truth. I have already indicated areas in which I do have knowledge which I am not allowed to discuss."

"I find that very strange, given your position."

"I was in Europe for a NATO intelligence meeting when all this started, and I'm a European and Soviet specialist."

"What do you think we ought to do about the killing of Director Jacobs?"

"In the abstract, we should react forcefully to the murder of any of our citizens, even more so in a case like this. But I'm Intelligence, not Operations."

"Including cold-blooded murder?" Fowler pressed.

"If the government decides that killing people is the correct course of action in the pursuit of our national interests, then such killing falls outside the legal definition of murder, doesn't it?"

"That's an interesting position. Go on."

"Because of the way our government works, such decisions have to be made ... have to reflect the way the American people want things to be, or would want them to be, if they had the knowledge available to the people who make the decisions. That's why we have congressional oversight of covert operations, both to ensure that the operations are appropriate, and to depoliticize them."

"So you're saying that that sort of decision depends upon reasonable men making a reasoned decision—to commit murder."

"That's overly simplified, but, yes."

"I disagree. The American people support capital punishment; that's wrong, too. We demean ourselves and we betray the ideals of our country when we do things like that. What do you think of that?"

"I think you are wrong, Governor, but I don't make government policy. I provide information to those who do."

Bob Fowler's voice changed to something Jack had not yet heard this morning. "Just so we know where we stand. You've lived up to your billing, Dr. Ryan. You are indeed honest, but despite your youth I think that your views reflect times past. People like you do make government policy, by casting your analysis in directions of your own choosing—hold it!" Fowler held up his hand. "I'm not questioning your integrity. I do not doubt that you do the best job you can, but to tell me that people like you do not make government policy is arrant nonsense."

Ryan flushed red at that, feeling it, trying to control it, but failing miserably. Fowler wasn't questioning Jack's integrity, just the second-brightest star in his personal constellation, his intelligence. He wanted to snarl back what he thought, but couldn't.

"Now you're going to tell me that if I knew what you knew, I'd think

differently, right?" Fowler asked.

"No, sir. I don't use that argument. It sounds and smells like bullshit. Either you believe me or you do not. All I can do is persuade, not convince. Maybe I am wrong sometimes," Jack allowed as he cooled off. "All I can do is give you the best I have. May I pass along a lesson, too, sir?"

"Go on."

"The world is not always what we wish it to be, but wishes don't change it."

Fowler was amused. "So I should listen to you even when you're wrong? What if I know you're wrong?"

A marvelous philosophical discussion might have followed, but Ryan knew when he was beaten. He'd just wasted ninety minutes. Perhaps one final try.

"Governor, there are tigers in the world. Once I saw my daughter lying near death in a hospital because somebody who hated me tried to kill her. I didn't like it, and I tried to wish it away, but it didn't work. Maybe I just learned a harder lesson. I hope you never have to."

"Thank you. Good morning, Dr. Ryan."

Ryan collected his papers and left. It was like something dimly remembered from the Bible. He'd been measured and found wanting by the man who might be his country's next President. He was even more disturbed by his reaction to it: Fuck him. He'd fulfilled Fowler's own observation. It was a very dumb thing to think.

"Kick it loose, big brother!" Tim Jackson said. Robby cracked open one eye to see Timmy clad in his multicolored uniform and boots. "It's time for our morning run."

"I remember changing your diapers."

"You gotta catch me first. Come on, you got five minutes to get ready."

Captain Jackson grinned up at his little brother. He was in pretty good shape, and a kendo master. "I'm gonna run your ass right into the ground."

Pride goeth before the fall, Captain Jackson told himself fifteen minutes later. He would have settled for a fall. If he fell down, he might rest for a few seconds. When he started staggering, Tim backed the pace off.

"You win," Robby gasped. "I ain't gonna change your diapers again."

"Hey, we've barely done two miles."

"A carrier's only a thousand feet long!"

"Yeah, and I bet the steel deck's bad on the knees, too. Go on, head back and get breakfast ready, sir. I got two more miles to do."

"Aye aye, sir." *Where are my kendo sticks?* Robby thought, *I can still whip his ass at that!*

It took Robby five minutes to find his way back to the right BOQ building.

He passed a number of officers heading to or from their runs, and for the first time in his life, Robby Jackson felt old. It was hardly fair. He was one of the youngest captains in the Navy, and still one hell of a fighter pilot. He also knew how to fix breakfast. It was all on the table when Timmy got back.

"Don't feel too bad, Rob. This is what I do for a living. I can't fly airplanes."

"Shut up and drink your juice."

"Where the hell did you say you were?"

"Aboard *Ranger*—that's a carrier, boy. Observing ops off Panama. My boss gets into Monterey this afternoon and I'm s'posed to meet him there."

"Down where the bombs are going off," Tim observed as he buttered his toast.

"Another one last night?" Robby asked. Well, that made sense, didn't it?

"Looks like we bagged us another druggie. Nice to see the CIA, or somebody, grew hisself a pair of balls for a change. Love to know how the guys are getting the bombs in."

"What do you mean?" Robby asked. Something wasn't right.

"Rob, I *know* what's going down. It's some of our people down there doin' it."

"Tim, you've lost me."

Second Lieutenant Timothy Jackson, Infantry, leaned across the breakfast table in the conspiratorial way of junior officers. "Look, I know it's a secret and all, but, hell, how smart do you have to be? One of my people is down there right now. Figure it out, man. One of my best people disappears, don't show up where he's supposed to be—where the Army thinks he is, for Christ's sake. He's a Spanish speaker. So are some others who checked out funny, Muñoz out of recon, León, two others I heard about. All Spanish speakers, okay? Then all of a sudden there's some serious ass-kickin' going on down in banana land. Hey, how smart you gotta be?"

"Have you told anyone about this?"

"Why tell anybody? I'm a little worried about Chavez—he's one of my people, and I worry a little about him, but he's one good fucking soldier. Far as I'm concerned, he can kill all the druggies he wants. I just want to know how they did the bombs. That might come in handy someday. I'm thinking about going special-ops."

The Navy did the bombs, Timmy, Robby thought very loudly indeed.

"How much talk is there about this?"

"About the first bombing, everybody thought that was pretty good, but talk about our people bein' involved? Uh-uh. Maybe some folks're thinking the same way I am, but you don't talk about shit like that. Security, right?"

"That's right, Tim."

"You know a senior Agency guy, right?"

“Sort of. Godfather for Jack Junior.”

“Tell him for us, kill all you want.”

“I’ll do that,” Robby said quietly. It had to be an Agency operation. A very “black” Agency operation, but it wasn’t nearly as black as they wanted it to be. If some nugget a year out of the academy could figure it out.... The ordies on *Ranger,* personnel officers and NCOs all over the Army—lots of people must have put it together by now. Not all of those who heard the talk would be on the good side.

“Let me give you a tip. You hear talk about this, you tell people to clam up. You get talk started about an operation like this, people start disappearing.”

“Hey, Rob, anybody wants to mess with Chavez and Muñoz and—”

“Listen to me, boy! I’ve been there. I’ve been shot at by machine guns, and my Tomcat ate a missile once, damned near killed the best RIO I ever had. It’s dangerous out there, and talk gets people dead. You remember that. This isn’t college anymore, Tim.”

Tim considered that for a moment. His brother was right. His brother was also wondering what, if anything, he should do about it. Rob considered just sitting on it, but he was a Tomcat driver, a man of action, not the sort to do nothing at all. If nothing else, he decided, he’d have to warn Jack that the security on the operation wasn’t as secure as it ought to be.

22.

Disclosures

UNLIKE AIR FORCE and Army generals, most Navy admirals do not have personal aircraft to chauffeur them around, and for the most part they fly commercial. A coterie of aides and drivers waiting at the gates helps ease the pain, of course, and Robby Jackson was not above making points with his boss by appearing at San José Airport just as the 727 pulled up to the jetway that evening. He had to wait for the first-class passengers to deplane, of course, since even flag officers fly coach.

Vice Admiral Joshua Painter was the current Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Air Warfare, known to insiders by his "designator," OP-05, or just "oh-five." His three-star rank was a miracle. Painter was first of all an honest man; second, an outspoken one; third, someone who thought the real Navy was at sea, not alongside the Potomac River; finally and most damagingly, he was that rarest of naval officers, the author of a book. The Navy does not encourage its officers to commit their thoughts to paper, except for the odd piece on thermodynamics or the behavior of neutrons within a reactor vessel. An intellectual, a maverick, and a warrior in a service that was increasingly anti-intellectual, conformist, and bureaucratized, he thought of himself as the token exception in what was turning into The Corporate Navy. Painter was a crusty, acerbic Vermont native, short and slight of build, with pale, almost colorless blue eyes and a tongue sharp enough to chip stone. He was also the living god of the aviation community. He'd flown more than four hundred missions over North Vietnam in several different models of the F-4 Phantom, and had two MiGs to his credit—the side panel from his jet, with two red stars painted on it, hung in his Pentagon office, along with the caption, SIDEWINDER MEANS NOT HAVING TO SAY YOU'RE SORRY. Though a perfectionist and a very demanding boss, he deemed nothing too good for his pilots or his enlisted crews, especially the latter.

"I see you got the message," Josh Painter observed, reaching a finger out to tap Robby's bright new shoulder boards.

"Yes, sir."

"I also hear your new tactics were a disaster."

"They could have worked out a little better," Captain Jackson admitted.

"Yeah, it does help if the carrier survives. Maybe a CAG slot will reinforce that in your mind. I just approved you for one," OP-05 announced. "You get Wing Six. It chops to *Abe Lincoln* when *Indy* goes in for overhaul.

Congratulations, Robby. Try not to screw up too badly in the next eighteen months. Now, what went wrong with the Fleet-Ex?" he asked as they walked off toward the waiting car.

"The 'Russians' cheated," Robby answered. "They were smart." That earned him a laugh from his boss. Though crusty, Painter did have a lively sense of humor. The discussion took care of the drive to flag quarters at the Naval Post-Graduate School on the California coast at Monterey.

"Any more on the news about those drug bastards?" Painter asked while his aide carried his bags in.

"We're sure giving them a hard time, aren't we?" Jackson observed.

The Admiral stopped dead in his tracks. "What the hell do you mean?"

"I know that I'm not supposed to know, sir, but I mean, I was there, and I did see what was going on."

Painter waved Jackson inside. "Check the fridge. See if you can put a martini together while I pump bilges. Fix whatever you want for yourself."

Robby made the proper arrangements. Whoever set up flag quarters for them knew what Painter liked to drink. Jackson opened a Miller Lite for himself.

Painter reappeared without his uniform shirt and took a sip from his glass. Then he dismissed his aide and gave Jackson a very close look.

"I want you to repeat what you said on the way in, Captain."

"Admiral, I know I'm not cleared for this, but I'm not blind. I watched the A-6 head for the beach on radar, and I don't figure it was a coincidence. Whoever set up security on the op could have done a better job, sir."

"Jackson, you're going to have to forgive me, but I just spent five and a half hours sitting too close to the engines on a beat-up old 727. You're telling me that those two bombs that took druggies out fell off one of *my* A-6s?"

"Yes, sir. You didn't know?"

"No, Robby, I didn't." Painter knocked off the rest of his drink and set the glass down. "Jesus Christ. What lunatic set up this abortion?"

"But that new bomb, it had to—I mean, the orders and everything—shit, for this sort of thing, the orders have to chop through -05."

"*What* new bomb?" Painter nearly shouted that out, but managed to control himself.

"Some kind of plastic, fiberglass, whatever, some kind of new bombcase. It looks like a stock, low-drag two-thousand-pounder with the usual attachment points for the smart-bomb gear, but it's not made out of steel or any other kind of metal, and it's painted blue like an exercise bomb."

"Oh, okay. There has been a little work on a low-observable bomb for the ATA"—Painter referred to the new Stealth attack plane the Navy was working on—"but, hell, we've just done a little preliminary testing, maybe a dozen

drops. Whole program's experimental. They don't even use the regular bomb filler, and I'm probably going to shit-can the program, 'cause I don't think it's worth the money. They haven't even taken those things off China Lake yet."

"Sir, there were several in Ranger's bomb locker. I saw 'em, Admiral, I touched'em. I saw one attached to an A-6. I watched that A-6 on radar while I was up in the E-2 for the Fleet-Ex. It flew off to the beach and came back from a different direction. The timing might be a coincidence, but I'd be careful putting money down on that. The night I flew back, I saw another one attached to the same aircraft. Next day I hear that another druggie got his house knocked flat. It stands to reason that half a ton of HE'll do just fine for that, and a combustible bombcase won't leave shit behind for evidence."

"Nine hundred eighty-five pounds of Octol—that's what they use in those things." Painter snorted. "It'll do a house, all right. You know who flew the mission?"

"Roy Jensen, he's skipper of—"

"I know him. We were shipmates on—Robby, what the hell is going on here? I want you to start over from the beginning and tell me everything you saw."

Captain Jackson did just that. It took ten uninterrupted minutes.

"Who was the 'tech-rep' from?" Painter asked.

"I didn't ask, sir."

"How much you want to bet he isn't even aboard anymore? Son, we've been had. *I've* been had. Goddammit! Those orders should have come through my office. Somebody's been using my fucking airplanes and not telling me."

It wasn't about the bombings, Robby understood, it was about propriety. And it was about security. Had the Navy planned the job, it would have been done better. Painter and his senior A-6 expert would have set it up so that there would have been no awkward evidence for other people—like Robby in the E- 2C-to notice. What Painter feared was the simple fact that now his people could be left holding the bag for an operation imposed from above, bypassing the regular chain of command.

"Get Jensen up here?" Robby wondered.

"I thought of that. Too obvious. Might get Jensen in too much trouble. But I've got to find out where the hell his orders came from. *Ranger's* out for another ten days or so, right?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Has to be an Agency job," Josh Painter observed quietly. "Authorized higher up than that, but it has to be Agency."

"For what it's worth, sir, I got a good friend who's pretty senior there. I'm godfather for one of his kids."

"Who's that?"

"Jack Ryan."

"Oh, yeah, I've met him. He was with me on *Kennedy* for a day or two back when—you're sure to remember that cruise, Rob." Painter smiled. "Right before you took that missile hit. By that time he was off on HMS *Invincible.* "

"What? Jack was aboard then? But—why the hell didn't he come down to see me?"

"You never did find out what that op was all about, did you?" Painter shook his head, thinking of the *Red October* affair. "Maybe he can tell you about it. I can't."

Robby accepted it without questioning and turned back to the matter at hand. "There's a land side to this operation, too, Admiral," he said, and explained on for another couple of minutes.

"Charlie-Fox," Painter said when he was done. That was the Navy's shorthand and sanitized version of an expression that had begun in the Marine Corps to denote a confused and self-destructive military operation: Cluster-Fuck. "Robert, you get your ass on the first plane back to D.C. and tell your friend that his operation is going to hell in a basket. Jesus, don't those Agency clowns ever learn? If this gets out, and from what you're telling me, it's sure as hell going to, it's going to hurt us. It's going to hurt the whole country. We don't need this kind of shit, not in an election year with that asshole Fowler running. Also tell him that the next time the Agency decides to play soldier, it *might help* if they asked somebody who knows something about it ahead of time."

The Cartel had an ample supply of people who were accustomed to carrying guns, and assembling them took only a few hours. Cortez was detailed to run the operation. He'd coordinate it from the village of Anserma, which was in the center of the area in which the "mercenary" teams seemed to be operating. He hadn't told his boss everything he knew, of course, nor did he reveal his full objective. The Cartel was a cooperative enterprise. Nearly three hundred men had been brought in by cars, trucks, and buses, personal retainers from all of the Cartel chieftains, all of them reasonably fit and accustomed to violence. Their presence here reduced the security details of the remaining drug lords. That would allow Escobedo a sizable advantage as he tried to discover which of his colleagues was making the "power play," while Cortez dealt with the "mercenaries." He had every intention of running the American soldiers to ground and killing them all, of course, but there was no special hurry in that. Félix had every reason to suspect that he was up against elite troops, perhaps even American Green Berets, formidable opponents for whom he had due respect. Casualties among his force, therefore, were to be expected. Félix wondered how many he'd have to kill off in order to alter the overall balance of power within the Cartel to his personal advantage.

There was no point in telling the assembled multitude, of course. These

harsh, brutal men were used to brandishing their weapons like the Japanese samurai warriors of all those bad movies that they liked to watch, and like those actors playing at killers, these men were accustomed to having people cower before them, the omnipotent, invincible warriors of the Cartel, armed with their AK-47s, swaggering down village streets. *Comical scum,* Cortez thought.

It was all rather comical, really. Cortez would not mind a bit. It was to be a diverting and entertaining exercise, something from half a millennium before, when brutal men would tether a bear in a pit and let dogs at it. Eventually the bear died, and though it was frequently rather hard on the dogs, you could always get new ones. Those new dogs would be trained differently, to be loyal to a new master.... It was marvelous, Cortez realized after a moment. He'd be playing a game, with men instead of bears and dogs, a game that hadn't been played since the time of the Caesars. He understood now why some of the drug lords had gotten the way they were. This sort of Godlike power was destructive to one's soul. He'd have to remember that. But first there was work to do.

The chain of command was established. There were five groups of fifty or so men. They were assigned operating areas. Communications would be by radio, coordinated through Cortez, in the safety of a house outside the village. About the only complication was the possible interference of the Colombian Army. Escobedo was taking care of that. M-19 and FARC would start making trouble elsewhere. That would keep the Army occupied.

The "soldiers," as they immediately took to calling themselves, moved off into the hills in trucks. *Buena suerte,* Cortez told their leaders: Good luck. Of course, he wished them nothing of the kind. Luck was no longer a factor in the operation, which suited the former colonel of the DGI. In a properly planned operation, it never was.

It was a quiet day in the mountains. Chavez heard the pealing of church bells echoing up and down the valley, calling the faithful to Sunday liturgy. Was it Sunday? Chavez wondered. He'd lost track. Whichever day it was, traffic sounds were less than normal. Except for the loss of Rocha, things were in rather good shape. They hadn't even expended much of their ammunition, though in another few days they were due for a resupply drop from the helicopter supporting the operation. You could never have too much ammunition. That was one truth Chavez had learned. Happiness is a full bandolier. And a full canteen. And hot food.

The topography of the valley allowed them to hear things especially well. Sound carried up the slopes with a minimum of attenuation, and the air, though thin, seemed to give every noise a special bell-like clarity. Chavez heard the trucks well off, and put his binoculars on a bend in the road, several miles away, to see what it was. He wasn't the least concerned. Trucks were targets, not things to worry about. He adjusted the focus on the binoculars to get the sharpest possible image, and the sergeant had a good pair of eyes. After a minute or so he spotted three of them, flatbed trucks like farmers used,

with removable wooden sides. But they were filled with men, and the men appeared to be carrying rifles. The trucks stopped, and the men jumped out. Chavez punched his sleeping companion.

"Oso, get the captain here right now!"

Ramirez was there in less than a minute, with his own pair of binoculars.

"You're standing up, sir!" Chavez growled. "Get the fuck down!"

"Sorry, Ding."

"You see 'em?"

"Yeah."

They were just milling around, but it was impossible to miss their rifles, slung over their shoulders. As both men watched, they divided into four groups and started moving off the road. A moment later, they were lost in the trees.

"It'll take 'em about three hours to get here, Cap'n," Ding estimated.

"By that time we'll be six miles north. Get ready to move."

Ramirez set up his satellite radio.

"VARIABLE, this is KNIFE, over." He got a reply on the first call.

"KNIFE, this is VARIABLE. We read you loud and clear. Over."

"KNIFE reports armed men entering the woods five miles east-southeast our position. Estimate reinforced platoon in strength, and heading our way."

"Are they soldiers, over."

"Negative—say again, negative. Weapons in evidence, but no uniforms. I repeat, they do not appear to be wearing uniforms. We are getting ready to move."

"Roger that, KNIFE. Move immediately, check in when you can. We'll try to find out what's going on."

"Roger. KNIFE out."

"What's that all about?" one of the case officers asked.

"I don't know. I wish Clark was here," the other said. "Let's check in with Langley."

Jackson managed to catch a United red-eye flight out of San Francisco direct to Dulles International Airport. Admiral Painter had called ahead, and a Navy sedan took him to Washington National, where his Corvette had been parked, and remarkably enough, not stolen. Robby had played it all back and forth in his mind during the entire flight. In the abstract, CIA operations were fun things to think about: spies skulking about and doing whatever the hell it was that they did. He didn't especially mind what this one was doing, but, damn it,

the Navy was being used, and you didn't do that without letting people know. His first stop was at his home to change clothes. Then he made a phone call.

Ryan was home, and enjoying it. He'd managed to get home Friday evening a few minutes ahead of his wife's return from Hopkins and slept in late Saturday to shake off the lingering effects of travel shock. The remainder of the day had been devoted to playing with his kids and taking them to Saturday-night mass so that he could get another long night's sleep, plus reacquainting himself with his wife. Now he was sitting on his John Deere lawn tractor. He might be one of the top people in CIA, but he still cut his own grass. Others seeded and fertilized, but for Jack the pastoral act of cutting was therapy. It was a three-hour ritual done every two weeks—somewhat more often in the spring, but by now the growth rate was down to a reasonable level. He enjoyed the smell of the cut grass. For that matter, he enjoyed the greasy smell of the tractor and the vibration of the motor. He couldn't entirely escape reality, of course. Clipped to his belt was a portable telephone whose electronic chiming was noticeable over the rumble of the tractor. Jack switched off as he hit the activation button on the phone.

"Hello."

"Jack? Rob."

"How you doing, Robby?"

"Just got myself frocked."

"Congratulations, *Captain* Jackson! Aren't you a little young for that?"

"Call it affirmative action, lettin' the aviators catch up with the bubbleheads. Hey, Sissy and I are heading over to Annapolis. Any problem we stop by on the way?"

"Hell, no. How about lunch?"

"Sure it's no trouble?" Jackson asked.

"Robby, give me a break," Ryan replied. "Since when did you get humble on me?"

"Ever since you got important and all."

Ryan violated an FCC rule with his retort.

"Little over an hour okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be finished the grass by then. See ya', bud." Ryan terminated the call and placed one to his house, which had three lines. It was, perversely, a long-distance call. He needed a D.C. line for his work. Cathy needed a Baltimore connection for hers, plus a local line for other matters.

"Hello?" Cathy answered.

"Rob and Sis are coming over for lunch," Jack told his wife. "How about hot dogs on the grill?"

"My hair's a mess!" Caroline Ryan announced.

"Okay, I'll grill that, too. Can you set up the charcoal for me? I ought to be finished out here in twenty minutes or so."

In fact, it took just over thirty. Ryan parked the mower in the garage next to his Jaguar and went into the house to wash up. He had to shave, too, which he barely finished doing when Robby pulled into the driveway.

"How the hell did you make it this fast?" Jack demanded. He was still wearing his dingy cut-offs.

"You prefer I should be late, Dr. Ryan?" Robby asked as he and his wife got out of the car. Cathy appeared at the door. Handshakes and kisses were exchanged as everyone caught up on what they'd been doing since the last time they'd gotten together. Cathy and Sissy went into the living room while Jack and Robby got the hot dogs and walked out to the deck. The charcoal wasn't quite ready yet.

"So how do you like being a captain?"

"Be even better when they pay me what I am most clearly worth." Being frocked meant that Robby could wear the four stripes of a captain, but still drew the pay of a mere commander. "I'm getting a CAG slot, too. Admiral Painter told me last night."

"Shit hot!" Jack clapped Robby on the shoulder. "That's the next big step, isn't it?"

"So long as I don't step on my weenie. The Navy giveth, and the Navy taketh away. I don't get it for a year and a half, which means giving up part of my delightful tour in the Pentagon, sob." Robby stopped for a moment and got serious. "That's not why I came."

"Oh?"

"Jack, what the hell have you guys got going in Colombia?"

"Rob, I don't know."

"Look, Jack, this is cool, okay? I fucking know! Your security on the op sucks. Hey, I know you got need-to-know rules, but my admiral is kinda pissed that you're using his assets without telling him about it."

"Who's that?"

"Josh Painter," Jackson answered. "You met him on *Kennedy,* remember?"

"Who told you that!"

"A reliable source. I've been thinking about it. The story back then was that Ivan lost a sub and we were out to help 'em find it, but things got a little rough for a while, explaining why my RIO had to have brain surgery and my Tomcat needed three weeks before it could fly again. I guess there was more to that than met the eye, and it never made the papers. Shame I can't hear the story. Anyway, we'll set that one aside for a while. This is why I'm here:

"Those two druggie houses that got blown up—the bombs came off of an A-6E Intruder medium attack bomber belonging to the United States Navy. I'm not the only one who knows. Whoever set up this operation, well, the

security's for shit, Jack. You also got a bunch of light-infantry soldiers running around. Doing what, I don't know, but people also know that they're down there. Maybe you can't tell me what's happening. Okay, it's compartmented and all that, and you can't tell me anything, but I'm telling *you,* Jack, the word's leaking out, and some folks in the Pentagon are going to be big-league angry when this sucker hits the networks. Whatever dickhead set this thing up is in way the hell over his head, and the word from on high is that us guys in blue and green suits will not repeat *not* get left holding the bag this time."

"Cool off, Rob." Ryan popped open a can of beer for Robby and one for himself.

"Jack, we're friends, and ain't nothing gonna change that. I know you'd never do anything this dumb, but—"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't fucking know, okay? I was in Belgium last week and I told them I didn't know. I was in Chicago Friday morning with that Fowler guy, and I told him and his aide that I don't know. And I'm telling you that I don't know."

Jackson was quiet for a moment. "You know, anybody else, I'd call him a liar. I know what your new job is, Jack. You're telling me that you're serious? Honest to God, Jack, this here is important."

"Word of honor, Captain, I don't know dick."

Robby drained his beer and crushed the can flat. "Ain't that the way it always is?" he said. "We got people out there killing, maybe getting hurt, too, and nobody knows anything. God, I love being a fucking pawn. You know, I don't mind taking my chances, but it's nice to know why."

"I'll do my best to find out."

"Good idea. They really haven't told you what's happening, eh?"

"They haven't told me shit, but I'm going to damned well find out. You might want to drop a hint on your boss," Jack added.

"What's that?"

"Tell him to keep a low profile until I get back to you."

Whatever doubt the Patterson brothers had about what they should do ended that Sunday afternoon. The Grayson sisters came for visitors' day, sitting across from their men—neither pair had trouble distinguishing who was who—and proclaiming their undying love for the men who'd liberated them from their pimp. It was no longer just a question of getting out of jail. The final decision was made on the way back to their cell.

Henry and Harvey were in the same cell, mainly for security reasons. Had they been separated, then by the simple expedient of changing shirts, they could have swapped cells and somehow—the jailers knew that the Pattersons were clever bastards—done something to screw things up for everybody. The additional advantage was that the brothers didn't fight each other, as was

hardly uncommon with the rest of the jail population, and the fact that they were quiet and untroublesome allowed them to work in undisturbed peace.

Jails are necessarily buildings designed to take abuse. The floors are of bare reinforced concrete, since carpets or tile would just be ripped up to start a fire or some other mischief. The resulting hard, smooth concrete floor made a good grinding surface. Each brother had a simple length of heavy metal wire taken from the bedstead. No one has yet designed a prison bed that doesn't require metal, and metal makes good weapons. In prison such weapons are called shanks, an ugly word completely suitable to their ugly purpose. Law requires that jails and prisons cannot be mere cages for housing prisoners like animals in a zoo, and this jail, like others, had a crafts shop. An idle mind, judges have ruled for decades, is the devil's workshop. The fact that the devil is already a resident in the criminal mind simply means that the craft shops provide tools and material for making shanks more effective. In this case, each brother had a small, grooved piece of wood doweling and some electrician's tape. Henry and Harvey took turns, one rubbing his shank on the concrete to get a needlelike point while the other stood guard for an approaching uniform. It was high-quality wire, and the sharpening process took some hours, but people in jail have lots of idle time. Finished, each wire was inserted in the groove in the dowel—miraculously enough, the groove, cut by a craft-shop router, was exactly the right size and length. The electrician's tape secured the wire in place, and now each brother had a six-inch shank, capable of inflicting a deep, penetrating trauma upon a human body.

They hid their weapons—prison inmates are very effective at it—and discussed tactics. Any graduate of a guerrilla or terrorist school would have been impressed. Though the language was coarse and the discussion lacking in the technical jargon preferred by trained professionals in the field of urban warfare, the Patterson brothers had a clear understanding of the idea of *Mission.* They understood covert approach, the importance of maneuver and diversion, and they knew about clearing the area after the mission was successfully executed. In this they expected the tacit assistance of their cellmates, but jails and prisons, though violent and evil places, remain communities of men, and the pirates were decidedly unpopular, whereas the Pattersons were fairly high in the hierarchical chain as tough, "honest" hoods. Besides, everyone knew that they were not people to cross, which encouraged cooperation and discouraged informants.

Jails are also places with hygienic rules. Since criminals are frequently the type to defer bathing, and brushing and flossing their teeth, and since such behavior lends itself to epidemic, showers are part of an unbending routine. The Patterson brothers were counting on it.

"What do you mean?" the man with a Spanish accent asked Mr. Stuart.

"I mean they'll be out in eight years. Considering they murdered a family of four and got caught red-handed with a large supply of cocaine, it's one hell of a good deal," the attorney replied. He didn't like doing business on Sunday, and especially didn't like doing business with this man in the den of his home

with his family in the backyard, but he had chosen to do business with drug types. He told himself at least ten times with every single case that he'd been a fool to have taken the first one—and gotten him off, of course, because the DEA agents had screwed up their warrant, tainting all the evidence and tossing the case on a classic "legal technicality." That success, which had earned him fifty thousand dollars for four days' work, had given him a "name" within the drug community, which had money to burn—or to hire good criminal lawyers. You couldn't easily say no to such people. They were genuinely frightening. They had *killed* lawyers who displeased them. And they paid so well, well enough that he could take time to apply his considerable talents to indigent clients who couldn't pay. At least that was one of the arguments he used on sleepless nights to justify dealing with the animals. "Look, these guys were looking at a seat in the electric chair—life at minimum—and I knocked that down to twenty years and out in eight. For Christ's sake, that's a goddamned good deal."

"I think you could do better," the man replied with a blank look and in a voice so devoid of emotion as to be mechanistic. And decidedly frightening to a lawyer who had never owned or shot a gun.

That was the other side of the equation. They didn't merely hire him. Somewhere else was another lawyer, one who gave advice without getting directly involved. It was a simple security provision. It also made perfect professional sense, of course, to get a second opinion of anything. It also meant that in special cases the drug community could make sure that its own attorney wasn't making some sort of arrangement with the state, as was not entirely unknown in the countries from which they came. And as was the case here, some might say. Stuart could have played his information from the Coasties for all it was worth, gambling to have the whole case thrown out. He estimated a fifty-fifty chance of that. Stuart was good, even brilliant in a courtroom, but so was Davidoff, and there is not a trial lawyer in the world who would have predicted the reaction of a jury—a south Alabama, law-and-order jury—to a case like this one. Whoever was in the shadows giving advice to the man in his den, he was not as good as Stuart in a courtroom. Probably an academic, the trial lawyer thought, maybe a professor supplementing his teaching income with some informal consulting. Whoever he—she?—was, Stuart hated him on instinct.

"If I do what you want me to do, we run the risk of blowing the whole case. They really could end up in the chair." It also would mean wrecking the careers of Coast Guard sailors who had done wrong, but not nearly so wrong as Stuart's clients had most certainly done. His ethical duty as a lawyer was to give his clients the best possible defense within the law, within the Standards of Professional Conduct, but most of all, within the scope of his knowledge and experience—instinct, which was as real and important as it was impossible to quantify. Exactly how a lawyer balanced his duty on that three-cornered scale was the subject of endless class hours in law school, but the answers arrived at in the theaterlike lecture halls were always clearer than in the real legal world found beyond the green campus lawns.

"They could also go free."

The man's thinking reversal on appeal, Stuart realized. It was an academic lawyer giving advice.

"My professional advice to my clients is to accept the deal that I have negotiated."

"Your clients will decline that advice. Your clients will tell you tomorrow morning to—what is the phrase? Go for broke?" The man smiled like a dangerous machine. "Those are your instructions. Good day, Mr. Stuart. I can find the door." The machine left.

Stuart stared at his bookcases for a few minutes before making his telephone call. He might as well do it now. No sense making Davidoff wait. No public announcement had yet been made, though the rumors were out on the street. He wondered how the U.S. Attorney would take it. It was easier to predict what he'd say. The outraged *I thought we had a deal!* would be followed by a resolute *Okay, we'll see what the jury says!* Davidoff would muster his considerable talents, and the battle in Federal District Court would be an epic duel. But that was what courts were all about, wasn't it? It would be a fascinating and exciting technical exercise in the theory of the law, but like most such exercises, it would have little to do with right and wrong, less to do with what had actually happened aboard the good ship *Empire Builder,* and nothing at all to do with justice.

Murray was in his office. Moving into their townhouse had been a formality. He slept there—most of the time—but he saw far less of it than he'd seen of his official apartment in the Kensington section of London while legal attaché to the embassy on Grosvenor Square. It was hardly fair. For what it had cost him to move back to the D.C. area—the city that provided a home for the United States government denied decent housing to those on government salaries—one would have thought that he'd have gotten some real use from it.

His secretary was not in on Sunday, of course, and that meant Murray had to answer his own phone. This one came in on his direct, private line.

"Yeah, Murray here."

"Mark Bright. There's been a development on the Pirates Case that you need to know about. The lawyer for the subjects just called the U.S. Attorney. He's tossing the deal they made. He's going to fight it out; he's going to put those Coasties on the stand and try to blow away the whole case on the basis of that stunt they pulled. Davidoff's worried."

"What do you think?" Murray asked.

"Well, he'll reinstate the whole case: drug-related capital murder. If it means clobbering the Coast Guard, well, that's the price of justice. His words, not mine," Bright pointed out. Like many FBI agents, the agent was also a member of the bar. "Going on my experience, not his, I'd say it's real gray, Dan. Davidoff's good—I mean, he's really good in front of a jury—but so's the defense guy, Stuart. The local DEA hates his guts, but he's an effective son of a bitch. The law is pretty muddled. What'll the judge say? Depends on the

judge. What'll the jury say—depends on what the judge says and does. It's like putting a bet down on the next Super Bowl right now, before the season starts, and that doesn't even take into account what'll happen in the U.S. Court of Appeals after the trial's over in District Court. Whatever happens, the Coasties are going to get raped. Too bad. No matter what, Davidoff is going to tear each of 'em a new asshole for getting him into this mess."

"Warn 'em," Murray said. He told himself that it was an impulsive statement, but it wasn't. Murray believed in law, but he believed in justice more.

"You want to repeat that, sir?"

"They gave us TARPON."

"Mr. Murray"—he wasn't "Dan" now—"I might have to arrest them. Davidoff just might set up a grand jury on this and—"

"Warn them. That is an order, Mr. Bright. I presume the local cops have a good attorney who represents them. Recommend that attorney to Captain Wegener and his men."

Bright hesitated before replying. "Sir, what you just told me to do might be seen as—"

"Mark, I've been in the Bureau a long time. Maybe too damned long," Murray's fatigue—and some other things—said. "But I won't stand by and watch these men get ambushed for doing something that helped us. They'll have to take their chances with the law—but by God, they'll have the same advantages that those fucking pirates have! We owe them that much. Log that one in as my order and carry it out."

"Yes, sir." Murray could hear Bright thinking the rest of the answer: *Damn!*

"On the case, anything else you need from our end that you need help with?"

"No, sir. The forensics are all in. From that side the case is tight as hell. DNA matches on both semen samples to the subjects, DNA blood matches to two of the victims. The wife was a blood donor, and we found a quart of her stuff in a Red Cross freezer; the other one's to the daughter. Davidoff might just bring this one off on that basis alone." The new DNA-match technology was rapidly becoming one of the Bureau's deadliest forensic weapons. Two California men who'd thought themselves to have committed the perfect rape-murder were now contemplating the gas chamber due to the work of two Bureau biochemists and a relatively inexpensive laboratory test.

"Anything else you need, you call me direct. This one is directly tied in with Emil's murder, and I've got all the horsepower I need."

"Yes, sir. Sorry to bother you on a Sunday."

"Right." It was one small thing to chuckle about as he hung up. Murray turned in his swivel chair to stare out the windows onto Pennsylvania Avenue. A pleasant Sunday afternoon, and people were walking up the street of presidents like pilgrims, stopping along the way to purchase ice-creams and T-

shirts from vendors. Farther down the street, beyond the Capitol, in the areas that tourists were careful to avoid, there were other places that people entered, also like pilgrims, also stopping to buy things.

"Fucking drugs," he observed quietly. Just how much more damage would they do?

The Deputy Director (Operations) was also in his office. Three signals from VARIABLE had come in within the space of two hours. Well, it was not entirely unexpected that the opposition would react. They were acting more rapidly and in a more organized way—it appeared—than he had expected, but it wasn't something that he'd neglected to consider beforehand. The whole point of using the troops he was using, after all, was for their field skills ... and their anonymity. Had he selected Green Berets from the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, or Rangers from Fort Stewart, Georgia, or people from the new Special Operations Command at MacDill—it would have been too many people from too small a community. That would have been noticed. But light-fighters had four nearly complete and widely separated divisions, over forty thousand men spread from New York to Hawaii, with the same field skills as soldiers in higher-profile units; and taking forty people out of forty thousand was a far more concealable exercise. Some would be lost. He'd known that going in and so, he was sure, did the soldiers themselves. They were assets, and assets sometimes get expended. That was harsh, but it was reality. If the infantrymen had wanted a safe life, they would not have chosen to be infantrymen, to have re-enlisted at least once each, and to volunteer for a job that was advertised as being potentially dangerous. These weren't government clerks tossed into the jungle and told to fend for themselves. They were professional soldiers who knew what the score was.

At least, that's what Ritter told himself. But, his mind asked him, *if you don't know what the score is, how can they?*

The craziest part of all was that the operation was working out exactly as planned—in the field. Clark's brilliant idea, using a few disconnected violent acts to instigate a gang war within the Cartel, appeared to be happening. How else to explain the attempted ambush of Escobedo? He found himself glad that Cortez and his boss had escaped. Now there would be revenge and confusion and turmoil from which the Agency could step back and cover its tracks.

Who, us? the Agency would ask by way of answer to reporters' questions, which would start the following day, Ritter was certain. He was, in fact, surprised that they hadn't started already. But the pieces of the puzzle were coming apart now instead of together. The *Ranger* battle group would sail back north, continuing its Fleet-Ex during the slow trip back to San Diego. The CIA representative was already off the ship and on his way home with the second and final tape cassette. The rest of the "exercise" bombs would be dropped at sea, targeted on discarded life-rafts as normal Drop-Ex's. The fact that they'd never been officially released from the Navy weapons-testing base in California would never be noticed. If it were? Some paperwork screwup—they happened all the time. No, the only tricky part was with those troops in the

field. He could have made immediate arrangements to lift them out. Better to leave them there for a few more days. There might be more work for them to do, and as long as they were careful, they'd be all right. The opposition would not be all that good.

"So?" Colonel Johns asked Zimmer.

"Gotta change engines. This one's shot. The burner cans are all right, but the compressor failed big-time. Maybe the boys back home can rebuild it. No way we can fix it with what we've got here, sir."

"How long?"

"Six hours, if we start now, Colonel."

"Okay, Buck."

They'd brought two spare engines, of course. The hangar that held the Pave Low III helicopter wasn't big enough for both it and the MC-130 which provided aerial tanking and spare parts, however, and Zimmer waved to another NCO to punch the button to open the door. They needed a special cart and hoist to handle the T-64 turboshaft engines in any case.

The hangar doors rolled on their metal tracks just as a roach wagon drove onto the flight line. Immediately men descended on the truck. It was a hot day at the Canal Zone—a place where snow is something one sees on television—and it was time for cold drinks. Everyone knew the truck driver, a Panamanian who'd been doing this since God knew when and made a pretty good living at it.

He was also a serious airplane buff. From his own years of observations, plus casual conversations with the enlisted men who serviced them, he'd acquired a familiarity with everything in the inventory of the United States Air Force, and would have been a useful intelligence asset had anyone bothered trying to recruit him. He would never have done anything to hurt them in any case. Though often overbearing, more than once he'd had trouble with his truck and had it fixed on the spot for free by a green-clad mechanic, and around Christmas—everyone knew he had children—there would be presents for him and his sons. He'd even managed a few helicopter rides for them, showing them what the family house outside the base looked like. It was not every father who could do that for his children! The *norteamericanos* were not perfect, he knew, but they were fair and they were generous if you dealt with them honestly, since honesty wasn't something they expected from "natives." That was all the more true now that they were having trouble with the pineapple-faced buffoon who was running his country's government.

As he passed out his Cokes and munchies, he noticed that there was a Pave Low III in the hangar across the way, a large, formidable and in its peculiar way, a very beautiful helicopter. Well, that explained the Combat Talon transport/tanker, and the armed guards who kept him from taking his normal route. He knew much about both aircraft, and while he would never reveal what he knew of their capabilities, telling someone the simple fact that they

were here, that was no crime, was it?

But next time, after the money was passed, he'd be asked to take note of the times they came and went.

They'd moved very rapidly for the first hour, then slowed to their normal slow, careful, and very alert pace. Even so, moving in daylight wasn't something they preferred to do. While the Ninja might well own the night, day was something for all, a far easier time to teach people to hunt than in the dark. While the soldiers still had practical advantages over anyone who might come hunting them—even other soldiers—those advantages were minimized by daytime operations. Like gamblers, the light-fighters preferred to use every card in the deck. Doing so, they consciously avoided what some sportsman might call a "fair" fight, but combat had stopped being a sport when a gladiator named Spartacus decided to kill on a free-agent basis, though it had taken the Romans a few more generations to catch on.

Everyone had his war paint on. They wore gloves despite the fact that it was warm. They knew that the nearest other SHOWBOAT team was fifteen klicks to the south, and anyone they saw was either an innocent or a hostile, not a friendly, and to soldiers trying to stay covert, "innocent" was rather a thin concept. They were to avoid contact with anything and anyone, and if contact were made, it would be an on-the-spot call.

The other rules were also different now. They didn't move in single file. Too many people following a single path made for tracks. Though Chavez was at point, with Oso twenty meters behind, the rest of the squad was advancing in line abreast, with frequent changes of direction, shifting almost like a football backfield, but over a much larger area. Soon they'd start looping their path, waiting to see if someone might be following. If so, that someone was in for a surprise. For the moment, the mission was to move to a preselected location and evaluate the opposition. And wait for orders.

The police lieutenant didn't often go to evening services at Grace Baptist Church, but he did this time. He was late, but the lieutenant had a reputation for being late, even though he customarily drove his unmarked radio car wherever he went. He parked on the periphery of the well-filled parking lot, walked in, and sat in the back, where he made sure his miserable singing would be noticed.

Fifteen minutes later, another plain-looking car stopped right next to his. A man got out with a tire iron, smashed the window on the right-side front door, and proceeded to remove the police radio, the shotgun clipped under the dash —and the locked, evidence-filled attaché case on the floor. In less than a minute he was back in his car and gone. The case would be found again only if the Patterson brothers didn't keep their word. Cops are honest folk.

23.

The Games Begin

THE MORNING ROUTINE was exactly the same despite the fact that Ryan had been away from it for a week.

His driver awoke early and drove his own car to Langley, where he switched over to the official Buick and also picked up some papers for his passenger. These were in a metal case with a cipher lock and a self-destruct device. No one had ever tried to interfere with the car or its occupants, but that wasn't to say that it would never happen. The driver, one of the official CIA security detail, carried his own 9mm Beretta 92-F pistol, and there was an Uzi submachine gun under the dash. He had trained with the Secret Service and was an expert on protecting his "principal," as he thought of the acting DDI. He also wished that the guy lived closer to D.C., or that he was entitled to mileage pay for all the driving he did. He drove around the inner loop of the Capital Beltway, then took the cloverleaf east on Maryland Route 50.

Jack Ryan rose at 6:15, an hour that seemed increasingly early as he marched toward forty, and followed the same kind of morning routine as most other working people, though his being married to a physician guaranteed that his breakfast was composed of healthy foods, as opposed to those he liked. What was wrong with grease, sugar, and preservatives, anyway?

By 6:55 he was finished with breakfast, dressed, and about halfway through his paper. It was Cathy's job to get the children off to school. Jack kissed his daughter on his way to the door, but Jack Jr. thought himself too old for that baby stuff. The Agency Buick was just arriving, as regular and reliable as airlines and railroads tried to be.

"Good morning, Dr. Ryan."

"Good morning, Phil." Jack preferred to open his own doors, and slid into the right-rear seat. First he would finish his *Washington Post,* ending, as always, with the comics, and saving Gary Larson for last. If there was anything an Agency person needed it was his daily dose of *The Far Side,* far and away the most popular cartoon at Langley. It wasn't hard to understand why. By that time the car was back on Route 50, in the heavy Washington-bound traffic. Ryan worked the lock on the letter case. After opening it he used his Agency ID card to disarm the destruct device. The papers within were important, but anyone who attacked the car now would be more interested in him than in any written material, and no one at the Agency had illusions about Ryan's—or any other person's—ability to resist attempts to extract information. He now had forty minutes to catch up on developments that had

taken place overnight—in this case over the weekend—so that he'd be able to ask intelligent questions of the section chiefs and night watch officers who'd brief him when he got in.

Reading the newspaper first always put a decent spin on the official CIA reports. Ryan had his doubts about journalists—their analysis was often faulty—but the fact of the matter was that they were in the same basic job as the Agency: information-gathering and -dissemination, and except for some very technical fields—which were, however, vitally important in matters like arms control—their performance was often as good as and sometimes better than the trained government employees who reported to Langley. Of course, a good foreign correspondent was generally paid better than a GS-12-equivalent case officer, and talent often went where the money was. Besides, reporters were allowed to write books, too, and that's where you could make real money, as many Moscow correspondents had done over the years. All a security clearance really meant, Ryan had learned over the years, was sources. Even at his level in the Agency, he often had access to information little different in substance than any competent newspaper reported. The difference was that Jack knew the sources for that information, which was important in gauging its reliability. It was a subtle but often crucial difference.

The briefing folders began with the Soviet Union. All sorts of interesting things were happening there, but still no one knew what it meant or where it was leading. Fine. Ryan and CIA had been reporting that analysis for longer than he cared to remember. People expected better. Like that Elliot woman, Jack thought, who hated the Agency for what it did—actually, for things it never did anymore—but conversely expected it to know everything. When would they wake up and realize that predicting the future was no easier for intelligence analysts than for a good sportswriter to determine who'd be playing in the Series? Even after the All-Star break, the American League East had three teams within a few percentage points of the lead. That was a question for bookmakers. It was a pity, Ryan grunted to himself, that Vegas didn't set up a betting line on the Soviet Politburo membership, or *glasnost,* or how the "nationalities question" was going to turn out. It would have given him some guidance. By the time they got to the beltway, he was reading through reports from Latin and South America. Sure enough, some drug lord named Fuentes had gotten himself blown up by a bomb.

Well, isn't that too bad? was Jack's initial observation. He was thinking abstractly, but came down to earth. No, it wasn't all that bad that he was dead. It was very worrisome that he'd been killed by an American aircraft bomb. That was the sort of thing that Beth Elliot hated CIA for, Jack reminded himself. All that judge-jury-and-executioner stuff. It had nothing to do with right or wrong. The question, to her, was political expediency and maybe aesthetics. Politicians are more concerned with "issues" than "principles," but talked as though the two nouns had the same meaning.

Jesus, you're really into Monday-morning cynicism, aren't you?

How the hell did Robby Jackson tumble to this? Who set up the operation? What will happen if the word really does get out?

Better yet: Am I supposed to care about that? If yes, why? If not, why not?

It's political, Jack. How do politics enter into your job? Are politics even supposed to enter into your job?

As with many things, this would have been a superb topic for a philosophical discussion, something for which Ryan's Jesuit education had both prepared him and given him a taste. But the case at hand wasn't an abstract examination of principles and hypotheticals. He was supposed to have answers. What if a member of the Select Committee asked him a question that he had to answer? That could happen at any time. He could defer such a question only for as long as it took to drive from Langley to The Hill.

And if Ryan lied, he'd go to jail. That was the downside of his promotion.

For that matter, if he honestly said that he didn't know, he might not be believed, probably not by the committee members, maybe not by a jury. Even honesty might not be real protection. Wasn't that a fun thought?

Jack looked out the window as they passed the Mormon temple, just outside the beltway near Connecticut Avenue. A decidedly odd-looking building, it had grandeur with its marble columns and gilt spires. The beliefs represented by that impressive structure seemed curious to Ryan, a lifelong Catholic, but the people who held them were honest and hardworking, and fiercely loyal to their country, because they believed in what America stood for. And that was what it all came down to, wasn't it? Either you stand *for* something, or you don't, Ryan told himself. Any jackass could be against things, like a petulant child claiming to hate an untasted vegetable. You could tell what these people stood for. The Mormons tithed their income, which allowed their church to construct this monument to faith, just as medieval peasants had taken from their need to build the cathedrals of their age, for precisely the same purpose. The peasants were forgotten by all but the God in Whom they believed. The cathedrals—testimony to those beliefs—remained in their glory, still used for their intended purpose. Who remembered the political issues of that age? The nobles and their castles had crumbled away, the royal bloodlines had mostly ended, and all that age had left behind were memorials to faith, belief in something more important than man's corporeal existence, expressed in stonework crafted by the hands of men. What better proof could there be of what really mattered? Jack knew he wasn't the first to wonder at the fact, not by a very long shot indeed, but it wasn't often that anyone perceived Truth so clearly as Ryan did on this Monday morning. It made expediency seem a shallow, ephemeral, and ultimately useless commodity. He still had to figure out what he would do, and knew that his action would possibly be decided by others, but he knew what sort of guide, what sort of measure he would use to determine his action. That was enough for now, he told himself.

The car pulled through the gate fifteen minutes later, then around the front of the building and into the garage. Ryan tucked all of his material back into the case and took the elevator to the seventh floor. Nancy already had his coffee machine perking as he walked in. His people would arrive in five minutes to complete his morning brief. Ryan had a few more moments for thought.

What had been enough on the beltway faded in the confines of his office. Now he had to *do* something, and while his guide would be principle, his actions would be tactically drawn. And Jack didn't have a clue.

His department chiefs arrived on schedule and began their briefings. They found the acting DDI curiously withdrawn and quiet this morning. Normally he asked questions and had a humorous remark or two. This time he nodded and grunted, hardly saying anything. Maybe he'd had a tough weekend.

For others, Monday morning meant going to court, seeing lawyers, and facing juries. Since the defendant in a criminal trial had the right to put his best face before a jury, it was shower time for the residents of the Mobile jail.

As with all aspects of prison life, security was the foremost consideration. The cell doors were opened, and the prisoners, wearing towels and sandals, trooped toward the end of the corridor under the watchful eyes of three experienced guards. The morning banter among the prisoners was normal: grumbling, jokes, and the odd curse. On their own or during their exercise or eating periods, the prisoners tended to form racially polarized groups, but jail policy forbade such segregation in the blocks—the guards knew it merely guaranteed violence, but the judges who'd made the rules were guided by principle, not reality. Besides, if somebody got killed, it was the guards' fault, wasn't it? The guards were the most cynical of all law-enforcement people, shunned by street cops as mere custodians, hated by the inmates, and not terribly well regarded by the community. It was hard for them to care greatly about their jobs, and their foremost concern was personal survival. The danger involved in working here was very real. The death of an inmate was no small matter to be sure—a serious criminal investigation was conducted both by the guards and the police, or in some cases, federal officers—but the life of a criminal was a smaller concern than the life of a guard—to the guards themselves.

For all that, they did their best. They were mostly experienced men and they knew what to look for. The same was true of the inmates, of course, and what went on here was no different in principle from what happened on a battlefield or in the shadow wars between intelligence agencies. Tactics evolved as measures and countermeasures changed over time. Some prisoners were craftier than others. Some were goddamned geniuses. Others, especially the young, were frightened, meek people whose only objective was exactly the same as the guards': personal survival in a dangerous environment. Each class of prisoner required a slightly different form of scrutiny, and the demands on the guards were severe. It was inevitable that some mistakes would be made.

Towels were hung on numbered hooks. Each prisoner had his own personal bar of soap, and a guard watched them parade naked into the shower enclosure, which had twenty shower heads. He made sure that no weapons were visible. But he was a young guard, and he'd not yet learned that a really determined man always has one place in which he can hide something.

Henry and Harvey Patterson picked neighboring shower heads directly

across from the pirates, who had foolishly selected places that could not be seen from the guard's position at the door. The brothers traded a happy look. The bastards might be king shit, but they weren't real swift in the head. Neither brother was particularly comfortable at the moment. The electrician's tape on the three-quarter-inch wood dowels was smooth, but had edges, and walking to the shower in a normal manner had required all their determination. It hurt. The hot water started all at once, and the enclosure started filling up with steam. The Patterson brothers applied their soap bars in the obvious place to facilitate getting their shanks, part of which were visible to a careful onlooker in any case, but they knew that the guard was new. Harvey nodded to a couple of people at the end of the enclosure. The act began with rather an uninspired bit of extemporaneous dialogue.

"Give me my fuckin' soap back, motherfucker!"

"Yo' *momma,"* the other replied casually. He'd thought about his line.

A blow was delivered, and returned.

"Knock it the fuck off—get the fuck out here!" the guard shouted. That's when two more people entered the fray, one knowing why, the other a young first-timer who only knew that he was scared and fighting back to protect himself. The chain reaction expanded almost at once to include the entire shower area. Outside, the guard backed off, calling for help.

Henry and Harvey turned, their shanks concealed in their hands. Ramón and Jesus were watching the fighting, looking the wrong way, fairly certain that they'd stay out of it; not knowing that it had been staged.

Harvey took Jesus, and Henry took Ramón.

Jesus never saw it coming, just a brown shape approaching him like a shadow and a punch in the chest, followed by another. He looked down to see blood spouting from a hole that went all the way into his heart—with each beat the holes tore further open—then a brown hand struck again, and a third red arc of blood joined the first two. He panicked, trying to hold his hand over the wounds to stop the bleeding, not knowing that most of the blood went into the pericardial sac, where it was already causing his death by congestive heart failure. He fell back against the wall and slid to the floor. Jesus died without knowing why.

Henry, who knew that he was the smart one, went for a faster kill. Ramón only made it easier, seeing the danger coming and turning away. Henry drove him against the tiled wall and smashed his shank into the side of the man's head, at the temple, where he knew the bone was eggshell-thin. Once in, he wiggled it left-right, up-down twice. Ramón wriggled like a caught fish for a few seconds, then went limp as a rag doll.

Each Patterson put his weapon in the hand of his brother's victim—they didn't have to worry about fingerprints in the shower—pushed the two bodies together, and stepped back to their own shower streams, where both washed down vigorously and cooperatively to remove any blood that might have splattered on them. By this time things had quieted down. The two men who'd

disagreed over ownership of a bar of Dial had shaken hands, apologized to the guard, and were completing their morning ablutions. The steam continued to cloud the enclosure, and the Pattersons continued their thorough washdown. Cleanliness was especially next to godliness where evidence was concerned. After five minutes the water stopped and the men trooped out.

The guard did his count—if there is anything a jail guard knows how to do, it is count—and came up two short while the other eighteen started drying off and playing grab-ass in the way of prisoners in an all-male environment. He stuck his head into the shower, ready to shout something in high-school Spanish, but saw at the bottom of the steam cloud what looked like a body.

"Oh, fuck!" He turned and screamed for the other guards to return. "Nobody fucking move!" he screamed at the prisoners.

"What's the problem?" an anonymous voice asked.

"Hey, man, I gotta be in court in an hour," another pointed out.

The Patterson brothers dried themselves off, put their sandals back on, and stood quietly. Other conspirators might have exchanged a satisfied look—they had just committed a perfect double murder with a cop standing fifteen feet away—but the twins didn't need to. Each knew exactly what the other was thinking: Freedom. They'd just dodged one murder by doing two more. They knew that the cops would play ball. That lieutenant was a righteous cop, and righteous cops kept their word.

Word of the pirates' deaths spread with speed that would have done any news organization proud. The lieutenant was sitting at his desk filling out an incident report when it reached him. He nodded at the news and went back to the embarrassing task of explaining how his personal police radio car had been violated, and an expensive radio, his briefcase, and, worst of all, a shotgun removed. That last item required all kinds of paperwork.

"Maybe that's God's way of telling you to stay home and watch TV," another lieutenant observed.

"You agnostic bastard, you know I finally decided to—oh, shit!"

"Problem?"

"The Patterson Case. I had all the bullets in my briefcase, forgot to take them out. They're gone. Duane, the bullets are gone! The examiner's notes, the photos, everything!"

"The DA's gonna love you, boy. You just put the Patterson boys back on the street."

It was worth it, the police lieutenant didn't say.

At his office four blocks away, Stuart took the call and breathed a sigh of relief. He ought to have been ashamed, of course, and knew it, but this time he just couldn't bring himself to mourn for his clients. For the system that had

failed them, yes, but not for their lives, which had manifestly benefited no one. Besides, he'd gotten his fee paid up-front, as any smart attorney did with druggies.

Fifteen minutes later, the U.S. Attorney had a statement out saying that he was outraged that federal prisoners had died in such a way, and that their deaths would be investigated by the appropriate federal authorities. He added that he'd hoped to arrange their deaths within the law, but death under law was a far different thing from death at the unknown hand of a murderer. All in all, it was an excellent statement which would make the noon and evening news broadcasts, which delighted Edward Davidoff even more than the deaths. Losing that case might have ended his chance for a Senate seat. Now people would say that justice had in fact been done, and they'd associate his statement and his face with it. It was almost as good as a conviction.

The Pattersons' lawyer was in the room, of course. They never spoke to a police officer without their attorney present—or so he thought, anyway.

"Hey," Harvey said. "Nobody fuck with me, I don't fuck with nobody. I heard a scuffle, like. That was it, man. You hear something like that in a place like this, smart move is you don't even look, y'know? You be better off not knowin'."

"It would appear that my clients have nothing to contribute to your investigation," the lawyer told the detectives. "Is it possible that the two men killed each other?"

"We don't know. We are just interviewing those who were present when it happened."

"I understand, then, that you do not contemplate charging my clients with anything having to do with this regrettable incident?"

"Not at this time, counselor," the senior detective said.

"Very well, I want that on the record. Also, for the record, my clients have no knowledge that is pertinent to your investigation. Finally, and this, too, is for the record, you will not question my clients except in my presence."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you. Now, if you will excuse me, I would like to confer with my clients in private."

That conference lasted for about fifteen minutes, after which the attorney knew what had taken place. Which is to say that he didn't "know" in the metaphysical or legal sense, or in any way that had anything to do with legal ethics—but he knew. Under the Canons of Ethics, of course, he could not act on his speculation without betraying his oath as an officer of the court. And so he did what he could do. He filed a new discovery motion on his clients' murder case. By the end of the day he would have added proof of what he did

not know.

"Good morning, Judge," Ryan said.

"'Morning, Jack. This'll have to be fast. I'm going out of town in a few minutes."

"Sir, if somebody asks me what the hell's going on in Colombia, what do I tell 'em?"

"We have kept you out of this one, haven't we?" Moore said.

"Yes, sir, you have."

"I have orders to do that. You can guess where the orders come from. What I can tell you is, the Agency hasn't blown anybody up, okay? We do have an op running down there, but we haven't planted any car bombs."

"That's good to know, Judge. I really didn't think that we were in the car-bomb business," Ryan said as casually as he could. *Oh, shit! The Judge, too?* "So, if I get a call from The Hill, I tell them that, right?"

Moore smiled as he rose. "You're going to have to get used to dealing with them, Jack. It's not easy, and it's often not fun, but I think you'll find that they do business—better than Fowler and his people do, from what I heard this morning."

"It could have gone better, sir," Ryan admitted. "I understand the Admiral handled the last one. I suppose I ought to have spoken more with him before I flew out."

"We don't expect you to be perfect, Jack."

"Thank you, sir."

"And I have to catch a flight out to California."

"Safe trip, Judge," Ryan said as he walked out of the room. Jack entered his office and closed the door before he let his face slip out of neutral.

"Oh, my God," he breathed to himself. If it had been a simple, straight lie from Judge Moore, it would have been easier to take. But it hadn't been. The lie had been carefully crafted, and must have been planned, must have been rehearsed. *We haven't planted any car bombs.*

No, you let the Navy drop them for you.

Okay, Jack. Now what the hell do you do?

He didn't know, but he had all day to worry about it.

Whatever lingering doubts they might have had were eliminated by Monday's dawn. The people who'd come into the hills hadn't left. They had spent all night at a base camp of their own, just a few klicks to the south, and Chavez could hear them blundering around now. He'd even heard a single shot, but

whatever it had been aimed at wasn't a member of his squad. Maybe a deer, or whatever, maybe a guy slipped and let one go by mistake. It was ominous enough all by itself.

The squad was tucked into a tight defensive position. The cover and concealment were good, as were the fire lanes, but best of all their position was unobvious. They'd refilled their canteens on the way and were far from a water source; anyone hunting soldiers would look for the reverse. They'd also look for a spot on higher ground, but this one was almost as good. The uphill side was dense with trees and could not be approached quietly. The reverse slope was treacherous, and other paths to the overlook point could be seen from the squad's position, allowing them to wait for their chance and move out of the way if necessary. Ramirez had a good eye for terrain. Their current mission was to avoid contact if possible; and if not, to sting and move. That also meant that Chavez and his comrades were no longer the only hunters in the woods. None of them would admit to being afraid, but the wariness factor had just doubled.

Chavez was outside the perimeter at a listening/observation post which gave him a good view of the most likely avenue of approach to the rest of the squad, and a covert path back to it, should he have to move. Guerra, the operations sergeant, was with him. Ramirez wanted both SAWs in close.

"Maybe they'll just go away," Ding thought aloud—in a whisper, really.

Guerra snorted. "I think maybe we yanked their tail one time too many, man. What we need right now's a deep hole."

"Sounds like they stopped off for lunch. Wonder how long?"

"Also sounds like they're sweeping up and down like they think they're a fucking broom. If I guess right, we'll see them over on that point, then they'll come down that little draw and head back up right in front of us."

"You may be right, Paco."

"We oughta be movin'."

"Better to do it at night," Ding replied. "Now we know what they're doing, we can keep out of their way."

"Maybe. Looks like rain, Ding. You suppose maybe they'll go home 'steada gettin' wet like us fools?"

"We'll know in an hour or two."

"It's going to blow visibility to shit, too."

"Roger that."

"There!" Guerra pointed.

"Got 'em." Chavez put his glasses on the distant treeline. He saw two of them at once, joined by six more in less than a minute. Even from a few miles away it was obvious that they were huffing and puffing. One man stopped and took a drink from a bottle—beer? Ding wondered—right out in the open, standing up like he wanted to be a target. Who were these scum? They wore

ordinary clothing with no thought of camouflage, but had web gear just like Chavez. The rifles were demonstrably AK-47s, mainly folding-stock.

"Six, this is Point, over."

"Six here."

"I got eight—no, ten people carrying AKs, half a klick east and downhill of the top of hill two-zero-one. They're not doin' much of anything at the moment, just standing there, over."

"Where are they looking, over."

"Just jerkin' off, sir. Over."

"Keep me posted," Captain Ramirez ordered.

"Roger. Out." Chavez went back to his glasses. One of them waved toward the top. Three others headed that way with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

"Wassa matta, wittle baby don wanna cwime da widdle fucking hill?" Ding asked. Though Guerra didn't know it, he was quoting his first platoon sergeant from Korea. "I think they're gettin' tired, Paco."

"Good. Maybe they'll go home."

They were tired, all right. The three took their own sweet time going up. Once there, they shouted down that they hadn't seen anyone. Below them, the others stood mostly in the clearing, just stood there like fools, Ding noted in some surprise. Confidence was a good thing in a soldier, but that wasn't confidence, and those weren't soldiers. About the time the three climbers were halfway down, clouds blotted out the sun. Almost immediately thereafter rain started to fall. A major tropical thunderstorm had built up on the western side of the mountain. Two minutes behind the rain came lightning. One bolt struck the summit, right where the climbers had been. It hung there for a surprisingly long fraction of a second like the finger of an angry god. Then others started hitting everywhere, and the rain started falling in earnest. What had been unrestricted visibility was now a radius of four hundred meters at most, expanding and contracting with the march of the opaque, wet curtains. Chavez and Guerra traded a concerned look. Their mission was look-and-listen, but now they couldn't see very far and could hear less. Worse, even after the storm passed, the ground around them would be wet. Leaves and twigs wouldn't crackle when people stepped on them. Humidity in the air would absorb sound. The inept clowns they'd been watching could therefore approach much closer to the outpost without notice. On the other hand, if the squad had to move, it could move faster with a lower risk of detection, for the same reasons. As always, the environment was neutral, giving advantage only to those who knew how to take it, and sometimes imposing the same handicaps on both sides.

The storm lasted all afternoon, dropping several inches of rain. Lightning touched down within a hundred yards of the sergeants, an experience new to both and as frightening as an artillery barrage, with its sudden burst of light and noise. After that it was just wet, cold, and miserable as the temperature dropped into the upper fifties.

"Ding, look left front," Guerra whispered urgently.

"Oh, fuck!" Chavez didn't have to ask aloud how they'd gotten this close. With their hearing still affected by the thunder, and the whole mountain sodden, there were two men, not two hundred meters away.

"Six, this is Point, we got a pair of gomers two hundred meters southeast of us," Guerra reported to his captain. "Stand by. Over."

"Roger, standing by," Ramirez answered. "Be cool, Paco."

Guerra keyed his transmit switch by way of reply.

Chavez moved very slowly, bringing his weapon closer to a firing position, making sure the safety was on but leaving his thumb on the lever. He knew that they were the nearest thing to invisible, well concealed in ground cover and sapling trees. Each man had his war paint on, and even from fifty feet away they would look like part of the environment. They had to keep still, since the human eye is very effective at detecting movement, but as long as they did, they were invisible. This was a very practical demonstration of why the Army trained people to be disciplined. Both sergeants wished they had their camouflage fatigues, but it was a little late to worry about that, and the khaki cloth was brown with rain and mud anyway. By unspoken agreement, each man watched a discrete sector so that they wouldn't have to turn their heads very much. They knew that they could speak if they did so in whispers, but they would do so only for really important information.

"I hear something behind us," Chavez said ten minutes later.

"Better look," Guerra answered.

Ding had to take his time, over thirty seconds to rotate his body and head.

"Uh-oh." There were several men putting bedrolls down on the ground. "Stayin' for the night."

It was clear what had happened. The people they'd been watching had continued their patrol routine and ended up straddling the observation post with their night camp. They could now see or hear over twenty men.

"This is gonna be a fun night," Guerra whispered.

"Yeah, and I gotta take a leak, too." It was a feeble attempt at a joke. Ding looked up at the sky. The rainfall was down to sprinkles now, but the clouds were just as thick. It would be dark a little early, maybe in two hours.

The enemy was spread out in three groups, which wasn't entirely stupid, but each group built fires for cooking, which was. They were also noisy, talking as though they were sitting down for a meal in some village *cantina.* That was good news for Chavez and Guerra. It allowed them to use their radio again.

"Six, this is Point, over."

"Six here."

"Six, uh ..." Chavez hesitated. "The bad guys have set up their camp all around us. They don't know we're here."

"Tell me what you want to do."

"Nothin' right now. I think maybe we can walk on out when it gets dark. We'll let you know when."

"Roger. Out."

"Walk on out?" Guerra whispered.

"No sense gettin' him all worried, Paco."

"Hey, *'mano,* I'm fucking worried."

"Bein' worried don't help."

There were still no answers. Ryan left his office after what appeared to have been a normal day's work of catching up on correspondence and reports. Not much work had actually been accomplished, however. There were too many distractions that simply hadn't gone away.

He told his driver to head for Bethesda. He hadn't called ahead, but going there would not seem to be too much out of the ordinary. The security watch on the VIP suite was as strong as ever, but they all knew Ryan. The one by the door gave him a sorrowful shake of the head as he reached for the door. Ryan caught that signal clearly enough. He stopped and composed himself before going in. Greer didn't need to see shock on the faces of his visitors. But shock was what Jack felt.

He was barely a hundred pounds now, a scarecrow that had once been a man, a professional naval officer who'd commanded ships and led men in the service of their country. Fifty years of government service lay wasting away on the hospital bed. It was more than the death of a man. It was the death of an age, of a standard of behavior. Fifty years of experience and wisdom and judgment were slipping away. Jack took his seat next to the bed and waved the security officer out of the room.

"Hey, boss."

His eyes opened.

Now what do I say? How are you feeling? There's something to say to a dying man!

"How was the trip, Jack?" The voice was weak.

"Belgium was okay. Everybody sends regards. Friday I got to brief Fowler, like you did the last time."

"What do you think of him?"

"I think he needs some help on foreign policy."

A smile: "So do I. Gives a nice speech, though."

"I didn't exactly hit it off with one of his aides, Elliot, the gal from Bennington. Obnoxious as hell. If her man wins, she says, I retire." That was really the wrong thing to say. Greer tried to move but couldn't.

"Then you find her, and kiss and make up. If you have to kiss her ass at

noon on the Bennington quad, you do that. When are you going to learn to bend that stiff Irish neck of yours? Ask Basil sometime how much he likes the people he has to work for. Your duty is to serve the *country,* Jack, not just the people you happen to like." A blow from a professional boxer could not have stung worse.

"Yes, sir. You're right. I still have a lot to learn."

"Learn fast, boy. I haven't got many lessons left."

"Don't say that, Admiral." The line was delivered like the plea of a child.

"It's my time, Jack. Some men I served with died off Savo Island fifty years ago, or at Leyte, or lots of other parts of ocean. I've been a lot luckier than they were, but it's my time. And it's your turn to take over for me. I want you to take my place, Jack."

"I do need some advice, Admiral."

"Colombia?"

"I could ask how you know, but I won't."

"When a man like Arthur Moore won't look you in the eye, you know that something is wrong. He was in here Saturday and he wouldn't look me in the eye."

"He lied to me today." Ryan explained on for five minutes, outlining what he knew, what he suspected, and what he feared.

"And you want to know what to do?" Greer asked.

"I could sure use a little guidance, Admiral."

"You don't need guidance, Jack. You're smart enough. You have all the contacts you need. And you know what's right."

"But what about—"

"Politics? All that shit?" Greer almost laughed. "Jack, you know, when you lay here like this, you know what you think about? You think about all the things you'd like another chance at, all the mistakes, all the people you might have treated better, and you thank God that it wasn't worse. Jack, you will never regret honesty, even if it hurts people. When they made you a Marine lieutenant you swore an oath before God. I understand why we do that now. It's a help, not a threat. It's something to remind you how important words are. Ideas are important. Principles are important. Words are important. Your word is the most important of all. Your word is who you are. That's the last lesson, Jack. You have to carry on from here." He paused, and Jack could see the pain coming through the heavy medications. "You have a family, Jack. Go home to them. Give 'em my love and tell them that I think their daddy is a pretty good guy, and they ought to be proud of him. Good night, Jack." Greer drifted off to sleep.

Jack didn't get up for several minutes. It took that long for him to regain control of himself. He dried his eyes and walked out of the room. The doctor was on his way in. Jack stopped him and identified himself.

“Not much longer. Less than a week. I’m sorry, but there never was much hope.”

“Keep him comfortable,” Ryan said quietly. Another plea.

“We are,” the oncologist replied. “That’s why he’s out most of the time. He’s still quite lucid when he’s awake. I’ve had some nice talks with him. I like him, too.” The doctor was used to losing patients, but had never grown to enjoy it. “In a few years, we might have saved him. Progress isn’t fast enough.”

“Never is. Thanks for trying, doc. Thanks for caring.” Ryan took the elevator back down to ground level and told the driver to take him home. On the way they passed the Mormon temple again, the marble lit with floodlights. Jack still didn’t know exactly what he’d do, but now he was certain of what he had to accomplish. He’d made his silent promise to a dying man, and no promise could be more important than that.

The clouds were breaking up and there would be moonlight soon. It was time. The enemy had sentries out. They paced around the same as the ones who’d guarded the processing sites. The fires were still burning, but conversation had died off as weary men fell asleep.

“Just walk out together,” Chavez said. “They see us creep or crawl, they know we’re bad guys. They see us walkin’, we’re some of them.”

“Makes sense,” Guerra agreed.

Both men slung their weapons across their chests. The profile of each would be distinctively wrong to the enemy, but close up against their bodies the outlines would be obscured and the weapons could still be ready for immediate use. Ding could depend on his MP5 SD2 to kill quietly if the necessity arose. Guerra took out his machete. The metal blade was black-anodized, of course, and the only shiny part was the razor-sharp edge itself. Guerra was especially good with edged weapons, and was ever sharpening his steel. He was also ambidextrous, and held it loosely in his left hand while his right was on the pistol grip of his M-16.

The squad had already moved to a line roughly a hundred meters from the camp past which they’d be walking, ready to provide support if it were needed. It would be a tricky exercise at best, and everyone hoped that it wouldn’t be necessary.

“ ’kay, Ding, you lead off.” Guerra actually ranked Chavez, but this was a situation where expertise counted for more than seniority.

Chavez headed down the hill, keeping to cover as long as he could, then angling left and north toward safety. His low-light goggles were in his rucksack, back at the squad’s hideout because he was supposed to have been relieved before nightfall. Ding missed the night scope. A lot.

The two men moved as quietly as they could, and the soaked ground helped, but the cover got very thick along the path they took. It was only

three or four hundred meters to safety, but this time it was too far.

They didn't use paths, of course, but they couldn't entirely avoid them, and one of the paths twisted around. Just as Chavez and Guerra crossed it, two men appeared a mere ten feet away.

"What are you doing out?" one asked. Chavez just waved in a friendly sort of way, hoping that the gesture would stop him, but he approached, trying to see who it was, his companion at his side. About the time he noticed that Ding was carrying the wrong sort of weapon it was too late for everyone.

Chavez had both hands back on his submachine gun, and swiveled it around on the double-looped sling, delivering a single round under the man's chin that exploded out the top of his head. Guerra turned and brought his machete around, and just like in the movies, the whole head came off. Both he and Chavez leaped to catch both victims before they made too much noise.

Shit! Ding thought. Now they'd know that somebody was here. There wasn't time to remove the bodies to a hiding place—they might bump into someone else. If that was true, he reasoned, better to get full value from the kills. He found the loose head and set it on the chest of Guerra's victim, held in both lifeless hands. The message was a clear one: *Don't fuck with us!*

Guerra nodded approval and Ding led off again. It took ten more minutes before they heard a spitting sound just to the right.

"I been watchin' ya' half of forever," Oso said.

"You okay?" Ramirez whispered.

"Met two guys. They're dead," Guerra said.

"Let's get moving before they find 'em."

That was not to be. A moment later they heard the thud of a falling body, followed by a shout, followed by a scream, followed by a wild burst of AK-47 fire. It went in the wrong direction, but it sufficed to awaken any sleeping soul within a couple of klicks. The squad members activated their low-light gear, the better to pick their way through the cover as quickly as possible while the camp behind them exploded with noise and shouts and curses aimed in all directions. They didn't stop for two hours. It was as official as orders off their satellite net: they were now the hunted.

It had happened with unaccustomed rapidity, one hundred miles from the Cape Verde Islands. The satellite cameras had been watching for some days now, scanning the storm on several different light frequencies. The photos were downlinked to anyone with the right equipment, and already ships were altering course to get clear of it. Very hot, dry air had spilled off the West African desert in what was already a near-record summer and, driven by the easterly trade winds, combined with moist ocean air to form towering thunderheads, hundreds of them that had begun to merge. The clouds reached down into the warm surface water, drawing additional heat upward into the air to add that energy to what the clouds already contained. When some

critical mass of heat and rain and cloud was reached, the storm began to organize itself. The people at the National Hurricane Center still didn't understand why it happened—or why, given the circumstances, it happened so seldom—but it was happening now. The chief scientist manipulated his computer controls to fast-forward the satellite photos, rewind, and fast-forward again. He could see it clearly. The clouds had begun their counterclockwise orbit around a single point in space. It was becoming an organized storm, using its circular motion to increase its own coherence and power as though it knew that such activity would give it life. It wasn't the earliest that such a storm had begun, but conditions were unusually "good" this year for their formation. How lovely they appeared on the satellite photographs, like some kind of modern art, feathery pinwheels of gossamer cloud. Or, the chief scientist thought, *that's how they would look if they didn't kill so many people.* When you got down to it, the reason they gave the storms names was that it was unseemly for hundreds or thousands of human lives to be ended by a number. This one would be such a storm, the meteorologist thought. For the moment they'd call it a tropical depression, but if it kept growing in size and power, it would change to a tropical storm. At that point they'd start calling it *Adele.*

About the only thing that the movies got right, Clark thought, was that they often had spies meeting in bars. Bars were useful things in civilized countries. They were places for men to go and have a few, and meet other men, and strike up casual conversations in dimly lit, anonymous rooms, usually with the din of bad music to mute out their words beyond a certain, small radius. Larson arrived a minute late, sliding up to Clark's spot. This *cantina* didn't have stools, just a real brass bar on which to rest one's foot. Larson ordered a beer, a local one, which was something the Colombians were good at. They were good at a lot of things, Clark thought. Except for the drug problem this country could really be going places. This country was suffering—as much as? No, more than his own. Colombia's government was having to face the fact that it had fought a war against the druggies and was losing ... unlike America? the CIA officer wondered. Unlike America, the Colombian government was threatened? Yeah, sure, he told himself, we're so much better off than this place.

"Well?" he asked when the owner moved to the other end of the bar.

Larson spoke quietly, in Spanish. "It's definite. The number of troops the big shots have out on the street has dropped way the hell off."

"Gone where?"

"A guy told me southwest. They were talking about a hunting expedition in the hills."

"Oh, Christ," Clark muttered in English.

"What gives?"

"Well, there's about forty light-infantry soldiers ..." he explained on for several minutes.

"We've *invaded?"* Larson looked down at the bar. "Jesus Christ, what lunatic came up with that idea?"

"We both work for him—for them, I suppose."

"Goddammit, there is one thing we cannot do to these people, and that's *fucking* it!"

"Fine. You fly back to D.C. and tell the DDO. If Ritter still has a brain, he'll pull them out quick, before anybody really gets hurt." Clark turned. He was thinking very hard at the moment, and didn't like some of the ideas he was getting. He remembered a mission in "Eye" Corps, when ... "How about you and me take a look down that way tomorrow?"

"You really want me to blow my cover, don't you?" Larson observed.

"You got a bolt-hole?" Clark meant what every field officer sets up when he goes covert, a safe place to run to and hide in if it becomes necessary.

Larson snorted. "Is the Pope Polish?"

"What about your lady friend?"

"We don't take care of her, too, and I'm history with this outfit." The Agency encouraged loyalty to one's agents, even when one didn't sleep with them, and Larson was a man with the normal affection for his year-long lovers.

"We'll try to cover it like a prospecting trip, but after this one, on my authorization, your cover is officially blown, and you will return to D.C. for reassignment. Her, too. That's an official order."

"I didn't know you had—"

Clark smiled. "Officially I don't, but you'll soon discover that Mr. Ritter and I have an understanding. I do the field work and he doesn't second-guess me."

"Nobody has that much juice." All Larson got for a reply was a raised eyebrow and a look into eyes that appeared far more dangerous than he had ever appreciated.

Cortez sat in the one decent room in the house. It was the kitchen, a large one by local standards, and he had a table on which to set his radios and his maps, and a ledger sheet on which he kept a running tally. So far he had lost eleven men in short, violent, and for the most part noiseless encounters—and gotten nothing in return. The "soldiers" he had in the field were still too angry to be afraid, but that wholly suited his purpose. There was a clear acetate cover on the main tactical map, and he used a red grease pencil to mark areas of activity. He had made contact with two—maybe three—of the American teams. He determined contact, of course, by the fact that he had lost eleven men. He chose to believe that he'd lost eleven stupid ones. That was a relative measure, of course, since luck was always a factor on the battlefield, but by and large history taught that the dumb ones die off first, that there was a Darwinian selection process on the field of combat. He planned to lose another

fifty or so men before doing anything different. At that point he'd call for reinforcements, further stripping the lords of their retainers. Then he would call his boss and say that he'd identified two or three fellow lords whose men were behaving rather oddly in the field—he already knew whom he would accuse, of course—and the next day he would warn one of those—also preselected—that his own boss was behaving rather oddly, and that his—Cortez's —loyalty was to the organization as a whole which paid him, not to single personalities. His plan was for Escobedo to be killed off. It was necessary, and not especially regrettable. The Americans had already killed off two of the really smart members, and he would help to eliminate the remaining two intellects. The surviving lords would need Cortez, and would know that they needed him. His position as chief of security and intelligence would be upgraded to a seat around the table while the rest of the Cartel was restructured in accordance with his ideas for a streamlined and more secure organization. Within a year he'd be first among equals; another year and he'd merely be first. He wouldn't even have to kill the rest off. Escobedo was one of the smart ones, and he'd proven so easy to manipulate. The rest would be as children, more interested in their money and their expensive toys than with what the organization could really accomplish. His ideas in that area were vague. Cortez was not one to think ten steps ahead. Four or five were enough.

He reexamined the maps. Soon the Americans would become alert to the danger of his operation and would react. He opened his briefcase and compared aerial photographs with the maps. He now knew that the Americans had been brought in and were supported probably by a single helicopter. That was so daring as to be foolish. Hadn't the Americans learned about helicopters on the plains of Iran? He had to identify likely landing zones ... or did he?

Cortez closed his eyes and commanded himself to return to first principles. That was the real danger in operations like this. One got so caught up in what was going on that one lost sight of the overall situation. Perhaps there was another way. The Americans had already helped him. Perhaps they might help him again. How might he bring that about? What could he do to and for them? What might they do for him? It gave him something to ponder for the rest of the sleepless night.

Bad weather had prevented them from testing out the new engine the previous night, and for the same reason they had to wait until 0300 local time to try this night. The Pave Low was not allowed to show itself by day under any circumstances, without a direct order from on high.

A cart pulled the chopper out of the hangar, and the rotor was unfolded and locked into place before the engines were started. PJ and Captain Willis applied power, with Sergeant Zimmer at his engineer's console. They taxied normally to the runway and started their takeoff in the way of helicopters, with an uneven lurch as the reluctant tons of metal and fuel climbed into the air like a child on his first ladder.

It was hard to say what happened first. A terrible screech reached the pilot's ears, coming through the protective foam of his Darth Vader helmet. At the

same time, perhaps a millisecond earlier, Zimmer shouted a warning too loudly over the intercom circuit. Whatever happened first, Colonel Johns' eyes flicked down to his instrument panel and saw that his Number One engine dials were all wrong. Willis and Zimmer both killed the engine while PJ slewed the chopper around, thankful that he was only fifty feet off the pavement. In less than three seconds, he was back on the ground, powering his single working engine down to idle.

"Well?"

"The new engine, sir. It just came apart on us—looks like a total compressor failure. Sounds worse. I'm going to have to give it a look to see if it damaged anything else," Zimmer reported.

"Did you have any problem putting it in?"

"Negative. It went just like the book says, sir. That's the second time with this lot of engines, sir. The contractor's fucking up somewhere with those new composite turbine blades. That's going to down-check the whole engine run until we identify the problem, ground every bird that's using them, us, the Navy, Army, everybody." The new engine design used turbine-compressor blades made from ceramic instead of steel. It was lighter—you could carry a little more gas—and cheaper—you could buy a few more engines—than the old way, and contractor tests had shown the new version to be just as reliable—until they had reached line service, that is. The first failure had been blamed on an ingested bird, but two Navy choppers using this engine had gone down at sea without a trace. Zimmer was right. Every aircraft with this engine installed would be grounded until the problem was understood and fixed.

"Oh, that's just great, Buck," Johns said. "The other spare we brought down?"

"Take a guess, sir," Zimmer suggested. "I can have 'em send us an old rebuilt one down."

"Tell me what you think."

"I think we go for a rebuilt, or maybe yank one from another bird back at Hurlburt."

"Get on the horn as soon as I cool her down," the colonel ordered. "I want *two* good engines down here ASAP."

"Yes, sir." The crewmen shared looks on the other issue. What about the people they were supposed to support?

His name was Esteves, and he, too, was a staff sergeant, Eleven-Bravo, U.S. Army. Before all this had started, he'd also been part of the recon unit of the 5th Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, First Brigade of the 25th "Tropical Lightning" Infantry Division (Light), based at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Young, tough, and proud like every other SHOWBOAT soldier, he was also tired and frustrated. And at the moment, sick. Something he'd eaten, or maybe drunk. When the time came, he'd check in with the squad medic and get some

pills to handle it, but right now his bowels rumbled and his arms felt weaker than he would have liked. They'd been in the field exactly twenty-seven minutes less than Team KNIFE, but they hadn't made any contact at all since trashing that little airfield. They'd found six processing sites, four of them very recently used, but all of them devoid of people. Esteves wanted to get on the scoreboard, as he was sure the other squads were doing. Like Chavez he'd grown up in a gang area, and unlike him had been deeply involved with one until fate had shaken him loose long enough to join the Army. Also unlike Chavez, he'd once used drugs, until his sister had OD'd on a needle of overrich heroin. He'd been there, seen her life just stop as though someone had pulled the plug from a wall socket. He'd found that dealer the next night, and joined the Army to escape the murder rap, not ever thinking that he'd become a professional soldier, never dreaming that there were opportunities in life beyond car washes and family-assistance checks. He'd leapt at this chance to get even with the scum who had killed his sister and enslaved his people. But he hadn't yet killed one, hadn't yet gotten on the scoreboard. Fatigue and frustration were a deadly combination in the face of the enemy.

Finally, he thought. He saw the glow of the fire from half a klick away. He did what he was supposed to do, calling his sighting into his captain, waiting for the squad to form up in two teams, then moving in to take out the ten or so men who were doing their idiot dance in acid. Tired and eager though he was, discipline was still the central fact of his life. He led his section of two other men to a good fire-support position while the captain took charge of the assault element. The very moment he was certain that tonight would be different, it became so.

There was no bathtub, no backpacks full of leaves, but there were fifteen men with weapons. He tapped the danger signal on his radio but got no reply. Though he didn't know it, a branch had broken the antenna off his radio ten minutes earlier. He stood, trying to decide what to do, looking around for some sign, some clue, while the two soldiers at his side wondered what the hell was the matter. Then his stomach cramped up on him again. Esteves doubled over, tripped on a root, and dropped his weapon. It didn't go off, but the buttstock hit the ground hard enough that the bolt jerked back and forth one time with a metallic clack. That was when he discovered that twenty feet away was another man whose presence he hadn't yet detected.

This man was awake, massaging his aching calves so that he could get some sleep. He was startled by the noise. A man who liked to hunt, his first reaction was disbelief. How could anyone be out there? He'd made sure that none of his fellows had gone beyond his lookout position, but that sound was man-made and could have come only from a weapon of some sort. His team had already been warned of some brushes with—whoever the hell they were, they had killed the people who were supposed to kill them, which surprised and worried this one. The sudden noise had startled him at first, but that emotion was immediately followed by fright. He moved his rifle to his left and fired off a whole magazine. Four rounds hit Esteves, who died slowly enough to scream a curse at destiny. His two teammates hosed down the area from which the fire had come, killing the man loudly and messily, but by that time the others

around the fire were up and running, and the assault element wasn't yet in place. The captain's reaction to the noise was the logical one. His support team had been ambushed, and he had to get in to the objective to take the heat off of them. The fire-support element shifted fire to the encampment, and soon learned that there were other men about. Most of them ran away from the fire and blundered into the assault element, which was racing in the opposite direction.

Had there been a proper after-action report, the first comment would have been that control was lost on both sides. The captain leading the squad had reacted precipitously, and, leading from the front instead of laying back to think about it, he was one of the first men killed. The rest of the squad was now leaderless but didn't know it. The prowess of the individual soldiers was undiminished, of course, but soldiers are first, last, always, members of teams, each a living, thinking organism whose total strength is far greater than the sum of its parts. Without leadership to direct them, they fell back on training, but that was confused by the sound and the dark. Both groups of men were now intermixed, and the Colombians' lack of training and leadership was less important now as the battle was fought by individuals on one side, and by mutually supporting pairs on the other. It lasted under five confused and bloody minutes. The pairs "won." They killed with abandon and efficiency, then crawled away, eventually rising to race to their rally point while those enemies left alive continued to shoot, mostly at each other. Only five made it to the rally point, three from the assault element and Esteves' two from the support element. Half of the squad was dead, including the captain, the medic, and the radioman. The soldiers still didn't know what they'd run into—through a communications foul-up they hadn't been warned of the Cartel's operations against them. What they did know was bad enough. They headed back to their base camp, collected their packs, and moved out.

The Colombians knew less and more. They knew that they had killed five Americans—they hadn't found Esteves yet—and that they had lost twenty-six, some of them probably to their own fire. They didn't know if any had gotten away, didn't know the strength of the unit that had attacked them, didn't even know that they had in fact been attacked by Americans at all—the weapons they recovered were mainly American, but the M-16 was popular throughout South America. They, like the men they'd chased away, knew that something terrible had happened. Mainly they grouped together and sat down and threw up and experienced postcombat shock, having learned for the first time that the mere possession of an automatic weapon didn't make one into a god. Shock was gradually replaced by rage as they collected their dead.

Team BANNER—what was left of it—didn't have that luxury. They didn't have time to think about who had won and who had lost. Each of them had learned a shocking lesson about combat. Someone with a better education might have pointed out that the world was not deterministic, but each of the five men from BANNER consoled himself with the bleakest of soldierly observations: Shit happens.

24.

Ground Rules

CLARK AND LARSON started off well before dawn, heading south again in their borrowed Subaru four-wheel-drive wagon. In the front was a briefcase. In the back were a few boxes of rocks, under which were two Beretta automatics whose muzzles were threaded for silencers. It was a pity to abuse the guns by placing all those rocks in the same box, but neither man figured to take the weapons home after the job was completed, and both fervently hoped that they wouldn't be needed in any way.

"What exactly are we looking for?" Larson asked after an hour or so of silence.

"I was kind of hoping that you'd know. Something unusual."

"Seeing people walk around with guns down here isn't terribly unusual, in case you haven't noticed."

"Organized activity?"

"That, too, but it does give us something to think about. We won't be seeing much military activity," Larson said.

"Why?"

"Guerrillas raided a small army post again last night—heard it on the radio this morning. Either M-19 or FARC is getting frisky."

"Cortez," Clark said at once.

"Yeah, that makes sense. Pull all the official heat in a different direction."

"I'm going to have to meet that boy," Mr. Clark told the passing scenery.

"And?" Larson asked.

"And what do you think? The bastard was part of a plot to kill one of our ambassadors, the Director of the FBI, and the Administrator of DEA, plus a driver and assorted bodyguards. He's a terrorist."

"Take him back?"

"Do I look like a cop?" Clark responded.

"Look, man, we don't—"

"I do. By the way, have you forgotten those two bombs? I believe you were there."

"That was—"

“Different?” Clark chuckled. “That’s what they always say, ‘But that’s different.’ Larson, I didn’t go to Dartmouth like you did, and maybe the difference is lost on me.”

“This isn’t the fucking movies!” Larson said angrily.

“Carlos, if this was the movies, you’d be a blond with big tits and a loose blouse. You know, I’ve been in this business since you were driving cars made by Matchbox, and I’ve never got laid on the job. Never. Not once. Hardly seems fair.” He might have added that he was married and took it seriously, but why confuse the lad? He had accomplished what he’d intended. Larson smiled. The tension was broken.

“I guess maybe I got you there, Mr. Clark.”

“Where is she?”

“Gone till the end of the week—European run. I left a message in three places—I mean, the message for her to bug out. Soon as she gets back, she hops the next bird for Miami.”

“Good. This one is complicated enough. When it’s all over, marry the girl, settle down, raise a family.”

“I’ve thought about that. What about—I mean, is it fair to—”

“The job you’re in is less dangerous statistically than running a liquor store in a big city. They all raise families. What holds you together on a big job in a faraway place is the knowledge that there is somebody to come back to. You can trust me on that one, son.”

“But for the moment we’re in the area you want to look at. Now what do we do?”

“Start prowling the side roads. Don’t go too fast.” Clark cranked down his window and started smelling the air. Next he opened his briefcase and pulled out a topographical map. He grew quiet for several minutes, getting his brain in synch with the situation. There were soldiers up there, trained men in Indian country, being hunted and trying to evade contact. He had to get himself in the proper frame of mind, alternately looking at the terrain and the map. “God, I’d kill for the right kind of radio right now.” *Your fault, Johnny,* Clark told himself. *You should have demanded it. You should have told Ritter that there had to be someone on the ground to liaise with the soldiers instead of trying to run it through a satellite link like it was a goddamned staff study.*

“Just to talk to them?”

“Look, kid, how much security you seen so far?”

“Why, none.”

“Right. With a radio I could call them down out of the hills and we could pick them up, clean them up, and drive ’em to the fucking airport for the flight home,” Clark said, the frustration manifest in his voice.

“That’s craz—Jesus, you’re right. This situation really is crazy.” The realization dawned on Larson, and he was amazed that he’d misinterpreted the

situation so completely.

"Make a note—this is what happens when you run an op out of D.C. instead of running it from the field. Remember that. You might be a supervisor someday. Ritter thinks like a spymaster instead of a line-animal like me, and he's been out of the field too long. That's the biggest problem at Langley: the guys who run the show have forgotten what it's like out here, and the rules have changed a lot since they serviced all their dead-drops in Budapest. Moreover, this is a very different situation from what they think it is. This isn't intelligence-gathering. It's low-intensity warfare. You gotta know when not to be covert, too. This sort of thing is a whole new ball game."

"They didn't cover this sort of thing at The Farm."

"That's no surprise. Most of the instructors there are a bunch of old—" Clark stopped. "Slow down some."

"What is it?"

"Stop the car."

Larson did as he was told, pulling off the gravel surface. Clark jumped out with his briefcase, which seemed very strange indeed, and took the ignition keys as he did so. His next move was open the back, then to toss the keys back to Larson. Clark dug into one of the boxes, past the samples of gold-bearing rock, and came out with his Beretta and silencer. He was wearing a bush jacket, and the gun disappeared nicely in the small of his back, silencer and all. Then he waved to Larson to stay put and follow him slowly in the car. Clark started walking with his map and a photograph in his hands. There was a bend in the road; just around it was a truck. Near the truck were some armed men. He was looking at his map when they shouted, and his head came up in obvious surprise. A man jerked his AK in a way that required no words: *Come here at once or be shot.*

Larson was overcome with the urge to wet his pants, but Clark waved for him to follow and walked confidently to the truck. Its loadbed was covered with a tarp, but Clark already knew what was under it. He'd smelled it. That was why he'd stopped around the bend.

"Good day," he said to the nearest one with a rifle.

"You have picked a bad day to be on the road, my friend."

"He told me you would be out here. I have permission," Clark replied.

"What? Permission? Whose permission?"

"Señor Escobedo, of course," Larson heard him say.

Jesus, this isn't happening, please tell me this isn't happening!

"Who are you?" the man said with a mixture of anger and wariness.

"I am a prospector. I am looking for gold. Here," Clark said, turning his photo around. "This area I have marked, I think there is gold here. Of course I would not come here without permission of Señor Escobedo, and he told me to tell those I met that I am here under his protection."

“Gold—you look for gold?” another man said as he came up. The first one deferred to him, and Clark figured he was talking to the boss now.

“Sí. Come, I will show you.” Clark led them to the back of the Subaru and pulled two rocks from the cardboard box. “My driver there is Señor Larson. He introduced me to Señor Escobedo. If you know Señor Escobedo—you must know him, no?”

The man clearly didn’t know what to do or think. Clark was speaking in good Spanish, with a trace of accent, and talking as normally as though he were asking directions from a policeman.

“Here, you see this?” Clark said, pointing to the rock. “That is gold. This may be the biggest find since Pizarro. I think Señor Escobedo and his friends will buy all of this land.”

“They did not tell me of this,” the man temporized.

“Of course. It is a secret. And I must warn you, señor, not to speak of it to anyone or you will surely speak to Señor Escobedo!”

Bladder control was a major problem for Larson now.

“When are we leaving?” someone called from the truck.

Clark looked around while the two gunmen tried to decide what to do. A driver and perhaps one other in the truck. He didn’t hear or see anyone else. He started walking toward it. Two more steps and he saw what he’d needed and feared to see. Sticking out from under the edge of the tarp was the front sight assembly of an M-16A2 rifle. What he had to do was decided in less than a second. Even to Clark it was amazing how the old habits kept coming back.

“Stop!” the leader said.

“Can I load my samples on your truck?” Clark asked without turning. “To take to Señor Escobedo? He will be very pleased to see what I have found, I promise you,” Clark added.

The two men ran to catch up with him, their rifles dangling from their hands as they did so. They’d gotten within ten feet when he turned. As he did so, his right hand remained fixed in space, and took the Beretta from his waistband while his left hand fluttered the map and photo. Neither one saw it coming, Larson realized. He was so smooth....

“Not this truck, señor, I—”

It was just one more thing to surprise him, but it would be the last. Clark’s hand came up and fired into the man’s forehead at a range of five feet. Before the leader had even started to fall, the second was also dead from the same cause. Without pause he moved around the right side of the truck. He hopped up on the running board and saw that there was just a driver. He, too, took a silenced round in the head. By this time Larson was out of the car. Approaching Clark from the rear, he came close to getting a round for his trouble.

“Don’t do that!” Clark said as he safed his pistol.

“Christ, I just—”

“You announce your presence in a situation like this. You almost died ’cause you didn’t. Remember that. Come on.” Clark hopped onto the back of the truck and pulled back the tarp.

Most of the dead were locals, judging by their clothes, but there were two faces that Clark vaguely recognized. It took a moment for him to remember....

“Captain Rojas. Sorry, kid,” he said quietly to the body.

“Who?”

“He had command of Team BANNER. One of ours. These fuckers killed some of our people.” His voice seemed quite tired.

“Looks like our guys did all right, too—”

“Let me explain something to you about combat, kid. There are two kinds of people in the field: your people and other people. The second category can include noncombatants, and you try to avoid hurting them if you have the time, but the only ones who really matter are your own people. You got a handkerchief?”

“Two.”

“Give ’em to me, then load those two in the truck.”

Clark pulled the cap of the gas tank that hung under the cab. He tied the handkerchiefs together and fed them in. The tank was full and the cloth was immediately saturated with gasoline.

“Come on, back to the car.” Clark disassembled his pistol and put it back in the rock box, then closed the back hatch and got back into the front seat. He punched the cigarette lighter. “Pull up close.”

Larson did so, getting there about the time the lighter popped out. Clark took it out and touched it to the soaked handkerchiefs. They ignited at once. Larson didn’t have to be told to take off. They were around the next bend before the fire started in earnest.

“Back to the city, fast as you can,” Clark ordered next. “What’s the fastest way to get to Panama?”

“I can have you there in a couple of hours, but it means—”

“Do you have the radio codes to get onto an Air Force base?”

“Yes, but—”

“You are now out of country. Your cover is completely blown,” Mr. Clark said. “Get a message to your girl before she gets back. Have her desert, or jump ship, or whatever you call it with an airline so that she doesn’t have to come back here. She’s blown, too. Both your lives are in danger-no-shit danger. There might have been somebody watching us. Somebody might have noticed that you drove me down here. Somebody might have noticed that you borrowed this car twice. Probably not, but you don’t get old in this business by taking unnecessary chances. You have nothing more to contribute to this

operation, so get your asses clear."

"Yes, sir." They reached the highway before Larson spoke again. "What you did ..."

"What about it?"

"You were right. We can't let people do that and—"

"You're wrong. You don't know why I did that, do you?"

Clark asked. He spoke like a man teaching a class, but gave only one of the reasons. "You're thinking like a spy, and this is no longer an intelligence operation. We have people, soldiers, running and hiding up in those hills. What I did was to create a diversion. If they think our guys came down to avenge their dead, it may pull some of the bad guys down off the mountain, get them to look in the wrong place, take some of the heat off our guys. Not much, but it's the best I could do." He paused for a moment. "I won't say it didn't feel good. I don't like seeing our people killed, and I fucking well don't like not being allowed to do anything about it. That's been happening for too many years—Middle East, everywhere—we lose people and don't do a goddamned thing about it. This time I just had an excuse. It's been a long time. And you know something—it did feel good," Clark admitted coldly. "Now shut up and drive. I have some thinking to do."

Ryan was in his office, still quiet, still thinking. Judge Moore was finding all sorts of excuses to be away. Ritter was spending a lot of time out of the office. Jack couldn't ask questions and demand answers if they weren't here. That also made Ryan the senior executive present, and gave him all sorts of extraneous paper to shuffle and telephone calls to return. Maybe he could make that work for him. Of one thing he was certain. He had to find out what the hell was happening. It was also plain that Moore and Ritter had made two mistakes of their own. First, they thought that Ryan didn't know anything. They ought to have known better. He'd only gotten this far in the Agency because he was good at figuring things out. Their second mistake was in their likely assumption that his inexperience would prevent him from pressing too hard even if he did start figuring things out. Fundamentally they were both thinking like bureaucrats. People who spent their lives in bureaucracies were typically afraid of breaking rules. That was a sure way to get fired, and it cowed people to think of tossing their careers away. But that was an issue Jack had decided on long before. He didn't know what his profession was. He'd been a Marine, a stockbroker, an assistant professor of history, and then joined CIA. He could always go back to teaching. The University of Virginia had already talked to Cathy about becoming a full professor at their medical school, and even Jeff Pelt wanted Ryan to come and liven up the history department as a visiting lecturer. It would be nice to teach again, Jack thought. It would certainly be easier than what he was doing here. Whatever he saw in his future, he didn't feel trapped by his job. And James Greer had given him all the guidance he needed: *Do what you think is right.*

"Nancy." Jack keyed his intercom. "When is Mr. Ritter going to be back?"

"Tomorrow morning. He had to meet with somebody down at The Farm."

"Okay, thanks. Could you call my wife and leave a message that I'm going to be pretty late tonight?"

"Surely, Doctor."

"Thanks. I need the file on INF verification, the OSWR preliminary report."

"Dr. Molina is out at Sunnyvale with the Judge," Nancy said. Tom Molina was the head of the Office of Strategic Weapons Research, which was back-checking two other departments on the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty verification procedures.

"I know. I just want to look the report over so I can discuss it with him when he gets back."

"Take about fifteen minutes to get it."

"No rush," Jack replied and killed the intercom. That document could tie up King Solomon himself for three days, and it gave him a wholly plausible excuse for staying late. Congress had gotten antsy about some technical issues as both sides worked to destroy the last of their launchers. Ryan and Molina would have to testify there in the next week. Jack pulled the writing panel out from the side of his desk, knowing what he'd do after Nancy and the other clerical people left.

Cortez was a very sophisticated political observer. That was one reason he'd made colonel so young in an organization as bureaucratized as the DGI. Based on the Soviet KGB model, it had already grown a collection of clerks and inspectors and security officers to make the American CIA look like a mom-and-pop operation—which made the relative efficiencies of the agencies all the more surprising. For all their advantages, the Americans lacked political will, always fighting over issues that ought to have been quite clear. At the KGB Academy, one instructor had compared them to the Polish parliament of old, a collection of over five hundred barons, *all* of whom had had to agree before anything happened—and because of which nothing ever happened, allowing Poland to be raped by anyone with the ability to make a simple decision.

The Americans had acted in this case, however, acted decisively and well. What had changed?

What had changed—what had to have changed in this case—was that the Americans were breaking their own laws. They had responded emotionally ... no, that wasn't fair, Félix told himself. They had responded forcefully to a direct and arrogant challenge, just as the Soviets would have reacted, though with minor tactical differences. The emotional aspect to the reaction was that they had done the proper thing only by violating their incredible intelligence-oversight laws. And it was an election year in America....

"Ah," Cortez said aloud. It really was that simple, wasn't it? The Americans, who had already helped him, would do so again. He just had to identify the

proper target. That took only ten minutes more. So fitting, he thought, that his military rank had been that of colonel. For a century of Latin American history, it was always the colonels who did this sort of thing.

What would Fidel say? Cortez nearly laughed out loud at the thought. For as long as that bearded ideologue had breathed, he'd hated the *norteamericanos* as an evangelist hated sin, enjoyed every small sting he'd been able to inflict on them, dumped his criminals and lunatics on the unsuspecting Carter—*Anyone could have taken advantage of that fool,* Cortez thought with amusement—played every possible gambit of guerrilla diplomacy against them. He really would have enjoyed this one. Now Félix just had to figure a way to pass the message along. It was a high-risk play on his part, but he'd won every toss to this point, and the dice were hot in his hand.

Perhaps it had been a mistake, Chavez reflected. Perhaps leaving the head on the man's chest had merely enraged them. Whatever the cause, the Colombians were prowling the woods with gusto now. They hadn't caught Team KNIFE'S trail, and the soldiers were working very hard not to leave one, but one thing was clear to him: there would be a knock-down, drag-out firefight, and it wouldn't be long in coming.

But that wasn't clear to Captain Ramirez. His orders were still to evade and avoid, and he was following them. Most of the men didn't question that, but Chavez did—or more precisely, wanted to. But sergeants don't question captains, at least not very often, and then only if you were a first sergeant and had the opportunity to take the man aside. If there was going to be a fight, and it sure as hell looked that way, why not set it up on favorable terms? Ten good men, armed with automatic weapons and grenades, plus two SAWs, made for one hell of an ambush. Give them a trail to follow, lead them right into the killzone. They were still carrying a couple of claymores. With luck, they'd drop ten or fifteen men in the first three seconds. Then the other side—those few who ran away fast enough—wouldn't be pissed. They'd be pissing in their pants. Nobody would be crazy about hot pursuit then. Why didn't Ramirez see that? Instead he was keeping everyone on the move, wearing them out, not looking for a good place to rest up, prepare a major ambush, duke it out, and *then* take off again. There was a time for caution. There was a time to fight. What that most favored word in any military lexicon, "initiative," meant was who did the deciding on which time was which. Chavez knew it on instinct. Ramirez, he suspected, was thinking too much. About what, Chavez didn't know, but the captain's thinking was starting to worry the sergeant.

Larson returned the car and drove Clark to the airport in his own BMW. He'd miss the car, he realized, as they walked to his aircraft. Clark was carrying all of his classified or sensitive equipment out with him, and nothing else. He hadn't stopped to pack, not even his razor, though his Beretta 92-F, with silencer, was again tucked into the small of his back. He walked coolly and

normally, but Larson now knew what tension looked like in Mr. Clark. He appeared even more relaxed than usual, even more offhand, even more absentminded, all the more to appear harmless to the people around him. This, Larson told himself, was one very dangerous cat. The pilot played back the shooting at the truck, the way he'd put the two gunmen at ease, confused them, asked for their help. He'd never known that the Agency had people like this, not after the Church Committee hearings.

Clark climbed up into the aircraft, tossing his gear in the back, and managed to look a little impatient as Larson ran through his preflight procedures. He didn't return to normal until the wheels were retracted.

"How long to Panama?"

"Two hours."

"Take us out over the water as soon as you can."

"You're nervous?"

"Now—only about your flying," Clark said over his headset. He looked over and smiled. "What I'm worried about is thirty or so kids who may just be hung out to dry."

Forty minutes later they left Colombian airspace. Once over the Bay of Panama, Clark reached back for his gear, then forced open the door and dumped it into the sea.

"You mind if I ask ... ?"

"Let's assume for the moment that this whole operation is coming apart. Just how much evidence do you want to be carrying into the Senate hearing room?" Clark paused. "Not much danger of that, of course, but what if people see us carrying stuff and wonder what it is and why we're carrying it?"

"Oh. Okay."

"Keep thinking, Larson. Henry Kissinger said it: Even paranoids have enemies. If they're willing to hang those soldiers out, what about us?"

"But ... Mr. Ritter—"

"I've known Bob Ritter for quite a while. I have a few questions for him. I want to see if he has good enough answers. It's for goddamned sure he didn't keep us informed of things we needed to know. Maybe that's just another example of D.C. perspective. Then again, maybe it's not."

"You don't really think—"

"I don't know what to think. Call in," Clark ordered. There was no sense getting Larson thinking about it. He hadn't been in the Agency long enough to understand the issues.

The pilot nodded and did what he was told. He switched his radio over to a seldom-used frequency and began transmitting. "Howard Approach, this is special flight X-Ray Golf Whiskey Delta, requesting permission to land, over."

"Whiskey Delta, this is Howard Approach, stand by," replied some faceless

tower controller, who then checked his radio codes. He didn't know who XGWD was, but those letters were on his "hot" list. CIA, he thought, or some other agency that put people where they didn't belong, which was all he needed to know. "Whiskey Delta, squawk one-three-one-seven. You are cleared for a direct visual approach. Winds are one-nine-five at ten knots."

"Roger, thank you. Out." At least one thing had gone well today, Larson thought. Ten minutes later he put the Beech on the ground and followed a jeep to a parking place on the ramp. Air Force Security Police were waiting for them there, and whisked both officers over to Base Operations. The base was on security-alert drill; everyone was wearing green and most had sidearms. This included the operations staff, most of whom were in flight suits to look militant.

"Next flight stateside?" Clark asked a young female captain. Her uniform "poopy suit" bore the silver wings of a pilot, and Clark wondered what she flew.

"We have a -141 inbound to Charleston," she replied. "But if you want to get on it—"

"Young lady, check your ops orders for this." Clark handed over his "J. T. Williams" passport. "In the SI section," he added helpfully.

The captain rose from her seat and pulled open the top drawer of her classified file cabinet, the one with the double combination lock. She extracted a red-bordered ring binder and flipped to the last divider. This was the "Special Intelligence" section, which identified certain things and people that were more closely guarded than mere "top" secrets. It took only a couple of seconds before she returned.

"Thank you, Colonel Williams. The flight leaves in twenty minutes. Is there anything that you and your aide require, sir?"

"Have Charleston arrange to have a puddle-jumper standing by to take us to D.C., if you would, please, Captain. Sorry to have to drop in on you so unexpectedly. Thank you for your assistance."

"Any time, sir," she replied, smiling at this polite colonel.

"Colonel?" Larson asked on the way out the door.

"Special Ops, no less. Pretty good for a beat-up old chief bosun's mate, isn't it?" A jeep had them to the Lockheed Starlifter in five minutes. The tunnel-like cargo compartment was empty. This was an Air Force Reserve flight, the loadmaster explained. They dropped some cargo off but were deadheading back home. That was fine with Clark, who stretched out as soon as the bird lifted off. It was amazing, he thought as he dozed off, all the things his countrymen did well. You could transition from being in mortal danger to being totally safe in a matter of hours. The same country that put people into the field and failed to support them properly treated them like VIPs—so long as they had the right ID notification in the right book, as though that could make it all better. It was crazy, the things we could do, and the things we couldn't. A moment later he was snoring next to an amazed Carlos Larson. He

didn't wake until just before the landing, five hours later.

As with any other government agency, CIA had regular business hours. By 3:30, those who came in early on "flex-time" were already filing out to beat the traffic, and by 5:30 even the seventh floor was quiet. Outside Jack's office, Nancy Cummings put the cover over her IBM typewriter—she used a word processor, too, but Nancy still liked typewriters—and hit a button on her intercom.

"Anything else you need me for, Dr. Ryan?"

"No, thank you. See you in the morning."

"Okay. Good night, Dr. Ryan."

Jack turned in his chair, back to staring out at the trees that walled the complex off from outside view. He was trying to think, but his mind was a blank void. He didn't know what he'd find. Part of him hoped that he'd find nothing. He knew that what he would do was going to cost him his career at the Agency, but he didn't really give much of a damn anymore. If this was what his job required, then the job wasn't really worth having, was it?

But what would the Admiral say about that?

Jack didn't have that answer. He pulled a paperback out of his desk drawer and started reading. A few hundred pages later it was seven o'clock.

Time. Ryan lifted his phone and called the floor security desk. When the secretaries were gone home, it was the security guys who ran errands.

"This is Dr. Ryan. I need some documents from central files." He read off three numbers. "They're big ones," he warned the desk man. "Better take somebody else to help."

"Yes, sir. We'll head down in a minute."

"Not that much of a hurry," Ryan said as he hung up. He already had a reputation as an easygoing boss. As soon as the phone was back in its cradle, he jumped to his feet and switched on his personal Xerox machine. Then he walked out his door to Nancy's outer office space, listening for the diminishing sound of the two security officers walking out to the main corridor.

They didn't lock office doors up here. There was no point. You had to pass through about ten security zones to get here, each guarded by armed officers, each supervised by a separate central security office on the first floor. There were also roving patrols. Security at CIA was tighter than at a federal prison, and about as oppressive. But it didn't really apply to the senior executives, and all Jack had to do was walk across the corridor and open the door to Bob Ritter's office.

The DDO's office safe—vault was a better term—was set up the same way as Ryan's, behind a false panel in the wall. It was less for secrecy—any competent burglar would find it in under a minute—than for aesthetics. Jack opened the panel and dialed the combination for the safe. He wondered if

Ritter knew that Greer had the combination. Perhaps he did, but certainly he didn't know that the Admiral had written it down. It was so odd a thing for the Agency, so odd that no one had ever considered the possibility. The smartest people in the world still had blind spots.

The safe doors were all alarmed, of course. The alarm systems were foolproof, and worked the same way as the safety locks on nuclear weapons—and they were the best kind available, weren't they? You dialed in the right combination or the alarm went off. If you goofed doing it the first time, a light would go on above the dial, indicating that you had ten seconds to get it right or another light would go on at two separate security desks. A second goof would set off more alarms. A third would put the safe in lock-down for two hours. Several CIA executives had learned to curse the system and become the subject of jokes in the security department. But not Ryan, who was not intimidated by combination locks. The computer that kept track of such things decided that, well, it must be Mr. Ritter, and that was that.

Jack's heart beat faster now. There were over twenty files in here, and his time was measured in minutes. But again Agency procedures came to his rescue. Inside the front cover of each file was a summary sheet telling what "Operation WHATEVER" was all about. He didn't really pay attention to what they said, but used the summary sheets only to identify items of interest. In less than two minutes, Jack had files labeled EAGLE EYE, SHOWBOAT-I and SHOWBOAT-II, CAPER, and **RECIPROCITY.** The total stack was nearly eighteen inches high. Jack made careful note of where the folders went, then closed the safe door without locking it. Next he returned to his office, setting the papers on the floor behind his desk. He started reading **EAGLE EYE** first of all.

"Holy Christ!" "Detection and interdiction of incoming drug flight," he saw, meant ... shooting them down. Someone knocked on his door.

"Come on in." It was the security guys with the files he'd requested. Ryan had them set the files on a chair and dismissed them.

Jack figured he had an hour, two at most, to do what he had to do. That meant he had time to scan, not to read. Each operation had a more detailed summary of objectives and methods plus an event log and daily progress report. Jack's personal Xerox machine was a big, sophisticated one that organized and collated sheets, and most importantly, zipped them through very rapidly. He started feeding sheets into the hopper. The automatic feed allowed him to read and copy at the same time. Ninety minutes later he had copied over six hundred sheets, maybe a quarter of what he'd taken. It wasn't enough, but it would have to do. He summoned the security guards to return the files they'd brought up—he took the time to ruffle them up first. As soon as they were gone, he assembled the files he'd... ... stolen? Jack asked himself. It suddenly dawned on him that he'd just violated the law. He hadn't thought of that. He really hadn't. As he loaded the files back in the safe, Ryan told himself that really he hadn't violated anything. As a senior executive, he was entitled to know these things, and the rules didn't *really* apply to him ... but that, he remembered, was a dangerous way to think. He was serving a higher

cause. He was doing What Was Right. He was—

"Shit!" Ryan said aloud when he closed the safe door. "You don't know what the hell you're doing." He was back in his office a minute later.

It was time to leave. First he made a notation on the Xerox count sheet. You didn't make Xerox copies anywhere in this building without signing off for them, but he'd thought ahead on that. Roughly the right number of sheets were assembled in a pile and placed in his safe, ostensibly a copy of the OSWR report that Nancy had retrieved. Making such copies was something that directorate chiefs were allowed to do fairly freely. Inside his safe, he found, was the manual for its operation. The copies he'd made went into his briefcase. The last thing Ryan did before leaving was to change his combination to something nobody would ever guess. He nodded to the security officer at the desk next to the elevator on his way out. The Agency Buick was waiting when he got to the basement garage.

"Sorry to make you stay in so late, Fred," Jack said as he got in. Fred was his evening driver.

"No problem, sir. Home?"

"Right." It required all of his discipline not to start reading on the way. Instead he leaned back and commanded himself to take a nap. It would be the only sleep he would get tonight, he was sure.

Clark got into Andrews just after eight. His first call was to Ritter's office, but it was shortstopped elsewhere and he learned that the DDO was unavailable until morning. With nothing better to do, Clark and Larson checked into a motel near the Pentagon. After picking up shaving gear and a toothbrush from the Marriott's gift shop, Clark again went to sleep, again surprising the younger officer, who was far too keyed up to do so.

"How bad is it?" the President asked.

"We've lost nine people," Cutter replied. "It was inevitable, sir. We knew going in that this was a dangerous operation. So did they. What we can do—"

"What we can do is shut this operation down, and do it at once. And keep a nice tight lid on it forever. This one never happened. I didn't bargain for any of this, not for the civilian casualties, and sure as hell not for losing nine of our own people. Damn it, Admiral, you told me that these kids were so good —"

"Mr. President, I never—"

"The hell you didn't!" the President said loudly enough to startle the Secret Service agent outside his upstairs office. "How the hell did you get me into this mess?"

Cutter's patrician face went pale as a corpse. Everything he'd worked for, the action he'd been proposing for three years.... Ritter was proclaiming

success. That was the maddest part of all.

"Sir, our objective was to hurt the Cartel. We have accomplished that. The CIA officer who's running RECIPROCITY, in Colombia, right now, said that he could start a gang war within the Cartel—and we have done just that! They just tried to assassinate one of their own people—Escobedo. Drug shipments coming in are down. We haven't announced it yet, but the papers are already talking about how prices are going up on the street. We're winning."

"Fine. You tell Fowler that!" The President slammed a file folder down on his desk. His own private polls showed Fowler ahead by fourteen points.

"Sir, after the convention, the opposition candidate always—"

"Now you're giving me political advice? Mister, you haven't shown me a hell of a lot of competence in your supposed area of expertise."

"Mr. President, I—"

"I want this whole thing shut down. I want it kept quiet. I want you to do it, and I want you to do it fast. This is your mess and you will clean it up."

Cutter hesitated. "Sir, how do you want me to go about it?"

"I don't want to know. I just want to know when it's done."

"Sir, that may mean that I'll have to disappear for a while."

"Then *disappear!"*

"People might notice."

"Then you are on a special, classified mission for the President. Admiral, I want this thing closed out. I don't care what you have to do. Just do it!"

Cutter came to attention. He still remembered how to do that. "Yes, Mr. President."

"Reverse your rudder," Wegener said. USCGC Panache pivoted with the change of rudder and engine settings, pointing herself down the channel.

"Midships."

"Rudder amidships, aye. Sir, my rudder is amidships," the young helmsman announced under the watchful eye of Master Chief Quartermaster Oreza.

"Very well. All ahead one-third, steady up on course one-nine-five." Wegener looked at the junior officer of the deck. "You have the conn. Take her out."

"Aye aye, sir, I have the conn," the ensign acknowledged in some surprise. "Take her out" generally means that you start from the dock, but the skipper was unusually cautious today. The kid on the wheel could handle it from here. Wegener lit his pipe and headed out for the bridge wing. Portagee followed him there.

"That's about as happy as I've ever been to head out to sea," Wegener said.

“I know what you mean, Cap’n.”

It had been one scary day. Only one, but that had been enough. The FBI agent’s warning had come as quite a shock. Wegener had grilled his people one by one—something that he’d found as distasteful as it had been unfruitful —to find out who had spilled the beans. Oreza thought he knew but wasn’t sure. He was thankful that he’d never have to be. That danger had died with the pirates in Mobile jail. But both men had learned their lesson. From now on they’d abide by the rules.

“Skipper, why d’ya suppose that FBI guy warned us?”

“That’s a good question, Portagee. It figures that what we choked out of the bastards turned that money seizure they pulled off. I guess they figured they owed us some. Besides, the local guy says that it was his boss in Washington who ordered him to warn us.”

“I think we owe him one,” Oreza said.

“I think you’re right.” Both men stayed out to savor yet another sunset at sea, and *Panache* took a heading of one-eight-one, heading for her patrol station in the Yucatan Channel.

Chavez was down to his last set of batteries. The situation, if anything, had gotten worse. There was a group somewhere be hind them, necessitating a rear guard. It was something that he on point, couldn’t concern himself about, but it was there a nagging concern as real as the sore muscles that had him popping Tylenol every few hours. Maybe they were being folowed Maybe it was just accidental—or maybe Ramirez had gotter predictable in his evasion tactics. Chavez didn’t think so but he was becoming too tired to think coherently, and knew it. Maybe the captain had the same problem, he realized. That was especially worrisome. Sergeants were paid to fight Cantains were paid to think. But if Ramirez was too tired to do that then they might as well not have him.

Noise. A whisper from a branch swishing through the ak. But there was no wind blowing at the moment. Maybe an animal. Maybe not.

Chavez stopped. He held his hand straight up. Vega, walking slack fifty meters back, relayed the signal. Ding moved along side a tree and stayed standing for the best possible visibili He started to lean against it and found himself drifting. The sergeant shook his head to clear it. Fatigue was really getting to him now.

There. Movement. It was a man. Just a spectral green shape, barely more than a stick figure on the goggle display, nearly two hundred meters to Ding’s right front. He was moving uphill and—another one, about twenty meters behind. They were moving like ... soldiers, with the elaborate footwork that looked so damned crazy when somebody else was doing it....

There was one way to check. On the bottom side of his PVS- 7 goggles was a small infrared light for use in reading maps. Invisible to the human eye, it

would show up like a beacon to anyone wearing another PVS-7. He didn't even have to make a noise. They'd be looking around constantly.

It was still a risk, of course.

Chavez stepped away from the tree. It was too far to see if they were wearing their headsets, if they were....

Yes. The lead figure was turning his head left and right. It stopped dead on where Chavez was standing. Ding tipped his goggles up to expose the IR light and blinked it three times. He dropped his night scope back into place just in time to see the other one do the same.

"I think they're our guys," Chavez whispered into his radio mike.

"Then they're pretty lost," Ramirez replied through his earpiece. "Be careful, Sergeant."

Click-Click. Okay.

Chavez waited for Oso to set his SAW up in a convenient place, then walked toward the other man, careful to keep where Vega could cover him. It seemed an awfully long way to walk, farther still without being able to put his weapon on the target, but he couldn't exactly do that, could he? He spotted one more, and there would be others out there also, watching him over the sights of their weapons. If that wasn't a friendly, his chances of seeing the sunrise were somewhere between zero and not much.

"Ding, is that you?" a whisper called the remaining ten meters. "It's León."

Chavez nodded. Both men took very deep breaths as they walked together and hugged. Somehow a handshake just wasn't enough under the circumstances.

"You're lost, 'Berto."

"No shit, man. I know where the fuck we are, but we're fucking lost all right."

"Where's Cap'n Rojas?"

"Dead. Esteves, Delgado, half the team."

"Okay. Hold it." Ding punched his radio button. "Six, this is Point. We just made contact with BANNER. They've had a little trouble, sir. You better get up here."

Click-click.

León waved for his men to come in. Chavez didn't even think to count. It was enough to see that half weren't there. Both men sat on a fallen tree.

"What happened?"

"We walked right into it, man. Thought it was a processing site. It wasn't. Musta been thirty-forty guys there. I think Esteves fucked up and it all came apart. Like a bar fight with guns, man. Then Captain Rojas went down, and—it was pretty bad, *'mano.* Been on the run ever since."

"We got people chasing us, too."

"What's the good news?" León asked.

"I ain't heard any lately, 'Berto," Ding said. "I think it's time for us to get our asses outa this place."

"Roge-o," Sergeant León said just as Ramirez appeared. He made his report to the captain.

"Cap'n," Chavez said when he was finished, "we're all pretty beat. We need a place to belly up."

"The man's right," Guerra agreed.

"What about behind us?"

"They ain't heard nothin' in two hours, sir," Guerra reminded him. "That knoll over there looks like a good spot to me." That was about as hard as he could press his officer, but finally it was enough.

"Take the men up. Set up the perimeter and two outposts. We'll try to rest up till sundown, and maybe I can call in and get us some help."

"Sounds good to me, Cap'n." Guerra took off to get things organized. Chavez left at once to sweep the area while the rest of the squad moved to its new RON site—except, Chavez thought, this was an ROD—remain-over-day—site. It was a bleak attempt at humor, but it was all he could manage under the circumstances.

"My God," Ryan breathed. It was four in the morning, and he was awake only because of coffee and apprehension. Ryan had uncovered his share of things with the Agency. But never anything like this. The first thing he had to do was ... what?

Get some sleep, even a few hours, he told himself. Jack lifted the phone and called the office. There was always a watch officer on duty.

"This is Dr. Ryan. I'm going to be late. Something I ate. I've been throwing up all night ... no, I think it's over now, but I need a few hours of sleep. I'll drive myself in tomorr—today," he corrected himself. "Yeah, that's right. Thanks. 'Bye."

He left a note on the refrigerator door for his wife and crawled into a spare bed to avoid disturbing her.

Passing the message was the easiest part for Cortez. It would have been hard for anyone else, but one of the first things he'd done after joining the Cartel was to get a list of certain telephone numbers in the Washington, D.C., area. It hadn't been hard. As with any task, it was just a matter of finding someone who knew what you needed to know. That was something Cortez excelled at. Once he had the list of numbers—it had cost him $10,000, the best sort of money well spent, that is to say, someone's else's well-spent money—it was merely a matter of knowing schedules. That was tricky, of course. The person might not be there, which risked disclosure, but the right sort of eyes-only

prefix would probably serve to warn off the casual viewer. The secretaries of such people typically were disciplined people who risked their jobs when they showed too much curiosity.

But what really made it easy was a new bit of technology, the facsimile printer. It was a brand-new status symbol. Everyone had to have one, just as everyone, especially the important, had to have a direct private telephone line that bypassed his secretary. That and the fax went together. Cortez had driven to Medellin to his private office and typed the message himself. He knew what official U.S. government messages looked like, of course, and did his best to reproduce it here. EYES-ONLY NIMBUS was the header, and the name in the FROM slot was bogus, but that in the To place was quite genuine, which ought to have been sufficient to get the attention of the addressee. The body of the message was brief and to the point, and indicated a coded reply-address. How would the addressee react? Well, there was no telling, was there? But this, too, Cortez felt was a good gamble. He inserted the single sheet in his fax, dialed the proper number, and waited. The machine did the rest. As soon as it heard the warbling electronic love-call of another fax machine, it transmitted the message form. Cortez removed the original and folded it away into his wallet.

The addressee turned in surprise when he heard the whir of his fax printing out a message. It had to be official, because only half a dozen people knew that private line. (It never occurred to him that the telephone company's computer knew about it, too.) He finished what he was doing before reaching over for the message.

What the hell is NIMBUS? he wondered. Whatever it was, it was eyes-only to him, and therefore he started to read the message. He was sipping his third cup of morning coffee while he did so, and was fortunate that his cough deposited some of it onto his desk and not his trousers.

Cathy Ryan was nothing if not punctual. The phone in the guest room rang at precisely 8:30. Jack's head jerked off the pillow as though from an electric shock, and his hand reached out to grab the offensive instrument.

"Hello?"

"Good morning, Jack," his wife said brightly. "What's the problem with you?"

"I had to stay up late with some work. Did you take the other thing with you?"

"Yes, what's the—"

Jack cut her off. "I know what it says, babe. Could you just make the call? It's important." Dr. Caroline Ryan was also bright enough to catch the meaning of what he said.

"Okay, Jack. How do you feel?"

"Awful. But I have work to do."

"So do I, honey. 'Bye."

"Yeah." Jack hung up and commanded himself to get out of the bed. First a shower, he told himself.

Cathy was on her way to Surgery, and had to hurry. She lifted her office phone and called the proper number on the hospital's D.C. line. It rang only once.

"Dan Murray."

"Dan, this is Cathy Ryan."

"Morning! What can I do for you this fine day, Doctor?" "Jack said to tell you that he'd be in to see you just after ten. He wants you to let him park in the drive-through, and he said to tell you that the folks down the hall aren't supposed to know. I don't know what that means, but that's what he told me to say." Cathy didn't know whether to be amused or not. Jack did like to play funny little games—she thought they were pretty dumb little games—with people who shared his clearances, and wondered if this was some sort of joke or not. Jack especially liked to play games with his FBI friend.

"Okay, Cath', I'll take care of that."

"I have to run off to fix somebody's eyeball. Say hi to Liz for me."

"Will do. Have a good one."

Murray hung up with a puzzled look on his face. *Folks down the hall aren't supposed to know.* "The folks down the hall" was a phrase Murray had used the first time they'd met, in St. Thomas's Hospital in London when Dan had been the legal attaché at the U.S. Embassy on Grosvenor Square. The folks down the hall were CIA.

But Ryan was one of the top six people at Langley, arguably one of the top three.

What the hell did that mean?

"Hmph." He called his secretary and had her notify the security guards to allow Ryan into the driveway that passed under the main entrance to the Hoover Building. Whatever it meant, he could wait.

Clark arrived at Langley at nine that morning. He didn't have a security pass—not the sort of thing you carry into the field—and had to use a code-word to get through the main gate, which seemed very conspiratorial indeed. He parked in the visitors' lot—CIA has one of those—and walked in the main entrance, heading immediately to the left where he quickly got what looked like a visitor's badge which, however, worked just fine in the electronically controlled gates. Now he angled off to the right, past the wall murals that

looked as though some enormous child had daubed mud all over the place. The decorator for this place, Clark was sure, had to have been a KGB plant. Or maybe they'd just picked the lowest bidder. An elevator took him to the seventh floor, and he walked around the corridor to the executive offices that have their own separate corridor on the face of the building. He ended up in front of the DDO's secretary.

"Mr. Clark to see Mr. Ritter," he said.

"Do you have an appointment?" the secretary asked.

"No, I don't, but I think he wants to see me," Clark said politely. There was no sense in abusing her. Besides, Clark had been raised to show deference to women. She lifted her phone and passed the message. "You can go right in, Mr. Clark."

"Thank you." He closed the door behind him. The door, of course, was heavy and soundproof. That was just as well.

"What the hell are you doing here?" the DDO demanded.

"You're going to have to shut SHOWBOAT down," Clark said without preamble. "It's coming apart. The bad guys are hunting those kids down and —"

"I know. I heard late last night. Look, I never figured this would be a no-loss operation. One of the teams got clobbered pretty good thirty-six hours ago, but based on intercepts, looks like they gave better than they took, and then they got even with some others who—"

"That was me," Clark said.

"What?" Ritter asked in surprise.

"Larson and I took a little drive about this time yesterday, and I found three of those—whatevers. They were just finished loading up the bodies into the back of a truck. I didn't see any point in letting them live," Mr. Clark said in a normal tone of voice. It had been a very long time since anyone at CIA had said something like that.

"Christ, John!" Ritter was even too surprised to blast Clark for violating his own security by stepping into a separate operation.

"I recognized one of the bodies," Clark went on. "Captain Emilio Rojas, United States Army. He was a hell of a nice kid, by the way."

"I'm sorry about that. Nobody ever said this was safe."

"I'm sure his family, if any, will appreciate that. This operation is blown. It's time to cut our losses. What are we doing to get them out?" Clark asked.

"I'm looking at that. I have to coordinate with somebody. I'm not sure that he'll agree."

"In that case, sir," Clark told his boss, "I suggest that you make your case rather forcefully."

"Are you threatening me?" Ritter asked quietly.

“No, sir, I would prefer not to have you read me that way. I am telling you, on the basis of my experience, that this operation must be terminated ASAP. It is your job to make that necessity plain to the people who authorized the operation. Failing to get such permission, I would advise you to terminate the operation anyway.”

“I could lose my job for that,” the DDO pointed out.

“After I identified the body of Captain Rojas, I set fire to the truck. Couple reasons. I wanted to divert the enemy somewhat, and, of course, I also wanted to render the bodies unrecognizable. I’ve never burned the body of a friendly before. I did not like doing that. Larson still doesn’t know why I did it. He’s too young to understand. You’re not, sir. You sent those people into the field and you are responsible for them. If you are telling me that your job is more important than that, I am here to tell you that you are wrong, sir.” Clark hadn’t yet raised his voice above the level of a reasonable man discussing ordinary business, but for the first time in a very long time, Bob Ritter feared for his personal safety.

“Your diversion attempt was successful, by the way. The opposition has forty people looking in the wrong place now.”

“Good. That will make the extraction effort all the easier to accomplish.”

“John, you can’t give me orders like this.”

“Sir, I am not giving you orders. I am telling you what has to be done. You told me that the operation was mine to run.”

“That was RECIPROCITY, not SHOWBOAT.”

“This is not a time for semantics, sir. If you do not pull those people out, more—possibly all of them—will be killed. That, sir, is your responsibility. You can’t put people in the field and not support them. You know that.”

“You’re right, of course,” Ritter said after a moment. “I can’t do it on my own. I have to inform—well, you know. I’ll take care of that. We’ll pull them out as quickly as we can.”

“Good.” Clark relaxed. Ritter was a sharp operator, often too sharp in his dealings with subordinates, but he was a man of his word. Besides, the DDO was too smart to cross him on a matter like this. Clark was sure of that. He had made his own position pretty damned clear, and Ritter had caught the signal five-by-five.

“What about Larson and his courier?”

“I’ve pulled them both out. His plane’s at Panama, and he’s at the Marriott down the road. He’s pretty good, by the way, but he’s probably blown as far as Colombia is concerned. I’d say they could both use a few weeks off.”

“Fair enough. What about you?”

“I can head back tomorrow if you want. You might want me to help with the extraction.”

“We may have a line on Cortez.”

"Really?"

"And you're the guy who got the first picture of him."

"Oh. Where—the guy at the Untiveros house, the guy we just barely missed?"

"The same. Positive ID from the lady he seduced. He's running the people they have in the field from a little house near Anserma."

"I'd have to take Larson back for that."

"Think it's worth the risk?"

"Getting Cortez?" Clark thought for a moment. "Depends. It's worth a look. What do we know about his security?"

"Nothing," Ritter admitted, "just a rough idea where the house is. We got that from an intercept. Be nice to get him alive. He knows a lot of things we want to find out. We bring him back here and we can hang a murder rap over his head. Death-penalty kind."

Clark nodded thoughtfully. Another element of spy fiction was the canard about how people in the intelligence business were willing to take their cyanide capsules or face a firing squad with a song in their hearts. The facts were to the contrary. Men faced certain death courageously only when there was no attractive alternative. The trick was to give them such an alternative, which didn't require the mind of a rocket scientist, as the current aphorism went. If they got Cortez, the normal form would be take him all the way through a trial, sentence him to death—just a matter of picking the right judge, and in national-security matters, there was always lots of leeway—and take it from there. Cortez would crack in due course, probably even before the trial started. Cortez was no fool, after all, and would know when and how to strike a bargain. He'd already sold out on his own country. Selling out on the Cartel was trivial beside that.

Clark nodded. "Give me a few hours to think about it."

Ryan turned left off 10th Street, Northwest, into the drive-through. There were uniformed and plainclothes guards, one of whom held a clipboard. He approached the car.

"Jack Ryan to see Dan Murray."

"Could I see some ID, please?"

Jack pulled out his CIA pass. The guard recognized it for what it was and waved to another guard. This one punched the button to lower the steel barrier that was supposed to prevent people with car bombs from driving under the headquarters of the FBI. He pulled over it and found a place to park the car. A young FBI agent met him in the lobby and handed him a pass that would work the Bureau's electronic gate. If someone invented the right sort of computer virus, Jack thought, half of the government would be prevented from going to work. And maybe the country would be safe until the problem was fixed.

The Hoover Building has a decidedly unusual layout, a maze of diagonal corridors intersecting with squared-off corridors. It is even worse than the Pentagon for the uninitiated to find their way about. In this case, Ryan was well and truly disoriented by the time they found the right office. Dan was waiting for him and led him into his private office. Jack closed the door behind him.

"What gives?" Murray asked.

Ryan set his briefcase on Murray's desk and opened it.

"I need some guidance."

"About what?"

"About what is probably an illegal operation—several of them, as a matter of fact."

"How illegal?"

"Murder," Jack said as undramatically as he could manage.

"The car bombs in Colombia?" Murray asked from his swivel chair.

"Not bad, Dan. Except they weren't car bombs."

Oh? Dan sat down and thought for a few seconds before speaking. He remembered that whatever was being done was retribution for the murder of Emil and the rest. "Whatever they were, the law on this is fairly muddled, you know. The prohibition against killing people in intelligence operations is an Executive Order, promulgated by the President. If he writes *except in this case* on the bottom of the order, then it's legal—sort of. The law on this issue is really strange. More than anything else, it's a constitutional matter, and the Constitution is nice and vague where it has to be."

"Yeah, I know about that. What makes it illegal is that I've been told to give incorrect information to Congress. If the oversight people were in on it, it wouldn't be murder. It would be properly formulated government policy. In fact, as I understand the law, it would not be murder even if we did it first and then told Congress, because we have a lead time to start a covert op if the oversight folks are out of town. But if the DCI tells me to give false information to Congress, then we're committing murder, because we're not following the law. That's the good news, Dan."

"Go on."

"The bad news is that too many people know what's going on, and if the story gets out, some people we have out in the field are in a world of hurt. I'll set the political dimension aside for the moment except to say that there's more than one. Dan, I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do." Ryan's analysis, as usual, was very accurate. He'd made only a single mistake. He didn't know what the real bad news was.

Murray smiled, not because he wanted to, but because his friend needed it. "What makes you think I do?"

Ryan's tension eased a bit. "Well, I could go to a priest for guidance, but

they ain't cleared SI. You are, and the FBI's the next best thing to the priesthood, isn't it?" It was an inside joke between the two. Both were Boston College graduates.

"Where's the operation being run out of?"

"Guess. It isn't Langley, not really. It's being run out of a place exactly six blocks up the street."

"That means I can't even go to the AG."

"Yeah, he just might tell his boss, mightn't he?"

"So I get in trouble with my bureaucracy," Murray observed lightly.

"Is government service really worth the hassle?" Jack asked bleakly, his depression returning. "Hell, maybe we can retire together. Who can you trust?"

That answer came easily. "Bill Shaw." Murray rose. "Let's go see him."

"Loop" is one of those computer words that has gained currency in society. It identifies things that happen and the people who make them happen, an action- or decision-cycle that exists independently of the things around it. Any government has a virtually infinite collection of such loops, each defined by its own special set of ground rules, understood by the players. Within the next few hours a new loop had been established. It included selected members of the FBI, but not the U.S. Attorney General, who had authority over the Bureau. It would also include members of the Secret Service, but not their boss, the Secretary of the Treasury. Investigations of this sort were mainly exercises in paper-chasing and analysis, and Murray—who was also tasked to head this one up—was surprised to see that one of his "subjects" was soon on the move. It didn't help him at all to learn that he was driving to Andrews Air Force Base.

By that time, Ryan was back at his desk, looking slightly wan, everyone thought, but everyone had heard that he'd been sick the night before. Something he ate. He now knew what to do: nothing. Ritter was gone, and the Judge still wasn't back. It wasn't easy to do nothing. It was harder still to do things that didn't matter a damn right now. He did feel better, however. Now the problem wasn't his alone. He didn't know that this was nothing to feel better about.

25.

The ODYSSEY File

MURRAY HAD A senior agent drive to Andrews immediately, of course, and he got there just in time to watch the small jet taxi off to the end of runway One-Left. The agent used his ID to get himself into the office of the colonel who commanded the 89th Military Airlift Wing. That got the agent the flight plan for the aircraft that had just taken off. He used the colonel's phone to call Murray, then admonished the colonel that he, the agent, had never been there, had never made an official inquiry; that this was part of a major criminal investigation and was code-word material. The code-word for the case was ODYSSEY.

Murray and Shaw were together within a minute of taking the call. Shaw had found that he could handle the duties of acting Director. He was sure that it was not a permanent job, and after the proper political figurehead was found, he'd revert to Executive Assistant Director (Investigations). Part of him thought that too bad. What was wrong with having a career cop running the Bureau? Of course, that was politics, not police work, and in over thirty years of police work he'd discovered that politics was not his cup of tea.

"We gotta get somebody there," Shaw observed. "But how, for God's sake?"

"Why not the Panama legal attaché?" Murray asked. "I know him. Solid guy."

"He's out doing something with DEA. Won't be back in the office for a couple of days. His number-two's not up to it. Too inexperienced to run this himself."

"Morales is available in Bogotá—but somebody'd notice.... We're playing catch-up again, Bill, and that guy is flying down there at five hundred miles per hour.... How about Mark Bright? Maybe he can steal a jet from the Air Guard."

"Do it!"

"Special Agent Bright," he said as he picked up the phone.

"Mark, this is Dan Murray. I need you to do something. Start taking notes, Mark." Murray kept talking. Two minutes later Bright muttered a mild obscenity and pulled out his phone book. The first call went to Eglin Air Force Base, the second to the local Coast Guard, and the third to his home. He sure as hell wouldn't be home for dinner. Bright grabbed a few items on his way

out the door and had another agent drive him to the Coast Guard yard, where a helicopter was already waiting. It took off a minute after he got aboard and headed east to Eglin Air Force Base.

The Air Force had only three F-15E Strike-Eagles, all prototypes for a ground-attack version of the big, twin-engined fighter, and two of those were at Eglin for technical tests while Congress decided if the service would actually put the aircraft into serial production. Aside from some training birds located elsewhere, this was the only two-seat version of the Air Force's prime air-superiority fighter. The major who'd be flying him was standing at the side of the aircraft when Bright stepped out of the helicopter. A couple of NCOs assisted the agent into his flight suit, parachute harness, and life vest. The helmet was sitting on the top of the rear ejection seat. In ten minutes the aircraft was ready to roll.

"What gives?" the pilot asked.

"I need to be at Panama, just as fast as you can arrange it."

"Gee, you mean you're going to make me fly fast?" the major responded, then laughed. "Then there's no rush."

"Say again?"

"The tanker took off three minutes ago. We'll let him get up to thirty thousand before we lift off. He'll top us off up there, and we go balls to the wall. Another tanker is taking off from Panama to meet us—so we'll have enough fuel to land, sir. That way we can go supersonic most of the flight. You did say you were in a hurry?"

"Uh-huh." Bright was struggling to adjust his helmet. It didn't fit very well. It was also quite warm in the cockpit, and the air-conditioning system hadn't taken hold yet. "What if the other tanker doesn't show up?"

"The Eagle is a very good glider," the major assured him. "We won't have to swim *too* far."

A radio message crackled in Bright's ears. The major answered it, then spoke to his passenger. "Grab your balls, sir. It is now post time." The Eagle taxied to the end of the runway, where it sat still for a moment while the pilot brought the engines to full, screaming, vibrating power, and then slipped his brakes. Ten seconds later Bright wondered if a catapult shot off a carrier could be more exciting than this. The F-15E held a forty-degree angle of climb and just kept accelerating, leaving Florida's gulf coast far behind. They tanked a hundred miles offshore—Bright was too fascinated to be frightened, though the buffet was noticeable—and after separating, the Eagle climbed to forty thousand feet and the pilot punched burners. The aft cockpit was mainly concerned with delivering bombs and missiles on target, but did have a few instruments. One of them told the agent that they had just topped a thousand miles per hour.

"What's the hurry?" the pilot asked.

"I want to get to Panama ahead of somebody."

“Can you give me some details? Might help, you know.”

“One of those business jets—G-Three, I think. Left Andrews eighty-five minutes ago.”

The pilot laughed. “Is that all? Hell, you can check into a hotel ’fore he gets down. We’re already ahead of him. We’re wasting fuel going this fast.”

“So waste it,” Bright said.

“Fine with me, sir. Mach-2 or sittin’ still, they pay me the same. Okay, figure we’ll get in ninety minutes ahead of your guy. How do you like the ride?”

“Where’s the drink cart?”

“Should be a bottle down by your right knee. A nice domestic vintage, good nose, but not the least pretentious.”

Bright got it and had a drink out of sheer curiosity.

“Salt and electrolytes, to keep you alert,” the pilot explained a few seconds later. “You’re FBI, right?”

“Correct.”

“What gives?”

“Can’t say. What’s that?” He heard a beeping sound in his headphones.

“SAM radar,” the major said.

“What?”

“That’s Cuba over there. There’s a SAM battery on that point that doesn’t like American military aircraft. I can’t imagine why. We’re out of range anyway. Don’t sweat it. It’s normal. We use them to calibrate our systems, too. Part of the game.”

Murray and Shaw were reading over the material Jack had dropped off. Their immediate problems were, first, to determine what was supposed to be going on; next, to determine what was actually going on; next, to determine if it was legal or not; next, if not, then to take appropriate action, once they could figure what appropriate action was. This wasn’t a mere can of worms. It was a can of poisonous snakes that Ryan had spilled over Murray’s desk.

“You know how this might end up?”

Shaw turned away from the desk. “The country doesn’t need another one.” *Not by my hands,* he didn’t say.

“We got one whether we need it or not,” Murray said. “I admit, part of me says, ‘Right on!’ about why they’re doing it, but from what Jack tells me, we have at the very least a technical violation of the oversight laws, and definitely a violation of the Executive Order.” .

“Unless there’s a classified codicil that we don’t know about. What if the AG knows?”

“What if he’s part of it? The day Emil got hit, the AG flew to Camp David along with the rest of ’em, remember?”

“What I want to know is, what the hell our friend is going to Panama for?”

“Maybe we’ll find out. He’s going down alone. No security troops, everybody sworn to secrecy. Who’d you send over to Andrews to choke it out of ’em?”

“Pat O’Day,” Murray answered. That explained matters. “I want him to handle the liaison with the Secret Service guys, too. He’s done a lot of work with them. When the time comes, that is. We’re a mile away from being ready for that.”

“Agreed. We have eighteen people working ODYSSEY. That’s not enough.”

“We have to keep it tight for the moment, Bill. I think the next step is getting somebody over from Justice to cover our asses for us. Who?”

“Christ, I don’t know,” Shaw replied in exasperation. “It’s one thing to run an investigation that the AG knows about but is kept out of, but I can’t remember ever running one completely unknown to him.”

“Let’s take our time, then. The main thing right now is to figure out what the plan was, then branch out from there.” It was a logical observation from Murray. It was also wrong. It was to be a day of errors.

The F-15E touched down at Howard Field right on time, eighty minutes before the scheduled arrival of the flight from Andrews. Bright thanked the pilot, who refueled and took off at once for a more leisurely return to Eglin. The base intelligence officer met Bright, along with the most senior agent from the legal attaché’s office in Panama City, who was young, sharp, but too new in his post for a case of this sensitivity. The arriving agent briefed his two colleagues on what little he knew and swore both to secrecy. It was enough to get things going. His first stop was the post exchange, where he got some nondescript clothing. The intelligence officer supplied a very plain automobile with local tags that they left outside the gate. On base they’d use an anonymous blue Air Force sedan. The Plymouth sat near the flight line when the VC-20A landed. Bright pulled his Nikon out of the bag and attached a 1000mm telephoto lens. The aircraft taxied to a stop at one of the hangars, and the stairs folded down with the hatch. Bright snugged his camera in and started shooting close-ups from several hundred yards away as the single passenger stepped out of the plane and into a waiting car.

“Jesus, it’s really him.” Bright rewound and removed the film cassette. He handed it to the other FBI agent and reloaded another thirty-six-frame spool.

The car they followed was a twin to their Air Force sedan. It drove straight off post. Bright and the rest barely had time to switch cars, but the Air Force colonel driving had ambitions to race the NASCAR circuit and took up a surveillance position a hundred yards behind it.

“Why no security?” he asked.

“He generally doesn’t bother, they told me,” Bright told him. “Sounds odd, doesn’t it?”

“Hell, yes, given who he is, what he knows, and where the hell he happens to be at the moment.”

The trip into town was unremarkable. The Air Force sedan dropped Cutter off at a luxury hotel on the outskirts of Panama City. Bright hopped out and watched him check in, just like a man on a business trip. The other agent came in a few minutes later while the colonel stayed with the car.

“Now what?”

“Anybody you can trust on the local PD?” Bright asked.

“Nope. I know a few, some of them pretty good guys. But trust? Not down here, man.”

“Well, there’s always the old-fashioned way,” Bright observed.

“’kay.” The assistant legal attaché reached for his wallet and walked to the registration desk. He came back two minutes later. “The Bureau owes me twenty bucks. He’s registered as Robert Fisher. Here’s the American Express number.” He handed over a crumpled carbon sheet that also had the scrawled signature.

“Call the office and run it. We need to keep an eye on his room. We need—Christ, how many assets do we have?” Bright waved him outside.

“Not enough for this.”

Bright’s face twisted into an ugly shape for a moment. This was no easy call to make. ODYSSEY was a code-word case, and one thing that Murray had impressed on him was the need for security, but—there was always a “but,” wasn’t there?—this was something that needed doing. So he was the senior man on the scene and he had to make the call. Of such things, he knew, careers were made and broken. It was murderously hot and humid, but that wasn’t the only reason Mark Bright was sweating.

“Okay, tell him we need a half-dozen good people to help us with the surveillance.”

“You sure—”

“I’m not sure of anything right now! The man we’re supposed to be shadowing—if we suspect him—Christ Almighty, if we suspect him—” Bright stopped talking. There wasn’t much else to say, was there?

“Yeah.”

“I’ll hang out here. Tell the colonel to get things organized.”

It turned out that they needn’t have hurried. The subject—that’s what he was now, Bright told himself—appeared in the lobby three hours later, looking fresh and scrubbed in his tropical-weight suit. Four cars waited outside for him, but Cutter only knew about the small, white Mercedes into which he climbed and which drove off to the north. The other three kept it in visual contact.

It was getting dark. Bright had shot only three frames on his second roll of film. He ejected that one and replaced it with some super-high-speed black and white film. He shot a few pictures of the car just to make sure that he got the license number. The driver at this point wasn't the colonel, but a sergeant from the criminal-investigation detachment who knew the area and was impressed as hell to be working a code-word case with the Bureau. He identified the house the Mercedes pulled into. They ought to have guessed it.

The sergeant knew a place that overlooked the house, not a thousand yards away, but they were too late getting there and the car couldn't stay on the highway. Bright and the local FBI representative jumped out and found a wet, smelly place to lie down and wait. The sergeant left them a radio with which to summon him and wished them luck.

The owner of the house was away attending to matters of state, of course, but he had been kind enough to give them free use of it. That included a small but discreet staff which served light snacks and drinks, then withdrew, leaving the tape recorders, both men were sure, to record events. Well, that didn't matter, did it?

The hell it doesn't! Both men realized the sensitivity of the conversation that was about to take place, and it was Cortez who surprised his guest by graciously suggesting that they speak outside, despite the weather. Both men dropped off their suitcoats and went through the French doors to the garden. About the only good news was the impressive collection of blue bug-lights which crackled and sparkled as they attracted and electrocuted thousands of insects. The noise would make hash out of most recording attempts, and who would have expected either of them to eschew the house's air conditioning?

"Thank you for responding to my message," Cortez said pleasantly. It was not a time for bluster or posturing. It was time for business, and he'd have to appear appropriately humble before this man. It didn't bother him. Dealing with people of his rank required it, and it was something he'd have to get used to, Félix expected. They needed deference. It made surrendering all the easier.

"What do you want to talk about?" Admiral Cutter asked.

"Your operations against the Cartel, of course." Cortez waved toward a cane chair. He disappeared for a moment, then returned with the tray of drinks and glasses. For tonight, Perrier was the drink of choice. Both men left the alcohol untouched. For Félix, that was the first good sign.

"What operations are you talking about?"

"You should know that I had nothing personally to do with the death of Mr. Jacobs. It was an act of madness."

"Why should I believe that?"

"I was in America at the time. Didn't they tell you?" Cortez filled in some details. "An information source like Mrs. Wolfe," he concluded, "is worth far more than stupid, emotional revenge. It is more foolish still to challenge a

powerful nation in so obvious a way. Your response was quite well done. In fact, the operations you are running are most impressive. I didn't even suspect your airport-surveillance operations until after they were terminated, and the way you simulated the car bomb—a work of *art,* if I may say so. Can you tell me what the strategic objective of your operation is?"

"Come now, Colonel."

"Admiral, I have the power to expose the totality of your activities to the press," Félix said almost sadly. "Either you tell me or you tell the members of your own Congress. You will find me far more accommodating. We are, after all, men of the same profession."

Cutter thought for a moment, and told him. He was greatly irritated to see his interlocutor start laughing.

"Brilliant!" Cortez said when he was able to. "One day I would wish to meet this man, the one who proposed this idea. Truly he is a professional!"

Cutter nodded as though accepting the compliment. For a moment Félix wondered if that might be true ... it was easy enough to find out.

"You must forgive me, Admiral Cutter. You think I am making light of your operation. I say to you honestly that I am not. You have, in fact, accomplished your goal."

"We know. We know that somebody tried to kill you and Escobedo."

"Yes," Félix replied. "Of course. I would also like to know how you are developing such fine intelligence on us, but I know that you will not tell me."

Cutter played the card for all he thought it was worth. "We have more assets than you think, Colonel." It wasn't worth that much.

"I am sure," Cortez allowed. "I think we have an area of agreement."

"What might that be?"

"You wish to initiate a war within the Cartel. So do I."

Cutter betrayed himself by the way he stopped breathing. "Oh? How so?"

Already Cortez knew that he had won. And this fool was advising the American President?

"Why, I will become a *de facto* part of your operation and restructure the Cartel. That means eliminating some of the more offensive members, of course."

Cutter wasn't a total fool, but made the further mistake of stating the obvious as a question: "With yourself as the new head?"

"Do you know what sort of people these 'drug lords' are? Vicious peasants. Barbarians without education, drunk with power, yet they complain like spoiled children that they are not respected. " Cortez smiled up at the stars. "They are not people to be taken seriously by men such as ourselves. Can we agree that the world will be better when they have left it?"

"The same thought has occurred to me, as you have already pointed out."

"Then we are in agreement."

"Agreement on what?"

"Your 'car bombs' have already eliminated five of the chieftains. I will further reduce the number. Those eliminated will include all who approved the murder of your ambassador and the others, of course. Such actions cannot go unpunished or the world is plunged into chaos. Also, to show good faith, I will unilaterally reduce cocaine shipments to your country by half. The drug trade is disordered and overly violent," the former DGI colonel said judiciously. "It needs restructuring."

"We want it stopped!" Even as he said it, Cutter knew that it was a foolish thing to say.

Cortez sipped at his Perrier and continued to speak reasonably. "It will never be stopped. So long as your citizens wish to destroy their brains, someone will make this possible. The question, then, is how do we make the process more orderly? Your education efforts will eventually reduce the demand for drugs to tolerable levels. Until then, I can regularize the trade to minimize the dislocation of your society. I will reduce exports. I can even give you some major arrests so that your police can take credit for the reductions. This is an election year, is it not?"

Cutter's breathing took another hiatus. They were playing high-stakes poker, and Cortez had just announced that the deck was marked.

"Go on," was all he managed to say.

"Was this not the objective of your operations in Colombia? To sting the Cartel and reduce drug trafficking? I offer you success, the sort of success to which your President can point. Reduction in exports, some dramatic seizures and arrests, an intramural war within the Cartel for which you will not be blamed, yet for which you will also take credit. I give you victory," Cortez said.

"In return for ... ?"

"I, too, must have a small victory to establish my position with the chieftains, yes? You will withdraw support for the Green Berets you have climbing those horrible mountains. You know—the men you are supporting with that large black helicopter in Hangar Three at Howard Air Force Base. You see, those chieftains whom I wish to displace have large groups of retainers, and the best way for me to reduce their numbers is to have your men kill them for me. At the same time, unfortunately, in order to gain standing with my *superiors"*—this word was delivered with Richter-scale irony —"my bloody and costly operation must ultimately be successful. It is a regrettable necessity, but from your point of view it also eliminates a potential security problem, does it not?"

My God. Cutter looked away from Cortez, out past the bug lights into the jungle.

“What do you suppose they’re talking about?”

“Beats the hell out of me,” Bright replied. He was on his last roll of film. Even with the high-speed setting, to get a good shot he had to bring the shutter speed way down, and that meant holding the camera as still as a hunting rifle on a distant prong-horn.

What was it the President said? Close the operation out, and I don’t care how....

But I can’t do that.

“Sorry,” Cutter said. “Impossible.”

Cortez made a helpless, shrugging gesture with both hands. “In that case we will inform the world that your government has invaded Colombia and has committed murder on a particularly epic scale. You are aware, of course, of what will probably happen to you, your President, and many senior members of your government. It took so long for you to get over all those other scandals. It must be very troubling to serve a government that has so many problems with its own laws and then uses them against its own servants.”

“You can’t blackmail the United States government.”

“Why not, Admiral? Our mutual profession carries risks, does it not? You nearly killed me with your first ‘car bomb,’ and yet I have taken no personal offense. Your risk is exposure. Untiveros’s family was there, you know, his wife and two little ones, eleven domestic servants, I believe. All dead from your bomb. I will not count those who were carrying guns, of course. A soldier must take a soldier’s chance. As did I. As must you, Admiral, except that yours is not a soldier’s chance. Your chance will be before your courts and television reporters, and congressional committees.” *What was the old soldier’s code?* Cortez asked himself. *Death before dishonor.* He knew that his guest had no stomach for either.

“I need time to—”

“Think? Excuse me, Admiral, but I must be back in four hours, which means I must leave here in fifteen minutes. My superiors do not know that I am gone. I have no time. Neither do you. I offer you the victory for which you and your President hoped. I require something in return. If we cannot agree, then the consequences will be unpleasant for both of us. It is that simple. Yes or no, Admiral?”

“What do you suppose they just shook hands about?”

“Cutter doesn’t look real happy about it. Call the car! Looks like they’re buggin’ out.”

“Who the hell was he meeting with, anyway? I don’t recognize him. If he’s a player, he’s not a local one.”

“I don’t know.” The car was late getting back, but the backup followed Cutter right back to his hotel. By the time Bright got back to the airfield, he

learned that the subject was planning a good night's sleep for himself. The VC-20A was scheduled for a noon departure right back to Andrews. Bright planned to beat it there by taking an early commercial flight to Miami and connecting into Washington National. He'd arrive half dead from fatigue, but he'd get there.

Ryan took the call for the Director—Judge Moore was finally on his way back, but was still three hours out of Dulles. Jack's driver was ready as the executive elevator opened onto the garage, and they immediately left for Bethesda. They got there too late. Jack opened the door to see the bed covered with a sheet. The doctors had already left.

"I was there at the end. He went out easy," one of the CIA people told him. Jack didn't recognize him, though he gave the impression that he'd been waiting for Jack to appear. "You're Dr. Ryan, right?"

"Yes," Jack said quietly.

"About an hour before he faded out, he said something about—to remember what you two talked about. I don't know what he meant, sir."

"I don't know you."

"John Clark." The man came over to shake Ryan's hand. "I'm Operations, but Admiral Greer recruited me, too, long time ago." Clark let out a breath. "Like losing a father. Twice."

"Yeah," Ryan said huskily. He was too tired, too wrung out to hide his emotions.

"Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee and tell you a few stories about the old guy." Clark was sad, but he was a man accustomed to death. Clearly Ryan was not, which was his good luck.

The cafeteria was closed, and they got coffee from a waiting-room pot. It was reheated and full of acid, but Ryan didn't want to go home just yet, and was late remembering that he'd driven his own car in. He'd have to drive himself home tonight. He was too tired for that. He decided to call home and tell Cathy that he'd be staying over in town. CIA had an arrangement with one of the local Marriotts. Clark offered to drive him down, and Jack dismissed his driver. By this time both men decided that a drink wasn't a bad idea.

Larson was gone from the room. He'd left a note saying that Maria would be coming in later that night, and he was going to pick her up. Clark had a small bottle of bourbon, and this Marriott had real glasses. He mixed two and handed one over to Jack Ryan.

"James Greer, the last of the good guys," Clark said as he raised his glass.

Jack took a sip. Clark had mixed it a little strong, and he nearly coughed.

"If he recruited you, how come—"

"Operations?" Clark smiled. "Well, sir, I never went to college, but Greer spotted me through some of his Navy contacts. It's a long story, and parts of it

I'm not supposed to tell, but our paths have crossed three times."

"Oh?"

"When the French went in to bag those *Action Directe* folks you found on the satellite photos, I was the liaison officer in Chad. The second time they went in, after the ULA people who took that dislike to you, I was on the chopper. And I'm the fool who went on the beach to bring Mrs. Gerasimov and her daughter out. And that, sir, was all your fault. I do the crazy stuff," Clark explained. "All the field work that the espionage boys wet their pants over. Of course, maybe they're just smarter than I am."

"I didn't know."

"You weren't supposed to know. Sorry we missed on bagging those ULA pukes. I've always wanted to apologize to you for that. The French were really good about it. They were so happy with us for fingering *Action Directe* that they wanted to give us the ULA heads on plaques. But there was this damned Libyan unit out on maneuvers, and the chopper just stumbled on them—that's a problem when you go zooming in low—and it turned out that the camp was probably empty anyway. Everybody was real sorry it didn't work out as planned. Might have saved you a little grief. We tried, Dr. Ryan. We surely tried."

"Jack." Ryan held out his glass for a refill.

"Fine. Call me John." Clark topped both drinks off. "The Admiral said I could tell you all that. He also said that you tumbled to what was happening down south. I was down there," Clark said. "What do you want to know?"

"You sure you can tell me that?"

"The Admiral said so. He's—excuse me, he was a deputy director, and I figure that means I can do what he told me to do. This bureaucratic stuff is a little confusing to a humble line-animal, but I figure you can never go far wrong by telling the truth. Besides, Ritter told me that everything we did was legal, that he had all the permission he needed for this hunting expedition. That permission had to come from one place. Somebody decided that this drug stuff was a 'clear and present danger'— that's a quote—to the security of the United States. Only one man has the power to say that for-real, and if he does, he has the authority to do something about it. Maybe I never went to college, but I do read a lot. Where do you want me to start?"

"At the beginning," Jack replied. He listened for over an hour.

"You're going back?" Ryan asked when he was finished.

"I think a chance at bagging Cortez is worth it, and I might be able to help with the extraction of those kids up in the mountains. I don't really like the idea, but it is what I do for a living. I don't suppose your wife likes all the things she has to do as a doc."

"One thing I gotta ask. How did you feel about guiding those bombs in?"

"How did you feel about shooting people, back when you did it?"

Jack nodded. “Sorry—I had that coming.”

“I joined up as a Navy SEAL. Lot of time in Southeast Asia. I got orders to go and kill people, and I went and killed ‘em. That wasn’t a declared war either, was it? You don’t go around braggin’ about it, but it’s the job. Since I joined the Agency I haven’t done very much of that—there have been times when I wished I could have done more of it, ’cause it might have saved a few lives in the long run. I had the head of Abu Nidal in my gunsights, but I never got permission to take the fucker out. Same story with two other people just as bad. It would have been deniable, clean, everything you want, but the lace-panty section at Langley couldn’t make up their minds. They told me to see if it was possible, and it’s just as dangerous to do that as it is to pull the trigger, but I never got the green light to complete the mission. From where I sit, it’s a good mission. Those bastards are the enemies of our country, they kill our citizens—taken out a couple Agency people, too, and not real pretty how they did it—but we don’t do anything about it. Tell me that makes sense. But I follow orders like I’m supposed to. Never violated one since I joined up.”

“How do you feel about talking to the FBI?”

“You gotta be kidding. Even if I felt like it, which I don’t, my main concern is those kids up in the hills. You hold me up on that, Jack, and some of them might get killed. Ritter called me earlier this evening and asked if I was willing to go back. I leave eight-forty tomorrow morning for Panama, and I stage from there back into Colombia.”

“You know how to get in touch with me?”

“That might be a good idea,” Clark agreed.

The rest had done everyone good. Aches had eased, and all hoped that the remaining stiffness would be worked out by the first few hours of movement. Captain Ramirez assembled his men and explained the new situation to them. He’d called in via his satellite link and requested extraction. The announcement was met with general approval. Unfortunately, he went on, the request had to be booted upstairs—with a favorable endorsement, VARIABLE had told him—and in any case the helicopter was down for an engine change. They’d be in-country at least one more night, possibly two. Until then, their mission was to evade contact and head for a suitable extraction point. These were already identified, and Ramirez had indicated the one he was heading for. It was fifteen kilometers away to the south. So the job for tonight was to skirt past the group that had been hunting for them. That would be tricky, but once past them it should be clear sailing through an area already swept. They’d try to cover eight or nine klicks tonight and the rest the following night. In any case the mission was over and they were pulling out. The recent arrivals from Team BANNER would form a third fire-team, augmenting KNIFE’S already formidable firepower. Everyone still had at least two-thirds of his original ammo load-out. Food was running short, but they had enough for two days if nobody minded a few stomach rumbles. Ramirez ended his briefing on a confident note. It hadn’t been cheap, and it hadn’t been easy, but

they had accomplished their mission and put a real hurtin' on the druggies. Now everybody had to keep it together for the trip out. The squad members exchanged nods and prepared to leave.

Chavez led off twenty minutes later. The idea was to keep as high on the mountain as they could. The opposition had shown a tendency to camp out lower down, and this way they stood the best chance of keeping clear. As always he was to avoid anything that looked like habitation. That meant giving a wide berth to the coffee plantations and associated villages, but that was what they had been doing anyway. They also had to move as fast as caution allowed, which meant that caution was downgraded. It was something often done in exercises, always with confidence. Ding's confidence in that sort of thing had also been downgraded by his experience in the field. The good news, as far as he was concerned, was that Ramirez was acting like an officer again. Probably he'd just been tired, too.

One nice thing about being close to the coffee plantations was that the cover wasn't so thick. People went into the woods to get fuel for their fires, and that thinned things out quite a bit. What effects it had on erosion wasn't Chavez's concern. That helped him to go faster, and he was covering nearly two kilometers per hour, which was far faster than he'd expected. By midnight his legs were telling him about every meter. Fatigue, he was learning again, was a cumulative factor. It took more than one day's rest to slough off all of its effects, no matter what sort of shape you were in. He wondered if the altitude wasn't also to blame. In any case he was still fighting to keep up the pace, to keep alert, to remember the path he was supposed to follow. Infantry operations are far more demanding intellectually than most people realize, and intellect is ever the first victim of fatigue.

He remembered a small village on the map, about half a klick from where he was at the moment, downhill. He'd taken the right turn at a landmark a klick back—he'd rechecked it at the rally point where they'd rested forty minutes earlier. He could hear noise from that direction. It seemed odd. The local peasants worked hard on the coffee plantations, he'd been told. They should have been asleep by now. Ding missed the obvious signal. He didn't miss the scream—more of a pant, really, the sort of sound made when—

He switched on his night scope and saw a figure running toward him. He couldn't tell—then he could. It was a girl, moving with considerable skill through the cover. Behind her was the noise of someone running after her with less skill. Chavez tapped the danger signal on his radio. Behind him everyone stopped and waited for his all-clear.

There wouldn't be one. The girl tripped and changed directions. A few seconds later she tripped again and landed right at Chavez's feet.

The sergeant clamped his left hand across her mouth. His other hand put a finger to his lips in the universal sign to be quiet. Her eyes went wide and white as she saw him—or more properly, didn't see him, just a melange of camouflage paint that looked like something from a horror movie.

"Señorita, you have nothing to fear from me. I am a soldier. I do not molest

women. Who is chasing you?" He removed his hand and hoped that she wouldn't scream.

But she couldn't even if she had wanted to, instead gasping out her reply. She'd run too far too fast. "One of their 'soldiers,' the men with guns. I—"

His hand went back on her mouth as the crashing sound came closer.

"Where are you?" the voice crooned.

Shit!

"Run that way," Chavez told her, pointing. "Do not stop and do not look back. Go!"

The girl took off and the man made for the noise. He ran right past Ding Chavez and precisely one foot farther. The sergeant clasped his hand across the man's face and took him down, pulling the head back as he did so. Just as both men hit the ground, Ding's combat knife made a single lateral cut. He was surprised by the noise. Escaping air from the windpipe combined with the spurting blood to make a gurgling sound that made him cringe. The man struggled for a few futile seconds, then went limp. The victim had a knife of his own, and Chavez set it in the wound. He hoped the girl wouldn't be blamed for it, but he'd done all that he could as far as she was concerned. Captain Ramirez showed up a minute later and was not very pleased.

"Didn't have much choice, sir," Chavez said in his own defense. Actually he felt rather proud of himself. After all, protecting the weak was the job of the soldier, wasn't it?

"Move your ass outa here!"

The squad moved especially fast to clear the area, but if anyone came looking for the amorous sleepwalker, no one heard anything to suggest it. It was the last incident of the night. They arrived at the preplanned stopover point just before dawn. Ramirez set up his radio and called in.

"Roger, KNIFE, we copy your position and your objective. We do not as yet have confirmation for the extraction. Please call back around eighteen hundred Lima. We ought to have things set up by then. Over."

"Roger, will call back at eighteen hundred. KNIFE out."

"Shame about BANNER," one communicator said to the other.

"These things do happen."

"Your name Johns?"

"That's right," the colonel said without turning at once. He'd just come back from a test flight. The new—actually rebuilt five-year-old—engine worked just fine. The Pave Low III was back in business. Colonel Johns turned to see to whom he was talking.

"Do you recognize me?" Admiral Cutter asked curtly. He was wearing his full uniform for a change. He hadn't done that in months, but the three stars

on each braided shoulder board gleamed in the morning sun, along with his ribbons and surface-warfare officer's badge. In fact, the general effect of the undress-white uniform was quite overpowering, right down to the white buck shoes. Just as he had planned.

"Yes, sir, I do. Please excuse me, sir."

"Your orders have been changed, Colonel. You are to return to your stateside base as soon as possible. That means today," Cutter emphasized.

"But what about—"

"That will be taken care of through other means. Do I have to tell you whose authority I speak with?"

"No, sir, you do not."

"You will not discuss this matter with anyone. That means nobody, anywhere, ever. Do you require any further instructions, Colonel?"

"No, sir, your orders are quite clear."

"Very well." Cutter turned and walked back to the staff car, which drove off at once. His next stop was a hilltop near the Gaillard Cut. There was a communications van there. Cutter walked right past the armed guard—he wore a Marine uniform but was a civilian—and into the van, where he made a similar speech. Cutter was surprised to learn that moving the van would be difficult and would require a helicopter, since the van was too large to be pulled down the little service road. He was, however, able to order them to shut down, and he'd see about getting a helicopter to lift the van out. Until then they would stay put and not do anything. Their security was blown, he explained, and further transmissions would only further endanger the people with whom they communicated. He got agreement on that, too, and left. He boarded his aircraft at eleven in the morning. He'd be home in Washington for supper.

Mark Bright was there just after lunch. He handed his film cassettes over to a lab expert and proceeded to Dan Murray's busy office, where he reported what he had seen.

"I don't know who he met with, but maybe you'll recognize the face. How about the Amex number?"

"It's a CIA account that he's had access to for the past two years. This is the first time he's used it, though. The local guy faxed us a copy so we could run the signature. Forensics has already given us a handwriting match," Murray said. "You look a little tuckered."

"I don't know why—hell, I must have slept three hours in the past day and a half. I've done my D.C. time. Mobile was supposed to be a nice vacation."

Murray grinned. "Welcome back to the unreal world of Washington."

"I had to get some help to pull this off," Bright said next.

"Like what?" Murray wasn't smiling anymore.

"Air Force personnel, intel and CID types. I told 'em this was code-word

material, and, hell, even if I had told them everything I know, which I didn't, I don't know what the story is myself. I take responsibility, of course, but if I hadn't done it, I probably wouldn't have gotten the shots."

"Sounds to me like you did the right thing," Murray said. "I don't suppose you had much choice in the matter. It happens like that sometimes."

Bright acknowledged the official forgiveness. "Thanks."

They had to wait five more minutes for the photographs. Decks had been cleared for this case, but even priority cases took time, much to the annoyance of everyone. The technician—actually a section chief—arrived with the moist prints.

"I figured you'd want these babies in a hurry."

"You figured right, Marv—Holy Christ!" Murray exclaimed. "Marv, this is code-word."

"You already told me, Dan. Lips are zipped. We can enhance them some, but that'll take another hour. Want me to get that started?"

"Fast as you can." Murray nodded, and the technician left. "Christ," Murray said again when he reexamined the photos. "Mark, you take a mean picture."

"So who the hell is it?"

"Félix Cortez."

"Who's that?"

"Used to be a DGI colonel. We missed him by a whisker when we bagged Filiberto Ojeda."

"The Macheteros case?" That didn't make any sense.

"No, not exactly." Murray shook his head. He spoke almost reverently, thought for a minute, and called for Bill Shaw to come down. The acting Director was there within a minute. Agent Bright was still in the dark when Murray pointed his boss to the photographs. "Bill, you ain't going to believe this one."

"So who the hell is Félix Cortez?" Bright asked.

Shaw answered the question. "After he skipped out of Puerto Rico, he went to work for the Cartel. He had a piece of Emil's murder, how much we don't know, but he sure as hell was involved. And here he is, sitting with the President's National Security Adviser. Now what do you suppose they had to talk about?"

"It's not with this batch, but I got a picture of them shaking hands," the junior agent announced.

Shaw and Murray just stared at him when he said that. Then at each other. *The President's head national-security guy shook hands with somebody who works for the drug Cartel ... ?*

"Dan," Shaw said, "what the hell is going on? Has the whole world just gone crazy?"

"Sure looks that way, doesn't it?"

"Put a call in to your friend Ryan. Tell him ... Tell his secretary that there's a terrorism thing—no, we can't risk that. Pick him up on the way home?"

"He's got a driver."

"That's a big help."

"I got it." Murray lifted his phone and dialed a Baltimore number. "Cathy? Dan Murray. Yeah, we're fine, thanks. What time does Jack's driver usually get him home? Oh, he didn't? Okay, I need you to do something, and it's important, Cathy. Tell Jack to stop off at Danny's on the way home to, uh, to pick the books up. Just like that, Cathy. This isn't a joke. Can you do that? Thanks, doc." He replaced the phone. "Isn't that conspiratorial?"

"Who's Ryan—isn't he CIA?"

"That's right," Shaw answered. "He's also the guy who dumped this case in our laps. Unfortunately, Mark, you are not cleared for it."

"I understand, sir."

"Why don't you see how quick you can fly home and find out how much that new baby's grown. Damned nice work you did here. I won't forget," the acting Director promised him.

Pat O'Day, a newly promoted inspector working out of FBI Headquarters, watched from the parking lot as a subordinate stood on the flight line in the soiled uniform of an Air Force technical sergeant. It was a clear, hot day at Andrews Air Force Base, and a D.C. Air National Guard F-4C landed right ahead of the VC-20A. The converted executive jet taxied to the 89th's terminal on the west side of the complex. The stairs dropped and Cutter walked out wearing civilian clothes. By this time—through Air Force intelligence personnel—the Bureau knew that he'd visited a helicopter crew and a communications van in the morning. So far no one had approached either of them to find out why, because headquarters was still trying to figure things out, and, O'Day thought, failing miserably—but that was headquarters for you. He wanted to go back out to the field where the real cops were, though this case did have its special charm. Cutter walked across to where his personal car was parked, tossed his bag in the back seat, and drove off, with O'Day and his driver in visual pursuit. The National Security Adviser got onto Suitland Parkway heading toward D.C., then, after entering the city, onto I-395. They expected him to get off at the Maine Avenue exit, possibly heading toward the White House, but instead the man just kept going to his official residence at Fort Myer, Virginia. A discreet surveillance didn't get more routine than that.

"Cortez? I know that name. Cutter met with a former DGI guy?" Ryan asked.

"Here's the photo." Murray handed it over. The lab troops had run it

through their computerized enhancement process. One of the blackest of the Bureau's many forensic arts, it had converted a grainy photographic frame to glossy perfection. Moira Wolfe had again verified Cortez's identity, just to make everyone sure. "Here's another." The second one showed them shaking hands.

"This'll look good in court," Ryan observed as he handed the frames back.

"It's not evidence," Murray replied.

"Huh?"

Shaw explained. "High government officials meet with ... with strange people all the time. Remember the time when Kissinger made the secret flight to China?"

"But that was—" Ryan stopped when he realized how dumb his objection sounded. He remembered a clandestine meeting with the Soviet Party chairman that he couldn't tell the FBI about. How would *that* look to some people?

"It isn't evidence of a crime, or even a conspiracy, unless we know that what they talked about was illegal," Murray told Jack. "His lawyer will argue, probably successfully, that his meeting with Cortez, while appearing to be irregular, was aimed at the execution of sensitive but proper government policy."

"Bullshit," Jack observed.

"The attorney would object to your choice of words, and the judge would have it stricken from the record, instruct the jury to disregard it, and admonish you about your language in court, Dr. Ryan," Shaw pointed out. "What we have here is a piece of interesting information, but it is not evidence of a crime until we know that a crime is being committed. Of course, it is bullshit."

"Well, I met with the guy who guided the 'car bombs' into the targets."

"Where is he?" Murray asked at once.

"Probably back in Colombia by now." Ryan explained on for a few minutes.

"Christ, who is this guy?" Murray asked.

"Let's leave his name out of it for a while, okay?"

"I really think we should talk to him," Shaw said.

"He's not interested in talking to you. He doesn't want to go to jail."

"He won't." Shaw rose and paced around the room. "In case I never told you, I'm a lawyer, too. In fact, I have a J.D. If we were to attempt to try him, his lawyer would throw Martinez-Barker at us. You know what that is? A little-known result of the Watergate case. Martinez and Barker were Watergate conspirators, right? Their defense, probably an honest one, was that they thought the burglary was sanctioned by properly constituted authority as part of a national-security investigation. In a rather wordy majority opinion, the appeals court ruled that there had been no criminal intent, the defendants had

acted in good faith throughout, and therefore no actual crime had been committed. Your friend will say on the stand that once he'd heard the 'clear and present danger' pronouncement from his superiors, and been told that authorization came from way up the chain of command, he was merely following orders given by people who had sufficient constitutional authority to do so. I suppose Dan already told you, there really isn't any law in a case like this. Hell, the majority of my agents would probably like to buy your guy a beer for avenging Emil's death."

"What I can tell you about this guy is that he's a serious combat vet, and as far as I could tell, he's a very straight guy."

"I don't doubt it. As far as the killing is concerned—we've had lawyers say that the actions of police snipers come awfully close to cold-blooded murder. Drawing a distinction between police work and combat action isn't always as easy as we would like. In this case, how do you draw the line between murder and a legitimate counterterrorist operation? What it'll come down to—hell, it will mainly reflect the political beliefs of the judges who try the case, and the appeal, and every other part of the proceeding. Politics. You know," Shaw said, "it was a hell of a lot easier chasing bank robbers. At least then you knew what the score was."

"There's the key to it right there," Ryan said. "How much you want to bet that this whole thing started because it was an election year?"

Murray's phone rang. "Yeah? Okay, thanks." He hung up. "Cutter just got in his car. He's heading up the G.W. Parkway. Anybody want to guess where he's going?"

26.

Instruments of State

INSPECTOR O'DAY THANKED his lucky stars—he was an Irishman and believed in such things—that Cutter was such an idiot. Like previous National Security Advisers he'd opted against having a Secret Service detail, and the man clearly didn't know the first thing about countersurveillance techniques. The subject drove right onto the George Washington Parkway and headed north in the firm belief that nobody would notice. No doubling back, no diversion into a one-way street, nothing that one could learn from watching a TV cop show or better yet, reading a Philip Marlowe mystery, which was how Patrick O'Day amused himself. Even on surveillances, he'd play Chandler tapes. He had more problems figuring those cases out than the real ones, but that was merely proof that Marlowe would have made one hell of a G-Man. This sort of case didn't require that much talent. Cutter might have been a Navy three-star, but he was a babe in the woods as far as conspiracy went. His personal car didn't even change lanes, and took the exit for CIA unless, O'Day thought, he had an unusual interest in the Federal Highway Administration's Fairbanks Highway Research Station, which was probably closed in any case. About the only bad news was that picking Cutter up when he left would be tough to do. There wasn't a good place to hide a car here—CIA security was pretty good. O'Day dropped his companion off to keep watch in the woods by the side of the road and whistled up another car to assist. He fully expected that Cutter would reappear shortly and drive right home.

The National Security Adviser never noticed the tail and parked in a VIP slot. As usual, someone held open the door and escorted him to Ritter's office on the seventh floor. The Admiral took his seat without a friendly word.

"Your operation is really coming apart," he told the DDO harshly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I met with Félix Cortez last night. He knows about the troops. He knows about the recon on the airfields. He knows about the bombs, and he knows about the helicopter we've been using to support SHOWBOAT. I'm shutting everything down. I've already had the helicopter fly back to Eglin, and I ordered the communications people at VARIABLE to terminate operations."

"The hell you have!" Ritter shouted.

"The hell I haven't. You're taking your orders from me, Ritter. Is that clear?"

“What about our people?” the DDO demanded.

“I’ve taken care of that. You don’t need to know how. It’s all going to quiet down,” Cutter said. “You got your wish. There is a gang war underway. Drug exports are going to be cut by half. We can let the press report that the drug war is being won.”

“And Cortez takes over, right? Has it occurred to you that as soon as he’s settled in, things change back?”

“Has it occurred to you that he can blow the operation wide open? What do you suppose will happen to you and the Judge if he does that?”

“The same thing that’ll happen to you,” Ritter snarled back.

“Not to me. I was there, so was the Attorney General. The President never authorized you to kill anybody. He never said anything about invading a foreign country.”

“This whole operation was your idea, Cutter.”

“Says who? Do you have my signature on a single memo?” the Admiral asked. “If this gets blown, the best thing you can hope for is that we’ll be on the same cellblock. If that Fowler guy wins, we’re both fucked. That means we can’t let it get blown, can we?”

“I do have your name on a memo.”

“That operation is already terminated, and there’s no evidence left behind, either. So what can you do to expose me without exposing yourself and the Agency to far worse accusations?” Cutter was rather proud of himself. On the flight back from Panama he’d figured the whole thing out. “In any case, I’m the guy giving the orders. The CIA’s involvement in this thing is over. You’re the only guy with records. I suggest that you do away with them. All the traffic from SHOWBOAT, VARIABLE, RECIPROCITY, and EAGLE EYE gets destroyed. We can hold on to CAPER. That’s one part of the op that the other side hasn’t cottoned to. Convert that into a straight covert operation and we can still use it. You have your orders. Carry them out.”

“There will be loose ends.”

“Where? You think people are going to volunteer for a stretch in federal prison? Will your Mr. Clark announce the fact that he killed over thirty people? Will that Navy flight crew write a book about dropping two smart-bombs on private homes in a friendly country? Your radio people at VARIABLE never actually saw anything. The fighter pilot splashed some airplanes, but who’s he going to tell? The radar plane that guided him in never saw him do it, because they always switched off first. The special-ops people who handled the land side of the operation at Pensacola won’t talk. And there are only a few people from the flight crews we captured. I’m sure we can work something out with them.”

“You forgot the kids we have in the mountains,” Ritter said quietly. He knew that part of the story already.

“I need information on where they are so that I can arrange for a pickup.

I'm going to handle that through my own channels, if you don't mind. Give me the information."

"No."

"That wasn't a request. You know, I just could be the guy who exposes you. Then your attempts to tie me in with all this would merely look like a feeble effort at exculpating yourself."

"It would still wreck the election."

"And guarantee your imprisonment. Hell, Fowler doesn't even believe in putting serial killers in the chair. How do you think he'll react to dropping bombs on people who haven't even been indicted—and what about that 'collateral damage' you were so cavalier about? This is the only way, Ritter."

"Clark is back in Colombia. I'm sending him after Cortez. That would also tie things up." It was Ritter's last play, and it wasn't good enough.

Cutter jerked in his chair. "And what if he blows it? It is not worth the risk. Call off your dog. That, too, is an order. Now give me that information—and shred your files."

Ritter didn't want to. But he didn't see an alternative. The DDO walked to his wall safe—the panel was open at the moment—and pulled out the files. In SHOWBOAT-II was a tactical map showing the programmed exfiltration sites. He gave it to Cutter.

"I want it all done tonight."

Ritter let out a breath. "It will be."

"Fine." Cutter folded the map into his coat pocket. He left the office without another word.

It all came down to this, Ritter told himself. Thirty years of government service, running agents all over the world, doing things that his country needed to have done, and now he had to follow an outrageous order or face Congress, and courts, and prison. And the best alternative would be to take others there with him. It wasn't worth it. Bob Ritter worried about those kids in the mountains, but Cutter said that he'd take care of it. The Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency told himself that he could trust the man to keep his word, knowing that he wouldn't, knowing that it was cowardice to pretend that he would.

He lifted the files off the steel shelves himself, taking them to his desk. Against the wall was a paper shredder, one of the more important instruments of contemporary government. These were the only copies of the documents in question. The communications people on that hilltop in Panama shredded everything as soon as they uplinked copies to Ritter's office. CAPER went through NSA, but there was no operational traffic there, and those files would be lost in the mass of data in the basement of the Fort Meade complex.

The machine was a big one, with a self-feeding hopper. It was entirely normal for senior government officials to destroy records. Extra copies of sensitive files were liabilities, not assets. No notice would be taken of the fact

that the clear plastic bag that had been empty was now filled with paper pasta that had once been important intelligence documents. CIA burned tons of the stuff every day, and used some of the heat that was generated to make hot water for the washrooms. Ritter set the papers in the hopper in half-inch lots, watching the entire history of his field operations turn to rubbish.

"There he is," the junior agent said into his portable radio. "Southbound."

O'Day picked the man up three minutes later. The backup car was already on Cutter, and by the time O'Day had caught up, it was clear that he was merely returning to Fort Myer, the VIP section off Sherman Road, east of the officers' club. Cutter lived in a red brick house with a screen porch overlooking Arlington National Cemetery, the garden of heroes. To Inspector O'Day, who'd served in Vietnam, what little he knew of the man and the case made it seem blasphemous that he should live here. The FBI agent told himself that he might be jumping to an inaccurate conclusion, but his instincts told him otherwise as he watched the man lock his car and walk into the house.

One benefit of being part of the President's staff was that he had excellent personal security when he wanted it, and the best technical security services as a matter of course. The Secret Service and other government agencies worked very hard and very regularly to make sure that his phone lines were secure. The FBI would have to clear any tap with them, and would also have to get a court order first, neither of which had been done. Cutter called a WATS line number—with a toll-free 800 prefix—and spoke a few words. Had anyone recorded the conversation he would have had a problem explaining it, but then so would the listener. Each word he spoke was the first word on a dictionary page, and the number of each page had three digits. The old paperback dictionary had been given him before he left the house in Panama, and he would soon discard it. The code was as simple and easy to use as it was effective, and the few words he spoke indicated pages whose numbers combined to indicate map coordinates for a few locations in Colombia. The man on the other end of the line repeated them back and hung up. The WATS-LINE call would not show up on Cutter's phone bill as a long-distance call. The WATS account would be terminated the next day. His final move was to take the small computer disk from his pocket. Like many people he had magnets holding messages to his refrigerator door. Now he waved one of them over the disk a few times to destroy the data on it. The disk itself was the last existing record of the soldiers of Operation SHOWBOAT. It was also the last means of reopening the satellite radio link to them. It went into the trash. SHOWBOAT had never happened.

Or that's what Vice Admiral James A. Cutter, USN, told himself. He mixed himself a drink and walked out onto his porch, looking down across the green carpet to the countless head-stones. Many times he'd walked over to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, watching the soldiers of the President's Guard go through their mechanistic routine before the resting places of men who had

served their country to the utmost. It occurred to him now that there would be more unknown soldiers, fallen on some nameless field. The original unknown soldier had died in France in World War I, and had known what he fought for —or thought he did, Cutter corrected himself. Most often they never really understood what it was all about. What they were told wasn't always the truth, but their country called, and off they went to do their duty. But you really needed a perspective to understand what it was all about, how the game was played. And that didn't always—ever?—jibe with what the soldiers were told. He remembered his own service off the coast of Vietnam, a junior officer on a destroyer, watching five-inch-gun rounds pound the beach, and wondering what it was like to be a soldier, living in the mud. But still they went to serve their country, not knowing that the country herself didn't know what service she needed or wanted. An army was composed of young kids who did their job without understanding, serving with their lives, and in this case, with their deaths.

"Poor bastards," he whispered to himself. It really was too bad, wasn't it? But it couldn't be helped.

It surprised everyone that they couldn't get the radio link working. The communications sergeant said that his transmitter was working just fine, but there was no answer from VARIABLE at six o'clock local time. Captain Ramirez didn't like it, but decided to press on to the extraction point. There had been no fallout from Chavez's little adventure with the would-be rapist, and the young sergeant led off for what he expected would be the last time. The enemy forces had swept this area, stupidly and oafishly, and wouldn't be back soon. The night went easily. They moved south in one-hour segments, stopping off at rally points, looping their path of advance to check for trailers, and detecting none. By four the following morning, they were at the extraction site. It was a clearing just downhill from a peak of eight thousand feet, lower than the really big crests, and conducive to a covert approach. The chopper could have picked them up nearly anywhere, of course, but their main consideration was still stealth. They'd be picked up, and no one would ever be the wiser. It was a shame about the men they'd lost, but no one would ever really know what they'd been here for, and the mission, though a costly one, had been a success. Captain Ramirez had said so.

He set his men in a wide perimeter to cover all approaches, with fallback defensive positions in case something untoward and unexpected happened. When that task was completed, he again set up his satellite radio and started transmitting. But again, there was no reply from VARIABLE. He didn't know what the problem was, but to this point there had been no hint of trouble, and communications foul-ups were hardly unknown to any infantry officer. He wasn't very worried about this one. Not yet, anyway.

Clark was caught rather short by the message. He and Larson were just planning their flight back to Colombia when it arrived. Just a message form

with a few code-words, it was enough to ignite Clark's temper, so vile a thing that he labored hard to control it in the knowledge that it was his most dangerous enemy. He wanted to call Langley, but decided against it, fearing that the order might be restated in a way difficult to ignore. As he cooled off, his brain started working again. That was the danger of his temper, Clark reminded himself, it stopped him from thinking. He sure as hell needed to think now. In a minute he decided that it was time for a little initiative.

"Come on, Larson, we're going to take a little ride." That was easily accomplished. He was still "Colonel Williams" to the Air Force, and got himself a car. Next came a map, and Clark picked his brain to remember the path to that hilltop.... It took an hour, and the last few hundred yards were a potholed nightmare of a twisted, half-paved road. The van was still there, as was the single armed guard, who came forward to give them a less than eager greeting.

"Stand down, mister, I was here before."

"Oh, it's you—but, sir, I'm under orders to—"

Clark cut him off. "Don't argue with me. I know about your orders. Why the hell do you think I'm here? Now be a good boy and safe that weapon before you hurt yourself." Clark walked right past him, again amazing Larson, who was far more impressed with loaded and pointed guns.

"What gives?" Clark asked as soon as he was inside. He looked around. All the gear was turned off. The only noise was from the air-conditioning units.

"They shut us down," the senior communicator answered.

"Who shut you down?"

"Look, I can't say, all right, I got orders that we're shut down. That's it. You want answers, go see Mr. Ritter."

Clark walked right up to the man. "He's too far away."

"I got my orders."

"What orders?"

"To shut down, damn it! We haven't transmitted or received anything since lunchtime yesterday," the man said.

"Who gave you the orders?"

"I can't say!"

"Who's looking after the field teams?"

"I don't know. Somebody else. He said our security was blown and it was being handed over to somebody else."

"Who—you can tell me this time," Clark said in an eerily calm voice.

"No, I can't."

"Can you call up the field teams?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Their satellite radios are encoded. The algorithm is on computer disk. We downloaded all three copies of the encryption keys and erased two of 'em. He watched us do it and took the third disk himself."

"How do you reestablish the link?"

"You can't. It's a unique algorithm that's based on the time transmissions from NAVSTAR satellites. Secure as hell, and just about impossible to duplicate."

"In other words those kids are completely cut off?"

"Well, no, he took the third disk, and there's somebody else who's—"

"Do you really believe that?" Clark asked. The man's hesitation answered the question. When the field officer spoke again, it was in a voice that didn't brook resistance. "You just told me that the commo link was unbreakable, but you accepted a statement from somebody you never saw before that it had been compromised. We got thirty kids down there, and it sounds like they've been abandoned. Now, who gave the orders to do it?"

"Cutter."

"He was *here?"*

"Yesterday."

"Jesus." Clark looked around. The other officer couldn't bring himself to look up. Both men had speculated over what was really happening, and had come to the same conclusion that he had. "Who set up the commo plan for this mission?"

"I did."

"What about their tactical radios?"

"Basically they're commercial sets, a little customized. They have a choice of ten SSB frequencies."

"You have the freqs?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Give them to me right now."

The man thought to say that he couldn't do that, but decided against it. He'd just say that Clark threatened him, and it didn't seem like the right time to start a little war in the van. That was accurate enough. He was very much afraid of Mr. Clark at this moment. He pulled the sheet of frequencies from a drawer. It hadn't occurred to Cutter to destroy that, too, but he had the radio channels memorized anyway.

"If anybody asks ..."

"You were never here, sir."

"Very good." Clark walked out into the darkness. "Back to the air base," Clark told Larson. "We're looking for a helicopter."

Cortez had made it back to Anserma without note having been taken of his seven-hour absence, and had left behind a communications link that knew how to find him, and now, rested and bathed, he waited for the phone to ring. He congratulated himself, first, on having set up a communications net in America as soon as he'd taken the job with the Cartel; next on his performance with Cutter, though not as much for this. He could scarcely have lost, though the American had made it easier through his own stupidity, not unlike Carter and the marielitos, though at least the former President had been motivated by humanitarian aims, not political advantage. Now it was just a matter of waiting. The amusing part was the book code that he was using. It was backwards from the usual thing. Normally a book code was transmitted in numbers to identify words, but this time words indicated numbers. Cortez already had the American tactical maps—anyone could buy American military maps from their Defense Mapping Agency, and he'd been using them himself to run his operation against the Green Berets. The book-code system was always a secure method of passing information; now it was even more so.

Waiting was no easier for Cortez than for anyone else, but he amused himself with further planning. He knew what his next two moves were, but what about after that? For one thing, Cortez thought, the Cartel had neglected the European and Japanese markets. Both regions were flush with hard currency, and while Japan might be hard to crack—it was hard to import things legally into that market—Europe would soon get much easier. With the EEC beginning its integration of the continent into a single political entity, trade barriers would soon start to come down. That meant opportunity for Cortez. It was just a matter of finding ports of entry where security was either lax or negotiable, and then setting up a distribution network. Reducing exports to America could not be allowed to interfere with Cartel income, after all. Europe was a market barely tapped, and there he would begin to expand the Cartel horizons with his surplus product. In America, reduced demand would merely increase price. In fact, he expected that his promise to Cutter—a temporary one to be sure—would have a small but positive effect on Cartel income. At the same time, the disorderly American distribution networks would sort themselves out rapidly after the supply was reduced. The strong and efficient would survive, and once firmly established, would conduct business in a more orderly way. Violent crime was more troublesome to the *yanquis* than the actual drug addiction that caused it. Once the violence abated, drug addiction itself would lose some of the priority in the pantheon of American social problems. The Cartel wouldn't suffer. It would grow in riches and power so long as people desired its product.

While that was happening, Colombia itself would be further subverted, but more subtly. That was one more area in which Cortez had been given professional training. The current lords used a brute-force approach, offering money while at the same time threatening death. No, that would also have to stop. The lust in the developed countries for cocaine was a temporary thing, was it not? Sooner or later it would become unfashionable, and demand would gradually diminish. That was one thing that the lords didn't see. When it

began to happen, the Cartel had to have a solid political base and a diversified economic foundation if it wished to survive the diminution of its power. That demanded a more accommodating stance with its parent country. Cortez was prepared to establish that, too. Eliminating some of the more obnoxious lords would be a major first step toward that goal. History taught that you could reach a *modus vivendi* with almost anybody. And Cortez had just proven it to be true.

The phone rang. He answered it. He wrote down the words given him and after hanging up, picked up the dictionary. Within a minute he was making marks on his tactical map. The American Green Berets were not fools, he saw. Their encampments were all set on places difficult to approach. Attacking and destroying them would be very costly. Too bad, but all things had their price. He summoned his staff and started getting radio messages out. Within an hour, the hunter groups were coming down off the mountains to redeploy. He'd hit them one at a time, he decided. That would guarantee sufficient strength to overwhelm each detachment, and also guarantee sufficient losses that he'd have to draw further on the retainers of the lords. He would not accompany the teams up the mountains, of course, but that was also too bad. It might have been amusing to watch.

Ryan hadn't slept at all well. A conspiracy was one thing when aimed at an external enemy. His career at CIA had been nothing more than that, an effort to bring advantage to his own country, often by inflicting disadvantage, or harm, upon another. That was his job as a servant of his country's government. But now he was in a conspiracy that was arguably against the government itself. The fact denied him sleep.

Jack was sitting in his library, a single reading lamp illuminating his desk. Next to him were two phones, one secure, one not. It was the latter which rang.

"Hello?"

"This is John," the voice said.

"What's the problem?"

"Somebody cut off support for the field teams."

"But why?"

"Maybe somebody wants them to disappear."

Ryan felt a chill at the back of his neck. "Where are you?"

"Panama. Communications have been shut down and the helicopter is gone. We have thirty kids on hilltops waiting for help that ain't gonna come."

"How can I reach you?" Clark gave him a number. "Okay, I'll be back to you in a few hours."

"Let's not screw around." The line clicked off.

"Jesus." Jack looked into the shadows of his library. He called his office to

say that he'd drive himself into work. Then he called Dan Murray.

Ryan was back in the FBI building underpass sixty minutes later. Murray was waiting for him and took him back upstairs. Shaw was there, too, and much-needed coffee was passed out.

"Our field guy called me at home. VARIABLE has been shut down, and the helicopter crew that was supposed to bring them out has been pulled. He thinks they're going to be—hell, he thinks—"

"Yeah," Shaw observed. "If so, we now have a probable violation of the law. Conspiracy to commit murder. Proving it might be a little tough, though."

"Stuff your law—what about those soldiers?"

"How do we get them out?" Murray asked. "Get help from—no, we can't get the Colombians involved, can we?"

"How do you think they'd react to an invasion from a foreign army?" Shaw noted. "About the same way we would."

"What about confronting Cutter?" Jack asked. Shaw answered.

"Confront him with what? What do we have? Zip. Oh, sure, we can get those communications guys and the helicopter crews and talk to them, but they'll stonewall for a while, and then what? By the time we have a case, those soldiers are dead."

"And if we can bring them out, then what case do we have?" Murray asked. "Everybody runs for cover, papers get shredded...."

"If I may make a suggestion, gentlemen, why don't we forget about courtrooms for the moment and try to concentrate on getting those grunts the hell out of Indian country?"

"Getting them out is fine, but—"

"You think your case will get better with thirty or forty new victims?" Ryan snapped. "What is the objective here?"

"That was a cheap shot, Jack," Murray said.

"Where's your case? What if the President authorized the operation, with Cutter as his go-between, and there's no written orders? CIA acted in accordance with verbal orders, and the orders are arguably legal, except that I got told to mislead Congress if they ask, *which they haven't done yet!* There's also that little kink in the law that says we can start a covert operation without telling them, no matter what it is—the limits on our covert ops come from a White House Executive Order, remember—as long as we do get around to telling them. Therefore a killing authorized by the guy who puts out the Executive Order can only become a murder *retroactively* if something extraneous to the murder itself does not happen! What bonehead ever set these statutes up? Have they ever really been tested in court?"

"You left something out," Murray observed.

“Yeah, the most obvious reply from Cutter is that this isn’t a covert operation at all, but a paramilitary counterterrorist op. That evades the whole issue of intelligence-oversight. Now we come under the War Powers Resolution, which has another lead-time factor. Have any of these laws ever been tested in court?”

“Not really,” Shaw answered. “There’s been a lot of dancing around, but nothing actually on point. War-Powers especially is a constitutional question that both sides are afraid to put in front of a judge. Where are you coming from, Ryan?”

“I got an agency to protect, don’t I? If this adventure goes public, the CIA reverts back to what it was in the seventies. For example, what happens to your counterterrorist programs if the info we feed you dries up?” That one scored points, Jack saw. CIA was the silent partner in the war on terrorism, feeding most of its data to the Bureau, as Shaw had every reason to know. “On the other hand, from what we’ve talked about the last couple of days, what real case do you have?”

“If by withdrawing support for SHOWBOAT, Cutter made it easier for Cortez to kill them, we have a violation of the District of Columbia law against conspiracy to commit murder. In the absence of a federal law, a crime committed on federal property can be handled by the municipal law that applies to the violation. Some part of what he did was accomplished here or on other federal property, and that’s where the jurisdiction comes from. That’s how we investigated the cases back in the seventies.”

“What cases were they?” Jack asked Shaw.

“It spun out of the Church Committee hearings. We investigated assassination plots by CIA against Castro and some others—they never came to trial. The law we would have used was the conspiracy statute, but the constitutional issues were so murky that the investigation died a natural death, much to everyone’s relief.”

“Same thing here, isn’t it? Except while we fiddle ...”

“You’ve made your point,” the acting Director said. “Number one priority is getting them out, any way we can. Is there a way to do it covertly?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Look, for starters let’s get in touch with your field officer,” Murray suggested.

“He doesn’t—”

“He gets immunity, anything he wants,” Shaw said at once. “My word on it. Hell, far as I can tell he hasn’t really broken any laws anyway—because of Martinez-Barker—but you have my word, Ryan, no harm comes to him.”

“Okay.” Jack pulled the slip of paper from his shirt pocket. The number Clark had given him wasn’t a real number, of course, but by adding and subtracting to the digits in a prearranged way, the call went through.

“This is Ryan. I’m calling from FBI Headquarters. Hold on and listen.” Jack

handed the phone over.

"This is Bill Shaw. I'm acting Director. Number one, I just told Ryan that you are in the clear. My word: no action goes against you. Will you trust me on that? Good." Shaw smiled in no small surprise. "Okay, this is a secure line, and I presume that your end is the same way. I need to know what you think is going on, and what you think we can do about it. We know about the kids, and we're looking for a way to get them out. From what Jack tells us, you might have some ideas. Let's hear them." Shaw punched the speaker button on his phone, and everyone started taking notes.

"How fast do you think we can have the radios set up?" Ryan wondered when Clark had finished.

"The technicians start getting in around seven-thirty, figure by lunch. What about transport?"

"I think I can handle that," Jack said. "If you want covert, I can arrange covert. It means letting somebody else in, but it's somebody we can trust."

"No way we can talk to them?" Shaw asked Clark, whose name he didn't yet know.

"Negative," the speaker said. "You sure you can pull it off on your end?"

"No, but we can give it a pretty good try," Shaw replied.

"See you tonight, then." The line clicked off.

"Now all we have to do is steal some airplanes," Murray thought aloud. "Maybe a ship, too? So much the better if we bring it off covertly, right?"

"Huh?" That one threw Ryan. Murray explained.

Admiral Cutter emerged from his house at 6:15 for his daily jog. He headed downhill toward the river and chugged along the path paralleling the George Washington Parkway. Inspector O'Day followed. A reformed smoker, the inspector had no problems keeping up, and watched for anything unusual, but nothing appeared. No messages passed, no dead-drops laid, just a middle-aged man trying to keep fit. Another agent picked him up as Cutter turned for home. O'Day would change and be ready to follow Cutter into work, wondering if he'd spot some unusual behavior there.

Jack showed up for work at the usual hour, looking as tired as he felt. The morning conference in Judge Moore's office began at 8:30, and for once there was a full crew, though there might as well not have been. The DCI and DDO, he saw, were quiet, nodding but not taking very many notes.

These were—well, not friends, Ryan thought. Admiral Greer had been a friend and mentor. But Judge Moore had been a good boss, and though he and Ritter had never really gotten along, the DDO had never treated him unfairly. He had to give them one more chance, Jack told himself impulsively. When the conference ended, he was slow picking up his things while the others left.

Moore caught the cue, as did Ritter.

"Jack, you want to say something?"

"I'm not sure I'm right for DDI," Ryan opened.

"Why do you say that?" Judge Moore asked.

"Something's happening that you aren't telling me about. If you don't trust me, I shouldn't have the job."

"Orders," Ritter said. He was unable to hide his discomfort.

"Then you look me straight in the eye and tell me it's all legitimate. I'm supposed to know. I have a right to know." Ritter looked to Judge Moore.

"I wish we were able to let you in on this, Dr. Ryan," the DCI said. He tried to bring his eyes up to meet Jack's, but they wavered and fixed on a spot of wall. "But I have to follow orders, too."

"Okay. I've got some leave coming. I want to think a few things over. My work is all caught up. I'm out of here for a few days, starting in an hour."

"The funeral's tomorrow, Jack."

"I know. I'll be there, Judge," Ryan lied. Then he left the room.

"He knows," Moore said after the door closed.

"No way."

"He knows and he wants to be out of the office."

"So what do we do about it if you're right?"

The Director of Central Intelligence looked up this time. "Nothing. That's the best thing we can do right now."

That was clear. Cutter had done better than he knew. In destroying the radio encryption codes needed to communicate with the four teams, KNIFE, BANNER, FEATURE, and OMEN, he'd eliminated the Agency's ability to affect the turn of events. Neither Ritter nor Moore really expected the National Security Adviser to get the men out, but they had no alternative that would not damage themselves, the Agency, and their President—and, incidentally, their country. If Ryan wanted out of the way if things came apart—well, Moore thought, maybe he had sensed something. The DCI didn't blame him for wanting to stay clear.

There were still things he had to tie up, of course. Ryan left the building just after eleven that morning. He had a car phone in his Jaguar and placed a call to a Pentagon number. "Captain Jackson, please," he said when it was picked up. "Jack Ryan calling." Robby picked up a few seconds later.

"Hey, Jack!"

"How's lunch grab you?"

"Fine with me. My place or yours, boy?"

"You know Artie's Deli?"

"K Street at the river. Yeah."

"Be there in half an hour."

"Right."

Robby spotted his friend at a corner table and came right over. There was already a place set for him, and another man was at the table.

"I hope you like corned beef," Jack said. He waved to the other man. "This is Dan Murray."

"The Bureau guy?" Robby asked as they shook hands.

"Correct, Captain. I'm a deputy assistant director."

"Doing what?"

"Well, I'm supposed to be in the Criminal Division, but ever since I got back I've been stuck supervising two major cases. You ought to be able to guess which ones they are."

"Oh." Robby started working on his sandwich.

"We need some help, Rob," Jack said.

"Like what?"

"Like we need you to get us somewhere quietly."

"Where?"

"Hurlburt Field. That's part of—"

"Eglin, I know. Hurlburt's where the Special Operations Wing works out of; it's right next to P-cola. Whole lot of people been borrowing Navy airplanes lately. The boss doesn't like it."

"You can tell him about this," Murray said. "Just so it doesn't leave his office. We're trying to clean something up."

"What?"

"I can't say, Rob," Jack replied. "But part of it is what you brought to me. It's a worse mess than you think. We have to move real fast, and nobody can know about it. We just need a discreet taxi service for the moment."

"I can do that, but I want to clear it with Admiral Painter."

"Then what?"

"Meet me at Pax River at two o'clock, down the hill at Strike. Hell, I've wanted to do a little proficiency flying anyway."

"Might as well finish your lunch."

Jackson left them five minutes later. Ryan and Murray did the same, driving to the latter's house. Here Jack made a phone call to his wife, telling her that he had to be out of town for a few days and not to worry. They drove away in

Ryan's car.

Patuxent River Naval Air Test Center is located about an hour's drive from Washington, on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Formerly one of the nicer plantations of antebellum Maryland, it was now the Navy's primary flight-test and evaluation center, fulfilling most of the functions of the better-known Edwards Air Force Base in California. It is the home of the Navy's Test Pilot School, where Robby had been an instructor, and houses various test directorates, one of which, located a mile or two downhill from the main flight line, is called Strike. The Strike Directorate is concerned with fighter and attack planes, the sexy fast-movers. Murray's FBI identification was sufficient to get them on base, and after checking in with the Strike security shack, they found a place to wait, listening to the bellow of afterburning jet engines. Robby's Corvette arrived twenty minutes later. The new captain led them into the hangar.

"You're in luck," he told them. "We're taking a couple of Tomcats down to Pensacola. The Admiral called ahead, and they're preflighting the birds already. I, uh—"

Another officer came into the room. "Cap'n Jackson? I'm Joe Bramer," the lieutenant said. "I hear we're heading down south, sir."

"Correct, Mr. Bramer. These gents are going with us. Jack Murphy and Dan Tomlinson. They're government employees who need some familiarization with Navy flight procedures. Think you can rustle up some poopy suits and hard hats?"

"No problem, sir. Be back in a minute."

"You wanted covert. You got covert," Jackson chuckled. He pulled his flight suit and helmet from a bag. "What gear you guys bringing along?"

"Shaving kits," Murray replied. "And one bag."

"We can handle that."

Fifteen minutes later, everyone climbed up ladders to board the aircraft. Jack got to fly with his friend. Five minutes after that, the Tomcats were taxiing to the end of the runway.

"Go easy, Rob," Ryan said as they awaited clearance for takeoff.

"Like an airliner," Jackson promised. It wasn't quite that way. The fighters leapt off the ground and streaked to cruising altitude about twice as fast as a 727, but Jackson kept the ride smooth and level once he got there.

"What gives, Jack?" he asked over the intercom.

"Robby, I can't—"

"Did I ever tell you all the things I can make this baby do for me? Jack, my boy, I can make this baby sing. I can turn inside a virgin quail."

"Robby, what we're trying to do is rescue some people who may be cut off. And if you tell that to anyone, even your Admiral, you might just screw things up for us. You ought to be able to figure it out from there."

“Okay. What about your car?”

“Just leave it there.”

“I’ll get somebody to put the right sticker on it.”

“Good idea.”

“You’re getting better about flying, Jack. You haven’t whimpered once.”

“Yeah, well, I got one more flight today, and that one’s in a fucking helicopter. I haven’t ridden one of those since the day my back got broken on Crete.” It felt good to tell him that. The real question, of course, was whether or not they’d get the chopper. But that was Murray’s job. Jack turned his head to look around and was stunned to see the other Tomcat only a few feet off their right wingtip. Murray waved at him. “Christ, Robby!”

“Huh?”

“The other plane!”

“Hell, I told him to ease it off some, must be twenty feet away. We always fly in formation.”

“Congratulations, you just got your whimper.”

The flight lasted just over an hour. The Gulf of Mexico appeared first as a blue ribbon on the horizon, then grew into an oceanic mass of water as the two fighters headed down to land. Pensacola’s strips were visible to the east, then got lost in the haze. It struck Ryan as odd that he feared flying less when he rode in a military aircraft. You could see better, and somehow that made a difference. But the fighters even landed in formation, which seemed madly dangerous, though nothing happened. The wingman touched first, and then Robby’s a second or two later. Both Tomcats rolled out and turned at the end of the runway, stopping near a pair of automobiles. Some groundcrew men had ladders.

“Good luck, Jack,” Robby said as the canopy came up.

“Thanks for the ride, man.” Jack managed to detach himself from the airplane without help and climbed down. Murray was beside him a minute later. Both entered the waiting cars, and behind them the Tomcats taxied away to complete their flight to nearby Pensacola Naval Air Station.

Murray had called ahead. The officer who met them was the intelligence chief for the 1st Special Operations Wing.

“We need to see Colonel Johns,” Murray said after identifying himself. That was the only conversation needed for the moment. The car took them past the biggest helicopters Ryan had ever seen, then to a low block building with cheap windows. The wing intelligence officer took them in. He handled the introduction of the visitors, thinking erroneously that Ryan was also FBI, then left the three alone in the room.

“What can I do for you?” PJ asked warily.

“We want to talk about trips you made to Panama and Colombia,” Murray replied.

“Sorry, we don’t discuss what we do here very freely. That’s what special ops are all about.”

“A couple of days ago you were given some orders by Vice Admiral Cutter. You were in Panama then,” Murray said. “Before that you had flown armed troops into Colombia. First you took them into the coastal lowlands, then you pulled them out and reinserted them into the hill country, correct?”

“Sir, I cannot comment on that, and whatever inference you draw is yours, not mine.”

“I’m a cop, not a reporter. You’ve been given illegal orders. If you carry them out, you may be an accessory to a major felony charge.” Best to get things immediately on the table, Murray thought. It had the desired effect. Hearing from a senior FBI official that his orders might be illegal forced Johns to respond, though only a little bit.

“Sir, you’re asking me something I don’t know how to respond to.”

Murray reached into his bag and pulled out a manila envelope. He removed a photograph and handed it to Colonel Johns. “The man who gave you those orders, of course, was the President’s National Security Adviser. Before he met with you, he met with this guy. That is Colonel Félix Cortez. He used to be with the DGI, but now he’s working for the Drug Cartel as chief of security. He was instrumental in the Bogotá murders. Exactly what they agreed on we do not know, but I can tell you what we do know. There is a communications van over the Gaillard Cut that had been the radio link with the four teams on the ground. Cutter visited it and shut it down. Then he came to see you and ordered you to fly home and never talk about the mission. Now, you put all three of those things together and tell me if what you do come up with sounds like something you want to be part of.”

“I don’t know, sir.” Johns’ response was automatic, but his face had gone pink.

“Colonel, those teams have already taken casualties. It appears likely that the orders you were given might have been aimed at getting them all killed. People are out hunting them right now,” Ryan said. “We need your help to go get them out.”

“Who exactly are you, anyway?”

“CIA.”

“But it’s your goddamned operation!”

“No, it isn’t, but I won’t bore you with the details,” Jack said. “We need your help. Without it, those soldiers aren’t going to make it home. It’s that simple.”

“So you’re sending us back to clean up your mess. That’s the way it always is with you people, you send us out—”

“Actually,” Murray said, “we were planning to go with you. Part of the way anyway. How soon can you be in the air?”

"Tell me exactly what you want." Murray did just that. Colonel Johns nodded and checked his watch.

"Ninety minutes."

The MH-53J was far larger than the CH-46 that had nearly ended Ryan's life at twenty-three, but no less frightening to him. He looked at the single rotor and remembered that they were making a long, over-water flight. The flight crew was businesslike and professional, hooking both civilians up to the intercom and telling them where to sit and what to do. Ryan was especially attentive to the ditching instructions. Murray kept looking at the miniguns, the impressive six-barrel gatlings set next to enormous hoppers of live shells. There were three for this flight. The helicopter lifted off just after four and headed southwest. As soon as they were airborne, Murray had a crewman attach him to the floor with a twenty-foot safety line so that he could walk around. The hatch at the rear of the aircraft was half open, and he walked back to watch the ocean pass beneath them. Ryan stayed put. The ride was better than the Marine Corps helicopters he remembered, but it still felt like sitting on a chandelier during an earthquake as the aircraft vibrated and oscillated beneath its enormous six-bladed rotor. He could look forward and see one of the pilots, just sitting there as comfortably as though at the wheel of a car. But, Ryan told himself, it wasn't a car.

What he hadn't anticipated was the midair refueling. He felt the aircraft increase power and take a slightly nose-up attitude. Then through the front window he saw the wing of another aircraft. Murray hastened forward to watch, standing behind the crew chief, Sergeant Zimmer. He and Ryan were both hooked into the intercom.

"What happens if you tangle with the hose?" Murray asked as they neared the drogue.

"I don't know," Colonel Johns answered coolly. "It's never happened to me yet. You want to keep it quiet now, sir?"

Ryan looked around for "facilities." He saw what looked like a camper's john, but getting to it meant taking his seat belt off. Jack decided against it. The refueling ended without incident, entirely due, Jack was sure, to his prayers.

Panache was cruising on her station in the Yucatan Channel, between Cuba and the Mexican Coast, following a racetrack pattern. There hadn't been much in the way of activity since the cutter had gotten here, but the crew took comfort from the fact that they were back at sea. The great adventure at the moment was observing the new female crewmen. They had a new female ensign fresh from the Coast Guard Academy in Connecticut, and a half dozen others, mainly unrated seamen, but two petty officers, both electronics types, who, their peers grudgingly admitted, knew their jobs. Captain Wegener was watching the new ensign stand watch as junior officer of the deck. Like all

new ensigns she was nervous and eager and a little scared, especially with the skipper on the bridge. She was also cute as a button, and that was something Wegener had never thought of an ensign before.

"Commanding officer, commanding officer," the bulkhead speaker called. Wegener picked up the phone next to his bridge chair.

"Captain here. What is it?"

"Need you in the radio room, sir."

"On the way." Red Wegener rose from his chair. "Carry on," he said on his way aft.

"Sir," the petty officer told him in the radio shack, "we just got a transmission from an Air Force helo, says he's got a person he has to drop off here. Says it's secret, sir. I don't have anything on my board about it, and ... well, sir, I didn't know what to do, sir. So I called you."

"Oh?" The woman handed him the microphone. Wegener depressed the transmit button. "This is *Panache.* Commanding officer speaking. Who am I talking to?"

"Panache, this is CAESAR. Helicopter inbound your position on a Sierra-Oscar. I have a drop-off for you, over."

Sierra-Oscar meant some sort of special operation. Wegener thought for a moment, then decided that there wasn't all that much to think about.

"Roger, CAESAR, say your ETA."

"ETA one-zero minutes."

"Roger, one-zero minutes. We'll be waiting. Out." Wegener handed the microphone back and returned to the bridge.

"Flight quarters," he told the OOD. "Miss Walters, bring us to Hotel Corpin."

"Aye aye, sir."

Things started happening quickly and smoothly. The bosun's mate of the watch keyed the 1-MC: "Flight quarters, flight quarters, all hands man your flight-quarter stations. Smoking lamp is out topside." Cigarettes sailed into the water and hands removed their caps, lest they be sucked into somebody's engines. Ensign Walters looked to see where the wind was, and altered course accordingly, also increasing the cutter's speed to fifteen knots, thus bringing the ship to Hotel Corpin, the proper course for flight operations. And all, she told herself proudly, without having to be told. Wegener turned away and grinned. It was one of many first steps in the career of a new officer. She'd actually known what to do and done it without help. For the captain it was like watching his child take a first step. Eager and smart.

"Christ, it's a big one," Riley said on the bridge wing. Wegener went out to watch.

The helicopter, he saw, was an Air Force -53, far larger than anything the Coast Guard had. The pilot brought it in from aft, then pivoted to fly sideways. Someone was attached to the rescue cable and lowered down to the waiting

arms of four deck crewmen. The instant he was detached from the harness, the helicopter lowered its nose and moved off to the south. Quick and smooth, Red noted.

"Didn't know we were getting company, sir," Riley observed as he pulled out a cigar.

"We're still at flight quarters, Chief!" Ensign Walters snapped from the wheelhouse.

"Yes, ma'am, beg pardon, I forgot," the bosun responded with a crafty look at Wegener. Another test passed. She wasn't afraid to yell at the master chief, even if he was older than her father.

"You can secure from flight quarters," the CO told her. "I didn't know either," Wegener told Riley. "I'm going aft to see who it is." He heard Ensign Walters give her orders, under the supervision of a lieutenant and a couple of chiefs.

The visitor, he saw as he approached the helo deck door, was stripping off a green flight suit, but didn't appear to be carrying anything, which seemed odd. Then the man turned around, and it just got stranger.

"Howdy, Captain," Murray said.

"What gives?"

"You got a nice quiet place to talk?"

"Come along." They were in Wegener's cabin shortly thereafter.

"I figure I owe you for a couple of favors," he said. "You could have given me a bad time over that dumb stunt we pulled. Thanks for the tip on the lawyer, too. What he told me was pretty scary—but it turns out that I didn't talk to him until after the two bastards were killed. Last time I ever do something that dumb," Wegener promised. "You're here to collect, right?"

"Good guess."

"So what's going on? You don't just borrow one of those special-ops helos for a personal favor."

"I need you to be someplace tomorrow night."

"Where?"

Murray pulled an envelope from his pocket. "These coordinates. I have the radio plan, too." Murray gave him a few more details.

"You did this yourself, didn't you?" the captain said.

"Yeah, why?"

"Because you ought to have checked the weather."

27.

The Battle of Ninja Hill

ARMIES HAVE HABITS. These often appear strange or even downright crazy to outsiders, but for all of them there is an underlying purpose, learned over the four millennia in which men have fought one another in an organized fashion. Mainly the lessons learned are negative ones. Whenever men are killed for no good purpose, it is the business of armies to learn from the mistake and ensure that it will never happen again. Of course, such mistakes are repeated as often in the profession of arms as in any other, but also as in all professions, the really good practitioners are those who never forget fundamentals. Captain Ramirez was one of these. Though the captain had learned that he had too much sentiment, that the loss of life which was part and parcel of his chosen way of life was too difficult a burden to bear, he still remembered the other lessons, one of which was reinforced by the most recent and unpleasant discovery. He still expected to be picked up tonight by the Air Force helicopter, and felt reasonably sure that he had evaded the teams set out to hunt Team KNIFE, but he remembered all the lessons of the past when soldiers died because the unexpected happened, because they took things for granted, because they forgot the fundamentals.

The fundamental rule here was that a unit in a fixed location was always vulnerable, and to reduce that vulnerability, the intelligent commander prepared a defense plan. Ramirez remembered that, and hadn't lost a keen eye for terrain. He didn't think that anyone would come to trouble his men that night, but he had already prepared for that eventuality.

His deployments reflected the threat, which he evaluated as a very large but relatively untrained force, and his two special advantages: first, that all of his men had radios, and second, that there were three silenced weapons at his disposal. Ramirez hoped that they wouldn't come calling, but if they did, he planned to give them a whole series of nasty surprises.

Each of his men was part of a two-man team for mutual support—there is nothing so fearful as to be alone in a combat action, and the effectiveness of any soldier is multiplied many times over merely by having a single comrade at his side. Each pair had dug three holes—called Primary, Alternate, and Supplementary—as part of three separate defensive networks, all of them camouflaged and carefully sited to be mutually supporting. Where possible, fire lanes were cleared, but always on oblique lines so that the fire would take the attacker from the side, not the front, and part of the plan was to force the attacker to move in a direction anticipated by the Team. Finally, if everything

broke down, there were three preplanned escape routes and corresponding rally points. His men kept busy all day, digging their holes, preparing their positions, siting their remaining claymore mines, until their rest periods were occupied only with sleep and not conversation. But he couldn't keep himself quite that busy, and couldn't keep himself from thinking.

Through the day things kept getting worse. The radio link was never reestablished, and every time Ramirez came up at a scheduled time and heard nothing, the thinner became his explanations for it. He could no longer wave it off as an equipment or power failure at the downlink. Throughout the afternoon he told himself that it was impossible they were cut off, and he never even considered the possibility that they had been cut off, but the nagging thought grew louder in the back of his mind that he and his men were alone, far from home, facing a potential threat with only what they had carried in on their own backs.

The helicopter landed back at the same facility it had only left two days before, taxiing into the hangar whose door was immediately closed. The MC-130 that had accompanied them down was similarly hidden. Ryan was exhausted by the flight and walked off with wobbly legs to find Clark waiting. The one really good piece of news was that Cutter had neglected to take the simple expedient of meeting with the base commander, never thinking that his orders would be disregarded. As a result, the reappearance of the special-operations aircraft was just another odd occurrence, and one green helicopter —in shadows they looked black—was pretty much the same as another.

Jack returned to the aircraft after making a trip to the rest room and drinking about a quart of water from the cooler. Introductions had already been explained, and he saw that Colonel Johns had hit it off with Mr. Clark.

"Third SOG, eh?"

"That's right, Colonel," Clark said. "I never made it into Laos myself, but you guys saved a few of our asses. I've been with the Agency ever since—well, almost," Clark corrected himself.

"I don't even know where to go. That Navy prick had us destroy all our maps. Zimmer remembers some of the radio freqs, but—"

"I got the freqs," Clark said.

"Fine, but we still have to find 'em. Even with tanker support, I don't have the legs to do a real search. There's a lot of country down there, and the altitude murders our fuel consumption. What's the opposition like?"

"Lots of people with AKs. Oughta sound familiar."

PJ grimaced. "It does. I got three minis. Without any air support ..."

"You guessed right: you are the air support. I'd hold on to the miniguns. Okay, the exfiltration sites were agreed upon beforehand?" Clark asked.

"Yeah—a primary and two backups for each team, total of twelve."

“We have to assume that they are known to the enemy. The job for tonight is finding ’em and getting them somewhere else that we know about and they don’t. Then tomorrow night you can fly in for the pickup.”

“And from there out.... The FBI guy wants us to land on that little boat. I’m worried about *Adele.* The last weather report I saw at noon had it heading north toward Cuba. I want to update that.”

“I just did,” Larson said as he rejoined the group. *“Adele* is heading west again, and she made hurricane an hour ago. Core winds are now seventy-five.”

“Oh, shit,” Colonel Johns observed. “How fast is she moving?”

“It’s going to be close for tomorrow night, but no problem for our flight this evening.”

“What flight is that, now?”

“Larson and I are going to hop down to locate the teams.” Clark pulled a radio out of what had been Murray’s bag. “We fly up and down the valley, talking on these. With luck we’ll get contact.”

“You must really believe in luck, son,” Johns said.

O‘Day reflected that the life of an FBI agent wasn’t always as glamorous as people thought. There was also the little problem that with less than twenty agents on the case he couldn’t assign this distasteful task to a junior agent. But the case had enough of those problems. They hadn’t even considered getting a search warrant yet, and sneaking into Cutter’s quarters without legal authorization—something that the Bureau seldom did anymore—was impossible. Cutter’s wife had just gotten back and was bossing her staff of stewards around like a woman to the manor born. On the other hand, the Supreme Court had ruled a few years before that trash-searching didn’t require the sanction of a court. That fact enabled Pat O’Day to get the best upper-body workout he’d had in years. Now he could barely raise his arms after having loaded a few tons of malodorous garbage bags into the back of a white-painted trash truck. It might have been one of several cans. The VIP section of Fort Myer was still a military post; even the trash cans had to be set up just so, and in this case, two homes shared each stopping place for the equally well-organized trash contractor. O‘Day had marked the bags before loading them into the back of the truck, and as a result, fifteen garbage bags were now sitting in one of the Bureau’s many laboratories, though not one that was part of the tourist route, since the FBI shows only its best face to those who tour the Hoover Building, the nice, clean, antiseptic labs. The only good news was that the ventilation system was good, and there were several cans of air freshener around to disguise the smells that got past the technicians’ surgical masks. O’Day himself felt as though a squadron of bluebottle flies would follow him for the rest of his life. The search took an hour as the garbage was processed across a white tabletop of imitation marble, about four days’ worth of coffee grinds and half-eaten croissants, decomposing merengue, and several diapers—those were from the wrong house: the officer next door to the

Cutters had his new granddaughter visiting.

"Bingo," a technician said. His gloved hand held up a computer disk. Even with the gloves, he held it on opposite corners and dropped it into an extended plastic baggie. O'Day took the bag and walked upstairs to latent prints.

Two senior technicians were working overtime tonight. They'd cheated somewhat, of course. They already had a copy of Admiral Cutter's fingerprints from the central print index—all military personnel are printed as a matter of course upon their enlistment—along with their entire bag of tricks, which included a laser.

"What was it in?" one of them asked.

"On top of some newspapers," O'Day replied.

"Aha! No extraneous grease, and good insulation against the heat. There may be a chance." The technician removed the disk from the clear bag and went to work. It took ten minutes, while O'Day paced the room.

"I got a thumbprint with eight points on the front side, and what is probably a smudged ring finger on the back side with one good point and one very marginal one. There is one completely different set, but it's too smudged to identify. It's a different pattern, though, has to be a different person."

O'Day figured that that was more than he'd had the right to expect under the circumstances. A fingerprint identification ordinarily required ten individual points—the irregularities that constituted the art of fingerprint identification—but that number had always been arbitrary. The inspector was certain that Cutter had handled this computer disk, even if a jury might not be completely sure, if that time ever came. Now it was time to see what was on it, and for that he headed to a different lab.

Since personal computers had entered the marketplace, it was only a matter of time until they were used in criminal enterprises. To investigate such use, the Bureau had its own department, but the most useful people of all were private consultants whose real business was "hacking," and for whom computers were marvelous toys and their use the most entertaining of games. To have an important government agency pay them for playing the game was their equivalent of a pro-football career. The one O'Day found waiting for him was one of the champs. He was twenty-five, and still a student at a local community college despite over two hundred hours of credits, the lowest grade for which had been a B+. He had longish red hair and a beard, both of which needed washing. O'Day handed it over.

"This is a code-word case," he said.

"That's nice," the consultant said. "This is a Sony MFD-2DD microfloppy, double-sided, double-density, 135TPI, probably formatted for 800K. What's supposed to be on it?"

"We're not sure, but probably an encipherment algorithm."

"Ah! Russian communications systems? The Sovs getting sophisticated on

us?"

"You don't need to know that," O'Day pointed out.

"You guys are no fun at all," the man said as he slid the disk into the drive. The computer to which it was attached was a new Apple Macintosh IIx, each of whose expander slots was occupied by a special circuit board, two of which the technician had personally designed. O'Day had heard that he'd work on an IBM only if someone put a gun to his head.

The programs he used for this task had been designed by other hackers to recover data from damaged disks. The first one was called Rescuedata. The operation was a delicate one. First the read heads mapped each magnetic zone on the disk, copying the data over to the eight-megabyte memory of the IIx and making a permanent copy on the hard drive, plus a floppy-disk copy. That allowed him to eject the original, which O'Day immediately reinserted in the baggie.

"It's been wiped," the man said next.

"What?"

"It's been wiped, not erased or initialized, but wiped. Probably with a little toy magnet."

"Shit," O'Day observed. He knew enough about computers to realize that the magnetically stored data was destroyed by magnetic interference.

"Don't get excited."

"Huh?"

"If this guy had initialized the disk, we'd be screwed, but he just swiped a magnet around. Some of the data is gone, but some probably isn't. Give me a couple of hours and maybe I can get some of this data back for you—there's a smidge right there. It's in machine language, but I don't recognize the format ... looks like a transposition algorithm. I don't know any of that cryppie stuff, sir. Looks fairly complex." He looked around. "This is going to take some time."

"How long?"

"How long to paint the Mona Lisa? How long to build a cathedral, How long ..." O'Day was out of the room before he heard the third one. He dropped the disk off in the secure file in his office, then headed for the gym for a shower and a half hour in the whirlpool. The shower removed the stink, and while the whirlpool went to work on the aches, O'Day reflected that the case against the son of a bitch was shaping up rather nicely.

"Sir, they just ain't there."

Ramirez handed the headset back and nodded. There was no denying it now. He looked over to Guerra, his operations sergeant.

"I think somebody forgot about us."

"Well, that's good news, Cap'n. What are we gonna do about it?"

“Our next check-in time is zero-one-hundred. We give ’em one more chance. If nothing by then, I guess we move out.”

“Where to, sir?”

“Head down off the mountain, see if we can borrow some transport and—Christ, I don’t know. We probably have enough cash we can use to fly out of here—”

“No passports, no ID.”

“Yeah. Make it to the Embassy in Bogotá?”

“That violates about a dozen different orders, sir,” Guerra pointed out.

“First time for everything,” Captain Ramirez observed. “Have everybody eat their last rations, rest up as best they can. We stand-to in two hours, and stay alert all night. I want Chavez and León to patrol down the hill, say two klicks’ worth.” Ramirez didn’t have to say what he was worried about. As unlikely as intellect told them it had to be, he and Guerra were on the same wavelength.

“It’s cool, Cap’n,” the sergeant assured him. “We’re going to be all right, just as soon as those REMFs get their shit together.”

The mission briefing took fifteen minutes. The men were angry and restive at the losses they had taken, not fully appreciative of the danger that lay ahead, only of their rage at what had already happened to their numbers. Such bravado, Cortez thought, such machismo. *The fools.*

The first target was only thirty kilometers away—for the obvious reasons he wanted to deal with the nearest one first—and twenty-two of them could be covered by truck. They had to wait for darkness, of course, but sixteen trucks rolled out, each with fifteen or so men aboard. Cortez watched them depart, muttering to one another as they pulled out of sight. His own people stayed behind, of course. He had so far recruited ten men, and their loyalty was to him alone. He’d recruited well, of course. No nonsense about who their parents were or how faithfully they had killed. He’d selected them for their skills. Most were dropouts from M-19 and FARC, men for whom five years of playing at guerrilla warfare had been enough. Some had received training in Cuba or Nicaragua and had basic soldier skills—actually terrorist skills, but that put them ahead of the “soldiers” of the Cartel, most of whom had never received formal training at all. They were mercenaries. Their only interest in Cortez was in the money he’d paid them, but he’d also promised them more. More to the point, there was nowhere else for them to go. The Colombian government had no use for them. The Cartel would not have trusted them. And they had forsworn their loyalty to the two Marxist groups which were so politically bankrupt that they allowed themselves to be hired out by the Cartel. That left Cortez. He was the man they would kill for. He hadn’t confided in them, since he didn’t yet trust them to do any more than that, but all great movements began with small groups of people whose methods were as murky as their objectives, who knew only loyalty to a single man. At least that’s what Cortez had been taught. He didn’t fully believe that himself, but it

was enough for the moment. He had no illusions about leading a revolution. He was merely executing—what was it called? A hostile takeover. Yes, that was right. Cortez chuckled to himself as he walked back inside and started looking at his maps.

"Good thing neither one of us is a smoker," Larson said as the wheels came up. In the cabin behind them was an auxiliary fuel tank. They had a two-hour flight down to their patrol area, and two hours back, with three hours of loiter time on station. "You suppose this is going to work?"

"If it doesn't, somebody's going to pay," Clark replied. "What about the weather?"

"We'll sneak back in ahead of it. Don't make any bets on tomorrow, though."

Chavez and León were two kilometers away from the team's farthest listening post. Both carried silenced weapons. León hadn't been the point scout for BANNER, but had woodcraft skills that Chavez liked. The best news of all was that they found nothing. Captain Ramirez had briefed them on what he was worried about. So far they hadn't detected it, which was fine with the two sergeants. They'd gone down to the north initially, then gradually come south while covering an arc of several kilometers, looking for signs, listening for noise. They were just turning for the climb back to the LZ when Chavez stopped and turned.

It was a metallic sound. He waved for León to freeze and pivoted his head around, hoping—what? he asked himself. Hoping that he'd really heard something? Hoping that he'd imagined it? He switched his goggles and scanned downhill. There was a road down there somewhere. If somebody came calling, it would be from that direction.

It was hard to tell at first. There was thick overhead cover here, and the relative absence of light forced him to turn the brightness control to the maximum. That made the picture fuzzy, like a pre-cable TV signal from a distant city, and what he was looking for was far off—at least five hundred meters, which was as far as he could see down a thinned-out area of the forest. The tension only made him more alert, but that made his imagination work all the harder, and he had to guard against seeing things that weren't there.

But something was there. He could feel it even before the noise returned. There were no more metallic sounds, but there was ... there was the over-loud whisper of leaves, and then it was a calm night again in the lee of the mountain. Chavez looked over to León, who also had his goggles on, was also looking that way, a green image on the tube. The goggled face turned toward Chavez and nodded. There was no emotion in the gesture, just the professional communication of an unpleasant thought. Chavez knelt to activate his radio.

"Six, this is Point," Ding called.

“Six here.”

“We’re at the turn-back point. We got movement down here, about half a klick below us. We’re gonna wait to see what it is.”

“Roger. Be careful, Sergeant,” Ramirez said.

“Will do. Out.” León came over to join him.

“How d‘you want to play this?” ’Berto asked.

“Let’s stay close, try not to move too much till we see what they’re up to.”

“You got it. Better cover about fifty meters uphill.”

“Go ahead, I’ll be right behind you.” Chavez took one more look downhill before following his comrade up to a stand of thick trees. Still nothing he could really identify on the speckled screen. Two minutes later he was at the new perch.

’Berto saw it first and pointed down a trail. The moving specks were larger than the noise generated by the viewing system. Heads. Four or five hundred meters off. Coming straight up the hill.

Okay, Chavez said to himself. *Let’s get a count.* He felt himself relaxing. This was business. He’d done it all before. The great unknown was now behind him. There would be a fight. He knew how to do that.

“Six, this is Point, estimate company strength, heading right up to you.”

“Anything else?”

“They’re moving kinda slow. Careful, like.”

“How long can you stay there?”

“Maybe a couple minutes.”

“Stay as long as it’s safe, then move. Try to pace them for another klick or so. We want to get as many as possible into the sack.”

“Roger.”

“These numbers suck, man,” León whispered.

“We sure as hell want to whittle ‘em down some ’fore we run, don’t we?” Chavez returned his eyes to the advancing enemy. He saw no obvious organization. They were taking their time, moving slowly up the hill, though he could easily hear them now. They moved in little bands of three or four, probably groups of friends, he thought, like street gangs did. You wanted a friend at your back.

Street gang, he thought. They didn’t bother with colors down here like in his barrio, just those damned AK-47s. No real plan, no fire and maneuver teams. He wondered if they had radios to coordinate with. Probably not. He realized, a little late, that they did know where they were going. He didn’t understand how they knew, but it only meant that they were heading into one hell of an ambush. But there were still a lot of ’em. An awful lot.

“Time to move,” Ding told ’Berto.

They raced uphill, or went as fast as their training allowed, choosing one good observation point after another and keeping their commander posted on their position and the enemy's. Ahead of them, up the hill, the squad had nearly two hours to reorient itself and prepare its ambush. Chavez and León copied his radio message on their own sets. The squad was moving forward to meet the attackers well in front of the primary defensive line. It was set between two particularly steep sections, anchored at those points with the SAWs, covering an approach route less than three hundred meters wide. If the enemy was dumb enough to come through there, well, that was their problem, wasn't it? So far they had taken a direct route to the LZ. Maybe they'd been told that KNIFE probably was there, not certainly, Chavez thought, as he and León picked their spot, just below one of the SAWs.

"Six, this is Point, we are in position. Enemy is three hundred meters below us."

Click-click.

"I see 'em," another voice called over the radio net. "Grenade One sees 'em."

"Medic has 'em."

"SAW One has 'em."

"Grenade Two. We got 'em."

"KNIFE, this is Six. Let's everybody be cool," Ramirez said calmly. "Looks like they're coming right in the front door. Remember the signal, people...."

It took another ten minutes. Chavez switched off his scope both to save batteries and to get his eyes back to normal. His mind played and replayed the squad fire-plan. He and León had specific areas of responsibility. Each soldier was supposed to limit his fire to an individual arc. All the arcs interlocked and overlapped somewhat, but they were supposed to hunt in their own little patch and not hose down the entire area. Even the two SAWs on line were so limited. The third was well behind the firing line with the small reserve force, ready to support the squad as it pulled back or to react to something unexpected.

They were within a hundred meters of the line now. The front rank of the advancing enemy was perhaps eighteen or twenty men, with others struggling behind to keep up. They moved slowly, careful of their footing, weapons held at port across their chests. Chavez counted three in his area of responsibility. León kept watch downhill as he brought his weapon up.

In the old days it was done with volley fire. Napoleonic infantry formed up shoulder-to-shoulder in ranks of two or four, leveling their muskets on command and firing on one another in one dreadful blast of power and ball. The purpose was shock. The purpose still is. Shock to unsettle those enemies fortunate enough to escape instant death, shock to tell them that this was not a place they wanted to be, shock to interfere with their performance, to stop them, to confuse them. It is no longer done with massed columns of muskets. Today it is done by letting them get very, very close, but the impact remains

as much psychological as physical.

Click-click-click. Get ready, Ramirez ordered. Across the line, the riflemen snugged their weapons into their shoulders. The machine guns came up on their bipods. Safeties went off. In the center of the line, the captain wrapped his hand around a length of communications wire. It was fifty yards long, and attached to its other end was a tin can containing a few pebbles. Slowly, carefully, he pulled the wire taut. Then he yanked it hard.

The sudden sound froze the moment in time. It was as if everything stopped for an instant that seemed to last for hours. The men in front of the light-fighters turned instinctively toward the sound in their midst, away from the unknown threat that lay to their front and their flanks, away from the fingers that had just begun to press down.

The moment ended with the white muzzle flashes of the squad. The leading fifteen attackers dropped in an instant. Behind them five more died or were wounded before fire was returned. Then the firing from above stopped. The attackers responded late. Many of them emptied whole magazines in the general direction of uphill, but the soldiers were down in their holes, denying the attackers targets.

"Who fired? Who fired? What is going on here?" It was the voice of Sergeant Olivero, whose accent was perfect.

Confusion is the ally of the prepared. More men rushed forward into the killing zone to see what was happening, wondering who had shot at whom. Chavez and all the others counted to ten before coming back up. Ding had two men within thirty meters of his position. On "Ten!" he dropped one with a three-round burst and wounded the other. Maybe a dozen more enemies were down now.

Click-click-click-click-click. "Everybody move out," Ramirez called over the radios.

The drill was the same across the line. One man from each pair took off at once, racing fifty meters uphill before stopping at a preselected spot. The SAWs, which had thus far fired only short bursts as though they were mere rifles, now fired long ones to cover the disengagement. Within a minute, KNIFE had moved away from the area now being beaten with late and inaccurate fire. One man was grazed by a stray round, but ignored it. As usual, Chavez was the last to leave and the slowest to move, picking his way from one thick tree to another as the returning fire became heavier. He reactivated his goggles to get a view of things. Perhaps thirty men were down in the kill zone, only half of them moving. Too late, the enemy was looping around the south side, trying to envelop a position already deserted. He watched them come into the position he and León had occupied only minutes before, and they just stood there in confusion, still wondering what had happened. There were screams from the wounded now, and then the curses started, obscene, powerful curses of enraged men who were accustomed to inflicting death, not receiving it. New voices became clear over the din of sporadic rifle fire and curses and screams. Those would be the leaders, giving orders loudly and in a

language all of the soldiers understood. Chavez had just started believing that this battle would be easily won when he took his final look.

"Oh, shit." He keyed his radio. "Six, this is Point. This is greater than company strength, sir. Say again, more than company strength. I estimate three-zero enemy casualties at this time. They just started moving up again. I got thirty or so moving south. Somebody's telling 'em to try 'n surround us."

"Roger, Ding. Get moving uphill."

"On the way." Chavez ran hard, leapfrogging past León's position.

"Mr. Clark, you've got me believing in miracles," Larson said at the wheel of his Beechcraft. They'd made contact with Team OMEN on the third try, and ordered them to move five klicks to a clearing barely large enough for the Pave Low. The next attempt took longer, nearly forty minutes. Now they were looking for BANNER. What was left of it, Clark reminded himself. He didn't know that its survivors had linked up with KNIFE, which was the last team on his list.

The second defense position was of necessity more dispersed than the first, and Ramirez was starting to worry. His men had handled the first ambush so perfectly that someone at the Infantry School might one day write a paper about it, but one immutable law of military operations was that successful tricks can rarely be repeated. There was nothing like death to teach someone a lesson. The enemy would maneuver now, would spread out, trying to coordinate or at least to make better use of his larger numbers. And the enemy was doing something smart. He was moving faster. Now that they knew that they had a real enemy with real teeth, they knew on instinct that the best thing to do was to push, to take the initiative and force the pace of the combat action. That was the one thing that Ramirez could not really prevent. But he, too, had cards to play.

His flank scouts kept him posted on enemy movements. There were now three groups of about forty men each. Ramirez couldn't deal with all three, but he could hurt them one at a time. He also had three fire teams of five men each. One—the remains of BANNER—he left in the center, with a scout on the left to keep track of the third enemy group while he slid the bulk of his force south and deployed on an oblique uphill-downhill line, almost an L-shaped ambush line anchored at the uphill side with both SAWs.

They didn't have to wait very long. The enemy was moving faster than Ramirez hoped, and there was barely time for his men to select good firing positions, but the attackers were still moving predictably over the terrain, which was again to be their misfortune. Chavez was at the bottom end and gave warning as they approached. Again, they allowed the enemy to close to fifty meters' distance. Chavez and León were several meters apart, looking for leaders. Their job was to fire first, silently, to remove anyone who might try to coordinate and lead the attackers. There was one, Ding thought, someone

gesturing to others. He leveled his MP-5 and squeezed off a burst which missed. Despite the silenced weapon, its cycling made enough noise to draw a shot, and the whole squad opened up. Five more attackers fell. The rest returned fire accurately this time and formed up to assault the defenders' position, but when their muzzle flashes revealed their position, both SAW machine guns raked up and down their line.

The theater of combat was horrible and fascinating to watch. As soon as people started firing, night vision fell away. Chavez tried to protect his by keeping one eye shut as he'd been drilled, but found that it didn't work. The forest was alive with bright cylindrical tongues of flame, some of which became small globes of light that illuminated the moving men like a series of strobe lights. Tracers from the machine guns walked fire into living men. Tracers from the riflemen meant something else. The last three rounds in every magazine were lit to tell them that it was time to load new magazines. The noise was unlike anything Chavez had ever heard, the chatter of the M-16s, and the lower, slower rattle of the AK-47s. The shouted orders, the screams of rage and pain and despairing death.

"Run!" It was Captain Ramirez's voice, shouting in Spanish. Again they disengaged by pairs. Or tried to. Two squad members had been hit in this exchange. Chavez tripped on one, who was trying to crawl away. He lifted the man on his shoulders and ran up the hill while he tried to ignore the pain in his legs. The man—it was Ingeles—died at the rally point. There was no time for grief; his unused magazines were passed out among the other riflemen. While Captain Ramirez tried to get things organized again, all of them heard the mixed notes of gunfire down the hill, more shouts, more curses. Only one more man made it to the rally point. Team KNIFE now had two more dead and one seriously wounded. Olivero took charge of that, leading the injured man up the hill to the casualty collection point near the LZ. It had taken fifteen minutes to inflict a further twenty casualties on the enemy, at the cost of 30 percent of their strength. If Captain Ramirez had had time to think, he would have realized that for all his cleverness he was in a losing game. But there wasn't time for thinking.

The BANNER men discouraged another group of the enemy with a few bursts of fire, but lost one of their number withdrawing up the hill. The next defense line was four hundred meters away. Tighter than the second, it was disagreeably close to their final defensive position. It was time to play their last card.

The enemy again closed in on empty terrain, and still didn't know what casualties they had inflicted on the evil spirits that appeared and killed and disappeared like something from a nightmare. Two of the men who occupied something akin to leadership positions were gone, one dead, the other gravely wounded, and now they stopped to regroup while the surviving leaders conferred.

For the soldiers, the situation was much the same. As soon as the casualties were identified, Ramirez rearranged his deployment to compensate, distantly thankful that he didn't have time to mourn his dead, that his training really

did force him to focus on the problem at hand. The helicopter wasn't going to come in time. Or was it? Or did it matter? What did matter?

What he had to do was further reduce the enemy numbers so that an escape attempt had a decent chance at success. They had to run away, but they had to do some more killing first. Ramirez had been keeping his explosives in reserve. None of his men had yet fired or thrown a grenade, and this position was the one protected by their remaining claymore mines, each of them set to protect a rifleman's hole.

"Why are you waiting, eh?" Ramirez called downhill. "Come on, we are not finished with you yet! First we kill you, then we fuck your women!"

"They don't have women," Vega shouted. "They do it to each other. Come, fairies, it is time to die!"

And so they came. Like a puncher remorselessly closing on a boxer, cutting off the ring, still driven by anger, scarcely noting their losses, drawn to the voices and cursing them as they did so. But more carefully now, the enemy troops had learned. Moving from tree to tree, covering one another as they did so. Firing ahead to keep heads down.

"Something's happening down to the south, there. See the flashes?" Larson said. "Over at two o'clock on the mountainside."

"I see it." They'd spent over an hour trying to raise BANNER by flying and transmitting over all three exfiltration sites, and gotten nothing. Clark didn't like leaving the area, but had little choice. If that was what it might be, they had to get closer. Even with a clear line of sight, these little radios were good for less than ten miles.

"Buster, " he told the pilot. *Get there as fast as you can.*

Larson retracted his flaps and pushed the throttles forward.

It was called a fire-sack, a term borrowed from the Soviet Army, and perfectly descriptive of its function. The squad was spread out in a wide arc, every man in his hole, though four of the holes were occupied by one instead of two, and another was not occupied at all. In front of each hole were one or two claymores, faced convex side toward the enemy. The position was just inside a stand of trees and faced down across what must have been a rockfall or small landslide, an open space perhaps seventy meters wide, looking down on some fallen trees, and a few new ones. The noise and muzzle flashes of the enemy approached that line and stopped moving, though the firing did not abate at all.

"Okay, people," Ramirez said. "On command we get the hell out of here, back to the LZ, and from there down X-route two. But we gotta thin them down some more first."

The other side was talking, too, and finally doing so intelligently. They used

names instead of places, just enough encoding to mask what they wanted to do, though they had again allowed themselves to follow terrain features instead of crossing them. Certainly they had courage, Ramirez thought; whatever sort of men they were, they didn't shrink from danger. If they'd had just a little training and one or two competent leaders, the fight would already have been over.

Chavez had other things on his mind. His weapon was flash-less in addition to being noiseless, and the Ninja was using his goggles to pick out individual targets and then dropping them without a shred of remorse. He got one possible leader. It was almost too easy. The rattle of fire from the enemy line masked the sound of his own weapon. But he checked his ammo bag and realized that he had only two magazines and sixty rounds beyond what were in his weapon already. Captain Ramirez was playing it smart, but he was also playing it close.

Another head appeared from behind a tree, then an arm gesturing to someone else. Ding tracked in on it and loosed a single round. It caught the man in the throat, but didn't prevent a gurgling scream. Though Chavez didn't know it, that was the main leader of the enemy, and his scream galvanized them to action. All across the treeline fire lanced out at the light-fighters, and with a shout, the enemy attacked.

Ramirez let them get halfway across, then fired a grenade from his launcher. It was a phosphorus round, which created an intense, spidery white fountain of light. Instantly, every man triggered his claymore mines.

—"Oh, shit, there's KNIFE. Willie Pete and claymores." Clark shoved his antenna out the aircraft's window.

"KNIFE, this is VARIABLE; KNIFE, this is VARIABLE. Come in, over!" His attempt at help could not have come at a worse moment.

Thirty more men fell dead, and ten wounded under the scything fragments from the mines. Next, grenades were launched into the treeline, including all of the WP rounds, to start fires. Far enough away to avoid instant death, but too close to be untouched by the showering bits of burning phosphorus, some men caught fire, adding their screams to the cacophony of the night. Hand-thrown grenades were added to the field, killing yet more of the attackers. Then Ramirez keyed his radio again.

"Move out, move out now!" But he'd done the right thing once too often.

When the KNIFE team moved out from their positions, they were swept with automatic-weapons fire from men shooting on reflex. Those soldiers who had them tossed smoke and CS tear-gas grenades to conceal their departure, but the sparkling of the pyrotechnics merely gave the other side a point of aim, and each drew the fire from a dozen weapons. Two were killed, and another two wounded as a direct result of doing what they'd been taught to do. Ramirez had done a stellar job of maintaining control of his unit to this point, but it was here that he lost it. The radio earpiece started crackling with an

unfamiliar voice.

"This is KNIFE," he said, standing erect. "VARIABLE, where the hell are you?"

"Overhead, we are overhead. What is your situation, over?"

"We're in deep shit, falling back to the LZ now, get down here, *get down here right now!"* Ramirez shouted for his men. "Get to the LZ, they're coming to get us!"

"Negative, negative. KNIFE, we cannot come in now. You must get clear, you must get clear. Acknowledge!" Clark told the radio. No reply. He repeated the instructions and again there was nothing.

And now there were only eight left of what had once been twenty-two men. Ramirez was carrying a wounded man, and his earpiece had fallen out as he ran for the LZ, two hundred meters up the hill, through one last stand of trees into the clearing where the helicopter would come.

But it didn't. Ramirez set his burden down, looking up at the sky with his eyes, then with his goggles, but there was no helicopter, no flash of strobe lights, no heat from turboshaft engines to light up the night sky. The captain yanked the earpiece out of the radio and screamed into it.

"VARIABLE, where the hell are you?"

"KNIFE, this is VARIABLE. We are orbiting your position in a fixed-wing aircraft. We cannot execute a pickup until tomorrow night. You must get clear, you must get clear. Acknowledge!"

"There's only eight of us left, there's only—" Ramirez stopped, and his humanity returned one last, lethal time. "Oh, my God." He hesitated, realizing that most of his men were gone, and he had been their commander, and he was responsible. That he wasn't, really, was something he would never learn.

The enemy was approaching now, approaching from three sides. There was only one way to escape. It was a preplanned route, but Ramirez looked down at the man he'd carried to the LZ and watched him die. He looked up again, looked round at his men, and didn't know what to do next. There wasn't time for training to work. A hundred meters away, the first of the enemy force emerged from the last line of trees and fired. His men returned it, but there were too many and the infantrymen were down to their last magazines.

Chavez saw it happening. He'd linked back up with Vega and León, to help a man whose leg was badly wounded. As he watched, a line of men swept across the LZ. He saw Ramirez drop prone, firing his weapon at the oncoming enemy, but there was nothing Ding and his friends could do, and they headed west, down the escape route. They didn't look back. They didn't need to. The sound told them enough. The chattering of the M-16s was answered by the louder fire of the AKs. A few more grenades went off. Men screamed and

cursed, all of them in Spanish. And then all the fire was from AKs. The battle for this hill had ended.

"Does that mean what I think it means?" Larson asked.

"It means that some stateside REMF is going to die," Clark said quietly. There were tears in his eyes. He'd seen this happen once before, when his helicopter had gotten off in time and the other hadn't, and he'd been ashamed at the time and long thereafter that he had survived while others had not. *"Shit!"* He shook his head and got control of himself.

"KNIFE, this is VARIABLE. Do you read me, over? Reply by name. Say again, reply by name."

"Wait a minute," Chavez said. "This is Chavez. Who's on this net?"

"Listen fast, kid, 'cause your net is compromised. This is Clark. We met awhile back. Head in the same direction you did on the practice night. Do you remember that?"

"Roger. I remember the way we headed then. We can do that."

"I'll be back for you tomorrow. Hang in there, kid. It ain't over yet. Repeat: I will be back for you. Now haul your ass out of there. Out."

"What was that all about?" Vega asked.

"We loop around east, down the hill to the north, then around east."

"And then what?" Oso demanded.

"How the fuck should I know?"

"Head back north," Clark ordered.

"What's an REMF?" Larson asked as he started the turn.

Clark's reply was so low as to be inaudible. "An REMF is a rear-echelon motherfucker, one of those useless, order-generating bastards who gets us line-animals killed. And one of them is going to pay for this, Larson. Now shut up and fly."

For another hour they continued their futile search for Team BANNER, then they headed back to Panama. That flight took two hours and fifteen minutes, during which Clark didn't say a word and Larson was afraid to. The pilot taxied the aircraft right into the hangar with the Pave Low, and the doors closed behind him. Ryan and Johns were waiting for them.

"Well?" Jack asked.

"We made contact with OMEN and FEATURE," Clark said. "Come on." He led them into an office with a table. There he spread out his map.

"What about the others?" Jack asked. Colonel Johns didn't have to. He already knew part of it from the look on Clark's face.

"OMEN will be right here tomorrow night. FEATURE will be here," Clark said, indicating two places marked on the map.

"Okay, we can handle that," Johns said.

"Goddammit!" Ryan growled. "What about the others?"

"We never made contact with BANNER. We watched the bad guys overrun KNIFE. Most of it," Clark corrected himself. "At least one man got away. I'm going in after him, on the ground." Clark turned to the pilot. "Larson, you'd better get a few hours. I need you bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in six hours."

"What about the weather?" he asked PJ.

"That fucking storm's jinking around like a Weasel on a SAM hunt. Nobody knows where the hell it's going, but it ain't there yet, and I've flown in weather before," Colonel Johns replied.

"Okay." The pilot walked off. There were some cots set in the next room. He landed on one and was asleep in a minute.

"Going in on the ground?" Ryan asked.

"What do you expect me to do—leave them there? Ain't we done enough of that?" Clark looked away. His eyes were red, and only PJ knew that it wasn't from strain and lack of sleep. "Sorry, Jack. There's some of our people there. I have to try. They'd try for me. It's cool, man. I know how to do it."

"How?" PJ asked.

"Larson and I'll fly in around noon, get a car and drive down. I told Chavez —that's the kid I talked to—to get around them and head east, down the mountain. We'll try to pick them up, drive 'em to the airport, and just fly them out."

"Just like that?" Ryan asked incredulously.

"Sure. Why not?"

"There's a difference between being brave and being an idiot," Ryan said.

"Who gives a fuck about being brave? It's my job." Clark walked off to get some sleep.

"You know what you're really afraid of?" Johns said when he'd left. "You're afraid of remembering the times that you could have done it and didn't. I can give you a play-by-play of every failure I've had in twenty-some years." The colonel was wearing his blue shirt with command wings and all the ribbons. He had quite a few.

Jack's eyes fixed on one, pale blue with five white stars. "But you..."

"It's a nice thing to wear, and it's nice to have four-stars salute me first and treat me like I'm something special. But you know what matters? Those two guys I got out. One's a general now. The other one flies for Delta. They're both alive. They both have families. That's what matters, Mr. Ryan. The ones I didn't get out, they matter, too. Some of them are still there, because I wasn't good enough or fast enough or lucky enough. Or they weren't. Or something. I

should have gotten them out. That's the job," Johns said quietly. "That's what I do."

We sent them in there, Jack told himself. My agency sent them in there. And some of them are dead now, and we let somebody tell us not to do anything about it. And I'm supposed to be ...

"Might be dangerous going in tonight."

"Possible. Looks that way."

"You have three minis aboard your chopper," Ryan said after a moment. "You only have two gunners."

"I couldn't whistle another one up this fast and—"

"I'm a pretty fair shot," Jack told him.

28.

Accounting

CORTEZ SAT AT the table, doing his sums. The Americans had done marvelously well. Nearly two hundred Cartel men had gone up the mountain. Ninety-six had returned alive, sixteen of those wounded. They'd even brought a live American down with them. He was badly hurt, still bleeding from four wounds, and he hadn't been well handled by the Colombian gunmen. The man was young and brave, biting off his screams, shaking with the effort to control himself. Such a courageous young man, this Green Beret. Cortez would not insult his bravery with questions. Besides, he was incoherent, and Cortez had other things to do.

There was a medical team here to treat "friendly" casualties. Cortez walked out to it and picked up a disposable syringe, filling it with morphine. He returned and stabbed the needle into a vein on the soldier's uninjured arm, pushing down on the plunger after it was in. The soldier relaxed at once, his pain extinguished by a wonderful, brief sensation of well-being. Then his breathing just stopped, and his life, too, was extinguished. Most unfortunate. Cortez could really have used men like this one, but they rarely worked for anything other than a flag. He walked over to his phone and called the proper number.

"*Jefe,* we eliminated one of the enemy forces last night.... Yes, *jefe*, there were ten of them as I suspected, and we got them all. We go after another team tonight.... There is one problem, *jefe.* The enemy fought well, and we took many casualties. I need more men for tonight's mission. *Sí,* thank you, *jefe.* That will do nicely. Send the men to Riosucio, and have the leaders report to me this afternoon. I will brief them here. Oh? Yes, that will be excellent. We'll be waiting for you."

With luck, Cortez thought, the next American team would fight equally as well. With luck he could eliminate two-thirds of the Cartel's stable of gunmen in a single week. Along with their bosses, also tonight. He was on the downslope now, Cortez thought. He'd gambled dangerously and hard, but the tricky ones were behind him.

It was an early funeral. Greer had been a widower, and estranged from his wife long before that. The reason for the estrangement was next to the rectangular hole in Arlington, the simple white headstone of First Lieutenant Robert White Greer, USMC, his only son, who'd graduated from the Naval Academy and gone to Vietnam to die. Neither Moore nor Ritter had ever met

the young man, and James had never kept a photo of him around the office. The former DDI had been a sentimental man but never a maudlin one. Yet he had long ago requested burial next to the grave of his son, and because of his rank and station an exception had been made and the place kept available for an event that for all men was as inevitable as it was untimely. He'd indeed been a sentimental man, but only in ways that mattered. Ritter thought that there were many explanations before his eyes. The way James had adopted several bright young people and brought them into the Agency, the interest he'd taken in their careers, the training and consideration he'd given them.

It was a small, quiet ceremony. James' few close friends were there, along with a much larger number of people from the government. Among the latter were the President—and, much to Bob Ritter's rage, Vice Admiral James A. Cutter, Jr. The President himself had spoken at the chapel service, noting the death of a man who had served his country continuously for more than fifty years, having enlisted in the U.S. Navy at seventeen, then entered the Academy, then reached two-star rank, achieving a third star for his flag after assuming his position at CIA. "A standard of professionalism, integrity, and devotion to his country that few have equaled and none have excelled" was how the President summarized the career Vice Admiral James Greer.

And that bastard *Cutter sat right there in the front row as he said it, too,* Ritter told himself. He found it especially sickening as he watched the honor guard from the 3rd Infantry Regiment fold the flag that had been draped over the casket. There was no one to hand it to. Ritter had expected it to go to—

But where was Ryan? He moved his head, trying to look around. He hadn't noticed before because Jack hadn't come from Langley with the rest of the CIA delegation. The flag went to Judge Moore by default. Hands were shaken, words exchanged. Yes, it really was a mercy that he'd gone so rapidly at the end. Yes, men like this didn't appear every day. Yes, this was the end of the Greer line, and that was too bad, wasn't it? No, I never met his son, but I heard.... Ritter and Moore were in the Agency Cadillac ten minutes later, heading back up the George Washington Parkway.

"Where the hell was Ryan?" the DCI asked.

"I don't know. I figured he'd drive himself in."

Moore was not so much angered as upset by the impropriety. He still had the flag in his lap, holding it as gently as a newborn baby without knowing why—until he realized that if there really was a God, as the Baptist preachers of his youth had assured him, and if James had really had a soul, he held its best legacy in his hands. It felt warm to the touch, and though he knew that it was merely his imagination or at most the residual heat absorbed from the morning sun, the energy radiating from the flag that James had served from his teens seemed to accuse him of treachery. They had just watched a funeral this morning, but two thousand miles away there were other people whom the Agency had sent to do a job and who would not receive even the empty reward of a grave amidst others of their kind.

"Bob, what the hell have we done?" Moore asked. "How did we ever get

into this?"

"I don't know, Arthur. I just don't know."

"James really was lucky," the Director of Central Intelligence murmured. "At least he went out—"

"With a clear conscience?" Ritter looked out the window, unable to bring himself to face his boss. "Look, Arthur—" He stopped, not knowing what to say next. Ritter had been with the Agency since the fifties, had worked as a case officer, a supervisor, station chief, then head of section at Langley. He had lost case officers, had lost agents, but he'd never betrayed them. There was a first time for everything, he told himself. It had just come home to him in a very immediate way, however, that for every man there was also a first time for death, and that to meet that final accounting improperly was the ultimate cowardice, the ultimate failure of life. But what else could they do?

It was a short drive to Langley, and the car stopped before that question could be answered. They rode the elevator up. Moore walked to his office. Ritter walked to his. The secretaries hadn't returned yet. They were in a van. Ritter paced around his office until they arrived, then walked over to see Mrs. Cummings.

"Did Ryan call in or anything?"

"No, and I didn't see him at all. Do you know where he is?" Nancy asked.

"Sorry, I don't." Ritter walked back and on impulse called Ryan's home, where all he got was an answering machine. He checked his card file for Cathy's work number and got past the secretary to her.

"This is Bob Ritter. I need to know where Jack is."

"I don't know," Dr. Caroline Ryan replied guardedly. "He told me yesterday that he had to go out of town. He didn't say where."

A chill went across Ritter's face. "Cathy, I have to know. This is very important—I can't tell you how important. Please trust me. I have to know where he is."

"I *don't* know. You mean you don't, either?" There was alarm in her voice.

Ryan knows, Ritter realized.

"Look, Cathy, I'll track him down. Don't worry or anything, okay?" The effort to calm her down was wasted, but Ritter hung up as soon as he could. The DDO walked to Judge Moore's office. The flag was centered on the DCI's desk, still folded into its triangular section, called a cocked-hat. Judge Arthur Moore, Director of Central Intelligence, was sitting quietly, staring at it.

"Jack's gone. His wife says she doesn't know where. He knows, Arthur. He knows and he's off doing something."

"How could he have found out?"

"How the hell should I know?" Ritter thought for a moment, then waved at his boss. "Come on."

They walked into Ryan's office. Ritter opened the panel for Jack's wall safe and dialed in the proper combination, and nothing happened other than the fact that the warning light went on over the dial.

"Damn," Ritter said. "I thought that was it."

"James's combination?"

"Yeah. You know how he was, never did like the damned things, and he probably ..." Ritter looked around. He got it on the third try, pulling out the writing panel from the desk, and there it was.

"I thought I did dial the right one." He turned and tried again. This time the light was accompanied by the goddamned beeper. Ritter turned back and checked the number again. There was some more writing on the sheet. Ritter pulled the panel farther out.

"Oh, my God."

Moore nodded and walked to the door. "Nancy, tell security that it's us trying to work the safe. Looks like Jack changed the combination without telling us like he was supposed to." The DCI closed the door and turned back.

"He knows, Arthur."

"Maybe. How do we check it out?"

A minute later they were in Ritter's office. He'd shredded all of his documents, but not his memory. You didn't forget the name of someone with the Medal of Honor. Then it was just a matter of flipping open his AUTOVON phone directory and calling the 1st Special Operations Wing at Eglin AFB.

"I need to talk to Colonel Paul Johns," Ritter told the sergeant who'd picked up the phone.

"Colonel Johns is off TDY somewhere, sir. I don't know where."

"Who does?"

"The wing operations officer might, sir. This is a nonsecure line, sir," the sergeant reminded him.

"Give me his number." The sergeant did so, and Ritter's next call went out on, and to, a secure line.

"I need to find Colonel Johns," Ritter said after identifying himself.

"Sir, I have orders not to give that information out to anybody. That means nobody, sir."

"Major, if he's down in Panama again, I need to know it. His life may depend on it. Something is happening that he needs to know about."

"Sir, I have orders—"

"Stuff your orders, sonny. If you don't tell me, and that flight crew dies, it will be your fault! Now you make the call, Major, yes or no?"

The officer had never seen combat, and life-death decisions were theoretical matters to him—or had been until now.

"Sir, they're back where they were before. Same place, same crew. That's as far as I go, sir."

"Thank you, Major. You did the right thing. You really did. Now I suggest that you make written note of this call and its content." Ritter hung up. The phone had been on speaker.

"Has to be Ryan," the DCI agreed. "Now what do we do?"

"You tell me, Arthur."

"How many more people are we going to kill, Bob?" Moore asked. His greatest fear now was of mirrors, looking into them and seeing something less than the image he wanted to be there.

"You do understand the consequences?"

"Fuck the consequences," snorted the former chief judge of the Texas Court of Appeals.

Ritter nodded and punched a button on his phone. When he spoke, it was in his accustomed, decisive voice of command. "I need everything CAPER has developed in the last two days." Another button. "I want chief of Station Panama to call me in thirty minutes. Tell him to clear decks for the day—he's going to be busy." Ritter replaced the phone receiver in its cradle. They'd have to wait for a few minutes, but it wasn't the sort of occasion to wait in silence.

"Thank God," Ritter said after a moment.

Moore smiled for the first time this day. "Me, too, Robert. Nice to be a man again, isn't it?"

The security police brought him in at gunpoint, the man in the tan suit. He said his name was Luna, and the briefcase he carried had already been searched for weapons. Clark recognized him.

"What the hell are you doing here, Tony?"

"Who's this?" Ryan asked.

"Station chief for Panama," Clark answered. "Tony, I hope you have a very good reason."

"I have a telex for Dr. Ryan from Judge Moore."

"What?"

Clark took Luna's arm and guided him into the office. He didn't have much time. He and Larson were to take off within minutes.

"This better not be some fucking joke," Clark announced.

"Hey, I'm delivering the mail, okay?" Luna said. "Now stop playing the macho game. I'm the spic here, remember?" He handed Jack the first sheet.

TOP SECRET—EYES ONLY DDI

IMPOSSIBLE TO REESTABLISH UPLINK TO SHOWBOAT TEAMS. TAKE WHATEVER

ACTION YOU DEEM APPROPRIATE TO RETRIEVE ASSETS IN COUNTRY. TELL CLARK TO BE CAREFUL. THE ENCLOSED MIGHT BE OF HELP. C DOESN'T KNOW. GOOD LUCK. M/R.

"Nobody ever said they were stupid," Jack breathed as he handed the sheet to Clark. The heading was meant as a separate message in and of itself, one that had nothing to do with distribution or security. "But does this mean what I think it does?"

"One less REMF to worry about. Make that two," Clark observed. He started flipping through the faxes. "Holy shit!" He set the pile down on the desk and paced a bit, staring out of the windows at the aircraft sitting in the hangar. "Okay," he said to himself. Clark had never been one to dally over making plans. He spoke to Ryan for several minutes. Then, to Larson: "Let's move ass, kid. We got a job to do."

"Spare radios?" Colonel Johns asked him as he left.

"Two spares, new batteries in all of 'em, and extra batteries," Clark replied.

"Nice to work with somebody's been around the block," PJ said. "Check-six, Mr. Clark."

"Always, Colonel Johns," Clark said as he headed to the door. "See you in a few hours."

The hangar doors opened. A small cart pulled the Beechcraft out into the sun, and the hangar doors closed. Ryan listened to the engines start up, and the sound diminished as the aircraft taxied away.

"What about us?" he asked Colonel Johns.

Captain Frances Montaigne came in. She looked as French as her ancestry, short, with raven-black hair. Not especially pretty, but Ryan's first impression was that she was a handful in bed—which stopped his thought processes cold as he wondered why that had occurred to him. It seemed odder still that she was a command pilot in a special-ops outfit.

"Weather's going dogshit on us, Colonel," she announced at once. "*Adele* is heading west again, doing twenty-five knots."

"Can't help the weather. Getting down and doing the snatch oughtn't to be too bad."

"Getting back might be kinda exciting, PJ," Montaigne observed darkly.

"One thing at a time, Francie. And we do have that alternate place to land."

"Colonel, even you aren't that crazy."

PJ turned to Ryan and shook his head. "Junior officers aren't what they used to be."

They stayed over water for most of the way down. Larson was as steady and confident as ever at the controls, but his eyes kept turning northeast. There

was no mistaking it, the high, thin clouds that were the perennial harbinger of an approaching hurricane. Behind them was *Adele,* and she had already made another chapter in history. Born off the Cape Verdes, she'd streaked across the Atlantic at an average speed of seventeen knots, then stopped as soon as she'd entered the eastern Caribbean, lost power, gained it back, jinked north, west, even east once. There hadn't been one this crazy since *Joan,* years before. Small as hurricanes went, and nowhere near the brutal power of a *Camille, Adele* was still a dangerous storm with seventy-five-knot winds. The only people who flew near tropical cyclones were dedicated hurricane-hunter aircraft flown by people for whom merely mortal danger was boring. It was not a place for a twin-engine Beechcraft, even with Chuck Yeager at the controls. Larson was already making plans. In case the mission didn't go right, or the storm changed course yet again, he started picking fields to put down on, to refuel and head southeast around the gray maelstrom that was marching toward them. The air was smooth and still, deceptively so. The pilot wondered how many hours until it changed to something very different. And that was only one of the dangers he'd face.

Clark sat quietly in the right seat, staring forward, his face composed and inhumanly serene while his mind turned over faster than the Beech's twin props. In front of the windshield he kept seeing faces, some living, some dead. He remembered past combat actions, past dangers, past fears, past escapes in which those faces had played their parts. Most of all he remembered the lessons, some learned in classrooms and lectures, but the important ones had come from his own experience. John Terence Clark was not a man who forgot things. Gradually he refreshed his memory on all the important lessons for this day, the ones about being alone in unfriendly territory. Then came the faces who'd play their part today. He looked at them, a few feet before his eyes, saw the expressions he expected them to wear, measuring the faces to understand the people who wore them. Finally came the plan of the day. He contemplated what he wanted to do and balanced that against the probable objectives of the opposition. He considered alternative plans and things that might go awry. When all that was done, he made himself stop. You could quickly get to the point that imagination became an enemy. Each segment of the operation was locked into its own little box which he'd open one at a time. He'd trust to his experience and instinct. But part of him wondered if—when—those qualities would fail him.

Sooner or later, Clark admitted to himself. *But not today.*

He always told himself that.

PJ's mission briefing took two hours. He, Captain Willis, and Captain Montaigne worked out every detail—where they'd refuel, where the aircraft would orbit if something went wrong. Which routes to take if things went badly. Each crew member got full information. It was more than necessary; it was a moral obligation to the crew. They were risking their lives tonight. They had to know why. As always, Sergeant Zimmer had a few questions, and one important suggestion that was immediately incorporated in the plan. Then it

was time to preflight the aircraft. Every system aboard each aircraft was fully checked out in a procedure that would last hours. Part of that was training for the new crewmen.

"What do you know about guns?" Zimmer asked Ryan.

"Never fired one of these babies." Ryan's hand stroked the handles of the minigun. A scaled-down version of the 20mm Vulcan cannon, it had a gang of six .30-caliber barrels that rotated clockwise under the power of an electrical motor, drawing shells from an enormous hopper to the left of the mount. It had two speed settings, 4,000 and 6,000 rounds per minute—66 or 100 rounds *per second.* The bullets were almost half tracers. The reason for that was psychological. The fire from the weapon looked like a laser beam from a science-fiction movie, the very embodiment of death. It also made a fine way to aim the weapon, since Zimmer assured him that the muzzle blast would be the most blinding thing short of staring into a noon sun. He checked Ryan out on the whole system: where the switches were, how to stand, how to aim.

"What do you know about combat, sir?"

"Depends on what you mean," Ryan replied.

"Combat is when people with guns are trying to kill you," Zimmer explained patiently. "It's dangerous."

"I know. I've been there a few times. Let's not dwell on that, okay? I'm already scared." Ryan looked over his gun, out the door of the aircraft, wondering why he'd been such a damned fool to volunteer for this. But what choice did he have? Could he just send these men off to danger? If he did, how did that make him different from Cutter? Jack looked around the interior of the aircraft. It seemed so large and strong and safe, sitting here on the concrete floor of the hangar. But it was an aircraft designed for life in the troubled air of an unfriendly sky. It was a helicopter: Ryan especially hated helicopters.

"The funny thing is, probably no sweat on the mission," Zimmer said after a moment. "Sir, we do our job right, it's just a flight in and a flight back out."

"That's what I'm scared of, Sarge," Ryan said, laughing mostly at himself.

They landed at Santagueda. Larson knew the man who ran the local flying service and talked him out of his Volkswagen Microvan. The two CIA officers drove north, and an hour later passed through the village of Anserma. They dallied here for half an hour, driving around until they found what they wanted to find: a few trucks heading in and out of a private dirt road and one expensive-looking car. CAPER had called it right, Clark saw, and it was the place he thought it was from the flight in. Having confirmed that, they moved out, heading north again for another hour and taking a side road into the mountains just outside of Vegas del Rio. Clark had his nose buried in a map, and Larson found a hilltop switchback at which to stop. That's where the radio came out.

“KIFE, this is VARIABLE, over.” Nothing, despite five minutes of trying. Larson drove farther west, horsing the Microvan around cow paths as he struggled to find another high spot for Clark to try again. It was three in the afternoon, and their fifth attempt until they got a reply.

“KNIFE here. Over.”

“Chavez, this is Clark. Where the hell are you?” Clark asked, in Spanish, of course.

“Let’s talk awhile first.”

“You’re good, kid. We really could have used you in 3rd SOG.”

“Why should I trust you? Somebody cut us off, man. Somebody decided to leave us here.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“Glad to hear it,” came the skeptical, bitter reply.

“Chavez, you’re talking over a radio net that might be compromised. If you got a map, we’re at the following set of coordinates,” Clark told him. “There’s two of us in a blue Volkswagen van. Check us out, take all the time you want.”

“I already have!” the radio told him.

Clark’s head spun around to see a man with an AK-47 twenty feet away.

“Let’s be real cool, people,” Sergeant Vega said. Three more men emerged from the treeline. One of them had a bloody bandage on his thigh. Chavez, too, had an AK slung over his shoulder, but he had held on to his silenced MP-5. He walked straight up to the van.

“Not bad, kid,” Clark told him. “How’d you know?”

“UHF radio. You had to transmit from a high spot, right? The map says there’s six of them. I heard you one other time, too, and I spotted you heading this way half an hour ago. Now what the fuck is going on?”

“First thing, let’s get that casualty treated.” Clark stepped out and handed Chavez his pistol, butt first. “I got a first-aid kit in the back.”

The wounded man was Sergeant Juardo, a rifleman from the 10th Mountain at Fort Drum. Clark opened the back of the van and helped load him aboard, then uncovered the wound.

“You know what you’re doing?” Vega asked.

“I used to be a SEAL,” Clark replied, holding up his arm so that they could see the tattoo. “Third Special Operations Group. Spent a lot of time in ’Nam, doing stuff that never made the TV news.”

“What were you?”

“Came out a chief bosun’s mate, E-7 to you.” Clark examined the wound. It was bad to look at, but not life-threatening as long as the man didn’t bleed out, which he’d managed not to do yet. So far it seemed that the infantrymen had done most of the right things. Clark ripped open an envelope and redusted

the wound with sulfa. “You have any blood-expanders?”

“Here.” Sergeant León passed over an IV bag. “None of us knows how to start one.”

“It’s not hard. Watch how I do it.” Clark grabbed Juardo’s upper arm hard and told him to make a fist. Then he stabbed the IV needle into the big vein inside the elbow. “See? Okay, I cheat. My wife’s a nurse, and sometimes I get to practice at her hospital,” Clark admitted. “How’s it feel, kid?” he asked the patient.

“Nice to be sitting down,” Juardo admitted.

“I don’t want to give you a pain shot. We might need you awake. Think you can hack it?”

“You say so, man. Hey, Ding, you got any candy?”

Chavez tossed over his Tylenol bottle. “Last ones, Pablo. Make ’em last, man.”

“Thanks, Ding.”

“We have some sandwiches in the front,” Larson said.

“Food!” Vega darted that way at once. A minute later the four soldiers were wolfing it down, along with a six-pack of Cokes that Larson had picked up on the way.

“Where’d you pick up the weapons?”

“Bad guys. We were just about out of ammo for our -16s, and I figured we might as well try to fit in, like.”

“You’re thinking good, kid,” Clark told him.

“Okay, what’s the plan?” Chavez asked.

“It’s your call,” Clark replied. “One of two things. We can drive you back to the airport and fly you out, take about three hours to get there, another three hours in the airplane, and it’s over, you’re back on U.S. territory.”

“What else?”

“Chavez, how’d you like to get the fucker who did this to you?” Clark knew the answer before he’d asked the question.

Admiral Cutter was leaning back in his chair when the phone buzzed. He knew who it was from the line that was blinking. “Yes, Mr. President?”

“Come in here.”

“On the way, sir.”

Summer is as slow a season for the White House as for most government agencies. The President’s calendar was fuller than usual with the ceremonial stuff that the politician in him loved and the executive in him abhorred. Shaking hands with “Miss Whole Milk,” as he referred to the steady stream of

visitors—though, he occasionally wondered to himself if he'd ever meet a Miss Condom, what with the way sexual mores were changing of late. The burden was larger than most imagine. For each such visitor there was a sheet of paper, a few paragraphs of information so that the person would leave thinking that, gee, the President really knows what I'm all about. He's really *interested!* Pressing flesh and talking to ordinary people was an important and usually pleasurable part of the job, but not now, a week short of the convention, still behind in the goddamned polls, as every news network announced at least twice a week.

"What about Colombia?" the President asked as soon as the door was closed.

"Sir, you told me to shut it down. It's being shut down."

"Any problems with the Agency?"

"No, Mr. President."

"How exactly—"

"Sir, you told me you didn't want to know that."

"You're telling me it's something I shouldn't know?"

"I'm telling you, sir, that I am carrying out your instructions. The orders were given, and the orders are being complied with. I don't think you will object to the consequences."

"Really?"

Cutter relaxed a bit. "Sir, in a very real sense, the operation was a success. Drug shipments are down and will drop further in the next few months. I would suggest, sir, that you let the press talk about that for the moment. You can always point to it later. We've hurt them. With Operation TARPON we have something we can point to all we wish. With CAPER we have a way of continuing to gather intelligence information. We will have some dramatic arrests in a few months as well."

"And how do you know that?"

"I've made those arrangements myself, sir."

"And just how did you do that?" the President asked, and stopped. "Something else I don't want to know?"

Cutter nodded.

"I assume that everything you've done is within the law," the President said for the benefit of the tape recorder he had running.

"You may make that assumption, sir." It was an artful reply in that it could mean anything, or nothing, depending on one's point of view. Cutter also knew about the tape recorder.

"And you're sure that your instructions are being carried out?"

"Of course, Mr. President."

“Make sure again.”

It had taken far longer than the bearded consultant expected. Inspector O’Day held the printout in his hands, and it might as well have been Kurdish. The sheet was half covered with paragraphs entirely composed of ones and zeroes.

“Machine language,” the consultant explained. “Whoever programmed this baby was a real pro. I recovered about forty percent of it. It’s a transposition algorithm, just like I thought.”

“You told me that last night.”

“It ain’t Russian. It takes in a message and enciphers it. No big deal, anybody can do that. What’s really clever is that the system is based on an independent input signal that’s unique to the individual transmission—over and above the encipherment algorithm that’s already built into the system.”

“You want to explain that?”

“It means a very good computer lash-up—somewhere—governs how this baby operates. It can’t be Russian. They don’t have the hardware yet, unless they stole a really sexy one from us. Also, the input that adds the variable into the system probably comes from the NAVSTAR satellites. I’m guessing here, but I think it uses a very precise time mark to set the encryption key, one that’s unique to each up-and-down transmission. Clever shit. That means NSA. The NAVSTAR satellites use atomic clocks to measure time with great precision, and the really sexy part of the system is also encrypted. Anyway, what we have here is a clever way of scrambling a signal in a way that you can’t break or duplicate even if you know how it was done. Whoever set this baby up has access to everything we got. I used to consult with NSA, and never even heard of this puppy.”

“Okay, and when the disk is destroyed ... ?”

“The link is gone, man. I mean, *gone.* If this is what it seems to be, you have an uplink facility that controls the algorithm, and ground stations that copy it down. You wipe this algorithm off, like somebody did, and the guys you used to be talking to can’t communicate with you anymore, and nobody else can communicate with them either. Systems don’t get any more secure than that.”

“You can tell all that? What else?”

“Half of what I just told you is informed speculation. I can’t rebuild the algorithm. I can just tell you how it probably worked. The bit on the NAVSTAR is supposition, but good supposition. The transposition processing is partly recovered, and it has NSA written all over it. Whoever did it really knows how to write computer code. It’s definitely ours. It’s probably the most sophisticated machine code we have. Whoever got to use it must have some serious juice. And whoever it is, he scrubbed it. It can never be used again. Whatever operation it was used for must be over.”

“Yeah,” O’Day said, chilled by what he had just learned. “Good work.”

“Now all you have to do is write a note to my prof and tell him why I

missed an exam this morning."

"I'll have somebody do that," O'Day promised him on the way out the door. He headed for Dan Murray's office, and was surprised to see that he was out. The next stop was with Bill Shaw.

Half an hour later it was clear that a crime had probably been committed. The next question was what to do about it.

The helicopter took off light. Mission requirements were fairly complex—more so than in the previous insertions—and speed was important this time. As soon as the Pave Low got to cruising altitude, it tanked from the MC-130E. There was no banter this time.

Ryan sat in back, strapped into his place while the MH-53J bounced and buffeted in the wash of the tanker. He wore a green flight suit and a similarly green helmet. There was also a flak jacket. Zimmer had explained to him that it would stop a pistol round, probably, secondary fragments almost certainly, but that he shouldn't depend on it to stop a rifle bullet. One more thing to worry about. Once clear of the tanker for the first time—they'd have to tank again before making landfall—Jack turned around to look out the door. The clouds were nearly overhead now, the outlying reaches from *Adele.*

Juardo's wound complicated matters and changed plans somewhat. They loaded him into Clark's seat on the Beech, leaving him with a radio and spare batteries. Then Clark and the rest drove back toward Anserma. Larson was still checking the weather, which was changing on an hour-to-hour basis. He was due to take off in ninety minutes for his part of the mission.

"How you fixed for rounds?" Clark asked in the Microvan.

"All we need for the AKs," Chavez replied. "About sixty each for the subs. I never knew how useful a silenced gun was."

"They are nice. Grenades?"

"All of us?" Vega asked. "Five frags and two CS."

"What are we going into?" Ding asked next.

"It's a farmhouse outside Anserma."

"What's the security there like?"

"I don't know squat yet."

"Hey, wait a minute, what are you getting us into?" Vega demanded.

"Relax, Sarge. If it's too heavy to handle, we back off and leave. All I know is we're going in for a close look. Chavez and I can handle that. By the way, there's spare batteries in the bag down there. Need 'em?"

"Fuckin' A!" Chavez pulled out his night scope and replaced the batteries at once. "Who's in the house?"

“Two people we especially want. Number One is Félix Cortez,” Clark said, giving some background. “He’s the guy running the operation against the SHOWBOAT teams—that’s the code name for this operation, in case nobody bothered to tell you. He also had a hand in the murder of the ambassador. I want his ass and I want it alive. Number Two is one Señor Escobedo. He’s one of the big shots in the Cartel. A lot of people want his ass.”

“Yeah,” León said. “We ain’t got no big shots yet.”

“So far we’ve gotten five or six of the bastards. That was my end of the operation.” Clark turned to look at Chavez. He had to say that to establish his credibility.

“But how, when—”

“We’re not supposed to talk all that much, children,” Clark told them. “You don’t go around advertising about killing folks no matter who told you it was okay.”

“Are you really that good?”

Clark just shook his head. “Sometimes. Sometimes not. If you guys weren’t damned good, you wouldn’t be here. And there are times when it’s just pure dumb luck.”

“We just walked into one,” León said. “I don’t even know what went wrong, but Captain Rojas just—”

“I know. I saw some pricks load his body into the back of a truck—”

León went rigid. “And what—”

“Did I do?” Clark asked. “There were three of them. I put them in the truck, too. Then I torched the truck. I’m not real proud of that, but I think I took some of the heat off you BANNER guys when I did. Wasn’t much, but it was all I could do at the time.”

“So who pulled the chopper back on us?”

“Same guy who chopped off the radio. I know who it is. After this is all over, I want his ass, too. You don’t send people out in the field and then pull this crap on ’em.”

“So what are you going to do?” Vega wanted to know.

“I’ll slap him firmly on both wrists. Now listen, people, you worry about tonight. One job at a time. You’re soldiers, not a bunch of teenage broads. Less talkin’ and more thinkin’.”

Chavez, Vega, and León took the cue. They started checking their gear. There was enough room in the van to strip and clean weapons. Clark pulled into Anserma at sundown. He found a quiet spot about a mile from the house and left the van. Clark took Vega’s night goggles, and then he and Chavez went out to take a walk.

There had been farming here recently. Clark wondered what it had been, but that and the fact that it was close to the village meant that the trees had been thinned out for cooking fires. They were able to move fast. Half an hour

later they could see the house, separated from the woods by two hundred meters of open ground.

“Not good,” Clark observed from his place on the ground.

“I count six, all with AKs.”

“Company,” the CIA officer said, turning to see where the noise was coming from. It was a Mercedes, and therefore could have belonged to anyone in the Cartel. Two more cars came with it, one ahead and one behind. A total of six guards got out to check the area.

“Escobedo and LaTorre,” Clark said from behind the binoculars. “Two big shots to see Colonel Cortez. I wonder why ...”

“Too many, man,” Chavez said.

“You notice there wasn’t any password or anything?”

“So?”

“It’s possible, if we play it right.”

“But how ...”

“Think creatively,” Clark told him. “Back to the car.” That took another twenty minutes. When they got there, Clark adjusted one of his radios.

“CAESAR, this is SNAKE, over.”

The second refueling was accomplished within sight of the beach. They’d have to tank at least once more before heading back to Panama. The other alternative didn’t seem especially likely at the moment. The good news was that Francie Montaigne was driving her Combat Talon with her usual aplomb, its four big propellers turning in a steady rhythm. Its radio operators were already talking to the surviving ground teams, taking that strain off the helicopter crew. For the first time in the mission, the air team was allowed to function as it had been trained. The MC-130E would coordinate the various pieces, coaching the Pave Low into the proper areas and away from possible threats in addition to keeping PJ’s chopper filled up with gas.

In back, the ride had settled down. Ryan was up and walking around. Fear became boring after a while, and he even managed to use the Port-A-Pot without missing. The flight crew had accepted him at least as an approved interloper, and for some reason that meant a lot to him.

“Ryan, you hear me?” Johns asked.

Jack reached down to the mike button. “Yeah, Colonel.”

“Your guy on the ground wants us to do something different.”

“Like what?”

PJ told him. “It means another tanking, but otherwise we can hack it. Your call.”

“You sure?”

“Special ops is what they pay us for.”

“Okay, then. We want that bastard.”

“Roger. Sergeant Zimmer, we’ll be feet-dry in one minute. Systems check.”

The flight engineer looked down his panel. “Roger that, PJ. Everything looks pretty solid to me, sir. Everything’s green.”

“Okay. First stop is Team OMEN. ETA is two-zero minutes. Ryan, you’d better grab hold of something. We’re going to start nap-of-the-earth. I have to talk to our backup.”

Jack didn’t know what that meant. He found out as soon as they crossed the first range of coastal mountains. The Pave Low leapt up like a mad elevator, then the bottom dropped out as it cleared the summit. The helicopter was on computer-assisted-flight mode, taking a six-degree slope—it felt much worse than that—up and down the terrain features, and skimmed over the ground with bare feet of clearance. The aircraft was made to be safe, not comfortable. Ryan didn’t feel much of either.

“First LZ in three minutes,” Colonel Johns announced half an eternity later. “Let’s go hot, Buck.”

“Roger.” Zimmer reached down on his console and flipped a toggle switch. “Switches hot. Guns are hot.”

“Gunners, stand to. That means you, Ryan,” PJ added.

“Thanks.” Jack gasped without toggling his mike. He took position on the left side of the aircraft and hit the activation switch for the minigun, which started turning at once.

“ETA one minute,” the copilot said. “I got a good strobe at eleven o’clock. Okay. OMEN, this is CAESAR, do you copy, over?”

Jack heard only one side of the conversation, but mentally thanked the flight crew for letting the guys in back know something.

“Roger, OMEN, say again your situation.... Roger that, we’re coming in. Good strobe light. Thirty seconds. Get ready in back,” Captain Willis told Ryan and the rest. “Safe guns, safe guns.”

Jack held his thumbs clear of the switch and elevated the minigun at the sky. The helicopter took a big nose-up attitude as it came down. It stopped and hovered a foot off the ground, not quite touching.

“Buck, tell the captain to come forward immediately.”

“Roger, PJ.” Behind him, Ryan heard Zimmer run aft, then, through the soles of his feet, felt the troops race aboard. He kept his eyes outboard, looking over the rotating barrels of his gun until the helicopter took off, and even then he trained the mini down at the ground.

“Well, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Colonel Johns observed as he brought the aircraft back to a southerly heading. “Hell, I don’t even know why they pay us for this. Where’s that ground-pounder?”

“Hooking him up now, sir,” Zimmer replied. “Got ’em all aboard. All clean, no casualties.”

“Captain ... ?”

“Yes, Colonel?”

“We got a job for your team if you think you’re up to it.”

“Let’s hear it, sir.”

The MC-130E Combat Talon was orbiting over Colombian territory, which made the crew a little nervous, since they didn’t have permission. The main job now was to relay communications, and even with the sophisticated gear aboard the four-engine support aircraft, they couldn’t handle it from over the ocean.

What they really needed was a good radar. The Pave Low/Combat Talon team was supposed to operate under supervision of an AWACS which, however, they hadn’t brought along. Instead a lieutenant and a few NCOs were writing on maps and talking over secure radio circuits at the same time.

“CAESAR, say your fuel state,” Captain Montaigne called.

“Looking good, CLAW. We’re staying down in the valleys. Estimate we’ll tank again in eight-zero minutes.”

“Roger eight-zero minutes. Be advised negative hostile radio traffic at this time.”

“Acknowledged.” That was one possible problem. What if the Cartel had somebody in the Colombian Air Force? Sophisticated as both American aircraft were, a P-51 left over from the Second World War could easily kill both of them.

Clark was waiting for them. With two vehicles. Vega had stolen a farm truck big enough for their needs. It turned out that he was quite adept at rewiring ignition systems, a skill about whose acquisition he was vague. The helicopter touched down and the men ran out toward the strobe light that Chavez still had. Clark got their officer and briefed him quickly. The helicopter took off and headed north, helped by the twenty-knot wind blowing down the valley. Then it looped west, heading for the MC-130 and another midair refueling.

The Microvan and the truck drove back toward the farmhouse. Clark’s mind was still racing. A really smart guy would have run the operation from inside the village, which would have been far tougher to approach. Cortez wanted to be far from anyone’s view, but failed to consider his physical security requirements in military terms. Cortez was thinking like a spy, for whom security was secrecy, and not a line-animal, for whom security was a lot of guns and a clear field of fire. Everyone, he figured, had his limitations. Clark

rode the back of the farm truck with the OMEN team group around him and his hand-drawn diagram of the objective. It was just like the old days, Clark thought, running missions on zero-minute notice. He hoped that these young light-fighters were as good as the animals in 3rd SOG. Even Clark, however, had limitations. The animals of 3rd SOG had been young then, too.

"Ten minutes, then," he concluded.

"All right," the captain agreed. "We haven't had much contact. We have all the weapons and ammo we need."

"So?" Escobedo asked.

"So we killed ten *norteamericanos* last night and we will kill ten more tonight."

"But the losses!" LaTorre objected.

"We are fighting highly skilled professional soldiers. Our men wiped them out, but the enemy fought bravely and well. Only one survived," Cortez said. "I have his body in the next room. He died here soon after they brought him in."

"How do you know that they are not close by?" Escobedo demanded. The idea of physical danger was something he'd allowed himself to forget.

"I know the location of every enemy group. They are waiting to be extracted by their helicopter support. They do not know that their helicopter has been withdrawn."

"How did you manage that?" LaTorre wondered aloud.

"Please permit me my methods. You hired me for my expertise. You should not be surprised when I demonstrate it."

"And now?"

"Our assault group—nearly two hundred men this time—should now be approaching the second American group. This one's code name is Team FEATURE," Félix added. "Our next question, of course, is which elements of the Cartel leadership are taking advantage of this—or perhaps I should say, which members are working with the Americans, using them for their own ends. As is often the case in such operations, both sides appear to be using the other."

"Oh?" It was Escobedo this time.

"Sí, jefe. And it should not surprise either of you that I have been able to identify those who have betrayed their comrades." He looked at both men, a thin smile on his lips.

There were only two road guards. Clark was back in the VW Microvan while OMEN raced through the woods to get to the objective. Vega and León had removed a side window, and now Vega, also in back, held it in place with his

hand.

“Everybody ready?” Clark asked.

“Go!” Chavez replied.

“Here we go.” Clark took the last turn in the road and slowed, taking the car right up to the two guards. They took their weapons off sling and assumed a more aggressive stance as he slowed the vehicle. “Excuse me, I am lost.”

That was Vega’s cue to let go of the glass. As it dropped, Chavez and León came up to their knees and aimed their MP-5s at the guards. Both took bursts in the head without warning, and both fell without a sound. Strangely, the submachine guns sounded awfully loud within the confines of the vehicle.

“Nicely done,” Clark said. Before proceeding, he lifted his radio.

“This is SNAKE. OMEN, report in.”

“SNAKE, this is OMEN Six. In position. Say again, we are in position.”

“Roger, stand by. CAESAR, this is SNAKE.”

“SNAKE, this is CAESAR, ready to copy.”

“Position check.”

“We are holding at five miles out.”

“Roger that, CAESAR, continue to hold at five miles. Be advised we are moving in.”

Clark killed the lights and drove the van a hundred yards down the driveway. He selected a spot where the road twisted. Here he stopped the van and maneuvered it to block the road.

“Give me one of your frags,” he said, stepping out and leaving the keys in the ignition. First he loosened the cotter pin on the grenade. Next he wired the body of the grenade to the door handle and ran another wire from the pin to the accelerator pedal. It took under a minute. The next person who opened that door was in for a nasty surprise. “Okay, come on.”

“Tricky, Mr. Clark,” Chavez observed.

“Kid, I was a Ninja before it became fashionable. Now shut up and do your jobs.” No smile now, no time for banter. It was like the return of his youth, but while that feeling was a welcome one, it would have been more so if his youth had not been spent doing things best unremembered. The pure exhilaration of leading men into battle, however, was something that his memory had not lied about. It was terrible. It was dangerous. It was also something at which he excelled, and knew it. For the moment he was not Mr. Clark. He was, again, The Snake, the man whose footsteps no one had ever heard. It took five minutes to get to their jump-off point.

The NVA were smarter opponents than these. All the security troops were near the house. He took Vega’s night scope and counted them, sweeping the grounds to check for strays, but there were none.

“OMEN Six, this is SNAKE. Say your position.”

“We are in the treeline north of the objective.”

“Toss your strobe to mark your position.”

“Okay, done.”

Clark turned his head and the goggles showed the infrared strobe blinking on the open ground, thirty feet from the treeline. Chavez, listening on the same radio circuit, did the same.

“Okay, stand by. CAESAR, this is SNAKE. We are in position on the east side of the objective where the driveway comes through the trees. OMEN is on the north side. We have two good strobes to mark friendly positions. Acknowledge.”

“Roger, copy, you are in the treeline at the road, east side of the objective. Say again, east of the objective, with OMEN to the north. Copy strobes to mark friendly positions. We are standing by at five miles,” PJ replied in his best computer voice.

“Roger, come on in. It’s show time. I repeat, come on in.”

“Roger, copy, CAESAR is turning in with hot guns.”

“OMEN, this is SNAKE. Commence firing, commence firing.”

Cortez had them both at a disadvantage, though neither knew the whole reason for it. LaTorre, after all, had talked to Félix the previous day and been told that Escobedo was the traitor in their midst. Because of that, he had his pistol out first.

“What is this?” Escobedo demanded.

“The ambush was very clever, *jefe,* but I saw through your ploy,” Cortez said.

“What are you talking about?”

Before Cortez could give his preplanned answer, several rifles started firing north of the house. Félix wasn’t a total fool. His first reaction was to extinguish the lights in the house. LaTorre still had his gun aimed at Escobedo, and Cortez dashed to the window, a pistol in his hand, to see what was happening. Just as he got there, he realized that he was being foolish, and dropped to his knees, peering around the frame. The house was of block construction and should stop a bullet, he told himself, though the windows certainly would not.

The fire was light and sporadic, just a few people, just an annoyance, and he had people to deal with that. Cortez’s own men, assisted by the bodyguards for Escobedo and LaTorre, returned fire at once. Félix watched his men move like soldiers, spreading out into two fire teams, dropping at once into the usual infantry drill of fire and movement. Whatever annoyance this was, they’d soon take care of things. The Cartel bodyguards, as usual, were brave but oafish. Two of them were already down.

Yes, he saw, it was already working. The gunfire from the trees was diminishing. Some bandits, perhaps, who'd been late realizing that they'd bitten off more than—

The sound was like nothing he'd ever heard.

"Target in sight," Jack heard over the intercom phones. Ryan was looking the wrong way, of course. Though he was standing at a gun, Colonel Johns had not mistaken him for a gunner, not a real one. Sergeant Zimmer was on the right-side gun, the one that corresponded to the pilot's seat. They'd come skimming in so low that Ryan felt—*knew* that he could reach out and touch some treetops. Then the aircraft pivoted. The sound and vibration assaulted Jack through all the protective gear, and the flash that accompanied the sound cast a shadow of the aircraft before Jack's eyes as he looked for other targets.

It looked like a huge, curving tube of yellow neon, Cortez's mind told him. Wherever it touched the ground, dust rose in a great cloud. It swept up and down the field between the house and the trees. Then it stopped after what could have been only a few seconds. Cortez couldn't see anything in the dust, and it took a second to realize that he should have been able to see something, the flashes of his men's rifles at the very least. Then there were flashes, but those were from farther away, in the treeline, and there were more now.

"CAESAR: Check fire, check fire!"

"Roger," the radio replied. Overhead, the horrible noise stopped. Clark hadn't heard it in a very long time. Another sound from his youth, it was as fearful now as it had been then.

"Heads up, OMEN, we're moving now, SNAKE is moving. Acknowledge."

"OMEN, this is Six, cease fire, cease fire!" The shooting from the treeline stopped. "SNAKE: Go!"

"Come on!" It was stupid to lead them with only a silenced pistol in his hand, Clark knew, but he was in command, and the good commanders led from the front. They covered the two hundred yards to the house in thirty seconds.

"Door!" Clark said to Vega, who used his AK to blast off the hinges, then kicked it down. Clark dove through low, rolling when he hit, looking and seeing one man in the room. He had an AK, and fired it, but shot high. Clark dropped him with a silenced round in the face, then another as he fell. There was a doorway but no door to the next room. He gestured to Chavez, who tossed a CS grenade into it. They waited for it to go off, then both rushed the room, again diving in low.

There were three men. One, holding a pistol, took a step toward them. Clark and Chavez hit him in the chest and head. The other armed man, kneeling by

the window, tried to turn about, but couldn't do it on his knees, and fell onto his side. Chavez was there in an instant, smashing his buttstock onto his forehead. Clark rushed the third man, slamming him against the block wall. León and Vega came in next, leapfrogging to the final door. That room was empty.

"Building is clear!" Vega shouted. "Hey, I—"

"Come on!" Clark dragged his man out the front. Chavez did the same, covered by León. Vega was slow in moving. They didn't know why until they were all outside.

Clark was already on his radio. "CAESAR, this is SNAKE. We got 'em. Let's get the fuck outa here."

"León," Vega said. "Look here."

"Tony," the sergeant said. The only other survivor from Ninja Hill had been a BANNER man. Leon walked over to Escobedo, who was still conscious. *"Motherfucker! You're fuckin' dead!"* León screamed, bringing his gun down.

"Stop!" Clark yelled at him. That almost didn't work, but Clark knocked him down, which did. "You're a soldier, goddammit, act like one! You and Vega—carry your friend on the chopper."

Team OMEN worked its way across the field. Several men, remarkably enough, weren't quite dead yet. That aberration was corrected with single rifle shots. The captain got his men together and counted them off with his finger.

"Good work," Clark told him. "You got everybody?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, here's comes our ride."

The Pave Low swept in from the west this time, and again didn't quite touch the ground. *Just like the old days, Clark.* A helicopter that touched the ground could set off a mine. Not likely here, but PJ hadn't gotten old enough to be a colonel by overlooking any chances at all. He grabbed Escobedo—he'd gotten a good enough look by now to identify him—by the arm and propelled him to the ramp. One of the chopper crew met them there, did his count, and before Clark was sitting down with his charge, the MH-53J was moving up and north. He assigned a soldier to look after Señor Escobedo and went forward.

Sweet Jesus, Ryan thought. He'd counted eight bodies, and they'd just been the ones close to the helicopter. Jack switched off his gun motor and relaxed—and really did this time. Relaxation was a relative thing, he'd just learned. Being shot at really was worse than flying in the back of a goddamned helicopter. Amazing, he thought. A hand grabbed his shoulder.

"We got Cortez and Escobedo alive!" Clark shouted at him.

"Escobedo? What the hell was he—"

"You complaining?"

"What the hell can we do with him?" Jack asked.

“Well, I sure as shit couldn’t just leave him there, could I?”

“But what—”

“If you want, I can give the bastard a flying lesson.” Clark gestured toward the stern ramp. *If he learns to fly before he hits the ground, fine.*...

“No, goddammit, that’s fucking murder!”

Clark grinned at him. “That gun next to you is not a negotiating tool, doc.”

“Okay, people,” PJ’s voice came over the intercom before that conversation went any further. “One more stop and we call this one a day.”

29.

Fill-ups

IT HAD STARTED with the President's warning. Admiral Cutter wasn't used to having to make sure his orders had been carried out. In his naval career orders were things that you gave and that other people did, or that you did after being told to do so by others. He placed a call to the Agency and got Ritter and asked the question, the one that had to be an unnecessarily insulting one. Cutter knew that he'd already humiliated the man, and that to do so further was not a smart move—but what if the President had been right? That risk called for further action. Ritter's reaction was a troubling one. The irritation that should have been in his voice, wasn't. Instead he'd spoken like any other government bureaucrat saying that yes, the orders were being carried out, of course. Ritter was a cold, effective son of a bitch, but even that sort had its limits, beyond which emotion comes to the fore; Cutter knew that he'd reached and passed that point with the DDO. The anger just hadn't been there, and it ought to have been.

Something is wrong. The National Security Adviser told himself to relax. *Something might be wrong.* Maybe Ritter was playing mind games. Maybe even he'd seen that his course of action was the only proper one, Cutter speculated, and resigned himself to the inevitable. After all, Ritter liked being Deputy Director (Operations). That was his rice bowl, as the government saying went. Even the most important government officials had those. Even they were often uncomfortable with the idea of leaving behind the office and the secretary and the driver and most of all the title that designated them as Important People despite their meager salaries. Like the line from some movie or other, leaving the government meant entering the real world, and in the real world, people expected results to back up position papers and National Intelligence Estimates. How many people stayed in government service because of the security, the benefits, and the insulation from that "real" world? There were more of those, Cutter was sure, than of the ones who saw themselves as the honest servants of the people.

But even if that were likely, Cutter considered, it was not certain, and some further checking was in order. And so he placed his own call to Hurlburt Field and asked for Wing Operations.

"I need to talk to Colonel Johns."

"Colonel Johns is off post, sir, and cannot be reached."

"I need to know where he is."

“I do not have that information, sir.”

“What do you mean, you don’t have that information, Captain ?” The real wing operations officer was off duty by now, and one of the helicopter pilots had drawn the duty for this evening.

“I mean I don’t know, sir,” the captain replied. He wanted to be a little more insolent in his answer to so stupid a question, but the call had come in on a secure line, and there was no telling who the hell was on the other end.

“Who does know?”

“I don’t know that, sir, but I can try to find out.”

Was this just some command fuck-up? Cutter asked himself. What if it wasn’t?

“Are all your MC-130s in place, Captain?” Cutter asked.

“Three birds are off TDY somewhere or other, sir. Where they are is classified—I mean, sir, that where our aircraft happen to be is almost always classified. Besides, what with that hurricane chasing around south of here, we’re getting ready to move a lot of our birds in case it heads this way.”

Cutter could have demanded the information right then and there. But that would have meant identifying himself, and even then, he was talking to some twenty-something-year-old junior officer who might just say no because nobody had told him otherwise, and such a junior officer knew that he’d never be seriously punished for not taking initiative and doing something he’d been told not to do—at least not over a telephone line, secure or not. Such a demand would also have called attention to something in a way that he didn’t want....

“Very well,” Cutter said finally and hung up. Then he called Andrews.

The first hint of trouble came from Larson, whose Beech was circling the FEATURE LZ. Juardo, still fighting the pain of his leg wound, was scanning out the side of the aircraft with his low-light goggles.

“Hey, man, I got some trucks on the ground down there at three o‘clock. Like fifteen of ’em.”

“Oh, that’s just great,” the pilot observed, and keyed his microphone.

“CLAW, this is LITTLE EYES, over.”

“LITTLE EYES, this is CLAW,” the Combat Talon answered.

“Be advised we have possible activity on the ground six klicks southeast of FEATURE. Say again we have trucks on the ground. No personnel are visible at this time. Recommend you warn FEATURE and CAESAR of possible intruders.”

“Roger, copy.”

“Christ, I hope they’re slow tonight,” Larson said over the intercom. “We’re going down to take a look.”

“You say so, man.”

Larson extended his flaps and reduced power as much as he dared. There was precious little light, and flying low over mountains at night was not his idea of fun. Juardo looked down with his goggles, but the tree canopy was too heavy.

“I don’t see anything.”

“I wonder how long those trucks have been there....”

There was a bright flash on the ground, perhaps five hundred meters below the summit. Then there were several more, small ones, like sparklers on the ground. Larson made another call:

“CLAW, this is LITTLE EYES. We have a possible firefight underway below FEATURE LZ.”

“Roger.”

“Roger, copy,” PJ said to the MC-130. “Aircraft commander to crew: we have a possible firefight at the next LZ. We may have a hot pickup.” At that moment something changed. The aircraft settled a touch and slowed. “Buck, what is that?”

“Uh-oh,” the flight engineer said. “I think we have a P3 leak here. Possible pressure bleed leak, maybe a bad valve, number-two engine. I’m losing some N_f speed and some Ng, sir. T_5 is coming up a little.” Ten feet over the flight engineer’s head, a spring had broken, opening a valve wider than it was supposed to be. It released bleed air supposed to recirculate within the turboshaft engine. That reduced combustion in the engine, and was manifested in reduced N_f or free-power turbine speed, also in Ng power from the gas-producer turbine, and finally the loss of air volume resulted in increased tailpipe temperature, called T_5. Johns and Willis could see all this from their instruments, but they really depended on Sergeant Zimmer to tell them what the problem was. The engines belonged to him.

“Talk to me, Buck,” Johns ordered.

“We just lost twenty-six-percent power in Number Two, sir. Can’t fix it. Bad valve, shouldn’t get much worse, though. Tailpipe temp ought to stabilize short of max-sustainable ... maybe. Ain’t an emergency yet, PJ. I’ll keep an eye on it.”

“Fine,” the pilot growled. At the valve, not at Zimmer. This was not good news. Things had gone well tonight, too well. Like most combat veterans, Paul Johns was a suspicious man. What his mind went over now were power and weight considerations. He had to climb over those goddamned mountains in order to tank and fly back to Panama....

But first he had a pickup to make.

“Give me a time.”

“Four minutes,” Captain Willis answered. “We’ll be able to see it over that

next ridge. Starting to mush on us, sir."

"Yeah, I can tell." Johns looked at his instruments. Number One was at 104 percent rated power. Number Two was just over 73 percent. Since they could accomplish their next segment of the mission despite the problem, it went onto the back burner for now. PJ dialed some more altitude into his autopilot. Climbing ridges would be getting harder now with greater weight on the airframe and less power to drag it around.

"It's a real fight, all right," Johns said a minute later. His night-vision systems showed lots of activity on the ground. Johns keyed his radio. "FEATURE, this is CAESAR, over." No answer.

"FEATURE, this is CAESAR, over." It took two more tries.

"CAESAR this is FEATURE, we are under attack."

"Roger, FEATURE, I can see that, son. I make your position about three hundred meters down from the LZ. Get up the hill, we can cover. Say again, we can cover."

"We have close contact, CAESAR."

"Run for it. I repeat, run for it, we can cover you," PJ told him calmly. *Come on, kid. I've been here before. I know the drill....* "Break contact now!"

"Roger. FEATURE, this is Six, head for the LZ. I repeat, head for the LZ now!" they heard him say. PJ keyed his intercom.

"Buck, let's go hot. Gunners to stations, we have a hot LZ here. There are friendlies on the ground. I say again: *there are friendlies on the ground, people.* So let's be goddamned careful with those fucking guns!"

Johns had wished a hundred times that he'd had one of these over Laos. The Pave Low carried over a thousand pounds of titanium armor which went, of course, over the engines, fuel cells, and transmission. The flight crew was protected by less effective Kevlar. The rest of the aircraft was less fortunate—a child could push a screwdriver through the aluminum skin—but those were the breaks. He orbited the LZ, a thousand feet higher and two thousand yards out, traveling in a clockwise circle to get a feel for things. Things didn't feel good.

"I don't like this, PJ," Zimmer told him over intercom. Sergeant Bean on the ramp gun felt the same way but didn't say anything. Ryan, who hadn't seen anything at any of the landing zones, also kept his mouth shut.

"They're moving, Buck."

"Looks like it."

"Okay, I'm spiraling in. AC to crew, we're heading in for a closer look. You may return fire directed at us, but nothing else until I say otherwise. I want to hear acknowledgments."

"Zimmer, acknowledge."

"Bean, acknowledge."

"Ryan, okay." *I can't see anything to shoot at anyway.*

It was worse than it looked. The attackers from the Cartel had chosen to approach the primary LZ from an unexpected direction. This took them right through the alternate extraction site selected by FEATURE, and the team had not had the time needed to prepare a full defensive network. Worst of all, some of the attackers were those who had survived the fight against KNIFE, and had learned a few things, like the way in which caution was sometimes improved by a speedy advance, not diminished by it. They also knew of the helicopter, but not enough. Had they known of its armament, the battle might have ended then and there, but they expected the rescue chopper to be unarmed because they had never really encountered any other sort. As usual in battle, the contest was defined by purpose and error, knowledge and ignorance. FEATURE was pulling back rapidly, leaving behind hastily arranged booby traps and claymores, but, as before, the casualties were less a warning to the attackers than a goad, and the Cartel's veterans of Ninja Hill were learning. Now they split into three distinct groups and began to envelop the hilltop LZ.

"I got a strobe," Willis said.

"FEATURE, this is CAESAR, confirm your LZ."

"CAESAR, FEATURE, do you have our strobe?"

"That's affirm. Coming in now. Get all your people in the open. I say again, get all your people where we can see them."

"We have three down we're bringing in. We're doing our best."

"Thirty seconds out," PJ told him.

"We'll be ready."

As before, the gunners heard half of the conversation, followed by their instructions: "AC to crew, I've ordered all friendlies into the open. Once we get a good count, I want you to hose down the area. Anything you can see is probably friendly. I want everything else suppressed hard. Ryan, that means beat the shit out of it."

"Roger," Jack replied.

"Fifteen seconds. Let's look sharp, people."

It came without warning. No one saw where it originated. The Pave Low was spiraling in steeply, but it could not wholly avoid flying over enemy troops. Six of them heard it approach and saw the black mass moving against the background of clouds. Simultaneously they aimed at the sky and let loose. The 7.62mm rounds lanced right through the floor of the helicopter. The sound was distinctive, like hail on a tin roof, and everyone who heard it knew immediately what it was. A scream confirmed it for the slow. Someone had been hit.

“PJ, we’re taking fire,” Zimmer said over the intercom circuit. As he said so, he trained his gun down and loosed a brief burst. Again the airframe vibrated. The line of tracers told the whole world what and where the Pave Low was, and more fire came in.

“Jesus!” Rounds hit the armored windshield. They didn’t penetrate, but they left nicks, and their impacts sparked like fireflies. On instinct, Johns jinked to the right, away from the fire. That unmasked the left side of the aircraft.

Ryan was as scared as he had ever been. It seemed that there were a hundred, two hundred, a thousand muzzle flashes down there, all aimed straight at him. He wanted to cringe, but knew that his safest place was behind the thousand-plus-pound gun mount. The gun didn’t really have much of a sight. He looked down the rotating barrels toward a particularly tight knot of flashes and depressed the trigger switch.

It felt like he was holding a jackhammer in his hands and sounded like a giant was ripping a canvas sail to bits. A gout of flame six feet long and three across erupted before his eyes, so bright that he could barely see through it, but the tight cylinder of tracers was impossible to miss, and it walked right into the flashes that were still sparkling on the ground. But not for long. He waved the gun around, assisted in the effort by the gyrations of the helicopter and the incredible vibration of the gun. The line of tracers wiggled and wavered over the target area for several seconds. By the time his thumbs came up, the sparkling of muzzle flashes had stopped.

“Son of a bitch,” he said to himself, so surprised that he momentarily forgot about the danger. That wasn’t the only incoming fire. Ryan selected another area and went to work, this time holding to short bursts, only a few hundred rounds each. Then the chopper turned fully away and he had no more targets.

On the flight deck, Willis and Johns scanned their instruments. They’d allowed themselves to be surprised. There was no critical damage to the aircraft. The flight controls, also protected by armor, engines, transmission, and fuel cells were impervious to rifle fire. Or supposed to be.

“We got some people hurt back here,” Zimmer reported. “Let’s get it over with, PJ.”

“Okay, Buck, I hear you.” PJ brought the chopper back around, looping to the left now. “FEATURE, this is CAESAR, we’re going to try that again.” Even his voice had lost its icy calm. Combat hadn’t changed very much, but he’d grown older.

“They’re closing in. Move your ass, mister! We’re all here, we’re all here.”

“Twenty seconds, son. AC to crew, we’re going back in. Twenty seconds.”

The helicopter stopped and pivoted in the air, not continuing its majestic sweep, and Johns hoped that those who were watching would be unprepared for that. He twisted the throttle control to max power and lowered his nose to dive in hard on the LZ. Two hundred meters out he brought the nose up and yanked the collective to slow down. It was his usual perfect maneuver. The Pave Low lost forward airspeed exactly at the right place—and dropped hard

on the ground because of the reduced power from Number Two. Johns cringed when he felt it, half expecting it to set off a booby trap, but that didn't happen and he left it there.

It seemed to take forever. Minds and bodies pumped up with adrenaline have their own time, the sort that stops the ticking of watches. Ryan thought that he could see the rotor blades spinning individually at the top of his peripheral vision. He wanted to look aft, wanted to see if the team had gotten aboard yet, but his area of responsibility was out the left-side gunner's door. He realized at once that he wasn't being paid to bring ammunition home. As soon as he was sure that there were no friendlies in front of him, he punched the gun switch and hosed down the treeline, sweeping his fire about a foot off the ground in a wide arc. On the other side, Zimmer was doing the same.

Aft, Clark was looking out the back door. Bean was on his minigun, and he couldn't shoot. This was where the friendlies were, and they moved toward the chopper, their legs pumping in what had to be a run, but seeming to be slow-motion. That was when the fire started from the trees.

Forward, Ryan was amazed that anyone could be alive in the area that he'd just hosed, but there it was. He saw a spark on the doorframe and knew it had to have been a bullet aimed right at him. Jack didn't cringe. There was no place to hide, and he knew that the side of the aircraft was getting hit far worse. He took an instant to look and see where the shooting was coming from, then trained on it and fired again. It seemed that the blast from the gun must push the aircraft sideways. The exhaust flames from the gun bored a hole through the dust kicked up by the spinning rotor, but still there were flashes of fire from the treeline.

Clark heard the screams inside and out over the low howl of the miniguns. He could feel the rounds hitting the side of the aircraft, and then saw two men fall just at the tail rotor of the helicopter while others were racing aboard.

"Shit!" He leapt to his feet and ran out the door, joined by Chavez and Vega. Clark lifted one of the fallen soldiers and dragged him toward the ramp. Chavez and Vega got the other. There was dust kicking up at their feet from the fire. Vega fell five feet from the ramp, taking his burden down with him. Clark tossed his soldier into the waiting hands of his team members and turned to assist. First he took the team member. When he turned, Chavez was struggling with Vega. Clark grabbed the man's shoulders and pushed backward, landing on the edge of the ramp. Ding grabbed Oso's feet and swung them around, leaping over them to grab the base of the minigun as the helicopter started lifting off. Fire came straight through the door, but Bean now had a clear field for his weapon and swept it across the area.

It was slow getting off. The helicopter had several tons of new weight, was at over five thousand feet of altitude, and trying to fly with reduced power. Forward, PJ cursed the balky machine. The Pave Low struggled up a few feet, still taking fire.

On the ground around them the attackers were enraged that the men whom they wanted to kill were escaping, and ran for one last attempt to prevent it.

They saw the helicopter as a trophy, some horrible apparition that had robbed them of success and their comrades of their lives, and each of them determined that this should not be. Over a hundred rifles were trained on the aircraft as it wavered, halfway between ground and flight.

Ryan felt the passage of several rounds—they were coming right through his door, going he knew not where, aiming for him and his gun. He was past fear. The flashes of rifle fire were places to aim, and that he did. One at a time he selected a target and touched his trigger, shifting rapidly from one to another. Safety, what there was of it, lay in eliminating the danger. There was no place to run, and he knew that the ability to respond was a luxury that everyone aboard the aircraft wanted, but only three of them had. He couldn't let them down. He moved the gun left to right and back again in a series of seconds that stretched out into hours, and he thought that he could hear each individual round the minigun spat out. His head jerked back when something hit his helmet, but he yanked it back and held the trigger down, spraying the area in one continuous blast of fire that changed as he realized that he had to bring his hands up and the muzzles down because the targets were dropping away. For one brief contradictory instant it seemed as if they and not he were getting away. Then it was over. For a moment, his hands wouldn't come off the gun. He tried to take a step back, but his hands wouldn't let go until he willed them to. Then they dropped to his side. Ryan shook his head to clear it. He was deafened by the noise from the minigun, and it took a few seconds before he started hearing the higher-frequency screams of wounded men. He looked around to see that the body of the aircraft was filled with the acidic smoke of the guns, but the rapidly increasing slipstream from forward flight was clearing it out. His eyes were still suffering from the gun flashes, and his legs were wobbly from the sudden fatigue that comes after violent action. He wanted to sit down, to go to sleep, to wake up in another place.

One of the screams was close by. It was Zimmer, only a few feet away, lying on his back and rolling around with his arms across his chest. Ryan went to see what the problem was.

Zimmer had taken three rounds in the chest. He was aspirating blood. It sprayed in a pink cloud from his mouth and nose. One round had shattered his right shoulder, but the serious ones were through the lungs. The man was bleeding to death before his eyes, Ryan knew at once. Was there a medic here? Might he do something?

"This is Ryan," he said over the intercom line. "Sergeant Zimmer is down. He's hit pretty bad."

"Buck!" PJ responded at once. "Buck, are you all right?"

Zimmer tried to answer but couldn't. His intercom line had been shot away. He shouted something Ryan couldn't understand, and Jack turned and screamed as loudly as he could at the rest of them, the others who didn't seem to care or know what the problem here was.

"Medic! Corpsman!" he added, not knowing what it was that Army troops said. Clark heard him and started heading that way.

“Come on, Zimmer, you’re going to be all right,” Jack told him. He remembered that much from his brief few months in the Marine Corps. Give them a reason to live. “We’re going to fix this up and you’re going to be all right. Hang in there, Sarge—it hurts, but you’re going to be all right.”

Clark was there a moment later. He stripped off the flight engineer’s flak jacket, oblivious to the screech of pain that it caused from the wrecked shoulder. For Clark, too, it was too much a return to years past and things half-remembered. Somehow he’d forgotten just how scary, how awful this sort of thing was, and while he was recovering his senses more rapidly than most, the horror of having been helpless under fire and helpless with its aftermath had nearly overpowered him. And he was helpless now. He could see that from the placement of the wounds. Clark looked up at Ryan and shook his head.

“My kids!” Zimmer screamed. The sergeant had a reason to live, but the reason wasn’t enough.

“Tell me about your kids,” Ryan said. “Talk to me about your kids.”

“Seven—I got seven kids—I gotta, I can’t *die!* My kids—my kids need me.”

“Hang in there, Sarge, we’re going to get you out of here. You’re going to make it,” Ryan told him, tears clouding in his eyes at the shame of lying to a dying man.

“They need me!” His voice was weaker now as the blood was filling his throat and lungs.

Ryan looked up at Clark, hoping that there was something to be said. Some hope. Something. Clark just stared into Jack’s face. He looked back down at Zimmer and took his hand, the uninjured one.

“Seven kids?” Jack asked.

“They need me,” Zimmer whimpered, knowing now that he wouldn’t be there, wouldn’t see them grow and marry and have their own children, wouldn’t be there to guide them, to protect them. He had failed to do what a father must do.

“I’ll tell you something about your kids that you don’t know, Zimmer,” Ryan said to the dying man.

“Huh? What?” He looked confused, looked to Ryan for the answer to the great question of life. Jack didn’t have that one, but told him what he could.

“They’re all going to college, man.” Ryan squeezed the hand as hard as he could. “You got my word, Zimmer, all your kids’ll go to college. I will take care of that for you. Swear to God, man, I’ll do it.”

The sergeant’s face changed a bit at that, but before Ryan could decide what emotion he beheld, the face changed again, and there was no emotion left. Ryan hit the intercom switch. “Zimmer’s dead, Colonel.”

“Roger.” Ryan was offended by the coldness of the acknowledgment. He didn’t hear what Johns was thinking: *God, oh God, what do I tell Carol and the*

kids?

Ryan had Zimmer's head cradled on his lap. He disengaged himself slowly, resting the head down on the metal floor of the helicopter. Clark wrapped his burly arms around the younger man.

"I'm going to do it," Jack told him in a choking voice. "That wasn't a fucking lie. I am going to do it!"

"I know. He knew it too. He really did."

"You sure?" The tears had started, and it was hard for Jack to repeat the most important question of his life. "Are you really sure?"

"He knew what you said, Jack, and he believed you. What you did, doc, that was pretty good." Clark embraced Ryan in the way that men do only with their wives, their children, and those with whom they had faced death.

In the right-front seat, Colonel Johns put his grief away into a locked compartment that he would later open and experience to the full. But for now he had a mission to fly. Buck would surely understand that.

Cutter's jet arrived at Hurlburt Field well after dark. He was met by a car which took him to Wing Operations. He'd arrived entirely without warning, and strode into the Operations office like an evil spirit.

"Who the hell's in charge here?"

The sergeant at the desk recognized the President's National Security Adviser immediately from seeing him on television. "Right through that door, sir."

Cutter found a young captain dozing in his swivel chair. His eyes had cracked open just as the door did, and the twenty-nine-year-old officer jumped to his feet quite unsteadily.

"I want to know where Colonel Johns is," Vice Admiral Cutter told him quietly.

"Sir, that is information which I am not able to—"

"You know who the hell I am?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you trying to say no to me, Captain?"

"Sir, I have my orders."

"Captain, I am countermanding all of your orders. Now, you answer my question and you do it right now." Cutter's voice was a few decibels higher now.

"Sir, I don't know where the—"

"Then you find somebody who does, and you get him here."

The captain was frightened enough that he took the route of least resistance.

He called a major, who lived on post and was in the office in under eight minutes.

"What the hell is this?" the major said on the way through the door.

"Major, I am what's going on here," Cutter told him. "I want to know where Colonel Johns is. He's the goddamned CO of this outfit, isn't he?"

"Yessir!" *What the hell is this ... ?*

"Are you telling me that the people of this unit don't know where their CO is?" Cutter was sufficiently amazed that his authority hadn't generated immediate compliance with his orders that he allowed himself to bluster off on a tangent.

"Sir, in Special Operations, we—"

"Is this a fucking Boy Scout camp or a military organization ?" the Admiral shouted.

"Sir, this is a military organization," the major replied. "Colonel Johns is off TDY. I am under orders, sir, not to discuss his mission or his location with anyone without proper authority, and you are not on the list, sir. Those are my orders, Admiral."

Cutter was amazed and only got angrier. "Do you know what my job is and who I work for?" He hadn't had a junior officer talk to him like this in over a decade. And he'd broken that one's career like a matchstick.

"Sir, I have written orders on this matter. The President ain't on the list either, sir," the major said from the position of attention. *Fucking squid, calling the United States Air Force a Boy Scout camp! Well, fuck you and the horse you rode in on—Admiral, sir,* his face managed to communicate quite clearly.

Cutter had to soften his voice, had to regain control of his emotions. He could take care of this insolent punk at leisure. But for now he needed that information. He started, therefore, with an apology, man to man, as it were. "Major, you'll have to excuse me. This is a most important matter, and I can't explain to you why it is important or the issues involved here. I can say that this is a real life-or-death situation. Your Colonel Johns may be in a place where he needs help. The operation may be coming apart around him, and I really need to know. Your loyalty to your commander is laudable, and your devotion to duty is exemplary, but officers are supposed to exercise judgment. You have to do that now, Major. I am telling you that I need that information —and I need it now."

Reason succeeded where bluster had failed. "Admiral, the colonel went back down to Panama along with one of our MC- 130s. I do not know why, and I don't know what they're doing. That is normal in a special-ops wing, sir. Practically everything we do is compartmented, and this one is tighter than most. What I just told you is everything I know, sir."

"Exactly where?"

"Howard, sir."

"Very well. How can I get in touch with them?"

"Sir, they're out of the net. I do not have that information. They can contact us but we can't contact them."

"That's crazy," Cutter objected.

"Not so, Admiral. We do that sort of thing all the time. With the MC-130 along, they're a self-contained unit. The Herky-bird takes maintenance and support personnel to sustain the operation, and unless they call us for something, they're completely independent of this base. In the event of a family emergency or something like that, we can try to contact them through Howard's base ops office, but we haven't had to do so in this case. I can try to open that channel now for you, if you wish, sir, but it might take a few hours."

"Thanks, but I can be there in a few hours."

"Weather's breaking down around that area, sir," the major warned him.

"That's okay." Cutter left the room and walked back to his car. His plane had already been refueled, and ten minutes later it was lifting off for Panama.

Johns was on an easier flight profile now, heading northeast down the great Andean valley that forms the spine of Colombia. The flight was smooth, but he had three concerns. First, he didn't have the necessary power to climb over the mountains to his west at his present aircraft weight. Second, he'd have to refuel in less than an hour. Third, the weather ahead was getting worse by the minute.

"CAESAR, this is CLAW, over."

"Roger, CLAW."

"When are we going to tank, sir?" Captain Montaigne asked.

"I want to get closer to the coast first, and maybe if we burn some more off I can head west some more to do it."

"Roger, but be advised that we're starting to get radar emissions, and somebody might just detect us. They're air-traffic radars, but this Herky-bird is big enough to give one a skin-paint, sir."

Damn! Somehow Johns had allowed himself to forget that.

"We got a problem here," PJ told Willis.

"Yeah. There's a pass about twenty minutes ahead that we might be able to climb over."

"How much?"

"Says eighty-one hundred on the charts. Drops down a lot lower farther up, but with the detection problem ... and the weather. I don't know, Colonel."

"Let's find out how high we can take her," Johns said. He'd tried to go easy on the engines for the last half hour. Not now. He had to find out what he could do. PJ twisted the throttle control on the collective arm to full power,

watching the gauge for Number Two as he did so. The needle didn't even reach 70 percent this time.

"The P3 leak is getting worse, boss," Willis told him.

"I see it." They worked to get maximum lift off the rotor, but though they didn't know it, that, too, had taken damage and was not delivering as much lift as it was supposed to. The Pave Low labored upward, reaching seventy-seven hundred feet, but that was where it stopped, and then it started descending, fighting every foot but gradually losing altitude.

"As we burn off more gas ..." Willis said hopefully.

"Don't bet on it." PJ keyed his radio. "CLAW, CAESAR, we can't make it over the hills."

"Then we'll come to you."

"Negative, too soon. We have to tank closer to the coast."

"CAESAR, this is LITTLE EYES. I copy your problem. What sort of fuel you need for that monster?" Larson asked. He'd been pacing the helicopter since the pickup, in accordance with the plan.

"Son, right now I'd burn piss if I had enough."

"Can you make the coast?"

"That's affirmative. Close, but we ought to be able to make it."

"I can pick you an airfield one-zero-zero miles short of the coast that has all the avgas you need. I am also carrying a casualty who's bleeding and needs some medical help."

Johns and Willis looked at each other. "Where is it?"

"At current speed, about forty minutes. El Pindo. It's a little place for private birds. Ought to be deserted this time of night. They have ten-kay gallons of underground storage. It's a Shell concession and I've been in and out of there a bunch of times."

"Altitude?"

"Under five hundred. Nice, thick air for that rotor, Colonel."

"Let's do it," Willis said.

"CLAW, did you copy that?" Johns asked.

"That's affirm."

"That's what we're going to try. Break west. Stay close enough to maintain radio contact, but you are free to evade radar coverage."

"Roger, heading west," Montaigne replied.

In back, Ryan was sitting by his gun. There were eight wounded men in the helicopter, but two medics were working on them and Ryan was unable to offer any help better than that. Clark rejoined him.

"Okay, what are we going to do with Cortez and Escobedo?"

"Cortez we want, the other one, hell, I don't know. How do we explain kidnapping him?"

"What do you think we're going to do, put him on trial?" Clark asked over the din of the engines and the wind.

"Anything else is cold-blooded murder. He's a prisoner now, and killing prisoners is murder, remember?"

You're getting legal on me, Clark thought, but he knew that Ryan was right. Killing prisoners was contrary to the code.

"So we take him back?"

"That blows the operation," Ryan said. He knew he was talking too loudly for the subject. He was supposed to be quiet and thoughtful now, but the environment and the events of the evening defeated that. "Christ, I don't know what to do."

"Where are we going—I mean, where's this chopper going?"

"I don't know." Ryan keyed his intercom to ask. He was surprised by the answer and communicated it to Clark.

"Look, let me handle it. I got an idea. I'll take him out of here when we land. Larson and I will tidy that part of it up. I think I know what'll work."

"But—"

"You don't really want to know, do you?"

"You can't murder him!" Jack insisted.

"I won't," Clark said. Ryan didn't know how to read that answer. But it did offer a way out, and he took it.

Larson got there first. The airfield was poorly lit, only a few glow lights showing under the low ceiling, but he managed to get his aircraft down, and with his anticollision lights blinking, he guided the way to the fuel-service area. He'd barely stopped when the helicopter landed fifty yards away.

Larson was amazed. In the dim blue lights he could see numerous holes in the aircraft. A man in a flight suit ran out toward him. Larson met him and led him to the fuel hose. It was a long one, about an inch in diameter, used to fuel private aircraft. The power to the pumps was off, but Larson knew where the switch was, and he shot the door lock. He'd never done that before, but just like in the movies, five rounds removed the brass mechanism from the wooden frame of the door. A minute later, Sergeant Bean had the nozzle into one of the outrigger tanks. That was when Clark and Escobedo appeared. A soldier held a rifle to the latter's head while the CIA officers conferred.

"We're going back," Clark told the pilot.

"What?" Larson turned to see two soldiers taking Juardo out of the Beech and toward the helicopter.

"We're taking our friend here back home to Medellin. Couple of things we

have to do first, though ... ”

“Oh, great.” Larson walked back to his aircraft and climbed up on the wing to open his fuel caps. He had to wait fifteen minutes. The helicopter usually drank fuel through a far larger hose. When the crewman took the hose back, the chopper’s rotor started turning again. Soon after that, it lifted off into the night. There was lightning ahead to the north, and Larson was just as happy that he wasn’t flying there. He let Clark handle the fueling while he went inside to make a telephone call. The funny part was that he’d even make money off the deal. Except that there was nothing funny about anything that had happened during the preceding month.

“Okay,” PJ said into the intercom. “That’s the last pit stop, and we’re heading for home.”

“Engine temps aren’t all that great,” Willis said. The T-64-GE- 7 engines were designed to burn aviation kerosene, not the more volatile and dangerous high-octane gas used by private planes. The manufacturer’s warranty said that you could use that fuel for thirty hours before the burner cans were crisped down to ashes, but the warranty didn’t say anything about bad valve springs and P3 loss.

“Looks like we’re going to cool ’em down just fine,” the colonel said, nodding at the weather ahead.

“Thinking positive again, are we, Colonel?” Willis said as coolly as he could manage. It wasn’t just a thunderstorm there, it was a hurricane that stood between them and Panama. On the whole, it was something scarier than being shot at. You couldn’t shoot *back* at a storm.

“CLAW, this is CAESAR, over,” Johns called on his radio.

“I read you, CAESAR.”

“How’s the weather ahead look?”

“Bad, sir. Recommend that you head west, find a spot to climb over, and try to approach from the Pacific side.”

Willis scanned the navigational display. “Uh-uh.”

“CLAW, we just gained about five-kay pounds in weight. We, uh, looks like we need another way.”

“Sir, the storm is moving west at fifteen knots, and your course to Panama takes you into the lower-right quadrant.”

Headwinds all the way, PJ told himself.

“Give me a number.”

“Estimated peak winds on your course home are seven-zero knots.”

“Great!” Willis observed. “That makes us marginal for Panama, sir. Very damned marginal.”

Johns nodded. The winds were bad enough. The rain that came with them

would greatly reduce engine efficiency. His flight range might be less than half of what it should be ... no way he could tank in the storm ... the smart move would be to find a place to land and stay there, but he couldn't do that either.... Johns keyed his radio yet again.

"CLAW, this is CAESAR. We are heading for Alternate One."

"Are you out of your skull?" Francie Montaigne replied.

"I don't like it, sir," Willis said.

"Fine. You can testify to that effect someday. It's only a hundred miles off the coast, and if it doesn't work, we'll use the winds to slingshot us around. CLAW, I need a position check on Alternate One."

"You crazy fucker," Montaigne breathed. To her communications people: "Call up Alternate One. I need a position check and I need it now."

Murray was not having any fun at all. Though *Adele* wasn't really a major hurricane, Wegener had told him, it was more than he had ever expected to see. The seas had been forty feet, and though once *Panache* had looked like a white steel cliff alongside the dock, she now rode like a child's toy in a bathtub. The FBI agent had a scopolamine patch stuck to his head below and behind his ear to combat motion-sickness, but it wasn't fighting hard enough at the moment. But Wegener was just sitting in his bridge chair, smoking his pipe like the Old Man of the Sea while Murray held on to the grab-bar over his head, feeling like the man on the flying trapeze.

They were not in their programmed position. Wegener had explained to his visitor that there was only one place they could be. It moved, but that's where they had to be, and Murray was distantly thankful that the seas weren't quite as bad as they had been. He worked his way over to the door and looked out at the towering cylinder of cloud.

"Panache, this is CLAW, over," the speaker said. Wegener rose to take the mike.

"CLAW, this is *Panache.* Your signal is weak but readable, over."

"Position check, over."

Wegener gave it to the pilot, who sounded like a girl, he thought. Christ, they were everywhere now.

"CAESAR is inbound yours."

"Roger. Please advise CAESAR that conditions are below margins. I say again, it is not good down here at the moment."

"Roger, copy. Stand by." The voice came back two minutes later. *"Panache,* this is CLAW. CAESAR says he wants to try it. If he can't do it, he plans to HIFR. Can you handle that, over."

"That's affirmative, we can sure as hell try. Give me an ETA, over."

“Estimate six-zero minutes.”

“Roger, we’ll be ready. Keep us posted. Out.” Wegener looked across his bridge. “Miss Walters, I have the conn. I want chiefs Oreza and Riley on the bridge, now.”

“Captain has the conn,” Ensign Walters said. She was disappointed. Here she was in the middle of a goddamned tropical storm and having the time of her young life. She wasn’t even ill from it, though many of the crew were. So why couldn’t the skipper let her keep the goddamned conn?

“Left standard rudder,” Wegener ordered. “Come to new course three-three-five. All ahead two-thirds.”

“Left standard rudder, aye, coming to new course three-three-five.” The helmsman turned the wheel, then reached for the throttle controls. “Two thirds, sir.”

“Very well. How you feel, Obrecki?” the skipper asked.

“Hell of a coaster, but I’m wondering when the ride is going to stop, sir.” The youngster grinned, but didn’t take his eyes off the compass.

“You’re doing just fine. Let me know if you get tired, though.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Oreza and Riley appeared a minute later. “What gives?” the former asked.

“We go to flight quarters in thirty minutes,” the captain told them.

“Oh, fuck!” Riley observed. “Excuse me, Red, but ... shit!”

“Okay, Master Chief, now that we’ve gotten that behind us, I’m depending on you to get it done,” Wegener said sternly. Riley accepted the rebuke like the pro he was.

“Beg pardon, Cap’n, you’ll get my best shot. Put the XO in the tower?”

Wegener nodded. The executive officer was the best man to command the evolution from the flight-control station. “Go get him.” Riley left and Wegener turned to his quartermaster. “Portagee, I want you on the wheel when we go Hotel Corpin. I’ll have the conn.”

“Sir, there ain’t no Hotel Corpin.”

“That’s why you’re on the wheel. Relieve Obrecki in half an hour and get a feel for her. We gotta give him the best target we can.”

“Jesus.” Oreza looked out the windows. “You got it, Red.”

Johns held the aircraft down, staying a scant five hundred feet above ground level. He disengaged the automatic flight controls, trusting more to his skill and instinct now, leaving the throttle to Willis and concentrating on his instruments as much as he could. It started in an instant. One moment they were flying in clear air, the next there was rain pelting the aircraft.

“This isn’t so bad,” Johns lied outrageously over the intercom.

“They even pay us to do it,” Willis agreed with no small irony.

PJ checked the navigation display. The winds were from the northwest at the moment, slowing the helicopter somewhat, but that would change. His eyes flickered from the airspeed indicator to another one that worked off a Doppler-radar aimed at the ground. Satellite and inertial navigation systems told a computer display where he was and where he wanted to go, a red dot. Another screen held the display of a radar system that interrogated the storm ahead, showing the worst sections in red. He’d try to avoid those, but the yellow areas he had to fly through were bad enough.

“Shit!” Willis shouted. Both pilots yanked up on the collective and twisted to maximum power. They’d caught a downdraft. Both pairs of eyes locked onto the dial that gave them vertical velocity in feet per minute. For an instant they were headed down at over a thousand, less than thirty seconds of life for an aircraft at five hundred feet. But microbursts like that are localized phenomena. The helicopter bottomed out at two hundred and clawed its way back up. PJ decided that seven hundred feet was a safer cruise altitude at the moment. He said one word:

“Close.”

Willis grunted by way of reply.

In back, men were strapped down to the floor. Ryan had already done that, and was holding onto his minigun mount as though it would make a difference. He could see out the open door—at nothing, really. Just a mass of gray darkness occasionally lit by lightning. The helicopter was jolting up and down, tossed like a child’s kite by the moving masses of air, except that the helicopter weighed forty thousand pounds. But there was nothing he could do. His fate was in the hands of others, and nothing he knew or did mattered now. Even vomiting didn’t make him feel any better, though he and others were doing that. He just wanted it to be over, and only intellect told him that he really did care how it ended—didn’t he?

The buffeting continued, but the winds shifted as the helicopter penetrated the storm. They had started off from the northeast, but shifted with measurable speed counterclockwise, and were soon on the port quarter of the aircraft. That increased their ground speed. With an airspeed of one-fifty, they now had a ground speed of one-ninety and increasing.

“This is doing wonders for our fuel economy,” Johns noted.

“Fifty miles,” Willis replied.

“CAESAR, this is CLAW, over.”

“Roger, CLAW, we are five-zero miles from Alternate One, and it’s a little bumpy—” *A little bumpy, my ass,* Captain Montaigne thought, roller-coastering through lighter weather a hundred miles away “—otherwise okay,” Johns reported. “If we cannot make the landing, I think we can try to slingshot out the other side and make for the Panamanian coast.” Johns frowned as more water struck the windshield. Some was ingested into the engines at the same time.

"Flameout! We've lost Number Two."

"Restart it," Johns said, still trying to be cool. He lowered the nose and traded altitude for speed to get out of the heavy rain. That, too, was supposed to be a local phenomenon. Supposed to be.

"Working on it," Willis rasped.

"Losing power in Number One," Johns said. He twisted the throttle all the way and managed to get some of it back. His two-engine aircraft was now operating on one of its engines at 80 percent power. "Let's get Two back, Captain. We have a hundred foot per minute of 'down' right now."

"Working," Willis repeated. The rain eased a little, and Number Two started turning and burning again, but delivered only 40 percent. "I think the P3 loss just got worse. We got a shit sandwich here, Colonel. Forty miles. We're committed to Alternate One now."

"At least we have an option. I never could swim worth a damn." PJ's hands were sweaty now. He could feel them loose inside the handmade gloves. Intercom time: "AC to crew, we're about fifteen minutes out," he told them. "One-five minutes out."

Riley had assembled a group of ten, all experienced crewmen. Each had a safety line around his waist, and Riley checked every knot and buckle personally. Though all had life preservers on, finding a man overboard in these conditions would require a miracle from an especially loving God who had lots of things to keep Him busy tonight, Riley thought. Tie-down chains and more two-inch line was assembled and set in place, already secured to the deck wherever possible. He took the deck crew forward, standing them against the aft-facing wall of the superstructure. "All ready here," he said over the phone to the XO in flight control. To his people: "If any of you fuck up and go over the side, I'll fucking jump overboard an' strangle you myself!"

They were in a whirlpool of wind. According to the navigational display, they were now north of their target, traveling at nearly two hundred fifty knots. The buffet now was the worst it had been. One downburst hurled them down at the black waves until Johns stopped at a bare hundred feet. It was now to the point that the pilot wanted to throw up. He'd never flown in conditions like this, and it was worse than the manuals said it was. "How far?"

"We should be there right now, sir!" Willis said. "Dead south."

"Okay." Johns pushed the stick to the left. The sudden change of direction relative to the wind threatened to snap the helicopter over, but he held it and crabbed onto the new course. Two minutes later, they were in the clear.

"Panache, this is CAESAR, where the hell are you?"

"Lights on, everything, now!" Wegener shouted when he heard the call. In a

moment *Panache* was lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Goddamn if you don't look pretty down there!" the voice said a few seconds later.

Adele was a small, weak, disorganized hurricane, now turning back into a tropical storm due to confused local weather conditions. That made her winds weaker than everyone had feared, but the eye was also small and disorganized, and the eye was what they needed now.

It is a common misconception that the eye of a hurricane is calm. It is not, though after experiencing the powerful winds in the innermost wall of clouds, the fifteen knots of breeze there seem like less than nothing to an observer. But the wind is unsteady and shifting, and the seas in the eye, though not as tall as those in the storm proper, are confused. Wegener had stationed his ship within a mile of the northwest edge of the eye, which was barely four miles across. The storm was moving at about fifteen knots. They had fifteen minutes to recover the helicopter. About the only good news was that the air was clear. No rain was falling, and the crew in the pilothouse could see the waves and allow for them.

Aft at flight control, the executive officer donned his headset and started talking.

"CAESAR, this is *Panache.* I am the flight-operations officer, and I will guide your approach. We have fifteen knots of wind, and the direction is variable. The ship is pitching and rolling in what looks like about fifteen-foot seas. We have about ten or fifteen minutes to do this, so there's not that much of a rush." That last sentence was merely aimed at making the helicopter's crew feel better. He wondered if anyone could bring this off.

"Skipper, a few more knots and I can hold her a little steadier," Portagee reported at the wheel.

"We can't run out of the eye."

"I know that, sir, but I need a little more way on."

Wegener went outside to look. The helicopter was visible now, its strobes blinking in the darkness as it circled the ship to allow the pilot to size things up. *If anything screws this up, it's going to be the roll,* Wegener realized. Portagee was right about the speed. "Two-thirds," he called back inside.

"Christ, that's a little boat," Johns heard Willis breathe.

"Just so the oars ain't in the way." PJ took the helicopter down, circling one last time and coming to a straight course dead aft of the cutter. He leveled out at one hundred feet and found that he couldn't hover very well. He lacked the power, and the aircraft wavered left and right when he tried.

"Hold that damned boat steady!" he said over the radio circuit.

"We are trying, sir," the XO replied. "We have the wind off the port bow at the moment. I recommend you come in from the portside and stay at an angle

to the deck all the way in."

"Roger, I can see why." Johns adjusted power one more time and moved in.

"Okay, let's move!" Riley told his men. They divided into three teams, one for each of the helicopter's wheel assemblies.

The deck, Johns saw, was not quite large enough for a fore-and-aft landing, but by angling his approach he could plant all six wheels on the black surface. He came in slowly, fifteen knots faster than the ship to start, and sloughing that off as he closed, but the wind shifted and turned the helicopter. Johns swore and turned fully away to try again.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I have some power problems here."

"Roger, take your time, sir," the XO replied.

PJ started again, a thousand yards out. The approach this time went well. He flared the aircraft a hundred yards aft to drop off excess speed, then flattened out and eased forward. His main gear touched just where he wanted, but the ship rolled hard and threw the aircraft to starboard. Instinctively PJ hit power and collective to lift free of the deck. He shouldn't have, and knew it even as he did so.

"This is hard," he said over the radio, managing not to curse as he brought the chopper back around.

"Shame we don't have more time to practice," the Coast Guard officer agreed. "That was a good, smooth approach. The ship just took a bad roll on us. Do that one more time, you'll be just fine."

"Okay, one more time." PJ came in again.

The ship was rolling twenty degrees left and right despite her stabilizers and bilge keels, but Johns fixed his eyes on the center of the target area, which wasn't rolling at all, just a fixed point in space. That had to be the trick, he told himself, pick the spot that isn't moving. Again he flared out to kill off speed and inched forward. Just as he approached the deck, his eyes shifted to where the nosewheels had to hit, and slammed the collective down. It felt almost as bad as a crash, but the collective held the chopper in place.

Riley was first up and rolled under the aircraft at the nosewheels. Another boatswain's mate followed with the tie-down chains. The master chief found a likely spot and hooked them in place, then shot his arm out and made a fist. Two men on the other end of the chains pulled them taut, and the chief rolled free and went down the portside to get to work on the main gear. It took several minutes. The Pave Low shifted twice before they had it secured, but soon they had two-inch line to back up the chains. By the time Riley was finished, it would have taken explosives to lift it from the deck. The deck crew entered the helicopter at the stern ramp and guided the passengers out. Riley counted fifteen people. He'd been told to expect more than that. Then he saw

the bodies, and the men who were struggling with them.

Forward, Johns and Willis shut down their engines.

"CLAW, CAESAR is down. Return to base." Johns took off his helmet too soon to catch the reply, though Willis caught it.

"Roger. Out."

Johns looked around. He didn't feel like a pilot now. His aircraft was down. He was safe. It was time to get out and do something else. He couldn't get out his door without risking a fall overboard and ... he'd allowed himself to forget Buck Zimmer. That door in his mind opened itself now. Well, he told himself, Buck would understand. The colonel stepped over the flight-engineer console. Ryan was still there, his flight suit speckled from his nausea. Johns knelt by the side of his sergeant. They'd served together on and off for over twenty years.

"He told me he has seven kids," Ryan said.

Johns' voice was too tired for any overt emotions. He spoke like a man a thousand years old, tired of life, tired of flying, tired of everything. "Yeah, cute ones. His wife is from Laos. Carol, her name is. Oh, God, Buck—why now?"

"Let me help," Jack said. Johns took the arms. Ryan got the legs. They had to wait in line. There were other bodies to be carried out, some dead, some only wounded, and they got the understandable priority. The soldiers, Jack saw, carried their own, helped by Sergeant Bean. The Coasties offered help, but it was declined—not unkindly, and the sailors understood the reason. Ryan and Johns also declined the assistance, the colonel because of the years with his friend, and the CIA officer because of a duty self-imposed. Riley and his men stayed behind briefly to collect packs and weapons. Then they, too, went below.

The bodies were set in a passageway for the time being. The wounded went to the crew's mess. Ryan and the Air Force officers were guided to the wardroom. There they found the man who'd started it all, months before, though none of them would ever understand how it had all happened. There was one more face, one which Jack recognized.

"Hi, Dan."

"Bad?" the FBI agent asked.

Jack didn't respond to that. "We got Cortez. I think he was wounded. He's probably in sick bay with a couple of soldiers keeping an eye on him."

"What got you?" Murray asked. He pointed to Jack's helmet.

Ryan took it off and saw a gouge where a 7.62 bullet had scraped away a quarter inch or so of fiberglass. Jack knew that he should have reacted to it, but that part of his life was four hundred miles behind him. Instead he sat down and stared at the deck and didn't say anything for a while. Two minutes later, Murray moved him onto a cot and covered him with a blanket.

Captain Montaigne had to fight the last two miles through high winds, but she was a particularly fine pilot and the Lockheed Hercules was a particularly fine aircraft. She touched down a little hard, but not too badly, and followed the guide jeep to her hangar. A man in civilian clothes was waiting there, along with some officers. As soon as she'd shut down, she walked out to meet them. She made them wait while she headed for the rest room, smiling through her fatigue that there was not a man in America who'd deny a lady a trip to the john. Her flight suit smelled horrible and her hair was a wreck, she saw in the mirror before she returned. They were waiting for her right outside the door.

"Captain, I want to know what you did tonight," the civilian asked—but he wasn't a civilian, she realized after a moment, though the prick certainly didn't deserve to be anything else. Montaigne didn't know everything that was behind all this, but she did know that much.

"I just flew a very long mission, sir. My crew and I are beat to hell."

"I want to talk to all of you about what you did."

"Sir, that is *my* crew. If there's any talking to be done, you'll talk to me!" she snapped back.

"What did you do?" Cutter demanded. He tried pretending it wasn't a girl. He didn't know that she was not pretending that he wasn't a man.

"Colonel Johns went in to rescue some special-ops troopers." She rubbed both hands across the back of her neck. "We got 'em—he got 'em, most of 'em, I suppose."

"Then where is he?"

Montaigne looked him right in the eye. "Sir, he had engine trouble. He couldn't climb out to us—couldn't get over the mountains. He flew right into the storm. He didn't fly out of it, sir. Anything else you want to know? I want to get showered, get some coffee down, and start thinking about search and rescue."

"The field's closed," the base commander said. "Nobody gets out for another ten hours. I think you need some rest, Captain."

"I think you're right, sir. Excuse me, I have to see to my crew. I'll have you the SAR coordinates in a few minutes. Somebody's gotta try," she added.

"Look, General, I want—" Cutter started to say.

"Mister, you leave that crew alone," said an Air Force one-star who was retiring soon anyway.

Larson landed at Medellin's city airport about the same time the MC-130 approached Panama. It had been a profane flight, Clark in the back with Escobedo, the latter's hands tied behind his back and a gun in his ribs. There had been many promises of death in the flight. Death to Clark, death to Larson and his girlfriend who worked for Avianca, death to many people. Clark just

smiled through it all.

“So what do you do with me, eh? You kill me now?” he asked as the wheels locked in the down position. Finally, Clark responded.

“I suggested that we could give you a flying lesson out the back of the helicopter, but they wouldn’t let me. So looks like we’re going to have to let you go.”

Escobedo didn’t know how to answer. His bluster wasn’t able to cope with the fact that they might not want to kill him. They just didn’t have the courage to, Clark decided.

“I had Larson call ahead,” he said.

“Larson, you motherless traitor, you think you will survive?”

Clark dug the pistol in Escobedo’s ribs. “You don’t bother the guy who’s flying the goddamned airplane. If I were you, señor, I’d be very pleased to be coming home. We’re even having you met at the airport.”

“Met by whom?”

“By some of your friends,” Clark said as the wheel squeaked down on the tarmac. Larson reversed his props to brake the aircraft. “Some of your fellow board members.”

That’s when he saw the real danger coming. “What did you tell them?”

“The truth,” Larson answered. “That you were taking a flight out of the country under very strange circumstances, what with the storm and all. And, gee, what with all the odd happenings of the past few weeks, I thought that it was kind of a coincidence ...”

“But I will tell them—”

“What?” Clark asked. “That we put our own lives at risk by delivering you back home? That it’s all a trick? Sure, you tell them that.”

The aircraft stopped but the engines didn’t. Clark gagged the chieftain. Then he unbuckled Escobedo’s seat belt and pulled him toward the door. A car was already there. Clark stepped down, his silenced automatic in Escobedo’s back.

“You are not Larson,” the man with the submachine gun said.

“I am his friend. He is flying. Here is your man. You should have something for us.”

“You do not need to leave,” said the man with the briefcase.

“This one has too many friends. It is best, I think, that we should leave.”

“As you wish,” the second one said. “But you have nothing to fear from us.” He handed over the briefcase.

“Gracias, jefe, ” Clark said. They loved to be called that. He pushed Escobedo toward them.

“You should know better than to betray your friends,” said the second one as Clark reentered the aircraft. The comment was aimed at the bound and

gagged chieftain, whose eyes were very, very wide, staring back at Clark as he closed the door.

"Get us the hell out of here."

"Next stop, Venezuela," Larson said as he goosed the throttles.

"Then Gitmo. Think you can hack it?"

"I'll need some coffee, but they make it good down here." The aircraft lifted off and Larson thought, *Jesus, it's good to have this one behind us.* That was true for him, but not for everyone.

30.

The Good of the Service

BY THE TIME Ryan awoke on his cot in the wardroom, they were out of the worst of it. The cutter managed to make a steady ten knots east, and with the storm heading northwest at fifteen, they were in moderate seas in six hours. Course was made northeast, and *Panache* increased to her best continuous speed of about twenty knots.

The soldiers were quartered with the cutter's enlisted crew, who treated them like visiting kings. By some miracle some liquor bottles were discovered —probably from the chiefs' quarters, but no one hazarded to ask—and swiftly emptied. Their uniforms were discarded and new clothing issued from ship's stores. The dead were placed in cold storage, which everyone understood was the only possible thing. There were five of them; two of them, including Zimmer, had died during the rescue. Eight men were wounded, one of them seriously, but the two Army medics, plus the cutter's independent-duty corpsman, were able to stabilize him. Mainly the soldiers slept and ate and slept some more during their brief cruise.

Cortez, who'd been wounded in the arm, was in the brig. Murray looked after him. After Ryan awoke, both men went below with a TV camera which was set up on a tripod, and the senior FBI executive started to ask some questions. It was soon apparent that Cortez had had nothing to do with the murder of Emil Jacobs, which was as surprising to Murray as it was reasonable on examination of the information. It was a complication that neither man had actually expected, but one that might work in their favor, Ryan thought. He was the one who started asking the questions about Cortez's experience with the DGI. Cortez was wholly cooperative throughout. He'd betrayed one allegiance, and doing so to another came easily, especially with Jack's promise that he wouldn't be prosecuted if he cooperated. It was a promise that would be kept to the letter.

Cutter remained in Panama for another day. The search-and-rescue operation aimed at locating the downed helicopter was delayed by weather, and it was hardly surprising to him that nothing was found. The storm kept heading northwest and blew itself out on the Yucatan Peninsula, ending as a series of line squalls that caused half a dozen tornados in Texas several days later. Cutter didn't stay long enough for that. As soon as the weather permitted, he flew straight back to D.C. just hours after Captain Montaigne returned to Eglin

Air Force Base, her crew sworn to secrecy that their commander had every reason to enforce.

Panache arrived at Guantánamo Naval Base thirty-six hours after taking the helicopter aboard. Captain Wegener had radioed for permission, claiming a machinery problem and wanting to get out of Hurricane *Adele's* path. Several miles off, Colonel Johns started up their helicopter and flew it onto the base, where it was immediately rolled into a hangar. The cutter came alongside an hour later, showing moderate storm damage, some of which was quite real.

Clark and Larson met the ship at the dock. Their aircraft was also hidden away. Ryan and Murray joined them, and a squad of Marines went aboard the cutter to retrieve Félix Cortez. Some telephone calls were placed, and then it was time to decide what had to be done. There were no easy solutions, nothing that would be entirely legal. The soldiers were treated at the base hospital and flown the next day to Fort MacDill in Florida. The same day, Clark and Larson returned the aircraft to Washington, having stopped to refuel in the Bahamas. In Washington it was turned over to a small corporation that belongs to CIA. Larson went on leave, wondering if he should really marry the girl and raise a family. Of one thing he was certain: he would leave the Agency.

Predictably, one of the things that happened was quite unexpected, and would forever be a mystery to all but one.

Admiral Cutter had returned two days earlier, and was back in his regular routine. The President was off on a political trip, trying to reestablish himself in the polls before the convention started two weeks hence. That made easier what had been a very hectic few weeks for his National Security Adviser. One way or another, he decided, he'd had enough of this. He'd served this President well, done things that needed to be done, and was entitled to a reward. He thought a fleet command would be appropriate, preferably Commander-in-Chief Atlantic Fleet. Vice Admiral Painter, the current Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Air Warfare), had been told to expect it, but it was the President's call to make, after all, and Cutter figured that he could have just about anything he wanted. After that, if the President was re-elected, maybe Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.... It was something to think about over breakfast, which was at a civilized hour for a change. He'd even have time for a jog after his morning briefing from CIA. The doorbell rang at 7:15. Cutter answered it himself.

"Who are you?"

"Your regular briefing officer was taken ill, sir. I have the duty today," the man said. Forties, looked like one tough old field officer.

"Okay, come on." Cutter waved him into the study. The man sat down, glad to see that the Admiral had a TV and VCR in here.

"Okay, where do we start today?" Cutter asked after the door was closed.

"Gitmo, sir," the man said.

"What's happening in Cuba?"

"Actually, I have it on videotape, sir." The field officer inserted it in the unit and punched "play."

"What is this ... ?" *Jesus Christ!* The tape played on for several minutes before the CIA officer stopped it.

"So what? That's the word of a traitor to his own country," Cutter said to answer the man's expectant smile.

"There's this, too." He held up a photograph of the two of them. "Personally, I'd love to see you in federal prison. That's what the FBI wants. They're going to arrest you later today. You can imagine the charges. Assistant Deputy Director Murray is running the case. He's probably meeting with a U.S. Magistrate right now—whatever the mechanics are. Personally I don't care about that."

"Then why—?"

"I'm a bit of a movie buff. Used to be in the Navy, too. In the movies at times like this, they always give a guy a chance to handle things himself—'for the good of the service,' they usually say. I wouldn't try running away. There's a team of FBI agents watching you, in case you haven't noticed. Given the way things work in this town—how long things take to get done—I don't suppose you'll be meeting them until ten or eleven. If you do, Admiral, then God help you. You'll get life. I only wish they could do something worse, but you'll get life in a federal pen, with some career hood sticking it up that tight little ass of yours when the guards aren't around. I wouldn't mind seeing that either. Anyway." He retrieved the videotape, tucking it in the briefcase along with the photograph that the Bureau really shouldn't have given him—and they'd told Ryan that he'd only use it to identify Cortez. "Good day, sir."

"But you've—"

"Done what? Nobody swore me to secrecy over this. What secrets have I revealed, Admiral? You were there for all of them."

"You're Clark, aren't you?"

"Excuse me? Who?" he said on his way out. Then he was gone.

Half an hour later, Pat O'Day saw Cutter jogging down the hill toward the George Washington Parkway. One nice thing about having the President out of town, the inspector thought, was that he didn't have to shake out of the rack at 4:30 to meet the bastard. He'd been here only forty minutes, spending a lot of time with his stretching exercises, and there he was. O'Day let him pass, then moved out, keeping up easily since the man was quite a bit older. But that wasn't all....

O'Day followed him for a mile, then two, approaching the Pentagon. Cutter followed the jogging path between the road and the river. Perhaps he didn't

feel well. He alternately jogged and walked. Maybe he's trying to see if he has a tail, O'Day thought, but ... Then he started moving again.

Just opposite the beginning of the northern parking lot, Cutter got off the path, heading toward the road as though to cross it. The inspector had now closed to within fifty yards. Something was wrong. He didn't know what. It was ...

... the way he was looking at the traffic. He wasn't looking for openings, O'Day realized too late. A bus was coming north, a D.C. transit bus, it had just come off the 14th Street Bridge and—

"Look out!" But the man wasn't listening for that sort of warning.

Brakes screeched. The bus tried to avoid the man, slamming into another car, then five more added their mass to the pileup. O'Day approached only because he was a cop, and cops are expected to do such things. Vice Admiral James A. Cutter, Jr., USN, was still in the road, thrown fifty feet by the collision.

He'd wanted it to look like an accident, O'Day thought, *but it wasn't.* The agent didn't notice a passerby in a cheap-bodied government car who came down the other side of the parkway, rubbernecking at the accident scene like many others, but with a look of satisfaction instead of horror at the sight.

Ryan was waiting at the White House. The President had flown home because of the death of his aide, but he was still President, and there was still work to be done, and if the DDI said that he needed to meet with the President, then it had to be important. The President was puzzled to see that along with Ryan were Al Trent and Sam Fellows, co-chairmen of the House Select Committee on Intelligence Oversight.

"Come on in," he said, guiding them regally into the Oval Office. "What's so important?"

"Mr. President, it has to do with some covert operations, especially one called SHOWBOAT."

"What's that?" the President asked, on guard. Ryan explained for a minute or so.

"Oh, that. Very well. SHOWBOAT was given to these two men personally by Judge Moore under his hazardous-operations rule."

"Dr. Ryan tells us that there are some other things we need to know about also. Other operations related to SHOWBOAT," Congressman Fellows said.

"I don't know about any of that."

"Yes, you do, Mr. President," Ryan said quietly. "You authorized it. It is my duty under the law to report on these matters to Congress. Before I do so, I felt it necessary to notify you. I asked the two congressmen here to witness my doing so."

"Mr. Trent, Mr. Fellows, could you please excuse me for a moment? There

are some things going on that I don't know about. Will you allow me to question Dr. Ryan in private for a moment?"

Say no! Ryan wished as hard as he could, but one does not deny such requests to the President, and in a moment he and Ryan were alone.

"What are you hiding, Ryan?" the President asked. "I know you're hiding some things."

"Yes, sir, I am and I will. The identities of some of our people, CIA and military, who acted on what they thought was proper authority." Ryan explained further, wondering what of it the President knew and what he didn't. It was something he was sure he'd never fully know. Most of the really important secrets Cutter had taken to his grave. Ryan suspected what had happened there, but ... but had decided to let that sleeping dog lie, too. *Was it possible to be connected with something like this,* he asked himself, *and not be corrupted by it?*

"What Cutter did, what you say he did—I didn't know. I'm sorry. I'm especially sorry about those soldiers."

"We got about half of them out, sir. I was there. That's the part I cannot forgive. Cutter deliberately cut them off with the intention of giving you a political—"

"*I never authorized that!"* he almost screamed.

"You allowed it to happen, sir." Ryan tried to look him straight in the eye, and on the moment of wavering, it was the President who looked away. "My God, sir, how could you do it?"

"The people want us to stop the flow of drugs."

"Then do it, do just what you tried to do, but do it in accordance with the law."

"It won't work that way."

"Why not?" Ryan asked. "Have the American people ever objected when we used force to protect our interests?"

"But what we had to do here could never be public."

"In that case, sir, all you needed to do was make the appropriate notification of the Congress and do it covertly. You got partial approval for the operation, politics would not necessarily have come into play, but in breaking the rules, sir, you tcok a national-security issue and made it into a political one."

"Ryan, you're smart and clever and good at what you do, but you're naïve."

Jack wasn't that naive: "What are you asking me to do, sir?"

"How much does the Congress really need to know?"

"Are you asking me to lie for you, sir? You called me naive, Mr. President. I had a man die in my arms two days ago, a sergeant in the Air Force who left seven children behind. Tell me, sir, am I naive to let that weigh upon my

thinking?"

"You can't talk to me that way."

"I take no pleasure in it, sir. But I will not lie for you."

"But you are willing to conceal the identities of people who—"

"Who followed your orders in good faith. Yes, Mr. President, I am willing to do that."

"What happens to the country, Jack?"

"I agree with you that we do not need another scandal, but that is a political question. On that, sir, you have to talk to the men outside. My function is to provide information for the government, and to perform certain tasks for the government. I am an instrument of policy. So were those people who died for their country, sir, and they had a right to expect that their lives would be given greater value by the government they served. They were people, Mr. President, young kids for the most part who went off to do a job because their country—you, sir—thought it important that they do so. What they didn't know was that there were enemies in Washington. They never suspected that, and that's why most of them died. Sir, the oath our people take when they put the uniform on requires them to bear 'true faith and allegiance' to their country. Isn't it written down somewhere that the country owes them the same thing? It's not the first time this has happened, but I wasn't part of it before, and I will not lie about it, sir, not to protect you or anyone else."

"I didn't know that, Jack. Honestly, I didn't know."

"Mr. President, I choose to believe that you are an honorable man. What you just said, sir, is that really an excuse?" Jack paused, and was fully answered by silence.

"Do you wish to meet with the congressmen before I brief them, sir?"

"Yes. Why don't you wait outside for us."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

Jack waited for an hour of discomfort before Trent and Fellows reappeared. They drove with him to Langley in silence, and the three walked into the office of the Director of Central Intelligence.

"Judge," Trent said, "that may have been the greatest service you have ever done your country."

"Under the circumstances—" Moore paused. "What else could I have done?"

"You could have left them to die, you could have warned the opposition that we were coming in," Jack said. "In that case I wouldn't be here. And for that, Judge, I am in your debt. You could have stuck with the lie."

"And live with myself?" Moore smiled in a very strange way and shook his head.

"And the operations?" Ryan asked. Exactly what had been discussed in the Oval Office he didn't know, and he told himself not to make any guesses.

“Never happened,” Fellows said. “Under the hazardous-operations rule, you have done what you needed to do—granted, a little late, but we have been notified. We don’t need another scandal like this, and with the way things are going, the situation will settle itself. Politically it’s shaky, but legally you can argue that it’s all according to Hoyle.”

“The craziest part of all is, it almost worked,” Trent observed. “Your CAPER operation was brilliant, and I assume it’ll be kept going.”

“It will. The whole operation did work,” Ritter said for the first time. “It really did. We did start a war within the Cartel, and Escobedo’s killing was just the last act—or maybe not if it goes on further. With that many chieftains gone, maybe Colombia will be able to do a little better. We need that capability. We can’t have it stripped away from us.”

“I agree,” Ryan said. “We need the capability, but you don’t make public policy this way, damn it!”

“Jack, tell me what right and wrong is?” Moore asked. “You seem to be the expert today,” he added without very much irony.

“This is supposed to be a democracy. We let the people know something, or at least we let *them* know.” He waved at the congressmen. “When a government decides to kill people who threaten its interests or its citizens, it doesn’t have to be murder. Not always. I’m just not sure where the line is. But I don’t have to be sure. Other people are supposed to tell us that.”

“Well, come January, it won’t be us,” Moore observed. “It’s agreed, then? It stays here. No political footballs?”

Trent and Fellows could scarcely have been further apart politically, the gay New Englander and the tough-minded Mormon from Arizona. They nodded agreement.

“No games on this,” Trent said.

“It would just hurt the country,” Fellows concurred.

“And what we’ve just done ...” Ryan murmured. *Whatever the hell it was ...*

“You didn’t do it,” Trent said. “The rest of us did.”

“Right,” Jack snorted. “Well, I’m gone soon, too.”

“Think so?” Fellows asked.

“Not so, Dr. Ryan. We don’t know who Fowler is going to appoint, probably some political lawyer he likes. I know the names on the list,” Trent said.

“It sure as hell won’t be me. He doesn’t like me,” Ryan said.

“He doesn’t have to like you, and you’re not going to be Director. But you will be here,” Trent told him. *Deputy Director, maybe,* the congressman thought to himself.

“We’ll see.” Fellows said. “What if things turn out differently in November? Fowler may just screw it up yet.”

“You have my word, Sam,” Trent replied. “If that happens, it happens.”

"There is one wild card, though," Ritter pointed out.

"I've already discussed that with Bill Shaw," Moore said. "It's funny. The only law he actually broke was illegal entry. None of the data he got out of her was technically classified. Amazing, isn't it?"

Ryan shook his head and left work early. He had an appointment with his attorney, who would soon be establishing an educational trust for seven kids living in Florida.

The infantrymen were cycled through Fort MacDill's special-operations center. Told that their operation had been a success, they were sworn to secrecy, given their promotions, and sent on to new postings. Except for one.

"Chavez?" a voice called.

"Yo, Mr. Clark."

"Buy you dinner?"

"There a good Mexican place around here?"

"Maybe I can find one."

"What's the occasion?"

"Let's talk jobs," Clark said. "There's an opening where I work. It pays better than what you do now. You'll have to go back to school for a couple of years, though."

"I've been thinkin' about that," Chavez replied. He'd been thinking that he was officer material. If he'd been in command instead of Ramirez, maybe—or maybe not. But he did want to find out.

"You're good, kid. I want you to work with me."

Chavez thought about that. At least he'd get a dinner out of the idea.

Captain Bronco Winters was dispatched to an F-15 squadron in Germany, where he distinguished himself and was soon a flight leader. He was a calmer young man now. He'd exorcised the demons of his mother's death. Winters would never look back. He'd had a job, and done it.

It was a cold, dismal fall after a hot, muggy summer in Washington. The political city emptied out for the presidential election, which shared that November with all of the House seats and a third of the Senate, plus hundreds of political-appointment slots in the executive branch. In the early fall, the FBI broke several Cuban-run spy rings, but strangely that was politically neutral. Although arresting a drug ring was a police success, arresting a spy ring was seen as a failure because of the existence of a spy ring in the first place. There was no political advantage except in the Cuban refugee community, whose votes might as well already have been cast anyway, since Fowler was talking

about “opening a dialogue” with the Cuba they had left. The President regained the lead after his own convention, but ran a lackluster campaign and fired two key political advisers. But most of all, it was time for a change, and though it was close, J. Robert Fowler carried the election with a bare 2 percent advantage in the popular vote. Some called it a mandate; others called it a sloppy campaign on both sides. The latter was closer to the truth, Ryan thought after it was all over.

All over the city and its environs, displaced appointees made preparations to move home—wherever home was—or to move into law offices so that they could stay in the area. Congress hadn’t changed very much, but Congress rarely did. Ryan remained in his office, wondering if he’d be confirmed as the next DDI. It was too soon to tell. One thing he did know was that the President was still President, and still a man of honor, whatever mistakes he’d made. Before he left, pardons would be issued to those who needed them. They’d go on the books, but no one was expected to notice, and after things were explained to the Fowler people—Trent would handle that—it wasn’t expected that anyone ever would.

On the Saturday after the election, Dan Murray drove Moira Wolfe to Andrews Air Force Base, where a jet was waiting for them. It took just over three hours before they landed at Guantánamo. A leftover from the Spanish-American War, Gitmo, as it’s called, is the only American military installation on Communist soil, a thorn stuck in Castro’s side that rankled him as much as he rankled his oversized neighbor across the Florida Strait.

Moira was doing well at the Department of Agriculture, executive secretary to one of the department’s top career executives. She was thinner now, but Murray wasn’t concerned about that. She’d taken up walking for exercise, and was doing well with her psychological counseling. She was the last of the victims, and he hoped that this trip would help.

So this was the day, Cortez thought. He was surprised and disappointed at his fate, but resigned to it. He’d gambled greatly and lost greatly. He feared his fate, but he wouldn’t let that show, not to Americans. They loaded him into the back of a sedan and drove toward the gate. He saw another car ahead of his, but made no special note of it.

And there it was, the tall barbed-wire fence, manned on one side by American Marines in their multicolor fatigues—they called them “utilities,” Cortez had learned—and on the other by Cubans in their battle dress. Perhaps, just perhaps, Cortez thought, he might talk his way out of this. The car halted fifty meters from the gate. The corporal to his left pulled him out of the car and unlocked his handcuffs, lest he take them across and so enrich a Communist country. *Such trivial nonsense,* Félix thought.

“Come on, Pancho,” the black corporal said. “Time to go home.”

Even without the cuffs, both Marines grabbed him by the arms to help him walk to his mother country. There at the gate he saw two officers waiting for him, impassively for now. They would probably embrace him when he came

across, which wouldn't mean a thing. In either case, Cortez was determined to meet his fate like a man. He straightened his back and smiled at those waiting for him as though they were family members waiting at the airport gate.

"Cortez," a man's voice called.

They stepped out of the guard shack, just inside the gate. He didn't know the man, but the woman ...

Félix stopped, and the motion of the two Marines nearly toppled him. She just stood there, staring at him. She didn't speak a word, and Cortez didn't know what to say. The smile vanished from his lips. The look in her eyes made him shrink within himself. He'd never meant to hurt her. To use her, yes, of course, but never really ...

"Come on, Pancho," the corporal said, heaving the man forward. They were just at the gate.

"Oh, by the way, this here's yours, Pancho," the corporal said, tucking a videocassette in his belt. "Welcome home, asshole." A final push.

"Welcome home, *Colonel,* "the senior of the two Cubans said. He embraced his former comrade and whispered: "You have much to answer for!"

But before they dragged him off, Félix turned one last time, seeing Moira, just standing there with the man he didn't know, and his last thought as he turned away was that once again she'd understood: silence was the greatest passion of all.

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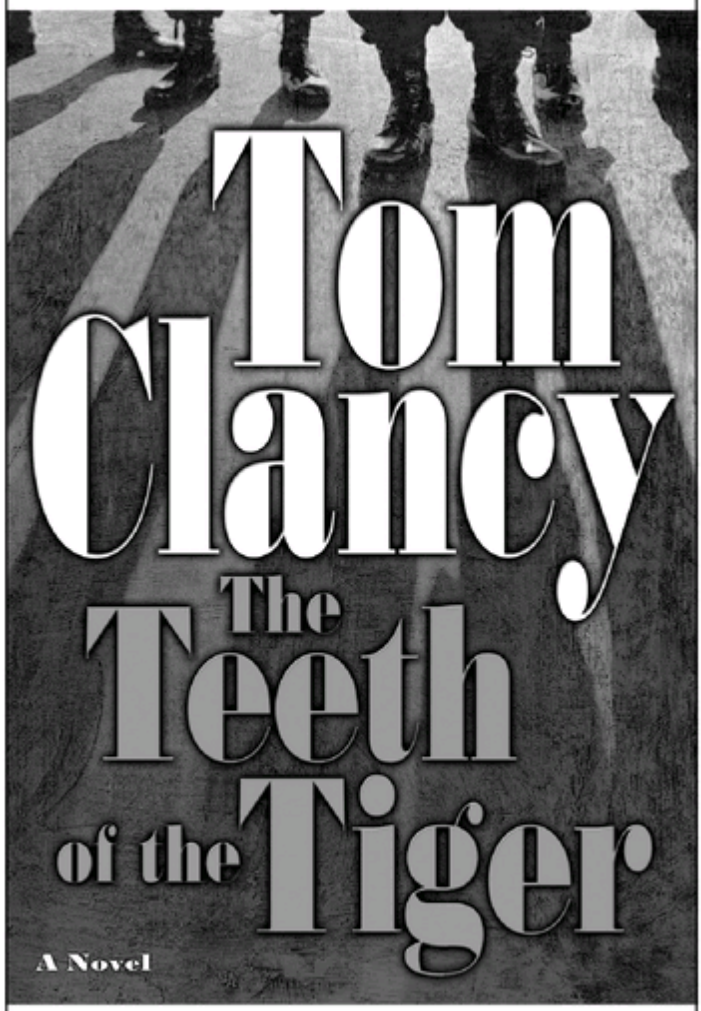

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THE SUM OF ALL FEARS

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Quite a few others who entertained my endless questions and ideas—even the dumb ones;

And all the men of goodwill who hope, as I do, that the corner may finally be turned, and were willing to talk about it.

For Mike and Peggy Rodgers, a sailor and his lady—and all the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces, because the noblest of ideas have always been protected by warriors

Why, you may take the most gallant sailor, the most intrepid airman or the most audacious soldier, put them at a table together—what do you get? *The sum of their fears.*

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

[T]he two contenders met, with all their troops, on the field of Camlan to negotiate. Both sides were fully armed and desperately suspicious that the other side was going to try some ruse or stratagem. The negotiations were going along smoothly until one of the knights was stung by an asp and drew his sword to kill the reptile. The others saw the sword being drawn and immediately fell upon each other. A tremendous slaughter ensued. The chronicle . . . is quite specific about the point that the slaughter was excessive chiefly because the battle took place without preparations and premeditation.

—HERMAN KAHN, On Thermonuclear War

PROLOGUE

BROKEN ARROW

"Like the wolf on the fold." In recounting the Syrian attack on the Israeli-held Golan Heights at 1400 local time on Saturday, the 6th of October, 1973, most commentators automatically recalled Lord Byron's famous line. There is also little doubt that that is precisely what the more literarily inclined Syrian commanders had in mind when they placed the final touches on the operations plans that would hurl more tanks and guns at the Israelis than any of Hitler's vaunted panzer generals had ever dreamed of having.

However, the sheep found by the Syrian Army that grim October day were more like big-horned rams in autumn rut than the more docile kind found in pastoral verse. Outnumbered by roughly nine to one, the two Israeli brigades on the Golan were crack units. The 7th Brigade held the northern Golan and scarcely budged, its defensive network a delicate balance of rigidity and flexibility. Individual strongpoints held stubbornly, channeling the Syrian penetrations into rocky defiles where they could be pinched off and smashed by roving bands of Israeli armor which lay in wait behind the Purple Line. By the time reinforcements began arriving on the second day, the situation was still in hand—but barely. By the end of the fourth day, the Syrian tank army that had fallen upon the 7th lay a smoking ruin before it.

The Barak ("Thunderbolt") Brigade held the southern heights and was less fortunate. Here the terrain was less well suited to the defense, and here also the Syrians appear to have been more ably led. Within hours the Barak had been broken into several fragments. Though each piece would later prove to be as dangerous as a nest of vipers, the Syrian spearheads were quick to exploit the gaps and race toward their strategic objective, the Sea of Galilee. The situation that developed over the next thirty-six hours would prove to be the gravest test of Israeli arms since 1948.

Reinforcements began arriving on the second day. These had to be thrown into the battle area piecemeal—plugging holes, blocking roads, even rallying units that had broken under the desperate strain of combat and, for the first time in Israeli history, fled the field before the advancing Arabs. Only on the third day were the Israelis able to assemble their armored fist, first enveloping, then smashing the three deep Syrian penetrations. The changeover to offensive operations followed without pause. The Syrians were hurled back toward their own capital by a wrathful counterattack, and surrendered a field littered with burned-out tanks and shattered men. At the end of this day the troopers of the Barak and the 7th heard over their unit radio nets a message from Israeli Defense Forces High Command:

YOU HAVE SAVED THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL.

And so they had. Yet outside Israel, except for schools in which men learn the profession of arms, this epic battle is strangely unremembered. As in the Six Day War of 1967, the more freewheeling operations in the Sinai were the ones that attracted the excitement and admiration of the world: bridging the Suez, the Battle of the "Chinese" Farm, the encirclement of the Egyptian 3rd Army—this despite the fearful implications of the Golan fighting, which was far closer to home. Still, the survivors of those two brigades knew what they had done, and their officers could revel in the knowledge that among professional soldiers who know the measure of skill and courage that such a stand entails, their Battle for the Heights would be remembered with Thermopylae, Bastogne, and Gloucester Hill.

Each war knows many ironies, however, and the October War was no exception. As is true of most glorious defensive stands, this one was largely unnecessary. The Israelis had misread intelligence reports which, had they been acted on as little as twelve hours earlier, would have enabled them to execute pre-set plans and pour reserves onto the Heights hours before the onslaught commenced. Had they done so, there would have been no heroic stand. There would have been no need for their tankers and infantrymen to die in numbers so great that it would be weeks before the true casualty figures were released to a proud but grievously wounded nation. Had the information been acted upon, the Syrians would have been massacred before the Purple Line for all their lavish collection of tanks and guns—and there is little glory in massacres. This failure of intelligence has never been adequately explained. Did the fabled Mossad fail so utterly to discern the Arabs' plans? Or did Israeli political leaders fail to recognize the warnings they received? These questions received immediate attention in the world press, of course, most particularly in regard to Egypt's assault-crossing of the Suez, which breached the vaunted Bar-Lev Line.

Equally serious but less well appreciated was a more fundamental error made years earlier by the usually prescient Israeli general staff. For all its firepower, the Israeli Army was not heavily outfitted with tube artillery, particularly by Soviet standards. Instead of heavy concentrations of mobile field guns, the Israelis chose to depend heavily on large numbers of short-range mortars, and attack aircraft. This left Israeli gunners on the Heights outnumbered twelve to one, subject to crushing counter-battery fire, and unable to provide adequate support to the beleaguered defenders. That error cost many lives.

As is the case with most grave mistakes, this one was made by intelligent men, for the very best of reasons. The same attack-fighter that struck the Golan could rain steel and death on the Suez as little as an hour later. The IAF was the first modern air force to pay systematic attention to "turn-around time." Its ground crewmen were trained to act much like a racing car's pit crew, and their speed and skill effectively doubled each plane's striking power, making the IAF a profoundly flexible and weighted instrument. And making a Phantom or a Skyhawk appear to be more valuable than a dozen mobile field guns.

What the Israeli planning officers had failed to take fully into account was the fact that the Soviets were the ones arming the Arabs, and, in doing so,

would inculcate their clients with their own tactical philosophies. Intended to deal with NATO air power always deemed better than their own, Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) designers had always been among the world's best. *Russian* planners saw the coming October War as a splendid chance to test their newest tactical weapons and doctrine. They did not spurn it. The Soviets gave their Arab clients a SAM network such as the North Vietnamese or Warsaw Pact forces of the time dared not dream about, a nearly solid phalanx of interlocking missile batteries and radar systems deployed in depth, along with new mobile SAMs that could advance with the armored spearheads, extending the "bubble" of counter-air protection under which ground action could continue without interference. The officers and men who were to operate those systems had been painstakingly trained, many within the Soviet Union with the full benefit of everything the Soviets and Vietnamese had learned of American tactics and technology, which the Israelis were correctly expected to imitate. Of all the Arab soldiers in the October War, only these men would achieve their pre-war objectives. For two days they effectively neutralized the IAF. Had ground operations gone according to plan, that would have been enough.

And it is here that the story has its proper beginning. The situation on the Golan Heights was immediately evaluated as serious. The scarce and confused information coming in from the two stunned brigade staffs led Israeli High Command to believe that tactical control of the action had been lost. It seemed that their greatest nightmare had finally occurred: they had been caught fatally unready; their northern kibbutzim were vulnerable; their civilians, their *children* lay in the path of a Syrian armored force that by all rights could roll down from the Heights with the barest warning. The initial reaction of the staff operations officers was something close to panic.

But panic is something that good operations officers also plan for. In the case of a nation whose enemies' avowed objective was nothing short of physical annihilation, there was no defensive measure that could be called extreme. As early as 1968, the Israelis, like their American and NATO counterparts, had based their ultimate plan on the nuclear option. At 03:55 hours, local time, on October 7th, just fourteen hours after the actual fighting began, the alert orders for OPERATION JOSHUA were telexed to the IAF base outside Beersheba.

Israel did not have many nuclear weapons at the time—and denies having any to this date. Not that many would be needed, if it came to that. At Beersheba, in one of the countless underground bomb-storage bunkers, were twelve quite ordinary-looking objects, indistinguishable from the many other items designed to be attached to tactical aircraft except for the silver-red striped labels on their sides. No fins were attached, and there was nothing unusual in the streamlined shape of the burnished-brown aluminum skin, with barely visible seams and a few shackle points. There was a reason for that. To an unschooled or cursory observer, they might easily have been mistaken for fuel tanks or napalm canisters, and such objects hardly merit a second look. But each was a plutonium fission bomb with a nominal yield of 60 kilotons, quite enough to carve the heart out of a large city, or to kill thousands of troops in the field, or, with the addition of cobalt jackets—stored separately

but readily attachable to the external skin—to poison a landscape to all kinds of life for years to come.

On this morning, activity at Beersheba was frantic. Reserve personnel were still streaming into the base from the previous day's devotions and family-visiting all over the small country. Those men on duty had been so for too long a time for the tricky job of arming aircraft with lethal ordnance. Even the newly arriving men had had precious little sleep. One team of ordnancemen, for security reasons not told the nature of their task, was arming a flight of A-4 Skyhawk strike-fighters with nuclear weapons under the eyes of two officers, known as "watchers," for that was their job, to keep visual track of everything that had to do with nuclear weapons. The bombs were wheeled under the centerline hardpoint of each of the four aircraft, lifted carefully by the hoisting arm, then shackled into place. The least exhausted of the ground crew might have noticed that the arming devices and tail fins had not yet been attached to the bombs. If so, they doubtless concluded that the officer assigned to that task was running late—as was nearly everything this cold and fateful morning. The nose of each weapon was filled with electronics gear. The actual exploder mechanism and capsule of nuclear material—collectively known as "the physics package"—were already in the bombs, of course. The Israeli weapons, unlike American ones, were not designed to be carried by alert aircraft during time of peace, and they lacked the elaborate safeguards installed in American weapons by the technicians at the Pantex assembly plant, outside Amarillo, Texas. The fusing systems comprised two packages, one for attachment to the nose, and one integral with the tail fins. These were stored separately from the bombs themselves. All in all, the weapons were very unsophisticated by American or Soviet standards, in the same sense that a pistol is far less sophisticated than a machine gun, but, at close range, equally lethal.

Once the nose and fin packages were installed and activated, the only remaining activation procedure was the installation of a special arming panel within the cockpit of each fighter, and the attachment of the power plug from the aircraft to the bomb. At that point the bomb would be "released to local control," placed in the hands of a young, aggressive pilot, whose job was then to loft it in a maneuver called The Idiot's Loop, which tossed the bomb on a ballistic path that would—probably—allow him and his aircraft to escape without harm when the bomb detonated.

Depending on the exigencies of the moment and the authorization of the "watchers," Beersheba's senior ordnance officer had the option to attach the arming packages. Fortunately, this officer was not at all excited about the idea of having half-live "nukes" sitting about on a flight line that some lucky Arab might attack at any moment. A religious man, for all the dangers that faced his country on that cold dawn, he breathed a silent prayer of thanks when cooler heads prevailed in Tel Aviv, and gave the order to stand JOSHUA down. The senior pilots who would have flown the strike mission returned to their squadron ready-rooms and forgot what they had been briefed to do. The senior ordnance officer immediately ordered the bombs removed and returned to their place of safekeeping.

The bone-tired ground crew began removing the weapons just as other

teams arrived on their own carts for the task of rearming the Skyhawks with Zuni rocket clusters. The strike order had been put up: *The Golan.* Hit the Syrian armored columns advancing on the Barak's sector of Purple Line from Kafr Shams. The ordnancemen jostled under the aircraft, two teams each trying to do their jobs, one team trying to remove bombs that they didn't know to be bombs at all, while the other hung Zunis on the wings.

There were more than four strike aircraft cycling through Beersheba, of course. The dawn's first mission over the Suez was just returning—what was left of it. The RF-4C Phantom reconnaissance aircraft had been lost, and its F-4E fighter escort limped in trailing fuel from perforated wing tanks and with one of its two engines disabled. The pilot had already radioed his warning in: there was some new kind of surface-to-air missile, maybe that new SA-6; its radar-tracking systems had not registered on the Phantom's threat-receiver; the recce bird had had no warning at all, and only luck had enabled him to evade the four targeted on his aircraft. That fact was flashed to IAF high command even before the aircraft touched down gingerly on the runway. The plane was directed to taxi down to the far end of the ramp, close to where the Skyhawks stood. The Phantom's pilot followed the jeep to the waiting firefighting vehicles, but just as it stopped, the left main tire blew out. The damaged strut collapsed as well, and 45,000 pounds of fighter dropped to the pavement like dishes from a collapsed table. Leaking fuel ignited, and a small but deadly fire enveloped the aircraft. An instant later, 20mm ammunition from the fighter's gun pod started cooking off, and one of the two crewmen was screaming within the mass of flames. Firefighters moved in with water-fog. The two "watcher" officers were the closest, and raced toward the flames to drag the pilot clear. All three were peppered by fragments from the exploding ammunition, while a fireman coolly made his way through the flames to the second crewman and carried him out, singed but alive. Other firemen collected the watchers and the pilot and loaded their bleeding bodies into an ambulance.

The nearby fire distracted the ordnancemen under the Skyhawks. One bomb, the one on aircraft number three, dropped a moment too soon, crushing the team supervisor's legs on the hoist. In the shrieking confusion of the moment, the team lost track of what was being done. The injured man was rushed to the base hospital while the three dismounted nuclear weapons were carted back to the storage bunker—in the chaos of an airbase on the first full day of a shooting war, the empty cradle on one of the carts somehow went unnoticed. The aircraft line chiefs arrived a moment later to begin abbreviated pre-flight checks as the jeep arrived from the ready shack. Four pilots jumped off it, each with a helmet in one hand and a tactical map in the other, each furiously eager to lash out at his country's enemies.

"What the hell's that?" snapped eighteen-year-old Lieutenant Mordecai Zadin. Called Motti by his friends, he had the gangling awkwardness of his age.

"Fuel tank, looks like," replied the line chief. He was a reservist who owned a garage in Haifa, a kindly, competent man of fifty years.

"Shit," the pilot replied, almost quivering with excitement. "I don't need extra fuel to go to the Golan and back!"

"I can take it off, but I'll need a few minutes." Motti considered that for a moment. A *sabra* from a northern kibbutz, a pilot for barely five months, he saw the rest of his comrades strapping into their aircraft. Syrians were attacking toward the home of his parents, and he had a sudden horror of being left behind on his first combat mission.

"Fuck it! You can strip it off when I get back." Zadin went up the ladder like a shot. The chief followed, strapping the pilot in place and checking the instruments over the pilot's shoulder.

"She's ready, Motti! Be careful."

"Have some tea for me when I get back." The youngster grinned with all the ferocity such a child could manage. The line chief slapped him on the helmet.

"You just bring my airplane back to me, *menchkin. Mazeltov*."

The chief dropped down to the concrete and removed the ladder. He next gave the aircraft a last visual scan for anything amiss, as Motti got his engine turning. Zadin worked the flight controls and eased the throttle to full idle, checking fuel and engine-temperature gauges. Everything was where it should be. He looked over to the flight leader and waved his readiness. Motti pulled down the manual canopy, took a last look at the line chief, and fired off his farewell salute.

At eighteen, Zadin was not a particularly young pilot by IAF standards. Selected for his quick boy's reactions and aggressiveness, he'd been identified as a likely prospect four years earlier, and had fought hard for his place in the world's finest air force. Motti loved to fly, had wanted to fly ever since as a toddler he'd seen a Bf-109 training aircraft that an ironic fate had given Israel to start its air force. And he loved his Skyhawk. It was a pilot's aircraft. Not an electronicized monster like the Phantom, the A-4 was a small, responsive bird of prey that leaped at the twitch of his hand on the stick. Now he would fly combat. He was totally unafraid. It never occurred to him to fear for his life—like any teenager he was certain of his own immortality, and combat flyers are selected for their lack of human frailty. Yet he marked the day. Never had he seen so fine a dawn. He felt supernaturally alert, aware of everything: the rich wake-up coffee; the dusty smell of the morning air at Beersheba; now the manly scents of oil and leather in the cockpit; the idle static on his radio circuits; and the tingle of his hands on the control stick. He had never known such a day and it never occurred to Motti Zadin that fate would not give him another.

The four-plane formation taxied in perfect order to the end of runway zero-one. It seemed a good omen, taking off due north, toward an enemy only fifteen minutes away. On command of the flight leader—himself a mere twenty-one-all four pilots pushed their throttles to the stops, tripped their brakes, and dashed forward into the cool, calm morning air. In seconds all were airborne and climbing to five thousand feet, careful to avoid the civilian air traffic of Ben-Gurion International Airport, which in the mad scheme of life in the Middle East was still fully active.

The Captain gave his usual series of terse commands, just like a training flight: tuck it in, check engine, ordnance, electrical systems. Heads up for MiGs and friendlies. Make sure your IFF is squawking green. The fifteen minutes it took to fly from Beersheba to the Golan passed rapidly. Zadin's eyes

strained to see the volcanic escarpment for which his older brother had died while taking it from the Syrians only six years before. The Syrians would not get it back, Motti told himself.

"Flight: turn right to heading zero-four-three. Targets are tank columns four kilometers east of the line. Heads up. Watch for SAMs and ground fire."

"Lead, four: I have tanks on the ground at one," Zadin reported coolly. "Look like our Centurions."

"Good eye, Four," the Captain replied. "They're friendly."

"I got a beeper, *I got launch warning!"* someone called. Eyes scanned the air for danger.

"*Shit!*" called an excited voice. "SAMs low at twelve coming up!"

"I see them. Flight, left and right, break NOW!" the Captain commanded.

The four Skyhawks scattered by elements. There were a dozen SA-2 missiles several kilometers off, like flying telephone poles, coming toward them at Mach-3. The SAMs split left and right too, but clumsily, and two exploded in a midair collision. Motti rolled right and hauled his stick into his belly, diving for the ground and cursing the extra wing weight. Good, the missiles were not able to track them down. He pulled level a bare hundred feet above the rocks, still heading toward the Syrians at four hundred knots, shaking the sky as he roared over the cheering, beleaguered troopers of the Barak.

The mission was a washout as a coherent strike, Motti already knew. It didn't matter. He'd get some Syrian tanks. He didn't have to know exactly whose, so long as they were Syrian. He saw another A-4 and formed up just as it began its firing run. He looked forward and saw them, the dome shapes of Syrian T-62s. Zadin toggled his arming switches without looking. The reflector gunsight appeared in front of his eyes.

"Uh-oh, more SAMs, coming in on the deck." It was the Captain's voice, still cool.

Motti's heart skipped a beat: a swarm of missiles, smaller ones—are these the SA-6s they told us about? he wondered quickly—was tracing over the rocks toward him. He checked his ESM gear; it had not sensed the attacking missiles. There was no warning beyond what his eyes told him. Instinctively Motti clawed for altitude in which to maneuver. Four missiles followed him up. Three kilometers away. He snap-rolled right, then spiraled down and left again. That fooled three of them, but the fourth followed him down. An instant later it exploded a bare thirty meters from his aircraft.

The Skyhawk felt as though it had been kicked aside ten meters or more. Motti struggled with the controls, getting back level just over the rocks. A quick look chilled him. Whole sections of his port wing were shredded. Warning beepers in his headset and flight instruments reported multiple disaster: hydraulics zeroing out, radio out, generator out. But he still had manual flight controls, and his weapons could fire from backup battery power. At that instant he saw his tormentors: a battery of SA-6 missiles, four launcher vehicles, a Straight Flush radar van, and a heavy truck full of reloads, all four kilometers away. His hawk's eyes could even see the Syrians struggling with the missiles, loading one onto a launcher rail.

They saw him, too, and then began a duel no less epic for its brevity.

Motti eased as far down as he dared with his buffeting controls and

carefully centered the target in his reflector sight. He had forty-eight Zuni rockets. They fired in salvos of four. At two kilometers he opened fire into the target area. The Syrian missileers somehow managed to launch another SAM. There should have been no escape, but the SA-6 had a radar-proximity fuse, and the passing Zunis triggered it, exploding the SAM harmlessly half a kilometer away. Motti grinned savagely beneath his mask as he fired rockets and now 20-millimeter cannon fire into the mass of men and vehicles.

The third salvo hit, then four more as Zadin kicked rudder to drop his rockets all over the target area. The missile battery was transformed into an inferno of diesel fuel, missile propellant, and exploding warheads. A huge fireball loomed in his path, and Motti tore through it with a feral shout of glee, his enemies obliterated, his comrades avenged.

Zadin had but a moment of triumph. Great sheets of the aluminum which made up his aircraft's left wing were being ripped away by the four-hundred-knot slipstream. The A-4 began shuddering wildly. When Motti turned left for home, the wing collapsed entirely. The Skyhawk disintegrated in midair. It took only a few seconds before the teenaged warrior was smashed on the basaltic rocks of the Golan Heights, neither the first nor the last to die there. No other of his flight of four survived.

Of the SAM battery almost nothing was left. All six vehicles had been blasted to fragments. Of the ninety men who had manned them, the largest piece recovered was the headless torso of the battery commander. Both he and Zadin had served their countries well, but as is too often the case, conduct which in another time or place might have inspired the heroic verse of a Virgil or a Tennyson went unseen and unknown. Three days later Zadin's mother received the news by telegram, learning again that all Israel shared her grief, as if such a thing were possible for a woman who had lost two sons.

But the lingering footnote to this bit of unreported history was that the unarmed bomb broke loose from the disintegrating fighter and proceeded yet farther eastward, falling far from the fighter-bomber's wreckage to bury itself fifty meters from the home of a Druse farmer. It was not until three days later that the Israelis discovered that their bomb was missing, and not until the day after the October War ended that they were able to reconstruct the details of its loss. This left the Israelis with a problem insoluble even to their imaginations. The bomb was somewhere behind Syrian lines—but where? Which of the four aircraft had carried it? Where had it gone down? They could hardly ask the Syrians to search for it. And could they tell the Americans, from whom the "special nuclear material" had been adroitly and deniably obtained?

And so the bomb lay unknown, except to the Druse farmer, who simply covered it over with two meters of dirt and continued to farm his rocky patch.

1

THE LONGEST JOURNEY . . .

Arnold van Damm sprawled back in his executive swivel chair with all the elegance of a rag doll tossed into a corner. Jack had never seen him wear a coat except in the presence of the President, and not always then. At formal affairs that required black tie, Ryan wondered if Arnie needed a Secret Service agent standing by with a gun. The tie was loose in the unbuttoned collar, and he wondered if it had ever been tightly knotted. The sleeves on Arnie's L. L. Bean blue-striped shirt were rolled up, and grimy at the elbows because he usually read documents with his forearms planted on the chronically cluttered desk. But not when speaking to someone. For important conversations, the man leaned back, resting his feet on a desk drawer. Barely fifty, van Damm had thinning gray hair and a face as lined and careworn as an old map, but his pale blue eyes were always alert, and his mind keenly aware of everything that went on within or beyond his sight. It was a quality that went along with being the President's Chief of Staff.

He poured his Diet Coke into an oversized coffee mug that featured an emblem of the White House on one side and "Arnie" engraved on the other, and regarded the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence with a mixture of wariness and affection. "Thirsty?"

"I can handle a real Coke if you have one down there," Jack observed with a grin. Van Damm's left hand dropped below sight, and a red aluminum can appeared on a ballistic path that would have terminated in Ryan's lap had he not caught it. Opening the can under the circumstances was a tricky exercise, but Jack ostentatiously aimed the can at van Damm when he popped the top. Like the man or not, Ryan told himself, he had style. He was unaffected by his job except when he had to be. This was not such a time. Arnold van Damm acted important only for outsiders. Insiders didn't need an act.

"The Boss wants to know what the hell is going on over there," the Chief of Staff opened.

"So do I." Charles Alden, the President's National Security Advisor, entered the room. "Sorry I'm late, Arnie."

"So do we, gentlemen," Jack replied. "That hasn't changed in a couple of years. You want the best stuff we've got?"

"Sure," Alden said.

"Next time you fly to Moscow, look out for a large white rabbit with waistcoat and pocket watch. If he offers you a trip down a rabbit hole, take it and let me know what you find down there," Ryan said with mock gravity. "Look, I'm not one of those right-wing idiots who moans for a return to the Cold War, but then, at least, the Russians were predictable. The poor bastards

are starting to act like we do now. They're unpredictable as hell. The funny part is, now I can understand what a pain in the ass we always were to the KGB. The political dynamic over there is changing on a daily basis. Narmonov is the sharpest political infighter in the world, but every time he goes to work, it's another crisis."

"What sort of cat is he?" van Damm asked. "You've met the man." Alden had met Narmonov, but van Damm had not.

"Only once," Ryan cautioned.

Alden settled down in an armchair. "Look, Jack, we've seen your file. So has the Boss. Hell, I've almost got him to respect you. Two Intelligence Stars, the submarine business, and, Jesus, the thing with Gerasimov. I've heard of still waters running deep, fella, but never this deep. No wonder Al Trent thinks you're so damned smart." The Intelligence Star was CIA's highest decoration for performance in the field. Jack actually had three. But the citation for the third was locked away in a very safe place, and was something so secret that even the new President didn't and would never know. "So prove it. Talk to us."

"He's one of those rare ones. He thrives on chaos. I've met docs like that. There are some, a rare few, who keep working in emergency rooms, doing trauma and like that, after everybody else burns out. Some people just groove to pressure and stress, Arnie. He's one of them. I don't think he really likes it, but he's good at it. He must have the physical constitution of a horse—"

"Most politicians do," van Damm observed.

"Lucky them. Anyway, does Narmonov really know where's he's going? I think the answer is both yes and no. He has some sort of idea where he's moving his country to, but how he gets there, and exactly where he's going to be when he arrives, that he doesn't know. That's the kind of balls the man has."

"So, you like the guy." It was not a question.

"He could have snuffed my life out as easy as popping open this can of Coke, and he didn't. Yeah," Ryan admitted with a smile, "that does compel me to like him a little. You'd have to be a fool not to admire the man. Even if we were still enemies, he'd still command respect."

"So we're not enemies?" Alden asked with a wry grin.

"How can we be?" Jack asked in feigned surprise. "The President says that's a thing of the past."

The Chief of Staff grunted. "Politicians talk a lot. That's what they're paid for. Will Narmonov make it?"

Ryan looked out the window in disgust, mainly at his own inability to answer the question. "Look at it this way: Andrey Il'ych has got to be the most adroit political operator they've ever had. But he's doing a high-wire act. Sure, he's the best around, but remember when Karl Wallenda was the best high-wire guy around? He ended up as a red smear on the sidewalk because he had one bad day in a business where you only get one goof. Andrey Il'ych is in the same kind of racket. Will he make it? People have been asking that for eight years! We think so—I think so—but . . . but, hell, this is virgin ground, Arnie. We've never been here before. Neither has he. Even a goddamned weather forecaster has a data base to help him out. The two best Russian historians we

have are Jake Kantrowitz at Princeton and Derek Andrews at Berkeley, and they're a hundred-eighty degrees apart at the moment. We just had them both into Langley two weeks ago. Personally I lean towards Jake's assessment, but our senior Russian analyst thinks Andrews is right. You pays your money and you takes your choice. That's the best we got. You want pontification, check the newspapers."

Van Damm grunted and went on. "Next hot spot?"

"The nationalities question is the big killer," Jack said. "You don't need me to tell you that. How will the Soviet Union break up—what republics will leave—when and how, peacefully or violently? Narmonov is dealing with that on a daily basis. That problem is here to stay."

"That's what I've been saying for about a year. How long to let things shake out?" Alden wanted to know.

"Hey, I'm the guy who said East Germany would take at least a year to change over—I was the most optimistic guy in town at the time, and I was wrong by eleven months. Anything I or anyone else tells you is a wild-ass guess."

"Other trouble spots?" van Damm asked next.

"There's always the Middle East—" Ryan saw the man's eyes light up.

"We want to move on that soon."

"Then I wish you luck. We've been working on that since Nixon and Kissinger back during the '73 semifinals. It's chilled out quite a bit, but the fundamental problems are still there, and sooner or later it's going to be thawed. I suppose the good news is that Narmonov doesn't want any part of it. He may have to support his old friends, and selling them weapons is a big money-maker for him, but if things blow up, he won't push like they did in the old days. We learned that with Iraq. He might continue to pump weapons in—I think he won't, but it's a close call—but he will do nothing more than that to support an Arab attack on Israel. He won't move his ships, and he won't alert troops. I doubt he's willing even to back them if they rattle their sabers a little. Andrey Il'ych says those weapons are for defense, and I think he means it, despite the word we're getting from the Israelis."

"That's solid?" Alden asked. "State says different."

"State's wrong," Ryan replied flatly.

"So does your boss," van Damm pointed out.

"In that case, sir, I must respectfully disagree with the DCI's assessment."

Alden nodded. "Now I know why Trent likes you. You don't talk like a bureaucrat. How have you lasted so long, saying what you really think?"

"Maybe I'm the token." Ryan laughed, then turned serious. "Think about it. With all the ethnic crap he's dealing with, taking an active role bears as many dangers as advantages. No, he sells weapons for hard currency and only when the coast is clear. That's business, and that's as far as it goes."

"So if we can find a way to settle things down . . . ?" Alden mused.

"He might even help. At worst, he'll stand by the sidelines and bitch that he's not in the game. But tell me, how do you plan to settle things down?"

"Put a little pressure on Israel," van Damm replied simply.

"That's dumb for two reasons. It's wrong to pressure Israel until their security concerns are alleviated, and their security concerns will not be

alleviated until some of the fundamental issues are settled first."

"Like . . . ?"

"Like what is this conflict all about." *The one thing that everyone overlooks.*

"It's religious, but the damned fools believe in the same things!" van Damm growled. "Hell, I read the Koran last month, and it's the same as what I learned in Sunday school."

"That's true," Ryan agreed, "but so what? Catholics and Protestants both believe that Christ is the son of God, but that hasn't stopped Northern Ireland from blowing up. Safest place in the world to be Jewish. The friggin' Christians are so busy killing one another off that they don't have time to be anti-Semitic. Look, Arnie, however slight the religious differences in either place may appear to us, to *them* they appear big enough to kill over. That's as big as they need to be, pal."

"True, I guess," the Chief of Staff agreed reluctantly. He thought for a moment. "Jerusalem, you mean?"

"Bingo." Ryan finished off his Coke and crushed the can before flipping it into van Damm's trash can for two. "The city is sacred to three religions—think of them as three tribes—but it physically belongs to only one of them. That one is at war with one of the others. The volatile nature of the region militates toward putting some armed troops in the place, but whose? Remember, some Islamic crazies shot up Mecca not that long ago. Now, if you put an Arab security force in Jerusalem, you create a security threat to Israel. If things stay as they are, with only an Israeli force, you offend the Arabs. Oh, and forget the UN. Israel won't like it because the Jews haven't made out all that well in the place. The Arabs won't like it because there's too many Christians. And we won't like it because the UN doesn't like us all that much. The only available international body is distrusted by everyone. Impasse."

"The President really wants to move on this," the Chief of Staff pointed out. *We have to do something to make it look like we're DOING SOMETHING.*

"Well, next time he sees the Pope, maybe he can ask for high-level intercession." Jack's irreverent grin froze momentarily. Van Damm thought he was cautioning himself against speaking badly of the President, whom he disliked. But then Ryan's face went blank. Arnie didn't know Jack well enough to recognize the look. "Wait a minute . . ."

The Chief of Staff chuckled. It wouldn't hurt for the President to see the Pope. It always looked good with the voters, and after that the President would have a well-covered dinner with B'nai B'rith to show that he liked all religions. In fact, as van Damm knew, the President went to church only for show now that his children were grown. That was one amusing aspect of life. The Soviet Union was turning back to religion in its search for societal values, but the American political left had turned away long ago and had no inclination to turn back, lest it should find the same values that the Russians were searching for. Van Damm had started off as a left-wing believer, but twenty-five years of hands-on experience in government had cured him of that. Now he distrusted ideologues of both wings with equal fervor. He was the sort to look for solutions whose only attraction was that they might actually work. His reverie on politics took him away from the discussion of the moment.

"You thinking about something, Jack?" Alden asked.

"You know, we're all 'people of the book,' aren't we?" Ryan asked, seeing the outline of a new thought in the fog.

"So?"

"And the Vatican is a real country, with real diplomatic status, but no armed forces . . . they're Swiss . . . and Switzerland is neutral, not even a member of the UN. The Arabs do their banking and carousing there . . . gee, I wonder if he'd go for it . . . ?" Ryan's face went blank again, and van Damm saw Jack's eyes center as the light bulb flashed on. It was always exciting to watch an idea being born, but less so when you didn't know what it was.

"Go for what? *Who* go for *what?"* the Chief of Staff asked with some annoyance. Alden just waited.

Ryan told them.

"I mean, a large part of this whole mess is over the Holy Places, isn't it? I could talk to some of my people at Langley. We have a really good—"

Van Damm leaned back in his chair. "What sort of contacts do you have? You mean talking to the Nuncio?"

Ryan shook his head. "The Nuncio is a good old guy, Cardinal Giancatti, but he's just here for show. You've been here long enough to know that, Arnie. You want to talk to folks who know stuff, you go to Father Riley at Georgetown. He taught me when I got my doctorate at G-Town. We're pretty tight. He's got a pipeline into the General."

"Who's that?"

"The Father General of the Society of Jesus. The head Jesuit, Spanish guy, his name is Francisco Alcalde. He and Father Tim taught together at St. Robert Bellarmine University in Rome. They're both historians, and Father Tim's his unofficial rep over here. You've never met Father Tim?"

"No. Is he worth it?"

"Oh, yeah. One of the best teachers I ever had. Knows D.C. inside and out. Good contacts back at the home office." Ryan grinned, but the joke was lost on van Damm.

"Can you set up a quiet lunch?" Alden asked. "Not here, someplace else."

"The Cosmos Club up in Georgetown. Father Tim belongs. The University Club is closer, but—"

"Right. Can he keep a secret?"

"A *Jesuit* keep a secret?" Ryan laughed. "You're not Catholic, are you?"

"How soon could you set it up?"

"Tomorrow or day after all right?"

"What about his loyalty?" van Damm asked out of a clear sky.

"Father Tim is an American citizen, and he's not a security risk. But he's also a priest, and he has taken vows to what he naturally considers an authority higher than the Constitution. You can trust the man to honor all his obligations, but don't forget what all those obligations are," Ryan cautioned. "You can't order him around, either."

"Set up the lunch. Sounds like I ought to meet the guy in any case. Tell him it's a get-acquainted thing," Alden said. "Make it soon. I'm free for lunch tomorrow and the next day."

"Yes, sir." Ryan stood.

* * *

The Cosmos Club in Washington is located at the corner of Massachusetts and Florida avenues. The former manor house of Sumner Welles, Ryan thought it looked naked without about four hundred acres of rolling ground, a stable of thoroughbred horses, and perhaps a resident fox that the owner would hunt, but not too hard. These were surroundings the place had never possessed, and Ryan wondered why it had been built in this place in this style, so obviously at odds with the realities of Washington, but built by a man who had understood the workings of the city so consummately well. Chartered as a club of the intelligentsia-membership was based on "achievement" rather than money—it was known in Washington as a place of erudite conversation and the worst food in a town of undistinguished restaurants. Ryan led Alden into a small private room upstairs.

Father Timothy Riley, S.J., was waiting for them, a briar pipe clamped in his teeth as he paged through the morning's *Post.* A glass sat at his right hand, a skim of sherry at the bottom of it. Father Tim was wearing a rumpled shirt and a jacket that needed pressing, not the formal priest's uniform that he saved for important meetings and had been hand-tailored by one of the nicer shops on Wisconsin Avenue. But the white Roman collar was stiff and bright, and Jack had the sudden thought that despite all his years of Catholic education he didn't know what the things were made of. Starched cotton? Celluloid like the detachable collars of his grandfather's age? In either case, its evident rigidity must have been a reminder to its wearer of his place in this world, and the next.

"Hello, Jack!"

"Hi, Father. This is Charles Alden, Father Tim Riley." Handshakes were exchanged and places at the table selected. A waiter came in and took drink orders, closing the door as he left.

"How's the new job, Jack?" Riley asked.

"The horizons keep broadening," Ryan admitted. He left it at that. The priest would already know the problems Jack was having at Langley.

"We've had this idea about the Middle East, and Jack suggested that you'd be a good man to discuss it with," Alden said, getting everyone back to business. He had to stop when the waiter returned with drinks and menus. His discourse on the idea took several minutes.

"That's interesting," Riley said when it was all on the table.

"What's your read on the concept?" the National Security Advisor wanted to know.

"Interesting . . ." The priest was quiet for a moment.

"Will the Pope . . . ?" Ryan stopped Alden with a wave of the hand. Riley was not a man to be hurried when he was thinking. He was, after all, an historian, and they didn't have the urgency of medical doctors.

"It certainly is elegant," Riley observed after thirty seconds. "The Greeks will be a major problem, though."

"The Greeks? How so?" Ryan asked in surprise.

"The really contentious people right now are the Greek Orthodox. We and they are at each other's throats half the time over the most trivial

administrative issues. You know, the rabbis and the imams are actually more cordial at the moment than the Christian priests are. That's the funny thing about religious people, it's hard to predict how they will react. Anyway, the problems between the Greeks and Romans are mainly administrative—who gets custody over which site, that sort of thing. There was a big go-round over Bethlehem last year, who got to do the midnight mass in the Church of the Nativity. It is awfully disappointing, isn't it?"

"You're saying it won't work because two Catholic churches can't—"

"I said there could be a problem, Dr. Alden. I did not say that it wouldn't work." Riley lapsed back into silence for a moment. "You'll have to adjust the troika . . . but given the nature of the operation, I think we can get the right kind of cooperation. Co-opting the Greek Orthodox is something you'll have to do in any case. They and the Muslims get along very well, you know."

"How so?" Alden asked.

"Back when Mohammed was chased out of Mecca by the pre-Muslim pagans, he was granted asylum at the Monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai —it's a Greek Orthodox shrine. They took care of him when he needed a friend. Mohammed was an honorable man; that monastery has enjoyed the protection of the Muslims ever since. Over a thousand years, and that place has never been troubled despite all the nasty things that have happened in the area. There is much to admire about Islam, you know. We in the West often overlook that because of the crazies who call themselves Muslims—as though we don't have the same problem in Christianity. There is much nobility there, and they have a tradition of scholarship that commands respect. Except that nobody over here knows much about it," Riley concluded.

"Any other conceptual problems?" Jack asked.

Father Tim laughed. "The Council of Vienna! How did you forget that, Jack?"

"What?" Alden sputtered in annoyance.

"Eighteen-fifteen. Everybody knows that! After the final settlement of the Napoleonic Wars, the Swiss had to promise never to export mercenaries. I'm sure we can finesse that. Excuse me, Dr. Alden. The Pope's guard detachment is composed of Swiss mercenaries. So was the French king's once—they all got killed defending King Louis and Marie Antoinette. Same thing nearly happened to the Pope's troops once, but they held the enemy off long enough for a small detachment to evacuate the Holy Father to a secure location, Castel Gandolfo, as I recall. Mercenaries used to be the main Swiss export, and they were feared wherever they went. The Swiss Guards of the Vatican are mostly for show now, of course, but once upon a time the need for them was quite real. In any case, Swiss mercenaries had such a ferocious reputation that a footnote of the Council of Vienna, which settled the Napoleonic Wars, compelled the Swiss to promise not to allow their people to fight anywhere but at home and the Vatican. But, as I just said, that is a trivial problem. The Swiss would be delighted to be seen helping solve this problem. It could only increase their prestige in a region where there is a lot of money."

"Sure," Jack observed. "Especially if we provide their equipment. M-1 tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles, cellular communications. . . ."

"Come on, Jack," Riley said.

"No, Father, the nature of the mission will demand some heavy weapons—for psychological impact if nothing else. You have to demonstrate that you're serious. Once you do that, then the rest of the force can wear the Michelangelo jump suits and carry their halberds and smile into the cameras—but you still need a Smith & Wesson to beat four aces, especially over there."

Riley conceded the point. "I like the elegance of the concept, gentlemen. It appeals to the noble. Everyone involved claims to believe in God by one name or another. By appealing to them in His name . . . hmm, that's the key, isn't it? The City of God. When do you need an answer?"

"It's not all that high-priority," Alden answered. Riley got the message. It was a matter of official White House interest, but was not something to be fast-tracked. Neither was it something to be buried on the bottom of someone's desk pile. It was, rather, a back-channel inquiry to be handled expeditiously and very quietly.

"Well, it has to go through the bureaucracy. The Vatican has the oldest continuously-operating bureaucracy in the world, remember."

"That's why we're talking to you," Ryan pointed out. "The General can cut through all the crap."

"That's no way to talk about the princes of the church, Jack!" Riley nearly exploded with laughter.

"I'm a Catholic, remember? I understand."

"I'll drop them a line," Riley promised. *Today,* his eyes said.

"Quietly," Alden emphasized.

"Quietly," Riley agreed.

Ten minutes later Father Timothy Riley was back in his car for the short drive back to his office at Georgetown. Already his mind was at work. Ryan had guessed right about Father Tim's connections and their importance. Riley was composing his message in Attic Greek, the language of philosophers never spoken by more than fifty thousand people, but the language in which he'd studied Plato and Aristotle at Woodstock Seminary in Maryland all those years before.

Once in his office, he instructed his secretary to hold all calls, closed the door, and activated his personal computer. First he inserted a disk that allowed the use of Greek characters. Riley was not a skilled typist—having both a secretary and a computer rapidly erodes that skill—and it took him an hour to produce the document he needed. It was printed up as a double-spaced nine-page letter. Riley next opened a desk drawer and dialed in his code for a small but secure office safe that was concealed in what appeared to be a file drawer. Here, as Ryan had long suspected, was a cipher book, laboriously handprinted by a young priest on the Father General's personal staff. Riley had to laugh. It just wasn't the sort of thing one associated with the priesthood. In 1944, when Admiral Chester Nimitz had suggested to Francis Cardinal Spellman, Catholic Vicar General for the U.S. military, that perhaps the Marianas Islands needed a new bishop, the Cardinal had produced his cipher book and used the communications network of the U.S. Navy to have a new bishop appointed. As with any other organization, the Catholic Church occasionally needed a secure communications link, and the Vatican cipher service had been around for centuries. In this case, the cipher key for this day

was a lengthy passage from Aristotle's discourse on Being *qua* Being, with seven words removed and four grotesquely misspelled. A commercial encryption program handled the rest. Then he had to print out a new copy and set it aside. His computer was again switched off, erasing all record of the communique. Riley next faxed the letter to the Vatican and shredded all the hard copies. The entire exercise took three laborious hours, and when he informed his secretary that he was ready to get back to business, he knew that he'd have to work far into the night. Unlike an ordinary businessman, Riley didn't swear.

"I don't like this," Leary said quietly behind his binoculars.

"Neither do I," Paulson agreed. His view of the scene through the ten-power telescopic sight was less panoramic and far more focused. Nothing about the situation was pleasing. The subject was one the FBI had been chasing for more than ten years. Implicated in the deaths of two special agents of the Bureau and a United States Marshal, John Russell (a/k/a Matt Murphy, a/k/a Richard Burton, a/k/a/ Red Bear) had disappeared into the warm embrace of something called the Warrior Society of the Sioux Nation. There was little of the warrior about John Russell. Born in Minnesota far from the Sioux reservation, he'd been a petty felon whose one major conviction had landed him in a prison. It was there that he had discovered his ethnicity and begun thinking like his perverted image of a Native American—which to Paulson's way of thinking had more of Mikhail Bakunin in it than of Cochise or Toohoolhoolzote. Joining another prison-born group called the American Indian Movement, Russell had been involved in a half-dozen nihilistic acts, ending with the deaths of three federal officers, then vanished. But sooner or later they all screwed up, and today was John Russell's turn. Taking its chance to raise money by running drugs into Canada, the Warrior Society had made its mistake, and allowed its plans to be overheard by a federal informant.

They were in the ghostly remains of a farming town six miles from the Canadian border. The FBI Hostage Rescue Team, as usual without any hostages to rescue, was acting its role as the Bureau's premiere SWAT team. The ten men deployed on the mission under squad supervisor Dennis Black were under the administrative control of the Special Agent in Charge of the local field office. That was where the Bureau's customary professionalism had come to a screeching halt. The local S-A-C had set up an elaborate ambush plan that had started badly and nearly ended in disaster, with three agents already in hospitals from the auto wrecks and two more with serious gunshot wounds. In return, one subject was known dead, and maybe another was wounded, but no one was sure at the moment. The rest—three or four; they were not sure of that either—were holed up in what had once been a motel. What they knew for sure was that either the motel had a still-working phone or, more likely, the subjects had a cellular "brick" and had called the media. What was happening now was of such magnificent confusion as to earn the admiration of Phineas T. Barnum. The local S-A-C was trying to salvage what remained of his professional reputation by using the media to his advantage. What he hadn't figured out yet was that handling network teams dispatched from as far away as Denver and Chicago wasn't quite the same thing as

dealing with the local reporters fresh from journalism school. It was very hard to call the shots with the pros.

"Bill Shaw is going to have this guy's balls for brunch tomorrow," Leary observed quietly.

"That does us a whole lot of good," Paulson replied. A snort. "Besides, what balls?"

"What you got?" Black asked over the secure radio circuit.

"Movement, but no ID," Leary replied. "Bad light. These guys may be dumb, but they're not crazy."

"The subjects have asked for a TV reporter to come in with a camera, and the S-A-C has agreed."

"Dennis, have you—" Paulson nearly came off the scope at that.

"Yes, I have," Black replied. "He says he's in command." The Bureau's negotiator, a psychiatrist with hard-won expertise in these affairs, was still two hours away, and the S-A-C wanted something for the evening news. Black wanted to throttle the man, but he couldn't, of course.

"Can't arrest the guy for incompetence," Leary said, his hand over the microphone. *Well, the only thing these bastards don't have is a hostage. So why not give 'em one? That'll give the negotiator something to do.*

"Talk to me, Dennis," Paulson said next.

"Rules of Engagement are in force, on my authority," Supervisory Special Agent Black said. "The reporter is a female, twenty-eight, blond and blue, about five-six. Cameraman is a black guy, dark complexion, six-three. I told him where to walk. He's got brains, and he's playing ball."

"Roger that, Dennis."

"How long you been on the gun, Paulson?" Black asked next. The book said that a sniper could not stay fully alert on the gun for more than thirty minutes, at which point the observer and sniper exchanged positions. Dennis Black figured that someone had to play by the book.

"About fifteen minutes, Dennis. I'm okay . . . okay, I got the newsies."

They were very close, a mere hundred fifteen yards from the front door of the block building. The light was not good. The sun would set in another ninety minutes. It had been a blustery day. A hot southwesterly wind was ripping across the prairie. Dust stung the eyes. Worse, the wind was hitting over forty knots and was directly across his line of sight. That sort of wind could screw up his aim by as much as four inches.

"Team is standing by," Black advised. "We just got Compromise Authority."

"Well, at least he isn't a total asshole," Leary replied over the radio. He was too angry to care if the S-A-C heard that or not. More likely, the dumbass had just choked again.

Both sniper and observer wore ghillie suits. It had taken them two hours to get into position, but they were effectively invisible, their shaggy camouflage blending them in with the scrubby trees and prairie grass here. Leary watched the newsies approach. The girl was pretty, he thought, though her hair and makeup had to be suffering from the dry, harsh wind. The man on the camera looked like he could have played guard for the Vikings, maybe tough and fast enough to clear the way for that sensational new halfback, Tony Wills. Leary shook it off.

"The cameraman has a vest on. Girl doesn't." *You stupid bitch,* Leary thought. *I know Dennis told you what these bastards were all about.*

"Dennis said he was smart." Paulson trained the rifle on the building. "Movement at the door!"

"Let's everyone try to be smart," Leary murmured.

"Subject One in sight," Paulson announced. "Russell's coming out. Sniper One is on target."

"Got him," three voices replied at once.

John Russell was an enormous man. Six-five, over two hundred-fifty pounds of what had once been athletic but was now a frame running to fat and dissolution. He wore jeans, but was bare-chested with a headband securing his long black hair in place. His chest bore tattoos, some professionally done, but more of the prison spit-and-pencil variety. He was the sort of man police preferred to meet with gun in hand. He moved with the lazy arrogance that announced his willingness to depart from the rules.

"Subject One is carrying a large, blue-steel revolver," Leary told the rest of the team. *Looks like an N-Frame Smith. . . .* "I, uh—Dennis, there's something odd about him . . ."

"What is it?" Black asked immediately.

"Mike's right," Paulson said next, examining the face through his scope. There was a wildness to his eyes. "He's on something, Dennis, he's doped up. Call those newsies back!" But it was too late for that.

Paulson kept the sight on Russell's head. Russell wasn't a person now. He was a subject, a target. The team was now acting under the Compromise Authority rule. At least the S-A-C had done that right. It meant that if something went badly wrong, the HRT was free to take whatever action its leader deemed appropriate. Further, Paulson's special Sniper Rules of Engagement were explicit. If the subject appeared to threaten any agent or civilian with deadly force, then his right index finger would apply four pounds, three ounces of pressure to the precision set-trigger of the rifle in his grasp.

"Let's everybody be real cool, for Christ's sake," the sniper breathed. His Unertl telescopic sight had crosshairs and stadia marks. Automatically Paulson reestimated the range, then settled down while his brain tried to keep track of the gusting wind. The sight reticle was locked on Russell's head, right on the ear, which made a fine point of aim.

It was horridly comical to watch. The reporter smiling, moving the microphone back and forth. The burly cameraman aiming his minicam with its powerful single light running off the battery pack around the black man's waist. Russell was speaking forcefully,, but neither Leary nor Paulson could hear a word he was saying against the wind. The look on his face was angry from the beginning, and did not improve. Soon his left hand balled into a fist, and his fingers started flexing around the grips of the revolver in his right. The wind buffeted the silk blouse close around the reporter's bra-less chest. Leary remembered that Russell had a reputation as a sexual athlete, supposedly on the brutal side. But there was a strange vacancy to his face. His expressions went from emotionless to passionate in what had to be a chemically induced whipsaw state that only added to the stress of being trapped by FBI agents. He

calmed suddenly, but it wasn't a normal calm.

That asshole S-A-C, Leary swore at himself. *We ought to just back off and wait them out. The situation is stabilized. They're not going anywhere. We could negotiate by phone and just wait them out. . . .*

"Trouble!"

Russell's free hand grabbed the reporter's upper right arm. She tried to draw back, but possessed only a fraction of the strength required to do so. The cameraman moved. One hand came off the Sony. He was a big, strong man, and might have pulled it off, but his move only provoked Russell. The subject's gun hand moved.

"On target on target on target!" Paulson said urgently. *Stop, you asshole, STOP NOW!* He couldn't let the gun come up very far. His brain was racing, evaluating the situation. A large-frame Smith & Wesson, maybe a .44. It made big, bloody wounds. Maybe the subject was just punctuating his words, but Paulson didn't know or care what those words were. He was probably telling the black guy on the camera to stop; the gun seemed to be pointing more that way than at the girl, but the gun was still coming up and—

The crack of the rifle stopped time like a photograph. Paulson's finger had moved, seemingly of its own accord, but training had simply taken over. The rifle surged back in recoil, and the sniper's hand was already moving to work the bolt and load another round. The wind had chosen a bad moment to gust, throwing Paulson's aim off ever so slightly to the right. Instead of drilling through the center of Russell's head, the bullet struck well forward of the ear. On hitting bone, it fragmented. The subject's face was ripped explosively from the skull. Nose, eyes, and forehead vanished into a wet red mist. Only the mouth remained, and that was open and screaming, as blood vented from Russell's head as though from a clogged showerhead. Dying, but not dead, Russell jerked one round off at the cameraman before falling forward against the reporter. Then the cameraman was down, and the reporter was just standing there, not having had enough time even to be shocked by the blood and tissue on her clothing and face. Russell's hands clawed briefly at a face no longer there, then went still. Paulson's radio headset screamed "GO GO GO!" but he scarcely took note of it. He drove the second round into the chamber, and spotted a face in a window of the building. He recognized it from photographs. It was a subject, a bad guy. And there was a weapon there, looked like an old Winchester lever-action. It started moving. Paulson's second shot was better than the first, straight into the forehead of Subject Two, someone named William Ames.

Time started again. The HRT members raced in, dressed in their black Nomex coveralls and body armor. Two dragged the reporter away. Two more did the same with the cameraman, whose Sony was clasped securely to his chest. Another tossed an explosive flash-bang grenade through the broken window while Dennis Black and the remaining three team members dove through the open door. There were no other shots. Fifteen seconds later the radio crackled again.

"This is Team Leader. Building search complete. Two subjects down and dead. Subject Two is William Ames. Subject Three is Ernest Thorn, looks like he's been dead for a while from two in the chest. Subjects' weapons are

neutralized. Site is secure. Repeat, site secure."

"Jesus!" It was Leary's first shooting involvement after ten years in the Bureau. Paulson got up to his knees after clearing his weapon, folded the rifle's bipod legs, then trotted toward the building. The local S-A-C beat him there, service automatic in hand, standing over the prone body of John Russell. It was just as well that the front of Russell's head was hidden. Every drop of blood he'd once had was now on the cracked cement sidewalk.

"Nice job!" the S-A-C told everyone. That was his last mistake in a day replete with them.

"You ignorant, shit-faced asshole!" Paulson pushed him against the painted block walls. "These people are dead because of you!" Leary jumped between them, pushing Paulson away from the surprised senior agent. Dennis Black appeared next, his face blank.

"Clean up your mess," he said, leading his men away before something else happened. "How's that newsie?"

The cameraman was lying on his back, the Sony at his eyes. The reporter was on her knees, vomiting. She had good cause. An agent had already wiped her face, but her expensive blouse was a red obscenity that would occupy her nightmares for weeks to come.

"You okay?" Dennis asked. "Turn that goddamned thing off!"

He set the camera down, switching off the light. The cameraman shook his head and felt at a spot just below the ribs. "Thanks for the advice, brother. Gotta send a letter to the people that make this vest. I really—" And his voice stopped. Finally the realization of what had happened took hold, and the shock started. "Oh God, oh, sweet merciful Jesus!"

Paulson walked to the Chevy Carryall and locked his rifle in the rigid guncase. Leary and one other agent stayed with him, telling him that he had done exactly the right thing. They'd do that until Paulson got over his stress period. It wasn't the sniper's first kill, but while they had all been different incidents, they were all the same, all things to be regretted. The aftermath to a real shooting does not include a commercial.

The reporter suffered the normal post-traumatic hysteria. She ripped off her blood-soaked blouse, forgetting that there was nothing under it. An agent wrapped a blanket around her and helped to steady her down. More news crews were converging on the scene, most heading toward the building. Dennis Black got his people together to clear their weapons and help with the two civilians. The reporter recovered in a few minutes. She asked if it had really been necessary, then learned that her cameraman had taken a shot that had been stopped by the Second Chance vest the Bureau had recommended to both of them, but which she had rejected. She next entered the elation phase, just as happy as she could be that she could still breathe. Soon the shock would return, but she was a bright journalist despite her youth and inexperience, and had already learned something important. Next time she'd listen when someone gave her good advice; the nightmares would merely punctuate the importance of the lesson. Within thirty minutes she was standing up without assistance, wearing her backup outfit, giving a level if brittle account of what had happened. But it was the tape footage that would impress the people at Black Rock, headquarters of CBS. The cameraman would

get a personal letter from the head of the News Division. The footage had everything: drama, death, a courageous (and attractive) reporter, and would run as the lead piece for the evening news broadcast for this otherwise slow news day, to be repeated by all the network morning shows the next day. In each case the anchor would solemnly warn people that what they were about to see might disturb the sensitive—just to make sure that everyone understood that something especially juicy was about to screen. Since everyone had more than one chance to view the event, quite a few had their tape machines turning the second time around. One of them was the head of the Warrior Society. His name was Marvin Russell.

It had started innocently enough. His stomach was unsettled when he awoke. The morning jobs became a little more tiresome. He didn't feel quite himself. *You're over thirty,* he told himself. *You're not a boy anymore.* Besides, he'd always been vigorous. Maybe it was just a cold, a virus, the lingering effects of bad water, some stomach bug. He'd just work his way out of it. He added weight to his pack, took to carrying a loaded magazine in his rifle. He'd gotten lazy, that's all. That was easily remedied. He was nothing if not a determined man.

For a month or so, it worked. Sure, he was even more tired, but that was to be expected with the extra five kilos of weight he carried. He welcomed the additional fatigue as evidence of his warrior's virtue, went back to simpler foods, forced himself to adopt better sleep habits. It helped. The muscle aches were no different from the time he'd entered this demanding life, and he slept the dreamless sleep of the just. What had been tough became tougher still as his focused mind gave its orders to a recalcitrant body. Could he not defeat some invisible microbe? Had he not bested far larger and more formidable organisms? The thought was less a challenge than a petty amusement. As with most determined men, his competition was entirely within himself, the body resisting what the mind commanded.

But it never quite went away. Though his body became leaner and harder, the aches and the nausea persisted. He became annoyed with it, and the annoyance first surfaced in jokes. When his senior colleagues took note of his discomfort, he called it morning sickness, evoking gales of rough laughter. He bore the discomfort for another month, then found that it was necessary to lighten his load to maintain his place in front with the leaders. For the first time in his life, faint doubts appeared like wispy clouds in the clear sky of his determined self-image. It was no longer an amusement.

He stuck with it for still another month, never slacking in his routine except for the additional hour of sleep that he imposed on his otherwise tireless regimen. Despite this, his condition worsened—well, not exactly worsened, but did not improve a bit. Maybe it was merely the increasing years, he finally admitted to himself. He was, after all, only a man, however hard he worked to perfect his form. There was no disgrace in that, determined though he might have been to prevent it.

Finally he started grumbling about it. His comrades were understanding. All of them were younger than he, many having served their leader for five years or more. They revered him for his toughness, and if the toughness showed a

few hairline cracks, what did it mean except that he was human after all, and all the more admirable because of it? One or two suggested home remedies, but finally a close friend and comrade told him that he was foolish indeed not to see one of the local doctors—his sister's husband was a good one, a graduate of British medical schools. Determined as he was to avoid this abnegation of his person, it was time to take what he knew to be good advice.

The doctor was as good as advertised. Sitting behind his desk in a laboratory coat the color of starched white, he took a complete medical history, then performed a preliminary examination. There was nothing overtly wrong. He talked about stress—something his patient needed no lectures about—and pointed out that over the years stress claimed an increasing heavy forfeit on those who bore it. He talked about good eating habits, how exercise could be overdone, how rest was important. He decided that the problem was a combination of various small things, including what was probably a small but annoying intestinal disorder, and prescribed a drug to ameliorate it. The doctor concluded his lecture with a soliloquy about patients who were too proud to do what was good for them, and how foolish they were. The patient nodded approvingly, according the physician deserved respect. He'd given not dissimilar lectures to his own subordinates, and was as determined as always to do things in exactly the right way.

The medication worked for a week or so. His stomach almost returned to normal. Certainly it improved, but he noted with annoyance that it wasn't quite the same as before. Or was it? It was, he admitted to himself, hard to remember such trivial things as how one felt on awakening. The mind, after all, concerned itself with the great ideas, like mission and purpose, and left the body to attend its own needs and leave the mind alone. The mind wasn't supposed to be bothered. The mind gave orders and expected them to be followed. It didn't need distractions like this. How could purpose exist with distractions? He'd determined his life's purpose long years before.

But it simply would not go away, and finally he had to return to the physician. A more careful examination was undertaken. He allowed his body to be poked and prodded, to have his blood drawn by a needle instead of the more violent instruments for which he had prepared himself. Maybe it was something almost serious, the physician told him, a low-order systemic infection, for example. There were drugs to treat that. Malaria, once pandemic to the region, for example, had similar but more serious debilitating effects, as did any number of maladies which had once been serious but were now easily defeated by the forces available to modern medicine. The tests would show what was wrong, and the doctor was determined to fix it. He knew of his patient's purpose in life, and shared it from a safer and more distant perspective.

He returned to the doctor's office two days later. Immediately he knew that something was wrong. He'd seen the same look often enough on the face of his intelligence officer. Something unexpected. Something to interfere with plans. The doctor began speaking slowly, searching for words, trying to find a way to make the message easier, but the patient would have none of that. He had chosen to live a dangerous life, and demanded the information as directly as he would have given it. The physician nodded respectfully, and replied in

kind. The man took the news dispassionately. He was accustomed to disappointments of many kinds. He knew what lay at the end of every life, and had many times helped to deliver it to others. So. Now it lay in his path also, to be avoided if possible but there nonetheless, perhaps near, perhaps not. He asked what could be done, and the news was less bad than he had expected. The doctor did not insult him with words of comfort, but read his patient's mind and explained the facts of the matter. There were things to be done. They might succeed. They might not. Time would tell. His physical strength would help a great deal, as would his iron determination. A proper state of mind, the physician told him, was highly important. The patient almost smiled at that, but stopped himself. Better to show the courage of a stoic than the hope of a fool. And what was death, after all? Had he not lived a life dedicated to justice? To the will of God? Had he not sacrificed his life to a great and worthy purpose?

But that was the rub. He was not a man who planned on failure. He had selected a goal for his life, and years before determined to reach it regardless of cost to himself or others. On that altar he had sacrificed everything he might have been, the dreams of his dead parents, the education which they had hoped he would use for the betterment of himself and others, a normal, comfortable life with a woman who might bear him sons—all of that he had rejected in favor of a path of toil, danger, and utter determination to reach that single shining goal.

And now? Was it all for nothing? Was his life to end without meaning? Would he never see the day for which he had lived? Was God that cruel? All these thoughts paraded through his consciousness while his face remained neutral, his eyes guarded as always. No. He would not let that be. God could not have deserted him. He would see the day—or at least see it grow closer. His life would have meaning after all. It had not been all for nothing, nor would what future he might yet have be for nothing. On that, too, he was determined.

Ismael Qati would follow his doctor's orders, do what must be done to extend his time, and perhaps defeat this internal enemy, as insidious and contemptible as those outside. In the meantime he would redouble his efforts, push himself to the limits of physical endurance, ask his God for guidance, look for a sign of His will. As he had fought his other enemies, so would he fight this one, with courage and total dedication. He'd never known mercy in his life, after all, and he would not start showing it now. If he had to face death, the deaths of others paled even further than usual. But he would not lash out blindly. He would do what he had to do. He would carry on as before, waiting for the chance that his faith told him must lie somewhere beyond his sight, between himself and the end of his path. His determination had always been directed by intelligence. It was that which explained his effectiveness.

2

LABYRINTHS

The letter from Georgetown arrived in a Roman office, scarce minutes after transmission, where, as with any bureaucracy, the night clerk (what intelligence agencies call a watch officer) simply dropped it on the proper desk and went back to his studies for an exam on the metaphysical discourses of Aquinas. A young Jesuit priest named Hermann Schorner, private secretary to Francisco Alcalde, Father General of the Society of Jesus, arrived the next morning promptly at seven and began sorting the overnight mail. The fax from America was third from the top, and stopped the young cleric in his tracks. Cipher traffic was a routine part of his job, but was not all that common. The code prefix at the top of the communication indicated the originator and the priority. Father Schörner hurried through the rest of the mail and went immediately to work.

The procedure was an exact inversion of what Father Riley had done, except that Schörner's typing skills were excellent. He used an optical scanner to transcribe the text into a personal computer and punched up the decryption program. Irregularities on the facsimile copy caused some garbles, but that was easily fixed, and clear-text copy—still in Attic Greek, of course—slid out of the ink-jet printer. It had required merely twenty minutes, as opposed to Riley's three laborious hours. The young priest prepared morning coffee for himself and his boss, then read the letter with his second cup of the day. How extraordinary, Schörner reflected.

Reverend Francisco Alcalde was an elderly but uncommonly vigorous man. At sixty-six, he still played a fair game of tennis, and was known to ski with the Holy Father. A gaunt, wiry six-four, his thick mane of gray hair was brush-cut over deep-set owlish eyes. Alcalde was a man with solid intellectual credentials. The master of eleven languages, had he not been a priest he might have become the foremost medieval historian in Europe. But he was, before all things, a priest whose administrative duties chafed against his desire for both teaching and pastoral ministry. In a few years he would leave his post as Father General of Roman Catholicism's largest and most powerful order and find himself again as a university instructor, illuminating young minds and leaving campus to celebrate mass in a small working-class parish where he could concern himself with ordinary human needs. That, he thought, would be the final blessing of a life cluttered with so many of them. Not a perfect man, he frequently wrestled with the pride that attended his intellect, trying and not always succeeding to cultivate the humility necessary to his vocation. Well, he sighed, perfection was a goal never to be reached, and he smiled at the humor of it.

"Guten Morgen, Hermann!" he said, sweeping through the door.

"*Bongiorno,*" the German priest replied, then lapsed into Greek. "Something interesting this morning."

The bushy eyebrows twitched at the message, and he jerked his head toward the inner office. Schörner followed with the coffee.

"The tennis court is reserved for four o'clock," Schörner said as he poured his boss's cup.

"So you can humiliate me yet again?" It was occasionally joked that Schörner could turn professional, contributing his winnings to the Society, whose members were required to take a vow of poverty. "So, what is the message?"

"From Timothy Riley in Washington." Schörner handed it over.

Alcalde donned his reading glasses and read slowly. He left his coffee untouched and, on finishing the message, read through it again. Scholarship was his life, and Alcalde rarely spoke about something without reflection.

"Remarkable. I've heard of this Ryan fellow before . . . isn't he in intelligence?"

"Deputy Director of the American CIA. We educated him. Boston College and Georgetown. He's principally a bureaucrat, but he's been involved in several operations in the field. We don't know all of the details, but it would appear that none were improper. We have a small dossier on him. Father Riley speaks very highly of Dr. Ryan."

"So I see." Alcalde pondered that for a moment. He and Riley had been friends for thirty years. "He thinks this proposal may be genuine. And you, Hermann?"

"Potentially, it is a gift from God." The comment was delivered without irony.

"Indeed. But an urgent one. What of the American President?"

"I would guess that he has not yet been briefed, but soon will be. As to his character?" Schörner shrugged. "He could be a better man."

"Who of us could not?" Alcalde said, staring at the wall.

"Yes, Father."

"How is my calendar for today?" Schörner ran over the list from memory. "Very well . . . call Cardinal D'Antonio and tell him that I have something of importance. Fiddle the schedule as best you can. This is something that calls for immediate attention. Call Timothy, thank him for his message, and tell him that I am working on it."

Ryan awoke reluctantly at five-thirty. The sun was an orange-pink glow that back-lit the trees, ten miles away on Maryland's eastern shore. His first considered course of action was to draw the shades. Cathy didn't have to go into Hopkins today, though it took him half the walk to the bathroom to remember why. His next action was to take two extra-strength Tylenol. He'd had too much to drink the previous night, and that, he reminded himself, was three days in a row. But what was the alternative? Sleep came increasingly hard to him, despite work hours that grew longer and fatigue that—

"Damn," he said, squinting at himself in the mirror. He looked terrible. He padded his way into the kitchen for coffee. Everything was better after coffee.

His stomach contracted itself into a tight, resentful ball on seeing the wine bottles still sitting on the countertop. A bottle and a half, he reminded himself. Not two. He hadn't drunk two full bottles. One had already been opened. It wasn't that bad. Ryan flipped the switch for the coffee machine and headed for the garage. There he climbed into the station wagon and drove to the gate to get his paper. Not all that long ago he'd walked out to get it, but, hell, he told himself, he wasn't dressed. That was the reason. The car radio was set to an all-news station, and he got his first exposure to what the world was doing. The ball scores. The Orioles had lost again. Damn, and he was supposed to take little Jack to a game. He'd promised after the last Little League game he'd missed. And when, he asked himself, are you going to do that, next April? Damn.

Well, the whole season, practically, was ahead. School wasn't even out yet. He'd get to it. Sure. Ryan tossed the morning *Post* on the car seat and drove back to the house. The coffee was ready. First good news of the day. Ryan poured himself a mug and decided against breakfast. Again. That was bad, a part of his mind warned him. His stomach was in bad-enough shape already, and two mugs of straight-dripped coffee would not help. He forced his mind into the paper to stifle that voice.

It is not often appreciated how much intelligence services depend on the news media for their information. Part of it was functional. They were in much the same business, and the intelligence services didn't have the brain market cornered. More to the point, Ryan reflected, the newsies didn't pay people for information. Their confidential sources were driven either by conscience or anger to leak whatever information they let out, and that made for the best sort of information; any intelligence officer could tell you that. Nothing like anger or principle to get a person to leak all sorts of juicy stuff. Finally, though the media was replete with lazy people, quite a few smart ones were drawn by the better money that went with news-gathering. Ryan had learned which bylines to read slowly and carefully. And he noted the datelines, as well. As Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, he knew which department heads were strong and which were weak. The *Post* gave him better information, for example, than the German desk. The Middle East was still quiet. The Iraq business was finally settling out. The new arrangement over there was taking shape, at long last. *Now, if we could just do something about the Israeli side*. . . . It would be nice, he thought, to set that whole area to rest. And Ryan believed it possible. The East-West confrontation which had predated his birth was now a thing of history, and who would have believed that? Ryan refilled his mug without looking, something that even a hangover allowed him to do. And all in just a brief span of years—less time, in fact, than he had spent in the Agency. Damn. Who would have believed it?

Now that was so amazing that Ryan wondered how long people would be writing books about it. Generations, at least. The next week a KGB representative was coming into Langley to seek advice on parliamentary oversight. Ryan had counseled against letting him in—and the trip was being handled with the utmost secrecy—because the Agency still had Russians working for it, and the knowledge that KGB and CIA had instituted official contacts on anything would terrify them (equally true, Ryan admitted to

himself, of Americans still in the employ of KGB . . . probably). It was an old friend coming over, Sergey Golovko. Friend, Ryan snorted, turning to the sports page. The problem with the morning paper was that it never had the results of last night's game. . . .

Jack's return to the bathroom was more civilized. He was awake now, though his stomach was even less happy with the world. Two antacid tablets helped that. And the Tylenol were working. He'd reinforce that with two more at work. By six-fifteen he was washed, shaved, and dressed. He kissed his still-sleeping wife on the way out—was rewarded by a vague *hmmm*—and opened the front door in time to see the car pulling up the driveway. It troubled Ryan vaguely that his driver had to awaken far earlier than he to get here on time. It bothered him a little more who his driver was.

"Morning, doc," John Clark said with a gruff smile. Ryan slid into the front seat. There was more leg room, and he thought it would insult the man to sit in back.

"Hi, John," Jack replied.

Tied it on again last night, eh, doc? Clark thought. *Damned fool. For someone as smart as you are, how can you be so dumb? Not getting the jogging in either, are you?* he wondered on seeing how tight the DDCI's belt looked. Well, he'd just have to learn, as Clark had learned, that late nights and too much booze were for dumb kids. John Clark had turned into a paragon of healthy virtue before reaching Ryan's age. He figured that it had saved his life at least once.

"Quiet night," Clark said next, heading out the driveway.

"That's nice." Ryan picked up the dispatch box and dialed in the code. He waited until the light flashed green before opening it. Clark was right, there wasn't much to be looked at. By the time they were halfway to Washington, he'd read everything and made a few notes.

"Going to see Carol and the kids tonight?" Clark asked as they passed over Maryland Route 3.

"Yeah, it is tonight, isn't it?"

"Yep."

It was a regular once-a-week routine. Carol Zimmer was the Laotian widow of Air Force sergeant Buck Zimmer, and Ryan had promised to take care of the family after Buck's death. Few people knew of it—fewer people knew of the mission on which Buck had died—but it gave Ryan great satisfaction. Carol now owned a 7-Eleven between Washington and Annapolis. It gave her family a steady and respectable income when added to her husband's pension, and, with the educational trust fund that Ryan had established, guaranteed that each of the eight would have a college degree when the time came—as it had already come for the eldest son. It would be a long haul to finish that up. The youngest was still in diapers.

"Those punks ever come back?" Jack asked.

Clark just turned and grinned. For several months after Carol had taken over the business, some local toughs had been hanging out at the store. They had objected to a Laotian woman and her mixed-race kids owning a business in the semirural area. Finally she had mentioned it to Clark. John had given them one warning, which they had been too dense to heed. Perhaps they'd mistaken him for an off-duty police officer, someone not to be taken too seriously. John

and his Spanish-speaking friend had set things right, and after the gang leader had gotten out of the hospital, the punks had never come near the place. The local cops had been very understanding, and business had shown an immediate twenty-percent increase. *I wonder if that guy's knee ever came all the way back?* Clark wondered with a wistful smile. *Maybe now he'll take up an honest trade. . . .*

"How are the kids doing?"

"You know, it's kinda hard to get used to the idea of having one in college, doc. A little tough on Sandy, too . . . doc?"

"Yeah, John?"

"Pardon my saying so, but you look a little rocky. You want to back it off a little."

"That's what Cathy says." It occurred to Jack to tell Clark to mind his own business, but you didn't say that sort of thing to a man like Clark, and besides, he was a friend. And besides that, he was correct.

"Docs are usually right," John pointed out.

"I know. It's just a little—a little stressful at the office. Got some stuff happening, and—"

"Exercise beats the hell out of booze, man. You're one of the smartest guys I know. Act smart. End of advice." Clark shrugged and returned his attention to the morning traffic.

"You know, John, if you had decided to become a doc, you would have been very effective," Jack replied with a chuckle.

"How so?"

"With a bedside manner like yours, people would be afraid not to do what you said."

"I am the most even-tempered man I know," Clark protested.

"Right, no one's ever lived long enough for you to get really mad. They're dead by the time you're mildly annoyed."

And that was why Clark was Ryan's driver. Jack had engineered his transfer out of the Directorate of Operations to become a Security and Protective Officer. DCI Cabot had eliminated fully twenty percent of the field force, and people with paramilitary experience had been first on the block. Clark's expertise was too valuable to lose, and Ryan had bent two rules and outright evaded a third to accomplish this much, aided and abetted by Nancy Cummings and a friend in the Admin Directorate. Besides, Jack felt very safe around this man, and he was able to train the new kids in the SPO unit. He was even a superb driver, and as usual, he got Ryan into the basement garage right on time.

The Agency Buick slid into its spot, and Ryan got out, fiddling with his keys. The one for the executive elevator was on the end, and two minutes later, he arrived at the seventh floor, walking from the corridor to his office. The DDCI's office adjoins the long, narrow suite accorded the DCI, who was not at work yet. A small, surprisingly modest place for the number-two man in the country's premiere intelligence service, it overlooked the visitor-parking lot, beyond which was the thick stand of pines that separated the Agency compound from the George Washington Parkway and the Potomac River valley beyond. Ryan had kept Nancy Cummings from his previous and brief

stint as Deputy Director (Intelligence). Clark took his seat in that office, going over dispatches that pertained to his duties, in preparation for the morning SPO conference—they concerned themselves with which terrorist group was making noise at the moment. No serious attempt had ever been made on a senior Agency executive, but history was not their institutional concern. The future was, and even CIA didn't have a particularly bright record for predicting that.

Ryan found his desk neatly piled with material too sensitive for the car's dispatch case, and prepped himself for the morning department-head meeting, which he co-chaired with the DCI. There was a drip-coffee machine in his office. Next to it was a clean but never-used mug that had once belonged to the man who'd brought him into the Agency, Vice Admiral James Greer. Nancy took care of that, and Ryan never began a day at Langley without thinking of his dead boss. So. He rubbed his hands across his face and eyes and went to work. What new and interesting things did the world hold in store this day?

The logger, like most of his trade, was a big, powerful man. Six-four and two hundred twenty pounds of former all-state defensive end, he'd joined the Marines instead of going to college—could have, he thought, could have taken the scholarship to Oklahoma or Pitt, but he'd decided against it. And he knew that he would never have wanted to leave Oregon for good. A college degree would have meant that. Maybe play pro ball, and then—turn into a "suit"? No. Since childhood he'd loved the outdoor life. He made a good living, raised his family in a friendly small town, lived a rough, healthy life, and was the best damned man in the company for dropping a tree straight and soft. He drew the special ones.

He yanked the string on the big, two-man chain saw. On a silent command, his helper took his end off the ground as the logger did the same. The tree had already been notched with a double-headed ax. They worked the saw in slowly and carefully. The logger kept one eye on the chain saw while the other watched the tree. There was an art to doing this just right. It was a point of honor with him that he didn't waste an inch of wood he didn't have to. Not like the guys down at the mill, though they'd told him that the mill wouldn't touch this baby. They pulled the saw after completing the first cut, and started the second without pausing for breath. This time it took four minutes. The logger was tensely alert now. He felt a puff of wind on his face and paused to make sure it was blowing the way he wanted. A tree, no matter how large, was a plaything for a stiff wind—especially when nearly cut in half. . . .

It was swaying at the top now . . . almost time. He backed the saw off and waved to his helper. *Watch my eyes, watch my hands!* The kid nodded seriously. About another foot would do it, the logger knew. They completed it very slowly. It abused the chain, but this was the dangerous part. Safety guys were monitoring the wind, and . . . now!

The logger brought the saw out and dropped it. The helper took the cue and backed off ten yards as his boss did the same. Both watched the base of the tree. If it kicked, that would tell them of the danger.

But it didn't. As always, it seemed so agonizingly slow. This was the part the

Sierra Club liked to film, and the logger understood why. So slow, so agonizing, like the tree knew it was dying, and was trying not to, and losing, and the groan of the wood was a moan of despair. Well, yes, he thought, it did seem like that, but it was only a goddamned tree. The cut widened as he watched and the tree fell. The top was moving very fast now, but the danger was at the bottom, and that's what he continued to watch. As the trunk passed through the forty-five-degree mark, the wood parted completely. The body of the tree kicked then, moving over the stump about four feet, like the death rattle of a man. Then the noise. The immense swish of the top branches ripping through the air. He wondered quickly how fast the top was moving. Speed of sound, maybe? No, not that fast . . . and then—WHUMP! The tree actually bounced, but softly, when it hit the wet ground. Then it lay still. It was lumber now. That was always a little sad. It had been a pretty tree.

The Japanese official came over next, the logger was surprised to see. He touched the tree and murmured something that must have been a prayer. That amazed him, it seemed like something an Indian would do—interesting, the logger thought. He didn't know that Shinto was an animistic religion with many similarities to those of Native Americans. Talking to the spirit of the tree? Hmph. Next he came to the logger.

"You have great skill," the little Japanese said with an exquisitely polite bow.

"Thank you, sir." The logger nodded his head. It was the first Japanese he'd ever met. Seemed like a nice enough guy. And saying a prayer to the tree . . . that had class, the logger thought on reflection.

"A great pity to kill something so magnificent."

"Yeah, I guess it is. Is it true that you will put this in a church, like?"

"Oh, yes. We no longer have trees like this, and we need four huge beams. Twenty meters each. This one tree will do all of them, I hope," the man said, looking back at the fallen giant. "They must all come from a single tree. It is the tradition of the temple, you see."

"Ought to," the logger judged. "How old's the temple?"

"One thousand two hundred years. The old beams—they were damaged in the earthquake two years ago, and must be replaced very soon. With luck, these should last as long. I hope they will. It is a fine tree."

Under the supervision of the Japanese official, the fallen tree was cut into manageable segments—they weren't all that manageable. Quite a bit of special equipment had to be assembled to get this monster out, and Georgia-Pacific was charging a huge amount of money for the job. But that was not a problem. The Japanese, having selected the tree, paid without blinking. The representative even apologized for the fact that he didn't want the GP mill to work the tree. It was a religious thing, he explained slowly and clearly, and no insult to the American workers was intended. The senior GP executive nodded. That was okay with him. It was their tree now. They'd let it season for a little while before loading it on an American-flag timber carrier for the trip across the Pacific, where the log would be worked with skill and due religious ceremony—by hand, the GP man was amazed to hear—for its new and special purpose. That it would never reach Japan was something that none of them knew.

The term trouble-shooter was particularly awkward for a law-enforcement official, Murray thought. Of course, as he leaned back in the leather chair he could feel the 10mm Smith & Wesson automatic clipped to his waistband. He ought to have left it in his desk drawer, but he liked the feel of the beast. A revolver man for most of his career, he'd quickly come to love the compact power of the Smith. And Bill understood. For the first time in recent memory, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation was a career cop who'd started his career on the street, busting bad guys. In fact, Murray and Shaw had started off in the same field division. Bill was slightly more skilled at the administrative side, but no one mistook him for a headquarters weenie. Shaw had first gotten high-level attention by staring down two armed bank robbers before the cavalry'd had time to arrive. He'd never fired his weapon in anger, of course—only a tiny percentage of FBI agents ever did—but he'd convinced those two hoods that he could drop both of them. There was steel under the gentlemanly velvet, and one hell of a brain. Which was why Dan Murray, a deputy assistant director, didn't mind working as Shaw's personal problem-solver.

"What the hell do we do with this guy?" Shaw asked with quiet disgust.

Murray had just finished his report on the Warrior Case. Dan sipped at his coffee and shrugged.

"Bill, the man is a genius with corruption cases—best we've ever had. He just doesn't know dick about the muscle end of the business. He got out of his depth with this one. Luckily enough, no permanent damage was done." And Murray was right. The newsies had treated the Bureau surprisingly well for saving the life of their reporter. What was truly amazing was the fact that the newsies had never quite understood that the reporter had had no place in that particular arena. As a result, they were grateful to the local S-A-C for letting the news team on the scene, and grateful to the Hostage Rescue Team for saving both of them when things had taken a dangerous turn. It wasn't the first time the Bureau had reaped a PR bonanza from a near-catastrophe. The FBI was more jealous of its public relations than any government agency, and Shaw's problem was simply that to fire S-A-C Walt Hoskins would look bad. Murray pressed on. "He's learned his lesson. Walt isn't stupid, Bill."

"And bagging the Governor last year was some coup, wasn't it?" Shaw grimaced. Hoskins was a genius at political corruption cases. A state governor was now contemplating life in a federal prison because of him. That was how Hoskins had become a Special-Agent-in-Charge in the first place. "You have something in mind, Dan?"

"ASAC Denver," Murray replied with a mischievous twinkle. "It's elegant. He goes from a little field office to head of corruption cases in a major field division. It's a promotion that takes him out of command and puts him back in what he's best at—and if the rumbles we're getting out of Denver are right, he'll have lots of work to do. Like maybe a senator and a congressman—maybe more. The preliminary indications on the water project look big. I mean *real* big, Bill: like twenty million bucks changing hands."

Shaw whistled respectfully at that. "All that for one senator and one congresscritter?"

"Like I said, maybe more. The latest thing is some environmental types being paid off—in government and out. Who do we have better at unraveling a ball of yarn that big? Walt's got a nose for this sort of thing. The man can't draw his gun without losing a few toes, but he's one hell of a bird dog." Murray closed the folder in his hands. "Anyway, you wanted me to look around and make a recommendation. Send him to Denver or retire him. Mike Delaney is willing to rotate back this way—his kid's going to start at GW this fall, and Mike wants to teach down at the Academy. That gives you the opening. It's all very neat and tidy, but it's your call, Director."

"Thank you, Mr. Murray," Director Shaw said gravely. Then his face broke into a grin. "Remember when all we had to worry about was chasing bank bandits? I *hate* this admin crap!"

"Maybe we shouldn't have caught so many," Dan agreed. "We'd still be working riverside Philly and having a beer with the troops at night. Why do people toast success? It just screws up your life."

"We're both talking like old farts."

"We both are old farts, Bill," Murray pointed out. "But at least I don't travel around with a protective detail."

"You son of a bitch!" Shaw gagged and dribbled coffee down his necktie. "Oh, Christ, Dan!" he gasped, laughing. "Look what you made me do."

"Bad sign when a guy can't hold his coffee, Director."

"Out! Get the orders cut before I bust you back to the street."

"Oh, no, please, not that, anything but that!" Murray stopped laughing and turned semiserious for a moment. "What's Kenny doing now?"

"Just got his assignment to his submarine, USS *Maine.* Bonnie's doing fine with the baby—due in December. Dan?"

"Yeah, Bill?"

"Nice call on Hoskins. I needed an easy out on that. Thanks."

"No problem, Bill. Walt will jump at it. I wish they were all this easy."

"You following up on the Warrior Society?"

"Freddy Warder's working on it. We just might roll those bastards up in a few months."

And both knew that would be nice. There were not many domestic terrorist groups left. Reducing their number by one more by the end of the year would be another major coup.

It was dawn in the Dakota badlands. Marvin Russell knelt on the hide of a bison, facing the sunrise. He wore jeans, but was bare-chested and barefoot. He was not a tall man, but there was no mistaking the power in him. During his first and only stint in prison—for burglary—he'd learned about pumping iron. It had begun merely as a hobby to work off surplus energy, had grown with the understanding that physical strength was the only form of self-defense that a man in the penitentiary could depend upon, and then blossomed into the attribute he'd come to associate with a warrior of the Sioux Nation. His five feet eight inches of height supported fully two hundred pounds of lean, hard muscle. His upper arms were the size of some men's upper legs. He had the waist of a ballerina and the shoulders of an NFL linebacker. He was also slightly mad, but Marvin Russell did not know that.

Life had not given him or his brother much of a chance. Their father had been an alcoholic who had worked occasionally and not well as an auto mechanic to provide money that he had transferred regularly and immediately to the nearest package store. Marvin's memories of childhood were bitter ones: shame for his father's nearly perpetual state of inebriation, and shame greater still for what his mother did while her husband was passed-out drunk in the living room. Food came from the government dole after the family had returned from Minnesota to the reservation. Schooling came from teachers who despaired of accomplishing anything. His neighborhood had been a scattered collection of government-built plain block houses that stood like specters in perpetual clouds of blowing prairie dust. Neither Russell boy had ever owned a baseball glove. Neither had known a Christmas as much other than a week or two when school was closed. Both had grown in a vacuum of neglect and learned to fend for themselves at an early age.

At first this had been a good thing, for self-reliance was the way of their people, but all children need direction, and direction was something the Russell parents had been unable to provide. The boys had learned to shoot and hunt before they'd learned to read. Often the dinner had been something brought home with .22-caliber holes in it. Almost as often, they had cooked the meals. Though not the only poor and neglected youth of their settlement, they had without doubt been at the bottom, and while some of the local kids had overcome their backgrounds, the leap from poverty to adequacy had been far too broad for them. From the time they had begun to drive—well before the legal age—they'd taken their father's dilapidated pickup a hundred miles or more on clear cool nights to distant towns where they might obtain some of the things their parents had been unable to provide. Surprisingly, the first time they'd been caught—by another Sioux holding a shotgun—they'd taken their whipping manfully and been sent home with bruises and a lecture. They'd learned from that. From that moment on, they'd only robbed whites.

In due course they'd been caught at that, also, red-handed inside a country store, by a tribal police officer. It was their misfortune that any crime committed on federal property was a federal case, and further that the new district court judge was a man with more compassion than perception. A hard lesson at that point might—or might not—have changed their path, but instead they'd gotten an administrative dismissal and counseling. A very serious young lady with a degree from the University of Wisconsin had explained to them over months that they could never have a beneficial self-image if they lived by stealing the goods of others. They would have more personal pride if they found something worthwhile to do. Emerging from that session wondering how the Sioux Nation had ever allowed itself to be overrun by white idiots, they learned to plan their crimes more carefully.

But not carefully enough, since the counselor could not have offered them the graduate-school expertise that the Russell boys might have received in a proper prison. And so they were caught, again, a year later, but this time off the reservation, and this time they found themselves dispatched to a year and a half of hard time because they'd been burglarizing a gun shop.

Prison had been the most frightening experience of their lives. Accustomed to land as open and vast as the Western sky, they'd spent over a year of their

lives in a cage smaller than the federal government deemed appropriate for a badger in a zoo, and surrounded by people far worse than their most inflated ideas of their own toughness. Their first night on the blocks, they'd learned from screams that rape was not a crime inflicted exclusively on women. Needing protection, they had almost immediately been swept into the protective arms of their fellow Native American prisoners of the American Indian Movement.

They had never given much thought to their ancestry. Subliminally, they might have sensed that their peer group did not display the qualities they had seen on those occasions when the family TV had worked, and probably felt some vague shame that they had always been different. They'd learned to snicker at Western movies, of course, whose "Indian" actors were most often whites or Mexicans, mouthing words that reflected the thoughts of Hollywood scriptwriters who had about as much knowledge of the West as they had of Antarctica, but even there the messages had left a negative image of what they were and from what roots they had come. The American Indian Movement had changed all that. Everything was the White Man's fault. Espousing ideas that were a mix of trendy East Coast anthropology, a dash of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, more than a little John Ford Western (what else, after all, was the American cultural record?), and a great deal of misunderstood history, the Russell brothers came to understand that their ancestors were of noble stock, ideal hunter-warriors who had lived in harmony with nature and the gods. The fact that the Native Americans had lived in as peaceful a state as the Europeans—the word "Sioux" in Indian dialect means "snake," and was not an appellation assigned with affection—and that they had only begun roaming the Great Plains in the last decade of the 18th century were somehow left out, along with the vicious intertribal wars. Times had once been far better. They had been masters of their land, following the buffalo, hunting, living a healthy and satisfying life under the stars, and, occasionally, fighting short, heroic contests among themselves—rather like medieval jousts. Even the torture of captives was explained as an opportunity for warriors to display their stoic courage to their admiring if sadistic murderers.

Every man craves nobility of spirit, and it wasn't Marvin Russell's fault that the first such opportunity came from convicted felons. He and his brother learned about the gods of earth and sky, beliefs in which had been cruelly suppressed by false, white beliefs. They learned about the brotherhood of the plains, about how the whites had stolen what was rightfully theirs, had killed the buffalo which had been their livelihood, had divided, compressed, massacred, and finally imprisoned their people, leaving them little beyond alcoholism and despair. As with all successful lies, the cachet to this one was a large measure of truth.

Marvin Russell greeted the first orange limb of the sun, chanting something that might or might not have been authentic—no one really knew anymore, least of all him. But prison had not been an entirely negative experience. He'd arrived with a third-grade reading level, and left with high-school equivalency. Marvin Russell had not ever been a dullard, and it was not his fault either that he'd been betrayed by a public school system that had consigned him to failure before birth. He read books regularly, everything he

could get on the history of his people. Not quite everything. He was highly selective in the editorial slant of the books he picked up. Anything in the least unfavorable to his people, of course, reflected the prejudice of whites. The Sioux had not been drunks before the whites arrived, had not lived in squalid little villages, had certainly not abused their children. That was all the invention of the white man.

But how to change things? he asked the sun. The glowing ball of gas was red with yet more blowing dust from this hot, dry summer, and the image that came to Marvin was of his brother's face. The stop-motion freeze-frame of the TV news. The local station had done things with the tape that the network had not. Every frame of the incident had been examined separately. The bullet striking John's face, two frames of his brother's face detaching itself from the head. Then the ghastly aftermath of the bullet's passage. The gunshot—damn that nigger and his vest!—and the hands coming up like something in a Roger Corman movie. He'd watched it five times, and each pixel of each image was so firmly fixed in his memory that he knew he'd never be able to forget it.

Just one more dead Indian. "Yes, I saw some good Indians," General William Tecumseh—a Native American name!— Sherman had said once. "They were dead." John Russell was dead, killed like so many without the chance for honorable combat, shot down like the animal a Native American was to whites. But more brutally than most. Marvin was sure the shot had been arranged with care. Cameras rolling. That wimp pussy reporter with her high-fashion clothes. She'd needed a lesson in what was what, and those FBI assassins had decided to give it to her. Just like the cavalry of old at Sand Creek and Wounded Knee and a hundred other nameless, forgotten battlefields.

And so Marvin Russell faced the sun, one of the gods of his people, and searched for answers. The answer wasn't here, the sun told him. His comrades were not reliable. John had died learning that. Trying to raise money with drugs! Using drugs! As though the whiskey the white man had used to destroy his people wasn't bad enough. The other "warriors" were creatures of their white-made environment. They didn't know that they'd already been destroyed by it. They called themselves Sioux warriors, but they were drunkards, petty criminals who had labored and failed to succeed even in that undemanding field. In a rare flash of honesty—how could one be dishonest before one of his gods?—Marvin admitted to himself that they were less than he. As his brother had been. Stupid to join their foolish quest for drug money. And ineffective. What had they ever accomplished? They'd killed an FBI agent and a United States Marshal, but that was long in the past. Since then? Since then they had merely talked about their one shining moment. But what sort of moment had it been? What had they accomplished? Nothing. The reservation was still there. The liquor was still there. The hopelessness was still there. Had anyone even noticed who they were and what they did? No. All they had accomplished was to anger the forces that continued to oppress them. So now the Warrior Society was hunted, even on its own reservation, living not like warriors at all, but like hunted animals. But they were supposed to be the hunters, the sun told him, not the prey.

Marvin was stirred by the thought. *He* was supposed to be the hunter. The

whites were supposed to fear *him.* It had once been so, but was no more. He was supposed to be the wolf in the fold, but the white sheep had grown so strong that they didn't know there was such a thing as a wolf, and they hid behind formidable dogs who were not content to stay with the flocks, but hunted the wolves themselves until they and not the sheep were frightened, driven, nervous creatures, prisoners on their own range.

So he had to leave his range.

He had to find his brother wolves. He had to find wolves for whom the hunt was still real.

3

. . . A SINGLE SIT

This was the day. His day. Captain Benjamin Zadin had enjoyed rapid career growth in the Israeli National Police. The youngest captain on the force, he was the last of three sons, the father of two sons of his own, David and Mordecai, and until very recently had been on the brink of suicide. The death of his beloved mother and the departure of his beautiful but adulterous wife had come within a single week, and that had only been two months before. Despite having done everything he'd ever planned on doing, he'd suddenly been faced with a life that seemed empty and pointless. His rank and pay, the respect of his subordinates, his demonstrated intelligence and clearheadedness in times of crisis and tension, his military record on dangerous and difficult border-patrol duty, they were all as nothing compared to an empty house of perverse memories.

Though Israel is regarded most often as "the Jewish state," that name disguises the fact that only a fraction of the country's population is actively religious. Benny Zadin had never been so, despite the entreaties of his mother. Rather he'd enjoyed the swinging life-style of a modern hedonist, and not seen the inside of a *shul* since his Bar Mitzvah. He spoke and read Hebrew because he had to—it was the national language—but the rules of his heritage were to him a curious anachronism, a backward aspect of life in what was otherwise the most modern of countries. His wife had only accentuated that. One might measure the religious fervor of Israel, he'd often joked, by the swimming suits on its many beaches. His wife's background was Norwegian. A tall, skinny blonde, Elin Zadin looked about as Jewish as Eva Braun—that was their joke on the matter—and still enjoyed showing off her figure with the skimpiest of bikinis, and sometimes only half of that. Their marriage had been passionate and fiery. He'd known that she'd always had a wandering eye, of course, and had occasionally dallied himself, but her abrupt departure to another had surprised him—more than that, the manner of it had left him too stunned to weep or beg, had merely left him alone in a home that also contained several loaded weapons whose use, he knew, might easily have ended his pain. Only his sons had stopped that. He could not betray them as he'd been betrayed, he was too much of a man for that. But the pain had been—still was—very real.

Israel is too small a country for secrets. It was immediately noticed that Elin had taken up with another man, and the word had quickly made its way to Benny's station, where men could see from the hollow look around the eyes that their commander's spirit had been crushed. Some wondered how and when he would bounce back, but after a week the question had changed to whether he would do so at all. At that point, one of Zadin's squad sergeants

had taken matters in hand. Appearing at his captain's front door on a Thursday evening, he'd brought with him Rabbi Israel Kohn. On that evening, Benjamin Zadin had rediscovered God. More than that, he told himself, surveying the Street of the Chain in Old Jerusalem, he knew again what it was to be a Jew. What had happened to him was God's punishment, no more, no less. Punishment for ignoring the words of his mother, punishment for his adultery, for the wild parties with his wife and others, for twenty years of evil thoughts and deeds while pretending to be a brave and upstanding commander of police and soldiers. But today he would change all that. Today he would break the law of man to expiate his sins against the Word of God.

It was early in the morning of what promised to be a blistering day, with a dry easterly wind blowing in from Arabia. He had forty men arrayed behind him, all of them armed with a mixture of automatic rifles, gas guns, and other arms that fired "rubber bullets," more accurately called missiles, made of ductile plastic that could knock a grown man down, and if the marksmen were very careful, stop a heart from blunt trauma. His police were needed to allow the law to be broken—which was not the idea that Captain Zadin's immediate superiors had in mind—and to stop the interference of others willing to break a higher law to keep him from his job. That was the argument Rabbi Kohn had used, after all. Whose law was it? It was a question of metaphysics, something far too complicated for a simple police officer. What was far simpler, as the Rabbi had explained, was the idea that the site of Solomon's Temple was the spiritual home of Judaism and the Jews. The site on Temple Mount had been chosen by God, and if men had disputed that fact, it was of little account. It was time for Jews to reclaim what God had given them. A group of ten conservative and Hasidic rabbis would today stake out the place where the new temple would be reconstructed in precise accordance with the Holy Scriptures. Captain Zadin had orders to prevent their march through the Chain Gate, to stop them from doing their work, but he would ignore those orders, and his men would do as he commanded, protecting them from the Arabs who might be waiting with much the same intentions as he was supposed to have.

He was surprised that the Arabs were there so early. No better than animals, really, the people who'd killed David and Motti. His parents had told all of their sons what it had been like to be a Jew in Palestine in the 1930s, the attacks, the terror, the envy, the open hatred, how the British had refused to protect those who had fought with them in North Africa—against those who had allied themselves with the Nazis. The Jews could depend on no one but themselves and their God, and keeping faith with their God meant reestablishing His Temple on the rock where Abraham had forged the covenant between his people and their Lord. The government either didn't understand that or was willing to play politics with the destiny of the only country in the world where Jews were truly safe. His duty as a Jew superseded that, even if he'd not known it until quite recently.

Rabbi Kohn showed up at the appointed time. Alongside him was Rabbi Eleazar Goldmark, a tattooed survivor of Auschwitz, where he had learned the importance of faith while in the face of death itself. Both men held a bundle of stakes and surveyor's string. They'd make their measurements, and from this day forward a relay of men would guard the site, eventually forcing the

government of Israel to clear the site of Muslim obscenities. An upwell of popular support throughout the country, and a flood of money from Europe and America, would allow the project to be completed in five years—and then no one would ever be able to talk about taking this land away from those to whom God Himself had deeded it.

"Shit," muttered someone behind Captain Zadin, but a turn and a look from his commander stifled whoever had blasphemed the moment of destiny.

Benny nodded to the two leading rabbis, who marched off. The police followed their captain, fifty meters behind. Zadin prayed for the safety of Kohn and Goldmark, but knew that the danger they faced was fully accepted, as Abraham had accepted the death of his son as a condition of God's Law.

But the faith that had brought Zadin to this moment had blinded him to what should have been the obvious fact that Israel was indeed a country too small for secrets, and that fellow Jews who viewed Kohn and Goldmark as simply another version of Iran's fundamentalist ayatollas knew of what was happening, and that as a result the word had gotten out. TV crews were assembled in the square at the foot of the Wailing Wall. Some wore the hard hats of construction workers in anticipation of the rain of stones that surely was coming. Perhaps that was all the better, Captain Zadin thought as he followed the rabbis to the top of Temple Mount. The world should know what was happening. Unconsciously he increased his pace to close on Kohn and Goldmark. Though they might accept the idea of martyrdom, his job was to protect them. His right hand went down to the holster at his hip and made sure the flap wasn't too tight. He might need that pistol soon.

The Arabs were there. It was a disappointment that there were so many, like fleas, like rats in a place they didn't belong. Just so long as they kept out of the way. They wouldn't, of course, and Zadin knew it. They were opposed to the Will of God. That was their misfortune.

Zadin's radio squawked, but he ignored it. It would just be his commander, asking him what the hell he was up to and ordering him to desist. Not today. Kohn and Goldmark strode fearlessly to the Arabs blocking their path. Zadin nearly wept at their courage and their faith, wondering how the Lord would show his favor to them, hoping that they would be allowed to live. Behind him, about half his men were truly with him, which was possible because Benny had worked his watch bill to make it so. He knew without looking that they were not using their Lexan shields; instead, safety switches on their shoulder weapons were now being flicked to the Off position. It was hard waiting for it, hard to anticipate the first cloud of stones that would be coming at any moment.

Dear God, please let them live, please protect them. Spare them as you spared Isaac.

Zadin was now less than fifty meters behind the two courageous rabbis, one Polish-born, a survivor of the infamous camps where his wife and child had died, where he had somehow kept his spirit and learned the importance of faith; the other American-born, a man who'd come to Israel, fought in her wars, and only then turned to God, as Benny himself had done so brief a span of days before.

The two were barely ten meters from the surly, dirty Arabs when it

happened. The Arabs were the only ones who could see that their faces were serene, that they truly welcomed whatever the morning might hold for them, and only the Arabs saw the shock and the puzzlement on the face of the Pole, and the stunned pain on the American's at the realization of what fate had in mind.

On command, the leading row of Arabs, all of them teenagers with a lengthy history of confrontation, sat down. The hundred young men behind them did the same. Then the front row started clapping. And singing. Benny took a moment to comprehend it, though he was as fluent in Arabic as any Palestinian.

We shall overcome
We shall overcome
We shall overcome some day

The TV crews were immediately behind the police. Several of them laughed in surprise at the savage irony of it. One of them was CNN correspondent Pete Franks, who summed it up for everyone: *"Son of a BITCH!"* And in that moment Franks knew that the world had changed yet again. He'd been in Moscow for the first democratic meeting of the Supreme Soviet, in Managua the night the Sandinistas had lost their surething election, and in Beijing to see the Goddess of Liberty destroyed. *And now* this? he thought. *The Arabs finally wised up. Holy shit.*

"I hope you have that tape rolling, Mickey."

"Are they singing what I think they're singing?"

"Sure as hell sounds like it. Let's get closer."

The leader of the Arabs was a twenty-year-old sociology student named Hashimi Moussa. His arm was permanently scarred from an Israeli club, and half his teeth were gone from a rubber bullet whose shooter had been especially angry on one particular day. No one questioned his courage. He'd had to prove that beyond doubt. He'd had to face death a dozen times before his position of leadership had been assured, but now he had it, and people listened to him, and he was able to activate an idea he'd cherished for five endless, patient years. It had taken three days to persuade them, then the fantastic good luck of a Jewish friend disgusted with the religious conservatives of his country who'd spoken a little too loudly about the plans of this day. Perhaps it was destiny, Hashimi thought, or the Will of Allah, or simply luck. Whatever it was, this was the moment he'd lived for since his fifteenth year, when he'd learned of Gandhi and King, and how they had defeated force with naked, passive courage. Persuading his people had meant stepping back from a warrior code that seemed part of their genes, but he'd done it. Now his beliefs would be put to the test.

All Benny Zadin saw was that his path was blocked. Rabbi Kohn said something to Rabbi Goldmark, but neither turned back to where the police were stopped, because to turn away was to admit defeat. Whether they were too shocked at what they saw or too angry, he would never learn. Captain Zadin turned to his men.

"Gas!" He'd planned this part in advance. The four men with gas guns were all religious men. They leveled their weapons and fired simultaneously into the crowd. The gas projectiles were dangerous and it was remarkable that no

one was injured by them. In a few seconds, gray clouds of tear gas bloomed within the mass of sitting Arabs. But on command, each of them donned a mask to protect himself from it. This impeded their singing, but not their clapping or resolution, and it only enraged Captain Zadin further when the easterly wind blew the gas toward his men and away from the Arabs. Next, men with insulated gloves lifted the hot projectiles and threw them back toward the police. In a minute, they were able to remove their masks, and there was laughter in their singing now.

Next Zadin ordered the rubber bullets launched. He had six men armed with these weapons, and from a range of fifty meters they could force any man to run for cover. The first volley was perfect, hitting six of the Arabs in the front line. Two cried out in pain. One collapsed, but not one man moved from his place except to succor the injured. The next volley was aimed at heads not chests, and Zadin had the satisfaction of seeing a face explode in a puff of red.

The leader—Zadin recognized the face from earlier encounters—stood and gave a command the Israeli captain could not hear. But its significance became clear immediately. The singing became louder. Another volley of rubber bullets followed. One of his marksmen was very angry, the police commander saw. The Arab who'd taken one fully in the face now took another in the top of his head, and with it his body went limp in death. It should have warned Benny that he had already lost control of his men, but worse still was that he was losing control of himself.

Hashimi did not see the death of his comrade. The passion of the moment was overwhelming. The consternation on the faces of the two invading rabbis was manifest. He could not see the faces of the police behind their masks, but their actions, their movements, made their feelings clear. In a brilliant moment of clarity he knew that he was winning, and he shouted again to his people to redouble their efforts. This they did in the face of fire and death.

Captain Benjamin Zadin stripped off his helmet and walked forcefully toward the Arabs, past the rabbis who had suddenly been struck with incomprehensible indecision. Would the Will of God be upset by the discordant singing of some dirty savages?

"Uh-oh," Pete Franks observed, his eyes streaming from the gas that had blown over his face.

"I got it," the cameraman said without bidding, zooming his lens in on the advancing Israeli police commander. "Something is going to happen—this guy looks pissed, Pete!"

Oh, God, Franks thought. Himself a Jew, himself strangely at home in this barren but beloved land, he knew that history was occurring before his eyes yet again, was already composing his two or three minutes of verbal reporting that would overlay the tape his cameraman was recording for posterity, and was wondering if another Peabody might be in his future for doing his tough and dangerous job supremely well.

It happened quickly, much too quickly, as the captain strode directly to the Arab leader. Hashimi now knew that a friend was dead, his skull caved in by what was supposed to be a nonlethal weapon. He prayed silently for the soul of his comrade and hoped that Allah would understand the courage required to face death in this way. He would. Hashimi was sure of that. The Israeli

approaching him was a face known to him. Zadin, the name was, a man who'd been there before often enough, just one more Israeli face most often hidden behind a Lexan mask and drawn gun, one more man unable to see Arabs as people, to whom a Muslim was the launcher for a rock or a Molotov cocktail. Well, today he'd learn different, Hashimi told himself. Today he'd see a man of courage and conviction.

Benny Zadin saw an animal, like a stubborn mule, like—what? He wasn't sure what he saw, but it wasn't a man, wasn't an Israeli. They'd changed tactics, that was all, and the tactics were womanly. They thought this would stand in the way of his purpose? Just as his wife had told him that she was leaving for the bed of a better man, that he could have the children, that his threats to beat her were empty words, that he couldn't do that, wasn't man enough to take charge of his own household. He saw that beautiful empty face and wondered why he hadn't taught her a lesson; she'd just stood there, not a meter away, staring at him, smiling—finally laughing at his inability to do what his manhood had commanded him to do, and, so, passive weakness had defeated strength.

But not this time.

"Move!" Zadin commanded in Arabic.

"No."

"I will kill you."

"You will not pass."

"Benny!" a levelheaded member of the police screamed. But it was too late for that. For Benjamin Zadin, the deaths of his brothers at Arab hands, the way his wife had left, and the way these people just sat in his way was too much. In one smooth motion he drew his service automatic and shot Hashimi in the forehead. The Arab youth fell forward, and the singing and clapping stopped. One of the other demonstrators started to move, but two others grabbed him and held him fast. Others began praying for their two dead comrades. Zadin turned his gun hand to one of these, but though his finger pressed on the trigger, something stopped him a gram short of the release pressure. It was the look in the eyes, the courage there, something other than defiance. Resolution, perhaps . . . and pity, for the look on Zadin's face was anguish that transcended pain, and the horror of what he had done crashed through his consciousness. He had broken faith with himself. He had killed in cold blood. He had taken the life of someone who had threatened no man's life. He had murdered. Zadin turned to the rabbis, looking for something, he knew not what, and whatever he sought simply was not there. As he turned away, the singing began again. Sergeant Moshe Levin came forward and took the captain's weapon.

"Come on, Benny, let's get you away from this place."

"What have I done?"

"It is done, Benny. Come with me."

Levin started to lead his commander away, but he had to turn and look at the morning's handiwork. Hashimi's body was slumped over, a pool of blood coursing down between the cobblestones. The sergeant knew that he had to do or say something. It wasn't supposed to be like this. His mouth hung open, and his face swung from side to side. In that moment, Hashimi's disciples knew

that their leader had won.

Ryan's phone rang at 2:03 Eastern Daylight Time. He managed to get it before the start of the second ring.

"Yeah?"

"This is Saunders at the Ops Center. Get your TV on. In four minutes CNN is running something hot."

"Tell me about it." Ryan's hand fumbled for the remote controller and switched the bedroom TV on.

"You ain't gonna believe it, sir. We copied it off the CNN satellite feed, and Atlanta is fast-tracking it onto the network. I don't know how it got past Israeli censors. Anyway—"

"Okay, here it comes." Ryan rubbed his eyes clear just in time. He had the TV sound muted to keep from disturbing his wife. The commentary was unnecessary in any case. "Dear God in heaven . . ."

"That about covers it, sir," the senior watch officer agreed.

"Send my driver out now. Call the Director, tell him to get in fast. Get hold of the duty officer at the White House Signals Office. He'll alert the people on his end. We need the DDI, and the desks for Israel, Jordan—hell, that whole area, all the desks. Make sure State's up to speed—"

"They have their own—"

"I know that. Call them anyway. Never assume anything in this business, okay?"

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"Yeah, send me about four hours' more sleep." Ryan set the phone down.

"Jack . . . was that—" Cathy was sitting up. She'd just caught the replay.

"It sure was, babe."

"What's it mean?"

"It means the Arabs just figured out how to destroy Israel." *Unless we can save the place.*

Ninety minutes later, Ryan turned on the West Bend drip machine behind his desk before running over the notes from the night-duty staff. It would be a day for coffee. He'd shaved in the car on the way in, and a look at the mirror showed that he'd not done a very good job of it. Jack waited until he had a full cup before marching into the Director's office. Charles Alden was there with Cabot.

"Good morning," the National Security Advisor said.

"Yeah," the Deputy Director replied in a husky voice. "What do you suppose is good about it? The President know yet?"

"No. I didn't want to disturb him until we know something. I'll talk to him when he wakes up—sixish. Marcus, what do you think of your Israeli friends now?"

"Have we developed anything else, Jack?" Director Cabot asked his subordinate.

"The shooter is a police captain, according to the insignia. No name on him yet, no background. The Israelis have him in the jug somewhere and they're not saying anything. From the tape it looks like two definitely dead, probably

a few more with minor injuries. Chief of Station has nothing he can report to us except that it really happened, and we have that on tape. Nobody seems to know where the TV crew is. We did not have any assets at the site when all this happened, so we're going exclusively from the news coverage." *Again*, Ryan didn't add. The morning was bad enough. "Temple Mount is shut down, guarded by their army now, nobody in or out, and they've closed access to the Wailing Wall also. That may be a first. Our embassy over there has not said anything, they're waiting for instructions from here. Same story for the others. No official reaction from Europe yet, but I expect that to change within the hour. They're at work already, and they got the same pictures from their Sky News service."

"It's almost four," Alden said, wearily checking his watch. "In three hours people are going to have their breakfasts upset—what a hell of a thing to see in the morning. Gentlemen, I think this one's going to be big. Ryan, you called it. I remember what you said last month."

"Sooner or later the Arabs had to wise up," Jack said. Alden nodded agreement. It was gracious of him, Jack noted. He'd said the same thing in one of his books several years earlier.

"I think Israel can weather this, they always have—" Jack cut his Director off.

"No way, boss," Ryan said. Someone had to straighten Cabot out. "It's what Napoleon said about the moral and the physical. Israel depends absolutely on having the moral high-ground. Their whole cachet is that they are the only democracy in the region, that they are the guys in white hats. That concept died about three hours ago. Now they look like Bull—whoever it was—in Selma, Alabama, except he used water hoses. The civil-rights community is going to go berserk." Jack paused to sip at his coffee. "It's a simple question of justice. When the Arabs were throwing rocks and cocktails, the police could say that they were using force in response to force. Not this time. Both the deaders were sitting down and not threatening anybody."

"It's the isolated act of one deranged man!" Cabot announced angrily.

"Not so, sir. The one shot with a pistol was like you say, but the first victim was killed with two of those rubber bullets at a range of more than twenty yards—with two aimed shots from a single-shot weapon. That's cold, and it wasn't any accident."

"Are we sure he's dead?" Alden asked.

"My wife's a doc, and he looked dead to her. The body spasmed and went limp, probably indicating death from massive head trauma. They can't say this guy tripped and fell onto the curb. This really changes things. If the Palestinians are smart, they'll double-down their bets. They'll stay with this tactic and wait for the world to respond. If they do that, they can't lose," Jack concluded.

"I agree with Ryan," Alden said. "There'll be a UN resolution before dinner. We'll have to go along with it, and that just might show the Arabs that nonviolence is a better weapon than rocks are. What will the Israelis say? How will they react?"

Alden knew what the answer was. This was to enlighten the DCI, so Ryan took the question. "First they'll stonewall. They're probably kicking

themselves for not intercepting the tape, but it's a little late for that. This was almost certainly an unplanned incident—I mean that the Israeli government is as surprised as we are—otherwise they would have grabbed the TV crew. That police captain is having his brain picked apart now. By lunchtime they'll say that he's crazy—hell, he probably is—and that this is an isolated act. How they do their damage control is predictable, but—"

"It's not going to work," Alden interrupted. "The President's going to have to have a statement out by nine. We can't call this a 'tragic incident.' It's cold-blooded murder of an unarmed demonstrator by a state official."

"Look, Charlie, this is just an isolated incident," Director Cabot said again.

"Maybe so, but I've been predicting this for five years." The National Security Advisor stood and walked to the windows. "Marcus, the only thing that has held Israel together for the past thirty years has been the stupidity of the Arabs. Either they never recognized that Israeli legitimacy is based entirely on their moral position or they just didn't have the wit to care about it. Israel is now faced with an impossible ethical contradiction. If they really are a democracy that respects the rights of its citizens, they have to grant the Arabs broader rights. But that means playing hell with their political integrity, which depends on soothing their own extreme religious elements—and that crowd doesn't care a rat's ass about Arab rights, does it? But if they cave in to the religious zealots and stonewall, try to gloss over this thing, then they are not a democracy, and that imperils the political support from America without which they cannot survive economically or militarily. The same dilemma applies to us. Our support for Israel is based on their political legitimacy as a functioning liberal democracy, but that legitimacy just evaporated. A country whose police murder unarmed people has no legitimacy, Marcus. We can no more support an Israel that does things like this than we could have supported Somoza, Marcos, or any other tin-pot dictator—"

"Goddamn it, Charlie! Israel isn't—"

"I know that, Marcus. They're not. They're really not. But the only way they can prove that is to change, to become true to what they have always claimed to be. If they stonewall on this, Marcus, they're doomed. They'll lean on their political lobby and find out it isn't there anymore. If it goes that far, then they embarrass our government even more than it already is, and we'll be faced with the possible necessity of overtly cutting them off. We can't do that either. We must find another alternative." Alden turned back from the window. "Ryan, that idea of yours is now on the front burner. I'll handle the President and State. The only way we can get Israel out of this is to find some kind of a peace plan that works. Call your friend at Georgetown and tell him it's no longer a study. Call it Project PILGRIMAGE. By tomorrow morning I need a good sketch of what we want to do and how we want to do it."

"That's awful fast, sir," Ryan observed.

"Then don't let me stop you, Jack. If we don't move quickly on this, God only knows what might happen. You know Scott Adler at State?"

"We've talked a few times."

"He's Brent Talbot's best man. I suggest you get together with him after you check with your friends. He can cover your backside on the State Department flank. We can't trust that bureaucracy to do anything fast. Better pack some

bags, boy, you're going to be busy. I want facts, positions, and a gold-plated evaluation just as fast as you can generate it, and I want it done black as a coal mine." That last remark was aimed at Cabot. "If this is going to work, we can't risk a single leak."

"Yes, sir," Ryan said. Cabot just nodded.

Jack had never been in the faculty residence at Georgetown. It struck him as odd, but he shoved that thought aside as breakfast was served. Their table overlooked a parking lot.

"You were right, Jack," Riley observed. "That was nothing to wake up to."

"What's the word from Rome?"

"They like it," the President of Georgetown University replied simply.

"How much?" Ryan asked.

"You're serious?"

"Alden told me two hours ago that this is now on the front burner."

Riley accepted this news with a nod. "Trying to save Israel, Jack?"

Ryan didn't know how much humor was in the question, and his physical state did not allow levity. "Father, all I'm doing is following up on something—you know, orders?"

"I am familiar with the term. Your timing was pretty good on floating this thing."

"Maybe so, but let's save the Nobel Prize for some other time, okay?"

"Finish your breakfast. We can still catch everybody over there before lunch, and you look pretty awful."

"I feel pretty awful," Ryan admitted.

"Everybody should stop drinking about forty," Riley observed. "After forty you really can't handle it anymore."

"You didn't," Jack noted.

"I'm a priest. I have to drink. What exactly are you looking for?"

"If we can get preliminary agreement from the major players, we want to get negotiations going ASAP, but this end of the equation has to be done very quietly. The President needs a quick evaluation of his options. That's what I'm doing."

"Will Israel play?"

"If they don't, they're fucked—excuse me, but that's exactly where things are."

"You're right, of course, but will they have the sense to recognize their position?"

"Father, all I do is gather and evaluate information. People keep asking me to tell fortunes, but I don't know how. What I do know is that what we saw on TV is going to ignite the biggest firestorm since Hiroshima, and we sure as hell have to try to do something before it burns up a whole region."

"Eat. I have to think for a few minutes, and I do that best when I'm chewing on something."

It was good advice, Ryan knew a few minutes later. The food soaked up the coffee acid in his stomach, and the energy from the food would help him get through the day. Inside an hour, he was on the move again, this time to the State Department. By lunch he was on his way home to pack, managing to nap

for three hours along the way. He stopped back at Alden's White House office for a session that dragged far into the night. Alden had really taken charge there, and the skull session in his office covered a huge amount of ground. Before dawn Jack headed off to Andrews Air Force Base. He was able to call his wife from the VIP Lounge. Jack had hoped to take his son to a ball game over the weekend, but for him there wouldn't be a weekend. A final courier arrived from CIA, State, and the White House, delivering two hundred pages of data that he'd have to read on the way across the Atlantic.

4

PROMISED LAND

The U.S. Air Force's Ramstein air base is set in a German valley, a fact which Ryan found slightly unsettling. His idea of a proper airport was one on land that was flat as far as the eye could see. He knew that it didn't make much of a difference, but it was one of the niceties of air travel to which he'd become accustomed. The base supported a full wing of F-16 fighter-bombers, each of which was stored in its own bombproof shelter which in its turn was surrounded by trees—the German people have a mania for green things that would impress the most ambitious American environmentalists. It was one of those remarkable cases in which the wishes of the tree-huggers coincided exactly with military necessity. Spotting the aircraft shelters from the air was extremely difficult, and some of the shelters-French-built-had trees planted on top of them, making camouflage both aesthetically and militarily pleasing. The base also housed a few large executive aircraft, including a converted 707 with "The United States of America" painted on it. Resembling a smaller version of the President's personal transport, it was known locally as "Miss Piggy," and was assigned to the use of the commander of USAF units in Europe. Ryan could not help but smile. Here were over seventy fighter aircraft tasked to the destruction of Soviet forces which were now drawing back from Germany, housed on an environmentally admirable facility, which was also home to a plane called Miss Piggy. The world was truly mad.

On the other hand, traveling Air Force guaranteed excellent hospitality and VIP treatment worthy of the name, in this case at an attractive edifice called the Cannon Hotel. The base commander, a full colonel, had met his VC-20B Gulfstream executive aircraft and whisked him off to his Distinguished Visitor's quarters where a slide-out drawer contained a nice collection of liquor bottles to help him to conquer jet lag with nine hours of drink-augmented sleep. That was just as well, because the available television service included a single channel. By the time he awoke at about six in the morning, local, he was almost in synch with the time zones, stiff and hungry, having almost survived another bout with travel shock. He hoped.

Jack didn't feel like jogging. That was what he told himself. In fact he knew that he couldn't have jogged half a mile with a gun to his head. And so he walked briskly. He soon found himself being passed by early-morning exercise nuts, many of whom had to be fighter pilots, they were so young and lean. Morning mist hung in the trees that were planted nearly to the edge of the blacktopped roads. It was much cooler than at home, with the still air disturbed every few minutes by the discordant roar of jet engines—"the sound of freedom"—the audible symbol of the military force that had guaranteed the

peace of Europe for over forty years—now resented by the Germans, of course. Attitudes change as rapidly as the times. American power had achieved its goal and was becoming a thing of the past, at least as far as Germany was concerned. The inner-German border was gone. The fences and guard towers were down. The mines were gone. The plowed strip of dirt that had remained pristine for two generations to betray the footprints of defectors was now planted with grass and flowers. Locations in the East once examined in satellite photos or about which Western intelligence agencies had sought information at the cost of both money and blood were now walked over by camera-toting tourists, among whom were intelligence officers more shocked than bemused at the rapid changes that had come and gone like the sweep of a spring tide. *I knew that I was right about this place,* some thought. Or, *How did we ever blow that one so badly?*

Ryan shook his head. It was more than amazing. The question of the two Germanys had been the centerpiece of East-West conflict since before his birth, had appeared to be the one unchanging thing in the world, the subject of enough white papers and Special National Intelligence Estimates and news stories to fill the entire Pentagon with pulp. All the effort, all the examination of minutiae, the petty disputes—gone. Soon to be forgotten. Even scholarly historians would never have the energy to look at all the data that had been thought important—crucial, vital, worthy of men's lives—and was now little more than a vast footnote to the end of the Second World War. This base had been one such item. Designed to house the aircraft whose task it was to clear the skies of Russian planes and crush a Soviet attack, it was now an expensive anachronism whose residential apartments would soon house German families. Ryan wondered what they'd do with the aircraft shelters like that one there. . . . Wine cellars, maybe. The wine was pretty good.

"Halt!" Ryan stopped cold in his tracks and turned to see where the sound had come from. It was an Air Force security policeman—woman. Girl, actually, Ryan saw, though her M-16 rifle neither knew nor cared about plumbing fixtures.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"ID, please." The young lady was quite attractive, and quite professional. She also had a backup in the trees. Ryan handed over his CIA credentials.

"I've never seen one of these, sir."

"I came in last night on the VC-20. I'm staying over at the Inn, room 109. You can check with Colonel Parker's office."

"We're on security alert, sir," she said next, reaching for her radio.

"Just do your job, miss—excuse me, Sergeant Wilson. My plane doesn't leave till ten." Jack leaned against a tree to stretch. It was too nice a morning to get excited about anything, even if there were two armed people who didn't know who the hell he was.

"Roger." Sergeant Becky Wilson switched off her radio. "The Colonel's looking for you, sir."

"On the way back, I turn left at the Burger King?"

"That's right, sir." She handed his ID back with a smile.

"Thanks, Sarge. Sorry to bother you."

"You want a ride back, sir? The Colonel's waiting."

"I'd rather walk. He can wait, he's early." Ryan walked away from a buck sergeant who now had to ponder the importance of a man who kept her base commander sitting on the front step of the Cannon. It took ten brisk minutes, but Ryan's directional sense had not left him, despite the unfamiliar surroundings and a six-hour time differential.

"Morning, sir!" Ryan said as he vaulted the wall into the parking lot.

"I set up a little breakfast with COMUSAFE staff. We'd like your views on what's happening in Europe."

Jack laughed. "Great! I'm interested in hearing yours." Ryan walked off toward his room to dress. *What makes them think I know anything more than they do?* By the time his plane left, he'd learned four things he hadn't known. Soviet forces withdrawing from what had formerly been called East Germany were decidedly unhappy with the fact that there was no place for them to withdraw to. Elements of the former East German army were even less happy about their enforced retirement than Washington actually knew; they probably had allies among ex-members of the already de-established Stasi. Finally, though an even dozen members of the Red Army Faction had been apprehended in Eastern Germany, at least that many others had gotten the message and vanished before they, too, could be swept up by the *Bundeskriminalamt,* the German federal police. That explained the security alert at Ramstein, Ryan was told.

The VC-20B lifted off from the airfield just after ten in the morning, headed south. Those poor terrorists, he thought, devoting their lives and energy and intellect to something that was vanishing more swiftly than the German countryside below him. Like children whose mother had died. No friends now. They'd hidden out in Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic, blissfully unaware of the coming demise of both communist states. Where would they hide now? Russia? No chance. Poland? That was a laugh. The world had changed under them, and was about to change again, Ryan thought with a wistful smile. Some more of their friends were about to watch the world change. Maybe, he corrected himself. Maybe . . .

"Hello, Sergey Nikolayevich," Ryan had said as the man had entered his office, a week before.

"Ivan Emmetovich," the Russian had replied, holding out his hand. Ryan remembered the last time they'd been this close, on the runway of Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport. Golovko had held a gun in his hand then. It had not been a good day for either, but as usual, it was funny the way things had worked out. Golovko, for having nearly, but not quite, prevented the greatest defection in Soviet history, was now First Deputy Chairman of the Committee for State Security. Had he succeeded, he would not have gone quite so far, but for being very good, if not quite good enough, he'd been noticed by his own President, and his career had taken a leap upward. His security officer had camped in Nancy's office with John Clark, as Ryan had led Golovko into his.

"I am not impressed." Golovko looked around disapprovingly at the painted gypsum-board drywall. Ryan did have a single decent painting borrowed from a government warehouse, and, of course, the not-exactly-required photo of President Fowler over by the clothes tree on which Jack hung his coat.

"I do have a nicer view, Sergey Nikolayevich. Tell me, is the statue of Iron Feliks still in the middle of the square?"

"For the moment." Golovko smiled. "Your Director is out of town, I gather."

"Yes, the President decided that he needed some advice."

"On what?" Golovko asked with a crooked smile.

"Damned if I know," Ryan answered with a laugh. *Lots of things*, he didn't say.

"Difficult, is it not? For both of us." The new KGB Chairman was not a professional spook either—in fact that was not unusual. More often than not, the director of that grim agency had been a Party man, but the Party was becoming a thing of history also, and Narmonov had selected a computer expert who was supposed to bring new ideas into the Soviet Union's chief spy agency. That would make it more efficient. Ryan knew that Golovko had an IBM PC behind his desk in Moscow now.

"Sergey, I always used to say that if the world made sense, I'd be out of a job. So look what's happening. Want some coffee?"

"I would like that, Jack." A moment later he expressed approval of the brew.

"Nancy sets it up for me every morning. So. What can I do for you?"

"I have often heard that question, but never in such surroundings as this." There was a rumbling laugh from Ryan's guest. "My God, Jack, do *you* ever wonder if this is all the result of some drug-induced dream?"

"Can't be. I cut myself shaving the other day and I didn't wake up."

Golovko muttered something in Russian that Jack didn't catch, though his translators would when they went over the tapes.

"I am the one who reports to our parliamentarians on our activities. Your Director was kind enough to respond favorably to our request for advice."

Ryan couldn't resist that opening: "No problem, Sergey Nikolayevich. You can screen all your information through me. I'd be delighted to tell you how to present it." Golovko took it like a man.

"Thank you, but the Chairman might not understand." With jokes aside, it was time for business.

"We want a *quid pro quo*. " The fencing began.

"And that is?"

"Information on the terrorists you guys used to support."

"We cannot do that," Golovko said flatly.

"Sure you can."

Next Golovko waved the flag: "An intelligence service cannot betray confidences and continue to function."

"Really? Tell Castro that next time you see him," Ryan suggested.

"You're getting better at this, Jack."

"Thank you, Sergey. My government is most gratified indeed for your President's recent statement on terrorism. Hell, I like the guy personally. You know that. We're changing the world, man. Let's clean a few more messes up. You never approved of your government's support for those creeps."

"What makes you believe that?" the First Deputy Chairman asked.

"Sergey, you're a professional intelligence officer. There's no way you can personally approve the actions of undisciplined criminals. I feel the same way,

of course, but in my case it's personal." Ryan leaned back with a hard look. He would always remember Sean Miller and the other members of the Ulster Liberation Army who'd made two earnest attempts to kill Jack Ryan and his family. Only three weeks earlier, after years exhausting every legal opportunity, after three writs to the Supreme Court, after demonstrations and appeals to the Governor of Maryland and the President of the United States for executive clemency, Miller and his colleagues had, one by one, walked into the gas chamber in Baltimore, and been carried out half an hour later, quite dead. *And may God have mercy on their souls*, Ryan thought. *If God has a strong enough stomach.* One chapter in his life was now closed for good.

"And the recent incident . . . ?"

"The Indians? That merely illustrates my case. Those 'revolutionaries' were dealing drugs to make money. They're going to turn on you, the people you used to fund. In a few years they're going to be more of a problem for you than they ever were for us." That was entirely correct, of course, and both men knew it. The terrorist-drug connection was something the Soviets were starting to worry about. Free enterprise was starting most rapidly of all in Russia's criminal sector. That was as troubling to Ryan as to Golovko. "What do you say?"

Golovko inclined his head to the side. "I will discuss it with the Chairman. He will approve."

"Remember what I said over in Moscow a couple of years back? Who needs diplomats to handle negotiations when you have real people to settle things?"

"I expected a quote from Kipling or something similarly poetic," the Russian observed dryly. "So how do you deal with your Congress?"

Jack chuckled. "Short version is, you tell them the truth."

"I needed to fly eleven thousand kilometers to hear you say that?"

"You select a handful of people in your parliament you can trust to keep their mouths shut, and whom the rest of parliament trust to be completely honest—that's the hard part—and you brief them into everything they need to know. You have to set up ground rules—"

"Ground rules?"

"A baseball term, Sergey. It means the special rules that apply to a specific playing field."

Golovko's eyes lit up. "Ah, yes, that is a useful term."

"Everyone has to agree on the rules, and you may never, ever break them." Ryan paused. He was talking like a college lecturer again, and it wasn't fair to speak that way to a fellow professional.

Golovko frowned. That was the hard part, of course: never, ever breaking the rules. The intelligence business wasn't often that cut and dried. And conspiracy was part of the Russian soul.

"It's worked for us," Ryan added.

Or has it? Ryan wondered. *Sergey knows if it has or not . . . well, he knows some things that I don't. He could tell me if we've had major leaks on the Hill since Peter Henderson . . . but at the same time he knows that we've penetrated so many of their operations despite their manic passion for the utmost secrecy.* Even the Soviets had admitted it publicly: the hemorrhage of defectors from KGB over the years had gutted scores of exquisitely planned operations against America

and the West. In the Soviet Union as in America, secrecy was designed to shield failure as well as success.

"What it comes down to is trust," Ryan said after another moment. "The people in your parliament are patriots. If they didn't love their country, why would they put up with all the bullshit aspects of public life? It's the same here."

"Power," Golovko responded at once.

"No, not the smart ones, not the ones you will be dealing with. Oh, there'll be a few idiots. We have them here. They are not an endangered species. But there are always those who're smart enough to know that the power that comes with government service is an illusion. The duty that comes along with it is always greater in magnitude. No, Sergey, for the most part you'll be dealing with people as smart and honest as you are."

Golovko's head jerked at the compliment, one professional to another. He'd guessed right a few minutes earlier, Ryan was getting good at this. He started to think that he and Ryan were not really enemies any longer. Competitors, perhaps, but not enemies. There was more than professional respect between them now.

Ryan looked benignly at his visitor, smiling inwardly at having surprised him. And hoping that one of the people Golovko would select for oversight would be Oleg Kirilovich Kadishev, code name SPINNAKER. Known in the media as one of the most brilliant Soviet parliamentarians in a bumptious legislative body struggling to build a new country, his reputation for intelligence and integrity belied the fact that he'd been on the CIA payroll for several years, the best of all the agents recruited by Mary Pat Foley. The game goes on, Ryan thought. The rules were different. The world was different. But the game went on. Probably always would, Jack thought, vaguely sorry it was true. But, hell, America even spied on Israel—it was called "keeping an eye on things"; it was never called "running an operation." The oversight people in Congress would have leaked that in a minute. *Oh, Sergey, do you have a lot of new things to learn about!*

Lunch followed. Ryan took his guest to the executive dining room, where Golovko found the food somewhat better than KGB standards—something Ryan would not have believed. He also found that the top CIA executives wanted to meet him. The Directorate chiefs and their principal deputies all stood in line to shake his hand and be photographed. Finally there was a group photo before Golovko had taken the executive elevator back to his car. Then the people from Science and Technology, and Security had swept every inch of every corridor and room Golovko and his bodyguard had traveled. Finding nothing, they had swept again. And again. And once more until it was decided that he had not availed himself of the opportunity to play his own games. One of the S&T people had lamented the fact that it just wasn't the same anymore.

Ryan smiled, remembering the remark. Things were happening so goddamned fast. He settled back into the chair and tightened his seat belt. The VC-20 was approaching the Alps, and the air might be bumpy there.

"Want a paper, sir?" the attendant asked. It was a girl for a change, and a

pretty one. Also married and pregnant. A pregnant staff sergeant. It made Ryan uneasy to be served by someone like that.

"What d'you have?"

"International Trib. "

"Great!" Ryan took the paper—and nearly gasped. There it was, right on the front page. Some bonehead had leaked one of the photos. Golovko, Ryan, the directors of S&T, Ops, Admin, Records, and Intelligence, plunging through their lunches. None of the American identities were secret, of course, but even so. . . .

"Not a real good picture, sir," the sergeant noted with a grin. Ryan was unable to be unhappy.

"When are you due, Sarge?"

"Five more months, sir."

"Well, you'll be bringing your child into a much better world than the one either one of us was stuck with. Why don't you sit down and relax? I'm not liberated enough to be waited on by a pregnant lady."

* * *

The *International Herald-Tribune* is a joint venture of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. The one sure way for Americans traveling in Europe to keep track of the ball scores and important comic strips, it had already broadened its distribution into what had been the Eastern Bloc to serve American businessmen and tourists who were flooding the former communist nations. The locals also used it, both as a way to hone their English skills and to keep track of what was happening in America, more than ever a fascination to people learning how to emulate something they'd been raised to hate. In addition it was as fine an information source as had ever been available in those countries. Soon everyone was buying it, and the American management of the paper was expanding operations to broaden its readership still further.

One such regular reader was Günther Bock. He lived in Sofia, Bulgaria, having left Germany—the eastern part—rather hurriedly some months before, after a warning tip from a former friend in the Stasi. With his wife, Petra, Bock had been a unit leader in the Baader-Meinhof Gang, and after that had been crushed by the West German police, in the Red Army Faction. Two near arrests by the *Bundeskriminalant* had frightened him across the Czech border, and thence on to the DDR, where he had settled into a quiet semiretirement. With a new identity, new papers, a regular job—he never showed up, but the employment records were completely *in Ordnung*—he'd deemed himself safe. Neither he nor Petra had reckoned with the popular revolt that had overturned the government of the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, but they both decided that they could survive that change in anonymity. They'd never counted on a popular riot storming into Stasi headquarters, either. That event had resulted in the destruction of literally millions of documents. Many of the documents had not been destroyed, however. Many of the rioters had been agents of the *Bundesnachrichtendienst*, the West German intelligence agency, who'd been in the front ranks of the intruders and known exactly which rooms

to savage. Within days, people from the RAF had started disappearing. It had been hard to tell at first. The DDR telephone system was so decrepit that getting phone calls through had never been easy, and for obvious security reasons the former associates had not lived in the same areas, but when another married couple had failed to make a rendezvous for dinner, Günther and Petra had sensed trouble. Too late. While the husband made rapid plans to leave the country, five heavily armed GSG-9 commandos had kicked down the flimsy door of the Bock apartment in East Berlin. They'd found Petra nursing one of her twin daughters, but whatever sympathy they might have felt at so touching a scene had been mitigated by the fact that Petra Bock had murdered three West German citizens, one quite brutally. Petra was now in a maximum-security prison, serving a life sentence in a country where "life" meant that you left prison in a casket or not at all. The twin daughters were the adopted children of a Munich police captain and his barren wife.

It was very odd, Günther thought, how much that stung him. After all, he was a revolutionary. He had plotted and killed for his cause. It was absurd that he would allow himself to be enraged by the imprisonment of his wife . . . and the loss of his children. But. But they had Petra's nose and eyes, and they'd smiled for him. They would not be taught to hate him, Günther knew. They'd never even be told who he and Petra had been. He'd dedicated himself to something larger and grander than mere corporeal existence. He and his colleagues had made a conscious and reasoned decision to build a better and more just world for the common man, and yet—and yet he and Petra had decided, also in a reasoned and conscious way, to bring into it children who would learn their parents' ways, to be the next generation of Bocks, to eat the fruits of their parents' heroic labor. Günther was enraged that this might not happen.

Worse still was his bewilderment. What *had* happened was quite impossible. *Unmöglich. Unglaublich*. The people, the common *Volk* of the DDR had risen up like revolutionaries themselves, forsaking their nearly perfect socialist state, opting instead to merge with the exploitative monstrosity crafted by the imperialist powers. They'd been seduced by Blaupunkt appliances and Mercedes automobiles, and—what? Günther Bock genuinely did not understand. Despite his inborn intelligence, the events did not connect into a comprehensible pattern. That the people of his country had examined "scientific socialism" and decided it did not work, and could never work—that was too great a leap of imagination for him to make. He'd committed too much of his life to Marxism ever to deny it. Without Marxism, after all, he was a criminal, a common murderer. Only his heroic revolutionary *ethos* elevated his activities above the acts of a thug. But his revolutionary *ethos* had been summarily rejected by his own chosen beneficiaries. That was simply impossible. *Unmöglich*.

It wasn't quite fair that so many impossible things piled one upon another. As he opened the paper he'd bought twenty minutes before at a kiosk seven blocks from his current residence, the photo on the front page caught his eye, as the paper's editor had fully intended.

CIA FETES KGB, the caption began.

"Was ist das denn für Quatsch?" Günther muttered.

“In yet another remarkable turn in a remarkable time, the Central Intelligence Agency hosted the First Deputy Chairman of the KGB in a conference concerning ‘issues of mutual concern’ to the world’s two largest intelligence empires. . . .” the story read. “Informed sources confirm that the newest area of East-West cooperation will include information-sharing on the increasingly close ties between international terrorists and the international drug trade. CIA and KGB will work together to . . .”

Bock set the paper down and stared out the window. He knew what it was to be a hunted animal. All revolutionaries did. It was the path he had chosen, along with Petra, and all their friends. The task was a clear one. They would test their cunning and skill against their enemies. The forces of light against the forces of darkness. Of course, it was the forces of light that had to run and hide, but that was a side issue. Sooner or later the situation would be reversed when the common people saw the truth and sided with the revolutionaries. Except for one little problem. The common people had chosen to go another way. And the terrorist world was rapidly running out of dark places in which the forces of light might hide.

He’d come to Bulgaria for two reasons. Of all the former East Bloc countries, Bulgaria was the most backward and because of it had managed the most orderly transition from communist rule. In fact, communists still ran the country, though under different names, and the country was still politically safe, or at least neutral. The Bulgarian intelligence apparat, once the source of designated killers for KGB whose hands had finally become too clean for such activity, was still peopled with reliable friends. *Reliable friends*, Günther thought. But the Bulgarians were still in the thrall of their Russian masters—associates, now—and if KGB were really cooperating with CIA . . . The number of safe places was being reduced by one more digit.

Giinther Bock should have felt a chill at the increased personal danger. Instead his face flushed and pulsed with rage. As a revolutionary he’d often enough bragged that every hand in the world was turned against him—but whenever he’d said that, it had been with the inner realization that such was not and would never be the case. Now his boast was becoming reality. There were still places to run, still contacts he could trust. But how many? How soon before trusted associates would bend to the changes in the world? The Soviets had betrayed themselves and world socialism. The Germans. The Poles. The Czechs, the Hungarians, the Romanians. Who was next?

Couldn’t they see? It was all a trap, some kind of incredible conspiracy of counterrevolutionary forces. A lie. They were casting away what could be—should be—was—the perfect social order of structured freedom from want, orderly efficiency, of fairness and equality. Of . . .

Could that all be a lie? Could it all have been a horrible mistake? Had he and Petra killed those cowering exploiters for nothing?

But it didn’t matter, did it? Not to Günther Bock, not right now. He was soon to be hunted again. One more safe patch of ground was about to become a hunting preserve for his enemies. If the Bulgarians shared their papers with the Russians, if the Russians had a few men in the right office, with the right credentials and the right access, his address and new identity could already be on its way to Washington, and from there to BND headquarters, and in a

week's time he might be sharing a cell close to Petra's.

Petra, with her light brown hair and laughing blue eyes. As brave a girl as any man could want. Seemingly cold to her victims, wonderfully warm to her comrades. So fine a mother she'd been to Erika and Ursel, so superior at that task as she'd been at every other she'd ever attempted. Betrayed by supposed friends, caged like an animal, robbed of her own offspring. His beloved Petra, comrade, lover, wife, believer. Robbed of her life. And now he was being driven farther from her. There had to be a way to change things back.

But first he had to get away.

Bock set the paper down and tidied up the kitchen. When things were clean and neat, he packed a single bag and left the apartment. The elevator had quit again, and he walked down the four flights to the street. Once there he caught a tram. In ninety minutes he was at the airport. His passport was a diplomatic one. In fact he had six of them carefully concealed in the lining of his Russian-made suitcase, and, ever the careful man, three of them were the numerical duplicates of others held by real Bulgarian diplomats, unknown to the Foreign Ministry office that kept the records. That guaranteed him free access to the most important ally of the international terrorist: air transport. Before time for lunch, his flight rotated off the tarmac, headed south.

Ryan's flight touched down at a military airport outside Rome just before noon, local time. By coincidence they rolled in right behind yet another VC-20B of the 89th Military Airlift Wing that had arrived only a few minutes earlier from Moscow. The black limousine on the apron was waiting for both aircraft.

Deputy Secretary of State Scott Adler greeted Ryan as he stepped off with an understated smile.

"Well?" Ryan asked through the airport sounds.

"It's a go."

"Damn," Ryan said as he took Adler's hand. "How many more miracles can we expect this year?"

"How many do you want?" Adler was a professional diplomat who'd worked his way up the Russian side of the State Department. Fluent in their language, well versed on their politics, past and present, he understood the Soviets as did few men in government—including Russians themselves. "You know the hard part about this?"

"Getting used to hearing *da* instead of *nyet*, right?"

"Takes all the fun out of negotiations. Diplomacy can really be a bitch when both sides are reasonable." Adler laughed as the car pulled off.

"Well, this ought to be a new experience for both of us," Jack observed soberly. He turned to watch "his" aircraft prepare for an immediate departure. He and Adler would be traveling together for the rest of the trip.

They sped toward central Rome with the usual heavy escort. The Red Brigade, so nearly exterminated a few years earlier, was back in business, and even if it hadn't been, the Italians were careful protecting foreign dignitaries. In the right-front seat was a serious-looking chap with a little Beretta squirt-gun. There were two lead cars, two chase cars, and enough cycles for a motocross race. The speedy progress down the ancient streets of Rome made

Ryan wish he were back in an airplane. Every Italian driver, it seemed, had ambitions to ride in the Formula One circuit. Jack would have felt safer in a car with Clark, driving an unobtrusive vehicle on a random path, but in his current position his security arrangements were ceremonial in addition to being practical. There was one other consideration, of course. . . .

"Nothing like a low profile," Jack muttered to Adler.

"Don't sweat it. Every time I've come here it's been the same way. First time?"

"Yep. First time in Rome. I wonder how I've ever missed coming here—always wanted to, the history and all."

"A lot of that," Adler agreed. "Think we might make a little more?"

Ryan turned to look at his colleague. Making history was a new thought to him. Not to mention a dangerous one. "That's not my job, Scott."

"If this does work, you know what'll happen."

"Frankly, I never bothered thinking about that."

"You ought to. No good deed ever goes unpunished."

"You mean Secretary Talbot . . . ?"

"No, not him. Definitely not my boss."

Ryan looked forward to see a truck scuttle out of the way of the motorcade. The Italian police officer riding on the extreme right of the motorcycle escort hadn't flinched a millimeter.

"I'm not in this for credit. I just had an idea, is all. Now I'm just the advance man."

Adler shook his head slightly and kept his peace. *Jesus, how did you ever last this long in government service?*

The striped jump suits of the Swiss Guards had been designed by Michelangelo. Like the red tunics of the British Guardsmen, they were anachronisms from a bygone era when it had made sense for soldiers to wear brightly colored uniforms, and also, like the Guardsmen uniforms, they were kept on more for their attractiveness to tourists than for any practical reason. The men and their weapons look so *quaint*. The Vatican guards carried halberds, evil-looking long-handled axes made originally for infantrymen to unhorse armored knights—as often as not by crippling the horse the enemy might be riding; horses didn't fight back very well, and war is ever a practical business. Once off his mount, an armored knight was dispatched with little more effort than that required to break up a lobster—and about as much remorse. People thought medieval weapons romantic somehow, Ryan told himself, but there was nothing romantic about what they were designed to do. A modern rifle might punch holes in some other fellow's anatomy. These were made to dismember. Both methods would kill, of course, but at least rifles made for neater burial.

The Swiss Guards had rifles, too, Swiss rifles made by SIG. Not all of them wore Renaissance costumes, and since the attempt on John Paul II, many of the guards had received additional training, quietly and unobtrusively, of course, since such training did not exactly fit the image of the Vatican. Ryan wondered what Vatican policy was on the use of deadly force, whether the chief of the guards chafed at the rules imposed from on high by people who certainly did not appreciate the nature of the threat and the need for decisive

protective action. But they'd do their best within their constraints, grumbling among themselves and voicing their opinions when the time seemed right, just like everyone else in that business.

A bishop met them, an Irishman named Shamus O'Toole, whose thick red hair clashed horribly with his clothing. Ryan was first out of the car, and his first thought was a question: was he supposed to kiss O'Toole's ring or not? He didn't know. He hadn't met a real bishop since his confirmation—and it had been a long time since sixth grade in Baltimore. O'Toole deftly solved that problem by grasping Ryan's hand in a bearish grip.

"So many Irishmen in the world!" he said with a wide grin.

"Somebody has to keep things straight, Excellency."

"Indeed, indeed!" O'Toole greeted Adler next. Scott was Jewish and had no intentions of kissing anyone's ring. "Would you come with me, gentlemen?"

Bishop O'Toole let them into a building whose history might have justified three scholarly volumes, plus a picture book for its art and architecture. Jack barely noticed the two metal detectors they passed through on the third floor. Leonardo da Vinci might have done the job, so skillfully were they concealed in door frames. Just like the White House. The Swiss Guards didn't all wear uniforms. Some of the people prowling the halls in soft clothes were too young and too fit to be bureaucrats, but for all that the overall impression was a cross between visiting an old art museum and a cloister. The clerics wore cassocks, and the nuns—they were here in profusion also—were not wearing the semicivilian attire adopted by their American counterparts. Ryan and Adler were parked briefly in a waiting room, more to appreciate the surroundings than to inconvenience them, Jack was sure. A Titian madonna adorned the opposite wall, and Ryan admired it while Bishop O'Toole announced the visitors.

"God, I wonder if he ever did a small painting?" Ryan muttered. Adler chuckled.

"He did know how to capture a face and a look and a moment, didn't he? Ready?"

"Yeah," Ryan said. He felt oddly confident.

"Gentlemen!" O'Toole said from the open door. "Will you come this way, please?" They walked through yet another anteroom. This one had two secretarial desks, both unoccupied, and another set of doors that looked fourteen feet tall.

The office of Giovanni Cardinal D'Antonio would have been used in America for balls or formal occasions of state. The ceiling was frescoed, the walls covered with blue silk, and the floor's ancient hardwood accented with rugs large enough for an average living room. The furniture was probably the most recent in manufacture, and that looked to be at least two hundred years old, brocaded fabric taut over the cushions and gold leaf on the curved wooden legs. A silver coffee service told Ryan where to sit.

The Cardinal came toward them from his desk, smiling in the way that a king might have done a few centuries earlier to greet a favored minister. D'Antonio was a man of short stature, and clearly one who enjoyed good food. He must have been a good forty pounds overweight. The room air reported that he was a man who smoked, something he ought to have stopped, since he

was rapidly approaching seventy years of age. The old, pudgy face had an earthy dignity to it. The son of a Sicilian fisherman, D'Antonio had mischievous brown eyes to suggest a roughness of character that fifty years of service to the Church had not wholly erased. Ryan knew his background and could easily see him pulling in nets at his father's side, back a very long time ago. The earthiness was also a useful disguise for a diplomat, and that's what D'Antonio was by profession, whatever his vocation might have been. A linguist like many Vatican officials, he was a man who had spent thirty years practicing his trade, and the lack of military power that had crippled his efforts at making the world change had merely taught him craftiness. In intelligence parlance he was an agent of influence, welcome in many settings, always ready to listen or offer advice. Of course he greeted Adler first.

"So good to see you again, Scott."

"Eminence, a pleasure as always." Adler took the offered hand and smiled his diplomat's smile.

"And you are Dr. Ryan. We have heard so many things about you."

"Thank you, Your Eminence."

"Please, please." D'Antonio waved both men to a sofa so beautiful that Ryan flinched at resting his weight on it. "Coffee?"

"Yes, thank you," Adler said for both of them. Bishop O'Toole did the pouring, then sat down to take notes. "So good of you to allow us in at such short notice."

"Nonsense." Ryan watched in no small amazement as the Cardinal reached inside his cassock and pulled out a cigar holder. A tool that looked like silver but was probably stainless steel performed the appropriate surgery on the largish brown tube, then D'Antonio lit it with a gold lighter. There wasn't even an apology about the sins of the flesh. It was as though the Cardinal had quietly flipped off the "dignity" switch to put his guests at ease. More likely, Ryan thought, he merely worked better with a cigar in his hand. Bismarck had felt the same way.

"You are familiar with the rough outlines of our concept," Adler opened.

"Sì. I must say that I find it very interesting. You know of course that the Holy Father proposed something along similar lines some time ago."

Ryan looked up at that. He hadn't.

"When that initiative first came out, I did a paper on its merits," Adler said. "The weak point was the inability to address security considerations, but in the aftermath of the Iraq situation, we have the opening. Also, you realize, of course, that our concept does not exactly—"

"Your concept is acceptable to us," D'Antonio said with a regal wave of his cigar. "How could it be otherwise?"

"That, Eminence, is precisely what we wanted to hear." Adler picked up his coffee. "You have no reservations?"

"You will find us highly flexible so long as there is genuine goodwill among the active parties. If there is total equality among the participants, we can agree unconditionally to your proposal." The old eyes sparkled. "But can you guarantee equality of treatment?"

"I believe we can," Adler said seriously.

"I think it should be possible, else we are all charlatans. What of the

Soviets?"

"They will not interfere. In fact, we are hoping for open support. In any case, what with the distractions they already have—"

"Indeed. They will benefit from the diminution of the discord in the region, the stability on various markets, and general international goodwill."

Amazing, Ryan thought. *Amazing how matter-of-factly people have absorbed the changes in the world. As though they had been expected. They had not. Not by anyone. If anyone had suggested their possibility ten years earlier, he would have been institutionalized.*

"Quite so." The Deputy Secretary of State set down his cup. "Now, on the question of the announcement . . ."

Another wave of the cigar. "Of course you will want the Holy Father to make it."

"How very perceptive," Adler observed.

"I am not yet completely senile," the Cardinal replied. "And press leaks?"

"We would prefer none."

"That is easily accomplished in this city, but in yours? Who knows of this initiative?"

"Very few," Ryan said, opening his mouth for the first time since sitting down. "So far, so good."

"But on your next stop . . . ?" D'Antonio had not been informed of their next stop, but it was the obvious one.

"That might be a problem," Ryan said cautiously. "We'll see."

"The Holy Father and I will both be praying for your success."

"Perhaps this time your prayers will be answered," Adler said.

Fifty minutes later the VC-20B lifted off again. It soared upward across the Italian coast, then turned southwest to recross Italy on the way to its next destination.

"Jesus, that was fast," Jack observed when the seat belt light went off. He kept his buckled, of course. Adler lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the window on his side of the cabin.

"Jack, this is one of those situations where you do it fast or it doesn't get done." He turned and smiled. "They're rare, but they happen."

The cabin attendant—this one was a male—came aft and handed both men copies of a printout that had just arrived on the aircraft facsimile machine.

"What?" Ryan observed crossly. "What gives?"

In Washington people do not always have time to read the papers, at least not all the papers. To assist those in government service to see what the press is saying about things is an in-house daily press-summary sheet called *The Early Bird.* Early editions of all major American papers are flown to D.C. on regular airline flights, and before dawn they are vetted for stories relating to all manner of government operations. Relevant material is clipped and photocopied, then distributed by the thousands to various offices whose staff members then repeat the process by highlighting individual stories for their superiors. This process is particularly difficult in the White House, whose staff members are by definition interested in everything.

Dr. Elizabeth Elliot was Special Assistant to the President for National

Security Affairs. The immediate subordinate to Dr. Charles Alden, whose title was the same, but without the "Special," Liz, also referred to as "E.E.," was dressed in a fashionable linen suit. Current fashions dictated that women's "power" clothing was not mannish but feminine, the idea being that since even the most obtuse of men would be able to tell the difference between themselves and women, there was little point in trying to conceal the truth. The truth was that Dr. Elliot was not physically unattractive and enjoyed dressing to emphasize the fact. Tall at five feet eight inches, and with a slender figure that long work hours and mediocre food sustained, she did not like playing second-fiddle to Charlie Alden. And besides, Alden was a Yalie. She'd most recently been Professor of Political Science at Bennington, and resented the fact that Yale was considered more prestigious by whatever authorities made such judgments.

Current work schedules at the White House were easier than those of only a few years earlier, at least in the national-security shop. President Fowler did not feel the need for a first-thing-in-the-morning intelligence briefing. The world situation was far more pacific than any of his predecessors had known, and Fowler's main problems were of the domestic political variety. Commentary on that could readily be had from watching morning TV news shows, something Fowler did by watching two or more TV sets at the same time, something that had infuriated his wife and still bemused his staffers. That fact meant that Dr. Alden didn't have to arrive until eight or so to get his morning briefing, after which he would brief the President at nine-thirty. President Fowler didn't like dealing directly with the briefing officers from CIA. As a result, it was E.E. who had to arrive just after six so that *she* could screen dispatches and message traffic, confer with the CIA watch officers (she didn't like them either), and their counterparts from State and Defense. She also got to read over *The Early Bird*, and to highlight items of interest for her boss, the estimable Dr. Charles Alden.

Like I'm a goddamned addle-brained simpering secretary, E.E. fumed.

Alden, she thought, was a logical contradiction. A liberal who talked tough, a skirt-chaser who supported women's rights, a kindly, considerate man who probably enjoyed using her like a goddamned functionary. That he was also a distinguished observer and an amazingly accurate forecaster of events, with an even dozen books—each of them thoughtful and perceptive—was beside the point. He was in *her* job. It had been promised to her while Fowler had still been a longshot candidate. The compromise that had placed Alden in his West Wing corner office and her in the basement was merely another of those acts that political figures use as excuses to violate their word without anything more than a perfunctory apology. The Vice President had demanded and gotten the concession at the convention; he'd also gotten what should have been her office on the main level for one of his own people, relegating her to this most prestigious of dungeons. In return for that, the Veep was a team player, and his tireless campaigning was widely regarded as having made the difference. The Vice President had delivered California, and without California, J. Robert Fowler would still be governor of Ohio. And so she had a twelve-by-fifteen office in the basement, playing secretary and / or administrative assistant to a goddamned Yalie who appeared once a month on

the Sunday talk shows and hobnobbed with chiefs of state with her as lady-in-goddamned-waiting.

Dr. Elizabeth Elliot was in her normal early-morning mood, which was foul, as any White House regular could testify. She walked out of her office and into the White House Mess for a refill of her coffee cup. The strong drip coffee only made her mood the fouler, a thought that stopped her in her tracks and forced a self-directed smile she never bothered displaying for any of the security personnel who checked her pass every morning at the west ground-level entrance. They were just cops, after all, and cops were nothing to get excited about. Food was served by Navy stewards, and the only good thing about them was that they were largely minorities, many Filipinos in what she deemed a disgraceful carryover from America's colonial-exploitation period. The long-service secretaries and other support personnel were not political, hence mere bureaucrats of one description or another. The important people in this building were political. What little charm E.E. had was saved for them. The Secret Service agents observed her movements with about as much interest as they might have accorded the President's dog, if he'd had a dog, which he didn't. Both they and the professionals who ran the White House, despite the arrivals and departures of various self-inflated egos in human form, regarded her as just another of many politically elevated individuals who would depart in due course while the pros stayed on, faithfully doing their duty in accordance with their oaths of office. The White House caste system was an old one, with each regarding all the others as less than itself

Elliot returned to her desk and set her coffee down to get a good stretch. The swivel chair was comfortable—the physical arrangements here were first-rate, far better than those at Bennington—but the endless weeks of early mornings and late nights had taken a physical toll in addition to that on her character. She told herself that she ought to return to working out. At least to walk. Many staffers took part of lunch to pace up and down the mall. The more energetic even jogged. Some female staffers took to jogging with military officers detailed to the building, especially the single ones, doubtless drawn to the short haircuts and simplistic mentalities that attached to uniformed service. But E.E. didn't have time for that, and so she settled for a stretch before sitting down with a muttered curse. Department head at America's most important women's college, and here she was playing secretary to a goddamned Yalie. But bitching didn't ever fix things, and she went back to work.

She was halfway through the *Bird*, and flipped to a new page as she picked up her yellow highlighting pen. The articles were unevenly set. Almost all were just crooked enough on the redacted pages to annoy, and E.E. was a pathologically neat person. At the top of page eleven was a small piece from the *Hartford Courant.* ALDEN PATERNITY CASE read the headline. Her coffee mug stopped in midflight.

What?

> Suit papers will be filed this week in New Haven by Ms. Marsha Blum, alleging that her newly born daughter was fathered by Professor Charles W. Alden, former Chairman of the Department of History at Yale, and currently National Security Advisor to President Fowler. Claiming a two-year relationship with Dr. Alden, Ms. Blum, herself a doctoral candidate in Russian history, is suing Alden for lack of child

support. . . .

"That randy old goat," Elliot whispered to herself.

And it was true. That thought came to her in a blazing moment of clarity. It had to be. Alden's amorous adventures were already the subject of humorous columns in the Post. Charlie chased skirts, slacks, any garment that had a woman inside it.

Marsha Blum . . . Jewish? Probably. The jerk was banging one of his doctoral students. Knocked her up even. I wonder why she just didn't get an abortion and be done with it? I bet he dumped her, and she was so mad . . .

Oh, God, he's scheduled to fly to Saudi Arabia later today . . .

We can't *let that happen . . .*

The idiot. No warning, none. He didn't talk to anyone about it. He couldn't have. I would have heard. Secrets like that last about as long as they take to repeat in the lavatory. What if he hadn't even known himself? Could this Blum girl be that angry with Charlie? That resulted in a smirk. *Sure she could.*

Elliot lifted her phone . . . and paused for a moment. You didn't just call the President in his bedroom. Not for just anything. Especially not when you stood to make a personal gain from what happened.

On the other hand . . .

What would the Vice President say? Alden was really his man. But the VP was pretty strait-laced. Hadn't he warned Charlie to keep a lower profile on his womanizing? Yes, three months ago. The ultimate political sin. He'd gotten caught. Not with his hand in the cookie jar either. That brought out a short bark of a laugh. *Shtuping* one of his seminar girls! What an asshole! And this guy was telling the President how to conduct affairs of state. That almost unleashed a giggle.

Damage control.

The feminists would freak. They'd ignore the stupidity of the Blum girl for not taking care of her unwanted—was it?—pregnancy in the feminist way. After all, what was "prochoice" all about? She'd made her choice, period. To the feminist community it was simply a case of a male turd who had exploited a sister and was now employed by a supposedly pro-feminist President.

The antiabortion crowd would also disapprove . . . even more violently. They'd recently done something intelligent, which struck Elizabeth Elliot as nothing short of miraculous. Two stoutly conservative senators were sponsoring legislation to compel "illegitimate fathers" to support their irregular offspring. If abortion was to be outlawed, it had finally occurred to those Neanderthals that someone had to do something about the unwanted children. Moreover, that crowd was on another morality kick, and they were kicking the Fowler Administration for a number of reasons already. To the right-wing nuts, Alden would just be another irresponsible lecher, a white one—so much the better—and one in an administration they loathed.

E.E. considered all the angles for several minutes, forcing herself to be dispassionate, examining the options, thinking it through from Alden's angle. What could he do? Deny it was his? Well, a genetic testing would establish that, and that was guts-ball, something for which Alden probably didn't have the stomach. If he admitted it . . . well, clearly he couldn't marry the girl (the article said she was only twenty-four). Supporting the child would be an

admission of paternity, a gross violation of academic integrity. After all, professors weren't supposed to bed their students. That it happened, as E.E. well knew, was besides the point. As with politics, the rule in academia was to avoid detection. What might be the subject of a hilarious anecdote over a faculty lunch table became infamy in the public press.

Charlie's gone, and what timing . . .

E.E. punched the number to the upstairs bedroom.

"The President, please. This is Dr. Elliot calling." A pause while the Secret Service agent asked if the President would take the call. *God, I hope I didn't catch him on the crapper!* But it was too late to worry about that.

The hand came off the mouthpiece at the other end of the circuit. Elliot heard the whirring sound of the President's shaver, then a gruff voice.

"What is it, Elizabeth?"

"Mr. President, we have a little problem I think you need to see right away."

"Right away?"

"Now, sir. It's potentially damaging. You'll want Arnie there also."

"It's not the proposal that we're—"

"No, Mr. President. Something else. I'm not kidding. It's potentially very serious."

"Okay, come on up in five minutes. I presume you can wait for me to brush my teeth?" A little presidential humor.

"Five minutes, sir."

The connection was broken. Elliot set the phone down slowly. Five minutes. She'd wanted more time than that. Quickly she took her makeup case from a desk drawer and hurried off to the nearest bathroom. A quick look in the mirror . . . no, first she had to take care of the morning coffee. Her stomach told her that an antacid tablet might be a good idea, too. She did that, then rechecked her hair and face. They'd do, she decided. Just some minor repairs to her cheek highlights. . . .

Elizabeth Elliot, Ph.D., walked stiffly back to her office and took another thirty seconds to compose herself before lifting *The Early* Bird and leaving for the elevator. It was already at the basement level, the door open. It was manned by a Secret Service agent who smiled good morning at the arrogant bitch only because he was inveterately polite, even to people like E.E.

"Where to?"

Dr. Elliot smiled most charmingly. "Going up," she told the surprised agent.

5

CHANGES AND GUARDS

Ryan stayed in VIP quarters at the U.S. Embassy, waiting for the clock hands to move. He was taking Dr. Alden's place in Riyadh, but since he was visiting a prince, and princes don't like their calendars rearranged any more than the next man, he had to sit tight while the clock simulated Alden's flight time across the world to where Ryan was. After three hours he got tired of watching satellite TV, and took a walk, accompanied by a discreet security guard. Ordinarily Ryan would have availed himself of the man's services as a tour guide, but not today. Now he wanted his brain in neutral. It was his first time in Israel and he wanted his impressions to be his own while his mind played over what he'd been watching on TV.

It was hot here on the streets of Tel Aviv, and hotter still where he was going, of course. The streets were busy with people scurrying about shopping or pursuing business. There was the expected number of police about, but more discordant was the occasional civilian toting an Uzi sub-machine gun, doubtless on his—or her—way to or from a reserve meeting. It was the sort of thing to shock an American antigun nut (or warm the heart of a pro-gun nut). Ryan figured that the weapons display probably knocked the hell out of purse-snatching and street crime. Ordinary civil crime, he knew, was pretty rare here. But terrorist bombings and other less pleasant acts were not. And things were getting worse instead of better. That wasn't new either.

The Holy Land, sacred to Christians, Muslims, and Jews, he thought. Historically, it had the misfortune to be at the crossroads between Europe and Africa on one hand—the Roman, Greek, and Egyptian empires—and Asia on the other—the Babylonians, Assyrians, and Persians—and one constant fact in military history is that a crossroads is always contested by somebody. The rise of Christianity, followed 700 years later by the rise of Islam, hadn't changed matters very much, though it had redefined the teams somewhat and given wider religious significance to the crossroads already contested for three millennia. And that only made the wars all the more bitter.

It was easy to be cynical about it. The First Crusade, 1096, Ryan thought it was, had mainly been about extras. Knights and nobles were passionate people and produced more offspring than their castles and associated cathedrals could support. The son of a noble could hardly take up farming, and those not eliminated by childhood disease had to go *somewhere*. And when Pope Urban II had sent out his message that the infidels had overrun the land of Christ, it became possible for men to launch a war of aggression to reclaim land of religious importance *and* to find themselves fiefdoms to rule, peasants to oppress, and trade routes to the Orient on which to sit and charge their tolls.

Whichever objective might have been the more important probably differed from one heart to another, but they all had known of both. Jack wondered how many different kinds of feet had trodden on these streets, and how they had reconciled their personal-political-commercial objectives with their putatively holy cause. Doubtless the same had been true of Muslims, of course, since three hundred years after Mohammed the venal had doubtless added their ranks to those of the devout, just as it had happened in Christianity. Stuck in the middle were the Jews, those not scattered by the Romans, or those who had found their way back. The Jews had probably been treated more brutally by the Christians back in the early second millennium, something else which had since changed, probably more than once.

Like a bone, an immortal bone fought over by endless packs of hungry dogs.

But the reason the bone was not ever destroyed, the reason the dogs kept coming back over the span of centuries was what the land represented. So much history. Scores of historical figures had been here, including the Son of God, as the Catholic part of Ryan believed. Beyond the significance of the very location, this narrow land bridge between continents and cultures, were thoughts and ideals and hopes that lived in the minds of men, somehow embodied in the sand and stones of a singularly unattractive place that only a scorpion could really love. Jack supposed that there were five great religions in the world, only three of which had really spread beyond their own point of origin. Those three had their home within a few miles of where he stood.

So, of course, this is where they fight wars.

The blasphemy was stunning. Monotheism had been born here, hadn't it? Starting with the Jews, and built upon by Christians and Muslims, here was the place where the idea had caught on. The Jewish people—Israelites seemed too strange a term—had defended their faith with stubborn ferocity for thousands of years, surviving everything the animists and pagans could throw at them, and then facing their sternest tests at the hands of religions grown on the ideas that they had defended. It hardly seemed fair—it wasn't fair at all, of course—but religious wars were the most barbaric of all. If one were fighting for God Himself, then one could do nearly anything. One's enemies in such a war were also fighting against God, a hateful and damnable thing. To dispute the authority of Authority itself—well, each soldier could see himself as God's own avenging sword. There could be no restraint. One's actions to chastise the enemy/sinner were sanctioned as thoroughly as anything could be. Rapine, plunder, slaughter, all the basest crimes of man would become something more than a right—made into a duty, a Holy Cause, not sins at all. Not just being paid to do terrible things, not just sinning because sin felt good, but being told that you could literally get away with anything, because God really was on your side. They even took it to the grave. In England, knights who had served in the Crusades were buried under stone effigies whose legs were crossed instead of sitting side by side—the mark of a holy crusader—so that all eternity could know that they'd served their time in God's name, wetting their swords in children's blood, raping anything that might have caught their lonely eyes, and stealing whatever wasn't set firmly in the ground. All sides. The Jews mainly as victims, but taking their part on the hilt end of the sword when they got the chance, because all men are alike in their virtues and vices.

The bastards must have loved it, Jack thought bleakly, watching a traffic cop settling a dispute at a busy corner. *There must have been some genuinely good men back then. What did they do? What did they think? I wonder what God thought?*

But Ryan wasn't a priest or a rabbi or an imam. Ryan was a senior intelligence officer, an instrument of his country, an observer and reporter of information. He continued looking around, and forgot about history for the moment.

The people were dressed for the oppressive heat, and the bustle of the streets made him think of Manhattan. So many of them had portable radios. He passed a sidewalk restaurant and saw no less than ten people listening to an hourly news broadcast. Jack had to smile at that. His kind of people. When driving his car, the radio was always tuned to an all-news D.C. station. The eyes he saw flickered about. The level of alertness was so pervasive that it took him a few moments to grasp it. Like the eyes of his own security guard. Looking for trouble. Well, that made sense. The incident on Temple Mount had not sparked a wave of violence, but such a wave was expected—it did not surprise Ryan that the people in his sight failed to recognize the greater threat to them that came from the absence of violence. Israel had a myopia of outlook that was not hard to comprehend. The Israelis, surrounded by countries that had every reason to see the Jewish state immolated, had elevated paranoia to an art form, and national security to an obsession. One thousand nine hundred years after Masada and the diaspora, they'd returned to a land they'd consecrated, fleeing oppression and genocide . . . only to invite more of the same. The difference was that they now held the sword, and had well and truly learned its use. But that, too, was a dead end. Wars were supposed to end in peace, but none of their wars had really ended. They'd stopped, been interrupted, no more than that. For Israel, peace had been nothing more than an intermission, time to bury the dead and train the next class of fighters. The Jews had fled from near-extermination at Christian hands, betting their existence on their ability to defeat Muslim nations that had at once voiced their desire to finish what Hitler had started. And God probably thought exactly what He had thought during the Crusades. Unfortunately, parting seas and fixing the sun in the sky seemed to be things of the Old Testament. Men were supposed to settle things now. But men didn't always do what they were supposed to do. When Thomas More had written *Utopia,* the state in which men acted morally in all cases, he had given both the place and the book the same title. The meaning of "Utopia" is "Noplace." Jack shook his head and turned a corner down another street of white-painted stucco buildings.

"Hello, Dr. Ryan."

The man was in his middle fifties, shorter than Jack, and more heavyset. He had a full beard, neatly trimmed, but speckled with gray, and looked less like a Jew than a unit commander in Sennacherib's Assyrian army. A broadsword or mace would not have been out of place in his hand. Had he not been smiling, Ryan would have wanted John Clark at his side.

"Hello, Avi. Fancy meeting you here."

General Abraham Ben Jakob was Ryan's counterpart in the Mossad,

assistant director of the Israeli foreign-intelligence agency. A serious player in the intelligence trade, Avi had been a professional army officer until 1968, a paratrooper with extensive special-operations experience who'd been talent-scouted by Rafi Eitan and brought into the fold. His path had crossed Ryan's half a dozen times in the past few years, but always in Washington. Ryan had the utmost respect for Ben Jakob as a professional. He wasn't sure what Avi thought of him. General Ben Jakob was very effective at concealing his thoughts and feelings.

"What is the news from Washington, Jack?"

"All I know is what I saw on CNN at the embassy. Nothing official yet, and even if there were, you know the rules better than I do, Avi. Is there a good place to eat around here?"

That had already been planned, of course. Two minutes and a hundred yards later, they were in the back room of a quiet mom-and-pop place where both men's security guards could keep an eye on things. Ben Jakob ordered two Heinekens.

"Where you're going, they do not serve beer."

"Tacky, Avi. Very tacky," Ryan replied after his first sip.

"You are taking Alden's place in Riyadh, I understand."

"How could the likes of me ever take Dr. Alden's place anywhere?"

"You will be making your presentation about the same time Adler makes his. We are interested to hear it."

"In that case you will not mind waiting, I guess."

"No preview, not even one professional to another?"

"Especially not one professional to another." Jack drank his beer right out of the bottle. The menu, he saw, was in Hebrew. "Guess I'll have to let you order. . . . That damned fool!" *I've been left holding the bag before, but never one this big.*

"Alden." It was not a question. "He's my age. Good God, he should know that experienced women are both more reliable and more knowledgeable." Even in affairs of the heart, his terminology was professional.

"He might even pay more attention to his wife."

Ben Jakob grinned. "I keep forgetting how Catholic you are."

"That's not it, Avi. What lunatic wants more than *one* woman in his life?" Ryan asked deadpan.

"He's gone. That's the evaluation of our embassy." *But what does that mean?*

"Maybe so. Nobody asked me for an opinion. I really respect the guy. He gives the President good advice. He listens to us, and when he disagrees with the Agency, he generally has a good reason for doing so. He caught *me* short on something six months back. The man is brilliant. But playing around like that . . . well, I guess we all have our faults. What a damn-fool reason to lose a job like that. Can't keep his pants zipped." *And what timing*, Jack raged at himself.

"Such people cannot be in government service. They are too easy to compromise."

"The Russians are getting away from honey traps . . . and the girl was Jewish, wasn't she? One of yours, Avi?"

"Doctor Ryan! Would *I* do such a thing?" If a bear could laugh, it would

have sounded like Avi Ben Jakob's outburst.

"Can't be your operation. There was evidently no attempt at blackmail." Jack nearly crossed the line with that one. The General's eyes narrowed.

"It was not our operation. You think us mad? Dr. Elliot will replace Alden."

Ryan looked up from his beer. He hadn't thought about that. *Oh, shit* . . .

"Both your friend and ours," Avi pointed out.

"How many government ministers have you disagreed with in the last twenty years, Avi?"

"None, of course."

Ryan snorted and finished off the bottle. "What was that you said earlier, the part about one professional to another, remember?"

"We both do the same thing. Sometimes, when we are very lucky, they listen to us."

"And some of the times they listen to us, we're the ones who're wrong. . . ."

General Ben Jakob didn't alter his steady, relaxed gaze into Ryan's face when he heard that. It was yet another sign of Ryan's growing maturity. He genuinely liked Ryan as a man and as a professional, but personal likes and dislikes had little place in the intelligence trade. Something fundamental was happening. Scott Adler had been to Moscow. Both he and Ryan had visited Cardinal D'Antonio in the Vatican. As originally planned, Ryan was supposed to backstop Adler here with the Israeli Foreign Ministry, but Alden's astounding *faux pas* had changed that.

Even for an intelligence professional, Avi Ben Jakob was a singularly well-informed man. Ryan waffled on the question of whether or not Israel was America's most dependable ally in the Middle East. That was to be expected from an historian, Avi judged. Whatever Ryan thought, most Americans did regard Israel that way, and as a result, Israelis heard more from inside the American government than any other country—more even than the British, who had a formal relationship with the American intelligence community.

Those sources had informed Ben Jakob's intelligence officers that Ryan was behind what was going on. That seemed incredibly unlikely. Jack was very bright, almost as smart as Alden, for example, but Ryan had also defined his own role as a servant, not a master, an implementer of policy, not a maker of it. Besides, the American President did not like Ryan, and had not hidden the fact from his inner circle. Elizabeth Elliot was reported to hate him, Avi knew. Something that had happened before the election, an imagined slight, a harsh word. Well, government ministers were notoriously touchy. *Not like Ryan and me,* General Ben Jakob thought. Both he and Ryan had faced death more than once, and perhaps that was their bond. They didn't have to agree on everything. There was respect between them.

Moscow, Rome, Tel Aviv, Riyadh. What could he deduce from that?

Scott Adler was Secretary of State Talbot's picked man, a highly skilled professional diplomat. Talbot was also bright. President Fowler might not have been terribly impressive, but he had selected superior cabinet officers and personal advisers. Except for Elliot, Avi corrected himself. Talbot used Deputy Secretary Adler to do his important advance work. And when Talbot himself entered formal negotiations, Adler was always at his side.

The most amazing thing, of course, was that not one of the Mossad's

informants had a clue what was going on. *Something important in the Middle East*, they said. *Not sure what . . . I heard that Jack Ryan at the Agency had something to do with it. . . .* End of report.

It should have been infuriating, but Avi was used to that. Intelligence was a game where you never saw all the cards. Ben Jakob's brother was a pediatrician with similar problems. A sick child rarely told him what was wrong. Of course, his brother could always ask, or point, or probe. . . .

"Jack, I must tell my superiors something," General Ben Jakob said plaintively.

"Come on, General." Jack turned and waved for another beer. "Tell me, what the hell happened on the Mount?"

"The man was—is deranged. In the hospital they have a suicide watch on him. His wife had just left him, he came under the influence of a religious fanatic, and . . ." Ben Jakob shrugged. "It was terrible to see."

"That's true, Avi. Do you have any idea the political fix you're in now?"

"Jack, we've been dealing with this problem for—"

"I thought so. Avi, you are one very bright spook, but you do not know what's happening this time. You really don't."

"So tell me."

"I didn't mean that and you know it. What happened a couple days ago has changed things forever, General. You must know that."

"Changed to what?"

"You're going to have to wait. I have my orders, too."

"Does your country threaten us?"

"Threaten? That will never happen, Avi. How could it?" Ryan warned himself that he was talking too much. *This guy is good,* Jack reminded himself.

"But you cannot dictate policy to us."

Jack bit off his reply. "You're very clever, General, but I still have my orders. You have to wait. I'm sorry that your people in D.C. can't help you, but neither can I."

Ben Jakob changed tack yet again. "I'm even buying you a meal, and my country is not so rich as yours."

Jack laughed at his tone. "Good beer, too, and as you say, I can't do this where you say I'm going. If that's where I'm going. . . ."

"Your air crew has already filed the flight plan. I checked."

"So much for secrecy." Jack accepted the new bottle with a smile for the waiter. "Avi, let it rest for a while. Do you really think that we'd do anything to compromise your country's security?"

Yes! the General thought, but he couldn't say that of course. Instead he said nothing. But Ryan wasn't buying, and used the silence to change the course of the discussion himself.

"I hear you're a grandfather now."

"Yes. My daughter added to the gray in my beard. A daughter of her own. Leah."

"You have my word: Leah will have a secure country to grow up in, Avi."

"And who will see to that?" Ben Jakob asked.

"The same people who always have." Ryan congratulated himself for the answer. The poor guy really was desperate for information, and he was sad

that Avi had made it so obvious. *Well, even the best of us can be pushed into corners. . . .*

Ben Jakob made a mental note to have the file on Ryan updated. The next time they met, he wanted to have better information. The General wasn't a man who enjoyed losing at anything.

Dr. Charles Alden contemplated his office. He wasn't leaving quite yet, of course. It would harm the Fowler Administration. His resignation, signed and sitting on the green desk blotter, was for the end of the month. But that was just for show. As of today, his duties were at an end. He'd show up, read the briefing papers, scribble his notes, but Elizabeth Elliot would do the briefs now. The President had been regretful, but his usual cool self. *Sorry to lose you, Charlie, really sorry, especially now, but I'm afraid there's just no other way. . . .* He'd managed to retain his dignity in the Oval Office despite the rage he'd felt. Even Arnie van Damm had been human enough to observe, "Oh, shit, Charlie!" Though enraged at the political damage to his boss, van Damm had at least mixed a little humanity and locker-room sympathy with his anger. But not Bob Fowler, champion of the poor and the helpless.

It was worse with Liz. That arrogant bitch, with her silence and her eloquent eyes. She'd get the credit for what he had done. She knew it, and was already basking in it.

The announcement would be made in the morning. It had already been leaked to the press. By whom was anyone's guess. Elliot, displaying her satisfaction? Arnie van Damm, in a rapid effort at damage control? One of a dozen others?

The transition from power to obscurity comes fast in Washington. The embarrassed look on the face of his secretary. The forced smiles of the other bureaucrats in the West Wing. But obscurity comes only after a blaze of publicity to announce the fact: like the flare of light from an exploding star, public death is preceded by dazzling fanfare. That was the media's job. The phone was ringing off the hook. There had been twenty of them waiting outside his house in the morning, cameras at the ready, sunlike lights blazing in his face. And knowing what it had to be even before the first question.

That foolish little bitch! With her cowlike eyes and cowlike udders and broad, cowlike hips. How could he have been so stupid! Professor Charles Winston Alden sat in his expensive chair and stared at his expensive desk. His head was bursting with a headache that he attributed to stress and anger. And he was right. But he failed to allow for the fact that his blood pressure was nearly double what it should have been, driven to new heights by the stress of the moment. He similarly failed to consider the fact that he had not taken his antihypertensive medication in the past week. A prototypical professor, he was always forgetting the little things while his methodical mind picked apart the most intricate of problems.

And so it came as a surprise. It started at an existing weakness in part of the Circle of Willis, the brain's own blood-beltway. Designed to get blood to any part of the brain, as a means of bypassing vessels that might become blocked with age, the vessel carried a huge amount of blood. Twenty years of high blood pressure, and twenty years of his taking his medication only when he

remembered that he had an upcoming doctor's appointment, and the added stress of seeing his career stop with a demeaning personal disgrace, culminated in a rupture of the vessel on the right side of his head. What had been a searing migraine headache became death itself. Alden's eyes opened wide, and his hands flew up to grasp his skull as though to hold it together. It was too late for that. The rip widened, allowing more blood to escape. This both deprived important parts of his brain of the oxygen needed to function and further boosted intracranial pressure to the point that other brain cells were squeezed to extinction.

Though paralyzed, Alden did not lose consciousness for quite some time, and his brilliant mind recorded the event with remarkable clarity. Already unable to move, he knew that death was coming for him. So close, he thought, his mind racing to outrun death. *Thirty-five years to get here. All those books. All those seminars. The bright young students. The lecture circuit. The talk shows. The campaigns. All to get here. I was so close to accomplishing something important. Oh, God! To die* now, *to die like this!* But he knew that death was here, that he had to accept it. He hoped that someone would forgive him. He hadn't been a bad man, had he? He'd tried so hard to make a difference, to make the world a better place, and now on the brink of something really important . . . so much the better for everyone if this had happened while mounted on that foolish little cow . . . better still, he knew in one final moment, if his studies and his intellect had been his only pass—

Alden's disgrace and de facto firing determined the fact that his death would take long to discover. Instead of being buzzed by his secretary every few minutes, it took nearly an hour. Because she was intercepting all calls to him, none were forwarded. It would not have mattered in any case, though it would cause his secretary some guilt for weeks to come. Finally, when she was ready to leave for the day, she decided that she had to tell him so. She buzzed him over the intercom and got no response. Frowning, she paused, then buzzed him again. Still nothing. She next rose and walked to the door, knocking on it. Finally she opened it and screamed loudly enough that the Secret Service agents outside the Oval Office in the opposite corner of the building heard her. The first to arrive was Helen D'Agustino, one of the President's personal bodyguards, who'd been walking the corridors to loosen up after sitting most of the day.

"Shit!" And that fast her service revolver was out. She'd never seen so much blood in her life, all coming out of Alden's right ear and puddling on his desk. She shouted an alert over her radio transmitter. It had to be a head shot. Her sharp eyes swept the room, tracking over the front sight of her Model 19 Smith & Wesson. *Windows intact.* She darted across the room. *Nobody here. So, what then?*

Next she felt with her left hand for Alden's pulse on the carotid artery. Of course there was none, but training dictated that she had to check. Outside the room, all exits to the White House were blocked, guns were drawn, and visitors froze in their tracks. Secret Service agents were conducting a thorough check of the entire building.

"Goddamn!" Pete Connor observed as he entered the room.

"Sweep is complete!" a voice told both of them through their earpieces.

“Building is clear. HAWK is secure.” “Hawk” was the President’s code name with the Secret Service. It displayed the agents’ institutional sense of humor, both for its association with the President’s name and its ironic dissonance with his politics.

“Ambulance is two minutes out!” the communications center added. They could get an ambulance faster than a helicopter.

“Stand easy, Daga,” Connor said. “I think the man had a stroke.”

“Move!” This was a Navy chief medical corpsman. The Secret Service agents were trained in first aid, of course, but the White House always had a medical team standing by, and the corpsman was first on the scene. He carried the sort of duffel bag carried by corpsmen in the field, but didn’t bother opening it. There was just too much blood on the desk, he saw instantly, and the top of the puddle was congealing. The corpsman decided not to disturb the body—it was a potential crime scene, and the Secret Service guys had briefed him on that set of rules—most of the blood had come out Dr. Alden’s right ear. There was a trickle from the left one also, and postmortem lividity was already starting in what parts of the face he could see. Diagnoses didn’t come much easier than that.

“He’s dead, probably been close to an hour, guys. Cerebral hemorrhage. Stroke. Isn’t this guy a hypertensive?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Special Agent D’Agustino said after a moment.

“You’ll have to post him to be sure, but that’s what he died of. Blowout.”

A physician arrived next. He was a Navy captain, and confirmed his chiefs observation.

“This is Connor, tell the ambulance to take it easy. PILGRIM is dead, looks like from natural causes. Repeat, PILGRIM is dead,” the principal agent said over his radio.

The postmortem examination would check for many things, of course. Poison. Possible contamination of his food or water. But the White House environment was monitored on a continuous basis. D’Agustino and Connor shared a look. Yes, he had suffered from high blood pressure, and he sure as hell had had a bad day. Just about as bad as they get.

“How is he?” Heads turned. It was HAWK, the President himself, with a literal ring of agents around him, pressing through the door. And Dr. Elliot behind him. D’Agustino made a mental note that they’d have to make up a new code name for her. She wondered if HARPY might suffice. Daga didn’t like the bitch. No one on the Presidential Security Detail did. But they weren’t paid to like her, or, for that matter, even to like the President.

“He’s dead, Mr. President,” the doctor said. “It appears he suffered a massive stroke.”

The President took the news without a visible reaction. The Secret Service agents reminded themselves that he’d seen his wife through a multiyear battle against multiple sclerosis, finally losing her while still governor of Ohio. It must have drained the man, they thought, wanting it to be true. It must have stripped all of his emotions away. Certainly there were few emotions left in him. He made a clucking sound, and grimaced, and shook his head, and then he turned away.

Liz Elliot took his place, peering over the shoulder of an agent. Helen

D'Agustino examined her face as Elliot pressed forward to get her look. Elliot liked to wear makeup, Daga knew, and she watched the new National Security Advisor pale beneath it. Certainly it was a horrible scene, D'Agustino knew. It looked as though a bucket of red paint had been spilled on the desk.

"Oh, God!" Dr. Elliot whispered.

"Out of the way, please!" called a new voice. It was an agent with a stretcher. He pushed Liz Elliot roughly out of the way. Daga noticed that she was too shocked-fo be angry at that, that her face was still very white, her eyes unfocused. She might think she's a tough bitch, Special Agent D'Agustino thought, but she's not as tough as she thinks. The thought gave the agent satisfaction.

Little weak at the knees, eh, Liz? Helen D'Agustino, one month out of the Secret Service Academy, had been out on a discreet surveillance when the subject—a counterfeiter—had "made" her and for some reason she'd never understood come out with a large automatic pistol. He'd even fired a round in her direction. No more than that, though. She'd earned her nickname, Daga, by drawing her S&W and landing three right in the poor bastard's ten-ring at a range of thirty-seven feet, just like a cardboard target at the range. Just that easy, too. She'd never even dreamed about it. And so Daga was one of the guys, a member of the Service pistol team when they'd outshot the Army's elite Delta Force commandos. Daga was tough. Clearly Liz Elliot was not, however arrogant she might be. *No guts, lady*? It did not occur to Special Agent Helen D'Agustino at that moment that Liz Elliot was HAWK'S chief adviser for national security.

It had been a quiet meeting, the first such meeting that Günther Bock remembered. None of the blustering rhetoric so beloved of the revolutionary soldiers. His old comrade-in-arms, Ismael Qati, was normally a firebrand, eloquent in five languages, but Qati was subdued in every way, Bock saw. The ferocity of his smile was not there. The sweeping gestures that had always punctuated his words were more restrained, and Bock wondered if the man might not be feeling well.

"I grieved when I heard the news of your wife," Qati said, turning to personal matters for a moment.

"Thank you, my friend." Bock decided to put his best face on it: "It is a small thing compared to what your people have endured. There are always setbacks."

There were more than a few in this case, and both knew it. Their best weapon had always been solid intelligence information. But Bock's had dried up. The Red Army Faction had drawn for years on all sorts of information. Its own people within the West German government. Useful tidbits from the East German intelligence apparat, and all the Eastern Bloc clones of their common master, the KGB. Doubtless a good deal of their data had come from Moscow, routed through the smaller nations for political reasons that Bock had never questioned. After all, world socialism is itself a struggle with numerous tactical moves. *Used to be,* he, corrected himself.

It was all gone now, the help upon which he'd been able to draw. The East Bloc intelligence services had turned on their revolutionary comrades like cur

dogs. The Czechs and Hungarians had literally *sold* information on them to the West! The East Germans had given it away in the name of Greater German cooperation and brotherhood. East Germany—the German Democratic Republic—no longer existed. Now it was a mere appendage to capitalist Germany. And the Russians . . . Whatever indirect support they'd ever had from the Soviets was gone, possibly forever. With the demise of socialism in Europe, their sources within various government institutions had been rolled up, turned double agent, or simply stopped delivering, having lost their faith in a socialist future. At a stroke, the best and most useful weapon of the European revolutionary fighters had disappeared.

Fortunately, it was different here, different for Qati. The Israelis were as foolish as they were vicious. The one constant thing in the world, both Bock and Qati knew, was the inability of the Jews to make any kind of meaningful political initiative. Formidable as they were at the business of war, they had always been hopelessly inept at the business of peace. Added to that was their ability to dictate policy to their own masters as though they didn't want peace at all. Bock was not a student of world history, but he doubted that there was any precedent for such behavior as this. The ongoing revolt of both indigenous Israeli Arabs and Palestinian captives in the occupied territories was a bleeding sore on the soul of Israel. Once able to infiltrate Arab groups at will, Israeli police and domestic intelligence agencies were gradually being shut out, as popular support for this rebellion became more and more fixed in the minds of their enemies. At least Qati had an ongoing operation to command. Bock envied him that, however bad the tactical situation might be. Another perverse advantage for Qati was the efficiency of his enemy. Israeli intelligence had waged its shadow war against the Arab freedom fighters for two generations now. Over that time the foolish ones had died by the guns of Mossad officers. Those still alive, like Qati, were the survivors, the strong, clever, dedicated products of a Darwinian selection process.

"How are you dealing with informers?" Bock asked.

"We found one last week," Qati answered with a cruel smile. "He identified his case officer before he died. Now we have him under surveillance."

Bock nodded. Once the Israeli officer would merely have been assassinated, but Qati had learned. By watching him— very carefully and only intermittently—they might identify other infiltrators.

"And the Russians?" This question got a strong reaction.

"The pigs! They give us nothing of value. We are on our own. It has always been so." Qati's face showed what had today been rare animation. It came, then went, and the Arab's face lapsed back into enveloping fatigue.

"You seem tired, my friend."

"It has been a long day. For you also, I think."

Bock allowed himself a yawn and a stretch. "Until tomorrow?"

Qati rose with a nod, guiding his visitor to his room. Bock took his hand before retiring. They'd known each other for almost twenty years. Qati returned to the living room, and walked outside. His security people were in place and alert. Qati spoke with them briefly, as always, because loyalty resulted from attention to the needs of one's people. Then he too went to bed. He paused for evening prayers, of course. It troubled him vaguely that his

friend Günther was an unbeliever. Brave, clever, dedicated though he was, he had no faith, and Qati did not understand how any man could carry on without that.

Carry on? Does he carry on at all? Qati asked himself as he lay down. His aching legs and arms at last knew rest, and though the pain in them didn't end, at least it changed. Bock was finished, wasn't he? Better for him if Petra had died at the hands of GSG-9. They must have wanted to kill her, those German commandos, but the rumor was that they'd found her with a babe suckling on each breast, and you could not be a man and kill such a picture as that. Qati himself, for all his hatred for Israelis, could not do that. It would be an offense at God Himself. Petra, he thought, smiling in the dark. He'd taken her once, when Günther had been away. She'd been lonely, and he'd been hot-blooded from a successful operation in Lebanon, the killing of an Israeli adviser to the Christian militia, and so they'd shared their revolutionary fervor for two blazing hours.

Does Günther know? Did Petra tell him?

Perhaps she did. It wouldn't matter. Bock was not that sort of man, not like an Arab for whom it would have been a blood insult. Europeans were so casual about such things. It was a curiosity to Qati that they should be that way, but there were many curiosities in life. Bock was a true friend. Of that he was sure. The flame burned in Günther's soul as truly and brightly as it did in his own. It was sad that events in Europe had made life so hard on his friend. His woman caged. His children stolen. The very thought of it chilled Qati's blood. It was foolish of them to have brought children into the world. Qati had never married, and enjoyed the company of women rarely enough. In Lebanon ten years earlier, all those European girls, some in their teens even. He remembered with a quiet smile. Things no Arab girl would ever learn to do. So hot-blooded they'd been, wanting to show how dedicated they were. He knew that they had used him as surely as he'd used them. But Qati had been younger then, with a young man's passions.

Those passions were gone. He wondered if they would ever return. He hoped they would. He hoped mainly that he'd recover well enough that he'd have the energy for more than one thing. Treatment was going well, the doctor said. He was tolerating it much better than most. If he always felt tired, if the crippling bouts of nausea came from time to time, he mustn't be discouraged. That was normal—no, the normal way of things was not even so "good" as this. There was real hope, the doctor assured him on every visit. It wasn't merely the things any doctor would say to encourage his patient, the doctor had told him last week. He was truly doing well. He had a good chance. The important thing, Qati knew, was that he had something still to live for. He had purpose. That, he was sure, was the thing keeping him alive.

"What's the score?"

"Just carry on," Dr. Cabot replied over the secure satellite link. "Charlie had a massive stroke at his desk." A pause. "Maybe the best thing that could have happened to the poor bastard."

"Liz Elliot taking over?"

"That's right."

Ryan compressed his lips into a tight grimace, as though he'd just taken some particularly foul medicine. He checked his watch. Cabot had arisen early to make the call and give the instructions. He and his boss were not exactly friends, but the importance of this mission had overcome that. Maybe it would be the same with E.E., Ryan told himself.

"Okay, boss. I take off in ninety minutes, and we deliver our pitches simultaneously, as per the plan."

"Good luck, Jack."

"Thank you, Director." Ryan punched the Off button on the secure phone console. He walked out of the communications room and back to his room. His bag was already packed. All he had to do was knot his tie. The coat went over his shoulder. It was too hot here for that, and hotter still where he was going. He'd have to wear a coat there. It was expected, one of those curious rules of formal behavior that demanded the maximum discomfort to attain the proper degree of decorum. Ryan lifted his bag and left the room.

"Synchronize our watches?" Adler was waiting outside and chuckled.

"Hey, Scott, that isn't my idea!"

"It does make sense . . . kinda."

"I suppose. Well, I got an airplane to catch."

"Can't take off without you," Adler pointed out.

"One advantage to government service, isn't it?" Ryan looked up and down the corridor. It was empty, though he wondered if the Israelis had managed to bug it. If so, the Muzak might interfere with their bugs. "What do you think?"

"Even money."

"That good?"

"Yeah," Adler said with a grin. "This is the one, Jack. It was a good idea you had."

"Not just mine. I'll never get any credit for it anyway. Nobody'll ever know."

"We'll know. Let's get to work."

"Let me know how they react. Good luck, man."

"I think *mazeltov* is the proper expression." Adler took Ryan's hand. "Good flight."

The embassy limo took Ryan directly to the aircraft, whose engines were already turning. It had priority clearance to taxi, and was airborne in less than five minutes from the time he boarded. The VC-20B headed south, down the dagger-shape that was Israel, then east over the Gulf of Aqaba and into Saudi airspace.

As was his custom, Ryan stared out the window. His mind went over what he was supposed to do, but that had been rehearsed for over a week, and his brain could do that quietly while Ryan stared. The air was clear, the sky virtually cloudless as they flew over what was to all appearances a barren wasteland of sand and rock. What color there was came from stunted bushes too small to pick out individually, and had the general effect of an unshaven face. Jack knew that much of Israel looked exactly the same, as did the Sinai, where all those tank battles had been fought, and he found himself wondering why men chose to die for land like this. But they had, for almost as long as man had existed on the planet. Man's first organized wars had been fought

here, and they hadn't stopped. At least not yet.

Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, is roughly in the center of that country, which is as large as all of America east of the Mississippi. The executive aircraft made a relatively fast descent, allowed by the modest amount of air traffic here, and the air was agreeably smooth as the pilot brought the aircraft low into the Riyadh International. In another few minutes the Gulfstream taxied toward the cargo terminal, and the attendant opened the forward door.

After two hours' exposure to air conditioning, Jack felt as though he'd stepped into a blast furnace. The shade temperature was over 110, and there was no shade. Worse, the sun reflected off the pavement, as though from a mirror, so intensely that Ryan's face stung from it. There to greet him was the deputy chief of mission at the embassy, and the usual security people. In a moment, he was sweating inside yet another embassy limo.

"Good flight?" the DCM asked.

"Not bad. Everything ready here?"

"Yes, sir."

It was nice to be called "sir," Jack thought. "Well, let's get on with it."

"My instructions are to accompany you as far as the door."

"That's right."

"You might be interested to know that we haven't had any press inquiries. D.C. has kept this one pretty quiet."

"That'll change in about five hours."

Riyadh was a clean city, though quite different from Western metropolises. The contrast with Israeli towns was remarkable. Nearly everything was new. Only two hours away, but that was by air. This place had never been the crossroads Palestine had been. The ancient trading routes had given the brutal heat of Arabia a wide berth, and though the coastal fishing and trading towns had known prosperity for millennia, the nomadic people of the interior had lived a stark existence, held together only by their Islamic faith, which was in turn anchored by the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Two things had changed that. The British in the First World War had used this area as a diversion against Ottoman Turkey, drawing their forces here and away from sites which might have been of greater utility to their allies in Germany and Austria-Hungary. Then, in the 1930s, oil had been discovered. Oil in quantities so vast as to make Texas an apostrophe. With that, first the Arab world had changed, and then the whole world had soon followed.

From the first, the relationship between the Saudis and the West had been delicate. The Saudis were still a curious mixture of the primitive and the sophisticated. Some people on this peninsula were but a single generation from nomadic life that was little different from that of the wanderers of the Bronze Age. At the same time there was an admirable tradition of Koranic scholarship, a code that was harsh but scrupulously fair, and remarkably similar to the Talmudic traditions of Judaism. In a brief span of time these people had become accustomed to wealth beyond count or meaning. Viewed as comic wastrels by the "sophisticated" West, they were merely the newest entry in a long line of nouveau riche nations of which America had been a recent part. A nouveau riche himself, Ryan smiled at some of the buildings in sympathy. People with "old" money—earned by bumptious ancestors whose

rough manners had long since been conveniently forgotten—were always uncomfortable around those who had made, not inherited, their comforts. As it was with individuals, so it was with nations. The Saudis and their Arab brethren were still learning how to be a nation, much less a rich and influential one, but the process was an exciting one for them and their friends. They'd had some easy lessons, and some very hard ones, most recently with their neighbors to the north. For the most part they had learned well, and now Ryan hoped that the next step would be as easily made. A nation achieves greatness by helping others to make peace, not by demonstrating prowess at war or commerce. To learn that, it had taken America from the time of Washington to the time of Theodore Roosevelt, whose Nobel Peace Prize adorned the wall in the White House room that still bore his name. *It took us almost a hundred twenty years,* Jack thought as the car turned and slowed. *Teddy got the Prize for arbitrating some little piss-ant border dispute, and we're asking these folks to help us settle the most dangerous flashpoint in the civilized world after merely fifty years of effective nationhood. What reason do we have to look down on these people?*

There is a choreography to occasions of state as delicate and as adamant as any ballet. The car—it used to be a carriage—arrives. The door is opened by a functionary—who used to be called a footman. The Official waits in dignified solitude while the Visitor alights from the car. The Visitor nods to the footman if he's polite, and Ryan was. Another, more senior, functionary first greets the Visitor, then conducts him to the Official. On both sides of the entryway are the official guards, who were in this case uniformed, armed soldiers. Photographers had been left out, for obvious reasons. Such affairs would be more comfortable in temperatures under a hundred degrees, but at least here there was shade from a canopy, as Ryan was conducted to his Official.

"Welcome to my country, Dr. Ryan." Prince Ali bin Sheik extended a firm hand to Jack.

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"Would you follow me?"

"Gladly, sir." *Before I melt.*

Ali led Jack and the DCM inside, where they parted ways. The building was a palace—Riyadh had quite a few palaces, since there were so many royal princes—but Ryan thought "working palace" might have been a more accurate term. It was smaller than the British counterparts Ryan had visited, and cleaner, Jack saw somewhat to his surprise. Probably because of the cleaner and dryer air of the region, which contrasted to the damp, sooty atmosphere of London. It was also air conditioned. The inside temperature could not have been far above eighty-five, which somehow seemed comfortable to Ryan. The Prince was dressed in flowing robes with a headdress held atop his head by a pair of circular—whats? Ryan wondered. He ought to have gotten briefed on that, Jack thought too late. Alden was supposed to have done this anyway. Charlie knew this area far better than he did, and—but Charlie Alden was dead, and Jack was carrying the ball.

Ali bin Sheik was referred to at State and CIA as a Prince-Without-Portfolio. Taller, thinner, and younger than Ryan, he advised the King of Saudi Arabia on foreign affairs and intelligence matters. Probably the Saudi intelligence

service—British-trained—reported to him, but that was not as clear as it should have been, doubtless another legacy of the Brits, who took their secrecy far more seriously than Americans. Though the file on Ali was a thick one, it mainly dealt with his background. Educated at Cambridge, he'd become an Army officer, and continued his professional studies at Leavenworth and Carlisle Barracks in the United States. At Carlisle he'd been the youngest man in his class—a colonel at twenty-seven-to be a royal prince was career-enhancing-and finished third in a group whose top ten graduates had each gone on to command a division or equivalent post. The Army General who'd briefed Ryan on Ali remembered his classmate fondly as a young man of no mean intellectual gifts and superb command potential. Ali had played a major role in persuading the King to accept American aid during the Iraqi war. He was regarded as a serious player quick to make decisions and quicker still to express displeasure at having his time wasted, despite his courtly manners.

The Prince's office was easily identified by the two officers at the double doors. A third man opened them, bowing to both as they passed.

"I've heard much about you," Ali said casually.

"All good, I trust," Ryan replied, trying to be at ease.

Ali turned with an impish smile. "We have some mutual friends in Britain, Sir John. Do you keep current with your small-arms skills?"

"I really don't have the time, sir."

Ali waved Jack to a chair. "For some things one should make time."

Both sat, and things became formal. A servant appeared with a silver tray, and poured coffee for both men before withdrawing.

"I sincerely regret the news on Dr. Alden. For so fine a man to be brought down so foolishly . . . May God have mercy on his soul. At the same time, I have looked forward to meeting you for some time, Dr. Ryan."

Jack sipped at his coffee. It was thick, bitter, and hideously strong.

"Thank you, Your Highness. Thank you also for agreeing to see me in the place of a more senior official."

"The most effective efforts at diplomacy often begin informally. So how may I be of service?" Ali smiled and leaned back in his chair. The fingers of his left hand toyed with his beard. His eyes were as dark as flint, and though they seemed to gaze casually at his visitor, the atmosphere in the room was now businesslike. And that, Ryan saw, was fast enough.

"My country wishes to explore a means of—that is, the rough outline of a plan with which to alleviate tensions in this area."

"With Israel, of course. Adler, I presume, is delivering the same proposal to the Israelis at this moment?"

"Correct, Your Highness."

"That is dramatic," the Prince observed with an amused smile. "Do go on."

Jack began his pitch: "Sir, our foremost consideration in this matter must be the physical security of the State of Israel. Before either of us was born, America and other countries stood by and did very little to prevent the extermination of six million Jews. The guilt attending that infamy lies heavy on my country."

Ali nodded gravely before speaking. "I have never understood that. Perhaps

you might have done better, but the strategic decisions made during the war by Roosevelt and Churchill were made in good faith. The issue with the shipload of Jews that nobody wanted prior to the outbreak of war, of course, is another issue entirely. I find it very strange indeed that your country did not grant asylum to those poor people. Fundamentally, however, no one saw what was coming, not the Jews, nor the Gentiles, and by the time it became clear what was happening, Hitler had physical control of Europe, and no direct intervention on your part was possible. Your leaders decided at that time that the best way to end the slaughter was to win the war as expeditiously as possible. That was logical. They might have made a political issue of the ongoing *Endlösung,* I believe the term was, but they decided that it would be ineffective from a practical point of view. That, in retrospect, was probably incorrect, but the decision was not made in malice." Ali paused to let his history lesson sink in for a moment. "In any case, we understand and conditionally accept the reasons behind your national goal to preserve the State of Israel. Our acceptance, as I am sure you will understand, is conditional upon your recognition of other people's rights. This part of the world is not composed of Jews and savages."

"And that, sir, is the basis of our proposal," Ryan replied. "If we can find a formula that recognizes those other rights, will you accept a plan in which America is the guarantor of Israeli security?" Jack didn't have time to hold his breath for the reply.

"Of course. Have we not made that clear? Who else but America can guarantee the peace? If you must put troops in Israel to make them feel secure, if you must execute a treaty to formalize your guarantee, those are things we can accept, *but* what of Arab rights?"

"What is your view of how we should address those rights?" Jack asked.

Prince Ali was stunned by the question. Was not Ryan's mission to present the American plan? He almost lapsed into anger, but Ali was too clever for that. It wasn't a trap he saw. It was a fundamental change in American policy.

"Dr. Ryan, you asked that question for a reason, but it was a rhetorical question nonetheless. I believe the answer to that question is yours to make."

The answer took three minutes.

Ali shook his head sadly. "That, Dr. Ryan, is something we would probably find acceptable, but the Israelis will never agree to it even though we might—more precisely, they would reject it for the very reason that we would accept it. They should agree to it, of course, but they will not."

"Is it acceptable to your government, sir?"

"I must, of course, present it to others, but I think our response would be favorable."

"Any objections at all?"

The Prince paused to finish his coffee. He stared over Ryan's head toward something on the far wall. "We could offer several modifications, none of them really substantive to the central thesis of your scheme. Actually, I think the negotiations on those minor issues would be easily and quickly accomplished, since they are not matters of consequence to the other interested parties."

"And who would be your choice for the Muslim representative?"

Ali leaned forward. “That is simple. Anyone could tell you. The Imam of the Al-Aqusa Mosque is a distinguished scholar and linguist. His name is Ahmed bin Yussif. Ahmed is consuited by scholars throughout Islam for his opinions on matters of theology. Sunni, Shi’a, all defer to him on selected issues. He is even a Palestinian by birth.”

“That easy?” Ryan closed his eyes and let out a breath. He’d guessed right on that one. Yussif was not exactly a political moderate, and had called for the expulsion of Israel from the West Bank. But he had also denounced terrorism per se on theological grounds. He wasn’t quite perfect, but if the Muslims could live with him, he was perfect enough.

“You are very confident, Dr. Ryan.” Ali shook his head. “Too confident. I grant you that your plan is fairer than anything I or my government expected, but it will never happen.” Ali paused again and fixed Ryan with his eyes. “Now I must ask myself if this was ever a serious proposal, or merely something to give the appearance of fairness.”

“Your Highness, President Fowler addresses the United Nations General Assembly next Thursday. He will present this very plan then, live and in color. I am authorized to extend your government an invitation to the Vatican to negotiate the treaty formally.”

The Prince was sufficiently surprised by that that he lapsed into an Americanism: “Do you really think you can bring this off?”

“Your Highness, we’re going to give it one hell of a try.”

Ali rose and walked to his desk. There he lifted a phone, pushed a button and spoke rapidly and, to Ryan, incomprehensibly. Jack had a sudden, giddy moment of whimsy. The Arabic language, as with the Hebrew, went from right to left instead of left to right, and Ryan wondered how one’s brain dealt with that.

Son of a BITCH, Jack thought to himself. *This just might work!*

Ali replaced the phone and turned to his visitor. “I think it is time for us to see His Majesty.”

“That fast?”

“One advantage to our form of government is that when one government minister wishes access to another, it is merely a matter of calling a cousin or an uncle. We are a family business. I trust that your President is a man of his word.”

“The UN speech is already written. I’ve seen it. He expects to take heat from the Israeli lobby at home. He’s ready for that.”

“I’ve seen them in action, Dr. Ryan. Even when we were fighting for our lives alongside American soldiers, they denied us weapons we needed for our own security. Do you think that will change?”

“Soviet communism is at an end. The Warsaw Pact is at an end. So many things that shaped the world I grew up in are gone, and gone forever. It’s time to get rid of the rest of the turmoil in the world. You ask if we can do it—why not? Sir, the only constant factor in human existence is change.” Jack knew that he was being outrageously confident, and wondered how Scott Adler was doing in Jerusalem. Adler wasn’t a screamer, but he knew how to lay down the word. That hadn’t been done with the Israelis for a long enough time that Jack didn’t know when it had last been—or ever been—tried. But the

President *was* committed to this. If the Israelis tried to stop it, they might just find out how lonely the world was.

"You forgot God, Dr. Ryan."

Jack smiled. "No, Your Highness. That's the point, isn't it?"

Prince Ali wanted to smile, but didn't. It wasn't time yet. He pointed to the door. "Our car is waiting."

At the New Cumberland Army Depot in Pennsylvania, the storage facility for standards and flags dating back to Revolutionary times, a brigadier general and a professional antiquarian laid flat on a table the dusty regimental colors once carried by the 10th United States Cavalry. The General wondered if some of the grit on the standard was left over from Colonel Benjamin Henry Grierson's campaign against the Apaches. This standard would go to the regiment. It wouldn't see much use. Maybe once a year it would be taken out, but from this pattern a new one would be made. That this was happening at all was a curiosity. In an age of cutbacks, a new unit was forming. Not that the General objected. The 10th had a distinguished history, but had never gotten its fair shake from Hollywood, for example, which had made but a single movie about the Black regiments. For the 10th was one of four Black units—the 9th and 10th Cavalry, the 24th and 25th Infantry—each of which had played its part in settling the West. This regimental standard dated back to 1866. Its centerpiece was a buffalo, since the Indians who'd fought the troopers of the 10th thought their hair similar to the rough coat of an American bison. Black soldiers had been there at the defeat of Geronimo, and saved Teddy Roosevelt's ass on the charge up San Juan Hill, the General knew. It was about time that they got a little official recognition, and if the President had ordered it for political reasons, so what? The 10th had an honorable history, politics notwithstanding.

"Take a week," the civilian said. "I'll do this one personally. God, I wonder what Grierson would have thought of the TO & E for the Buffalos today!"

"It is substantial," the General allowed. He'd commanded the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment a few years earlier. The Black Horse Cav was still in Germany, though he wondered how much longer that would last. But the historian was right. With 129 tanks, 228 armored personnel carriers, 24 self-propelled guns, 83 helicopters, and 5,000 troopers, a modern Armored Cavalry Regiment was in fact a reinforced brigade, fast-moving and very hard-hitting.

"Where are they going to be based?"

"The regiment will form up at Fort Stewart. After that, I'm not sure. Maybe it'll be the round-out for 18th Airborne Corps."

"Paint them brown, then?"

"Probably. The regiment knows about deserts, doesn't it?" The General felt the standard. Yeah, there was still grit in the fabric, from Texas, and New Mexico, and Arizona. He wondered if the troopers who had followed this standard knew that their outfit was being born anew. Maybe so.

6

MANEUVERS

The Navy's change-of-command ceremony, little changed since the time of John Paul Jones, concluded on schedule at 11:24. It had been held two weeks earlier than expected, so that the departing skipper could more quickly assume the Pentagon duty that he would just as happily have avoided. Captain Jim Rosselli had brought USS *Maine* through the final eighteen months of her construction at General Dynamics' Electric Boat Division at Groton, Connecticut, through the launching and final outfitting, through builder's trials and acceptance trials, through commissioning, through shakedown and post-shakedown availability, through a day of practice missile shoots out of Port Canaveral, and through the Panama Canal for her trip to the missile-submarine base at Bangor, Washington. His last job had been to take the boat —*Maine* was huge, but in U.S. Navy parlance still a "boat"—on her first deterrence patrol into the Gulf of Alaska. That was over now, and, four days after returning his boat to port, he ended his association with the boat by turning her over to his relief, Captain Harry Ricks. It was slightly more complicated than that, of course. Missile submarines since the first, USS *George Washington* —long since converted to razor blades and other useful consumer items—had two complete crews, called "Blue" and "Gold." The idea was simply that the missile boats could spend more time at sea if the crews switched off duty. Though expensive, it worked very effectively. The "Ohio" class of fleet ballistic missile submarines was averaging over two-thirds of their time at sea, with continuing seventy-day patrols divided by twenty-five-day refit periods. Rosselli had, therefore, really given Ricks half of the command of the massive submarine, and full command of the "Gold" crew, which was now vacating the ship for the "Blue" crew, which would conduct the next patrol.

The ceremony concluded, Rosselli retired one last time to his stateroom. As the "plankowner" commanding officer, certain special souvenirs were his for the asking. A piece of teak decking material drilled for cribbage pegs was part of the tradition. That the skipper had never played cribbage in his life, after a single failed attempt, was beside the point. These traditions were not quite as old as Captain John Paul Jones, but were just as firm. His ball-cap, with *C.O.* and *Plankowner* emblazoned in gold on the back, would form part of his permanent collection, as would a ship's plaque, a photo signed by the entire crew, and various gifts from Electric Boat.

"God, I've wanted one of these!" Ricks said.

"They are pretty nice, Captain," Rosselli replied with a wistful smile. It really wasn't fair. Only the best of officers got to do what he'd done, of course.

He'd had command of a fast-attack, USS *Honolulu*, whose reputation as a hot and lucky boat he had continued for his two-and-a-half-year tour as CO. Then he'd been given the Gold crew of USS *Tecumseh*, where he'd excelled yet again. This third—and most unusual—command tour had been necessarily abbreviated. His job had been to oversee the shipwrights at Groton, then get the boat "dialed in" for her first real team of COs. He'd only had the boat under way for—what? A hundred days, something like that. Just enough to get to know the girl.

"You're not making it any easier on yourself, Rosey," said the squadron commander, Captain (now a Rear Admiral Selectee) Bart Mancuso.

Rosselli tried to put humor in his voice. "Hey, Bart, one wop to another, show some pity, eh?"

"I hear ya', *paisan.* It isn't supposed to be easy."

Rosselli turned to Ricks. "Best crew I ever had. The XO is going to be one hell of a skipper when the time comes. The boat is fuckin' perfect. Everything works. The refit's a waste of time. The only thing on the gripe sheet that matters is the wiring in the wardroom pantry. Some yard electrician crossed a few cables, and the breakers aren't labeled right. Regs say we have to reset the wiring instead of relabeling the breakers. And that's it. *Nothing* else."

"Power plant?"

"Four-point-oh, people and equipment. You've seen the results of the ORSE, right?"

"Um-hum." Ricks nodded. The ship had scored almost perfectly on the Operational Reactor Safeguards Examination, which was the Holy Grail of the nuclear community.

"Sonar?"

"The equipment is the best in the fleet—we got the new upgrade before it became standard. I worked a deal with the guys at SubGru Two right before we commissioned. One of your old guys, Bart. Dr. Ron Jones. He's with Sonosystems, even rode for a week with us. The ray-path analyzer is like magic. Torpedo department needs a little work, but not much. I figure they can knock another thirty seconds off their average time. A young chief—matter of fact that department's pretty young across the board. Hasn't quite settled in yet, but they're not much slower than the guys I had on *Tecumseh,* and if I'd had a little more time I could have gotten them completely worked up."

"No sweat," Ricks observed comfortably. "Hell, Jim, I have to have something to do. How many contacts did you have on the patrol?"

"One Akula-class, the *Admiral Lunin.* Picked her up three times, never closer than sixty thousand yards. If he got a sniff of us—hell, he didn't. Never turned toward us. We held him for sixteen hours once. Had really good water, and, well—" Rosselli smiled—"I decided to trail him for a while, way the hell away, of course."

"Once a fast-attack, always a fast-attack," Ricks said with a grin. He was a lifelong boomer driver, and the idea did not appeal to him, but what the hell, it wasn't a time to criticize.

"Nice profile you did on him," Mancuso put in, to show that he wasn't the least offended by Rosselli's action. "Pretty good boat, isn't it?"

"The Akula? Too good. But not good enough," Rosselli said. "I wouldn't start worrying until we find a way to track these mothers. I tried when I had *Honolulu*, against Richie Seitz on *Alabama*. He greased my ass for me. Only time that ever happened. I figure God could find an Ohio, but He'll have to have a good day."

Rosselli wasn't kidding. The Ohio-class of missile submarines were more than just quiet. Their level of radiated noise was actually lower than the background noise level of the ocean, like a whisper at a rock concert. To hear them you had to get incredibly close, but to prevent that from happening, the Ohios had the best sonar systems yet devised. The Navy had done everything right with this class. The original contract had specified a maximum speed of 26—7 knots. The first Ohio had made 28.5. On builder's trials, *Maine* had made 29.1 due to a new and very slick super-polymer paint. The seven-bladed propeller enabled almost twenty knots without a hint of noisy cavitation, and the reactor plant operated in almost all regimes on natural convection circulation, obviating the need for potentially noisy feed-pumps. The Navy's mania for noise-control had reached its pinnacle in this class of submarine. Even the blades of the galley mixer were coated with vinyl to prevent metal-to-metal clatter. What Rolls-Royce was to cars, Ohio was to submarines.

Rosselli turned. "Well, she's yours now, Harry."

"You couldn't have set her up much better, Jim. Come on, the O-Club's open, and I'll buy you a beer."

"Yeah," the former commanding officer observed with a husky voice. On the way out, members of the crew lined up to shake his hand one last time. By the time Rosselli got to the ladder, there were tears in his eyes. On the walk down the brow, they were running down his cheeks. Mancuso understood. It had been the same for him. A good CO developed a genuine love for his boat and his men, and for Rosselli it was worse still. He'd had his extra shots at command, more than even he had gotten, and that made the last one all the harder to leave. Like Mancuso, all Rosselli could look forward to now was a staff job, commanding a desk, nevermore to hold that godlike post of commanding officer of a ship of war. He'd be able to ride the boats, of course, to rate skippers, check ideas and tactics, but henceforth he'd be a tolerated visitor, never really welcome aboard. Most uncomfortable of all, he'd have to avoid revisiting his former command, lest the crew compare his command style to that of their new CO, possibly undermining the new man's command authority. It was, Mancuso reflected, like it must have been for immigrants, as it had been for his own ancestors, looking back one last time at Italy, knowing that they would never return to it, that their lives were irrevocably changed.

The three men climbed into Mancuso's staff car for the ride to the reception at the Officers Club. Rosselli set his souvenirs on the floor and extracted a handkerchief to wipe his eyes. *It isn't fair, just isn't fair. To leave command of a ship like this one to be a goddamned telephone operator at the NMCC. Joint service billet, my ass!* Rosselli blew his nose and contemplated the shore duty that the remainder of his active career held.

Mancuso looked away in quiet respect.

Ricks just shook his head. No need to get all that emotional about it. He was already making mental notes. The Torpedo Department wasn't up to speed

yet, eh? Well, he'd do something about *that!* And the XO was supposed to be super-hot. Hmph. What skipper ever failed to praise his XO? If this guy thought he was ready for command, that meant an XO who might be a little *too* ready, and might not be totally supportive, might be feeling his oats. Ricks had had one of those already. Such XOs often needed some subtle reminders of who was boss. Ricks knew how to do that. The good news, the most important news, of course, was about the power plant. Ricks was a product of the Nuclear Navy's obsession with the nuclear power plant. It was something the Squadron Commander, Mancuso, was overly casual about, Ricks judged. The same was probably true of Rosselli. So, they'd passed their ORSE—so what? On *his* boats, the engineering crew had to be ready for an ORSE every goddamned day. One problem with these Ohios was that the systems worked so well people took things casually. That would be doubly true after maxing their ORSE. Complacency was the harbinger of disaster. And these fast-attack guys and their dumb mentality! *Tracking* an Akula, for God's sake! Even from sixty-K yards, what did this lunatic think he was doing?

Ricks' motto was that of the boomer community: WE HIDE WITH PRIDE (the less polite version was CHICKEN OF THE SEA). If they can't find you, they can't hurt you. Boomers weren't supposed to go around looking for trouble. Their job was to run from it. Missile submarines weren't actually combatant ships at all. That Mancuso didn't reprimand Rosselli on the spot was amazing to Ricks.

He had to consider that, however. Mancuso hadn't reprimanded Rosselli. He'd commended him.

Mancuso was his squadron commander, and did have those two Distinguished Service Medals. It wasn't exactly fair that Ricks was a boomer type stuck working for a fast-attack puke, but there it was. A charger himself, he was clearly a man who wanted aggressive skippers. And Mancuso was the guy who'd be doing his fitness reports. That was the central truth in the equation, wasn't it? Ricks was an ambitious man. He wanted command of a squadron, followed by a nice Pentagon tour, then he'd get his star as a Rear Admiral (Lower Half), then command of a Submarine Group—the one at Pearl would be nice; he liked Hawaii—after which he'd be very well suited for yet another Pentagon tour. Ricks was a man who'd mapped out his career path while still a lieutenant. So long as he did everything exactly by The Book, more exactly than anyone else, he'd stick to that path.

He hadn't quite planned on working for a fast-attack type, though. He'd have to adapt. Well, he knew how to do that. If that Akula showed up on his next patrol, he'd do what Rosselli had done—but better, of course. He had to. Mancuso would expect it, and Ricks knew that he was in direct competition with thirteen other SSBN COs. To get that squadron command, he had to be the best of fourteen. To be the best, he had to do things that would impress the squadron commander. Okay, so to keep his career path as straight as it had been for twenty years, he had to do a few new and different things. Ricks would have preferred not to, but career came first, didn't it? He knew that he was destined to have an Admiral's flag in the corner of his Pentagon office someday—someday soon. He'd make the adjustment. With an Admiral's flag came a staff, and a driver, and his own parking place in the acres of Pentagon

blacktop, and further career-enhancing jobs that might, if he were very lucky, culminate in the E-Ring office of the CNO—better yet, Director of Naval Reactors, which was technically junior to the CNO, but carried with it eight full years in place. He knew himself better suited for that job, which was the one that set policy for the entire nuclear community. DNR wrote The Book. Everything he had to do was set forth in The Book. As the Bible was the path to salvation for Christian and Jew, The Book was the path to flag rank. Ricks knew The Book. Ricks was a brilliant engineer.

J. Robert Fowler was human after all, Ryan told himself. The conference was held upstairs, on the bedroom level of the White House, because the air conditioning in the West Wing was down for repairs, and the sun blasting through the windows of the Oval Office made that room uninhabitable. Instead they were using an upstairs sitting room, the one often delegated for the buffet line at those "informal" White House dinners that the President liked to have for "intimate" groups of fifty or so. The antique chairs were grouped around a largish dinner table in a room whose walls were decorated with a mural mélange of historical scenes. Moreover, it was a shirtsleeve environment. Fowler was a man uncomfortable with the trappings of his office. Once a federal prosecutor, an attorney who had not once defended a criminal before entering politics with both feet and never looking back, he'd grown up in an informal working environment and seemed to prefer a tie loose in his collar and sleeves rolled up to the elbow. It seemed so very odd to Ryan, who knew the President also to be priggish and stiff in his relationships with subordinates. Odder still, the President had walked into the room carrying the sports page from the *Baltimore Sun*, which he preferred to the local papers' sports coverage. President Fowler was a rabid football fan. The first NFL pre-season games were already history, and he was handicapping the teams for the coming season. The DDCI shrugged, leaving his coat on. There was as much complexity in this man as any other, Jack knew, and complexities were not predictable.

The President had discreetly cleared his calendar for this afternoon conference. Sitting at the head of the table, and directly under an air-conditioning vent, Fowler actually smiled a little as his guests took their places. At his left was G. Dennis Bunker, Secretary of Defense. Former CEO of Aerospace, Inc., Bunker was a former USAF fighter pilot who'd flown 100 missions in the early days of Vietnam, then left the service to found a company he'd ultimately built into a multibillion-dollar empire that sprawled across southern California. He'd sold that and all his other commercial holdings to take this job, keeping only one enterprise under his control—the San Diego Chargers. That retention had been the subject of considerable joshing during his confirmation hearings, and there was light-hearted speculation that Fowler liked Bunker mainly for his SecDef's love of football. Bunker was a rarity in the Fowler Administration, as close to a hawk as anyone here, a knowledgeable player in the defense area whose lectures to men in uniform were listened to. Though he'd left the Air Force as a captain, he'd left with three Distinguished Flying Crosses earned driving his F-105 fighter-bomber "downtown" into the environs of Hanoi. Dennis Bunker had

seen the elephant. He could talk tactics with captains and strategy with generals. Both the uniforms and the politicians respected the SecDef, and that was rare.

Next to Bunker was Brent Talbot, Secretary of State. A former professor of political science at Northwestern University, Talbot was a longtime friend and ally of the President. Seventy years old, with regal white hair over a pale, intelligent face, Talbot was less an academic than an old-fashioned gentleman, albeit one with a killer instinct. After years of sitting on PFIAB—the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board—and countless other commissions, he was in a place where he could make his impact felt. The archetypical outside-insider, he'd finally picked a winning horse in Fowler. He was also a man with genuine vision. The changes in the East-West relationship signaled to the SecState a historic opportunity to change the face of the world, and he wanted his name on the changes.

On the President's right was his Chief of Staff, Arnold van Damm. This was, after all, a political assembly, and political advice was of paramount import. Next to van Damm was Elizabeth Elliot, the new National Security Advisor. She looked rather severe today, Ryan noted, dressed in an expensive suit with a wispy cravat knotted around her pretty, thin neck. Beside her was Marcus Cabot, Director of Central Intelligence, and Ryan's immediate boss.

The second-rank people were farther away from the seat of power, of course. Ryan and Adler were at the far end of the table, both to separate them from the President and to allow their fuller visibility to the senior members of the conference when they began speaking.

"This your year, Dennis?" the President asked the SecDef.

"You bet it is!" Bunker said. "I've waited long enough, but with those two new linebackers, this year we're going to Denver."

"Then you'll meet the Vikings there," Talbot observed. "Dennis, you had the first draft pick, why didn't you take Tony Wills?"

"I have three good running backs. I needed linebackers, and that kid from Alabama is the best I've ever seen."

"You'll regret it," the Secretary of State pronounced. Tony Wills had been drafted from Northwestern. An academic All-American, Rhodes Scholar, winner of the Heisman Trophy, and the kid who had almost single-handedly resurrected Northwestern as a football school, Wills had been Talbot's prize student. By all accounts an exceptional young man, people were already talking about his future in politics. Ryan thought that premature, even in America's changing political landscape. "He'll kick your butt, third game of the season. And then again in the Super Bowl, if your team makes it that far, which I doubt, Dennis."

"We'll see," Bunker snorted.

The President laughed as he arranged his papers. Liz Elliot tried and failed to hide her disapproval, Jack noted from twenty feet away. Her papers were already arranged, her pen in its place to make notes, and her face impatient at the locker-room talk at her end of the table. Well, she had the job she'd angled for, even if it had taken a death—Ryan had heard the details by now—to get it for her.

"I think we'll call the meeting to order," President Fowler said. Noise in the

room stopped cold. “Mr. Adler, could you fill us in on what happened on your trip?”

“Thank you, Mr. President. I would say that most of the pieces are in place. The Vatican agrees to the terms of our proposal unconditionally and is ready to host the negotiations at any time.”

“How did Israel react?” Liz Elliot asked, to show that she was on top of things.

“Could have been better,” Adler said neutrally. “They’ll come, but I expect serious resistance.”

“How serious?”

“Anything they can do to avoid being nailed down, they’ll do. They are very uncomfortable with this idea.”

“This was hardly unexpected, Mr. President,” Talbot added.

“What about the Saudis?” Fowler asked Ryan.

“Sir, my read is that they’ll play. Prince Ali was very optimistic. We spent an hour with the King, and his reaction was cautious but positive. Their concern is that the Israelis won’t do it, no matter what pressure we put on them, and they are worried about being left hanging. Setting that aside for the moment, Mr. President, the Saudis appear quite willing to accept the plan as drafted, and to accept their participatory role in its implementation. They offered some modifications, which I outlined in my briefing sheet. As you can see, none of them are substantively troublesome. In fact, two of them look like genuine enhancements.”

“The Soviets?”

“Scott handled that,” Secretary Talbot replied. “They have signed off on the idea, but their read also is that Israel will not cooperate. President Narmonov cabled us day before yesterday that the plan is wholly compatible with his government’s policy. They are willing to underwrite the plan to the extent that they will restrict arms sales to the other nations in the region to cover defensive needs only.”

“Really?” Ryan blurted.

“That does clobber one of your predictions, doesn’t it?” DCI Cabot noted with a chuckle.

“How so?” the President asked.

“Mr. President, arms sales to that area are a major cash cow for the Sovs. For them to reduce those sales will cost them billions in hard-currency earnings that they really need.”

Ryan leaned back and whistled. “That is surprising.”

“They also want to have a few people at the negotiations. That seems fair enough. The arms-sales aspect of the treaty—if we get that far—will be set up as a side-bar codicil between America and the Soviets.”

Liz Elliot smiled at Ryan. She’d predicted that development.

“In return, the Soviets want some help on farm commodities, and a few trade credits,” Talbot added. “It’s cheap at the price. Soviet cooperation in this affair is hugely important to us, and the prestige associated with the treaty is important for them. It’s a very equitable deal for the both of us. Besides, we have all that wheat lying around and doing nothing.”

“So the only stumbling block is Israel?” Fowler asked the table. He was

answered with nods. “How serious?”

“Jack,” Cabot said, turning to his deputy, “how did Avi Ben Jakob react to things?”

“We had dinner the day before I flew to Saudi Arabia. He looked very unhappy. Exactly what he knew I do not know. I didn’t give him very much to warn his government with, and—”

“What does ‘not very much’ mean, Ryan?” Elliot snapped down the table.

“Nothing,” Ryan answered. “I told him to wait and see. Intelligence people don’t like that. I would speculate that he knew something was up, but not what.”

“The looks I got at the table over there were pretty surprised,” Adler said to back Ryan up. “They expected something, but what I gave them wasn’t it.”

The Secretary of State leaned forward. “Mr. President, Israel has lived for two generations under the fiction that they and they alone are responsible for their national security. It’s become almost a religious belief over there—and despite the fact that we give them vast amounts of arms and other grants every year, it is their government policy to live as though that idea were true. Their institutional fear is that once they mortgage their national security to the goodwill of others, they become vulnerable to the discontinuance of that goodwill.”

“You get tired of hearing that,” Liz Elliot observed coldly.

Maybe you wouldn’t if six million of your relatives got themselves turned into air pollution, Ryan thought to himself. *How the hell can we not be sensitive to memories of the Holocaust?*

“I think we can take it as given that a bilateral defense treaty between the United States and Israel will sail through the Senate,” Arnie van Damm said, speaking for the first time.

“How quickly can we deploy the necessary units to Israeli territory?” Fowler wanted to know.

“It would take roughly five weeks from the time you push the button, sir,” the SecDef replied. “The 10th Armored Cavalry Regiment is forming up right now. That’s essentially a heavy brigade force, and it’ll defeat—make that ‘destroy’—any armored division the Arabs could throw at it. To that we’ll add a Marine unit for show, and with the home-port deal at Haifa, we’ll almost always have a carrier battle-group in the Eastern Med. Toss in the F-16 wing from Sicily, and you’ve got a sizable force. The military will like it, too. It gives them a big play area to train in. We’ll use our base in the Negev the same way we use the National Training Center at Fort Irwin. The best way to keep that unit tight and ready is to train the hell out of it. It’ll be expensive to run it that way, of course, but—”

“But we’ll pay that price,” Fowler said, cutting Bunker off gently. “It’s more than worth the expenditure, and we won’t have any problems on the Hill keeping that funded, will we, Arnie?”

“Any congressman who bitches about this will have his career cut short,” the Chief of Staff said confidently.

“So it’s just a matter of eliminating Israeli opposition?” Fowler went on.

“Correct, Mr. President,” Talbot replied for the assembly.

“What’s the best way to do that?” This presidential question was rhetorical.

That answer was already delineated. The current Israeli government, like all which had preceded it for a decade, was a shaky coalition of disparate interests. The right kind of shove from Washington would bring it down. "What about the rest of the world?"

"The NATO countries will not be a problem. The rest of the U.N. will go along grudgingly," Elliot said before Talbot could speak. "So long as the Saudis play ball on this, the Islamic world will fall into line. If Israel resists, they'll be as alone as they have ever been."

"I don't like putting too much pressure on them," Ryan said.

"Dr. Ryan, that's not within your purview," Elliot said gently. A few heads moved slightly, and a few eyes narrowed, but no one rose to Jack's defense.

"That is true, Dr. Elliot," Ryan said after the awkward silence. "It is also true that too much pressure might have an effect opposite from what the President intends. Then there is a moral dimension that needs to be considered."

"Dr. Ryan, this is all about the moral dimension," the President said. "The moral dimension is simply put: there has been enough war there, and it is time to put an end to it. Our plan is a means of doing that."

Our plan, Ryan heard him say. Van Damm's eyes flickered for a moment, then went still. Jack realized that he was as alone here in this room as the President intended Israel to be. He looked down at his notes and kept his mouth shut. *Moral dimension, my ass!* Jack thought angrily. *This is about setting footprints in the sands of time, and about the political advantages of being seen as The Great Peacemaker.* But it wasn't a time for cynicism, and though the plan was no longer Ryan's, it was a worthy one.

"If we have to squeeze them, how do we go about it?" President Fowler asked lightly. "Nothing harsh, just to send a quiet and intelligible message."

"There's a major shipment of aircraft spares ready to go next week. They're replacing the radar systems on all their F-15 fighters," Secretary of Defense Bunker said. "There are other things, too, but that radar system is very important to them. It's brand-new. We're just installing it ourselves. The same is true for the F-16's new missile system. Their Air Force is their crown jewel. If we are forced to withhold that shipment for technical reasons, they'll get the signal loud and clear."

"Can it be done quietly?" Elliot asked.

"We can let them know that if they make noise, it won't help," van Damm said. "If the speech goes over well at the U.N., as it should, we might be able to obviate their congressional lobby."

"It might be preferable to sweeten the deal by allowing them to get more arms instead of crippling systems they already have." That was Ryan's last toss. Elliot slammed the door on the DDCI.

"We can't afford that."

The Chief of Staff agreed: "We can't possibly squeeze any more defense dollars out of the budget, even for Israel. The money just isn't there."

"I'd prefer to let them know ahead of time—if we really intend to squeeze them," the Secretary of State said.

Liz Elliot shook her head. "No. If they need to get the message, let them get it the hard way. They like to play tough. They ought to understand."

"Very well." The President made a last note on his pad. "We hold until the

speech next week. I change the speech to include an invitation to enter formal negotiations in Rome starting two weeks from yesterday. We let Israel know that they either play ball or face the consequences, and that we're not kidding this time. We send that message as Secretary Bunker suggested, and do that by surprise. Anything else?"

"Leaks?" van Damm said quietly.

"What about Israel?" Elliot asked Scott Adler.

"I told them that this was highly sensitive, but—"

"Brent, get on the phone to their Foreign Minister, and tell them that if they start making noise prior to the speech, there will be major consequences."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"And as far as this group is concerned, there will be no leaks." That presidential command was aimed at the far end of the table. "Adjourned."

Ryan took his papers and walked outside. Marcus Cabot joined him in the hall after a moment.

"You should know when to keep your mouth shut, Jack."

"Look, Director, if we press them too hard—"

"We'll get what we want."

"I think it's wrong, and I think it's dumb. We'll get what we want. Okay, so it takes a few extra months, we'll still get it. We don't have to threaten them."

"The President wants it done that way." Cabot ended the discussion by walking off.

"Yes, sir," Jack responded to thin air.

The rest of the people filed out. Talbot gave Ryan a wink and a nod. The rest, except for Adler, avoided eye contact. Adler came over after a whisper from his boss.

"Nice try, Jack. You almost got yourself fired a few minutes ago."

That surprised Ryan. Wasn't he supposed to say what he thought? "Look, Scott, if I'm not allowed to—"

"You're not allowed to cross the President, not this one. You do not have the rank to make adverse advice stick. Brent was ready to make that point, but you got in the way—and you lost, and you didn't leave him any room to maneuver. So next time keep it zipped, okay?"

"Thanks for your support," Jack answered with an edge on his voice.

"You blew it, Jack. You said the right thing the wrong way. Learn from that, will you?" Adler paused. "The Boss also says 'well done' for your work in Riyadh. If you'd just learn when to shut up, he says, you'd be a lot more effective."

"Okay, thanks." Adler was right, of course. Ryan knew it.

"Where you headed?"

"Home. I don't have anything left to do today at the office."

"Come along with us. Brent wants to talk to you. We'll have a light dinner at my shop." Adler led Jack to the elevator.

"Well?" the President asked, still back in the room.

"I'd say it looks awfully good," van Damm said. "Especially if we can bring this one in before the elections."

"Be nice to hold a few extra seats," Fowler agreed. The first two years of his administration had not been easy. Budget problems, added to an economy that

couldn't seem to decide what it wanted to do, had crippled his programs and saddled his tough managerial style with more question marks than exclamation points. The congressional elections in November would be the first real public response to their new President, and early poll numbers looked exceedingly iffy. It was the general way of things that the President's party lost seats in off-year elections, but this President could not afford to lose many. "Shame we have to pressure the Israelis, but . . ."

"Politically it'll be worth it—if we can bring the treaty off."

"We can," Elliot said, leaning against the doorframe. "If we make the time line, we can have the treaties out of the Senate by October 16th."

"You are one ambitious lady, Liz," Arnold noted. "Well, I have work to do. If you will excuse me, Mr. President?"

"See you tomorrow, Arnie."

Fowler walked over to the windows facing Pennsylvania Avenue. The blistering heat of early August rose in shimmers from the streets and sidewalks. Across the street in Lafayette Park, there remained two anti-nuclear-weapons signs. That garnered a smirk and a snort from Fowler. Didn't those dumb hippies know that nukes were a thing of the past? He turned.

"Join me for dinner, Elizabeth?"

Dr. Elliot smiled at her boss. "Love to, Bob."

The one good thing about his brother's involvement with drugs was that he had left nearly a hundred thousand dollars cash behind in a battered suitcase. Marvin Russell had taken that and driven to Minneapolis, where he'd bought presentable clothes, a decent set of luggage, and a ticket. One of the many things he'd learned in prison was the proper methodology for obtaining an alternate identity. He had three of them, complete with passports, that no cop knew anything about. He'd also learned about keeping a low profile. His clothes were presentable but not flashy. He purchased a standby ticket on a flight he expected to be underbooked, saving himself another few hundred dollars. That $91,545.00 had to last him a long time, and life got expensive where he was heading. Life also got very cheap, he knew, but not in terms of money. A warrior could face that, he decided early on.

After a layover in Frankfurt, he traveled on in a southerly direction. No fool, Russell had once participated in an international conference of sorts—he'd sacrificed a total identity-set for that trip, four years previously. At the conference he'd made a few contacts. Most important of all, he'd learned of contact procedures. The international terrorist community was a careful one. It had to be, with all the forces arrayed against it, and Russell did not know his luck—of the three contact numbers he remembered, one had long since been compromised and two Red Brigade members rolled quietly up with it. He used one of the others, and that number still worked. The contact had led him to a dinner meeting in Athens, where he'd been checked and cleared for further travel. Russell hurried back to his hotel—the local food did not agree with him—and sat down to wait for the phone to ring. To say he was nervous was an understatement. For all Marvin's caution, he knew that he was vulnerable. With not even a pocketknife to defend himself—traveling with weapons was far too dangerous—he was an easy mark for any cop who

carried a gun. What if this contact line had been burned? If it had, he'd be arrested here, or summoned into a carefully prepared ambush from which he'd be lucky to escape alive. European cops weren't as mindful of constitutional rights as the Americans—but that thought died a rapid and quiet death. How kindly had the FBI treated his brother?

Damn! One more Sioux warrior shot down like a dog. Not even time to sing his Death Song. They'd pay for that. But only if he lived long enough, Marvin Russell corrected himself.

He sat by the window, the lights behind him extinguished, watching the traffic, watching for approaching police, waiting for the phone to ring. How would he make them pay? Russell asked himself. He didn't know, and really didn't care. Just so there was something he could do. The money belt was tight around his waist. One drawback of his physical condition was that there wasn't much slack in his waistline to take up. But he couldn't risk losing his money—without it, where the hell would he be? Keeping track of money was a pain in the ass, wasn't it? Marks in Germany. Drachmas or douche bags or something else here. Fortunately, you got your airline tickets with bucks. He traveled American-flag carriers mainly for that reason, certainly not because he liked the sight of the Stars and Stripes on the tailfins of the aircraft. The phone rang. Russell lifted it.

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow, nine-thirty, be in front of the hotel, ready to travel. Understood?"

"Nine-thirty. Yes." It clicked off before he could say more.

"Okay," Russell said to himself. He rose and moved toward the bed. The door was double-locked and chained, and he had a chair propped under the knob. Marvin pondered that. If he were being set up, they'd bag him like a duck in autumn right in front of the hotel, or maybe they'd take him away by car and spring the trap away from civilians . . . that was more likely, he judged. But certainly they wouldn't go to all the trouble of setting up a rendezvous and then kick in the door here. Probably not. Hard to predict what cops would do, wasn't it? So he slept in his jeans and shirt, the money belt securely wrapped around his waist. After all, he still had thieves to worry about. . . .

The sun rose about as early here as it did at home. Russell awoke with the first pink-orange glow. On checking in he'd requested an east-facing room. He said his prayers to the sun and prepared himself for travel. He had breakfast sent up—it cost a few extra drachmas, but what the hell?—and packed what few things he'd removed from his suitcase. By nine he was thoroughly ready and thoroughly nervous. If it was going to happen, it would happen in thirty minutes. He could easily be dead before lunch, dead in a foreign land, distant from the spirits of his people. Would they even send his body back to the Dakotas? Probably not. He'd just vanish from the face of the earth. The actions he ascribed to policemen were the same ones he would himself have taken, but what would be good tactics for a warrior were something else to cops, weren't they? Russell paced the room, looking out the window at the cars and the street vendors. Any one of those people selling trinkets or Cokes to the tourists could so easily be a police officer. No, more than one, more like ten.

Cops didn't like fair fights, did they? They shot from ambush and attacked in gangs.

9:15. The numbers on the digital clock marched forward with a combination of sloth and alacrity that depended entirely on how often Russell turned to check them. It was time. He lifted his bags and left the room without a backward glance. It was a short walk to the elevator, which arrived quickly enough that it piqued Russell's paranoia yet again. A minute later he was in the lobby. A bellman offered to take his bags, but he declined the offer and made his way to the desk. The only thing left on his bill was breakfast, which he settled with his remaining local currency. He had a few minutes left over, and walked to the newsstand for a copy of anything that was in English. What was happening in the world? It was an odd moment of curiosity for Marvin, whose world was a constricted one of threats and responses and evasions. What was the world? he asked himself. It was what he could see at the time, little more than that, a bubble of space defined by what his senses reported to him. At home he could see distant horizons and a huge enveloping dome of sky. Here, reality was circumscribed by walls, and stretched a mere hundred feet from one horizon to another. He had a sudden attack of anxiety, knowing what it was to be a hunted animal, and struggled to fight it off. He checked his watch: 9:28. Time.

Russell walked outside to the cab stand, wondering what came next. He set his two bags down, looking about as casually as he could manage in the knowledge that guns might even now be aimed at his head. Would he die as John had died? A bullet in the head, no warning at all, not even the dignity an animal might have? That was no way to die, and the thought of it sickened him. Russell balled his hands into tight, powerful fists to control the trembling as a car approached. The driver was looking at him. This was it. He lifted his bags and walked to it.

"Mr. Drake?" It was the name under which Russell was currently traveling. The driver wasn't the one he'd met for dinner. Russell knew at once that he was dealing with pros, who compartmented everything. That was a good sign.

"That's me," Russell answered with a smile/grimace.

The driver got out and opened the trunk. Russell heaved the bags in, then walked to the passenger door and got in the front seat. If this were a trap, he could throttle the driver before he died. At least he'd accomplish that much.

Fifty meters away, Sergeant Spiridon Papanicolaou of the Hellenic National Police sat in an old Opel liveried as a taxi. Sitting there with an extravagant black mustache and munching on a breakfast roll, he looked like anything but a cop. He had a small automatic in the glove box, but like most European cops, he was not skilled in its use. The Nikon camera sitting in a clip holder under his seat was his only real weapon. His job was surveillance, actually working at the behest of the Ministry of Public Order. His memory for faces was photographic—the camera was for people lacking the talent of which he was justifiably proud. His method of operation was one that required great patience, but Papanicolaou had plenty of that. Whenever his superiors got wind of a possible terrorist operation in the Athens area, he prowled hotels and airports and docks. He wasn't the only such officer, but he was the best. He had a nose for it as his father had had a nose for where the fish were

running. And he hated terrorists. In fact, he hated all variety of criminals, but terrorists were the worst of the lot, and he chafed at his government's off again/on-again interest in running the murderous bastards out of his ancient and noble country. Currently the interest was on-again. A week earlier there had been a possible sighting report of someone from the PFLP near the Parthenon. Four men from his squad were at the airport. A few others were checking the cruise docks, but Papanicolaou liked to check the hotels. They had to stay somewhere. Never the best—they were too flashy. Never the worst—these bastards liked a modest degree of comfort. The middle sort, the comfortable family places on the secondary streets, with lots of college-age travelers whose rapid shuffling in and out made for difficulty in spotting one particular face. But Papanicolaou had his father's eyes. He could recognize a face from half a second's exposure at seventy meters.

And the driver of that blue Fiat was a "face." He couldn't remember if it had a name attached to it, but he remembered seeing the face somewhere. The "Unknown" file, probably, one of the hundreds of photographs in the files that came in from Interpol and the military-intelligence people whose lust for the blood of terrorists was even more frustrated by their government's policy. This was the country of Leonidas and Xenophon, Odysseus and Achilles. Greece—Hellas to the sergeant—was the home of epic warriors and the very birthplace of freedom and democracy, not a place for foreign scum to kill with impunity . . .

Who's the other one? Papanicolaou wondered. *Dresses like an American . . . odd features, though.* He raised the camera in one smooth motion, zoomed the lens to full magnification, and got off three rapid frames before putting it back down. The Fiat was moving . . . well, he'd see where it was going. The sergeant switched off his on-call light and headed out of the cab rank.

Russell settled back in the seat. He didn't bother with the seat belt. If he had to escape the car, he didn't want to be bothered. The driver was a good one, maneuvering in and out of traffic, which was lively here. He didn't say a word. That was fine with Russell, too. The American moved his head to the side and scanned forward, looking for a trap. His eyes flickered around the inside of the car. No obvious places to hide a weapon. No visible microphones or radio equipment. That didn't mean anything, but he looked anyway. Finally he pretended to relax and cocked his head in a direction from which he could look ahead and also behind by eyeing the right-side mirror. His hunter's instincts were taut and alert this morning. There was potential danger everywhere.

The driver took what seemed to be an aimless path. It was hard for Russell to be sure, of course. The streets of this city had predated chariots, much less automobiles, and later concessions made to wheeled vehicles had fallen short of making Athens a Los Angeles. Though the autos on the street were tiny ones, traffic seemed to be a constant, moving, anarchic logjam. He wanted to know where they were going, but there was no sense in asking. He would be unable to distinguish between a truthful answer and a lie—and even if he got a straight answer, it probably would not have meant anything to him. He was for better or worse committed to this course of action, Russell knew. It didn't make him feel any more comfortable, but to deny the truth of it was to lie to

himself, and Russell was not that sort. The best he could do was to stay alert. That he did.

The airport, Papanicolaou thought. That was certainly convenient. In addition to his squadmates, there were at least twenty other officers there, armed with pistols and sub-machine guns. That should be easy. Just move a few of the plain-clothes people in close while two heavily armed people in uniform strolled by, and take them down—he liked that American euphemism—quickly and cleanly. Off into a side room to see if they were what he thought, and if not—well, then his captain would fuss over them. Sorry, he'd say, but you fit a description we got from—whomever he might conveniently blame; maybe the French or Italians—and one cannot be too careful with international air travel. They would automatically upgrade whatever tickets the two people had to first-class ones. It almost always worked.

On the other hand, if that face was what Papanicolaou thought it was, well, then he'd have gotten his third terrorist of the year. Maybe even the fourth. Just because the other one dressed like an American didn't mean he had to be one. Four in just eight months—no, only seven months, the sergeant corrected himself. Not bad for one somewhat eccentric cop who liked to work alone. Papanicolaou allowed his car to close in slightly. He didn't want to lose these fish in traffic.

Russell counted a bunch of cabs. They had to cater to tourists mainly, or other people who didn't care to drive in the local traffic . . . *that's odd.* It took him a moment to figure why. Oh, sure, he thought, its dome light wasn't on. Only the driver. Most of the others had passengers, but even those without had their dome lights on. It must have been the on-duty light, he judged. But that one's was out. Russell's driver had it easy, taking the next right turn to head down toward what appeared to be something akin to a real highway. Most of the cabs failed to take the turn. Though Russell didn't know it, they were heading either toward museums or shopping areas. But the one with the light out followed them around the corner, fifty yards back.

"We're being followed," Marvin announced quietly. "You have a friend watching our back?"

"No." The driver's eyes immediately went up to the mirror. "Which one do you think it is?"

"I don't 'think,' sport. It's the taxi fifty yards back, right side, dirty-white, without the dome light on, I don't know the make of the car. He's made two turns with us. You should pay better attention," Russell added, wondering if this was the trap he feared. He figured he could kill the driver easily enough. A little guy with a skinny neck that he could wring as easily as he killed a mourning dove, yeah, it wouldn't be hard.

"Thank you. Yes, I should," the driver replied after identifying the cab. *And who might you be . . . ? We'll see.* He made another random turn. It followed.

"You are correct, my friend," the driver said thoughtfully. "How did you know?"

"I pay attention to things."

"So I see . . . this changes our plans somewhat." The driver's mind was racing. Unlike Russell, he knew that he hadn't been set up. Though he had been unable to establish his guest's bonafides, no intelligence or police officer

would have given him that warning. Well, probably not, he corrected himself. But there was one way to check that. He was also angry at the Greeks. One of his comrades had disappeared off the streets of Piraeus in April, to turn up in Britain a few days later. That friend was now in Parkhurst Prison on the Isle of Wight. They'd once been able to operate in relative impunity in Greece, most often using the country as a safe transit point. He knew that doing actual operations here had been a mistake— just having the country as a sally-port had been quite valuable enough, an advantage not to be squandered—but that didn't mitigate his anger at the Greek police.

"It may be necessary to do something about this."

Russell's eyes went back to the driver. "I don't have a weapon."

"I do. I would prefer not to use it. How strong are you?"

By way of answering, Russell reached out his left hand and squeezed the driver's right knee.

"You have made your point," the driver said with a level voice. "If you cripple me, I cannot drive." *Now, how do we do this . . . ?* "Have you killed before?"

"Yes," Russell lied. He hadn't ever personally killed a man, but he'd killed enough other things. "I can do that."

The driver nodded and increased speed on his way out of town. He had to find . . .

Papanicolaou frowned. They were not heading to the airport. Too bad. Good thing he hadn't called it in. Well. He allowed himself to lay back, shielding himself with other vehicles. The paint job on the Fiat made it easy to spot, and as traffic thinned out, he could take it a little more casually. Maybe they were going to a safe house. If so, he'd have to be very careful, but also if so, he'd have a valuable piece of information. Identifying a safe house was about the best thing he could accomplish. Then the muscle boys could move in, or the intelligence squad could stake it out, identifying more and more faces, then assaulting the place in such a way as to arrest three or even more of the bastards. There could be a decoration and promotion at the end of this surveillance. Again he thought of making a radio call, but—but what did he really know? He was letting his excitement get away with him, wasn't he? He had a probable identification on a face without a name. Might his eyes have deceived him? Might the face be something other than what he thought? A common criminal, perhaps?

Spiridon Papanicolaou grumbled a curse at fate and luck, his trained eyes locked on the car. They were entering an old part of Athens, with narrow streets. Not a fashionable area, it was a working-class neighborhood with narrow streets, mainly empty. Those with jobs were at them. Housewives were at the local shops. Children played in parks. Quite a few people were taking their holidays on the islands, and the streets were emptier than one might have expected. The Fiat slowed suddenly and turned right into one of many anonymous sidestreets.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

The car stopped briefly. Russell had already removed his jacket and tie, still wondering if this could be the final act of the trap, but he didn't really care

anymore. What would happen would happen. He flexed his hands as he walked back up the street.

Sergeant Spiridon Papanicolaou increased speed to approach the corner. If they were heading into this rabbit warren of narrow lanes, he could not maintain visual contact without getting closer. Well, if they identified him, he'd call for help. Police work was unpredictable, after all. As he approached the corner, he saw a man standing on the sidestreet, looking at a paper. Not either of the men he was shadowing. This one wasn't wearing a jacket, though his face was turned away, and the way he was standing there was like something in a movie. The sergeant smiled wryly at that—but the smile stopped at once.

As soon as Papanicolaou was fully onto the sidestreet, he saw the Fiat, no more than twenty meters away, and backing up rapidly toward him. The police officer stood on the brakes to stop his taxi, and started to think about reversing himself when an arm reached across his face. His hands came off the wheel to grab it, but the powerful hand gripped his chin, and another seized the back of his neck. His instinct to turn and see what was happening was answered by the way one hand wrenched his head to the left, and he saw the face of the American—but then he felt his vertebrae strain for a brief instant and snap with an audible sound that announced his death to Papanicolaou as surely and irrevocably as a bullet. Then he knew. The man did have odd features, like something else from a movie, like something . . .

Russell jumped out of the way and waved. The Fiat pulled forward again, then went into reverse and slammed hard into the taxi. The driver's head lolled forward atop its broken neck. Probably the man was dead already, Russell knew, but that wasn't a matter of concern. Yes, it was. He felt for a pulse, then made sure the neck was well and truly snapped—he worked it around to make sure the spine was severed, too—before moving to the Fiat. Russell smiled to himself as he got in. *Gee, that wasn't so hard . . .*

"He's dead. Let's get the hell out of here!"

"Are you sure?"

"I broke his neck like a toothpick. Yeah, he's dead, man. It was easy. Little pencil-neck of a guy."

"Like me, you mean?" The driver turned and grinned. He'd have to dump the car, of course, but the joy of their escape and the satisfaction of the killing was sufficient to the moment. And he had found a comrade, a worthy one. "Your name is?"

"Marvin."

"I am Ibrahim."

The President's speech was a triumph. The man did know how to deliver a good performance, Ryan told himself as the applause rippled across the General Assembly auditorium in New York. His gracious if rather cold smile thanked the assembled representatives of a hundred sixty or so countries. The cameras panned to the Israeli delegation, whose clapping was rather more perfunctory than that of the Arab states—there evidently hadn't been time to brief them. The Soviets outdid themselves, joining those who stood. Jack lifted the remote control and switched off the set before the ABC commentator could

summarize what the President had said. Ryan had a draft of the speech on his desk, and had made notes of his own. Moments earlier the invitations had been telexed by the Vatican to all of the concerned foreign ministries. All would come to Rome in ten days. The draft treaty was ready for them. Quiet, rapid moves by a handful of ambassadors and deputy-assistant-secretaries of state had informed other governments of what was in the offing, and uniform approval had come back. The Israelis knew about that. The proper back-channel leaks had been allowed to percolate in the desired direction. If they stonewalled—well, Bunker had put a hold on that shipment of aircraft parts, and the Israelis had been too shocked to react yet. More accurately, they'd been told not to react if they ever wanted to see the new radar systems. There were already rumbles from the Israeli lobby, which had its own sources throughout the U.S. government, and was making discreet calls to key members of Congress. But Fowler had briefed the congressional leadership two days earlier, and the initial read on the Fowler Plan was highly favorable. The chairman and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had promised passage of both draft treaties in under a week. It was going to happen, Jack thought to himself. It might really work. Certainly it wouldn't hurt anything. All the goodwill America had generated in its own adventure in the Persian Gulf was on the line. The Arabs would see this as a fundamental change in U.S. policy—which it was—America was slapping Israel down. Israel would see it the same way, but that wasn't really true. The peace would be guaranteed the only way that was possible, by American military and political power. The demise of East-West confrontation had made it possible for America, acting in accord with the other major powers, to dictate a just peace. *What we think a just peace is,* Ryan corrected himself. *God, I hope this works out.*

It was too late for that, of course. It had, after all, been his idea, the Fowler Plan. They had to break the cycle, to find a way out of the trap. America was the only country trusted by both sides, a fact won with American blood on the one hand and vast amounts of money on the other. America had to guarantee the peace, and the peace had to be founded on something looking recognizably like justice to all concerned. The equation was both simple and complex. The principles could be expressed in a single short paragraph. The details of execution would take a small book. The monetary cost—well, the enabling legislation would sail through Congress despite the size of it. Saudi Arabia was actually underwriting a quarter of the cost, a concession won only four days earlier by Secretary Talbot. In return, the Saudis would be buying yet another installment of high-tech arms, which had been handled by Dennis Bunker. Those two had really handled their end superbly, Ryan knew. Whatever the President's faults, his two most important cabinet members—two close friends—were the best such team he'd ever seen in government service. And they'd served their President and their country well in the past week.

"This is going to work," Jack said quietly to himself in the privacy of his office. "Maybe, maybe, maybe." He checked his watch. He'd have a read on that in about three hours.

Qati faced his television with a frown. *Was it possible?* History said no, but—

But the Saudis had broken off their supply of money, seduced by the help America had given them against Iraq. And his organization had bet on the wrong horse in that one. Already his people were feeling the financial pinch, though they'd been careful to invest what funds they had received over the previous generation. Their Swiss and other European bankers had ensured a steady flow of money, and the pinch was more psychological than real, but to the Arab mind the psychological was real, just as it was to any politically astute mind.

The key to it, Qati knew, was whether or not the Americans would put real pressure on the Zionists. They'd never done so. They'd allowed the Israelis to attack an American warship and kill American sailors—and forgiven them before the bleeding had stopped, before the last victim had died. When American military forces had to fight for every dollar of funds from their own Congress, that same spineless body of political whores fell over itself giving arms to the Jews. America had never pressured Israel in any meaningful way. That was the key to his existence, wasn't it? So long as there was no peace in the Middle East, he had a mission: the destruction of the Jewish State. Without that—

But the problems in the Middle East predated his birth. They might go away, but only when—

But it was a time for truth, Qati told himself, stretching tired and sore limbs. What prospects for destroying Israel did he have? Not from without. So long as America supported the Jews, and so long as the Arab states failed to unite. . . .

And the Russians? The cursed Russians had stood like begging dogs at the end of Fowler's speech.

It was possible. The thought was no less threatening to Qati than the first diagnosis of his cancer. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. What if the Americans did pressure the Jews? What if the Russians did support this absurd new plan? What if the Israelis gave in to the pressure? What if the Palestinians found the concessions demanded of Israel to their taste? It could work. The Zionist state might continue to exist. The Palestinians might find contentment in their new land. A *modus vivendi* might evolve into being.

It would mean that his life had been to no purpose. It would mean that all the things he had worked for, all the sacrifice and self-denial had gone for nothing. His freedom fighters had fought and died for a generation . . . for a cause that might be forever lost.

Betrayed by his fellow Arabs, whose money and political support had sustained his men.

Betrayed by the Russians, whose support and arms had sustained his movement from its birth.

Betrayed by the Americans—the most perversely of all. For taking away their enemy.

Betrayed by Israel—for making something akin to a fair peace. It wasn't fair at all, of course. So long as a single Zionist lived on Arab lands, there would be no fairness.

Might he be betrayed by the Palestinians also? What if they came to accept

this? Where would his dedicated fighters come from?

Betrayed by everyone?

No, God could not let that be. God was merciful, and gave his light to the faithful.

No, this could not really happen. It wasn't possible. Too many things had to fall into place for this hellish vision to become real. Had not there been so many peace plans for this region? So many visions. And where had they led? Even the Carter-Sadat-Begin talks in America, where the Americans had browbeaten their putative allies into serious concessions, had choked and died when Israel had utterly failed to consider an equitable settlement for the Palestinians. No, Qati was sure of that. Perhaps he could not depend on the Russians. Perhaps he could not depend on the Saudis. Certainly he could not depend on the Americans. But he could depend on Israel. The Jews were far too stupid, far too arrogant, far too shortsighted to see that their best hope for long-term security could only lie in an equitable peace. The irony struck him very hard, hard enough to garner a smile. It had to be God's plan, that his movement would be safeguarded by his bitterest enemies. Their obstinacy, their stiff Jewish necks would never bow to this. And if that was what was required for the war to continue, then the fact of it, and the irony of it, could only be a sign from God Himself that the cause guiding Qati and his men was indeed the Holy Cause they believed it to be.

"Never! Never will I bow to this infamy!" the Defense Minister shouted. It was a dramatic performance, even for him. He'd pounded the table hard enough to upset his water glass, and the puddle from it threatened to seep over the edge and into his lap. He studiously ignored it as his fierce blue eyes swept around the cabinet room.

"And what if Fowler is serious with his threats?"

"We'll break his career!" Defense said. "We can do that. We've jerked American politicians into line before!"

"More than we've been able to do here," the Foreign Minister observed *sotto voce* to his neighbor at the table.

"What was that?"

"I said it might not be possible in this case, Rafi." David Askenazi took a sip from his glass before going on. "Our ambassador in Washington tells me that his people on the Hill find real support for Fowler's plan. The Saudi Ambassador threw a major party last weekend for the congressional leadership. He performed well, our sources tell us. Right, Avi?"

"Correct, Minister," General Ben Jakob answered. His boss was out of the country at the moment, and he spoke for the Mossad. "The Saudis and the rest of the 'moderate' Gulf states are willing to end their declared state of war, to institute ministerial relations with us preparatory for full recognition at an unspecified later date, and to underwrite part of the American costs for stationing their troops and planes here—plus, I might add, picking up the entire cost of the peacekeeping force *and* the economic rehabilitation of our Palestinian friends."

"How do we say no to that?" the Foreign Minister inquired dryly. "Are you surprised at the support in the American Congress?"

"It's all a trick!" Defense insisted.

"If so, it's a damnably clever one," Ben Jakob said.

"You believe this twaddle, Avi? *You?"* Ben Jakob had been Rafi Mandel's best battalion commander in the Sinai, so many years before.

"I don't know, Rafi." The Deputy Director of the Mossad had never been more cognizant of his position as a deputy, and speaking in the name of his boss did not come easy.

"Your evaluation?" the Prime Minister asked gently. Someone at the table, he decided, had to be calm.

"The Americans are entirely sincere," Avi replied. "Their willingness to provide a physical guarantee—the mutual-defense treaty, and the stationing of troops—is genuine. From a strictly military point of—"

"I speak for the defense of Israel!" Mandel snarled.

Ben Jakob turned to stare his former commander down. "Rafi, you have always outranked me, but I've killed my share of enemies and you know it well." Avi paused for a moment to let that rest on the table. When he went on, his voice was quiet and measured and dispassionate as he allowed his reason to overcome emotions no less strong than Mandel's. "The American military units represent a serious commitment. We're talking about a twenty-five-percent increase in the striking power of our Air Force, and that tank unit is more powerful than our strongest brigade. Moreover, I do not see how that commitment can ever be withdrawn. For that to happen—our friends in America will never let it happen."

"We've been abandoned before!" Mandel pointed out coldly. "Our only defense is ourselves."

"Rafi," the Foreign Minister said. "My friend, where has that led us? You and I have fought together, too, and not merely in this room. Is there to be no end to it?"

"Better no treaty than a bad treaty!"

"I agree," the Prime Minister said. "But how bad will this treaty be?"

"We have all read the draft. I will propose some modest changes, but, my friends, I think it is time," the Foreign Minister said. "My advice to you is that we accept the Fowler Plan, with certain conditions." The Foreign Minister outlined them.

"Will the Americans grant those, Avi?"

"They'll complain about the cost, but our friends in their Congress will go along, whether President Fowler approves them or not. They will recognize our historic concessions, and they will wish to make us feel secure within our borders."

"Then I will resign!" Rafi Mandel shouted.

"No, Rafi, you will not," the Prime Minister said, growing a little tired of his histrionics. "If you resign, you cast yourself out. You want this seat someday, and you will never have it if you leave the cabinet now."

Mandel flushed crimson at that rebuke.

The Prime Minister looked around the room. "So what is the opinion of the government?"

Forty minutes later, Jack's phone rang. He lifted it, noting that it was his

most secure line, the direct one that bypassed Nancy Cummings.

"Ryan." He listened for a minute and made some notes. "Thanks."

Next the DDCI rose and walked into Nancy's office, then turned left through the door into Marcus Cabot's more capacious room. Cabot was lying on the couch in the far corner. Like Judge Arthur Moore, his predecessor, Cabot liked to smoke the occasional cigar. His shoes were off, and he was reading over a file with striped tape on the borders. Just one more secret file in a building full of them. The folder dropped, and Cabot, looking like a pink, chubby volcano, eyed Ryan as he approached.

"What is it, Jack?"

"Just got a call from our friend in Israel. They're coming to Rome, and the cabinet voted to accept the treaty terms, with a few modifications."

"What are they?" Ryan handed over his notes. Cabot scanned them. "You and Talbot were right."

"Yeah, and I should have let him play the card instead of me."

"Good call, you predicted all but one." Cabot rose and slipped into his black loafers before walking to his desk. Here he lifted a phone. "Tell the President I'll meet him at the White House when he gets back from New York. I want Talbot and Bunker there also. Tell him it's a go." He set the phone back in the cradle. He grinned around the cigar in his teeth, trying to look like George Patton, who hadn't smoked to the best of Ryan's knowledge. "How about that?"

"How long you figure to finalize it?"

"With the advance work you and Adler did, plus the finishing work from Talbot and Bunker . . . ? Hmm. Give it two weeks. Won't go as fast as it did with Carter at Camp David, because too many professional diplomats are involved, but in fourteen days the President takes his seven-four-seven to Rome to sign the documents."

"You want me to go down with you to the White House?"

"No, I'll handle it."

"Okay." That wasn't unexpected. Ryan left the room the same way he'd come in.

7

THE CITY OF GOD

The cameras were in place. Air Force C-5B Galaxy transports had loaded the newest state-of-the-art ground-station vans at Andrews Air Force Base and flown them to Leonardo da Vinci Airport. This was less for the signing ceremony—if they got that far, commentators worried—than what wags called the pre-game show. The fully digital improved-definition equipment just coming on line, the producers felt, would better depict the art collections that litter Vatican walls as trees line national parks. Local carpenters and specialists from New York and Atlanta had worked around the clock to build the special booths from which the network anchors would broadcast. All three network morning news shows were originating from the Vatican. CNN was also there in force, as were NHK, BBC, and nearly every other television network in the world, all fighting for space in the grand piazza that sprawls before the church begun in 1503 by Bramante, carried on by Raphael, Michelangelo, and Bernini. A brief but violent windstorm had carried spray from the central fountain into the *Deutsche Welle* anchor booth and shorted out a hundred thousand marks' worth of equipment. Vatican officials had finally protested that there would be no room for the people to witness the event—for which they prayed—but by then it had been far too late. Someone remembered that in Roman times this had been the site of the Circus Maximus, and it was generally agreed that this was the grandest circus of recent years. Except that the Roman "circus" was mainly for chariot races.

The TV people enjoyed their stay in Rome. The crews for *Today and Good Morning America* were able, for once, to rise indecently late instead of before the paperboy, to begin their broadcasts after lunch—!!!—and finish in time for afternoon shopping, followed by dinner at one of Rome's many fine restaurants. Their research people scoured reference books for historical remote locations like the Colosseum—correctly called the Flavian Amphitheater, one careful back-room type discovered—where people waxed rhapsodic on the Roman substitute for NFL football: combat, to the death, man against man, man against beast, beast against Christian, and various other permutations thereof. But it was the Forum that was the symbolic focus for their time in Rome. Here were the ruins of Rome's civic center, where Cicero and Scipio had walked and talked and met with supporters and opponents, the place to which visitors had come for centuries. Eternal Rome, mother of a vast empire, playing yet another role on the world stage. In its center was the Vatican, just a handful of acres, really, but a sovereign country nonetheless. "How many divisions has the Pope?" a TV anchorman quoted Stalin, then rambled into a discourse on how the Church and its values had outlasted

Marxism-Leninism to the extent that the Soviet Union had decided to open diplomatic relations with the Holy See, and had its own evening news, *Vremya,* originating from a booth less than fifty yards from his own.

Additional attention was given to the two other religions present in the negotiations. At the arrival ceremony, the Pope had recalled an incident from the earliest days of Islam: a commission of Catholic bishops had traveled to Arabia, essentially on an intelligence-gathering mission to see what Mohammed was up to. After a cordial first meeting, the senior Bishop had asked where he and his companions might celebrate mass. Mohammed had immediately offered the use of the mosque in which they stood. After all, the Prophet had observed, is this not a house consecrated to God? The Holy Father extended the same courtesy to the Israelis. In both cases there was some measure of discomfort to the more conservative churchmen present, but the Holy Father had swept that aside with a speech characteristically delivered in three languages.

"In the name of the God Whom we all know by different names, but Who is nevertheless the same God of all men, we offer our city to the service of men of goodwill. We share so many beliefs. We believe in a God of mercy and love. We believe in the spiritual nature of man. We believe in the paramount value of faith, and in the manifestation of that faith in charity and brotherhood To our brothers from distant lands, we give you greetings and we offer our prayers that your faith will find a way to the justice and the peace of God to which all of our faiths direct us."

"Wow," a morning-show anchor observed off-mike. "I'm beginning to think this circus is serious."

But coverage didn't stop there, of course. In the interest of fairness, balance, controversy, a proper understanding of events, and selling commercials, the TV coverage included the head of a Jewish paramilitary group who vociferously recalled Ferdinand and Isabella's expulsion of the Jews from Iberia, the czar's Black Hundreds, and, naturally, Hitler's Holocaust—which he emphasized further because of German reunification—and concluded that Jews were fools to trust anyone at all except the weapons in their own strong hands. From Qum, the Ayatolla Daryaei, the religious leader of Iran and long an enemy of everything Americans did, railed against all unbelievers, consigning each and every one to his personal version of hell, but translation made understanding difficult for American viewers, and his grandiloquent ranting was cut short. A self-styled "charismatic Christian" from the American South got the most air time. After first denouncing Roman Catholicism as the quintessential Anti-Christ, he repeated his renowned claim that God didn't even *hear* the prayers of the Jews, much less the infidel Muslims, whom he called Mohammedans as an unnecessary further insult.

But somehow those demagogues were ignored—more correctly, their views were. The TV networks received thousands of angry calls that such bigots were given air time at all. This delighted the TV executives, of course. It meant that people would return to the same show seeking further outrage. The American bigot immediately noticed a dip in his contribution envelopes. B'nai B'rith raced to condemn the off-the-reservation rabbi. The leader of the League of Islamic Nations, himself a distinguished cleric, denounced the radical imam

as a heretic against the words of the Prophet, whom he quoted at length to make his point. The TV networks provided all of the countervailing commentary also, thus showing balance enough to pacify some viewers and enrage others.

Within a day, one newspaper column noted that the thousands of correspondents attending the conference had taken to calling it the Peace Bowl, in recognition of the circular configuration of the Piazza San Pietro. The more observant realized that this was evidence of the strain on reporters with a story to cover but nothing to report. Security at the conference was hermetically tight. Those participants who came and went were carried about by military aircraft via military air bases. Reporters and cameramen with their long lenses were kept as far from the action as possible, and for the most part travel was accomplished in darkness. The Swiss Guards of the Vatican, outfitted though they were in Renaissance jump suits, let not a mouse pass by their lines, and perversely when something significant did happen—the Swiss Defense Minister discreetly entered a remote doorway—no one noticed.

Polling information in numerous countries showed uniform hope that this would be the one. A world tired of discord and riding a euphoric wave of relief at recent changes in East-West relations somehow sensed that it was. Commentators warned that there had been no harder issue in recent history, but people the world over prayed in a hundred languages and a million churches for an end to this last and most dangerous dispute on the planet. To their credit, the TV networks reported that, too.

Professional diplomats, some of them the most certified of cynics who hadn't seen the inside of a church since childhood, felt the weight of such pressure as they had never known. Sketchy reports from Vatican custodial staffers spoke of solitary midnight walks down the nave of Saint Peter's, strolls along outside balconies on clear, starlit nights, long talks of some participants with the Holy Father. But nothing else. The highly paid TV anchors stared at one another in awkward silences. Print journalists struggled and stole any good idea they could find just so that they could produce some copy. Not since Carter's marathon stint at Camp David had such weighty negotiations proceeded with so little reportage.

And the world held its breath.

The old man wore a red fez trimmed with white. Not many continued the characteristic manner of dress, but this one kept to the way of his ancestors. Life was hard for the Druse, and the one solace he had lay in the religion he'd observed for all of his sixty-six years.

The Druse are members of a Middle Eastern religious sect combining aspects of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, founded by Al-hakim bi'amrillahi, Caliph of Egypt in the 11th century, who had deemed himself the incarnation of God Himself. Living for the most part in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, they occupy a precarious niche in the societies of all three nations. Unlike Muslim Israelis, they are allowed to serve in the armed forces of the Jewish state, a fact that does not engender trust for the Syrian Druse in the government that rules over them. While some Druse have risen to command in the Syrian Army, it was well remembered that one such officer, a colonel commanding a regiment, had

been executed after the 1973 war for being forced off a strategic crossroads. Though in strictly military terms he'd fought bravely and well, and had been lucky to extract what remained of his command in good order, the loss of that crossroads had cost the Syrian Army a pair of tank brigades, and as a result the Colonel had been summarily executed . . . for being unlucky, and probably for being a Druse.

The old farmer didn't know all of the details behind that story, but knew enough. The Syrian Muslims had killed another Druse then, and more since. He accordingly trusted no one from the Syrian Army or government. But that did not mean that he had the least affection for Israel, either. In 1975 a long-barreled Israeli 175mm gun had scoured his area, searching for a Syrian ammunition depot, and the fragments from one stray round had mortally wounded his wife of forty years, adding loneliness to his surfeit of misery. What for Israel was a historical constant was for this simple farmer an immediate and deadly fact of life. Fate had decided that he should live between two armies, both of which regarded his physical existence as an annoying inconvenience. He was not a man who had ever asked much of life. He had a small holding of land which he farmed, a few sheep and goats, a simple house built of stones he'd carried from his rocky fields. All he wanted to do was live. It was not, he'd once thought, all that much to ask, but sixty-six turbulent years had proven him wrong and wrong again. He'd prayed for mercy from his God, and for justice, and for just a few comforts—he'd always known that wealth would never be his—so that his lot and that of his wife would be just a little easier. But that had never happened. Of the five children his wife had borne him, only one had survived into his teens, and that son had been conscripted into the Syrian Army in time for the 1973 war. His son had more luck than the entire family had known: when his BTR-60 personnel carrier had taken a hit from an Israeli tank, he'd been thrown out the top, losing only an eye and a hand in the process. Alive, but half-blinded, he'd married and given his father grandchildren as he lived a modestly successful life as a merchant and moneylender. Not much of a blessing, in contrast to what else had happened in his life, it seemed to the farmer the only joy he'd known.

The farmer grew his vegetables and grazed his few head of stock on his rocky patch close to the Syrian-Lebanese border. He didn't persevere, didn't really endure, and even survival was an overstatement of his existence. Life for the farmer was nothing more than a habit he could not break, an endless succession of increasingly weary days. When each spring his ewes produced new lambs, he prayed quietly that he'd not live to see them slaughtered—but he also resented the fact that these meek and foolish animals might outlast himself.

Another dawn. The farmer neither had nor needed an alarm clock. When the sky brightened, the bells on his sheep and goats started to clatter. His eyes opened, and he again became conscious of the pain in his limbs. He stretched in his bed, then rose slowly. In a few minutes he'd washed and scraped the gray stubble from his face, eaten his stale bread and strong, sweet coffee, and begun one more day of labor. The farmer did his gardening in the morning, before the heat of the day really took hold. He had a sizable garden, because

selling off its surplus in the local market provided cash for the few things that he counted as luxuries. Even that was a struggle. The work punished his arthritic limbs, and keeping his animals away from the tender shoots was one more curse in his life, but the sheep and goats could also be sold for cash, and without that money he would long since have starved. The truth of the matter was that he ate adequately from the sweat of his wrinkled brow, and had he not been so lonely, he could have eaten more. As it was, solitude had made him parsimonious. Even his gardening tools were old. He trudged out to the field, the sun still low in the sky, to destroy the weeds that every day sprang up anew among his vegetables. If only someone could train a goat, he thought, echoing words of his father and grandfather. A goat that would eat the weeds but not the plants, that would be something. But a goat was no more intelligent than a clod of dirt, except when it came to doing mischief. The three-hour effort of lifting the mattock and tearing up the weeds began in the same corner of the garden, and he worked his way up one row and down the next with a steady pace that belied his age and infirmity.

Clunk.

What was that? The farmer stood up straight and wiped some sweat away. Halfway through the morning labor, beginning to look forward to the rest that came with attending to the sheep . . . Not a stone. He used his tool to pull the dirt away from—oh, that.

People often wonder at the process. Farmers the world over have joked of it since farming first began, the way that farm fields produce rocks. Stone fences along New England lanes attest to the superficially mysterious process. Water did it. Water falling as rain seeps into the soil. In the winter the water freezes into ice, which expands as it becomes a solid. As it expands, it pushes up rather than down, because pushing up is easier. That action moves rocks in the soil to the surface, and so fields grow rocks, something especially true on the Golan region of Syria, whose soil is a geologically recent construct of volcanism, and whose winters, surprisingly to many, can grow cold and frosty.

But this one was not a rock.

It was metallic, a sandy brown color, he saw, pulling the dirt away. Oh, yes, that day. The same day his son had been—

What do I do about this damned thing? the farmer asked himself. It was, of course, a bomb. He wasn't so foolish that he didn't know that much. How it had gotten here was a mystery, of course. He'd never seen any aircraft, Syrian or Israeli, drop bombs anywhere close to his farm, but that didn't matter. He could scarcely deny that it was here. To the farmer it might as well have been a rock, just a big brown rock, too big to dig out and carry off to the edge of the field, big enough to interrupt two rows of carrots. He didn't fear the thing. It had not gone off, after all, and that meant that it was broken. Proper bombs fell off airplanes and exploded when they hit the ground. This one had just dug its small crater, which he'd filled back up the next day, unmindful at the time of the injuries to his son.

Why couldn't it have just stayed two meters down, where it belonged? he asked himself. But that had never been the pattern of his life, had it? No, anything that could do him harm had found him, hadn't it? The farmer wondered why God had been so cruel to him. Had he not said all his prayers, followed all of

the strict rules of the Druse? What had he ever asked for? Whose sins was he expiating?

Well. There was no sense asking such questions at this late date. For the moment, he had work to do. He continued his weeding, standing on the exposed tip of the bomb to get a few, and worked his way down the row. His son would visit in a day or two, allowing the old man to see and beam at his grandchildren, the one unqualified joy of his life. He'd ask his son's advice. His son had been a soldier, and understood such things.

It was the sort of week that any government employee hated. Something important was happening in a different time zone. There was a six-hour differential, and it seemed very strange to Jack that he was being afflicted with jet lag without having traveled anywhere.

"So how's it going over there?" Clark asked from the driver's seat.

"Damned well." Jack flipped through the documents. "The Saudis and Israelis actually agreed on something yesterday. They both wanted to change something, and both actually proposed the same change." Jack chuckled at that. It had to be accidental, and if they'd known, both sides would have changed their positions.

"That must have embarrassed the hell out of somebody!" Clark laughed aloud, thinking the same as his boss. It was still dark, and the one good thing about the early days was that the roads were empty. "You really liked the Saudis, didn't you?"

"Ever been over there?"

"Aside from the war, you mean? Lots of times, Jack. I staged into Iran from there back in '79 and '80, spent a lot of time with the Saudis, learned the language."

"What did you think of the place?" Jack asked.

"I liked it there. Got to know one guy pretty well, a major in their army—spook really, like me. Not much field experience, but a lot of book learning. He was smart enough to know that he had a lot to learn, and he listened when I told him stuff. Got invited to his house a coupla-three times. He had two sons, nice little kids. One's flying fighters now. Funny how they treat their women, though. Sandy'd never go for it." Clark paused as he changed lanes to pass a truck. "Professionally speaking, they were cooperative as hell. Anyway, what I saw I sort of liked. They're different from us, but so what? World ain't full of Americans."

"What about the Israelis?" Jack asked as he closed the document case.

"I've worked with them once or twice—well, more than that, doc, mainly in Lebanon. Their intelligence guys are real pros, cocky, arrogant bastards, but the ones I met had a lot to be cocky about. Fortress mentality, like—us-and-them mentality, y'know? Also understandable." Clark turned. "That's the big hangup, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Weaning them away from that. It can't be easy."

"It isn't. I wish they'd wake up to the way the world is now," Ryan growled.

"Doc, you have to understand. They all think like front-line grunts. What do you expect? Hell, man, their whole country is like a free-fire zone for the other

side. They have the same way of thinking that us line animals had in 'Nam. There are two kinds of people—your people and everybody else." John Clark shook his head. "You know how many times I've tried to explain that to kids at the Farm? Basic survival mentality. The Israelis think that way 'cause they can't think any other way. The Nazis killed millions of Jews and we didn't do dick about it—well, okay, maybe we couldn't have done anything 'cause of the way things were at the time. Then again, I wonder if Hitler was all that hard a target if we woulda ever got serious about doing his ass.

"Anyway, I agree with you that they have to look beyond all that, but you gotta remember that we're asking one hell of a lot."

"Maybe you should have been along when I met with Avi," Jack observed with a yawn.

"General Ben Jakob? Supposed to be one tough, serious son of a bitch. His troops respect the man. That says a lot. Sorry I wasn't there, boss, but that two weeks of fishing was just about what I needed." Even line animals got vacations.

"I hear you, Mr. Clark."

"Hey, I gotta go down to Quantico this afternoon to requalify on pistol. If you don't mind me saying so, you look like you could use a little stress-relief, man. Why not come on down? I'll get a nice little Beretta for you to play with."

Jack thought about that. It sounded nice. In fact it sounded great. But. But he had too much work to do.

"No time, John."

"Aye aye, sir. You're not getting your exercise, you're drinking too goddamned much, and you look like shit, Dr. Ryan. That is my professional opinion."

About what Cathy told me last night, but Clark doesn't know just how bad it is. Jack stared out the window at the lights of houses whose government-worker occupants were just waking up.

"You're right. I have to do something about it, but today I just don't have the time."

"How about tomorrow at lunch we take a little run?"

"Lunch with the directorate chiefs," Jack evaded.

Clark shut up and concentrated on his driving. When would the poor, dumb bastard learn? Smart a guy as he was, he was letting the job eat him up.

The President awoke to find an unkempt mountain of blond hair on his chest and a thin, feminine arm flung across him. There were worse ways to awaken. He asked himself why he'd waited so long. She'd been clearly available to him for—God, for years. In her forties, but lithe and pretty, as much as any man could want, and the President was a man with a man's needs. His wife, Marian, had lingered for years, bravely fighting the MS that had ultimately stolen her life, but only after crushing what had once been a lively, charming, intelligent, bubbling personality, the light of his life, Fowler remembered. What personality he'd once had had largely been her creation, and it had died its own lingering death. A defense mechanism, he knew. All those endless months. He'd had to be strong for her, to provide for her the

stoic reserve of energy without which she would have died so much sooner. But doing that had made an automaton of Bob Fowler. There was only so much personality, so much strength, so much courage a man contained, and as Marian's life had drained away, so had his humanity ebbed with it. And perhaps more than that, Fowler admitted to himself.

The perverse thing was that it had made him a better politician. His best years as governor and his presidential campaign had displayed the calm, dispassionate, intellectual reason that the voters had wanted, much to the surprise of pundits and mavens or whatever you called the commentators who thought they knew so much but never tried to find out themselves. It had also helped that his predecessor had run an unaccountably dumb campaign, but Fowler figured he would have won anyway.

The victory, almost two Novembers ago, had left him the first President since—Cleveland, wasn't it?—without a wife. And also without much of a personality. The Technocrat President, the editorial writers called him. That he was by profession a lawyer didn't seem to matter to the news media. Once they had a simple label that all could agree on, they made it truth whether it was accurate or not. The Ice Man.

If only Marian could have lived to see this. She'd known he wasn't made of ice. There were those who remembered what Bob Fowler had once been like, a passionate trial lawyer, advocate of civil rights, the scourge of organized crime. The man who cleaned up Cleveland. Not for very long, of course, for all such victories, like those in politics, were transitory. He remembered the birth of each of his children, the pride of fatherhood, the love of his wife for him and their two children, the quiet dinners in candlelit restaurants. He remembered meeting Marian at a high-school football game, and she'd loved the spectacle as much as he ever had. Thirty years of marriage which had begun while both were still in college, the last three of which had been an ongoing nightmare as the disease that had manifested itself in her late thirties had in her late forties taken a dramatic and downward turn and, finally, a death too long in coming but too soon in arriving, by which time he'd been too exhausted even to shed tears. And then the years of aloneness.

Well, perhaps that was over.

Thank God for the Secret Service, Fowler thought. In the governor's mansion in Columbus it would quickly have gotten out. But not here. Outside his door was a pair of armed agents, and down the hall that Army warrant officer with the leather briefcase called the Football, an appellation which did not please the President, but there were things even he could not change. His National Security Advisor could, in any case, share his bed, and the White House staffers kept the secret. That, he thought, was rather remarkable.

Fowler looked down at his lover. Elizabeth was undeniably pretty. Her skin was pale because her work habits denied her sunlight, but he preferred women with pale, fair skin. The covers were askew because of the previous night's gyrations, and he could examine her back; the skin was so smooth and soft. He felt her relaxed breath on his chest, and the way her left arm wrapped around him. He ran a hand down her back and was rewarded by a *hmmmmm* and a slight increase in pressure from the sleeping hug she gave him.

There was a discreet knock at the door. The President pulled the covers up

and coughed. After a five-count, the door opened, and an agent came in with a coffee tray with some document printouts before withdrawing. Fowler knew he couldn't trust one of the ordinary staff *that* far, but the Secret Service really was the American version of the Praetorian Guard. The agent never betrayed his emotions, except for a good-morning nod at the Boss, as the agents referred to him. The devotion they gave him was almost slavish. Though well-educated men and women, they really did have a simple outlook on things, and Fowler knew that there was room in the world for such people. Someone, often someone quite skilled, had to carry out the decisions and orders of his or her superiors. The gun-toting agents were sworn to protect him, even to interpose their bodies between the President and any danger—the maneuver was called "catching the bullet"—and it amazed Fowler that such bright people could train themselves to do something so selflessly dumb. But it was to his benefit. As was their discretion. Well, the joke was that such good help was hard to come by. It was true: you had to be President to have that kind of servant.

Fowler reached for his coffee and poured a cup one-handed. He drank it black. After his first sip he used a remote-control to switch on a TV set. It was tuned to CNN, and the lead story—it was two in the afternoon there—was Rome, of course.

"Mmmmm." Elizabeth moved her head, and her hair swept across him. She always awoke slower than he. Fowler ran a finger down her spine, earning himself a last cuddle before her eyes opened. Her head came up with a violent start.

"Bob!"

"Yes?"

"Somebody's been here!" She pointed to the tray with the cups, and knew that Fowler hadn't fetched it himself.

"Coffee?"

"Bob!"

"Look, Elizabeth, the people outside the door know that you're here. What do you think we are hiding, and from whom are we hiding it? Hell, they probably have microphones in here." He'd never said that before. He didn't know for sure, and had studiously refrained from inquiring, but it was a logical thing to expect. The institutional paranoia of the Secret Service denied the agents the ability to trust Elizabeth or anyone else, except the President. Therefore, if she tried to kill him, they needed to know, so that the agents outside the door could burst in with their guns and save HAWK from his lover. There probably were microphones. Cameras, too? No, probably not cameras, but surely there had to be microphones. Fowler actually found that thought somewhat stimulating, a fact that editorial writers would never have believed. Not the Ice Man.

"My God!" Liz Elliot had never thought of that. She hoisted herself up, and her breasts dangled deliciously before his eyes. But Fowler was not that sort of morning person. Mornings were for work.

"I am the President, Elizabeth," Fowler pointed out as she disengaged herself. The idea of cameras occurred to her, too, and she quickly rearranged the bedclothes. Fowler smiled at the foolishness of it. "Coffee?" he asked

again.

Elizabeth Elliot almost giggled. Here she was, in the President's bed, naked as a jaybird, with armed guards outside the door. But Bob had *let someone in the room!* The man was incredible. Had he even covered her up? She could ask, but decided not to, fearing that he might display his twisted sense of humor, which was at its best when it was slightly cruel. And yet. Had she ever had so good a lover as he? The first time—it must have been years, but he was so patient, so . . . respectful. So easy to manage. Elliot smiled her secret smile to herself. He could be directed to do exactly what she wanted, when she wanted it, and do it consummately well, for he loved to give pleasure to a woman. Why? she wondered. Perhaps he wanted to be remembered. He was a politician, after all, and what they all craved was a few lines in history books. Well, he'd have those, one way or another. Every president did, even Grant and Harding were remembered, and with what was happening. . . . Even here he craved being remembered, and so he did what the woman wanted, if the woman had the wit to ask.

"Turn the sound up," Liz said. Fowler complied at once, she was gratified to see. So eager to please, even in this. So why the hell had he let some servant in with the coffee! There was no understanding this man. He was already reading over the faxes from Rome.

"My dear, this is going to work. I hope your bags are packed, Elizabeth."

"Oh?"

"The Saudis and the Israelis actually agreed on the big one last night . . . according to Brent—God, this is amazing! He had separate solo sessions with both sides, and both of them suggested the same thing . . . and to keep them from knowing it, he simply cycled back and forth as he said it would probably be acceptable . . . then confirmed it on another round trip! Ha!" Fowler slapped the back of his hand on the page. "Brent is really delivering for us. And that Ryan guy, too. He's a pretentious pain in the ass, but that idea of his —"

"Come on, Bob! It wasn't even original. Ryan just repeated some things other people have been saying for years. It was new to Arnie, but Arnie's interests stop at the White House fence. Giving credit to Ryan for this is like saying he managed a nice sunset for you."

"Maybe," the President allowed. He thought there was more to the DDCI's concept-proposal than that, but it wasn't worth upsetting Elizabeth about. "Ryan did do a nice job with the Saudis, remember?"

"He'd be a lot more effective if he'd just keep his mouth shut. Fine, he gave the Saudis a good brief. That's not exactly a great moment in American foreign policy, is it? Giving briefs is his job. Brent and Dennis are the guys who really pulled it together, not Ryan."

"I suppose not. You're right, I guess. Brent and Dennis are the ones who got the final commitments to the conference . . . Brent says three more days, maybe four." The President handed the faxes over. It was time for him to rise and prepare for a day's work, but before he did he ran a hand over a particular curve in the sheet, just to let her know that . . .

"Stop that!" Liz giggled to make it sound playful. He did as told, of course. To ease the blow, she leaned over for a kiss, which was delivered, bad breath

and all, just as requested.

"What gives?" a truck driver asked at the lumber terminal. Four enormous trailers sat in a line, away from the stacks of felled trees being prepared for shipment to Japan. "They were here last time, too."

"Going to Japan," the dispatcher observed, going over the trucker's manifest.

"So, what here ain't?"

"Something special. They're paying to have those logs kept that way, renting the trailers and everything. I hear the logs are being made into beams for a church or temple or something. Look close—they're chained together. Tied with a silk rope, too, but chains to make sure they stay together. Something about the tradition of the temple or something. Going to be a bitch of a rigging job to load them on the ship that way."

"Renting the trailers just to keep the logs in a special place? Chaining them together. Jeez! They got more money'n brains, don't they?"

"What do we care?" the dispatcher asked, tired of answering the same question every time a driver came through his office.

And they were sitting there. The idea, the dispatcher thought, was to let the logs season some. But whoever had thought that one up hadn't been thinking very clearly. This was the wettest summer on record in an area known for its precipitation, and the logs, which had been heavy with moisture when their parent tree had been felled, were merely soaking up more rain as it fell down across the yard. The stubs of branches trimmed off in the field hadn't helped much either. The rain just soaked into the exposed capillaries and proceeded into the trunk. The logs were probably heavier now than when they had been cut. Maybe they should throw a tarp over them, the dispatcher thought, but then they'd just be trapping the moisture in, and besides, the orders were to let them sit on the trailers. It was raining now. The yard was turning into a damned swamp, the mud churned by every passing truck and loading machine. Well, the Japanese probably had their own plans for seasoning and working the logs. Their orders precluded doing any real seasoning here, and it was their money. Even when they were loaded on the ship, they were supposed to be carried topside, the last items loaded on the MV *George McReady* for shipment across the Pacific. Sure as hell they'd get wet that way, too. If they got much wetter, the dispatcher thought, someone would have to be careful with them. If they got dropped into the river, they would scarcely float.

* * *

The farmer knew that his grandchildren were embarrassed by his backwardness. They resisted his hugs and kisses, probably complained a little before their father brought them out here, but he didn't mind. Children today lacked the respect of his generation. Perhaps that was a price for their greater opportunities. The cycle of the ages was breaking. His life had been little different from ten generations of ancestors, but his son was doing better

despite his injuries, and his children would do better still. The boys were proud of their father. If their schoolmates commented adversely on their Druse religion, the boys could point out that their father had fought and bled against the hated Israelis, had even killed a few of the Zionists. The Syrian government was not totally ungrateful to its wounded veterans. The farmer's son had his own modest business, and government officials did not harass him, as they might otherwise have done. He'd married late, which was unusual for the area. His wife was pretty enough, and respectful—she treated the farmer well, possibly in gratitude for the fact that he had never shown an interest in moving into her small household. The farmer showed great pride in his grandchildren, strong, healthy boys, headstrong and rebellious as boys should be. The farmer's son was similarly proud, and was prospering. He and his father walked outside after the noon meal. The son looked at the garden that he'd once weeded, and felt pangs of guilt that his father was still working there every day. But hadn't he offered to take his father in? Hadn't he offered to give his father a little money? All such offers had been rejected. His father didn't have much, but he did have his stubborn pride.

"The garden looks very healthy this year."

"The rain has been good," the farmer agreed. "There are many new lambs. It has not been a bad year. And you?"

"My best year. Father, I wish you did not have to work so hard."

"Ah!" A wave of the hand. "What other life have I known? This is my place."

The courage of the man, the son thought. And the old man did have courage. He endured. Despite everything. He had not been able to give his son much, but he had passed along his stoic courage. When he'd found himself lying stunned on the Golan Heights, twenty meters from the smoking wreckage of the personnel carrier, he could have just lain down to die, the son knew, his eye put out, and his left hand a bloody mess that doctors would later have to remove. He could have just lain there on the ground and died, but he'd known that giving up was not something his father would have done. And so he'd risen and walked six kilometers to a battalion aid station, arriving there still carrying his rifle and accepting treatment only after making his report. He had a decoration for that, and his battalion commander had made life a little easier for him, giving him some money to start his little shop, making sure that local officials knew that he was to be treated with respect. The Colonel had given him the money, but his father had given him the courage. If only he would now accept a little help.

"My son, I need your advice."

That was something new. "Certainly, Father."

"Come, I will show you." He led his son into the garden, where the carrots were. With his foot, he scraped dirt off the—

"Stop!" the son nearly screamed. He took his father by the arm and pulled him back. "My God—how long has that been there?"

"Since the day you were hurt," the farmer answered.

The son's right hand went to his eyepatch, and for one horrid moment the terror of the day came back to him. The blinding flash, flying through the air, his dead comrades screaming as they burned to death. The Israelis had done

that. One of their cannons had killed his mother, and now—this?

What was it? He commanded his father to stay put and walked back to see. He moved very carefully, as though he were traversing a minefield. His assignment in the Army had been with the combat engineers; though his unit had been committed to battle with the infantry, their job was supposed to have been laying a minefield. It was big, it looked like a thousand-kilo bomb. It had to be Israeli; he knew that from the color. He turned to look at his father.

"This has been here since then?"

"Yes. It made its own hole, and I filled it in. The frost must have brought it up. Is there danger? It is broken, no?"

"Father, these things never truly die. It is very dangerous. Big as it is, if it goes off it could destroy the house and you in it!"

The farmer gestured contempt for the thing. "If it wanted to explode, it would have done so when it fell."

"That is not true! You will listen to me on this. You will not come close to this cursed thing!"

"And what of my garden?" the farmer asked simply.

"I will find a way to have this removed. Then you can garden." The son considered that. It would be a problem. Not a small problem, either. The Syrian Army did not have a pool of skilled people to disarm unexploded bombs. Their method was to detonate them in place, which was eminently sensible, but his father would not long survive the destruction of his house. His wife would not easily tolerate having him in their own home, and he could not help his father rebuild, not with only one hand. The bomb had to be removed, but who would do that?

"You must promise me that you will not enter the garden!" the son announced sternly.

"As you say," the farmer replied. He had no intention of following his son's orders. "When can you have it removed?"

"I don't know. I need a few days to see what I can do."

The farmer nodded. Perhaps he'd follow his son's instructions after all, at least about not approaching this dead bomb. It had to be dead, of course, despite what his son had said. The farmer knew that much of fate. If the bomb had wanted to kill him, it would have happened by now. What other misfortune had avoided him?

The newsies finally got something to sink their teeth into the next day. Dimitrios Stavarkos, Patriarch of Constantinople, arrived by car—he refused to fly in helicopters—in broad daylight.

"A nun with a beard?" a cameraman asked over his hot mike as he zoomed in. The Swiss Guards at the door rendered honors, and Bishop O'Toole conducted the new visitor inside and out of view.

"Greek," the anchorman observed at once. "Greek Orthodox, must be a bishop or something. What's he doing here?" the anchor mused.

"What do we know about the Greek Orthodox Church?" his producer asked.

"They don't work for the Pope. They allow their priests to marry. The Israelis threw one of them in prison once for giving arms to the Arabs, I

think," someone else observed over the line.

"So the Greeks get along with the Arabs, but not the Pope? What about the Israelis?"

"Don't know," the producer admitted. "Might be a good idea to find out."

"So now there are four religious groups involved."

"Is the Vatican really involved or did they just offer this place as neutral ground?" the Anchor asked. Like most anchormen, he was at his best when reading copy from a TelePrompTer.

"When has this happened before? If you want 'neutral,' you go to Geneva," the cameraman observed. He liked Geneva.

"What gives?" One of the researchers entered the booth. The producer filled her in.

"Where's that damned consultant?" the Anchor growled.

"Can you run the tape back?" the researcher asked. The control-room crew did that, and she freeze-framed the monitor.

"Dimitrios Stavarkos. He's the Patriarch of Constantinople—Istanbul to you, Rick. He's the head of all the Orthodox churches, kind of like the Pope. The Greek, Russian, and Bulgarian Orthodox churches have their own heads, but they all defer to the Patriarch. Something like that."

"They allow their priests to marry, don't they?"

"Their priests, yes . . . but as I recall, if you become a bishop or higher, you have to be celibate—"

"Bummer," Rick observed.

"Stavarkos led the battle with the Catholics over the Church of the Nativity last year—won it, too, as I recall. He really pissed a few Catholic bishops off. What the hell is *he* doing here?"

"You're supposed to tell us that, Angie!" the Anchor noted crossly.

"Hold your water, Rick." Angie Miriles was tired of dealing with the airheaded prima donna. She sipped at her coffee for a minute or two and made her announcement. "I think I have this figured out."

"You mind filling us in?"

"Welcome!" Cardinal D'Antonio kissed Stavarkos on both cheeks. He found the man's beard distasteful, but that could not be helped. The Cardinal led the Patriarch into the conference room. There were sixteen people grouped around a table, and at the foot of it was an empty chair. Stavarkos took it.

"Thank you for joining us," said Secretary Talbot.

"One does not reject an invitation of this sort," the Patriarch replied.

"You've read the briefing material?" That had been delivered by messenger.

"It is very ambitious," Stavarkos allowed cautiously.

"Can you accept your role in the agreement?"

This was going awfully fast, the Patriarch thought. But—"Yes," he answered simply. "I require plenipotentiary authority over all Christian shrines in the Holy Land. If that is agreed to, then I will gladly join your agreement."

D'Antonio managed to keep his face impassive. He controlled his breathing and prayed rapidly for divine intervention. He'd never quite be able to decide whether he got it or not.

"It is very late in the day for such a sweeping demand." Heads turned. The

speaker was Dmitriy Popov, First Deputy Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union. "It is also inconsiderate to seek unilateral advantage when everyone here has conceded so much. Would you stand in the way of the accord on that basis alone?"

Stavarkos was not accustomed to such direct rebukes.

"The question of Christian shrines is not of direct significance to the agreement, Your Holiness," Secretary Talbot observed. "We find your conditional willingness to participate disappointing."

"Perhaps I misunderstood the briefing material," Stavarkos allowed, covering his flanks. "Could you perhaps clarify what my status would be?"

"No way," the Anchor snorted.

"Why not?" Angela Miriles replied. "What else makes sense?"

"It's just too much."

"It is a lot," Miriles agreed, "but what else fits?"

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"You might not see it. Stavarkos doesn't much like the Roman Catholic Church. That battle they had last Christmas was a nasty one."

"How come we didn't report it, then?"

"Because we were too damned busy talking about the downturn in Christmas sales figures," *you asshole,* she didn't add.

"A separate commission, then?" Stavarkos didn't like that.

"The Metropolitan wishes to send his own representative," Popov said. Dmitriy Popov still believed in Marx rather than God, but the Russian Orthodox Church was *Russian*, and Russian participation in the agreement had to be real, however minor this point might appear. "I must say that I find this matter curious. Do we hold up the agreement on the issue of which Christian church is the most influential? Our purpose here is to defuse a potential flashpoint for war between Jews and Muslims, and the Christians stand in the way?" Popov asked the ceiling—a little theatrically, D'Antonio thought.

"This side issue is best left to a separate committee of Christian clerics," Cardinal D'Antonio finally allowed himself to say. "I pledge you my word before God that sectarian squabbles are at an end!"

I've heard that before, Stavarkos reminded himself—and yet. And yet, how could he allow himself to be so petty? He reminded himself also of what the Scriptures taught, and that he believed in every word of it. *I am making a fool of myself, and doing it before the Romans and the Russians!* An additional consideration was that the Turks merely tolerated his presence in Istanbul—Constantinople!—and this gave him the chance to earn immense prestige for his churches and his office.

"Please forgive me. I have allowed some regrettable incidents to color my better judgment. Yes, I will support this agreement, and I will trust my brethren to keep their word."

Brent Talbot leaned back in his chair and whispered his own prayer of thanks. Praying wasn't a habit with the Secretary of State, but here, in these surroundings, how could one avoid it?

"In that case, I believe we have an agreement." Talbot looked around the

table, and one after another the heads nodded, some with enthusiasm, some with resignation. But they all nodded. They had reached an agreement.

"Mr. Adler, when will the documents be ready for initialing?" D'Antonio asked.

"Two hours, Your Eminence."

"Your Highness," Talbot said as he rose to his feet, "Your Eminences, Ministers—we have done it."

Strangely, they scarcely realized what they had done. The process had lasted for quite some time, and as with all such negotiations, the process had become reality, and the objective had become something separate from it. Now suddenly they were at the place they all intended to reach, and the wonder of the fact gave to them a sense of unreality that, for all their collective expertise at formulating and reaching foreign-policy goals, overcame their perceptions. Each of the participants stood, as Talbot did, and the movement, the stretch of legs, altered their perceptions somewhat. One by one they understood what they had done. More importantly, they understood that they had actually done it. The impossible had just happened.

David Askenazi walked around the table to Prince Ali, who had handled his country's part in the negotiations, and extended his hand. That wasn't good enough. The Prince gave the Minister a brotherly embrace.

"Before God, there will be peace between us, David."

"After all these years, Ali," replied the former Israeli tanker. As a lieutenant, Askenazi had fought in the Suez in 1956, again as a captain in 1967, and his reserve battalion had reinforced the Golan in 1973. Both men were surprised by the applause that broke out. The Israeli burst into tears, embarrassing himself beyond belief.

"Do not be ashamed. Your personal courage is well known, Minister," Ali said graciously. "It is fitting that a soldier should make the peace, David."

"So many deaths. All those fine young boys who—on both sides, Ali. All those boys."

"But no more."

"Dmitriy, your help was extraordinary," Talbot told his Russian counterpart at the other end of the table.

"Remarkable what can happen when we cooperate, is it not?"

What occurred to Talbot had come already to Askenazi: "Two whole generations pissed away, Dmitriy. All that wasted time."

"We cannot recover lost time," Popov replied. "We can have the wit not to lose any more." The Russian smiled crookedly. "For moments like this, there should be vodka."

Talbot jerked his head toward Prince Ali. "We don't all drink."

"How can they live without vodka?" Popov chuckled.

"One of the mysteries of life, Dmitriy. We both have cables to send."

"Indeed we do, my friend."

To the fury of the correspondents in Rome, the first to break the story was a *Washington Post* reporter in Washington. It was inevitable. She had a source, an Air Force sergeant who did electronic maintenance on the VC-25A, the President's new military version of the Boeing 747. The sergeant had been

prepped by the reporter. Everyone knew that the President was heading to Rome. It was just a question of when. As soon as the sergeant learned that she'd be heading out, she'd ostensibly called home to check that her good uniform was back from the cleaners. That she had called the wrong number was an honest mistake. It was just that the reporter had the same gag message on her answering machine. That was the story she'd use if she ever got caught, but she didn't in this case, and didn't ever expect to be.

An hour later, at the routine morning meeting between the President's press secretary and the White House correspondents, the *Post* reporter announced an "unconfirmed report" that Fowler was going to Rome—and did this mean that the treaty negotiations had reached an impasse or success? The press secretary was caught short by that. He'd just learned ten minutes before that he'd be flying to Rome, and as usual was sworn to total secrecy—an admonition that carried about as much weight as sunlight on a cloudy day. He allowed himself to be surprised by the question, though, and that surprised the man who had fully expected to engineer the leak—but only *after* lunch at the afternoon briefing. His "no comment" hadn't carried enough conviction, and the White House correspondents smelled the blood in the water. They all had edited copies of the President's appointments schedule, and sure enough, there were names to check with.

The President's aides were already making calls to cancel appointments and appearances. Even the President cannot allow important people to be inconvenienced without warning, and while those might keep secrets, not all of their assistants and secretaries can. It was a classic case of the phenomenon upon which a free press depends. People who know things cannot keep them inside. Especially secret things. Within an hour, confirmation was obtained from four widely separated sources: President Fowler had canceled several days' worth of appointments. The President was going somewhere, and it wasn't Peoria. That was enough for all the TV networks to run bulletins timed to erase segments of various game shows with hastily written statements, which immediately cut to commercials, denying millions of people the knowledge of what the word or phrase was, but informing them of the best way to get their clothes clean despite deep grass stains.

It was late afternoon in Rome, a sultry, humid summer day, when the pool headquarters was told that three, only three, cameras—and no correspondents—would be permitted into the building whose outside had been subjected to weeks of careful scrutiny. In the "green room" trailers near each of the anchor booths, the network anchors on duty had makeup applied and hustled to their chairs, putting their earpieces in and waiting for word from their directors.

The picture that appeared simultaneously on the booth monitors and TV sets all over the world showed the conference room. In it was a large table all of whose seats were filled. At its head was the Pope, and before him was a folder of folio size, made of red calfskin—the reporters would never know of the momentary panic that had erupted when someone realized that he *didn't* know what kind of leather it was, and had to check with the supplier; fortunately, no one objected to the skin of a calf.

It had been agreed that no statement would be made here. Preliminary

statements would be made in the capitals of each of the participants, and the really flowery speeches were being drafted for the formal signing ceremonies. A Vatican spokesman delivered a written release to all of the TV correspondents. It said in essence that a draft treaty concerning a final settlement of the Middle East dispute had been negotiated, and that the draft was ready for initialing by representatives of the interested nations. The formal treaty documents would be signed by the chiefs of state and/or foreign ministers in several days. The text of the treaty was not available for release, nor were its provisions. This did not exactly thrill the correspondents—mainly because they realized that the treaty details would be broken from the foreign ministries in the respective capitals of the concerned nations, to other reporters.

The red folder was passed from place to place. The order of the initialers, the Vatican statement pointed out, had been determined by lot, and it turned out that the Israeli Foreign Minister went first, followed by the Soviet, the Swiss, the American, the Saudi, and the Vatican representatives. Each used a fountain pen, and a curved blotter was applied to each set of initials by the priest who moved the document from place to place. It wasn't much of a ceremony, and it was swiftly accomplished. Handshakes came next, followed by a lengthy bit of mutual applause. And that was it.

"By God," Jack said, watching the TV picture change. He looked down to the fax of the treaty outline, and it was not very different from his original concept. The Saudis had made changes, as had the Israelis, the Soviets, the Swiss, and, of course, the State Department, but the original idea was his—except insofar as he himself had borrowed ideas from a multitude of others. There were few genuinely original ideas. What he'd really done had been to organize them, and pick an historically correct moment to make his comment. That was all. For all that, it was the proudest moment of his life. It was a shame that there was no one to congratulate him.

In the White House, President Fowler's best speechwriter was already working on the first draft of his speech. The American President would have primacy of place at the ceremony because it had been his idea, after all, his speech before the U.N. that had brought them all together in Rome. The Pope would speak—hell, they would all speak, the speechwriter thought, and for her that was a problem, since each speech had to be original and unrepetitive. She realized that she'd probably still be working on it while hopping the Atlantic on the -25A, pecking busily away on her laptop. But that, she knew, was what they paid her for, and Air Force One had a LaserJet printer.

Upstairs in the Oval Office the President was looking over his hastily revised schedule. A committee of new Eagle Scouts would have to be disappointed, as would the new Wisconsin Cheese Queen, or whatever the young lady's title was, and a multitude of business people whose importance in their own small ponds quite literally paled when they entered the side door into the President's workshop. His appointments secretary was getting the word out. Some people whose visits were genuinely important were being shoehorned into every spare minute of the next thirty-six hours. That would make the President's next day and a half as hectic as it ever got, but that, too, was part

of the job.

"Well?" Fowler looked up to see Elizabeth Elliot grinning at him through the open door to the secretary's anteroom.

Well, this is what you wanted, isn't it? Your presidency will forever be remembered as the one in which the Middle East problems were settled once and for all. If—Liz admitted to herself in a rare moment of objective clarity—*it all works out, which is not a given in such disputes as this.*

"We have done a service to the whole world, Elizabeth." By "we" he actually meant "I," Elliot knew, but that was fair enough. It was Bob Fowler who'd endured the months of campaigning on top of his executive duties in Columbus, the endless speeches, kissing babies and kissing ass, stroking legions of reporters whose faces changed far more rapidly than their brutally repetitive questions. It was an endurance race to get into this one small room, this seat of executive power. It was a process that somehow did not break the men—pity it was still only men, Liz thought—who made it safely here. But the prize for all the effort, all the endless toil, was that the person who occupied it got to take the credit. It was a simple historical convention that people assumed the President was the one who directed things, who made the decisions. Because of that, the President was the one who got the kudos and the barbs. The President was responsible for what went well and for what went badly. Mostly that concerned domestic affairs, the blips in the unemployment figures, interest rates, inflation (wholesale and retail), and the all-powerful Leading Economic Indicators, but on rare occasions, something really important happened, something that changed the world. Reagan, Elliot admitted to herself, would be remembered by history as the guy who happened to be around when the Russians decided to cash in their chips on Marxism, and Bush was the man who collected that particular political pot. Nixon was the man who'd opened the door to China, and Carter the one who had come so tantalizingly close to doing what Fowler would now be remembered for. The American voters might select their political leaders for pocketbook issues, but history was made of more important stuff. What earned a man a few paragraphs in a general-history text and focused volumes of scholarly study were the fundamental changes in the shape of the political world. That was what really counted. Historians remembered the ones who shaped political events—Bismarck, not Edison—treating technical changes in society as though they were driven by political factors, and not the reverse, which, she judged, might have been equally likely. But historiography had its own rules and conventions that had little to do with reality, because reality was too large a thing to grasp, even for academics working years after events. Politicians played within those rules, and that suited them because following those rules meant that when something memorable happened, the historians would remember them.

"Service to the world?" Elliot responded after a lengthy pause. "Service to the world. I like the sound of that. They called Wilson the man who kept us out of war. You will be remembered as the one who put an end to war."

Fowler and Elliot both knew that scant months after being reelected on that platform, Wilson had led America into its first truly foreign war, the war to end all wars, optimists had called it, well before Holocaust and nuclear

nightmares. But this time, both thought, it was more than mere optimism, and Wilson's transcendent vision of what the world could be was finally within the grasp of the political figures who made the world into the shape of their own choosing.

The man was a Druse, an unbeliever, but for all that he was respected. He bore the scars of his own battle with the Zionists. He'd gone into battle, and been decorated for his courage. He'd lost his mother to their inhuman weapons. And he'd supported the movement whenever asked. Qati was a man who had never lost touch with the fundamentals. As a boy he'd read the *Little Red Book* of Chairman Mao. That Mao was, of course, an infidel of the worst sort—he'd refused even to acknowledge the idea of a God and persecuted those who worshiped—was beside the point. The revolutionary was a fish who swam in a peasant sea, and maintaining the goodwill of those peasants—or in this case, a shopkeeper—was the foundation of whatever success he might enjoy. This Druse had contributed what money he could, had once sheltered a wounded freedom fighter in his home. Such debts were not forgotten. Qati rose from his desk to greet the man with a warm handshake and the perfunctory kisses.

"Welcome, my friend."

"Thank you for seeing me, Commander." The shopkeeper seemed very nervous, and Qati wondered what the problem was.

"Please, take a chair. Abdullah," he called, "would you bring coffee for our guest?"

"You are too kind."

"Nonsense. You are our comrade. Your friendship has not wavered in—how many years?"

The shopkeeper shrugged, smiling inwardly that this investment was about to pay off. He was frightened of Qati and his people—that was why he had never crossed them. He also kept Syrian authorities informed of what he'd done for them, because he was wary of those people, too. Mere survival in that part of the world was an art form, and a game of chance.

"I come to you for advice," he said after his first sip of coffee.

"Certainly." Qati leaned forward in his chair. "I am honored to be of help. What is the problem, my friend?"

"It is my father."

"How old is he now?" Qati asked. The farmer had occasionally given his men gifts also, most often a lamb. Just a peasant, and an infidel peasant at that, but he was one who shared his enemy with Qati and his men.

"Sixty-six—you know his garden?"

"Yes, I was there some years ago, soon after your mother was killed by the Zionists," Qati reminded him.

"In his garden there is an Israeli bomb."

"Bomb? You mean a shell."

"No, Commander, a bomb. What you can see of it is half a meter across."

"I see—and if the Syrians learn of it . . ."

"Yes. As you know, they explode such things in place. My father's house would be destroyed." The visitor held up his left forearm. "I cannot be of

much help rebuilding it, and my father is too old to do it himself. I come here to ask how one might go about removing the damned thing."

"You have come to the right place. Do you know how long it has been there?"

"My father says that it fell the very day this happened to me." The shopkeeper gestured with his ruined arm again.

"Then surely Allah smiled on your family that day."

Some smile, the shopkeeper thought, nodding.

"You have been our most faithful friend. Of course we can help you. I have a man highly skilled in the business of disarming and removing Israeli bombs —and then he takes the guts from them and makes bombs for our use." Qati stopped and held up an admonishing finger. "You must never repeat that."

The visitor jerked somewhat in his chair. "For my part, Commander, you may kill all of them you wish, and if you can do it from a bomb the pigs dropped into my father's garden, I will pray for your safety and success."

"Please excuse me, my friend. No insult was intended. I must say such things, as you can understand." Qati's message was fully understood.

"I will never betray you," the shopkeeper announced forcefully.

"I know this." Now it was time to keep faith with the peasant sea. "Tomorrow I will send my man to your father's home. *Insh'Allah,*" he said, God willing.

"I am in your debt, Commander." *Sometime between now and the new year*, he hoped.

8

THE PANDORA PROCESS

The converted Boeing 747 rotated off the Andrews runway just before sunset. President Fowler had had a bad day and a half of briefings and unbreakable appointments. He would have two more even worse; even presidents are subject to the vagaries of ordinary human existence, and in this case, the eighthour flight to Rome was coupled with a six-hour time change. The jet lag would be a killer. Fowler was a seasoned-enough traveler to know that. To attenuate the worst of it, he'd fiddled with his sleep pattern yesterday and today so that he'd be sufficiently tired to sleep most of the way across, and the VC-25A had lavish accommodations to make the flight as comfortable as Boeing and the United States Air Force could arrange. An easy-riding aircraft, the -25A had its presidential accommodations in the very tip of the nose. The bed—actually a convertible sofa—was of decent size, and the mattress had been selected for his personal taste. The aircraft was also large enough that a proper separation between the press and the administration people was possible—nearly two hundred feet, in fact; the press was in a closed-off section in the tail—and while his press secretary was dealing with the reporters aft, Fowler was discreetly joined by his National Security Advisor. Pete Connor and Helen D'Agustino shared a look that an outsider might take to be blank, but which spoke volumes within the close fraternity of the Secret Service. The Air Force Security Policeman assigned to the door just stared at the aft bulkhead, trying not to smile.

"So, Ibrahim, what of our visitor?" Qati asked.

"He is strong, fearless, and quite cunning, but I don't know what possible use we have for him," Ibrahim Ghosn replied. He related the story of the Greek policeman.

"Broke his neck?" At least the man was not a plant . . . that is, if the policeman had really died, and this was not an elaborate ruse of the Americans, Greeks, Israelis, or God only knew who.

"Like a twig."

"His contacts in America?"

"They are few. He is hunted by their national police. His group, he says, killed three of them, and his brother was recently ambushed and murdered by them."

"He is ambitious in his choice of enemies. His education?"

"Poor in formal terms, but he is clever."

"Skills?"

"Few that are of use to us."

"He *is* an American," Qati pointed out. "How many of those have we had?"

Ghosn nodded. "That is true, Commander."

"The chance that he could be an infiltrator?"

"I would say slim, but we must be careful."

"In any case, I have something I need you to do." Qati explained about the bomb.

"Another one?" Ghosn was an expert at this task, but he was not exactly excited about being stuck with it. "I know the farm—that foolish old man. I know, I know, his son fought against the Israelis, and you like the cripple."

"That cripple saved the life of a comrade. Fazi would have bled to death had he not received shelter in that little shop. He didn't have to do that. That was at a time when the Syrians were angry with us."

"All right. I have nothing to do for the rest of the day. I need a truck and a few men."

"This new friend is strong, you say. Take him with you."

"As you say, Commander."

"And be careful!"

"Insh' Allah." Ghosn was almost a graduate of the American University of Beirut—almost because one of his teachers had been kidnapped, and two others had used that as an excuse to leave the country. That had denied Ghosn the last nine credit hours needed for a degree in engineering. Not that he really needed it. He'd been at the top of his class, and learned well enough from the textbooks without having to listen to the explanations of instructors. He'd spent quite a bit of time in labs of his own making. Ghosn had never been a front-line soldier of the movement. Though he knew how to use small arms, his skills with explosives and electronic devices were too valuable to be risked. He was also youthful in appearance, handsome, and quite fair-skinned, as a result of which he traveled a lot. An advance man of sorts, he often surveyed sites for future operations, using his engineer's eye and memory to sketch maps, determine equipment needs, and provide technical support for the actual operations people, who treated him with far more respect than an outsider might have expected. Of his courage there was no doubt. He'd proven his bravery more than once, defusing unexploded bombs and shells that the Israelis had left in Lebanon, then reworking the explosives recovered into bombs of his own. Ibrahim Ghosn would have been a welcome addition to any one of a dozen professional organizations anywhere in the world. A gifted, if largely selftaught engineer, he was also a Palestinian whose family had evacuated Israel at the time of the country's founding, confidently expecting to return as soon as the Arab armies of the time erased the invaders quickly and easily. But that happy circumstance had not come about, and his childhood memories were of crowded, unsanitary camps where antipathy for Israel had been a creed as important as Islam. It could not have been otherwise. Disregarded by the Israelis as people who had voluntarily left their country, largely ignored by other Arab nations who might have made their lot easier but had not, Ghosn and those like him were mere pawns in a great game whose players had never agreed upon the rules. Hatred of Israel and its friends came as naturally as breathing, and finding ways to end the lives of such people was his task in life. It had never occurred to him to wonder why.

Ghosn got the keys for a Czech-built GAZ-66 truck. It wasn't as reliable as a Mercedes, but a lot easier to obtain—in this case it had been funneled to his organization through the Syrians years before. On the back was a home-built A-frame. Ghosn loaded the American in the cab with himself and the driver. Two other men rode on the loadbed as the truck pulled out of the camp.

Marvin Russell examined the terrain with the interest of a hunter in a new territory. The heat was oppressive, but really no worse than the Badlands during a bad summer wind, and the vegetation—or lack of it—wasn't all that different from the reservation of his youth. What appeared to others as bleak was just another dusty place to an American raised on one. Except here they didn't have the towering thunderstorms—and the tornados they spawned—of the American Plains. The hills were also higher than the rolling Badlands. Russell had never seen mountains before. Here he saw them, high and dry and hot enough to make a climber gasp. Most climbers, Marvin Russell thought. He could hack it. He was in shape, better shape than these Arabs.

The Arabs, on the other hand, seemed to be believers in guns. So many guns, mostly Russian AK-47s at first, but soon he was seeing heavy antiaircraft guns and the odd battery of surface-to-air missiles, tanks, and self-propelled field guns belonging to the Syrian Army. Ghosn noted his guest's interest and started explaining things.

"These are here to keep the Israelis out," he said, casting his explanation in accordance with his own beliefs. "Your country arms the Israelis and the Russians arm us." He didn't add that this was becoming increasingly tenuous.

"Ibrahim, have you been attacked?"

"Many times, Marvin. They send their aircraft. They send commando teams. They have killed thousands of my people. They drove us from our land, you see. We are forced to live in camps that—"

"Yeah, man. They're called reservations where I come from." That was something Ghosn didn't know about. "They came to our land, the land of our ancestors, killed off the buffalo, sent in their army, and massacred us. Mainly they attacked camps of women and children. We tried to fight back. We killed a whole regiment under General Custer at a place called the Little Big Horn—that's the name of a river—under a leader named Crazy Horse. But they didn't stop coming. Just too many of them, too many soldiers, too many guns, and they took the best of our land, and left us shit, man. They make us live like beggars. No, that's not right. Like animals, like we're not people, even, 'cause we look different, speak different, got a different religion. They did all that 'cause we were in a place they wanted to have, and they just moved us out, like sweepin' away the garbage."

"I didn't know about that," Ghosn said, amazed that his were not the only people to be treated that way by the Americans and their Israeli vassals. "When did it happen?"

"Hundred years ago. Actually started around 1865. We fought, man, we did the best we could, but we didn't have much of a chance. We didn't have friends, see? Didn't have friends like you got. Nobody gave us guns and tanks. So they killed off the bravest. Mainly they trapped the leaders and murdered them—Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull died like that. Then they squeezed us and starved us until we had to surrender. Left us dusty, shitty places to live, sent

us enough food to keep us alive, but not enough to be strong. When some of us try to fight back, try to be men—well, I told you what they did to my brother. Shot him from ambush like he was an animal. Did it on television, even, so's people would know what happened when an Indian got too big for his britches."

The man *was* a comrade, Ghosn realized. This was no infiltrator, and his story was no different from the story of a Palestinian. Amazing.

"So why did you come here, Marvin?"

"I had to leave before they got me, man. I ain't proud of it, but what else could I do—you want me to wait till they could ambush me?" Russell shrugged. "I figured I'd come someplace, find people like me, maybe learn a few things, learn how I could go back, maybe, teach my people how to fight back some." Russell shook his head. "Hell, maybe it's all hopeless, but I ain't gonna give in—you understand that?"

"Yes, my friend, I understand. It has been so with my people since before I was born. But you, too, must understand: it is not hopeless. So long as you stand up and fight back, there is always hope. That is why they hunt you—because they fear you!"

"Hope you're right, man." Russell stared out the open window, and the dust stung his eyes, 7,000 miles from home. "So, what are we doing?"

"When you fought the Americans, how did your warriors get weapons?"

"Mainly we took what they left behind."

"So it is with us, Marvin."

Fowler woke up about halfway across the Atlantic. Well, that was a first, he told himself. He'd never managed to do it in an airplane before. He wondered if any U.S. president had, or done it on the way to see the Pope, or with his National Security Advisor. He looked out the windows. It was bright this far north—the aircraft was close to Greenland—and he wondered for a moment if it were morning or still night. That was almost a metaphysical question on an airplane, of course, which changed the time far faster than a watch could.

Also metaphysical was his mission. This would be remembered. Fowler knew his history. This was something unique. It had never happened before. Perhaps it was the beginning of the process, perhaps the end of it, but what he was up to was simply expressed. He would put an end to war. J. Robert Fowler's name would be associated with this treaty. It was the initiative of his presidential administration. His speech at the U.N. had called the nations of the world to the Vatican. His subordinates had run the negotiations. His name would be the first on the treaty documents. His armed forces would guarantee the peace. He had truly earned his place in history. That was immortality, the kind that all men wanted but few earned. Was it any wonder that he was excited? he asked himself with dispassionate reflectivity.

A president's greatest fear was gone now. He'd asked himself that question from the first moment, the first fleeting selfdirected thought, while still a prosecutor chasing after the *capo* of the Cleveland family of the Cosa Nostra—*if you're the President, what if you have to push the button?* Could he have done it? Could he have decided that the security of his country required the deaths of thousands—millions—of other human beings? Probably not, he judged. He

was too good a man for that. His job was to protect people, to show them the way, to lead them along a beneficial path. They might not always understand that he was right and they wrong, that his vision was the correct one, the logical one. Fowler knew himself to be cold and aloof on such matters, but he was always right. Of that he was certain. He had to be certain, of himself and his motivations. Were he ever wrong, he knew, his conviction would be mere arrogance, and he'd faced that charge often enough. The one thing he was unsure about was his ability to face a nuclear war.

But that was no longer an issue, was it? Though he'd never admit it publicly, Reagan and Bush had ended that chance, forcing the Soviets to face their own contradictions, and facing them, to change their ways. And it had all happened in peace, because men really were more logical than beasts. There would continue to be hot spots, but so long as he did his job right they would not get out of hand—and the trip he was making now would end the most dangerous problem remaining in the world, the one with which no recent administration could cope. What Nixon and Kissinger had failed to do, what had defied the valiant efforts of Carter, the halfhearted attempts of Reagan, and the well-meaning gambits of Bush and his own predecessor, what all had failed to do, Bob Fowler would accomplish. It was a thought in which to bask. Not only would he find his place in the history books, but he would also make the rest of his presidency that much easier to manage. This would also put the seal on his second term, a forty-five-state majority, solid control of Congress, and the remainder of his sweeping social programs. With historic accomplishments like this one came international prestige and immense domestic clout. It was power of the best kind, earned in the best way, and the sort that he could put to the best possible use. With a stroke of a pen—actually several pens, for that was the custom—Fowler became great, a giant among the good, and a good man among the powerful. Not once in a generation did a single man have such a moment as this. Maybe not once in a century. And no one could take it away.

The aircraft was traveling at 43,000 feet, moving at a ground speed of 633 knots. The placement of his cabin allowed him to look forward, as a president should look, and down at a world whose affairs he was managing so well. The ride was silky smooth, and Bob Fowler was going to make history. He looked over to Elizabeth, lying on her back, her right hand up around her head and the covers down at her waist, exposing her lovely chest to his eyes. While most of the rest of the passengers fidgeted in their seats, trying to get some sleep, he looked. Fowler didn't want to sleep right now. The President had never felt more like a man, a great man to be sure, but at this moment, just a man. His hand slid across her breasts. Elizabeth's eyes opened wide and she smiled, as though in her dreams she had read his thoughts.

Just like home, Russell thought to himself. The house was made of stones instead of block, and the roof was flat instead of peaked, but the dust was the same, and the pathetic little garden was the same. And the man might as easily have been a Sioux, the tiredness in his eyes, the bent back, the old, gnarled hands of one defeated by others.

"This must be the place," he said as the truck slowed.

"The old man's son fought the Israelis and was badly wounded. Both have been friends to us."

"You have to look out for your friends," Marvin agreed. The truck stopped, and Russell had to hop out to allow Ghosn to step down.

"Come along, I will introduce you."

It was all surprisingly formal to the American. He didn't understand a word, of course, but he didn't have to. The respect of his friend Ghosn for the old one was good to see. After a few more remarks the farmer looked at Russell and bowed his head, which embarrassed the American. Marvin took his hand gently and shook it in the manner of his people, muttering something that Ghosn translated. Then the farmer led them into his garden.

"Damn," Russell observed when he saw it.

"American Mark 84 2,000-pound bomb, it would appear. . . ." Ghosn said offhandedly, then knew he was wrong . . . the nose wasn't quite right . . . of course, the nose was crushed and distorted . . . but oddly so. . . . He thanked the farmer and waved him back to the truck. "First we must uncover it. Carefully, very carefully." "I can handle that," Russell said. He went back to the truck and selected a folding shovel of a military design.

"We have people—"

The American cut Ghosn off. "Let me do it. I'll be careful."

"Do not touch it. Use the shovel to dig around it, but use your hands to remove the soil from the bomb itself. Marvin, I warn you, this is very dangerous."

"Better step back, then." Russell turned and grinned. He had to show this man that he was courageous. Killing the cop had been easy, no challenge at all. This was different.

"And leave my comrade in danger?" Ghosn asked rhetorically. He knew that this was the intelligent thing to do, what he would have done had his own people done the digging, because his skills were too valuable to be risked stupidly, but he could not show weakness in front of the American, could he? Besides, he could watch and see if the man was as courageous as he seemed.

Ghosn was not disappointed. Russell stripped to the waist and got on his knees to dig around the periphery of the bomb. He was even careful of the garden, far more so than Ghosn's men would have been. It took an hour until he'd dug a shallow pit around the device, piling up the soil in four neat mounds. Already Ghosn knew that there was something odd here. It was not a Mark 84. It had roughly the same size, but the shape was wrong, and the bombcase was . . . just wasn't right. The Mark 84 had a sturdy case made of cast steel, so that when the explosive filler detonated, the case would be transformed into a million razor-sharp fragments, the better to tear men to bits. But not this one. In two visible places the case was broken, and it wasn't quite thick enough for that kind of bomb. So what the hell was it?

Russell moved in closer and used his hands to pull the dirt off the surface of the bomb itself. He was careful and thorough. The American worked up a good sweat but didn't slacken his efforts even once. The muscles in his arm rippled, and Ghosn admired him for that. The man had a physical power like none he had ever seen. Even Israeli paratroopers didn't look so formidable. He'd excavated two or three tons of dirt, yet he barely showed the effort, his

movements as steady and powerful as a machine.

"Stop for a minute," Ghosn said. "I must get my tools."

"Okay," Russell replied, sitting back and staring at the bomb.

Ghosn returned with a rucksack and a canteen, which he handed to the American.

"Thanks, man. It is a little warm here." Russell drank half a liter of water. "Now what?"

Ghosn took a paintbrush from the sack and began sweeping the last of the dirt from the weapon. "You should leave now," he warned.

"That's okay, Ibrahim. I'll stay if you don't mind."

"This is the dangerous part."

"You stayed by me, man," Russell pointed out.

"As you wish. I am now looking for the fuse."

"Not in the front?" Russell pointed to the nose of the bomb.

"Not there. There is usually one at the front—it appears to be missing; that's just a screw-on cap—one in the middle and one at the back."

"How come it don't have no fins on it?" Russell asked. "Don't bombs have fins on 'em, you know, like an arrow?"

"The fins were probably stripped off when it hit the ground. That's often how we find such bombs, because the fins come off and lie on the surface."

"Want me to uncover the back of the thing, then?"

"Very, very carefully, Marvin. Please."

"Okay, man." Russell moved around his friend and resumed pulling the dirt off the back end of the bombcase. Ghosn, he noted, was one cool son of a bitch. Marvin was as scared as he had ever been, this close to a shitload of explosives, but he could not and damned well would not show anything that looked like fear to this guy. Ibrahim might be a little pencilnecked geek, but the dude had real balls, dicking with a bomb like this. He noted that Ghosn was sweeping the dirt off like he was using the brush on a girl's tits, and made his own efforts just as cautious. Ten minutes later, he had uncovered the back.

"Ibrahim?"

"Yes, Marvin?" Ghosn said without looking.

"There ain't nothing here. The back's just a hole, man."

Ghosn lifted the brush from the case and turned to look. That was odd. But he had other things to do. "Thank you. You can stop now. I still have not found a fuse."

Russell backed off, sat on a mound of dirt, and proceeded to empty the rest of the canteen. On reflection he walked over to the truck. The three men there along with the farmer were just standing—the farmer watching in the open, the others observing more circumspectly behind the stone walls of the house. Russell tossed one man the empty canteen, and had a full one returned the same way. He gave a thumbs-up sign to all of them and walked back to the bomb.

"Back off for a minute and have a drink," Marvin said on his return.

"Good idea," Ghosn agreed, setting his brush down next to the bomb.

"Find anything?"

"A plug connection, nothing else." That was odd, too, Ghosn thought, pulling the top off the canteen. There were no stenciled markings, just a silver-

and-red label block near the nose. Color codes were common on bombs, but he'd never seen that one before. So, what was this damned thing? Maybe a FAE or some kind of submunition canister? Something old and obsolete that he'd never seen before. It had come down in 1973, after all. Maybe something that had long since gone out of service. That was very bad news. If it were something he'd never seen before, it might have a fusing system that he didn't know. His manual for dealing with such things was Russian in origin, though printed in Arabic. Ghosn had long since committed it to memory, but there was no description for anything like this. And that was truly frightening. Ghosn took a long pull from the canteen and then poured a little across his face.

"Take it easy, man," Russell said, noticing the man's tension.

"This job is never easy, my friend, and it is always very frightening."

"You look pretty cool, Ibrahim." It wasn't a lie. While brushing the dirt off, he looked like a doctor, almost, doing something real hard, Russell thought, but doing it. The little fucker had balls, Marvin told himself again.

Ghosn turned and grinned. "That is all a lie. I am quite terrified. I truly hate doing this."

"You got a big pair, boy, and that's no shit."

"Thank you. Now I must return while I still can. You really should leave, you know."

Russell spat into the dirt. "Fuck it."

"That would be very difficult." Ghosn grinned. "And if you got a reaction from 'her,' you might not like it."

"I guess when these suckers come, the earth really does move!"

Ghosn knew enough of American idiom that he fell backwards and laughed uproariously. "Please, Marvin, do not say such things when I am working!" *I like this man!* Ghosn told himself. *We are too humorless a lot. I like this American!* He had to wait another few minutes before he calmed down enough to resume his work.

Another hour's brushing showed nothing. There were seams in the bombcase, even some sort of hatch . . . he'd never seen that before. But no fuse point. If there was one, it had to be underneath. Russell moved away some more dirt, allowing Ghosn to continue his search, but again, nothing. He decided to examine the back.

"There's a flashlight in my sack...."

"Got it." Russell handed the light over.

Ghosn lay down on the dirt and contorted himself to look into the hole. It was dark, of course, and he switched on the light.... He saw electrical wiring, and something else, some sort of metal framework—latticework would be more accurate. He judged he could see perhaps eighty centimeters . . . and if this was a real bomb, there would not be so much empty space. So. So. Ghosn tossed the light to the American.

"We have just wasted five hours," he announced.

"Huh?"

"I don't know what this thing is, but it is not a bomb." He sat up and had a brief attack of the shakes, but it didn't last long.

"What is it, then?"

"Some kind of electronic sensing device, perhaps, a warning system. Maybe a camera pod—the lens assembly must be underneath. That doesn't matter. What is important is that it is no bomb."

"So now what?"

"We move it, take it back with us. It might be valuable. Perhaps something we can sell to the Russians or the Syrians."

"So the old guy was worried about nothing?"

"Correct." Ghosn rose and the two men walked back to the truck. "It is safe now," he told the farmer. Might as well tell him what he wanted to know, and why confuse him with the facts of the matter? The farmer kissed Ghosn's dirty hands, and those of the American, which further embarrassed Russell.

The driver pulled the truck around, and backed into the garden, careful to do as little damage to the rows of vegetables as possible. Russell watched as two men filled a half-dozen sandbags and hoisted them onto the truck. Next they put a sling around the bomb and began to crank it up with a winch. The bomb—or whatever it was—was heavier than expected, and Russell took over the hand winch, displaying his strength yet again as he cranked it up alone. The Arabs swung the A-frame forward, then he lowered the bomb into the nest made of sandbags. A few ropes secured it in place, and that was that.

The farmer would not let them leave. He brought out tea and bread, insisting on feeding the men before they left, and Ghosn accepted the man's hospitality with appropriate humility. Four lambs were added to the truck's load before they left.

"That was a good thing you did, man," Russell observed as they pulled off.

"Perhaps," Ghosn said tiredly. Stress was so much more tiring than actual labor, though the American seemed to handle both quite well. Two hours later they were back in the Bekaa Valley. The bomb—Ghosn didn't know what else to call it—was dropped unceremoniously in front of his workshop, and the party of five went to feast on fresh lamb. To Ghosn's surprise, the American had never had lamb before, and so was properly introduced to the traditional Arab delicacy.

"Got something interesting, Bill," Murray announced as he came into the Director's office.

"What's that, Danny?" Shaw looked up from his appointments schedule.

"A cop got himself killed over in Athens, and they think it was an American who did it." Murray filled Shaw in on the technical details.

"Broke his neck barehanded?" Bill asked.

"That's right. The cop was a skinny little guy," Murray said, "but . . ."

"Jesus. Okay, let's see." Murray handed the photo over. "We know this guy, Dan? It's not the best picture in the world."

"Al Denton thinks it might be Marvin Russell. He's playing computer games on the original slide. There were no prints or other forensic stuff. The car was registered to a third party who disappeared, probably never existed in the first place. The driver of the other vehicle is an unknown. Anyway, it fits Russell's description, short and powerful, and the cheekbones and coloration make him look like an Indian. Clothing is definitely American. So's the suitcase."

"So you think he skipped the country after we got his brother . . . smart

move," Shaw judged. "He was supposed to be the bright one, wasn't he?"

"Smart enough to get teamed up with an Arab."

"Think so?" Shaw examined the other face. "Could be Greek, or anything Mediterranean. Skin's a little fair for an Arab, but it's a pretty ordinary face, and you said it's an unknown. Gut call, Dan?"

"Yep." Murray nodded. "I checked the file. A confidential informant told us a few years ago that Marvin made a trip east a few years back and made contacts with the PFLP. Athens is a convenient place to renew the association. Neutral ground."

"Also a good place to make connections for a drug deal," Shaw suggested. "What current info do we have on Brother Marvin?"

"Not much. Our best CI out there is back in the joint—had a brawl with a couple of reservation cops and came off second-best."

Shaw grunted. The problem with Confidential Informants, of course, was that most of them were criminals who did illegal things and regularly ended up in jail. That both established their bonafides and made them temporarily useless. Such were the rules of the game. "Okay," the FBI Director said. "You want to do something. What is it?"

"With a little nudge, we can spring the CI on good-time rules and get him back into the Warrior Society. If this is a terrorist connection, we'd better start running some leads down. Ditto if it's for drugs. Interpol has already come up blank on the driver. No record of his face for either terrorist or drug connections. The Greeks have come to a blank wall. Information on the car didn't lead them anywhere. They have a dead sergeant, and all they got to go on is two faces with no names attached. Sending the photo to us was their last shot. They figured him for an American. . . ."

"Hotel?" the Director asked, ever the investigator.

"Yeah, they identified that—that is, they know it's one of two places side by side. There were ten people with American passports who checked out that day, but they're both little places with lots of in-and-out, and they came up with nothing useful for identification purposes. The hotel staff is forgetful. That kind of a place. Who's to say that our friend even stayed there? The Greeks want us to do follow-up on the names from the hotel register," Murray concluded.

Bill Shaw handed the photo back. "That's simple enough. Run with it."

"Already being done."

"Assuming we know that these two had anything to do with the killing. Well, you gotta go with your best guess. Okay: let the U.S. Attorney know that our CI has paid his debt to society. It's about time we ran those 'warriors' down once and for all." Shaw had won his spurs on counterterrorism, and that class of criminal was still his first hate.

"Yeah, I'll play up the drug connection on that. We ought to have him sprung in two weeks or so."

"Fair enough, Dan."

"When's the President get into Rome?" Murray asked.

"Pretty soon. Really something, isn't it?"

"Bet your ass, man. Kenny'd better find himself another line of work soon. Peace is breaking out."

Shaw grinned. “Who woulda thunk it? We can always get him a badge and a gun so’s he can earn an honest living.”

Presidential security was completed with a discreetly located flight of four Navy Tomcat fighters that had followed the VC-25A at a distance of five miles while a radar-surveillance aircraft made sure that nothing was approaching Air Force One. Normal commercial traffic was set aside, and the environs of the military airfield being used for the arrival had not so much been combed as strained. Already waiting on the pavement was the President’s armored limousine, which had been flown in a few hours earlier by an Air Force C-141B, and enough Italian soldiers and police to discourage a regiment of terrorists. President Fowler emerged from his private washroom shaved and scrubbed pink, his tie exquisitely knotted, and smiling as brightly as Pete and Daga had ever seen. *As well he might*, Connor thought. The agent did not moralize as deeply as D‘Agustino did. The President was a man, and as most presidents were, a lonely man—doubly so with the loss of his wife. Elliot might be an arrogant bitch, but she was undeniably attractive, and if that’s what it took to allay the stress and pressure of the job, then that’s what it took. The President had to relax, else the job would burn him up—as it had burned others up—and that was bad for the country. So long as HAWK didn’t break any major laws, Connor and D’Agustino would protect both his privacy and his pleasures. Pete understood. Daga merely wished that he had better taste. E.E. had left the quarters a little earlier, and was dressed in something especially nice. She joined the President in the dining area just before landing for coffee and donuts. There was no denying that she was attractive, especially this morning. Maybe, Special Agent Helen D’Agustino thought, she was a good lay. Certainly she and the President were the best-rested people on the flight. The media pukes—the Secret Service has an institutional dislike for reporters—had squirmed and fidgeted in their seats throughout the flight, and looked rumpled despite their upbeat expressions. The most harried of all was the President’s speechwriter, who’d worked through the night without pause except for coffee and head-calls and finally delivered the speech to Arnie van Damm a bare twenty minutes before touchdown. Fowler had run through it over breakfast and loved it.

“Callie, this is just wonderful!” The President beamed at the weary staff member, who had the literary elegance of a poet. Fowler amazed everyone in sight by giving the young lady—she was still on the sunny side of thirty—a hug that left tears in Callie Weston’s eyes. “Get yourself some rest and enjoy Rome.”

“A pleasure, Mr. President.”

The aircraft came to a stop at the appointed place. The mobile stairs came immediately into place. A section of red carpet was rolled in place to lead from the stairs to the longer carpet that led in turn to the podium. The President and Prime Minister of Italy moved to their appointed places, along with the U.S. Ambassador and the usual hangers-on, including some exhausted protocol officers who’d had to plan this ceremony literally on the fly. The door of the aircraft was opened by an Air Force sergeant. Secret Service agents looked outside suspiciously for any sign of trouble, and caught glances from

other agents of the advance team. When the President appeared, the Italian Air Force band played its arrival fanfare, different from the traditional American "Ruffles and Flourishes."

The President made his way down the steps alone, walking from reality to immortality, he reflected. Reporters noticed that his stride was bouncy and relaxed, and envied him the comfortable quarters where he could sleep in regal solitude. Sleep was the only sure cure for jet lag, and clearly the President had enjoyed a restful flight. The Brooks Brothers suit was newly pressed—Air Force One has all manner of amenities—his shoes positively sparkled, and his grooming was perfection itself. Fowler made his way to the U.S. Ambassador and his wife, who conducted him to the Italian President. The band struck up "The Star-Spangled Banner." Next came the traditional review of the assembled troops, and a brief arrival speech that only hinted at the eloquence that would soon follow. In all, it took twenty minutes before Fowler got into his car, along with the Ambassador, Dr. Elliot, and his personal bodyguards.

"First one of those I've ever enjoyed," was Fowler's evaluation of the ceremony. There was general agreement that the Italians had handled it with elegance.

"Elizabeth, I want you to stay close. There are a few aspects to the agreement that we need to go over. I need to see Brent, too. How's he doing?" Fowler asked the Ambassador.

"Tired but pretty happy with himself," Ambassador Coates replied. "The last negotiation session lasted over twenty hours."

"What's the local press saying?" E.E. asked.

"They're euphoric. They all are. This is a great day for the whole world." *It's happening on my turf, and I'll be there to see it!* Jed Coates said to himself. *Not often you get to see history made.*

"Well, that was nice."

The National Military Command Center—NMCC—is located in the D-Ring of the Pentagon near the River Entrance. One of the few such installations in government which actually looks like its Hollywood renditions, it is an arena roughly the size and proportions of a basketball court and two stories in height. NMCC is in essence the central telephone switchboard for the United States military. It is not the only one—the nearest alternate is at Fort Ritchie in the Maryland hills—since it is far too easy to destroy, but it is the most conveniently located of its type. It's a regular stop for VIPs who want to see the sexier parts of the Pentagon, much to the annoyance of the staff, for whom it's merely the place where they work.

Adjoining the NMCC is a smaller room in which one can see a set of IBM PC/AT personal computers—old ones with 5.25-inch floppy drives—that constitute the Hot Line, the direct communications link between the American and Soviet presidents. The NMCC "node" for the link was not the only one, but it was the primary downlink. That fact was not widely known in America, but it had been purposefully made known to the Soviets. Some form of direct communications between the two countries would be necessary even during an ongoing nuclear war, and letting the Soviets know that the only readily

usable downlink was here might serve, some "experts" had judged three decades earlier, as a life-insurance policy for the area.

That, Captain James Rosselli, USN, thought, was just so much theoretician-generated horseshit. That no one had ever seriously questioned it was another example of all the horseshit that lay and stank within Washington in general and the Pentagon in particular. With all the nonsense that took place within the confines of Interstate 495, the Washington Beltway, it was just one more bit of data accepted as gospel, despite the fact that it didn't make a whole lot of sense. To "Rosey" Rosselli, Washington, D.C., was about 300 square miles surrounded by reality. He wondered if the laws of physics even applied inside the Beltway. He'd long since given up on the laws of logic.

Joint duty, Rosey grunted to himself. The most recent effort of Congress to reform the military—something it was singularly unable to do for itself, he groused—had prescribed that uniformed officers who aspired to flag rank—and which of them didn't?—had to spend some of their time in close association with peers from the other uniformed services. Rosselli had never been told how hanging around with a field-artillery man might make him a better submarine driver, but then no one else had evidently wondered about that. It was simply accepted as an article of faith that cross-pollination was good for something, and so the best and brightest officers were taken away from their professional specialties and dropped into things which they knew not the first thing about. Not that they'd ever learn how to do their new jobs, of course, but they might learn just enough to be dangerous, plus losing currency in what they were supposed to do. That was Congress's idea of military reform.

"Coffee, Cap'n?" an Army corporal asked.

"Better make it decaf," Rosey replied. *If my disposition gets any worse, I might start hurting people.*

Work here was career-enhancing. Rosselli knew that, and he also knew that being here was partly his fault. He'd majored in sub and minored in spook throughout his career. He'd already had a tour at the Navy's intelligence headquarters at Suitland, Maryland, near Andrews Air Force Base. At least this was a better commute—he'd gotten official housing at Bolling Air Force Base, and the trip to the Pentagon was a relatively simple hop across I-295/395 to his reserved parking place, another perk that came with duty in the NMCC, and one worth shedding blood for.

Once duty here had been relatively exciting. He remembered when the Soviets had splashed the Korean Airlines 747 and other incidents, and it must have been wonderfully chaotic during the Iraq War—that is, when the senior watch officer wasn't answering endless calls of "what's happening?" to anyone who'd managed to get the direct-line number. But now?

Now, as he had just watched on his desk TV, the President was about to defuse the world's biggest remaining diplomatic bomb, and soon Rosselli's work would mostly involve taking calls about collisions at sea, or crashed airplanes, or some dumbass soldier who'd gotten himself run over by a tank. Such things were serious, but not matters of great professional interest. So here he was. His paperwork was finished. That was something Jim Rosselli was good at—he'd learned how to shuffle papers in the Navy, and here he had

a superb staff to help him with it—and the rest of the day was mainly involved with sitting and waiting for something to happen. The problem was that Rosselli was a do-er, not a wait-er, and who wanted a disaster to happen anyway?

"Gonna be a quiet day." This was Rosselli's XO, an Air Force F-15 pilot, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Barnes.

"I think you're right, Rocky." *Just what I wanted to hear!* Rosselli checked his watch. It was a twelve-hour shift, with five hours left to go. "Hell, it's getting to be a pretty quiet world."

"Ain't it the truth." Barnes turned back to the display screen. *Well, I got my two MiGs over the Persian Gulf. At least it hasn't been a complete waste of time.*

Rosselli stood and decided to walk around. The duty watch officers thought this was to look at what they were doing, to make sure they were doing something. One senior civilian ostentatiously continued doing the *Post* crossword. It was his "lunch" break and he preferred eating here to the mostly empty cafeterias. Here he could watch TV. Rosselli next wandered over to the left into the Hot Line room, and he was lucky for a change. A message was announced by the dinging of a little bell. The actual message received looked like random garbage, but the encryption machine changed that into cleartext Russian which a Marine translated:

> *"So you think you know the real meaning of fear? Yeah, you think you do know, but I doubt it. When you sit in a shelter with bombs falling all over. And the houses around you are burning like torches. I agree that you experience horror and fright For such moments are dreadful, for as long as they last, But the all-clear sounds—then it's okay— You take a deep breath, the stress has passed by. But real fear is a stone deep down in your chest. You hear me? A stone. That's what it is, no more.*

"Ilya Selvinskiy," the Marine Lieutenant said.

"Hmph?"

"Ilya Selvinskiy, Russian poet, did some famous work during the Second World War. I know this one, *Sprakh,* the title is, 'Fear.' It's very good." The young officer grinned. "My opposite number is pretty literate. So . . ." TRANSMISSION RECEIVED. THE REST OF THE POEM IS EVEN BETTER, ALEKSEY, the Lieutenant typed, STAND BY FOR REPLY.

"What do you send back?" Rosselli asked.

Today . . . maybe a little Emily Dickinson. She was a morbid bitch, always talking about death and stuff. No, better yet—Edgar Allan Poe. They really like him over there. Hmmm, which one . . . ?" The Lieutenant opened a desk drawer and pulled out a volume.

"Don't you do it in advance?" Rosselli asked.

The Marine grinned up at his boss. "No, sir, that's cheating. We used to do it that way, but we changed things about two years ago, when things lightened up. Now it's sort of a game. He picks a poem, and I have to respond with a corresponding passage from an American poet. It helps pass the time, Cap'n. Good for language skills on both sides. Translating poetry is a bitch—good exercise." The Soviet side transmitted its messages in Russian, and the Americans in English, necessitating skilled translators at both ends.

"Much real business on the line?"

"Captain, I've never seen much more than test messages. Oh, when we have the SecState flying over, sometimes we check weather data. We even chatted a little about hockey when their national team came over to play with the NHL

guys last August, but mainly it's duller than dirt, and that's why we trade poetry passages. Weren't for that, we'd all go nuts. Shame we can't talk like on CB or something, but the rules are the rules."

"Guess so. They say anything about the treaty stuff in Rome?"

"Not a word. We don't do that, sir."

"I see." Rosselli watched the Lieutenant pick a stanza from "Annabel Lee." He was surprised. Rosey had expected something from "The Raven." Nevermore . . .

The arrival day was one of rest and ceremony—and mystery. The treaty terms had still not been leaked, and news agencies, knowing that something "historic" had happened, were frantic to discover exactly what it was. To no avail. The chiefs of state of Israel, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, the Soviet Union, the United States of America, and their host, Italy, arrayed themselves around a massive 15th-century table, punctuated with their chief diplomats and representatives of the Vatican and the Eastern Orthodox Church. In deference to the Saudis, toasts were offered in water or orange juice, which was the only discordant note of the evening. Soviet President Andrey Il'ych Narmonov was particularly effusive. His country's participation in the treaty was a matter of great importance, and the inclusion of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Commission for Christian Shrines would have major political import in Moscow. The dinner lasted three hours, after which the guests departed in view of the cameras on the far side of the avenue, and once more the newsies were thunderstruck by the fellowship. A jovial Fowler and Narmonov traveled together to the former's hotel and availed themselves for only the second time of the opportunity to discuss matters of bilateral interest.

"You have fallen behind in your deactivation of your missile forces," Fowler observed after pleasantries were dispensed with. He eased the blow by handing over a glass of wine.

"Thank you, Mr. President. As we told your people last week, our disposal facility has proven inadequate. We can't dismantle the damned things fast enough, and our naturelovers in parliament are objecting to our method of neutralizing the propellant stocks."

Fowler smiled in sympathy. "I know the problem, Mr. President." The environmental movement had taken off in the Soviet Union the previous spring, with the Russian parliament passing a new set of laws modeled on—but much tougher than—American statutes. The amazing part was that the central Soviet government was abiding by the laws, but Fowler couldn't say that. The environmental nightmare inflicted on that country by more than seventy years of Marxism would take a generation of tough laws to fix. "Will this affect the deadline for fulfilling the treaty requirements?"

"You have my word, Robert," Narmonov said solemnly. "The missiles will be destroyed by 1st March even if I must blow them up myself."

"That is good enough for me, Andrey."

The reduction treaty, a carryover from the previous administration, mandated a fifty-percent reduction in intercontinental launchers by the coming spring. All of America's Minuteman-II missiles had been tagged for destruction, and the U.S. side of the treaty obligations was fully on track. As

had been done under the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, the surplus missiles were dismantled to their component stages, which were either crushed or otherwise destroyed before witnesses. The news had covered the first few destructions, then grown tired of it. The missile silos, also under inspection, were stripped of their electronic equipment and, in the case of American structures, fifteen had already been declared surplus and sold—in four cases, farmers had purchased them and converted them to real silos. A Japanese conglomerate that had large holdings in North Dakota had further purchased a command bunker and made it into a wine cellar for the hunting lodge its executives used each fall.

American inspectors on the Soviet side reported that the Russians were trying mightily, but that the plant built for dismantlement of the Russian missiles had been poorly designed, as a result of which the Soviets were thirty percent behind schedule. Fully a hundred missiles were sitting on trailers outside the plant, the silos they'd left already destroyed by explosives. Though the Soviets had in each case removed and burned the guidance package in front of American inspectors, there were lingering intelligence evaluations that it was all a sham—the erector trailers, some argued, could elevate and fire the missiles. Suspicion of the Soviets was too hard a habit to break for some in the U.S. intelligence community, as was doubtless true of the Russians as well, Fowler thought.

"This treaty is a major step forward, Robert," Narmonov said after a sip from his wineglass—now that they were alone they could relax like gentlemen, the Russian thought with a sly grin. "You and your people are to be congratulated."

"Your help was crucial to its success, Andrey," Fowler replied graciously. It was a lie, but a politic one which both men understood. In fact it was not a lie, but neither man knew that.

"One less trouble spot for us to worry about. How blind we were!"

"That is true, my friend, but it is behind us. How are your people dealing with Germany?"

"The Army is not happy, as you might imagine—"

"Neither is mine." Fowler interrupted gently with his pronouncement. "Soldiers are like dogs. Useful, of course, but they must know who the master is. Like dogs, they can be forgetful and must be reminded from time to time."

Narmonov nodded thoughtfully as the translation came across. It was amazing how arrogant this man was. Just what his intelligence briefings had told him, the Soviet President noted. And patronizing, too. Well, the American had the luxury of a firm political system, Andrey Il'ych told himself. It allowed Fowler to be so sure of himself while he, Narmonov, had to struggle every day with a system not yet set in stone. Or even wood, the Russian thought bleakly. What a luxury indeed to be able to look on soldiers as dogs to be cowed. Didn't he know that dogs also had teeth? So strange the Americans were. Throughout communist rule in the Soviet Union, they had fretted about the political muscle of the Red Army—when in fact it had had none at all after Stalin's elimination of Tukhachevskiy. But now they discounted all such stories while the dissolution of the iron hand of Marxism-Leninism was allowing soldiers to think in ways that would have ended in execution only a

few years earlier. Well, this was no time to disabuse the American of his illusions, was it?

"Tell me, Robert, this treaty idea—where exactly did it come from?" Narmonov asked. He knew the truth and wanted to see Fowler's abilities as a liar.

"Many places, as with all such ideas," the President replied lightly. "The moving force was Charles Alden—poor bastard. When the Israelis had that terrible incident, he activated his plan immediately and—well, it worked, didn't it?"

The Russian nodded again, and made his mental notes. Fowler lied with skill, evading the substance of the question to give a truthful but evasive answer. Khrushchev was right, as he'd already known. Politicians all the world over are not terribly different. It was something to remember about Fowler. He didn't like sharing credit, and was not above lying in the face of a peer, even over something so small as this. Narmonov was vaguely disappointed. Not that he'd expected anything else, but Fowler could have shown grace and humanity. He'd stood to lose nothing by it, after all. Instead he was as petty as any local Party *apparatchik. Tell me, Robert*, Narmonov asked behind a poker face that would have stood him well in Las Vegas, *what sort of man are you?*

"It is late, my friend," Narmonov observed. "Tomorrow afternoon, then?"

Fowler stood. "Tomorrow afternoon, Andrey."

Bob Fowler escorted the Russian to the door and saw him off, then returned to his suite of rooms. Once there he pulled the handwritten checklist out of his pocket to make sure he'd asked all the questions.

"Well?"

"Well, the missile problem, he says, is exactly what our inspectors said it is. That ought to satisfy the guys at DIA." A grimace; it wouldn't. "I think he's worried about his military."

Dr. Elliot sat down. "Anything else?"

The President poured her a glass of wine, then sat beside his National Security Advisor. "The normal pleasantries. He's a very busy, very worried man. Well, we knew that, didn't we?"

Liz swirled the wine around the glass and sniffed at it. She didn't like Italian wines, but this one wasn't bad. "I've been thinking, Robert . . ."

"Yes, Elizabeth?"

"What happened to Charlie . . . we need to do something. It isn't fair that he should have disappeared like that. He's the guy who put this treaty on track, isn't he?"

"Well, yes," Fowler agreed, sipping at his own replenished glass. "You're right, Elizabeth. It really was his effort."

"I think we should let that out—quietly, of course. At the very least—"

"Yes, he should be remembered for something other than a pregnant grad student. That's very gracious of you, Elizabeth." Fowler tapped his glass against hers. "You handle the media people. You're releasing the treaty details tomorrow before lunch?"

"That's right, about nine, I think."

"Then after you're finished, take a few of the journalists aside and give it to them on background. Maybe Charlie will rest a little easier."

"No problem, Mr. President," Liz agreed. Exorcizing that particular demon came easily enough, didn't it? Was there anything she could not talk him into?

"Big day tomorrow."

"The biggest, Bob, the biggest." Elliot leaned back and loosened the scarf from her throat. "I never thought I'd ever have a moment like this."

"I did," Fowler observed with a twinkle in his eye. There came a momentary pang of conscience. He'd expected to have it with someone else, but that was fate, wasn't it? Fate. The world was so strange. But he had no control over that, did he? And fate had decreed that he would be here at the moment in question, with Elizabeth. It wasn't his doing, was it? Therefore, he decided, there was no guilt, was there? How could there be guilt? He was making the world into a better, safer, more peaceful place. How could guilt attach to that?

Elliot closed her eyes as the President's hand caressed her offered neck. Never in her wildest dreams had she expected a moment like this.

The entire floor of the hotel was reserved for the President's party, and the two floors under it. Italian and American guards stood at all the entrances, and at various places in the buildings along the street. But the corridor outside the President's suite of rooms was the exclusive domain of the Presidential Protective Detail. Connor and D'Agustino made their own final check before retiring for the evening. A full squad of ten agents were in view, and another ten were behind various closed doors. Three of the visible agents had FAG-bags, black satchels across their chests. Officially called fast-action-gun bags, each contained an Uzi submachine gun which could be extracted and fired in about a second and a half. Anyone who got this far would find a warm reception.

"I see HAWK and HARPY are discussing affairs of state," Daga observed quietly.

"Helen, I didn't think you were so much of a prude," Pete Connor replied with a sly grin.

"None of my business, but in the old days people outside the door had to be eunuchs or something."

"Keep talking like that and Santa will drop coal in your stocking."

"I'd settle for that new automatic the FBI adopted," Daga said with a chuckle. "They're like teenagers. It's unseemly."

"Daga . . ."

"I know, he's the Boss, and he's a big boy, and we have to look the other way. Relax, Pete, you think I'm going to blab to a reporter?" She opened the door to the fire stairs and saw three agents, two of whom had their FAG-bags at the ready.

"And I was about to offer you a drink, too. . . ." Connor said deadpan. It was a joke. He and Daga were nondrinkers while on duty, and they were nearly always on duty. It wasn't that he had never thought about getting into her pants. He was divorced, as was she, but it would never have worked, and that was that. She knew it, too, and grinned at him.

"I could use one—the stuff they have here is what I was raised on. What a crummy job this is!" A final look down the corridor. "Everybody's in place, Pete. I think we can call it a night."

"You really like the ten-millimeter?"

"Fired one last week up at Greenbelt. Got a possible with my first string. It doesn't get much better than that, lover."

Connor stopped dead in his tracks and laughed. "Christ, Daga!"

"People might notice?" D'Agustino batted her eyes at him. "See what I mean, Pete?"

"God, who ever heard of a Guinea puritan?"

Helen D'Agustino elbowed the senior agent in the ribs and made her way to the elevator. Pete was right. She was turning into a damned prude, and she'd never ever been like that. A passionate woman whose single attempt at marriage had collapsed because one household wasn't large enough for two assertive egos—at least not two Italian ones—she knew she was allowing her prejudices to color her judgment. That was not a healthy thing, even over something both trivial and divorced from her job. What HAWK did on his own time was his business, but the look in his eyes. . . . He was infatuated with the bitch. Daga wondered if any president had allowed that to happen. Probably, she admitted. They were only men, after all, and all men sometimes thought from the testicles instead of the brain. That the President should become a lackey of such a shallow woman as this—that was what offended her. But that, she admitted to herself, was both odd and inconsistent. After all, women didn't come much more liberated than she was. So why, she asked herself, was it bothering her? It had been too long a day for that. She needed sleep, and knew that she'd only get five or six hours before she was on duty again. *Damn these overseas trips. . . .*

"So what is it?" Qati asked just after dawn. He'd been away the previous day, meeting some other guerrilla leaders, and also for a trip to the doctor, Ghosn knew, though he could not ask about that.

"Not sure," the engineer replied. "I'd guess a jamming pod, something like that."

"That's useful," the Commander said at once. Despite the rapprochement, or whatever the key phrase was, between East and West, business was still business. The Russians still had a military, and that military still had weapons. Countermeasures against those weapons were items of interest. Israeli equipment was particularly prized, since the Americans copied it. Even old equipment showed how the Israeli engineers thought through problems, and could provide useful clues to newer systems.

"Yes, we should be able to sell it to our Russian friends."

"How did the American work out?" Qati asked next.

"Quite well. I do like him, Ismael. I understand him better now." The engineer explained why. Qati nodded.

"What should we do with him, then?"

Ghosn shrugged. "Weapons training, perhaps? Let's see if he fits in with the men."

"Very well. I'll send him out this morning to see how well he knows combat skills. And you, how soon will you pick the thing apart?"

"I planned to do it today."

"Excellent. Do not let me stop you."

"How are you feeling, Commander?"

Qati frowned. He felt terrible, but he was telling himself that part of that was the possibility of some sort of treaty with the Israelis. Could it be real? Could it be possible? History said no, but there had been so many changes. . . . Some sort of agreement between the Zionists and the Saudis . . . well, after the Iraq business, what could he expect? The Americans had played their role, and now they were presenting some kind of bill. Disappointing, but hardly unexpected, and whatever the Americans were up to would divert attention away from the latest Israeli atrocity. That people calling themselves Arabs had been so womanly as to meekly accept fire and death. . . . Qati shook his head. You didn't fight that way. So the Americans would do something or other to neutralize the political impact of the Israeli massacre, and the Saudis were playing along like the lapdogs they were. Whatever was in the offing, it could hardly affect the Palestinian struggle. He should soon be feeling better, Qati told himself.

"It is of no account. Let me know when you've determined exactly what it is."

Ghosn took his dismissal and left. He was worried about his commander. The man was ill—he knew that much from his brother-in-law, but exactly how sick he didn't know. In any case, he had work to do.

The workshop was a disreputable-looking structure of plain wood walls and a roof of corrugated steel. Had it looked more sturdy, some Israeli F-16 pilot might have destroyed it years before.

The bomb—he still thought of it by that name—lay on the dirt floor. An A-frame like that used for auto or truck service stood over it, with a chain for moving the bomb if necessary, but yesterday two men had set it up in accordance with his instructions. Ghosn turned on the lights—he liked a brightly lit work area—and contemplated the . . . bomb.

Why do I keep calling it that? he asked himself. Ghosn shook his head. The obvious place to begin was the access door. It would not be easy. Impact with the ground had telescoped the bombcase, doubtless damaging the internal hinges . . . but he had all the time he wanted.

Ghosn selected a screwdriver from his toolbox and went to work.

President Fowler slept late. He was still fatigued from the flight, and . . . he almost laughed at himself in the mirror. Good Lord, three times in less than twenty-four hours . . . wasn't it? He tried to do the arithmetic in his head, but the effort defeated him before his morning coffee. In any case, three times in relatively short succession. He hadn't done *that* in quite a long time! But he'd also gotten his rest. His body was composed and relaxed after the morning shower, and the razor plowed through the cream on his face, revealing a man with younger, leaner features that matched the twinkle in his eyes. Three minutes later he selected a striped tie to go with the white shirt and gray suit. Not somber, but serious was the prescription for the day. He'd let the churchmen dazzle the cameras with their red silk. His speech would be all the more impressive if delivered by a well-turned-out businessman/politician, which was his political image, despite the fact that he'd never in his life run a private business of any sort. A serious man, Bob Fowler—with a common touch to be sure, but a serious man whom one could trust to do The Right

Thing.

Well, I will sure as hell prove that today, the President of the United States told himself in yet another mirror as he checked his tie. His head turned at the knock on the door. "Come in."

"Good morning, Mr. President," said Special Agent Connor.

"How are you today, Pete?" Fowler asked, turning back to the mirror . . . the knot wasn't quite right, and he started afresh.

"Fine, thank you, sir. It's a mighty nice day outside."

"You people never get enough rest. Never get to see the sights, either. That's my fault, isn't it?" *There*, Fowler thought, *that's perfect.*

"It's okay, Mr. President. We're all volunteers. What do you want for breakfast, sir?"

"Good morning, Mr. President!" Dr. Elliot came in behind Connor. "This is the day!"

Bob Fowler turned with a smile. "It sure as hell is! Join me for breakfast, Elizabeth?"

"Love to. I have the morning brief—it's a nice short one for a change."

"Pete, breakfast for two . . . a big one. I'm hungry."

"Just coffee for me," Liz said to the servant. Connor caught the tone of her voice; but did not react beyond nodding before he left. "Bob, you look wonderful."

"So do you, Elizabeth." And so she did, in her most expensive suit, which was also serious-looking but just feminine enough. She took her seat and did the briefing.

"CIA says the Japanese are up to something," she said as she concluded.

"What?"

"They caught a whiff, Ryan says, of something in the next round of trade negotiations. The Prime Minister is quoted as saying something unkind."

"What exactly?"

" 'This is the last time we'll be cut out of our proper role on the world stage, and I'll make them pay for this,' " Dr. Elliot quoted. "Ryan thinks it's important."

"What do you think?"

"I think Ryan's being paranoid again. He's been cut out of this end of the treaty works, and he's trying to remind us how important he is. Marcus agrees with my assessment, but forwarded the report out of a fit of objectivity," Liz concluded with heavy irony.

"Cabot is something of a disappointment, isn't he?" Fowler observed as he looked over the briefing notes.

"He doesn't seem very effective at telling his people who the boss is. He's being captured by the bureaucracy over there, especially Ryan."

"You really don't like him, do you?" the President noted.

"He's arrogant. He's—"

"Elizabeth, he has a very impressive record. I don't much care for him either as a person, but as an intelligence officer he has done a lot of things very, very well."

"He's a throwback. He's James Bond—or thinks he is. Fine," Elliot admitted, "he's done some important things, but that sort of thing is history. We need

someone now with a broader view."

"Congress won't go for it," the President said as breakfast was wheeled in. The food had been scanned for radioactives, checked for electronic devices, and sniffed for explosives—which, the President thought, put one hell of a strain on the dogs, who probably liked sausage as well as he did. "We'll serve ourselves, thanks," the President dismissed the Navy steward before going on. "They love him there, Congress loves the guy." He didn't have to add the fact that Ryan, as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, was not merely a presidential appointee. He'd also been through a confirmation hearing in the U.S. Senate. Such people were not easily dismissed. There had to be a reason.

"I never have figured that out. Especially Trent. Of all the people to sign off on Ryan, why him?"

"Ask him," Fowler suggested as he buttered his pancakes.

"I have. He danced around the issue like the prima ballerina at the New York Ballet." The President laughed uproariously at that.

"Christ, woman, don't ever let *anybody* hear you say that!"

"Robert, we both support the estimable Mr. Trent's choice of sexual preference, but he is a prissy son of a bitch and we both know it."

"True," Fowler had to agree. "So what are you telling me, Elizabeth?"

"It's time for Cabot to put Ryan in his place."

"How much of this is envy for Ryan's part in the treaty, Elizabeth?"

Elliot's eyes flared, but the President was looking at his plate. She took a deep breath before speaking and tried to decide if it were a goad or not. Probably not, but the President wasn't the sort to be impressed by emotions in matters like this. "Bob, we've been through that. Ryan connected a few ideas that other people had already come up with. He's an intelligence officer, for God's sake! All they do is *report* what other people do."

"He's done more than that." Fowler saw where this was going, but it was fun to play games with her.

"Fine, he's killed people! Is that what's special about him? James goddamned Bond! You even let them execute the ones who—"

"Elizabeth, those terrorists also killed seven Secret Service agents. My life depends on those people, and it would have been damned ungracious and just plain idiotic of me to commute the sentences of people who killed their colleagues." The President almost frowned at that—*So much for strongly held principle, eh, Bob?* a voice asked him—but managed to control himself.

"And now you can't do it at all, or people will say that you failed to do it once out of personal self-interest. You allowed yourself to be trapped and outmaneuvered," she pointed out. She had been goaded after all, Liz decided, and answered in kind, but Fowler wasn't buying.

"Elizabeth, I may be the only former prosecutor in America who doesn't believe in capital punishment, but . . . we do live in a democracy, and the people support the idea." He looked up from his meal. "Those people were terrorists. I can't say I'm happy that I allowed them to be executed, but if anyone deserved it, they did. The time wasn't right to make a statement on that issue. Maybe in my second term. We have to wait for the right case. Politics is the art of the possible. That means one thing at a time, Elizabeth. You know that as well as I do."

"If you don't do something, you'll wake up and find that Ryan is running CIA for you. He's able, I admit, but he's something from the past. He's the wrong person for the times we live in."

God, you're an envious woman, Fowler thought. *But we all have our weaknesses.* It was time to stop playing with her, though. It wouldn't do to offend her too deeply.

"What do you have in mind?"

"We can ease him out."

"I'll think about it—Elizabeth, let's not spoil the day with a discussion like this one, okay? How do you plan to break the news of the treaty terms?"

Elliot leaned back and sipped at her coffee. She reproached herself for moving too soon and too passionately on this. She disliked Ryan greatly, but Bob was right. It wasn't the time, wasn't the place. She had all the time in the world to make her play, and she knew that she had to do it with skill.

"A copy of the treaty, I think."

"Can they read that fast?" Fowler laughed. The media was full of such illiterates.

"You should see the speculation. The lead *Times* piece was faxed in this morning. They're frantic. They'll eat it up. Besides, I ginned up some Cliff Notes for them."

"However you want to do it," the President said as he finished off his sausage. He checked his watch. Timing was everything. There was a six-hour time difference between Rome and Washington. That meant the treaty could not be signed until two in the afternoon at the earliest, so as to catch the morning news shows. But the American people had to be prepped for the news, and that meant that the TV crews had to have the details of the treaty by three, Eastern Daylight Time, in order to absorb everything fully. Liz would break the news at nine, twenty minutes from now, he noted. "And you'll be playing up Charlie's part in it?"

"Right. It's only fair that he should get most of the credit." *And so much for Ryan's part in the process*, Bob Fowler noted without comment. *Well, Charlie was the guy who really got it moving, wasn't he?* Fowler felt vaguely sorry for Ryan. Though he also thought the DDCI something from the past, he'd learned all that the man had done, and was impressed. Arnie van Damm thought a lot of Ryan also, and Arnie was the best judge of character in the administration. But Elizabeth was his National Security Advisor, and he could not have her and the DDCI at each other's throats, could he? No, he couldn't. It was that simple.

"Dazzle them, Elizabeth."

"Won't be hard." She smiled at him and left.

The task proved much harder than he'd expected. Ghosn thought about asking for help, but decided against it. Part of his aura in the organization was that he worked alone with these things except for the donkeywork, for which he would occasionally require a few strong backs.

The bomb/device/pod turned out to be of sturdier construction than he'd expected. Under the strong worklights, he took the time to wash it off with water and found a number of unexplained items. There were screw-in points

which were plugged shut with slot-bolts. On removing one, he found yet another electrical lead. More surprising, the bombcase was thicker than he'd expected. He'd dismantled an Israeli jamming pod before, but though it had mostly been of aluminum construction, there had been several places where the case had been of fiberglass or plastic, which was transparent to electronic radiation.

He'd started on the access hatch, but found it nearly impossible to pry open and tried to find something easier. But there wasn't anything easier. Now he returned to the hatch, frustrated that several hours of work had led nowhere.

Ghosn sat back and lit a cigarette. *What are you?* he asked the object.

It was so much like a bomb, he realized. The heavy case—why hadn't he realized that it was so damned heavy, too heavy for a jamming pod . . . but it couldn't be a bomb, could it? No fuses, no detonator, what he had seen of the inside was electrical wiring and connectors. It *had to be* some kind of electronic device. He stubbed the cigarette out in the dirt and walked over to his workbench.

Ghosn had a wide variety of tools, one of which was a gasoline-powered rotary saw, useful for cutting steel. It was really a two-man tool, but he decided to use it alone, and to use it on the hatch, which had to be less sturdy than the case itself. He set the cutting depth to nine millimeters and started the tool, manhandling it onto the hatch. The sound of the saw was dreadful, more so as the diamond-edge of the blade bit into the steel, but the weight of the saw was sufficient to keep it from jerking off the bomb, and he slowly worked it down along the edge of the access hatch. It took twenty minutes for him to make the first cut. He stopped the saw and set it aside, then probed the cut with a bit of thin wire.

Finally! he told himself. He was through. He'd guessed right. The rest of the bombcase seemed to be ... four centimeters or so, but the hatch was only a quarter of that. Ghosn was too happy to have accomplished *something* to ask himself why a jamming pod needed a full centimeter of hardened steel around it. Before starting again, he donned ear protection. His ears were ringing from the abuse of the first cut, and he didn't want a headache to make the job worse than it already was.

The "Special Report" graphics appeared on all the TV networks within seconds of one another. The network anchors who'd risen early—by the standards of their stint in Rome, that is—to receive their brief from Dr. Elliot raced to their booths literally breathless, and handed over their notes to their respective producers and researchers.

"I knew it," Angela Miriles said. "Rick, I *told* you!"

"Angie, I owe you lunch, dinner, and maybe breakfast in any restaurant you can name."

"I'll hold you to that." The chief researcher chuckled. The bastard could afford it.

"How do we do this?" the producer asked.

"I'm going to wing it. Give me two minutes and we're flying."

"Shit," Angie observed quietly to herself. Rick didn't like winging it. He did, however, like scooping the print reporters, and the timing of the event made

that a gimme. *Take that*, New York Times*!* He sat still only long enough for makeup, then faced the cameras as the network's expert—some expert! Miriles thought to herself—joined Rick in the anchor booth.

"Five!" the assistant director said. "Four, three, two, one!" His hand jerked at the anchor.

"It's real," Rick announced. "In four hours, the President of the United States, along with the President of the Soviet Union, the King of Saudi Arabia, and the Prime Ministers of Israel and Switzerland, plus the chiefs of two major religious groups will sign a treaty that offers the hope for a complete settlement of the disputed areas of the Middle East. The details of the treaty are stunning." He went on for three uninterrupted minutes, speaking rapidly as though to race with his counterparts on the other networks.

"There has been nothing like this in living memory, yet another miracle—no, yet another milestone on the road to world peace. Dick?" The anchor turned to his expert commentator, a former ambassador to Israel.

"Rick, I've been reading this for half an hour now, and I still don't believe it. Maybe this is a miracle. We sure picked the right place for it. The concessions made by the Israeli government are stunning, but so are the guarantees that America is making to secure the peace. The secrecy of the negotiations is even more impressive. Had these details broken as recently as two days ago, the whole thing might have come apart before our eyes, but here and now, Rick, here and now, I believe it. It's real. You said it right. It's real. It's really happening, and in a few hours we'll see the world change once more.

"This would never have happened but for the unprecedented cooperation of the Soviet Union, and clearly we owe a vast debt of thanks to the embattled Soviet President, Andrey Narmonov."

"What do you make of the concession made by all the religious groups?"

"Just incredible. Rick, there have been religious wars in this region for virtually all of recorded history. But we should put in here that the architect of the treaty was the late Dr. Charles Alden. A senior administration official was generous in praise to the man who died only weeks ago, and died in disgrace. What a cruel irony it is that the man who really identified the basic problem in the region as the artificial incompatibility of the religions, all of which began in this one troubled region, that that man is not here to see his vision become reality. Alden was apparently the driving force behind this agreement, and one can only hope that history will remember that, despite the timing and circumstances of his death, it was Dr. Charles Alden of Yale who helped to make this miracle happen." The former Ambassador was also a Yalie, and a classmate of Charlie Alden.

"What of the others?" the anchor asked.

"Rick, when something of this magnitude happens—and it's darned rare when it does—there are always a lot of people who play their individual roles, and all of those roles are important. The Vatican Treaty was also the work of Secretary Brent Talbot, ably supported by Undersecretary Scott Adler, who is, by the way, a brilliant diplomatic technician and Talbot's righthand man. At the same time, it was President Fowler who approved this initiative, who used muscle when that was needed, and who took Charlie's vision forward after his death. No president has ever had the political courage and dazzling vision to

stake his political reputation on so wild a gambit. Had we failed on this, one can scarcely imagine the political fallout, but Fowler pulled it off. This is a great day for American diplomacy, a great day for East-West understanding, and perhaps the greatest moment for world peace in all of human history."

"I couldn't have said it better, Dick. What about the Senate, which has to approve the Vatican Treaty, and also the U.S.-Israeli Bilateral Defense Treaty?"

The commentator grinned and shook his head in overt amusement. "This will go through the United States Senate so fast that the President might smear the printer's ink on the bill. The only thing that can slow this up is the rhetoric you'll hear in the committee room and on the Senate floor."

"But the cost of stationing American troops—"

"Rick, we have a military for the purpose of preserving the peace. That's their job, and to do that job in this place, America will pay whatever it costs. This isn't a sacrifice for the American taxpayer. It's a privilege, an historic honor to place the seal of American strength on the peace of the world. Rick, this is what America is all about. Of course we'll do it."

"And that's it for now," Rick said, turning back to Camera One. "We'll be back in two and a half hours for live coverage of the signing of the Vatican Treaty. We now return you to New York. This is Rick Cousins reporting to you from the Vatican."

"Son of a bitch!" Ryan breathed. This time, unfortunately, the TV had awakened his wife, who was watching the events on the tube with interest.

"Jack, how much did you—" Cathy stood and went off to make the morning coffee. "I mean, you went over there, and you—"

"Honey, I was involved. I can't say how much." Jack knew he ought to have been angry at how credit for the first proposal had been assigned to Alden, but Charlie had been a good guy, even if he had displayed his share of human weaknesses, and Alden had pushed it along when it had needed a push. Besides, he told himself, history will find out a little, as it usually did. The real players knew. He knew. He was used to being in the background, to doing things that others didn't and couldn't know about. He turned to his wife and smiled.

And Cathy knew. She'd heard him speculating aloud a few months earlier. Jack didn't know that he murmured to himself when he shaved, and thought he didn't wake her up when he arose so early, but she'd never yet failed to see him off, even if she didn't open her eyes. Cathy liked the way he kissed her, thinking her asleep, and didn't want to spoil it. He was having trouble enough. Jack was hers, and the goodness of the man was no mystery to his wife.

It's not fair, the other Dr. Ryan told herself. *It was Jack's idea—at least part of it was*. How many other things didn't she know? It was a question Caroline Muller Ryan, M.D., F.A.C.S., rarely asked herself. But she could not pretend that Jack's nightmares weren't real. He had trouble sleeping, was drinking too much, and what sleep he had was littered with things she could never ask about. Part of that frightened her. What had her husband done? What guilt was he carrying?

Guilt? Cathy asked herself. Why had she asked herself that?

Ghosn pried the hatch off after three hours. He'd had to change a blade on the cutting tool, but the delay had mainly resulted from the fact that he ought to have asked for an extra hand but been too proud to do so. In any case it was done, and a prybar finished the job. The engineer took a worklight and looked into the thing. He found yet another mystery.

The inside of the device was a metal lattice-frame—titanium perhaps? he wondered—which held in place a cylindrical mass ... secured with heavy bolts. Ghosn used his worklight to look around the cylinder and saw more wires, all connected to the cylinder. He caught the edge of a largish electronic device ... some sort of radar transceiver, he thought. Aha! So it was some sort of . . . but why, then . . . ? Suddenly he knew that he was missing something . . . something big. But what? The markings on the cylinder were in Hebrew, and he didn't know that other Semitic language well, and he didn't understand the significance of these markings. The frame which held it, he saw, was partially designed as a shock-absorber . . . and it had worked admirably. The framing was grossly distorted, but the cylinder it held seemed largely intact. Damaged to be sure, but it had not split. . . . Whatever was inside the cylinder was supposed to be protected against shock. That made it delicate, and *that* meant it was some sort of delicate electronic device. So he came back to the idea that it was a jamming pod. Ghosn was too focused to realize that his mind had closed out other options; that his engineer's brain was so fixed on the task at hand that he was ignoring possibilities and the signals that presented them. Whatever it was, however, he had to get it out first. He next selected a wrench and went to work on the bolts securing the cylinder in place.

Fowler sat in a 16th-century chair, watching the protocol officers flutter around like pheasants unable to decide whether to walk or fly. People commonly thought that affairs like this one were run smoothly by professional stage-managers who planned everything in advance. Fowler knew better. Sure, things were smooth enough when there had been time enough—a few months—to work out all the details. But this affair had been set up with days, not months, of preparation, and the dozen or so protocol officers had scarcely decided who was the boss among themselves. Curiously, it was the Russian and the Swiss officers who were the calmest, and before the American President's eyes, it was they who huddled and worked out a quick alliance, then presented their plan—whatever it was—to the others, which they then put into play. Just like a good football squad, the President smiled to himself. The Vatican representative was too old for a job like this. The guy—a bishop, Fowler thought, maybe a monsignor—was over sixty and suffering from an anxiety attack that might just kill him. Finally the Russian took him aside for two quick minutes, nods were exchanged and a handshake, then people started moving as though they had a common purpose. Fowler decided that he'd have to find out the Russian's name. He looked like a real pro. More importantly, it was hugely entertaining to watch, and it relaxed the President at a moment when he needed the relaxation.

Finally—only five minutes late, and that was a miracle, Fowler thought with a suppressed grin—the various heads of state rose from their chairs, summoned like the members of a wedding party by the nervous mother-in-

law-to-be, and told where to stand in line. More perfunctory handshakes were exchanged, along with a few jokes that suffered from the absence of translators. The Saudi King looked cross at the delays. As well he might, Fowler thought. The King probably had other things on his mind. Already there were death threats directed at him. But there was no fear on the man's face, Bob Fowler saw. He might be a humorless man, but he had the bearing and courage—and the class, the President admitted to himself—that went with his title. It had been he who'd first committed to the talks after two hours with Ryan. That was too bad, wasn't it? Ryan had filled in for Charlie Alden, taking his assignment on the fly and doing the job as though he'd prepared fully for it. The President frowned to himself at that. He'd allowed himself to forget just how frantic the initial maneuvers had been. Scott Adler in Moscow, Rome, and Jerusalem, and Jack Ryan in Rome and Riyadh. They'd done very well, and neither would ever get much credit. Such were the rules of history, President Fowler concluded. If they'd wanted credit, they ought to have tried for his job.

Two liveried Swiss Guards opened the immense bronze doors, revealing the corpulent form of Giovanni Cardinal D'Antonio. The sun-bright TV lights surrounded him with a man-made halo that nearly elicited a laugh from the President of the United States of America. The procession into the room began.

Whoever had built this thing, Ghosn thought, knew a thing or two about designing for brute force. It was odd, he thought. Israeli equipment always had a delicacy to it—no, wrong term. The Israelis were clever, efficient, elegant engineers. They made things as strong as they had to be, no more, no less. Even their ad hoc gear showed foresight and meticulous workmanship. But this one . . . this one was overengineered to a fare-theewell. It had been hurriedly designed and assembled. It was almost crude, in fact. He was grateful for that. It made disassembly easier. No one had thought to include a self-destruct device that he'd have to figure out first—the Zionists were getting devilishly clever at that! One such subsystem had nearly killed Ghosn only five months earlier, but there was none here. The bolts holding the cylinder in place were jammed, but still straight, and that meant it was just a matter of having a bigenough wrench. He squirted penetrating oil onto each, and after waiting for fifteen minutes and two cigarettes, he attached the wrench to the first. The initial turns came hard, but soon the bolt allowed itself to be withdrawn. Five more to go.

It would be a long afternoon. The speeches came first. The Pope began, since he was the host, and his rhetoric was surprisingly muted, drawing quiet lessons from Scripture, again focusing on the similarities among the three religions present. Earphones gave each of the chiefs of state and religious figures simultaneous translations, which were quite unnecessary, as each of them had a written copy of the various speeches, and the men around the table struggled not to yawn, for speeches were only speeches, after all, and politicians have trouble listening to the words of others, even other chiefs of state. Fowler had the most trouble. He'd be going last. He surreptitiously

checked his watch, keeping his face blank as he pondered the ninety minutes left to go.

It took another forty minutes, but finally all the bolts came out. Big, heavy, noncorrosive ones. This thing had been built to last, Ghosn thought, but that merely worked to his benefit. Now, to get the cylinder out. He took another careful look for possible antitamper devices—caution was the only defense in a job like his—and felt around the inside of the pod. The only thing connected was the radar transceiver; though there were three other plug connections, they were all vacant. In his fatigue, it did not strike Ghosn as odd that all three were facing him, easily accessible. The cylinder was jammed in place by the telescoped framing, but with the bolts removed, it was just a matter of applying enough force to drag it clear.

Andrey Il'ych Narmonov spoke briefly. His statement, Fowler thought, was simple and most dignified, showing remarkable modesty that was sure to elicit comment from the commentators.

Ghosn set an additional block and tackle on the A-frame. The cylinder, conveniently enough, had a hoist eye built into it. Thankfully the Israelis didn't like to waste energy any more than he did. The remainder of the pod was less heavy than he expected, but in a minute he had the cylinder hoisted to the point that its friction in its nesting frame was lifting the whole pod. That couldn't last. Ghosn sprayed more penetrating oil on the internal frame and waited for gravity to assert itself ... but after a minute his patience wore thin and he found a gap large enough for a prybar and started levering the frame away from the cylinder walls one fraction of a millimeter at a time. Inside of four minutes there was a brief shriek of protesting metal and the pod fell free. Then it was just a matter of pulling on the chain and hoisting the cylinder free.

The cylinder was painted green, and had its own access hatch, which was not entirely surprising. Ghosn identified the type of wrench he needed and began work on the four bolts holding it in place. These bolts were tight but yielded quickly to his pressure. Ghosn was going faster now, and the excitement that always came near the end of the job took hold, despite the good sense that told him to relax.

Finally it was Fowler's turn.

The President of the United States walked to the lectern, a brown-leather folder in his hands. His shirt was starched stiff as plywood, and it was already chafing his neck, but he didn't care. This was the moment for which he had prepared his entire life. He looked straight into the camera, his face set in an expression serious but not grave, elated but not yet joyous, proud but not arrogant. He nodded to his peers.

"Holy Father, Your Majesty, Mr. President," Fowler began, "Messrs Prime Minister, and to all the people of our troubled but hopeful world:

"We have met in this ancient city, a city that has known war and peace for

three thousand years and more, a city from which sprang one of the world's great civilizations, and is today home to a religious faith greater still. We have all come from afar, from deserts and from mountains, from sweeping European plains and from yet another city by a wide river, but unlike many foreigners who have visited this ancient city, we have all come in peace. We come with a single purpose—to bring an end to war and suffering, to bring the blessings of peace to one more troubled part of a world now emerging from a history bathed in blood but lit by the ideals that set us apart from the animals as a creation in the image of God." He looked down only to turn pages. Fowler knew how to give a speech. He'd had lots of practice over the previous thirty years, and he delivered this one as confidently as he'd addressed a hundred juries, measuring his words and his cadences, adding emotional content that belied his Ice Man image, using his voice like a musical instrument, something physical that was subordinate to and part of his intense personal will.

"This city, this Vatican state, is consecrated to the service of God and man, and today it has fulfilled that purpose better than at any time. For today, my fellow citizens of the world, today we have achieved another part of the dream that all men and women share wherever they may live. With the help of your prayers, through a vision given us so many centuries ago, we have come to see that peace is a better thing than war, a goal worthy of efforts even more mighty, demanding courage far greater than is required for the shedding of human blood. To turn away from war, to turn toward peace, is the measure of our strength.

"Today it is my honor, and a privilege that all of us share, to announce to the world a treaty to put a final end to the discord that has sadly defiled an area holy to us all. With this agreement, there will be a final solution based on justice, and faith, and the word of the God Whom we all know by different names, but Who knows each of us.

"This treaty recognizes the rights of all men and women in the region to security, and freedom of religion, to freedom of speech, to the basic dignity enshrined in the knowledge that all of us are God's creations, that each of us is unique, but that we are all equal in His sight. . . ."

The final hatch came open. Ghosn closed his eyes and whispered a fatigued prayer of thanks. He'd been at this for hours, skipping his noon meal. He set the hatch down, placing the bolts on the concave surface so that they wouldn't be lost. Ever the engineer, Ghosn was neat and tidy in everything he did. Inside the hatch was a plastic seal, still tight, he noted with admiration. That was a moisture and weather seal. And *that* definitely made it a sophisticated electronic device. Ghosn touched it gently. It wasn't pressurized. He used a small knife to cut the plastic and peeled it carefully aside. He looked for the first time into the cylinder, and it was as though a hand of ice suddenly gripped his heart. He was looking at a distorted sphere of yellow-gray . . . like dirty bread dough.

It was a bomb.

At least a self-destruct device. A very powerful one, fifty kilos of high explosive. . . .

Ghosn backed off; a sudden urge to urinate gripped his loins. The engineer

fumbled for a smoke and lit it on the third attempt. How had he missed . . . what? What had he missed? Nothing. He'd been as careful as he always was. The Israelis hadn't killed him yet. Their design engineers were clever, but so was he.

Patience, he told himself. He commenced a new examination of the cylinder's exterior. There was the wire, still attached, from the radar device, and three additional plug points, all of them empty.

What do I know of this thing?

Radar transceiver, heavy case, access hatch . . . explosive sphere wired with . . .

Ghosn leaned forward again to examine the object. At regular and symmetrical intervals on the sphere were detonators ... the wires from them were . . .

It isn't possible. No, it cannot be that!

Ghosn removed the detonators one by one, detaching the wires from each, and setting them down on a blanket, slowly and carefully, for detonators were the most twitchy things man made. The high explosive, on the other hand, was so safe to use that you could pinch off a piece and set it on fire to boil water. He used the knife to pry loose the surprisingly hard blocks.

"There is an ancient legend of Pandora, a woman of mythology given a box. Though told not to open it, she foolishly did so, admitting strife and war and death into our world. Pandora despaired at her deeds until she found, remaining alone in the bottom of the nearly empty box, the spirit of hope. We have seen all too much of war and strife, but now we have finally made use of hope. It has been a long road, a bloody road, a road marked with despair, but it has always been an upward road, because hope is humanity's collective vision of what can, should, and *must* be, and hope has led us to this point.

"That ancient legend may have its origin in paganism, but its truth is manifest today. On this day we put war and strife and unnecessary death back into the box. We close the box on conflict, leaving in our possession hope, Pandora's last and most important gift to all humanity. This day is the fulfillment of the dream of all mankind.

"On this day, we have accepted from the hands of God the gift of peace.

"Thank you." The President smiled warmly at the cameras and made his way to his chair amid the more-than-polite applause of his peers. It was time to sign the treaty. The moment was here, and after being the last speaker, Fowler would be the first to sign. The moment came quickly, and J. Robert Fowler became a man of history.

He was not going slowly now. He pulled the blocks away, knowing as he did so that he was being reckless and wasteful, but now he knew—thought he knew—what he had in his hands.

And there it was, a ball of metal, a shining nickel-plated sphere, not corroded or damaged by its years in the Druse's garden, protected by the plastic seal of the Israeli engineers. It was not a large object, not much larger than a ball that a child might play with. Ghosn knew what he would do next. He reached his hand all the way into the sundered mass of explosives, extending his fingers to the gleaming nickel surface.

Ghosn's fingertips brushed the ball of metal. It was warm to the touch.
"Allahu akhbar!"

9

RESOLVE

"This is interesting."

"It's a rather unique opportunity," Ryan agreed.

"How reliable—how trustworthy?" Cabot asked.

Ryan smiled at his boss. "Sir, that's always the question. You have to remember how the game works. You're never sure of anything—that is, what certainty you have generally takes years to acquire. This game only has a few rules, and nobody ever knows what the score is. In any case, this is a lot more than a defection." His name was Oleg Yurievich Lyalin—Cabot didn't know that yet—and he was a KGB "Illegal" who operated without the shield of diplomatic immunity and whose cover was that of a representative of a Soviet industrial concern. Lyalin ran a string of agents with the code name of THISTLE, and he was running it in Japan. "This guy is a real field-spook. He's got a better net going than the KGB *Rezident* in Tokyo, and his best source is right in the Japanese cabinet."

"And?"

"And he's offering us the use of his network."

"Is this as important as I'm starting to think it is . . . ?" the DCI asked his deputy.

"Boss, we rarely get a chance like this. We've never really run ops in Japan. We lack a sufficient number of Japanese-speaking people—even here on the inside to translate their documents—and our priorities have always been elsewhere. So just establishing the necessary infrastructure to conduct ops there would take years. But the Russians have been working in Japan since before the Bolsheviks took over. The reason is historical: the Japanese and the Russkies have fought wars for a long time, and they've always regarded Japan as a strategic rival—as a result of which they placed great emphasis on operations there even before Japanese technology became so important to them. What he is doing is essentially giving us the Russian business at a bargain price, the inventory, the accounts receivables, the physical plant, everything. It doesn't get much better than this."

"But what he's asking . . ."

"The money? So what? That's not a thousandth of a percent of what it's worth to our country," Jack pointed out.

"It's a million dollars a month!" Cabot protested. *Tax free!* the Director of Central Intelligence did not add.

Ryan managed not to laugh. "So the bastard's greedy, okay? Our trade deficit with Japan is how much at last count?" Jack inquired with a raised eyebrow. "He's offering us whatever we want for as long as we want it. All we

have to do is arrange to pick him up and fly him and his family over whenever it becomes necessary. He doesn't want to retire to Moscow. He's forty-five, and that's the age when they get antsy. He has to rotate home in ten years—to what? He's lived in Japan almost continuously for thirteen years. He likes affluence. He likes cars, and VCRs, and not standing in line for potatoes. He likes us. About the only people he doesn't like is the Japanese—he doesn't like them at all. He figures he's not even betraying his country, 'cause he's not giving us anything he isn't feeding them, and part of the deal is that he does nothing against Mother Russia. Fine, I can live with that." Ryan chuckled for a moment. "It's capitalism. The man is starting an elite news service, and it's information we can really use."

"He's charging enough."

"Sir, it's worth it. The information he can give us will be worth billions in our trade negotiations, and billions in federal taxes as a result. Director, I used to be in the investment business, that's how I made my money. Investment opportunities like this come along about once every ten years. The Directorate of Operations wants to run with it. I agree. We'd have to be crazy to say no to this guy. His introductory package—well, you've had a chance to read it, right?"

The introductory package was the minutes of the last Japanese cabinet meeting, every word, grunt, and hiss. It was highly valuable for psychological analysis if nothing else. The nature of the exchange in the cabinet meetings could tell American analysts all sorts of things about how their government thought and reached decisions. That was data often inferred but never confirmed.

"It was most enlightening, especially what they said about the President. I didn't forward that. No sense getting him annoyed at a time like this. Okay—the operation is approved, Jack. How do we run things like this?"

"The code name we've selected is MUSHASHI. That's the name of a famous samurai dueling master, by the way. The operation will be called NIITAKA. We'll use Japanese names for the obvious reason"—Jack decided to explain; though Cabot was bright, he was new to the intelligence trade—"in the event of compromise or a leak from our side, we want it to appear that our source is Japanese, not Russian. Those names stay in this building. For outsiders who get let into this, we use a different code name. That one will be computer-generated and it'll change on a monthly basis."

"And the real name of the agent?"

"Director, it's your choice. You have the right to know it. I deliberately have not told you to this point because I wanted you to see the whole picture first. Historically it's evenly split, some directors want to know, and about the same number do not. It's a principle of intelligence operations that the fewer the number of people who know things, the less likely that there will be any sort of leak. Admiral Greer used to say the First Law of Intelligence Operations is that the likelihood of an operation's being burned was proportional to the *square* of the people in on the details. Your call, sir."

Cabot nodded thoughtfully. He decided to temporize. "You liked Greer, didn't you?"

"Like a father, sir. After I lost Dad in the plane crash, well, the Admiral sort

of adopted me." *More like I adopted him*, Ryan thought. "On MUSHASHI, you'll probably want to think it through."

"And if the White House asks to know the details?" Cabot asked next.

"Director, despite what MUSHASHI thinks, his employers will regard what he is doing as high treason, and that's a capital crime over there. Narmonov is a good guy and all that, but the Soviets have executed forty people that we know of for espionage. That included TOP HAT, JOURNEYMAN, and a guy named Tolkachev, all of whom were highly productive agents for us. We tried to do a trade in all three cases, but they were popped before negotiations had a chance to get under way. The appeals process in the Soviet Union is still somewhat abbreviated," Ryan explained. "The simple fact, sir, is that if this guy gets burned, he will probably be shot right in the head. That's why we take agent-identity so seriously. If we screw up, people die, *glasnost* notwithstanding. Most presidents understand that. One more thing."

"Yes?"

"He's told us something else. He wants all his reports to be handled physically, not by cable. If we don't agree, he doesn't do business. Okay, technically that's no problem. We've done that before with agents of this caliber. The nature of his information is such that immediacy is not required. There's daily air service to and from Japan via United, Northwest, and even All Nippon Airways straight into Dulles International Airport."

"But . . ." Cabot's face twisted into a grimace.

"Yeah." Jack nodded. "He doesn't trust our communications security. That scares me."

"You don't think . . . ?"

"I don't know. We've had very limited success penetrating Soviet ciphers for the past few years. NSA assumes that they have the same problems with ours. Such assumptions are dangerous. We've had indications before that our signals are not fully secure, but this one comes from a very senior guy. I think we have to take this seriously."

"Just how scary could this be?"

"Terrifying," Jack answered flatly. "Director, for obvious reasons we have numerous communications systems. We have MERCURY right downstairs to handle all of our stuff. The rest of the government mainly uses stuff from NSA; Walker and Pelton compromised their systems a long time ago. Now, General Olson over at Fort Meade says they've fixed all that, but for expense reasons they have not fully adopted the TAPDANCE one-time systems that they've been playing with. We can warn NSA again—I think they'll ignore this warning also, but we have to do it—and on our end, I think it's time to act. For starters, sir, we need to think about a reexamination of MERCURY." That was the CIA's own communications nexus, located a few floors below the Director's office, and that used its own encrypting systems.

"Expensive," Cabot noted seriously. "With our budget problems . . .

"Not half as expensive as a systematic compromise of our message traffic is. Director, there is *nothing* as vital as secure communications links. Without that, it doesn't matter what else we have. Now, we've developed our own one-time system. All we need is authorization of funds to make it go."

"Tell me about it. I haven't been briefed in."

"Essentially it's our own version of the TAPDANCE. It's a one-time pad with transpositions stored on laser-disk CD-ROM. The transpositions are generated from atmospheric radio noise, then superencrypted with noise from later in the day—atmospheric noise is pretty random, and by using two separate sets of the noise, and using a computer-generated random algorithm to mix the two, well, the mathematicians say that's as random as it gets. The transpositions are generated by computer and fed onto laser disks in realtime. We use a different disk for every day of the year. Each disk is unique, two copies only, one to the station, one in MERCURY—no back-ups. The laser-disk reader we use at both ends looks normal, but has a beefed-up laser, and as it reads the transposition codes from the disk it also burns them right off the plastic. When the disk is used up, or the day ends—and the day will end first, since we're talking billions of characters per disk—the disk is destroyed by baking it in a microwave oven. That takes two minutes. It ought to be secure as hell. It can only be compromised at three stages: first, when the disks are manufactured; second, from disk-storage here; third, from disk-storage in each station. Compromise of one station does not compromise anyone else. We can't make the disks tamperproof—we've tried, and it would both cost too much and make them overly vulnerable to accidental damage. The downside of this is that it'll require us to hire and clear about twenty new communications technicians. The system is relatively cumbersome to use, hence the increased number of communicators. The main expense component is here. The field troops we've talked to actually prefer the new system because it's user-friendly."

"How much to set it up?"

"Fifty million dollars. We have to increase the size of MERCURY and set up the manufacturing facility. We have the space, but the machinery is expensive. From the time we get the money, we could have it up and running in maybe as little as three months."

"I see your point. It's probably worth doing, but getting the money . . . ?"

"With your permission, sir, I could talk to Mr. Trent about it."

"Hmm." Cabot stared down at his desk. "Okay, feel him out very gently. I'll bring this up with the President when he gets back. I'll trust you on MUSHASHI. You and who else know his real name?"

"The DO, Chief of Station Tokyo, and his case officer." The Director of Operations was Harry Wren, and if he was not quite Cabot's man, he was the man Cabot had picked for the job. Wren was on his way to Europe at the moment. A year ago Jack had thought the choice a mistake, but Wren was doing well. He'd also picked a superb deputy, actually a pair of them: the famous Ed and Mary Pat Foley, one of whom—Ryan could never decide which—would have been his choice for DO. Ed was the organization man, and Mary Pat was the cowboy side of the best husband-wife team the Agency had ever fielded. Making Mary Pat a senior executive would have been a worldwide first, and probably worth a few votes in Congress. She was pregnant again with her third, but that wasn't expected to slow Supergirl down. The Agency had its own day-care center, complete to cipher locks on the doors, a heavily armed response team of security officers, and the best play equipment Jack had ever seen.

"Sounds good, Jack. I'm sorry I faxed the President as soon as I did. I ought to have waited."

"No problem, sir. The information was thoroughly laundered."

"Let me know what Trent thinks about the funding."

"Yes, sir." Jack left for his office. He was getting good at this, the DDCI told himself. Cabot wasn't all that hard to manage.

Ghosn took his time to think. This was not a time for excitement, not a time for precipitous action. He sat down in the corner of his shop and chain-smoked his cigarettes for several hours, all the time staring at the gleaming metal ball that lay on the dirt floor. *How radioactive is it?* one part of his brain wondered almost continuously, but it was a little late for that. If that heavy sphere was giving off hard gammas, he was already dead, another part of his brain had already decided. This was a time to think and evaluate. It required a supreme act of will for him to sit still, but he managed it.

For the first time in many years he was ashamed of his education. He had expertise both in electrical and mechanical engineering, but he'd hardly bothered cracking a book about their nuclear equivalent. What possible use could such a thing have had for him? he asked himself on the rare occasions that he'd considered acquiring knowledge in that area. Obviously none. As a result of that, he'd limited himself to broadening and deepening his knowledge in areas of direct interest: mechanical and electronic fusing systems, electronic countermeasure gear, the physical characteristics of explosives, the capabilities of explosive-sensing systems. He was a real expert on this last category of study. He read everything he could find on the instrumentation used in detecting explosives at airports and other areas of interest.

Number One, Ghosn told himself on lighting cigarette number fifty-four of the day, *every book I can find on nuclear materials, their physical and chemical properties; bomb technology, bomb physics; radiological signatures . . . the Israelis must know the bomb is missing—since 1973!* he thought in amazement. *Then why . . . ? Of course. The Golan Heights are volcanic in origin. The underlying rock and the soil in which those poor farmers tried to raise their vegetables were largely basaltic, and basalt had a relatively high background-radiation count . . . the bomb was buried two or three meters in rocky soil, and whatever emissions it gave off were lost in background count. . . .*

I'm safe*!* Ghosn realized.

Of course! If the weapon were that "hot, " it would have been better shielded! Praise be to Allah for that!

Can I . . . can I? That was the question, wasn't it?

Why not?

"Why not?" Ghosn said aloud. "Why not. I have all the necessary pieces, damaged, but . . ."

Ghosn stubbed the cigarette out in the dirt next to all the others and rose. His body was racked by coughing—he knew that cigarettes were killing him . . . more dangerous than that . . . but they were good for thinking.

The engineer lifted the sphere. What to do with it? For the moment, he set it in the corner and covered it with a toolbox. Then he walked out of the building toward his jeep. The drive to headquarters took fifteen minutes.

“I need to see the Commander,” Ghosn told the chief guard.

“He just retired for the evening,” the guard said. The entire detail was becoming protective of their commander.

“He’ll see me.” Ghosn walked right past him and into the building.

Qati’s quarters were on the second floor. Ghosn went up the steps, past another guard, and pulled open the bedroom door. He heard retching from the adjoining bathroom.

“Who the devil is it?” a cross voice asked. “I told you that I didn’t want to be disturbed!”

“It’s Ghosn. We need to talk.”

“Can’t it wait?” Qati appeared from the lighted doorway. His face was ashen. It came out as a question, not an order, and that told Ibrahim more than he’d ever known of his Commander’s condition. Perhaps this would make him feel better.

“My friend, I need to show you something. I need to show it to you tonight.” Ghosn strained to keep his voice level and unexcited.

“Is it that important?” Almost a moan.

“Yes.”

“Tell me about it.”

Ghosn just shook his head, tapping his ear as he did so. “It’s something interesting. That Israeli bomb has some new fusing systems. It nearly killed me. We need to warn our colleagues about it.”

“Bomb? I thought—” Qati stopped himself. His face cleared for a moment and the Commander’s expression formed a question. “Tonight, you say?”

“I’ll drive you over myself.”

Qati’s strength of character prevailed. “Very well. Let me get my clothes on.”

Ghosn waited downstairs. “The Commander and I have to go see about something.”

“Mohammed!” the chief guard called, but Ghosn cut him off.

“I’ll take the Commander myself. There is no security problem at my shop.”

“But—”

“But you worry like an old woman! If the Israelis were that clever, you’d already be dead, and the Commander with you!” It was too dark to see the expression on the guard’s face, but Ghosn could feel the rage that radiated toward him from the man, an experienced front-line fighter.

“We’ll see what the Commander says!”

“What’s the problem now?” Qati emerged from the door, tucking his shirt in.

“I’ll drive you myself, Commander. We don’t need a security force for this.”

“As you say, Ibrahim.” Qati walked to the jeep and got in. Ghosn drove off past some astonished security guards.

“What exactly is this all about?”

“It’s a bomb after all, not an electronics pod,” the engineer replied.

“So? We’ve retrieved scores of the cursed things! What is this all about?”

“It is easier to show you.” The engineer drove rapidly, watching the road. “If you think I have wasted your time—when we are done, feel free to end my life.”

Qati's head turned at that. The thought had already occurred to him, but he was too good a leader for that. Ghosn might not be the material of a fighter, but he was an expert at what he did. His service to the organization was as valuable as any man's. The Commander endured the rest of the ride in silence, wishing the medicines he was taking allowed him to eat—no, to retain what he ate.

Fifteen minutes later, Ghosn parked his jeep fifty meters from the shop and led his Commander to the building by an indirect route. By this time Qati was thoroughly confused and more than a little angry. When the lights went on, he saw the bombcase.

"So, what about it?"

"Come here." Ghosn led him to the corner. The engineer bent down and lifted the toolbox. "Behold!"

"What is it?" It looked like a small cannonball, a sphere of metal. Ghosn was enjoying this. Qati was angry, but that would soon change.

"It's plutonium."

The Commander's head snapped around as though driven by a steel spring. "What? What do—"

Ghosn held up his hand. He spoke softly but positively. "What I am sure of, Commander, is that this is the explosive portion of an atomic bomb. An Israeli atomic bomb."

"Impossible!" the Commander whispered.

"Touch it," Ghosn suggested.

The Commander bent down and touched a finger to it. "It's warm, why?"

"From the decay of alpha particles. A form of radiation that is not harmful—here it is not, in any case. That is plutonium, the explosive element of an atomic bomb. It can be nothing else."

"You're sure?"

"Positive, absolutely positive. It can only be what I say it is." Ghosn walked over to the bombcase. "These"—he held up some tiny electronic parts—"they look like glass spiders, no? They are called kryton switches, they perform their function with total precision, and that kind of precision is necessary for only one application found inside a bombcase. These explosive blocks, the intact ones, note that some are hexagons, some are pentagons? That is necessary to make a perfect explosive sphere. A shaped charge, like that for an RPG, but the focus is inward. These explosive blocks are designed to crush that sphere to the size of a walnut."

"But it's metal! What you say is not possible."

"Commander, I do not know as much as I should of these matters, but I do know a little. When the explosives go off, they compress that metal sphere as though it were made of rubber. It is possible—you know what an RPG does to the metal on a tank, no? There is enough explosive here for a hundred RPG projectiles. They will crush the metal as I say. When it is compressed, the proximity of the atoms begins a nuclear chainreaction. Think, Commander:

"The bomb fell into the old man's garden on the first day of the October War. The Israelis were frightened by the force of the Syrian attack, and they were immensely surprised by the effectiveness of the Russian rockets. The aircraft was shot down, and the bomb was lost. The exact circumstances don't

matter. What matters, Ismael, is that we have the parts of a nuclear bomb." Ghosn pulled out another cigarette and lit it.

"Can you . . ."

"Possibly," the engineer said. Qati's face was suddenly cleared of the pain he'd known for over a month.

"Truly Allah is beneficent."

"Truly He is. Commander, we need to think about this, very carefully, very thoroughly. And security . . ."

Qati nodded. "Oh, yes. You did well to bring me here alone. For this matter we can trust no one . . . no one at all...." Qati let his voice trail off, then turned to his man. "What do you need to do?"

"My first need is for information—books, Commander. And do you know where I must go to get them?"

"Russia?"

Ghosn shook his head. "Israel, Commander. Where else?"

Representative Alan Trent met with Ryan in a House hearing room. It was the one used for closed-door hearings, and was swept daily for bugs.

"How's life treating you, Jack?" the congressman asked.

"No special complaints, Al. The President had a good day."

"Indeed he did—the whole world did. The country owes you a debt of thanks, Dr. Ryan."

Jack's smile dripped with irony. "Let's not allow anybody to learn that, okay?"

Trent shrugged. "Rules of the game. You should be used to it by now. So. What brings you down on such short notice?"

"We have a new operation going. It's called NIITAKA." The DDCI explained on for several minutes. At a later date he would have to hand over some documentation. All that was required now was notification of the operation and its purpose.

"A million dollars a month. That's *all* he wants?" Trent laughed aloud.

"The Director was appalled," Jack reported.

"I've always liked Marcus, but he's a tightfisted son of a bitch. We've got two certified Japan-bashers on the oversight committee, Jack. It's going to be hard to rein them in with this stuff."

"Three, counting you, Al."

Trent looked very hurt. "Me, a Japan-basher? Just because there used to be two TV factories in my district, and a major auto-parts supplier has laid off half its people? Why the hell should I be the least bit angry about that? Let me see the cabinet minutes," the congressman commanded.

Ryan opened his case. "You can't copy them, you can't quote from them. Look, Al, this is a long-term op and—"

"Jack, I didn't just get into town from the chicken ranch, did I? You've turned into a humorless SOB. What's the problem?"

"Long hours," Jack explained as he handed the papers over. Al Trent was a speed reader, and flicked through the pages with indecent speed. His face went into neutral, and he turned back into what he was before all things, a cold, calculating politician. He was well to the left side of the spectrum, but

unlike most of his ilk Trent let his ideology stop at the water's edge. He also saved his passion for the House floor and his bed at home. Elsewhere he was icily analytical.

"Fowler will go ballistic when he sees this. They are the most arrogant people. You've sat in on cabinet meetings. Ever hear stuff like this?" Trent asked.

"Only on political matters. I was surprised by the tone of the language, too, but it might just be a cultural thing, remember."

The congressman looked up briefly. "True. Beneath the patina of good manners, they can be wild and crazy folks, kind of like the Brits, but this is like Animal House. . . . Christ, Jack, this is explosive. Who recruited him?"

"The usual mating dance. He shows up at various receptions, and Chief of Station Tokyo caught a whiff, let it simmer for a few weeks, then made his move. The Russian handed over the packet and his contractual demands."

"Why Operation NIITAKA, by the way? I've heard that before somewhere, haven't I?"

"I picked it myself. When the Japanese strike force was heading for Pearl Harbor, the mission-execute signal was 'Climb Mount Niitaka.' Remember, you're the only guy here who knows that word. We're going onto a monthly-change identification cycle on this. This is hot enough that we're giving him the whole treatment."

"Right," Trent agreed. "What if this guy's an agent provocateur?"

"We've wondered about that. It's possible but unlikely. For KGB to do that—well, it kinda breaks the rules as they are understood now, doesn't it?"

"Wait!" Trent read over the last page again. "What the hell's this about communications?"

"What it is, is scary." Ryan explained what he wanted to do.

"Fifty million? You sure?"

"That's the one-time start-up costs. Then there's the new communicators. Total annual costs after start-up are about fifteen million."

"Pretty reasonable, actually." Trent shook his head. "NSA is quoting a much higher price to switch over to their system."

"They have a bigger infrastructure to worry about. That number I gave you ought to be solid. MERCURY is pretty small."

"How soon do you want it?" Trent knew that Ryan quoted hard budget numbers. It came from his business experience, Al knew, which was pretty thin in government service.

"Last week would be nice, sir."

Trent nodded. "I'll see what I can do. You want it 'black,' of course?"

"Like a cloudy midnight," Ryan answered.

"Goddamn it!" Trent swore. "I've *told* Olson about this. His technical weenies do their rain dance and he buys it every time. What if—"

"Yeah, what if all our communications are compromised." Jack did not make it a question. "Thank God for *glasnost*, eh?"

"Does Marcus understand the implications?"

"I explained it to him this morning. He understands. Al, Cabot may not have all the experience you or I would like, but he's a fast learner. I've had worse bosses."

"You're too loyal. Must be a lingering symptom of your time in the Marines," Trent observed. "You'd be a good director."

"Never happen."

"True. Now that Liz Elliot is National Security Advisor, you'll have to cover your ass. You know that."

"Yep."

"What in hell did you do to piss her off? Not that it's all that hard to do."

"It was back right after the convention," Ryan explained. "I was up in Chicago to brief Fowler. She caught me tired from a couple of long trips and she yanked my chain pretty hard. I yanked back."

"Learn to be nice to her," Trent suggested.

"Admiral Greer said that."

Trent handed the papers back to Ryan. "It is difficult, isn't it?"

"Sure is."

"Learn anyway. Best advice I can give you." *Probably a total waste of time, of course.*

"Yes, sir."

"Good timing on the request, by the way. The rest of the committee will be impressed as hell with the new operation. The Japan-bashers will put the word out to their friends on Appropriations that the Agency is really doing something useful. We'll have the money to you in two weeks if we're lucky. What the hell, fifty million bucks—chicken feed. Thanks for coming down."

Ryan locked his case and stood. "Always a pleasure."

Trent shook his hand. "You're a good man, Ryan. What a damned shame you're straight."

Jack laughed. "We all have our handicaps, Al."

Ryan returned to Langley to put the NIITAKA documents back in secure storage, and that ended his work for the day. He and Clark took the elevator down to the garage and left the building an hour early, something they did every two weeks or so. Forty minutes later they pulled into the parking lot of a 7-Eleven between Washington and Annapolis.

"Hello, Doc Ryan!" Carol Zimmer said from behind the register. One of her sons relieved her there, and she led Jack into the back room. John Clark checked out the store. He wasn't worried about Ryan's security, but he had some lingering worries about the way some local toughs felt about the Zimmer enterprise. He and Chavez had taken care of that one gang leader, having done so in front of three of his minions, one of whom had tried to interfere. Chavez had shown mercy to that lad, who hadn't required an overnight stay at the local hospital. That, Clark judged, was a sign of Ding's growing maturity.

"How is business?" Jack asked in the back room.

"We up twenty-six 'rcent from this time las' year."

Carol Zimmer had been born in Laos less than forty years before, rescued from a hilltop fortress by an Air Force special-operations helicopter just as the North Vietnamese Army had overrun that last outpost of American power in Northern Laos. She'd been sixteen at the time, the last living child of a Hmong chieftain who'd served American interests, and his own—he'd been a willing agent—courageously and well, and to the death. She'd married Air Force

sergeant Buck Zimmer, who'd died in yet another helicopter after yet another betrayal, and then Ryan had stepped in. He hadn't lost his business sense despite his years of government service. He'd selected a good site for the store, and as fate had it, they hadn't needed his educational trust fund for the first of the kids now in college. With a kind word from Ryan to Father Tim Riley, the lad had a full scholarship at Georgetown and was already dean's-listed in pre-med. Like most Asians, Carol had a reverence for learning that bordered on religious fanaticism, and which she passed on to all of her kids. She also ran her store with the mechanistic precision a Prussian sergeant expected of an infantry squad. Cathy Ryan could have performed a surgical procedure on the register counter. It was that clean. Jack smiled at the thought. Maybe Laurence Alvin Zimmer, Jr., would do just that.

Ryan looked over the books. His CPA certificate had lapsed, but he could still read a balance sheet.

"You eat dinnah with us?"

"Carol, I can't. I have to get home. My son has a Little League game tonight. Everything's okay? No problems—not even those punks?"

"They not come back. Mistah Clark scare them away fo' good!"

"If they ever come back, I want you to call me right away," Jack said seriously.

"Okay, okay. I learn lesson," she promised him.

"Fine. You take care." Ryan stood.

"Doc Ryan?"

"Yes?"

"Air Force say Buck die in accident. I never ask anybody, but I ask you: accident, no accident?"

"Carol, Buck lost his life doing his job, saving lives. I was there. So was Mr. Clark."

"The ones make Buck die . . . ?"

"You have nothing to fear from them," Ryan said evenly. "Nothing at all." Jack saw the recognition in her eyes. Though Carol had modest language skills, she'd caught what he'd meant by his answer.

"Thank you, Doc Ryan. I never ask again, but I must know."

"It's okay." He was surprised she'd waited so long.

The bulkhead-mounted speaker rattled. "Conn, sonar. I have a routine noise level bearing zero-four-seven, designate contact Sierra-5. No further information at this time. Will advise."

"Very well." Captain Ricks turned to the plotting table. "Tracking party, begin your TMA." The Captain looked around the room. Instruments showed a speed of seven knots, a depth of four hundred feet, and a course of three-zero-three. The contact was broad on his starboard beam.

The ensign commanding the tracking party immediately consulted the Hewlett-Packard minicomputer located in the starboard-after corner of the attack center. "Okay," he announced, "I have a trace angle . . . little shaky . . . computing now." That took the machine all of two seconds. "Okay, I have a range gate . . . it's a convergence zone, range between three-five and four-five thousand yards if he's in CZ-1, five-five and six-one thousand yards for CZ-2."

"It's almost too easy," the XO observed to the skipper.

"You're right, X, disable the computer," Ricks ordered.

Lieutenant Commander Wally Claggett, Executive Officer, "Gold," USS *Maine*, walked back to the machine and switched it off. "We have a casualty to the HP computer ... looks like it'll take hours to fix," he announced. "Pity."

"Thanks a lot," Ensign Ken Shaw observed quietly to the quartermaster hunched next to him at the chart table.

"Be cool, Mr. Shaw," the petty officer whispered back. "We'll take care o' ya. Don't need that thing now anyway, sir."

"Let's keep it quiet in the attack center!" Captain Ricks observed.

The submarine's course took her northwest. The sonar operators fed information to the attack center as she did so. Ten minutes later, the tracking party made its decision.

"Captain," Ensign Shaw announced. "Estimate contact Sierra-5 is in the first CZ, range looks like three-nine thousand yards, course is generally southerly, speed between eight and ten knots."

"You can do better than that!" the CO announced sharply.

"Conn, sonar, Sierra-5 looks like Akula-class Soviet fast-attack, preliminary target ident is Akula number six, the *Admiral Lunin*. Stand by"—a moment's silence—"possible aspect change on Sierra-5, possible turn. Conn, we have a definite aspect change. Sierra-5 is now beam-on, definite beam-aspect on target."

"Captain," the XO said, "that maximizes the effectiveness of his towed array."

"Right. Sonar, conn, I want a self-noise check."

"Sonar aye, stand by, sir." Another few seconds. "Conn, we're making some sort of noise . . . not sure what, rattle, like, maybe something in the after ballast tanks. Didn't show before, sir. Definitely aft . . . definitely metallic."

"Conn, maneuvering room, we got something screwy back here. I can hear something from aft, maybe in the ballast tanks."

"Captain," Shaw said next. "Sierra-5 is now on a reciprocal heading. Target course is now southeasterly, roughly one-three-zero."

"Maybe he can hear us," Ricks growled. "I'm taking us up through the layer. Make your depth one hundred feet."

"One hundred feet, aye," the diving officer responded immediately. "Helm, five degrees up on the fairwater planes."

"Five degrees up on the fairwater planes, aye. Sir, the fairwater planes are up five degrees, coming to one hundred feet."

"Conn, maneuvering, the rattle has stopped. It stopped when we took the slight up-angle."

The XO grunted next to the Captain. "What the hell does that mean . . . ?"

"It probably means that some dumbass dockyard worker left his toolbox in the ballast tank. That happened to a friend of mine once." Ricks was truly angry now, but if you had to have such incidents, here was the place for them. "When we get above the layer, I want to go north and clear datum."

"Sir, I'd wait. We know where the CZ is. Let him slide out of it, then we can maneuver clear while he can't hear us. Let him think he's got us scoped before we start playing tricks. He probably thinks we don't have him. By

maneuvering radically, we're tipping our hand."

Ricks considered that. "No, we've canceled the noise aft, we've probably dropped off his scopes already, and when we get above the layer, we can get lost in the surface noise and maneuver clear. His sonar isn't all that good. He doesn't even know what we are yet. He's just sniffing for something. This way we can put more distance between us."

"Aye aye," the XO responded neutrally.

Maine leveled off at one hundred feet, well above the thermocline layer, the boundary between relatively warm surface water and the cold deep water. It changed acoustical conditions drastically and, Ricks judged, should eliminate any chance that the Akula had him.

"Conn, sonar, contact lost on Sierra-5."

"Very well. I have the conn," Ricks announced.

"Captain has the conn," the officer of the deck acknowledged.

"Left ten degrees rudder, come to new course three-fivezero."

"Left ten degrees rudder, aye, coming to new course three-five-zero. Sir, my rudder is left ten degrees."

"Very well. Engine room, conn, make turns for ten knots."

"Engine room, aye, turns for ten knots. Building up slowly."

Maine steadied up on a northerly course and increased speed. It took several minutes for her towed-array sonar to straighten out and be useful again. During this time, the American submarine was somewhat blinded.

"Conn, maneuvering, we got that noise again!" the speaker announced.

"Slow to five—all ahead one-third!"

"All ahead one-third, aye. Sir, engine room answers all ahead one-third."

"Very well. Maneuvering, conn, what about that noise?"

"Still there, sir."

"We'll give it a minute," Ricks judged. "Sonar, conn, got anything on Sierra-5?"

"Negative, sir, holding no contacts at this time."

Ricks sipped at his coffee and watched the clock on the bulkhead for three minutes. "Maneuvering, conn, what about the noise?"

"Has not changed, sir. It's still there."

"Damn! X, bring her down a knot." Claggett did as he was told. The skipper was losing it, he realized. Not good. Another ten minutes passed. The worrisome noise aft attenuated but did not go away.

"Conn, sonar! Contact bearing zero-one-five, just appeared real sudden, like, it's Sierra-5, sir. Definite Akula-class, *Admiral Lunin*. Evaluate as direct-path contact, bow-on aspect. Probably just came up through the layer, sir."

"Does he have us?" Ricks asked.

"Probably yes, sir," the sonarman reported.

"Stop!" another voice announced. Commodore Mancuso walked into the room. "Okay, we conclude the exercise at this point. Will the officers please come with me?"

Everyone let out a collective breath as the lights went up. The room was set in a large square building shaped not at all like a submarine, though its various other rooms duplicated most of the important parts of an Ohio-class boomer. Mancuso led the attack-center crew into a conference room and

closed the door.

"Bad tactical move, Captain." Bart Mancuso was not known for his diplomacy. "XO, what advice was that you gave to your skipper?" Claggett recited it word for word. "Captain, why did you reject that advice?"

"Sir, I estimated that our acoustical advantage was sufficient to allow me to do that in such a way as to maximize separation from the target."

"Wally?" Mancuso turned to the skipper of the Red Team, Commander Wally Chambers, about to become the CO of USS *Key West.* Chambers had worked for Mancuso on *Dallas,* and had the makings of one hell of a fast-attack skipper. He had just proven that, in fact.

"It was too predictable, Captain. Moreover, by continuing course and changing depth course you presented the noise source to my towed array, and also gave me a hull-popping transient that ID'd you as a definite submarine contact. You would have been better off to turn bow-on, maintain depth, and slow down. All I had was a vague indication. If you'd slowed down, I would never have ID'd you. Since you didn't, I noted your hop on top the layer and sprinted in fast underneath as soon as I cleared the CZ. Captain, I didn't know I had you until you let me know, but you let me know, and you did let me get close. I floated my tail over the layer while I stayed right underneath it. There was a fairly good surface duct, and I had you at two-nine thousand yards. I could hear you, but you couldn't hear me. Then it was just a matter of continuing my sprint until I was close enough for a high-probability solution. I had you cold."

"The point of the exercise was to show you what happened when you lost your acoustical advantage." Mancuso let that sink in before going on. "Okay, so it wasn't fair, was it? Who ever said life was fair?"

"Akula's a good boat, but how good is its sonar?"

"We assume it's as good as a second-flight 688."

No way, Ricks thought to himself. "What other surprises can I expect?"

"Good question. The answer is that we don't know. And if you don't know, you assume they're as good as you are."

No way, Ricks told himself.

Maybe even better, Mancuso didn't add.

"Okay," the Commodore told the assembled attack-center crew. "Go over your own data and we do the wash-up in thirty minutes."

Ricks watched Captain Mancuso exit the room, sharing a chuckle with Chambers. Mancuso was a smart, effective subdriver, but he was still a damned fast-attack jockey who didn't belong in command of a boomer squadron because he simply didn't think the right way. Calling in his former shipmate from Atlantic Fleet, another fast-attack jockey—well, yeah, that's how it was done, but damn it! Ricks was sure he'd done the right thing.

It had been an unrealistic test. Ricks was sure of that. Hadn't Rosselli told the both of them that *Maine* was quiet as a black hole? Damn. This was his first chance to show the Commodore what he could do, and he'd been faked out of making a favorable impression by an artificial and unfair test, and some goofs from his people—the ones Rosselli had been so damned proud of.

"Mr. Shaw, let's see your TMA records."

"Here, sir." Ensign Shaw, who'd graduated sub school at Groton less than

two months before, was standing in the corner, the chart and his notes grasped tightly in his tense hands. Ricks snatched them away and spread them on a worktable. The Captain's eyes scanned the pages.

"Sloppy. You could have done this at least a minute faster."

"Yes, sir," Shaw replied. He didn't know how he might have gone faster, but the Captain said so, and the Captain was always right.

"That could have made the difference," Ricks told him, a muted but still nasty edge on his voice.

"Sorry, sir." That was Ensign Shaw's first real mistake. Ricks straightened, but still had to look up to meet Shaw's eyes. That didn't help his disposition either.

" 'Sorry' doesn't cut it, Mister. 'Sorry' endangers our ship and our mission. 'Sorry' gets people killed. 'Sorry' is what an unsatisfactory officer says. Do you understand me, Mr. Shaw?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine." The word came out as a curse. "Let's make sure this never happens again."

The rest of the half hour was spent going over the records of the exercise. The officers left the room for a larger one, where they would relive the exercise, learning what the Red Team had seen and done. Lieutenant Commander Claggett slowed the Captain down.

"Skipper, you were a little hard on Shaw."

"What do you mean?" Ricks asked in annoyed surprise.

"He didn't make any mistakes. I couldn't have done the track more than thirty seconds faster myself. The quartermaster I had with him has been doing TMAs for five years. He's taught it at sub school. I kept an eye on both of them. They did okay."

"Are you saying the mistake was my fault?" Ricks asked in a deceptively gentle voice.

"Yes, sir," the XO replied honestly, as he had been taught to do.

"Is that a fact?" Ricks walked out the door without another word.

To say that Petra Hassler-Bock was unhappy was an understatement of epic proportions. A woman in her late thirties, she'd lived over fifteen years on the run, hiding from the West German police before things had simply become too dangerous, precipitating her escape to the East Zone—what had been the East Zone, the *Bundeskriminalamt* investigator smiled to himself. Amazingly, she'd thrived on it. Every photo in the thick file showed an attractive, vital, smiling woman with a girl's unlined face framed by pretty brown hair. This same face had coldly watched three people die, one after several days of knifework, the detective told himself. That murder had been part of an important political statement—it had been at the time of the vote on whether or not to allow the Americans to base their Pershing-2 and Cruise missiles in Germany, and the Red Army Faction had wanted to terrify people into seeing things their way. It hadn't worked, of course, though it had made the victim's death into a gothic exercise.

"Tell me, Petra, did you enjoy killing Wilhelm Manstein?" the detective asked.

"He was a pig," she answered defiantly. "An overweight, sweaty, whoremongering pig."

That was how they'd caught him, the detective knew. Petra had set up the kidnapping first by attracting his attention, then by establishing a brief but fiery relationship. Manstein had not been the most attractive example of German manhood, of course, but Petra's idea of women's liberation was rather more robust than the norm in Western countries. The nastiest members of Baader-Meinhof and the RAF had been the women. Perhaps it was a reaction to the *Kinder-Küche-Kirche* mind-set of German males, as some psychologists said, but the woman before him was the most coldly frightening assassin he'd ever met. The first body parts mailed to Manstein's family had been those which had offended her so greatly. Manstein had lived for ten days after that, the pathologist's report stated, providing noisy red entertainment for this still-young lady.

"Well, you took care of that, didn't you? I imagine Günther was somewhat unsettled by your passion, wasn't he? After all, you spent—what? Five nights with Herr Manstein before the kidnapping? Did you enjoy that part also, *mein Schatz?"* The insult scored, the detective saw. Petra had been attractive once, but no longer. Like a flower a day after cutting, she was no longer a living thing. Her skin was sallow, her eyes surrounded by dark rings, and she'd lost at least eight kilos. Defiance blazed out from her, but only briefly. "I expect you did, giving in to him, letting him 'do his thing.' You must have enjoyed it enough that he kept coming back. It wasn't just baiting him, was it? It could not have been just an act. Herr Manstein was a discerning philanderer. He had so much experience, and he only frequented the most skillful whores. Tell me, Petra, how did you acquire so much skill? Did you practice beforehand with Gunther—or with others? All in the name of revolutionary justice, of course, or revolutionary *Kameradschaft, nicht wahr?* You are a worthless slut, Petra. Even whores have morals, but not you.

"And your beloved revolutionary cause," the detective sneered. "*Doch!* Such a cause. How does it feel to be rejected by the entire German *Volk?"* She stirred in her chair at that, but couldn't quite bring herself . . . "What's the matter, Petra, no heroic words now? You always talked about your visions of freedom and democracy, didn't you? Are you disappointed now that we have real democracy—and the people detest you and your kind! Tell me, Petra, what is it like to be rejected? Totally rejected. And you know it's true," the investigator added. "You know it's no joke. You watched the people in the street from your windows, didn't you, you and Günther? One of the demonstrations was right under your apartment, wasn't it? What did you think while you watched, Petra? What did you and Günther say to each other? Did you say it was a counterrevolutionary trick?" The detective shook his head, leaning forward to stare into those empty, lifeless eyes, enjoying his own work as she had done.

"Tell me, Petra, how do you explain the votes? Those were free elections. You know that, of course. Everything you stood for and worked for and murdered for—all a mistake, all for *nothing!* Well, it wasn't a total loss, was it? At least you got to make love to Wilhelm Manstein." The detective leaned back and lit a small cigar. He blew smoke up at the ceiling. "And now, Petra? I

hoped you enjoyed that little tryst, *mein Schatz*. You will never leave this prison alive. Never, Petra. No one will ever feel pity for you, not even when you're confined to a wheelchair. Oh, no. They'll remember your crimes and tell themselves to leave you here with all the other vicious beasts. There is no hope for you. You will die in this building, Petra."

Petra Hassler-Bock's head jerked at that. Her eyes went wide for an instant as she thought to say something, but stopped short.

The detective went on conversationally. "We lost track of Günther, by the way. We nearly got him in Bulgaria—missed him by thirty hours. The Russians, you see, have been giving us their files on you and your friends. All those months you spent at those training camps. Well, in any case, Günther is still on the run. In Lebanon, we think, probably holed up with your old friends in that ratpack. They're next," the detective told her. "The Americans, the Russians, the Israelis, they're cooperating now, didn't you hear? It's part of this treaty business. Isn't *that* wonderful? I think we'll get Günther there . . . with luck he'll fight back or do something really foolish, and we can bring you a picture of his body. . . . Pictures, that's right! I almost forgot!

"I have something to show you," the investigator announced. He inserted a videocassette into a player and switched on the TV. It took a moment for the picture to settle down into what was plainly an amateur video taken with a hand-held camera. It showed twin girls, dressed in matching pink dirndl outfits, sitting side by side on a typical rug in a typical German apartment—everything was fully *in Ordnung,* even the magazines on the table were squared off. Then the action started.

"Komm, Erika. Komm, Ursel!" a woman's voice urged, and both infants pulled themselves up on a coffee table and tottered toward her. The camera followed their halting, unstable steps into the woman's arms.

"Mutti, Mutti!" they both said. The detective switched the TV off.

"They're talking and walking. *Ist das nicht wunderbar?* Their new mother loves them very much, Petra. Well, I thought you'd like to see that. That's all for today." The detective pressed a hidden button and a guard appeared to take the manacled prisoner back to her cell.

The cell was stark, a cubicle made of white-painted bricks. There was no outside window, and the door was of solid steel except for a spyhole and a slot for food trays. Petra didn't know about the TV camera that looked through what seemed to be yet another brick near the ceiling, but was really a small plastic panel transparent to red and infrared light. Petra Hassler-Bock retained her composure all the way to the cell, and until the door was slammed shut behind her.

Then she started coming apart.

Petra's hollow eyes stared at the floor—that was painted white also—too wide and horrified for tears at first, contemplating the nightmare that her life had become. It could not be real, part of her said with confidence that bordered on madness. All she'd believed in, all she'd worked for—gone! Günther, gone. The twins, gone. The cause, gone. Her life, gone.

The *Bundeskriminalamt* detectives interrogated her only for amusement. She knew that much. They had never seriously probed her for information, but there was a reason for that. She had nothing worthwhile to give them. They'd

shown her copies of the files from Stasi headquarters. Nearly everything her erstwhile fraternal socialist brothers had had on her—far more than she had expected—was now in *West* German hands. Names, addresses, phone numbers, records dating back more than twenty years, things about herself that she'd forgotten, things about Günther that she'd never known. All in the hands of the BKA.

It was all over. All lost.

Petra gagged and started weeping. Even Erika and Ursel, her twins, the product of her own body, the physical evidence of her faith in the future, of her love for Günther. Taking their first steps in the apartment of strangers. Calling some stranger *Mutti,* mommy. The wife of a BKA captain—they'd told her that much. Petra wept for half an hour, not making noise, knowing that there had to be a microphone in the cell, this cursed white box that denied her sleep.

Everything lost.

Life—here? The first and only time she'd been in the exercise yard with other prisoners, they'd had to pull two of them off of her. She could remember their screams as the guards had taken her for medical treatment—whore, murderess, animal. . . . To live here for forty years or more, alone, always alone, waiting to go mad, waiting for her body to weaken and decay. For her life meant *life*. Of that she was certain. There would be no pity for her. The detective had made that clear. No pity at all. No friends. Lost and forgotten . . . except for the hate.

She made her decision calmly. In the manner of prisoners all over the world, she'd found a way of getting a piece of metal with an edge on it. It was, in fact, a segment of razor blade from the instrument with which she was allowed to shave her legs once a month. She removed it from its place of hiding, then pulled the sheet—also white—from the mattress. It was like any other, about ten centimeters thick, covered with heavy striped fabric. Its trim was a loop of fabric in which was inserted a ropelike stiffener, with the mattress fabric sewn tight around it to give the edge strength. With the razor edge she began detaching the trim from the mattress. It took three hours and not a small amount of blood, for the razor segment was small, and it cut her fingers many times, but finally she had two full meters of improvised rope. She turned one end of the rope into a noose. The free end of the rope she tied over the light fixture over the door. She had to stand on her chair to do that, but she'd have to stand on the chair in any case. It took three attempts to get the knot right. She didn't want too much length on the rope.

When she was satisfied with that, she proceeded without pause. Petra Hassler-Bock removed her dress and her bra. Next she knelt on the chair with her back to the door, getting its position and hers just right, placed the noose around her neck, and drew it tight. Then she drew up her legs, using her bra to secure them between her back and the door. She didn't want to flinch from this. She had to show her courage, her devotion. Without stopping for a prayer or lament, her hands pushed the chair away. Her body fell perhaps five centimeters before the improvised rope stopped her fall and drew tight. Her body rebelled against her will at this point. Her drawn-up legs fought against the bra holding them between the backs of her thighs and the metal door, but

in fighting the restraint, they merely pushed Petra fractionally away from the door, and that increased the strangulation on her upper neck.

She was surprised by the pain. The noose fractured her larynx before sliding over it to a point under her jaw. Her eyes opened wide, staring at the white bricks of the far wall. That's when the panic hit her. Ideology has its limits. She couldn't die, didn't want to die, didn't want to—

Her fingers raced to her throat. It was a mistake. They fought to get under the mattress trim, but it was too thin, cutting so deeply into the soft flesh of her neck that she couldn't get a single finger under it. Still she fought, knowing that she had mere seconds before the blood loss to her brain ... it was getting vague now, her vision was beginning to suffer. She couldn't see the lines of mortar between the even Germanmade brickwork on the far wall. Her hands kept trying, cutting into the surface blood vessels of her throat, drawing blood that only made the noose slick, able to sink in tighter, cutting off circulation through the carotid arteries even more. Her mouth opened wide and she tried to scream, no, she didn't want to die, didn't—needed help. Couldn't anyone hear her? Could no one help her? Too late, just two seconds, maybe only one, maybe not even that, the last remaining shred of consciousness told her that if she could just loosen the bra holding her legs, she could have stood and . . .

The detective watched the TV picture, saw her hands flutter toward the bra, searching limply for the clasp before they fell away, and twitched for a few more seconds, then stopped. So close, he thought. *So very close to saving herself.* It was a pity. She'd been a pretty girl, but she'd chosen to murder and torture, and she'd also chosen to die, and if she'd changed her mind at the end—didn't they all? Well, not quite all—that was merely renewed proof that the brutal ones were cowards after all, *nicht wahr?*

Aber natürlich.

"This television is broken," he said, switching it off. "Better get a new one to keep an eye on Prisoner Hassler-Bock."

"That will take about an hour," the guard supervisor said.

"That's fast enough." The detective removed the cassette from the same tape recorder he'd used to show the touching family scene. It went into his briefcase with the other. He locked the case and stood. There was no smile on his face, but there was a look of satisfaction. It wasn't his fault that the *Bundestag* and *Bundesrat* were unable to pass a simple and effective death-penalty statute. That was because of the Nazis, of course. Damned barbarians. But even barbarians were not total fools. They hadn't ripped up the autobahns after the war, had they? Of course not. So just because the Nazis had executed people—well, some of them had even been ordinary murderers whom any civilized government of the era would have executed. And if anyone merited death, Petra Hassler-Bock did. Murder by torture. Death by hanging. That, the detective figured, was fair enough. The Wilhelm Manstein murder case had been his from the start. He'd been there when the man's genitals had arrived by mail. He'd watched the pathologists examine the body, had attended the funeral, and he remembered the sleepless nights when he'd been unable to wash the horrid spectacles from his mind. Perhaps now he would. Justice had been slow, but it had come. With luck those two cute little girls would grow

into proper citizens, and no one would ever know who and what their birth mother had once been.

The detective walked out of the prison toward his car. He didn't want to be near the prison when her body was discovered. Case closed.

"Hey, man."

"Marvin. I hear that you did well with weapons," Ghosn said to his friend.

"No big deal, man. I've been shooting since I was a kid. That's how you get dinner where I come from."

"You outshot our best instructor," the engineer pointed out.

"Your targets are a hell of a lot bigger than a rabbit, and they don't move. Hell, I used to hit jacks on the move with my .22. If you have to shoot what you eat, you learn right quick to hit what you aim at, boy. How'd you do with that bomb thing?" Marvin Russell asked.

"A lot of work for very little return," Ghosn replied.

"Maybe you can make a radio from all that electrical stuff," the American suggested.

"Perhaps something useful."

10

LAST STANDS

Flying west is always easier than flying east. The human body adjusts more easily to a longer day than a shorter one, and the combination of good food and good wine makes it all the easier. Air Force One had a sizable conference room that could be used for all manner of functions. In this case it was a dinner for senior administration officials and selected members of the press pool. The food, as usual, was superb. Air Force One may be the only aircraft in the world which serves something other than TV dinners. Its stewards shop daily for fresh foods which are most often prepared at six hundred knots at eight miles altitude, and more than one of the cooks had left military service to become executive chef at a country club or posh restaurant. Having cooked for the President of the United States of America looks good on any chefs resume.

The wine in this case was from New York, a particularly good blush Chablis that the President was known to like, when he wasn't drinking beer. The converted 747 had three full cases stowed below. Two white-coated sergeants kept all the glasses filled as the courses came in and out. The atmosphere was relaxed, and the conversations all off the record, on deep background, and be careful or you'll never eat in here again.

"So, Mr. President," *The New York* Times asked. "How quickly do you think this will be implemented?"

"It is starting even as we speak. The Swiss Army representatives are already in Jerusalem to look things over. Secretary Bunker is meeting with the Israeli government to facilitate the arrival of American forces into the region. We expect to have things actually moving inside of two weeks."

"And the people who'll have to vacate their homes?" *The Chicago Tribune* continued the question.

"They will be seriously inconvenienced, but with our help the new homes will be constructed very rapidly. The Israelis have asked for and will get credits with which to purchase prefabricated housing made in America. We're also paying to set up a factory of that type for them to continue on their own. Many thousands of people will be relocated. That will be somewhat painful, but we're going to make it just as easy as we can."

"At the same time," Liz Elliot put in, "let's not forget that quality of life is more than having a roof over your head. Peace has a price, but it also has benefits. Those people will know real security for the first time in their lives."

"Excuse me, Mr. President," the *Tribune* reporter said with a raised glass. "That was not meant as criticism. I think we all agree that this treaty is a godsend." Heads nodded all around the table. "The way it is implemented is

an important story, however, and our readers want to know about it."

"The relocations will be the hardest part," Fowler responded calmly. "We must salute the Israeli government for agreeing to it, and we must do the best we can to make the process just as painless as is humanly possible."

"And what American units will be sent over to defend Israel?" another reporter asked.

"Glad you asked," Fowler said. He was. The previous questioner had overlooked the most obvious potential obstacle to treaty-implementation—would the Israeli Knesset ratify the agreements? "As you may have heard, we're reestablishing a new Army unit, the 10th United States Cavalry Regiment. It's being formed at Fort Stewart, Georgia, and at my direction ships of the National Defense Reserve Fleet are being mobilized right now to get them over to Israel just as quickly as we can. The 10th Cavalry is a famous unit with a distinguished history. It was one of the Black units that the Westerns have almost totally ignored. As luck would have it"—luck had nothing to do with it—"the first commander will be an African-American, Colonel Marion Diggs, a distinguished soldier, West Point grad and all that. That's the land force. The air component will be a complete wing of F-16 fighter-bombers, plus a detachment of AWACS aircraft, and the usual support personnel. Finally, the Israelis are giving us home-porting at Haifa, and we'll almost always have a carrier battle-group and a Marine Expeditionary Unit in the Eastern Med to back up everything else."

"But with the draw-down—"

"Dennis Bunker came up with the idea on the 10th Cavalry, and frankly I wish I could say that it's one of mine. As for the rest, well, we'll try to fit it in somehow or other with the rest of the defense budget."

"Is it really necessary, Mr. President? I mean, with all the budget battles, particularly on the matter of defense, do we really have to—"

"Of course we do." The National Security Advisor cut the reporter off at his ugly knees. *You asshole,* Elliot's expression said. "Israel has serious and very real security considerations, and our commitment to preserving Israeli security is the *sine qua non* of this agreement."

"Christ, Marty," another reporter muttered.

"We'll compensate for the additional expense in other areas," the President said. "I know I'm returning to one more round of ideologically based wrangling over how we pay for the cost of government, but I think we have demonstrated here that government's costs do pay off. If we have to nudge taxes up a little to preserve world peace, then the American people will understand and support it," Fowler concluded matter-of-factly.

Every reporter took note of that. The President was going to propose yet another tax increase. There had already been Peace Dividend-I and -II. This would be the first Peace Tax, one of them thought with a wry smile. That would sail through Congress along with everything else. The smile had another cause as well. She noted the look in the President's eyes when he gazed over at his National Security Advisor. She'd wondered about that. She'd tried to get Liz Elliot at home twice, right before the trip to Rome, and both times all she'd gotten on her private line was the answering machine. She could have followed up on that. She could have staked out Elliot's town house

off Kalorama Road and made a record of how often Elliot was sleeping at home and how often she was not. But. But that was none of her business, was it? No, it wasn't. The President was a single man, a widower, and his personal life had no public import so long as he was discreet about it, and so long as it didn't interfere with his conduct of official business. The reporter figured she was the only one who'd noticed. What the hell, she thought, if the President and his National Security Advisor were that close, maybe it was a good thing. Look how well the Vatican Treaty had gone....

Brigadier General Abraham Ben Jakob read over the treaty text in the privacy of his office. He was not a man who often had difficulty in defining his thoughts. That was a luxury accorded him by paranoia, he knew. For all of his adult life—a life that had started at age sixteen in his case, the first time he'd carried arms for his country—the world had been an exceedingly simple place to understand: there were Israelis and there were others. Most of the others were enemies or potential enemies. A very few of the others were associates or perhaps friends, but friendship for Israel was mostly a unilateral business. Avi had run five operations in America, "against" the Americans. "Against" was a relative term, of course. He'd never intended harm to come to America, he'd merely wanted to know some things the American government knew, or to obtain something the American government had and Israel needed. The information would never be used against America, of course, nor would the military hardware, but the Americans, understandably, didn't like having their secrets taken away. That did not trouble General Ben Jakob in any way. His mission in life was to protect the State of Israel, not to be pleasant to people. The Americans understood that. The Americans occasionally shared intelligence information with the Mossad. Most often this was done on a very informal basis. And on rare occasions, the Mossad gave information to the Americans. It was all very civilized—in fact, it was not at all unlike two competing businesses who shared both adversaries and markets, and sometimes cooperated but never quite trusted each other.

That relationship would now change. It had to. America was now committing its own troops to Israeli defense. That made America partly responsible for the defense of Israel—and reciprocally made Israel responsible for the safety of the Americans (something the American media had not yet noted). That was the Mossad's department. Intelligence-sharing would have to become a much wider street than it had been. Avi didn't like that. Despite the euphoria of the moment, America was not a country with which to entrust secrets, particularly those obtained after much effort and often blood by intelligence officers in his employ. Soon the Americans would be sending a senior intelligence representative to work out the details. They'd send Ryan, of course. Avi started making notes. He needed to get as much information as he could on Ryan so that he could cut as favorable a deal with the Americans as possible.

Ryan . . . was it true that he'd gotten this whole thing started? There was a question, Ben Jakob thought. The American government had denied it, but Ryan was not a favorite of President Fowler or his National Security Bitch, Elizabeth Elliot. The information on her was quite clear. While Professor of

Political Science at Bennington, she'd had PLO representatives in to lecture on their view of the Middle East—in the name of fairness and balance! It could have been worse. She wasn't Vanessa Redgrave, dancing with an AK-47 held over her head, Avi told himself, but her "objectivity" had stretched to the point of listening politely to the representatives of the people who'd attacked Israeli children at Ma'alot, and Israeli athletes at Munich. Like most members of the American government, she had forgotten what principle was. But Ryan wasn't one of those. . . .

The Treaty was his work. His sources were right. Fowler and Elliot would never have come up with an idea like this. Using religion as the key would never have occurred to them.

The Treaty. He went back to it, returning to his notes. How had the government ever allowed itself to be maneuvered into this?

We shall overcome . . .

That simple, wasn't it? The panicked telephone calls and cables from Israel's American friends, the way they were starting to jump ship, as though . . .

But how could it have been otherwise? Avi asked himself. In any case, the Vatican Treaty was a done deal. Probably a done deal, he told himself. The eruptions in the Israeli population had begun, and the next few days would be passionate. The reasons were simple enough to understand:

Israel was essentially vacating the West Bank. Army units would remain in place, much as American units were still based in Germany and Japan, but the West Bank was to become a Palestinian state, demilitarized, its borders guaranteed by the U.N., which was probably a nice sheet of framed parchment, Ben Jakob reflected. The real guarantee would come from Israel and America. Saudi Arabia and its sister Gulf states would pay for the economic rehabilitation of the Palestinians. Access to Jerusalem was guaranteed also—that's where most of the Israeli troops would be, with large and easily secured base camps and the right to patrol at will. Jerusalem itself became a dominion of the Vatican. An elected mayor—he wondered if the Israeli now holding the post would keep his post.... Why not? he asked himself, he was the most evenhanded of men—would handle civil administration, but international and religious affairs would be managed under Vatican authority by a troika of three clerics. Local security for Jerusalem was to be handled by a Swiss motorized regiment. Avi might have snorted at that, but the Swiss had been the model for the Israeli Army, and the Swiss were supposed to train with the American regiment. The 10th Cavalry were supposed to be crack regular troops. On paper it was all very neat.

Things on paper usually were.

On Israel's streets, however, the rabid demonstrations had already begun. Thousands of Israeli citizens were to be displaced. Two police officers and a soldier had already been hurt—at Israeli hands. The Arabs were keeping out of everyone's way. A separate commission run by the Saudis would try to settle which Arab family owned what piece of ground—a situation that Israel had thoroughly muddled when it had seized land that might or might not have been owned by Arabs, and—but that was not Avi's problem, and he thanked God for it. His given name was Abraham, not Solomon.

Will it work? he wondered.

It cannot possibly work, Qati told himself. Word that a treaty had been signed had thrown him into a ten-hour bout of nausea, and now that he had the treaty text, he felt himself at death's door itself.

Peace? And yet Israel will continue to exist? What, then, of his sacrifices, what of the hundreds, thousands, of freedom fighters sacrificed under Israeli guns and bombs? For what had they died? For what had Qati sacrificed his life? He might as well have died, Qati told himself. He'd denied himself everything. He might have lived a normal life, might have had a wife and sons and a house and comfortable work, might have been a doctor or engineer or banker or merchant. He had the intelligence to succeed at anything his mind selected as worthy of himself—but no, he had chosen the most difficult of paths. His goal was to build a new nation, to make a home for his people, to give them the human dignity they deserved. To lead his people. To defeat the invaders.

To be remembered.

That was what he craved. Anyone could recognize injustice, but to remedy it would have allowed him to be remembered as a man who had changed the course of human history, if only in a small way, if only for a small nation....

That wasn't true, Qati admitted to himself. To accomplish his task meant defying the great nations, the Americans and Europeans who had inflicted their prejudices on his ancient homeland, and men who did that were not remembered as small men. Were he successful, he would be remembered among the great, for great deeds define great men, and the great men were those whom history remembered. But whose deeds would be remembered now? Who had conquered what—or whom?

It was not possible, the Commander told himself. Yet his stomach told him something else as he read over the treaty text with its dry, precise words. The Palestinian people, his noble, courageous people, could they possibly be seduced by this infamy?

Qati stood and walked back to his private bathroom to retch again. That, part of his brain said even as he bent over the bowl, was the answer to his question. After a time he stood and drank a glass of water to remove the vile taste from his mouth, but there was another taste that was not so easily removed.

Across the street, in another safe house run by the organization, Günther Bock was listening to *Deutsche Welle's* German overseas radio service. Despite his politics and his location, Bock would never stop thinking of himself as a German. A German revolutionary-socialist to be sure, but a German. It had been another warm day in his true home, the radio reported, with clear skies, a fine day to walk along the Rhein holding Petra's hand, and . . .

The brief news report stopped his heart. "Convicted murderess Petra Hassler-Bock was found hanged in her prison cell this afternoon, the victim of an apparent suicide. The wife of escaped terrorist Günther Bock, Petra Hassler-Bock was convicted of the brutal murder of Wilhelm Manstein after her arrest in Berlin and sentenced to life imprisonment. Petra Hassler-Bock was thirty-eight years of age.

"The resurgence of the Dresden football club has surprised many observers.

Led by star forward Willi Scheer . . .”

Bock’s eyes went wide in the unlit darkness of his room. Unable even to look at the lit radio dial, his eyes found the open window and stared at the stars of evening.

Petra, dead?

He knew it was true, knew better than to tell himself it was impossible. It was all too possible . . . inevitable, in fact. *Apparent suicide!* Of course, just as all the Baader-Meinhof members had *apparently* committed suicide, one having reportedly shot himself in the head . . . three times. “A real death-grip on the gun” had been the joke in the West German police community of the time.

They’d murdered his wife, Bock knew. His beautiful Petra was dead. His best friend, his truest comrade, his lover. Dead. It should not have hit him as hard as it did, Günther knew. What else might he have expected? They’d had to kill her, of course. She was both a link with the past and a potentially dangerous link with Germany’s socialist future. In killing her they’d further secured the political stability of the new Germany, *Das Vierte Reich.*

“Petra,” he whispered to himself. She was more than a political figure, more than a revolutionary. He remembered every contour of her face, every curve of her youthful body. He remembered waiting for their children to be born, and the smile with which she’d greeted him after delivering Erika and Ursel. They too were gone, as totally removed from him as though they’d also died.

It was not a time to be alone. Bock dressed and walked across the street. Qati, he was glad to see, was still awake, though he looked ghastly.

“What is wrong, my friend?” the Commander asked.

“Petra is dead.”

Qati showed genuine pain on his face. “What happened?”

“The report is that she was found dead in her cell—hanged.” His Petra, Bock thought in delayed shock, found strangled by her graceful neck. The image was too painful for contemplation. He’d seen that kind of death. He and Petra had executed a class enemy that way and watched his face turn pale, then darken, and . . . The image was unbearable. He could not allow himself to see Petra that way.

Qati bowed his head in sorrow. “May Allah have mercy on our beloved comrade.”

Bock managed not to frown. Neither he nor Petra had ever believed in God, but Qati had meant well by his prayer, even though it was nothing more than a waste of breath. At the very least it was an expression of sympathy and goodwill—and friendship. Bock needed that right now, and so he ignored the irrelevancy and took a deep breath.

“It is a bad day for our cause, Ismael.”

“Worse than you think, this cursed treaty—”

“I know,” Bock said. “I know.”

“What do you think?” One thing Qati could depend on was Bock’s honesty. Günther was objective about everything.

The German took a cigarette from the Commander’s desk and lit it from the table lighter. He didn’t sit, but rather paced the room. He had to move about to prove to himself that he was still alive as he commanded his mind to consider the question objectively.

“One must see this as merely one part of a larger plan. When the Russians betrayed world socialism, they set in motion a series of events aimed at solidifying control over most of the world on the part of the capitalist classes. I used to think that the Soviets merely advanced this as a matter of clever strategy, to get economic assistance for themselves—you must understand that the Russians are a backward people, Ismael. They couldn’t even make communism work. Of course, communism was invented by a German,” he added with an ironic grimace (that Marx had been a Jew was something he diplomatically left out). Bock paused for a moment, then went on with a coldly analytical voice. He was grateful for the chance to close the door briefly on his emotions and speak like the revolutionary of old.

“I was wrong. It was not a question of tactics at all. It is a complete betrayal. Progressive elements within the Soviet Union have been outmaneuvered even more thoroughly than in the DDR. Their rapprochement with America is quite genuine. They are trading ideological purity for temporary prosperity, yes, but there is no plan on their part to return to the socialist fold.

“America, for its part, is charging a price for the help they offer. America forced the Soviets to deny support for Iraq, to lessen support for you and your Arab brothers, and finally to accede to their plan to secure Israel once and for all. Clearly the Israel Lobby in America has been planning this trick for some time. What makes it different is Soviet acquiescence. What we now face is not merely America, but conspiracy on a global scale. We have no friends, Ismael. We have only ourselves.”

“Do you say we are defeated?”

“No!” Bock’s eyes blazed for a moment. “If we stop now—they have advantage enough already, my friend. Give them one more and they will use the current state of affairs to hunt all of us down. Your relationship with the Russians is as bad as it has ever been. It will get worse still. Next, the Russians will begin cooperation with the Americans and Zionists.”

“Who would have ever thought that the Americans and Russians would—”

“No one. No one except those who brought it about, the American ruling elite and their bought dogs, Narmonov and his lackeys. They were exceedingly clever, my friend. We ought to have seen it coming, but we did not. You didn’t see it coming here. I never saw it coming in Europe. The failure was ours.”

Qati told himself that the truth was precisely what he needed to hear, but his stomach told him something else entirely.

“What ideas do you have for remedying the situation?” the Commander asked.

“We are faced with an alliance of two very unlikely friends and their hangers-on. One must find a way to destroy the alliance. In historical terms, when an alliance is broken the former allies are even more suspicious of each other than they were before the alliance was formed. How to do that?” Bock shrugged. “I don’t know. That will require time. . . . The opportunities are there. Should be there,” he corrected himself. “There is much potential for discord. There are many people who feel as we do, many still in Germany who feel as I do.”

“But you say it must begin between America and Russia?” Qati asked,

interested as always by his friend's meanderings.

"That is where it must lead. If there were a way to make it start there, so much the better, but that would seem unlikely."

"Perhaps not as unlikely as you imagine, Günther," Qati said to himself, scarcely aware that he'd spoken aloud.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. We will discuss this later. I am tired, my friend."

"Forgive me for troubling you, Ismael."

"We will avenge Petra, my friend. They will pay for their crimes!" Qati promised him.

"Thank you." Bock left. Two minutes later he was back in his room. The radio was still on, now playing traditional music. It came back to him then, the weight of the moment. He did not manage tears, however. All Bock felt was rage. Petra's death was a wrenching personal tragedy, but his whole *world* of ideas had been betrayed. The death of his wife was just one more symptom of a deeper and more virulent disease. The whole world would pay for Petra's murder if he could manage it. All in the name of revolutionary justice, of course.

Sleep came hard for Qati. Surprisingly, part of the problem was guilt. He too had his memories of Petra Hassler and her supple body—she hadn't been married to Günther then—and the thought of her dead, found at the end of a German rope. . . . How had she died? Suicide, the news report had said? Qati believed it. They were brittle, these Europeans. Clever but brittle. They knew the passion of the struggle, but they did not know of endurance. Their advantage lay in their broader view. That came from their more cosmopolitan environment and their generally superior education. Whereas Qati and his people tended to be overly focused on their immediate problem, their European comrades could see the broader issues more clearly. The moment of perceptive clarity came as something of a surprise. Qati and his people had always regarded the Europeans as comrades but not as equals, as dilettantes in the business of revolution. That was a mistake. They had always faced a more rigorous revolutionary task because they lacked the ready-made sea of discontent from which Qati and his colleagues drew their recruits. That they had been less successful in their goals was due to objective circumstances, not a reflection on their intelligence or dedication.

Bock could have made a superb operations officer because he saw things clearly.

And now? Qati asked himself. That was a question, but one that would require time for contemplation. It was not a question for a hasty answer. He'd sleep on that one for several days ... more like a week, the Commander promised himself as he tried to find sleep.

* * *

". . . I have the great privilege and high honor of introducing the President of the United States."

The assembled members of Congress stood as one person from their crowded seats in the House chamber. Arrayed in the front row were the members of the cabinet, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Justices of the Supreme Court, who also rose. In the balconies were others, among them the Saudi and Israeli ambassadors sitting side-by-side for the first time in memory. The TV cameras panned the great room in which both history and infamy had been made. The applause echoed from wall to wall until hands grew red from it.

President Fowler rested his notes on the lectern. He turned to shake the hand of the Speaker of the House, the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, and his own Vice President, Roger Durling. In the euphoria of the moment no one would comment that Durling came last. Next he turned to smile and wave at the assembled multitude, and the noise increased yet again. Every gesture in Fowler's repertoire came into play. The onehand wave, the two-hand wave, hands at shoulder level, and hands over the head. The response was truly bipartisan, and that was remarkable, Fowler noted. His most vociferous enemies in the House and Senate were assiduous in their enthusiasm, and he knew it to be genuine. There still was true patriotism in the Congress, much to the surprise of everyone. Finally, he waved for silence and the applause grudgingly subsided.

"My fellow Americans, I come to this house to report on recent events in Europe and the Middle East, and to lay before the United States Senate a pair of treaty documents which, I hope, will meet with your speedy and enthusiastic approval." More applause. "With these treaties the United States, operating in close cooperation with many other nations—some trusted old friends, and some valuable new ones—has helped to bring about peace in a region that has helped to give peace to the world, but which has known all too little peace itself.

"One can search all of human history. One can trace the evolution of the human spirit. All of human progress, all the shining lights that have lit our way up from barbarism, all the great and good men and women who have prayed and dreamed and hoped and worked for this moment—this moment, this opportunity, this culmination, is the last page in the history of human conflict. We have reached not a starting point, but a *stopping* point. We—" More applause interrupted the President. He was very slightly annoyed, having not planned for this interruption. Fowler smiled broadly, waving for silence.

"We have reached a stopping point. I have the honor to report to you that America has led the way on the road to justice and peace." Applause. "It is fitting that this should be so . . ."

"A little thick, isn't it?" Cathy Ryan asked.

"A little." Jack grunted in his chair and reached for his wine. "It's just how things go, babe. There are rules for this sort of thing just as there are for opera. You have to follow the formula. Besides, it is a major—hell, a colossal development. Peace is breaking out again."

"When are you leaving?" Cathy asked.

"Soon," Jack replied.

"Of course there is a price we must pay for this, but history demands

responsibility from those who forge it," Fowler said on the TV. "It is our task to guarantee the peace. We must send American men and women to protect the State of Israel. We are sworn to defend that small and courageous country against all enemies."

"What enemies are they?" Cathy asked.

"Syria isn't happy with the treaty as yet. Neither is Iran. As far as Lebanon goes, well, there isn't any Lebanon in any real sense of the word. It's just a place on the map where people die. Libya and all those terrorist groups. There are still enemies to be concerned about." Ryan finished off the glass and walked into the kitchen to refill it. It was a shame to waste good wine like this, Jack told himself. The way he was guzzling it, he might as well drink anything. . . .

"There will be a monetary cost as well," Fowler was saying as Ryan came back.

"Taxes are going up again," Cathy observed crossly.

"Well, what did you expect?" *Fifty million of it is my fault, of course. A billion here, and a billion there . . .*

"Will this really make a difference?" she asked.

"It should. We'll find out if all those religious leaders believe in what they say or if they're just bullshit artists. What we've done is to hoist them on their own petards, babe. . . . Make that 'principles,' " Jack said after a moment. "Either they work things out in accordance with their beliefs or they reveal themselves as charlatans."

"And . . . ?"

"I don't think they're charlatans. I think they'll be faithful to what they've always said. They have to be."

"And soon you won't have any real work to do, will you?" Jack caught the hopeful note in her voice. "I don't know about *that.* "

After the end of the President's speech came the commentary. Speaking in opposition was Rabbi Solomon Mendelev, an elderly New Yorker who was one of Israel's most fervent—some would say rabid—supporters. Oddly, he'd never actually traveled to Israel. Jack didn't know why that was true and made a mental note to find out why tomorrow. Mendelev led a small but effective segment of the Israeli lobby. He'd been nearly alone in voicing approval—well, understanding—of the shootings on Temple Mount. The rabbi had a beard, and wore a black yarmulke over what looked like a well-rumpled suit.

"This is a betrayal of the State of Israel," he said after receiving the first question. Surprisingly, he spoke with calm reason. "In forcing Israel to return what was rightfully hers, the United States has betrayed the Jewish people's historic right to the land of their fathers, and also gravely compromised the physical security of the country. Israeli citizens will be forced from their homes at gunpoint, just as happened fifty years ago," he concluded ominously.

"Now wait a minute!" another commentator responded heatedly.

"God, these people are passionate," Jack noted.

"I lost family members in the Holocaust," Mendelev said, his voice still reasonable. "The whole point of the State of Israel is to give Jews a place where they can be safe."

"But the President is sending American troops—"

"We sent American troops to Vietnam," Rabbi Mendelev pointed out. "And we made promises, and there was a treaty involved there also. Israel's only possible security is within defensible borders behind her own troops. What America has done is to bully that country into accepting an agreement. Fowler cut off defense supplies to Israel as a means of 'sending a message.' Well, the message was sent and received: either give in or be cut off. That is what happened. I can prove it, and I will testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to prove it."

"Uh-oh," Jack observed quietly.

"Scott Adler, Deputy Secretary of State, personally delivered that message while John Ryan, the Deputy Director of the CIA, made his own pitch to Saudi Arabia. Ryan promised the Saudi King that America would bring Israel to heel. That's bad enough, but for Adler, a Jew, to do what he did. . . ." Mendelev shook his head.

"This guy's got some good sources."

"Is what he says true, Jack?" Cathy asked.

"Not exactly, but what we were doing over there was supposed to be secret. It wasn't supposed to be widely known that I was out of the country."

"I knew you were gone—"

"But not where to. It won't matter. He can make a little noise, but it won't matter."

The demonstrations began the next day. They'd bet everything on this. It was the last desperate throw. The two leaders were Russian Jews who'd only recently been allowed to leave a country that manifestly had little love for them. On arrival in their only true home, they'd been allowed to settle on the West Bank, that part of Palestine that had been taken from Jordan by force of arms in the Six Day War of 1967. Their prefabricated apartments—tiny by American standards but incomprehensibly luxurious by Russian ones—stood on one of the hundreds of rocky slopes that defined the region. It was new and strange to them, but it was home, and home is something people fight to defend. The son of Anatoliy—he'd renamed himself Nathan—was already a regular officer in the Israeli Army. The same was true of David's daughter. Their arrival into Israel so short a time before had seemed to all of them like salvation itself—and now they were being told to leave their homes? Again? Their lives had borne enough recent shocks. This was one too many.

The whole block of apartments was similarly occupied by Russian immigrants, and it was easy for Anatoliy and David to form a local *kollektiv* and get things properly organized. They found themselves an Orthodox rabbi —the only thing they didn't have in their small community—to provide religious guidance and began their march toward the Knesset behind a sea of flags and a holy Torah. Even in so small a country this took time, but the march was of such a nature as to attract the inevitable media coverage. By the time the sweating and weary marchers arrived at their destination, all the world knew of their trek and its purpose.

The Israeli Knesset is not the most sedate of the world's parliamentary bodies. The body of men and women ranges from the ultra-right to the ultra-left, with precious little room for a moderate middle. Voices are often raised,

fists are often shaken or pounded on whatever surface presents itself, all beneath the black-and-white photo of Theodor Herzl, an Austrian whose ideal of Zionism in the mid-19th century was the guiding vision for what he hoped would be a safe homeland for his abused and mistreated people. The passion of the parliamentarians is such as to make many an observer wonder how it is possible, in a country where nearly everyone is a member of the Army Reserves and consequently has an automatic weapon in his (or her) closet, that some Knesset members have failed to be blasted to quivering fragments at their seats in the course of a spirited debate. What Theodor Herzl would have thought of the goings-on is anyone's guess. It was Israel's curse that the debates were too lively, the government too severely polarized both on political and religious grounds. Almost every religious subsect had its own special area of land and consequently its own parliamentary representation. It was a formula calculated to make France's often-fragmented assembly look well organized, and it had for a generation denied Israel a stable government with a coherent national policy.

The demonstrators, joined by many others, arrived an hour before debate was to begin on the question of the treaties. It was already possible—likely—that the government would fall, and the newly arrived citizens sent representatives to every member of the Knesset they could locate. Members who agreed with them came outside and gave fiery speeches denouncing the treaties.

"I don't like this," Liz Elliot observed, watching the TV in her office. The political furor in Israel was much stronger than she had expected, and Elliot had called Ryan in for an assessment of the situation.

"Well," the DDCI agreed, "it is the one thing we couldn't control, isn't it?"

"You're a big help, Ryan." On Elliot's desk was the polling data. Israel's most respected public-opinion firm had conducted a survey of five thousand people and found the numbers were 38 percent in favor of the treaty, 41 percent opposed, and 21 percent undecided. The numbers roughly matched the political makeup of the Knesset, whose right-wing elements slightly outnumbered the left, and whose precarious center was always fragmented into small groupings, all of which waited for a good offer from one side or the other that would magnify their political importance.

"Scott Adler went over this weeks ago. We knew going in that the Israeli government was shaky. For Christ's sake, when in the last twenty years has it *not* been shaky?"

"But if the Prime Minister cannot deliver . . ."

"Then it's back to Plan B. You wanted to put pressure on their government, didn't you? You'll get your wish." This was the one thing that hadn't been fully considered, Ryan thought, but the truth of the matter was that full consideration would not have helped. The Israeli government had been a model of anarchy in action for a generation. The treaty work had gone ahead on the assumption that once transformed into a *fait accompli,* the treaty would have to be ratified by the Knesset. Ryan had not been asked for an opinion on that, though he still thought it a fair assessment.

"The political officer at the embassy says that the balance of power may be

the little party controlled by our friend Mendelev," Elliot noted, trying to be calm.

"Maybe so," Jack allowed.

"It's absurd!" Elliot snarled. "That little old fart hasn't even been there—"

"Some sort of religious thing. I checked. He doesn't want to go back until the Messiah arrives."

"Jesus!" the National Security Advisor exclaimed.

"Exactly. You got it." Ryan laughed and got a nasty look. "Look, Liz, the man has his personal religious beliefs. We may think they're a little off, but the Constitution demands that we both tolerate and *respect* them. That's the way we do things in this country, remember?"

Elliot waved her fist at the TV set. "But this crazy rabbi is screwing things up! Isn't there *anything* we can do about it?"

"Like what?" Jack asked quietly. There was more to her demeanor than panic.

"I don't know—*something*. . . ." Elliot allowed her voice to trail off, leaving an opening for her visitor.

Ryan leaned forward and waited until he had her full attention. "The historical precedent you're looking for, Dr. Elliot, is, 'Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?' Now, if you're trying to tell me something, let's get it clear and in the open, shall we? Are you proposing that we interfere with the parliament of a friendly democratic country, or that we do something illegal within the borders of the United States of America?" A pause while her eyes focused a little more tightly. "Neither one of those things will happen, Dr. Elliot. We let them make up their own minds. If you even think of telling me to interfere with Israel's democratic processes, the President gets my resignation just as fast as I can drive down here to deliver it. If you're wishing out loud for us to hurt that little old guy in New York, remember that such wishes fall under at least two conspiracy statutes. My duty as an ordinary citizen, much less an official of the government of my country, is to report suspected violations of the law to the appropriate law-enforcement agencies." The look Ryan got after his pronouncement was venomous.

"Damn you! I never said—"

"You just fell into the most dangerous trap in government service, ma'am. You started to think that your wishes to make the world a better place supersede the principles under which our government is supposed to operate. I can't stop you from having such thoughts, but I can tell you that my agency will not be a party to it, not as long as I'm there." It sounded too much like a lecture, but Ryan felt that she needed it. She was entertaining the most dangerous of thoughts.

"*I never said that!"*

Bullshit. "Fine, you never said or thought that. I was mistaken. You have my apology. Let the Israelis decide to ratify the treaties or not. They have a democratic government. It is their right to decide. We have the right to nudge them in the right direction, to tell them that our continued level of aid is contingent upon their agreeing to it, but not to interfere directly with their governmental processes. There are some lines you may not cross, even if 'you' happen to be the U.S. government."

The National Security Advisor managed a smile. “Thank you for your views on the matter of proper government policy, Dr. Ryan. That will be all.”

“Thank *you,* Dr. Elliot. My assessment, by the way, is that we should let things be. The treaty will be approved despite what you see here.”

“Why?” Elliot managed not to hiss.

“The treaties are good for Israel in any objective sense. The people will realize that as soon as they’ve had a chance to digest the information and make their views known to their representatives. Israel is a democracy, and democracies generally do the smart thing. History, you see. Democracy has become popular in the world because it works. If we panic and take precipitous action, we’ll only mess things up. If we let the process work as it’s supposed to work, the right thing will probably happen.”

“Probably?”

“There are no certainties in life; there are only probabilities,” Ryan explained. Why didn’t everyone understand that? he wondered to himself. “But interference has a higher probability of failure than doing nothing. Doing nothing at all is often the right thing. This is such a case. Let their system work. I think it will work. That is my opinion.”

“Thank you for your assessment,” she said, turning away.

“A pleasure as always.”

Elliot waited until she heard the door close before turning to look. “You arrogant prick, I’ll break you for that,” she promised.

Ryan climbed back into his car on West Executive Drive. *You went too far, man,* he told himself.

No, you didn’t. She was starting to think that way and you had to slam the door on it right there and then.

It was the most dangerous thought that a person in government could have. He’d seen it before. Some dreadful thing happened to people in Washington, D.C. They arrived in the city, usually full of ideals, and those fine thoughts evaporated so rapidly in what was in fact a muggy and humid environment. Some called it being captured by the system. Ryan thought of it as a kind of environmental pollution. The very atmosphere of Washington corroded the soul.

And what makes you immune, Jack?

Ryan considered that, unmindful of the look Clark gave him in the mirror as they drove toward the river. What had made him different to this point was the fact that he had never given in, not even once . . . or had he? There were things he might have done differently. There were some things that hadn’t worked out quite as well as he might have wished.

You’re not different at all. You just think you are.

As long as I can face the question and the answers, then I am safe.

Sure.

“So?”

“So I can do many things,” Ghosn replied. “But not alone. I will need help.”

“And security?”

“That is an important question. I have to make a serious assessment of what the possibilities are. At that point I will know my precise requirements. I know

I will need help in some areas, however."

"Such as?" the Commander asked.

"The explosives."

"But you are an expert in such things," Qati objected.

"Commander, this task requires precision such as we have never been forced to face. We cannot use ordinary plastic explosives, for example, for the simple reason that they are plastic—they change shape. The explosive blocks I use must be as rigid as stone, must be shaped to a thousandth of a millimeter, and the shape must be determined mathematically. The theoretical side of that is something I could assimilate, but it will take months. I would rather devote my time to refabricating the nuclear material . . . and . . ."

"Yes?"

"I believe I can improve the bomb, Commander."

"Improve? How?"

"If my initial readings are correct, this type of weapon can be adapted to become not a bomb but a trigger."

"Trigger for what?" Qati asked.

"A thermonuclear fusion bomb, a hydrogen bomb, Ismael. The yield of the weapon might be increased by a factor of ten, perhaps a hundred. We could destroy Israel, certainly a very large part of it."

The Commander paused for a few breaths, assimilating that bit of information. When he spoke, he spoke softly. "But you need help. Where might be the best place?"

"Günther may have some valuable contacts in Germany. If he can be trusted," Ghosn added.

"I have considered this. Günther can be trusted." Qati explained why.

"We are sure the story is real?" Ghosn asked. "I have no more faith in coincidences than you, Commander."

"There was a photograph in a German newspaper. It appeared quite genuine." A German tabloid had managed to get a graphic black-and-white photo that showed the results of a hanging in all its ghastly splendor. The fact that Petra was nude above the waist had ensured its publication. Such an end for a terrorist murderer was too juicy to be denied to the German males, one of whom had been castrated by this woman.

"The problem is simply that we must minimize the number of people who know about this, else—excuse me, Ismael."

"But we need some help. Yes, I understand that." Qati smiled. "You are correct. It is time to discuss our plans with our friend. You propose to explode the bomb in Israel?"

"Where else? It is not my place to make such plans, but I assumed—"

"I have not thought about it. One thing at a time, Ibrahim. When are you leaving for Israel?"

"I planned to do so in the next week or so."

"Let it wait until we see what this treaty business will do." Qati thought. "Begin your studies. We will make haste slowly on this matter. First you must determine your requirements. We will then try to meet them in the most secure location we can arrange."

It took forever, it seemed, but forever in political terms can be a time period ranging from five minutes to five years. In this case it took less than three days for the important part to happen. Fifty thousand more demonstrators arrived before the Knesset. Led by veterans of all of Israel's wars, the new crowd supported the treaties. There were more shouts and shaken fists, but for once there was no overt violence as the police managed to keep the two passionate groups separated. Instead they labored to outshout each other.

The cabinet met again in closed session, both ignoring and attending to the din outside their windows. The Defense Minister was surprisingly quiet during the discussion. On being asked, he agreed that the additional arms promised by the Americans would be hugely useful: forty-eight additional F-16 fighter-bombers; and for the first time, M-2/3 Bradley fighting vehicles, Hellfire antitank missiles, and access to the revolutionary new tank-gun technology America was developing. The Americans would underwrite most of the cost of building a high-tech training center in the Negev similar to their own National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, where the 10th Cav unit would train constantly as the "OpFor" or opposing force against Israeli units. The Defense Minister knew the effect the NTC had had for the U.S. Army, which was at its highest state of professionalism since World War II. With the new matériel and training base, he judged that the real effectiveness of Israel's defense forces would increase by fifty percent. To that he added the U.S. Air Force F-16 wing and the tank regiment, both of which, as spelled out in a secret codicil of the Mutual-Defense Treaty, chopped to Israeli command in time of emergency—a situation that was defined by Israel. That was totally unprecedented in American history, the Foreign Minister pointed out.

"So, is our national security degraded or enhanced by the treaties?" the Prime Minister asked.

"It is somewhat enhanced," the Defense Minister admitted.

"Then will you say so?"

Defense pondered that for a moment, his eyes boring in on the man seated at the head of the table. *Will you support me when I make my bid for the premiership?* his eyes asked.

The Prime Minister nodded.

"I will address the crowds. We can live with these treaties."

The speech did not pacify everyone, but it was enough to convince a third of the antitreaty demonstrators to depart. The crucial middle element in the Israeli parliament observed the events, consulted its conscience, and made its decision. The treaties were ratified by a slim margin. Even before the United States Senate had a chance to clear the treaties through the Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees, implementation of both agreements began.

11

ROBOSOLDIERS

They weren't supposed to look human. The Swiss Guards were all over 185 centimeters in height and not one weighed less than eighty-five kilograms, which translated to about six-one and a hundred eighty pounds for American tourists. Their physical fitness was manifest. The Guard encampment, just outside the city in what had been a Jewish settlement until less than two weeks before, had its own high-tech gymnasium, and the men were "encouraged" to pump iron until their exposed skin looked as taut as a drumhead. Their forearms, exposed below rolled-up sleeves, were thicker than the lower legs of most men, and already tanned brown beneath what were often sunbleached blond hairs. Their mostly blue eyes were always hidden behind dark glasses in the case of the officers, and tinted Lexan shields for the rest.

They were outfitted in fatigues of an urban-camouflage pattern, a curious design of black, white, and several shades of gray that allowed them to blend in with the stones and whitewashed stucco of Jerusalem in a way that was eerily effective, especially at night. Their boots were the same, not the spitshined elegance of parade soldiers. The helmets were Kevlar, covered with cloth of the same pattern. Over the fatigues went camouflaged flak jackets of American design that merely seemed to increase the physical bulk of the soldiers. Over the flak jackets came the web gear. Each man always carried four fragmentation grenades and two smokes, plus a one-liter canteen, first-aid packet, and ammo pouches for a light total loadout of about twelve kilos.

They traveled about the city in teams of five, one noncom and four privates per team, and twelve teams to each duty section. Each man carried a SIG assault rifle, two of which had grenade launchers slung underneath the barrel. The sergeant also carried a pistol, and two men in each team carried radios. The teams on patrol were in constant radio contact and regularly practiced mutual-support maneuvers.

Half of each duty section walked, while the other half moved about slowly and menacingly in American-built HMMWVs. Essentially an oversized jeep, each "hummer" had at least a pintle-mounted machine gun, and some had six-barreled miniguns plus Kevlar armor to protect the crews against the casual enemy. At the commanding note of their horns, everyone cleared a path.

At the command post were several armored fighting vehicles—English-built armored cars that could just barely navigate the streets of the ancient city. Always on duty at the post was a platoon-sized unit commanded by a captain. This was the emergency-response team. They were armed with heavy weapons, like the Swedish Carl Gustav M-2 recoilless, just the right thing for

knocking a hole in any building. Supporting *them* was an engineer section with copious quantities of high explosives; the "sappers" ostentatiously practiced by knocking down those settlements which Israel had agreed to abandon. In fact, the entire regiment practiced its combat skills at those sites, and people were allowed to observe from a few hundred meters away in what was rapidly becoming a genuine tourist attraction. Already, Arab merchants were producing T-shirts with logos like ROBOSOLDIER! for anyone who cared to buy them. The commercial sense of the merchants was not unrewarded.

The Swiss Guards did not smile, nor did they speak to the casual interrogator, a facility that came easily to them. Journalists were encouraged to meet with the commanding officer, Colonel Jacques Schwindler, and were occasionally allowed to speak with lower ranks in barracks or at training exercises, but never on the street. Some contact with the locals was inevitable, of course. The soldiers were learning rudimentary Arabic, and English sufficed for everyone else. They occasionally issued traffic citations, though this was mainly a function of the local civil police force that was still forming up—with support from the Israelis who were phasing out of the function. More rarely a Swiss Guard would step into a street fight or other disturbance. Most often the mere sight of a five-man team would reduce people to respectful silence and docile civility. The mission of the Swiss was intimidation, and it didn't require many days for people to appreciate how good they were at it. At the same time, their operations depended most of all on something other than the physical.

On the right shoulder of each uniform was a patch. It was in the shape of a shield. The centerpiece was the white cross on red background of the Swiss, to demonstrate the origin of the soldiers. Around it were the Star and Crescent of Islam, the six-pointed Judaic Star of David, and the Christian Cross. There were three versions of the patch, so that each religious emblem had an equal chance of being on top. It was publicly known that the patches were distributed at random, and the symbology indicated that the Swiss flag protected them all equally.

The soldiers deferred always to religious leaders. Colonel Schwindler met daily with the religious troika which governed the city. It was believed that they alone made policy, but Schwindler was a clever, thoughtful man whose suggestions from the first had carried great weight with the Imam, the Rabbi, and the Patriarch. Schwindler had also traveled to the capitals of every Middle East nation. The Swiss had chosen well—he'd been known as the best colonel in their army. An honest and scrupulously fair man, he'd acquired an enviable reputation. Already on his office wall was a gold-mounted sword, a present from the King of Saudi Arabia. A stallion of equal magnificence was quartered at the Guard force encampment. Schwindler didn't know how to ride.

It was up to the troika to run the city. They had proven to be even more effective than anyone had dared to hope. Chosen for their piety and scholarship, each soon impressed the others. It had been agreed upon at once that each week there would be a public prayer service particular to one of the represented religions, and that each would attend, not actually participating, but demonstrating the respect that was at the foundation of their collective purpose. Originally suggested by the Imam, it had unexpectedly proven to be

the most effective method of tempering their internal disagreements and also setting the example for the citizens of the city in their care. This was not to say that there were not disagreements. But those were invariably difficulties between two of the members, and in such cases the uninvolved third would mediate. It was in the interests of all to reach a peaceful and reasonable settlement. "The Lord God"—a phrase each of the three could use without prejudice—required their goodwill, and after a few initial teething problems, that goodwill prevailed. Over coffee, after concluding one dispute over scheduling access to one shrine or another, the Greek Patriarch noted with a chuckle that perhaps this was the first miracle he had ever witnessed. No, the Rabbi had replied, it was no miracle that men of God should have the conviction to obey their own religious principles. All at once? the Imam had asked with a smile, perhaps not a miracle, but certainly it had required over a millennium to achieve. Let us not begin a new dispute, the Greek had said with a rumbling laugh, over the settlement of another—now if you can only help me find a way to deal with my fellow Christians!

Outside on the streets, when clerics of one faith encountered those of another, greetings were exchanged to set an example for everyone. The Swiss Guards saluted each in their turn, and when speaking with the most senior, they would remove their glasses or helmets to show public respect.

That was the only humanity the Swiss Guards were allowed to demonstrate. It was said that they didn't even sweat.

"Scary sons of bitches," Ryan observed, standing in shirtsleeves at a corner. American tourists snapped pictures. Jews still looked a touch resentful. Arabs smiled. The Christians who'd largely been driven out of Jerusalem by increasing violence had barely started to return. Everyone got the hell out of their way as the five men moved briskly down the street, not quite marching, their helmeted heads turning left and right. "They really do look like robots."

"You know," Avi said, "there hasn't been a single attack on them since the first week. Not one."

"I wouldn't want to fool with them," Clark observed quietly.

In the first week, as though by Providence, an Arab youth had killed an elderly Israeli woman with a knife—it had been a street robbery rather than a crime with political significance—and had made the mistake of doing so in view of a Swiss private, who'd run him down and subdued him with a martial-arts blow right out of a movie. The Arab in question had been taken to the troika and given the choice of a trial by Israeli or Islamic law. He'd made the mistake of choosing the latter. After a week in an Israeli hospital to allow his injuries to heal, he'd faced a trial in accordance with the word of the Koran, chaired by Imam Ahmed bin Yussif. One day after that, he had been flown to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, driven to a public square, and, after having had time to repent his misdeeds, publicly beheaded with a sword. Ryan wondered how you said *pour encourager les autres* in Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic. Israelis had been amazed at the speed and severity of justice, but the Muslims had merely shrugged and pointed out that the Koran had its own stern criminal code, and that it had proven highly effective over the years.

"Your people are still a little unhappy with this, aren't they?"

Avi frowned. Ryan had faced him with the necessity of expressing his

personal opinion or speaking the truth. “They’d feel safer with our paratroops here . . . man-to-man, Ryan?” Truth won out, as it had to with Avi.

“Sure.”

“They’ll learn. It will take a few more weeks, but they will learn. The Arabs like the Swiss, and the key to the peace on this street is how our Arab friends feel. Now, will you tell me something?” Clark’s head moved fractionally at that.

“Maybe,” Ryan answered, looking up the street.

“How much did you have to do with this?”

“Nothing at all,” Jack replied with a neutral coldness that matched the pace of the soldiers. “It was Charlie Alden’s idea, remember? I was just the messenger boy.”

“So Elizabeth Elliot has told everyone.” Avi didn’t have to say any more.

“You wouldn’t have asked the question unless you knew the answer, Avi. So why ask the question?”

“Artfully done.” General Ben Jakob sat down and waved for the waiter. He ordered two beers before speaking again. Clark and the other bodyguard weren’t drinking. “Your President pushed us too hard. Threatening us with withholding our arms....”

“He could have gone a little easier, I suppose, but I do not make policy, Avi. Your people made it happen when they murdered those demonstrators. That reopened a part of our own history that we wish to forget. It neutralized your congressional lobby—a lot of those people were on the other side of our own civil-rights movement, remember. You forced us to move, Avi. You know that. Besides—” Ryan stopped abruptly.

“Yes?”

“Avi, this thing just might work. I mean, look around!” Jack said as the beers arrived. He was thirsty enough that a third of it disappeared in an instant.

“It is a slim possibility,” Ben Jakob admitted.

“You get better intel from Syria than we do,” Ryan pointed out. “I’ve heard that they’ve started saying nice things about the settlement—very quietly, I admit. Am I right?”

“If it’s true.” Avi grunted.

“You know the hard part about ‘peace’ intel?”

Ben Jakob’s eyes were focused on a distant wall as he contemplated—what? “Believing it is possible?”

Jack nodded. “That’s one area where we have the advantage over you guys, my friend. We’ve been through all that.”

“True, but the Soviets never said—proclaimed—for two generations that they wanted to wipe you from the face of the earth. Tell the worthy President Fowler that such concerns are not so easily allayed.”

Jack sighed. “I have. I did. Avi, I’m not your enemy.”

“Neither are you my ally.”

“Allies? We are now, General. The treaties are in force. General, my job is to provide information and analysis to my government. Policy is made by people senior to me, and smarter than me,” Ryan added with deadpan irony.

“Oh? And who might they be?” General Ben Jakob smiled at the younger

man. His voice dropped a few octaves. “You’ve been in the trade for what—not even ten years, Jack. The submarine business, what you did in Moscow, the role you played in the last election—”

Ryan tried to control his reaction but failed. “Jesus, Avi!” *How the hell did he find that out!*

“You cannot take the Lord’s name in vain, Dr. Ryan,” the deputy chief of the Mossad chided. “This is the City of God. Those Swiss chaps might shoot you. Tell the lovely Miss Elliot that if she pushes too hard, we still have friends in your media, and a story such as that . . .” Avi smiled.

“Avi, if your people mention that to Liz, she will not know what you are talking about.”

“Rubbish!” General Ben Jakob snorted.

“You have my word on that, sir.”

It was Brigadier Ben Jakob’s turn to be surprised. “That is difficult to believe.”

Jack finished off the beer. “Avi, I’ve said what I can. Has it ever occurred to you that your information may not have come from an entirely reliable source? I will tell you this: I have no personal knowledge of what you alluded to. If there was any kind of deal, I was kept out of it. Okay, I have reason to believe that something may have happened, and I can even speculate what it might have been, but if I ever have to sit in front of a judge and answer questions, all I can say is that I do not know anything. And you, my friend, cannot blackmail someone with something that person doesn’t know about. You’d have to do a pretty good selling job just to convince them that something had happened in the first place.”

“My God, what Moore and Ritter set up really was elegant, wasn’t it?”

Ryan set down his empty glass. “Things like that never happen in real life, General. That’s movie stuff. Look, Avi, maybe that report you have is a little on the thin side. The spectacular ones often are. Reality never quite keeps up with art, after all.” It was a good play. Ryan grinned to carry the point.

“Dr. Ryan, in 1972 the Black September faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization contracted the Japanese Red Army to shoot up Ben Gurion Airport, which they did, killing off mainly American Protestant pilgrims from your island of Puerto Rico. The single terrorist taken alive by our security forces told his interrogators that his dead comrades and their victims would become a constellation of stars in the heavens. In prison he purportedly converted himself to Judaism, and even circumcised himself with his teeth, which speaks volumes for his flexibility,” Brigadier General Avi Ben Jakob added matter-of-factly. “Do not ever tell me that there is something too mad to be true. I have been an intelligence officer for more than twenty years, and the only thing of which I am certain is that I have not yet seen it all.”

“Avi, even I’m not that paranoid.”

“You have never experienced a holocaust, Dr. Ryan.”

“Oh? Cromwell and the Potato Famine don’t count? Get off that horse, General. We’re deploying the U.S. troops here. If it comes to that, there will be American blood on the Negev, or Golan, or whatever.”

“And what if—”

“Avi, you ask what if. If *that* what-if ever happens, General, I will fly here

myself. I used to be a Marine. You know I've been shot at before. There will be no second Holocaust. Not while I live. My countrymen will not let it happen ever again. Not my government, Avi, my countrymen. We will not let that happen. If Americans have to die to help protect this country, then Americans will die to do so."

"You said that to Vietnam." Clark's eyes flared at that one, Ben Jakob noticed. "You have something to say?"

"General, I'm no high official, just a grunt with pretensions. But I got more combat time than anybody in this country of yours, and I'm telling you, sir, that what really scares me about this place is how you guys always fuck up the same way we did over there—we learned, you didn't. And what Dr. Ryan says is right. He'll come over. So will I, if it comes to that. I've killed my share of enemies, too," Clark told him in a low, quiet voice.

"Another Marine?" Avi asked lightly, though he knew better.

"Close enough," Clark said. "And I've kept current, as they say," he added with a smile.

"What about your associate?" Avi motioned toward Chavez, who stood casually at the corner, eyeing the street.

"Good as I ever was. So're those kids in the Cav. But this war talk is all bullshit. You guys both know that. You want security, sir, you settle your domestic problems. Peace will follow that like a rainbow after a storm."

"Learn from your mistakes. . . ."

"We had a four-thousand-mile buffer to fall back through, General. It isn't that far from here to the Med. You'd better learn from our mistakes. Good news is, you are better able to make a real peace than we ever were."

"But to have it imposed—"

"Sir, if it works, you'll thank us. If it doesn't work, we have a lot of people to stand by you when the crap hits the fan." Clark noticed that Ding had moved casually from his post across the street, moving aimlessly, it seemed, like a tourist.

"Including you?"

"Bet your ass, General," Clark replied, alert now, watching the people on the street. What had Chavez spotted? What had he missed?

* * *

Who are they? Ghosn wondered. It took a second. *Brigadier General Abraham Ben Jakob, Deputy Director of the Mossad,* his brain answered after sorting through all the recognition photographs he'd memorized. *Talking to an American. I wonder who he is.* . . . Ghosn's head turned slowly and casually. The American would have several bodyguards . . . the one close by was obvious. A very serious fellow that one was, old . . . late forties, perhaps. It was the hardness—no, not hardness but alertness. One could control the face but not the eyes—ah, the man put sunglasses back on. More than one. Had to be more than one, plus Israeli security officers. Ghosn knew that he'd let his eyes linger a touch too long, but—

"Oops." A man had bumped into him, a fraction smaller and slighter than

Ghosn. Dark complexion, possibly even a brother Arab, but he'd spoken in English. Contact was broken before Ghosn had time to realize that he'd been quickly and expertly frisked. "Sorry." The man moved off. Ghosn didn't know, wasn't sure if it had been what it seemed to be or if he'd just been checked out by an Israeli, American, or other security officer. Well, he wasn't carrying a weapon, not even a pocketknife, just a shopping bag full of books.

Clark saw Ding give the all-clear sign, an ordinary gesture, like shooing an insect off his neck. Then why the eye-recognition from the target—anyone who took an interest in his protectee was a target—why had he stopped and looked? Clark turned around. There was a pretty girl just two tables away. Not Arab or Israeli, some sort of European, Germanic language, sounded like, maybe Dutch. Good-looking girl, and such girls attracted looks. Maybe he and the other two had just been between a looker and his lookee. Maybe. For a protective officer the balance between awareness and paranoia was impossible to draw even when you understood the tactical environment, and Clark had no such illusions here. On the other hand, they'd selected a random eatery on a random street, and the fact that Ryan was here, and that Ben Jakob and he had decided to look things over . . . nobody had intelligence that good, and nobody had enough troops to cover even a single city—except maybe the Russians in Moscow—to make the threat a real one. But why the eye-recognition?

Well. Clark recorded the face and it went into the memory hopper with all the hundreds of others.

* * *

Ghosn continued his own patrol. He'd purchased all the books he needed and was now observing the Swiss troops, how they moved, how tough they looked. Avi Ben Jakob, he thought. Missed opportunity. Targets like that one didn't appear every day. He continued down the rough, cobbled street, his eyes vacant as they appeared to scan at random. He'd take the next right, increase his pace, and try to get ahead of the Swiss before they made it to the next cross street. He both admired what he saw in them and regretted that he saw it.

"Nicely done," Ben Jakob observed to Clark. "Your subordinate is well trained."

"He shows promise." As Clark watched, Ding Chavez looped back to his lookout point across the street. "You know the face?"

"No. My people probably got a photograph. We'll check it out, but it was probably a young man with normal sexual drives." Ben Jakob jerked his head toward the Dutch girl, if that's what she was.

Clark was surprised the Israelis hadn't made a move. A shopping bag could contain anything. And "anything" had generally negative connotations in this environment. God, he hated this job. Looking out for himself was one thing.

He typically used mobility, random paths, irregular pacing, always keeping an eye out for escape routes or ambush opportunities. But Ryan, while he might have had similar instincts—tactically speaking, the DDCI was pretty swift, Clark judged—had an overdeveloped sense of faith in the competence of his two bodyguards.

"So, Avi?" Ryan asked.

"Well, the first echelon of your cavalry troops is settling in. Our tank people like your Colonel Diggs. I must say I find their regimental crest rather odd—a bison is just a kind of wild cow, after all." Avi chuckled.

"As with a tank, Avi, you probably don't want to stand in front of one." Ryan wondered what would happen when the 10th Cav ran its first full-up training exercise with the Israelis. It was widely believed in the U.S. Army that the Israelis were overrated, and Diggs had a big reputation as a kick-ass tactician. "It looks like I can report to the President that the local situation is showing real signs of promise."

"There will be difficulties."

"Of course there will. Avi, the millennium doesn't arrive for a few more years," Jack noted. "But did you think things would go so smoothly so fast?"

"No, I didn't," Ben Jakob admitted. He fished out the cash to pay the check, and both men rose. Clark took his cue and went over to Chavez.

"Well?"

"Just that one guy. Heavy shopping bag, but it looked like books—textbooks, matter of fact. There was a sales slip still in one. Would you believe books on nuclear physics? The one title I saw was, anyway. Big, thick, heavy mother. Maybe he's a grad student or something, and that is one pretty lady over there, man."

"Let's keep our minds on business, Mr. Chavez."

"She's not my type, Mr. Clark."

"What do you think of the Swiss guys?"

"They look awful pretty for track-toads. I wouldn't want to play with them unless I picked the turf and the time, man." Chavez paused. "You notice the guy I frisked eyeballed them real hard?"

"No."

"He did . . . looked like he knew what he was—" Domingo Chavez paused. "I suppose people around here seen a lot of soldiers. Anyway, he gave 'em a professional sorta look. That's what I noticed first, not the way he eyeballed you and the doc. The guy had smart eyes, y'know what I mean?"

"What else?"

"Moved good, decent shape. Hands looked soft, though, not hard like a soldier. Too old for a college kid, but maybe not for a grad student." Chavez paused again. "Jesucristo! this is a paranoid business we're in, man. He was not carrying a weapon. His hands didn't look like he was a martial-arts type. He just came down the street looking at those Swiss grunts, eyeballed over where the doc and his friend were, then he just kept going. End of story." There were times when Chavez wished he'd opted to remain in the Army. He would have had his degree and his commission by now instead of cramming in night courses at George Mason while he played bodyguard to Ryan. At least the doc was a good guy, and working with Clark was . . . interesting. But this

intelligence stuff was a strange life.

"Time to move," Clark advised.

"I got the point." Ding's hand checked the automatic clipped under his loose shirt. The Israeli guards were already moving up the street.

Ghosn caught them just as he'd planned. The Swiss had helped. An elderly Muslim cleric had stopped the squad sergeant to ask a question. There was a problem with translation. The imam didn't speak English, and the Swiss soldier's Arabic was still primitive. It was too good an opportunity to pass up.

"Excuse me," Ghosn said to the imam, "can I help with translation?" He absorbed the rapid-fire string of his native language and turned to the soldier.

"The imam is from Saudi Arabia. This is his first time in Jerusalem since he was a boy and he requires directions to the Troika's office."

On recognizing the seniority of the cleric, the sergeant removed his helmet and inclined his head respectfully. "Please tell him that we would be honored to escort him there."

"Ah, there you are!" another voice called. It was obviously an Israeli. His Arabic was accented but literate. "Good day, Sergeant," the man added in English.

"Greetings, Rabbi Ravenstein. You know this man?" the soldier asked.

"This is Imam Mohammed Al Faisal, a distinguished scholar and historian from Medina."

"Is it all I have been told?" Al Faisal asked Ravenstein directly.

"All that and more!" the rabbi replied.

"Excuse me?" Ghosn had to say.

"You are?" Ravenstein asked.

"A student. I was attempting to assist with the language problem."

"Ah, I see," Ravenstein said. "Very kind of you. Mohammed is here to look at a manuscript we uncovered at a dig. It's a scholarly Muslim commentary on a very old Torah, Tenth Century, a fantastic find. Sergeant, I can manage things from here, and thank you also, young man."

"Do you require escort, sir?" the sergeant asked. "We are heading that way."

"No, thank you, we are both too old to keep up with you."

"Very well." The sergeant saluted. "Good day."

The Swiss moved off. The few people who'd taken note of the brief encounter pointed and smiled.

"The commentary is by Al Qalda himself, and it seems to cite the work of Nuchem of Acre," Ravenstein said. "The state of preservation is incredible."

"Then I must see it!" The two scholars began walking down the street as rapidly as their aged legs would carry them, oblivious to everything around them.

Ghosn's face didn't change. He'd shown wonder and amusement for the benefit of the Swiss infantrymen now halfway down the block, themselves with a trailing escort of small children. His discipline allowed him to sidle off to the side, take another turn, and vanish down a narrow alley, but what he had just seen was far more depressing.

Mohammed Al Faisal was one of the five greatest Islamic scholars, a highly respected historian, and a distant member of the Saudi royal family despite his

unpretentious nature. Except for his age—the man was nearing eighty—he might have been one of the members of the troika running Jerusalem—that and the fact that they'd wanted a scholar of Palestinian ancestry for political reasons. No friend of Israel, and one of the most conservative of the Saudi religious leaders, had he become enamored of the treaty also?

Worse still, the Swiss had treated the man with the utmost respect. Worst of all, the Israeli rabbi had done the same. The people in the streets, nearly all of them Palestinians, had watched it all with amusement and . . . what? Tolerance? Acceptance, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. The Israelis had long ago given lip-service to respect for their Arab neighbors, but that promise had not even been written on sand for all the permanence it had carried.

Ravenstein wasn't like that, of course. Another scholar, living in his own little world of dead things and ideas, he'd often counseled moderation in dealings with Arabs, and handled his archaeological digs with Muslim consultation . . . and now . . .

And now he was a psychological bridge between the Jewish world and the Arab one. People like that would continue doing what they had always done, but now it was not an aberration, was it?

Peace. It was possible. It could happen. It wasn't just another mad dream imposed on the region by outsiders. How quickly the ordinary people were adapting to it. Israelis were leaving their homes. The Swiss had already taken over one settlement and demolished several others. The Saudi commission was set up, and was beginning to work on restoring land parcels to their rightful owners. A great Arab university was planned for the outskirts of Jerusalem, to be built with Saudi money. It was moving so fast! Israelis were resisting, but less than he had expected. In another week, he'd heard from twenty people, tourists would flood the city—hotel bookings were arriving as rapidly as satellite phone links could deliver them. Already two enormous new hotels were being planned for the influx, and on the basis of increased tourism alone the Palestinians here would reap fantastic economic benefits. They were already proclaiming their total political victory over Israel, and had collectively decided to be magnanimous in their triumph—it made financial sense to be so, and the Palestinians had the most highly developed commercial sense in the Arab world.

But Israel would still survive.

Ghosn stopped at a street café, set down his bag, and ordered a glass of juice. He contemplated the narrow street as he waited. There were Jews and Muslims. Tourists would soon flood the place; the first wave had barely broken at local airports. Muslims, of course, to pray at the Dome of the Rock. Americans with their money, even Japanese, curious about a land even more ancient than their own. Prosperity would soon come to Palestine.

Prosperity was the handmaiden of peace, and the assassin of discontent.

But prosperity was not what Ibrahim Ghosn wanted for his people or his land. Ultimately, perhaps, but only after the other necessary preconditions had been met. He paid for his orange juice with American currency and walked off. Soon he was able to catch a cab. Ghosn had entered Israel from Egypt. He'd leave Jerusalem for Jordan, thence back to Lebanon. He had work to do,

and he hoped the books he carried contained the necessary information.

Ben Goodley was a postdoctoral student from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. A bright, good-looking academic of twenty-seven years, he was also possessed of enough ambition for the entire family after which the school had been named. His doctoral thesis had examined the folly of Vietnam from the intelligence side of the equation, and it had been sufficiently controversial that his professor had forwarded it to Liz Elliot for comment. The National Security Advisor's only beef with Goodley was that he was a man. Nobody was perfect.

"So exactly what sort of research do you want to do?" she asked him.

"Doctor, I hope to examine the nature of intelligence decisions as they relate to recent changes in Europe and the Middle East. The problem is getting FOI'd into certain areas."

"And what is your ultimate objective? I mean," Elliot said, "is it teaching, writing, government service, what?"

"Government service, of course. The historical environment demands, I think, that the right people take the right action. My thesis made it clear, didn't it, that we've been badly served by the intelligence community almost continuously since the 1960s. The whole institutional mind-set over there is geared in the wrong direction. At least"—he leaned back and tried to look comfortable—"that's how it often appears to an outsider."

"And why is that, do you think?"

"Recruiting is one problem. The way CIA, for example, selects people really determines how they obtain and analyze data. They create a gigantic self-fulfilling prophecy. Where's their objectivity, where's their ability to see trends? Did they predict 1989? Of course not. What are they missing now? Probably a lot of things. It might be nice," Goodley said, "to get a handle on the important issues before they become crisis items."

"I agree." Elliot watched the young man's shoulders drop as he discreetly let out a deep breath. She decided to play him just a little, just enough to let him know whom he'd be working for. "I wonder what we can do with you . . . ?" Elliot let her eyes trace across the far wall.

"Marcus Cabot has an opening for a research assistant. You'll need a security clearance, and you'll need to sign a very strict nondisclosure agreement. You cannot publish anything without having it cleared in advance."

"That's almost prior-restraint," Goodley pointed out. "What about the Constitutional issue?"

"Government must keep some secrets if it is to function. You may have access to some remarkable information. Is getting published your goal, or is it what you said? Public service does require some sacrifices."

"Well . . ."

"There will be some important openings at CIA in the next few years," Elliot promised.

"I see," Goodley said, quite truthfully. "I never intended to publish classified information of course."

"Of course," Elliot agreed. "I can handle that through my office, I suppose. I

found your paper impressive. I want a mind like yours working for the government if you can agree to the necessary restrictions."

"In that case I guess I can accept them."

"Fine." Elliot smiled. "You are now a White House Fellow. My secretary will take you across the street to the security office. You have a bunch of forms to fill out."

"I already have a 'secret' clearance."

"You'll need more than that. You'll have to get a SAP/SAR clearance—that means 'special-access programs/special access required.' It normally takes a few months for that—"

"Months?" Goodley asked.

"I said 'usually.' We can fast-track part of that. I suggest you start apartment-hunting. The stipend is sufficient?"

"Quite sufficient."

"Fine. I'll call Marcus over at Langley. You'll want to meet him." Goodley beamed at the National Security Advisor. "Glad to have you on the team."

The new White House Fellow took his cue and stood. "I will try not to disappoint you."

Elliot watched him leave. It was so easy to seduce people, she knew. Sex was a useful tool for the task, but power and ambition were so much better. She'd already proven that. Elliot smiled to herself.

"An atomic bomb?" Bock asked.

"So it would seem," Qati replied.

"Who else knows?"

"Ghosn is the one who discovered it. Only he."

"Can it be used?" the German asked. *And why have you told me?*

"It was severely damaged and must be repaired. Ibrahim is now assembling the necessary information for evaluating the task. He thinks it possible."

Günther leaned back. "This is not some elaborate ruse? An Israeli trick, perhaps an American one?"

"If so, it is a very clever one," Qati said, then explained the circumstances of the discovery.

"Nineteen seventy-three . . . it does fit. I remember how close the Syrians came to destroying the Israelis. . . ." Bock was silent for a moment. He shook his head briefly. "How to use such a thing. . . ."

"That is the question, Günther."

"Too early to ask such a question. First, you must determine if the weapon can be repaired. Second, you must determine its explosive yield—no, before that you must determine its size, weight, and portability. That is the most important consideration. After that comes the yield—I will assume that—" He fell silent. "Assume? I know little of such weapons. They cannot be too heavy. They can be fired from artillery shells of less than twenty-centimeter diameter. I know that much."

"This one is much larger than that, my friend."

"You should not have told me this, Ismael. In a matter like this one, security is everything. You cannot trust anyone with knowledge such as this. People talk, people boast. There could be penetration agents in your organization."

“It was necessary. Ghosn knows that he will need some help. What contacts do you have in the DDR?”

“What sort?” Qati told him. “I know a few engineers, people who worked in the DDR nuclear program . . . it’s a dead program, you know.”

“How so?”

“Honecker was planning to build several reactors of the Russian sort. When Germany reunited, their environmental activists took one look at the design and—well, you can imagine. The Russian designs do not have a sterling reputation, do they?” Bock grunted. “As I keep telling you, the Russians are a backward people. Their reactor designs, one fellow told me, were mainly for production of nuclear material for weapons . . .”

“And . . .”

“And it is likely that there was a nuclear-weapons program within the DDR. Interesting, I never thought that through, did I?” Bock asked himself quietly. “What exactly do you want me to do?”

“I need you to travel to Germany and find some people—we would prefer merely one, for obvious reasons—to assist us.”

Back to Germany? Bock asked himself. “I’ll need—”

Qati tossed an envelope into his friend’s lap. “Beirut has been a crossroads for centuries. Those travel documents are better than the real ones.”

“You will need to move your location immediately,” Bock said. “If I am caught, you will have to assume that they will get every bit of information I have. They broke Petra. They can break me or anyone else they wish.”

“I will pray for your safety. In that envelope is a telephone number. When you return, we will be elsewhere.”

“When do I leave?”

“Tomorrow.”

12

TINSMITHS

"And I'll raise you a dime," Ryan said after taking his draw.

"You're bluffing," Chavez said after a sip of beer.

"I never bluff," Jack replied.

"Out." Clark tossed in his cards.

"They all say that," the Air Force sergeant observed. "See your dime and bump you a quarter."

"Call," Chavez said.

"Three jacks."

"Beats my eights," the sergeant groused.

"But not a straight, doc." Ding finished off his beer. "Gee, that puts me five bucks ahead."

"Never count your winnings at the table, son," Clark advised soberly.

"I never did like that song." Chavez grinned. "But I like this game."

"I thought soldiers were lousy gamblers," the Air Force sergeant observed sourly. He was three bucks down, and he was a real poker player. He got to practice against politicians all the time on long flights when they needed a good dealer.

"One of the first things they teach you at CIA is how to mark cards," Clark announced as he went for the next round of drinks.

"Always knew I should have taken the course at the Farm," Ryan said. He was about even, but every time he'd had a good hand, Chavez had held a better one. "Next time I'll let you play with my wife."

"She good?" Chavez asked.

"She's a surgeon. She deals seconds so smooth she can fool a professional mechanic. She plays with cards as a kind of dexterity exercise," Ryan explained with a grin. "I never let her deal."

"Mrs. Ryan would never do anything like that," Clark said when he sat back down.

"Your turn to deal," Ding said.

Clark started shuffling, something he also did fairly well. "So what you think, doc?"

"Jerusalem? Better than I hoped. How about you?"

"Last time I was there—'84, I think—God, it was like Olongapo in the P.I. You could smell it—the trouble, I mean. You couldn't actually see it, but, man, it was there. You could feel people watching you. Now? It's sure chilled out some. How about some five-card stud?" Clark asked.

"Dealer's choice," the sergeant agreed.

Clark dealt the hole cards, then the first set of up cards. "Nine of spades to

the Air Force. Five of diamonds to our Latino friend. Queen of clubs to the doc, and the dealer gets—how about that? Dealer gets an ace. Ace bets a quarter."

"Well, John?" Ryan asked after the first round of bets.

"You do put a lot of faith in my powers of observation, Jack. We'll know for sure in a couple of months, but I'd say it looks all right." He dealt four more cards. "Possible straight—possible straight flush to the Air Force. Your bet, sir."

"Another quarter." The Air Force sergeant felt lucky. "The Israeli security guys have mellowed out some, too."

"How so?"

"Dr. Ryan, the Israelis really know about security. Every time we fly over here, they put a wall up around the bird, y'know? This time the wall wasn't so high. I talked to a couple of 'em and they say they're more relaxed—not officially, but personal, y'know? Used to be they hardly talked at all. Looked like a big difference to me, anyway."

Ryan smiled as he decided to fold. His eight, queen, and deuce weren't going anywhere. It never failed. You always got better data from sergeants than generals.

"What we have here," Ghosn said, flipping his book to the right page, "is essentially an Israeli copy of an American Mark-12 fission bomb. It's a boosted-fission design."

"What does that mean?" Qati asked.

"It means that tritium is squirted into the core just as the act of firing begins. That generates more neutrons and greatly increases the efficiency of the reaction. As a result, you need only a small amount of fissionable material . . ."

"But?" Qati heard the "but" coming.

Ghosn leaned back and stared at the core of the device. "But the mechanism to insert the boost material was destroyed by the impact. The kryton switches for the conventional explosives are no longer reliable and must be replaced. We have enough intact explosive blocks to determine their proper configuration, but manufacturing new ones will be very difficult. Unfortunately I cannot depend on simply reverse-engineering the entire weapon. I must duplicate the original design theoretically first, determine what it can and cannot do, then re-invent the processes for fabrication. Do you have any idea what the original cost for that was?"

"No," Qati admitted, sure that he was about to learn.

"More than what it cost to land people on the moon. The most brilliant minds in human history were part of this process: Einstein, Fermi, Bohr, Oppenheimer, Teller, Alvarez, von Neumann, Lawrence—a hundred others! The giants of physics in this century. Giants."

"You're telling me you cannot do it?"

Ghosn smiled. "No, Commander, I am telling you that I can. What is the work of genius the first time is the work of a tinsmith soon thereafter. It required genius the first time because it was the first time, and also because technology was so primitive. All the calculations had to be done manually at

first, on big mechanical calculators. All the work on the first hydrogen bomb was done on the first primitive computers—Eniac, I think it was called. But today?" Ghosn laughed. It really was absurd. "A videogame has more computing power than Eniac ever did. I can run the calculations on a high-end personal computer in seconds and duplicate what took Einstein months. But the most important thing is that they did not really know if it was possible. It is, and I know *that!* Next, they made records of how they proceeded. Finally, I have a template, and though I cannot reverse-engineer it entirely, I can use this as a theoretical model.

"You know, given two or three years, I could do it all myself."

"Do you think we have two or three years?"

Ghosn shook his head. He'd already reported on what he saw in Jerusalem. "No, Commander. We surely do not."

Qati explained what he had ordered their German friend to do.

"That is good. Where do we move to?"

Berlin was once more the capital of Germany. It had been Bock's plan that this should be so, of course, but not that it should be this sort of Germany. He'd flown in from Italy—via Greece, and, before that, Syria—and cleared passport control with scarcely a wave. From that point, he'd simply rented a car and driven out of Berlin on highway E-74 north toward Greifswald.

Günther had rented a Mercedes-Benz. He rationalized this by telling himself that his cover was that of a businessman, and besides he hadn't rented the biggest one available. There were times when he thought he might as well have rented a bicycle. This road had been neglected by the DDR government, and now that the Federal Republic was fully in place, the highway was little more than a linear repair gang. It went without saying that the other side of the road was already fixed. His peripheral vision caught hundreds of big, powerful Benzes and BMWs streaking south toward Berlin as the capitalists from the West blazed about to reconquer economically what had collapsed under political betrayal.

Bock took his exit outside Greifswald, driving east through the town of Kemnitz. The attempts at road repair had not yet reached the secondary roads. After hitting half a dozen potholes Günther had to pull over and consult his map. He proceeded three kilometers, then made a series of turns, ending up on what had once been an upscale neighborhood of professionals. In the driveway of the house he sought was a Trabant. The grass was still neatly trimmed, of course, and the house was neatly arranged, down to the even curtains in the windows—this was Germany, after all—but there was an air of disrepair and depression not so much seen as felt. Bock parked his car a block away and walked an indirect route back to the house.

"I am here to see Herr Doktor Fromm," he told the woman, Frau Fromm, probably, who answered the door.

"Who may I say is calling?" she asked formally. She was in her middle forties, her skin tight over severe cheeks, with too many lines radiating from her dull blue eyes and tight, colorless lips. She examined the man on her front step with interest, and perhaps a little hope. Though Bock had no idea why this should be so, he took the chance to make use of it.

"An old friend." Bock smiled to reinforce the image. "May I surprise him?"

She wavered for a moment, then her face changed and good manners took hold. "Please come in."

Bock waited in the sitting room, and he realized that his impression was right—but why it was right struck him hard. The interior of the house reminded him of his own apartment in Berlin. The same specially made furniture that had once looked so good in contrast to what was available for ordinary citizens in the German Democratic Republic did not impress as it once had. Perhaps it was the Mercedes he'd driven up, Bock told himself as he heard footsteps approaching. But no. It was dust. Frau Fromm was not cleaning the house as a good German *Hausfrau* did. A sure sign that something was badly wrong.

"Yes?" Dr. Manfred Fromm said as a question before his eyes widened in delayed recognition. "Ah, so good to see you!"

"I wondered if you'd remember your old friend Hans," Bock said with a chuckle, stretching out his hand. "A long time, Manfred."

"A very long time indeed, *Junge!* Come to my study." The two men walked off under the inquisitive eyes of Frau Fromm. Dr. Fromm closed the door behind himself before speaking.

"I am sorry about your wife. It was unspeakable what happened."

"That is past. How are you doing?"

"You haven't heard? The Greens have attacked us. We're about to shut down."

Doktor Manfred Fromm was, on paper, the deputy assistant director of the Lubmin/Nord Nuclear Power Station. The station had been built twenty years earlier from the Soviet WER Model 230 design, which, primitive as it was, had been adequate with an expert German operations team. Like all Soviet designs of the period, the reactor was a plutonium producer. But unlike Chernobyl it had a containment dome. It was neither terribly efficient nor especially unsafe, but did carry the benefit of producing weapons-grade nuclear material in addition to 816 megawatts of electrical power from its two functioning reactors.

"The Greens," Bock repeated quietly. "Them." The Green Party was a natural consequence of the German national spirit, which venerated all growing things on one hand, while trying very hard to kill them on the other. Formed from the extreme—or the consistent—elements of the environmental movement, it had fought against many things equally upsetting to the Communist Bloc. But where it had failed to prevent the deployment of theater nuclear weapons—and after their successful deployment had resulted in the INF Treaty, which had eliminated all such weapons on both sides of the line-it was now successfully raising the purest form of political hell in what had once been the German Democratic Republic. The nightmare of pollution in the East was now the obsession of the Greens, and number one on their hit list was the nuclear-power industry, which they called hideously unsafe. Bock reminded himself that the Greens had never truly been under proper political control. The party would never be a major power in German politics, and now it was being exploited by the same government that it had once annoyed. Whereas once the Greens had shrieked about the pollution of the Ruhr and the Rhein

from Krupp, and howled about the deployment of NATO nuclear arms, now they were crusading in the East more fervently than Barbarossa had ever attempted in the Holy Land. Their incessant carping on the mess in the East was ensuring that socialism would not soon return to Germany. It was enough to make both men wonder if the Greens had not been a subtle capitalist ploy from the very beginning.

Fromm and the Bocks had met five years earlier. The Red Army Faction had come up with a plan to sabotage a West German reactor and wanted technical advice on how to do so most efficiently. Though never revealed to the public, their plan had been thwarted only at the last minute. Publicity on the BND's intelligence success would conversely have threatened Germany's own nuclear industry.

"Less than a year until they shut us down for good. I only go in to work three days a week now. I've been replaced by a 'technical expert' from the West. He lets me 'advise' him, of course," Fromm reported.

"There must be more, Manfred," Bock observed. Fromm had also been the chief engineer in Erich Honecker's most cherished military project. Though allies within the World Socialist Brotherhood, the Russians and the Germans could never have been true friends. The bad blood between the nations stretched back a thousand years, and while Germany had at least made a go of socialism, the Russians had failed completely. As a result, the East German military had never been anything like the much larger force in the West. To the last, the Russians had feared Germans, even those on their own side, before incomprehensibly allowing the country to be unified. Erich Honecker had decided that such distrust might have strategic ramifications, and had drawn plans to keep some of the plutonium produced at Greifswald and elsewhere. Manfred Fromm knew as much about nuclear bomb design as any Russian or American, even if he'd never quite been able to put his expertise into play. The plutonium stockpile secretly accumulated over ten years had been turned over to the Russians as a final gesture of Marxist fealty, lest the Federal German government get it. That last honorable act had resulted in angry recriminations—angry enough that one other cache of material had never been turned over. What connections Fromm and his colleagues had once had with the Soviets were completely gone.

"Oh, I have a fine offer." Fromm lifted a manila envelope on his cluttered desk. "They want me to go to Argentina. My counterparts in the West have been there for years, along with most of the chaps I worked with."

"What do they offer?"

Fromm snorted. "One million D-Mark per year until the project is completed. No difficulties with taxes, numbered account, all the normal enticements," Fromm said with an emotionless voice. And that, of course, was quite impossible. Fromm could no more work for fascists than he could breathe water. His grandfather, one of the original Spartacists, had died in one of the first labor camps soon after Hitler's accession to power. His father had been part of the communist underground and a player in a spy ring, had somehow survived the war despite the systematic hunting of the Gestapo and the *Sicherheitsdienst*, and been an honored local Party member to the day of his death. Fromm had learned Marxism-Leninism while he'd learned to walk, and

the elimination of his profession had not enamored him of the new political system which he'd been educated to despise. He'd lost his job, had never fulfilled his prime ambition, and was now being treated like an office boy by some pink-cheeked engineer's assistant from Göttingen. Worst of all, his wife wanted him to take the job in Argentina and was making a further hell of his life so long as he refused to consider it. Finally he had to ask his question. "Why are you here, Günther? The entire country is looking for you, and despite that fine disguise, you are in danger here."

Bock smiled confidently. "Isn't it amazing what new hair and glasses can do for you?"

"That does not answer my question."

"I have friends who need your skills."

"What friends might those be?" Fromm asked dubiously.

"They are politically acceptable to me and to you. I have not forgotten Petra," Bock replied.

"That was a good plan we put together, wasn't it? What went wrong?"

"We had a spy among us. Because of her they changed the security arrangements at the plant three days before we were supposed to go in."

"A Green?"

Günther allowed himself a bitter smile. "*Ja*. She had second thoughts about possible civilian casualties and damage to the environment. Well, she is now part of the environment." Petra had done the shooting, her husband remembered. There was nothing worse than a spy, and it was fitting that Petra should have done the execution.

"Part of the environment, you say? How poetic." It was Fromm's first attempt at levity, and about as successful as all his attempts. Manfred Fromm was a singularly humorless man.

"I cannot offer you money. In fact, I cannot tell you anything else. You must decide on the basis of what I have already said." Bock didn't have a gun, but he did have a knife. He wondered if Manfred knew the alternatives he faced. Probably not. Despite his ideological purity, Fromm was a technocrat, and narrowly focused.

"When do we leave?"

"Are you being watched?"

"No. I had to travel to Switzerland for the 'business offer.' Such things cannot be discussed in this country, even if it is united and happy," he explained. "I made my own travel arrangements. No, I do not think I am being watched."

"Then we can leave at once. You need not pack anything."

"What do I tell my wife?" Fromm asked, then wondered why he'd bothered. It wasn't as though his marriage was a happy one.

"That is your concern."

"Let me pack some things. It's easier that way. How long . . . ?"

"I do not know."

It took half an hour. Fromm explained to his wife that he was going to be away for a few days for further business discussions. She gave him a hopeful kiss. Argentina might be nice, and nicer still to be able to live *well* somewhere. Perhaps this old friend had been able to talk sense into him. He drove a

Mercedes, after all. Perhaps he knew what the future really held.

Three hours later Bock and Fromm boarded a flight to Rome. After an hour's layover, their next stop was Turkey, and from there to Damascus, where they checked into a hotel to get some needed rest.

If anything, Ghosn told himself, Marvin Russell was even more formidable-looking than he'd been before. What little excess weight he'd carried had sweated off, and his daily fitness exercises with the soldiers of the movement had only added to an already muscular physique, while the sun had bronzed him until he might almost have been mistaken for an Arab. The one discordant note was his religion. His comrades reported that he was a true pagan, an unbeliever, who prayed to the sun, of all things. It disquieted the Muslims, but people were working, gently, to show him the true faith of Islam, and it was reported that he listened respectfully. It was also reported that he was a dead shot with any weapon to any range; that he was the most lethal hand-to-hand fighter they'd ever encountered—he'd nearly crippled an instructor—and that he had field-craft skills that would impress a fox. A clever, cunning, natural warrior was the overall assessment. Aside from his religious eccentricities, the others liked and admired him.

"Marvin, if you get any tougher you will frighten me!" Ghosn chuckled at his American friend.

"Ibrahim, this is the best thing I've ever done, coming here. I never knew that there were other folks who been fucked over like my people, man—but you guys are better at fighting back. You guys got real balls." Ghosn blinked at that—this from a man who'd snapped a policeman's neck like a twig. "I really want to help, man, any way I can."

"There is always a place for a true warrior." If his language skills improved, he'd make a fine instructor, Ghosn thought. "Well, I must be off."

"Where you going?"

"A place we have east of here." It was to the north. "Some special work I must do."

"That thing we dug up?" Russell asked casually. Almost too casually, Ghosn thought, but that was not possible, was it? Caution was one thing. Paranoia was another.

"Something else. Sorry, my friend, but we must take our security seriously."

Marvin nodded. "It's cool, man. That's what killed my brother, fucking up security. See ya when you get back."

Ghosn left for his car and drove out of the camp. He took the Damascus road for an hour. Foreigners so often failed to appreciate how small the Middle East was—the important parts, at least. The drive from Jerusalem to Damascus, for example, would have been a mere two hours on decent roads, though the two cities were the proverbial worlds apart politically . . . or had been, Ghosn reminded himself. He'd heard of some ominous rumblings from Syria of late. Was even that government tiring of the struggle? It was easy to call that an impossibility, but that word no longer had its prior meaning.

Five kilometers outside Damascus he spotted the other car waiting at the prescribed place. He drove past it for two thousand meters, scanning for surveillance before he decided it was safe to turn around. A minute later he

pulled over close to it. The two men got out as they'd been directed to do, and their driver, a member of the Organization, simply drove away.

"Good morning, Günther."

"And to you, Ibrahim. This is my friend Manfred." Both men got into the back of the car, and the engineer drove off at once.

Ghosn eyed the newcomer in the mirror. Older than Bock, thinner, with deep-sunk eyes. He was poorly dressed for the environment and sweating like a pig. Ibrahim handed back a plastic water bottle. The newcomer wiped off the top with his handkerchief before drinking. *Arabs not sanitary enough for you?* Ghosn wondered. Well, that was not his concern, was it?

The drive to the new location took two hours. Ghosn deliberately took a circuitous route despite the fact that the sun would keep a careful observer informed of their direction. He didn't know what sort of training this Manfred fellow had, and while it was prudent to assume he knew every skill there was, it was also prudent to employ every trick in the book. By the time they arrived at their destination, only a trained reconnaissance soldier would have been able to duplicate the route.

Qati had chosen well. Until a few months earlier it had been a command center for Hezbollah. Dug into the side of a steep hillside, the corrugated-iron roof was covered with earth and planted with the sparse local shrubbery. Only a skilled man who knew exactly what he was looking for could ever have spotted it, and that was unlikely. Hezbollah was particularly adept at routing out informers in its midst. A dirt track ran right past it to an abandoned farm whose land was too playedout even for opium and hashish production, which was the major cash crop in the area. Inside the structure was about a hundred square meters of concrete-floored shade, even with room to park a few vehicles. The only bad news was that this place would be a deathtrap in case of an earthquake, Ghosn told himself, not an unknown occurrence in the region. He pulled the car in between two posts, out of sight. On leaving the car, he dropped camouflage netting behind it. Yes, Qati had chosen well.

The hardest balance, as always, was choosing between the two aspects of security. On the one hand, the more people who knew anything was happening, the worse it was. On the other, some people were necessary just to provide a guard force. Qati had brought most of his personal guard, ten men of known loyalty and skill. They knew Ghosn and Bock by sight, and their leader came forward to meet Manfred.

"This is our new friend," Ghosn told the man, who looked closely at the German's face and walked away.

"Was gibt's hier?" Fromm asked in tense German.

"What we have here," Ghosn answered in English, "is very interesting."

Manfred took his lesson from that.

"Kommen Sie mit, bitte." Ghosn led them to a wall with a door in it. A man with a rifle stood outside of it, which made much better sense than a lock. The engineer nodded to the guard, who nodded curtly back. Ghosn led them into the room and pulled a cord to turn on the fluorescent lighting. There was a large metal worktable covered with a tarp. Ghosn removed the tarp without further comment. He was tiring of the drama in any case. It was time for real work.

"Gott im Himmel!"

"I've never seen it myself," Bock admitted. "So that is what it looks like?"

Fromm put on some glasses and peered over the mechanism for perhaps a minute before looking up. "American design, but not American manufacture." He pointed. "Wrong sort of wiring. Crude device, thirty years—no, older than that in design, but not in fabrication. These circuit boards are . . . 1960s, perhaps early '70s. Soviet? From the cache in Azerbaijan, perhaps?"

Ghosn merely shook his head.

"Israeli? *Ist das möglich?*" That question got a nod.

"More than possible, my friend. It is here."

"Gravity bomb. Tritium injection into the pit to boost yield—fifty to seventy kilotons, I'd guess—radar and impact fusing. It has actually been dropped, but did not go off. Why?"

"Apparently it was never armed. Everything we recovered is before you," Ghosn answered. He was already impressed with Manfred.

Fromm ran his fingers inside the bombcase, searching for connectors. "You're correct. How interesting." There was a long pause. "You know that it can probably be repaired . . . and even . . ."

"Even what?" Ghosn asked, knowing the answer.

"This design can be converted into a triggering device."

"For what?" Bock asked.

"For a hydrogen bomb," Ghosn answered. "I suspected that."

"Awfully heavy, nothing like the efficiency of a modern design. As they say, crude but effective. . . ." Fromm looked up. "You want my help to repair it, then?"

"Will you help?" Ghosn asked.

"Ten years—more, twenty years I have studied and thought. . . . How will it be used?"

"Does that trouble you?"

"It will not be used in Germany?"

"Of course not," Ghosn answered almost in annoyance. What quarrel did the Organization really have with the Germans, after all?

Something in Bock's mind, however, went *click*. He closed his eyes for a moment to engrave the thought in his memory.

"Yes, I will help."

"You will be well paid," Ghosn promised him. He saw a moment later that this was a mistake. But that didn't matter, did it?

"I do not do such things for money! You think I am a mercenary?" Fromm asked indignantly.

"Excuse me. I meant no insult. A skilled worker is someone to be rewarded for his time. We are not beggars, you know."

Neither am I, Fromm almost said before his good sense intervened. These were not the Argentines, were they? They were not fascists, not capitalists, they were revolutionary comrades who had also fallen upon bad political times . . . though he was sure their fiscal situation was highly favorable indeed. The Soviets had never *given* arms to the Arabs. It had all been sold for hard currency, even under Brezhnev and Andropov, and if that had been good enough for the Soviets when they still held the true faith . . . then . . .

"Forgive me. I merely stated a fact, and I did not mean to insult you, either. I know you are not beggars. You are revolutionary soldiers, freedom fighters, and I will be honored to assist you in any way I can." He waved his hand. "You may feel free to pay me whatever you think fair"—it would be plenty, more than a mere million D-Mark!—"but please understand that I do not sell myself for money."

"It is a pleasure to meet an honorable man," Ghosn said with a satisfied look.

Bock thought they had both laid it on rather thick, but kept his peace. He already suspected how Fromm would be paid.

"So," Ghosn said next. "Where do we begin?"

"First, we think. I need paper and a pencil."

"And who might you be?" Ryan asked.

"Ben Goodley, sir."

"Boston?" Ryan asked. The accent was quite distinctive.

"Yes, sir. Kennedy School. I'm a postdoctoral Fellow and, well, now I'm a White House Fellow also."

"Nancy?" Ryan turned to his secretary.

"The Director has him on your calendar, Dr. Ryan."

"Okay, Dr. Goodley," Ryan said with a smile, "come on in." Clark took his seat after sizing the new guy up.

"Want some coffee?"

"You have decaf?" Goodley asked.

"You want to work here, boy, you'd better get used to the real stuff. Grab a seat. Sure you don't want any?"

"I'll pass, sir."

"Okay." Ryan poured his customary mug and sat down behind his desk. "So what are you doing in this puzzle palace?"

"The short version is, looking for a job. I did my dissertation on intelligence operations, their history and prospects. I need to see some things to finish my work at Kennedy, then I want to find out if I can do the real thing."

Jack nodded. That sounded familiar enough. "Clearances?"

"TS, SAP/SAR. Those are new. I already had a 'secret' because some of my work at Kennedy involved going into some presidential archives, mainly in D.C., but some of the stuff in Boston is still sensitive. I even was part of the team that FOI'd a lot of stuff from the Cuban Missile Crisis."

"Dr. Nicholas Bledsoe, his work?"

"That's right."

"I didn't buy all of Nick's conclusions, but that was a hell of a piece of research." Jack raised his mug in salute.

Goodley had written nearly half of that monograph, including the conclusions. "What did you take issue with—if I may ask?"

"Khrushchev's action was fundamentally irrational. I think—and the record bears this out—that his placing the missiles there was impulsive rather than reasoned."

"I disagree. The paper pointed out that the principal Soviet concern was our IRBMs in Europe, especially the ones in Turkey. It seems logical to conclude

that it was all a ploy to reach a stable situation regarding theater forces."

"Your paper didn't report on everything," Jack said.

"Such as?" Goodley asked, hiding his annoyance.

"Such as the intel we were getting from Penkovskiy and others. Those documents are still classified and will remain so for another twenty years."

"Isn't fifty years a long time?"

"Sure is," Ryan agreed. "But there's a reason. Some of that information is still . . . well, not exactly current, but it would reveal some tricks we don't want revealed."

"Isn't that just a *little* extreme?" Goodley asked as dispassionately as he could manage.

"Let's say we had Agent BANANA operating back then. Okay, he's dead now—died of old age, say—but maybe Agent PEAR was recruited by him, and he's still working. If the Sovs find out who BANANA was, that might give them a clue. Also you have to think about certain methods of message-transfer. People have been playing baseball for a hundred fifty years, but a change-up is still a change-up. I used to think the same way you do, Ben. You learn that most of the things that are done here are done for a reason."

Captured by the system, Goodley thought.

"By the way, you did notice that Khrushchev's last batch of tapes pretty much proved Nick Bledsoe wrong on some of his points—one other thing."

"Yes?"

"Let's say that John Kennedy had hard intel in the spring of 1961, really good stuff that Khrushchev wanted to change the system. In '58 he'd effectively gutted the Red Army, and he was trying to reform the Party. Let's say that Kennedy had hard stuff on that, and he was told by a little bird that if he cut the Russkies a little slack, maybe we could have had a rapprochement in the '60s. *Glasnost,* say, thirty years early. Let's say all that happened, and the President blew the call, decided for political reasons that it was disadvantageous to cut Nikita a little slack. . . . *That* would mean that the 1960s were all a great big mistake. Vietnam, everything, all a gigantic screwup."

"I don't believe it. I've been through the archives. It's not consistent with everything we know about—"

"Consistency in a politician?" Ryan interrupted. "There's a revolutionary concept."

"If you're saying that really happened—"

"It was a hypothetical," Jack said with a raised eyebrow. Hell, he thought, the information was all out there for anyone who wanted to pull it together. That it had never been done was just another manifestation of a wider and more troubling problem. But the part that worried him was right in this building. He'd leave history to historians . . . until, someday, he decided to rejoin their professional ranks. *And when will that be, Jack?*

"Nobody'd ever believe it."

"Most people believe that Lyndon Johnson lost the New Hampshire primary to Eugene McCarthy because of the Tet Offensive, too. Welcome to the world of intelligence, Dr. Goodley. You know what's the hard part of recognizing the truth?" Jack asked.

"What's that?"

"Knowing that something just bit you on the ass. It's not as easy as you think."

"And the breakup of the Warsaw Pact?"

"Case in point," Ryan agreed. "We had all kinds of indicators, and we all blew the call. Well, that's not true, exactly. A lot of the youngsters in the DI—Directorate of Intelligence," Jack explained unnecessarily, which struck Goodley as patronizing, "were making noise, but the section chiefs pooh-poohed it."

"And you, sir?"

"If the Director's agreeable, we can let you see some of that. Most of it, in fact. The majority of our agents and field officers got faked out of their jockstraps, too. We all could have done better, and that's as true of me as it is of anybody else. If I have a weakness, it's that I have too tactical a focus."

"Trees instead of the forest?"

"Yep," Ryan admitted. "That's the big trap here, but knowing about it doesn't always help a whole hell of a lot."

"I guess that's why they sent me over," Goodley observed. Jack grinned. "Hell, that's not terribly different from how I got started here. Welcome aboard. Where do you want to start, Dr. Goodley?"

Ben already had a good idea on that, of course. If Ryan could not see it coming, that was not his problem, was it?

"So where do you get the computers?" Bock asked. Fromm was closeted away with his paper and pencils.

"Israel for a start, maybe Jordan or Turkey," Ghosn replied.

"This will be rather expensive," Bock warned.

"I have already checked out the computer-controlled machine tools. Yes, they are expensive." *But not that expensive*. It occurred to Ghosn that he had access to hard-currency assets that might boggle the mind of this unbeliever. "We will see what your friend requires. Whatever it is, we will get it."

13

PROCESS

Why did I ever accept this job?

Roger Durling was a proud man. The upset winner of what was supposed to have been a secure Senate seat, then the youngest governor in the history of California, he knew pride to be a weakness, but he also knew that there was much to justify his.

I could have waited a few years, maybe returned to the Senate and earned my way into the White House instead of cutting a deal and delivering the election to Fowler . . . in return for this.

"This" was Air Force Two, the radio call sign for whatever aircraft the Vice President rode on. The implicit contrast with "Air Force One" made just one more joke that attached to what was putatively the second most important political post in the United States, though not as earthily apt as John Nance Garner's observation: "A pitcher of warm spit." The whole office of Vice President, Durling judged, was one of the few mistakes made by the Founding Fathers. It had once been worse. Originally the Vice President was supposed to have been the losing candidate who, after losing, would patriotically take his place in a government not his and preside over the Senate, setting aside petty political differences to serve the country. How James Madison had ever been that foolish was something scholars had never really examined, but the mistake had been corrected quickly enough by the 12th Amendment in 1803. Even in an age when gentlemen preparing for a duel referred to each other as "sir," that was something that pressed selflessness too far. And so the law had been changed, and the Vice President was now an appendage instead of a defeated enemy. That so many Vice Presidents had succeeded to the top job was less a matter of design than happenstance. That so many had done well—Andrew Johnson, Theodore Roosevelt, Harry Truman—was miraculous.

It was in any case a chance he would never have. Bob Fowler was physically healthy and politically as secure as any President had been since . . . Eisenhower? Durling wondered. Maybe even FDR. The important, almost co-equal role for the Vice President that Carter had initiated with Walter Mondale—something largely ignored but highly constructive—was a thing of the past. Fowler did not need Durling anymore. The President had made that quite clear.

And so Durling was relegated to subsidiary—not even secondary—duties. Fowler got to fly about in a converted 747 dedicated to his use alone. Roger Durling got whatever aircraft might be available, in this case one of the VC-20B Gulfstreams that were used by anyone who had the right credentials. Senators and House members on junkets got them if they were on the right

committees, or if the President sensed a need to stroke their egos.

You're being petty, Durling told himself. *By being petty, you justify all the crap you have to put up with.*

His misjudgment had been at least as great as Madison's, the Vice President told himself as the aircraft taxied out. In deciding that a political figure would place country above his own ambition, Madison had merely been optimistic. Durling, on the other hand, had ignored an evident political reality, that the real difference in importance between President and Vice President was far greater than the difference between Fowler and any of a dozen committee chairmen in the House or Senate. The President had to deal with Congress to get any work done. He didn't *need* to deal with his Vice President.

How had he allowed himself to get here? That earned an amused grunt, though the question had occurred to Durling a thousand times. Patriotism, of course, or at least the political version of it. He'd delivered California, and without California he and Fowler would both still be governors. The one substantive concession he'd gotten—the accession of Charlie Alden to the post of National Security Advisor—had been for naught, but he had been the deciding factor in changing the Presidency from one party to another. And his reward for that was drawing every crap detail in the executive branch, delivering speeches that would rarely make the news, though those of various cabinet officials did, speeches to keep faithful the party faithful, speeches to float new ideas—usually bad ones, and rarely his own—and wait for lightning to strike himself instead of the President. Today he was going out to talk about the need to raise taxes to pay for the peace in the Middle East. What a marvelous political opportunity! he thought. Roger Durling would outline the need for new taxes in St. Louis before a convention of purchasing managers, and he was sure the applause would be deafening.

But he had accepted the job, had given his word to perform the duties of the office, and if he did any less, then what would he be?

The aircraft rolled unevenly past the hangars and various aircraft, including NEACP, the 747 configured as the National Emergency Airborne Command Post, known as "Kneecap," or more dramatically as "The Doomsday Plane." Always within two flying hours of wherever the President might be (a real headache when the President visited Russia or China), it was the only safe place the President might occupy in a nuclear crisis—but that didn't really matter anymore, did it? Durling saw people shuffling in and out of the aircraft. Funding hadn't been reduced on that yet—well, it was part of the President's personal fleet—and it was still kept ready for a rapid departure. He wondered how soon that might change. Everything else had.

"We're ready for departure. All buckled, sir?" the sergeant-attendant asked.

"You bet! Let's get this show on the road," Durling replied with a smile. On Air Force One, he knew, people often showed their confidence in the aircraft and the crew by not buckling. More evidence that his airplane was second-best, but he could hardly growl at the sergeant for being a pro, and to this man Roger Durling was important. The Vice President reflected that this made the sergeant E-6 in the U.S. Air Force a more honorable man than most of the people in politics, but that wasn't much of a surprise, was it?

"That's a roger."

"Again?" Ryan asked.

"Yes, sir," the voice on the other end of the phone said.

"Okay, give me a few minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Ryan finished off his coffee and walked off toward Cabot's office. He was surprised to see Goodley in there again. The youngster was keeping his distance from the Director's cigar smoke, and even Jack thought that Marcus was overdoing the Patton act or whatever the hell Cabot thought he was trying to look like.

"What is it, Jack?"

"CAMELOT," Jack replied with visible annoyance. "Those White House pukes have bowed out again. They want me to join in instead."

"Well, are you that tied up?"

"Sir, we talked about that four months ago. It's important for the people at the White House to—"

"The President and his people are busy on some things," the DCI explained tiredly.

"Sir, these things are scheduled weeks in advance, and it's the fourth straight time that—"

"I *know*, Jack."

Ryan stood his ground. "Director, somebody has to explain to them how important this is."

"I've tried, dammit!" Cabot shot back. He had done so, Jack knew.

"Have you tried working through Secretary Talbot, or maybe Dennis Bunker?" Jack asked. *At least the President listens to them,* Jack didn't add.

He didn't have to. Cabot got the message. "Look, Jack, we can't give orders to the President. We can only give advice. He doesn't always take it. You're pretty good at this, anyway. Dennis likes playing with you."

"Fine, sir, but it's not my job—do they even *read* the washup notes?"

"Charlie Alden did. I suppose Liz Elliot does too."

"I bet," Ryan observed icily, ignoring Goodley's presence. "Sir, they are being irresponsible."

"That's a little strong, Jack."

"It's a little true, Director," Ryan said as calmly as he could.

"Can I ask what CAMELOT is?" Ben Goodley asked.

"It's a game," Cabot answered. "Crisis-management, usually."

"Oh, like SAGA and GLOBAL?"

"Yeah," Ryan said. "The President never plays. The reason is that we cannot risk knowledge of how he would act in a given situation—and yes, that is overly Byzantine, but it's always been that way. Instead, the National Security Advisor or some other senior staff member takes his place, and the President is supposed to be briefed on how it goes. Except that President Fowler thinks that he doesn't have to bother, and now his people are starting to act the same dumb way." Jack was sufficiently annoyed that he used the words "President Fowler" and "dumb" in the same sentence.

"Well, I mean, is it really necessary?" Goodley asked. "Sounds like an anachronism to me."

"You have car insurance, Ben?" Jack asked.

"Yes, sure."

"Ever have an auto accident?"

"Not one that was my fault," Goodley replied.

"Then why bother with insurance?" Jack answered the question: "Because it's *insurance*, right? You don't expect to need it, you never want to need it, but because you *might* need it, you spend the money—or time, in this case—to have it."

The Presidential Scholar made a dismissive gesture. "Come on, it's a different thing altogether."

"That's right. In a car it's just your ass." Ryan stopped the sermon. "Okay, Director, I'm off for the rest of the day."

"Your objections and recommendations are noted, Jack. I will bring them up at my first opportunity—oh, before you leave, about NIITAKA . . ."

Ryan stopped in his tracks and stared down at Cabot. "Sir, Mr. Goodley is not cleared for that word, much less that file."

"We are not discussing the substance of the case. When will the people downstairs"—Ryan was grateful he didn't say MER-CURY—"be ready for the, uh, modified operations? I want to improve data-transfer."

"Six weeks. Until then we have to use the other methods we discussed."

The Director of Central Intelligence nodded. "Very well. The White House is very interested in that, Jack. Good job to all concerned."

"Glad to hear that, sir. See you tomorrow." Jack walked out.

"NIITAKA?" Goodley asked after the door closed. "Sounds Japanese."

"Sorry, Goodley. You can forget that word at your earliest opportunity." Cabot had spoken it only to remind Ryan of his place, and the honorable part of the man already regretted having done so.

"Yes, sir. May I ask an unrelated question?"

"Sure."

"Is Ryan as good as people say?"

Cabot stubbed out the remains of his cigar, to the relief of his visitor. "He's got quite a record."

"Really? I've heard that. You know, that's the whole reason I'm here, to examine the personality types that really make a difference. I mean, how does someone grow into the job? Ryan's skyrocketed up the ladder here. I'd be very interested in seeing how he managed to do that."

"He's done it by being right a lot more often than he's wrong, by making some tough calls, and with some field jobs that even I can hardly believe," Cabot said after a moment's consideration. "And you can never, ever reveal that to anyone, Dr. Goodley."

"I understand, sir. Could I see his record, his personnel file?" The DCI's eyebrows arched. "Everything you see in there is classified. Anything you try to write about it—"

"Excuse me, but I know that, sir. Everything I write is subject to security review. I signed off on that. It's important that I learn how a person really fits in here, and Ryan would seem to be an ideal case study for examining how that process happens. I mean, that's why the White House sent me over here," Goodley pointed out. "I'm supposed to report to them on what I find."

Cabot was silent for a moment. “I suppose that’s okay, then.”

Ryan’s car arrived at the Pentagon’s River Entrance. He was met by an Air Force one-star and conducted inside, bypassing the metal detector. Two minutes later he was in one of many subterranean rooms that lie under and around this ugliest of official buildings.

“Hello, Jack,” Dennis Bunker called from the far end of the room.

“Mr. Secretary.” Jack nodded as he took his National Security Advisor’s chair. The game started immediately. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Aside from the fact that Liz Elliot has decided not to grace us with her presence?” The Secretary of Defense chuckled, then went serious. “There has been an attack on one of our cruisers in the Eastern Med. The information is still sketchy, but the ship has been severely damaged and may be sinking. We presume heavy casualties.”

“What do we know?” Jack asked, settling into the game. He put on a color-coded name tag that identified which part he was playing. A card hanging from the ceiling over his chair had the same purpose.

“Not much.” Bunker looked up as a Navy lieutenant entered the room.

“Sir, USS *Kidd* reports that *Valley Forge* exploded and sank five minutes ago as a result of the initial damage. There are no more than twenty survivors, and rescue operations are under way.”

“What is the cause of the loss?” Ryan asked.

“Unknown, sir. *Kidd* was thirty miles from *Valley Forge* at the time of the incident. Her helo is on the scene now. Commander Sixth Fleet has brought all his ships to full-alert status. USS *Theodore Roosevelt* is launching aircraft to sweep the area.”

“I know the CAG on *TR,* Robby Jackson,” Ryan said to nobody in particular. Not that it mattered. *Theodore Roosevelt* was actually in Norfolk, and Robby was still preparing for his next cruise. The names in the war game were generic, and personal knowledge of the players didn’t matter since they were not supposed to be real people. But if it were real, Robby was Commander Air Group on USS *Theodore Roosevelt,* and his would be the first plane off the cats. It was well to remember that though this might be a game, its purpose was deadly serious. “Background information?” Jack asked. He didn’t remember all of the pre-brief on the scenario being played out.

“CIA reports a possible mutiny in the Soviet Union by Red Army units in Kazakhstan, and disturbances in two Navy bases there also,” the game narrator, a Navy commander, reported.

“Soviet units in the vicinity of *Valley Forge*?” Bunker asked.

“Possibly a submarine,” the naval officer answered.

“Flash Message,” the wall speaker announced. “USS *Kidd* reports that it has destroyed an inbound surface-to-surface missile with its Close-In Weapons System. Superficial damage to the ship, no casualties.”

Jack walked to the corner to pour himself a cup of coffee. He smiled as he did so. These games were fun, he admitted to himself. He really did enjoy them. They were also realistic. He’d been swept away from a normal day’s routine, dumped in a stuffy room, given confused and fragmented information, and had no idea at all what the hell was supposed to be going on. That was

reality. The old joke: How do crisis-managers resemble mushrooms? They're kept in the dark and fed horseshit.

"Sir, we have an incoming HOTLINE message . . ."

Okay, Ryan thought, *it's* that *kind of game today. The Pentagon must have come up with the scenario. Let's see if it's still possible to blow the world up. . . .*

"More concrete?" Qati asked.

"Much more concrete," Fromm answered. "The machines each weigh several tons, and they must be totally stable. The room must be totally stable, and totally sealed. It must be clean like a hospital—no, much better than any hospital you have ever seen." Fromm looked down at his list. *Not cleaner than a* German *hospital, of course.* "Next, electrical power. We'll need three large backup generators, and at least two UPSs—"

"What?" Qati asked.

"Un-interruptible power supplies," Ghosn translated. "We'll keep one of the backup generators turning at all times, of course?"

"Correct," Fromm answered. "Since this is a primitive operation, we'll try not to use more than one machine at a time. The real problem with electricity is ensuring a secure circuit. So, we take the line current through the UPSs to protect against spikes. The computer systems on the milling machines are highly sensitive.

"Next!" Fromm said. "Skilled operators."

"That will be highly difficult," Ghosn observed.

The German smiled, amazing everyone present. "Not so. It will be easier than you think."

"Really?" Qati asked. *Good news from this infidel?*

"We'll need perhaps five highly trained men, but you have them in the region, I am sure."

"Where? There is no machine shop in the region that—"

"Certainly there is. People here wear spectacles, do they not?"

"But—"

"Of course!" Ghosn said, rolling his eyes in amazement.

"The degree of precision, you see," Fromm explained to Qati, "is no different from what is required for eyeglasses. The machines are very similar in design, just larger, and what we are attempting to do is simply to produce precise and predictable curves in a rigid material. Nuclear bombs are produced to exacting specifications. So are spectacles. Our desired object is larger, but the principle is the same, and with the proper machinery it is merely a matter of scale, not of substance. So: can you obtain skilled lens-makers?"

"I don't see why not," Qati replied, hiding his annoyance.

"They must be highly skilled," Fromm said like a schoolmaster. "The best you can find, people with long experience, preferably with training in Germany or England."

"There will be a security problem," Ghosn said quietly.

"Oh? Why is that?" Fromm asked with a feigned bafflement that struck both of the others as the summit of arrogance.

"Quite so," Qati agreed.

"Next, we need sturdy tables on which to mount the machines."

Halfway point, Lieutenant Commander Walter Claggett told himself. In forty-five more days, USS *Maine* would surface outside Juan de Fuca Straits, link up with the tugboat, and follow Little Toot into Bangor, where she would then tie up and begin the handoff process to the "Blue" crew for the next deterrence-patrol cycle. *And not a moment too soon.*

Walter Claggett—friends called him Dutch, a nickname that had originated at the Naval Academy for a reason he no longer remembered; Claggett was Black—was thirty-six years old, and it had been made known to him before sailing that he was being "deep-dipped" for early selection to commander and had a chance for an early crack at a fast-attack boat. That was fine with him. His two attempts at marriage had both ended in failure, which was not uncommon for submariners—thankfully, there were no kids involved in either union—and the Navy was his life. He was just as happy to spend all of his time at sea, saving his carousing time for those not really brief intervals on the beach. To be at sea, to slide through black water in control of a majestic ship of war, that was the best of all things to Walter Claggett. The company of good men, respect truly earned in a most demanding profession, the acquired ability to know every time what the right thing to do was, the relaxed banter in the wardroom, the responsibility he had to counsel his men—Claggett relished every aspect of his career.

It was just his commanding officer he couldn't stand.

How the hell did Captain Harry Ricks ever make it this far? he asked himself for the twentieth time this week. The man was brilliant. He could have designed a submarine reactor system on the back of an envelope, or maybe even in his head during a rare daydream. He knew things about submarine design that Electric Boat's shipwrights had never even thought about. He could discuss the ins and outs of periscope design with the Navy's chief optics expert, and knew more about satellite-navigation aids than NASA or TRW or whoever the hell was running *that* program. Surely he knew more about the guidance packages on their Trident-II D-5 sea-launched ballistic missiles than anyone this side of Lockheed's Missile Systems Division. Over dinner two weeks earlier, he'd recited a whole page from the maintenance manual. From a technical point of view, Ricks might have been the most thoroughly prepared officer in the United States Navy.

Harry Ricks was the quintessential product of the Nuclear Navy. As an engineer he was unequaled. The technical aspects of his job were almost instinctive to him. Claggett was good, and knew it; he also knew that he'd never be as good as Harry Ricks.

It's just that he doesn't know dick about submarining or submariners, Claggett reflected bleakly. It was incredible, but true, that Ricks had little feeling for seamanship and none at all for sailors.

"Sir," Claggett said slowly, "this is a very good chief. He's young, but he's sharp."

"He can't keep control of his people," Ricks replied.

"Captain, I don't know what you mean by that."

"His training methods aren't what they're supposed to be."

"He is a little unconventional, but he has cut six seconds off the average reload time. The fish are all fully functional, even the one that came over from the beach bad. The compartment is completely squared away. What more can we ask of the man?"

"I don't ask. I direct. I order. I expect things to be done my way, the right way. And they will be done that way," Ricks observed in a dangerously quiet voice.

It made no sense at all to cross the skipper on issues like this, especially when he posed them in this way, but Claggett's job as executive officer was to stand between the crew and the captain, especially when the captain was wrong.

"Sir, I must respectfully disagree. I think we look at results, and the results here are just about perfect. A good chief is one who stretches the envelope, and this one hasn't stretched it very far. If you slap him down, it will have a negative effect on him and his department."

"X, I expect support from all my officers, and especially from you."

Claggett sat straight up in his chair as though from a blow. He managed to speak calmly. "Captain, you have my support and my loyalty. It is not my job to be a robot. I'm supposed to offer alternatives. At least," he added, "that's what they told me at PXO School." Claggett regretted the last sentence even before it was spoken, but somehow it had come out anyway. The CO's cabin was quite small, and immediately got smaller still.

That was a very foolish thing to say, Lieutenant *Commander Walter Martin Claggett,* Ricks thought with a blank look.

"Next, the reactor drills," Ricks said.

"Another one? So soon?" *For Christ's sake, the last one was friggin'* PERFECT. *Almost perfect,* Claggett corrected himself. *The kids might have saved ten or fifteen seconds somewhere.* The Executive Officer didn't know where that might have been, though.

"Proficiency means every day, X."

"Indeed it does, sir, but they are proficient. I mean, the ORSE we ran right before Captain Rosselli left missed setting the squadron record by a whisker, and the last drill we ran beat *that!"*

"No matter how good drill results are, always demand better. That way you always *get* better. Next ORSE, I want the squadron record, X."

He wants the Navy record, the world record, maybe even a certificate from God, Claggett thought. *More than that, he wants it on* his *record.*

The growler phone on the bulkhead rattled. Ricks lifted it.

"Commanding Officer . . . yes, on the way." He hung up. "Sonar contact."

Claggett was out the door in two seconds, the Captain right behind him.

"What is it?" Claggett asked first. As executive officer, he was also the approach officer for tactical engagements.

"Took me a couple minutes to recognize it," the leading sonarman reported. "Real fluky contact. I think it's a 688, bearing about one-nine-five. Direct-path contact, sir."

"Playback," Ricks ordered. The sonarman took over another screen—his had grease-pencil marks on it and he didn't want to remove those yet—and ran the display back a few minutes.

"See here, Cap'n? Real fluky . . . right about here it started firming up. That's when I called in."

The Captain stabbed his finger on the screen. "You should have had it there, petty officer. That's two minutes wasted. Pay closer attention next time."

"Aye aye, Cap'n." What else could a twenty-three-year-old sonarman second-class say? Ricks left the sonar room. Claggett followed, patting the sonar operator on the shoulder as he went.

Goddamn it, Captain!

"Course two-seven-zero, speed five, depth five hundred even. We're under the layer," the Officer of the Deck reported. "Holding contact Sierra-Eleven at bearing one-nine-five, broad on the port beam. Fire-control tracking party is manned. We have fish in tubes one, three, and four. Tube two is empty for service. Doors closed, tubes dry."

"Tell me about Sierra-Eleven," Ricks ordered.

"Direct-path contact. He's below the layer, range unknown."

"Environmental conditions?"

"Flat calm on the roof, a moderate layer at about one hundred feet. We have good isothermal water around us. Sonar conditions are excellent."

"First read on Sierra-Eleven is over ten thousand yards." It was Ensign Shaw on the tracking party.

"Conn, Sonar, we evaluate contact Sierra-Eleven as a definite 688-class, US fast-attack. I can guestimate speed at about fourteen-fifteen knots, sir."

"Whoa!" Claggett observed to Ricks. "We picked up a Los Angeles at 10-K plus! That's gonna piss somebody off . . ."

"Sonar, conn, I want data, not guesses," Ricks said.

"Cap'n, he did well to pick that contact out of the background," Claggett said very quietly. Summer in the Gulf of Alaska meant fishing boats and baleen whales, both in large numbers, making noise and cluttering up sonar displays. "That's one hell of a good sonarman in there."

"We pay him to be good, X. We don't award medals for doing an adequate job. I want a playback later to see if there might have been a sniff earlier that he missed."

Anybody can find something on playback, Claggett thought to himself.

"Conn, Sonar, I'm getting a very faint blade-count . . . seems to indicate fourteen knots, plus or minus one, sir."

"Very well. That's better, Sonar."

"Uh, Captain . . . may be a little closer than ten thousand ... not much, but a little. Track is firming up ... best estimate now nine-five hundred yards, course roughly three-zero-five," Shaw reported next, waiting for the sky to fall.

"So he's not over ten thousand yards off now?"

"No, sir, looks like nine-five hundred."

"Let me know when you change your mind again," Ricks replied. "Drop speed to four knots."

"Reduce speed four knots, aye," the OOD acknowledged.

"Let him get ahead of us?" Claggett asked.

"Yep." The Captain nodded.

"We have a firing solution," the weapons officer said. The XO checked his watch. It didn't get much better than this.

"Very well. Glad to hear it," Ricks replied.

"Speed is now four knots."

"Okay, we have him. Sierra-Eleven is at bearing two-zero-one, range nine-one hundred yards, course three-zero-zero, speed fifteen."

"Dead meat," Claggett said. *Of course he's making it easy by going that fast.*

"True enough. This will look good on the patrol report."

"That's tricky," Ryan observed. "I don't like the way this is going."

"Neither do I," Bunker agreed. "I recommend weapons release to the *TR* battle group."

"I agree, and will so advise the President." Ryan placed the call. Under the rules for this game, the President was supposed to be on Air Force One, somewhere over the Pacific, returning from an unspecified country on the Pacific Rim. The President's decision-making role was being played by a committee elsewhere in the Pentagon. Jack made his recommendation and waited for the reply.

"Only in self-defense, Dennis."

"Bullshit," Bunker said quietly. "He listens to me."

Jack grinned. "I agree, but not this time. No offensive action, you may act only to defend the ships in the group."

The SecDef turned to the action officer: "Forward that to *Theodore Roosevelt.* Tell them I expect full combat air patrols. Anything over two hundred miles I want reported to me. Under two hundred, the battle-group commander is free to act at discretion. For submarines, the bubble radius is fifty—five-zero—miles. Inside that, prosecute to kill."

"That's creative," Jack said.

"We have that attack on *Valley Forge.*" The best estimate at the moment was that it had been a surprise missile attack from a Soviet submarine. It appeared that some units of the Russian fleet were acting independently, or at least under orders not emanating from Moscow. Then things got worse.

"HOTLINE message. There has just been a ground-force attack on a Strategic Rocket Regiment . . . SS-18 base in Central Asia."

"Launch all the ready bombers right now! Jack, tell the President that I just gave the order."

"Comm-link failure," the wall speaker said. "Radio contact with Air Force One has been interrupted."

"Tell me more!" Jack demanded.

"That's all we have, sir."

"Where's the Vice President now?" Ryan asked.

"He's aboard Kneecap Alternate, six hundred miles south of Bermuda. Kneecap Prime is four hundred miles ahead of Air Force One, preparing to land in Alaska for the transfer."

"Close enough to Russia that an intercept is possible . . . but not likely . . . have to be a one-way mission," Bunker thought aloud. "Unless they strayed over a Soviet warship with SAMs. ... Vice President is temporarily in charge."

"Sir, I—"

"That's my call to make, Jack. The President is either out of the loop or has had his comm links compromised. SecDef says that the Vice President is in

charge until the comm links are reestablished and validated by code-word authentication. Forces are now at DEFCON-ONE on my authority."

One thing about Dennis Bunker, Ryan thought, the man never stopped being a fighter jock. He makes decisions and sticks to them. He was usually right, too, as he was here.

Ryan's file was a thick one. Almost five inches, Goodley saw in the privacy of his seventh-floor cubbyhole. Half an inch of that was background and security-clearance forms. The academic record was fairly impressive, especially his doctoral work in history at Georgetown University. Georgetown wasn't Harvard, of course, but it was a fairly respectable institution, Goodley told himself. His first Agency job had been as part of Admiral James Greer's Junior Varsity program, and his first report, "Agents and Agencies," had dealt with terrorism. Odd coincidence, Goodley thought, given what had happened later.

The documents on Ryan's encounter in London occupied thirty double-space pages, mainly police-report summaries and a few news photos. Goodley started making notes. *Cowboy,* he wrote first of all. Running into things like that. The academic shook his head. Twenty minutes later, he read over the executive summary of Ryan's second CIA report, the one which confidently predicted that the terrorists would probably never operate in America—delivered days before the attack on his family.

Guessed wrong there, didn't you, Ryan? Goodley chuckled to himself. As bright as they said he was, he made mistakes like everyone else. . . .

He'd made a few while working in England, too. He hadn't predicted Chernenko's succession of Andropov, though he had predicted Narmonov was the coming man well in advance of nearly everyone, except Kantrowitz up at Princeton, who'd been the first to see star quality in Andrey Il'ych. Goodley reminded himself that he'd been an undergraduate then, bedding that girl at Wellesley, Debra Frost . . . wonder what ever happened to her . . . ?

"Son of a bitch . . ." Ben whispered a few minutes later. "Son of a *bitch.* "

Red October, a Soviet ballistic missile submarine . . . defected. Ryan was one of the first to suspect it. . . . Ryan, an analyst at London Station had . . . run the operation at sea! *Killed* a Russian sailor. That was the cowboy part again. Couldn't just arrest the guy, had to shoot him down like something in a movie. . . .

Goddamn! A Russian ballistic-missile defected . . . *and they kept it quiet . . . oh, the boat was later sunk in deep water.*

Back to London after that for a few more months before rotating home to be Greer's special assistant and heir-apparent. Some interesting work with the arms-control people. . . .

That can't be right. The KGB Chairman was killed in a plane crash. . . .

Goodley was taking furious notes now. Liz Elliot could not have known any of this, could she?

You're not looking for good stuff about Ryan, the White House Fellow reminded himself. Elliot had never really said that, of course, but she had made herself clear in a way that he'd understood . . . or thought he'd understood, Goodley corrected himself. He suddenly realized just how

dangerous a game this might be.

Ryan kills people. He'd shot and killed at least three. You didn't get that from talking to the man. Life wasn't a Western. People didn't carry revolvers with notches cut in the handles. Goodley didn't feel a chill over his skin, but he did remind himself that Ryan was someone to be regarded warily. He'd never before met someone who had killed other men, and was not foolish enough to regard such people as heroic or somehow more than other men, but it was something to keep in mind, wasn't it?

There were blank spots around the time of James Greer's death, he noted . . . wasn't that the time when all that stuff was happening down in Colombia? He made some notes. Ryan had been acting DDI then, but just after Fowler took over, Judge Arthur Moore and Robert Ritter had retired to make way for the new presidential administration, and Ryan had been confirmed by the Senate as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. So much for his work record. Goodley closed that portion and opened up the personal and financial side. . . .

"Bad call . . ." Ryan said. Twenty minutes too late.

"I think you're right."

"Too late. What did we do wrong?"

"I'm not sure," Bunker replied. "Tell the *TR* group to disengage and pull back, maybe?"

Ryan stared at the map on the far wall. "Maybe, but we've backed Andrey Il'ych into a corner . . . we have to let him out."

"How? How do we do that without cornering ourselves?"

"I think there was a problem with this scenario . . . not sure what, though. . . ."

"Let's rattle his cage hard," Ricks thought aloud.

"Like how, Cap'n?" Claggett asked.

"Status on Tube Two?"

"Empty, it was down for maintenance inspection," the weapons officer replied.

"Is it okay?"

"Yes, sir, completed the inspection half an hour before we got the contact."

"Okay . . ." Ricks grinned. "I want a water slug out of tube two. Let's give him a real launch transient to wake him up!"

Damn! Claggett thought. It was almost something Mancuso or Rosselli would have done. Almost . . . "Sir, that's kind of a noisy way to do it. We can shake him up enough with a 'Tango' call on the Gertrude."

"Weps, we have a solution on Sierra-Eleven?" *Mancuso wants aggressive skippers, well, I'll show him aggressive—*

"Yes, sir!" the weapons officer snapped back at once.

"Firing Point Procedures. Prepare to fire a water slug on Tube Two."

"Sir, I confirm torpedo tube two is empty. Weapons in tubes one, three, and four are secure." A call was made to the torpedo room to reconfirm what the electronic displays announced. In the torpedo room, the chief made a look through the small glass port to make certain that they wouldn't be launching

anything.

"Tube Two is empty by visual inspection. High-pressure air is online," the chief called over the communications circuit. "We are ready to shoot."

"Open outer door."

"Open outer door, aye. Outer door is open."

"Weps?"

"Locked in."

"Match generated bearings and . . . SHOOT!"

The weapons officer pushed the proper button. USS *Maine* shuddered with the sudden pulse of high-pressure air out of the torpedo tube and into the sea.

Aboard USS *Omaha,* six thousand yards away, a sonarman had been trying for the past few minutes to decide if the trace on his screen was something other than clutter when a dot appeared on the screen.

"Conn, Sonar, transient, transient. Mechanical Transient bearing zero-eight-eight, dead aft!"

"What the hell?" the Officer of the Deck said. He was the boat's navigator, in the third week of duty in the new post. "What's back there?"

"Transient, transient—launch transient bearing zero-eight-eight! I say again, LAUNCH TRANSIENT DEAD AFT!"

"All ahead flank!" the suddenly pale Lieutenant said a touch too loudly. "Battle stations! Stand by the five-inch room." He lifted the command phone for the Captain, but the general alarm was already sounding, and the Commanding Officer ran barefoot into the attack center, his coveralls still open.

"What the fuck is going on?"

"Sir, we had a launch transient dead aft—Sonar, conn, what else do you have?"

"Nothing, sir, nothing after the transient. That was a launch-transient, HP air into the water, but . . . sounded a little funny, sir. I show nothing in the water."

"Right full rudder!" the OOD ordered, ignoring the Captain. He hadn't been relieved yet, and conning the boat was his responsibility. "Make your depth one hundred feet. Five-inch room, launch a decoy now-now-now!"

"Right full rudder, aye. Sir, my rudder is right full, no course given. Speed twenty knots and accelerating," helmsman said.

"Very well. Come to course zero-one-zero."

"Aye, coming to new course zero-one-zero!"

"Who's in this area?" the CO asked in a relaxed voice, though he didn't feel relaxed.

"Maine's around here somewhere," the navigator answered.

"Harry Ricks." *That asshole,* he didn't say. It would have been bad for discipline. "Sonar, talk to me!"

"Conn, Sonar, there is nothing in the water. If there was a torpedo, I'd have it, sir."

"Nav, drop speed to one-third."

"Aye, all ahead one-third."

* * *

"I think we scared the piss out of him," Ricks observed, hovering over the sonar display. Seconds after the simulated launch, the 688 on the scope had floored his power plant, and now there was also the gurgling sound of a decoy.

"Just backed off on the power, sir, blade count is coming down."

"Yeah, he knows there's nothing after him, now. We'll give him a call on the Gertrude."

"That dumbass! Doesn't he know that there may be an Akula around here?" the Commanding Officer of USS *Omaha* growled.

"We don't show him, sir, just a bunch of fishing boats."

"Okay. Secure from general quarters. We'll let *Maine* have her little laugh." He grimaced. "My fault. We should have been trolling along at ten instead of fifteen knots. Make it so."

"Aye, sir. Where to?"

"The boomer ought to have a feel for what's north of here. Go southeast."

"Right."

"Nice reaction, Nav. We might have evaded the fish. Lessons?"

"You said it, sir. We were going too fast."

"Learn from your Captain's mistake, Mr. Auburn."

"Always, sir."

The skipper punched the younger man's shoulder on the way out.

Thirty-six thousand yards away, the *Admiral Lunin* was drifting at three knots just over the thermocline layer, her towed-array sonar drooping under it.

"Well?" her Captain asked.

"We have this burst of noise at one-three-zero," the sonar officer said, pointing to the display, "and nothing else. Fifteen seconds later, we have another burst of noise here . . . ahead of the first. The signature appears to be an American Los Angeles class going to full power, then slowing and disappearing off our screens."

"An exercise, Yevgeniy ... the first transient was an American missile submarine . . . an Ohio-class. What do you think of that?" Captain First Rank Valentin Borissovich Dubinin asked.

"No one has ever detected an Ohio in deep water. . . ."

"For all things there is a first time."

"And now?"

"We will hover and wait. The Ohio is quieter than a sleeping whale, but at least we know now that there is one in the area. We will not chase after it. Very foolish of the Americans to make noise in this way. I've never seen that happen before."

"The game has changed, Captain," the sonar officer observed. It had changed quite a lot. He didn't have to say "Comrade Captain" anymore.

"Indeed it has, Yevgeniy. Now it is a true game. No one need get hurt, and

we can test our skills as in the Olympics."

"Critique?"

"I would have closed a little before shooting, sir," the weapons officer said. "Even money he might have evaded that one."

"Agreed, but we were only trying to shake him up," Ricks said comfortably.

Then what was the purpose of that exercise? Dutch Claggett wondered. *Oh, of course, to show how aggressive you are.*

"I guess we accomplished that," the XO said to support his captain. There were grins all around the control room. Boomers and fast-attack subs often played games, mostly preplanned. As usual, the Ohio had won this one, too. They'd known that *Omaha* was around, of course, and that she was looking for a Russian Akula that the P-3s had lost off the Aleutians a few days before. But the Russian Shark-class sub was nowhere to be heard.

"OOD, take her south. We went and made a datum with that launch transient. We'll clear datum back down where *Omaha* was."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Well done, people." Ricks walked back to his cabin.

"New course?"

"South," Dubinin said. "He'll clear datum by going into the area already swept by the Los Angeles. We'll maintain position just over the layer, leave our 'tail' under it, and try to reacquire." There wasn't much chance, the Captain knew, but fortune still favored the bold. Or something like that. The submarine was due to go back to port in another week, and supposedly the new sonar array she was due to receive during her scheduled overhaul was a major improvement over the current one. He'd been here south of Alaska for three weeks. The submarine he'd detected, USS *Maine* or USS *Nevada,* if his intelligence reports were correct, would finish this patrol, refit, conduct another, refit again, then yet another patrol in February, which coincided with his deployment schedule after his overhaul. So the next time he was back, he'd be up against the same captain, and this one had made a mistake. After the refit, *Admiral Lunin* would be quieter, and would have better sonar, and Dubinin was starting to wonder when he'd be able to play his game against the Americans.... Wouldn't it be nice, he thought. All the time he'd spent to get here, the wonderful years learning his trade in Northern Fleet under Marko Ramius. What a pity, for such a brilliant officer to have died in an accident. But duty at sea was dangerous, always had been, always would be. Marko had got his crew off before scuttling.... Dubinin shook his head. Today he might have gotten an assist from the Americans. Might? Would have, just as an American ship would get one from a Soviet. The changes in his country and the world made Dubinin feel much better about his job. It had always been a demanding game of skill, but its deadly purpose had changed. Oh, yes, the American missile submarines still had their rockets pointed at his country, and Soviet rockets were pointed at America, but perhaps they would be gone soon. Until they were, he'd continue to do his job, and it seemed ironic indeed that just as the Soviet Navy was on the threshold of becoming competitive—the Akula class was roughly equal with an early Los Angeles class in a

mechanical sense—the need for it was diminishing. Like a friendly game of cards, perhaps? he asked himself. Not a bad simile. . . .

"Speed, Captain?"

Dubinin considered that. "Assume a range of twenty nautical miles and a target speed of five knots. We'll do seven knots, I think. That way we can remain very quiet and perhaps still catch him . . . every two hours we'll turn to maximize the capacity of the sonar. . . . Yes, that is the plan." *Next time, Yevgeniy, we'll have two new officer sonar operators to back you up,* Dubinin reminded himself. The drawdown of the Soviet submarine force had released a lot of young officers who were now getting specialist training. The submarine's complement of officers would double, and even more than the new equipment, that would make a difference in his abilities to hunt.

"We blew it," Bunker said. "I blew it. I gave the President bad advice."

"You're not the only one," Ryan admitted as he stretched. "But was that scenario realistic—I mean, really realistic?"

It turned out that the whole thing had been a ploy by a hard-pressed Soviet leader trying to get control over his military, and doing so by making it look as though some renegades had taken action.

"Not likely, but possible."

"All things are possible," Jack observed. "What do you suppose their war games say about us?"

Bunker laughed. "Nothing good, I'm sure."

At the end, America had had to accept the loss of its cruiser, USS *Valley Forge,* in return for the Charlie-class submarine that USS *Kidd*'s helicopter had found and sunk. That was not regarded as an even trade, rather like losing a rook to the other fellow's knight. Soviet forces had gone on alert in Eastern Germany, and the weaker NATO forces had been unsure of their ability to deal with them. As a result, the Soviets had won a concession on the troop-pullback schedule. Ryan thought the whole scenario contrived, but they often were, and the point in any case was to see how to manage an unlikely crisis. Here they had done badly, moving too rapidly in nonessential areas, and too slowly in the ones that mattered, but which had not been recognized in time.

The lesson, as always, was: Don't make mistakes. That was something known by any first-grader, of course, and all men made mistakes, but the difference between a first-grader and a senior official was that official mistakes carried far more weight. That fact was an entirely different lesson, and one often not learned.

14

REVELATION

"So what have you found?"

"He's a most interesting man," Goodley replied. "He's done some things at CIA that are hardly believable."

"I know about the submarine business, and the defection of the KGB head. What else?" Liz Elliot asked.

"He's rather well liked in the international intelligence community, like Sir Basil Charleston over in England—well, it's easy to see why they like him—but the same is true in the NATO countries, especially in France. Ryan stumbled across something that enabled the DGSE to bag a bunch of *Action Directe* people," Goodley explained. He was somewhat uncomfortable with his role of designated informer.

The National Security Advisor didn't like to be kept waiting, but there was no sense in pressing the young scholar, was there? Her face took on a wry smile. "Am I to assume that you have started admiring the man?"

"He's done fine work, but he's made his mistakes, too. His estimate on the fall of East Germany and the progress of reunification was way off." He had not managed to learn that everyone else was, as well. Goodley himself had guessed almost exactly right on this issue up at the Kennedy School, and the paper he'd published in an obscure journal was something else that had earned him attention at the White House. The White House Fellow stopped again.

"And . . . ?" Elliot prodded.

"And there are some troubling aspects in his personal life."

Finally! "And those are?"

"Ryan was investigated by the SEC for possible insiderstock trading before he entered CIA employ. It seems there was a computer-software company about to get a Navy contract. Ryan found out about it before anyone else and made a real killing. The SEC found out—the reason is that the company executives themselves were also investigated—and examined Ryan's records. He got off on a technicality."

"Explain," Liz ordered.

"In order to cover their own backsides, the company officials arranged to have something published in a defense trade paper, just a little filler item, not even two column inches, but it was enough to show that the information upon which they and Ryan operated was technically in the public domain. That made it legal. What's more interesting is what Ryan did with the money after attention was called to it. He cut it out of his brokerage account—that's in a blind-trust arrangement now with four different money-managers." Goodley

stopped. “You know what Ryan’s worth now?”

“No, what is it?”

“Over fifteen million dollars. He’s by far the richest guy at the Agency. His holdings are somewhat undervalued. I’d say he’s worth closer to twenty myself, but he’s been using the same accounting method since before he joined CIA, and you can’t critique him there. How you figure net worth is kind of metaphysical, isn’t it? Accountants have different ways of doing things. Anyway, what he did with that windfall: he split it off to a separate account. Then a short while ago it all moved out into an educational trust fund.”

“His kids?”

“No,” Goodley answered. “The beneficiaries—no, let me back up. He used part of the money to set up a convenience store—a 7-Eleven—for a widow and her children. The rest of the money is set aside in T-Bills and a few blue-chip stocks to educate her children.”

“Who is she?”

“Her name is Carol Zimmer. Laotian by birth, she’s the widow of an Air Force sergeant who got killed in a training accident. Ryan has been looking after the family. He even signed out of his office to attend the birth of the newest child—a girl, by the way. Ryan visits the family periodically,” Goodley concluded.

“I see.” She didn’t, but that is what one says. “Any professional connection?”

“Not really. Mrs. Zimmer, as I said, was Laotian. Her father was one of those tribal chieftains that CIA supported against the North Vietnamese. The whole group was wiped out. I haven’t discovered how she managed to escape. She married an Air Force sergeant and came to America. He died in an accident somewhere, rather recently. There is nothing in Ryan’s file to show any previous connection to the family at all. The Laos connection is possible—to CIA, I mean—but Ryan wasn’t in government employ then, he was an undergrad in college. There’s nothing in the file to show a connection of any kind. Just one day, a few months before the last presidential election, he set up this trust fund, and ever since he visits them on the average of once a week. Oh, there was one other thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I cross-referenced this from another file. There was some trouble at the 7-Eleven, some local punks were bothering the Zimmer family. Ryan’s principal bodyguard is a CIA officer named Clark. He used to be a field officer, and now is a protective guy. I wasn’t able to get his file,” Goodley explained. “Anyway, this Clark guy evidently assaulted a couple of gang kids. Sent one to the hospital. I checked a newspaper clipping. It was in the news, a little item—concerned citizen sort of thing. Clark and another CIA guy—the paper identified them as federal employees, no CIA connection—were supposedly accosted by four street toughs. This Clark guy must be a piece of work. The gang leader had his knee broken and was hospitalized. One other was just knocked unconscious, and the rest just stood there and wet their pants. The local cops treated it as a gang problem—well, a former gang problem. No formal charges were pressed.”

“What else do you know about this Clark?”

"I've seen him a few times. Big guy, late forties, quiet, actually seems kind of shy. But he moves—you know what he moves like? I took karate courses once. The instructor was a former Green Beret, Vietnam veteran, all that stuff. Like that. He moves like an athlete, fluid, economical, but it's his eyes. They're always moving around. He looks at you sideways and decides if you're a threat or not a threat. . . ." Goodley paused. At that moment he realized what Clark really was. Whatever else he was, Ben Goodley was no fool. "That is one dangerous guy."

"What?" Liz Elliot didn't know what he was talking about.

"Excuse me. I learned that from the karate teacher up at Cambridge. The really dangerous ones don't seem dangerous. You just sort of lose track of them in the room. My teacher, he was mugged on the subway station right there by Harvard. I mean, they tried to mug him. He left three kids bleeding on the bricks. They thought he was just a janitor or something—he's an African-American, about fifty now, I guess. Looks like a janitor or something the way he dresses, not dangerous at all. That's what Clark is like, just like my old *sensei*. . . . Interesting," Goodley said. "Well, he's a SPO, and they're supposed to be good at their job.

"I speculate that Ryan found out that some punks were bothering Mrs. Zimmer, and had his bodyguard straighten things out. The Anne Arundel County police thought it was just fine."

"Conclusions?"

"Ryan has done some very good work, but he's blown some big ones, too. Fundamentally, he's a creature of the past. He's still a Cold War guy. He's got problems with the Administration, like a few days ago when you didn't attend the CAMELOT game. He doesn't think you take your jobs seriously, thinks that not playing those war games is irresponsible."

"He said that?"

"Almost a direct quote, I was in the room with Cabot when he came in and bitched."

Elliot shook her head. "That's a Cold Warrior talking. If the President does his job right, and if I do my job right, there won't be any crises to manage. That's the whole point, isn't it?"

"And so far, you guys seem to be doing all right," Goodley observed.

The National Security Advisor ignored the remark, looking at her notes.

The walls were in place, and weather-sealed with plastic sheeting. The air-conditioning system was already running, removing both humidity and dust from the air. Fromm was at work with the machine-tool tables. Table was too pedestrian a term. They were designed to hold several tons each, and had screw jacks on each sturdy leg. The German was leveling each machine with the aid of spirit-levels built into the frames.

"Perfect," he said after three hours of work. It had to be perfect. Now it was. Under each table was a full meter of reinforced concrete footings. Once leveled, the legs were bolted into place so that each was a solid part of the earth.

"The tools must be so rigid?" Ghosn asked. Fromm shook his head.

"Quite the reverse. The tools float on a cushion of air."

“But you said they weigh over a ton each!” Qati objected.

“Floating them on an air cushion is trivial—you’ve seen photographs of hovercraft weighing a hundred tons. Floating them is necessary to dampen out vibrations from the earth.”

“What tolerances are we seeking?” Ghosn asked.

“Roughly what one needs for an astronomical telescope,” the German replied.

“But the original bombs—”

Fromm cut Ghosn off. “The original American bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were crude embarrassments. They wasted almost all of their reaction mass, especially the Hiroshima weapon—you would not manufacture so crude a weapon any more than you would design a bomb with a burning gunpowder fuse, eh?

“In any case, you cannot use such a wasteful design,” Fromm went on. “After the first bombs, the American engineers had to face the problem that they had limited supplies of fissile material. That few kilos of plutonium over there is the most expensive material in the world. The plant needed to make it though nuclear bombardment costs billions, then comes the additional cost of separation, another plant, and another billion. Only America had the money to do the initial project. Everyone in the world *knew* about nuclear fission—it was no secret, what real secrets are there in physics, eh?—but only America had the money and resources to make the attempt. And the people,” Fromm added. “What people they had! So the first bombs—they made three, by the way—were designed to use all the available material, and because the main criterion was reliability, they were made to be crude but effective. And they required the largest aircraft in the world to carry them.

“*Also* . . . then the war was won, and bomb-design became a professional study and not a frantic wartime project, *ja?* The plutonium reactor they have at Hanford turned out only a few tens of kilos of plutonium per year at the time, and the Americans had to learn to use the material more efficiently. The Mark-12 bomb was one of the first really advanced designs, and the Israelis improved it somewhat. That bomb has five times the yield of the Hiroshima device for less than a fifth of the reaction mass-twenty-fivefold improvement in efficiency, *ja?* And we can improve that by almost a factor of ten.

“Now a really expert design team with the proper facilities could advance that by another factor of . . . perhaps four. Modern warheads are the most elegant, the most fascinating—”

“Two megatons?” Ghosn asked. Was it possible?

“We cannot do it here,” Fromm said, the sorrow manifest in his voice. “The available information is insufficient. The physics are straightforward, but there are engineering concerns, and there are no published articles to aid us in the bomb-design process. Remember that warhead tests are being carried out even today to make the bombs smaller and yet more efficient. One must experiment in this field as with any other, and we cannot experiment. Nor do we have the time or money to train technicians to execute the design. I *could* come up with a theoretical design for a megaton-plus device, but in truth it would have only a fifty-percent likelihood of success. Perhaps a little more, but it would not be a practical undertaking without a proper experimental-test program.”

"What can you do?" Qati asked.

"I can make this into a weapon with a nominal yield of between four hundred and five hundred kilotons. It will be roughly a cubic meter in size and weigh roughly five hundred kilos." Fromm paused to read the looks on their faces. "It will not be an elegant device, and it will be overly bulky and heavy. It will also be quite powerful." It would be far more clever in design than anything American or Russian technicians had managed in the first fifteen years of the nuclear age, and that, Fromm thought, wasn't bad at all.

"Explosive containment?" Ghosn asked.

"Yes." This young Arab was very clever, Fromm thought. "The first bombs used massive steel cases. Ours will use explosives—bulky but light, and just as effective. We will squirt tritium into the core at the moment of ignition. As in the original Israeli design, that will generate large quantities of neutrons to boost the fission reaction; that reaction in turn will blast additional neutrons into another tritium supply, causing a fusion reaction. The energy budget is roughly fifty kilotons from the primary and four hundred from the secondary."

"How much tritium?" While not a difficult substance to obtain in small amounts—watchmakers and gunsight manufacturers used it, but only in microscopic quantities—Ghosn knew supplies over ten milligrams were virtually unobtainable, as he had just discovered himself. Tritium—not plutonium despite what Fromm had said—was the most expensive commercially available material on the planet. You could get tritium, but not plutonium.

"I have fifty grams," Fromm announced smugly. "Far more than we can actually use."

"Fifty *grams!"* Ghosn exclaimed. *"Fifty?"*

"Our reactor complex was manufacturing special nuclear material for our own bomb project. When the socialist government fell, it was decided to give the plutonium to the Soviets—loyalty to the world socialist cause, you see. The Soviets didn't see things that way. Their reaction"—Fromm paused—"they called it . . . well, I will leave that to your imagination. Their reaction was so strong that I decided to hide our tritium production. As you know it is very valuable commercially—my insurance policy, you might call it."

"Where?"

"In the basement of my home, concealed in some nickelhydrogen batteries."

Qati didn't like that, not one small bit. The Arab chieftain was not a well man, the German could see, and that did not help him conceal his feelings.

"I need to return to Germany in any case to get the machine tools," he said.

"You have them?"

"Five kilometers from my home is the Karl Marx Astrophysical Institute. We were supposed to manufacture astronomical telescopes there, visual and X-ray telescopes. Alas, it never opened. Such a fine 'cover' wasted, eh? In the machine shop, in crates marked *Astrophysical Instruments,* are six highprecision, five-axis machines—the finest sort," Fromm observed with a wolfish grin. "Cincinnati Milacron, from the United States of America. Precisely what the Americans use at their Oak Ridge, Rocky Flats, and Pantex fabrication plants."

"What about operators?" Ghosn asked.

"We were training twenty of them, sixteen men and four women, each with a university degree. . . . No, that would be too dangerous. It is not really necessary in any case. The machines are 'user-friendly,' as they say. We could do the work ourselves, but that would take too much time. Any skilled lensmaker—even a master gunsmith, as a matter of fact—can operate them. What was the business of Nobel Prize winners fifty years ago is now the work of a competent machinist," Fromm said. "Such is the nature of progress, *ja?*"

"It could be, then again it could not," Yevgeniy said. He'd been on duty for twenty hours straight, and only six hours of fitful sleep separated that from yet another, longer stint.

Finding it, if that indeed was what they'd done, had taken all of Dubinin's skill. He'd guessed that the American missile sub had headed south, and that her cruising speed was on the order of five knots. Next came environmental considerations. He'd had to stay close, within direct-path range, not allowing himself to come into a sonar convergence zone. The CZs were annular—donut—shaped areas around a vessel. Sound that went downward from a point within the convergence zone was refracted by the water temperature and pressure, traveling back and forth to the surface on a helical path at semiregular intervals that in turn depended on environmental conditions. By staying out of them, relative to where he thought his target was, he could evade one means of detection. To do that meant that he had to stay within theoretical direct-path distance, the area in which sound simply traveled radially from its source. To accomplish that without detection, he had to remain on the top side of the thermocline layer—he figured that the American would remain under it—while allowing his towed-array sonar to hang below it. In this way his own engine-plant noises would probably be deflected away from the American submarine.

Dubinin's tactical problem lay in his disadvantages. The American submarine was quieter than his, and possessed both better sonars and better sonar-operators. Senior Lieutenant Yevgeniy Nikolayevich Rykov was a very bright young officer, but he was the only sonar expert aboard who might fairly be matched against his American counterparts, and the boy was burning himself out. Captain Dubinin's only advantage lay in himself. He was a fine tactician, and knew it. And his American counterpart was not, Dubinin thought, and didn't know it. There was a final disadvantage. By staying on top of the layer, he made counterdetection by an American patrol aircraft easier, but Dubinin was willing to run that risk. What lay before him was a prize such as no Russian submarine commander had ever grasped.

Both Captain and Lieutenant stared at a "waterfall" display, looking not at a strobe of light, but instead a disjointed, barely visible vertical line that wasn't as bright as it should have been. The American Ohio-class was quieter than the background noise of the ocean, and both men wondered if somehow environmental conditions were showing them the acoustical shadow of that most sophisticated of missile submarines. It was just as likely, Dubinin thought, that fatigue was playing hallucinatory games with both of their minds.

"We need a transient," Rykov said, reaching for his tea. "A dropped tool, a

slammed hatch . . . a mistake, a mistake. . . .”

I could ping him . . . I could duck below the layer and hit him with a blast of active sonar energy and find out . . . NO! Dubinin turned away and nearly swore at himself. *Patience, Valentin. They are patient, we must be patient.*

“Yevgeniy Nikolay’ch, you look weary.”

“I can rest in Petropavlovsk, Captain. I will sleep for a week, and see my wife—well, I will not sleep entirely for that week,” he said with an exhausted grin. The Lieutenant’s face was illuminated by the yellow glow of the screen. “But I will not turn away from a chance like this one!”

“There will be no accidental transients.”

“I know, Captain. Those damned American crews . . . I *know* it’s him, I *know* it’s an Ohio! What *else* could it be?”

“Imagination, Yevgeniy, imagination and too large a wish on our part.”

Lieutenant Rykov turned. “I think my captain knows better than that!”

“I think my lieutenant is right.” *Such a game this is! Ship against ship, mind against mind. Chess in three dimensions, played in an ever-changing physical environment. And the* Americans were the masters of the game. Dubinin knew that. Better equipment, better crews, better training. Of course the Americans knew that too, and two generations of advantage had generated arrogance rather than innovation . . . not in all, but certainly in some. A clever commander in the missile submarine would be doing things differently. . . . *If* I *had such a submarine, not all the world could find me!*

“Twelve more hours, then we must break contact and turn for home.”

“Too bad,” Rykov observed, not meaning it. Six weeks at sea was enough for him.

“Make your depth six-zero feet,” the Officer of the Deck said.

“Make my depth six-zero feet, aye,” the Diving Officer replied. “Ten degrees up on the fairwater planes.”

The missile-firing drill had just begun. A regular occurrence, it was intended both to ensure the competence of the crew and desensitize them to their primary war-fighting mission, the launch of twenty-four UGM-93 Trident-II D-5 missiles, each with ten Mark 5 re-entry vehicles of 400 kilotons nominal yield. A total of two hundred forty warheads with a total net yield of 96 megatons. But there was more to it than that, since nuclear weapons depended on the interlocking logic of several physical laws. Small weapons employed their yield with greater efficiencies than larger ones. Most important of all, the Mark 5 RV had a demonstrated accuracy of ± 50 meters CEP (“Circular Error Probable”), meaning that after a flight of over four thousand nautical miles, half the warheads would land within 164.041 *feet* of their targets, and nearly all the rest within 300 feet. The “miss” distance was far smaller than the crater to be expected from such a warhead, as a result of which the D-5 missile was the first sea-launched ballistic missile with counterforce capability. It was designed for a disarming first-strike. Given the normal two-at-one targeting, *Maine* could eliminate 120 Soviet missiles and/or missile-control bunkers, roughly ten percent of the current Soviet ICBM force, which was itself configured for a counterforce mission.

In the missile-control center—MCC—aft of the cavernous missile room, a

senior chief petty officer lit up his panel. All twenty-four birds were on line. On-board navigation equipment fed data into each missile-guidance system. It would be updated in a few minutes from orbiting navigation satellites. To hit a target, the missile had to know not only where the target was, but also where the missile itself was starting from. The NAVSTAR Global Positioning System could do that with a tolerance of less than five meters. The senior chief watched status lights change as missiles were interrogated by his computers and reported their readiness.

Around the submarine, water pressure on the hull diminished at a rate of 2.2 tons per square foot for every 100 feet of rise toward the surface. *Maine*'s hull expanded slightly as the pressure was relieved, and there was a tiny amount of noise as steel relaxed from the compression.

It was only a groan, scarcely audible even over the sonar systems and seductively close to the call of a whale. Rykov was so drunk with fatigue that had it come a few minutes later he would have missed it, but though his daydreams were getting the best of him, his mind retained enough of its sharpness to take note of the sound.

"Captain . . . hull-popping noise . . . right there!" His finger stabbed the screen, just at the bottom of the shadow he and Dubinin had been examining. "He's coming shallow."

Dubinin raced into the control room. "Stand by to change depth." He put on a headset that connected him to Lieutenant Rykov.

"Yevgeniy Nikolay'ch, this must be done well and done quickly. I will drop below the layer just as the American goes over it."

"No, Captain, you can wait. His array will hang below briefly, as ours would do!"

"Damn!" Dubinin almost laughed. "Forgive me, Lieutenant. For that, a bottle of Starka." Which was the best Russianmade vodka.

"My wife and I will drink your health . . . I'm getting an angle reading. . . . Estimate target five degrees depression from our array. . . . Captain, if I can hold him, the moment we lose him through the layer—"

"Yes, a quick range estimate!" It would be crude, but it would be something. Dubinin rasped quick orders to his tracking officer.

"Two degrees . . . hull noises are gone . . . this is very hard to hold, but he's occulting the background a little more now—GONE! He's through the layer now!"

"One, two, three . . ." Dubinin counted. The American must be doing a missile drill, or coming up to receive communications, in any case he'd go to twenty meters depth, and his towed array . . . five hundred meters long . . . speed five knots, and . . . Now!

"Helm, down five degrees on the bow planes. We're going just below the layer. *Starpom,* make note of outside water temperature. Gently, helm, gently . . ."

Admiral Lunin dipped her bow and slid below the undulating border that marked the difference between relatively warm surface water and colder deep water.

"Range?" Dubinin asked his tracking officer.

"Estimate between five and nine thousand meters, Captain! Best I can do with the data."

"Well done, Kolya! Splendid."

"We're below the layer now, water temperature down five degrees!" the *Starpom* called.

"Bow planes to zero, level out."

"Planes to zero, Captain . . . zero angle on the boat."

Had there been enough overhead room, Dubinin would have leaped off his feet. He'd just done what no other Soviet submarine commander—and if his intelligence information was right, only a handful of Americans—had ever done. He'd established contact with and *tracked* an American Ohio-class fleet ballistic-missile submarine. In a war situation he'd be able to fire off ranging pings with his active sonar and launch torpedoes. He'd stalked the world's most elusive game, and was close enough for a killing shot. His skin tingled from the excitement of the moment. Nothing in the world could match this feeling. Nothing at all.

"Ryl nepravo," he said next. "Right rudder, new course three-zero-zero. Increase speed slowly to ten knots."

"But, Captain . . ." his *Starpom*—executive omcer—said.

"We're breaking contact. He'll continue this drill for at least thirty minutes. It is very unlikely that we can evade counterdetection when he concludes it. Better to leave now. We do not want him to know what we have done. We will meet this one again. In any case our mission is accomplished. We have tracked him, and we got close enough to launch our attack. At Petropavlovsk, men, there will be much drinking, and your captain will do the buying! Now let's clear the area quietly so that he will not know that we were ever here."

Captain Robert Jefferson Jackson wished he was younger, wished that his hair was still completely black, that he could again be a young "nugget" fresh from Pensacola, ready to take his first hop in one of the forbidding fighter aircraft that sat like enormous birds of prey along the flight line at Oceana Naval Air Station. That all twenty-four of the F-14D Tomcats in the immediate area were his was not as satisfying as the knowledge that *one* was his and his alone. Instead, as Commander Air Group, he "owned" two Tomcat squadrons, two more of F/A-18 Hornets, one of A-6E Intruder medium-attack aircraft, another of S-3 submarine hunters, and finally the less glamorous tankers, electronic-warfare Prowlers, and rescue/ASW helicopters. A total of seventy-eight birds with an aggregate value of . . . what? A billion dollars? Much more if you considered replacement cost. Then there were the three thousand men who flew and serviced the aircraft, each of whom was beyond price, of course. He was responsible for all of it. It was much more fun to be a new fighter pilot who drove his personal airplane and left the worrying to management. Robby was now management, the guy the kids talked about in their cabins on the ship. They didn't want to be called into his office, because that was like going to see the Principal. They didn't really like flying with him, because (A) he was too old to be good at it anymore (they thought), and (B) he'd tell them whatever he thought they were doing wrong (fighter pilots do not often admit mistakes, except among themselves).

There was a certain irony to it. His previous job had been in the Pentagon, pushing papers. He'd prayed and lusted for release from that job, whose main excitement every day was finding a decent parking spot. Then he'd gotten command of his air wing—and been stuck with more admin crap than he'd ever faced in his life. At least he got to fly twice a week—if he was lucky. Today was such a day. His command master chief petty officer gave him a grin on the way out the door.

"Mind the store, Master Chief."

"Roger that, skipper. It'll be here when you get back." Jackson stopped in his tracks. "You *can* have someone steal all the paperwork."

"I'll see what I can do, sir."

A staff car took him to the flight line. Jackson was already in his Nomex flight suit, an old smelly one whose olive-drab color was faded from many washings, and threadbare at the elbows and seat from years of use. He could and should have gotten a new one, but pilots are superstitious creatures; Robby and this flight suit had been through a lot together.

"Hey, skipper!" called one of his squadron commanders.

Commander Bud Sanchez was shorter than Jackson. His olive skin and Bismarck mustache accentuated bright eyes and a grin right out of a toothpaste commercial. Sanchez, Commanding Officer of VF-1, would fly Jackson's wing today. They'd flown together when Jackson had commanded VF-41 off the *John F. Kennedy*. "Your bird is all dialed in. Ready to kick a little ass?"

"Who's the opposition today?"

"Some jarheads out of Cherry Point in -18-Deltas. We got a Hummer already orbiting a hundred miles out, and the exercise is BARCAP against low-level intruders." BARCAP meant Barrier Combat Air Patrol. The mission was to prevent attacking aircraft from crossing a line that they were not supposed to cross. "Up to some heavy ACM? Those Marines sounded a little cocky over the phone."

"The Marine I can't take ain't been born yet," Robby said as he pulled his helmet off the rack. It bore his call sign, Spade.

"Hey, you RIOs," Sanchez called, "quit holdin' hands and let's get it on!"

"On the way, Bud." Michael "Lobo" Alexander came from around the lockers, followed by Jackson's radar-intercept officer, Henry "Shredder" Walters. Both were under thirty, both lieutenants. In the locker room, people talked by call sign rather than rank. Robby loved the fellowship of squadron life as much as he loved his country.

Outside, the plane captains—petty officers—who were responsible for maintaining the aircraft walked the officers to their respective birds and helped them aboard. (On the dangerous area of a carrier flight deck, pilots are led virtually by the hand by enlisted men, lest they get lost or hurt.) Jackson's bird had a double-zero ID number on the nose. Under the cockpit was painted "CAPT R.J. Jackson 'SPADE'" to make sure that everyone knew that this was the CAG's bird. Under that was a flag representing a MiG-29 fighter aircraft that an Iraqi had mistakenly flown too close to Jackson's Tomcat not so long before. There hadn't been much to it—the other pilot had forgotten, once, to check his "six" and paid the price—but a kill was a kill, and kills were what

fighter pilots lived for.

Five minutes later, all four men were strapped in, and engines were turning.

"How are you this morning, Shredder?" Jackson asked over his intercom.

"Ready to waste some Marines, skipper. Lookin' good back here. Is this thing gonna fly today?"

"Guess it's time to find out." Jackson switched to radio.

"Bud, this is Spade, ready here."

"Roger, Spade, you have the lead." Both pilots looked around, got an all-clear from their plane captains, and looked around again.

"Spade has the lead." Jackson tripped his brakes. "Rolling now."

"Hello, *mein Schatz,*" Manfred Fromm said to his wife.

Traudl rushed forward to embrace him. "Where have you been?"

"That I cannot say," Fromm replied with a knowing twinkle in his eye. He hummed a few bars from Lloyd Webber's "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina."

"I knew you would see," Traudl beamed at him.

"You must not talk of this." To confirm her suspicion he handed her a wad of banknotes, five packets of ten thousand D-Marks each. *That should keep the mercenary bitch quiet and happy*, Manfred Fromm told himself. "And I will only be here overnight. I had some business to do, and of course—"

"Of course, Manfred." She hugged him again, the money in her hands. "If only you had called!"

Arrangements had been absurdly easy to make. A ship outbound for Latakia, Syria, was sailing from Rotterdam in seventy hours. He and Bock had arranged for a commercial trucking company to load the machine tools into a small cargo container which would be loaded on the ship and unloaded onto a Syrian dock in six more days. It would have been faster to send the tools by air, or even by rail to a Greek or Italian port for faster transshipment by sea, but Rotterdam was the world's busiest port, with overworked customs officials whose main task was searching for drug shipments. Sniffer dogs could go over that particular container to their hearts' content.

Fromm let his wife go into the kitchen to make coffee. It would take a few minutes, and that was all he needed. He walked down into his basement. In the corner, as far from the water heater as was possible, was an orderly pile of lumber, on top of which were four black metal boxes. Each weighed about ten kilograms, about twenty-five pounds. Fromm carried one at a time—on the second trip, he got a pair of gloves from his bureau drawer to protect his hands—and placed them in the trunk of his rented BMW. By the time the coffee was ready, his task was complete.

"You have a fine tan," Traudl observed, carrying the tray out from the kitchen. In her mind she'd already spent about a quarter of the money her husband had given her. So Manfred had seen the light. She'd known he would, sooner or later. Better that it should be sooner. She'd be especially nice to him tonight.

"Günther?"

Bock didn't like leaving Fromm to his own devices, but he also had a task to perform. This was a far greater risk. It was, he told himself, a high-risk

operational concept, even if the real dangers were in the planning stage, which was both an oddity and a relief.

Erwin Keitel lived on a pension, and not an especially comfortable one at that. Its necessity came from two facts. First, he was a former Lieutenant Colonel in the East German Stasi, the intelligence and counterintelligence arm of the defunct German Democratic Republic; second, he had liked his work of thirty-two years. Whereas most of his former colleagues had acknowledged the changes in their country and for the most part put their German identity ahead of whatever ideology they'd once held—and told literally everything they knew to the *Bundesnachrichtendienst*—Keitel had decided that he was not going to work for capitalists. That made him one of the "politically unemployed" citizens of the united Germany. His pension was a matter of convenience. The new German government honored, after a fashion, pre-existing government obligations. It was at the least politically expedient, and what Germany now was, was a matter of daily struggling with facts that were not and could not be reconciled. It was easier to give Keitel a pension than to leave him on the official dole, which was deemed more demeaning than a pension. By the government, that is. Keitel didn't see things quite that way. If the world made any sense at all, he thought, he would have been executed or exiled—exactly where he might have been exiled to, Keitel didn't know. He'd begun to consider going over to the Russians—he'd had good contacts in the KGB—but that thought had died a quick death. The Soviets had washed their hands of everything to do with the DDR, fearing treachery from people whose allegiance to world socialism—or whatever the hell the Russians stood for now, Keitel had no idea—was somewhat less than their allegiance to their new country. Keitel took his seat beside Bock's in the corner booth of a quiet *Gasthaus* in what had formerly been East Berlin.

"This is very dangerous, my friend."

"I am aware of that, Erwin." Bock waved for two liter glasses of beer. Service was quicker than it had been a few years before, but both men ignored that.

"I cannot tell you how I feel about what they did to Petra," Keitel said after the girl left them.

"Do you know exactly what happened?" Bock asked in a level and emotionless voice.

"The detective who ran the case visited her in prison—he did so quite often—not for interrogation. They made a conscious effort to push her over the edge. You must understand, Günther, courage in a man or a woman is a finite quality. It was not weakness on her part. Anyone can break. It is simply a matter of time. They watched her die," the retired colonel said.

"Oh?" Bock's face didn't change, but his knuckles went white on the stein handle.

"There was a television camera hidden in her cell. They have her suicide on videotape. They watched her do it, and did nothing to stop her."

Bock didn't say anything, and the room was too dim to see how pale his face went. It was as though a hot blast from a furnace swept over him, followed by one from the North Pole. He closed his eyes for a brief second to get control of himself. Petra would not have wished him to be governed by

emotion at a time like this. He opened his eyes to look at his friend.

"Is that a fact?"

"I know the name of the detective. I know his address. I still have friends," Keitel assured Bock.

"Yes, Erwin, I am sure you do. I need your help to do something."

"Anything."

"You know, of course, what brought us to this."

"That depends on how you mean it," Keitel said. "The people disappointed me in the way they allowed themselves to be seduced, but the common people always lack the discipline to know what is good for them. The real cause of our national misfortune...."

"Precisely—the Americans and the Russians."

"Mein lieber Günther, even a united Germany cannot—"

"Yes, it can. If we are to remake the world into our image, Erwin, both of our oppressors must be damaged severely."

"But how?"

"There is a way. Can you believe me that much, just for now?"

Keitel drained his beer and sat back. He'd helped train Bock. At fifty-six, it was too late for him to change his ideas of the world, and he was still a fine judge of character. Bock was a man such as himself. Günther had been a careful, ruthless, and very effective clandestine operator.

"What of our detective friend?"

Bock shook his head. "As much satisfaction as that might give me, no. This is not a time for personal revenge. We have a movement and a country to save." *More than one, in fact,* Bock thought, but this was not the time for that. What was taking shape in his mind was a grand stroke, a breathtaking maneuver that might—he was too intellectually honest to say *would,* even to himself—change the world into a more malleable shape. Exactly what would happen after that, who could say? That would not matter at all if he and his friends were unable to take the first bold step.

"How long have we known each other—fifteen years, twenty?" Keitel smiled. *"Aber natürlich.* Of course I can trust you."

"How many others can we trust?"

"How many do we need?"

"No more than ten, but we will need a total of ten." Keitel's face went blank. *Eight men we can trust absolutely . . . ?*

"That is too many for safety, Günther. What sort of men?" Bock told him. "I know where to start. It should be possible ... men of my age . . . and some younger, of your age. The physical skills you require are not difficult to obtain, but remember that much of this is beyond our control." "As some of my friends say, that is in God's hands," Günther said with a smirk.

"Barbarians," Keitel snorted. "I have never liked them."

"Ja, doch, they don't even let a man have a beer." Bock smiled. "But they are strong, Erwin, they are determined, and they are faithful to the cause."

"Whose cause is that?"

"One we both share at the moment. How much time do you need?"

"Two weeks. I can be reached—"

"No." Bock shook his head. "Too risky. Can you travel, are you being

watched?"

"Watch me? All of my subordinates have changed allegiance, and the BND knows that the KGB will have nothing to do with me. They would not waste the assets to watch me. I am a gelding, you see?"

"Some gelding, Erwin." Bock handed over some cash. "We will meet in Cyprus in two weeks. Make sure you are not followed."

"I will—I do. I have not forgotten how, my friend."

Fromm awoke at dawn. He dressed at leisure, trying not to wake Traudl. She'd been more of a wife in the past twelve hours than in the preceding twelve months, and his conscience told him that their nearly failed marriage had not been entirely her fault. He was surprised to find breakfast waiting on the table for him.

"When will you be back?"

"I'm not sure. Probably several months."

"That long?"

"Mein Schatz, the reason I am there is that they need what I know, and I am being well paid." He made a mental note to have Qati send additional funds. So long as money kept coming in, she'd not be nervous.

"It is not possible for me to join you?" Traudl asked, showing real affection for her man.

"It is no place for a woman." Which was honest enough that his conscience allowed itself to relax a little. He finished his coffee. "I must be off."

"Hurry back."

Manfred Fromm kissed his wife and walked out the door. The BMW was not affected in the least by the fifty kilos of weight in the trunk. He waved to Traudl one last time before driving off. He gave the house a final look in the mirror, thinking, correctly, that he might not see it again.

His next stop was the Karl Marx Astrophysical Institute. The single-story buildings were already showing their neglect, and it surprised him that vandals had not broken windows. The truck was already there. Fromm used his keys to let himself into the machine shop. The tools were still there, still in hermetically sealed crates, and the crates were still marked *Astrophysical Instruments*. It was just a matter of signing some forms he'd typed up the previous afternoon. The truck driver knew how to operate the propane-fueled forklift, and drove each crate into the container. Fromm took the batteries from the trunk of his car and set them in a final, small box, which was loaded on last. It took the driver an additional half hour to chain things down in place, and then he drove off. He and "Herr Professor Fromm" would meet again outside Rotterdam.

Fromm rendezvoused with Bock in Greifswald. They drove west in the latter's car—Bock was a better driver.

"How was home?"

"Traudl liked the money a great deal," Fromm reported.

"We'll send her more, at regular intervals . . . every two weeks, I think."

"Good. I was going to ask Qati about that."

"We take care of our friends," Bock observed as they passed over what had once been a border crossing. Now it was merely green.

“How long for the fabrication process?”

“Three months . . . maybe four. We could go faster,” Fromm said apologetically, “but remember that I have never actually done this with real material, only in simulation. There is absolutely no margin for error. It will be complete by the middle of January. At that point, it is yours to use.” Fromm wondered, of course, what plans Bock and the others had for it, but that was not really his concern, was it? *Doch.*

15

DEVELOPMENT

Ghosn could only shake his head. He knew objectively that it resulted from the sweeping political changes in Europe, the effective elimination of borders attendant to the economic unification, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and headlong rush to join in the new European family. Even so, the hardest part of getting these five machine tools out of Germany and into his valley had been finding a suitable truck at Latakia, and that had actually been rather difficult, since negotiating the road into where his shop lay had incomprehensibly been overlooked by everyone—including, he thought with some satisfaction, the German. Fromm was now observing closely as a gang of men labored to move the last of the five tools onto its table. Arrogant as he may have been, Fromm was an expert technologist. Even the tables had been built to exactly the right size, with ten centimeters of extra space around each tool so that one could rest his notebook. The backup generators and UPSs were in place and tested. It was just a matter of getting the tools set up and fully calibrated, which would take about a week.

Bock and Qati were observing the whole procedure from the far end of the building, careful to keep out of the way.

"I have the beginnings of an operational plan," Günther said.

"You do not intend the bomb for Israel, then?" Qati asked. He was the one who would approve or disapprove the plan. He would, however, listen to his German friend. "Can you tell me of it yet?"

"Yes." Bock did so.

"Interesting. What of security?"

"One problem is our friend Manfred—more properly, his wife. She knows his skills, and she knows he is away somewhere."

"I would have thought that killing her carries more risks than rewards."

"Ordinarily it would appear so, but all of Fromm's fellow experts are also away—with their wives in most cases. Were she merely to disappear, it would be assumed by the neighbors that she'd joined her husband. His absence risks a comment by her, however casual it might be, that Manfred is off doing something. Someone might notice."

"Does she actually know what his former job was?"

"Manfred is very security-conscious, but we must assume that she does. What woman does not?"

"Go on," Qati said tiredly.

"Discovery of her body will force the police to search for her husband, and that is also a problem. She must disappear. Then it will seem that she has joined her husband."

“Instead of the other way around,” Qati observed with a rare smile, “at the end of the project.”

“Quite so.”

“What sort of woman is she?”

“A shrew, a money-grabber, not a believer,” Bock, an atheist, said, somewhat to Qati’s amusement.

“How will you do it?”

Bock explained briefly. “It will also validate the reliability of our people for that part of the operation. I’ll leave the details to my friends.”

“Trickery? One cannot be overly careful in an enterprise like this one.”

“If you wish, a videotape of the elimination? Something unequivocal?” Bock had done that before.

“It is barbaric,” Qati said. “But regrettably necessary.”

“I will take care of that when I go to Cyprus.”

“You’ll need security for that trip, my friend.”

“Yes, thank you, I think I will.” Bock knew what that meant. If his capture looked imminent—well, he was in a profession that entailed serious risks, and Qati had to be careful. Günther’s own operational proposal made that all the more imperative.

“The tools all have levelers for the air plates,” Ghosn said in annoyance, fifteen meters away. “Very good ones—why all the trouble with the table?”

“My young friend, this is something we can only do one time. Do you wish to take any chances at all?”

Ghosn nodded. The man was right, even if he was a patronizing son of a bitch. “And the tritium?”

“In those batteries. I’ve kept them in a cool place. You release the tritium by heating them. The procedure for recovering the tritium is delicate but straightforward.”

“Ah, yes, I know how to do that.” Ghosn remembered such lab experiments from university.

Fromm handed him a copy of the manual for the first tool. “Now, we both have new things to learn so that we can teach the operators.”

Captain Dubinin sat in the office of the Master Shipwright of the yard. Known variously as Shipyard Number 199, Leninskaya Komsomola, or simply Komsomol’sk, it was the yard at which the *Admiral Lunin* had been built. Himself a former submarine commander, the man preferred the title Master Shipwright to Superintendent and had changed the title on his office door accordingly on taking the job two years earlier. He was a traditionalist, but also a brilliant engineer. Today he was a happy man.

“While you were gone, I got hold of something wonderful!”

“What might that be, Admiral?”

“The prototype for a new reactor feed pump. It’s big, cumbersome, and a cast-iron bastard to install and maintain, but it’s—”

“Quiet?”

“As a thief,” the Admiral said with a smile. “It reduces the radiated noise of your current pump by a factor of fifty.”

“Indeed? Who did we steal that from?”

The Master Shipwright laughed at that. “You don’t need to know, Valentin Borissovich. Now, I have a question for you: I have heard that you did something very clever ten days ago.”

Dubinin smiled. “Admiral, that is something which I cannot—”

“Yes, you can. I spoke with your squadron commander. Tell me, how close did you get to USS *Nevada?”*

“I think it was actually *Maine,* ” Dubinin said. The intelligence types disagreed, but he went with his instincts. “About eight thousand meters. We identified him from a mechanical transient made during an exercise, then I proceeded to stalk on the basis of a couple of wild guesses—”

“Rubbish! Humility can be overdone, Captain. Go on.”

“And after tracking what we thought was our target, he confirmed it with a hull transient. I think he came up to conduct a rocket-firing drill. At that point, given our operational schedule and the tactical situation, I elected to break contact while it was possible to do so without counterdetection.”

“That was your cleverest move of all,” the Master Shipwright said, pointing a finger at his guest. “You could not have decided better, because the next time you go out, you will be the most quiet submarine we’ve ever put to sea.”

“They still have the advantage over us,” Dubinin pointed out honestly.

“That is true, but for once the advantage will be less than the difference between one commander and another, which is as it should be. We both studied under Marko Ramius. If only he were here to see this!”

Dubinin nodded agreement. “Yes, given current political circumstances it is truly a game of skill, not one of malice anymore.”

“Would that I were young enough to play,” the Master Shipwright said.

“And the new sonar?”

“This is our design from the Severomorsk Laboratory, a large-aperture array, roughly a forty-percent improvement in sensitivity. On the whole, you will be the equal of an American Los Angeles class in nearly all regimes.”

Except crew, Dubinin didn’t say. It would be years before his country had the ability to train men as the Western navies did, and by that time Dubinin would no longer have command at sea—*but!* In three months time he’d have the best ship that his nation had ever given one of its captains. If he were able to cajole his squadron commander into giving him a larger officer complement, he could beach the more inept of his conscripts and begin a really effective training regimen for the rest. Training and leading the crew was his job. He was the commanding officer of *Admiral Lunin.* He took credit for what went well and blame for what went badly. Ramius had taught him that from the first day aboard the first submarine. His fate was in his own hands, and what man could ask for more than that?

Next year, USS Maine, when the bitterly cold storms of winter sweep across the North Pacific, we will meet again.

“Not a single contact,” Captain Ricks said in the wardroom.

“Except for *Omaha.* ” LCDR Claggett looked over some paperwork. “And he was in too much of a hurry.”

“Ivan doesn’t even try anymore. Like he’s gone out of business.” It was almost a lament from the Navigator.

"Why even try to find us?" Ricks observed. "Hell, aside from that Akula that got lost . . ."

"We did track the guy awhile back," Nav pointed out.

"Maybe next time we'll get some hull shots," a lieutenant observed lightly from behind a magazine. There was general laughter. Some of the more extreme fast-attack skippers had on very rare occasions maneuvered close enough to some Soviet submarines to take flash photographs of their hulls. But that was a thing of the past. The Russians were a lot better at the submarine game than they'd been only ten years earlier. Being number two did make one try harder.

"Now, the next engineering drill," Ricks said.

The Executive Officer noted that the faces around the table didn't change. The officers were learning not to groan or roll their eyes. Ricks had a very limited sense of humor.

"Hello, Robby!" Joshua Painter got up from his swivel chair and walked over to shake hands with his visitor.

"Morning, sir."

"Grab a seat." A steward served coffee to both men. "How's the wing look?"

"I think we'll be ready on time, sir."

Admiral Joshua Painter, USN, was Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, Commander-in-Chief Atlantic, and Commander-in-Chief U.S. Atlantic Fleet—they paid him only one salary for the three jobs, though he did have three staffs to do his thinking for him. A career aviator—mainly fighters—he had reached the summit of his career. He would not be selected for Chief of Naval Operations. Someone with fewer politically rough edges would get that job, but Painter was content. Under the rather eccentric organization of the armed services, the CNO and other service chiefs merely advised the Secretary of Defense. The SecDef was the one who gave the orders to the area CINCs—commanders-in-chief. SACLANT-CIN**CLANT-CINCLANTFLT** might have been an awkward, cumbersome, and generally bloated command, but it was a *command.* Painter owned real ships, real airplanes, and real Marines, had the authority to tell them where to go and what to do. Two complete fleets, 2nd and 6th, came under his authority: seven aircraft carriers, a battleship—though an aviator, Painter rather liked battleships; his grandfather had commanded one—over a hundred destroyers and cruisers, sixty submarines, a division and a half of Marines, thousands of combat aircraft. The fact of the matter was that only one country in the world had more combat power than Joshua Painter did, and that country was no longer a serious strategic threat in these days of international amity. He no longer had to look forward to the possibility of war. Painter was a happy man. A man who'd flown missions over Vietnam, he'd seen American power go from its post–World War II peak to its nadir in the 1970s, then bounce back again until America once more was the most powerful country on earth. He'd played his part in the best of times and the worst of times, and now the best of times were better still. Robby Jackson was one of the men to whom his Navy would be turned over.

"What's this I heard about Soviet pilots in Libya again?" Jackson asked.

"Well, they never really left, did they?" Painter asked rhetorically. "Our

friend wants their newest weapons, and he's paying with hard cash. They need the cash. It's business. That's simple enough."

"You'd think he'd learn," Robby observed with a shake of the head.

"Well, maybe he will . . . soon. It must be real lonely being the last of the hotheads. Maybe that's why he's loading up while he still can. That's what the intel people say."

"And the Russians?"

"Quite a lot of instructors and technical people there on contract, especially aviators and SAM types."

"Nice to know. If our friend tries anything, he's got some good stuff to hide behind."

"Not good enough to stop you, Robby."

"Good enough to make me write some letters." Jackson had written enough of those. As a CAG, he could look forward on this cruise—as with every other he'd ever taken—to deaths in his air wing. To the best of his knowledge, no carrier had ever sailed for a deployment, whether in peace or war, without some fatalities, and as the "owner" of the air wing, the deaths were his responsibility. *Wouldn't it be nice to be the first,* Jackson thought. Aside from the fact that it would look good on his record, not having to tell a wife or a set of parents that Johnny had lost his life in service of his country . . . possible, but not likely, Robby told himself. Naval aviation was too dangerous. Past forty now, knowing that immortality was something between a myth and a joke, he had already found himself staring at the pilots in the squadron ready rooms and wondering which of the handsome, proud young faces would not be around when *TR* again made landfall at the Virginia Capes, whose pretty, pregnant wife would find a chaplain and another aviator on her doorstep just before lunch, along with a squadron wife to hold her hand when the world ended in distant fire and blood. A possible clash with Libyans was just one more threat in a universe where death was a permanent resident. He'd gotten too old for this life, Jackson admitted quietly to himself. Still as fine a fighter pilot as any—he was too mature to call himself the world's best anymore, except over drinks—the sadder aspects of the life were catching up, and it would soon be time to move on, if he were lucky, to an admiral's flag, just flying occasionally to show he still knew how and trying to make the good decisions that would minimize the unwanted visits.

"Problems?" Painter asked.

"Spares," Captain Jackson replied. "It's getting harder to keep all the birds up."

"Doing the best we can."

"Yes, sir, I know. Going to get worse, too, if I'm reading the papers right." Like maybe three carriers would be retired, along with their air wings. Didn't people ever learn?

"Every time we've won a war we've been punished for it," CINCLANT said. "At least winning this one didn't cost us a whole lot. Don't worry, there'll be a place for you when the time comes. You're my best wing commander, Captain."

"Thank you, sir. I don't mind hearing things like that."

Painter laughed. "Neither did I."

“There is a saying in English,” Golovko observed. “‘With friends like these, who has need of enemies?’ What else do we know?”

“It would appear that they turned over their entire supply of plutonium,” the man said. A representative of the weapons research and design institute at Sarova, south of Gorkiy, he was less a weapons engineer than a scientist who kept track of what people outside the Soviet Union were up to. “I ran the calculations myself. It is theoretically possible that they developed more of the material, but what they turned over to us slightly exceeds our own production of plutonium from plants of similar design here in the Soviet Union. I think we got it all from them.”

“I have read all that. Why are you here now?”

“The original study overlooked something.”

“And what might that be?” the First Deputy Chairman of the Committee for State Security asked.

“Tritium.”

“And that is?” Golovko didn’t remember. He was not an expert on nuclear materials, being more grounded in diplomatic and intelligence operations.

The man from Sarova hadn’t taught basic physics in years. “Hydrogen is the simplest of materials. An atom of hydrogen contains a proton, which is positively charged, and an electron, which is negatively charged. If you add a neutron—that has no electrical charge—to the hydrogen atom, you get deuterium. Add another, and you get tritium. It has three times the atomic weight of hydrogen because of the additional neutrons. In simple terms, neutrons are the stuff of atomic weapons. When you liberate them from their host atoms, they radiate outward, bombarding other atomic nuclei, releasing more neutrons. That causes a chain reaction, releasing vast amounts of energy. Tritium is useful because the hydrogen atom is not supposed to contain any neutrons at all, much less two of them. It is unstable, and tends to break down at a fixed rate. The half-life of tritium is 12.3 years,” he explained. “Thus, if you insert tritium in a fission device, the additional neutrons it adds to the initial fission reaction accelerate or ‘boost’ the fission in the plutonium or uranium reaction mass by a factor of between five and forty, allowing a far more efficient use of the heavy fission materials like plutonium or enriched uranium. Secondly, additional amounts of tritium placed in the proper location nearby the fission device—called a ‘primary’ in this case—begin a fusion reaction. There are other ways of doing this, of course. The chemicals of choice are lithium-deuteride and lithium-hydride, which is more stable, but tritium is still extremely useful for certain weapons applications.”

“And how does one make tritium?”

“Essentially by placing large quantities of lithium-aluminum in a nuclear reactor and allowing the thermal neutron flux—that’s an engineering term for the back-and-forth traffic of the particles—to irradiate and transform lithium to tritium by capture of some of the neutrons. It turns up as small, faceted bubbles inside the metal. I believe that the Germans also manufactured tritium at their Greifswald plant.”

“Why? What evidence do you have?”

“We analyzed the plutonium they sent us. Plutonium has two isotopes,

Plutonium-239 and -240. From the relative proportions, you can determine the neutron flux in the reactor. The German sample has too little 240. Something was attenuating the neutron flux. That something was probably—almost certainly—tritium."

"You are certain of that?"

"The physics involved here are complex but straightforward. In fact you can in many cases identify the plant that produced a plutonium sample by examining the ratio of various materials. My team and I are quite certain of our conclusions."

"Those plants were under international inspection, yes? Are there no controls on the production of tritium?"

"The Germans managed to circumvent some of the plutonium inspections, and there are no international controls on tritium at all. Even if there were such controls, concealing tritium production would be child's play."

Golovko swore under his breath. "How much?"

The scientist shrugged. "Impossible to say. The plant is being completely shut down. We no longer have access to it."

"Doesn't tritium have other uses?"

"Oh, yes. It's commercially very valuable. It's phosphorescent—glows in the dark. People use it for watch dials, gunsights, instrument faces, all manner of applications. It is commercially very valuable, on the order of fifty thousand American dollars per gram."

Golovko was surprised at himself for the digression. "Back up for a moment, please. You tell me that our Fraternal Socialist Comrades in the German Democratic Republic were working not only to make their own atomic bombs, but also hydrogen bombs?"

"Yes, that is likely."

"And one element of this plan is unaccounted for?"

"Also correct—possibly correct," the man corrected himself.

"Likely?" It was like extracting an admission from a child, the First Deputy Chairman thought.

"Da. In their place, given the directives they received from Erich Honecker, it is certainly something I would have done. It was, moreover, technically quite simple to do. After all, we gave them the reactor technology."

"What in hell were we thinking about?" Golovko muttered to himself.

"Yes, we made the same mistake with the Chinese, didn't we?"

"Didn't anyone—" The engineer cut him off.

"Of course there were warnings voiced. From my institute and the one at Kyshtym. No one listened. It was judged politically expedient to make this technology available to our allies." The last word was delivered evenly.

"And you think we should do something?"

"I suppose we could ask our colleagues in the Foreign Ministry, but it would be worthwhile to get something substantive done. So I decided to come here."

"You think, then, that the Germans—the new Germans, I mean—might have a supply of fissionable material and this tritium from which they might make their own nuclear arsenal?"

"That is a real possibility. There are, as you know, a sizable number of German nuclear scientists who are mainly working in South America at the

moment. The best of all possible worlds for them. They are doing what may well be weaponsrelated research twelve thousand kilometers from home, learning that which they need to learn at a distant location, and on someone else's payroll. If that is indeed the case, are they doing so merely as a business venture? I suppose that is a possibility, but it would seem more likely that their government has some knowledge of the affair. Since their government has taken no action to stop them, one must assume that their government approves of that activity. The most likely reason for their government to approve is the possible application of the knowledge they are acquiring for German national interests."

Golovko frowned. His visitor had just strung three possibilities into a threat. He was thinking like an intelligence officer, and an especially paranoid one at that. But those were often the best kind.

"What else do you have?"

"Thirty possible names." He handed a file over. "We've spoken with our people—those who helped the Germans set up the Greifswald plant, I mean. Based on their recollections, these are the people most likely to be part of the project, if any. Half a dozen of them are remembered as being very clever indeed, good enough to work with us at Sarova."

"Any of them make overt inquiries into—"

"No, and not necessary. Physics is physics. Fission is fission. Laws of science do not respect rules of classification. You cannot conceal nature, and that's exactly what we're dealing with here. If these people can operate a reactor, then the best of them can design nuclear weapons, given the necessary materials—and our reactor design *gave* them the ability to generate the proper materials. I think it is something you need to look into—to see what they did, and what they have. In any case, that is my advice."

"I have some very good people in Directorate T of the First Chief Directorate," Golovko said. "After we digest this information, some of them will come to speak with you." Sarova was only a few hours away by train.

"Yes, I've met with some of your technology analysts. A few of them are very good indeed. I hope you still have good contacts in Germany."

Golovko didn't answer that. He had many contacts still in Germany, but how many of them had been doubled? He'd recently done a reliability assessment of former penetration agents in the Stasi, and concluded that none could be trusted—more properly, that those who could be trusted were no longer in positions of any use, and even those . . . He decided on the spot to make this an all-Russian operation.

"If they have the materials, how soon might they fabricate weapons?"

"Given their level of technical expertise, and the fact that they've had access to American systems under NATO, there is no reason whatever why they could not have homemade weapons already in their inventory. They would not be crude weapons, either. In their position, and given the special nuclear materials, I could easily have produced two-stage weapons within months of unification. More sophisticated three-stage weapons . . . maybe another year."

"Where would you do it?"

"In East Germany, of course. Better security. Exactly where?" The man thought for a minute. "Look for a place with extremely precise machine tools,

the sort associated with highprecision optical instruments. The X-ray telescope we just orbited was a direct spinoff of H-Bomb research. Management of X-rays, you see, is very important in a multistage weapon. We learned much of American bomb technology from open-source papers on focusing X-rays for astrophysical observations. As I said, it's physics. It cannot be hidden, only discovered; once discovered, it is open for all who have the intelligence and the desire to make use of it."

"That is so wonderfully reassuring," Golovko observed crossly. But who could he be angry with—this man for speaking the truth, or Nature for being so easy to discover? "Excuse me, Professor. Thank you very much indeed for taking the time to bring this to our attention."

"My father is a mathematics teacher. He has lived his entire life in Kiev. He remembers the Germans."

Golovko saw the man out the door, then walked back to stare out the window.

Why did we ever let them unify? he asked himself. *Do they still want land?* Lebensraum? *Do they still want to be the dominant European power? Or are you being paranoid, Sergey?* He was paid to be paranoid, of course. Golovko sat down and lifted his phone.

"It is a small thing, and if it is necessary nothing more needs to be said," Keitel replied to the question.

"And the men?"

"I have what I need, and they are reliable. All have worked overseas, mainly in Africa. All are experienced. Three colonels, six lieutenant colonels, two majors—all of them retired like me."

"Reliability is all-important," Bock reminded the man.

"I know that, Günther. Each of these men would have been a general someday. Each has impeccable Party credentials. Why do you think they were retired, eh? Our New Germany cannot trust them."

"Agent-provocateurs?"

"I am the intelligence officer here," Keitel reminded his friend. "I do not tell you your job. Don't you tell me mine. Please, my friend, either you trust me or you do not. That choice is yours."

"I know that, Erwin. Forgive me. This operation is most important."

"And I know that, Günther."

"How soon can you do it?"

"Five days—I'd prefer that we take longer, but I am prepared to move quickly. The problem, of course, is disposing of the body in a suitable manner."

Bock nodded. That was something he'd never had to worry about. The Red Army Faction had rarely had to worry about that—except in the case of the turncoat Green woman who'd blown that one operation. But that one had been happenstance rather than design. Burying her in a national forest had been done—out of humor actually, not that he had thought of it, putting her back into the ecology she'd loved so much. It had been Petra's idea.

"How will I deliver the videotape to you?"

"Someone will meet you here. Not me, someone else. Stay at the same hotel

two weeks from today. You will be met. Conceal the tape cassette in a book."

"Very well." Keitel thought Bock was overdoing things. Cloak-and-dagger was such a game that amateurs enjoyed playing it more than the professionals, for whom it was merely the job. Why not simply put the thing in a box and wrap it in plastic like a movie cassette? "I will soon need some funding."

Bock handed over an envelope. "A hundred thousand marks."

"That will do nicely. Two weeks from today." Keitel left Bock to pay the bill and walked off.

Günther ordered another beer, staring off to the sea, cobalt blue under a clear sky. Ships were passing out on the horizon—one was a naval vessel, whose he couldn't tell at that distance, and the rest were simply merchantmen plying their trade from one unknown port to another.

On a day like this, a warm sun and a cool ocean breeze. Not far away was a beach of powdery white sand where children and lovers could enjoy the water. He thought of Petra and Erika and Ursel. No one passing by could tell from his face. The overt emotions of his loss were behind him. He'd wept and raged enough to exorcise them, but within him were the higher emotions of cold fury and revenge. So fine a day it was, and he had no one with whom to enjoy it. Whatever fine days might come later would find him just as alone. There would never be another Petra for him. He might find a girl here to use, just as some sort of biological exercise, but that wouldn't change things. He would be alone for the remainder of his life. It was not a pleasant thought. No love, no children, no personal future. Around him the terrace bar was about half full of people, mainly Europeans, mainly on vacation with their families, smiling and laughing as they drank their beer or wine or other local concoctions, thinking ahead to the entertainments the night might hold, the intimate dinners, and the cool cotton sheets that would follow, the laughter and the affection—all the things that the world had denied Günther Bock.

He hated them all, sitting there alone, his eyes sweeping over the scene as he might have done a zoo, watching the animals. Bock detested them for their laughter and their smiles . . . and their futures. It wasn't fair. He'd had a purpose in life, a goal to strive for. They had jobs. Fifty or so weeks per year they left their homes and drove to their workplaces and did whatever unimportant thing it was that they did, and came home, and like good Europeans saved their money for the annual fling in the Aegean, or Majorca, or America, or someplace where there was sun and clean air and a beach. Pointless though their lives might have been, they had the happiness that life had denied to the solitary man sitting in the shade of a white umbrella, staring out to sea again and sipping at his beer. It was not fair, not the least bit fair. He had devoted his life to their welfare—and they had the life that he'd hoped to give them, while he had less than nothing.

Except his mission.

Bock decided that he would not lie to himself on this issue any more than he did on others. He hated them. Hated them all. If he didn't have a future, why should they? If happiness was a stranger to him, why should it be their companion? He hated them because they had rejected him and Petra, and Qati, and all the rest who fought against injustice and oppression. In doing that, they had chosen the bad over the good—and for that one was damned.

He was more than they were, Bock knew, he was better than they could ever hope to be. He could look down on all of them and their pointless little lives, and whatever he did to them—for them, he still tried to believe—was for him alone to decide. If some of them were hurt, that was too bad. They were not really people. They were empty shadows of what could have been people if they'd lived lives of purpose. They had not cast him out, they'd cast themselves out, seeking the happiness that came from . . . whatever lives they led. The lazy way. Like cattle. Bock imagined them, heads down in feeding troughs, making contented barnyard noises while he surveyed them. If some had to die—and some *did* have to die—should it trouble him? Not at all, Günther decided.

"Mister President . . ."

"Yes, Elizabeth?" Fowler replied with a chuckle.

"When's the last time someone told you how good a lover you are?"

"I sure don't hear that in the Cabinet Room." Fowler was speaking to the top of her head, which nestled on his chest. Her left arm was wrapped around his chest, while his left hand stroked her blond hair. The fact of the matter, the President thought, was that he was indeed pretty good at this. He had patience, which he judged the most important talent for the business. Liberation and equal-rights issues notwithstanding, it was a man's job to make a woman feel cherished and respected. "Not in the Press Room either."

"Well, you're hearing it from your National Security Advisor."

"Thank you, Dr. Elliot." Both had a good laugh. Elizabeth moved up to kiss him, dragging her breast along his chest to do so. "Bob, you don't know what you mean to me."

"Oh, I think I might," the President allowed.

Elliot shook her head. "All those dry years in academe. Never had time, always too busy. I was so tied up with being a professor. So much time wasted...." A sigh.

"Well, I hope I was worth waiting for, dear."

"You were, and you are." She rolled over, resting her head on his shoulder and drawing his hand across her chest until it rested on a convenient spot. His other hand found a similar place, and her hands held his in place.

What do I say next? Liz asked herself. She had spoken the truth. Bob Fowler was a gentle, patient, and talented lover. It was also true that on hearing such a thing, any man, even a president, was under control. *Nothing, for a while,* she decided. There was time to enjoy him further, and time to examine her own feelings, her eyes open and staring at a dark rectangle on the wall that was a fine oil painting whose artist she'd never bothered to note, some sweeping Western landscape of where the plains ended at the Front Range of the Rockies. His hands moved gently, not quite arousing her again, but giving her subtle waves of pleasure which she accepted passively, occasionally adjusting the position of her head to show that she was still awake.

She was starting to love the man. Wasn't that odd? She paused, wondering if it was or wasn't. There was much to like and admire in him. There was also much to confuse. He was an irreconcilable mixture of coldness and warmth, and his sense of humor defied understanding. He cared deeply about many

things, but his depth of feeling seemed always motivated by a logical understanding of issues and principles rather than true passion. He was often befuddled—genuinely so—that others didn't share his feelings on issues, in the same way that teachers of mathematics were never angered, but saddened and puzzled that others failed to see the beauty and symmetry of their calculations. Fowler was also capable of remarkable cruelty and total ruthlessness, both delivered without a trace of rancor. People stood in his way, and if he could destroy them, he did. It was like the line in *The Godfather.* It was never personal, just business. Perhaps he'd learned that from the *mafiosi* he'd sent to prison, Liz wondered. The same man could treat his true followers with a matter-of-fact coldness that rewarded efficiency and loyalty with . . . how could she describe it? The gratitude of an accountant.

And yet he was also a wonderfully tender man in bed. Liz frowned at the wall. There was no understanding him, was there?

"Did you see that report from Japan?" the President asked, getting to business just as Elliot was on the verge of a conclusion.

"Ummm, glad you brought that up. Something disturbing came into the office the other day."

"About what?" Fowler showed his interest by moving his hands in a more deliberate fashion, as though to coax information out of her that she'd been waiting to reveal for some time.

"Ryan," Liz replied.

"Him again? What is it?"

"The reports we heard about improper financial dealings were true, but it looks like he weaseled out of them on a technicality. It would have been enough to keep him out of this Administration, but since he's grandfathered in from before—"

"There are technicalities and technicalities. What other thing do you have?"

"Sexual impropriety, and possibly using Agency personnel to settle personal scores."

"Sexual impropriety . . . disgraceful...."

Elliot giggled. He liked that. "There might be a child involved." Fowler did not like that. He was a very seriously committed man on the issue of children's rights. His hands stopped moving.

"What do we know?"

"Not enough. It should be looked at, though," Liz said, coaxing his hands back into motion.

"Okay, have the FBI do a quiet investigation," the President said, ending the issue, he thought.

"That won't work."

"Why?"

"Ryan has a very close relationship with the Bureau. They might balk on those grounds, might smooth the thing over."

"Bill Shaw isn't like that. He's as good a cop as I've ever met—even *I* can't make him do things, and that's the way it should be." Logic and principle again. The man was impossible to predict.

"Shaw worked personally on the Ryan Case—the terrorist thing, I mean. Prior personal involvement by the head of the investigative agency . . . ?"

“True,” Fowler admitted. It would look bad. Conflict of interest and all that.

“And Shaw’s personal troubleshooter is that Murray fellow. He and Ryan are pretty tight.”

A grunt. “So, what then?”

“Somebody from the Attorney General’s office, I think.”

“Why not Secret Service?” Fowler asked, knowing the answer, but wondering if she did.

“Then it looks like it’s a witch-hunt.”

“Good point. Okay, the A.G.’s office. Call Greg tomorrow.”

“Okay, Bob.” Time to change subjects. She brought one of his hands to her face and kissed it. “You know, at times like this I really miss cigarettes.”

“Smoke after sex?” he asked with a harder embrace.

“When you make love to me, Bob, I smoke during sex. . . .” She turned to stare into his eyes.

“Maybe I should think about relighting the fire?”

“They say,” the National Security Advisor purred, moving to kiss him again, “they say the President of the United States is the most powerful man in the world.”

“I do my best, Elizabeth.”

Half an hour later Elliot decided that it was true. She was starting to love him. Then she wondered what he felt for her. . . .

16

FUELING THE FIRE

"Guten Abend, Frau Fromm," the man said.

"And you are?"

"Peter Wiegler, from the *Berliner Tageblatt.* I wonder if I might speak with you briefly."

"About what?" she asked.

"Aber . . . " He gestured at the rain he was standing in. She remembered that she was civilized after all, even to a journalist.

"Yes, of course, please come in."

"Thank you." He came in out of the rain and removed his coat, which she hung on a peg. He was a captain in the KGB's First Chief (Foreign) Directorate, a promising young officer of thirty years, handsome, gifted in languages, the holder of a master's degree in psychology, and another in engineering. He already had Traudl Fromm figured out. The new Audi parked outside was comfortable but not luxurious, her clothing—also new—very presentable but not overpowering. She was proud and moderately greedy, but also parsimonious. Curious, but guarded. She was hiding something, also smart enough to know that turning him away would generate more suspicion than whatever explanation she might have. He took his seat on an overstuffed chair and waited for the next move. She didn't offer coffee. She hoped the encounter would be a short one. He wondered if this third person on his list of ten names might be something worth reporting to Moscow Center.

"Your husband is associated with the Greifswald-Nord Nuclear Power Station?"

"He was. As you know, it is being closed down."

"Quite so. I would like to know what you and he think of that. Is Dr. Fromm at home?"

"No, he is not," she answered uncomfortably. "Wiegler" didn't react visibly.

"Really? May I ask where he is?"

"He is away on business."

"Perhaps I might come back in a few days, then?"

"Perhaps. You might call ahead?" It was the way she said it that the KGB officer noticed. She was hiding something, and the Captain knew that it had to be something—

There was another knock at the door. Traudl Fromm went to answer it.

"Guten Abend, Frau Fromm," a voice said. "We bring a message from Manfred."

The Captain heard the voice, and something inside his head went on alert. He told himself not to react. This was Germany, and everything was *in*

Ordnung. Besides, he might learn something. . . .

"I, ah, have a guest at the moment," Traudl answered.

The next statement was delivered in a whisper. The Captain heard approaching steps, and took his time before turning to look. It was a fatal error.

The face he saw might as easily have come from one of the endless World War II movies that he'd grown up on, just that it lacked the black-and-silver-trimmed uniform of an SS officer. It was a stern, middle-aged face with light blue eyes entirely devoid of emotion. A professional face that measured his as quickly as he—

It was time to—

"Hello. I was just about to leave."

"Who is he?" Traudl didn't get a chance to answer.

"I'm a reporter with—" It was too late. A pistol appeared from nowhere. *"Was gibt's hier?"* he demanded.

"Where is your car?" the man behind the gun asked.

"I parked it down the street. I—"

"All those spaces right in front? Reporters are lazy. Who are you?"

"I'm a reporter with the—"

"I think not."

"This one, too," the one in back said. The Captain remembered the face from somewhere. . . . He told himself not to panic. That, too, was a mistake.

"Listen closely. You will be going on a short trip. If you cooperate, you will be returned here within three hours. If you do not cooperate, things will go badly for you. *Verstehen Sie*?"

They had to be intelligence officers, the Captain thought, making a correct guess. And they had to be German, and that meant that they would play by the rules, he told himself, making the last mistake of what had been a promising career.

The courier arrived from Cyprus right on schedule, handing off his package to another man at one of five pre-selected transfer points, all of which had been under surveillance for twelve hours. The second man walked two blocks and started up his Yamaha motorcycle, tearing off into the countryside just as fast as he could in an area where motorcyclists were all certifiably mad. Two hours after that, he delivered the package, certain that he had not been followed, and kept going another thirty minutes before circling back to his point of origin.

Günther Bock took the package and was annoyed to see that it was to all appearances a movie cassette—*Chariots of Fire*—rather than the hollowed-out book he'd requested. Perhaps Erwin was delivering a message along with the cassette. Bock inserted it in a player and switched it on, catching the first few minutes of the feature movie, which was subtitled in French. Soon, he realized that Keitel's message was on what intelligence professionals really did. He fast-forwarded through ninety minutes of the film before the picture changed.

What?

"*Who* are you?" an off-camera voice asked harshly.

"I am Peter Wiegler, I am a reporter with—" The rest was a scream. The

equipment used was crude, just an electrical cord ripped off a lamp or appliance, the insulation trimmed off the free end to expose a few centimeters of copper. Few understood just how effective crude instruments could be, especially if the user possessed some degree of sophistication. The man who called himself Peter Wiegler screamed as though his throat would split from the effort. He'd already bitten through his lower lip in previous efforts to keep silent. The only good thing about using electricity was that it wasn't especially bloody, just noisy.

"You must understand that you are being foolish. Your courage is impressive, but wasted here. Courage only has use when there is hope of rescue. We've already searched your car. We have your passports. We know that you are not German. So, what are you? Pole, Russian, what?"

The young man opened his eyes and took a long breath before speaking. "I am an investigative reporter with the *Berliner Tageblatt*. " They hit him again with the electric cord, and this time he passed out. Bock watched a man's back approach the victim and check his eyes and pulse. The torturer appeared to be wearing a chemical-warfare-protective suit of rubberized fabric, but without the hood and gloves. It must have been awfully hot, Bock thought.

"Obviously a trained intelligence officer. Probably Russian. Not circumcised, and his dental work is stainless steel, not especially well done. That means an East Bloc service, of course. Too bad, this lad is quite brave." The voice was admirably clinical, Bock thought.

"What drugs do we have?" another voice asked.

"A rather good tranquilizer. Now?"

"Now. Not too much."

"Very well." The man went off-camera, then returned with a syringe. He grasped the victim's upper arm, then injected the drug into a vein inside the elbow. It took three minutes before the KGB man regained consciousness, just enough for the rush of drugs to assault his higher brain functions.

"Sorry we had to do that to you. You have passed the test," the voice said, this time in Russian.

"What test—" The answer was in Russian, just two words before his brain took hold and stopped him. "Why did you ask me in Russian?"

"Because that was what we wished to know. Good night."

The victim's eyes went wide as a small-caliber pistol appeared, was placed against his chest, and fired. The camera withdrew a bit to show more of the room. A plastic sheet—actually three of them—covered the floor to catch blood and other droppings under the metal chair. The bullet wound was speckled with black powder marks and bulged outward from the intrusion of gun-gasses below the skin. There wasn't much bleeding. Heart wounds never produced much. In a few more seconds the body stopped quivering.

"We could have taken more time to ascertain additional information, but we have what we need, as I will explain later." It was Keitel's voice, off-camera.

"Now, Traudl . . ."

They brought her in front of the camera, hands bound in front of her, her mouth gagged with the same bandaging tape, her eyes wide in terror, naked. She was trying to say something around the gag, but no one there had been interested. The tape was a day and a half old, of course. Günther could tell

that from the TV that was playing in the corner, tuned to an evening news broadcast. The entire performance was a professional *tour de force* designed to meet his requirements.

Bock could almost hear the man thinking, *Now, how do we do this?* Günther momentarily regretted the instructions he'd given Keitel. But the evidence had to be positive. Magicians and other experts in illusion regularly consulted with intelligence agencies—but some things could not be faked, and he had to be sure that he could trust Keitel to do terrible and dangerous things. It was an objective necessity that this be graphic.

Another man looped a rope over a ceiling beam and hauled her hands up, then the first pressed his pistol into her armpit and fired a single shot. At least he wasn't a sadist, Bock thought. Such people were not reliable. It was quite sad to watch in any case. The bullet had punctured her heart, but she was too excited to die quickly, struggling for more than half a minute, eyes still wide, fighting for breath, still trying to speak, probably begging for help, asking why. . . . After she went limp, one checked the pulse at her neck, then lowered her slowly to the floor. They'd been as gentle about it as they could have been under the circumstances. The shooter spoke without facing the camera.

"I hope you are satisfied. I did not enjoy this."

"You weren't supposed to," Bock said to the television set.

The Russian was taken off the chair and laid beside Traudl Fromm. While the bodies were dismembered, Keitel's voice spoke. It was a useful diversion, as the visual scene simply got more horrible. Bock was not squeamish about many things, but it troubled his psyche when human bodies were abused after death. Necessary or not, it seemed gratuitous to him.

"The Russian is undoubtedly an intelligence officer, as you have seen. His automobile was a rental from Berlin, and is being driven tomorrow to Magdeburg, where it will be turned in. It was parked down the street, normal procedure for a professional, of course, but a giveaway in the event of capture. In the car we found a list of names, all of them in the DDR nuclear-power industry. It would seem that our Russian comrades have suddenly become interested in Honecker's bomb project. A pity we didn't have another few years to follow up on that, no? I regret the complication involved, but it took us several days to set up arrangements for disposing of the bodies, and we had no idea Frau Fromm had her 'guest' when we knocked on the door. At that point, of course, it was too late. Besides, with the rain we had ideal conditions for the kidnapping." Two men were working on each body. All wore the protective suits, and now they had their hoods and masks on, doubtless to protect them from the smell as much as to protect their identity. As in a slaughterhouse, sawdust was applied in buckets full to soak up the copious amounts of blood being spilled. Bock knew from experience just how messy murders could be. They worked quickly as Keitel's voice-over went on, using powered industrial cutting tools. Arms and legs had been removed from the torsos, and then the heads were removed and held up to the camera. No one could fake this. Keitel's men had truly murdered two human beings. The dismemberment in front of a playing television made that absolutely certain, and would doubtless also make disposal easier. The pieces were assembled neatly for wrapping in plastic. One of the men started brushing the blood-

soaked sawdust into a pile for yet another plastic bag.

"The body parts will be burned at two widely separated locations. This will be accomplished long before you get the tape. That ends our message. We await further instructions." And the tape returned to the dramatization of the 1920 Olympics—or was it 1924? Bock wondered. Not that it mattered, of course.

"Yes, Colonel?"

"One of my officers has failed to check in." The Colonel was from Directorate T, the technical branch of the First Chief Directorate. The holder of a doctor's degree in engineering, his personal specialty was missile systems. He had worked in America and France, ferreting out the secrets of various military weapons before being promoted to his current job.

"Details?"

"Captain Yevgeniy Stepanovich Feodorov, age thirty, married, one child, a fine young officer on the Major's List. He was one of the three I sent into Germany at your direction to check out their nuclear facilities. He's one of my best."

"How long?" Golovko asked.

"Six days. He flew into Berlin via Paris last week. He had German papers, good ones from downstairs, and a list of ten names to investigate. His instructions were to maintain a low profile unless he discovered something important, in which case he was to make contact with Station Berlin—what's left of it, I mean. We scheduled a periodic check-in, of course. He didn't make it, and after twenty-four hours, I got the alert."

"Could it be that he's just careless?"

"Not this boy," the Colonel said flatly. "Does the name mean anything to you?"

"Feodorov . . . wasn't his father . . . ?"

"Stefan Yurievich, yes. Yevgeniy is his youngest son."

"Good God, Stefan taught *me*, " Golovko said. "Possibility of. . . ?"

"Defection?" The Colonel shook his head angrily. "Not a chance. His wife is in the chorus with the opera. No—they met in university and married young over the objections of both sets of parents. It's a love match like we all wish we had. She's a stunningly beautiful girl, voice like an angel. Only a *zhopnik* would walk away from her. Then there's the child. He is by all reports a good father." Golovko saw where this was leading.

"Arrested, then?"

"I haven't heard a whisper. Perhaps you might arrange to have that checked. I fear the worst." The Colonel frowned and stared down at the rug. He didn't want to be the one who broke the news to Natalia Feodorova.

"Hard to believe," Golovko said.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, if your suspicions are correct, then this program we were tasked to investigate is a matter of grave importance to them, is it not? We may have confirmed something in the most expensive way possible."

General Lieutenant Sergey Nikolayevich Golovko was silent for several seconds. *It's not supposed to be like this,* he told himself. *The intelligence business is supposed to be civilized. Killing each other's officers is a thing of the distant past.*

We don't do that sort of thing anymore, haven't done it in years . . . decades. . . .

"None of the alternatives are credible, are they?"

The Colonel shook his head. "No. But the most credible is that our man stumbled into something both real and extremely sensitive. Sensitive enough to kill for. A secret nuclear-weapons program is that sensitive, is it not?"

"Arguably, yes." The Colonel was showing the sort of loyalty to his people that KGB expected, Golovko noted. He was also thinking over the alternatives and presenting his best estimate of the situation.

"Have you sent your technical people to Sarova yet?"

"Day after tomorrow. My best man was sick, just got out of the hospital—broke his leg in a fall down some stairs."

"Have him carried there if necessary. I want a worst-case estimate of plutonium production at the DDR power stations. Send another man to Kyshtym to back-check the people at Sarova. Pull in the other people you sent to Germany. We'll restart the investigation more carefully. Two-man teams, and the backup man is to be armed . . . that is dangerous," Golovko said on reflection.

"General, it takes a lot of time and money to train my field people. I will need two years to replace Feodorov, two whole years. You can't just pull an officer out of another branch and drop him into this line of work. These people must understand what they are looking for. Assets like that should be protected."

"You are correct. I will clear it with the Chairman and send experienced officers . . . maybe some people from the Academy . . . credential them like German police officials?"

"I like that, Sergey Nikolay'ch."

"Good man, Pavel Ivan'ch. And on Feodorov?"

"Maybe he'll turn up. Thirty days before he's declared missing, then I'll have to see his wife. Very well, I'll pull my people in and start planning the next phase of the operation. When will I have a list of the escort officers?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Very well, General, thank you for your time."

Golovko shook the man's hand and remained standing until the door closed. He had ten minutes until his next appointment.

"Damn," he said to his desk top.

"More delays?"

Fromm did not quite manage to hide his disgust. "We are saving time! The material we will be working on has machining characteristics similar to stainless steel. We must also manufacture blanks for the casting process. Here."

Fromm unfolded his working drawings.

"We have here a folded cylinder of plutonium. Around the plutonium is a cylinder of beryllium, which is a godsend for our purposes. It is very light, very stiff, an X-ray window, and a neutron reflector. Unfortunately, it is also rather difficult to machine. We must use cubic boron-nitride tools, essentially an analog to industrial diamond. Steel or carbon tools would have results you do not wish to contemplate. We also have health considerations."

"Beryllium is not toxic," Ghosn said. "I checked."

"True, but the dust resulting from the matching process converts to beryllium oxide, which when inspired converts again to beryllium hydroxide, and *that* causes berylliosis, which is uniformly fatal." Fromm paused, staring at Ghosn like a schoolmaster before going on.

"Now, around the beryllium is a cylinder of tungsten-rhenium, which we need for its density. We will purchase twelve kilograms in powder form, which we will sinter into cylindrical segments. You know sintering? That is heating it just hot enough to form. Melting and casting is too difficult, and not necessary for our purposes. Around that goes the explosive-lens assembly. And this is just the primary, Ghosn, not even a quarter of our total energy budget."

"And the precision required . . ."

"Exactly. Think of this as the world's largest ring or necklace. What we produce must be as finely finished as the most beautiful piece of jewelry you have ever seen—or perhaps a precision optical instrument."

"The tungsten-rhenium?"

"Available from any major electrical concern. It's used in special filaments for vacuum tubes, numerous other applications, and it's far easier to work than pure tungsten."

"Beryllium—oh, yes, it's used in gyroscopes and other instruments . . . thirty kilograms."

"Twenty-five . . . yes, get thirty. You have no idea how lucky we are."

"How so?"

"The Israeli plutonium is gallium-stabilized. Plutonium has four phase-transformations below melting point, and has the curious habit, in certain temperature regimes, of changing its density by a factor of over twenty percent. It is a multistate metal."

"In other words, a subcritical mass can—"

"Exactly," Fromm said. "What appears to be a subcritical mass can under certain circumstances convert itself into criticality. It will not explode, but the gamma- and neutron-flux would be lethal within a radius of . . . oh, anywhere from ten to thirty meters, depending on circumstances. That was discovered during the Manhattan Project. They were—no, not lucky. They were brilliant scientists, and as soon as they had a gram or so of plutonium, it was decided to investigate its properties. Had they waited, or simply assumed that they knew more than they did—well . . ."

"I had no idea," Ghosn admitted. *Merciful God* . . .

"Not everything is in books, my young friend, or should I say, not all the books have all the information. In any case, with the addition of gallium, the plutonium is a stable mass. It is actually quite safe to work, as long as we take the proper precautions."

"So we start by machining out stainless-steel blanks to these specifications, then make our casting-molds-investment casting, of course."

Fromm nodded. "Correct. Very good, *mein Junge."*

"Then when the casting is done, we will machine the bomb material. . . . I see. Well, we seem to have good machinists."

They'd "drafted"—that was the term they used—ten men, all Palestinians, from local optical shops, and trained them on the use of the machine tools.

The tools were all that Fromm had said they were. Two years earlier they'd been totally state-of-the-art, identical to the equipment used in the American Y-12 fabrication plant at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Tolerances were measured by laser interferometry, and the rotating tool heads were computer-controlled in three dimensions through five axes of movement. Instructions were passed to the computers via touch-screens. The design itself had been done on a minicomputer and drawn out on an expensive drafting machine.

Ghosn and Fromm brought the machinists in and set them to work on their first task, making the stainless-steel blank for the plutonium primary that would ignite the thermonuclear fire.

"Now," Fromm said, "for the explosive lenses. . . ."

* * *

"I've heard much about you," Bock said.

"I hope it was good," Marvin Russell replied with a guarded smile.

My first Indian, Bock thought quickly. He was oddly disappointed. Except for the cheekbones, he might have easily been mistaken for any Caucasian, and even those could seem like a Slav with perhaps a taste of Tatar in his background. . . . What color there was had come mainly from the sun. The rest of the man was formidable enough, the size and obvious strength.

"I hear you killed a police officer in Greece by snapping his neck."

"I don't know why people make a big deal about that," Russell said with weary honesty. "He was a scrawny little fuck, and I know how to take care of myself."

Bock smiled and nodded. "I understand how you feel, but your method was impressive in any case. I have heard good things about you, Mr. Russell, and —"

"Just call me Marvin. Everybody else does."

Bock smiled. "As you wish, Marvin. I am Günther. Particularly your skill with weapons."

"It's no big deal," Russell said, genuinely puzzled. "Anybody can learn to shoot."

"How do you like it here?"

"I like it a lot. These people—I mean, they have heart, y'know? They ain't quitters. They work real hard at what they do. I admire that. And what they done for me, Günther, it's like family, man."

"We are a family, Marvin. We share everything, good and bad. We all have the same enemies."

"Yeah, I seen that."

"We may need your help for something, Marvin. It's for something fairly important."

"Okay," Russell replied simply.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean 'yes,' Günther."

"You haven't even asked what it is," the German pointed out.

"Okay." Marvin smiled. "So tell me."

"We need you to go back to America in a few months. How dangerous is that for you?"

"Depends. I've done time—in prison, I mean. You know that. My fingerprints are on file with the cops, but they don't have a picture of me—I mean, the one they have is pretty old. I've changed since then. They're looking for me up in the Dakotas, probably. If you send me there, it might be a little tricky."

"Nowhere near there, Marvin."

"Then it shouldn't be much of a problem, dependin' on what you need me to do."

"How do you feel about killing people—Americans, I mean." Bock watched his face for a reaction.

"Americans." Marvin snorted. "Hey, man, *I'm* a fuckin' American, okay? My country ain't what you think. *They* stole my country from me, just like what happened to these guys here, okay? It ain't just here shit like that happened, okay? You want me to do some people for you, yeah, I can do that, if you got a reason. I mean, I don't kill for fun, I ain't no psycho, but you got a reason, sure, I can do it."

"Maybe more than one—"

"I heard you when you said 'people,' Günther. I ain't so stupid that I think 'people' means one guy. You just make sure some cops, maybe even some FBI guys are in there, yeah, I'll help kill all you want. One thing you need to know, though."

"What's that?"

"The other side ain't dumb. They got my brother, remember. They're serious dudes."

"We also are serious," Bock assured him.

"I seen that, man. What can you tell me about the job?"

"What do you mean, Marvin?" Bock asked as casually as he could.

"I mean I grew up there, man, remember? I know stuff that maybe you don't. Okay, you got security and all that, and you ain't gonna tell me anything now. Fine, that's no problem. But you might need my help later on. These guys here are okay, they're smart and all, but they don't know dick about America—I mean, not what you need to get around and stuff. You go huntin', you gotta know the ground. I know the ground."

"That is why we want your help," Bock assured him, as though he'd already thought that part all the way through. Actually he had not, and now he was wondering just how useful this man might be.

* * *

Andrey Il'ych Narmonov saw himself as the captain of the world's largest ship of state. That was the good news. The bad news was that the ship had a leaky bottom, a broken rudder, and uncertain engines. Not to mention a mutinous crew. His office in the Kremlin was large, with room to pace about, something he found himself doing all too much of late. That, he thought, was a sign of an uncertain man, and the President of the Union of Soviet Socialist

Republics could not afford that, especially when he had an important guest.

Union of Sovereign *Soviet Republics,* he thought. Though the official name-change had not yet been approved, that was how his people were starting to think. *That's the problem*.

The ship of state was breaking up. There was no precedent for it. The dissolution of the British Empire was the example that many liked to use, but that wasn't quite right, was it? Nor was any other example. The Soviet Union of old had been a unique political creation. What was now happening in the Soviet Union was also entirely without precedent. What had once been exhilarating to him was now more than frightening. He was the one who had to make the hard decisions, and he had no historical model to follow. He was completely on his own, as alone as any man had ever been, with a task larger than any man had ever faced. Lauded in the West as a consummate political tactician, he thought of it himself as an endless succession of crises. *Wasn't it Gladstone?* he thought. *Wasn't it he who described his job as being the man on a raft in the rapids, fending off rocks with a pole? How apt, how apt indeed.* Narmonov and his country were being swept along by overwhelming forces of history, somewhere down that river was an immense cataract, a falls that could destroy everything . . . but he was too busy with the pole and the rocks to look so far ahead. That was what being a political tactician meant. He devoted all his creative energy to day-to-day survival, and was losing sight of the next week . . . even the day after tomorrow. . . .

"Andrey Il'ych, you are growing thin," Oleg Kirilovich Kadishev observed from his leather seat.

"The walking is good for my heart," the President replied wryly.

"Then perhaps you will join our Olympic team?"

Narmonov stopped for a moment. "It would be nice indeed to compete merely against foreigners. *They* think I am brilliant. Alas, our own people know better."

"What can I do to help my President?"

"I need your help, the help of those on the right."

It was Kadishev's turn to smile. The press—Western as well as Soviet—never got that straight. The *left* wing in the Soviet Union was that of the communist hard-liners. For over eighty years, reform in that country had always come from the right. All the men executed by Stalin for wanting to allow the merest bit of personal freedom had always been denounced as *Right*-Deviationists. But self-styled progressives in the West were always on the political left, and they called *their* reactionary enemies "conservatives" and generally identified them as being on the political *right*. It seemed too great a stretch of imagination for Western journalists to adjust their ideological polarity to a different political reality. The newly liberated Soviet journalists had merely aped their Western colleagues and used the foreign descriptions to muddle what was already a chaotic political scene. The same was true of "progressive" Western politicians, of course, who were championing so many of the experiments of the Soviet Union in their own countries—all the experiments which had been taken to the limit and proven to be something worse than mere failures. Perhaps the blackest humor available in all the world was the carping from leftist elements in the West, some of whom were already observing that the

backward Russians had failed because they had proven unable to convert socialism into a humanistic government—whereas *advanced* Western governments could accomplish just that (of course, Karl Marx himself had said that, hadn't he?). Such people were, Kadishev thought with a bemused shake of his head, no less idealistic than the members of the first Revolutionary Soviets, and just as addlebrained. The Russians had merely taken the revolutionary ideals to their logical limits, and found there only emptiness and disaster. Now that they were turning back—a move that called for political and moral courage such as the world had rarely seen—the West *still* didn't understand what was happening! *Khrushchev was right all along,* the parliamentarian thought. *Politicians are the same all over the world.*

Mostly idiots.

"Andrey Il'ych, we do not always agree on methods, but we have always agreed on goals. I know you are having trouble with our friends on the other side."

"*And* with your side," President Narmonov pointed out more sharply than he should have.

"And with my side, it is true," Kadishev admitted casually. "Andrey Il'ych, do you say that we must agree with you on everything?"

Narmonov turned, his eyes momentarily angry and wide. "Please, not that, not today."

"How may we help you?" *Losing control of your emotions, Comrade President? A bad sign, my friend. . . .*

"I need your support on the ethnic issue. We cannot have the entire Union break apart."

Kadishev shook his head forcefully. *"That* is inevitable. Letting the Baits and the Azeris go eliminates many problems."

"We need the Azerbaijani oil. If we let that go, our economic situation worsens. If we let the Baits go, the momentum will strip away half of our country."

"Half our population, true, but scarcely twenty percent of our land. And most of our problems," Kadishev said again.

"And what of the people who leave? We throw them into chaos and civil war. How many will die, how many deaths on our conscience, eh?" the President demanded.

"Which is a normal consequence of decolonization. We cannot prevent it. By attempting to, we merely keep the civil war within our own borders. *That* forces us to place too much power into the hands of the security forces, and that is too dangerous. I don't trust the Army any more than you do."

"The Army will not launch a coup. There are no Bonapartists in the Red Army."

"You have greater confidence in their fealty than I do. I think they see a unique historical opportunity. The Party has held the military down since the Tukhachevskiy business. Soldiers have long memories, and they may be thinking that this is their chance."

"Those people are all dead! And their children with them," Narmonov countered angrily. It had been over fifty years, after all. Those few with direct memory of the purges were in wheelchairs or living on pensions.

"But not their grandchildren, and there is institutional memory to consider as well." Kadishev leaned back and considered a new thought that had sprung almost fully formed into his head. *Might that be possible . . .* ?

"They have concerns, yes, and those concerns are little different from my own. We differ on how to deal with the problem, not on the issue of control. While I am not sure of their judgment, I *am* sure of their loyalty."

"Perhaps you are correct, but I am not so sanguine."

"With your help we can present a united front to the forces of early dissolution. That will discourage them. That will allow us to get through a few years of normalization, and then we can consider an orderly departure for the republics with a genuine commonwealth—association, whatever you wish to call it—to keep us associated economically while being separate politically."

The man is desperate, Kadishev saw. *He really is collapsing under the strain. The man who moves about the political arena like a Central Army hockey forward is showing signs of fatigue . . . will he survive without my help?*

Probably, Kadishev judged. Probably. That was too bad, the younger man thought. Kadishev was the de facto leader of the forces on the "left," the forces that wanted to break up the entire country and the government that went with it, yanking the remaining nation—based on the Russian Federation—into the 21st century by its throat. If Narmonov fell . . . if he found himself unable to continue, then who . . .

Why, me, of course.

Would the Americans support him?

How could they fail to support Agent SPINNAKER of their own Central Intelligence Agency?

Kadishev had been working for the Americans since his recruitment by Mary Patricia Foley some six years before. He didn't think of it as treason. He was working for the betterment of his country, and saw himself as succeeding. He'd fed the Americans information on the internal workings of the Soviet government, some of it highly valuable, some material they could as easily have gotten from their own reporters. He knew that they regarded him as their most valuable source of political intelligence in the Soviet Union, especially now that he controlled fully forty percent of the votes in the country's bumptious new parliament, the Congress of People's Deputies. *Thirty-nine percent,* he told himself. *One must be honest.* Perhaps another eight percent could be his if he made the proper move. There were many shades of political loyalty among the twenty-five hundred members. Genuine democrats, Russian nationalists of both democratic and socialist stripe, radicals of both left and right. There was also a cautious middle of politicians, some genuinely concerned about what course their country might take, others merely seeking to conserve their personal political status. How many could he appeal to? How many could he win over?

Not quite enough . . .

But there was one more card he could play, wasn't there?

Da. If he had the audacity to play it.

"Andrey Il'ych," he said in a conciliatory voice, "you ask me to depart from an important principle so that I can help you reach a goal we share—but to do so by a route that I distrust. This is a very difficult matter. I am not even sure

that I can deliver the support you require. My comrades might well turn their backs on me." It only agitated the man further.

"Rubbish! I know how well they trust you and your judgment."

They are not the only ones who trust me, Kadishev told himself.

As with most investigations, this one was done mainly with paper. Ernest Wellington was a young attorney, and an ambitious one. As a law-school graduate and a member of the bar, he could have applied to the FBI and learned the business of investigation properly, but he considered himself a lawyer rather than a cop, besides which he enjoyed politics, and the FBI prided itself on avoiding political wrangling wherever possible. Wellington had no such inhibitions. He enjoyed politics, considered it the life's blood of government service, and knew it to be the path to speedy advancement both within and without the government. The contacts he was making now would make his value to any of a hundred "connected" law firms jump fivefold, plus making him a known name within the Department of Justice. Soon he would be in the running for a "special-assistant" job. After that—in five years or so—he'd have a crack at a section chiefs office . . . maybe even U.S. Attorney in a major city, or head of a special DoJ strike force. That opened the door to political life, where Ernest Wellington could be a real player in the Great Game of Washington. All in all, it was heady wine indeed for an ambitious man of twenty-seven years, an honors graduate from Harvard Law who'd ostentatiously turned down lucrative offers from prestigious firms, preferring instead to devote his early professional years to public service.

Wellington had a pile of paper on his desk. His office was in what was almost an attic in the Justice Department's building on the Mall, and the view from the single window was of the parking lot that rested in the center of the Depression-era structure. It was small, and the air conditioning was faulty, but it was private. It is little appreciated that lawyers avoid time in court as assiduously as the boastful avoid genuine tests of ability. Had he taken the jobs offered by the New York corporate firms-the best such offer was for over $100,000 per year-his real function would have been that of proofreader, really a glorified secretary, examining contracts for typos and possible loopholes. Early life in the Justice Department was little different. Whereas in a real prosecutorial office he might have been tossed alive into a courtroom environment to sink or swim, here at headquarters he examined records, looking for inconsistencies, nuances, possible technical violations of the law, as though he were an editor for a particularly good mystery writer. Wellington started making his notes.

John Patrick Ryan. Deputy to the Director of Central Intelligence, nominated by the President-politics at work-and confirmed less than two years previously. Prior to that acting Deputy Director (Intelligence), following the death of Vice Admiral James Greer. Prior to that, Special Assistant to DDI Greer, and sometime special representative of the Directorate of Intelligence over in England. Ryan had been an instructor in history at the Naval Academy, a graduate student at Georgetown University, and a broker at the Baltimore office of Merrill Lynch. Also, briefly, a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps. Clearly a man who enjoyed career changes, Wellington thought,

noting all the important dates.

Personal wealth. The requisite financial statement was in the file, near the top. Ryan was worth quite a bit. Where had it come from? That analysis took several hours. In his days as a broker, J. P. Ryan had been a real cowboy. He'd bet over a hundred thousand dollars on the Chicago and North Western Railroad at the time of the employee takeover, and reaped . . . over six million from it. That was his one really big score-sixty-to-one opportunities were not all that common, were they?—but some of the others were also noteworthy. On hitting a personal net worth of eight million, he'd called it quits and gone to Georgetown for his doctorate in history. Continued to play the market on an amateur basis—that wasn't quite right, was it?—until joining government service. His portfolio was now managed by a multiplicity of investment counselors . . . their accounting methods were unusually conservative. Ryan's net worth looked to be twenty million, maybe a little more. The accounts were managed on a blind basis. All Ryan saw was quarterly earnings statements. There were ways around that, of course, but it was all strictly legal. Proving impropriety was virtually impossible unless they put a wiretap on the line of his brokers, and that was not something easily accomplished.

He had been investigated by the SEC, but that had actually been a spinoff of the SEC's look at the firm he'd bought into. The summary sheet noted in clipped bureaucratese that no technical violation had been made, but Wellington observed that this judgment was more technical than substantive. Ryan had balked at signing a consent order—understandably—and the government had not pressed him on the issue. That was less understandable, but explainable, since Ryan had not been the actual target of the investigation; someone had decided that it had all probably been a coincidence. Ryan had, however, broken that money out of his main account . . . *Gentleman's Agreement?* Wellington wrote on his legal pad. Perhaps. If asked, Ryan would respond that he'd done it out of an over-scrupulous sense of guilt. The money had gone into T-Bills, rolled over automatically for years and untouched until it had all been used to . . . *I see. That's interesting. . . .*

Why an educational trust fund? Who was Carol Zimmer? What interest did Ryan have in her children? Timing? Significance?

It was amazing, as always, that so much paper could show so little. Perhaps, Wellington mused, that was the real point of government paperwork, to give the appearance of substance while saying as little as possible. He chuckled. That was also the point of most legal papers, wasn't it? For two hundred dollars per hour, lawyers loved to quibble over the placement of commas and other weighty matters. He paused, recycling his brain. He had missed something very obvious.

Ryan was not liked by the Fowler Administration. *Why,* then, had he been nominated for DDCI. Politics? But politics was the reason you selected people unqualified for . . . Did Ryan have any political connections at all? The file didn't show any. Wellington riffled through the papers and found a letter signed by Alan Trent and Sam Fellows of the House Select Committee. *That* was an odd couple, a gay and a Mormon. Ryan had sailed through confirmation much more easily than Marcus Cabot, even easier than Bunker and Talbot, the President's two star cabinet members. Part of that was because

he was a second-level man, but that didn't explain it all. That meant political connections, and very fine ones. Why? What connections? Trent and Fellows . . . *what the hell could* those *two ever agree on?*

It was certain that Fowler and his people didn't like Ryan, else the Attorney General would not have personally placed Wellington on the case. Case? Was that the right term for his activities? If there was a case, why wasn't this being handled by the FBI? Politics, obviously. Ryan had worked closely with the FBI on several things . . . but . . .

William Connor Shaw, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was celebrated as the most honest man in government. Politically naive, of course, but the man dripped integrity, and that wasn't all so bad a quality in a police agency, was it? Congress thought so. There was even talk of eliminating special prosecutors, the FBI had become so clean, especially after the special prosecutor had bungled the . . . but the Bureau was being segregated from this one.

This was an interesting case, wasn't it? A man could win his spurs on something like this.

17

PROCESSING

The days were shorter now, Jack told himself. It wasn't that he was all that late, just that the days were shortening. The earth's orbit around the sun, and the way the axis of rotation was not perpendicular with the plane of the . . . ecliptic? Something like that. His driver dropped him off in front of the door, and he walked tiredly in, wondering when the last day had been, outside of the weekends, when he'd seen his house in daylight and not outlined by electric lights. About the only good news was that he didn't bring work home —but that wasn't quite true either, was it? He brought no documents home, but it was less easy to clear out his mind than to clear off his desk.

Ryan heard the sounds of a normal house, the TV tuned to Nickelodeon. The washing machine was making noise. Have to have that fixed. He walked into the family room to announce himself.

"Daddy!" Jack Jr. ran over to deliver a hug followed by a plaintive look. "Daddy, you promised to take me to a baseball game!"

Oh, shit . . . The kids were back in school, and there couldn't be more than a dozen home games left up in Baltimore. He had to, had to, had to . . . *When*? When could he break loose? The new communications center project was only half done, and that was his baby, and the contractor was a week behind, and he had to get that back on line if it was going to be ready when it was supposed to be. . . .

"I'm going to try, Jack," Ryan promised his son, who was too young to understand about any obligation beyond a father's promise.

"Daddy, you promised!"

"I know." *Shit!* Jack made a mental note. He had to do something about that.

"Bedtime," Cathy announced. "Tomorrow's a schoolday."

Ryan hugged and kissed both of his children, but the exercise in affection merely left an empty spot in his conscience. What sort of a father was he turning into? Jack Jr.'s First Communion was next April or May, and who could say if he'd be home for that? Better find out the date so that he could schedule it now. Try to schedule it now. Jack reminded himself that little things like promises to his kids were—

Little things?

God, how did this ever happen? Where has my life gone?

He watched the kids head to their rooms, then himself headed to the kitchen. His dinner was in the oven. He set the plate on the breakfast counter before walking to the refrigerator. He was buying wine in boxes now. It was much more convenient, and his taste in wine was getting far less selective of

late. The cardboard boxes held a Mylar bag full of—Australian, wasn't it? About where California wines had been twenty years earlier. The vintage in question was very fruity, to mask its inadequacies, and had the proper alcohol content, which was what he was mainly after anyway. Jack looked at the wall clock. If he were very lucky, he might get six and a half, maybe seven hours of sleep before a new day started. He needed the wine to sleep. At the office, he lived on coffee, and his system was becoming saturated with caffeine. Once he'd been able to nap at his desk, but no longer. By eleven in the morning his system was wired, and by late afternoon his body played a strange melody of fatigue and alertness that sometimes left him wondering if he were going a little mad. Well, as long as he asked himself that question. . . .

A few minutes later he finished his dinner. Pity the oven had dried it out. Cathy had done this one herself. He'd been—he'd planned to be home at a decent hour, but . . . It was always something, wasn't it? When he stood, there was a twinge of discomfort from his stomach. On the way into the family room he opened the closet door to pull a packet of antacid tablets from his coat pocket. These he chewed and washed down with wine, starting off his third glass in less than thirty minutes at home.

Cathy wasn't there, though she'd left some papers on the table next to her customary chair. Jack listened and thought he heard a shower running. Fine. He took the cable controller and flipped to CNN for another news-fix. The lead story was something about Jerusalem.

Ryan settled back into his chair and allowed himself a smile. It was working. The story was about the resurgence of tourism. Shopowners were loading up in anticipation of their biggest Christmas in a decade. Jesus, explained a Jew who'd opted to stay in the town of Bethlehem, was after all a nice Jewish boy from a good family. His Arab partner toured the camera crew through the store. *Arab partner?* Jack thought. Well, why not?

It's worth it, Ryan told himself. *You helped bring that about.* You *helped make that happen. You have saved lives, and if nobody else knows, the hell with it. You know. God knows. Isn't that enough?*

No, Jack told himself in a quiet flash of honesty.

So what if the idea had not been completely original? What idea ever was? It had been his thought that had brought it together, his contacts that had gotten the Vatican on board, his. . . . He deserved something for it, some recognition, enough for a little footnote in some history book, but would he get it?

Jack snorted into his wine. No chance. Liz Elliot, that clever bitch, telling everybody that it was Charlie Alden who'd done it. If Jack ever tried to set the record straight, he'd look like a swine stealing credit from a dead man—and a good man, despite his mistake with that Blum girl. *Cheer up, Jack. You're still alive. You have a wife, you have kids.*

It still wasn't fair, was it? Fair? Why had he ever expected life to be fair? Was he turning into another one of *them?* Ryan asked himself. Another Liz Elliot, another grasping, small-minded ass with an ego-size inversely proportionate to her character. He'd so often worried and wondered about the process, how a person might be corrupted. He'd feared the overt methods, deciding that a cause or a mission was so vital that you might lose perspective

on the important things, like the value of a single human life, even the life of an enemy. He hadn't lost that, not ever, and knew that he never would. It was the subtler things that were wearing at him. He was turning into a functionary, worrying about credit and status and influence.

He closed his eyes to remind himself of what he already had: a wife, two kids, financial independence, accomplishments that no one could ever take away.

You are turning into one of them. . . .

He'd fought—he had *killed*—to defend his family. Maybe Elliot was offended by that, but in quiet moments like this, Jack remembered the times with a thin, grim smile. Not two hundred yards from where he now sat, he'd drilled three rounds into a terrorist's chest, coldly and efficiently-steel on target!—validating all the things they'd taught him at Quantico. That his heart had been beating a thousand times per second, that he'd come close to wetting his pants, that he'd had to swallow back his vomit, were small things. He'd done what he had to do, and because of that his wife and children were alive. He was a man who'd proven his manhood in every possible way—winning and marrying a wonderful girl, fathering two God-sent children, defending all of them with skill and courage. Every time fate had presented its challenge, Jack had met it and gotten the job done.

Yeah, he told himself, smiling at the TV. *Screw Liz Elliot.* That was a humorous thought. Who, he asked himself, would want to? That cold, skinny bitch, with her arrogance and . . . what else? Ryan's mind paused, seeking the answer to the question. What else? She was weak, wasn't she? Weak and timid. Beneath all the bluster and the hardness, what was really in there? Probably not much. He'd seen that sort of National Security Advisor before. Cutter, unwilling to face the music. Liz Elliot. Who'd want to screw her? Not very smart, and nothing in there to back up what smarts she did have. Good thing for her that the President had Bunker and Talbot to fall back on.

You're better than all of them. It was a satisfying thought to accompany the end of this glass of wine. *Why not have another? This stuff really isn't all that bad, is it?*

When Ryan returned, he saw Cathy was back also, going over her patient notes in the high-backed chair she liked.

"Want a glass of wine, honey?"

Dr. Caroline Ryan shook her head. "I have two procedures tomorrow."

Jack came around to take his place in the other chair, almost not glancing at his wife, but he caught her out the corner of his eye.

"Wow."

Cathy looked up from her paperwork to grin at him. Her face was nicely made up. Jack wondered how she'd managed not to mess her hair up in the shower.

"Where did you get that?"

"Out of a catalog."

"Whose, Fredericks?"

Dr. Caroline Muller Ryan, M.D., F.A.C.S., was dressed in a black peignoir that was a masterpiece of revelation and concealment. He couldn't tell what held the robe portion in place. Underneath was something filmy and . . . very

nice. The color was odd, though, Cathy's nighties were all white. He'd never forgotten the wonderful white one she'd worn on their wedding night. Not that she'd been a virgin at the time, but somehow that white silk had made her so . . . that, too, was a memory that would never go away, Jack told himself. She'd never worn it since, saying that like her wedding dress, it was something to be used only once. What have I done to earn this wonderful girl? Jack asked himself.

"To what do I owe this honor?" Jack asked.

"I've been thinking."

"About what?"

"Well, Little Jack is seven. Sally is ten. I want another one."

"Another what?" Jack set his glass down.

"Another baby, you dope!"

"Why?" her husband asked.

"Because I can, and because I want one. I'm sorry," she went on with a soft smile, "if that bothers you. The exercise, I mean."

"I think I can handle that."

"I have to get up at four-thirty," Cathy said next. "My first procedure is before seven."

"So?"

"So." She rose and walked over to her husband. Cathy bent down to kiss him on the cheek. "See me upstairs."

Ryan sat still for a minute or two, gunning down the rest of his drink, switching off the TV, and smiling to himself. He checked to make sure the house was locked and the security system armed. He stopped off in the bathroom to brush his teeth. A surreptitious check of her vanity drawer revealed a thermometer and a little index card with dates and temperatures on it. So. She wasn't kidding. She'd been thinking about this and, typically, keeping it to herself. Well, that was okay, wasn't it? Yeah.

Jack entered the bedroom and paused to hang up his clothes, donning a bathrobe before joining his wife at the bedside. She rose to wrap her arms around his neck, and he kissed her.

"You sure about this, babe?"

"Does it bother you?"

"Cathy, to please you—anything you want that I can get or give, honey. Anything."

I wish you'd cut back on the drinking, Cathy didn't say. It wasn't the time. She felt his hands through the peignoir. Jack had strong but gentle hands that now traced her figure through the outfit. It was cheap and tarty, but every woman was entitled to look cheap and tarty once in a while, even an associate professor of ophthalmologic surgery at The Wilmer Eye Institute of the Johns Hopkins Hospital. Jack's mouth tasted like toothpaste and cheap white wine, but the rest of him smelled like a man, the man who'd made her life into a dream—mostly a dream. He was working too hard, drinking too much, not sleeping enough. But underneath all that was her man. And they didn't come any better, weaknesses, absences, and all.

Cathy made the proper noises when Jack's hands found the buttons. He got the message, but his fingers were clumsy. Annoying, the buttons were small

and in those damned little fabric loops, but behind the buttons and the fabric were her breasts, and that fact ensured that he would not stop. Cathy took in a deep breath and smelled her favorite dusting powder. She didn't like perfume. A woman generated all the smells a man needed, she thought. There. Now his hands found her bare, smooth and still young skin. Thirty-six was not old, not too old for one more child. One more was all she craved, one more time to feel a new life growing within her. She'd accept the stomach upsets, the compressed bladder, the odd discomfort that merely gave detail to the wonder and the miracle of new life. The pain of birth—it was not fun, not at all, but to be able to do it, to have Jack at her side as he'd done with Sally and Little Jack, it was the most profound act of love that she had ever known. It was what being a woman meant, to be able to bring life to the world, to give a man the only kind of immortality that was, as he gave it to her.

And besides, she thought with a suppressed giggle, getting pregnant beat the hell out of jogging as a form of exercise.

Jack's hands removed her garment completely and eased her onto the bed. He was good at this, always had been, from their first nervous time, and at that moment she'd known that he would ask for her hand . . . after he'd sampled the other parts. Another giggle of past and present as his hands slid over skin that was now both hot and cold to the touch. And when he'd asked, when he'd worked up the courage, she'd seen the fear in his eyes, the terror at the possibility of rejection, when she was the one who had worried—even cried once—for a week that he might not ask, might change his mind, might find someone else. From before their first lovemaking, Cathy had known. This was the one. Jack was the man with whom she would share her life, whose children she would bear, whom she would love to the grave, maybe beyond if the priests were right. It wasn't his size or his strength, not even the bravery he'd had to show twice in her sight—and, she suspected, more than that in other places she'd never know about—it was his goodness, his gentleness, and a strength that only the perceptive knew about. Her husband was in some ways ordinary, in others unique, but in all ways a man, with all the strengths and few of the weaknesses. . . .

And tonight he would give her another child. Her cycle, predictable as always, was confirmed by her morning temperature. Well, she admitted, it was mainly a statistical probability, but a very high probability in her case. Mustn't get too clinical, not with Jack, and not at a time like this.

Her skin was on fire now. Jack was so good at this. His kisses both gentle and passionate, his hands so wonderfully skilled. He was wrecking her hair, but that didn't matter. Surgical caps made perms a waste of time and money. Through the scent of the dusting powder now came the more significant smells of a woman who was nearly ready. Ordinarily she was more of a participant in these episodes, but tonight she was letting Jack take complete charge, searching over her silky skin for the . . . interesting parts. He liked that occasionally. He also liked it when she played a more active role. More than one way to do this. It came almost as a surprise. Cathy arched her back and whimpered the first time, not really saying anything. It wasn't necessary. They'd been married long enough that he knew all the signals. She kissed him hard and wantonly, digging her nails into his shoulders. That signal meant

now!

But nothing happened.

She took his hand, kissed it, and moved it down so that he would know that she was ready.

He seemed unusually tense. Okay, she was rushing him . . . why not let . . . after all, she'd let him take charge, and if she changed now. . . . She moved the hand back to her breast and was not disappointed. Cathy paid closer attention to him now. Tried to. His skills in exciting her were unchanged. She cried out again, kissed him hard, gasping a little, letting him know that he was the one, that her world centered on him as his centered on her. But still his back and shoulders were tense and knotted. What was the matter?

Her hands moved again, running over his chest, pulling playfully on the black hairs. That always set him off . . . especially as her hands followed the hairy trail down to . . .

What?

"Jack, what's wrong?" It seemed forever before she heard him speak.

"I don't know." Jack rolled over, away from his wife, onto his back, and his eyes stared in the ceiling.

"Tired?"

"I guess that's it." Jack slurred the words. "Sorry, honey."

Damn damn damn! But before she could think to say something else, his eyes closed.

It's the hours he's working, and all that drinking. But it wasn't fair! This was the day, this was the moment, and—

You're being selfish.

Cathy rose from the bed and collected her peignoir from the floor. She hung it up neatly before getting another that was fit to sleep in and heading into the bathroom.

He's a man, not a machine. He's tired. He's been working too goddamned hard. Everyone has a bad day. Sometimes he wants it and you're not in the mood, and sometimes that makes him a little mad, and it's not his fault and it's not your fault. You have a wonderful marriage, but not a perfect one. Jack's as good a man as you have ever known, but he is not perfect either.

But I wanted . . .

I want another baby, and the timing is so right, right now!

Cathy's eyes filled with tears of disappointment. She knew she was being unfair. But she was still disappointed. And a little angry.

* * *

"Well, Commodore, I can't knock the service."

"Hell, Ron, you expect me to have an old shipmate pick up a rental?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

Mancuso snorted. His driver tossed the bags into the back of the Navy Plymouth while he and Jones let themselves into the back.

"How's the family?"

"Great, thank you, Commodore—"

"You can call me Bart now, Dr. Jones. Besides, I just screened for Admiral."

"All right!" Dr. Ron Jones observed. "Bart. I like that. Just don't call me Indy. Let's see, the family. Kim's back in school for her doctorate. The kids are all in school—day-care, whatever—and I'm turning into a damned businessman."

"Entrepreneur, I believe, is the correct term," Mancuso observed.

"Okay, be technical. Yeah, I own a big piece of the company. But I still get my hands dirty. I got a business guy to do the accounting bullshit. I still like to do real work. Last month I was down at AUTEC on the *Tennessee* checking out a new system." Jones looked at the driver. "Okay to talk here?"

"Petty Officer Vincent is cleared higher than I am. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, sir, Admiral's always right, sir," the driver observed as he headed off toward Bangor.

"You got a problem, Bart."

"How big?"

"A unique problem, skipper," Jones said, lapsing back to the time when he and Mancuso had done some interesting things aboard USS *Dallas.* "It's never happened before."

Mancuso read his eyes. "Got pictures of the kids?"

Jones nodded. "You bet. How are Mike and Dominic doing?"

"Well, Mike's looking at the Air Force Academy."

"Tell him the oxygen rots your brain."

"Dominic's thinking CalTech."

"No kidding? Hell, I can help him out."

The rest of the drive occupied itself with small talk. Mancuso swept into his office and closed the soundproof door behind Jones after ordering coffee from his steward.

"What's the problem, Ron?"

Jones hesitated just a fraction before answering. "I think somebody was tracking *Maine*. "

"Track an Ohio? Come on."

"Where is she now?"

"Heading back out to sea, as a matter of fact. Blue Crew is embarked. She links up with a 688 when she clears the strait for some noise checks, then clears to her patrol area." Mancuso could discuss almost anything with Jones. His company consulted on the sonar technology for all submarines and antisubmarine platforms in the U.S. fleet, and that necessarily included a lot of operational information.

"Got any Gold Crew guys on base now?"

"The Captain's off on vacation. XO's here, Dutch Claggett. Know him?"

"Wasn't he on the *Norfolk?* Black guy, right?"

"That's right."

"I've heard good stuff about him. He did a nice job on a carrier group on his command quals. I was riding a P-3 when he kicked their ass."

"You heard right. He's being deep-dipped. This time next year he'll be taking command of a fast-attack."

"Who's his skipper?"

"Harry Ricks. Heard of him, too?"

Jones looked at the floor and muttered something. “I got a new guy working for me, retired chief whose last tour was with Ricks. Is he as bad as I hear?”

“Ricks is a super engineer,” Mancuso said. “I mean it. He’s a genius at that stuff.”

“Fine, skipper, so are you, but does Ricks know how to drive?”

“Want some coffee, Ron?” Mancuso gestured at the pot.

“You might want Commander Claggett here, sir.” Jones rose and got his own coffee. “Since when have you turned diplomat?”

“Command responsibilities, Ron. I never told outsiders about the crazy stuff you did on *Dallas*.”

Jones turned and laughed. “Okay, you got me there. I have the sonar analysis in my briefcase. I need to see his course tracks, depth records, that stuff. I think there’s a good chance *Maine* had a trailer, and that, Bart, is no shit.”

Mancuso lifted his phone. “Find Lieutenant Commander Claggett. I need him in my office at once. Thank you. Ron, how sure—”

“I did the analysis myself. One of my people looked it over and caught a whiff. I spent fifty hours massaging the data. One chance in three, maybe more, that she was being trailed.”

Bart Mancuso set his coffee cup down. “That’s really hard to believe.”

“I know. That very fact may be skewing my analysis. It is kinda incredible.”

It was an article of faith in the United States Navy that its fleet ballistic-missile submarines had never, not ever, not once been tracked while on deterrence patrol. As with most articles of faith, however, it had caveats.

The location of American missile-sub bases was not a secret. Even the United Parcel Service deliverymen who dropped off packages knew what to look for. In its quest for cost-efficiency, the Navy mainly used civilian security officers—“rentacops”—at its bases. Except that Marines were used wherever there were nuclear weapons. Wherever you saw Marines, there were nukes about. That was called a security measure. The missile boats themselves were unmistakably different from the smaller fast-attack subs. The ship names were on the Navy register, and the sailors of those ships wore ballcaps identifying them by name and hull number. With knowledge available to anyone, the Soviets knew where to station their own fast-attack boats to catch the American “boomers” on the way out to sea.

At first this had not been a problem. The first classes of Soviet fast-attack submarines had been equipped with “Helen Keller” sonars that could neither see nor hear, and the boats themselves had been noisier than unmuffled automobiles. All that had changed with the advent of the Victor-III class, which approximated a late American 594-class in radiated noise levels, and began to approach adequacy in sonar performance. Victor-IIIs had occasionally turned up at the Juan de Fuca Strait—and elsewhere—waiting for a U.S. missile sub to deploy, and in some cases, since harbor entrances are typically restricted waters, they had established contact and held on tight. That occasionally had included active sonar-lashing, both unnerving and annoying to American sub crews. As a result, U.S. fast-attack subs often accompanied missile submarines to sea. Their mission was to force the Soviet subs off. This was accomplished by the simple expedient of offering an

additional target for sonar, confusing the tactical situation, or sometimes by forcing the Russian submarine off-track by ramming—called "shouldering," to defuse that most obscene of marine terms. In fact, American boomers had been tracked, only in shallow water, only near well-known harbors, and only for brief periods of time. As soon as the American subs reached deep water, their tactics were to increase speed to degrade the trailing sub's sonar performance, to maneuver evasively, and then go quiet. At that point—every time—the American submarine broke contact. The Soviet sub lost its track, and became the prey instead of the hunter. Missile submarines typically had highly drilled torpedo departments, and the more aggressive skippers would have all four of their tubes loaded with Mark 48 torpedoes with solutions set on the now-blinded Soviet sub as they watched them wander away in vulnerable befuddlement.

The simple fact was that American missile submarines were invulnerable in their patrol areas. When fast-attack boats were sent in to hunt them, care had to be given to operating depths—much like traffic control for commercial aircraft—lest an inadvertent ramming occur. American fast-attack boats, even the most advanced 688-class, had rarely tracked missile submarines, and the cases where Ohios had been tracked could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Nearly all involved a grievous mistake made by the missile-boat skippers, the ultimate "black mark in the copybook," and even then only a very good and very lucky fast-attack skipper had managed to pull it off—and never ever without being counterdetected. *Omaha* had one of the best drivers in the Pacific Fleet, and he had failed to find *Maine* despite having some good intelligence data provided—better than anything a Soviet commander would ever get.

"Good morning, sir," Dutch Claggett said on his way through the door. "I was right down the hall at personnel."

"Commander, this is Dr. Ron Jones."

"This the Jonesy you like to brag on, sir?" Claggett took the civilian's hand.

"None of those stories are true," Jones said.

Claggett stopped cold when he saw the looks. "Somebody die or something?"

"Grab a seat," Mancuso said. "Ron thinks you might have been tracked on your last patrol."

"Bullshit," Claggett observed. "Excuse me, sir."

"You're pretty confident," Jones said.

"Maine is the best submarine we own, Dr. Jones. We are a black hole. We don't radiate sound, we suck it in from around us."

"You know the party line, Commander. Now, can we talk business?" Ron unlocked his briefcase and pulled out a heavy sheaf of computer printouts. "Right around the halfway point in your patrol."

"Okay, yeah, that's when we snuck up behind *Omaha."*

"I'm not talking about that. *Omaha* was in front of you," Jones said, flipping to the right page.

"I still don't believe it, but I'll look at what you got."

The computer pages were essentially a graphic printout of two "waterfall" sonar displays. They bore time and true-bearing references. A separate set

showed environmental data, mainly water temperature.

"You had a lot of clutter to worry about," Jones said, pointing to notations on the pages. "Fourteen fishing boats, half a dozen deep-draft merchant ships, and I see the humpbacks were up to thin out the krill. So your sonar crew was busy, maybe a little overloaded. You also had a pretty hard layer."

"All that's right," Claggett allowed.

"What's this?" Jones pointed to a blossom of noise on the display.

"Well, we were tracking *Omaha,* and the Captain decided to rattle their cage with a water slug."

"No shit?" Jones asked. "Well, that explains his reaction. I guess they changed their underwear and headed north. You never would have pulled that off on me, by the way."

"Think so?"

"Yeah, I think so," Jones replied. "I always paid real good attention to what was aft of us. I've been out on Ohios, Commander, okay? You can be tracked. Anybody can. It isn't just the platform. Now, look here."

The printout was a computer-generated cacophony of dots that seemed for the most part to show nothing but random noise, as though a convention of ants had walked across the pages for hours. As with all truly random events, this one had irregularities, places where for one reason or another the ants had never trod, or places where a large number had congregated and then dispersed.

"This line of bearing," Jones said. "This pattern comes back eight times, and it comes back only when the layer thins out."

Commander Claggett frowned. "Eight, you say? These two could be reverbs from the fishing boats, or really distant CZCONTACTS." He flipped through the pages. Claggett knew his sonar. "This is thin."

"That's why your people didn't catch it, either aboard or here. But that's why I got the contract to back-check your people," Jones said. "Who was out there?"

"Commodore?" Claggett asked, and got a nod. "There was an Akula-class out there somewhere. The P-3s lost him south of Kodiak, so he was within maybe six hundred miles of us. That doesn't mean this is him."

"Which one?"

"Admiral Lunin, " Claggett answered.

"Captain Dubinin?"

"Jesus, you *are* cleared pretty good," Mancuso noted. "They say he's very good."

"Ought to be, we have a mutual friend. Is Commander Claggett cleared for that?"

"No. Sorry, Dutch, but that is really black."

"He ought to be cleared for that," Jones said. "This secrecy crap goes way too far, Bart."

"Rules are rules."

"Yeah, sure. Anyway, this is the one that twigged me. Last page." Ron flipped through to the end. "You were coming up to antenna depth . . ."

"Yeah; practice on the missiles."

"You made some hull noises."

"We came up fast, and the hull's made of steel, not elastic," Claggett said in some annoyance. "So?"

"So your hull went up through the layer faster than your 'tail' did. Your towed array caught this."

Claggett and Mancuso both went very quiet. What they saw was a fuzzy vertical line, but the line was in a frequency range that denoted a Soviet submarine's acoustical signature. It was by no means conclusive evidence, but it, like all the other things Jones had notated, was dead aft of *Maine*'s course.

"Now, if I was a betting man, which I'm not, of course, I'd give you two-to-one that while you were underneath the layer, someone might have been tooling along just over top, letting his tail hang under it. He caught your hull transient, saw you were going shallow, and ducked under the layer just as you came over it. Cute move, but your big up-angle meant that your tail stayed down longer than it should have, and that's where this signature came from."

"But there's nothing after that."

"Nothing at all," Jones admitted. "It never came back. From there on to the end of the tapes, nothing but random noise and otherwise-identified contacts."

"It's pretty thin, Ron," Mancuso said, standing up to straighten his back.

"I know. That's why I flew out. In writing it would never sell."

"What do you know about Russian sonar that we don't?"

"Getting better . . . approaching where we were, oh, ten or twelve years ago. They pay more attention to broad-band than we do—that's changing now. I sold the Pentagon on taking another look at the broad-band integration system Texas Instruments has been working on. Commander, what you said before about being a black hole. It cuts both ways. You can't *see* a black hole, but you *can* detect it. What if you track an Ohio by what should be there but isn't?"

"Background noise?"

"Yep." Jones nodded. "You make a hole in it. You make a black spot where there's no noise. If he can really isolate a line of bearing on his gear, and if he's got really good filters, and one dynamite sonar operator, I think it's possible—*if* something else cues you in."

"That's *real* thin."

Jones granted that observation. "But it's not impossible. I ran the numbers. It's not good, but it's not impossible. Moreover, we can track below ambient now. Maybe they can, too. I'm hearing they've started turning out a new large-aperture tail—the one designed by the guys outside Murmansk. Good as a BQR-15 used to be."

"I don't believe it," Mancuso said.

"I do, skipper. It's not new technology. What do we know about *Lunin*?"

"She's in overhaul right now. Let's see." Mancuso turned to look at the polar-projection chart on his office wall. "If that was him, then if he headed straight back to base . . . it's *possible*, technically speaking, but you're assuming a hell of a lot."

"I'm saying that this bird was just in the neighborhood when you fired that water slug, that you headed south, and so did he, that you gave him a hull transient which he reacted to, and then he broke contact on his own. The data is thin, but it fits—maybe, I grant you, *maybe*. That's what they pay me for, guys."

"I commended Ricks for rattling *Omaha*'s cage like that," Mancuso said after a moment. "I want aggressive skippers."

Jones chuckled to break the tension in the room. "I wonder why, Bart?"

"Dutch knows about that job we had on the beach, that pickup we did."

"That was a little exciting," Jones admitted.

"One chance in three. . . ."

"The probability increases if you assume the other skipper is smart. Dubinin had a great teacher."

"What are you two talking about?" Lieutenant Commander Claggett asked in some exasperation.

"You know we have all sorts of data on the Russian Typhoon class, lots more on their torpedoes. Ever wonder how we got all that data, Commander?"

"Ron, goddamn it!"

"I didn't break any rules, skipper, and besides, he needs to know."

"I can't do that and you know it."

"Fine, Bart." Jones paused. "Commander, you may speculate on how we got all that information in one great big lump. You might even guess right."

Claggett had heard a few rumbles, like why the Eight-Ten dock at Norfolk had been closed so long a few years before. There was a story floated about, spoken only in submarine wardrooms far at sea and well below the surface, that somehow the U.S. Navy had gotten its hands on a Russian missile sub, how a very strange reactor had turned up at the Navy's nuclear-power school in Idaho for tests and then had disappeared, how complete drawings *and* some hardware from Soviet torpedoes had magically appeared in Groton, and how two night missile shots out of Vandenberg Air Force Base had not appeared to be American missiles at all. Lots of operational intelligence had come into the fleet, very good stuff, stuff that sounded like it had come from someone who knew what the hell he was talking about—not always the case with intelligence information—on Soviet submarine tactics and training. Claggett needed only look at Mancuso's uniform to see the ribbon that denoted a Distinguished Service Medal, America's highest peacetime decoration. The ribbon had a star on it, indicating a second such award. Mancuso was rather young for a squadron command, and very young indeed to be selected for Rear Admiral (Lower Half). And here was a former enlisted man who'd sailed with Mancuso, and now called him *Bart*. He nodded to Dr. Jones.

"I get the picture. Thanks."

"You're saying operator error?"

Jones frowned. He didn't know all that much about Harry Ricks. "Mainly bad luck. Call it good luck, even. Nothing bad happened, and we've learned something. We know more about the Akula than we used to. A weird set of circumstances came together. Won't happen again in a hundred years, maybe. Your skipper was a victim of circumstance, and the other guy—if there was another guy there—was very damned sharp. Hey, the important thing about mistakes is that you learn from them, right?"

"Harry gets back in ten days," Mancuso said. "Can you be back here then?"

"Sorry," Jones said with a shake of the head. "I'm going to be in England. I'm going out on HMS *Turbulent* for a few days of hide 'n' seek. The Brits have a new processor that we need to look at, and I drew the duty."

"You're not going to ask me to present this to the CO, are you, sir?" Claggett asked after a minute's reflection.

"No, Dutch . . . you trying to tell me something?"

It was Claggett's turn to look unhappy. "Sir, he's my boss, and he's not a bad boss, but he is a little positive in his thinking."

That was artfully done, Jones thought. *Not a bad boss . . . a little positive. He just called his skipper an idiot in a way that no one could ever call disloyal.* Ron wondered what sort of hypernuc-engineer this Ricks was. The good news was that this XO had his act together. And a smart skipper listened to his XO.

"Skipper, how's Mr. Chambers doing?"

"Just took over *Key West*. Got a kid you trained as his leading sonarman. Billy Zerwinski, just made chief, I hear."

"Oh, yeah? Good for him. I figured Mr. Chambers was going places, but Billy Z as a chief? What is my Navy coming to?"

"This is taking forever," Qati observed sourly. His skin was pasty white. The man was suffering again from his drug treatment.

"That is false," Fromm replied sternly. "I told you several months, and it will be several months. The first time this was done, it took three years and the resources of the world's richest nation. I will do it for you in an eighth of that time, and on a shoestring budget. In a few days we'll start to work on the rhodium. That will be much easier."

"And the plutonium?" Ghosn asked.

"That will be the last metal work—you know why, of course."

"Yes, Herr Fromm, and we must be extremely careful, since when you work with a critical mass you must be careful that it does not become critical while you are forming it," Ghosn replied, allowing his exacerbation to show for a change. He was tired. He'd been at work for eighteen hours now, supervising the workers. "And the tritium?"

"Last of all. Again the obvious reason. It is relatively unstable, and we want the tritium we use to be as pure as possible."

"Quite so." Ghosn yawned, barely having heard the answer to his question, and not troubling himself to wonder why Fromm had answered as he had.

For his part Fromm made a mental note. Palladium. He needed a small quantity of palladium. How had he forgotten that? He grunted to himself. Long hours, miserable climate, surly workers and associates. A small price to pay, of course, for this opportunity. He was doing what only a handful of men had ever done, and he was doing it in such a way as to equal the work of Fermi and the rest in 1944—5. It was not often that a man could measure himself against the giants and come off well in the comparison. He found himself wondering idly what the weapon would be used for, but admitted to himself that he didn't care, not really. Well, he had other work to do.

The German walked across the room to where the milling machines were. Here another team of technicians were at work. The beryllium piece now on the machine had the most intricate shape and had been the hardest to program, with concave, convex, and other complex curves. The machine was computer-controlled, of course, but was kept under constant observation through the Lexan panels that isolated the machining area from the outside

world. The area was ventilated upwards into an electrostatic air-cleaner. There was no sense in just dumping the metallic dust into the external air—in fact, doing so constituted a major security hazard. Over the electrostatic collection plates was a solid two meters of earth. Beryllium was not radioactive, but plutonium was, and plutonium would presently be worked on this very same machine. The beryllium was both necessary to the device and good practice for later tasks.

The milling machine was everything Fromm had hoped for when he'd ordered it several years before. The computer-driven tools were monitored by lasers, producing a degree of perfection that could not have been achieved so quickly as recently as five years ago. The surface of the beryllium was jeweled from the machining, already looking like the finish on a particularly fine rifle bolt, and this was only the first stage of machining. The data readout on the machine showed tolerances measured in angstroms. The toolhead was spinning at 25,000 rpm, not so much grinding as burning off irregularities. Separate instruments kept a computer eye on the work being done, both measuring tolerances and waiting for the toolhead to show signs of wear, at which point the machine would automatically stop and replace the tool with a fresh one. Technology was wonderful. What had once been the work of specially trained master machinists overseen by Nobel Prize winners was now being done by microchips.

The actual casing for the device was already fabricated. Ellipsoidal in shape, it was 98 centimeters in length by 52 in extreme breadth. Made of steel one centimeter in thickness, it had to be strong, but not grossly so, just enough to hold a vacuum. Also ready for installation were curved blocks of polyethylene and polyurethane foam, because a device of this sort required the special properties of both the strongest and the flimsiest materials. They had gotten ahead of themselves in some areas, of course, but there was no sense in wasting time or idle hands. On another machine, workers were practicing yet again on a stainless-steel blank that simulated the folded-cylinder plutonium reaction-mass primary. It was their seventh such practice session. Despite the sophistication of the machines, the first two had gone badly, as expected. By number five they had figured most of the process out, and the sixth attempt had been good enough to work—but not good enough for Fromm. The German had a simple mental model for the overall task, one formulated by America's National Aeronautics and Space Administration to describe the first moon landing. In order for the device to perform as desired, a complex series of individual events had to take place in an inhumanly precise sequence. He viewed the process as a walk through a series of gates. The wider the gates were, the easier it would be to walk through them quickly. Plus/minus tolerances reflected slight closure of the individual gates. Fromm wanted zero tolerances. He wanted every single part of the weapon to match his design criteria as exactly as the available technology made possible. The closer to perfection he could get, the more likely it was that the device would perform exactly as he predicted . . . or even better, part of him thought. Unable to experiment, unable to find empirical solutions to complex theoretical problems, he'd overengineered the weapon, provided an energy budget that was several orders of magnitude beyond what was really necessary for the

projected yield. That explained the vast quantity of tritium he planned to use, more than five times what was really needed in a theoretical sense. That carried its own problems, of course. His tritium supply was several years old, and some parts of it had decayed into ^{3}He, a decidedly undesirable isotope of helium, but by filtering the tritium through palladium he'd separate the tritium out, ensuring a proper total yield. American and Soviet bombmakers could get away with far less of it, because of their extensive experimentation, but Fromm had his own advantage. He did not have to concern himself with a long shelf-life for his device, and that was a luxury that his Soviet and American counterparts did not have. It was the only advantage he had over them, and Fromm planned to make full use of it. As with most parts of bomb design, it was an advantage that cut both ways, but Fromm knew he had full control over the device. *Palladium* , he told himself. *Mustn't forget that*. But he had plenty of time.

"Finished." The head of the team waved for Fromm to look. The stainless-steel blank came off the machine easily, and he handed it to Fromm. It was thirty centimeters in length. The shape was complex, what one would get from taking a large water tumbler and bending its top outside and down toward the base. It would not hold water because of a hole in the center of what might have been the bottom—actually it would, Fromm told himself a second later, just in the wrong way. The blank weighed about three kilograms, and every surface was mirror-smooth. He held it up to the light to check for imperfections and irregularities. His eyes were not that good. The quality of the finish was easier to understand mathematically than visually. The surface, so said the machine, was accurate to a thousandth of a micron, or a fraction of a single wavelength of light.

"It is a jewel," Ghosn observed, standing behind Fromm. The machinist beamed.

"Adequate," was Fromm's judgment. He looked at the machinist. "When you've made five more equally as good, I will be satisfied. Every metal segment must be of this quality. Begin another," he told the machinist. Fromm handed the blank to Ghosn and walked away.

"Infidel," the machinist growled under his breath.

"Yes, he is," Ghosn agreed. "But he is the most skilled man I have ever met."

"I'd rather work for a Jew."

"This is magnificent work," Ghosn said to change the subject.

"I would not have believed it possible to polish metal so precisely. This machine is incredible. I could make anything with it."

"That is good. Make another of these," Ghosn told him with a smile.

"As you say."

Ghosn walked to Qati's room. The Commander was looking at a plate of simple foods, but unable to touch it for fear of retching.

"Perhaps this will make you feel better," Ghosn told him.

"That is?" Qati said, taking it.

"That is what the plutonium will look like."

"Like glass . . ."

"Smoother than that. Smooth enough for a laser mirror. I could tell you the accuracy of the surface, but you've never seen anything that small in your life

anyway. Fromm is a genius."

"He's an arrogant, overbearing—"

"Yes, Commander, he is all of that, but he is exactly the man we need. I could never have done this myself. Perhaps, given a year or two, perhaps I might have been able to rework that Israeli bomb into something that would work—the problems were far more complex than I knew only a few weeks ago. But this Fromm . . . what I am learning from him! By the time we are finished, I *will* be able to do it again on my own!"

"Really?"

"Commander, do you know what engineering is?" Ghosn asked. "It is like cooking. If you have the right recipe, the right book, and the right ingredients, anyone can do it. Certainly this task is a hard one, but the principle holds. You must know how to use the various mathematical formulae, but they are all in books also. It is merely a question of education. With computers, the proper tools—and a good teacher, which this Fromm bastard is . . ."

"Then why haven't more—"

"The hard part is getting the ingredients, specifically the plutonium or U-235. That requires a nuclear reactor plant of a specific type or the new centrifuge technology. Either represents a vast investment, and one which is difficult to conceal. It also explains the remarkable security measures taken in the handling and transport of bombs and their components. The oft-told tale that bombs are hard to make is a lie."

18

PROGRESS

Wellington had three men working for him. Each was an experienced investigator, accustomed to politically sensitive cases which demanded the utmost discretion. His job was to identify likely areas of field investigation, then to examine and correlate the information they returned to his office in the Justice Department. The tricky part was to gather the information without notice going back to the target of the probe, and Wellington correctly thought that that part of the task would be particularly difficult with a target like Ryan. The DDCI was nothing if not perceptive. His previous job had qualified him as a man who could hear the grass grow and read tea leaves with the best of them. That meant going slow . . . but not too slow. It also seemed likely to the young attorney that the purpose of his investigation was not to produce data suitable for a grand jury, which gave him quite a bit more leeway than he might otherwise have had. He doubted that Ryan could have been so foolish as to have actually broken any law. The SEC rules had been grazed, perhaps bent, but on inspection of the SEC investigation documents, it was clear that Ryan's action had, arguably, been made in good faith and full expectation that he had not violated any statute. That judgment might have been technical on Ryan's part, but the law was technical. The Securities and Exchange Commission could have pushed, and might even have gotten an indictment, but they would never have gotten a conviction . . . maybe they could have muscled him into a settlement and/or a consent decree, but Wellington doubted that also. They'd suggested it as a sign of good faith and he had answered with a flat *no*. Ryan was not a man to tolerate being pushed around. This man had killed people. That didn't frighten Wellington in any way. It was merely an indicator of the man's strength of character. Ryan was a tough, formidable son of a bitch who met things head-on when he had to.

That's his weakness, Wellington told himself.

He prefers to meet things head-on. He lacks subtlety. It was a common failing of the honest, and a grievous weakness in a political environment.

Ryan had political protectors, however. Trent and Fellows were nothing if not canny political craftsmen.

What an interesting tactical problem. . . .

Wellington saw his task as twofold: to get something that could be used against Ryan, and something that would also neutralize his political allies.

Carol Zimmer. Wellington closed one file and opened another.

There was a photograph from the Immigration and Naturalization Service. That one was years old—she'd been a childbride in the most literal sense of the word when she'd first come to America, a tiny little thing with a doll's

face. A more recent photo taken by his field investigator showed a mature woman still short of forty, her face now showing some lines where once there had been the smoothness of china. If anything she was more beautiful than before. The timid, almost hunted look in the first photo—understandable, since it had been taken after her escape from Laos—had been replaced by that of a woman secure in her life. She had a cute smile, Wellington told himself.

The lawyer remembered a classmate in law school, Cynthia Yu. *Damn, hadn't she been quite a lay . . . same sort of eyes, almost, the Oriental coquette. . . .*

Might that *be it?*

Something that simple?

Ryan was married: Wife, Caroline Muller Ryan, M.D., eye surgeon. Photo: a quintessential Wasp, except that she was Catholic, slender and attractive, mother of two.

Well, just because a man has a pretty wife . . .

Ryan had established an educational trust fund. . . . Wellington opened another file. In it was a Xerox copy of the document.

Ryan, he saw, had done it alone, through a lawyer—not his regular lawyer! A D.C. guy. And Caroline Ryan had not signed the papers . . . did she even know about it? The information on his desk suggested that she did not.

Wellington next checked the birth records on the newest Zimmer child. Her husband had been killed in a "routine training accident" . . . the timing was equivocal. She might have gotten pregnant the very week her husband had been killed. Then again, she might not have. It was her seventh child—eighth? You couldn't tell with those, could you? Gestation could be nine months, or less. First kids were usually late. Later kids, as often as not, were early. Birth weight of the child . . . five pounds seven ounces . . . less than average, but she was an Asian, and they were small . . . did they have smaller-than-normal babies? Wellington made his notes, recognizing that he had a series of maybes and not a single fact.

But, hell, was he really looking for facts?

The two punks. Ryan's bodyguards, Clark and Chavez, had mangled one of them. His investigator had checked that out with the Anne Arundel County Police Department. The local cops had signed off on Clark's story. The punks in question had long but minor records, a few summary probations, a few sessions with youth counselors. The cops were delighted at the way things had turned out. "Okay with me if he'd shot that worthless little fucker," a police sergeant had said with a laugh recorded on the investigator's tape cassette. "That Clark guy looked like one very serious dude. His sidekick ain't much different. If those punks were dumb enough to hassle them, hey, it's a tough world, y'know? Two other gang members confirmed the story the way the good guys told it, and that's a closed case, man."

But *why* had Ryan set his two bodyguards on them?

He's killed to protect his family, hasn't he? This is not a guy who tolerates danger to his . . . friends . . . family . . . lovers?

It is *possible.*

"Hmm . . ." Wellington observed to himself. The DDCI is getting a little on the side. Nothing illegal, just unsavory. Also out of character for the saintly Dr. John Patrick Ryan. When his lover is annoyed by some local gang

members, he simply sics his bodyguards on them, like a mafia *capo* might do, as a lordly public service that no cop would ever bother fooling with.

Might that be enough?

No.

He needed something more. Evidence, some sort of evidence. Not good enough for a grand jury . . . but good enough for—what? To launch an official investigation. Of course. Such investigations were never really secret, were they? A few whispers, a few rumors. Easily done. But first Wellington needed something to hang his hat on.

"There are those who say this could be a preview of the Super Bowl: Three weeks into the NFL season, the Metrodome. Both teams are two and oh. Both teams look like the class of their respective conferences. The San Diego Chargers take on the Minnesota Vikings."

"You know, Tony Wills's rookie season has started even more spectacularly than his college career. Only two games, and he has three hundred six yards rushing in forty-six carries—that's six-point-seven yards every time he touches the ball, and he did *that* against the Bears and the Falcons, two fine rushing defenses," the color man observed. "Can anybody stop Tony Wills?"

"And a hundred twenty-five yards in his nine pass receptions. It's no wonder that they call this kid the Franchise."

"Plus his doctorate from Oxford University." The color man laughed. "Academic All-American, Rhodes Scholar, the man who singlehandedly put Northwestern University back on the map with two trips to the Rose Bowl. You suppose he's faster than a speeding bullet?"

"We'll find out. That rookie middle linebacker for the Chargers, Maxim Bradley, is the best thing I've seen since Dick Butkus came out of Illinois, the best middle linebacker Alabama ever turned out—and that's the school of Leroy Jordan, Cornelius Bennett, and quite a few other all-pros. They don't call him the Secretary of Defense for nothing." It was already the biggest joke in the NFL, referring to the team owner, Dennis Bunker, the real SecDef.

"Tim, I think we got us a ball game!"

"I should be there," Brent Talbot observed. "Dennis is."

"If I tried to keep him away from his games, he'd resign," President Fowler said. "Besides, he used his own plane." Dennis Bunker owned his own small jet, and though he allowed others to fly him around, he still maintained a current commercial pilot's license. It was one of the reasons the military respected him. He could try his hand at almost anything that flew, having once been a distinguished combat flyer.

"What's the spread on this one?"

"Vikings by three," the President answered. "That's just because of the home field. The teams are pretty even. I saw Wills against the Falcons last week. He's some kid."

"Tony's all of that. A wonderful boy. Smart, marvelous attitude, spends a lot of time with kids."

"How about we get him to be a spokesman for the antidrug campaign?"

"He already does that in Chicago. I can call him if you want."

Fowler turned. "Do it, Brent."

Behind them Pete Connor and Helen D'Agustino relaxed on a couch. President Fowler knew them both to be football fans, and the President's TV room was large and comfortable.

"Anybody want a beer?" Fowler asked. He could not watch a ball game without a beer.

"I'll get it," D'Agustino said, heading for the refrigerator in the next room. It was the most curious thing about this most complex of men, "Daga" thought to herself. The man looked, dressed, walked, and acted like a patrician. He was a genuine intellectual, with the arrogance to match. But in front of a TV watching a football game—Fowler watched baseball only when his presidential duties required it—he was Joe Six-Pack, with a bowl of popcorn and a glass of beer, or two, or three. Of course, even here, his "anybody want a beer?" was a command. His bodyguards could not drink on duty, and Talbot never touched the stuff. Daga got herself a Diet Coke.

"Thank you," Fowler said when she handed the glass to her President. He was even more polite at football games. Perhaps, D'Agustino thought, because it was something he and his wife had done. She hoped that was true. It gave the man the humanity that he needed above all things.

"Wow! Bradley hit Wills hard enough that we heard it up here." On the screen, both men got up and traded what looked like an emotional exchange but was probably a mutual laugh.

"Might as well get acquainted fast, Tim. They'll be seeing a lot of each other. Second and seven from the thirty-one, both teams just getting loosened up. That Bradley's a smart linebacker. He played off the center and filled the hole like he knew what was coming."

"He certainly reads his keys well for a rook, and that Viking center made the Pro Bowl last year," the color guy pointed out.

"Great ass on that Bradley kid," Daga pointed out quietly.

"This women's lib stuff is going too far, Helen," Pete said with a grin. He shifted positions on the couch to get his service revolver out of his kidney.

Günther Bock and Marvin Russell stood on the sidewalk just outside the White House grounds among a crowd of a hundred or so tourists, most of whom aimed cameras at the executive mansion. They'd arrived in the city the previous evening, and tomorrow they'd tour the Capitol. Both wore ballcaps to protect them from what still felt like a summer sun. Bock had a camera draped around his neck on a Mickey Mouse strap. He snapped a few photos, mainly to blend in with the rest of the tourists. The real observations came from his trained eye. This was a much harder target than people realized. The buildings around the White House were all large enough that sharpshooters were provided with excellent perches concealed by the stonework. He knew that he was probably under surveillance right now, but they couldn't have the time or money to compare his likeness to every photo they had on their books, and he'd taken the trouble to alter his appearance enough to dispense with that worry.

The President's helicopter flew in and landed only a hundred meters from where he stood. A man with a man-portable SAM might stand a good chance of taking it out—except for the practical considerations. To be there at the

right time was much harder than it seemed. The ideal way would be to have a small truck, perhaps one with a hole cut in the roof so that the missileer could stand, fire, and attempt his escape. Except for the riflemen who certainly perched on the surrounding buildings, and Bock had no illusions that such snipers would miss their targets. Americans had invented sharpshooting, and their President would have the services of the best. Doubtless some of the people in this crowd of tourists were also Secret Service agents, and it was unlikely that he'd spot them.

The bomb could be driven here and detonated in a truck . . . depending on the protective measures that Ghosn had warned him about. Similarly, he might be able to deliver the weapon by truck to the immediate vicinity of the Capitol Building, perhaps at the time of the President's State of the Union Address . . . if the weapon were ready on time. That they weren't sure of, and there was also the question of shipping it here—three weeks it would take. Latakia to Rotterdam, then transshipment to an American port. Baltimore was the closest major port. Norfolk/Newport News was next. Both handled lots of containerized shipping. They could fly it in, but airborne cargo was often X-rayed, and they could not risk that.

The idea was to catch the President on a weekend. It almost had to be a weekend for everything else to work. Everything else. Bock knew that he was violating one of his most important operational precepts—simplicity. But for this to have a chance of working, he had to arrange more than one incident, and he had to do it on a weekend. But the American President was in the White House only about half the time on weekends, and his movements between Washington, Ohio, and other places were unpredictable. The simplest security measure available to the President of the United States was the one they used: his movement schedule, as well known as it might have been, was irregular and its precise details were often closely held. Bock needed at least a week's lead-time to set up his other arrangements—and that was optimistic—but it would be nearly impossible to get that seven days. It would actually have been simpler to plan a simple assassination with conventional weapons. A small aircraft, for example, might be armed with SA-7 missiles . . . probably not. The President's helicopter undoubtedly had the best infrared jammers available. . . .

One chance. You get only one chance.

What if we are patient? What if we simply sit on the bomb for a year and bring it into the country for the next State of the Union speech? Getting the bomb close enough to the Capitol Building to destroy it and everyone in it should not be hard. He'd heard—and would see tomorrow—that the Capitol was a building of classical construction—lots of stone, but little structural ironwork . . . perhaps all they needed was patience.

But that wouldn't happen. Qati would not allow it. There was both the question of security and the more important consideration that Qati thought himself a dying man, and dying men were not known for their patience.

And would it work in any case? How well did the Americans guard the areas where the President's presence was predictable well in advance? Were their radiological sensors in the area?

You'd put them there, wouldn't you?

Only one chance. You'll never be able to repeat this.

At least one week's advance notice or you'll never achieve anything beyond mass murder.

Must be a place without the likely presence of radiological sensors. That eliminated Washington.

Bock started walking away from the black iron fence. His face did not betray the anger he felt.

"Back to the hotel?" Russell asked.

"Yes, why not?" Both men were still tired from their traveling anyway.

"Good, wanted to catch the ball game. You know, that's about the only thing Fowler and I see eye to eye on?"

"Hmph? What's that?"

"Football." Russell laughed. "You know? Football. Okay, I'll teach it t'ya."

Fifteen minutes later they were in their room. Russell switched the TV to the local NBC channel.

"That was some drive, Tom. The Vikings had to convert six third-downs, and two of them required measurements."

"And one was a bad spot," President Fowler said.

"Ref didn't think so." Talbot chuckled.

"They're holding Tony Wills to barely three yards a carry, and one of those was his twenty-yard break on the reverse that caught the Chargers napping."

"A lot of work for three points, Tim, but they did get the three."

"And now the Chargers get their chance at offense. The Vikings defense is a little iffy, with two of their starters out with minor injuries. I bet they're sorry to miss this one."

The Chargers' quarterback took his first snap, faded back five steps, and hurled the ball toward his flanker, slanting across the middle, but a hand tipped the ball and it ended up in the surprised face of the Vikings' free safety, who pulled it in and fell at the forty.

Bock found the game exciting in a distant sort of way, but almost totally incomprehensible. Russell tried to explain, but it didn't really help very much. Günther consoled himself with a beer, stretching out on the bed while his mind rolled over what he'd seen. Bock knew what he wanted his plan to accomplish, but the exact details—especially here in America—were looking harder than expected. If only—

"What was that they said?"

"The Secretary of Defense," Russell answered.

"A joke?"

Marvin turned. "Sort of a joke. That's what they call the middle linebacker, Maxim Bradley, from the University of Alabama. But the real one owns the team. Dennis Bunker—there he is." The camera showed Bunker in one of the stadium's sky-boxes.

How remarkable, Bock thought.

"What is this Super Bowl they talked about?"

"That's the championship game. They have a playoff series of the most successful teams, and the last one is called the Super Bowl."

"Like the World Cup, you mean?"

"Yeah, something like that. 'Cept we do it every year. This year—actually next year, end of January—it's in the new stadium they built at Denver. The Skydome, I think they call it."

"They expect these two teams to go there?"

Russell shrugged. "That's the talk. The regular season is sixteen weeks, man, then three weeks of playoffs, then another week wait for the Super Bowl."

"Who goes to this last game?"

"Lots of people. Hey, man, it's *the* game. Everybody wants to go to it. Getting tickets is a mother. These two teams are the best bet to go all the way, but it's real unpredictable, y'know?"

"President Fowler is a football enthusiast?"

"That's what they say. He's supposed to go to a lot of Redskin games right here in D.C."

"What about security?" Bock asked.

"It's tough. They put him in one of the special boxes. Figure they have it rigged with bulletproof glass or something."

How very foolish, Bock thought. Of course, a stadium was easier to secure than it might seem to the casual observer. A heavy crew-served weapon could be fired only from an entrance ramp, and watching those was relatively easy. On the other hand . . .

Bock closed his eyes. He was thinking in an unorganized way, vacillating between conventional and unconventional approaches to the problem. He was also allowing himself to focus on the wrong thing. Killing the American President was desirable but not essential. What *was* essential was to kill the largest possible number of people in the most spectacular way imaginable, then to coordinate with other activities in order to foment . . .

Think! Concentrate on the real mission.

"The television coverage for these games is most impressive," Bock observed after a minute.

"Yeah, they make a big deal of that. Satellite vans, all that stuff." Russell was concentrating on the game. The Vikings had scored something called a touchdown, and the score was now ten to nothing, but it seemed now that the other team was moving rapidly in the other direction.

"Has the game ever been seriously disrupted?"

Marvin turned. "Huh? Oh, during the war with Iraq, they had really tight security—and you remember the movie, right?"

"Movie?" Bock asked.

"Black Sunday, I think it was—some Middle East guys tried to blow up the place." Russell laughed. "Already been done, man. In Hollywood, anyway. They used a blimp. Anyway, during the Super Bowl when we were fighting Iraq, they wouldn't let the TV blimp come near the place."

"Is there a game at Denver today?"

"No, that's tomorrow night, Broncos and the Seahawks. Won't be much of a game. The Broncos are rebuilding this year."

"I see." Bock left the room and arranged for the concierge to get them tickets to Denver in the morning.

Cathy got up to see him off. She even fixed breakfast. Her solicitude over the past few days had not made her husband feel any better. Quite the reverse. But he couldn't say anything about it, could he? Even the way she overdid it, straightening his tie and kissing him on the way out the door. The smile, the loving look, all for a husband who couldn't get it up, Jack thought on his way out to the car. The same sort of smothering attention you might give to some poor bastard in a wheelchair.

"Morning, doc."

"Hello, John."

"Catch the Vikings-Chargers game yesterday?"

"No, I, uh, took my son to see the Orioles. They lost six to one." Success was following Jack everywhere, but at least he'd kept his word to his son. That was something, wasn't it?

"Twenty-four to twenty-one in overtime. God, that Wills kid is incredible. They held him to ninety-six yards, but when he had to deliver, he popped it for twenty yards and set up the field goal," Clark reported.

"You have money on the game?"

"Five bucks at the office, but it was a three-point spread. The education fund won that one."

It gave Ryan something to chuckle about. Gambling was as illegal at CIA as it was in every other government office, but a serious attempt to enforce a ban on football betting might have started a revolution—the same was true at the FBI, Jack was sure, which enforced interstate gambling statutes—and the semiofficial system was that half-point betting spreads were not allowed. All "pushes" (odds-caused ties) forfeited into the Agency's in-house charity, the Education Aid Fund. It was something that even the Agency's own Inspector General winked at—in fact, he liked to lay money on games as much as the next guy.

"Looks like you at least got some sleep, Jack," Clark noted as they made their way toward Route 50.

"Eight hours," Jack said. He'd wanted another chance the previous night, but Cathy had said no. *You're too tired, Jack. That's all it is. You're working too hard, and I want you to take it easy, okay?*

Like I'm a goddamned stud horse that's been overworked.

"Good for you," Clark said. "Or maybe your wife insisted, eh?"

Ryan stared ahead at the road. "Where's the box?"

"Here."

Ryan unlocked it and started looking at the weekend's dispatches.

They caught an early direct flight from Washington National to Denver's Stapleton International. It was a clear day most of the way across the country. Bock got a window seat and looked at the country, his first time in America. As were most Europeans, he was surprised, almost awed by the sheer size and diversity. The wooded hills of Appalachia; the flat farmlands of Kansas, speckled with the immense circular signature of the traveling irrigation systems; the stunning way the plains ended and the Rockies began within easy sight of Denver. No doubt Marvin would say something when they arrived about how this had all been property of his people. What rubbish. They'd been

nomadic barbarians, following the herds of bison, or whatever had once been there before civilization arrived. America might be his enemy, but it was a civilized country, and all the more dangerous for it. By the time the aircraft landed, he was squirming with his need for a smoke. Ten minutes after landing they'd rented a car and were examining a map. Bock's head was dizzy from the lack of oxygen here. Nearly fifteen hundred meters of altitude, he realized. It was a wonder that people could play American football here.

They'd landed behind the morning rush hour, and driving to the stadium was simple. Southwest of the city, the new Skydome was a distinctive structure located on an immense plot of ground to allow ample room for parking. He parked the car close to a ticket window and decided that the simple approach would be best.

"Can I get two tickets for tonight's match?" he asked the attendant.

"Sure, we have a few hundred left. Where do you want them?"

"I don't know the stadium at all, I'm afraid."

"You must be new here," the lady observed with a friendly smile. "All we got's in the upper deck, Section Sixty-six and Sixty-eight."

"Two, please. Is cash all right?"

"Sure is. Where are you from?"

"Denmark," Bock replied.

"Really? Well, welcome to Denver! Hope you enjoy the game."

"Can I look around to see where my seat is?"

"Technically, no, but nobody really minds."

"Thank you." Bock smiled back at the simpering fool.

"They had seats for tonight?" Marvin Russell asked. "I'll be damned."

"Come, we will see where they are."

Bock walked through the nearest open gate, just a few meters from the big ABC vans that carried the satellite equipment for the evening broadcast. He took the time to notice that the stadium was hard-wired for the equipment. So the TV vans would always be in the same place, just by Gate 5. Inside, he saw a team of technicians setting up their equipment, then he headed up the nearest ramp, deliberately heading in the wrong direction.

The stadium had to seat sixty thousand people, perhaps a little more. It had three primary levels, called lower, mezzanine, and upper, plus two complete ranks of enclosed boxes, some of which looked quite luxurious. Structurally it was quite impressive. Massive reinforced-concrete construction, all the upper decks were cantilevered. There were no pillars to block a spectator's view. A fine stadium. A superb target. Beyond the parking lot to the north were endless hectares of low-rise apartment buildings. To the east was a government office center. The stadium was not in the city center, but that couldn't be helped. Bock found and took his seat, orienting himself with the compass and the TV equipment. The latter was quite easy. An ABC banner was being hung below one of the press boxes.

"Hey!"

"Yes?" Bock looked down at a security guard.

"You're not supposed to be here."

"Sorry." He held up his tickets. "I just bought them, and I wanted to see where my seats were so that I would know where to park. I've never seen an

American football game," he added, heavy on the accent. Americans, he'd heard, were always nice to people with European accents.

"You want to park in Area A or B. Try to arrive early, like before five. You want to beat the rush-hour traffic. It can be a bear out there."

Günther bobbed his head. "Thank you. I'll be leaving now."

"No problem, sir. It's no big deal. I mean, it's the insurance, y'know? You have people wandering around, they might get hurt and sue."

Bock and Russell left. They circled the bottom level, just so that Günther could be sure he had the configuration memorized. Then that became unnecessary when he found a stadium diagram printed on a small card.

"Seen what you wanted?" Marvin asked when they got back to the car.

"Yes, possibly."

"You know, that's pretty subtle," the American mused aloud.

"What do you mean?"

"Dickin' with the TV. The really dumb thing about revolutionaries is that they overlook the psychological stuff. You don't have to kill a lot of people, just pissin' them off, scarin' them, that's enough, isn't it?"

Bock stopped at the parking-lot exit and looked at his companion. "You have learned much, my friend."

"This is pretty hot stuff," Ryan said, leafing through the pages.

"I didn't know it was that bad," Mary Patricia Foley agreed.

"How are you feeling?"

The senior field officer's eyes twinkled. "Clyde has dropped. Waiting for my water to break."

Jack looked up. "Clyde?"

"That's what I'm calling him—her—whatever."

"Doing your exercises?"

"Rocky Balboa should be in the shape I'm in. Ed's got the nursery all painted up. The crib is put back together. All ready, Jack."

"How much time will you be taking off?"

"Four weeks, maybe six."

"I may want you to go over some of this at home," Ryan said, lingering on page two.

"Long as you pay me." Mary Pat laughed.

"What do you think, MP?"

"I think SPINNAKER is the best source we have. If he says it, it's probably true."

"We haven't caught a whiff of this anywhere else. . . ."

"That's why you recruit good penetration agents."

"True," Ryan had to agree.

The report from Agent SPINNAKER wasn't quite earthshaking, but it was like the first rumble that got people worrying about a major quake. Since the Russians had taken the cork out of the bottle, the Soviet Union had developed an instant case of political schizophrenia. Wrong term, Ryan reflected. Multiple-personality disorder, perhaps. There were five identifiable political areas: the true-believing communists, who thought that any divergence from the True Path was a mistake (the Forward-to-the-Past crowd, some called

them); the progressive socialists, who wanted to create socialism with a human face (something that had singularly failed in Massachusetts, Jack thought wryly); the middle-of-the-roaders, who wanted some free-market capitalism backed up with a solid safety net (or craved the worst of both worlds, as any economist could say); the reformists, who wanted a thin net and a lot of capitalism (but no one knew what capitalism was yet, except for a rapidly expanding criminal sector); and on the far right, those who wanted a right-wing authoritarian government (which was what had put communism in place over seventy years before). The groups on the extreme ends of the spectrum had perhaps ten percent in the Congress of People's Deputies. The remaining eighty percent of the votes were fairly evenly split among the three vaguely centrist positions. Naturally enough, various issues scrambled allegiances—environmentalism was particularly hot and divisive—and the biggest wild card was the incipient breakup of the republics that had always chafed under Russian rule, all the more so because of the political coda imposed from Moscow. Finally, each of the five groupings had its own political subsets. For example, there was currently a lot of talk from the political right of inviting the most likely Romanov heir-presumptive back to Moscow—not to take over, but merely to accept a semiofficial apology for the murder of his ancestors. Or so the cover story went. Whoever had come up with that idea, Jack thought, was either the most naive son of a bitch since Alice went down the rabbit hole or a politician with a dangerously simplistic mind-set. The good news, CIA's Station Paris reported, was that the Prince of all the Russias had a better feel for politics and his own safety than his sponsors did.

The bad news was that the political and economic situation in the Soviet Union looked utterly hopeless. SPINNAKER'S report merely made it look more ominous. Andrey Il'ych Narmonov was desperate, running out of options, running out of allies, running out of ideas, running out of time, and running out of maneuvering room. He was, the report said, overly concerned with his waffling on the nationalities problem, to the point that he was trying to strengthen his hold on the security apparatus—MVD, KGB, and the military—so that he could keep the empire together by force. But the military, SPINNAKER said, was both unhappy with that mission, and unhappy with the halfhearted way Narmonov planned to implement it.

There had been speculation about the Soviet military and its supposed political ambitions since the time of Lenin. It wasn't new. Stalin had taken a scythe through his officer corps in the late 1930s; it was generally agreed that Marshal Tukhashevskiy had not really posed a political threat, that it had been yet another case of Stalin's malignant paranoia. Khrushchev had done the same in the late '50s, but without the mass executions; that had been done because Khrushchev had wanted to save money on tanks and depend on nuclear arms instead. Narmonov had retired quite a few generals and colonels also; in this case, the move had been exclusively one of economizing on military expense across the board. But this time also, the military reductions had been accompanied by a political renaissance. For the first time there was a true political opposition movement in the country, and the fact of the matter was that the Soviet Army had all the guns. To counter that worrisome

possibility, the KGB's Third Chief Directorate had existed for generations—KGB officers who wore military uniforms and whose mission it was to keep an eye on everything. But the Third Chief Directorate was a mere shadow of what it had been. The military had persuaded Narmonov to remove it as a precondition to its own goal of a truly professional force, loyal to the country and the new constitution.

Historians invariably deemed the age in which they lived to be one of transition. For once they were right, Jack thought. If this were not an age of transition, then it was hard to imagine what the hell was. In the case of the Soviets, they were poised between two political and economic worlds, teetering, not quite balanced, not quite sure which way they would go. And that made their political situation dangerously vulnerable to . . . what? Jack asked himself.

Damned near anything.

SPINNAKER said Narmonov was being pressured to make a deal with the military, which, he said, was part of the Forward-to-the-Past mob. Group One. The danger existed, he said, that the Soviet Union would revert to a quasi-military state that repressed its progressive elements; that Narmonov had lost his nerve.

"He says he's had one-on-one meetings with Andrey Il'ych," Mary Pat pointed out. "Intel doesn't come any better than that."

"Also true," Jack replied. "It is worrisome, isn't it?"

"I'm not really concerned about a reversion to Marxist rule. . . . What worries me—"

"Yeah, I know. Civil war." *Civil war in a country with thirty thousand nuclear warheads. There's a cheery thought.*

"Our position has been to cut Narmonov as much slack as he needs, but if our guy is right, that might be the wrong policy."

"What's Ed think?"

"Same as me. We trust Kadishev. I recruited him. Ed and I have seen every report he's ever sent in. He delivers. He's smart, well placed, very perceptive, ballsy son of a gun. When's the last time he gave us bad stuff?"

"I don't know that he ever has," Jack replied.

"Neither do I, Jack."

Ryan leaned back in his chair. "Christ, I just love these easy calls. . . . I don't know, MP. The time I met Narmonov . . . that is one tough, smart, agile son of a bitch. He's got real brass ones." Jack stopped. *More than you can say for yourself, boy.*

"We all have our limitations. Even the brass ones go soft." Mrs. Foley smiled. "Oops, wrong metaphor. People run out of steam. Stress, hours, time in the saddle. Reality grinds us all down. Why do you think I'm taking time off? Being pregnant gives me a great excuse. Having a newborn isn't exactly a picnic, but I get a month or so off the fundamentals, real-life instead of the stuff we do here every day. That's one advantage we have over men, doc. You guys can't break away like we women can. That may be Andrey Il'ych's problem. Who can he turn to for advice? Where can he go for help? He's been there a long time. He's dealing with a deteriorating situation, and he's running out of gas. That's what SPINNAKER tells us, and it is consistent with the

facts."

"Except that we haven't heard anything like this from anyone else."

"But he's our best guy for the inside stuff."

"Which completes the circularity of the argument, Mary Pat."

"Doc, you have the report, and you have my opinion," Mrs. Foley pointed out.

"Yes, ma'am." Jack set the document on his desk.

"What are you going to tell them?" "Them" was the top row of the executive branch: Fowler, Elliot, Talbot.

"I guess I go with your evaluation. I'm not entirely comfortable with it, but I don't have anything to counter your position with. Besides, the last time I went against you, turned out I was the one who blew the call."

"You know, you're a pretty good boss."

"And you're pretty good at letting me down easy."

"We all have bad days," Mrs. Foley said as she got awkwardly to her feet. "Let me waddle back to my office."

Jack rose also and walked to open the door for her. "When are you due?"

She smiled back at him. "October thirty-first—Halloween, but I'm always late, and they're always big ones."

"You take care of yourself." Jack watched her leave, then walked in to see the Director.

"You'd better look this over."

"Narmonov? I heard another SPINNAKER came in."

"You heard right, sir."

"Who's doing the writeup?"

"I will," Jack said. "I want to do some cross-checking first, though."

"I go down tomorrow. I'd like to have it then."

"I'll have it done tonight."

"Good. Thanks, Jack."

This is the place, Günther told himself halfway into the first quarter. The stadium accommodated sixty-two thousand seven hundred twenty paying fans. Bock figured another thousand or so people selling snacks and beverages. The game was not supposed to be an important one, but it was clear that Americans were as serious about their football as Europeans were. There was a surprising number of people with multicolored paint on their faces—the local team colors, of course. Several were actually stripped to the waist and had their chests painted up like football sweaters, complete with the huge numbers the Americans used. Various exhortatory banners hung from the rails at the front of the upper decks. There were women on the playing field selected for their dancing ability and other physical attributes, leading the fans in cheers. Bock learned about a curious kind of demonstration called The Wave.

He also learned about the sovereignty of American television. This large raucous crowd meekly accepted stoppage of the game so that ABC could intersperse the play with commercials—that would have started a riot in the most civilized European soccer crowd. TV was even used to regulate play. The field was littered with referees in striped shirts, and even they were supervised by cameras and, Russell pointed out, another official whose job it was to look

at videotape recordings of every play and rule on the rightness or wrongness of every official ruling on the field. And to supervise *that*, two enormous TV screens made the same replays visible to the crowd. If all that had been tried in Europe, there would have been dead officials and fans at every game. The combination of riotous enthusiasm and meek civilization here was remarkable to Bock. The game was less interesting, though he saw Russell genuinely enjoyed it. The ferocious violence of American football was broken by long periods of inactivity. The occasional flaring of tempers was muted by the fact that each player wore enough protective equipment as to require a pistol to inflict genuine harm. And so big they were. There could hardly be a man down there under a hundred kilos. It would have been easy to call them oafish and awkward, but the running backs and others demonstrated speed and agility that one might never have guessed. For all that, the rules of the game were incomprehensible. Bock had never been one to enjoy sporting contests anyway. He'd played soccer as a boy, but that was far in his past.

Günther returned his attention to the stadium. It was a massive and impressive structure with its arching steel roof. The seats had rudimentary cushions. There was an adequate number of toilets, and a massive collection of concession stands, most serving weak American beer. A total of sixty-five thousand people here, counting police, concessionaires, TV technicians. Nearby apartments. . . . He realized that he'd have to educate himself on the effects of nuclear weapons to come up with a proper estimate of expected casualties. Certainly a hundred thousand. Probably more. Enough. He wondered how many of these people would be here. Most, perhaps. Sitting in their comfortable chairs, drinking their cold, weak beer, devouring their hot dogs and peanuts. Bock had been involved in two aircraft incidents. One airliner blown out of the sky, another attempted hijacking that had not gone well at all. He'd fantasized at the time about the victims, sitting in comfortable chairs, eating their mediocre meals, watching their in-flight movie, not knowing that their lives were completely in the control of others whom they did not know. Not knowing. That was the beauty of it, how he could know and they could not. To have such control over human life. It was like being God, Bock thought, his eyes surveying the crowd. A particularly cruel and unfeeling God, to be sure, but history was cruel and unfeeling, wasn't it?

Yes, this was the place.

19

DEVELOPMENT

"Commodore, I have real trouble believing that," Ricks said as evenly as he could manage. He was tanned and refreshed from his trip to Hawaii. He'd stopped in at Pearl Harbor while there, of course, to look over the sub base there and dream about having command of Submarine Squadron One. That was a fast-attack squadron, but if a fast-attack guy like Mancuso could take over a boomer squadron, then surely turnabout was fair play.

"Dr. Jones is a really good man," Bart Mancuso replied.

"I don't doubt it, but our own people have been over the tapes." It was normal operating procedure and had been so for more than thirty years. Tapes from missile-sub patrols were always examined by a team of experts on shore as a back-check to the sub's crew. They wanted to make sure that no one might have been trailing a missile boat. "This Jones guy was one hell of a sonar operator, but now he's a contractor, and he has to justify his fees somehow, doesn't he? I'm not saying he's dishonest. It's his job to look for anomalies, and in this case what he did was to string a bunch of coincidences into a hypothesis. That's all there is here. The data is equivocal—hell, the data is almost entirely speculative—but the bottom line is that for this to be true, you have to assume that the same crewmen who tracked a 688 were unable to detect a Russian boat at all. Is that plausible?"

"That's a good point, Harry. Jones doesn't say that it's certain. He gives it a one-in-three chance."

Ricks shook his head. "I'd say one in a thousand, and that's being generous."

"For what it's worth, Group agrees with you, and I had some people from OP-02 here three days ago who said the same thing."

So why are we having this conversation? Ricks wanted to ask, but couldn't. "The boat was checked for noise on the way out, right?"

Mancuso nodded. "Yep, by a 688 right out of overhaul, all the bells and whistles."

"And?"

"And she's still a black hole. The attack boat lost her at a range of three thousand yards at five knots."

"So how are we writing it up?" Ricks asked as casually as he could manage. This was going into his record, and that made it important.

It was Mancuso's turn to squirm. He hadn't decided. The bureaucrat part of him said that he'd done everything right. He'd listened to the contractor, booted the data up the chain of command to Group, to Force, and to the Pentagon experts. Their analysis had all been negative: Dr. Jones was being overly paranoid. The problem was that Mancuso had sailed with Jones for

three very good years in USS *Dallas,* and had never known him to make a bad call. Never. Not once. That Akula *had* been somewhere out there in the Gulf of Alaska. From the time the P-3 patrol aircraft had lost her to the moment she'd appeared outside her base, the *Admiral Lunin* had just fallen off the planet. Where had she been? Well, if you drew speed/time circles, it was possible that she'd been in *Maine's* patrol area, possible that she'd left *Maine* at the proper time and made homeport at the proper time. But it was also possible—and very damned likely—that she'd never been in the same area as the American missile sub. *Maine* hadn't detected her, and neither had *Omaha.* How likely was it that a Russian sub could have evaded detection by both top-of-the-line warships?

Not very.

"You know what worries me?" Mancuso asked.

"What's that?"

"We've been in the missile-sub business for over thirty years. We've never been tracked in deep water. When I was XO on *Hammerhead*, we ran exercises against *Georgia* and had our heads handed to us. I never tried tracking an Ohio when I had *Dallas,* and the one exercise I ran against *Pulaski* was the toughest thing I ever did. But I've tracked Deltas, Typhoons, everything the Russians put in the water. I've taken hull shots of Victors. We're so good at this business. . . ." The squadron commander frowned. "Harry, we're used to being the best."

Ricks continued to speak reasonably. "Bart, we *are* the best. The only people close to us are the Brits, and I think we have them faded. Nobody else is in the same ball park. I got an idea."

"What's that?"

"You're worried about Mr. Akula. Okay, I can understand that. It's a good boat, like a late 637-class even, for damned sure the best thing they've ever put in the water. Okay, we have standing orders to evade everything that comes our way—but you gave Rosselli a nice writeup for tracking this same Akula. You probably got a little heat from Group for that."

"Good guess, Harry. A couple of noses went decidedly out of joint, but if they don't like the way I run my squadron, they can always pick a new squadron boss."

"What do we know about *Admiral Lunin?"*

"She's in the yard for overhaul now, due out late January."

"Going by past performance, it'll come out a little quieter."

"Probably. Word is that she'll have a new sonar suite, say about ten years behind us," Mancuso added.

"And that doesn't allow for the operators. It's still not a match for us, not even close to one. We can prove that."

"How?" Mancuso asked.

"Why not recommend to Group that any boat that comes across an Akula is supposed to track him aggressively. Let the fast-attack guys really try to get in close. *But* if a boomer gets close enough to track without risk of counterdetection, let's go for that, too. I think we need better data on this bird. If he's a threat, let's upgrade what information we have on him."

"Harry, that will really put Group into the overhead. They're not going to

like this idea at all." But Mancuso already did, and Harry could see it.

Ricks snorted. "So? We're the best, Bart. You know it. I know it. They know it. We set some reasonable guidelines."

"Like what?"

"The farthest anyone has ever tracked an Ohio is—what?"

"Four thousand yards, Mike Heimbach on *Scranton* against Frank Kemeny on *Tennessee*. Kemeny detected Heimbach first—difference was about one minute on detection. Everything closer than that was a prearranged test."

"Okay, we multiply that by a factor of . . . five, say. That's more than safe, Bart. Mike Heimbach had a brand-new boat, the first rendition of the new sonar integration system, and three extra sonarmen out of Group Six, as I recall."

Mancuso nodded. "Right, it was a deliberate test, and they worst-cased everything to see if anyone could detect an Ohio. Isothermal water, below the layer, everything."

"And still *Tennessee* won," Ricks pointed out. "Frank was under orders to make it easy, and he still detected first, and as I recall he had a solution three minutes before Mike did."

"True." Mancuso thought for a moment. "Make it twenty-five thousand yards separation. No closer than that."

"Fine. I know I can track an Akula at that range. I have a very good sonar department—hell, we all do. If I stumble across this guy, I hover out there and gather all the signature data I can. I draw a twenty-five-thousand-yard circle around him and keep outside of it. There is no chance in *hell* that I'll get counterdetected."

"Five years ago, Group would have shot both of us even for talking like this," Mancuso observed.

"The world's changed. Look, Bart, you can run a 688 in close, but what does it prove? If we're really worried about boomer vulnerability, why dick around?"

"You're sure you can handle this?"

"Hell, yes! I'll write up the proposal for your operations staff, and you can send it up the flagpole to Group."

"This'll end up in Washington, you know that."

"Yeah, no more 'We hide with pride,' eh? What are we, a bunch of little old ladies? Damn it, Bart, I'm the commanding officer of a warship. Somebody wants to tell me I'm vulnerable, well, I'm going to prove that's a load of horseshit. Nobody has ever tracked me. Nobody ever will, and I'm prepared to prove that."

This interview had not gone the way Mancuso had expected at all. Ricks was talking like a real submarine-driver. It was the kind of talk Mancuso liked to hear.

"You sure you're comfortable with this? It's really going to light a fire up the line. You're going to take some heat."

"So are you."

"I'm the squadron commander. I'm supposed to take heat."

"I'll take my chances, Bart. Okay, I'm going to have to drill the hell out of my people, especially the sonar troops, tracking party, like that. I have the

time, and I have a pretty good crew."

"Okay. You write up the proposal. I'll give it a favorable endorsement and send it up."

"See how easy it is?" Ricks grinned. If you want to be number one in a squadron of good skippers, he thought, you have to stand out from the crowd. OP-02 in the Pentagon would get excited about this, but they'd see that it was Harry Ricks who'd made the suggestion, and they knew his reputation as a smart, careful operator. On that basis, plus Mancuso's endorsement, it would be approved after some hemming and hawing. Harry Ricks: the best submarine engineer in the Navy, and a man willing to back up his expertise with deeds. Not a bad image. Certainly an image that would be noted and remembered.

"So how was Hawaii?" Mancuso asked, surprised and very pleased with the Commanding Officer (Gold) of USS *Maine*.

"This is very interesting. The Karl Marx Astrophysical Institute." The KGB Colonel handed the black-and-whites over to Golovko.

The First Deputy Chairman looked over the photos and set them down. "Empty building?"

"Nearly so. Inside, we found this. It's a delivery manifest for five American machine tools. Very good ones, extremely expensive."

"Used for?"

"Used for many things, like the fabrication of telescope mirrors, which fits very nicely with the institute's cover. The same instruments, our friends at Sarova tell us, are used to shape components for nuclear weapons."

"Tell me about the institute."

"Much of it appears to be entirely legitimate. Its head was to have been the DDR's leading cosmologist. It's been absorbed by the Max Planck Institute in Berlin. They're planning to build a large telescope complex in Chile, and are designing an X-ray observation satellite with the European Space Agency. It is noteworthy that X-ray telescopes have a rather close relationship with nuclear-weapons research."

"How does one tell the difference between scientific research and—"

"You can't," the Colonel admitted. "I've done some checking. We have leaked information on this ourselves."

"What? How?"

"There have been a number of articles published in various professional journals about stellar physics. One begins, 'Imagine the center of a star with an X-ray flux of such and such,' except for one small thing: the star the author described has a flux much higher than the center of any star—by fourteen orders of magnitude."

"I don't understand." Golovko was having trouble with all this scientific gibberish.

"He described a physical environment in which the activity was one hundred thousand *billion* times the intensity inside *any* star. He was, in fact, describing the interior of a thermonuclear bomb at the moment of detonation."

"And how the hell did that get past censors!" Golovko demanded in

amazement.

"General, how scientifically literate do you think our censors are? As soon as that one saw 'imagine the center of a star,' he decided that it was not a matter of state security at all. That article was published fifteen years ago. There are others. In the past week I've discovered just how useless our secrecy measures are. You can imagine what it's like from the Americans. Fortunately, it requires a very clever chap to assimilate all the data. But it is by no means impossible. I've talked to a team of young engineers at Kyshtym. With a little push from here, we can initiate an in-depth study of how extensive the open scientific literature is. That will take five to six months. It does not directly affect this particular project, but I think it would be a most useful study to undertake. I think it likely that we have systematically underestimated the danger of third-world nuclear weapons."

"But that's not true," Golovko objected. "We know that—"

"General, I helped write that study three years ago. I am telling you that I was grossly optimistic in my assessments."

The First Deputy Chairman thought about that for a few seconds. "Pyotr Ivan'ch, you are an honest man."

"I am a frightened man," the Colonel replied.

"Back to Germany."

"Yes. Of the people we suspect were part of the DDR bomb project, three are unaccounted for. All three men and their families are gone. The rest have found other work. Two could possibly be involved in nuclear research with weapons applications, but again, how does one tell? Where is the dividing line between peaceful physics and weapons-related activity? I do not know."

"The three missing ones?"

"One is definitely in South America. The other two are merely missing. I am recommending that we launch a major operation to examine what's happening in Argentina."

"What about the Americans?" Golovko mused.

"Nothing definite. I expect they're as much in the dark as we are." The Colonel paused. "It is difficult to see how they would have an interest in wider proliferation of nuclear weapons. It's contrary to their government policy."

"Explain Israel, then."

"The Israelis obtained nuclear material from the Americans over twenty years ago, plutonium from their Savannah River plant, and enriched uranium from a depot in Pennsylvania. In both cases the transfers were apparently illegal. The Americans themselves launched an investigation. They believe that the Israeli Mossad pulled off one of the greatest operations in history, aided by Jewish-American citizens in sensitive positions. There was no prosecution. What evidence they had came from sources that could not be revealed in court, and it was deemed politically inadvisable to reveal security leaks in so sensitive a government activity. Everything was handled quietly. The Americans and Europeans have been lax in selling nuclear technology to various countries—capitalism at work, there is a huge amount of money involved—but we made the same mistake with China and Germany, did we not? No," the Colonel concluded. "I do not believe the Americans have any more interest in seeing German-made nuclear weapons than we do."

"Next step?"

"I don't know, General. We've run all our leads down as well as we can without risk of detection. I think we need to look at activity in South America. Next, some careful inquiries within the German military establishment to see if there is any indication of a nuclear program there."

"If there were, we'd have known by now." Golovko frowned. "Good Lord, did I really say that? What delivery systems are likely?"

"Aircraft. There is no need for ballistic launchers. From Eastern Germany to Moscow is not all that far. They know our air-defense capabilities, don't they? We left enough of our equipment behind."

"Pyotr, just how much more good news will you leave me this afternoon?"

The Colonel smiled very grimly indeed. *"Nu,* and all those Western fools are rhapsodizing about how safe the world has become."

The sintering process for the tungsten-rhenium was simplicity itself. They used a radio-frequency furnace much like a microwave oven. The metallic powder was poured into a mold and slid into the furnace for heating. After it became dazzlingly white hot—unfortunately not hot enough actually to melt the tungsten, which had a very high thermal tolerance—pressure was applied, and the combination of heat and pressure formed it into a mass that while not quite metallically solid was firm enough to treat as such. A total of twelve curved sections were made one after the other. They required machining to modest tolerances of shape and smoothness, and were set aside on their own section of shelving installed in the fabrication plant.

The big milling machine was working on the final large beryllium component, a large metallic hyperboloid about fifty centimeters in length, with a maximum width of twenty. The eccentric shape made for difficult machining, even with computer-assisted tools, but that could not be helped.

"As you see, the initial neutron flux will be a simple spherical expansion from the Primary, but it will be trapped by the beryllium," Fromm explained to Qati. "These metallic elements actually reflect neutrons. They are gyrating about at approximately twenty percent of the speed of light, and we will leave them with only this exit into the cone. Inside the hyperboloid will be this cylinder of tritium-enriched lithium deuteride."

"It happens so fast?" the Commander asked. "The explosives will be destroying everything."

"It requires a new way of thinking. As fast as the actions of the explosives are, you must remember that we require only three shakes for the bomb to complete the detonation process."

"Three what?"

"Shakes." Fromm allowed himself another of his rare smiles. "You know what a nanosecond is—that is one billionth of a second, *ja?* In that span of time, a beam of light goes only thirty centimeters. The time it takes a beam of light to go from here to here." He held his hands out about a foot apart.

Qati nodded. Surely that was a very brief time indeed.

"Good. A 'shake' is ten nanoseconds. The time for light to go three meters. The term was invented by the Americans in the 1940s. They mean the time for a shake of a lamb's tail—a technical joke, you see. In other words, in three

shakes, the time needed for a beam of light to go approximately nine meters, the bomb has begun and ended the detonation process. That is many thousands of times less than the time required for chemical explosives to do anything."

"I see," Qati said, speaking both the truth and a lie. He left the room, allowing Fromm to return to his ghastly reveries. Günther was waiting out in the open air.

"Well?"

"I have the American side of the plan," Bock announced. He opened up a map and set it on the ground. "We will place the bomb here."

"What is this place?" Bock answered the question. "How many?" the Commander asked next.

"Over sixty thousand here. If the bomb's yield is as promised, the lethal radius will encompass all of this. Total dead will number between one and two hundred thousand."

"That is all? For a nuclear bomb, that is all?"

"Ismael, this is merely a large explosive device."

Qati closed his eyes and swore under his breath. Having only a minute before been told that it was something completely out of his experience, now he was being told the reverse. The Commander was bright enough to understand that both experts were correct.

"Why this place?" Bock explained that, too.

"It would be very gratifying indeed to kill their President."

"Gratifying, but not necessarily beneficial. We could take the bomb into Washington, but I evaluate the risks of detection as serious, far too serious. Commander, my plan must take into consideration the fact that we have only one device and only one chance. We must therefore minimize the risk of detection and base our target-selection on convenience more than any other factor."

"And the German end of the operation?"

"That is more easily accomplished."

"Will it work?" Qati asked, staring off at the dusty hills of Lebanon.

"It should. I give it a sixty-percent chance."

At the very least we will punish the Americans and the Russians, the Commander told himself. The question came next: *Is that enough?* Qati's face became hard as he considered the answer to that.

But there was more than one question. Qati thought himself a dying man. The disease process had its ebbs and flows, like an inexorable tide, but a tide that never quite restored itself to where it had been a year or a month before. Though today he felt well, he knew that this was a relative thing. There was as much chance that his life would end in the next year as there was that Bock's plan would succeed. Could he allow himself to die and *not* do everything he could to see his mission accomplished?

No, and if his own death was likely, what importance should he give to the lives of others? Were they not all unbelievers?

Günther is an unbeliever, a true infidel. Marvin Russell is another, a pagan. The people you propose to kill . . . they are not unbelievers. They are People of the Book, misguided followers of Jesus the Prophet, but also people who believe in the

one God.

Yet Jews were also People of the Book. The Koran proclaimed it. They were the spiritual ancestors of Islam, as much the children of Abraham as the Arabs. So much in their religion was the same as his. His war against Israel was not about religion. It was about his people, cast out of their own land, displaced by another people who also claimed to be motivated by a religious imperative when it was really something else.

Qati faced his own beliefs in all their contradictions. Israel was his enemy. The Americans were his enemy. The Russians were his enemy. That was his personal theology, and though he might claim to be a Muslim, what ruled his life had precious little to do with God, however much he might proclaim the opposite to his followers.

"Proceed with your planning, Günther."

20

COMPETITION

At the halfway point of the NFL season, the Vikings and Chargers were still the class of the league. Shrugging off their overtime loss to Minnesota, San Diego took their revenge the next week at home against doormat Indianapolis, whom they buried 45—3, while the Vikings had to struggle against the Giants in a Monday Night game, emerging on the sweet side of a 21—17 score. Tony Wills passed a thousand rushing yards in the third quarter of the season's eighth game, and was already consensus rookie of the year, plus becoming the official NFL spokesman for the President's Campaign Against Substance Abuse (CASA). The Vikings stumbled against the Forty-Niners, losing 24—16, which evened their record with San Diego's 7-1, but their nearest competition in the NFL Central—"Black and Blue"—division was the Bears at 4—3. Parity in the National Football League had come and gone. The only serious challenge in the American Conference came, as always, from the Dolphins and Raiders, both of which were on the Chargers' dance card for the tail end of the season.

None of this was the least comfort to Ryan. Sleep came hard, despite the enveloping fatigue that seemed to define what his life had become. Before when thoughts had plagued his night, he'd come to the windows facing the Chesapeake Bay and stood, watching the ships and boats pass a few miles away. Now he sat and stared. His legs were weary and weak, always tired, until standing took a conscious effort. His stomach rebelled at the acid produced by stress and augmented by caffeine and alcohol. He needed sleep, slumber to relax his muscles, dreamless oblivion to loosen his mind from the day-to-day decisions. He needed exercise. He needed many things. He needed to be a man again. Instead he got wakefulness, a mind that would not stop turning over the thoughts of the day and the failures of the night.

Jack knew that Liz Elliot hated him. He even thought he knew why, that first meeting a few years before in Chicago where she'd been in a bad mood and he'd been in one also, and their introduction had been one of harsh words. The difference was that he tended to forget slights—most of them, anyway—and she did not; and she had the ear of the President. Because of her, his role in the Vatican Treaty would never be known. The one thing he had done that was untainted by his work at the Agency—Ryan was proud of what he'd done in CIA, but knew that it was narrowly political or strategic, aimed at the betterment of his own country, while the Vatican Treaty had been for the betterment of the whole world. That one proud insight. Gone, credited to others. Jack didn't want sole credit. It had not been exclusively his work, but he did want fair mention as one of the players. Was that asking too much? Fourteen-hour days, much of it spent in cars, the three times he'd

risked his life for his country—for what? So that some political bitch from Bennington could tear up his evaluations.

Liz, you wouldn't even be there except for me and what I did, and neither would your boss, the Ice Man, Jonathan Robert Fowler of Ohio!

But they could not know that. Jack had given his word. Given his word to what? For what?

The worst part of all, it was now affecting him in a way that was both new and totally unexpected. He'd disappointed his wife again this night. It was incomprehensible to him. Like throwing a light switch and getting no light, like turning the key to start the car and—

Like not being a man. That was the simple description.

I am a man. I've done all the things a man can do.

Try explaining that to your wife, chump!

I've fought for my family, for my country, killed for my family and my country. I've won respect among the best of men. I've done things that can never be known and kept the secrets that had to be kept. I've served as well as any man can.

So why are you looking out at the water at two in the morning, ace?

I've made a difference! Jack's *mind raged.*

Who knows? Who cares?

But what of my friends?

A whole lot of good they do you—besides, what friends? When's the last time you saw Skip Tyler or Robby Jackson? Your friends at Langley—why not confide your problems to them?

Dawn came as a surprise, but not so much a surprise as that he'd actually slept, sitting alone in the living room. Jack rose, feeling the aches in his muscles unhelped by whatever number of hours he'd not been awake. It hadn't been sleep, he told himself on the way to the bathroom. It was just that he hadn't been awake. Sleep was rest, and he felt singularly unrested, with a pounding headache from the cheap wine of the previous night. The only good news—if that's what it was—was that Cathy didn't get up. Jack fixed his own coffee and was waiting at the door when Clark drove up.

"Another great weekend, I see," the man said as Ryan got into the car.

"Et tu, John?"

"Look, Deputy Director, you want to take a swing at me, go right ahead. You looked like shit a couple of months back and you're getting worse instead of better. When's the last time you took a vacation, got away for more than a day or two, you know, maybe pretended you were a real person instead of some fuckin' government ticket-puncher who's afraid that if he leaves nobody'll notice?"

"Clark, you do have a way of brightening my mornings."

"Hey, man, I'm just an SPO, but don't bitch if I take the 'protective' part seriously, 'kay?" John pulled the car over and parked it. "Doc, I've seen this before. People burn out. You're burning out. You're burning the candle both ends and the middle. That's hard to do when you're in your twenties, and you ain't in your twenties anymore, in case nobody bothered telling you."

"I'm quite aware of the infirmities that come with age." Ryan tried a wry smile to show that it wasn't that big a deal, that Clark was overdoing it.

It didn't work. Suddenly it occurred to John that his wife hadn't been at the

door. Trouble at home? Well, he couldn't ask about that, could he? What he saw in Ryan's face was bad enough. It wasn't just fatigue. He was tiring from within, all the shit he was taking from up the chain of command, the strain of backstopping Director Cabot on damned near everything that went out the front door. Cabot—not a bad guy, he meant well, but the truth of the matter was that he just didn't know what the hell he was doing. So Congress depended on Ryan, and the Operations and Intelligence Directorates depended on Ryan for leadership and coordination. He couldn't escape his responsibilities, and didn't have the good sense to realize that some were really things he could leave to others. The directorate chiefs could have taken up more of the slack, but they were letting Ryan do it all. A strong bark from the Deputy Director's office could have set that right, but would Cabot back him up—or would those White House pukes take it as a sign that Jack was trying a takeover?

Fuckin' politics! Clark thought as he pulled back onto the road. Office politics, political politics. And something was wrong at home, too. Clark didn't know what, but he knew it was something.

Doc, you're too damned good a man for this!

"Can I lay a piece of advice on you?"

"Go ahead," Jack replied, looking through dispatches.

"Take two weeks, go to Disney World, Club Med, find a beach and walk it. Get the hell out of town for a while."

"The kids are in school."

"So take them out of school, for Christ's sake! Better yet, maybe, leave them and get away, you and your wife. No, you're not that kind. Take them to see Mickey."

"I can't. They're in school—"

"They're in *grammar* school, not graduate school, doc. Missing two weeks of long division and learning to spell 'squirrel' won't stunt their intellectual growth. You need to get away, recharge the batteries, smell the fucking roses!"

"Too much work, John."

"You listen to me! You know how many friends I've buried? You know how many people I went out with who never got the chance to have a wife and kids and a nice house on the water? A lot, pal, a whole lot, never came close to having what you have. You got all that, and you're trying very damned hard to end up dead—and that's what's gonna happen, doc. One way or another, give it maybe ten years."

"I have a job to do!"

"It ain't important enough to wreck your fucking life for, you dumbass! Can't you see that?"

"And then who runs the shop?"

"Sir, you might be hard to replace when you're at your best, but the shape you're in now, that Goodley kid can do your job at least as well as you can." And that, Clark saw, scored for points. "Just how effective do you think you are right now?"

"Will you do me a favor and just drive the car." There was another SPINNAKER report waiting for him, according to coded phrases in the morning dispatches, along with one from NIITAKA. This would be a busy day.

Just what he needed, Jack thought to himself, closing his eyes for a moment's rest.

It got worse. Ryan was surprised to find himself at work, more surprised that fatigue had defeated morning coffee and allowed him to sleep for forty minutes or so on the way in. He accepted Clark's told-you-so look and made his way up to the 7th floor. A messenger brought in the two important files, along with a note that Director Cabot was going to be late. The guy was keeping banker's hours. Spies were supposed to work harder, Jack thought. *I sure as hell do.*

NIITAKA came first. The Japanese, the report said, were planning to renege on a rare trade concession made only six months earlier. It would be explained away as "unfortunate and unforeseen" circumstances, part of which might be true, Ryan thought as he read down the page—the Japanese had as many domestic political problems as everyone else—but there was something else: they were going to coordinate something in Mexico . . . something to do with the state visit of their Prime Minister to Washington the coming February. Instead of buying American farm goods, they were opting to buy them cheaper from Mexico, playing that off against reduced tariff barriers into that country. That was the plan, in any case. They weren't sure they could get the concession from Mexico, and they were planning . . .

. . . a bribe?

"Jesus," Ryan breathed. The Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party—PRI—didn't exactly have an exemplary record for integrity, but this . . . ? It would be handled in face-to-face talks in Mexico City. If they got the concession, trading access to Mexican markets to opening Japan to Mexican foodstuffs, then the amount of American foodstuffs they had committed to buy the previous February would be reduced. It made good business sense. Japan would get food a little cheaper than they could in America while at the same time opening up a new market. Their excuse to American farmers would have to do with agricultural chemicals that their food-and-drug agency would decide, much to everyone's surprise, not to like for reasons of public health.

The bribe was fully in proportion to the magnitude of the target. Twenty-five million dollars, to be paid in a roundabout, quasi-legal fashion. When the Mexican President left office the following year, he would head a new corporation that . . . no, they would buy out a corporation he already owned for fair market value, and the new ownership would keep him on, while inflating the value of the business and paying his impressive salary in return for his obvious expertise at public relations.

"Nice separation," Ryan said aloud. It was almost comical, and the funny part was that it might even be legal in America if someone hired a sharp-enough lawyer. Maybe not even that much. Plenty of people from State and Commerce had hired themselves out to Japanese interests immediately after leaving government service.

Except for one little thing: what Ryan held in his hand was evidence of conspiracy. In one way they were foolish: the Japanese thought that some councils were sacrosanct, that some words spoken aloud would never be heard outside the four enclosing walls that heard them. They didn't know that a certain cabinet member had a certain mistress who in turn had a personal beef

that matched her ability to loosen a man's tongue; and that America now had access to all that information, courtesy of a KGB officer. . . .

"Think, boy."

If they could get harder evidence, and give that over to Fowler. . . . But how? You couldn't exactly cite the report of a spy in court. . . a Russian national, a KGB officer working in a third country.

But they weren't talking about an open court with rules of evidence, were they? Fowler could discuss this in his own face-to-face meet with their PM.

Ryan's phone rang. "Yes, Nancy?"

"The Director just called in. He's got the flu."

"Lucky him. Thanks. Flu, my ass," Ryan said after hanging up. The man was lazy.

. . . Fowler could play it one of two ways: (1) face-to-face, tell him that we know what he's up to and we won't stand for it, that we will inform the proper congressional people and . . . or, (2) just leak it to the press.

Option 2 would have all sorts of evil consequences, not the least of which would be in Mexico. Fowler didn't like the Mexican President, and liked the PRI even less. Whatever you said about Fowler, he was an honest man who loathed corruption in all its forms.

Option 1 . . . Ryan had to report this to Al Trent, didn't he? He had to let Trent know about the new operation, but Trent had his personal ax to grind on trade issues, and Fowler would worry that he might be leaky on this issue. On the other hand, could he legally *not* tell Trent? Ryan lifted his phone again.

"Nancy, could you tell the general counsel that I need to see him? Thanks."

Next came SPINNAKER. *What,* Ryan thought, *does Mr. Kadishev have to say today . . . ?*

"Dear God in heaven." Ryan forced himself to relax. He read through the complete report, then stopped and read through it again. He picked up his phone and punched the button to speed-dial Mary Pat Foley.

But the phone just rang for thirty seconds until someone picked it up.

"Yes?"

"Who is this?"

"Who is this?"

"This is Deputy Director Ryan. Where's Mary Pat?"

"In labor, sir. Sorry, I didn't know who you were," the man's voice went on. "Ed's with her, of course."

"Okay, thanks." Ryan hung up. "Shit!" On the other hand, he couldn't be angry about that, could he? He got up and walked out to his secretary's office.

"Nancy, Mary Pat's in labor," Jack told Mrs. Cummings.

"Oh, wonderful—well, not wonderful, it's not all that much fun," Nancy observed. "Flowers?"

"Yeah, something nice—you know that stuff better than I do. Put it on my American Express."

"Wait until we're sure everything's okay?"

"Yeah, right." Ryan returned to his office. "Now what?" he asked himself.

You know what you have to do. The only question is whether or not you really want to do it.

Jack lifted his phone again and punched yet another speed-dial button.

"Elizabeth Elliot," she said, picking up her direct line, the one known only to a handful of government insiders.

"Jack Ryan."

The cold voice grew yet colder. "What is it?"

"I need to see the President."

"What about?" she asked.

"Not over the phone."

"It's a secure phone, Ryan!"

"Not secure enough. When can I come over? It's important."

"How important?"

"Important enough to bump his appointment schedule, Liz!" Ryan snapped back. "You think I'm playing games here?"

"Calm down and wait." Ryan heard pages turning. "Be here in forty minutes. You can have fifteen minutes. I'll fix the schedule."

"Thank you, Dr. Elliot." Ryan managed not to slam the phone down. *Goddamn that woman!* Ryan got up again. Clark was back in Nancy's office. "Warm the car up."

"Where to?" Clark asked, rising. -

"Downtown." Jack turned. "Nancy, call the Director. Tell him I have to get something to the Boss, and, with all due respect, he should get his tail in here." That would be inconvenient. Cabot's place was an hour away, in fox country.

"Yes, sir." One of the few things he could depend on was Nancy Cummings' professionalism.

"I need three copies of this. Make one more for the Director and return the original to secure storage."

"Take two minutes," Nancy said.

"Fine." Jack walked off to the washroom. Looking in the mirror, he saw that Clark was as right as ever. He really did look like hell. But that couldn't be helped. "Ready?"

"If you are, doc." Clark was already holding the documents in a zipped leather case.

The perversity of life did not abate this Monday morning. Somewhere around the I-66 cutoff, some fool had managed to cause an accident, and that backed traffic up. What should have been a ten- or fifteen-minute drive took thirty-five. Even senior government officials have to deal with D.C. traffic. The Agency car pulled into West Executive Drive barely on time. Jack managed not to run into the west entrance to the White House only because someone might notice. Reporters used this entrance, too. A minute later he was in Liz Elliot's corner office.

"What gives?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"I'd prefer to go over this just once. We have a report from a penetration agent that you're not going to like very much."

"You have to tell me something," Elliot pointed out, reasonably for once.

"Narmonov, his military, and nukes."

She nodded. "Let's go." It was a short walk down two corridors, past eight Secret Service agents who guarded the President's office like a pack of very respectful wolves.

"I hope this is good," President Fowler said without rising. "I'm missing a budget brief for this."

"Mr. President, we have a very highly placed penetration agent inside the Soviet government," Ryan began.

"I know that. I have asked you not to reveal his name to me, as you recall."

"Yes, sir," Ryan said. "I'm going to tell you his name now. Oleg Kirilovich Kadishev. We call him SPINNAKER. He was recruited some years ago by Mary Patricia Foley when she and her husband were in Moscow."

"Why did you give me that?" Fowler asked.

"So that you can evaluate what he says. You've seen his reports before under the code names RESTORATIVE and PIVOT."

"PIVOT . . . ? That's the one back in September that talked about problems with Narmonov's—I mean, that he was having trouble with his security apparatus."

"Correct, Mr. President." *Good for you*, Ryan thought. *You remember what we send down.* It was not always so, Ryan knew.

"I gather his problems are worsening or you would not be here. Go on," Fowler ordered, leaning back in his chair.

"Kadishev says he had a meeting with Narmonov last week—late last week—"

"Wait a minute. Kadishev—he's a member of their parliament, head of one of the opposition groups, right?"

"Also correct, sir. He has a lot of one-on-ones with Narmonov, and that's why he's so valuable to us."

"Fine, I can see that."

"In their most recent meeting, he says, Narmonov said that his problems are indeed getting worse. He's allowed his military and security forces to increase their internal clout, but it would seem that this is not enough. There may be opposition to the arms-reduction-treaty implementation. According to this report, the Soviet military wants to hold on to all of its SS-18s instead of eliminating six regiments of them as agreed. Our man says that Narmonov may be ready to give in to them on that point. Sir, that would be treaty violation, and that's why I'm here."

"How important is it?" Liz Elliot asked. "The technical side, I mean."

"Okay, we've never been able to make this very clear. Secretary Bunker understands, but Congress has never quite figured it out: since we're in the process of reducing nuclear arms by a little more than half, we've changed the nuclear equation. When both sides had ten thousand RVs it was pretty clear to everyone that nuclear war was a difficult—virtually impossible—thing to win. With so many warheads to hit, you'd never get them all, and there would always be enough left to launch a crippling counterattack.

"But with the reductions, the calculus changes. Now, depending on the mix of forces, such an attack becomes theoretically possible, and that's why the mix of forces was so carefully spelled out in the treaty documents."

"You're saying that the reduction makes things more dangerous rather than less?" Fowler asked.

"No, sir, not exactly. I've said all along—I consulted with the treaty team back some years ago, back when Ernie Allen was running it—that the net

strategic improvement from a fifty-percent reduction was illusory, mere symbolism."

"Oh, *come* on," Elliot observed scathingly. "It's a reduction by half of—"

"Dr. Elliot, if you ever bothered to sit in on the CAMELOT games you'd understand this a little better." Ryan turned away before he noticed her reaction to this rebuke. Fowler noticed her flush briefly and almost smiled in amusement at her discomfort at being cut down in front of her lover. The President returned his attention to Ryan, sure that he and Elizabeth would speak further on the matter.

"This issue gets very technical. If you don't believe me, ask Secretary Bunker or General Fremont out at SAC Headquarters. The deciding factor is the mix of forces, not the number. If they hold on to those extra SS-18 regiments, the mix is changed to the point at which the Soviets have a genuine advantage. The effect on the treaty is substantive, not merely numerical. But there's more."

"Okay," the President said.

"According to this report, there appears to be some collusion between the military and the KGB. As you know, while the Soviet military owns and maintains the strategic launchers, the warheads have always been under KGB control. Kadishev thinks that those two agencies are getting a little too cozy, and further that security on the warheads might be problematic."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that an inventory of tactical warheads is being withheld."

"Missing nukes?"

"Small ones. It's possible, he says."

"In other words," Fowler said, "their military may be blackmailing Narmonov, and it's possible that they are holding some small weapons as their trump cards?"

Not bad, Mr. President. "Correct, sir."

Fowler was quiet for thirty seconds or so, turning that over in his head as he stared into space. "How reliable is this Kadishev?"

"Mr. President, he's been in our employ for five years. His advice has been very valuable to us, and to the best of our knowledge he's never misled us."

"Possible that he's been turned?" Elliot asked.

"Possible but not likely. We have ways of dealing with that. There are prearranged code phrases which warn us of trouble. Good-news phrases accompany each report, and did in this case also."

"What about confirming the report through other sources?"

"Sorry, Dr. Elliot, but we have nothing to confirm this."

"You came down here with an unconfirmed report?" Elliot asked.

"That is correct," Ryan admitted, not knowing how tired he looked. "There aren't too many agents who could make me do that, but this is one of them."

"What can you do to confirm that?" Fowler asked.

"We can make discreet inquiries through our own networks, and with your permission we can have careful discussions with some foreign services. The Brits have someone in the Kremlin who's giving them some really good stuff. I know Sir Basil Charleston, and I can make approaches, but that means revealing something of what we know. You don't do something like this on the old-boy net. At this level you have to make a real *quid pro quo.* We never do

that without getting executive approval."

"I can understand that. Give me a day to think about it. Does Marcus know about this?"

"No, Mr. President. He has the flu. Ordinarily I would not have come here without consulting with the Director first, but I figured you would want to know about this quickly."

"You've said previously that the Soviet military was more politically reliable than this," Elliot observed.

"Also correct, Dr. Elliot. Action such as Kadishev reports is completely unprecedented. Historically, our worries about political ambition within the Soviet military have been as groundless as they've been continuous. It would seem that this may have changed. The possibility of a de facto alliance between the military and the KGB is most disturbing."

"So you were wrong before?" Elliot pressed.

"That is a possibility," Ryan admitted.

"And now?" Fowler asked.

"Mr. President, what do you want me to say? Might I be wrong on this also? Yes, I may. Am I sure this report is accurate? No, I am not, but the import of the information compels me to bring it to your attention."

"I'm less concerned with the missile issue than with the missing warheads," Elliot said. "If Narmonov is facing real blackmail . . . wow."

"Kadishev is a potential political rival to Narmonov," Fowler noted speculatively. "Why confide in him?"

"You meet regularly with the congressional leadership, sir. So does he. The political dynamic in the Congress of People's Deputies is more confused than on the Hill. Moreover, there's genuine respect between the two. Kadishev has supported Narmonov more often than he's opposed the man. They may be rivals, but there is also a commonality of views on many key issues."

"Okay, I want this information confirmed any way you can, and as quickly as you can."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"How's Goodley working out?" Elliot asked.

"He's a bright kid. He's got a good feel for the Eastern Bloc. I read over a paper he did up at the Kennedy School awhile back, and it was better than what our people did at the time."

"Get him in on this. A fresh mind might be useful," Liz opined.

Jack shook his head emphatically. "This is too sensitive for him."

"Goodley is that Presidential Fellow you told me about? Is he that good, Elizabeth?" Fowler wanted to know.

"I think so."

"My authority, Ryan, let him in," the President ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else?"

"Sir, if you have a minute, we did have something else come in about Japan." Jack explained further for a few minutes.

"Is that a fact . . . ?" Fowler smiled in his clever way. "What do you think of them?"

"I think they like to play games," Ryan answered. "I do not envy the folks

who have to negotiate with them."

"How can we find out if this is true?"

"It comes from a good source. It's another one we guard closely."

"Wouldn't it be nice if . . . how would we find out if the deal is struck?"

"I don't know, Mr. President."

"I could ram something like that right down his throat. I'm getting tired of this trade impasse, and I'm tired of being lied to. Find a way to do it."

"We'll try, Mr. President."

"Thanks for coming in." The President didn't rise or extend his hand. Ryan stood and left.

"What do you think?" Fowler asked as he scanned over the report.

"It confirms what Talbot says about Narmonov's vulnerability . . . but worse."

"I agree. Ryan looks harried."

"He shouldn't be playing both sides of the street."

"Hmph?" the President grunted without looking up.

"I have a preliminary report from the investigation Justice has been running. It looks as though he is playing around, as we suspected, and there is a kid involved. She's the widow of an Air Force guy who died in a training accident. Ryan has spent a lot of money to take care of the family, and his wife doesn't know."

"I don't need that sort of scandal, not another womanizer on top of Charlie's affairs." *Good thing they haven't found out about us*, he didn't have to say. That was, in any case, a different matter. Alden had been a married man. Ryan still was. Fowler was not. That made it different. "How sure are you of this? You said a preliminary report?"

"That's right."

"Firm it up and let me know what you find out."

Liz nodded and went on. "This thing with the Soviet military . . . scary."

"Very scary," Fowler agreed. "We'll talk about it over lunch."

"And that is the halfway point," Fromm said. "Might I ask a favor?"

"What favor is that?" Ghosn asked, hoping that it was not to go back to Germany for time with his wife. That might be sticky.

"I have not had a drink in two months."

Ibrahim smiled. "You understand that I am not permitted such things."

"But do the same rules apply to me?" The German smiled. "I am an infidel, after all."

Ghosn laughed heartily. "Quite true. I'll talk to Günther about it."

"Thank you. Tomorrow, we begin on the plutonium."

"It will take so long?"

"Yes, that and the explosive blocks. We are precisely on schedule."

"That is good to know." *January 12th was the day*.

"Who do we have good in the KGB?" Ryan asked himself back in his office. The big problem with SPINNAKER'S report was that much, maybe most, of the KGB was loyal to Narmonov. The part that might not be was the Second Chief Directorate, which concerned itself with the country's internal security. The

First Chief—a/k/a Foreign—Directorate definitely was, especially with Golovko in his position as First Deputy Chairman to keep an eye on things. That man was a pro, and reasonably nonpolitical. Ryan had a wild thought that a direct call might—no, he'd have to set up a meet . . . but where?

No, that was too dangerous.

"You want me?" It was Goodley, sticking his head through Jack's door. Ryan waved him in.

"Want a promotion?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that at the direction of the President of the United States you are in on something that I think you're not ready for." Jack handed him the SPINNAKER report. "Read."

"Why me, and why did you say—"

"I also said you did a nice job predicting the breakup of the Pact. It was better than anything we did in-house, by the way."

"You mind if I say that you're a strange guy to work with?"

"How do you mean that?" Jack asked.

"You don't like my attitude, but you commend my work."

Ryan leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "Ben, believe it or not, I am not always right. I make mistakes. I've made some whoppers even, but I am smart enough to know that, and because I'm that smart, I look for people with opposing views to backstop me. That's a good habit to get into. I learned it from Admiral Greer. If you learn anything from your time here, Dr. Goodley, learn that. We can't afford fuck-ups here. They happen anyway, but we still can't afford them. That paper you did at Kennedy was better than what I did. It's theoretically possible that you might again one day be right when I am wrong. Fair enough?"

"Yes, sir," Goodley replied quietly, surprised at the statement. Of course he'd be right when Ryan was wrong. That's why he was here.

"Read."

"Mind if I smoke?"

Jack's eyes opened. "You a smoker?"

"I quit a couple of years ago, but since I've been here . . ."

"Try to break that habit, but before you do, give me one."

They both lit up and puffed away in silence, Goodley reading over the report, Ryan watching his eyes. The Presidential Fellow looked up.

"Damn."

"Good first reaction. Now, what do you think?"

"It's plausible."

Ryan shook his head. "That's what I just told the President an hour ago. I'm not sure, but I had to take it to him."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want to play on this a little. The DI's Russian people will chew on it for a couple of days. I want you and me to do our own analysis, but I want a different spin on it."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that you think it's plausible, and I have my doubts. Therefore, you will look for reasons it might not be true, and I'll look for reasons that it is."

Jack paused. “The Intelligence Directorate will play this conventionally. They’re too organized down there. I don’t want that.”

“But you want me to—”

“I want you to exercise that brain. I think you’re smart, Ben. I want you to prove it. That’s an order, by the way.”

Goodley considered that. He wasn’t accustomed to getting or taking orders. “I don’t know that I can do that.”

“Why not?”

“It’s contrary to my views. It’s not the way I see this, it’s—”

“Your beef with me and a lot of people here is the corporate mind of CIA, right? Part of that is correct, we do have a corporate mind, and there are drawbacks to that. It’s also true that your way of thinking has its own pitfalls. If you can prove to me that you are no more a prisoner of your views than I try to be of mine, then you have a future here. Objectivity isn’t easy. You have to exercise it.”

It was a very clever challenge, Goodley thought. He wondered next if he’d perhaps misjudged the DDCI.

“Will Russell cooperate?”

“Yes, Ismael, he will,” Bock said, sipping at a beer. He’d gotten a case of a good German export brew for Fromm, and kept a few for himself. “He thinks we’ll be setting off a large conventional bomb to eliminate television coverage of the game.”

“Clever, but not actually intelligent,” Qati observed. He wanted a beer himself, but could not ask. Besides, he told himself, it would probably upset his stomach, and he’d actually enjoyed three consecutive days of relative health.

“His outlook is limited to tactical matters, yes. On tactical matters he is quite useful, however. His assistance will be crucial to that phase of the operation.”

“Fromm is working out well.”

“As I thought he would. It really is a pity that he will not see it to fruition. The same with the machinists?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Qati frowned. Not a man who blanched at the sight of blood, neither was he one to kill unnecessarily. He’d had to kill people for reasons of security before, though never this many. It was almost becoming a habit. But, he asked himself, why worry about a few when you plan to kill so many more?

“Have you planned for the consequences of failure or discovery?” Bock asked.

“Yes, I have,” Qati replied with a sly smile, followed by an explanation.

“That is ingenious. Good to plan for every contingency.”

“I thought you’d like it.”

21

CONNECTIVITY

It took two weeks, but something finally came back. A KGB officer in the employ of CIA nosed around and heard something: there might be an ongoing operation about nuclear weapons in Germany. Something being run out of Moscow Center. Golovko himself was overseeing things. People working in KGB Station Berlin were cut out of it. End of report.

"Well?" Ryan asked Goodley. "What do you think?"

"It fits the SPINNAKER report. If the story about a fluky inventory of tactical nukes is correct, it certainly makes sense that it would have something to do with the pullbacks of their forward-deployed forces. Things get lost in transit all the time. I lost two boxes of books when I moved down here myself."

"I'd like to think that people take closer care of nuclear weapons than that," Ryan said dryly, noting that Goodley still had a hell of a lot to learn. "What else?"

"I've been looking for data to counter the report. The Soviet reason for their inability to deactivate the SS-18s on schedule is that the factory they built for the purpose is inadequate. Our on-site inspectors can't decide if it's true or not—engineering question. I find it hard to believe that if the Russians actually built the thing—and, hell, they've been building SS-18s for quite a while, haven't they?—they should be able to design a place to dismantle them safely. They say the problem is in the fueling systems, and the wording of the treaty documents. The -18 uses storable liquids and has a pressurized body—that is, the missile structure depends on pressurization to remain rigid. They can defuel in the silos, but then they can't extract the birds without damaging them, and the treaty requires that they be taken intact to the disposal facility. But the disposal facility isn't designed right for defueling, they say. Something about a design flaw and possible environmental contamination. The storable liquids are nasty, they say, and you have to take all sorts of precautions to keep from poisoning people, and the facility is only three kilometers from a city, etc., etc." Goodley paused. "The explanation is plausible, but you have to wonder how people could have screwed up so badly."

"Structural problem," Jack said. "They have trouble placing facilities out in the boonies for the simple reason that there few people have cars, and getting people from their homes to their place of work is more complicated there than here. It's subtle stuff like that that drives us crazy trying to figure the Russians out."

"On the other hand, they can point to a basic mistake like that and try to explain all kinds of things away."

"Very good, Ben," Jack observed. "Now you're thinking like a real spook."

"This is a crazy place to work."

"Storable liquids are nasty, by the way. Corrosive, reactive, toxic. Remember all the problems we had with the Titan-II missiles?"

"No," Goodley admitted.

"Maintenance of the things is a bastard. You have to take all sorts of precautions, despite which you routinely get leaks. The leaks corrode things, injure the maintenance people. . . ."

"Have we exchanged positions on this?" Ben asked lightly.

Ryan smiled, eyes closed. "I'm not sure."

"We're supposed to have better data than this. We're supposed to be able to find things out."

"Yeah, I thought that way once myself. People expect us to know everything there is about every rock, puddle, and personality in the whole world." His eyes opened. "We don't. Never have. Never will. Disappointing, isn't it? The all-pervasive CIA. We have a fairly important question here, and all we have are probabilities, not certainties. How is the President supposed to make a decision if we can't give him facts instead of possibly learned opinions? I've said it before—in writing, even. What we provide people with, most of the time, is official guesses. You know, it's embarrassing to have to send something like this out." Jack's eyes fell on the Directorate of Intelligence report. Their teams of Russian experts had chewed on SPINNAKER for a week and decided that it was probably true but could represent a misunderstanding.

Jack's eyes closed again, and he wished his headache would go away. "That's our structural problem. We look at various probabilities. If you give people a firm opinion, you run the risk of being wrong. Guess what? People remember when you're wrong a lot more often than when you're right. So the tendency is to include all the possibilities. It's intellectually honest, even. Hell of a good dodge. Problem is, it doesn't give people what they think they need. On the user end, people as often as not need probabilities rather than certainties, but they don't always know that. It can drive you crazy, Ben. The outside bureaucracies ask for things we often as not cannot deliver, and our inside bureaucracy doesn't like sticking its neck out on the line any more than anyone else. Welcome to the real world of intelligence."

"I never figured you for a cynic."

"I'm not a cynic. I'm a realist. Some things we know. Some things we don't. The people here are not robots. They're just people looking for answers and finding more questions instead. We have a lot of good people in this building, but bureaucracy mutes individual voices, and facts are discovered more often by individuals than committees." There was a knock on the door. "Come in."

"Dr. Ryan, your secretary isn't—"

"She's having a late lunch."

"I have something for you, sir." The man handed the envelope over. Ryan signed for it and dismissed the messenger.

"Good old All Nippon Airlines," Ryan said after opening the envelope. It was another NIITAKA report. He snapped upright in his chair. "Holy shit!"

"Problem?" Goodley asked.

"You're not cleared for this."

"What seems to be the problem?" Narmonov asked.

Golovko was in the uncomfortable position of having to announce a major success with unpleasant consequences. "President, we have for some time been working on a project to penetrate American cipher systems. We've had some successes, particularly with their diplomatic systems. This is a message that was sent to several of their embassies. We've recovered all of it."

"And?"

* * *

"Who sent this out?"

"Look, Jack," Cabot said, "Liz Elliot took the last SPINNAKER seriously, and she wants State's opinion."

"Well, that's just great. What we've learned from it is that KGB has penetrated our diplomatic ciphers. NIITAKA read the same cable that our Ambassador got. So now Narmonov knows what we're worried about."

"The White House will say that it's not all that bad. Does it really hurt that he knows what our concerns are?" the Director asked.

"The short version is—yes, it does. Sir, you realize that I didn't know about this cable, and how do I read it? I get the text from a KGB officer in Tokyo. Jesus Christ, did we send this inquiry out to Upper Volta, too?"

"They got it all?"

Jack's voice turned to acid. "Care to check the translation?"

"Go see Olson."

"On the way."

Forty minutes later, Ryan and Clark breezed into the outer office of Lieutenant General Ronald Olson, Director of the National Security Agency. Located at Fort Meade, Maryland, between Washington and Baltimore, it had the atmosphere of another Alcatraz, but without the pleasant view of San Francisco Bay. The main building was surrounded by a double fence patrolled by dogs at night—something even CIA didn't bother with, considering it overly theatrical—as physical evidence of their mania for security. NSA's job was to make and break ciphers, to record and interpret every bit of electronic noise on the planet. Jack left his driver reading a *Newsweek* as he strode into the top-floor office of the man who ran this particular outfit, which was several times the size of CIA.

"Ron, you got one big problem."

"What, exactly?"

Jack handed over the NIITAKA dispatch. "I've warned you about this."

"When did this go out?"

"Seventy-two hours ago."

"Out of Foggy Bottom, right?"

"Correct. It was read in Moscow precisely eight hours later."

"Meaning that someone in State might have leaked it, and their embassy could have sent it over by satellite," Olson said. "Or it could have leaked from a cipher clerk or any one of fifty foreign-service officers. . . ."

"Or it could mean that they've broken the whole encoding system."

"STRIPE is secure, Jack."

"Ron, why haven't you just expanded TAPDANCE?"

"Get me the funding and I will."

"This agent has warned us before that they've penetrated our cipher systems. They're reading our mail, Ron, and this is a pretty good piece of evidence."

The General stood his ground. "It's equivocal and you know it."

"Well, our guy is saying that he wants personal assurance from the Director that we haven't, don't, and will never use comm links to transmit his material. As proof of that necessity, he sends us this, which he got at some significant hazard to his own ass." Jack paused. "How many people use this system?"

"STRIPE is exclusively for the State Department. Similar systems are used by the Defense Department. More or less the same machine, slightly different keying systems. The Navy especially likes it. It's very user-friendly," Olson said.

"General, we've had the random-pad technology available for over three years. Your first version, TAPDANCE, used tape cassettes. We're moving over to CD-ROM. It works, it's easy to use. We'll have our systems up and running in another couple of weeks."

"And you want us to copy it?"

"Looks sensible to me."

"You know what my people will say if we copy a system from CIA?" Olson asked.

"Goddamn it! We stole the idea from you, remember?"

"Jack, we're working on something similar, easier to use, little bit more secure. There are problems, but my back-room boys are almost ready to try it out."

Almost ready, Ryan thought. *That means anywhere from three months to three years.*

"General, I'm putting you on official notice. We have indications that your communications links are compromised."

"And?"

"And I will make that report to Congress and the President as well."

"It's much more likely that there's someone at State who leaked this. Further, it is possible that you're the victim of disinformation. What does this agent give us?" the NSA Director asked.

"Some very useful material—us and Japan."

"But nothing on the Soviet Union?"

Jack hesitated before answering, but there was no question of Olson's loyalty. Or his intelligence. "Correct."

"And you're saying that you're certain this *isn't* a false-flag operation? I repeat—certain?"

"You know better than that, Ron. What's certain in this business?"

"Before I request a couple hundred million dollars' worth of funding, I need something better than this. It's happened before, and we've done it, too—if the other side has something you can't break, get them to change it. Make it appear that they're penetrated."

"That might have been true fifty years ago, but not anymore."

"Repeat, I need better evidence before I go to see Trent. We can't slap something together as quickly as you can with MERCURY. We have to make thousands of the goddamned things. Supporting that is complex and costly as hell. I need hard evidence before I stick my neck out that far."

"Fair enough, General. I've had my say."

"Jack, we'll look into it. I have a tiger team that does that, and I'll have them examining the problem tomorrow morning. I appreciate your concern. We're friends, remember?"

"Sorry, Ron. Long hours."

"Maybe you need some time off. You look tired."

"That's what everybody tells me."

Ryan's next stop was at the FBI.

"I heard," Dan Murray said. "That bad?"

"I think so. Ron Olson isn't so sure." Jack didn't have to explain. Of all the possible disasters for a government to face short of war, none was worse than leaky communications links. Literally everything depended on secure methods of moving information from one place to another. Wars had been won and lost on the basis of a single message that had been leaked to the other side. One of America's most stunning foreign-policy coups, the Washington Naval Treaty, had been the direct result of the State Department's ability to read the cipher traffic between all of the participating diplomats and their governments. A government that had no secrets could not function.

"Well, there's the Walkers, Pelton, the others. . . ." Murray observed. The KGB had been remarkably successful at recruiting people within the American communications agencies. Cipher clerks held the most sensitive jobs in the embassies, but were so poorly paid and regarded that they were still called "clerks," not even "technicians." Some resented that. Some resented it enough that they had decided that they could make money from what they knew. They all learned eventually that intelligence agencies pay poorly (except for CIA, which rewarded treason with real money), but by then it was always too late to turn back. From Walker the Russians had learned how American cipher machines were designed and how their keying systems worked. The basics of the cipher machines hadn't really changed all that much in the preceding ten years. Improved technology had made them more efficient and much more reliable than their stepping-switch and pin-disc ancestors, but they all worked on a mathematical area called Complexity Theory, which had been developed by telephone engineers sixty years earlier to predict the working of large switching systems. And the Russians had some of the best mathematical theorists in the world. It was believed by many that knowledge of the structure of cipher machines might enable a really clever mathematician to crack a whole system. Had some unknown Russian made a theoretical breakthrough? If so . . .

"We have to assume there are more we haven't caught. Add that to their technical expertise, and I'm really worried."

"Doesn't affect the Bureau directly, thank God." Most of the FBI encrypted communications were voice links, and though they could be broken, the data recovered was both too time-sensitive and further disguised by the use of code

names and slang that mostly concealed what agents were up to. Besides which, the opposition had real limits on how many things they could examine.

"Can you have your people do some scratching around?"

"Oh, yeah. You're going up the chain on this?"

"I think I have to, Dan."

"You're bucking a couple of major bureaucracies."

Ryan leaned against the doorframe. "My cause is just, isn't it?"

"You never learn, do you?" Murray shook his head and laughed.

"Those bastard Americans!" Narmonov raged.

"What's the problem now, Andrey Il'ych?"

"Oleg Kirilovich, have you any idea what it is like dealing with a suspicious foreign country?"

"Not yet," Kadishev answered. "I only deal with suspicious domestic elements." The effective abolition of the Politburo had perversely eliminated the apprenticeship period during which an up-and-coming Soviet political figure might learn the international version of statecraft. Now they were no better off than Americans were. And that, Kadishev reminded himself, was something to keep in mind. "What seems to be the problem?"

"This must be kept absolutely secret, my young friend."

"Understood."

"The Americans have circulated a memorandum around their embassies to make discreet inquiries concerning my political vulnerability."

"Indeed?" Kadishev did not allow himself to react beyond the single word. He was immediately struck by the dichotomy of the situation. His report had had the proper effect on the American government, but the fact that Narmonov knew of it made his discovery as an American agent possible. Wasn't that interesting? he asked himself in a moment of clear objectivity. His maneuvers were now a genuine gamble, with a downside as enormous as the upside. Such things were to be expected, weren't they? He was not gambling a month's wages. "How do we know this?" he asked after a moment's reflection.

"That I cannot reveal."

"I understand." *Damn! Well, he is confiding in me . . . though that might be a clever ploy on Andrey Il'ych's part, mightn't it?* "But we are sure of it?"

"Quite sure."

"How can I help?"

"I need your help, Oleg. Again, I ask for it."

"This business with the Americans concerns you greatly, then?"

"Of course it does!"

"I can understand that it is something to be considered, but what real interest do they have in our domestic politics?"

"You know the answer to that."

"True."

"I need your help," Narmonov repeated.

"I must discuss this with my colleagues."

"Quickly, if you please."

"Yes." Kadishev took his leave and walked out to his car. He drove himself, which was unusual for a senior Soviet politician. Times had changed. Such

officials now had to be men of the people, and that meant that the reserved center lanes of the broad Moscow streets were gone, along with most of the other traditional perks. That was too bad, Kadishev thought, but without the other changes that made it necessary, he'd still be a lonely voice in some distant *oblast* instead of the leader of a major faction in the Congress of People's Deputies. So he was willing to do without the dacha in the woods east of Moscow, and the luxury apartment, and the chauffeur-driven, handmade limousine, and all the other things that had once attached to the rulers of this vast and unhappy country. He drove to his legislative office, where at least he had a reserved parking place. Once behind the closed door of his office, he composed a brief letter on his personal typewriter. This he folded into a pocket. There was work to do this day. He walked down the street to the immense lobby of the Congress, and checked his coat. The attendant was female. She took his coat and handed him a numbered token. He thanked her politely. As she took the coat to its numbered hook, the attendant removed the note from the inside pocket and tucked it into the pocket of her own jacket. Four hours later it arrived in the American Embassy.

"Panic attack?" Fellows asked.

"You might call it that, gentlemen," Ryan said.

"Okay, tell us about the problem." Trent sipped at his tea.

"We've had more indications that our communications links may be penetrated."

"Again?" Trent rolled his eyes.

"Come on, Al, we've heard that song before," Fellows grumbled. "Details, Jack, details."

Ryan went through the data.

"And what's the White House think?"

"I don't know yet. I'm heading up the street after I leave here. Frankly I'd rather discuss it with you guys first, and I had to come down on some other stuff anyway." Jack went on to describe the SPINNAKER report on Narmonov's problems.

"How long have you had this?"

"A couple of weeks—"

"Why haven't we heard it?" Trent demanded.

"Because we've been running around in circles trying to confirm it," Jack answered.

"And?"

"Al, we've been unable to confirm directly. There are indications that the KGB is up to something. There seems to be a very discreet operation in Germany, looking for some lost tactical nukes."

"Good Lord!" Fellows noted. "What do you mean by 'lost'?"

"We're not sure. If it ties in with SPINNAKER, well, maybe there's been some creative accounting on the part of the Soviet Army."

"Your opinion?"

"I don't know, guys, I just don't know. Our analysis people are about evenly divided—those that are willing to offer an opinion."

"We know their army isn't real happy," Fellows said slowly. "The loss of

funding, loss of prestige, loss of units and billets . . . but *that* unhappy?"

"Pleasant thought," Trent added. "A power struggle in a country with all those nukes. . . . How reliable has SPINNAKER been?"

"Very. Five years of devoted service."

"He's a member of their parliament, right?" Fellows asked.

"Correct."

"Evidently a very senior one to get stuff like this . . . that's okay, I don't think either one of us wants to know his name," Fellows added.

Trent nodded. "Probably somebody we've met." *Good guess, Al,* Jack didn't say. "You're taking this seriously also?"

"Yes, sir, and also trying very hard to confirm it."

"Anything new on NI TAKA?" Trent asked.

"Sir, I—"

"I heard from up the treet that there's something to do with Mexico," Al Trent said next. "The President evidently wants my support on something. You are cleared to tell us. Honest, Jack, the President has authorized it."

It was a technical rules violation, but Ryan had never known Trent to break his word. He went through that report also.

"Those little bastards!" Trent breathed. "You know how many votes it cost me to roll over on that trade deal, and now they're planning to *break* it! So you're saying we've been rolled again?"

"A possibility, sir."

"Sam? The farmers in your district use all those nasty agricultural chemicals. Might cost 'em."

"Al, free trade is an important principle," Fellows said.

"So's keeping your goddamned word!"

"No argument, Al." Fellows started thinking about how many of his farmers might lose expected export income from a flipflop on the deal that he'd fought for on the floor of the House. "How can we confirm this one?"

"Not sure yet."

"Bug his airplane?" Trent suggested with a chuckle. "If we can confirm this, I'd like to be there when Fowler shoves it up his ass! God *damn* it! I lost votes over this!" That he'd carried his district 58—42 was, for the moment, beside the point. "Well, the President wants us to back him up on this one. Problems from your side of the aisle, Sam?"

"Probably not."

"I'd just as soon stay clear of the political side of this, gentlemen. I'm just here as a messenger, remember?"

"Jack Ryan, last of the virgins." Trent laughed. "Good report, thanks for coming down. Let us know if the President wants us to authorize the new and improved TAPDANCE."

"He'll never try. You're looking at two or three hundred million bucks, and bucks are tight," Fellows noted. "I want to see better data before we spring for it. We've dropped too much money down these black holes."

"All I can say, Congressman, is that I'm taking it very seriously. So is the FBI."

"And Ron Olson?" Trent asked.

"He's circling his wagons."

"You'll have a better chance if he asks," Fellows told Ryan.

"I know. Well, at least we'll have our system up and running in three more weeks. We've started turning out the first set of discs and doing preliminary tests now."

"How so?"

"We use a computer to look for nonrandomness. The big one, the Cray YMP. We brought in a consultant from MIT's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory to do a new kind of type-token program. In another week—ten days, call it—we'll know if the system is what we expect it to be. Then we'll start sending the hardware out."

"I really hope you're wrong on this," Trent said as the meeting closed.

"So do I, man, but my instincts say otherwise."

"And how much is it going to cost?" Fowler asked over lunch.

"From what I gather, two or three hundred million."

"No. We've got budget problems enough."

"I agree," Liz Elliot said. "But I wanted to discuss it with you first. It's Ryan's idea. Olson at NSA says he's full of it, says the systems are secure, but Ryan's really crazed about this new encoding system. You know he pushed the same thing through for the Agency—even went to Congress directly."

"Oh, really?" Fowler looked up from his plate. "He didn't go through OMB? What gives?"

"Bob, he delivered his pitch for the new NSA system to Trent and Fellows before he came to see me!"

"Who the hell does he think he is!"

"I keep telling you, Bob."

"He's out, Elizabeth. Out. O-U-T. Get moving on it."

"Okay, I think I know how to do it."

Circumstances made it easy. One of Ernest Wellington's investigators had been staking out the 7-Eleven for a week. The Zimmer family business was just off U.S. Route 50 between Washington and Annapolis, and was adjacent to a large housing development from which it drew much of its business. The investigator parked his van at the end of a street that gave him both a view of the business building and the family house which was only fifty yards away from it. The van was a typical covert-surveillance vehicle, custom-built by one of several specialty firms. The roof vent concealed a sophisticated periscope, whose two lenses were connected respectively to a TV camera and a 35mm Canon. The investigator had a cooler full of soft drinks, a large thermos of coffee and a chemical toilet. He thought of the cramped van as his own personal space vehicle, and some of its high-tech gadgetry was at least as good as NASA had installed on the Shuttle.

"Bingo!" the radio crackled. "Subject vehicle is taking the exit. Breaking off now."

The man in the van lifted his own microphone. "Roger, out."

Clark had noticed the Mercury two days earlier. One of the problems with commuting was that the same vehicles kept showing up from time to time,

and he'd decided that's all it was. It never got close, and never followed them off the main road. In this case, as he took the exit, it didn't follow. Clark shifted his attention to other matters. He hadn't noticed that the guy was using a microphone . . . but those new cellular things had you talking into the visor, and—wasn't technology wonderful? A good chase car need not tip himself off anymore. He pulled into the 7-Eleven parking lot, his eyes scanning for trouble. He saw none. Clark and Ryan exited the car at the same instant. Clark's topcoat was unbuttoned, as was his suit jacket, the easier to allow access to the Beretta 10mm pistol riding on his right hip. The sun was setting, casting a lovely orange glow in the western sky, and it was unseasonably warm, shirtsleeve weather that made him regret the raincoat he was wearing. D.C.-area weather was as predictably unpredictable as anywhere in the world.

"Hello, Dr. Ryan," one of the Zimmer kids said. "Mom's over at the house."

"Okay." Ryan walked back outside and headed for the flagstone walk to the Zimmer residence. He spotted Carol in the back, with her youngest on the new swing set. Clark trailed, alert as ever, seeing nothing but still-green lawns and parked cars, a few kids throwing a football. Such temperate weather in the beginning of December worried Clark. He believed it heralded a bastard of a winter.

"Hi, Carol!" Jack called. Mrs. Zimmer was closely observing her youngest in the swing seat.

"Doc Ryan, you like the new swing set?"

Jack nodded a little guiltily. He should have helped get it together. He was an expert on assembling toys. He leaned over. "How's the little munchkin?"

"She won't get out, and it's dinnertime," Carol said. "You help?"

"How's everyone else?"

"Peter accepted in college, too! Full scholarship MIT."

"Great!" Jack gave her a congratulatory hug. *What's the old joke? "The doctor is five and the lawyer is three?" God, wouldn't Buck be proud of how these kids are turning out?* It was little more than the normal Asian obsession with education, of course, the same thing that had stood Jewish-Americans in such good stead. If an opportunity presents itself, grab it by the throat. He bent down to the newest Zimmer, who held her arms up for her Uncle Jack.

"Come on, Jackie." He picked her up and got a kiss for his trouble. Ryan looked up when he heard the noise.

"Gotcha." It's a simple trick, and an effective one. Even if you know it's coming, you can't do much to prevent it. The van had several buttons which, when pressed, beeped the horn. It was a sound the human brain recognized as a danger signal, and one instinctively looked toward whatever direction it had come from to see if there was any cause for concern. The investigator hit the nearest one, and, sure enough, Ryan looked up toward the sound, with an armful of kid. He'd caught the hug for the woman, and the kiss from the kid, and now he had a full-face shot on the 1200-speed film in his camera to back up the videotape. That simple. He had the goods on this Ryan guy. Amazing that a man with such a lovely wife would feel the need to screw around, but that was life, wasn't it? A CIA bodyguard to keep everything nice and secure.

A kid involved, too. *What a shit,* the man thought as the motor-drive whirred away on the Canon.

"You stay for dinnah! This time you stay. We celebrate Peter scholarship."

"Can't say no to that one, doc," Clark observed.

"Okay." Ryan carried Jacqueline Theresa Zimmer into the house. Neither he nor Clark noticed that the van parked fifty yards away pulled off a few minutes later.

It was the most delicate part of the process. The plutonium was set into cerium sulfide ceramic crucibles. The crucibles were carried to the electric furnace. Fromm closed and locked the door. A vacuum pump evacuated the enclosure and replaced argon.

"Air has oxygen," Fromm explained. "Argon is an inert gas. We take no chances. Plutonium is highly reactive and pyrophoric. The ceramic crucibles are also inert and nonreactive. We use more than one crucible to avoid the possibility of forming a critical mass and starting a premature atomic reaction."

"The phase-transformations?" Ghosn asked.

"Correct."

"How long?" This question from Qati.

"Two hours. We take our time in this part. On removal from the furnace, the crucibles will be covered, of course, and we make the pour in an inert-gas enclosure. Now you know why we needed this sort of furnace."

"No danger when you make the pour?"

Fromm shook his head. "None at all, so long as we are careful. The configuration of the mold absolutely prevents forming a critical mass. I've done this many times in simulation. There have been accidents, but those invariably involved larger masses of fissile material and took place before all the hazards of handling plutonium were fully understood. No, we will move slowly and carefully. Pretend it is gold," Fromm concluded.

"The machining process?"

"Three weeks, and two more of assembly and testing of the components."

"The tritium extraction?" Ghosn asked.

Fromm bent down to look into the furnace. "I'll do that right before completion, and that will conclude the exercise."

"See any resemblance?" the investigator asked.

"Hard to tell," Wellington thought. "In any case, he sure seems to like the little tyke. Cute enough. I watched them build the,swing set last weekend. The little one—name's Jackie, by the way, Jacqueline Theresa—"

"Oh? That's interesting." Wellington made a note.

"Anyway, the little one loves the damned thing."

"Seems right fond of Mr. Ryan, also."

"You suppose he really is the father?"

"Possible," Wellington said, watching the videotape and comparing the picture there with the still shots. "Light wasn't very good."

"I can have the back-room boys enhance it. Take a few days for the tape,

though. They have to do it frame by frame."

"I think that's a good idea. We want this to be solid."

"It will be. So what's going to happen to him?"

"He'll be encouraged to leave government service, I suppose."

"You know, if we were private citizens, you might call this blackmail, invasion of privacy. . . ."

"But we're not, and it isn't. This guy holds a security clearance, and it appears that his personal life isn't what it should be."

"I suppose that's not our fault, is it?"

"Exactly."

22

REPERCUSSIONS

"Damn it, Ryan, you can't do that!"

"Do what?" Jack responded.

"You went over my head to the Hill."

"What do you mean? All I did was suggest to Trent and Fellows that there might be a problem. I'm supposed to do that."

"It's not confirmed," the Director insisted.

"So, what ever is fully confirmed?"

"Look at this." Cabot handed over a new file.

"This is SPINNAKER. Why haven't I seen it yet?"

"Just read it!" Cabot snapped back.

"Confirms the leak . . ." It was a short one, and Jack raced through it.

"Except he thinks it's a leak in the Moscow Embassy. Like a code clerk, maybe."

"Pure speculation on his part—all he really says is that he wants his reports transported by hand now. That's the only definite thing this tells us."

Cabot dodged. "I know we've done that before."

"Yes, we have," Ryan admitted. It would even be easier now with the direct air service from New York to Moscow.

"What's the rat line look like now?"

Ryan frowned at that. Cabot liked to use Agency jargon, though the term "rat line," meaning the chain of people and methods that transported a document from agent to case officer, had actually gone out of favor. "It's a fairly simple one. Kadishev leaves his messages in a coat pocket. The checkroom attendant at their Congress retrieves the messages and gets them off to one of our people by brush-pass. Simple and direct. Also rather fast. I've never been comfortable with it, but it works."

"So now we have two top agents who're unhappy with our communications systems, and I have to fly all the way to Japan—personally—to meet with one."

"It's not all that unusual for an agent to want to meet a high Agency official, Director. These people get twitchy, and knowing that some higher-up cares about them is what they need."

"It'll waste a whole week of my time!" Cabot objected.

"You have to go to Korea in late January anyway," Ryan pointed out. "Catch our friend on the way back. He's not demanding to see you immediately, just soon." Ryan returned to the SPINNAKER report, wondering why Cabot allowed himself to be sidetracked by irrelevancies. The reason, of course, was that the man was a dilettante, and a lazy one, who disliked losing

arguments.

The new report said that Narmonov was very worried indeed that the West would find out just how desperate his situation with the Soviet military and KGB was. There was no further information on missing nuclear weapons, but plenty on new changes in parliamentary loyalties. The report gave Ryan the impression of having been slapped together. He decided to have Mary Pat look at it. Of all the people in the Agency, she was the only one who really understood the guy.

"I presume you're taking it to the President."

"Yes, I think I have to."

"If I may make a suggestion, remember to tell him that we have not really confirmed anything Kadishev has said."

Cabot looked up. "So?"

"So it's true, Director. When you single-source something, especially something that's apparently highly important, you tell people that."

"I believe this guy."

"I'm not so sure."

"The Russian department buys it," Cabot noted.

"True, they've signed off on it, but I'd feel a hell of a lot better if we had independent confirmation," Jack said.

"Do you have any firm basis to doubt this information?"

"Nothing I can show to you, no. It's just that we ought to have been able to confirm something by now."

"So you expect me to go all the way down to the White House, present this, and then admit that it might be wrong?" Cabot stamped out his cigar, much to Jack's relief.

"Yes, sir."

"I won't do that!"

"You have to do that, sir. You have to do that because it happens to be true. It's the rule."

"Jack, it can get slightly tedious when you tell me what the rules of this place are. I am the Director, you know."

"Look, Marcus," Ryan said, trying to keep the exasperation out of his voice, "what we have with this guy is some really hot information, something which, if true, could affect the way we deal with the Soviets. But it is not confirmed. It just comes from one person, okay? What if he's wrong? What if he misunderstands something? What if he's lying, even?"

"Do we have any reason to believe that?"

"None at all, Director, but on something this important—is it prudent or reasonable to affect our government's policy on the basis of a short letter from a single person?" That was always the best way to get to Marcus Cabot, prudence and reason.

"I hear what you're saying, Jack. Okay. My car is waiting. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Cabot grabbed his coat and walked out to the executive elevator. His Agency car was waiting. As Director of Central Intelligence he got a pair of bodyguards, one driving and the other in the front-passenger seat. Otherwise he had to deal with traffic the same as everyone else. Ryan, he thought on the

drive down the George Washington Parkway, was becoming a pain in the ass. Okay, so he himself was new here. Okay, so he was inexperienced. Okay, so he liked to leave day-to-day stuff to his subordinates. He was the Director, after all, and didn't need to deal with every little damned thing. He was getting tired of having the rules of conduct explained to him once or twice a week, tired of having Ryan go over his head, tired of having analysis explained to him every time something really juicy came in. By the time he entered the White House, Cabot was quite annoyed.

"Morning, Marcus," Liz Elliot said in her office.

"Good morning. We have another SPINNAKER report. President needs to go over it."

"So, what's Kadishev up to?"

"Who told you his name?" the DCI growled.

"Ryan—didn't you know?"

"Goddamn it!" Cabot swore. "He didn't tell me that."

"Sit down, Marcus. We have a few minutes. How happy are you with Ryan?"

"Sometimes he forgets who's the Director and who's the Deputy."

"He is a little on the arrogant side, isn't he?"

"Slightly," Cabot agreed frostily.

"He's good at what he does—within limitations—but personally I'm getting a little tired of his attitude."

"I know what you mean. He likes telling me what I have to do—with this, for example."

"Oh, he doesn't trust your judgment?" the National Security Advisor asked, selecting her needle with care.

Cabot looked up. "Yeah, that's the attitude he conveys."

"Well, we weren't able to change everything from the previous administration. Of course, he *is* a pro at this. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"And I'm not?" Cabot demanded.

"Of course you are, Marcus, you know I never meant it that way!"

"Sorry, Liz. You're right. Sometimes he rubs me the wrong way. That's all."

"Let's go see the Boss."

"How solid is this?" President Fowler asked five minutes later.

"As you've already heard, this agent has been working for us over five years, and his information has invariably been accurate."

"Have you confirmed it?"

"Not completely," Cabot replied. "It's unlikely that we can, but our Russian department believes it, and so do I."

"Ryan had his doubts."

Cabot was getting a little tired of hearing about Ryan. "I do not, Mr. President. I think Ryan is trying to impress us with his new views on the Soviet government, trying to show us that he's not a cold-warrior anymore." Again Cabot had dwelt on irrelevancies, Elliot thought to herself.

Fowler's eyes shifted. "Elizabeth?"

"It's certainly plausible that the Soviet security apparatus is trying to stake out an improved position," her voice purred at its most reasonable timbre. "They're unhappy with the liberalization, they're unhappy with their loss of

power, and they're unhappy with what they think is a failure of leadership on Narmonov's part. This information, therefore, is consistent with a lot of other facts we have. I think we should believe it."

"If this is true, then we have to ease off on our support for Narmonov. We cannot be party to a reversion to more centralized rule, particularly if it results from elements who so clearly dislike us."

"Agreed," Liz said. "Better to lose Narmonov. If he can't break their military to his will, then someone else will have to. Of course, we have to give him a fair chance . . . how we do that is rather tricky. We don't want to dump the country into the hands of their military, do we?"

"Are you kidding?" Fowler observed.

They stood on a catwalk inside the massive boat-shed where the Trident submarines were prepared for sea, watching the crew of USS *Georgia* load up for their next cruise.

"Talked his way out of it, Bart?" Jones asked.

"His explanation made a lot of sense, Ron."

"When's the last time you caught me wrong?"

"For all things there is a first time."

"Not this one, skipper," Dr. Jones said quietly. "I got a feeling."

"Okay, I want you to spend some more time on the simulator with his sonar troops."

"Fair enough." Jones was quiet for a few seconds. "You know, it might be fun to go out, just one more time. . . ."

Mancuso turned. "You volunteering?"

"No. Kim might not understand my being away for three months. Two weeks is long enough. Too long, as a matter of fact. I'm getting very domesticated, Bart, getting old and respectable. Not young and bright-eyed like those kids."

"What do you think of them?"

"The sonar guys? They're good. So's the tracking party. The guy Ricks replaced was Jim Rosselli, right?"

"That's right."

"He trained them well. Can we go off the record?"

"Sure."

"Ricks is not a good skipper. He's too tough on the troops, demands too much, too hard to satisfy. Not like you were at all, Bart."

Mancuso dodged the compliment. "We all have different styles."

"I know that, but I wouldn't want to sail with him. One of his chiefs asked for a transfer off. So did half a dozen petty officer."

"They all had family problems." Mancuso had approved all the transfers, including the young chief torpedoman.

"No, they didn't," Jones said. "They needed excuses, and they used them."

"Ron, look, I'm the squadron commander, okay? I can only evaluate my COs on the basis of performance. Ricks didn't get here by being a loser."

"You look from the top down. I look from the bottom up. From my perspective, this man is not a good skipper. I wouldn't say that to anybody else, but we were shipmates. Okay, I was a peon, just a lowly E-6, but you

never treated me that way. You were a good boss. Ricks isn't. The crew doesn't like him, does not have confidence in him."

"Damn it, Ron, I can't allow stuff like that to affect my judgment."

"Yeah, I know. Annapolis, old school tie—ring, whatever matters to you Canoe U. grads. You have to approach it a different way. Like I said, I wouldn't talk this way with anybody else. If I was on that boat, I'd try to transfer off."

"I sailed with some skippers I didn't like. It's mainly a matter of style."

"You say so, Commodore." Jones paused. "Just remember one thing, okay? There's lots of ways to impress a senior officer, but there's only one way to impress a crew."

Fromm insisted that they take their time. The mold had long since cooled and was now broken open in the inert atmosphere of the first machine tool. The roughly formed metal mass was set in place. Fromm personally checked the computer codes that told the machine what it had to do and punched the first button. The robotic system activated. The moving arm selected the proper toolhead, secured it on the rotating spindle, and maneuvered itself into place. The enclosed area was flooded with argon gas, and Freon began spraying on the plutonium to keep everything to the proper isothermal heat environment. Fromm touched the computer screen, selecting the initial program. The spindle started turning, reaching over a thousand RPM, and approached the plutonium mass with a motion that was neither human nor mechanistic, but something else entirely, like a caricature of a man's action. As they watched from behind the Lexan shield, the first shavings of the silvery metal thread peeled off the main mass.

"How much are we losing?" Ghosn asked.

"Oh, the total will be less than twenty grams," Fromm estimated. "It's nothing to worry about." Fromm looked at another gauge, the one that measured relative pressures. The machine tool was totally isolated from the rest of the room, with the pressure inside its enclosure marginally less than outside. The fact that argon gas was heavier than air would keep oxygen away from the plutonium. That prevented possible combustion. Combustion would generate plutonium dust, which was every bit as lethal as Fromm had told them. A toxic heavy metal, the additional hazard of radioactivity—mainly low-energy alphas—merely made death more rapid and marginally less pleasant. The machinists moved in to take over supervision of the process. They had worked out extremely well, Fromm thought. The skills they'd brought with them had grown with remarkable speed under his tutelage. They were nearly as good as the men he'd trained in Germany, despite their lack of formal education. There was much to be said for practical instead of theoretical work.

"How long?" Qati asked.

"How many times do I have to tell you? We are precisely on schedule. This phase of the project is the most time-consuming. The product we are now producing must be perfect. Absolutely perfect. If this part of the device fails to function, nothing else will."

"That's true of everything we've done!" Ghosn pointed out.

"Correct, my young friend, but this is the easiest thing to get wrong. The metal is hard to work, and the metallic phase transformations make it all the more delicate. Now, let's see those explosive blocks."

Ghosn was right. Everything had to work. The explosives had been almost entirely his problem after Fromm had set the design specifications. They'd taken normal TNT and added a stiffener, a plastic that made the material quite rigid, but without affecting its chemical properties. Normally explosives are plastic and easily malleable by their nature. That property had to be eliminated, since the shape of the blocks was crucial to the way in which their explosive energy was delivered. Ghosn had shaped six hundred such blocks, each a segment of a full ellipsoid. Seventy of them would nest together exactly, forming an explosive ring with an outside diameter of 35 centimeters. Each block had a squib fired from kryton switches. The wires leading from the power supply to the switches all had to be of exactly the same length. Fromm lifted one of the blocks.

"You say that these are all identical?" Fromm asked.

"Completely. I followed your directions exactly."

"Pick seventy at random. I'll take one of the stainless-steel blanks, and we will test your work."

The spot was already prepared, of course. It was, in fact, the eroded crater from an American-made Mark 84 bomb dropped by an Israeli F-4 Phantom some years before. Qati's men had erected a prefabricated structure of timber posts and beams whose roof was three layers of sandbags. Camouflage netting had been added to reduce the chance of notice. Test assembly took three hours, and an electronic strain-gauge was inserted in the steel blank and a wire run to the next crater down—two hundred meters away—where Fromm waited with an oscilloscope. They were finished just before dusk.

"Ready," Ghosn said.

"Proceed," Fromm replied, concentrating on his scope.

Ibrahim pressed the button. The structure disintegrated before their eyes. A few sandbags survived, flying through the air, but mainly there was a shower of dirt. On the O-scope, the peak pressure was frozen in place well before the *crump* of the blast wave passed over their heads. Bock and Qati were somewhat disappointed in the physical effects of the explosion, most of which had been attenuated by the sandbags. Was such a small detonation enough to ignite a nuclear device?

"Well?" Ghosn asked as a man ran off to the newly deepened crater.

"Ten percent off," Fromm said, looking up. Then he smiled. "Ten percent too much."

"What does that mean?" Qati demanded, suddenly worried that they'd done something wrong.

"It means that my young student has learned his lessons well." Fifteen minutes later, they were sure. It took two men to find it, and half an hour to remove the tungsten casing from the core. What had been a nearly solid steel mass as big around as a man's fist was now a distorted cylinder no wider than a cigar. Had it been plutonium, a nuclear reaction would have taken place. Of that the German was sure. Fromm hefted it in his hand and presented it to Ibrahim.

"Herr Ghosn," he said formally. "You have a gift with explosives. You are a fine engineer. In the DDR it took us three attempts to get it right. You have done it in one."

"How many more?"

Fromm nodded. "Very good. We shall do another tomorrow. We will test all the stainless-steel blanks, of course."

"That is why we made them," Ghosn agreed.

On the way back, Bock ran over his own calculations. According to Fromm, the force of the final explosion would be more than four hundred fifty thousand tons of TNT. He therefore based his estimates on a mere four hundred thousand. Bock was always conservative on casualty estimates. The stadium and all in it would be vaporized. No, he corrected himself. That wasn't really true. There was nothing magical about this weapon. It was merely a large explosive device. The stadium and all in it would be totally destroyed, but there would be a great deal of rubble flung ballistically hundreds, perhaps thousands of meters. The ground nearest the device would be pulverized down to pieces of molecular size. Dust particles would then be sucked up into the fireball. Bits of the bomb-assembly residue would affix themselves to the rising, boiling dust. That's what fallout was, he'd learned, dirt with bomb residue attached. The nature of the blast—being set off at ground level—would maximize the fallout, which would be borne downwind. The majority would fall within thirty kilometers of the blast site. The remainder would be a plaything of the winds, to fall over Chicago or St. Louis or maybe even Washington. How many would die from that?

Good question. He estimated roughly two hundred thousand from the blast itself, certainly no more than that. Another fifty to one hundred thousand from secondary effects, that number including long-term deaths from cancers which would take years to manifest themselves. As Qati had noted earlier, the actual death count was somewhat disappointing. It was so easy to think of nuclear bombs as magical engines of destruction, but they were not. They were merely highly powerful bombs with some interesting secondary effects. It also made for the finest terrorist weapon yet conceived.

Terrorist? Bock asked himself. *Is that what I am?*

It was, of course, in the eye of the beholder. Bock had long since decided his measure of respect for the judgment of others. This event would be the best expression of it.

"John, I need an idea," Ryan said.

"What's that?" Clark asked.

"I've drawn a blank. The Japanese Prime Minister is going to be in Mexico in February, then he's flying up here to see the President. We want to know what he's going to be saying on his airplane."

"I don't have the legs to dress up as a stew, doc. Besides, I've never learned to do the tea ceremony, either." The field officer turned SPO paused and turned serious. "Bug an airplane . . . ? That sounds like a real technical challenge."

"What do you know about this?"

John examined his coffee. "I've placed intelligence-gathering devices before,

but always on the ground. With an aircraft you have lots of ambient noise to worry about. You also have to sweat where your subject intends to sit. Finally, with a presidential aircraft you need to worry about security. The technical side is probably the hardest," he decided. "The greatest personal threat to the guy is probably at home—unless he's going to stopover at Detroit, right? Mexico City. Okay, people speak Spanish there, and my Spanish is pretty good. I'd take Ding down with me, of course. . . . What sort of aircraft will he be using?"

"I checked. He'll be flying a JAL 747. The upper deck behind the cockpit is laid out as his conference room. They put in beds, too. That's where he'll be. Their PM likes to kibbitz with the drivers. He's pretty smart about traveling, sleeps as much as he can to handle the jet lag."

Clark nodded. "People have to wipe the windows. Not like he's got an air force base to handle all the ground-service requirements like we do it. If JAL flies into there regularly, they'll have Mexican ground crews. I'll check out data on the 747. . . . Like I said, that's the easy part. I can probably talk my way there. Might even get Ding to head down with a good set of papers and get a job. That would make it easier. I presume this has executive approval?"

"The President said 'find a way.' He'll have to approve the final op-plan."

"I need to talk to the S&T guys." Clark referred to the CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology. "The real problem is noise. . . . How fast, doc?"

"Fast, John."

"Okay." Clark rose. "Gee, I get to be a field-spook again. I'll be over in the new building. It may take me a few days to figure if it's possible or not. This mean I can't go on the U.K. trip?"

"Bother you?" Jack asked.

"Nope. Just as soon stay home."

"Fair enough. I get to do some Christmas shopping at Hamleys."

"You know how lucky you are to have 'em little? All my girls want now is clothes, and I can't pick girl clothes worth a damn." Clark lived in horror of buying women's clothing.

"Sally has her doubts now, but little Jack still believes."

Clark shook his head. "After you stop believing in Santa Claus, the whole world just goes downhill."

"Ain't it the truth?"

23

OPINIONS

"Jack, you look bloody awful," Sir Basil Charleston observed.

"If one more person tells me that, I'm going to waste him."

"Bad flight?"

"Bumpy as hell all the way across. Didn't sleep much." As the even-darker-than-usual circles under his eyes proclaimed.

"Well, we'll see if lunch helps."

"It is a pretty day," Ryan noted as they walked up Westminster Bridge Road toward Parliament. It was a rare early-winter English day with a blue, cloudless sky. A brisk wind swept down the Thames, but Ryan didn't mind. He had a heavy coat and a scarf around his neck, and the frigid blast on his face woke him up. "Trouble at the office, Bas?"

"Found a bug, a bloody bug, two floors down from my office! The whole building's being swept."

"Things are tough all over. KGB?"

"Not sure," Charleston said as they crossed the bridge. "Trouble with the façade, you see, bloody thing began crumbling—same as happened to Scotland Yard a few years ago. The workers replacing it found an unexplained wire and followed it. . . . Our Russian friends have not cut back on their activities, and there are other services as well. See anything like that in your shop?"

"No. It helps that we're more isolated than Century House." Jack meant that the British Secret Intelligence Service was in so densely populated an area—there was a nearby apartment block, for example—that a very low-power bug could get data out. That was less likely at the Agency's Langley headquarters, which sat alone on a large wooded campus. In addition to that, the newer construction had allowed installation of elaborate protections against internal radio sources. "You should do what we've done and install wave guides."

"That would cost a bloody fortune, which we do not have at the moment."

"What the hell, it gives us a chance to take a walk. If anyone can bug us out here, we've already lost."

"It never ends, does it? We win the Cold War, but it never ever ends."

"Which Greek was it? The one whose personal hell was rolling a big rock up a hill, and every time he got it there the son of a bitch rolled down the other side."

"Sisyphus . . . ? Tantalus, perhaps? Long time since I bade farewell to Oxford, Sir John. In either case, you're right. Get to the top of one hill and all you see is another damned hill." They continued walking down the embankment, away from Parliament, but toward lunch. Meetings like this one had rules. You couldn't get down to business until after the small talk and a

pregnant pause. In this case, there were some off-season American tourists snapping pictures. Charleston and Ryan walked around to avoid them.

"We have a problem, Bas."

"What's that?" Charleston said without turning. Behind them were three security officers. Two more preceded them.

Jack didn't turn either. "We have a guy inside the Kremlin. Spends some time with Narmonov. Says Andrey Il'ych is worried about a military/KGB coup. Says that they might renege on the strategic-arms treaty. Also says that some tactical nuclear devices may be missing from their inventories in Germany."

"Indeed? That's cheery news. How good is your source?"

"Extremely good."

"Well, I can only say it's news to me, Dr. Ryan."

"How good is your guy?" Jack asked.

"Quite good."

"Nothing like this?"

"Some rumbles, of course. I mean, Narmonov does have a full plate, doesn't he? Ever since that dreadful affair with the Baits, and the Georgians, *and* his Muslims. What is it you Yanks say, 'one-armed paperhanger'? He's that busy and more. He's had to make a deal with his security forces, but a *coup d'état?*"Charleston shood his head. "No. The tea leaves don't appear that way to us."

"That's precisely what our agent is telling us. What about the nuclear thing?"

"I'm afraid our chap isn't well-placed for that sort of information. More the civilian side, you see." And that, Jack knew, was as far as Basil would go. "How seriously are you taking this?"

"Very seriously. I have to. This agent has been giving us good stuff for a lot of years."

"One of Mrs. Foley's recruits?" Charleston asked with a chuckle. "What a marvelous young lady. I understand she recently delivered another child?"

"Little girl, Emily Sarah, looks just like her mom." Jack thought he'd dodged the first question rather adroitly. "Mary Pat will be back at work right after New Year."

"Ah, yes, you do have that fortress nursery on your grounds, don't you?"

"One of the smartest investments we ever made. Wish I'd thought of it."

"You Americans!" Sir Basil laughed. "Missing nuclear weapons. Yes, I suppose one must take that very seriously indeed. Possible collusion between the Army and KGB and a tactical-nuclear trump. Quite frightening, I must say, but we have not heard a whisper. Rather a difficult secret to keep, wouldn't you say? I mean, blackmail doesn't work terribly well unless people know they're being blackmailed."

"We've also caught a rumble that KGB is running some nuclear-oriented operation in Germany. That's all, just a rumble."

"Yes, we've heard that too," Charleston said as they turned to walk down the brow to the *Tattersall Castle*, an old paddle steamer long since converted to a restaurant.

"And?"

"And we've run our own op. It seems that Erich Honecker had his own little Manhattan Project under way. Fortunately it died in the womb. Ivan was quite upset to learn of it. The DDR returned a goodly supply of plutonium to their former socialist colleagues just before the change. I speculate that KGB is investigating the same thing."

"Why didn't you tell us?" *Jesus, Bas,* Jack thought. *You guys just don't forget, do you?*

"Nothing to tell, Jack." Charleston nodded at the headwaiter, who took them to a table well aft. The security officers situated themselves between their charges and the rest of luncheoning humanity. "Our German friends have been very forthcoming. The project, they say, has been quashed, completely and for all time. We've had our technical people over everything, and they confirmed everything our German colleagues told us."

"When was this?"

"Several months ago. Ever eat here, Jack?" Charleston asked as the waiter appeared.

"Not this one, a few of the other ferryboats." Basil ordered a pint of bitter. Jack decided on a lager. They watched the waiter withdraw. "The KGB op is more recent."

"Interesting. Could be the same thing, you know, could be that they had the same interests we had and were just a little slower to move."

"On nukes?" Ryan shook his head. "Our Russian friends are pretty smart, Bas, and they pay much closer attention to nuclear issues than we do. It's one of the things I admire about them."

"Yes, they did learn their lesson from China, didn't they?" Charleston set his menu down and waved for the waiter to bring the drinks. "You think this is a serious matter, then?"

"Sure do."

"Your judgment is generally rather good, Jack. Thank you," Basil told the waiter. Both men made their orders. "You think we should poke about?"

"I think that might be a good idea."

"Very well. What else can you tell me?"

"I'm afraid that's it, Bas."

"Your source must be very good indeed." Sir Basil sipped at his beer. "I think you have reservations."

"I do, but . . . hell, Basil, when do we not have reservations?"

"Any contrary data?"

"None, just that we've been totally unable to confirm. Our source is good enough that we may not be able to confirm elsewhere. That's why I came over. Your guy must be pretty good, too, judging by what you've sent us. Whoever he is, he might be the best chance to back our guy up."

"And if we can't confirm?"

"Then probably we'll go with it anyway." Ryan didn't like that.

"And your reservations?"

"Probably don't matter. Two reasons. Number one, I'm not sure myself whether to sign off on this or not. Number two, not everyone cares what I think."

"And that's why you've not received credit for your work on the treaty?"

Ryan grinned rather tiredly, having not had much sleep in the preceding thirty-six hours. “I refuse to be surprised by that, and I won’t ask how you pulled that one out of the hat.”

“But?”

“But I wish somebody would leak it to the press or something!” Ryan allowed himself a laugh.

“I’m afraid we don’t do that here. I’ve only leaked it to one person.”

“PM?”

“His Royal Highness. You’re having dinner with him tonight, correct? I reckoned he might like to know.”

Jack thought about that. The Prince of Wales wouldn’t let it go any further. Ryan could never have told him . . . but . . . “Thanks, pal.”

“We all crave recognition in one way or another. You and I are both denied it as a matter of course. Not really fair, but there you are. In this case I broke one of my own rules, and if you ask why, I’ll tell you: what you did was bloody marvelous, Jack. If there were justice in the world, Her Majesty would enter you in the Order of Merit.”

“You can’t tell her, Basil. She just might do it all on her own.”

“She might indeed, and that would let out the little secret, mightn’t it?” Dinner arrived, and they had to wait again.

“It wasn’t just me. You know that Charlie Alden did a lot of good work. So did Talbot, Bunker, Scott Adler, a bunch of others.”

“Your modesty is as comprehensive as ever, Dr. Ryan.”

“Does that mean ‘stupid,’ Bas?” Ryan got a smile instead of an answer. The Brits were good at that.

Fromm would never have believed it. They’d made five stainless-steel blanks to duplicate the size and configuration of the plutonium. Ghosn had made all the necessary explosive blocks. They’d tested the explosives on all five blanks, and in every case the explosives had done their job. This was one very talented young man. Of course he’d had exact plans to follow, and Fromm had generated them with the help of a fine computer, but even so, getting something so difficult right the first time was hardly the norm in engineering.

The plutonium was now through the first part of the machining process. It actually looked rather good, like a high-quality steel forging machined to be part of an automotive engine. That was a good beginning. The robot arm of the milling machine removed the plutonium from its spindle and set it in an enclosed box. The box was, of course, filled with argon gas. The arm sealed it and moved it to a door, then Fromm removed it from the machine enclosure and walked over to the air-bearing lathe. The process was reverse-duplicated. He slid the box into the enclosure. Vacuum pumps were activated and while the air was sucked out the top of the enclosure, argon gas was added at the bottom. When the internal atmosphere was totally inert, the robot arm of this tool opened the box and extracted the plutonium. The next programmed set of movements set it precisely on a new spindle. The degree of precision was hugely important. Under Fromm’s supervision, the spindle was activated, building its speed up slowly to fifteen thousand RPM.

“It would appear that—no!” Fromm swore. He’d thought he’d gotten it

perfect. The spindle slowed back down, and a tiny adjustment was made. Fromm took his time checking the balance, then powered it up again. This time it was perfect. He took the RPMs all the way to twenty-five thousand and there was no jitter at all.

"You men did the first machining very nicely," Fromm said over his shoulder.

"How much mass did we lose?" Ghosn asked.

"Eighteen-point-five-two-seven grams." Fromm switched the spindle off and stood. "I can scarcely praise our workers enough. I suggest that we wait until tomorrow to begin final polishing. It is foolish to rush about. We're all tired, and I think dinner is called for."

"As you say, Herr Fromm."

"Manfred," the German said, surprising the younger man. "Ibrahim, we must talk."

"Outside?" Ghosn led the German out the door. Night was falling.

"We mustn't kill these men. They are too valuable. What if this opportunity presents itself again?"

"But you agreed . . ."

"I never expected things would go this well. The schedule I worked up assumed that you and I—no, I shall be honest, that *I* would have to supervise everything. You, Ibrahim, have astounded me with your skill. What we have done here is to have assembled a superb team. We must keep this team together!"

And where else will we get ten kilos of plutonium? Ghosn wanted to ask.

"Manfred, I think you are correct. I will discuss this with the Commander. You must remember—"

"Security. *Ich weiss es schon.* We can take no chances at this stage. I merely entreat you, as a matter of justice—of professional recognition, *ja?*—that consideration must be given. Do you understand?"

"Quite well, Manfred, I agree with you." The German was acquiring humanity, Ghosn thought. A pity it came so late. "In any case, I also agree with your desire for a decent dinner before we begin the final phase. Tonight there is fresh lamb, and we've obtained some German beer. Bitburger, I hope you like it."

"A good regional lager. A pity, Ibrahim, that your religion denies it to you."

"On this night," Ghosn said, "I hope Allah will forgive me for indulging." Just as well, Ibrahim thought, to earn the infidel's confidence.

"Jack, it would appear that you are working too hard."

"It's the commute, sir. Two or three hours a day in a car."

"Find a place closer?" His Royal Highness suggested gently.

"Give up Peregrine Cliff?" Ryan shook his head. "Then what about Cathy and Johns Hopkins? Then there's the kids, taking them out of school. No, that's no solution."

"You doubtless recall that the first time we met, you commented rather forcefully on my physical and psychological condition. I rather doubt that I looked as dreadful as you do now." The Prince had received more than one bit of information from Sir Basil Charleston, Jack noted, as a result of which there

was no alcohol being served with dinner.

"It blows hot and cold at work. At the moment, it's blowing rather hot."

"Truman, then? 'If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen'?"

"Yes, sir, something like that, but it'll cool off. Just that we have some things happening now. It's like that. When you were driving your ship, it was like that, too, wasn't it?"

"That was much healthier work. I also had a far shorter distance to commute. About fifteen feet, as a matter of fact," he added with a chuckle.

Ryan laughed rather tiredly. "Must be nice. For me it's that far to see my secretary."

"And the family?"

There was no sense in lying. "Could be better. My work doesn't help."

"Something is troubling you, Jack. It's quite obvious, you know."

"Too much stress. I've been hitting the booze too hard, not enough exercise. The usual. It'll get better, just I've had a longer than usual stretch of bad times at the office. I appreciate your concern, sir, but I'll be all right." Jack almost convinced himself that it was true. Almost.

"As you say."

"And I must say that's the best dinner I've had in a very long time. So, when's the next time you're coming over to our side of the pond?" Ryan asked, grateful for the chance to change subjects.

"Late spring. A breeder in Wyoming will have some horses for me. Polo ponies, actually."

"You gotta be crazy to play that game. Lacrosse on horses."

"Well, it gives me a chance to enjoy the countryside. Magnificent place, Wyoming. I plan to tour Yellowstone also."

"Never been there," Jack said.

"Perhaps you could come with us, then? I might even teach you how to ride."

"Maybe," Jack allowed, wondering how he'd look on a horse, and wondering how the hell he'd be able to get away from the office for a week. "Just so you don't wave one of those hammers at me."

"Mallet, Jack, mallet. I shan't try to involve you in polo. You'd probably end up killing some unfortunate horse. I presume you'll be able to find the time."

"I can sure try. If I'm lucky, the world will settle down a little by then."

"It's settled down quite a bit, thanks in large part to your work."

"Sir, Basil may have placed a little too much emphasis on what I did. I was just one cog in the machine."

"Modesty can be overdone. I find it disappointing that you failed to receive any recognition," the Prince observed.

"That's life, isn't it?" Jack was surprised at how it came out. For once he'd been unable to hide his feelings completely.

"I thought as much. Yes, Jack, that's life, and life is not always fair. Have you thought perhaps about changing your line of work—take leave, perhaps?"

Jack grinned. "Come on, I don't look all that bad. They need me at the office."

His Royal Highness became very serious. "Jack, are we friends?"

Ryan sat upright in his chair. "I don't have all that many, but you're one of

them."

"Do you trust my judgment?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Get out. Leave. You can always come back to it. A person of your talents never really leaves. You know that. I don't like the way you look. You've been at it too long. Have you any idea how lucky you are that you *can* leave? You have a degree of freedom I do not. Use it."

"Nice try, man. If you were in my position, you wouldn't leave. Same reason, even. I'm not a quitter. Neither are you. It's that simple."

"Pride can be a destructive force," the Prince pointed out.

Jack leaned forward. "It's not pride. It's fact. They do need me. I wish they didn't, but they do. Problem is, they don't know it."

"Is the new Director that bad?"

"Marcus is not a bad person, but he's lazy. He likes his position better than he likes his duties. I don't suppose that's a problem limited to the American government, is it? I know better. So do you. Duty comes first. Maybe you're stuck with your job because you were born into it, but I'm just as stuck with mine because I'm the guy best able to do it."

"Do they listen to you?" His Highness asked sharply.

Jack shrugged. "Not always. Hell, sometimes I'm wrong, but there has to be somebody there who does the right thing, at least tries to. That's me, sir. That's why I can't bug out. You know that just as well as I do."

"Even if it harms you?"

"Correct."

"Your sense of duty is admirable, Sir John."

"I had a couple of good teachers. You didn't run and hide when you knew you were a target. You could have done that—"

"No, I could not have done so. If I had—"

"The bad guys would have won," Jack finished the thought. "My problem isn't very different, is it? I learned part of this from you. Surprised?" Jack asked.

"Yes," he admitted.

"You don't run away from things. Neither do I."

"Your verbal maneuvering is as skillful as ever."

"See? I haven't lost it yet." Jack was rather pleased with himself.

"I will insist that you bring the family out to Wyoming with us."

"You can always go over my head—talk to Cathy."

His Highness laughed. "Perhaps I will. Flying back tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir. I'm going to hit Hamleys for some toys."

"Get yourself some sleep, Jack. We'll have this argument again next year."

It was five hours earlier in Washington. Liz Elliot stared across her desk at Bob Holtzman, who covered the White House. Like the permanent staffers here, Holtzman had seen them come and go, outlasting them all. His greater experience in the building was something of a paradox. Though necessarily cut out of the really good stuff—Holtzman knew that there were some secrets he'd never see until years too late to make a story of them; that was the work of historians—his skill at reading nuances and catching whiffs would have

earned him a senior place at any intelligence agency. But his paper paid much better than any government agency, especially since he'd also penned a few best-selling books on life at the highest levels of government.

"This is deep background?"

"That's right," the National Security Advisor said.

Holtzman nodded and made his notes. That set the rules. No direct quotes. Elizabeth Elliot could be referred to as an "administration official," or in the plural as "sources within." He looked up from his notebook—tape recorders were also out for this sort of interview—and waited. Liz Elliot liked her drama. She was a bright woman, somewhat elitist—not an uncommon trait in White House officialdom—and definitely the person closest to the President, if he was reading the signals right. But that was none of the public's business. The probable love affair between the President and his National Security Advisor was no longer a complete secret. The White House staffers were as discreet as ever—more, in fact. He found it odd that they should be so. Fowler was not the most lovable of men. Perhaps they felt sympathy for what had to be a lonely man. The circumstances of his wife's death were well known, and had probably added a percentage point of sympathy votes in the last election. Maybe the staffers thought he'd change with a steady romance in his life. Maybe they were just being good professionals. (That distinguished them from political appointees, Holtzman thought. Nothing was sacred to them.) Maybe Fowler and Elliot were just being very careful. In any case, the White House press had discussed it off and on at The Confidential Source, the bar at the National Press Club building, just two blocks away, and it had been decided that Fowler's love life was not properly a matter of public interest so long as it did not injure his job performance. After all, his foreign-policy performance was pretty good. Euphoria from the Vatican Treaty and its stunningly favorable aftermath had never gone away. You couldn't slam a president who was doing so fine a job.

"We may have a problem with the Russians," Elliot began.

"Oh?" Holtzman was caught by surprise for once.

"We have reason to believe that Narmonov is having considerable difficulty dealing with his senior military commanders. That could have effects on final compliance with the arms treaty."

"How so?"

"We have reason to believe that the Soviets will resist elimination of some of their SS-18 stocks. They're already behind in destruction of the missiles."

Reason to believe. Twice. Holtzman thought about that for a moment. A very sensitive source, probably a spy rather than an intercept. "They say that there's a problem with the destruct facility. The inspectors we have over there seem to believe them."

"Possibly the factory was designed with—what do you call it? Creative incompetence."

"What's the Agency say?" Holtzman asked, scribbling his notes just as fast as he could.

"They gave us the initial report, but so far they've been unable to get us a real opinion."

"What about Ryan? He's pretty good on the Soviets."

"Ryan's turning into a disappointment," Liz said. "As a matter of fact—and this is something you can't say, you can't use his name—we have a little investigation going that's turned up some disturbing data."

"Like?"

"Like I think we're getting skewed data. Like I think a senior Agency official is having an affair with a person of foreign birth, and there may be a child involved."

"Ryan?"

The National Security Advisor shook her head. "Can't confirm or deny. Remember the rules."

"I won't forget," Holtzman replied, hiding his annoyance. Did she think she was dealing with Jimmy Olsen?

"The problem is, it looks like he knows we don't like what he's telling us, and as a result he's trying to put a spin on the data to please us. This is a time when we really need good stuff from Langley, but we're not getting it."

Holtzman nodded thoughtfully. That was not exactly a new problem at Langley, but Ryan wasn't that sort, was he? The reporter set that aside. "And Narmonov?"

"If what we're getting is in any way correct, he may be on the way out, whether from the right or the left, we can't say. It may be that he's losing it."

"That's solid?"

"It appears so. The part about blackmail from his security forces is very disturbing. But with our problems at Langley . . ." Liz held up her hands.

"Just when things were going so well, too. I guess you're having problems with Cabot?"

"He's learning his job pretty well. If he had better support, he'd be okay."

"How worried are you?" Holtzman asked.

"Very much so. This is a time when we need good intel, but we're not getting it. How the hell can we figure out what to do about Narmonov unless we get good information. So what do we get?" Liz asked in exasperation. "Our hero is running around doing stuff that really doesn't concern his agency—he's gone over people's heads to the Hill on some things—doing a Chicken Little act on one thing while at the same time he's not getting Cabot good analysis on what appears to be a major issue. Of course, he has his distractions. . . ."

Our hero, Holtzman thought. *What an interesting choice of words. She really hates the guy, doesn't* she. Holtzman knew the fact, but not the reason. There was no reason for her to be jealous of him. Ryan had never shown great ambition, at least not in a political sense. He was a pretty good man, by all accounts. The reporter remembered his one public *faux pas*, a confrontation with Al Trent which, Holtzman was certain, must have been staged. Ryan and Trent got along very well now by all accounts. What could possibly have been important enough to stage something like that? Ryan had two intelligence stars—what for, Holtzman had never been able to find out. Just rumors, five different versions of four different stories, probably all of them false. Ryan wasn't all that popular with the press. The reason was that he had never really leaked anything. He took secrecy a little too seriously. On the other hand, he didn't try to curry favor either, and Holtzman respected anyone who avoided that. Of one thing he was sure: he had gravely underestimated the antipathy

for Ryan in the Fowler Administration.

I'm being manipulated. That was as obvious as a peacock in a barnyard. Very cleverly, of course. The bit about the Russians was probably genuine. The Central Intelligence Agency's inability to get vital information to the White House wasn't exactly new either, was it? That was probably true also. So where was the lie? Or was there a lie at all? Maybe they just wanted to get truthful but sensitive information out . . . in the normal way. It wasn't the first time he'd learned things in the northwest-corner office of the White House West Wing.

Could Holtzman not do a story on this?

Not hardly, Bobby boy, the reporter told himself.

The ride home was smooth as silk. Ryan caught as much sleep as he could, while the sergeant who took care of the cabin read through assembly instructions for some of the toys Jack had picked up.

"Yo, Sarge." The pilot was back in the cabin for a stretch. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Well, Maj, our DV here picked up some stuff for the kiddies." The NCO handed over a page of directions. Tab-1 into Slot-A, use ⅞ths bolt, tighten with a wrench, using . . .

"I think I'd rather tinker with broke engines."

"Roger that," the sergeant agreed. "This guy's got some bad times ahead."

24

REVELATION

"I don't like being used," Holtzman said, leaning back with his hands clasped at the base of his neck.

He sat in the conference room with his managing editor, another long-term Washington-watcher who'd won his spurs in the feeding frenzy that had ended the presidency of Richard Nixon. Those had been heady times. It had given the entire American media a taste for blood that had never gone away. The only good part about it, Holtzman thought, was that they didn't cozy up to anyone now. Any politician was a potential target for the righteous wrath of America's investigatorial priesthood. The fact of it was healthy, though the extent of it occasionally was not.

"That's beside the point. Who does? So what do we know is true?" the editor asked.

"We have to believe her that the White House isn't getting good data. That's nothing new at CIA, though it's not as bad as it used to be. The fact of the matter is that Agency performance has improved somewhat—well, there is the problem that Cabot has lopped off a lot of heads. We also have to believe what she says about Narmonov and his military."

"And Ryan?"

"I've met him at social functions, never officially. He's actually a fairly nice guy, good sense of humor. He must have a hell of a record. Two Intelligence Stars—what for, we do not know. He fought Cabot on downsizing the Operations Directorate, evidently saved a few jobs. He's moved up very fast. Al Trent likes him despite that run-in they had a few years ago. There's gotta be a story in that, but Trent flatly refused to discuss it the only time I asked him. Supposedly they kissed and made up, and I believe that like I believe in the Easter Bunny."

"Is he the sort to play around?" the editor asked next.

"What sort is that? You expect they're issued a scarlet 'A' for their shirts?"

"Very clever, Bob. So what the hell are you asking me?"

"Do we run a story on this or not?"

The editor's eyes widened in surprise. "Are you kidding? How can we *not* run a story on this?"

"I just don't like being used."

"We've been through that! I don't either. Granted that it's obvious in this case, but it's still an important story, and if we don't run it, then the *Times* will. How soon will you have it ready?"

"Soon," Holtzman promised. Now he knew why he'd declined a promotion to assistant managing editor. He didn't need the money; his book income

absolved him of the necessity of working at all. He liked being a journalist, still had his idealism, still cared about what he did. It was a further blessing, he thought, that he was absolved of the necessity of making executive decisions.

The new feed-water pump was everything the Master Shipwright had promised on the installation side, Captain Dubinin noted. They'd practically had to dismantle a whole compartment to get it in, plus torch a hole through the submarine's double hull. He could still look up and see sky through what should have been a curved steel overhead, something very unnerving indeed for a submarine officer. They had to make sure that the pump worked satisfactorily before they welded shut the "soft patch" through which it had arrived. It could have been worse. This submarine had a steel hull. Those Soviet submarines made of titanium were the devil to weld shut.

The pump/steam-generator room was immediately aft of the reactor compartment. In fact the reactor vessel abutted the bulkhead on the forward side, and the pump assembly on the after side. The pump circulated water in and out of the reactor. The saturated steam went into the steam-generator, where it ran through an interface. There its heat caused water in the "outside" or nonradioactive loop to flash to steam, which then turned the submarine's turbine engines (in turn driving the propeller through reduction gears). The "inner loop" steam, with most of its energy lost, then ran through a condenser that was cooled by seawater from outside the hull, and was pumped as water back into the bottom of the reactor vessel for reheating to continue the cycle. The steam-generator and condenser were actually the same large structure, and the same multistage pump handled all of the circulation. This one mechanical object was the acoustical Achilles' heel of all nuclear-powered ships. The pump had to exchange vast quantities of water that was "hot" both thermally and radioactively. Doing that much mechanical work had always meant making a large amount of noise. Until now.

"It's an ingenious design," Dubinin said.

"It should be. The Americans spent ten years perfecting it for their missile submarines, then decided not to use it. The design team was crushed."

The Captain grunted. The new American reactor designs were able to use natural convection-circulation. One more technical advantage. They were so damnably clever. As both men waited, the reactor was powering up. Control rods were being withdrawn, and free neutrons from the fuel elements were beginning to interact, starting a controlled nuclear chain-reaction. At the control panel behind the Captain and the Admiral, technicians called off temperature readings in degrees Kelvin, which started at absolute zero and used Celsius measurements.

"Any time now . . . ," the Master Shipwright breathed.

"You've never seen it in operation?" Dubinin asked.

"No."

Marvelous, the Captain thought, looking up at the sky. *What a horrible thing to see from inside a submarine*. "What was that?"

"The pump just kicked in."

"You're joking." He looked at the massive, multibarrel assembly. He

couldn't—Dubinin walked over to the instrument panel and—

Dubinin laughed out loud.

"It works, Captain," the chief engineer said.

"Keep running up the power," Dubinin said.

"Ten percent now, and rising."

"Take it all the way to one-ten."

"Captain . . . "

"I know, we never go over a hundred." The reactor was rated for fifty thousand horsepower, but like most such machines, the maximum power rating was conservative. It had been run at nearly fifty-eight thousand—once, on builder's trials, resulting in minor damage to the steam-generator's internal piumbing—and the maximum useful power was fifty-four-point-nine-six. Dubinin had only done that once, soon after taking command. It was something a ship's commander did, just as a fighter pilot must find out at least one time how fast he can make his aircraft lance through the air.

"Very well," the engineer agreed.

"Keep a close eye on things, Ivan Stepanovich. If you see any problems, shut down at once." Dubinin patted him on the shoulder and walked back to the front of the compartment, hoping the welders had done their jobs properly. He shrugged at the thought. The welds had all been X-rayed for possible faults. You couldn't worry about everything, and he had a fine chief engineer to keep an eye on things.

"Twenty-percent power."

The Master Shipwright looked around. The pump had also been mounted on its own small raft structure, essentially a table with spring-loaded legs. They largely prevented transmission of whatever noise the pump generated into the hull, and from there into the water. That, he thought, had been poorly designed. Well, there were always things to be done better. Building ships was one of the last true engineering art forms.

"Twenty-five."

"I can hear something now," Dubinin said.

"Speed equivalent?"

"With normal hotel load"—that meant the power required to operate various ship's systems ranging from air conditioning to reading lights—"ten knots." The Akula-class required a great deal of electric power for her internal systems. That was due mainly to the primitive air-conditioning systems, which alone ate up ten percent of reactor output. "We need seventeen-percent power for hotel loadings before we start turning the screw. Western systems are much more efficient."

The Master Shipwright nodded grumpily. "They have a vast industry concerned with environmental engineering. We do not have the infrastructure to do the proper research yet."

"They have a much hotter climate. I was in Washington once, in July. Hell could scarcely be worse."

"That bad?"

"The embassy chap who took me around said it was once a malarial swamp. They've even had yellow fever epidemics there. Miserable climate."

"I didn't know that."

“Thirty percent,” the engineer called.

“When were you there?” the Admiral asked.

“Over ten years ago, for the Incidents at Sea negotiations. My first and last diplomatic adventure. Some headquarters fool thought they needed a submariner. I was drafted out of Frunze for it. Total waste of time,” Dubinin added.

“How was it?”

“Dull. The American submarine types are arrogant. Not very friendly back then.” Dubinin paused. “No, that’s not fair. The political climate was very different. The hospitality was cordial, but reserved. They took us to a baseball game.”

“And?” the Admiral asked.

The Captain smiled. “The food and beer were enjoyable. The game was incomprehensible, and their explanations just made things worse.”

“Forty percent.”

“Twelve knots,” Dubinin said. “The noise is picking up. . . .”

“But?”

“But it’s a fraction of what the old pump put out. My men have to wear ear protection in here. At full speed the noise is terrible.”

“We’ll see. Did you learn anything interesting in Washington?”

Another grunt. “Not to walk the streets alone. I went out for a stroll and saw some poor woman attacked by a street hooligan, and, you know, that was only a few blocks from the White House!”

“Really?”

“The young crook tried to run right past me with her purse. Like something from a film. It was quite amazing.”

“Tried to?”

“Did I ever tell you I was a good football player? I tackled him, a little too enthusiastically. Broke his kneecap, as a matter of fact.” Dubinin smiled, remembering the injury he’d inflicted on the worthless bastard. Concrete sidewalks were so much harder than a grassy football pitch. . . .

“Fifty percent.”

“Then what happened?”

“And the embassy people went mad about it. The Ambassador screamed a lot. Thought they’d send me right home. But the local police talked about giving me a medal. It was hushed up, and I was never asked to be a diplomat again.” Dubinin laughed out loud. “I won. Eighteen knots.”

“Why did you interfere?”

“I was young and foolish,” Dubinin explained. “Never occurred to me that it might all be some CIA trick—that’s what the Ambassador was worried about. It wasn’t, just a young criminal and a frail Black woman. His kneecap shattered quite badly. I wonder how well he runs now? And if he really was CIA, that’s one less spy we have to worry about.”

“Sixty-percent power, still very steady,” the engineer called. “No pressure fluctuations at all.”

“Twenty-three knots. The next forty-percent power doesn’t do very much for us . . . and the flow noise off the hull starts building up at this point. Run it up smartly, Vanya!”

"Aye, Captain!"

"What's the fastest you've ever had him?"

"Thirty-two at max-rated power. Thirty-three on overload."

"There's talk about a new hull paint. . . ."

"The stuff the English invented? Intelligence says it adds more than a knot to the American hunter submarines."

"That's right," the Admiral confirmed. "I hear we have the formula, but actually making it is very difficult, and applying it properly is even more so."

"Anything over twenty-five and you run the risk of stripping the anechoic tiles off the hull. Had that happen once when I was Starpom on the *Sverdlovskiy Komsomolets*. . . ." Dubinin shook his head. "Like being inside a drum, the way those damned rubber slabs pounded the hull."

"Not much we can do about that, I'm afraid."

"Seventy-five-percent power."

"Take those tiles off and I get another knot."

"You don't really advocate that?"

Dubinin shook his head. "No. If a torpedo goes into the water, that could be the difference between life and death."

Conversation stopped at that point. In ten minutes power had reached a hundred percent, fifty-thousand horsepower. The pump noise was quite loud now, but it was still possible to hear a person speaking. With the old pump this power level was like listening to a rock band, Dubinin remembered, you could feel the sound rippling through your body. Not now, and the rafting of the pump body . . . the yard commander had promised him a vast reduction in radiated noise. He had not been boasting. Ten minutes later, he'd seen and heard everything he'd needed.

"Power down," Dubinin commanded.

"Well, Valentin Borissovich?"

"KGB stole this from the Americans?"

"That is my understanding," the Admiral said.

"I may kiss the next spy I meet."

The Motor Vessel *George McReady* lay alongside the pier loading cargo. She was a large ship, ten years old, driven by large, low-speed marine diesels, and designed as a timber carrier. She could carry thirty thousand tons of finished lumber or, as was the case now, logs. The Japanese preferred to process the lumber themselves for the most part. It kept the processing money in their country instead of having to export it. At least an American-flag vessel was being used to do the delivery, a concession that had required ten months of negotiations. Japan could be a fun place to visit, though rather expensive.

Under the watchful eyes of the First Officer, gantry cranes lifted the logs from trucks and lowered them into the built-for-the-purpose holds. The process was remarkably speedy. Automation of cargo-loading was probably the most important development in the commercial shipping business. *George M* could be fully loaded in less than forty hours, and off-loaded in thirty-six, allowing the ship to return to sea very rapidly, but denying her crew the chance to do very much in whatever port they might be visiting. The loss of income for waterfront bars and other businesses that catered to sailors was not

a matter of great concern to the shipowners, who did not make money when their hulls were tied alongside the pier.

"Pete, got the weather," the Third Officer announced. "Could be better."

The First Officer looked at the chart. "Wow!"

"Yeah, a monster Siberian low forming up. Gonna get bumpy a couple of days out. It's gonna be too big to dodge, too."

The First Officer whistled at the numbers. "Don't forget your 'scope patch, Jimmy."

"Right. How much deck cargo?"

"Just those boys over there." He pointed.

The other man grunted, then picked up a pair of binoculars from the holder. "Christ, they're chained together!"

"That's why we can't strike 'em below."

"Outstanding," the junior man observed.

"I already talked to the bosun about it. We'll have them tied down nice and tight."

"Good idea, Pete. If this storm builds like I expect, you'll be able to surf down there."

"Captain still on the beach?"

"Right, he's due back at fourteen hundred."

"Fueling complete. ChEng will have his diesels on line at seventeen hundred. Depart at sixteen-thirty?"

"That's right."

"Damn, a guy hardly has time to get laid anymore."

"I'll tell the Captain about the weather forecast. It might make us late in Japan."

"Cap'n'll love that."

"Won't we all?"

"Hey, if it screws up our alongside time, maybe I can. . . ."

"You and me both, buddy." The First Officer grinned. Both men were single.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Fromm asked. He leaned down, staring at the metallic mass through the Lexan sheeting. The manipulator arm had detached the plutonium from the spindle and moved it for a visual inspection that wasn't really necessary, but the plutonium had to be moved for the next part of the finishing process anyway, and Fromm wanted to see the thing close up. He shined a small, powerful flashlight on the metal, but then switched it off. The reflection of the overhead lights was enough.

"It really is amazing," Ghosn said.

What they looked at might easily have been a piece of blown glass, so smooth it appeared. In fact it was far smoother than that. The uniformity of the outside surface was so exact that the greatest distorting effect came from gravity. Whatever imperfections there might have been were far too small to see with the naked eye, and were definitely below the design tolerances Fromm had established when he'd worked the hydrocodes on the minicomputer.

The outside of the folded cylinder was perfect, reflecting light like some sort of eccentric lens. As the arm rotated it around the long axis, the placement

and size of the reflected ceiling lights did not move or waver. Even the German found that remarkable.

"I would never have believed we could do so well," Ghosn said.

Fromm nodded. "Such things were not possible until quite recently. The air-bearing-lathe technology is hardly fifteen years old, and the laser-control systems are newer still. The main commercial application is still for ultrafine instruments like astronomical telescopes, very high-quality lenses, special centrifuge parts. . . ." The German stood. "Now, we must also polish the inside surfaces. Those we cannot visually inspect."

"Why do the outside first?"

"This way we can be sure that the machine is performing properly. The laser will control the inside—we know now, you see, that it is giving us good data." That explanation wasn't really true, but Fromm didn't want to give the real one: he truly thought this beautiful. The young Arab might not understand. *Das ist die schwarze Kunst.* . . . It actually *was* rather Faustian, Fromm thought, wasn't it?

How very strange, Ghosn thought, *that something so wonderfully shaped could* . . .

"Things continue to go well."

"Indeed," Fromm replied. He gestured to the interior of the enclosure. When run properly, the lathe trimmed off something almost like metallic thread, but thinner, visible mainly because of its reflectivity. A singularly valuable thread, it was collected for remelting and possible future use.

"A good stopping place," Fromm said, turning away.

"I agree." They'd been at it for fourteen hours. Ghosn dismissed the men. He and Fromm walked out, too, leaving the room to the custody of the two security guards.

The guards were not highly educated men. Selected from the Commander's personal retinue of followers, each was the veteran of many years of combat operations. Perversely, their fighting had been more against fellow Arabs than their putative Zionist enemies. There was a plethora of terrorist groups, and since each drew its support from the Palestinian community, there was competition for the limited pool of followers. Competition among men with guns not infrequently led to confrontation and death. In the case of the guards, it also proved their loyalty. Each of the men on duty was an expert shot, about good enough to be on a par with the new American addition to the organization, the infidel Russell.

One of the guards, Achmed, lit up a cigarette and leaned against the wall. He faced yet another boring night. Walking guard on the outside, or patrolling the block on which Qati slept, at least gave them a variety of things to observe. One might imagine that there was an Israeli agent behind every parked car or behind every window, and such thoughts kept one awake and alert. Not here. Here they guarded machines that sat dumbly still. For diversion, and also in keeping with their duties, the guards kept an eye on the machinists, following them around the room, to and from their eating and sleeping spaces, and even on some of their less complicated jobs. Though not well educated, Achmed was a bright man, quick to learn, and he fancied that he could have done any of these machinist jobs, given a few months to learn

the trade properly. He was very good with weapons, able to diagnose a problem or fix an improper sight as quickly and well as a master gunsmith.

As he walked around, he listened to the drone of the blowers for the various air systems, and on each circuit he looked at the instrument panels that reported their status. The panels also monitored the backup generators, making sure each night that there was sufficient fuel in the tanks.

"They are awfully worried about the schedule, aren't they?" Achmed mused. He continued his walk around, hoping the indicator light would blink off. He and his companion stopped to look at the same metallic bar that had so interested Fromm and Ghosn.

"What do you suppose that is?"

"Something wondrous," Achmed said. "Certainly they are keeping it as secret as they can."

"I think it's part of an atomic bomb."

Achmed turned. "Why do you say that?"

"One of the machinists said it could be nothing else."

"Wouldn't that be something to give to our Israeli friends?"

"After all the Arabs who've died in the last few years—the Israelis, the Americans, all the rest. . . . Yes, it would be a fine gift." They continued their walk past the idle machines. "I wonder what the rush is?"

"Whatever it is, they want it finished on time." Achmed paused again, looking at the plethora of metal and plastic parts on the assembly table. An atomic bomb? he asked himself. But some of these things looked like . . . like soda straws, long, thin ones, wrapped in tight bundles and twisted slightly. . . . Soda straws—in an atomic bomb? That was not possible. An atomic bomb had to be . . . what? He admitted to himself that he had no idea at all. Well, he was able to read the Koran, and the newspapers, and weapons manuals. It wasn't his fault he hadn't had the chance to have proper schooling like Ghosn, whom he liked in a distant and slightly jealous way. Such a fine thing, an education. If only his own father had been something more than a displaced peasant, a shopowner, perhaps, someone able to save a little money. . . .

On his next circuit, he saw the—paint can? That's what it looked like. The metal shavings from the lathe were collected from the Freon sump. Achmed had seen the process often enough. The scrap—it looked mainly like very fine metallic thread—was collected mechanically and loaded into the container, which did look very much like a paint can, using a window and thick rubber gloves. The can was then placed into a double-door chamber and removed, taken to the next room, and opened in another similar chamber and put into one of those odd crucibles.

"I'm going outside for a piss," his companion said.

"Enjoy the fresh air," Achmed observed.

Achmed slung his weapon and watched his friend go out the double doors. He'd take a stroll soon himself, when it was time to check the perimeter security. He was the senior man, and was responsible for the outside guards, in addition to the security of the shop itself. It was worth it just to get out of the controlled environment of the machine shop. This was no way for a man to live, Achmed thought, stuck inside a sealed enclosure like a space station or submarine. He craved an education, but not to be an office worker, sitting

down all the time and staring at papers. No, to be an engineer, the sort who built roads and bridges, that was an ambition he might once have held. Perhaps his son would be one, if he ever had the chance to marry and have a son. Something to dream for. His dreams were more limited now. For this to end, to be able to set his gun down, to have a real life, that was his primary dream.

But the Zionists had to die first.

Achmed stood alone in the room, bored to death. At least the outside guards could look at the stars. Something to do, something to do. . . .

The paint can sat there, inside the enclosure. It appeared to be ready for the transfer. He'd watched the machinists do it often enough. What the hell. Achmed removed the can from the air lock and walked it into the furnace room. They put it inside the electric furnace, and . . . it was simple enough, and he was glad to be able to do something different, maybe something helpful to whatever project this was.

The can was light, might have held only air for all he could tell. Was it empty? The top was held on with clamps, and . . . no, he decided. He'd just do what the machinists did. Achmed walked to the furnace, opened the door, checked to see that the power was off—this thing got *hot,* he knew. It melted metal! Next he put on the thick rubber gloves they used and, forgetting to switch on the argon-flooding system, loosened the clamps on the can. He rotated the can backwards so that he could see what it looked like. He saw.

As he removed the top, the oxygen-laden air entered the can and attacked the plutonium filaments, some of which reacted at once, essentially exploding in his face. There was a flash, as though from a rifle primer, just a tiny puff of heat and light, certainly nothing to endanger a man, he knew at once. Not even any smoke that he noticed immediately, though he did sneeze once.

Despite that, Achmed was seized with terror. He'd done something he ought not to have done. What would the Commander think of him? What might the Commander do *to* him? He listened to the air-conditioning system, and thought he saw a puff of thin smoke rising into the exhaust vent. That was good. The electric dust-collector plates would take care of that. All he had to do . . .

Yes. He resealed the can and carried it back into the machine shop. His fellow guard hadn't returned yet. Good. Achmed slid the can back where it had been and made sure that things looked as they had looked a few minutes earlier. He lit another cigarette to relax himself, vexed with himself that he was as yet unable to quit the habit. It was starting to impede his running.

Achmed didn't know that he was already a corpse whose death had not yet been registered, and that his cigarette might as easily have been the breath of life itself.

"I can do it," Clark announced, striding through the door like John Wayne into the Alamo.

"Tell me about it," Jack said, waving to a chair.

"I just got back from Dulles, talked to a few people. The JAL 747s set up for Trans-Pac flights are arranged very conveniently for us. The upstairs lounge is set up with beds, like an old Pullman car. It helps us. The room is very lively

acoustically, and that makes for easy pickup." He laid out a diagram. "There's a table here and here. We use two wireless bugs and four broadcast channels."

"Explain," Jack said.

"The wireless bugs are omnidirectional. Okay, they transmit to the SHF transmitter, and that one gets it out of the airplane."

"Why four channels?"

"The big problem is canceling out the airplane noise, the engine whine, the air, all that stuff. Two channels are interior sound. The other two are for background noise only. We use that to cancel out the crap. We have people down in S&T who have been working on that for quite a while. You use the recorded background noise to establish what the interference is, then just change its phase to cancel it out. Pretty simple stuff if you have the right computer backup equipment. We do. Okay? The transmitter goes in a bottle. We aim it out a window. Easy to do, I checked. Now, we will need a chase plane."

"Like what?"

"With the right equipment, a business jet like a Gulfstream, better yet an EC-135. I'd recommend more than one, have them form up and break off."

"How far away?"

"As long as it's line of sight . . . up to thirty miles, and doesn't have to be the same altitude. Not like we have to fly formation on the guy."

"How hard to build it?"

"Simple. The hardest part is the battery, and that'll fit in a liquor bottle, like I said. We'll make it a brand that you usually find in a duty-free store—I have a guy checking that—one with a ceramic bottle 'stead of a glass one. Like an expensive bottle of Chivas, maybe. The Japanese like their scotch."

"Detection?" Ryan asked.

Clark grinned like a teenager who'd just snookered a teacher. "We build the system exclusively from Japanese components, *and* we place a receiver tuned to the right freqs in the aircraft. He'll be traveling with the usual mob of newsies. I'll set a receiver in the wastebin of one of the downstairs heads. If the op gets burned, they'll think it was one of their own. It'll even look like a journalist did it."

Ryan nodded. "Nice touch, John."

"I thought you'd like that. When the bird lands, we have a guy recover the bottle. We'll fix it—I mean, we'll see to it that you can't get the cork out. Superglue, maybe."

"Getting aboard in Mexico City?"

"I have Ding looking at that. Time he got a taste for planning operations, and this is the soft side. My Spanish is good enough to fool a Mexican national."

"Back to the bugging equipment. We won't be reading this in real-time?"

"No way." Clark shook his head. "What'll come across will be garbled, but we'll use high-speed tape machines to record, then we can wash it through the 'puters downstairs to get clean copy. It's an additional operational safeguard. The guys in the chase birds won't know what they're listening to, and only the drivers need to know who they're shadowing . . . maybe not even that, as a matter of fact. I have to check on that."

“How long to produce clean copy?”

“Have to do it at this end . . . say a couple of hours. That’s what the S&T guys say, anyway. You know the real beauty of this?”

“Tell me.”

“Airplanes are about the last place you can’t bug. Our S&T guys have been playing with it for a long time. What made the breakthrough came from the Navy—very black project. Nobody knows we can do this. The computer codes are very complex. Lots of people are playing with it, but the actual breakthrough is on the theoretical side of the math. Came from a guy at NSA. I repeat, Sir John, nobody knows this is possible. Their security guys will be asleep. If they find the bug, they’ll think it’s an amateur attempt to do something. The receiver I put aboard won’t actually recover anything usable to anyone but us—”

“And we’ll have a guy recover that also, to back up the aerial transmissions.”

“That’s right. So we have double-redundancy-or triple, I never have figured what the right terminology is. Three separate channels for the information, one in the plane and two being beamed out from it.”

Ryan raised his coffee mug in salute. “Okay, now that the technical side looks possible, I want an operational feasibility evaluation.”

“You got it, Jack. Goddamn! It’s good to be a real spy again. With all due respect, watching out for your ass does not test my abilities all that much.”

“I love you, too, John.” Ryan laughed. It was his first in too long a time. If they could pull this one off, maybe that Elliot bitch would get off his back for once. Maybe the President would understand that field operations with real live field of ficers were still useful. It would be a small victory.

25

RESOLUTION

"So what's the story on the things?" the Second Officer asked, looking down at the cargo deck.

"Supposed to be the roof beams for a temple. Small one, I guess," the First Officer noted. "How much more will these seas build . . . ?"

"I wish we could slow down, Pete."

"I've talked to him twice about it. Captain says he has a schedule to meet."

"Tell that to the fuckin' ocean."

"Haven't tried that. Who do you call?"

The Second Officer, who had the watch, snorted. The First Officer—the ship's second in command—was on the bridge to keep an eye on things. That was actually the Captain's job, but the ship's Master was asleep in his bed.

MV *George McReady* was pounding through thirty-foot waves, trying to maintain twenty knots, but failing despite full cruising power on her engines. The sky was overcast, with occasional breaks in the clouds for the full moon to peek through. The storm was actually breaking up, but the wind was holding steady at sixty knots and the seas were still increasing somewhat. It was a typical North Pacific storm, both officers had already decided. Nothing about it made any sense. The air temperature was a balmy 10 degrees Fahrenheit, and the flying spray was freezing to ice that impacted the bridge windows like birdshot in duck season. The only good news was that the seas were right on the bow. *George M* was a freighter, not a cruise liner, and lacked antiroll stabilizers. In fact, the ride wasn't bad at all. The superstructure was set on the after portion of the ship, and that damped out most of the pitching motion associated with heavy seas. It also had the effect of reducing the officers' awareness of events at the forward end of the ship, a fact further accentuated by the reduced visibility from flying spray.

The ride also had a few interesting characteristics. When the bow plowed into an especially high wave, the ship slowed down. But the size of the ship meant that the bow slowed quicker than the stern, and as the deceleration forces fought to reduce ship's speed, the hull rebelled by shuddering. In fact, the hull actually bent a few inches, something difficult to believe until it was seen.

"I served on a carrier once. They flex more than a foot in the middle. Once we were—"

"Look dead ahead, sir!" the helmsman called.

"Oh, shit!" the Second Officer shouted. "Rogue wave!"

Suddenly there it was, a fifty-footer just a hundred yards from the *George M's* blunt bow. The event was not unexpected. Two waves would meet and

add their heights for a few moments, then diverge. . . . The bow rose on one medium-sized crest, then dropped before the onrushing green wall.

"Here we go!"

There wasn't time for the bow to climb over this one. The green water simply stepped over the bow as though it had never been there and kept rolling aft the five hundred feet to the superstructure. Both officers watched in detached fascination. There was no real danger to the ship—at least, they both told themselves, no immediate danger. The solid green mass came past the heavy cargo-handling masts and equipment, advancing at a speed of thirty miles per hour. The ship was already shuddering again, the bow having hit the lower portion of the wave, slowing the ship. In fact, the bow was still underwater, since this wave was far broader than it was high, but the top portion was about to hit a white-painted steel cliff that was perpendicular to its axis of advance.

"Brace!" the Second Officer told the helmsman.

The crest of the wave didn't quite make the level of the bridge, but it did hit the windows for the senior officers' cabins. Instantly there was a white vertical curtain of spray that blotted out the entire world. The single second it lasted seemed to stretch into a minute, then it cleared, and the ship's deck was exactly where it was supposed to be, though covered with seawater that was struggling to drain out the scuppers. *George M* took a 15-degree roll, then settled back down.

"Drop speed to sixteen knots, my authority," the First Officer said.

"Aye," the helmsman acknowledged.

"We're not going to break this ship while I'm on the bridge," the senior officer announced.

"Makes sense to me, Pete." The Second Officer was on his way to the trouble board, looking for an indicator light for flooding or other problems. The board was clear. The ship was designed to handle seas far worse than this, but safety at sea demanded vigilance. "Okay here, Pete."

The growler phone rang. "Bridge, First Officer here."

"What the hell was that?" the Chief Engineer demanded.

"Well, it was sorta a big wave, ChEng," Pete answered laconically. "Any problems?"

"No kidding. It really clobbered the forward bulkhead. I thought I was gonna eat my window—looks like a porthole is cracked. I really think we might want to slow down some. I hate getting wet in bed, y'know?"

"I already ordered that."

"Good." The line clicked off.

"What gives?" It was the Captain, in pajamas and bathrobe. He managed to see the last of the seawater draining off the main deck.

"Fifty-sixty-footer. I've dropped speed to sixteen. Twenty's too much for the conditions."

"Guess you're right," the Captain grumbled. Every extra hour alongside the dock meant fifteen thousand dollars, and the owners did not like extra expenses. "Build it back up soon as you can." The Captain withdrew before his bare feet got too cold.

"Will do," Pete told the empty doorway.

"Speed fifteen point eight," the helmsman reported.

"Very well." Both officers settled back down and sipped at their coffee. It wasn't really frightening, just somewhat exciting, and the moonlit spray flying off the bow was actually rather beautiful to see. The First Officer looked down at the deck. It took a moment for him to realize.

"Hit the lights."

"What's the problem?" The Second Officer moved two steps to the panel and flipped on the deck floods.

"Well, we still have one of them."

"One of—" The junior officer looked down. "Oh. The other three . . ."

The First Officer shook his head. How could you describe the power of mere water? "That's strong chain, too, the wave snapped it like yarn. Impressive."

The Second Officer picked up the phone and punched a button. "Bosun, our deck cargo just got swept over the side. I need a damage check on the front of the superstructure." He didn't have to say that the check should be done from inside the structure.

An hour later it was clear that they'd been lucky. The single strike from the deck cargo had landed right on a portion of the superstructure backed by sturdy steel beams. Damage was minor, some welding and painting to be done. That didn't change the fact that someone would have to cut down a new tree. Three of the four logs were gone, and that Japanese temple would have to wait.

The three logs, still chained together, were already well aft of the *George M.* They were still green, and started soaking up seawater, making them heavier still.

Cathy Ryan watched her husband's car pull out of the driveway. She was now past the stage of feeling bad for him. Now she was hurt. He wouldn't talk about it—that is, he didn't try to explain himself, didn't apologize, tried to pretend that . . . what? And then part of the time he said he didn't feel well, was too tired. Cathy wanted to talk it over, but didn't know how to begin. The male ego was a fragile thing, Dr. Caroline Ryan knew, and this had to be its most fragile spot. It had to be a combination of stress and fatigue and booze. Jack wasn't a machine. He was wearing down. She'd seen the symptoms months earlier. As much the commute as anything else. Two and a half, sometimes three hours every day in the car. The fact that he had a driver was something, but not much. Three more hours a day that he was away, thinking, working, not home where he belonged.

Am I helping or hurting? she asked herself. *Is part of it my fault*?

Cathy walked into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Okay, she wasn't a pink-cheeked kid anymore. There were worry lines around her mouth and squint lines around her eyes. She should have her spectacle prescription looked at. She was starting to get headaches during procedures, and she knew it could be a problem with her eyes—she was, after all, an ophthalmic surgeon—but like everyone else she was short of time and was putting off having her eyes looked at by another member of The Wilmer Eye Institute staff. Which was pretty dumb, she admitted to herself. She still had rather pretty eyes. At least the color didn't change, even though their

refractive error might suffer from all the close work that her job mandated.

She was still quite slim. Wouldn't hurt to sweat off three or four pounds—better yet, to transfer that weight into her breasts. She was a small-breasted woman from a small-breasted family in a world that rewarded women for having udders to rival Elsie the Borden cow. Her usual joke that bust size was inversely proportional to brain size was a defense mechanism. She craved larger ones as a man always wanted a larger penis, but God or the gene pool had not chosen to give her those, and she would *not* submit to the vain ignominy of surgery—besides which she didn't like the numbers on that kind of surgery. Too many silicone-implant cases developed complications.

The rest of her . . . her hair, of course, was always a mess, but surgical discipline absolutely prevented her from paying great attention to that. It was still blond and short and very fine, and when Jack took the time to notice, he liked her hair. Her face was still pretty, despite the squint lines and worry lines. Her legs had always been pretty nice, and with all the walking she did at Hopkins/Wilmer, they had actually firmed up slightly. Cathy concluded that her looks were not the sort to make dogs bark when she passed. She was, in fact, still rather attractive. At least the other docs at the hospital thought so. Some of her senior medical students positively swooned over her, she liked to think. Certainly no one fought to escape her rounds.

She was also a good mother. Though Sally and Little Jack were still asleep, she never failed to look after them. Especially with Jack gone so much, Cathy filled in, even to the point of playing catch with her son during T-ball season (that was something that made her husband uncomfortably guilty whenever he learned of it). She cooked good meals when she had the time. Whatever the house needed, she either did herself or "contracted out"—Jack's phrase—to others.

She still loved her husband, and she let him know it. She had a good sense of humor, Cathy thought. She didn't let most things bother her. She never failed to touch Jack whenever the opportunity presented itself; she was a doctor, with a delicate touch. She talked to him, asked what he thought of something or other, let him know that she cared about him, cared about his opinions on things. There could be no doubt in his mind that he was still her man in every way. In fact, she loved him in every way a wife could. Cathy concluded that she wasn't doing anything wrong.

So why didn't he—couldn't he . . . ?

The face in the mirror was more puzzled than hurt, she thought. *What else can I do?* she asked it.

Nothing.

Cathy tried to set that aside. A new day was beginning. She had to get the kids ready for school. That meant setting breakfast up before they awoke. This part of life wasn't fair, of course. She was a surgeon, a professor of surgery, as a matter of fact, but the simple facts of life also said she was a mother, with mother's duties that her husband did not share, at least not on the early morning of a workday. So much for women's lib. She got into her robe and walked down to the kitchen. It could have been worse. Both kids liked oatmeal, and actually preferred the flavored instant kind. She boiled the water for it, then turned the range to low heat while she walked back to wake the

little ones up. Ten minutes later Sally and Little Jack were washed and dressed on their way to the kitchen. Sally arrived first, setting the TV to the Disney Channel in time for Mousercise. Cathy took her ten minutes of peace to look at the morning paper and drink her coffee.

On the bottom right-hand side of the front page was an article about Russia. *Well, maybe that's one of the things that's bothering Jack.* She decided to read it. Maybe she could talk to him, find out why he was so . . . distracted? Was it just that, maybe?

". . . disappointed with the ability of CIA to deliver data on the problem. There are further rumors of an underway investigation. An administration official confirms the rumors that a senior CIA official is suspected of financial misconduct and also of sexual improprieties. The name of this official has not been revealed, but he is reportedly very senior and responsible for coordinating information for the administration. . . ."

Sexual improprieties? What did that mean? Who was it?

He.

Very senior and responsible for . . .

That was Jack. That was her husband. That was the phrase they used for someone at his level. In a quiet moment of total clarity, she knew that it had to be.

Jack . . . playing around? My Jack?

It wasn't possible.

Was it?

His inability to perform, his tiredness, the drinking, the distractions ? Was it possible that the reason he didn't . . . someone else was exciting him?

It wasn't possible. Not Jack. Not her Jack.

But why else . . . ? She was still attractive—everyone thought so. She was still a good wife—there was no doubt of that. Jack wasn't ill. She would have caught any gross symptoms; she was a doctor, and a good one, and she knew she would not have missed anything important. She went out of her way to be nice to Jack, to talk to him, to let him know that she loved him, and . . .

Perhaps it wasn't *likely*, but was it *possible?*

Yes.

No. Cathy set the paper down and sipped at her coffee. Not possible. Not her Jack.

It was the last hour of the last leg in the manufacturing process. Ghosn and Fromm watched the lathe with what looked like detachment, but was in both cases barely controlled excitement. The Freon liquid being sprayed on the rotating metal prevented their seeing the product whose final manufacture was under way. That didn't help, even though both knew that seeing would not have helped in the least. The part of the plutonium mass being machined was hidden from their sight by other metal, and even if *that* had been otherwise, they both knew that their eyes were too coarse an instrument to detect imperfections. Both watched the machine readout of the computer systems. Tolerances indicated by the machine were well within the twelve angstroms specified by Herr Doktor Fromm. They had to believe the computer, didn't they?

"Just a few more centimeters," Ghosn said as Bock and Qati joined them.

"You've never explained the Secondary part of the unit," the Commander said. He'd taken to calling the bomb "the unit."

Fromm turned, not really grateful for the distraction, though he knew he should be. "What do you wish to know?"

"I understand how the Primary works, but not the Secondary," Qati said simply and reasonably.

"Very well. The theoretical side of this is quite straightforward once you understand the principle. That was the difficult part, you see, discovering the principle. It was thought at first that making the Secondary work was simply a matter of temperature—that is what distinguishes the center of a star, *ja?* Actually it is not, the first theoreticians overlooked the matter of pressure. That is rather strange in retrospect, but pioneering work is often that way. The key to making the Secondary work is managing the energy in such a way as to convert energy into pressure at the same time you use its vast heat, and also to change its direction by ninety degrees. That is no small task when you are talking about redirecting seventy kilotons of energy," Fromm said smugly. "However, the belief that to make the Secondary function is a matter of great theoretical difficulty, that is a fiction. The real insight Ulam and Teller had was a simple one, as most great insights are. Pressure is temperature. What they discovered—the secret—is that there is no secret. Once you understand the principles involved, what remains is just a question of engineering. Making the bomb work is computationally, not technically, demanding. The difficult part is to make the weapon portable. That is pure engineering," Fromm said again.

"Soda straws?" Bock asked, knowing that his countryman wanted to be asked about that. He was a smug bastard.

"I cannot know for sure, but I believe this to be my personal innovation. The material is perfect. It is light, it is hollow, and it is easily twisted into the proper configuration." Fromm walked over to the assembly table and returned with one. "The base material is polyethylene, and as you see, we have coated the outside with copper and the inside with rhodium. The length of the 'straw' is sixty centimeters, and the inside diameter is just under three millimeters. Many thousands of them surround the Secondary, in bundles twisted one hundred eighty degrees into a geometric shape called a helix. A helix is a useful shape. It can direct energy while retaining its ability to radiate heat in all directions."

Inside every engineer, Qati thought, was a frustrated teacher. "But what do they do?"

"*Also* . . . the first emission off the Primary is massive gamma radiation. Just behind that are the X-rays. In both cases we are talking about high-energy photons, quantum particles which carry energy but which have no mass—"

"Light waves," Bock said, remembering his Gymnasium physics. Fromm nodded.

"Correct. Extremely energetic light waves of a different—higher—frequency. Now, we have this vast amount of energy radiating from the Primary. Some we can reflect or warp toward the Secondary by use of the channels we have built. Most is lost, of course, but the fact is that we will have so much energy

at our fingertips that we need only a small fraction of it. The X-rays sweep down the straws. Much of their energy is absorbed by the metallic coatings, while the oblique surfaces reflect some further down, allowing further energy absorption. The polyethylene also absorbs a good deal of energy. And what do you suppose happens?"

"Absorb that much energy, and it must explode, of course," Bock said before Qati could.

"Very good, Herr Bock. When the straws explode—actually they convert into plasma, but having split straws, we will not split hairs, eh?—the plasma expands radially to their axes, thus converting the axial energy from the Primary into radial energy imploding on the Secondary."

The light bulb went on in Qati's head. "Brilliant—but you lose half of the energy, that part expanding outward."

"Yes and no. It still makes an energy barrier, and that is what we need. Next, the uranium fins around the body of the Secondary are also converted to plasma—from the same energy flux, but more slowly than the straws due to their mass. This plasma has far greater density, and is pressed inward. Within the actual Secondary casing, there is two centimeters of vacuum, since that space will be evacuated. So we have a 'running start' for the plasma that is racing inward."

"So you use the energy from the Primary, redirected into a right-angle turn to perform the same function on the Secondary that is first done by chemical explosives?" Qati saw.

"Excellent, Commander!" Fromm replied, just patronizingly enough to be noticed. "We now have a relatively heavy mass of plasma pressing inward. The vacuum gap gives it room to accelerate before slamming into the Secondary. This compresses the Secondary. The secondary assembly is lithium-deuteride and lithium-hydride, both doped with tritium, surrounded by uranium 238. This assembly is crushed violently by the imploding plasma. It is also being bombarded by neutrons from the Primary, of course. The combination of heat, pressure, and neutron bombardment causes the lithium to fission into tritium. The tritium immediately begins the fusion process, generating vast quantities of high-energy neutrons along with the liberated energy. The neutrons attack the U-238, causing a fast-fission reaction, adding to the overall Secondary yield."

"The key, as Herr Fromm said," Ghosn explained, "is managing the energy."

"Straws," Bock noted.

"Yes, I said the same thing," Ghosn said. "It is truly brilliant. Like building a bridge from paper."

"And the yield from the Secondary?" Qati asked. He didn't really understand the physics, but he did understand the final number.

"The Primary will generate approximately seventy kilotons. The Secondary will generate roughly four hundred sixty-five kilotons. The numbers are approximate because of possible irregularities within the weapon, and also because we cannot test to measure actual effects."

"How confident are you in the performance of the weapon?"

"Totally," Fromm said.

"But without testing, you said . . ."

"Commander, I knew from the beginning that a proper test program was not possible. That is the same problem we had in the DDR. For that reason the design is overengineered, in some cases by a factor of forty percent, in others by a factor of more than one hundred. You must understand that an American, British, French, or even Soviet weapon of the same yield would not be a fifth the size of our 'unit.' Such refinements of size and efficiency can come only from extensive testing. The physics of the device are entirely straightforward. Engineering refinements come only from practice. As Herr Ghosn said, building a bridge. The Roman bridges of antiquity were very inefficient structures. By modern standards they use far too much stone, and as a result far too much labor to build them, *ja?* Over the years we have learned to build bridges more efficiently, using fewer materials and less labor to perform the same task. But do not forget that some Roman bridges still stand. They are still bridges, even if they are inefficient. This bomb design, though inefficient and wasteful of materials, is still a bomb, and it *will* work as I say."

Heads turned as the beeper on the lathe went off. An indicator light blinked green. The task was finished. Fromm walked over, telling the technicians to flush the Freon out of the system. Five minutes later the object of so much loving care was visible. The manipulator arm brought it into view. It was finished.

"Excellent," Fromm said. "We will carefully examine the plutonium, and then we will commence assembly. *Meine Herren,* the difficult part is behind us." He thought that called for a beer, and made another mental note that he hadn't gotten the palladium yet. Details, details. But that's what engineering was.

"What gives, Dan?" Ryan asked over his secure phone. He had missed the morning paper at home only to find the offending article waiting on his desk as part of *The Bird.*

"It sure as hell didn't come from here, Jack. It must be in your house."

"Well, I just tore our security director a brand-new asshole. He says he doesn't have anything going. What the hell does a 'very senior' official mean?"

"It means that this Holtzman guy got carried away with his adjectives. Look, Jack, I've already gone too far. I'm not supposed to discuss ongoing investigations, remember?"

"I'm not concerned about that. Somebody just leaked material that comes from a closely held source. If the world made any sense, we'd bring Holtzman in for questioning!" Ryan snarled into the phone.

"You want to rein in a little, boy?"

The DDCI looked up from the phone and commanded himself to take a deep breath. It wasn't Holtzman's fault, was it? "Okay, I just simmered down."

"Whatever investigation is under way, it isn't the Bureau running it."

"No shit?"

"You have my word on it," Murray said.

"That's fair enough, Dan." Ryan calmed down further. If it wasn't the FBI and it wasn't his own in-house security arm, then that part of the story was probably fiction.

"Who could have leaked it?"

Jack barked out a laugh. “Could have? Ten or fifteen people on the Hill. Maybe five in the White House, twenty—maybe forty here.”

“So the other part could just be camouflage, or somebody who wants a score settled.” Murray did not make it a question. He figured at least a third of all press leaks were aimed at settling grudges in one way or another. “The source is sensitive?”

“This phone isn’t all that secure, remember?”

“Gotcha. Look, I can approach Holtzman quietly and informally. He’s a good guy, responsible, a pro. We can talk to him off the record and let him know that he may be endangering people and methods.”

“I have to go to Marcus for that.”

“And I have to talk to Bill, but Bill will play ball.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to my Director. I’ll be back.” Ryan hung up and walked again to the Director’s office.

“I’ve seen it,” Director Cabot said.

“The Bureau doesn’t know about this investigation, and neither do our people. From that we can surmise that the scandal part of the story is pure bull, but somebody’s been leaking the take from SPINNAKER, and that sort of thing gets agents killed.”

“What do you suggest?” the DCI asked.

“Dan Murray and I approach Holtzman informally and let him know that he’s stepping on sensitive toes. We ask him to back off.”

“Ask?”

“Ask. You don’t give orders to reporters. Not unless you sign their paychecks, anyway,” Jack corrected himself. “I’ve never actually done this, but Dan has. It was his idea.”

“I have to go upstairs on this,” Cabot said.

“Goddamn it, Marcus, we *are* upstairs!”

“Dealing with the press—it has to be decided elsewhere.”

“Super—get in your car and drive down and make sure you ask very nicely.” Ryan turned and stormed out before Cabot had a chance to flush at the insult.

By the time he’d walked the few yards to his private office, Jack’s hands were quivering. *Can’t he back me up on* anything? Nothing was going right lately. Jack pounded once on his desk, and the pain brought things back under control. Clark’s little operation, that seemed to be heading in the right direction. That was one thing, and one thing was better than nothing.

Not much better. Jack looked at the photo of his wife and kids.

“Goddamn it,” he swore to himself. He couldn’t get that guy to back him up on anything, he’d become a lousy father to his kids, and sure as hell he was no great shakes as a husband lately.

Liz Elliot read the front-page article with no small degree of satisfaction. Holtzman had delivered exactly what she had expected. Reporters were so easy to manipulate. It opened a whole new world for her, she had belatedly realized. With Marcus Cabot being so weak, and no one within the CIA bureaucracy to back him up, she would have effective control of that, as well. Wasn’t that something?

Removing Ryan from his post was now more than a mere exercise in spite, as desirable as so simple a motive might have been. Ryan was the one who had said no to a few White House requests, who occasionally went directly to Congress on internal matters . . . who prevented her from having closer contact with the Agency. With him out of the way, she could give orders—couched as "suggestions"—to Cabot, who would then carry them out with a total absence of resistance. Dennis Bunker would still have Defense and his dumb football team. Brent Talbot would have the State Department. Elizabeth Elliot would have control of the National Security apparatus—because she also had the ear, and all the other important parts, of the President. Her phone beeped.

"Director Cabot is here."

"Send him in," Liz said. She stood and walked toward the door. "Good morning, Marcus."

"Hello, Dr. Elliot."

"What brings you down?" she asked, waving him to a seat on the couch.

"This newspaper article."

"I saw it," the National Security Advisor said sympathetically.

"Whoever leaked this might have endangered a valuable source."

"I know. Somebody at your end? I mean, what is this about an in-house investigation?"

"It isn't us."

"Really?" Dr. Elliot leaned back and played with her blue silk cravat. "Who, then?"

"We don't know, Liz." Cabot looked even more uncomfortable than she had expected. Maybe, she thought playfully, he thought he was the target of the investigation . . . ? There was an interesting idea. "We want to talk to Holtzman."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we and the FBI talk to him, informally of course, to let him know that he may be doing something irresponsible."

"Who came up with that, Marcus?"

"Ryan and Murray."

"Really?" She paused, as though considering the matter. "I don't think that's a good idea. You know how reporters are. If you have to stroke them, you have to stroke them properly . . . hmm. I can handle that if you wish."

"This really is serious. SPINNAKER is very important to us." Cabot tended to repeat himself when he got excited.

"I know it. Ryan was pretty clear in his briefing, back when you were ill. You still haven't confirmed his reports?"

Cabot shook his head. "No. Jack went off to England to ask the Brits to nose around, but we don't expect anything for a while."

"What do you want me to tell Holtzman?"

"Tell him that he may be jeopardizing a highly important source. The man could die over this, and the political fallout might be very serious," Cabot concluded.

"Yes, it could have undesired effects on their political scene, couldn't it?"

"If SPINNAKER is right, then they're in for a huge political shakeup.

Revealing that we know what we know could jeopardize him. Remember that —"

Elliot interrupted. "That Kadishev is our main fallback position. Yes. And if he gets 'burned,' then we might have no fallback position. You've made yourself very clear, Marcus. Thank you. I'll work on this myself."

"That should be quite satisfactory," Cabot said after a moment's pause.

"Fine. Anything else I need to know this morning?"

"No, that's why I came down."

"I think it's time to show you something. Something we've been working on here. Pretty sensitive," she added. Marcus got the message.

"What is it?" the DCI asked guardedly.

"This is absolutely confidential." Elliot pulled a large manila envelope from her desk. "I mean absolutely, Marcus. It doesn't leave the building, okay?"

"Agreed." The DCI was already interested.

Liz opened the envelope and handed over some photographs. Cabot looked them over.

"Who's the woman?"

"Carol Zimmer. She's the widow of an Air Force crewman who got himself killed somehow or other." Elliot filled in some additional details.

"Ryan, screwing around? I'll be damned."

"Any chance we could get more information from inside the Agency?"

"If you mean accomplishing that without any suspicion on his part, it would be very difficult." Cabot shook his head. "His two SPOs, Clark and Chavez, no way. They're very tight. Good friends, I mean."

"Ryan's friendly with bodyguards? You serious?" Elliot was surprised. It was like being solicitous toward furniture.

"Clark's an old field officer. Chavez is a new kid, working as a SPO while he finishes his college degree, looking to be a field officer. I've seen the files. Clark'll retire in a few more years, and keeping him around as a SPO is just a matter of being decent. He's done some really interesting things. Good man, good officer."

Elliot didn't like that, but from what Cabot said, it seemed that it couldn't be helped. "We want Ryan eased out."

"That might not be easy. They really like him on the Hill."

"You just said he's insubordinate."

"It won't wash on the Hill. You know that. You want him fired, the President just has to ask for his resignation."

But that wouldn't wash on the Hill either, Liz thought, and it seemed immediately clear that Marcus Cabot wouldn't be much help. She hadn't really expected that he would be. Cabot was too soft.

"We can handle it entirely from this end if you want."

"Probably a good idea. If it became known at Langley that I had a hand in this, it might look like spite. Can't have that," Cabot demurred. "Bad for morale."

"Okay." Liz stood, and so did Cabot. "Thanks for coming down."

Two minutes later she was back in her chair, her feet propped up on a drawer. This was going so well. Exactly as planned. *I'm getting good at this. . . .*

"So?"

"This was published in a Washington paper today," Golovko said. It was seven in the evening in Moscow, the sky outside dark and cold as only Moscow could get cold. That he had to report on something in an American newspaper did not warm the night very much.

Andrey Il'ych Narmonov took the translation from the First Deputy Chairman and read through it. Finished, he tossed the two pages contemptuously onto his desk top. "What rubbish is this?"

"Holtzman is a very important Washington reporter. He has access to very senior officials in the Fowler Administration."

"And he probably writes a good deal of fiction, just as our reporters do."

"We think not. We think the tone of the report indicates that he was given the data by someone in the White House."

"Indeed?" Narmonov pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose, cursing the cold that the sudden weather change had brought with it. If there was anything for which he did not have time, it was an illness, even a minor one. "I don't believe it. I've told Fowler personally about the difficulty with the missile destruction, and the rest of this political twaddle is just that. You know that I've had to deal with uniformed hotheads—those fools who went off on their own in the Baltic region. So do the Americans. It's incredible to me that they should take such nonsense seriously. Surely their intelligence services tell them the truth—and the truth is what I've told Fowler myself!"

"Comrade President." Golovko paused for a beat. *Comrade* was too hard a habit to break. "Just as we have political elements who distrust the Americans, so they have elements who continue to hate and distrust us. Changes between us have come and gone very rapidly. Too rapidly for many to assimilate. I find it plausible that there might be American political officials who believe this report."

"Fowler is vain, he is far weaker as a man than he would like people to know, he is personally insecure—but he is not a fool, and only a fool would believe this, particularly after meeting me and talking with me." Narmonov handed the translation back to Golovko.

"My analysts believe otherwise. We think it possible that the Americans really believe this."

"Thank them for their opinion. I disagree."

"If the Americans are getting a report saying this, it means that they have a spy within our government."

"I have no doubt that they have such people—after all, we do also, do we not?—but I do not believe it in this case. The reason is simple, no spy could have reported something which I did not say, correct? I have not said this to anyone. It is not true. What do you do to a spy who lies to us?"

"My President, it is not something we look upon kindly," Golovko assured him.

"That is doubtless true of the Americans also." Narmonov paused for a moment, then smiled. "Do you know what this could be?"

"We are always open to ideas."

"Think like a politician. This could easily be a sign of some sort of power play within their government. Our involvement would then be merely

incidental." "We have heard that there

Golovko thought about that. "We have heard that there is—that Ryan, their Deputy Director, is unloved by Fowler. . . ."

"Ryan, ah, yes, I remember him. A worthy adversary, Sergey Nikolay'ch?"

"He is that."

"And an honorable one. He gave his word to me that one time, and he kept his word."

Definitely something a politician would remember, Golovko thought.

"Why are they unhappy with him?" Narmonov asked.

"Reportedly a clash of personalities."

"That I can believe. Fowler and his vanity." Narmonov held up his hands. "There you have it. Perhaps I might have made a good intelligence analyst?"

"The finest," Golovko agreed. He had to agree, of course. Moreover, his President had said something that his own people had not examined fully. He left the august presence of his chief of state with a troubled expression. The defection of KGB Chairman Gerasimov a few years ago—an event that Ryan had himself engineered, if Golovko read the signs correctly—had inevitably crippled KGB's overseas operations. Six complete networks in America had collapsed, along with eight more in Western Europe. Replacement networks were only now beginning to take their place. That left major holes in KGB's ability to penetrate American government operations. The only good news was that they were starting to read a noteworthy fraction of American diplomatic and military communications—as much as four or five percent in a good month. But code-breaking was no substitute for penetration agents. There was something very strange going on here. Golovko didn't know what it was. Perhaps his President was right. Perhaps this was merely the ripples from an internal power-play. But it could also have been something else. The fact that Golovko didn't know what it was did not help matters.

"Just made it back in time," Clark said. "Did they sweep the wheels today?"

"If it's Wednesday. . . ." Jack replied. Every week his official car was examined for possible electronic bugs.

"Can we talk about it, then?"

"Yes."

"Chavez was right. It's easy, just a matter of dropping a nice little *mordida* on the right guy. The regular maintenance man will be taken sick that day, the two of us get tapped to service the 747. I get to play maid, scrub the sinks and the crappers, replenish the bar, the whole thing. You'll have the official evaluation on your desk tomorrow, but the short version is, yeah, we can do it, and the likelihood of discovery is minimal."

"You know the downside?"

"Oh, yeah. Major International Incident. I get early retirement. That's okay, Jack. I can retire whenever I want. It would be a shame for Ding, though. That kid is showing real promise."

"And if you're discovered?"

"I say in my best Spanish that some Japanese reporter asked me to do it, and paid me a lot of pesos to do it. That's the hook, Jack. They won't make a big deal about it if they think it's one of their own. Looks too bad, loss of face

and all that."

"John, you're a tricky, underhanded son of a bitch."

"Just want to serve my country, sir." Clark started laughing. A few minutes later he took the turn. "Hope we're not too late."

"It was a long one at the office."

"I saw that thing in the paper. What are we doing about it?"

"The White House will be talking to Holtzman, telling him to lay off."

"Somebody dipping his pen in the company inkwell?"

"Not that we know about, same with the FBI."

"Camouflage for the real story, eh?"

"Looks that way."

"What bullshit," Clark observed as he pulled into the parking place.

It turned out that Carol was in her home, cleaning up after dinner. The Zimmer family Christmas tree was up. Clark began ferrying the presents in. Jack had picked some of them up in England; Clark and Nancy Cummings had helped to wrap them—Ryan was hopeless at wrapping presents. Unfortunately, they'd walked into the house just in time to hear crying.

"No problem, Dr. Ryan," one of the kids told him in the kitchen. "Jackie had a little accident. Mom's in the bathroom."

"Okay." Ryan walked that way, careful to announce his presence.

"Okay, okay, come in," Carol said.

Jack saw Carol leaning over the bathtub. Jacqueline was crying in the piteous monotone of a child who knows that she has misbehaved. There was a pile of kids' clothes on the tile floor, and the air positively reeked of crushed flowers. "What happened?"

"Jackie think my perfume is same as her toy perfume, pour whole bottle." Carol looked up from scrubbing.

Ryan lifted the little girl's shirt. "You're not kidding."

"Whole bottle—expensive! Bad girl!"

Jacqueline's crying increased in pitch. She'd probably had her backside smacked already. Ryan was just as happy not to have seen that. He disciplined his own kids as necessary, but didn't like to see other people smack theirs. That was one of several weak spots in his character. Even after Carol lifted her youngest out of the tub, the smell had not gone away.

"Wow, it is pretty strong, isn't it?" Jack picked Jackie up, which didn't mute her crying very much.

"Eighty dollar!" Carol said, but her anger was now gone. She had ample experience with small children, and knew that they were expected to do mischief. Jack carried the little one out to the living room. Her attitude changed when she saw the stack of presents.

"You too nice," her mother noted.

"Hey, I just happened to be doing some shopping, okay?"

"You no come here Christmas, you have you own family."

"I know, Carol, but I can't let Christmas go by without stopping in." Clark came in with a final pile. These were his, Jack saw. Good man, Clark.

"We have nothing for you," Carol Zimmer said.

"Sure you do. Jackie gave me a good hug."

"What about me?" John asked.

Jack handed Jackie over. It was funny. Quite a few men were wary of John Clark on the basis of looks alone, but the Zimmer kids thought of him as a big teddy bear. A few minutes later they drove away.

"Nice of you to do that, John," Ryan said as they drove off.

"No big deal. Hey, man, you know how much fun it was to shop for little kids? Who the hell wants to buy his kid a Bali bra—that's what Maggie wanted, put it on her list—a sexy bra, for Christ's sake. How the hell can a father walk into a department store and buy something like that for his own daughter?"

"They get a little big for Barbie Dolls."

"More's the pity, doc, more's the pity."

Jack turned and chuckled. "That bra—"

"Yeah, Jack, if I ever find out, he's dog meat."

Ryan had to laugh at that, but he knew he could afford to laugh. His little girl wasn't dating yet. That would be hard, watching her leave with someone else, beyond his protective reach. Harder still for a man like John Clark.

"Regular time tomorrow?"

"Yep."

"See ya' then, doc."

Ryan walked into his house at 8:55. His dinner was in its usual place. He poured his usual glass of wine, took a sip, then removed his coat and hung it in the closet before walking upstairs to change clothes. He caught Cathy going the other way and smiled at her. He didn't kiss her. He was just too tired. That was the problem. If he could only get time to relax. Clark was right, just a few days off to unwind. That's all he needed, Jack told himself as he changed.

Cathy opened the closet door to get some medical files she'd left in her own topcoat. She almost turned away when she noticed something, not sure what it was. Cathy Ryan leaned in, puzzled, then caught it. Where was it? Her nose searched left and right in a way that might have appeared comical except for the look on her face when she found it. Jack's camel-hair coat, the expensive one she'd gotten for him last year.

It wasn't her perfume.

26

INTEGRATION

The assembly had begun with the purchase of additional instruments. An entire day. was spent attaching one heavy block of spent uranium to the inside of the far end of the case.

"This is tedious, I know," Fromm said almost apologetically. "In America and elsewhere there are special jigs, specially designed tools, people assemble many individual weapons of the same design, all advantages that we do not have."

"And here everything must be just as exact. Commander," Ghosn added.

"My young friend is correct. The physics are the same for all of us."

"Then don't let us stop you," Qati said.

Fromm went immediately back to work. Part of him was already counting the money he'd receive, but most concerned itself with the job at hand. Only half of the machinists had actually worked on the bomb's physics package itself. The rest had been employed entirely with manufacturing other fittings, most of which could be called cradles. These would hold the bomb components in place, and were mainly made from stainless steel for strength and compactness. Each was set in place according to a precise sequence, as the bomb was more complex than most machines, and required assembly according to a rigid set of instructions. Here again the process was made simpler by the quality of the design and the precision of the machine tools. Even the machinists were amazed that the parts all fit, and they murmured among themselves that whatever Fromm might be—and on this subject their speculation had been wide-ranging and colorful—he was an inhumanly skilled designer. The hardest part was installing the various uranium blocks. Installation of the lighter and milder materials went much more smoothly.

"The procedure for the tritium transfer?" Ghosn asked.

"We'll leave that for last, of course," Fromm said, backing off from checking a measurement.

"Just heat the battery to release the gas, correct?"

"Yes," Fromm said with a nod, "but—no, no, not that way!"

"What did I do wrong?"

"This must twist in," Fromm told the machinist. He stepped forward to demonstrate. "Like that, do you see?"

"Yes, thank you."

"The elliptical reflectors hang on these—"

"Yes, thank you, I know."

"Very good."

Fromm waved to Ghosn. "Come over here. You see how this works now?"

Fromm pointed to two series of elliptical surfaces which nested together one after the other—there was a total of nineteen—each made of a different material. “The energy off the Primary impacts the first set of these surfaces, destroying each in its turn, but in the process . . .”

“Yes, it is always more clear to see the physical model than to extract it from a sheet of figures.” This portion of the weapon derived its utility from the fact that light waves have no mass but do carry momentum. They were not “light” waves at all, technically speaking, but since the energy was all in the form of photons, the same principle held. The energy would immolate each of the elliptical surfaces, but in the process each surface would transfer a small but reliable percentage of the energy in another direction, adding to the energy already headed that way from the Primary itself.

“Your energy budget is lavish, Herr Fromm,” Ghosn observed not for the first time.

The German shrugged. “Yes, it must be. If you cannot test, you must overengineer. The first American bomb—the one used on Hiroshima—was an untested design. It was wasteful of materials and disgustingly inefficient, but it was overengineered. And it did work. With a proper test program . . .” With a proper test program he could measure the empirical effects, determine exactly what the necessary energy budget was, and how well he managed it, determine the exact performance of each component, improve those that needed improvement, and reduce the size of those which were too large or too massive for the task at hand, just as the Americans, and Russians, and British, and French had done over a period of decades, constantly refining their designs, making them more and more efficient, and because of that, smaller, lighter, simpler, more reliable, less expensive. This, Fromm thought, was the ultimate engineering discipline, and he was immeasurably grateful that he had finally gotten the chance to try his hand at it. This design was crude and heavy, no masterpiece of design. It would function—of that he was certain—but with time he could have done so much better. . . .

“Yes, I see. A man of your skill could reduce this entire unit to the size of a large bucket.”

It was a vast compliment. “Thank you, Herr Ghosn. Probably not that small, but small enough for the nose of a rocket.”

“If our Iraqi brothers had taken the time . . .”

“Indeed, there would be no Israel. But they were foolish, were they not?”

“They were impatient,” Ibrahim said, silently cursing them for it.

“One must be cold and clearheaded about such things. Such decisions must be made on the basis of logic, not emotion.”

“Indeed.”

Achmed was feeling very poorly indeed. He’d made his excuses and taken his leave, heading off to see the Commander’s own physician, as per orders from Qati. Achmed had little experience of doctors. It was, he thought, something to be avoided if possible. He’d seen combat action and seen death and wounds, but never to himself. Even that was preferable to his current situation. One could understand injury from a bullet or a grenade, but what had made him ill so quickly and unexpectedly?

The doctor listened to his description of his condition, asked a few questions that were not entirely foolish, and noted that Achmed was a smoker—that had earned the fighter a head-shake and a cluck, as though cigarettes had anything to do with his situation. What rubbish, Achmed thought. Didn't he run six kilometers each day—or had, until very recently?

The physical examination came next. The doctor placed a stethoscope on his chest and listened. Instantly, Achmed noted, the doctor's eyes became guarded in a way not unlike the expression of a courageous fighter who didn't wish to betray his feelings.

"Breathe in," the physician ordered. Achmed did so. "Now, out slowly."

The stethoscope moved. "Again, please." The procedure was repeated six more times, front and back.

"Well?" Achmed asked when the examination was finished.

"I don't know. I want to take you to see someone who understands these lung problems better."

"I have no time for that."

"You have time for this. I will talk to your Commander if necessary."

Achmed managed not to grumble. "Very well."

It was a measure of Ryan's own situation that he took no note of it, or more correctly that he was grateful for the diminished attention his wife accorded him. It helped. It took some of the pressure off. Maybe she understood that he just needed to be left alone for a while. He'd make it up to her, Jack promised himself. He sure as hell would, when he got it all back together. He was sure of that, or told himself that he was, though a distant part of his mind was less sure and announced the fact to a consciousness that preferred not to listen. He tried to cut back on the drinking, but with the reduced demands he could, he decided, get a little more sleep, and the wine helped him sleep. In the spring, when things warmed up, he'd get back into a healthier routine. Yeah, that was it. He'd jog. He'd take the time at work, at lunch he'd get outside with the rest of the local sweat squad and run around the perimeter road inside the CIA enclosure. Clark would be a good trainer for this. Clark was a rock. Better him than Chavez, who was disgustingly fit and singularly unsympathetic to those who failed to keep in good shape—doubtless a carryover from his time in the infantry, Ryan thought. Ding would learn as he got closer to thirty. That number was the great equalizer, when you stopped being young and had to face the fact that everything had limits.

Christmas could have gone better, he thought, sitting at his desk. But it had been in the middle of the week, which meant that the kids were home two full weeks. It also meant that Cathy had to miss time at work, and that was a little hard on her. She liked her work, and as much as she loved the kids, and as fine a mother as she was, she resented the time away from Hopkins and her patients. Strictly speaking, it wasn't fair for her, Jack admitted to himself. She, too, was a professional and a fine one, despite which she was the one who always got tapped with kid duty while he never got relief from his work. But there were thousands of eye surgeons, and even a few hundred professors of eye surgery, but there was only one DDCI, and that was that. Not fair, perhaps, but a fact.

So much the better if he were able to accomplish something, Ryan told himself. Letting Elizabeth Elliot handle that damned newsie had been a mistake. Not that he'd expected much else from Marcus Cabot. The man was a drone. It really was that simple. He enjoyed the prestige that went with his post, but he didn't *do* anything. Ryan got most of the work, none of the credit, and all of the blame. Maybe that would change. He had the Mexican operation fully in hand, had taken that over entirely from the Directorate of Operations, and, by God, he'd get the credit for this. Maybe then things would get better. He pulled out the file for the operation and decided that he'd go over every detail, check every possible contingency. This one would work, and he'd make those White House bastards respect him.

"Go to your room!" Cathy shouted at Little Jack. Both an order and an admission of failure. Then she walked out of the room, tears in her eyes. She was acting stupidly, shouting at the kids when she should be confronting her own husband. But how? What could she say? What if—what if it were true? Then what? She kept telling herself that it couldn't be, but that was too hard to believe. How else to explain it? Jack had never failed at anything in his life. She remembered with pride the fact that he'd risked his life for her and the children. She'd been terrified, the breath frozen in her throat, walking along the beach, watching her man advance toward men with guns, with his life and others in the balance. How could a man who had done that betray his own wife? It didn't make any sense.

But what other explanation was there? Didn't he find her exciting anymore? If so, why not? Wasn't she pretty enough? Didn't she do everything—and more—that a wife could? The simple rejection was bad enough—but to be set aside, to know that his energy and vigor was serving some other, unknown woman with cheap perfume was more than she could bear.

She had to confront him, had to get it into the open, had to find out.

How? she asked herself. That was the question. Could she discuss it with someone at Hopkins . . . a psychiatrist, perhaps? Get professional advice . . . ?

And risk having it get out, risk having her shame widely known? Caroline Ryan, Associate Professor, pretty, bright Cathy Ryan can't even hold on to her own husband? What do you suppose she did wrong? her friends would whisper when she was elsewhere. Sure, they'd all say that it couldn't be *her* fault, but then they'd pause and look embarrassed, and after a moment they'd wonder aloud what she might have done dif ferently, why she hadn't noticed the signals, because, after all, a failed marriage was rarely the work of a single partner, and Jack wasn't really the sort to play around, was he? The embarrassment of it would be worse than anything in her life, she thought, forgetting for the moment times that had been far worse.

It didn't make any sense. But she didn't know what to do about it, though at the same time she knew that doing nothing was probably the worst thing of all. Was it all a trap? Did she have any choices at all?

"What's the matter, Mommy?" Sally asked, a Barbie in her hands.

"Nothing, honey, just leave Mommy alone for a little while, okay?"

"Jack says he's sorry and can he come out of his room?"

"Yes, if he promises to be good."

"Okay!" Sally ran out of the room.

Was it that simple? Cathy wondered. She could forgive him almost anything. Could she forgive him this? Not because she would want to forgive him. Because there was more to it than her pride. There were also the kids, and kids needed a father, even a neglectful one. Was her pride more important than their needs? The other side of that—what sort of household would they have if Mom and Dad didn't get along? Wasn't that even more destructive? After all, she could always find . . .

. . . another Jack?

She started crying again. She cried for herself, for her own inability to make a decision, for the injury to her character. It was the sort of weeping that did nothing for the problem except make it worse. Part wanted him gone. Part wanted him back. No part knew what to do.

"You understand that this is strictly confidential," the investigator said rather than asked. The man before him was short and overweight, with soft, pink hands. The Bismarck mustache was obviously an affectation to make him look manly. In fact he didn't look terribly impressive at all until you took a close look at his face. Those dark eyes didn't miss a thing.

"Doctors are accustomed to confidentiality," Bernie Katz replied, handing the credentials back. "Make it fast. I have rounds in twenty minutes."

The investigator thought that his assignment did have a certain elegance to it, though he wasn't sure that he approved. The problem was that playing around wasn't exactly a felony, though it did usually disqualify a man from a high security clearance. After all, if a man could break a promise made in a church, then why not one made merely of paper?

Bernie Katz leaned back, waiting as patiently as he was able, which wasn't very patient. He was a surgeon, accustomed to doing things and making his own decisions, not waiting for others. One hand twirled at his mustache as he rocked in the chair.

"How well do you know Dr. Caroline Ryan?"

"Cathy? I've worked with her on and off for eleven years."

"What can you tell me about her?"

"She's a brilliant surgeon, technically speaking, exceptional judgment, superbly skilled. She's one of the best instructors we have on staff. She's also a good friend. What seems to be the problem here?" Katz's eyes narrowed on his visitor.

"Sorry, I'm the guy asking the questions."

"Yeah, I can tell. Get on with it," Katz said coldly, examining the man, watching body language, expression, demeanor. He didn't like what he saw.

"Has she made any comments lately . . . I mean, trouble at home, that sort of thing?"

"You do understand, I hope, that I am a physician, and things said to me are privileged."

"Is Cathy Ryan your patient?" the man asked.

"I've examined her in the past. We all do that here."

"Are you a psychiatrist?"

Katz nearly growled back an answer. Like most surgeons he had a temper.

“You know the answer to that.”

The investigator looked up from his notes and spoke matter-of-factly. “In that case privilege does not apply. Now, could you answer the question, please?”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“No, she has made no such comments to the best of my knowledge.”

“Comments on her husband, his behavior, changes in the way he’s acting?”

“No. I know Jack pretty well, too. I really like the guy. He’s evidently a good husband. They have two great kids, and you know the story on what happened to them some years back as well as I do, right?”

“Correct, but people change.”

“Not them.” Katz’s comment had the finality of a death sentence.

“You seem quite certain.”

“I’m a doctor. I live by my judgment. What you are alleging is crap.”

“I’m alleging nothing,” the investigator said, knowing it was a lie, and knowing that Katz knew it for a lie. He’d judged the man correctly from the first moment. Katz was a hotheaded, passionate man unlikely to keep any secret he deemed unworthy of being kept. Probably one hell of a doctor, too.

“I return to my original question. Has Caroline Ryan acted in any way different from, say, a year ago?”

“She’s a year older. They have kids, the kids are growing up, and kids can be a bother. I have a few of my own. Okay, so she’s gained a pound or two, maybe—not a bad thing, she tries to be too thin—and she’s a little tireder than she ought to be. She has a long commute, and work is hard here, especially for a mother with kids.”

“That’s all, you think?”

“Hey, I’m an eye-cutter, not a marriage counselor. Not my field.”

“Why did you say you’re not a marriage counselor. I never brought that up, did I?”

Clever son of a bitch, aren’t you? Katz thought, letting go of his mustache. *Degree in psychology, maybe . . . more likely self-taught. Cops were pretty good at reading people. Reading me, even?* “Trouble at home for a married person generally means a troubled marriage,” Katz said slowly. “No, there has been no such comment.”

“You’re sure?”

“Quite sure.”

“Okay, thank you for your time, Dr. Katz. Sorry to have bothered you.” He handed over a card. “If you hear anything like that, I’d appreciate it if you called me.”

“What gives?” Katz asked. “If you want my cooperation, I want an answer. I don’t spy on people for the fun of it.”

“Doctor, her husband holds a very high and very sensitive government position. We routinely keep an eye on such people for reasons of national security. You do the same thing, even if you don’t think much about it. If a surgeon shows up with liquor on his breath, for example, you take note of it and you take action, correct?”

“That doesn’t happen here, ever,” Katz assured him.

"But you would take note of such a thing if it did happen."

"You bet we would."

"Glad to hear it. As you know, John Ryan has access to all sorts of highly sensitive information. Were we not to keep an eye on such people, we would be irresponsible. We've—this is a highly sensitive matter, Dr. Katz."

"I understand that."

"We've had indications that her husband might be acting . . . irregularly. We have to check that out. Understand? We *have* to."

"Okay."

"That's all we ask."

"Very well."

"Thank you for your cooperation, sir." The investigator shook hands and left.

Katz managed not to flush until the man was gone. He didn't really know Jack all that well. They'd met at parties perhaps five or six times, traded a few jokes, talked about baseball or the weather or maybe international relations. Jack had never begged off on an answer, had never said *I can't discuss that* or anything. Pleasant-enough guy, Bernie thought. A good father by all accounts. But he didn't *know* the man at all.

Katz did, however, know Cathy as well as he knew any other doctor. She was a thoroughly wonderful person. If one of his kids should ever need eye surgery, she was one of the three people in the world whom he would trust to do the fix, and that was the highest compliment he could pay to anyone. She'd backed him up on cases and procedures, and he had backed her up. When one needed advice, it was the other who got asked. They were friends, and associates. If they'd ever decided to leave the Hopkins/Wilmer faculty, they would have set up an office together, because a medical partnership is even harder to maintain than a good marriage. He might have married her, Katz thought, if he'd had the chance. She would have been an easy girl to love. She had to be a good mother. She drew a disproportionate number of kids as patients because in some cases the surgeon needed small hands, and hers were small, dainty, and supremely skillful. She lavished attention on her little patients. The floor nurses loved her for it. Everyone loved her, as a matter of fact. Her surgical team was extremely loyal to her. They didn't come any better than Cathy.

Trouble at home? Jack's playing around behind her back . . . hurting my friend?

"That worthless son of a bitch."

He was late again, Cathy saw. After nine this time. Couldn't he ever get home at a decent hour?

And if not, why not?

"Hi, Cath," he said on his way through to the bedroom. "Sorry I'm late."

When he was out of sight, she walked toward the closet and opened the door to check the coat. Nothing. He'd had it cleaned the very next day, claiming that it had been spotted. It had been spotted, Cathy remembered, but, but, but . . .

What to do?

She almost started crying again.

Cathy was back in her chair when Jack came through on his way toward the kitchen. He didn't notice the look, didn't notice the silence. His wife stayed in her place, not really seeing the television picture her eyes were fixed on while her mind kept going over and over it, searching for an answer but finding only more anger.

She needed advice. She didn't want her marriage to end, did she? She could feel the process by which emotion and anger were taking over from reason and love. She knew that she ought to be worried about that, ought to resist the process, but she found herself unable to do either as the anger simply fed on itself. Cathy walked quietly into the kitchen and got herself a drink. She didn't have any procedures tomorrow. It was okay to have one drink. Again she looked over at her husband, and again he didn't notice. Didn't notice her? *Why* didn't he notice her? She'd put up with so much. Okay, the time they'd spent in England had been all right, she'd had a fairly good time teaching on staff at Guy's Hospital; it hadn't hurt her tenure at Hopkins a bit. But the other stuff—he was away so damned much! All that time back and forth to Russia when he was messed up with the arms treaty, so many other things, playing spy or something, leaving her at home with the kids, forcing her to lose time at work. She'd missed a couple of good procedures for that reason, when she'd been unable to get a sitter and had been forced to stick Bernie with something that she ought to have done.

And what had Jack been up to all that time? She had once accepted the fact that she couldn't even ask. What *had* he been doing? Maybe having a good laugh? A little fling with some sultry female agent somewhere? Like in the movies. There he was, in some exotic setting, a quiet, darkly lit bar, having a meeting with some agent, and one thing might have led to another. . . .

Cathy settled back in front of the TV and gulped at her drink. She nearly sputtered it back out. She wasn't accustomed to drinking bourbon straight.

This is all a mistake.

It seemed as though there were a war within her mind, the forces of good on one side, and the forces of evil on the other—or was it the forces of naivete and those of reality? She didn't know, and she was too upset to judge.

Well, it didn't matter for tonight, did it? She was having her period, and even if Jack had asked—which he wouldn't, she knew—she'd say no. Why should he ask if he was getting it somewhere else? Why should she say yes if he was? Why get the leavings? Why be second-string?

She sipped more carefully at her drink this time.

Need to get advice, need to talk to somebody! *But who?*

Maybe Bernie, she decided. She could trust Bernie. Soon as she got back. Two days.

* * *

"That takes care of the preliminaries."

"Sure does, boss," the coach said. "How goes the Pentagon, Dennis?"

"Not as much fun as you're having, Paul."

"That's the choice, isn't it? Fun or importance?"

"Everybody all right?"

"Yes, sir! We're pretty healthy for this far into the season, and we have the bye this week to get everybody up to speed. I want another crack at those Vikings."

"So do I," Secretary Bunker said from his E-Ring office. "Think we can really stop Tony Wills this time?"

"We can sure try. Isn't he one great kid? I haven't seen running like that since Gayle Sayers. Defensing him is a bitch, though."

"Let's not try to think too far ahead. I want to be in Denver in a few weeks."

"We play 'em one at a time, Dennis, you know that. Just we don't know who we're playing yet. I'd prefer L.A. We can handle them easy enough," the coach thought. "Then we'll probably have to handle Miami in the division game. That'll be harder, but we can do it."

"I think so, too."

"I have films to look at."

"Fair enough. Just remember, one at a time—but three more wins."

"You tell the President to come on out to Denver. We'll be there to see him. This is San Diego's year. The Chargers go all the way."

Dubinin watched the water invade the graving dock as the sluices were opened. *Admiral Lunin* was ready. The new sonar array was rolled up on its spool inside the teardrop-shaped fairing that sat atop the rudder post. The seven-bladed screw of manganese-bronze had been inspected and polished. The hull was restored to full watertight integrity. His submarine was ready for sea.

As was the crew. He'd gotten rid of eighteen conscript sailors and replaced them with eighteen new officers. The radical downsizing of the Soviet submarine fleet had eliminated a large number of officer billets. It would have been a waste of skilled manpower to return them to civilian life—besides which there were not enough jobs for them—and as a result they'd been retrained and assigned to the remaining submarines as technical experts. His sonar department would now be almost exclusively officers—two *michmaniy* would assist with the maintenance—and all of them were genuine experts. Surprisingly, there was little grumbling among them. The Akula-class had what was for Soviet submarines very comfortable accommodations, but more important than that was the fact that the new members of the wardroom had been fully briefed on their mission, and what the boat had done—probably done, Dubinin corrected himself—on the previous cruise. It was the sort of thing that appealed to the sportsman in them. This was for the submariner the ultimate test of skill. For that they would do their best.

Dubinin would do the same. Pulling in a lot of old professional debts, and leaning heavily on the yard's Master Shipwright, he'd performed miracles during the refit. Bedding had all been replaced. The ship had been scrubbed surgically clean and repainted with bright, airy colors. Dubinin had worked with the local supply officers and obtained the best food he could find. A well-fed crew was a happy crew, and men responded to a commander who worked hard for them. That was the whole point of the new professional spirit in the Soviet Navy. Valentin Borissovich Dubinin had learned his trade from the best

teacher his Navy had ever had, and he was determined that he would be the new Marko Ramius. He had the best ship, had the best crew, and he would on this cruise set the standard for the Soviet Pacific Fleet.

He would also have to be lucky, of course.

"That's the hardware," Fromm said. "From now on . . ."

"Yes, from now on we are assembling the actual device. I see you've changed the design somewhat . . . ?"

"Yes. Two tritium reservoirs. I prefer the shorter injection piping. Mechanically it is no different. The timing is not critical, and the pressurization ensures that it will function properly."

"Also makes loading the tritium easier," Ghosn observed. "That's why you did it."

"Correct."

The inside of the device made Ghosn think of the half assembled body of some alien airplane. There was the delicacy and precision of aircraft parts, but the almost baffling configuration in which they were placed. Something from a science-fiction movie, Ghosn thought, whimsical for a brief moment . . . but then this was science fiction, or had been until recently. The first public discussion of nuclear weapons had been in H. G. Wells, hadn't it? That hadn't been so long ago.

"Commander, I saw your doctor," Achmed said in the far corner.

"And—you still look ill, my friend," Qati noted. "What is the problem?"

"He wants me to see another doctor in Damascus."

Qati instantly did not like that. Did not like it at all. But Achmed was a comrade who had served the movement for years. How could he say no to someone who had twice saved his life, once stopping a bullet himself to do so?

"You know that what goes on here. . . ."

"Commander, I will die before I speak of this place. Even though I know nothing of this—this project. I will die first."

There was no doubting the man, and Qati knew what it was to be seriously ill at a young and healthy age. He could not deny the man medical care while he himself regularly visited a physician. How could his men respect him if he did such a thing?

"Two men will go with you. I will select them."

"Thank you, Commander. Please forgive my weakness."

"Weakness?" Qati grabbed the man by the shoulder. "You are the strongest among us! We need you back, and we need you healthy! Go tomorrow."

Achmed nodded and withdrew to another place, embarrassed and shamed by his illness. His Commander, he knew, faced death. It had to be cancer, he had so often visited the physician. Whatever it was, the Commander had not let it stop him. There was courage, he thought.

"Break for the night?" Ghosn asked.

Fromm shook his head. "No, let's take another hour or two to assemble the explosive bed. We should be able to get part of it in place before we're too weary." Both men looked up as Qati approached.

"Still on schedule?"

"Herr Qati, whatever arrangements you have in mind, we will be ready a

day early. Ibrahim saved us that day with his work on the explosives." The German held one of the small hexagonal blocks. The squibs were already in place, the wire trailing off. Fromm looked at the other two, then bent down, setting the first block in its nesting place. Fromm made sure the block was exactly in place, then attached a numbered tag on the wire and draped it into a plastic tray that held a number of dividers, like the trays of a toolbox. Qati attached the wire to a terminal, checking three times to make sure the number on the wire was the same as that on the terminal. Fromm watched also. The process took four minutes. The electrical components had already been pre-tested. They could not be tested again. The first part of the bomb was now live.

27

DATA FUSION

"I've had my say, Bart," Jones said on the way to the airport.

"That bad?"

"The crew hates him—the training they just went through didn't help. Hey, I was there, okay? I was in with the sonar guys, in the simulator, and he was there, and I wouldn't want to work for him. He almost yelled at me."

"Oh?" That surprised Mancuso.

"Yeah, he said something that I didn't like—something plain wrong, skipper—and I called him on it, and you should have seen his reaction. Shit, I thought he'd have a stroke or something. And he was wrong, Bart. It was my tape. He was hassling his people for not cueing on something that wasn't there, okay? It was one of my trick tapes, and they saw that it was bogus, but he didn't and he started raisin' hell. That's a good sonar department. He doesn't know how to use it, but he sure likes to kibbitz like he does. Anyway, after he left, the guys started talking, okay? That isn't the only bunch he gives a hard time to. I hear the engineers are going nuts trying to keep this clown happy. Is it true they maxed an ORSE?"

Mancuso nodded, despite the fact he didn't like hearing this. "They came within a whisker of setting a record."

"Well, the guy doesn't want a record, he wants a perfect. He wants to redefine what perfect is. I'm telling you, man, if I was stuck on that boat, after the first cruise the first thing up through the hatch would be my seabag. I'd fuckin' *desert* before I worked for that guy!" Jones paused. He'd gone too far. "I caught the signal his XO gave you, I even thought he might have been a little out of line, maybe. I was wrong. That's one very loyal XO. Ricks hates one of his JOs, the kid does tracking-party duty. The quartermaster who's breaking him in—Ensign Shaw, I think his name is—says he's a real good kid, but the skipper's riding him like a broke-down horse."

"Great, what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Beats me, Bart. I retired as an E-6, remember?" *Relieve the son of a bitch*, Jones thought, though he knew better. You could only relieve for cause.

"I'll talk to him," Mancuso promised.

"You know, I heard about skippers like that. Never did believe the stories. Guess I got spoiled working for you," Dr. Jones observed as they approached the terminal. "You haven't changed a bit, you know that? You still listen when somebody talks at you."

"You have to listen, Ron. You can't know it all yourself."

"I got news: not everyone knows that. I got one more suggestion."

"Don't let him go hunting?"

"If I were in your position, I wouldn't." Jones opened the door. "I don't want to rain on the parade, skipper. That's my professional observation. He isn't up to the game. Ricks is nothing near the captain you used to be."

Used to be. A singularly poor choice of words, Mancuso thought, but it was true. It was a hell of a lot easier to run a boat than to run a squadron, and a hell of a lot more fun, too.

"Better hustle if you want to catch that flight." Mancuso held out his hand.

"Skipper, always a pleasure."

Mancuso watched him walk into the terminal. Jones had never once given him bad advice, and if anything he'd gotten smarter. A pity he hadn't stayed in and gone for a commission. That wasn't true, the Commodore thought next. Ron would have made one hell of a CO, but he would never have had a chance. The system didn't allow it, and that was that.

The driver headed back without being told, leaving Mancuso in his rear seat with his thoughts. The system hadn't changed enough. He'd come up the old way, power school, an engineer tour before he got command. There was too much engineering in the Navy, not enough leadership. He'd made the transition, as did most of the skippers—but not all. Too many people made it through who thought that other people were just numbers, machines to be fixed, things to order, who measured people by numbers that were more easily understood than real results. Jim Rosselli wasn't like that. Neither was Bart Mancuso, but Harry Ricks was.

So. Now what the hell do I do?

First and foremost, he had no basis for relieving Ricks. Had the story come from anyone except Jones, he would have dismissed it as personality clashes. Jones was too reliable an observer for that. Mancuso considered what he'd been told and matched it with the higher-than-usual rate of transfer requests, the rather equivocal words he'd heard from Dutch Claggett. The XO was in a very touchy spot. Already selected for command . . . one bad word from Ricks and he'd lose that; against that possibility he had his loyalty to the Navy. His job demanded loyalty to his CO even while the Navy demanded truth. It was an impossible position for Claggett, and he'd done all that he could.

The responsibility was Mancuso's. He was the squadron commander. The boats were his. The skippers and crews were his. He rated the COs. That was it, wasn't it?

But was it right? All he had was anecdotal information and coincidence. What if Jones was just pissed off at the guy? What if the transfer requests had just been a statistical blip?

Dodging the issue, Bart. They pay you to make the tough decisions. Ensigns and chiefs get the easy ones. Senior captains are supposed to know what to do. That was one of the Navy's more entertaining fictions.

Mancuso lifted his carphone. "I want *Maine's* XO in my office in thirty minutes."

"Yes, sir," his yeoman responded.

Mancuso closed his eyes and dozed for the rest of the ride. Nothing like a catnap to clear the mind. It had always worked on USS *Dallas.*

Hospital food, Cathy thought. Even at Hopkins it was still hospital food.

There had to be a special school somewhere for hospital chefs. The curriculum would be devoted to eliminating whatever fresh ideas they had, along with any skills they might have with spices, knowledge of recipes. . . . About the only thing they couldn't ruin was the Jell-O.

"Bernie, I need some advice."

"What's the problem, Cath?" He knew already what it had to be, just from the look on her face and the tone of her voice. He waited as sympathetically as he could. Cathy was a proud woman, as she had every right to be. This had to be dreadfully hard on her.

"It's Jack." The words came out rapidly, as though by a spasm, then stopped again.

The pain Katz saw in her eyes was more than he could bear. "You think he's . . ."

"What? No—I mean—how, why did you . . . ?"

"Cathy, I'm not supposed to do this, but you're too important a friend for that. Screw the rules! Look, I had a guy in here last week, asking about you and Jack."

The hurt only got worse. "What do you mean? Who was here? Where from?"

"Government guy, some kind of investigator. Cathy, I'm sorry, but he asked me if there—if you had said anything about trouble at home. This guy was checking up on Jack, and he wanted to know if I knew anything that you were saying."

"What did you say?"

"I told him I didn't know anything. I told him that you're one of the best people I know. You are, Cathy. You're not alone. You have friends, and if there is anything I can do—that any of us can do—to help you, we will help you. Cathy, you're like family. You're probably feeling very hurt, and you're probably feeling very embarrassed. That is stupid, Cathy, that is very stupid. You know it's stupid, don't you?" Those pretty blue eyes were covered in tears, Katz saw, and in this moment he craved the chance to kill Jack Ryan, maybe do it on a table with a very sharp, very small surgical knife. "Cathy, being alone doesn't help. This is what friends are really for. You are not alone."

"I just can't believe it, Bernie. I just *can't.* "

"Come on, let's talk in my office, where it's private. Food's crummy today anyway." Katz got her out of there, and he was sure that no one noticed. Two minutes later they were in his private office. He moved a stack of case files from the only other chair and sat her in it.

"He's just been acting different lately."

"Do you really think it's possible that Jack is fooling around?" It took half a minute. Katz watched her eyes go up and down, finally staying down as she faced reality.

"It's possible. Yes."

Bastard! "Have you talked to him about it?" Katz kept his voice low and reasonable, but not dispassionate. She needed a friend now, and friends had to share pain to be useful.

A shake of the head. "No, I don't know how."

"You know that you have to do that."

"Yeah." Not so much a word as a gasp.

"It's not going to be easy. Remember," Katz said with gentle hope in his voice, "it could all be a mistake. Just some crazy misunderstanding." Which Bernie Katz didn't believe for a moment.

She looked up, and her eyes were streaming now. "Bernie, is there something wrong with me?"

"No!" Katz managed not to shout. "Cathy, if there's a better person in this hospital than you, goddamn if I've ever met them! There is *nothing* wrong with you! You hear me? Whatever the hell this is, it is *not your fault!"*

"Bernie, I want another baby, I don't want to lose Jack—"

"Then if you really think that, you have to win him back."

"I *can't!* He isn't, he doesn't—" She broke down completely.

Katz learned then and there that anger has few limits. Having to keep it in, being denied a target, didn't help, but Cathy needed a friend more than she needed anything else.

"Dutch, this whole conversation is off the record."

Lieutenant Commander Claggett was instantly on guard. "As you say, Commodore."

"Tell me about Captain Ricks."

"Sir, he's my CO."

"I'm aware of that, Dutch," Mancuso said. "I'm the squadron commander. If there's a problem with one of my skippers, there's a problem with one of my boats. Those boats cost a billion a copy, and I have to know about the problems. Is that clear, Commander?"

"Yes, sir."

"Talk. That's an order."

Dutch Claggett sat ramrod straight and spoke rapidly. "Sir, he couldn't lead a three-year-old to the crapper. He treats the troops like they're robots. He demands a lot, but he never praises even when the guys put out. That's not the way I was taught to officer. He doesn't listen, sir. He doesn't listen to me, doesn't listen to the troops. Okay, fine, he's the CO. He owns the boat, but a smart skipper listens."

"That's the reason for the transfers?"

"Yes, sir. He gave the chief torpedoman a bad time—I think he was wrong. Chief Getty was showing some initiative. He had the weapons on line, he had his people well trained, but Captain Ricks didn't like the way he did it and came down on him. I counseled against it, but the CO didn't listen. So Getty put in for transfer, and the skipper was glad to get rid of him, and endorsed it."

"Do you have confidence in him?" Mancuso asked.

"Technically he's very good. Engineering-wise, he's brilliant. He just doesn't know people and he doesn't know tactics."

"He told me he wants to prove otherwise. Can he?"

"Sir, you're going too far now. I don't know that I have the right to answer that."

Mancuso knew it was true, but pressed on anyway. "You're supposed to be

qualified for command, Dutch. Get used to making some hard calls."

"Can he do it? Yes, sir. We have a good boat and a good crew. What he can't do the rest of us will do for him."

The Commodore nodded and went silent for a moment. "If you have any trouble with your next FitRep, I want to know about it. I think you may be a better XO than he's entitled to, Commander."

"Sir, he's not a bad guy. I hear he's a good father and all that. His wife's a sweetie. It's just that he never learned to handle people, and nobody ever bothered teaching him right. Despite that he is a capable officer. If he'd only give an inch on the humanity side, he'd be a real star."

"Are you comfortable with your op-orders?"

"If we sniff out an Akula to go in and track him—safe distance and all that. Am I comfortable? Hell, yes. Come on, Commodore, we're so quiet there's not a thing to worry about. I was surprised Washington approved this thing, and all, but that's bureaucratic stuff. The short version is, anybody can drive this boat. Okay, maybe Cap'n Ricks isn't perfect, but unless our boat breaks, Popeye could do the mission."

They put the Secondary assembly in before the Primary. The collection of lithium compounds was contained in a metal cylinder roughly the size of a 105mm artillery casing, 65 centimeters high and 11 centimeters in diameter. It even had a rim machined on the bottom end so that it would fit in exactly the right spot. There was a small curved tube at the bottom that attached to what would soon be the tritium reservoir. On the outside of the casing were the fins made of spent uranium 238. They looked like rows of thick, black soda crackers, Fromm thought. Their mission, of course, was to be immolated to plasma. Beneath the cylinder were the first bundles of "soda straws"—even Fromm was calling them that now, though they actually were not; they were of the wrong diameter. Sixty centimeters in length, each bundle of a hundred was held together by thin but strong plastic spacers, and the bottom of each had been given a half-turn to make each bundle into a helix, a shape rather like that of a spiral staircase. The hard part in this segment of the design was to arrange the helixes to nest together perfectly. Seemingly trivial, it had taken fully two days for Fromm to figure out, but as with all aspects of his design, the pieces all fit into proper place until that portion of the design seemed a perfectly assembled mass of . . . soda straws. It almost made the German laugh. With tape measure, micrometer, and an expert eye—gradation marks had been machined into many of the parts, a small detail that had impressed Ghosn very greatly indeed. When Fromm was satisfied, they went on. First came the plastic foam blocks, each cut to precise specifications. They fit into the elliptical bombcase. Ghosn and Fromm were now doing all the work. Slowly, carefully, they eased the first block into place within the flanges on the interior of the case. The straw bundles came next, one at a time, nesting perfectly with those immediately under them. At every step both men stopped to check the work. Fromm and Ghosn both checked the work, checked the plans, checked the work again, and checked the plans again.

For Bock and Qati, watching a few meters away, it was the most tedious thing they had ever seen.

“The people who do this work in America and Russia must die of boredom,” the German said quietly.

“Perhaps.”

“Next bundle, number thirty-six,” Fromm said.

“Thirty-six,” Ghosn replied, examining the three tags on the next batch of a hundred straws. “Bundle thirty-six.”

“Thirty-six,” Fromm agreed, looking at the tags. He took it and maneuvered it into place. It fit perfectly, Qati saw, coming closer. The German’s skilled hands moved it slightly, so that the slits on its plastic jigs dropped into the slots on the jigs directly underneath. When Fromm was satisfied, Ghosn looked.

“Correct position,” Ibrahim said for what must have been the hundredth time of the day.

“I agree,” Fromm announced, and both men wired it firmly into place.

“Like assembling a gun,” Qati whispered to Günther as he walked away from the worktable.

“No.” Bock shook his head. “Worse than that. More like a child’s toy.” The two men looked at each other and started laughing.

“Enough of that!” Fromm said in annoyance. “This is serious work! We need silence! Next bundle, number thirty-seven!”

“Thirty-seven,” Ghosn dutifully replied.

Bock and Qati walked out of the room together.

“Watching a woman having a baby cannot be as dreadful as this!” Qati raged when they got outside.

Bock lit a cigarette. “It isn’t. I know. Women move faster than this.”

“Indeed, that is unskilled labor.” Qati laughed again. The humor vanished, and the Commander became serious. “It’s a pity.”

“Yes, it is. They have all served us well. When?”

“Very soon.” Qati paused. “Günther, your part in the plan . . . it is very dangerous.”

Bock took a long pull on his cigarette, blowing the smoke out into the chilled air. “It is my plan, is it not? I know the risks.”

“I do not approve of suicidal plans,” Qati observed after a moment.

“Nor do I. It is dangerous, but I expect to survive. Ismael, if we wanted a safe life, we would be working in offices—and we would never have met. What binds us is the danger and the mission. I’ve lost my Petra, my daughters, but I still have my mission. I do not say that this is enough, but is it not more than most men have?” Günther looked up at the stars. “I have thought often of this, my friend. How does one change the world? Not in safety. The safe ones, the timid ones, they benefit from our work. They rage at life, but they lack the courage to act. We are the ones who act. We take the risks, we face the danger, we deny ourselves for others. It is our task. My friend, it is far too late to have second thoughts.”

“Günther, it is easier for me. I am a dying man.”

“I know.” He turned to look at his friend. “We’re all dying men. We’ve cheated death, you and I. Eventually death will win, and the death we face lies not in bed. You chose this path, and so did I. Can we turn back now?”

“I cannot, but facing death is a hard thing.”

"That is true." Gunther flipped his cigarette into the dirt. "But at least we have the privilege of knowing. The little people do not. In choosing not to act, they choose not to know. That is their choice. One can either be an agent of destiny or a victim of it. Everyone has that choice." Bock led his friend back in. "We have made ours."

"Bundle thirty-eight!" Fromm commanded as they entered.

"Thirty-eight," Ghosn acknowledged.

"Yes, Commodore?"

"Sit down, Harry, we need to talk over some things."

"Well, I have the crew all ready. The sonar troops are hot."

Mancuso looked at his subordinate. *At what point,* he wondered, *does a positive can-do attitude become a lie?* "I'm a little concerned with the transfer rate from your ship."

Ricks didn't go defensive. "Well, we had some guys with family concerns. No sense holding on to people whose minds are in the wrong place. A statistical blip. I had it happen once before."

I bet you did. "How's morale?" Mancuso asked next.

"You've seen the results of our drills and exams. That must tell you something," Captain Ricks replied.

Clever son of a bitch. "Okay, let me make it clear, Harry. You had a run-in with Dr. Jones."

"So?"

"So I talked with him about it."

"How formal is this?"

"Informal as you like, Harry."

"Fine. Your Jones fellow is a pretty good technician, but he seems to have forgotten the fact that he left the Navy as an enlisted man. If he wants to talk to me as an equal, it would help if he'd bothered to accomplish something."

"That man has a doctor's degree in physics from CalTech, Harry."

Ricks took on a puzzled expression. "So?"

"So he's one of the smartest people I know, and he was the best enlisted man I ever met."

"That's fine, but if enlisted were as smart as officers, we'd pay them more." It was the supreme arrogance of the statement that angered Bart Mancuso.

"Captain, when I was driving *Dallas,* and Jones talked, I listened. If life had worked out a little different, he'd be on his XO tour right now and on his way to command of a fast-attack. Ron would have made a superb CO."

Ricks dismissed that. "We'll never know that, will we? I always figured that those who can, do. Those who can't make excuses. Okay, fine, he's a good technician. I don't dispute that. He did good work with my sonar department, and I'm grateful for that, but let's not get too excited. There are lots of technicians, and lots of contractors."

This was going nowhere, Mancuso saw. It was time to lay the law down. "Look, Harry, I'm catching rumbles about morale on your boat. I see that many transfer requests, and it tells me there might be a problem. So I nose around, and my impression is confirmed. You have a problem whether you know it or not."

"That, sir, is bullshit. It's like the alcohol-counseling weenies. People with no drinking problem say they have no drinking problem, but the counselors say that denial of a problem is the first indication there is one. It's a circular argument. If I had a morale problem on my boat, performance figures would show it. But they *don't*. My record is pretty clear. I drive submarines for a living. I've been in the top one percent of the top one percent since I put this suit on. Okay, my style isn't the same as the next guy's. I don't kiss butt, and I don't mollycoddle. I demand performance, and I get it. You show me one hard indicator that I'm not doing it right, and I'll listen, but until you do, sir, it isn't broke, and I'm not going to try and fix it."

Bartolomeo Vito Mancuso, Captain (Rear Admiral selectee), United States Navy, did not come out of his chair only because his mainly Sicilian ancestry had been somewhat diluted in America. In the old country, he was instantly sure, his great-great-grandfather would have leveled his *lupara* and blown a wide, bloody hole through Ricks' chest for that. Instead he kept his face impassive and coldly decided on the spot that Ricks would never get beyond captain's rank. It was in his power to do that. He had a large collection of COs working for him. Only the top two, maybe the top three, would screen for flag rank. Ricks would be rated no higher than fourth in that group. It might be dishonest, Mancuso told himself in a moment of dispassionate integrity, but it was still the right thing to do. This man could not be trusted with command higher than he now held, and he had probably come too far already. It would be so easy. Ricks would object loudly and passionately to being rated fourth in a group of fourteen, but Mancuso would simply say, *Sorry, Harry—I'm not saying there's anything wrong with you, just that Andy, Bill, and Chuck are a little better. Just bad luck to be in a squadron of aces, Harry. I have to make an honest call, and they're just a whisker better.*

Ricks was just fast enough to realize that he had crossed over a line, that there really were no "off-the-record" talks in the Navy. He had defied his squadron commander, a man already on the fast track, a man trusted and believed by the Pentagon and the OP-02 bureaucracy.

"Sir, excuse me for being so positive. It's just that nobody likes to be called down when-"

Mancuso smiled as he cut the man off. "No problem, Harry. We Italians tend to be a little passionate, too." *Too late, Harry*. . . .

"Maybe you're right. Let me think it over. Besides, if I tangle with that Akula, I'll show you what my people can do."

Little late to talk about "my people, "fella. But Mancuso had to give him the chance, didn't he? Not much of a chance, but a little one. If there were a miracle, then he might reconsider. *Might*, Bart told himself, *if this arrogant little prick decides to kiss my ass at the main gate at noon on the Fourth of July while the marching band passes by.*

"Sessions like this are supposed to be uncomfortable for everybody," the squadron commander said. Ricks would end up as an engineering expert, and a good one, once Mancuso got rid of him, and there was no disgrace in topping out as a captain, was there? Not for a good man, anyway.

"Nothing else?" Golovko asked.

"Not a thing," the Colonel replied.

"And our officer?"

"I saw his widow two days ago. I told her that he was dead, but that we were unable to recover the body. She took the news badly. It is a hard thing to see so lovely a face in tears," the man reported quietly.

"What about the pension, other arrangements?"

"I am seeing to it myself."

"Good, those damned paper-pushers don't seem to care about anyone or anything. If there's a problem, let me know."

"I have nothing more to suggest from the technical-intelligence side," the Colonel went on. "Can you follow up elsewhere?"

"We're still rebuilding our network inside their defense ministry. Preliminary indications are that there is nothing, that the new Germany has disavowed the whole DDR project," Golovko said. "There is a hint that American and British agencies have made similar inquiries and come away satisfied."

"It is unlikely, I think, that German nuclear weapons would be a matter of immediate concern to the Americans or the English."

"True. We are carrying on, but I do not expect to find anything. I think this is an empty hole."

"In that case, Sergey Nikolayevich, why was our man murdered?"

"We still don't *know* that, damn it!"

"Yes, I suppose he might now be working for the Argentineans. . . ."

"Colonel, remember your place!"

"I have not forgotten it. Nor have I forgotten that when someone troubles to murder an intelligence officer there is a good reason for it."

"But there's nothing there! At least three intelligence services are looking. Our people in Argentina are still working—"

"Oh, yes, the Cubans?"

"Correct, that was their area of responsibility, and we can scarcely depend on their assistance now, can we?"

The Colonel closed his eyes. What had KGB come to? "I still think we should press on."

"Your recommendation is noted. The operation is not over."

Exactly what he could do now, Golovko thought after the man left, exactly what new avenues he should explore . . . he didn't know. He had a goodly percentage of his field force sniffing for leads, but as yet there was nothing. This miserable profession was so much like police work, wasn't it?

Marvin Russell went over his requirements. Certainly these were generous people. He still had almost all of the money he'd brought over. He'd even offered to make use of it, but Qati would have none of that. He had a briefcase in which were forty thousand dollars in crisp twenties and fifties, and on setting himself up in America he'd take in a direct bank transfer from an English bank. His tasks were fairly simple. First he needed new identities for himself and the others. That was child's play. Even doing the driver's licenses was not difficult if you had the right hardware, and he'd be purchasing that for cash. He'd even be able to set the equipment up in the safe house. Now,

exactly why he had to do hotel reservations in addition to setting up the safe house was another question. These characters sure liked to keep things complicated.

On the way to the airport he'd taken a day to stop at a good tailor shop—Beirut might have been at war, but life still went on. By the time he boarded the British Airways jet for Heathrow he looked quite distinguished. Three very nice suits—two of them packed. A conservative haircut, expensive shoes that cramped his feet.

"Magazine, sir?" the stew asked.

"Thank you." Russell smiled.

"American?"

"That's right. Going home."

"It must be rather difficult in Lebanon."

"Did get kind of exciting, yes."

"Drink?"

"A beer would be very nice." Russell grinned. He was even getting the businessman lingo down. The plane was not even a third full, and it seemed like this stewardess was going to adopt him. Maybe it was the tan, Russell thought.

"There you go, sir. Will you be staying long in London?"

"'Fraid not. Connecting to Chicago. Two-hour layover."

"That is too bad." She even looked disappointed for him. The Brits, Russell thought, sure were nice people. Almost as hospitable as those Arabs.

The last bundle went in just after three in the morning, local time. Fromm didn't alter his demeanor a dot. He checked this one as carefully as he had checked the first, fixing it in place only after he was fully satisfied. Then he stood straight up and stretched.

"Enough!"

"I agree, Manfred."

"This time tomorrow we'll have the assembly finished. What remains is simple, not fourteen hours' work."

"In that case, let's get some sleep." On the way out of the building, Ghosn gave the Commander a wink.

Qati watched them depart, then walked over to the senior guard. "Where's Achmed?"

"Went to see the doctor, remember?"

"Hmmm. When's he back?"

"Tomorrow, maybe the day after, I'm not sure."

"Very well. We will have a special job for you soon." The guard watched the men walking away from the building and nodded dispassionately. "Where do you want us to excavate the hole?"

28

CONTRACTUAL OBLIGATIONS

Jet lag could be a real bitch, Marvin thought. Russell had left O'Hare in a rented Mercury and driven west to a motel just east of Des Moines. He surprised the clerk by paying cash for his room, explaining that his wallet and credit cards had been stolen. He had an obviously brand-new wallet to support that statement, besides which the clerk honored cash as readily as any businessman. Sleep came easily that night. He awoke just after five, after a good ten hours of slumber, had himself a big American breakfast—as hospitable as people were in Lebanon, they didn't know how to eat; he wondered how they managed to live without bacon—and set off for Colorado. By lunch he was halfway across Nebraska, and going over his plans and requirements again. Dinner found him in the town of Roggen, an hour northeast of Denver, which was close enough. Stiff from travel, he found yet another motel and crashed for the night. This time he was able to watch and enjoy some American TV, including a recap of the NFL season on ESPN. It was surprising how much he'd missed football. Almost as surprising as how much he'd missed having a drink whenever he wanted. That craving was fixed with a bottle of Jack Daniel's he'd gotten along the way. By midnight he was feeling pretty mellow, looking around at his surroundings, glad to be back in America, and also glad for the reason he was back. It was time for some payback. Russell had not forgotten who had once owned Colorado, and hadn't forgotten the massacre at Sand Creek.

It should have been expected. Things had gone too smoothly, and reality does not often allow perfection. A small mistake in one of the fittings for the Primary had been detected, and that fitting had to be removed and remachined, a process that set them back by thirty hours, of which forty minutes had been required for the machining and the rest for disassembly and reassembly of the weapon. Fromm, who should have been philosophical, had been livid during the whole procedure, and insisted on doing the fix himself. Then had come the laborious replacement of the explosive blocks, all the more onerous for having already been done once.

"Only three millimeters," Ghosn noted. Just a mistaken setting on one of the controls. Since it had been a manual job, the computers hadn't caught it. One of Fromm's figures had been misread, and the first visual inspection of the assembly hadn't caught it. "And we had that extra day."

Fromm merely grumbled behind his protective mask as he and Ghosn lifted the plutonium assembly and gently set it in place. Five minutes later it was clear that they had it correctly located. The bars of tungsten-rhenium next fit

into their own places, then the beryllium segments, and finally, the heavy depleted-uranium hemisphere that separated the Primary from the Secondary. Fifty more explosive blocks and they were done. Fromm ordered a pause—what they had just accomplished was heavy work, and he wanted a short rest. The machinists were already gone, their services no longer required.

"We should have been done by now," the German said quietly.

"It is unreasonable to expect perfection, Manfred."

"The ignorant bastard couldn't read!"

"The number on the plans was smudged." *And that was your fault*, Ghosn did not have to say.

"Then he should have asked!"

"As you say, Manfred. You pick a poor time to be impatient. We are on schedule."

The young Arab just didn't understand, Fromm knew. The culmination of his life's ambitions, and it should have been done by now! "Come on."

It required ten additional hours until the seventieth and last explosive block sat in its resting place. Ghosn attached its wire lead to the proper terminal, and that was that. He extended his hand to the German, who took it.

"Congratulations, Herr Doktor Fromm."

"Ja. Thank you, Herr Ghosn. Now we only need to weld the case shut, draw the vacuum—oh, excuse me, the tritium. How did I forget that? Who does the welding?" Manfred asked.

"I will. I'm very good at that." The top half of the bombcase had a wide flange to ensure the safety of that procedure, and it had already been checked for a perfect fit. The machinists had not merely handled the precise work on the explosive part of the device. Every single part—except for the single mistrimmed fitting—had been cut and shaped to Fromm's specifications, and the bombcase had already been checked. It fit as tightly as the back of a watch.

"Doing the tritium is easy."

"Yes, I know." Ghosn motioned for the German to go outside. "You are fully satisfied with the design and the assembly?"

"Completely," Fromm said confidently. "It will function exactly as I predict."

"Excellent," Qati said, waiting outside with one of his bodyguards.

Fromm turned, noting the Commander's presence, along with one of his ubiquitous guards. Dirty, scruffy people, but he had to admire them, Fromm told himself as he turned to look at the darkened valley. There was a quarter-moon, and he could just make out the landscape. So dry and harsh it was. Not these people's fault that they looked as they did. The land here was hard. But the sky was clear. Fromm looked up at the stars on this cloudless night. More stars than one could see in Germany, especially the Eastern part, with all its air pollution, and he thought about astrophysics, the path he might have taken, so closely related to the path he had.

Ghosn stood behind the German. He turned to Qati and nodded. The Commander made the same gesture to his bodyguard, whose name was Abdullah.

"Just the tritium remains," Fromm said, his back to them.

"Yes," Ghosn said. "I can do that myself."

Fromm was about to say that there was one more thing. He let it wait a moment, and didn't pay attention to Abdullah's footsteps. There was no sound at all as the guard removed a silenced pistol from his belt and pointed it at Fromm's head from a range of one meter. Fromm began to turn, to make sure that Ghosn knew about the tritium, but he never made it around. Abdullah had his orders. It was supposed to be merciful, as it had been for the machinists. It was a pity that it had been necessary at all, Qati thought, but it was necessary, and that was that. None of that mattered to Abdullah, who merely followed his orders, squeezing on the trigger smoothly and expertly until the round fired. The bullet entered the back of Fromm's skull, soon thereafter exiting through his forehead. The German dropped in a crumpled mass. Blood fountained out, but sideways, without reaching Abdullah's clothing. The guard waited until the blood flow stopped, then summoned two comrades to carry the body to the waiting truck. He'd be buried with the machinists. That, at least, was fitting, Qati thought. All the experts in the same place.

"A pity," Ghosn observed quietly.

"Yes, but do you really think we would have further use of him?"

Ibrahim shook his head. "No. He would have been a liability. We could not trust him. An infidel and a mercenary. He fulfilled his contract."

"And the device?"

"It will work. I have checked the numbers twenty times. It is far better than anything I might have designed."

"What's this about tritium?"

"In the batteries. I only need to heat them up and bleed off the gas. Then the gas is pumped into the two reservoirs. You know the rest."

Qati grunted. "You have explained it, but I do not know it."

"This part of the job is work for a high-school chemistry lab, no more than that. Simple."

"Why did Eromm leave it for last?"

Ghosn shrugged. "Something has to be last. This is an easy task rather than a hard one. Perhaps that is why. I can do it now if you wish."

"Good."

Qati watched the procedure. One after another, Ghosn loaded the batteries into the furnace, which he set for very low heat. A metal tube and a vacuum pump drew off the gas emitted by each in turn. It took less than an hour.

"Fromm lied to us," Ghosn observed when he was done.

"What?" Qati asked in alarm.

"Commander, there is almost fifteen percent more tritium than he promised. So much the better."

The next step was even simpler. Ghosn carefully checked that each reservoir was air- and pressure-tight-it was the sixth such test; the young engineer had learned from his German teacher—then transferred the tritium gas. The valves were closed and locked shut with cotter pins, so that any vibration in transit could not open them.

"Finished," Ghosn announced. The guards lifted the top of the bombcase and lowered it into place from an overhead winch. It fit precisely into place.

Ghosn took an hour to weld it shut. Another test confirmed that the bombcase was pressure-tight. He next attached a Leybold vacuum pump to the case.

"What exactly do you need to achieve?"

"A millionth of an atmosphere is what we specified."

"Can you do that? Won't it harm—"

Ghosn spoke not unlike Fromm, surprising the both of them. "Commander, please? All that presses in is *air*. It does not crush you, and it will not crush this steel case, will it? It will take a few hours, and we can also test the integrity of the bombcase again." Which had also been done five times. Even without being welded, the case held well. Now one piece of metal, it would be as perfect as the mission required. "We can get some sleep. It doesn't hurt the pump to run."

"When will it be ready to transport?"

"In the morning. When is the ship leaving?"

"Two days."

"There you have it." Ghosn smiled broadly. "Time to spare."

First, Marvin visited the local branch of Colorado Federal Bank and Trust Company. He amazed and delighted the branch vice president by placing a call to England and having five hundred thousand dollars transferred by wire. Computers made things so much easier. In seconds he had confirmation that Mr. Robert Friend was every bit as substantial as he claimed to be.

"Can you recommend a good local realtor?" Russell asked the very solicitous banker.

"Right down the street, third door on the right. I'll have your checks ready when you get back." The banker watched him leave and placed a rapid phone call to his wife, who worked in the real-estate office. She was waiting for him at the door.

"Mr. Friend, welcome to Roggen!"

"Thank you, good to be back."

"You've been away?"

"Spent some time in Saudi Arabia," Russell/Friend explained. "But I missed my winters."

"What are you looking for?"

"Oh, a medium-sized ranch, place where I might raise some beef."

"House, barns?"

"Yeah, a good-sized house. Not that big, don't need it—there's just me, you see—say about three thousand square feet. I can go smaller for good land."

"You originally from around here?"

"The Dakotas, actually, but I need to be close to Denver for the transportation—air travel, I mean. I do a lot of that. My old homestead is too far from things."

"Will you want help to run your ranch?"

"Yeah, I'll need that, say a place big enough for two hands—maybe a couple. I really should have a place closer to town, but, damn it, I just want a place where I can eat my own beef."

"I know what you mean," the realtor agreed. "I have a couple of places you might like."

"Then let's go see them." Russell smiled at the lady.

The second one was perfect. Just off Exit 50, five hundred acres, a nice old farmhouse with a new kitchen, a two-car garage, and three sturdy outbuildings. There was clear land in all directions, a pond with some trees half a mile from the house, and plenty of room for the cattle that Russell would never see.

"This one's been on the market for five months. The owner's estate is asking four hundred," the realtor said, "but we can probably get them to go for three-fifty."

"Okay," Russell said, checking access to Interstate 76. "Tell them if they sign the contract this week, I'll make a fifty-thousand cash deposit, settlement in, oh, say four or five weeks. No problem on financing. I'll pay cash for the whole thing when I get the rest of my funds transferred. But—I want to start moving in immediately. God, I hate living in hotels, done way too much of that. You think we get all that done?"

The realtor beamed at him. "I think I can guarantee it."

"Great. So, how did the Broncos do this year?"

"Eight and eight. They're rebuilding. My husband and I have season tickets. You going to try and get tickets for the Super Bowl?"

"I'd sure like to."

"Going to be pretty hard," the realtor warned him.

"I'll find a way." An hour and one telephone call later, the realtor took a cashier's check for fifty thousand dollars from her banker husband. Russell had directions to the local furniture and appliance store. After an hour there, Marvin purchased a white Ford van from the local dealership and drove it to the ranch. He parked it in one of the barns. He'd be keeping the rental for a while. He would spend one more night in the motel, then settle into his new house. He did not feel any sense of accomplishment. There was much left to do.

Cathy Ryan found herself paying closer attention to the newspapers now. They were good for reporting scandals and leaks, and she now had the interest in such things that she had lacked before, especially for the by-line of Robert Holtzman. Unfortunately, the new articles on the problems at CIA were more general, concentrating mainly on changes within the Soviet Union that she had difficulty understanding. It just wasn't an area in which she had much interest—as Jack didn't much care about the developments in eye surgery that his wife was very excited about. Finally there did come a piece about financial impropriety and a "very senior official." That was the second such item and she realized that if it was Jack, she had all the investigatorial documents there in her own home. It was a Sunday, and Jack was away at work again, leaving her at home with the kids again. The kids enjoyed this chilly morning in front of the TV. Cathy Ryan went into the financial files.

They were a disaster. Money management was another thing that failed to interest Dr. Caroline Ryan, and Jack assumed the duties more or less by default, just as cooking fell into her domain. She didn't even know the filing system, and was certain that Jack never expected her to wade into this colossal mess of documents. Along the way, she learned that the blind trust

that managed their stock portfolio was doing rather well at the moment. Ordinarily, she just saw the year-end earnings statements. Money didn't interest her very much. The house was paid off. The kids' education funds were already set up. The Ryan family actually lived off the combined income of the two Doctors Ryan, which allowed their investments to grow, while complicating their annual taxes, which was also something that Jack—CPA certification or not—took care of, with the aid of the family's attorney. The most recent statement of net worth drew a gasp. Cathy decided to add the money managers to the Christmas-card list. But that was not what she was after. She found it at two-thirty in the afternoon. The file was simply marked "Zimmer," and was naturally enough in the last drawer she got to.

The Zimmer file was several inches thick. She sat cross-legged on the floor before opening it, her head already aching from eyestrain and the Tylenol which she should have taken but hadn't. The first document was a letter from Jack to an attorney—not their regular attorney, the one who did their wills and taxes and other routine work—instructing him to set up an educational trust fund for seven children, a number which had been changed to eight several months later, Cathy saw. The trust fund had been set up with an initial investment of over half a million dollars, and managed as a stock portfolio through the same managers who did part of the Ryan family account. Cathy was surprised to see that Jack did actually make recommendations for this account, something that he did not do for his own. He hadn't lost his touch, either. The yield from the Zimmer portfolio was twenty-three percent. Another hundred thousand dollars had been invested in a business—a Sub-Chapter-S corporation, she saw, whatever that was—with Southland Corporation as—oh, she realized, a 7-Eleven. It was a Maryland corporation, with the address given as ...

That's only a few miles from here! It was, in fact, right off of Route 50, and that meant that Jack passed it twice a day on his way to and from work.

How convenient!

So who the hell was Carol Zimmer?

Medical bills? Obstetrics?

Dr. Marsha Rosen! *I know her!* Had Cathy not been on the faculty at Hopkins, she would have used Marsha Rosen for her own pregnancies; Rosen was a Yale graduate with a very fine reputation.

A baby? Jacqueline Zimmer? Jacqueline? Cathy thought, her face flushed scarlet. Then the tears began streaming down her cheeks.

You bastard! You can't give me a baby, but you gave one to her, didn't you!

She checked the date, then searched her memory. Jack hadn't been home that day until very late. She remembered, because she'd had to cancel out on a dinner party over at . . .

He was there! He was there for the delivery, wasn't he! What more proof do I need? The triumph of the discovery changed at once into black despair.

The world could end so easily, Cathy thought. Just a slip of paper could do it, and that was it. It was over.

Is it over?

How could it not be? Even if he still wanted—did she want him?

What about the kids? Cathy asked herself. She closed the file and replaced it

without rising. “You’re a doctor,” she said to herself. “You’re supposed to think before you act.”

The kids needed a father. But what sort of father was he? Gone thirteen or fourteen hours a day, sometimes seven days a week. He managed to take his son to one—just one!—base-ball game despite constant pleas. He was lucky to make half of Little Jack’s T-Ball games. He missed *every* school affair, the Christmas plays, all the other things. Cathy had been half surprised that he’d been home Christmas morning. The night before, assembling the toys, he’d gotten drunk again, and she hadn’t even bothered trying to attract him. What was the point? His present to her . . . well, it was nice enough, but the sort of thing a man could get in a few minutes of shopping, no big deal—

Shopping.

Cathy rose and checked through the mail on Jack’s desk. His credit card bills were sitting in the pile. She opened one and found a bunch of entries from . . . Hamleys, in London. Six hundred dollars? But he’d only gotten one thing for Little Jack, and two small items for Sally. Six hundred dollars!

Christmas shopping for two families, Jack?

“Just how much more evidence do you need, Cathy girl?” she asked herself aloud again. “Oh God oh God oh God . . .”

She didn’t move for a very long time, nor did she see or hear anything outside of her own misery. Only the mother in her kept subconscious track of the sound of the kids in the playroom.

Jack got home just before seven that evening, actually rather pleased with himself to be an hour early, and further pleased that he had the Mexico operation set in concrete now. All he had to do was take it to the White House, and then after he got it approved—Fowler would go for this; risks and all, distaste for covert operations and all, this was too juicy for the politician in him to turn down—and after Clark and Chavez brought it off, his stock would go up. And things would change. Things would get better. He would get things straightened out. For starters, he’d plan a vacation. It was time for one. A week off, maybe two, and if some CIA puke showed up with daily briefing documents, Ryan would kill the son of a bitch. He wanted freedom from the job, and he’d get it. Two good weeks. Take the kids out of school and go see Mickey, just as Clark had suggested. He’d make the reservations tomorrow.

“I’m home!” Jack announced. Silence. That was odd. He went downstairs and found the kids in front of the TV. They were doing too damned much of that, but that was their father’s fault. He’d change that, too. He’d cut back on his hours. It was time Marcus held up his end instead of working banker’s hours and leaving Jack with all the goddamned work.

“Where’s Mommy?”

“I don’t know,” Sally said without turning away from the green slime and orange guck.

Ryan walked back upstairs and into the bedroom to change. Still no sign of his wife. He found her carrying a basket of wash. Jack stood in her path, leaning forward to kiss her, but she leaned back and shook her head. Okay, that was no big thing.

“What’s for dinner, babe?” he inquired lightly.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you fix something?” It was her tone, the snappy

way she fired back without provocation.

"What did I do?" Jack asked. He was already surprised, but he hadn't had time enough to grasp her demeanor. The look in her eyes was an alien thing, and when she answered to this question, her voice made him shrivel.

"Nothing, Jack, you haven't done anything at all." She pushed past him with the basket and disappeared around the corner.

He just stood there, flat against the wall, his mouth open, not knowing what to say, and not understanding why his wife had suddenly decided to despise him.

It took only a day and a half from Latakia to Piraeus. Bock had found a ship heading to the right port, eliminating the need to transship at Rotterdam. Qati disliked deviation from the plan, but a careful check of shipping schedules showed that the five days saved might be important, and he agreed to it. He and Ghosn watched the gantry crane lift up the cargo container and move it onto the deck of the *Carmen Vita,* a Greek-flag container ship on the Mediterranean run. She would sail on the evening tide, and arrive in the United States in eleven days. They could have chartered a jet aircraft and done this, Qati thought, but it would have been too dangerous. Eleven days. He'd be able to see his physician again, and still have time to fly to America and make certain that all the arrangements were satisfactory. The workers secured the container box in place. It would be well protected, in the center of the ship, with other boxes atop it, and well aft so that winter storms would not buffet it directly. The two men retired to a waterfront bar and waited for the ship to sail, then flew to Damascus and drove from there to their headquarters. The bomb shop was already gone—mothballed would have been a more accurate term. The power cables had been cut, and dirt pushed over all the entrances. If someone ever drove a heavy truck over the concealed roof there would be a major surprise, but that was unlikely. It *was* possible that they might use the facility again, and against that slim possibility was the inconvenience of removing the machines to another burial place. Simply covering the facility over was the most logical alternative.

Russell flew to Chicago to catch the first round of playoff games. He took with him a camera, an expensive Nikon F4, and burned up two rolls of ASA-100 color prints photographing the ABC trucks—the *Monday Night Football* team was doing this particular wild-card game—before catching a cab back to the airport. He was lucky enough on the flight that he caught part of the game on the radio during the drive from Stapleton International to his new house off Interstate 76. The Bears pulled it out in overtime, 23-20. That meant that Chicago would have the honor of losing the following week to the Vikings in the Metrodome. Minnesota had a bye during the first week of wild-card games. Tony Wills' pulled groin would be fully healed, and that rookie, the announcer pointed out, had barely missed making two thousand rushing yards in his first NFL season, plus eight hundred yards as a receiver. Russell managed to catch nearly all of the AFC game because it was played on the West Coast. There were no surprises, but it was still football.

USS *Maine* left the shed without incident. Tugs turned her around, pointing the submarine down the channel, and continued to stand by if assistance were required. Captain Ricks stood atop the sail, actually aft of the cockpit, leaning against rails set in the very top of the structure. Lieutenant Commander Claggett stood his watch in the control room. The navigator actually did the work, using the periscope to mark positions, which a quartermaster dutifully checked off on the chart, ensuring that the submarine was in the center of the channel and headed in the proper direction. The trip to sea was a fairly lengthy one. Throughout the boat, men continued to stow gear. Those not actually on watch settled into their bunks and tried to nap. Soon *Maine* would be on her regular six-hour watch cycle. The sailors all made the conscious effort to get their minds from land-mode into at-sea-mode. Families and friends might as well have been on another planet. For the next two months their entire world was contained within the steel hull of their submarine.

Mancuso watched the sailing as he always did for each of his boats. It was a shame, he decided, that there was no way to get Ricks off the boat. But there was no such way. He'd meet with Group in a few days to go over routine business. At that meeting he'd express his misgivings about Ricks. He would not be able to go too far this first time, just to let Group know that he had his doubts about the "Gold" CO. The quasi-political nature of the exercise grated on Mancuso, who liked things in the open and aboveboard, the Navy Way. But the Navy Way had its own rules of behavior, and in the absence of substantive cause for action, all he could do now was express concern with Ricks and his way of running things. Besides, Group was headed by yet another hyper-engineering type who would probably have a little too much sympathy with Harry.

Mancuso tried to find an emotion for the moment, but failed. The slate-gray shape diminished in the distance, gliding across the oily-calm waters of the harbor, heading out for her fifth deterrence patrol, as U.S. Navy submarines had been doing for over thirty years. Business as usual, world changes and all, that's all it was. *Maine* sailed out to keep the peace through the threat of the most inhuman force known to man. The Commodore shook his head. What a hell of a way to run a railroad. That was why he'd always been a fast-attack man. But it worked, had worked, probably would continue to work for a lot more years, Bart told himself, and while not every boomer skipper was another Mush Morton, they'd all brought their boats back. He got into his navy-blue official car and told the driver to take him back to the office. Paperwork beckoned.

At least the kids didn't notice. Jack took some comfort in that. Kids lived as spectators in a highly complex world which required years of schooling to appreciate, as a result of which they took note mainly of the parts that they understood, and that did not include a mom and dad who simply didn't talk. It wouldn't last forever, of course, but it might last long enough for things to be smoothed over. Probably would, Jack thought. Sure it would.

He didn't know what was wrong, nor did he know what to do about it. What he ought to have done, of course, was get home at a decent hour, maybe take her out to dinner at a nice place and—but that was not possible with two kids

in school. Getting a sitter in the middle of the week and this far out of town was impractical. Another option was simply to get home and pay closer attention to his wife, leading to a—

But he couldn't depend on his ability to do that, and one more failure could only make things worse.

He looked up from his desk, out at the pines that lay beyond the CIA boundary fence. The symmetry was perfect. His work was messing up his family life, and now his family life was messing up his work. So now he had nothing at all that he could do properly. Wasn't that nice? Ryan got up from his desk and left the office, wandering to the nearest kiosk. Once there he purchased his first pack of cigarettes in ... five years? Six? Whatever, he stripped off the cellophane top and tapped one out. One luxury of having a private office was that he could smoke without interference—CIA had become just like all government offices in that respect; for the most part, people could smoke only in the rest rooms. He pretended not to see the disapproving look on Nancy's face on his way back in, then went rooting in his desk for an ashtray before lighting up.

It was, he decided a minute later—just as the initial dizziness hit him—one of the dependable pleasures of life. Alcohol was another. You ingested these substances and you got the desired result, which explained their popularity in spite of the dangers to health that everyone knew about. Alcohol and nicotine, the two things that make intolerable life into something else. While they shortened it.

Wasn't that just great? Ryan almost laughed at his incredible stupidity. Just what else of himself would he destroy? But did it matter?

His work mattered. That he was sure of. That was what had landed him in this mess, one way or another. That was the prime destructive factor in his life, but he could no more leave that than he could change anything else.

"Nancy, please ask Mr. Clark to come in."

John appeared two minutes later. "Aw, hell, doc!" he observed almost immediately. "Now, what's the wife gonna say?"

"Not a thing."

"Bet you're wrong on that." Clark turned to open a window for ventilation. He'd quit a long time before. It was the one vice that he feared. It had killed his father. "What do you want?"

"How's the hardware?"

"Waiting for your go-ahead to build it."

"Go," Jack said simply.

"You got a go-mission order?"

"No, but I don't need it. We'll call it part of the feasibility study. How long to slap things together?"

"Three days, they say. We'll need some cooperation from the Air Force."

"What about the computer side?"

"That program has already been validated. They've taken tapes from six different aircraft and smoothed out the noise. It's never taken them more than two or three hours to do an hour of tape."

"Mexico City to D.C. is ..."

"Depending on weather, just under four hours, max. Doing the full tape will

be an overnighter," Clark estimated. "The President's schedule is what?"

"Arrival ceremony is Monday afternoon. The first business session is the following morning. State dinner Tuesday night."

"You going?"

Ryan shook his head. "No, we're going to the one a week earlier—geez, that's not too far off, is it? I'll call the 89th Wing at Andrews. They do training hops all the time. Getting your team aboard won't be hard."

"I have three capture teams selected. They're all ex-Air Force and -Navy elint spooks," Clark said. "They know the business."

"Okay, run with it."

"You got it, doc."

Jack watched him leave and lit up another.

29

CROSSROADS

MV *Carmen Vita* cleared the Strait of Gibraltar right on schedule, her Pielstick diesels driving her at a constant nineteen knots. The crew of forty officers and men (this ship did not have any women in the crew, though three of the officers had their wives with them) settled down for the normal sailing routine of watch-keeping and maintenance. They were seven days out from the Virginia Capes. On her deck and stowed below were a goodly number of standard-sized container boxes. These actually came in two sizes, and they were all loaded with various types of cargo which the captain and crew neither knew nor cared very much about. The whole point of containerization was that the ship was used exclusively as a contract-hauler, much as a trucker was used by various businesses. All the ship's crew needed to worry about was the weight of the containers, and that always seemed to work out rather uniformly, since the containers themselves were always loaded to reflect what a commercial truck could legally pull along a public highway.

The ship's southerly routing also made for a fairly sedate and uneventful passage. The really bitter winter storms followed a more northerly track, and the ship's master, a native of India, was happy for it. A youngish man for such a substantial command—he was only thirty-seven-he knew that good weather made for a fast and fuel-efficient voyage. He aspired to a larger and more sumptuous ship, and by keeping *Carmen Vita* on schedule and under budget, he'd get that in due course.

It was the tenth day in a row that Clark hadn't seen Mrs. Ryan. John Clark had a good memory for such things, honed by years of field operations of one sort or another in which one stayed alive by keeping track of everything whether it seemed important or not. He'd never seen her more than twice in a row. Jack worked an inconvenient schedule—but so did she, with early-morning surgery at least twice a week . . . and she was awake this morning. He saw her head through the kitchen window, sitting at a table, probably drinking coffee and reading the paper or watching TV. But she hadn't even turned her head to look at her husband when he left, had she? Ordinarily she got up to kiss him goodbye like any wife. Ten days in a row.

Not a good sign, was it? What was the problem? Jack came out to the car, his face dark and looking down. There was the grimace again.

"Morning, doc!" Clark greeted him cheerily.

"Hi, John," was the subdued reply. He hadn't brought his paper again, either. He started reading from the dispatch box as usual, and by the time they reached the the D.C. Beltway, he'd just be staring, a grim thousand-yard stare

in his eyes as he lit a continuous chain of cigarettes. Clark decided that he just couldn't stand it anymore:

"Problem at home, doc?" he asked quietly, watching the road.

"Yeah, but it's my problem."

"Guess so. The kids are okay?"

"It's not the kids, John. Leave it, okay?"

"Right." Clark concentrated on his driving while Ryan went through the message traffic.

What the hell is the problem? Be analytical, Clark told himself*, think it through.*

His boss had been depressed for over a month now, but it had really gotten worse—the news article, that thing from Holtzman? A family problem, not involving the kids. That meant trouble with the wife. He made a mental note to recheck that piece and any subsequent pieces when he got into the office. Seventy minutes after picking Ryan up—traffic was light this morning—he headed for CIA's rather impressive library and got the staff there busy. It wasn't hard for them. The Agency kept a special file for all the pieces that concerned it, arranged in folders by the authors' by-lines. The problem, Clark thought, was immediately clear.

Holtzman had talked about financial and sexual misconduct. Right after that article came out . . .

"Aw, shit," Clark whispered to himself. He made copies of the various recent pieces—there were four of them—and went for a walk to clear his head. One nice thing about being a SPO, especially a SPO assigned to Ryan, was that he had very little work to do. Ryan was a homebody while in Langley. He didn't really move around all that much. As he took a quick walking tour of the grounds, he reread the news articles and made another connection. The Sunday piece. Ryan had gone home early that day. He'd been upbeat, talking about getting away right after the Mexican job, taking John's advice for a trip to Florida—but the next morning he'd looked like a corpse. And he wasn't bringing the paper out with him. His wife must have been reading it, and something had gone very bad between Ryan and his wife. That seemed reasonably clear. Clear enough for Clark.

Clark came back into the building, going through the normal routine of passing through the computer-controlled gates, then setting off to locate Chavez, who was in the New Headquarters Building. John found him in an office, going over schedules.

"Ding, get your coat." Ten minutes later they were on the D.C. Beltway. Chavez was checking a map.

"Okay," Chavez said. "I have it. Broadway and Monument, up from the harbor."

Russell was dressed in coveralls. The photos of the ABC vans in Chicago had turned out very well, and he'd had a lab in Boulder blow them up to poster size. These he compared to his van—it was exactly the same model of utility van—to make precise measurements. What came next wasn't easy. He'd purchased a dozen large sheets of semirigid plastic, and he began carving them to make an exact match of the ABC logo. As he finished each, he taped it to the side of his van and used a marker pencil to scribe in the letters. It

required six attempts to get it right, and Russell next used the knife to make reference marks on the van. It seemed a pity to score the paint on the van, but he reminded himself that the van would be blown up anyway, and there was no sense in getting sentimental about a truck. On the whole, he was proud of his artistic talents. He hadn't had a chance to exercise them since he'd learned a trade in the prison shop, many years before. When the logo was painted on, black letters on the white-painted truck, nobody would be able to tell the difference.

The next job of the day was to drive to the local motor-vehicle agency to get commercial tags for the van. He explained that he would use it for his electronics business, installing and servicing commercial phone systems. He walked out with temporary tags, and they promised delivery of the real ones in four working days, which struck Russell as unnecessarily efficient. Getting the license was even easier. The international licensing documents that Ghosn had provided to go along with his passport were honored by the State of Colorado, after he passed a written test, and he had a photo-certified license card to go along with the tags. His only "mistake" was messing up one of the forms, but the clerk let him sign a fresh one while Russell dumped the first in the trash can. Or appeared to. The blank form slid into the pocket of his parka.

Johns Hopkins Hospital is not located in the best of neighborhoods. As compensation for that fact the Baltimore City Police guarded it in a way that reminded Clark of his time in Vietnam. He found a parking place on Broadway, just across from the main entrance. Then he and Chavez went in, walking around the marble statue of Jesus which both found rather admirable in size and execution. The large complex—Hopkins is a vast facility—made finding the right part difficult, but ten minutes later they were sitting outside The Wilmer Eye Institute office of Associate Professor Caroline M. Ryan, M.D., F.A.C.S. Clark relaxed and read a magazine while Chavez cast his lecherous dark eyes on the receptionist whom Mrs. Ryan evidently rated. The other Dr. Ryan, as Clark thought of her, showed up at 12:35 with an armful of documents. She gave the two CIA officers a *who-are-you* look and breezed into her office without a word. It didn't take much of a look on his part either. She'd always appeared to him a very attractive and dignified female. Not now. Her face, if anything, was in worse shape than her husband's. This really was getting out of hand, John thought. Clark gave it a ten-count and just walked past the open-mouthed receptionist to begin his newest career, marriage counselor.

"What is this?" Cathy asked. "I don't have any appointments today."

"Ma'am, I need a few minutes of your time."

"Who are you? Are you going to ask me about Jack?"

"Ma'am, my name is Clark." He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the card-sized CIA photo-pass, attached as most were, to a metal chain that went around his neck. "There may be some things you need to know about."

Cathy's eyes went hard almost at once, the anger taking over from the hurt. "I know," she said. "I've heard it all."

"No, ma'am, I think that you do not know. This isn't a good place to talk. May I invite you to lunch?"

"Around here? The streets aren't all that—"

"Safe?" Clark smiled to show just how absurd her observation was.

For the first time Caroline Ryan applied a professional eye to her visitor. He was about Jack's height but bulkier. Whereas she had once found her husband's face manly, Clark's was rugged. His hands looked large and powerful, and his body language proclaimed that he could deal with anything. More impressive was his demeanor. The man could have intimidated almost anyone, she realized, but he was going out of his way to appear gentlemanly, and succeeding, like the ballplayers who sometimes came here to see the kids. *Teddy bear* was what she thought. Not because he was, but because he wanted to be.

"There's a place right down Monument Street."

"Fine." Clark turned and lifted her overcoat from the clothes tree. He held it almost daintily for her to put it on. Chavez joined them outside. He was much smaller than Clark, but more overtly dangerous, like a gang kid who was trying to smooth off his edges. Chavez, she saw, took the lead as they walked outside, preceding them up the sidewalk in a way that was almost comical. The streets here were not what she thought safe—at least not for a woman walking alone, though that was more a problem at night than during the day—but Chavez moved like a man in battle. That, she thought, was interesting. They found the small restaurant quickly, and Clark steered everyone into a corner booth. Both the men had their backs to the wall so that they could stare outward at any incoming threat. Both had their coats unbuttoned, though they both seemed outwardly relaxed.

"Who exactly are you?" she asked. The whole affair was like something from a bad movie.

"I'm your husband's driver," John replied. "I'm a field officer, paramilitary type. I've been with the Agency for almost twenty years."

"You're not supposed to tell people stuff like that."

Clark just shook his head. "Ma'am, we haven't even started breaking laws yet. Now I'm mainly a Security and Protective Officer, a SPO. Ding Chavez here is also a SPO."

"Hello, Doctor Ryan. My real name is Domingo." He held out his hand. "I work with your husband also. John and I drive him around and protect him on trips and stuff."

"You're both carrying guns?"

Ding almost looked embarrassed. "Yes, ma'am."

With that, the adventurous part of the meeting ended, Cathy thought. Two obviously very tough men were trying to charm her. They had even succeeded. But that didn't change her problem. She was about to say something, but Clark started off first.

"Ma'am, there seems to be a problem between you and your husband. I don't know what it is—I think I know some of it—but I do know that it's hurting the guy. That's bad for the Agency."

"Gentlemen, I appreciate your concern, but this is a private matter."

"Yes, ma'am," Clark responded in his eerily polite voice. He reached into his pocket and pulled out Xerox copies of the Holtzman articles. "Is this the problem?"

"That's not any of your . . ." Her mouth clamped shut.

"I thought so. Ma'am, none of this is true. I mean, the sexual impropriety part. That's definitely not true. Your husband hardly goes anywhere without one of us. Because of where he works and who he is, he has to sign out for every place he goes to—like a doctor on call, okay? If you want I can get you copies of his itinerary for as far back as you want."

"That can't be legal."

"No, it probably isn't," Clark agreed. "So?"

She so wanted to believe, Cathy thought, but she couldn't, and it was best to tell them why. "Look, your loyalty to Jack is very impressive—but I *know*, okay? I went through the financial records, and I know about that Zimmer woman, and I know about the kid!"

"What exactly do you know?"

"I know that Jack was there for the delivery. I know about the money, and how he tried to hide it from me and everybody else. I know that he's being investigated by the government."

"What do you mean?"

"A government investigator was here at Hopkins! I know that!"

"Dr. Ryan, there is no such investigation at CIA, and no investigation at the FBI, either. That's a fact."

"Then who was here?"

"I'm afraid I don't know that," Clark answered. It wasn't entirely true, but Clark figured this lie was not pertinent to the matter at hand.

"Look, I know about Carol Zimmer," she said again.

"What do you know?" Clark repeated quietly. The response he got surprised him.

The answer almost came out as a scream. "Jack's playing around, and she's the one! And there's a kid involved, and Jack is spending so much time with her that he doesn't have any time for me and he can't even—" She stopped, at the point of sobbing.

Clark waited for her to settle down. His eyes didn't leave her face for an instant, and he saw it all as clearly as though it had been printed on a page. Ding merely looked embarrassed. He wasn't old enough to understand.

"Will you hear me through?"

"Sure, why not? It's over, the only reason I haven't just walked out is the kids. So go ahead, make your pitch. Tell me that he still loves me and all that. He doesn't have the guts to talk about it to me himself, but I'm sure he had something to do with this," she concluded bitterly.

"First of all, he does not know we are here. If he finds out, I'll probably lose my job, but that's no big thing. I have my retirement. Besides, I'm about to break bigger rules than that one. Where do I begin?" Clark paused before going on.

"Carol Zimmer is a widow. Her husband was Chief Master Sergeant Buck Zimmer, U.S. Air Force. He died in the line of duty. As a matter of fact, he died in your husband's arms. I know. I was there. Buck took five rounds in the chest. Both lungs. It took him five or six minutes to die. He left behind seven children—eight, if you count the one his wife was carrying. Buck didn't know about that one when he died. Carol was waiting to surprise him.

"Sergeant Zimmer was the crew chief on an Air Force special-operations helicopter. We took that aircraft into a foreign country to rescue a group of U.S. Army soldiers who were conducting a covert mission."

"I was one of 'em, ma'am," Ding announced, somewhat to Clark's displeasure. "I wouldn't be here if the doc hadn't put it out on the line."

"The soldiers had been deliberately cut off from support from this end of the operation—"

"Who?"

"He's dead now," Clark answered in a way that left no doubt at all. "Your husband uncovered what was an illegal operation. He and Dan Murray of the FBI set up the rescue mission. It was a bad one, really tough. We were very lucky to get it done. I'm surprised you haven't noticed something—nightmares, maybe?"

"He doesn't sleep well—well, yes, sometimes he . . ."

"Dr. Ryan missed having a bullet take his head off by . . . oh, maybe two inches, maybe three. We had to rescue a squad of soldiers off a hilltop, and they were under attack. Jack worked one machine gun. Buck Zimmer had another one. Buck took hits as we lifted out, went down hard. Jack and I tried to help him, but I don't even think you Hopkins guys could have done very much. It wasn't real pretty. He died—" Clark stopped for a moment, and Cathy could see that he wasn't faking the pain. "He was talking about his kids. Worried about 'em, like any man would be. Your husband held Zimmer in his arms and promised him that he would look after them, that he'd see they were all educated, that he would take care of the family. Ma'am, I've been in this business a long time, back before you learned how to drive a car, okay? I've never seen anything better than what Jack did.

"After we got back, Jack did what he promised. I mean, of course. I'm not surprised he kept it a secret from you. There are aspects to the total operation that I do not know myself. But this much I do know: that man gives his word, he keeps it. I helped. We got the family moved up here from Florida. He set them up a little business. One of the kids is already in college, at Georgetown, and the second-oldest is already accepted into MIT. I forgot to tell you, Carol Zimmer—well, Carol ain't her name. She was born in Laos. Zimmer got her out when everything went to hell there, married her, and they started punching out kids like movie tickets. Anyway, she's a typical Asian mom. She thinks education is a gift from God Himself, and those kids really study hard. They all think your husband's a saint. We stop in to see them at least once a week, every week."

"I want to believe you," Cathy said. "What about the baby?"

"You mean when it was born? Yeah, we were both there. My wife was the coach for the delivery—Jack didn't think it was right for him to be in the room, and I've never been there for one. It kind of scares me," Clark admitted. "So we waited in the usual place with all the other wimps. If you want, I can introduce you to the Zimmer family. You can also confirm the story through Dan Murray at the FBI, if you think that is necessary."

"Won't that get you into trouble?" Cathy knew at once that she could trust Murray. He was strait-laced on moral issues; it came from being a cop.

"I will definitely lose my job. I suppose they could prosecute me—

technically I have just committed a federal felony—but I doubt it would go that far. Ding would lose his job, too, because he hasn't had the sense to keep his mouth shut like I told him to."

"Shit," Ding commented, then looked embarrassed. "Excuse me, ma'am. John, this is a matter of honor. 'Cept for the doc, I'd be fertilizer on some Colombian hilltop. I owe him my life. That counts more than a job, *'mano."*

Clark handed over an index card. "These are the dates of the operation. You may remember that when Admiral Greer died, Jack didn't make the funeral."

"Yes! Bob Ritter called me, and—"

"That's when it was. You can verify all of this with Mr. Murray."

"God!" It all hit her at once.

"Yes, ma'am. All the garbage in these articles. It's all a lie."

"Who's doing it?"

"I don't know, but I am going to find out. Doctor, I've been watching your guy come apart for the past six months. I've seen it happen before, in combat —I spent quite some time in Vietnam—but this has been worse. That Vatican Treaty, the way the Middle East is settling down. Jack had a big part in that, but he isn't getting any credit at all. Exactly what part he played, I'm not sure. He's pretty good at keeping secrets. That's part of his problem. He keeps it all inside. You do that too much and it's like cancer, like acid or something. It eats you up. It's eating him up, and this crap in the papers has made it a lot worse.

"All I can say, doc, is this: I don't know a better man than your husband, and I've been around the block a few times. He's put it on the line more than the times you know about, but there's people around who don't like him very much, and those people are trying to get him in a way that he can't deal with. It's typical, dirty, underhanded crap, but Jack's not the kind of guy who can deal with that. He plays by the rules, you see. So it's eating him up."

Cathy was weeping now. Clark handed her a handkerchief.

"I figured you should know. If you think it's necessary, I want you to check it out as much as you think you have to. That's your decision, and I want you to make the call without worrying about me or Ding or anybody else, okay? I'll take you to see Carol Zimmer and the kids. If I lose my job—the hell with it. I've been in the business too damned long anyway."

"Christmas presents?"

"For the Zimmer kids? Yeah, I helped wrap them. Your husband can't wrap presents worth a damn, but I suppose you know that. I even delivered some of my own. My two are too grown for fun presents, and they're great kids, the Zimmers. It's nice being an uncle," John added with a genuine smile.

"All a lie?"

"I don't know about the financial stuff, just the other things. And they tried to get at him through you, judging by what you just said."

The tears stopped at that moment. Cathy wiped her eyes and looked up. "You're right. You said you don't know who's doing this?"

"I'm planning to find out," Clark promised her. Her demeanor had changed completely. This was some broad.

"I want you to let me know. And I want to meet the Zimmer family."

"When do you get off work?"

"I have to make a few phone calls and some notes—say an hour?"

"I can squeeze that in, but I may have to leave early. They have a 7-Eleven about ten miles from your place."

"I know it's close, but not exactly where."

"You can follow me down."

"Let's go." Cathy led them out, or tried to. Chavez beat her out the door, and held the point all the way back to the hospital. He and Clark decided to stay outside and get some air, then spotted two youths sitting on their car.

It was strange, John Clark thought as he crossed the street. At the beginning Caroline Ryan had been the angry one, angry and betrayed. He'd been the voice of understanding. Now she was feeling much better—though worse in another way—but he had absorbed all of her anger. It was a little too much to bear, and there in front of him was an outlet for it.

"Off the car, punk!"

"Christ, John!" Ding said behind him.

"Says who!" the youth said, hardly turning to see the man approaching. He got his head around just in time to see the hand grasp his shoulder. Then the world rotated and the brick wall of a building approached his face very rapidly. Fortunately, his boom-box absorbed most of the impact, which however had a negative effect on the boom-box.

"Motherfucker!" the kid snarled, coming out with a knife. His companion was six feet away, and also had a knife out.

Clark just smiled at them. "Who's first?"

The thought of avenging his appliance died a quick death. Both youths knew danger when they saw it.

"You lucky I don't have my gun, man!"

"You can leave the knives, too."

"You a cop?"

"No, I am not a policeman," Clark said, walking over with his hand out. Chavez backed him up, his coat opened, as both youths noticed. They dropped their knives and started walking away.

"What the hell is—"

Clark turned to see a policeman approaching, with a large dog. Both were fully alert. John pulled out his CIA pass. "I didn't like their attitude."

Chavez handed the knives over. "They dropped these, sir."

"You really should leave that sort of thing to us."

"Yes, sir," Clark agreed. "You're right. Nice dog you have there."

The cop pocketed the knives. "Have a good one," he said, wondering what the hell this had been about.

"You, too, officer." Clark paused and turned to Chavez. "Goddamn, that felt good."

"Ready to go to Mexico, John?"

"Yeah. I just hate leaving unfinished business behind, you know?"

"So who's trying to fuck him over?"

"Not sure."

"Bull," Ding observed.

"Won't be sure until I talk to Holtzman."

"You say so, man. I like her," he added. "That's some lady."

"Yeah, she is. Just what he needs to set things straight."
"You think she'll call that Murray guy?"
"Does it matter?"
"No." Chavez looked up the street. "A question of honor, Mr. C."
"I knew you'd understand, Ding."

Jacqueline Zimmer was a beautiful child, Cathy thought, holding her. She wanted another, must have another. Jack would give her one, maybe another girl if they were lucky.
"We hear so much 'bout you!" Carol said. "You doctor?"
"Yes, I teach doctors, I'm a professor of surgery."
"My oldes' son must meet you. He want to be doctor. He student at Georgetown."
"Maybe I can help him a little. Can I ask you a question?"
"Yes."
"Your husband . . ."
"Buck? He die. I don't know all the things, just that he die—on duty, yes? Is secret thing. Very hard for me," Carol said soberly, but without overt grief. She was over that now. "Buck was a very good man. So your husban'. You be nice to him," Mrs. Zimmer added.
"Oh, I will," Cathy promised. "Now, we have to make this a secret?"
"What secret?"
"Jack doesn't know that I know about you."
"Oh? I know there are many secret, but—okay, I un'erstan'. I keep this secret, too."
"I will talk to Jack about that. I think you should come to our house and meet our children. But for now, we keep the secret?"
"Yes, okay. We surprise him?"
"Right." Cathy smiled as she handed the child back. "I will see you again, soon."
"Feel better, doc?" Clark asked her out in the parking lot.
"Thank you . . ."
"Call me John."
"Thanks, John." It was the warmest smile since his kids' at Christmas.
"Anytime."
Clark drove west on Route 50. Cathy turned east for home. Her knuckles were white on the steering wheel of her car. The anger was back now. For the most part she was angry at herself. How could she have thought that of Jack? She'd been very foolish, very small, and so disgustingly selfish. But it wasn't really her fault. Someone else had invaded their household, she decided as she pulled into the garage. She was on the phone almost immediately. She had to do one more thing. She had to be completely certain.
"Hi, Dan."
"Cathy! How's the eye business, kid?" Murray asked.
"Got a question for you."
"Shoot."
She'd already decided how to do it. "There's a problem with Jack. . . ."
Murray's voice became guarded. "What is it?"

"He's having nightmares," Cathy said. It wasn't a lie, but what followed was. "Something about a helicopter, and Buck somebody . . . I can't ask him about it, but—"

Murray cut her off. "Cathy, I can't talk about it over the phone. That's a business matter, kid."

"Really?"

"Really, Cathy. It's something I know about, but I cannot discuss it with you. I'm sorry, but that's the way it has to be. It's business."

Cathy went on with a touch of alarm in her voice. "It's not something that's happening now—I mean—"

"It's way in the past, Cathy. That's all I can say. If you think Jack needs professional help, then I can make a few calls and—"

"No, I don't think so. It was really bad a few months ago, but it does seem to be getting better. I was just worried that it might be something at the office. . . ."

"All behind him, Cathy. Honest."

"You sure, Dan?"

"Positive. I would not kid around on something like this."

And that, Cathy knew, was that. Dan was every bit as honest as Jack was. "Thanks, Dan. Thanks a lot," she said in her best medical voice, the one that revealed nothing at all.

"Anytime, Cathy." By the time he hung up, Murray wondered if he'd just been had in some way. No, he decided, there was no way she could have found out about that.

Had he seen the other end of the disconnected phone line, he would have been surprised to discover how wrong he was. Cathy sat alone in the kitchen, crying one last time. She'd had to check, there had not been a choice to purge all the emotions from her soul, but now she was completely certain that Clark had spoken the truth; that someone was trying to hurt her husband, that whoever it was was willing to use his wife and his family against him. *Who could ever hate a man so much that they would try that?* she wondered.

Whoever it was was her enemy. Whoever it was had attacked her and her family just as coldly as those terrorists had done, but much more cravenly.

Whoever it was would pay for that.

"Where have you been?"

"Sorry, doc. I had some errands to run." Clark had come back through the S&T office. "Here."

"What's this?" Ryan took the bottle. It was an expensive container of Chivas Regal in a ceramic bottle. The sort you couldn't see through.

"That's our transceiver. They made up four of them. Nice job, isn't it? Here's the pickup." Clark handed over a green stick, almost the thickness of a cocktail straw, but not quite. "It'll look like a plastic doodad to hold the flowers in place. We decided to use three of them. The techies say they can multiplex the outbound transmissions, and for some reason or other they can crunch the computer time down to one-to-one. They also say that if we had another few months to play with the comm links, we could almost real-time the whole thing."

"What we have is enough," Jack said. Here and now "almost" was better than perfect too late. "I've funded enough research projects."

"I agree. What about the test flights?"

"Tomorrow, ten o'clock."

"Super." Clark stood. "Hey, doc, how about you call it a day? You look wasted."

"I think you're right. Give me another hour and I'm out of here."

"Fair enough."

Russell met them at Atlanta. They'd come across through Mexico City, thence through Miami, where the customs people were very interested in drugs, but not particularly interested in Greek businessmen who opened their bags without being asked. Russell, who was now Robert Friend of Roggen, Colorado—with the driver's license to prove it—shook hands with both of them and helped to collect their baggage.

"Weapons?" Qati asked.

"Not here, man. I have everything you need at home."

"Any problems?"

"Not one." Russell was silent for a moment. "Maybe there is one."

"What?" Ghosn asked with concealed alarm. Being on foreign soil always made him nervous, and this was his first trip to America.

"Cold as hell where we're going, guys. You might want to get some decent coats."

"That can wait," the Commander decided. He was feeling very bad now. The latest batch of chemotherapy had denied him food for nearly two days, and as much as he craved nourishment, his stomach rebelled at the mere sight of it in one of the airport fast-food stands. "What about our flight?"

"Hour and a half. How about you get some sweaters, okay? Follow me. I'm not foolin' about the weather. It's like zero where we're going."

"Zero? That is not so—" Ghosn stopped. "You mean below zero, centigrade?"

Russell stopped for a second. "Oh. Yeah, that's right. Zero here means something different. Zero's cold, guys, okay?"

"As you say," Qati agreed. Half an hour later they had thick woolen sweaters to go under their thin raincoats. The mostly empty Delta flight to Denver left on time. Three hours later they walked off their last jetway for a while. Ghosn had never seen so much snow in his life.

"I can hardly breathe," Qati said.

"It'll take you a day to get used to the altitude. You guys go get the luggage. I'll get the car and warm it up for you."

"If he's betrayed us," Qati said as Russell walked away, "we'll know it in the next few minutes."

"He has not," Ghosn replied. "He is a strange man, but a faithful one."

"He is an infidel, a pagan."

"That is true, but he also listened to an imam in my presence. At least he was polite. I tell you, he is faithful."

"We will see," Qati said, walking tiredly and breathlessly to the baggage-claim level. Both men looked around as they moved, searching for eyes. That

was always the giveaway, the eyes that fixed on you. It was hard even for the most professional of men to keep from looking at their targets.

They collected their luggage without incident, and Marvin was waiting. He could not stop the blast of air from hitting them, and thin as the air was, it was also colder than either had ever experienced. The heat of the car was welcome indeed.

"How go the preparations?"

"Everything is on schedule, Commander," Russell said. He drove off. The Arabs were quietly impressed by the vast open space, the broad interstate highway—they found the speed-limit signs very strange—and the obvious wealth in the area. They were also impressed with Russell, who had manifestly done quite well. Both men rested easier that he had not betrayed them. It was not that Qati had actually expected it, rather that he knew that his vulnerability increased as they got closer to the final part of the plan. That, he knew, was normal.

The farm was of a good size. Russell had thoughtfully overheated it somewhat, but what Qati noted most of all was its obvious defensibility, with a clear field of fire in all directions. He got them inside and carried the bags for them.

"You guys have to be pretty tired," Marvin observed. "Why don't you just bed down? You're safe here, okay?" Qati took the advice. Ghosn did not. He and Russell went to the kitchen. Ibrahim was happy to learn that Marvin was a skilled cook.

"What is this meat?"

"Venison—deer meat. I know you can't eat pork, but you got any problems with deer?" the American asked.

Ghosn shook his head. "No, but I have never had it."

"It's okay, I promise. I found this at a local store this morning. Native-American soul food, man. This is good mule deer. There's a game-rancher around here who grows them commercially. I can try you out on beefalo, too."

"What the devil is that?"

"Beefalo? Another thing you can only get around here. It's a cross between beef cattle and buffalo. Buffalo is what my people used to eat, man, biggest damned cow you're ever gonna see!" Russell grinned. "Good lean meat, healthy and everything. But venison's the best, Ibrahim."

"You must not call me that," Ghosn said tiredly. It had been a twenty-seven-hour day for him, counting the time zones.

"I got the IDs for you and the Commander." Russell pulled the envelopes from a drawer and tossed them on the table. "Names are exactly what you wanted, see? We just have to do the photos and put them on the cards. I have the equipment to do it."

"Was this hard to get?"

Marvin laughed. "Naw, it's standard commercial stuff. I used my own license form as a master, ginned up the copies, then I got the hardware to do first-class dupes. Lots of companies use photo-passes, and the equipment is standardized. Three hours' work. I figure we have all day tomorrow and day after to go over everything."

"Excellent, Marvin."

"You want a drink?"

"Alcohol, you mean?"

"Hey, man, I saw you have a beer with that German guy—what was his name?"

"Herr Fromm, you mean."

"Come on, it's not as bad as eatin' pork, is it?"

"Thank you, but I will pass on that—is that how you say it?"

" 'Pass on the drink'?—yeah, that's fine, man. How's that Fromm guy doing?" Marvin asked casually, looking at the meat. It was almost done.

"Doing well," Ghosn answered just as casually. "He went off to see his wife."

"Exactly what were you guys working on, anyway?" Russell poured himself a shot of Jack Daniel's.

"He helped us with the explosives, some special tricks, you see. He's an expert in the field."

"Great."

It was the first hopeful sign in a few days, maybe a few weeks, Ryan thought. Dinner was fine, all the better to make it home in time to have it with the kids. Cathy had evidently gotten home from work at a reasonable hour and had taken the time to fix a good one. Best of all, they'd talked over dinner, not about very much, but they'd talked. Afterwards Jack had helped her clean up. Finally the kids went off to bed, and they were alone.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you," Cathy said.

"It's okay, I guess I deserved it." Ryan was willing to say almost anything to calm things down.

"No, I was wrong, Jack. I was feeling bitchy, and I had cramps, and my back hurt. What's wrong with you is that you're working too hard and drinking too much." She came over to kiss him. "Smoking, Jack?"

He was amazed. He hadn't expected to be kissed. More than that, he expected an explosion if she discovered that he'd smoked. "Sorry, babe. Bad day at the office. I wimped."

Cathy held his hands. "Jack, I want you to cut back on the drinking, and get your rest. That's your problem, that and the stress. We'll worry about the smoking later, just so you don't smoke around the kids. I haven't been very sympathetic, and I've been a little wrong myself, but you have to clean up your act. What you've been doing is bad for you, and bad for us."

"I know."

"Go to bed. You need sleep more than anything else."

Being married to a physician had its drawbacks. Chief among those was that you couldn't argue with one. Jack kissed her on the cheek and did as he was told.

30

EAST ROOM

Clark arrived at the house at the proper time and had to do something unusual. He waited. After a couple of minutes he was ready to knock on the door, but then it opened. Dr. Ryan (male) came out partway, then stopped and turned to kiss Dr. Ryan (female), who watched him walk off, and, after his back was fully turned, fired off a beaming smile at the car.

All right! Clark thought. Maybe he did have a new career set up. Jack also looked fairly decent, and Clark told him so as soon as he got in the car.

"Yeah, well, I got sent to bed early." Jack chuckled, tossing his paper on the front seat. "Forgot to have a drink, too."

"Couple more days like that and you just might be human again."

"Maybe you're right." But he still lit up a cigarette, somewhat to Clark's annoyance. Then he realized just how smart Caroline Ryan was. One thing at a time. Damn, Clark told himself, that is some broad.

"I'm set up for the test flight. Ten o'clock."

"Good. It is nice to put you to some real work, John. Playing SPO must be boring as hell," Ryan said, opening the dispatch box.

"It has its moments, sir," Clark replied, pulling onto Falcon's Nest Road. It was another quiet day on the dispatches, and soon Ryan had his head buried in the morning *Post.*

Three hours later, Clark and Chavez arrived at Andrews Air Force Base. A pair of VC-20Bs had already been scheduled for routine training flights. The pilots and crews of the 89th Military Airlift—"The President's"—Wing had a strict regimen for maintaining proficiency. The two aircraft took off a few minutes apart and headed east to perform various familiarization maneuvers to acquaint two new copilots with air-traffic control procedures—which the drivers already knew backwards and forwards, of course, but that was beside the point.

In the back, an Air Force technical sergeant was doing his own training, playing with the sophisticated communications equipment that the plane carried. He occasionally looked aft to see that civilian, whoever the hell he was, talking into a flower pot, or just into a little green stick. There are some things, the sergeant thought, that a guy just isn't supposed to understand. He was entirely correct.

Two hours later the two Gulfstreams landed back at Andrews and rolled to a halt at the VIP terminal. Clark gathered up his gear and walked out to meet another civilian who'd been aboard the other aircraft. The pair walked off to their car, already talking.

"I could understand part of what you were saying—clear, I mean," Chavez

reported. “Say about a third of it, maybe a little less.”

“Okay, we’ll see what the techies can do with it.” The drive back to Langley took thirty-five minutes, and from there Clark and Chavez drove back into Washington for a late lunch.

Bob Holtzman had gotten the call the previous evening. It had come on his unlisted home line. A curt, short message, it had also piqued his interest. At two in the afternoon he walked into a small Mexican place in Georgetown called Esteban’s. Most of the business crowd had gone, leaving the place about a third full, mainly with kids from Georgetown University. A wave from the back told him where to go.

“Hello,” Holtzman said, sitting down.

“You Holtzman?”

“That’s right,” the reporter said. “And you are?”

“Two friendly guys,” the older one said. “Join us for lunch?”

“Okay.” The younger one got up and started feeding quarters into a jukebox that played Mexican music. In a moment it was certain that his tape recorder wouldn’t have a chance of working.

“What do you want to see me about?”

“You’ve been writing some pieces on the Agency,” the older one started off. “The target of your articles is the Deputy Director, Dr. John Ryan.”

“I never said that,” Holtzman replied.

“Whoever leaked all that shit to you lied. It’s a setup.”

“Says who?”

“Just how honest a reporter are you?”

“What do you mean?” Holtzman asked.

“If I tell you something totally off the record, will you print it?”

“That depends on the nature of the information. What exactly is your intention?”

“What I mean, Mr. Holtzman, is that I can prove to you that you’ve been lied to, but the proof of that can never be revealed. It would endanger some people. It would also prove that somebody’s been using you to grind an ax or two. I want to know who that person is.”

“You know that I can never reveal a source. That violates our code of ethics.”

“Ethics in a reporter,” the man said just loudly enough to be heard over the music. “I like that. Do you also protect sources who lie to you?”

“No, we don’t do that.”

“Okay, then I’m going to tell you a little story, but the condition is that you may never, ever reveal what I am going to tell you. Will you honor such a condition?”

“What if I find out you are misleading me?”

“Then you will be free to print it. Fair enough?” Clark got a nod. “Just remember, I will be very unhappy if you ever print it, ’cuz I ain’t lying. One more thing, you can’t ever use what I am going to tell you as a lead to do your own digging.”

“That’s asking a lot.”

“You make the call, Mr. Holtzman. You have the reputation of an honest reporter, and a pretty smart one. There are some things that can’t be reported

—well, that's going too far. Let's say that there are things that have to remain secret for a very long time. Like years. What I'm getting at is this: you've been used. You have been conned into printing lies in order to hurt someone. Now, I'm not a reporter, but if I were, that would bother me. It would bother me because it's wrong, and it would bother me because someone took me for a sucker."

"You have it figured out. Okay, I agree to your conditions."

"Fair enough." Clark told his story. It took ten minutes.

"What about the mission? Where exactly did the man die?"

"Sorry, pal. And you can forget about finding that one out. Less than ten people can answer that." Clark's lie was a clever one. "If you even manage to figure out who they are, they won't talk—they can't. Not too many people voluntarily leak information about breaking laws."

"And the Zimmer woman?"

"You can check out most of that story. Where she lives, the family business, where the kid was born, who was there, who the doctor was."

Holtzman checked his notes. "There's something really, really big behind all this, isn't there?"

Clark just stared at him. "All I want is a name."

"What will you do with it?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

"What will Ryan do with it?"

"He doesn't know we're here."

"Bullshit."

"That, Mr. Holtzman, is the truth."

Bob Holtzman had been a reporter a very long time. He'd been lied to by experts. He'd been the target of very organized and well-planned lies, had been the instrument of political vendettas. He didn't like that part of his job, not in the least. The contempt he felt for politicians came mainly from their willingness to break any rule. Whenever a politician broke his word, told the most outrageous of lies, took money from a contributor and left the room at once to perform a service for that contributor, it was called "just politics." That was wrong, and Holtzman knew it. There was still in him something of the idealist who had graduated from Columbia's journalism school, and though life had made him a cynic, he was one of those few people in Washington who remembered his ideals and occasionally mourned for them.

"Assuming I can verify this story you've told, what's in it for me?"

"Maybe just satisfaction. Maybe nothing more than that. I honestly doubt there will be any more, but if there is, I'll let you know."

"Just satisfaction?" Holtzman asked.

"Ever want to get even with a bully?" Clark asked lightly.

The reporter brushed that aside. "What do you do at the Agency?"

Clark smiled. "I'm really not supposed to talk about that."

"Once upon a time, the story goes, a very senior Soviet official defected, right off the tarmac at Moscow airport."

"I've heard that story. If you ever printed it . . ."

"Yes, it would fuck up relations, wouldn't it?" Holtzman observed.

"How long have you had it?"

"Since right before the last election. The President asked me not to run it."

"Fowler, you mean?"

"No, the one Fowler beat."

"And you played ball." Clark was impressed.

"The man had a family, a wife and a daughter. Were they killed in a plane crash, like the press release said?"

"You ever going to print this?"

"I can't, not for a lot of years, but someday I'm going to do a book. . . ."

"They got out, too," Clark said. "You're looking at the guy who got them out of the country."

"I don't believe in coincidences."

"The wife's name is Maria. The daughter's name is Katryn."

Holtzman didn't react, but he knew that only a handful of people in the Agency could possibly have known the details to that one. He'd just asked his own trick question and gotten the right answer.

"Five years from today I want the details of the bust-out."

Clark was quiet for a moment. Well, if the reporter was willing to break a rule, then Clark had to play ball, too. "That's fair. Okay, you have a deal."

"Jesus Christ, John!" Chavez said.

"The man needs a *quid pro quo."*

"How many people inside know the details?"

"Of the operation? Not many. My end ... if you mean all the details, maybe twenty, and only five of them are still in the Agency. Ten of them are not Agency employees."

"Then who?"

"That would give too much away."

"Air Force Special Ops," Holtzman said. "Or maybe the Army, Task Force 160, those crazy guys at Fort Campbell, the ones who went into Iraq the first night—"

"You can speculate all you want, but I'm not going to say anything. I will say this, when I tell you my end, I want to know how the hell you figured out that we even had this operation."

"People like to talk," Holtzman said simply.

"True enough. Do we have a deal, sir?"

"If I can verify what you've told me, if I'm sure I've been lied to, yes, I will reveal the source. You have to promise that it will never get to the press."

Jesus, this is like diplomacy, Clark reflected. "Agreed. I'll call you in two days. For what it's worth, you're the first reporter I've ever talked to."

"So, what do you think?" Holtzman asked with a grin.

"I think I ought to stick with spooks." John paused. "You might have been a pretty good one."

"I am a pretty good one."

"Just how heavy is this thing?" Russell asked.

"Seven hundred kilos." Ghosn did the mental arithmetic. "Three quarters of a ton—your ton, that is."

"Okay," Russell said. "The truck'll handle that. How do we get it from the truck into my truck?" The question turned Ghosn pale.

"I had not considered that."

"How was it loaded on?"

"The box is set on a wooden . . . platform?"

"You mean a pallet? They put it in with a forklift?"

"Yes," Ghosn said, "that is correct,"

"You're lucky. Come on, I'll show you." Russell led the man out into the cold. Two minutes later he saw that one of the barns had a concrete loading dock and a rusty, propane-powered forklift. The only bad news was that the dirt path leading up to it was covered with snow and frozen mud. "How delicate is the bomb?"

"Bombs can be very delicate, Marvin," Ghosn pointed out.

Russell had a good laugh at that one. "Yeah, I guess so."

It was fully ten hours earlier in Syria. Dr. Vladimir Moiseyevich Kaminiskiy had just started work, early as was his custom. A professor at Moscow State University, he'd been sent to Syria to teach in his specialty, which was respiratory problems. It was not a specialty to make a man an optimist. Much of what he saw in the Soviet Union and also here in Syria was lung cancer, a disease as preventable as it was lethal.

His first case of the day had been referred by a Syrian practitioner whom he admired—the man was French-trained and very thorough—and also one who only referred interesting cases.

On entering the examining room, Kaminiskiy found a fit-looking man in his early thirties. A closer look showed someone with a gray, drawn face. His first impression was, *cancer,* but Kaminiskiy was a careful man. It could be something else, something contagious. His examination took longer than he'd expected, necessitating several X-ray films, and some additional tests, but he was called back to the Soviet Embassy before the results arrived.

It required all of Clark's patience, but he let it go almost three days on the assumption that Holtzman didn't get right on the case. John left his house at eight-thirty in the evening and drove to a gas station. There he told the attendant to fill up the car—he hated pumping it himself—and walked over to the pay phone.

"Yeah," Holtzman said, answering his unlisted line.

Clark didn't identify himself. "You have a chance to run the facts down?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact. Got most of 'em, anyway. Looks like you were right. Really is annoying when people lie to you, isn't it?"

"Who?"

"I call her Liz. The President calls her Elizabeth. Want a freebie?" Holtzman added.

"Sure."

"Call this evidence of good faith on my part. Fowler and she are getting it on. Nobody's reported it because we figure it's not the public's business."

"Good for you," Clark observed. "Thanks. I owe you one."

"Five years, man."

"I'll be around." Clark hung up. *So,* John thought. *I thought that's who it was*. He dropped another quarter in the phone. He got lucky on the first try. It was

a woman's voice.

"Hello?"

"Dr. Caroline Ryan?"

"Yes, who's this?"

"The name you wanted, ma'am, is Elizabeth Elliot. The President's National Security Advisor." Clark decided not to add the other part. It was not relevant to the situation, was it?

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Thank you." The line clicked off.

Cathy had sent Jack to bed early again. The man was being sensible. Well, that wasn't a surprise, was it? she thought. After all, he married me.

The timing could have been a little better. A few days earlier she had planned to skip the official dinner, claiming work as an excuse, but now . . .

How do I do this . . .?

"Morning, Bernie," Cathy Ryan said as she scrubbed her hands, as usual, all the way to the elbows.

"Hi, Cath. How's it going?"

"A lot better, Bernie."

"Really?" Dr. Katz started scrubbing.

"Really."

"Glad to hear it," Katz observed dubiously.

Cathy finished, shutting off the water with taps from her elbows. "Bernie, it turns out I overreacted rather badly."

"What about the guy who came to see me?" Katz asked, his head down.

"It was not true. I can't explain now, maybe some other time. Need a favor."

"Sure, what?"

"The cornea replacement I have scheduled for Wednesday, can you take it?"

"What gives?"

"Jack and I have to go to a formal dinner in the White House tomorrow night. State dinner for the Prime Minister of Finland, would you believe? The procedure is straightforward, no complications I know about. I can have you the file this afternoon. Jenkins is going to do the procedure—I'm just supposed to ride shotgun." Jenkins was a bright young resident.

"Okay, I'll do it."

"Okay, thanks. Owe you one," Cathy said on her way through the door.

The *Carmen Vita* pulled into Hampton Roads barely an hour late. She turned to port and proceeded south past the Navy piers. The captain and pilot rode the portside bridge wing, noting the carrier that was even now departing from the pier with a few hundred wives and children waving goodbye to USS *Theodore Roosevelt.* Two cruisers, two destroyers, and a frigate were already moving. They, the pilot explained, were the screening ships for "The Stick," as *TR* was called by her crew. The Indian-born captain grunted and returned to business. Half an hour later the container ship approached her pier at the end of Terminal Boulevard. Three tugs took their position and eased the *Carmen Vita* alongside. The ship had barely been tied up when the gantry cranes

started moving cargo.

"Roggen, Colorado?" the trucker asked. He flipped open his large book map and looked on I-76 for the right place. "Okay, I see it."

"How fast?" Russell asked.

"From the time I leave here? Eighteen hundred miles. Oh, two days, maybe forty hours if I'm lucky. Gonna cost you."

"How much?" Russell asked. The trucker told him. "Cash all right?"

"Cash is fine. I knock ten percent off for that," the trucker said. The IRS never found out about cash transactions.

"Half in advance." Russell peeled off the bills. "Half on delivery, a grand bonus if you break forty hours."

"Sounds good to me. What about the box?"

"You bring that right back here. We'll be getting more stuff in a month," Russell lied. "We can make this a sort of regular run for you."

"Sounds good to me."

Russell returned to his friends, and together they watched the unloading process from the comfort of a block building with a large coffee urn.

Teddy Roosevelt cleared the harbor in record time, bending on twenty knots before they reached the sea buoy. Already the aircraft were orbiting overhead, first among them the F-14 Tomcat fighters that had lifted off from Oceana Naval Air Station. As soon as there was sea room, the carrier came into the northerly wind to commence flight operations. The first plane down had the Double-Zero number of the CAG, Captain Robby Jackson. His Tomcat caught a gust over the fantail, and as a result caught the number-two wire when it landed—"trapped"—somewhat to Jackson's annoyance. The next aircraft, flown by Commander Rafael Sanchez, made a perfect trap on the #3 arrester wire. Both aircraft taxied out of harm's way. Jackson left the fighter and immediately sprinted to his place on Vulture's Row, high up on the carrier's island structure, so that he could observe the arrival of the rest of his aircraft. This was how a deployment started, with the CAG and squadron commanders watching their troops land. Each trap would be recorded on videotape for critiques. The cruise had not gotten off to a very good start, Jackson noted as he sipped his first mug of shipboard coffee. He'd missed his customary "OK" grade, as the Air Boss had informed him with a twinkling eye.

"Hey, skipper, how my kids doing?" Sanchez asked, taking his seat behind Robby.

"Not bad. I see you kept your record going, Bud."

"It's not hard, Captain. You just keep an eye on the wind as you turn in. I saw that gust you took. Guess I should have warned you."

"Pride goeth before the fall, Commander," Robby observed. Sanchez had seventeen consecutive OKs. Maybe he could see the wind, Jackson thought. Seventy uneventful minutes later, *TR* turned back east, taking the great-circle route for the Strait of Gibraltar.

The trucker made sure the container box was firmly secured to the bed of his truck, then climbed into the cab of his Kenworth diesel tractor. He started his engine and waved to Russell, who waved back.

"I still think we should follow him," Ghosn said.

"He'd notice and wonder why," Marvin replied. "And if something goes wrong, what would you do, fill in the hole it makes in the highway? You didn't follow the ship, did you?"

"True." Ghosn looked at Qati and shrugged. Then they walked off to their car for the drive to Charlotte, from which they would fly directly to Denver.

Jack was ready early, as he usually was, but Cathy took her time. It was so unusual for her to look in a mirror and see hair that looked like it belonged to a real woman, as opposed to a surgeon who didn't give a damn. That had entailed the waste of two hours, but there were prices that one had to pay. Before she went downstairs, Cathy took two suitcases out from her closet and set them in the middle of the bedroom.

"Here, can you do this?" she asked her husband.

"Sure, babe." Ryan took the gold necklace and clasped it around her neck. It was one he'd given her on the Christmas before Little Jack was born. Some good memories went along with this necklace, Jack remembered. Then he stood back. "Turn around."

Cathy did as she was told. Her evening dress was royal-blue silk that caught and reflected light like glass. Jack Ryan was not a man who understood women's fashions—figuring the Russians out came more easily to him—but he approved whatever the new rules were. The rich blue of the dress and the gold jewelry she wore with it set off the blush of her fair skin and the buttery yellow of her hair. "Nice," Jack said. "All ready, babe?"

"Sure am, Jack." She smiled back at him. "Go warm the car up."

Cathy watched him head out into the garage, then said a few words to the sitter. She put on her fur—surgeons typically have little use for animal-rights activists—and followed Jack a minute later. Jack backed out of the garage and headed off.

Clark had to laugh to himself. Ryan still didn't know beans about countersurveillance techniques. He watched the taillights of the car diminish, then disappear entirely around the bend of the road before heading into the Ryan driveway.

"You're Mr. Clark?" the sitter asked.

"That's right."

"They're in the bedroom." The sitter pointed.

"Thank you." Clark returned a minute later. Typical woman, he thought, they all overpack. Even Caroline Ryan wasn't perfect. "Good night."

"Night." The sitter was already entranced with the TV.

It takes just under an hour to drive from Annapolis, Maryland, into Central D.C. Ryan missed having an official car, but his wife had insisted that they drive themselves. They turned off of Pennsylvania Avenue, through the gate into East Executive Drive, where uniformed police directed them to a parking place. Their wagon looked a little humble mixed in with Caddys and Lincolns, but that was all right with Jack. The Ryans walked up the gentle slope to the East Entrance, where Secret Service personnel checked their invitations against the guest list, and checked them off. Jack's car keys set off the metal detector, evoking an embarrassed smile.

No matter how many times one goes there, there is always something magical about visiting the White House, especially at night. Ryan led his wife westward. They handed off their coats and took their numbered token right next to the White House's own small theater, then continued. At the chicane turn there were the usual three social reporters, women in their sixties who stared you in the face while making their notes and generally looked like the witches from *Macbeth* with their open-mouth, drooly smiles. Officers from all the military services decked out in their full-dress-what Ryan used to call "Headwaiter"—uniforms waited in files to provide escort duty. As usual the Marines looked best with their scarlet sashes, and a disgustingly good-looking captain motioned them up the stairs to the main level. Jack noted the admiring glance cast at his wife and decided to smile about it.

At the top of the marble stairs another officer, this one a female Army lieutenant, directed them into the East Room. They were announced into the room—as though anyone were listening—and a liveried usher approached at once with a silver tray of drinks.

"You're driving, Jack," Cathy whispered. Jack took a Perrier and a twist. Cathy got champagne.

The East Room of the White House is the size of a small gymnasium. The walls are ivory-white, its false columns decorated with gold leaf. There was a string quartet in one corner, along with a grand piano that was being played, rather well, Ryan thought, by an Army sergeant. Half the people were already here, the men in black tie and the women in dresses. Perhaps there were people who were totally comfortable at such affairs, Ryan told himself, but he wasn't one of them. He started circulating, and soon found Defense Secretary Bunker and his wife, Charlotte.

"Hello, Jack."

"Hi, Dennis, you know my wife?"

"Caroline," Cathy said, sticking her hand out.

"So, what do you think about the game?"

Jack laughed. "Sir, I know how you and Brent Talbot have been fighting over this. I was born in Baltimore. Somebody stole our team."

"You didn't lose that much, did you? This is our year."

"But the Vikings say the same thing."

"They were lucky to get past New York."

"The Raiders gave you a brief scare, as I recall."

"They got lucky," Bunker grumbled. "We buried 'em in the second half."

Caroline Ryan and Charlotte Bunker traded a woman-to-woman look: *Football!* Cathy turned, and there she was. Mrs. Bunker made off while the boys talked about boy things.

Cathy took a deep breath. She wondered if this was the right time and the right place, but she could no more have stopped herself now than she could have given up surgery. She left Jack facing the other way, and headed across the floor in a line as direct as a falcon's.

Dr. Elizabeth Elliot was dressed almost identically to Dr. Caroline Ryan. The cuts and pleats were a little different, but the expensive garments were close enough to make a fashion editor wonder if they had shopped at the same store. A triple string of pearls graced her neck, and she was talking with two

others. Her head turned as she saw the approaching shape.

"Hello, Dr. Elliot. You remember me?" Cathy asked with a warm smile.

"No. Should I?"

"Caroline Ryan. That help?"

"Sorry," Liz replied, knowing at once who she was, but not knowing anything else that might be of interest. "Do you know Bob and Libby Holtzman?"

"I've read your material," Cathy said, taking Holtzman's extended hand.

"It's always nice to hear that." Holtzman noted the delicacy of her touch and could feel the guilt shoot up his arm. Was this the woman whose marriage he had attacked? "This is Libby."

"You're a reporter, too," Cathy observed. Libby Holtzman was taller than she, and dressed in an outfit that emphasized her ample bosom. One of hers is worth both of mine, Cathy noted, managing not to sigh. Libby had the sort of bust on which men yearn to lay their heads.

"You operated on a cousin of mine a year or so ago," Libby Holtzman said. "Her mom says you're the best surgeon in the world."

"All doctors love to hear that." Cathy decided that she would like Mrs. Holtzman, despite her physical handicap.

"I know you're a surgeon, but where have we met?" Liz Elliot asked with the offhand interest she might have shown a dog breeder.

"Bennington. In my freshman year, you taught PoliSci 101."

"Is that a fact? I'm surprised you remember." She made it clear that she did not.

"Yes. Well, you know how it is." Cathy smiled. "Freshman Pre-Med is a real bear. We really have to concentrate on the important stuff. So the unimportant courses are all throwaways, easy A's."

Elliot's expression didn't change. "I was never an easy grader."

"Sure you were. It was just a matter of repeating it all back to you." Cathy smiled even more broadly.

Bob Holtzman was tempted to take a step back, but managed not to move at all. His wife's eyes went a touch wider, having caught the signals more quickly than her husband. A war had just begun. It would be nastier than most.

"What ever happened to Dr. Brooks?"

"Who?" Liz asked.

Cathy turned to the Holtzmans. "Times really were different back in the '70s, weren't they? Dr. Elliot just had her master's, and the PoliSci department was—well, kind of radical. You know, the fashionable kind." She turned back. "Surely you haven't forgotten Dr. Brooks and Dr. Hemmings! Where was that house you shared with them?"

"I don't remember." Liz told herself to maintain control. This would all be over soon. But she couldn't walk away.

"Wasn't it on that three-way corner, a few blocks from the campus . . .? We used to call them the Marx Brothers," Cathy explained with a giggle. "Brooks never wore socks—in Vermont, remember; he must have gotten terrible colds from that—and Hemmings never washed his hair. That was some department. Of course, Dr. Brooks went off to Berkeley, and then you went out there, too, to finish your doctorate. I guess you liked working under him. Tell me, how is

Bennington now?"

"Just as nice as ever."

"I never get back there for the alum meetings," Cathy said.

"I haven't been back there myself in over a year," Liz replied.

"What ever happened to Dr. Brooks?" Cathy asked again.

"He teaches at Vassar now, I think."

"Oh, you've kept track of him? Still trying to bed every skirt in sight, too, I bet. Radical-chic. How often do you see him?"

"Not in a couple of years."

"We never understood what you saw in them," Cathy observed.

"Come now, Caroline, none of us were virgins back then."

Cathy sipped at her champagne. "That's true, times were different, and we did lots of very dumb things. But I got lucky. Jack made an honest woman of me."

Zing! Libby Holtzman thought.

"Some of us haven't had time."

"I don't know how you manage without a family. I don't think I could handle the loneliness."

"At least I never have to worry about an unfaithful husband," Liz observed icily, finding her own weapon, not knowing it wasn't loaded anymore.

Cathy looked amused. "Yes, I suppose some women have to worry about that. But I don't, thank God."

"How can any woman be sure?"

"Only a fool is unsure. If you know your man," Cathy explained, "you know what he can and cannot do."

"And you really feel that secure?" Liz asked.

"Of course."

"They say the wife is always the last to know."

Cathy's head cocked to one side. "Is this a philosophical discussion or are you trying to say something to my face instead of behind my back?"

Jesus! Bob Holtzman felt that he was a spectator at a prizefight.

"Did I give you that impression? Oh, I'm so sorry, Caroline."

"That's okay, Liz."

"Excuse me, but I prefer—"

"I go by 'professor,' too; you know, medical doctor, Johns Hopkins, and all that."

"I thought you were an *associate* professor."

Dr. Ryan nodded. "That's right. I got offered a full professorship at the University of Virginia, but that meant moving away from the house we like, moving the kids out of school, and, of course, there's the problem with Jack's career. So I turned it down."

"I guess you are pretty tied down."

"I do have responsibilities, and I like working at Hopkins. We're doing some pioneer work, and it's good to be where the action is. It must have been much easier for you to come to Washington, what with nothing to hold you anywhere—and besides, what's new in political science?"

"I'm quite satisfied with my life, thank you."

"I'm sure you are," Cathy replied, seeing the chink and knowing how to

exploit it. “You can always tell when a person is happy in their work.”

“And you, Professor?”

“Life couldn’t be much better. As a matter of fact, there’s only one real difference between us,” Caroline Ryan said.

“And that is?”

“. . . I don’t know where my wife wandered off to. There’s yours with Liz Elliot and the Holtzmans. I wonder what they’re talking about?” Bunker said....

“At home, at night, I sleep with a man,” Cathy said sweetly. “And the nice thing about it is that I never have to change the batteries.”

... Jack turned to see his wife and Elizabeth Elliot, whose pearl necklace seemed to turn brown before his eyes, she went so pale. His wife was shorter than the National Security Advisor, and she looked like a pixie next to Libby Holtzman, but whatever the hell had just happened, Cathy was holding her ground like a momma-bear on her kill, her eyes locked on the taller Elliot. He moved over to see what the problem was.

“Hi, honey.”

“Hello, Jack,” Cathy said, her eyes fixed on her target. “Do you know Bob and Libby?”

“Hi.” Ryan shook hands with both, catching looks from them that he could only guess at. Mrs. Holtzman seemed about to explode, but then she took a breath and controlled herself.

“You’re the lucky guy who married this woman?” Libby asked. That comment made Elliot turn away first from the confrontation.

“Actually she’s the one who married me, I think,” Jack said after a further moment’s confusion.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Elliot said, departing from the battlefield as gracefully as she could. Cathy took Jack’s arm and steered him toward the corner with the piano.

“What in the *hell* was that all about?” Libby Holtzman asked her husband. She thought she knew most of it already. Her successful struggle not to laugh aloud had nearly strangled her.

“What it’s about, my dear, is that I broke an ethical rule. And you know something?”

“You did the right thing,” Libby announced. “The Marx Brothers? ‘Three-way corner.’ Liz Elliot, the Queen Radical WASP. My God.”

“Jack, I have a terrible headache, I mean, a really terrible one,” Cathy whispered to her husband.

“That bad?”

She nodded. “Can we get out of here before I get nauseous?”

“Cathy, you don’t just walk out of these things,” Jack pointed out.

“Sure, you do.”

“What were you and Liz talking about?”

“I don’t think I like her very much.”

“You’re not the only one. Okay.” Jack headed for the door with Cathy on his arm. The Army captain at the stairs was very understanding. Five minutes later they were outside. Jack helped his wife into the car and headed back up the drive toward Pennsylvania.

"Go straight," Cathy said.

"But—"

"Go straight, Jack." It was her surgeon's voice. The one that told people what to do. Ryan pulled past Lafayette Park. "Now left."

"Where are we supposed to be going?"

"Now turn right—and left into the driveway."

"But—"

"Jack, please?" Cathy said softly.

The doorman of the Hay Adams Hotel helped Caroline from the car. Jack handed the keys to the parking attendant, then followed his wife in. He watched the concierge hand her a key, then she breezed off to the elevators. He followed her onto and off the elevator, and from there to a corner suite.

"What gives, Cathy?"

"Jack, there's been too much work, too much kids, and not enough us. Tonight, my darling, there is time for us." She wrapped her arms around his neck, and there was nothing for her husband to do but kiss her. She put the key in his hand. "Now get the door open before we scare somebody."

"But what about—"

"Jack, shut up. Please," she added.

"Yes, dear." Ryan led his wife into the room.

Cathy was gratified to see that her instructions had been carried out as perfectly as the staff of this most excellent of hotels could arrange. A light dinner was set on the table, along with a chilled bottle of Moët. She draped her coat on the sofa in confidence that everything else was as it should be.

"Could you pour the champagne? I'll be back in a moment. You might want to take your coat off and relax," she said over her shoulder on the way into the bedroom.

"Sure," Jack said to himself. He didn't know what was going on, or what Cathy had in mind, but he didn't really care all that much either. After dropping his dinner jacket atop his wife's mink, he peeled the foil off the champagne, then twisted off the wire, and gently worked the cork free. He poured two glasses and set the bottle back in the silver bucket. He decided to trust the wine untasted, then walked to look out the window at the White House. Jack didn't hear her come back into the room. He felt it, felt the air change somehow. When he turned, she was standing there in the doorway.

It was the second time she'd worn it, the floor-length gown of white silk. The first time had been their honeymoon. Cathy walked barefoot across the carpet to her husband, gliding through space like an apparition.

"Your headache must have gone away."

"I'm still thirsty, though," Cathy said, smiling up at Jack's face.

"I think I can handle that." Jack lifted the glass and held it to her lips. She took a single sip, then moved it to his.

"Hungry?"

"No."

She leaned against him, taking both his hands in hers. "I love you, Jack. Shall we?"

Jack turned her around, and walked behind, his hands at her waist. The bed, he saw, was turned down, and the light out, though the glare from the

floodlit White House washed in through the windows.

"Remember the first time, the first night we were married?"

Jack chuckled. "I remember both, Cathy."

"This is going to be another first time, Jack." She reached behind him and flipped off the cummerbund. Her husband took the cue. When he was naked, she embraced him as fiercely as she could manage, and the silk of her nightgown rustled against his skin. "Lie down."

"You're more beautiful than ever, Cathy."

"I wouldn't want anyone to steal you from me." Cathy joined him on the bed. He was ready, and so was she. Caroline pulled the nightgown up to her waist and mounted him, then let it fall down around her. His hands found her breasts. She held them in place, rocking up and down on him, knowing that he couldn't last very long, but neither could she.

No man should be so lucky, Jack told himself, straining, trying to control himself, and though he failed miserably, he was rewarded with a smile that nearly broke his heart.

"Not bad," Cathy said a minute later, kissing his hands.

"Out of practice."

"The night is young," she said as she lay down beside him, "and that's the best I've had in a while, too. Now, are you hungry?"

Ryan looked around the room. "I, uh ..."

"Wait." She left the bed and returned with a bathrobe with the hotel monogram. "I want you to stay warm."

Dinner passed in silence. There was nothing that needed to be said, and for the following hour they silently pretended that they were both in their twenties again, young enough to experiment in love, to explore it like a new and wonderful place where every turn in the road revealed something never before seen. It had been far too long, Jack told himself, but he dismissed the thought from a mind that for once was untroubled. Dessert was finished, and he poured the last of the champagne.

"I have to stop drinking." *But not tonight.*

Cathy finished off her glass and set it on the table. "It wouldn't hurt you to stop, but you're not an alcoholic. We proved that last week. You needed rest, and you got your rest. And now, I want more of you."

"If there's any left."

Cathy stood and took his hand. "There's plenty more where that came from."

This time Jack did the leading. Once in the bedroom, he reached down and pulled the nightgown over her head, then tossed his robe on the floor next to it.

The first kiss lasted for some eternal period of time. He lifted her in his arms and lay her on the bed, joining her a moment later. The urgency had not passed for either of them. Soon he was atop her, feeling her warmth under and around him. He did better this time, controlling himself until her back arched and her face took on the curious look of pain that every man wants to give his wife. At the end, his arms reached under her and lifted her off the bed, up against his chest. Cathy loved it when he did that, loved her man's strength almost as much as his goodness. And then it was over, and he lay at her side.

Cathy pulled him against her, his face to her regrettably flat chest.

"There never was anything wrong with you," she whispered into his ear. She was not surprised by what came next. She knew the man so well, though she'd been foolish enough to forget the fact. She hoped that she'd be able to forgive herself for that. Jack's whole body shook with his sobs. Cathy held him fast to her, feeling his tears on her breasts. Such a fine, strong man.

"I've been a lousy husband, and a lousy father."

Her cheek came down on the top of his head. "Neither one of us has set any records lately, Jack, but that's over, isn't it?"

"Yeah." He kissed her breast. "How did I ever find you?"

"You won me, Jack. In the great lottery of life, you got me. I got you. Do you think that married people always deserve each other? All the ones I see at work who just can't make it. Maybe they just don't try, maybe they just forget."

"Forget?"

What I almost forgot. "'For richer, for poorer; for better, for worse; in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.' Remember? I made the promise, too. Jack, I know how good you can be, and that's plenty good enough. I was so bitchy to you last week.... I'm sorry for all the terrible things I did. But that's all over."

Presently the weeping stopped. "Thanks, babe."

"Thank you, Jack." She ran a finger down his back.

"You mean?" His head moved back to see her face. He got another smile, the gentle kind that a woman saved for her husband.

"I think so. Maybe this one will be another girl."

"That might be nice."

"Go to sleep."

"In a minute." Jack rose to head for the bathroom, then into the sitting room before coming back. Ten minutes later he was still. Cathy rose to put her nightie back on, and on her way back from the bathroom she canceled the wake-up call that Jack had just ordered. It was her turn to stare out the windows at the home of the President. The world had never seemed prettier. Now, if she could just get Jack to quit working for those people....

The truck made a fuel stop outside of Lexington, Kentucky. The driver paused ten minutes to load up on coffee and pancakes—he found breakfasts best for staying awake on the road—then pressed on. The thousand-dollar bonus sounded pretty good, and to be sure of it he had to cross the Mississippi before the rush hour in St. Louis.

31

DANCERS

Ryan knew it was too late when the traffic woke him up and he saw that the windows were flooded with light. A look at his watch showed eight-fifteen. That almost set off a panic attack, but it was too late to panic, wasn't it? Jack rose from the bed and walked into the sitting room to see his wife already working on her morning coffee.

"Don't you have to work today?"

"I was supposed to assist with a procedure that started a few minutes ago, but Bernie is covering for me. I think you ought to put some clothes on, though."

"How do I get to work?"

"John'll be here at nine."

"Right." Ryan walked off to shower and shave. On the way, he looked in the closet and noted that a suit, shirt, and tie were waiting for him. His wife had certainly planned this one carefully. He had to smile. Jack had never thought of his wife as a master—mistress?—of conspiracy. By eight-forty he was washed and shaved.

"You know I have an appointment right across the street at eleven."

"No, I didn't. Say hi to that Elliot bitch for me." Cathy smiled.

"You don't like her, either?" he asked.

"Not much there to like. She was a crummy college teacher. She's not as smart as she thinks. Major ego problems."

"I've noticed. She doesn't like me very much."

"I did get that impression. We had a little fight yesterday. I think I won," Cathy observed.

"What was it all about anyway?"

"Oh, just a girl-to-girl thing." Cathy paused. "Jack . . .?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"I think it's time for you to leave."

Ryan examined his breakfast plate. "I think you may be right. I have a couple more things to do ... but when they're done . . ."

"How long?" she asked.

"Two months at the outside. I can't just leave, babe. I'm a presidential appointee. I had to be confirmed by the Senate, remember? You can't just walk away from that—it's like desertion if you do. There are rules you have to follow."

Cathy nodded. She'd won her point already. "I understand, Jack. Two months is good enough. What would you like to do?"

"I could get a research job almost anywhere, Center for Strategic and

International Studies, Heritage, maybe the Johns Hopkins Center for Advanced International Studies. I had this talk in England with Basil. When you get to my level, you're never really gone. Hmph. I might even write another book...."

"We'll start off with a nice long vacation, soon as the kids are out of school."

"I thought . . .?"

"I won't be too pregnant then, Jack."

"You really think it happened last night?"

Her eyes arched wickedly. "The timing was just about right, and you had two chances, didn't you? What's the matter? You feel used?"

Her husband smiled. "I've been used worse."

"See me tonight?"

"Did I ever tell you how much I like that nightie?"

"My wedding dress? It's a little formal, but it did have the desired effect. Shame we don't have more time now, isn't it?"

Jack decided he'd better get out of here while he still could. "Yeah, babe, but I have work to do, and so do you."

"Awww," Cathy observed playfully.

"I can't tell the President that I was late because I was boffing my wife across the street." Jack came to his wife and kissed her. "Thanks, honey."

"A pleasure, Jack."

Ryan emerged from the front door to see Clark waiting in the drive-through. He got right in.

"Morning, doc."

"Hi, John. You only made one mistake."

"What's that?"

"Cathy knew your name. How?"

"You don't need to know," Clark replied, handing over the dispatch box. "Hell, sometimes I like to sack in myself, y'know?"

"I'm sure you broke some kind of law."

"Yeah, right." Clark headed out. "When do we get the go-ahead on the Mexico job?"

"That's what I'm going into the White House for."

"Eleven?"

"Right."

It was gratifying to see that the CIA could in fact operate without his presence. Ryan arrived on the seventh floor to see that everyone was at work. Even Marcus was where he belonged.

"Ready for your trip?" Jack asked the Director.

"Yeah, heading off tonight. Station Japan is setting up the meet with Lyalin."

"Marcus, please remember that he is Agent MUSHASHI, and his information is NIiTAKA. Using his real name, even here, is a bad habit to get into."

"Yeah, Jack. You're heading down to see the President soon for the Mexico thing?"

"That's right."

"I like the way you set that thing up."

"Thanks, Marcus, but the credit goes to Clark and Chavez. Open to a suggestion?" Jack asked.

"Go ahead."

"Put them back in Operations?"

"If they bring this one off, the President will go along with it. So will I."

"Fair enough." That, Jack thought, was pretty easy. He wondered why.

Dr. Kaminiskiy went over the films and swore at himself for his error of the previous day. It hardly seemed possible, but—

But it wasn't possible. Not here. Was it? He had to run some additional tests, but first he spent an hour tracking down his Syrian colleague. The patient was moved to another hospital, one with a laminar room. Even if Kaminiskiy were wrong, this man had to be totally isolated.

Russell fired up the forklift and took several minutes to figure out the controls. He wondered what the previous owner had needed with one, but there was no point in that. There was enough remaining pressure in the propane tanks that he didn't have to worry about that either. He walked back to the house.

The people here in Colorado were friendly enough. Already, the local newspaper distributors had set up the delivery boxes at the end of the drive. Russell had the morning paper to read with his coffee. A moment later he realized how good a thing that was.

"Uh-oh," he observed quietly.

"What is the problem, Marvin?"

"I've never seen this before. The Vikings fans are planning a convoy . . . over a thousand cars and buses. Damn," he noted. "That'll screw the roads up." He turned to see the extended weather forecast.

"What do you mean?"

"They have to come down I-76 to get to Denver. That might mess things up some. We want to arrive about noon, maybe a little later . . . about the same time the convoy is supposed to arrive. . . ."

"Convoy—what do you mean? Convoy defending against what?" Qati asked.

"Not a real convoy," Russell explained. "More like a, uh, a motorcade. The fans from Minnesota have a big deal laid on. Tell you what, let's get a motel room for us. One close to the airport. When's our flight?" He paused. "Jesus, I really haven't been thinking very clear, have I?"

"What do you mean?" Ghosn asked again.

"Weather," Russell replied. "This is Colorado, and it is January. What if we get another snowstorm?" He scanned the page. *Uh-oh* ...

"For driving, you mean?"

"That's right. Look, what we ought to do is get rooms reserved, one of the motels right by the airport, say. We can go down the night before . . . or I'll get the rooms for two—no, three nights, so there won't be any suspicion. Christ, I hope there's vacancies." Russell walked to the phone and flipped open the Yellow Pages right next to it. It took him four tries to find a room with twin doubles in a little independent place a mile from the airport. This he had to guarantee with a credit card that he'd managed not to use until now. He didn't like having to do that. One more bit of paper for his trail.

"Good morning, Liz." Ryan walked into the office and sat down. "How are you today?"

The National Security Advisor didn't like being baited any more than the next person. She'd had a little battle with this bastard's wife—in front of reporters!—and taken her lumps publicly. Whether Ryan had had anything to do with it or not, he must have had a good laugh about it last night. Worse than that, what that skinny little bitch had said also went after Bob Fowler, didn't it? The President had thought so on being told last night.

"You ready for the brief?"

"Sure am."

"Come on." She'd let Bob handle this.

Helen D'Agustino watched the two officials enter the Oval Office. She'd heard the story, of course. A Secret Service agent had heard the whole thing, and the vicious putdown administered to Dr. Elliot had already been the subject of a few discreet chuckles.

"Good morning, Mr. President," she heard Ryan say as the door closed.

"Morning, Ryan. Okay, let's hear it."

"Sir, what we plan to do is actually fairly simple. Two CIA officers will be in Mexico, at the airport, covered as airline maintenance personnel. They'll do the normal stuff, emptying ashtrays, cleaning the johns. Before they leave they will place fresh flower arrangements in the upstairs lounge. Concealed in the arrangements will be microphones like this one." Ryan pulled the plastic spike from his pocket and handed it over. "These will transmit what they pick up to a second transmitter, concealed in a bottle. That device will broadcast a multichannel EHF—that's extremely high frequency—signal out of the aircraft. A series of three other aircraft will fly parallel courses with the 747 to receive that signal. An additional receiver with a tape recorder attached will be concealed on the 747, both as a backup to the air-to-air links and as a cover for the operation. If it's located, the bugs will seem to be something done by the news people accompanying the Prime Minister. We don't expect that, of course. We'll have people at Dulles to recover our gadgets. In either case, the electronic transmission will be processed and the transcripts presented to you a few hours after the aircraft lands."

"Very well. What are the chances for success?" Chief of Staff Arnold van Damm asked. He had to be there, of course. This was more an exercise in politics than statecraft. The downside political risk was serious, just as the reward for success would be more than noteworthy.

"Sir, there are no guarantees for operations of this kind. If something is said, it is likely that we'll know what it is, but he might not even discuss the matter at all. The equipment has all been tested. It works. The field officer running this operation is well experienced. He's done touchy ones before."

"Like?" van Damm asked.

"Like getting Gerasimov's wife and daughter out a few years ago." Ryan explained on for a minute or so.

"Is the operation worth the risk?" Fowler asked.

That surprised Ryan quite a bit. "Sir, that decision is yours to make."

"But I asked you for an opinion."

"Yes, Mr. President, it is. The take we've been getting from NIITAKA shows

a considerable degree of arrogance on their part. Something like this might have the net effect of shocking them into playing honest ball with us."

"You approve of our policy of dealing with Japan?" van Damm asked, just as surprised as Ryan had been a moment earlier.

"My approval or disapproval is beside the point, but the answer to your question is, yes."

The Chief of Staff was openly amazed. "But the previous administration—how come you never told us?"

"You never asked, Arnie. I don't make government policy, remember? I'm a spook. I do what you tell me to do, as long as it's legal."

"You're satisfied on the legality of the operation?" Fowler asked with a barely suppressed smile.

"Mr. President, you're the lawyer, not me. If I do not know the legal technicalities—and I don't—I must assume that you, as an officer of the court, are not ordering me to break the law."

"That's the best dance number I've seen since the Kirov Ballet was in Kennedy Center last summer," van Damm observed with a laugh.

"Ryan, you know all the moves. You have my approval," Fowler said after a brief pause. "If we get what we expect, then what?"

"We have to go over that with the State Department guys," Liz Elliot announced.

"That is potentially dangerous," Ryan observed. "The Japanese have been hiring a lot of the people from the tradenegotiation section. We have to assume that they have people inside."

"Commercial espionage?" Fowler asked.

"Sure, why not? NIITAKA has never given us hard evidence of that, but if I were a bureaucrat looking to leave government service and make half a mill' a year representing them-like a lot of them do—how would I present myself to them as a potentially valuable asset? I'd do it the same way a Soviet official or spook presents bonafides to us. You deliver something juicy up-front. That's illegal, but we're not devoting any assets to looking at the problem. For that reason, wide dissemination of the information from this operation is very dangerous. Obviously you'll want the opinion of Secretary Talbot and a few others, but I'd be really careful how much farther you spread it. Also, remember that if you tell the PM that you know what he said—and if he knows he only said it in one place—you run the risk of compromising this intelligence gathering technique." The President accepted that without anything more than a raised eyebrow.

"Make it look like a leak in Mexico?" van Damm asked.

"That's the obvious ploy," Ryan agreed.

"And if I confront him with it directly?" Fowler asked.

"Kind of hard to beat a straight flush, Mr. President. And if this were ever to leak, Congress would go ballistic. That's one of my problems. I'm required to discuss this operation with Al Trent and Sam Fellows. Sam will play ball, but Al has political reasons to dislike the Japanese."

"I could order you not to tell him...."

"Sir, that's one law I may not break for any reason."

"I might have to give you that order," Fowler observed.

Ryan was surprised again. Both he and the President knew what the consequences of that order would be. Just what Cathy had in mind. It might, in fact, be a fine excuse to leave government service.

"Well, maybe that won't be necessary. I'm tired of playing patty-cake with these people. They made an agreement, and they're going to keep it or have to deal with a very irate president. Worse than that, the idea that someone can suborn the president of a country in so venal a way is contemptible. Goddamn it! I hate corruption."

"Right on, boss," van Damm commented. "Besides, the voters will like it."

"That bastard," Fowler went on after a moment. Ryan couldn't tell how much of this was real and how much feigned. "He tells me he's coming over to work out a few details, get acquainted some more, and what he's really planning is to welsh on a deal. Well, we'll see about that. I guess it's time he learned about hardball." The discourse stopped. "Ryan, I missed you last night."

"My wife got a headache, sir. Had to leave. Sorry."

"Feeling all right now?"

"Yes, sir, thank you."

"Turn your people loose."

Ryan stood. "Will do, Mr. President."

Van Damm followed him out and walked him to the West Entrance. "Nice job, Jack."

"Gee, they going to start liking me?" Jack asked wryly. The meeting had gone much too well.

"I don't know what happened last night, but Liz is really pissed at your wife."

"They talked about something, but I don't know what."

"Jack, you want it straight?" van Damm asked.

Ryan knew that the friendly walk to the door was just too convenient, and the symbolism was explicit enough, wasn't it? "When, Arnie?"

"I'd like to say it's just business and not personal, but it is personal. I'm sorry, Jack, but it happens. The President will give you a glowing sendoff."

"Nice of him," Jack replied matter-of-factly.

"I tried, Jack. You know I like you. These things happen."

"I'll go quietly. But—"

"I know. No back-shots on the way out or after you're gone. You'll be asked in periodically, maybe draw some special missions, liaison stuff. You get an honorable discharge. On that, Jack, you have my word of honor, and the President's. He's not a bad guy, Jack, really he isn't. He's a tough-minded son of a bitch and a good politician, but he's as honest as any man I know. It's just that your way of thinking and his way of thinking are different—and he's the President."

Jack could have said that the mark of intellectual honesty is the solicitation of opposing points of view. Instead he said, "Like I said, I'll go quietly. I've been doing this long enough. It's time to relax a little, smell the roses and play with the kids."

"Good man." Van Damm patted his arm. "You bring this job off and your going-away statement from the Boss will sparkle. We'll have Callie Weston

write it, even."

"You stroke like a pro, Arnie." Ryan shook his hand and walked off to his car. Van Damm would have been surprised to see the smile on his face.

"Do you have to do it that way?"

"Elizabeth, ideological differences notwithstanding, he has served his country well. I disagree with him on a lot of things, but he's never lied to me, and he's always tried to give me good advice," Fowler replied, looking at the plastic-stick microphone. He suddenly wondered if it was working.

"I *told* you what happened last night."

"You got your wish. He's on the way out. At this level you do not throw people out the door. You do it in a civilized and honorable way. Anything else is small-minded and decidedly stupid politically. I agree with you that he's a dinosaur, but even dinosaurs get a nice spot in the museums."

"But—"

"That's all. Okay, you had words with his wife last night. I'm sorry about that, but what kind of person penalizes someone for what their wife did?"

"Bob, I have a right to expect your support!"

Fowler didn't like that, but responded reasonably. "And you have it, Elizabeth. Now, this is neither the time nor the place for this sort of discussion."

Marcus Cabot arrived at Andrews Air Force Base just after lunch for his flight to Korea. The arrangements were more luxurious than they looked. The aircraft was a U.S. Air Force C-141B Starlifter, an aircraft with four engines and an oddly serpentlike fuselage. Loaded into the cargo area, he saw, was essentially a house trailer complete with kitchen, living and bed rooms. It was also heavily insulated—the C-141 is a noisy aircraft, especially aft. He went out the front door to meet the flight crew. The pilot, he saw, was a blond captain of thirty years. There were, in fact, two complete flight crews. The flight would be long, with a fueling stop at Travis Air Force Base in California, followed by three midair "tankings" over the Pacific. It would also be singularly boring, and he would sleep through it as much as possible. He wondered if government service was really worth it, and the knowledge that Ryan would soon be gone—Arnold van Damm had gotten the word to him—didn't improve his outlook. The Director of Central Intelligence strapped himself in and started to read through his briefing documents. An Air Force noncom offered him a glass of wine, which he started on as the aircraft taxied off the ramp.

John Clark and Domingo Chavez boarded their own flight later that afternoon for Mexico City. It was better, the senior man thought, to get settled in and acclimated. Mexico City was yet another high-altitude metropolis whose thin air was made all the worse by air pollution. Their mission gear was carefully packed away, and they expected no trouble with customs clearance. Neither carried a weapon, of course, as this sort of mission did not require it.

The truck pulled off the Interstate exactly thirty-eight hours and forty minutes after leaving the cargo terminal at Norfolk. That was the easy part. It took fifteen minutes and all the driver's skill to back his rig up to the concrete loading dock outside the barn. A warm sun had thawed the ground into a six-inch-deep layer of gooey mud that almost prevented him from completing the maneuver, but on the third try he made it. The driver jumped down and walked back toward the dock.

"How do you open this thing?" Russell asked.

"I'll show you." The driver paused to scrape the mud off his boots, then worked the latch on the container. "Need help unloading?"

"No, I'll do it myself. There's coffee over in the house."

"Thank you, sir. I could use a cup."

"Well, that was easy enough," Russell said to Qati as they watched the man go away. Marvin opened the doors and saw a single large box with *Sony* printed on all four sides, along with arrows to show which side was up, and the image of a champagne glass to tell the illiterate it was delicate. It was also sitting on a wooden pallet. Marvin removed the fasteners that held it in place, then fired up the forklift. The task of removing the bomb and putting it inside the barn was completed in another minute. Russell shut the forklift down, then draped a tarp over the box. By the time the trucker came back, the cargo box was again closed.

"Well, you got your bonus," Marvin told him, handing over the cash.

The driver riffled through the bills. Now he got to drive the box back to Norfolk, but first he'd hit the nearest truck stop for eight hours of sleep. "A pleasure doing business with you, sir. You said you might have another job for me in a month or so?"

"That's right."

"Here's how you reach me." The trucker handed over his card.

"Heading right back?"

"After I get some sack time. I just heard on the radio there's snow coming tomorrow night. A big one, they say."

"That time of year, isn't it?"

"Sure is. You have a good one, sir."

"Be careful, man," Russell said, shaking his hand one more time.

"It's a mistake to let him go," Ghosn observed to the Commander in Arabic.

"I think not. The only face he has really seen is Marvin's, after all."

"True."

"Have you checked it?" Qati asked.

"There is no damage to the packing box. I will do a more detailed check tomorrow. I would say that we are almost ready."

"Yes."

"You want the good news or the bad news?" Jack asked.

"Good first," Cathy said.

"They're asking me to resign my position."

"What's the bad news?"

"Well, you never really leave. They'll want me to come back occasionally. To consult, stuff like that."

"Is that what you want?"

"This work does get in your blood, Cathy. Would you like to leave Hopkins and just be a doc with an office and patients and glasses to prescribe?"

"How much?"

"Couple times a year, probably. Special areas I happen to know a lot about. Nothing regular."

"Okay, that's fair—and, no, I couldn't give up teaching young docs. How soon?"

"Well, I have two things I have to finish up with. Then we have to pick someone for the job...." *How about the Foleys,* Jack thought. *But which one . . .?*

"Conn, sonar."

"Conn, aye," the navigator answered.

"Sir, I got a possible contact bearing two-nine-five, very faint, but it keeps coming back."

"On the way." It was a short five steps into the sonar room. "Show me."

"Right here, sir." The sonarman pointed to a line on the display. Though it looked fuzzy, it was in fact composed of discrete yellow dots in a specific frequency range, and as the time scale moved vertically upward, more dots kept appearing, regular only in that they seemed to form a vague and fuzzy line. The only change in the line was a slight drift in direction. "I can't tell you what it is yet."

"Tell me what it isn't."

"It ain't no surface contact, and I don't think it's random noise either, sir." The petty officer traced it all the way to the top of the tube with a grease pencil. "Right about here, I decided it might actually be something."

"What else you got?"

"Sierra-15 over here is a merchant, heading southeast and way the hell away from us—that's a third-CZ contact we been trackin' since before turn of the last watch, and that's about it, Mr. Pitney. I guess it's too bumpy topside for the fishermen to be out this far."

Lieutenant Pitney tapped the screen. "Call it Sierra-16, and I'll get a track started. How's the water?"

"Deep channel seems very good today, sir. Surface noise is a little tough, though. This one's tough to hold."

"Keep an eye on it."

"Aye aye." The sonarman turned back to his scope.

Lieutenant Jeff Pitney returned to the control room, lifted the growler phone, and punched the button for the Captain's cabin. "Gator here, Cap'n. We have a possible sonar contact bearing two-nine-five, very faint. Our friend might be back, sir. . . . Yes, sir." Pitney hung up and hit the 1-MC speaker system. "Man the fire-control tracking party."

Captain Ricks appeared a minute later, wearing sneakers and his blue coveralls. His first stop was to control, to check course, speed, and depth. Then he went into sonar.

"Let's see it."

"Damn thing just faded on me again, sir," the sonarman said sheepishly. He used a piece of toilet paper—there was a roll over each scope—to erase the

previous mark, and penciled in another. “I think we have something here, sir.”

“I hope you didn’t interrupt my sleep for nothing,” Ricks noted. Lieutenant Pitney caught the look the two other sonarmen exchanged at that.

“Coming back, sir. You know, if this is an Akula, we should be getting a little pump noise in this spectrum over here....”

“Intelligence says he’s coming out of overhaul. Ivan is learning how to make them quieter,” Ricks said.

“Guess so . . . slow drift to the north, call the current bearing two-nine-seven.” Both men knew that figure could be off by ten degrees either way. Even with the enormously expensive system on *Maine*, really long-distance bearings were pretty vague.

“Anybody else around?” Pitney asked.

“Omaha is supposed to be around somewhere south of Kodiak. Wrong direction. It’s not her. Sure it’s not a surface contact?”

“No way, Cap’n. If it was diesel, I’d know it, and if it was steam, I’d know that, too. There’s no pounding from surface noise. Has to be a submerged contact, Cap’n. Only thing makes sense.”

“Pitney, we’re on two-eight-one?”

“Yessir.”

“Come left to two-six-five. We’ll set up a better baseline for the target-motion analysis, try to get a range estimate before we turn in.”

Turn in, Pitney thought. *Jesus, boomers aren’t supposed to do this stuff.* He gave the order anyway, of course.

“Where’s the layer?”

“One-five-zero feet, sir. Judging by the surface noise, there’s twenty-five-footers up there,” the sonarman added.

“So he’s probably staying deep to smooth the ride out.”

“Damn, lost him again . . . we’ll see what happens when the tail straightens back out....”

Ricks leaned his head out of the sonar room and spoke a single word: “Coffee.” It never occurred to him that the sonarmen might like some, too.

It took five more minutes of waiting before the dots started appearing again in the right place.

“Okay, he’s back. I think,” the sonarman added. “Bearing looks like three-zero-two now.”

Ricks walked out to the plotting table. Ensign Shaw was doing his calculations along with a quartermaster. “Has to be a hundred-thousand-plus yards. I’m assuming a northeasterly course from the bearing drift, speed of less than ten. Has to be a hundred-K yards or more.” That was good, fast work, Shaw and the petty officer thought.

Ricks nodded curtly and went back to sonar.

“Firming up, getting some stuff on the fifty-hertz line now. Starting to smell like Mr. Akula, maybe.”

“You must have a pretty good channel.”

“Right, Captain, pretty good and improving a little. That storm’s gonna change it when the turbulence gets down to our depth, sir.”

Ricks went into control again: “Mr. Shaw?”

“Best estimate is one-one-five-K yards, course northeasterly, speed five

knots, maybe one or two more, sir. If his speed's much higher than that, the range is awfully far."

"Okay, I want us to come around very gently, come right to zero-eight-zero."

"Aye aye, sir. Helm, right five degrees rudder, come to new course zero-eight-zero."

"Right five degrees rudder, aye. Sir, my rudder is right five degrees, coming to new course zero-eight-zero."

"Very well."

Slowly, so as not to make too great a bend in the towed array, USS *Maine* reversed course. It took three minutes before she settled down on the new course, doing something no U.S. fleet ballistic-missile submarine had ever done before. Lieutenant Commander Claggett appeared in the control room soon thereafter.

"How long you figure he's going to hold this course?" he asked Ricks.

"What would you do?"

"I think I'd troll along in a ladder pattern," Dutch answered, "and my drift would be south instead of north, reverse of how we do it in the Barents Sea, right? Interval between sweeps will be determined by the performance of his tail. That's one hard piece of intel we can develop, but depending on how that number looks, we'll have to be real careful how we trail him, won't we?"

"Well, I can't approach to less than thirty thousand yards under any circumstances. So . . . we'll close to fifty-K until we have a better feel for him, then ease it in as circumstances permit. One of us should be in here at all times as long as he's in the neighborhood."

"Agreed." Claggett nodded. He paused for a beat before going on. "How the hell," the XO asked very quietly indeed, "did OP-02 ever agree to this?"

"Safer world now, isn't it?"

"I s'pose, sir."

"You're jealous that boomers can do a fast-attack job?"

"Sir, I think that OP-02 slipped a gear, either that or they're trying to impress some folks with our flexibility or something."

"You don't like this?"

"No, Captain, I don't. I know we can do it, but I don't think we should."

"Is that what you talked to Mancuso about?"

"What?" Claggett shook his head. "No, sir. Well, he did ask me that, and I said we could do it. Not my place to enter into that yet."

Then what did you talk to him about? Ricks wanted to ask. He couldn't, of course.

The Americans were a great disappointment to Oleg Kirilovich Kadishev. The whole reason they'd recruited him was to get good inside information on the Soviet government, and he'd delivered precisely that for years. He'd seen the sweeping political changes coming for his country, seen them early because he'd known Andrey Il'ych Narmonov for what he was. And for what he was not. The President of his country was a man of stunning political gifts. He had the courage of a lion and the tactical agility of a mongoose. It was a plan that he lacked. Narmonov had no idea where he was going, and that was

his weakness. He had destroyed the old political order, eliminated the Warsaw Pact through inaction, merely by saying out loud, only once, that the Soviet Union would not interfere with the political integrity of other countries, and had done so in the knowledge that the only thing that kept Marxism in place was the threat of Soviet force. The Eastern European communists had foolishly played along, actually thinking themselves secure in the love and respect of their people in one of history's most colossal and least understood acts of lunacy. But what made the irony sublime was that Narmonov could not see the same thing in his own country, to which was added one more, fatal, variable.

The Soviet people—a term that never had any meaning, of course—were held together only by the threat of force. Only the guns of the Red Army guaranteed that Moldavians, and Latvians, and Tadzhiks and so many others would follow the Moscow line. They loved the communist leadership even less than their great-grandfathers had loved the czars. And so while Narmonov had dismantled the Party's central role in managing the country, he'd eliminated his ability to control his people, but left himself no ethos with which to supplant what had gone before. The plan—in a nation which for over eighty years had always had The Plan—simply did not exist. So, necessarily, when turmoil began to replace order, there was nothing to do, nothing to point to, no goal to strive for. Narmonov's dazzling political maneuvers were ultimately pointless. Kadishev saw that. Why didn't the Americans, who had gambled everything on the survival of "their man" in Moscow?

The forty-six-year-old parliamentarian snorted at the thought. He was their man, wasn't he? He'd warned them for years, and they hadn't listened, but instead used his reports to buttress a man who was rich in skill but bereft of vision—and how could a man lead without vision?

The Americans, just as foolish, just as blind, had actually been surprised by the violence in Georgia, and the Baltic states. They actually ignored the nascent civil war that had already begun in the arc of Southern republics. Half a million military weapons had vanished in the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Mostly rifles, but some were *tanks!* The Soviet Army could not begin to deal with the situation. Narmonov struggled with it on a day-to-day basis like some kind of desperate juggler, barely managing to keep up, taking his effort from one place to another, keeping his plates in the air, but barely. Didn't the Americans understand that some fine day all the plates would fall at the same time? The consequences of that were frightening to everyone. Narmonov needed a vision, needed a plan, but he didn't have one.

Kadishev did, and that was the entire point of his exercise. The Union had to be broken up. The Muslim republics had to go. The Balts had to go. Moldavia had to go. The Western Ukraine had to go—he wanted to keep the Eastern part. He had to find a way to protect the Armenians, lest they be massacred by the local Muslims, and had to find a way to keep access to the oil of Azerbaijan, at least long enough until, with help from the West, he could exploit all the resources of Siberia.

Kadishev was a Russian. It was part of his soul. Russia was the mother of the Union, and like a good mother, she would let her children go at the proper time. The proper time was now. That would leave a country stretching from

the Baltic to the Pacific, with a largely homogeneous population and immense resources that were scarcely catalogued, much less tapped. It could and should be a great, strong country, powerful as any, rich in history and arts, a leader in the sciences. That was Kadishev's vision. He wished to lead a Russia that was a true superpower, a friend and associate to other countries of European heritage. It was his task to bring his country into the light of freedom and prosperity. If that meant dismissing almost half of the population and twenty-five percent of the land—so be it.

But the Americans weren't helping. Why this should be so, he simply did not understand. They had to see that Narmonov was a street without an exit, a road that merely stopped . . . or perhaps stopped at the brink of a great abyss.

If the Americans couldn't help, then it was within his power to force them to help. That was why he had allowed himself to be recruited by Mary Foley in the first place.

It was early morning in Moscow, but Kadishev was a man who had long since disciplined himself to live on a minimum of sleep. He typed his report on an old, heavy, but quiet machine. Kadishev used the same cloth ribbon many times. No one would ever be able to examine the ribbon to see what had been written on it, and the paper was from a sheaf taken from the office central supply room. Several hundred people had access to it. Like all professional gamblers, Kadishev was a careful man. When he was finished, he used leather gloves to wipe the paper clean of whatever fingerprints he might have accidentally left on it, then, using the same gloves, he folded the copy into a coat pocket. In two hours the message would be passed. In less than twenty, the message would be in other hands.

Agent SPINNAKER needn't have bothered. KGB was under orders not to harass the People's Deputies. The coat-check girl pocketed the paper, and soon thereafter passed it across to an individual whose name she did not know. That man left the building and drove to his own workplace. Two hours after that, the message was in another container in the pocket of a man driving to the airport, where he boarded the 747 for New York.

"Where to this time, Doctor?" the driver asked.

"Just drive around."

"What?"

"We need to talk," Kaminiskiy said.

"About what?"

"I know you are KGB," Kaminiskiy said.

"Doctor," the driver chuckled, "I am an embassy driver."

"Your embassy medical file is signed by Dr. Feodor Il'ych Gregoriyev. He is a KGB doctor. We were classmates. May I go on?"

"Have you told anyone?"

"Of course not."

The driver sighed. Well, what could one do about that? "What is it you wish to talk about?"

"You are KGB—Foreign Directorate?"

There was no avoiding it. "Correct. I hope this is important."

“It may be. I need someone to come down from Moscow. There’s a patient I’m treating. He has a very unusual lung problem.”

“Why should it interest me?”

“I’ve seen a similar problem before—a worker from Beloyarskiy. Industrial accident. I was called in to consult on it.”

“Yes? What is at Beloyarskiy?”

“They fabricate atomic weapons there.”

The driver slowed the car. “Are you serious?”

“It could be something else—but the tests I need to run now are very specific. If this represents a Syrian project, we will not get the proper cooperation. Therefore, I need some special equipment from Moscow.”

“How quickly?”

“The patient isn’t going anywhere, except into the ground. I’m afraid his condition is quite hopeless.”

“I have to go through the *Rezident* on this. He won’t be back until Sunday.”

“Fast enough.”

32

CLOSURE

"Can I help?" Russell asked.

"Thank you, Marvin, but I would really prefer to do this myself, without distractions," Ghosn said.

"I understand. Yell if you need anything."

Ibrahim donned his heaviest clothing and walked out into the cold. The snow was falling quite hard. He'd seen snow in Lebanon, of course, but nothing like this. The storm had scarcely begun half an hour before and there was already more than three centimeters of it. The northerly wind was the most bitter he'd ever experienced, cutting into his very bones as he walked the sixty meters or so to the barn. Visibility was restricted to no more than two hundred meters. He could hear the traffic on the nearby highway, but could not even see the lights of the vehicles. He entered the barn through a side door and already regretted the fact that this building had no heating. Ghosn told himself very forcefully that he could not allow such things to affect him.

The cardboard box that shielded the device from casual view was not actually attached, and came off easily. What lay under that was a metal box with dials and other accoutrements for what it pretended to be, a commercial videotape machine. The suggestion had come from Günther Bock, and the actual body of the machine had been purchased as scrap from a Syrian TV news agency which had replaced it with a new model. The access doors built into the metal body were almost perfectly suited to Ghosn's purpose, and the ample void space held the vacuum pump in case that was needed. Ghosn instantly saw that it was not. The gauge that was part of the bombcase showed that the body had not leaked any air at all. That hardly came as a surprise—Ghosn was just as skilled a welder as he had told the late Manfred Fromm—but it was gratifying to the young engineer. Next he checked the batteries. There were three of these, all new, all nickel-cadmium, and all, he saw, fully charged, according to the test circuit. The timing device was next to the batteries. Making sure that its firing terminals were vacant, he checked its time—it was already set on local—against his watch, and saw that either one or the other (probably his watch) was a total of three seconds off. That was close enough for his purposes. Three glasses placed inside the box to illustrate any rough handling in transit were still intact. The shippers had taken their care, as he had hoped.

"You are ready, my friend," Ghosn said quietly. He closed the inspection door, made sure it was properly latched, then replaced the cardboard cover. Ghosn blew warm breath on his hands, then walked back to the house.

"How will the weather affect us?" Qati asked him.

"There's another storm behind this one. I figure we'll drive down tomorrow evening, right before it starts. The second one will be short, maybe another inch or two, they say. If we go in between the two, the road should be all right. Then we check into the motel and wait for the right time, right?"

"Correct. And the truck?"

"I'll do the painting today, soon as I have the heaters rigged. That's only two hours' work. I have the templates all done," Russell said as he finished his coffee. "Load the bomb after I paint, okay?"

"How long for the paint to dry?" Ghosn asked.

"Three hours, tops. I want the paint job to be good, okay?"

"That is fine, Marvin."

Russell laughed as he collected the breakfast dishes. "Man, I wonder what the people who made that movie would think?" He turned to see puzzlement on the faces of his guests.

"Didn't Günther tell you?" The faces were blank. "I saw the movie on television once. *Black Sunday*. A guy came up with an idea of killing the whole Super Bowl crowd from a blimp."

"You're joking," Qati observed.

"No. In the movie they had a big antipersonnel thing on the bottom of the blimp, but the Israelis found out what was going on, and their CIA guys got there in a nick of time—you know, how it usually happens in the movies. With my people it was always the cavalry that got there in a nick of time, so's they could kill all the savage Indians."

"In this movie the objective was to kill the entire stadium?" Ghosn asked very quietly.

"Huh—oh, yeah, that's right." Russell was loading the dishes into the dishwasher. "Not like we're doing." He turned. "Hey, don't feel bad. Just taking out the TV coverage is going to piss people off like you wouldn't believe. And this stadium is covered, okay? That blimp-thing wouldn't work. You'd need like a nuke or something to do the same thing."

"There's an idea," Ghosn observed with a chuckle, wondering what reaction he'd get.

"Some idea. Yeah, you might start a real nuclear war—shit, man, guess whose people lives up in the Dakotas, where all those SAC bases are? I don't think I could play that kind of a game." Russell dumped in the detergent and started the wash cycle. "What exactly do you have in that thing, anyway?"

"A very compact and powerful high-explosive compound. It will do some damage to the stadium, of course."

"I figured that. Well, taking out the TV won't be hard—that's delicate shit, y'know?—and just doing that—man, I'm telling you, it's going to have an effect like you wouldn't believe."

"I agree, Marvin, but I would like to hear your reasoning on this," Qati said.

"We've never had a really destructive terrorist act over here. This one will change things. People won't feel safe. They'll install checkpoints and security stuff everywhere. It'll really piss people off, make people think. Maybe they'll see what the real problems are. That's the whole point, isn't it?"

"Correct, Marvin," Qati replied.

"Can I help you with the painting?" Ghosn asked. He might get curious,

Ibrahim thought, and they couldn't have that.

"I'd appreciate it."

"You must promise to turn the heat on," the engineer observed with a smile.

"Depend on it, man, or else the paint won't dry right. I guess this is kinda cold for ya."

"Your people must be very hard to live in such a place."

Russell reached for his coat and gloves. "Hey, man, it's our place, y'know?"

* * *

"Do you really expect to find him?" the *Starpom* asked.

"I think we have a fine chance," Dubinin replied, leaning over the chart. "He'll be somewhere in here, well away from the coastal waters—too many fishermen with nets there—and north of this area."

"Excellent, Captain, only two million square kilometers to search."

"And we will cover only two-thirds of that. I said a fine chance, not a certainty. In three or four more years, we'll have the RPV the designers are working on, and we can send our sonar receptors down into the deep sound channel." Dubinin referred to the next step in submarine technology, a robot minisub which would be controlled from the mother ship by a fiber-optic cable. It would carry both sensors and weapons, and by diving very deep it could find out if sonar conditions in the thousand-to-two-thousand-meter regime were really as good as the theorists suggested. That would change the game radically.

"Anything on the turbulence sensors?"

"Negative, Captain," a lieutenant answered.

"I wonder if those things are worth the trouble," the executive officer groused.

"They worked the last time."

"We had calm seas overhead then. How often are the seas calm in the North Pacific in winter?"

"It could still tell us something. We must use every trick we have. Why are you not optimistic?"

"Even Ramius only tracked an Ohio once, and that was on builder's trials, when they had the shaft problem. And even then, he only held the contact for —what? Seventy minutes."

"We had this one before."

"True enough, Captain." The *Starpom* tapped a pencil on the chart.

Dubinin thought about his intelligence briefing on the enemy—old habits were hard to break. Harrison Sharpe Ricks, Captain, Naval Academy, in his second missile-submarine command, reportedly a brilliant engineer and technician, a likely candidate for higher command. A hard and demanding taskmaster, highly regarded in his Navy. He'd made a mistake before, and was unlikely to make another, Dubinin told himself.

* * *

"Fifty thousand yards, exactly," Ensign Shaw reported.

"This guy's not doing any Crazy Ivans," Claggett thought for the first time.

"He's not expecting to be hunted himself, is he?" Ricks asked.

"I guess not, but his tail's not as good as he thinks it is." The Akula was doing a ladder-search pattern. The long legs were on a roughly southwest-to-northeast vector, and at the end of each he shifted down southeast to the next leg, with an interval between search legs of about fifty thousand yards, twenty-five nautical miles. That gave a notional range of about thirteen miles to the Russian's towed-array sonar. At least, Claggett thought, that's what the intelligence guys would have said.

"You know, I think we'll hold at fifty-K yards, just to play it on the safe side," Ricks announced after a moment's reflection. "This guy is a lot quieter than I expected."

"Plant noises are down quite a bit, aren't they? If this guy was creeping instead of trying to cover ground...." Claggett was pleased that his Captain was speaking like his conservative-engineer self again. He wasn't especially surprised. When push came to shove, Ricks reverted to type, but that was all right with the XO, who didn't think it was especially prudent to play fast-attack with a billion-dollar boomer.

"We could still hold him at forty, thirty-five tops."

"Think so? How much will his tail's performance improve with a slower speed?"

"Good point. It'll be some, but intelligence calls it a thin-line array like ours . . . probably not all that much. Even so, we're getting a good profile on this bird, aren't we?" Ricks asked rhetorically. He'd get a gold star in his copybook for this.

"So, what do you think, MP?" Jack asked Mrs. Foley. He held the translation in his hand. She'd opted for the original Russian-language document.

"Hey, I recruited him, Jack. He's my boy."

Ryan checked his watch; it was just about time. Sir Basil Charleston was nothing if not punctual. His secure direct-line phone rang right on the hour.

"Ryan."

"Bas here."

"What gives, man?"

"That thing we talked out, we had our chap look into it. Nothing at all, my boy."

"Not even that our impressions were incorrect?" Jack asked, his eyes screwed tightly shut as though to keep the news out.

"Correct, Jack, not even that. I admit I find that slightly curious, but it is plausible, if not likely, that our chap should not know this."

"Thanks for trying, pal. We owe you one."

"Sorry we could not be of help." The line went dead.

It was the worst possible news, Ryan thought. He stared briefly at the ceiling.

"The Brits have been unable to confirm or deny SPINNAKER'S allegations," Jack announced. "What's that leave us with?"

"It's really like this?" Ben Goodley asked. "It all comes down to *opinion?"*

"Ben, if we were really that smart at reading fortunes, we'd be *making* fortunes in the stock market," Ryan said gruffly.

"But you did!" Goodley pointed out.

"I got lucky on a few hot issues." Ryan dismissed the observation. "Mary Pat, what do you think?"

Mrs. Foley looked tired, but then she had an infant to worry about. Jack thought he should tell her to take it easier. "I have to back up my agent, Jack. You know that. He's our best source of political intelligence. He gets in to see Narmonov alone. That's why he's so valuable, and that's why his stuff has always been hard to back up—but it's never been wrong, has it?"

"The scary part is that he's starting to convince me."

"Why scary, Dr. Ryan?"

Jack lit a cigarette. "'Cause I know Narmonov. That man could have made me disappear one cold night outside o' Moscow. We cut a deal, shook on it, and that was that. Takes a very confident man to do something like that. If he has lost that confidence, then . . . then the whole thing could come apart, rapidly and unpredictably. Can you think of anything scarier than that?" Ryan's eyes swept the room.

"Not hardly," agreed the head of the Intelligence Directorate's Russian Department. "I think we have to go with it."

"So do I," Mary Pat agreed.

"Ben?" Jack asked. "You believed this guy from the beginning. What he says backs up your position from up at Harvard."

Dr. Benjamin Goodley didn't like being cornered like that. He had learned a hard but important lesson in his months in CIA: it was one thing to form an opinion in an academic community, to discuss options around the lunch tables in the Harvard faculty club, but it was different here. From these opinions national policy was made. And that, he realized, was what being captured by the system actually meant.

"I hate to say this, but I've changed my mind. There may be a dynamic here we haven't examined."

"What might that be?" the head of the Russian Department asked.

"Just consider this abstractly. If Narmonov goes down, who replaces him?"

"Kadishev is one of the possibilities, say one chance in three or so," Mary Pat answered.

"In academia—hell, anywhere—isn't that a conflict of interest?"

"M.P.?" Ryan asked, shifting his eyes.

"Okay, so what? When has he ever lied to us before?"

Goodley decided to run with it, pretending this was an academic discussion. "Mrs. Foley, I was detailed to look for indications that SPINNAKER was wrong. I've checked everything I've had access to. The only thing I've found is a slight change in the tone of his reports over the last few months. The way he uses language is subtly different. His statements are more positive, less speculative in some areas. Now, that may fit his reports—the content of them, I mean—but . . . but there may be some meaning in that."

"You're basing your evaluation on how he dots his i's?" the Russian expert demanded with a snort. "Kid, we don't do that sort of work here."

"Well, I have to take this one downtown," Ryan said. "I have to tell the

President that we think he's right. I want to get Andrews and Kantrowitz in here to backstop us—objections?" There were none. "Okay, thank you. Ben, could you stay for a moment? Mary Pat, take a long weekend. That's an order."

"She's colicky, and I haven't been getting much sleep," Mrs. Foley explained.

"So have Ed take the night duty," Jack suggested.

"Ed doesn't have tits. I nurse, remember?"

"M.P., has it ever occurred to you that nursing is a conspiracy of lazy men?" Ryan asked with a grin.

The baleful look in her eyes concealed her good humor. "Yeah, at about two every morning. See you Monday."

Goodley got back in his chair after the other two left. "Okay, you can yell at me now."

Jack waved for him to light up. "What do you mean?"

"For bringing up a dumb idea."

"Dumb idea, my ass. You were the first to suggest it. You've been doing good work."

"I haven't found beans," the Harvard scholar grumbled.

"No, but you've been looking in all the right places."

"If this stuff was for-real, how likely is it that you'd be able to confirm through other sources?" Goodley asked.

"A little better than even money, maybe sixty percent, tops. Mary Pat was right. This guy's been giving us stuff we can't always get somewhere else. But you're also correct: he stands to profit from being right. I have to run this one down to the White House before the weekend starts. Then I'm going to call Jake Kantrowitz and Eric Andrews and get them to fly in here for a look-see next week. Got any particular plans for the weekend?" Jack asked.

"Not."

"You do now. I want you to sweep through all your notes and do us a position paper, a good one." Ryan tapped his desk. "I want it here Monday morning."

"Why?"

"Because you're intellectually honest, Ben. When you look at something, you really look."

"But you never agree with my conclusions!" Goodley objected.

"Not very often, but your supporting data is first-rate. Nobody's right all the time. Nobody's wrong all the time, either. The process is important, the intellectual discipline, and you have that locked down pretty tight, Dr. Goodley. I hope you like living in Washington. I'm going to offer you a permanent position here. We're setting up a special group in the DI. Their mission will be to take contrarian positions, an in-house Team-B that reports directly to the DDI. You'll be the number-two man in the Russian Section. Think you can handle it? Think carefully, Ben," Jack added hastily. "You'll take a lot of heat from the A-Team. Long hours, mediocre pay, and not a hell of a lot of satisfaction at the end of the day. But you'll see a lot of good stuff, and every so often someone's going to pay attention to you. Anyway, the position paper I want will be your entrance exam—if you're interested. I don't

give a good goddamn what your conclusions are, but I want something I can contrast with what I'm going to get from everybody else. You game or not?"

Goodley squirmed in his seat and hesitated before talking. Christ, was this going to abort his career? But he couldn't *not* say it, could he? He let out his breath, and spoke. "There's something you should know."

"Okay."

"When Dr. Elliot sent me here—"

"You were supposed to critique me. I know." Ryan was very amused. "I did a pretty good job of seduction, didn't I?"

"Jack, there was more to it than that . . . she wanted me to do a personal check . . . to look for stuff that she could use against you."

Ryan's face went very cold. "And?"

Goodley flushed, but went on rapidly. "And I delivered. I checked your file for the SEC investigation, and passed on some things about other financial dealings—the Zimmer family, stuff like that." He paused. "I'm pretty ashamed of myself."

"Learn anything?"

"About you? You're a good boss. Marcus is a lazy asshole, looks good in a suit. Liz Elliot is a prissy, mean-spirited bitch; she really likes manipulating people. She used me like a bird dog. I learned something, all right. I'll never, ever do that again. Sir, I've never apologized like this to anyone before, but you ought to know. You have a right to know."

Ryan stared into the young man's eyes for more than a minute, wondering if he'd flinch, wondering what sort of stuff was in there. Finally he stubbed out his cigarette. "Make sure it's a good position paper, Ben."

"You'll get the best I have."

"I think I already have, Dr. Goodley."

"Well?" President Fowler asked.

"Mr. President, SPINNAKER reports that there is definitely a number of tactical nuclear weapons missing from Soviet Army inventories, and that the KGB is conducting a frantic search for them."

"Where?"

"All over Europe, including inside the Soviet Union itself. Supposedly, KGB is loyal to Narmonov, at least most of it, Narmonov thinks—our man says he's not so sure. The Soviet military is definitely not; he says that a coup is a serious possibility, but Narmonov is not taking strong-enough action to deal with it. The possibility of blackmail is quite real. If this report is correct, there is the possibility of a rapid power shift over there whose consequences are impossible to estimate."

"And what do you think?" Dennis Bunker asked soberly.

"The consensus at Langley is that this may be reliable information. We're beginning a careful check of all relevant data. The two best outside consultants are at Princeton and Berkeley. I'll have them in the office Monday to look over our data."

"When will you have a firm estimate?" Secretary Talbot asked.

"Depends on what you mean by firm. End of next week, we'll have a preliminary estimate. 'Firm' is going to take a while. I've tried getting this

confirmed by our British colleagues, but they came up blank."

"Where could those things show up?" Liz Elliot asked.

"Russia's a big country," Ryan replied.

"It's a big world," Bunker said. "What's your worst-case estimate?"

"We haven't started that process yet," Jack answered. "When you're talking about missing nuclear weapons, worst-cases can be pretty bad."

"Is there any reason to suspect a threat directed against us?" Fowler asked.

"No, Mr. President. The Soviet military is rational, and that would be an act of lunacy."

"Your faith in the uniformed mentality is touching," Liz Elliot noted. "You really think theirs are more intelligent than ours?"

"They deliver when we ask them to," Dennis Bunker said sharply. "I wish you would have just a little respect for them, Dr. Elliot."

"We will save that for another day," Fowler observed. "What could they possibly gain from threatening us?"

"Nothing, Mr. President," Ryan answered.

"Agreed," Brent Talbot said.

"I'll feel better when those SS-18s are gone," Bunker noted, "but Ryan's right."

"I want an estimate on that, too," Elliot said. "I want it fast."

"You'll get it," Jack promised.

"What about the Mexico operation?"

"Mr. President, the assets are in place."

"What is this?" the Secretary of State asked.

"Brent, I think it's time you got briefed in on this. Ryan, commence."

Jack ran through the background information and the operational concept. It took several minutes.

"I can't believe they'd do such a thing: it's outrageous," Talbot said.

"Is this why you're not coming out to the game?" Bunker asked with a smile. "Brent, I can believe it. How quickly will you have the transcripts from the aircraft?"

"Given his ETA into Washington, plus processing time . . . say around ten that night."

"You can still come out to the game then, Bob," Bunker said. It was the first time Ryan had ever seen someone address the President that way.

Fowler shook his head. "I'll catch it at Camp David. I want to be bright-eyed for this meet. Besides, the storm that just hit Denver might be here Sunday. Getting back into town could be tough, and the Secret Service spent a couple hours explaining how bad football games are for me—meaning them, of course."

"Going to be a good one," Talbot said.

"What's the point spread?" Fowler asked.

Jesus! Ryan thought.

"Vikings by three," Bunker said. "I'll take all of that action I can get."

"We're flying out together," Talbot said. "Just so Dennis doesn't drive the airplane."

"Leaving me up in the hills of Maryland. Well, somebody has to mind the government." Fowler smiled. He had an odd smile, Jack thought. "Back to

business. Ryan: you said this is not a threat to us?"

"Let me backtrack, sir. First, I must emphasize that the SPINNAKER report remains totally unconfirmed."

"You said the CIA backs it."

"There is a consensus of opinion that it is probably reliable. We're checking that very hard right now. That's the whole point of what I said earlier."

"Okay," Fowler said. "If it's not true, there is nothing for us to worry about, correct?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"And if it is?"

"Then the risk is one of political blackmail in the Soviet Union, worst-case, a civil war with the use of nuclear weapons."

"Which is not good news—possible threats to us?"

"No direct threat to us is likely."

Fowler leaned back in his chair. "That makes sense, I suppose. But I want a really, *really* good estimate of that just as fast as you can get it to me."

"Yes, sir. Believe me, Mr. President, we're checking every aspect of this development."

"Good report, Dr. Ryan."

Jack stood to take his dismissal. It was so much more civilized now that they'd gotten rid of him.

The markets had sprung up of their own accord, mainly in the eastern sections of Berlin. Soviet soldiers, never the most free of individuals, now found themselves in an undivided *Western* city that offered each the chance simply to walk away, to disappear. The amazing thing was that so few did it, despite the controls kept on them, and one reason for it was the availability of open-air markets. The individual Soviet soldiers were continuously surprised at the desire of Germans, Americans and so many others to buy memorabilia of the Red Army—belts, *shapka* fur hats, boots, whole uniforms, all manner of trinkets—and the fools paid *cash*. Hard-currency cash, dollars, pounds, Deutschmarks, whose value at home in the Soviet Union was multiplied tenfold. Other sales to more discriminating buyers had included such big-ticket items as a T-80 tank, but that had required the connivance of a regimental commander, who'd justified it in his paperwork as the accidental destruction of a vehicle by fire. The Colonel had gotten a Mercedes 560SEL from that, with plenty of cash left over for his retirement fund. Western intelligence agencies had gotten all they wished by this point, leaving the markets to amateurs and tourists; they assumed that the Soviets tolerated it for the simple reason that it brought a good deal of hard currency into their economy, and did so at bargain prices. Westerners typically paid more than ten times the actual production cost of what they purchased. The introductory course in capitalism, some Russians thought, would have other payoffs when the troops concluded their conscripted service.

Erwin Keitel approached one such Soviet soldier, a senior sergeant by rank. "Good day," he said in German.

"*Nicht spreche,*" the Russian answered. "English?"

"English is okay, yes?"

"*Da.*" The Russian nodded.

"Ten uniforms." Keitel held up both hands to make the number unambiguous.

"Ten?"

"Ten, all large, big like me," Keitel said. He could have spoken in perfect Russian, but that would have caused more trouble than it was worth. "Colonel uniforms, all colonel, okay?"

"Colonel—*polkovnik*. Regiment officer, yes? Three stars here?" The man tapped his shoulders.

"Yes." Keitel nodded. "Tank uniform, must be for tank."

"Why you want?" the sergeant asked, mainly to be polite. He was a tanker, and getting the right garb was not a problem.

"Make movie—television movie."

"Television?" The man's eyes lit up. "Belts, boots?"

"Yes."

The man checked left and right, then lowered his voice. "Pistol?"

"You can do that?"

The sergeant smiled and nodded emphatically to show that he was a serious broker. "Take money."

"Must be Russian pistol, correct pistol," Keitel said, hoping that this pidgin exchange was clear.

"Yes, I can get."

"How soon?"

"One hour."

"How much?"

"Five thousand mark, no pistol. Ten pistol, five thousand mark more." And that, Keitel thought, was highway robbery.

He held up his hands again. "Ten thousand mark, yes. I pay." To show he was serious, he displayed a sheaf of hundred-mark notes. He tucked one in the soldier's pocket. "I wait one hour."

"I come back here, one hour." The soldier left the area rapidly. Keitel walked into the nearest *Gasthaus* and ordered a beer.

"If this were any easier," he observed to a colleague, "I'd say it was a trap."

"You heard about the tank?"

"The T-80, yes, why?"

"Willi Heydrich did that for the Americans."

"Willi?" Keitel shook his head. "What was his fee?"

"Five hundred thousand D-Mark. Damned-fool Americans. Anyone could have set that up."

"But they didn't know that at the time." The man laughed bleakly. DM500,000 had been enough to set the former *Oberst-Leutnant* Wilhelm Heydrich up in a business—a *Gasthaus* like this one—which made for a much better living than he'd ever gotten from the Stasi. Heydrich had been one of Keitel's most promising subordinates, and now he had sold out, quit his career, turned his back on his political heritage, and turned into one more new-German citizen. His intelligence training had merely served as a vehicle, to take one last measure of spite out on the Americans.

"What about the Russian?"

"The one who made the deal? Ha!" the man snorted. "Two *million* marks. He undoubtedly paid off the division commander, got his Mercedes, and banked the rest. That unit rotated back to the Union soon thereafter, and one tank more or less from a division . . . ? The inspectorate might not even have noticed."

They had one more round while watching the TV over the bar—a disgusting habit picked up from the Americans, Keitel thought. When forty minutes had passed, he went back outside, with his colleague in visual contact. It might be a trap, after all.

The Russian sergeant was back early. He wasn't carrying anything but a smile.

"Where is it?" Keitel asked.

"Truck, around . . ." The man gestured.

"*Ecke?* Corner?"

"*Da,* that word, corner. *Um die Ecke.*" The man nodded emphatically.

Keitel waved to the other man, who went to get the car. Erwin wanted to ask the soldier how much of the money was going to his lieutenant, who typically skimmed a sizable percentage of every deal for their own use, but that really was beside the point, wasn't it?

The Soviet Army GAZ-69 light truck was parked a block away. It was a simple matter of backing up the agent's car to the tailgate and popping the trunk. But first, of course, Keitel had to inspect the merchandise. There were ten camouflage battle-dress uniforms, lightweight, but of better than normal quality because these were for officers' use. Headwear was a black beret with the red star and rather antique-looking tank badge that showed them to be for an armor officer. The shoulder-boards of each uniform had the three stars of a full colonel. Also included were the uniform belts and boots.

"Pistolen?" Keitel asked.

First, eyes swept the street. Then ten cardboard boxes appeared. Keitel pointed to one, and it opened to reveal a Makarov PM. That was a 9-millimeter automatic modeled on the German Walther PP. The Russians, in a gesture of magnanimity, even tossed in five boxes of 9mm- x -18 ball ammunition.

"*Ausgezeichnet,*" Keitel observed, reaching for his money. He counted out ninety-nine hundred-mark bills.

"Thank you," the Russian said. "You need more, you see me, yes?"

"Yes, thank you." Keitel shook his hand and got into the car.

"What has the world become?" the driver said as he headed off. As recently as three years before, those soldiers would have been court-martialed—perhaps even shot—for what they had done.

"We have enriched the Soviet Union to the tune of ten thousand marks."

The driver grunted. "*Doch,* and that 'merchandise' must have cost at least two thousand to manufacture! What is it they call that . . . ?"

"A 'volume discount.'" Keitel couldn't decide whether to laugh or not. "Our Russian friends learn fast. Or perhaps the *muzhik* cannot count past ten."

"What we plan to do is dangerous."

"That is true, but we are being well paid."

"You think I do this for money?" the man asked, an edge on his voice.

"No, nor do I. But if we must risk our lives, we might as well be rewarded for it."

"As you say, Colonel."

It never occurred to Keitel that he really did not know what he was doing, that Bock had not told him everything. For all his professionalism, Keitel had neglected to remind himself that he was doing business with a terrorist.

The air was wonderfully still, Ghosn thought. He'd never experienced really heavy snow. The storm was lingering longer than expected, was expected to continue for another hour or so. It had dropped half a meter, which, along with the flakes still in the air, muffled sound to a degree he had never known. It was a silence you could hear, he told himself standing on the porch.

"Like it, eh?" Marvin asked.

"Yes."

"When I was a boy we got really big storms, not like this one, storms that dropped *feet* of snow—like a whole meter at once, man—and then it would really get cold, like twenty or thirty below. You go outside, and it's like you're on another planet or something, and you wonder what it was like a hundred years ago, living in a tipi with your woman and your babies and your horses outside, everything clean and pure like it's supposed to be. It must have been something, man, it must have really been something."

The man was poetic, but foolish, Ibrahim thought. So primitive a life, most of your children died before their first year had ended, starving in winter because there was no game to hunt. What fodder was there for the horses, and how did they get to it under the snow? How many people and animals froze to death? Yet he idolized the life. That was foolish. Marvin had courage. He had tenacity, and strength, and devotion, but the fact of the matter was that he didn't understand the world, didn't know God, and lived according to a fantasy. It really was unfortunate. He could have been a valuable asset.

"When do we leave?"

"We'll give the highway boys a couple of hours to scrape the roads. You take the car—it has front-wheel drive and you won't have any problem driving. I'll take the van. There's no hurry, right? We don't want to take chances."

"That is right."

"Let's go inside 'fore we both freeze."

"They really gotta clean up the air in this place," Clark said when he finished coughing.

"It is pretty bad," Chavez agreed.

They'd rented a small place near the airport. Everything they needed was tucked away in closets. They'd made their contacts on the ground. The usual service team would be sick when the 747 came in. It would be a fiscal illness, of course. It turned out that getting the two CIA officers aboard wasn't all that hard. The Mexicans did not especially like the Japanese, at least not the government kind, whom they regarded as more arrogant than Americans—which, to a Mexican citizen, was remarkable. Clark checked his watch. Nine more hours until it swooped in through the pollution. Just a brief courtesy

visit to see the Mexican President, supposedly, then off to Washington to see Fowler. Well, that made things easy for Clark and Chavez.

They started off for Denver just at midnight. The Colorado state-roads teams had done their usual professional job. What could not be scraped was salted and sanded, and the usual one-hour drive took merely an additional fifteen minutes. Marvin handled the check-in, paying for three nights with cash, and making a show of getting a receipt for his expense account. The desk clerk noted the ABC logo on the truck, and was disappointed that the rooms he'd given them were around back. Had they parked in front, maybe he could get more business. As soon as he left, the clerk went back to dozing in front of the TV. The Minnesota fans would be arriving the next day, and they promised to be a raucous, troublesome crowd.

The meet with Lyalin proved easier to arrange than expected. Cabot's brief get-acquainted session with the new head of the Korean CIA had gone even more smoothly than he'd dared to hope—the Koreans were quite professional—allowing him to fly off to Japan twelve hours early. The Chief of Station Tokyo had a favorite spot, a hostess house located in one of the innumerable meandering back streets within a mile of the embassy, and also a place very easy to secure and surveil.

"Here is my latest report," Agent MUSHASHI said, handing over the envelope.

"Our President is most impressed with the quality of your information," Cabot replied.

"As I am impressed with the salary."

"So, what can I do for you?"

"I wanted to be sure that you are taking me seriously," Lyalin said.

"We do that," Marcus assured him. *Does this fellow think we pay in the millions for the fun of it?* He wondered. It was Cabot's first face-to-face with an agent. Though he'd been briefed to expect a conversation just like this one, it still came as a surprise.

"I plan to defect in a year, with my family. What exactly will you do for me?"

"Well, we will debrief you at length, then assist you in finding a comfortable place to live and work."

"Where?"

"Anywhere you wish, within reason." Cabot managed to conceal his exasperation. This was work for a junior case officer.

"What do you mean, 'within reason'?"

"We won't let you live right across the street from the Russian Embassy. What exactly do you have in mind?"

"I don't know yet."

Then why did you bring this up? "What sort of climate do you like?"

"Warm, I think."

"Well, there's Florida, lots of sun."

"I will think about that." The man paused. "You do not lie to me?"

"Mr. Lyalin, we take good care of our guests."

“Okay. I will continue to send you information.” And with that, the man simply got up and left.

Marcus Cabot managed not to swear, but the look he gave to the station chief ignited a laugh.

“First time you’ve done a touchy-feely, right?”

“You mean that’s all?” Cabot could scarcely believe it.

“Director, this is a funny business. Crazy as it sounds, what you just did was very important,” Sam Yamata said. “Now he knows that we really care about him. Bringing up the President wars a good move, by the way.”

“You say so.” Cabot opened the envelope and started reading. “Good Lord!”

“More on the Prime Minister’s trip?”

“Yes, the details we didn’t get before. Which bank, payoffs to other officials. We may not even need to bug the airplane. . . .”

“Bug an airplane?” Yamata asked.

“You never heard me say that.”

The station chief nodded. “How could I? You were never here.”

“I need to get this off to Washington fast.”

Yamata checked his watch. “We’ll never catch the direct flight in time.”

“Then we’ll fax it secure.”

“We’re not set up for that. Not on the Agency side, I mean.”

“How about the NSA guys?”

“They have it, Director, but we’ve been warned about the security of their systems.”

“The President needs this. It has to go out. Do it, my authority.”

“Yes, sir.”

33

PASSAGES

It was nice to wake up at a decent hour—eight o'clock—at home on a Saturday. Without a headache. That was something he hadn't done in months. He fully planned to spend the day at home doing precisely nothing more than shave, and he planned that only because he'd be going to mass that evening. Ryan soon learned that on Saturday mornings his children were glued to the TV set, watching various cartoons, including something concerning turtles that he'd heard about but never seen. On reflection, he decided to pass on it this morning also.

"How are you this morning?" he asked Cathy on his way into the kitchen.

"Not bad at all. I—oh, damn!"

The noise she heard was the distinctive trilling of the secure phone. Jack ran into the library to catch it.

"Yeah?"

"Dr. Ryan, this is the ops room. Swordsman," the watch officer said.

"Okay." Jack hung up. "Damn."

"What's the matter?" Cathy asked from the doorway.

"I have to go in. By the way, I have to be in tomorrow, too."

"Jack, come on—"

"Look, babe, there are a couple of things I have to do before I leave. One's happening right about now—and you can forget that, okay?—and I have to be in on it."

"Where do you have to go this time?"

"Just into the office. I don't have any overseas stuff planned at all, as a matter of fact."

"Supposed to snow tonight, maybe a big one."

"Great. Well, I can always stay over."

"I'm going to be so happy when you leave that goddamned place for good."

"Can you stick with me just a couple months more?"

"'Couple of months'?"

"April first, I'm out of there. Deal?"

"Jack, it's not that I don't like what you do, just that—"

"Yeah, the hours. Me, too. I'm used to the idea of leaving now, turning into a normal person again. I gotta change."

Cathy bowed to the inevitable and went back to the kitchen. Jack dressed casually. On weekends you didn't have to wear a suit. He decided that he could even dispense with a tie, and also that he'd drive himself. Thirty minutes later he was on the road.

It was a gloriously clear afternoon over the Strait of Gibraltar. Europe to the north, Africa to the south. The narrow passage had once been a mountain range, the geologists said, and the Mediterranean a dry basin until the Atlantic had broken in. This would have been the perfect place to watch from, too, thirty thousand feet up.

And best of all, he would not have had to worry about commercial air traffic back then. Now he had to listen to the guard circuit make sure some airliner didn't blunder into his_ path. Or the other way around, which was actually more honest.

"There's our company," Robby Jackson observed.

"Never seen her before, sir," Lieutenant Walters said.

"Her" was the Soviet carrier *Kuznetzov,* the first real carrier in the Russian Fleet. Sixty-five thousand tons, thirty fixed-wing aircraft, ten or so helicopters. Escorting her were the cruisers *Slava* and *Marshal Ustinov*, plus what looked like one Sovremenny- and two Udaloy-class destroyers. They were coming east in a compressed tactical formation, and were two hundred forty miles behind the *TR* battle group. Half a day back, Robby thought, or half an hour, depending on how you looked at it.

"We give 'em a flyby?" Walters asked.

"Nope, why piss 'em off?"

"Looks like they're in a hurry," the RIO said, looking through a pair of binoculars. "I'd say about twenty-five knots."

"Maybe they're just trying to clear the strait as quick as they can."

"I doubt that, skipper. What do you suppose they're here for?"

"Same as us, according to intel. Train, show the flag, make friends and influence people."

"Didn't you have a run-in once . . . ?"

"Yeah, a Forger put a heat-seeker up my ass a few years back. Got my Tom back all right, though." Robby paused for a moment. "They said it was an accident, supposedly the pilot was punished."

"Believe it?"

Jackson gave the Russian battle group a last look. "Yeah, as a matter of fact."

"First time I saw a picture of that thing I said to myself, there's a Navy Cross that hasn't happened yet."

"Chill out, Shredder. Okay, we seen 'em. Let's head back." Robby moved the stick to turn back east. This he did in a leisurely maneuver rather than the hard-bank-and-pull a younger fighter jock might try. Why stress the airframe unnecessarily? Jackson would have thought if he'd bothered to think about it. In the backseat, Lieutenant Henry "Shredder" Walters thought the CAG was just turning into an old guy.

Not that old. Captain Jackson was as alert as ever. His seat was jacked up about as far as it would go, because Robby was on the short side. This gave him a good field of view. His eyes swept in a constant pattern left-right, up-down, and in to look at his instruments about once a minute. His main concern was commercial air traffic, and also private planes, since this was a weekend, and people liked to orbit the Rock to take pictures. A civilian in a

Learjet, Robby thought, could be more dangerous than a loose Sidewinder....

"Jesus! Coming up at nine!"

Captain Jackson's head snapped to the left. Fifty feet away was a MiG-29 Fulcrum-N, the new naval variant of the Russian air-superiority fighter. The visored face of the pilot was staring at him. Robby saw that four missiles were hanging on the wings. The Tomcat had only two at the moment.

"Came up from underneath," Shredder reported.

"Clever of him." Robby took the news with equanimity. The Russian pilot waved. Robby returned the gesture.

"Damn, if he wanted to—"

"Shredder, will you cool it? I've been playing games with Ivan for almost twenty years. I've intercepted more Bears than you've had pussy. We're not tactical. I just wanted to fly back here and get a look at their formation. Ivan over there decided to come up to look at us. He's being neighborly about it." Robby edged his stick forward, taking his aircraft down a few feet. He wanted to eyeball the Russian's underside. No extra fuel tanks, just the four missiles, AA-11 "Archers," NATO called them. The tail hook looked flimsier than the one the Americans had on their planes, and he remembered reports of landing problems the Russians had experienced. Well, carrier aviation was new to them, wasn't it? They'd spend years learning all the lessons. Other than that, the aircraft looked impressive. Newly painted, the pleasant gray the Russians used instead of the high-tech infrared-suppressive gray that the U.S. Navy had adopted a few years ago. The Russian version was prettier; the USN paint was more effective in concealment, though it did give the planes a painfully leprous appearance. He memorized the tail number to report to the wing intelligence troops. He couldn't see any of the pilot. The helmet and visor covered his face, and he wore gloves. Fifty-foot closure was a little tight, but not that big a deal. Probably the Russian was trying to show him that he was good, but not crazy. That was fair enough. Robby came back up level and waved to thank the Russian for holding a steady line. Again the gesture was returned.

What's your name, boy? Robby thought. He also wondered what the Russian thought about the victory flag painted under the cockpit, under which was printed in small letters, MiG-29, 17-1-91. *Let's not get too cocky over there.*

The 747 landed after its long trans-Pacific flight, much to the relief of the flight crew, Clark was sure. Twelve-hour flights must have been a bitch, the CIA officer was sure, especially flying into a smog-filled bowl at the end of it. The aircraft taxied out, then turned and finally stopped at a space marked by a military band, several rows of soldiers and civilians, and the customary red carpet.

"You know, after that much time in an airplane I'm too dogshit to do anything intelligent," Chavez observed quietly.

"So remember never to run for president," Clark replied.

"Right, Mr. C."

The stairs were rolled up, and presently the door opened. The band struck up something or other—the two CIA officers were too far away to hear it clearly. The normal TV crews flitted about. The arriving Japanese Prime

Minister was met by the Mexican Foreign Minister, listened to a brief speech, made a brief one of his own, walked past the troops who'd been standing in place for ninety minutes, then did the first sensible thing of the day. He got into a limo and drove off to his embassy for a shower—or more likely, Clark thought, a hot bath. The way the Japs did it was probably the perfect cure for air travel, a long soak in hundred-plus degree water. It was sure to take the wrinkles out of the skin and the stiffness out of the muscles, John thought. Pity that Americans hadn't learned that one. Ten minutes after the last dignitary left, and the troops marched off, and the carpet was rolled back up, the maintenance people were summoned to the aircraft.

The pilot spoke briefly with the head mechanic. One of the big Pratt and Whitney engines was running just a hair warm. Other than that, he had no beefs at all. Then the flight crew departed for a rest. Three security people took station around the outside of the aircraft. Two more paced the interior. Clark and Chavez entered, showing their passes to Mexican and Japanese officials, and went to work. Ding started in the washrooms, taking his time because he'd been told the Japanese were particular about having spotless latrines. It required only one sniff of the air inside the airplane to note that Japanese citizens were allowed to smoke. Each ashtray had to be checked, and more than half of those required emptying and cleaning. Newspapers and magazines were collected. Other cleaning staff handled the vacuuming.

Forward, Clark checked the booze locker. Half the people aboard must have arrived with hangovers, he decided. There were some serious drinkers aboard. He was also gratified to see that the technical people at Langley had guessed right on the brand of scotch that JAL liked to serve. Finally he went up to the lounge area behind the cockpit. It exactly matched the computer mock-up he'd examined for hours prior to coming down. By the time he'd finished his cleaning duties, he was sure that bringing this one off would be a snap. He helped Ding with the trash bags and left the aircraft in time to catch a dinner. On the way out to his car, he passed a note to a CIA officer from Station Mexico.

* * *

"Goddamn it!" Ryan swore. "This came in through State?"

"Correct, sir. Director Cabot's orders to use a fax line. He wanted to save transcription time."

"Didn't Sam Yamata bother to explain about datelines and time zones?"

" 'Fraid not."

There was no sense swearing further at the man from the Japan Department. Ryan read through the pages again. "Well, what do you think?"

"I think the Prime Minister is walking into an ambush."

"Isn't that too damned bad?" Ryan observed. "Messenger this down to the White House. The President's going to want it PDQ."

"Right." The man left. Ryan dialed up operations next. "How's Clark doing?" Jack asked without preamble.

"Okay, he says. He's ready to make the plant. The monitor aircraft are all

standing by. We know of no changes in the PM's schedule."

"Thanks."

"How long are you going to be in?"

Jack looked outside. The snow had already started. "Maybe all night."

It was developing into a big one. The eastbound cold-weather storm from the Midwest was linking into a low-pressure area coming up the coast. The really big snowstorms in the D.C. area always came in from the south, and the National Weather Service was saying six-to-eight inches. That prediction was up from two-to-four only a few hours earlier. He could leave work right now, then try to fight his way back in the morning, or he could stay. Staying, unfortunately, looked like the best option.

Golovko was also in his office, though the time in Moscow was eight hours ahead of Washington. That fact did not contribute to Sergey's humor, which was poor.

"Well?" he asked the man from the communications-intelligence watch staff.

"We got lucky. This document was sent by facsimile printer from the U.S. Embassy Tokyo to Washington." He handed the sheet over.

The slick thermal paper was covered mainly with gibberish, some discrete but disordered letters, and even more black-and-white hash from the random noise, but perhaps as much as twenty percent was legible English, including two complete sentences and one full paragraph.

"Well?" Golovko asked again.

"When I delivered it to the Japanese section for comment, they handed me this." Another document was passed. "I've marked the paragraph."

Golovko read the Russian-language paragraph, then compared it to the English—

"It's a fucking translation. How was our document sent in?"

"By embassy courier. It wasn't transmitted because two of the crypto machines in Tokyo were being repaired, and the *Rezident* decided it was unimportant enough to wait. It ended up in the embassy bag. So they are not reading our ciphers, but they got this anyway."

"Who's working this case? Lyalin? Yes," Golovko said, almost to himself. He next called the senior watch officer for the First Chief Directorate. "Colonel, this is Golovko. I want a Flash-priority to *Rezident* Tokyo. Lyalin to report to Moscow immediately."

"What's the problem?"

"The problem is we have another leak."

"Lyalin is a very effective officer. I know the material he's sending back."

"So do the Americans. Get that message off at once. Then I want everything we have from THISTLE on my desk." Golovko hung up and looked at the Major standing in front of his desk. "That mathematician who figured this all out—good God, I wish we'd had him five years ago!"

"He spent ten years devising this theory on ordering chaos. If it's ever made public, he'll win the Planck Medal. He took the work of Mandelbrot at Harvard University in America and MacKenzie at Cambridge, and—"

"I will take your word for it, Major. The last time you tried to explain this witchcraft to me I merely got a headache. How is the work going?"

"We grow stronger every day. The only thing we cannot break is the new CIA system that's starting to come on line. It seems to use a new principle. We're working on it."

* * *

President Fowler boarded the Marine VH-3 helicopter before the snow got too bad. Painted a shiny olive-drab on the bottom, with white on top, and little else in the way of markings, it was his personal bird, with the call sign Marine-One. Elizabeth Elliot boarded just behind him, the press corps noted. Pretty soon they'd have to break the story on the two, some thought. Or maybe the President would do the job for them by marrying the bitch.

The pilot, a Marine lieutenant colonel, brought the twin-turbine engines to full power, then eased up on the collective, rising slowly and turning northwest. He was almost instantly on instruments, which he didn't like. Flying blind and on instruments didn't trouble him. Flying blind and on instruments with the President aboard did. Flying in snow was about the worst thing there was. All external visual references were gone. Staring out the windshield could turn the most seasoned airman into a disoriented and airsick feather-merchant in a matter of seconds. As a result, he spent far more time scanning his instruments. The chopper had all manner of safety features, including collision-avoidance radar, plus having the undivided attention of two senior air-traffic controllers. In some perverse ways, this was a safe way to fly. In clear air some lunatic with a Cessna might just try to perform a midair with Marine-One, and maneuvering to avoid such things was a regular drill for the Colonel, both in the air and in the aircraft simulator at Anacostia Naval Air Station.

"Wind's picking up faster than I 'spected," the copilot, a major, observed.

"May get a little bumpy when we hit the mountains."

"Should have left a little sooner."

The pilot switched settings on his intercom box, linking him with the two Secret Service agents in back. "May want to make sure everybody's strapped in tight. Picking up a little chop."

"Okay, thanks," Pete Connor replied. He looked to see that everyone's seat belt was securely fastened. Everyone aboard was too seasoned a flyer to be the least bit concerned, but he preferred a smooth ride as much as the next person. The President, he saw, was fully relaxed, reading over a folder that had just arrived a few minutes before they'd left. Connor settled back also. Connor and D'Agustino loved Camp David. A company of hand-picked Marine riflemen provided perimeter security. They were backed up and augmented by the best electronic surveillance systems America had ever built. Backing everyone up were the usual Secret Service agents. Nobody was scheduled to come in or out of the place this weekend, except possibly one CIA messenger who would drive. Everyone could relax, including the President and his lady friend, Connor thought.

"This is getting bad. Better tell the weather pukes to stick their head out the window."

"They said eight inches."

"I got a buck says more than a foot."

"I never bet against you on weather," the copilot reminded the Colonel.

"Smart man, Scotty."

"Supposed to clear tomorrow night."

"I'll believe that when I see it, too."

"Temp's supposed to drop to zero, too, maybe a touch under."

"That I believe," the Colonel said, checking his altitude, compass, and artificial horizon. His eyes went outboard again, seeing only snowflakes being churned by the downwash of the rotor tips. "What do you call visibility?"

"Oh, in a clear spot . . . maybe a hundred feet . . . maybe one-fifty...." The Major turned to grin at the Colonel. The grin stopped when he started thinking about the ice that might build up on the airframe. "What's the outside temp?" he murmured to himself.

"Minus 12 centigrade," the Colonel said before he could look at the thermometer.

"Coming up?"

"Yeah. Let's take her down a little, ought to be colder."

"Goddamned D.C. weather."

Thirty minutes later they circled over Camp David. Strobe lights told them where the landing pad was—you could see down better than in any other direction. The copilot looked aft to check the fairing over the landing gear. "We got a little ice now, Colonel. Let's get this beast down before something scary happens. Wind is thirty knots at three-zero-zero."

"Starting to feel a touch heavy." The VH-3 could pick up as much as four hundred pounds of ice per minute under the right—wrong—weather conditions. "Fuckin' weather weenies. Okay, I got the LZ in sight."

"Two hundred feet, airspeed thirty," the Major read off the instruments. "One fifty at twenty-five . . . one hundred at under twenty . . . looking good . . . fifty feet and zero groundspeed...."

The pilot eased down on the collective. The snow on the ground started blowing up from the rotor-wash. It created a vile condition called a white-out. The visual references which had just reappeared—vanished instantly. The flight crew felt themselves to be inside a Ping-Pong ball. Then a gust of wind swung the helicopter around to the left, tilting it also. The pilot's eyes immediately flicked down to the artificial horizon. He saw it tilt, knowing that the danger that had appeared was as severe as it was unexpected. He moved the cyclic to level the aircraft and dropped the collective to the floor. Better a hard landing than catching a rotor in the trees he couldn't see. The helicopter dropped like a stone—exactly three feet. Before people aboard realized that something was wrong, the helicopter was down and safe.

"And that's why they let you fly the Boss," the Major said over the intercom. "Nice one, Colonel."

"I think I broke something."

"I think you're right."

The pilot keyed the intercom. "Sorry about that. We caught a gust over the pad. Everybody okay back there?"

The President was already up, leaning into the cockpit. "You were right,

Colonel. We should have left sooner. My mistake," Fowler said graciously. What the hell, he thought, he wanted this weekend.

The Camp David detachment opened the chopper's door. An enclosed HMMWV pulled up to it so that the President and his party didn't have to get too cold. The flight crew watched them pull away, then checked for damage.

"Thought so."

"Metering pin?" The Major bent down to look. "Sure enough." The landing had just been hard enough to snap the pin that controlled the hydraulic shock-absorber on the right-side landing gear. It would have to be fixed.

"I'll go check to see if we have a spare," the crew chief said. Ten minutes later he was surprised to learn that they didn't. That was annoying. He placed a phone call to the helicopter base at the old Anacostia Naval Air Station to have a few driven up. Until it arrived, there was nothing that could be done. The aircraft could still be flown in an emergency, of course. A fire team of Marine riflemen stood close guard on the helicopter, as always, while another squad walked perimeter guard in the woods around the landing-pad area.

"What is it, Ben?"

"Does this place have a dorm?" Goodley asked.

Jack shook his head. "You can use the couch in Nancy's office if you want. How's your paper coming?"

"I'm going to be up all night anyway. I just thought of something."

"What's that?"

"Going to sound a little crazy—nobody ever checked to make sure that our friend Kadishev actually met with Narmonov."

"What do you mean?"

"Narmonov was out of town most of last week. If there was no meet, then the guy was lying to us, wasn't he?"

Jack closed his eyes and cocked his head to one side. "Not bad, Dr. Goodley, not bad."

"We have Narmonov's itinerary. I have people checking on Kadishev's now. I'm going all the way back to last August. If we're going to do a check, it might as well be a comprehensive one. My position piece might be a little late, but this hit me last—this morning, actually. I've been chasing it down most of the day. It's harder than I thought."

Jack motioned to the storm outside. "Looks like I'm going to be stuck here awhile. Want some help?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Let's get some dinner first."

Oleg Yurievich Lyalin boarded his flight to Moscow with mixed feelings. The summons was not all that irregular. It was troublesome that it had come so soon after his meeting with the CIA Director, but that was probably happenstance. More likely it had to do with the information he'd been delivering to Moscow about the Japanese Prime Minister's trip to America. One surprise he had not told CIA concerned Japanese overtures to the Soviet Union to trade high technology for oil and lumber. That deal would have upset the Americans greatly only a few years earlier, and marked the

culmination of a five-year project that Lyalin had worked on. He settled into his airline seat and allowed himself to relax. He had never betrayed his country, after all, had he?

The satellite uplink trucks were in two batches. There were eleven network vehicles, all parked just at the stadium wall. Two hundred meters away were thirty-one more, smaller Ku-band uplinks for what looked like regional TV stations, as opposed to the bigger networks' vans. The first storm had passed, and what looked like a tank division's worth of heavy equipment was sweeping up the snow from the stadium's enormous parking lot.

There was the spot, Ghosn thought, right next to the ABC "A" unit. There was a good twenty meters of open space. The absence of security astounded him. He counted only three police cars, just enough to keep drunks away from men trying to get their work done. So secure the Americans felt. They'd tamed the Russians, crushed Iraq, intimidated Iran, pacified his own people, and now they were as totally relaxed as a people could be. They must love their comforts, Ibrahim told himself. Even their stadia had roofs and heat to keep the elements out.

"Gonna knock those things over like dominoes," Marvin observed from the driver's seat.

"Indeed we will," Ghosn agreed.

"See what I told you about security?"

"I was wrong to doubt you, my friend."

"Never hurts to be careful." Russell started another drive around the perimeter. "We'll come in this gate right here, and just drive right up." The headlights of the van illuminated the few flakes of this second storm. It was too cold to snow a lot, Russell had explained. This Canadian air mass was heading south. It would warm up as it hit Texas, dropping its moisture there instead of on Denver, which had half a meter, Ghosn estimated. The men who cleared the roads were quite efficient. As with everything else, the Americans liked their conveniences. Cold weather—build a stadium with a roof. Snow on the highways—get rid of it. Palestinians—buy them off. Though his face didn't show it, he had never hated America more than at this moment. Their power and their arrogance showed in everything they did. They protected themselves against everything, no matter how big or small, knew that they did, and proclaimed it to themselves and the whole world.

Oh, God, to bring them down!

* * *

The fire was agreeably warm. The President's cabin at Camp David was in the classic American pattern, heavy logs laid one atop the other, though on the inside, they were reinforced with Kevlar fiber, and the windows were made of rugged polycarbonate to stop a bullet. The furniture was an even more curious mix of ultramodern and old-comfortable. Before the couch he sat on were three printers for the major news services because his predecessors liked to see the wire copy, and there were three full-sized televisions, one of

which was usually tuned to CNN. But not tonight. Tonight it was on Cinemax. Half a mile away was a discreetly-sited antenna farm that tracked all of the commercial satellites, along with most of the military ones, a benefit of which was access to every commercial satellite channel—even the X-rated ones, which Fowler didn't bother with—creating the world's most expensive and exclusive cable system.

Fowler poured himself a beer. It was a bottle of Dortmunder Union, a popular German brew that the Air Force flew over—being President did carry some useful and unofficial perks. Liz Elliot drank a French white while the President's left hand toyed with her hair.

The movie was a sappy comedic romance that appealed to Bob Fowler. The female lead, in fact, reminded him of Liz in looks and mannerisms. A little too snappy, a little too domineering, but not without redeeming social value. Now that Ryan was gone—well, on the way to be gone—maybe things would settle down.

"We've certainly done well, haven't we?"

"Yes, we have, Bob." She paused for a sip of wine. "You were right about Ryan. Better to let him go honorably." *So long as he's gone, along with that little shrew he married.*

"I'm glad to hear you say that. He's not a bad guy, just old-fashioned. Out of date."

"Obsolete," Liz added.

"Yeah," the President agreed. "Why are we talking about him?"

"I can think of better things." She turned her face into his hand and kissed it.

"So can I," the President murmured as he set his glass down.

"The roads are covered," Cathy reported. "I think you made the right decision."

"Yeah, there was just a bad one on the Parkway just outside the gate. I'll be home tomorrow night. I can always steal one of the four-by-fours they have downstairs."

"Where's John?"

"He's not here right now."

"Oh," Cathy observed. *And what might he be up to?*

"While I'm here, I might as well get some work done. Call you in the morning."

"Okay, 'bye."

"That's one aspect of this place that I won't miss," Jack told Goodley. "Okay, what have you developed?"

"We've been able to verify all the meetings through September."

"You look like you're ready to drop. How long have you been up?"

"Since yesterday, I guess."

"Must be nice to be still in your twenties. Grab a piece of the couch outside," Ryan ordered.

"What about you?"

"I want to read over this stuff again." Jack tapped the file on his desk. "You're not into this one yet. Go get some Zs."

"See you in the morning."

The door closed behind Goodley. Jack started to read through the NIITAKA documents, but soon lost concentration. He locked the file in his desk and found a piece of his own couch, but sleep wouldn't come. After a few minutes of staring at the ceiling, Ryan decided that he might as well stare at something less boring. He switched on the TV. Jack worked the controller to catch a news broadcast, but he hit the wrong button and found himself staring at the tail end of a commercial on Channel 20, an independent Washington station. He almost corrected the mistake when the movie came back. It took a moment. Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner . . . black and white . . . Australia.

"Oh, yeah," Ryan said to himself. It was *On the Beach*. He hadn't seen that in years, a Cold War classic from . . . Nevil Shute, wasn't it? A Gregory Peck movie was always worth the trouble. Fred Astaire, too.

The aftermath of a nuclear war. Jack was surprised at how tired he was. He'd been getting his rest lately, and . . . . . he went to sleep, but not all the way. As sometimes happened to him, the movie entered his mind, though the dream was in color, and that was better than the black-and-white print on the TV, his mind decided, then decided further to watch the movie in its entirety. From the inside. Jack Ryan began to take over various roles. He drove Fred Astaire's Ferrari in the bloody and last Australian Grand Prix. He sailed to San Francisco in the USS *Sawfish,* SSN-623 (except, part of his mind objected, that 623 was the number of a different submarine, USS *Nathan Hale,* wasn't it?). And the Morse signal, the Coke bottle on the windowshade, that wasn't very funny at all, because it meant that he and his wife would have to have that cup of tea, and he really didn't want to do that because it meant he had to put the pill in the baby's formula so that he could be sure that the baby would die and his wife wasn't up to it—understandable, his doctor was a wife—and he had to take the responsibility because he was the one who always did and wasn't it a shame that he had to leave Ava Gardner on the beach watching him sail so that he and his men could die at home if they made it which they probably wouldn't and the streets were so empty now. Cathy and Sally and Little Jack were all dead and it was all his fault because he made them take their pills so that they wouldn't die of something else that was even worse but that was still dumb and wrong even though there wasn't much of a choice was there so instead why not use a gun to do it and

"What the fuck!" Jack snapped upright as though driven by a steel spring. He looked at his hands, which were shaking rather badly, until they realized that his mind was under conscious control now. "You just had a nightmare, boy, and this one wasn't the helicopter with Buck and John.

"It was worse."

Ryan reached for his cigarettes and lit one, standing up after he did so. The snow was still coming down. The scrapers weren't keeping pace with it, down on the parking lot. It took time to shake one of these off, watching his family die like that. So many of the goddamned things. *I've gotta get away from this place!* There were just too many memories, and not all of them were good. The wrong call he'd made before the attack on his family, the time in the submarine, being left on the runway at Sheremetyevo Airport and looking at good old Sergey Nikolayevich from the wrong side of a pistol, and worst of all

that helicopter ride out of Colombia. It was just too much. It was time to leave. Fowler and even Liz Elliot were doing him a favor, weren't they?

Whether they knew it or not.

Such a nice world lay out there. He'd done his part. He'd made parts of it a little better, and had helped others to do more. The movie he'd just lived in, hell, it might have come to pass in one way or another. But not now. It was clean and white out there, the lights over the parking lot just illuminating it enough, so much better than it usually looked. He'd done his part. Now it was someone else's turn to try his or her hand at the easier stuff.

"Yeah." Jack blew his smoke out at the window. First, he'd have to break this habit again. Cathy would insist. And then? Then an extended vacation, this coming summer, maybe go back to England—maybe by ship instead of flying? Take the time to drive around Europe, maybe blow the whole summer. Be a free man again. Walk the beach. But then he'd have to get a job, do something. Annapolis—no, that was out. Some private group? Maybe teach? Georgetown, maybe?

"Espionage 101." He chuckled to himself. That was it, he'd teach how to do all the illegal stuff.

"How the hell did James Greer ever last so long in this crummy racket?" How had he handled the stress? That was one lesson he'd never passed on.

"You still need sleep, man," he reminded himself. This time he made sure the TV was off.

34

PLACEMENT

Ryan was surprised to see that the snow hadn't stopped. The walkway outside his top-floor office window had almost two feet piled up, and the maintenance crews had failed completely to keep up with things through the night. High winds were blowing and drifting snow across the roads and parking lots more quickly than it could be removed, and even the snow that they did manage to move simply found another inconvenient place to blow over. It had been years since a storm like this had hit the Washington area. The local citizenry was already beyond panic into desperation, Jack thought. Cabin fever would already be setting in. Food stocks would not easily be replaced. Already some husbands and some wives were looking at their spouses and wondering how hard to cook they might be.... It was one thing to laugh about as he went to get water for his coffee machine. He grabbed Ben Goodley's shoulder on the way out of the office.

"Shake it loose, Dr. Goodley."

The eyes opened slowly. "What time is it?"

"Seven-twenty. What part of New England are you from originally?"

"New Hampshire, up north, place called Littleton."

"Well, take a look out the window and it might remind you of home."

By the time Jack returned with fresh water, the younger man was standing at the windows. "Looks like about a foot and a half out there, maybe a little more. So, what's the big deal? Where I come from this is called a flurry."

"In D.C. it's called The Ice Age. I'll have coffee ready in a few minutes." Ryan decided to call the security desk of the lobby. "What's the situation?"

"People calling in saying they can't make it. But what the hell—most of the night staff couldn't get out. The G.W. Parkway is closed. So's the Beltway on the Maryland side, and the Wilson Bridge—again."

"Outstanding. Okay, this is important, so listen up—that means anybody who makes it in is probably KGB-trained. Shoot 'em." Goodley could hear the laughter on the phone from ten feet away. "Keep me posted on the weather situation. And reserve me a four-by-four, the GMC, in case I have to go somewhere." Jack hung up and looked at Goodley. "Rank hath its privileges. Besides, we have a couple of them."

"What about people who have to get in?"

Jack watched the coffee start to come out of the machine. "If the Beltway and G.W. are closed, that means that two-thirds of our people can't get in. Now you know why the Russians have invested so much money in weather-control programs."

"Doesn't anybody down here—"

"No, people down here pretend that snow is something that happens on ski slopes. If it doesn't stop soon, it'll be Wednesday before anything starts moving in this town."

"It's really that bad here?"

"You'll see for yourself, Ben."

"And I left my cross-country skis up in Boston."

"We didn't hit that hard," the Major objected.

"Major, the breaker board seems to disagree with you," the crew chief replied. He pushed the breaker back in position. The small black plastic tab hesitated for a moment, then popped right back out. "No radio because of this one, and no hydraulics'cause of that one. I'm afraid we're grounded for a while, sir."

The metering pins for the landing gear had arrived at two in the morning, on the second attempt. The first, aborted, attempts had been by car, until someone had decided that only a military vehicle could make it. The parts had arrived by HMMWV, and even that had been held up by the various stopped cars on the highways between Washington and Camp David. Repairs on the helicopter were supposed to have started in another hour or so—it was not a difficult job—but suddenly they were more complicated.

"Well?" the Major asked.

"Probably a couple of loose wires in there. I gotta pull the whole board, sir, inspect the whole thing. That's a whole day's work at best. Better tell 'em to warm up a backup aircraft."

The Major looked outside. This was not a day he wanted to fly anyway. "We're not supposed to go back until tomorrow morning. When'll it be fixed?"

"If I start now . . . say around midnight."

"Get breakfast first. I'll take care of the backup bird."

"Roge-o, Major."

"I'll have them run some power out here for a heater, and a radio, too." The Major knew the crew chief was from San Diego.

The Major trudged back to the cabin. The helicopter pad was on a high spot, and the wind was trying very hard to blow it clear of snow. As a result there was only six inches to worry about. Down below, the drifts were as much as three feet deep. The grunts out walking the woods must be having a fine time, he thought.

"How bad?" the pilot asked, shaving.

"Circuit panel is acting up. The chief says he needs all day to get it back on line."

"We didn't hit that hard," the Colonel objected.

"I already said that. Want me to make the call?"

"Yeah, go ahead. Have you checked the threat board?"

"The world's at peace, Colonel, sir. I checked."

The "threat board" was mainly an expression. The alert level of the government agencies that dealt with various problems depended on the expected level of danger in the world. The greater the possible danger, the more assets were kept ready to deal with them. At the moment there was no perceived threat to the United States of America, and that meant that only a

single aircraft was kept ready to backstop the President's VH-3. The Major placed the call to Anacostia.

"Yeah, let's keep dash-two warm. Dash-one is down with electrical problems . . . no, we can handle it here. Oughta be back on line by midnight. Right. 'Bye." The Major hung up just in time for Pete Connor to enter their cabin.

"What gives?"

"Bird's broke," the Colonel replied.

"I didn't think we hit that hard," Connor objected.

"Well, that makes it official," the Major observed. "The only one who thinks we did hit that hard's the friggin' airplane."

"The backup's on alert status," the Colonel said as he finished shaving. "Sorry, Pete. Electrical problem, maybe had nothing to do with the touchdown. The backup can be here in thirty-five minutes. Our threat board is blank. Anything we need to know about?"

Connor shook his head. "No, Ed. We know of no particular threat."

"I can bring the backup bird here, but it means exposing it to the weather. We can take better care of it down at Anacostia. That's your call, sir."

"You can leave it down there."

"The Boss still wants to watch the game up here, right?"

"Correct. We all get a day off. Lift off for D.C. tomorrow about six-thirty. Problem with that?"

"No, ought to be fixed before then."

"Okay." Connor left and walked back to his cabin.

"What's it like out there?" Daga asked.

"About how it looks," Pete said. "The chopper's broke."

"I wish they'd be more careful," Special Agent Helen D'Agustino observed as she brushed her hair.

"Not their fault." Connor lifted the phone to the Secret Service command center, located a few blocks west of the White House. "This is Connor. The chopper is down with a mechanical problem. Backup is being kept at Anacostia because of weather conditions. Anything on the board I need to know about?"

"No, sir," the junior agent responded. On his status board, in LED characters he could see that the President of the United States—designated POTUS on his display—was shown to be at Camp David. The First Lady of the United States —FLO-TUS—space was blank. The Vice President was at his official residence on the ground of the U.S. Naval Observatory off Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest, along with his family. "Everything's nice and calm, far as we know."

"How are the roads down there?" Pete asked.

"Bad. Every Carryall we have is out retrieving people."

"Thank God for Chevrolet." Like the FBI, the Secret Service used the big Chevy four-wheel-drive trucks to get around. Heavily armored and with roughly the fuel-efficiency of a tank, the Carryall was able to do things that only a tank could excel. "Okay, it's nice and snug up here."

"I bet the Marines are freezing their *cojones* off."

"What about Dulles?"

"The Prime Minister is due in at eighteen hundred. The guys say Dulles has

one runway open now. They expect to have everything clear by afternoon. Storm's slacking off a little here, finally. You know, the funny thing . . ."

"Yeah." Connor didn't need to hear the rest. The funny thing was that weather like this made the job of the Secret Service easier. "Okay, you know where to reach us."

"Right. See ya tomorrow, Pete."

Connor looked outside when he heard the noise. A Marine was driving a snowplow, trying to clear the paths between the cabins. Two more were working on the roads. It seemed rather odd. The equipment was painted in the Pentagon's woodland camouflage pattern of greens and browns, but the Marines were in their whites. There were even white pullover covers for their M-16A2 rifles. Anyone who tried to get in here today would find, too late, that the perimeter guard force was totally invisible, and these Marines were all combat veterans. At times like this, even the Secret Service could relax, and that came rarely enough. There came a knock on the door. Daga got it.

"Morning papers, ma'am." A Marine corporal handed them over.

"You know," D'Agustino observed after she closed the door, "sometimes I think the guys who deliver these things are the only people you can really depend on."

"What about the Marines?" Pete asked with a laugh.

"Oh, them, too."

"Aspect change in Sierra-16!" the sonarman called. "Target is coming left."

"Very well," Dutch Claggett replied. "Mr. Pitney, you have the conn."

"Aye aye, sir, I have the conn," the navigator said as the XO went into the sonar room. The fire-control tracking party perked up, waiting to restart their calculations.

"Right there, sir." The sonarman tapped the screen with his pencil. "Looks like a beam aspect now. Conn, sonar, bearing is now one-seven-zero, target is coming left. Radiated noise level is constant, estimate target speed is unchanged."

"Very well, thank you."

It was the third such turn they had tracked. Claggett's estimation appeared to be correct. The Russian was conducting a very methodical, very conservative—and very smart—search pattern of this patrol area, just like the 688s did in looking for Russian subs. The interval between the rungs of this ladder seemed to be about forty thousand yards.

"X, that new feed pump they have is a beaut," the sonarman observed. "His plant noise is way the hell down, and the sucker's doing ten knots according to the tracking party."

"Couple more years and we're going to have to worry about these guys."

"Transient, transient—mechanical transient on Sierra-16, bearing is now one-six-four, still drifting left. Speed constant." The petty officer circled the noise blip on the screen. "Maybe, sir, but they still got a lot to learn."

"Range to target is now four-eight thousand yards."

"Mr. Pitney, let's open the range some. Bring her right," the executive officer commanded.

"Aye, helm, left five degrees rudder, come to new course two-zero-four."

"Turning for another leg?" Captain Ricks asked as he entered sonar.

"Yeah, looks like the legs are pretty regular, Cap'n."

"Methodical son of a bitch, isn't he?"

"Turned within two minutes of our estimate," Claggett replied. "I just ordered us right to maintain distance."

"Fair enough." Ricks was actually enjoying this. He hadn't been aboard a fast-attack boat since his first assistant-department-head tour. Playing tag with Russian submarines was something he had not done in the past fifteen years. On the rare occasions he'd heard them at all, his action had always been the same: track long enough to determine the other sub's course, then turn perpendicular to it and head away until it faded back to random noise.

Necessarily, the game was changing somewhat. It wasn't as easy as it used to be. The Russian subs were getting quieter. What had been an annoying trend a few years ago was rapidly turning into something genuinely troubling. And maybe we just had to change the way we do business....

"You know, X, what if this becomes the standard tactic?"

"What do you mean, Cap'n?"

"I mean, as quiet as these guys are getting, maybe this is the smart move."

"Huh?" Claggett was lost.

"If you're tracking the guy, at least you always know where he is. You can even launch a SLOT buoy and call in assets to help you dispose of him. Think about it. They're getting pretty quiet. If you break off as soon as you detect the guy, what's to say you don't blunder into him again? So instead, we track at a nice, safe distance and just keep an eye on him."

"Uh, Captain, that's fine as far as it goes, but what if the other guy gets a sniff of us, or what if he just reverses course and boogies backwards at high speed?"

"Good point. So we trail on his quarter instead of just off his stern . . . that will make an accidental closure less likely. Banging straight aft for a trailer is a logical defensive measure, but he can't go punching holes all over the ocean, can he?"

Jesus, this guy is trying to develop tactics. . . . "Sir, let me know if you sell that one to OP-02."

"Instead of trailing dead aft, I'm going to hold off his northern quarter now. It gives us better performance off the tail anyway. It should actually be safer."

That part of it made sense, Claggett thought. "You say so, Cap'n. Maintain fifty-K yards?"

"Yes, we still want to be a little cautious."

The second storm, as predicted, hadn't done very much, Ghosn saw. There was a light dusting—that seemed to be the term they used—on the vehicles and parking lot. Hardly enough to bother with, it duplicated the most severe winter storm he'd ever seen in Lebanon.

"How about some breakfast?" Marvin asked. "I hate to work on an empty stomach."

The man was remarkable, Ibrahim thought. He was completely free of jitters. Either very brave or ... something else. Ghosn considered that. He'd killed the Greek policeman without a blink, had taught a brutal lesson to one

of the organization's combat instructors, shown his prowess with firearms, and been completely contemptuous of danger when they'd uncovered the Israeli bomb. There was something missing in this man, he concluded. The man was fearless, and such men were not normal. It wasn't that he was able to control his fear as most soldiers learned to do. Fear simply wasn't there. Was it merely a case of trying to impress people? Or was it real? Probably real, Ghosn thought, and if it were, this man was truly mad, and therefore more dangerous than useful. It made things easier for Ghosn to think that.

The motel didn't offer room service from its small coffee shop. All three walked out into the cold to get their breakfasts. Along the way, Russell picked up a paper to read about the game.

Qati and Ghosn only needed a brief look to find one more reason to hate Americans. They ate eggs with bacon or ham, and pancakes with sausage—in all three cases, products of the most unclean of animals, the pig. Both men found the sight and smell of pork products repulsive. Marvin didn't help when he ordered some as unconsciously as he'd ordered coffee. The Commander, Ghosn noted, ordered oatmeal, and halfway through breakfast he went suddenly pale and left the table.

"What's the matter with him anyway? Sick?" Russell asked.

"Yes, Marvin, he is quite ill." Ghosn looked at the greasy bacon on Russell's plate and knew the smell of it had set Qati's stomach off.

"I hope he's able to drive."

"That will not be a problem." Ghosn wondered if that were true. Of course it was, he told himself, the Commander had been through tougher times—but such bluster was for others, not for times like this. No, because there had never been such a time as this, the Commander would do what must be done. Russell paid for the breakfast with cash, leaving a large tip because the waitress looked like a Native American.

Qati was pale when they got back to the rooms, and wiping his face after a long bout of nausea.

"Can I get you something, man?" Russell asked. "Milk, something good for your stomach?"

"Not now, Marvin, thank you."

"You say so, man." Russell opened his paper. There was nothing to do for the next few hours but wait. The morning line on the game, he saw, was Minnesota by six and a half. He decided that if anyone asked, he'd take the Vikings and give the points.

Special Agent Walter Hoskins, Assistant Special Agent in Charge (Corruption and Racketeering), of the Denver Field Division, knew that he would miss the game despite the fact that his wife had given him a ticket for Christmas. This he had sold to the S-A-C for two hundred dollars. Hoskins had work to do. A confidential informant had scored at the annual NFL Commissioner's party last night. That party—like the ones preceding the Kentucky Derby—always attracted the rich, powerful, and important. This one had been no exception. Both U.S. Senators from Colorado and California, a gaggle of congressmen, the states' governors, and approximately three hundred others had attended. His CI had been at the table with Colorado's governor, senators, and the

congresswoman from the third district, all of whom were targets of his corruption case. Liquor had flowed, and in the *vino* had been the usual amount of *veritas.* A deal had been made last night. The dam would be built. The payoffs had been agreed upon. Even the head of the Sierra Club's local branch had been in on it. In return for a large donation from the contractor and a new park to be authorized by the Governor, the environmentalists would mute their objections to the project. The sad part, Hoskins thought, was that the area really needed the water project. It would be good for everyone, including the local fishermen. What made it illegal was that bribes were being made. He would have his choice of five federal statutes to apply to the case, the nastiest of which was the RICO law, the Racketeer-Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act that had been passed over twenty years before without a thought about its possible scope of coverage. He already had one governor in a federal penitentiary, and to that he would add four more elected officials. The scandal would rip Colorado state politics asunder. The confidential informant in question was the Governor's personal aide, an idealistic young woman who had decided eight months earlier that enough was enough. Women were always best for wearing a wire, especially if they had large breasts, as this one did. The mike went right in the bra, and the geometry of the location made for good sound quality. It was also a safe spot because the Governor had already sampled her charms and found them lacking. The old saw was right: hell really did have no fury like a woman scorned.

"Well?" Murray asked, annoyed to have to be in his office on another Sunday. He'd had to ride the subway in, and now that was broken down. He might be stuck all day here.

"Dan, we have enough to prosecute already, but I want to wait until the money gets passed to do the bust. My CI really delivered for us. I'm doing the transcript myself right now."

"Can you fax it?"

"Soon as I'm done. Dan, we've got them all by the ass, all of 'em."

"Walt, we just might put up a statue to you," Murray said, forgetting his annoyance. Like most career cops he loathed public corruption almost as much as he loathed kidnappers.

"Dan, the transfer here is the best thing that ever happened to me." Hoskins laughed into the phone. "Maybe I'll run for one of the vacant Senate seats."

"Colorado could do worse," Dan observed. *Just so you don't carry a gun anywhere,* Murray thought unkindly. He knew that was unfair. Though Walt wasn't worth beans on the muscle end of the business, the other side of his assessment the previous year had also been correct: Hoskins was a brilliant investigator, a chessmaster to equal Bill Shaw, even. Walt just couldn't bring down a bust worth a damn. Well, Murray corrected himself, this one wouldn't be very hard. Politicians hid behind lawyers and press spokesmen, not guns. "What about the U.S. Attorney?"

"He's a good, sharp kid, Dan. He's on the team. Backup from the Department of Justice won't hurt, but the fact of the matter is that this guy can do it if he has to."

"Okay. Shoot me the transcript when it's done." Murray switched buttons on his phone, calling Shaw's home in Chevy Chase.

"Yeah."

"Bill, Dan here," Murray said over the secure phone. "Hoskins scored last night. Says he's got it all on tape—all five principal subjects cut the deal over their roast beef."

"You realize that we might have to promote the guy now?" the FBI Director noted with a chuckle.

"So make him a deputy assistant director," Dan suggested.

"That hasn't kept you out of trouble. Do I need to come in?"

"Not really. What's it like there?"

"I'm thinking of putting up a ski-jump in the driveway. Roads really look bad."

"I took the Metro in, then it shut down—ice on the tracks or something."

"Washington, D.C., the City that Panics," Shaw replied. "Okay, I plan to relax and watch the game, Mr. Murray."

"And I, Mr. Shaw, will forgo my personal pleasures and work for the greater glory of the Bureau."

"Good, I like dedication in my subordinates. Besides, I got my grandson here," Shaw reported, watching his daughter-in-law feed him from a bottle.

"How is Kenny Junior?"

"Oh, we just might make an agent out of him. Unless you really need me, Dan...."

"Bill, enjoy the kid, just remember to hand him back when he messes the diapers."

"Right. Keep me posted on this. I'll have to take this to the President myself, you know."

"You expect problems there?"

"No. He's a standup guy on corruption stuff."

"I'll be back." Murray walked out of his office toward communications. He found Inspector Pat O'Day heading the same way.

"Were those your sled dogs I saw in the drive-thru, Pat?"

"Some of us drive decent cars." O'Day had a four-wheel-drive pickup. "The 9th Street barrier is frozen in the up position, by the way. I've told 'em to leave the other one down."

"What are you in for?"

"I have the watch in the command center. My relief lives out in Frederick. I don't expect to see him until half-past Thursday. I-270 is closed until spring, I think."

"Christ, this is a wimpy town when it snows."

"Tell me about it." O'Day's last field assignment had been in Wyoming, and he still missed the hunting out there.

Murray told the communications staff that the inbound fax from Denver was code-word material. Nobody would get to see it but him for the moment.

"I can't match this one," Goodley said just after lunch.

"Which one?"

"The first one that shook us up—no, excuse me, the second one. I cannot reconcile Narmonov's and SPINNAKER'S schedules."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"I know. The odd thing is, remember what I said about linguistic differences in his reports?"

"Yeah, but remember my Russian is pretty thin. I can't catch nuances like you can."

"This is the first place it shows up, and it's also the first one where I can't satisfy myself that they definitely met." Goodley paused. "I think I might have something here."

"Remember that you have to sell it to our Russian department."

"That's not going to be easy."

"That's right," Ryan agreed. "Back it up with something, Ben."

One of the security guys helped Clark with the case of bottles. He restocked the bar supplies, then headed to the upper level with the remaining four bottles of Chivas. Chavez tagged behind with the flowers. John Clark put the bottles in their places and looked around the compartment to be sure that everything was in order. He fussed with a few minor items to show that he was being sincere. The bottle with the transceiver in it had a cracked top. That should make sure that nobody tried to open it, he thought. Clever of the S&T guys, he thought. The simple things usually worked best.

The flower arrangements had to be fastened in place. They were mainly white roses, nice ones, Chavez thought, and the little green sticks that held them in place looked like they belonged. Ding next went downstairs and looked at the forward washrooms. In the trash bin of one he dropped a very small, Japanese-made tape recorder, making sure beforehand that it was operating properly. He met Clark at the base of the spiral stairs and then both left the aircraft. The advance security people were just starting to arrive as they disappeared into the terminal's lower level.

Once inside, both men found a locked room and used it to change clothes. They emerged dressed like businessmen, hair recombed, both wearing sunglasses.

"They always this easy, Mr. C?"

"Nope." Both men walked to the opposite side of the terminal. This put them half a mile from the JAL 747, but with a direct line of sight to it. They could also see a Gulfstream-IV business jet liveried as a private aircraft. It was supposed to take off right before the Japanese aircraft, but would head on a diverging course. Clark took a Sony Walkman from his briefcase, inserted a tape cassette, and donned the earphones. In fact, he heard the murmurs of the security men on the aircraft, and the tape was recording their words as his eyes scanned a paperback book. It was a pity that he couldn't understand Japanese, Clark thought. As with most covert operations, the main component was sitting around and doing precisely nothing while he waited for something to happen. He looked up to see the red carpet being rolled out again, and the troops forming up, and a lectern being set up. It must have been a real pain in the ass for the people who had to handle these things, he thought.

Things picked up rapidly. The President of Mexico personally accompanied the Japanese Prime Minister to the aircraft, shaking his hand warmly at the base of the stairs. That might have been evidence right there, Clark thought. There was elation that the job was going well, but sadness that such things as

this really happened. The party went up the stairs, the door closed, the stairs were hauled off, and the 747 started its engines.

Clark heard the conversation pick up in the airplane's upstairs lounge. Then sound quality went immediately to hell when the engines fired up. Clark watched the Gulfstream begin taxiing off. The 747 began rolling two minutes later. It made sense. You had to be careful sending aircraft into the sky behind a jumbo. The big wide-bodies left behind wake turbulence that could be very dangerous. The two CIA officers remained in the observation lounge until the JAL airliner lifted off, and then their job was done.

Aloft, the Gulfstream climbed out to its cruising altitude of forty-one thousand feet on a heading of zero-two-six, inbound to New Orleans. The pilot eased off on the throttle somewhat, coached by the men in the back. Off to their right, the 747 was leveling off at the same altitude, on a course of zero-three-one. Inside the bigger aircraft, the supposed bottle of scotch was pointed out a window, and its EHF transmissions were scattering out toward the Gulfstream's receptors. The very favorable data-bandwidth of the system guaranteed a good signal, and no less than ten tape recorders were at work, two for each separate side-band channel. The pilot eased his course as far east as he dared until the two aircraft were over the water, then he turned back left as a second aircraft, this one an EC-135 that had struggled to get out of Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma, took up station thirty miles east and two thousand feet below the larger Boeing product.

The first aircraft landed at New Orleans, unloaded its men and equipment, refueled, then lifted off to head back to Mexico City.

Clark was at the embassy. One of his additions to the operation was a Japanese-speaker from the Agency's Intelligence Directorate. Reasoning that his test reception would be useful to determine the effectiveness of the system, he had further decided that it would be better still to get an immediate read on what was being said. Clark thought that this was a reasonable demonstration of operational initiative. The linguist took his time, listening to the taped conversation three times before he started typing. He generated less than two pages. It annoyed him that Clark was reading over his shoulder.

"'I wish it was this easy to make a deal with the opposition in the Diet,'" Clark read aloud. "'We merely must take care of some of his associates also.'"

"Looks to me that we got what we want," the linguist observed.

"Where's your communications guy?" Clark asked the Station Chief.

"I can do it myself." It was, indeed, easy enough. The Station Chief transcribed the two typed pages into a computer. Attached to the computer was a small machine that looked like a video-disc machine. On the large disc were literally billions of random digital numbers. Each letter he typed was randomly transformed into something else and transmitted to the MERCURY room at Langley. Here the incoming signal was recorded. A communications technician selected the proper description disc from the secure library, slid it into his own machine, and pressed a button. Within seconds a laser printer generated two pages of cleartext message. This was sealed in an envelope and handed to a messenger, who made for the seventh-floor office of the Deputy Director.

"Dr. Ryan, the dispatch you were waiting for."

"Thank you." Jack signed for it. "Dr. Goodley, you're going to have to excuse me for a moment."

"No problem." Ben went back to his pile of papers.

Ryan pulled the dispatch out and read it slowly and carefully twice. Then he picked up the phone and asked for a secure line to Camp David.

"Command center," a voice answered.

"This is Dr. Ryan at Langley. I need to talk to the Boss."

"Wait one, sir," the Navy chief petty officer replied. Ryan lit a cigarette.

"This is the President," a new voice said.

"Mr. President, this is Ryan. I have a fragment of conversation off the 747."

"So soon?"

"It was made before engine startup, sir. We have an unidentified voice—we think it's the PM—saying that he made the deal." Jack read off three lines verbatim.

"That son of a bitch," Fowler breathed. "You know, with evidence like that I could prosecute a guy."

"I thought you'd want this fast, sir. I can fax you the initial transcript. The full one will take until twenty-one hundred or so."

"It'll be nice to have something to read after the game. Okay, send it up." The line went dead.

"You're welcome, sir," Jack said into the phone.

"It is time," Ghosn said.

"Okay." Russell stood up and got into his heavy coat. It would be a really cold one outside. The predicted high temperature was six above, and they were not there yet. A bitter northeast wind was sweeping down out of Nebraska, where it was even colder. The only good thing about that was the clear sky it brought. Denver is also a city with a smog problem made all the worse by winter-temperature inversions. But today the sky was literally cloudless, and to the west Marvin could see streams of snow being blown off the Front Range peaks like white banners. Surely it was auspicious, and the clear weather meant that the flight out of Stapleton would not be delayed as he had feared a few days before. He started the engine of the van, rehearsing his lines and going over the plan as he allowed the vehicle to heat. Marvin turned to look at the cargo. Almost a ton of super-high explosives, Ibrahim had said. That would really piss people off. Next he got into the rental car and started that one, too, flipping the heater all the way on. Shame that Commander Qati felt so bad. Maybe it was nerves, Russell thought.

A few minutes later they came out. Ghosn got in next to Marvin. He was nervous, too.

"Ready, man?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Russell dropped the van into reverse and backed out of the parking place. He pulled forward, checking that the rental car was following, then headed off the parking lot onto the highway.

The drive to the stadium required only a few uneventful minutes. The police were out in force, and he saw that Ghosn was eyeing them very carefully. Marvin was not concerned. The cops were only there for traffic control, after

all, and they were just standing around, since the traffic had scarcely begun. It was almost six hours till game time. He turned off the road onto the parking lot at the media entrance, and there was a cop he had to talk to. Qati had already broken off, and was now circling a few blocks away. Marvin stopped the van and rolled his window down.

"Howdy," he said to the cop.

Officer Peter Dawkins of the Denver City Police was already cold despite the fact that he was a native Coloradan. He was supposed to guard the media and VIP gate, a post he'd been stuck with only because he was a very junior officer. The senior guys were in warmer spots.

"Who are you?" Dawkins asked.

"Tech staff," Russell replied. "This is the media gate, right?"

"Yeah, but you're not on my list." There was a limited number of available spaces in the VIP lot, and Dawkins couldn't just let anyone in.

"Tape machine broke in the A unit over there," Russell explained with a wave. "We had to bring down a backup."

"Nobody told me," the police officer observed.

"Nobody told me either until six last night. We had to bring the goddamned thing down from Omaha." Russell waved his clipboard rather vaguely. In the back, Ghosn was scarcely breathing.

"Why didn't they fly it down?"

"'Cause FedEx don't work on Sunday, man, and the damned thing's too big to get through the door of a Lear. I ain't complaining, man. I'm Chicago tech staff, okay? I'm Network. I get triple-time-and-a-half for this shit, away from home, special event, weekend overtime."

"That sounds pretty decent," Dawkins observed.

"Better'n a week's normal pay, man. Keep talking, officer." Russell grinned. "This is a buck and a quarter a minute, y'know?"

"You must have a hell of a union."

"We sure do." Marvin laughed.

"You know where to take it?"

"No problem, sir." Russell pulled off. Ghosn let out a long breath as the van started moving again. He'd listened to every word, sure that something would go disastrously wrong.

Dawkins watched the van pull away. He checked his watch and made a notation of his own on his clipboard. For some reason the Captain wanted him to keep track of who arrived when. It didn't make sense to Dawkins, but the Captain's ideas didn't always make sense, did they? It took a moment for him to realize that the ABC van had Colorado tags. That was odd, he thought, as a Lincoln Town Car pulled up. This one was on his list. It was the President of the NFL's American Conference. The VIPs were supposed to be pretty early, probably, Dawkins thought, so they could settle into their sky boxes and start their drinking early. He'd also drawn security at the President's party the night before and watched every rich clown in Colorado get sloppy drunk, along with various politicians and other Very Important People—mostly assholes, the young cop thought, having watched them—from all over America. He supposed that Hemingway was right after all: the rich just have more money.

Two hundred yards away, Russell parked the van, set the brake, and left the

engine on. Ghosn went in back. The game was scheduled to start at 4:20 local time. Major affairs always ran late, Ibrahim judged. He'd assumed a start time of 4:30. To that he added another half hour, setting T-Zero at 5:00, Rocky Mountain Standard Time. Arbitrary numbers always had zeros in them, after all, and the actual time of the detonation had been set weeks before: precisely on the first hour after game start.

The device did not have a very sophisticated antitamper device. There was a crude one set on each access door, but there hadn't been time to do anything complicated, and that, Ghosn thought, was a good thing. The gusting northeast wind was rocking the van, and a delicate tumbler switch might not have been a good idea after all.

For that matter, he realized rather belatedly, just slamming the door closed on the van might have . . . *What else have you failed to consider?* he wondered. Ghosn reminded himself that all such moments brought up the most frightening of thoughts. He swiftly ran over everything he had done to this point. Everything had been checked a hundred times and more. It was ready. Of course it was ready. Hadn't he spent months of careful preparation for this?

The engineer made a last check of his test circuits. All were fine. The cold had not affected the batteries that badly. He connected the wires to the timer —or tried to. His hands were stiff from the cold, and quivered from the emotion of the moment. Ghosn stopped. He took a moment to get control of himself and attached them on the second try, screwing down the nut to hold them firmly in place.

And that, he decided, was that. Ghosn closed the access door, which set the simple tamper switch, and backed away from the device. No, he said to himself. It is no longer a "device."

"That it?" Russell asked.

"Yes, Marvin," Ghosn answered quietly. He moved forward into the passenger seat.

"Then let's leave." Marvin watched the younger man get out and reached across to lock the door. Then he exited the van and locked his. They walked west, past the big network uplink vans with their huge dish antennas. They had to be worth millions each, Marvin thought, and every one would be wrecked, along with the TV weenies, just like the ones who had made a sporting event of his brother's death. Killing them didn't worry him a bit, not one little bit. In a moment the bulk of the stadium shielded them from the wind. They continued across the parking lot, past the ranks of early-arriving fans and the cars which were pulling onto the lot, many of them from Minnesota, full of fans dressed warmly, carrying peanuts and wearing hats, some of them adorned with horns.

Qati and the rental car were on a sidestreet. He simply slid over from the driver's seat, allowing Marvin to get behind the wheel. Traffic was now becoming thick, and, to avoid the worst of it, Russell took an alternate route he'd scouted out the previous day.

"You know, it really is a shame, messing with the game like this."

"What do you mean?" Qati asked.

"This is the fifth time the Vikings have made it to the Super Bowl. This time it looks like they're going to win. That Wills kid they have running for them is

the best since Sayers, and because of us nobody'll see it happen. Too bad." Russell shook his head and grinned at the irony of it all. Neither Qati nor Ghosn bothered to reply, but Russell hadn't expected them to. They just didn't have much sense of humor, did they? The motel parking lot was nearly empty. Everyone staying there must have been a fan of one sort or another, Marvin thought as he opened the door.

"All packed?"

"Yes." Ghosn traded a look with the Commander. It was too bad, but it could not be helped.

The room hadn't been made up yet, but that was no big thing. Marvin went into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. When the American emerged, he saw that both Arabs were standing.

"Ready?"

"Yes," Qati said. "Could you get my bag down, Marvin?"

"Sure." Russell turned and reached for the suitcase that lay on the metal shelf. He didn't hear the steel bar that struck the back of his neck. His short but powerful frame dropped to the cheap all-weather carpet on the floor. Qati had struck hard, but not hard enough to kill, the Commander realized. He was weakening by the day. Ghosn helped him move the body back into the bathroom, where they laid him faceup. The motel was a cheap one, and the bathroom was small, too small for their purposes. They'd hoped to set him in the tub, but there wasn't room for both men to stand. Instead, Qati simply knelt by the American's side. Ghosn shrugged his disappointment and reached for a towel from the rack.

He wrapped the towel around Russell's neck. The man was more stunned than unconscious, and his hands were beginning to move. Ghosn had to move quickly. Qati handed him the steak knife that he'd removed from the coffee shop after dinner the previous night. Ghosn took it and cut deeply into the side of Russell's neck, just below the right ear. Blood shot out as though from a hose, and Ibrahim pushed the towel back down to keep it from splashing on his clothes. Then he did the same thing to the carotid artery on the left side. Both men held the towel down, almost as though to stanch the blood flow.

It was at that moment that Marvin's eyes came completely open. There was no comprehension in them, there was no time for him to understand what was happening. His arms moved, but each man used all his weight to hold them down and prevented the American from accomplishing anything. He didn't speak, though his mouth opened, and, after a last accusing look at Ghosn, the eyes went dreamy for a moment, then rolled back. By this time Qati and Ghosn were leaning back to avoid the blood that now filled the grooves between the bathroom tiles. Ibrahim pulled back the towel. The blood was trickling out now, and was not a concern. The towel was quite sodden, however. He tossed it into the tub. Qati handed him another.

"I hope God will be merciful to him," Ghosn said quietly.

"He was a pagan." It was too late for recriminations.

"Is it his fault that he never met a godly man?"

"Wash," Qati said. There were two sinks outside the bathroom. Each man lathered his hands thoroughly, checking his clothes for any sign of blood. There was none.

"What will happen to this place when the bomb goes off?" Qati asked.

Ghosn thought about that. "This close . . . it will be outside the fireball, but —" He walked to the windows and pulled the drapes back a few centimeters. The stadium was readily visible, and a direct line of sight made it easy to say what would happen. "The thermal pulse will set it afire, and then the blast wave will flatten the building. The whole building will be consumed."

"You're sure?"

"Completely. The effects of the bomb are easy to predict."

"Good." Qati removed all the travel documents and identification he and Ghosn had used to this point. They'd have to clear customs inspection, and they had already tempted fate enough. The surplus documents they tossed in a trash can. Ghosn got both bags and took them out to the car. They checked the room once more. Qati got into the car. Ghosn closed the door for the last time, leaving the Do Not Disturb card on the knob. It was a short drive to the airport, and their flight left in two hours.

The parking lot filled up rapidly. By three hours before game time, much to Dawkins' surprise, the VIP lot was filled. Already the pre-game show had begun. He could see a team wandering around the lot with a minicam, interviewing the Vikings fans, who had converted one entire half of the parking lot into a giant tailgate party. There were white vapor trails rising from charcoal grills. Dawkins knew that the Vikings fans were slightly nutty, but this was ridiculous. All they had to do was walk inside. They could have any manner of food and drink, and consume it in 68-degree air, sitting on a cushioned seat, but no—they were proclaiming their toughness in air that couldn't be much more than 5 degrees Fahrenheit. Dawkins was a skier and had worked his way through college as a ski patrol at one of the Aspen slopes. He knew cold and he knew the value of warmth. You couldn't impress cold air with anything. The air and wind simply didn't notice.

"How are things going, Pete?"

Dawkins turned. "No problems, Sarge. Everybody on the list is checked off."

"I'll spell you for a few minutes. Go inside and warm up for a while. You can get coffee at the security booth just inside the gate."

"Thanks." Dawkins knew that he'd need something. He was going to be stuck outside for the whole game, patrolling the lot to make sure nobody tried to steal something. Plainclothes officers were on the lookout for pickpockets and ticket scalpers, but most of them would get to go inside and watch the game. All Dawkins had was a radio. That was to be expected, he thought. He had less than three years on the force. He was still almost a rookie. The young officer walked up the slope toward the stadium, right past the ABC minivan he'd checked through. He looked inside and saw the Sony tape machine. Funny, it didn't seem to be hooked up to anything. He wondered where those two techies were, but getting coffee was more important. Even polypropylene underwear had its limits, and Dawkins was as cold as he had ever remembered.

Qati and Ghosn returned the car to the rental agency and took the courtesy bus to the terminal, where they checked in their bags for the flight, then

headed in to check their flight's status. Here they learned that the American MD-80 for Dallas-Fort Worth was delayed. Weather in Texas, the clerk at the desk explained. There was ice on the runways from the storm that had just skirted past Denver the previous night.

"I must make my connection to Mexico. Can you book me through another city?" Ghosn asked.

"We have one leaving for Miami, same departure time as your flight to Dallas. I can book you a connecting flight in Miami." The ticket agent tapped the data into her terminal. "There's a one-hour layover. Oh, okay, it's only a fifteen-minute difference into Mexico City."

"Could you do that, please? I must make my connection."

"Both tickets?"

"Yes, excuse me."

"No problem." The young lady smiled at her computer. Ghosn wondered if she'd survive the event. The huge glass windows faced the stadium, and even at this distance the blast wave . . . maybe, he thought, if she ducked fast enough. But she'd already be blinded from the flash. Such pretty dark eyes, too. A pity. "Here you go. I'll make sure they switch the bags over," she promised him. That Ghosn took with a grain of salt.

"Thank you."

"The gate is that way." She pointed.

"Thank you once more."

The ticket agent watched them head off. The young one was pretty cute, she thought, but his big brother—or boss? she wondered—looked like a sourpuss. Maybe he didn't like to fly.

"Well?" Qati asked.

"The connecting flight roughly duplicates our schedule. We've lost a quarter hour buffer time in Mexico. The weather problem is localized. There should be no further difficulty."

The terminal was very nearly empty. Those people who wished to leave Denver were evidently waiting for later flights so that they might watch the game on TV, and the same appeared to be true of arriving flights, Ibrahim saw. There were scarcely twenty people in the departure lounge.

"Okay, I can't reconcile the schedules here either," Goodley said. "In fact, I'd almost say we have a smoking gun."

"How so?" Ryan asked.

"Narmonov was only in Moscow two days last week, Monday and Friday. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday he was in Latvia, Lithuania, the Western Ukraine, and then a trip down to Volgograd for some local politicking. Friday's out because of when the message came over, right? But Monday, our friend was in the Congress building practically all day. I don't think they met last week, but the letter implies that they did. I think we got a lie here."

"Show me," Jack said.

Goodley spread his data out on Ryan's desk. Together they went over the dates and itineraries.

"Well, isn't that interesting," Jack said after a few minutes. "That son of a bitch."

"Persuasive?" Goodley wanted to know.

"Completely?" The Deputy Director shook his head. "No."

"Why not?"

"It's possible that our data is incorrect. It's possible that they met on the sly, maybe last Sunday when Andrey Il'ych was out at his dacha. One swallow doesn't make a spring," Jack said with a nod toward the snow outside. "We need to make a detailed check on this before it goes any farther, but what you've uncovered here is very, very interesting, Ben."

"But, damn it—"

"Ben, you go slow on stuff like this," Jack explained. "You don't toss out the work of a valuable agent on the basis of equivocal data, and this is equivocal, isn't it?"

"Technically, yes. You think he's been turned?"

"Doubled, you mean?" Ryan grinned. "You're picking up on the jargon, Dr. Goodley. You answer the question for me."

"Well, if he'd been doubled on us, no, he wouldn't send this sort of data. They wouldn't want to send us this kind of signal unless elements within the KGB—"

"Think it through, Ben," Jack cautioned.

"Oh, yeah. It compromises them, too, doesn't it? You're right, it's not likely. If he'd been turned, the data should be different."

"Exactly. If you're right, and if he's been misleading us, the most likely explanation is the one you came up with. He stands to profit from the political demise of Narmonov. It helps to think like a cop in this business. Who profits —who has motive, that's the test you apply here. Best person to look at this is Mary Pat."

"Call her in?" Goodley asked.

"Day like this?"

Qati and Ghosn boarded the flight on the first call, taking their first-class seats and strapping in. Ten minutes later the aircraft pulled back from the gate and taxied out to the end of the runway. They'd made a smart move, Ghosn thought. The flight to Dallas had still not been called. Two minutes after that, the airliner lifted off and soon turned southeast toward the warmer climes of Florida.

The maid was having a bad day already. Most of the guests had left late and she was way behind on her schedule. She clucked with disappointment at seeing the keep-out card on one doorknob, but it was not on the other, connecting room, and she thought it might be a mistake. The flip side of the card was the green Make Up Room NOW message, and guests often made that mistake. First she went into the unmarked one. It was easy. Only one of the beds had been used. She stripped off the linen and replaced it with the speed that came from doing the same job more than fifty times per day. Then she checked out the bathroom, replaced the soiled towels, put a new bar of soap in the holder, and emptied the trash can into the bag that hung from her cart. Then she had to make a decision—whether to make up the other room or not. The card on the knob said no, but if they didn't want it, why didn't they do

the same thing for this room? It was worth a look at least. If anything obviously important was laid out, she'd stay clear. The maid looked through the open connecting door and saw two ordinarily messed-up beds. No clothing was on the floors. In fact, the room was as neat today as it had been the day before. She stuck her head through the door and looked back toward the wash area. Nothing remarkable there either. She decided to clean it, too. The maid got behind her cart and turned it to push through the door. Again she did the beds, then headed back to—

How had she missed that before? A man's legs. What? She walked forward and—

It took the manager over a minute to calm her down enough to understand what she was saying. Thank God, he thought, that there were no guests on that side of the motel now; all were off to see the game. The young man took a deep breath and walked outside, past the coffee shop and around to the back side of the motel. The door had closed automatically, but his passkey fixed that.

"My God," he said simply. At least he'd been prepared for it. The manager was no fool. He didn't touch anything, but rather walked into the connecting room and out that door. The desk phone in his office had all the emergency numbers printed on a small card. He punched up the second one.

"Police."

"I want to report a murder," the manager said as calmly as he could manage.

President Fowler set the fax down on the corner table and shook his head. "It really is unbelievable that he'd try something so blatant."

"What are you going to do about it?" Liz asked.

"Well, we have to verify it, of course, but I think we'll be able to do that. Brent is flying back from the game tonight. I'll want him in my office early for his advice, but I figure we'll just confront him with it. If he doesn't like it, that's just too damned bad. This is Mafia stuff."

"You really do have a thing about this, don't you?"

Fowler opened a bottle of beer. "Once a prosecutor, always a prosecutor. A hood is a hood is a hood."

The JAL 747 touched down at Dulles International Airport three minutes early. Out of deference to the weather, and with the approval of the Japanese Ambassador, the arrival ceremony was abbreviated. Besides, the sign of a really important arrival in Washington was informality. It was one of the local folkways that the Ambassador had explained to the current Prime Minister's predecessor. After a brief but sincere greeting from Deputy Secretary of State Scott Adler, the official party was loaded into all the four-wheel-drive vehicles that the embassy had been able to assemble on such short notice, and headed off to the Madison Hotel, a few blocks from the White House. The President, he learned, was at Camp David, and would be coming back to Washington the following morning. The Japanese Prime Minister, still suffering from the lingering effects of travel, decided to get a few more hours of sleep. He'd not yet taken off his coat when another cleanup crew boarded the aircraft yet

again. One man retrieved the unused liquor, including one bottle with a cracked neck. Another emptied the wastebaskets of the various washrooms into a large trash bag. They were soon on their way to Langley. All of the chase aircraft except the first landed at Andrews Air Force Base, where the flight crews also began their mandated rest periods—in this case at the base officers' club. The recordings started their trip to Langley by car, arriving later than the tape recorder from Dulles. It turned out that the machine off the 747 had the best sound quality, and the technicians started on that tape first.

The Gulfstream returned to Mexico City, also on time. The aircraft rolled out to the general-aviation terminal and the flight crew of three—it was an Air Force crew, though no one knew that—walked into the terminal for dinner. Since they were Air Force, it was time for some crew rest. Clark was still at the embassy, and planned to catch the first quarter at least before heading back to D.C. and all that damned snow.

"Be careful or you're going to fall asleep during the game," the National Security Advisor warned.

"It's only my second beer, Elizabeth," Fowler replied.

There was a cooler next to the sofa, and a large silver tray of munchies. Elliot still found it quite incredible. J. Robert Fowler, President of the United States, so intelligent and hard-minded in every possible way, but a rabid football fan, sitting here like Archie Bunker, waiting for the kickoff.

"I found one, but the other one's a son of a bitch," the crew chief reported. "Can't seem to figure this one out, Colonel."

"Come on inside and warm up," the pilot said. "You've been out here too long anyway."

"Some kind of drug deal, I'll bet you," the junior detective said.

"Then it's amateurs," his partner observed. The photographer had snapped his customary four rolls of film, and now the coroner's men were lifting the body into the plastic bag for transport to the morgue. There could be little doubt on the cause of death. It was a particularly brutal murder. It seemed that the killers-there had to be two, the senior man already thought—had to have held the man's arms down before they slashed his throat, and then they had watched him bleed out while using the towel to keep their clothes clean. Maybe they were paying off a debt somehow or other. Perhaps this guy had done a rip-off, or there was some old grudge that they had settled. This was clearly not a crime of passion; it was far too cruel and calculated for that.

The detectives noted their good luck, however. The victim's wallet had still been in his pocket. They had all his ID, and better than that, they had two complete sets of other ID, all of which were now being checked out. The motel records had noted the license numbers of both vehicles associated with these rooms, and those also were being checked on the motor-vehicle-records computer.

"The guy's an Indian," the coroner's rep said as they picked him up. "Native

American, I mean."

"I've seen the face somewhere before," the junior detective thought. "Wait a minute." Something caught his eye. He unbuttoned the man's shirt, revealing the top of a tattoo.

"He's done time," the senior man said. The tattoo on the man's chest was a crude one, spit-and-pencil, and it showed something that he'd seen before. . . . "Wait a minute . . . this means something . . ."

"Warrior Society!"

"You're right. The Feds had something out on—oh, yeah, remember? The shooting up in North Dakota last year?" The senior man thought for a second. "When we get the information from the license, make sure they send it right off to Washington. Okay, you can take him out now." The body was lifted and carried out. "Bring in the maid and the manager."

Inspector Pat O'Day had the good luck of drawing watch duty in the FBI's command center, Room 5005 of the Hoover Building. The room was oddly shaped, roughly triangular, with the desks of the command staff in the angle, and screens on the long wall. The quiet day they were having—there was adverse weather across half the country, and adverse weather is more of an obstacle to crime than any police agency—meant that one of the screens was showing the teams lining up for the coin toss in Denver. Just as the Vikings won the toss and elected to receive, a young lady from communications walked in with a couple of faxes from the Denver P.D.

"A murder case, sir. They think we might know who this is."

The quality of photographs on driver's licenses is not the sort to impress a professional anything, and blowing them up—then sending them via fax—didn't improve matters very much. He had to stare at it for a few seconds, and almost decided that he didn't know the face until he remembered some things from his time in Wyoming.

"I've seen this guy before . . . Indian . . . Marvin Russell?" He turned to another agent. "Stan, have you ever seen this guy?"

"Nope."

O'Day looked over the rest of the faxes. Whoever he was, he was dead, with a slashed throat, the Denver cops said. "Probable drug-related killing" was the initial read from the Denver homicide guys. Well, that made sense, didn't it? John Russell had been part of a drug deal. The other initial data was that there had been other IDs at the scene of the crime, but that the licenses had been fakes—very good ones, the notes said. However, they had a truck registered to the victim, and also a car at the scene was a rental that had been signed out to Robert Friend, which was the name on the victim's license. The Denver P.D. was now looking for the vehicles, and he wanted to know if the Bureau had anything useful on the victim and any likely associates.

"Get back to 'em, and tell 'em to fax us the photos from the other IDs they found."

"Yes, sir."

Pat watched the teams get onto the field for the kickoff, then lifted the phone. "Dan? Pat. You want to come on down here? I think an old friend of ours just might have turned up dead. . . . No, not that kind of friend."

Murray showed up just in time for the kickoff, which took precedence over the faxes. Minnesota got the ball out to the twenty-four-yard line, and their offense went to work. The network immediately had the screen covered with all sorts of useless information so that the fans couldn't see the players.

"This look like Marvin Russell to you?" Pat asked.

"Sure as hell does. Where is he?"

O'Day waved at the TV screen. "Would you believe Denver? They found him about ninety minutes ago with his throat cut. Local P.D. thinks it's drug-related."

"Well, that's what did his brother in. What else?" Murray took the faxes from O'Day's hand.

Tony Wills got the first handoff, taking the ball five yards off tackle—almost breaking it for more. On second down, both men saw Wills catch a swing pass for twenty yards.

"That kid is really something," Pat said. "I remember seeing a game where Jimmy Brown . . ."

* * *

Bob Fowler had just started his third beer of the afternoon, wishing he'd been at the game instead of being stuck here. Of course, the Secret Service would have gone ape, and the security at the game would have to have been beefed up to the point that people would still be trying to get in. That was not a good political move, was it? Liz Elliot, sitting next to the President, flipped one of the other TVs to HBO to catch a movie. She donned a set of headphones so that she could hear it without disturbing the Commander-in-Chief. It just made no sense at all, she thought, none. How this man could get so enthusiastic about something as dumb as a little-boys' game. . . .

Pete Dawkins finished his pre-game duties by pulling a chain across his gate. Anyone who wanted to get in now would have to use one of the two gates that were still open, but guarded. At the last Super Bowl a very clever gang of thieves had prowled the parking lot and come away with two hundred thousand dollars' worth of goods from the parked cars—mainly tape decks and radios—and that was not going to happen in Denver. He started his patrol, along with three other officers. By agreement, they'd circulate all around the lot instead of sticking to specific areas. It was too cold for that. Moving around would at least keep them warm. Dawkins' legs felt as stiff as cardboard, and moving would loosen them up. He didn't really expect to stop any crimes. What car thief would be so dumb as to prowl around in zero-degree weather? Soon he found himself in the area the Minnesota fans had occupied. They were certainly well organized. The tailgate parties had all ended on time. The lawn chairs were all stowed away, and they'd done a very effective job of cleaning up the area. Except for a few puddles of frozen coffee, you could hardly tell that they had done something here. Maybe the Minnesota fans weren't such idiots after all.

Dawkins had a radio plugged into his ear. Listening to a game on the radio

was like having sex with your clothes on, but at least he knew what the cheers were about. Minnesota scored first. Wills took it in by sweeping left end from fifteen yards out. The Vikings' first drive had taken only seven plays and four minutes fifty seconds. Minnesota sounded pretty tough today.

* * *

"God, Dennis must be sick," Fowler observed. Liz didn't hear him, concentrating instead on her movie. The Secretary of Defense immediately had cause to feel sicker. The kickoff was fielded at the five, and the reserve running back who handled that duty for the Chargers made it all the way to the forty—but there he fumbled and a Viking fell on the ball.

"They say Marvin was a clever little bastard. Look at the numbers on the other licenses. Except for the first couple of digits, they're the same as his. . . . I bet he got—well, somebody got—one of those ID machines," Murray said.

"Passports and everything," O'Day replied, watching Tony Wills do it again for eight yards. "If they don't figure a way to key on that kid, this game's going to be a blowout."

"What kind of passports?"

"They didn't say. I've asked for more information. They'll fax the photos when they get back into the office."

In Denver the computers were humming. The rental car company was identified, and a check of their system revealed that the car had been returned to Stapleton International Airport just a few hours earlier. That made a really hot trail, and the detectives drove directly there from the motel after taking initial statements from the first pair of "witnesses." The descriptions of the other two matched the photos on the passports. These were on their way to police headquarters. Already, they knew, the FBI was yelling for information. That made it sound more and more like a major drug case. Both detectives wondered where the victim's van was.

Dawkins finished his first circuit of the stadium just as Minnesota made its second touchdown. Again it was Wills, this time a four-yard pass out of the backfield. The guy already had fifty-one yards rushing and two receptions. Dawkins found himself looking at the ABC van he'd checked through. Why the Colorado tags? They said they were from Chicago, and that they had brought the tape widget in from Omaha. But the truck was painted like an official network truck. The local TV stations were not network-owned. They all showed network affiliation, but the big letters on them were for the local callletters for the stations. Something to ask the sarge about. Dawkins circled the entry on his clipboard and wrote a question mark next to it. He walked inside to the security booth.

"Where's the sarge?"

"Out walking the lot," the officer at the booth replied. "The dumbass has

twenty bet on the Chargers. I don't think he can take it."

"I'll see if I can get him to lay a little more," Dawkins replied with a grin. "Which way did he go?"

"North, I think."

"Thanks."

The Vikings kicked off again, with the score 14–0. The same return man took the kick, this time three yards deep in the end zone. He ignored the safety man's advice to down the ball and went up the middle like a shot. Breaking one tackle at the sixteen, he took advantage of a picture-book block and broke for the sidelines. Fifteen yards later it was clear that only the kicker had a chance, but the kicker was slow. At one hundred three yards, it was the longest kick return in Super Bowl history. The point after was good, and the game was now 14-7.

"Feeling better, Dennis?" the Secretary of State asked the Secretary of Defense.

Bunker set his coffee down. He had decided not to drink. He wanted to be stone sober when he accepted the Lombardi Trophy from the Commissioner.

"Yeah, now we just have to figure a way to stop your boy."

"Good luck."

"He's a great kid, Brent. Goddamn if he can't run."

"He isn't just an athlete. Kid's got brains, and a good heart."

"Brent, if you educated him, I know he's smart," Bunker said generously. "I just wish he'd pull a hamstring right about now."

Dawkins found his sergeant a few minutes later. "Something funny here," he said.

"What's that?"

"This truck—little white van on the east end of the row of big satellite trucks, 'ABC' painted on it. Colorado commercial tags, but supposedly it's from Chicago or maybe Omaha. I check 'em through, said they had a tape deck to replace a broken one, but when I walked past it a few minutes ago, it wasn't hooked up, and the guys who brought it in were gone."

"What are you telling me?" the sergeant asked.

"I think it might be a good idea to check it out."

"Okay, call it in. I'll give it a walk-past." The sergeant looked at the clipboard to check the tag number. "I was headed off to help out the Wells Fargo guys at the loading dock. You take that for me, okay?"

"Sure, Sarge." Dawkins headed off.

The watch supervisor lifted his Motorola radio. "Lieutenant Vernon, this is Sergeant Yankevich, could you meet me down at the TV place?"

Yankevich started walking back south around the stadium. He had his own personal radio, but it lacked an earpiece. San Diego stopped the Vikings on downs. Minnesota punted—a good one that required a fair catch at the Chargers' thirty. Well, maybe his team could get the game even. Somebody ought to shoot that Wills kid, he thought angrily.

Officer Dawkins walked to the north end of the stadium and saw a Wells Fargo armored car parked at the lower-level loading dock. One man was

trying to sling out bags of what had to be coins.

"What's the problem?"

"The driver's beat his knee up, he's off having it fixed. Can you give me a hand?"

"Inside or outside?" Dawkins asked.

"You hand them out, okay? Be careful, they're heavy mothers."

"Gotcha." Dawkins hopped inside. The interior of the armored truck was lined with shelves holding innumerable bags of mainly quarters, it looked like. He lifted one, and it was as heavy as he'd been told. The police officer stuck his clipboard in his belt and went to work, handing them out to the loading dock, where the guard set them on a two-wheel handtruck. Trust the sarge to stick him with this.

Yankevich met the Lieutenant at the media entrance. Both walked over to the truck in question. The Lieutenant looked inside. "A big box with 'Sony' written on it . . . wait a minute. Says it's a commercial videotape machine."

Sergeant Yankevich filled his boss in on what Dawkins had told him. "It's probably nothing, but—"

"Yeah—but. Let me find the ABC guy. I'm also going to call the bomb squad. Stay here and keep an eye on the thing."

"I have a Slim Jim in my car. If you want I can get in easy enough." Every cop knows how to break into cars.

"I don't think so. We'll let the bomb guys think it over—besides, it's probably just what it looks like. If they came down to replace a broke tapedeck—well, maybe the broken one was fixed and they decided they didn't need it."

"Okay, Lieutenant." Yankevich walked inside to get another cup of coffee to keep warm, then returned to the out-of doors he loved so much. The sun was setting behind the Rockies, and even in zero weather with a bitter wind, it was always something beautiful to watch. The police sergeant walked past the network uplink vans to watch the glowing orange ball dip through one of the blowing snow clouds. Some things were better than football. When the last edge of the sun dipped below the ridgeline, he turned back, deciding to take another look at the box inside the truck. He would not make it.

35

THREE SHAKES

The timer just outside the bombcase reached 5:00:00, and things began to happen.

First, high-voltage capacitors began to charge, and small pyrotechnics adjacent to the tritium reservoirs at both ends of the bomb fired. These drove pistons, forcing the tritium down narrow metal tubes. One tube led into the Primary, the other into the Secondary. There was no hurry here, and the objective was to mix the various collections of lithium-deuteride with the fusion-friendly tritium atoms. Elapsed time was ten seconds.

At 5:00:10, the timer sent out a second signal.

Time Zero.

The capacitors discharged, sending an impulse down a wire into a divider network. The length of the first wire was 50 centimeters. This took one and two-thirds nanoseconds. The impulse entered a dividing network using krytron switches—each of them a small and exceedingly fast device using self-ionized and radioactive krypton gas to time its discharges with remarkable precision. Using pulse-compression to build their amperage, the dividing network split the impulse into seventy different wires, each of which was exactly one meter in length. The relayed impulses required three-tenths of a shake (three nanoseconds) to transit this distance. The wires all had to be of the same length, of course, because all of the seventy explosive blocks were supposed to detonate at the same instant. With the krytrons and the simple expedient of cutting each wire to the same length, this was easy to achieve.

The impulses reached the detonators simultaneously. Each explosive block had three separate detonators, and none of them failed to function. The detonators were small wire filaments, sufficiently thin that the arriving current exploded each. The impulse was transferred into the explosive blocks, and the physical detonation process began 4.4 nanoseconds after the signal was transmitted by the timer. The result was not an explosion, but an *im*plosion, since the explosive force was mainly focused inward.

The high-explosives blocks were actually very sophisticated laminates of two materials, each laced with dust from light and heavy metals. The outer layer in each case was a relatively slow explosive with a detonation speed of just over seven thousand meters per second. The explosive wave in each expanded radially from the detonator, quickly reaching the edge of the block. Since the blocks were detonated from the outside-in, the blast front traveled inward through the blocks. The border between the slow and fast explosives contained bubbles—called voids—which began to change the shockwave from spherical-shaped to a planar, or flat wave, which was focused again to match

exactly its metallic target, called “drivers.”

The “driver” in each case was a piece of carefully shaped tungsten-rhenium. These were hit by a force wave traveling at more than nine thousand eight hundred meters (six miles) per second. Inside the tungsten-rhenium was a one-centimeter layer of beryllium. Beyond that was a one-millimeter thickness of uranium 235, which though thin weighed almost as much as the far thicker beryllium. The entire metallic mass was driving across a vacuum, and since the explosion was focused on a central point, the actual closing speed of opposite segments of the bomb was 18,600 meters (or 11.5 miles) per second.

The central aiming point of the explosives and the metallic projectiles was a ten-kilogram (22-pounds) mass of radioactive plutonium 239. It was shaped like a glass tumbler whose top had been bent outwards and down toward the bottom, creating two parallel walls of metal. Ordinarily denser than lead, the plutonium was compressed further by the million-atmospheres pressure of the implosion. This had to be done very quickly. The plutonium 239 mass also included a small but troublesome quantity of plutonium 240, which was even less stable and prone to pre-ignition. The outer and inner surfaces were slammed together and driven in turn toward the geometric center of the weapon.

The final external act came from a device called a “zipper.” Operating off the third signal from the still-intact electronic timer, the zipper was a miniature particle accelerator, a very compact minicyclotron that looked remarkably like a handheld hair-dryer. This fired deuterium atoms at a beryllium target. Neutrons traveling ten percent of the speed of light were generated in vast numbers and traveled down a metal tube into the center of the Primary, called the Pit. The neutrons were timed to arrive just as the plutonium reached half of its peak density.

Ordinarily a material weighing roughly twice an equivalent mass of lead, the plutonium was already ten times denser than that and still accelerating inward. The bombardment of neutrons entered a mass of still-compressing plutonium.

Fission.

The plutonium atom has an atomic weight of 239, that being the combined number of neutrons and protons in the atomic nucleus. What began happened at literally millions of places at once, but each event was precisely the same. An invading “slow” neutron passed close enough to a plutonium nucleus to fall under the Strong Nuclear Force that holds atomic nuclei together. The neutron was pulled into the atom’s center, changing the energy state of the host nucleus and kicking it into an unstable state. The once symmetrical atomic nucleus began gyrating wildly and was torn apart by force fluctuations. In most cases a neutron or proton disappeared entirely, converted to energy in homage to Einstein’s law $E = MC^2$. The energy that resulted from the disappearance of the particles was released in the form of gamma- and X-radiation, or any of thirty or so other but less important routes. Finally, the atomic nucleus released two or three additional neutrons. This was the important part. The process that had required only one neutron to start released two or three more, each traveling at over ten percent of the speed of light—20,000 miles per second—through space occupied by a plutonium mass

two hundred times the density of water. The majority of the newly liberated atomic particles found targets to hit.

A chain reaction merely means that the process builds on itself, that the energy released is sufficient to continue the process without outside assistance. The fission of the plutonium proceeded in steps called "doublings." The energy liberated by each step was double that of the preceding one, and that of each subsequent step was doubled again. What began as a trivial amount of energy and just a handful of freed particles doubled and redoubled, and the interval between steps was measured in fractions of nanoseconds. The rate of increase —that is, the acceleration of the chain reaction—is called the "Alpha," and is the most important variable in the fission process. An Alpha of 1,000 means that the number of doublings per microsecond is a vast number, 2^{1000}—the number 2 multiplied by itself one *thousand* times. At peak fission—between 2^{50} and 2^{53}—the bomb would be generating 10 billion billion watts of power, one hundred thousand times the electrical-generating capacity of the entire world. Fromm had designed the bomb to do just that—and that was only ten percent of the weapon's total designed output. The Secondary had yet to be affected. No part of it had yet been touched by the forces only a few inches away.

But the fission process had scarcely begun.

Some of the gamma rays, traveling at the speed of light, were outside the bombcase while the plutonium was still being compressed by the explosives. Even nuclear reactions take time. Other gamma rays started to impact on the Secondary. The majority of the gammas streaked through a gas cloud that only a few microseconds earlier had been the chemical explosive blocks, heating it far beyond the temperatures chemicals alone could achieve. Made up of very light atoms like carbon and oxygen, this cloud emitted a vast quantity of low-frequency "soft" X-rays. To this point, the device was functioning exactly as Fromm and Ghosn had planned.

The fission process was seven nanoseconds—0.7 shakes—old when something went wrong.

Radiation from the fissioning plutonium blazed in on the tritium-impregnated lithium-deuteride that occupied the geometric center of the Pit. The reason Manfred Fromm had left the tritium extraction to last lay in his basic engineer's conservatism. Tritium is an unstable gas, with a half-life of 12.3 years, meaning that a quantity of pure tritium will, after that time, be composed half of tritium and half of ^{3}He. Called "helium-three," ^{3}He is a form of that second-lightest of elements whose nucleus lacks an extra neutron, and craves another. By filtering the gas through a thin block of palladium, the ^{3}He would have been easily separated out, but Ghosn hadn't known about that. As a result, more than a fifth of the tritium was the wrong material. It could hardly have been a worse material.

The intense bombardment from the adjacent fission reaction seared the lithium compound. Normally a material half the density of salt, it was compressed to a metallic state that exceeded the density of earth's core. What began was actually a fusion reaction, though a small one, releasing huge quantities of new neutrons, and also changing many of the lithium atoms into more tritium, which broke down—"fused"—under the intense pressure to

release yet more neutrons. The additional neutrons generated were supposed to invade the plutonium mass, boosting the alpha and causing at least a doubling of the weapon's unboosted fission yield. This had been the first method of increasing the power of the second-generation nuclear weapons. But the presence of ^{3}He poisoned the reaction, trapping nearly a quarter of the high-energy neutrons in uselessly stable helium atoms.

For several more nanoseconds, this did not matter. The plutonium was still increasing its reaction rate, still doubling, still increasing its Alpha at a rate only expressable numerically.

Energy was now flooding into the Secondary. The metallically coated straws flashed to plasma, pressing inward on the Secondary. Radiant energy in quantities not found on the surface of the sun vaporized but also reflected off elliptical surfaces, delivering yet more energy to the Secondary assembly, called the *Holraum*. The plasma from the immolated straws pounded inward toward the second reservoir of lithium compounds. The dense uranium 238 fins just outside the Secondary pit also flashed to dense plasma, driving inward through the vacuum, then striking and compressing the tubular containment of more ^{238}U around the central container which held the largest quantity of lithium-deuteride/tritium. The forces were immense, and the structure was pounded with a degree of pressure greater than that of a healthy stellar core.

But not enough.

The Primary's reaction had already slackened. Starved of neutrons by the presence of the ^{3}He poison, the bomb's explosive force began to blow apart the reaction mass as soon as the physical forces reached their balance. The chain reaction reached a moment of stability, at last unable to sustain its geometric rate of growth; the last two chain-reaction doublings were lost entirely, and what should have been a total Primary yield of seventy thousand tons of TNT was halved, halved again, and in fact ended with a total yield of eleven thousand two hundred tons of high explosive.

Fromm's design had been as perfect as the circumstances and materials allowed. An equivalent weapon less than a quarter the size was possible, but his specifications were more than adequate. A massive safety factor in the energy budget had been planned for. Even a thirty-kiloton yield would have been enough to ignite the "spark plug" in the Secondary to start a massive fusion "burn," but thirty-KT was not reached. The bomb was technically called a "fizzle."

But it was a fizzle equivalent to eleven thousand two hundred tons of TNT. That could be represented by a cube of high explosives seventy-five feet high, seventy-five feet long, and seventy-five feet thick, as much as could be carried by nearly four hundred trucks, or one medium-sized ship—but conventional explosives could never have detonated with anything approaching this deadly efficiency; in fact, a conventional explosion of this magnitude is a practical impossibility. For all that, it was still a fizzle.

As yet no perceptible physical effects had even left the bomb-case, much less the truck. The steel case remained largely intact, though that would rapidly change. Gamma radiation had already escaped, along with X-rays, but these were invisible. Visible light had not yet emerged from the plasma cloud

that had only three “shakes” before been over a thousand pounds of exquisitely designed hardware . . . and yet, everything that was to happen had already taken place. All that remained now was the distribution of the energy already released by natural laws which neither knew nor cared about the purposes of their manipulators.

36

WEAPONS EFFECTS

Sergeant Ed Yankevich should have been the first to notice what was happening. His eyes were on the van, and he was walking in that direction, scarcely forty feet away, but the human nervous system works in milliseconds and no faster.

The fizzle had just ended when the first radiation reached the police officer. These were gamma rays, which are actually photons, the same stuff that light waves are made of, but far more energetic. They were already attacking the body of the truck as well, causing the sheet steel to fluoresce like neon. Immediately behind the gammas were X-rays, also composed of photons but less energetic. The difference was lost on Yankevich, who would be the first to die. The intense radiation was most readily absorbed by his bones, which rapidly heated to incandescence, while at the same time the neurons of his brain were simultaneously excited as though each had become a flash bulb. In fact, Sergeant Yankevich was unable to notice a thing. He literally disintegrated, exploded from within by the tiny fraction of energy his body was able to absorb as the rest raced through him. But the gammas and X-rays were heading in all possible directions at the speed of light, and their next effect was one no one had anticipated.

Adjacent to the van, whose body was now being reduced to molecular bits of metal, was ABC's "A" satellite unit. Inside were several people who would have no more time to sense their fate than Sergeant Yankevich. The same was true of the elaborate and expensive electrical equipment in the van. But at the rear of this vehicle, pointing south and upward, was a large parabolic-dish antenna, not unlike the kind used for radar. In the center of this, like the stamen of a flower, was the wave guide, essentially a metal tube with a square cross-section whose inside dimensions roughly approximated the wavelength of the signal it was now broadcasting to a satellite 22,600 miles over the equator.

The wave-guide of the A unit, and soon thereafter each of the eleven trucks lined up west of it, was struck by the gammas and X-rays. In the process, electrons were blasted off the atoms of the metal—in some cases the guides were lined with gold plate, which accentuated the process—which gave up their energy at once in the form of photons. These photons formed waves whose frequency was roughly that of the satellite uplink transmitters. There was one difference: the uplink trucks were in no case transmitting as much as one thousand watts of radio-frequency—RF—energy, and in most cases far less than that. The energy transfer from the A unit's wave guide, however, released nearly a million watts of energy in one brief, orgasmic pulse that ended in less

than a microsecond as the antenna and the associated truck were also vaporized by the searing energy front. Next to go was the ABC "B" unit, then TWI. NHK, which was sending the Super Bowl to Japan, was the fourth van in the line. There were eight more. All were destroyed. This process took approximately fifteen "shakes." The satellites to which they transmitted were a long distance away. It would take the energy roughly an eighth of a second to span the distance, a relative eternity.

Next to emerge from the explosion—the truck was now part of it—was light and heat energy. The first blast of light escaped just before the expanding fireball blocked it. The second installment escaped soon thereafter, radiating in all directions. This generated the two-phase pulse which is characteristic of nuclear detonations.

The next energy effect was blast. This was actually a secondary effect. The air absorbed much of the soft X-rays and was burned into an opaque mass which stopped further electromagnetic radiation, transforming it into mechanical energy that expanded at several times the speed of sound, but before that energy had a chance to damage anything, more distant events were already under way.

The primary ABC video link was actually by fiber-optic cable—a high-quality landline—but the cable ran through the A van and was cut even before the stadium itself was damaged. The backup link was through the Telstar 301 satellite, and the Pacific Coast was serviced by Telstar 302. ABC used the Net-1 and Net-2 primary links on each bird. Also using Telstar 301 was Trans World International, which represented the NFL's worldwide rights and distributed the game to most of Europe, plus Israel and Egypt. TWI sent the same video signal to all its European clients, and also provided facilities for separate audio uplinks in the various European languages, which usually meant more than one audio link per country. Spain, for example, accounted for five dialects, each of which had its own audio sideband-channel. NHK, broadcasting to Japan, used both the JISO-F2R satellite and its regular full-time link, Westar 4, which was owned and operated by Hughes Aerospace. Italian TV used Major Path 1 of the Teleglobe satellite (owned by the Intelsat conglomerate) to feed its own viewers, plus those in Dubai and whatever Israelis didn't like the play-byplay through TWI and Telstar. Teleglobe's Major Path 2 was delegated to serve most of South America. Also present, either right at the stadium or a short distance away, were CNN, ABC's own news division, CBS Newsnet, and ESPN. Local Denver stations had their own satellite trucks on the scene, their uses mainly rented to outsiders.

There was a total of thirty-seven active satellite uplink trucks using either microwave or Ku-band transmitters to generate a total of 48 active video, and 168 active audio signals, all feeding over a billion sports fans in seventy-one countries when the gamma and X-ray flux struck. In most cases the impact generated a signal in the wave guides, but in six trucks, the traveling-wave tubes themselves were illuminated first and put out a gigantic pulse on exactly the proper frequencies. Even that was beside the point, however. Resonances and otherwise inconsequential irregularities within the wave guides meant that wide segments of the satellite frequencies were all covered with the noise-spike. All but two of the communications satellites orbiting over the Western

Hemisphere were being worked by the TV crews at Denver. What happened to them is expressed simply. Their sensitive antennas were designed to receive billionths of watts. Instead, they were suddenly bombarded with between one and ten thousand times that on numerous separate channels. That surge overloaded an equal number of the front-end amplifiers inside the satellites. The computer software running the satellites took note of this and began to activate isolation switches to protect the sensitive equipment from the spike. Had the incident affected merely one such receiver, service would have been restored at once and nothing further would have happened, but commercial communications satellites are immensely expensive artifacts, costing hundreds of millions of dollars to build and hundreds of millions more to launch into orbit. When more than five amplifiers recorded spikes, the software automatically began shutting circuits down, lest possibly serious damage to the entire satellite result. When twenty or more were affected, the software took the further step of deactivating all onboard circuits, and next firing off an emergency signal to its command ground station to say that something very serious had just happened. The safety software on the satellites were all customized variations of a single, very conservative program designed to safeguard billions of dollars' worth of nearly irreplaceable assets. In a brief flicker of time, a sizable fraction of the world's satellite communications dropped out of existence. Cable television and telecommunications systems all ceased, even before the technicians who managed their operations knew that something had gone disastrously wrong.

Pete Dawkins was resting for a moment. He thought of it as protecting the armored truck. The Wells Fargo guard was off delivering another few hundred pounds of quarters, and the police officer was sitting, his back against the shelves full of coin bags, listening to his radio. The Chargers were coming up to the line for a third-and-five at the Vikings' forty-seven. At that moment, the darkening sky outside turned incandescent yellow, then red—not the friendly, gentle red of a sunset, but a searing violet that was far brighter than that color could possibly have been. His mind barely had time to register that fact when it was assaulted by a million other things at once. The earth rose beneath him. The armored car was tossed up and sideways like a toy kicked by a child. The open rear door was slammed shut as if struck by a cannon. The body of the truck sheltered him from the shockwave—as did the body of the stadium, though Dawkins had not the time to realize it. Even so, he was nearly blinded by the flash that did reach him, and deafened by the overpressure wave that swept across him like the crushing hand of a giant. Had Dawkins been less disoriented, he might have thought *earthquake*, but even that idea did not occur to him. Survival did. The noise had not stopped, nor had the shaking, when he realized that he was trapped inside a vehicle whose fuel tank contained perhaps as much as fifty gallons of gasoline. He blinked his eyes clear and started crawling out the shattered windshield toward the brightest spot he could see. He did not notice that the backs of his hands looked worse than any sunburn he'd ever had. He did not realize that he could not hear a thing. All he cared about was getting to the light.

Outside Moscow, in a bunker under sixty meters of concrete, is the national headquarters of *Voyska PVO*, the Soviet air-defense service. A new facility, it was designed much like its Western counterparts in the form of a theater, since this configuration allowed the maximum number of people to see the data displayed on the large wall that was required for the map displays which were needed for their duties. It was 03:00:13 local time, according to the digital clock over the display, 00:00:13 Zulu (Greenwich Mean) Time, 19:00:13 in Washington, D.C.

On duty was Lieutenant General Ivan Grigoriyevich Kuropatkin, a former—he would have said "current"—fighter pilot, now fifty-one years of age. The third-ranking man at this post, he was taking his place in the normal duty rotation. Though as a very senior officer he could have opted for more convenient hours, the new Soviet military was to be founded on professionalism, and professional officers, he thought, led by example. Arrayed around him were his usual battle staff, composed of colonels, majors, plus a leavening of captains and lieutenants for menial work.

The job of *Voyska PVO* was to defend the Soviet Union against attack. In the missile age and in the absence of an effective defense against ballistic missiles—both sides were still working on that—his duties were more to warn than defend. Kuropatkin didn't like that, but neither could he change it. In geosynchronous orbit over the coast of Peru was a pair of satellites, called Eagle-I and -II, whose task it was to watch the United States and spot a missile launch just as soon as the missiles left their silos. The same satellites could also spot an SLBM launch from the Gulf of Alaska, though their coverage that far north was somewhat dependent on weather which, at the moment, was vile. The display from the orbiting Eagles was in the infrared spectrum, which mainly measured heat. The display was presented as the camera perceived it, without borderlines or other computer-generated data which, the Russian designers thought, simply cluttered the display unnecessarily. Kuropatkin was not looking up, but rather at a junior officer who seemed to be doing a calculation of some sort, when something caught his eye. His gaze shifted automatically, entirely without conscious thought, and it took fully a second for him to realize why.

There was a white dot in the center of the display.

"*Nichevo* . . ." He shook that off at once. "Isolate and zoom in!" he ordered loudly. The Colonel working the controls was sitting right next to him, and was already doing just that.

"Central United States, General. Double-flash thermal signature, that is a probable nuclear detonation," the Colonel said mechanically, his professional judgment overpowering his intellectual denial.

"Coordinates."

"Working, General." The distance from the Center to the satellite ensured a delay in getting things to happen. By the time the satellite's telescopic lens started moving in, the thermal signature from the fireball was expanding rapidly. Kuropatkin's immediate impression was that this could not possibly be a mistake, and as hot as that image was, what materialized in the pit of his stomach was a fist of ice.

"Central U.S., looks like the city of *Densva.*"

"Denver, what the hell's in Denver?" Kuropatkin demanded. "Find out."

"Yes, General."

Kuropatkin was already reaching for a telephone. This line was a direct link to the Ministry of Defense and also the residence of the Soviet President. He spoke quickly but clearly.

"Attention: This is Lieutenant General Kuropatkin at PVO Moscow Center. We have just registered a nuclear detonation in the United States. I repeat: we have just registered a nuclear detonation in the United States."

One voice on the line swore. That would be President Narmonov's watch staff.

The other voice, that of the Defense Ministry's senior watch officer, was more reasoned. "How sure are you of this?"

"Double-flash signature," Kuropatkin replied, astounded at his own coolness. "I'm watching the fireball expansion now. This is a nuclear event. I will call in more data as soon as I have it—what?" he asked a junior officer.

"General, Eagle-II just took one hell of an energy spike, four of the SHF links just shut down momentarily, and another is gone completely," a major said, leaning over the General's desk.

"What happened, what was it?"

"I don't know."

"Find out."

The picture went blank just as San Diego was coming up for their third-and-five at the forty-seven. Fowler finished off his fourth beer of the afternoon and set the glass down in annoyance. Damned TV people. Someone probably tripped over a plug, and he'd miss a play or two in what looked like one hell of a game. He ought to have gone to this one despite the advice of the Secret Service. He glanced over to see what Elizabeth was watching, but her screen had suddenly gone blank as well. Had one of the Marines driven over the cable with a snowplow? Good help certainly was hard to come by, the President grumped. But no, that wasn't right. The ABC affiliate—Baltimore's Channel 13, WJZ—put up its "Network Difficulty—Please Stand By" graphic, whereas Elizabeth's channel was just random noise now. How very odd. Like any male TV viewer, Fowler picked up the TV controller and changed channels. CNN was off the air, too, but the local Baltimore and Washington stations were not. He'd just started wondering what that meant when a phone started ringing. It had an unusually atonal, strident sound, and was one of the four kept on the lower shelf of the coffee table that sat right in front of his couch. He reached down for it before he realized which one it was, and that delayed understanding caused his skin to go cold. It was the red phone, the one from North American Aerospace Defense Command at Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado.

"This is the President," Fowler said in a gruff, suddenly frightened voice.

"Mr. President, this is Major General Joe Borstein. I am the senior NORAD watch officer. Sir, we have just registered a nuclear detonation in the Central United States."

"What?" the President said after two or three seconds' pause.

"Sir, there's been a nuclear explosion. We're checking the exact location

now, but it appears to have been in the Denver area."

"Are you sure?" the President asked, fighting to keep calm.

"We're rechecking our instruments now, sir, but, yes, we're pretty sure. Sir, we don't know what happened or how it got there, but there was a nuclear explosion. I urge you to get to a place of safety at once while we try and figure out what's going on."

Fowler looked up. Neither TV picture had changed and now alarm Klaxons were erupting all over the presidential compound.

Offutt Air Force Base, just outside Omaha, Nebraska, was once known as Fort Crook. The former cavalry post had a splendid if somewhat anachronistic collection of red brick dwellings for its most senior officers, in the rear of which was stabling for the horses they no longer needed, and in front of which was a flat parade ground of sufficient size to exercise a regiment of cavalry. About a mile from that was the headquarters of the Strategic Air Command, a much more modern building with its own antique, a B-17 Flying Fortress of World War II, sitting outside. Also outside the building but below ground was the new command post, completed in 1989. A capacious room, local wags joked that it had been built because Hollywood's rendition of such rooms was better than the one SAC had originally built for itself, and the Air Force had decided to alter its reality to fit a fictional image.

Major General Chuck Timmons, Deputy Chief of Staff (Operations), had availed himself of the opportunity to stand his watch here instead of in his upstairs office, and had in fact been watching the Super Bowl out of one eye on one of the eight large-screen TVs, but on two of the others had been real-time imagery from the Defense Support Program Satellites, called the DSPS birds, and he had caught the double-flash at Denver just as fast as everyone else. Timmons dropped the pencil he'd been working with. Behind his battle-staff seat were several glassed-in rooms—there were two levels of such rooms—which contained the fifty or so support personnel who kept SAC operating around the clock. Timmons lifted his phone and punched the button for the senior intelligence officer.

"I see it, sir."

"Possible mistake?"

"Negative, sir, test circuitry says the bird's working just fine."

"Keep me posted." Timmons turned to his deputy. "Get the boss in here. Beep everybody, I want a full emergency-action team and a full battle-staff-and I want it now!" To his operations officer: "Get Looking Glass up now! I want the alert wings postured for takeoff, and I want an immediate alert flashed to everybody."

In the glassed-in room behind the General and to his left, a sergeant pushed a few buttons. Though SAC had long since ceased keeping aircraft in the air around the clock, thirty percent of SAC's aircraft were typically kept on alert status at any time. The order out to the alert wings was sent by landline and used a computer-generated voice because it had been decided that a human might get excited and slur his words. The orders took perhaps twenty seconds to be transmitted, and the operations officers at the alert wings were galvanized to action.

At the moment, that meant two wings, the 416th Bomb Wing at Griffiss Air Force Base, Rome, New York, which flew the B-52, and the 384th, which flew the B-1B out of nearby McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas. At the latter, crewmen in their ready rooms, nearly all of whom had also been watching the Super Bowl, raced out the door to waiting vehicles which took them to their guarded aircraft. The first man from each crew of four slapped the emergency-startup button that was part of the nosewheel assembly, then ran farther aft to sprint up the ladder into the aircraft. Even before the crews were strapped in, the engines were starting up. The ground crews yanked off the red-flagged safety pins. Rifle-armed sentries got out of the way of the aircraft, training their weapons outward to engage any possible threat. To this point, no one knew that this was anything more than a particularly ill-timed drill.

At McConnell, the first aircraft to move was the wing commander's personal B-1B. An athletic forty-five, the Colonel also had the advantage of having his aircraft parked closest to the alert shack. As soon as all four of his engines were turning and the way cleared, he tripped his brakes and began to taxi his aircraft toward the end of the runway. That took two minutes, and on reaching the spot, he was told to wait.

* * *

At Offutt, the alert KC-135 was under no such restrictions. Called "Looking Glass," the converted—and twenty-five-year-old—Boeing 707 had aboard a general officer and a complete if downsized battle-staff. It was just lifting off into the falling darkness. Onboard radios and command links were just coming on line, and the officer aboard hadn't yet learned what all the hubbub was about. Behind him on the ground, three more additional and identical aircraft were being prepped for departure.

"What gives, Chuck?" CINC-SAC said as he came in. He was wearing casual clothes, and his shoes were not tied yet.

"Nuclear detonation at Denver, also some trouble on satellite communications links that we just found out about. I've postured the alert aircraft. Looking Glass just lifted off. Still don't know what the hell's going on, but Denver just blew up."

"Get 'em off," the Commander-in-Chief Strategic Air Commander ordered. Timmons gestured to a communications officer, who relayed the order. Twenty seconds later, the first B-1B roared down the runway at McConnell.

It was not a time for niceties. A Marine captain pushed open the door into the President's cabin and tossed two white parkas at Fowler and Elliot even before the first Secret Service agent showed up.

"Right now, sir!" he urged. "Chopper's still broke, sir."

"Where to?" Pete Connor arrived with his overcoat unbuttoned, just in time to hear what the Marine had said.

"Command post, 'less you say different. Chopper's broke," the captain said yet again. "Come on, sir!" he nearly screamed at the President.

"Bob!" Elliot said in some alarm. She didn't know what the President had

heard over the phone, merely that he looked pale and sick. Both donned their parkas and came outside. They saw that a full squad of Marines lay in the snow, their loaded rifles pointed outward. Six more stood around the Hummer, whose engine was screaming in neutral.

At Anacostia Naval Air Station in Washington, the crew of Marine Two—it wouldn't be Marine One until the President got aboard—was just lifting off amid a worrisome cloud of snow, but in a few seconds they were above the ground effect and able to see fairly well. The pilot, a major, turned his aircraft northwest, wondering what the hell was happening. The only people who knew anything knew merely that they didn't know very much. For a few minutes this would not matter. As with any organization, responses to a sudden emergency were planned beforehand and had been thoroughly rehearsed both to get things done and to attenuate the panic that might come from indecision mixed with danger.

"What the hell is going on in Denver that I need to know about?" General Kuropatkin asked in his hole outside Moscow.

"Nothing I know of," his intelligence officer replied honestly.

That's a big help, the General thought. He lifted the phone to the Soviet military intelligence agency, the GRU.

"Operations/Watch Center," a voice answered.

"This is General Kuropatkin at PVO Moscow."

"I know the reason for your call," the GRU Colonel assured him.

"What is happening at Denver? Is there a nuclear-weapons storage facility, anything like that?"

"No, General. Rocky Mountain Arsenal is near there. That is a storage center for chemical weapons, in the process of being deactivated. It's turning into a depot for the American reserve army—they call it the National Guard—tanks and mechanized equipment. Outside Denver is Rocky Flats. They used to fabricate weapons components there, but—"

"Where exactly?" Kuropatkin asked.

"Northwest of the city. I believe the explosion is in the southern part of Denver, General."

"Correct. Go on."

"Rocky Flats is also in the process of deactivation. To the best of our knowledge, there are no more weapons components to be found there."

"Do they transport weapons through there? I *must know something!*" The General was finally getting excited.

"I have nothing more to tell you. We're as much in the dark as you. Perhaps KGB has more, but we do not."

You couldn't shoot a man for honesty, Kuropatkin knew. He switched lines again. Like most professional soldiers, he had little use for spies, but the next call was a necessity.

"State Security, command center," a male voice said.

"American department, the duty watch officer."

"Stand by." There was the usual chirping and clicking, and a female voice

answered next. “American desk.”

“This is Lieutenant General Kuropatkin at PVO Moscow Center,” the man said yet again. “I need to know what, if anything, is happening in the Central United States, the city of Denver.”

“Very little, I would imagine. Denver is a major city, and a large administrative center for the American government, the second-largest after Washington, in fact. It is a Sunday evening there, and very little should be happening at the moment.” Kuropatkin heard pages riffling. “Oh, yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“The final game in the championship-elimination series of American-rules football. It is being played in the new Denver city stadium which, I believe, is an enclosed structure.”

Kuropatkin managed not to curse the woman for that irrelevancy. “I don’t need *that*. Is there any civil unrest, any sort of disturbance or ongoing problem? A weapons-storage facility, a secret base of some sort that I don’t know about?”

“General, everything we have on such subjects is available to you. What is the nature of your inquiry?”

“Woman, there has been a nuclear explosion there.”

“In Denver?”

“*Yes!*”

“Where, exactly?” she asked, cooler than the General was.

“Stand by.” Kuropatkin turned. “I need coordinates on the explosion and I need them now!”

“Thirty-nine degrees forty minutes north latitude, one hundred five degrees six minutes west longitude. Those numbers are approximate,” the Lieutenant on the satellite desk added. “Our resolution isn’t very good in the infrared spectrum, General.” Kuropatkin relayed the numbers.

“Wait,” the woman’s voice said. “I need to fetch a map.”

Andrey Il’ych Narmonov was asleep. It was now 3:10 in the morning in Moscow. The phone woke him, and an instant later his bedroom door opened. Narmonov nearly panicked at the second event. No one ever entered his bedroom without permission. It was KGB Major Pavel Khrulev, the assistant chief of the President’s personal security detail.

“My President, there is an emergency. You must come with me at once.”

“What is the matter, Pasha?”

“There has been a nuclear explosion in America.”

“What—who?”

“That is all I know. We must go at once to the command bunker. The car is waiting. Don’t bother getting dressed.” Khrulev tossed him a robe.

Ryan stubbed out his cigarette, still annoyed at the “Technical Difficulty—Please Stand By” sign that was keeping him from watching the game. Goodley came in with a couple cans of Coke. Dinner was already ordered.

“What gives?” Goodley asked.

“Picture went out.” Ryan took his Coke and popped it open.

At SAC Headquarters, a lieutenant colonel at the far left side of the third row of battle-staff seats consulted the TV-controller card. The room had eight TV displays, arranged in two horizontal rows of four. One could call up more than fifty individual displays, and the woman was an intelligence officer whose first instinct was to check the new channels. A quick manipulation of her controller showed that both CNN and its subsidiary CNN Headline News were off the air. She knew that they used different satellite circuits, and that piqued her curiosity, perhaps the most important aspect of intelligence work. The system also allowed access to other cable channels, and she started going through them. HBO was off the air. Showtime was off the air. ESPN was off the air. She checked her directory and concluded that at least four satellites were not functioning. At that point the Colonel got up and walked over to CINC-SAC.

"Sir, there's something very odd here," she said.

"What's that?" CINC-SAC said without turning.

"At least four commercial satellites appear to be down. That includes a Telstar, an Intelsat, and a Hughes bird. They're all down, sir."

That notification caused CINC-SAC to turn. "What else can you tell me?"

"Sir, NORAD reports that the explosion was in the Denver metropolitan area, very close to the Skydome, where they were playing the Super Bowl. SecState and SecDef were both at the game, sir."

"Christ, you're right," CINC-SAC realized instantly.

At Andrews Air Force Base, the National Emergency Airborne Command Post—NEACP, pronounced "Kneecap"—was positioned on the ramp with two of its four engines turning, waiting for someone to arrive so that the crew could take off.

Captain Jim Rosselli had barely been on duty for an hour when this nightmare arrived. He sat in the NMCC Crisis Management Room, wishing a flag officer were here. That was not to be. While there had once been a general or admiral in the National Military Command Center at all times, the thaw between East and West and the downsizing of the Pentagon now meant that a senior officer was always on call, but the day-to-day administrative work was handled by captains and colonels. It could have been worse, Rosselli thought. At least he knew what it was to have lots of nuclear weapons at his disposal.

"What the *fuck* is going on?" Lieutenant Colonel Richard Barnes asked the wall. He knew that Rosselli didn't know.

"Rocky, can we save that for another time?" Rosselli asked calmly. His voice was dead-level. One might never have known from looking at or listening to the Captain that he was excited, but the former submarine commander's hands were so moist that by rubbing them on his trousers he'd already created a damp spot that their navy-blue color made invisible.

"You got it, Jim."

"Call General Wilkes, let's get him in here."

"Right." Barnes punched a button on the secure phone, calling Brigadier General Paul Wilkes, a former bomber pilot who lived in official housing on

Boiling Air Force Base, just across the Potomac from National Airport.

"Yeah," Wilkes said gruffly.

"Barnes here, sir. We need you in the NMCC immediately." That was all the Colonel had to say. "Immediately" is a word that has special meaning for an aviator.

"On the way." Wilkes hung up and muttered further: "Thank God for four-wheel-drive." He struggled into an olive-drab winter parka and headed out the door without bothering with boots. His personal car was a Toyota Land Cruiser that he liked for driving the back country. It started at once, and he backed out, struggling across roads not yet plowed.

The Presidential Crisis Room at Camp David was an anachronistic leftover from the bad old days, or so Bob Fowler had thought on first seeing it over a year before. Constructed during the Eisenhower Administration, it had been designed to resist nuclear attack in an age when the accuracy of a missile was measured in miles rather than yards. Blasted into the living granite rock of the Catoctin Mountains of western Maryland, it had a solid sixty feet of overhead protection, and until 1975 or so had been a highly secure and survivable shelter. About thirty feet wide and forty deep, with a ten-foot ceiling, it contained a staff of twelve, mostly Navy communications types, of whom six were enlisted men. The equipment was not quite as modern as that on NEACP or certain other facilities that the President might use. He sat at a console that looked like 1960s NASA in configuration. There was even an ashtray built into the desk top. In front of him was a bank of television sets. The chair was a comfortable one, even if the situation decidedly was not. Elizabeth Elliot took the one next to his.

"Okay," President J. Robert Fowler said, "what the hell is going on?"

The senior briefing officer, he saw, was a Navy lieutenant commander. That was not very promising.

"Sir, your helicopter is down with a mechanical problem. A second Marine helo is on its way here now to get you to Kneecap. We have CINC-SAC and CINC-NORAD on line. These buttons here give you direct lines to all the other CINCs." By this, the naval officer meant the Commanders-in-Chief of major joint-service commands: CINCLANT was Commander-in-Chief Atlantic, Admiral Joshua Painter, USN; there was a corresponding CINC-PAC in charge of Pacific area forces, and both were traditionally Navy posts. CINC-SOUTH was in Panama, CINC-CENT in Bahrain, CINC-FOR—heading Forces Command—was at Fort McPherson in Atlanta, Georgia, all three of which were traditionally Army posts. There were others as well, including SACEUR, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, the chief NATO military officer, who at the moment was an Air Force four-star general. Under the existing command system, the service chiefs actually had no command authority. Instead, they advised the Secretary of Defense, who in turn advised the President. Presidential orders were issued from the President through the SecDef directly to the CINCs.

But the SecDef . . .

Fowler looked for the button labeled NORAD and pushed it.

"This is the President. I am in my Camp David communications room."

"Mr. President, this is still Major General Borstein. CINC-NORAD is not here, sir. He was in Denver for the Super Bowl. Mr. President, it is my duty to advise you that our instruments put the detonation either at or very near the Skydome stadium in Denver. It would appear very likely that Secretaries Bunker and Talbot are both dead, along with CINC-NORAD."

"Yes," Fowler said. There was no emotion in his voice. He'd already reached that conclusion.

"The Vice-CINC is traveling at the moment. I will be the senior NORAD officer for the next few hours until someone more senior manages to get back."

"Very well. Now: What the hell is going on?"

"Sir, we do not know. The detonation was not preceded by anything unusual. There was not—I repeat, sir, *not*—a ballistic inbound track prior to the explosion. We are trying to contact the air controllers at Stapleton International Airport to have them check their radar tapes for a possible airborne delivery vehicle. We didn't see anything coming in on any of our scopes."

"Would you have seen an inbound aircraft?"

"Not necessarily, sir," General Borstein replied. "It's a good system, but there are ways to beat it, especially if you use a single aircraft. In any case, Mr. President, there are some things we need to do at once. Can we talk about that for a moment?"

"Yes."

"Sir, on my own command authority as acting-CINC-NORAD, I have placed my command on DEFCON-ONE alert. As you know, NORAD has that authority, and also nuclear-release authority for defensive purposes only."

"You will not release any nuclear weapons without my authorization," Fowler said forcefully.

"Sir, the only nukes we have in our inventory are in storage," Borstein said. His voice was admirably mechanical, the other uniformed people thought. "I propose that we next initiate a conference call with CINC-SAC."

"Do it," Fowler ordered. It happened instantly.

"Mr. President, this is CINC-SAC," General Peter Fremont, USAF, announced. His voice was all business.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Sir, we do not know that, but there are some things we should do immediately."

"Go on."

"Sir, I recommend that we immediately place all of our strategic forces on a higher alert level. I recommend DEFCON-TWO. If we are dealing with a nuclear attack, we should posture our forces to maximum readiness. That will enable us to respond to an attack with the greatest possible effect. It could also have the effect of deterring whoever got this thing under way, in the event that he might have—or we could give him—second thoughts.

"If I can add to that, sir, we should also increase our readiness across the board. If for no other reason, the availability of military units to provide assistance and to reduce possible civilian panic might be very useful. I recommend DEFCON-THREE for conventional forces."

"Better to do that selectively, Robert," Liz Elliot said.

"I heard that—who is it?" Borstein asked.

"This is the National Security Advisor," Liz said, a touch too loudly. She was as pale as her white silk blouse. Fowler was still under control. Elliot was struggling to do the same.

"We have not met, Dr. Elliot. Unfortunately, our command-and-control systems do not allow us to do that selectively—at least not very fast. By sending out the alert now, however, we can activate all the units we need, then select the units we need to do things while they come on line. That will save us at least an hour. That is my recommendation."

"I concur in that," General Fremont added at once.

"Very well, do it," Fowler said. It sounded reasonable enough.

The communications were handled through separate channels. CINC-SAC handled the strategic forces. The first Emergency Action Message used the same robotic voice that had already scrambled the alerted SAC wings. While the SAC bomber bases already knew that they were being alerted, the DEFCON-TWO notice made it official and far more ominous. Fiber-optic landlines carried a similar notice to the Navy's Extremely Low Frequency radio system located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula region. This signal had to be sent out by mechanical Morse. The nature of this radio system was such that it could only send out its characters very slowly, rather like the speed of a novice typist, and it acted as a cueing system, telling submarines to come to the surface for a more detailed message to be delivered by satellite radios.

At King's Bay, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; and Groton, Connecticut, and at three other locations in the Pacific, signals by landline and satellite link were received by the duty staffs of the missile submarine squadrons, most of them aboard submarine tenders. Of America's thirty-six missile submarines in service at the moment, nineteen were at sea, on "deterrence patrol," as it was called. Two were in yardoverhaul status, and were totally unavailable for duty. The rest were tied up alongside tenders, except for USS *Ohio*, which was in the boatshed at Bangor. All had reduced crews aboard, though not one had her CO aboard this Sunday evening. That didn't really matter. The "boomers" all had two crews, and in every case one of the two commanding officers assigned to each boat was within thirty minutes of his command. All carried beepers, which went off almost simultaneously. The duty crews aboard each submarine began preparations for immediate sortie. The Command Duty Officer on each boomer was an officer who had passed the stringent test required before a submariner could be "qualified for command." Their operational orders were clear: when this sort of alert came, they had to get to sea just as fast as possible. Most thought it a drill, but drills for strategic forces were a serious business. Already, tugboats were lighting up their diesels to help the slate-gray hulls away from the tenders. Deck crews were removing safety lines and stanchions, as men who'd been aboard the tenders scrambled down the ladders to their various ships. Aboard, division officers and assistants checked their rosters to see who was aboard and who was not. The fact of the matter was that these warships, like all warships, were overmanned. They could easily sail and operate with half a

crew if they had to. DEFCON-TWO meant that they had to.

* * *

Captain Rosselli and the NMCC staff handled the conventional forces. Pre-set recordings went directly to the individual units. In the Army that meant division level. In the Air Force it was at the wing level, and in the Navy it was at the squadron level. The conventional forces were going to DEFCON-THREE. Captain Rosselli and Colonel Barnes handled voice lines to higher command levels. Even when talking to three-star officers with no less than twenty-five years of service each, it was necessary to tell every single one that: *No, sir, this is not repeat not a drill.*

American military units all over the world went instantly on alert. As was to be expected, those units which ordinarily maintained high alert levels responded the most quickly. One of these was the Berlin Brigade.

37

HUMAN EFFECTS

"Captain, we have an Emergency Action Message on the ELF."

"What?" Ricks asked, turning away from the chart table.

"Emergency Action Message, Captain." The communications officer handed over the brief code group.

"Great time for a drill." Ricks shook his head and said, "Battle Stations. Alert-One."

A petty officer immediately activated the 1-MC and made the announcement. "General Quarters, General Quarters, all hands man your battle stations." Next came an electronic alarm sure to end the most captivating of dreams.

"Mr. Pitney," Ricks said over the noise. "Antenna depth."

"Aye, Captain. Diving officer, make your depth six-zero feet."

"Make my depth six-zero feet, aye. Helm, ten degrees up on the fairwater planes."

"Ten degrees up on the fairwater planes, aye." The young crewman—helm duty is typically given to very junior men—pulled back on the aircraftlike wheel. "Sir, my planes are up ten degrees."

"Very well."

Barely had that been done when people flooded into the control room. The Chief of the Boat—*Maine*'s senior enlisted man—took his battle station at the air-manifold panel. He was the submarine's senior Diving Officer. Lieutenant Commander Claggett entered the conn to back the Captain up. Pitney, the boat's navigator, was already at his post, which was conning officer. Various enlisted men took their seats at weapons consoles. Aft, officers and men assumed their positions as different as the Missile Control Center—MCC—which monitored the status of *Maine*'s twenty-four Trident missiles, and the auxiliary equipment room, which was mainly concerned with the ship's backup diesel engine.

In the control room, the IC—internal communications—man of the watch called off the compartments as they reported in as manned and ready.

"What gives?" Claggett asked Ricks. The Captain merely handed over the brief EAM slip.

"Drill?"

"I suppose. Why not?" Ricks asked. "It's a Sunday, right?"

"Still bumpy up on the roof?"

As though on cue, *Maine* started taking rolls. The depth gauge showed 290 feet, and the massive submarine suddenly rocked 10 degrees to starboard. Throughout the vessel, men rolled their eyes and grumbled. There was

scarcely a man aboard who hadn't lost it at least once. This was the perfect environment for motion sickness. With no outside references—submarines are conspicuously short of windows and portholes—the eyes saw something that clearly was not moving while the inner ears reported that movement was definitely taking place. The same thing that had affected nearly all of the Apollo astronauts began to affect these sailors. Unconsciously, men shook their heads sharply, as though to repel a bothersome insect. They uniformly hoped that whatever the hell they were up to—no one from Ricks on down knew as yet what was happening—they'd soon be able to get back where they belonged—four hundred feet, where the ship's motion was imperceptible.

"Level at six-zero feet, sir."

"Very well," Pitney replied.

"Conn, sonar, contact lost on Sierra-16. Surface noise is screwing us all up."

"What's the last position?" Ricks asked.

"Last bearing was two-seven-zero, estimated range four-nine thousand yards," Ensign Shaw replied.

"Okay. Run up the UHF antenna. Up 'scope," he also ordered the quartermaster of the watch. *Maine* was taking 20-degree rolls now, and Ricks wanted to see why. The quartermaster rotated the red-and-white control wheel, and the oiled cylinder hissed up on hydraulic power.

"Wow," the Captain said as he put his hands on the handles. He could feel the power of the sea slapping the exposed top of the instrument. He bent down to look.

"We have a UHF signal coming in now, sir," the communications officer reported.

"That's nice," Ricks said. "I'd call that thirty-foot seas, people, mostly rollers, some are breaking over. Well, we can shoot through that if we have to," he added almost as a joke. After all, this had to be a drill.

"How's the sky?" Claggett asked.

"Overcast—no stars." Ricks stood back and slapped the handles up. "Down 'scope." He turned to Claggett. "X, we want to get back tracking our friend just as soon as we can."

"Aye, Cap'n."

Ricks was about to lift the phone to MCC. He wanted to tell the missile-control crew that he wanted this drill over just as fast as they could arrange it. The communications officer was in the compartment before he could push the proper button.

"Captain, this isn't a drill."

"What do you mean?" Ricks noticed that the Lieutenant didn't look very happy.

"DEFCON-TWO, sir." He handed over the message.

"What?" Ricks scanned the message, which was brief and chillingly to the point. "What the hell's going on?" He handed it off to Dutch Claggett.

"DEFCON-TWO? We've never been at DEFCON-TWO, not as long as I've been in . . . I remember a DEFCON-THREE once, but I was a plebe then. . . ."

Around the compartment, men traded glances. The American military has five alert levels, numbered five through one. DEFCON-FIVE was denoted normal peacetime operations. FOUR was slightly higher, calling for increased

manning of certain posts, keeping more people—mainly meaning pilots and soldiers—close to their airplanes or tanks, as the case might be. DEFCON-THREE was far more serious. At that point units were fully manned for operational deployment. At DEFCON-TWO units began to deploy, and this level was saved for the imminent threat of war. DEFCON-ONE was a level to which American forces had never been called. At that point, war was to be considered something more than a threat. Weapons were loaded and aimed in anticipation of orders to shoot.

But the entire DEFCON system was more haphazard than one might imagine. Submarines generally kept a higher-than-normal state of alert as a part of routine operations. Missile submarines, always ready to launch their birds in a matter of minutes, were effectively at DEFCON-TWO all the time. The notice from the FLTSATCOM merely made it official, and a lot more ominous.

"What else?" Ricks asked communications.

"That's it, sir."

"Any news come in, any threat warning?"

"Sir, we got the usual news broadcast yesterday. I was planning to get the next one in about five hours—you know, so we'd have the Super Bowl score." The Lieutenant paused. "Sir, there was nothing in the news, and nothing official about any crisis."

"So what the hell is going on?" Ricks asked rhetorically. "Well, that doesn't really matter, does it?"

"Captain," Claggett said, "for starters, I think we need to break off from our friend at two-seven-zero."

"Yeah. Bring her around northeast, X. He's not due for another turn soon, and that'll open the range pretty fast, then we'll head north to open further."

Claggett looked at the chart, mainly as a matter of habit to see that the water was deep. It was. They were, in fact, astride the great-circle route from Seattle to Japan. On command, USS *Maine* turned to port. A right turn would have been just as easy, but this way they would immediately start opening the range on the Akula which they'd been tracking for several days. In a minute this put the submarine broadside to the thirty-footers rolling just a few feet over their heads and made the submarine's sail almost exactly that, a target for the natural forces at work. The boat took a 40-degree roll. All over the submarine, men braced and grabbed for loose gear.

"Take her down a little, Captain?" Claggett asked.

"In a few minutes. Let's see if there's any follow-up on the satellite channel."

Three pieces of what had once been one of the most magnificent evergreen trees in Oregon had now been in the North Pacific for several weeks. The logs had still been green and heavy when they'd fallen off the MV *George McReady*. Since becoming just another entry in the flotsam on the sea, they'd soaked in more water, and the heavy steel chain that held them together changed what should have been a slightly positive buoyancy into neutral buoyancy. They could not quite get to the surface, at least not in these weather conditions. The pounding of the seas defeated every attempt at rising to the sunlight—of which there was none at the moment—and they hovered like blimps, turning slowly as the sea struggled mightily to break their chains.

A junior sonarman aboard *Maine* heard something, something at zero-four-one, almost dead ahead. It was an odd sound, he thought, metallic, like a tinkle but deeper. Not a ship, he thought, not a biologic. It was almost lost in the surface noise, and wouldn't settle down on bearing. . . .

"Shit!" He keyed his microphone. "Conn, sonar—sonar contact close aboard!"

"What?" Ricks dashed into sonar.

"Don't know what, but it's close, sir!"

"Where?"

"Can't tell, like both sides of the bow—not a ship, I don't know what the hell it is, sir!" The petty officer checked off the pip on his screen while his ears strained to identify the sound. "Not a point source—it's *close,* sir!"

"But—" Ricks stopped, turned, and shouted on reflex: "Emergency dive!" He knew it was too late for that.

The entire length of USS *Maine* reverberated like a bass drum as one of the logs struck the fiberglass dome over the bow sonar array.

There were three sections of what had once been a single tree. The first hit axially just on the edge of the sonar dome, doing very little damage because the submarine was only doing a few knots, and everything about her hull was built for strength. The noise was bad enough. The first log was shunted aside, but there were two more, and the center one tapped the hull once just outside the control room.

The helmsman responded at once to the Captain's command, pushing his control yoke all the way to the stops. The stern of the submarine rose at once, into the path of the logs. *Maine* had a cruciform stern. There was a rudder both above and below the propeller shaft. To the left and right were the stern planes, which operated like the stabilizers of an aircraft. On the outer surface of each was another vertical structure that looked like an auxiliary rudder, but was in fact a fitting for sonar sensors. The chain between two of the logs fouled on that. Two logs were outboard, and one inboard. The inboard one was just long enough to reach the spinning propeller. The resulting noise was the worst anyone had ever heard. *Maine*'s seven-bladed screw was made of manganese-bronze alloy that had been shaped into its nearly perfect configuration over a period of seven months. It was immensely strong, but not this strong. Its scimitar-shaped blades struck the logs one after another, like a slow, inefficient saw. Each impact gouged or dented the outboard edges. The officer in the maneuvering room, aft, had already decided to stop the shaft before the order to do so arrived. Outside the hull, not a hundred feet from his post, he heard the screams of abused metal as the sonar fitting was wrenched off the starboard stern plane; along with it went the additional fitting that held the submarine's towed-array sonar. At that point the logs, one of them now badly splintered, fell off into the submarine's wake, and the worst of the noise stopped.

"What the fuck was that?" Ricks nearly screamed.

"Tail's gone, sir. We just lost the tail," a sonarman said. "Right-side lateral array is damaged, sir." Ricks was already out of the room. The petty officer was talking to himself.

"Conn, maneuvering room," a speaker was saying. "Something just pounded

the hell out of our screw. I'm checking for damage to the shaft now."

"Stern planes are damaged, sir. Very sluggish on the controls," the helmsman said. The Chief of the Boat pulled the youngster off the seat and took his place. Slowly and carefully, the Master Chief worked the control wheel.

"Damaged hydraulics, feels like. The trim tabs"—these were electrically powered—"look okay." He worked the wheel left and right. "Rudder is okay, sir."

"Lock the stern planes in neutral. Ten degrees up on the fairwater planes." This order came from the XO.

"Aye."

"So, what was it?" Dubinin asked.

"Metallic—an enormous mechanical transient, bearing zero-five-one." The officer tapped the blazing mark on his screen. "Low frequency as you see, like a drum . . . but this noise here, much higher pitch. I heard that on my phones, sounded like a machine gun. Wait a minute . . ." Senior Lieutenant Rykov said, thinking rapidly. "The frequency—I mean the interval of the impulses—that was a blade-rate, that was a propeller . . . only thing it could be. . . ."

"And now?" the Captain asked.

"Gone completely."

"I want the entire sonar crew on duty." Captain Dubinin returned to control. "Come about, new course zero-four-zero. Speed ten."

Getting a Soviet Army truck was simplicity itself. They'd stolen it, along with a staff car. It was just after midnight in Berlin, and since it was a Sunday night, the streets were empty. Berlin is as lively a city as any in the world, but Monday there is a workday, and work is something that Germans take seriously. What little traffic there was came from people late to leave their local *Gasthaus*, or perhaps a few workers whose jobs required round-the-clock manning. What mattered was that traffic was agreeably light, allowing them to get to their destination right on time.

There used to be a wall, Günther Bock thought. On one side was the American Berlin detachment, and on the other a Soviet detachment, each with a small but heavily used exercise area adjacent to their barracks. The wall was gone now, leaving nothing but grass between two mechanized forces. The staff car pulled up to the Soviet gate. The sentry there was a senior sergeant of twenty years with pimples on his face and an untidy uniform. His eyes went a little wide when he saw the three stars on Keitel's shoulder boards.

"Stand at attention!" Keitel roared in perfect Russian. The boy complied at once. "I am here from Army Command to conduct an unannounced readiness inspection. You will not report our arrival to anyone. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Colonel!"

"Carry on—and clean up that filthy uniform before I come back through here or you'll find yourself on the Chinese border! Move!" Keitel ordered Bock, who was sitting at the wheel.

"*Zu Befehl, Herr Oberst,*" Bock replied after he moved off. It was funny, actually. There were a few humorous aspects to all this, Bock thought. A few.

But you had to have the right sense of humor for it.

The regimental headquarters was in an old building once used by Hitler's Wehrmacht that the Russians had used more than they had maintained. It did have the usual garden outside, and in the summer one could see the flowers arranged to duplicate the unit's patch. This one was a Guards Tank Regiment, though one with a history to which its soldiers paid little attention, judging by the sentry at the gate. Bock pulled right up to the door. Keitel and the rest dismounted from their vehicles and walked into the front door like gods in a bad mood.

"Who's the duty officer of this whorehouse?" Keitel bellowed. A corporal just pointed. Corporals do not dispute the orders of staff-grade officers. The duty officer, they found, was a major, perhaps thirty years of age.

"What is this?" the young officer asked.

"I am Colonel Ivanenko of the Inspectorate. *This* is an unannounced operational-readiness inspection. Hit your alarm!" The Major walked two steps and punched a button that set off sirens all over the camp area.

"Next, call your regimental commander, and get his drunken ass over here! What is your readiness state, Major?" Keitel demanded without giving the man a chance to take a breath. The junior officer stopped in midreach for the phone, not knowing which order he was supposed to follow first. *"Well?"*

"Our readiness is in accordance with unit norms, Colonel Ivanenko."

"You have a chance to prove that." Keitel turned to one of the others. "Take this child's name!"

Less than two thousand meters away, they could see lights going on at the American base in what had so recently been West Berlin.

"They're having a drill also," Keitel/Ivanenko observed. "Splendid. We'd better be faster than they are," he added.

"What is this?" The regimental commander, also a colonel, arrived without his buttons done.

"This looks like a sorry spectacle!" Keitel boomed. *"This* is an unannounced readiness inspection. You have a regiment to lead, Colonel. I suggest you get to it without asking any further questions."

"But—"

"But *what?"* Keitel demanded. *"Don't you know what a readiness inspection* is?"

There was one thing about dealing with Russians, Keitel thought. They were arrogant, overbearing, and they hated Germans, however much they protested otherwise. On the other hand, when browbeaten, they were predictable. Even though his rank insignia was no higher than this man's, he had a louder voice, and that was all he needed.

"I'll show you what my boys can do."

"We'll be outside to watch," Keitel assured him.

"Dr. Ryan, you'd better get down here." The line clicked off.

"Okay," Jack said. He grabbed his cigarettes and walked down to room 7-F-27, the CIA's Operations Center. Located on the north side of the building, it was the counterpart to operations rooms in many other government agencies. In the center of the twenty-by-thirty-foot room, once you got past the cipher

lock on the door, was a large circular table with a lazy-Susan bookcase in the center and six seats around it. The seats had overhead plaques to designate their functions: Senior Duty Officer, Press, Africa—Latin America, Europe—USSR, Near-East-Terrorism, and South Asia—East Asia—Pacific. The wall clocks showed the time in Moscow, Beijing, Beirut, Tripoli, and, of course, Greenwich Mean. There was an adjacent conference room that looked down on the CIA's internal courtyard.

"What gives?" Jack asked, arriving with Goodley in his wake.

"According to NORAD a nuclear device just went off in Denver."

"I hope that's a fucking joke!" Jack replied. That, too, was a reflex. Before the man had a chance to respond, Ryan's stomach turned over. Nobody made jokes like that one.

"I wish it were," the Senior Duty Officer replied.

"What do we know?"

"Not much."

"Anything? Threat board?" Jack asked. Again it was reflexive. If there had been anything, he would have heard it by now. "Okay—where's Marcus?"

"Coming home in the C-141, somewhere between Japan and the Aleutians. You're it, sir," the SDO pointed out, quietly thanking a beneficent God that it wasn't himself. "President's at Camp David. SecDef and SecState—"

"Dead?" Ryan asked.

"It would appear so, sir."

Ryan closed his eyes. "Holy Jesus. The Vice President?"

"At his official residence. We've only been going about three minutes. The NMCC watch officer is a Captain James Rosselli. General Wilkes is on the way in. DIA's on line. They—I mean the President just ordered DEFCON-TWO on our strategic forces."

"Anything from the Russians?"

"Nothing unusual at all. There's a regional air-defense exercise under way in Eastern Siberia. That's all."

"Okay, alert all the stations. Put the word out that I want to hear anything they might have—anything. They are to hit every source they can just as fast as they can." Jack paused one more time. "How sure are we that this really happened?"

"Sir, two DSPS satellites copied the flash. We have a KLH-11 that's going to be overhead in about twenty minutes, and I've directed NPIC to put every camera they have on Denver. NORAD says it's a definite nuclear detonation, but there's no word on yield or damage. The explosion seems to be in the immediate area of the stadium—like *Black Sunday,* sir, but real. This is definitely not a drill, not if we're jacking the strategic forces to DEFCON-TWO, sir."

"Inbound ballistic track? Aircraft delivery?"

"Negative on the first, there was no launch warning, and no ballistic radar track."

"What about a FOBS?" Goodley asked. A weapon could be delivered by satellite. That was the purpose of a Fractional-Orbital Bombardment System.

"They would have caught that," the SDO replied. "I already asked. On the aircraft side, they don't know yet. They're trying to check air-traffic-control

tapes."

"So we don't know jack shit."

"Correct."

"President check in with us yet?" Ryan asked.

"No, but we have an open line there. He has the National Security Advisor there also."

"Most likely scenario?"

"I'd say terrorism."

Ryan nodded. "So would I. I'm taking over the conference room. Okay, I want DO, DI, DS&T in here immediately. If you need choppers to fetch them in, order 'em." Ryan walked into the room, leaving the door open.

"Christ," Goodley said. "You sure you want me here?"

"Yes, and when you have an idea, you say it out loud. I forgot about FOBS." Jack lifted the phone and punched the FBI button.

"Command Center."

"This is CIA, Deputy Director Ryan speaking. Who is this?"

"Inspector Pat O'Day. I have Deputy Assistant Director Murray here also. You're on speaker, sir."

"Talk to me, Dan." Jack put his phone on speaker also. A watch officer handed him a cup of coffee.

"We don't know anything. No heads-up at all, Jack. Thinking terrorists?"

"At the moment it seems the most plausible alternative."

"How sure are you of that?"

"Sure?" Ryan shook his head at the phone, Goodley saw. "What's 'sure' mean, Dan?"

"I hear you. We're still trying to figure out what happened here, too. I can't even get CNN on the TV to work."

"What?"

"One of my communications people says the satellites are all out," Murray explained. "Didn't you know that?"

"No." Jack pointed for Goodley to get back into the Ops Center and find out. "If that's true, it could scratch the terrorism idea. Jesus, that's scary!"

"It's true, Jack. We've checked."

"They think ten commercial commosats are nonfunctional," Goodley said. "All the defense birds are on line, though. Our commlinks are okay."

"Find the most senior S&T guy you can find—or one of our commo people—and ask him what could snuff out satellites. Move!" Jack ordered. "Where's Shaw?"

"On his way in. Going to be awhile the way the roads are."

"Dan, I'll give you everything I get here."

"It'll be a two-way street." The line went dead.

The most horrible thing was that Ryan didn't know what to do next. It was his job to gather data and forward it to the President, but he had no data. What information there was would come in through military circuits. CIA had failed again, Ryan told himself. Someone had done something to his country and he hadn't warned anyone. People were dead because his agency had failed in its mission. Ryan was Deputy Director, the man who really ran the shop for the political drone placed over his head. The failure was personal. A million

people dead, maybe, and there he was, all alone in an elegant little conference room staring at a wall with nothing on it. He hunted a line to NORAD and punched it.

"NORAD," a disembodied voice answered.

"This is the CIA Operations Center, Deputy Director Ryan speaking. I need information."

"We do not have much, sir. We think the bomb exploded in the immediate vicinity of the Skydome. We are trying to estimate yield, but nothing yet. A helicopter has been dispatched from Lowry Air Force Base."

"Will you keep us posted?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you." That was a big help, Ryan thought. Now he knew that someone else didn't know anything.

There was nothing magical about a mushroom cloud, Battalion Chief Mike Callaghan of the Denver City Fire Department knew. He'd seen one before, as a rookie firefighter. It had been a fire in the Burlington yards just outside the city, in 1968. A propane tank-car had let go, right next to another trainload of bombs en route to the Navy's munitions terminal at Oakland, California. The chief back then had had the good sense to pull his men back when the tank ruptured, and from a quarter mile away they'd watched a hundred tons of bombs go off in a hellish firecracker series. There had been a mushroom then also. A large mass of hot air rose, roiling as it went into an annular shape. It created an updraft, drawing air upward into its donut-shaped center, making the stem of the mushroom. . . .

But this one was much larger.

He was behind the wheel of his red-painted command car, following the first alarm, three Seagrave pumper units, an aerial ladder truck, and two ambulances. It was a pitiful first response. Callaghan lifted his radio and ordered a general alarm. Next he ordered his men to approach from upwind.

Christ, what had happened here?

It couldn't be that . . . most of the city was still intact.

Chief Callaghan didn't know much, but he knew there was a fire to fight and people to rescue. As his car turned off the last sidestreet onto the boulevard leading to the stadium, he saw the main smoke mass. The parking lot, of course. It had to be. The mushroom cloud was blowing rapidly southwest toward the mountains. The parking lot was a mass of fire and flame from burning gasoline and oil and auto parts. A powerful gust of wind cleared the smoke briefly, just enough that he could see that there had been a stadium here . . . a few sections were still . . . not intact, but you could tell what they were—had been only a few minutes before. Callaghan shut that out. He had a fire to fight. He had people to rescue. The first pump unit pulled up at a hydrant. They had good water here. The stadium was fully sprinklered, and that system fed off two 36-inch, high-pressure mains that gridded around the complex.

He parked his car next to the first big Seagrave and left it to climb on top of the fire engine. Some heavy structural material—the stadium roof, he supposed—was in the parking lot to his right. More had landed a quarter mile

away in the mercifully empty parking lot of a shopping center. Callaghan used his portable radio to order the next wave of rescue units to check both the shopping center and the residential area that lay beyond it. The smaller fires would have to wait. There were people in the stadium who needed help, but his firefighters would have to fight through two hundred yards of burning cars to get to them. . . .

Just then he looked up to see a blue Air Force rescue helicopter. The UH-1N landed thirty yards away. Callaghan ran over toward it. The officer inside the back, he saw, was an Army major.

"Callaghan," he said. "Battalion chief."

"Griggs," the Major replied. "You need a look-around?"

"Right."

"'Kay." The Major spoke into his headset and the helicopter lifted off. Callaghan grabbed a seat belt but didn't strap in.

It didn't take long. What appeared to be a wall of smoke from street level became discrete pillars of black and gray smoke from overhead. Perhaps half of the cars had ignited. He could use one of the driving lanes to get closer in, but some of the way was blocked by wrecked and burning cars. The chopper made a single circuit, bouncing through the roiled, hot air. Looking down, Callaghan could see a mass of melted asphalt, some of it still glowing red. The only spot not giving off smoke was the south end of the stadium itself, which seemed to glisten, though he didn't know why. What they could see appeared to be a crater whose dimensions were hard to judge, since they could only catch bits and pieces of it at a time. It took a long look to determine that parts of the stadium structure remained standing, perhaps four or five sections, Callaghan thought. There had to be people in there.

"Okay, I've seen enough," Callaghan told Griggs. The officer handed him a headset so that they could speak coherently.

"What is this?"

"Just what it looks like, far as I can tell," Griggs replied. "What do you need?"

"Heavy-lift and rigging equipment. There are probably people in what's left of the stadium. We gotta get in to them. But what about the—what about radiation?"

The Major shrugged. "I don't know. When I leave here, I'm picking up a team from Rocky Flats. I work at the Arsenal, and I know a little about this, but the specialists are at Rocky Flats. There's a NEST team there. I need to get them down here ASAP. Okay, I'll call the guard people at the Arsenal, we can get the heavy equipment down here fast. Keep your people to windward. Keep your people at this end. Do not attempt to approach from any other direction, okay?"

"Right."

"Set up a decontamination station right there where your engines are. When people come out, hose them down—strip them and hose them down. Understand?" the Major asked as the chopper touched down. "Then get them to the nearest hospital. Upwind—remember that everything has to go northeast into the wind, so you know you're safe."

"What about fallout?"

"I'm no expert, but I'll give you the best I got. Looks like it was a small one. Not much fallout. The suction from the fireball and the surface wind should have driven most of the radioactive shit away from here. Not all, but most. It should be okay for an hour or so—exposure, I mean. By that time I'll have the NEST guys here and they can tell you for sure. Best I can do for now, Chief. Good luck."

Callaghan jumped out and ran clear. The chopper lifted right off, heading northwest for Rocky Flats.

"Well?" Kuropatkin asked.

"General, we measure yield by the initial and residual heat emissions. There is something odd about this, but my best figure is between one hundred fifty and two hundred kilotons." The Major showed his commander the calculations.

"What's odd about it?"

"The energy from the initial flash was low. That might mean some clouds were in the way. The residual heat is quite high. This was a major detonation, comparable to a very large tactical warhead or a small strategic one."

"Here's the target book," a lieutenant said. It was just that, a clothbound quarto-sized volume whose thick pages were actually foldout maps. It was intended for use in strike-damage evaluation. The map of the Denver area had a plastic overlay that showed the targeting of Soviet strategic missiles. A total of eight birds were detailed on the city, five SS-18s and three SS-19s, totaling no fewer than sixty-four warheads and twenty megatons of yield. Someone, Kuropatkin reflected, thought Denver a worthy target.

"We're assuming a ground-burst?" Kuropatkin asked.

"Correct," the Major replied. He used a compass to draw a circle centered on the stadium complex. "A two-hundred-kiloton device would have a lethal blast radius this wide. . . ."

The map was color-coded. Hard-to-kill structures were colored brown. Dwellings were yellow. Green denoted commercial and other buildings deemed easy targets to destroy. The stadium, he saw, was green, as was nearly everything immediately around it. Well inside the lethal radius were hundreds of houses and low-rise apartment buildings.

"How many in the stadium?"

"I called KGB for an estimate," the Lieutenant said. "It's an enclosed structure—with a roof. The Americans like their comforts. Total capacity is over sixty thousand."

"My God," General Kuropatkin breathed. "Sixty thousand there . . . at least another hundred thousand inside this radius. The Americans must be insane by now." *And if they think* we *did it*. . . .

"Well?" Borstein asked.

"I ran the numbers three times. Best guess, one-fifty-KT, sir," the Captain said.

Borstein rubbed his face. "Christ. Casualty count?"

"Two hundred-K, based on computer modeling and a quick look at the maps we have on file," she answered. "Sir, if somebody's thinking terrorist device,

they're wrong. It's too big for that."

Borstein activated the conference line to the President and CINC-SAC.

"We have some early numbers here."

* * *

"Okay, I'm waiting," the President said. He stared at the speaker as though it were a person.

"Initial yield estimates look like one hundred fifty kilotons."

"That big?" General Fremont's voice asked.

"We checked the numbers three times."

"Casualties?" CINC-SAC asked next.

"On the order of two hundred thousand initial dead. Add fifty more to that from delayed effects."

President Fowler recoiled backwards as though slapped across the face. For the past five minutes he had denied as much as he could. This most important of denials had just vanished. Two hundred thousand people dead. His citizens, the people he'd sworn to preserve, protect, and defend.

"What else?" his voice asked.

"I didn't catch that," Borstein said.

Fowler took a deep breath and spoke again. "What else do you have?"

"Sir, our impression here is that the yield is awfully high for a terrorist device."

"I'd have to concur in that," CINC-SAC said. "An IND—an improvised nuclear device, that is, what we'd expect from unsophisticated terrorists—should not be much more than twenty-KT. This sounds like a multistage weapon."

"Multistage?" Elliot said toward the speaker.

"A thermonuclear device," General Borstein replied. "An H-Bomb."

"Ryan here, who's this?"

"Major Fox, sir, at NORAD. We have an initial feel for yield and casualties." The Major read off the bomb numbers.

"Too big for a terrorist weapon," said an officer from the Directorate of Science and Technology.

"That's what we think, sir."

"Casualties?" Ryan asked.

"Probable prompt-kill number is two hundred thousand or so. That includes the people at the stadium."

I have to wake up, Ryan told himself, his eyes screwed tightly shut. *This has to be a fucking nightmare, and I'm going to wake up from it*. But he opened his eyes, and nothing had changed at all.

* * *

Robby Jackson was sitting in the cabin of the carrier's skipper, Captain Ernie Richards. They had been half-listening to the game, but mainly discussing tactics for an upcoming war game. The *Theodore Roosevelt* battle group would approach Israel from the west, simulating an attacking enemy. The enemy in this case was the Russians. It seemed highly unlikely, of course, but you had to set some rules for the game. The Russians, in this case, were going to be clever. The battle group would be broken up to resemble a loose assembly of merchant ships instead of a tactical formation. The first attack wave would be fighters and attack-bombers squawking "international" on their IFF boxes, and would try to approach Ben-Gurion International Airport in the guise of peaceful airliners, the better to get inside Israeli airspace unannounced. Jackson's operations people had already purloined airliner schedules and were examining the time factors, the better to make their first attack seem as plausible as possible. The odds against them were long. It was not expected that *TR* could do much more than annoy the IAF and the new USAF contingent. But Jackson liked long odds.

"Turn up the radio, Rob. I forgot what the score is."

Jackson leaned across the table and turned the dial, but got music. The carrier had her own on-board TV system, and was also radio-tuned to the U.S. Armed Forces network. "Maybe the antenna broke," the Air Wing Commander observed.

Richards laughed. "At a time like this? I could have a mutiny aboard."

"That would look good on the old fit-rep, wouldn't it?" Someone knocked at the door. "Come!" Richards said. It was a yeoman.

"Flash-traffic, sir." The petty officer handed the clipboard over.

"Anything important?" Robby asked.

Richards just handed the message over. Then he lifted the growler phone and punched up the bridge. "General quarters."

"What the hell?" Jackson murmured. "DEFCON-THREE—why, for Christ's sake?"

Ernie Richards, a former attack pilot, had a reputation as something of a character. He'd reinstituted the traditional Navy practice of bugle calls to announce drills. In this case, the 1-MC speaker system blared forth the opening bars of John Williams' frantic call to arms in *Star Wars*, followed by the usual electronic gonging.

"Let's go, Rob." Both men started running down to the Combat Information Center.

"What can you tell me?" Andrey Il'ych Narmonov asked.

"The bomb had a force of nearly two hundred kilotons. That means a large device, a hydrogen bomb," General Kuropatkin said. "The death count will be well over one hundred thousand dead. We also have indications of a strong electromagnetic pulse that struck one of our early-warning satellites."

"What could account for that?" The questioner here was one of Narmonov's military advisers.

"We do not know."

"Do we have any nuclear weapons unaccounted for?" Kuropatkin heard his President ask.

"Absolutely not," a third voice replied.

"Anything else?"

"With your permission, I would like to order *Voyska PVO* to a higher alert level. We already have a training exercise under way in Eastern Siberia."

"Is that provocative?" Narmonov asked.

"No, it is totally defensive. Our interceptors cannot harm anyone more than a few hundred kilometers from our own borders. For the moment I will keep all my aircraft within Soviet airspace."

"Very well, you may proceed."

In his underground control center, Kuropatkin merely pointed to another officer, who lifted a phone. The Soviet air-defense system had already been prepped, of course; inside a minute radio messages were being broadcast, and long-range search radars came on all over the country's periphery. Both the messages and the radar signals were immediately detected by National Security Agency assets, both on the ground and in orbit.

"Anything else I should do?" Narmonov asked his advisers.

A Foreign Ministry official spoke for all of them. "I think doing nothing is probably best. When Fowler wishes to speak with us, he will do so. He has trouble enough without our interfering."

* * *

The American Airlines MD-80 landed at Miami International Airport and taxied over to the terminal. Qati and Ghosn rose from their first-class seats and left the aircraft. Their bags would be transferred automatically to the connecting flight, not that either one particularly cared about that, of course. Both men were nervous, but less so than one might have expected. Death was something both had accepted as an overt possibility for this mission. If they survived, so much the better. Ghosn didn't panic until he realized that there was no unusual activity at all. There should have been some, he thought. He found a bar and looked for the usual elevated television set. It was tuned to a local station. There was no game coverage. He debated asking a question, but decided not to. It was a good decision. He had only to wait a minute before he overheard another voice asking what the score was.

"It was fourteen-seven Vikings," another voice answered. "Then the goddamned signal was lost."

"When?"

"About ten minutes ago. Funny they don't have it back yet."

"Earthquake, like the Series game in San Francisco?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, man," the bartender replied.

Ghosn stood and left for the walk back to the departure lounge.

"What does CIA have?" Fowler asked.

"Nothing at the moment, sir. We're collecting data, but you know everything that we—wait a minute." Ryan took the message form that the Senior Duty Officer handed him. "Sir, I have a flash here from NSA. The Russian air-defense system just went to a higher alert level. Radars are all coming on, and there's a lot of radio chatter."

"What does that mean?" Liz Elliot asked.

"It means that they want to increase their ability to protect themselves. PVO isn't a threat to anybody unless they're approaching or inside Soviet airspace."

"But *why* would they do it?" Elliot asked again.

"Maybe they're afraid somebody will attack them."

"Goddamn it, Ryan!" the President shouted.

"Mr. President, excuse me. That was not a flippant remark. It is literally true. *Voyska PVO* is a defense system like our NORAD. Our air-defense and warning systems are now at a higher alert status. So are theirs. It's a defensive move only. They have to know that we've had this event. When there's trouble of this sort, it's natural to activate your own defenses, just as we have done."

"It's potentially disturbing," General Borstein said at NORAD HQ. "Ryan, you forget we *have* been attacked. They have not. Now, before they've even bothered to call us, they're jacking up their alert levels. I find that a little worrisome."

"Ryan, what about those reports that we got about missing Soviet nuclear weapons?" Fowler asked. "Could that fit into this situation?"

"What missing nukes?" CINC-SAC demanded. "Why the hell didn't I hear about that?"

"What kind of nukes?" Borstein asked a second later.

"That was an unconfirmed report from a penetration agent. There are no details," Ryan answered, then realized he had to press on. "The sum of the information received is this: We've been told that Narmonov has political problems with his military; that they are unhappy with the way he's doing things; that in the ongoing pullback from Germany, an unspecified number of nuclear weapons—probably tactical ones—have turned up missing; that KGB is conducting an operation to determine what, if anything, is missing. Supposedly Narmonov is personally concerned that he might be the target of political blackmail, and that the blackmail could have a nuclear dimension. *But*, and I must emphasize the *but*, we have been totally unable to confirm these reports despite repeated attempts, and we are examining the possibility that our agent is lying to us."

"Why didn't you tell us that?" Fowler asked.

"Mr. President, we're in the process of formulating our assessment now. The work is still ongoing, sir, I mean, we've been doing it over the weekend."

"Well, it sure as hell wasn't one of ours," General Fremont said heatedly. "And it's no goddamned terrorist bomb, it's too goddamned big for that. *Now* you tell us that the Russians may have a short inventory. That's more than disturbing, Ryan."

"And it could explain the increased alert level at PVO," Borstein added ominously.

"Are you two telling me," the President asked, "that this could have been a Soviet device?"

"There aren't all that many nuclear powers around," Borstein replied first. "And the yield of this device is just too damned big for amateurs."

"Wait a minute." Jack jumped in again. "You have to remember that the facts we have here are very thin. There is a difference between information and speculation. You have to remember that."

"How big are Soviet tactical nuclear weapons?" Liz Elliot wanted to know.

CINC-SAC handled that one: "A lot like ours. They have little one-kiloton ones for artillery rounds, and they have warheads up to five hundred-KT left over from the SS-20s they did away with."

"In other words the yield of this explosion falls into the range of the Soviet warhead types that we have heard are missing?"

"Correct, Dr. Elliot," General Fremont replied.

At Camp David, Elizabeth Elliot leaned back in her chair and turned to the President. She spoke too softly for the speakerphone to catch her words.

"Robert, you were supposed to be at that game, along with Brent and Dennis."

It was strange that he hadn't had that thought enter his mind yet, Fowler told himself. He, too, leaned back. "No," he replied. "I cannot believe that the Russians would attempt such a thing."

"What was that?" a voice on the speaker asked.

"Wait a minute," the President said too quietly.

"Mr. President, I didn't catch what you said."

"I said, wait a minute!" Fowler shouted. He put his hand over the speaker for a moment. "Elizabeth, it's our job to get control of this situation and we will. Let's try to put this personal stuff aside for the moment."

"Mr. President, I want you on Kneecap just as fast as you can get there," CINC-SAC said. "This situation could be very serious indeed."

"If we're going to get control, Robert, we must do it quickly."

Fowler turned to the naval officer standing behind him. "When's the chopper due in?"

"Twenty-five minutes, sir, then thirty more to get you to Andrews for Kneecap."

"Almost an hour . . ." Fowler looked at the wall clock, as people do when they know what time it is, know what time it will take to do something, and look at the clock anyway. "The radio links on the chopper aren't enough for this. Tell the chopper to take Vice President Durling to Kneecap. General Fremont?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"You have extra Kneecaps there, don't you?"

"Yes, I do, sir."

"I'm sending the Vice President up on the primary. You send a spare down here. You can land it at Hagerstown, can't you?"

"Yes, sir, we can use the Fairchild-Republic airfield, where they used to build the A-10s."

"Okay, do that. It'll take me an hour to get to Andrews, and I cannot afford to waste an hour. It's my job to settle this thing down, and I need that hour."

"That, sir, is a mistake," Fremont said in the coldest voice he had. It would take two hours to get the aircraft to central Maryland.

"That may be, but it's what I'm going to do. This is not a time for me to run away."

Behind the President, Pete Connor and Helen D'Agustino traded a baleful look. They had no illusions on what would happen if there were a nuclear

attack on the United States. Mobility was the President's best defense, and he had just thrown that away.

The radio message from Camp David went out at once. The presidential helicopter was just crossing the Washington Beltway when it turned and went back southeast. It landed on the grounds of the U.S. Naval Observatory. Vice President Roger Durling and his entire family jumped aboard. They didn't even bother strapping in. Secret Service agents, with their Uzi sub-machine guns out, knelt inside the aircraft. All Durling knew was what the Secret Service detail had told him. Durling told himself that he had to relax, that he had to keep his head. He looked at his youngest child, a boy only four years old. To be that age again, he'd thought only the day before, to be that age again and be able to grow up in a world where the chance of a major war no longer existed. All the horrors of his youth, the Cuban Missile Crisis that had marked his freshman year in college, his service as a platoon leader in the 82nd Airborne, a year of which had been in Vietnam. War experience made Durling a most unusual liberal politician. He hadn't run from it. He'd taken his chances and remembered having two men die in his arms. Just yesterday he'd looked at his son and thanked God that he wouldn't have to know any of that.

And now, this. His son still didn't know anything more than that they were getting a surprise helicopter ride, and he loved to fly. His wife knew more, and there were tears streaming from her eyes as she stared back at him.

The Marine VH-3 touched down within fifty yards of the aircraft. The first Secret Service agent leaped off and saw a platoon of Air Force security police marking the way to the stairs. The Vice President was practically dragged toward them, while a burly agent picked up his young son and ran the distance. Two minutes later, before people had even strapped in, the pilot of the National Emergency Airborne Command Post—Kneecap—firewalled his engines and roared down runway Zero-One Left. He headed east for the Atlantic Ocean, where a KC-10 tanker was already orbiting to top off the Boeing's tanks.

"We have a major problem here," Ricks said in the maneuvering room. *Maine* had just tried to move. At any speed over three knots, the propeller screeched like a banshee. The shaft was slightly bent, but they'd live with that for a while. "All seven blades must be damaged. If we try for anything over three we make noise. Over five and we'll lose the shaft bearings in a matter of minutes. The outboard motor can give us two or three knots, but that's noisy too. Comments?" There were none. No one aboard doubted Ricks'engineering expertise. "Options?"

"Kinda thin, aren't they?" Dutch Claggett observed.

Maine had to stay near the surface. At this alert level, she had to be ready to launch in minutes. Ordinarily they could have gone to a deeper depth, if for no other reason than to reduce the horrible motion the ship was taking right now from surface turbulence, but her reduced speed made coming up too time-consuming.

"How close is *Omaha*?" the chief engineer asked.

"Probably within a hundred miles, and there's P-3s at Kodiak—but we still

have that Akula out there to worry about," Claggett said. "Sir, we can hang tough right here and wait it out."

"No, we have a hurt boomer. We need some kind of support."

"That means radiating," the XO pointed out.

"We'll use a SLOT buoy."

"At two knots through the water, that doesn't buy us much, sir. Captain, radiating is a mistake."

Ricks looked at his chief engineer, who said, "I like the idea of having a friend around."

"So do I," the Captain said. It didn't take long. The buoy was on the surface in seconds and immediately began broadcasting a short message in UHF. It was programmed to continue broadcasting for hours.

"We're going to have a nationwide panic on our hands," Fowler said. That was not his most penetrating observation. He had a growing panic in his own command center, and knew it. "Is there anything coming out of Denver?"

"Nothing on any commercial TV or radio channel that I know of," a voice at NORAD replied.

"Okay, you people stand by." Fowler searched his panel for another button.

"FBI Command Center. Inspector O'Day speaking."

"This is the President," Fowler said unnecessarily. It was a direct line and the light on the FBI panel was neatly labeled. "Who's in charge down there?"

"I am Deputy Assistant Director Murray, Mr. President. I'm the senior man at the moment."

"How are your communications?"

"They're okay, sir. We have access to the military commsats."

"One thing we have to worry about is a nationwide panic. To prevent that, I want you to send people to all the TV network headquarters. I want your people to explain to them that they may not broadcast anything about this. If necessary, you are directed to use force to prevent it."

Murray didn't like that. "Mr. President, that is against—"

"I know the law, okay? I used to be a prosecutor. This is necessary to preserve life and order, and it will be done, Mr. Murray. That is a Presidential Order. Get to it."

"Yes, sir."

38

FIRST CONTACTS

The various communications-satellite operators were fiercely independent companies and very often ruthless competitors, but they were not enemies. Between them were agreements informally called treaties. There was always the possibility that one satellite or another could go down, whether from an internal breakdown or collision with space debris that was becoming a real worry for them. Accordingly, there were mutual-assistance agreements specifying that in the event one operator lost a bird, his associates would take up the slack, just as newspapers in the same city traditionally agreed to share printing facilities in the event of a fire or natural disaster. To back up these agreements, there were open phone lines between the various corporate headquarters. Intelsat was the first to call Telstar.

"Bert, we just had two birds go down," Intelsat's duty engineer reported in a slightly shaken voice. "What gives?"

"Shit, we just lost three, and Westar 4 and Teleglobe are down, too. We've had complete system failures here. Running checks now—you?"

"Same here, Bert. Any ideas?"

"None. We're talking like nine birds down, Stacy. Fuck!" The man paused. "Ideas? Wait a minute, getting something . . . okay, it's software. We're interrogating 301 now . . . they got spiked . . . Jesus! 301 got spiked on over a hundred freqs! Somebody just tried to zorch us."

"That's how it looks here, too. But who?"

"Sure as hell wasn't a hacker . . . this would take megawatts to do that on just one channel."

"Bert, that's exactly what I'm getting. Phone links, everything spiked at once. You in any hurry to light them back up?" "You kidding me? I got a billion worth of hardware up there. Till I find out what the hell clobbered them, they stay down. I've got my senior VP on the way in now. The Pres was out in Denver," Bert added.

"Mine, too, but my chief engineer is snowed in. Damned if I'm going to put my ass on the line. I think we should cooperate on this, Bert."

"No arguments with me, Stace. I'll whistle up Fred Kent at Hughes and see what he thinks. It'll take awhile for us to review everything and do full systems checks. I'm staying down until I know—and I mean *know*—what happened here. We got an industry to protect, man."

"Agreed. I won't light back up without talking to you."

"Keep me posted on anything you find out?"

"You got it, Bert. I'll be back to you in an hour one way or another."

The Soviet Union is a vast country, by far the largest in the world both in area and in the expanse of its borders. All of those borders are guarded, since both the current country and all its precursors have been invaded many times. Border defenses include the obvious—troop concentrations, airfields, and radar posts—and the subtle, like radio reception antennas. The latter were designed to listen in on radio and other electronic emissions. The information was passed on by landline or microwave links to Moscow Center, the headquarters of the Committee for State Security, the KGB, at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square. The KGB's Eighth Chief Directorate is tasked to communications intelligence and communications security. It has a long and distinguished history that has benefited from another traditional Russian strength, a fascination with theoretical mathematics. The relationship between ciphers and mathematics is a logical one, and the most recent manifestation of this was the work of a bearded, thirtyish gnome of a man who was fascinated with the work of Benoit Mandelbrot at Harvard University, the man who had effectively invented fractal geometry. Uniting this work with that of MacKenzie's work on Chaos Theory at Cambridge University in England, the young Russian genius had invented a genuinely new theoretical way of looking at mathematical formulae. It was generally conceded by that handful of people who understood what he was talking about that his work was easily worth a Planck Medal. It was an historical accident that his father happened to be a General in the KGB's Chief Border Guards Directorate, and that as a result the Committee for State Security had taken immediate note of his work. The mathematician now had everything a grateful Motherland could offer, and someday he'd probably have that Planck Medal also.

He'd needed two years to make his theoretical breakthrough into something practical, but fifteen months earlier he'd made his first "recovery" from the U.S. State Department's most secure cipher, called STRIPE. Six months after that he'd proven conclusively that it was similar in structure to everything the U.S. military used. Cross-checking with another team of cryptanalysts who had access to the work of the Walker spy ring, and the even more serious work done by Pelton, what had resulted only six months earlier was a systematic penetration of American encryption systems. It was still not perfect. Daily keying procedures occasionally proved impossible to break. Sometimes they went as much as a week without recovering one message, but they'd gone as many as three days recovering over half of what they received, and their results were improving by the month. Indeed, the main problem seemed to be that they didn't have the computer hardware to do all the work they should have been able to do, and the Eighth Directorate was busily training more linguists to handle the message traffic they were receiving.

Sergey Nikolayevich Golovko had been awakened from a sound sleep and driven to his office to add his name to the people all over the world shocked into frightened sobriety. A First Chief Directorate man all of his life, his job was to examine the collective American mind and advise his President on what was going on. The decrypts flooding onto his desk were the most useful tool.

He had no less than thirty such messages which bore one of two messages. All strategic forces were being ordered to Defense Condition Two, and all

conventional forces were coming to Defense Condition Three. The American President was panicking, KGB's First Deputy Chairman thought. There was no other explanation. *Was it possible that he thought the Soviet Union had committed this infamy?* That was the most frightening thought of his life.

"Another one, naval one." The messenger dropped it on his desk.

Golovko needed only one look. "Flash this to the Navy immediately." He had to call his President with the rest. Golovko lifted the phone.

For once the Soviet bureaucracy worked quickly. Minutes later, an extremely low-frequency signal went out, and the submarine *Admiral Lunin* went to the surface to copy the full message. Captain Dubinin read it as the printer generated it.

AMERICAN SUBMARINE USS MAINE REPORTS LOCATION AS 50D-55M-09sN 153D-01M-23sW. PROPELLER DISABLED BY COLLISION OF UNKNOWN CAUSE. Dubinin left the communications room and made for the chart table.

"Where were we when we copied that transient?"

"Here, Captain, and the bearing was here." The navigator traced the line with his pencil.

Dubinin just shook his head. He handed the message over. "Look at this."

"What do you suppose he's doing?"

"He'll be close to the surface. So . . . we'll go up, just under the layer, and we'll move quickly. Surface noise will play hell with his sonar. Fifteen knots."

"You suppose he was following us?"

"Took you long enough to realize that, didn't it?" Dubinin measured the distance to the target. "Very proud, this one. We'll see about that. You know how the Americans boast of taking hull photographs? Now, my young lieutenant, now it will be our turn!"

"What does this mean?" Narmonov asked the First Deputy Chairman.

"The Americans have been attacked by forces unknown, and the attack was serious, causing major loss of life. It is to be expected that they will increase their military readiness. A major consideration will be the maintenance of public order," Golovko replied over the secure phone line.

"And?"

"And, unfortunately, all their strategic weapons happen to be aimed at the *Rodina."*

"But we had no part in this!" the Soviet President objected.

"Correct. You see, such responses are automatic. They are planned in advance and become almost reflexive moves. Once attacked, you become highly cautious. Countermoves are planned in advance so that you may act rapidly while applying your intellectual capacities to an analysis of the problem without additional and unnecessary distractions."

The Soviet President turned to his Defense Minister. "So, what should we do?"

"I advise an increase in our alert status. Defensive-only, of course. Whoever conducted this attack might, after all, attempt to strike us also."

"Approved," Narmonov said bluntly. "Highest peacetime alert."

Golovko frowned at his telephone receiver. His choice of words had been exquisitely correct: reflexive. “May I make a suggestion?”

“Yes,” the Defense Minister said.

“If it is possible, perhaps it would be well to tell our forces the reason for the alert. It might lessen the shock of the order.”

“It’s a needless complication,” Defense thought.

“The Americans have not done this,” Golovko said urgently, “and that was almost certainly a mistake. Please consider the state of mind of people suddenly taken from ordinary peacetime operations to an elevated state of alert. It will only require a few additional words. Those few words could be important.”

“Good idea,” Narmonov thought. “Make it so,” he ordered Defense.

“We will soon hear from the Americans on the Hot Line,” Narmonov said. “What will they say?”

“That is hard to guess, but whatever it is, we should have a reply ready for them, just to settle things down, to make sure they know we had nothing to do with it.”

Narmonov nodded. That made good sense. “Start working on it.”

The Soviet defense-communications agency operators grumbled at the signal they’d been ordered to dispatch. For ease of transmission, the meat of the signal should have been contained in a single five-letter code group that could be transmitted, decrypted, and comprehended instantly by all recipients, but that was not possible now. The additional sentences had to be edited down to keep the transmission from being too long. A major did this, got it approved by his boss, a major general, and sent it out over no less than thirty communications links. The message was further altered to apply to specific military services.

The *Admiral Lunin* had only been on her new course for five minutes when a second ELF signal arrived. The communications officer fairly ran into the control room with it.

GENERAL ALERT LEVEL TWO. THERE HAS BEEN A NUCLEAR DETONATION OF UNKNOWN ORIGIN IN THE UNITED STATES. AMERICAN STRATEGIC AND CONVENTIONAL FORCES HAVE BEEN ALERTED FOR POSSIBLE WAR. ALL NAVAL FORCES WILL SORTIE AT ONCE. TAKE ALL NECESSARY PROTECTIVE MEASURES.

“Has the world gone mad?” the Captain asked the message. He got no reply. “That’s all?”

“That is all, no cueing to put the antenna up.”

“These are not proper instructions,” Dubinin objected. “ ‘All necessary protective measures’? What do they mean by that? Protecting ourselves, protecting the Motherland—what the hell do they mean?”

“Captain,” the *Starpom* said, “General Alert Two carries its own rules of action.”

“I know that,” Dubinin said, “but do they apply here?”

“Why else would the signal have been sent?”

A Level Two General Alert was something unprecedented for the Soviet Military. It meant that the rules of action were not those of a war, but not

those of peace either. Though Dubinin, like every other Soviet ship captain, fully understood his duties, the implications of the order seemed far too frightening. The thought passed, however. He was a naval officer. He had his orders. Whoever had given those orders must have understood the situation better than he. The commanding officer of the *Admiral Lunin* stood erect and turned to his second in command.

"Increase speed to twenty-five knots. Battle stations."

It happened just as fast as men could move. The New York FBI office, set in the Jacob Javits Federal Office Building on the southern end of Manhattan, dispatched its men north, and the light Sunday traffic made it easy. The unmarked but powerful cars screamed uptown to the various network headquarters buildings. The same thing happened in Atlanta, where agents left the Martin Luther King Building for CNN Headquarters. In each case, no fewer than three agents marched into the master control rooms and laid down the law: Nothing from Denver would go out. In no case did the network employees know why this was so, so busy were they trying to reestablish contact. The same thing happened in Colorado, where, under the direction of Assistant Special-Agent-in-Charge Walter Hoskins, the local field division's agents invaded all the network affiliates, and the local phone company, where they cut all long-distance lines over the furious objections of the Bell employees. But Hoskins had made one mistake. It came from the fact that he didn't watch much television.

KOLD was an independent station that was also trying to become a superstation. Like TBS, WWOR, and a few others, it had its own satellite link to cover a wide viewing area. A daring financial gamble, it had not yet paid off for the investors who were running the station on a highly leveraged shoestring out of an old and almost windowless building northeast of the city. The station used one of the Anik-series Canadian satellites and reached Alaska, Canada, and the North-Central U.S. reasonably well with its programming, which was mainly old network shows.

The KOLD building had once been Denver's first network television station, and was constructed in the pattern originally required by the Federal Communications Commission in the 1930s: monolithic reinforced concrete, fit to survive an enemy bomb attack—the specifications predated nuclear weapons. The only windows were in the executive offices on the south side of the building. It was ten minutes after the event that someone passed by the open door of the program manager. He stopped cold, turned and ran back to the newsroom. In another minute a cameraman entered onto the freight elevator that ran all the way to the roof. The picture, hard-wired into the control room and then sent out on a Ku-band transmitter to the Anik satellite, which was untouched by earlier events, broke into the reruns of *The Adventures of Dobie Gillis* across Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, Idaho, and three Canadian provinces. In Calgary, Alberta, a reporter for a local paper who'd never got over her crush on Dwayne Hickman was startled by the picture and the voice-over, and called her city desk. Her breathless report went out at once on the Reuters wire. Soon thereafter, CBC uplinked the video to Europe on one of their unaffected Anik satellites.

By that time the Denver FBI had a pair of men entering the KOLD building. They laid down the law to a news crew that protested about the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which argument carried less weight than the men with guns who shut the power down to their transmitter. The FBI agents at least apologized as they did so. They needn't have bothered. What had been a fool's errand from the beginning was already an exercise in futility.

"So, what the hell is going on?" Richards asked his staff.

"We have no idea, sir. No reason was given for the alert," the communications officer said lamely.

"Well, it leaves us between two chairs, doesn't it?" This was a rhetorical question. The *TR* battle group was just passing Malta, and was now in range of targets in the Soviet Union. That required "The Stick's" A-6E Intruders to take off, climb rapidly to cruising altitude, and top off their tanks soon thereafter, but at that point they had the gas to make it all the way to their targets on or near the Kerch Peninsula. Only a year before, U.S. Navy carriers, though carrying a sizable complement of thermonuclear bombs, had not been part of the SIOP. This acronym, pronounced "Sy-Op," stood for "Single Integrated Operations Plan," and was the master blueprint for dismantling the Soviet Union. The drawdown of strategic missiles—mostly land-based ones for the United States—had radically reduced the number of available warheads, and, like planners everywhere, the Joint Strategic Targeting Staff, colocated with headquarters SAC, tried to make up for the shortfall in any way they could. As a result, whenever an aircraft carrier was in range of Soviet targets, it assumed its SIOP tasking. In the case of USS *Theodore Roosevelt,* it meant that about the time the ship passed east of Malta, she became not a conventional-theater force, but a nuclear-strategic force. To fulfill this mission, *TR* carried fifty B-61-Mod-8 nuclear gravity bombs in a special, heavily-guarded magazine. The B-61 had FUFO—for "full fusing option," more commonly called "dial-a-yield"—that selected an explosive power ranging from ten to five hundred kilotons. The bombs were twelve feet long, less than a foot in diameter, weighed a mere seven hundred pounds, and were nicely streamlined to cut air resistance. Each A-6E could carry two of them, with all of its other hard-points occupied by auxiliary fuel tanks to allow a combat radius of more than a thousand miles. Ten of them were the explosive equivalent of a whole squadron of Minuteman missiles. Their assigned targets were naval, on the principle that people most often kill friends, or at least associates, rather than total strangers. One assigned SIOP mission, for example, was to reduce the Nikolayev Shipyard on the Dniepr River to a radioactive puddle. Which was, incidentally, where the Soviet carrier *Kuznetzov* had been built.

The Captain's additional problem was that his battle group commander, an admiral, had taken the chance to fly into Naples for a conference with the Commander of the United States Sixth Fleet. Richards was on his own.

"Where's our friend?" *Roosevelt*'s CO asked.

"About two hundred fifty miles back," the operations officer said. "Close."

"Let's get the plus-fives right up, skipper," Jackson said. "I'll take two and orbit right about here to watch the back door." He tapped the chart.

"Play it cool, Rob."

“No sweat, Ernie.” Jackson walked to a phone. “Who’s up?” he asked the VF-1 ready room. “Good.” Jackson went off to get his flight suit and helmet.

“Gentlemen,” Richards said as Jackson left, “since we are now east of Malta, we are now part of the SIOP, therefore a strategic and not a conventional asset, and DEFCON-TWO applies to us. If anyone here needs a refresher on the DEFCON-TWO Rules of Engagement, you’d better do it fast. Anything that might be construed as a threat to us may be engaged and destroyed on my authority as battle group commander. Questions?”

“Sir, we don’t know what is happening,” the ops officer pointed out.

“Yeah. We’ll try to think first, but, people, let’s get our collective act together. Something bad is happening, and we’re at DEFCON-TWO.”

It was a fine, clear night on the flight deck. Jackson briefed Commander Sanchez and their respective RIOs, then the plane captains for the two Tomcats sitting on the waist cats walked the flight crews out to them. Jackson and Walters got aboard. The plane captain helped strap both in, then disappeared downward and removed the ladder. Captain Jackson ran through the start-up sequence, watching his engine instruments come into normal idle. The F-14D was currently armed with four radar-homing Phoenix missiles and four infrared Sidewinders.

“Ready back there, Shredder?” Jackson asked.

“Let’s do it, Spade,” Walter replied.

Robby pushed his throttles to the stops, then jerked them around the detent and into afterburner, and signaled his readiness to the catapult officer, who looked down the deck to make sure it was clear. The officer fired off a salute to the aircraft.

Jackson blinked his flying lights in reply, dropping his hand to the stick and pulling his head back against the rest. A second later the cat officer’s lighted wand touched the deck. A petty officer hit the firing button, and steam jetted into the catapult machinery.

For all his years at this business, his senses never quite seemed to be fast enough. The acceleration of the catapult nearly jerked his eyeballs around inside their sockets. The dim glow lights of the deck vanished behind him. The back of the aircraft settled and they were off. Jackson made sure he was actually flying before taking the aircraft out of burner, then he retracted his gear and flaps and started a slow climb to altitude. He was just through a thousand feet when “Bud” Sanchez and “Lobo” Alexander pulled alongside.

“There go the radars,” Shredder said, taking note of his instruments. The entire *TR* battle group shut down every emission in a matter of seconds. Now no one would be able to track them from their own electronic noise.

Jackson settled down. Whatever this was, he told himself, it couldn’t be all that bad, could it? It was a beautifully clear night, and the higher he got, the clearer it became through the panoramic canopy of his fighter. The stars were discrete pinpricks of light, and their twinkling ceased almost entirely as they reached thirty thousand feet. He could see the distant strobes of commercial aircraft, and the coastlines of half a dozen countries. A night like this, he thought, could make a poet of a peasant. It was for moments like these that he’d become a pilot. He turned west, with Sanchez on his wing. There were some clouds that way, he realized at once. He couldn’t see all that many stars.

"Okay," Jackson ordered, "let's get a quick picture."

The Radar Intercept Officer activated his systems. The F-14D had just been fitted with a new Hughes-built radar called an LPI, for "low probability of intercept." Though using less power than the AWG-9 system it had replaced, the LPI combined greater sensitivity with a far lower chance of being picked up by another aircraft's threat receiver. It also had vastly improved look-down performance.

"There they are," Walters reported. "Nice circular formation."

"They have anything up?"

"Everything I see has a transponder on."

" 'Kay—we'll be on station in another few minutes."

Fifty miles behind them, an E-2C Hawkeye airborne-early-warning bird was coming off the number-two catapult. Behind it, two KA-6 tankers were firing up, along with more fighters. The tankers would soon arrive at Jackson's station to top off his fuel tanks, enabling the CAG to stay aloft for four more hours. The E-2C was the most important. It climbed out at full military power, turning south to take station fifty miles from its mother ship. As soon as it reached twenty-five thousand, its surveillance radar switched on, and the onboard crew of three operators began cataloging their contacts. Their data was sent by digital link back to the carrier and also to the group air-warfare officer aboard the Aegis cruiser, USS *Thomas Gates*, whose call sign was "Stetson."

"Nothing much, skipper."

"Okay, we're on station. Let's orbit and searchlight around." Jackson turned his aircraft into a shallow right turn, with Sanchez in close formation.

The Hawkeye spotted them first. They were almost directly under Jackson and his two Tomcats, and out of the detection cone of their radars for the moment.

"Stetson, this is Falcon-Two, we have four bogies on the deck, bearing two-eight-one, one hundred miles out." The reference was for *TR*'s position.

"IFF?"

"Negative, their speed is four hundred, altitude seven hundred, course one-three-five."

"Amplify," the AWO said.

"They're in a loose finger-four, Stetson," the Hawkeye controller said. "Estimate we have tactical fighters here."

* * *

"I got something," Shredder reported to Jackson a moment later. "On the deck, looks like two—no, four aircraft, heading southeast."

"Whose?"

"Not ours."

In *TR*'s combat information center, no one as yet had a clue what was going

on, but the group intelligence staff was doing its best to find out. What they had learned to this point was that most satellite news channels seemed to be down, though all military satellite links were up and running. A further electronic sweep of the satellite spectrum showed that a lot of video circuits were unaccountably inactive, as were the satellite phone links. So addicted were the communications people to the high-tech channels, that it required the services of a third-class radioman to suggest sweeping shortwave bands. The first they found was BBC. The news flash was recorded and raced into CIC. The voice spoke with the quiet assurance that the British Broadcasting Corporation was known for:

"Reuters reports a nuclear detonation in the Central United States. The Denver, Color*ay*do"—the Brits have trouble pronouncing some American state names—"television station, KOLD, broadcast via satellite a picture of a mushroom cloud over Denver, along with a voice report of a massive explosion. Station KOLD is now off the air, and attempts to reach Denver by telephone have not yet been successful. There has as yet been no official comment whatever on this incident."

"Holy Christ," someone said for all of them. Captain Richards looked around the room at his staff.

"Well, now we know why we're at DEFCON-TWO. Let's get some more fighters up. F-18s forward of us, -14s aft. I want four A-6s loaded with B-61s and briefed on SIOP targets. One squadron of -18s loaded with antiship missiles, and start planning an Alpha Strike on the *Kuznetzov* battle group."

"Captain," a talker called. "Falcon reports four inbound tactical aircraft."

Richards had only to turn around to see the main tactical display, a radarscope fully three feet across. The four new contacts showed up as inverted V-shapes with course vectors. Closest point of approach was less than twenty miles, easily within range of air-to-surface missiles.

"Have Spade ID those bandits right now!"

* * *

". . . close and identify," was the order from the Hawkeye control aircraft.

"Roger," Jackson acknowledged. "Bud, go loose."

"Roger." Commander Sanchez eased his stick to the left to open the distance between his fighter and Jackson's. Called the "Loose Deuce," the formation enabled the aircraft to be mutually supporting and also impossible to attack simultaneously. As he split off, both aircraft tipped down and dove at full dry power. In a few seconds they were through Mach-One.

"Boresighted," Shredder told his driver. "I'm activating the TV system."

The Tomcat was built with a simple identification device. It was a television camera with a ten-power telescopic lens that worked equally well in daylight and darkness. Lieutenant Walters was able to slave the TV into the radar system, and in a few seconds he had four dots that grew rapidly as the Tomcats overtook them. "Twin rudder configuration."

"Falcon, this is Spade. Inform Stick we have visual but no ID, and we are closing."

Major Pyotr Arabov was no tenser than usual. An instructor pilot, he was teaching three Libyans the intricacies of night overwater navigation. They had turned over the Italian island of Pantelleria thirty minutes earlier, and were now inbound for Tripoli and home. Formation flying at night was difficult for the three Libyans, though each had over three hundred hours in type, and overwater flying was the most dangerous of all. Fortunately they had picked a good night for it. The star-filled sky gave them a good horizon reference. Better to learn the easy way first, Arabov thought, and at this altitude. A true tactical profile, at one hundred meters and higher speed on a cloudy night could be exceedingly dangerous. He was not any more impressed with the airmanship of these Libyans than the U.S. Navy had been on several occasions, but they did seem willing to learn, and that was something. Besides, their oil-rich country, having learned its own lessons from the Iraqis, had decided that if it were to have an air force at all, it had better have a properly trained one. That meant the Soviet Union could sell a lot more of its MiG-29s, despite the fact that sales in the Israel area were now severely curtailed. It also meant that Major Arabov was being paid partly in hard currency.

The instructor pilot looked left and right to see that the formation was—well, not exactly tight, but close enough. The aircraft were behaving sluggishly with two fuel tanks under each wing. Each fuel tank had stabilizing fins, and looked rather like bombs, actually.

"They're carrying something, skipper. MiG-29s, for sure."

"Right." Jackson checked the display himself, then keyed his radio. "Stick, this is Spade, over."

"Go ahead." The digital radio circuit allowed Jackson to recognize Captain Richards' voice.

"Stick, we have ID on the bogies. Four MiG-two-niners. They appear to have underwing cargo. Course, speed, and altitude unchanged." There was a brief pause.

"Splash the bandits."

Jackson's head snapped up. "Say again, Stick."

"Spade, this is Stick: Splash the bandits. Acknowledge."

He called them "bandits," Jackson thought. *And he knows more than I do.*

"Roger, engaging now. Out." Jackson keyed his radio again. "Bud, follow me in."

"Shit!" Shredder observed. "Recommend we target two Phoenix, left pair and right pair."

"Do it," Jackson replied, setting the weapons switch on the top of his stick to the AIM-54 setting. Lieutenant Walters programmed the missiles to keep their radars quiet until they were merely a mile out.

"Ready. Range is sixteen-thousand. Birds are in acquisition."

Jackson's heads-up display showed the correct symbology. A beeping tone in his headset told him that the first missile was ready to fire. He squeezed the trigger once, waited a second, then squeezed again.

"Shit!" Michael "Lobo" Alexander observed, half a mile away.

"You know better than that!" Sanchez snarled back at him.

"Sky is clear. I don't see anything else around us."

Jackson closed his eyes to save as much of his vision as possible from the yellow-white exhaust flames of the missiles. They rapidly pulled away, accelerating to over three thousand miles per hour, almost a mile per second. Jackson watched them home in as he positioned his aircraft for another shot if the Phoenixes failed to function properly.

Arabov made another instrument check. There was nothing unusual. His threat receivers showed only air-search radars, though one reading had disappeared a few minutes earlier. Other than that, this was an exceedingly routine training mission, proceeding straight and level on a direct course toward a fixed point. His threat receivers had not detected the LPI radar which had been tracking him and his flight of four over the past five minutes. It was able, however, to detect the powerful homing radar in a Phoenix missile.

A bright red warning light flashed on, and a screeching sound abused his hearing. Arabov looked down to check his instruments. They seemed to be functioning, but this wasn't—his next move was to turn his head. He just had time to see a half-moon of yellow light and a ghostly, starlit smoke trail, then a flash.

The Phoenix targeted on the right-hand pair exploded just a few feet from them. The one-hundred-thirty-five-pound warhead filled their air with high-speed fragments which shredded both MiGs. The same happened to the left-hand pair. The air was filled with an incandescent cloud of exploding jet fuel and airplane parts. Three pilots were killed directly by the explosion. Arabov was rocketed out of the disintegrating fighter by his ejection seat, whose parachute opened a scant two hundred feet over the water. Already unconscious from the unexpected shock of ejection, the Russian Major was saved by systems that anticipated his injuries. An inflatable collar held his head above water, a UHF radio began screaming for the nearest rescue helicopter, and a powerful blue-white strobe light started flashing in the darkness. Around him were a few thin patches of burning fuel and nothing else.

Jackson watched the entire process. He'd probably set an all-time one-shot record. Four aircraft on one missile salvo. But there had been no skill involved. As with his Iraqi victim, they hadn't known he was there. Any new nugget right out of the RAG could have done this. It was murder, not war—what war? he asked, was there a war?—and he didn't even know why.

"Splash four MiGs," he said over the radio. "Stick, this is Spade, splash four. Returning to CAP station, we need some gas."

"Roger, Spade, tankers are overhead now. We copy you splashed four."

"Uh, Spade, what the fuck is going on?" Lieutenant Walters asked.

"I wish I knew, Shredder." *Did I just fire the first shot in a war?* What *war?*

Despite his earlier screaming, the Guards tank regiment was about as sharp a Russian unit as Keitel had ever seen. Their T-80 main battle tanks looked slightly toylike with their reactive armor panels festooned on turret and hull, but they were also low-slung dangerous-looking vehicles whose enormously

long 125mm guns left no doubt as to their identity and purpose. The supposed inspection team was moving about in groups of three. Keitel had the most dangerous mission, as he was with the regimental commander. Keitel —"Colonel Ivanenko"—checked his watch as he walked behind the real Colonel.

Just two hundred meters away, Günther Bock and two other ex-Stasi officers approached a tank crew. They were boarding their vehicle as the officers approached.

"Stop!" one ordered.

"Yes, Colonel," the junior sergeant who commanded the tank replied.

"Step down. We are going to inspect your vehicle."

The commander, gunner, and driver assembled in front of their vehicle while the other crews boarded theirs. Bock waited for the neighboring tanks to button up, then shot all three Russians with his silenced automatic. The three bodies were tossed under the tank. Bock took the gunner's seat and looked around for the controls he'd been briefed on. Not twelve hundred meters away, parked at right angles to his tank, were over fifty American M1A1 tanks whose crews were also boarding their vehicles.

"Power coming on," the driver reported over the intercom. The diesel engine roared to life along with all the others.

Bock flipped the loading switch to Armor-Piercing Fin-Stabilized Discarding-Sabot round and punched the load button. Automatically, the breech to the tank's main gun dropped open, and first the shell, then the propellant charge were rammed home, and the breech shut by itself. That, Bock thought, was easy enough. Next he depressed the gunsight and selected an American tank. It was easy to spot. The American tank park was lit up like any parking lot so that trespassers might easily be spotted. The laser gave him a range display, and Bock elevated the gun to the proper stadimeter line. The wind he estimated as zero. It was a calm night. Bock checked his watch and waited for the sweep hand to reach the twelve. Then he squeezed the triggers. Bock's T-80 rocked backwards, along with three others. Two-thirds of a second later, the shell struck the turret of the American tank. The results were impressive. He'd struck the ammo compartment in the rear of the turret. The forty rounds of ammunition ignited at once. Blowout panels vented most of it straight up, but the protective fire-doors inside the vehicle had already been blown out by the shell, and the crew incinerated in their seats as their two-million-dollar tank turned into a mottled green-and-brown volcano, along with two others.

One hundred meters to the north, the regimental commander froze in midsentence, turning toward the noise in disbelief.

"What's going on?" he managed to shout before Keitel shot him in the back of the head.

Bock had already fired his second round into the engine box of another tank, and was loading a third. Seven M1A1s were burning before the first American gunner got a round loaded. The huge turret swung around while tank commanders screamed orders at their drivers and gunners. Bock saw the operating turret and swung toward it. His round missed wide to the left, but struck another Abrams behind the first. The American shot also missed high because the gunner was excited. His second round was instantly loaded, and

the American exploded a T-80 two down from Bock's. Günther decided to leave this American alone.

"We're under attack—commence firing commence firing!" the "Soviet" tank commanders screamed into their own command circuits.

Keitel ran to the command vehicle. "I am Colonel Ivanenko. Your commander is dead—get moving! Take those crazy bastards out while we still have a regiment left!"

The operations officer hesitated, having not the slightest idea what was happening, only able to hear the gunfire. But the orders came from a colonel. He lifted his radio, dialed up the battalion command circuit, and relayed the instruction.

There was the expected moment's hesitation. At least ten American tanks were now burning, but four were shooting back. Then the entire Soviet line opened fire, and three of the active American tanks were blown apart. Those shielded by the front row began firing off smoke and maneuvering, mainly backwards, as the Soviet tanks started to roll. Keitel watched in admiration as the Soviet T-80s moved out. Seven of them remained still, of which four were burning. Two more blew up before they crossed the line where once a wall had stood.

It was worth it, Keitel thought, just for this moment. Whatever Günther had in mind, it was worth it to see the Russians and Americans killing each other.

Admiral Joshua Painter arrived at CINCLANT headquarters just in time to catch the dispatch from *Theodore Roosevelt.*

"Who's in command there?"

"Sir, the battle group commander flew into Naples. Senior officer in the group is Captain Richards," Fleet Intelligence replied. "He said he had four MiGs inbound and armed, and since we're at DEFCON-TWO, he splashed them as a potential threat to the group."

"Whose MiGs?"

"Could be from the *Kuznetzov* group, sir."

"Wait a minute—you said DEFCON-TWO?"

"TR's east of Malta now, sir, SIOP applies," Fleet Operations pointed out.

"Does anybody know what's going on?"

"I sure as hell don't," the Fleet Intelligence Officer replied honestly.

"Get me Richards on a voice line." Painter stopped. "What's the fleet status?"

"Everything alongside has orders to prepare to get under way, sir. That's automatic."

"But why are we *at* DEFCON-THREE here?"

"Sir, they haven't told us that."

"Fabulous." Painter pulled the sweater over his head and yelled for coffee.

"*Roosevelt* on line two, sir," the intercom called. Painter punched the button and put the phone on speaker.

"This is CINCLANT."

"Richards here, sir."

"What's going on?"

"Sir, we're fifteen minutes into a DEFCON-TWO alert here. We had a flight

of MiG-29s inbound and I ordered them splashed."

"Why?"

"They appeared to be armed, sir, and we copied a radio transmission about the explosion."

Painter went instantly cold. "What explosion?"

"Sir, BBC reports a nuclear detonation in Denver. The local TV station that originated the report, they say, is now off the air. With that kind of information, I took the shot. I'm senior officer present. It's my battle group here. Sir, unless you have some more questions, I have things to do here."

Painter knew he had to get out of the man's way. "Use your head, Ernie. Use your goddamned head."

"Aye aye, sir. Out." The line went dead.

"Nuclear explosion?" Fleet Intelligence asked.

Painter had a hot line to the National Military Command Center. He activated it. "This is CINCLANT."

"Captain Rosselli, sir."

"Have we had a nuclear explosion?"

"That's affirmative, sir. In the Denver area, NORAD estimates yield in the low hundreds and high casualties. That's all we know. We haven't got the word out to everyone yet."

"Well, here's something else for you to know: *Theodore Roosevelt* just intercepted and splashed four MiG-29s inbound. Keep me posted. Unless otherwise directed, I'm putting everything to sea."

Bob Fowler was into his third cup of coffee already. He was cursing himself for having drunk those four strong German beers like he was Archie Bunker or something, and one of his fears was that the people here would notice the alcohol on his breath. Intellect told him that his thought processes might be somewhat affected by the alcohol intake, but he'd had the drinks over a period of hours, and natural processes plus the coffee either already had or soon would purge it from his system entirely.

For the first time, he was grateful for the death of his wife, Marian. He'd been there at the bedside, had watched his beloved wife die. He knew what grief and tragedy were, and however dreadful the deaths of all those people in Denver might be, he told himself, he had to step back from it, had to set it aside, had to concentrate on preventing the death of anyone else.

So far, Fowler told himself, things had gone well. He had moved quickly to cut off the spread of the news. A nationwide panic was something that he didn't need. His military services were at a higher level of alert that would either prevent or deter an additional attack for some indefinite period of time.

"Okay," he said on the conference line to NORAD and SAC. "Let's summarize what has happened to this point."

NORAD answered: "Sir, we've had a single nuclear detonation in the hundred-kiloton range. There has as yet been no report from the scene. Our forces are moving to a high state of alert. Satellite communications are down —"

"Why?" Elizabeth Elliot asked in a voice more brittle than Fowler's. "What could have done that?"

"We don't know. A nuclear detonation in space might, from EMP effects—that's electromagnetic pulse. When a nuclear device explodes at high altitude, most of its energy is released in the form of electromagnetic radiation. The Russians know more about the practical effects of such explosions than we do; they have more empirical data from their tests at Novaya Zemlya back in the 1960s. But we have no evidence of such an explosion, and we should have noticed it. Therefore a nuclear attack on satellites is most unlikely. Next possibility is a massive blast of electromagnetic energy from a ground source. Now, the Russians *have* pumped a lot of money into microwave weapons-research. They have a ship in the Eastern Pacific with lots of antennas aboard. It's the *Yuri Gagarin*. She's classed as a space-event-support ship, and she has four enormous high-gain antennas. That ship is currently three hundred miles off the coast of Peru, well within sight of the injured satellites. Supposedly the ship is supporting operations for the *Mir* space station. Aside from that, we're out of guesses. I have an officer talking with Hughes Aerospace right now to see what their thinking is.

"Okay, we're still trying to get ATC tapes from Stapleton to see if an aircraft might have delivered the bomb, and we are awaiting word from rescue and other teams dispatched to the site of the explosion. That's all I have."

"We have two wings fully in the air and more coming on line as we speak," CINC-SAC said next. "All my missile wings are alerted. My Vice-CINC is in the air in Looking Glass Auxiliary West, and another Kneecap is about to take off for where you are, sir."

"Anything happening in the Soviet Union?"

"Their air-defense people are increasing their alert level, as we have already discussed," General Borstein replied. "We're getting other radio activity, but nothing we can classify yet. There is no indication of an attack on the United States."

"Okay." The President let out a breath. Things were bad, but not out of control. All he had to do was get things settled down, and then he could go forward. "I'm going to open the direct line to Moscow."

"Very well, sir," NORAD replied.

A Navy chief yeoman was two seats away from President Fowler. His computer terminal was already lit up. "You want to slide down here, Mr. President," the chief said. "I can't cross-deck my display to your screen."

Fowler crab-walked his swivel chair the eight feet to the chiefs place.

"Sir, the way this works is, I type in what you say here, and it's relayed directly through the NMCC computers in the Pentagon—all they do is encipher it—but when the Russians reply, it arrives in the Hot Line room in Russian, is translated there, and then sent here from the Pentagon. There's a backup at Fort Ritchie in case something goes wrong in D.C. We have landline and two separate satellite links. Sir, I can type about as fast as you can speak." The chief yeoman's name tag read *Orontia,* and Fowler couldn't decide what his ancestry was. He was a good twenty pounds overweight, but he sounded relaxed and competent. Fowler would settle for that. Chief Orontia also had a pack of cigarettes sitting next to his keyboard. The President stole one, ignoring the no-smoking signs that hung on every wall. Orontia lit it with a Zippo.

"All ready, sir." Chief Pablo Orontia looked sideways at his Commander-in-Chief. His gaze didn't betray the fact that he'd been born in Pueblo, Colorado, and still had family there. The President would settle things down, that was his job. Orontia's job, he reasoned, was to do his best to help the man. Orontia had served his country in two wars and many other crises, mainly as an admiral's yeoman on carriers, and now he turned off his feelings as he had trained himself to do.

"Dear President Narmonov . . ."

* * *

Captain Rosselli watched the first for-real transmission of the Hot Line since his arrival in Washington. The message was put up on the IBM-PC/AT and encrypted, then the computer operator hit the return button to transmit it. He really should be back at his desk, Jim thought, but what went through here might be vital to what he was doing.

AS YOU HAVE PROBABLY BEEN TOLD, THERE HAS BEEN A MAJOR EXPLOSION IN THE CENTRAL PART OF MY COUNTRY. I HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT IT WAS A NUCLEAR EXPLOSION, AND THAT THE LOSS OF LIFE IS SEVERE.

President Narmonov read, with his advisers at his side.

"About what one would expect," Narmonov said. "Send our reply."

"Jesus, that was fast!" the Army Colonel on duty remarked and began his translation. A Marine sergeant typed the English version, which was automatically linked to Camp David, Fort Ritchie, and the State Department. The computers printed out hard copy that was sent almost as fast to SAC, NORAD, and the intelligence agencies via facsimile printer.

AUTHENTICATOR: TIMETABLE TIMETABLE TIMETABLE

REPLY FROM MOSCOW
PRESIDENT FOWLER:
WE HAVE NOTED THE EVENT. PLEASE ACCEPT OUR DEEPEST SYMPATHY AND THAT OF THE SOVIET PEOPLE. HOW IS SUCH AN ACCIDENT POSSIBLE?

"Accident?" Fowler asked.

"That was awfully fast, Robert," Elliot observed at once. "Too damned fast. His English isn't very good. The message had to be translated, and you take time to read things like this. Their reply must have been canned—made up in advance . . . what does that mean?" Liz asked, almost talking to herself, as Fowler formulated his next message. *What's going on here? Who is doing this, and why . . . ?*

PRESIDENT NARMONOV:
I REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT THIS WAS NOT AN ACCIDENT. THERE IS NO AMERICAN NUCLEAR DEVICE WITHIN A HUNDRED MILES, NOR WERE ANY US WEAPONS IN TRANSIT IN THE AREA. THIS WAS A DELIBERATE ACT BY UNKNOWN FORCES.

"Well, that's no surprise," Narmonov said. He congratulated himself for correctly predicting the first message from America. "Send the next reply," he told the communicator. To his advisers: "Fowler is an arrogant man, with the

weaknesses of arrogance, but he is no fool. He will be very emotional about this. We must settle him down, calm him. If he can keep control of himself, his intelligence will allow him to maintain control of the matter."

"My President," said Golovko, who had just arrived in the command center. "I think this is a mistake."

"What do you mean?" Narmonov asked in some surprise.

"It is a mistake to tailor your words to what you think of the man, his character, and his mental state. People change under stress. The man at the other end of that telephone line may not be the same man whom you met in Rome."

The Soviet President dismissed that idea. "Nonsense. People like that never change. We have enough of them here. I've been dealing with people like Fowler all my life."

> PRESIDENT FOWLER:
> IF THIS IS IN FACT A DELIBERATE ACT THEN IT IS A CRIME WHOLLY WITHOUT PRECEDENT IN HUMAN HISTORY. WHAT MADMAN WOULD DO SUCH A THING, AND TO WHAT PURPOSE? SUCH ACTION MIGHT ALL TOO EASILY LEAD TO GLOBAL CATASTROPHE. YOU MUST BELIEVE THAT THE SOVIET UNION HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS INFAMOUS ACT.

"Too fast, Robert," Elliot said. "'You must believe'? What is this guy trying to say?"

"Elizabeth, you're reading too much into this," Fowler replied.

"These responses are *canned*, Robert! Canned. He's answering too fast. He had them prepared in advance. That means something."

"Like what?"

"Like we were supposed to be *at the game*, Robert! It looks to me like these were tailored for somebody else—like Durling. What if the bomb was supposed to get you, too, along with Brent and Dennis?"

"I have to set that aside, I told you that!" Fowler said angrily. He paused and took a deep breath. He could not allow himself to get angry. He had to stay calm. "Look, Elizabeth—"

"You *can't* set that aside! You have to consider that possibility, because if it was planned, that tells us something about what is going on."

"Dr. Elliot is right," NORAD said over the open phone line. "Mr. President, you are entirely correct to distance yourself from this event in an emotional sense, but you have to consider all possible aspects of the operational concept that may be at work here."

"I am compelled to agree with that," CINC-SAC added.

"So, what do I do?" Fowler asked.

"Sir," NORAD said, "I don't like this 'you must believe' stuff either. It might be a good idea to let him know that we're ready to defend ourselves."

"Yeah," General Fremont agreed. "He knows that, anyway, if his people are doing their job right."

"But what if he takes our alert level as a threat?"

"They won't, sir," NORAD assured him. "It's just how anybody would do business in a case like this. Their senior military leadership is very professional."

Dr. Elliot stirred at that remark, Fowler noted. "Okay, I'll tell him we've

alerted our forces, but that we don't have any evil intentions."

> PRESIDENT NARMONOV:
> WE HAVE NO REASON TO SUSPECT SOVIET INVOLVEMENT IN THIS INCIDENT. HOWEVER, WE MUST ACT PRUDENTLY. WE HAVE BEEN THE VICTIM OF A VICIOUS ATTACK, AND MUST TAKE ACTION TO PROTECT OURSELVES AGAINST ANOTHER. ACCORDINGLY I HAVE PLACED OUR ARMED FORCES ON A PRECAUTIONARY ALERT. THIS IS ALSO NECESSARY FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF PUBLIC ORDER, AND TO ASSIST IN RESCUE OPERATIONS. YOU HAVE MY PERSONAL ASSURANCE THAT WE WILL TAKE NO OFFENSIVE ACTION WITHOUT JUST CAUSE.

"That's reassuring," Narmonov said dryly. "Nice of him to let us know about the alert."

"We know," Golovko said, "and he must know that we already know."

"He does not know that we know the extent of his alert," the Defense Minister said. "He cannot know that we are reading their codes. The alert level of their forces is more than precautionary. The American strategic forces have not been at this readiness status since 1962."

"Really?" Narmonov asked.

"General, that is not technically true," Golovko said urgently. "Their ordinary level of readiness is very high for American strategic forces, even when their military posture is Defense Condition Five. The change to which you refer is inconsequential."

"Is this true?" Narmonov asked.

The Defense Minister shrugged. "It depends on how you look at it. Their land-based rocket force is always at a higher level of alert than ours because of the lower maintenance requirements of their rockets. The same is true of their submarines, which spend far more time at sea than ours do. The technical difference may be small, but the psychological difference is not. The increased level of alert tells their people that something horrible is under way. I think that is significant."

"I do not," Golovko shot back.

Marvelous, Narmonov thought*, two of my most important advisers cannot agree on something this important. . . .*

"We need to reply," the Foreign Minister said.

> PRESIDENT FOWLER:
> WE HAVE NOTED YOUR INCREASED ALERT STATUS. SINCE MOST OF YOUR WEAPONS ARE IN FACT POINTED AT THE SOVIET UNION WE MUST ALSO TAKE PRECAUTIONS. I SUGGEST THAT IT IS VITAL THAT NEITHER OF OUR TWO COUNTRIES TAKE ANY ACTION THAT MIGHT SEEM PROVOCATIVE.

"That's the first time he didn't have it canned," Elliot said. "First he says 'I didn't do it,' now he says we better not provoke him. What's he really thinking?"

Ryan looked over the faxes of all six messages. He handed them to Goodley. "Tell me what you think."

"Pure vanilla. Looks like everyone is playing a very cautious game, and that's what they should be doing. We alert our forces as a precaution and they do the same. Fowler's said that we have no reason to think they did it—that's good. Narmonov says both sides should play it cool on provoking the other

side—that's good, too. So far, so good," Ben Goodley thought.

"I agree," the Senior Duty Officer said.

"That makes it unanimous," Jack said. *Thank God, Bob, I didn't know you had it in you.*

Rosselli walked back to his desk. Okay, things appeared to be more or less under control.

"Where the hell have you been?" Rocky Barnes asked.

"Hot Line room, things appear to be fairly cool."

"Not anymore, Jim."

General Paul Wilkes was almost there. It had taken nearly twenty minutes to get from his house onto I-295 and from there to I-395, a total distance of less than five miles. Snowplows had barely touched this road, and now it was cold enough that what had been salted was freezing to ice anyway. Worst of all, those few D.C. drivers who were venturing out were showing their customary driving skill. Even those with four-wheel-drives were acting as though the additional traction made them immune to the laws of physics. Wilkes had just passed over South Capitol Street, and was now heading downhill toward the Maine Avenue exit. To his left, some maniac in a Toyota was passing him, and then came right, to head for the exit into downtown D.C. The Toyota skidded sideways on a patch of ice that front-wheel drive didn't master. There was no chance to avoid it. Wilkes broadsided the car at about fifteen miles per hour.

"The hell with it," he said aloud. He didn't have time for this. The General backed up a few feet and started to maneuver around before the driver even got out. He didn't check his mirror. As he changed lanes, he was rear-ended by a tractor-trailer doing about twenty-five. It was enough to drive the General's car over the concrete divider and into the face of another car. Wilkes was killed instantly.

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ECHOES

Elizabeth Elliot stared blankly at the far wall as she sipped her coffee. It was the only thing that made sense. All the warnings they'd had and ignored. It all fit. The Soviet military was making a power-play and targeting Bob Fowler had to be part of it. *We should have been there*, she thought. *He wanted to go to the game, and everyone expected him to, because Dennis Bunker owned one of the teams. I would have been there, too. I could be dead now. If they wanted to kill Bob, then they also wanted to kill me. . . .*

> PRESIDENT NARMONOV:
> I AM GRATIFIED THAT WE AGREE ON THE NECESSITY FOR CAUTION AND REASON. I MUST NOW CONFER WITH MY ADVISERS SO THAT WE MAY ASCERTAIN THE CAUSE OF THIS HORRIBLE EVENT, AND ALSO TO BEGIN RESCUE OPERATIONS. I WILL KEEP YOU INFORMED.

The reply that came back was almost immediate.

> PRESIDENT FOWLER:
> WE WILL STAND BY.

"That's simple enough," the President said, looking at the screen.

"Think so?" Elliot asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Robert, we've had a nuclear explosion at a location that you were supposed to be at. That's number one. Number two: we've had reports of missing Soviet nuclear weapons. Number three: how do we really know that it's Narmonov at the other end of this computer modem?" Liz asked.

"What?"

"Our best intelligence suggests the possibility of a *coup d'état* in Russia, doesn't it? But we're acting now as though such intelligence did not exist *even though* we've had what very easily could be a tactical nuclear weapon—exactly what we think is missing—explode over here. We are not considering all of the potential dimensions here." Dr. Elliot turned to the speakerphone. "General Borstein, how hard is it to get a nuclear device into the United States?"

"With our border controls, it's child's play," NORAD replied. "What are you saying, Dr. Elliot?"

"I'm saying that we've had hard intel for some time now that Narmonov is in political trouble—that his military is acting up, *and* that there's a nuclear dimension. Okay, what if they stage a coup? A Sunday evening—Monday morning—is good timing because everyone's asleep. We always assumed that the nuclear element was for domestic blackmail—but what if the operation was more clever than that? What if they figured they could decapitate our

government in order to prevent our interference with their coup? Okay, the bomb goes off, and Durling is on Kneecap—just like he is right now—and they're talking to him. They can predict what we're going to think, and they pre-plan their statements over the Hot Line. We go on automatic alert, and so do they—you see? We *can't* interfere with the coup in any way."

"Mr. President, before you evaluate that possibility, I think you need some outside advice from the intelligence community," CINC-SAC said.

Another phone lit up. The yeoman got it.

"For you, Mr. President, NMCC."

"Who is this?" Fowler asked.

"Sir, this is Captain Jim Rosselli at the National Military Command Center. We have two reports of contact between U.S. and Soviet forces. USS *Theodore Roosevelt* reports that they have splashed—that means shot down, sir—a flight of four inbound Russian MiG-29 aircraft—"

"What? Why?"

"Sir, under the Rules of Engagement, the captain of a ship has the right to take defense action to protect his command. *Theodore Roosevelt* is now at DEFCON-TWO, and as the alert level changes, you get more latitude in what you can do, and when you can take action. Sir, the second is as follows: there is an unconfirmed report of shots being exchanged between Russian and American tanks in Berlin. SACEUR says the radio message stopped—I mean, it was cut off, sir. Before that, a U.S. Army captain reported that Soviet tanks were attacking the Berlin Brigade at its base in southern Berlin, and that a tank battalion of ours was just about wiped out, sir. They were attacked in their lager by Soviet forces stationed just across from them. Those two things—the reports, I mean, were almost simultaneous. The reported times were just two minutes apart, Mr. President. We're trying to reestablish contact with Berlin right now, going through SACEUR at Mons, Belgium."

"Christ," Fowler observed. "Elizabeth, does this fit into your scenario?"

"It could show that they're not kidding, that they are serious about not being interfered with."

Most of the American forces had escaped out of the lager. The senior officer on the scene had decided on the spot to turn and run for cover in the woods and residential streets around the brigade base. He was a lieutenant colonel, the brigade executive officer. The Colonel commanding the brigade was nowhere to be found, and the XO was now considering his options. The brigade had two mechanized infantry battalions and one of tanks. From the last, only nine of fifty-two M1A1s had gotten away. He could see the glow from the rest of them, still burning in their lager.

A DEFCON-THREE alert out of nowhere, and then minutes later, this. Over forty tanks and a hundred men lost, shot down without warning. Well, he'd see about that.

The Berlin Brigade had been in place since long before his birth, and scattered throughout its encampment were defensive positions. The Colonel dispatched his remaining tanks and ordered his Bradley fighting vehicles to volley-fire their TOW-2 missiles.

The Russian tanks had overrun the tank lager and stopped. They had no

further orders. Battalion commanders were not yet in control of their formations, left behind by the mad dash of the T-80s across the line, and the regimental commander was nowhere to be found. Without orders, the tank companies stopped, sitting still, looking for targets. The regimental executive officer was also missing, and when the senior battalion commander realized this, his tank dashed off to the headquarters vehicle, since he was the next-senior officer in the regiment. It was amazing, he thought. First the readiness drill, next the flash alert from Moscow, and then the Americans had started shooting. He hadn't a clue what was going on. Even the barracks and administrative buildings were still lit up, he realized. Someone would have to get those lights off. His T-80 was back-lit as though on a target range.

"Command tank, two o'clock, skylined, moving left to right," a sergeant told a corporal.

"Identified," the gunner replied over the intercom.

"Fire."

"On the way." The corporal squeezed his trigger. The seal-cap blew off the missile tube, and the TOW-2 blasted out, trailing behind a thin control wire. The target was about twenty-five hundred meters away. The gunner kept his cross-hairs on target, guiding the antitank missile to its target. It took eight seconds, and the gunner had the satisfaction of seeing detonation right in the center of the turret.

"Target," the Bradley commander said, indicating a direct hit. "Cease fire. Now let's find another one of these fuckers . . . ten o'clock, tank, coming around the PX!"

The turret came left. "Identified!"

"Okay, what does CIA make of this?" Fowler asked.

"Sir, again all we have is scattered and unconnected information," Ryan replied.

"*Roosevelt* has a Soviet carrier battle group a few hundred miles behind them, and they carry MiG-29s," Admiral Painter said.

"They're even closer to Libya, and our friend the Colonel has a hundred of the same aircraft."

"Flying over water at midnight?" Painter asked. "When's the last time you heard of the Libyans doing that—and twenty-some miles from one of our battle groups!"

"What about Berlin?" Liz Elliot asked.

"We don't know!" Ryan stopped and took a deep breath. "Remember that we just don't know much."

"Ryan, what if SPINNAKER was right?" Elliot asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What if there is a military coup going on right now over there, and they set a bomb off over here to keep us from interfering, to decapitate us?"

"That's totally crazy," Jack answered. "Risk a war? Why do it? What would we do if there were a coup? Attack at once?"

"Their military might expect us to," Elliot pointed out.

"Disagree. I think SPINNAKER might have been lying to us from the

beginning on this issue."

"Are you making this up?" Fowler asked. It was coming home to the President now that he might actually have been the real target of the bomb, that Elizabeth's theoretical model for the Russian plan was the only thing that made sense.

"No, sir!" Ryan snapped back indignantly. "I'm the *hawk* here, remember? The Russian military is too smart to pull something like this. It's too big a gamble."

"Then explain the attacks on our forces!" Elliot said.

"We don't know for sure that there have been attacks on our forces."

"So now you think our people are lying?" Fowler asked.

"Mr. President, you are not thinking this through. Okay, let's assume that there is an ongoing coup in the Soviet Union—I don't accept that hypothesis, but let's assume it, okay? The purpose, you say, for exploding the bomb over here is to keep us from interfering. Fine. Then why attack our military forces if they want us to sit on our hands?"

"To show that they're serious," Elliot fired back.

"That's crazy! It's tantamount to telling us they *did* explode the bomb here. Do you think they would expect us not to respond to a nuclear attack?" Ryan demanded, then answered his own question: *"It does not make sense!"*

"Then give me something that does," Fowler said.

"Mr. President, we are in the very earliest stages of a crisis. The information we have coming in now is scattered and confused. Until we know more, trying to put a spin on it is dangerous."

Fowler's face bore down on the speakerphone. "Your job is to tell me what's going on, not to give me lessons in crisis-management. When you have something I can use, get back to me!"

* * *

"What in the hell are they thinking?" Ryan asked.

"Is there something I don't know here?" Goodley asked. The young academic looked as alarmed as Ryan felt.

"Why should you be any different from the rest of us?" Jack snapped back, and regretted it. "Welcome to crisis-management. Nobody knows crap, and you're expected to make good decisions anyway. Except it's not possible, it just isn't."

"The thing with the carrier scares me," the S&T man observed.

"Wrong. If we only splashed four aircraft, it's only a handful of people," Ryan pointed out. "Land combat is something else. If we really have a battle going on in Berlin, that's the scary one, almost as bad as an attack on some of our strategic assets. Let's see if we can get hold of SACEUR."

The nine surviving M1A1 tanks were racing north along a Berlin avenue, along with a platoon of Bradley fighting vehicles. Streetlights were on, heads sticking out windows, and it was instantly apparent to the few onlookers that whatever was happening wasn't a drill. All the tanks had the speed governors

removed from their engines, and they could all have been arrested in America for violating the national interstate highway limit. One mile north of their camp, they turned east. Leading the formation was a senior NCO who knew Berlin well—this was his third tour in the once-divided city—well enough that he had a perfect spot in mind, if the Russians hadn't got there first. There was a construction site. A memorial to the Wall and its victims was going up after a long competition. It overlooked the Russian and American compounds which were soon to be vacated, and bulldozers had pushed up a high berm of dirt for the sculpture that would sit atop it. But it wasn't there yet, just a thick dirt ramp. The Soviet tanks were milling about on their objective, probably waiting for their infantry to show up or something. They were taking TOW hits from the Bradleys and returning fire into the woods.

"Christ, they're going to kill those Bradley guys," the unit commander—a captain whose tank was the last survivor of his company—said. "Okay, find your spots." That took another minute. Then the tanks were hull-down, just their guns and the tops of turrets showing. "Straight down the line! Commence firing, fire at will."

All nine tanks fired at once. The range was just over two thousand meters, and now the element of surprise was with someone else. Five Russian tanks died with the first volley, and six more in the second, as the Abrams tanks went into rapid fire.

In the trees with the Bradleys, the brigade XO watched the north end of the Russian line crumple. That was the only word for it, he thought. The tank crews were all combat vets, and now they had the edge. The northernmost Russian battalion tried to reorient itself, but one of his Bradleys had evidently scored on its commander, and there was confusion there. Why the Russians hadn't pressed home the attack was one question that floated about the rear of his brain, but that was something to save for the after-action report. Right now he saw that they had screwed up, and that was a good thing for him and his men.

"Sir, I've got Seventh Army." A sergeant handed him a microphone.

"What's happening over there?"

"General, this is Lieutenant Colonel Ed Long, we just got our ass attacked by the regiment across town from us. No warning at all, they just came into our kazerne like Jeb Stuart. We've got 'em stopped, but I've lost most of my tanks. We need some help here."

"Losses?"

"Sir, I've lost over forty tanks, eight Bradleys, and at least two hundred men."

"Opposition?"

"One regiment of tanks. Nothing else yet, but they have lots of friends, sir. I could sure use some myself."

"I'll see what I can do."

General Kuropatkin checked his status board. Every radar system that was not down for repair was now operating. Satellite information told him that two SAC bases were empty. That meant their aircraft were now airborne and flying toward the Soviet Union along with KC-135 tankers. Their missile fields

would also be at full alert. His Eagle satellites would give launch-warning, announcing that his country had thirty minutes left to live. Thirty minutes, the General thought. Thirty minutes and the reason of the American President were all that stood between life and death for his country.

"Air activity picking up over Germany," a colonel said. "We show some American fighters coming out from Ramstein and Bitburg, heading east. Total of eight aircraft."

"What do we have on the American Stealth fighters?"

"There is a squadron—eighteen of them—at Ramstein. Supposedly the Americans are demonstrating them for possible sale to their NATO allies."

"They could all be in the air right now," Kuropatkin noted, "carrying nuclear weapons, for that matter."

"Correct, they can easily carry two B-61-type weapons each. With high-altitude cruise, they could be over Moscow before we knew it. . . ."

"And with their bombsights . . . they could lay their weapons exactly on any target they wish . . . two and a half hours from the time they lift off . . . my God." In the weapon's earth-penetration mode, it could be placed close enough to eliminate the President's shelter. Kuropatkin lifted his phone. "I need to talk to the President."

"Yes, General, what is it?" Narmonov asked.

"We have indications of American air activity over Germany."

"There's more than that. A Guards regiment in Berlin reports being under attack by American troops."

"That's mad."

And the report came in not five minutes after my friend Fowler promised not to do anything provocative. "Speak quickly, I have enough business here already."

"President Narmonov. Two weeks ago a squadron of American F-117A Stealth fighters arrived at their Ramstein air base, ostensibly for demonstration to their NATO allies. The Americans said they want to sell them. Each of those aircraft can carry two half-megaton weapons."

"Yes?"

"I cannot detect them. They are virtually invisible to everything we have."

"What are you telling me?"

"From the time they leave their bases, then refuel, they can be over Moscow in less than three hours. We would have no more warning than Iraq had."

"Are they truly that effective?"

"One reason we left so many people in Iraq was to observe closely what the Americans are capable of. Our people never saw that American plane on a radarscope, neither ours nor the French scopes Saddam had. Yes, they are that good."

"But why would they wish to do such a thing?" Narmonov demanded.

"Why would they attack our regiment in Berlin?" the Defense Minister asked in reply.

"I thought this place was proof against anything in their arsenal."

"Not against a nuclear gravity bomb delivered with high accuracy. We are only one hundred meters down here," Defense said. *In the old battle between warhead and armor, warhead always wins. . . .*

"Back to Berlin," Narmonov said. "Do we know what's happening there?"

"No, what we have has come from junior officers only."

"Get someone in there to find out. Tell our people to fall back if they can do so safely—and take defensive action only. Do you object to that?"

"No, that is prudent."

The National Photographic Intelligence Center, NPIC, is located at the Washington Navy Yard, in one of several windowless buildings housing highly sensitive government activities. At the moment they had a total of three KH-11 photographic and two KH-12 "Lacrosse" radar-imaging satellites in orbit. At 00:26:46 Zulu Time, one of the -11s came within optical range of Denver. All of its cameras zoomed in on the city, especially its southern suburbs. The images were downlinked in real-time to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and sent from there to NPIC by fiber-optic cable. At NPIC, they were recorded in two-inch videotape. Analysis started immediately.

This aircraft was a DC-10. Qati and Ghosn again availed themselves of first-class seating, pleased and amazed at their good luck. The word had gotten out only minutes before the flight was called. As soon as the report had gone out on the Reuters wire, it had been inevitable. AP and UPI had instantly picked it up, and all television stations subscribed to the wire services. Surprised that the networks had not yet put out their own special bulletins, the local affiliates ran with it anyway. The one thing about it that had surprised Qati was the silence. As the word spread like a wave through the terminal building, what lay behind it was not shouting and panic, but an eerie silence that allowed one to hear the flight calls and other background noises normally submerged by the cacophony of voices in such public areas. So the Americans faced tragedy and death, the Commander thought. The lack of passion surprised him.

It was soon behind him in any case. The DC-10 accelerated down the runway and lifted off. A few minutes later it was over international waters, heading toward a neutral country and safety. One more connection, both men thought in a silence of their own. One more connection, and they would disappear completely. Who would have expected such luck?

"The infrared emissions are remarkable," the photoanalyst thought aloud. It was his first nuclear detonation. "I have damage and secondary fires up to a mile from the stadium. Not much of the stadium itself. Too much smoke and IR interference. Next pass, if we're lucky, we ought to have some visible-light imagery."

"What can you tell us about casualty count?" Ryan asked.

"What I have is inconclusive. Mainly the visible-light shots show smoke that's obscuring everything. Infrared levels are very impressive. Lots of fires immediately around the stadium itself. Cars, I guess, gas tanks cooking off."

Jack turned to the senior Science and Technology officer. "Who do we have up in the photo section?"

"Nobody," S&T replied. "Weekend, remember? We let NPIC handle weekend work unless we expect something hot."

"Who's the best guy?"

"Andy Davis, but he lives in Manassas. He'll never make it in."

"Goddamn it." Ryan picked up the phone again. "Send us the best ten photos you have," he told NPIC.

"You'll have them in two or three minutes."

"How about someone to evaluate the bomb effects?"

"I can do that," S&T said. "Ex-Air Force. I used to work intel for SAC."

"Run with it."

The nine Abrams tanks had by now accounted for nearly thirty of the Russian T-80s. The Soviets had pulled south to find cover of their own. Their return fire had killed three more of the MIAls, but now the odds were a lot more even. The Captain commanding the tank detachment sent his Bradleys east to conduct reconnaissance. As with their first dash, there were people watching them, but for the most part they did this from windows now unlit. The streetlights worried one Bradley commander, who took a rifle and began shooting them out, to the horror of Berliners who had the courage to watch.

"*Was nun?*" Keitel asked. What now?

"Now we get the devil away from here and disappear. Our work is done," Bock replied, turning the wheel to the left. A northerly escape route seemed best. They'd dump the car and truck, change their clothes, and vanish. They might even survive all this, Bock thought. Wouldn't that be something? But his main thought was that he'd avenged his Petra. It had been the Americans and Russians who'd brought her death about. Germans had only been the pawns of the great players, and the great players were paying now, Bock told himself, were paying now and would pay more. Revenge wasn't so cold a dish after all, was it?

"Russian staff car," the gunner said, "and a GAZ truck."

"Chain gun." The track commander took his time identifying the inbound targets. "Wait."

"I *love* killin' officers. . . ." The gunner centered the sight for his 25mm cannon. "On target, Sarge."

For all his experience as a terrorist, Bock was not a soldier. He took the dark, square shape two blocks away for a large truck. His plan had worked. The American alert, so perfectly timed, could only mean that Qati and Ghosn had done their job exactly as he'd envisioned five months earlier. His eyes shifted as he saw what looked like a flash bulb and a streak of light that went over his head.

"Fire—hose 'em!"

The gunner had his selector switch on rapid fire. The 25-millimeter chain gun was wonderfully accurate, and the tracers allowed you to walk fire right into the target. The first long burst hit the truck. There might, he reasoned, be armed soldiers in the truck. The initial rounds went into the engine block,

shattering it into fragments, then, as the vehicle surged forward, the next burst swept through the cab and cargo area. The truck collapsed on two flattened front tires and ground to a halt, the wheel rims digging grooves in the asphalt. By that time the gunner had shifted fire and put a short burst through the staff car. This target merely lost control and slammed into a parked BMW. Just to make sure, the gunner hit the car again, and then the truck. Someone actually got out of the truck, probably wounded already from the way he moved. Two more 25mm rounds fixed that.

The track commander moved immediately. One does not linger where one has killed. Two minutes later they found another surveillance spot. Police cars were racing down the streets, their blue lights flashing. One of them stopped a few hundred meters from the Bradley, backed up and raced off, the track commander saw. Well, he'd always known German cops were smart.

Five minutes after the Bradley departed for another block, the first Berliner, an exceedingly courageous physician, came out his front door and went to the staff car. Both men were dead, each torso ripped to shreds by the cannon shells, though both faces were intact except for the splashed blood. The truck was an even greater mess. One of the men there might have survived for a few minutes, but by the time the doctor got there, it was far too late. He found it odd that they all wore Russian officers' uniforms. Not knowing what else to do, he called the police. Only later did he realize how disproportionate his understanding of the events outside his home had been.

"They weren't kidding about the infrared signature. This must have been some bomb," the S&T guy observed. "Damage is a little funny, though . . . hmph."

"What do you mean, Ted?" Ryan asked.

"I mean the ground damage ought to be worse than this . . . must be shadows and reflections." He looked up. "Sorry. Shockwaves don't go through things—like a hill, I mean. There must have been reflections and shadows here, that's all. These houses here ought not to be there anymore." "I still don't know what you mean," Ryan said.

"There are always anomalies in cases like this. I'll get back to you when I have this figured out, okay?" Ted Ayres asked.

* * *

Walter Hoskins sat in his office because he didn't know what else to do, and as most senior man present, he had to answer the phones. All he needed to do was turn to see what the stadium was. The pall of smoke was only five miles away through his windows, one of which was cracked. Part of him wondered if he should send a team down there, but he had no such orders. He turned his chair to look that way again, amazed that the window was almost intact. After all, it was supposed to have been a nuclear bomb, and it was only five miles. The remains of the cloud were now over the front range of the Rockies, still intact enough that you could tell what it had been, and behind it like a wake was another black plume of fires from the bomb area, The destruction must be

. . .

. . . not enough. Not enough? What a crazy thought. With nothing else to do, Hoskins lifted the phone and dialed up Washington. “Give me Murray.”

“Yeah, Walt.”

“How busy are you?”

“Not very, as a matter of fact. How is it at your end?”

“We have the TV stations and phones shut down. I hope the President will be there when I have to explain that one to the judge.”

“Walt, this isn’t the time—”

“Not why I called.”

“Well, then you want to tell me?”

“I can see it from here, Dan,” Hoskins said in a voice that was almost dreamy.

“How bad is it?”

“All I see is the smoke, really. The mushroom cloud is over the mountains now, all orange, like. Sunset, it’s high enough to catch the sunset, I guess. I can see lots of little fires. They’re lighting up the smoke from the stadium area. Dan?”

“Yeah, Walt?” Dan responded. The man seemed to be in shock, Murray thought.

“Something odd.”

“What’s that?”

“My windows aren’t broken. I’m only like five miles from there, and only one of my windows is cracked, even. Odd, isn’t it?” Hoskins paused. “I have some stuff here that you said you wanted, pictures and stuff.” Hoskins leafed through the documents that had been set in his In basket. “Marvin Russell sure picked a busy day to die. Anyway, I have the passport stuff you wanted. Important?”

“It can wait.”

“Okay.” Hoskins hung up.

“Walt’s losing it, Pat,” Murray observed.

“You blame him?” O’Day asked.

Dan shook his head. “No.”

“If this gets worse . . .” Pat observed.

“How far out is your family?”

“Not far enough.”

“Five miles,” Murray said quietly.

“What?”

“Walt said that his office is just five miles away, he can see it from there. His windows aren’t broken, even.”

“Bullshit,” O’Day replied. “He must really be out of it. Five miles, that’s less than nine thousand yards.”

“What do you mean?”

“NORAD said the bomb was a hundred-kiloton range. That’ll break windows over a hell of a long distance. Only takes half a pound or so of overpressure to do a window.”

“How do you know?”

"Used to be in the Navy—intelligence, remember? I had to evaluate the damage distances for Russian tactical nukes once. A hundred-kiloton bomb at nine thousand yards won't sink you, but it'll wreck everything topside, scorch paint, start small fires. Bad news, man."

"Curtains, like?"

"Ought to," O'Day thought aloud. "Yeah, regular curtains would light up, especially if they're dark ones."

"Walt's not so far out of it that he'd miss a fire in his office. . . ." Murray lifted his phone to Langley.

"Yeah, what is it, Dan?" Jack said into the speaker.

"What number do you have on the size of the explosion?"

"According to NORAD, one-fifty, maybe two hundred kilotons, size of a big tactical weapon or a small strategic one," Ryan said. "Why?" On the other side of the table, the S&T officer looked up from the photos.

"I just talked to my ASAC Denver. He can see the stadium area from his office—five miles, Jack. He's only got one cracked window."

"Bull," S&T noted.

"What do you mean?" Ryan asked.

"Five miles, that's eight thousand meters," Ted Ayres pointed out. "The thermal pulse alone should fry the place, and the shock wave would sure as hell blow a plate-glass window out."

Murray heard that. "Yeah, that's what a guy here just said. Hey, my guy might be a little out of it—shock, I mean—but he'd notice a fire next to his desk, don't you think?"

"Do we have anything from people on the scene yet?" Jack asked Ayres.

"No, the NEST team is on the way, but the imagery tells us a lot, Jack."

"Dan, how quick can you get somebody to the scene?" Ryan asked.

"I'll find out."

"Hoskins."

"Dan Murray, Walt. Get some people down there fast as you can. You stay put to coordinate."

"Okay."

Hoskins gave the proper orders, wondering just how badly he might be endangering his people. Then, with nothing else to do, he looked over the file on his desk. Marvin Russell, he thought, yet another criminal who died of dumb. Drug dealers. Didn't they ever learn?

Roger Durling was grateful when the Kneecap aircraft disengaged from the tanker. The converted 747 had the usual pussycat ride, but not when in close proximity to a KC-10 tanker. It was something only his son enjoyed. Aboard in the conference room were an Air Force brigadier, a Navy captain, a Marine major, and four other field- and staff-grade officers. All the data the President got came to Kneecap automatically, including the Hot Line transcripts.

"You know, what they're saying is okay, but it sure as hell would be nice to know what everyone's thinking."

"What if this really is a Russian attack?" the General asked.

"Why would they do it?"

"You've heard the chatter between the President and CIA, sir."

"Yeah, but that Ryan guy's right," Durling said. "None of this makes any sense."

"So who ever said the world had to make sense? What about the contact in the Med and Berlin?"

"Forward-deployed forces. We go on alert, and they go on alert, and they're close to each other, and someone goofs. You know, like Gavrilo Prinzip shooting the Archduke. An accident happens and then things just slide down the chute."

"That's why we have the Hot Line, Mr. Vice President."

"True," Durling conceded. "And so far it seems to be working."

They made the first fifty yards easily, but then it got harder, and soon it went from hard to impossible. Callaghan had a total of fifty firefighters trying to fight their way on, with a hundred more in support. On reflection, he had a continuous water spray over every man and woman. If nothing else, he reasoned, it would wash whatever fallout or dust or whatever the hell was out here off his people and into the sewer drains—that which didn't freeze first, that is. The men in front were coated with ice that made a translucent layer on their turn-out coats.

The biggest problem was the cars. They'd been tossed about like toys, lying on their sides or tops, leaking gasoline that collected into burning puddles that were being supplied faster than they burned off. Callaghan ordered a truck in. One at a time, his men ran cables to the frames of the wrecked cars, and the truck dragged them clear, but this was horribly time-consuming. It would take forever to get into the stadium. And there were people in there. He was sure of it. There had to be. Callaghan just stood there, out of the water spray, guilty that he was warmer than his people. He turned when he heard the roar of a large diesel engine.

"Hello." It was a man wearing the uniform of a U.S. Army colonel. The name tag on his parka read Lyle. "I hear you need heavy equipment."

"What you got?"

"I have three engineer tanks, M728s, just rolling in now. Got something else, too."

"What's that?"

"A hundred MOPP suits, you know, chemical warfare gear. It ain't perfect, but it's better than what your people got on. Warmer, too. Why don't you pull your people off and get them outfitted. Truck's over there." The Colonel pointed.

Callaghan hesitated for a moment, but decided that he couldn't turn this offer down. He called his people off and pulled them back to don the military gear. Colonel Lyle tossed him an outfit.

"The water fog's a good idea, ought to keep dust and stuff down. So, what do you want us to do?"

"You can't tell from here, but there is still some structure in there. I think there might be survivors. I have to find out. Can you help us get through these cars?"

"Sure." The Colonel lifted his own radio and ordered the first vehicle in. The M728, Callaghan saw, was essentially a tank with a dozer blade on the front, and a big A-frame and winch on the back of the turret. There was even an odd-looking short-barreled gun.

"This isn't going to be very neat. Can you live with that?"

"Screw neat—get in there!"

"Okay." Lyle picked up the interphone at the left rear of the vehicle. "Make a hole," he ordered.

The driver revved up the diesel just as the first firemen returned. He made a sincere effort to avoid the fire hoses—even so he split eight two-and-a-half-inch lines. The blade dropped and the tank crashed into the mass of burning cars at twenty miles per hour. It made a hole, all right, about thirty feet deep. Then the tank backed off and started widening it.

"Jesus," Callaghan observed. "What do you know about radiation stuff?"

"Not much. I checked with the NEST guys before I drove down. They ought to be here any time. Until then . . ." Lyle shrugged. "You really think there's live ones in there?"

"Part of the structure is still there. I saw it from the chopper."

"No shit?"

"Yeah, I saw it."

"But that's crazy. The NORAD guys say it was a big one."

"What?" Callaghan shouted over the noise of the tank.

"The bomb, it was supposed to be a big one. There shouldn't even be a parking lot here."

"You mean this was a *little* one?" Callaghan looked at the man as though he were crazy.

"Hell, yes!" Lyle stopped for a moment. "If there's people in there . . ." He ran to the back of the tank and grabbed the phone. A moment later the M728 stopped.

"What's the matter?"

"If there are survivors, hell, we might squash one this way. I just told him to take it easier. Goddamn, you're right. And I thought you were crazy."

"What do you mean?" Callaghan shouted again, waving his firefighters to put their spray on the tank also.

"There may be survivors in there. This bomb was a hell of a lot smaller than they told me on the phone."

"*Maine*, this is Sea Devil One-Three," the P-3C Orion called. "We're about forty minutes out from your position. What seems to be the problem?"

"We have screw and shaft damage, and we have an Akula in the neighborhood, last fix five-zero thousand yards southwest," Ricks answered.

"Roger that. We'll see if we can drive him off for you. We'll report when we get on station. Out."

"Captain, we can do three knots, let's do that, north, open as much as we can," Claggett said.

Ricks shook his head. "No, we'll stay quiet."

"Sir, our friend out there must have copied the collision transient. He will be coming this way. We've lost our best sonar. Smart move is to evade as best

we can."

"No, the smart move is to stay covert."

"Then at least launch a MOSS."

"That makes sense, sir," the weapons officer thought.

"Okay, program it to sound like we are now, and give it a southerly course."

"Right." *Maine's* number-three torpedo tube was loaded with a MOSS, a Mobile Submarine Simulator. Essentially a modified torpedo itself, the MOSS contained a sonar transducer connected to a noise generator, instead of a warhead. It would radiate the sound of an Ohio-class submarine, and was designed to simulate a damaged one. Since shaft damage was one of the few reasons that an Ohio might make noise, that option was already programmed in. The weapons officer selected the proper noise track, and launched the weapon a few minutes later. The MOSS sped off to the south, and two thousand yards away, it began radiating.

* * *

The skies had cleared over Charleston, South Carolina. What had fallen as snow in Virginia and Maryland had been mainly sleet here. The afternoon sun had removed most of that, returning the antebellum city to its normally pristine state. As the Admiral commanding Submarine Group Six watched from the tender, two of his ballistic-missile submarines started down the Cooper River for the sea and safety. He wasn't the only one to watch. One hundred ninety miles over his head, a Soviet reconnaissance satellite made its pass, continuing up the coast to Norfolk, where the sky was also clearing. The satellite downlinked its pictures to the Russian intelligence center on Cuba's western tip. From there it was immediately relayed by communications satellite. Most of the Russian satellites used high-polar orbits, and had not been affected by the EMP. The imagery was in Moscow in a matter of seconds.

"Yes?" the Defense Minister asked.

"We have imagery of three American naval bases. Missile submarines at Charleston and King's Bay are putting to sea."

"Thank you." The Defense Minister replaced the phone. Another threat. He relayed it at once to President Narmonov.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that the military action taken by the Americans is not merely defensive. Some of the submarines in question carry the Trident D-5 missile, which has first-strike capability. You'll recall how interested the Americans were in forcing us to eliminate our SS-18s?"

"Yes, and they are removing a large number of their Minutemen," Narmonov said. "So?"

"So they don't *need* land-based missiles to make a first strike. They can do it from submarines. We cannot. We depend on our land-based ICBMs for that."

"And what of our SS-18s?"

"We're removing the warheads from some of them even as we speak, and if they ever get that damned deactivation facility working, we'll be in full compliance with the treaty—we are now, in fact, just the damned Americans

don't admit it." The Defense Minister paused. Narmonov wasn't getting it. "In other words, while we have eliminated some of our most accurate missiles, the Americans still have theirs. We are at a strategic disadvantage."

"I have not had much sleep, and my thinking is not at its best," Narmonov said testily. "You *agreed* to this treaty document only a year ago, and now you're telling me that we are threatened by it?"

They're all the same, the Defense Minister thought. *They never listen, they never really pay attention. Tell them something a hundred times and they just don't hear you!*

"The elimination of so many missiles and warheads changes the correlation of forces—"

"Rubbish! We're still equal in every way!" President Narmonov objected.

"That is not the question. The important factor is the relationship between the number of launchers—and their relative vulnerability—and the number of warheads available to both sides. We can still strike first and eliminate the American land-based missile force with our land-based missiles. That is why they were so willing to remove half of theirs. But the majority of their warheads are at sea, and now, for the first time, such sea-based missiles are totally adequate for a disarming first strike."

"Kuropatkin," Narmonov said, "are you hearing this?"

"Yes, I am. The Defense Minister is correct. The additional dimension, if I may say it, is that the reduction in the number of launchers has changed the overall ratio of launchers-to-warheads. For the first time in a generation, a truly disarming first-strike is possible, especially if the Americans are able to decapitate our government with their first strike."

"And they could do that with the Stealth fighters they put in Germany," Defense concluded the statement.

"Wait a minute. Are you telling me that Fowler blew up his own city as an excuse to attack us? What madness is this?" Now the Soviet President began to understand fear.

The Defense Minister spoke slowly and clearly. "Whoever detonated that weapon is beside the point. If Fowler begins to think that it was our doing, he has the ability to act against us. Comrade President, you must understand this: technically speaking, our country is on the edge of annihilation. Less than thirty minutes separate their land-based missiles from us. Twenty minutes for their sea-based ones, and as little as two hours from those goddamned invisible tactical bombers, which would be the most advantageous opening move. All that separates us from destruction is the mental state of President Fowler."

"I understand." The Soviet President was quiet for half a minute. He stared off at the status board on the far wall. When he spoke, his voice showed the anger that comes from fright. "What do you propose we should do—attack the Americans? I will not do such a thing."

"Of course not, but we would be well advised to place our strategic forces on full alert. The Americans will take note of this and realize that a disarming attack is not possible, and we can settle this affair down long enough for reason to take hold."

"Golovko?"

The First Deputy Chairman of the KGB shrank from the inquiry. “We know that they are at full alert status. It is possible that our doing the same will provoke them.”

“If we do not, we present ourselves as a much more inviting target.” The Defense Minister was inhumanly calm, perhaps the only man in the room who was fully in control of himself. “We know that the American President is under great stress, that he has lost many thousands of his citizens. He might lash out without thinking. He is much less likely to do so if he knows that we are in a position to respond in kind. We do not dare to show weakness at a time like this. Weakness always invites attack.”

Narmonov looked around the room for a dissenting opinion. There was none. “Make it so,” he told Defense.

“We still haven’t heard anything from Denver,” Fowler said, rubbing his eyes.

“I wouldn’t expect much,” General Borstein replied.

NORAD’s command post is literally inside of a mountain. The entrance tunnel had a series of steel blast-doors. The structures inside were designed to survive anything that could be aimed at them. Shock-absorbing springs and bags of compressed air isolated the people and machines from the granite floors. Overhead were steel roofs to stop any rock fragments that might be blasted free by a near-miss. Borstein didn’t expect to survive an attack. There was a whole regiment of Soviet SS-18 Mod 4s tasked to the destruction of this post and a few others. Instead of ten or more MIRVs, they carried a single *twenty* five-megaton warhead whose only plausible military mission was to turn Cheyenne Mountain into Cheyenne Lake. That was a pleasant thought. Borstein was a fighter pilot by trade. He’d started off in the F-100, called the “Hun” by its drivers, graduated from there to F-4 Phantoms, and commanded an F-15 squadron in Europe. He’d always been a tactical guy, stick and rudder, scarf and goggles: kick the tires, light the fires, first one up’s the leader. Borstein frowned at the thought. Even he wasn’t old enough to remember those days. His job was continental air defense, to keep people from blowing his country up. He’d failed. A nearby piece of America was blown up, along with his boss, and he didn’t know why or how or who. Borstein was not a man accustomed to failure, but failure was what he saw on his map display.

“General!” a major called to him.

“What is it?”

“Picking up some radio and microwave chatter. First guess is that Ivan’s alerting his missile regiments. Ditto in some naval bases. Flash traffic outbound from Moscow.”

“Christ!” Borstein lifted his phone again.

“Never done it?” Elliot asked.

“Strange but true,” Borstein said. “Even during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Russians never put their ICBMs on alert.”

“I don’t believe it,” Fowler snorted. “Never?”

“The General’s right,” Ryan said. “The reason is that their telephone system historically has been in pretty bad shape. I guess they’ve finally gotten it fixed

enough—"

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. President, God is in the details. You send alert messages by voice—we do it that way, and so do the Soviets. The Russian phone system stinks, and you don't want to use a fluky system for orders of that importance. That's why they've been investing so much money in fixing it up, just as we have invested a lot in our command-and-control systems. They use a lot of fiber-optic cable now, just like we do, plus a whole new set of microwave relays. That's how we're catching it," Jack explained. "Scatter off the microwave repeaters."

"Another couple of years, they'll be fully fiber-optic and we wouldn't have known," General Fremont added. "I don't like this."

"Neither do I," Ryan said, "but we're at DEFCON-TWO also, aren't we?"

"They don't know that. We didn't tell them that," Liz Elliot said.

"Unless they're reading our mail. I've told you we have reports that they've penetrated our cipher systems."

"NSA says you're crazy."

"Maybe I am, but NSA's been wrong before, too."

"What do you think Narmonov's mental state is?"

As scared as I am? Ryan wondered. "Sir, there's no telling that."

"And we don't even know if it's really him," Elliot put in.

"Liz, I reject your hypothesis," Jack snapped over the conference line. "The only thing you have to support it comes from my agency, and we have our doubts about it." *Christ, I'm sorry I ever took that report in,* he told himself.

"Cut that out, Ryan!" Fowler snarled back. "I need facts, not arguments now, okay?"

"Sir, as I keep pointing out, we do not as yet have sufficient information on which to base any decision."

"Balls," the Colonel next to General Fremont said.

"What do you mean?" CINC-SAC turned away from the speakerphone.

"Dr. Elliot is right, sir. What she said earlier makes sense."

"Mr. President," they heard a voice say. "We have a Hot Line transmission coming in."

> PRESIDENT FOWLER:
> WE HAVE JUST RECEIVED A REPORT THAT A US ARMY UNIT IN BERLIN HAS ATTACKED A SOVIET UNIT WITHOUT WARNING. CASUALTIES ARE REPORTED SEVERE. PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT IS HAPPENING.

"Oh, shit," Ryan said, looking at the fax.

"I need opinions, people," Fowler said over the conference line.

"The best thing is to say that we have no knowledge of this incident," Elliot said. "If we admit knowledge, we have to assume some responsibility."

"This is a singularly bad time to lie," Ryan said forcefully. Even he thought he was overdoing it. *They won't listen to you if you shout, Jack, boy. . . .*

"Tell that to Narmonov," Elliot shot back. "They attacked us, remember?"

"So the reports say, but—"

"Ryan, are you saying our people lied?" Borstein snarled from Cheyenne Mountain.

"No, General, but at times like this the news is chancy, and you know that

as well as I do!"

"If we deny knowledge, we can avoid taking a stand that we might have to back down from, and we avoid challenging them for the moment," the National Security Advisor insisted. "Why are they bringing this up now?" she asked.

"Mr. President, you used to be a prosecutor," Ryan said. "You know how unreliable eyewitness accounts can be. Narmonov could be asking that question in good faith. My advice is to answer it honestly." Jack turned to Goodley, who gave him a thumbs-up.

"Robert, we're not dealing with civilians, we're dealing with professional soldiers, and they ought to be good observers. Narmonov is accusing us of something we didn't do," Elliot countered. "Soviet troops do not initiate combat operations without orders. Therefore he must know that his accusation is false. If we admit knowledge, we will appear to admit his charge is true. I don't know what game he's playing—whoever that is at the other end of the line—but if we simply say we don't know what he's talking about, we buy ourselves time."

"I strongly disagree with that," Jack said as calmly as he could manage.

> PRESIDENT NARMONOV:
> As YOU KNOW, I AM MAINLY CONCERNED WITH EVENTS WITHIN OUR OWN BORDERS. I HAVE AS YET NO INFORMATION FROM BERLIN. THANK YOU FOR YOUR INQUIRY. I JUST ORDERED MY PEOPLE TO CHECK INTO IT.

"Opinions?"

"The bastard's lying through his teeth," the Defense Minister said. "Their communications system is too good for that."

"Robert, Robert, why do you lie when I know you are lying . . . ?" Narmonov said, his head down. The Soviet President now had his own questions to ask. Over the past two or three months his contacts with America had grown slightly cold. When he asked for some additional credits, he was put off. The Americans were insisting on full compliance with the arms-reduction agreement even though they knew what the problem was, and even though he'd given Fowler his word face-to-face that everything would be done. What had changed? Why had Fowler retreated from his promises? What the hell was he doing now?

"It's more than just a lie, more than just this lie," the Defense Minister observed after a moment.

"What do you mean?"

"He has emphasized again that his interest is in rescue of casualties in the Denver area, but we know he has placed his strategic forces on full alert. Why has he not told us of this?"

"Because he is afraid of provoking us . . . ?" Narmonov asked. His words seemed rather hollow even to himself.

"Possibly," Defense admitted. "But they do not know the success we've had reading their codes. Perhaps they think they have concealed this from us."

"No," Kuropatkin said in his command center. "I must disagree with that. We could hardly fail to see some of these indicators. They should know that we are aware of some aspects of their strategic alert."

"But not all." The Defense Minister turned to stare at Narmonov. "We must

face the possibility that the American President is no longer rational."

"The first time?" Fowler asked.

Elizabeth Elliot nodded. She was quite pale now. "It's not widely known, Robert, but it is true. The Russians have never placed their Strategic Rocket Forces on alert. Until now."

"Why now?" the President asked.

"Robert, the only thing that makes sense is that it isn't Narmonov over there."

"But how can we be sure?"

"We can't. All we have is this computer link. There's no voice link, no visual link."

"Dear God."

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COLLISIONS

"Ryan, how do we know it's really Narmonov over there?"

"Mr. President, who else would it be?"

"Goddamn it, Ryan! You're the one who brought me the reports!"

"Mr. President, you have to settle down," Jack said in a voice that wasn't particularly calm. "Yes, I brought you that information, and I also told you it was unconfirmed, and I just told you a few minutes ago that we have reason to believe that it may not ever have been true at all."

"Can't you see your own data? You're the one who warned us that there might be some missing nukes!" Elliot pointed out. "Well, they turned up—they turned up here, right where we were supposed to be!"

Christ, she's even more rattled than he is, Helen D'Agustino told herself. She traded a look with Pete Connor, who was pasty-white. *This is going too fast.*

"Look, Liz, I keep telling you that our information is too damned thin. We don't have enough to make any kind of informed judgment here."

"But why have they gone on nuclear alert?"

"For the same reason that we have!" Ryan shouted back. "Maybe if both sides would back off—"

"Ryan, don't tell me what to do," Fowler said quietly. "What I want from you is information. We make the decisions here."

Jack turned away from the speakerphone. Now he was losing it, Goodley thought, now Ryan was pale and sick-looking. The Deputy Director of Central Intelligence stared out the windows at the CIA courtyard and the largely empty building beyond. He took a few deep breaths and turned back.

"Mr. President," Jack said under taut control, "our opinion is that President Narmonov is in control of the Soviet government. We do not know the origin of the explosion in Denver, but there is no information in our possession that would lead us to believe that it was a Soviet weapon. Our opinion is that for the Soviets to undertake such an operation would be lunacy, and even if their military were in control—after a coup about which we have no information at all, sir—such a miscalculation is unlikely to the point of—the likelihood is so low as to approach zero, sir. That is CIA's position."

"And Kadishev?" Fowler asked.

"Sir, we have evidence just developed yesterday and today to suggest that his reports may be false. We cannot confirm one of the meetings that should —"

"*One*? You can't confirm *one* meeting?" Elliot asked.

"Will you let me talk?" Jack snarled, losing it again. "Damn it, it was

Goodley who did this work, not me!" He paused for a breath. "Dr. Goodley noted some subtle differences in the nature of the reports and decided to check up on them. All of Kadishev's reports supposedly came from face-to-face meetings with Narmonov. In one case we cannot reconcile the schedules of both men. We cannot be sure they met in that case at all. If they didn't meet, then Kadishev is a liar."

"I suppose you've considered the possibility that they met in secret?" Elliot inquired acidly. "Or do you think that a subject like this would be handled as a routine business matter! Do you think he'd be discussing a possible coup in a routine scheduled meeting!"

"I keep telling you that his information has never been confirmed, not by us, not by the Brits, not by anybody."

"Ryan, would you expect that a conspiracy leading to a military coup, especially in a country like the Soviet Union, would be handled in the utmost secrecy?" Fowler asked.

"Of course."

"Then would you necessarily expect to have it confirmed by other sources?" Fowler asked, talking like a lawyer in a courtroom.

"No, sir," Ryan admitted.

"Then this is the best information we have, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. President, if it's true."

"You say that you have no firm evidence to confirm it?"

"Correct, Mr. President."

"But you have no hard information to contradict it either, do you?"

"Sir, we have reasons—"

"Answer my question!"

Ryan's right hand compressed into a tight, white fist. "No, Mr. President, nothing hard."

"And for the past few years he's given us good, reliable information?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, based on the record of Mr. Kadishev, this is the best available information?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you. I suggest, Dr. Ryan, that you try to develop additional information. When you get it, I'll listen to it." The line clicked off.

Jack stood slowly. His legs were stiff and sore from the stress of the moment. He took one step to the window and lit a cigarette. "I blew it," he told the world. "Oh, Christ, I've blown it. . . ."

"Not your fault, Jack," Goodley offered.

Jack spun around. "That'll look real good on my fucking tombstone, won't it? 'It wasn't his fault' the fucking world blew up!"

"Come on, Jack, it's not that bad."

"Think so? Did you hear their voices?"

The Soviet carrier *Kuznetzov* didn't launch aircraft in the manner of U.S. carriers. Rather, it had a ski-jump bow configuration. The first MiG-29 raced forward from its starting point and went up the angled ramp and into the air. This manner of takeoff was hard on pilots and aircraft, but it worked. Another

aircraft followed, and both turned to head east. They'd barely gotten to altitude when the flight leader noted a buzz in his headphones.

"Sounds like an emergency beeper on the guard frequency," he said to his wingman. "Sounds like one of ours."

"Da, east-southeast. It is one of ours. Who do you suppose it is?"

"I have no idea." The flight leader passed this information on to *Kuznetzov* and received instructions to investigate.

* * *

"This is Falcon-Two," the Hawkeye reported. "We have two inbounds from the Russkie carrier, fast movers, bearing three-one-five and two-five-zero miles from Stick."

Captain Richards looked at the tactical display. "Spade, this is Stick. Close and warn them off."

"Roger," Jackson replied. He'd just topped his fuel tanks off. Jackson could stay up for another three hours or so, and he still carried six missiles.

" 'Warn them off'?" Lieutenant Walters asked.

"Shredder, I don't know what's going on either." Jackson brought the stick around. Sanchez did the same, again splitting out to a wide interval.

The two pairs of aircraft flew on reciprocal courses at a closing speed of just under a thousand miles per hour. Four minutes later both Tomcats went active on their radars. Ordinarily that would have alerted the Russians to the fact that American fighters were in the area, and that the area might not be totally healthy. But the new American radars were stealthy and were not picked up.

It turned out that this didn't matter. A few seconds later the Russians activated their own radar systems.

"Two fighters coming in toward us!"

The Russian flight leader checked his own radar display and frowned. The two MiGs were only supposed to be guarding their own task force. The alert had come in, and the fighters went up. Now he was on what might be a rescue mission and had no particular desire to play foolish games with American aircraft, especially at night. He knew that the Americans knew he was about. His threat receiver did detect the emanations from their airborne early-warning aircraft.

"Come right," he ordered. "Down to one thousand meters to look for that beeper." He'd leave his radar on, however, to show that he didn't wish to be trifled with.

"They're evading to the left, going down."

"Bud, you have the lead," Jackson said. Sanchez had the most missiles. Robby would cover his tail.

"Stick, this is Falcon-Two, both inbounds are breaking south and diving for the deck."

As Richards watched, the course vectors changed on both inbound aircraft. Their course tracks were not actually converging with the *Roosevelt* group at the moment, though they would be coming fairly close.

"What are they up to?"

"Well, they don't know where we are, do they?" the Operations Officer pointed out. "Their radars are on, though."

"Looking for us, then?"

"That would be my guess."

"Well, now we know where the other four came from." Captain Richards picked up the mike to talk to Jackson and Sanchez.

"Splash 'em," was the order. Robby took high cover. Sanchez went down, pulling behind and below both MiGs.

"I've lost the Americans."

"Forget them! We're looking for a rescue beeper, remember?" The flight leader craned his neck. "Is that a strobe light? On the surface at two o'clock . . . ?"

"I have it."

"Follow me down!"

"Evading, down and right!" Bud called. "Engaging now."

He was a bare two thousand yards aft of the MiGs. Sanchez selected a Sidewinder and lined his aircraft up on the "south guy," the trailing wingman. As the Tomcat continued to close, the pilot got the warbling tone in his earphones and triggered off his missile. The AIM-9M Sidewinder leaped off its launch rail, straight into the starboard engine of the MiG-29, which exploded. Barely had that happened when Sanchez triggered off a second 'Winder.

"Splash one."

"What the hell!" The flight leader caught the flash out the corner of his eye and turned to see his wingman's aircraft heading down before a trail of yellow. He wrenched his stick left, his throttle hand punching the flare/chaff-release button as his eyes searched the darkness for his attacker.

Sanchez's second missile missed right. It didn't matter. He was still tracking, and the MiG's turn brought the target right into the path of his 20mm cannon. One quick burst detached part of the MiG's wing. The pilot barely ejected in time. Sanchez watched the chute deploy. A minute later, as he orbited overhead, he saw that both Russians seemed to have survived the incidents. That was fine with Bud.

"Splash two. Stick, we have two good chutes on the splashes . . . wait a minute, there's three strobes down there," Jackson called. He gave the position, and almost instantly a helicopter lifted off from *Theodore Roosevelt.*

"Spade, is it supposed to be this easy?" Walters asked.

"I thought the Russians were smarter than this myself," the Captain admitted. "This is like first day of duck season."

Ten minutes later *Kuznetzov* made a radio call for its two MiGs and got no reply.

The Air Force helicopter returned from Rocky Flats. Major Griggs alighted with five men, all of them dressed in protective gear. Two of them ran to find

Chief Callaghan close to the M728 engineer tanks.

"Ten more minutes if we're lucky," Colonel Lyle shouted from atop the lead tank.

"Who's in charge here?" one of the NEST team asked.

"Who are you?"

"Parsons, team leader." Laurence Parsons was the head of the on-duty Nuclear Emergency Search Team, yet another failure for this day. Their job was to locate nuclear devices before they went off. Three such teams were kept on duty around the clock, one just outside Washington, another in Nevada, and the third, recently activated at Rocky Flats to help make up for the retirement of the Energy Department's weapons-fabrication facility outside Denver. It had been anticipated, of course, that they wouldn't always be able to get there in time. He held a radiation counter in his hand, and didn't like what he saw. "How long have your people been here?"

"About half an hour, maybe forty minutes."

"Ten more minutes, I want everybody away from here. You're taking Rems here, Chief."

"What do you mean? The Major said the fallout is all—"

"What you're getting is from neutron activation. It's hot here!"

Callaghan cringed at the thought. His life was being attacked by something he couldn't see or feel. "There may be people inside. We're almost there."

"Then do it fast! I mean *fast!"* Parsons and his team started moving back to the helicopter. They had their own work to do. At the chopper they met a man in civilian clothes.

"Who the fuck are you?" Parsons demanded.

"FBI! What happened here?"

"Take a guess!"

"Washington needs information!"

"Larry, it's hotter here than it is at the stadium!" another NEST team member reported.

"Makes sense," Parsons said. "Ground burst." He pointed. "Far side, downwind side. In-close was shielded some."

"What can you tell me?" the FBI agent asked.

"Not much," Parsons said over the sound of the turning rotor. "Ground burst, yield under twenty KT, all I got."

"It's dangerous here?"

"Hell, yes! Set up—where, where?"

"How about at the Aurora Presbyterian Hospital, two miles upwind?" a NESTer suggested. "Across from Aurora Mall. Ought to be okay there."

"You know where that is?" Parsons asked.

"Yes!"

"Then move out! Ken, you tell these people to get the hell out of here, it's twenty percent hotter here than in close. We have to get samples. Ken, you make sure they clear the area in ten minutes—fifteen max. Drag them out if you have to. Start here!"

"Right."

The FBI agent ducked as the helicopter lifted off. The NEST team member began running down the line of fire trucks, waving for them to get away. The

agent decided to do the same. After a few minutes he got in his car and headed northeast.

"Shit, I forgot about the neutrons," Major Griggs said.

"Thanks a lot!" Callaghan screamed over the sound of the tank.

"It's okay, they cut it off at a hundred. A hundred won't really hurt anybody."

Callaghan heard the sound of the engines pulling away. "What about the people inside?" The chief found the inter-phone at the back of the tank. "Listen up, we have ten minutes and we gotta get the hell out of here. Lean on it!"

"You got it, man," the tank commander replied. "Better get clear. I'll give you a ten count."

Callaghan ran to the side. Colonel Lyle jumped off and did the same. Inside the vehicle, the driver backed off ten yards, took the engine to the red line, and slipped the brake. The M728 crushed five vehicles, slamming them aside. The tank was moving at perhaps a mile per hour, but it didn't stop. Its treads ripped up the asphalt, then it was through.

The area immediately next to the stadium structure was amazingly intact. Most of the wreckage from the roof and upper wall had been thrown hundreds of yards, but here there were only small piles of brick and concrete fragments. Too much for a wheeled vehicle, but clear enough that men could walk. Firefighters advanced and sprayed everything. The asphalt was still very hot, and the water steamed off it. Callaghan ran in front of the tank, waving for his men to go left and right.

"You know what this looks like?" a NEST team member said as the helicopter circled the ruined stadium.

"Yeah, Chernobyl. They had firemen there, too." Parsons turned away from that thought. "Head downwind," he told the pilot. "Andy, what do you make this?"

"Ground burst, and this wasn't any hundred-KT weapon, Larry, not even twenty-five."

"What screwed up NORAD's estimate, do you think?"

"The parking lot. Asphalt, plus all those burning cars—it's the perfect black-body material—it's even *black*, for God's sake! I'm surprised the thermal pulse didn't look bigger than that—and everything around here is white from the snow 'n' ice, right? They got a megareflection plus a huge energy contrast."

"Makes sense, Andy," Parsons agreed. "Terrorists?"

"That's my bet for now, Larry. But we gotta get some residue to be sure."

The sounds of battle had died down. The Bradley commander heard scattered firing and guessed that the Russians had pulled back partway, maybe all the way to their own kazerne. It made sense, both sides' tanks had been badly mauled, and it was now a battle for infantrymen and their fighting vehicles. Foot soldiers, he knew, were smarter than tankers. It came from wearing a shirt instead of a foot of iron. Vulnerability made you think. He changed position yet again. It was odd how this worked, though he'd practiced the maneuver often enough. The vehicle ran close to a corner, and a man

would dismount to peer around it.

"Nothin', Sarge. It's all—wait! Something moving, 'bout two miles down the street. . . ." The soldier raised a pair of glasses. "BDRM! The missile kind."

Okay, the sergeant thought, *that'll be the reconnaissance element for the next wave.* His job was entirely straightforward. Reconnaissance was a two-part job. His job was both to find the enemy and to prevent the enemy from finding things.

"Another one!"

"Get ready to move. Traverse right, targets to the right," he added for the gunner.

"Ready, Sarge."

"Go!" The Bradley's armored body rocked backwards as a vehicle leaped into the intersection. The gunner brought his turret around. It looked like a small-bore shooting gallery. There were two BDRM armored scout cars heading straight toward them. The gunner engaged the leader, exploding the antitank missile launcher on top. The BDRM veered to the left and rammed some parked cars. Already the gunner shifted fire to the second, which jerked right to evade, but the street was too narrow for that. The chain gun was a nice compromise between a machine gun and a cannon. The gunner was able to walk his tracers into the target, and had the satisfaction of watching it explode. But—

"Back fast—now!" the sergeant screamed into the intercom. There had been a third BDRM back there. The Bradley retreated the way it had come. Barely had it gotten behind the buildings when a missile streaked down the street it had crossed, trailing a thin wire behind it. The missile exploded a few hundred meters away.

"Time to leave, turn us around," the track commander said. Then he activated his radio. "This is Delta Three-Three. We have contact with reconnaissance vehicles. Two destroyed, but the third one spotted us. We got more friends coming in, sir."

"General, we've pushed them back across the line, I can hold out against what's here, but if more gets in to us, we're screwed," Colonel Long said. "Sir, we need help here!"

"Okay, I'll have some air to you in ten minutes. Fast-movers on the way now."

"That's a start, but I need more than that, sir."

SACEUR turned to his operations officer. "What's ready?"

"Second of the 11th Cav, sir. They're moving out of their kazerne right now."

"What's between them and Berlin?"

"Russians? Not much. If they move fast. . . ."

"Move 'em out." SACEUR walked back to his desk and lifted the phone for Washington.

"Yes, what is it?" Fowler asked.

"Sir, it appears that the Russians are bringing reinforcements into Berlin. I have just ordered the 2nd Squadron, 11th Armored Cav to move toward Berlin

to reinforce. I also have aircraft heading in now to assess the situation."

"Do you have any idea what they're up to?"

"None, sir, it makes no damned sense at all, but we still have people being killed. What are the Russians telling you, Mr. President?"

"They're asking why we attacked them, General."

"Are they nuts?" *Or is it something else*? SACEUR wondered. *Something really frightening*?

"General." It was a woman's voice, probably that Elliot woman, SACEUR thought. "I want to be very clear on this. Are you sure that the Soviets initiated the attack?"

"Yes, ma'am!" SACEUR replied heatedly. "The commander of the Berlin Brigade is probably dead. The XO is Lieutenant Colonel Edward Long. I know the kid, he's good. He says the Russians opened fire on the brigade without warning while they were responding to the alert you sent out from D.C. They didn't even have their tubes loaded. I repeat, ma'am, the Russians are the ones who started shooting, and that's definite. Now, do I have your permission to reinforce?"

"What happens if you don't?" Fowler asked.

"In that case, Mr. President, you have about five thousand letters to write."

"Look, okay, send in the reinforcements. Tell Berlin to take no offensive action. We're trying to get things settled down."

"I wish you luck, Mr. President, but right now I have a command to run."

> PRESIDENT NARMONOV:
> WE HAVE RECEIVED WORD FROM EUROPE THAT A SOVIET TANK REGIMENT LAUNCHED AN ATTACK ON OUR BERLIN BRIGADE WITHOUT WARNING. I JUST TALKED TO OUR COMMANDER AND HE CONFIRMS THAT THIS IS TRUE.
>
> WHAT IS HAPPENING? WHY DID YOUR TROOPS ATTACK OUR TROOPS?

"Have we heard anything from Berlin yet?" Narmonov asked.

The Defense Minister shook his head. "No, the lead reconnaissance elements should just be getting in now. Radio communications are a disaster. Our VHF radios work poorly in cities because they are line-of-sight only. What we're getting is fragmented, mainly tactical communications between subunit commanders. We have not established contact with the regimental commander. He may be dead. After all," Defense pointed out, "the Americans like to go after commanders first."

"So we really do not know what is going on?"

"No, but I am *certain* that no Soviet commander would open fire on Americans without just cause!"

Golovko closed his eyes and swore under his breath. Now the Defense Minister was showing the strain.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch?" Narmonov asked.

"We have nothing more to report from KGB. You may expect that all of the American land-based missiles are fully on alert, as are all their submarine missiles at sea. We estimate that the American missile submarines in port will all have sortied in a matter of hours."

"And our missile submarines?"

"One is leaving the dock now. The rest are preparing to do so. It will take

most of the day to get them all out."

"Why are we so slow?" Narmonov demanded.

"The Americans have two complete crews for their boats. We have only one. It's simply easier for them to surge them out this way."

"So you are telling me that their strategic forces are totally ready, or nearly so, and ours are not?"

"All of our land-based rockets are fully prepared."

"President Narmonov, your reply to the Americans . . . ?"

"What do I say now?" Andrey Il'ych asked.

A colonel entered the room. "Report from Berlin." He handed it to the Defense Minister.

"The Americans are in the eastern part of the city. The first wave of scout cars was taken under fire. Four vehicles, the officer commanding was killed in one of them. We've returned fire and gotten two American vehicles . . . no contact as yet with our regiment." The Defense Minister looked at the other one. "Carrier *Kuznetzov* reports that he launched a two-plane patrol. They detected a rescue radio signal and went to investigate. Contact was then lost. They have an American carrier battle group four hundred kilometers away, and request instructions."

"What does that mean?"

The Defense Minister checked the times on the second dispatch. "If our planes are not back by now, they are nearly out of fuel. We must assume they were lost, cause unknown, but the close proximity of the American carrier is troubling. . . . What the *hell* are they doing?"

> PRESIDENT FOWLER:
> I AM CERTAIN THAT NO SOVIET COMMANDER WOULD ATTACK AMERICAN TROOPS WITHOUT ORDERS, AND THERE WERE NO SUCH ORDERS. WE HAVE SENT ADDITIONAL TROOPS INTO BERLIN TO INVESTIGATE AND THEY WERE ATTACKED BY YOUR FORCES IN THE EASTERN PART OF THE CITY, WELL AWAY FROM YOUR ENCAMPMENT. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

"What the hell is he talking about? What am *I* doing? What the hell is he doing!" Fowler growled. A light came on. It was the CIA. The President pushed the button, adding a new line to his conference call.

"That depends on who 'he' is," Elliot warned.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Mr. President, what we have here is simple confusion."

"Ryan! We don't want analysis, we want information. Do you have any?" Liz shouted.

"The Soviets are sortieing their ships out of the Northern Fleet ports. One missile submarine is supposed to be heading out."

"So their land-based missiles are fully alerted?"

"Correct."

"And they're adding to their submarine missile force also?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Do you have any good news?"

"Sir, the news is that there is no real news right now, and you're—"

"Listen, Ryan. One last time: I want information from you and nothing else. You brought me that Kadishev stuff and now you're saying it was all wrong.

So why should I believe you now?"

"Sir, when I gave it to you I told you it was not confirmed!"

"I think we may have confirmation now," Liz pointed out. "General Borstein, if they're fully on line, what exactly is the threat?"

"The fastest thing they can get to us is an ICBM. Figure one regiment of SS-18s targeted on the Washington area, and most of the others targeted on our missile fields in the Dakotas, plus the sub bases at Charleston, King's Bay, Bangor, and the rest. Warning time will be twenty-five minutes."

"And we will be targets here?" Liz asked.

"That is a reasonable assumption, Dr. Elliot."

"So they will try to use SS-18s to finish what the first weapon missed?"

"If that was their work, yes."

"General Fremont, how far out is the backup Kneecap?"

"Dr. Elliot, it took off about ten minutes ago. It'll be at Hagerstown in ninety-five minutes. They have some good tail winds." CINC-SAC regretted that addition almost at once.

"So if they are thinking about an attack, and they launch it within the next hour and a half, we're dead here?"

"Yes."

"Elizabeth, it's our job to prevent that, remember?" Fowler said quietly.

The National Security Advisor looked over at the President. Her face might have been made of glass, so brittle it looked. It wasn't supposed to be like this. She was the chief adviser to the most powerful man in the world, in a place of ultimate safety, guarded by dedicated servants, but less than thirty minutes from the time some faceless, nameless Russian made a decision, perhaps one already made, she'd be dead. Dead, a few ashes in the wind, certainly no more than that. Everything she'd worked for, all the books and classes and seminars would have ended in a blinding, annihilating flash.

"Robert, we don't even know who we're talking to," she said in an uneven voice.

"Back to their message, Mr. President," General Fremont said. " 'Additional troops to investigate.' Sir, that sounds like reinforcements."

A rookie fireman found the first survivor, crawling up the concrete ramp from the basement loading dock. It was amazing he'd made it. His hands had second-degree burns, and the crawl had ground bits of glass and concrete and Lord knew what into his injuries. The firefighter lifted the man—it was a cop—and carried him off to the evacuation point. The two remaining fire engines sprayed both men with water, then they were ordered to strip, and they were hosed again. The police officer was semiconscious, but tore a sheet of paper off the clipboard he'd been holding, and all during the ambulance ride he was trying to tell the fireman something, but the firefighter was too cold, too tired, and much too scared to pay attention. He'd done his job, and might have lost his life in the process. It was altogether too much for a twenty-year-old, who simply stared at the wet floor of the ambulance and shivered inside his blanket.

The entranceway had been topped with a pre-stressed concrete lintel. That had been shattered by the blast, with one piece blocking the way in. A soldier

from the tank snaked a cable from the turret-mounted winch around the largest of the remaining blocks. As he did this, Chief Callaghan kept staring at his watch. It was too late to stop now in any case. He had to see this through if he died in the process.

The cable went taut, pulling the concrete fragment clear. Miraculously, the remainder of the entranceway did not collapse. Callaghan led the way through the rubbled opening, with Colonel Lyle behind him.

The emergency lights were on, and it seemed that every sprinkler head had gone off. This part of the stadium was where the main came into the structure, Callaghan remembered, and that explained the falling water. There were other sounds, the kind that came from people. Callaghan went into a men's room and found two women, both sitting in the water, both of their coats sprinkled with their own vomit.

"Get 'em out of here!" he shouted to his men. "Go both ways, give it a quick check, and get back here fast as you can!" Callaghan checked all the toilet stalls. They were unoccupied. Another look at the room showed nothing else. They'd come all this way for two women in the wrong bathroom. Just two. The chief looked at Colonel Lyle, but there really wasn't anything to say. Both men walked out into the concourse.

It took Callaghan a moment to realize it, even though it was right there, an entrance to the stadium's lower level. Whereas only a short time before the view would have been of the stadium south side, and the roof, what he now saw was the mountains, still outlined in orange by a distant setting sun. The opening called to him, and as though in a trance, he walked up the ramp.

It was a scene from hell. Somehow this section had been shielded one way or another from the blast. But not the thermal pulse. There were perhaps three hundred seats, still largely intact, still with people in them. What had once been people. They were burned black, charcoaled like overdone meat, worse than any fire victim he'd ever seen in nearly thirty years of fighting fires. At least three hundred, still sitting there, looking at where the field had been.

"Come on, Chief," Colonel Lyle said, pulling him away. The man collapsed, and Lyle saw him vomiting inside his gas mask. The Colonel got it off him and pulled him clear. "Time to leave. It's all over here. You've done your job." It turned out that four more people were still alive. The firemen loaded them on the engine deck of the tank, which drove off at once to the evacuation point. The remaining firefighters there washed everything off and departed, too.

Perhaps the only good luck of the day, Larry Parsons thought, was the snow cover. It had attenuated the thermal damage to the adjacent buildings. Instead of hundreds of house fires, there were only a few. Better, the afternoon sun of the previous day had been just intense enough to form a crust on the yards and roofs around the stadium. Parsons was looking for material on that crust. He and his men searched with scintillometers. The almost incredible fact of the matter was that while a nuclear bomb converted much of its mass into energy, the total mass lost in the process was minuscule. Aside from that, matter is very hard to destroy, and he was searching for residue from the device. This was easier than one might have thought. The material was dark, on a flat white surface, and it was also highly radioactive. He had a choice of

six very hot spots, two miles downrange of the stadium. Parsons had taken the hottest. Dressed in his lead-coated protective suit, he was trudging across a snow-covered lawn. Probably an elderly couple, he thought. No kids had built a snowman or lain down to make angels. The rippling sound of the counter grew larger . . . there.

The residue was hardly larger in size than dust particles, but there were many of them, probably pulverized gravel and paving material from the parking lot, Parsons thought. If he were very lucky, it had been sucked up through the center of the fireball, and bomb residue had affixed itself to it. If he were lucky. Parsons scooped up a trowel's worth and slid it into a plastic bag. This he tossed to his teammate, who dropped the bag into a lead bucket.

"Very hot stuff, Larry!"

"I know. Let me get one more." He scooped up another sample and bagged it as well. Then he lifted his radio.

"Parsons here. You got anything?"

"Yeah, three nice ones, Larry. Enough, I think, for an assay."

"Meet me at the chopper."

"On the way."

Parsons and his partner walked off, ignoring the wide eyes watching from behind windows. Those people were not his concern for the moment. Thank God, he thought, that they hadn't bothered him with questions. The helicopter sat in the middle of a street, its rotor still turning.

"Where to?" Andy Bowler asked.

"We're going to the command center—shopping center. Should be nice and cold there. You take the samples back and run them through the spectrometer."

"You should come along."

"Can't," Parsons said with a shake of the head. "I have to call into D.C. This isn't what they told us. Somebody goofed, and I gotta tell them. Have to use a landline for that."

The conference room had at least forty phone lines routed into it, one of which was Ryan's direct line. The electronic warble caught his attention. Jack pushed the flashing button and lifted the receiver.

"Ryan."

"Jack, what's going on?" Cathy Ryan asked her husband. There was alarm but not panic in her voice.

"What do you mean?"

"The local TV station says an atomic bomb went off in Denver. Is there a war, Jack?"

"Cathy, I can't—no, honey, there's no war going on, okay?"

"Jack, they showed a picture. Is there anything I need to know?"

"You know almost everything I know. Something happened. We don't know what exactly, and we're trying to find out. The President's at Camp David with the National Security Advisor and—"

"Elliot?"

"Yes. They're talking to the Russians right now. Honey, I have work to do."

"Should I take the children somewhere?"

The proper thing, and the honorable and dramatic thing, Jack told himself, was to tell his wife to stay home, that they had to share the risks with everyone else, but the fact was there was no place of safety that he knew. Ryan looked out the window, wondering what the hell he should say.

"No."

"Liz Elliot is advising the President?"

"That's right."

"Jack, she's a small, weak person. Maybe she's smart, but inside she's weak."

"I know. Cathy, I really have things to do here."

"Love you."

"And I love you, too, babe. 'Bye." Jack replaced the receiver. "The word's out," he announced, "pictures and all."

"Jack!" It was the Senior Duty Officer. "AP just sent out a flash: shooting in Berlin between U.S. and Soviet forces. Reuters is reporting the explosion in Denver."

Ryan got on the phone to Murray. "You have the wire services?"

"Jack, I knew this wouldn't work."

"What do you mean?"

"The President told us to shut the networks down. I guess we goofed somewhere."

"Super. You should have refused that one, Dan."

"I tried, okay?"

There were just too many redundancies, too many nodes. Two satellites serving the United States were still up and operating, and so was nearly all of the microwave-repeater system that had preceded them. The networks didn't merely run out of New York and Atlanta. NBC's Los Angeles bureau, after a surreptitious call from Rockefeller Center, took over for that network. CBS and ABC accomplished the same out of Washington and Chicago, respectively. The irate reporters also let the public know that FBI agents were "holding hostage" the network news headquarters people in the most heinous abuse yet of the First Amendment. ABC was outraged that its crew had been killed, but that was a small thing compared to the scope of the story. The proverbial cat was out of the bag, and phone lines at the White House press office lit up. Many reporters had the direct number to Camp David as well. There was no statement from the President. That only made things worse. The CBS affiliate in Omaha, Nebraska, had only to drive past SAC headquarters to note the beefed-up guard force and the empty flight line. Those pictures would be on nationwide in a matter of minutes, but it was the local news teams who did the best and the worst work. There is scarcely a city or town in America that lacks a National Guard armory or a base for reservists. Concealing the activity at all of them was tantamount to concealing a sunrise, and the wire-service printers reported activity everywhere. All that was needed to punctuate those reports was the few minutes of tape from KOLD in Denver, running almost continuously now, to explain what was going on, and why.

The phones at the Aurora Presbyterian were all being used. Parsons knew

that he could have forced his way onto one, but it was easier to run across the street to a largely deserted shopping center. He found an FBI agent there, wearing a blue "raid" jacket that proclaimed his identity in large block letters.

"You the guy from the stadium?" Parsons' headgear was gone, but he still wore the metallic coat and pants.

"Yeah."

"I need a phone."

"Save your quarters." They were standing outside a men's clothing store. The door had alarm tape on it, but looked cheap. The agent pulled out his service pistol and fired five rounds, shattering the glass. "After you, pal."

Parsons ran to the counter and lifted the store phone, dialing his headquarters in Washington. Nothing happened.

"Where are you calling?"

"D.C."

"The long-distance lines are down."

"What do you mean? The phone company shouldn't be hurt from this."

"We did it. Orders from Washington," the agent explained.

"What fucking idiot ordered that?"

"The President."

"Outstanding. I gotta get a call out."

"Wait." The agent took the phone and called his own office.

"Hoskins."

"This is Larry Parsons, NEST team leader. Can you relay something to Washington?"

"Sure."

"The bomb was a ground burst, less than fifteen kilotons. We have samples of the residue, and it's on the way to Rocky Flats for spectroscopy. You know how to get that out?"

"Yes, I can do that."

"Okay." Parsons hung up.

"You have pieces from the bomb?" the FBI agent asked incredulously.

"Sounds crazy, doesn't it? That's what fallout is, bomb residue that gets attached to dirt particles."

"So what?"

"So we can figure out a lot from that. Come on," he told the agent. Both men ran back across the street toward the hospital. An FBI agent, Parsons decided, was a useful fellow to have around.

"Jack, got something from Denver, came in through Walt Hoskins. The bomb was a ground burst, fifteen or so kilotons. The NEST guys have residue and they're going to test it."

Ryan took his notes. "Casualty count?"

"Didn't say."

"Fifteen kilotons," the S&T man observed. "Low for what the satellites said, but possible. Still, too goddamned big for an IND."

* * *

The F-16C wasn't exactly ideal for this mission, but it was fast. Four had left Ramstein only twenty minutes earlier. Put aloft by the initial DEFCON-THREE alert, they'd come east to what they still referred to as the inner-German border. They'd not even arrived there when new orders had sent them toward the southern end of Berlin to get a look at what was happening at the Berlin Brigade's kazerne. Four F-15s from Bitburg joined for top cover. All eight USAF fighters were loaded for air-to-air missions only, with two extra fuel tanks each in the place of bombs for the F-16s, and conformal fuel cells for the Eagles. From ten thousand feet they could see the flashes and explosion on the ground. The flight of four broke into two elements of two each, and went down for a closer look, while the Eagles orbited overhead. The problem, it was later decided, was twofold. First, the pilots were simply too surprised at the turn of events to consider all the possibilities; adding to this was the fact that American aircraft losses over Iraq had been so minor as to make the pilots forget that this was a different place.

The Russian tank regiment had both SA-8 and SA-11 missiles, plus the normal complement of Shilka 23mm flak vehicles. The antiair company commander had waited for this moment, not illuminating his radars, playing it smart, as the Iraqis had singularly failed to do. He waited until the American aircraft were under a thousand meters before giving his order.

Barely had their threat receivers come on when a swarm of missiles rose from the eastern edge of the Russian encampment. The Eagles, high up, had a much better chance at evasion. The F-16 Fighting Falcons, descending right into the SAM trap, had almost none. Two were blotted out in a matter of seconds. The second pair dodged the first wave of SAMs, but one was caught in the frag pattern of a second-wave SA-11 it almost but not quite evaded. That pilot ejected successfully, but died when he landed too hard on the roof of an apartment building. The fourth F-16 escaped by skimming the rooftops and screaming west on full burner. Two of the Eagles joined him. A total of five American aircraft crashed into the city. Only one of the pilots lived. The escaping aircraft radioed the news to Commander U.S. Air Forces Europe at Ramstein. Already he had twelve F-16s arming up with heavy ordnance. The next wave would be different.

> PRESIDENT NARMONOV:
> WE SENT SOME AIRCRAFT INTO BERLIN TO INVESTIGATE THE SITUATION THERE. THEY WERE SHOT DOWN WITHOUT WARNING BY SOVIET MISSILES. WHY WAS THIS DONE?

"What does this mean?"

" 'Shot down without warning'? There's a *battle* under way, and that's why the aircraft were sent there! The regiment has antiaircraft troops," the Defense Minister explained. "They only have short-range, low-altitude rockets. If the Americans were just looking from a safe height—ten thousand meters—we couldn't even have touched them. They must have been lower, probably trying to support their troops with an air attack. That's the only way we could have gotten them."

"But we have no information?"

"No, we have not established contact yet."

"We will not answer this one."

"That is a mistake," Golovko said.

"This situation is dangerous enough already," Narmonov said angrily. "We do not know what is going on there. How can I respond when he claims to have information which I do not?"

"If you do not respond, you appear to admit the incident."

"We admit nothing!" the Defense Minister shouted. "We could not even have done this unless they were attacking us, and we don't know whether it really happened or not."

"So tell them that," Golovko suggested. "Perhaps if they understand that we are as confused as they, they will also understand that—"

"But they won't understand, and they won't believe. They've already accused us of launching this attack, and they won't believe that we have no control over the area."

Narmonov retreated to a corner table and poured himself a cup of tea, while the intelligence and defense advisers traded—arguments? Was that the right word? The Soviet President looked up at the ceiling. This command center dated back to Stalin. A spur off one of the Moscow subway lines built by Lazar Kaganovich, Stalin's pet Jewish anti-Semite and his most trusted henchman, it was fully a hundred meters down, but now his people told him that it was not truly a place of safety after all.

What was Fowler thinking? Narmonov asked himself. The man was undoubtedly shaken by the murder of so many American citizens, but how could it be possible that he was thinking that the Soviets were responsible? And what was actually happening? A battle in Berlin, a possible clash between naval forces in the Mediterranean, all unrelated—or were they?

Did it matter? Narmonov stared at a picture on the wall and realized that, no, it did not matter. He and Fowler were both politicians for whom appearances had more weight than reality, and perceptions more importance than facts. The American had lied to him in Rome over a trivial matter. Was he lying now? If he were, then none of the past ten years of progress mattered at all, did they? It had all been for nothing.

"How do wars begin?" Narmonov asked himself quietly in the corner. In history, wars of conquest were started by strong men who wished to grow stronger still. But the time for men of imperial ambition had passed. The last such criminal had died not so long before. All that had changed in the 20th century. The First World War had been started—how? A tubercular assassin had killed a buffoon so unloved that his own family had ignored the funeral. An overbearing diplomatic note had prompted Czar Nikolay II to leap to the defense of people he hadn't loved, and then the timetables had begun. Nikolay had the last chance, Narmonov remembered. The last of the Czars had held in his hand the chance to stop it all, but hadn't. If only he'd known what his decision for war would mean, he might have found the strength to stop it, but in his fear and his weakness he'd signed the mobilization order that had ended one age and begun another. That war had begun because small, frightened men feared war less than showing weakness.

Fowler is such a man, Narmonov told himself. *Proud, arrogant, a man who lied in a small thing lest I think less of him. He will be angered by the deaths. He will fear additional deaths, but he will fear displaying weakness even more. My country*

is at the mercy of such a man.

It was an elegant trap Narmonov was in. The irony of it might have evoked a tight, bitter smile, but instead the Soviet President set down his tea, for his stomach would take no more hot, bitter liquid. He could not afford to show weakness either, could he? That would only encourage Fowler to yet more irrationality. Part of Andrey Il'ych Narmonov asked if what he thought of Jonathan Robert Fowler might also apply to himself. . . . But he had to reply. To do nothing would display weakness, wouldn't it?

"No answer?" Fowler asked the chief yeoman.

"No, sir, nothing yet." Orontia's eyes were locked on the computer screen.

"My God," the President muttered. "All those people dead."

And I could have been one of them, Liz Elliot thought, the idea coming back to her like waves on a beach, crashing in, ebbing away only to crash back again. *Someone wanted to kill us, and I am part of that "us." And we don't know who or why. . . .*

"We can't let this go any farther."

We don't even know what we are trying to stop. Who is doing this? Why are they doing it? Liz looked over at the clock and calculated the time to the arrival of the Kneecap aircraft. *We should have gone out on the first one. Why didn't we think to have it fly to Hagerstown to pick us up! We're stuck here in a perfect target, and if they want to kill us, this time they'll get us, won't they?*

"How can we stop it?" Liz asked. "He's not even answering us."

Sea Devil One-Three, a P-3C Orion antisubmarine aircraft out of Kodiak Naval Air Station, was buffeting through the winds at low altitude, about five hundred feet. It laid the first line of ten DIFAR sonobuoys ten miles southwest of *Maine's* position. In the back, the sonar operators were strapped tightly into their high-backed seats, most with a vomit bag close by as they tried to make sense of their displays. It took several minutes for things to firm up.

"Christ, that's my boat," Jim Rosselli said. He dialed Bangor and asked for Commodore Mancuso.

"Bart, what gives?"

"Maine reported a collision, shaft and screw damage. There's a P-3 riding shotgun on her right now, and we have *Omaha* heading toward her flat-out. That's the good news. The bad news is that *Maine* was tracking an Akula at the time."

"She was *what?*"

"Harry sold me and OP-02 on the idea, Jim. Too late to worry about it now. It should be okay. The Akula was way off. You heard what Harry did to *Omaha* last year, right?"

"Yeah, I thought he stripped a gear."

"Look, it should be okay. I'm surging my boats right now, Jim. Unless you need me for something else, I'm kinda busy."

"Right." Rosselli hung up.

"What gives?" Rocky Barnes asked.

Rosselli handed over the message. "My old sub, disabled in the Gulf of

Alaska, and there's a Russian prowling around."

"Hey, they're quiet, right? You told me that. The Russians don't even know where they are."

"Yeah."

"Cheer up, Jim. I probably knew some of those F-16 drivers who got snuffed over Berlin."

"Where the hell is Wilkes? He should have been here by now," Rosselli said. "He's got a good car."

"No tellin', man. What the fuck is going on?"

"I don't know, Rocky."

"We've got a long one coming in," Chief Orontia said. "Here it comes."

> PRESIDENT FOWLER:
>
> WE HAVE NO INFORMATION FROM BERLIN ON THE MATTER TO WHICH YOU REFER. COMMUNICATIONS HAVE BROKEN DOWN. MY ORDERS HAVE GONE OUT TO OUR TROOPS, AND IF THEY HAVE GOTTEN THEM THEN THEY WILL TAKE NO ACTION EXCEPT IN SELF-DEFENSE. PERHAPS THEY FELT THEMSELVES TO BE UNDER ATTACK BY YOUR AIRCRAFT AND ACTED TO DEFEND THEMSELVES. IN ANY CASE WE ARE TRYING EVEN NOW TO REESTABLISH CONTACT WITH THE TROOPS, BUT OUR FIRST ATTEMPT TO REACH THEM WAS STOPPED BY AMERICAN TROOPS WHO WERE WELL OUTSIDE THEIR CAMP. YOU ACCUSE US OF HAVING OPENED FIRE, YET I HAVE TOLD YOU THAT OUR FORCES HAVE NO SUCH ORDERS, AND THE ONLY DEFINITE WORD WE HAVE TELLS US THAT YOUR FORCES WERE WELL INTO OUR ZONE OF THE CITY WHEN THEY STRUCK.
>
> MR. PRESIDENT, I CANNOT RECONCILE YOUR WORDS WITH THE FACTS WE HAVE. I MAKE NO ACCUSATION, BUT I KNOW OF NOTHING MORE THAT I CAN SAY TO ASSURE YOU THAT SOVIET FORCES HAVE TAKEN NO ACTION WHATEVER AGAINST AMERICAN FORCES.
>
> YOU HAVE TOLD US THAT YOUR ALERTING OF YOUR FORCES IS DEFENSIVE ONLY, BUT WE HAVE INDICATIONS THAT YOUR STRATEGIC FORCES ARE IN A VERY HIGH STATE OF ALERT. YOU SAY YOU HAVE NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT WE ARE TO BLAME FOR THIS INFAMY, YET YOUR MOST ALERT FORCES ARE THOSE ARRAYED AGAINST MY COUNTRY. WHAT DO YOU WISH ME TO THINK? YOU ASK FOR PROOF OF OUR GOOD INTENTIONS, BUT ALL OF YOUR ACTIONS APPEAR TO LACK THEM.

"He's blustering," Liz Elliot observed at once. "Whoever it is over there is rattled. Good, we may get the upper hand here yet."

"Good?" CINC-SAC asked. "You realize that this frightened person you're talking about has a whole lot of missiles pointing at us. I don't read it that way, Dr. Elliot. I think we have an angry man here. He's thrown our inquiries right back in our face."

"What do you mean, General?"

"He says he knows we're alerted. Okay, that's no surprise, but he also says that those weapons are pointed at him. He's accusing us of threatening him now—with nukes, Mr. President. That matters a hell of a lot more than the piss-ant business in Berlin."

"I agree," General Borstein added. "He's trying to bluster us, sir. We asked about a couple of lost airplanes, and we get all this tossed back at us."

Fowler punched up CIA again. "Ryan, you got the latest one?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you make of Narmonov's mental state?"

"Sir, he's a little angry right now, and also very concerned about our defensive posture. He's trying to find a way out of this."

"I don't read it that way. He's rattled."

"Well, who the hell isn't?" Jack asked. "Of *course* he's rattled, the same as everyone else."

"Look, Ryan, we are in control up here."

"I never said otherwise, Liz," Jack replied, biting off what he really thought. "This is a grave situation, and he's as concerned as we are. He's trying to figure out what's happening the same as everyone else. The problem is nobody really knows anything."

"Well, whose fault is that? That is your job, isn't it?" Fowler asked testily.

"Yes, Mr. President, and we're working on it. A lot of people are."

"Robert, does this sound like Narmonov? You've met the man, you've spent time with him."

"Elizabeth, I just don't know."

"It's the only thing that makes sense. . . ."

"Liz, who says that any of this has to make sense?" Ryan asked.

"This weapon was a big one, right, General Borstein?"

"That's what our instruments tell us, yes."

"Who has bombs that large?"

"Us, the Russians, the Brits, the French. Maybe the Chinese have weapons like this, but we don't think so; theirs are big and clunky. Israel has warheads in this range. That's it. India, Pakistan, South Africa all probably have fission weapons, but not large enough for this."

"Ryan, is that correct information?" Elliot asked.

"Yes, it is."

"So if it wasn't Britain, France or Israel, then who the hell was it?"

"Goddamn it, Liz! *We don't know,* okay? We do not know, and this isn't a fucking Sherlock Holmes mystery. Eliminating who it wasn't doesn't tell us who it was! You can't convert the absence of information into a conclusion."

"Does CIA know everybody who has weapons of this type?" Fowler asked.

"Yes, sir, we think we do."

"How confident are you in that?"

"Until today I would have bet my life on it."

"So again you are not telling me the truth, are you?" Fowler observed coldly.

Jack stood from his chair. "Sir, you may be the President of the United States, but don't you ever accuse me of lying again! My wife just called here to ask if she should take the kids somewhere, and if you think I'd be so goddamned dumb as to play games at a time like this, you, sir, are the one who needs help!"

"Thank you, Ryan, that will be all." The line clicked off.

"Jesus!" the Senior Duty Officer observed.

Jack looked around the room for a wastebasket. He just made it in time. Ryan fell to his knees and vomited into it. He reached for a can of Coke and washed his mouth out, spitting back into the basket. No one spoke until he rose.

"They just don't understand," Jack said quietly. He stretched, then lit a cigarette. "They just don't understand.

"You see, this is all very simple. There is a difference between not knowing anything and understanding that you don't know. We have a crisis, and all the players are reverting to type. The President is thinking like a lawyer, trying to be cool, doing what he knows how to do, running down the evidence and trying to make a case, interrogating the witnesses, trying to reduce everything, playing that game. Liz is fixed on the fact that she might have been blown up, can't set that aside. Well." Ryan shrugged. "I guess I can understand that. I've been there, too. She's a political scientist, looking for a theoretical model. She's feeding that to the President. She has a real elegant model, but it's based on crap, isn't it, Ben?"

"You left out something, Jack," Goodley pointed out.

Ryan shook his head. "No, Ben, I just haven't gotten there yet. Because I can't control my *fucking* temper, they won't listen to me now. I should have known, I had my warning—I even saw it coming—but I let my temper get the best of me again. And you know the funny part? If it wasn't for me, Fowler would still be in Columbus, Ohio, and Elliot would be teaching shiny young faces at Bennington." Jack walked to the window again. It was dark outside, and the lighted room made it into a mirror.

"What are you talking about?"

"That, gentlemen, is a secret. Maybe that's what they'll put on the stone: Here lies John Patrick Ryan. He tried to do the right thing—and look what happened. I wonder if Cathy and the kids will make it. . . ."

"Come on, it's not that bad," the Senior Duty Officer observed, but all the others in the room felt the chill.

Jack turned. "Isn't it? Don't you see where this is heading? They're not listening to anybody. They're not listening. They might listen to Dennis Bunker or Brent Talbot, but they're both air pollution, little bits of fallout somewhere over Colorado. I'm the closest thing in town to an adviser right now, and I got myself tossed out."

41

THE FIELD OF CAMLAN

The *Admiral Lunin* was going too fast for safety. Captain Dubinin knew that, but chances like this did not come along often. This was, in fact, the first, and the Captain wondered if it might also be the last. Why were the Americans on a full-blown nuclear alert—yes, of course, a possible nuclear explosion in their country was a grave matter, but could they be so mad as to assume that a Soviet had done such a thing?

"Get me a polar projection chart," he said to a quartermaster. Dubinin knew what he would see, but it wasn't a time for remembrance, it was a time for hard facts. The meter-square sheet of hard paper was on the table a moment later. Dubinin took a pair of dividers and walked them from *Maine's* estimated position to Moscow, and to the strategic rocket fields in the central part of his country.

"Yes." It could hardly be more clear, could it?

"What is it, Captain?" the *Starpom* asked.

"USS *Maine,* according to our intelligence estimates, is in the northernmost patrol sector of the missile submarines based at Bangor. That makes good sense, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Captain, based on what little we know of their patrol patterns."

"She carries the D-5 rocket, twenty-four of them, eight or so warheads per rocket. . . ." He paused. There had been a time when he'd been able to do such calculations in his head instantly.

"One hundred ninety-two, Captain," the executive officer said for him.

"Correct, thank you. That includes nearly all of our SS-18s, less those being deactivated by treaty, and the CEP accuracy of the D-5 makes it likely that those one hundred ninety-two warheads will destroy roughly one hundred sixty of their targets, which, in turn, accounts for more than a fifth of our total warhead count, and our most accurate warheads at that. Remarkable, isn't it?" Dubinin asked quietly.

"You really think they're that good?"

"The Americans demonstrated their marksmanship ability over Iraq, didn't they? I for one have never doubted the quality of their weapons."

"Captain, we know that the American D-5 submarine rockets are the most likely first-strike tool . . ."

"Continue the thought."

The *Starpom* looked at the chart. "Of course. This is the closest one."

"Indeed. USS *Maine* is the point of the lance aimed at our country." Dubinin tapped the chart with his dividers. "If the Americans launch an attack, the first rockets will fly from this point, and nineteen minutes after that, they will hit. I

wonder if our comrades in the Strategic Rocket Forces can respond that quickly . . . ?"

"But, Captain, what can we do about this?" the executive officer asked dubiously.

Dubinin pulled the chart off the table and slid it back into its open drawer. "Nothing. Not a thing. We cannot attack preemptively without orders or grave provocation, can we? According to our best intelligence, he can launch his rockets at intervals of fifteen seconds, probably less, really. The manual becomes less important in war, doesn't it? Say four minutes from the first to the last. You have to do a ladder-north strike pattern to avoid warhead fratricide. That doesn't matter, if you examine the physics of the event. I looked at that while I was at Frunze, you know. Since our rockets are liquid-fueled, they cannot launch while the attack is under way. Even if their electronic components can withstand the electromagnetic effects, they are too fragile structurally to tolerate the physical forces. So unless we can launch with confidence before the enemy warheads fall, our tactics are to ride it out and launch a few minutes later. For our part here, if he can launch in four minutes, that means we have to be within six thousand meters, hear the first launch transient, and fire our own torpedo immediately to have any hope of stopping him from firing his last rocket, don't we?"

"A difficult task."

The Captain shook his head. "An impossible task. The only thing that makes sense is for us to eliminate him before he receives his launch order, but we cannot do that without orders, and we have no such orders."

"So, what do we do?"

"Not very much we can do." Dubinin leaned over the chart table. "Let's assume that he's truly disabled, and that we have an accurate position fix. We still have to detect him. If his engine plant is down at minimums, hearing him will be nearly impossible, especially if he's up against the surface noise. If we go active, what's to stop him from launching a torpedo against us? If he does that, we can fire back—and hope to survive, ourselves. Our weapon might even hit him, but then again it might not. If he does not shoot as soon as he hears our active sonar . . . maybe we can get close enough that we can intimidate him, force him down. We'll lose him again when he goes under the layer . . . but if we can force him down . . . and then stay atop the layer, blasting away with our active sonar . . . perhaps we can keep him from going to missile-firing depth." Dubinin frowned mightily. "Not an especially brilliant plan, is it? If one of them suggested it"—he waved to the junior officers conning the ship—"I'd tear a strip off their young backs. But I don't see anything better. Do you?"

"Captain, that makes us exceedingly vulnerable to attack." The idea was more accurately described as suicidal, the *Starpom* thought, though he was sure Dubinin knew that.

"Yes, it does, but if that is what is required to prevent this bastard from getting to firing depth, it is exactly what I propose to do. I see no alternative."

PRESIDENT NARMONOV:
PLEASE UNDERSTAND THE POSITION WE ARE IN. THE WEAPON WHICH DESTROYED DENVER WAS OF SUCH A SIZE AND TYPE AS TO MAKE IT VERY UNLIKELY THAT THIS CRIME WAS COMMITTED BY TERRORISTS, YET WE HAVE

TAKEN NO ACTION WHATEVER TO RETALIATE AGAINST ANYONE. WERE YOUR COUNTRY ATTACKED, YOU TOO WOULD ALERT YOUR STRATEGIC FORCES. WE HAVE SIMILARLY ALERTED OURS, ALONG WITH OUR CONVENTIONAL FORCES. FOR TECHNICAL REASONS IT WAS NECESSARY TO INITIATE A GLOBAL ALERT INSTEAD OF A MORE SELECTIVE ONE. BUT AT NO TIME HAVE I ISSUED ANY INSTRUCTIONS TO COMMENCE OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS. OUR ACTIONS TO THIS POINT HAVE BEEN DEFENSIVE ONLY, AND HAVE SHOWN CONSIDERABLE RESTRAINT.

WE HAVE NO EVIDENCE TO SUGGEST THAT YOUR COUNTRY HAS INITIATED ACTION AGAINST OUR HOMELAND, BUT WE HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT YOUR TROOPS IN BERLIN HAVE ATTACKED OURS, AND HAVE ALSO ATTACKED AIRCRAFT ATTEMPTING TO INSPECT THE AREA. WE ARE SIMILARLY INFORMED THAT SOVIET AIRCRAFT HAVE APPROACHED AN AMERICAN CARRIER GROUP IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

PRESIDENT NARMONOV, I URGE YOU TO RESTRAIN YOUR FORCES. IF WE CAN END THE PROVOCATIONS, WE CAN END THIS CRISIS, BUT I CANNOT TELL MY PEOPLE NOT TO DEFEND THEMSELVES.

" 'Restrain your forces'? Goddamn it," the Defense Minister swore. "We haven't *done* anything! He's accusing *us* of provoking *him! His* tanks have invaded East Berlin, *his* fighter-bombers have attacked our forces there, and he just confirmed the fact that his carrier aircraft have attacked ours! And this arrogant madman now says that we must not provoke him! What does he expect us to do—run away everywhere we see an American?"

"That might be the most prudent thing we can do," Golovko observed.

"Run like a thief from a policeman?" Defense asked sarcastically. "You ask that we should do that?"

"I suggest it as a possibility to be considered." The First Deputy Chairman of KGB stood his ground bravely, Narmonov thought.

"The important part of this message is the second sentence," the Foreign Minister pointed out. His analysis was all the more chilling for its matter-of-fact tone. "They say that they do not believe this was a terrorist attack. Who is left as a likely attacker, then? He goes on to say that America has not yet retaliated against anyone *yet.* The subsequent statement that they have no evidence to suggest that we perpetrated this infamy is, I think, rather hollow when juxtaposed with the first paragraph."

"And running away will only make it more clear to him that we are the ones who started this," Defense added.

" 'More clear'?" Golovko asked.

"I must agree with that," Narmonov said, looking up from his chair. "I must assume now that Fowler is not rational. This communique is not well reasoned. He is accusing us, quite explicitly."

"What of the nature of the explosion?" Golovko asked the Defense Minister.

"A weapon of that size is indeed too large for terrorists. Our studies indicate that a first- or even second-generation fission device might be achievable, but the maximum yield for such a device is certainly less than a hundred—probably less than forty kilotons. Our instruments tell us that this device was well over a hundred. That means a third-generation fission weapon or more likely a multistage fusion device. To do that is not the work of amateurs."

"So, then, who could have done it?" Narmonov asked.

Golovko looked over to his President. "I have no idea. We did uncover a possible DDR bomb project. They were producing plutonium, as you all know,

but we have good reason to believe that the project never truly got under way. We've looked at ongoing projects in South America. They are not to this point either. Israel has such capabilities, but what reason would they have to do this? Attack their own guardian? If China were to do something like this, they would more likely attack us. We have the land and resources they need, and America has much more value to them as a trading partner than as an enemy. No, for this to be a project of a nation-state means that only one of a handful has the ability to do it, and the problems of operational security are virtually insurmountable. Andrey Il'ych, if you *directed* KGB to do this, we probably could not. The type of individual necessary for such a mission—by that I mean the skill, intelligence, dedication—are not qualities which you find in a psychotic; murder on this scale, likely to bring about such a crisis as this, would require a diseased personality. KGB has no such people, for the obvious reason."

"So you are telling me that you have no information and that you can find no sensible hypothesis to explain the events of this morning?"

"That is the case, Comrade President. I wish I could report something else, but I cannot."

"What sort of advice is Fowler getting?"

"I don't know," Golovko admitted. "Secretaries Talbot and Bunker are both dead. Both were watching the football match—Defense Secretary Bunker was the owner of one of the teams, in fact. The Director of CIA is either still in Japan or on his way back from there."

"The Deputy Director is Ryan, correct?"

"That is true."

"I know him. He is not a fool."

"No, he is not, but he is also being dismissed. Fowler dislikes him, and we have learned that Ryan has been asked to resign. Therefore, I cannot say who is advising President Fowler, except for Elizabeth Elliot, the National Security Advisor, with whom our Ambassador is not impressed."

"You tell me, then, that this weak, vain man is probably not getting good advice from anyone?"

"Yes."

"That explains much." Narmonov leaned back and closed his eyes. "So I am the only one who can give him good advice, but he probably thinks I am the one who killed his city. Splendid." It was perhaps the most penetrating analysis of the night, but wrong.

> PRESIDENT FOWLER:
>
> FIRST OF ALL, I HAVE DISCUSSED THIS MATTER WITH MY MILITARY COMMANDERS AND HAVE BEEN ASSURED THAT NO SOVIET ATOMIC WARHEAD IS MISSING.
>
> SECOND, WE HAVE MET, YOU AND I, AND I HOPE YOU KNOW THAT I WOULD NEVER HAVE GIVEN SUCH A CRIMINAL ORDER AS THIS.
>
> THIRD, ALL OF OUR ORDERS TO OUR MILITARY FORCES HAVE BEEN OF A DEFENSIVE NATURE. I HAVE AUTHORIZED NO OFFENSIVE ACTION WHATEVER.
>
> FOURTH, I HAVE ALSO MADE INQUIRIES WITH OUR INTELLIGENCE SERVICES, AND I REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT WE TOO HAVE NO IDEA WHO COULD HAVE COMMITTED THIS INHUMAN ACT. WE WILL WORK TO CHANGE THAT, AND ANY INFORMATION WE DEVELOP WILL BE SENT TO YOU AT ONCE.
>
> MR. PRESIDENT, I WILL GIVE NO FURTHER ORDERS TO MY FORCES OF ANY

KIND UNLESS PROVOKED. THE SOVIET MILITARY IS IN A DEFENSIVE POSTURE AND WILL REMAIN SO.

"Oh, God," Elliot rasped. "How many lies do we have here?" Her finger traced down the computer screen.

"One, we know that they have missing warheads. That is a lie.

"Two, why is he stressing the fact that it's really him that you two met in Rome? Why bother doing that unless he thinks that we suspect it's *not* Narmonov at all? The real guy wouldn't do that, he wouldn't have to, would he? Probably a lie.

"Three, we know that they've attacked us in Berlin. That's a lie.

"Four, he brings up the KGB for the first time. I wonder why. What if they actually have a cover plan . . . after intimidating us—beautiful, after intimidating us, they offer us their cover plan, and we have to buy it.

"Five, now he's warning us not to provoke him. They're in a 'defensive posture,' eh? Some posture." Liz paused. "Robert, this is spin-control pure and simple. He's trying to fake us out."

"That's the way I read it, too. Comments, anyone?"

"The nonprovocation statement is troubling," CINC-SAC replied. General Fremont was watching his status boards. He now had ninety-six bombers in the air, and over a hundred tankers. His missile fields were on line. The Defense Support Program satellites had their Cassegrain-focus telescopic cameras zoomed in on the Soviet missile fields instead of on wide-field scanning mode. "Mr. President, there is something we need to discuss right about now."

"What is that, General?"

Fremont spoke in his best calm-professional voice. "Sir, the builddown of the respective strategic-missile forces on both sides has affected the calculus of a nuclear strike. Before, when we had over a thousand ICBMs, neither we nor the Soviets ever expected that a disarming first-strike was a real strategic possibility. It just demanded too much. Things are different now. Improvements in missile technology plus the reduction in the number of fixed high-value targets now means that such a strike is a theoretical possibility. Add to that Soviet delays in deactivating their older SS-18s to comply with the strategic-arms treaty, and we have what may well be a strategic posture on their part in which such a strike may be an attractive option. Remember that we've been reducing our missile stocks faster than they. Now, I know that Narmonov gave you a personal assurance that he'd be fully in compliance with the treaty in four more weeks, but those missile regiments are still active as far as we can tell.

"Now," Fremont went on, "if that intelligence you have that Narmonov was being threatened by his military is correct—well, sir, the situation is pretty clear, isn't it?"

"Make it clearer, General," Fowler said so quietly that CINC-SAC barely heard him.

"Sir, what if Dr. Elliot is right, what if they really expected you to be at the game? Along with Secretary Bunker, I mean. The way our command-and-control works, that would have severely crippled us. I'm not saying they

would have attacked, but certainly they would have been in a position, while denying responsibility for the Denver explosion, to—well, to announce their change in government in such a way as to prevent us, by simple intimidation, from acting against them. That's bad enough. But they've missed their target, so to speak, haven't they? Okay, now what are they thinking? They may be thinking that you suspect that they've done this thing, and that you're angry enough to retaliate in one way or another. If they're thinking that, sir, they might also be thinking that their best way of protecting themselves is to disarm us quickly. Mr. President, I'm not saying that they are thinking that way, but that they might be." And a cold evening grew colder still.

"And how do we stop them from launching, General?" Fowler asked.

"Sir, the only thing that will keep them from launching is the certainty that the strike will not work. That's particularly true if we're dealing with their military. They're good. They're smart. They're rational. They think before they act, like all good soldiers. If they know we're ready to shoot at the first hint of an attack, then that attack becomes militarily futile, and it will not be initiated."

* * *

"That's good advice, Robert," Elliot said.

"What's NORAD think?" Fowler asked. The President didn't think to consider that he was asking a two-star general to evaluate the opinion of a four-star.

"Mr. President, if we are to get some rationality back into this situation, that would appear to be the way to do it."

"Very well. General Fremont, what do you propose?"

"Sir, at this point, we can advance our strategic-forces readiness to DEFCON-ONE. The code word for that is SNAPCOUNT. At that point we are at maximum readiness."

"Won't that provoke them?"

"Mr. President, no, it should not. Two reasons. First, we are already at a high state of alert, they know it, and while they are clearly concerned, they have not objected in any way. That's the one sign of rationality we've seen to this point. Second, they won't know until we tell them that we've upped things a notch. We don't have to tell them until they do something provocative."

Fowler sipped at his newest cup of coffee. He'd have to visit the bathroom soon, he realized.

"General, I'm going to hold off on that. Let me think that one over for a few minutes."

"Very well, sir." Fremont's voice did not reveal any overt disappointment, but a thousand miles from Camp David, CINC-SAC turned to look at his Deputy Chief of Staff (Operations).

"What is it?" Parsons asked. There was nothing more for him to do at the moment. Having made his urgent phone call, and having decided to let his

fellow NEST team members handle the lab work, he'd decided to assist the doctors. He'd brought instruments to evaluate the radiation exposure to the firefighters and handful of survivors, something in which the average physician has little expertise. The situation was not especially cheerful. Of the seven people who had survived the explosion at the stadium, five already showed signs of extreme radiation sickness. Parsons evaluated their exposures at anywhere from four hundred to over a thousand Rems. Six hundred was the maximum exposure normally compatible with survival, though with heroic treatment higher exposures had been survived. If one called living another year or two with three or four varieties of cancer breaking out in one's body "survival." The last one, fortunately, seemed to have the least. He was still cold, though his hands and face were badly burned, but he hadn't vomited yet. He was also quite deaf.

It was a young man, Parsons saw. The clothing in the bag next to his bed included a handgun and a badge—a cop. He also held something in his hand, and when the boy looked up, he saw the FBI agent standing next to the NEST leader.

Officer Pete Dawkins was deep in shock, nearly insensate. His shaking came both from being cold and wet and from the aftermath of more terror than any man had ever faced and survived. His mind had divided itself into three or four separate areas, all of which were operating along different paths and at different speeds, and none of them were particularly sane or coherent. What held part of one such area together was training. While Parsons ran some sort of instrument over the clothing he'd worn only a short time before, Dawkins' damaged eyes saw standing next to him another man in a blue plastic windbreaker. On the sleeves and over the chest were printed "FBI." The young officer sprang upwards, disconnecting himself from the IV line. That caused both a doctor and a nurse to push him back down, but Dawkins fought them with the strength of madness, holding out his hand to the agent.

Special Agent Bill Clinton was also badly shaken. Only the vagaries of scheduling had saved his life. He, too, had had a ticket for the game, but he'd had to give it to another member of his squad. From that misfortune, which had enraged the young agent only four days earlier, his life had been spared. What he'd seen at the stadium had stunned him. His exposure to radiation—only forty Rems, according to Parsons—terrified him, but Clinton, too, was a cop, and he took the paper from Dawkins' hand.

It was, he saw, a list of cars. One was circled and had a question-mark scribbled next to the license plate.

"What's this mean?" Clinton asked, leaning past a nurse who was trying to restart Dawkins' IV line.

"Van," the man gasped, not hearing, but knowing the question. "Got in . . . asked Sarge to check it out, but—south side, by the TV trucks. ABC van, little one, two guys, I let them in. Not on my list."

"South side, does that mean anything?" Clinton asked Parsons.

"That's where it was." Parsons leaned down. "What did they look like, the two men?" He gestured at the paper, and then pointed at himself and Clinton.

"White, both thirties, ordinary . . . said they came from Omaha . . . with a tape machine. Thought it was funny they came from Omaha . . . told Sergeant

Yankevich . . . went to check it out right before."

"Look," a doctor said, "this man is in very bad shape, and I have to—"

"Back off," Clinton said.

"Did you look in the truck?"

Dawkins only stared. Parsons grabbed a piece of paper and drew a truck on it, stabbing at the picture with his pencil.

Dawkins nodded, on the edge of consciousness. "Big box, three feet, 'Sony' printed on it—they said it was a tape deck. Truck from Omaha . . . but—" He pointed at the list.

Clinton looked. "Colorado tags!"

"I let it in," Dawkins said just before he collapsed.

"Three-foot box . . ." Parsons said quietly.

"Come on." Clinton ran out of the emergency room. The nearest phone was at the admitting desk. All four were being used. Clinton took one right out of the hand of an admitting clerk, hung up, and cleared the line.

"What are you doing!"

"Shut up!" the agent commanded. "I need Hoskins. . . . Walt, this is Clinton at the hospital. I need you to run a tag number. Colorado E-R-P-five-two-zero. Suspicious van at the stadium. Two men were driving it, white, thirties, ordinary-looking. The witness is a cop, but now he's passed out."

"Okay. Who's with you?"

"Parsons, the NEST guy."

"Get down here—no, stay put, but keep this line open." Hoskins put that line on hold, then dialed another from memory. It was for the Colorado Department of Motor Vehicles. "This is the FBI, I need a quick tag check. Your computer up?"

"Yes, sir," a female voice assured him.

"Edward Robert Paul Five Two Zero." Hoskins looked down at his desk. Why did that sound familiar?

"Very well." Hoskins heard the tapping. "Here we go, that's a brand-new van registered to Mr. Robert Friend of Roggen. You need the license number for Mr. Friend?"

"Christ," Hoskins said.

"Excuse me, sir?" He read off the number. "That's correct."

"Can you check two other license numbers?"

"Surely." He read them off. "First one's an incorrect number . . . so's the second—wait a minute, these numbers are just like—"

"I know. Thank you." Hoskins set the phone down. "Okay, Walt, think fast. . . ." First he needed more information from Clinton.

"Murray."

"Dan, this is Walt Hoskins. Something just came in you need to know."

"Shoot."

"Our friend Marvin Russell parked a van at the stadium. The NEST guy says that the place where he parked it is pretty close to where the bomb went off. There was at least one—no, wait a minute—okay. There was one other guy in there with him, and the other one must have been driving the rental car. Okay. Inside the van was a large box. The van was painted up like an ABC

vehicle, but Russell was found dead a couple miles away. So he must have dropped off the van and left. Dan, this looks like how the bomb might have gotten there."

"What else do you have, Walt?"

"I have passport photos and other ID for two other people."

"Fax 'em."

"On the way." Hoskins left for the communications room. On the way he grabbed another agent. "Get the Denver homicide guys who're working the Russell case—wherever they are, get 'em on the phone real fast."

"Thinking terrorism again?" Pat O'Day asked. "I thought the bomb was too big for that."

"Russell was a suspected terrorist, and we think he might—shit!" Murray exclaimed.

"What's that, Dan?"

"Tell Records I want the photos from Athens that're in the Russell file." The Deputy Assistant Director waited for the call to be made. "We had an inquiry from the Greeks, one of their officers got murdered and they sent us some photos. I thought at the time it might be Marvin, but . . . there was somebody else in there, a car, I think. We had him in profile, I think. . . ."

"Fax coming in from Denver," a woman announced.

"Bring it over," Murray commanded.

"Here's page one." The rest arrived rapidly.

"Airline ticket . . . connecting ticket. Pat—"

O'Day took it. "I'll run it down."

"Shit, look at this!"

"Familiar face?"

"It looks like . . . Ismael Qati, maybe? I don't know the other one."

"Mustache and hair are wrong, Dan," O'Day said, turning away from his phone. "A little thin, too. Better call Records to see what they have current on the mutt. You don't want to jump too fast, man."

"Right." Murray lifted his phone.

"Good news, Mr. President," Borstein said from inside Cheyenne Mountain. "We have a KH-11 pass coming up through the Central Soviet Union. It's almost dawn there now, clear weather for a change, and we'll get a look at some missile fields. The bird's already programmed. NPIC is real-timing it into here and Offutt also."

"But not here," Fowler groused. Camp David had never been set up for that, a remarkable oversight, Fowler thought. It did go into Kneecap, which was where he should have gone when he'd had the chance. "Well, tell me what you see."

"Will do, sir, this ought to be very useful for us," Borstein promised.

"Coming up now, sir," a new voice said. "Sir, this is Major Costello, NORAD intel. We couldn't have timed this much better. The bird is going to sweep very close to four regiments, south to north, at Zhangiz Tobe, Alyesk, Uzhur, and Gladkaya, all but the last are SS-18 bases. Gladkaya is SS-11s, old birds. Sir, Alyesk is one of the places they're supposed to be deactivating but haven't

yet. . . ."

The morning sky was clear at Alyesk. First light was beginning to brighten the northeastern horizon, but none of the soldiers of the Strategic Rocket Forces bothered to look. They were weeks behind schedule and their current orders were to correct that deficiency. That such orders were nearly impossible was beside the point. At each of the forty launch silos was a heavy articulated truck. The SS-18s—the Russians actually called them RS-20s, for Rocket, Strategic, Number 20—were old ones, more than eleven years, in fact, which was why the Soviets had agreed to eliminate them. Powered by liquid-fueled motors, the fuels and oxidizers in question were dangerous, corrosive chemicals—unsymmetrical dimethyl hydrazine and nitrogen tetroxide—and the fact that they were called "storable" liquids was a relative statement. They were more stable than cryogenic fuels insofar as they did not require refrigeration, but they were toxic to the point of nearly instant lethality to human contact, and they were necessarily highly reactive. One safeguard was the encapsulation of the missiles in steel capsules which were loaded like immense rifle cartridges into the silos, a Soviet design innovation that protected the delicate silo instrumentation from the chemicals. That the Soviets bothered with such systems at all was not—as American intelligence officers carped—to take advantage of their higher energy impulse, but rather a result of the fact that the Soviets had lagged in developing a reliable and powerful solid fuel for its missiles, a situation only recently remedied with the new SS-25. Though undeniably large and powerful, the SS-18—given the ominous NATO code name of SATAN—was an ill-tempered, pitiless bitch to maintain, and the crews were delighted to be rid of them. More than one Strategic Rocket Forces soldier had been killed in maintenance and training accidents, just as Americans had lost men with its counterpart U.S. missile, the Titan-II. All of the Aleysk birds were tagged for elimination, and that was the reason for the presence of the men and the transporter trucks. But first the warheads had to be removed. The Americans could watch the missiles in the destruction process, but the warheads were still the most secret of artifacts. Under the watchful eyes of a colonel, the nose shroud was removed from Rocket Number 31 by a small crane, exposing the MIRVs. Each of the conically shaped multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles was about 40 centimeters in width at the bottom, tapering to a needle point 150 centimeters above its base. Each also represented about half a megaton of three-stage thermonuclear device. The soldiers treated the MIRVs with all the respect they so clearly deserved.

"Okay, getting some pictures now," Fowler heard Major Costello say. "Not much activity . . . sir, we're isolating on just a few of the silos, the ones that we can see the best—there's woods all over there, Mr. President, but because of the angle of the satellite we know which ones we can see clearly . . . okay, there's one, Tobe Silo Zero-Five . . . nothing unusual . . . the command bunker is right there . . . I can see guards patrolling around . . . more than usual . . . I see five—seven people—we can get them real good in infrared, it's cold there, sir. Nothing else. Nothing else unusual, sir . . . good. Okay, coming up on

Alyesk now—Jeez!"

"What is it?"

"Sir, we're looking at four silos on four different cameras. . . ."

"Those are service trucks," General Fremont said from the SAC command center. "Service trucks at all four. Silo doors are open, Mr. President."

"What does that mean?"

Costello took the question: "Mr. President, these are all -18 Mod 2s, fairly old ones. They were supposed to be deactivated by now, but they haven't been. We now have five silos in sight, sir, and all five have service trucks there. I can see two with people standing around, doing something to the missiles."

"What's a service truck?" Liz Elliot asked.

"Those are the trucks they use to transport the missiles. They also have all the tools you use to work on them. There's one truck per bird—actually more than one. It's a big semi-truck, like a hook 'n' ladder truck, actually, with storage bins built in for all the tools and stuff—Jim, they look like they pulled the shroud—yeah! There are the warheads, it's lit up, and they're doing something to the RVs . . . I wonder what?"

Fowler nearly exploded. It was like listening to a football game on the radio, and—"What does all this mean!"

"Sir, we can't tell . . . coming up to Uzhur now. Not much activity, Uzhur has the new mark of the -18, the Mod 5 . . . no trucks, I can see sentries again. Mr. President, I would estimate that we have more than the usual number of sentries around. Gladkaya next . . . that'll take a couple of minutes. . . ."

"Why are the trucks there?" Fowler asked.

"Sir, all I can say is that they appear to be working on the birds."

"Goddamn it! Doing what!" Fowler screamed into the speakerphone.

The reply was very different from the cool voice of a few minutes earlier. "Sir, there's no way we can tell that."

"Then tell me what *you do* know!"

"Mr. President, as I already said, these missiles are old ones, they're maintenance-intensive, and they were scheduled for destruction, but they're overdue for that. We observed increased site security at all three SS-18 regiments, but at Alyesk every bird we saw had a truck and a maintenance crew there, and the silos were all open. That's all we can tell from these pictures, sir."

"Mr. President," General Borstein said, "Major Costello has told you everything he can."

"General, you told me that we'd get something useful from this. *What* did we get?"

"Sir, it may be significant that there's all that work going on at Alyesk."

"But you don't know what the work is!"

"No, sir, we don't," Borstein admitted rather sheepishly.

"Could they be readying those missiles for launch?"

"Yes, sir, that is a possibility."

"My God."

"Robert," the National Security Advisor said, "I am getting very frightened."

"Elizabeth, we don't have time for this." Fowler collected himself. "We must

maintain control of ourselves, and control of the situation. We must. We must convince Narmonov—"

"Robert, don't you *see!* It's *not him!* That's the only thing that makes *sense*. We don't know who we're dealing with!"

"What can we do about it?"

"I don't know!"

"Well, whoever it is, they don't want a nuclear war. Nobody would. It's too crazy," the President assured her, sounding almost like a parent.

"Are you sure of that? Robert, are you really sure? They tried to kill *us!"*

"Even if that's true, we have to set it aside."

"But we *can't.* If they were willing to try once, they will be willing to try again! Don't you see?"

Just a few feet behind him, Helen D'Agustino realized that she'd read Liz Elliot correctly the previous summer. She was as much a coward as a bully. And now whom did the President have to advise him? Fowler rose from his chair and headed for the bathroom. Pete Connor trailed along as far as the door, because even Presidents are not allowed to make that trip alone. "Daga" looked down on Dr. Elliot. Her face was—what? the Secret Service agent asked herself. It was beyond fear. Agent D'Agustino was every bit as frightened herself, but she didn't—that was unfair, wasn't it? Nobody was asking her for advice, nobody was asking her to make sense of this mess. Clearly, none of it made sense at all. It simply didn't. At least no one was asking her about it, but that wasn't her job. It was Liz Elliot's job.

"I got a contact here," one of the sonar operators said aboard Sea Devil One-Three. "Buoy three, bearing two-one-five . . . blade count now . . . single screw —nuclear submarine contact! Not American, screw's not American."

"Got him on four," another sonarman said. "This dude's hauling ass, blade count shows over twenty, maybe twenty-five knots, bearing my buoy is three-zero-zero."

"Okay," the Tacco said, "I have a posit. Can you give me drift?"

"Bearing now two-one-zero!" the first one responded. "This guy is moving!"

Two minutes later it was clear the contact was heading straight for USS *Maine.*

"Is this possible?" Jim Rosselli asked. The radio message had gone from Kodiak straight to the NMCC. The commander of the patrol squadron didn't know what to do and was screaming for instructions. The report came in the form of a RED ROCKET, copied off also to CINCPAC, who would also be requesting direction from above.

"What do you mean?" Barnes asked.

"He's heading straight for where *Maine* is. How the hell could he know where she is?"

"How'd we find out?"

"SLOT buoy, radio—oh, no, that asshole hasn't maneuvered clear?"

"Kick this to the President?" Colonel Barnes asked.

"I guess." Rosselli lifted the phone.

"This is the President."

"Sir, this is Captain Jim Rosselli at the National Military Command Center. We have a disabled submarine in the Gulf of Alaska, USS *Maine,* an Ohio-class missile boat. Sir, she has prop damage and cannot maneuver. There is a Soviet attack submarine heading straight toward her, about ten miles out. We have a P-3C Orion ASW aircraft that is now tracking the Russian. Sir, he requests instructions."

"I thought they can't track our missile submarines."

"Sir, nobody can, but in this case they must have DF—I mean used direction-finders to locate the sub when she radioed for help. *Maine* is a missile submarine, part of SIOP, and is under DEFCON-TWO Rules of Engagement. Therefore, so is the Orion that's riding shotgun for her. Sir, they want to know what to do."

"How important is *Maine?"* Fowler asked.

General Fremont took that. "Sir, that sub is part of the SIOP, a big part, over two hundred warheads, very accurate ones. If the Russians can take her out, they've hurt us badly."

"How badly?"

"Sir, it makes one hell of a hole in our war plan. *Maine* carries the D-5 missile, and they are tasked counterforce. They're supposed to attack missile fields and selected command-and-control assets. If something happens to her, it would take literally hours to patch up that hole in the plan."

"Captain Rosselli, you're Navy, right?"

"Yes, Mr. President—sir, I have to tell you that I was CO of *Maine's* Gold Crew until a few months ago."

"How soon before we have to make a decision?"

"Sir, the Akula is inbound at twenty-five knots, currently about twenty thousand yards from our boat. Technically speaking, they're within torpedo range right now."

"What are my options?"

"You can order an attack or not order an attack," Rosselli replied.

"General Fremont?"

"Mr. President—no, Captain Rosselli?"

"Yes, General?"

"How sure are you that the Russians are boring straight in on our boat?"

"The signal is quite positive on that, sir."

"Mr. President, I think we have to protect our assets. The Russians won't be real pleased with an attack on one of their boats, but it's an attack boat, not a strategic asset. If they challenge us on this, we can explain it. What I want to know is why they ordered the boat in this way. They must know that it would alarm us."

"Captain Rosselli, you have my authorization for the aircraft to engage and destroy the submarine."

"Aye aye, sir." Rosselli lifted the other phone. "GRAY BEAR, this is MARBLEHEAD"—the current code name for the NMCC—"National Command Authority approves I repeat *approves* your request. Acknowledge."

"MARBLEHEAD, this is GRAY BEAR, we copy request to engage is approved."

"That's affirmative."

"Roger. Out."

The Orion turned in. Even the pilots were feeling the effects of the weather now. Technically it was still light, but the low ceiling and heavy seas made it seem that they were flying down an immense and bumpy corridor. That was the bad news. The good news was that their contact was acting dumb, running very fast, below the layer, and almost impossible to miss. The Tacco in back coached him in along the Akula's course. Sticking out the tail of the converted Lockheed Electra airliner was a sensitive device called a magnetic anomaly detector. It reported on variations in the earth's magnetic field, such as those caused by the metallic mass of a submarine.

"Madman madman madman, smoke away!" the system operator called. He pushed a button to release a smoke float. In front, the pilot immediately turned left to set up another run. This he did, then a third, turning left each time.

"Okay, how's this look back there?" the pilot asked.

"Solid contact, nuclear-powered sub, positive Russian. I say let's do it this time."

"Fair enough," the pilot observed.

"Jesus!" the copilot muttered.

"Open the doors."

"Coming open now. Safeties off, release is armed, weapon is hot."

"Okay, I have it set," the Tacco said. "Clear to drop."

It was too easy. The pilot lined up on the smoke floats, which were almost perfectly in a row. He passed over the first, then the second, then the third. . . .

"Dropping now-now-now! Torp away!" The pilot added power and climbed a few hundred feet.

The Mark 50 ASW torpedo dropped clear, retarded by a small parachute that automatically released when the fish hit the water. The new and very sophisticated weapon was powered by an almost noiseless propulsion instead of a propeller, and had been programmed to stay covert until it reached the target depth of five hundred feet.

It was just about time to slow down, Dubinin thought, another few thousand meters. His gamble, he felt, had been a good one. It seemed a wholly reasonable supposition that the American missile submarine would stay near the surface. If he'd guessed right, then by racing in just below the layer—he was running at one hundred ten meters—surface noise would keep the Americans from hearing him and he could conduct the remainder of the search more covertly. He was about to congratulate himself for a good tactical decision.

"Torpedo sonar on the starboard bow!" Lieutenant Rykov screamed from sonar.

"Rudder left! Ahead flank! Where is the torpedo?"

Rykov: "Depression angle fifteen! Below us!"

"Emergency surface! Full rise on the planes! New course three-zero-zero!" Dubinin dashed into sonar.

"What the hell?"

Rykov was pale. "I can't hear screws . . . just that damned sonar . . . looking away—no, it's in acquisition now!"

Dubinin turned: "Countermeasures—three—now!"

"Cans away!"

Admiral Lunin's countermeasures operators rapidly fired off three 15-centimeter cans of gas-generating material. These filled the water with bubbles, making a target for the torpedo, but one that didn't move. The Mark 50 had already sensed the submarine's presence and was turning in.

"Coming through one hundred meters," the *Starpom* called. "Speed twenty-eight knots."

"Level off at fifteen, but don't be afraid of broaching."

"Understood! Twenty-nine knots."

"Lost it, the curve in the towed array just ruined our reception." Rykov's hands went up in frustration.

"Then we must be patient," Dubinin said. It wasn't much of a joke, but the sonar crew loved him for it.

"The Orion just engaged the inbound, sir, just picked up an ultrasonic sonar, very faint, bearing two-four-zero. It's one of ours, it's a Mark 50, sir."

"That ought to take care of him," Ricks observed. "Thank God."

"Passing through fifty meters, leveling out, ten degrees on the planes. Speed thirty-one."

"Countermeasures didn't work . . . ," Rykov said. The towed array was straightening out, and the torpedo was still back there.

"No propeller noises?"

"None . . . I should be able to hear them even at this speed."

"Must be one of their new ones. . . ."

"The Mark 50? It's supposed to be a very clever little fish."

"We will see about that. Yevgeniy, remember the surface action?" Dubinin smiled.

The *Starpom* did a superb job of maintaining control, but the thirty-foot seas guaranteed that the submarine would broach—break the surface—as the waves and troughs swept overhead. The torpedo was a scant three hundred meters behind when the Akula leveled out. The American Mark 50 antisubmarine torpedo was not a smart weapon, but a "brilliant" one. It had identified and ignored the countermeasures Dubinin had ordered only minutes before and, using a powerful ultrasonic sonar, was now looking for the sub in order to conclude its mission. But here physical laws intervened in favor of the Russians. It is widely believed that sonar reflects off the metal hull of a ship, but this is not true. Rather, sonar reflects off the air inside a submarine, or more precisely off the border of water and air through which the sound energy cannot pass. The Mark 50 was programmed to identify these air-water boundaries as ships. As the torpedo rocketed after its prey, it began to see immense ship-shapes stretching as far as its sonar could reach. Those were waves. Though the weapon had been programmed to ignore a flat surface and thus avoid a problem called "surface capture," its designers had not addressed

the problem of a heavy, rolling sea. The Mark 50 selected the nearest such shape, raced toward it—

—and sprang into clear air like a leaping salmon. It crashed into the back of the next wave, reacquired the same immense target shape—

—and leaped again. This time the torpedo hit at a slight angle. Dynamic forces caused it to turn and race north inside the body of a wave, sensing huge ships both left and right. It turned left, springing into the air yet again, but this time it hit the next wave hard enough to detonate its contact fuse.

"That was close!" Rykov said.

"No, not close, perhaps a thousand meters, but probably more." The Captain leaned into the control room. "Slow to five knots, down to thirty meters."

"We hit it?"

"I don't know, sir," the operator said. "He went shallow in a hurry, and the fish went charging up after him, circled around some—" The sonarman traced his finger on the display. "Then it exploded here, close to where the Akula disappeared into the surface noise. Can't say—no breakup noises, sir, I have to call it a miss."

"Bearing and distance to the target?" Dubinin asked.

"Roughly nine thousand meters, bearing zero-five-zero," the *Starpom* replied. "What is the plan now, Captain?"

"We will locate and destroy the target," said Captain First Rank Valentin Borissovich Dubinin.

"But—"

"We have been attacked. Those bastards tried to kill us!"

"That was an aerial weapon," the executive officer pointed out.

"I heard no airplane. We have been attacked. We will defend ourselves."

"Well?"

Inspector Pat O'Day was making furious notes. American Airlines, like all the major carriers, had its ticket information on computer. With a ticket number and flight numbers, he could track anyone down. "Okay," he told the woman on the other end. "Wait a minute." O'Day turned. "Dan, there were only six first-class tickets on that flight from Denver to Dallas-Fort Worth, the flight was nearly empty—but it hasn't taken off yet because of ice and snow in Dallas. We have the names for two other first-class passengers who changed to a Miami flight. Now, the Dallas connection was for Mexico City. The two who changed through Miami were also booked on a DC-10 out of Miami into Mexico City. That plane's off, one hour out of Mexico."

"Turn it around?"

"They say they can't because of fuel."

"One hour—Christ!" Murray swore.

O'Day ran a large hand over his face. As scared as everyone else in America —more so, since everyone in the command center had informed reason to be frightened—Inspector Patrick Sean O'Day was trying mightily to set

everything aside and concentrate on whatever he had at hand. It was too slim and too circumstantial to be considered hard evidence as yet. He'd seen too many coincidences in his twenty years with the Bureau. He'd also seen major cases break on thinner stuff than this. You ran with what you had, and they had this.

"Dan, I—"

A messenger came in from the Records Division. She handed over two files to Murray. The Deputy Assistant Director opened the Russell file first, rummaging for the Athens photo. Next he took out the most recent photo of Ismael Qati. He set both next to the passport photos just faxed in from Denver.

"What do you think, Pat?"

"The passport one of this guy still looks thin for Mr. Qati . . . cheekbones and eyes are right, mustache isn't. He's losing hair, too, if this is him. . . ."

"Go with the eyes?"

"The eyes are right, Dan, the nose—yeah, it's him. Who's this other mutt?"

"No name, just these frames from Athens. Fair skin, dark hair, well-groomed. Haircut's right, hairline is right." He checked the descriptive data on the license and passport. "Height, little guy, build—it fits, Pat."

"I agree, I agree about eighty percent worth, man. Who's the Legal Attaché in Mexico City?"

"Bernie Montgomery—shit! He's in town to meet with Bill."

"Try Langley?"

"Yeah." Murray lifted his CIA line. "Where's Ryan?"

"Right here, Dan. What gives?"

"We have something. First, a guy named Marvin Russell, Sioux Indian, member of the Warrior Society, he dropped out of sight last year, somewhere in Europe, we thought. He turned up with his throat cut in Denver today. There were two people with him, they flew out. One, we have a picture but no name. The other may be Ismael Qati."

That bastard! "Where are they?"

"We think they're aboard an American Airlines flight from Miami to Mexico City, first-class tickets, about an hour out from the terminal."

"And you think there's a connection?"

"A vehicle registered to Marvin Russell, a/k/a Robert Friend of Roggen, Colorado, was on the stadium grounds. We have fake IDs from two people, probably Qati and the unknown subject, recovered from the murder scene. There's plenty enough to arrest on suspicion of murder."

Yeah, Jack thought. Had the situation not been so horrible, Ryan would have laughed at that. "Murder, eh? You going to try and make the arrest?"

"Unless you have a better idea."

Ryan was quiet for a moment. "Maybe I do. Hold on for a minute." He lifted another phone and dialed the United States Embassy in Mexico City. "This is Ryan calling for the Station Chief. Tony? Jack Ryan here. Is Clark still there? Good, put him on."

"Jesus, Jack, what the hell is—" Ryan cut him off.

"Shut up, John. I have something for you to do. We have two people coming in to the airport there on an American flight from Miami, due in about an

hour. We'll fax you the photos in a few minutes. We think they might be involved in this."

"So it's a terrorist gig?"

"Best thing we have, John. We want those two, and we want them fast."

"Might be a problem from the local cops, Jack," Clark warned. "I can't exactly have a shoot-out down here."

"Is the Ambassador in?"

"I think so."

"Transfer me over and stand by."

"Right."

"Ambassador's office," a female voice said.

"This is CIA Headquarters, and I need the Ambassador right now!"

"Surely." The secretary was a cool one, Ryan thought.

"Yeah, what is it?"

"Mr. Ambassador, this is Jack Ryan, Deputy Director of CIA—"

"This is an open phone line."

"I know that! Shut up and listen. There are two people coming into Mexico City airport in an American Airlines flight from Miami. We need to pick them up and get them back here just as fast as we can."

"Our people?"

"No, we think they're terrorists."

"That means arresting them, clearing it through the local legal system and —"

"We don't have time for that!"

"Ryan, we can't strong-arm these people, they won't stand for it."

"Mr. Ambassador, I want you to call the President of Mexico right now, and I want you to tell him that we need his cooperation—it's life-and-death, okay? If he doesn't agree immediately, I want you to tell him this, and I need you to write it down. Tell him that we know about his retirement plan. Okay? Use those exact words, *We know about his retirement* plan. "

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you say exactly that, do you understand?"

"Look, I don't like playing games and—"

"Mr. Ambassador, if you do not do exactly what I'm telling you, I will have one of my people render you unconscious and then have the DCM make the call."

"You can't threaten me like that!"

"I just did, pal, and if you think I'm kidding, you just fucking try me!"

"Temper, Jack," Ben Goodley cautioned.

Ryan looked away from the phone. "Sir, excuse me. It's very tense here, okay, we've had a nuclear device go off in Denver, and this may be the best lead we have. Look, there isn't time for niceties. Please. Play along with me. Please."

"Very well."

Ryan let out a breath. "Okay. Tell him also that one of our people, a Mr. Clark, will be at the airport security office in a few minutes. Mr. Ambassador, I cannot emphasize enough how important this is. Please do it now."

"I'll do it. You'd better calm down up there," the career foreign-service

officer advised.

"We're trying very hard, sir. Please have your secretary transfer me back to the Station Chief. Thank you." Ryan looked over to Goodley. "Just hit me over the fucking head if you feel the need, Ben."

"Clark."

"We're faxing some photos down, along with their names and seat assignments. Okay, you are to check in with the airport security boss before you grab 'em. You still have the airplane down there?"

"Right."

"When you have 'em, get 'em aboard, and get 'em the hell up here."

"Okay, Jack. We're on it."

Ryan killed the line and picked up on Murray. "Fax the data you have to our Station Chief Mexico. I have two field officers on the scene, good ones, Clark and Chavez."

"Clark?" Murray asked as he handed the fax information to Pat O'Day. "The same one who—"

"That's the man."

"I wish him luck."

The tactical problem was complex. Dubinin had an antisubmarine aircraft overhead and could not afford to make a single mistake. Somewhere ahead was an American missile submarine that he fully intended to destroy. He had ordered it to protect himself, the Captain reasoned. He had been fired upon with a live weapon. That changed matters greatly. He really should radio fleet command for instructions, or at least to announce his intentions, but with an aircraft overhead that was suicide, and he'd brushed close enough to death for one day. The attack on *Admiral Lunin* could only mean that the Americans were planning an attack on his country. They'd violated their favorite international hobbyhorse—the seas were free for the passage of all. They'd attacked him in international waters before he was close enough to commit a hostile act. Someone, therefore, thought there was a state of war. Fine, Dubinin thought. So be it.

The submarine's towed-array sonar was drooping well below the level of the boat, and the sonar crewmen were now concentrating as they never had.

"Contact," Lieutenant Rykov called. "Sonar contact, bearing one-one-three, single screw . . . noisy, sounds like a damaged submarine. . . ."

"You're certain it's not a surface contact?"

"Positive . . . surface traffic is well south of this track because of the storms. The sound is definitely characteristic of a submarine power plant . . . noisy, as though from some damage

. . . southerly drift . . . bearing one-one-five now."

Valentin Borissovich turned to shout into the control room: "Estimated distance to target's reported position?"

"Seven thousand meters!"

"Long, long shot . . . southerly drift . . . speed?"

"Difficult to tell . . . less than six knots, certainly . . . there's a blade-rate there, but it's faint and I can't read it."

"We may not get more than one shot," Dubinin whispered to himself. He

went back to control. “Weapons! Set up a torpedo on a course of one-one-five, initial search depth seventy meters, activation point . . . four thousand meters.”

“Very well.” The Lieutenant made the proper adjustments to his board. “Set for tube one . . . weapon is hot, ready! Outer door is closed, Captain.”

Dubinin turned to look at the executive officer. Ordinarily a very sober man—he scarcely drank even at ceremonial dinners—the *Starpom* nodded approval. The Captain didn’t need it, but was grateful for it even so.

“Open outer door.”

“Outer door is open.” The weapons officer flipped the plastic cover off the firing switch.

“Fire.”

The Lieutenant stabbed the button home. “Weapon is free.”

“Conn, sonar! Transient, transient, bearing one-seven*five—torpedo in the water bearing one-nine-five!”*

“All ahead full!” Ricks shouted to the helm.

“Captain!” Claggett screamed. “Belay that order!”

“What?” The youngster at the helm was all of nineteen and had never heard a captain’s order countermanded. “What do I do, sir?”

“Captain, if you goose the engines like that, we lose the shaft in about fifteen seconds!”

“Shit, you’re right.” Ricks was pink beneath the red battle lights in the control room. “Tell the engine room, best safe speed, helm, right ten degrees rudder, come north, new course zero-zero-zero.”

“Right ten degrees rudder, aye.” The boy’s voice quavered as he turned the wheel. Fear is as contagious as plague. “Sir, my rudder is right ten degrees, coming to new course zero-zero-zero.”

Ricks swallowed and nodded. “Very well.”

“Conn, sonar, bearing to torpedo is now bearing one-nine-zero, torpedo going left to right, torpedo is not pinging at this time.”

“Thank you,” Claggett replied.

“Without our tail, we’re going to lose track of it real quick.”

“That’s true, sir. Captain, how about we let the Orion know what’s going on?”

“Good idea, run up the antenna.”

“Sea Devil One-Three, this is *Maine.*

“Maine, this is One-Three, we are still evaluating that torpedo we dropped and—”

“One-Three, we have a torpedo in the water one-eight-zero. You missed the guy. Start another search pattern south of us. I think this bird is engaging our MOSS.”

“Roger, on the way.” The Tacco informed Kodiak that there was a for-real battle going on now.

“Mr. President,” Ryan said, “we may have some useful information here, sir.” Jack was sitting down in front of the speakerphone, his hands flat on the

table and wet enough to leave marks on the Formica top, Goodley saw. For all that, he envied Ryan's ability to control himself.

"What might that be?" Fowler asked harshly.

Ryan's head dropped at the tone of the reply. "Sir, the FBI has just informed us that they have information on two, possibly three, confirmed terrorist suspects in Denver today. Two of them are believed to be on an airliner inbound to Mexico. I have people in the area, and we're going to try and pick them up, sir."

"Wait a minute," Fowler said. "We *know* that this wasn't a terrorist act."

"Ryan, this is General Fremont. How was this information developed?"

"I don't know all the details, but they have information on an automobile—a truck, I think, a van, that was at the site. They've checked the tag number and the owner—the owner turned up dead, and we ran the other two down by their airline tickets and—"

"Hold it!" CINC-SAC cut Ryan off. "How the *hell* can anyone know that—a survivor from the bomb site? For Christ's sake, man, this was a hundred-kiloton weapon—"

"Uh, General, the best number we have now—it came from the FBI—is fifteen-KT, and—"

"The FBI?" Borstein said from NORAD. "What the hell do they know about this? Anyway, a fifteen-kiloton weapon wouldn't leave any survivors for over a mile around. Mr. President, that cannot be good information."

"Mr. President, this is the NMCC," Ryan heard on the same line. "We just received a message from Kodiak. That Soviet submarine is attacking USS *Maine.* There is a torpedo in the water, *Maine* is aitempting to evade."

Jack heard something, he wasn't sure what, over the speakerphone.

"Sir," Fremont said at once, "this is a very ominous development."

"I understand that, General," the President said just loudly enough to hear. "General—SNAPCOUNT."

"What the hell's that?" Goodley asked quietly.

"Mr. President, that is a mistake. We have a solid piece of information here. You wanted information from us and now we have it!" Ryan barked rapidly, almost losing it again. His hands went from flat to fists. Jack struggled with himself again, and regained control. "Sir, this is a real indicator."

"Ryan, it looks to me like you've been lying and misleading me all day," Fowler said in a voice that hardly sounded human at all. The line went dead for the last time.

The final alert signal was sent out simultaneously over dozens of circuits. The duplication of channels, their known function, the brevity of the message, and the identical encipherment pattern told the Soviets much, even before the receipted signal was input into their computers. When the single word came out, it was reprinted in the Kremlin command center only seconds later. Golovko took the dispatch off the machine.

"SNAPCOUNT," he said simply.

"What is that?" President Narmonov asked.

“A code word.” Golovko’s mouth went white for a moment. “It’s a term from American football, I think. It means the set of numbers used before the—the quarterback takes the ball to begin a play.”

“I don’t understand,” Narmonov said.

“Once the Americans had the code word COCKEDPISTOL to denote complete strategic readiness. The meaning is unambiguous to anyone, yes?” The KGB’s Deputy Chairman went on as though in a dream: “This word, to an American, would mean much the same thing. I can only conclude that—”

“Yes.”

42

ASP AND SWORD

PRESIDENT NARMONOV:
I SEND THIS TO YOU, OR YOUR SUCCESSOR, AS A WARNING.
WE HAVE JUST RECEIVED A REPORT THAT A SOVIET SUBMARINE IS EVEN NOW ATTACKING AN AMERICAN MISSILE SUBMARINE. AN ATTACK ON OUR STRATEGIC ASSETS WILL NOT BE TOLERATED, AND WILL BE INTERPRETED AS THE PRECURSOR TO AN ATTACK AGAINST THE UNITED STATES.
I MUST FURTHER ADVISE YOU THAT OUR STRATEGIC FORCES ARE AT THEIR MAXIMUM STATE OF READINESS. WE ARE PREPARED TO DEFEND OURSELVES.
IF YOU ARE SERIOUS IN YOUR PROTESTATIONS OF INNOCENCE, I URGE YOU TO CEASE ALL AGGRESSIVE ACTS WHILE THERE IS STILL TIME.

" 'Successor'? What the hell does *that* mean?" Narmonov turned away for a moment, then looked at Golovko. "What is happening here? Is Fowler ill? Is he mad? What goes on here? What's this submarine business?" When he finished talking, his mouth remained open like that of a hooked fish. The Soviet President was gulping his breaths now.

"We had a report of a disabled American missile submarine in the eastern Pacific, and sent a submarine to investigate, but that submarine has no authorization to attack," the Defense Minister said.

"Are there any circumstances under which our men might do this?"

"None. Without authorization from Moscow, they may act only in self-defense." The Defense Minister looked away, unable to bear the gaze of his President. He had no wish to speak again, but neither did he have a choice. "I no longer think this is a controllable situation."

"Mr. President." It was an Army warrant officer. He opened his briefcase —"the football"—and removed a ring binder. The first divider was bordered in red. Fowler flipped to it. The page read:

SIOP MAJOR ATTACK OPTION **SKYFALL**

"So, what the hell is SNAPCOUNT?" Goodley asked.

"That's as high as alerts go, Ben. That means the pistol is cocked and pointed, and you can feel the pressure on the trigger."

"How the hell did we—"

"Drop it, Ben! However the fuck we got here, we *are* here." Ryan stood and started walking around. "We better start thinking very fast, people."

The senior duty officer started: “We have to make Fowler understand—”

“He can’t understand,” Goodley said harshly. “He can’t understand if he isn’t listening.”

“State and Defense are out—they’re both dead,” Ryan pointed out.

“Vice President—Kneecap.”

“Very good, Ben . . . do we have a button for that . . . yes!” Ryan pushed it.

“Kneecap.”

“This is CIA, DDCI Ryan speaking. I need to talk to the Vice President.”

“Wait one, sir.” It turned out to be a short “one.”

“This is Roger Durling. Hello, Ryan.”

“Hello, Mr. Vice President. We have a problem here,” Jack announced.

“What went wrong? We’ve been copying the Hot Line messages. They were kinda tense but okay until about twenty minutes ago. What the hell went wrong?”

“Sir, the President is convinced that there has been a *coup d’état* in the Soviet Union.”

“What? Whose fault is that?”

“Mine, sir,” Ryan admitted. “I’m the jerk who delivered the information. Please set that aside. The President isn’t listening to me.”

Jack was amazed to hear a brief, bitter laugh. “Yeah, Bob doesn’t listen to me very much either.”

“Sir, we have to get to him. We now have information that this may have been a terrorist incident.”

“What information is that?” Jack ran it down in about a minute. “That’s thin,” Durling observed.

“It may be thin, sir, but it’s all we got, and it’s a goddamned sight better than anything else we’ve got in.”

“Okay, stop for a minute. Right now I want your evaluation of the situation.”

“Sir, my best read is that the President is wrong, it is Andrey Il’ych Narmonov over there. It’s approaching dawn in Moscow. President Narmonov is suffering from sleep deprivation, he’s just as scared as we are—and from that last message he’s wondering if President Fowler is crazy or not. That is a bad combination. We have reports of isolated contact between Soviet and American forces. Christ knows what really happened, but both sides are reading it as aggressive acts. What’s really happening is simple chaos-forward-deployed forces bumping, but they’re shooting because of alert levels on both sides. It’s cascading on itself.”

“Agreed, I agree with all of that. Go on.”

“Somebody has to back down and do it very fast. Sir, you have to talk to the President. He won’t even take my calls now. Talbot and Bunker are both dead, and there’s nobody else he’ll listen to.”

“What about Arnie van Damm?”

“Fuck!” Ryan snarled. How had he forgotten Arnie? “Where is he?”

“I don’t know. I can have the Secret Service find out real fast. What about Liz?”

“She’s the one who came up with the brilliant idea that Narmonov isn’t there.”

"Bitch," Durling observed. He'd worked so hard and wasted so much political capital to get Charlie Alden into that job. "Okay, I'll try to get through to him. Stand by."

"Right."

"The Vice President is calling, sir. Line Six."

Fowler punched the button. "Make it fast, Roger."

"Bob, you need to get this thing back under control."

"What do you think I've been trying to do!"

Durling was sitting in a high-backed leather chair. He closed his eyes. The tone of the answer said it all. "Bob, you have made things worse instead of better. You have to step back from this for a moment. Take a deep breath, walk around the room—think! There is no reason to expect that the Russians did this. Now, I just talked to CIA, and they said—"

"Ryan, you mean?"

"Yes, he just filled me in and—"

"Ryan's been lying to me."

"Bullshit, Bob." Durling kept his voice level and reasonable. He called it his country-doctor voice. "He's too much of a pro for that."

"Roger, I know you mean well, but I don't have time for psychoanalysis. We have what may be a nuclear strike about to be launched on us. The good news, I suppose, is that you'll survive. I wish you luck, Roger. Wait—there's a Hot Line message coming in."

> PRESIDENT FOWLER:
>
> THIS IS ANDREY IL'YCH NARMONOV COMMUNICATING TO YOU.
>
> THE SOVIET UNION HAS TAKEN NO AGGRESSIVE ACTS AGAINST THE UNITED STATES. NONE AT ALL. WE HAVE NO INTEREST IN HARMING YOUR COUNTRY. WE WISH TO BE LEFT ALONE AND TO LIVE IN PEACE.
>
> I HAVE AUTHORIZED NO ACTION WHATEVER AGAINST ANY AMERICAN FORCES OR CITIZENS, YET YOU THREATEN US. IF YOU ATTACK US, WE MUST THEN ATTACK YOU ALSO, AND MILLIONS WILL DIE. WILL IT ALL BE AN ACCIDENT?
>
> THE CHOICE IS YOURS. I CANNOT STOP YOU FROM ACTING IRRATIONALLY. I HOPE THAT YOU WILL REGAIN CONTROL OF YOURSELF. TOO MANY LIVES ARE AT RISK FOR EITHER OF US TO ACT IRRATIONALLY.

"At least we're still getting these," Goodley noted.

"Yeah, it just makes things so much better. It's going to set him off," Ryan announced. "This one's really going to do it. You can't tell an irrational person that he's losing it. . . ."

"Ryan, this is Durling." Ryan fairly leaped at the button.

"Yes, Mr. Vice President."

"He didn't—he didn't listen, and then this new one came in, and he reacted rather badly to it."

"Sir, can you open a channel to SAC?"

"No, I'm afraid not. They're on a conference call with NORAD and Camp David. Part of the problem, Jack, the President knows he's vulnerable there and he's afraid—well . . ."

"Yeah, everyone's afraid, aren't we?"

There was silence for a moment, and Ryan wondered if Durling felt guilty for being in a place of relative safety.

At Rocky Flats, the residue samples were loaded into a gamma-ray spectrometer. It had taken longer than expected, due to a minor equipment problem. The operators stood behind a shield and used lead-lined rubber gloves and yard-long tongs to move the samples out of the lead bucket, then waited for the technician to activate the machine.

"Okay—this is a hot one, all right."

The machine had two displays, one on a cathode-ray tube, with a backup paper printout. It measured the energy of the photoelectrons generated by the gamma radiation within the instrument. The precise energy state of these electrons identified both the element and the isotope of the source. These showed as lines or spikes on the graphic display. The relative intensity of the various energy lines—shown as the height of the spike—determined the proportions. A more precise measurement would require insertion of the sample in a small reactor for reactivation, but this system was good enough for the moment.

The technician flipped to the beta channel. "Whoa, look at that tritium line! What did you say the yield on this thing was?"

"Under fifteen."

"Well, it had a shitload of tritium, doc—look at that!" The technician—he was a master's candidate—made a notation on his pad and switched back to the gamma channel. "Okay . . . plutonium, we've got some 239, 240; neptunium, americium, gadolinium, curium, promethium, uranium—some U-235, some 238 . . . I—this was a sophisticated beast, guys."

"Fizzle," one of the NESTers said, reading the numbers. "We're looking at the remains of fizzle. This was not an IND. All that tritium. . . . Christ, this was supposed to be a two-stager, that's too much for a boosted fission weapon—it's a fucking H-Bomb!"

The technician adjusted his dials to fine-tune the display. "Look at the 239/240 mix. . . ."

"Get the book!"

Sitting on the shelf opposite the spectrometer was a three-inch binder of red vinyl.

"Savannah River," the technician said. "They've always had that gadolinium problem. . . . Hanford does it another way . . . they always seem to generate too much promethium."

"Are you crazy?"

"Trust me," the technician said. "My thesis is on contamination problems at the plutonium plants. Here's the numbers!" He read them off.

A NESTer flipped to the index, then back to a page. "It's close! Close! Say the gadolinium again!"

"Zero point zero five eight times ten to the minus 7, plus or minus point zero zero two."

"Holy Mary Mother of God!" The man turned the book around.

"Savannah River. . . . That's not possible."

"Nineteen sixty-eight. It was a vintage year. It's our stuff. It's our fucking plutonium."

The senior NESTer blinked his disbelief away. "Okay, let me call D.C."

"Can't," the technician said as he refined his readings. "The long-distance lines are all down."

"Where's Larry?"

"Aurora Presbyterian, working with the FBI guys. I put the number on a Post-it over the phone in the corner. I think he's working D.C. through them."

"Murray."

"Hoskins—I just heard from Rocky Flats. Dan, this sounds nuts: the NEST team says the weapon used American plutonium. I asked him to confirm it, and he did—said he asked the same thing. The plutonium came from the DOE plant at Savannah River, turned out in February 1968, K Reactor. They have chapter and verse, he says they can even tell you what part of K Reactor—sounds like bullshit to me, too, but he's the friggin' expert."

"Walt, how the hell am I going to get anybody to believe that?"

"Dan, that's what the man told me."

"I need to talk to him."

"The phone lines are down, remember? I can get him in here in a few minutes."

"Do that, and do it fast."

"Yeah, Dan?"

"Jack, the NEST team just reported into our Denver office. The material in the bomb was American."

"What?"

"Listen, Jack, we've all said that, okay? The NEST team got fallout samples and analyzed them, and they say the uranium—no, plutonium—came from Savannah River, 1968. I have the NEST team leader coming in to the Denver Field Division now. The long-distance lines are down, but I can patch through our system and you can talk to him directly."

Ryan looked at the Science and Technology officer. "Tell me what you think."

"Savannah River, they've had problems there, like a thousand-pound MUF."

"Muff?"

"M-U-F, acronym: material unaccounted for. Lost material."

"Terrorists," Ryan said positively.

"Starting to make sense," S&T agreed.

"Oh, God, and he won't listen to me now!" Well, there was still Durling.

"That's hard to believe," the Vice President said.

"Sir, it's hard data, checked by the NEST team at Rocky Flats, it's hard, scientific data. It may sound nuts, but it's objective fact." *I hope, oh God, I hope.* Durling could hear Ryan thinking it. "Sir, this was definitely not a Russian weapon—that's the important thing. We are *certain* it was not a Soviet weapon. Tell the President right now!"

"Will do." Durling nodded to the Air Force communications sergeant.

"Yes, Roger," the President said.

"Sir, we've just received some important information."

"What now?" The President sounded tired unto death.

"It came to me from CIA, but they got it from the FBI. The NEST team has identified the bomb material as definitely not Russian. They think the bomb material is American."

"That is crazy!" Borstein announced. "We do not have any missing weapons. We take damned good care of those things!"

"Roger, you got that from Ryan, didn't you?"

"Yes, Bob, I did."

Durling heard a long sigh over the line. "Thank you."

The Vice President's hand trembled as he lifted the other phone. "He didn't buy it."

"He's *got* to buy it, sir, it's *true!"*

"I'm out of ideas here. You were right, Jack, he's not listening to anyone now."

"New Hot Line message, sir."

PRESIDENT NARMONOV, Jack read:

> YOU ACCUSE ME OF IRRATIONALITY. WE HAVE TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND DEAD, AN ATTACK ON OUR FORCES IN BERLIN, AN ATTACK ON OUR NAVY BOTH IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE PACIFIC. . . .

"He's close to doing it. Goddamn it! We've got the information he needs to stop this thing in its tracks and—"

"I'm out of ideas," Durling said over the speakerphone. "These damned messages over the Hot Line are making things worse instead of better, and—"

"That seems to be the key problem, doesn't it?" Ryan looked up. "Ben, you good driving in snow?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Come on!" Ryan raced out of the room. They caught an elevator to the first floor and Jack ran into the security room. "Keys to the car!"

"Here, sir!" A very frightened young man tossed them over. The CIA's security force kept its vehicles just off the VIP lot. The blue GMC Jimmy four-wheel-drive was unlocked.

"Where are we going?" Goodley asked as he got into the driver's-side door.

"Pentagon, River Entrance—and get us there fast."

"What was it?" The torpedo had circled something but not exploded, and finally run out of fuel.

"Not enough mass to set off the magnetic exploder—too small to hit directly . . . must have been a decoy," Dubinin said. "Where's that original intercept?" A sailor handed it over. *" 'Propeller disabled by collision,'* Goddamn it! We were tracking a bad power plant, not a damaged screw." The Captain smashed his fist down on the chart table hard enough to draw blood. "Come north, go active!"

"Oh, shit, conn, sonar, we have an active low-frequency sonar bearing one-nine-zero."

"Warm up the weapons!"

"Sir, if we deploy the outboard we'll get another two or three knots," Claggett said.

"Too noisy!" Ricks snapped back.

"Sir, we're up in the surface noise. The high-freqs from the outboard motor won't matter much up here. His active sonar is low-freq, and that active stuff's liable to detect us whether we're noisy or not. What we need now is distance, sir, if he gets too close the Orion can't engage to support us."

"We have to take him out."

"Bad move, sir. We're on SNAPCOUNT status now, if we have to shoot, that takes priority. Putting a unit in the water will tell us just where to look. Captain, we need distance to keep out of his active sonar, and we can't risk a shot."

"No! Weapons officer, set it up!"

"Aye, sir."

"Communications, tell the Orion to get us some help!"

"Here's the last one, Colonel."

"Well, that was fast enough," the regimental commander said.

"The boys are getting lots of practice," the Major standing next to him observed as the tenth and final RV was lifted off the SS-18 at Alyesk. "Be careful there, Sergeant."

It was ice that did it. A few minutes earlier some snow had blown into the missile capsule. The shuffling of boots had crushed and melted it, but then the subzero temperatures had refrozen it into an invisible, paper-thin skim of ice. The sergeant was in the process of stepping back off the fold-down catwalk when he slipped, and his wrench went flying. It bounced off the railing, twirling like a baton for a moment. The sergeant grabbed for it but missed, and it went down.

"Run!" the Colonel screamed. The sergeant needed no encouragement. The corporal on the crane swung the warhead clear and himself jumped from the vehicle. They all knew to go upwind.

The wrench nearly made it all the way down, but it struck an interior fitting and went sideways, gouging the skin of the first stage in two places. The missile skin was also the missile tankage, and both the fuel and oxidizer were released. The two chemicals formed small clouds—only a few grams of each were leaking—but the chemicals were hypergolic. They ignited on contact. That happened two minutes after the wrench began its fall.

The explosion was a powerful one. It knocked the Colonel down, over two hundred meters from the silo. He instinctively rolled behind a thick pine tree as the crushing overpressure wave swept by. He looked a moment later to see the silo topped by a pillar of flame. His men had all made it—a miracle, he thought. His next thought reflected the humor that so often accompanies an escape from death: *Well, that's one less missile for the Americans to bother us about!*

The Defense Support Program Satellite already had its sensor focused on the Russian missile fields. The energy bloom was unmistakable. The signal was downlinked to Alice Springs in Australia, and from there back up to a USAF

communications satellite, which relayed it to North America. It took just over half a second.

"Possible launch—possible launch at Alyesk!"

In that moment everything changed for Major General Joe Borstein. His eyes focused on the real-time display, and his first thought was that it had happened, despite everything, all the changes, all the progress, all the treaties, somehow it had happened, and he was watching it and he would be there to watch it all happen until the SS-18 with his name on it landed on Cheyenne Mountain. This wasn't dropping bombs on the Paul Doumer Bridge, or hassling fighters over Germany. This was the end of life.

Borstein's voice was the sound of sandpaper. "I only see one . . . where's the bird?"

"No bird no bird no bird," a female captain announced. "The bloom is too big, more like an explosion. No bird, no bird. This is not a launch, I repeat this is not a launch."

Borstein saw that his hands were shaking. They hadn't done that the time he'd been shot down, nor the time he'd crashed at Edwards, nor the times he'd driven airplanes through weather too foul for hailstones. He looked around at his people and saw in their faces the same thing he'd just felt in the pit of his stomach. Somehow it had been like watching a dreadfully scary movie to this point, but it was not a movie now. He lifted the phone to SAC and switched off the input to the Gold Phone line to Camp David.

"Pete, did you copy that?"

"I sure did, Joe."

"We, uh, we better settle this thing down, Pete. The President's losing it."

CINC-SAC paused for a beat before responding. "I almost lost it, but I just got it back."

"Yeah, I hear you, Pete."

"What the hell was that?"

Borstein flipped the switch back on. "Mr. President, that was an explosion, we think, in the Alyesk missile fields. We, uh, sure had a scare there for a moment, but there is no bird in the air—say again, Mr. President, there are no birds flying now. That was a definite false alarm."

"What does it mean?"

"Sir, I do not know that. Perhaps—they were servicing the missiles, sir, and maybe they had an accident. It's happened before—we had the same problem with the Titan-II."

"General Borstein is correct," CINC-SAC confirmed soberly. "That's why we got rid of the Titan-II . . . Mr. President?"

"Yes, General?"

"Sir, I recommend we try to cool things down some more, sir."

"And just how do we do that?" Fowler wanted to know. "What if that was related to their alert activity?"

The ride down the George Washington Parkway was uneventful. Though covered with snow, Goodley had maintained a steady forty miles per hour in four-wheel drive, and not lost control once, getting around abandoned cars like a race-car driver at Daytona. He pulled into the River/Mall Entrance to

the Pentagon. The civilian guard there was backed up by a soldier now, whose M-16 rifle was undoubtedly loaded.

"CIA!" Goodley said.

"Wait." Ryan handed over his badge. "In the slot. I think it'll work here."

Goodley did as he was told. Ryan's high-level badge had the right electronic code for this security device. The gate went up, and the road barrier went down, clearing the way. The soldier nodded. If the pass worked, everything had to be okay, right?

"Right up to the first set of doors."

"Park it?"

"Leave it! You come in with me."

Security inside the River Entrance was also beefed up. Jack tried to pass through the metal detector, but was stopped by pocket change that he then threw on the floor in a rage. "NMCC?"

"Come with me, sir."

The entrance to the National Military Command Center was barred by a wall of bullet-resistant glass, behind which was a black female sergeant armed with a revolver.

"CIA—I have to get in." Ryan held his badge against the black pad, and again it worked.

"Who are you, sir?" a Navy petty officer asked.

"DDCI. You take me to whoever's running this."

"Follow me, sir. The man you want to see is Captain Rosselli."

"Captain? No flag officer?"

"General Wilkes got lost, sir. We don't know where the hell he is." The enlisted man turned through a door.

Ryan saw a Navy captain and an Air Force lieutenant colonel, a status board, and a gang of multiple-line phones. "You Rosselli?"

"That's right—and you?"

"Jack Ryan, DDCI."

"You picked a bad place to come to, pal," Colonel Barnes observed.

"Anything changed?"

"Well, we just had what looked like a missile launch in Russia—"

"Jesus!"

"No bird came up, maybe an explosion in the hole. You have anything we need to know?"

"I need a line into the FBI command center and I need to talk to both of you."

"That's crazy," Rosselli said two minutes later.

"Maybe so." Ryan lifted the line. "Dan, Jack here."

"Where the hell are you, Jack? I just called Langley."

"Pentagon. What do you have on the bomb?"

"Stand by, I have a patch through to Dr. Larry Parsons. He's the NEST boss. He's on now."

"Okay, this is Ryan, Deputy Director of CIA. Talk to me."

"The bomb was made of American plutonium. That's definite. They've rechecked the sample four times. Savannah River Plant, February 1968, K Reactor."

"You're sure?" Jack asked, wishing very hard that the answer would be affirmative.

"Positive. Crazy as it sounds, it was our stuff."

"What else?"

"Murray tells me you have had problems with the yield estimate. Okay, I've been there, okay? This was a small device, less than fifteen—that's *one-five* kiloton yield. There are survivors from the scene—not many, but I've seen them myself, okay? I'm not sure what screwed up the initial estimate, but I have been there and I'm telling you it was a little one. It also seems to have been a fizzle. We're trying to ascertain more about that now—but this is the important part, okay? The bomb material was definitely American in origin. One hundred percent sure."

Rosselli leaned over to make sure that this phone line was a secure one into FBI headquarters. "Wait a minute. Sir, this is Captain Jim Rosselli, U.S. Navy. I have a master's in nuclear physics. Just to make sure this is what I'm hearing, I want you to give me the 239/240 proportions, okay?"

"Wait a minute and I will. . . . Okay, 239 was nine eight point nine three; 240 is zero point four five. You want the trace elements also?"

"No, that'll do it. Thank you, sir." Rosselli looked up and spoke quietly. "Either he's telling the truth or he's one smart fuckin' liar."

"Captain, I'm glad you agree. I need you to do something."

"What's that?"

"I need to get on the Hot Line."

"I can't allow that."

"Captain, have you been keeping track of the messages?"

"No, Rocky, and I haven't had time. We've got three separate battles going on and—"

"Let's go look."

Ryan hadn't been in there before, which struck him as odd. The printed copies of the messages were being kept on a clipboard. There were six people in the room, and they all looked ashen.

"Christ, Ernie—" Rosselli observed.

"Anything lately?" Jack asked.

"Nothing since the President sent one out twenty minutes ago."

"It was going fine when I was here right after—oh, my God. . . ." Rosselli observed as he got to the bottom.

"The President has lost it," Jack said. "He refuses to take information from me and he refuses to listen to Vice President Durling. Now this is real simple, okay? I know President Narmonov. He knows me. With what the FBI just gave us, what you just heard, Captain, I think I might be able to accomplish something. If not—"

"Sir, that is not possible," Rosselli replied.

"Why?" Jack asked. Though his heart was racing, he forced himself to control his breathing. He had to be cool be cool be cool now.

"Sir, the whole point of this link is that the only two people on it are—"

"One of them, maybe both now, is not playing with a full deck. Captain, you can see where we are. I can't force you to do this. I'm asking you to think. You just used your head a moment ago. Use it again," Ryan said calmly.

"Sir, they'll lock us up for doing this," the Link supervisor said.

"You have to be alive to be locked up," Jack said. "We are at SNAPCOUNT right now. You people know how serious this is. Captain Rosselli, you are the senior officer present, and you make the call."

"I see everything you put on that machine before it's transmitted."

"Fair enough. Can I type it myself?"

"Yes. You type, and it's crossloaded and encrypted before it goes out."

A Marine sergeant made room for him. Jack sat down and lit a cigarette, ignoring the signs prohibiting the vice.

ANDREY IL'YCH, Ryan tapped in slowly, THIS IS JACK RYAN. Do YOU STILL MAKE YOUR OWN FIRES IN THE DACHA?

"Okay?"

Rosselli nodded to the NCO sitting next to Ryan. "Transmit."

"What is this?" the Defense Minister asked. Four men hovered over the terminal. A Soviet Army major translated.

"Something's wrong here," the communications officer said. "This is—"

"Send back, 'Do you remember who it was who bandaged your knee?' "

"What?"

"Send it!" Narmonov said.

They waited for two minutes.

YOUR BODYGUARD ANATOLIY ASSISTED ME, BUT MY TROUSERS WERE RUINED.

"It's Ryan."

"Make sure," Golovko said.

The translator looked at his screen. "It says, '*And our friend is doing well?' "*

Ryan typed: HE RECEIVED AN HONORABLE BURIAL AT CAMP DAVID.

"What the hell?" Rosselli asked.

"There's not twenty people in the world who know this. He's making sure it's really me," Jack said. His fingers were poised over the keys.

"That looks like bullshit."

"Okay, fine, it's bullshit, but does it *hurt* anything?" Ryan demanded.

"Send it."

* * *

"What the hell is this?" Fowler shouted. "Who's doing this—"

"Sir, we have an incoming from the President. He's ordering us to—"

"Ignore it," Jack said coldly.

"Goddamn it, I can't!"

"Captain, the President has lost control. If you allow him to shut me off, your family, my family, a whole lot of people are going to die. Captain, your oath is to the Constitution, not the President. Now you look over those messages again and tell me that I'm wrong!"

"From Moscow," the translator said. *" 'Ryan, what is happening?' "*

PRESIDENT NARMONOV:
WE HAVE BEEN THE VICTIMS OF A TERRORIST ACT. THERE WAS MUCH CONFUSION HERE, BUT WE NOW HAVE POSITIVE EVIDENCE AS TO THE ORIGIN OF THE WEAPON.
WE ARE CERTAIN THAT THE WEAPON WAS NOT SOVIET. I REPEAT WE ARE CERTAIN THE WEAPON WAS NOT SOVIET.
WE ARE NOW ATTEMPTING TO APPREHEND THE TERRORISTS. WE MAY HAVE THEM WITHIN THE NEXT FEW MINUTES.

"Send back, 'Why has your President accused us of this?' "

There was another pause of two minutes.

PRESIDENT NARMONOV:
WE HAVE BEEN THE VICTIMS OF GREAT CONFUSION HERE. WE HAVE HAD SOME INTELLIGENCE REPORTS OF POLITICAL TURMOIL IN THE SOVIET UNION. THESE REPORTS WERE FALSE, BUT THEY CONFUSED US GREATLY. IN ADDITION, THE OTHER INCIDENTS HAVE HAD AN INCENDIARY EFFECT ON BOTH SIDES.

"That's true enough."

"Pete, you get people in there just as fast as you can and arrest this man!"

Connor couldn't say no to that despite the look he received from Helen D'Agustino. He called Secret Service headquarters and relayed the message.

"He asks, *'What you—what* do *you suggest?' "*

I ASK THAT YOU TRUST US AND ALLOW US TO TRUST YOU. WE BOTH MUST BACK AWAY FROM THIS. I SUGGEST THAT BOTH YOU AND WE REDUCE THE ALERT LEVELS OF STRATEGIC FORCES AND GIVE ORDERS TO ALL TROOPS TO EITHER HOLD IN PLACE OR WITHDRAW AWAY FROM ANY SOVIET OR AMERICAN UNIT IN CLOSE PROXIMITY, AND IF POSSIBLE THAT ALL SHOOTING BE STOPPED IMMEDIATELY.

"Well?" Ryan asked.

"Send it."

"Can it be a trick?" the Defense Minister asked. "Can it *not* be a trick?"

"Golovko?"

"I believe that it is Ryan, and I believe he is sincere—but can he persuade his President?"

President Narmonov walked away for a moment, thinking of history, thinking of Nikolay II. "If we stand our forces down . . . ?"

"Then they can strike us, and our ability to retaliate is cut in half!"

"Is half enough?" Narmonov asked, seeing the escape hatch, leaning toward it, praying for the opening to be real. "Is half enough to destroy them?"

"Well . . ." Defense nodded. "Certainly, we have more than double the amount we need to destroy them. We call it overkill."

"Sir, the Soviet reply reads: *'Ryan:*

" 'On my order, being sent out as you read this, Soviet strategic forces are standing down. We will maintain our defensive alert for the moment, but we will stand down our offensive forces to a lower alert level which is still higher than peacetime standards. If you match our move, I propose a phased mutual stand-down over the next five hours.' "

Jack's head went down on the keyboard, actually placing some characters on the screen.

"Could I have a glass of water? My throat's a little dry."

"Mr. President?" Fremont said.

"Yes, General."

"Sir, however this happened, I think it's a good idea."

Part of Bob Fowler wanted to hurl his coffee cup into the wall, but he stopped himself. It didn't matter, did it? It did, but not that way.

"What do you recommend?"

"Sir, just to make sure, we wait until we see evidence of a stand-down. When we do, we can back off ourselves. For starters—right now—we can rescind SNAPCOUNT without any real degradation of our readiness."

"General Borstein?"

"Sir, I concur in that," said the voice from NORAD.

"General Fremont: Approved."

"Thank you, Mr. President. We'll get right on it." General Peter Fremont, United States Air Force, Commander-in-Chief Strategic Air Command, turned to his Deputy Chief of Staff (Operations). "Keep the alert going, posture the birds, but keep them on the ground. Let's get those missiles uncocked."

"Contact . . . bearing three-five-two . . . range seven thousand six hundred meters." They'd been waiting several minutes for that.

"Set it up. No wires, activation point four thousand meters out." Dubinin looked up. He didn't know why the aircraft overhead hadn't already executed another attack.

"Set!" the weapons officer called a moment later.

"Fire!" Dubinin ordered.

"Captain, message coming in on the ELF," the communications officer said over the squawk box.

"That's the message that announces the end of the world." The Captain sighed. "Well, we fired our shots, didn't we?" It would have been nice to think that their action would save lives, but he knew better. It would enable the Soviet forces to kill more Americans, which wasn't quite the same thing. Everything about nuclear weapons was evil, wasn't it?

"Go deep?"

Dubinin shook his head. "No, they seem to have more trouble with the surface turbulence than I expected. We may actually be safer here. Come right to zero-nine-zero. Suspend pinging. Increase speed to ten knots."

Another squawk: "We have the message-five-letter group: 'Cease all hostilities'!"

"Antenna depth, quickly!"

The Mexican police proved to be extremely cooperative, and the literate Spanish of Clark and Chavez hadn't hurt very much. Four plainclothes detectives from the Federal Police waited with the CIA officers in the lounge

while four more uniformed officers with light automatic weapons took unobtrusive positions nearby.

"We don't have enough people to do this properly," the senior *Federal* worried.

"Better to do it off the airplane," Clark said.

"Muy bien, Señor. You think they may be armed?"

"Actually, no, I don't. Guns can be dangerous when you're traveling."

"Has this something to do with—Denver?"

Clark turned and nodded. "We think so."

"It will be interesting to see what such men look like." The detective meant the eyes, of course. He'd seen the photographs.

The DC-10 pulled up to the gate and cut power to its three engines. The jetway moved a few feet to mate with the forward door.

"They travel first class," John said unnecessarily.

"Si. The airline says there are fifteen first-class passengers, and they've been told to hold the rest. You will see, Señor Clark, we know our business."

"I have no doubt of that. Forgive me if I gave that impression, *Teniente.*"

"You are CIA, no?"

"I am not permitted to say."

"Then of course you are. What will you do with them?"

"We will speak," Clark said simply.

The gate attendant opened the door to the jetway. Two Federal Police officers took their places left and right of the door, their jackets open. Clark prayed there would be no gunplay. The people started walking out, and the usual greetings were called from the waiting area.

"Bingo," Clark said quietly. The police lieutenant straightened his tie to signal the men at the door. They made it easy, the last two first-class passengers to come out. Qati looked sick and pale, Clark noticed. Maybe it had been a bad flight. He stepped over the rope barrier. Chavez did the same, smiling and calling to a passenger who looked at them in open puzzlement.

"Ernesto!" John said, running up to him.

"I'm afraid I'm the wrong—"

Clark went right past the man from Miami.

Ghosn was slow to react, dulled by the flight from America, relaxed by the thought that they had escaped. By the time he started to move, he was tackled from behind. Another policeman placed a gun against the back of his head, and he was handcuffed before they hauled him to his feet.

"Well, I'll be a son of a bitch," Chavez said. "You're the guy with the books! We've met before, sweetheart."

"Qati," John said to the other one. They'd already been patted down. Neither was armed. "I've wanted to meet you for years."

Clark took out their tickets. The police would collect their luggage. The police moved them out very quickly. The business and tourist passengers would not know that anything untoward had happened until they were told by family members in a few minutes.

"Very smooth, Lieutenant," John said to the senior officer.

"As I said, we know our business."

"Could you have your people phone the embassy and tell them that we got

‘em both alive.”

“Of course.”

The eight men waited in a small room while the bags were collected. There could be evidence in them, and there wasn’t that much of a hurry. The Mexican police lieutenant examined their faces closely, but saw nothing more or less human than what he’d seen in the faces of a hundred murderers. It was vaguely disappointing, even though he was a good-enough cop to know better. The luggage was searched, but aside from some prescription drugs—they were checked and determined not to be narcotics—there was nothing unusual. The police borrowed a courtesy van for the drive to the Gulfstream.

“I hope you have enjoyed your stay in Mexico,” the lieutenant said in parting.

“What the hell is going on?” the pilot asked. Though in civilian clothes, she was an Air Force major.

“Let me explain it like this,” Clark said. “You Air Scouts are going to drive the airplane to Andrews. Mr. Chavez and I are going to interview these two gentlemen in back. You will not look, not hear, not think about anything that’s going on in back.”

“What—”

“That was a *thought*, Major. I do not want you to have any *thoughts* about this. Do I have to explain myself again?”

“No, sir.”

“Then let’s get the hell out of here.”

The pilot and copilot went forward. The two communications technicians sat at their consoles and drew the curtain between themselves and the main cabin.

Clark turned to see his two guests exchanging looks. That was no good. He removed Qati’s tie and wrapped it around his eyes. Chavez did the same to his charge. Next both were gagged, and Clark went forward to find some earplugs. Finally, they set both men in seats as far apart as the airplane’s cabin allowed. John let the plane take off before he did anything else. The fact was that he despised torture, but he needed information now, and he was prepared to do anything to get it.

“Torpedo in the water!”

“Christ, he’s dead aft of us!” Ricks turned. “Best possible speed, come left to two-seven-zero! XO, take the return shot!”

“Aye! Snapshot,” Claggett said. “One-eight-zero, activation point three thousand, initial search depth two hundred.”

“Ready!”

“Match and shoot!”

“Three fired, sir.” It was a standard tactic. The torpedo fired on the reciprocal heading would at least force the other guy to cut the control wires to his weapon. Ricks was already in sonar.

“Missed the launch transient, sir, and didn’t catch the fish very soon either. Surface noise. . . .”

“Take her deep?” Ricks asked Claggett.

“This surface noise may be our best friend.”

"Okay, Dutch . . . you were right before, I should have dropped the outboard."

"ELF message sir—SNAPCOUNT is canceled, sir."

"Canceled?" Ricks asked incredulously.

"Canceled, yes, sir."

"Well, isn't that good news," Claggett said.

"Now what?" the Tacco asked himself. The message in his hand made no sense at all.

"Sir, we finally got the bastard."

"Run your track."

"Sir, he fired at *Maine*!"

"I know, but I can't engage."

"That's crazy, sir."

"Sure as hell is," the tactical officer agreed.

"Speed?"

"Six knots, sir—maneuvering says the shaft bearings are pretty bad, sir."

"If we try any more . . ." Ricks frowned.

Claggett nodded. ". . . the whole thing comes apart. I think it's about time for some countermeasures."

"Do it."

"Five-inch room, launch a spread." Claggett turned back. "We're not going fast enough to make a turn very useful."

"I figure it's about even money."

"Could be worse. Why the hell do you think they canceled SNAPCOUNT?" the XO asked, staring at the sonar scope.

"X, I guess the danger of war is over . . . . I haven't handled this well, have I?"

"Shit, skipper, who would have known?"

Ricks turned. "Thanks, X."

"The torpedo is now active, ping-and-listen mode, bearing one-six-zero."

"Torpedo, American Mark 48, bearing three-four-five, just went active!"

"Ahead full, maintain course," Dubinin ordered.

"Countermeasures?" the *Starpom* asked.

The Captain shook his head. "No, no—we're at the edge of its acquisition range . . . and that would just give it a reason to turn this way. The surface conditions will help. We're not supposed to have battles in heavy weather," Dubinin pointed out. "It's hard on the instruments."

"Captain, I have the satellite signal—it's an all-forces message, 'Disengage and withdraw from any hostile forces, take action only for self-defense.'"

"I'm going to be court-martialed," Valentin Borissovich Dubinin observed quietly.

"You did nothing wrong, you reacted correctly at every—"

"Thank you. I hope you will testify to that effect."

"Change in signal—change in aspect, torpedo just turned west away from us," Lieutenant Rykov said. "The first programmed turn must have been to the

right."

"Thank God it wasn't to the left. I think we've survived. Now, if only our weapon can miss . . . ."

"Sir, it's continuing to close. The torpedo is probably in acquisition—continuous pinging now."

"Less than two thousand yards," Ricks said.

"Yeah," Claggett agreed.

"Try some more countermeasures—hell, go continuous on them." The tactical situation was getting worse. *Maine* was not moving quickly enough to make an evasive course worthwhile. The countermeasures filled the sea with bubbles, and while they might draw the Russian torpedo into a turn—their only real hope—the sad fact of the matter was that as the fish penetrated the bubbles it would find *Maine* with its sonar again. Perhaps a continuous set of such false targets would saturate the seeker. That was their best shot right now.

"Let's keep her near the surface," Ricks added. Claggett looked at him and nodded in understanding.

"Not working, sir . . . sir, I've lost the fish aft, in the baffles now."

"Surface the ship," Ricks called. "Emergency blow!"

"Surface capture?"

"And now I'm out of ideas, X."

"Come left, parallel to the seas?"

"Okay, you do it."

Claggett went into control. "Up 'scope!" He took a quick look and checked the submarine's course. "Come right to new course zero-five-five!"

USS *Maine* surfaced for the last time into thirty-five-foot seas and nearly total darkness. Her circular hull wallowed in the rolling waves, and she was slow to turn.

The countermeasures were a mistake. Though the Russian torpedo was pinging, it was mainly a wake-follower. Its seeker head tracked bubbles, and the string of countermeasures made for a perfect trail, which suddenly stopped. When *Maine* surfaced, the submarine left the bubble stream. Again the factors involved were technical. The surface turbulence confused the wake-following software and the torpedo began its programmed circular search pattern, just under the surface. On its third circuit it found an unusually hard echo amid the confusing shapes over its head. The torpedo turned to close, now activating its magnetic-influence fusing system. The Russian weapon was less sophisticated than the American Mark 50. It could not go higher than twenty meters of depth and so was not drawn up to the surface. The active magnetic field it generated was cast out like an invisible spiderweb, and when that net was disturbed by the presence of a metallic mass—

The thousand-kilo warhead exploded fifty feet from *Maine*'s already crippled stern. The twenty-thousand-ton warship shook as though rammed.

An alarm sounded instantly: *"Flooding flooding flooding in the engine room!"*

Ricks lifted the phone. "How bad?"

"Get everybody off, sir!"

"Abandon ship! Break out the survival gear! Send out message: damaged and sinking, give our position!"

"Captain Rosselli! Flash traffic coming in."

Ryan looked up. He'd had his drink, followed by something colder and carbonated. Whatever the message was, the naval officer could handle it.

"You Mr. Ryan?" a man in a suit asked. Two more were behind him.

"Dr. Ryan, yeah."

"Secret Service, sir, the President ordered us to come here and arrest you."

Jack laughed at that. "What for?"

The agent looked instantly uncomfortable. "He didn't say, sir."

"I'm not a cop, but my dad was. I don't think you can arrest me without a charge. The law, you know? The Constitution. 'Preserve, protect, and defend.' "

The agent was in an instant quandary. He had orders from someone he had to obey, but he was too professional to violate the law. "Sir, the President said . . ."

"Well, tell you what. I'll just sit right here, and you can talk to the President on that phone and find out. I'm not going anywhere." Jack lit another cigarette and lifted another phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey, babe."

"Jack! What's going on?"

"It's okay. It got a little tense, but we have it under control now, Cath, I'm afraid I'm going to be stuck here for a while, but it's okay, Cathy, honest."

"Sure?"

"You worry about that new baby, not about anything else. That's an order."

"I'm late, Jack. Just a day, but—"

"Good." Ryan leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and smiled blissfully. "You want it to be a girl, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then I guess I do, too. Honey, I'm still busy here, but, honest, you can relax. Have to run. 'Bye." He replaced the phone. "Glad I remembered to do that."

"Sir, the President wants to talk to you." The senior agent handed the phone toward Ryan.

What makes you think I want to talk to him? Jack nearly asked. But that would have been unprofessional. He took the phone. "Ryan here, sir."

"Tell me what you know," Fowler said curtly.

"Mr. President, if you give me about fifteen minutes, I can do a better job. Dan Murray at FBI knows everything I do, and I have to make contact with two officers. Is that okay, sir?"

"Very well."

"Thank you, Mr. President." Ryan handed the phone back and placed a call to the CIA Operations Center. "This is Ryan. Did Clark make the pickup?"

"Sir, this is an unsecure line."

"I don't care—answer the question."

"Yes, sir, they're flying back now. We don't have a comm link to the

aircraft. It's Air Force, sir."

"Who's the best guy to evaluate the explosion?"

"Wait." The Senior Duty Officer passed that along to the Science and Technology man. "He says Dr. Lowell at Lawrence-Livermore."

"Get him moving. The nearest air base is probably Travis. Get him something fast." Ryan hung that line up and turned to the senior Hot Line officer.

"There's a VC-20 just took off from Mexico City inbound for Andrews. I have two officers and two—two other people aboard. I need to establish a comm link to the aircraft. Get someone to set that up, please."

"Can't do it here, sir, but you can in the conference room on the other side."

Ryan stood. "Come with me?" he said to the Secret Service agents.

It could hardly have been more bitter, Qati thought, but a moment later he realized that this wasn't true. He had faced death for a year now, and death by any cause was still death. Had he escaped—but he had not escaped.

"Okay, let's talk."

"I do not understand," Qati said in Arabic.

"I have a little trouble with that accent," Clark replied, feeling very clever. "I learned the language from a Saudi. Please speak slowly."

Qati allowed himself to be shaken momentarily by the use of his native tongue. He decided to reply in English to show his own cleverness. "I will never tell you a thing."

"Sure you will."

Qati knew that he had to resist as long as he could. It would be worth the price.

43

THE REVENGE OF MOEDRED

Dubinin had little choice in the matter. As soon as he was certain that the American torpedo was dead, he ran up his satellite antenna and broadcast his report. The American Orion dropped active sonobuoys all around him but did not attack, confirming his impression that he had committed a crime little different from murder. As soon as the signal was receipted, he turned about and headed for the direction of the explosion. A seaman could do nothing else.

> PRESIDENT FOWLER:
> I REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT A SOVIET SUBMARINE, AFTER BEING ATTACKED, COUNTERAT-TACKED AN AMERICAN SUBMARINE, POSSIBLY DAMAGING IT. IT WOULD APPEAR THAT THIS HAPPENED SHORTLY BEFORE I BROADCAST MY DISENGAGEMENT ORDER. I OFFER NO EXCUSE FOR THIS MISTAKE. THE INCIDENT WILL BE INVESTIGATED, AND IF THE FACTS WARRANT, THE CAPTAIN OF OUR SUBMARINE WILL BE PUNISHED SEVERELY.

"Well?"

"Mr. President, I think we acknowledge, thank the man, and let this one slide, sir," Jack replied.

"I agree. Thank you." The line went dead again.

"That was my boat!" Rosselli snarled.

"Yeah," Ryan said. "Sorry to hear it. I've spent time aboard subs, with Bart Mancuso, as a matter of fact. Know him?"

"He's the squadron commander out at Bangor."

Ryan turned. "Oh? I didn't know. I'm sorry, Captain, but what else can we do?"

"I know," Rosselli said quietly. "With luck maybe they can get the crew off . . . ."

Jackson was nearly out of fuel and ready to turn back. *Theodore Roosevelt* had an Alpha Strike spotted and ready to take off when the new orders came in. The battle group immediately increased speed to open the distance between the American and Russian formations. It didn't seem to Jackson like running away. The Hawkeye called a warning that the Russian ships had turned west—perhaps into the wind to launch aircraft. But though four fighters were aloft, they orbited the battle group, which continued west. Their search radars were up, but their missile radars went down. That, he knew, was a hopeful sign.

And so, Robby told himself, *so ends my second war, if that's what it was*. . . . He brought his Tomcat around, with Sanchez on his wing. Four more F-14s would orbit here, just to keep an eye on things for the next few hours.

Jackson trapped just in time to see a rescue helicopter landing forward. By the time he dismounted the aircraft, three people were in the ship's hospital. He headed down to see who they were and what had been going on. A few minutes later he knew that he wouldn't be painting any more victory flags on his aircraft. Not for something like this.

Berlin settled down much more quickly than anyone imagined. The relief column of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment had gone only thirty kilometers when the halt order arrived, and it pulled off the autobahn to wait. Inside Berlin itself, the American brigade got the word first, and pulled back into the western portion of the kazerne. Russians probed forward with dismounted infantry to see what was happening, but without orders to renew the attack, they remained tensely in place. Soon the area was flooded with police cars, much to the bemusement of the soldiers. Twenty minutes after the Americans began moving, communications were reestablished with Moscow, and the Russians pulled farther back into their defensive positions. A number of unexplained bodies were found, including the regimental commander and his executive officer, plus three tank crews, all of whom had been killed with small-arms fire. But the most important discovery was made by a Berlin policeman, who was first to examine the truck and staff car ripped apart by 25mm cannon slugs from a Bradley. The "Russians" were all dead, but none had identity disks. The policeman immediately called for assistance, which was dispatched at once. Two of the faces looked familiar to the cop, though he couldn't remember why.

"Jack."

"Hi, Arnie, grab a seat."

"What happened, Jack?"

Ryan shook his head. His mental state was one of giddiness. His reason told him that sixty thousand people had died, but despite that, the relief at having stopped something a hundred times worse had left him in a slightly drunken condition. "Not really sure yet, Arnie. You know the important part."

"The President sounds like hell."

A grunt. "You ought to have heard him a couple hours ago. He lost it, Arnie."

"That bad?"

Jack nodded. "That bad." A pause. "Maybe anybody would have, maybe you just can't expect a guy to deal with this, but—but that's his job, man."

"You know, he once told me that he was most grateful for Reagan and the others because of the changes, the fact that something like this wasn't really possible anymore."

"Listen, man, as long as those goddamned things exist, it's possible."

"You advocating disarmament?" van Damm asked.

Ryan looked up again. The giddiness was gone now. "I got the stars out of my eyes a long time ago. What I'm saying is, if it's possible, you damned well think about it. He didn't. He didn't even look at the war games we ran. He was just so sure it would never happen. Well, it did, didn't it?"

"How did Liz do?"

"Don't ask. The Boss needed good advice, and he didn't get any from her."

"And you?"

"He didn't listen to me, and that's partly my fault, I guess."

"Hey, it's over."

Jack nodded again. "Yeah."

"Ryan, call for you."

Jack took the phone. "Ryan here. Yeah, okay. Go slower." He listened for several minutes, making notes. "Thanks, John."

"What was that?"

"A confession. Is the helicopter ready?"

"At the pad. On the other side," one of the Secret Service men said.

The helicopter was a VH-60. Ryan climbed aboard and strapped in, along with van Damm and three agents. The chopper lifted off at once. The sky was clearing. The wind was still lively, but there were stars to be seen in the west.

"Where's the Vice President?" van Damm asked.

"Kneecap," an agent replied. "He stays up six more hours till we're sure this is over."

Jack didn't even hear. He had his ear-protectors in, and took the chance to lean back and stare into space. The helicopter even had a bar, he saw. What a nice way to travel.

"They wanted to start a nuclear war?" Chavez asked.

"That's what they said." Clark washed his hands. It wasn't that bad. He'd broken only four of Qati's fingers. It was the way you worked the broken bones that really mattered. Ghosn—they now knew his name—had taken a little more, but both stories were almost identical.

"I heard it, too, man, but—"

"Yeah. Ambitious fuckers, weren't they?" Clark put some ice cubes into a bag and walked back to rest it on Qati's hand. He had his information now, and he was not a sadist. The sensible thing, he thought, was to toss their asses out of the airplane here and now, but that wasn't his job either. Both terrorists were manacled to their seats. Clark took a chair in the back so that he could keep an eye on both. Their luggage was there also. He decided to rummage through it now that he had the time.

"Hello, Ryan," the President said from his chair. "Hi, Arnie."

"Bad day, Bob," van Damm offered.

"Very." The man had aged. It seemed a cliché, but it was true. His skin was sallow, the eyes sitting at the bottom of dark-rimmed wells. Though he was normally a carefully groomed man, Fowler's hair was askew. "Ryan, you have them?"

"Yes, sir, two of our field officers grabbed them in Mexico City. Their names are Ismael Qati and Ibrahim Ghosn. You know who Qati is. We've been after that guy for a long time. He had a piece of the Beirut bombing, two aircraft incidents, lots of other things, mainly to do with Israel. Ghosn is one of his people, evidently an engineer by profession. They were somehow able to fabricate the weapon."

"Whose sponsorship?" the President asked.

"We—our man, that is—had to sweat that out of them. Sir, that's a technical violation—"

Fowler's eyes flared into life. "I forgive them! Get on with it."

"Sir, they say the, uh, operation was bankrolled and supported by the Ayatolla Mahmoud Haji Daryaei."

"Iran." Not a question, a statement. Fowler's eyes became more animated.

"Correct. As you know, Iran isn't exactly pleased with how our actions in the Gulf worked out, and—sir, according to our people, this is what they said:

"It was a two-part plan. Part one was the bomb in Denver. Part two was an incident in Berlin. They had another guy working with them, Günther Bock, former Red Army Faction guy, his wife was arrested by the Germans last year and she later hanged herself. The objective, Mr. President, was to drive us and the Russians into a nuclear exchange—or at the least to so screw up our relations that the situation in the Gulf would revert to chaos. That would serve Iranian interests—or so Daryaei supposedly thinks."

"How did they get the weapon?"

"They say it's Israeli—was Israeli," Ryan corrected himself. "Evidently it got lost in 1973. We have to check that with the Israelis, but it makes sense. The plutonium came from Savannah River, and it's probably part of the big MUF they had some years back. We've long suspected that the first generation of Israeli nukes was fabricated from material obtained over here."

Fowler stood. "You're telling me that this fucking *mullah* did this—and killing a hundred thousand Americans wasn't *enough? He wanted to start a nuclear war, too!*"

"That is the information, sir."

"Where is he?"

"As a matter of fact, Mr. President, we know quite a lot about him. He has supported several terrorist groups, as you know. He was the loudest Islamic voice against the Vatican Treaty, but he lost a lot of prestige when it started working, and that did not improve his disposition very much. Daryaei lives in Qum in Iran. His political faction is losing some of its power, and there's already been an attempt on his life."

"Is their story plausible?"

"Yes, Mr. President, it is."

"You think Daryaei capable of such a thing?"

"On the record, sir, I would have to say that he is. Yes."

"He lives in Qum?"

"Correct. It's a city with a religious history, very important to the Shi'a branch of Islam. I don't know the exact population, certainly more than a hundred thousand."

"Where in Qum does he live?"

"That's the problem. He moves around a lot. He was nearly killed last year, and he learned from that. Never sleeps in the same place twice, so we hear. He stays in the same part of the city, but I can't give you a location better than plus or minus a mile or so."

"He did this?"

"So it would seem, Mr. President. That's our best data."

"But you can't localize him better than a mile."

"Yes, sir."

Fowler contemplated that for a few seconds before speaking, but when he did, Ryan's blood turned to ice.

"That's close enough."

> PRESIDENT NARMONOV:
> WE HAVE APPREHENDED THE TERRORISTS AND DETERMINED THE EXTENT OF THE OPERATION. . . .

"Is this possible?"

"Yes, I would say so," Golovko replied. "Daryaei is a fanatic. He loathes the Americans."

"Those *barbarians* tried to bait us into—"

"Let them handle it," Golovko advised. "It is they who suffered the worst losses."

"You know what he will wish to do?"

"Yes, Comrade President, as do you."

> PRESIDENT FOWLER:
> PENDING EXAMINATION OF THE EVIDENCE I WILL ACCEPT YOUR LAST COMMUNICATION AS FACT. WE WASH OUR HANDS OF THIS. WHATEVER ACTION YOU FEEL IS NECESSARY, WE WILL NOT OBJECT NOW OR IN THE FUTURE. THESE MADMEN WERE WILLING TO DESTROY US BOTH. To HELL WITH THEM.

"Christ, Andruska," Ryan murmured. *That's a clear statement!* The President read the message off the screen without a word.

Ryan had been under the impression that Narmonov had kept control of his emotions, but now the reverse seemed to be true. Fowler sat rock-steady in his chair, surveying the room with calm eyes.

"The world will learn a lesson from this," Fowler said. "I'll make sure that nobody ever does this again."

Another phone line went off. "Mr. President, FBI, sir."

"Yes?"

"Mr. President, this is Murray, we've just had a flash from the *Bundeskriminalamt*—that's the German Federal Criminal Police—that they've found the body of one Günther Bock in eastern Berlin, dressed in the uniform of a Russian army colonel. There were nine others similarly dressed, one of whom is believed to be a former colonel in the Stasi. The data we got from Qati and the other one is confirmed on that side, sir."

"Murray, I want an opinion. Are you confident in the confessions?"

"Sir, generally speaking, when we bag these guys they sing like canaries. It's not the Mafia, there's no law of *omertà."*

"Thank you, Mr. Murray." Fowler looked up at Ryan. "Well?"

"Sounds like we got good stuff from them."

"So we agree for once." Fowler punched his SAC button. "General Fremont?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"How quickly can you re-target a missile. I want to attack a city in Iran."

"What?"

"I'll let Deputy Director Ryan explain."

"Those sons of bitches." Fremont spoke for everyone in the room.

"Yes, General, and I intend to get the man who did this, and get him in a way that will send a message that nobody will ever forget. The leader of Iran has committed an act of war against the United States of America. I intend to reply exactly in proportion to his act. I want a missile targeted on Qum. How long will that take?"

"Ten minutes at least, sir, let me, uh, check with my operations people." CINC-SAC flipped off his microphone switch. "Christ."

"Pete," the Deputy Chief of Staff (Operations) said, "the man is right. That fucker almost killed us all—us and the Russians! For *profit,* for political *profit!*"

"I don't like it."

"You have to re-target the bird. I suggest a Minuteman-III out of Minot. The three RVs'll flatten the place. I'll need ten minutes."

Fremont nodded.

"Mr. President, you can wait."

"No, I'm not going to wait. Ryan, you know what they did, you know why they did it. It was an act of war—"

"An act of terrorism, sir."

"State-sponsored terrorism is war—your own position paper from six years ago said that!"

Jack had not known that Fowler'd read it, and being hoist on his own petard came as a surprise. "Well, yes, sir, I did say that, but—"

"That *holy man* tried to kill—*did* kill thousands of Americans, and tried to trick us and the Russians into killing two *hundred million* more! He almost succeeded."

"Yes, sir, that is also true, but—" Fowler cut him off with a raised hand and continued to speak in the placid voice of a man whose decision had been made.

"It was an act of war. I will reply in kind. That's decided. I'm the President. I'm the Commander-in-Chief. I am the one who evaluates and acts upon the safety and security of the United States. I decide what the military of this country does. This man slaughtered thousands of our citizens, and used a nuclear weapon to do it. I have decided that I will reply in kind. Under the Constitution, that is my right, and my duty."

"Mr. President," van Damm spoke. "The American people-"

Fowler's anger appeared, but only briefly. *"The American people will* demand *that I act!* But that's not the only reason. I must act. I must reply to this—just to make sure it never happens again!"

"Please think it through, sir."

"Arnold, I have."

Ryan looked over at Pete Connors and Helen D'Agustino. Both concealed their feelings with marvelous skill. The rest of the room approved of Fowler's purpose, and Jack already knew that he was not the one to reason with the man. He looked at the clock and wondered what would come next.

"Mr. President, this is General Fremont."

"I'm here, General."

"Sir, we have re-targeted a Minuteman-III missile in North Dakota for the target specified. I—sir, have you thought this through?"

"General, I am your Commander-in-Chief. Is the missile readied for launch?"

"Sir, the launch sequence will take about a minute from the time you give the order."

"The order is given."

"Sir, it's not that simple. I need an ID check. You've been briefed on the procedure, sir."

Fowler reached for his wallet and removed a plastic card, much like a credit card. On it were ten different eight-number groups. Only Fowler knew which one he was supposed to read.

"Three-Three-Six-Zero-Four-Two-Zero-Nine."

"Sir, I confirm your identification code. Next, Mr. President, the order must be confirmed."

"What?"

"Sir, the two-man rule applies. In the event of an overt attack, I can be the second man, but since that is not the case, someone on my list must confirm the order."

"I have my Chief of Staff right here."

"Sir, negative on that, the rule is that to be on the list you must be an elected official or one approved by Congress—the Senate, that is—like a cabinet secretary."

"I'm on the list," Jack said.

"Is that Dr. Ryan, DDCI?"

"Correct, General."

"Deputy Director Ryan, this is CINC-SAC," Fremont said in a voice that oddly mimicked the robotic one used to issue SAC orders. "Sir, I have received a nuclear-launch order. I need you to confirm that order, but first I also need to verify your identity, sir. Could you please read your identification code?"

Jack reached for his own ID card and read off his code group. Ryan could hear Fremont or one of his people flipping through the pages of a book.

"Sir, I confirm your identification as Dr. John Patrick Ryan, Deputy Director of Central Intelligence."

Jack looked at Fowler. If he didn't do it, the President would just get someone else. It really was that simple, wasn't it? And was Fowler wrong—was he really wrong?

"It's my responsibility, Jack," Fowler said, standing at Ryan's side, resting his hand on Jack's shoulder. "You're just confirming it."

"Dr. Ryan, CINC-SAC here, I repeat, sir, I have a nuclear-launch order from the President, and I require confirmation, sir."

Ryan looked at his President, then leaned down to the microphone. He struggled for the breath to speak. "CINC-SAC, this is John Patrick Ryan. I am DDCI." Jack paused, then went on quickly:

"Sir, I do *not* confirm this order. I repeat, General, this is *not* a valid launch order. Acknowledge at once!"

"Sir, I copy negative approval of the order."

"That is correct," Jack said, his voice growing stronger. "General, it is my duty to inform you that in my opinion the President is not, I repeat *not* in command of his faculties. I urge you to consider that if another launch order is attempted." Jack rested his hands on the desk, took a deep breath, and

snapped back erect.

Fowler was slow to react, but when he did, he pressed his face against Jack's. "Ryan, I order you—"

Jack's emotions exploded one last time: "To do what? To kill a hundred thousand people—and why?"

"What they tried to do—"

"What you damned near *let* them do!" Ryan jabbed a finger into the President's chest. "You're the one who fucked up! You're the one who took us to the edge—and now the real reason you're willing to slaughter a whole city is because you're mad, because your pride is hurt, and you want to get even. You want to show them that nobody can push *you* around! *That's the reason, isn't it? ISN'T IT?"* Fowler went white. Ryan lowered his voice. "You need a better reason than that to kill people. I know. I've had to do that. I *have* killed people. You want this man killed, we can do it, but I'm not going to help you kill a hundred thousand others just to take out the one man you want."

Ryan stepped back. He dropped his ID card on the desk and walked from the room.

"Jesus!" Chuck Timmons observed. They'd heard the entire exchange over the hot mike. Everyone in SAC headquarters had.

"Yeah," Fremont said. "Thank Him. But first deactivate that missile!" The Commander-in-Chief Strategic Air Command had to think for a moment. He couldn't remember if Congress was in session or not, but that was beside the point. He ordered his communications officer to place a call to the chairmen and ranking minority members of the Senate and House armed-services committees. When all four were on line, they'd stage a conference call with the Vice President, who was still aboard Kneecap.

"Jack?" Ryan turned.

"Yeah, Arnie?"

"Why?"

"That's why they have a two-man rule. There are a hundred thousand people in that city—probably more, I can't recall how big it is." Jack looked into the cold clear sky. "Not on my conscience. If we need Daryaei dead, there are other ways." Ryan blew smoke into the wind. "And that fucker'll be just as dead."

"I think you were right. I want you to know that."

Jack turned. "Thank you, sir." A long pause. "Where's Liz, by the way?"

"Back in the cabin, under sedation. She didn't cut the mustard, did she?"

"Arnie, today nobody did. Mainly we were lucky. You can tell the President that I'm resigning effective—oh, Friday, I guess. Good a day as any. Someone else'll have to decide on the replacement."

The President's Chief of Staff was quiet for a moment, then brought things back to the main issue. "You know what you've just started here, don't you?"

"Constitutional crisis, Arnie?" Jack flipped the butt into the snow. "Not my first, Arnie, not my first. I need to ride that chopper back to Andrews."

"I'll take care of it."

They'd just crossed into U.S. territory when a thought struck John Clark. Qati's bags had those medications. One was Prednisone, and another was Compazine. Prednisone was a steroid . . . often used to mitigate the adverse effects of—he got up from his seat and looked at Qati. Though still blindfolded, the man was different from the most recent photos he'd seen of the man, thinner, his hair was—the man had cancer, Clark thought. What did that mean? He got on the radio and called that information ahead.

The Gulfstream was a few minutes late getting in. Ryan was awakened on the couch in the VIP lounge on the south side of the Andrews complex. Murray was next to him, still awake. Three FBI vehicles were there. Clark, Chavez, Qati, and Ghosn were loaded into them, and the convoy of four-wheel-drives headed into D.C.

"What are we going to do with them?" Murray asked.

"I have an idea, but we need to do something first."

"What, exactly?"

"You have an interrogation room at the Hoover Building?"

"No, Buzzard's Point, the Washington Field Office," Murray said. "Did your guy Mirandize them?"

"Yeah, I told him he had to do that, right before he started cutting their balls off." Ryan turned as he heard a loud noise. Kneecap was landing on the same Runway Zero-One it had left ten or so hours before. They must have shut down the strategic systems quicker than expected, Jack thought.

The *Admiral Lunin* surfaced amid the flares and smoke floats dropped by the P-3. It was much too far for a rescue aircraft to come out, at least in this weather. The seas hadn't moderated, and the light was bad, but Dubinin's was the only ship in the area, and he did the best he could to start rescue operations.

The interrogation room was ten by ten, with a cheap table and five equally cheap chairs. There was no two-way mirror. That trick had been around far too long. Instead, two fiber-optic cables ran out of the room and into cameras, one from a light switch, and the other from what looked like a nail hole in the doorframe.

Both terrorists were set in place, looking somewhat the worse for wear. The broken fingers both sported offended the professional ethic of the FBI, but Murray decided to pass on that. Clark and Chavez went off for coffee.

"As you see," Ryan told them, "you failed. Washington is still here."

"And Denver?" Ghosn asked. "I know about Denver."

"Yes, you did manage to do something there, but the guilty parties have already paid."

"What do you mean?" Qati asked.

"I mean that Qum isn't there anymore. Your friend Daryaei is now explaining his misdeeds to Allah."

They were just too tired, Ryan thought. Fatigue was the worst enemy of men, even worse than the dull pain in his hand. Qati didn't show horror at all. His next error was worse.

“You have made an enemy of all Islam. All that you have done to make peace in the region will be *as nothing!* because of this.”

“Was that your objective?” Ryan asked in considerable surprise, drawing on the two hours of sleep he’d had. “Was *that* what you wanted to do? Oh, my God!”

“Your god?” Qati spat.

“What of Marvin Russell?” Murray asked.

“We killed him. He was merely an infidel,” Qati said.

Murray looked at Ghosn. “This is true? Wasn’t he a guest in your camp?”

“He was with us for some months, yes. The fool’s help was indispensable.”

“And you murdered him.”

“Yes, along with two hundred thousand others.”

“Tell me,” Jack said, “isn’t there a line in the Koran that goes something like, ‘If a man shall enter your tent and eat your salt, even though he be an infidel, you will protect him’?”

“You quote poorly—and what do you care of the Koran?”

“You might be surprised.”

44

THE BREEZE OF EVENING

Ryan's next call was to Arnie van Damm. He explained what he had learned.

"My God! They were willing to—"

"Yeah, and it almost worked," Ryan said huskily. "Clever, weren't they?"

"I'll tell him."

"I have to report this, Arnie. I have to tell the Vice President ."

"I understand."

"One more thing."

"What's that?"

The request he made was approved largely because no one had a better idea. After the two terrorists had had their hands treated, they were bedded down separately in FBI holding cells.

"What do you think, Dan?"

"It's—Christ, Jack, where are the words for something like this?"

"The man's got cancer," Clark said. "He figures that if he has to die—why not a bunch of others? Dedicated son of a bitch, isn't he?"

"What are you going to do?" Murray asked.

"We don't have a federal death-penalty statute, do we?"

"No, neither does Colorado, as a matter of fact." Murray took a moment to understand where Ryan was heading. "Oh."

Golovko had considerable trouble tracking Ryan down with his phone call. The report on his desk from Dr. Moiseyev, sitting there amid all the other things, had dumbfounded him, but on learning Jack's plans, it was easy to set the rendezvous.

Perhaps the only good news of the week was the rescue. The *Admiral Lunin* pulled into Kodiak harbor at dawn. Alongside the pier, she off-loaded her guests. Of the *Maine*'s crew of one hundred fifty-seven, perhaps a hundred had gotten off before the submarine was claimed by the sea. Dubinin and his crew had rescued eighty-one of them, and recovered eleven bodies, one of which was Captain Harry Ricks. Professionals regarded it as an incredible feat of seamanship, though the news media failed to cover the story until the Soviet submarine had put back to sea. Among the first to call home was Ensign Ken Shaw.

Joining them on the trip out of Andrews was Dr. Woodrow Lowell of the Lawrence-Livermore Laboratory, a bearded, bearish man, known to his friends

as Red because of his hair. He'd spent six hours in Denver reviewing the damage patterns.

"I have a question," Jack said to him. "How was it the yield estimates were so far off? That almost made us think the Russians did it."

"It was a parking lot," Lowell replied. "It was made of macadam, a mixture of gravel and asphalt. The energy from the bomb liberated various complex hydrocarbons from the upper layer of the pavement and ignited it—like a great big fuel-air explosive bomb. The water vapor there—from the snow that flashed away—caused another reaction that released more energy. What resulted was a flame-front double the diameter of the nuclear fireball. Add to that the fact that snow cover reflected a lot of the energy, and you got a huge augmentation of the apparent energy released. It would have fooled anybody. Then afterwards, the pavement had another effect. It radiated residual heat very rapidly. The short version is, the energy signature was much larger than the actual yield justified. Now, you want the real bad news?" Lowell asked.

"Okay."

"The bomb was a fizzle."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it should have been much larger, and we don't know why. The bomb residue was lousy with tritium. The design yield was at least ten times what it actually delivered."

"You mean?"

"Yeah, if this thing had worked . . ."

"We *were* lucky, weren't we?"

"If you want to call that luck, yeah."

Somehow Jack slept for most of the flight.

The aircraft landed the next morning at Beersheba. Israeli military personnel met the aircraft and convoyed everyone to Jerusalem. The press had found out some of what was happening, but not enough to be a bother, not on a secure Israeli Air Force base. That would come later. Prince Ali bin Sheik was waiting outside the VIP building.

"Your Highness." Jack nodded to him. "Thank you for coming."

"How could I not?" Ali handed over a newspaper.

Jack scanned the headline. "I didn't think that would stay secret very long."

"It's true, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you stopped it?"

"Stopped it?" Ryan shrugged. "I just wouldn't—it was a lie, Ali. I was lucky I guessed—no, that's not true. I didn't know that until later. It's just that I couldn't put my name to it, that's all. Your Highness, that's not important now. There are some things I have to do. Sir, will you help us?"

"With anything, my friend."

"Ivan Emmettovich!" Golovko called. And to Ali, "Your Royal Highness."

"Sergey Nikolay'ch. Avi." The Russian walked up with Avi Ben Jakob at his side.

"Jack," John Clark said. "You guys want to get to a better spot? One mortar round sure would waste a lot of top spooks, y'know?"

"Come with me," Avi said, then led them inside. Golovko briefed them on

what he had.

"The man is still alive?" Ben Jakob asked.

"Suffering all the pains of hell, but yes, for another few days."

"I cannot go to Damascus," Avi said.

"You never told us you lost a nuke," Ryan said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. The press doesn't have that yet, but they will in another day or two. Avi, you never told us there was something lost out there! Do you know what that might have meant to us?" Ryan asked.

"We assumed that it had broken up. We tried to search for it, but—"

"Geology," Dr. Lowell said. "The Golan Heights are volcanic, lots of basaltic rock, makes for a high background count, and that means it's hard to track in on a hot spot—but you still should have told us. We have some tricks at Livermore we might have used, stuff not too many people know about."

"I am sorry, but it is done," General Ben Jakob said. "You fly to Damascus, then?"

They used Prince Ali's plane for that, a personal Boeing 727 whose flight crew, Jack learned, was exclusively composed of former drivers from the President's Wing. It was nice to travel first class. The mission was covert, and the Syrians cooperated. Representatives from the U.S., Soviet, and Saudi embassies attended a brief meeting at the Syrian Foreign Ministry, and then they went off to the hospital.

He'd been a powerful man, Jack could see, but he was wasting away like dead, rotting meat. Despite the oxygen line under his nose, his skin was almost blue. All his visitors had to wear protective gear, and Ryan was careful to keep back. Ali handled the interrogation.

"You know why I am here?"

The man nodded.

"As you hope to see Allah, you will tell me what you know."

The armored column of the 10th Armored Cavalry Regiment ran from the Negev to the border of Lebanon. Overhead was a full squadron of F-16s, and another of Tomcats from the USS *Theodore Roosevelt.* The Syrian Army was also deployed in force, though its air force was staying out of the way. The Middle East had taken its lesson on American air power. The display of force was massive and unequivocal. The word was out: nobody would get in the way. The vehicles drove deep into the small, abused country, finally onto a valley road. The spot had been marked on the map by a dying man anxious to save what remained of his soul, and only an hour's work was needed to determine the exact location. Army engineers found the entrance and checked for booby-traps, then waved the others in.

"God Almighty," Dr. Lowell said, swinging a powerful light around the darkened room. More engineers swept the room, checking for wires on the machines, and carefully checking every drawer of every table and desk before the rest were allowed farther than the door. Then Lowell went to work. There was a set of plans that he took outside to read in the light.

"You know," he said after fifteen minutes of total silence, "I never really

appreciated how easy this was. We've had this illusion that you really needed to—" He stopped. "Illusion, that's the right word."

"What are you telling me?"

"It was supposed to be a five-hundred-kiloton device."

"If it had gone off right, we would have known it had to be the Russians," Jack said. "No one could have stopped it. We wouldn't be here now."

"Yeah, I think we have to adjust our threat estimate some."

"Doc, we think we found something," an Army officer said. Dr. Lowell went inside, then returned to don protective clothing.

"So large as that?" Golovko asked, staring at the plans.

"Clever people. Do you know how hard it was for me to persuade the President that—excuse me. I didn't, did I? If this had been a big one, I would have believed the report."

"And what report is that?" Golovko asked.

"Can we conduct a little business?"

"If you wish."

"You're holding someone we want," Jack said.

"Lyalin?"

"Yes."

"He betrayed his country. He will suffer for it."

"Sergey, first, he gave us nothing that we could use against you. That was his deal. We only got the take from THISTLE, his Japanese network. Second, except for him and what he gave us, we might not be here now. Turn him loose."

"In return for what?"

"We have an agent who told us that Narmonov was being blackmailed by your military, and that your military was using some missing tactical nuclear weapons to make it stick. That's why we suspected that the weapon might have been yours."

"But that's a lie!"

"He was very convincing," Ryan replied. "I almost believed it myself. The President and Dr. Elliot did believe it, and that's why things got so bad on us. I'll gladly hang this bastard out to dry, but it's betraying a confidence . . . remember our conversation in my office, Sergey? If you want that name, you have to pay."

"That man we will shoot," Golovko promised.

"No, you can't."

"What do you mean?"

"We've cut him off, and all I said was that he lied to us. If he gave us stuff that wasn't true, even in your country it does not constitute espionage, does it? Better not to kill him. You'll understand, if we can make this deal."

The First Deputy Chairman considered that for a moment. "You can have Lyalin—three days. You have my word, Jack."

"Our man has the codename of SPINNAKER. Oleg Kirilovich—"

"Kadishev? *Kadishev!"*

"You think you're disappointed? You ought to see it from my side."

"This is the truth—no games now, Ryan?"

"On that, sir, you have my word of honor. I wouldn't mind seeing him shot,

but he's a politician, and in this case he really didn't commit espionage, did he? Do something creative with him. Make him dogcatcher somewhere," Jack suggested.

Golovko nodded. "It will be done."

"A pleasure doing business with you, Sergey. A shame about Lyalin."

"What do you mean?" Golovko asked.

"The stuff he was giving us—both of us—it's really too valuable to lose. . . ."

"We do not do business to that degree, Ryan, but I admire your sense of humor."

Dr. Lowell emerged from the structure just then, carrying a lead bucket.

"What's in there?"

"I think it's some plutonium. Want to take a closer look? You could end up like our friend in Damascus." Lowell handed the bucket to a soldier, and to the engineer commander he said, "Move everything out, box it, ship it. I want to examine everything. Make sure you move everything out."

"Yes, sir," the Colonel said. "And the sample?"

* * *

Four hours later they were in Dimona, the Israeli nuclear "research" facility, where there was another gamma-ray spectrometer. While technicians ran the test, Lowell went over the plans again, shaking his head. To Ryan the drawings looked like the diagram of a computer chip or something similarly incomprehensible.

"It's big, clunky. Ours are less than a quarter this size . . . but you know how long it took us to build something of this size and yield?" Lowell looked up. "Ten years. They did it in a cave in five months. How's that for progress, Dr. Ryan?"

"I didn't know. We always figured a terrorist's device—but what went wrong?"

"Probably something with the tritium. We had two fizzles back in the fifties, helium contamination. Not too many people know about that. That's my best guess. The design needs some further looking at—we'll computer-model it—but on gross examination, it looks like a fairly competent—oh, thank you." Lowell took the spectrometry printout from the Israeli technician. He shook his head and spoke very softly:

"Savannah River, K Reactor, 1968—it was a very good year."

"This is the one? You're sure?"

"Yeah, this is the one. The Israelis told me the type of weapon they lost, the mass of plutonium—except for the scraps, it's all here." Lowell tapped the design sheets. "That's it, that's all of it," he said.

"Until the next time," Lowell added.

Always a student of the law and its administration, Deputy Assistant Director Daniel E. Murray observed the proceedings with interest. Rather odd that they used priests instead of lawyers, of course, but damn if it didn't work. The trial took just a day. It was scrupulously fair and admirably swift. The

sentence didn't bother Murray, either.

They flew to Riyadh aboard Prince Ali's aircraft, leaving the USAF transport at Beersheba. There would be no indecent haste in the administration of sentence. There had to be time for prayer and reconciliation, and no one wanted to treat this any differently from a more pedestrian case. It also gave time for people to sit and reflect, and in Ryan's case to meet with another surprise. Prince Ali brought him in to Ryan's accommodations.

"I am Mahmoud Haji Daryaei," the man said unnecessarily. Jack knew his face well enough from the CIA file. He also knew that the last time Daryaei had spoken with an American, the ruler of Iran had been Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

"What can I do for you?" Ryan asked. Ali handled the translation for both of them.

"Is it true? What I have been told, I wish to know that it is true."

"Yes, sir, it is true."

"Why should I believe you?" The man was approaching seventy years of age, with a deeply lined face and black, angry eyes.

"Then why did you ask the question?"

"Insolence does not please me."

"Attacks against American citizens do not please me," Ryan answered.

"I had nothing to do with this, you know that."

"I do now, yes. Will you answer a question? If they had asked for your help, would you have given it?"

"No," Daryaei said.

"Why should I believe that?"

"To slaughter so many people, even unbelievers, is a crime before God."

"Besides," Ryan added, "you know how we would react to such a thing."

"You accuse me of the ability to do such a thing?"

"You accuse us of such things regularly. But in this case you were mistaken."

"You hate me."

"I have no love for you," Jack admitted readily. "You are the enemy of my country. You have supported those who kill my fellow citizens. You have taken pleasure in the deaths of people whom you have never met."

"And yet you refused to allow your President to kill me."

"That is incorrect. I refused to allow my President to destroy the city."

"Why?"

"If you truly think yourself a man of God, how can you ask such a question?"

"You are an unbeliever!"

"Wrong. I believe, just as you do, but in a different way. Are we so different? Prince Ali doesn't think so. Does peace between us frighten you so much as that? Or do you fear gratitude more than hate? In any case, you asked why, and I will answer. I was asked to assist in the deaths of innocent people. I could not live with that on my conscience. It was as simple as that. Even the deaths of those I should perhaps consider unbelievers. Is that so hard for you to understand?"

Prince Ali said something that he didn't bother to translate, perhaps a quote from the Koran. It sounded stylized and poetic. Whatever it was, Daryaei nodded and spoke one last time to Ryan.

"I will consider this. Goodbye."

Durling settled into the chair for the first time. Arnold van Damm sat across the room.

"You handled matters well."

"Was there anything else we could have done?"

"I suppose not. It's today, then?"

"Right."

"Ryan's handling it?" Durling asked, looking through the summary sheets.

"Yes, it seemed the best thing to do."

"I want to see him when he gets back."

"Didn't you know? He resigned. As of today, he's out," van Damm said.

"The hell you say!"

"He's out," Arnie reiterated.

Durling shook his finger at the man. "Before you leave, you tell him that I want him in my office."

"Yes, Mr. President."

The executions were at noon on Saturday, six days after the bomb exploded. The people gathered, Ghosn and Qati were led out into the market square. They were given time to pray. It was a first for Jack, being a spectator at something like this. Murray just stood, his face set. Clark and Chavez, along with a gaggle of security personnel, were mainly watching the crowd.

"It just seems so inconsequential," Ryan said as the event got under way.

"It is not! The world will learn from this," Prince Ali said solemnly. "Many will learn. This is justice happening. That is the lesson."

"Some lesson." Ryan turned to look at his companions atop the building. He'd had time to reflect, and all he saw was—what? Ryan didn't know. He'd done his job, but what had it all meant? "The deaths of sixty thousand people who never should have died put an end to wars that need never have been? Is that how history is made, Ali?"

"All men die, Jack. *Insh-Allah,* never again in numbers so great. You stopped it, you prevented something worse. What you did, my friend . . . the blessings of God go with you."

"I would have confirmed the launch order," Avi said, his voice uncomfortable in its frankness. "And then? I would have blown my brains out, perhaps? Who can say? Of this I am certain: I would not have had the courage to say no."

"Nor I," Golovko said.

Ryan said nothing as he looked back down at the square. He'd missed the first one, but that was all right.

Even though Qati knew it was coming, it didn't matter. As with so many things in life, it was all controlled by reflex. A soldier prodded his side with a sword, barely enough to break the skin. Instantly, Qati's back arched, his neck extended itself in an involuntary flinch. The Captain of the Saudi Special

Forces already had his sword moving. He must have practiced, Jack realized a moment later, because the head was removed with a single stroke as deceptively powerful as a ballet master's. Qati's head landed a meter or so away, and then the body flopped down, blood spraying from the severed vessels. He could see the arms and legs tightening against the restraints, but that, too, was mere reflex. The blood pumped out in a steady rhythm as Qati's heart continued to work, striving to preserve a life already departed. Finally that, too, stopped, and all that was left of Qati were separated parts and a dark stain on the ground. The Saudi Captain wiped the sword clean on what looked like a bolt of silk, replaced it in the golden scabbard, and walked into a path the crowd made for him.

The crowd did not exult. In fact, there was no noise at all. Perhaps a collective intake of breath, a few murmured prayers from the more devout among those present; for whose souls the prayers were offered only they and their God could say. At once those in the front row began to depart. A few from inside the crowd who'd been denied a view came to the fence line, but they stayed there for only a moment before going about their business. After the prescribed interval, the body parts would be collected and given a proper burial in accordance with the religion that each of them had defiled.

Jack didn't know what emotion he was supposed to feel. He'd seen enough death. He knew that much. But these deaths did not touch his heart at all, and now he wondered and worried a little about that.

"You asked me how history is made, Jack," Ali said. "You have just seen it."

"What do you mean?"

"You do not need us to tell you," Golovko said.

The men who started a war, or tried to, executed like criminals in the market square, Jack thought. *Not a bad precedent.*

"Maybe you're right, maybe it will make people think twice before the next time." *That's an idea whose time has come.*

"In all our countries," Ali said, "the sword is the symbol of justice . . . an anachronism, perhaps, from a time when men acted as men. But a sword still has a use."

"Certainly it is precise," Golovko observed.

"So, Jack, you have fully left government service?" Ali asked after a moment. Ryan turned away from the scene, just as everyone else had done.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"And those foolish 'ethics' laws no longer apply. Good." Ali turned. The Special Forces officer appeared as though by magic. The salute he gave Prince Ali was the sort to impress Kipling. The sword came next. The scabbard was wrought gold encrusted with jewels. The hilt was gold and ivory, and you could see where parts of it had been worn down by generations of strong hands. Manifestly the weapon of a king.

"This is three hundred years old," Ali said, turning to Ryan. "It has been carried in peace and war by my ancestors. It even has a name—*Breeze of Evening* is the best I can do in English. It means more than that, of course. We wish you to have it, Dr. Ryan, as a reminder of those who died—and those who did not, because of you. It has killed many times. His Majesty believes that the sword has killed enough."

Ryan took the scimitar from the Prince's hand. The gold scabbard was nicked and abraded by generations of sandstorms and battles, but Ryan saw that his reflection was not so terribly distorted as he might have feared. The blade, he saw, on drawing it partway, was mirror-bright, still rippled from the Damascus smith who'd shaped the steel into its fearful and effective purpose. Such a dichotomy, Ryan thought, smiling without knowing it, that something so beautiful could have so terrible a purpose. Such irony. And yet—

He'd keep the sword, hang it in a place of honor, look at it from time to time to remind himself of what it and he had done. And just maybe—

"Killed enough?" Ryan slid the sword back into its sheath and let it fall to his side. "Yes, Your Highness. I think we all have."

Afterword

Now that the tale is told, a few things need to be made clear. All of the material in this novel relating to weapons technology and fabrication is readily available in any one of dozens of books. For reasons which I hope will be obvious to the reader, certain technical details have been altered, sacrificing plausibility in the interests of obscurity. This was done to salve my conscience, *not* in any reasonable expectation that it matters a damn.

The Manhattan Project of World War II still represents the most remarkable congregation of scientific talent in human history, never equaled, and perhaps never to be exceeded. The vastly expensive project broke new scientific ground and produced numerous additional discoveries. Modern computer theory, for example, largely grew from bomb-related research, and the first huge mainframe computers were mainly used for bomb design.

I was first bemused, then stunned, as my research revealed just how easy such a project might be today. It is generally known that nuclear secrets are not as secure as we would like—in fact the situation is worse than even well-informed people appreciate. What required billions of dollars in the 1940s is much less expensive today. A modern personal computer has far more power and reliability than the first Eniac, and the "hydrocodes" which enable a computer to test and validate a weapon's design are easily duplicated. The exquisite machine tools used to fabricate parts can be had for the asking. When I asked explicitly for specifications for the very machines used at Oak Ridge and elsewhere, they arrived Federal Express the next day. Some highly specialized items designed specifically for bomb manufacture may now be found in stereo speakers. The fact of the matter is that a sufficiently wealthy individual could, over a period of from five to ten years, produce a multistage thermonuclear device. Science is all in the public domain, and allows few secrets.

Delivery of such a device is child's play. I could base that statement on "extensive conversations" with various police and security agencies, but it doesn't take long for a person to say, "Are you kidding?" I heard that phrase more than once. Probably no country—certainly no liberal democracy—can secure its borders against such a threat.

So that's the problem. What might be the solution? For starters, international controls over the traffic in nuclear materials and technology ought to be made something more than the joke they currently are. Nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented, and I personally think that nuclear power is a safe and environmentally benign alternative to the use of fossil fuels, but any tool must be used with care, and this tool admits of abuses too fearful for us to ignore.

—Peregrine Cliff, February 1991

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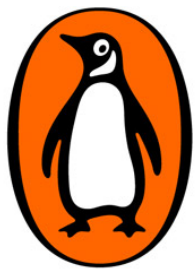

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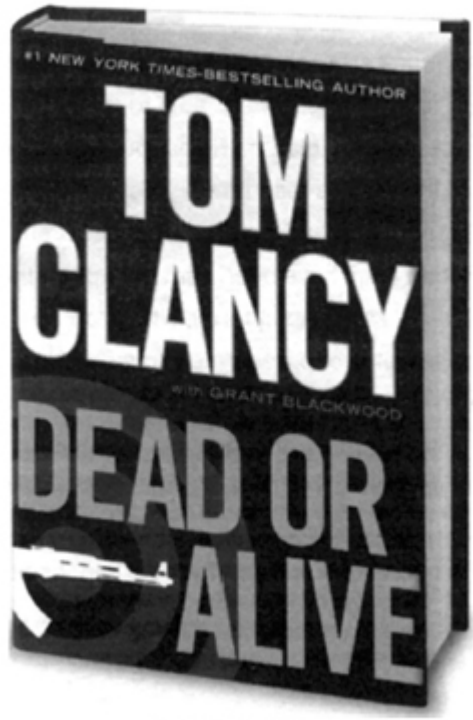

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WITHOUT REMORSE

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It never happens without help:
Bill, Darrell, and Pat, for “professional” advice;
C.J., Craig, Curt, Gerry, and Steve, for more of the same;
Russell for unexpected expertise

And for some *ex post facto* help of the highest magnitude:
G.R. and Wayne, for finding it;
Shelly, for doing the work;
Craig, Curt, Gerry, Steve P., Steve R.,
and Victor, for helping me to understand:

Think where man’s glory most begins and ends.
And say my glory was I had such friends.
—William Butler Yeats

In loving memory of Kyle Haydock,
July 5, 1983-August 1, 1991

In the original hardcover edition of *Without Remorse* are the words of a poem which I found by accident and whose title and author I was unable to identify. I found in them the perfect remembrance for my "little buddy," Kyle Haydock, who succumbed to cancer at the age of eight years and twenty-six days—to me, he will never really be gone.

Later, I learned that the title of this poem is "Ascension" and that the author, who penned these magnificent words, is Colleen Hitchcock, a poet of rare talent living in Minnesota. I wish to take this opportunity to commend her work to all students of the lyric phrase. As her words caught and excited my attention, I hope they will have the same effect on others.

Ascension

And if I go,
while you're still here…
Know that I live on,
vibrating to a different measure
-behind a thin veil you cannot see through.
You will not see me,
so you must have faith.
I wait for the time when we can soar together again,
-both aware of each other.
Until then, live your life to its fullest.
And when you need me,
Just whisper my name in your heart,
…I will be there.

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In earlier editions of *Without Remorse*, this poem inadvertently appeared without attribution to its author.

Arma virumque cano
—*Publius Vergilius Maro*

Beware the fury of a patient man
—*John Dryden*

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Tom Clancy

PROLOGUE

Meeting Places

NOVEMBER

Camille had either been the world's most powerful hurricane or the largest tornado in history. Certainly it had done the job to this oil rig, Kelly thought, donning his tanks for his last dive into the Gulf. The superstructure was wrecked, and all four of the massive legs weakened—twisted like the ruined toy of a gigantic child. Everything that could safely be removed had already been torched off and lowered by crane onto the barge they were using as their dive base. What remained was a skeletal platform which would soon make a fine home for local game fish, he thought, entering the launch that would take him alongside. Two other divers would be working with him, but Kelly was in charge. They went over procedures on the way over while a safety boat circled nervously to keep the local fishermen away. It was foolish of them to be here—the fishing wouldn't be very good for the next few hours—but events like this attracted the curious. And it would be quite a show. Kelly thought with a grin as he rolled backwards off the dive boat.

It was eerie underneath. It always was, but comfortable, too. The sunlight wavered under the rippled surface, making variable curtains of light that trained across the legs of the platform. It also made for good visibility. The C4 charges were already in place, each one a block about six inches square and three inches deep, wired tight against the steel and fused to blow inward. Kelly took his time, checking each one, starting with the first rank ten feet above the bottom. He did it quickly because he didn't want to be down here that long, and neither did the others. The men behind

him ran the prima-cord, wrapping it tight around the blocks. Both were local, experienced UDT men, trained almost as well as Kelly. He checked their work, and they checked his, for caution and thoroughness was the mark of such men. They finished the lower level in twenty minutes, and came up slowly to the upper rank, just ten feet below the surface, where the process was repeated, slowly and carefully. When you dealt with explosives, you didn't rush and you didn't take chances.

Colonel Robin Zacharias concentrated on the task at hand. There was an SA-2 site just over the next ridge. Already it had volleyed off three missiles, searching for the fighter-bombers he was here to protect. In the back seat of his F-105G Thunderchief was Jack Tait, his "bear," a lieutenant colonel and an expert in the field of defense-suppression. The two men had helped invent the doctrine which they were now implementing. He drove the Wild Weasel fighter, showing himself, trying to draw a shot, then ducking under it, closing in on the rocket site. It was a deadly, vicious game, not of hunter and prey, but of hunter and hunter—one small, swift, and delicate, and the other massive, fixed, and fortified. This site had given fits to the men of his wing. The commander was just too good with his radar, knowing when to switch it on and when to switch it off. Whoever the little bastard was, he'd killed two Weasels under Robin's command in the previous week, and so the colonel had drawn the mission for himself as soon as the frag order had gone up to hit this area again. It was his specialty: diagnosing, penetrating, and destroying air defenses—a vast, rapid, three-dimensional game in which the prize of winning was survival.

He was roaring low, never higher than five hundred feet, his fingers controlling the stick semiautomatically while Zacharias's eyes watched the karsk hilltops and his ears listened to the talk from the back seat.

"He's at our nine, Robin," Jack told him. "Still sweeping, but he doesn't have us. Spiraling in nicely."

We're not going to give him a Shrike, Zacharias thought. *They tried that the last time and he spoofed it somehow.* That error had cost him a major, a captain, and an aircraft…a fellow native of Salt Lake City, Al Wallace…friends for years….damn it! He shook the thought off, not even reproving himself for the lower-case profanity.

"Giving him another taste," Zacharias said, pulling back on the

stick. The Thud leaped upwards into the radar coverage of the site, hovering there, waiting. This site commander was probably Russian-trained. They weren't sure how many aircraft the man had killed—only that it had been more than enough—but he had to be a proud one because of it, and pride was deadly in this business.

"Launch…two, two valid launches, Robin," Tait warned from the back.

"Only two?" the pilot asked.

"Maybe he has to pay for them," Tait suggested coolly. "I have them at nine. Time to do some pilot magic, Rob."

"Like this?" Zacharias rolled left to keep them in view, pulling into them, and split-S-ing back down. He'd planned it well, ducking behind a ridge. He pulled out at a dangerous low altitude, but the SA-2 Guideline missiles went wild and dumb four thousand feet over his head.

"I think it's time," Tait said.

"I think you're right." Zacharias turned hard left, arming his cluster munitions. The F-105 skimmed over the ridge, dropping back down again while his eyes checked the next ridge, six miles and fifty seconds away.

"His radar is still up," Tait reported. "He knows we're coming."

"But he's only got one left." *Unless his reload crews are really hot today. Well, you can't allow for everything.*

"Some light flak at ten o'clock." It was too far to be a matter of concern, though it did tell him which way out not to take. "There's the plateau."

Maybe they could see him, maybe not. Possibly he was just one moving blip amid a screen full of clutter that some radar operator was striving to understand. The Thud moved faster at low level than anything ever made, and the camouflage motif on the upper surfaces was effective. They were probably looking up. There was a wall of jamming there now, part of the plan he'd laid out for the other Weasel bird, and normal American tactics were for a medium-altitude approach and steep dive. But they'd done that twice and failed, and so Zacharias decided to change the technique. Low level, he'd Rockeye the place, then the other Weasel would finish things off. His job was killing the command van and the commander within. He jinked the Thud left and right, up and down, to deny a good shooting track to anybody on the ground. You still had to worry about guns, too.

“Got the star!” Robin said. The SA-6 manual, written in Russian, called for six launchers around a central control point. With all the connective paths, the typical Guideline site looked just like a Star of David, which seemed rather blasphemous to the Colonel, but the thought only hovered at the edge of his mind as he centered the command van on his bombsight pipper.

“Selecting Rockeye,” he said aloud, confirming the action to himself. For the last ten seconds, he held the aircraft rock steady. “Looking good…release…now!”

Four of the decidedly un-aerodynamic canisters fell free of the fighter’s ejector racks, splitting open in midair, scattering thousands of submunitions over the area. He was well beyond the site before the bomblets landed. He didn’t see people running for slit trenches, but he stayed low, reefing the Thud into a tight left turn, looking up to make sure he’d gotten the place once and for all. From three miles out his eyes caught an immense cloud of smoke in the center of the Star.

That’s for Al, he allowed himself to think. No victory roll, just a thought, as he leveled out and picked a likely spot to egress the area. The strike force could come in now, and that SAM battery was out of business. Okay. He selected a notch in the ridge, racing for it just under Mach-1, straight and level now that the threat was behind him. *Home for Christmas.*

The red tracers that erupted from the small pass startled him. That wasn’t supposed to be there. No deflection on them, just coming right in. He jinked up, as the gunner had thought he would, and the body of the aircraft passed right through the stream of fire. It shook violently and in the passage of a second good changed to evil.

“Robin!” a voice gasped over the intercom, but the main noise was from wailing alarms, and Zacharias knew in a fatal instant that his aircraft was doomed. It got worse almost before he could react. The engine died in flames, and then the Thud started a roll-yaw that told him the controls were gone. His reaction was automatic, a shout for ejection, but another gasp from the back made him turn just as he yanked the handles even though he knew the gesture was useless. His last sight of Jack Tait was blood that hung below the seat like a vapor trail, but by then his own back was wrenched with more pain than he’d ever known.

“Okay,” Kelly said and fired off a flare. Another boat started tossing small explosive charges into the water to drive the fish away from the area. He watched and waited for five minutes, then looked at the safety man.

“Area’s clear.”

“Fire in the hole,” Kelly said, repeating the mantra three times more. Then he twisted the handle on the detonator. The results were gratifying. The water around the legs turned to foam as the rig’s legs were chopped off bottom and top. The fall was surprisingly slow. The entire structure slid off in one direction. There was an immense splash as the platform hit, and for one incongruous moment it appeared as though steel might float. But it couldn’t. The see-through collection of light I-beams sank below sight, to rest right on the bottom, and another job was done.

Kelly disconnected the wires from the generator and tossed them over the side.

“Two weeks early. I guess you really wanted that bonus,” the executive said. A former Navy fighter pilot, he admired a job well and quickly done. The oil wasn’t going anywhere, after all. “Dutch was right about you.”

“The Admiral is a good guy. He’s done a lot for Tish and me.”

“Well, we flew together for two years. Bad-ass fighter jock. Good to know those nice things he said were true.” The executive liked working with people who’d had experiences like his own. He’d forgotten the terror of combat somehow. “What’s with that? I’ve been meaning to ask.” He pointed to the tattoo on Kelly’s arm, a red seal, sitting up on his hind flippers and grinning impudently.

“Something we all did in my unit,” Kelly explained as offhandedly as he could.

“What unit was that?”

“Can’t say.” Kelly added a grin to mute the refusal.

“I bet it’s something to do with how Sonny got out—but okay.” A former naval officer had to respect the rules. “Well, the check’ll be in your account by the end of the business day, Mr. Kelly. I’ll radio in so your wife can pick you up.”

Tish Kelly was glowing her me-too look at the women in The Stork Shop. Not even three months yet, she could wear anything she wanted—well, almost. Too soon to shop for anything special, but she had the free time and wanted to see what the options were. She

thanked the clerk, deciding that she'd bring John here in the evening and help him pick something out for her because he liked doing that. Now it was time to pick him up. The Plymouth wagon they'd driven down from Maryland was parked right outside, and she'd learned to navigate the streets of the coastal town. It was a nice break from the cold autumn rain of their home, to be here on the Gulf Coast where the summer was never really gone for more than a few days. She brought the wagon onto the street, heading south for the oil company's huge support yard. Even the traffic lights were in her favor. One changed to green in such a timely fashion that her foot didn't even have to touch the brakes.

The truck driver frowned as the light changed to amber. He was late, and running a little too fast, but the end of his six-hundred-mile run from Oklahoma was in sight. He stepped on the clutch and brake pedals with a sigh that abruptly changed to a gasp of surprise as both pedals went all the way to the floor at the same speed. The road ahead was clear, and he kept going straight, downshifting to cut speed, and frantically blowing his diesel horn. *Oh God, oh God, please don't—*

She never saw it coming. Her head rever turned. The station wagon just jumped right through the intersection, and the driver's lingering memory would be of the young woman's profile disappearing under the hood of his diesel tractor, and then the awful lurch and shuddering surge upwards as the truck crushed the wagon under his front wheels.

The worst part of all was not feeling. Helen was her friend. Helen was dying, and Pam knew she should feel something, but she couldn't. The body was gagged, but that didn't stop all the sounds as Billy and Rick did what they were doing. Breath found its way out, and though her mouth couldn't move, the sounds were those of a woman soon to leave her life behind, but the trip had a price which had to be paid first, and Rick and Billy and Burt and Henry were doing the collecting. She tried to tell herself that she was really in another place, but the awful choking sounds kept bringing her eyes and her consciousness back to what reality had become. Helen was bad. Helen had tried to run away, and they couldn't have that. It had been explained to them all more than once, and was now being explained again in a way, Henry said, that they would be sure to remember. Pam felt where her ribs had once been broken,

remembering her lesson. She knew there was nothing she could do as Helen's eyes fixed on her face. She tried to convey sympathy with her eyes. She didn't dare do more than that, and presently Helen stopped making noise, and it was over, for now. Now she could close her eyes and wonder when it would be her turn.

The crew thought it was pretty funny. They had the American pilot tied up right outside their sandbagged emplacement so he could see the guns that had shot him down. Less funny was what their prisoner had done, and they'd expressed their displeasure for it with fists and boots. They had the other body, too, and they set it right next to him, enjoying the look of sorrow and despair on his face as he looked at his fellow bandit. The intelligence officer from Hanoi was here now, checking the man's name against a list he'd brought along, bending down again to read off the name. It must have been something special, the gunners all thought, from the way he reacted to it, and the urgent phone call he'd made. After the prisoner passed out from his pain, the intelligence officer had swabbed some blood from the dead body and covered the live one's face with it. Then he'd snapped a few photos. That puzzled the gun crew. It was almost as though he wanted the live one to look as dead as the body next to him. How very odd.

It wasn't the first body he'd had to identify, but Kelly had thought that aspect of his life was a thing left far behind. Other people were there to support him, but not falling down wasn't the same thing as surviving, and there was no consolation at a moment such as this. He walked out of the emergency room, people's eyes on him, doctors and nurses. A priest had been called to perform his last duty, and had said a few things that he knew were unheard. A police officer explained that it hadn't been the driver's fault. The brakes had failed. Mechanical defect. Nobody's fault, really. Just one of those things. All the things he'd said before, on other such occasions, trying to explain to some innocent person why the main part of his world had just ended, as though it mattered. This Mr. Kelly was a tough one, the officer saw, and all the more vulnerable because of it. His wife and unborn child, whom he might have protected against any hazard, were dead by an accident. Nobody to blame. The trucker, a family man himself, was in the hospital, under sedation after having gone under his rig in the hope of

finding her alive. People Kelly had been working with sat with him, and would help him make arrangements. There was nothing else to be done for a man who would have accepted hell rather than this; because he'd seen hell. But there was more than one hell, and he hadn't seen them all quite yet.

1

Enfant perdu

MAY

He'd never know why he stopped. Kelly pulled his Scout over to the shoulder without a conscious thought. She hadn't had her hand out soliciting a ride. She'd just been standing at the side of the road, watching the cars speed past in a spray of highway grit and a wake of fumes. Her posture was that of a hitchhiker, one knee locked, the other bent. Her clothes were clearly well used and a backpack was loosely slung over one shoulder. Her tawny, shoulder-length hair moved about in the rush of air from the traffic. Her face showed nothing, but Kelly didn't see that until he was already pressing his right foot on the brake pedal and angling onto the loose rock of the shoulder. He wondered if he should go back into the traffic, then decided that he was already committed, though to what he didn't know, exactly. The girl's eyes followed the car and, as he looked in his rearview mirror, she shrugged without any particular enthusiasm and walked towards him. The passenger window was down already, and in a few seconds she was there.

"Where you goin'?" she asked.

That surprised Kelly. He thought the first question—*Need a ride?*—was supposed to be his. He hesitated for a second or two, looking at her. Twenty-one, perhaps, but old for her years. Her face wasn't dirty, but neither was it clean, perhaps from the wind and dust on the interstate. She wore a man's cotton shirt that hadn't been ironed in months, and her hair was knotted. But what surprised him most of all were her eyes. Fetchingly gray-green, they stared past Kelly into …what? He'd seen the look before often enough, but only on

weary men. He'd had the look himself, Kelly remembered, but even then he'd never known what his eyes saw. It didn't occur to him that he wore a look not so different now.

"Back to my boat," he answered finally, not knowing what else to say. And that quickly, her eyes changed.

"You have a boat?" she asked. Her eyes lit up like a child's, a smile started there and radiated down the remainder of her face, as though he'd just answered an important question. She had a cute gap between her front teeth, Kelly noticed.

"Forty-footer—she's a diesel cruiser." He waved to the back of the Scout, whose cargo area was completely filled with cartons of groceries. "You want to come along?" he asked, also without thinking.

"Sure!" Without hesitation she yanked open the door and tossed her backpack on the floor in front of the passenger seat.

Pulling back into traffic was dangerous. Short of wheel-base and short of power, the Scout wasn't built for interstate-highway driving, and Kelly had to concentrate. The car wasn't fast enough to go in any other lane than the right, and with people coming on and off at every interchange, he had to pay attention because the Scout wasn't nimble enough to avoid all the idiots who were heading out to the ocean or wherever the hell people went on a three-day weekend.

You want to come along? he'd asked, and she'd said *Sure*, his mind reported to him. *What the hell?* Kelly frowned in frustration at the traffic because he didn't know the answer, but then there were a lot of questions to which he hadn't known the answers in the last six months. He told his mind to be quiet and watched the traffic, even though it kept up its inquiries in a nagging sort of background noise. One's mind, after all, rarely obeys its own commands.

Memorial Day weekend, he thought. The cars around him were filled with people rushing home from work, or those who'd already made that trip and picked up their families. The faces of children stared out of the rear-seat windows. One or two waved at him, but Kelly pretended not to notice. It was hard not having a soul, most especially when you could remember having had one.

Kelly ran a hand across his jaw, feeling the sandpaper texture. The hand itself was dirty. No wonder they'd acted that way at the grocery warehouse. *Letting yourself go, Kelly.*

Well, who the hell cares?

He turned to look at his guest and realized that he didn't know her name. He was taking her to his boat, and he didn't know her name. Amazing. She was staring forward, her face serene. It was a pretty face in profile. She was thin—perhaps willowy was the right word, her hair halfway between blonde and brown. Her jeans were worn and torn in a few places, and had begun life at one of those stores where they charged you extra to sell jeans that were pre-faded—or whatever they did with them. Kelly didn't know and cared less. One more thing not to care about.

Christ, how did you ever get this screwed up? his mind demanded of him. He knew the answer, but even that was not a full explanation. Different segments of the organism called John Terrence Kelly knew different parts of the whole story, but somehow they'd never all come together, leaving the separate fragments of what had once been a tough, smart, decisive man to blunder about in confusion—and despair? There was a happy thought.

He remembered what he'd once been. He remembered all the things that he had survived, amazed that he had done so. And perhaps the worst torment of all was that he didn't understand what had gone wrong. Sure, he knew what had *happened*, but those things had all been on the outside, and somehow his understanding had gotten lost, leaving him alive and confused and without purpose. He was on autopilot. He knew that, but not where fate was taking him.

She didn't try to talk, whoever she was, and that was just as well, Kelly told himself, though he sensed that there was something he ought to know. The realization came as a surprise. It was instinctual, and he'd always trusted his instincts, the warning chill on his neck and forearms. He looked around at the traffic and Kelly saw no particular danger other than cars with too much engine under the hood and not enough brains behind the wheel. His eyes scanned carefully and found nothing. But the warning didn't go away, and Kelly found himself checking the mirror for no good reason, while his left hand wandered down between his legs and found the checkered grips of the Colt automatic that hung hidden under the seat. His hand was stroking the weapon before he realized it.

Now what the hell did you do that for? Kelly pulled his hand back and shook his head with a grimace of frustration. But he did keep checking the mirror—just the normal watch on traffic, he lied to

himself for the next twenty minutes.

The boatyard was a swarm of activity. The three-day weekend, of course. Cars were zipping about too fast for the small and badly paved parking lot, each driver trying to evade the Friday rush that each was, of course, helping to create. At least here the Scout came into its own. The high ground clearance and visibility gave Kelly an advantage as he maneuvered to *Springer*'s transom, and he looped around to back up to the slip he'd left six hours before. It was a relief, to crank up the windows and lock the car. His adventure on the highways was over, and the safety of the trackless water beckoned.

Springer was a diesel-powered motor yacht, forty-one feet long, custom built but similar in her lines and internal arrangements to a Pacemaker Coho. She was not especially pretty, but she had two sizable cabins, and the midships salon could be converted easily into a third. Her diesels were large but not supercharged, because Kelly preferred a large comfortable engine to a small straining one. He had a high-quality marine radar, every sort of communications gear that he could legally use, and navigation aids normally reserved for offshore fishermen. The fiberglass hull was immaculate, and there was not a speck of rust on the chromed rails, though he had deliberately done without the topside varnish that most yacht-owners cherished because it wasn't worth the maintenance time. *Springer* was a workboat, or was supposed to be.

Kelly and his guest alighted from the car. He opened the cargo door and started carrying the cartons aboard. The young lady, he saw, had the good sense to stay out of the way.

"Yo, Kelly!" a voice called from the flying bridge.

"Yeah, Ed. what was it?"

"Bad gauge. The generator brushes were a little worn, and I replaced them, but I think it was the gauge. Replaced that, too." Ed Murdock, the yard's chief mechanic, started down, and spotted the girl as he began to step off the ladder. Murdock tripped on the last step and nearly landed flat on his face in surprise. The mechanic's face evaluated the girl quickly and approvingly.

"Anything else?" Kelly asked pointedly.

"Topped off the tanks. The engines are warm," Murdock said, turning back to his customer. "It's all on your bill."

"Okay, thanks, Ed."

"Oh, Chip told me to tell you, somebody else made an offer in

case you ever want to sell—"

Kelly cut him off. "No chance, Ed."

"She's a jewel, Kelly," Murdock said as he gathered his tools and walked away smiling, pleased with himself for the double entendre.

It took several seconds for Kelly to catch that one. It evoked a belated grunt of semi-amusement as he loaded the last of the groceries into the salon.

"What do I do?" the girl asked. She'd just been standing there, and Kelly had the impression that she was trembling a little and trying to hide it.

"Just take a seat topside," Kelly said, pointing to the flying bridge. "It'll take me a few minutes to get things started."

"Okay." She beamed a smile at him guaranteed to melt ice, as though she knew exactly what one of his needs was.

Kelly walked aft to his cabin, pleased at least that he kept his boat tidy. The master-cabin head was also neat, and he found himself staring into the mirror and asking, "Okay, now what the fuck are you going to do?"

There was no immediate answer, but common decency told him to wash up. Two minutes later he entered the salon. He checked to see that the grocery cartons were secure, then went topside.

"I, uh, forgot to ask you something—" he began.

"Pam," she said, extending her hand. "What's yours?"

"Kelly," he replied, nonplussed yet again.

"Where we going, Mr. Kelly?"

"Just Kelly," he corrected her, keeping his distance for the moment. Pam just nodded and smiled again.

"Okay, Kelly, where to?"

"I own a little island about thirty—"

"You own an *island?*" Her eyes went wide.

"That's right." Actually, he just leased it, and that had been a fact long enough that Kelly didn't find it the least bit remarkable.

"Let's go!" she said with enthusiasm, looking back at the shore.

Kelly laughed out loud. "Okay, let's do that!"

He flipped on the bilge blowers. *Springer* had diesel engines, and he didn't really have to worry about fumes building up, but for all his recently acquired slovenliness, Kelly was a seaman, and his life on the water followed a strict routine, which meant observing all the safety rules that had been written in the blood of less careful men. After the prescribed two minutes, he punched the button to

start the portside, then the starboard-side diesel. Both of the big Detroit Diesel engines caught at once, rumbling to impressive life as Kelly checked the gauges. Everything looked fine.

He left the flying bridge to slip his mooring lines, then came back and eased the throttles forward to take his boat out of the slip, checking tide and wind—there was not much of either at the moment—and looking for other boats. Kelly advanced the port throttle a notch farther as he turned the wheel, allowing *Springer* to pivot all the more quickly in the narrow channel, and then he was pointed straight out. He advanced the starboard throttle next, bringing his cruiser to a mannerly five knots as he headed past the ranks of motor and sail yachts. Pam was looking around at the boats, too, mainly aft, and her eyes fixed on the parking lot for a long couple of seconds before she looked forward again, her body relaxing more as she did so.

"You know anything about boats?" Kelly asked.

"Not much," she admitted, and for the first time he noticed her accent.

"Where you from?"

"Texas. How about you?"

"Indianapolis, originally, but it's been a while."

"What's this?" she asked. Her hands reached out to touch the tattoo on his forearm.

"It's from one of the places I've been," he said. "Not a very nice place."

"Oh, over there." She understood.

"That's the place." Kelly nodded matter-of-factly. They were out of the yacht basin now, and he advanced the throttles yet again.

"What did you do there?"

"Nothing to talk to a lady about," Kelly replied, looking around from a half-standing position.

"What makes you think I'm a lady?" she asked.

It caught him short, but he was getting used to it by now. He'd also found that talking to a girl, no matter what the subject, was something that he needed to do. For the first time he answered her smile with one of his own.

"Well, it wouldn't be very nice of me if I assumed that you weren't."

"I wondered how long it would be before you smiled." *You have a very nice smile*, her tone told him.

How's six months grab you? he almost said. Instead he laughed, mainly at himself. That was something else he needed to do.

"I'm sorry. Guess I haven't been very good company." He turned to look at her again and saw understanding in her eyes. Just a quiet look, very human and feminine, but it shook Kelly. He could feel it happen, and ignored the part of his consciousness that told him that it was something he'd needed badly for months. That was something he didn't need to hear, especially from himself. Loneliness was bad enough without reflection on its misery. Her hand reached out yet again, ostensibly to stroke the tattoo, but that wasn't what it was all about. It was amazing how warm her touch was, even under a hot afternoon sun. Perhaps it was a measure of just how cold his life had become.

But he had a boat to navigate. There was a freighter about a thousand yards ahead. Kelly was now at full cruising power, and the trim tabs at the stern had automatically engaged, bringing the boat to an efficient planing angle as her speed came to eighteen knots. The ride was smooth until they got into the merchant ship's wake. Then *Springer* started pitching, up and down three or four feet at the bow as Kelly maneuvered left to get around the worst of it. The freighter grew before them like a cliff as they overtook her.

"Is there someplace I can change?"

"My cabin is aft. You can move in forward if you want."

"Oh, really?" She giggled. "Why would I do that?"

"Huh?" She'd done it to him again.

Pam went below, careful to hold on to the rails as she carried her backpack. She hadn't been wearing much. She reappeared in a few minutes wearing even less, short-shorts and a halter, no shoes, and perceptibly more relaxed. She had dancer's legs, Kelly noticed, slim and very feminine. Also very pale, which surprised him. The halter was loose on her, and frayed at the edges. Perhaps she'd recently lost weight, or maybe she'd deliberately bought it overlarge. Whatever the reason, it showed quite a bit of her chest. Kelly caught himself shifting his eyes, and chastised himself for ogling the girl. But Pam made it hard not to. Now she grasped his upper arm and sat up against him. Looking over, he could see right down the halter just as far as he wanted.

"You like them?" she asked.

Kelly's brain and mouth went into lock. He made a few embarrassed sounds, and before he could decide to say anything she

was laughing. But not at him. She was waving at the crew of the freighter, who waved back. It was an Italian ship, and one of the half dozen or so men hanging over the rail at the stern blew Pam a kiss. She did the same in return.

It made Kelly jealous.

He turned the wheel to port again, taking his boat across the bow wave of the freighter, and as he passed the vessel's bridge he tooted his horn. It was the correct thing to do, though few small boaters ever bothered. By this time, a watch officer had his glasses on Kelly—actually Pam, of course. He turned and shouted something to the wheelhouse. A moment later the freighter's enormous "whistle" sounded its own bass note, nearly causing the girl to leap from her seat.

Kelly laughed, and so did she, and then she wrapped her arms tightly around his bicep. He could feel a finger tracing its way around the tattoo.

"It doesn't feel like—"

Kelly nodded. "I know. Most people expect it to feel like paint or something."

"Why did—"

"—I get it? Everybody in the outfit did. Even the officers. It was something to do, I guess. Pretty dumb, really."

"I think it's cute."

"Well, I think you're pretty cute."

"You say the nicest things." She moved slightly, rubbing her breast against his upper arm.

Kelly settled down to a steady cruising speed of eighteen knots as he worked his way out of Baltimore harbor. The Italian freighter was the only merchant ship in view, and the seas were flat, with one-foot ripples. He kept to the main shipping channel all the way out into the Chesapeake Bay.

"You thirsty?" she asked as they turned south.

"Yeah. There's a fridge in the kitchenette—it's in the—"

"I saw it. What do you want?"

"Get two of anything."

"Okay," she replied brightly. When she stood, the soft feeling worked its way straight up his arm, finally departing at the shoulder.

"What's that?" she asked on returning. Kelly turned and winced. He'd been so content with the girl on his arm that he'd neglected to

pay attention to the weather. “That” was a thunderstorm, a towering mass of cumulonimbus clouds that reached eight or ten miles skyward.

“Looks like we’re going to get some rain,” he told her as he took the beer from her hand.

“When I was a little girl, that meant a tornado.”

“Well, not here, it doesn’t,” Kelly replied, looking around the boat to make sure that there was no loose gear. Below, he knew, everything was in its proper place, because it always was, ennui or not. Then he switched on his marine radio. He caught a weather forecast at once, one that ended with the usual warning.

“Is this a small craft?” Pam asked.

“Technically it is, but you can relax. I know what I’m doing. I used to be a chief bosun’s mate.”

“What’s that?”

“A sailor. In the Navy, that is. Besides, this is a pretty big boat. The ride might get a little bumpy, is all. If you’re worried, there are life jackets under the seat you’re on.”

“Are you worried?” Pam asked. Kelly smiled and shook his head. “Okay.” She resumed her previous position, her chest against his arm, her head on his shoulder, a dreamy expression in her eyes, as though anticipating something that was to be, storm or no storm.

Kelly wasn’t worried—at least not about the storm—but he wasn’t casual about things either. Passing Bodkin Point, he continued east across the shipping channel. He didn’t turn south until he was in water he knew to be too shallow for anything large enough to run him down. Every few minutes he turned to keep an eye on the storm, which was charging right in at twenty knots or so. It had already blotted out the sun. A fast-moving storm most often meant a violent one, and his new southerly course meant that he wasn’t outrunning it any longer. Kelly finished off his beer and decided against another. Visibility would drop fast. He pulled out a plastic-coated chart and fixed it in place on the table to the right of the instrument panel, marked his position with a grease pencil, and then checked to make sure that his course didn’t take him into shallows—*Springer* drew four and a half feet of water, and for Kelly anything less than eight feet constituted shallow water. Satisfied, he set his compass course and relaxed again. His training was his buffer against both danger and complacency.

“Won’t be long now,” Pam observed, just a trace of unease in her

voice as she held on to him.

"You can head below if you want," Kelly said. "It's gonna get rainy and windy. And bumpy."

"But not dangerous."

"No, unless I do something really dumb. I'll try not to," he promised.

"Can I stay here and see what it's like?" she asked, clearly unwilling to leave his side, though Kelly did not know why.

"It's going to get wet," he warned her again.

"That's okay." She smiled brightly, fixing even more tightly to his arm.

Kelly throttled back some, taking the boat down off plane. There was no reason to hurry. With the throttles eased back, there was no longer a need for two hands on the controls either. He wrapped his arm around the girl, her head came automatically down on his shoulder again, and despite the approaching storm everything was suddenly right with the world. Or that's what Kelly's emotions told him. His reason said something else, and the two views would not reconcile themselves. His reason reminded him that the girl at his side was—what? He didn't know. His emotions told him that it didn't matter a damn. She was what he needed. But Kelly was not a man ruled by emotions, and the conflict made him glower at the horizon.

"Something wrong?" Pam asked.

Kelly started to say something, then stopped, and reminded himself that he was alone on his yacht with a pretty girl. He let emotion win this round for a change.

"I'm a little confused, but, no, nothing is wrong that I know about."

"I can tell that you—"

Kelly shook his head. "Don't bother. Whatever it is, it can wait. Just relax and enjoy the ride."

The first gust of wind arrived a moment later, heeling the boat a few degrees to port. Kelly adjusted his rudder to compensate. The rain arrived quickly. The first few warning sprinkles were rapidly followed by solid sheets that marched like curtains across the surface of the Chesapeake Bay. Within a minute visibility was down to only a few hundred yards, and the sky was as dark as late twilight. Kelly made sure his running lights were on. The waves started kicking up in earnest, driven by what felt like thirty knots of

wind. Weather and seas were directly on the beam. He decided that he could keep going, but he was in a good anchoring place now, and wouldn't be in another for five hours. Kelly took another look at the chart, then switched on his radar to verify his position. Ten feet of water, a sand bottom that the chart called HRD and was therefore good holding ground. He brought *Springer* into the wind and eased the throttles until the propellers were providing just enough thrust to overcome the driving force of the wind.

"Take the wheel," he told Pam.

"But I don't know what to do!"

"It's all right. Just hold her steady and steer the way I tell you to. I have to go forward to set the anchors. 'Kay?"

"You be careful!" she shouted over the gusting wind. The waves were about five feet now, and the bow of the boat was leaping up and down. Kelly gave her shoulder a squeeze and went forward.

He had to watch himself, of course, but his shoes had no-skid soles, and Kelly knew his business. He kept his hands on the grab rail all the way around the superstructure, and in a minute he was on the foredeck. Two anchors were clipped to the deck, a Danforth and a CQR plow-type, both slightly oversized. He tossed the Danforth over first, then signaled for Pam to ease the wheel to port. When the boat had moved perhaps fifty feet south, he dropped the CQR over the side as well. Both ropes were already set to the proper lengths, and after checking that all was secure, Kelly made his way back to the flying bridge.

Pam looked nervous until the moment that he sat back down on the vinyl bench—everything was covered with water now, and their clothes were soaked through. Kelly eased the throttles to idle, allowing the wind to push *Springer* back nearly a hundred feet. By that time both anchors had dug into the bottom. Kelly frowned at their placement. He ought to have set them farther apart. But only one anchor was really necessary. The second was just insurance. Satisfied, he switched off the diesels.

"I could fight the storm all the way down, but I'd prefer not to," he explained.

"So we park here for the night?"

"That's right. You can go down to your cabin and—"

"You want me to go away?"

"No—I mean, if you don't like it here—" Her hand came up to his face. He barely caught her words through the wind and rain.

"I like it here." Somehow it didn't seem like a contradiction at all.

A moment later Kelly asked himself why it had taken so long. All the signals had been there. There was another brief discussion between emotion and reason, and reason lost again. There was nothing to be afraid of here, just a person as lonely as he. It was so easy to forget. Loneliness didn't tell you what you had lost, only that something was massing. It took something like this to define that emptiness. Her skin was soft, dripping with rain, but warm. It was so different from the rented passion that he'd tried twice in the past month, each time coming away disgusted with himself.

But this was something else. This was real. Reason cried out one last time that it couldn't be, that he'd picked her up at the side of the road and had known her for only a brief span of hours. Emotion said that it didn't matter. As though observing the conflict in his mind, Pam pulled the halter over her head. Emotion won.

"They look just fine to me," Kelly said. His hand moved to them, touching delicately. They felt just fine, too. Pam hung the halter on the steering wheel and pressed her face against his, her hands pulling him forward, taking charge in a very feminine way. Somehow her passion wasn't animalistic. Something made it different. Kelly didn't know what it was, but didn't search for the reason, not now.

Both rose to their feet. Pam nearly slipped, but Kelly caught her, dropping to his knees to help remove her shorts. Then it was her turn to unbutton his shirt after placing his hands on her breasts. His shirt remained in place for a long moment because neither wanted his hands to move, but then it was done, one arm at a time, and his jeans went next. Kelly slipped out of his shoes as the rest came off. Both stood for the next embrace, weaving as the boat pitched and rocked beneath them, the rain and wind pelting them. Pam took his hand and led him just aft of the driver's console, guiding him down to a supine position on the deck. She mounted him at once. Kelly tried to sit up, but she didn't let him, instead leaning forward while her hips moved with gentle violence. Kelly was as unready for that as he'd been for everything else this afternoon, and his shout seemed to outscream the thunder. When his eyes opened, her face was inches from him, and the smile was like that on a stone angel in a church.

"I'm sorry, Pam, I—"

She stopped his apology with a giggle. "Are you always this

good?"

Long minutes later, Kelly's arms were wrapped around her thin form, and so they stayed until the storm passed. Kelly was afraid to let go, afraid of the possibility that this was as unreal as it had to be. Then the wind acquired a chill, and they went below. Kelly got some towels and they dried each other off. He tried to smile at her, but the hurt was back, all the more powerful from the joy of the previous hour, and it was Pam's turn to be surprised. She sat beside him on the deck of the salon, and when she pulled his face down to her chest, he was the one who wept, until her chest was wet again. She didn't ask. She was smart enough for that. Instead she held him tightly until he was done and his breathing came back to normal.

"I'm sorry," he said after a while. Kelly tried to move but she wouldn't let him.

"You don't have to explain. But I'd like to help," she said, knowing that she already had. She'd seen it from almost the first moment in the car: a strong man, badly hurt. So different from the others she had known. When he finally spoke, she could feel his words on her breast.

"It's been nearly seven months. Down in Mississippi on a job. She was pregnant, we just found out. She went to the store, and—it was a truck, a big tractor-trailer rig. The linkage broke." He couldn't make himself say more, and he didn't have to.

"What was her name?"

"Tish—Patricia."

"How long were you—"

"Year and a half. Then she was just …gone. I never expected it. I mean, I put my time in, did some dangerous stuff, but that's all over, and that was me, not her. I never thought—" His voice cracked again. looked down at him in the muted light of the salon, seeing the scars she'd missed before and wondering what their story was. It didn't matter. She brought her cheek down to the top of his head. *He should have been a father right about now. Should have been a lot of things.*

"You never let it out, did you?"

"No."

"And why now?"

"I don't know," he whispered.

"Thank you." Kelly looked up in surprise. "That's the nicest thing a man has ever done to me."

“I don’t understand.”

“Yes, you do,” Pam replied. “And Tish understands, too. You let me take her place. Or maybe she did. She loved you, John. She must have loved you a lot. And she still does. Thank you for letting me help.”

He started crying again, and Pam brought his head back down, cradling him like a small child. It lasted ten minutes, though neither looked at a clock. When he was done, he kissed her in gratitude that rapidly turned to renewed passion. Pam lay back, letting him take charge as he needed to do now that he was again a man in spirit. Her reward was in keeping with the magnitude of what she had done for him, and this time it was her cries that canceled out the thunder. Later, he fell asleep at her side, and she kissed his unshaven cheek. That was when her own tears began at the wonder of what the day had brought after the terror with which it had begun.

2

Encounters

Kelly awoke at his accustomed time, thirty minutes before sunrise, to the mewing of gulls and saw the first dull glow on the eastern horizon. At first he was confused to find a slender arm across his chest, but other feelings and memories explained things in a few seconds. He extricated himself from her side and moved the blanket to cover her from the morning chill. It was time for ship's business.

Kelly got the drip coffee machine going, then he pulled on a pair of swim trunks and headed topside. He hadn't forgotten to set the anchor light, he was gratified to see. The sky had cleared off, and the air was cool after the thunderstorms of the previous night. He went forward and was surprised to see that one of his anchors had dragged somewhat. Kelly reproached himself for that, even though nothing had actually gone wrong. The water was a flat, oily calm and the breeze gentle. The pink-orange glow of first light decorated the tree-spotted coastline to the east. All in all, it seemed as fine a morning as he could remember. Then he remembered that what had changed had nothing at all to do with the weather.

"Damn," he whispered to the dawn not yet broken. Kelly was stiff, and did some stretching exercises to get the kinks out, slow to realize how fine he felt without the usual hangover. Slower still to recall how long it had been. Nine hours of sleep? he wondered. That much? No wonder he felt so good. The next part of the morning routine was to get a squeegee to dispose of the water that had pooled on the fiberglass deck.

His head turned at the low, muted rumble of marine diesels. Kelly looked west to spot it, but there was a little mist that way, being pushed his way by the breeze, and he couldn't make anything out.

He went to the control station on the flying bridge and got out his glasses, just in time to have a twelve-inch spotlight blaze through the marine 7 x 50s. Kelly was dazzled by the lights, which just as suddenly switched off, and a loud-hailer called across the water.

"Sorry, Kelly. Didn't know it was you." Two minutes later the familiar shape of a Coast Guard forty-one-foot patrol boat eased alongside *Springer*. Kelly scrambled along the portside to deploy his rubber fenders.

"You trying to kill me or something?" Kelly said in a conversational voice.

"Sorry." Quartermaster First Class Manuel "Portagee" Oreza stepped from one gun'l to the other with practiced ease. He gestured to the fenders. "Wanna hurt my feelings?"

"Bad sea manners, too," Kelly went on as he walked towards his visitor.

"I spoke to the young lad about that already," Oreza assured him. He held out his hand. "Morning, Kelly."

The outstretched hand had a Styrofoam cup filled with coffee. Kelly took it and laughed.

"Apology accepted, sir." Oreza was famous for his coffee.

"Long night. We're all tired, and it's a young crew," the coastguardsman explained wearily. Oreza was nearly twenty-eight himself, and by far the oldest man of his boat crew.

"Trouble?" Kelly asked.

Oreza nodded, looking around at the water. "Kinda. Some damned fool in a little day-sailer turned up missing after that little rainstorm we had last night, and we've been looking all over bejazzus for him."

"Forty knots of wind. Fair blow, Portagee," Kelly pointed out. "Came in right fast, too."

"Yeah, well, we rescued six boats already, just this one still missing. You see anything unusual last night?"

"No. Came outa Baltimore around …oh, sixteen hundred, I suppose. Two and a half hours to get here. Anchored right after the storm hit. Visibility was pretty bad, didn't see much of anything before we went below."

"We," Oreza observed, stretching. He walked over to the wheel, picked up the rain-soaked halter, and tossed it to Kelly. The look on his face was neutral, but there was interest behind the eyes. He hoped his friend had found someone. Life hadn't been especially

fair to the man.

Kelly handed the cup back with a similarly neutral expression.

"There was one freighter coming out behind us," he went on. "Italian flag, container boat about half full, must have been knocking down fifteen knots. Anybody else clear the harbor?"

"Yeah." Oreza nodded and spoke with professional irritation. "I'm worried about that. Fuckin' merchies plowing out at full speed, not paying attention."

"Well, hell, you stand outside the wheelhouse, you might get wet. Besides, sea-and-anchor detail might violate some union rule, right? Maybe your guy got run down," Kelly noted darkly. It wouldn't have been the first time, even on a body of water as civilized as the Chesapeake.

"Maybe," Oreza said, surveying the horizon. He frowned, not believing the suggestion and too tired to hide it. "Anyway, you see a little day-sailer with an orange-and-white candystripe sail, you want to give me a call?"

"No problem."

Oreza looked forward and turned back. "Two anchors for that little puff o' wind we had? They're not far enough apart. Thought you knew better."

"Chief Bosun's Mate," Kelly reminded him. "Since when does a bookkeeper get that snotty with a real seaman?" It was only a joke. Kelly knew Portagee was the better man in a small boat. Though not by much of a margin, and both knew that, too.

Oreza grinned on his way back to the cutter. After jumping back aboard, he pointed to the halter in Kelly's hand. "Don't forget to put your shirt on. *Boats!* Looks like it oughta fit just fine." A laughing Oreza disappeared inside the wheelhouse before Kelly could come up with a rejoinder. There appeared to be someone inside who was not in uniform, which surprised Kelly. A moment later, the cutter's engines rumbled anew and the forty-one-boat moved northwest.

"Good mornin'." It was Pam. "What was that?"

Kelly turned. She wasn't wearing any more now than when he'd put the blanket on her, but Kelly instantly decided that the only time she'd surprise him again would be when she did something predictable. Her hair was a medusalike mass of tangles, and her eyes were unfocused, as though she'd not slept well at all.

"Coast Guard. They're looking for a missing boat. How'd you sleep?"

“Just fine.” She came over to him. Her eyes had a soft, dreamlike quality that seemed strange so early in the morning, but could not have been more attractive to the wide-awake sailor.

“Good morning.” A kiss. A hug. Pam held her arms aloft and executed something like a pirouette. Kelly grabbed her slender waist and hoisted her aloft.

“What do you want for breakfast?” he asked.

“I don’t eat breakfast,” Pam replied, reaching down for him.

“Oh.” Kelly smiled. “Okay.”

She changed her mind about an hour later. Kelly fixed eggs and bacon on the galley stove, and Pam wolfed it down so speedily that he fixed seconds despite her protests. On further inspection, the girl wasn’t merely thin, some of her ribs were visible. She was undernourished, an observation that prompted yet another unasked question. But whatever the cause, he could remedy it. Once she’d consumed four eggs, eight slices of bacon, and five pieces of toast, roughly double Kelly’s normal morning intake, it was time for the day to begin properly. He showed her how to work the galley appliances while he saw to recovering the anchors.

They got back under way just shy of a lazy eight o’clock. It promised to be a hot, sunny Saturday. Kelly donned his sunglasses and relaxed in his chair, keeping himself alert with the odd sip from his mug. He maneuvered west, tracing down the edge of the main ship channel to avoid the hundreds of fishing boats he fully expected to sortie from their various harbors today in pursuit of rock-fish.

“What are those things?” Pam asked, pointing to the floats decorating the water to port.

“Floats for crab pots. They’re really more like cages. Crabs get in and can’t get out. You leave floats so you know where they are.” Kelly handed Pam his glasses and pointed to a bay-build workboat about three miles to the east.

“They trap the poor things?” Kelly laughed.

“Pam, the bacon you had for breakfast? The hog didn’t commit suicide, did he?”

She gave him an impish look. “Well, no.”

“Don’t get too excited. A crab is just a big aquatic spider, even though it tastes good.”

Kelly altered course to starboard to clear a red nunbuoy.

“Seems kinda cruel, though.”

“Life can be that way,” Kelly said too quickly and then regretted it.

Pam’s response was as heartfelt as Kelly’s. “Yeah, I know.”

Kelly didn’t turn to look at her, only because he stopped himself. There’d been emotional content in her reply, something to remind him that she, too, had demons. The moment passed quickly, however. She leaned back into the capacious conning chair, leaning against him and making things right again. One last time Kelly’s senses warned him that something was not right at all. But there were no demons out here, were there?

“You’d better go below.”

“Why?”

“Sun’s going to be hot today. There’s some lotion in the medicine cabinet, main head.”

“Head?”

“Bathroom!”

“Why is everything different on a boat?”

Kelly laughed. “That’s so sailors can be the boss out here. Now, shoo! Go get that stuff and put a lot on or you’ll look like a french fry before lunch.”

Pam made a face. “I need a shower, too. Is that okay?”

“Good idea,” Kelly answered without looking. “No sense scaring the fish away.”

“You!” She swatted him on the arm and headed below.

“Vanished, just plain vanished,” Oreza growled. He was hunched over a chart table at the Thomas Point Coast Guard Station.

“We shoulda got some air cover, helicopter or something,” the civilian observed.

“Wouldn’t have mattered, not last night. Hell, the gulls rode that blow out.”

“But where’d he go?”

“Beats me, maybe the storm sank his ass.” Oreza glowered at the chart. “You said he was northbound. We covered all these ports and Max took the western shore. You sure the description of the boat was correct?”

“Sure? Hell, we did everything but buy the goddamned boat for ’em!” The civilian was as short-tempered as twenty-eight hours of caffeine-induced wakefulness could explain, even worse for having

been ill on the patrol boat, much to the amusement of the enlisted crew. His stomach felt like it was coated with steel wool. “Maybe it did sink,” he concluded gruffly, not believing it for a moment.

“Wouldn’t that solve your problem?” His attempt at levity earned him a growl, and Quartermaster First Class Manuel Oreza caught a warning look from the Station commander, a gray-haired warrant officer named Paul English.

“You know,” the man said in a state of exhaustion, “I don’t think anything is going to solve this problem, but it’s my job to try.”

“Sir, we’ve all had a long night. My crew is racked out, and unless you have a really good reason to stay up, I suggest you find a bunk and get a few Zs, sir.”

The civilian looked up with a tired smile to mute his earlier words. “Petty Officer Oreza, smart as you are, you ought to be an officer.”

“If I’m so smart, how come we missed our friend last night?”

“That guy we saw around dawn?”

“Kelly? Ex-Navy chief, solid guy.”

“Kinda young for a chief, isn’t he?” English asked, looking at a not very good photo the spotlight had made possible. He was new at the station.

“It came along with a Navy Cross,” Oreza explained.

The civilian looked up. “So, you wouldn’t think—”

“Not a chance in hell.”

The civilian shook his head. He paused for a moment, then headed off to the bunk room. They’d be going out again before sunset, and he’d need the sack time.

“So how was it?” English asked after the man left the room.

“That guy is shipping a lot of gear, Cap’n.” As a station commander, English was entitled to the title, all the more so that he let Portagee run his boat his way. “Sure as hell he doesn’t sleep much.”

“He’s going to be with us for a while, on and off, and I want you to handle it.”

Oreza tapped the chart with a pencil. “I still say this would be a perfect place to keep watch from, and I know we can trust the guy.”

“The man says no.”

“The man ain’t no seaman, Mr. English. I don’t mind when the guy tells me what to do, but he don’t know enough to tell me how to do it.” Oreza circled the spot on the chart.

• • •

"I don't like this."

"You don't have to like it," the taller man said. He unfolded his pocket knife and slit the heavy paper to reveal a plastic container of white powder. "A few hours' work and we turn three hundred thousand. Something wrong with that, or am I missin' something?"

"And this is just the start," the third man said.

"What do we do with the boat?" asked the man with the scruples.

The tall one looked up from what he was doing. "You get rid of that sail?"

"Yeah."

"Well, we can stash the boat …but probably smarter to scuttle. Yeah, that's what we'll do."

"And Angelo?" All three looked over to where the man was lying, unconscious still, and bleeding.

"I guess we scuttle him, too," the tall one observed without much in the way of emotion. "Right here ought to be fine."

"Maybe two weeks, there won't be nothin' left. Lots of critters out there." The third one waved outside at the tidal wetlands.

"See how easy it is? No boat, no Angelo, no risk, and three hundred thousand bucks. I mean, how much more do you expect, Eddie?"

"His friends still ain't gonna like it." The comment came more from a contrarian disposition than moral conviction.

"What friends?" Tony asked without looking. "He ratted, didn't he? How many friends does a rat have?"

Eddie bent to the logic of the situation and walked over to Angelo's unconscious form. The blood was still pumping out of the many abrasions, and the chest was moving slowly as he tried to breathe. It was time to put an end to that. Eddie knew it; he'd merely been trying to delay the inevitable. He pulled a small .22 automatic from his pocket, placed it to the back of Angelo's skull, and fired once. The body spasmed, then went slack. Eddie set his gun aside and dragged the body outside, leaving Henry and his friend to do the important stuff. They'd brought some fish netting, which he wrapped around the body before dumping it in the water behind their small motorboat. A cautious man, Eddie looked around, but there wasn't much danger of intruders here. He motored off until he found a likely spot a few hundred yards off, then stopped and drifted while he lifted a few concrete blocks from

the boat and tied them to the netting. Six were enough to sink Angelo about eight feet to the bottom. The water was pretty clear here, and that worried Eddie a little until he saw all the crabs. Angelo would be gone in less than two weeks. It was a great improvement over the way they usually did business, something to remember for the future. Disposing of the little sailboat would be harder. He'd have to find a deeper spot, but he had all day to think about it.

Kelly altered course to starboard to avoid a gaggle of sports craft. The island was visible now, about five miles ahead. Not much to look at, just a low bump on the horizon, not even a tree, but it was his and it was as private as a man could wish. About the only bad news was the miserable TV reception.

Battery Island had a long and undistinguished history. Its current name, more ironic than appropriate, had come in the early nineteenth century, when some enterprising militiaman had decided to place a small gun battery there to guard a narrow spot in the Chesapeake Bay against the British, who were sailing towards Washington, D.C., to punish the new nation that had been so ill-advised as to challenge the power of the world's foremost navy. One British squadron commander had taken note of a few harmless puffs of smoke on the island, and, probably with more amusement than malice, had taken one ship within gun range and let loose a few salvos from the long guns on his lower deck. The citizen soldiers manning the battery hadn't needed much encouragement to make a run for their rowboats and hustle to the mainland, and shortly thereafter a landing party of Jack Tars and a few Royal Marines had rowed ashore in a pinnace to drive nails into the touch holes, which was what "spiking guns" meant. After this brief diversion, the British had continued their leisurely sail up the Patuxent River, from which their army had walked to Washington and back, having forced Dolley Madison to evacuate the White House. The British campaign had next headed to Baltimore, where a somewhat different outcome resulted.

Battery Island, under reluctant federal ownership, became an embarrassing footnote to a singularly useless war. Without so much as a caretaker to look after the earthen emplacements, weeds overtook the island, and so things had remained for nearly a hundred years.

With 1917 came America's first real foreign war, and America's navy, suddenly faced with the U-boat menace, needed a sheltered place to test its guns. Battery Island seemed ideal, only a few steaming hours from Norfolk, and so for several months in the fall of that year, 12-and 14-inch battleship rifles had crashed and thundered, blasting nearly a third of the island below mean low water and greatly annoying the migratory birds, who'd long since realized that no hunters ever shot at them from the place. About the only new thing that happened was the scuttling of over a hundred World War I—built cargo ships a few miles to the south, and these, soon overgrown with weeds, rapidly took on the appearance of islands themselves.

A new war and new weapons had brought the sleepy island back to life. The nearby naval air station needed a place for pilots to test weapons. The happy coincidence of the location of Battery Island and the scuttled ships from World War I had made for an instant bombing range. As a result, three massive concrete observation bunkers were built, from which officers could observe TBFs and SB2C bombers practicing runs on targets that looked like ship-shaped islands—and pulverizing quite a few of them until one bomb hung on the rack just long enough to obliterate one of the bunkers, thankfully empty. The site of the destroyed bunker had been cleared in the name of tidiness, and the island converted to a rescue station, from which a crashboat might respond to an aircraft accident. *That* had required building a concrete quay and boathouse and refurbishment of the two remaining bunkers. All in all, the island had served the local economy, if not the federal budget, well, until the advent of helicopters made crashboats unnecessary, and the island had been declared surplus. And so the island remained unnoticed on a register of unwanted federal property until Kelly had managed to acquire a lease.

Pam leaned back on her blanket as they approached, basting in the warm sun beneath a thick coating of suntan lotion. She didn't have a swimsuit, and wore only a bra and panties. It didn't offend Kelly, but the impropriety of it was vaguely disturbing for no reason that stood up to logical analysis. In any case, his current job was driving his boat. Further contemplation of her body could wait, he told himself about every minute, when his eyes darted that way to make sure she was still there.

He eased the wheel farther to the right to pass well clear of a

large fishing yacht. He gave Pam another look. She'd slipped the straps of her bra down off her shoulders for a more even tan. Kelly approved.

The sound startled both of them, rapid short blasts on the fishing boat's diesel horns. Kelly's head scanned all the way around, then centered on the boat that lay two hundred yards to port. It was the only thing close enough to be of concern, and also seemed to be the source of the noise. On the flying bridge a man was waving at him. Kelly turned to port to approach. He took his time bringing *Springer* alongside. Whoever this guy was, he wasn't much of a boat handler, and when he brought his craft to a halt, twenty feet away, he kept his hand on the throttles.

"What's the problem?" Kelly called over the loud-hailer.

"Lost our props!" a swarthy man hollered back. "What do we do?"

Row, Kelly almost replied, but that wasn't very neighborly. He brought his boat closer in to survey the situation. It was a medium-sized fishing cruiser, a fairly recent Hatteras. The man on the bridge was about five-eight, fiftyish, and bare-chested except for a mat of dark hair. A woman was also visible, also rather downcast.

"No screws at all?" Kelly asked when they were closer.

"I think we hit a sandbar," the man explained. "About half a mile that way." He pointed to a place Kelly kept clear of.

"Sure enough, there's one that way. I can give you a tow if you want. You have good enough line for it?"

"Yes!" the man replied immediately. He went forward to his rope locker. The woman aboard continued to look embarrassed.

Kelly maneuvered clear for a moment, observing the other "captain," a term his mind applied ironically. He couldn't read charts. He didn't know the proper way of attracting another boat's attention. He didn't even know how to call the Coast Guard. All he'd managed to do was buy a Hatteras yacht, and while that spoke well of his judgment, Kelly figured it had more likely come from a smart salesman. But then the man surprised Kelly. He handled his lines with skill and waved *Springer* in.

Kelly maneuvered his stern in close, then went aft to his well deck to take the towing line, which he secured to the big cleat on the transom. Pam was up and watching now. Kelly hustled back to the fly bridge and coaxed his throttle a crack.

"Get on your radio," he told the Hatteras owner. "Leave your

rudder amidships till I tell you different. Okay?"

"Got it."

"Hope so," Kelly whispered to himself, pushing the throttle levers until the towing line came taut.

"What happened to him?" Pam asked.

"People forget there's a bottom under this water. You hit it hard enough and you break things." He paused. "You might want to put some more clothes on."

Pam giggled and went below. Kelly increased speed carefully to about four knots before starting the turn south. He'd done this all before, and grumbled that if he did it one more time he'd have special stationery printed up for the bills.

Kelly brought *Springer* alongside very slowly, mindful of the boat he was towing. He scurried off the bridge to drop his fenders, then jumped ashore to tie off a pair of spring lines before heading towards the Hatteras. The owner already had his mooring lines set up, and tossed them to Kelly on the quay while he set his fenders. Hauling the boat in a few feet was a good chance to show his muscles to Pam. It only took five minutes to get her snugged in, after which Kelly did the same with *Springer*.

"This is yours?"

"Sure enough," Kelly replied. "Welcome to my sandbar."

"Sam Rosen," the man said, holding his hand out. He'd pulled a shirt on, and while he had a strong grip, Kelly noted that his hands were so soft as to be dainty.

"John Kelly."

"My wife, Sarah."

Kelly laughed. "You must be the navigator."

Sarah was short, overweight, and her brown eyes wavered between amusement and embarrassment. "Somebody needs to thank you for your help," she observed in a New York accent.

"A law of the sea, ma'am. What went wrong?"

"The chart shows six feet where we struck. This boat only takes four! And low tide was five hours ago!" the lady snapped. She wasn't angry at Kelly, but he was the closest target, and her husband had already heard what she thought.

"Sandbar, it's been building there from the storms we had last winter, but my charts show less than that. Besides, it's a soft bottom."

Pam came up just then, wearing clothing that was nearly

respectable, and Kelly realized he didn't know her last name.

"Hi, I'm Pam."

"Y'all want to freshen up? We have all day to look at the problem." There was general agreement on that point, and Kelly led them off to his home.

"What the hell is that?" Sam Rosen asked. "That" was one of the bunkers that had been built in 1943, two thousand square feet, with a roof fully three feet thick. The entire structure was reinforced concrete and was almost as sturdy as it looked. A second, smaller bunker lay beside it.

"This place used to belong to the Navy," Kelly explained, "but I lease it now."

"Nice dock they built for you," Rosen noted.

"Not bad at all," Kelly agreed. "Mind if I ask what you do?"

"Surgeon," Rosen replied.

"Oh, yeah?" That explained the hands.

"Professor of surgery," Sarah corrected. "But he can't drive a boat worth a damn!"

"The goddamned charts were off!" the professor grumbled as Kelly led them inside. "Didn't you hear?"

"People, that's history now, and lunch and a beer will allow us to consider it in comfort." Kelly surprised himself with his words. Just then his ears caught a sharp *crack* coming across the water from somewhere to the south. It was funny how sound carried across the water.

"What was that?" Sam Rosen had sharp ears, too.

"Probably some kid taking a muskrat with his .22," Kelly judged. "It's a pretty quiet neighborhood, except for that. In the fall it can get a little noisy around dawn—ducks and geese."

"I can see the blinds. You hunt?"

"Not anymore," Kelly replied.

Rosen looked at him with understanding, and Kelly decided to reevaluate him for a second time.

"How long?"

"Long enough. How'd you know?"

"Right after I finished residency, I made it to Iwo and Okinawa. Hospital ship."

"Hmm, kamikaze time?"

Rosen nodded. "Yeah, lots of fun. What were you on?"

"Usually my belly," Kelly answered with a grin.

"UDT? You look like a frogman," Rosen said. "I had to fix a few of those."

"Pretty much the same thing, but dumber." Kelly dialed the combination lock and pulled the heavy steel door open.

The inside of the bunker surprised the visitors. When Kelly had taken possession of the place, it had been divided into three large, bare rooms by stout concrete walls, but now it looked almost like a house, with painted drywall and rugs. Even the ceiling was covered. The narrow view-slits were the only reminder of what it had once been. The furniture and rugs showed the influence of Patricia, but the current state of semiarray was evidence that only a man lived here now. Everything was neatly arranged, but not as a woman would do things. The Rosens also noted that it was the man of the house who led them to the "galley" and got things out of the old-fashioned refrigerator box while Pam wandered around a little wide-eyed.

"Nice and cool," Sarah observed. "Damp in the winter, I bet."

"Not as bad as you think." Kelly pointed to the radiators around the perimeter of the room. "Steam heat. This place was built to government specifications. Everything works and everything cost too much."

"How do you get a place like this?" Sam asked.

"A friend helped me get the lease. Surplus government property."

"He must be some friend," Sarah said, admiring the built-in refrigerator.

"Yes, he is."

Vice Admiral Winslow Holland Maxwell, USN, had his office on the E-Ring of the Pentagon. It was an outside office, allowing him a fine view of Washington—and the demonstrators, he noted angrily to himself. *Baby Killers!* one placard read. There was even a North Vietnamese flag. The chanting, this Saturday morning, was distorted by the thick window glass. He could hear the cadence but not the words, and the former fighter pilot couldn't decide which was more enraging.

"That isn't good for you, Dutch."

"Don't I know it!" Maxwell grumbled.

"The freedom to do that is one of the things we defend," Rear Admiral Casimir Podulski pointed out, not quite making that leap of faith despite his words. It was just a little too much. His son had

died over Haiphong in an A-4 strike-fighter. The event had made the papers because of the young aviator's parentage, and fully eleven anonymous telephone calls had come in the following week, some just laughing, some asking his tormented wife where the blotter was supposed to be shipped. "All those nice, peaceful, sensitive young people."

"So why are you in such a great mood, Cas?"

"This one goes in the wall safe, Dutch." Podulski handed over a heavy folder. Its edges were bordered in red-and-white-striped tape, and it bore the coded designator BOXWOOD GREEN.

"They're going to let us play with it?" *That* was a surprise.

"It took me till oh-three-thirty, but yes. Just a few of us, though. We have authorization for a complete feasibility study." Admiral Podulski settled into a deep leather chair and lit up a cigarette. His face was thinner since the death of his son, but the crystal-blue eyes burned as bright as ever.

"They're going to let *us* go ahead and do the planning?" Maxwell and Podulski had worked towards that end for several months, never in any real expectation that they'd be allowed to pursue it.

"Who'd ever suspect us?" the Polish-born Admiral asked with an ironic look. "They want us to keep it off the books."

"Jim Greer, too?" Dutch asked.

"Best intel guy I know, unless you're hiding one somewhere."

"He just started at CIA, I heard last week," Maxwell warned.

"Good. We need a good spy, and his suit's still blue, last time I checked."

"We're going to make enemies doing this, lots of 'em."

Podulski gestured at the window and the noise. He hadn't changed all that much since 1944 and USS *Essex*. "With all those a hundred feet away from us, what'll a few more matter?"

"How long have you had the boat?" Kelly asked about halfway through his second beer. Lunch was rudimentary, cold cuts and bread supplemented by bottled beer.

"We bought it last October, but we've only been running it two months," the doctor admitted. "But I took the Power Squadron courses, finished top in my class." He was the sort who finished number one in nearly everything, Kelly figured.

"You're a pretty good line-handler," he observed, mainly to make the man feel better.

“Surgeons are pretty good with knots, too.”

“You a doc, too, ma’am?” Kelly asked Sarah.

“Pharmacologist. I also teach at Hopkins.”

“How long have you and your wife lived here?” Sam asked, and the conversation ground to an awkward halt.

“Oh, we just met,” Pam told them artlessly. Naturally enough it was Kelly who was the most embarrassed. The two physicians merely accepted the news as a matter of course, but Kelly worried that they’d see him as a man taking advantage of a young girl. The thoughts associated with his behavior seemed to race in circles around the inside of his skull until he realized that no one else seemed to care all that much.

“Let’s take a look at that propeller.” Kelly stood. “Come on.”

Rosen followed him out the door. The heat was building outside, and it was best to get things done quickly. The secondary bunker on the island housed Kelly’s workshop. He selected a couple of wrenches and wheeled a portable air compressor towards the door.

Two minutes later he had it sitting next to the doctor’s Hatteras and buckled a pair of weight belts around his waist.

“Anything I have to do?” Rosen asked.

Kelly shook his head as he stripped off his shirt. “Not really. If the compressor quits, I’ll know pretty quick, and I’ll only be down five feet or so.”

“I’ve never done that.” Rosen turned his surgeon’s eyes to Kelly’s torso, spotting three separate scars that a really good surgeon might have been skillful enough to conceal. Then he remembered that a combat surgeon didn’t always have the time for cosmetic work.

“I have, here and there,” Kelly told him on the way to the ladder.

“I believe it,” Rosen said quietly to himself.

Four minutes later, by Rosen’s watch, Kelly was climbing back up the ladder.

“Found your problem.” He set the remains of both props on the concrete dock.

“God! What did we hit?”

Kelly sat down for a moment to strip off the weights. It was all he could do not to laugh. “Water, doc, just water.”

“What?”

“Did you have the boat surveyed before you bought it?”

“Sure, the insurance company made me do that. I got the best buy around, he charged me a hundred bucks.”

"Oh, yeah? What deficiencies did he give you?" Kelly stood back up and switched the compressor off.

"Practically nothing. He said there was something wrong with the sinks, and I had a plumber check it, but they were fine. I guess he had to say something for his money, right?"

"Sinks?"

"That's what he told me over the phone. I have the written survey somewhere, but I took the information over the phone."

"Zincs," Kelly said, laughing. "Not sinks."

"What?" Rosen was angry at not getting the joke.

"What destroyed your props was electrolysis. Galvanic reaction. It's caused by having more than one kind of metal in saltwater, corrodes the metal. All the sandbar did was to scuff them off. They were already wrecked. Didn't the Power Squadron tell you about that?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"*But*—you just learned something, Doctor Rosen." Kelly held up the remains of the screw. The metal had the flaked consistency of a soda cracker. "This used to be bronze."

"Damn!" The surgeon took the wreckage in his hand and picked off a waferlike fragment.

"The surveyor meant for you to replace the zinc anodes on the strut. What they do is to absorb the galvanic energy. You replace them every couple of years, and that protects the screws and rudder by remote control, like. I don't know all the science of it, but I do know the effects, okay? Your rudder needs replacement, too, but it's not an emergency. Sure as hell, you need two new screws."

Rosen looked out at the water and swore. "Idiot."

Kelly allowed himself a sympathetic laugh. "Doc, if that's the biggest mistake you make this year, you're a lucky man."

"So what do I do now?"

"I make a phone call and order you a couple of props. I'll call a guy I know over in Solomons, and he'll have somebody run them down here, probably tomorrow." Kelly gestured. "It's not that big a deal, okay? I want to see your charts, too."

Sure enough, when he checked their dates, they were five years old. "You need new ones every year, doc."

"Damn!" Rosen said.

"Helpful hint?" Kelly asked with another smile. "Don't take it so seriously. Best kind of lesson. It hurts a little but not much. You

learn and you get on with it."

The doctor relaxed, finally, allowing himself a smile. "I suppose you're right, but Sarah'll never let me forget it."

"Blame the charts," Kelly suggested.

"Will you back me up?"

Kelly grinned. "Men have to stick together at times like this."

"I think I'm going to like you, Mr. Kelly."

"So where the fuck is she?" Billy demanded.

"How the hell should I know?" Rick replied, equally angry—and fearful of what Henry would say when he got back. Both their eyes turned to the woman in the room.

"You're her friend," Billy said.

Doris was trembling already, wishing she could run from the room, but there was no safety in that. Her hands were shaking as Billy took the three steps to her, and she flinched but didn't evade the slap that landed her on the floor.

"*Bitch.* You better tell me what you know!"

"I don't know anything!" she screamed up at him, feeling the burning spot on her face where she'd been hit. She looked over to Rick for sympathy, but saw no emotion at all on his face.

"You know something—and you better tell me right now," Billy said. He reached down to unbutton her shorts, then removed the belt from his pants. "Get the rest in here," he told Rick.

Doris stood without waiting for the order, nude from the waist down, crying silently, her body shaking with sobs for the pain soon to come, afraid even to cower, knowing she couldn't run. There was no safety for her. The other girls came in slowly, not looking in her direction. She'd known that Pam was going to run, but that was all, and her only satisfaction as she heard the belt whistle through the air was that she would reveal nothing that could hurt her friend. As searing as the pain was, Pam had escaped.

3

Captivity

After replacing all the diving gear in the machine shop, Kelly took a two-wheel hand truck out onto the quay to handle the groceries. Rosen insisted on helping. His new screws would arrive by boat the next day, and the surgeon didn't seem in any hurry to take his boat back out.

"So," Kelly said, "you teach surgery?"

"Eight years now, yeah." Rosen evened up the boxes on the two-wheeler.

"You don't look like a surgeon."

Rosen took the compliment with grace. "We're not all violinists. My father was a bricklayer."

"Mine was a fireman." Kelly started wheeling the groceries towards the bunker.

"Speaking of surgeons…" Rosen pointed at Kelly's chest. "Some good ones worked on you. That one looks like it was nasty."

Kelly nearly stopped. "Yeah, I got real careless that time. Not as bad as it looks, though, just grazed the lung."

Rosen grunted. "So I see. Must have missed your heart by nearly two inches. No big deal."

Kelly moved the boxes into the pantry. "Nice to talk to somebody who understands, doc," he noted, wincing inwardly at the thought, remembering the feel of the bullet when it had spun him around. "Like I said—careless."

"How long were you over there?"

"Total? Maybe eighteen months. Depends on if you count the hospital time."

"That's a Navy Cross you have hanging on the wall. Is that what

it's for?"

Kelly shook his head. "That was something else. I had to go up north to retrieve somebody, A-6 pilot. I didn't get hurt, but I got sicker 'n' hell. I had some scratches—you know—from thorns and stuff. They got infected as hell from the river water, would you believe? Three weeks in the hospital from that. It was worse'n being shot."

"Not a very nice place is it?" Rosen asked as they came back for the last load.

"They say there's a hundred different kinds of snake there. Ninety-nine are poisonous."

"And the other one?"

Kelly handed a carton over to the doctor. "That one eats your ass whole." He laughed. "No, I didn't like it there much. But that was the job, and I got that pilot out, and the Admiral made me a chief and got me a medal. Come on, I'll show you my baby." Kelly waved Rosen aboard. The tour took five minutes, with the doctor taking note of all the differences. The amenities were there, but not glitzed up. This guy, he saw, was all business, and his charts were all brand new. Kelly fished out another beer from his cooler for the doctor and another for himself.

"What was Okinawa like?" Kelly asked with a smile, each man sizing up the other, each liking what he saw.

Rosen shrugged and grunted eloquently. "Tense. We had a lot of work, and the kamikazes seemed to think the red cross on the ship made a hell of a nice target."

"You were working while they were coming in at you?"

"Injured people can't wait, Kelly."

Kelly finished his beer. "I'd rather be shooting back. Let me get Pam's stuff and we can get back in the air conditioning." He headed aft and picked up her backpack. Rosen was already on the quay, and Kelly tossed the backpack across. Rosen looked too late, missed the catch, and the pack landed on the concrete. Some contents spilled out, and from twenty feet away, Kelly immediately saw what was wrong even before the doctor's head turned to look at him.

There was a large brown plastic prescription bottle, but without a label. The top had been loose, and from it had spilled a couple of capsules.

Some things are instantly clear. Kelly stepped slowly off the boat to the quay. Rosen picked up the container and placed the spilled

capsules back in it before snapping down the white plastic top. Then he handed it to Kelly.

"I know they're not yours, John."

"What are they, Sam?"

His voice could not have been more dispassionate. "The trade name is Quaalude. Methaqualone. It's a barbiturate, a sedative. A sleeping pill. We use it to get people off into dreamland. Pretty powerful. A little too powerful, in fact. A lot of people think it ought to be taken off the market. No label. It's not a prescription."

Kelly suddenly felt tired and old. And betrayed somehow. "Yeah."

"You didn't know?"

"Sam, we only met—not even twenty-four hours ago. I don't know anything about her."

Rosen stretched and looked around the horizon for a moment. "Okay, now I'm going to start being a doctor, okay? Have you ever done drugs?"

"No! I *hate* the goddamned stuff. People die because of it!" Kelly's anger was immediate and vicious, but it wasn't aimed at Sam Rosen.

The professor took the outburst calmly. It was his turn to be businesslike. "Settle down. People get hooked on these things. How doesn't matter. Getting excited doesn't help. Take a deep breath, let it out slow."

Kelly did, and managed a smile at the incongruity of the moment. "You sound just like my dad."

"Firemen are smart." He paused. "Okay, your lady friend may have a problem. But she seems like a nice girl, and you seem like a *mensch.* So do we try and solve the problem or not?"

"I guess that's up to her," Kelly observed, bitterness creeping into his voice. He felt betrayed. He'd started giving his heart away again, and now he had to face the fact that he might have been giving it to drugs, or what drugs had made of what ought to have been a person. It might all have been a waste of time.

Rosen became a little stern. "That's right, it is up to her, but it might be up to you, too, a little, and if you act like an idiot, you won't help her very much."

Kelly was amazed by how rational the man sounded under the circumstances. "You must be a pretty good doc."

"I'm one hell of a good doc," Rosen announced. "This isn't my field, but Sarah is damned good. It may be you're both lucky. She's

not a bad girl, John. Something's bothering her. She's nervous about something, in case you didn't notice."

"Well, yes, but—" And some part of Kelly's brain said, *See!*

"But you mainly noticed she's pretty. I was in my twenties once myself, John. Come on, we may have a little work ahead." He stopped and peered at Kelly. "I'm missing something here. What is it?"

"I lost a wife less than a year ago." Kelly explained on for a minute or two.

"And you thought that maybe she—"

"Yeah, I guess so. Stupid, isn't it?" Kelly wondered why he was opening up this way. Why not just let Pam do whatever she wanted? But that wasn't an answer. If he did that, he would just be using her for his selfish needs, discarding her when the bloom came off the rose. For all the reverses his life had taken in the past year, he knew that he couldn't do that, couldn't be one of those men. He caught Rosen looking fixedly at him.

Rosen shook his head judiciously. "We all have vulner-abilities. You have training and experience to deal with your problems. She doesn't. Come on, we have work to do." Rosen took the hand truck in his large, soft hands and wheeled it towards the bunker.

The cool air inside was a surprisingly harsh blast of reality. Pam was trying to entertain Sarah, but not succeeding. Perhaps Sarah had written it off to the awkward social situation, but physicians' minds are always at work, and she was starting to apply a professional eye to the person in front of her. When Sam entered the living room, Sarah turned and gave him a look that Kelly was able to understand.

"And so, well, I left home when I was sixteen," Pam was saying, rattling on in a monotonal voice that exposed more than she knew. Her eyes turned, too, and focused on the backpack Kelly held in his hands. Her voice had a surprisingly brittle character that he'd not noticed before.

"Oh, great. I need some of that stuff." She came over and took the pack from his hands, then headed towards the master bedroom. Kelly and Rosen watched her leave, then Sam handed his wife the plastic container. She needed only one look.

"I didn't know," Kelly said, feeling the need to defend himself. "I didn't see her take anything." He thought back, trying to remember times when she had not been in his sight, and concluded that she

might have taken pills two or perhaps three times, then realizing what her dreamy eyes had really been after all.

"Sarah?" Sam asked.

"Three-hundred-milligram. It ought not to be a severe case, but she does need assistance."

Pam came back into the room a few seconds later, telling Kelly that she'd left something on the boat. Her hands weren't trembling, but only because she was holding them together to keep them still. It was so clear, once you knew what to look for. She was trying to control herself, and almost succeeding, but Pam wasn't an actress.

"Is this it?" Kelly asked. He held the bottle in his hands. His reward for the harsh question was like a well-earned knife in the heart.

Pam didn't reply for a few seconds. Her eyes fixed on the brown plastic container, and the first thing Kelly saw was a sudden, hungry expression as though her thoughts were already reaching for the bottle, already picking one or more of the tablets out, already anticipating whatever it was that she got from the damned things, not caring, not even noting that there were others in the room. Then the shame hit her, the realization that whatever image she had tried to convey to the others was rapidly diminishing. But worst of all, after her eyes swept over Sam and Sarah, they settled on Kelly again, oscillating between his hand and his face. At first hunger vied with shame, but shame won, and when her eyes locked on his, the expression on her face began as that of a child caught misbehaving, but it and she matured into something else, as she saw that something which might have grown into love was changing over an interval of heartbeats into contempt and disgust. Her breathing changed in a moment, becoming rapid, then irregular as the sobs began, and she realized that the greatest disgust was within her own mind, for even a drug addict must look inward, and doing so through the eyes of others merely added a cruel edge.

"I'm s-s-s-orry, Kel-el-y. I di-didn't tel-el…" she tried to say, her body collapsing into itself. Pam seemed to shrink before their eyes as she saw what might have been a chance evaporate, and beyond that dissipating cloud was only despair. Pam turned away, sobbing, unable to face the man she'd begun to love.

It was decision time for John Terrence Kelly. He could feel betrayed, or he could show the same compassion to her that she had shown to him less than twenty hours before. More than

anything else, what decided it was her look to him, the shame so manifest on her face. He could not just stand there. He had to do something, else his own very proud image of himself would dissolve as surely and rapidly as hers.

Kelly's eyes filled with tears as well. He went to her and wrapped his arms around her to keep her from falling, cradling her like a child, pulling her head back against his chest, because it was now his time to be strong for her, to set whatever thoughts he had aside for a while, and even the dissonant part of his mind refused to cackle its *I told you so* at this moment, because there was someone hurt in his arms, and this wasn't the time for that. They stood together for a few minutes while the others watched with a mixture of personal unease and professional detachment.

"I've been trying," she said presently, "I really have—but I was so scared."

"It's okay," Kelly told her, not quite catching what she had just said. "You were there for me, and now it's my turn to be here for you."

"But—" She started sobbing again, and it took a minute or so before she got it out. "I'm not what you think I am."

Kelly let a smile creep into his voice as he missed the second warning. "You don't know what I think, Pammy. It's okay. Really." He'd concentrated so hard on the girl in his arms that he hadn't noticed Sarah Rosen at his side.

"Pam, how about we take a little walk?" Pam nodded agreement, and Sarah led her outside, leaving Kelly to look at Sam.

"You are a *mensch*," Rosen announced with satisfaction at his earlier diagnosis of the man's character. "Kelly, how close is the nearest town with a pharmacy?"

"Solomons, I guess. Shouldn't she be in a hospital?"

"I'll let Sarah make the call on that, but I suspect it's not necessary."

Kelly looked at the bottle still in his hand. "Well, I'm going to deep-six these damned things."

"No!" Rosen snapped. "I'll take them. They all carry lot numbers. The police can identify the shipment that was diverted. I'll lock them up on my boat."

"So what do we do now?"

"We wait a little while."

Sarah and Pam came back in twenty minutes later, holding hands

like mother and daughter. Pam's head was up now, though her eyes were still watery.

"We got a winner here, folks," Sarah told them. "She's been trying for a month all by herself."

"She says it isn't hard," Pam said.

"We can make it a lot easier," Sarah assured her. She handed a list to her husband. "Find a drugstore. John, get your boat moving. Now."

"What happens?" Kelly asked thirty minutes and five miles later. Solomons was already a tan-green line on the northwestern horizon.

"The treatment regime is pretty simple, really. We support her with barbiturates and ease her off."

"You give her drugs to get her off drugs?"

"Yep." Rosen nodded. "That's how it's done. It takes time for the body to flush out all the residual material in her tissues. The body becomes dependent on the stuff, and if you try to wean them off too rapidly, you can get some adverse effects, convulsions, that sort of thing. Occasionally people die from it."

"What?" said Kelly, alarmed. "I don't know anything about this, Sam."

"Why should you? That's our job, Kelly. Sarah doesn't think that's a problem in this case. Relax, John. You give"—Rosen took the list from his pocket—"yeah, I thought so, phenobarb, you give that to attenuate the withdrawal symptoms. Look, you know how to drive a boat, right?"

"Yep," Kelly said, turning, knowing what came next.

"Let us do our job. Okay?"

The man didn't feel much like sleep, the coastguardsmen saw, much to their own displeasure. Before they'd had the chance to recover from the previous day's adventures, he was up again, drinking coffee in the operations room, looking over the charts yet again, using his hand to make circles, which he compared with the memorized course track of the forty-one-boat.

"How fast is a sailboat?" he asked an annoyed and irritable Quartermaster First Class Manuel Oreza.

"That one? Not very, with a fair breeze and calm seas, maybe five knots, a little more if the skipper is smart and experienced. Rule of thumb is, one point three times the square root waterline length is your hull speed, so for that one, five or six knots." And he hoped

the civilian was duly impressed with that bit of nautical trivia.

"It was windy last night," the official noted crossly.

"A small boat doesn't go faster on choppy seas, it goes slower. That's because it spends a lot of time going up and down instead of forward."

"So how did he get away from you?"

"He didn't get away from *me*, okay?" Oreza wasn't clear on who this guy was or how senior a position he actually held, but he wouldn't have taken this sort of abuse from a real officer—but a real officer would not have harassed him this way; a real officer would have listened and understood. The petty officer took a deep breath, wishing for once that there was an officer here to explain things. Civilians listened to officers, which said a lot about the intelligence of civilians. "Look, sir, you told me to lay back, didn't you? I *told* you that we'd lose him in the clutter from the storm, and we did. Those old radars we use aren't worth a damn in bad weather, least not for a dinky little target like a day-sailer."

"You already said that."

And I'll keep saying it until you figure it out, Oreza managed not to say, catching a warning look from Mr. English. Portagee took a deep breath and looked down at the chart.

"So where do you think he is?"

"Hell, the Bay ain't that wide, so's you have two coastlines to worry about. Most houses have their own little docks, you have all these creeks. If it was me, I'd head up a creek. Better place to hide than a dock, right?"

"You're telling me he's gone," the civilian observed darkly.

"Sure as hell," Oreza agreed.

"Three *months* of work went into that!"

"I can't help that, sir." The coastguardsman paused. "Look, he probably went east rather than west, okay? Better to run before the wind than tack into it. That's the good news. Problem is, a little boat like that you can haul it out, put it on a trailer. Hell, it could be in Massachusetts by now."

He looked up from the chart. "Oh, that's just what I wanted to hear!"

"Sir, you want me to lie to you?"

"Three months!"

He just couldn't let go, Oreza and English thought at the same time. You had to learn how to do that. Sometimes the sea took

something, and you did your best looking and searching, and mostly you found it, but not always, and when you failed, the time came when you had to let the sea claim the prize. Neither man had ever grown to like it, but that was the way things were.

"Maybe you can whistle up some helicopter support. The Navy has a bunch of stuff at Pax River," Warrant Officer English pointed out. It would also get the guy out of his station, an objective worthy of considerable effort for all the disruption he was causing to English and his men.

"Trying to get rid of me?" the man asked with an odd smile.

"Excuse me, sir?" English responded innocently. A pity, the warrant officer thought, that the man wasn't a total fool.

Kelly tied back up at his quay after seven. He let Sam take the medications ashore while he snapped various covers over his instrument panels and settled his boat down for the night. It had been a quiet return trip from Solomons. Sam Rosen was a good man at explaining things, and Kelly a good questioner. What he'd needed to learn he'd picked up on the way out, and for most of the return trip he'd been alone with his thoughts, wondering what he would do, how he should act. Those were questions without easy answers, and attending to ship's business didn't help, much as he'd hoped that it would. He took even more time than was necessary checking the mooring lines, doing the same for the surgéon's boat as well before heading inside.

The Lockheed DC-130E Hercules cruised well above the low cloud deck, riding smoothly and solidly as it had done for 2,354 hours of logged flight time since leaving the Lockheed plant at Marietta, Georgia, several years earlier. Everything had the appearance of a pleasant flying day. In the roomy front office, the flight crew of four watched the clear air and various instruments, as their duties required. The four turboprop engines hummed along with their accustomed reliability, giving the aircraft a steady high-pitched vibration that transmitted itself through the comfortable high-backed seats and created standing circular ripples in their Styrofoam coffee cups. All in all, the atmosphere was one of total normality. But anyone seeing the exterior of the aircraft could tell different. This aircraft belonged to the 99th Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron.

Beyond the outer engines on each wing of the Hercules hung additional aircraft. Each of these was a Model-147SC drone. Originally designed to be high-speed targets with the designation Firebee-II, now they bore the informal name "Buffalo Hunter." In the rear cargo area of the DC-130E was a second crew which was now powering up both of the miniature aircraft, having already programmed them for a mission sufficiently secret that none of them actually knew what it was all about. They didn't have to. It was merely a matter of telling the drones what to do and when to do it. The chief technician, a thirty-year-old sergeant, was working a bird code-named Cody-193. His crew station allowed him to turn and look out a small porthole to inspect his bird visually, which he did even though there was no real reason to do so. The sergeant loved the things as a child will love a particularly entertaining toy. He'd worked with the drone program for ten years, and this particular one he had flown sixty-one times. That was a record for the area.

Cody-193 had a distinguished ancestry. Its manufacturers, Teledyne-Ryan of San Diego, California, had built Charles Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis*, but the company had never quite managed to cash in on that bit of aviation history. Struggling from one small contract to another, it had finally achieved financial stability by making targets. Fighter aircraft had to practice shooting at something. The Firebee drone had begun life as just that, a miniature jet aircraft whose mission was to die gloriously at the hands of a fighter pilot—except that the sergeant had never quite seen things that way. He was a drone controller, and his job, he thought, was to teach those strutting eagles a lesson by flying "his" bird in such a way as to make their missiles hit nothing more substantial than air. In fact, fighter pilots had learned to curse his name, though Air Force etiquette also required them to buy him a bottle of booze for every miss. Then a few years earlier someone had noted that if a Firebee drone was hard for our people to hit, the same might be true of others who fired at aircraft for more serious purposes than the annual William Tell competition. It was also a hell of a lot easier on the crews of low-level reconnaissance aircraft.

Cody-193's engine was turning at full power, hanging from its pylon and actually giving the mother aircraft a few knots of free airspeed. The sergeant gave it a final look before turning back to his instruments. Sixty-one small parachute symbols were painted on the

left side just forward of the wing, and with luck, in a few days he would paint a sixty-second. Though he was not clear on the precise nature of this mission, merely beating the competition was reason enough to take the utmost care in preparing his personal toy for the current game.

"Be careful, baby," the sergeant breathed as it dropped free. Cody-193 was on its own.

Sarah had a light dinner cooking. Kelly smelled it even before opening the door. Kelly came inside to see Rosen sitting in the living room.

"Where's Pam?"

"We gave her some medication," Sam answered. "She ought to be sleeping now."

"She is," Sarah confirmed, passing through the room on the way to the kitchen. "I just checked. Poor thing, she's exhausted, she's been doing without sleep for some time. It's catching up with her."

"But if she's been taking sleeping pills—"

"John, your body reacts strangely to the things," Sam explained. "It fights them off, or tries to, at the same time it becomes dependent on them. Sleep will be her big problem for a while."

"There's something else," Sarah reported. "She's very frightened of something, but she wouldn't say what it was." She paused, then decided that Kelly ought to know. "She's been abused, John. I didn't ask about it—one thing at a time—but somebody's given her a rough time."

"Oh?" Kelly looked up from the sofa. "What do you mean?"

"I mean she's been sexually assaulted," Sarah said in a calm, professional voice that belied her personal feelings.

"You mean raped?" Kelly asked in a low voice while the muscles of his arms tensed.

Sarah nodded, unable now to hide her distaste. "Almost certainly. Probably more than once. There is also evidence of physical abuse on her back and buttocks."

"I didn't notice."

"You're not a doctor," Sarah pointed out. "How did you meet?"

Kelly told her, remembering the look in Pam's eyes and knowing now what it must have been from. Why hadn't he noticed it? Why hadn't he noticed a lot of things? Kelly raged.

"So she was trying to escape.… I wonder if the same man got her

on the barbiturates?" Sarah asked. "Nice guy, whoever it was."

"You mean that somebody's been working her over, and got her on drugs?" Kelly said. "But why?"

"Kelly, please don't take this wrong… but she might have been a prostitute. Pimps control girls that way." Sarah Rosen hated herself for saying that, but this was business and Kelly had to know. "She's young, pretty, a runaway from a dysfunctional family. The physical abuse, the undernourishment, it all fits the pattern."

Kelly was looking down at the floor. "But she's not like that. I don't understand." But in some ways he did, he told himself, thinking back. The ways in which she'd clung to him and drawn him to her. How much was simply skill, and how much real human feelings? It was a question he had no desire to face. What was the right thing to do? Follow your mind? Follow your heart? And where might they lead?

"She's fighting back, John. She's got guts." Sarah sat across from Kelly. "She's been on the road for over four years, doing God knows what, but something in her won't quit. But she can't do it alone. She needs you. Now I have a question." Sarah looked hard at him. "Will you be there to help her?"

Kelly looked up, his blue eyes the color of ice as he searched for what he really felt. "You guys are really worked up about this, aren't you?"

Sarah sipped from a drink she'd made for herself. She was rather a dumpy woman, short and overweight. Her black hair hadn't seen a stylist in months. All in all she looked like the sort of woman who, behind the wheel of a car, attracts the hatred of male drivers. But she spoke with focused passion, and her intelligence was already very clear to her host. "Do you have any idea how bad it's getting? Ten years ago, drug abuse was so rare that I hardly had to bother with it. Oh, sure, I *knew* about it, read the articles from Lexington, and every so often we'd get a heroin case. Not very many. Just a black problem, people thought. Nobody really gave much of a damn. We're paying for that mistake now. In case you didn't notice, that's all changed—and it happened practically overnight. Except for the project I'm working on, I'm nearly full-time on kids with drug problems. I wasn't *trained* for this. I'm a *scientist*, an expert on adverse interactions, chemical structures, how we can design new drugs to do special things—but now I have to spend nearly all of my time in clinical work, trying to keep children alive who should

be just learning how to drink a beer but instead have their systems full of chemical *shit* that never should have made it outside a goddamned laboratory!"

"And it's going to get worse," Sam noted gloomily.

Sarah nodded. "Oh yeah, the next big one is cocaine. She needs you, John," Sarah said again, leaning forward. It was as though she had surrounded herself with her own storm cloud of electrical energy. "You'd damned well better be there for her, boy. You be there for her! Somebody dealt her a really shitty hand, but she's *fighting.* There's a *person* in there."

"Yes, ma'am," Kelly said humbly. He looked up and smiled, no longer confused. "In case you were worried, I decided that a while back."

"Good." Sarah nodded curtly.

"What do I do first?"

"More than anything else, she needs rest, she needs good food, and she needs time to flush the barbiturates out of her system. We'll support her with phenobarb, just in case we have withdrawal problems—I don't expect that. I examined her while you two were gone. Her physical problem is not so much addiction as exhaustion and undernourishment. She ought to be ten pounds heavier than she is. She ought to tolerate withdrawal rather well if we support her in other ways."

"Me, you mean?" Kelly asked.

"That's a lot of it." She looked over towards the open bedroom door and sighed, the tension going out of her. "Well, given her underlying condition, that phenobarb will probably have her out for the rest of the night. Tomorrow we start feeding her and exercising her. For now," Sarah announced, "we can feed ourselves."

Dinner talk focused deliberately on other subjects, and Kelly found himself delivering a lengthy discourse on the bottom contours of the Chesapeake Bay, segueing into what he knew about good fishing spots. It was soon decided that his visitors would stay until Monday evening. Time over the dinner table lengthened, and it was nearly ten before they rose. Kelly cleaned up, then quietly entered his bedroom to hear Pam's quiet breathing.

Only thirteen feet long, and a scant three thousand sixty-five pounds of mass—nearly half of that fuel—the Buffalo Hunter angled towards the ground as it accelerated to an initial cruising speed of

over five hundred knots. Already its navigational computer, made by Lear-Siegler, was monitoring time and altitude in a very limited way. The drone was programmed to follow a specific flight path and altitude, all painstakingly predetermined for systems that were by later standards absurdly primitive. For all that, Cody-193 was a sporty-looking beast. Its profile was remarkably like that of a blue shark with a protruding nose and underslung air intake for a mouth —stateside it was often painted with aggressive rows of teeth. In this particular case, an experimental paint scheme—flat white beneath and mottled brown and green atop—was supposed to make it harder to spot from the ground—and the air. It was also stealthy —a term not yet invented. Blankets of RAM—radar-absorbing material—were integral with the wing surfaces, and the air intake was screened to attenuate the radar return off the whirling engine blades.

Cody-193 crossed the border between Laos and North Vietnam at 11:41:38 local time. Still descending, it leveled out for the first time at five hundred feet above ground level, turning northeast, somewhat slower now in the thicker air this close to the ground. The low altitude and small size of the speeding drone made it a difficult target, but by no means an impossible one, and outlying gun positions of the dense and sophisticated North Vietnamese air-defense network spotted it. The drone flew directly towards a recently sited 37mm twin gun mount whose alert crew got their mount slued around quickly enough to loose twenty quick rounds, three of which passed within feet of the diminutive shape but missed. Cody-193 took no note of this, and neither jinked nor evaded the fire. Without a brain, without eyes, it continued along on its flight path rather like a toy train around a Christmas tree while its new owner ate breakfast in the kitchen. In fact it was being watched. A distant EC-121 Warning Star tracked -193 by means of a coded radar transponder located atop the drone's vertical fin.

"Keep going, baby," a major whispered to himself, watching his scope. He knew of the mission, how important it was, and why nobody else could be allowed to know. Next to him was a small segment from a topographical map. The drone turned north at the right place, dropping down to three hundred feet as it found the right valley, following a small tributary river. At least the guys who programmed it knew their stuff, the major thought.

-193 had burned a third of its fuel by now and was consuming the remaining amount very rapidly at low level, flying below the crests of the unseen hills to the left and right. The programmers had done their best, but there was one chillingly close call when a puff of wind forced it to the right before the autopilot could correct, and -193 missed an unusually tall tree by a scant seventy feet. Two militiamen were on that crest and fired off their rifles at it, and again the rounds missed. One of them started down the hill towards a telephone, but his companion called for him to stop as -193 flew blindly on. By the time a call was made and received, the enemy aircraft would be long gone, and besides, they'd done their duty in shooting at it. He worried about where their bullets had landed, but it was too late for that.

Colonel Robin Zacharias, USAF, was walking across the dirt of what might in other times and circumstances be called a parade ground, but there were no parades here. A prisoner for over six months, he faced every day as a struggle, contemplating misery more deep and dark than anything he'd been able to imagine. Shot down on his eighty-ninth mission, within sight of rotation home, a completely successful mission brought to a bloody end by nothing more significant than bad luck. Worse, his "bear" was dead. And he was probably the lucky one, the Colonel thought as he was led across the compound by two small, unfriendly men with rifles. His arms were tied behind him, and his ankles were hobbled because they were afraid of him despite their guns, and even with all that he was also being watched by men in the guard towers. *I must really look scary to the little bastards*, the fighter pilot told himself.

Zacharias didn't feel very dangerous. His back was still injured from the ejection. He'd hit the ground severely crippled, and his effort to evade capture had been little more than a token gesture, a whole hundred yards of movement over a period of five minutes, right into the arms of the gun crew which had shredded his aircraft.

The abuse had begun there. Paraded through three separate villages, stoned and spat upon, he'd finally ended up here. Wherever here was. There were sea birds. Perhaps he was close to the sea, the Colonel speculated. But the memorial in Salt Lake City, several blocks from his boyhood home, reminded him that gulls were not merely creatures of the sea. In the preceding months he had been subjected to all sorts of physical abuse, but it had

strangely slackened off in the past few weeks. Perhaps they'd become tired of hurting him, Zacharias told himself. And maybe there really was a Santa Claus, too, he thought, his head looking down at the dirt. There was little consolation to be had here. There were other prisoners, but his attempts at communicating with them had all failed. His cell had no windows. He'd seen two faces, neither of which he had recognized. On both occasions he'd started to call out a greeting only to be clubbed to the ground by one of his guards. Both men had seen him but made no sound. In both cases he'd seen a smile and a nod, the best that they could do. Both men were of his age, and, he supposed, about his rank, but that was all he knew. What was most frightening to a man who had much to be frightened about was that this was not what he had been briefed to expect. It wasn't the Hanoi Hilton, where all the POWs were supposed to have been congregated. Beyond that he knew virtually nothing, and the unknown can be the most frightening thing of all, especially to a man accustomed over a period of twenty years to being absolute master of his fate. His only consolation, he thought, was that things were as bad as they could be. On that, he was wrong.

"Good morning, Colonel Zacharias," a voice called across the compound. He looked up to see a man taller than himself, Caucasian, and wearing a uniform very different from that of his guards. He strode towards the prisoner with a smile. "Very different from Omaha, isn't it?"

That was when he heard a noise, a thin screeching whine, approaching from the southwest. He turned on instinct—an aviator must always look to see an aircraft, no matter where he might be. It appeared in an instant, before the guards had a chance to react.

Buffalo Hunter, Zacharias thought, standing erect, turning to watch it pass, staring at it, holding his head up, seeing the black rectangle of the camera window, whispering a prayer that the device was operating. When the guards realized what he was doing, a gun butt in the kidneys dropped the Colonel to the ground. Suppressing a curse, he tried to deal with the pain as a pair of boots came into his restricted field of vision.

"Do not get overly excited," the other man said. "It's heading to Haiphong to count the ships. Now, my friend, we need to become acquainted."

Cody-193 continued northeast, holding a nearly constant speed and altitude as it entered the dense air-defense belt surrounding North Vietnam's only major port. The cameras in the Buffalo Hunter recorded several triple-A batteries, observation points, and more than a few people with AK-47s, all of whom made at least a token shot at the drone. The only thing -193 had going for it was its small size. Otherwise it flew on a straight and level course while its cameras snapped away, recording the images on 2.25-inch film. About the only thing not shot at it were surface-to-air missiles: -193 was too low for that.

"Go, baby, go!" the Major said, two hundred miles away. Outside, the four piston engines of the Warning Star were straining to maintain the altitude necessary for him to watch the drone's progress. His eyes were locked on the flat glass screen, following the blinking blip of the radar transponder. Other controllers monitored the location of other American aircraft also visiting the enemy country, in constant communication with RED CROWN, the Navy ship that managed air operations from the seaward side. "Turn east, baby—now!"

Right on schedule, Cody-193 banked hard to the right, coming a touch lower and screaming over the Haiphong docks at 500 knots, a hundred tracer rounds in its wake. Longshoremen and sailors from various ships looked up in curiosity and irritation, and not a little fear for all the steel flying in the sky over their heads.

"Yes!" the Major shouted, loudly enough that the sergeant-controller to his left looked up in irritation. You were supposed to keep things quiet here. He keyed his mike to speak to Red Crown. "Cody-one-niner-three is bingo."

"Roger, copy bingo on one-niner-three," the acknowledgment came back. It was a false use of the "bingo" code word, which ordinarily meant an aircraft with a low fuel state, but it was a term so commonly used that it made a more than adequate disguise. The Navy enlisted man on the other end of the circuit then told an orbiting helicopter crew to wake up.

The drone cleared the coast right on schedule, keeping low for a few more miles before going into its final climb, down to its last hundred pounds of fuel as it reached its preprogrammed point thirty miles offshore and began circling. Now another transponder came on, one tuned to the search radars of U.S. Navy picket ships. One of these, the destroyer *Henry B. Wilson*, took note of the

expected target at the expected time and place. Her missile technicians used the opportunity to run a practice intercept problem, but had to switch off their illumination radars after a few seconds. It made the airedales nervous.

Circling at five thousand feet, Cody-193 finally ran out of fuel and became a glider. When the airspeed fell to the right number, explosive bolts blew a hatch cover off the top, deploying a parachute. The Navy helicopter was already on station, and the white 'chute made for a fine target. The drone's weight was a scant fifteen hundred pounds now, barely that of eight men. Wind and visibility cooperated this day. The 'chute was snagged on their first attempt, and the helicopter turned at once, heading for the carrier USS *Constellation*, where the drone was carefully lowered into a cradle, ending its sixty-second combat mission. Before the helicopter could find its own spot on the flight deck, a technician was already unfastening the cover plate on the photo compartment and yanking the heavy film cassette from its slot. He took it below at once, and handed it over to another technician in the ship's elaborate photo lab. Processing required a brief six minutes, and the still-damp film was wiped clean and handed over yet again to an intelligence officer. It was better than good. The film was run from one spool to another over a flat glass plate under which was a pair of fluorescent lights.

"Well, Lieutenant?" a captain asked tensely.

"Okay, sir, wait one…" Turning the spool, he pointed to the third image. "There's our first reference point… there's number two, she was right on course… okay, here's the IP… down the valley, over the hill—there, sir! We have two, three frames! Good ones, the sun was just right, clear day—you know why they call these babies Buffalo Hunters? It's—"

"Let me see!" The Captain nearly shoved the junior officer out of the way. There was a man there, an American, with two guards, and a fourth man—but it was the American he wanted to see.

"Here, sir." The Lieutenant handed over a magnifying glass. "We might get a good face off of this, and we can play with the negative some more if you give us a little time. Like I said, the cameras can tell the difference between a male and a female—"

"Mmmmm." The face was black, meaning a white man on the negative. But— "Damn, I can't tell."

"Cap'n, that's our job, okay?" He was an intelligence officer. The

Captain was not. “Let us do our job, sir.”

“He’s one of ours!”

“Sure as hell, sir, and this guy isn’t. Let me take these back to the lab for positive prints and blowups. The air wing will want a look at the port shots, too.”

“They can wait.”

“No, sir, they can’t,” the Lieutenant pointed out. But he took a pair of scissors and removed the relevant shots. The remainder of the roll was handed to a chief petty officer, while the Lieutenant and the Captain went back to the photo lab. Fully two months of work had gone into the flight of Cody-193, and the Captain lusted for the information he knew to be on those three two-and-a-quarter-inch frames.

An hour later he had it. An hour after that, he boarded a flight to Danang. Another hour and he was on a flight to Cubi Point Naval Air Station in the Philippines, followed by a puddle-jumper to Clark Air Force Base, and a KC-135 that would fly directly to California. Despite the time and rigors of the next twenty hours of flying, the Captain slept briefly and fitfully, having solved a mystery whose answer just might change the policy of his government.

4

First Light

Kelly slept nearly eight hours, again arising at the sound of the gulls to find that Pam wasn't there. He went outside and saw her standing on the quay, looking out over the water, still weary, still robbed of the ability to get the rest she needed. The Bay had its usual morning calm, the glassy surface punctuated by the circular ripples of bluefish chasing after insects. Conditions like this seemed so fitting to the start of a day; a gentle westerly breeze in his face, and the odd silence that allowed one to hear the rumble of a boat's motor from so far away that the boat could not be seen. It was the sort of time that allowed you to be alone with nature, but he knew that Pam merely felt alone. Kelly walked out to her as quietly as he could and touched her waist with both his hands.

"Good morning." She didn't answer for a long time, and Kelly stood still, holding her lightly, just enough that she could feel his touch. She was wearing one of his shirts, and he didn't want his touch to be sexual, only protective. He was afraid to press himself on a woman who'd suffered that kind of abuse, and could not predict where the invisible line might be.

"So now you know," she said, just loudly enough to be heard over the silence, unable to turn and face him.

"Yes," Kelly answered, equally quiet.

"What do you think?" Her voice was a painful whisper.

"I'm not sure what you mean, Pam." Kelly felt the trembling start, and he had to resist the urge to hold her tighter.

"About me."

"About you?" He allowed himself to get a little closer, altering his hold until his arms wrapped around her waist, but not tightly. "I

think you're beautiful. I think I'm real glad we met."

"I do drugs."

"The docs say you're trying to quit. That's good enough for me."

"It's worse than that, I've done things—" Kelly cut her off.

"I don't care about that, Pam. I've done things, too. And one thing you did, for me was very nice. You gave me something to care about, and I didn't ever expect that to happen." Kelly pulled her tighter. "The things you did before we met don't matter. You're not alone, Pam. I'm here to help if you want me to."

"When you find out…" she warned.

"I'll take my chances. I think I know the important parts already. I love you, Pam." Kelly surprised himself with those words. He'd been too afraid to voice the thought even to himself. It was too irrational, but again emotion won out over reason, and reason, for once, found itself approving.

"How can you say that?" Pam asked. Kelly gently turned her around and smiled.

"Damned if I know! Maybe it's your tangled hair—or your runny nose." He touched her chest through the shirt. "No, I think it's your heart. No matter what's behind you, your heart is just fine."

"You mean that, don't you?" she asked, looking at his chest. There was a long moment, then Pam smiled up at him, and that, too, was like a dawn. The orange-yellow glow of the rising sun lit up her face and highlighted her fair hair.

Kelly wiped the tears from her face, and the wet feel of her cheeks eliminated whatever doubts he might have had. "We're going to have to get you some clothes. This is no way for a lady to dress."

"Who says I'm a lady?"

"I do."

"I'm so scared!"

Kelly pulled her against his chest. "It's okay to be scared. I was scared all the time. The important part is to know that you're going to do it." His hands rubbed up and down her back. He hadn't intended to make this a sexual encounter, but he found himself becoming aroused until he realized that his hands were rubbing over scars made by men with whips or ropes or belts or other odious things. Then his eyes looked straight out over the water, and it was just as well that she couldn't see his face.

"You must be hungry," he said, stepping away from her, holding

on to her hands.

She nodded. “Starving.”

“That I can fix.” Kelly led her by the hand back to the bunker. Already he loved her touch. They met Sam and Sarah coming from the other side of the island after a morning’s walk and stretch.

“How are our two lovebirds?” Sarah asked with a beaming smile, because she’d already seen the answer, watching from two hundred yards away.

“Hungry!” Pam replied.

“And we’re getting a couple of screws today,” Kelly added with a wink.

“What?” Pam asked.

“Propellers,” Kelly explained. “For Sam’s boat.”

“Screws?”

“Sailor talk, trust me.” He grinned at her, and she wasn’t sure if she could believe it or not.

“That took long enough,” Tony observed, sipping coffee from a paper cup.

“Where’s mine?” Eddie demanded, irritable from lack of sleep.

“You told me to put the fucking heater outside, remember? Get your own.”

“You think I want all that smoke and shit in here? You can die from that monoxide shit,” Eddie Morello said irritably.

Tony was tired as well. Too tired to argue with this loudmouth. “Okay, man, well, the coffeepot’s outside. Cups are there too.”

Eddie grumbled and went outside. Henry, the third man, was bagging the product and kept out of the argument. It had actually worked out a little better than he’d planned. They’d even bought his story about Angelo, thus eliminating one potential partner and problem. There was at least three hundred thousand dollars’ worth of finished drugs now being weighed and sealed in plastic bags for sale to dealers. Things hadn’t gone quite as planned. The expected “few hours” of work had lingered into an all-night marathon as the three had discovered that what they paid for others to do wasn’t quite as easy as it looked. The three bottles of bourbon they’d brought along hadn’t helped either. Still and all, over three hundred thousand dollars of profit from sixteen hours of work wasn’t all that bad. And this was just the beginning. Tucker was just giving them a taste.

Eddie was still worried about the repercussions of Angelo's demise. But there was no turning back, not after the killing, and he'd been forced into backing Tony's play. He grimaced as he looked out of a vacant porthole towards an island north of what had once been a ship. Sunlight was reflecting off the windows of what was probably a nice, large power cruiser. Wouldn't it be nice to get one of those? Eddie Morello liked to fish, and maybe he could take his kids out sometime. It would be a good cover activity, wouldn't it?

Or maybe crab, he told himself. After all, he knew what crabs ate. The thought evoked a quiet bark of a laugh, followed by a brief shudder. Was he safe, linked up with these men? They—he—had just killed Angelo Vorano, not twenty-four hours earlier. But Angelo wasn't part of the outfit, and Tony Piaggi was. He was their legitimacy, their pipeline to the street, and that made him safe—for a while. As long as Eddie stayed smart and alert.

"What room do you suppose this was?" Tucker asked Piaggi, just to make conversation.

"What do you mean?"

"When this was a ship, looks like it was a cabin or something," he said, sealing the last envelope and placing it inside the beer cooler. "I never thought about that." Which was actually true.

"Captain's cabin, you think?" Tony wondered. It was something to pass the time, and he was thoroughly sick of what they'd done all night.

"Could be, I suppose. It's close to the bridge." The man stood, stretching, wondering why it was that he had to do all the hard work. The answer came easily enough. Tony was a "made" man. Eddie wanted to become one. He would never be, and neither would Angelo, Henry Tucker reflected, glad for it. He'd never trusted Angelo, and now he was no longer a problem. One thing about these people, they seemed to keep their word—and they would continue to, as long as he was their connection to the raw material, and not one minute longer. Tucker had no illusions about that. It had been good of Angelo to make his connection with Tony and Eddie, and Angelo's death had had exactly the effect on Henry that his own death would have on the other two: none. All men have their uses, Tucker told himself, closing the beer cooler. And the crabs had to eat too.

With luck that would be the last killing for a while. Tucker didn't

shrink from it, but he disliked complications that often came from killing. A good business ran smoothly, without fuss, and made money for everyone, which kept everyone happy, even the customers at the far end of the process. Certainly this load would keep them happy. It was good Asian heroin, scientifically processed and moderately cut with nontoxic elements that would give the users a rocketship high and a calm, gentle descent back to whatever reality they were trying to escape. The sort of rush they would want to experience again, and so they'd return to their pushers, who could charge a little extra for this very good stuff. "Asian Sweet" was already the trade name.

There was danger, having a street name. It gave the police something to target, a name to chase after, specific questions to ask, but that was the risk in having a hot product, and for that reason he'd selected his associates for their experience, connections, and security. His processing site had also been selected with an eye to security. They had a good five miles of visibility, and a fast boat with which to make their escape. Yeah, there was danger, to be sure, but all life was danger, and you measured risk against reward. Henry Tucker's reward for less than a single day's work was one hundred thousand dollars in untaxed cash, and he was willing to risk a lot for that. He was willing to risk far more for what Piaggi's connections could do, and now he had them interested. Soon they'd become as ambitious as he was.

The boat from Solomons arrived a few minutes early, with the propellers. The doctors hadn't told Kelly to keep Pam busy, but it was a simple enough prescription for her problems. Kelly wheeled the portable compressor back onto the dock and started it up, telling her how to regulate the airflow by keeping an eye on a gauge. Next he got the wrenches he needed and set them on the dock also.

"One finger, this one, two fingers, that one, and three fingers, this one here, okay?"

"Right," Pam replied, impressed with Kelly's expertise. He was hamming things up a little, the rest of them knew, but that was okay with everyone.

Kelly climbed down the ladder into the water, and his first job was to check the threads on the prop shafts, which appeared to be in decent shape. He reached his hand out of the water with one

finger up and was rewarded with the right wrench, which he used to remove the retaining nuts, then handed them up one at a time. The whole operation took only fifteen minutes, and the shiny new screws were fully attached, and new protective anodes set in place. He took his time giving the rudders a look, and decided that they'd be okay for the rest of the year, though Sam should keep an eye on them. It was a relief, as usual, to climb out of the water and breathe air that didn't taste like rubber.

"What do I owe you?" Rosen asked.

"For what?" Kelly took off his gear and switched off the compressor.

"I always pay a man for his work," the surgeon said somewhat self-righteously.

Kelly had to laugh. "Tell you what, if I ever need a back operation, you can make it a freebie. What is it you docs call this sort of thing?"

"Professional courtesy—but you're not a physician," Rosen objected.

"And you're not a diver. You're not a seaman yet, either, but we're going to fix that today, Sam."

"I was at the top of my power-squadron class!" Rosen boomed.

"Doc, when we got kids from training school, we used to say, 'That's fine, sonny, but this here's the fleet.' Let me get the gear stowed and we'll see how well you can really drive this thing."

"I bet I'm a better fisherman than you are," Rosen proclaimed.

"Next they're going to see who can pee the farthest," Sarah observed acidly to Pam.

"That, too." Kelly laughed on his way back inside. Ten minutes later he'd cleaned off and changed into a T-shirt and cutoffs.

He took a place on the flying bridge and watched Rosen prepare his boat for getting under way. The surgeon actually impressed Kelly, particularly with his line handling.

"Next time let your blowers work for a while before you light off the engines," Kelly said after Rosen started up.

"But it's a diesel."

"Number one, 'it' is a 'she,' okay? Number two, it's a good habit to get into. The next boat you drive might be gas. Safety, doc. You ever take a vacation and rent a boat?"

"Well, yes."

"In surgery you do the same thing the same way, every time?"

Kelly asked. “Even when you don’t really have to?”

Rosen nodded thoughtfully. “I hear you.”

“Take her out.” Kelly waved. This Rosen did, and rather smartly, the surgeon thought. Kelly didn’t: “Less rudder, more screws. You won’t always have a breeze helping you away from alongside. Propellers push water; rudders just direct it a little. You can always depend on your engines, especially at low speed. And steering breaks sometimes. Learn how to do without it.”

“Yes, Captain,” Rosen growled. It was like being an intern again, and Sam Rosen was used to having those people snap to his orders. Forty-eight, he thought, was a little old to be a student.

“You’re the captain. I’m just the pilot. These are my waters, Sam.” Kelly turned to look down at the well deck. “Don’t laugh, ladies, it’ll be your turn next. Pay attention!” Quietly: “You’re being a good sport, Sam.”

Fifteen minutes later they were drifting lazily on the tide, fishing lines out under a warm holiday sun. Kelly had little interest in fishing, and instead assigned himself lookout duty on the flying bridge while Sam taught Pam how to bait her line. Her enthusiasm surprised all of them. Sarah made sure that she was liberally covered with Coppertone to protect her pale skin, and Kelly wondered if a little tan would highlight her scars. Alone with his thoughts on the flying bridge, Kelly asked himself what sort of man would abuse a woman. He stared out through squinted eyes at a gently rolling surface dotted with boats. How many people like that were within his sight? Why was it that you couldn’t tell from looking at them?

Packing the boat was simple enough. They’d stocked in a good supply of chemicals, which they would have to replenish periodically, but Eddie and Tony had access through a chemical-supply business whose owner had casual ties to their organization.

“I want to see,” Tony said as they cast off. It wasn’t as easy as he’d imagined, snaking their eighteen-footer through the tidal swamps, but Eddie remembered the spot well enough, and the water was still clear.

“Sweet Jesus!” Tony gasped.

“Gonna be a good year for crabs,” Eddie noted, glad that Tony was shocked. A fitting kind of revenge, Eddie thought, but it was not a pleasant sight for any of them. Half a bushel’s worth of crabs

were already on the body. The face was fully covered, as was one arm, and they could see more of the creatures coming in, drawn by the smell of decay that drifted through the water as efficiently as through the air: nature's own form of advertising. On land, Eddie knew, it would be buzzards and crows.

"What do you figure? Two weeks, maybe three, and then no more Angelo."

"What if somebody—"

"Not much chance of that," Tucker said, not bothering to look. "Too shallow for a sailboat to risk coming in, and motorboats don't bother much. There's a nice wide channel half a mile south, fishing's better there, they say. I guess the crabbers don't like it here either."

Piaggi had trouble looking away, though his stomach had already turned over once. The Chesapeake Bay blue crabs, with their claws, were dismantling the body already softened by warm water and bacteria, one little pinch at a time, tearing with their claws, picking up the pieces with smaller pincers, feeding them into their strangely alien mouths. He'd wondered if there would still be a face there, eyes to stare up at a world left behind, but crabs covered it, and somehow it seemed likely that the eyes had been the first things to go. The frightening part, of course, was that if one man could die this way, so could another, and even though Angelo had already been dead, somehow Piaggi was sure that being disposed of this way was worse than mere death. He would have regretted Angelo's death, except that it was business, and… Angelo had deserved it. It was a shame, in a way, that his gruesome fate had to be kept a secret, but that was business, too. That was how you kept the cops from finding out. Hard to prove murder without a body, and here they had accidentally found a way to conceal a number of murders. The only problem was getting the bodies here—and not letting others know of the method of disposal, because people talk, Tony Piaggi told himself, as Angelo had talked. A good thing that Henry had found out about that.

"How 'bout crab cakes when we get back to town?" Eddie Morello asked with a laugh, just to see if he could make Tony puke.

"Let's get the fuck outa here," Piaggi replied quietly, settling into his seat. Tucker took the engine out of idle and picked his way out of the tidal marsh, back into the Bay.

Piaggi took a minute or two to get the sight out of his mind,

hoping that he could forget the horror of it and remember only the efficiency of their disposal method. After all, they might be using it again. Maybe after a few hours he'd see humor in it, Tony thought, looking at the cooler. Under the fifteen or so cans of National Bohemian was a layer of ice, under which were twenty sealed bags of heroin. In the unlikely event that anyone stopped them, it was unlikely that they'd look farther than the beer, the real fuel for Bay boaters. Tucker drove the boat north, and the others laid out their fishing rods as though they were trying to find a good place to harvest a few rockfish from the Chesapeake.

"Fishing in reverse," Morello said after a moment, then he laughed loudly enough that Piaggi joined in.

"Toss me a beer!" Tony commanded between laughs. He was a "made man," after all, and deserved respect.

"Idiots," Kelly said quietly to himself. That eighteen-footer was going too fast, too close to other fishing boats. It could catch a few lines, and certainly would throw a wake sure to disturb other craft. That was bad sea manners, something Kelly was always careful to observe. It was just too easy to—hell, it wasn't even hard enough to be "easy." All you had to do was buy a boat and you had the right to sail her around. No tests, no nothing. Kelly found Rosen's 7 x 50 binoculars and focused them on the boat that was coming close aboard. Three assholes, one of them holding up a can of beer in mock salute.

"Bear off, dickhead," he whispered to himself. The jerks in a boat, drinking beer, probably half-potted already, not even eleven o'clock yet. He gave them a good look, and was vaguely grateful that they passed no closer than fifty yards. He caught the name: *Henry's Eighth.* If he saw that name again, Kelly told himself, he'd remember to keep clear.

"I got one!" Sarah called.

"Heads up, we got a big wake coming in from starboard!" It arrived a minute later, causing the big Hatteras to rock twenty degrees left and right of vertical.

"That," Kelly said, looking down at the other three, "is what I mean by bad sea manners!"

"Aye aye!" Sam called back.

"I've still got him," Sarah said. She worked the fish in, Kelly saw, with consummate skill. "Pretty big, too!"

Sam got the net and leaned over the side. A moment later he stood back up. The net contained a struggling rockfish, maybe twelve or fourteen pounds. He dumped the net in a water-filled box in which the fish could wait to die. It seemed cruel to Kelly, but it was only a fish, and he'd seen worse things than that.

Pam started squealing a moment later as her line went taut. Sarah put her rod in its holder and started coaching her. Kelly watched. The friendship between Pam and Sarah was as remarkable as that between himself and the girl. Perhaps Sarah was taking the place of the mother who had been lacking in affection, or whatever Pam's mother had lacked. Regardless, Pam was responding well to the advice and counsel of her new friend. Kelly watched with a smile that Sam caught and returned. Pam was new at this, tripping twice as she walked the fish around. Again Sam did the honors with the net, this time recovering an eight-pound blue.

"Toss it back," Kelly advised. "They don't taste worth a damn!"

Sarah looked up. "Throw back her first fish? What are you, a Nazi? You have any lemon at your place, John?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I'll show you what you can do with a bluefish, that's why." She whispered something to Pam that evoked a laugh. The blue went into the same tank, and Kelly wondered how it and the rock would get along.

Memorial Day, Dutch Maxwell thought, alighting from his official car at Arlington National Cemetery. To many just a time for a five-hundred-mile auto race in Indianapolis, or a day off, or the traditional start of the summer beach season, as testified to by the relative lack of auto traffic in Washington. But not to him, and not to his fellows. This was their day, a time to remember fallen comrades while others attended to other things both more and less personal. Admiral Podulski got out with him, and the two walked slowly and out of step, as admirals do. Casimir's son, Lieutenant (junior grade) Stanislas Podulski, was not here, and probably never would be. His A-4 had been blotted from the sky by a surface-to-air missile, the reports had told them, nearly a direct hit. The young pilot had been too distracted to notice until perhaps the last second, when his voice had spoken its last epithet of disgust over the "guard" channel. Perhaps one of the bombs he'd been carrying had gone off sympathetically. In any case, the small attack-bomber had

dissolved into a greasy cloud of black and yellow, leaving little behind; and besides, the enemy wasn't all that fastidious about respecting the remains of fallen aviators. And so the son of a brave man had been denied his resting place with comrades. It wasn't something that Cas spoke about. Podulski kept such feelings inside.

Rear Admiral James Greer was at his place, as he'd been for the previous two years, about fifty yards from the paved driveway, setting flowers next to the flag at the headstone of his son.

"James?" Maxwell said. The younger man turned and saluted, wanting to smile in gratitude for their friendship on a day like this, but not quite doing so. All three wore their navy-blue uniforms because they carried with them a proper sort of solemnity. Their gold-braided sleeves glistened in the sun. Without a spoken word, all three men lined up to face the headstone of Robert White Greer, First Lieutenant, United States Marine Corps. They saluted smartly, each remembering a young man whom they had bounced on their knees, who had ridden his bike at Naval Station Norfolk and Naval Air Station Jacksonville with Cas's son, and Dutch's. Who had grown strong and proud, meeting his father's ships when they'd returned to port, and talked only about following in his father's footsteps, but not too closely, and whose luck had proven insufficient to the moment, fifty miles southwest of Danang. It was the curse of their profession, each knew but never said, that their sons were drawn to it also, partly from reverence for what their fathers were, partly from a love of country imparted by each to each, most of all from a love of their fellow man. As each of the men standing there had taken his chances, so had Bobby Greer and Stas Podulski taken theirs. It was just that luck had not smiled on two of the three sons.

Greer and Podulski told themselves at this moment that it *had* mattered, that freedom had a price, that some men must pay that price else there would be no flag, no Constitution, no holiday whose meaning people had the right to ignore. But in both cases, those unspoken words rang hollow. Greer's marriage had ended, largely from the grief of Bobby's death. Podulski's wife would never be the same. Though each man had other children, the void created by the loss of one was like a chasm never to be bridged, and as much as each might tell himself that, yes, it was worth the price, no man who could rationalize the death of a child could truly be called a man at all, and their real feelings were reinforced by the same

humanity that compelled them to a life of sacrifice. This was all the more true because each had feelings about the war that the more polite called "doubts," and which they called something else, but only among themselves.

"Remember the time Bobby went into the pool to get Mike Goodwin's little girl—saved her life?" Podulski asked. "I just got a note from Mike. Little Amy had twins last week, two little girls. She married an engineer down in Houston, works for NASA."

"I didn't even know she was married. How old is she now?" James asked.

"Oh, she must be twenty… twenty-five? Remember her freckles, how the sun used to breed them down at Jax?"

"Little Amy," Greer said quietly. "How they grow." Maybe she wouldn't have drowned that hot July day, but it was one more thing to remember about his son. *One life saved, maybe three?* That was something, wasn't it? Greer asked himself.

The three men turned and left the grave without a word, heading slowly back to the driveway. They had to stop there. A funeral procession was coming up the hill, soldiers of the Third Infantry Regiment, "The Old Guard," doing their somber duty, laying another man to rest. The admirals lined up again, saluting the flag draped on the casket and the man within. The young Lieutenant commanding the detail did the same. He saw that one of the flag officers wore the pale blue ribbon denoting the Medal of Honor, and the severity of his gesture conveyed the depth of his respect.

"Well, there goes another one," Greer said with quiet bitterness after they had passed by. "Dear God, what are we burying these kids for?"

"'Pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe…'" Cas quoted. "Wasn't all that long ago, was it? But when it came time to put the chips on the table, where were the bastards?"

"We *are* the chips, Cas," Dutch Maxwell replied. "This *is* the table."

Normal men might have wept, but these were not normal men. Each surveyed the land dotted with white stones. This had been the front lawn of Robert E. Lee once—the house was still atop the hill—and the placement of the cemetery had been the cruel gesture of a government that had felt itself betrayed by the officer. And yet Lee had in the end given his ancestral home to the service of those men

whom he had most loved. That was the kindest irony of this day, Maxwell reflected.

"How do things look up the river, James?"

"Could be better, Dutch. I have orders to clean house. I need a pretty big broom."

"Have you been briefed in on BOXWOOD GREEN?"

"No." Greer turned and cracked his first smile of the day. It wasn't much, but it was something, the others told themselves. "Do I want to be?"

"We'll probably need your help."

"Under the table?"

"You know what happened with KINGPIN," Casimir Podulski noted.

"They were damned lucky to get out," Greer agreed. "Keeping this one tight, eh?"

"You bet we are."

"Let me know what you need. You'll get everything I can find. You doing the 'three' work, Cas?"

"That's right." Any designator with a -3 at the end denoted the operations and planning department, and Podulski had a gift for that. His eyes glittered as brightly as his Wings of Gold in the morning sun.

"Good," Greer observed. "How's little Dutch doing?"

"Flying for Delta now. Copilot, he'll make captain in due course, and I'll be a grandfather in another month or so."

"Really? Congratulations, my friend."

"I don't blame him for getting out. I used to, but not now."

"What's the name of the SEAL who went in to get him?"

"Kelly. He's out, too," Maxwell said.

"You should have gotten the Medal for him, Dutch," Podulski said. "I read the citation. That was as hairy as they come."

"I made him a chief. I couldn't get the Medal for him." Maxwell shook his head. "Not for rescuing the son of an admiral, Cas. You know the politics."

"Yeah." Podulski looked up the hill. The funeral procession had stopped, and the casket was being moved off the gun carriage. A young widow was watching her husband's time on earth end. "Yeah, I know about politics."

• • •

Tucker eased the boat into the slip. The inboard-outboard drive made that easy. He cut the engine and grabbed the mooring lines, which he tied off quickly. Tony and Eddie lifted the beer cooler out while Tucker collected the loose gear and snapped a few covers into place before joining his companions on the parking lot.

"Well, that was pretty easy," Tony noted. The cooler was already in the back of his Ford Country Squire station wagon.

"Who do you suppose won the race today?" Eddie asked. They'd neglected to take a radio with them for the trip.

"I had a yard bet on Foyt, just to make it interesting."

"Not Andretti?" Tucker asked.

"He's a paisan, but he ain't lucky. Betting is business," Piaggi pointed out. Angelo was a thing of the past now, and the manner of his disposal was, after all, a little amusing, though the man might never eat crab cakes again.

"Well," Tucker said, "you know where to find me."

"You'll get your money," Eddie said, speaking out of place. "End of the week, the usual place." He paused. "What if demand goes up?"

"I can handle it," Tucker assured him. "I can get all you want."

"What the hell kind of pipeline do you have?" Eddie asked, pushing further.

"Angelo wanted to know that, too, remember? Gentlemen, if I told you that, you wouldn't need me, would you?"

Tony Piaggi smiled. "Don't trust us?"

"Sure." Tucker smiled. "I trust you to sell the stuff and share the money with me."

Piaggi nodded approval. "I like smart partners. Stay that way. It's good for all of us. You have a banker?"

"Not yet, haven't thought about it much," Tucker lied.

"Start thinking, Henry. We can help set you up, overseas bank. It's secure, numbered account, all that stuff. You can have somebody you know check it out. Remember, they can track money if you're not careful. Don't live it up too much. We've lost a lot of friends that way."

"I don't take chances, Tony."

Piaggi nodded. "Good way to think. You have to be careful in this business. The cops are getting smart."

"Not smart enough." Neither were his partners, when it came to that, but one thing at a time.

5

Commitments

The package arrived with a very jet-lagged Captain at the Navy's intelligence headquarters in Suitland, Maryland. On-staff photo-interpretation experts were supplemented by specialists from the Air Force's 1127th Field Activities Group at Fort Belvoir. It took twenty hours to go through the entire process, but the frames from the Buffalo Hunter were unusually good, and the American on the ground had done what he was supposed to do: look up and stare at the passing reconnaissance drone.

"Poor bastard paid the price for it," a Navy chief observed to his Air Force counterpart. Just behind him the photo caught an NVA soldier with his rifle up and reversed. "I'd like to meet you in a dark alley, you little fuck."

"What do you think?" The Air Force senior master sergeant slid an ID photo over.

"Close enough I'd bet money on it." Both intelligence specialists thought it odd that they had such a thin collection of files to compare with these photographs, but whoever had guessed had guessed well. They had a match. They didn't know that what they had was a series of photographs of a dead man.

• • •

Kelly let her sleep, glad that she was able to without any chemical help. He got himself dressed, went outside, and ran around his island twice—the circumference was about three quarters of a mile—to work up a sweat in the still morning air. Sam and Sarah, early risers also, bumped into him while he was cooling down on the dock.

“The change in you is remarkable, too,” she observed. She paused for a moment. “How was Pam last night?”

The question jarred Kelly into a brief silence, followed by: *“What?”*

“Oh, shit, Sarah…” Sam looked away and nearly laughed. His wife flushed almost as crimson as the dawn.

“She persuaded me not to medicate her last night,” Sarah explained. “She was a little nervous, but she wanted to try and I let her talk me out of it. That’s what I meant, John. Sorry.”

How to explain last night? First he’d been afraid to touch her, afraid to seem to be pressing himself on her, and then she’d taken that as a sign that he didn’t like her anymore, and then… things had worked out.

“Mainly she has some damned-fool idea—” Kelly stopped himself. Pam could talk to her about this, but it wasn’t proper for him to do so, was it? “She slept fine, Sarah. She really wore herself out yesterday.”

“I don’t know that I’ve ever had a more determined patient.” She stabbed a hard finger into Kelly’s chest. “You’ve helped a lot, young man.”

Kelly looked away, not knowing what he was supposed to say. *The pleasure was all mine*? Part of him still believed that he was taking advantage of her. He’d stumbled upon a troubled girl and… exploited her? No, that wasn’t true. He loved her. Amazing as that seemed. His life was changing into something recognizably normal —probably. He was healing her, but she was healing him as well.

“She’s—she’s worried that I won’t—the stuff in her past, I mean. I really don’t care much about that. You’re right, she’s a very strong girl. Hell, I have a somewhat checkered past, too, y’know? I ain’t no priest, guys.”

“Let her talk it out,” Sam said. “She needs that. You have to let things in the open before you start dealing with them.”

“You’re sure it won’t affect you? It might be some pretty ugly stuff,” Sarah observed, watching his eyes.

“Uglier than war?” Kelly shook his head. Then he changed the subject. “What about the… medications?”

The question relieved everyone, and Sarah was talking work again. “She’s been through the most crucial period. If there were going to be a serious withdrawal reaction, it would have happened already. She may still have periods of agitation, brought on by

external stress, for example. In that case you have the phenobarb, and I've already written out instructions for you, but she's gutting it out. Her personality is far stronger than she appreciates. You're smart enough to see if she's having a bad time. If so, make her—*make her*—take one of the tablets."

The idea of forcing her to do anything bridled Kelly. "Look, doc, I can't—"

"Shut up, John. I don't mean jamming it down her throat. If you tell her that she really needs it, she's going to listen to you, okay?"

"How long?"

"For another week, maybe ten days," Sarah said after a moment's reflection.

"And then?"

"Then you can think about the future you two might have together," Sarah told him.

Sam felt uneasy getting this personal. "I want her fully checked out, Kelly. When's the next time you're due into Baltimore?"

"A couple of weeks, maybe sooner. Why?"

Sarah handled that: "I wasn't able to do a very thorough exam. She hasn't seen a physician in a long time, and I'll feel better if she has a CPX—complete history and physical. Who do you think, Sam?"

"You know Madge North?"

"She'll do," Sarah thought. "You know, Kelly, it wouldn't hurt for you to get checked out, too."

"Do I look sick?" Kelly held his arms out, allowing them to survey the magnificence of his body.

"Don't give me that crap," Sarah snapped back. "When she shows up, you show up. I want to make sure you're both completely healthy—period. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"One more thing, and I want you to hear me through," Sarah went on. "She needs to see a psychiatrist."

"Why?"

"John, life isn't a movie. People don't put their problems behind and ride into a sunset in real life, okay? She's been sexually abused. She's been on drugs. Her self-esteem isn't very high right now. People in her position blame *themselves* for being victims. The right kind of therapy can help to fix that. What you're doing is important, but she needs professional help, too. Okay?"

Kelly nodded. “Okay.”

“Good,” Sarah said, looking up at him. “I like you. You listen well.”

“Do I have a choice, ma’am?” Kelly inquired with a twisted grin.

She laughed. “No, not really.”

“She’s always this pushy,” Sam told Kelly. “She really ought to be a nurse. Docs are supposed to be more civilized. Nurses are the ones who push us around.” Sarah kicked her husband playfully.

“Then I better never run into a nurse,” Kelly said, leading them back off the dock.

Pam ended up sleeping just over ten hours, and without benefit of barbiturates, though she did awaken with a crushing headache which Kelly treated with aspirin.

“Get Tylenol,” Sarah told him. “Easier on the stomach.” The pharmacologist made a show of checking Pam again while Sam packed up their gear. On the whole she liked what she saw. “I want you to gain five pounds before I see you again.”

“But—”

“And John’s going to bring you in to see us so that we can get you completely checked out—two weeks, say?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Kelly nodded surrender again.

“But—”

“Pam, they ganged up on me. I have to go in, too,” Kelly reported in a remarkably docile voice.

“You have to leave so early?”

Sarah nodded. “We really should have left last night, but what the hell.” She looked at Kelly. “If you don’t show up like I said, I’ll call you and scream.”

“Sarah. Jesus, you’re a pushy broad!”

“You should hear what Sam says.”

Kelly walked her out to the dock, where Sam’s boat was already rumbling with life. She and Pam hugged. Kelly tried just to shake hands, but had to submit to a kiss. Sam jumped down to shake their hands.

“New charts!” Kelly told the surgeon.

“Aye, Cap’n.”

“I’ll get the lines.”

Rosen was anxious to show him what he’d learned. He backed out, drawing mainly on his starboard shaft and turning his Hatteras

within her own length. The man didn't forget. A moment later Sam increased power on both engines and drove straight out, heading directly for water he knew to be deep. Pam just stood there, holding Kelly's hand, until the boat was a white speck on the horizon.

"I forgot to thank her," Pam said finally.

"No, you didn't. You just didn't say it, that's all. So how are you today?"

"My headache's gone." She looked up at him. Her hair needed washing, but her eyes were clear and there was a spring in her step. Kelly felt the need to kiss her, which he did. "So what do we do now?"

"We need to talk," Pam said quietly. "It's time."

"Wait here." Kelly went back into the shop and returned with a pair of folding lounge chairs. He gestured her into one. "Now tell me how terrible you are."

Pamela Starr Madden was three weeks shy of her twenty-first birthday, Kelly learned, finally discovering her surname as well. Born to a lower-working-class family in the Panhandle region of northern Texas, she'd grown up under the firm hand of a father who was the sort of man to make a Baptist minister despair. Donald Madden was a man who understood the form of religion, but not the substance, who was strict because he didn't know how to love, who drank from frustration with life—and was angry at himself for that, too—yet never managed to come to terms with it. When his children misbehaved, he beat them, usually with a belt or a switch of wood until his conscience kicked in, something which did not always happen sooner than fatigue. The final straw for Pam, never a happy child, had come on the day after her sixteenth birthday, when she'd stayed late at a church function and ended up going on what was almost a date with friends, feeling that she finally had the right to do so. There hadn't even been a kiss at the end of it from the boy whose household was almost as restrictive as her own. But that hadn't mattered to Donald Madden. Arriving home at ten-twenty on a Friday evening, Pam came into a house whose lights blazed with anger, there to face an enraged father and a thoroughly cowed mother.

"The things he said…" Pam was looking down at the grass as she spoke. "I didn't do any of that. I didn't even *think* of doing it, and Albert was so innocent… but so was I, then."

Kelly squeezed her hand. "You don't have to tell me any of this,

Pam." But she did have to, and Kelly knew that, and so he continued to listen.

After sustaining the worst beating of her sixteen years, Pamela Madden had slipped out her first-floor bedroom window and walked the four miles to the center of the bleak, dusty town. She'd caught a Greyhound bus for Houston before dawn, only because it had been the first bus, and it hadn't occurred to her to get off anywhere in between. So far as she could determine, her parents had never even reported her as missing. A series of menial jobs and even worse housing in Houston had merely given emphasis to her misery, and in short order she'd decided to head elsewhere. With what little money she'd saved, she'd caught yet another bus—this one Continental Trailways—and stopped in New Orleans. Scared, thin, and young, Pam had never learned that there were men who preyed on young runaways. Spotted almost at once by a well-dressed and smooth-talking twenty-five-year-old named Pierre Lamarck, she'd taken his offer of shelter and assistance after he had sprung for dinner and sympathy. Three days later he had become her first lover. A week after that, a firm slap across the face had coerced the sixteen-year-old girl into her second sexual adventure, this one with a salesman from Springfield, Illinois, whom Pam had reminded of his own daughter—so much so that he'd engaged her for the entire evening, paying Lamarck two hundred fifty dollars for the experience. The day after that, Pam had emptied one of her pimp's pill containers down her throat, but only managed to make herself vomit, earning a savage beating for the defiance.

Kelly listened to the story with a serene lack of reaction, his eyes steady, his breathing regular. Inwardly it was another story entirely. The girls he'd had in Vietnam, the little childlike ones, and the few he'd taken since Tish's death. It had never occurred to him that those young women might not have enjoyed their life and work. He'd never even thought about it, accepting their feigned reactions as genuine human feelings—for wasn't he a decent, honorable man? But he had paid for the services of young women whose collective story might not have been the least bit different from Pam's, and the shame of it burned inside him like a torch.

By nineteen, she'd escaped Lamarck and three more pimps, always finding herself caught with another. One in Atlanta had enjoyed whipping his girls in front of his peers, usually using light cords. Another in Chicago had started Pam on heroin, the better to

control a girl he deemed a little too independent, but she'd left him the next day, proving him right. She'd watched another girl die in front of her eyes from a hot-shot of uncut drugs, and that frightened her more than the threat of a beating. Unable to go home—she'd called once and had the phone slammed down by her mother even before she could beg for help—and not trusting the social services which might have helped her along a different path, she finally found herself in Washington, D.C., an experienced street prostitute with a drug habit that helped her to hide from what she thought of herself. But not enough. And that, Kelly thought, was probably what had saved her. Along the way she'd had two abortions, three cases of venereal disease, and four arrests, none of which had ever come to trial. Pam was crying now, and Kelly moved to sit beside her.

"You see what I really am?"

"Yes, Pam. What I see is one very courageous lady." He wrapped his arm tightly around her. "Honey, it's okay. Anybody can mess up. It takes guts to change, and it really takes guts to talk about it."

The final chapter had begun in Washington with someone named Roscoe Fleming. By this time Pam was hooked solidly on barbiturates, but still fresh and pretty-looking when someone took the time to make her so, enough to command a good price from those who liked young faces. One such man had come up with an idea, a sideline. This man, whose name was Henry, had wanted to broaden his drug business, and being a careful chap who was used to having others do his bidding, he'd set up a stable of girls to run drugs from his operation to his distributors. The girls he bought from established pimps in other cities, in each case a straight cash transaction, which each of the girls found ominous. This time Pam tried to run almost at once, but she'd been caught and beaten severely enough to break three ribs, only later to learn of her good fortune that the first lesson hadn't gone further. Henry had also used the opportunity to cram barbiturates into her, which both attenuated the pain and increased her dependence. He'd augmented the treatment by making her available to any of his associates who wanted her. In this, Henry had achieved what all the others had failed to do. He had finally cowed her spirit.

Over a period of five months, the combination of beatings, sexual abuse, and drugs had depressed her to a nearly catatonic state until she'd been jarred back to reality only four weeks earlier by tripping

over the body of a twelve-year-old boy in a doorway, a needle still in his arm. Remaining outwardly docile, Pam had struggled to cut her drug use. Henry's other friends hadn't complained. She was a much better lay this way, they thought, and their male egos had attributed it to their prowess rather than her increased level of consciousness. She'd waited for her chance, waiting for a time when Henry was away somewhere, because the others got looser when he wasn't around. Only five days earlier she'd packed what little she had and bolted. Penniless—Henry had never let them have money—she'd hitched her way out of town.

"Tell me about Henry," Kelly said softly when she'd finished.

"Thirty, black, about your height."

"Did any other girls get away?"

Pam's voice went cold as ice. "I only know of one who tried. It was around November. He… killed her. He thought she was going to the cops, and"—she looked up—"he made us all watch. It was terrible."

Kelly said quietly, "So why did you try, Pam?"

"I'd rather die than do that again," she whispered, the thought now out in the open. "I wanted to die. That little boy. Do you know what happens? You just *stop*. Everything stops. And I was helping. I helped kill him."

"How did you get out?"

"Night before… I… fucked them all… so they'd like me, let me… let me out of their sight. You understand now?"

"You did what was necessary to escape," Kelly replied. It required every bit of his strength to keep his voice even. "Thank God."

"I wouldn't blame you if you took me back and sent me on my way. Maybe Daddy was right, what he said about me."

"Pam, do you remember going to church?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the story that ends, 'Go forth and sin no more'? You think that I've never done something wrong? Never been ashamed? Never been scared? You're not alone, Pam. Do you have any idea how brave you've been to tell me all this?"

Her voice by now was entirely devoid of emotion. "You have a right to know."

"And now I do, and it doesn't change anything." He paused for a second. "Yes, it does. You're even gutsier than I thought you were, honey."

"Are you sure? What about later?"

"The only 'later' thing I'm worried about is those people you left behind," Kelly said.

"If they ever find me…" Emotion was coming back now. Fear. "Every time we go back to the city, they might see me."

"We'll be careful about that," Kelly said.

"I'll never be safe. Never."

"Yeah, well, there's two ways to handle that. You can just keep running and hiding. Or you can help put them away."

She shook her head emphatically. "The girl they killed. They knew. They knew she was going to the cops. That's why I can't trust the police. Besides, you don't know how scary these people are."

Sarah had been right about something else, Kelly saw. Pam was wearing her halter again, and the sun had given definition to the marks on her back. There were places which the sun didn't darken as it did the others. Echoes of the welts and bloody marks that others had made for their pleasure. It had all started with Pierre Lamarck, or more correctly, Donald Madden, small, cowardly men who managed their relations with women through force.

Men? Kelly asked himself.

No.

Kelly told her to stay in place for a minute and headed off into the machinery bunker. He returned with eight empty soda and beer cans, which he set on the ground perhaps thirty feet from their chairs.

"Put your fingers in your ears," Kelly told her.

"Why?"

"Please," he replied. When she did, Kelly's right hand moved in a blur, pulling a .45 Colt automatic from under his shirt. He brought it up into a two-hand hold, going left to right. One at a time, perhaps half a second apart, the cans alternatively fell over or flew a foot or two in the air to the crashing report of the pistol. Before the last was back on the ground from its brief flight, Kelly had ejected the spent magazine and was inserting another, and seven of the cans moved a little more. He checked to be sure the weapon was clear, dropped the hammer, and replaced it in his belt before sitting down next to her.

"It doesn't take all that much to be scary to a young girl without friends. It takes a little more to scare me. Pam, if anybody even *thinks* about hurting you, he has to talk to me first."

She looked over at the cans, then up at Kelly, who was pleased with himself and his marksmanship. The demonstration had been a useful release for him, and in the brief flurry of activity, he'd assigned a name or a face to each of the cans. But he could see she still was not convinced. It would take a little time.

"Anyway." He sat down with Pam again. "Okay, you told me your story, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you still think it makes a difference to me?"

"No. You say it doesn't. I guess I believe you."

"Pam, not all the men in the world are like that—not very many, as a matter of fact. You've been unlucky, that's all. There isn't anything wrong with you. Some people get hurt in accidents or get sick. Over in Vietnam I saw men get killed from bad luck. It almost happened to me. It wasn't because there was something wrong with them. It was just bad luck, being in the wrong place, turning left instead of right, looking the wrong way. Sarah wants you to meet some docs and talk it through. I think she's right. We're going to get you all fixed up."

"And then?" Pam Madden asked. He took a very deep breath, but it was too late to stop now.

"Will you… stay with me, Pam?"

She looked as though she'd been slapped. Kelly was stunned by her reaction. "You can't, you're just doing it because—"

Kelly stood and lifted her by the arms. "Listen to me, okay? You've been sick. You're getting better. You've taken everything that goddamned world could toss at you, and you didn't quit. I *believe* in you! It's going to take time. Everything does. But at the end of it, you will be one goddamned fine person." He set her down on her feet and stepped back. He was shaking with rage, not only at what had happened to her, but at himself for starting to impose his will on her. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. Please, Pam… just believe in yourself a little."

"It's hard. I've done terrible things."

Sarah was right. She did need professional help. He was angry at himself for not knowing exactly what to say.

The next few days settled into a surprisingly easy routine. Whatever her other qualities, Pam was a horrible cook, which failing made her cry twice with frustration, though Kelly managed to choke

down everything she prepared with a smile and a kind word. But she learned quickly, too, and by Friday she'd figured out how to make hamburger into something tastier than a piece of charcoal. Through it all, Kelly was there, encouraging her, trying hard not to be overpowering and mainly succeeding. A quiet word, a gentle touch, and a smile were his tools. She was soon aping his habit of rising before dawn. He started getting her to exercise. This came very hard indeed. Though basically healthy, she hadn't run more than half a block in years, and so he made her walk around the island, starting with two laps, by the end of the week up to five. She spent her afternoons in the sun, and without much to wear she most often did so in her panties and bra. She acquired the beginnings of a tan, and never seemed to notice the thin, pale marks on her back that made Kelly's blood chill with anger. She began to pay more serious attention to her appearance, showering and washing her hair at least once per day, brushing it out to a silky gloss, and Kelly was always there to comment on it. Not once did she appear to need the phenobarbital Sarah had left behind. Perhaps she struggled once or twice, but by using exercise instead of chemicals, she worked herself onto a normal wake-sleep routine. Her smiles acquired more confidence, and twice he caught her looking into the mirror with something other than pain in her eyes.

"Pretty nice, isn't it?" he asked Saturday evening, just after her shower.

"Maybe," she allowed.

Kelly lifted a comb from the sink and started going through her wet hair. "The sun has really lightened it up for you."

"It took a while to get all the dirt out," she said, relaxing to his touch.

Kelly struggled with a tangle, careful not to pull too hard. "But it did come out, Pammy, didn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess so, maybe," she told the face in the mirror.

"How hard was that to say, honey?"

"Pretty hard." A smile, a real one with warmth and conviction.

Kelly set the comb down and kissed the base of her neck, letting her watch in the mirror. Kelly got the comb back and continued his work. It struck him as very unmanly, but he loved doing this. "There, all straight, no tangles."

"You really ought to buy a hair-dryer."

Kelly shrugged. "I've never needed one."

Pam turned around and took his hands. “You will, if you still want to.”

He was quiet for perhaps ten seconds, and when he spoke, the words didn’t quite come out as they should, for now the fear was his. “You sure?”

“Do you still—”

“Yes!” It was hard lifting her with wet hair, still nude and damp from the shower, but a man had to hold his woman at a time like this. She was changing. Her ribs were less pronounced. She’d gained weight on a regular, healthy diet. But it was the person inside who had changed the most. Kelly wondered what miracle had taken place, afraid to believe that he was part of it, but knowing that it was so. He set her down after a moment, looking at the mirth in her eyes, proud that he’d helped to put it there.

“I have my rough edges, too,” Kelly warned her, unaware of the look in his eyes.

“I’ve seen most of them,” she assured him. Her hands started rubbing over his chest, tanned and matted with dark hair, marked with scars from combat operations in a faraway place. Her scars were inside, but so were some of his, and together each would heal the other. Pam was sure of that now. She’d begun to look at the future as more than a dark place where she could hide and forget. It was now a place of hope.

6

Ambush

The rest was easy. They made a quick boat trip to Solomons, where Pam was able to buy a few simple things. A beauty shop trimmed her hair. By the end of her second week with Kelly, she'd started to run and had gained weight. Already she could wear a two-piece swimsuit without an overt display of her rib cage. Her leg muscles were toning up; what had been slack was now taut, as it ought to be on a girl her age. She still had her demons. Twice Kelly woke to find her trembling, sweating, and murmuring sounds that never quite turned into words but were easily understood. Both times his touch calmed her, but not him. Soon he was teaching her to run *Springer*, and whatever the defects in her schooling, she was smart enough. She quickly grasped how to do the things that most boaters never learned. He even took her swimming, surprised somehow that she'd learned the skill in the middle of Texas.

Mainly he loved her, the sight, the sound, the smell, and most of all the feel of Pam Madden. Kelly found himself slightly anxious if he failed to see her every few minutes, as though she might somehow disappear. But she was always there, catching his eye, smiling back playfully. Most of the time. Sometimes he'd catch her with a different expression, allowing herself to look back into the darkness of her past or forward into an alternate future different from that which he had already planned. He found himself wishing that he could reach into her mind and remove the bad parts, knowing that he would have to trust others to do that. At those times, and the others, for the most part, he'd find an excuse to head her way, and let his fingertips glide over her shoulder, just to be sure she knew that he was there.

Ten days after Sam and Sarah had left, they had a little ceremony. He let her take the boat out, tie the bottle of phenobarbital to a large rock, and dump it over the side. The splash it made seemed a fitting and final end to one of her problems. Kelly stood behind her, his strong arms about her waist, watching the other boats traveling the Bay, and he looked into a future bright with promise.

"You were right," she said, stroking his forearms.

"That happens sometimes," Kelly replied with a distant smile, only to be stunned by her next statement.

"There are others, John, other women Henry has… like Helen, the one he killed."

"What do you mean?"

"I have to go back. I have to help them… before Henry—before he kills more of them."

"There's danger involved, Pammy," Kelly said slowly.

"I know… but what about them?"

It was a symptom of her recovery, Kelly knew. She had become a normal person again, and normal people worried about others.

"I can't hide forever, can I?" Kelly could feel her fear, but her words defied it and he held her a little tighter.

"No, you can't, not really. That's the problem. It's too hard to hide."

"Are you sure you can trust your friend on the police?" she asked.

"Yes: he knows me. He's a lieutenant I did a job for a year ago. A gun got tossed, and I helped find it. So he owes me one. Besides, I ended up helping to train their divers, and I made some friends." Kelly paused. "You don't have to do it, Pam. If you just want to walk away from it, that's okay with me. I don't *have* to go back to Baltimore ever, except for the doctor stuff."

"All the things they did to me, they're doing to the others. If I don't do something, then it'll never really be gone, will it?"

Kelly thought about that, and his own demons. You simply could not run away from some things. He knew. He'd tried. Pam's collection was in its way more horrible than his own, and if their relationship were to go further, those demons had to find their resting place.

"Let me make a phone call."

"Lieutenant Allen," the man said into his phone in Western District.

The air conditioning wasn't working well today, and his desk was piled with work as yet undone.

"Frank? John Kelly," the detective heard, bringing a smile.

"How's life in the middle of the Bay, fella?" *Wouldn't I like to be there.*

"Quiet and lazy. How about you?" the voice asked.

"I wish," Allen answered, leaning back in his swivel chair. A large man, and like most cops of his generation, a World War II veteran—in his case a Marine artilleryman—Allen had risen from foot patrol on East Monument Street to homicide. For all that, the work was not as demanding as most thought, though it did carry the burden associated with the untimely end of human life. Allen immediately noted the change in Kelly's voice. "What can I do for you?"

"I, uh, met somebody who might need to talk with you."

"How so?" the cop asked, fishing around in his shirt pocket for a cigarette and matches.

"It's business, Frank. Information regarding a killing."

The cop's eyes narrowed a bit, while his brain changed gears. "When and where?"

"I don't know yet, and I don't like doing this over a phone line."

"How serious?"

"Just between us for now?"

Allen nodded, staring out the window. "That's fine, okay."

"Drug people."

Allen's mind went *click.* Kelly had said his informant was "somebody," not a "man." That made the person a female, Allen figured. Kelly was smart, but not all that sophisticated in this line of work. Allen had heard the shadowy reports of a drug ring using women for something or other. Nothing more than that. It wasn't his case. It was being handled by Emmet Ryan and Tom Douglas downtown, and Allen wasn't even supposed to know that much.

"There's at least three drug organizations up and running now. None of them are very nice folks," Allen said evenly. "Tell me more."

"My friend doesn't want much involvement. Just some information for you, that's it, Frank. If it goes further, we can reevaluate then. We're talking some scary people if this story is true."

Allen considered that. He'd never dwelt upon Kelly's background, but he knew enough. Kelly was a trained diver, he knew, a bosun's

mate who'd fought in the brownwater Navy in the Mekong Delta, supporting the 9th Infantry; a squid, but a very competent, careful squid whose services had come highly recommended to the force from somebody in the Pentagon and who'd done a nice job retraining the force's divers, and, by the way, earning a nice check for it, Allen reminded himself. The "person" had to be female. Kelly would never worry about guarding a man that tightly. Men just didn't think that way about other men. If nothing else, it sure sounded interesting.

"You're not screwing me around, are you?" he had to ask.

"That's not my way, man," Kelly assured him. "My rules: it's for information purposes only, and it's a quiet meet. Okay?"

"You know, anybody else, I'd probably say come right in here and that would be it, but I'll play along with you. You did break the Gooding case open for me. We got him, you know. Life plus thirty. I owe you for that. Okay, I'll play along for now. Fair enough?"

"Thanks. What's your schedule like?"

"Working late shift this week." It was just after four in the afternoon, and Allen had just come on duty. He didn't know that Kelly had called three times that day already without leaving a message. "I get off around midnight, one o'clock, like that. It depends on the night," he explained. "Some are busier than others."

"Tomorrow night. I'll pick you up at the front door. We can have a little supper together."

Allen frowned. This was like a James Bond movie, secret agent crap. But he did know Kelly to be a serious man, even if he didn't know squat about police work.

"See you then, sport."

"Thanks, Frank. 'Bye." The line clicked off and Allen went back to work, making a note on his desk calendar.

"Are you scared?" he asked.

"A little," she admitted.

He smiled. "That's normal. But you heard what I said. He doesn't know anything about you. You can always back out if you want. I'll be carrying a gun all the time. And it's just a talk. You can get in and get out. We'll do it in one day—one night, really. And I'll be with you all the time."

"Every minute?"

"Except when you're in the ladies' room, honey. There you have

to look out for yourself." She smiled and relaxed.

"I have to fix dinner," she said, heading off to the kitchen.

Kelly went outside. Something in him called for more weapons practice, but he'd done that already. Instead he walked into the equipment bunker and took the .45 down from the rack. First he depressed the stud and action spring. Next he swiveled the bushing. That allowed the spring to go free. Kelly dismounted the slide assembly, removing the barrel, and now the pistol was field-stripped. He held the barrel up to a light, and, as expected, it was dirty from firing. He cleaned every surface, using rags, Hoppe's cleaning solvent, and a toothbrush until there was no trace of dirt on any metal surface. Next he lightly oiled the weapon. Not too much oil, for that would attract dirt and grit, which could foul and jam the pistol at an inconvenient moment. Finished cleaning, he reassembled the Colt quickly and expertly—it was something he could and did do with his eyes closed. It had a nice feel in his hand as he jacked the slide back a few times to make sure it was properly assembled. A final visual inspection confirmed it.

Kelly took two loaded magazines from a drawer, along with a single loose round. He inserted one loaded clip into the piece, working the slide to load the first round in the chamber. He carefully lowered the hammer before ejecting the magazine and sliding another round into place. With eight cartridges in the weapon, and a backup clip, he now had a total of fifteen rounds with which to face danger. Not nearly enough for a walk in the jungles of Vietnam, but he figured it was plenty for the dark environs of a city. He could hit a human head with a single aimed shot from ten yards, day or night. He'd never once rattled under fire, and he'd killed men before. Whatever the dangers might be, Kelly was ready for them. Besides, he wasn't going after the Vietcong. He was going in at night, and the night was his friend. There would be fewer people around for him to worry about, and unless the other side knew he was there—which they wouldn't—he didn't have to worry about an ambush. He just had to stay alert, which came easily to him.

Dinner was chicken, something Pam knew how to fix. Kelly almost got out a bottle of wine but thought better of it. Why tempt her with alcohol? Maybe he'd stop drinking himself. It would be no great loss, and the sacrifice would validate his commitment to her. Their conversation avoided serious matters. He'd already shut the

dangers from his mind. There was no need to dwell on them. Too much imagination made things worse, not better.

"You really think we need new curtains?" he said.

"They don't match the furniture very well."

Kelly grunted. "For a boat?"

"It's kinda dull there, you know?"

"Dull," he observed, clearing the table. "Next thing, you'll say that men are all alike—" Kelly stopped dead in his tracks. It was the first time he'd slipped up that way. "Sorry…"

She gave him an impish smile. "Well, in some ways you are. And stop being so nervous about talking to me about things, okay?"

Kelly relaxed. "Okay." He grabbed her and pulled her close. "If that's the way you feel… well…"

"Mmm." She smiled and accepted his kiss. Kelly's hands wandered across her back, and there was no feel of a bra under the cotton blouse. She giggled at him. "I wondered how long it would take you to notice."

"The candles were in the way," he explained.

"The candles were nice, but smelly." And she was right. The bunker was not well ventilated. Something else to fix. Kelly looked forward into a very busy future as he moved his hands to a nicer place.

"Have I gained enough weight?"

"Is it my imagination, or…?"

"Well, maybe just a little," Pam admitted, holding his hands on her.

"We need to get you some new clothes," he said, watching her face, the new confidence. He had her on the wheel, steering the proper compass course past Sharp's Island Light, well east of the shipping channel, which was busy today.

"Good idea," she agreed. "But I don't know any good places." She checked the compass like a good helmsman.

"They're easy to find. You just look at the parking lot."

"Huh?"

"Lincolns and Caddys, honey. Always means good clothes," Kelly noted. "Never fails."

She laughed as intended. Kelly marveled at how much more in control she seemed, though there was still a long ways to go.

"Where will we stay tonight?"

“On board,” Kelly answered. “We’ll be secure here.” Pam merely nodded, but he explained anyway.

“You look different now, and they don’t know me from Adam. They don’t know my car or my boat. Frank Allen doesn’t know your name or even that you’re a girl. That’s operational security. We ought to be safe.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Pam said, turning to smile at him. The confidence in her face warmed his blood and fed his already capacious ego.

“Going to rain tonight,” Kelly noted, pointing at distant clouds. “That’s good, too. Cuts down visibility. We used to do a lot of stuff in the rain. People just aren’t alert when they’re wet.”

“You really know about this stuff, don’t you?”

A manly smile. “I learned in a really tough school, honey.”

They made port three hours later. Kelly made a great show of being alert, checking out the parking lot, noting that his Scout was in its accustomed place. He sent her below while he tied up, then left her there while he drove the car right to the dock. Pam, as instructed, walked straight from the boat to the Scout without looking left or right, and he drove off the property at once. It was still early in the day, and they drove immediately out of the city, finding a suburban shopping center in Timonium, where Pam over a period of two—to Kelly, interminable—hours selected three nice outfits, for which he paid cash. She dressed in the one he liked best, an understated skirt and blouse that went well with his jacket and no tie. For once Kelly was dressing in accordance with his own net worth, which was comfortable.

Dinner was eaten in the same area, an upscale restaurant with a dark corner booth. Kelly didn’t say so, but he’d needed a good meal, and while Pam was okay with chicken, she still had a lot to learn about cooking.

“You look pretty good—relaxed, I mean,” he said, sipping his after-dinner coffee.

“I never thought I’d feel this way. I mean, it’s only been… not even three weeks?”

“That’s right.” Kelly set his coffee down. “Tomorrow we’ll see Sarah and her friends. In a couple of months everything will be different, Pam.” He took her left hand, hoping that it would someday bear a gold ring on the third finger.

“I believe that now. I really do.”

"Good."

"What do we do now?" she asked. Dinner was over and there were hours until the clandestine meeting with Lieutenant Allen.

"Just drive around some?" Kelly left cash on the table and led her out to the car.

It was dark now. The sun was nearly set, and rain was starting to fall. Kelly headed south on York Road towards the city, well fed and relaxed himself, feeling confident and ready for the night's travail. Entering Towson, he saw the recently abandoned streetcar tracks that announced his proximity to the city and its supposed dangers. His senses perked up at once. Kelly's eyes darted left and right, scanning the streets and sidewalks, checking his three rearview mirrors every five seconds. On getting in the car, he'd put his .45 Colt automatic in its accustomed place, a holster just under the front seat that he could reach faster than one in his belt—and besides, it was a lot more comfortable that way.

"Pam?" he asked, watching traffic, making sure the doors were locked—a safety provision that seemed outrageously paranoid when he was so alert.

"Yes?"

"How much do you trust me?"

"I do trust you, John."

"Where did you—work, I mean?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's dark and rainy, and I'd like to see what it's like down there." Without looking, he could feel her body tense. "Look, I'll be careful. If you see anything that worries you, I'll make tracks like you won't believe."

"I'm scared of that," Pam said immediately, but then she stopped herself. She *was* confident in her man, wasn't she? He'd done so much for her. He'd saved her. She had to trust him—no, he had to know that she did. She had to show him that she did. And so she asked: "You promise you'll be careful?"

"Believe it, Pam," he assured her. "You see one single thing that worries you and we're gone."

"Okay, then."

It was amazing, Kelly thought, fifty minutes later. The things that are there but which you never see. How many times had he driven through this part of town, never stopping, never noticing? And for years his survival had depended on his noting everything, every

bent branch, every sudden bird-call, every footprint in the dirt. But he'd driven through this area a hundred times and never noticed what was happening because it was a different sort of jungle filled with very different game. Part of him just shrugged and said, *Well, what did you expect?* Another part noted that there had always been danger here, and he'd failed to take note of it, but the warning was not as loud and clear as it should have been.

The environment was ideal. Dark, under a cloudy, moonless sky. The only illumination came from sparse streetlights that created lonely globes of light along sidewalks both deserted and active. Showers came and went, some fairly heavy, mostly moderate, enough to keep heads down and limit visibility, enough to reduce a person's normal curiosity. That suited Kelly fine, since he was circulating around and around the blocks, noting changes from the second to the third pass by a particular spot. He noted that not even all the streetlights were functioning. Was that just the sloth of city workers or creative maintenance on the part of the local "businessmen"? Perhaps a little of both, Kelly thought. The guys who changed the bulbs couldn't make all that much, and a twenty-dollar bill would probably persuade them to be a little slow, or maybe not screw the bulb in all the way. In any case, it set the mood. The streets were dark, and the dark had always been Kelly's trusted friend.

The neighborhoods were so… sad, he thought. Shabby storefronts of what had been mom-and-pop grocery stores, probably run out of business by supermarkets which had themselves been wrecked in the '68 rioting, opening a hole in the economic fabric of the area, but one not yet filled. The cracked cement of the sidewalks was littered with all manner of debris. Were there people who lived here? Who were they? What did they do? What were their dreams? Surely not all could be criminals. Did they hide at night? And if then, what about the daylight? Kelly had learned it in Asia: give the enemy one part of the day and he would secure it for himself, and then expand it, for the day had twenty-four hours, and he would want them all for himself and his activities. No, you couldn't give the other side anything, not a time, not a place, nothing that they could reliably use. That's how people lost a war, and there *was* a war going on here. And the winners were not the forces of good. That realization struck him hard. Kelly had already seen what he knew to be a losing war.

The dealers were a diverse group, Kelly saw as he cruised past their sales area. Their posture told him of their confidence. They owned the streets at this hour. There might be competition from one to the other, a nasty Darwinian process that determined who owned what segment of what sidewalk, who had territorial rights in front of this or that broken window, but as with all such competition, things would soon attain some sort of stability, and business would be conducted, because the purpose of the competition was business, after all.

He turned right onto a new street. The thought evoked a grunt and a thin, ironic smile. New street? No, these streets were old ones, so old that "good" people had left them years ago to move out of the city into greener places, allowing other people, deemed less valuable than themselves, to move in, and then they too had moved away, and the cycle had continued for another few generations until something had gone very badly wrong to create what he saw now in this place. It had taken an hour or so for him to grasp the fact that there were people here, not just trash-laden sidewalks and criminals. He saw a woman leading a child by the hand away from a bus stop. He wondered where they were returning from. A visit with an aunt? The public library? Some place whose attractions were worth the uncomfortable passage between the bus stop and home, past sights and sounds and people whose very existence could damage that little child.

Kelly's back got straighter and his eyes narrower. He'd seen that before. Even in Vietnam, a country at war since before his birth, there were still parents, and children, and, even in war, a desperate quest for something like normality. Children needed to play some of the time, to be held and loved, protected from the harsher aspects of reality for as long as the courage and talents of their parents could make that possible. And it was true here, too. Everywhere there were victims, all innocent to some greater or lesser degree, and the children the most innocent of all. He could see it there, fifty yards away, as the young mother led her child across the street, short of the corner where a dealer stood, making a transaction. Kelly slowed his car to allow her safe passage, hoping that the care and love she showed that night would make a difference to her child. Did the dealers notice her? Were the ordinary citizens worthy of note at all? Were they cover? Potential customers? Nuisances? Prey? And what of the child? Did they care at all? Probably not.

“Shit,” he whispered quietly to himself, too detached to show his anger openly.

“What?” Pam asked. She was sitting quietly, leaning away from the window.

“Nothing. Sorry.” Kelly shook his head and continued his observation. He was actually beginning to enjoy himself. It was like a reconnaissance mission. Reconnaissance was learning, and learning had always been a passion for Kelly. Here was something completely new. Sure, it was evil, destructive, ugly, but it was also different, which made it exciting. His hands tingled on the wheel.

The customers were diverse, too. Some were obviously local, you could tell from their color and shabby clothing. Some were more addicted than others, and Kelly wondered what that meant. Were the apparently functional ones the newly enslaved? Were the shambling ones the veterans of self-destruction, heading irrevocably towards their own deaths? How could a normal person look at them and not be frightened that it was possible to destroy yourself one dose at a time? What drove people to do this? Kelly nearly stopped the car with that thought. That was something beyond his experience.

Then there were the others, the ones with medium-expensive cars so clean that they had to come from the suburbs, where standards had to be observed. He pulled past one and gave the driver a quick look. *Even wears a tie!* Loose in the collar to allow for his nervousness in a neighborhood such as this one, using one hand to roll down the window while the other perched at the top of the wheel, his right foot doubtless resting lightly on the gas pedal, ready to jolt the car forward if danger should threaten. The driver’s nerves must be on edge, Kelly thought, watching him in the mirror. He could not be comfortable here, but he had come anyway. Yes, there it was. Money was passed out the window, and something received for it, and the car moved off as quickly as the traffic-laden street would allow. On a whim, Kelly followed the Buick for a few blocks, turning right, then left onto a main artery, where the car got into the left lane and stayed there, driving as rapidly as was prudent to get the hell out of this dreary part of the city, but without drawing the unwanted attention of a police officer with a citation book.

Yeah, the police, Kelly thought as he gave up the pursuit. *Where the hell are they?* The law was being violated with all the apparent

drama of a block party, but they were nowhere to be seen. He shook his head as he turned back into the trading area. The disconnect from his own neighborhood in Indianapolis, merely ten years before, was vast. How had things changed so rapidly? How had he missed it? His time in the Navy, his life on the island, had insulated him from everything. He was a rube, an innocent, a tourist in his own country.

He looked over at Pam. She seemed all right, though a little tense. Those people were dangerous, but not to the two of them. He'd been careful to remain invisible, to drive like everyone else, meandering around the few blocks of the "business" area in an irregular pattern. He was not blind to the dangers, Kelly told himself. In searching for patterns of activity, he hadn't made any of his own. If anyone had eyeballed him and his vehicle especially hard, he would have noticed. And besides, he still had his Colt .45 between his legs. However formidable these thugs might appear, they were nothing compared to the North Vietnamese and Vietcong he'd faced. They'd been good. He'd been better. There was danger on these streets, but far less than he had survived already.

Fifty yards away was a dealer dressed in a silk shirt that might have been brown or maroon. It was hard to tell the color in the poor illumination, but it had to be silk from the way it reflected light. Probably real silk, Kelly was willing to bet. There was a flashiness to these vermin. It wasn't enough for them merely to violate the law, was it? Oh, no, they had to let people know how bold and daring they were.

Dumb, Kelly thought. *Very dumb to draw attention to yourself that way. When you do dangerous things, you conceal your identity, conceal your very presence, and always leave yourself with at least one route of escape.*

"It's amazing they can get away with this," Kelly whispered to himself.

"Huh?" Pam's head turned.

"They're so stupid." Kelly waved at the dealer near the corner. "Even if the cops don't do anything, what if somebody decides to—I mean, he's holding a lot of money, right?"

"Probably a thousand, maybe two thousand," Pam replied.

"So what if somebody tries to rob him?"

"It happens, but he's carrying a gun, too, and if anyone tries—"

"Oh—the guy in the doorway?"

"He's the real dealer, Kelly. Didn't you know that? The guy in the shirt is his lieutenant. He's the guy who does the actual—what do you call it?"

"Transaction," Kelly replied dryly, reminding himself that he'd failed to spot something, knowing that he'd allowed his pride to overcome his caution. *Not a good habit,* he told himself.

Pam nodded. "That's right. Watch—watch him now."

Sure enough, Kelly saw what he now realized was the full transaction. Someone in a car—another visitor from the suburbs, Kelly thought—handed over his money (an assumption, since Kelly couldn't really see, but surely it wasn't a BankAmericard). The lieutenant reached inside the shirt and handed something back. As the car pulled off, the one in the flamboyant shirt moved across the sidewalk, and in shadows that Kelly's eyes could not quite penetrate there was another exchange.

"Oh, I get it. The lieutenant holds the drugs and makes the exchange, but he gives the money to his boss. The boss holds the earnings, but he also has a gun to make sure nothing goes wrong. They're not as dumb as I thought they were."

"They're smart enough."

Kelly nodded and made a mental note, chastising himself for having made at least two wrong assumptions. But that's why you did reconnaissance, after all.

Let's not get too comfortable, Kelly, he told himself. *Now you know that there's* two *bad guys up there, one armed and well concealed in that doorway.* He settled in his seat and locked his eyes on the potential threat, watching for patterns of activity. The one in the doorway would be the real target. The misnamed "lieutenant" was just a hireling, maybe an apprentice, undoubtedly expendable, living on crumbs or commission. The one he could just barely see was the real enemy. And that fit the time-honored pattern, didn't it? He smiled, remembering a regional political officer for the NVA. That job had even carried a code name. Ermine Coat. Four days they'd stalked that bastard, *after* they'd positively identified him, just to make sure he was the one, then to learn his habits, and determine the best possible way to punch his ticket. Kelly would never forget the look on the man's face when the bullet entered his chest. Then their three-mile run to the LZ, while the NVA's reaction team headed in the wrong direction because of the misleading pyro-charge he'd set up.

What if that man in the shadows was his target? How would he do it? It was an interesting mental game. The feeling was surprisingly godlike. He felt like an eagle, watching, cataloging, but above it all, a predator at the top of the food chain, not hungry now, riding the thermals over them.

He smiled, ignoring the warnings that the combat-experienced part of his brain was beginning to generate.

Hmm. He hadn't seen that car before. It was a muscle car, a Plymouth Roadrunner, red as a candy apple, half a block away. There was something odd about the way it—

"Kelly…" Pam suddenly tensed in her seat.

"What is it?" His hand found the .45 and loosened it in the holster just a millimeter or so, taking comfort from the worn wooden grips. But the fact that he'd reached for it, and the fact that he'd felt a sudden need for that comfort, were a message that his mind could not ignore. The cautious part of his brain began to assert itself, his combat instincts began to speak more loudly. Even that brought a surge of reflective pride. *It's so nice,* he reflected in the blink of an eye, *that I still have it when I need it.*

"I know that car—it's—"

Kelly's voice was calm. "Okay, I'll get us out of here. You're right, it's time to leave." He increased speed, maneuvering left to get past the Roadrunner. He thought to tell Pam to get down, but that really wasn't necessary. In less than a minute he'd be gone, and—*damn!*

It was one of the gentry customers, someone in a black Karmann-Ghia convertible who'd just made his transaction, and, eager to have this area behind him, shot left from beyond the Roadrunner only to stop suddenly for yet another car doing much the same thing. Kelly stood on his brakes to avoid a collision, didn't want that to happen right now, did he? But the timing worked out badly, and he stopped almost right next to the Roadrunner, whose driver picked that moment to get out. Instead of going forward, he opted to walk around the back of the car, and in the course of turning, his eyes ended up not three feet from Pam's cringing face. Kelly was looking that way also, knowing that the man was a potential danger, and he saw the look in the man's eyes. He recognized Pam.

"Okay, I see it," his voice announced with an eerie calm, his combat voice. He turned the wheel farther to the left and stepped on the gas, bypassing the little sports car and its invisible driver. Kelly reached the corner a few seconds later, and after the briefest

pause to check traffic, executed a hard left turn to evacuate the area.

"He saw me!" Her voice hovered on the edge of a scream.

"It's okay, Pam," Kelly replied, watching the road and his mirror. "We are leaving the area. You're with me and you're safe."

Idiot, his instincts swore at the rest of his consciousness. *You'd better hope they don't follow. That car has triple your horsepower and—*

"Okay." Bright, low-slung headlights made the same turn Kelly'd executed twenty seconds earlier. He saw them wiggle left and right. The car was accelerating hard and fishtailing on the wet asphalt. Double headlights. It wasn't the Karmann-Ghia.

You are now in danger, his instincts told him calmly. *We don't know how much yet, but it's time to wake up.*

Roger that.

Kelly put both hands on the wheel. The gun could wait. He started evaluating the situation, and not much of it was good. His Scout was not made for this sort of thing. It wasn't a sports car, wasn't a muscle car. He had four puny cylinders under the hood. The Plymouth Roadrunner had eight, each one of them bigger than what Kelly was now calling on. Even worse, the Roadrunner was made for low-end acceleration and cornering, while the Scout had been designed for plodding across unpaved ground at a hot fifteen miles per hour. This was not good.

Kelly's eyes divided their time equally between the windshield and the rearview mirror. There wasn't much of a gap, and the Roadrunner was closing it rapidly.

Assets, his brain started cataloging. *The car isn't completely useless, she's a rugged little bitch. You have big, mean bumpers, and that high ground-clearance means you can ram effectively. So what about the coachwork? That Plymouth might be a status symbol for jerks, but this little baby can be—*is*—a weapon, and you know how to use weapons.* The cobwebs fell completely from his mind.

"Pam," Kelly said as quietly as he could manage, "you want to get down on the floor, honey?"

"Are they—" She started to turn, the fear still manifest in her voice, but Kelly's right hand pushed her down towards the floor.

"Looks like they're following us, yes. Now, you let me handle this, okay?" The last unengaged part of his consciousness was proud of Kelly's calm and confidence. Yes, there was danger, but Kelly knew about danger, knew a hell of a lot more than the people in the

Roadrunner. If they wanted a lesson in what danger really was, they'd come to the right fucking place.

Kelly's hands tingled on the wheel as he eased left, then braked and turned hard right. He couldn't corner as well as the Roadrunner, but these streets were wide—and being in front gave him the choice of path and timing. Losing them would be hard, but he knew where the police station was. It was just a matter of leading them there. They'd break contact at that point.

They might shoot, might find a way to disable the car, but if that happened, he had the .45, and a spare clip, and a box of ammo in the glove compartment. They might be armed, but they sure as hell weren't trained. He'd let them get close… how many? Two? Maybe three? He ought to have checked, Kelly told himself, remembering that there hadn't been time.

Kelly looked in the mirror. A moment later he was rewarded. The headlights of another, uninvolved car a block away shone straight through the Roadrunner. Three of them. He wondered what they might be armed with. Worst-case was a shotgun. The real worst-case was a rapid-fire rifle, but street hoods weren't soldiers, and that was unlikely.

Probably not, but let's not make any assumptions, his brain replied.

His .45 Colt, at close range, was as lethal as a rifle. He quietly blessed his weekly practice as he turned left. *If it comes to that, let them get close and go for a quick ambush.* Kelly knew all there was to know about ambushes. Suck 'em in and blow 'em away.

The Roadrunner was ten yards behind now, and its driver was wondering what to do next.

That's the hard part, isn't it? Kelly thought for his pursuer. *You can get close as you want, but the other guy is still surrounded by a ton of metal. What are you going to do now? Ram me, maybe?*

No, the other driver wasn't a total fool. Sitting on the rear bumper was the trailer hitch, and ramming would have driven it right through the Roadrunner's radiator. Too bad.

The Roadrunner made a move to the right. Kelly saw its headlights rock backwards as the driver floored his big V-8, but being in front helped. Kelly snapped the wheel to the right to block. He immediately learned that the other driver didn't have the stomach to hurt his car. He heard tires squeal as the Roadrunner braked down to avoid a collision. *Don't want to scratch that red paint, do we? Good news for a change!* Then the Roadrunner snapped left,

but Kelly covered that move also. It was like sailboats in a tacking duel, he realized.

"Kelly, what's happening?" Pam asked, her voice cracking on every word.

His reply was in the same calm voice he'd used for the past few minutes. "What's happening is that they're not very smart."

"That's Billy's car—he loves to race."

"Billy, eh? Well, Billy likes his car a little too much. If you want to hurt somebody, you ought to be willing to—" Just to surprise them, Kelly stomped on his brakes. The Scout nose-dived, giving Billy a really good look at the chromed trailer hitch. Then Kelly accelerated again, watching the Roadrunner's reaction. *Yeah, he wants to follow close, but I can intimidate him real easy, and he won't like that. He's probably a proud little fuck.*

There, that's how I do it.

Kelly decided to go for a soft kill. No sense getting things complicated. Still, he knew that he had to play this one very carefully and very smart. His brain started measuring angles and distances.

Kelly hit his accelerator too hard taking a corner. It almost made him spin out, but he'd planned for that and only botched the recovery enough to make his driving look sloppy to Billy, who was doubtless impressed with his own abilities. The Roadrunner used its cornering and wide tires to close the distance and hold formation on Kelly's starboard-quarter. A deliberate collision now could throw the Scout completely out of control. The Roadrunner held the better hand now, or so its driver thought.

Okay…

Kelly couldn't turn right now. Billy had blocked that. So he turned hard left, taking a street through a wide strip of vacant lots. Some highway would be built here. The houses had been cleared off, and the basements filled in with dirt, and the night's rain had turned that to mud.

Kelly turned to look at the Roadrunner. *Uh-oh.* The right-side passenger window was coming down. That meant a gun, sure as hell. *Cutting this a little close, Kelly…* But that, he realized instantly, could be made to help. He let them see his face, staring at the Roadrunner, mouth open now, fear clearly visible. He stood on the brakes and turned hard right. The Scout bounded over the half-destroyed curb, obviously a maneuver of panic. Pam screamed with

the sudden jolt.

The Roadrunner had better power, its driver knew, better tires, and better brakes, and the driver had excellent reflexes, all of which Kelly had noted and was now counting on. His braking maneuver was covered and nearly matched by the Roadrunner, which then mimicked his turn, also bouncing over the crumbling cement of an eradicated neighborhood, following the Scout across what had recently been a block of homes, falling right into the trap Kelly had sprung. The Roadrunner made it about seventy feet.

Kelly had already downshifted. The mud was a good eight inches deep, and there was the off-chance that the Scout might get stuck momentarily, but the odds were heavily against that. He felt his car slow, felt the tires sink a few inches into the gooey surface, but then the big, coarsely treaded tires bit and started pulling again. *Yeah.* Only then did he turn around.

The headlights told the story. The Roadrunner, already low-slung for cornering paved city streets, yawed wildly to the left as its tires spun on the gelatinous surface, and when the vehicle slowed, their spinning merely dug wet holes. The headlights sank rapidly as the car's powerful engine merely excavated its own grave. Steam rose instantly when the hot engine block boiled off some standing water.

The race was over.

Three men got out of the car and just stood there, uncomfortable to have mud on their shiny punk shoes, looking at the way their once-clean car sat in the mud like a weary sow hog. Whatever nasty plans they'd had, had been done in by a little rain and dirt. *Nice to know I haven't lost it yet,* Kelly thought.

Then they looked up to where he was, thirty yards away.

"You dummies!" he called through the light rain. "See ya 'round, assholes!" He started moving again, careful, of course, to keep his eyes on them. That's what had won him the race, Kelly told himself. Caution, brains, experience. Guts, too, but Kelly dismissed that thought after allowing himself just the tiniest peek at it. Just a little one. He nursed the Scout back onto a strip of pavement, upshifted, and drove off, listening to the little clods of mud thrown by his tires into the wheel wells.

"You can get up now, Pam. We won't be seeing them for a while."

Pam did that, looking back to see Billy and his Roadrunner. The sight of him so close made her face go pale again. "What did you do?"

"I just let them chase me into a place that I selected," Kelly explained. "That's a nice car for running the street, but not so good for dirt."

Pam smiled for him, showing bravery she didn't feel at the moment, but completing the story just as Kelly would have told it to a friend. He checked his watch. Another hour or so until shift change at the police station. Billy and his friends would be stuck there for a long time. The smart move was to find a quiet place to wait. Besides, Pam looked like she needed a little calming down. He drove for a little while, then, finding an area with no major street activity, he parked.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"That was scary," she replied, looking down and shaking badly.

"Look, we can go right back to the boat and—"

"No! Billy raped me… and killed Helen. If I don't stop him, he'll just keep doing it to people I know." The words were as much to persuade herself as him, Kelly knew. He'd seen it before. It was courage, and it went part and parcel with fear. It was the thing that drove people to accomplish missions, and also the thing that selected those missions for them. She'd seen the darkness, and finding the light, she had to extend its glow to others.

"Okay, but after we tell Frank about it, we get you the hell out of Dodge City."

"I'm okay," Pam said, lying, knowing he saw the lie, and ashamed of it because she didn't grasp his intimate understanding for her feelings of the moment.

You really are, he wanted to tell her, but she hadn't learned about those things yet. And so he asked a question: "How many other girls?"

"Doris, Xantha, Paula, Maria, and Roberta… they're all like me, John. And Helen… when they killed her, they made us watch."

"Well, with a little luck you can do something about that, honey." He put his arm around her, and after a time the shaking stopped.

"I'm thirsty," she said.

"There's a cooler on the backseat."

Pam smiled. "That's right." She turned in the seat to reach for a Coke—and her body suddenly went rigid. She gasped, and Kelly's skin got that all-too-familiar unwelcome feeling, like an electric charge running along its surface. The danger feeling.

"Kelly!" Pam screamed. She was looking towards the car's left

rear. Kelly was already reaching for his gun, turning his body as he did so, but it was too late, and part of him already knew it. The outraged thought went through his mind that he'd erred badly, fatally, but he didn't know how, and there was no time to figure it out because before he could reach his gun, there was a flash of light and an impact on his head, followed by darkness.

7

Recovery

It was a routine police patrol that spotted the Scout. Officer Chuck Monroe, sixteen months on the force, just old enough to have his own solo radio car, made it a habit to patrol his part of the District after taking to the street. There wasn't much he could do about the dealers—that was the job of the Narcotics Division—but he could show the flag, a phrase he'd learned in the Marine Corps. Twenty-five, newly married, young enough to be dedicated and angry at what was happening in his city and his old neighborhood, the officer noted that the Scout was an unusual vehicle for this area. He decided to check it out, record its tag number, and then came the heart-stopping realization that the car's left side had taken at least two shotgun blasts. Officer Monroe stopped his car, flipped on his rotating lights, and made the first, preliminary call of possible trouble, please stand by. He stepped out of the car, switching his police baton into his left hand, leaving his right at the grip of his service revolver. Only then did he approach the car. A well-trained officer, Chuck Monroe moved in slowly and carefully, his eyes scanning everything in sight.

"Oh, shit!" The return to his radio car was rapid. First Monroe called for backup and then for an ambulance, and then he notified his District desk of the license number of the subject automobile. Then, grabbing his first-aid kit, he returned to the Scout. The door was locked, but the window was blown out, and he reached inside to unlock it. What he saw then froze him in his tracks.

The head rested on the steering wheel, along with the left hand, while the right rested in his lap. Blood had sprayed all over the inside. The man was still breathing, which surprised the officer.

Clearly a shotgun blast, it had obliterated the metal and fiberglass of the Scout's body and hit the victim's head, neck, and upper back. There were several small holes in the exposed skin, and these were oozing blood. The wound looked as horrible as any he had seen on the street or in the Marine Corps, and yet the man was alive. That was sufficiently amazing that Monroe decided to leave his first-aid kit closed. There would be an ambulance here in minutes, and he decided that any action he took was as likely to make things worse as better. Monroe held the kit under his right hand like a book, looking at the victim with the frustration of a man of action to whom action was denied. At least the poor bastard was unconscious.

Who was he? Monroe looked at the slumped form and decided that he could extricate the wallet. The officer switched the first-aid kit to his left hand and reached in for the wallet pocket with his right. Unsurprisingly, it was empty, but his touch had elicited a reaction. The body moved a little, and that wasn't good. He moved his hand to steady it, but then the head moved, too, and he knew that the head had better stay still, and so his hand automatically and wrongly touched it. Something rubbed against something else, and a cry of pain echoed across the dark, wet street before the body went slack again.

"Shit!" Monroe looked at the blood on his fingertips and unconsciously rubbed it off on his blue uniform trousers. Just then he heard the banshee-wail of a Fire Department ambulance approaching from the east, and the officer whispered a quiet prayer of thanks that people who knew what they were doing would shortly relieve him of this problem.

The ambulance turned the corner a few seconds later. The large, boxy, red-and-white vehicle halted just past the radio car, and its two occupants came at once to the officer.

"What d'we got." Strangely, it didn't come out like a question. The senior fireman-paramedic hardly needed to ask in any case. In this part of town at this time of night, it wouldn't be a traffic accident. It would be "penetrating trauma," in the dry lexicon of his profession. "Jesus!"

The other crewman was already moving back to the ambulance when another police car arrived on the scene.

"What gives?" the watch supervisor asked.

"Shotgun, close range, and the guy's still alive!" Monroe reported.

“I don’t like the neck hits,” the first ambulance guy observed tersely.

“Collar?” the other paramedic called from an equipment bay.

“Yeah, if he moves his head… damn.” The senior firefighter placed his hands on the victim’s head to secure it in place.

“ID?” the sergeant asked.

“No wallet. I haven’t had a chance to look around yet.”

“Did you run the tags?”

Monroe nodded. “Called ’em in; it takes a little while.”

The sergeant played his flashlight on the inside of the car to help the firemen. A lot of blood, otherwise empty. Some kind of cooler in the backseat. “What else?” he asked Monroe.

“The block was empty when I got here.” Monroe checked his watch. “Eleven minutes ago.” Both officers stood back to give the paramedics room to work.

“You ever seen him before?”

“No, Sarge.”

“Check the sidewalks.”

“Right.” Monroe started quartering the area around the car.

“I wonder what this was all about,” the sergeant asked nobody in particular. Looking at the body and all the blood, his next thought was that they might never find out. So many crimes committed in this area were never really solved. That was not something pleasing to the sergeant. He looked at the paramedics. “How is he, Mike?”

“Damned near bled out, Bert. Definite shotgun,” the man answered, affixing the cervical collar. “A bunch of pellets in the neck, some near the spine. I don’t like this at all.”

“Where you taking him?” the police sergeant asked.

“University’s full up,” the junior paramedic advised. “Bus accident on the Beltway. We have to take him to Hopkins.”

“That’s an extra ten minutes.” Mike swore. “You drive, Phil, tell them we have a major trauma and we need a neurosurgeon standing by.”

“You got it.” Both men lifted him onto the gurney. The body reacted to the movement, and the two police officers—three more radio cars had just arrived—helped hold him in place while the firefighters applied restraints.

“You’re a real sick puppy, my friend, but we’ll have you in the hospital real quick now,” Phil told the body, which might or might not still be alive enough to hear the words. “Time to roll, Mike.”

They loaded the body in the back of the ambulance. Mike Eaton, the senior paramedic, was already setting up an IV bottle of blood-expanders. Getting the intravenous line was difficult with the man facedown, but he managed it just as the ambulance started moving. The sixteen-minute trip to Johns Hopkins Hospital was occupied with taking vital signs—the blood pressure was perilously low—and doing some preliminary paperwork.

Who are you? Eaton asked silently. Good physical shape, he noted, twenty-six or -seven. Odd for a probable drug user. This guy would have looked pretty tough standing up, but not now. Now he was more like a large, sleeping child, mouth open, drawing oxygen from the clear plastic mask, breathing shallowly and too slowly for Eaton's comfort.

"Speed it up," he called to the driver, Phil Marconi.

"Roads are pretty wet, Mike, doing my best."

"Come on, Phil, you wops are supposed to drive crazy!"

"But we don't drink like you guys," came the laughing reply. "I just called ahead, they got a neck-cutter standing by. Quiet night at Hopkins, they're all ready for us."

"Good," Eaton responded quietly. He looked at his shooting victim. It often got lonely and a little spooky in the back of an ambulance, and that made him glad for the otherwise nerve-grating wail of the electronic siren. Blood dripped off the gurney down to the floor of the vehicle; the drops traveled around on the metal floor, as though they had a life entirely of their own. It was something you never got used to.

"Two minutes," Marconi said over his shoulder. Eaton moved to the back of the compartment, ready to open the door. Presently he felt the ambulance turn, stop, then back up quickly before stopping again. The rear doors were yanked open before Eaton could reach for them.

"Yeow!" the ER resident observed. "Okay, folks, we're taking him into Three." Two burly orderlies pulled the gurney out while Eaton disconnected the IV bottle from the overhead hook and carried it beside the moving cart.

"Trouble at University?" the resident asked.

"Bus accident," Marconi reported, arriving at his side.

"Better off here anyway. Jesus, what did he back into?" The doctor bent down to inspect the wound as they moved. "Must be a hundred pellets in there!"

"Wait till you see the neck," Eaton told him.

"Shit…" the resident breathed.

They wheeled him into the capacious emergency room, selecting a cubicle in the corner. The five men moved the victim from the gurney to a treatment table, and the medical team went to work. Another physician was standing by, along with a pair of nurses.

The resident, Cliff Severn, reached around delicately to remove the cervical collar after making sure the head was secured by sandbags. It took only one look.

"Possible spine," he announced at once. "But first we have to replace blood volume." He rattled off a series of orders. While the nurses got two more IVs started, Severn took the patient's shoes off and ran a sharp metal instrument across the sole of his left foot. The foot moved. Okay, there was no immediate nerve damage. Good news. A few more sticks on the legs also got reactions. Remarkable. While that was happening, a nurse took blood for the usual battery of tests. Severn scarcely had to look as his well-trained crew did their separate jobs. What appeared to be a flurry of activity was more like the movement of a football backfield, the end product of months of diligent practice.

"Where the hell's neuro?" Severn asked the ceiling.

"Right here!" a voice answered.

Severn looked up. "Oh—Professor Rosen."

The greeting stopped there. Sam Rosen was not in a good mood, as the resident saw at once. It had been a twenty-hour day for the professor already. What ought to have been a six-hour procedure had only begun a marathon effort to save the life of an elderly woman who'd fallen down a flight of stairs, an effort that had ended unsuccessfully less than an hour before. He ought to have saved her, Sam was telling himself, still not sure what had gone wrong. He was grateful rather than angry about this extension to a hellish day. Maybe he could win this one.

"Tell me what we have," the professor ordered curtly.

"Shotgun wound, several pellets very close to the cord, sir."

"Okay." Rosen bent down, his hands behind his back. "What's with the glass?"

"He was in a car," Eaton called from the other side of the cubicle.

"We need to get rid of that, need to shave the head, too," Rosen said, surveying the damage. "What's his pressure?"

"BP fifty over thirty," a nurse-practitioner reported. "Pulse is one-

forty and thready."

"We're going to be busy," Rosen observed. "This guy is very shocky. Hmm." He paused. "Overall condition of the patient looks good, good muscle tone. Let's get that blood volume back up." Rosen saw two units being started even as he spoke. The ER nurses were especially good and he nodded approval at them.

"How's your son doing, Margaret?" he asked the senior one.

"Starting at Carnegie in September," she answered, adjusting the drip-rate on the blood bottle.

"Let's get the neck cleaned off next, Margaret. I need to take a look."

"Yes, doctor."

The nurse selected a pair of forceps, grabbed a large cotton ball, which she dipped in distilled water, then wiped across the patient's neck with care, clearing away the blood and exposing the actual wounds. It looked worse than it might really be, she saw at once. While she swabbed the patient off, Rosen looked for and got sterile garb. By the time he got back to the bedside, Margaret Wilson had a sterile kit in place and uncovered. Eaton and Marconi stayed in the corner, watching it all.

"Nice job, Margaret," Rosen said, putting his glasses on. "What's he going to major in?"

"Engineering."

"That's good." Rosen held his hand up. "Tweezers." Nurse Wilson set a pair in his hand. "Always room for a bright young engineer."

Rosen picked a small, round hole on the patient's shoulder, well away from anything really vital. With a delicacy that his large hands made almost comical to watch, he probed for and retrieved a single lead ball which he held up to the light. "Number seven shot, I believe. Somebody mistook this guy for a pigeon. That's good news," he told the paramedics. Now that he knew the shot size and probable penetration, he bent down low over the neck. "Hmm… what's the BP now?"

"Checking," another nurse said from the far side of the table. "Fifty-five over forty. Coming up."

"Thank you," Rosen said, still bent over the patient. "Who started the first IV?"

"I did," Eaton replied.

"Good work, fireman." Rosen looked up and winked. "Sometimes I think you people save more lives than we do. You saved this one,

that's for damned sure."

"Thank you, doctor." Eaton didn't know Rosen well, but he made a note that the man's reputation was deserved. It wasn't every day that a fireman-paramedic got that sort of praise from a full professor. "How's he going to—I mean, the neck injury?"

Rosen was down again, examining it. "Responses, doctor?" he asked the senior resident.

"Positive. Good Babinski. No gross indications of peripheral impairment," Severn replied. This was like an exam, which always made the young resident nervous.

"This may not be as bad as it looks, but we're going to have to clean it up in a hurry before these pellets migrate. Two hours?" he asked Severn. Rosen knew the ER resident was better on trauma than he was.

"Maybe three."

"I'll get a nap out of it anyway." Rosen checked his watch. "I'll take him at, oh, six."

"You want to handle this one personally?"

"Why not? I'm here. This one is straightforward, just takes a little touch." Rosen figured he was entitled to an easy case, maybe once a month. As a full professor, he drew a lot of the hard ones.

"Fine with me, sir."

"Do we have an ID on the patient?"

"No, sir," Marconi replied. "The police ought to be here in a few."

"Good." Rosen stood and stretched. "You know, Margaret, people like us shouldn't work these kind of hours."

"I need the shift-differential," Nurse Wilson replied. Besides which, she was the nursing-team leader for this shift. "What's this, I wonder?" she said after a moment.

"Hmph?" Rosen walked around to her side of the table while the rest of the team did its work.

"A tattoo on his arm," she reported. Nurse Wilson was surprised by the reaction it drew from Professor Rosen.

The transition from sleep to wakefulness was usually easy for Kelly, but not this time. His first coherent thought was to be surprised, but he didn't know why. Next came pain, but not so much pain as the distant warning that there would be pain, and lots of it. When he realized that he could open his eyes, he did, only to find himself staring at a gray linoleum floor. A few scattered drops of liquid

reflected the bright overhead fluorescents. He felt needles in his eyes, and only then did he realize that the real stabs were in his arms.

I'm alive.

Why does that surprise me?

He could hear the sound of people moving around, muted conversations, distant chimes. The sound of rushing air was explained by air-conditioning vents, one of which had to be nearby, since he could feel the moving chill on the skin of his back. Something told him that he ought to move, that being still made him vulnerable, but even after he managed a command to his limbs to do something, nothing happened. That's when the pain announced its presence. Like the ripple on a pond from the fall of an insect, it started somewhere on his shoulder and expanded. It took a moment to classify. The nearest approximation was a bad sunburn, because everything from the left side of his neck on down to his left elbow felt scorched. He knew he was forgetting something, probably something important.

Where the fuck am I?

Kelly thought he felt the distant vibration of—what? Ship's engines? No, that wasn't right somehow, and after a few more seconds he realized it was the faraway sound of a city bus pulling away from a stop. Not a ship. A city. Why am I in a city?

A shadow crossed his face. He opened his eyes to see the bottom half of a figure dressed all over in light-green cotton. The hands held a clipboard of some sort. Kelly couldn't even focus his eyes well enough to tell if the figure was male or female before it went away, and it didn't occur to him to say anything before he drifted back to sleep.

"The shoulder wound was extensive but superficial," Rosen told the neurosurgical resident, thirty feet away.

"Bloody enough. Four units," she noted.

"Shotgun wounds are like that. There was only one real threat to the spine. Took me a little while to figure how to remove it without endangering anything."

"Two hundred thirty-seven pellets, but"—she held the X ray up to the light—"looks like you got them all. This fellow just got a nice collection of freckles, though."

"Took long enough," Sam said tiredly, knowing that he ought to

have let someone else handle it, but he'd volunteered, after all.

"You know this patient, don't you?" Sandy O'Toole said, arriving from the recovery room.

"Yeah."

"He's coming out, but it'll be a while." She handed over the chart which showed his current vitals. "Looking good, doctor."

Professor Rosen nodded and explained further to the resident, "Great physical shape. The firemen did a nice job holding up his BP. He did almost bleed out, but the wounds looked worse than they really were. Sandy?"

She turned back. "Yes, doctor?"

"This one is a friend of mine. Would you mind terribly if I asked you to take—"

"A special interest?"

"You're our best, Sandy."

"Anything I need to know?" she asked, appreciating the compliment.

"He's a good man, Sandy." Sam said it in a way that carried real meaning. "Sarah likes him, too."

"Then he must be all right." She headed back into recovery, wondering if the professor was playing matchmaker again.

"What do I tell the police?"

"Four hours, minimum. I want to be there." Rosen looked over at the coffeepot and decided against it. Any more and his stomach might rupture from all the acid.

"So who is he?"

"I don't know all that much, but I ran into trouble on the Bay in my boat and he helped me out. We ended up staying at his place for the weekend." Sam didn't go any further. He didn't really know that much, but he had inferred a lot, and that scared him very much indeed. He'd done his part. While he hadn't saved Kelly's life—luck and the firemen had probably done that—he had performed an exceedingly skillful procedure, though he had also annoyed the resident, Dr. Ann Pretlow, by not allowing her to do much of anything except watch. "I need a little sleep. I don't have much scheduled for today. Can you do the follow-up on Mrs. Baker?"

"Certainly."

"Have someone wake me up in three hours," Rosen said on the way to his office, where a nice comfortable couch awaited.

“Nice tan,” Billy observed with a smirk. “I wonder where she got it.” There was general amusement. “What do we do with her?”

He thought about that. He’d just discovered a fine way to deal with bodies, much cleaner, in its way, and far safer than what they’d been doing. But it also involved a lengthy boat trip, and he just didn’t have the time to be bothered. He also didn’t want to have anyone else use that particular method. It was too good to share with anyone. He knew that one of them would talk. That was one of his problems.

“Find a spot,” he said after a moment’s consideration. “If she’s found, it doesn’t matter much.” Then he looked around the room, cataloging the expressions he saw. The lesson had been learned. Nobody else would try this again, not anytime soon. He didn’t even have to say anything.

“Tonight? Better at night.”

“That’s fine. No hurry.” Everyone else could learn even more from looking at her for the rest of the day, lying there in the middle of the floor. He took only a little pleasure from it, and people had to learn their lessons, and even when it was too late for one of them, others could learn from that one’s mistakes. Especially when the lessons were clear and hard. Even the drugs wouldn’t block this one out.

“What about the guy?” he asked Billy.

Billy smirked again. It was his favorite expression. “Blew him away. Both barrels, ten feet. We won’t be seeing him no more.”

“Okay.” He left. There was work to be done and money to collect. This little problem was behind him. It was a pity, he thought on the way to his car, that they couldn’t all be solved this easily.

The body remained in place. Doris and the others sat in the same room, unable to look away from what had once been a friend, learning their lesson as Henry wished.

Kelly vaguely noted that he was being moved. The floor moved under him. He watched the lines between the floor tiles travel like movie credits until they backed him into another room, a small one. This time he tried to raise his head, and indeed it moved a few inches, enough to see the legs of a woman. The green surgical slacks ended above her ankles, and they were definitely a woman’s. There was a whirring sound, and his horizon moved downwards. After a moment he realized that he was on a powered bed, hanging

between two hoops of stainless steel. His body was attached to the bed somehow, and as the platform rotated he could feel the pressure of the restraints that held him in place, not uncomfortable, but there. Presently he saw a woman. His age, perhaps a year or two younger, with brown hair stuffed under a green cap and light eyes that sparkled in a friendly way.

"Hello," she said from behind her mask. "I'm your nurse."

"Where am I?" Kelly asked in a raspy voice.

"Johns Hopkins Hospital."

"What—"

"Somebody shot you." She reached out to touch his hand.

The softness of her hand ignited something in his drug-suppressed consciousness. For a minute or so, Kelly couldn't figure out what it was. Like a cloud of smoke, it shifted and revolved, forming a picture before his eyes. The missing pieces began to come together, and even though he understood it was horror that awaited him, his mind struggled to hurry them along. In the end it was the nurse who did it for him.

Sandy O'Toole had left her mask on for a reason. An attractive woman, like many nurses she felt that male patients responded well to the idea of someone like her taking a personal interest in them. Now that Patient Kelly, John, was more or less alert, she reached up and untied the mask to give him her beaming feminine smile, the first good thing of the day for him. Men liked Sandra O'Toole, from her tall, athletic frame to the gap between her front teeth. She had no idea why they considered the gap sexy—food got caught there, after all—but as long as it worked, it was one more tool for her business of helping to make sick people well. And so she smiled at him, just for business. The result was like no other she had encountered.

Her patient went ghostly pale, not the white of snow or fresh linen, but the mottled, sickly look and texture of Styrofoam. Her first thought was that something had gone gravely wrong, a massive internal bleed, perhaps, or even a clot-driven thrombosis. He might have screamed, but couldn't catch his breath, and his hands fell limp. His eyes never left her, and after a moment O'Toole realized that she had somehow caused whatever it was. O'Toole's first instinct was to take his hand and say that everything was all right, but she knew instantly that it wasn't true.

"Oh, God… oh, God… Pam." The look on what ought to have

been a ruggedly handsome face was one of black despair.

"She was with me," Kelly told Rosen a few minutes later. "Do you know anything, doc?"

"The police will be here in a few minutes, John, but, no, I don't know anything. Maybe they took her to another hospital." He tried to hope. But Sam knew that it was a lie, and he hated himself for lying. He made a show of taking Kelly's vital signs, something Sandy could have done just as well, before examining his patient's back. "You're going to be okay. How's the shoulder?"

"Not real great, Sam," Kelly replied, still groggy. "How bad?"

"Shotgun—you took quite a bit, but—was the window on the car rolled up?"

"Yeah," Kelly said, remembering the rain.

"That's one of the things that saved you. The shoulder muscles are pretty beaten up, and you damned near bled to death, but there won't be any permanent damage except for some scarring. I did the job myself."

Kelly looked up. "Thanks, Sam. Pain isn't so bad… worse the last time I—"

"Quiet down, John," Rosen ordered gently, giving the neck a close look. He made a mental note to order a complete new set of X rays just to make sure there wasn't something he had missed, maybe close to the spine. "The pain medication will kick in pretty fast. Save the heroics. We don't award points for that here. 'Kay?"

"Aye aye. Please—check the other hospitals for Pam, okay?" Kelly asked, hope yet in his voice though he knew better, too.

Two uniformed officers had been waiting the whole time for Kelly to come out from under. Rosen brought in the older of the two a few minutes later. The questioning was brief, on doctor's orders. After confirming his identity, they asked about Pam; they already had a physical description from Rosen, but not a surname, which Kelly had to provide. The officers made note of his appointment with Lieutenant Allen and left after a few minutes as the victim started to fade out. The shock of the shooting and surgery, added to the pain medications, would diminish the value of what he said anyway, Rosen pointed out.

"So who's the girl?" the senior officer asked.

"I didn't even know her last name until a couple minutes ago," Rosen said, seated in his office. He was dopey from lack of sleep,

and his commentary suffered as well. “She was addicted to barbiturates when we met them—she and Kelly were living together, I suppose. We helped her clean up.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“My wife, Sarah. She’s a pharmacologist here. You can talk to her if you want.”

“We will,” the officer assured him. “What about Mr. Kelly?”

“Ex-Navy, Vietnam vet.”

“Do you have any reason to believe that he’s a drug user, sir?”

“Not a chance,” Rosen answered, a slight edge on his voice. “His physical condition is too good for that, and I saw his reaction when we found out that Pam was using pills. I had to calm him down. Definitely not an addict. I’m a physician, I would have noticed.”

The policeman was not overly impressed, but accepted it at face value. The detectives would have a lot of fun with this one, he thought. What had appeared to be a simple robbery was now at least a kidnapping as well. Wonderful news. “So what was he doing in that part of town?”

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted. “Who’s this Lieutenant Allen?”

“Homicide, Western District,” the cop explained.

“I wonder why they had an appointment.”

“That’s something we’ll get from the Lieutenant, sir.”

“Was this a robbery?”

“Probably. It sure looks that way. We found his wallet a block away, no cash, no credit cards, just his driver’s license. He also had a handgun in his car. Whoever robbed him must have missed that. That’s against the law, by the way,” the cop noted. Another officer came in.

“I checked the name again—I *knew* I heard it before. He did a job for Allen. Remember last year, the Gooding case?”

The senior man looked up from his notes. “Oh, yeah! He’s the guy who found the gun?”

“Right, and he ended up training our divers.”

“It still doesn’t explain what the hell he was doing over there,” the cop pointed out.

“True,” his partner admitted. “But it makes it hard to believe he’s a player.”

The senior officer shook his head. “There was a girl with him. She’s missing.”

“Kidnapping, too? What do we have on her?”

"Just a name. Pamela Madden. Twenty, recovering doper, missing. We have Mr. Kelly, his ear, his gun, and that's it. No shells from the shotgun. No witnesses at all. A missing girl, probably, but a description that could fit ten thousand local girls. Robbery-kidnapping." All in all, not that atypical a case. They often started off knowing damned little. In any case, the two uniformed officers had mainly determined that the detectives would take this one over almost immediately.

"She wasn't from around here. She had an accent, Texas, somewhere out there."

"What else?" the senior officer asked. "Come on, doc, anything you know, okay?"

Sam grimaced. "She had been the victim of sexual abuse. She might have been a hooker. My wife said—hell, I saw it, evidence of scars on her back. She'd been whipped, some permanent scarring from welts, that sort of thing. We didn't press, but she might have been a prostitute."

"Mr. Kelly has strange habits and acquaintances, doesn't he?" the officer observed while making notes.

"From what you just said, he helps cops, too, doesn't he?" Professor Rosen was getting angry. "Anything else? I have rounds to make."

"Doctor, what we have here is a definite attempted murder, probably as part of a robbery, and maybe a kidnapping also. Those are serious crimes. I have procedures to follow, just like you do. When will Kelly be up for a real interview?"

"Tomorrow, probably, but he's going to be very rocky for a couple of days."

"Is ten in the morning okay, sir?"

"Yes."

The cops rose. "Somebody will be back then, sir."

Rosen watched them leave. This, strangely enough, had been his first real experience with a major criminal investigation. His work more often dealt with traffic and industrial accidents. He found himself unable to believe that Kelly could be a criminal, yet that had seemed to be the thrust of their questions, wasn't it? That's when Dr. Pretlow came in.

"We finished the blood work on Kelly." She handed the data over. "Gonorrhea. He should be more careful. I recommend penicillin. Any known allergies?"

“No.” Rosen closed his eyes and swore. What the hell else would happen today?

“Not that big a deal, sir. It looks like a very early case. When he’s feeling better I’ll have Social Services talk to him about—”

“No, you won’t,” Rosen said in a low growl.

“But—”

“But the girl he got it from is probably dead, and we will *not* force him to remember her that way.” It was the first time Sam had admitted the probable facts to himself, and that made it all the worse, declaring her dead. He had little to base it on, but his instincts told him it must be so.

“Doctor, the law requires—”

It was just too much. Rosen was on the point of exploding. “That’s a good *man* in there. I watched him fall in love with a girl who’s probably been murdered, and his last memory of her will *not* be that she gave him venereal disease. Is that clear, doctor? As far as the patient is concerned, the medication is for a post-op infection. Mark the chart accordingly.”

“No, doctor, I will not do that.”

Professor Rosen made the proper notations. “Done.” He looked up. “Doctor Pretlow, you have the makings of an excellent technical surgeon. Try to remember that the patients upon whom we perform our procedures are human beings, with feelings, will you? If you do so, I think you will find that the job is somewhat easier in the long run. It will also make you a much better physician.”

And what was he so worked up about? Pretlow asked herself on the way out.

8

Concealment

It was a combination of things. June 20 was a hot day, and a dull one. A photographer for the *Baltimore Sun* had a new camera, a Nikon to replace his venerable Honeywell Pentax, and while he mourned for his old one, the new camera, like a new love, had all sorts of new features to explore and enjoy. One of them was a whole collection of telephoto lenses that the distributor had thrown in. The Nikon was a new model, and the company had wanted it accepted within the news-photo community quickly, and so twenty photographers at various papers around the country had gotten free sets. Bob Preis had gotten his because of a Pulitzer Prize earned three years before. He was sitting in his car on Druid Lake Drive now, listening to his police radio, hoping for something interesting to happen, but nothing was. And so he was playing with his new camera, practicing his lens-switching skills. The Nikon was beautifully machined, and as an infantryman will learn to strip and clean his rifle in total darkness, Preis was changing from one lens to another by feel, forcing himself to scan the area just as a means of keeping his eyes off a procedure that had to become as natural and automatic as zipping his pants.

It was the crows that caught his attention. Located off-center in the irregularly shaped lake was a fountain. No example of architectural prowess, it was a plain concrete cylinder sticking six or eight feet up from the water's surface, and in it were a few jets that shot water more or less straight up, though today shifting winds were scattering the water haphazardly in all directions. Crows were circling the water, trying occasionally to get in, but defeated by the swirling sheets of clear white spray, which

appeared to frighten them. What were the crows interested in? His hands searched the camera case for the 200mm lens, which he attached to the camera body, bringing it up to his eyes smoothly.

"Sweet Jesus!" Preis instantly shot ten rapid frames. Only then did he get on his car radio, telling his base office to notify the police at once. He switched lenses again, this time selecting a 300mm, his longest. After finishing one roll, he threaded another, this one 100-speed color. He steadied the camera on the windowsill of the tired old Chevy and fired off another roll. One crow, he saw, got through the water, settling on—

"Oh, God, no…" Because it was, after all, a human body there, a young woman, white as alabaster, and in the through-the-lens optics, he could see the crow right there, its clawed feet strutting around the body, its pitiless black eyes surveying what to the bird was nothing more than a large and diverse meal. Preis sat his camera down and shifted his car into gear. He violated two separate traffic laws getting as close to the fountain as he could, and in what was for him a rare case of humanity overcoming professionalism, slammed his hand down on the horn, hoping to startle the bird away. The bird looked up, but saw that whatever the noise came from, there was no immediate threat here, and it went back to selecting the first morsel for its iron-hard beak. It was then that Preis made a random but effective guess. He blinked his lights on and off, and to the bird that was unusual enough that it thought better of things and flew away. It might have been an owl, after all, and the meal wasn't going anywhere. The bird would just wait for the threat to go away before returning to eat.

"What gives?" a cop asked, pulling alongside.

"There's a body on the fountain. Look." He handed the camera over.

"God," the policeman breathed, handing it back after a long quiet moment. He made the radio call while Preis shot another roll. Police cars arrived, rather like the crows, one at a time, until eight were parked within sight of the fountain. A fire truck arrived in ten minutes, along with someone from the Department of Recreation and Parks, trailering a boat behind his pickup. This was quickly put into the water. Then came the forensics people with a lab truck, and it was time to go out to the fountain. Preis asked to go along—he was a better photographer than the one the cops used—but was rebuffed, and so he continued to record the event from the lake's

edge. There wouldn't be another Pulitzer in this. There could have been, he thought. But the price of that would have involved immortalizing the instinctive act of a carrion bird, defiling the body of a girl in the midst of a major city. And that wasn't worth the nightmares. He had enough of those already.

A crowd had already gathered. The police officers congregated in small knots, trading quiet comments and barbed attempts at grim humor. A TV news truck arrived from its studio on Television Hill just north of the park, which held the city zoo. It was a place Bob Preis often took his young children, and they especially liked the lion, not so originally named Leo, and the polar bears, and all the other predators that were safely confined behind steel bars and stone walls. *Unlike some people,* he thought, watching them lift the body and place it in a rubber bag. At least her torment was over. Preis changed rolls one more time to record the process of loading the body into the coroner's station wagon. A *Sun* reporter was here now. He'd ask the questions while Preis determined how good his new camera really was back at his darkroom on Calvert Street.

"John, they found her," Rosen said.

"Dead?" Kelly couldn't look up. The tone of Sam's voice had already told him the real news. It wasn't a surprise, but the end of hope never comes easily to anyone.

Sam nodded. "Yeah."

"How?"

"I don't know yet. The police called me a few minutes ago, and I came over as quick as I could."

"Thanks, pal." If a human voice could sound dead, Sam told himself, Kelly's did.

"I'm sorry, John. I—you know how I felt about her."

"Yes, sir, I do. It's not your fault, Sam."

"You're not eating." Rosen gestured to the food tray.

"I'm not real hungry."

"If you want to recover, you have to get your strength back."

"Why?" Kelly asked, staring at the floor.

Rosen came over and grasped Kelly's right hand. There wasn't much to say. The surgeon didn't have the stomach to look at Kelly's face. He'd pieced enough together to know that his friend was blaming himself, and he didn't know enough to talk to him about it, at least not yet. Death was a companion for Sam Rosen, M.D.,

F.A.C.S. Neurosurgeons dealt with major injuries to that most delicate part of the human anatomy, and the injuries to which they most often responded were frequently beyond anyone's power to repair. But the unexpected death of a person one knows can be too much for anyone.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked after a minute or two.

"Not right now, Sam. Thanks."

"Maybe a priest?"

"No, not now."

"It wasn't your fault, John."

"Whose, then? She trusted me, Sam. I blew it."

"The police want to talk to you some more. I told them tomorrow morning."

He'd been through his second interview in the morning. Kelly had already told them much of what he knew. Her full name, her hometown, how they'd met. Yes, they had been intimate. Yes, she had been a prostitute, a runaway. Yes, her body had shown signs of abuse. But not everything. Somehow he'd been unable to volunteer information because to have done so would have entailed admitting to other men the dimensions of his failure. And so he had avoided some of their inquiries, claiming pain, which was quite real, but not real enough. He already sensed that the police didn't like him, but that was okay. He didn't much like himself at the moment.

"Okay."

"I can—I should do some things with your medications. I've tried to go easy, I don't like overdoing the things, but they'll help you relax, John."

"Dope me up more?" Kelly's head lifted, and the expression was not something that Rosen ever wanted to see again. "You think that's really going to make a difference, Sam?"

Rosen looked away, unable to meet his eyes now that it was possible to do so. "You're ready for a regular bed. I'll have you moved into one in a few minutes."

"Okay."

The surgeon wanted to say more, but couldn't find the right words. He left without any others.

It took Sandy O'Toole and two orderlies to move him, as carefully as they could, onto a standard hospital bed. She cranked up the head portion to relieve the pressure on his injured shoulder.

"I heard," she told him. It bothered her that his grief wasn't right.

He was a tough man, but not a fool. Perhaps he was one of those men who did his weeping alone, but she was sure he hadn't done it yet. And that was necessary, she knew. Tears released poisons from inside, poisons which if not released could be as deadly as the real kind. The nurse sat beside his bed. "I'm a widow," she told him.

"Vietnam?"

"Yes, Tim was a captain in the First Cavalry."

"I'm sorry," Kelly said without turning his head. "They saved my butt once."

"It's hard. I know."

"Last November I lost Tish, and now—"

"Sarah told me. Mr. Kelly—"

"John," he said softly. He couldn't find it in himself to be gruff to her.

"Thank you, John. My name is Sandy. Bad luck does not make a bad person," she told him in a voice that meant what it said, though it didn't quite sound that way.

"It wasn't luck. She told me it was a dangerous place and I took her there anyway because I wanted to see for myself."

"You almost got yourself killed trying to protect her."

"I didn't protect her, Sandy. I killed her." Kelly's eyes were wide open now, looking at the ceiling. "I was careless and stupid and I killed her."

"Other people killed her, and other people tried to kill you. You're a victim."

"Not a victim. Just a fool."

We'll save that for later, Nurse O'Toole told herself. "What sort of girl was she, John?"

"Unlucky." Kelly made an effort to look at her face, but that just made it worse. He gave the nurse a brief synopsis of the life of Pamela Starr Madden, deceased.

"So after all the men who hurt her or used her, you gave her something that nobody else did." O'Toole paused, waiting for a reply and getting none. "You gave her love, didn't you?"

"Yes." Kelly's body shuddered for a moment. "Yes, I did love her."

"Let it out," the nurse told him. "You have to."

First he closed his eyes. Then he shook his head. "I can't."

This would be a difficult patient, she told herself. The cult of manhood was a mystery to her. She'd seen it in her husband, who

had served a tour in Vietnam as a lieutenant, then rotated back again as a company commander. He hadn't relished it, hadn't looked forward to it, but he hadn't shrunk from it. It was part of the job, he'd told her on their wedding night, two months before he'd left. A stupid, wasteful job that had cost her a husband and, she feared, her life. Who really cared what happened in a place so far away? And yet it had been important to Tim. Whatever that force had been, its legacy to her was emptiness, and it had no more real meaning than the grim pain she saw on the face of her patient. O'Toole would have known more about that pain if she'd been able to take her thought one step further.

"That was really stupid."

"That's one way of looking at it," Tucker agreed. "But I can't have my girls leaving without permission, can I?"

"You ever hear of burying them?"

"Anybody can do that." The man smiled in the darkness, watching the movie. They were in the back row of a downtown theater, a 1930s film palace that was gradually falling to ruin, and had started running films at 9 A.M. just to keep up with the painting bill. It was still a good place for a covert meeting with a confidential informant, which was how this meeting would go on the officer's time sheet.

"Sloppy not killing the guy, too."

"Will he be a problem?" Tucker asked.

"No. He didn't see anything, did he?"

"You tell me, man."

"I can't get that close to the case, remember?" The man paused for a handful of popcorn and munched away his irritation. "He's known to the department. Ex-Navy guy, skin diver, lives over on the Eastern Shore somewhere, sort of a rich beach bum from what I gather. The first interview didn't develop anything at all. Ryan and Douglas are going to be working the case now, but it doesn't look like they have much of anything to work with."

"That's about what she said when we… 'talked' to her. He picked her up, and it looks like they had a mighty good time together, but her supply of pills ran out, she said, and she had him bring her in town to score some 'ludes. So, no harm done?"

"Probably not, but let's try to control loose ends, okay?"

"You want me to get him in the hospital?" Tucker asked lightly.

“I can probably arrange that.”

“No! You damned fool, this is going on the books as a robbery. If anything else happens, it just gets bigger. We don’t want that. Leave him be. He doesn’t know anything.”

“So he’s not a problem?” Tucker wanted to be clear on that.

“No. But try to remember that you can’t open a murder investigation without a body.”

“I have to keep my people in line.”

“From what I hear you did to her—”

“Just keeping them in line,” Tucker reemphasized. “Making an example, like. You do that right and you don’t have any more problems for a while. You’re not a part of that. Why does it bother you?”

Another handful of popcorn helped him bend to the logic of the moment. “What do you have for me?”

Tucker smiled in the darkness. “Mr. Piaggi is starting to like doing business with me.”

A grunt in the darkness. “I wouldn’t trust him.”

“It does get complicated, doesn’t it?” Tucker paused. “But I need his connections. We’re about to hit the big time.”

“How long?”

“Soon,” Tucker said judiciously. “Next step, I think, we start feeding stuff north. Tony is up there talking to some people today, matter of fact.”

“What about now? I could use something juicy.”

“Three guys with a ton of grass good enough?” Tucker asked.

“Do they know about you?”

“No, but I know about them.” That was the point, after all—his organization was tight. Only a handful of people knew who he was, and those people knew what would happen if they got a little loose. You just had to have the stones to enforce discipline.

“Take it easy on him,” Rosen said outside the private room. “He’s recovering from a major injury and he’s still on several medications. He’s really not capable of talking to you with a full deck.”

“I have my job, too, doctor.” It was a new officer on the case now, a detective sergeant named Tom Douglas. He was about forty, and looked every bit as tired as Kelly, Rosen thought, and every bit as angry.

“I understand that. But he’s been badly hurt, plus the shock of

what happened to his girlfriend."

"The quicker we get the information we need, the better our chances are to find the bastards. Your duty is to the living, sir. Mine is to the dead."

"If you want my medical opinion, he's not really capable of helping you right now. He's been through too much. He's clinically depressed, and that has implications for his physical recovery."

"Are you telling me that you want to sit in?" Douglas asked. *Just what I need—an amateur Sherlock to watch over us.* But that was a battle he couldn't win and wouldn't bother to fight.

"I'll feel better if I can keep an eye on things. Go easy on him," Sam repeated, opening the door.

"Mr. Kelly, we're sorry," the detective said after introducing himself. Douglas opened his notebook. The case had been booted up the ladder to his office because of its high profile. The first-page color photo on the *Evening Sun* had come as close to the pornographic as anything the media could publish, and the mayor had personally called for action on this one. Because of that, Douglas had taken the case, wondering how long the mayor's interest would last. *Not very,* the detective thought. The only thing that occupied a politician's mind for more than a week was getting and holding votes. This case had more spin on it than one of Mike Cuellar's screwballs, but it was his case, and what was always the worst part was about to take place. "Two nights ago you were in the company of a young lady named Pamela Madden?"

"Yes." Kelly's eyes were closed when Nurse O'Toole came in with his morning antibiotic dose. She was surprised to see the two other men there and stopped in the doorway, not knowing if she should interrupt or not.

"Mr. Kelly, yesterday afternoon we discovered the body of a young woman who fits the physical description of Miss Madden." Douglas reached into his coat pocket.

"No!" Rosen said, getting out of his chair.

"Is this she?" Douglas asked, holding the photo before Kelly's face, hoping that his proper grammar would somehow lessen the impact.

"God *damn* it!" The surgeon turned the cop around and pushed him against the wall. In the process the photo dropped on the patient's chest.

Kelly's eyes went wide in horror. His body sprang upwards,

fighting the restraints. Then he collapsed, his skin pasty white. All in the room turned away but for the nurse, whose eyes were locked on her patient.

"Look, doc, I—" Douglas tried to say.

"Get the hell out of my hospital!" Rosen fairly screamed. "You can *kill* somebody with that kind of shock! Why didn't you tell me —"

"He has to identify—"

"*I* could have done that!"

O'Toole heard the noise as the two grown men scuffled like children in a playground, but John Kelly was her concern, the antibiotic medication still in her hand. She tried to remove the photograph from Kelly's view, but her own eyes were first drawn to the image and then repulsed by it as Kelly's hand seized the print and held it a scant twelve inches from his own wide-open eyes. It was his expression now that occupied her consciousness. Sandy recoiled briefly at what she saw there, but then Kelly's face composed itself and he spoke.

"It's okay, Sam. He has his job to do, too." Kelly looked down at the photo one last time. Then he closed his eyes and held it up for the nurse to take.

And things settled down for everyone except Nurse O'Toole. She watched Kelly swallow the oversized pill and left the room for the calm of the corridor.

Sandra O'Toole walked back to the nurses' station, remembering what she alone had seen. Kelly's face turning so pale that her first reaction to it was that he must be in shock, then the tumult behind her as she reached for her patient—but then what? It wasn't like the first time at all. Kelly's face had transformed itself. Only an instant, like opening a door into some other place, and she'd seen something she had never imagined. Something very old and feral and ugly. The eyes not wide, but focused on something she could not see. The pallor of his face not that of shock, but of rage. His hands balled briefly into fists of quivering stone. And then his face had changed again. There had been comprehension to replace the blind, killing rage, and what she'd seen next was the most dangerous sight she had ever beheld, though she knew not why. Then the door closed. Kelly's eyes shut, and when he opened them, his face was unnaturally serene. The complete sequence had not taken four seconds, she realized, all of it while Rosen and Douglas

had been scuffling against the wall. He'd passed from horror to rage to understanding—then to concealment, but what had come in between comprehension and disguise was the most frightening thing of all.

What had she seen in the face of this man? It took her a moment to answer the question. Death was what she'd seen. Controlled. Planned. Disciplined.

But it was still Death, living in the mind of a man.

"I don't like doing this sort of thing, Mr. Kelly," Douglas said back in the room as he adjusted his coat. The detective and the surgeon traded a look of mutual embarrassment.

"John, are you all right?" Rosen looked him over and took his pulse quickly, surprised to find it nearly normal.

"Yeah." Kelly nodded. He looked at the detective. "That's her. That's Pam."

"I'm sorry. I really am," Douglas said with genuine sincerity, "but there's no easy way to do this. There never is. Whatever happened, it's over now, and now it's our job to try and identify the people who did it. We need your help to do that."

"Okay," Kelly said neutrally. "Where's Frank? How come he's not here?"

"He can't have a hand in this," Sergeant Douglas answered, with a look to the surgeon. "He knows you. Personal involvement in a criminal case isn't terribly professional." It wasn't entirely true—in fact, was hardly true at all—but it served the purpose. "Did you see the people who—"

Kelly shook his head, looking down at the bed, and he spoke just above a whisper. "No. I was looking the wrong way. She said something, but I didn't get around. Pam saw them, I turned right, then started turning left. I never made it."

"What were you doing at the time?"

"Observing. Look, you talked to Lieutenant Allen, right?"

"That's correct." Douglas nodded.

"Pam witnessed a murder. I was bringing her in to talk to Frank about it."

"Go on."

"She was linked up with people who deal drugs. She saw them kill somebody, a girl. I told her she had to do something about it. I was curious about what it was like," Kelly said in a flat monotone,

still bathing in his guilt while his mind replayed the image.

"Names?"

"None that I remember," Kelly answered.

"Come on," Douglas said, leaning forward. "She must have told you something!"

"I didn't ask much. I figured that was your job—Frank's job, I mean. We were supposed to meet with Frank that night. All I know is it's a bunch of people who deal drugs and who use women for something."

"That's all you know?"

Kelly looked him straight in the eyes. "Yes. Not very helpful, is it?"

Douglas waited a few seconds before going on. What might have been an important break in an important case was not going to happen, and so it was his turn to lie again, beginning with some truth to make it easier. "There's a pair of robbers working the west side of town. Two black males, medium size, and that's all we have for a description. Their MO is a sawed-off shotgun. They specialize in taking down people coming in for a drug buy, and they particularly like the gentry customers. Probably most of their robberies don't even get reported. We have them linked to two killings. This might be number three."

"That's all?" Rosen asked.

"Robbery and murder are major crimes, doctor."

"But that's just an accident!"

"That's one way of looking at it," Douglas agreed, turning back to his witness. "Mr. Kelly, you must have seen something. What the hell were you doing around there? Was Miss Madden trying to buy something—"

"No!"

"Look, it's over. She's dead. You can tell me. I have to know."

"Like I said, she was linked up with this bunch, and I—dumb as it sounds, I don't know shit about drugs." *I'll be finding out, though.*

Alone in his bed, alone with his mind, Kelly's eyes calmly surveyed the ceiling, scanning the white surface like a movie screen.

First, the police are wrong, Kelly told himself. He didn't know how he knew, but he did, and that was enough. *It wasn't robbers, it was* them, *the people Pam was afraid of.*

What had happened fit what Pam had told him. It was something

they had done before. He had allowed himself to be spotted—twice. His guilt was still quite real, but that was history now and he couldn't change it. Whatever he had done wrong, it was done. Whoever had done this to Pam, they were still out there, and if they'd done this twice already, they would do it again. But that was not really what occupied his mind behind the blank staring mask.

Okay, he thought, *Okay. They've never met anyone like me before.*

I need to get back into shape, Chief Bosun's Mate John Terrence Kelly told himself.

The injuries were severe, but he'd survive them. He knew every step of the process. Recovery would be painful, but he'd do what they told him, he'd push the envelope a little bit, enough to make them proud of their patient. Then the really hard part would start. The running, the swimming, the weights. Then the weapons training. Then the mental preparation—but that was already underway, he realized…

Oh, no. Not in their wildest nightmares have they ever met anyone like me.

The name they had given him in Vietnam boiled up from the past.

Snake.

Kelly pushed the call button pinned to his pillow. Nurse O'Toole appeared within two minutes.

"I'm hungry," he told her.

"I hope I never have to do that again," Douglas told his lieutenant, not for the first time.

"How did it go?"

"Well, that professor might make a formal complaint. I think I calmed him down enough, but you never know with people like that."

"Does Kelly know anything?"

"Nothing we can use," Douglas replied. "He's still too messed up from being shot and all to be coherent, but he didn't see any faces, didn't—hell, if he had seen anything, he would probably have done something. I even showed him the picture, trying to shake him a little. I thought the poor bastard would have a heart attack. The doctor went crazy. I'm not real proud of that, Em. Nobody should have to see something like that."

"Including us, Tom, including us." Lieutenant Emmet Ryan

looked up from a large collection of photos, half taken at the scene, half at the coroner's office. What he saw there sickened him despite all his years of police work, especially because this wasn't a crime of madness or passion. No, this event had been done for a purpose by coldly rational men. "I talked to Frank. This Kelly guy is a good scout, helped him clear the Gooding case. He's not linked up with anything. The doctors all say that he's clean, not a user."

"Anything on the girl?" Douglas didn't need to say that this could have been the break they'd needed. If only Kelly had called them instead of Allen, who didn't know about their investigation. But he hadn't, and their best potential source of information was dead.

"The prints came back. Pamela Madden. She was picked up in Chicago, Atlanta, and New Orleans for prostitution. Never came to trial, never did any time. The judges just kept letting her go. Victimless crime, right?"

The sergeant suppressed a curse at the many idiots on the bench. "Sure, Em, no victims at all. So we're not any closer to these people than we were six months ago, are we? We need more manpower," Douglas said, stating the obvious.

"To chase down the murder of a street hooker?" the Lieutenant asked. "The mayor didn't like the picture, but they've already told him what she was, and after a week, things go back to normal. You think we'll break something loose in a week, Tom?"

"You could let him know—"

"No." Ryan shook his head. "He'd talk. Ever know a politician who didn't? They've got somebody inside this building, Tom. You want more manpower? Tell me, where do we get it, the kind we can trust?"

"I know, Em." Douglas conceded the point. "But we're not getting anywhere."

"Maybe Narcotics will shake something loose."

"Sure." Douglas snorted.

"Can Kelly help us?"

"No. Damned fool was just looking the wrong way."

"Then do the usual follow-up, just to make sure everything looks okay and leave it at that. Forensics isn't in yet. Maybe they'll turn something."

"Yes, sir," Douglas replied. As so often happened in police work, you played for breaks, for mistakes the other side made. These people didn't make many, but sooner or later they all did, both

officers told themselves. It was just that they never seemed to come soon enough.

Lieutenant Ryan looked back down at the photos. “They sure had their fun with her. Just like the other one.”

“Good to see you’re eating.”

Kelly looked up from a mostly empty plate. “The cop was right, Sam. It’s over. I have to get better, have to focus on something, right?”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. Hell, I could always go back in the Navy or something.”

“You have to deal with your grief, John,” Sam said, sitting down next to the bed.

“I know how. I’ve had to do that before, remember?” He looked up. “Oh—what did you tell the police about me?”

“How we met, that sort of thing. Why?”

“What I did over there. It’s secret, Sam.” Kelly managed to look embarrassed. “The unit I belonged to, it doesn’t officially exist. The things we did, well, they never really happened, if you know what I mean.”

“They didn’t ask. Besides, you never really told me,” the surgeon said, puzzled—even more so by the relief on his patient’s face.

“I got recommended to them by a pal in the Navy, mainly to help train their divers. What they know is what I’m allowed to tell. It’s not what I really did, exactly, but it sounds good.”

“Okay.”

“I haven’t thanked you for taking such good care of me.”

Rosen stood and walked to the door, but he stopped dead three feet short of it and turned.

“You think you can fool me?”

“I guess not, Sam,” Kelly answered guardedly.

“John, I have spent my whole damned *life* using these hands to fix people. You have to stay aloof, you can’t get too involved, because if you do you can lose it, lose the edge, lose the concentration. I’ve never hurt anyone in my life. You understand me?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“What are you going to do?”

“You don’t want to know, Sam.”

“I want to help. I really do,” Rosen said, genuine wonder in his voice. “I liked her, too, John.”

“I know that.”

“So what can I do?” the surgeon asked. He was afraid that Kelly might ask for something he was unfitted to do; more afraid still that he might agree.

“Get me better.”

9

Labor

It was almost grim to watch, Sandy thought. The strange thing was that he was being a good patient. He didn't whine. He didn't bitch. He did just what they told him to do. There was a streak of the sadist in all physical therapists. There had to be, since the job meant pushing people a little further than they wanted to go—just as an athletic coach would do—and the ultimate aim was to help, after all. Even so, a good therapist had to push the patient, encourage the weak, and browbeat the strong; to cajole and to shame, all in the name of health; that meant taking satisfaction from the exertion and pain of others, and O'Toole could not have done that. But Kelly, she saw, would have none of it. He did what was expected, and when the therapist asked for more, more was delivered, and on, and on, until the therapist was pushed beyond the point of pride in the result of his efforts and began to worry.

"You can ease off now," he advised.

"Why?" Kelly asked somewhat breathlessly.

"Your heart rate is one-ninety-five." And had been there for five minutes.

"What's the record?"

"Zero," the therapist replied without a smile. That earned him a laugh, and a look, and Kelly slowed his pace on the stationary bike, easing himself down over a period of two minutes to a reluctant stop.

"I've come to take him back," O'Toole announced.

"Good, do that before he breaks something."

Kelly got off and toweled his face, glad to see that she hadn't brought a wheelchair or something similarly insulting. "To what do

I owe this honor, ma'am?"

"I'm supposed to keep an eye on you," Sandy replied. "Trying to show us how tough you are?"

Kelly had been a touch lighthearted, but turned serious. "Mrs. O'Toole, I'm supposed to get my mind off my troubles, right? Exercise does that for me. I can't run with one arm tied up, I can't do push-ups, and I can't lift weights. I *can* ride a bike. Okay?"

"You have me there. Okay." She pointed to the door. Out in the bustling anonymity of the corridor, she said, "I'm very sorry about your friend."

"Thank you, ma'am." He turned his head, slightly dizzy from the exertion, as they walked along in the crowd. "We have rituals in uniform. The bugle, the flag, the guys with rifles. It works fairly well for the men. It helps you to believe that it all meant something. It still hurts, but it's a formal way to say goodbye. We learned to deal with it. But what happened to you is different, and what just happened to me is different. So what did you do? Get more involved in work?"

"I finished my masters. I'm a nurse-practitioner. I teach. I worry about patients." And that was her whole life now.

"Well, you don't have to worry about me, okay? I know my limits."

"Where are the limits?"

"A long way off," Kelly said with the beginnings of a smile that he quickly extinguished. "How am I doing?"

"Very well."

It hadn't gone all that smoothly, and both knew it. Donald Madden had flown to Baltimore to claim the body of his daughter from the coroner's office, leaving his wife home, never meeting with anyone despite pleas from Sarah Rosen. He wasn't interested in talking to a fornicator, the man had said over the phone, a remark that Sandy knew about but which neither medic had passed on. The surgeon had filled her in on the background of the girl, and it was merely a final sad chapter to a brief and sad life, something the patient didn't need to know. Kelly had asked about funeral arrangements, and both had told him that he would be unable to leave the hospital in any case. Kelly had accepted that in silence, surprising the nurse.

His left shoulder was still immobilized, and there had to be pain, the nurse knew. She and others could see the occasional wince,

especially close to the time for a new pain medication, but Kelly wasn't the type to complain. Even now, still breathing hard from a murderous thirty minutes on the bike, he was making quite a point of walking as rapidly as he could, cooling himself down like a trained athlete.

"Why the big show?" she asked.

"I don't know. Does there have to be a reason for everything? It's the way I am, Sandy."

"Well, your legs are longer than mine. Slow down, okay?"

"Sure." Kelly eased off his pace as they reached the elevator. "How many girls are there—like Pam I mean?"

"Too many." She didn't know the numbers. There were enough that they were noticed as a class of patient, enough that you knew they were there.

"Who helps them?"

The nurse pushed the elevator button. "Nobody. They're starting up programs for dealing with the drug habits, but the real problems, the abusive backgrounds and what comes from it—there's a new term now, 'behavioral disorder.' If you're a thief, there are programs. If you abuse kids, there's a program, but girls like that are outcasts. Nobody does much of anything. The only people who deal with that are church groups. If somebody said it was a disease, maybe people would pay attention."

"Is it a disease?"

"John, I'm not a doctor, just a nurse-practitioner, and it's outside my field anyway. I do post-op care for surgical patients. Okay, we talk over lunch, and I know a little. It's surprising how many of them show up dead. Drug overdoses, accidental or deliberate, who can say? Or they meet the wrong person or their pimp gets a little too rough, and they show up here, and their underlying medical problems don't help very much, and a lot of them just don't make it. Hepatitis from bad needles, pneumonia, add that to a major injury and it's a deadly combination. But is anybody going to do anything about it?" O'Toole looked down as the elevator arrived. "Young people aren't supposed to die that way."

"Yeah." Kelly gestured for her to get in the elevator first.

"You're the patient," she objected.

"You're the lady," he insisted. "Sorry, it's the way I was raised."

Who is this guy? Sandy asked herself. She was managing the care of more than one patient, of course, but the professor had ordered

her—well, not exactly, she told herself, but a "suggestion" from Dr. Rosen carried a lot of weight, especially since she had great respect for him as a friend and counselor—to keep a special eye on him. It wasn't matchmaking, as she'd initially suspected. He was still too hurt—and so was she, though she would not admit it. Such a strange man. So like Tim in many ways, but much more guarded. A strange mixture of the gentle and the rough. She hadn't forgotten what she had seen the previous week, but it was gone now, and never a hint of it had returned. He treated her with respect and good humor, never once commenting on her figure, as many patients did (and to which she pretended to object). He was so unlucky and yet so purposeful. His furious effort in rehab. His outward toughness. How to reconcile that with his incongruous good manners?

"When will I get out?" Kelly asked in a voice that was light but not light enough.

"Another week," O'Toole replied, leading him off the elevator. "Tomorrow we unwrap your arm."

"Really? Sam didn't tell me. Then I can start using the arm again?"

"It's going to hurt when you do," the nurse warned.

"Hell. Sandy, it hurts already." Kelly grinned. "I might as well get some use out of the pain."

"Lie down," the nurse ordered. Before he could object, she had a thermometer in his mouth and was taking his pulse. Then she checked his blood pressure. The numbers she put on the chart were 98.4, 64, and 105/60. The last two were especially surprising, she thought. Whatever else she might say about the patient, he was rapidly getting himself back into shape. She wondered what the urgency was.

One more week, Kelly thought after she left. *Got to get this damned arm working.*

"So what have you found out for us?" Maxwell asked.

"Good news and bad news," Greer replied. "The good news is that the opposition has very little in the way of regular ground forces within response distance of the objective. We have ID'd three battalions. Two are training to go south. One just returned from Eye Corps. It's pretty beat-up, in the process of reconstituting. The usual TO and E. Not much in the way of heavy weapons. What

mechanized formations they have are well away from here."

"And the bad news?" Admiral Podulski asked.

"Do I have to tell you? Enough triple-A along the coast to turn the sky black. SA-2 batteries here, here, and probably here, too. It's dangerous there for fast-movers, Cas. For helicopters? One or two rescue birds, sure, it's doable, but a large lift will be real dicey. We went all over this when we scoped out KINGPIN, remember?"

"It's only thirty miles from the beach."

"Fifteen or twenty minutes in a helo, flying in a straight line, which they will *not* be able to do, Cas. I went over the threat maps myself. The best route I can identify—it's your area, Cas, but I do know a little, okay?—is twenty-five minutes, and I wouldn't want to fly it in daylight."

"We can use -52s to blast a corridor through," Podulski suggested. He'd never been the most subtle man in the world.

"I thought you wanted to keep this small," Greer observed. "Look, the real bad news is that there isn't much enthusiasm for this kind of mission anywhere. KINGPIN failed—"

"That wasn't our fault!" Podulski objected.

"I know that, Cas," Greer said patiently. Podulski had always been a passionate advocate.

"It ought to be doable," Cas growled.

All three men hovered over the reconnaisance photos. It was a good collection, two from satellites, two from SR-71 Blackbirds, and three very recent low-obliques from Buffalo Hunter drones. The camp was two hundred meters square, an exact square in fact, undoubtedly fitting exactly the diagram in some East Bloc manual for building secure facilities. Each corner had a guard tower, each of which was exactly ten meters in height. Each tower had a tin roof to keep the rain off the NVA-standard-issue RPD light machine gun, an obsolete Russian design. Inside the wire were three large buildings and two small ones. Inside one of the large buildings were, they believed, twenty American officers, all lieutenant-colonel/commander rank or higher, for this was a special camp.

It was the Buffalo Hunter photos that had first come to Greer's attention. One was good enough to have identified a face, Colonel Robin Zacharias, USAF. His F-105G Wild Weasel had been shot down eight months earlier; he and his weapons-systems operator had been reported killed by the North Vietnamese. Even a picture of his body had been published. This camp, whose code name, SENDER

GREEN, was known to fewer than fifty men and women, was separate from the better-known Hanoi Hilton, which had been visited by American citizens and where, since the spectacular but unsuccessful Operation KINGPIN raid on the camp at Song Tay, nearly all American POWs had been concentrated. Out of the way, located in the most unlikely of places, not acknowledged in any way, SENDER GREEN was ominous. However the war would turn out, America wanted her pilots back. Here was a place whose very existence suggested that some would never be returned. A statistical study of losses had shown an ominous irregularity: flight officers of relatively high rank were reported killed at a higher rate than those of lower rank. It was known that the enemy had good intelligence sources, many of them within the American "peace" movement, that they had dossiers on senior American officers, who they were, what they knew, what other jobs they had held. It was possible that those officers were being held in a special place, that their knowledge was being used by North Vietnam as a bargaining chip for dealing with their Russian sponsors. The prisoners' knowledge in areas of special strategic interest was being traded—maybe—for continuing support from a sponsor nation that was losing interest in this lengthy war, with the new atmosphere of detente. So many games were going on.

"Gutsy," Maxwell breathed. The three blowups showed the man's face, each one staring straight at the camera. The last of the three caught one of his guards in the act of swinging a rifle butt into his back. The face was clear. It was Zacharias.

"This guy is Russian," Casimir Podulski said, tapping the drone photos. The uniform was unmistakable.

They knew what Cas was thinking. The son of Poland's one-time ambassador to Washington, by heredity a count and scion of a family that had once fought at the side of King John Sobieski, his family had been extinguished on one side of the demarcation line by the Nazis along with the rest of the Polish nobility and on the other by the Russians in Katyn Forest, where two brothers had been murdered after fighting a brief and futile two-front war. In 1941, the day after graduating Princeton University, Podulski had joined the U.S. Navy as an aviator, adopting a new country and a new profession, both of which he had served with pride and skill. And rage. That was now all the more intense because soon he would be forced to retire. Greer could see the reason. His surprisingly delicate

hands were gnarled with arthritis. Try as he might to conceal it, his next physical would down-check him for good, and Cas would face retirement with memories of a dead son and a wife on antidepressant medications, after a career he would probably deem a failure despite his medals and personal flag.

"We've got to find a way," Podulski said. "If we don't, we'll never see these men again. You know who might be there, Dutch? Pete Francis, Hank Osborne."

"Pete worked for me when I had *Enterprise*," Maxwell acknowledged. Both men looked at Greer.

"I concur in the nature of the camp. I had my doubts. Zacharias, Francis, and Osborne are all names they'd be interested in." The Air Force officer had spent a tour at Omaha, part of the joint-targeting staff that selected the destinations for strategic weapons, and his knowledge of America's most secret war plans was encyclopedic. The two naval officers had similarly important information, and while each might be brave, and dedicated, and obstinately determined to deny, conceal, and disguise, they were merely men, and men had limits; and the enemy had time. "Look, if you want, I can try to sell the idea to some people, but I'm not very hopeful."

"If we don't, we're breaking faith with our people!" Podulski slammed his fist on the desk. But Cas had an agenda, too. Discovery of this camp, rescue of its prisoners, would make it explicitly clear that North Vietnam had publicly lied. That might poison the peace talks enough to force Nixon to adopt yet another optional plan being drawn up by a larger Pentagon working group: the invasion of the North. It would be that most American of military operations, a combined-arms assault, without precedent for its daring, scope, and potential dangers: an airborne drop directly into Hanoi, a division of marines hitting the beaches on both sides of Haiphong, air-mobile assaults in the middle, supported by everything America could bring to bear in one massive, crushing attempt to break the North by capture of its political leadership. That plan, whose cover name changed on a monthly basis—currently it was CERTAIN CORNET—was the Holy Grail of vengeance for all the professionals who had for six years watched their country blunder about in indecision and the profligate waste of America's children.

"Don't you think I know that? Osborne worked for me at Suitland. I went with the chaplain when he delivered the fucking telegram, okay? I'm on your side, remember?" Unlike Cas and

Dutch, Greer knew that CERTAIN CORNET would never be more than a staff study. It just couldn't happen, not without briefing Congress, and Congress had too many leaks. A possibility in 1966 or '67, maybe even as late as 1968, such an operation was unthinkable now. But SENDER GREEN was still there, and this mission was possible, just.

"Cool down, Cas," Maxwell suggested.

"Yes, sir."

Greer shifted his gaze to the relief map. "You know, you airedales kind of limit your thinking."

"What do you mean?" Maxwell asked.

Greer pointed to a red line that ran from a coastal town nearly to the camp's main gate. On the overhead photos it looked like a good road, blacktopped and all. "The reaction forces are here, here, and here. The road's here, follows the river most of the way up. There are flak batteries all over the place, the road supports them, but, you know, triple-A isn't dangerous to the right sort of equipment."

"That's an invasion," Podulski observed.

"And sending in two companies of air-mobile troops isn't?"

"I've always said you were smart, James," Maxwell said. "You know, this is right where my son was shot down. That SEAL went in and recovered him right about here," the Admiral said, tapping the map.

"Somebody who knows the area from ground level?" Greer asked. "That's a help. Where is he?"

"Hi, Sarah." Kelly waved her to the chair. She looked older, he thought.

"This is my third time, John. You were asleep the other two."

"I've been doing a lot of that. It's okay," he assured her. "Sam's in here a couple times a day." He was already uncomfortable. The hardest part was facing friends, Kelly told himself.

"Well, we've been busy in the lab." Sarah spoke rapidly. "John, I needed to tell you how sorry I am that I asked you to come into town. I could have sent you somewhere else. She didn't need to see Madge. There's a guy I know in Annapolis, perfectly good practitioner…" Her voice stumbled on.

So much guilt, Kelly thought. "None of this was your fault, Sarah," he said when she stopped talking. "You were a good friend to Pam. If her mom had been like you, maybe—"

It was almost as though she hadn't heard him. "I should have given you a later date. If the timing had been a little different—"

She was right on that part, Kelly thought. The variables. What if? What if he'd selected a different block to be parked on? What if Billy had never spotted him? *What if I hadn't moved at all and let the bastard just go on his way?* A different day, a different week? What if a lot of things. The past happened because a hundred little random things had to fall exactly into place in exactly the right way, in exactly the proper sequence, and while it was easy to accept the good results, one could only rage at the bad ones. What if he'd taken a different route from the food warehouse? What if he'd not spotted Pam at the side of the road and never picked her up? What if he'd never spotted the pills? What if he hadn't cared, or what if he'd been so outraged that he had abandoned her? Would she be alive now? If her father had been a little more understanding, and she'd never run away, they would never have met. Was that good or bad?

And if all that were true, then what *did* matter? Was *everything* a random accident? The problem was that you couldn't tell. Maybe if he were God looking down on everything from above, maybe then it would fit some pattern, but from the inside it merely *was*, Kelly thought, and you did the best you could, and tried to learn from your mistakes for when the next random event happened to you. But did that make sense? Hell, did anything really make sense? That was far too complex a question for a former Navy chief lying in a hospital bed.

"Sarah, none of this is your fault. You helped her in the best way you could. How could you change that?"

"Damn it, Kelly, we had her saved!"

"I know. And I brought her here, and I got careless, not you. Sarah, everyone tells me it's not my fault, and then you come in here and tell me it's yours." The grimace was almost a smile. "This can be very confusing, except for one thing."

"It wasn't an accident, was it?" Sarah noted.

"No, it wasn't."

"There he is," Oreza said quietly, keeping his binoculars on the distant speck. "Just like you said."

"Come to papa," the policeman breathed in the darkness.

It was just a happy coincidence, the officer told himself. The

people in question owned a corn farm in Dorchester County, but between the cornrows were marijuana plants. Simple, as the saying went, but effective. With a farm came barns and outbuildings, and privacy. Being clever people, they didn't want to drive their product across the Bay Bridge in their pickup truck, where the summer traffic was unpredictably interrupted, and besides, a sharp-eyed toll taker had helped the State Police make a bust only a month before. They were careful enough to become a potential threat to his friend. That had to be stopped.

So they used a boat. This heaven-sent coincidence gave the Coast Guard the chance to participate in a bust and thus to raise his stature in their eyes. It couldn't hurt, after he'd used them as the stalking horse to help get Angelo Vorano killed, Lieutenant Charon thought, smiling in the wheelhouse.

"Take 'em now?" Oreza asked.

"Yes. The people they're delivering to are under our control. Don't tell anybody that," he added. "We don't want to compromise them."

"You got it." The quartermaster advanced his throttles and turned the wheel to starboard. "Let's wake up, people," he told his crew.

The forty-one-boat squatted at the stern with the increased power. The rumble of the diesels was intoxicating to the boat's commander. The small steel wheel vibrated in his hands as he steadied up on his new course. The funny part was that it would come as a surprise to them. Although the Coast Guard was the principal law-enforcement agency on the water, their main activity had always been search and rescue, and the word hadn't quite gotten out yet. Which, Oreza told himself, was just too goddamned bad. He'd found a few coastguardsmen smoking pot in the past couple of years, and his wrath was something still talked about by those who'd seen it.

The target was easily seen now, a thirty-foot Bay-built fishing boat of the sort that dotted the Chesapeake, probably with an old Chevy engine, and that meant she couldn't possibly outrun his cutter. It was a perfectly good thing to have a good disguise, Oreza thought with a smile, but not so clever to bet your life and your freedom on one card, however good it might be.

"Just let everything look normal," the policeman said quietly.

"Look around, sir," the quartermaster replied. The boat crew was alert but not obviously so, and their weapons were holstered. The

boat's course was almost a direct one toward their Thomas Point station, and if the other boat even took note of them—and nobody was looking aft at the moment—they could easily assume that the forty-one-footer was just heading back to the barn. Five hundred yards now. Oreza jammed the throttles to the stops to get the extra knot or two of overtake speed.

"There's Mr. English," another crewman said. The other forty-one-boat from Thomas Point was on a reciprocal course, outbound from the station, holding steady on a straight line, roughly towards the lighthouse that the station also supported.

"Not real smart, are they?" Oreza asked.

"Well, if they were smart, why break the law?"

"Roger that, sir." Three hundred yards now, and a head turned aft to see the gleaming white shape of the small cutter. Three people aboard the target craft, and the one who had looked at them leaned forward to say something to the guy at the wheel. It was almost comical to watch. Oreza could imagine every word they were saying. There's a Coast Guard boat back there. So just play it cool, maybe they're just changing the duty boat or something, see the one there… Uh-oh, I don't like this… Just be cool, damn it! I really don't like this. Settle down, their lights aren't on and their station is right down there, for Christ's sake.

Just about time, Oreza smiled to himself, *just about time for: oh, shit!*

He grinned when it happened. The guy at the wheel turned, and his mouth opened and shut, having said just that. One of the younger crewmen read the man's lips and laughed.

"I think they just figured it out, skipper."

"Hit the lights!" the quartermaster ordered, and the cop lights atop the wheelhouse started blinking, somewhat to Oreza's displeasure.

"Aye aye!"

The Bay boat turned rapidly south, but the outbound cutter turned to cover the maneuver, and it was instantly clear that neither could outrun the twin-screw forty-one-boats.

"Should have used the money to buy something sportier, boys," Oreza said to himself, knowing that criminals learned from their mistakes, too, and buying something to outrun a forty-one-foot patrol boat was not exactly a taxing problem. This one was easy. Chasing another little sailboat would be easy, if this damned fool of

a cop would let them do it right, but the easy ones wouldn't last forever.

The Bay boat cut power, trapped between two cutters. Warrant Officer English kept station a few hundred yards out while Oreza drove in close.

"Howdy," the quartermaster said over his loud-hailer. "This is the U.S. Coast Guard, and we are exercising our right to board and conduct a safety inspection. Let's everybody stay where we can see you, please."

It was remarkably like watching people who'd just lost a pro-football game. They knew they couldn't change anything no matter what they did. They knew that resistance was futile, and so they just stood there in dejection and acceptance of their fate. Oreza wondered how long that would last. How long before somebody would be dumb enough to fight it out?

Two of his sailors jumped aboard, covered by two more on the forty-one's fantail. Mr. English brought his boat in closer. A good boat-handler, Oreza saw, like a warrant was supposed to be, and he had his people out to offer cover, too, just in case the bad guys got a crazy idea. While the three men stood in plain view, mostly looking down at the deck and hoping that it might really be a safety inspection, Oreza's two men went into the forward cabin. Both came out in less than a minute. One tipped the bill of his cap, signaling all-clear, then patted his belly. Yes, there were drugs aboard. Five pats—a lot of drugs aboard.

"We have a bust, sir," Oreza observed calmly.

Lieutenant Mark Charon of the Narcotics Division, Baltimore City Police Department, leaned against the doorframe—hatch, whatever these sailors called the thing—and smiled. He was dressed in casual clothes, and might have easily been mistaken for a coastie with the required orange life jacket.

"You handle it, then. How does it go in the books?"

"Routine safety inspection, and, golly, they had drugs aboard," Oreza said in mock surprise.

"Exactly right, Mr. Oreza."

"Thank you, sir."

"My pleasure, Captain."

He'd already explained the procedure to Oreza and English. In order to protect his informants, credit for the arrest would go to the coasties, which didn't exactly displease the quartermaster or the

warrant officer. Oreza would get to paint a victory symbol on his mast, or whatever they called the thing the radar was attached to, a representation of the five-leafed marijuana plant, and the crewmen would have something to brag about. They might even have the adventure of testifying before a federal district court—probably not, since these small-timers would undoubtedly cop to the smallest offense their attorney could negotiate. They would get word out that the people to whom they were making the delivery had probably informed on them. With luck those people might even disappear, and that would really make his task easy. There would be an opening in the drug ecostructure—another new buzzword Charon had picked up on. At the very least, a potential rival in that ecostructure was now out of business for good. Lieutenant Charon would get a pat on the back from his captain, probably a flowery thank-you letter from the United States Coast Guard and the U.S. Attorney's office, not to mention congratulations for running such a quiet and effective operation that had not compromised his informants. One of our best men, his captain would affirm again. How do you get informants like that? Cap'n, you know how that works, I have to protect these people. Sure, Mark, I understand. You just keep up the good work.

I'll do my best, sir, Charon thought to himself, staring off at the setting sun. He didn't even watch the coasties cuffing the suspects, reading them their constitutional rights from the plastic-coated card, smiling as they did so, since for them this was a very entertaining game. But then, that's what it was for Charon, too.

Where were the damned helicopters? Kelly asked himself.

Everything about the damned mission had been wrong from the first moment. Pickett, his usual companion, had come down with violent dysentery, too bad for him to go out, and Kelly had gone out alone. Not a good thing, but the mission was too important, and they had to cover every little hamlet or *ville.* So he'd come in alone, very, very carefully moving up the stinking water of this—well, the map called it a river, but it wasn't quite large enough for Kelly to think of it that way.

And, of course, this is the *ville* they'd come to, the fuckers.

PLASTIC FLOWER, he thought, watching and listening. *Who the hell came up with* that *name?*

PLASTIC FLOWER was the code name for an NVA political-action

team or whatever they called it. His team had several other names, none of them complimentary. Certainly they weren't the precinct workers he'd seen on election day in Indianapolis. Not these people, schooled in Hanoi on how to win hearts and minds.

The *ville*'s headman, chief, mayor, whatever the hell he was, was just a little too courageous to be called anything but a fool. He was paying for that foolishness before the distant eyes of Bosun's Mate 1/c J. T. Kelly. The team had arrived at oh-one-thirty, and in a very orderly and almost civilized way, entered every little hooch, awakening the whole population of farmers, bringing them into the common area to see the misguided hero, and his wife, and his three daughters, all waiting for them, sitting in the dirt, their arms cruelly tied behind their backs. The NVA major who led PLASTIC FLOWER invited them all to sit in a mannerly voice that reached Kelly's observation point, less than two hundred meters away. The *ville* needed a lesson in the foolishness of resistance to the people's liberation movement. It was not that they were bad people, just misguided, and he hoped that this simple lesson would make clear to them the error of their ways.

They started with the man's wife. That took twenty minutes.

I have to do something! he told himself.

There's eleven of them, idiot. And while the Major might be a sadistic motherfucker, the ten soldiers with him had not been selected exclusively for their political correctness. They would be reliable, experienced, and dedicated soldiers. How a man could be dedicated to such things as this, Kelly didn't have the imagination to understand. That they were was a fact that he could not afford to ignore.

Where was the fucking reaction team? He'd called in forty minutes earlier, and the support base was only twenty minutes off by chopper. They wanted this Major. His team might also be useful, but they wanted the Major alive. He knew the location of the local political leaders, those the Marines hadn't swept up in a superb raid six weeks earlier. This mission was probably a reaction to that, a deliberate response so close to the American base, to say that, no, you haven't gotten us all yet, and you never will.

And they were probably right, Kelly thought, but that question went far beyond the mission for tonight.

The oldest daughter was maybe fifteen. It was hard to tell with the small, deceptively delicate Vietnamese women. She'd lasted all

of twenty-five minutes and was not yet dead. Her screams carried clearly across the flat, open ground to Kelly's watery post, and his hands squeezed the plastic of his CAR-15 so hard that had he thought or noticed, he might have worried about breaking something.

The ten soldiers with the Major were deployed as they should be. Two men were with the Major, and they rotated duty with the perimeter guards so that all of them could partake in the evening's festivities. One of them finished the girl with a knife. The next daughter was perhaps twelve.

Kelly's ears scanned the cloudy sky, praying to hear the distinctive mutter of a Huey's two-bladed rotor. There were other sounds. The rumble of 155s from the marine fire base to the east. Some jets screaming overhead. None were loud enough to mask the high-pitched screech of a child, but there were still eleven of them, and only one of him, and even if Pickett had been here, the odds would not have been remotely close enough to try a play. Kelly had his CAR-15 carbine, a thirty-round magazine securely fixed in its place, another taped, inverted, to the end of that one, and two more similar sets. He had four fragmentation grenades, two willie-petes, and two smokes. His deadliest appliance was his radio, but he'd already called out twice and gotten an acknowledgment both times, along with orders to sit tight.

Easy thing to say back at the base, wasn't it?

Twelve years old, maybe. Too young for this. There was no age for this, he told himself, but he'd never be able to change things alone, and there was no good for anyone in adding his death to those of this family.

How could they do it? Were they not men, soldiers, professional warriors like himself? Could anything be so important that they could cast aside their humanity? What he saw was impossible. It could not be. But it was. The rumbles of the distant artillery continued, dropping planned fire-missions on a suspected supply route. A continuous stream of aircraft overhead, maybe Marine intruders doing a Mini-Arc Light strike at something or other, probably empty woods, because most of those targets were just that. Not here, where the enemy was, but that wouldn't help anything, would it? These villagers had bet their lives and their families on something that wasn't working, and maybe that Major thought he was being merciful in just eliminating one family in the

most graphic method possible instead of ending all their lives in a more efficient way. Besides, dead men told no tales, and this was a tale he would want repeated. Terror was something they could use, and use well.

Time crept on, slowly and rapidly, and presently the twelve-year-old stopped making noise and was cast aside. The third and final daughter was eight, he saw through his binoculars. The *arrogance* of the fuckers, building a large fire. They couldn't have anyone miss this, could they?

Eight years old, not even old enough, not a throat large enough for a proper scream. He watched the changing of the guard. Two more men moved from the perimeter into the center of the *ville*. R&R for the political-action group, who couldn't go to Taiwan as Kelly had. The man nearest to Kelly hadn't had his chance yet, probably wouldn't. The headman didn't have enough daughters, or maybe this one was on the Major's shit list. Whatever the real reason, he wasn't getting any, and it must have frustrated him. The soldier's eyes were looking in now, watching his squadmates partake in something that he would miss tonight. Maybe next time… but at least he could watch… and he did, Kelly saw, forgetting his duty for the first time tonight.

Kelly was halfway there before his mind remarked on the fact, crawling as rapidly as he could in silence, helped by the moist ground. A low crawl, his body as flat as he could manage, closer, closer, both driven and drawn by the whine that emanated from near the fire.

Should have done it sooner, Johnnie-boy,

It wasn't possible then.

Well, fuck, it isn't possible now!

It was then that fate intervened in the sound of a Huey, probably more than one, off to the southeast. Kelly heard it first, rising carefully behind the soldier, his knife drawn. They still hadn't heard it when he struck, driving his knife into the base of the man's skull, where the spinal cord meets the base of the brain—the medulla, someone had told him in a lecture. He twisted it, almost like a screwdriver, his other hand across the soldier's mouth, and, sure enough, it worked. The body went instantly limp, and he lowered it gently, not from any feelings of humanity, but to limit noise.

But there was noise. The choppers were too close now. The Major's head went up, turning southeast, recognizing the danger.

He shouted an order for his men to assemble, then turned and shot the child in the head just as soon as one of his privates moved off of her and out of the way.

It only took a few seconds for the squad to assemble. The Major did a quick and automatic head count, coming up one short, and he looked in Kelly's direction, but his eyes and his vision had been long since compromised by the fire, and the only thing he did see was some spectral movement in the air.

"One, two, three," Kelly whispered to himself after pulling the cotter pin out of one of his frags. The boys in 3rd SOG cut their own fuses. You never knew what the little old lady in the factory might do. Theirs burned for exactly five seconds, and on "three," the grenade left his hand. It was just metallic enough to glint with the orange firelight. A nearly perfect toss, it landed in the exact center of the ring of soldiers. Kelly was already prone in the dirt when it landed. He heard the shout of alarm that was just a second too late to help anyone.

The grenade killed or wounded seven of the ten men. He stood with his carbine and dropped the first one with three rounds to the head. His eyes didn't even pause to see the flying red cloud, for this was his profession, and not a hobby. The Major was still alive, lying on the ground but trying to aim his pistol until his chest took five more. His death made the night a success. Now all Kelly had to do was survive. He had committed himself to a foolish act, and caution was his enemy.

Kelly ran to the right, his carbine held high. There were at least two NVA moving, armed and angry and confused enough that they weren't running away as they should. The first chopper overhead was an illum bird, dropping flares that Kelly cursed, because the darkness was his best friend right now. He spotted and hosed down one of the NVA, emptying his magazine into the running figure. Moving right still, he switched magazines, circling around, hoping to find the other one, but his eyes lingered on the center of the *ville*. People scurrying around, some of them probably hurt by his grenade, but he couldn't worry himself about that. His eyes froze on the victims—worse, they stayed too long on the fire, and when he turned away, the shape of it stayed in his eyes, alternating between orange and blue ghost images that wrecked his night vision. He could hear the roar of a Huey flared for landing close to the *ville*, and that was loud enough to mask even the screams of the villagers.

Kelly hid behind the wall of a hooch, eyes looking outward, away from the fire as he tried to blink them clear. At least one more unhurt NVA was moving, and he wouldn't be running towards the sound of the chopper. Kelly kept heading right, more slowly now. There was a ten-meter gap from this hooch to the next, like a corridor of light in the glow of the fire. He looked around the corner before making the run, then took off fast, his head low for once. His eyes caught a moving shadow, and when he turned to look, he stumbled over something and went down.

Dust flew up around him, but he couldn't find the source of the noise quickly enough. Kelly rolled left to avoid the shots, but that took him towards the light. He half stood and pushed himself backwards, hitting the wall of a hooch, eyes scanning frantically for the muzzle flashes. There! He brought his CAR-15 to bear and fired just as two 7.62 rounds caught him in the chest. The impact spun him around, and two more hits destroyed the carbine in his hands. When next he looked up he was on his back, and it was quiet in the *ville.* His first attempt to move achieved nothing but pain. Then the muzzle of a rifle pressed to his chest.

"Over here, Lieutenant!" Followed by: "Medic!"

The world moved as they dragged him closer to the fire. Kelly's head hung limply to the left, watching the soldiers sweep through the *ville*, two of them disarming and examining the NVA.

"This fucker's alive," one of them said.

"Oh, yeah?" The other walked over from the body of the eight-year-old, touched his muzzle to the NVA's forehead, and fired once.

"Fuck, Harry!"

"Knock that shit off!" the Lieutenant screamed.

"Look at what they done, sir!" Harry screamed back, falling to his knees to vomit.

"What's your problem?" the medical corpsman asked Kelly, who was quite unable to reply. "Oh, shit," he observed further. "Ell-Tee, this must be the guy who called in!"

One more face appeared, probably the Lieutenant commanding the Blue Team, and the oversized patch on his shoulder was that of the 1st Cavalry Division.

"Lieutenant, looks all clear, sweeping the perimeter again now!" an older voice called.

"All dead?"

"That's affirm, sir!"

“Who the hell are you?” the Lieutenant said, looking back down. “Crazy fucking Marines!”

“Navy!” Kelly gasped, spraying a little blood on the medic.

“What?” Nurse O’Toole asked.

Kelly’s eyes opened wide. His right arm moved rapidly across his chest as his head swiveled to survey the room. Sandy O’Toole was in the corner, reading a book under a single light.

“What are you doing here?”

“Listening to your nightmare,” she answered. “Second time. You know, you really ought to—”

“Yeah, I know.”

10

Pathology

“Your gun’s in the back of the car,” Sergeant Douglas told him. “Unloaded. Keep it that way from now on.”

“What about Pam?” Kelly asked from his wheelchair.

“We’ve got some leads,” Douglas replied, not troubling himself to conceal the lie.

And that said it all, Kelly thought. Someone had leaked it to the papers that Pam had an arrest record for prostitution, and with that revelation, the case had lost its immediacy.

Sam brought the Scout up to the Wolfe Street entrance himself. The bodywork was all fixed, and there was a new window on the driver’s side. Kelly got out of the wheelchair and gave the Scout a long look. The doorframe and adjacent pillar had broken up the incoming shot column and saved his life. Bad aim on someone’s part, really, after a careful and effective stalk—helped by the fact that he hadn’t troubled himself to check his mirrors, Kelly told himself behind a blank expression. How had he managed to forget that? he asked himself for the thousandth time. Such a simple thing, something he’d stressed for every new arrival in 3rd SOG: always check your back, because there might be somebody hunting you. Simple thing to remember, wasn’t it?

But that was history. And history could not be changed.

“Back to your island, John?” Rosen asked.

Kelly nodded. “Yeah. I have work waiting, and I have to get myself back into shape.”

“I want to see you back here in, oh, two weeks, for a follow-up.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be back,” Kelly promised. He thanked Sandy O’Toole for her care, and was rewarded with a smile. She’d almost become a

friend in the preceding eighteen days. Almost? Perhaps she already was, if only he would allow himself to think in such terms. Kelly got into his car and fixed the seat belt in place. Goodbyes had never been his strong suit. He nodded and smiled at them and drove off, turning right towards Mulberry Street, alone for the first time since his arrival at the hospital.

Finally. Next to him, on the passenger seat where he'd last seen Pam alive, was a manila envelope marked *Patient Records/Bills* in Sam Rosen's coarse handwriting.

"God," Kelly breathed, heading west. He wasn't just watching traffic now. The cityscape was forever transformed for John Kelly. The streets were a curious mixture of activity and vacancy, and his eyes swept around in a habit he'd allowed himself to forget, zeroing in on people whose inactivity seemed to display a purpose. It would take time, he told himself, to distinguish the sheep from the goats. The city traffic was light, and in any case, people didn't linger on these streets. Kelly looked left and right to see that the other drivers' eyes were locked forward, shutting out what lay around them, just as he had once done, stopping uneasily for red lights they couldn't comfortably run and hitting the gas hard when the lights changed. Hoping that they could leave it all behind, that the problems here would stay here and never move outward to where the good people lived. In that sense it was a reversal of Vietnam, wasn't it? There the bad things were out in the boonies, and you wanted to keep them from moving in. Kelly realized that he'd come home to see the same kind of lunacy and the same kind of failure in a very different kind of place. And he'd been as guilty and as foolish as everyone else.

The Scout turned left, heading south past another hospital, a large white one. Business district, banks and offices, courthouse, city hall, a good part of town where good people came in daylight, leaving quickly at night, all together because there was safety in their hurried numbers. Well-policed, because without these people and their commerce, the city would surely die. Or something like that. Maybe it wasn't a question of life or death at all, but merely of speed.

Only a mile and a half, Kelly wondered. *That much?* He'd have to check a map. A dangerously short distance in any case between these people and what they feared. Stopped at an intersection, he could see a long way, because city streets, like firebreaks, offered

long and narrow views. The light changed and he moved on.

Springer was in her accustomed place, twenty minutes later. Kelly assembled his things and went aboard. Ten minutes after that, the diesels were chugging away, the air conditioning was on, and he was back in his little white bubble of civilization, ready to cast off. Off of pain medications and feeling the need for a beer and some relaxation—just the symbolic return to normality—he nevertheless left the alcohol alone. His left shoulder was distressingly stiff despite his having been able to use it, after a fashion, for almost a week. He walked around the main salon, swinging his arms in wide circles, and wincing from the pain on the left side, before heading topside to cast off. Murdock came out to watch, but said nothing from the door into his office. Kelly's experience had made the papers, though not the involvement with Pam, which somehow the reporters had failed to connect. The fuel tanks were topped off, and all the boat's systems appeared to be operating, but there was no bill for whatever the yard had done.

Kelly's line-handling was awkward as his left arm refused to do the things his mind commanded in the usual timely fashion. Finally, the lines were slipped, and *Springer* headed out. After clearing the yacht basin, Kelly settled into the salon control station, steering a straight course out to the Bay in the comfort of the air conditioning and the security of the enclosed cabin. Only after clearing the shipping channel an hour later did he look away from the water. A soft drink chased two Tylenol down his throat. That was the only drug he'd allowed himself for the last three days. He leaned back in the captain's chair and opened the envelope Sam had left him, while the autopilot drove the boat south.

Only the photos had been left out. He'd seen one of them, and that one had been enough. A handwritten cover note—every page in the envelope was a photocopy, not an original—showed that the professor of pathology had gotten the copies from his friend, the state medical examiner, and could Sam please be careful how he handled this. Kelly couldn't read the signature.

The "wrongful death" and "homicide" blocks on the cover sheet were both checked. The cause of death, the report said, was manual strangulation, with a deep, narrow set of ligature marks about the victim's neck. The severity and depth of the ligature marks suggested that brain death had occurred from oxygen deprivation even before the crushed larynx terminated airflow to the lungs.

Striations on the skin suggested that the instrument used was probably a shoestring, and from bruises that appeared to come from the knuckles of a large-handed man about the throat, that the killer had faced the supine victim while performing the act. Beyond that, the report went on for five single-spaced pages, the victim had been subjected to violent and extensive traumatic insult prior to death, all of which was cataloged at length in dry medical prose. A separate form noted that she had been raped, further that the genital area showed definite signs of bruising and other abuse. An unusually large quantity of semen was still evident in her vagina upon her discovery and autopsy, indicating that the killer had not been alone in raping the victim. ("Blood types O+, O- and AB-, per attached serology report.") Extensive cuts and bruises about the hands and forearms were termed "defensive-classical." Pam had fought for her life. Her jaw had been broken, along with three other bones, one of them a compound fracture of the left ulna. Kelly had to set the report down, staring at the horizon before reading on. His hands didn't shake, and he didn't utter a word, but he needed to look away from the cold medical terminology.

"As you can see from the photos, Sam," the handwritten page at the back said, "this was something from a couple of really sick folks. It was deliberate torture. It must have taken hours to do all this. One thing the report leaves out. Check Photo #6. Her hair was combed or brushed out, probably, almost certainly postmortem. The pathologist who handled the case missed it somehow. He's a youngster. (Alan was out of town when she came in, or I'm sure he would have handled it himself.) It seems a little odd, but it's clear from the photo. Funny how you can miss the obvious things. It was probably his first case like this, and probably he was too focused on listing the major insults to notice something so minor. I gather you knew the girl. I'm sorry, my friend. Brent," the page was signed, more legibly than the cover sheet. Kelly slid the package back into the envelope.

He opened a drawer in the console and removed a box of .45 ACP ammunition, loading the two magazines for his automatic, which went back into the drawer. There were few things more useless than an unloaded pistol. Next he went into the galley and found the largest can on the shelves. Sitting back down at the control station, he held the can in his left hand, and continued what he'd been doing for almost a week, working the can like a dumbbell, up and

down, in and out, welcoming the pain, savoring it while his eyes swept the surface of the water.

"Never again, Johnnie-boy," he said aloud in a conversational tone. "We're not going to make any more mistakes. Not ever."

The C-141 landed at Pope Air Force Base, adjacent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, soon after lunch, ending a routine flight that had originated over eight thousand miles away. The four-engine jet transport touched down rather hard. The crew was tired despite their rest stops along the way, and their passengers required no particular care. On flights such as this, there was rarely any live cargo. Troops returning from the theater of operations rode "Freedom Birds," almost invariably chartered commercial airliners whose stewardesses passed out smiles and free booze for the duration of the lengthy return trip to the real world. No such amenities were required on the flights into Pope. The flight crew ate USAF-standard box lunches, and for the most part flew without the usual banter of young airmen.

The roll-out slowed the aircraft, which turned at the end of the runway onto a taxiway, while the crew stretched at their seats. The pilot, a Captain, knew the routine by heart, but there was a brightly painted jeep in case he forgot, and he followed it to the receiving center. He and his crew had long since stopped dwelling on the nature of their mission. It was a job, a necessary one, and that was that, they all thought as they left the aircraft for their mandated crew-rest period, which meant, after a short debrief and notification of whatever shortcomings the aircraft had exhibited in the past thirty hours, heading off to the O-Club for drinks, followed by showers and sleep in the Q. None of them looked back at the aircraft. They'd see it again soon enough.

The routine nature of the mission was a contradiction. In most previous wars, Americans had lain close to where they fell, as testified to by American cemeteries in France and elsewhere. Not so for Vietnam. It was as though people understood that no American wanted to remain there, living or dead, and every recovered body came home, and having passed through one processing facility outside Saigon, each body would now be processed again prior to transshipment to whatever hometown had sent the mainly young men off to die in a distant place. The families would have had time by now to decide where burial would take place, and instructions

for those arrangements waited for each body identified by name on the aircraft's manifest.

Awaiting the bodies in the receiving center were civilian morticians. That was one occupational specialty that the military did not carry in its multiplicity of training regimens. A uniformed officer was always present to verify identification, for that *was* a responsibility of the service, to make sure that the right body went off to the right family, even though the caskets that left this place were in almost all cases sealed. The physical insult of combat death, plus the ravages of often late recovery in a tropical climate, were not things families wanted or needed to see on the bodies of their loved ones. As a result, positive identification of remains wasn't really something that anyone could check, and for that very reason, it was something the military took as seriously as it could.

It was a large room where many bodies could be processed at once, though the room was not as busy as it had been in the past. The men who worked here were not above grim jokes, and some even watched weather reports from that part of the world to predict what the next week's work load would be like. The smell alone was enough to keep the casual observer away, and one rarely saw a senior officer here, much less a civilian Defense Department official, for whose equilibrium the sights here might be a little too much to bear. But one becomes accustomed to smells, and that of the preserving agents was much preferred over the other odors associated with death. One such body, that of Specialist Fourth Class Duane Kendall, bore numerous wounds to the torso. He'd made it as far as a field hospital, the mortician saw. Some of the scarring was clearly the desperate work of a combat surgeon—incisions that would have earned the wrath of a chief of service in a civilian hospital were far less graphic than the marks made by fragments from an explosive booby-trap device. The surgeon had spent maybe twenty minutes trying to save this one, the mortician thought, wondering why he had failed—probably the liver, he decided from the location and size of the incisions. You can't live without one of those no matter how good the doctor is. Of more interest to the man was a white tag located between the right arm and the chest which confirmed an apparently random mark on the card on the outside of the container in which the body had arrived.

"Good ID," the mortician said to the Captain who was making his rounds with a clipboard and a sergeant. The officer checked the

required data against his own records and moved on with a nod, leaving the mortician to his work.

There was the usual number of tasks to be performed, and the mortician went about them with neither haste nor indolence, lifting his head to make sure the Captain was at the other end of the room. Then he pulled a thread from the stitches made by another mortician at the other end of the pipeline. The stitches came completely undone almost instantly, allowing him to reach into the body cavity and remove four clear-plastic envelopes of white powder, which he quickly put into his bag before reclosing the gaping hole in Duane Kendall's body. It was his third and last such recovery of the day. After spending half an hour on one more body, it was the end of his working day. The mortician walked off to his car, a Mercury Cougar, and drove off post. He stopped off at a Winn-Dixie supermarket to pick up a loaf of bread, and on the way out dropped some coins into a public phone.

"Yeah?" Henry Tucker said, picking it up on the first ring.

"Eight." The phone clicked off.

"Good," Tucker said, really to himself, putting the receiver down. Eight kilos from this one. Seven from his other man; neither man knew that the other was there, and the pickups from each were done on different days of the week. Things could pick up rapidly now that he was getting his distribution problems in hand.

The arithmetic was simple enough. Each kilo was one thousand grams. Each kilo would be diluted with nontoxic agents like milk sugar, which his friends obtained from a grocery-supply warehouse. After careful mixing to ensure uniformity throughout the entire batch, others would divide the bulk powder into smaller "hits" of the drugs that could be sold in smaller batches. The quality and burgeoning reputation of his product guaranteed a slightly higher than normal price which was anticipated by the wholesale cost he received from his white friends.

The problem would soon become one of scale. He'd started his operation small, since Tucker was a careful man, and size made for greed. That would soon become impossible. His supply of pure refined heroin was far more extensive than his partners knew. They were, for now, happy that its quality was so high, and he would gradually reveal to them the magnitude of his supply, while never giving them a hint of his method of shipment, for which he

regularly congratulated himself. The sheer elegance of it was striking, even to him. The best government estimates—he kept track of such things—of heroin imports from Europe, the "French" or "Sicilian" connection, since they could never seem to get the terminology right, amounted to roughly one metric ton of pure drugs per year. That, Tucker judged, would have to grow, because drugs were the coming thing in American vice. If he could bring in a mere twenty kilos of drugs per week—and his shipment modality was capable of more than that—he had that number beaten, and he didn't have to worry about customs inspectors. Tucker had set up his organization with a careful eye on the security issue. For starters, none of the important people on his team touched drugs. To do so was death, a fact that he had made clear early on in the simplest and clearest possible way. The distant end of the operation required only six people. Two procured the drugs from local sources whose security was guaranteed by the usual means—large sums of cash paid to the right people. The four on-site morticians were also very well paid and had been selected for their businesslike stability. The United States Air Force handled transportation, reducing his costs and headaches for what was usually the most complicated and dangerous part of the import process. The two at the receiving station were similarly careful men. More than once, they'd reported, circumstances had compelled them to leave the heroin in the bodies, which had been duly buried. That was too bad, of course, but a good business was a careful business, and the street markup easily compensated for the loss. Besides, those two knew what would happen if they even thought about diverting a few kilos for their own enterprises.

From there it was merely a matter of transport by automobile to a convenient place, and that was handled by a trusted and well-paid man who never once exceeded a speed limit. Doing things on the Bay, Tucker thought, sipping on his beer and watching a baseball game, was his masterstroke. In addition to all the other advantages that the location gave him, he'd given his new partners reason to believe that the drugs were dropped off ships heading up the Chesapeake Bay to the Port of Baltimore—which they thought wonderfully clever—when in fact he transported them himself from a covert pickup point. Angelo Vorano had proven that by buying his dumb little sailboat and offering to make a pickup. Convincing Eddie and Tony that he'd burned them to the police had been so

easy.

With a little luck he could take over the entire East Cost heroin market for as long as Americans continued to die in Vietnam. It was also time, he told himself, to plan for the peace that would probably break out someday. In the meantime he needed to think about finding a way to expand his distribution network. What he had, while it had worked, and while it had brought him to the attention of his new partners, was rapidly becoming outdated. It was too small for his ambitions, and soon it would have to be restructured. But one thing at a time.

"Okay, it's official." Douglas dropped the case file on the desk and looked at his boss.

"What's that?" Lieutenant Ryan asked.

"First, nobody saw anything. Second, nobody knew what pimp she worked for. Third, nobody even knows who she was. Her father hung up on me after he said he hasn't talked to his daughter in four years. That boyfriend didn't see shit before or after he was shot." The detective sat down.

"And the mayor's not interested anymore," Ryan finished the case summary.

"You know, Em, I don't mind running a covert investigation, but it is hurting my success rate. What if I don't get promoted next board?"

"Funny, Tom."

Douglas shook his head and stared out the window. "Hell, what if it really was the Dynamic Duo?" the sergeant asked in frustration. The pair of shotgun robbers had killed again two nights before, this time murdering an attorney from Essex. There had been a witness in a car fifty yards away, who had confirmed that there were two of them, which wasn't exactly news. There was also a generally held belief in police work that the murder of a lawyer ought not to be a crime at all, but neither man joked about this investigation.

"Let me know when you start believing that," Ryan said quietly. Both knew better, of course. These two were only robbers. They'd killed several times, and had twice driven their victim's car a few blocks, but in both cases it had been a sporty car, and probably they'd wanted no more than to have a brief fling with a nice set of wheels. The police knew size, color, and little else. But the Duo were businesslike crooks, and whoever had murdered Pamela

Madden had wanted to make a very personal impression; or there was a new and very sick killer about, which possibility added merely one more complication to their already busy lives.

"We were close, weren't we?" Douglas asked. "This girl had names and faces, and she was an eyewitness."

"But we never knew she was there until after that bone-head lost her for us," Ryan said.

"Well, he's back to wherever the hell he goes to, and we're back to where we were before, too." Douglas picked up the file and walked back to his desk.

It was after dark when Kelly tied *Springer* up. He looked up to note that a helicopter was overhead, probably doing something or other from the nearby naval air station. In any case it didn't circle or linger. The outside air was heavy and moist and sultry. Inside the bunker was even worse, and it took an hour to get the air conditioning up to speed. The "house" seemed emptier than before, for the second time in a year, the rooms automatically larger without a second person to help occupy the space. Kelly wandered about for fifteen minutes or so. His movements were aimless until he found himself staring at Pam's clothes. Then his brain clicked in to tell him that he was looking for someone no longer there. He took the articles of clothing and set them in a neat pile on what had once been Tish's dresser, and might have become Pam's. Perhaps the saddest thing of all was that there was so little of it. The cutoffs, the halter, a few more intimate things, the flannel shirt she'd worn at night, her well-worn shoes on top of the pile. So little to remember her by.

Kelly sat on the edge of his bed, staring at them. How long had it all lasted? Three weeks? Was that all? It wasn't a matter of checking the days on a calendar, because time wasn't really measured in that way. Time was something that filled the empty spaces in your life, and his three weeks with Pam had been longer and deeper than all the time since Tish's death. But all that was now a long time ago. His hospital stay seemed like a mere blink of an eye, but it was as though it had become a wall between that most precious part of his life and where he was now. He could walk up to the wall and look over it at what had been, but he could never more reach out and touch it. Life could be so cruel and memory could be a curse, the taunting reminder of what had been and what might have

developed from it if only he'd acted differently. Worst of all, the wall between where he was and where he might have gone was one of his own construction, just as he had moments earlier piled up Pam's clothes because they no longer had a use. He could close his eyes and see her. In the silence he could hear her, but the smells were gone, and her feel was gone.

Kelly reached over from the bed and touched the flannel shirt, remembering what it had once covered, remembering how his large strong hands had clumsily undone the buttons to find his love inside, but now it was merely a piece of cloth whose shape contained nothing but air, and little enough of that. It was then that Kelly began sobbing for the first time since he'd learned of her death. His body shook with the reality of it, and alone inside the walls of rebarred concrete he called out her name, hoping that somewhere she might hear, and somehow she might forgive him for killing her with his stupidity. Perhaps she was at rest now. Kelly prayed that God would understand that she'd never really had a chance, would recognize the goodness of her character and judge her with mercy, but that was one mystery whose solutions were well beyond his ability to solve. His eyes were limited by the confines of this room, and they kept returning to the pile of clothing.

The bastards hadn't even given her body the dignity of being covered from the elements and the searching eyes of men. They'd wanted everybody to know how they'd punished her and enjoyed her and tossed her aside like a piece of rubbish, something for a bird to pick at. Pam Madden had been of no consequence to them, except perhaps a convenience to be used in life, and even in death, as a demonstration of their prowess. As central as she had been to his life, that was how unimportant she had been to them. Just like the headman's family, Kelly realized. A demonstration: defy us and suffer. And if others found out, so much the better. Such was their pride.

Kelly lay back in the bed, exhausted by weeks of bed rest followed by a long day of exertion. He stared at the ceiling, the light still on, hoping to sleep, hoping more to find dreams of Pam, but his last conscious thought was something else entirely.

If his pride could kill, then so could theirs.

Dutch Maxwell arrived at his office at six-fifteen, as was his custom.

Although as Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Air) he was no longer part of any operational command hierarchy, he was still a Vice Admiral, and his current job required him to think of every single aircraft in the U.S. Navy as his own. And so the top item on his pile of daily paperwork was a summary of the previous day's air operations over Vietnam—actually it was today's, but had happened yesterday due to the vagaries of the International Dateline, something that had always seemed outrageous even though he'd fought one battle practically astride the invisible line on the Pacific Ocean.

He remembered it well: less than thirty years earlier, flying an F4F-4 Wildcat fighter off USS *Enterprise*, an ensign, with all his hair —cut very short—and a brand-new wife, all piss-and-vinegar and three hundred hours under his belt. On the fourth of June, 1942, in the early afternoon, he'd spotted three Japanese "Val" dive bombers that ought to have followed the rest of the Hiryu air group to attack *Yorktown* but had gotten lost and headed towards his carrier by mistake. He'd killed two of them on his first surprise pass out of a cloud. The third had taken longer, but he could remember every glint of the sun off his target's wings and the tracers from the gunner's futile efforts to drive him off. Landing on his carrier forty minutes later, he'd claimed three kills before the incredulous eyes of his squadron commander—then had all three confirmed by gunsight cameras. Overnight, his "official" squadron coffee mug had changed from "Winny"—a nickname he'd despised—to "Dutch," engraved into the porcelain with blood-red letters, a call sign he'd borne for the remainder of his career.

Four more combat cruises had added twelve additional kills to the side of his aircraft, and in due course he'd commanded a fighter squadron, then a carrier air wing, then a carrier, then a group, and then been Commander, Air Forces, U.S. Pacific Fleet, before assuming his current job. With luck a fleet command lay in his future, and that was as far as he'd ever been able to see. Maxwell's office was in keeping with his station and experience. On the wall to the left of his large mahogany desk was the side plate from the F6F Hellcat he'd flown at Philippine Sea and off the coast of Japan. Fifteen rising-sun flags were painted on the deep blue background lest anyone forget that the Navy's elder statesman of aviators had really done it once, and done it better than most. His old mug from the old *Enterprise* sat on his desk as well, no longer used for

something so trivial as drinking coffee, and certainly not for pencils.

This near-culmination of his career should have been a matter of the utmost satisfaction to Maxwell, but instead his eyes fell upon the daily loss report from Yankee Station. Two A-7A Corsair light-attack bombers had been lost, and the notation said they were from the same ship and the same squadron.

"What's the story on this?" Maxwell asked Rear Admiral Podulski.

"I checked," Casimir replied. "Probably a midair. Anders was the element leader, his wingman, Robertson, was a new kid. Something went wrong but nobody saw what it was. No SAM call, and they were too high for flak."

"'Chutes?"

"No." Podulski shook his head. "The division leader saw the fireball. Just bits and pieces came out."

"What were they in after?"

Cas's face said it all. "A suspected truck park. The rest of the strike went in, hit the target, good bomb patterns, but no secondaries."

"So the whole thing was a waste of time." Maxwell closed his eyes, wondering what had gone wrong with the two aircraft, with the mission assignment, with his career, with his Navy, with his whole country.

"Not at all, Dutch. *Somebody* thought it was an important target."

"Cas, it's too early in the morning for that, okay?"

"Yes, sir. The CAG is investigating the incident and will probably take some token action. If you want an explanation, it's probably that Robertson was a new kid, and he was nervous—second combat mission—and probably he thought he saw something, and probably he jinked too hard, but they were the trail element and nobody saw it. Hell, Dutch, we saw that sort of thing happen, too."

Maxwell nodded. "What else?"

"An A-6 got shredded north of Haiphong—SAM—but they got it back to the boat all right. Pilot and B/N both get DFCs for that," Podulski reported. "Otherwise a quiet day in the South China Sea. Nothing much in the Atlantic. Eastern Med, picking up some signs the Syrians are getting frisky with their new MiGs, but that's not our problem yet. We have that meeting with Grumman tomorrow, and then it's off to The Hill to talk with our worthy public servants about the F-14 program."

"How do you like the numbers on the new fighter?"

“Part of me wishes we were young enough to qualify, Dutch.” Cas managed a smile. “But, Jesus, we used to build carriers for what one of these things is going to cost.”

“Progress, Cas.”

“Yeah, we have so much of that.” Podulski grunted. “One other thing. Got a call from Pax River. Your friend may be back home. His boat’s at the dock, anyway.”

“You made me wait this long for it?”

“No sense rushing it. He’s a civilian, right? Probably sleeps till nine or ten.”

Maxwell grunted. “That must be nice. I’ll have to try it sometime.”

11

Fabrication

Five miles can be a long walk. It is always a long swim. It is a particularly long swim alone. It was an especially long swim alone and for the first time in weeks. That fact became clear to Kelly before the halfway point, but even though the water east of his island was shallow enough that he could stand in many places, he didn't stop, didn't allow himself to slacken off. He altered his stroke to punish his left side all the more, welcoming the pain as the messenger of progress. The water temperature was just about right, he told himself, cool enough that he didn't overheat, and warm enough that it didn't drain the energy from his body. Half a mile out from the island his pace began to slow, but he summoned the inner reservoir of whatever it was that a man drew on and gutted it out, building the pace up again until, when he touched the mud that marked the eastern side of Battery Island, he could barely move. Instantly his muscles began to tighten up, and Kelly had to force himself to stand and walk. It was then that he saw the helicopter. He'd heard one twice during his swim, but made no note of it. He had long experience with helicopters, and hearing them was as natural as the buzz of an insect. But having one land on his sandbar was not all that common, and he walked over towards it until a voice called him back towards the bunkers.

"Over here, Chief!"

Kelly turned. The voice was familiar, and on rubbing his eyes he saw the undress whites of a very senior naval officer—that fact made clear by the golden shoulder boards that sparkled in the late-morning sun.

"Admiral Maxwell!" Kelly was glad for the company, especially

this man, but his lower legs were covered in mud from the walk out of the water. “I wish you’d called ahead, sir.”

“I tried, Kelly.” Maxwell came up to him and took his hand. “We’ve been calling here for a couple of days. Where the hell were you? Out on a job?” The Admiral was surprised at the instant change in the boy’s face.

“Not exactly.”

“Why don’t you go get washed off? I’ll go looking for a soda.” It was then that Maxwell saw the recent scars on Kelly’s back and neck. *Jesus!*

Their first meeting had been aboard USS *Kitty Hawk*, three years earlier, he as AirPac, Kelly as a very sick Bosun’s Mate First Class. It wasn’t the sort of thing a man in Maxwell’s position could forget. Kelly had gone in to rescue the flight crew of Nova One One, whose pilot had been Lieutenant, junior grade, Winslow Holland Maxwell III, USN. Two days of crawling about in an area that was just too hot for a rescue helicopter to go trolling, and he’d come out with Dutch 3rd, injured but alive, but Kelly had caught a vicious infection from the putrid water. And how, Maxwell still asked himself, how did you thank a man for saving your only son? So young he’d looked in the hospital bed, so much like his son, the same sort of defiant pride and shy intelligence. In a just world Kelly would have received the Medal of Honor for his solo mission up that brown river, but Maxwell hadn’t even wasted the paper. Sorry, Dutch, CINCPAC would have said, I’d like to go to bat for you on this, but it’s a waste of effort, just would look too, well, suspicious. And so he’d done what he could.

“Tell me about yourself.”

“Kelly, sir, John T., bosun’s mate first—”

“No.” Maxwell had interrupted him with a shake of the head. “No, I think you look more like a *Chief* Bosun’s Mate to me.”

Maxwell had stayed on *Kitty Hawk* for three more days, ostensibly to conduct a personal inspection of flight operations, but really to keep an eye on his wounded son and the young SEAL who’d rescued him. He’d been with Kelly for the telegram announcing the death of his father, a firefighter who’d had a heart attack on the job. And now, he realized, he’d arrived just after something else.

Kelly returned from his shower in a T-shirt and shorts, dragging a little physically, but with something tough and strong in his eyes.

“How far was that swim, John?”

"Just under five miles, sir."

"Good workout," Maxwell observed, handing over a Coca-Cola for his host. "You better cool down some."

"Thank you, sir."

"What happened to you? That mess on your shoulder is new." Kelly told his story briefly, in the way of one warrior to another, for despite the difference in age and station they were of a kind, and for the second time Dutch Maxwell sat and listened like the surrogate father he had become.

"That's a hard hit, John," the Admiral observed quietly.

"Yes, sir." Kelly didn't know what else he was supposed to say, and looked down for a moment. "I never thanked you for the card… when Tish died. That was good of you, sir. How's your son doing?"

"Flying a 727 for Delta. I'm going to be a grandfather any day now," the Admiral said with satisfaction, then he realized how cruel the addition might have seemed to this young, lonely man.

"Great!" Kelly managed a smile, grateful to hear something good, that something he'd done had come to a successful conclusion. "So what brings you out here, sir?"

"I want to go over something with you." Maxwell opened his portfolio and unfolded the first of several maps on Kelly's coffee table.

The younger man grunted. "Oh, yeah, I remember this place." His eyes lingered on some symbols that were hand-sketched in. "Classified information here, sir."

"Chief, what we're going to talk about is very sensitive."

Kelly turned to look around. Admirals always traveled around with aides, usually a shiny young lieutenant who would carry the official briefcase, show his boss where the head was, fuss over where the car was parked, and generally do the things beneath the dignity of a hardworking chief petty officer. Suddenly he realized that although the helicopter had its flight crew, now wandering around outside, Vice Admiral Maxwell was otherwise alone, and that was most unusual.

"Why me, sir?"

"You're the only person in the country who's seen this area from ground level."

"And if we're smart, we'll keep it that way." Kelly's memories of the place were anything but pleasant. Looking at the two-dimensional map instantly brought bad three-dimensional

recollections.

"How far did you go up the river, John?"

"About to here." Kelly's hand wandered across the map. "I missed your son on the first sweep so I doubled back and found him right about here."

And that wasn't bad, Maxwell thought, tantalizingly close to the objective. "This highway bridge is gone. Only took us sixteen missions, but it's *in* the river now."

"You know what that means, don't you? They build a ford, probably, or a couple underwater bridges. You want advice on taking those out?"

"Waste of time. The objective is here." Maxwell's finger tapped a spot marked with red pen.

"That's a long way to swim, sir. What is it?"

"Chief, when you retired you checked the box for being in the Fleet Reserve," Maxwell said benignly.

"Hold on, sir!"

"Relax, son, I'm not recalling you." *Yet*, Maxwell thought. "You had a top-secret clearance."

"Yeah, we all did, because of—"

"This stuff is higher than TS, John." And Maxwell explained why, pulling additional items from his portfolio.

"Those motherfuckers…" Kelly looked up from the recon photo. "You want to go in and get them out, like Song Tay?"

"What do you know about that?"

"Just what was in the open," Kelly explained. "We talked it around the group. It sounded like a pretty slick job. Those Special Forces guys can be real clever when they work at it. But—"

"Yeah, *but* there was nobody home. This guy"—Maxwell tapped the photo—"is positively ID'd as an Air Force colonel. Kelly, you can never repeat this."

"I understand that, sir. How do you plan to do it?"

"We're not sure yet. You know something about the area, and we want your information to help look at alternatives."

Kelly thought back. He'd spent fifty sleepless hours in the area. "It would be real hairy for a helo insertion. There's a lot of triple-A there. The nice thing about Song Tay, it wasn't close to anything, but this place is close enough to Haiphong, and you have these roads and stuff. This is a tough one, sir."

"Nobody ever said it was going to be easy."

"If you loop around here, you can use this ridgeline to mask your approach, but you have to hop the river somewhere… here, and you run into that flak trap… and that one's even worse, 'cording to these notations."

"Did SEALs plan air missions over there, Chief?" Maxwell asked, somewhat amused, only to be surprised at the reply.

"Sir, 3rd SOG was always short of officers. They kept getting shot up. I was the group operations officer for two months, and we *all* knew how to plan insertions. We had to, that was the most dangerous part of most missions. Don't take this wrong, sir, but even enlisted men know how to think."

Maxwell bristled a little. "I never said they didn't."

Kelly managed a grin. "Not all officers are as enlightened as you are, sir." He looked back down at the map. "You plan this sort of thing backwards. You start with what do you need on the objective, then you backtrack to find out how you get it all there."

"Save that for later. Tell me about the river valley," Maxwell ordered.

Fifty hours, Kelly remembered, picked up from Danang by helo, deposited aboard the submarine USS *Skate*, which then had moved Kelly right into the surprisingly deep estuary of that damned stinking river, fighting his way up against the current behind an electrically powered sea-scooter, which was still there, probably, unless some fisherman had snagged a line on it, staying underwater until his air tanks gave out, and he remembered how frightening it was not to be able to hide under the rippled surface. When he couldn't do that, when it had been too dangerous to move, hiding under weeds on the bank, watching traffic move on the river road, hearing the ripping thunder of the flak batteries on the hilltops, wondering what some 37mm fire could do to him if some North Vietnamese boy scout stumbled across him and let his father know. And now this flag officer was asking him how to risk the lives of other men in the same place, trusting him, much as Pam had, to know what to do. That sudden thought chilled the retired chief bosun's mate.

"It's not a really nice place, sir. I mean, your son saw a lot of it, too."

"Not from your perspective," Maxwell pointed out.

And that was true, Kelly remembered. Little Dutch had bellied up in a nice thick place, using his radio only on alternate hours,

waiting for Snake to come and fetch him while he nursed a broken leg in silent agony, and listened to the same triple-A batteries that had splashed his A-6 hammer the sky at other men trying to take out the same bridge that his own bombs had missed. *Fifty hours*, Kelly remembered, no rest, no sleep, just fear and the mission.

"How much time, sir?"

"We're not sure. Honestly, I'm not sure if we can get the mission green-lighted. When we have a plan, then we can present it. When it's approved, we can assemble assets, and train, and execute."

"Weather considerations?" Kelly asked.

"The mission has to go in the fall, this fall, or maybe it'll never go."

"You say these guys will never come back unless we get them?"

"No other reason for them to set this place up in the way they did," Maxwell replied.

"Admiral, I'm pretty good, but I'm just an enlisted guy, remember?"

"You're the only person who's been close to the place." The Admiral collected the photographs and the maps. He handed Kelly a fresh set of the latter. "You turned down OCS three times. I'd like to know why, John."

"You want the truth? It would have meant going back. I pushed my luck enough."

Maxwell accepted that at face value, silently wishing that his best source of local information had accumulated the rank to match his expertise, but Maxwell also remembered flying combat missions off the old *Enterprise* with enlisted pilots, at least one of whom had displayed enough savvy to be an air-group commander, and he knew that the best helicopter pilots around were probably the instant Warrant Officers the Army ran through Fort Rucker. This wasn't the time for a wardroom mentality.

"One mistake from Song Tay," Kelly said after a moment.

"What's that?"

"They probably overtrained. After a certain period of time, you're just dulling the edge. Pick the right people, and a couple of weeks, max, will handle it. Go further than that and you're just doing embroidery."

"You're not the first person to say that," Maxwell assured him.

"Will this be a SEAL job?"

"We're not sure yet. Kelly, I can give you two weeks while we

work on other aspects of the mission."

"How do I get in touch, sir?"

Maxwell dropped a Pentagon pass on the table. "No phones, no mail, it's all face-to-face contact."

Kelly stood and walked him out to the helicopter. As soon as the Admiral came into view, the flight crew started lighting up the turbine engines on the SH-2 SeaSprite. He grabbed the Admiral's arm as the rotor started turning.

"Was the Song Tay job burned?"

That stopped Maxwell in his tracks. "Why do you ask?"

Kelly nodded. "You just answered my question, Admiral."

"We're not sure, Chief." Maxwell ducked his head under the rotor and got into the back of the helicopter. As it lifted off, he found himself wishing again that Kelly had taken the invitation to officer-candidate school. The lad was smarter than he'd realized, and the Admiral made a note to look up his former commander for a fuller evaluation. He also wondered what Kelly would do on his formal recall to active duty. It seemed a shame to betray the boy's trust—it might seem that way to him, Maxwell thought as the SeaSprite turned and headed northeast—but his mind and soul lingered with the twenty men believed to be SENDER GREEN, and his first loyalty had to be to them. Besides, maybe Kelly needed the distraction from his personal troubles. The Admiral consoled himself with that thought.

Kelly watched the helo disappear into the forenoon haze. Then he walked towards his machine shop. He'd expected that by this time today his body would be hurting and his mind relaxed. Strangely, the reverse was now true. The exercise at the hospital had paid off more handsomely than he'd dared to hope. There was still a problem with stamina, but his shoulder, after the usual start-up pain, had accepted the abuse with surprising good grace, and now having passed through the customary post-exercise agony, the secondary period of euphoria had set in. He'd feel good all day, Kelly expected, though he'd hit the bed early tonight in anticipation of yet another day's punishing exercise, and tomorrow he'd take a watch and start exercising in earnest by rating himself against the clock. The Admiral had given him two weeks. That was about the time he'd given to himself for his physical preparation. Now it was time for another sort.

Naval stations, whatever their size and purpose, were all alike. There were some things they all had to have. One of these was a machine shop. For six years there had been crashboats stationed at Battery Island, and to support them, there had to be machine tools to repair and fabricate broken machine parts. Kelly's collection of tools was the rough equivalent of what would be found on a destroyer, and had probably been purchased that way, the Navy Standard Mark One Mod Zero machine shop selected straight out of some service catalog. Maybe even the Air Force had the same thing for all he knew. He switched on a South Bend milling machine and began checking its various parts and oil reservoirs to make sure it would do what he wanted.

Attendant to the machine were numerous hand tools and gauges and drawers full of various steel blanks, just roughly machined metal shapes intended for further manufacturing into whatever specific purpose a technician might need. Kelly sat in a stool to decide exactly what he needed, then decided that he needed something else first. He took down the .45 automatic from its place on the wall, unloaded and disassembled it before giving the slide and barrel a very careful look inside and out.

"You're going to need two of everything," Kelly said to himself. But first things first. He set the slide on a sturdy jig and used the milling machine first of all to drill two small holes in the top of the slide. The South Bend machine made an admirably efficient drill, not even a tenth of a turn on the four-handled wheel and the tiny cutting bit lanced through the ordnance steel of the automatic. Kelly repeated the exercise, making a second hole 1.25 inches from the first. Tapping the holes for threads was just as easy, and a screwdriver completed the exercise. That ended the easy part of the day's work and got him used to operating the machine, something he hadn't done in over a year. A final examination of the modified gun slide assured Kelly that he hadn't hurt anything. It was now time for the tricky part.

He didn't have the time or equipment to do a really proper job. He knew how to use a welding set well enough, but lacked the gear to fabricate the special parts needed for the sort of instrument he would have liked to have. To do that would mean going to a small foundry whose artisans might have guessed what he was up to, and that was something he could not risk. He consoled himself with the thought that good enough was good enough, while perfect was

always a pain in the ass and often not worth the effort anyway.

First he got a sturdy steel blank, rather like a can, but narrower and with thicker walls. Again he drilled and tapped a hole, this time in the center of the bottom plate, axial with the body of the "can," as he already thought of it. The hole was .60 inches in diameter, something he had already checked with a pair of calipers. There were seven similar blanks, but of lesser outside diameter. These he cut off to a length of three quarters of an inch before drilling holes in their bottoms. These new holes were .24 inches, and the shapes he ended up with were like small cups with holes in the bottom, or maybe diminutive flowerpots with vertical sides, he thought with a smile. Each of these was a "baffle." He tried to slide the baffles into the "can," but they were too wide. That earned Kelly a grumble at himself. Each baffle had to go on his lathe. This he did, trimming down the outside of each to a shiny, uniform diameter exactly one millimeter less than that of the inside of the can, a lengthy operation that had him swearing at himself for the fifty minutes it required. Finished, finally, he rewarded himself with a cold Coke before sliding the baffles inside the can. Agreeably, they all fit snugly enough that they didn't rattle, but loosely enough that they slid out with only a shake or two. Good. He dumped them out and next machined a cover cap for the can, which had to be threaded as well. Finished with that task, he first screwed it into place with the baffles out, and then with the baffles in, congratulating himself for the tight fit of all the parts—before he realized that he hadn't cut a hole in the cover plate, which he had to do next, again with the milling machine. This hole was a scant .23 inches in diameter, but when he was done he could see straight through the entire assembly. At least he'd managed to drill everything straight.

Next came the important part. Kelly took his time setting up the machine, checking the arrangements no less than five times before doing the last tapping operation with one pull on the operating handle—that after a long breath. This was something he'd observed a few times but never actually done himself, and though he was pretty good with tools, he was a retired bosun, not a machinist's mate. Finished, he dismounted the barrel and reassembled the pistol, heading outside with a box of .22 Long Rifle ammunition.

Kelly had never been intimidated by the large, heavy Colt automatic, but the cost of .45 ACP was far higher than that of .22 rimfire cartridges, and so the previous year he'd purchased a

conversion kit allowing the lighter rounds to be fired through the pistol. He tossed the Coke can about fifteen feet before loading three rounds in the magazine. He didn't bother with ear protection. He stood as he always did, relaxed, hands at his sides, then brought the gun up fast, dropping into a crouching two-hand stance. Kelly stopped cold, realizing that the can screwed onto the barrel blanked out his sights. That would be a problem. The gun went back down, then came up again, and Kelly squeezed off the first round without actually seeing the target. With the predictable results: when he looked, the can was untouched. That was the bad news. The good news was that the suppressor had functioned well. Often misrepresented by TV and movie sound editors into an almost musical *zing*, the noise radiated by a really good silencer is much like that made by swiping a metal brush along a piece of finished lumber. The expanding gas from the cartridge was trapped in the baffles as the bullet passed through the holes, largely plugging them and forcing the gas to expand in the enclosed spaces inside the can. With five internal baffles—the cover plate made for number six—the noise of the firing was muted to a whisper.

All of which was fine, Kelly thought, but if you missed the target, he would probably hear the even louder sound of the pistol's slide racking back and forth, and the mechanical sounds of a firearm were impossible to mistake for anything harmless. Missing a soda can at fifteen feet did not speak well of his marksmanship. The human head was bigger, of course, but his target area inside the human head was not. Kelly relaxed and tried again, bringing the gun up from his side in a smooth and quick arc. This time he started pulling the trigger just as the silencer can began to occult the target. It worked, after a fashion. The can went down with a .22-inch hole an inch from the bottom. Kelly's timing wasn't quite right. His next shot was roughly in the center of the can, however, evoking a smile. He ejected the magazine, loading five hollow-point rounds, and a minute later, the can was no longer usable as a target, with seven holes, six of them roughly grouped in the center.

"Still have the old touch, Johnnie-boy," Kelly said to himself, safing the pistol. But this was in daylight against a stationary piece of red metal, and Kelly knew that. He walked back to his shop and stripped the pistol down again. The suppressor had tolerated the use without any apparent damage, but he cleaned it anyway, lightly oiling the internal parts. One more thing, he thought. With a small

brush and white enamel he painted a straight white line down the top of the slide. Now it was two in the afternoon. Kelly allowed himself a light lunch before starting his afternoon exercises.

"Wow, that much?"

"You complaining?" Tucker demanded. "What's the matter, can't you handle it?"

"Henry, I can handle whatever you deliver," Piaggi replied, more than a little miffed at first by the man's arrogance, then wondering what might come next.

"We're going to be here three days!" Eddie Morello whined for his part.

"Don't trust your old lady that long?" Tucker grinned at the man. Eddie would have to be next, he had already decided. Morello didn't have much sense of humor anyway. His face flushed red.

"Look, Henry—"

"Settle down, everybody." Piaggi looked at the eight kilos of material on the table before turning back to Tucker. "I'd love to know where you get this stuff."

"I'm sure you would, Tony, but we already talked about that. Can you handle it?"

"You gotta remember, once you start this sort of thing, it's kinda hard to stop it. People depend on you, kinda like what do you tell the bear when you're outa cookies, y'know?" Piaggi was already thinking. He had contacts in Philadelphia and New York, young men—like himself, tired of working for a mustache with old-fashioned rules. The money potential here was stunning. Henry had access to—what? he wondered. They had started only two months before, with two kilograms that had assayed out to a degree of purity that only the best Sicilian White matched, but at half the delivery price. And the problems associated with delivery were Henry's, not his, which made the deal doubly attractive. Finally, the physical security arrangements were what most impressed Piaggi. Henry was no dummy, not some upstart with big ideas and small brains. He was, in fact, a businessman, calm and professional, someone who might make a serious ally and associate, Piaggi thought now.

"My supply is pretty solid. Let me worry about that, paisan."

"Okay." Piaggi nodded. "There is one problem, Henry. It'll take me a while to get the cash together for something this big. You

should have warned me, man."

Tucker allowed himself a laugh. "I didn't want to scare you off, Anthony."

"Trust me on the money?"

A nod and a look. "I know you're a serious guy." Which was the smart play. Piaggi wouldn't walk away from the chance to establish a regular supply to his associates. The long-term money was just too good. Angelo Vorano might not have grasped that, but he had served as the means to meet Piaggi, and that was enough. Besides, Angelo was now crab shit.

"This is pure stuff, same as before?" Morello asked, annoying both of the others.

"Eddie, the man isn't going to trust us on the cash and fuck us at the same time, is he?" Piaggi asked.

"Gentlemen, let me tell you what's happening here, okay? I got a big supply of good stuff. Where I get it, how I get it, that's my business. I even got a territory I don't want you fooling with, but we ain't bumped heads yet on the street and we'll keep it that way." Both of the Italians nodded, Tucker saw. Eddie dumbly, but Tony with understanding and respect. Piaggi spoke the same way:

"You need distribution. We can handle that. You have your own territory, and we can respect that, too."

It was time for the next play. "I didn't get this far by being stupid. After today, you guys are out of this part of the business."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, no more boat rides. I mean you guys don't handle the material anymore."

Piaggi smiled. He'd done this four times now, and the novelty had already worn off. "You have no argument from me on that. If you want, I can have my people take deliveries whenever you want."

"We separate the stuff from the money. We handle it like a business," Tucker said. "Line of credit, like."

"The stuff comes over first."

"Fair enough, Tony. You pick good people, okay? The idea is we separate you and me from the drugs as much as possible."

"People get caught, they talk," Morello pointed out. He felt excluded from the conversation, but wasn't quite bright enough to grasp the significance of that.

"Mine don't," Tucker said evenly. "My people know better."

"That was you, wasn't it?" Piaggi asked, making the connection

and getting a nod. “I like your style, Henry. Try to be more careful next time, okay?”

“I spent two years getting this all set up, cost me a lot of money. I want this operation to run for a long time, and I’m not taking any more chances than I have to anymore. Now, when can you pay me off for this load?”

“I brought an even hundred with me.” Tony waved towards the duffel bag on the deck. This little operation had grown with surprising rapidity as it was, but the first three loads had sold off for fine prices, and Tucker, Piaggi thought, was a man you could trust, insofar as you could trust anyone in this line of work. But, he figured, a rip would have happened already if that was what Tucker wanted, and this much drugs was too much for a guy running that kind of setup. “It’s yours to take, Henry. Looks like we’re going to owe you another… five hundred? I’ll need some time, like a week or so. Sorry, man, but you kinda sandbagged me this way. Takes time to front up that much cash, y’know?”

“Call it four, Tony. No sense squeezing your friends first time out. Let’s generate a little goodwill at first, okay?”

“Special introductory offer?” Piaggi laughed at that and tossed Henry a beer. “You gotta have some Italian blood in you, boy. Okay! We’ll do it like you say, man.” *Just how good is that supply of yours, Henry?* Piaggi couldn’t ask.

“And now there’s work to do.” Tucker slit open the first plastic bag and dumped it into a stainless-steel mixing bowl, glad that he wouldn’t have to trouble himself with this mess again. The seventh step in his marketing plan was now complete. From now on he’d have others do this kitchen stuff, under his supervision at first, of course, but starting today Henry Tucker would start acting like the executive he had become. Mixing the inert material into the bowl, he congratulated himself on his intelligence. He’d started the business in exactly the right way, taking risks, but carefully considered ones, building his organization from the bottom up, doing things himself, getting his hands dirty. Perhaps Piaggi’s antecedents had started the same way, Tucker thought. Probably Tony had forgotten that, and forgotten also its implications. But that wasn’t Tucker’s problem.

“Look, Colonel, I was just an aide, okay? How many times do I have to tell you that? I did the same thing your generals’ aides do, all the

littler dumb stuff."

"Then why take such a job?" It was sad, Colonel Nikolay Yevgeniyevich Grishanov thought, that a man had to go through this, but Colonel Zacharias wasn't a man. He was an enemy, the Russian reminded himself with some reluctance, and he wanted to get the man talking again.

"Isn't it the same in your air force? You get noticed by a general and you get promoted a lot faster." The American paused for a moment. "I wrote speeches, too." That couldn't get him into any trouble, could it?

"That's the job of a political officer in my air force." Grishanov dismissed that frivolity with a wave.

It was their sixth session. Grishanov was the only Soviet officer allowed to interview these Americans, the Vietnamese were playing their cards so carefully. Twenty of them, all the same, all different. Zacharias was as much an intelligence officer as fighter pilot, his dossier said. He'd spent his twenty-odd-year career studying air-defense systems. A master's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, in electrical engineering. The dossier even included a recently acquired copy of his master's thesis, "Aspects of Microwave Propagation and Diffusion over Angular Terrain," photocopied from the university archives by some helpful soul, one of the unknown three who had contributed to his knowledge of the Colonel. The thesis ought to have been classified immediately upon its completion—as would have happened in the Soviet Union, Grishanov knew. It was a very clever examination of what happened to low-frequency search-radar energy—and how, incidentally, an aircraft could use mountains and hills to mask itself from it. Three years after that, following a tour of duty in a fighter squadron, he'd been assigned to a tour of duty at Offutt Air Force Base, just outside Omaha, Nebraska. Part of the Strategic Air Command's war-plans staff, he'd worked on flight profiles which might allow American B-52 bombers to penetrate Soviet air defenses, applying his theoretical knowledge of physics to the practical world of strategic-nuclear war.

Grishanov could not bring himself to hate this man. A fighter pilot himself, having just completed a regimental command in PVO-Strany, the Soviet air-defense command, and already selected for another, the Russian colonel was in a curious way Zacharias's exact counterpart. His job, in the event of war, was to stop those bombers

from ravaging his country, and in peace to plan methods of making their penetration of Soviet air space as difficult as possible. That identity made his current job both difficult and necessary. Not a KGB officer, certainly not one of these little brown savages, he took no pleasure at all in hurting people—shooting them down was something else entirely—even Americans who plotted the destruction of his country. But those who knew how to extract information did not know how to analyze what he was looking for, nor even what questions to ask—and writing the questions down would be no help; you had to see the man's eyes when he spoke. A man clever enough to formulate such plans was also clever enough to lie with enough conviction and authority to fool almost anyone.

Grishanov didn't like what he saw now. This was a skillful man, and a courageous one, who had fought to establish missile-hunting specialists the Americans called Wild Weasels. It was a term a Russian might have used for the mission, named for vicious little predators who chased their prey into their very dens. This prisoner had flown eighty-nine such missions, if the Vietnamese had recovered the right pieces from the right aircraft—like Russians, Americans kept a record of their accomplishments on their aircraft—this was exactly the man he needed to talk to. Perhaps that was a lesson he would write about, Grishanov thought. Such pride told your enemies whom they had captured, and much of what he knew. But that was the way of fighter pilots, and Grishanov would himself have balked at the concealment of his deeds against his country's enemies. The Russian also tried to tell himself that he was sparing harm to the man across the table. Probably Zacharias had killed many Vietnamese—and not simple peasants, but skilled, Russian-trained missile technicians—and this country's government would want to punish him for that. But that was not his concern, and he didn't want to allow political feelings to get in the way of his professional obligations. His was one of the most scientific and certainly the most complex aspects of national defense. It was his duty to plan for an attack of hundreds of aircraft, each of which had a crew of highly trained specialists. The way they thought, their tactical doctrine, was as important as their plans. And as far as he was concerned, the Americans could kill all of the bastards they wanted. The nasty little fascists had as much to do with his country's political philosophy as cannibals did with gourmet cooking.

“Colonel, I do know better than that,” Grishanov said patiently. He laid the most recently arrived document on the table. “I read this last night. It’s excellent work.”

The Russian’s eyes never left Colonel Zacharias. The American’s physical reaction was remarkable. Though something of an intelligence officer himself, he had never dreamed that someone in Vietnam could get word to Moscow, then have Americans under their control find something like this. His face proclaimed what he was thinking: *How could they know so much about me?* How could they have reached that far back into his past? Who possibly could have done it? Was anyone that good, that professional? The Vietnamese were such fools! Like many Russian officers, Grishanov was a serious and thorough student of military history. He’d read all manner of arcane documents while sitting in regimental ready rooms. From one he’d never forget, he learned how the Luftwaffe had interrogated captured airmen, and that lesson was one he would try to apply here. While physical abuse had only hardened this man’s resolve, he had just been shaken to his soul by a mere sheaf of paper. Every man had strengths and every man had weaknesses. It took a person of intelligence to recognize the differences.

“How is it that this was never classified?” Grishanov asked, lighting a cigarette.

“It’s just theoretical physics,” Zacharias said, shrugging his thin shoulders, recovering enough that he tried to conceal his despair. “The telephone company was more interested than anybody else.”

Grishanov tapped the thesis with his finger. “Well, I tell you, I learned several things from that last night. Predicting false echoes from topographical maps, modeling the blind spots mathematically! You can plan an approach route that way, plot maneuvers from one such point to another. Brilliant! Tell me, what sort of place is Berkeley?”

“Just a school, California style,” Zacharias replied before catching himself. He was talking. He wasn’t supposed to talk. He was trained not to talk. He was trained on what to expect, and what he could safely do, how to evade and disguise. But that training never quite anticipated this. And, dear God, was he tired, and scared, and sick of living up to a code of conduct that didn’t count for beans to anyone else.

“I know little of your country—except professional matters, of

course. Are there great regional differences? You come from Utah. What sort of place is it?"

"Zacharias, Robin G. Colonel—"

Grishanov raised his hands. "Please, Colonel. I know all that. I also know your place of birth in addition to the date. There is no base of your air force near Salt Lake City. All I know is from maps. I will probably never visit this part—any part of your country. In this Berkeley part of California, it is green, yes? I was told once they grow wine grapes there. But I know nothing of Utah. There is a large lake there, but it's called Salt Lake, yes? It's salty?"

"Yes, that's why—"

"How can it be salty? The ocean is a thousand kilometers away, with mountains in between, yes?" He didn't give the American time to reply. "I know the Caspian Sea quite well. I was stationed at a base there once. It isn't salty. But this place is? How strange." He stubbed out his cigarette.

The man's head jerked up a little. "Not sure, I'm not a geologist. Something left over from another time, I suppose."

"Perhaps so. There are mountains there, too, yes?"

"Wasatch Mountains," Zacharias confirmed somewhat drunkenly.

One clever thing about the Vietnamese, Grishanov thought, the way they fed their prisoners, food a hog would eat only from necessity. He wondered if it were a deliberate and thought-out diet or something fortuitously resulting from mere barbarity. Political prisoners in the Gulag ate better, but the diet of these Americans lowered their resistance to disease, debilitated them to the point that the act of escape would be doomed by inadequate stamina. Rather like what the *fascisti* did to Soviet prisoners, distasteful or not, it was useful to Grishanov. Resistance, physical and mental, required energy, and you could watch these men lose their strength during the hours of interrogation, watch their courage wane as their physical needs drew more and more upon their supply of psychological resolve. He was learning how to do this. It was time-consuming, but it was a diverting process, learning to pick apart the brains of men not unlike himself.

"The skiing, is it good?"

Zacharias's eyes blinked, as though the question took him away to a different time and place. "Yeah, it is."

"That is something one will never do here, Colonel. I like cross-country skiing for exercise, and to get away from things. I had

wooden skis, but in my last regiment my maintenance officer made me steel skis from aircraft parts."

"Steel?"

"Stainless steel, heavier than aluminum but more flexible. I prefer it. From a wing panel on our new interceptor, project E-266."

"What's that?" Zacharias knew nothing of the new MiG-25.

"Your people now call it Foxbat. Very fast, designed to catch one of your B-70 bombers."

"But we stopped that project," Zacharias objected.

"Yes, I know that. But your project got me a wonderfully fast fighter to fly. When I return home, I will command the first regiment of them."

"Fighter planes made of steel? Why?"

"It resists aerodynamic heating much better than aluminum," Grishanov explained. "And you can make good skis from discarded parts." Zacharias was very confused now. "So how well do you think we would do with my steel fighters and your aluminum bombers?"

"I guess that depends on—" Zacharias started to say, then stopped himself cold. His eyes looked across the table, first with confusion at what he'd almost said, then with resolve.

Too soon, Grishanov told himself with disappointment. He'd pushed a little too soon. This one had courage. Enough to take his Wild Weasel "downtown," the phrase the Americans used, over eighty times. Enough to resist for a long time. But Grishanov had plenty of time.

12

Outfitters

63 VW, LOW MLGE, RAD, HTR.…

Kelly dropped a dime in the pay phone and called the number. It was a blazing hot Saturday, temperature and humidity in a neck-and-neck race for triple digits while Kelly fumed at his own stupidity. Some things were so blatantly obvious that you didn't see them until your nose split open and started bleeding.

"Hello? I'm calling about the ad for the car… that's right," Kelly said. "Right now if you want… Okay, say about fifteen minutes? Fine, thank you, ma'am. I'll be right there. 'Bye." He hung up. At least something had gone right. Kelly grimaced at the inside of the phone booth. *Springer* was tied up in a guest slip at one of the marinas on the Potomac. He had to buy a new car, but how did you get to where the new car was? If you drove there, then you could drive the new car back, but what about the one you took? It was funny enough that he started laughing at himself. Then fate intervened, and an empty cab went driving past the marina's entrance, allowing him to keep his promise to a little old lady.

"The 4500 block, Essex Avenue," he told the driver.

"Where's that, man?"

"Chevy Chase."

"Gonna cost extra, man," the driver pointed out, turning north.

Kelly handed a ten-dollar bill across. "Another one if you get me there in fifteen minutes."

"Cool." And the acceleration dropped Kelly back in his seat. The taxi avoided Wisconsin Avenue most of the way. At a red light the driver found Essex Avenue on his map, and he ended up collecting the extra ten with about twenty seconds to spare.

It was an upscale residential neighborhood, and the house was easy to spot. There it was, a VW Beetle, an awful peanut-butter color speckled with a little body rust. It could not have been much better. Kelly hopped up the four wooden front steps and knocked on the door.

"Hello?" It was a face to match the voice. She had to be eighty or so, small and frail, but with fey green eyes that hinted at what had been, enlarged by the thick glasses she wore. Her hair still had some yellow in the gray.

"Mrs. Boyd? I called a little while ago about the car."

"What's your name?"

"Bill Murphy, ma'am." Kelly smiled benignly. "Awful hot, isn't it?"

"T'rble," she said, meaning *terrible.* "Wait a minute." Gloria Boyd disappeared and then came back a moment later with the keys. She even came out to walk him to the car. Kelly took her arm to help her down the steps.

"Thank you, young man."

"My pleasure, ma'am," he replied gallantly.

"We got the car for my granddaughter. When she went to college, then Ken used it," she said, expecting Kelly to know who Ken was.

"Excuse me?"

"My husband," Gloria said without turning. "He died a month ago."

"I'm very sorry to hear that, ma'am."

"He was sick a long time," said the woman, not yet recovered from the shock of her loss but accepting the fact of it. She handed him the keys. "Here, take a look."

Kelly unlocked the door. It looked like the car used by a college student and then by an elderly man. The seats were well worn, and one had a long slash in it, probably by a packing box of clothes or books. He turned the key in the lock and the engine started immediately. There was even a full tank of gas. The ad hadn't lied about the mileage, only 52,000 miles on the odometer. He asked for and got permission to take it around the block. The car was mechanically sound, he decided, bringing it back to the waiting owner.

"Where did all the rust come from?" he asked her, giving the keys back.

"She went to school in Chicago, at Northwestern, all that terrible

snow and salt."

"That's a good school. Let's get you back inside." Kelly took her arm and directed her back to the house. It smelled like an old person's house, the air heavy with dust that she was too tired to wipe, and stale food, for the meals she still fixed were for two, not one.

"Are you thirsty?"

"Yes, ma'am, thank you. Water will be just fine." Kelly looked around while she went to the kitchen. There was a photo on the wall, a man in a high-necked uniform and Sam Browne belt, holding the arm of a young woman in a very tight, almost cylindrical, white wedding dress. Other photos cataloged the married life of Kenneth and Gloria Boyd. Two daughters and a son, a trip to the ocean, an old car, grandchildren, all the things earned in a full and useful life.

"Here you go." She handed over a glass.

"Thank you. What did your husband do?"

"He worked for the Commerce Department for forty-two years. We were going to move to Florida, but then he got sick so now I'm going alone. My sister lives in Fort Pierce, she's a widow too, her husband was a policeman…" Her voice trailed off as the cat came in to examine the new visitor. That seemed to invigorate Mrs. Boyd. "I'm moving down there next week. The house is already sold, have to get out next Thursday. I sold it to a nice young doctor."

"I hope you like it down there, ma'am. How much do you want for the car?"

"I can't drive anymore because of my eyes, cataracts. People have to drive me everywhere I go. My grandson says it's worth one thousand five hundred dollars."

Your grandson must be a lawyer to be that greedy, Kelly thought. "How about twelve hundred? I can pay cash."

"Cash?" Her eyes became fey again.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then you can have the car." She held out her hand and Kelly took it carefully.

"Do you have the paperwork?" It made Kelly feel guilty that she had to get up again, this time heading upstairs, slowly, holding on to the banister while Kelly took out his wallet and counted off twelve crisp bills.

It should have taken only another ten minutes, but instead it was

thirty. Kelly had already checked up on how to do the mechanics of a title transfer, and besides, he wasn't going to do all of that. The auto-insurance policy was tucked into the same cardboard envelope as the title, in the name of Kenneth W. Boyd. Kelly promised to take care of that for her, and the tags, too, of course. But it turned out that all the cash made Mrs. Boyd nervous, and so Kelly helped her fill out a deposit ticket, and then drove her to her bank, where she could drop it into the night depository. Then he stopped off at the supermarket for milk and cat food before bringing her home and walking her to the door again.

"Thank you for the car, Mrs. Boyd," he said in parting.

"What are you going to use it for?"

"Business." Kelly smiled and left.

At quarter of nine that night, two cars pulled into the service area on Interstate 95. The one in front was a Dodge Dart and the one behind it a red Plymouth Roadrunner. Roughly fifty feet apart, they picked a half-full area north of Maryland House, a rest stop set in the median of the John F. Kennedy Highway, offering full restaurant services along with gas and oil—good coffee, but, understandably, no alcoholic beverages. The Dart took a few meandering turns in the parking lot, finally stopping three spaces from a white Oldsmobile with Pennsylvania tags and a brown vinyl top. The Roadrunner took a space in the next row. A woman got out and walked towards the brick restaurant, a path that took her past the Olds.

"Hey, baby," a man said. The woman stopped and took a few steps towards the vinyl-topped automobile. The man was Caucasian, with long but neatly combed black hair and an open-necked white shirt.

"Henry sent me," she said.

"I know." He reached out to stroke her face, a gesture which she did not resist. He looked around a little before moving his hand downwards. "You have what I want, baby?"

"Yes." She smiled. It was a forced, uneasy smile, frightened but not embarrassed. Doris was months beyond embarrassment.

"Nice tits," the man said with no emotional content at all in his voice. "Get the stuff."

Doris walked back to her car, as though she'd forgotten something. She returned with a large purse, almost a small duffel,

really. As she walked past the Olds, the man's hand reached out and took it. Doris proceeded into the building, returning a minute later holding a can of soda, her eyes on the Roadrunner, hoping that she'd done everything right. The Olds had its motor running, and the driver blew her a kiss, to which she responded with a wan smile.

"That was easy enough," Henry Tucker said, fifty yards away, at the outdoor eating area on the other side of the building.

"Good stuff?" another man asked Tony Piaggi. The three of them sat at the same table, "enjoying" the sultry evening while the majority of the patrons were inside with the air conditioning.

"The best. Same as the sample we gave you two weeks ago. Same shipment and everything," Piaggi assured him.

"And if the mule gets burned?" the man from Philadelphia asked.

"She won't talk," Tucker assured him. "They've all seen what happens to bad girls." As they watched, a man got out of the Roadrunner and got into the Dart's driver's seat.

"Very good," Rick told Doris.

"Can we go now?" she asked him, shaking now that the job was over, sipping nervously at her soda.

"Sure, baby, I know what you want." Rick smiled and started the car. "Be nice, now. Show me something."

"There's people around," Doris said.

"So?"

Without another word, Doris unbuttoned her shirt—it was a man's shirt—leaving it tucked into her faded shorts. Rick reached in and smiled, turning the wheel with his left hand. *It could have been worse*, Doris told herself, closing her eyes, pretending that she was someone else in some other place, wondering how long before her life would end too, hoping it wouldn't be long.

"The money?" Piaggi asked.

"I need a cup of coffee." The other man got up and walked inside, leaving his briefcase, which Piaggi took in his hand. He and Tucker walked off to his car, a blue Cadillac, without waiting for the other man to come back.

"Not going to count it?" Tucker asked halfway across the parking lot.

"If he stiffs us, he knows what happens. This is business, Henry."

"That's right," Tucker agreed.

“Bill Murphy,” Kelly said. “I understand you have some vacant apartments.” He held up the Sunday paper.

“What are you looking for?”

“A one-bedroom would be fine. I really just need a place to hang my clothes,” Kelly told the man. “I travel a lot.”

“Salesman?” the manager asked.

“That’s right. Machine tools. I’m new here—new territory, I mean.”

It was an old garden-apartment complex, built soon after the Second World War for returning veterans, composed exclusively of three-story brick structures. The trees looked about right for that time period. They’d been planted then and grown well, tall enough now to support a good population of squirrels, wide enough to give shade to the parking areas. Kelly looked around approvingly as the manager took him to a first-floor furnished unit.

“This is just fine,” Kelly announced. He looked around, testing the kitchen sink and other plumbing fixtures. The furniture was obviously used, but in decent shape. There were even air conditioners in the windows of every room.

“I have other ones—”

“This is just what I need. How much?”

“One seventy-five a month, one month security deposit.”

“Utilities?”

“You can pay them yourself or we can bill it. Some of our renters prefer that. They’ll average about forty-five dollars a month.”

“Easier to pay one bill than two or three. Let’s see. One seventy-five, plus forty-five…”

“Two-twenty,” the manager said helpfully.

“Four-forty,” Kelly corrected. “Two months, right? I can pay you with a check, but it’s an out-of-town bank. I don’t have a local account yet. Is cash okay?”

“Cash is always okay with me,” the manager assured him.

“Fine.” Kelly took out his wallet, handing over the bills. He stopped. “No, six-sixty, we’ll make it three months, if that’s okay. And I need a receipt.” The helpful manager pulled a pad from his pocket and wrote one up on the spot. “How about a phone?” Kelly asked.

“I can have that done by Tuesday if you want. There’s another deposit for that.”

“Please take care of that, if you would.” Kelly handed over some

more money. “My stuff won’t be here for a while. Where can I get sheets and stuff?”

“Nothing much open today. Tomorrow, lots of ’em.”

Kelly looked through the bedroom door at the bare mattress. He could see the lumps from this distance. He shrugged. “Well, I’ve slept on worse.”

“Veteran?”

“Marine,” Kelly said.

“So was I once,” the manager replied, surprising Kelly. “You don’t do anything wild, do you?” He didn’t expect so, but the owner insisted that he ask, even ex-Marines. The answer was a sheepish, reassuring grin.

“I snore pretty bad, they tell me.”

Twenty minutes later Kelly was in a cab heading downtown. He got out at Penn Station and caught the next train to D.C., where another taxi delivered him to his boat. By nightfall, *Springer* was headed down the Potomac. It would have been so much easier, Kelly told himself, if there were just one person to help him. So much of his time was tied up with useless commuting. But was it really useless? Maybe not. He was getting a lot of thinking done, and that was as important as his physical preparations. Kelly arrived at his home just before midnight after six continuous hours of thinking and planning.

Despite a weekend of almost nonstop motion, there was no time to dawdle. Kelly packed clothing, most of it purchased in the suburbs of Washington. Linens he would buy in Baltimore. Food the same. His .45 automatic, plus the .22-.45 conversion kit, was packed in with old clothing, along with two boxes of ammunition. He shouldn’t need more than that, Kelly thought, and ammo was heavy. While he fabricated one more silencer, this one for the Woodsman, he thought through his preparations. His physical condition was excellent, nearly as good as it had been in 3rd SOG, and he’d been shooting every day. His aim was probably better than it had ever been, he told himself, going through what were now almost mindless mechanical operations on the machine tools. By three in the morning the new suppressor was fitted to the Woodsman and tested. Thirty minutes after that he was back aboard *Springer*, headed north, looking forward to a few hours’ sleep once he got past Annapolis.

It was a lonely night, with scattered clouds, and his mind drifted

somewhat before he commanded himself to concentrate. He was not a lazy civilian anymore, but Kelly allowed himself his first beer in weeks while his mind churned over variables. What had he forgotten? The reassuring answer was that he could think of nothing. The less-than-satisfactory thought was that he still knew little. Billy with his red Plymouth muscle car. A black guy named Henry. He knew their area of operation. And that was all.

But.

But he'd fought armed and trained enemies with less knowledge than that, and though he would force himself to be just as careful now as he had been there, deep down he knew that he would accomplish this mission. Partly it was because he was more formidable than they, and far more highly motivated. The other part, Kelly realized with surprise, was because he didn't care about the consequences, only the results. He remembered something from his Catholic prep school, a passage from Virgil's *Aeneid* that had defined his mission almost two thousand years before: *Una salus victus nullam sperare salutem.* The one hope of the doomed is not to hope for safety. The very grimness of the thought made him smile as he sailed under the stars, light dispatched from distances so vast that it had begun its journey long before Kelly, or even Virgil, had been born.

The pills helped shut out reality, but not all the way. Doris didn't so much think the thought as listen to it, sense it, like recognizing something that she didn't wish to face but refused to go away. She was too dependent on the barbiturates now. Sleep came hard to her, and in the emptiness of the room she was unable to avoid herself. She would have taken more pills if she could, but they didn't allow her what she wanted, not that she wanted much. Just brief oblivion, a short-term liberation from her fear, that was all—and that was something they had no interest in granting her. She could see more than they knew or would have expected, she could peer into the future, but that was little consolation. Sooner or later she would be caught by the police. She'd been arrested before, but not for something of this magnitude, and she'd go away for a long time for this. The police would try to get her to talk, promise her protection. She knew better. Twice now she'd seen friends die. Friends? As close to that as was possible, someone to talk to, someone who shared her life, such as it was, and even in this captivity there were

little jokes, small victories against the forces that ruled her existence, like distant lights in a gloomy sky. Someone to cry with. But two of them were dead, and she'd watched them die, sitting there, drugged but unable to sleep and blot it out, the horror so vast that it became numbing, watching their eyes, seeing and feeling the pain, knowing that she could do nothing, knowing even that they knew it as well. A nightmare was bad enough, but one of those couldn't reach out and touch you. You could wake up and flee from one of those. Not this. She could watch herself from outside, as though she were a robot outside her own command but not that of others. Her body would not move unless others commanded it, and she even had to conceal her thoughts, was even afraid to voice them within her own mind lest they hear them or see them on her face, but now, try as she might, she could not force them away.

Rick lay next to her, breathing slowly in the darkness. Part of her liked Rick. He was the gentlest of them, and sometimes she allowed herself to think that he liked her, maybe a little, because he didn't beat her badly. She had to stay in line, of course, because his anger was every bit as bad as Billy's, and so around Rick she tried very hard to be good. Part of her knew that it was foolish, but her reality was defined by other people now. And she'd seen the results of real resistance. After one especially bad night Pam had held her, and whispered her desires to escape. Later, Doris had prayed that she had gotten away, that there might be hope after all, only to see her dragged in and to watch her die, sitting helplessly fifteen feet away while they did everything to her that they could imagine. Watching her life end, her body convulsing from lack of oxygen with the man's face staring at her, laughing at her from an inch away. Her only act of resistance, thankfully unnoticed by the men, had been to brush out her friend's hair, crying all the while, hoping somehow that Pam would know there was someone who cared, even in death. But the gesture had seemed empty even as she'd done it, making her tears all the more bitter.

What had she done wrong? Doris wondered, how badly had she offended God that her life should be this way? How could anyone possibly deserve such a bleak and hopeless existence?

"I'm impressed, John," Rosen said, staring at his patient. Kelly sat on the examining table, his shirt off. "What have you been doing?"

"Five-mile swim for the shoulders. Better than weights, but a

little of that, too, in the evening. A little running. About what I used to do back in the old days."

"I wish I had your blood pressure," the surgeon observed, removing the cuff. He'd done a major procedure that morning, but he made time for his friend.

"Exercise, Sam," Kelly advised.

"I don't have the time, John," the surgeon said—rather weakly, both thought.

"A doc should know better."

"True," Rosen conceded. "How are you otherwise?"

The reply was just a look, neither a smile nor a grimace, just a neutral expression that told Rosen all he needed to know. One more try: "There's an old saying: Before setting out on revenge, dig two graves."

"Only two?" Kelly asked lightly.

Rosen nodded. "I read the post report, too. I can't talk you out of it?"

"How's Sarah?"

Rosen accepted the deflection with good grace. "Deep into her project. She's excited enough that she's telling me about it. It's pretty interesting stuff."

Just then Sandy O'Toole came in. Kelly startled both of them by lifting his T-shirt and covering his chest. "Please!"

The nurse was so startled that she laughed, and so did Sam until he realized that Kelly was indeed ready for whatever he was planning. The conditioning, the looseness, the steady, serious eyes that changed to mirth when he wanted them to. *Like a surgeon*, Rosen thought, and what a strange thought that was, but the more he looked at this man, the more intelligence he saw.

"You're looking healthy for a guy who got shot a few weeks ago," O'Toole said with a friendly look.

"Clean living, ma'am. Only one beer in thirty-some days."

"Mrs. Lott is conscious now, Doctor Rosen," the nurse reported. "Nothing unusual, she appears to be doing fine. Her husband's been in to see her. I think he'll be okay, too. I had my doubts."

"Thanks, Sandy."

"Well, John, you're healthy, too. Put your shirt on before Sandy starts blushing," Rosen added with a chuckle.

"Where do you get lunch around here?" Kelly asked.

"I'd show you myself, but I have a conference in about ten

minutes. Sandy?"

She checked her watch. "About time for mine. You want to risk hospital food or something outside?"

"You're the tour guide, ma'am."

She guided him to the cafeteria, where the food was hospital-bland, but you could add salt and other spices if you wanted. Kelly selected something that might be filling, even healthy, to compensate for the lack of taste.

"Have you been keeping busy?" he asked after they selected a table.

"Always," Sandy assured him.

"Where do you live?"

"Off Loch Raven Boulevard, just in the County." She hadn't changed, Kelly saw. Sandy O'Toole was functioning, quite well in fact, but the emptiness in her life wasn't qualitatively different from his. The real difference was that he could do something; she could not. She was reaching out, she had a capacity for good humor, but her grief overcame it at every turn. A powerful force, grief. There were advantages in having enemies you could seek out and eliminate. Fighting a shadow was far more difficult.

"Row house, like they have around here?"

"No, it's an old bungalow, whatever you call it, big square two-story house. Half an acre. That reminds me," she added. "I have to cut the grass this weekend." Then she remembered that Tim had liked cutting grass, had decided to leave the Army after his second Vietnam tour and get his law degree and live a normal kind of life, all of that taken away from her by little people in a distant place.

Kelly didn't know what she was thinking, exactly, but he didn't have to. The change in her expression, the way her voice trailed off, said it all. How to cheer her up? It was a strange question for him, considering his plans for the next few weeks.

"You were very kind to me while I was upstairs. Thanks."

"We try to take care of our patients," she said with a friendly and unaccustomed expression.

"A face as pretty as yours should do that more," Kelly told her.

"Do what?"

"Smile."

"It's hard," she said, serious again.

"I know, ma'am. But I did have you laughing before," Kelly told her.

"You surprised me."

"It's Tim, isn't it?" he asked, jolting her. People weren't supposed to talk about that, were they?

She stared into Kelly's eyes for perhaps five seconds. "I just don't understand."

"In some ways it's easy. In some ways it's hard. The hard part," Kelly said, thinking it through himself as he did so, "is understanding why people make it necessary, why people do things like that. What it comes down to is, there are bad people out there, and somebody has to deal with them, 'cuz if you don't, then someday they'll deal with you. You can try ignoring them, but that doesn't ever work, really. And sometimes you see things you just can't ignore." Kelly leaned back, searching for more words. "You see lots of bad things here, Sandy. I've seen worse. I've watched people doing things—"

"Your nightmare?"

Kelly nodded. "That's right. I almost got myself killed that night."

"What was—"

"You don't want to know, honest. I mean, I don't understand that part either, how people can do things like that. Maybe they believe in something so much that they stop remembering that it's important to be human. Maybe they want something so much that they don't care. Maybe there's just something wrong with them, how they think, how they feel. I don't know. But what they do is real. Somebody has to try and stop it." *Even when you know it's not going to work*, Kelly didn't have the heart to add. How could he tell her that her husband had died for a failure?

"My husband was a knight in shiny armor on a white horse? Is that what you're telling me?"

"You're the one wearing white, Sandy. You fight against one kind of enemy. There's other kinds. Somebody has to fight against them, too."

"I'll never understand why Tim had to die."

It really came down to that, Kelly thought. It wasn't about great political or social issues. Everyone had a life, which was supposed to have a natural end after an amount of time determined by God or Fate or something men weren't supposed to control. He'd seen young men die, and caused his share of deaths, each life something of value to its owner and others, and how did you explain to the others what it was all about? For that matter, how did you explain

it to yourself? But that was from the outside. From the inside it was something else. Maybe that was the answer.

"You do some pretty hard work, right?"

"Yes," Sandy said, nodding a little.

"Why not do something easier? I mean, work a department where it's different, I don't know—the nursery, maybe? That's a happy place, right?"

"Pretty much," the nurse admitted.

"It's still important, too, right? Taking care of little babies, it's routine, yeah, but it still has to be done the right way, doesn't it?"

"Of course."

"But you don't do that. You work Neuro. You do the hard stuff."

"Somebody has to—" *Bingo!* Kelly thought, cutting her off.

"It's hard—hard to do the work, hard on you—it hurts you some, right?"

"Sometimes."

"But you do it anyway," Kelly pointed out.

"Yes," Sandy said, not as an admission, but something stronger.

"That's why Tim did what he did." He saw the understanding there, or perhaps the beginnings of it, just for a moment before her lingering grief pushed the argument aside.

"It still doesn't make sense."

"Maybe the *thing* doesn't make sense, but the *people* do," Kelly suggested. That was about as far as his mind stretched. "Sorry, I'm not a priest, just a broken-down Navy chief."

"Not too broken down," O'Toole said, finishing her lunch.

"And part of that is your doing, ma'am. Thank you." That earned him another smile.

"Not all our patients get better. We're kind of proud of those who do."

"Maybe we're all trying to save the world, Sandy, one little bit at a time," Kelly said. He rose and insisted on walking her back to the unit. It took the whole five minutes to say what he wanted to say.

"You know, I'd like to have dinner with you, maybe? Not now, but, well—"

"I'll think about it," she allowed, half dismissing the idea, half wondering about it, knowing as Kelly did that it was too soon for both of them, though probably not as much for her. What sort of man was this? she asked herself. What were the dangers of knowing him?

13

Agendas

It was his first-ever visit to the Pentagon. Kelly felt ill at ease, wondering if he should have worn his khaki chief's uniform, but his time for wearing that had passed. Instead he wore a blue lightweight suit, with a miniature of the Navy Cross ribbon on the lapel. Arriving in the bus and car tunnel, he walked up a ramp and searched for a map of the vast building, which he quickly scanned and memorized. Five minutes later he entered the proper office.

"Yes?" a petty officer asked.

"John Kelly, I have an appointment with Admiral Maxwell." He was invited to take a seat. On the coffee table was a copy of *Navy Times*, which he hadn't read since leaving the service. But Kelly was able to control his nostalgia. The bitches and gripes he read about hadn't changed very much.

"Mr. Kelly?" a voice called. He rose and walked through the open door. After it closed, a red do-not-disturb light blinked on to warn people off.

"How are you feeling, John?" Maxwell asked first of all.

"Fine, sir, thank you." Civilian now or not, Kelly could not help feeling uneasy in the presence of a flag officer. That got worse at once when another door opened to admit two more men, one in civilian clothes, the other a rear admiral—another aviator, Kelly saw, with the medal of honor, which was even more intimidating. Maxwell did the introductions.

"I've heard a lot about you," Podulski said, shaking the younger man's hand.

"Thank you, sir." Kelly didn't know what else to say.

"Cas and I go back a ways," Maxwell observed, handling the

introductions. “I got fifteen”—he pointed to the aircraft panel hanging on the wall—“Cas got eighteen.”

“All on film, too,” Podulski assured him.

“I didn’t get any,” Greer said, “but I didn’t let the oxygen rot my brain either.” In addition to wearing soft clothes, this admiral had the map case. He took one out, the same panel he had back at his home, but more marked up. Then came the photographs, and Kelly got another look at the face of Colonel Zacharias, this time enhanced somehow or other, and recognizably similar to the ID photo Greer put next to it.

“I was within three miles of the place,” Kelly noted. “Nobody ever told me about—”

“It wasn’t there yet. This place is new, less than two years old,” Greer explained.

“Any more pictures, James?” Maxwell asked.

“Just some SR-71 overheads, high-obliques, nothing new in them. I have a guy checking every frame of this place, a good guy, ex-Air Force. He reports to me only.”

“You’re going to be a good spy,” Podulski noted with a chuckle.

“They need me there,” Greer replied in a lighthearted voice bordered with serious meaning. Kelly just looked at the other three. The banter wasn’t unlike that in a chief’s mess, but the language was cleaner. He looked over at Kelly again. “Tell me about the valley.”

“A good place to stay away from—”

“First, tell me how you got little Dutch back. Every step of the way,” Greer ordered.

Kelly needed fifteen minutes for that, from the time he left USS *Skate* to the moment the helicopter had lifted him and Lieutenant Maxwell from the river’s estuary for the flight to *Kitty Hawk*. It was an easy story to tell. What surprised him were the looks the admirals passed back and forth.

Kelly wasn’t equipped to understand the looks yet. He didn’t really think of the admirals as old or even as totally human. They were *admirals*, godlike, ageless beings who made important decisions and looked as they should look, even the one out of uniform. Nor did Kelly think of himself as young. He’d seen combat, after which every man is forever changed. But their perspective was different. To Maxwell, Podulski, and Greer, this young man was not terribly unlike what they had been thirty years earlier. It was

instantly clear that Kelly was a warrior, and in seeing him they saw themselves. The furtive looks they traded were not unlike those of a grandfather watching his grandson take his first tentative step on the living-room rug. But these were larger and more serious steps.

"That was some job," Greer said when Kelly finished. "So this area is densely populated?"

"Yes and no, sir. I mean, it's not a city or like that, but some farms and stuff. I heard and saw traffic on this road. Only a few trucks, but lots of bicycles, oxcarts, that sort of thing."

"Not much military traffic?" Podulski asked.

"Admiral, that stuff would be on this road here." Kelly tapped the map. He saw the notations for the NVA units. "How are you planning to get in here?"

"There's nothing easy, John. We've looked at a helicopter insertion, maybe even trying an amphibious assault and racing up this road."

Kelly shook his head. "Too far. That road is too easy to defend. Gentlemen, you have to understand, Vietnam is a real nation in arms, okay? Practically everybody there has been in uniform, and giving people guns makes them feel like part of the team. There are enough people with guns there to give you a real pain coming up this way. You'd never make it."

"The people really support the communist government?" Podulski asked. It was just too much for him to believe. But not for Kelly.

"Jesus, Admiral, why do you think we've been fighting there so long? Why do you think nobody helps pilots who get shot down? They're not *like* us over there. That's something we've never understood. Anyway, if you put Marines on the beach, nobody's going to welcome them. Forget racing up this road, sir. I've been there. It ain't much of a road, not even as good as it looks on these pictures. Drop a few trees and it's closed." Kelly looked up. "Has to be choppers."

He could see the news was not welcome, and it wasn't hard to understand why. This part of the country was dotted with antiaircraft batteries. Getting a strike force in wasn't going to be easy. At least two of these men were pilots, and if a ground assault had looked promising to them, then the triple-A problem must have been worse than Kelly appreciated.

"We can suppress the flak," Maxwell thought.

"You're not talking about -52s again, are you?" Greer asked.

"*Newport News* goes back on the gunline in a few weeks. John, ever see her shoot?"

Kelly nodded. "Sure did. She supported us twice when we were working close to the coast. It's impressive what those eight-inchers can do. Sir, the problem is, how many things do you need to go right for the mission to succeed? The more complicated things get, the easier it is for things to go wrong, and even one thing can be real complicated." Kelly leaned back on the couch, and reminded himself that what he had just said wasn't only for the admirals to consider.

"Dutch, we have a meeting in five minutes," Podulski said reluctantly. This meeting had not been a successful one, he thought. Greer and Maxwell weren't so sure of that. They had learned a few things. That counted for something.

"Can I ask why you're keeping this so tight?" Kelly asked.

"You guessed it before." Maxwell looked over at the junior flag officer and nodded.

"The Song Tay job was compromised," Greer said. "We don't know how, but we found out later through one of our sources that they knew—at least suspected—something was coming. They expected it later, and we ended up hitting the place right after they evacuated the prisoners, but before they had their ambush set up. Good luck, bad luck. They didn't expect Operation KINGPIN for another month."

"Dear God," Kelly breathed. "Somebody over here deliberately betrayed them?"

"Welcome to the real world of intelligence operations, Chief," Greer said with a grim smile.

"But *why?*"

"If I ever meet the gentleman, I will be sure to ask." Greer looked at the others. "That's a good hook for us to use. Check the records of the operation, real low-key like?"

"Where are they?"

"Eglin Air Force base, where the KINGPIN people trained."

"Whom do we send?" Podulski asked.

Kelly could feel the eyes turn in his direction. "Gentlemen, I was just a chief, remember?"

"Mr. Kelly, where's your car parked?"

"In the city, sir. I took the bus over here."

"Come with me. There's a shuttle bus you can take back later."

They walked out of the building in silence. Greer's car, a Mercury, was parked in a visitor slot by the river entrance. He waved for Kelly to get in and headed towards the George Washington Parkway.

"Dutch pulled your package. I got to read it. I'm impressed, son." What Greer didn't say was that on his battery of enlistment tests, Kelly had scored an average of 147 on three separately formatted IQ tests. "Every commander you had sang your praises."

"I worked for some good ones, sir."

"So it appears, and three of them tried to get you into OCS, but Dutch asked you about that. I also want to know why you didn't take the college scholarship."

"I was tired of schools. And the scholarship was for swimming, Admiral."

"That's a big deal at Indiana, I know, but your marks were plenty good to get an academic scholarship. You attended a pretty nice prep school—"

"That was a scholarship, too." Kelly shrugged. "Nobody in my family ever went to college. Dad served a hitch in the Navy during the war. I guess it just seemed like something to do." That it had been a major disappointment to his father was something he'd never told anyone.

Greer pondered that. It still didn't answer things. "The last ship I commanded was a submarine, *Daniel Webster*. My chief of the boat, senior chief sonarman, the guy had a doctorate in physics. Good man, knew his job better than I knew mine, but not a leader, shied away from it some. You didn't, Kelly. You tried to, but you didn't."

"Look, sir, when you're out there and things happen, somebody has to get it done."

"Not everybody sees things that way. Kelly, there's two kinds of people in the world, the ones who need to be told and the ones who figure it out all by themselves," Greer pronounced.

The highway sign said something that Kelly didn't catch, but it wasn't anything about CIA. He didn't tumble to it until he saw the oversized guardhouse.

"Did you ever interact with Agency people while you were over there?"

Kelly nodded. "Some. We were—well, you know about it, Project PHOENIX, right? We were part of that, a small part."

"What did you think of them?"

"Two or three of them were pretty good. The rest—you want it straight?"

"That's exactly what I want," Greer assured him.

"The rest are probably real good mixing martinis, shaken not stirred," Kelly said evenly. That earned him a rueful laugh.

"Yeah, people here do like to watch the movies!" Greer found his parking place and popped his door open. "Come with me, Chief." The out-of-uniform admiral led Kelly in the front door and got him a special visitor's pass, the kind that required an escort.

For his part, Kelly felt like a tourist in a strange and foreign land. The very normality of the building gave it a sinister edge. Though an ordinary, and rather new, government office building, CIA headquarters had some sort of aura. It wasn't like the real world somehow. Greer caught the look and chuckled, leading Kelly to an elevator, then to his sixth-floor office. Only when they were behind the closed wooden door did he speak.

"How's your schedule for the next week?"

"Flexible. I don't have anything tying me down," Kelly answered cautiously.

James Greer nodded soberly. "Dutch told me about that, too. I'm very sorry, Chief, but my job right now concerns twenty good men who probably won't see their families again unless we do something." He reached into his desk drawer.

"Sir, I'm real confused right now."

"Well, we can do it hard or easy. The hard way is that Dutch makes a phone call and you get recalled to active duty," Greer said sternly. "The easy way is, you come to work for me as a civilian consultant. We pay you a per-diem that's a whole lot more than chief's pay."

"Doing what?"

"You fly down to Eglin Air Force Base, via New Orleans and Avis, I suppose. This"—Greer tossed a billfold-like ID in Kelly's lap —"gives you access to their records. I want you to go over the operations plans as a model for what we want to do." Kelly looked at the photo-ID. It even had his old Navy photograph, which showed only his head, as in a passport.

"Wait a minute, sir. I am not qualified—"

"As a matter of fact I think you are, but from the outside it will look like you're not. No, you're just a very junior consultant gathering information for a low-level report that nobody important

will ever read. Half the money we spend in this damned agency goes out the door that way, in case nobody ever told you," Greer said, his irritation with the Agency giving flight to mild exaggeration. "That's how routine and pointless we want it to look."

"Are you really serious about this?"

"Chief, Dutch Maxwell is willing to sacrifice his career for those men. So am I. If there's a way to get them out—"

"What about the peace talks?"

How do I explain that to this kid? Greer asked himself. "Colonel Zacharias is officially dead. The other side said so, even published a photo of a body. Somebody went to visit his wife, along with the base chaplain and another Air Force wife to make things easier. Then they gave her a week to vacate the official quarters, just to make things official," Greer added. "He's *officially* dead. I've had some very careful talks with some people, and we"—this part came very hard—"our country will not screw up the peace talks over something like this. The photo we have, enhancement and all, isn't good enough for a court of law, and that's the standard that is being used. That's a standard of proof that we can't possibly meet, and the people who made the decision know it. They don't want the peace talks sidetracked, and if the lives of twenty more men are necessary to end the goddamned war, then that's what it takes. Those men are being written off."

It was almost too much for Kelly to believe. How many people did America write off every year? And not all were in uniform, were they? Some were right at home, in American cities.

"It's really that bad?"

The fatigue on Greer's face was unmistakable. "You know why I took this job? I was ready to retire. I've served my time, commanded my ships, done my work. I'm ready for a nice house and playing golf twice a week and doing a little consulting on the side, okay? Chief, too many people come to places like this, and reality to them is a memo. They focus in on 'process' and forget that there's a human being at the far end of the paper chain. That's why I stayed in. Somebody has to try and put a little reality back into the process. We're handling this as a 'black' project. Do you know what that means?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"It's a new term that's cropped up. That means it doesn't exist. It's crazy. It shouldn't be that way, but it is. Are you on the team or

not?"

New Orleans… Kelly's eyes narrowed for a moment that lingered into fifteen seconds and a slow nod. "If you think I can help, sir, then I will. How much time do I have?"

Greer managed a smile and tossed a ticket folder into Kelly's lap. "Your ID is in the name of John Clark; should be easy to remember. You fly down tomorrow afternoon. The return ticket is open, but I want to see you next Friday. I expect good work out of you. My card and private line are in there. Get packed, son."

"Aye aye, sir."

Greer rose and walked Kelly to the door. "And get receipts for everything. When you work for Uncle Sam you have to make sure everyone gets paid off properly."

"I will do that, sir." Kelly smiled.

"You can catch the blue bus back to the Pentagon outside." Greer went back to work as Kelly left the office.

The blue shuttle bus arrived moments after he walked up to the covered pickup point. It was a curious ride. About half the people who boarded were uniformed, and the other half civilians. Nobody talked to anyone, as though merely exchanging a pleasantry or a comment on the Washington Senators' continuing residency at the bottom of the American League would violate security. He smiled and shook his head until he reflected on his own secrets and intentions. And yet—Greer had given him an opportunity that he'd not considered. Kelly leaned back in his seat and looked out the window while the other passengers on the bus stared fixedly forward.

"They're real happy," Piaggi said.

"I told you all along, man. It helps to have the best product on the street."

"Not everybody's happy. Some people are sitting on a couple hundred keys of French stuff, and we've knocked the price down with our special introductory offer."

Tucker allowed himself a good laugh. The "old guard" had been overcharging for years. That was monopoly pricing for you. Anyone would have taken the two of them for businessmen, or perhaps lawyers, since there were lots of both in this restaurant two blocks from the new Garmatz courthouse. Piaggi was somewhat better dressed, in Italian silk, and he made a mental note to introduce

Henry to his tailor. At least the guy had learned how to groom himself. Next he had to learn not to dress too flashy. Respectable was the word. Just enough that people treated you with deference. The flashy ones, like the pimps, were playing a dangerous game that they were too dumb to understand.

"Next shipment, twice as much. Can your friends handle it?"

"Easy. The people in Philly are especially happy. Their main supplier had a little accident."

"Yeah, I saw the paper yesterday. Sloppy. Too many people in the crew, right?"

"Henry, you just keep getting smarter and smarter. Don't get too smart, okay? Good advice," Piaggi said with quiet emphasis.

"That's cool, Tony. What I'm saying is, let's not make that kind of mistake ourselves, okay?"

Piaggi relaxed, sipping his beer. "That's right, Henry. And I don't mind saying that it's nice to do business with somebody who knows how to organize. There's a lot of curiosity about where your stuff comes from. I'm covering that for you. Later on, though, if you need more financing…"

Tucker's eyes blazed briefly across the table. "No, Tony. No now, no forever."

"Okay for now. Something to think about for later."

Tucker nodded, apparently letting it go at that, but wondering what sort of move his "partner" might be planning. Trust, in this sort of enterprise, was a variable quantity. He trusted Tony to pay on time. He'd offered Piaggi favorable terms, which had been honored, and the eggs this goose laid were his real life insurance. He was already at the point that a missed payment wouldn't harm his operation, and as long as he had a steady supply of good heroin, they'd do business like a business, which was why he'd approached them in the first place. But there was no real loyalty here. Trust stopped at his usefulness. Henry had never expected any more than that, but if his associate ever started pressing on his pipeline…

Piaggi wondered if he'd pressed too far, wondering if Tucker knew the potential of what they were doing. To control distribution on the entire East Coast, and do so from within a careful and secure organization, that was like a dream come true. Surely he would soon need more capital, and his contacts were already asking how they might help. But he could see that Tucker did not recognize the innocence of the inquiry, and if he discussed it further, protesting

his goodwill, that would only make things worse. And so Piaggi went back to his lunch and decided to leave things be for a while. It was too bad. Tucker was a very smart small-timer, but still a small-timer at heart. Perhaps he'd learn to grow. Henry could never be "made," but he could still become an important part of the organization.

"Next Friday okay?" Tucker asked.

"Fine. Keep it secure. Keep it smart."

"You got it, man."

It was an uneventful flight, a Piedmont 737 out of Friendship International Airport. Kelly rode coach, and the stewardess brought him a light lunch. Flying over America was so different from his other adventures aloft. It surprised him how many swimming pools there were. Everywhere you flew, lifting off from the airport, over the rolling hills of Tennessee, the overhead sun would sparkle off little square patches of chlorine-blue water surrounded by green grass. His country appeared to be so benign a place, so comfortable, until you got closer. But at least you didn't have to watch for tracer fire.

The Avis counter had a car waiting, along with a map. It turned out that he could have flown into Panama City, Florida, but New Orleans, he decided, would suit him just fine. Kelly tossed both his suitcases into the trunk and headed east. It was rather like driving his boat, though somewhat more hectic, dead time in which he could let his mind work, examining possibilities and procedures, his eyes sweeping the traffic while his mind saw something else entirely. That was when he started to smile, a thin, composed expression that he never thought about while his imagination took a careful and measured look at the next few weeks.

Four hours after landing, having passed through the lower ends of Mississippi and Alabama, he stopped his car at the main gate of Eglin AFB. A fitting place for the KINGPIN troopers to have trained, the heat and humidity were an exact match with the country they'd ultimately invaded, hot and moist. Kelly waited outside the guard post for a blue Air Force sedan to meet him. When it did, an officer got out.

"Mr. Clark?"

"Yes." He handed over his ID folder. The officer actually saluted him, which was a novel experience. Clearly someone was overly

impressed with CIA. This young officer had probably never interacted with anybody from there. Of course, Kelly had actually bothered to wear a tie in the hope of looking as respectable as possible.

"If you'll follow me, please, sir." The officer, Captain Griffin, led him to a first-floor room at the Bachelor Officers' Quarters, which was somewhat like a medium-quality motel and agreeably close to the beach. After helping Kelly get unpacked, Griffin walked him to the Officers' Club, where, he said, Kelly had visitor's privileges. All he had to do was show his room key.

"I can't knock the hospitality, Captain." Kelly felt obligated to buy the first beer. "You know why I'm here?"

"I work intelligence," Griffin replied.

"KINGPIN?" As though in a movie, the officer looked around before replying.

"Yes, sir. We have all the documents you need ready for you. I hear you worked special ops over there, too."

"Correct."

"I have one question, sir," the Captain said.

"Shoot," Kelly invited between sips. He'd dried out on the drive from New Orleans.

"Do they know who burned the mission?"

"No," Kelly replied, and on a whim added, "Maybe I can pick up something on that."

"My big brother was in that camp, we think. He'd be home now except for whatever…"

"Motherfucker," Kelly said helpfully. The Captain actually blushed.

"If you identify him, then what?"

"Not my department," Kelly replied, regretting his earlier comment. "When do I start?"

"Supposed to be tomorrow morning, Mr. Clark, but the documents are all in my office."

"I need a quiet room, a pot of coffee, maybe some sandwiches."

"I think we can handle that, sir."

"Then let me get started."

Ten minutes later, Kelly got his wish. Captain Griffin had supplied him with a yellow legal pad and a battery of pencils. Kelly started off with the first set of reconnaissance photographs, these taken by an RF-101 Voodoo, and as with SENDER GREEN, the

discovery of Song Tay had been a complete accident, the random discovery of an unexpected thing in a place expected to have been a minor military training installation. But in the yard of the camp had been letters stomped in the dirt, or arranged with stones or hanging laundry: "K" for "come and get us out of here," and other such marks that had been made under the eyes of the guards. The list of people who had become involved was a genuine who's who of the special operations community, names that he knew only by reputation.

The configuration of the camp was not terribly different from the one in which he was interested now, he saw, making appropriate notes. One document surprised him greatly. It was a memo from a three-star to a two-star, indicating that the Song Tay mission, though important in and of itself, was also a means to an end. The three-star had wanted to validate his ability to get special-ops teams into North Vietnam. That, he said, would open all sorts of possibilities, one of which was a certain dam with a generator room… oh, yeah, Kelly realized. The three-star wanted a hunting license, to insert several teams in-country and play the same games OSS had behind German lines in the Second World War. The memo concluded with a note that political factors made the latter aspect of POLAR CIRCLE—one of the first cover names for what became Operation KINGPIN—extremely sensitive. Some would see it as a widening of the war. Kelly looked up, finishing his second cup of coffee. What was it about politicians? he wondered. The enemy could do anything he wanted, but our side was always trembling at the possibility of being seen to widen the war. He'd even seen some of that at his level. The PHOENIX project, the deliberate targeting of the enemy's political infrastructure, was a matter of the greatest sensitivity. Hell, they wore uniforms, didn't they? A man in a combat zone wearing a uniform was fair game in anyone's book of rules, wasn't he? The other side took out local mayors and schoolteachers with savage abandon. There was a blatant double standard to the way the war had been conducted. It was a troubling thought, but Kelly set it aside as he turned back to the second pile of documents.

Assembling the team and planning the operation had taken half of forever. Good men all, however. Colonel Bull Simons, another man he knew only by his reputation as one of the toughest sharp-end combat commanders any Army had ever produced. Dick

Meadows, a younger man in the same mold. Their only waking thought was to bring harm and distraction to the enemy, and they were skilled in doing so with small forces and minimum exposure. How they must have lusted for this mission, Kelly thought. But the oversight they'd had to deal with… Kelly counted ten separate documents to higher authority, promising success—as though a memo could make such a claim in the harsh world of combat operations—before he stopped bothering to count them. So many of them used the same language until he suspected that a form letter had been ginned up by some unit clerk. Probably someone who'd run out of fresh words for his colonel, and then expressed a sergeant's contempt for the interlocutors by giving them the same words every time, in the expectation that the repeats would never be noticed—and they hadn't been. Kelly spent three hours going through reams of paper between Eglin and CIA, concerns of deskbound bean-counters distracting the men in green suits, "helpful" suggestions from people who probably wore ties to bed, all of which had required answers from the operators who carried guns… and so KINGPIN had grown from a relatively minor and dramatic insertion mission to a Cecil B. De Mille epic which had more than once gone to the White House, there becoming known to the President's National Security Council staff—

And that's where Kelly stopped, at two-thirty in the morning, defeated by the next pile of paper. He locked everything up in the receptacles provided and jogged back to his room at the Q, leaving notice for a seven-o'clock wake-up call.

It was surprising how little sleep you needed when there was important work to be done. When the phone rang at seven, Kelly bounced from the bed, and fifteen minutes later was running along the beach barefoot, in a pair of shorts. He was not alone. He didn't know how many people were based at Eglin, but they were not terribly different from himself. Some had to be special operations types, doing things that he could only guess at. You could tell them from the somewhat wider shoulders. Running was only part of their fitness game. Eyes met and evaluated others, and expressions were exchanged as each man knew what the other was thinking—*How tough is* he, *really?*—as an automatic mental exercise, and Kelly smiled to himself that he was enough a part of the community that he merited that kind of competitive respect. A large breakfast and shower left him fully refreshed, enough to get him back to his

clerk's work, and on the walk back to the office building, he asked himself, surprisingly, why he'd ever left this community of men. It was, after all, the only real home he'd known after leaving Indianapolis.

And so the days continued. He allowed himself two days of six-hours' sleep, but never more than twenty minutes for a meal, and not a single drink after that first beer, though his exercise periods grew to several hours per day, mainly, he told himself, to firm up. The real reason was one that he never quite admitted. He wanted to be the toughest man on that early-morning beach, not just an associate part of the small, elite community. Kelly was a SEAL again, more than that, a bullfrog, and more still, he was again becoming *Snake.* By the third or fourth morning, he could see the change. His face and form were now an expected part of the morning routine for the others. The anonymity only made it better, that and the scars of battle, and some would wonder what he'd done wrong, what mistakes he'd made. Then they would remind themselves that he was still in the business, scars and all, not knowing that he'd left it—*quit,* Kelly's mind corrected, with not a little guilt.

The paperwork was surprisingly stimulating. He'd never before tried to figure things out in quite this way, and he was surprised to find he had a talent for it. The operational planning, he saw, had been a thing of beauty flawed by time and repetition, like a beautiful girl kept too long in her house by a jealous father. Every day the mockup of the Song Tay camp had been erected by the players, and each day, sometimes more than once, taken down lest Soviet reconnaissance satellites take note of what was there. How debilitating that must have been to the soldiers. And it had all taken so long, the soldiers practicing while the higher-ups had dithered, pondering the intelligence information so long that… the prisoners had been moved.

"Damn," Kelly whispered to himself. It wasn't so much that the operation might have been betrayed. It had just taken too long… and that meant that *if* it had been betrayed, the leaker had probably been one of the last people to discover what was afoot. He set that thought aside with a penciled question.

The operation itself had been meticulously planned, everything done just right, a primary plan and a number of alternates, with each segment of the team so fully briefed and trained that every

man could do every function in his sleep. *Crashing* a huge Sikorsky helicopter right in the camp itself so that the strike team would not have to wait to get to the objective. Using miniguns to take down the guard towers like chainsaws against saplings. No finesse, no pussyfooting, no movie-type bullshit, just brutally direct force. The after-action debriefs showed that the camp guards had been immolated in moments. How elated the troopers must have felt as the first minute or two of the operation had run more smoothly than their simulations, and then the stunning, bitter frustration when the "negative Item" calls had come again and again over their radio circuits. "Item" was the simple code word for an American POW, and none were home that night. The soldiers had assaulted and liberated an empty camp. It wasn't hard to imagine how quiet the choppers must have been for the ride back to Thailand, the bleak emptiness of failure after having done everything better than right.

There was, nonetheless, much to learn here. Kelly made his notes, cramping fingers and wearing out numerous pencils. Whatever else it had been, KINGPIN was a supremely valuable lesson. So much had gone right, he saw, and all of that could be shamelessly copied. All that had gone wrong, really, was the time factor. Troops of that quality could have gone in much sooner. The quest for perfection hadn't been demanded at the operational level, but higher, from men who had grown older and lost contact with the enthusiasm and intelligence of youth. And a consequence had been the failure of the mission, not because of Bull Simons, or Dick Meadows, or the Green Berets who'd gladly placed their lives at risk for men they'd never met, but because of others too afraid to risk their careers and their offices—matters of far greater importance, of course, than the blood of the guys at the sharp end. Song Tay was the whole story of Vietnam, told in the few minutes it had taken for a superbly-trained team to fail, betrayed as much by process as by some misguided or traitorous person hidden in the federal bureaucracy.

SENDER GREEN would be different, Kelly told himself. If for no other reason than that it was being run as a private game. If the real hazard to the operation was oversight, then why not eliminate the oversight?

"Captain, you've been very helpful," Kelly said.

"Find what you wanted, Mr. Clark?" Griffin asked.

"Yes, Mr. Griffin," he said, dropping unconsciously back into naval terminology for the young officer. "The analysis you did on the secondary camp was first-rate. In case nobody ever told you, that might have saved a few lives. Let me say something for myself: I wish we'd had an intel-weenie like you working for us when I was out in the weeds."

"I can't fly, sir. I have to do something useful," Griffin replied, embarrassed by the praise.

"You do." Kelly handed over his notes. Under his eyes they were placed in an envelope that was then sealed with red wax. "Courier the package to this address."

"Yes, sir. You're due some time off. Did you get any sleep at all?" Captain Griffin asked.

"Well, I think I'll depressurize in New Orleans before I fly back."

"Not a bad place for it, sir." Griffin walked Kelly to his car, already loaded.

One other bit of intelligence had been stunningly easy, Kelly thought, driving out. His room in the Q had contained a New Orleans telephone directory in which, to his amazement, had been the name he'd decided to look up while sitting in James Greer's office in CIA.

This was the shipment that would make his reputation, Tucker thought, watching Rick and Billy finish loading things up. Part of it would find its way to New York. Up until now he'd been an interloper, an outsider with ambition. He'd provided enough heroin to get people interested in himself and his partners—the fact that he had partners had attracted interest of its own, in addition to the access. But now was different. Now he was making his move to be part of the crew. He would be seen as a serious businessman because this shipment would handle all the needs of Baltimore and Philadelphia for… maybe a month, he estimated. Maybe less if their distribution network was as good as they said. The leftovers would start meeting the growing needs in the Big Apple, which needed the help after a major bust. After so long a time of making small steps, here was the giant one. Billy turned on a radio to get the sports news, and got a weather forecast instead.

"I'm glad we're going now. Storms coming in later."

Tucker looked outside. The sky was still clear and untroubled. "Nothing for us to worry about," he told them.

He loved New Orleans, a city in the European tradition, which mixed Old World charm with American zest. Rich in history, owned by Frenchmen and Spaniards in their turn, it had never lost its traditions, even to its maintenance of a legal code that was nearly incomprehensible to the other forty-nine states, and was often a matter of some befuddlement to federal authorities. So was the local patois, for many mixed French into their conversations, or what they called French. Pierre Lamarck's antecedents had been Acadians, and some of his more distant relatives were still residents in the local bayous. But customs that were eccentric and entertaining to tourists, and a comfortable life rich in tradition to others, had little interest to Lamarck except as a point of reference, a personal signature to distinguish him from his peers. That was hard enough to do, as his profession demanded a certain flash, a personal flair. He accentuated his uniqueness with a white linen suit complete with vest, a white, long-sleeved shirt, and a red, solid-color tie, which fitted his own image as a respectable, if ostentatious, local businessman. That went along well with his personal automobile, an eggshell-white Cadillac. He eschewed the ornamental excesses that some other pimps placed on their automobiles, nonfunctional exhaust pipes. One supposed Texan even had the horns of a longhorn steer on his Lincoln, but that one was really poor white trash from lower Alabama, and a boy who didn't know how to treat his ladies.

This latter quality was Lamarck's greatest talent, he told himself with great satisfaction, opening the door of his car for his newest acquisition, fifteen years old and recently broken in, possessed of an innocent look and demure movement that made her a noteworthy and enticing member of his eight-girl stable. She'd earned the pimp's unaccustomed courtesy with a special service of her own earlier in the day. The luxury car started on the first turn of the key, and at seven-thirty, Pierre Lamarck set off on another night's work, for the nightlife in his city started early and lasted late. There was a convention in town, distributors for something or other. New Orleans attracted a lot of conventions, and he could track the cash flow of his business by their comings and goings. It promised to be a warm and lucrative night.

It had to be him, Kelly thought, half a block away, behind the wheel of his still-rented car. Who else would wear a three-piece suit

and be accompanied by a young girl dressed in a tight mini? Certainly not an insurance agent. The girl's jewelry looked cheap-showy even from this distance. Kelly slipped the car into gear, following. He was able to lie back. How many white Caddies could there be? he wondered, crossing the river, three cars back, eyes locked on his target while peripheral parts of his mind dealt with the other traffic. Once he had to risk a ticket at a traffic light, but otherwise the tracking was simple. The Caddy stopped at the entrance to an upscale hotel, and he saw the girl get out, and walk towards the door, her stride a mixture of the businesslike and the resigned. He didn't want to see her face all that closely, afraid of what memories might result from it. This was not a night for emotion. Emotion was what had given him the mission. How he accomplished it had to come from something else. That would be a constant struggle, Kelly told himself, but one he would have to contend with successfully. That was, after all, why he'd come to this place, on this night.

The Cadillac moved on a few more blocks, finding a parking place by a seedy, flashy bar close enough to the nice hotels and businesses that a person could walk there quickly, yet never be far from the safety and comfort of civilized safety. A fairly constant stream of taxicabs told him that this aspect of local life had a firm, institutional foundation. He identified the bar in question and found himself a place to park three blocks away.

There was a dual purpose in parking so far from his objective. The walk in along Decatur Street gave him both a feel for the territory and a look at likely places for his action. Surely it would be a long night. Some short-skirted girls smiled at him as mechanically as the changing of the traffic lights, but he walked on, his eyes sweeping left and right while a distant voice reminded him of what he had once thought of such gestures. He silenced that voice with another, more current thought. His clothes were casual, what a moderately comfortable man might wear in this humid heat and heavy atmosphere, dark and anonymous, loose and baggy. They proclaimed money, but not too much, and his stride told people that he was not one to be trifled with. A man of understated substance having a discreet night on the wild side.

He walked into Chats Sauvages at eight-seventeen. His initial impression of the bar was smoke and noise. A small but enthusiastic rock band played at the far end. There was a dance floor, perhaps

twenty-five feet square, where people his age and younger moved with the music; and there was Pierre Lamarck, sitting at a table in the corner with a few acquaintances, or so they seemed from their demeanor. Kelly walked to the men's room, both an immediate necessity and an opportunity to look the place over. There was another entrance on the side, but no closer to Lamarck's table than the one through which both he and Kelly had entered. The nearest path to the white Caddy led past Kelly's place at the bar, and that told him where his perch had to be. Kelly ordered a beer and turned conveniently to watch the band.

At nine-ten two young women came to Lamarck. One sat on his lap while the other nibbled at his ear. The other two men at the table watched with neutral interest while both women handed over something to him. Kelly couldn't tell what it was because he was looking towards the band, careful not to stare too often in Lamarck's direction. The pimp solved that problem immediately: it turned out, unsurprisingly, to be cash, and the man somewhat ostentatiously wrapped the bills around a roll removed from his pocket. Flash money, Kelly had troubled himself to learn, an important part of a pimp's public image. The first two women left, and Lamarck was soon joined by another, in what became an intermittent stream that didn't stop. His table mates enjoyed the same sort of traffic, Kelly saw, sipping their drinks, paying cash, joshing with and occasionally fondling the waitress who served them, then tipping her heavily by way of apology. Kelly moved from time to time. He removed his jacket, rolling up his sleeves, to present a different image to the bar's patrons, and limiting himself to two beers, which he nursed as carefully as he could. Tedious as it was, he disregarded the unpleasant nature of the evening, instead noticing things. Who went where. Who came and left. Who stayed. Who lingered in one place. Kelly soon started recognizing patterns and identifying individuals to whom he assigned names of his own creation. Most of all he observed everything there was to see about Lamarck. He never took off his suit jacket, kept his back to the wall. He talked amiably with his two companions, but their familiarity was not that of friends. Their joking was too affected. There was too much emphasis on their interactive gestures, not the casual comfort that you saw among people whose company was shared for some purpose other than money. Even pimps got lonely, Kelly thought, and though they sought out their own kind, theirs was not

friendship but mere association. The philosophical observations he put aside. If Lamarck never took off his coat, he had to be carrying a weapon.

Just after midnight, Kelly put his coat back on and made yet another trip to the men's room. In the toilet stall he took the automatic he'd hidden inside his slacks and moved it to the waistband. Two beers in four hours, he thought. His liver ought to have eliminated the alcohol from his system, and even if it hadn't, two beers should not have had much effect on one as bulky as he. It was an important statement which, he hoped, wasn't a lie.

His timing was good. Washing his hands for the fifth time, Kelly saw the door open in the mirror. Only the back of the man's head, but under the dark hair was a white suit, and so Kelly waited, taking his time until he heard the urinal flush. A sanitary sort of fellow, the man turned, and their eyes met in the mirror.

"Excuse me," Pierre Lamarck said. Kelly stepped away from the sink, still drying his hands with a paper towel.

"I like the ladies," he said quietly.

"Hmph?" Lamarck had no less than six drinks in him, and his liver had not been up to the task, which didn't prevent his self-admiration in the dirty mirror.

"The ones that come up to you." Kelly lowered his voice. "They, uh, work for you, like?"

"You might say that, my man." Lamarck took out a black plastic comb to readjust his coiffeur. "Why do you ask?"

"I might need a few," Kelly said with embarrassment.

"A few? You sure you can handle that, my man?" Lamarck asked with a sly grin.

"Some friends in town with me. One's having a birthday, and—"

"A party," the pimp observed pleasantly.

"That's right." Kelly tried to be shy, but mainly came off as being awkward. The error worked in his favor.

"Well, why didn't you say so? How many ladies do you require, sir?"

"Three, maybe four. Talk about it outside? I could use some air."

"Sure thing. Just let me wash my hands, okay?"

"I'll be outside the front door."

The street was quiet. Busy city though New Orleans might be, it was still the middle of the week, and the sidewalks, while not empty, weren't crowded either. Kelly waited, looking away from the

bar's entrance until he felt a friendly hand on his back.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about. We all like to have a little fun, especially when we're away from home, right?"

"I'll pay top dollar," Kelly promised with an uneasy smile.

Lamarck grinned, like the man of the world he was, to put this chicken farmer at ease. "With my ladies, you have to. Anything else you might need?"

Kelly coughed and took a few steps, willing Lamarck to follow, which he did. "Maybe some, well, something to help us party, like?"

"I can handle that, too," Lamarck said as they approached an alley.

"I think I met you before, couple years back. I remember the girl, really, her name was… Pam? Yeah, Pam. Thin, tawny hair."

"Oh, yeah, she was fun. She's not with me anymore," Lamarck said lightly. "But I have lots more. I cater to the men who like 'em young and fresh."

"I'm sure you do," Kelly said, reaching behind his back. "They're all on—I mean they all use things that make it—"

"Happy stuff, man. So they're always in the mood to party. A lady has to have the proper attitude." Lamarck stopped at the entrance to the alley, looking outward, maybe worried about cops, which suited Kelly just fine. Behind him, he had not troubled to see, was a dark, scarcely lit corridor of blank brick walls, inhabited by nothing more than trash cans and stray cats, and open at the far end. "Let's see. Four girls, rest of the evening, shall we say, and something to help get the party started… five hundred should do it. My girls aren't cheap, but you will get your money's—"

"Both hands in the open," Kelly said, the Colt automatic leveled twelve inches from the man's chest.

Lamarck's first response was a disbelieving bluster: "My man, that is a very foolish—"

Kelly's voice was all business. "Arguing with a gun is even more foolish, my man. Turn, walk down the alley, and you might even make it back to the bar for a nightcap."

"You must need money real bad to try something this dumb," the pimp said, trying an implied threat.

"Your roll worth dying for?" Kelly asked reasonably. Lamarck measured the odds and turned, moving into the shadows.

"Stop," Kelly told him after fifty yards, still behind the blank wall of the bar, or perhaps another just like it. His left arm grabbed the

man's neck and pushed him against the bricks. His eyes looked up and down the alley three times. His ears searched for sounds separate from traffic noise and distorted music. For the moment it was a safe and quiet place. "Hand me your gun—real careful."

"I don't—" The sound of a hammer being cocked sounded awfully loud, that close to his ear.

"Do I look stupid?"

"Okay, okay," Lamarck said, his voice losing its smooth edge now. "Let's be real cool. It's only money."

"That's smart," Kelly said approvingly. A small automatic appeared. Kelly put his right index finger into the trigger guard. There was no sense in putting fingerprints on the weapon. He was taking enough chances, and as careful as he'd been to this point, the dangers of his action were suddenly very real and very large. The pistol fit nicely into his coat pocket.

"Let's see the roll next."

"Right here, man." Lamarck was starting to lose it. That was both good and bad, Kelly thought. Good because it was pleasing to see. Bad because a panicked man might do something foolish. Instead of relaxing, Kelly actually became more tense.

"Thank you, Mr. Lamarck," Kelly said politely, to calm the man.

Just then he wavered, and his head turned a few inches or so, as his consciousness asserted itself through the six drinks he'd had this evening. "Wait a minute—you said you knew Pam."

"I did," Kelly said.

"But why—" He turned farther to see a face that was bathed in darkness, only eyes showing with light glistening off their moisture, and the rest of the face a shadow white.

"You're one of the guys who ruined her life."

Outrage: "Hey, man, she came to *me!*"

"And you got her on pills so she could party real good, right?" the disembodied voice asked. Lamarck could hardly remember what the man looked like now.

"That was *business*, so you met her, so she was a good fuck, right?"

"She certainly was."

"I shoulda trained her better an' you coulda had her again insteada—was, you say?"

"She's dead," Kelly told him, reaching in his pocket. "Somebody killed her."

“So? I didn’t do it!” It seemed to Lamarck that he was facing a final exam, a test he didn’t understand, based on rules he didn’t know.

“Yes, I know that,” Kelly said, screwing the silencer onto the pistol. Lamarck saw that somehow, his eyes making the adjustment to the darkness. His voice became a shrill rasp.

“Then what are you doing this for?” the man said, too puzzled even to scream, too paralyzed by the incongruity of the past few minutes, by the passage of his life from the normality of his hangout bar to its end only forty feet away in front of a windowless brick wall, and he had to have an answer. Somehow it was more important than the escape, whose attempt he knew to be futile.

Kelly thought about that for a second or two. He could have said many things, but it was only fair, he decided, to tell the man the truth as the gun came up quickly and finally.

“Practice.”

14

Lessons Learned

The early flight back from New Orleans to Washington National was too short for a movie, and Kelly had already eaten breakfast. He settled on a glass of juice at his window seat and was thankful that the flight was only about a third full as, after every combat action of his life, he went over every detail. It was a habit that had begun in the SEALs. Following every training exercise there had been an event called various things by his various commanders. "Performance Critique" seemed most appropriate at the moment.

His first mistake had been the product of something desired and something forgotten. In wanting to see Lamarck die in the darkness, he'd stood too close, simultaneously forgetting that head wounds often bleed explosively. He'd jumped out of the way of the spouting blood like a child avoiding a wasp in his backyard, but had still not escaped it entirely. The good news was that he'd made only that one mistake; and his selection of dark clothing had mitigated the danger there. Lamarck's wounds had been immediately and definitively fatal. The pimp had fallen to the ground as limp as a rag doll. The two screws that Kelly had drilled in the top of his pistol held a small cloth bag he'd sewn himself, and the bag had caught the two ejected cartridge cases, leaving the police who'd investigate the scene without that valuable bit of evidence. His stalk had been effectively carried out, just one more anonymous face in a large and anonymous bar.

His hastily selected site for the elimination had also worked well enough. He remembered walking down the alley and blending back into the sidewalk traffic, walking the distance to his car and driving back to the motel. There, he'd changed clothes, bundling the blood-

splattered slacks, shirt, and, just to be sure, the underwear as well, into a plastic cleaner bag, which he'd walked across the street and deposited in a supermarket Dumpster. If the clothing was discovered, it might well be taken as something soiled by a sloppy meatcutter. He hadn't met with Lamarck in the open. The only lighted place in which they'd spoken was the bar's men's room, and there fortune—and planning—had smiled on him. The sidewalk they'd walked on was too dark and too anonymous. Perhaps a casual observer who might have known Lamarck could give an investigator a rough idea of Kelly's size, but little else, and that was a reasonable gamble to have taken, Kelly judged, looking down at the wooded hills of northern Alabama. It had been an apparent robbery, the pimp's one thousand, four hundred seventy dollars of flash money tucked away in his bag. Cash was cash, after all, and not to have taken it would have shown the police that there had been a real motive in the elimination aside from something easily understandable and agreeably random. The physical side of the event—he could not think of it as a crime—was, he thought, as clean as he could have done it.

Psychological? Kelly asked himself. More than anything else Kelly had tested his nerve, the elimination of Pierre Lamarck having been a kind of field experiment, and in that he'd surprised himself. It had been some years since Kelly had entered combat, and he'd halfway expected a case of the shakes after the event. Such things had happened to him more than once before, but though his stride away from Lamarck's body had been slightly uneasy, he'd handled the escape with the sort of tense aplomb that had marked many of his operations in Vietnam. So much had come back to him. He could catalog the familiar sensations that had returned as though he'd been watching a training film of his own production: the increased sensory awareness, as though his skin had been sandblasted, exposing every nerve; hearing, sight, smell all amplified. *I was so fucking alive at that moment,* he thought. It was vaguely sad that such a thing had happened due to the ending of a human life, but Lamarck had long since forfeited his right to life. In any just universe, a person—Kelly simply could not think of him as a *man*—who exploited helpless girls simply did not deserve the privilege of breathing the same air used by other human beings. Perhaps he'd taken the wrong turn, been unloved by his mother or beaten by his father. Perhaps he'd been socially deprived, raised in poverty, or

exposed to inadequate schooling. But those were matters for psychiatrists or social workers. Lamarck had acted normally enough to function as a person in his community, and the only question that mattered to Kelly was whether or not he had lived his life in accordance with his own free will. That had clearly been the case, and those who took improper actions, he had long since decided, ought to have considered the possible consequences of those actions. Every girl they exploited might have had a father or mother or sister or brother or lover to be outraged at her victimization. In knowing that and in taking the risk, Lamarck had knowingly gambled his life to some greater or lesser degree. *And gambling means that sometimes you lose,* Kelly told himself. If he hadn't weighed the hazards accurately enough, that was not Kelly's problem, was it?

No, he told the ground, thirty-seven thousand feet below.

And what did Kelly feel about it? He pondered that question for a while, leaning back and closing his eyes as though napping. A quiet voice, perhaps conscience, told him that he ought to feel *something,* and he searched for a genuine emotion. After several minutes of consideration, he could find none. There was no loss, no grief, no remorse. Lamarck had meant nothing to him and probably would be no loss to anyone else. Perhaps his girls—Kelly had counted five of them in the bar—would be without a pimp, but then maybe one of them would seize the opportunity to correct her life. Unlikely, perhaps, but possible. It was realism that told Kelly he couldn't fix all the problems of the world; it was idealism that told him his inability to do so did not preclude him from addressing individual imperfections.

But all that took him away from the initial question: What did he *feel* about the elimination of Pierre Lamarck? The only answer he could find was, Nothing. The professional elation of having done something difficult was different from satisfaction, from the nature of the task. In ending the life of Pierre Lamarck he had removed something harmful from the surface of the planet. It had enriched him not at all—taking the money had been a tactic, a camouflage measure, certainly not an objective. It had not avenged Pam's life. It had not changed very much. It had been like stepping on an offensive insect—you did it and moved on. He would not try to tell himself different, but neither would his conscience trouble him, and that was sufficient to the moment. His little experiment had been a

success. After all the mental and physical preparation, he had proven himself worthy of the task before him. Kelly's mind focused behind closed eyes on the mission before him. Having killed many men better than Pierre Lamarck, he could now think with confidence about killing men worse than the New Orleans pimp.

This time they visited him, Greer saw with satisfaction. On the whole, CIA's hospitality was better. James Greer had arranged parking in the VIP Visitors' area—the equivalent at the Pentagon was always haphazard and difficult to use—and a secure conference room. Cas Podulski thoughtfully selected a seat at the far end, close to the air-conditioning vent, where his smoking wouldn't bother anyone.

"Dutch, you were right about this kid," Greer said, handing out typed copies of the handwritten notes which had arrived two days earlier.

"Somebody ought to have put a gun to his head and walked him into OCS. He would have been the kind of junior officer we used to be."

Podulski chuckled at his end of the table. "No wonder he got out," he said with lighthearted bitterness.

"I'd be careful putting a gun to his head," Greer observed with a chuckle of his own. "I spent a whole night last week going through his package. This guy's a wild one in the field."

"Wild?" Maxwell asked with a hint of disapproval in his voice. "Spirited, you mean, James?"

Perhaps a compromise, Greer thought: "A self-starter. He had three commanders and they backed him on every play he made except one."

"PLASTIC FLOWER? The political-action major he killed?"

"Correct. His lieutenant was furious about that, but if it's true about what he had to watch, the only thing you can fault was his judgment, rushing in the way he did."

"I read through that, James. I doubt I could have held back," Cas said, looking up from the notes. Once a fighter pilot, always a fighter pilot. "Look at this, even his grammar is good!" Despite his accent, Podulski had been assiduous in learning his adopted language.

"Jesuit high school," Greer pointed out. "I've gone over our in-house assessment of KINGPIN. Kelly's analysis tracks on every major

point except where he calls a few spades."

"Who did the CIA assessment?" Maxwell asked.

"Robert Ritter. He's a European specialist they brought in. Good man, a little terse, knows how to work the field, though."

"Operations guy?" Maxwell asked.

"Right." Greer nodded. "Did some very nice work working Station Budapest."

"And why," Podulski asked, "did they bring in a guy from that side of the house to look over the KINGPIN operation?"

"I think you know the answer, Cas," Maxwell pointed out.

"If BOXWOOD GREEN goes, we need an Operations guy from this house. We have to have it. I don't have the juice to do everything. Are we agreed on that?" Greer looked around the table, seeing the reluctant nods. Podulski looked back down at his documents before saying what they all thought.

"Can we trust him?"

"He's not the one who burned KINGPIN. Cas, we have Jim Angleton looking at that. It was his idea to bring Ritter onboard. I'm new here, people. Ritter knows the bureaucracy here better than I do. He's an operator; I'm just an analyst-type. And his heart's in the right place. He damned near lost his job protecting a guy—he had an agent working inside GRU, and it was time to get him out. The decision-weenies upstairs didn't like the timing, with the arms talks going on, and they told him no. Ritter brought the guy out anyway. It turned out his man had something State needed, and that saved Ritter's career." It hadn't done much for the martini-mixer upstairs, Greer didn't add, but that was a person CIA was doing rather well without.

"Swashbuckler?" Maxwell asked.

"He was loyal to his agent. Sometimes people here forget about that," Greer said.

Admiral Podulski looked up the table. "Sounds like our kind of guy."

"Brief him in," Maxwell ordered. "But you tell him that if I ever find out some civilian in the building fucked up our chance to get these men out, I will *personally* drive down to Pax River, *personally* check out an A-4, and *personally* napalm his house."

"You should let me do that, Dutch," Cas added with a smile. "I've always had a better hand for dropping things. Besides, I have six hundred hours in the Scooter."

Greer wondered how much of that was humor.

"What about Kelly?" Maxwell asked.

"His CIA identity is 'Clark' now. If we want him in, we can utilize him better as a civilian. He'd never get over being a chief, but a civilian doesn't have to worry about rank."

"Make it so," Maxwell said. It was convenient, he thought, to have a naval officer seconded to CIA, wearing civilian clothes but still subject to military discipline.

"Aye aye, sir. If we get to training, where will it be done?"

"Quantico Marine Base," Maxwell replied. "General Young is a pal from the old days. Aviator. He understands."

"Marty and I went through test-pilot school together," Podulski explained. "From what Kelly says, we don't need that many troops. I always figured KINGPIN was overmanned. You know, if we bring this off, we have to get Kelly his Medal."

"One thing at a time, Cas." Maxwell set that aside, looking back to Greer as he stood. "You will let us know if Angleton finds out anything?"

"Depend on it," Greer promised. "If there's a bad guy inside, we'll get his ass. I've fished with the guy. He can pull a brook trout out of thin air." After they left he set an afternoon meeting with Robert Ritter. It meant putting Kelly off, but Ritter was more important now, and while there was a rush on the mission, it wasn't all that great a rush.

Airports were useful places, with their bustling anonymity and telephones. Kelly placed his call, as he waited for his baggage to appear—he hoped—in the proper place.

"Greer," the voice said.

"Clark," Kelly replied, smiling at himself. It seemed so James Bond to have a cover name. "I'm at the airport, sir. Do you still want me in this afternoon?"

"No. I'm tied up." Greer flipped through his daybook. "Tuesday… three-thirty. You can drive in. Give me your car type and license number."

Kelly did that, surprised that he'd been bumped. "You get my notes, sir?"

"Yes, and you did a fine job, Mr. Clark. We'll be going over them Tuesday. We are very pleased with your work."

"Thank you, sir," Kelly said into the phone.

"See you Tuesday." The line clicked off.

"And thanks for that, too," Kelly said after he hung up. Twenty minutes later he had his bags and was walking off to his car. About an hour after that he was in his Baltimore apartment. It was lunchtime, and he fixed a couple of sandwiches, chasing both down with Coca-Cola. He hadn't shaved today, and his heavy beard made a shadow on his face, he saw in the mirror. He'd leave it. Kelly headed into the bedroom for a lengthy nap.

The civilian contractors didn't really understand what they were up to, but they were being paid. That was all they really required, since they had families to feed and house payments to make. The buildings they had just erected were well to the right of spartan: bare concrete block, nothing in the way of utilities, built to odd proportions, not like American construction at all except for the building materials. It was as though their size and shape had been taken from some foreign construction manual. All the dimensions were metric, one worker noted, though the actual plans were noted in odd numbers of inches and feet, as American building plans had to be. The job itself had been simple enough, the site already cleared when they'd first arrived. A number of the construction workers were former servicemen, most ex-Army, but a few Marines as well, and they were at turns pleased and uncomfortable to be at this sprawling Marine base in the wooded hills of northern Virginia. On the drive into the construction site they could see the morning formations of officer candidates jogging along the roads. All those bright young kids with shaved heads, one former corporal of the 1st Marines had thought this very morning. How many would get their commissions? How many would deploy *there?* How many would come home early, shipped in steel boxes? It was nothing he could foresee or control, of course. He'd served his time in hell and returned unscratched, which was still remarkable to the former grunt who'd heard all too often the supersonic *crack* of rifle bullets. To have survived at all was amazing enough.

The roofs were finished. Soon it would be time to leave the site for good, after a mere three weeks of well-paid work. Seven-day weeks. Plenty of overtime on every working day he'd been here. Somebody had wanted this place built in a hurry. Some very odd things about it, too. The parking lot, for one. A hundred-slot blacktopped lot. Someone was even painting the lines. For buildings

with no utilities? But strangest of all was the current job that he'd drawn because the site foreman liked him. Playground equipment. A large swing set. A huge jungle gym. A sandbox, complete with half a dump truck's load of sand. All the things that his two-year-old son would someday cavort on when he was old enough for kindergarten in the Fairfax County Schools. But it was structural work, and it required assembly, and the former Marine and two others fumbled through the plans like fathers in a backyard, figuring which bolts went where. Theirs was not to reason why, not as union construction workers on a government contract. Besides, he thought, there was no understanding the Green Machine. The Corps operated according to a plan that no man really figured out, and if they wanted to pay him overtime for this, then that was another monthly house payment earned for every three days he came here. Jobs like this might be crazy, but he sure liked the money. About the only thing he didn't like was the length of the commute. Maybe they'd have to do something equally crazy at Fort Belvoir, he hoped, finishing the last item on the jungle gym. He could drive from his house to that place in twenty minutes or so. But the Army was a little more rational than the Corps. It had to be.

"So what's new?" Peter Henderson asked. They were dining just off The Hill, two acquaintances from New England, one a Harvard graduate, the other from Brown, one a junior aide to a senator, the other a junior member of the White House staff.

"It never changes, Peter," Wally Hicks said resignedly. "The peace talks are going nowhere. We keep killing their people. They keep killing ours. I don't think there's ever going to be peace in our time, you know?"

"It has to, Wally," Henderson said, reaching for his second beer.

"If it doesn't—" Hicks started to say gloomily.

Both had been seniors at the Andover Academy in October 1962, close friends and roommates who had shared class notes and girlfriends. Their real political majority had come one Tuesday night, however, when they'd watched their country's president give a tense national address on the black-and-white television in the dormitory lounge. There were missiles in Cuba, they'd learned, something that had been hinted at in the papers for several days, but these were children of the TV generation, and contemporary reality came in horizontal lines on a glass tube. For both of them it

had been a stunning if somewhat belated entrée into the real world for which their expensive boarding school ought to have prepared them more speedily. But theirs was the fat and lazy time for American youth, all the more so that their wealthy families had further insulated them from reality with the privilege that money could buy without imparting the wisdom required for its proper use.

The sudden and shocking thought had arrived in both minds at the same instant: it could all be *over.* Nervous chatter in the room told them more. They were *surrounded* by Targets. Boston to the southeast, Westover Air Force Base to the southwest, two other SAC bases, Pease and Loring, within a hundred-mile radius. Portsmouth Naval Base, which housed nuclear submarines. If the missiles flew, they would not survive; either the blast or the fallout would get them. And neither of them had even gotten *laid* yet. Other boys in the dorm had made their claims—some of them, perhaps, might even have been true—but Peter and Wally didn't lie to each other, and neither had scored, despite repeated and earnest efforts. How was it possible that the world didn't take their personal needs into account? Weren't they the elite? Didn't their lives *matter?*

It was a sleepless night, that Tuesday in October, Henderson and Hicks sitting up, whispering their conversation, trying to come to terms with a world that had transformed itself from comfort to danger without the proper warning. Clearly, they had to find a way to change things. After graduation, though each went a separate way, Brown and Harvard were separated by only a brief drive, and both their friendship and their mission in life continued and grew. Both majored in political science because that was the proper major for entering into the process which really mattered in the world. Both got master's degrees, and most important of all, both were noticed by people who mattered—their parents helped there, and in finding a form of government service that did not expose them to uniformed servitude. The time of their vulnerability to the draft was early enough that a quiet telephone call to the right bureaucrat was sufficient.

And so, now, both young men had achieved their own entry-level positions in sensitive posts, both as aides to important men. Their heady expectations of landing policymaking roles while still short of thirty had run hard into the blank wall of reality, but in fact they were closer to it than they fully appreciated. In screening

information for their bosses and deciding what appeared on the master's desk in what order, they had a real effect on the decision process; and they also had access to data that was wide, diverse, and sensitive. As a result in many ways both knew more than their bosses did. And that, Hicks and Henderson thought, was fitting, because they often *understood* the important things better than their bosses did. It was all so clear. War was a *bad thing* and had to be avoided entirely, or when that wasn't possible, ended as rapidly as one could bring it about; because war ended lives, and that was a *very bad thing,* and with war out of the way, people could learn to solve their disagreements peacefully. It was so obvious both stood in wonder that so many people failed to grasp the simple clarity of the Truth that both men had discovered in high school.

There was only one difference between the two, really. As a White House staffer, Hicks worked inside the system. But he shared everything with his classmate, which was okay because both had Special Access security clearances—and besides, he needed the feedback of a trained mind he both understood and trusted.

Hicks didn't know that Henderson had taken one step beyond him. If he couldn't change government policy from the inside, Henderson had decided during the Days of Rage following the Cambodia incursion, he had to get help from the outside—some outside agency that could assist him in blocking government actions that endangered the world. There were others around the world who shared his aversion to war, people who saw that you couldn't force people to accept a form of government they really didn't want. The first contact had come at Harvard, a friend in the peace movement. Now he communicated with someone else. He ought to have shared this fact with his friend, Henderson told himself, but the timing just wasn't right. Wally might not understand yet.

"—it has to, and it will," Henderson said, waving to the waitress for another round. "The war will end. We will get out. Vietnam will have the government it wants. We will have lost a war, and that will be a good thing for our country. We'll learn from that. We'll learn the limits of our power. We'll learn to live and let live, and then we can give peace a chance."

Kelly arose after five. The events of the previous day had left him more fatigued than he had appreciated, and besides, traveling had always tired him out. But he was not tired now. A total of eleven

hours' sleep in the last twenty-four had left him fully rested and alert. Looking in the mirror, he saw the heavy beard from almost two days' worth of growth. Good. Then he selected his clothing. Dark, baggy, and old. He'd taken the whole bundle down to the laundry room and washed everything with hot water and extra bleach to abuse the fabric and mute the colors, making already shabby clothing look all the more unsightly. Old white gym socks and sneakers completed the picture, though both were more serviceable than their appearance suggested. The shirt was too large for him, and long, which suited his purposes. A wig completed the picture he wanted, made of coarse black Asian hair, none too long. He held it under a hot-water faucet and soaked it, then brushed it out in a deliberately sloppy way. He'd have to find a way to make it smell, too, Kelly thought.

Nature again provided some additional cover. Evening storms were rolling in, bringing with them leaf-swirling wind and rain that covered him on the way to his Volkswagen. Ten minutes later he parked near a neighborhood liquor store, where he purchased a bottle of cheap yellow wine and a paper bag to semiconceal it. He took off the twist cap and poured about half of it into a gutter. Then it was time to go.

It all looked different now, Kelly thought. It was no longer an area he could pass through, seeing the dangers or not. Now it was a place of sought danger. He drove past the spot where he'd led Billy and his Roadrunner, turning to see if the tire marks were still there —they weren't. He shook his head. That was in the past, and the future occupied his thoughts.

In Vietnam there always seemed to be the treeline, a spot where you passed from the openness of a field or farmed area into the jungle, and in your mind that was the place where safety ended and danger began because Charlie lived in the woods. It was just a thing of the mind, a boundary imaginary rather than real, but in looking around this area he saw the same thing. Only this time he wasn't walking in with five or ten comrades in striped jungle fatigues. He was driving through the barrier in a rust-speckled car. He accelerated, and just like that, Kelly was in the jungle, and again at war.

He found a parking place among autos as decrepit as his own, and quickly got out, as he once would have run away from a helicopter LZ the enemy might see and approach, and headed into

an alley dotted with trash and several discarded appliances. His senses were alert now. Kelly was already sweating, and that was good. He wanted to sweat and smell. He took a mouthful of the cheap wine and sloshed it around his mouth before letting it dribble out onto his face, neck, and clothing. Bending down briefly, he got a handful of dirt, which he rubbed onto his hands and forearms, and a little onto his face. An afterthought added some to the hair of his wig, and by the time Kelly had passed through the city-block-length of the alley, he was just one more wino, a street bum like those who dotted the area even more than the drug pushers. Kelly adjusted his gait, slowing down and becoming deliberately sloppy in his movements while his eyes searched for a good perch. It wasn't all that difficult. Several of the houses in the area were vacant, and it was just a matter of finding one with a good view. That required half an hour. He settled for a corner house with upstairs bay windows. Kelly entered it from the back door. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw two rats in the wreckage of what a few years before had been a kitchen. *Fuckin' rats!* It was foolish to fear them, but he loathed their small black eyes and leprous hair and naked tails.

"Shit!" he whispered to himself. Why hadn't he thought about that? Everybody got a creeping chill from something: spiders, snakes, or tall buildings. For Kelly, it was rats. He walked towards the doorway, careful to keep his distance. The rats merely looked at him, edging away but less afraid of him than he was of them. "Fuck!" they heard him whisper, leaving them to their meal.

What followed was anger. Kelly made his way up the unbanistered stairs and found the corner bedroom with the bay windows, furious with himself for allowing such a dumb and cowardly distraction. Didn't he have a perfectly good weapon for dealing with rats? What were they going to do, assemble into a battalion for a rat-wave attack? That thought finally caused an embarrassed smile in the darkness of the room. Kelly crouchcd at the windows, evaluating his field of view and his own visibility. The windows were dirty and cracked. Some glass panels were missing entirely, but each window had a comfortable sill on which he could sit, and the house's location at the corner of two streets gave him a long view along each of the four main points of the compass, since this part of the city streets was laid out along precisely surveyed north-south, east-west lines. There wasn't enough illumination on

the streets for those below him to see into the house. With his dark, shabby clothing, in this unfit and derelict house, Kelly was invisible. He took out a small pair of binoculars and began his reconnaissance.

His first task was to learn the environment. The rain showers passed, leaving moisture in the air that made for little globes of light punctuated by the flying insects attracted to their eventual doom by streetlights. The air was still warm, perhaps mid-eighties, falling slowly, and Kelly was perspiring a little. His first analytical thought was that he should have brought water to drink. Well, he could correct that in the future, and he didn't really need a drink for some hours. He had thought to bring chewing gum, and that made things easier. The sounds of the streets were curious. In the jungle he'd heard the tittering of insects, the calls of birds, and the flapping of bats. Here it was automotive sounds near or distant, the occasional squeal of brakes, conversations loud or muted, barking dogs, and rattling trash cans, all of which he analyzed while watching through his binoculars and considering his actions for the evening.

Friday night, the start of the weekend, and people were making their purchases. It seemed this was a busy night for the gentry business. He identified one probable dealer a block and a half away. Early twenties. Twenty minutes of observation gave him a good physical picture of both the dealer and his assistant-"lieutenant." Both moved with the ease that came both with experience and security in their place, and Kelly wondered if they had fought either to take this place or to defend it. Perhaps both. They had a thriving trade, perhaps regular customers, he thought, watching both men approach an imported car, joshing with the driver and passenger before the exchange was made, shaking hands and waving afterwards. The two were of roughly the same height and build, and he assigned them the names Archie and Jughead.

Jesus, what an innocent I was, Kelly told himself, looking down another street. He remembered that one asshole they'd caught smoking grass in 3rd SOG—right before going out on a job. It had been Kelly's team, and Kelly's man, and though he was an FNK right from SEAL school, that was no excuse at all. Confronting the man, he'd explained reasonably but positively that going into the field in anything less than a hundred-percent-alert state could mean death for the entire team. "Hey, man, it's cool, I know what I'm doing"

had not been a particularly intelligent response, and thirty seconds later another team member had found it necessary to pull Kelly off the instantly ex-member of the team, who was gone the next day, never to return.

And that had been the only instance of drug use in the entire unit as far as Kelly knew. Sure, off-duty they'd had their beer bashes, and when Kelly and two others had flown to Taiwan for R&R, their collective vacation had not been terribly unlike a mobile earthquake of drunken excesses. Kelly truly believed that was different, blind to the explicit double standard. But they didn't drink beer before heading into the boonies either. It was a matter of common sense. It had also been one of unit morale. Kelly knew of no really elite unit that had developed a drug problem. The problem —a very serious one indeed, he'd heard—was mainly in the REMFs and the draftee units composed of young men whose presence in Vietnam was even less willing than was his own, and whose officers hadn't been able to overcome the problem either because of their own failings or their not dissimilar feelings.

Whatever the cause, the fact that Kelly had hardly considered the problem of drug use was both logical and absurd. He set all of that aside. However late he had learned about it, it was here before his eyes.

Down another street was a solo dealer who didn't want, need, or have a lieutenant. He wore a striped shirt and had his own clientele. Kelly thought of him as Charlie Brown. Over the next five hours, he identified and classified three other operations within his field of view. Then the selection process began. Archie and Jughead seemed to be doing the most business, but they were in line of sight to two others. Charlie Brown seemed to have his block entirely to himself, but there was a bus stop only a few yards away. Dagwood was right across the street from the Wizard. Both had lieutenants, and that took care of that. Big Bob was even larger than Kelly, and his lieutenant was larger still. That was a challenge. Kelly wasn't really looking for challenges—yet.

I need to get a good map of the area and memorize it. Divide it into discrete areas, Kelly thought. *I need to plot bus lines, police stations. Learn police shift times. Patrol patterns. I have to learn this area, a ten-block radius ought to be enough. I can't ever park the car in the same place twice, no one parking place even visible from another.*

You can hunt a specific area only once. That means you have to be

careful whom you select. No movement on the street except in darkness. Get a backup weapon… not a gun… a knife, a good one. A couple lengths of rope or wire. Gloves, rubber ones like women use to wash dishes. Another thing to wear, like a bush jacket, something with pockets —no, something with pockets on the inside. A water bottle. Something to eat, candy bars for energy. More chewing gum… maybe bubble gum? Kelly thought, allowing himself some levity. He checked his watch: three-twenty.

Things were slowing down out there. Wizard and his number-two walked away from their piece of sidewalk, disappearing around a corner. Dagwood soon did the same, getting right into his car while his lieutenant drove. Charlie was gone the next time he looked. That left Archie and Jughead to his south, and Big Bob to the west, both still making sporadic sales, many of them still to upscale clients. Kelly continued to watch for another hour, until Arch and Jug were the last to call it quits for the night… and they disappeared rather fast, Kelly thought, not sure how they'd done it. Something else to check. He was stiff when he rose, and made another note on that. He shouldn't sit still so much. His dark-accustomed eyes watched the stairs as he descended, as quietly as he could, for there was activity in the house next door, Fortunately, the rats were gone, too. Kelly looked out the back door, and finding the alley empty, walked away from the house, keeping his pace to that of a drunk. Ten minutes later his car was in sight. Fifty yards away, Kelly realized that he'd unthinkingly parked the car close to a streetlight. That was a mistake not to be repeated, he reproached himself, approaching slowly and drunkenly until he was within a car length. Then, first checking up and down the now-vacant street, he got in quickly, started the engine, and pulled away. He didn't flip on the headlights until he was two blocks away, turning left and reentering the wide vacant corridor, leaving the not-so-imaginary jungle and heading north towards his apartment.

In the renewed comfort and safety of his car he went over everything he'd seen in the past nine hours. The dealers were all smokers, igniting their cigarettes with what seemed to be Zippo lighters whose bright flames would injure their night vision. The longer the night got, the less business there was and the sloppier they seemed to become. They were human. They got tired. Some stayed out longer than others. Everything he'd seen was useful and important. In their operating characteristics, and especially in their

differences, were their vulnerabilities.

It had been a fine night, Kelly thought, passing the city's baseball stadium and turning left onto Loch Raven Boulevard, relaxing finally. He even considered a sip of the wine, but this wasn't the time to indulge in any bad habits. He removed his wig, wiping away the sweat it had caused. Jesus, he was thirsty.

He addressed that need ten minutes later, having parked his car in the proper place and made his way quietly into the apartment. He looked longingly at the shower, needing the clean feeling after being surrounded by dust and squalor and… rats. That final thought made him shudder. *Fucking rats,* he thought, filling a large glass with ice, then adding tap water. He followed it with several more, using his free hand to strip off his clothing. The air conditioning felt wonderful, and he stood in front of the wall unit, letting the chilled air wash over his body. All this time, and he didn't need to urinate. Had to take water with him from now on. Kelly took a package of lunch meat from the refrigerator and made two thick sandwiches, chased down by another pint of ice water.

Need a shower bad, he told himself. But he couldn't allow himself one. He'd have to get used to the feeling of a sticky, plasticlike coating all over his body. He'd have to like it, cultivate it, for in that was a part of his personal safety. His grime and odor were part of his disguise. His looks and smell had to make people look away from him, to avoid coming too close. He couldn't be a person now. He had to be a street creature, shunned. Invisible. The beard was even darker now, he saw in the mirror before heading to the bedroom, and his last decision of the day was to sleep on the floor. He couldn't dirty up new sheets.

15

Lessons Applied

Hell began promptly at eleven that morning, though Colonel Zacharias had no way of knowing the time. The tropical sun seemed always to be overhead, beating mercilessly down. Even in his windowless cell there was no escaping it, any more than he could escape the insects that seemed to thrive on the heat. He wondered how anything could thrive here, but everything that did seemed to be something that hurt or offended him, and that was as concise a definition of hell as anything he'd learned in the temples of his youth. Zacharias had been trained for possible capture. He'd been through the survival, evasion, resistance, and escape course, called SERE School. It was something you had to do if you flew airplanes for a living, and it was purposefully the most hated thing in the military because it did things to otherwise pampered Air Force and Navy officers that Marine drill instructors would have quailed at—things which were, in any other context, deeds worthy of a general court-martial followed by a lengthy term at Leavenworth or Portsmouth. The experience for Zacharias, as for most others, had been one he would never willingly repeat. But his current situation was not of his own volition either, was it? And he *was* repeating SERE School.

He'd considered capture in a distant sort of way. It wasn't the sort of thing you could really ignore once you'd heard the awful, despairing electronic *rawwwww* of the emergency radios, and seen the 'chutes, and tried to organize a RESCAP, hoping the Jolly Green Giant helicopter could swoop in from its base in Laos or maybe a Navy "Big Mutha"—as the squids called the rescue birds—would race in from the sea. Zacharias had seen that work, but more often

he'd seen it fail. He'd heard the panicked and tragically unmanly cries of airmen about to be captured: "Get me out of here," one major had screamed before another voice had come on the radio, speaking spiteful words none of them could understand, but which they had understood even so, with bitterness and killing rage. The Jolly crews and their Navy counterparts did their best, and though Zacharias was a Mormon and had never touched alcohol in his life, he had bought those chopper crews enough drinks to lay low a squad of Marines, in gratitude and awe at their bravery, for that was how you expressed your admiration within the community of warriors.

But like every other member of that community, he'd never really thought capture would happen to him. Death, that was the chance and the likelihood he'd thought about. Zacharias had been King Weasel. He'd helped invent that branch of his profession. With his intellect and superb flying skills he'd created the doctrine and validated it in the air. He'd driven his F-105 into the most concentrated antiair network anyone had yet built, actually seeking out the most dangerous weapons for his special attention, and using his training and intelligence to duel with them, matching tactic for tactic, skill for skill, teasing them, defying them, baiting them in what had become the most exhilarating contest any man had ever experienced, a chess game played in three dimensions over and under Mach-1, with him driving his two-seater Thud and with them manning Russian-built radars and missile launchers. Like mongoose and cobra, theirs was a very private vendetta played for keeps every day, and in his pride and his skill, he'd thought he would win, or, at worst, meet his end in the form of a yellow-black cloud that would mark a proper airman's death: immediate, dramatic, and ethereal.

He'd never thought himself a particularly brave man. He had his faith. Were he to meet death in the air, then he could look forward to staring God in the face, standing with humility at his lowly station and pride at the life he had lived, for Robin Zacharias was a righteous man, hardly ever straying from the path of virtue. He was a good friend to his comrades, a conscientious leader mindful of his men's needs; an upright family man with strong, bright, proud children; most of all, he was an Elder in his church who tithed his Air Force salary, as his station in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints required. For all of those reasons he had never feared death. What lay beyond the grave was something whose

reality he viewed with confidence. It was life that was uncertain, and his current life was the most uncertain of all, and faith even as strong as his had limits imposed by the body which contained it. That was a fact he either did not fully understand or somehow did not believe. His faith, the Colonel told himself, should be enough to sustain him through anything. Was. Should be. *Was,* he'd learned as a child from his teachers. But those lessons had been taught in comfortable classrooms in sight of the Wasatch Mountains, by teachers in clean white shirts and ties, holding their lesson books, speaking with confidence imparted by the history of their church and its members.

It's different here. Zacharias heard the little voice that said so, trying to ignore it, trying his best *not* to believe it, for believing it was a contradiction with his faith, and that contradiction was the single thing his mind could not allow. Joseph Smith had died for his faith, murdered in Illinois. Others had done the same. The history of Judaism and Christianity was replete with the names of martyrs—*heroes* to Robin Zacharias, because that was the word used by his professional community—who had sustained torture at Roman or other hands and had died with God's name on their lips.

But they didn't suffer as long as you, the voice pointed out. A few hours. The brief hellish minutes burning at the stake, a day or two, perhaps, nailed to the cross. That was one thing; you could see the end of it, and if you knew what lay beyond the end, then you could concentrate on that. But to see beyond the end, you had to know *where* the end was.

Robin Zacharias was alone. There were others here. He'd caught glimpses, but there was no communication. He'd tried the tap code, but no one ever answered. Wherever they were, they were too distant, or the building's arrangements didn't allow it, or perhaps his hearing was off. He could not share thoughts with anyone, and even prayers had limits to a mind as intelligent as his. He was afraid to pray for deliverance—a thought he was unable even to admit, for it would be an internal admission that his faith had somehow been shaken, and that was something he could not allow, but part of him knew that in *not* praying for deliverance, he was admitting something by omission; that if he prayed, and after a time deliverance didn't come, then his faith might start to die, and with that his soul. For Robin Zacharias, that was how despair began, not with a thought, but with the unwillingness to entreat his God for

something that might not come.

He couldn't know the rest. His dietary deprivation, the isolation so especially painful to a man of his intelligence, and the gnawing fear of pain, for even faith could not take pain away, and all men know fear of that. Like carrying a heavy load, however strong a man might be, his strength was finite and gravity was not. Strength of body was easily understood, but in the pride and righteousness that came from his faith, he had failed to consider that the physical acted upon the psychological, just as surely as gravity but far more insidiously. He interpreted the crushing mental fatigue as a weakness assignable to something not supposed to break, and he faulted himself for nothing more than being human. Consultation with another Elder would have righted everything, but that wasn't possible, and in denying himself the escape hatch of merely admitting his human frailty, Zacharias forced himself further and further into a trap of his own creation, aided and abetted by people who wanted to destroy him, body and soul.

It was then that things became worse. The door to his cell opened. Two Vietnamese wearing khaki uniforms looked at him as though he were a stain on the air of their country. Zacharias knew what they were here for. He tried to meet them with courage. They took him, one man on each arm, and a third following behind with a rifle, to a larger room—but even before he passed through the doorway, the muzzle of the rifle stabbed hard into his back, right at the spot that still hurt, fully nine months after his painful ejection, and he gasped in pain. The Vietnamese didn't even show pleasure at his discomfort. They didn't ask questions. There wasn't even a plan to their abuse that he could recognize, just the physical attacks of five men operating all at once, and Zacharias knew that resistance was death, and while he wished for his captivity to end, to seek death in that way might actually be suicide, and he couldn't do that.

It didn't matter. In a brief span of seconds his ability to do anything at all was taken away, and he merely collapsed on the rough concrete floor, feeling the blows and kicks and pain add up like numbers on a ledger sheet, his muscles paralyzed by agony, unable to move any of his limbs more than an inch or two, wishing it would stop, knowing that it never would. Above it all he heard the cackling of their voices now, like jackals, devils tormenting him because he was one of the righteous and they'd gotten their hands

on him anyway, and it went on, and on, and on—

A screaming voice blasted its way past his catatonia. One more desultory half-strength kick connected with his chest, and then he saw their boots draw back. His peripheral vision saw their faces cringe, all looking towards the door at the source of the noise. A final bellow and they hastily made their way out. The voice changed. It was a… *white* voice? How did he know that? Strong hands lifted him, sitting him up against the wall, and the face came into view. It was Grishanov.

"My God," the Russian said, his pale cheeks glowing red with anger. He turned and screamed something else in oddly accented Vietnamese. Instantly a canteen appeared, and he poured the contents over the American's face. Then he screamed something else and Zacharias heard the door close.

"Drink, Robin, drink this." He held a small metal flask to the American's lips, lifting it.

Zacharias took a swallow so quickly that the liquid was in his stomach before he noted the acidic taste of vodka. Shocked, he lifted his hand and tried to push it away.

"I can't," the American gasped, "…can't drink, can't…"

"Robin, it is medicine. This is not entertainment. Your religion has no rule against this. Please, my friend, you need this. It's the best I can do for you," Grishanov added in a voice that shuddered with frustration. "You must, Robin."

Maybe it is medicine, Zacharias thought. Some medicines used an alcohol base as a preservative, and the Church permitted that, didn't it? He couldn't remember, and in not knowing he took another swallow. Nor did he know that as the adrenaline that the beating had flooded into his system dissipated, the natural relaxation of his body would only be accentuated by the drink.

"Not too much, Robin." Grishanov removed the flask, then started tending to his injuries, straightening out his legs, using moistened cloth to clean up the man's face.

"Savages!" the Russian snarled. "Bloody stinking savages. I'll throttle Major Vinh for this, break his skinny little monkey neck." The Russian colonel sat down on the floor next to his American colleague and spoke from the heart. "Robin, we are enemies, but we are men also, and even war has rules. You serve your country. I serve mine. These… these people do not understand that without honor there is no true service, only barbarism." He held up the flask

again. “Here. I cannot get anything else for the pain. I’m sorry, my friend, but I can’t.”

And Zacharias took another swallow, still numb, still disoriented, and even more confused than ever.

“Good man,” Grishanov said. “I have never said this, but you are a courageous man, my friend, to resist these little animals as you have.”

“Have to,” Zacharias gasped.

“Of course you do,” Grishanov said, wiping the man’s face clean as tenderly as he might have done with one of his children. “I would, too.” He paused. “God, to be flying again!”

“Yeah. Colonel, I wish—”

“Call me Kolya.” Grishanov gestured. “You’ve known me long enough.”

“Kolya?”

“My Christian name is Nikolay. Kolya is—nickname, you say?”

Zacharias let his head back against the wall, closing his eyes and remembering the sensations of flight. “Yes, Kolya, I would like to be flying again.”

“Not too different, I imagine,” Kolya said, sitting beside the man, wrapping a brotherly arm around his bruised and aching shoulders, knowing it was the first gesture of human warmth the man had experienced in almost a year. “My favorite is the MiG-17. Obsolete now, but, God, what a joy to fly. Just fingertips on the stick, and you—you just think it, just wish it in your mind, and the aircraft does what you want.”

“The -86 was like that,” Zacharias replied. “They’re all gone, too.”

The Russian chuckled. “Like your first love, yes? The first girl you saw as a child, the one who first made you think as a man thinks, yes? But the first airplane, that is better for one like us. Not so warm as a woman is, but much less confusing to handle.” Robin tried to laugh, but choked. Grishanov offered him another swallow. “Easy, my friend. Tell me, what is your favorite?”

The American shrugged, feeling the warm glow in his belly. “I’ve flown nearly everything. I missed the F-94 and the -89, too. From what I hear, I didn’t miss much there. The -104 was fun, like a sports car, but not much legs. No, the -86H is probably my favorite, just for handling.”

“And the Thud?” Grishanov asked, using the nickname for the F-105 Thunderchief.

Robin coughed briefly. “You take the whole state of Utah to turn one in, darned if it isn’t fast on the deck, though. I’ve had one a hundred twenty knots over the redline.”

“Not really a fighter, they say. Really a bomb truck.” Grishanov had assiduously studied American pilots’ slang.

“That’s all right. It will get you out of trouble in a hurry. You sure don’t want to dogfight in one. The first pass better be a good one.”

“But for bombing—one pilot to another, your bomb delivery in this wretched place is excellent.”

“We try, Kolya, we surely do try,” Zacharias said, his voice slurred. It amazed the Russian that the liquor had worked so quickly. The man had never had a drink in his life until twenty minutes earlier. How remarkable that a man would choose to live without drink.

“And the way you fight the rocket emplacements. You know, I’ve watched that. We are enemies, Robin,” Kolya said again. “But we are also pilots. The courage and skill I have watched here, they are like nothing I have ever seen. You must be a professional gambler at home, yes?”

“Gamble?” Robin shook his head. “No, I can’t do that.”

“But what you did in your Thud…”

“Not gambling. Calculated risk. You plan, you know what you can do, and you stick to that, get a feel for what the other guy is thinking.”

Grishanov made a mental note to refill his flask for the next one on his schedule. It had taken a few months, but he’d finally found something that worked. A pity that these little brown savages didn’t have the wit to understand that in hurting a man you most often made his courage grow. For all their arrogance, which was considerable, they saw the world through a lens that was as diminutive as their stature and as narrow as their culture. They seemed unable to learn lessons. Grishanov sought out such lessons. Strangest of all, this one had been something learned from a fascist officer in the Luftwaffe. A pity also that the Vietnamese allowed only him and no others to perform these special interrogations. He’d soon write to Moscow about that. With the proper kind of pressure, they could make real use of this camp. How incongruously clever of the savages to establish this camp, and how disappointingly consistent that they’d failed to see its possibilities. How distasteful that he had to live in this hot, humid, insect-ridden

country, surrounded by arrogant little people with arrogant little minds and the vicious dispositions of serpents. But the information he needed was here. As odious as his current work was, he'd discovered a phrase for it in a contemporary American novel of the type he read to polish up his already impressive language skills. A very American turn of phrase, too. What he was doing was "just business." That was a way of looking at the world he readily understood. A shame that the American next to him probably would not, Kolya thought, listening to every word of his rambling explanation of the life of a Weasel pilot.

The face in the mirror was becoming foreign, and that was good. It was strange how powerful habits were. He'd already filled the sink with hot water and had his hands lathered before his intellect kicked in and reminded him that he wasn't supposed to wash or shave. Kelly did brush his teeth. He couldn't stand the feel of film there, and for that part of the disguise he had his bottle of wine. *What foul stuff that was,* Kelly thought. *Sweet and heavy, strangely colored.* Kelly was not a wine connoisseur, but he did know that a decent table wine wasn't supposed to be the color of urine. He had to leave the bathroom. He couldn't stand to look in the mirror for long.

He fortified himself with a good meal, filling up with bland foods that would energize his body without making his stomach rumble. Then came the exercises. His ground-floor unit allowed him to run in place without the fear of disturbing a neighbor. It wasn't the same as real running, but it would suffice. Then came the push-ups. At long last his left shoulder was fully recovered, and the aches in his muscles were perfectly bilateral. Finally came the hand-to-hand exercises, which he practiced for general quickness in addition to the obvious utilitarian applications.

He'd left his apartment in daylight the day before, taking the risk of being seen in his disreputable state in order to visit a Goodwill store, where he'd found a bush jacket to go over his other clothing. It was so oversize and threadbare that they hadn't charged for it. Kelly had come to realize that disguising his size and physical conditioning was difficult, but that loose, shabby clothing did the trick. He'd also taken the opportunity to compare himself to the other patrons of the store. On inspection his disguise seemed to be effective enough. Though not the worst example of a street person,

he certainly fit into the lower half, and the clerk who'd handed over the bush jacket for free had probably done so as much to get him out of the building as to express compassion for his state in life. And wasn't that an improvement? What would he have given in Vietnam to have been able to pass himself off as just another villager, and thus waited for the bad guys to come in?

He'd spent the previous night continuing his reconnaissance. No one had given him as much as a second look as he'd moved along the streets, just one more dirty, smelly drunk, not even worth mugging, which had ended his concerns about being spotted for what he really was. He'd spent another five hours in his perch, watching the streets from the second-story bay windows of the vacant house. Police patrols had turned out to be routine, and the bus noises far more regular than he'd initially appreciated.

Finished with his exercises, he disassembled his pistol and cleaned it, though it hadn't been used since his return flight from New Orleans. The same was done with the suppressor. He reassembled both, checking the match-up of the parts. He'd made one small change. Now there was a thin white painted line down the top of the silencer that served as a night-sight. Not good enough for distance shooting, but he wasn't planning any of that. Finished with the pistol, he loaded a round into the chamber and dropped the hammer carefully before slapping the clip into the bottom of the handgrip. He'd also acquired a Ka-Bar Marine combat knife in a surplus store, and while he'd watched the streets the night before, he'd worked the seven-inch Bowie-type blade across a whetstone. There was something that men feared about a knife even more than a bullet. That was foolish but useful. The pistol and knife went into his waistband side by side in the small of his back, well hidden by the loose bulk of the dark shirt and bush jacket. In one of the jacket pockets went a whiskey flask filled with tap water. Four Snickers went on the other side. Around his waist was a length of eight-gauge electrical wire. In his pants pocket was a pair of Playtex rubber gloves. These were yellow, not a good color for invisibility, but he'd been unable to find anything else. They did cover his hands without giving away much in feel and dexterity, and he decided to take them along. He already had a pair of cotton work gloves in the car that he wore when driving. After buying the car he'd cleaned it inside and out, wiping every glass, metal, and plastic surface, hoping that he'd removed every trace of fingerprints. Kelly

blessed every police show and movie he'd ever seen, and prayed that he was being paranoid *enough* about his every tactic.

What else? he asked himself. He wasn't carrying any ID. He had a few dollars in cash in a wallet also obtained at Goodwill. Kelly had thought about carrying more, but there was no point in it. Water. Food. Weapons. Ropewire. He'd leave his binoculars home tonight. Their utility wasn't worth the bulk. Maybe he'd get a set of compact ones—make a note. He was ready. Kelly switched on the TV and watched the news to get a weather forecast—cloudy, chance of showers, low around seventy-five. He made and drank two cups of instant coffee for the caffeine, waiting for night to fall, which it presently did.

Leaving the apartment complex was, oddly enough, one of the most difficult parts of the exercise. Kelly looked out the windows, his interior lights already off, making sure that there wasn't anyone out there, before venturing out himself. Out the door of the building he stopped again, looking and listening before he walked directly to the Volkswagen, which he unlocked and entered. At once he put on the work gloves, and only after that did he close the car's door and start the engine. Two minutes after that he passed the place where he parked the Scout, wondering how lonely the car was now. Kelly had selected a single radio station, playing contemporary music, soft rock and folk, just to have the company of familiar noise as he drove south into the city.

Part of him was surprised at how tense it was, driving in. As soon as he got there he settled down, but the drive in, like the insertion flight on a Huey, was the time in which you contemplated the unknown, and he had to tell himself to be cool, to keep his face in an impassive mien while his hands sweated a little inside the gloves. He carefully obeyed every traffic law, observed all lights, and ignored the cars that sped past him. Amazing, he thought, how long twenty minutes could seem. This time he used a slightly different insertion route. He'd scouted the parking place the night before, two blocks from the objective—in his mind, the current tactical environment translated one block to a kilometer in the real jungle, a complementarity that made him smile to himself, briefly, as he pulled his car in behind someone's black 1957 Chevy. As before, he left the car quickly, ducking into an alley for the cover of darkness and the assumption of his physical disguise. Inside of twenty yards he was just one more shambling drunk.

“Hey, dude!” a young voice called. There were three of them, mid-to-late teens, sitting on a fence and drinking beer. Kelly edged to the other side of the alley to maximize his distance, but that wasn’t to be. One of them hopped down off the fence and came towards him.

“Whatcha lookin’ for, bum?” the boy inquired with all the unfeeling arrogance of a young tough. “Jesus, you sure do stink, man! Dint your mama teach ya to wash?”

Kelly didn’t even turn as he cringed and kept moving. This wasn’t part of the plan. Head down, turned slightly away from the lad who walked alongside him, keeping pace in a way calculated to torment the old bum, who switched his wine bottle to his other hand.

“I needs a drink, man,” the youth said, reaching for the bottle.

Kelly didn’t surrender it, because a street wino didn’t do that. The youngster tripped him, shoving him against the fence to his left, but it ended there. He walked back to his friend, laughing, as the bum rose and continued on his way.

“And don’ ya come back neither, man!” Kelly heard as he got to the end of the block. He had no plans to do so. He passed two more such knots of young people in the next ten minutes, neither of which deemed him worthy of any action beyond laughter. The back door of his perch was still ajar, and tonight, thankfully, the rats weren’t present. Kelly paused inside, listening, and, hearing nothing, he stood erect, allowing himself to relax.

“Snake to Chicago,” he whispered to himself, remembering his old call signs. “Insertion successful. At the observation point.” Kelly went up the same rickety stairs for the third and last time, finding his accustomed place in the southeast corner, sat down, and looked out.

Archie and Jughead were also in their accustomed place, a block away, he saw at once, talking to a motorist. It was ten-twelve at night. Kelly allowed himself a sip of water and a candy bar as he leaned back, watching them for any changes in their usual pattern of activity, but there was none he could see in half an hour of observation. Big Bob was in his place, too, as was his lieutenant, whom Kelly now called Little Bob. Charlie Brown was also in business tonight, as was Dagwood, the former still working alone and the latter still teamed up with a lieutenant Kelly had not bothered to name. But the Wizard wasn’t visible tonight. It turned out that he arrived late, just after eleven, along with his associate,

whose assigned name was Toto, for he tended to scurry around like a little dog that belonged in the basket on the back of the Wicked Witch's bicycle. "And your little dog, too…" Kelly whispered to himself in amusement.

As expected, Sunday night was slower than the two preceding nights, but Arch and Jug seemed busier than the others. Perhaps it was because they had a slightly more upscale client base. Though all served both local and outside customers, Arch and Jug seemed more often to draw the larger cars whose cleanliness and polish made Kelly think they didn't belong in this part of town. That might have been an unwarranted assumption, but it was not important to the mission. The really important thing was something he had scoped out the previous night on his walk into the area and confirmed tonight as well. Now it was just a matter of waiting.

Kelly made himself comfortable, feeling his body relax now that all the decisions had been made. He stared down at the street, still intensely alert, watching, listening, noting everything that came and went as the minutes passed. At twelve-forty, a police radio car traveled one of the cross streets, doing nothing more than showing the flag. It would return a few minutes after two, probably. The city buses made their whirring diesel noises, and Kelly recognized the one-ten, with the brakes that needed work. Their thin screech must have annoyed every person who tried to sleep along its route. Traffic slowed perceptibly just after two. The dealers were smoking more now, talking more. Big Bob crossed the street to say something to the Wizard, and their relations seemed cordial enough, which surprised Kelly. He hadn't seen that before. Maybe the man just needed change for a hundred. The police cruiser made its scheduled pass. Kelly finished his third Snickers bar of the evening, collecting the wrappers. He checked the area. He'd left nothing. No surface he had touched was likely to retain a fingerprint. There was just too much dust and grit, and he'd been very careful not to touch a windowpane.

Okay.

Kelly made his way down the stairs and out the back door. He crossed the street into the continuation of the alley that paralleled the street, still keeping to the shadows, still moving in a shambling but now exceeding quiet gait.

The mystery of the first night had turned out to be a boon. Archie and Jughead had vanished from his sight in a span of two or three

seconds. He hadn't looked away from them any longer than that. They hadn't driven away, and they hadn't had time to walk to the end of the block. Kelly had figured it out the previous night. These overlong blocks of row houses had not been built by fools. Halfway down, many of the continuous blocks had an arched passageway so that people could get to the alley more easily. It also made a fine escape route for Arch and Jug, and when conducting business they never strayed more than twenty feet from it. But they never really appeared to watch it either.

Kelly made sure of that, leaning against an outbuilding that might have been big enough to contain a Model-T Ford. Finding a pair of beer cans, he connected them with a piece of string and set them across the cement walk that led to the passage, making sure that no one could approach him from behind without making noise. Then he moved in, walking very lightly on his feet and reaching into his waistband for his silenced pistol. It was only thirty-five feet to cover, but tunnels transmitted sound better than telephones, and Kelly's eyes scanned the surface for anything on which he might trip or make noise. He avoided some newspaper and a patch of broken glass, arriving close to the other end of the passageway.

They looked different close-up, human almost. Archie was leaning back against the brown bricks of a wall, smoking a cigarette. Jughead was also smoking, sitting on someone's car fender, looking down the street, and every ten seconds the flaring of their cigarettes attacked and degraded their vision. Kelly could see them, but even ten feet away they couldn't see him. It didn't get much better.

"Don't move," he whispered, just for Archie. The man's head turned, more in annoyance than alarm, until he saw the pistol with the large cylinder screwed onto the end. His eyes flickered to his lieutenant, who was still facing the wrong way, humming some song or other, waiting for a customer who would never come. Kelly handled the notification.

"Hey!" Still a whisper, but enough to carry over the diminishing street sounds. Jughead turned and saw the gun aimed at his employer's head. He froze without being bidden. Archie had the gun and the money and most of the drugs. He also saw Kelly's hand wave him in, and not knowing what else to do, he approached.

"Business good tonight?" Kelly asked.

"Fair 'nuf," Archie responded quietly. "What you want?"

"Now what do you suppose?" Kelly asked with a smile.

"You a cop?" Jughead asked, rather stupidly, the other two thought.

"No, I'm not here to arrest anybody." He motioned with his hand. "In the tunnel, facedown, quick." Kelly let them go in ten feet or so, just enough to be lost to outside view, not so far that he didn't have some exterior light to see by. First he searched them for weapons. Archie had a rusty .32 revolver that went into a pocket. Kelly next took the electrical wire from around his waist and wrapped it tightly around both sets of hands. Then he rolled them over.

"You boys have been very cooperative."

"You better never come back here, man," Archie informed him, hardly realizing that he hadn't been robbed at all. Jug nodded and muttered. The response puzzled both of them.

"Actually, I need your help."

"What with?" Archie asked.

"Looking for a guy, name of Billy, drives a red Roadrunner."

"What? You dickin' my ass?" Archie asked in rather a disgusted voice.

"Answer the question, please," Kelly said reasonably.

"You get you fuckin' ass outa here," Archie suggested spitefully.

Kelly turned the gun slightly and fired two rounds into Jug's head. The body spasmed violently, and blood flew, but not on Kelly this time. Instead it showered across Archie's face, and Kelly could see the pusher's eyes open wide in horror and surprise, like little lights in the darkness. Archie had not expected that. Jughead hadn't seemed much of a conversationalist anyway, and the operation's clock was ticking.

"I said please, didn't I?"

"Sweet Jesus, man!" the voice rasped, knowing that to make any more noise would be death.

"Billy. Red Plymouth Roadrunner, loves to show it off. He's a distributor. I want to know where he hangs out," Kelly said quietly.

"If I tell you that—"

"You get a new supplier. Me," Kelly said. "And if you tell Billy that I'm out here, you'll get to see your friend again," he added, gesturing to the body whose warm bulk pressed limply against Archie's side. He had to offer the man hope, after all. Maybe even a little left-handed truth, Kelly thought: "Do you understand? Billy and his friends have been screwing around with the wrong people, and it's my job to straighten things out. Sorry about your friend, but

I had to show you that I'm serious, like."

Archie's voice tried to calm itself, but didn't quite make it, though he reached for the hope he'd been offered. "Look, man, I can't—"

"I can always ask somebody else." Kelly paused significantly. "Do you understand what I just said?"

Archie did, or thought he did, and he talked freely until the time came for him to rejoin Jughead.

A quick search of Archie's pockets turned up a nice wad of cash and a collection of small drug envelopes which also found their way into his jacket pockets. Kelly stepped carefully over both bodies and made his way to the alley, looking back to make sure that he hadn't stepped in any blood. He'd discard the shoes in any case. Kelly untied the string from the cans and replaced them where he'd found them, before renewing his drunken gait, taking a roundabout path back to his car, repeating his carefully considered routine every step of the way. Thank God, he thought, driving north again, he'd be able to shower and shave tonight. But what the hell would he do with the drugs? That was a question that fate would answer.

The cars started arriving just after six, not so incongruous an hour for activity on a military base. Fifteen of them, clunkers, none less than three years old, and all of them had been totaled in auto accidents and sold for scrap. The only thing unusual about them was that though they were no longer drivable, they almost looked as though they were. The work detail was composed of Marines, supervised by a gunnery sergeant who had no idea what this was all about. But he didn't have to. The cars were worked into place, haphazardly, not in neat military rows, but more the way real people parked. The job took ninety minutes, and the work detail left. At eight in the morning another such detail arrived, this one with mannequins. They came in several sizes, and they were dressed in old clothes. The child-size ones went on the swings and in the sandbox. The adult ones were stood up, using the metal stands that came with them. And the second work party left, to return twice a day for the indefinite future and move the mannequins around in a random way prescribed by a set of instructions thought up and written down by some damned fool of an officer who didn't have anything better to do.

Kelly's notes had commented on the fact that one of the most debilitating and time-consuming aspects of Operation KINGPIN had

been the daily necessity of setting up and striking down the mockup of their objective. He hadn't been the first to note it. If any Soviet reconnaissance satellites took note of this place, they would see an odd collection of buildings serving no readily identifiable purpose. They would also see a child's playground, complete with children, parents, and parked cars, all of which elements would move every day. That bit of information would counter the more obvious observation—that this recreational facility was half a mile off any paved road and invisible to the rest of the installation.

16

Exercises

Ryan and Douglas stood back, letting the forensics people do their jobs. The discovery had happened just after five in the morning. On his routine patrol pattern, Officer Chuck Monroe had come down the street, and spotting an irregular shadow in this passage between houses, shone his car light down it. The dark shape might easily have been a drunk passed out and sleeping it off, but the white spotlight had reflected off the pool of red and bathed the arched bricks in a pink glow that looked wrong from the first instant. Monroe had parked his car and come in for a look, then made his call. The officer was leaning on the side of his car now, smoking a cigarette and going over the details of his discovery, which was to him less horrific and more routine than civilians understood. He hadn't even bothered to call an ambulance. These two men were clearly beyond any medical redemption.

"Bodies sure do bleed a lot," Douglas observed. It wasn't a statement of any significance, just words to fill the silence as the cameras flashed for one last roll of color film. It looked as if two full-size cans of red paint had been poured in one spot.

"Time of death?" Ryan asked the representative from the coroner's office.

"Not too long ago," the man said, lifting one hand. "No rigor yet. After midnight certainly, probably after two."

The cause of death didn't require a question. The holes in both men's foreheads answered that.

"Monroe?" Ryan called. The young officer came over. "What do you know about these two?"

"Both pushers. Older one on the right there is Maceo Donald,

street name is Ju-Ju. The one on the left, I don't know, but he worked with Donald."

"Good eye spotting them, patrolman. Anything else?" Sergeant Douglas asked.

Monroe shook his head. "No, sir. Nothing at all. Pretty quiet night in the district, as a matter of fact. I came through this area maybe four times on my shift, and I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. The usual pushers doing the usual business." The implied criticism of the situation that everyone had to acknowledge as normal went unanswered. It was a Monday morning, after all, and that was bad enough for anyone.

"Finished," the senior photographer said. He and his partner, on the other side of the bodies, got out of the way.

Ryan was already looking around. There was a good deal of ambient light in the passageway, and the detective augmented that with a large flashlight, playing its beam over the edges of the walkway, his eyes looking for a coppery reflection.

"See any shell casing, Tom?" he asked Douglas, who was doing the same thing.

"Nope. They were shot from this direction, too, don't you think?"

"Bodies haven't been moved," the coroner said unnecessarily, adding, "Yes, definitely both shot from this side. Both were lying down when they were shot."

Douglas and Ryan took their time, examining every inch of the passageway three times, for thoroughness was their main professional weapon, and they had all the time in the world—or at least a few hours, which amounted to the same thing. A crime scene like this was one you prayed for. No grass to conceal evidence, no furniture, just a bare brick corridor not five feet wide, everything self-contained. That would be a time-saver.

"Nothing at all, Em," Douglas said, finishing his third sweep. "Probably a revolver, then." It was a logical observation. Light .22 shell casings, ejected from an automatic, could fly incredible distances, and were so small that finding them could drive one to distraction. Rare was the criminal who recovered his brass, and to have recovered four little .22s in the dark—no, that wasn't very likely.

"Some robber with a cheap one, want to bet?" Douglas asked.

"Could be." Both men approached the bodies and squatted down close to them for the first time.

"No obvious powder marks," the sergeant said in some surprise.

"Any of these houses occupied?" Ryan asked Monroe.

"Not either one of these, sir," Monroe said, indicating both of those bordering the passageway. "Most of the ones on the other side of the street are, though."

"Four shots, early in the morning, you figure somebody might have heard?" *The brick tunnel ought to have focused the sound like the lens of a telescope,* Ryan thought, and the .22 had a loud, sharp bark. But how often had there been cases just like this one in which no one had heard a thing? Besides, the way this neighborhood was going, people divided into two classes: those who didn't look because they didn't care, and those who knew that looking merely increased the chance of catching a stray round.

"There's two officers knocking on doors now, Lieutenant. Nothing yet."

"Not bad shooting, Em." Douglas had his pencil out, pointing to the holes in the forehead of the unidentified victim. They were scarcely half an inch apart, just above the bridge of the nose. "No powder marks. The killer must have been standing… call it three, four feet, max." Douglas stood back at the feet of the bodies and extended his arm. It was a natural shot, extending your arm and aiming down.

"I don't think so. Maybe there's powder marks we can't see, Tom. That's why we have medical examiners." He meant that both men had dark complexions, and the light wasn't all that good. But if there was powder tattooing around the small entrance wounds, neither detective could see it. Douglas squatted back down to give the entrance wounds another look.

"Nice to know somebody appreciates us," the coroner's representative said, ten feet away, scribbling his own notes.

"Either way, Em, our shooter has a real steady hand." The pencil moved to the head of Maceo Donald. The two holes in his forehead, maybe a little higher on the forehead than the other man, were even closer together. "That's unusual."

Ryan shrugged and began his search of the bodies. Though the senior of the two, he preferred to do this himself while Douglas took the notes. He found no weapon on either man, and though both had wallets and ID, from which they identified the unknown as Charles Barker, age twenty, the amount of cash discovered wasn't nearly what men in their business would customarily have on their

persons. Nor were there any drugs—

"Wait, here's something—three small glassine bags of white powdery substance," Ryan said in the language of his profession. "Pocket change, a dollar seventy-five; cigarette lighter, Zippo, brushed steel, the cheap one. Pack of Pall Malls from the shirt pocket—and another small glassine bag of white powdery substance."

"A drug ripoff," Douglas said, diagnosing the incident. It wasn't terribly professional but it was pretty obvious. "Monroe?"

"Yes, sir?" The young officer would never stop being a Marine. Nearly everything he said, Douglas noted, had "sir" attached to it.

"Our friends Barker and Donald—experienced pushers?"

"Ju-Ju's been around since I've been in the district, sir. I never heard of anybody messin' with him."

"No signs of a fight on the hands," Ryan said after turning them over. "Hands are tied up with… electrical wire, copper wire, white insulation, trademark on it, can't read it yet. No obvious signs of a struggle."

"Somebody got Ju-Ju!" It was Mark Charon, who had just arrived. "I had a case running on that fuck, too."

"Two exit wounds, back of Mr. Donald's head," Ryan went on, annoyed at the interruption. "I expect we'll find the bullets somewhere at the bottom of this lake," he added sourly.

"Forget ballistics," Douglas grunted. That wasn't unusual with the .22. First of all, the bullet was made of soft lead, and was so easily deformed that the striations imparted by the rifling of the gun barrel were most often impossible to identify. Second, the little .22 had a lot of penetrating power, more even than a .45, and often ended up splattering itself on some object beyond the victim. In this case the cement of the walkway.

"Well, tell me about him," Ryan ordered.

"Major street pusher, big clientele. Drives a nice red Caddy," Charon added. "Pretty smart one, too."

"Not anymore. His brain got homogenized about six hours ago."

"Rip?" Charon asked.

Douglas answered. "Looks that way. No gun, no drugs or money to speak of. Whoever did it knew their business. Looks real professional, Em. This wasn't some junkie who got lucky."

"I'd have to say that's the morning line, Tom," Ryan replied, standing up. "Probably a revolver, but those groups are awfully

tight for a Saturday-night special. Mark, any word on an experienced robber working the street?"

"The Duo," Charon said. "But they use a shotgun."

"This is almost like a mob hit. Look 'em straight in the eye—whack." Douglas thought about his words. No, that wasn't quite right either, was it? Mob hits were almost never this elegant. Criminals were not proficient marksmen, and they used cheap weapons for the most part. He and Ryan had investigated a handful of gang-related murders, and typically the victim had either been shot in the back of the head at contact range, with all the obvious forensic signs that attended such an event, or the damage was done so haphazardly that the victim was more likely to have a dozen widely scattered holes in his anatomy. These two had been taken out by someone who knew his business, and the collection of highly skilled Mafia soldiers was very slim indeed. But who had ever said that homicide investigation was an exact science? This crime scene was a mix of the routine and the unusual. A simple robbery in that the drugs and money of the victims were missing, but an unusually skillful killing in the fact that the shooter had been either very lucky—twice—or an expert shot. And a mob hit was usually not disguised as a robbery or anything else. A mob murder was most often a public statement.

"Mark, any noise on the street about a turf war?" Douglas asked.

"No, not really, nothing organized. A lot of stuff between pushers over street corners, but that isn't news."

"You might want to ask around," Lieutenant Ryan suggested.

"No problem, Em. I'll have my people check that out."

We're not going to solve this one fast—maybe never, Ryan thought. *Well,* he thought, *only on TV do you solve them in the first half hour—between commercials.*

"Can I have 'em now?"

"All yours," Ryan told the man from the medical examiner's office. His black station wagon was ready, and the day was warming up. Already flies were buzzing around, drawn to the smell of blood. He headed off to his own car, accompanied by Tom Douglas. Junior detectives would have the rest of the routine work.

"Somebody that knows how to shoot—better than me even," Douglas said as they drove back downtown. He'd tried out for the department's pistol team once.

"Well, lots of people with that skill are around now, Tom. Maybe

some have found employment with our organized friends."

"Professional hit, then?"

"We'll call it skillful for now," Ryan suggested as an alternative. "We'll let Mark do some of the scutwork on the intelligence side."

"That makes me feel warm all over." Douglas snorted.

• • •

Kelly arose at ten-thirty, feeling clean for the first time in several days. He'd showered immediately on returning to his apartment, wondering if in doing so he'd left rings on the sewers. Now he could shave, even, and that compensated for the lack of sleep. Before breakfast—brunch—Kelly drove half a mile to a local park and ran for thirty minutes, then drove back home for another thoroughly wonderful shower and some food. Then there was work to do. All the clothing from the previous evening was in a brown paper grocery bag—slacks, shirt, underwear, socks, and shoes. It seemed a shame to part with the bush jacket, whose size and pockets had proven to be so useful. He'd have to get another, probably several. He felt certain that he hadn't been splattered with blood this time, but the dark colors made it difficult to be sure, and they probably *did* carry powder residue, and this was not the time to take any chances at all. Leftover food and coffee grounds went on top of the clothing, and found their way into the apartment complex's Dumpster. Kelly had considered taking them to a distant dumpsite, but that might cause more trouble than it solved. Someone might see him, and take note of what he did, and wonder why. Disposing of the four empty .22 cases was easy. He'd dumped them down a sewer while jogging. The noon news broadcast announced the discovery of two bodies, but no details. Maybe the newspaper would say more. There was one other thing.

"Hi, Sam."

"Hey, John. You in town?" Rosen asked from his office.

"Yeah. Do you mind if I come down for a few minutes? Say around two?"

"What can I do for you?" Rosen asked from behind his desk.

"Gloves," Kelly said, holding his hand up. "The kind you use, thin rubber. Do they cost much?"

Rosen almost asked what the gloves were for, but decided he didn't need to know. "Hell, they come in boxes of a hundred pair."

"I don't need that many."

The surgeon pulled open a drawer in his credenza and tossed over ten of the paper-and-plastic bags. "You look awfully respectable." And so Kelly did, dressed in a button-down white shirt and his blue CIA suit, as he'd taken to calling it. It was the first time Rosen had seen him in a tie.

"Don't knock it, doc." Kelly smiled. "Sometimes I have to be. I even have a new job, sort of."

"Doing what?"

"Sort of consulting." Kelly gestured. "I can't say about what, but it requires me to dress properly."

"Feeling okay?"

"Yes, sir, just fine. Jogging and everything. How are things with you?"

"The usual. More paperwork than surgery, but I have a whole department to supervise." Sam touched the pile of folders on his desk. The small talk was making him uneasy. It seemed that his friend was wearing a disguise, and though he knew Kelly was up to something, in *not* knowing exactly what it was, he managed to keep his conscience under control. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure, doc."

"Sandy's car broke down. I was going to run her home, but I've got a meeting that'll run till four. She gets off shift at three."

"You're letting her work regular hours now?" Kelly asked with a smile.

"Sometimes, when she's not teaching."

"If it's okay with her, it's okay with me."

It was only a twenty-minute wait that Kelly disposed of by going to the cafeteria for a light snack. Sandy O'Toole found him there, just after the three-o'clock change of shift.

"Like the food better now?" she asked him.

"Even hospitals can't hurt a salad very much." He hadn't figured out the institutional fascination with Jell-O, however. "I hear your car's broke."

She nodded, and Kelly saw why Rosen had her working a more regular schedule. Sandy looked very tired, her fair skin sallow, with puffy dark patches under both eyes. "Something with the starter—wiring. It's in the shop."

Kelly stood. "Well, my lady's carriage awaits." His remark elicited a smile, but it was one of politeness rather than amusement.

“I’ve never seen you so dressed up,” she said on the way to the parking garage.

“Well, don’t get too worked up about it. I can still roll in the mud with the best of ’em.” And his jesting failed again.

“I didn’t mean—”

“Relax, ma’am. You’ve had a long day at the office, and your driver has a crummy sense of humor.”

Nurse O’Toole stopped and turned. “It’s not your fault. Bad week. We had a child, auto accident. Doctor Rosen tried, but the damage was too great, and she faded out on my shift, day before yesterday. Sometimes I hate this work,” Sandy concluded.

“I understand,” Kelly said, holding the door open for her. “Look, you want the short version? It’s never the right person. It’s never the right time. It never makes any sense.”

“That’s a nice way of looking at things. Weren’t you trying to cheer me up?” And that, perversely, made her smile, but it wasn’t the kind of smile that Kelly wanted to see.

“We all try to fix the broken parts as best we can, Sandy. You fight your dragons. I fight mine,” Kelly said without thinking.

“And how many dragons have you slain?”

“One or two,” Kelly said distantly, trying to control his words. It surprised him how difficult that had become. Sandy was too easy to talk with.

“And what did it make better, John?”

“My father was a fireman. He died while I was over there. House fire, he went inside and found two kids, they were down from smoke. Dad got them out okay, but then he had a heart attack on the spot. They say he was dead before he hit the ground. That counted for something,” Kelly said, remembering what Admiral Maxwell had said, in the sick bay of USS *Kitty Hawk,* that death should mean something, that his father’s death had.

“You’ve killed people, haven’t you?” Sandy asked.

“That’s what happens in a war,” Kelly agreed.

“What did that mean? What did it do?”

“If you want the big answer, I don’t have it. But the ones I took out didn’t ever hurt anybody else.” PLASTIC FLOWER sure as hell didn’t, he told himself. No more village chiefs and their families. Maybe someone else had taken the work over, but maybe not, too.

Sandy watched the traffic as he headed north on Broadway. “And the ones who killed Tim, did they think the same thing?”

"Maybe they did, but there's a difference." Kelly almost said that he'd never seen one of his people murder anyone, but he couldn't say *that* anymore, could he?

"But if everybody believes that, then where are we? It's not like diseases. You fight against things that hurt everybody. No politics and lying. We're not killing people. That's why I do this work, John."

"Sandy, thirty years ago there was a guy named Hitler who got his rocks off killing people like Sam and Sarah just because of what their goddamned names were. He had to be killed, and he was, too damned late, but he was." Wasn't that a simple enough lesson?

"We have problems enough right here," she pointed out. That was obvious from the sidewalks they passed, for Johns Hopkins was not in a comfortable neighborhood.

"I know that, remember?"

That statement deflated her. "I'm sorry, John."

"So am I." Kelly paused, searching for words. "There is a difference, Sandy. There are good people. I suppose most people are decent. But there are bad people, too. You can't wish them away, and you can't wish them to be good, because most won't change, and somebody has to protect the one bunch from the other. That's what I did."

"But how do you keep from turning into one of them?"

Kelly took his time considering that, regretting the fact that she was here at all. He didn't need to hear this, didn't want to have to examine his own conscience. Everything had been so clear the past couple of days. Once you decided that there was an enemy, then acting on that information was simply a matter of applying your training and experience. It wasn't something you had to *think* about. Looking at your conscience was hard, wasn't it?

"I've never had that problem," he said, finally, evading the issue. That was when he saw the difference. Sandy and her community fought against a *thing,* and fought bravely, risking their sanity in resisting the actions of forces whose root causes they could not directly address. Kelly and his fought against *people,* leaving the actions of their enemies to others, but able to seek them out and fight directly against their foe, even eliminating them if they were lucky. One side had absolute purity of purpose but lacked satisfaction. The other could attain the satisfaction of destroying the enemy, but only at the cost of becoming too much like what they

struggled against. Warrior and healer, parallel wars, similarity of purpose, but so different in their actions. Diseases of the body, and diseases of humanity itself. Wasn't that an interesting way to look at it?

"Maybe it's like this: it's not what you fight against. It's what you fight for."

"What are we fighting for in Vietnam?" Sandy asked Kelly again, having asked herself that question no less than ten times per day since she'd received the unwelcome telegram. "My husband died there and I don't still understand why."

Kelly started to say something but stopped himself. Really there was no answer. Bad luck, bad decisions, bad timing at more than one level of activity created the random events that caused soldiers to die on a distant battlefield, and even if you were there, it didn't always make sense. Besides, she'd probably heard every justification more than once from the man whose life she mourned. Maybe looking for that kind of meaning was nothing more than an exercise in futility. Maybe it wasn't supposed to make sense. Even if that were true, how could you live without the pretense that it did, somehow? He was still pondering that one when he turned onto her street.

"Your house needs some paint," Kelly told her, glad that it did.

"I know. I can't afford painters and I don't have the time to do it myself."

"Sandy—a suggestion?"

"What's that?"

"Let yourself live. I'm sorry Tim's gone, but he is gone. I lost friends over there, too. You have to go on."

The fatigue in her face was painful to see. Her eyes examined him in a professional sort of way, revealing nothing of what she thought or what she felt inside, but the fact that she troubled herself to conceal herself from him told Kelly something.

Something's changed in you. I wonder what it is. I wonder why, Sandy thought. Something had resolved itself. He'd always been polite, almost funny in his overpowering gentility, but the sadness she'd seen, that had almost matched her own undying grief, was gone now, replaced with something she couldn't quite fathom. It was strange, because he had never troubled to hide himself from her, and she thought herself able to penetrate whatever disguises he might erect. On that she was wrong, or perhaps she didn't know the

rules. She watched him get out, walk around the car, and open her door.

"Ma'am?" He gestured toward the house.

"Why are you so nice? Did Doctor Rosen…?"

"He just said you needed a ride, Sandy, honest. Besides, you look awful tired." Kelly walked her to the door.

"I don't know why I like talking to you," she said, reaching the porch steps.

"I wasn't sure that you did. You do?"

"I think so," O'Toole replied, with an almost-smile. The smile died after a second. "John, it's too soon for me."

"Sandy, it's too soon for me, too. Is it too soon to be friends?"

She thought about that. "No, not too soon for that."

"Dinner sometime? I asked once, remember?"

"How often are you in town?"

"More now. I have a job—well, something I have to do in Washington."

"Doing what?"

"Nothing important." And Sandy caught the scent of a lie, but it probably wasn't one aimed at hurting her.

"Next week maybe?"

"I'll give you a call. I don't know any good places around here."

"I do."

"Get some rest," Kelly told her. He didn't attempt to kiss her, or even take her hand. Just a friendly, caring smile before he walked away. Sandy watched him drive off, still wondering what there was about the man that was different. She'd never forget the look on his face, there on the hospital bed, but whatever that had been, it wasn't something she needed to fear.

Kelly was swearing quietly at himself as he drove away, wearing the cotton work gloves now, and rubbing them across every surface in the car that he could reach. He couldn't risk many conversations like this one. What was it all about? How the hell was he supposed to know? It was easy in the field. You identified the enemy, or more often somebody told you what was going on and who he was and where he was—frequently the information was wrong, but at least it gave you a starting place. But mission briefs never told you, really, how it was going to change the world or bring the war to an end. That was stuff you read in the paper, information repeated by reporters who didn't care, taken down from briefers who didn't

know or politicians who'd never troubled themselves to find out. "Infrastructure" and "cadre" were favorite words, but he'd hunted people, not infrastructure, whatever the hell that was supposed to be. Infrastructure was a *thing,* like what Sandy fought against. It wasn't a person who did evil things and could be hunted down like an offensive big-game animal. And how did that apply to what he was doing now? Kelly told himself that he had to control his thinking, stay to the easy stuff, just remember that he was hunting *people,* just as he had before. He wasn't going to change the whole world, just clean up one little corner.

"Does it still hurt, my friend?" Grishanov asked.

"I think I have some broken ribs."

Zacharias sat down in the chair, breathing slowly and in obvious pain. That worried the Russian. Such an injury could lead to pneumonia, and pneumonia could kill a man in this physical condition. The guards had been a little too enthusiastic in their assault on the man, and though it had been done at Grishanov's request, he hadn't wanted to do more than to inflict some pain. A dead prisoner would not tell him what he needed to know.

"I've spoken to Major Vinh. The little savage says he has no medicines to spare." Grishanov shrugged. "It might even be true. The pain, it is bad?"

"Every time I breathe," Zacharias replied, and he was clearly speaking the truth. His skin was even paler than usual.

"I have only one thing for pain, Robin," Kolya said apologetically, holding out his flask.

The American colonel shook his head, and even that appeared to hurt him. "I can't."

Grishanov spoke with the frustration of a man trying to reason with a friend. "Then you are a fool, Robin. Pain serves no one, not you, not me, not your God. Please, let me help you a little. Please?"

Can't do it, Zacharias told himself. To do so was to break his covenant. His body was a temple, and he had to keep it pure of such things as this. But the temple was broken. He feared internal bleeding most of all. Would his body be able to heal itself? It should, and under anything approaching normal circumstances, it would do so easily, but he knew that his physical condition was dreadful, his back still injured, and now his ribs. Pain was a companion now, and pain would make it harder for him to resist

questions, and so he had to measure his religion against his duty to resist. Things were less clear now. Easing the pain might make it easier to heal, and easier to stick to his duty. So what was the right thing? What ought to have been an easy question was clouded, and his eyes looked at the metal container. There was relief there. Not much, but some, and some relief was what he needed if he were to control himself.

Grishanov unscrewed the cap. "Do you ski, Robin?"

Zacharias was surprised by the question. "Yes, I learned when I was a kid."

"Cross-country?"

The American shook his head. "No, downhill."

"The snow in the Wasatch Mountains, it is good for skiing?"

Robin smiled, remembering. "Very good, Kolya. It's dry snow. Powdery, almost like very fine sand."

"Ah, the best kind of all. Here." He handed the flask over.

Just this once, Zacharias thought. *Just for the pain.* He took a swallow. *Push the pain back a few steps, just so I can keep myself together.*

Grishanov watched him do it, saw his eyes water, hoping the man wouldn't cough and hurt himself more. It was good vodka, obtained from the embassy's storeroom in Hanoi, the one thing his country always had in good supply, and the one thing the embassy always had enough of. The best quality of paper vodka, Kolya's personal favorite, actually flavored with old paper, something this American was unlikely to note—and something he himself missed after the third or fourth drink, if the truth be known.

"You are a good skier, Robin?"

Zacharias felt the warmth in his belly as it spread out and allowed his body to relax. In that relaxation his pain lessened, and he felt a little stronger, and if this Russian wanted to talk skiing, well, that couldn't hurt much, could it?

"I ski the expert slopes," Robin said with satisfaction. "I started when I was a kid. I think I was five when Dad took me the first time."

"Your father—also a pilot?"

The American shook his head. "No, a lawyer."

"My father is a professor of history at Moscow State University. We have a dacha, and in the winter when I was little, I could ski in the woods. I love the silence. All you can hear is the—how you say,

swish? Swish of the skis in the snow. Nothing else. Like a blanket on the earth, no noise, just silence."

"If you go up early, the mountains can be like that. You pick a day right after the snow ends, not much wind."

Kolya smiled. "Like flying, isn't it? Flying in a single-seat aircraft, a fair day with a few white clouds." He leaned forward with a crafty look. "Tell me, do you ever turn your radio off for a few minutes, just to be alone?"

"They let you do that?" Zacharias asked.

Grishanov chuckled, shaking his head. "No, but I do it anyway."

"Good for you," Robin said with a smile of his own, remembering what it was like. He thought of one particular afternoon, flying out of Mountain Home Air Force Base one February day in 1964.

"It is how God must feel, yes? All alone. You can ignore the noise of the engine. For me it just goes away after a few minutes. Is it the same for you?"

"Yeah, if your helmet fits right."

"That is the real reason I fly," Grishanov lied. "All the other rubbish, the paperwork, and the mechanical things, and the lectures, they are the price. To be up there, all alone, just like when I was a boy skiing in the woods—but better. You can see so far on a clear winter day." He handed Zacharias the flask again. "Do you suppose these little savages understand that?"

"Probably not." He wavered for a moment. Well, he'd already had one. Another couldn't hurt, could it? Zacharias took another swallow.

"What I do, Robin, I hold the stick just in my fingertips, like this." He demonstrated with the top of the flask. "I close my eyes for a moment, and when I open them, the world is different. Then I am not part of the world anymore. I am something else—an angel, perhaps," he said with good humor. "Then I possess the sky as I would like to possess a woman, but it is never quite the same. The best feelings are supposed to be alone, I think."

This guy really understands, doesn't he? He really understands *flying.* "You a poet or something?"

"I love poetry. I do not have the talent to make it, but that does not prevent me from reading it, and memorizing it, feeling what the poet tells me to feel," Grishanov said quietly, actually meaning what he said as he watched the American's eyes lose focus, becoming dreamy. "We are much alike, my friend."

“What’s the story on Ju-Ju?” Tucker asked.

“Looks like a ripoff. He got careless. One of yours, eh?” Charon said.

“Yeah, he moved a lot for us.”

“Who did it?” They were in the Main Branch of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, hidden in some rows, an ideal place, really. Hard to approach without being spotted, and impossible to bug. Even though a quiet place, there were just too many of the little alcoves.

“No telling, Henry. Ryan and Douglas were there, and it didn’t look to me like they had much. Hey, you going to get that worked up over one pusher?”

“You know better than that, but it puts a little dent in things. Never had one of mine wasted before.”

“You know better than *that,* Henry.” Charon flipped through some pages. “It’s a high-risk business. Somebody wanted a little cash, maybe some drugs, too, maybe break into the business quick? Look for a new pusher selling your stuff, maybe. Hell, as good as they were on the hit, maybe you could reach an understanding with ’em.”

“I have enough dealers. And making peace like that is bad for business. How they do ’em?”

“Very professional. Two in the head each. Douglas was talking like it was a mob hit.”

Tucker turned his head. “Oh?”

Charon spoke calmly, his back to the man. “Henry, this wasn’t the outfit. Tony isn’t going to do anything like that, is he?”

“Probably not.” *But Eddie might.*

“I need something,” Charon said next.

“What?”

“A dealer. What did you expect, a tip on the second at Pimlico?”

“Too many of ’em are mine now, remember?” It had been all right—better than that, really—to use Charon to eliminate the major competition, but as Tucker had consolidated his control on the local trade, he was able to target fewer and fewer independent operators for judicial elimination. That was particularly true of the majors. He had systematically picked out people with whom he had no interest in working, and the few who were left might be useful allies rather than rivals, if he could only find a way to negotiate with them.

“If you want me to be able to protect you, Henry, then I have to

be able to control investigations. For me to control the investigations, I have to land some big fish from time to time." Charon put the book back on the shelf. Why did he have to explain things like this to the man?

"When?"

"Beginning of the week, something tasty. I want to take down something that looks nice."

"I'll get back to you." Tucker replaced his book and walked away. Charon spent another few minutes, searching for the right book. He found it, along with the envelope that sat next to it. The police lieutenant didn't bother counting. He knew that the amount would be right.

Greer handled the introductions.

"Mr. Clark, this is General Martin Young, and this is Robert Ritter."

Kelly shook hands with both. The Marine was an aviator, like Maxwell and Podulski, both of whom were absent from this meeting. He hadn't a clue who Ritter was, but he was the one who spoke first.

"Nice analysis. Your language wasn't exactly bureaucratic, but you hit all the high points."

"Sir, it's not really all that hard to figure out. The ground assault ought to be fairly easy. You don't have first-line troops in a place like this, and those you have are looking in, not out. Figure two guys in each tower. The MGs are going to be set to point in, right? It takes a few seconds to move them. You can use the treeline to get close enough for M-79 range." Kelly moved his hands around the diagram. "Here's the barracks, only two doors, and I bet there's not forty guys in there."

"Come in here?" General Young tapped the southwest corner on the compound.

"Yes, sir." For an airedale, the Marine caught on pretty fast. "The trick's getting the initial strike team in close. You'll use weather for that, and this time of the year that shouldn't be real hard. Two gunships, just regular rockets and miniguns to hose these two buildings. Land the evac choppers here. It's all over in under five minutes from when the shooting starts. That's the land phase. I'll leave the rest to the fliers."

"So you say the real key is to get the assault element in close on

the ground—"

"No, sir. If you want to do another Song Tay, you can duplicate the whole plan, crash the chopper in the compound, the whole nine yards—but I keep hearing you want it done small."

"Correct," Ritter said. "Has to be small. There's no way we can sell this as a major operation."

"Fewer assets, sir, and you have to use different tactics. The good news is that it's a small objective, not all that many people to get out, not many bad guys to get in the way."

"But no safety factor," General Young said, frowning.

"Not much of one," Kelly agreed. "Twenty-five people. Land them in this valley, they hump over this hill, get into place, do the towers, blow this gate. Then the gunships come in and hose these two buildings while the assault element hits this building here. The snakes orbit while the slicks do the pickup, and we all boogie the hell down the valley."

"Mr. Clark, you're an optimist," Greer observed, reminding Kelly of his cover name at the same time. If General Young found out that Kelly had been a mere chief, they'd never get his support, and Young had already stretched a long way for them, using up his whole year's construction budget to build the mockup in the woods of Quantico.

"It's all stuff I've done before, Admiral."

"Who's going to get the personnel?" Ritter asked.

"That's being taken care of," James Greer assured him.

Ritter sat back, looking at the photos and diagrams. He was putting his career on the line, as was Greer and everyone else. But the alternative to doing something was doing nothing. Doing nothing meant that at least one good man, and perhaps twenty more, would never come home again. That wasn't the real reason, though, Ritter admitted to himself. The real reason was that others had decided that the lives of those men didn't matter, and those others might make the same decision again. That kind of thinking would someday destroy his Agency. You couldn't recruit agents if the word got out that America didn't protect those who worked for her. Keeping faith was more than the right thing. It was also good business.

"Better to get things going before we break the story," he said. "It'll be easier to get a 'go-mission' if we've already got it ready to go. Make it look like a unique opportunity. That's the other big

mistake they made with KINGPIN. It was too obviously aimed at getting a hunting license, and that was never in the cards. What we have here is a one-time rescue mission. I can take that to my friends in the NSC. That'll fly, probably, but we have to be ready to go when I do that."

"Bob, does that mean you're on our side?" Greer asked.

Ritter took a long moment before answering. "Yes, it does."

"We need an additional safety factor," Young said, looking at the large-scale map, figuring how the helicopters would get in.

"Yes, sir," Kelly said. "Somebody has to go in early and eyeball things." They still had both photos of Robin Zacharias out, one of an Air Force colonel, standing upright, holding his cap under his arm, chest decorated with silver wings and ribbons, smiling confidently into the camera with his family arrayed around him; and the other of a bowed, bedraggled man, about to be butt-stroked from behind. *Hell,* he thought, *why not one more crusade?*

"I guess that's me."

17

Complications

Archie hadn't known much, but it turned out to be enough for Kelly's purposes. All he really needed now was a little more sleep.

Tracking someone in a car, he found, was harder than it appeared on TV, and harder than it had been in New Orleans the one time he'd attempted it. If you followed too closely you ran the risk of being spotted. If you held too far back, you might lose the guy. Traffic complicated everything. Trucks could obstruct your vision. Watching one car half a block away necessarily caused you to ignore cars closer to you, and those, he found, could do the damnedest things. For all that, he blessed Billy's red Roadrunner. It was easy to spot, with its bright color, and even though the driver liked to lay rubber on the street and corner, he still couldn't break all that many traffic laws without attracting the attention of the police, something he didn't want to do any more than Kelly did.

Kelly had sighted the car just after seven in the evening, close to the bar which Archie had identified. Whatever he was like, Kelly thought, he didn't know much about being covert, but the car told him that. The mud was gone, he saw at once. The car looked freshly washed and waxed, and from their previous encounter, he knew Billy to be a man who treasured the thing. It offered a few interesting possibilities which Kelly considered while he trailed him, never closer than half a block, getting a feel for how he moved. It was soon apparent that he stayed clear of the major thoroughfares as much as possible and knew the side streets as a weasel knew his den. That placed Kelly at a disadvantage. Balancing it was the fact that Kelly was driving a car nobody noticed. There were just too many used Beetles on the street for one

more to attract notice.

After forty minutes the pattern became clear. The Roadrunner turned right quickly and came to a stop at the end of the block. Kelly weighed his options and kept going, slowly. As he approached he saw a girl get out, carrying a purse. She walked up to an old friend, the Wizard, several blocks from his usual hangout. Kelly didn't see a transfer of any kind—the two walked into a building and remained hidden for a minute or two until the girl came out—but he didn't have to. The event fitted what Pam had told him. Better yet, it identified the Wizard, Kelly told himself, turning left and approaching a red light. Now he knew two things he hadn't known before. In his rearview mirror he saw the Roadrunner cross the street. The girl headed the same way, disappearing from his view as the light changed. Kelly turned right and right again, spotting the Plymouth as it proceeded south with three people inside. He hadn't noticed the man—probably a man—before, crouching in back.

Darkness was falling rapidly, the good time of the day for John Kelly. He continued to follow the Roadrunner, leaving his lights off as long as he dared, and was rewarded by seeing it stop at a brownstone corner house, where all three occupants got out, having made their deliveries for the night to four pushers. He gave them a few minutes, parking his car a few blocks away and coming back on foot to observe, again disguised as a street drunk. The local architecture made it easier. All of the houses on the other side of the street had marble front steps, large, rectangular blocks of stone that made for good cover and concealment. It was just a matter of sitting on the sidewalk and leaning back against them, and he could not be seen from behind. Picking the right set of steps, close but not too close to a working street light, gave him a nice shadow in which to conceal himself, and besides, who paid any attention to a street bum anyway? Kelly adopted the same sort of drunken huddle he'd seen in others, occasionally lifting his bag-covered bottle for a simulated sip while he watched the corner brownstone for several hours.

Blood types O+, O-, and AB-, he remembered from the pathology report. The semen left inside Pam had been matched to those blood types, and he wondered what blood type Billy's was, as he sat there, fifty yards away from the house. The traffic moved on the street. People walked back and forth. Perhaps three people had given him

a look, but nothing more than that as he feigned sleep, watching the house from the corner of his eye and listening to every sound for possible danger as the hours passed. A pusher was working the sidewalk perhaps twenty yards or so behind him, and he listened to the man's voice, for the first time hearing how he described his product and negotiated the price, listening also to the different voices of the customers. Kelly had always possessed unusually good hearing—it had saved his life more than once—and this, too, was valuable intelligence information for his mind to catalog and analyze as the hours passed. A stray dog came up to him, sniffing in a curious, friendly way, and Kelly didn't shoo it away. That would have been out of character—had it been a rat things might have been different, he thought—and maintaining his disguise was important.

What sort of neighborhood had this been? Kelly wondered. On his side the dwellings were fairly ordinary brick row-houses. The other side was a little different, the more substantial brownstones perhaps fifty percent wider. Maybe this street had been the border between ordinary working people and the more substantial members of the turn-of-the-century middle class. Maybe that brownstone had been the upscale home of a merchant or a sea captain. Maybe it had resonated to the sound of a piano on the weekends, from a daughter who'd studied at the Peabody Conservatory. But they'd all moved on to places where there was grass, and this house, too, was now vacant, a brown, three-story ghost of a different time. He was surprised at how wide the streets were, perhaps because when they'd been laid out the principal mode of transport had been horse-powered wagons. Kelly shook the thought off. It was not relevant, and his mind had to concentrate on what was.

Four hours, finally, had passed when the three came out again, the men in the lead, the girl following. Shorter than Pam, stockier. Kelly risked himself slightly by lifting his head to watch. He needed to get a good look at Billy, who he assumed to be the driver. Not a very impressive figure, really, perhaps five-nine, slim at one-fifty or so, something shiny at his wrist, a watch or bracelet; he moved with brisk economy—and arrogance. The other was taller and more substantial, but a subordinate, Kelly thought, from the way he moved and the way he followed. The girl, he saw, followed more docilely still, her head down. Her blouse, if that's what it was, wasn't fully buttoned, and she got into the car without raising her

head to look around or do anything else that might proclaim interest in the world around her. The girl's movements were slow and uneven, probably from drugs, but that wasn't all of it. There was something else, something Kelly didn't quite catch about her that was disturbing nonetheless… a slackness, perhaps. Not laziness in her movement but something else. Kelly blinked hard when he remembered where he'd seen it before. At the *ville,* during PLASTIC FLOWER, the way the villagers had moved to assemble when they'd been summoned. Resigned, automatic motion, like living robots under the control of that major and his troops. They would have moved the same way to their deaths. And so she moved. And so would she.

So it was all true, then, Kelly thought. *They really did use girls as couriers… among other things.* The car started as he watched, and Billy's manner with the car matched the name to the driver. The car jerked a few feet to the corner, then turned left, accelerating with the squeal of tires across the intersection and out of Kelly's sight. *Billy, five-nine, slim, watch or bracelet, arrogant.* The positive identification was set in Kelly's brain, along with the face and the hair. He wouldn't forget it. The other male form was recorded as well, the one without a name—just a destiny far more immediate than its owner knew.

Kelly checked the watch in his pocket. One-forty. What had they been doing in there? Then he remembered other things that Pam had said. A little party, probably. That girl, whoever she was, probably also had O+, O-, or AB- fluid in her. But Kelly couldn't save the whole world, and the best way to save her had nothing at all to do with freeing her directly. He relaxed himself, just a little, waiting, because he didn't want his movement to appear to be linked with anything in case someone might have seen him, even be watching him now. There were lights in some of these houses, and so he lingered in his spot for another thirty minutes, enduring his thirst and some minor cramps before rising and shambling off to the corner. He'd been very careful tonight, very careful and very effective, and it was time for the second phase of the night's work. Time to continue his efforts at making a diversion.

Mainly he stuck to alleys, moving slowly, allowing his gait to wander left and right for several blocks in the undulating path of a snake—he smiled—before he went back to the streets, only pausing briefly to put on the pair of rubber surgical gloves. He passed a

number of pushers and their lieutenants as time passed, looking for the right one. His path was what is called a quartering search, a series of ninety-degree turns centered actually on where his Volkswagen was parked. He had to be careful, as always, but he was the unknown hunter, and the prey animals had no idea what they were, deeming themselves to be predators themselves. They were entitled to their illusions.

It was almost three when Kelly selected him. A loner, as Kelly had taken to calling them. This one had no lieutenant, perhaps was a new one in this business, just learning the ropes. He wasn't that old, or didn't appear so from forty yards away, as he counted through his roll after the night's enterprise. There was a lump at his right hip, undoubtedly a handgun, but his head was down. He was somewhat alert. On hearing Kelly's approach the head came up and turned, giving him a quick once-over, but the head went back to its task, dismissing the approaching shape and counting the money as the distance closed.

Kelly had troubled himself to go to his boat earlier in the day, using the Scout because he didn't want anyone at the yard to know that he had a different car, and retrieving something. As he approached Junior—everyone had to have an assigned name, however briefly—Kelly shifted the wine bottle from his right hand to his left. The right hand then pulled the cotter pin from the tip of the bang stick that was inside his new bush jacket, held in cloth loops on the left side on the now unbuttoned garment. It was a simple metal rod, eighteen inches long, with a screw-on cylinder at the tip, and the cotter pin dangled from a short length of light chain. Kelly's right hand removed it from the loops, still holding it in place as he closed on Junior.

The pusher's head turned again in annoyance. Probably he had trouble counting, and now he was arranging the bills by denomination. Maybe Kelly's approach had disturbed his concentration, or maybe he was just dumb, which seemed the more likely explanation.

Kelly stumbled, falling to the sidewalk, his head lowered, making himself look all the more harmless. His eyes looked backwards as he rose. He saw no other pedestrians within more than a hundred yards, and the only automobile lights he noted were red, not white, all pointed or heading away. As his head came up, there was no one at all in his view except for Junior, who was finishing up the night's

work, ready to go wherever home was for a nightcap or something else.

Ten feet now, and the pusher was ignoring him as he might ignore a stray dog, and Kelly knew the exhilaration that came the moment before it happened, that last moment of excited satisfaction when you just knew it was going to work, the enemy in the kill zone, unsuspecting that his time had come. The moment in which you could feel the blood in your veins, when you alone knew the silence was about to be violated, the wonderful satisfaction of knowing. Kelly's right hand came out a little as he took another step, still not headed all that close to the target, clearly walking past him, not towards him, and the criminal's eyes looked up again, just for a moment to make sure, no fear in his eyes, hardly even annoyance; not moving, of course, because people walked around *him,* not the reverse. Kelly was just an object to him, one of the things that occupied the street, of no more interest than an oil stain on the blacktop.

The Navy called it CPA, Closest Point of Approach, the nearest distance that a straight course took you to another ship or point of land. CPA here was three feet. When he was half a step away, Kelly's right hand pulled the bang stick from under his jacket. Then he pivoted on his left foot and drove off the right while his right arm extended almost as though to deliver a punch, all one hundred ninety-five pounds of his body mass behind the maneuver. The swollen tip of the bang stick struck the pusher just under the sternum, aimed sharply upward. When it did, the combined push of Kelly's arm and the inertial mass of the body pushed the chamber backwards, jamming the primer on the fixed firing pin, and the shotgun shell went off, its crimped green-plastic face actually in contact with Junior's shirt.

The sound was like that of dropping a cardboard box on a wooden floor. *Whump.* Nothing more than that, certainly not like a shot at all, because all the expanding gas from the powder followed the shot column into Junior's body. The light trap load—a low-brass shell with #8 birdshot, like that used for competition shooting, or perhaps an early-season dove hunt—would have only injured a man at more than fifteen yards, but in contact with his chest, it might as easily have been an elephant gun. The brutal power of the shot drove the air from his lungs in a surprisingly loud *whoosh,* forcing Junior's mouth open in a way that surprise might have done. And

truly he was surprised. His eyes looked into Kelly's, and Junior was still alive, though his heart was already as destroyed as a toy balloon, and the bottom of his lungs torn to bits. Gratifyingly, there was no exit wound. The upward angle of the strike left all of the energy and shot inside the chest, and the power of the explosion served to keep his body erect for a second—no more than that, but for Junior and Kelly it seemed a moment that lasted for hours. Then the body just fell, straight down, like a collapsing building. There was an odd, deep sigh, from air and gun-gases forced out of the entrance wound by the fall, a foul odor of acrid smoke and blood and other things that stained the air, not unlike the ended life it represented. Junior's eyes were still open, still looking at Kelly, still focusing on his face and trying to say something, his mouth open and quivering until all movement stopped with the question un-asked and -answered. Kelly took the roll from Junior's still-firm hand and kept moving up the street, his eyes and ears searching for danger, and finding none. At the corner he angled to the gutter and swished the tip of the bang stick in some water to remove whatever blood might be there. Then he turned, heading west to his car, still moving slowly and unevenly. Forty minutes later he was home, richer by eight hundred forty dollars and poorer by one shotgun shell.

"And who's this one?" Ryan asked.

"Would you believe, Bandanna?" the uniformed officer answered. He was an experienced patrol officer, white, thirty-two years old. "Deals smack. Well, not anymore."

The eyes were still open, which was not terribly common in murder victims, but this one's death had been a surprise, and a very traumatic one at that, despite which the body was amazingly tidy. There was a three-quarter-inch entrance wound with a jet-black ring around it like a donut, perhaps an eighth of an inch in thickness. That was from powder, and the diameter of the hole was unmistakably that of a 12-gauge shotgun. Beyond the skin was just a hole, like into an empty box. All of the internal organs had either been immolated or simply pulled down by gravity. It was the first time in his life that Emmet Ryan had ever looked *into* a dead body this way, as though it were not a body at all, but a mannequin.

"Cause of death," the coroner observed with early-morning irony, "is the total vaporization of his heart. The only way we'll even be

able to identify heart tissue is under a microscope. Steak tartare," the man added, shaking his head.

"An obvious contact wound. The guy must have jammed the muzzle right into him, then triggered it off."

"Jesus, he didn't even cough up any blood," Douglas said. The lack of an exit wound left no blood at all on the sidewalk, and from a distance Bandanna actually looked as though he were asleep—except for the wide and lifeless eyes.

"No diaphragm," the ME explained, pointing to the entrance *hole*. "That's between here and the heart. We'll probably find that the whole respiratory system is wiped out, too. You know, I've never seen anything this clean in my life." And the man had been working this job for sixteen years. "We need *lots* of pictures. This one will find its way into a textbook."

"How experienced was he?" Ryan asked the uniformed officer.

"Long enough to know better."

The detective lieutenant bent down, feeling around the left hip. "Still has a gun here."

"Somebody he knew?" Douglas wondered. "Somebody he let get real close, that's for damned sure."

"A shotgun's kinda hard to conceal. Hell, even a sawed-off is bulky. No warning at all?" Ryan stepped back for the ME to do his work.

"Hands are clean, no signs of a struggle. Whoever did this got real close without alarming our friend at all." Douglas paused. "Goddamn it, a shotgun's *noisy*. Nobody heard anything?"

"Time of death, call it two or three for now," the medical examiner estimated, for again there was no rigor.

"Streets are quiet then," Douglas went on. "And a shotgun makes a shitload of noise."

Ryan looked at the pants pockets. No bulge of a money roll, again. He looked around. There were perhaps fifteen people watching from behind the police line. Street entertainment was where you found it, and the interest on their faces was no less clinical and no more involved than that of the medical examiner.

"The Duo maybe?" Ryan asked nobody in particular.

"No, it wasn't," the ME said at once. "This was a single-barrel weapon. A double would have made a mark left or right of the entrance wound, and the powder distribution would have been different. Shotgun, this close, you only need one. Anyway, a single-

barrel weapon."

"Amen," Douglas agreed. "Someone is doing the Lord's work. Three pushers down in a couple of days. Might put Mark Charon out of business if this keeps up."

"Tom," Ryan said, "not today." *One more folder,* he thought. *Another drug-pusher ripoff, done very efficiently—but not the same guy who'd taken Ju-Ju down. Different MO.*

Another shower, another shave, another jog in Chinquapin Park during which he could think. Now he had a place and a face to go along with the car. The mission was on profile, Kelly thought, turning right on Belvedere Avenue to cross the stream before jogging back the other way and completing his third lap. It was a pleasant park. Not much in the way of playground equipment, but that allowed kids to run and play free-form, which a number of them were doing, some under the semiwatchful eyes of a few neighborhood mothers, many with books to go along with the sleeping infants who would soon grow to enjoy the grass and open spaces. There was an undermanned pickup game of baseball. The ball evaded the glove of a nine-year-old and came close to his jogging path. Kelly bent down without breaking stride and tossed the ball to the kid, who caught it this time and yelled a thank-you. A younger child was playing with a Frisbee, not too well, and wandered in Kelly's way, causing a quick avoidance maneuver that occasioned an embarrassed look from her mother, to which Kelly responded with a friendly wave and smile.

This is how it's supposed to be, he told himself. Not very different from his own youth in Indianapolis. Dad's at work. Mom's with the kids because it was hard to be a good mom and have a job, especially when they were little; or at least, those mothers who had to work or chose to work could leave the kids with a trusted friend, sure that the little ones would be safe to play and enjoy their summer vacation in a green and open place, learning to play ball. And yet society had learned to accept the fact that it wasn't this way for many. This area was so different from his area of operations, and the privileges these kids enjoyed ought not to be privileges at all, for how could a child grow to proper adulthood without an environment like this?

Those were dangerous thoughts, Kelly told himself. The logical conclusion was to try to change the whole world, and that was

beyond his capacity, he thought, finishing his three-mile run with the usual sweaty and good-tired feel, walking it off to cool down before he drove back to the apartment. The sounds drifted over of laughing children, the squeals, the angry shouts of *cheater!* for some perceived violation of rules not fully understood by either player, and disagreements over who was out or who was "it" in some other game. He got into his car, leaving the sounds and thought behind, because he was cheating, too, wasn't he? He was breaking the rules, important rules that he *did* fully understand, but doing so in pursuit of justice, or what he called justice in his own mind.

Vengeance? Kelly asked himself, crossing a street. *Vigilante* was the next word that came unbidden into his mind. That was a better word, Kelly thought. It came from *vigiles,* a Roman term for those who kept the watch, the *vigilia* during the night in the city streets, mainly watchmen for fire, if he remembered correctly from the Latin classes at St. Ignatius High School, but being Romans they'd probably carried swords, too. He wondered if the streets of Rome had been safe, safer than the streets of this city. Perhaps so—probably so. Roman justice had been… stern. Crucifixion would not have been a pleasant way to die, and for some crimes, like the murder of one's father, the penalty prescribed by law was to be bound in a cloth sack along with a dog and a rooster, and some other animal, then to be tossed in the Tiber—not to drown, but to be torn apart while drowning by animals crazed to get out of the sack. Perhaps he was the linear descendant of such times, of a *vigile,* Kelly told himself, keeping watch at night. It made him feel better than to believe that he was breaking the law. And "vigilantes" in American history books were very different from those portrayed in the press. Before the organization of real police departments, private citizens had patrolled the streets and kept the peace in a rough-and-ready way. As he was doing?

Well, no, not really, Kelly admitted to himself, parking the car. So what if it was vengeance? Ten minutes later another garbage bag filled with another set of discarded clothes found its way to the Dumpster, and Kelly enjoyed another shower before making a telephone call.

"Nurses' station, O'Toole."

"Sandy? It's John. Still getting out at three?"

"You do have good timing," she said, allowing herself a private

smile at her stand-up desk. “The damn car is broke again.” And taxicabs cost too much.

“Want me to look at it?” Kelly asked.

“I wish somebody could fix it.”

“I make no promises,” she heard him say. “But I come cheap.”

“How cheap?” Sandy asked, knowing what the reply would be.

“Permit me to buy you dinner? You can pick the place, even.”

“Yes, okay… but…”

“But it’s still too soon for both of us. Yes, ma’am, I know that. Your virtue is not endangered—honest.”

She had to laugh. It was just so incongruous that this big man could be so self-effacing. And yet she knew that she could trust him, and she was weary of cooking dinner for one, and being alone and alone and alone. Too soon or not, she needed company sometimes.

“Three-fifteen,” she told him, “at the main entrance.”

“I’ll even wear my patient bracelet.”

“Okay.” Another laugh, surprising another nurse who passed by the station with a trayful of medications. “Okay, I said yes, didn’t I?”

• • •

“Yes, ma’am. See you then,” Kelly said with a chuckle, hanging up.

Some human contact would be nice, he told himself, heading out the door. First Kelly headed to a shoe store, where he purchased a pair of black high-tops, size eleven. Then he found four more shoe stores, where he did the same, trying not to get the same brand, but he ended up with one duplicate pair even so. The same problem attended the purchase of bush jackets. He could find only two brand names for that type of garment, and ended up getting a pair of duplicates, then to discover that they were exactly the same, different only in the name tag inside the neck. Planned diversity in disguise, he found, was harder than he’d expected it to be, but that didn’t lessen the necessity of sticking to his plan. On getting back to his apartment—he was, perversely, thinking of it as “home” though he knew better—he stripped everything of tags and headed for the laundry room, where all the clothes went into the machine on a hot-hot cycle with plenty of Clorox bleach, along with the remaining dark-color clothes he’d picked up at yard sales. He was down to three clothing sets now, and realized he’d have to shop for more.

The thought evoked a frown. More yard sales, which he found tedious, especially now that he'd developed an operational routine. Like most men Kelly hated shopping, now all the more since his adventures were of necessity repetitive. His routine was also tiring him out, both from lack of sleep and the unremitting tension of his activity. None of it was routine, really. Everything was dangerous. Even though he was becoming accustomed to his mission, he would not become inured to the dangers, and the stress was there. That was partly good news in that he wasn't taking anything lightly, but stress could also wear at any man in little, hard-to-perceive ways such as the increased heart rate and blood pressure that resulted in fatigue. He was controlling it with exercise, Kelly thought, though sleep was becoming a problem. All in all it was not unlike working the weeds in 3rd SOG, but he was older now, and the lack of backup, the absence of companions to share the stress and ease the strain in the off-hours, was taking its toll. *Sleep,* he told himself, checking his watch. Kelly switched on the TV set in the bedroom, catching a noon news show.

"Another drug dealer was found dead in west Baltimore today," the reporter announced.

"I know," Kelly said back, fading out for his nap.

"Here's the story," a Marine colonel said at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, while another was doing much the same thing at exactly the same time at Camp Pendleton, California. "We have a special job. We're selecting volunteers exclusively from Force Recon. We need fifteen people. It's dangerous. It's important. It's something you'll be proud of doing after it's over. The job will last two to three months. That's all I can say."

At Lejeune a collection of perhaps seventy-five men, all combat veterans, all members of The Corps' most exclusive unit, sat in their hard-backed chairs. Recon Marines, they'd all volunteered to become Marines first—there were no draftees here—then done so again to join the elite within the elite. There was a slightly disproportionate representation of minorities, but that was only a matter of interest to sociologists. These men were *Marines* first, last, always, as alike as their green suits could make them. Many bore scars on their bodies, because their job was more dangerous and demanding than that of ordinary infantrymen. They specialized in going out in small groups, to look and learn, or to kill with a very

high degree of selectivity. Many of them were qualified snipers, able to place an aimed shot in a particular head at four hundred yards, or a chest at over a thousand, if the target had the good manners to stand still for the second or two needed for the bullet to cover the longer distance. They were the hunters. Few had nightmares from their duties, and none would ever fall victim to delayed-stress syndrome, because they deemed themselves to be predators, not prey, and lions know no such feelings.

But they were also men. More than half had wives and/or children who expected Daddy to come home from time to time; the rest had sweethearts and looked forward to settling down in the indeterminate future. All had served one thirteen-month tour of duty. Many had served two; a handful had actually served three, and none of this last group would volunteer. Some of them might have, perhaps most, had they only known the nature of the mission, because the call of duty was unusually strong in them, but duty takes many forms, and these men judged that they had served as much as any man should for one war. Now their job was to train their juniors, passing along the lessons that had enabled them to return home when others almost as good as they were had not; that was their institutional duty to The Corps, they all thought, as they sat quietly in their chairs and looked at the Colonel on the stage, wondering what *it* was, intensely curious but not curious enough to place their lives at risk again after having done so too often already. A few of them looked furtively left and right, reading the faces of the younger men, knowing from the expressions which ones would linger in the room and place their names in the hat. Many would regret not staying behind, knowing even now that not knowing what it was all about, and probably never finding out, would forever leave a blank spot on their consciences—but against that they weighed the faces of their wives and children and decided no, not this time.

After a few moments the men rose and filed out. Perhaps twenty-five or thirty stayed behind to register their names as volunteers. Their personnel jackets would be collected quickly and evaluated, and fifteen of their number would be selected in a process that appeared random but was not. Some special slots had to be filled with special skills, and in the nature of volunteering, some of the men rejected would actually be better and more proficient warriors than some of those accepted because their personal skills had been

made redundant by another volunteer. Such was life in uniform, and the men all accepted it, each with feelings of regret and relief as they returned to their normal duties. By the end of the day, the men who were going were assembled and briefed on departure times and nothing more. A bus would be taking them, they noted. They couldn't be going very far. At least not yet.

Kelly awoke at two and got himself cleaned up. This afternoon's mission demanded that he look civilized, and so he wore a shirt and a tie and a jacket. His hair, still growing back from being shaved, needed a trim, but it was a little late for that. He selected a blue tie for his blue blazer and white shirt and walked out to where the Scout was parked, looking like the executive salesman he'd pretended to be, waving at the apartment manager on the way.

Luck smiled on Kelly. There was an opening on the traffic loop at the hospital's main entrance, and he walked in to see a large statue of Christ in the lobby, perhaps fifteen or twenty feet high, staring down at him with a benign expression more fitting to a hospital than to what Kelly had been doing only twelve hours earlier. He walked around it, his back to the statue's back because he didn't need that sort of question on his conscience—not now.

Sandy O'Toole appeared at three-twelve, and when he saw her come through the oak doors Kelly smiled until he saw the look on her face. A moment later he understood why. A surgeon was right behind her, a short, swarthy man in greens, walking as rapidly as his short legs permitted and talking loudly at her. Kelly hesitated, looking on with curiosity as Sandy stopped and turned, perhaps tired of running away or merely bending to the necessity of the moment. The doctor was of her height, perhaps a little less, speaking so rapidly that Kelly didn't catch all the words while Sandy looked in his eyes with a blank expression.

"The incident report is filed, doctor," she said during a brief pause in his tirade.

"You have no right to do that!" The eyes blazed angrily in his dark, pudgy face, causing Kelly to draw a little closer.

"Yes, I do, doctor. Your medication order was incorrect. I am the team leader, and I am *required* to report medication errors."

"I am *ordering* you to withdraw that report! Nurses do not give orders to doctors!" What followed was language that Kelly didn't like, especially in the presence of God's image. As he watched, the

doctor's dark face grew darker, and he leaned into the nurse's space, his voice growing louder. For her part, Sandy didn't flinch, refusing to allow herself to be intimidated, which goaded the doctor further.

"Excuse me." Kelly intruded on the dispute, not too close, just to let everyone know that someone was here, and momentarily drawing an angry look from Sandra O'Toole. "I don't know what you two are arguing about, but if you're a doctor and the lady here is a nurse, maybe you two can disagree in a more professional way," he suggested in a quiet voice.

It was as though the physician hadn't heard a thing. Not since he was sixteen years old had anyone ignored Kelly so blatantly. He drew back, wanting Sandy to handle this herself, but the doctor's voice merely grew louder, switching now to a language he didn't understand, mixing English vituperation with Farsi. Through it all Sandy stood her ground, and Kelly was proud of her, though her face was growing wooden and her impassive mien had to be masking some real fear now. Her impassive resistance only goaded the doctor into raising his hand and then his voice even more. It was when he called her a "fucking cunt," doubtless something learned from a local citizen, that he stopped. The fist that he'd been waving an inch from Sandy's nose had disappeared, encased, he saw with surprise, in the hairy forepaw of a very large man.

"Excuse me," Kelly said in his gentlest voice. "Is there somebody upstairs who knows how to fix a broken hand?" Kelly had wrapped his fingers around the surgeon's smaller, more delicate hand, and was pressing the fingers inward, just a little.

A security guard came through the door just then, drawn by the noise of the argument. The doctor's eyes went that way at once.

"He won't get here fast enough to help you, doctor. How many bones in the human hand, sir?" Kelly asked.

"Twenty-eight," the doctor replied automatically.

"Want to go for fifty-six?" Kelly tightened his pressure.

The doctor's eyes closed on Kelly's, and the smaller man saw a face whose expression was neither angry nor pleased, merely there, looking at him as though he were an object, whose polite voice was a mocking expression of superiority. Most of all, he knew that the man would do it.

"Apologize to the lady," Kelly said next.

"I do not abase myself before women!" the doctor hissed. A little

more pressure on the hand caused his face to change. Only a little additional force, he knew, and things would begin to separate.

"You have very bad manners, sir. You only have a little time to learn better ones." Kelly smiled. "Now," he commanded. "Please."

"I'm sorry, Nurse O'Toole," the man said, without really meaning it, but the humiliation was still a bleeding gash on his character. Kelly released the hand. Then he lifted the doctor's name tag, and read it before staring again into his eyes.

"Doesn't that feel better, Doctor Khofan? Now, you won't ever yell at her again, at least not when she's right and you're wrong, will you? And you won't *ever* threaten her with bodily harm, will you?" Kelly didn't have to explain why that was a bad idea. The doctor was flexing his fingers to work off the pain. "We don't like that here, okay?"

"Yes, okay," the man said, wanting to run away.

Kelly took his hand again, shaking it with a smile, just enough pressure for a reminder. "I'm glad you understand, sir. I think you can go now."

And Dr. Khofan left, walking past the security guard without so much as a look. The guard did give one to Kelly, but let it go at that.

"Did you have to do that?" Sandy asked.

"What do you mean?" Kelly replied, turning his head around.

"I was handling it," she said, now moving to the door.

"Yes, you were. What's the story, anyway?" Kelly asked in a reasonable voice.

"He prescribed the wrong medication, elderly man with a neck problem, he's allergic to the med, and it's on the chart," she said, the words spilling out rapidly as Sandy's stress started bleeding off. "It could have really hurt Mr. Johnston. Not the first time with him, either. Doctor Rosen might get rid of him this time, and he wants to stay here. He likes pushing nurses around, too. We don't like that. But I was handling it!"

"Next time I'll let him break your nose, then." Kelly waved to the door. There wouldn't be a next time; he'd seen that in the little bastard's eyes.

"And then what?" Sandy asked.

"Then he'll stop being a surgeon for a while. Sandy, I don't like seeing people do things like that, okay? I don't like bullies, and I really don't like seeing them push women around."

"You really hurt people like that?"

Kelly opened the door for her. "No, not very often. Mainly they listen to my warnings. Look at it this way, if he hits you, you get hurt and he gets hurt. This way nobody gets hurt except for a few bent feelings, maybe, and nobody ever died from that."

Sandy didn't press the issue. Partly she was annoyed, feeling that she'd stood up well to the doctor, who wasn't all that good a surgeon and was far too careless on his post-op technique. He only did charity patients, and only those with simple problems, but that, she knew, was beside the point. Charity patients were *people,* and *people* merited the best care the profession could provide. He had frightened her. Sandy had been glad of the protection, but somehow felt cheated that she hadn't faced Khofan down herself. Her incident report would probably sink him once and for all, and the nurses on the unit would trade chuckles about it. Nurses in hospitals, like NCOs in any military unit, really ran things, after all, and it was a foolish doctor who crossed them.

But she'd learned something about Kelly this day. The look she'd seen and been unable to forget had not been an illusion. Holding Khofan's right hand, the look on John's face had been—well, no expression at all, not even amusement at his humiliation of the little worm, and that was vaguely frightening to her.

"So what's wrong with your car?" Kelly asked, pulling onto Broadway and heading north.

"If I knew that, it wouldn't be broke."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense," Kelly allowed with a smile.

He's a changeling, Sandy told herself. He turns things on and off. With Khofan he was like a gangster or something. First he tried to calm things down with a reasonable word, but then he acted like he was going to inflict a permanent injury. Just like that. No emotion at all. Like squashing a bug. But if that's true, what *is* he? Was it temper? No, she told herself, probably not. He's too in control for that. A psychopath? That was a scary thought—but no, that wasn't possible either. Sam and Sarah wouldn't have a friend like that, and they're two very smart people.

What, then?

"Well, I brought my toolbox. I'm pretty good on diesels. Aside from our little friend, how was work?"

"A good day," Sandy said, glad again for the distraction. "We discharged one we were really worried about. Little black girl,

three, fell out of her crib. Doctor Rosen did a wonderful job on her. In a month or two you'll never know she was hurt at all."

"Sam's a good troop," Kelly observed. "Not just a good doc—he's got class, too."

"So's Sarah." *Good troop, that's what Tim would have said.*

"Great lady." Kelly nodded, turning left onto North Avenue. "She did a lot for Pam," he said, this time reporting facts without the time for reflection. Then Sandy saw his face change again, freezing in place as though he'd heard the words from another's voice.

The pain won't ever go away, will it? Kelly asked himself. Again he saw her in his mind, and for a brief, cruel second, he told himself—lied, knowing it even as it happened—that she was beside him, sitting there on the right seat. But it wasn't Pam, never would be again. His hands tightened on the plastic of the steering wheel, the knuckles suddenly white as he commanded himself to set it aside. Such thoughts were like minefields. You wandered into them, innocent, expecting nothing, then found out too late that there was danger. *It would be better not to remember,* Kelly thought. *I'd really be better off that way.* But if without memories, good and bad, what was life, and if you forgot those who mattered to you, then what did you become? And if you didn't act on those memories, what value did life have?

Sandy saw it all on his face. A changeling, perhaps, but not always guarded. *You're not a psychopath. You feel pain and they don't —at least not from the death of a friend. What are you, then?*

18

Interference

"Do it again," he told her.

Thunk.

"Okay, I know what it is," Kelly said. He leaned over her Plymouth Satellite, jacket and tie off, sleeves rolled up. His hands were already dirty from half an hour's probing.

"Just like that?" Sandy got out of her car, taking the keys with her, which seemed odd, on reflection, since the damned car wouldn't start. *Why not leave them in and let some car thief go nuts?* she wondered.

"I got it down to one thing. It's the solenoid switch."

"What's that?" she asked, standing next to Kelly and looking at the oily-blue mystery that was an automobile engine.

"The little switch you put the key in isn't big enough for all the juice you need to turn the starter, so that switch controls a bigger one here." Kelly pointed with a wrench. "It activates an electromagnet that closes a bigger switch, and that one lets the electricity go to the starter motor. Follow me so far?"

"I think so." Which was almost true. "They told me I needed a new battery."

"I suppose somebody told you that mechanics love to—"

"Jerk women around 'cuz we're so dumb with cars?" Sandy noted with a grimace.

"Something like that. You're going to have to pay me something, though," Kelly told her, rummaging in his toolbox.

"What's that?"

"I'm going to be too dirty to take you out to dinner. We have to eat here," he said, disappearing under the car, white shirt, worsted

slacks and all. A minute later he was back out, his hands dirty. “Try it now.”

Sandy got back in and turned the key. The battery was down a little but the engine caught almost at once.

“Leave it on to charge things up.”

“What was it?”

“Loose wire. All I did was tighten it up some.” Kelly looked at his clothes and grimaced. So did Sandy. “You need to take it into the shop and have a lock washer put on the nut. Then it shouldn’t get loose again.”

“You didn’t have to—”

“You have to get to work tomorrow, right?” Kelly asked reasonably. “Where can I wash up?”

Sandy led him into the house and pointed him towards a bathroom. Kelly got the grime off his hands before rejoining her in the living room.

“Where’d you learn to fix cars?” she asked, handing him a glass of wine.

“My dad was a shade-tree mechanic. He was a fireman, remember? He had to learn all that stuff, and he liked it. I learned from him. Thanks.” Kelly toasted her with the glass. He wasn’t a wine drinker, but it wasn’t bad.

“Was?”

“He died while I was in Vietnam, heart attack on the job. Mom’s gone, too. Liver cancer, when I was in grade school,” Kelly explained as evenly as he could. The pain was distant now. “That was tough. Dad and I were pretty close. He was a smoker, that’s probably what killed him. I was sick myself at the time, infection from a job I did. I couldn’t get home or anything. So I just stayed over there when I got better.”

“I wondered why nobody came to visit you, but I didn’t ask,” Sandy said, realizing how alone John Kelly was.

“I have a couple uncles and some cousins, but we don’t see each other much.”

It was a little clearer now, Sandy thought. Losing his mother at a young age, and in a particularly cruel and lingering way. He’d probably always been a big kid, tough and proud, but helpless to change things. Every woman in his life had been taken away by force of one kind or another: his mother, his wife, and his lover. *How much rage he must feel,* she told herself. It explained so much.

When he'd seen Khofan threatening her, it was something he could protect her from. She still thought she could have handled it herself, but now she understood a little better. It defused her lingering anger, as did his manner. He didn't get too close to her, didn't undress her with his eyes—Sandy particularly hated that, though, strangely, she allowed patients to do it because she felt that it helped to perk them up. He acted like a *friend,* she realized, as one of Tim's fellow officers might have done, mixing familiarity with respect for her identity, seeing her as a person first, a woman after that. Sandra Manning O'Toole found herself liking it. As big and tough as he was, there was nothing to fear from this man. It seemed an odd observation with which to begin a relationship, if that was the thing happening.

Another *thunk* announced the arrival of the evening paper. Kelly got it and scanned the front page before dropping it on the coffee table. A front-page story on this slow summer news day was the discovery of another dead drug pusher. She saw Kelly looking at it, scanning the first couple of paragraphs.

Henry's increasing control of the local drug traffic virtually ensured that the newly dead dealer had been one of his distant minions. He'd known the dead man by his street name and only learned the real one, Lionel Hall, from the news article. They'd never actually met, but Bandanna had been mentioned to him as a clever chap, one worth keeping his eye on. Not clever enough, Tucker thought. The ladder to success in his business was steep, with slippery rungs, the selection process brutally Darwinian, and somehow Lionel Hall had not been equal to the demands of his new profession. A pity, but not a matter of great import. Henry rose from his chair and stretched. He'd slept late, having taken delivery two days earlier of fully fifteen kilograms of "material," as he was starting to call it. The boat trip to and from the packaging point had taken its toll—it was becoming a pain in the ass, Tucker thought, maintaining that elaborate cover. Those thoughts were dangerous, however, and he knew it. This time he'd merely watched his people do the work. And now two more knew more than they'd known before, but he was tired of doing such menial work himself. He had minions for that, little people who knew that they were little and knew they would prosper only so long as they followed orders exactly.

Women were better at that than men. Men had egos that they had

to nurture within their own fertile minds, and the smaller the mind the greater the ego. Sooner or later one of his people would rebel, get a little too uppity. The hookers he used were so much more easily cowed, and then there was the fringe benefit of having them around. Tucker smiled.

Doris awoke about five, her head pounding with a barbiturate-induced hangover made worse still by the double shot of whiskey that someone had decided to give her. The pain told her that she would have to live another day, that the mixture of drugs and alcohol hadn't done the job she'd dared to hope for when she'd looked at the glass, hesitated, then gunned it down before the party. What had followed the whiskey and the drugs was only half remembered, and it blended into so many other such nights that she had trouble separating the new from the old.

They were more careful now. Pam had taught them that. She sat up, looking at the handcuff on her ankle, its other end locked in a chain that was in turn fastened to a fitting screwed into the wall. Had she thought about it, she might have tried ripping it out, which a healthy young woman might have accomplished with a few hours of determined effort. But escape was death, a particularly hard and lengthy death, and as much as she desired the escape from a life grown horrid beyond any nightmare, pain still frightened her. She stood, causing the chain to rattle. After a moment or two Rick came in.

"Hey, baby," the young man said with a smile that conveyed amusement rather than affection. He bent down, unlocked the cuffs, and pointed to the bathroom. "Shower. You need it."

"Where did you learn to cook Chinese?" Kelly asked.

"A nurse I worked with last year. Nancy Wu. She's teaching at the University of Virginia now. You like it?"

"You kidding me?" If the shortest distance to any man's heart is his stomach, then one of the better compliments a man can give a woman is to ask for seconds. He held himself to one glass of wine, but attacked the food as quickly as decent table manners allowed.

"It's not that good," Sandy said, blatantly fishing for a compliment.

"It's much better than what I fix for myself, but if you're thinking about writing a cookbook, you need somebody with better taste."

He looked up. “I visited Taipei for a week once, and this is almost that good.”

“What did you do there?”

“R and R, sort of a vacation from getting shot at.” Kelly stopped it there. Not everything he and his friends had done was proper information to convey to a lady. Then he saw that he’d gone too far already.

“That’s what Tim and—I already had it planned for us to meet in Hawaii, but—” Her voice stopped again.

Kelly wanted to reach out to her, take her hand across the table, just to comfort her, but he feared it might seem to be an advance.

“I know, Sandy. So what else did you learn to cook?”

“Quite a lot. Nancy stayed with me for a few months and made me do all the cooking. She’s a wonderful teacher.”

“I believe it.” Kelly cleaned his plate. “What’s your schedule like?”

“I usually get up quarter after five, leave here just after six. I like to be on the unit half an hour before shift change so I can check the status of the patients and get ready for the new arrivals from the OR. It’s a busy unit. What about you?”

“Well, it depends on the job. When I’m shooting—”

“Shooting?” Sandy asked, surprised.

“Explosives. It’s my specialty. You spend a lot of time planning it and setting it up. Usually there’s a few engineers around to fuss and worry and tell me what not to do. They keep forgetting that it’s a hell of a lot easier to blow something up than it is to build it. I do have one trademark, though.”

“What’s that?”

“On my underwater work, I shoot some blasting caps a few minutes before I do the real shoot.” Kelly chuckled. “To scare the fish away.”

She was puzzled for a second. “Oh—so they won’t get hurt?”

“Right. It’s a personal quirk.”

It was just one more thing. He’d killed people in war, threatened a surgeon with permanent injury right in front of her and a security guard, but he went out of his way to protect *fish?*

“You’re a strange one.”

He had the good grace to nod. “I don’t kill for the fun of it. I used to hunt, and I gave that up. I fish a little, but not with dynamite. Anyway, I set the caps a good ways from the real job—that’s so it

won't have any effect on the important part. The noise scares most of them away. Why waste a perfectly good game fish?" Kelly asked.

It was automatic. Doris was somewhat nearsighted, and the marks looked like dirt when her eyes were clouded by the falling water, but they weren't dirt and they didn't wash off. They never disappeared, merely migrating to different places at the vagaries of the men who inflicted them. She rubbed her hands over them, and the pain told her what they were, reminders of the more recent parties, and then the effort to wash herself became futile. She knew she'd never be clean again. The shower was only good for the smell, wasn't it? Even Rick had made that clear enough, and he was the nicest of them, Doris told herself, finding a fading brown mark that he had placed on her, not one so painful as the bruises that Billy seemed to like.

She stepped out to dry off. The shower was the only part of the room that was even vaguely tidy. Nobody ever bothered to clean the sink or toilet, and the mirror was cracked.

"Much better," Rick said, watching. His hand extended to give her a pill.

"Thanks." And so began another day, with a barbiturate to put distance between herself and reality, to make life, if not comfortable, not tolerable, then endurable. Barely. With a little help from her friends, who saw to it that she did endure the reality they made. Doris swallowed the pill with a handful of water, hoping that the effects would come fast. It made things easier, smoothing the sharp edges, putting a distance between herself and her self. It had once been a distance too great to see across, but no longer. She looked at Rick's smiling face as it swept over her.

"You know I love ya, baby," he said, reaching to fondle her.

A wan smile as she felt his hands. "Yes."

"Special party tonight, Dor. Henry's coming over."

Click. Kelly could almost hear the sound as he got out of the Volkswagen, four blocks from the corner brownstone, as he switched trains of thought. Entering the "treeline" was becoming routine. He'd established a comfort level that tonight's dinner had enhanced, his first with another human being in… five weeks, six? He returned to the matter at hand.

He settled into a spot on the other side of the cross street, again finding marble steps which generated a shadow, and waited for the

Roadrunner to arrive. Every few minutes he'd lift the wine bottle—he had a new one now, with a red street wine instead of the white—for a simulated drink, while his eyes continuously swept left and right, even up and down to check second- and third-floor windows.

Some of the other cars were more familiar now. He spotted the black Karmann-Ghia which had played its part in Pam's death. The driver, he saw, was someone of his age, with a mustache, prowling the street looking for his connection. He wondered what the man's problem was that to assuage it he had to come from wherever his home might be to this place, risking his physical safety so that he might shorten his life with drugs. He was also leaving corruption and destruction in his wake with the money from the illicit traffic. Didn't he care about that? Didn't he see what drug money did to these neighborhoods?

But that was something Kelly was working very hard to ignore as well. There were still real people trying to eke out their lives here. Whether on welfare or subsisting on menial employment, real people lived here, in constant danger, perhaps hoping to escape to someplace where a real life was possible. They ignored the traffickers as best they could, and in their petty righteousness they ignored the street bums like Kelly, but he could not find it in himself to dislike them for that. In such an environment they, like he, had to concentrate on personal survival. Social conscience was a luxury that most people here could scarcely afford. You needed some rudimentary personal security of your own before you could take from its surplus and apply it to those more needy than yourself—and besides, how many were more needy than they were?

There were times when it was just a pleasure to be a man, Henry thought in the bathroom. Doris had her charms. Maria, the spindly, dumb one from Florida. Xantha, the one most drug-dependent, a cause for minor concern, and Roberta, and Paula. None were much beyond twenty, two still in their teens. All the same and all different. He patted some after-shave onto his face. He ought to have a real main-lady of his own, someone glamorous for other men to see and envy. But that was dangerous. To do that invited notice. No, this was just fine. He walked out of the room, refreshed and relaxed. Doris was still there, semiconscious now from the experience and the two-pill reward, looking at him with a smile that he decided was respectful enough. She'd made the proper

noises at the proper times, done the things that he'd wanted done without being asked. He could mix his own drinks, after all, and the silence of solitude was one thing, while the silence of a dumb bitch in the house was something else, something tedious. Just to be pleasant he bent down, offering a finger to her lips, which she duly kissed, her eyes unfocused.

"Let her sleep it off," Henry told Billy on the way out.

"Right. I have a pickup tonight anyway," Billy reminded him.

"Oh?" Tucker had forgotten in the heat of the moment. Even Tucker was human.

"Little Man was short a thousand last night. I let it slide. It's the first time, and he said he just goofed on his count. The vig is an extra five yards. His idea."

Tucker nodded. It was the first time ever that Little Man had made that kind of mistake, and he had always shown proper respect, running a nice trade on his piece of sidewalk. "Make sure he knows that one mistake's the house limit."

"Yes, sir." Billy bobbed his head, showing proper respect himself.

"Don't let that word get out, either."

That was the problem. Actually several problems, Tucker thought. First, the street dealers were such small-timers, stupidly greedy, unable to see that a regular approach to their business made for stability, and stability was in everyone's interest. But street pushers were street pushers—criminals, after all—and he'd never change that. Every so often one would die from a rip or a turf fight. Some were even dumb enough to use their own stuff—Henry was as careful as he could be to avoid them, and had been mainly successful. Occasionally one would try to press the limits, claiming to be cash-short just to chisel a few hundred bucks when he had a street trade many times that. Such cases had a single remedy, and Henry had enforced that rule with sufficient frequency and brutality that it hadn't been necessary to repeat it for a long time. Little Man had probably spoken the truth. His willingness to pay the large penalty made it likely, also evidence of the fact that he valued his steady supply, which had grown in recent months as his trade increased. Still, for months to come he would have to be watched carefully.

What most annoyed Tucker was that he had to trouble himself with such trivialities as Little Man's accounting mistake. He knew it was just a case of growing pains, the natural transition process from

small-time local supplier to major distributor. He'd have to learn to delegate his authority, letting Billy, for example, handle a higher level of responsibility. Was he ready? Good question, Henry told himself, leaving the building. He handed a ten to the youth who'd watched over his car, still considering the question. Billy had a good instinct for keeping the girls in line. A clever white boy from Kentucky's coal country, no criminal record. Ambitious. Team player. Maybe he was ready for a step up.

Finally, Kelly thought to himself. It was quarter after two when the Roadrunner appeared, after at least an hour's worrying that it might not appear at all. He settled back in the shadows, becoming a little more erect, and turned his head to give the man a good look. Billy and his sidekick. Laughing about something. The other one stumbled on the steps, maybe having had a drink too many or something. More to the point, when he fell there was a flutter of light little twirling rectangles that had to be banknotes.

That's where they count their money? Kelly wondered. *How interesting.* Both men bent down quickly to recover the cash, and Billy cuffed the other man on the shoulder, half playfully, saying something that Kelly couldn't make out from fifty yards off.

The buses passed every forty-five minutes at this time of night, and their route was several blocks away. The police patrol was highly predictable. The neighborhood routine was predictable as well. By eight the regular traffic was gone, and by nine-thirty the local citizens abandoned the streets entirely, barricading themselves behind triple-locked doors, thanking Providence that they had survived another day, already dreading the dangers of the next, and leaving the streets mainly to the illicit traffic. That traffic lingered until about two, Kelly had long since established, and on careful consideration he decided that he knew all that he needed to know. There were still random elements to be considered. There always were, but you could not predict the random, only prepare for it. Alternate evasion routes, constant vigilance, and weapons were the defense against it. Something was always left to chance, and however uncomfortable *that* was, Kelly had to accept it as a part of normal life—not that anything about his mission was normal.

He rose, tiredly, crossing the street and heading to the brownstone with his accustomed drunken gait. The door, he confirmed, wasn't locked. The brass plate behind the knob was

askew, he saw as he took a single long look while he passed by. The image fixed itself in his mind, and as he moved he began planning his mission for the following night. He heard Billy's voice again, a laugh filtering through the upstairs windows, an oddly accented sound, decidedly unmusical. A voice he already loathed, and for which he had special plans. For the first time he was close to one of the men who had murdered Pam. Probably two of them. It didn't have the physical effect one might have expected. His body relaxed. He'd do this one right.

Be seeing you, guys, he promised in the silence of his thoughts. This was the next really big step forward, and he couldn't risk blowing it. Kelly headed up the block, his eyes fixed on the two Bobs, a quarter mile away, clearly visible due to their size and the perfectly straight, wide city street.

This was another test—he had to be sure of himself. He headed north, without crossing the street, because if he followed a straight path all the way to them, they might notice and be at least curious about it, if not really alert. His approach had to be invisible, and by changing his angle relative to his targets instead of holding constant, he allowed his stooped body to blend into the background of housefronts and parked cars. Just a head, a small dark shape, nothing dangerous. At one block's distance he crossed the street, taking the opportunity again to scan all four compass points. Turning left, he headed up the sidewalk. It was fully twelve or fifteen feet wide, punctuated by the marble steps, giving useful maneuvering room for his uneven, meandering walk. Kelly stopped, lifting the bag-wrapped bottle to his lips before moving on. Better yet, he thought, another demonstration of his harmless nature. He stopped again to urinate in the gutter.

"Shit!" a voice said, Big or Little, he didn't bother to check. The disgust in the word was enough, the sort of thing that made a man turn away from what he beheld. Besides, Kelly thought, he'd needed the relief.

Both men were larger than he. Big Bob, the dealer, was six-three. Little Bob, the lieutenant, was fully six-five, muscular, but already developing a pot from beer or starchy food. Both were quite formidable enough, Kelly decided, making a quick reevaluation of his tactics. Better to pass by and leave them be?

No.

But he did pass by first. Little Bob was looking across the street.

Big Bob was leaning back against the building. Kelly drew an imaginary line between the two and counted three steps before turning left slowly so as not to alert them. He moved his right hand under the new-old bush jacket as he did so. As the right came out, the left covered it, wrapping around the handle of the Colt automatic in a two-hand grip and boxing posture later to be called the Weaver stance. His eyes went down, acquiring the white-painted line on the top of the suppressor as the gun came up. His arms extended full-length without locking the elbows, and the physical maneuver brought the sights in alignment with the first target, quickly but smoothly. The human eye is drawn to motion, particularly at night. Big Bob saw the move, knowing that something untoward was happening, but not sure what. His street-smart instincts made the correct analysis and screamed for action. Too late. *Gun,* he saw, starting to move his hand to a weapon of his own instead of dodging, which might have delayed his death.

Kelly's fingertip depressed the trigger twice, the first as the suppressor covered the target, the second right behind it, as soon as his wrist compensated for the .22's light recoil. Without shifting his feet he swiveled right, a mechanical turn that took the gun in an exact horizontal plane towards Little Bob, who had reacted already, seeing his boss starting to fall and reaching for his own weapon at his hip. Moving, but not fast enough. Kelly's first shot was not a good one, hitting low and doing little damage. But the second entered the temple, caroming off the thicker portions of the skull and racing around inside like a hamster in a cage. Little Bob fell on his face. Kelly lingered only long enough to be sure that both were dead, then turned and moved on.

Six, he thought, heading for the corner, his heart settling down from the rush of adrenaline, putting the gun back in its place next to the knife. It was two fifty-six as Kelly began his evasion drill.

Things hadn't started off well, the Recon Marine thought. The chartered bus had broken down once, and the "shortcut" the driver had selected to make up lost time had come to a halt behind a traffic tieup. The bus pulled into Quantico Marine Base just after three, following a jeep to its final destination. The Marines found an isolated barracks building already half occupied by snoring men and picked bunks for themselves so they could get some sleep. Whatever the interesting, exciting, dangerous mission was to be, the

startup was just one more day in the Green Machine.

Her name was Virginia Charles, and her night wasn't going well either. A nurse's aide at St. Agnes Hospital, only a few miles out from her neighborhood, her shift had been extended by the late arrival of her relief worker and her own unwillingness to leave her part of the floor unattended. Though she'd worked the same shift at the hospital for eight years, she hadn't known that the bus schedule changed soon after her normal departure time, and having just missed one bus, she'd had to wait what seemed to be forever for the next. Now she was getting off, two hours past her normal bedtime, and having missed "The Tonight Show," which she watched religiously on weekdays. Forty, divorced from a man who had given her two children—one a soldier, thankfully in Germany not Vietnam, and the other still in high school—and little else. On her union job, which was somewhere between menial and professional, she'd managed to do well for both of her sons, ever worrying as mothers do about their companions and their chances.

She was tired when she got off the bus, asking herself again why she hadn't used some of the money she'd saved over the years to get herself a car. But a car demanded insurance, and she had a young son at home who would both increase the cost of driving and give her something else to worry about. Maybe in a few years when that one, too, entered the service, which was his only hope for the college education she wished for him but would never be able to afford on her own.

She walked quickly and alertly, a tense stiffness in her weary legs. How the neighborhood had changed. She'd lived within a three-block radius all her life, and she could remember a lively and *safe* street life with friendly neighbors. She could even remember being able to walk to the New Zion A.M.E. Church without a worry on a rare Wednesday night off, which she had missed again due to her job. But she consoled herself with two hours of overtime which she could bank, and watched the streets for danger. It was only three blocks, she told herself. She walked fast, smoking a cigarette to stay alert, telling herself to be calm. She'd been mugged—the local term was actually "yoked"—twice in the previous year, both times by drug addicts needing money to support whatever habits they had, and the only good thing to come from that was the object lesson it had given to her sons. Nor had it cost her much in

monetary terms. Virginia Charles never carried much more money than carfare and other change to get dinner at the hospital cafeteria. It was the assault on her dignity that hurt, but not quite as badly as her memories of better times in a neighborhood peopled by mostly law-abiding citizens. One more block to go, she told herself, turning a corner.

"Hey, mama, spare a dollar?" a voice said, already behind her. She'd seen the shadow and kept walking past it, not turning, not noticing, ignoring it in the hope that the same courtesy would be extended to her, but that sort of courtesy was becoming rare. She kept moving, lowering her head, telling herself to keep moving, that not too many street toughs would attack a woman from behind. A hand on her shoulder gave the lie to that assumption.

"Give me money, bitch," the voice said next, not even with anger, just a matter-of-fact command in an even tone that defined what the new rules of the street were.

"Ain't got enough to interest you, boy," Virginia Charles said, twisting her shoulders so that she could keep moving, still not looking back, for there was safety in movement. Then she heard a *click*.

"I'll cut you," the voice said, still calm, explaining the hard facts of life to the dumb bitch.

That sound frightened her. She stopped, whispering a quiet prayer, and opened her small purse. She turned slowly, still more angry than frightened. She might have screamed, and only a few years earlier it would have made a difference. Men would have heard it and looked, perhaps come out to chase the assailant away. She could see him now, just a boy, seventeen or eighteen, and his eyes had the lifeless amplification of some sort of drug, that plus the arrogant inhumanity of power. Okay, she thought, pay him off and go home. She reached into the purse and extracted a five-dollar bill.

"Five whole dollar?" The youth smirked. "I need more'n that, bitch. Come on, or I'll cut you."

It was the look in the eyes that really scared her, causing her to lose her composure for the first time, insisting, "It's all I have!"

"More, or you bleed."

Kelly turned the corner, only half a block from his car, just starting to relax. He hadn't heard anything until he made the turn, but there were two people, not twenty feet from the rusting

Volkswagen, and a flare of reflected light told him that one was holding a knife.

His first thought was *Shit!* He'd already decided about this sort of thing. He couldn't save the whole world, and he wasn't going to try. Stopping one street crime might be fine for a TV show, but he was after bigger game. What he had not considered was an incident right next to his car.

He stopped cold, looking, and his brain started grinding as quickly as the renewed flood of adrenaline allowed. If anything serious happened here, the police would come right to this place, might be here for hours, and he'd left a couple of dead bodies less than a quarter mile behind him—not even that far, because it wasn't a straight line. This was not good, and he didn't have much time to make a decision. The boy had the woman by the arm, brandishing a knife, with his back to him. Twenty feet was an easy shot even in the dark, but not with a .22 that penetrated too much, and not with someone innocent or at least nonthreatening behind him. She was wearing some sort of uniform, older, maybe forty, Kelly saw, starting to move that way. That's when things changed again. The boy cut the woman's upper arm, the red clear in the glow of the streetlights.

Virginia Charles gasped when the knife sliced her arm, and yanked away, or tried to, dropping the five-dollar bill. The boy's other hand grabbed her throat to control her, and she could see in his eyes that he was deciding the next place for the knife to go. Then she saw movement, a man perhaps fifteen feet away, and in her pain and panic she tried to call for help. It wasn't much of a sound, but enough for the mugger to notice. Her eyes were fixed on something—what?

The youth turned to see a street wino ten feet away. What had been an instant and automatic alarm changed to a lazy smile.

Shit. This was not going well at all. Kelly's head was lowered, his eyes up and looking at the boy, sensing that the event was not really in his control.

"Maybe you got some money, too, pop?" he asked, intoxicated with power, and on a whim he took a step towards the man who had to have more money than this nursey bitch.

Kelly hadn't expected it, and it threw his timing off. He reached for his gun, but the silencer caught on his waistband, and the incoming mugger instinctively took his movement for the

threatening act it had to be. He took another step, more quickly, extending his knife hand. There was no time now to bring the gun out. Kelly stopped, backing off a half step and coming up to an erect stance.

For all his aggressiveness, the mugger wasn't very skillful. His first lunge with the knife was clumsy, and he was surprised at how easily the wino batted it aside, then stepped inside its arc. A stiff, straight right to the solar plexus deflated his lungs, winding him but not stopping his movements entirely. The knife hand came back wildly as the mugger started folding up. Kelly grabbed the hand, twisting and extending the arm, then stepping over the body already headed to the pavement. An extended ripping/cracking sound announced the dislocation of the youth's shoulder, and Kelly continued the move, rendering the arm useless.

"Why don't you go home, ma'am," he told Virginia Charles quietly, turning his face away and hoping she hadn't seen it very well. She ought not to have done so, Kelly told himself; he'd moved with lightning speed.

The nurse's aide stooped down to recover the five-dollar bill from the sidewalk and left without a word. Kelly watched sideways, seeing her hold her right hand on the bleeding left arm as she tried not to stagger, probably in shock. He was grateful that she didn't need any help. She would call someone, sure as hell, at least an ambulance, and he really ought to have helped her deal with her wound, but the risks were piling up faster than his ability to deal with them. The would-be mugger was starting to moan now, the pain from his destroyed shoulder penetrating the protective fog of narcotics. And this one had definitely seen his face, close up.

Shit, Kelly told himself. Well, he'd attempted to hurt a woman, and he'd attacked Kelly with a knife, both of them, arguably, failed attempts at murder. Surely this wasn't his first such attempt. He'd picked the wrong game and, tonight, the wrong playground, and mistakes like that had a price. Kelly took the knife from his limp hand and shoved it hard into the base of his skull, leaving it there. Within a minute his Volkswagen was half a block away.

Seven, he told himself, turning east.

Shit.

19

Quantity of Mercy

It was becoming more routine than the morning coffee and Danish at his desk, Lieutenant Ryan told himself. Two pushers down, both with a pair of .22s in the head, but *not* robbed this time. No loose cartridge cases around, no evident sign of a struggle. One with his hand on his pistol grip, but the gun hadn't cleared his hip pocket. For all that, it was unusual. He'd at least seen danger and reacted to it, however ineffectively. Then had come the call from only a few blocks away, and he and Douglas had rolled to that one, leaving junior detectives to deal with this crime scene. The call had identified the new one as interesting.

"Whoa," Douglas said, getting out first. One did not often see a knife sticking in the back of a head, up in the air like a fence post. "They weren't kidding."

The average murder in this part of the city, or any part of any city for that matter, was some sort of domestic argument. People killed other family members, or close friends, over the most trivial disputes. The previous Thanksgiving a father had killed his son over a turkey leg. Ryan's personal "favorite" was a homicide over a crab cake—not so much a matter of amusement as hyperbole. In all such cases the contributing factors were usually alcohol and a bleak life that transformed ordinarily petty disputes into matters of great import. *I didn't mean it* was the phrase most often heard afterwards, followed by some variation of *why didn't he just back off a little?* The sadness of such events was like a slow-acting acid on Ryan's soul. The sameness of those murders was the worst part of all. Human life ought not to end like variations of a single theme. It was too precious for that, a lesson learned in the bocage country of

Normandy and the snowy forests around Bastogne when he'd been a young paratrooper in the 101st Airborne. The typical murderer claimed not to have meant it, and frequently copped to the crime immediately, as remorseful as he or she could be over the loss of a friend or loved one by his or her own hand, and so two lives were often destroyed by the crime. Those were crimes of passion and poor judgment, and that's what murder was, for the most part. But not this one.

"What the hell's the matter with the arm?" he asked the medical examiner. Aside from the needle tracks the arm was twisted around so much that he realized he was looking at the wrong side of it.

"The victim's shoulder appears to be dislocated. Make that wrecked," the ME added after a second's consideration. "We have bruising around the wrist from the force of the grip. Somebody held the arm with two hands and damned near tore the arm off, like taking a branch off a tree."

"Karate move?" Douglas asked.

"Something like that. That sure slowed him down some. You can see the cause of death."

"Lieutenant, over here," a uniformed sergeant called. "This is Virginia Charles, she lives a block over. She reported the crime."

"Are you okay, Miss Charles?" Ryan asked. A fireman-paramedic was checking the bandage she'd placed on her own arm, and her son, a senior at Dunbar High School, stood by her side, looking down at the murder victim without a trace of sympathy. Within four minutes Ryan had a goodly quantity of information.

"A bum, you say?"

"Wino—that's the bottle he dropped." She pointed. Douglas picked it up with the greatest care.

"Can you describe him?" Lieutenant Ryan asked.

The routine was so exactingly normal that they might have been at any Marine base from Lejeune to Okinawa. The daily-dozen exercises followed by a run, everyone in step, the senior NCO calling cadence. They took particular pleasure in passing formations of new second lieutenants in the Basic Officers Course, or even more wimpy examples of officer-wannabes doing their summer school at Quantico. Five miles, passing the five-hundred-yard KD range and various other teaching facilities, all of them named for dead Marines, approaching the FBI Academy, but turning back off

the main road then, into the woods towards their training site. The morning routine merely reminded them that they were Marines, and the length of the run made them Recon Marines, for whom Olympic-class fitness was the norm. They were surprised to see a general officer waiting for them. Not to mention a sandbox and a swing set.

"Welcome to Quantico, Marines," Marty Young told them after they'd had a chance to cool down and been told to stand at ease. Off to the side, they saw two naval officers in sparkling undress whites, and a pair of civilians, watching and listening. Eyes narrowed collectively, and the mission was suddenly very interesting indeed.

"Just like looking at the photos," Cas observed quietly, looking around the training site; they knew what the lecture was about. "Why the playground stuff?"

"My idea," Greer said. "Ivan has satellites. The overhead schedules for the next six weeks are posted inside Building A. We don't know how good the cameras are, and so I'm going to assume that they're as good as ours, okay? You show the other guy what he wants to see or you make it easy for him to figure out. Any really harmless place has a parking lot." The drill was already determined. Every day the new arrivals would move the cars around randomly. Around ten every day they would take the mannequins from the cars and distribute them around the playground equipment. At two or three the cars would be moved again and the mannequins rearranged. They suspected correctly that the ritual would acquire a great deal of institutional humor.

"And after it's all over, it becomes a real playground?" Ritter asked, then answered his own question. "Hell, why not? Nice job, James."

"Thank you, Bob."

"It looks small this way," Admiral Maxwell said.

"The dimensions are accurate to within three inches. We cheated," Ritter said. "We have the Soviet manual for building places like this. Your General Young did a nice job."

"No glass in the windows on Building C," Casimir noted.

"Check the photos, Cas," Greer suggested. "There's a shortage of window glass over there. That building just has shutters, here and there. The callback"—he pointed to Building B—"has the bars. Just wood so that they can be removed later. We've just guessed at the

inside arrangements, but we've had a few people released from the other side and we've modeled this place on the debriefs. It's not totally made up from thin air."

The Marines were already looking around, having learned a little of the mission. Much of the plan they already knew, and they were thinking about how to apply their lessons of real combat operations to this perverted playground, complete with child mannequins who would watch them train with blue doll eyes. M-79 grenades to blast the guard towers. Willie-pete through the barracks windows. Gunships to hose things down after that… the "wives" and "kids" would watch the rehearsal and tell no one.

The site had been carefully selected for its similarity with another place—the Marines hadn't needed to be told that; it had to be so—and a few eyes lingered on a hill half a mile from the site. You could see everything from there. After the welcoming speech, the men divided into predetermined units to draw their weapons. Instead of M16A1 rifles, they had the shorter CAR-15 carbines, shorter, handier, preferred for close work. Grenadiers had standard M-79 grenade launchers, whose sights had been painted with radioactive tritium to glow in the dark, and their bandoleers were heavy with practice rounds because weapons training would start immediately. They'd start in daylight for feel and proficiency, but almost immediately their training would switch exclusively to night work, which the General had left out. It was obvious in any case. This sort of job only happened at night. The men marched to the nearest weapons-firing range to familiarize themselves. Already set up were window frames, six of them. The grenadiers exchanged looks and fired off their first volley. One, to his shame, missed. The other five razzed him at once, after making sure that the white puffs from their training rounds had appeared behind the frames.

"All right, all right, I just have to warm up," the corporal said defensively, then placed five shots through the target in forty seconds. He was slow—it had been a mainly sleepless night.

"How strong do you have to be to do that, I wonder?" Ryan asked.

"Sure as hell isn't Wally Cox," the ME observed. "The knife severed the spinal cord just where it enters the medulla. Death was instantaneous."

"He already had the guy crippled. The shoulder as bad as it looks?" Douglas asked, stepping aside for the photographer to finish

up.

"Worse, probably. We'll look at it, but I'll bet you the whole structure is destroyed. You don't repair an injury like this, not all the way. His pitching career was over even before the knife."

White, forty or older, long black hair, short, dirty. Ryan looked at his notes. "Go home, ma'am," he'd told Virginia Charles.

Ma'am.

"Our victim was still alive when she walked away." Douglas came over to his lieutenant. "Then he must have taken his knife away and gave it back. Em, in the past week we've seen four very expert murders and six very dead victims."

"Four different MOs. Two guys tied up, robbed, and executed, .22 revolver, no sign of a struggle. One guy with a shotgun in the guts, also robbed, no chance to defend himself. Two last night just shot, probably a .22 again, but not robbed, not tied up, and they were alerted before they were shot. Those were all pushers. But this guy's just a street hood. Not good enough, Tom." But the Lieutenant had started thinking about it. "Have we ID'd this one yet?"

The uniformed sergeant answered. "Junkie. He's got a rap sheet, six arrests for robbery, God knows what else."

"It doesn't fit," Ryan said. "It doesn't fit anything, and if you're talking about a really clever guy, why let somebody see him, why let her leave, why talk to her—hell, why take this guy out at all? What pattern does that fit?" There was no pattern. Sure, the two pairs of drug dealers had been taken down with a .22, but the small-bore was the most commonly used weapon on the street, and while one pair had been robbed, the other had not; nor had the second pair been shot with the same deadly precision, though each *did* have two head wounds. The other murdered and robbed dealer had been done by a shotgun. "Look, we have the murder weapon, and we have the wine bottle, and from one or both we'll get prints. Whoever this guy was, he sure as hell wasn't real careful."

"A wino with a sense of justice, Em?" Douglas prodded. "Whoever took this punk down—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. He wasn't Wally Cox." *But who and* what *the hell was he?*

Thank God for gloves, Kelly thought, looking at the bruises on his right hand. He'd let his anger get the better of him, and that wasn't smart! Looking back, reliving the incident, he realized that he'd

been faced with a difficult situation. If he'd let the woman get killed or seriously injured, and just gotten into his car and driven off, first, he'd never really have been able to forgive himself, and second, if anyone had seen the car, he'd be a murder suspect. That extended thought evoked a snort of disgust. He *was* a murder suspect now. Well, somebody would be. On coming home, he'd looked in the mirror, wig and all. Whatever that woman had seen, it had not been John Kelly, not with a face shadowed by his heavy beard, smeared with dirt, under a long and filthy wig. His hunched-over posture made him appear several inches shorter than he was. And the light on the street had not been good. And she'd been even more interested in getting away than anything else. Even so. He'd somehow left his wine bottle behind. He remembered dropping it to parry the knife thrust, and then in the heat of the moment he'd not recovered it. *Dumb!* Kelly raged at himself.

What would the police know? The physical description would not be a good one. He'd worn a pair of surgical gloves, and though they allowed him to bruise his hands, they hadn't torn and he hadn't bled. Most important of all, he had never touched the wine bottle with ungloved hands. Of that he was certain because he'd decided from the beginning to be careful about it. The police would know a street bum had killed that punk, but there were lots of street bums, and he only needed one more night. It meant that he'd have to alter his operational pattern even so, and that tonight's mission was more dangerous than it ought to be, but his information on Billy was too good to pass up on, and the little bastard might be smart enough to change his own patterns. What if he used different houses to count his cash or only used one for a few nights? If that was true, any wait beyond a day or two might invalidate his whole reconnaissance effort, forcing him to start again with a new disguise —*if* he could select something equally effective, which was not immediately likely. Kelly told himself that he'd killed six people to get this far—the seventh was a mistake and didn't count… except maybe to that lady, whoever she was. He took a deep breath. If he'd watched her get hurt worse, or killed, how would he be able to look in a mirror? He had to tell himself that he'd made the best of a bad situation. Shit happens. It ran the risks up, but the only concern there was failure in the mission, not in danger to himself. It was time to set his thoughts aside. There were other responsibilities as well. Kelly lifted his phone and dialed.

"Greer."

"Clark," Kelly responded. At least that was still amusing.

"You're late," the Admiral told him. The call was supposed to have been before lunch, and Kelly's stomach churned a little at the rebuke. "No harm done, I just got back. We're going to need you soon. It's started."

That's fast, Kelly thought. *Damn.* "Okay, sir."

"I hope you're in shape. Dutch says you are," James Greer said more kindly.

"I think I can hold up, sir."

"Ever been to Quantico?"

"No, Admiral."

"Bring your boat. There's a marina there and it'll give us a place to chat. Sunday morning. Ten sharp. We'll be waiting, Mr. Clark."

"Aye aye." Kelly heard the phone click off.

Sunday morning. He hadn't expected that. It was going too fast, and it made his other mission all the more urgent. Since when had the government ever moved that quickly? Whatever the reason, it affected Kelly directly.

"I hate it, but it's the way we work," Grishanov said.

"You really are that tied to your ground radar?"

"Robin, there is even talk of having the missile firing done by the intercept-control officer from his booth on the ground." The disgust in his voice was manifest.

"But then you're just a driver!" Zacharias announced. "You have to trust your pilots."

I really should have this man speak to the general staff, Grishanov told himself with no small degree of disgust. *They won't listen to me. Perhaps they would listen to him.* His countrymen had vast respect for the ideas and practices of Americans, even as they planned to fight and defeat them.

"It is a combination of factors. The new fighter regiments will be deployed along the Chinese border, you see—"

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't know? We've fought the Chinese three times this year, at the Amur River and farther west."

"Oh, come on!" This was too incredible for the American to believe. "You're allies!"

Grishanov snorted. "Allies? Friends? From the outside, yes,

perhaps it looks as though all socialists are the same. My friend, we have battled with the Chinese for centuries. Don't you read history? We supported Chiang over Mao for a long time—we trained his army for him. Mao hates us. We foolishly gave him nuclear reactors, and now they have nuclear arms, and do you suppose their missiles can reach my country or yours? They have Tu-16 bombers —Badgers you call them, yes? Can they reach America?"

Zacharias knew that answer. "No, of course not."

"They can reach Moscow, I promise you, and they carry half-megaton nuclear bombs, and for that reason the MiG-25 regiments are on the Chinese border. Along that axis we have no strategic depth. Robin, we've had real battles with these yellow bastards, division-size engagements! Last winter we crushed their attempt to take an island that belongs to us. They struck first, they killed a battalion of border guards and mutilated the dead—why do that, Robin, because of their red hair or because of their freckles?" Grishanov asked bitterly, quoting verbatim a wrathful article in *Red Star*. This was a very strange turn of events for the Russian. He was speaking the literal truth, and it was harder to convince Zacharias of this than any one of a number of clever lies he might have used. "We are not allies. We've even stopped shipping weapons to this country by train—the Chinese steal the consignments right off the rail carriages!"

"To use against you?"

"Against whom, then, the Indians? Tibet? Robin, these people are *different* from you and me. They don't see the world as we do. They're like the Hitlerites my father fought, they think they are better than other men—how you say?"

"Master race?" the American suggested helpfully.

"That is the word, yes. They believe it. We're animals to them, useful animals, yes, but they hate us, and they want what we have. They want our oil and our timber and our land."

"How come I've never been briefed on this?" Zacharias demanded.

"Shit," the Russian answered. "Is it any different in your country? When France pulled out of NATO, when they told your people to take your bases out, do you think any of us were told about it beforehand? I had a staff job then in Germany, and nobody troubled himself to tell me that anything was happening. Robin, the way you look to us is the same as how we look to you, a great colossus, but

the internal politics in your country are as much a mystery to me as mine are to you. It can all be very confusing, but I tell you this, my friend, my new MiG regiment will be based between China and Moscow. I can bring a map and show you."

Zacharias leaned back against the wall, wincing again with the recurring pain from his back. It was just too much to believe.

"It hurts still, Robin?"

"Yeah."

"Here, my friend." Grishanov handed over his flask, and this time it was accepted without resistance. He watched Zacharias take a long pull before handing it back.

"So just how good is this new one?"

"The MiG-25? It's a *rocket,*" Grishanov told him enthusiastically. "It probably turns even worse than your Thud, but for straight-line speed, you have no fighter close to it. Four missiles, no gun. The radar is the most powerful ever made for a fighter, and it cannot be jammed."

"Short range?" Zacharias asked.

"About forty kilometers." The Russian nodded. "We give away range for reliability. We tried to get both but failed."

"Hard for us, too," the American acknowledged with a grunt.

"You know, I do not expect a war between my country and yours. Truly I do not. We have little that you might wish to take away. What we have—resources, space, land—all these things you have. But the Chinese," he said, "they need these things, and they share a border with us. And we gave them the weapons that they will use against us, and there are so *many* of them! Little, evil people, like these here, but so many more."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

Grishanov shrugged. "I will command my regiment. I will plan to defend the Motherland against a nuclear attack from China. I just haven't decided how yet."

"It's not easy. It helps if you have space and time to play with, and the right people to play against."

"We have bomber people, but nothing like yours. You know, even without resistance, I doubt we could place as many as twenty bombers over your country. They're all based two thousand kilometers from where I will be. You know what that means? Nobody even to train against."

"You mean a red team?"

"We would call it a blue team, Robin. I hope you understand." Grishanov chuckled, then turned serious again. "But, yes. It will all be theoretical, or some fighters will pretend to be bombers, but their endurance is too short for a proper exercise."

"This is all on the level?"

"Robin, I will not ask you to trust me. That is too much. You know that and so do I. Ask yourself, do you really think your country will ever make war on my country?"

"Probably not," Zacharias admitted.

"Have I asked you about your war plans? Yes, certainly, they are most interesting theoretical exercises and I would probably find them fascinating war games, but have I asked about them?" His voice was that of a patient teacher.

"No, you haven't, Kolya, that's true."

"Robin, I am not worried about B-52s. I am worried about Chinese bombers. That is the war my country is preparing for." He looked down at the concrete floor, puffing on a cigarette and going on softly. "I remember when I was eleven. The Germans were within a hundred kilometers of Moscow. My father joined his transport regiment—they made it up from university teachers. Half of them never came back. My mother and I evacuated the city, east to some little village whose name I can't remember—it was so confusing then, so dark all the time—worrying about my father, a professor of history, driving a truck. We lost twenty million citizens to the Germans, Robin. Twenty million. People I knew. The fathers of friends—my wife's father died in the war. Two of my uncles died. When I went through the snow with my mother, I promised myself that someday I would defend my country, too, and so I am a fighter pilot. I do not invade. I do not attack. I defend. Do you understand this thing I tell you, Robin? My job is to protect my country so that other little boys will not have to run away from home in the middle of winter. Some of my classmates died, it was so cold. That is why I defend my country. The Germans wanted what we had, and now the Chinese want it, too." He waved towards the door of the cell. "People like… like *that*."

Even before Zacharias spoke, Kolya knew he had him. Months of work for this moment, Grishanov thought, like seducing a virgin, but much sadder. This man would never see his home again. The Vietnamese had every intention of killing these men when their utility ended. It was such a colossal waste of talent, and his

antipathy to his supposed allies was every bit as real as he feigned it to be—it was no longer pretense. From the first moment he'd arrived in Hanoi, he'd seen first-hand their arrogant superiority, and their incredible cruelty—and their stupidity. He had just achieved more with kind words and not even a liter of vodka than what they and their torturers had failed to do with years of mindless venom. Instead of inflicting pain, he had shared it. Instead of abusing the man beside him, he had given kindness, respecting his virtues, assuaging his injuries as best he could, protecting him from more, and bitterly regretting that he'd necessarily been the agent of the most recent of them.

There was a downside, however. To achieve this breakthrough, he'd opened his soul, told true stories, dredged up his own childhood nightmares, reexamined his true reason for joining the profession he loved. Only possible, only thinkable, because he'd known that the man sitting next to him was doomed to a lonely, unknown death—already dead to his family and his country—and an unattended grave. This man was no fascist Hitlerite. He was an enemy, but a straightforward one who had probably done his utmost to spare harm to noncombatants because he, too, had a family. There was in him no illusion of racial superiority—not even hatred for the North Vietnamese, and that was the most remarkable thing of all, for he, Grishanov, was learning to hate them. Zacharias didn't deserve to die, Grishanov told himself, recognizing the greatest irony of all.

Kolya Grishanov and Robin Zacharias were now friends.

"How does this grab you?" Douglas asked, setting it on Ryan's desk. The wine bottle was in a clear plastic bag, and the smooth, clear surface was uniformly coated with a fine yellow dust.

"No prints?" Emmet looked it over in considerable surprise.

"Not even a smudge, Em. Zilch." The knife came down next. It was a simple switchblade, also dusted and bagged.

"Smudges here."

"One partial thumbprint, matched with the victim. Nothing else we can use, but smudges, uniform smudges, the prints department says. Either he stabbed himself in the back of the neck or our suspect was wearing gloves."

It was awfully warm this time of the year to wear gloves. Emmet Ryan leaned back, staring at the evidence items on his desk, then at

Tom Douglas, sitting beside them. “Okay, Tom, go on.”

“We’ve had four murder scenes, a total of six victims. No evidence left behind. Five of the victims—three incidents—are pushers, two different MOs. But in every case, no witnesses, roughly the same time of day, all within a five-block radius.”

“Craftsmanship.” Lieutenant Ryan nodded. He closed his eyes, first mentally viewing the different crime scenes, then correlating the data. Rob, not rob, change MO. But the last one did have a witness. *Go home, ma’am.* Why was he polite? Ryan shook his head. “Real life isn’t Agatha Christie, Tom.”

“Our young lad, today, Em. Tell me about the method our friend used to dispatch him?”

“Knife there… I haven’t seen anything like that in a long time. Strong son of a bitch. I did see one… back in ’58 or ’59.” Ryan paused, collecting his thoughts. “A plumber, I think, big, tough guy, found his wife in bed with somebody. He let the man leave, then he took a chisel, held her head up—”

“You have to be really pissed off to do it the hard way. Anger, right? Why do it that way?” Douglas asked. “You can cut a throat a lot easier, and the victim is just as dead.”

“A lot messier, too. Noisy…” Ryan’s voice trailed off as he thought it through. It was not appreciated that people with their throats cut made a great deal of noise. If you opened the windpipe there could be the most awful gurgling sound, and if not, people screamed their way to death. Then there was the blood, so much of it, flying like water from a cut hose, getting on your hands and clothes.

On the other hand, if you wanted to kill someone in a hurry, like turning off a light switch, and if you were strong and had him crippled already, the base of the skull, where the spinal cord joined the brain, was just the perfect spot: quick, quiet, and relatively clean.

“The two pushers were a couple blocks away, time of death almost identical. Our friend does them, walks over this way, turns a corner, and sees Mrs. Charles being hassled.”

Lieutenant Ryan shook his head. “Why not just keep going? Cross the street, that’s the smart move. Why get involved? A killer with morals?” Ryan asked. That was where the theory broke down. “And if the same guy is wasting pushers, what’s the motive? Except for the two last night, it looks like robbery. Maybe with those two

something spooked him off before he could collect the money and the drugs. A car going down the street, some noise? If we're dealing with a robber, then it doesn't connect with Mrs. Charles and her friend. Tom, it's just speculation."

"Four separate incidents, no physical evidence, a guy wearing gloves—a street wino wearing gloves!"

"Not enough, Tom."

"I'm going to have Western District start shaking them down anyway."

Ryan nodded. That was fair enough.

It was midnight when he left his apartment. The area was so agreeably quiet on a weekday night. The old apartment complex was peopled with residents who minded their own business. Kelly had not so much as shaken a hand since the manager's. A few friendly nods, that was all. There were no children in the complex, just middle-aged people, almost all married couples sprinkled with a few widowed singles. Mainly white-collar workers, a surprising number of whom rode the bus to work downtown, watched TV at night, heading to bed around ten or eleven. Kelly moved out quietly, driving the VW down Loch Raven Boulevard, past churches and other apartment complexes, past the city's sports stadium as the neighborhoods evolved downward from middle- to working-class, and from working-class to subsistence, passing darkened office buildings downtown in his continuing routine. But tonight there was a difference.

Tonight would be his first major payoff. That meant risk, but it always did, Kelly told himself, flexing his hands on the plastic steering wheel. He didn't like the surgical gloves. The rubber held heat in, and though the sweat didn't affect his grip, the discomfort was annoying. The alternative was not acceptable, however, and he remembered not liking a lot of the things he'd done in Vietnam, like the leeches, a thought that generated a few chills. They were even worse than rats. At least rats didn't suck your blood.

Kelly took his time, driving around his objective almost randomly while he sized things up. It paid off. He saw a pair of police officers talking to a street bum, one of them close, the other two steps back, seemingly casual, but the distance between the two cops told him what he needed to know. One was covering the other. They saw the wino as someone potentially threatening.

Looking for you, Johnnie-boy, he told himself, turning the wheel and changing streets.

But the cops wouldn't change their whole operating routine, would they? Looking at and talking to winos would be an additional duty for the next few nights. There were other things that had higher priority: answering calls for holdup alarms in liquor stores, responding to family disputes, even traffic violations. No, hassling drunks would just be one more burden on men already overworked. It would be something with which to spice up their normal patrol patterns, and Kelly had troubled himself to learn what those patterns were. The additional danger was therefore somewhat predictable, and Kelly reasoned that he'd had his supply of bad luck for this mission. Just one more time and he'd switch patterns. To what he didn't know, but if things went right, what he should soon learn would provide the necessary information.

Thank you, he said to destiny, a block away from the corner brownstone. The Roadrunner was right there, and it was early still, a collection night; the girl wouldn't be there. He drove past it, continuing up the next block before turning right, then another block, and right again. He saw a police cruiser and checked the clock on the car. It was within five minutes of its normal schedule, and this one was a solo car. There wouldn't be another pass for about two hours, Kelly told himself, making a final right turn and heading towards the brownstone. He parked as close to it as he dared, then got out and walked away from the target house, heading back to the next block before dropping into his disguise.

There were two pushers on this block, both lone operators. They looked a little tense. Perhaps the word was getting out, Kelly thought with a suppressed smile. Some of their brethren were disappearing, and that had to be cause for concern. He kept well clear of both as he covered the block, inwardly amused that neither knew how close Death had passed them. How tenuous their lives were, and yet they didn't know. But that was a distraction, he told himself, turning yet again and heading to the objective. He paused at the corner, looking around. It was after one in the morning now, and things were settling down into the accustomed boredom that comes at the end of any working day, even the illegal kind. Activity on the street was diminishing, just as expected from all the reconnaissance he had done. There was nothing untoward on this street, and Kelly headed south past the rows of brownstones on one

side of the street and brick row-houses on the other. It required all of his concentration to maintain his uneven, harmless gait. One of those who had hurt Pam was now within a hundred yards. Probably two of them. Kelly allowed his mind to see her face again, to hear her voice, to feel the curves of her body. He allowed his face to become a frozen mask of stone and his hands to ball into tight fists as his legs shambled down the wide sidewalk, but only for a few seconds. Then he cleared his mind and took five deep, slow breaths.

"Tactical," he murmured to himself, slowing his pace and watching the corner house, now only thirty yards away. Kelly took in a mouthful of wine and let it dribble down on his shirt again. *Snake to Chicago, objective in sight. Moving in now.*

The sentry, if that's what he was, betrayed himself. The streetlights revealed puffs of cigarette smoke coming out the door, telling Kelly exactly where the first target was. He switched the wine bottle to his left hand and flexed his right one, turning his wrist around to make sure his muscles were loose and ready. Approaching the wide steps, he slumped against them, coughing. Then he walked up towards the door, which he knew to be ajar, and fell against it. Kelly tumbled to the floor, finding himself at the feet of the man whom he'd seen accompany Billy. Along the way, the wine bottle broke, and Kelly ignored the man, whimpering over the broken glass and spreading stain of cheap California red.

"That's tough luck, partner," a voice said. It was surprisingly gentle. "You best move along now."

Kelly just continued his whimpering, down on all fours, weaving on them. He coughed a little more, turning his head to see the sentry's legs and shoes, confirming his identification.

"Come on, pop." Strong hands reached down. Both hands, lifting him. Kelly allowed his own arms to dangle, one going behind as the man started to turn him towards the door. He staggered, turning yet more, and now the sentry was supporting him almost fully. Weeks of training and preparation and careful reconnaissance came together in a single instant.

Kelly's left hand slapped against his face. The right drove the Ka-Bar through the ribs, and so alert were his senses that his fingertips could feel the heart, trying to beat, but only destroying itself on the razor-sharp, double-edged blade of the fighting knife. Kelly twisted the blade, leaving it in as the body shuddered. The dark eyes were wide and shocked, and the knees already buckling. Kelly let him

down slowly, quietly, still holding the knife, but he had to allow himself a bit of satisfaction this time. He'd worked too hard for this moment to turn his emotions off completely.

"Remember Pam?" he whispered to the dying body in his hands, and for the question he received his satisfaction. There was recognition through the pain before the eyes rolled back.

Snake.

Kelly waited, counting to sixty before he withdrew the knife, which he wiped off on the victim's shirt. It was a good knife, and it didn't deserve to be stained with that kind of blood.

Kelly rested himself for a moment, breathing deeply. He'd gotten the right target, the subordinate. The principal objective was upstairs. Everything was going according to plan. He allowed himself exactly one minute to calm down and collect himself.

The stairs were creaky. Kelly attenuated that by keeping close to the wall, minimizing the displacement of the wooden treads, moving very slowly, eyes locked upwards because there was nothing below to concern him now. He had already replaced the knife in its scabbard. His .45/.22 was in his right hand now, suppressor screwed on, held low in his right hand as the left traced the cracked plaster wall.

Halfway up he started hearing sounds other than that of the blood coursing through his arteries. A slap, a whimper, a whine. Distant, animal sounds, followed by a cruel chuckle, barely audible even as he reached the landing and turned left towards their source. Breathing next, heavy, rapid and low.

Oh… shit! But he couldn't stop now.

"Please…" A despairing whisper that caused Kelly's knuckles to turn white around the pistol grip. He moved along the upstairs corridor slowly, again rubbing up against the wall. There was light coming from the master bedroom, only the illumination from streetlights through dirty windows, but with his eyes adjusted to darkness, he could see shadows on one wall.

"What's the matter, Dor?" a male voice asked as Kelly reached the doorframe. Very slowly he moved his head around the vertical barrier of painted wood.

There was a mattress in the room, and on the mattress a woman, kneeling, head down while a hand roughly squeezed her breast, then shook it. Kelly watched her mouth open in silent pain, remembering the photo that the detective had shown him. *You did*

that to Pam, too, didn't you… you little fuck! Liquid dripped from the girl's face, and the face staring down at her was smiling when Kelly took a step into the room.

His voice was light, relaxed, almost comical. "This looks like fun. Can I play, too?"

Billy turned, looking at the shadow that had just spoken, and saw an extended arm with a big automatic. The face turned back to a pile of clothing and a carry bag of some sort. The rest of him was naked, and his left hand held a tool of some sort, but not a knife or a gun. Those tools were elsewhere, ten feet away, and his eyes could not bring them closer.

"Don't even think it, Billy," Kelly said in a conversational tone.

"Who the fuck—"

"On your face, spread-eagle, or I'll shoot that little dick of yours right off." Kelly altered his aim. It was amazing how much importance men placed on that organ, how easily a threat to it intimidated. Not even a serious threat, what with its size. The brain was much larger and easier to hit. "Down! Now!"

Billy did what he was told. Kelly pushed the girl back on the mattress and reached in his belt for the electrical wire. In a few seconds the hands were securely wrapped and knotted. The left hand still held a pair of pliers, which Kelly took and used to tighten the wire yet more, drawing a gasp from Billy.

Pliers?

Jesus.

The girl was staring at his face, eyes wide, breath heavy, but her movements were slow and her head was tilted. She was drugged to some extent. And she had seen his face, was looking at it now, memorizing it.

Why do you have to be here? This is out of the pattern. You're a complication. I ought to… ought to…

If you do that, *John, then what the fuck are you?*

Oh, shit!

Kelly's hands started shaking then. This was real danger. If he let her live, then someone would know who he was—a description, enough to start a proper manhunt, and that would—might—prevent him from accomplishing his goal. But the greater danger was to his soul. If he killed her, that was lost forever. Of that he was certain. Kelly closed his eyes and shook his head. Everything was supposed to have gone so smoothly.

Shit happens, Johnnie-boy.

"Get dressed," he told her, tossing some stuff in her direction. "Do it now, be quiet, and stay there."

"Who are you?" Billy asked, giving Kelly an outlet for his rage. The distributor felt something cold and round at the back of his head.

"You even breathe loud, and your brains go on this floor, got it?" The head nodded by way of an answer.

Now what the hell do I do? Kelly demanded of himself. He looked over at the girl, struggling to put panties on. The light caught her breasts and Kelly's stomach revolted at the marks he saw there. "Hurry up," he told her.

Damn damn damn. Kelly checked the wire on Billy's wrists and decided to do another loop at the elbows, hurting him badly, straining the shoulders, but ensuring that he wouldn't be doing any resisting. To make things worse, he lifted Billy by the arms to a standing position, which evoked a scream.

"Hurt a little, does it?" Kelly asked. Then he applied a gag and turned him to the door. "Walk." To the girl: "You, too."

Kelly conducted them down the steps. There was some broken glass, and Billy's feet danced around it, sustaining cuts. What surprised Kelly was the girl's reaction to the body at the bottom.

"Rick!" she gasped, then stooped down to touch the body.

It had a name, Kelly thought, lifting the girl. "Out the back."

He stopped them at the kitchen, leaving them alone for an instant and looking out the back door. He could see his car, and there was no activity in his view. There was danger in what came next, but danger had again become his companion. Kelly led them out. The girl was looking at Billy, and he at her, motioning with his eyes. Kelly was dumbfounded to see that she was reacting to his silent entreaties. He took her arm and moved her aside.

"Don't worry about him, miss." He pointed her to the car, maneuvering Billy by the upper arm.

A distant voice told him that if she tried to help Billy, then he would have an excuse to—

No, goddamn it!

Kelly unlocked the car, forcing Billy in, then the girl into the front seat, before moving fast to the left-side door. Before starting the car he leaned over the seat and wired up Billy's ankles and knees.

"Who are you?" the girl asked as the car started moving.

"A friend," Kelly said calmly. "I am not going to hurt you. If I wanted to do that, I could have left you with Rick, okay?"

Her reply was slow and uneven, but for all that, still amazing to Kelly. "Why did you have to kill him? He was nice to me."

What the hell? Kelly thought, looking over at her. Her face was scraped, her hair a mess. He turned his eyes back to the street. A police cruiser went past on a reciprocal heading, and despite a brief moment of panic on Kelly's part, it just kept going, disappearing as he turned north.

Think fast, boy.

Kelly could have done many things, but only one alternative was realistic. *Realistic?* he asked himself. *Oh, sure.*

One does not expect to hear doorbells at a quarter to three in the morning. Sandy first thought she had dreamed it, but her eyes had opened, and in the way of the mind, the sound played back to her as though she had actually awakened a second earlier. Even so, she must have dreamed it, the nurse told herself, shaking her head. She'd just started to close her eyes again when it repeated. Sandy rose, slipped on a robe, and went downstairs, too disoriented to be frightened. There was a shape on the porch. She turned on the lights as she opened the door.

"Turn that fucking light off!" A rasping voice that was nonetheless familiar. The command it carried caused her to flip the switch without so much as a thought.

"What are you doing here?" There was a girl at his side, looking thoroughly horrible.

"Call in sick. You're not going to work today. You're going to take care of her. Her name is Doris," Kelly said, speaking in the low commanding tone of a surgeon in the middle of a complex procedure.

"Wait a minute!" Sandy stood erect and her mind started racing. Kelly was wearing a woman's wig—well, too dirty for that. He was unshaven, had on awful clothes, but his eyes were burning with something. Rage was part of it, a fury at something, and the man's strong hands were shaking at his side.

"Remember about Pam?" he asked urgently.

"Well, yes, but—"

"This girl's in the same spot. I can't help her. Not now. I have to

do something else."

"What are you doing, John?" Sandy asked, a different sort of urgency in her voice. And then, somehow, it was very clear. The TV news reports she'd been watching over dinner on the black-and-white set in the kitchen, the look she'd seen in his eyes in the hospital; the look she saw now, so close to the other, but different, the desperate compassion and the trust it demanded of her.

"Somebody's been beating the shit out of her, Sandy. She needs help."

"John," she whispered. "John… you're putting your life in my hands…"

Kelly actually laughed, after a fashion, a bleak snort that went beyond irony. "Yeah, well, you did okay the first time, didn't you?" He pushed Doris in the door and walked away, off to a car, without looking back.

"I'm going to be sick," the girl, Doris, said. Sandy hustled her to the first-floor bathroom and got her to the toilet in time. The young woman knelt there for a minute or two, emptying her belly into the white porcelain bowl. After another minute or so, she looked up. In the glare of incandescent lights off the white-tile walls, Sandra O'Toole saw the face of hell.

20

Depressurization

It was after four when Kelly pulled into the marina. He backed the Scout to the transom of his boat and got out to open the cargo hatch after checking the darkness for spectators, of which, thankfully, there were none.

"Hop," he told Billy, and that he did. Kelly pushed him aboard, then directed him into the main salon. Once there, Kelly got some shackles, regular marine hardware, and fastened Billy's wrists to a deck fitting. Ten minutes more and he had cast off, heading out to the Bay, and finally Kelly allowed himself to relax. With the boat on autopilot, he loosed the wires on Billy's arms and legs.

Kelly was tired. Moving Billy from the back of the VW into the Scout had been harder than he'd expected, and at that he'd been lucky to miss the newspaper distributor, dumping his bundles on street corners for the paper boy to unwrap and deliver before six. He settled back into the control chair, drinking some coffee and stretching by way of reward to his body for its efforts.

Kelly had the lights turned way down so that he could navigate without being blinded by the internal glow of the salon. Off to port were a half-dozen cargo ships tied up at Dundalk Marine Terminal, but very little in his sight was moving. There was always something relaxing about the water at a time like this, the winds were calm, and the surface a gently undulating mirror that danced with lights on the shore. Red and green lights from buoys blinked on and off while telling ships to stay out of dangerous shallows. *Springer* passed by Fort Carroll, a low octagon of gray stone, built by First Lieutenant Robert E. Lee, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; it had held twelve-inch rifles as recently as sixty years before. The orange fires

of the Bethlehem Steel Sparrow's Point Works glowed to the north. Tugboats were starting to move out of their basins to help various ships out of their berths, or to help bring new ones alongside, and their diesels growled across the flat surface in a distant, friendly way. Somehow that noise only emphasized the pre-dawn peace. The quiet was overwhelmingly comforting, just as things should be in preparation for the start of a new day.

"Who the fuck are you?" Billy asked, relieved of his gag and unable to bear the silence. His arms were still behind him, but his legs were free, and he sat up on the deck of the salon.

Kelly sipped his coffee, allowing his tired arms to relax and ignoring the noise behind him.

"I said, who the fuck are you!" Billy called more loudly.

It was going to be a warm one. The sky was clear. There were plenty of stars visible, with not even a hint of gathering clouds. No "Red Sky at Morning" to cause Kelly concern, but the outside temperature had dipped only to seventy-seven, and that boded ill for the coming day, with the hot August sun to beat down on things.

"Look, asshole, I want to know who the fuck you are!"

Kelly shifted a little in the wide control chair, taking another sip of his coffee. His compass course was one-two-one, keeping to the southern edge of the shipping channel, as was his custom. A brightly lit tug was coming in, probably from Norfolk, towing a pair of barges, but it was too dark to see what sort of cargo they bore. Kelly checked the lights and saw that they were properly displayed. That would please the Coast Guard, which wasn't always happy with the way the local tugs operated. Kelly wondered what sort of life it was, moving barges up and down the Bay. Had to be awfully dull doing the same thing, day in and day out, back and forth, north and south, at a steady six knots, seeing the same things all the time. It paid well, of course. A master and a mate, and an engineer, and a cook—they had to have a cook. Maybe a deckhand or two. Kelly wasn't sure about that. All taking down union wages, which were pretty decent.

"Hey, okay. I don't know what the problem is, but we can talk about it, okay?"

The maneuvering in close was probably pretty tricky, though. Especially in any kind of wind, the barges had to be unhandy things to bring alongside. But not today. Today it wouldn't be windy. Just

hotter than hell. Kelly started his turn south as he passed Bodkin Point, and he could see the red lights blinking on the towers of the Bay Bridge at Annapolis. The first glow of dawn was decorating the eastern horizon. It was kind of sad, really. The last two hours before sunrise were the best time of the day, but something that few ever bothered to appreciate. Just one more case of people who never knew what was going on around them. Kelly thought he saw something, but the glass windshield interfered with visibility, and so he left the control station and went topside. There he lifted his marine 7 x 50s, and then the microphone of his radio.

"Motor Yacht *Springer* calling Coast Guard forty-one-boat, over."

"This is Coast Guard, *Springer.* Portagee here. What are you doing up so early, Kelly? Over."

"Carrying out my commerce on the sea, Oreza. What's your excuse? Over."

"Looking out for feather merchants like you to rescue, getting some training done, what do you think? Over."

"Glad to hear that, Coast Guard. You push those lever-things towards the front of the boat—that's the pointy part, usually—and she goes faster. And the pointy part goes the same way you turn the wheel—you know, left to go left, right to go right. Over."

Kelly could hear the laughter over the FM circuit. "Roger, copy that, *Springer,* I will pass that along to my crew. Thank you, sir, for the advice. Over."

The crew on the forty-one-foot boat was howling after a long eight hours of patrol, and doing very little. Oreza was letting a young seaman handle the wheel, leaning on the wheelhouse bulkhead and sipping his own coffee as he played with the radio mike.

"You know, *Springer,* I don't take that sort of guff off many guys. Over."

"A good sailor respects his betters, Coast Guard. Hey, is it true your boats have wheels on the bottom? Over."

"Oooooooo," observed a new apprentice.

"Ah, that's a negative, *Springer.* We take the training wheels off after the Navy pukes leave the shipyard. We don't like it when you ladies get seasick just from looking at them. Over!"

Kelly chuckled and altered course to port to stay well clear of the small cutter. "Nice to know that our country's waterways are in

such capable hands, Coast Guard, 'specially with a weekend coming up."

"Careful, *Springer,* or I'll hit you for a safety inspection!"

"My federal tax money at work?"

"I hate to see it wasted."

"Well, Coast Guard, just wanted to make sure y'all were awake."

"Roger and thank you very much, sir. We were dozing a little. Nice to know we have real pros like you out here to keep us on our toes."

"Fair winds, Portagee."

"And to you, Kelly. Out." The radio frequency returned to the usual static.

And that took care of that, Kelly thought. It wouldn't do to have him come alongside for a chat. Not just now. Kelly secured the radio and went below. The eastern horizon was pink-orange now, another ten minutes or so until the sun made its appearance.

"What was that all about?" Billy asked.

Kelly poured himself another cup of coffee and checked the autopilot. It was warm enough now that he removed his shirt. The scars on his back from the shotgun blast could hardly have been more clear, even in the dim light of a breaking dawn. There was a remarkable long silence, punctuated by a deep intake of breath.

"You're…"

This time Kelly turned, looking down at the naked man chained to the deck. "That's right."

"I killed you," Billy objected. He'd never gotten the word. Henry hadn't passed it along, deeming it to be irrelevant to his operation.

"Think so?" Kelly asked, looking forward again. One of the diesels was running a little warmer than the other, and he made a note to check the cooling system after his other business was done. Otherwise the boat was behaving as docilely as ever, rocking gently on the almost invisible swells, moving along at a steady twenty knots, the bow pitched up at about fifteen degrees on an efficient planing angle. On the step, as Kelly called it. He stretched again, flexing muscles, letting Billy see the scars and what lay under them.

"So that's what it's about… she told us all about you before we snuffed her."

Kelly scanned the instrument panel, then checked the chart as he approached the Bay Bridge. Soon he'd cross over to the eastern side of the channel. He was now checking the boat's clock—he thought

of it as a chronometer—at least once a minute.

"Pam was a great little fuck. Right up to the end," Billy said, taunting his captor, filling the silence with his own malignant words, finding a sort of courage there. "Not real smart, though. Not real smart."

Just past the Bay Bridge, Kelly disengaged the autopilot and turned the wheel ten degrees to port. There was no morning traffic to speak of, but he looked carefully anyway before initiating the maneuver. A pair of running lights just on the horizon announced the approach of a merchant ship, probably twelve thousand yards off. Kelly could have flipped on the radar to check, but in these weather conditions it just would have been a waste of electricity.

"Did she tell you about the passion marks?" Billy sneered. He didn't see Kelly's hands tighten on the wheel.

The marks about the breasts appear to have been made with an ordinary set of pliers, the pathology report had said. Kelly had it all memorized, every single word of the dry medical phraseology, as though engraved with a diamond stylus on a plate of steel. He wondered if the medics had felt the same way he did. Probably so. Their anger had probably manifested itself in the increased detachment of their dictated notes. Professionals were like that.

"She talked, you know, she told us everything. How you picked her up, how you partied. We taught her that, mister. You owe us for that! Before she ran, I bet she didn't tell you, she fucked us all, three, four times each. I guess she thought that was pretty smart, eh? I guess she never figured that we'd all get to fuck her some more."

O+, O-, AB-, Kelly thought. Blood type O was by far the most common of all, and so that meant there could well have been more than three of them. *And what blood type are you, Billy?*

"Just a whore. A pretty one, but just a fucking little whore. That's how she died, did you know? She died while she was fucking a guy. We strangled her, and her cute little ass was pumping hard, right up till the time her face turned purple. Funny to watch," Billy assured him with a leer that Kelly didn't have to see. "I had my fun with her —three times, man! I hurt her, I hurt her bad, you hear me?"

Kelly opened his mouth wide, breathing slowly and regularly, not allowing his muscles to tense up now. The morning wind had picked up some, letting the boat rock perhaps five degrees left and right of the vertical, and he allowed his body to ride with the rolls,

commanding himself to accept the soothing motion of the sea.

"I don't know what the big deal is, I mean, she's just a dead whore. We should be able to cut a deal, like. You know how dumb you are? There was seventy grand back in the house, you dumb son of a bitch. Seventy grand!" Billy stopped, seeing it wasn't working. Still, an angry man made mistakes, and he'd rattled the guy before. He was sure of that, and so he continued.

"You know, the real shame, I guess, is she needed drugs. You know, if she just knew another place to score, we never woulda seen y'all. Then you fucked up, too, remember."

Yes, I remember.

"I mean, you really were dumb. Didn't you know about phones? Jesus, man. After our car got stuck, we called Burt and got his car, and just went cruisin', like, and there you were, easy as hell to spot in that jeep. You must've really been under her spell, man."

Phones? It was something that *simple that had killed Pam?* Kelly thought. His muscles went taut. *You fucking idiot, Kelly.* Then his shoulders went slack, just for a second, with the realization of how thoroughly he had failed her, and part of him recognized the emptiness of his efforts at revenge. But empty or not, it was something he would have. He sat up straighter in the control chair.

"I mean, shit, car easy to spot like that, how fuckin' dumb can a guy be?" Billy asked, having just seen real feedback from his taunts. Now perhaps he could start real negotiations. "I'm kinda surprised you're alive—hey, I mean, it wasn't anything personal. Maybe you didn't know the work she did for us. We couldn't let her loose with what she knew, right? I can make it up to you. Let's make a deal, okay?"

Kelly checked the autopilot and the surface. *Springer* was moving on a safe and steady course, and nothing in sight was on a converging path. He rose from his chair and moved to another, a few feet from Billy.

"She told you that we were in town to score some drugs? She told you that?" Kelly asked, his eyes level with Billy's.

"Yeah, that's right." Billy was relaxing. He was puzzled when Kelly started weeping in front of him. Perhaps here was a chance to get out of his predicament. "Geez, I'm sorry, man," Billy said in the wrong sort of voice. "I mean, it's just bad luck for you."

Bad luck for me? He closed his eyes, just a few inches from Billy's face. *Dear God, she was protecting me. Even after I failed her. She*

didn't even know if I was alive or not, but she lied to protect me. It was more than he could bear, and Kelly simply lost control of himself for several minutes. But even that had a purpose. His eyes dried up after a time, and as he wiped his face, he also removed any human feelings he might have had for his guest.

Kelly stood and walked back to the control chair. He didn't want to look the little bastard in the face any longer. He might really lose control, and he couldn't risk that.

"Tom, I think you may be right after all," Ryan said.

According to his driver's license—already checked out: no arrest record, but a lengthy list of traffic violations—Richard Oliver Farmer was twenty-four and would grow no older. He had expired from a single knife thrust into the chest, through the pericardium, fully transiting the heart. The size of the knife wound—ordinarily such traumatic insults closed up until they became difficult for the layman to see—indicated that the assailant had twisted the blade as much as the space between the ribs allowed. It was a large wound, indicating a blade roughly two inches in width. More important, there was additional confirmation.

"Not real smart," the ME announced. Ryan and Douglas both nodding, looking. Mr. Farmer had been wearing a white cotton, button-down-collar shirt. There was a suit jacket, too, hanging on a doorknob. Whoever had killed him had wiped the knife on the shirt. Three wipes, it appeared, and one of them had left a permanent impression of the knife, marked in the blood of the victim, who had a revolver in his belt but hadn't had a chance to use it. Another victim of skill and surprise, but, in this case, less circumspection. The junior of the pair pointed to one of the stains with his pencil.

"You know what it is?" Douglas asked. It was rhetorical; he answered his own question immediately. "It's a Ka-Bar, standard-issue Marine combat knife. I own one myself."

"Nice edge on it, too," the ME told them. "Very clean cut, almost surgical in the way it went through the skin. He must have sliced the heart just about in half. A very accurate thrust, gentlemen, the knife came in perfectly horizontal so it didn't jam on the ribs. Most people think the heart's on the left. Our friend knew better. Only one penetration. He knew exactly what he was doing."

"One more, Em. Armed criminal. Our friend got in close and did him so fast—"

"Yeah, Tom, I believe you now." Ryan nodded and went upstairs to join the other detective team. In the front bedroom was a pile of men's clothes, a cloth satchel with a ton of cash in it, a gun, and a knife. A mattress with semen stains, some still moist. Also a lady's purse. So much evidence for the younger men to catalog. Blood types from the semen stains. Complete ID on all three—they assumed three—people who had been here. Even a car outside to run down. Finally something like a normal murder case. Latent Prints would be all over the place. The photographers had already shot a dozen rolls of film. But for Ryan and Douglas the matter was already settled in its curious way.

"You know that guy Farber over at Hopkins?"

"Yeah, Em, he worked the Gooding case with Frank Allen. I set the date up. He's real smart," Douglas allowed. "A little peculiar, but smart. I have to be in court this afternoon, remember?"

"Okay, I think I can handle it. I owe you a beer, Tom. You figured this one faster than I did."

"Well, thanks, maybe I can be a lieutenant, too, someday."

Ryan laughed, fishing out a cigarette as he walked down the stairs.

"You going to resist?" Kelly asked with a smile. He'd just come back into the salon after tying up to the quay.

"Why should I help you with anything?" Billy asked with what he thought to be defiance.

"Okay." Kelly drew the Ka-Bar and held it next to a particularly sensitive place. "We can start right now if you want."

The whole body shriveled, but one part more than the others. "Okay, okay!"

"Good. I want you to learn a little from this. I don't want you ever to hurt another girl again." Kelly loosed the shackles from the deck fitting, but his arms were still together, bolted in tight, as he stood Billy up.

"Fuck you, man! You're gonna kill me! And I ain't gonna tell you shit."

Kelly twisted him around to stare in his eyes. "I'm not going to kill you, Billy. You'll leave this island alive. I promise."

The confusion on his face was sufficiently amusing that Kelly actually smiled for a second. Then he shook his head. He told himself that he was treading a very narrow and hazardous path

between two equally dangerous slopes, and to both extremes lay madness, of two different types but equally destructive. He had to detach himself from the reality of the moment, yet hold on to it. Kelly helped him down from the boat and walked him towards the machinery bunker.

"Thirsty?"

"I need to take a piss, too."

Kelly guided him onto some grass. "Go right ahead." Kelly waited. Billy didn't like being naked, not in front of another man, not in a subordinate position. Foolishly, he wasn't trying to talk to Kelly now, at least not in the right way. Coward that he was, he'd tried to build up his manhood earlier, trying to talk not so much to Kelly as to himself as he'd recounted his part in ending Pam's life, creating for himself an illusion of power, when silence might—well, would probably not have saved him. It might have created doubts, though, especially if he'd been clever enough to spin a good yarn, but cowardice and stupidity were not strangers to each other, were they? Kelly let him stand untended while he dialed the combination lock. Turning on the interior lights, he pushed Billy inside.

It looked like—was in fact a steel cylinder, seventeen inches in diameter, sitting on its own legs with large caster-wheels at the bottom, just where he'd left it. The steel cover on the end was not in place, hanging down on its hinge.

"You going to get in that," Kelly told him.

"Fuck you, man!" Defiance again. Kelly used the butt end of the Ka-Bar to club him on the back of the neck. Billy fell to his knees.

"One way or another, you're getting in—bleeding or not bleeding, I really don't care." Which was a lie, but an effective one. Kelly lifted him by the neck and forced his head and shoulders into the opening. "Don't move."

It was so much easier than he'd expected. Kelly pulled a key off its place on the wall and unbolted the shackles on Billy's hands. He could feel his prisoner tense, thinking that he might have a chance, but Kelly was fast on the wrench—he only had to remove one bolt to free both hands, and a prod from the knife in the right place encouraged Billy not to back up, which was the necessary precursor to any kind of effective resistance. Billy was just too cowardly to accept pain as the price for a chance at escape. He trembled but didn't resist at all, for all his lavish and desperate thoughts.

"Inside!" A push helped, and when his feet were inside the rim,

Kelly lifted the hatch and bolted it into place. Then he walked out, flipping the lights off. He needed something to eat and a nap. Billy could wait. The waiting would just make things easier.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded very worried.

"Hi, Sandy, it's John."

"John! What's going on?"

"How is she?"

"Doris, you mean? She's sleeping now," Sandy told him. "John, who—I mean, what's happened to her?"

Kelly squeezed the phone receiver in his hand. "Sandy, I want you to listen to me very carefully, okay? This is really important."

"Okay, go ahead." Sandy was in her kitchen, looking at a pot of coffee. Outside she could see neighborhood children playing a game of ball on a vacant field whose comforting normality now seemed to be very distant indeed.

"Number one, don't tell anybody that she's there. Sure as hell you don't tell the police."

"John, she's badly injured, she's hooked on pills, she probably has severe medical problems on top of that. I have to—"

"Sam and Sarah, then. Nobody else. Sandy, you got that? *Nobody else.* Sandy…" Kelly hesitated. It was too hard a thing to say, but he had to make it clear. "Sandy, I have placed you in danger. The people who worked Doris over are the same ones—"

"I know, John. I kinda figured that one out." The nurse's expression was neutral, but she too had seen the photo of Pamela Starr Madden's body. "John, she told me that you—killed somebody."

"Yes, Sandy, I did."

Sandra O'Toole wasn't surprised. She'd made the right guesses a few hours before, but hearing it from him—it was the way he'd just said it. Calm, matter-of-fact. *Yes, Sandy, I did.* Did you take the garbage out? Yes, Sandy, I did.

"Sandy, these are some very dangerous people. I could have left Doris behind—but I couldn't, could I? Jesus, Sandy, did you see what they—"

"Yes." It had been a long time since she'd worked the ER, and she'd almost forgotten the dreadful things that people did to one another.

"Sandy, I'm sorry that I—"

"John, it's done. I'll handle it, okay?"

Kelly stopped talking for a moment, taking strength from her voice. Perhaps that was the difference between them. His instinct was to lash out, to identify the people who did the evil things and to deal with them. *Seek out and destroy.* Her instinct was to protect in a different way, and it struck the former SEAL that her strength might well be the greater.

"I'll have to get her proper medical attention." Sandy thought about the young woman upstairs in the back bedroom. She'd helped her get cleaned off and been horrified at the marks on her body, the vicious physical abuse. But worst of all were her eyes, dead, absent of the defiant spark that she saw in patients even as they lost their fight for life. Despite years of work in the care of critically ill patients, she'd never realized that a person could be destroyed on purpose, through deliberate, sadistic malice. Now she might come to the attention of such people herself, Sandy knew, but greater than her fear for them was her loathing.

For Kelly those feelings were precisely inverted. "Okay, Sandy, but please be careful. Promise me."

"I will. I'm going to call Doctor Rosen." She paused for a moment. "John?"

"Yes, Sandy?"

"What you're doing… it's *wrong,* John." She hated herself for saying that.

"I know," Kelly told her.

Sandy closed her eyes, still seeing the kids chasing a baseball outside, then seeing John, wherever he was, knowing the expression that had to be on his face. She knew she had to say the next part, too, and she took a deep breath: "But I don't care about that, not anymore. I understand, John."

"Thank you," Kelly whispered. "Are you okay?"

"I'll do fine."

"I'll be back as soon as I can. I don't know what we can do with her—"

"Let me worry about that. We'll take care of her. We'll come up with something."

"Okay, Sandy… Sandy?"

"What, John?"

"Thanks." The line clicked off.

You're welcome, she thought, hanging up. What a strange man. He

was killing people, ending the lives of fellow human beings, doing it with an utter ruthlessness that she hadn't seen—had no desire to see—but which his voice proclaimed in its emotionless speech. But he'd taken the time and endangered himself to rescue Doris. She still didn't understand, Sandy told herself, dialing the phone again.

Dr. Sidney Farber looked exactly as Emmet Ryan expected: forty or so, small, bearded, Jewish, pipe-smoker. He didn't rise as the detective came in, but merely motioned his guest to a chair with a wave of the hand. Ryan had messengered extracts from the case files to the psychiatrist before lunch, and clearly the doctor had them. All of them were laid open on the desk, arrayed in two rows.

"I know your partner, Tom Douglas," Farber said, puffing on his pipe.

"Yes, sir. He said your work on the Gooding case was very helpful."

"A very sick man, Mr. Gooding. I hope he'll get the treatment he needs."

"How sick is this one?" Lieutenant Ryan asked.

Farber looked up. "He's as healthy as we are—rather healthier, physically speaking. But that's not the important part. What you just said. 'This one.' You're assuming one murderer for all these incidents. Tell me why." The psychiatrist leaned back in his chair.

"I didn't think so at first. Tom saw it before I did. It's the craftsmanship."

"Correct."

"Are we dealing with a psychopath?"

Farber shook his head. "No. The true psychopath is a person unable to deal with life. He sees reality in a very individual and eccentric way, generally a way that is very different from the rest of us. In nearly all cases the disorder is manifested in very open and easily recognized ways."

"But Gooding—"

"Mr. Gooding is what we—there's a new term, 'organized psychopath.'"

"Okay, fine, but he wasn't obvious to his neighbors."

"That's true, but Mr. Gooding's disorder manifested itself in the gruesome way he killed his victims. But with these killings, there's no ritual aspect to them. No mutilation. No sexual drive to them—that's usually indicated by cuts on the neck, as you know. No."

Farber shook his head again. “This fellow is all business. He’s not getting any emotional release at all. He’s just killing people and he’s doing it for a reason that is probably rational, at least to him.”

“Why, then?”

“Obviously it’s not robbery. It’s something else. He’s a very angry man, but I’ve met people like this before.”

“Where?” Ryan asked. Farber pointed to the opposite wall. In an oaken frame was a piece of red velvet on which were pinned a combat infantryman’s badge, jump wings, and a RANGER flash. The detective was surprised enough to let it show.

“Pretty stupid, really,” Farber explained with a deprecating gesture. “Little Jewish boy wants to show how tough he is. Well”—Farber smiled—“I guess I did.”

“I didn’t like Europe all that much myself, but I didn’t see the nice parts.”

“What outfit?”

“Easy Company, Second of the Five-Oh-Sixth.”

“Airborne. One-Oh-One, right?”

“All the way, doc,” the detective said, confirming that he too had once been young and foolish, and remembering how skinny he’d been, leaping out the cargo doors of C-47s. “I jumped into Normandy and Eindhoven.”

“And Bastogne?”

Ryan nodded. “That really wasn’t fun, but at least we went in by truck.”

“Well, that’s what you’re up against. Lieutenant Ryan.”

“Explain?”

“Here’s the key to it.” Farber held up the transcribed interview with Mrs. Charles. “The disguise. Has to be a disguise. It takes a strong arm to slam a knife into the back of the skull. That wasn’t any alcoholic. They have all sorts of physical problems.”

“But that one doesn’t fit the pattern at all.” Ryan objected.

“I think it does, but it’s not obvious. Turn the clock back. You’re in the Army, you’re an elite member of an elite unit. You take the time to recon your objective, right?”

“Always,” the detective confirmed.

“Apply that to a city. How do you do that? You camouflage yourself. So our friend decides to disguise himself as a wino. How many of those people on the street? Dirty, smelly, but pretty harmless except to one another. They’re invisible and you just filter

them out. Everyone does."

"You still didn't—"

"But how does he get in and out? You think he takes a bus—a taxi?"

"Car."

"A disguise is something you put on and take off." Farber held up the photo of the Charles murder scene. "He makes his double-kill two blocks away, he clears the area, and comes here—why do you suppose?" And there it was, right on the photo, a gap between two parked cars.

"Holy shit!" The humiliation Ryan felt was noteworthy. "What else did I miss, Doctor Farber?"

"Call me Sid. Not much else. This individual is very clever, changing his methods, and this is the only case where he displayed his anger. That's it, do you see? This is the only crime with rage in it—except maybe for the one this morning, but we'll set that aside for the moment. Here we see rage. First he cripples the victim, then he kills him in a particularly difficult way. Why?" Farber paused for a few contemplative puffs. "He was angry, but *why* was he angry? It had to have been an unplanned act. He wouldn't have planned something with Mrs. Charles there. For some reason he had to do something that he hadn't expected to do, and that made him angry. Also, he let her go—*knowing* that she saw him."

"You still haven't told me—"

"He's a combat veteran. He's very, very fit. That means he's younger than we are, and highly trained. Ranger, Green Beret, somebody like that."

"Why is he out there?"

"I don't know. You're going to have to ask him. But what you have is somebody who takes his time. He's watching his victims. He's picking the same time of day—when they're tired, when street traffic is low, to reduce the chance of being spotted. He's not robbing them. He may take the money, but that's not the same thing. Now tell me about this morning's kill," Farber commanded in a gentle but explicit way.

"You have the photo. There was a whole lot of cash in a bag upstairs. We haven't counted it yet, but at least fifty thousand dollars."

"Drug money?"

"We think so."

"There were other people there? He kidnapped them?"

"Two, we think. A man definitely, and probably a woman, too."

Farber nodded and puffed away for a few seconds. "One of two things. Either that's the person he was after all along, or he's just one more step towards something else."

"So all the pushers he killed were just camouflage."

"The first two, the ones he wired up—"

"Interrogated them." Ryan grimaced. "We should have figured this out. They were the only ones who weren't killed in the open. He did it that way to have more time."

"Hindsight is always easy," Farber pointed out. "Don't feel too bad. That one really did look like a robbery, and you had nothing else to go on. By the time you came here, there was a lot more information to look at." The psychiatrist leaned back and smiled at the ceiling. He loved playing detective. "Until this one"—he tapped the photos from the newest scene with his pipe—"you didn't really have much. This is the one that makes everything else clear. Your suspect knows weapons. He knows tactics. He's very patient. He stalks his victims like a hunter after a deer. He's changing his methodology to throw you off, but today he made a mistake. He showed a little rage this time, too, because he used a knife deliberately, and he showed the kind of training he had by cleaning the weapon right away."

"But he's not crazy, you say."

"No, I doubt he's disturbed in a clinical sense at all, but sure as hell he's motivated by something. People like this are highly disciplined, just like you and I were. Discipline shows in how he operates—but his anger also shows in *why* he operates. Something made this man start to do this."

"'Ma'am.'"

That one caught Farber short. "Exactly! Very good. Why didn't he eliminate her? That's the only witness we know about. He was polite to her. He let her go… interesting… but not enough to go on, really."

"Except to say that he's not killing for fun."

"Correct." Farber nodded. "Everything he does will have a purpose, and he has a lot of specialized training that he can apply to this mission. It is a *mission.* You have one really dangerous cat prowling the street."

"He's after drug people. That's pretty clear," Ryan said. "The one

—maybe two—he kidnapped…"

"If one is a woman, she'll survive. The man will not. From the condition of his body we'll be able to tell if he was the target."

"Rage?"

"That will be obvious. One other thing—if you have police looking for this guy, remember that he's better with weapons than almost anybody. He'll look harmless. He'll avoid a confrontation. He doesn't want to kill the wrong people, or he would have killed this Mrs. Charles."

"But if we corner him—"

"You don't want to do that."

"All comfy?" Kelly asked.

The recompression chamber was one of several hundred produced for a Navy contract requirement by the Dykstra Foundry and Tool Company, Inc., of Houston, Texas, or so the name plate said. Made of high-quality steel, it was designed to reproduce the pressure that came along with scuba diving. At one end was a triple-paned four-inch-square Plexiglas window. There was even a small air lock so that items could be passed in, like food or drink, and inside the chamber was a twenty-watt reading light in a protected fixture. Under the chamber itself was a powerful, gasoline-powered air compressor, which could be controlled from a fold-down seat, adjacent to which were two pressure gauges. One was labeled in concentric circles of millimeters and inches of mercury, pounds-per-square-inch, kilograms-per-square-centimeter, and "bar" or multiples of normal atmospheric pressure, which was 14.7 PSI. The other gauge showed equivalent water depth both in feet and meters. Each thirty-three feet of simulated depth raised the atmospheric pressure by 14.7 PSI, or one bar.

"Look, whatever you want to know, okay…" Kelly heard over the intercom.

"I thought you'd see things my way." He yanked the rope on the motor, starting the compressor. Kelly made sure that the simple spigot valve next to the pressure gauges was tightly shut. Then he opened the pressurization valve, venting air from the compressor to the chamber, and watched the needles rotate slowly clockwise.

"You know how to swim?" Kelly asked, watching his face.

Billy's head jerked with alarm. "What—look, please, don't drown me, okay?"

"That's not going to happen. So, can you swim?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Ever do any skin diving?" Kelly asked next.

"No, no, I haven't," replied a very confused drug distributor.

"Okay, well, you're going to learn what it's like. You should yawn and work your ears, like, to get used to the pressure," Kelly told him, watching the "depth" gauge pass thirty feet.

"Look, why don't you just ask your fucking questions, okay?"

Kelly switched the intercom off. There was just too much fear in the voice. Kelly didn't really like hurting people all that much, and he was worried about developing sympathy for Billy. He steadied the gauge at one hundred feet, closing off the pressurization valve but leaving the motor running. While Billy adjusted to the pressure, Kelly found a hose which he attached to the motor's exhaust pipe. This he extended outside to dump the carbon monoxide into the atmosphere. It would be a time-consuming process, just waiting for things to happen. Kelly was going on memory, and that was worrisome. There was a useful but rather rough instruction table on the side of the chamber, the bottom line of which commanded reference to a certain diving manual which Kelly did not have. He'd done very little deep diving of late, and the only one that had really concerned him had been a team effort, the oil rig down in the Gulf. Kelly spent an hour tidying things up around the machine shop, cultivating his memories and his rage before coming back to his fold-down seat.

"How are you feeling?"

"Look, okay, all right?" Rather a nervous voice, actually.

"Ready to answer some questions?"

"Anything, okay? Just let me outa here!"

"Okay, good." Kelly lifted a clipboard. "Have you ever been arrested, Billy?"

"No." A little pride in that one, Kelly noted. Good.

"Been in the service?"

"No." Such a stupid question.

"So you've never been in jail, never been fingerprinted, nothing like that?"

"Never." The head shook inside the window.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"I am, man! I am!"

"Yeah, you probably are, but I have to make sure, okay?" Kelly

reached with his left hand and twisted the spigot valve. Air hissed loudly out of the chamber while he watched the pressure gauges.

Billy didn't know what to expect, and it all came as a disagreeable surprise. In the preceding hour, he had been surrounded by four times the normal amount of air for the space he was in. His body had adapted to that. The air taken in through his lungs, also pressurized, had found its way into his bloodstream, and now his entire body was at 58.8 pounds per square inch of ambient pressure. Various gas bubbles, mainly nitrogen, were dissolved into his bloodstream, and when Kelly bled the air out of the chamber, those bubbles started to expand. Tissues around the bubbles resisted the force, but not well, and almost at once cell walls started first to stretch, and then, in some cases, to rupture. The pain started in his extremities, first as a dull but widespread ache and rapidly evolving into the most intense and unpleasant sensation Billy had ever experienced. It came in waves, timed exactly with the now-rapid beating of his heart. Kelly listened to the moan that turned into a scream, and the air pressure was only that of sixty feet. He twisted the release valve shut and re-engaged the pressurization one. In another two minutes the pressure was back to that of four bar. The restored pressure eased the pain almost completely, leaving behind the sort of ache associated with strenuous exercise. That was not something to which Billy was accustomed, and for him the pain was not the welcome sort that athletes know. More to the point, the wide and terrified eyes told Kelly that his guest was thoroughly cowed. They didn't look like human eyes now, and that was good.

Kelly switched on the intercom. "That's the penalty for a lie. I thought you should know. Now. Ever been arrested, Billy?"

"Jesus, man, no!"

"Never been in jail, fingerprinted—"

"No, man, like speeding tickets, I ain't never been busted."

"In the service?"

"No, I told you that!"

"Good, thank you." Kelly checked off the first group of questions. "Now let's talk about Henry and his organization." There was one other thing happening that Billy did not expect. Beginning at about three bar, the nitrogen gas that constitutes the majority of what humans call air has a narcotic effect not unlike that of alcohol or barbiturates. As afraid as Billy was, there was also a whiplash feeling of euphoria, along with which came impaired judgment. It

was just one more bonus effect from the interrogation technique that Kelly had selected mainly for the magnitude of the injury it could inflict.

"Left the money?" Tucker asked.

"More than fifty thousand. They were still counting when I left," Mark Charon said. They were back in the theater, the only two people in the balcony. But this time Henry wasn't eating any popcorn, the detective saw. It wasn't often that he saw Tucker agitated.

"I need to know what's going on. Tell me what you know."

"We've had a few pushers whacked in the past week or ten days —"

"Ju-Ju, Bandanna, two others I don't know. Yeah, I know that. You think they're connected?"

"It's all we got, Henry. Was it Billy who disappeared?"

"Yeah. Rick's dead. Knife?"

"Somebody cut his fuckin' heart out," Charon exaggerated. "One of your girls there, too?"

"Doris," Henry confirmed with a nod. "Left the money… why?"

"It could have been a robbery that went wrong somehow, but I don't know what would have screwed that up. Ju-Ju and Bandanna were both robbed—hell, maybe those cases are unrelated. Maybe what happened last night was, well, something else."

"Like what?"

"Like maybe a direct attack on your organization, Henry," Charon answered patiently. "Who do you know who would want to do that? You don't have to be a cop to understand motive, right?" Part of him—a large part, in fact—enjoyed having the upper hand on Tucker, however briefly. "How much does Billy know?"

"A lot—shit, I just started taking him to—" Tucker stopped.

"That's okay. I don't need to know and I don't want to know. But somebody else does, and you'd better think about that." A little late, Mark Charon was beginning to appreciate how closely his well-being was associated with that of Henry Tucker.

"Why not at least make it *look* like a robbery?" Tucker demanded, eyes locked unseeingly on the screen.

"Somebody's sending you a message, Henry. Not taking the money is a sign of contempt. Who do you know who doesn't need money?"

The screams were getting louder. Billy had just taken another excursion to sixty feet, staying there for a couple of minutes. It was useful to be able to watch his face. Kelly saw him claw at his ears when both tympanic membranes ruptured, not a second apart. Then his eyes and sinuses had been affected. It would be attacking his teeth, too, if he had any cavities—which he probably did, Kelly thought, but he didn't want to hurt him too much, not yet.

"Billy," he said, after restoring the pressure and eliminating most of the pain, "I'm not sure I believe that one."

"You motherfucker!" the person inside the chamber screamed at the microphone. "I fixed her, you know? I watched your little babydoll die with Henry's dick in her, slinging her cunt for him, and I seen you cry like a fucking baby about it, you fucking pussy!"

Kelly made sure his face was at the window when his hand opened the release valve again, bringing Billy back to eighty feet, just enough for a good taste. There would be bleeding in the major joints now, because the nitrogen bubbles tended to collect there for one reason or another, and the instinctive reaction of decompression sickness was to curl up in a ball, from which had come the original name for the malady, "the bends." But Billy couldn't fold up inside the chamber, much as he tried to. His central nervous system was being affected now, too, the gossamer fibers being squeezed, and the pain was multifaceted now, crushing aches in the joints and extremities, and searing, fiery threads throughout his body. Nerve spasms started as the tiny electrical fibers rebelled against what was happening to them, and his body jerked randomly as though being stung with electric shocks. The neurological involvement was a little disquieting this early on. That was enough for now. Kelly restored the pressure, watching the spasms slow down.

"Now, Billy, do you know how it was for Pam?" he asked, just to remind himself, really.

"Hurts." He was crying now. He'd gotten his arms up, and his hands were over his face, but for all that he couldn't conceal his agony.

"Billy," Kelly said patiently. "You see how it works? If I think you're lying, it hurts. If I don't like what you say, it hurts. You want me to hurt you some more?"

"Jesus—no, please!" The hands came away, and their eyes weren't so much as eighteen inches apart.

"Let's try to be a little bit more polite, okay?"

"…sorry…"

"I'm sorry, too, Billy, but you have to do what I tell you, okay?" He got a nod. Kelly reached for a glass of water. He checked the interlocks on the pass-through system before opening the door and setting the glass inside. "Okay, if you open the door next to your head, you can have something to drink."

Billy did as he was told and was soon sipping water through a straw.

"Now let's get back to business, okay? Tell me more about Henry. Where does he live?"

"I don't know," he gasped.

"Wrong answer!" Kelly snarled.

"Please, no! I don't know, we meet at a place off Route 40, he doesn't let us know where—"

"You have to do better than that or the elevator goes back to the sixth floor. Ready?"

"Noooooo!" The scream was so loud that it came right through the inch-thick steel. *"Please, no! I don't know—I really don't."*

"Billy, I don't have much reason to be nice to you," Kelly reminded him. "You killed Pam, remember? You tortured her to death. You got your rocks off using pliers on her. How many hours, Billy, how long did you and your friends work on her? Ten? Twelve? Hell, Billy, we've only been talking for seven hours. You're telling me you've worked for this guy for almost two years and you don't even know where he lives? I have trouble believing that. Going up," Kelly announced in a mechanical voice, reaching for the valve. All he had to do was crack it. The first hiss of pressurized air bore with it such terror that Billy was screaming before any real pain had a chance to start.

"I DON'T FUCKING KNOOOOOOOOOWWW!"

Damn! What if he doesn't?

Well, Kelly thought, *it doesn't hurt to be sure.* He brought him up just a little, just to eighty-five feet, enough to renew old pains without spreading the effects any further. Fear of pain was now as bad as the real thing, Kelly thought, and if he went too far, pain could become its own narcotic. No, this man was a coward who had often enjoyed inflicting pain and terror on others, and if he discovered that pain, however dreadful, could be survived, then he might actually find courage in himself. That was a risk Kelly was

unwilling to run, however remote it might be. He closed the release valve again and brought the pressure back up, this time to one hundred ten feet, the better to attenuate the pain and increase the narcosis.

"My God," Sarah breathed. She hadn't seen the postmortem photos of Pam, and her only question on the matter had been discouraged by her husband, a warning which she'd heeded.

Doris was nude, and disturbingly passive. The best thing that could be said for her was that Sandy had helped her bathe. Sam had his bag open, passing over his stethoscope. Her heart rate was over ninety, strong enough but too rapid for a girl her age. Blood pressure was also elevated. Temperature was normal. Sandy moved in, drawing four 5-cc test tubes of blood which would be analyzed at the hospital lab.

"Who does this sort of thing?" Sarah whispered to herself. There were numerous marks on her breasts, a fading bruise to her right cheek, and other, more recent edemas on her abdomen and legs. Sam checked her eyes for pupillary response, which was positive—except for the total absence of reaction.

"The same people who killed Pam," the surgeon replied quietly.

"Pam?" Doris asked.

"You knew her? How?"

"The man who brought you here," Sandy said. "He's the one—"

"The one Billy killed?"

"Yes," Sam answered, then realized how foolish it might sound to an outside listener.

"I just know the phone number," Billy said, drunkenly now from the high partial-pressure of nitrogen gas, and his release from pain was helping him to be much more compliant.

"Give it to me," Kelly ordered. Billy did as he was told and Kelly wrote it down. He had two full pages of penciled notes now. Names, addresses, a few phone numbers. Seemingly very little, but far more than he'd had only twenty-four hours before.

"How do the drugs come in?"

Billy's head turned away from the window. "Don't know…"

"We have to do better than that." *Hisssssssssssss…*

Again Billy screamed, and this time Kelly let it happen, watching the depth-gauge needle rotate to seventy-five feet. Billy started

gagging. His lung function was impaired now, and the choking coughs merely amplified the pain that now filled every cubic inch of his racked body. His whole body felt like a balloon, or more properly a collection of them, large and small, all trying to explode, all pressing on others, and he could feel that some were stronger and some weaker than others, and the weaker ones were those at the most important places inside him. His eyes were hurting now, seeming to expand beyond their sockets, and the way in which his paranasal sinuses were also expanding only made it worse, as though his face would detach from the rest of his skull; his hands flew there, desperately trying to hold it in place. The pain was beyond anything he had ever felt and beyond anything he had ever inflicted. His legs were bent as much as the steel cylinder allowed, and his kneecaps seemed to dig grooves into the steel, so hard they pressed against it. He was able to move his arms, and those twisted and turned about his chest, seeking relief, but only generating more pain as he struggled to hold his eyes in the sockets. He was unable even to scream now. Time stopped for Billy and became eternity. There was no light, no darkness, no sound or silence. All of reality was pain.

"…please… please…" the whisper carried over the speaker next to Kelly. He brought the pressure back up slowly, stopping this time at one hundred ten feet.

Billy's face was mottled now, like the rash from some horrible allergy. Some blood vessels had let go just below the surface of the skin, and a big one had ruptured on the surface of the left eye. Soon half of the "white" was red, closer to purple, really, making him look even more like the frightened, vicious animal he was.

"The last question was about how the drugs come in."

"I don't know," he whined.

Kelly spoke quietly into the microphone. "Billy, there's something you have to understand. Up until now what's happened to you, well, it hurts pretty bad, but I haven't really hurt you yet. I mean, not *really* hurt you."

Billy's eyes went wide. Had he been able to consider things in a dispassionate way, he would have remarked to himself that surely horror must stop *somewhere,* an observation that would have been both right and wrong.

"Everything that's happened so far, it's all things that doctors can fix, okay?" It wasn't much of a lie on Kelly's part, and what

followed was no lie at all. “The next time we let the air out, Billy, then things will happen that nobody can fix. Blood vessels inside your eyeballs will break open, and you’ll be blind. Other vessels inside your brain will let go, okay? They can’t fix either one. You’ll be blind and you’ll be crazy. But the pain will never go away. The rest of your life, Billy, blind, crazy, and hurt. You’re what? Twenty-five? You have lots more time to live. Forty years, maybe, blind, crazy, crippled. So it’s a good idea to not lie to me, okay?

“Now—how do the drugs come in?”

No pity, Kelly told himself. He would have killed a dog or a cat or a deer in the condition he’d inflicted on this… object. But Billy wasn’t a dog or a cat or a deer. He was a human being, after a fashion. Worse than the pimp, worse than the pushers. Had the situation been reversed, Billy would not have felt what he was feeling. He was a person whose universe was very small indeed. It held only one person, himself, surrounded by *things* whose sole function was to be manipulated for his amusement or profit. Billy was one who enjoyed the infliction of pain, who enjoyed establishing dominance over *things* whose feelings were nothing of importance, even if they truly existed at all. Somehow he’d never learned that there were other human beings in his universe, *people* whose right to life and happiness was equal to his own; because of that he had run the unrecognized risk of offending another person whose very existence he had never really acknowledged. He was learning different now, perhaps, though it was a little late. Now he was learning that his future was indeed a lonely universe which he would share not with people, but with pain. Smart enough to see that future, Billy broke. It was obvious on his face. He started talking in a choked and uneven voice, but one which, finally, was completely truthful. It was only about ten years too late, Kelly estimated, looking up from his notes at the relief valve. That ought to have been a pity, and truly it was for many of those who had shared Billy’s rather eccentric universe. Perhaps he’d just never figured it out, Kelly thought, that someone else might treat him the same way in which he treated so many others, smaller and weaker than himself. But that also was too late in coming. Too late for Billy, too late for Pam, and, in a way, too late for Kelly. The world was full of inequities and not replete with justice. It was that simple, wasn’t it? Billy didn’t know that justice might be out there waiting, and there simply hadn’t been enough of it to warn him.

And so he had gambled. And so he had lost. And so Kelly would save his pity for others.

"I don't know… I don't—"

"I warned you, didn't I?" Kelly opened the valve, bringing him all the way to fifty feet. The retinal blood vessels must have ruptured early. Kelly thought he saw a little red in the pupils, wide as their owner screamed even after his lungs were devoid of air. Knees and feet and elbows drummed against the steel. Kelly let it happen, waiting before he reapplied the air pressure.

"Tell me what you know, Billy, or it just gets worse. Talk fast."

His voice was that of confession now. The information was somewhat remarkable, but it had to be true. No person like this had the imagination to make it up. The final part of the interrogation lasted for three hours, only once letting the valve *hiss,* and then only for a second or two. Kelly left and revisited questions to see if the answers changed, but they didn't. In fact, the renewed question developed yet more information that connected some bits of data to others, formulating an overall picture that became clearer still, and by midnight he was sure that he'd emptied Billy's mind of all the useful data that it contained.

Kelly was almost captured by humanity when he set his pencils down. If Billy had shown Pam any mercy at all, perhaps he might have acted differently, for his own wounds were, just as Billy had said, only a business matter—more correctly, had been occasioned by his own stupidity, and he could not in good conscience harm a man for taking advantage of his own errors. But Billy had not stopped there. He had tortured a young woman whom Kelly had loved, and for that reason Billy was not a *man* at all, and did not merit Kelly's solicitude.

It didn't matter in any case. The damage had been done, and it progressed at its own speed as tissues torn loose by the barometric trauma wandered about blood vessels, closing them off one at a time. The worst manifestation of this was in Billy's brain. Soon his sightless eyes proclaimed the madness that they held, and though the final depressurization was a slow and gentle one, what came out of the chamber was not a man—but then, it never had been.

Kelly loosed the retaining bolts on the hatch. He was greeted with a foul stench that he ought to have expected but didn't. The buildup and release of pressure in Billy's intestinal tract and bladder had produced predictable effects. He'd have to hose it out later, Kelly

thought, pulling Billy out and laying him on the concrete floor. He wondered if he had to chain him to something, but the body at his feet was useless to its owner now, the major joints nearly destroyed, the central nervous system good only to transmit pain. But Billy was still breathing, and that was just fine, Kelly thought, heading off to bed, glad it was over. With luck he would not have to do something like this again. With luck and good medical care, Billy would live for several weeks. If you could call it that.

21

Possibilities

Kelly was actually disturbed by how well he slept. It wasn't fitting, he worried, that he should have gotten ten hours of uninterrupted sleep after what he'd done to Billy. This was an odd time for his conscience to manifest itself, Kelly said to the face in the mirror as he shaved; also a little late. If a person went around injuring women and dealing drugs, then he should have considered the possible consequences. Kelly wiped his face off. He felt no elation at the pain he'd inflicted—he was sure of that. It had been a matter of gathering necessary information while meting out justice in a particularly fitting and appropriate way. Being able to classify his actions in familiar terms went a long way towards keeping his conscience under control.

He also had to go someplace. After dressing, Kelly got a plastic drop cloth. This went to the after well-deck of his cruiser. He was already packed, and his things went into the main salon.

It would be a trip of several hours, most of it boring and more than half in darkness. Heading south for Point Lookout, Kelly took the time to scan the collection of derelict "ships" near Bloodsworth Island. Built for the First World War, they were an exceedingly motley collection. Some made of timber, others of concrete—which seemed very odd indeed—all of them had survived the world's first organized submarine campaign, but had not been commercially viable even in the 1920s, when merchant sailors had come a lot cheaper than the tugboat crews who routinely plied the Chesapeake Bay. Kelly went to the flying bridge and while the autopilot handled his southerly course, he examined them through binoculars, because one of them probably held interest. He could discern no

movement, however, and saw no boats in the morass that their final resting place had become. That was to be expected, he thought. It wouldn't be an ongoing industrial enterprise, though it was a clever hiding place for the activity in which Billy had so recently played a part. He altered course to the west. This matter would have to wait. Kelly made a conscious effort to change his thinking. He would soon be a team player, associated again with men like himself. A welcome change, he thought, during which he would have time to consider his tactics for the next phase of his operation.

The officers had merely been briefed on the incident with Mrs. Charles, but their alert level had been raised by follow-up information on the method by which her assailant had met his end. No additional cautionary words were needed. Two-man patrol cars handled most of them, though some solo cars driven by experienced —or overly confident—officers performed the same function in a way that would have grated on Ryan and Douglas had they seen it. One officer would approach while the other stood back, his hand resting casually on his service revolver. The lead officer would stand the wino up and frisk him, checking for weapons, and often finding knives, but no firearms—anyone in possession of one pawned it for money with which to buy alcohol or, in some cases, drugs. In the first night eleven such people were rousted and identified, with two arrests being made for what the officers deemed an improper attitude. But at the end of the shift, nothing of value had been turned up.

• • •

"Okay—I found something out," Charon said. His car sat in the parking lot outside a supermarket, next to a Cadillac.

"What's that?"

"They're looking for a guy disguised as a bum."

"You kidding me?" Tucker asked with some disgust.

"That's the word, Henry," the detective assured him. "They have orders to approach with caution."

"Shit," the distributor snorted.

"White, not too tall, forties. He's pretty strong, and he moves real good when he has to. They're going soft on the information that's out, but about the same time he interfered with a yoking, two more pushers turned up dead. I'm betting it's the same guy who's been

taking pushers out."

Tucker shook his head. "Rick and Billy, too? It doesn't make any sense."

"Henry, whether it makes sense or not, that's what the word is, okay? Now, you take this seriously. Whoever this guy is, he's a pro. You got that? A pro."

"Tony and Eddie," Tucker said quietly.

"That's my best guess, Henry, but it's only a guess." Charon pulled out of his parking place.

But none of it made any real sense, Tucker told himself, driving out onto Edmondson Avenue. Why would Tony and Eddie try to do —what? What the hell was going on? They didn't know much about his operation, merely that it existed, and that he wanted it and his territory left alone while he evolved into their principal supplier. For them to harm his business without first suborning his method of importing the product was not logical. Suborning… he'd used the wrong word… but—

Suborned. What if Billy were still alive? What if Billy had cut a deal and Rick hadn't gone along with it—a possibility; Rick had been weaker but more reliable than Billy.

Billy kills Rick, takes Doris out and dumps her somewhere—Billy knows how to do that, doesn't he?—why? Billy has made contact with—who? Ambitious little bastard, Billy, Tucker thought. *Not all that smart, but ambitious and tough when he has to be.*

Possibilities. Billy makes contact with somebody. Who? What does Billy know? He knows where the product is processed, but not how it comes in… maybe the smell, the formaldehyde smell on the plastic bags. Henry had been careful about that before; when Tony and Eddie had helped him package the product in the start-up phase, Tucker had taken the trouble to rebag everything, just to be on the safe side. But not the last two shipments… *damn.* That was a mistake, wasn't it? Billy knew roughly where the processing was done, but could he find it on his own? Henry didn't think so. He didn't know much about boats and didn't even like them all that much, and navigating wasn't an easily acquired art.

Eddie and Tony know about boats, you idiot, Tucker reminded himself.

But *why* would they cross him now, just when things were blooming?

Whom else had he offended? Well, there was the New York crew,

but he'd never even had direct contact with them. He'd invaded their market, though, taking advantage of a supply shortfall to establish an entry position. Might they be upset about that?

What about the Philadelphia crew? They had become the interface between himself and New York, and perhaps they were greedy. Perhaps they had found out about Billy.

Perhaps Eddie was making his move, betraying Tony and Henry at the same time.

Perhaps a lot of things. Whatever was happening, Henry still controlled the import pipeline. More to the point, he had to stand and defend what he had, his own territory, and his connections. Things were just starting to pay off big. Years of effort had been required to get to where he was now, Henry told himself, turning right towards his home. Starting over would entail dangers that, once run, were not easily repeated. A new city, setting up a new network. And Vietnam would be cooling off soon. The body count upon which he depended was declining. A problem now could wreck everything. If he could maintain his operation, his worst-case scenario was banking over ten million dollars—closer to twenty if he played the cards right—and leaving the business for good. That was not an unattractive option. Two years of high payoff to reach that spot. It might not be possible to start over from scratch. He had to stand and fight.

Stand and fight, boy. A plan began to form. He'd put the word out: he wanted Billy and he wanted him alive. He'd talk to Tony and sound him out on the chance that Eddie was playing a game of some sort, that Eddie was connected with rivals to the north. That was his starting point to gather information. Then he would act on it.

There's a likely spot, Kelly told himself. *Springer* was just crawling along, quietly. The trick was to find a place that was populated but not alert. Nothing unusual about that mission requirement, he smiled to himself. Toss in a bend in the river, and here was one. He checked the shoreline out carefully. It looked like a school, probably a boarding school, and there were no lights in the buildings. There was a town behind it, a small, sleepy one, just a few lights there, a car every couple of minutes, but those followed the main road, and nobody there could possibly see him. He let the boat proceed around a bend—better yet, a farm, probably tobacco

from the look of it, an old one with a substantial house maybe six hundred yards off, the owners inside and enjoying their air conditioning, the glare from their lights and TV preventing them from seeing outside. He'd risk it here.

Kelly idled his motors and went forward to drop his lunch-hook, a small anchor. He moved quickly and quietly, lowering his small dinghy into the water and pulling it aft. Lifting Billy over the rail was easy enough, but putting the body in the dinghy defeated him. Kelly hurried into the after stateroom and returned with a life jacket which he put on Billy before tossing him over the side. It was easier this way. He tied the jacket off to the stern. Then he rowed as quickly as he could to the shore. It only took three or four minutes before the dinghy's bow touched the muddy banks. It was a school, Kelly saw. It probably had a summer program, and almost certainly had a maintenance staff which would show up in the morning. He stepped out of the dinghy and hauled Billy onto the bank before removing the life jacket.

"You stay here, now."

"…stay…"

"That's right." Kelly pushed the dinghy back into the river. As he began rowing back, his aft-facing position forced him to look at Billy. He'd left him naked. No identification. He bore no distinguishing marks that Kelly had not created. Billy had said more than once that he'd never been fingerprinted. If true, then there was no way for police to identify him easily, probably not at all. And he couldn't live too long the way he was. The brain damage was more profound than Kelly had intended, and that indicated that other internal organs had to be severely damaged as well. But Kelly had shown some mercy after all. The crows probably wouldn't have a chance to pick at him. Just doctors. Soon Kelly had *Springer* moving back up the Potomac.

Two more hours and Kelly saw the marina at Quantico Marine Base. Tired, he made a careful approach, selecting a guest berth at the end of one of the piers.

"Who might you be?" a voice asked in the dark.

"The name's Clark," Kelly replied. "You should be expecting me."

"Oh, yeah. Nice boat," the man said, heading back to the small dock house. Within minutes a car came down the hill from officer-quarters.

"You're early," Marty Young said.

"Might as well get started, sir. Come aboard?"

"Thanks, Mr. Clark." He looked around the salon. "How did you get this baby? I suffer along with a little day-sailer."

"I don't know that I really should say, sir," Kelly replied. "Sorry." General Young accepted that with good grace.

"Dutch says you're going to be part of the op."

"Yes, sir."

"Sure you can hack it?" Young noticed the tattoo on Kelly's forearm and wondered what it denoted.

"I worked PHOENIX for over a year, sir. What sort of people have signed on?"

"They're all Force Recon. We're training them pretty hard."

"Kick 'em loose around five-thirty?" Kelly asked.

"That's right. I'll have somebody pick you up." Young smiled. "We need to get you nice and fit, too."

Kelly just smiled. "Fair enough, General."

"So what's so damned important?" Piaggi asked, annoyed to be bothered at short notice on a weekend night.

"I think somebody's making a move on me. I want to know who."

"Oh?" And *that* made the meeting important, if poorly timed, Tony thought. "Tell me what's happened."

"Somebody's been taking pushers down on the west side," Tucker said.

"I read the papers," Piaggi assured him. He poured some wine into his guest's glass. It was important at times like these to make a show of normality. Tucker would never be part of the family to which Piaggi belonged, but for all that he was a valuable associate. "Why is that important, Henry?"

"The same guy took down two of my people. Rick and Billy."

"The same ones who—"

"That's right. One of my girls is missing, too." He lifted his glass and sipped, watching Piaggi's eyes.

"Rip?"

"Billy had about seventy thousand, cash. The cops found it, right there." Tucker filled in a few more details. "The police say it looks real professional, like."

"You have any other enemies on the street?" Tony inquired. It wasn't a terribly bright question—anyone in the business had enemies—but the skill factor was the important one.

"I've made sure the cops know about my major competitors."

Piaggi nodded. That was within normal business practice, but somewhat risky. He shrugged it off. Henry could be a real cowboy, a source of occasional worry to Tony and his colleagues. Henry was also very careful when he had to be, and the man seemed to understand how to mix the two traits.

"Somebody getting even?"

"None of them would walk away from that kind of cash."

"True," Piaggi conceded. "I got news for you, Henry. *I* don't leave that sort of bundle laying around."

Oh, really? Tucker wondered behind impassive eyes. "Tony, either the guy fucked up or he's trying to tell me something. He's killed like seven or eight people, real smart. He took Rick down with a knife. I don't think he fucked up, y'dig?" The odd thing was that both men thought that a knifing was something the other would do. Henry had the impression that knives were the weapon of Italians. Piaggi thought it the trademark of a black.

"What I hear, somebody is doing pushers with a pistol—a little one."

"One was a shotgun, right in the guts. The cops are rousting street bums, doing it real careful."

"I didn't hear that," Piaggi admitted. This man had some great sources, but then he lived closer to that part of town, and it was to be expected that his intelligence network would be speedier than Piaggi's.

"It sounds like a pro doing this," Tucker concluded. "Somebody really good, y'know?"

Piaggi nodded understanding while his mind was in a quandary. The existence of highly skilled Mafia assassins was for the most part a fiction created by TV and movies. The average organized-crime murder was not a skilled act, but rather something carried out by a man who mainly did other, real, money-generating activities. There was no special class of killers who waited patiently for telephone calls, made hits, then returned to their posh homes to await the next call. There *were* made members who were unusually good or experienced at killing, but that wasn't the same thing. One simply got a reputation as a person whom killing didn't affect—and that meant that the elimination would be done with a minimum of fuss, not a maximum of artistry. True sociopaths were rare, even in the Mafia, and bungled killings were the rule rather than the exception.

And so "professional" to Henry meant something that existed only as a fiction, the TV image of a Mafia button man. But how the hell did Tony explain *that?*

"It isn't one of mine, Henry," he said after a moment's contemplation. That he didn't have *any* was another issue entirely, Piaggi told himself, watching the effect of his words on his associate. Henry had always assumed that Piaggi knew a good deal about killing. Piaggi *knew* that Tucker had more experience with that end of business than he ever wished to have, but that was just one more thing he would have to explain, and this clearly was not the time. For now, he watched Tucker's face, trying to read his thoughts as he finished his glass of Chianti.

How do I know he's telling the truth? The thought didn't require any special perception to read.

"You need some help, Henry?" Piaggi said, to break a very awkward silence.

"I don't think you're doing it. I think you're too smart," Tucker said, finishing his own glass.

"Glad to hear that." Tony smiled and refilled both glasses.

"What about Eddie?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is he ever going to get 'made'?" Tucker looked down, swirling the wine around the glass. One thing about Tony, he always set the right kind of atmosphere for a business discussion. It was one of the reasons they'd been drawn together. Tony was quiet, thoughtful, always polite, even when you asked a sensitive question.

"That's kind of touchy, Henry, and I really shouldn't talk that over with you. You can never be 'made.' You know that."

"No equal-opportunity in the outfit, eh? Well, that's okay. I know I'd never fit in real good. Just so's we can do business, Anthony." Tucker took the occasion to grin, breaking the tension somewhat and, he hoped, making it easier for Tony to answer the question. He got his wish.

"No," Piaggi said after a moment's contemplation. "Nobody thinks Eddie's got what it takes."

"Maybe he's lookin' for a way to prove differ'nt."

Piaggi shook his head. "I don't think so. Eddie's going to make a good living off this. He knows that."

"Who, then?" Tucker asked. "Who else knows enough? Who else would do a bunch of killings to cover up a move like this? Who else

would make it look like a pro job?"

Eddie's not smart enough. Piaggi knew that, or thought he did.

"Henry, taking Eddie out would cause major problems." He paused. "But I'll check around."

"Thank you," Tucker said. He stood and left Tony alone with his wine.

Piaggi stayed at his table. Why did things have to be so complicated? Was Henry being truthful? Probably, he thought. He was Henry's only connection to the outfit, and severing that tie would be very bad for everyone. Tucker could become highly important but would never be an insider. On the other hand he was smart and he delivered. The outfit had lots of such people, inside-outsiders, associate members, whatever you might call them, whose value and status were proportional to their utility. Many of them actually wielded more power than some "made" members, but there was always a difference. In a real dispute, being made counted for much—in most cases, counted for *everything.*

That could explain matters. Was Eddie jealous of Henry's status? Did he crave becoming a real member so much that he might be willing to forfeit the benefits of the current business arrangement? It didn't make sense, Piaggi told himself. But what did?

"Ahoy the *Springer!*" a voice called. The Marine corporal was surprised to see the cabin door open immediately. He'd expected having to jolt this… civilian… from his cushy bed. Instead he saw a man come out in jungle boots and bush fatigues. They weren't Marine "utilities," but close enough to show the man was serious. He could see where some badges had been removed, where a name and something else would have gone, and that somehow made Mr. Clark look more serious still.

"This way, sir." The corporal gestured. Kelly followed without a word.

Sir didn't mean anything, Kelly knew. When in doubt, a Marine would call a lightpole "Sir." He followed the youngster to a car and they drove off, crossing the railroad tracks and climbing uphill while he wished for another few hours of sleep.

"You the General's driver?"

"Yes, sir." And that was the extent of their conversation.

There were about twenty-five of them, standing in the morning mist, stretching and chatting among themselves as the squad NCOs

walked up and down the line, looking for bleary eyes or slack expressions. Heads turned when the General's car stopped and a man got out. They saw he wore the wrong sort of fatigues and wondered who the hell he was, especially since he had no rank insignia at all. He walked right up to the senior NCO.

"You Gunny Irvin?" Kelly asked.

Master Gunnery Sergeant Paul Irvin nodded politely as he sized the visitor up. "Correct, sir. Are you Mr. Clark?"

Kelly nodded. "Well, I'm trying to be, this early."

Both men traded a look. Paul Irvin was dark and serious-looking. Not as overtly threatening as Kelly had expected, he had the eyes of a careful, thoughtful man, which was to be expected for someone of his age and experience.

"What kinda shape you in?" Irvin asked.

"Only one way to find that out," "Clark" answered.

Irvin smiled broadly. "Good. I'll let you lead the run, sir. Our captain's away somewhere jerking off."

Oh, shit!

"Now let's get loosened up." Irvin walked back to the formation, calling it to attention. Kelly took a place on the right side of the second rank.

"Good morning, Marines!"

"Recon!" they bellowed back.

The daily dozen wasn't exactly fun, but Kelly didn't have to show off. He did watch Irvin, who was becoming more serious by the minute, doing his exercises like some sort of robot. Half an hour later they were indeed all loosened up, and Irvin brought them back to attention in preparation for the run.

"Gentlemen, I want to introduce a new member of our team. This is Mr. Clark. He'll be leading the run with me."

Kelly took his place, whispering, "I don't know where the hell we're going."

Irvin smiled in a nasty way. "No problem, sir. You can follow us in after you fall out."

"Lead off, jarhead," Kelly replied, one pro to another.

Forty minutes later, Kelly was still in the lead. Being there allowed him to set the pace, and that was the only good news. Not staggering was his other main concern, and that was becoming difficult, since when the body tires the fine-tuning controls go first.

"Left," Irvin said, pointing. Kelly couldn't know that he'd needed

ten seconds to assemble the surplus air to speak. He'd also had the burden of singing the cadence, however. The new path, just a dirt trail, took them into the piney woods.

Buildings, oh Jesus, I hope that's the stopping place. Even his thoughts were gasps now. The path wound around a little, but there were cars there, and that had to be—what? He almost stopped in surprise, and on his own called, "Quick-time, march!" to slow the formation down.

Mannequins?

"Detail," Irvin called out, "*halt!* Stand at ease," he added.

Kelly coughed a few times, bending down slightly, blessing his runs in the park and around his island for allowing him to survive this morning.

"Slow," was all Irvin had to say at the moment.

"Good morning, Mr. Clark." It turned out that one of the cars was real, Kelly saw. James Greer and Marty Young waved him over.

"Good morning. I hope y'all slept well," Kelly told them.

"You volunteered, John," Greer pointed out.

"They're four minutes slow this morning," Young observed. "Not bad for a spook, though."

Kelly turned away in semidisgust. It took a minute or so for him to realize what this place was.

"Damn!"

"There's your hill." Young pointed.

"Trees are taller here," Kelly said, evaluating the distance.

"So's the hill. It's a wash."

"Tonight?" Kelly asked. It wasn't hard to catch the meaning of the General's words.

"Think you're up to it?"

"I suppose we need to know that. When's the mission going to go?"

Greer took that one. "You don't need to know that yet."

"How much warning will I have?"

The CIA official weighed that one before answering. "Three days before we move out. We'll be going over mission parameters in a few hours. For now, watch how these men are setting up." Greer and Young headed off to their car.

"Aye aye," Kelly replied to their backs. The Marines had coffee going. He got a cup and started blending in with the assault team.

"Not bad," Irvin said.

"Thanks. I always figured it's one of the most important things you need to know in this business."

"What's that?" Irvin asked.

"How to run away as far and fast as you can."

Irvin laughed and then came the first work detail of the day, something that let the men cool down and have a laugh of their own. They started moving the mannequins around. It had become a ritual, which woman went with which kids. They'd discovered that the models could be posed, and the Marines made great fun of that. Two had brought new outfits, both rather skimpy bikinis, which they ostentatiously put on two lounging lady-figures. Kelly watched with incredulous amazement, then realized that the swimsuit models had had their bodies—painted, in the interests of realism. *Jesus,* he thought, *and they say sailors are screwy!*

USS *Ogden* was a new ship, or nearly so, having emerged from the New York Naval Shipyard's building ways in 1964. Rather a strange-looking ship, she was 570 feet long, and her forward half had a fairly normal superstructure and eight guns to annoy attacking aircraft. The odd part was the after half, which was flat on top and hollow underneath. The flat part was good for landing helicopters, and directly under that was a well deck designed to be filled with water from which landing craft could operate. She and her eleven sister ships had been designed to support landing operations, to put Marines on the beach for the amphibious-assault missions that The Corps had invented in the 1920s and perfected in the 1940s. But the Pacific Fleet amphibious ships were without a mission now—the Marines *were* on the beach, generally brought in by chartered jetliners to conventional airports—and so some of the 'phibs were being outfitted for other missions. As *Ogden* was.

Cranes were lifting a series of trailer vans onto the flight deck. When secured in place, deck parties erected various radio antennas. Other such objects were being bolted into place on the superstructure. The activity was being done in the open—there is no convenient way of hiding a 17,000-ton warship—and it was clear that *Ogden,* like two more sister ships, was transforming herself into a platform for the gathering of electronic intelligence—ELINT. She sailed out of the San Diego Naval Base just as the sun began to set, without an escort and without the Marine battalion she was built to carry. Her Navy crew of thirty officers and four

hundred ninety enlisted men settled into their routine watch bill, conducting training exercises and generally doing what most had chosen to do by enlisting in the Navy instead of risking a slot in the draft. By sunset she was well under the horizon, and her new mission had been communicated to various interested parties, not all of whom were friendly to the flag which she flew. With all those trailers aboard and a score of antennas looking like a forest of burnt trees to clutter up her flight deck—and no Marines embarked—she wouldn't be doing anyone direct harm. That was obvious to all who had seen her.

Twelve hours later, and two hundred miles at sea, bosun's mates assembled parties from the deck division and told some rather confused young men to unbolt all but one of the trailers—which were empty—and to strike down all of the antennas on the flight deck. Those on the superstructure would remain in place. The antennas went below first, into the capacious equipment-storage spaces. The empty trailers were wheeled after them, clearing the flight deck entirely.

At Subic Bay Naval Base, the commanding officer of USS *Newport News,* along with his executive officer and gunnery officer, looked over their missions for the coming month. His command was one of the last true cruisers in the world, with eight-inch guns like few others. They were semiautomatic, and loaded their powder charges not in loose bags but in brass cartridge cases different only in scale from the kind any deer hunter might jack into his Winchester .30-30. Able to reach almost twenty miles, *Newport News* could deliver a stunning volume of fire, as an NVA battalion had learned only two weeks earlier, much to its misfortune. Fifty rounds per gun tube per minute. The center gun of the number-two turret was damaged, and so the cruiser could be counted on to put only four *hundred* rounds per minute on target, but that was the equivalent of one hundred thousand-pound bombs. The cruiser's task for the next deployment, the Captain learned, was to go after selected triple-A batteries on the Vietnamese coast. That was fine with him, though the mission he really lusted for was to enter Haiphong harbor one night.

"Your lad seems to know his business—till now, anyway," General Young observed about quarter of two.

"It's a lot to ask him to do something like this the first night, Marty," Dutch Maxwell countered.

"Well, hell, Dutch, if he wants to play with my Marines…" That's how Young was. They were all "his" Marines. He'd flown with Foss off Guadalcanal, covered Chesty Puller's regiment in Korea, and was one of the men who'd perfected close-air support into the art form it now was.

They stood on the hilltop overlooking the site Young had recently erected. Fifteen of the Recon Marines were on the slopes, and their job was to detect and eliminate Clark as he climbed to his notional perch. Even General Young thought it an overly harsh test on Clark's first day with the team, but Jim Greer had made a very big deal of telling them how impressive the lad was, and spooks needed to be put in their place. Even Dutch Maxwell had agreed with that.

"What a crummy way to earn a living," said the admiral with seventeen hundred carrier landings under his belt.

"Lions and tigers and bears." Young chuckled. "Oh, my! I don't really expect him to make it here the first time. We have some fine people in this team, don't we, Irvin?"

"Yes, sir," the master gunnery sergeant agreed at once.

"So what do you think of Clark?" Young asked next.

"Seems like he knows a thing or two," Irvin allowed. "Pretty decent shape for a civilian—and I like his eyes."

"Oh?"

"You notice, sir? He's got cold eyes. He's been around the block." They spoke in low murmurs. Kelly was supposed to get here, but they didn't want their voices to make it too easy for him, nor to add any extraneous noise that might mask the sounds of the woods. "But not tonight. I told the people what would happen if this guy gets through the line on his first try."

"Don't you Marines know how to play fair?" Maxwell objected with an unseen smile. Irvin handled the answer.

"Sir, 'fair' means all my Marines get back home alive. Fuck the others, beg your pardon, sir."

"Funny thing, Sergeant, that's always been my definition of 'fair,' too." *This guy would have made one hell of a command master chief,* Maxwell thought to himself.

"Been following baseball, Marty?" The men relaxed. No way Clark would make it.

"I think the Orioles look pretty tough."

"Gentlemen, we're losing our concentration, like," Irvin suggested diplomatically.

"Quite right. Please excuse us," General Young replied. The two flag officers settled back into stillness, watching the illuminated hands of their watches turn to three o'clock, the operation's agreed stop-time. They didn't hear Irvin speak, or even breathe, for all that time. That took an hour. It was a comfortable one for the Marine general, but the Admiral just didn't like being in the woods, with all the bloodsucking bugs, and probably snakes, and all manner of unpleasant things not ordinarily found in the cockpit of a fighter aircraft. They listened to the whispering breezes in the pines, heard the flapping of bats and owls and perhaps some other night fliers, and little else. Finally it was 02:55. Marty Young stood and stretched, fishing in his pocket for a cigarette.

"Anybody got a smoke? I'm out, and I could sure use one," a voice murmured.

"Here you go, Marine," Young said, the gracious general. He held one out to the shadow and flicked his trusty Zippo. Then he jumped back a step. "Shit!"

"Personally, General, I think Pittsburgh looks pretty tough this year. The Orioles are a little weak in the pitching department." Kelly took one puff, without inhaling, and dropped it to the ground.

"How long have you been here?" Maxwell demanded.

"'Lions and tigers and bears, oh, my!'" Kelly mimicked. 'I 'killed' you around one-thirty, sir."

"You son of a bitch!" Irvin said. "You killed *me.*"

"And you were very polite about being quiet, too."

Maxwell turned on his flashlight. Mr. Clark—the Admiral had consciously decided to change the boy's name in his own mind—just stood there, a rubber knife in his hand, his face painted with green and black shadows, and for the first time since the Battle of Midway, his body shuddered with fear. The young face split into a grin as he pocketed his "knife."

"How the hell did you do that?" Dutch Maxwell demanded.

"Pretty well, I think, Admiral." Kelly chuckled, reaching down for Marty Young's canteen. "Sir, if I told, then everybody'd be able to, right?"

Irvin stood up from his place of repose and walked next to the civilian.

"Mr. Clark, sir, I think you'll do."

22

Titles

Grishanov was in the embassy. Hanoi was a strange city, a mixture of French-Imperial architecture, little yellow people and bomb craters. Traveling about a country at war was an unusual exercise, all the more so in an automobile daubed with camouflage paint. A passing American fighter-bomber coming back from a mission with an extra bomb or some unexpended 20-millimeter cannon rounds could easily use the car for practice, though they never seemed to do so. The luck of the draw made this a cloudy, stormy day, and air activity was at a minimum, allowing him to relax, but not to enjoy the ride. Too many bridges were down, too many roads cratered, and the trip lasted three times what ought to have been the norm. A helicopter trip would have been much faster, but would also have been madness. The Americans seemed to live under the fiction that an automobile might be civilian-owned—this in a country where a bicycle was a status symbol! Grishanov marveled—but a helicopter was an aircraft, and killing one was a *kill.* Now in Hanoi, he got the chance to sit in a concrete building where the electricity was a sometime thing—off at the moment—and air conditioning an absurd fantasy. The open windows and poorly fitting screens allowed insects freer reign than the people who worked and sweated here. For all that, it was worth the trip to be here in his country's embassy, where he could speak his native tongue and for a precious few hours stop being a semidiplomat.

"So?" his general asked.

"It goes well, but I must have more people. This is too much for one man to do alone."

"That is not possible." The General poured his guest a glass of

mineral water. The principal mineral present was salt. The Russians drank a lot of that here. “Nikolay Yevgeniyevich, they’re being difficult again.”

“Comrade General, I know that I am only a fighter pilot and not a political theorist. I know that our fraternal socialist allies are on the front line of the conflict between Marxism-Leninism and the reactionary Capitalist West. I know that this war of national liberation is a vital part of our struggle to liberate the world from oppression—”

“Yes, Kolya”—the General smiled slyly, allowing the man who was *not* a political theorist to dispense with further ideological incantations—“we know that all of this is true. Do go on. I have a busy day planned.”

The Colonel nodded his appreciation. “These arrogant little bastards are not helping us. They are using us, they are using me, they are using *my* prisoners to blackmail us. And if this is Marxism-Leninism, then I’m a Trotskyite.” It was a joke that few would have been able to make lightly, but Grishanov’s father was a Central Committee member with impeccable political credentials.

“What are you learning, Comrade Colonel?” the General said, just to keep things on track.

“Colonel Zacharias is everything that we were told, and more. We are now planning how to defend the *Rodina* against the Chinese. He is the ‘blue team’ leader.”

“What?” The General blinked. “Explain?”

“This man is a fighter pilot, but also an expert on defeating air defenses. Can you believe it, he’s only flown bombers as a guest, but he’s actually planned SAC missions and helped to write SAC doctrine for defense-avoidance and -suppression. So now he’s doing that for me.”

“Notes?”

Grishanov’s face darkened. “Back at the camp. Our fraternal socialist comrades are ‘studying’ them. Comrade General, do you know how important this data is?”

The General was by profession a tank officer, not an aviator, but he was also one of the brighter stars rising in the Soviet firmament, here in Vietnam to study everything the Americans were doing. It was one of the premier jobs in his country’s uniformed service.

“I would imagine that it’s highly valuable.”

Kolya leaned forward. “In another two months, perhaps six

weeks, I will be able to reverse-plan SAC. I'll be able to think as they think. I will know not only what their current plans are, but I will also be able to duplicate their thinking into the future. Excuse me, I do not mean to inflate my importance," he said sincerely. "This American is giving me a graduate course in American doctrine and philosophy. I've *seen* the intelligence estimates we get from KGB and GRU. At least half of it is wrong. That's only one man. Another one has told me about their carrier doctrine. Another about NATO war plans. It goes on, Comrade General."

"How do you do this, Nikolay Yevgeniyevich?" The General was new at this post, and had met Grishanov only once before, though his service reputation was better than excellent.

Kolya leaned back in his chair. "Kindness and sympathy."

"To our enemies?" the General asked sharply.

"Is it our mission to inflict pain on these men?" He gestured outside. "That's what *they* do, and what do they get for it? Mainly lies that sound good. My section in Moscow discounted nearly everything these little monkeys sent. I was told to come here to *get information.* That is what I am doing. I will take all the criticism I must in order to get information such as this, Comrade."

The General nodded. "So why are you here?"

"I need more people! It's too much for one man. What if I am killed—what if I get malaria or food poisoning—who will do my work? I can't interrogate all of these prisoners myself. Especially now that they are beginning to talk, I take more and more time with each, and I lose energy. I lose continuity. There are not enough hours in the day."

The General sighed. "I've tried. They offer you their best—"

Grishanov almost snarled in frustration. "Their best *what?* Best barbarians? That would destroy my work. I need *Russians.* Men, *kulturny* men! Pilots, experienced officers. I'm not interrogating private soldiers. These are real professional warriors. They are valuable to us because of what they know. They know much because they are intelligent, and because they are intelligent they will not respond well to crude methods. You know what I really need to support me? A good psychiatrist. And one more thing," he added, inwardly trembling at his boldness.

"Psychiatrist? That is not serious. And I doubt that we'll be able to get other men into the camp. Moscow is delaying shipments of antiaircraft rockets for 'technical reasons.' Our local allies are being

difficult again, as I said, and the disagreement escalates." The General leaned back and wiped sweat from his brow. "What is this other thing?"

"Hope, Comrade General. I need hope." Colonel Nikolay Yevgeniyevich Grishanov gathered himself.

"Explain."

"Some of these men know their situation. Probably all suspect it. They are well briefed on what happens to prisoners here, and they know that their status is unusual. Comrade General, the knowledge these men have is encyclopedic. Years of useful information."

"You're building up to something."

"We can't let them die," Grishanov said, immediately qualifying himself to lessen the impact of what he was saying. "Not all of them. Some we must have. Some will serve us, but I must have something to offer to them."

"Bring them back?"

"After the hell they've lived here—"

"They're *enemies,* Colonel! They all trained to kill *us!* Save your sympathy for your own countrymen!" growled a man who'd fought in the snows outside Moscow.

Grishanov stood his ground, as the General had once done. "They are men, not unlike us, Comrade General. They have knowledge that is useful, if only we have the intelligence to extract it. It is that simple. Is it too much to ask that we treat them with kindness, that we give something in return for learning how to save our country from possible destruction? We could torture them, as our 'fraternal socialist allies' have done, and get *nothing!* Does that serve our country?" It came down to that, and the General knew it. He looked at the Colonel of Air Defense and his first expressed thought was the obvious one.

"You wish to risk my career along with yours? My father is not a Central Committeeman." *I could have used this man in my battalion.…*

"Your father was a soldier," Grishanov pointed out. "And like you, a good one." It was a skillful play and both knew it, but what really mattered was the logic and significance of what Grishanov was proposing, an intelligence coup that would stagger the professional spies of KGB and GRU. There was only one possible reaction from a real soldier with a real sense of mission.

General-Lieutenant Yuri Konstantinovich Rokossovskiy pulled a bottle of vodka from his desk. It was the Starka label, dark, not

clear, the best and most expensive. He poured two small glasses.

"I can't get you more men. Certainly I cannot get you a physician, not even one in uniform, Kolya. But, yes, I will try to get you some hope."

The third convulsion since her arrival at Sandy's house was a minor one, but still troubling. Sarah had gotten her quieted down with as mild a shot of barbiturate as she dared. The blood work was back, and Doris was a veritable collection of problems. Two kinds of venereal disease, evidence of another systemic infection, and possibly a borderline diabetic. She was already attacking the first three problems with a strong dose of antibiotics. The fourth would be handled with diet and reevaluated later. For Sarah the signs of physical abuse were like something from a nightmare about another continent and another generation, and it was the mental aftermath of that that was the most disquieting of all, even as Doris Brown closed her eyes and lapsed into sleep.

"Doctor, I—"

"Sandy, will you *please* call me Sarah? We're in your house, remember?"

Nurse O'Toole managed an embarrassed smile. "Okay, Sarah. I'm worried."

"So am I. I'm worried about her physical condition, I'm worried about her psychological condition. I'm worried about her 'friends'—"

"I'm worried about John," Sandy said discordantly. Doris was under control. She could see that. Sarah Rosen was a gifted clinician, but something of a worrier, as many good physicians were.

Sarah headed out of the room. There was coffee downstairs. She could smell it and was heading for it. Sandy came with her. "Yes, that, too. What a strange and interesting man."

"I don't throw my newspapers away. Every week, same time, I bundle them together for the garbage collection—and I've been checking the back issues."

Sarah poured two cups. She had very delicate movements, Sandy thought. "I know what I think. Tell me what you think," the pharmacologist said.

"I think he's killing people." It caused her physical pain to say that.

"I think you're right." Sarah Rosen sat down and rubbed her eyes. "You never met Pam. Prettier than Doris, willowy, sort of, probably from an inadequate diet. It was much easier to wean her off the drugs. Not as badly abused, physically anyway, but just as much emotional hurt. We never got the whole story. Sam says that John did. But that's not the important part." Sarah looked up, and the pain O'Toole saw there was real and deep. "We had her *saved,* Sandy, and then something happened, and then something—something changed in John."

Sandy turned to look out the window. It was quarter of seven in the morning. She could see people coming out in pajamas and bathrobes to get their morning papers and collect half-gallon bottles of milk. The early crowd was leaving for their cars, a process that in her neighborhood lasted until eight-thirty or so. She turned back. "No, nothing changed. It was always there. Something—I don't know, released it, let it out? Like opening the door of a cage. What sort of man—part of him's like Tim, but another part I just don't understand."

"What about his family?"

"He doesn't have any. His mother and father are dead, no siblings. He was married—"

"Yes, I know about that, and then Pam." Sarah shook her head. "So lonely."

"Part of me says he's a good man, but the other part…" Sandy's voice trailed off.

"My maiden name was Rabinowicz," Sarah said, sipping her coffee. "My family comes from Poland. Papa left when I was too young to remember; mother died when I was nine, peritonitis. I was eighteen when the war started," she went on. For her generation "the war" could mean only one thing. "We had lots of relatives in Poland. I remember writing to them. Then they all just disappeared. All gone—even now it's hard to believe it really happened."

"I'm sorry, Sarah, I didn't know."

"It's not the sort of thing you talk a lot about." Dr. Rosen shrugged. "People took something from me, though, and I couldn't do anything about it. My cousin Reva was a good pen pal. I suppose they killed her one way or another, but I never found out who or where. Back then I was too young to understand. I suppose I was more puzzled than anything else. Later, I got angry—but against whom? I didn't do anything. I couldn't. And there's this empty

space where Reva was. I still have her picture, black-and-white of a girl with pigtails, twelve years old, I guess. She wanted to be a ballet dancer." Sarah looked up. "Kelly's got an empty place, too."

"But revenge—"

"Yeah, revenge." The doctor's expression was bleak. "I know. We're supposed to think he's a bad person, aren't we? Call the police, even, turn him in for doing that."

"I can't—I mean, yes, but I just—"

"Neither will I. Sandy, if he were a bad person, why did he bring Doris up here? He's risking his life two different ways."

"But there's something very scary about him."

"He could have just walked away from her," Sarah went on, not really hearing. "Maybe he's just the sort of person who thinks he has to fix everything himself. But now we have to help."

That turned Sandy around, giving her a respite from her real thoughts. "What are we going to do with her?"

"We're going to get her well, as far as we can, and after that it'll be up to her. What else can we do?" Sarah asked, watching Sandy's face change again, returning to her real dilemma.

"But what about John?"

Sarah looked up. "I have never seen him do anything illegal. Have you?"

It was a weapons-training day. A solid cloud cover meant that no reconnaissance satellites, American or Soviet, could see what was happening here. Cardboard targets were set up around the compound, and the lifeless eyes of mannequins watched from the sandbox and swing set as the Marines emerged from the woods, passing through the simulated gate, firing low-powered rounds from their carbines. The targets were shredded in seconds. Two M-60 machine guns poured fire into the open door of the "barracks"—which would already have been wrecked by the two Huey Cobra gunships—while the snatch team raced into the "prison block." There, twenty-five more mannequins were in individual rooms. Each was weighted to about one hundred fifty pounds—nobody thought that the Americans at SENDER GREEN would weigh even that much—and every one was dragged out while the fire-support element covered the evacuation.

Kelly stood next to Captain Pete Albie, who, it had been assumed for the purpose of the exercise, was dead. He was the only officer

on the team, an aberration that was compensated for by the presence of so many senior NCOs. As they watched, the mannequins were dragged to the simulated fuselages of the rescue helicopters. These were mounted on semitrailers, and had come in at dawn. Kelly clicked his stopwatch when the last man was aboard.

"Five seconds under nominal, Captain." Kelly held up the watch. "These boys are pretty good."

"Except we're not doing it in daylight, are we, Mr. Clark?" Albie, like Kelly, knew the nature of the mission. The Marines as yet did not—at least not officially—though by now they had to have a fairly good idea. He turned and smiled. "Okay, it's only the third run-through."

Both men went into the compound. The simulated targets were in feathery pieces, and their number was exactly double the worst-case estimate for the SENDER GREEN guard force. They replayed the assault in their minds, checking angles of fire. There were advantages and disadvantages to how the camp was set up. Following the rules in some nameless East Bloc manual, it didn't fit the local terrain. Most conveniently indeed, the best avenue of approach coincided with the main gate. In adhering to a standard that allowed for maximum security against a possible escape attempt of the prisoners, it also facilitated an assault from without —but they didn't expect that, did they?

Kelly ran over the assault plan in his mind. The insertion would put the Recon Marines on the ground one ridge away from SENDER GREEN. Thirty minutes for the Marines to approach the camp. M-79 grenades to eliminate the guard towers. Two Huey Cobra gunships —known with lethal elegance as "snakes" to the troops, and that appealed to him—would hose the barracks and provide heavy fire support—but the grenadiers on the team, he was sure, could take out the towers in a matter of five seconds, then pour willie-pete into the barracks and burn the guard force alive with deadly fountains of white flame, doing without the snakes entirely if they had to. Small and lean as this operation was, the size of the objective and the quality of the team made for unplanned safety factors. He thought of it as overkill, a term that didn't just apply to nuclear weapons. In combat operations, safety lay in not giving the other guy a chance, to be ready to kill him two, three, a dozen times over in as little time as possible. Combat wasn't supposed to be fair. To Kelly, things were looking very good indeed.

"What if they have mines?" Albie worried.

"On their own turf?" Kelly asked. "No sign of it from the photographs. The ground isn't disturbed. No warning signs to keep their people away."

"Their people would know, wouldn't they?"

"On one of the photos there's some goats grazing just outside the wire, remember?"

Albie nodded with some embarrassment. "Yeah, you're right. I remember that."

"Let's not borrow trouble," Kelly told him. He fell silent for a moment, realizing that he had been a mere E-7 chief petty officer, and now he was talking as an equal—more accurately as a superior—to an O-3 captain of Recon Marines. That ought to have been—what? Wrong? If so, then why was he doing so well at it, and why was the captain accepting his words? Why was he *Mr. Clark* to this experienced combat officer? "We're going to do it."

"I think you're right, Mr. Clark. And how do you get out?"

"As soon as the choppers come in, I break the Olympic record coming down that hill to the LZ. I call it a two-minute run."

"In the dark?" Albie asked.

Kelly laughed. "I run especially fast in the dark, Captain."

"Do you know how many Ka-Bar knives there are?"

From the tone of Douglas's question, Lieutenant Ryan knew the news had to be bad. "No, but I suppose I'm about to find out."

"Sunny's Surplus just took delivery of a thousand of the goddamn things a month ago. The Marines must have enough and so now the Boy Scouts can buy them for four ninety-five. Other places, too. I didn't know how many of the things were out there."

"Me, neither," Ryan admitted. The Ka-Bar was a very large and bulky weapon. Hoods carried smaller knives, especially switchblades, though guns were becoming increasingly common on the streets.

What neither man wanted to admit openly was that they were stymied again, despite what had appeared to be a wealth of physical evidence in the brownstone. Ryan looked down at the open file and about twenty forensic photographs. There had *almost* certainly been a woman there. The murder victim—probably a hood himself, but still officially a victim—had been identified immediately from the cards in his wallet, but the address on his

driver's license had turned out to be a vacant building. His collection of traffic violations had been paid on time, with cash. Richard Farmer had brushed with the police, but nothing serious enough to have merited a detailed inquiry. Tracking his family down had turned up precisely nothing. His mother—the father was long dead—had thought him a salesman of some sort. But somebody had nearly carved his heart out with a fighting knife, so quickly and decisively that the gun on the body hadn't been touched. A full set of fingerprints from Farmer merely generated a new card. The central FBI register did not have a match. Neither did the local police, and though Farmer's prints would be compared with a wide selection of unknowns, Ryan and Douglas didn't expect much. The bedroom had provided three complete sets of Farmer's, all on window glass, and semen stains had matched his blood type —O. Another set of stains had been typed as AB, which could mean the killer or the supposed (not quite certain) missing owner of the Roadrunner. For all they knew the killer might have taken the time to have a quickie with the suspected female—unless homosexuality was involved, in which case the suspected female might not exist at all.

There were also a selection of partial prints, one of a girl (supposition, from their size), and one of a man (also supposition), but they were so partial that he didn't expect much in the way of results. Worst of all, by the time the latent-prints team had gotten to check out the car parked outside, the blazing August sun had heated the car up so much that what might have been something to match prints with the registered owner of the car, one William Peter Grayson, had merely been a collection of heat-distorted blobs. It wasn't widely appreciated that matching partial prints with less than ten points of identification was difficult at best.

A check of the FBI's new National Crime Information Computer had turned up nothing on Grayson or Farmer. Finally, Mark Charon's narcotics team had nothing on the names Farmer or Grayson. It wasn't so much a matter of being back to square one. It was just that square seventeen didn't lead them anywhere. But that was often the way of things in homicide investigation. Detective work was a combination of the ordinary and the remarkable, but more of the former than the latter. Forensic sciences could tell you much. They did have the imprint of a common-brand sneaker from tracks in the brownstone—brand new, a help. They did know the

approximate stride of the killer, from which they had generated a height range of from five-ten to six-three, which, unfortunately, was taller than Virginia Charles had estimated—something they, however, discounted. They knew he was Caucasian. They knew he had to be strong. They knew that he was either very, very lucky or highly skilled with all manner of weapons. They knew that he probably had at least rudimentary skills in hand-to-hand combat—or, Ryan sighed to himself, had been lucky; after all, there had been only one such encounter, and that with an addict with heroin in his bloodstream. They knew he was disguising himself as a bum.

All of which amounted to not very much. More than half of male humanity fell into the estimated height range. Considerably more than half of the men in the Baltimore metropolitan area were white. There were millions of combat veterans in America, many from elite military units—and the fact of the matter was that infantry skills were infantry skills, and you didn't have to be a combat vet to know them, and his country had had a draft for over thirty years, Ryan told himself. There were perhaps as many as thirty thousand men within a twenty-mile radius who fit the description and skill-inventory of his unknown suspect. Was he in the drug business himself? Was he a robber? Was he, as Farber had suggested, a man on some sort of mission? Ryan leaned heavily to the latter model, but he could not afford to discount the other two. Psychiatrists, and detectives, had been wrong before. The most elegant theories could be shattered by a single inconvenient fact. *Damn.* No, he told himself, this one was exactly what Farber said he was. This wasn't a *criminal.* This was a *killer,* something else entirely.

"We just need the one thing," Douglas said quietly, knowing the look on his lieutenant's face.

"The one thing," Ryan repeated. It was a private bit of shorthand. *The one thing* to break a case could be a name, an address, the description or tag number of a car, a person who knew something. Always the same, though frequently different, it was for the detective the crucial piece in the jigsaw puzzle that made the picture clear, and for the suspect the brick which, taken from the wall, caused everything to fall apart. And it was out there. Ryan was sure of it. It had to be there, because this killer was a clever one, much too clever for his own good. A suspect like this who eliminated a single target could well go forever undetected, but this one was not satisfied with killing one person, was he? Motivated

neither by passion nor by financial gain, he was committed to a *process,* every step of which involved complex dangers. That was what would do him in. The detective was sure of it. Clever as he was, those complexities would continue to mount one upon the other until something important fell loose from the pile. It might even have happened already, Ryan thought, correctly.

"Two weeks," Maxwell said.

"That fast?" James Greer leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Dutch, that's really fast."

"You think we should fiddle around?" Podulski asked.

"Damn it, Cas, I said it was fast. I didn't say it was wrong. Two weeks' more training, one week of travel and setup?" Greer asked, getting a nod. "What about weather?"

"The one thing we can't control," Maxwell admitted. "But weather works both ways. It makes flying difficult. It also messes up radar and gunnery."

"How in hell did you get all the pieces moving this early?" Greer asked with a mixture of disbelief and admiration.

"There are ways, James. Hell, we're admirals, aren't we? We give orders, and guess what? Ships actually move."

"So the window opens in twenty-one days?"

"Correct. Cas flies out tomorrow to *Constellation.* We start briefing the air-support guys. *Newport News* is already clued in—well, partway. They think they're going to sweep the coast for triple-A batteries. Our command ship is plodding across the big pond right now. They don't know anything either except to rendezvous with TF-77."

"I have a lot of briefing to do," Cas confirmed with a grin.

"Helicopter crews?"

"They've been training at Coronado. They come into Quantico tonight. Pretty standard stuff, really. The tactics are straightforward. What does your man 'Clark' say?"

"He's my man now?" Greer asked. "He tells me he's comfortable with how things are going. Did you enjoy being killed?"

"He told you?" Maxwell chuckled. "James, I knew the boy was good from what he did with Sonny, but it's different when you're there to see it—hell, to *not* see or hear it. He shut Marty Young up, and that's no small feat. Embarrassed a lot of Marines, too."

"Give me a timeline on getting mission approval," Greer said. It

was serious now. He'd always thought the operation had merit, and watching it develop had been a lesson in many things that he'd need to know at CIA. Now he believed it possible. BOXWOOD GREEN might well succeed if allowed to go.

"You're sure Mr. Ritter won't waffle on us?"

"I don't think he will. He's one of us, really."

"Not until all the pieces are in place," Podulski said.

"He'll want to see a rehearsal," Greer warned. "Before you ask a guy to stick it on the line, he has to have confidence in the job."

"That's fair. We have a full-up live-fire rehearsal tomorrow night."

"We'll be there, Dutch," Greer promised.

The team was in an old barracks designed for at least sixty men, and there was plenty of room for everyone, enough that no one had a top bunk. Kelly had a private room set aside, one of those designed into the standard barracks for squad sergeants to sleep in. He'd decided not to live on his boat. One could not be part of the team and yet be totally separate from it.

They were enjoying their first night off since arriving at Quantico, and some kind soul had arranged for three cases of beer. That made for exactly three bottles each, since one of their number only drank Dr Pepper, and Master Gunnery Sergeant Irvin made sure that none of their number exceeded the limit.

"Mr. Clark," one of the grenadiers asked, "what's this all about?"

It wasn't fair, Kelly thought, to make them train without letting them know. They prepared for danger without knowing why, without knowing what purpose occasioned the risk of their lives and their future. It wasn't fair at all, but it wasn't unusual either. He looked straight in the man's eyes.

"I can't tell you, Corp. All I can say is, it's something you'll be mighty proud of. You have my word on that, Marine."

The corporal, at twenty-one the youngest and most junior man of the group, hadn't expected an answer, but he'd had to ask. He accepted the reply with a raise-can salute.

"I know that tattoo," a more senior man said.

Kelly smiled, finishing his second. "Oh, I got drunk one night, and I guess I got mistook for somebody else."

"All SEALs are good for is balancing a ball on their nose," a buck sergeant said, following it with a belch.

"Want me to demonstrate with one of yours?" Kelly asked quickly.

"Good one!" The sergeant tossed Kelly another beer.

"Mr. Clark?" Irvin gestured to the door. It was just as sticky-hot out there as inside, with a gentle breeze coming through the long-needled pines and the flapping of bats, invisibly chasing insects.

"What is it?" Kelly asked, taking a long pull.

"That's my question, Mr. Clark, sir," Irvin said lightly. Then his voice changed. "I know you."

"Oh?"

"Third Special Operations Group. My team backed you guys up on ERMINE COAT. You've come far for an E-6," Irvin observed.

"Don't spread it around, but I made chief before I left. Does anybody else know?"

Irvin chuckled. "No, I expect Captain Albie would sure as hell get his nose outa joint if he found out, and General Young might have a conniption. We'll just keep it 'tween us, Mr. Clark," Irvin said, establishing his position in oblique but uncertain terms.

"This wasn't my idea—being here, I mean. Admirals are easy to impress, I suppose."

"I'm not, Mr. Clark. You almost gave me a fucking heart attack with that rubber knife of yours. I don't remember your name, your real one, I mean, but you're the guy they called Snake, aren't you? You're the guy did PLASTIC FLOWER."

"That wasn't the smartest thing I ever did," Kelly pointed out.

"We were your backup on that, too. The goddamned chopper died—engine quit ten feet off the ground—*thump*. That's why we didn't make it. Nearest alternate was from First Cav. That's why it took so long."

Kelly turned. Irvin's face was as black as the night. "I didn't know."

The master gunnery sergeant shrugged in the darkness. "I seen the pictures of what happened. The skipper told us that you were a fool to break the rules like that. But that was our fault. We should have been there twenty minutes after your call. If'n we got there on time, maybe one or two of those little girls might have made it. Anyway, reason we didn't was a bad seal on the engine, just a little goddamn piece of rubber that cracked."

Kelly grunted. On such events the fates of nations turned. "Could have been worse—it could have let go at altitude and you woulda

really been in the shitter."

"True. Miserable fuckin' reason for a child to die, isn't it?" Irvin paused, gazing into the darkness of the piney woods as men of his profession did, always looking and listening. "I understand why you did it. I wanted you to know. Probably woulda done the same myself. Maybe not as good as you, but sure as hell, I would have tried, and I wouldn't have let that motherfucker live, orders or no orders."

"Thanks, Guns," Kelly said quietly, dropping back into Navyspeak.

"It's Song Tay, isn't it?" Irvin observed next, knowing that he'd get his answer now.

"Something close to that, yes. They should be telling you soon."

"You have to tell me more, Mr. Clark. I have Marines to worry about."

"The site is set up just right, perfect match. Hey, I'm going in, too, remember?"

"Keep talking," Irvin ordered gently.

"I helped plan the insertion. With the right people, we can do it. Those are good boys you have in there. I won't say it's easy or any dumb shit like that, but it's not all that hard. I've done harder. So have you. The training is going right. It looks pretty good to me, really."

"You sure it's worth it?"

That was a question with meaning so deep that few would have understood it. Irvin had done two combat tours, and though Kelly hadn't seen his official "salad bar" of decorations, he was clearly a man who had circled the block many times. Now Irvin was watching what might well be the destruction of his Marine Corps. Men were dying for hills that were given back as soon as they were taken and the casualties cleared, then to return in six months to repeat the exercise. There was just something in the professional soldier that hated repetition. Although training was just that—they had "assaulted" the site numerous times—the reality of war was supposed to be one battle for one place. In that way a man could tell what progress was. Before looking forward to a new objective, you could look back to see how far you had come and measure your chance for success by what you had learned before. But the third time you watched men die for the same piece of ground, then you knew. You just knew how things were going to end. Their country

was still sending men to that place, asking them to risk their lives for dirt already watered in American blood. The truth was that Irvin would not have voluntarily gone back for a third combat tour. It wasn't a question of courage or dedication or love of country. It was that he knew his life was too valuable to be risked for nothing. Sworn to defend his country, he had a right to ask for something in return—a real mission to fight for, not an abstraction, something *real.* And yet Irvin felt guilt, felt that he had broken faith, had betrayed the motto of The Corps, *Semper Fidelis:* Always Faithful. The guilt had compelled him to volunteer for one last mission despite his doubts and questions. Like a man whose beloved wife has slept with another man, Irvin could not stop loving, could not stop caring, and he would accept to himself the guilt unacknowledged by those who had earned it.

"Guns, I can't tell you this, but I will anyway. The place we're hitting, it's a prison camp, like you think, okay?"

Irvin nodded. "More to it. There has to be."

"It's not a regular camp. The men there, they're all dead, Guns." Kelly crushed the beer can. "I've seen the photos. One guy we identified for sure, Air Force colonel, the NVA said he was killed, and so we think these guys, they'll never come home unless we go get 'em. I don't want to go back either, man. I'm scared, okay? Oh, yeah, I'm good, I'm real good at this stuff. Good training, maybe I have a knack for it." Kelly shrugged, not wanting to say the next part.

"Yeah. But you can only do it so long." Irvin handed over another beer.

"I thought three was the limit."

"I'm a Methodist, not supposed to drink at all." Irvin chuckled. "People like us, Mr. Clark."

"Dumb sunzabitches, aren't we? There's Russians in the camp, probably interrogating our people. They're all high-rank, and we think they're all officially dead. They're probably being grilled real hard for what they know, because of who they are. We know they're there, and if we don't do anything… what's that make us?" Kelly stopped himself, suddenly needing to go further, to *tell* what else he was doing, because he had found someone who might truly understand, and for all his obsession with avenging Pam his soul was becoming heavy with its burden.

"Thank you, Mr. Clark. That's a fuckin' mission," Master Gunnery

Sergeant Paul Irvin told the pine trees and the bats. “So you’re first in and last out?”

“I’ve worked alone before.”

23

Altruism

“Where am I?” Doris Brown asked in a barely understandable voice.

“Well, you’re in my house,” Sandy answered. She sat in the corner of the guest bedroom, switching off the reading light and setting down the paperback she’d been reading for the past few hours.

“How did I get here?”

“A friend brought you here. I’m a nurse. The doctor is downstairs fixing breakfast. How are you feeling?”

“Terrible.” Her eyes closed. “My head…”

“That’s normal, but I know it’s bad.” Sandy stood and came over, touching the girl’s forehead. No fever, which was good news. Next she felt for a pulse. Strong, regular, though still a touch fast. From the way her eyes were screwed shut, Sandy guessed that the extended barbiturate hangover must have been awful, but that too was normal. The girl smelled from sweating and vomiting. They’d tried to keep her clean, but that had been a losing battle, if a not terribly important one compared to the rest. Until now, perhaps. Doris’s skin was sallow and slack, as though the person inside had shrunk. She must have lost ten or fifteen pounds since arriving, and while that wasn’t an entirely bad thing, she was so weak that she’d not yet noticed the restraints holding her hands, feet, and waist in place.

“How long?”

“Almost a week.” Sandy took a sponge and wiped her face. “You gave us quite a scare.” Which was an understatement. No less than seven convulsions, the second of which had almost panicked both nurse and physician, but number seven—a mild one—was eighteen

hours behind them now, and the patient's vital signs were stabilized. With luck that phase of her recovery was behind them. Sandy let Doris have some water.

"Thank you," Doris said in a very small voice. "Where's Billy and Rick?"

"I don't know who they are," Sandy replied. It was technically correct. She'd read the articles in the local papers, always stopping short of reading any names. Nurse O'Toole was telling herself that she didn't really know anything. It was a useful internal defense against feelings so mixed that even had she taken the time to figure things out, she knew she would have only confused herself all the more. It was not a time for bare facts. Sarah had convinced her of that. It was a time for riding with the shape of events, not the substance. "Are they the ones who hurt you?"

Doris was nude except for the restraints and the oversized diapers used on patients unable to manage their bodily functions. It was easier to treat her that way. The horrid marks on her breasts and torso were fading now. What had been ugly, discrete marks of blue and black and purple and red were fading to poorly defined areas of yellow-brown as her body struggled to heal itself. She was young, Sandy told herself, and while not yet healthy, she could become so. Enough to heal, perhaps, inside and outside. Already her systemic infections were responding to the massive doses of antibiotics. The fever was gone, and her body could now turn to the more mundane repair tasks.

Doris turned her head and opened her eyes. "Why are you doing this for me?"

That answer was an easy one: "I'm a nurse, Miss Brown. It's my job to take care of sick people."

"Billy and Rick," she said next, remembering again. Memory for Doris was a variable and spotty thing, mainly the recollection of pain.

"They're not here," O'Toole assured her. She paused before going on, and to her surprise found satisfaction in the words: "I don't think they'll be bothering you again." There was almost comprehension in the patient's eyes, Sandy thought. Almost. And that was encouraging.

"I have to go. Please—" She started to move and then noticed the restraints.

"Okay, wait a minute." Sandy removed the straps. "You think you

can stand today?"

"…try," she groaned. Doris rose perhaps thirty degrees before her body betrayed her. Sandy got her sitting up, but the girl couldn't quite make her head sit straight on her neck. Standing her up was even harder, but it wasn't that far to the bathroom, and the dignity of making it there was worth the pain and the effort for her patient. Sandy sat her down there, holding her hand. She took the time to dampen a washcloth and do her face.

"That's a step forward," Sarah Rosen observed from the door. Sandy turned and smiled by way of communicating the patient's condition. They put a robe on her before bringing her back to the bedroom. Sandy changed the linen first, while Sarah got a cup of tea into the patient.

"You're looking much better today, Doris," the physician said, watching her drink.

"I feel awful."

"That's okay, Doris. You have to feel awful before you can start to feel better. Yesterday you weren't feeling much of anything. Think you can try some toast?"

"So hungry."

"Another good sign," Sandy noted. The look in her eyes was so bad that both doctor and nurse could *feel* the skull-rending headache which today would be treated only with an ice pack. They'd spent a week leaching the drugs from her system, and this wasn't the time for adding new ones. "Lean your head back."

Doris did that, resting her head on the back of the overstuffed chair Sandy had once bought at a garage sale. Her eyes were closed and her limbs so weak that her arms merely rested on the fabric while Sarah handled the individual slices of dry toast. The nurse took a brush and started working on her patient's hair. It was filthy and needed washing, but just getting it straightened out would help, she thought. Medical patients put an amazing amount of stock in their physical appearance, and however odd or illogical it might seem to be, it was real, and therefore something which Sandy recognized as important. She was a little surprised by Doris's shudder a minute or so after she started.

"Am I alive?" The alarm in the question was startling.

"Very much so," Sarah answered, almost smiling at the exaggeration. She checked her blood pressure. "One twenty-two over seventy-eight."

"Excellent!" Sandy noted. It was the best reading all week.

"Pam…"

"What's that?" Sarah asked.

It took Doris a moment to go on, still wondering if this were life or death, and if the latter, what part of eternity she had found. "Hair… when she was dead… brushed her hair."

Dear God, Sarah thought. Sam had related that one part of the postmortem report to her, morosely sipping a highball at their home in Green Spring Valley. He hadn't gone further than that. It hadn't been necessary. The photo on the front page of the paper had been quite sufficient. Dr. Rosen touched her patient's face as gently as she could.

"Doris, who killed Pam?" She thought that she could ask this without increasing the patient's pain. She was wrong.

"Rick and Billy and Burt and Henry… killed her… watching…" The girl started crying, and the racking sobs only magnified the shuddering waves of pain in her head. Sarah held back on the toast. Nausea might soon follow.

"They made you watch?"

"Yes…" Doris's voice was like one from the grave.

"Let's not think about that now." Sarah's body shuddered with the kind of chill she associated with death itself as she stroked the girl's cheek.

"There!" Sandy said brightly, hoping to distract her. "That's much better."

"Tired."

"Okay, let's get you back to bed, dear." Both women helped her up. Sandy left the robe on her, setting an ice bag on her forehead. Doris faded off into sleep almost at once.

"Breakfast is on," Sarah told the nurse. "Leave the restraints off for now."

"Brushed her hair? What?" Sandy asked, heading down the stairs.

"I didn't read the report—"

"I saw the photo, Sarah—what they did to her—Pam, her name was, right?" Sandy was almost too tired to remember things herself.

"Yes. She was my patient, too," Dr. Rosen confirmed. "Sam said it was pretty bad. The odd thing, somebody brushed her hair out after she was dead, he told me that. I guess it was Doris who did it."

"Oh." Sandy opened the refrigerator and got milk for the morning coffee. "I see."

"I don't," Dr. Rosen said angrily. "I don't *see* how people can do that. Another few months and Doris would have died. As it was, any closer—"

"I'm surprised you didn't admit her under a Jane Doe," Sandy observed.

"After what happened to Pam, taking a chance like that—and it would have meant—"

O'Toole nodded. "Yes, it would have meant endangering John. That's what I understand."

"Hmph?"

"They killed her friend and made her watch… the things they did to her… To them *she* was just a *thing!*… Billy and Rick," Sandy said aloud, not quite realizing it.

"Burt and Henry," Sarah corrected. "I don't think the other two will be hurting anybody anymore." The two women shared a look, their eyes meeting across the breakfast table, their thoughts identical, though both were distantly shocked at the very idea of holding them, much less understanding them.

"Good."

• • •

"Well, we've shaken down every bum west of Charles Street," Douglas told his lieutenant. "We've had one cop cut—not seriously, but the wino is in for a long drying-out period at Jessup. A bunch have been puked on," he added with a smirk, "but we still don't know crap. He's not out there, Em. Nothing new in a week."

And it was true. The word had gotten out to the street, surprisingly slow but inevitable. Street pushers were being careful to the point of paranoia. That might or might not explain the fact that not a single one had lost his life in over a week.

"He's still out there, Tom."

"Maybe so, but he's not doing anything."

"In which case everything he did was to get Farmer and Grayson," Ryan noted with a look at the sergeant.

"You don't believe that."

"No, I don't, and don't ask me why, because I don't know why."

"Well, it would help if Charon could tell us something. He's been pretty good taking people down. Remember that bust he did with the Coast Guard?"

Ryan nodded. "That was a good one, but he's slowed down

lately."

"So have we, Em," Sergeant Douglas pointed out. "The only thing we really know about this guy is that he's strong, he wears new sneaks, and he's white. We don't know age, weight, size, motive, what kind of car he drives."

"Motive. We know he's pissed about something. We know he's very good at killing. We know he's ruthless enough to kill people just to cover his own activities… and he's patient." Ryan leaned back. "Patient enough to take time off?"

Tom Douglas had a more troubling idea. "Smart enough to change tactics."

That was a disturbing thought. Ryan considered it. What if he'd seen the shakedowns? What if he'd decided that you could only do one thing so long, and then you had to do something else? What if he'd developed information from William Grayson, and that information was now taking him in other directions—out of town, even? What if they'd never know, never close these cases? That would be a professional insult to Ryan, who hated leaving cases open, but he had to consider it. Despite dozens of field interviews, they had not turned up so much as a single witness except for Virginia Charles, and she'd been sufficiently traumatized that her information was scarcely believable—and contradicted the one really useful piece of forensic evidence they had. The suspect had to be taller than she had said, had to be younger, and sure as hell was as strong as an NFL linebacker. He wasn't a wino, but had chosen to camouflage himself as one. You just didn't *see* people like that. How did you describe a stray dog?

"The Invisible Man," Ryan said quietly, finally giving the case a name. "He should have killed Mrs. Charles. You know what we've got here?"

Douglas snorted. "Somebody I don't want to meet alone."

"Three groups to take Moscow out?"

"Sure, why not?" Zacharias replied. "It's your political leadership, isn't it? It's a huge communications center, and even if you get the Politburo out, they'll still get most of your military and political command and control—"

"We have ways to get our important people out," Grishanov objected out of professional and national pride.

"Sure." Robin almost laughed, Grishanov saw. Part of him was

insulted, but on reflection he was pleased with himself that the American colonel felt that much at ease now. “Kolya, we have things like that, too. We have a real ritzy shelter set up in West Virginia for Congress and all that. The 1st Helicopter Squadron is at Andrews, and their mission is to get VIPs the heck out of Dodge—but guess what? The durned helicopters can’t hop all the way to the shelter and back without refueling on the return leg. Nobody thought about that when they selected the shelter, because *that* was a political decision. Guess what else? We’ve never tested the evacuation system. Have you tested yours?”

Grishanov sat down next to Zacharias, on the floor, his back against the dirty concrete wall. Nikolay Yevgeniyevich just looked down and shook his head, having learned yet more from the American. “You see? You see why I say we’ll never fight a war? We’re *alike!* No, Robin, we’ve never tested it, we’ve never tried to evacuate Moscow since I was a child in the snow. Our big shelter is at Zhiguli. It’s a big stone—not a mountain, like a big—bubble? I don’t know the word, a huge circle of stone from the center of the earth.”

“Monolith? Like Stone Mountain in Georgia?”

Grishanov nodded. There was no harm in giving secrets to this man, was there? “The geologists say it is immensely strong, and we tunneled into it back in the late 1950s. I’ve been there twice. I helped supervise the air-defense office when they were building it. We expect—this is the truth, Robin—we expect to get our people there by *train.*”

“It won’t matter. We know about it. If you know where it is, you can take it out, just a matter of how many bombs you put there.” The American had a hundred grams of vodka in him. “Probably the Chinese do, too. But they’ll go for Moscow anyway, especially if it’s a surprise attack.”

“Three groups?”

“That’s how I’d do it.” Robin’s feet straddled an air-navigation chart of the southeastern Soviet Union. “Three vectors, from these three bases, three aircraft each, two to carry the bombs, one a protective jammer. Jammer takes the lead. Bring in all three groups on line, like, spaced wide like this.” He traced likely courses on the map. “Start your penetration descent here, take ’em right into these valleys, and by the time they hit the plains—”

“Steppes,” Kolya corrected.

"They're through your first line of defense, okay? They're smoking in low, like three hundred feet. Maybe they don't even jam at first. Maybe you have one special group, even. The guys you really train."

"What do you mean, Robin?"

"You have night flights into Moscow, airliners, I mean?"

"Of course."

"Well, what say you take a Badger, and you leave the strobes on, okay, and maybe you have little glow lights down the fuselage that you can turn on and off—you know, like windows? Hey, I'm an airliner."

"You mean?"

"It's something we looked at once. There's a squadron with the light kits still at… Pease, I think. That used to be the job—the B-47s based in England. If we ever decided like you guys were going to go after us, from intelligence or something, okay? You gotta have a plan for everything. That was one of ours. We called it JUMPSHOT. Probably in the dead files now, that was one of LeMay's specials. Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev—and Zhiguli. Three birds targeted there, two weapons each. Decap your whole political and military command structure. Hey look, I'm an airliner!"

It would work, Grishanov thought with an eerie chill. The right time of year, the right time of day… the bomber comes in on a regularly scheduled airliner route. Even in a crisis, the very illusion of something normal would be like a touchstone while people looked for the unusual. Maybe an air-defense squadron would put an aircraft up, a young pilot standing night alert while the senior men slept. He'd close to a thousand meters or so, but at night… at night your mind saw what the brain told it to see. Lights on the fuselage, well, of course it's an airliner. What bomber would be lit up? That was one op-plan the KGB had never tumbled to. How many more gifts would Zacharias give him?

"Anyway, if I was John Chinaman, that's one option. If they don't have much imagination, and go with a straight attack, over this terrain, yeah, they can do that. Probably one group is diversionary. They have a real target, too, but short of Moscow. They fly in high, off vector. About this far out"—he swept a hand across the map —"they make a radical turn and hit something, you can decide what's important, lots of good targets there. Chances are your fighters keep after them, right?"

"Da." They'd think the inbound bombers were turning away for a secondary target.

"The other two groups loop around from another direction, and they smoke in low. One of 'em's gonna make it, too. We've played it out a million times, Kolya. We know your radars, we know your bases, we know your airplanes, we know how you train. You're not that hard to beat. And the Chinese, they studied with you, right? You taught them. They know your doctrine and everything."

It was how he said it. No guile at all. And this was a man who had penetrated the North Vietnamese air defenses over eighty times. Eighty times.

"So how do I—"

"Defend against it?" Robin shrugged, bending down to examine the chart again. "I need better maps, but first thing, you examine the passes one at a time. You remember that a bomber isn't a fighter. He can't maneuver all that great, especially low. Most of what he's doing is keeping the airplane from crunching into the ground, right? I don't know about you, but that makes me nervous. He's going to pick a valley he can maneuver in. Especially at night. You put your fighters there. You put ground radars there. You don't need big sexy ones. That's just a bell-ringer. Then you plan to catch him when he comes out."

"Move the defenses back? I can't do that!"

"You put your defenses where they can work, Kolya, not to follow a dotted line on a piece of paper. Or do you like eating Chinese all that much? That's always been a weakness with you people. By the way, it also shortens your lines, right? You save money and assets. Next thing, you remember that the other guy, he knows how pilots think, too—a kill is a kill, right? Maybe there's decoy groups designed to draw your people out, okay? We have scads of radar lures we plan to use. You have to allow for that. You *control* your people. They stay in their sectors unless you have a really good reason to move them.…"

Colonel Grishanov had studied his profession for more than twenty years, had studied Luftwaffe documents not merely related to prisoner interrogation, but also classified studies of how the Kammhuber Line had been set up. This was incredible, almost enough to make him take a drink himself. But not quite, he told himself. This wasn't a briefing document in the making, wasn't a learned White Paper for delivery at the Voroshilov Academy. This

was a learned book, highly classified, but a *book: Origin and Evolution of American Bomber Doctrine.* From such a book he could go on to marshal's stars, all because of his American friend.

"Let's all stay back here," Marty Young said. "They're shooting all live stuff."

"Makes sense to me," Dutch said. "I'm used to having things go off a couple hundred yards behind me."

"And four hundred knots of delta-V," Greer added for him.

"A lot safer that way, James," Maxwell pointed out.

They stood behind an earthen berm, the official military term for a pile of dirt, two hundred yards from the camp. It made watching difficult, but two of the five had aviator's eyes, and they knew where to look.

"How long have they been moving in?"

"About an hour. Any time now," Young breathed.

"I can't hear a thing," Admiral Maxwell whispered.

It was hard enough to see the site. The buildings were visible only because of their straight lines, something which nature abhors for one reason or another. Further concentration revealed the dark rectangles of windows. The guard towers, erected only that day, were hard to spot as well.

"There's a few tricks we play," Marty Young noted. "Everybody gets vitamin-A supplements for night vision. Maybe a few percentage points of improvement in night vision. You play every card in the deck, right?"

All they heard was the wind whispering through the treetops. There was a surreal element to being in the woods like this. Maxwell and Young were accustomed to the hum of an aircraft engine and the faint glow of instrument lights that their eyes scanned automatically between outward sweeps for hostile aircraft, and the gentle floating sensation of an aircraft moving through the night sky. Being rooted to the land gave the feeling of motion that didn't exist as they waited to see something they had never experienced.

"There!"

"Bad news if you saw him move," Maxwell observed.

"Sir, SENDER GREEN doesn't have a parking lot with white cars on it," the voice pointed out. The fleeting shadow had been silhouetted against it, and only Kelly had seen it in any case.

“I guess that’s right, Mr. Clark.”

The radio sitting on the berm had been transmitting only the noise of static. That changed now, with four long dashes. They were answered at intervals by one, then two, then three, then four dots.

“Teams in place,” Kelly whispered. “Hold your ears. The senior grenadier takes the first shot when he’s ready, and that’s the kickoff.”

“Shit,” Greer sneered. He soon regretted it.

The first thing they heard was a distant mutter of twin-bladed helicopter rotors. Designed to make heads turn, and even though every man at the berm knew the plan in intimate detail, it still worked, which pleased Kelly no end. He’d drawn up much of the plan, after all. All heads turned but his.

Kelly thought he might have caught a glimpse of the tritium-painted M-79 sights of one grenadier, but it might as easily have been the blink of a lonely lightning bug. He saw the muted flash of a single launch, and not a second later the blinding white-red-black flash of a fragmentation grenade against the floor of one of the towers. The sudden, sharp bark made the men at his side jump, but Kelly wasn’t paying attention to that. The tower where men and guns would have been disintegrated. The echo had not yet dispersed through the theater of pines when the other three were similarly destroyed. Five seconds later the gunships came skimming in over the treetops, not fifty feet separating their rotors as miniguns ripped into the barracks building, two long neon fingers reaching in. The grenadiers were already pumping white-phosphorus rounds into the windows, and any semblance of night vision was lost in an instant.

“Jesus!” The way that the spreading fountains of burning phosphorus were concealed inside the building made the spectacle only more horrid, while the miniguns concentrated on the exits.

“Yeah,” Kelly said, loudly to make himself heard. “Anybody inside is a crispy critter. The smart ones who try to run come right into the mini fire. Slick.”

The fire element of the Marine assault force continued to pour fire into the barracks and admin buildings while the snatch team raced to the prison block. Now the rescue choppers came in, behind the AH-1 Huey Cobras, landing noisily close to the main gate. The fire element split, with half deploying around the choppers while the other half continued to hose the barracks. One of the gunships

began circling the area now, like an anxious sheepdog on the prowl for wolves.

The first Marines appeared, dragging the simulated prisoners in relays. Kelly could see Irvin checking and doing a count at the gate. There were shouts now, men calling off numbers and names, and the roar of the big Sikorsky choppers almost covered it all. The last Marines in were the fire-support teams, and then the rescue choppers increased power and lifted off into the darkness.

"That was fast," Ritter breathed as the sound faded. A moment later two fire engines appeared to extinguish the blazes left behind by the various explosive devices.

"That was fifteen seconds under nominal," Kelly said, holding up his watch.

"What if something goes wrong, Mr. Clark?" Ritter asked.

Kelly's face lit up in a wicked grin. "Some things did, sir. Four of the team were 'killed' coming in. I assume maybe a broke leg or two —"

"Wait a minute, you mean there's a chance—"

"Let me explain, sir?" Kelly said. "From the photos there is no reason to believe there are any people between the LZ and the objective. No farming on those hills, okay? For tonight's exercise, I eliminated four people at random. Call all of them broken legs. The people had to be carried into the objective and carried out, in case you didn't notice. Backups on everything. Sir, I *expect* a clean mission, but I messed it up some tonight just to check."

Ritter nodded, impressed. "I expected everything to be run by the book for this rehearsal."

"In combat things go wrong, sir. I allowed for that. Every man is cross-trained for at least one alternate job." Kelly rubbed his nose. He'd been nervous, too. "What you just saw was a successful simulated mission despite greater-than-expected complications. This one's going to work, sir."

"Mr. Clark, you sold me." The CIA field officer turned to the others. "What about medical support, that sort of thing?"

"When *Ogden* forms up with Task Force 77, we cross-deck medical personnel over to her," Maxwell said. "Cas is on his way there now to brief the people in. CTF-77 is one of my people, and he'll play ball. *Ogden*'s a pretty large boat. We'll have everything we need to care for them, medics, intel guys to debrief, the works. She sails them right to Subic Bay. We hop them out of Clark ASAP.

From the time the rescue choppers get off, we'll have them in California in… four and a half days."

"Okay, this part of the mission looks fine. What about the rest?"

Maxwell handled the answer: "*Constellation*'s whole air group will be in support. *Enterprise* will be farther up north working the Haiphong area. That should get the attention of their air-defense net and their high command. *Newport News* will be trolling the coast shooting up triple-A sites for the next few weeks. It's to be done randomly, and this area will be the fifth. She lays ten miles out and lobs in heavy fire. The big antiaircraft belt is within the range of her guns. Between the cruiser and the air group, we can blast a corridor for the helos to get in and out. Essentially we'll be doing so much that they oughtn't to notice this mission until it's already over."

Ritter nodded. He'd read through the plan, and had only wished to hear it from Maxwell—more to the point, to hear how he expressed himself. The Admiral was calm and confident, more so than Ritter had expected.

"It's still very risky," he said after a moment.

"It is that," Marty Young agreed.

"What's the risk to our country if the people in that camp tell everything they know?" Maxwell asked.

Kelly wanted to step back from this part of the discussion. Danger to country was something beyond his purview. His reality was at the small-unit level—or, more recently, even lower than that—and though his country's health and welfare started at that lowest common denominator, the big stuff required a perspective he didn't have. But there was no gracious way for him to withdraw, and so he stayed and listened and learned.

"You want an honest answer?" Ritter asked. "I'll give you one—none."

Maxwell took it with surprising calm that concealed outrage. "Son, you want to explain that?"

"Admiral, it's a matter of perspective. The Russians want to know a lot about us, and we want to know a lot about them. Okay, so this Zachary guy can tell them about SAC War Plans, and the other notional people there can tell them other things. So—we change our plans. It's the strategic stuff you're worried about, right? First, those plans change on a monthly basis. Second, do you ever think we'll implement them?"

"We might have to someday."

Ritter fished out a cigarette. “Admiral, do you *want* us to implement those plans?”

Maxwell stood a little straighter. “Mr. Ritter, I flew my F6F over Nagasaki just after the war ended. I’ve seen what those things do, and that was just a little one.” Which was all the answer anyone needed.

“And they feel the same way. How does that grab you, Admiral?” Ritter just shook his head. “They’re not crazy either. They’re even more afraid of us than we are of them. What they learn from those prisoners might scare them enough to sober them up, even. It works that way, believe it or not.”

“Then why are you supporting—*are* you supporting us?”

“Of course I am.” *What a stupid question,* his tone said, enraging Marty Young.

“But why then?” Maxwell asked.

“Those are our people. We sent them. We have to get them back. Isn’t that reason enough? But don’t tell me about vital national-security interests. You can sell that to the White House staff, even on The Hill, but not to me. Either you keep faith with your people or you don’t,” said the field spook who had risked his career to rescue a foreigner whom he hadn’t even liked very much. “If you don’t, if you fall into that habit, then you’re not worth saving or protecting, and then people stop helping you, and *then* you’re in real trouble.”

“I’m not sure I approve of you, Mr. Ritter,” General Young said.

“An operation like this one will have the effect of saving our people. The Russians will respect that. It shows them we’re serious about things. That will make my job easier, running agents behind the curtain. That means we’ll be able to recruit more agents and get more information. That way I gather information that you want, okay? The game goes on until someday we find a new game.” That was all the agenda he needed. Ritter turned to Greer. “When do you want me to brief the White House?”

“I’ll let you know. Bob, this is important—you are backing us?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the Texan. For reasons that the others didn’t understand, didn’t trust, but had to accept.

“So? What’s the beef?”

“Look, Eddie,” Tony said patiently. “Our friend’s got a problem. Somebody took down two of his people.”

"Who?" Morello asked. He was not in a particularly good mood. He'd just learned, again, that he was not a candidate to be accepted as a full member of the outfit. After all he'd done. Morello felt betrayed. Incredibly, Tony was siding with a black man instead of blood—they were distant cousins after all—and now the bastard was coming to him for help, of course.

"We don't know. His contacts, my contacts, we got nothin'."

"Well, ain't that just too fuckin' bad?" Eddie segued into his own agenda. "Tony, he came to *me,* remember? Through Angelo, and maybe Angelo tried to set us up, and we took care of that, remember? You wouldn't have this setup except for me, so now what's happening? I get shut out and he gets closer in—so what gives, Tony, you gonna get *him* made?"

"Back off, Eddie."

"How come you didn't stand up for me?" Morello demanded.

"I can't make it happen, Eddie. I'm sorry, but I can't." Piaggi hadn't expected this conversation to go well, but neither had he expected it to go this badly, this quickly. Sure, Eddie was disappointed. Sure, he had expected to be taken in. But the dumb fuck was getting a good living out of it, and what was it about? Being inside or making a living? Henry could see that. Why couldn't Eddie? Then Eddie took it one step further.

"I set this deal up for you. Now, you got a little-bitty problem, and who you come to—me! You *owe* me, Tony." The implications of the words were clear for Piaggi. It was quite simple from Eddie's point of view. Tony's position in the outfit was growing in importance. With Henry as a potential—a very real—major supplier, Tony would have more than a position. He would have influence. He'd still have to show respect and obeisance to those over him, but the command structure of the outfit was admirably flexible, and Henry's double-blind methods meant that whoever was his pipeline into the outfit had real security. Security of place in his organization was a rare and treasured thing. Piaggi's mistake was in not taking the thought one step further. He looked inward instead of outward. All he saw was that Eddie could replace him, become the intermediary, and then become a made man, adding status to his comfortable living. All Piaggi had to do was die, obligingly, at the right time. Henry was a businessman. He'd make the accommodation. Piaggi knew that. So did Eddie.

"Don't you see what he's doing? He's using you, man." The odd

part was that while Morello was beginning to understand that Tucker was manipulating both of them, Piaggi, the target of that manipulation, did not. As a result, Eddie's correct observation was singularly ill-timed.

"I've thought about that," Piaggi lied. "What's in it for him? A linkup with Philadelphia, New York?"

"Maybe. Maybe he thinks he can do it. Those people are getting awful big for their pants, man."

"We'll sweat that one out later, and I don't see him doing that. What we want to know is, who's taking his people down? You catch anything about somebody from out of town?" *Put him on the spot,* Piaggi thought. *Make him commit.* Tony's eyes bored in across the table at a man too angry to notice or care what the other man was thinking.

"I haven't heard shit about that."

"Put feelers out," Tony ordered, and it was an order. Morello had to follow it, had to check around.

"What if he was taking out some people from inside, reliability problems, like? You think he's loyal to anybody?"

"No. But I don't think he's offing his own people, either." Tony rose with a final order. "Check around."

"Sure," Eddie snorted, left alone at his table.

24

Hellos

“People, that went very well,” Captain Albie announced, finishing his critique of the exercise. There had been various minor deficiencies on the approach march, but nothing serious, and even his sharp eye had failed to notice anything of consequence on the simulated assault phase. Marksmanship especially had been almost inhumanly accurate, and his men had sufficient confidence in one another that they were now running within mere feet of fire streams in order to get to their assigned places. The Cobra crews were in the back of the room, going over their own performance. The pilots and gunners were treated with great respect by the men they supported, as were the Navy flight crews of the rescue birds. The normal us-them antipathy found among disparate units was down to the level of friendly joshing, so closely had the men trained and dedicated themselves. That antipathy was about to disappear entirely.

“Gentlemen,” Albie concluded, “you’re about to learn what this little picnic outing is all about.”

“Ten-hut!” Irvin called.

Vice Admiral Winslow Holland Maxwell walked up the center of the room, accompanied by Major General Martin Young. Both flag officers were in their best undress uniforms. Maxwell’s whites positively glistened in the incandescent lights of the building, and Young’s Marine khakis were starched so stiff that they might well have been made of plywood. A Marine lieutenant carried a briefing board that nearly dragged on the floor. This he set on an easel as Maxwell took his place behind the lectern. From his place on the corner of the stage, Master Gunnery Sergeant Irvin watched the

young faces in the audience, reminding himself that he had to pretend surprise at the announcement.

"Take your seats, Marines," Maxwell began pleasantly, waiting for them to do so. "First of all, I want to tell you for myself how proud I am to be associated with you. We've watched your training closely. You came here without knowing why, and you've worked as hard as any people I have ever seen. Here's what it's all about." The Lieutenant flipped the cover off the briefing board, exposing an aerial photograph.

"Gentlemen, this mission is called BOXWOOD GREEN. Your objective is to rescue twenty men, fellow Americans who are now in the hands of the enemy."

John Kelly was standing next to Irvin, and he, too, was watching faces instead of the Admiral. Most were younger than his, but not by much. Their eyes were locked on the reconnaissance photographs—an exotic dancer would not have drawn the sort of focus that was aimed at the blowups from the Buffalo Hunter drone. The faces were initially devoid of emotion. They were like young, fit, handsome statues, scarcely breathing, sitting at attention while the Admiral spoke to them.

"This man here is Colonel Robin Zacharias, U.S. Air Force," Maxwell went on, using a yard-long wooden pointer. "You can see what the Vietnamese did to him just for looking at the asset that snapped the picture." The pointer traced over to the camp guard about to strike the American from behind. "Just for looking up."

Eyes narrowed at that, all of them, Kelly saw. It was a quiet, determined kind of anger, highly disciplined, but that was the deadliest kind of all, Kelly thought, suppressing a smile that only he would have understood. And so it was for the young Marines in the audience. It wasn't a time for smiles. Each of the people in the room knew about the dangers. Each had survived a minimum of thirteen months of combat operations. Each had seen friends die in the most terrible and noisy way that the blackest of nightmares could create. But there was more to life than fear. Perhaps it was a quest. A sense of duty that few could articulate but which all of them felt. A vision of the world that men shared without actually seeing. Every man in the room had seen death in all its dreadful majesty, knowing that all life came to an end. But all knew there was more to life than the avoidance of death. Life had to have a purpose, and one such purpose was the service of others. While no man in the room would

willingly give his life away, every one of them would run the risk, trusting to God or luck or fate in the knowledge that each of the others would do the same. The men in these pictures were unknown to the Marines, but they were comrades—more than friends—to whom loyalty was owed. And so they would risk their lives for them.

"I don't have to tell you how dangerous the mission is," the Admiral concluded. "The fact of the matter is, you know those dangers better than I do, but these people are Americans, and they have the right to expect us to come for them."

"Fuckin' A, *sir!*" a voice called from the floor, surprising the rest of the Marines.

Maxwell almost lost it then. *It's all true*, he told himself. *It really does matter. Mistakes and all, we're still what we are.*

"Thank you, Dutch," Marty Young said, walking to center stage. "Okay, Marines, now you know. You volunteered to be here. You have to volunteer again to deploy. Some of you have families, sweethearts. We won't make you go. Some of you might have second thoughts," he went on, examining the faces, and seeing the insult he had caused them, not by accident. "You have today to think it over. Dismissed."

The Marines got to their feet, to the accompaniment of the grating sound of chairs scraping on the tile floor, and when all were at attention, their voices boomed as one:

"RECON!"

It was clear to those who saw the faces. They could no more shrink from this mission than they could deny their manhood. There were smiles now. Most of the Marines traded remarks with their friends, and it wasn't glory they saw before their eyes. It was purpose, and perhaps the look to be seen in the eyes of the men whose lives they would redeem. *We're Americans and we're here to take you home.*

"Well, Mr. Clark, your admiral makes a pretty good speech. I wish we recorded it."

"You're old enough to know better, Guns. It's going to be a dicey one."

Irvin smiled in a surprisingly playful way. "Yeah, I know. But if you think it's a crock, why the hell are you going in alone?"

"Somebody asked me to." Kelly shook his head and went off to join the Admiral with a request of his own.

She made it all the way down the steps, holding on to the banister, her head still hurting, but not so badly this morning, following the smell of the coffee to the sound of conversation.

Sandy's face broke into a smile. "Well, good morning!"

"Hi," Doris said, still pale and weak, but she smiled back as she walked through the doorway, still holding on. "I'm real hungry."

"I hope you like eggs." Sandy helped her to a chair and got her a glass of orange juice.

"I'll eat the shells," Doris replied, showing her first sign of humor.

"You can start with these, and don't worry about the shells," Sarah Rosen told her, shoveling the beginnings of a normal breakfast from the frying pan onto a plate.

She had turned the corner. Doris's movements were painfully slow, and her coordination was that of a small child, but the improvement from only twenty-four hours before was miraculous. Blood drawn the day before showed still more favorable signs. The massive doses of antibiotics had obliterated her infections, and the lingering signs of barbiturates were almost completely gone—the remnants were from the palliative doses Sarah had prescribed and injected, which would not be repeated. But the most encouraging sign of all was how she ate. Awkwardness and all, she unfolded her napkin and sat it in the lap of the terrycloth robe. She didn't shovel the food in. Instead she consumed her first real breakfast in months in as dignified a manner as her condition and hunger allowed. Doris was turning back into a person.

But they still didn't know anything about her except her name—Doris Brown. Sandy got a cup of coffee for herself and sat down at the table.

"Where are you from?" she asked in as innocent a voice as she could manage.

"Pittsburgh." A place as distant to her house guest as the back end of the moon.

"Family?"

"Just my father. Mom died in '65, breast cancer," Doris said slowly, then unconsciously felt inside her robe. For the first time she could remember, her breasts didn't hurt from Billy's attention. Sandy saw the movement and guessed what it meant.

"Nobody else?" the nurse asked evenly.

"My brother… Vietnam."

"I'm sorry, Doris."

"It's okay—"

"Sandy's my name, remember?"

"I'm Sarah," Dr. Rosen added, replacing the empty plate with a full one.

"Thank you, Sarah." This smile was somewhat wan, but Doris Brown was reacting to the world around her now, an event far more important than the casual observer might have guessed. *Small steps,* Sarah told herself. *They don't have to be big steps. They just have to head in the right direction.* Doctor and nurse shared a look.

There was nothing like it. It was too hard to explain to someone who hadn't been there and done it. She and Sandy had reached into the grave and pulled this girl back from grasping earth. Three more months, Sarah had estimated, maybe not that long, and her body would have been so weakened that the most trivial outside influence would have ended her life in a matter of hours. But not now. Now this girl would live, and the two medics shared without words the feeling that God must have known when He had breathed life into Adam. They had defeated Death, redeeming the gift that only God could give. For this reason both had entered their shared profession, and moments like this one pushed back the rage and sorrow and grief for those patients whom they couldn't save.

"Don't eat too fast, Doris. When you don't eat for a while, your stomach actually shrinks down some," Sarah told her, returning to form as a medical doctor. There was no sense in warning her about problems and pain sure to develop in her gastrointestinal tract. Nothing would stop it, and getting nourishment into her superseded other considerations at the moment.

"Okay. I'm getting a little full."

"Then relax a little. Tell us about your father."

"I ran away," Doris replied at once. "Right after David… after the telegram, and Daddy… he had some trouble, and he blamed me."

Raymond Brown was a foreman in the Number Three Basic Oxygen Furnace Shed of the Jones and Laughlin Steel Company, and that was all he was, now. His house was on Dunleavy Street, halfway up one of the steep hills of his city, one of many detached frame dwellings built around the turn of the century, with wood clapboard siding that he had to paint every two or three years, depending on the severity of the winter winds that swept down the Monongahela Valley. He worked the night shift because his house

was especially empty at night. Nevermore to hear the sounds of his wife, nevermore to take his son to Little League or play catch in the sloped sanctity of his tiny backyard, nevermore to worry about his daughter's dates on weekends.

He'd tried, done everything a man could do, after it was too late, which was so often the way of things. It had just been too much. His wife, discovering a lump, still a pretty young woman in her thirty-seventh year, his best and closest friend. He'd supported her as best he could after the surgery, but then came another lump, another surgery, medical treatment, and the downhill slide, always having to be strong for her until the end. It would have been a crushing burden for any man, and then followed by another. His only son, David, drafted, sent to Vietnam, and killed two weeks later in some nameless valley. The support of his fellow workers, the way they had come to Davey's funeral, hadn't stopped him from crawling inside a bottle, desperately trying to cling to what he had left, but too tightly. Doris had borne her own grief, something Raymond hadn't fully understood or appreciated, and when she'd come home late, her clothing not quite right, the cruel and hateful things he'd said. He could remember every word, the hollow sound as the front door had slammed.

Only a day later he'd come to his senses, driving with tears in his eyes to the police station, abasing himself before men whose understanding and sympathy he never quite recognized, desperate again to get his little girl back, to beg from her the forgiveness that he could never give himself. But Doris had vanished. The police had done what they could, and that wasn't much. And so for two years he'd lived inside a bottle, until two fellow workers had taken him aside and talked as friends do once they have gathered the courage to invade the privacy of another man's life. His minister was a regular guest in the lonely house now. He was drying out—Raymond Brown still drank, but no longer to excess, and he was working to cut it down to zero. Man that he was, he had to face his loneliness that way, had to deal with it as best he could. He knew that solitary dignity was of little value. It was an empty thing to cling to, but it was all he had. Prayer also helped, some, and in the repeated words he often found sleep, though not the dreams of the family which had once shared the house with him. He was tossing and turning in his bed, sweating from the heat, when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Raymond Brown?”

“Yeah, who’s this?” he asked with closed eyes.

“My name is Sarah Rosen. I’m a doctor in Baltimore, I work at Johns Hopkins Hospital.”

“Yes?” The tone of her voice opened his eyes. He stared at the ceiling, the blank white place that so closely matched the emptiness of his life. And there was sudden fear. Why would a doctor from Baltimore call him? His mind was spinning off towards a named dread when the voice went on quickly.

“I have somebody here who wants to talk to you, Mr. Brown.”

“Huh?” He next heard muffled noises that might have been static from a bad line, but was not.

“I can’t.”

“You have nothing to lose, dear,” Sarah said, handing over the phone. “He’s your father. Trust him.”

Doris took it, holding it in both hands close to her face, and her voice was a whisper.

“Daddy?”

From hundreds of miles away, the whispered word came through as clearly as a church bell. He had to breathe three times before answering, and that came out as a sob.

“Dor?”

“Yes—Daddy, I’m sorry.”

“Are you okay, baby?”

“Yes, Daddy, I’m fine.” And incongruous as the statement was, it was not a lie.

“Where are you?”

“Wait a minute.” Then the voice changed. “Mr. Brown, this is Doctor Rosen again.”

“She’s there?”

“Yes, Mr. Brown, she is. We’ve been treating her for a week. She’s a sick girl, but she’s going to be okay. Do you understand? She’s going to be okay.”

He was grasping his chest. Brown’s heart was a steel fist, and his breathing came in painful gasps that a doctor might have taken for something they were not.

“She’s okay?” he asked anxiously.

"She's going to be fine," Sarah assured him. "There's no doubt of that, Mr. Brown. Please believe me, okay?"

"Oh, sweet Jesus! Where, where are you?"

"Mr. Brown, you can't see her just yet. We will bring her to you just as soon as she's fully recovered. I worried about calling you before we could get you together, but—but we just couldn't *not* call you. I hope you understand."

Sarah had to wait two minutes before she heard anything she could understand, but the sounds that came over the line touched her heart. In reaching into one grave, she had extracted two lives.

"She's really okay?"

"She's had a bad time, Mr. Brown, but I promise you she will recover fully. I'm a good doc, okay? I wouldn't say that unless it were true."

"Please, please let me talk to her again. Please!"

Sarah handed the phone over, and soon four people were weeping. Nurse and physician were the luckiest, sharing a hug and savoring their victory over the cruelties of the world.

Bob Ritter pulled his car into a slot in West Executive Drive, the closed-off former street that lay between the White House and the Executive Office Building. He walked towards the latter, perhaps the ugliest building in Washington—no mean accomplishment—which had once held much of the executive branch of government, the State, War, and Navy departments. It also held the Indian Treaty Room, designed for the purpose of overawing primitive visitors with the splendor of Victorian gingerbread architecture and the majesty of the government which had constructed this giant tipi. The wide corridors rang with the sound of his footsteps on marble as he searched for the right room. He found it on the second floor, the room of Roger MacKenzie, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. "Special," perversely, made him a second-line official. The National Security *Advisor* had a corner office in the West Wing of the White House. Those who reported to him had offices elsewhere, and though distance from the Seat of Power defined influence, it didn't define arrogance of position. MacKenzie had to have a staff of his own in order to remind himself of his importance, real or illusory. Not really a bad man, and actually a fairly bright one, Ritter thought, MacKenzie

was nonetheless jealous of his position, and in another age he would have been the clerk who advised the chancellor who advised the King. Except today the clerk had to have an executive secretary.

"Hi, Bob. How are things at Langley?" MacKenzie asked in front of his secretarial staff, just to be sure they would know that he was meeting with an up-and-coming CIA official, and was therefore still very important indeed to have such guests calling on him.

"The usual." Ritter smiled back. *Let's get on with it.*

"Trouble with traffic?" he asked, letting Ritter know that he was almost, if not quite, late for the appointment.

"There's a little problem on the GW." Ritter gestured with his head towards MacKenzie's private office. His host nodded.

"Wally, we need someone to take notes."

"Coming, sir." His executive assistant rose from his desk in the secretarial area and brought a pad.

"Bob Ritter, this is Wally Hicks. I don't think you've met."

"How do you do, sir?" Hicks extended his hand. Ritter took it, seeing yet one more eager White House aide. New England accent, bright-looking, polite, which was about all he was entitled to expect of such people. A minute later they were sitting in MacKenzie's office, the inner and outer doors closed in the cast-iron frames that gave the Executive Office Building the structural integrity of a warship. Hicks hurried himself about to get coffee for everyone, like a page at some medieval court, which was the way of things in the world's most powerful democracy.

"So what brings you in, Bob?" MacKenzie asked from behind his desk. Hicks flipped open his note pad and began his struggle to take down every word.

"Roger, a rather unique opportunity has presented itself over in Vietnam." Eyes opened wider and ears perked up.

"What might that be?"

"We've identified a special prison camp southwest of Haiphong," Ritter began, quickly outlining what they knew and what they suspected.

MacKenzie listened intently. Pompous though he might have been, the recently arrived investment banker was also a former aviator himself. He'd flown B-24s in the Second World War, including the dramatic but failed mission to Ploesti. A patriot with flaws, Ritter told himself. He would try to make use of the former while ignoring the latter.

"Let me see your imagery," he said after a few minutes, using the proper buzzword instead of the more pedestrian "pictures."

Ritter took the photo folder from his briefcase and set it on the desk. MacKenzie opened it and took a magnifying glass from a drawer. "We know who this guy is?"

"There's a better photo in the back," Ritter answered helpfully.

MacKenzie compared the official family photo with the one from the camp, then with the enhanced blowup.

"Very close. Not definitive but close. Who is he?"

"Colonel Robin Zacharias. Air Force. He spent quite some time at Offutt Air Force Base, SAC War Plans. He knows everything, Roger."

MacKenzie looked up and whistled, which, he thought, was what he was supposed to do in such circumstances. "And this guy's no Vietnamese…"

"He's a colonel in the Soviet Air Force, name unknown, but it isn't hard to figure what he's there for. Here's the real punchline." Ritter handed over a copy of the wire-service report on Zacharias's death.

"Damn."

"Yeah, all of a sudden it gets real clear, doesn't it?"

"This sort of thing could wreck the peace talks," MacKenzie thought aloud.

Walter Hicks couldn't say anything. It wasn't his place to speak in such circumstances. He was like a necessary appliance—an animated tape machine—and the only real reason he was in the room at all was so his boss would have a record of the conversation. Wreck the peace talks he scribbled down, taking the time to underline it, and though nobody else noticed, his fingers went white around the pencil.

"Roger, the men we believe to be in this camp know an awful lot, enough to seriously compromise our national security. I mean *seriously*," Ritter said calmly. "Zacharias knows our nuclear war plans, he helped write SIOP. This is very serious business." Merely in speaking *sy-op*, merely by invoking the unholy name of the "Single Integrated Operations Plan," Ritter had knowingly raised the stakes of the conversation. The CIA field officer amazed himself at the skillful delivery of the lie. The White House pukes might not grasp the idea of getting people out because they were *people.* But they had their hot issues, and nuclear war-plans were the unholy of unholies in this and many other temples of government power.

"You have my attention, Bob."

"Mr. Hicks, right?" Ritter asked, turning his head.

"Yes, sir."

"Could you please excuse us?"

The junior assistant looked to his boss, his neutral face imploring MacKenzie to let him stay in the room, but that was not to be.

"Wally, I think we'll carry on for the moment in executive session," the special assistant to the President said, easing the impact of the dismissal with a friendly smile—and a wave towards the door.

"Yes, sir." Hicks stood and walked out the door, closing it quietly.

Fuck, he raged to himself, sitting back down at his desk. How could he advise his boss if he didn't hear what came next? Robert Ritter, Hicks thought. The guy who'd nearly destroyed sensitive negotiations at a particularly sensitive moment by violating orders and bringing some goddamned spy out of Budapest. The information he'd brought *had* somehow changed the U.S. negotiating position, and *that* had set the treaty back three months because America had decided to chisel something else out of the Soviets, who had been reasonable *as hell* to concede the matters already agreed to. That fact had saved Ritter's career—and probably encouraged him in that idiotically romantic view that individual people were more important than world peace, when peace itself was the only thing that mattered.

And Ritter knew how to jerk Roger around, didn't he? All that war-plans stuff was pure horseshit. Roger had his office walls covered with photos from The Old Days, when he'd flown his goddamned airplane all over hell and gone, pretending that he was personally winning the war against Hitler, just one more fucking war that good diplomacy would have prevented if only people had focused on the real issues as he and Peter hoped someday to do. This thing wasn't about war plans or SIOP or any of the other uniformed bullshit that people in this section of the White House Staff played with every goddamned day. It was about *people*, for Christ's sake. Uniformed people. Dumbass soldiers, people with big shoulders and little minds who did nothing more useful than kill, as though that made anything in the world better. And besides, Hicks fumed, they took their chances, didn't they? If they wanted to drop bombs on a peaceful and friendly people like the Vietnamese, well, they should have thought ahead of time that those people might not

like it very much. Most important of all, if they were dumb enough to gamble their *lives*, then they implicitly accepted the possibility of losing them, and so why then should people like Wally Hicks give a flying fuck about them when the dice came up wrong? They probably loved the action. It undoubtedly attracted the sort of women who thought that big dicks came along with small brains, who liked "men" who dragged their knuckles on the ground like well-dressed apes.

This could wreck the peace talks. Even MacKenzie thought that.

All those kids from his generation, dead. And now they might risk not ending the war because of *fifteen* or *twenty* professional *killers* who probably liked what they did. It just made no sense. *What if they gave a war and nobody came?* was one of his generation's favored aphorisms, though he knew it to be a fantasy. Because people like that *one* guy—Zacharias—would always seduce people into following them because little people who lacked Hicks's understanding and perspective wouldn't be able to see that it was just all a waste of energy. That was the most amazing part of all. Wasn't it *clear* that war was just plain *awful?* How smart did you have to be to understand *that?*

Hicks saw the door open. MacKenzie and Ritter came out.

"Wally, we're going across the street for a few minutes. Could you tell my eleven o'clock that I'll be back as soon as I can?"

"Yes, sir."

Wasn't that typical? Ritter's seduction was complete. He had MacKenzie sold enough that Roger would make the pitch to the National Security Advisor. And they would probably raise pure fucking hell at the peace table, and maybe set things back three months or more, unless somebody saw through the ruse. Hicks lifted his phone and dialed a number.

"Senator Donaldson's office."

"Hi, I was trying to get Peter Henderson."

"I'm sorry, he and the Senator are in Europe right now. They'll get back next week."

"Oh, that's right. Thanks." Hicks hung up. *Damn.* He was so upset that he'd forgotten.

Some things have to be done very carefully. Peter Henderson didn't even know that his code name was CASSIUS. It had been assigned to him by an analyst in the U.S.-Canada Institute whose love of

Shakespeare's plays was as genuine as that of any Oxford don. The photo in the file, along with the one-page profile of the agent, had made him think of the self-serving "patriot" in *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Brutus would not have been right. Henderson, the analyst had judged, did not have sufficient quality of character.

His senator was in Europe on a "fact-finding" tour, mainly having to do with NATO, though they would stop in on the peace talks at Paris just to get some TV tape that might be shown on Connecticut TV stations in the fall. In fact, the "tour" was mainly a shopping trip punctuated by a brief every other day. Henderson, enjoying his first such trip as the Senator's expert on national-security issues, had to be there for the briefs, but the rest of the time was his, and he had made his own arrangements. At the moment he was touring the White Tower, the famous centerpiece of Her Majesty's Tower of London, now approaching its nine hundredth year of guardianship on the River Thames.

"Warm day for London," another tourist said.

"I wonder if they get thunderstorms here," the American replied casually, examining Henry VIII's immense suit of armor.

"They do," the man replied, "but not as severe as those in Washington."

Henderson looked for an exit and headed towards it. A moment later he was strolling around Tower Green with his new companion.

"Your English is excellent."

"Thank you, Peter. I am George."

"Hi, George." Henderson smiled without looking at his new friend. It really was like James Bond, and doing it here—not just in London, but in the historical seat of Britain's royal family—well, that was just delicious.

George was his real name—actually Georgiy, which was the Russian equivalent—and he rarely went into the field anymore. Though he'd been a highly effective field officer for KGB, his analytical ability was such that he'd been called back to Moscow five years earlier, promoted to lieutenant colonel and placed in charge of a whole section. Now a full colonel, George looked forward to general's stars. The reason he'd come to London, via Helsinki and Brussels, was that he'd wanted to eyeball CASSIUS himself—and get a little shopping done for his own family. Only three men of his age in KGB shared his rank, and his young and pretty wife liked to wear Western clothes. Where else to shop for

them but London? George didn't speak French or Italian.

"This is the only time we will meet, Peter."

"Should I be honored?"

"If you wish." George was unusually good-natured for a Russian, though that was part of his cover. He smiled at the American. "Your senator has access to many things."

"Yes, he does," Henderson agreed, enjoying the courtship ritual. He didn't have to add, *and so do I.*

"Such information is useful to us. Your government, especially with your new president—honestly, he frightens us."

"He frightens me," Henderson admitted.

"But at the same time there is hope," George went on, speaking in a reasonable and judicious voice. "He is also a realist. His proposal for *détente* is seen by my government as a sign that we can reach a broad international understanding. Because of that we wish to examine the possibility that his proposal for discussions is genuine. Unfortunately we have problems of our own."

"Such as?"

"Your president, perhaps he means well. I say that sincerely, Peter," George added. "But he is highly… competitive. If he knows too much about us, he will press us too hard in some areas, and that might prevent us from reaching the accommodation that we all desire. You have adverse political elements in your government. So do we—leftovers from the Stalin era. The key to negotiations such as those which may soon begin is that both sides must be reasonable. We need your help to control the unreasonable elements on our side."

Henderson was surprised by that. The Russians could be so open, like Americans. "How can I do that?"

"Some things we cannot allow to be leaked. If they are, it will poison our chances for *détente.* If we know too much about you, or you know too much about us, well, the game becomes skewed. One side or the other seeks too much advantage, and then there can be no understanding, only domination, which neither side will accept. Do you see?"

"Yes, that makes sense."

"What I am asking, Peter, is that you let us know from time to time certain special things that you have learned about us. I won't even tell you what, exactly. I think you are intelligent enough to see for yourself. We will trust you on that. The time for war is behind

us. The coming peace, if it does come, will depend on people like you and me. There must be trust between our nations. That trust begins between two people. There is no other way. I wish there were, but that is how peace must begin."

"Peace—that would be nice," Henderson allowed. "First we have to get our damned war ended."

"We are working towards that end, as you know. We're—well, not pressuring, but we are *encouraging* our friends to take a more moderate line. Enough young men have died. It is time to put an end to it, an end that both sides will find acceptable."

"That's good to hear, George."

"So can you help us?"

They'd walked all around Tower Green, now facing the chapel. There was a chopping block there. Henderson didn't know if it had actually been used or not. Around it was a low chain fence, and standing on it at the moment was a raven, one of those kept on Tower grounds for the mixed reasons of tradition and superstition. Off to their right a Yeoman Warder was conducting a bunch of tourists around.

"I've been helping you, George." Which was true. Henderson had been nibbling at the hook for nearly two years. What the KGB colonel had to do now was to sweeten the bait, then see if Henderson would swallow the hook down.

"Yes, Peter, I know that, but now we are asking for a little more, some very sensitive information. The decision is yours, my friend. It is easy to wage war. Waging peace can be far more dangerous. No one will ever know the part you played. The important people of ministerial rank will reach their agreements and shake hands across the table. Cameras will record the events for history, and people like you and me, our names will never find their way into the history books. But it will matter, my friend. People like us will set the stage for the ministers. I cannot force you in this, Peter. You must decide if you wish to help us on your own account. You will also decide what it is that we need to know. You're a bright young man, and your generation in America has learned the lessons that must be learned. If you wish, I will let you decide over time—"

Henderson turned, making his decision. "No. You're right. Somebody has to help make the peace, and dithering around won't change that. I'll help you, George."

"There is danger involved. You know that," George warned. It

was a struggle not to react, but now that Henderson was indeed swallowing the hook, he had to set it firmly.

"I'll take my chances. It's worth it."

Ahhh.

"People like you need to be protected. You will be contacted when you get home." George paused. "Peter, I am a father. I have a daughter who is six and a son who is two. Because of your work, and mine, they will grow up in a much better world—a peaceful world. For them, Peter, I thank you. I must go now."

"See you, George," Henderson said. It caused George to turn and smile one last time.

"No, Peter, you will not." George walked down the stone steps towards Traitor's Gate. It required all of his considerable self-control not to laugh aloud at the mixture of what he had just accomplished and the thundering irony of the portcullised stone arch before his eyes. Five minutes later he stepped into a black London taxi and directed the driver to head towards Harrods Department Store in Knightsbridge.

Cassius, he thought. No, that wasn't right. Casca, perhaps. But it was too late to change it now, and besides, who would have seen the humor in it? Glazov reached in his pocket for his shopping list.

25

Departures

One demonstration, however perfect, wasn't enough, of course. For each of the next four nights, they did it all again, and twice more in daylight, just so that positioning was clear to everyone. The snatch team would be racing into the prison block only ten feet away from the stream of fire from an M-60 machine gun—the physical layout of the camp demanded it, much to everyone's discomfort—and that was the most dangerous technical issue of the actual assault. But by the end of the week, the BOXWOOD GREEN team was as perfectly trained as men could be. They knew it, and the flag officers knew it. Training didn't exactly slack off, but it did stabilize, lest the men become over-trained and dulled by the routine. What followed was the final phase of the preparation. While training, men would stop the action and make small suggestions to one another. Good ideas were bumped immediately to a senior NCO or to Captain Albie and more often than not incorporated in the plan. This was the intellectual part of it, and it was important that every member of the team felt as though he had a chance to affect things to some greater or lesser degree. From that came confidence, not the bravado so often associated with elite troops, but the deeper and far more significant professional judgment that considered and adjusted and readjusted until things were just right—and then *stopped*.

Remarkably, their off-duty hours were more relaxed now. They knew about the mission, and the high-spirited horseplay common to young men was muted. They watched TV in the open bay, read books or magazines, waiting for the word in the knowledge that halfway across the world other men were waiting, too, and in the quiet of twenty-five individual human minds, questions were being

asked. Would things go right or wrong? If the former, what elation would they feel? If the latter—well, they all had long since decided that win or lose, this wasn't the sort of thing you walked away from. There were husbands to be restored to their wives, fathers to their children, men to their country. Each knew that if death was to be risked, then this was the time and the purpose for it.

At Sergeant Irvin's behest, chaplains came to the group. Consciences were cleared. A few wills were drafted—just in case, the embarrassed Marines told the visiting officers—and all the while the Marines focused more and more on the mission, their minds casting aside extraneous concerns and concentrating on something identified only by a code name selected at random from separate lists of words. Every man walked over to the training site, checking placement and angles, usually with his most immediate teammate, practicing their run-in approach or the paths they'd take once the shooting started. Every one began his own personal exercise regime, running a mile or two on his own in addition to the regular morning and afternoon efforts, both to work off tension and to be just a little bit more certain that he'd be ready for it. A trained observer could see it from their look: serious but not tense, focused but not obsessive, confident but not cocky. Other Marines at Quantico kept their distance when they saw the team, wondering why the special place and the odd schedule, why the Cobras on the flight line, why the Navy rescue pilots in the Q, but one look at the team in the piney woods was all the warning they needed to mute the questions and keep their distance. Something special was happening.

"Thanks, Roger," Bob Ritter said in the sanctity of his office in Langley. He switched buttons on his phone and dialed another in-house number. "James? Bob. It's a go. Start pushing buttons."

"Thank you, James." Dutch Maxwell turned in his swivel chair and looked at the side panel affixed to his wall, blue aluminum from his F6F Hellcat fighter, with its even rows of red-and-white painted flags, each denoting a victim of his skill. It was his personal touchstone to his profession. "Yeoman Grafton," he called.

"Yes, sir?" a petty officer appeared in his doorway.

"Make signal to Admiral Podulski on *Constellation:* 'Olive Green.'"

"Aye aye, sir."

"Have my car come around, then call Anacostia. I need a helo in

about fifteen minutes."

"Yes, Admiral."

Vice Admiral Winslow Holland Maxwell, USN, rose from his desk and headed out the side door into the E-Ring corridor. His first stop was at the office in the Air Force's section of the building.

"Gary, we're going to need that transport we talked about."

"You got it, Dutch," the General replied, asking no questions.

"Let my office know the details. I'm heading out now, but I'll be calling in every hour."

"Yes, sir."

Maxwell's car was waiting at the River entrance, a master chief aviation bosun's mate at the wheel. "Where to, sir?"

"Anacostia, Master Chief, the helo pad."

"Aye." The senior chief dropped the car into gear and headed for the river. He didn't know what it was all about, but he knew it was about something. The Old Man had a spring in his step like the chief's daughter heading out for a date.

• • •

Kelly was working on his woodcraft, again, as he'd been doing for several weeks. He'd picked his weapons load-out in the fervent hope that he would not need to fire a single shot. The primary weapon was a CAR-15 carbine version of the M-16 assault rifle. A silenced 9mm automatic went into a shoulder holster, but his real weapon was a radio, and he would be carrying two of those, just to be sure, plus food and water and a map—and extra batteries. It came out to a twenty-three-pound load, not counting his special gear for the insertion. The weight wasn't excessive, and he found that he could move through the trees and over the hills without noticing it. Kelly moved quickly for a man of his size, and silently. The latter was a matter of where he walked more than anything else, where he placed his feet, how he twisted and turned to pass between trees and bushes, watching both his path and the area around him with equal urgency.

Overtraining, he told himself. *You should take it easier now.* He stood erect and headed down the hill, surrendering to his instincts. He found the Marines training in small groups, miming the use of their weapons while Captain Albie consulted with the four helicopter crews. Kelly was just approaching the site's LZ when a blue Navy helo landed and Admiral Maxwell emerged. Kelly, by

chance, was the first one there. He knew the purpose and the message of the visit before anyone had a chance to speak.

"We're going?"

"Tonight," Maxwell confirmed with a nod.

Despite the expectation and enthusiasm, Kelly felt the usual chill. It wasn't practice anymore. His life was on the line again. The lives of others would depend on him. He would have to get the job done. *Well*, he told himself, *I know how to do that.* Kelly waited by the chopper while Maxwell went over to Captain Albie. General Young's staff car pulled up so that he could deliver the news as well. Salutes were exchanged as Kelly watched. Albie got the word, and his back went a little straighter. The Recon Marines gathered around, and their reaction was surprisingly sober and matter-of-fact. Looks were exchanged, rather dubious ones, but they soon changed to simple, determined nods. The mission was GO. The message delivered, Maxwell came back to the helicopter.

"I guess you want that quick liberty."

"You said you'd do it, sir."

The Admiral clapped the younger man on the shoulder and pointed to the helo. Inside, they put on headsets while the flight crew spooled up the engine.

"How soon, sir?"

"You be back here by midnight." The pilot looked back at them from the right seat. Maxwell motioned for him to stay on the ground.

"Aye aye, sir." Kelly removed the headset and jumped out of the helicopter, going to join General Young.

"Dutch told me," Young said, the disapproval clear in his voice. You just didn't do things this way. "What do you need?"

"Back to the boat to change, then run me up to Baltimore, okay? I'll drive back myself."

"Look, Clark—"

"General, I helped plan this mission. I'm first in and I'm last out." Young wanted to swear but didn't. Instead he pointed to his driver, then to Kelly.

Fifteen minutes later, Kelly was in another life. Since leaving *Springer* tied up at the guest slip, the world had stopped, and he'd moved backwards in time. Now he was in forward motion for a brief period. A quick look determined that the dockmaster was keeping an eye on things. He raced through a shower and changed

into civilian clothes, heading back to the General's staff car.

"Baltimore, Corporal. Matter of fact, I'll make it easy on you. Just drop me off at the airport. I'll catch a cab the rest of the way."

"You got it, sir," the driver told a man already fading into sleep.

"So what's the story, Mr. MacKenzie?" Hicks asked.

"They approved it," the special assistant replied, signing a few papers and initialing a few others for various official archives where future historians would record his name as a minor player in the great events of his time.

"Can you say what?"

What the hell, MacKenzie thought. Hicks had a clearance, and it was a chance to display something of his importance to the lad. In two minutes he covered the high points of BOXWOOD GREEN.

"Sir, that's an invasion," Hicks pointed out as evenly as he could manage, despite the chill on his skin and the sudden knot in his stomach.

"I suppose they might think so, but I don't. They've invaded three sovereign countries, as I recall."

More urgently: "But the peace talks—you said yourself."

"Oh, screw the peace talks! Damn it, Wally, we have *people* over there, and what they know is vital to our national security. Besides"—he smiled—"I helped sell it to Henry." *And if this one comes off…*

"But—"

MacKenzie looked up. Didn't this kid get it? "But *what*, Wally?"

"It's dangerous."

"War is that way, in case nobody ever told you."

"Sir, I'm supposed to be able to talk here, right?" Hicks asked pointedly.

"Of course you are, Wally. So talk."

"The peace talks are at a delicate stage now—"

"Peace talks are always delicate, aren't they? Go on," MacKenzie ordered, rather enjoying his pedagogic discourse. Maybe this kid would learn something for a change.

"Sir, we've lost too many people already. We've killed a *million* of them. And for what? What have we gained? What has anybody gained?" His voice was almost a plea.

That wasn't exactly new, and MacKenzie was tired of responding to it. "If you're asking me to defend how we got stuck with this

mess, Wally, you're wasting your time. It's been a mess since the beginning, but that wasn't the work of *this* Administration, was it? We got elected with the mandate to get us the hell out of there."

"Yes, sir," Hicks agreed, as he had to. "That's exactly my point. Doing this might harm our chances to bring it to an end. I think it's a mistake, sir."

"Okay." MacKenzie relaxed, giving a tolerant eye to his aide. "That point of view may—I'll be generous, *does* have merit. What about the people, Wally?"

"They took their chances. They lost," Hicks answered with the coldness of youth.

"You know, that sort of detachment may have its use, but one difference between us is that I've been there and you haven't. You've never been in uniform, Wally. That's a shame. You might have learned something from it."

Hicks was genuinely taken aback by the irrelevancy. "I don't know what that might be, sir. It would only have interfered with my studies."

"Life isn't a book, son," MacKenzie said, using a word that he'd intended to be warm, but which merely sounded patronizing to his aide. "Real people bleed. Real people have feelings. Real people have dreams, and families. They have real lives. What you would have learned, Wally, is that they may not be *like* you, but they're still real people, and if you work in this government of the people, you must take note of that."

"Yes, sir." What else could he say? There was no way he'd win this argument. Damn, he really needed someone to talk to about this.

"John!" Not a word in two weeks. She'd feared that something had happened to him, but now she had to face the contradictory thought that he was indeed alive, and perhaps doing things best considered in the abstract.

"Hello, Sandy." Kelly smiled, dressed decently again, in a tie and blue blazer. It was so obviously a disguise, and so different from the way she'd last seen the man, that even his appearance was disturbing.

"Where have you been?" Sandy asked, waving him in, not wanting the neighbors to know.

"Off doing something," Kelly dodged.

“Doing what?” The immediacy of her tone demanded a substantive response.

“Nothing illegal, I promise,” was the best he could do.

“You’re sure?” A very awkward moment developed out of thin air. Kelly just stood there, right inside the door, suddenly oscillating between anger and guilt, wondering why he’d come here, why he’d asked Admiral Maxwell for a very special favor, and not really knowing the answer now.

“John!” Sarah called down the stairs, saving both from their thoughts.

“Hey, doc,” Kelly called, and both were glad for the distraction.

“Have we got a surprise for you!”

“What?”

Dr. Rosen came down the stairs, looking as frumpy as ever despite her smile. “You look different.”

“I’ve been exercising pretty regularly,” Kelly explained.

“What brings you here?” Sarah asked.

“I’m going to be going somewhere, and I wanted to stop over before I left.”

“Where to?”

“I can’t say.” The answer chilled the room.

“John,” Sandy said. “We know.”

“Okay.” Kelly nodded. “I figured you would. How is she?”

“She’s doing fine, thanks to you,” Sarah answered.

“John, we need to talk, okay?” Sandy insisted. Dr. Rosen bent to her wishes and went back upstairs while nurse and former patient drifted into the kitchen.

“John, what exactly have you been doing?”

“Lately? I can’t say, Sandy. I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

“I mean—I mean everything. What have you been up to?”

“You’re better off not knowing, Sandy.”

“Billy and Rick?” Nurse O’Toole said, putting it on the table.

Kelly motioned his head to the second floor. “You’ve seen what they did to her? They won’t be doing that anymore.”

“John, you can’t do things like that! The police—”

“—are infiltrated,” Kelly told her. “The organization has compromised somebody, probably someone very high up. Because of that I can’t trust the police, and neither can you, Sandy,” he concluded as reasonably as he could.

“But there are others, John. There are others who—” His

statement finally penetrated. “How do you know that?”

“I asked Billy some questions.” Kelly paused, and her face gave him yet more guilt. “Sandy, do you really think somebody is going to go out of his way to investigate the death of a prostitute? That’s what it is to them. Do you think anybody really cares about them? I asked you before, remember? You said that nobody even has a program to help them. You care. That’s why I brought her here. But do the cops? No. Maybe I could scratch up information to burn the drug ring. I’m not sure, it’s not what I’ve been trained for, but that’s what I’ve been doing. If you want to turn me in, well, I can’t stop you. I won’t hurt you—”

“I know that!” Sandy almost screamed. “John, you can’t do this,” she added more calmly.

“Why not?” Kelly asked. “They kill people. They do horrible things, and nobody’s doing anything about it. What about the victims, Sandy? Who speaks for them?”

“The law does!”

“And when the law doesn’t work, then what? Do we just let them die? Die like that? Remember the picture of Pam?”

“Yes,” Sandy replied, losing the argument, knowing it, wishing it were otherwise.

“They took hours on her, Sandy. Your—house-guest—watched. They *made her watch.*”

“She told me. She’s told us everything. She and Pam were friends. After—after Pam died, she’s the one who brushed Pam’s hair out, John.”

The reaction surprised her. It was immediately clear that Kelly’s pain was behind a door, and some words could bring it out in the open with a sudden speed that punished him badly. He turned away for a moment and took a deep breath before turning back. “She’s okay?”

“We’re going to take her home in a few days. Sarah and I will drive her there.”

“Thanks for telling me that. Thank you for taking care of her.”

It was the dichotomy that unsettled her so badly. He could talk about inflicting death on people so calmly, like Sam Rosen in a discussion of a tricky surgical procedure—and like the surgeon, Kelly cared about the people he—saved? Avenged? Was that the same thing? He thought so.

“Sandy, it’s like this: They killed Pam. They raped and tortured

and killed her—as an *example*, so they could use other girls the same way. I'm going to get every one of them, and if I die in the process, that's the chance I'm going to take. I'm sorry if you don't like me for that."

She took a deep breath. There was nothing more to be said.

"You said you're going away."

"Yes. If things work out I should be back in about two weeks."

"Will it be dangerous?"

"Not if I do it right." Kelly knew she would see through that one.

"Doing what?"

"A rescue mission. That's as far as I can go, and please don't repeat that to anyone. I'm leaving tonight. I've been off training for it, down at a military base."

It was Sandy's turn to look away, back towards the kitchen door. He wasn't giving her a chance. There were too many contradictions. He'd saved a girl who would otherwise have certainly died, but he'd killed to do it. He loved a girl who was dead. He was willing to kill others because of that love, to risk everything for it. He'd trusted her and Sarah and Sam. Was he a bad man or a good one? The mixture of facts and ideas was impossible to reconcile. Seeing what had happened to Doris, working so hard now to get her well, hearing her voice—and her father's—it had all made sense to her at the time. It was always easy to consider things dispassionately, when they were at a distance. But not now, faced with the man who had done it all, who explained himself calmly and directly, not lying, not concealing, just telling the truth, and trusting her, again, to understand.

"Vietnam?" she asked after a few moments, temporizing, trying to add more substance to a very muddled collection of thoughts.

"That's right." Kelly paused. He had to explain it, just a little, to help her understand. "There are some people over there who won't get back unless we do something, and I am part of it."

"But why do *you* have to go?"

"Why me? It has to be somebody, and I'm the one they asked. Why do *you* do the things you do, Sandy? I asked that before, remember?"

"Damn you, John! I've started to *care* about you," she blurted out.

The pain returned to his face one more time. "Don't. You might get hurt again, and I wouldn't want that." Which was exactly the wrong thing for him to say. "People who get attached to me get

hurt, Sandy."

Sarah came in just then, leading Doris into the kitchen, for the moment saving both of them from themselves. The girl was transformed. Her eyes were animated now. Sandy had trimmed her hair and found decent clothes for her. She was still weak, but moving under her own power now. Her soft brown eyes fixed on Kelly.

"You're him," she said quietly.

"I guess I am. How are you?"

She smiled. "I'm going home soon. Daddy—Daddy wants me back."

"I'm sure he does, ma'am," Kelly said. She was so different from the victim he'd seen only a few weeks before. Maybe it did all mean something.

The same thought came into Sandy's mind just then. Doris was the innocent one, the real victim of forces that had descended on her, and but for Kelly, she would be dead. Nothing else could have saved her. Other deaths had been necessary, but—but *what?*

"So maybe it was Eddie," Piaggi said. "I told him to sniff around and he says he doesn't have anything."

"And nothing's happened since you talked to him. Everything's back to normal, like," Henry replied, telling Anthony Piaggi what he already knew and following with a conclusion that he had also considered. "What if he was just trying to shake things up a little? What if he just wanted to be more important, Tony?"

"Possible."

Which led to the next question: "How much you want to bet that if Eddie takes a little trip, nothing else happens?"

"You think he's making a move?"

"You got anything else that makes sense?"

"Anything happens to Eddie, there could be trouble. I don't think I can—"

"Let me handle it? I have a way that'll work just fine."

"Tell me about it," Piaggi said. Two minutes later he nodded approval.

"Why did you come here?" Sandy asked while she and Kelly cleaned up the dinner table. Sarah took Doris back upstairs for more rest.

“I wanted to see how she was doing.” But that was a lie, and not an especially good one.

“It’s lonely, isn’t it?” Kelly took a long time to answer.

“Yeah.” She’d forced him to face something. Being alone was not the sort of life he wanted to have, but fate and his own nature had forced it on him. Every time he’d reached out, something terrible had happened. Vengeance against those who had made his life into what it now was did make for a purpose, but it wasn’t enough to fill the void they’d created. And now it was clear that what he was doing, all of it, was merely distancing him from someone else. How did life get so complicated as this?

“I can’t say it’s okay, John. I wish I could. Saving Doris was a fine thing, but not through killing people. There is supposed to be another way—”

“—and if there isn’t, then what?”

“Let me finish?” Sandy asked quietly.

“Sorry.”

She touched his hand. “Please be careful.”

“I usually am, Sandy. Honest.”

“What you’re doing, what you’re going off to, it’s not—”

He smiled. “No, it’s a real job. Official stuff and everything.”

“Two weeks?”

“If it goes according to plan, yes.”

“Will it?”

“Sometimes it actually does.”

Her hand squeezed his. “John, please, think it over. Please? Try to find another way. Let it go. Let it stop. You saved Doris. That’s a wonderful thing. Maybe with what you’ve learned you can save the others without—without any more killing?”

“I’ll try.” He couldn’t say no to that, not with the warmth of her hand on his, and Kelly’s trap was that his word, once given, could not be taken back. “Anyway, I have other things to worry about now.” Which was true.

“How will I know, John—I mean—”

“About me?” He was surprised she would even want to know.

“John, you can’t just leave me not knowing.”

Kelly thought for a moment, pulled a pen from his coat, and wrote down a phone number. “This goes to a guy—an admiral named James Greer. He’ll know, Sandy.”

“Please be careful.” Her grip and her eyes were desperate now.

"I will. I promise. I'm good at this, okay?"

So was Tim. She didn't have to say it. Her eyes did, and Kelly understood how cruel it could be to leave anyone behind.

"I have to go now, Sandy."

"Just make sure you come back."

"I will. Promise." But the words sounded empty, even to him. Kelly wanted to kiss her but couldn't. He moved away from the table, feeling her hand still on his. She was a tall woman, and very strong and brave, but she'd been hurt badly before, and it frightened Kelly that he might bring yet more pain to her life. "See you in a couple weeks. Say goodbye to Sarah and Doris for me, okay?"

"Yes." She followed him towards the front door. "John, when you get back, let it stop."

"I'll think about it," he said without turning, because he was afraid to look at her again. "I will."

Kelly opened the door. It was dark outside now, and he'd have to hustle to get to Quantico on time. He could hear her behind him, hear her breathing. Two women in his life, one taken by an accident, one by murder, and now perhaps a third whom he was driving away all by himself.

"John?" She hadn't let go of his hand, and he had to turn back despite his fear.

"Yes, Sandy?"

"Come back."

He touched her face again, and kissed her hand, and drew away. She watched him walk to the Volkswagen and drive off.

Even now, she thought. *Even now he's trying to protect me.*

Is it enough? Can I stop now? But what was "enough"?

"Think it through," he said aloud. "What do you know that others can use?"

It was quite a lot, really. Billy had told him much, perhaps a sufficient amount. The drugs were processed on one of those wrecked ships. He had Henry's name, and Burt's. He knew a senior narcotics officer was in Henry's employ. Could the police take that and spin it into a case firm enough to put them all behind bars for drug trafficking and murder? Might Henry get a death sentence? And if the answer to every question was yes, was that good enough?

As much as Sandy's misgivings, his association with the Marines

had brought the same questions to the front of his mind. What would they think if they knew that they were associating with a murderer? Would they see it that way or would they be sympathetic to his point of view?

"The bags stink," Billy had said. "Like dead bodies, like the stuff they use."

What the hell did that mean? Kelly wondered, going through town one last time. He saw police cars operating. They couldn't all be driven by corrupt cops, could they?

"Shit," Kelly snarled at the traffic. "Clear your mind, sailor. There's a job waiting, a real job."

But that had said it all. BOXWOOD GREEN was a *real* jab, and the realization came as clear and bright as the headlights of approaching cars. If someone like Sandy didn't understand—it was one thing to do it alone, just with your own thoughts and rage and loneliness, but when others saw and knew, even people who liked you, and knew exactly what it was all about.… When even they asked you to stop.…

Where was right? Where was wrong? Where was the line between them? It was easy on the highway. Some crew painted the lines, and you had to stay in the proper lane, but in real life it wasn't so clear.

Forty minutes later he was on I-495, the Washington Beltway. What was more important, killing Henry or getting those other women out of there?

Another forty and he was across the river into Virginia. Seeing Doris—what a dumb name—alive, after the first time when she'd been almost as dead as Rick. The more he thought about it, the better that seemed.

BOXWOOD GREEN wasn't about killing the enemy. It was about rescuing people.

He turned south on Interstate 95, and a final forty-five or so delivered him to Quantico. It was eleven-thirty when he drove into the training site.

"Glad you made it," Marty Young observed sourly. He was dressed in utilities for once instead of his khaki shirt.

Kelly looked hard into the General's eyes. "Sir, I've had a bad enough night. Be a pal and stow it, all right?"

Young took it like the man he was. "Mr. Clark, you sound like you're ready."

"That isn't what it's about, sir. Those guys in SENDER GREEN are ready."

"Fair enough, tough guy."

"Can I leave the car here?"

"With all these clunkers?"

Kelly paused, but the decision came quickly enough. "I think it's served its purpose. Junk it with the rest of 'em."

"Come on, the bus is down the hill a ways."

Kelly collected his personal gear and carried them to the staff car. The same corporal was driving as he sat in the back with the Marine aviator who wouldn't be going.

"What do you think, Clark?"

"Sir, I think we have a really good chance."

"You know, I wish just once, just one goddamned time, we could say, yeah, this one's going to work."

"Was it ever that way for you?" Kelly asked.

"No," Young admitted. "But you don't stop wishing."

"How was England, Peter?"

"Pretty nice. It rained in Paris, though. Brussels was pretty decent, my first time there," Henderson said.

Their apartments were only two blocks apart, comfortable places in Georgetown built during the late thirties to accommodate the influx of bureaucrats serving a growing government. Built of solid cinder-arch construction, they were more structurally sound than more recent buildings. Hicks had a two-bedroom unit, which compensated for the smallish living-dining room.

"So what's happening that you wanted to tell me about?" the Senate aide asked, still recovering from jet lag.

"We're invading the North again," the White House aide answered.

"What? Hey, I was at the peace talks, okay? I observed some of the chitchat. Things are moving along. The other side just caved in on a big one."

"Well, you can kiss that goodbye for a while," Hicks said morosely. On the coffee table was a plastic bag of marijuana, and he started putting a smoke together.

"You should lay off that shit, Wally."

"Doesn't give me a hangover like beer does. Shit, Peter, what's the difference?"

"The difference is your fucking security clearance!" Henderson said pointedly.

"Like that matters? Peter, they don't listen. You talk and talk and talk to them, and they just don't listen." Hicks lit up and took a long pull. "I'm going to leave soon anyway. Dad wants me to come and join the family business. Maybe after I make a few mill', maybe then somebody'll listen once in a while."

"You shouldn't let it get to you, Wally. It takes time. Everything takes time. You think we can fix things overnight?"

"I don't think we can fix things at all! You know what this all is? It's like Sophocles. We have our fatal flaw, and they have their fatal flaw, and when the fucking *deus* comes *ex* the fucking *machina*, the *deus* is going to be a cloud of ICBMs, and it's all going to be over, Peter. Just like we thought a few years ago up in New Hampshire." It wasn't Hicks's first smoke of the evening, Henderson realized. Intoxication always made his friend morose.

"Wally, tell me what the problem is."

"There's supposedly this camp…" Hicks began, his eyes down, not looking at his friend at all now as he related what he knew.

"That is bad news."

"They *think* there's a bunch of people there, but it's just supposition. We only know about one. What if we're fucking over the peace talks for *one guy*, Peter?"

"Put that damned thing out," Henderson said, sipping his beer. He just didn't like the smell of the stuff.

"No." Wally took another big hit.

"When is it going?"

"Not sure. Roger didn't say exactly."

"Wally, you have to stay with it. We need people like you in the system. Sometimes they will listen."

Hicks looked up. "When will that be, do you think?"

"What if this mission fails? What if it turns out that you're right? Roger will listen to you then, and Henry listens to Roger, doesn't he?"

"Well, yeah, sometimes."

What a remarkable chance this was, Henderson thought.

The chartered bus drove to Andrews Air Force Base, duplicating, Kelly saw, more than half of his drive. There was a new C-141 on the ramp, painted white on the top and gray on the bottom, its

strobe lights already rotating. The Marines got out of the bus, finding Maxwell and Greer waiting for them.

"Good luck," Greer said to each man.

"Good hunting," was what Dutch Maxwell told them.

Built to hold more than double their number, the Lockheed Starlifter was outfitted for litter patients, with a total of eighty beds bolted to the side of the aircraft and room for twenty or so attendants. That gave every Marine a place to lie down and sleep, plus room for all the prisoners they expected to rescue. The time of night made it easy for everyone, and the Starlifter started turning engines as soon as the cargo hatch was shut.

"Jesus, I hope this works," Maxwell said, watching the aircraft taxi into the darkness.

"You've trained them well, Admiral," Bob Ritter observed. "When do we go out?"

"Three days, Bob," James Greer answered. "Got your calendar clear?"

"For this? You bet."

26

Transit

A new aircraft, the Starlifter was also a disappointingly slow one. Its cruising speed was a mere 478 miles per hour, and their first stop was Elmendorf Air Force base in Alaska, 3,350 miles and eight hours away. It never ceased to amaze Kelly that the shortest distance to any place on Earth was a curve, but that was because he was used to flat maps, and the world was a sphere. The great-circle route from Washington to Danang would actually have taken them over Siberia, and that, the navigator said, just wouldn't do. By the time of their arrival at Elmendorf, the Marines were up and rested. They departed the aircraft to look at snow on not-so-distant mountains, having only a few hours before left a place where heat and humidity were in a daily race for 100. But here in Alaska they found mosquitoes sufficiently large that a few might have carried one of their number off. Most took the opportunity to jog a couple of miles, to the amusement of the Air Force personnel, who typically had little contact with Marines. Servicing the C-141 took a programmed time of two and a quarter hours. After refueling and one minor instrument replacement, the Marines were just as happy to reboard the aircraft for the second leg of the journey, for Yokota, in Japan. Three hours after that, Kelly walked onto the flight deck, growing bored with the noise and confinement.

"What's that over there?" he asked. In the distant haze was a brown-green line that denoted somebody's coast.

"Russia. They have us on radar right now."

"Oh, that's nice," Kelly observed.

"It's a small world, sir, and they own a big hunk of it."

"You talk to them—air-traffic control, like?"

"No." The navigator laughed. "They're not real neighborly. We talk on HF to Tokyo for this leg, and after Yokota, we're controlled through Manila. Is the ride smooth enough?"

"No beefs so far. Gets long, though."

"It does that," the navigator acknowledged, turning back to his instruments.

Kelly walked back into the cargo area. The C-141 was noisy, a constant high-frequency whine from the engines and the air through which they were passing. The Air Force didn't waste any money, as airlines did, on sound insulation. Every Marine was wearing earplugs, which made conversation difficult, and after a time didn't really block the noise anyway. The worst part of air travel was the boredom, Kelly thought, made worse by the sound-induced isolation. You could only sleep so much. Some of the men were honing knives which they would never really use, but it gave you something to do, and a warrior had to have a knife for some reason. Others were doing push-ups on the metal cargo deck of the aircraft. The Air Force crewmen watched impassively, not wanting to laugh, wondering what this obviously select group of Marines was up to, but unable to ask. It was for them just one more mystery as their aircraft slid down the Siberian coast. They were used to it, but to a man they wished the Marines well on whatever their job was.

The problem was the first thing on his mind when his eyes opened. *What do I do about this?* Henderson asked himself crossly.

It wasn't what he wanted to do, but what he would be able to do. He'd delivered information before. At first unknowingly, through contacts in the peace movement, he'd—well, not so much given over information as had joined in rambling discussions which over time had become more and more pointed until finally one of his friends had asked something just a little too directed to be a random inquiry. A friendly question she'd asked, and at a very friendly moment, but the look in her eyes was a little too interested in the reply and not enough interested in him, a situation which had immediately reversed when he'd answered the question. A spoonful of sugar, he'd told himself later, rather vexed with himself that he'd fallen prey to such an obvious and old-fashioned—well, not an error, really. He liked her, believed as she did in the way the world should be, and if anything he was annoyed that she'd felt it

necessary to manipulate his body in order to get something that reason and intellect would have elicited quite readily from his mind… well, probably.

She was gone now, gone somewhere. Henderson didn't know where, though he was sure that he'd never see her again. Which was sad, really. She'd been a great lay. One thing had led to another in a seemingly gradual and natural series of steps ending with his brief conversation at H.M. Tower of London, and now—now he had something the other side really needed. It was just that he didn't have anyone to tell it to. Did the Russians really know what they had there at that damned-fool camp southwest of Haiphong? It was information which, if used properly, would make them feel far more comfortable about *détente*, would allow them to back off a little, in turn allowing America to back off a little. That was how it had to start. It was a shame Wally didn't grasp that it had to start as little things, that you couldn't change the world all at once. Peter knew that he had to get that message across. He couldn't have Wally leave government service now, to become just one more goddamned financial puke, as though the world didn't have enough of them already. He was valuable where he was. Wally just liked to talk too much. It went along with his emotional instability. And his drug use, Henderson thought, looking in the mirror as he shaved.

Breakfast was accompanied by a morning paper. There it was again, on the first page as it was almost every day. Some medium-sized battle for some hill that had been exchanged a dozen or more times, X number of Americans and Y number of Vietnamese, all dead. The implications for the peace talks of some air raid or other, another boring and predictable editorial. Plans for a demonstration. *One, Two, Three, Four. We don't want your fucking war.* As though something so puerile as that really meant anything. In a way, he knew, it did. It did put pressure on political figures, did catch media attention. There was a mass of politicians who wanted the war to end, as Henderson did, but not yet a critical mass. His own senator, Robert Donaldson, was still on the fence. He was called a reasonable and thoughtful man, but Henderson merely found him indecisive, always considering everything about an issue and then most often going with the crowd as though he hadn't thought anything at all on his own. There had to be a better way, and Henderson was working on that, advising his senator carefully, shading things just a little bit, taking his time to become trusted so

that he could learn things that Donaldson wasn't supposed to tell anyone—but that was the problem with secrets. You just *had to* let others know, he thought on the way out the door.

Henderson rode the bus to work. Parking on The Hill was such a pain in the rump, and the bus went nearly from door to door. He found a seat in the back where he could finish reading the paper. Two blocks later he felt the bus stop, and immediately thereafter a man sat down next to him.

"How was London?" the man asked in a conversational voice, barely over the noise of the bus's diesel. Henderson looked over briefly. It wasn't someone he'd met before. Were they *that* efficient?

"I met someone there," Peter said cautiously.

"I have a friend in London. His name is George." Not a trace of an accent, and now that contact was established, the man was reading the sports page of the *Washington Post*. "I don't think the Senators will make it this year. Do you?"

"George said he had a… friend in town."

The man smiled at the box score. "My name is Marvin; you can call me that."

"How do we… how do I…?"

"What are you doing for dinner tonight?" Marvin asked.

"Nothing much. Want to come over—"

"No, Peter, that is not smart. Do you know a place called Alberto's?"

"Wisconsin Avenue, yeah."

"Seven-thirty," Marvin said. He rose and got off at the next stop.

The final leg started at Yokota Air Base. After another programmed two-and-a-quarter-hour service wait, the Starlifter rotated off the runway, clawing its way back into the sky. That was when things started to get real for everyone. The Marines made a concerted effort to sleep now. It was the only way to deal with the tension that grew in inverse proportion to the distance from their final destination. Things were different now. It wasn't just a training exercise, and their demeanor was adapting itself to a new reality. On a different sort of flight, a commercial airliner, perhaps, where conversation might have been possible, they'd trade jokes, stories of amorous conquests, talk about home and family and plans for the future, but the noise of the C-141 denied them that, and so they traded brave smiles that hung under guarded eyes, each man alone

with his thoughts and fears, needing to share them and deflect them, but unable to in the noisy cargo compartment of the Starlifter. That was why many of them exercised, just to work off the stress, to tire themselves enough for the oblivion of sleep. Kelly watched it, having seen and done it himself, alone with his own thoughts even more complex than theirs.

It's about rescue, Kelly told himself. What had started the whole adventure was saving Pam, and the fact of her death was his fault. Then he had killed, to get even, telling himself it was for her memory and for his love, but was that really true? What good things came from death? He'd *tortured* a man, and now he had to admit to himself that he'd taken satisfaction in Billy's pain. If Sandy had learned that, then what? What would she think of him? It was suddenly important to consider what she thought about him. She who worked so hard to save that girl, who nurtured and protected, following through on his more simple act of rescue, what would she think of someone who'd torn Billy's body apart one cell at a time? He could not, after all, stop all the evil in the world. He could not win the war to which he was now returning, and as skilled as this team of Recon Marines was, they would not win the war either. They were going for something else. Their purpose was rescue, for while there could be little real satisfaction in the taking of life, saving life was ever something to recall with the deepest pride. That was his mission now, and must be his mission on returning. There were four other girls in the control of the ring. He'd get them clear, somehow… and maybe he could somehow let the cops know what Henry was up to, and then they could deal with him. Somehow. How exactly he wasn't sure. But at least then he could do something that memory would not try to wash away.

And all he had to do was survive this mission. Kelly grunted to himself. No big deal, right?

Tough guy, he told himself with bravado that rang false even within the confines of his own skull. *I can do this. I've done it before.* Strange, he thought, how the mind doesn't always remember the scary parts until it was too late. Maybe it was proximity. Maybe it was easier to consider dangers that were half a world away, but then when you started getting closer, things changed.…

"Toughest part, Mr. Clark," Irvin said loudly, sitting down beside him after doing his hundred push-ups.

"Ain't it the truth?" Kelly half-shouted back.

“Something you oughta remember, squid—you got inside and took me out that night, right?” Irvin grinned. “And I’m pretty damned good.”

“They ought not to be all that alert, their home turf an’ all,” Kelly observed after a moment.

“Probably not, anyway, not as alert as we were that night. Hell, we knew you were coming in. You kinda expect home troops, like, go home to the ol’ lady every night, thinking about havin’ a piece after dinner. Not like us, man.”

“Not many like us,” Kelly agreed. He grinned. “Not many dumb as we are.”

Irvin slapped him on the shoulder. “You got that right, Clark.” The master gunnery sergeant moved off to encourage the next man, which was his way of dealing with it.

Thanks, Guns, Kelly thought, leaning back and forcing himself back into sleep.

Alberto’s was a place waiting to be fully discovered. A small and rather typical mom-and-pop Italian place where the veal was especially good. In fact, everything was good, and the couple who ran it waited patiently for the *Post*’s food critic to wander in, bringing prosperity with him. Until then they subsisted on the college crowd from nearby Georgetown University and a healthy local trade of neighborhood diners without which no restaurant could really survive. The only disappointing note was the music, schmaltzy tapes of Italian opera that oozed out of substandard speakers. The mom and pop in question would have to work on that, he thought.

Henderson found a booth in the back. The waiter, probably an illegal Mexican who comically tried to mask his accent as Italian, lit the candle on the table with a match and went off for the gin-and-tonic the new customer wanted.

Marvin arrived a few minutes later, dressed casually and carrying the evening paper, which he sat on the table. He was of Henderson’s age, totally nondescript, not tall or short, portly or thin, his hair a neutral brown and of medium length, wearing glasses that might or might not have held prescription lenses. He wore a blue short-sleeve shirt without a tie, and looked like just another local resident who didn’t feel like doing his own dinner tonight.

"The Senators lost again," he said when the waiter arrived with Henderson's drink. "The house red for me," Marvin told the Mexican.

"Sí," the waiter said and moved off.

Marvin had to be an illegal, Peter thought, appraising the man. As a staffer for a member of the Select Committee on Intelligence, Henderson had been briefed in by serious members of the FBI's Intelligence Division. "Legal" KGB officers had diplomatic covers, and if caught could only be PNG'd—declared persona non grata—and sent home. So they were secure from serious mishandling on the part of the American government, which was the good news; the bad news was that they were also more easily tracked, since their residences and automobiles were known. Illegals were just that, Soviet intelligence officers who came into the country with false papers and who if caught would end up in federal prison until the next exchange, which could take years. Those facts explained Marvin's superb English. Any mistake he made would have serious consequences. That made his relaxed demeanor all the more remarkable.

"Baseball fan, eh?"

"I learned the game long ago. I was a pretty good shortstop, but I never learned to hit a curve ball." The man grinned. Henderson smiled back. He'd seen satellite imagery of the very place where Marvin had learned his trade, that interesting little city northwest of Moscow.

"How will it work?"

"I like that. Good. Let's get down to business. We won't be doing this very often. You know why."

Another smile. "Yeah, they say that winters at Leavenworth are a motherfucker."

"Not a laughing matter, Peter," the KGB officer said. "This is a very serious business." *Please, not another bloody cowboy*, Marvin thought to himself.

"I know. Sorry," Henderson apologized. "I'm new to this."

"First of all, we need to set up a way of contacting me. Your apartment has curtains on the front windows. When they are all the way open, or all the way closed, there is nothing to concern us. When there is, leave them halfway closed. I will check your windows twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday mornings, about nine. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, Marvin."

"For starters, Peter, we'll use a simple transfer method. I will park my car on a street close to your home. It's a dark-blue Plymouth Satellite with license number HVR-309. Repeat that back to me. Don't ever write it down."

"HVR-309."

"Put your messages in this." He passed something under the table. It was small and metallic. "Don't get it too close to your watch. There's a powerful magnet in it. When you walk past my car, you can bend down to pick up a piece of litter, or rest your foot on the bumper and tie your shoe. Just stick the container on the inside surface of the bumper. The magnet will hold it in place."

It seemed very sophisticated to Henderson, though everything he'd just heard was kindergarten-level spycraft. This was good for the summer. Winter weather would require something else. The dinner menu arrived, and both men selected veal.

"I have something now if you're interested," Henderson told the KGB officer. *Might as well let them know how important I am.*

Marvin, whose real name was Ivan Alekseyevich Yegorov, had a real job, and everything that went along with it. Employed by the Aetna Casualty and Surety Company as a loss-control representative, he'd been through company training on Farmington Avenue in Hartford, Connecticut, before returning to the Washington regional office, and his job was to identify safety hazards at the many clients of the company, known in the trade as "risks." Selected mainly for its mobility—the post even came with a company car—the job carried with it the unexpected bonus of visiting the offices of various government contractors whose employees were not always as careful covering up the papers on their desks as they ought to have been. His immediate boss was delighted with Marvin's performance. His new man was highly observant and downright superb at documenting his business affairs. He'd already turned down promotion and transfer to Detroit —*sorry, boss, but I just like the Washington area too much*—which didn't bother his supervisor at all. A guy with his skills, holding a fairly low-paying job, just made his part of the office look all the better. For Marvin, the job meant being out of the office four days out of five, which allowed him to meet people whenever and wherever he wished, along with a free car—Aetna even paid gas

and maintenance—and a life so comfortable that had he believed in God he might have thought himself dead and in heaven. A genuine love for baseball took him to RFK Stadium, where the anonymity of the crowd was as perfect a place for brush-passes and other meets as *the KGB Field Operations Manual* dared to hope for. All in all, Captain Yegorov was a man on the way up, comfortable with his cover and his surroundings, doing his duty for his country. He'd even managed to arrive in America just in time to catch the sexual revolution. All he really missed was the vodka, something Americans did poorly.

Isn't this interesting? Marvin asked himself in his Chevy Chase apartment. It was downright hilarious that he had learned about a high-level Russian intelligence operation from an American, and here was a chance to hurt his country's Main Enemy through surrogates—if they could get things moving in time. He would also be able to inform his control officers of something the Soviet Air Force cretins had running that had significant implications for the Soviet Union's defense. They'd probably try to take that operation over. You couldn't trust pilots—it had to be a PVO Strany officer doing the questioning, he was sure—with something as important as national defense. He made his notes, photographed them, and rewound the film into the tiny cassette. His first appointment tomorrow was an early call at a local contractor. From there he would stop off to have breakfast at a Howard Johnson's, where he'd make his transfer. The cassette would be in Moscow in two days, maybe three, by diplomatic pouch.

Captain Yegorov ended his work for the evening just in time to catch the end of the Senators game—despite a ninth-inning homer by Frank Howard they fell short again, losing to Cleveland 5–3. Wasn't this something, he thought, sipping at his beer. Henderson was a plum all by himself, and nobody had bothered to tell him—probably hadn't known—that he had his own source within the White House Office of National Security Affairs. Wasn't that a kick in the ass?

Mission stress and all, it was a relief when the C-141 thumped down at Danang. They'd been in transit for a total of twenty-three noisy and mind-numbing hours, and that was quite long enough, they all thought, until reality struck them hard and fast. Scarcely had the cargo hatch opened when the smell hit them. It was what all

veterans of this place came to think of as the Smell of Vietnam. The contents of various latrines were dumped into barrels and burned with diesel fuel.

"Smell o' home!" one Marine joked, badly, evoking isolated barks of semiamusement.

"Saddle up!" Irvin shouted as the engine noise died. It took a little time. Reactions were slowed by fatigue and stiffness. Many shook their heads to clear off the dizziness induced by the earplugs, along with yawns and stretches which psychologists would have called typical nonverbal expressions of unease.

The flight crew came aft just as the Marines left. Captain Albie went to them, thanking them for the ride, which had been smooth, if long. The Air Force crew looked forward to several days of enforced crew-rest after the marathon stint, not yet knowing that they would hold in this area until the team was ready to fly home, perhaps catching a few cargo hops back and forth to Clark. Then Albie led his men off the aircraft. Two trucks were waiting, and they drove to a different part of the air base, where two aircraft waited. These were Navy C-2A Greyhounds. With a few desultory moans, the Marines selected seats for the next part of their journey, a one-hour hop to USS *Constellation.* Once there, they boarded a pair of CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters for a transfer to USS *Ogden*, where, disoriented and exhausted by travel, they were led to capacious and empty troop quarters—and bunks. Kelly watched them file off, wondering what came next for him.

"How was the trip?" He turned to see Admiral Podulski, dressed in wrinkled khakis and far too cheerful for the moment.

"Aviators gotta be crazy," Kelly bitched.

"Does get kinda long. Follow me," the Admiral ordered, leading him into the superstructure. Kelly looked around first. *Constellation* was on the eastern horizon, and he could see aircraft flying off one end while others circled to land on the other. Two cruisers were in close attendance, and destroyers ringed the formation. It was part of the Navy which Kelly had rarely seen, the Big Blue Team at work, commanding the ocean. "What's that?" he asked, pointing.

"Russian fishing trawler, AGI." Podulski waved Kelly through a watertight door.

"Oh, that's just great!"

"Don't worry. We can deal with that," the Admiral assured him.

Inside the superstructure, the two men headed up a series of

ladders, finding flag quarters, or what passed for them at the moment. Admiral Podulski had taken over the Captain's in-port cabin for the duration of the mission, relegating *Ogden*'s CO to his smaller accommodations nearer the bridge. There was a comfortable sitting room, and the ship's captain was there.

"Welcome aboard!" Captain Ted Franks said in greeting. "You're Clark?"

"Yes, sir."

Franks was a fifty-year-old pro who'd been in amphibious ships since 1944. *Ogden* was his fifth and would be his last command. Short, pudgy, and losing his hair, he still had the look of a warrior on a face that was by turns good-natured and deadly serious. At the moment, it was the former. He waved Kelly to a chair next to a table in the center of which was a bottle of Jack Daniel's.

"That ain't legal," Kelly observed at once.

"Not for me," Captain Franks agreed. "Aviator rations."

"I arranged for them," Casimir Podulski explained. "Brought 'em over from *Connie.* You need something to steady down after all that time with the Air Scouts."

"Sir, I never argue with admirals." Kelly dropped two ice cubes into a tumbler and covered them with alcohol.

"My XO is talking with Captain Albie and his people. They're all getting entertained, too," Franks added, meaning that every man had two miniatures on his assigned bunk. "Mr. Clark, our ship is yours. Anything we have, you got it."

"Well, Cap'n, you surely know how to say hello." Kelly sipped at his drink, and the first touch of the booze made his body remember how wrung-out he was. "So when do we start?"

"Four days. You need two to recover from the trip," the Admiral said. "The submarine will be with us two days after that. The Marines go in Friday morning, depending on weather."

"Okay." There was nothing else he could say.

"Only the XO and I know anything yet. Try not to spread things around. We've got a pretty good crew. The intel team is aboard and working. The medical team gets here tomorrow."

"Recon?"

Podulski handled that one. "We'll have photos of the camp later today, from a Vigilante working off *Connie.* Then another set twelve hours before you move out. We have Buffalo Hunter shots, five days old. The camp is still there, still guarded, same as before."

"Items?" Kelly asked, using the code word for prisoners.

"We've only got three shots of Americans in the compound." Podulski shrugged. "They don't make a camera yet that can see through a tile roof."

"Right." Kelly's face said it all.

"I'm worried about that, too," Cas admitted.

Kelly turned. "Captain, you have an exercise place, something like that?"

"Weight room, aft of the crew's mess. Like I said, it's yours if you want it."

He finished off his drink. "Well, I think I need to get some rack time."

"You'll mess with the Marines. You'll like the food here," Captain Franks promised.

"Fair enough."

"I saw two men not wearing their hard-hats," Marvin Wilson said to the boss.

"I'll talk to them."

"Aside from that, thanks a lot for your cooperation." He'd made a total of eleven safety recommendations, and the owner of the cement company had adopted every one, hoping for a reduction in his insurance rates. Marvin took off his white hard-hat and wiped the sweat from his brow. It was going to be a hot one. The summer climate was not all that much unlike Moscow, but more humid. At least the winters were milder.

"You know, if they made these things with little holes in them for ventilation, they'd be a lot more comfortable to wear."

"I've said that myself," Captain Yegorov agreed, heading off to his car. Fifteen minutes later he pulled into a Howard Johnson's. The blue Plymouth took a spot along the west side of the building, and as he got out, a patron inside finished off his coffee and left his spot at the counter, along with a quarter tip to thrill the waitress. The restaurant had a double set of doors to save on the air-conditioning bill, and when the two men met there, just the two of them, moving, with the glass of the doors interfering with anyone who might be observing them, the film was passed. Yegorov/Wilson continued inside, and a "legal" KGB major named Ishchenko went his way. Relieved of his burden for the day, Marvin Wilson sat at the counter and ordered orange juice to start. There were so many

good things to eat in America.

"I'm eating too much." It was probably true, but it didn't stop Doris from attacking the pile of hotcakes.

Sarah didn't understand the Americans' love for emaciation. "You lost plenty in the last two weeks. It won't hurt you to put a little back," Sarah Rosen told her graduating patient.

Sarah's Buick was parked outside, and today would see them in Pittsburgh. Sandy had worked on Doris's hair a little more, and made one more trip to get clothes that befitted the day, a beige silk blouse and a burgundy skirt that ended just above the knee. The prodigal son could return home in rags, but the daughter had to arrive with some pride.

"I don't know what to say," Doris Brown told them, standing to collect the dishes.

"You just keep getting better," Sarah replied. They went out to the car, and Doris got in the back. If nothing else, Kelly had taught them caution. Dr. Sarah Rosen headed out quickly, turning north on Loch Raven, getting on the Baltimore Beltway and heading west to Interstate 70. The posted limit on the new highway was seventy miles per hour, and Sarah exceeded it, pushing her heavy Buick northwest toward the Catoctin Mountains, every mile between them and the city an additional safety factor, and by the time they passed Hagerstown she relaxed and started enjoying the ride. What were the chances, after all, of being spotted in a moving car?

It was a surprisingly quiet ride. They'd talked themselves out in the previous few days as Doris had returned to a condition approximating normality. She still needed drug counseling, and seriously needed psychiatric help, but Sarah had already taken care of that with a colleague at the University of Pittsburgh's excellent medical school, a sixtyish woman who knew not to report things to the local police, assured that that part of the matter was already in hand. In the silence of the car Sandy and Sarah could feel the tension build. It was something they'd talked about. Doris was returning to a home and a father she'd left for a life that had nearly become a death. For many months the principal component of her new life would be guilt, part earned, part not. On the whole she was a very lucky young lady, something Doris had yet to grasp. She was, first of all, alive. With her confidence and self-esteem restored she might in two or three years be able to continue her life on a course

so normal that no one would ever suspect her past or notice the fading scars. Restored health would change this girl, returning her not only to her father but also to the world of real people.

Perhaps she might even become stronger, Sarah hoped, if the psychiatrist brought her along slowly and carefully. Dr. Michelle Bryant had a stellar reputation, a correct one, she hoped. For Dr. Rosen, still racing west slightly over the legal limit, this was one of the hard parts of medicine. She had to let the patient go with the job not yet complete. Her clinical work with drug abusers had prepared her for it, but those jobs, like this one, were never really finished. It was just that there came a time when you had to let go, hoping and trusting that the patient could do the rest. Perhaps sending your daughter off to be married was like this, Sarah thought. It could have been so much worse in so many ways. Over the phone her father seemed a decent man, and Sarah Rosen didn't need a specialization in psychiatry to know that more than anything else, Doris needed a relationship with an honorable and loving man so that she could, one day, develop another such relationship that would last her lifetime. That was now the job of others, but it didn't stop Sarah from worrying about her patient. Every doctor can be a Jewish mother, and in her case it was difficult to avoid.

The hills were steep in Pittsburgh. Doris directed them along the Monongahela River and up the right street, suddenly tense while Sandy checked the numbers on the houses. And there it was. Sarah pulled the red Buick into a parking place and everyone took a deep breath.

"You okay?" she asked Doris, getting a frightened nod in response.

"He's your father, honey. He loves you."

There was nothing remarkable about Raymond Brown, Sarah saw a moment later. He must have been waiting at the door for hours, and he, too, was nervous, coming down the cracked concrete steps, holding the rail as he did so with a trembling hand. He opened the car door, helping Sandy out with awkward gallantry. Then he reached inside, and though he was trying to be brave and impassive, when his fingers touched Doris's, the man burst into tears. Doris tripped coming out of the car, and her father kept her from falling, and clutched her to his chest.

"Oh, Daddy!"

Sandy O'Toole turned away, not put off by the emotion of the

moment, but wanting them to have it alone, and the look she gave Dr. Rosen was its own culminating moment for people of their profession. Both medics bit their lips and examined the other's moist eyes.

"Let's get you inside, baby," Ray Brown said, taking his little girl up the steps, needing to have her in his house and under his protection. The other two women followed without being bidden.

The living room was surprisingly dark. A day-sleeper, Mr. Brown had added dark shades to his home and had forgotten to raise them this day. It was a cluttered room of braided rugs and overstuffed '40s furniture, small mahogany tables with lacelike doilies. There were framed photos everywhere. A dead wife. A dead son. And a lost daughter—four of those. In the dark security of the house, father clutched daughter again.

"Honey," he said, recounting words that he'd been practicing for days. "The things I said, I was wrong, I was so damned wrong!"

"It's okay, Daddy. Thank you for… for letting me—"

"Dor, you're my little girl." Nothing more had to be said. That hug lasted over a minute, and then she had to draw back with a giggle.

"I have to go."

"The bathroom's in the same place," her father said, wiping his own eyes. Doris moved off, finding the stairs and going up. Raymond Brown turned his attention to his guests.

"I, uh, I have lunch ready." He paused awkwardly. This wasn't a time for good manners or considered words. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

"That's okay." Sarah smiled her benign doctor's smile, the sort that told him that everything was all right, even though it wasn't, really. "But we need to talk. This is Sandy O'Toole, by the way. Sandy's a nurse, and she's more responsible for your daughter's recovery than I am."

"Hi," Sandy said, and handshakes were exchanged all around.

"Doris still needs a lot of help, Mr. Brown," Dr. Rosen said. "She's been through a really terrible time. Can we talk a little bit?"

"Yes, ma'am. Please, sit down. Can I get you anything?" he asked urgently.

"I've set your daughter up with a doctor at Pitt. Her name's Michelle Bryant. She's a psychiatrist—"

"You mean Doris is… sick?"

Sarah shook her head. “No, not really. But she’s been through a very bad time, and good medical attention will help her recover a lot faster. Do you understand?”

“Doc, I will do *anything* you tell me, okay? I’ve got all the medical insurance I need through the company.”

“Don’t worry about that. Michelle will handle this as a. matter of professional courtesy. You have to go there with Doris. Now, it is very important that you understand, she’s been through a really horrible experience. Terrible things. She’s going to get better—she’s going to recover fully, but you have to do your part. Michelle can explain all that better than I can. What I’m telling you, Mr. Brown, is this: no matter what awful things you learn, please—”

“Doc,” he interrupted softly, “that’s my little girl. She’s all I have, and I’m not going to… foul up and lose her again. I’d rather die.”

“Mr. Brown, that is exactly what we needed to hear.”

Kelly awoke at one in the morning, local time. The big slug of whiskey he’d downed along the way had blessedly not resulted in a hangover. In fact, he felt unusually rested. The gentle rocking of the ship had soothed his body during the day/night, and lying in the darkness of his officers’ accommodations he heard the gentle creaks of steel compressing and expanding as USS *Ogden* turned to port. He made his way to the shower, using cold water to wake himself up. In ten minutes he was dressed and presentable. It was time to explore the ship.

Warships never sleep. Though most work details were synchronized to daylight hours, the unbending watch cycle of the Navy meant that men were always moving about. No less than a hundred of the ship’s crew were always at their duty stations, and many others were circulating about the dimly lit passageways on their way to minor maintenance tasks. Others were lounging in the mess spaces, catching up on reading or letter-writing.

He was dressed in striped fatigues. There was a name tag that said *Clark*, but no badges of rank. In the eyes of the crew that made “Mr. Clark” a civilian, and already they were whispering that he was a CIA guy—to the natural accompaniment of James Bond jokes that evaporated on the sight of him. The sailors stood aside in the passageways as he wandered around, greeting him with respectful nods that he acknowledged, bemused to have officer status. Though only the Captain and Executive Officer knew what this mission was

all about, the sailors weren't dumb. You didn't send a ship all the way from 'Dago just to support a short platoon of Marines unless there was one hell of a good reason, and the bad-ass bunch that had come aboard looked like the sort to make John Wayne take a respectful step back.

Kelly found the flight deck. Three sailors were walking there, too. *Connie* was still on the horizon, still operating aircraft whose strobes blinked away against the stars. In a few minutes his eyes adapted to the darkness. There were destroyers present, a few thousand yards out. Aloft on *Ogden*, radar antennas turned to the hum of electric motors, but the dominating sound was the continuous broomlike swish of steel hull parting water.

"Jesus, it's pretty," he said, mainly to himself.

Kelly headed back into the superstructure and wandered forward and upwards until he found the Combat Information Center. Captain Franks was there, sleepless, as many captains tended to be.

"Feeling better?" the CO asked.

"Yes, sir." Kelly looked down at the plot, counting the ships in this formation, designated TF-77.1. Lots of radars were up and running, because North Vietnam had an air force and might someday try to do something really dumb.

"Which one's the AGI?"

"This is our Russian friend." Franks tapped the main display. "Doing the same thing we are. The Elint guys we have embarked are having a fine old time," the Captain went on. "Normally they go out on little ships. We're like the *Queen Mary* for them."

"Pretty big," Kelly agreed. "Seems real empty, too."

"Yep. Well, no scuffles to worry about, 'tween my kids and the Marine kids, I mean. You need to look at some charts? I have the whole package under lock in my cabin."

"Sounds like a good idea, Cap'n. Maybe some coffee, too?"

Franks's at-sea cabin was comfortable enough. A steward brought coffee and breakfast. Kelly unfolded the chart, again examining the river he'd be taking up.

"Nice and deep," Franks observed.

"As far as I need it to be," Kelly agreed, munching on some toast. "The objective's right here."

"Better you than me, my friend." Franks pulled a pair of dividers out of his pocket and walked off the distance.

"How long you been in this business?"

“Gator navy?” Franks laughed. “Well, they kicked my ass out of Annapolis in two and a half years. I wanted destroyers, so they gave me a first-flight LST. XO as a jaygee, would you believe? First landing was Pelileu. I had my own command for Okinawa. Then Inchon, Wonsan, Lebanon. I’ve scraped off a lot of paint on a lot of beaches. You think…?” he asked, looking up.

“We’re not here to fail, Captain.” Kelly had every twist of the river committed to memory, yet he continued to look at the chart, an exact copy of the one he’d studied at Quantico, looking for something new, finding nothing. He continued to stare at it anyway.

“You’re going in alone? Long swim, Mr. Clark,” Franks observed.

“I’ll have some help, and I don’t have to swim back, do I?”

“I suppose not. Sure will be nice to get those guys out.”

“Yes, sir.”

27

Insertion

Phase One of Operation BOXWOOD GREEN began just before dawn. The carrier USS *Constellation* reversed her southerly course at the transmission of a single code word. Two cruisers and six destroyers matched her turn to port, and the handles on nine different sets of engine-room enunciators were pushed down to the FULL setting. All of the various ships' boilers were fully on line already, and as the warships heeled to starboard, they also started accelerating. The maneuver caught the Russian AGI crew by surprise. They'd expected *Connie* to turn the other way, into the wind to commence flight operations, but unknown to them the carrier was standing down this morning and racing northeast. The intelligence-gathering trawler also altered course, increasing power on her own in the vain hope of soon catching up with the carrier task force. That left *Ogden* with two Adams-class missile-destroyer escorts, a sensible precaution after what had so recently happened to USS *Pueblo* off the Korean coast.

Captain Franks watched the Russian ship disappear an hour later. Two more hours passed, just to be sure. At eight that morning a pair of AH-1 Huey Cobras completed their lonely overwater flight from the Marine air base at Danang, landing on *Ogden*'s ample flight deck. The Russians might have wondered about the presence of two attack helicopters on the ship which, their intelligence reports confidently told them, was on an electronic-intelligence mission not unlike their own. Maintenance men already aboard immediately wheeled the "snakes" to a sheltered spot and began a complete maintenance check which would verify the condition of every component. Members of *Ogden*'s crew lit up their own machine

shop, and skilled chief machinist's mates offered everything they had to the new arrivals. They were still not briefed on the mission, but it was clear now that something most unusual indeed was under way. The time for questioning was over. Whatever the hell it was, every resource of their ship was made available even before officers troubled themselves to relay that order to their various divisions. Cobra gunships meant action, and every man aboard knew they were a hell of a lot closer to North Vietnam than South. Speculation was running wild, but not that wild. They had a spook team aboard, then Marines, now gunships, and more helicopters would land this afternoon. The Navy medical corpsmen aboard were told to open up the ship's hospital spaces for new arrivals.

"We're going to raid the fuckers," a bosun's mate third observed to his chief.

"Don't spread that one around," the twenty-eight-year veteran growled back.

"Who the fuck am I gonna tell, Boats? Hey, man, I'm for it, okay?"

What is my Navy coming to? the veteran of Leyte Gulf asked himself.

"You, you, you," the junior man called, pointing to some new seamen. "Let's do a FOD walkdown." That started a detailed examination of the flight deck, searching for any object that might get sucked into an engine intake. He turned back to the bosun. "With your permission, Boats."

"Carry on." *College boys,* the senior chief thought, *avoiding the draft.*

"And if I see anybody smoking out here, I'll tear him a new asshole!" the salty third-class told the new kids.

But the real action was in officers' country.

"A lot of routine stuff," the intelligence officer told his visitors.

"We've been working on their phone systems lately," Podulski explained. "It makes them use radios more."

"Clever," Kelly noted. "Traffic from the objective?"

"Some, and one last night was in Russian."

"That's the indicator we want!" the Admiral said at once. There was only one reason for a Russian to be at SENDER GREEN. "I hope we get that son of a bitch!"

"Sir," Albie promised with a smile, "if he's there, he's got."

Demeanors had changed again. Rested now, and close to the

objective, thoughts turned away from abstract dread and back into focus on the hard facts of the matter. Confidence had returned—leavened with caution and concern, but they *had* trained for this. They were now thinking of the things that would go right.

The latest set of photos had come aboard, taken by an RA-5 Vigilante that had screamed low over no less than three SAM sites to cover its interest in a minor and secret place. Kelly lifted the blowups.

"Still people in the towers."

"Guarding something," Albie agreed.

"No changes I see," Kelly went on. "Only one car. No trucks… nothing much in the immediate area. Gentlemen, it looks pretty normal to me."

"*Connie* will hold position forty miles off seaward. The medics cross-deck today. The command team arrives tomorrow, and the next day—" Franks looked across the table.

"I go swimming," Kelly said.

The film cassette sat, undeveloped, in a safe in the office of a section chief of the KGB's Washington Station, in turn part of the Soviet Embassy, just a few blocks up 16th Street from the White House. Once the palatial home of George Mortimer Pullman—it had been purchased by the government of Nikolay II—it contained both the second-oldest elevator and the largest espionage operation in the city. The volume of material generated by over a hundred trained field officers meant that not all the information that came in through the door was processed locally, and Captain Yegorov was sufficiently junior that his section chief didn't deem his information worthy of inspection. The cassette finally went into a small manila envelope which was sealed with wax, then found its way into the awkward canvas bag of a diplomatic courier who boarded a flight to Paris, flying first class courtesy of Air France. At Orly, eight hours later, the courier walked to catch an Aeroflot jet to Moscow, which developed into three and a half hours of pleasant conversation with a KGB security officer who was his official escort for this part of the journey. In addition to his official duties, the courier did quite well for himself by purchasing various consumer goods on his regular trips west. The current item of choice was pantyhose, two pairs of which went to the KGB escort.

Upon arriving in Moscow and walking past customs control, the

waiting car took him into the city, where the first stop was not the Foreign Ministry, but KGB Headquarters at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square. More than half the contents of the diplomatic pouch were handed over there, which included most of the flat pantyhose packages. Two more hours allowed the courier to find his family flat, a bottle of vodka, and some needed sleep.

The cassette landed on the desk of a KGB major. The identification chit told him which of his field force had originated it, and the desk officer filled out a form of his own, then called a subordinate to convey it to the photo lab for development. The lab, while large, was also quite busy today, and he'd have to wait a day, perhaps two, his lieutenant told him on returning. The Major nodded. Yegorov was a new though promising field officer, and was starting to develop an agent with interesting legislative connections, but it was expected that it would be a while before CASSIUS turned over anything of great importance.

Raymond Brown left the University of Pittsburgh Medical School struggling not to quiver with anger after their first visit to Dr. Bryant. It had actually gone quite well. Doris had explained many of the events of the preceding three years with a forthright if brittle voice, and throughout he'd held her hand to lend support, both physical and moral. Raymond Brown actually blamed himself for everything that had happened to his daughter. If only he'd controlled his temper that Friday night so long before—but he hadn't. It was done. He couldn't change things. He'd been a different person then. Now he was older and wiser, and so he controlled his rage on the walk to the car. This process was about the future, not the past. The psychiatrist had been very clear about that. He was determined to follow her guidance on everything.

Father and daughter had dinner at a quiet family restaurant—he'd never learned to cook well—and talked about the neighborhood, which of Doris's childhood friends were doing what, in a gentle exercise at catching up on things. Raymond kept his voice low, telling himself to smile a lot and let Doris do most of the talking. Every so often her voice would slow, and the hurt look would reappear. That was his cue to change the subject, to say something nice about her appearance, maybe relate a story from the shop. Most of all he had to be strong and steady for her. Over the ninety minutes of their first session with the doctor, he'd learned

that the things he'd feared for three years had indeed come to pass, and somehow he knew that other things as yet unspoken were even worse. He would have to tap on undiscovered resources to keep his anger in, but his little girl needed him to be a—a *rock*, he told himself. A great big rock that she could hold on to, as solid as the hills on which his city was built. She needed other things, too. She needed to rediscover God. The doctor had agreed with him about it, and Ray Brown was going to take care of it, with the help of his pastor, he promised himself, staring into his little girl's eyes.

It was good to be back at work. Sandy was running her floor again, her two-week absence written off by Sam Rosen as a special-duty assignment, which his status as a department chairman guaranteed would pass without question. The post-op patients were the usual collection of major and minor cases. Sandy's team organized and managed their care. Two of her fellow nurses asked a few questions about her absence. She answered merely by saying she'd done a special research project for Dr. Rosen, and that was enough, especially with a full and busy patient load. The other members of the nursing team saw that she was somewhat distracted. There was a distant look in her eyes from time to time, her thoughts elsewhere, dwelling on something. They didn't know what. Perhaps a man, they all hoped, glad to have the team leader back. Sandy was better at handling the surgeons than anyone else on the service, and with Professor Rosen backing her up, it made for a comfortable routine.

"So, you replace Billy and Rick yet?" Morello asked.

"That'll take a while, Eddie," Henry replied. "This is going to mess up our deliveries."

"Aw, crap! You got that too complicated anyway."

"Back off, Eddie," Tony Piaggi said. "Henry has a good routine set up. It's safe and it works—"

"And it's too complicated. Who's gonna take care of Philadelphia now?" Morello demanded.

"We're working on that," Tony answered.

"All you're doing is dropping the stuff off and collecting the money, for Crissake! They're not going to rip anybody off, we're dealing with *business* people, remember?" *Not street niggers*, he had the good sense not to add. That part of the message got across

anyway. *No offense, Henry.*

Piaggi refilled the wineglasses. It was a gesture Morello found both patronizing and irritating.

"Look," Morello said, leaning forward. "I helped set up this deal, remember? You might not even be starting with Philly yet if it wasn't for me."

"What are you saying, Eddie?"

"I'll make your damn delivery while Henry gets his shit back together. How hard is it? Shit, you got broads doing it for you!" *Show a little panache*, Morello thought, *show them I have what it takes.* Hell, at least he'd show the guys in Philly, and maybe they could do for him what Tony wouldn't do. Yeah.

"Sure you want to take the chance, Eddie?" Henry asked with an inward smile. This wop was so easy to predict.

"Fuck, yeah."

"Okay," Tony said with a display of being impressed. "You make the call and set it up." Henry was right, Piaggi told himself. It had been Eddie all along, making his own move. How foolish. How easily dealt with.

"Still nothing," Emmet Ryan said, summarizing the Invisible Man Case. "All this evidence—and nothing."

"Only thing that makes sense, Em, is somebody was making a move." Murders didn't just start and stop. There had to be a reason. The reason might be hard, even impossible to discover in many cases, but an organized and careful series of murders was a different story. It came down to two possibilities. One was that someone had launched a series of killings to cover the real target. That target had to be William Grayson, who had dropped from the face of the earth, probably never to return alive, and whose body might someday be discovered—or not. Somebody very angry about something, very careful, and very skilled, and that somebody—the Invisible Man—had taken it to that point and stopped there.

How likely was that? Ryan asked himself. The answer was impossible to evaluate, but somehow the start-stop sequence seemed far too arbitrary. Far too much buildup for a single, seemingly inconsequential target. Whatever Grayson had been, he hadn't been the boss of anyone's organization, and if the murders had been a planned sequence, his death simply was not a logical stopping place. At least, Ryan frowned, that was what his instincts

told him. He'd learned to trust those undefined inner feelings, as all cops do. And yet the killings *had* stopped. Three more pushers had died in the last few weeks; he and Douglas had visited every crime scene only to find that they'd been two quite ordinary robberies gone bad, with the third a turf fight that one had lost and another won. The Invisible Man was gone, or at least inactive, and that fact blew away the theory which had to him seemed the most sensible explanation for the killings, leaving only something far less satisfying.

The other possibility did make more sense, after a fashion. Someone had made a move on a drug ring as yet undiscovered by Mark Charon and his squad, eliminating pushers, doubtless encouraging them to switch allegiance to a new supplier. Under that construction, William Grayson had been somewhat more important in the great scheme of things—and perhaps there was another murder or two, as yet undiscovered, which had eliminated the command leadership of this notional ring. One more leap of imagination told Ryan that the ring taken down by the Invisible Man was the same he and Douglas had been chasing after, lo these many months. It all tied together in a very neat theoretical bundle.

But murders rarely did that. Real murder wasn't like a TV cop show. You never figured it all out. When you knew who, you might never really learn why, at least not in a way that really satisfied, and the problem with applying elegant theories to the real-life fact of death was that people didn't fit theories terribly well. Moreover, even if that model for the events of the past month were correct, it had to mean that a highly organized, ruthless, and deadly-efficient individual was now operating a criminal enterprise in Ryan's city, which wasn't exactly good news.

"Tom, I just don't buy it."

"Well, if he's your commando, why did he stop?" Douglas asked.

"Do I remember right? Aren't you the guy who came up with that idea?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So you're not helping your lieutenant very much, Sergeant."

"We have a nice weekend to think about it. Personally, I'm going to cut the grass and catch the double-header on Sunday, and pretend I'm just a regular citizen. Our friend is gone, Em. I don't know where, but he might as well be on the other side of the world. Best guess, somebody from out of town who came here on a job,

and he did the job, and now he's gone."

"Wait a minute!" That was a new theory entirely, a contract assassin right out of the movies, and those people simply did not exist. But Douglas just headed out of the office, ending the chance for a discussion that might have demonstrated that each of the detectives was half wrong and half right.

Weapons practice started under the watchful eyes of the command team, plus whatever sailors could find an excuse to come aft. The Marines told themselves that the two newly arrived admirals and the new CIA puke had to be as jet-lagged as they'd been upon arrival, not knowing that Maxwell, Greer, and Ritter had flown a VIP transport most of the way, taking the Pacific in easier hops, with drinks and comfortable seats.

Trash was tossed over the side, with the ship moving at a stately five knots. The Marines perforated the various blocks of wood and paper sacks in an exercise that was more a matter of entertainment for the crew than real training value. Kelly took his turn, controlling his CAR-15 with two- and three-round bursts, and hitting the target. When it was over the men safed their weapons and headed back to their quarters. A chief stopped Kelly as he was reentering the superstructure.

"You're the guy going in alone?"

"You're not supposed to know that."

The chief machinist's mate just chuckled. "Follow me, sir." They headed forward, diverting from the Marine detail and finding themselves in *Ogden*'s impressive machine shop. It had to be impressive, as it was designed not merely to service the ship herself, but also the needs of whatever mobile equipment might be embarked. On one of the worktables, Kelly saw the sea sled he'd be using to head up the river.

"We've had this aboard since San Diego, sir. Our chief electrician and I been playing with it. We've stripped it down, cleaned everything, checked the batteries—they're good ones, by the way. It's got new seals, so it oughta keep the water out. We even tested it in the well deck. The guarantee says five hours. Deacon and I worked on it. It's good for seven," the chief said with quiet pride. "I figured that might come in handy."

"It will, Chief. Thank you."

"Now let's see this gun." Kelly handed it over after a moment's

hesitation, and the chief started taking it apart. In fifteen seconds it was field-stripped, but the chief didn't stop there.

"Hold on!" Kelly snapped as the front-sight assembly came off.

"It's too noisy, sir. You *are* going in alone, right?"

"Yes, I am."

The machinist didn't even look up. "You want me to quiet this baby down or do you like to advertise?"

"You can't do that with a rifle."

"Says who? How far you figure you have to shoot?"

"Not more than a hundred yards, probably not that much. Hell, I don't even want to have to use it—"

"'Cuz it's noisy, right?" The chief smiled. "You want to watch me, sir? You're gonna learn something."

The chief walked the barrel over to a drill press. The proper bit was already in place, and under the watchful eyes of Kelly and two petty officers he drilled a series of holes in the forward six inches of the hollow steel rod.

"Now, you can't silence a supersonic bullet all the way, but what you can do is trap all the gas, and that'll surely help."

"Even for a high-power cartridge?"

"Gonzo, you all set up?"

"Yeah, Chief," a second-class named Gonzales replied. The rifle barrel went onto a lathe, which cut a shallow but lengthy series of threads.

"I already got this made up." The chief held up a can-type suppressor, fully three inches in diameter and fourteen inches long. It screwed nicely onto the end of the barrel. A gap in the can allowed reattachment of the front sights, which also locked the suppressor fully in place.

"How long did you work on this?"

"Three days, sir. When I looked over the arms we embarked, it wasn't hard to figure what you might need, and I had the spare time. So I played around some."

"But how the hell did you know I was going—"

"We're exchanging signals with a sub. How hard is all that to figure out?"

"How did you know that?" Kelly demanded, knowing the answer even so.

"Ever know a ship that had secrets? Captain's got a yeoman. Yeomen talk," the machinist explained, completing the reassembly

process. “It makes the weapon about six inches longer, I hope you don’t mind.”

Kelly shouldered the carbine. The balance was actually improved somewhat. He preferred a muzzle-heavy weapon since it made for better control.

“Very nice.” He had to try it out, of course. Kelly and the chief headed aft. Along the way the machinist got a discarded wooden box. On the fantail, Kelly slapped a full magazine into the carbine. The chief tossed the wood into the water and stepped back. Kelly shouldered the weapon and squeezed off his first round.

Pop. A moment later came the sound of the bullet hitting the wood, actually somewhat louder than the report of the cartridge. He’d also distinctly heard the working of the bolt mechanism. This chief machinist’s mate had done for a high-powered rifle what Kelly himself had done for a .22 pistol. The master craftsman smiled benignly.

“The only hard part’s making sure there’s enough gas to work the bolt. Try it full auto, sir.”

Kelly did that, rippling off six rounds. It still sounded like gunfire, but the actual noise generated was reduced by at least ninety-five percent, and that meant that no one could hear it beyond a couple hundred yards—as opposed to over a thousand for a normal rifle.

“*Good* job, Chief.”

“Whatever you’re up to, sir, you be careful, hear?” the chief suggested, walking off without another word.

“You bet,” Kelly told the water. He hefted the weapon a little more, and emptied the magazine at the wood before it grew too far off. The bullets converted the wooden box into splinters to the accompaniment of small white fountains of seawater.

You’re ready, John.

• • •

So was the weather, he learned a few minutes later. Perhaps the world’s most sophisticated weather-prediction service operated to support air operations over Vietnam—not that the pilots really appreciated or acknowledged it. The senior meteorologist had come across from *Constellation* with the admirals. He moved his hands across a chart of isobars and the latest satellite photo.

“The showers start tomorrow, and we can expect rain on and off for the next four days. Some heavy stuff. It’ll go on until this slow-

moving low-pressure area slides up north into China," the chief petty officer told them.

All of the officers were there. The four flight crews assigned to the mission evaluated this news soberly. Flying a helicopter in heavy weather wasn't exactly fun, and no aviator liked the idea of reduced visibility. But falling rain would also muffle the noise of the aircraft, and reduced visibility worked both ways. The main hazard that concerned them was light antiaircraft guns. Those were optically aimed, and anything that hindered the ability of the crews to hear and see their aircraft made for safety.

"Max winds?" a Cobra pilot asked.

"At worst, gusts to thirty-five or forty knots. It will be a little bumpy aloft, sir."

"Our main search radar is pretty good for weather surveillance. We can steer you around the worst of it," Captain Franks offered. The pilots nodded.

"Mr. Clark?" Admiral Greer asked.

"Rain sounds good to me. The only way they can spot me on the inbound leg is the bubbles I leave on the surface of the river. Rain'll break that up. It means I can move in daylight if I have to." Kelly paused, knowing that to go on would merely make the final commitment. "*Skate* ready for me?"

"Whenever we say so," Maxwell answered.

"Then it's 'go-mission' on my end, sir." Kelly could feel his skin go cold. It seemed to contract around his entire body, making him seem smaller somehow. But he'd said it anyway.

Eyes turned to Captain Albie, USMC. A vice admiral, two rear admirals, and an up-and-coming CIA field officer now depended on this young Marine to make the final decision. He would take the main force in. His was the ultimate operational responsibility. It seemed very strange indeed to the young captain that seven stars needed him to say "go," but twenty-five Marines and perhaps twenty others had their lives riding on his judgment. It was his mission to lead, and it had to be exactly right the first time. He looked over at Kelly and smiled.

"Mr. Clark, sir, you be real careful. I think it's time for your swim. This mission is 'go.'"

There was no exultation. In fact, every man around the chart table looked down at the maps, trying to convert the two-dimensional ink on paper into three-dimensional reality. Then the

eyes came up, almost simultaneously, and each pair read all the others. Maxwell spoke first to one of the helicopter crews.

"I guess you'd better get your helo warmed up." Maxwell turned. "Captain Franks, would you signal *Skate?*" Two crisp *aye aye, sirs* answered him, and the men stood erect, stepping back from the chart and their decision.

It was a little late for the sober pause, Kelly told himself. He put his fear aside as best he could and started focusing his mind on twenty men. It seemed so strange to risk his life for people he hadn't met, but then, risk of life wasn't supposed to be rational. His father had spent a lifetime doing it, and had lost his life in the successful rescue of two children. *If I can take pride in my dad*, he told himself, *then I can honor him best in this way.*

You can do it, man. You know how. He could feel the determination begin to take over. All the decisions were made. He was committed to action now. Kelly's face took a hard set. Dangers were no longer things to be feared, but to be dealt with. To be overcome.

Maxwell saw it. He'd seen the same thing in ready rooms on carriers, fellow pilots going through the mental preparations necessary before you tossed the dice, and the Admiral remembered how it had been for him, the way the muscles tense, how your eyesight suddenly becomes very sharp. First in, last out, just as his mission had often been, flying his F6F Hellcat to eliminate fighters and then cover the attack aircraft all the way home. *My second son*, was what Dutch suddenly told himself, *as brave as Sonny and just as smart.* But he'd never sent Sonny into danger personally, and Dutch was far older than he'd been at Okinawa. Somehow danger assigned to others was larger and more horrid than that which you assumed for yourself. But it had to be this way, and Maxwell knew that Kelly trusted him, as he in his time had trusted Pete Mitscher. That burden was a heavy one, all the more because he had to see the face he was sending into enemy territory, alone. Kelly caught the look from Maxwell, and his face changed into a knowing grin.

"Don't sweat it, sir." He walked out of the compartment to pack up his gear.

"You know, Dutch"—Admiral Podulski lit up a cigarette—"we could have used that lad, back a few years. I think he would have fit in just fine." It was far more than a "few" years, but Maxwell knew the truth of the statement. They'd been young warriors once,

and now was the time of the new generation.

"Cas, I just hope he's careful."

"He will be. Just like we were."

The sea sled was wheeled out to the flight deck by the men who had prepared it. The helicopter was up and running now, its five-bladed rotor turning in the pre-dawn darkness as Kelly walked through the watertight door. He took a deep breath before striding out. He'd never had an audience like this before. Irvin was there, along with three of the other senior Marine NCOs, and Albie, and the flag officers, and the Ritter guy, seeing him off like he was goddamned Miss America or something. But it was the two Navy chiefs who came up to him.

"Batteries are fully charged. Your gear's in the container. It's watertight, so no problems there, sir. The rifle is loaded and chambered in case you need it in a hurry, safety on. New batteries for all the radios, and two sets of spares. If there's anything else to do, I don't know what it is," the chief machinist's mate shouted over the sound of the helicopter engines.

"Sounds good to me!" Kelly shouted back.

"Kick ass, Mr. Clark!"

"See you in a few—and thanks!" Kelly shook hands with the two chiefs, then went to see Captain Franks. For comic effect he stood at attention and saluted. "Permission to leave the ship, sir."

Captain Franks returned it. "Permission granted, sir."

Then Kelly looked at all the rest. *First in, last out.* A half smile and a nod were sufficient gestures for the moment, and at this moment they took their courage from him.

The big Sikorsky rescue chopper lifted off a few feet. A crewman attached the sled to the bottom of the helo, and then it headed aft, out of the burble turbulence of *Ogden*'s superstructure, flying off into the darkness without strobes and disappearing in a matter of seconds.

USS *Skate* was an old-fashioned submarine, modified and developed from the first nuclear boat, USS *Nautilus.* Her hull was shaped almost like that of a real ship rather than a whale, which made her relatively slow underwater, but her twin screws made for greater maneuverability, especially in shallow water. For years *Skate* had drawn the duty of inshore intelligence ship, creeping close to the

Vietnamese coast and raising whip antennas to snoop on radar and other electronic emissions. She'd also put more than one swimmer on the beach. That included Kelly, several years before, though there was not a single member of that crew still aboard to remember his face. He saw her on the surface, a black shape darker than the water that glistened with the waning quarter moon soon to be hidden by clouds. The helicopter pilot first of all set the sled on *Skate*'s foredeck, where the sub's crew secured it in place. Then Kelly and his personal gear were lowered by hoist. A minute later he was in the sub's control room.

"Welcome aboard," Commander Silvio Esteves said, anticipating his first swimmer mission. He was not yet through his first year in command.

"Thank you, sir. How long to the beach?"

"Six hours, more until we scope things out for you. Coffee? Food?"

"How about a bed, sir?"

"Spare bunk in the XO's cabin. We'll see you're not disturbed." Which was a better deal than that accorded the technicians aboard from the National Security Agency.

Kelly headed forward to the last real rest he'd have for the next three days—if things went according to plan. He was asleep before the submarine dived back under the waters of the South China Sea.

"This is interesting," the Major said. He dropped the translation on the desk of his immediate superior, another major, but this one was on the Lieutenant Colonel's list.

"I've heard about this place. GRU is running the operation—trying to, I mean. Our fraternal socialist allies are not cooperating very well. So the Americans know about it at last, eh?"

"Keep reading, Yuriy Petravich," the junior man suggested.

"Indeed!" He looked up. "Who exactly is this CASSIUS fellow?" Yuriy had seen the name before, attached to a large quantity of minor information that had come through various sources within the American left.

"Glazov did the final recruitment only a short time ago." The Major explained on for a minute or so.

"Well, I'll take it to him, then. I'm surprised Georgiy Borissovich isn't running the case personally."

"I think he will now, Yuriy."

They knew something bad was about to happen. North Vietnam had a multitude of search radars arrayed along its coast. Their main purpose was to provide raid warning for incoming strikes from the aircraft carriers the. Americans had sailing on what they called Yankee Station, and the North Vietnamese called something else. Frequently the search radars were jammed, but not this badly. This time the jammer was so powerful as to turn the Russian-made screen into a circular mass of pure white. The operators leaned in more closely, looking for particularly bright dots that might denote real targets amid the jamming noise.

"Ship!" a voice called into the operations center. "Ship on the horizon." It was yet another case where the human eye outperformed radar.

If they were dumb enough to put their radars and guns on hilltops, that wasn't his lookout. The master chief firecontrolman was in "Spot 1," the forward fire-director tower that made the most graceful part of his ship's profile. His eyes were glued to the eyepieces of the long-base rangefinders, designed in the late 1930s and still as fine a piece of optical gear as America had ever produced. His hand turned a small wheel, which operated not unlike the focusing mechanism of a camera, bringing a split-image together. His focus was on the radar antenna, whose metal framework, not protected now with camouflage netting, made a nearly perfect aiming reference.

"Mark!"

The firecontrolman 2/c next to him keyed the microphone, reading the numbers off the dial. "Range One-Five-Two-Five-Zero."

In central fire-control, a hundred feet below Spot 1, mechanical computers accepted the data, telling the cruiser's eight guns how much to elevate. What happened next was simple enough. Already loaded, the guns rotated with their turrets, coming up to the proper angle of elevation calculated a generation earlier by scores of young women—now grandmothers—on mechanical calculators. On the computer, the cruiser's speed and course were already set, and since they were firing at a stationary target, it was assigned an identical but reversed velocity vector. In this way the guns would automatically remain locked on target.

"Commence firing," the gunnery officer commanded. A young sailor closed the firing keys, and USS *Newport News* shook with the

first salvo of the day.

"Okay, on azimuth, we're short by… three hundred…" the master chief said quietly, watching the fountains of dirt in the twenty-power rangefinders.

"Up three hundred!" the talker relayed, and the next salvo thundered off fifteen seconds later. He didn't know that the first salvo had inadvertently immolated the command bunker for the radar complex. The second salvo arced through the air. "This one does it," the master chief whispered.

It did. Three of the eight rounds landed within fifty yards of the radar antenna and shredded it.

"On target," he said over his own microphone, waiting for the dust to clear. "Target destroyed."

"Beats an airplane any day," the Captain said, observing from the bridge. He'd been a young gunnery officer on USS *Mississippi* twenty-five years earlier, and had learned shore-bombardment against live targets in the Western Pacific, as had his treasured master chief in Spot 1. This was sure to be the last hurrah for the Navy's real gunships, and the Captain was determined that it would be a loud one.

A moment later some splashes appeared a thousand yards off. These would be from 130mm long guns the NVA used to annoy the Navy. He would engage them before concentrating on triple-A sites.

"Counterbattery!" the skipper called to central fire-control.

"Aye, sir, we're on it." A minute later *Newport News* shifted fire, her rapid-fire guns searching for and finding the six 130s that really should have known better.

It was a diversion, the Captain knew. It had to be. Something was happening somewhere else. He didn't know what, but it had to be something good to allow him and his cruiser on the gunline north of the DMZ. Not that he minded, the CO said to himself, feeling his ship shudder yet again. Thirty seconds later a rapidly expanding orange cloud announced the demise of that gun battery.

"I got secondaries," the CO announced. The bridge crew hooted briefly, then settled back down to work.

"There you are." Captain Mason stepped back from the periscope.

"Pretty close." Kelly needed only one look to see that Esteves was a cowboy. *Skate* was scraping off barnacles. The periscope was barely above water, the water lapping at the lower half of the lens.

“I suppose that’ll do.”

“Good rainstorm topside,” Esteves said.

“‘Good’ is right.” Kelly finished off his coffee, the real Navy sort with salt thrown in. “I’m going to use it.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, sir.” Kelly nodded curtly. “Unless you plan to go in closer,” he added with a challenging grin.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have any wheels on the bottom or I might just try.” Esteves gestured him forward. “What’s this one about? I usually know.”

“Sir, I can’t say. Tell you this, though: if it works, you’ll find out.” That would have to do, and Esteves understood.

“Then you better get ready.”

As warm as the waters were, Kelly still had to worry about the cold. Eight hours in water with only a small temperature differential could sap the energy from his body like a short-circuited battery. He worked his way into a green-and-black neoprene wet suit, adding double the normal amount of weight belts. Alone in the executive officer’s stateroom, he had his last sober pause, beseeching God to help not himself, but the men whom he was trying to rescue. It seemed a strange thing to pray, Kelly thought, after what he’d done so recently yet so far away, and he took the time to ask forgiveness for anything wrong he might have done, still wondering if he had transgressed or not. It was a time for that sort of reflection, but only briefly. He had to look forward now. Maybe God would help him to rescue Colonel Zacharias, but he had to do his part, too. Kelly’s last thought before leaving the stateroom was of the photo of a lonely American about to be clubbed from behind by some little NVA fuck. It was time to put an end to that, he told himself, opening the door.

“Escape trunk’s this way,” Esteves said.

Kelly climbed up the ladder, watched by Esteves and perhaps six or seven other men of *Skate*.

“Make sure we find out,” the Captain said, levering the hatch shut himself.

“I’ll sure as hell try,” Kelly replied, just as the metal fitting locked into place. There was an aqualung waiting for him. The gauge read full, Kelly saw, checking it again himself. He lifted the waterproof phone.

“Clark here. In the trunk, ready to go.”

“Sonar reports nothing except heavy rain on the surface. Visual search is negative. *Vaya con dios*, Señor Clark.”

“Gracias,” Kelly chuckled his reply. He replaced the phone and opened the flooding valve. Water entered the bottom of the compartment, the air pressure changing suddenly in the cramped space.

Kelly checked his watch. It was eight-sixteen when he cracked the hatch and pulled himself to the submerged foredeck of USS *Skate.* He used a light to illuminate the sea sled. It was tied down at four points, but before loosing it he clipped a safety line to his belt. It wouldn’t do to have the thing motor off without him. The depth gauge read forty-nine feet. The submarine *was* in dangerously shallow water, and the sooner he got away the sooner her crew would be safe again. Unclipping the sled, he flipped the power switch, and two shrouded propellers started turning slowly. Good. Kelly pulled the knife from his belt and banged it twice on the deck, then adjusted the flippers on the sled and headed off, on a compass course of three-zero-eight.

There was now no turning back, Kelly told himself. But for him there rarely was.

28

First In

It was just as well that he couldn't smell the water. At least not at first. Few things can be as unnerving or disorienting as swimming underwater at night. Fortunately the people who'd designed the sled were divers themselves, and knew that. The sled was slightly longer than Kelly was tall. It was, in fact, a modified torpedo with attachments allowing a man to steer it and control its speed, essentially making it a minisubmarine, though in appearance it was more like an aircraft drawn by a child. The "wings"—actually referred to as flippers—were controlled by hand. There was a depth gauge and an up/down-angle indicator, along with a battery-strength gauge and the vital magnetic compass. The electric motor and batteries had originally been designed to drive the shape through the water at high speed for over ten thousand yards. At lower speeds it could go much farther. In this case, it had five-to-six-hour endurance at five knots—more if the craftsmen aboard *Ogden* were right.

It was strangely like flying over in the C-141. The whirring of the twin props couldn't be heard any great distance, but Kelly was a mere six feet from them; the steady high-speed whine was already making him grimace inside his diving mask. Part of that was all the coffee he'd drunk. He had to stay nervously alert, and he had enough caffeine in him to enliven a corpse. So many things to worry about. There was boat traffic on the river. Whether it was ferrying triple-A ammo from one bank of the river to another or perhaps the Vietnamese version of a teenybopper crossing to see his girlfriend, there were small boats here. Running into one could be lethal in one of several ways, differing only in immediacy, not the

final outcome. Perversely, visibility was almost nil, and so Kelly had to assume that he'd have no more than two or three seconds to avoid something. He held to the middle of the channel as best he could. Every thirty minutes he'd slow down and ease his head above the surface for a position fix. There was no activity at all he could see. This country didn't have much in the way of electrical power stations anymore, and without lights by which to read or perhaps power radios, life for the ordinary people was as primitive as it was brutish for their enemies. It was all vaguely sad. Kelly didn't think that the Vietnamese people were any more innately warlike than any other, but there was a war here, and their behavior, as he had seen, fell short of exemplary. He took his fix and headed down again, careful not to go deeper than ten feet. He'd heard of a case of a diver who'd died while making an overly rapid ascent after being pressurized for a few hours at *fifteen* feet, and he had no desire at all to relive it himself.

Time crept by. Every so often the overhead clouds would thin out, and the light of the quarter moon would give definition to the raindrops on the surface of the river, fragile black circles expanding and disappearing on the ghostly blue screen ten feet above his head. Then the clouds would thicken again, and all he'd see was a dark gray roof, and the sound of the falling drops would compete with the infernal whirring of the props. Another danger was hallucination. Kelly had an active mind, and he was now in an environment devoid of input. Worse, his body was being lulled. He was in a nearly weightless state, rather like it must have been in the womb, and the sheer comfort of the experience was dangerous. His mind might react by dreaming, and he couldn't have that. Kelly developed a routine, sweeping his eyes over the rudimentary instruments, playing little games, like trying to hold his craft exactly level without using the angle indicator—but that proved impossible. What pilots called vertigo happened even more quickly here than in the air, and he found that he couldn't manage it for more than fifteen or twenty seconds before he started to tilt and go deeper. Every so often he'd do a complete roll, just for the difference of it, but mainly he cycled his eyes to the water and back to the instruments, repeating the process again and again, until that also became dangerously monotonous. Only two hours into the passage, Kelly had to tell himself to concentrate—but he couldn't concentrate on just one thing, or even two. Comfortable as he was,

every human being within a five-mile radius would wish nothing better than to end his life. Those people lived here, knew the land and the river, knew the sounds and the sights. And theirs was a country at war, where the unusual meant the dangerous, and the enemy. Kelly didn't know if the government paid bounty for dead or live Americans, but something like that must have been operating. People worked harder for a reward, especially one that coincided with patriotism. Kelly wondered how it had all happened. Not that it mattered. These people were enemies. Nothing would soon change that. Certainly not in the next three days, which was as far as the future went for Kelly. If there were to be anything beyond it, he had to pretend that there was not.

His next programmed halt was at a meandering horseshoe bend. Kelly slowed the sled and lifted his head carefully. Noise on the north bank, perhaps three hundred yards. It carried across the water. Male voices speaking in the language whose lilts had somehow always sounded poetic to him—but quickly turned ugly when the content was anger. Like the people, he supposed, listening for perhaps ten seconds. He took the sled back down, watching the course change on the compass as he followed the sweeping bend. What a strange intimacy that had been, if only for a few seconds. What were they talking about? Politics? Boring subject in a Communist country. Farming, perhaps? Talk of the war? Perhaps, for the voices were subdued. America was killing enough of this country's young men that they had reason to hate us, Kelly thought, and the loss of a son could be little different here than at home. They might talk to others about their pride for the little boy gone off to be a soldier—fried in napalm, dismembered by a machine gun, or turned to vapor by a bomb; the stories had to come back one way or another, even as lies, which amounted to the same thing—but in every case it must have been a child who'd taken a first step and said "daddy" in his native tongue. But some of the same children had grown up to follow PLASTIC FLOWER, and he did not regret killing them. The talk he'd heard sounded human enough, even if he couldn't understand it, and then came the casual question, What made them different?

They are *different, asshole! Let the politicians worry about why.* Asking those kinds of questions distracted him from the fact that there were twenty people like Kelly up the river. He swore in his mind and concentrated again on driving the sled.

Few things distracted Pastor Charles Meyer from the preparation of his weekly sermons. It was perhaps the most important part of his ministry, telling people what they needed to hear in a clear, concise manner, because his flock saw him only once a week unless something went wrong—and when something went badly wrong they needed the foundation of faith already in place if his special attention and counsel were to be truly effective. Meyer had been a minister for thirty years, all of his adult life, and the natural eloquence that was one of his true gifts had been polished by years of practice to the point where he could choose a Scripture passage and develop it into a finely focused lesson in morality. The Reverend Meyer was not a stern man. His message of faith was that of mercy and love. He was quick to smile and to joke, and though his sermons were of necessity a serious business, for salvation was the most serious of human goals, it was his task, he thought, to emphasize God's true nature. Love. Mercy. Charity. Redemption. His entire life, Meyer thought, was dedicated to helping people return after a bout of forgetfulness, to embrace despite rejection. A task as important as that was worth a diversion of his time.

"Welcome back, Doris," Meyer said as he entered Ray Brown's house. A man of medium height, his thick head of gray hair gave him a stately and learned appearance. He took both her hands in his, smiling warmly. "Our prayers are answered."

For all his pleasant and supportive demeanor, this would be an awkward meeting for all three participants. Doris had erred, probably rather badly, he thought. Meyer recognized that, trying not to dwell on it in a punitive way. The really important thing was that the prodigal had returned, and if Jesus had spent His time on earth for any reason, that parable contained it all in just a few verses. All of Christianity in a single story. No matter how grave one's misdeeds might be, there would always be a welcome for those with the courage to return.

Father and daughter sat together on the old blue sofa, with Meyer to their left in an armchair. Three cups of tea were on the low table. Tea was the proper drink for a moment like this.

"I'm surprised how good you look, Doris." He smiled, concealing his desperate desire to put the girl at ease.

"Thank you, Pastor."

"It's been hard, hasn't it?"

Her voice became brittle. "Yes."

“Doris, we all make mistakes. God made us imperfect. You have to accept that, and you have to try to do better all the time. We don’t always succeed—but you *did* succeed. You’re back now. The bad things are behind you, and with a little work you can leave them behind you forever.”

“I will,” she said with determination. “I really will. I’ve seen… and done… such awful things.…”

Meyer was a difficult man to shock. Clergymen were in the profession of listening to stories about the reality of hell, because sinners could not accept forgiveness until they were able to forgive themselves, a task which always required a sympathetic ear and a calm voice of love and reason. But what he heard now did shock him. He tried to freeze his body into place. Above all he tried to remember that what he heard was indeed *behind* his afflicted parishioner as over the course of twenty minutes he learned of things that even he had never dreamed of, things from another time, since his service as a young Army chaplain in Europe. There was a devil in creation, something for which his Faith had prepared him, but the face of Lucifer was not for unprotected eyes of men—certainly not for the eyes of a young girl whom an angry father had mistakenly driven away at a young and vulnerable age.

It only got worse. Prostitution was frightening enough. What damage it did to young women could last a lifetime, and he was grateful to learn that Doris was seeing Dr. Bryant, a wonderfully gifted physician to whom he’d referred two of his flock. For several minutes he shared Doris’s pain and shame while her father bravely held her hand, fighting back his own tears.

Then it turned to drugs, first the use of them, then the transfer of them to other, evil men. She was honest through it all, trembling, with tears dripping from her eyes, facing a past to make the strongest of hearts quail. Next came the recounting of sexual abuse, and, finally, the worst part of all.

It became very real to Pastor Meyer. Doris seemed to remember it all—as well she might. It would take all of Dr. Bryant’s skills to drive this horror into the past. She told the story in the manner of a motion picture, seemingly leaving nothing out. That was a healthy thing, to put it all in the open in this way. Healthy for Doris. Even healthy for her father. But Charles Meyer necessarily became the recipient of the horror that others were attempting to cast away. Lives had been lost. Innocent lives—victims’ lives, two girls not

unlike the one before him, murdered in a way worthy of… damnation, the pastor told himself in a voice of sadness mixed with rage.

"The kindness you showed to Pam, my dear, that is one of the most courageous things I've ever heard," the pastor said quietly, after it was all over, moved nearly to tears himself. "That was God, Doris. That was God acting through your hands and showing you the goodness of your character."

"You think so?" she asked, bursting then into uncontrolled tears.

He had to move then, and he did, kneeling in front of father and daughter, taking their hands in his. "God visited you, and saved you, Doris. Your father and I prayed for this moment. You've come back, and you won't ever do things like that again." Pastor Meyer couldn't know what he hadn't been told, the things that Doris had deliberately left out. He knew that a Baltimore physician and nurse had restored his parishioner to physical health. He didn't know how Doris had come to that point, and Meyer assumed that she'd escaped, as the girl Pam had almost done. Nor did he know that Dr. Bryant had been warned to keep all of this information close. That might not have mattered in any case. There were other girls still in the control of this Billy person and his friend Rick. As he had dedicated his life to denying souls to Lucifer, so also he had a duty to deny their bodies to him. He had to be careful. A conversation like this one was privileged in the ultimate sense. He would counsel Doris to speak with the police, though he could never force her to do so. But as a citizen, as a man of God, he had to do *something* to help those other girls. Exactly what, he wasn't sure. He'd ask his son about that, a young sergeant with the Pittsburgh city police force.

There. Kelly's head was above the water only enough to expose his eyes. He reached up with his hands to pull the rubber hood off his head, allowing his ears better access to the sounds of the area. There was all manner of noise. Insects, the flapping of bats, and loudest of all the rain that was sprinkling lightly at the moment. To his north was darkness that his acclimated eyes began to break into shapes. There was "his" hilltop, a mile away past another, lower hill. He knew from the aerial photographs that there were no habitations between where he was and where he had to go. There was a road only a hundred yards away, and at the moment it was totally vacant. So quiet it was that any mechanical sound would

surely have reached him. There was none. It was time.

Kelly steered the sled close to the bank. He selected a place with overhanging trees for the additional concealment. His first physical contact with the soil of North Vietnam had an electric feel to it. That soon passed. Kelly stripped off the wet suit, stuffing it in the waterproof container on the now surfaced sled. He quickly donned his camouflage fatigues. The jungle boots had soles copied from the NVA's in case anyone spotted tracks that looked out of the ordinary. Next he did his camouflage makeup, dark green on forehead and cheekbones and jaw, with lighter colors under his eyes and in the hollow of his cheeks. Shouldering his gear, he flipped the power switch on the sled. It motored off towards the middle of the river, its flotation chambers vented now, sinking it to the bottom. Kelly made an effort not to watch it hum away. It was bad luck, he remembered, to watch the helicopter fly away from the LZ. It showed lack of purpose. Kelly turned to the land, listening again for traffic on the road. Hearing none, he climbed the bank and crossed the gravel path immediately, disappearing at once into the thick foliage, moving slowly and deliberately up the first hill.

People cut wood here for cooking fires. That was disturbing—might people be out cutting tomorrow?—but helpful, too, as it allowed him to make his way more quickly and more quietly. He walked in a tense crouch, careful where he placed his feet, his eyes and ears sweeping around constantly as he moved. His carbine was in his hands. His thumb felt the selector switch, in the "safe" position. A round was chambered. He'd already checked that. The Navy chief had prepared the weapon properly and would understand that Kelly had needed to verify it visually, but if there was any one thing Kelly did not wish to do, it was to fire a single round from his CAR-15.

Climbing the first hill took half an hour. Kelly stopped there, finding a clear spot from which to look and listen. It was approaching three in the morning, local time. The only people awake were those who had to be, and they wouldn't like it very much. The human body was linked to a day/night cycle, and at this time of the morning bodily functions ebbed.

Nothing.

Kelly moved on, going down the hill. At the bottom was a small stream that fed into the river. He took the opportunity to fill one of his canteens, dropping in a purification tablet as he did so. Again he

listened, since sound followed nicely down valleys and over streams. Still nothing. He looked up as "his" hill, a gray mass under the cloudy sky. The rain was picking up as Kelly started his climb. Fewer trees had been cut here, which made sense, as the road didn't come all that close. This area was a little steep for proper farming, and with good bottomland so close by, he felt he could depend on a minimum of visitors. Probably that's why SENDER GREEN had been placed here, he told himself. There was nothing around to attract serious attention. That would cut both ways.

Halfway up, his eyes got their first look at the prison camp. It was an open space amidst forest. He didn't know if the area had started off as a meadow or if the trees had been cut for one reason or another. A branch of the river road came straight in from the other side of "his" hill. Kelly saw a flare of light from one of the guard towers—someone with a cigarette, no doubt. Didn't people ever learn? It could take hours to get your night vision really working, and just that much could ruin it. Kelly looked away, concentrating on the remainder of his climb, moving around bushes, seeking open spots where his uniform wouldn't rub against branches and leaves, making deadly noise. It almost came as a surprise when he reached the top.

He sat down for a moment, making himself totally still, looking and listening some more before he began his examination of the camp. He found a very good spot, perhaps twenty feet below the crest. The far side of the hill was steep, and a casual climber would make noise. In this place he wouldn't be skylined to an observer below. His place was within the shroud of bushes to break up whatever outline he might present. This was his place on his hill. He reached in his vest and pulled out one of his radios.

"SNAKE calling CRICKET, over."

"SNAKE, this is CRICKET, reading you five by five," one of the communicators replied inside the commo van parked on *Ogden*'s deck.

"In place, beginning surveillance. Over."

"Copy that. Out." He looked up at Admiral Maxwell. Phase Two of BOXWOOD GREEN was now complete.

Phase Three began at once. Kelly took the marine 7 x 50 binoculars from their case and began examining the camp. There were guards in all four towers, two of them smoking. That had to mean their

officer was asleep. The NVA had adamantine discipline and punished transgressions harshly—death was not an uncommon price for even a minor offense. There was a single automobile present, parked as expected near the building which had to house the officers at this compound. There were no lights at all, and no sounds. Kelly rubbed the rain from his eyes and checked the focus on both eyepieces before he commenced his survey. In a strange way it was like being back at Quantico Marine Base. The similarity of angle and perspective was uncanny. There seemed to be some minor differences in the buildings, but it could be the dark causing that, or perhaps a slight change in color. No, he realized. It was the courtyard, parade ground—whatever he was supposed to call it. There was no grass there. The surface was flat and bare, just the red clay of this region. The different color and lack of texture gave the buildings a subtly different setting. Different roofing materials, but the same slope. It *was* like being at Quantico, and with luck the battle would be as successful as the drills. Kelly settled in, allowing himself a sip of water. It had the distilled tastelessness of what they made on the submarine, clean and foreign, as he was in this alien place.

At quarter to four he saw some lights in the barracks, flickering yellow, like candles. Guard change, perhaps. The two soldiers in the tower nearest him were stretching, chatting to each other casually. Kelly could barely make out the murmur of conversation but not the words or cadence. They were bored. This would be that sort of duty. They might grouse about it, but not that badly. The alternative would be a stroll down the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos, and, patriotic though they might have been, only a fool would relish that thought. Here they kept watch on twenty or so men, locked in individual cells, perhaps chained to walls or otherwise hobbled, with as much chance of escaping the camp as Kelly had of walking on water—and even if they succeeded in that most impossible of feats, what would they be? Six-foot-tall white men in a land of small yellow people, none of whom would lift a hand on their behalf. Alcatraz Federal Prison could be no more secure than this. So the guards had three squares a day and quiet boring duty that would dull their senses.

Good news, Kelly told himself. *Stay bored, guys.*

The barracks doors opened. Eight men came out. No NCO in charge of the detail. That was interesting, surprisingly casual for the

NVA. They broke into pairs, each heading for a tower. In each case the relief crew climbed up before the duty crew came down, which was to be expected. A few remarks were exchanged, and the soldiers going off duty climbed down. Two lit up before heading back in the barracks, speaking to each other at the entrance. It was all in all a comfortable and grossly normal routine conducted by men who'd been doing the same thing for months.

Wait. Two of them limped, Kelly realized. *Veterans.* That was good news and bad news. People with combat experience were simply different. The time would come for action, and they'd react well, probably. Even without recent training, instincts would kick in, and they'd try to fight back effectively even without leadership—but as veterans they'd also be softer, disdainful of their duty, however cushy it might be, lacking the awkward eagerness of fresh young troops. As with all swords, that one cut in two directions. In either case, the plan of attack allowed for it. Kill people without warning, and their training was a moot point, which made it a hell of a lot safer.

Anyway, that was one wrong assumption. Troops on POW-guard duty were usually second-raters. These at least were combat troops, even if they had sustained wounds that relegated them to backup service. Any other mistakes? Kelly wondered. He couldn't see any yet.

His first substantive radio message was a single code group which he tapped out using Morse Code.

"EASY SPOT, sir." The communications technicians tapped out an acknowledgment.

"Good news?" Captain Franks asked.

"It means everything is as expected, no major news," Admiral Podulski replied. Maxwell was catching a nap. Cas wouldn't sleep until the mission was concluded. "Our friend Clark even delivered it exactly on time."

Colonel Glazov didn't like working on weekends any more than his Western counterparts, even less so when it was because his administrative assistant had made a mistake and set this report on the wrong pile. At least the boy had admitted it, and called his boss at home to report his error. He couldn't very well do much more than chide the oversight, at the same time he had to praise the lad's

honesty and sense of duty. He drove his personal car into Moscow from his dacha, found a parking place in the rear of the building, and submitted himself to the tiresome security-clearance procedures before taking the elevator up. Then came the necessity of unlocking his office and sending for the right documents from Central Files, which also took longer than usual on this weekend day. All in all, just getting to the point at which he could examine the damned thing required two hours from the unwelcome phone call that had started the process. The Colonel signed for the documents and watched the file clerk depart.

"Bloody hell," the Colonel said in English, finally alone in his fourth-floor office. CASSIUS had a friend in the White House National Security Office? No wonder some of his information had been so good—good enough to force Georgiy Borissovich to fly to London to consummate the recruitment. The senior KGB officer now had to chide himself. CASSIUS had kept that bit of information up his sleeve, perhaps in the knowledge that he'd rattle his ultimate control officer. The case officer, Captain Yegorov, had taken it in stride—as well he might—and described the first-contact meeting in exquisite detail.

"BOXWOOD GREEN," Glazov said. Just a code name for the operation, selected for no particular reason, as the Americans did. The next question was whether or not to forward the data to the Vietnamese. That would be a political decision, and one to be made quickly. The Colonel lifted the phone and dialed his most immediate superior, who was also at home and instantly in a foul humor.

Sunrise was an equivocal thing. The color of the clouds changed from the gray of slate to the gray of smoke as somewhere aloft the sun made its presence known, though that would not be the case here until the low-pressure area had passed north into China—or so the weather briefing had declared. Kelly checked his watch, making his mental notes at every point. The guard force was forty-four men, plus four officers—and maybe a cook or two. All except the eight on tower duty formed up just after dawn for calisthenics. Many had trouble doing their morning exercises, and one of the officers, a senior lieutenant from his shoulder boards, hobbled around with a cane—probably a bad arm, too, from the way he used it. *What got you?* Kelly wondered. A crippled and foul-tempered NCO walked

the lines of soldiers, swearing at them in a way that showed long months of practice. Through his binoculars Kelly watched the expressions that trailed behind the little bastard's back. It gave the NVA guards a human quality that he didn't welcome.

Morning exercise lasted half an hour. When it ended, the soldiers headed off for morning chow, falling out in a decidedly casual and unmilitary way. The tower guards spent most of their time looking in, as expected, most often leaning on their elbows. Their weapons were probably not chambered, a sensible safety precaution that would count against them either this night or the next, depending on weather. Kelly made another check of his surroundings. It would not do for him to fix too closely on the objective. He wouldn't move about now, not even in the gray daylight that had come with the morning, but he could turn his head to look and listen. Catching the patterns of bird calls, getting used to it so that a change would register at once. He had a green cloth across the muzzle of his weapon, a floppy hat to break up the outline of his head within and behind the bush, and facial camouflage paint, all of which conspired to make him invisible, part of this warm, humid environment that—*I mean*, why *do people fight for the damned place?* he wondered. Already he could feel bugs on his skin. The worst of them were put off by the unscented repellent he'd spread around. But not all, and the feel of things crawling on him combined with the knowledge that he couldn't make any rapid moves. There were no small risks in a place like this. He'd forgotten so much. Training was good and valuable, but it never quite made it all the way to full preparation. There was no substitute for the actual dangers involved, the slightly increased heart rate that could tire you out even when you lay still. You never quite forgot it, but you never really remembered it all, either.

Food, nourishment, strength. He reached into a pocket, moving his hand slowly and withdrawing a pair of food bars. Nothing he'd eat by choice in any other place, but it was vital now. He tore off the plastic wrappers with his teeth and chewed the bars up slowly. The strength they imparted to his body was probably as much psychological as real, but both factors had their uses, as his body had to deal with both fatigue and stress.

At eight, the guard cycle changed again. Those relieved from the towers went in for chow. Two men took posts at the gate, bored before they got there, looking out at the road for traffic that would

probably never come to this backwater camp. Some work details formed, and the jobs they performed were as clearly useless to Kelly as to those who carried them out in a stoic, unhurried way.

Colonel Grishanov arose just after eight. He'd been up late the night before, and though he'd planned to arise earlier, he'd just learned to his displeasure that his mechanical alarm clock had finally given up the ghost, corroded to death by the miserable climate. Eight-ten, he saw, looking at his aviator's watch. *Damn.* No morning run. It would soon be too hot for that, and besides, it looked like it would be raining all day. He brewed his own pot of tea over a small army-type cook stove. No morning paper to read—again. No news of the football scores. No review of a new ballet production. Nothing at all in this miserable place to distract him. Important as his duty was, he needed distraction as much as any man did. Not even decent plumbing. He was used to all of that, but it didn't help. God, to be able to go home, to hear people speaking his native language again, to be in a cultured place where there was something to talk about. Grishanov frowned in the shaving mirror. Months more to go, and he was grumbling like a private soldier, a damned recruit. He was supposed to know better.

His uniform needed pressing. The humidity here attacked the cotton fibers, making his usually crisp blouse look like pajamas, and he was already on his third set of shoes, Grishanov thought, sipping now at his tea and going over notes from the previous night's interrogations. All work and no play… and he was already late. He tried to light a cigarette, but the humidity had also rendered his matches useless. Well, he had the cookstove for that. Where had he left his lighter…?

There were compensations, if you could call them that. The Vietnamese soldiers treated him with respect, almost awe—except for the camp commander, Major Vinh, worthless bastard that he was. Courtesy to a fellow socialist ally demanded that Grishanov be given an orderly, in this case a small, ignorant peasant boy with only one eye who was able to make the bed and carry out the slops bowl every morning. The Colonel was able to walk out in the knowledge that his room would be somewhat tidy when he returned. And he had his work. Important, professionally stimulating. But he would have killed for his morning *Sovietskiy Sport.*

“Good morning, Ivan,” Kelly whispered to himself. He didn’t even need the binoculars for that. The size was so different—the man was over six feet—and the uniform far neater than that worn by the NVA. The glasses showed Kelly the man’s face, pale with a narrowed-eye expression to contemplate the day. He made a gesture to a small private who’d been waiting outside the door of the officers’ quarters. *Orderly*, Kelly thought. A visiting Russian colonel would like his comforts, wouldn’t he? Definitely a pilot from the wings over the blouse pocket, plenty of ribbons. *Only one?* Kelly wondered. *Only one Russian officer to help torture the prisoners? Odd when you think about it.* But that meant only one extraneous person to have to kill, and for all his lack of political sophistication, Kelly knew that killing Russians wouldn’t do anyone much good. He watched the Russian walk across the parade ground. Then the senior visible Vietnamese officer, a major, went towards him. Another limper, Kelly saw. The little Major saluted the tall Colonel.

“Good morning, Comrade Colonel.”

“Good morning, Major Vinh.” *Little bastard can’t even learn to salute properly. Perhaps he simply cannot make a proper gesture to his betters.* “The rations for the prisoners?”

“They will have to be satisfied with what they have,” the smaller man replied in badly accented and phrased Russian.

“Major, it is important that you understand me,” Grishanov said, stepping closer so that he could look more sharply down at the Vietnamese. “I need the information they have. I cannot get it if they are too sick to speak.”

“*Tovarich*, we have problems enough feeding our own people. You ask us to waste good food on murderers?” The Vietnamese soldier responded quietly, using a tone that both conveyed his contempt for the foreigner and at the same time seemed respectful to his soldiers, who would not have understood exactly what this was all about. After all, they thought that the Russians were fast allies.

“*Your* people do not have what my country needs, Major. And if *my* country gets what she needs, then *your* country might get more of what *it* needs.”

“I have my orders. If you are experiencing difficulty in questioning the Americans, then I am prepared to help.” *Arrogant dog.* It was a suffix that didn’t need to be spoken, and Vinh knew

how to stick his needle into a sensitive place.

"Thank you, Major. That will not be necessary." Grishanov made a salute himself, even sloppier than that given him by this annoying little man. It would be good to watch him die, the Russian thought, walking off to the prison block. His first "appointment" with the day was with an American naval aviator who was just about ready to crack.

Casual enough, Kelly thought from several hundred yards away. *Those two must get along fairly well.* His scrutiny of the camp was relaxed now. His greatest fear was that the guard force might send out security patrols, as a line unit in hostile country would surely have done. But they were not in hostile territory, and this was not really a line unit. His next radio message to *Ogden* confirmed that everything was within acceptable risk limits.

Sergeant Peter Meyer smoked. His father didn't approve, but accepted his son's weakness so long as he did it outside, as they were now, on the back porch of the parsonage after Sunday evening dinner.

"It's Doris Brown, right?" Peter asked. At twenty-six he was one of his department's youngest sergeants, and like most of the current class of police officers a Vietnam veteran. He was within six credit hours of completing his night-school degree and was considering making an application to the FBI Academy. Word that the wayward girl had returned was now circulating through the neighborhood. "I remember her. She had a reputation as a hot number a few years back."

"Peter, you know I can't say. This is a pastoral matter. I will counsel the person to speak to you when the time is right, but—"

"Pop, I understand the law on that, okay? You have to understand, we're talking two homicides here. Two dead people, plus the drug business." He flipped the butt of his Salem into the grass. "That's pretty heavy stuff, Pop."

"Even worse than that," his father reported more quietly still. "They don't just kill the girls. Torture, sexual abuse. It's pretty horrible. The person is seeing a doctor about it. I know I have to do something, but I can't—"

"Yeah, I know you can't. Okay, I can call the people in Baltimore and fill them in on what you've told me. I really ought to hold off

until we can give them something they can really use, but, well, like you say, we have to do something. I'll call down first thing tomorrow morning."

"Will it put her—the person—in danger?" the Reverend Meyer asked, vexed with himself for the slip.

"Shouldn't," Peter judged. "If she's gotten herself away—I mean, they ought not to know where she is, and if they did, they might have got her already."

"How can people do things like that?"

Peter lit up another. His father was just too good a man to understand. Not that he did either. "Pop, I see it all the time, and I have trouble believing it, too. The important part's getting the bastards."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

The KGB *rezident* in Hanoi had General-Major rank, and his job was mainly that of spying on his country's putative allies. What were their real objectives? Was their supposed estrangement with China real or a sham? Would they cooperate with the Soviet Union when and if the war came to a successful conclusion? Might they allow the Soviet Navy use of a base after the Americans left? Was their political determination really as solid as they said it was? Those were all questions whose answers he thought he had, but orders from Moscow and his own skepticism about everyone and everything compelled him to keep asking. He employed agents within the CPVN, the country's Foreign Ministry, and elsewhere, Vietnamese whose willingness to give information to an ally would probably have meant death—though to be politic about it, the deaths would be disguised "suicides" or "accidents" because it was in neither country's interest to have a formal breach. Lip-service was even more important in a socialist country than a capitalist one, the General knew, because symbols were far easier to produce than reality.

The enciphered dispatch on his desk was interesting, all the more so since it did not give him direct guidance on what to do about it. How like the Moscow bureaucrats! Always quick to meddle in matters that he was able to handle himself, now they didn't know what to do—but they were afraid to do nothing. So they stuck him with it.

He knew about the camp, of course. Though he ran a military-

intelligence operation, he had people in the office of the attaché who reported to him as well. The KGB watched everyone, after all; that was their job. Colonel Grishanov was using irregular methods, but he was reporting good results, better than the General's own office got from these little savages. Now the Colonel had come up with the boldest idea of all. Instead of letting the Vietnamese kill the prisoners in due course, bring them home to Mother Russia. It was brilliant in its way, and the KGB general was trying to decide if he'd endorse the idea to Moscow, where this decision would surely be kicked up to ministerial, or perhaps even Politburo level. On the whole, he thought that the idea had real merit… and that decided matters.

As entertaining as it might be for the Americans to rescue their people with this BOXWOOD GREEN operation, as much as it might show the Vietnamese again that they should cooperate more closely with the Soviet Union, that they really were a *client* state, it would also mean that the knowledge locked in those American minds would be lost to his country, and it was knowledge they must have.

How long, he wondered, could he let this one wait? The Americans moved quickly, but not that quickly. The mission had been approved at White House level only a week or so earlier. All bureaucracies were alike, after all. In Moscow it would take forever. Operation KINGPIN had gone on forever, else it would have succeeded. Only the good luck of a low-level agent in the Southern United States had allowed them to warn Hanoi, and then almost too late—but now they had real forewarning.

Politics. You just couldn't separate that from intelligence operations. Before, they'd all but accused him of delaying matters—he shouldn't give them that excuse again. Even client states need to be treated as comrades. The General lifted his phone to make a luncheon date. He'd bring his contact over to the embassy, just to be sure that he had some decent food to eat.

29

Last Out

There was a vicarious exhilaration in watching them. The twenty-five Marines worked out, finishing with a single-file run that looped around the helicopters parked on the deck. Sailors looked on quietly. The word was out now. The sea sled had been seen by too many, and like professional intelligence officers, sailors at their mess tables assembled the few facts and garnished them with speculation. The Marines were going into the North. After what, nobody knew, but everyone wondered. Maybe to trash a missile site and bring back some important piece of hardware. Maybe to take down a bridge, but most likely the target was human. The Vietnamese party bosses, perhaps.

"Prisoners," a bosun's mate third-class said, finishing his hamburger, called a "slider" in the Navy. "It's gotta be," he added, motioning his head to the newly arrived medical corpsmen who ate at their own isolated table. "Six corpsmen, four doctors, awful lot of talent, guys. What d'ya suppose they're here for?"

"Jesus," another sailor observed, sipping at his milk. "You're right, man."

"Feather in our cap if it comes off," noted another.

"Dirty weather tonight," a quartermaster put in. "The fleet-weather chief was smiling about it—and I seen him puke his guts out last night. I guess he can't handle anything smaller'n a carrier." USS *Ogden* did have an odd ride, which resulted from her configuration, and running broadside to the gusting westerly winds had only worsened it. It was always entertaining to see a chief petty officer lose his lunch—dinner in this case—and a man was unlikely to be *happy* about weather conditions that made him ill. There had

to be a reason for it. The conclusion was obvious, and the sort of thing to make a security officer despair.

"Jesus, I hope they make it."

"Let's get the flight deck fodded again," the junior bosun suggested. Heads nodded at once. A work gang was quickly assembled. Within an hour there would be not so much as a matchstick on the black no-skid surface.

"Good bunch of kids, Captain," Dutch Maxwell observed, watching the walkdown from the starboard wing of the bridge. Every so often a man would bend down and pick up something, a "foreign object" that might destroy an engine, a result called *FOD*, for "foreign-object damage." Whatever might go wrong tonight, the men were promising with their actions, it wouldn't be the fault of their ship.

"Lots of college kids," Franks replied, proudly watching his men. "Sometimes I think the deck division's as smart as my wardroom." Which was an entirely forgivable hyperbole. He wanted to say something else, the same thing that everyone was thinking: *What do you suppose the chances are?* He didn't voice the thought. It would be the worst kind of bad luck. Even thinking it loudly might harm the mission, but hard as he tried he couldn't stop his mind from forming the words.

In their quarters, the Marines were assembled around a sand-table model of the objective. They'd already gone over the mission once and were doing so again. The process would be repeated once more before lunch, and many times after it, as a whole group and as individual teams. Each man could see everything with his eyes closed, thinking back to the training site at Quantico, reliving the live-fire exercises.

"Captain Albie, sir?" A yeoman came into the compartment. He handed over a clipboard. "Message from Mr. Snake."

The Captain of Marines grinned. "Thanks, sailor. You read it?"

The yeoman actually blushed. "Beg pardon, sir. Yes, I did. Everything's cool." He hesitated for the moment before adding a dispatch of his own. "Sir, my department says good luck. Kick some ass, sir."

"You know, skipper," Sergeant Irvin said as the yeoman left the space, "I may never be able to punch out a swabbie again."

Albie read the dispatch. "People, our friend is in place. He counts forty-four guards, four officers, one Russian. Normal duty routine,

nothing unusual is happening there." The young captain looked up. "That's it, Marines. We're going in tonight."

One of the younger Marines reached in his pocket and pulled out a large rubber band. He broke it, marked two eyes on it with his pen, and dropped it atop what they now called Snake Hill. "That dude," he said to his teammates, "is one cool motherfucker."

"Y'all remember now," Irvin warned loudly. "You fire-support guys remember, he's gonna be pounding down that hill soon as we show up. It wouldn't do to shoot his ass."

"No prob', Gunny," the fire-team leader said.

"Marines, let's get some chow. I want you people to rest up this afternoon. Eat your veggies. We want our eyes to work in the dark. Weapons stripped and cleaned for inspection at seventeen-hun'rd," Albie told them. "Y'all know what this is all about. Let's stay real cool and we'll get it done." It was his time to meet again with the chopper crews for a final look at the insertion and extraction plans.

"Aye aye, sir," Irvin said for the men.

"Hello, Robin."

"Hi, Kolya," Zacharias said weakly.

"I'm still working on better food."

"Would be nice," the American acknowledged.

"Try this." Grishanov handed over some black bread his wife had sent him. The climate had already started to put mold on it, which Kolya had trimmed off with a knife. The American wolfed it down anyway. A sip from the Russian's flask helped.

"I'll turn you into a Russian," the Soviet Air Force colonel said with an unguarded chuckle. "Vodka and good bread go together. I would like to show you my country." Just to plant the seed of the idea, in a friendly way, as one man talks to another.

"I have a family, Kolya. God willing—"

"Yes, Robin, God willing." Or North Vietnam willing, or the Soviet Union willing. Or someone. Somehow he'd save this man, and the others. So many were friends now. He knew so much about them, their marriages, good and bad, their children, their hopes and dreams. These Americans were so strange, so open. "Also, God willing, if the Chinese decide to bomb Moscow, I have a plan now to stop them." He unfolded the map and set it on the floor. It was the result of all his talks with his American colleague, everything he had learned and analyzed formulated on a single sheet of paper. Grishanov was quite proud of it, not the least because it was the

clear presentation of a highly sophisticated operational concept.

Zacharias ran his fingers over it, reading the notations in English, which looked incongruous on a map whose legend was in Cyrillic. He smiled his approval. A bright guy, Kolya, a good student in his way. The way he layered his assets, the way he had his aircraft patrolling back rather than forward. He understood defense in depth now. SAM traps at the ends of the most likely mountain passes, positioned for maximum surprise. Kolya was thinking like a bomber pilot now instead of a fighter jock. That was the first step in understanding how it was done. If every Russian PVO commander understood how to do this, then SAC would have one miserable time…

Dear God.

Robin's hands stopped moving.

This wasn't about the ChiComs at all.

Zacharias looked up, and his face revealed his thought even before he found the strength to speak.

"How many Badgers do the Chinese have?"

"Now? Twenty-five. They are trying to build more."

"You can expand on everything I've told you."

"We'll have to, as they build up their force, Robin. I've told you that," Grishanov said quickly and quietly, but it was too late, he saw, at least in one respect.

"I've told you everything," the American said, looking down at the map. Then his eyes closed and his shoulders shook. Grishanov embraced him to ease the pain he saw.

"Robin, you've told me how to protect the children of my country. I have not lied to you. My father *did* leave his university to fight the Germans. I *did* have to evacuate Moscow as a child. I *did* lose friends that winter in the snow—little boys and little girls, Robin, children who froze to death. It *did* happen. I *did* see it."

"And I did betray my country," Zacharias whispered. The realization had come with the speed and violence of a falling bomb. How could he have been so blind, so stupid? Robin leaned back, feeling a sudden pain in his chest, and in that moment he prayed it was a heart attack, for the first time in his life wishing for death. But it wasn't. It was just a contraction of his stomach and the release of a large quantity of acid, just the perfect thing, really, to eat away at his stomach as his mind ate away the defenses of his soul. He'd broken faith with his country and his God. He was

damned.

"My friend—"

"You *used* me!" Robin hissed, trying to pull away.

"Robin, you must listen to me." Grishanov wouldn't let go. "I love my country, Robin, as you love yours. I have sworn an oath to defend her. I have never lied to you about that, and now it is time for you to learn other things." Robin had to understand. Kolya had to make it clear to Zacharias, as Robin had made so many things clear to Kolya.

"Like what?"

"Robin, you are a dead man. The Vietnamese have reported you dead to your country. You will never be allowed to return home. That is why you are not in the prison—Hoa Lo, the Hilton, your people call it, yes?" It seared Kolya's soul when Robin looked at him, the accusation there was almost more than he could bear. When he spoke again, his voice was the one doing the pleading.

"What you are thinking is wrong. I have *begged* my superiors to let me save your life. I swear this on the lives of my children: *I will not let you die.* You cannot go back to America. I will make for you a new home. You will be able to *fly* again, Robin! You will have a new life. I can do no more than that. If I could restore you to your Ellen and your children, I would do it. I am not a monster, Robin, I am a man, like you. I have a country, like you. I have a family, like you. In the name of your God, man, put yourself in my place. What would you have done in my place? What would you feel in my place?" There was no reply beyond a sob of shame and despair.

"Would you have me let them torture you? I can do that. Six men in this camp have died, did you know that? Six men died before I came here. *I put a stop to it!* Only one has died since my arrival—only one, and I wept for him, Robin, did you know that! I would gladly kill Major Vinh, the little fascist. *I have saved you!* I've done everything in my power, and I have begged for more. I give you my own food, Robin, things that my Marina sends to me!"

"And I've told you how to kill American pilots—"

"Only if they attack my country can I hurt them. Only if they try to kill my people, Robin! Only then! Do you wish them to kill my family?"

"It's not like that!"

"Yes, it is. Don't you see? This is not a game, Robin. We are in the business of death, you and I, and to save lives one must also take

them."

Perhaps he'd see it in time, Grishanov hoped. He was a bright man, a rational man. Once he had time to examine the facts, he would see that life was better than death, and perhaps they could again be friends. For the moment, Kolya told himself, I have saved the man's life. *Even if the American curses me for that, he will have to breathe air to speak his curse.* Colonel Grishanov would bear that burden with pride. He'd gotten his information and saved a life in the process, as was entirely proper for an air-defense pilot of PVO Strany who'd sworn his life's real oath as a frightened and disoriented boy on his way from Moscow to Gorkiy.

The Russian came out of the prison block in time for dinner, Kelly saw. He had a notebook in his hands, doubtless full of the information he'd sweated out of the prisoners.

"We're going to get your sorry red ass," Kelly whispered to himself. "They're gonna put three willie-petes through that window, pal, and cook you up for dinner—along with all your fucking notes. Yeah."

He could feel it now. It was, again, the private pleasure of knowing what would be, the godlike satisfaction of seeing the future. He took a sip from his canteen. He couldn't afford to dehydrate. Patience came hard now. Within his sight was a building with twenty lonely, frightened, and badly hurt Americans, and though he'd never met any of them, and though he only knew one by name, his was a worthy quest. For the rest, he tried to find the Latin from his high school: *Morituri non cognant*, perhaps. Those who are about to die—just don't know. Which was just fine with Kelly.

"Homicide."

"Hi, I'm trying to get Lieutenant Frank Allen."

"You got him," Allen replied. He'd been at his desk just five minutes this Monday morning. "Who's this?"

"Sergeant Pete Meyer, Pittsburgh," the voice replied. "Captain Dooley referred me to you, sir."

"I haven't talked to Mike in a while. Is he still a Pirates fan?"

"Every night, Lieutenant. I try to catch some of the games myself."

"You want a line on the Series, Sarge?" Allen asked with a grin.

Cop fellowship.

"Bucs in five. Roberto's real tough this year." Clemente was having a career year.

"Oh, yeah? Well, so are Brooks and Frank." The Robinsons weren't doing so badly either. "What can I do for you?"

"Lieutenant, I have some information for you. Two homicides, both victims female, in their late teens, early twenties."

"Back up, please." Allen got a clean sheet of paper. "Who's your source?"

"I can't reveal that yet. It's privileged. I'm working on changing that, but it might take a while. Can I go on?"

"Very well. Names of victims?"

"The recent one was named Pamela Madden—very recent, only a few weeks ago."

Lieutenant Allen's eyes went wide. "Jesus—the fountain murder. And the other one?"

"Her name was Helen, sometime last fall. Both murders were ugly, Lieutenant, torture and sexual abuse."

Allen hunched forward with the phone very close to his ear. "You telling me you have a witness to both killings?"

"That is correct, sir, I believe we do. I got two likely perps for you, too. Two white males, one named Billy and the other named Rick. No descriptions, but I can work on that, too."

"Okay, they're not my cases. It's being handled downtown—Lieutenant Ryan and Sergeant Douglas. I know both names—both victims, I mean. These are high-profile cases, Sarge. How solid is your information?"

"I believe it to be very solid. I have one possible indicator for you. Victim number two, Pamela Madden—her hair was brushed out after she was killed."

In every major criminal case, several important pieces of evidence were always left out of press accounts in order to screen out the usual collection of nuts who called in to confess to something—anything that struck their twisted fancies. This thing with the hair was sufficiently protected that even Lieutenant Allen didn't know about it.

"What else do you have?"

"The murders were drug-related. Both girls were mules."

"Bingo!" Allan exclaimed quietly. "Is your source in jail or what?"

"I'm pushing the edge here, but—okay, I'll level with you. My

dad's a preacher. He's counseling the girl. Lieutenant, this is really off-the-record stuff, okay?"

"I understand. What do you want me to do?"

"Could you please forward the info to the investigating officers? They can contact me through the station." Sergeant Meyer gave over his number. "I'm a watch supervisor here, and I have to roll out now to deliver a lecture at the academy. I'll be back about four."

"Very well, Sergeant. I'll pass that along. Thanks a lot for the input. You'll be hearing from Em and Tom. Depend on it." *Jesus, we'll give Pittsburgh the fuckin' Series to bag these bastards.* Allen switched buttons on his phone.

"Hey, Frank," Lieutenant Ryan said. When he set his coffee cup down, it appeared like slow-motion. That stopped when he picked up a pen. "Keep talking. I'm writing this down."

Sergeant Douglas was late this morning because of an accident on I-83. He came in with his usual coffee and danish to see his boss scribbling furiously.

"Brushed out the hair? He said that?" Ryan asked. Douglas leaned across the desk, and the look in Ryan's eyes was like that of a hunter who just heard the first rustle in the leaves. "Okay, what names did he—" The detective's hand balled into a fist. A long breath. "Okay, Frank, where is this guy? Thanks. 'Bye."

"Break?"

"Pittsburgh," Ryan said.

"Huh?"

"Call from a police sergeant in Pittsburgh, a possible witness in the murders of Pamela Madden and Helen Waters."

"No shit?"

"This is the one who brushed her hair, Tom. And guess what other names came along with it?"

"Richard Farmer and William Grayson?"

"Rick and Billy. Close enough? Possible mule for a drug ring. Wait…" Ryan leaned back, staring at the yellowed ceiling. "There was a girl there when Farmer was killed—we think there was," he corrected himself. "It's the connection, Tom. Pamela Madden, Helen Waters, Farmer, Grayson, they're all related… and that means—"

"The pushers, too. All connected somehow. What connects them, Em? We know they were all—probably all—in the drug business."

"Two different MOs, Tom. The girls were slaughtered like—no, you don't even do that to cattle. All the rest, though, all of them were taken down by the Invisible Man. Man on a mission! That's what Farber said, a man on a mission."

"Revenge," Douglas said, pacing Ryan's analysis on his own. "If one of those girls was close to me—Jesus, Em, who could blame him?"

There was only one person connected with either murder who'd been close with a victim, and he was known to the police department, wasn't he? Ryan grabbed his phone and called back to Lieutenant Allen.

"Frank, what was the name of that guy who worked the Gooding case, the Navy guy?"

"Kelly, John Kelly, he found the gun off Fort McHenry, then downtown contracted him to train our divers, remember? Oh! Pamela Madden! Jesus!" Allen exclaimed when the connection became clear.

"Tell me about him, Frank."

"Hell of a nice guy. Quiet, kinda sad—lost his wife, auto accident or something."

"Veteran, right?"

"Frogman, underwater demolitions. That's how he earns his living, blowing things up. Underwater stuff, like."

"Keep going."

"Physically he's pretty tough, takes care of himself." Allen paused. "I saw him dive, there's some marks on him, scars, I mean. He's seen combat and caught some fire. I got his address and all if you want."

"I have it in my case file, Frank. Thanks, buddy." Ryan hung up. "He's our guy. He's the Invisible Man."

"Kelly?"

"I have to be in court this morning—damn it!" Ryan swore.

"Nice to see you again," Dr. Farber said. Monday was an easy day for him. He'd seen his last patient of the day and was heading out for after-lunch tennis with his sons. The cops had barely caught him heading out of his office.

"What do you know about UDT guys?" Ryan asked, walking out into the corridor with him.

"Frogmen, you mean? Navy?"

"That's right. Tough, are they?"

Farber grinned around his pipe. "They're the first guys on the beach, ahead of the Marines. What do you think?" He paused. Something clicked in his mind. "There's something even better now."

"What do you mean?" the detective lieutenant asked.

"Well, I still do a little work for the Pentagon. Hopkins does a lot of things for the government. Applied Physics Lab, lots of special things. You know my background." He paused. "Sometimes I do psychological testing, consulting—what combat does to people. This is classified material, right? There's a new special-operations group. It's a spin-off of UDT. They call them SEALs now, for Sea Air Land—they're commandos, real serious folks, and their existence is not widely known. Not just tough. Smart. They're trained to think, to plan ahead. Not just muscle. Brains, too."

"Tattoo," Douglas said, remembering. "He has a tattoo of a seal on his arm."

"Doc, what if one of these SEAL guys had a girl who was brutally murdered?" It was the most obvious of questions, but he had to ask it.

"That's the mission you were looking for," Farber said, heading out the door, unwilling to reveal anything else, even for a murder investigation.

"That's our boy. Except for one thing," Ryan said quietly to the closed door.

"Yeah. No evidence. Just one hell of a motive."

• • •

Nightfall. It had been a dreary day for everyone at SENDER GREEN except for Kelly. The parade ground was mush, with fetid puddles, large and small. The soldiers had spent most of the day trying to keep dry. Those in the towers had adjusted their position to the shifting winds. Weather like this did things to people. Most humans didn't like being wet. It made them irritable and dull of mind, all the more so if their duty was also boring, as it was here. In North Vietnam, weather like this meant fewer air attacks, yet another reason for the men down below to relax. The increasing heat of the day had energized the clouds, adding moisture to them which the clouds just as quickly gave back to the ground.

What a shitty day, all the guards would be saying to one another

over their dinner. All would nod and concentrate on their meals, looking down, not up, looking inward, not outward. The woods would be damp. It was far quieter to walk on wet leaves than dry ones. No dry twigs to snap. The humid air would muffle sound, not transmit it. It was, in a word, perfect.

Kelly took the opportunity of the darkness to move around some, stiff from the inactivity. He sat up under his bush, brushing off his skin and eating more of his ration concentrates. He drained down a full canteen, then stretched his arms and legs. He could see the LZ, and had already selected his path to it, hoping the Marines wouldn't be trigger-happy when he ran down towards them. At twenty-one hundred he made his final radio transmission.

Light Green, the technician wrote on his pad. *Activity Normal.*

"That's it. That's the last thing we need." Maxwell looked at the others. Everyone nodded.

"Operation BOXWOOD GREEN, Phase Four, commences at twenty-two hundred. Captain Franks, make signal to *Newport News.*"

"Aye aye, sir."

On *Ogden*, flight crews dressed in their fire-protective suits, then walked aft to preflight their aircraft. They found sailors wiping all the windows. In the troop spaces, the Marines were donning their striped utilities. Weapons were clean. Magazines were full with fresh ammo just taken from airtight containers. The individual grunts paired off, each man applying camouflage paint to his counterpart. No smiles or joking now. They were as serious as actors on opening night, and the delicacy of the makeup work gave a strange counterpoint to the nature of the evening's performance. Except for one of their number.

"Easy on the eye shadow, sir," Irvin told a somewhat jumpy Captain Albie, who had the usual commander's jitters and needed a sergeant to steady him down.

In the squadron ready room aboard USS *Constellation*, a diminutive and young squadron commander named Joshua Painter led the briefing. He had eight F-4 Phantoms loaded for bear.

"We're covering a special operation tonight. Our targets are SAM sites south of Haiphong," he went on, not knowing what it was all about, hoping that it was worth the risk to the fifteen officers who would fly with him tonight, and that was just his squadron. Ten A-6

Intruders were also flying Iron Hand, and most of the rest of *Connie*'s air wing would trail their coats up the coast, throwing as much electronic noise into the air as they could. He hoped it was all as important as Admiral Podulski had said. Playing games with SAM sites wasn't exactly fun.

Newport News was twenty-five miles off the coast now, approaching a point that would put her exactly between *Ogden* and the beach. Her radars were off, and the shore stations probably didn't know quite where she was. After the last few days the NVA were getting a little more circumspect about using their coastal surveillance systems. The Captain was sitting in his bridge chair. He checked his watch and opened a sealed manila envelope, reading quickly through the action orders he'd had in his safe for two weeks.

"Hmm," he said to himself. Then: "Mr. Shoeman, have engineering bring boilers one and four fully on line. I want full power available as soon as possible. We're doing some more surfing tonight. My compliments to the XO, gunnery officer, and his chiefs. I want them in my at-sea cabin at once."

"Aye, sir." The officer of the deck made the necessary notifications. With all four of her boilers on line, *Newport News* could make thirty-four knots, the quicker to close the beach, and the quicker to depart from it.

"Surf City, here we come!" the petty officer at the wheel sang out loud as soon as the Captain was off the bridge. It was the official ship's joke—because the Captain liked it—actually made up several months before by a seaman first-class. It meant going inshore, right into the surf, for some shooting. "Goin' to Surf City, where it's two-to-one!"

"Mark your head, Baker," the OOD called to end the chorus.

"Steady on one-eight-five, Mr. Shoeman." His body moved to the beat. *Surf City, here we come!*

"Gentlemen, in case you're wondering what we've done to deserve the fun of the past few days, this is it," the Captain said in his cabin just off the bridge. He explained on for several minutes. On his desk was a map of the coastal area, with every triple-A battery marked from data on aerial and satellite photographs. His gunnery department looked things over. There were plenty of hilltops for good radar references.

"Oh, yeah!" the master chief firecontrolman breathed. "Sir,

everything? Five-inchers, too?"

The skipper nodded. "Chief Skelley, if we bring any ammo back to Subic, I'm going to be very disappointed with you."

"Sir, I propose we use number-three five-inch mount for star shell and shoot visually as much as we can."

It was an exercise in geometry, really. The gunnery experts—that included the commanding officer—leaned across the map and decided quickly how it would be done. They were already briefed on the mission; the only change was that they had expected to do it in daylight.

"There won't be anybody left alive to fire on those helos, sir."

The growler phone on the CO's desk rang. He grabbed it. "Captain speaking."

"All four boilers are now on line, sir. Full-speed bell is thirty, flank is thirty-three."

"Nice to know the ChEng is all awake. Very well. Sound General Quarters." He hung up the phone as the ship's gong started sounding. "Gentlemen, we have some Marines to protect," he said confidently. His cruiser's gunnery department was as fine as *Mississippi*'s had ever been. Two minutes later he was back on the bridge.

"Mr. Shoeman, I have the conn."

"Captain has the conn," the OOD agreed.

"Right-standard rudder, come to new course two-six-five."

"Right-standard rudder, aye, come to new course two-six-five, aye." Petty Officer Sam Baker rotated the wheel. "Sir, my rudder is right-standard."

"Very well," the Captain acknowledged, adding, "Surf City, here we come!"

"Aye aye, sir!" the helmsman hooted back. The skipper was really with it for an old fart.

It was the time for nerves now. *What could go wrong?* Kelly asked himself atop his hill. Lots of things. The helicopters might collide in midair. They might come right over an unknown flak site and be blotted from the sky. Some little widget or seal could let go, crashing them to the ground. What if the local National Guard was having a training exercise tonight? Something was always left to chance. He'd seen missions go wrong for any number of dumb and unpredictable reasons. But not tonight, he promised himself. Not

with all this preparation. The helo crews had trained intensively for three weeks, as had the Marines. The birds had been lovingly maintained. The sailors on *Ogden* had invented helpful things to do. You could never eliminate risk, but preparation and training could attenuate it. Kelly made sure his weapon was in proper shape and stayed in a tight sitting position. This wasn't sitting in a corner house in west Baltimore. This was real. This would enable him to put it all behind. His attempt to save Pam had ended in failure due to his error, but perhaps it had had a purpose after all. He'd made no mistakes for this mission. Nobody had. He wasn't rescuing one person. He was rescuing twenty. He checked the illuminated dial of his watch. The sweep hand was moving so slowly now. Kelly closed his eyes, hoping that when he opened them it would move more quickly. It didn't. He knew better. The former Chief of SEALs commanded himself to take a deep breath and continue the mission. For him that meant laying the carbine across his lap and concentrating on his binoculars. His reconnaissance had to continue right to the moment the first M-79 grenades were fired at the guard towers. The Marines were counting on him.

Well, maybe this would show the guys from Philly how important he was. Henry's operation breaks down and I handle things. *Eddie Morello is important*, he thought, stoking the fires of his own ego as he drove up Route 40 towards Aberdeen.

Idiot can't run his own operation, can't get dependable people. I told Tony he was too smart for his own good, too clever, not really a serious businessman—Oh, no, he's serious. He's more serious than you are, Eddie. Henry is going be the first nigger to get "made." You watch. Tony is going to do it. Can't do it for you. Your own cousin can't do it for you, after you connected him with Henry. Goddamned deal wouldn't be made except for me. I made the deal but I can't get made.

"Fuck!" he snarled at a red light. *Somebody starts taking Henry's operation apart and they ask* me *to check it out. Like Henry can't figure things out himself. Probably can't, not as smart as he thinks he is. So then what—he gets between me and Tony.*

That was it, wasn't it? Eddie thought. *Henry* wanted *to separate me from* Piaggi*—just like he got them to take Angelo out. Angelo was his first connection. Angelo introduced him to me… I introduced him to Tony… Tony and I handle the connection with Philly and New York… Angelo and me were a pair of connections… Angelo was the weak one…*

and Angelo gets whacked…

Tony and I are another pair of connections…

He only needs one, doesn't he? Just one connection to the rest of the outfit.

Separating me from Tony…

Fuck.

Morello fished in his pocket for a cigarette and punched the lighter on his Cadillac convertible. The top was down. Eddie liked the sun and the wind. It was almost like being out on his fishing boat. It also gave him fine visibility. That it made him somewhat easier to spot and trail hadn't occurred to him. Next to him, on the floor, was a leather attaché case. Inside that were six kilos of pure stuff. Philadelphia, they'd told him, was real short, and would handle the cutting themselves. Big cash deal. The identical case that was now southbound would be filled with nothing smaller than twenties. Two guys. Nothing to worry about. They were pros, and this was a long-term business relationship. He didn't have to worry about a rip, but he had his snubby anyway, concealed under his loose shirt, just at his belt buckle, the most useful, most uncomfortable place.

He had to think this one through, Morello told himself urgently. He might just have it all figured out. Henry was manipulating them. *Henry* was *manipulating* the outfit. A jig was trying to outthink them.

And succeeding. Probably he whacked his own people. The fuck liked to shit all over women—especially white ones. That figured, Morello thought. They were all like that. Thought he was pretty smart, probably. Well, he was pretty smart. But not smart enough. Not anymore. It wouldn't be hard to explain all of this to Tony. Eddie was sure of that. Make the transfer and drive back. Dinner with Tony. Be calm and reasonable. Tony likes that. Like he went to Harvard or something. Like a damned lawyer. Then we work on Henry, and we take over his operation. It was business. His people would play. They weren't in it because they loved him. They were in it for the money. Everybody was. And then he and Tony could take the operation over, and *then* Eddie Morello would be a made man.

Yeah. He had it all figured out now. Morello checked the time. He was right on as he pulled into the half-empty parking lot of a diner. The old-fashioned kind, made from a railroad car—the Pennsylvania Railroad was close by. He remembered his first meal

out of the house with his father, in a place just like this, watching the trains go past. The memory made him smile as he finished the cigarette and flipped it onto the blacktop.

The other car pulled in. It was a blue Oldsmobile, as he'd been led to expect. The two guys got out. One carried an attaché case and walked towards him. Eddie didn't know him, but he was well-dressed, respectable, like a businessman should be, in a nice tan suit. Like a lawyer. Morello smiled to himself, not looking too obviously in his direction while the backup man stayed at the car, watching, just to be on the safe side. Yeah, serious people. And soon they'd know that Eddie Morello was a serious man, too, he thought, with his hand in his lap, six inches from his hidden revolver.

"Got the stuff?"

"Got the money?" Morello asked in return.

"You made a mistake, Eddie," the man said without warning as he opened the briefcase.

"What do you mean?" Morello asked, suddenly alert, about ten seconds and a lifetime too late.

"I mean, it's goodbye, Eddie," he added quietly.

The look in the eyes said it all. Morello immediately went for his weapon, but it only helped the other man.

"Police, freeze!" the man shouted just before the first round burst through the opened top of the case.

Eddie got his gun out, just, and managed to fire one round into the floor of his car, but the cop was only three feet away and couldn't possibly miss. The backup officer was already running in, surprised that Lieutenant Charon hadn't been able to get the drop on the guy. As he watched, the attaché case fell aside and the detective extended his arm, nearly placing his service revolver on the man's chest and firing straight into his heart.

It was all so clear to Morello now, but only for a second or two. Henry had done it all. He'd made himself, that was it. And Morello knew that his only purpose in life had been to get Henry and Tony together. It didn't seem like much, not now.

"Backup!" Charon screamed over the dying man. He reached down to seize Eddie's revolver. Within a minute two State Police cars screeched into the parking lot.

"Damned fool," Charon told his partner five minutes later, shaking as he did so, as men do after killing. "He just went for the gun—like I didn't have the drop on him."

"I saw it all," the junior detective said, thinking that he had.

"Well, it's just what you said, sir," the State Police sergeant said. He opened the case from the floor of the Olds. It was filled with bags of heroin. "Some bust."

"Yeah," Charon growled. "Except dead the dumb fuck can't tell anybody anything." Which was exactly true. Remarkable, he thought, succeeding in his struggle not to smile at the mad humor of the moment. He'd just committed the perfect murder, under the eyes of other police officers. Now Henry's organization was safe.

Almost time now. The guard had changed. *Last time for that.* The rain continued to fall steadily. *Good.* The soldiers in the towers were huddling to stay dry. The dreary day had bored them even more than normal, and bored men were less alert. All the lights were out now. Not even candles in the barracks. Kelly made a slow, careful sweep with his binoculars. There was a human shape in the window of the officers' quarters, a man looking out at the weather—the Russian, wasn't it? *Oh, so that's your bedroom? Great: The first shot from grenadier number three—Corporal Mendez, wasn't it?—is programmed for that opening. Fried Russian.*

Let's get this one on. I need a shower. God, you suppose they have any more of that Jack Daniel's left? Regs were regs, but some things were special.

The tension was building. It wasn't the danger factor. Kelly deemed himself to be in no danger at all. The scary part had been the insertion. Now it was up to the airedales, then the Marines. His part was almost done, Kelly thought.

"Commence firing," the Captain ordered.

Newport News had switched her radars on only a few moments earlier. The navigator was in central fire-control, helping the gunnery department to plot the cruiser's exact position by radar fixes on known landmarks. That was being overly careful, but tonight's mission called for it. Now navigation and fire-control radars were helping everyone compute their position to a whisker.

The first rounds off were from the portside five-inch mount. The sharp bark of noise from the twin 5"/38s was very hard on the ears, but along with it came something oddly beautiful. With each shot the guns generated a ring of yellow fire. It was some empirical peculiarity of the weapon that did it. Like a yellow snake chasing its

tail, undulating for its few milliseconds of life. Then it vanished. Six thousand yards downrange, the first pair of star shells ignited, and it was the same metallic yellow that had a few seconds earlier decorated the gun mount. The wet, green landscape of North Vietnam turned orange under the light.

"Looks like a fifty-seven-mike-mike mount. I can see the crew, even." The rangefinder in Spot-1 was already trained into the proper bearing. The light just made it easier. Master Chief Skelley dialed in the range with remarkable delicacy. It was transmitted at once to "central." Ten seconds after that, eight guns thundered. Another fifteen, and the triple-A site vanished in a cloud of dust and fire.

"On target with the first salvo. Target Alfa is destroyed." The master chief took his command from below to shift bearings to the next. Like the Captain he would soon retire. Maybe they could open a gun store.

It was like distant thunder, but not right somehow. The surprising part was the absence of reaction below. Through the binoculars he could see heads turn. Maybe some remarks were exchanged. Nothing more than that. It was a country at war, after all, and unpleasant noises were normal here, especially the kind that sounded like distant thunder. Clearly too far away to be a matter of concern. You couldn't even see any flashes through the weather. Kelly had expected an officer or two to come out and look around. He would have done that in their place—probably. But they didn't.

Ninety minutes and counting.

The Marines were lightly loaded as they filed aft. Quite a few sailors were there to watch them. Albie and Irvin counted them off as they headed out onto the flight deck, directing them to their choppers.

The last sailors in line were Maxwell and Podulski. Both were wearing their oldest and most disreputable khakis, shirts and pants they'd worn in command at sea, things associated with good memories and good luck. Even admirals were superstitious. For the first time the Marines saw that the pale Admiral—that's how they thought of him—had the Medal of Honor. The ribbon caught many glances, and quite a few nods of respect that his tense face acknowledged.

"All ready, Captain?" Maxwell asked.

"Yes, sir," Albie replied calmly over his nervousness. Showtime. "See you in about three hours."

"Good hunting." Maxwell stood ramrod-straight and saluted the younger man.

"They look pretty impressive," Ritter said. He, too, was wearing khakis, just to fit in with the ship's wardroom. "Oh, Jesus, I hope this works."

"Yeah," James Greer breathed as the ship turned to align herself with the wind. Deck crewmen with lighted wands went to both troop carriers to guide their takeoffs, and then, one by one, the big Sikorskys lifted off, steadying themselves in the burble and turning west towards land and the mission. "It's in their hands now."

"Good kids, James," Podulski said.

"That Clark guy is pretty impressive, too. Smart," Ritter observed. "What's he do in real life?"

"I gather he's sort of at odds at the moment. Why?"

"We always have room for a guy who can think on his feet. The boy's smart," Ritter repeated as all headed back to CIC. On the flight deck, the Cobra crews were doing their final preflight checks. They'd get off in forty-five minutes.

"SNAKE, this is CRICKET. Time check is nominal. Acknowledge."

"Yes!" Kelly said aloud—but not too loud. He tapped three long dashes on his radio, getting two back. *Ogden* had just announced that the mission was now running and copied his acknowledgment. "Two hours to freedom, guys," he told the prisoners in the camp below. That the event would be less liberating for the other people in the camp was not a matter of grave concern.

Kelly ate his last ration bar, sliding all the wrappers and trash into the thigh pockets of his fatigues. He moved from his hiding place. It was dark now, and he could afford to. Reaching back in, he tried to erase the marks of his presence. A mission like this might be tried again, after all, and why let the other side know anything about how it had happened? The tension finally reached the point that he had to urinate. It was almost funny, and made him feel like a little kid, though he'd drunk half a gallon of water that day.

Thirty minutes' flying time to the first LZ, thirty more for the approach. When they crest the far hill, I go into live contact with them to control the final approach.

Let's get it on.

"Shifting fire right. Target Hotel in sight," Skelley reported. "Range… nine-two-five-zero." The guns thundered once more. One of the hundred-millimeter gun mounts was actually firing at them, now. The crew had watched *Newport News* immolate the rest of their antiaircraft battalion and, unable to desert their guns, they were trying, at least, to fire back and wound the monster that was hovering off their coastline.

"There's the helos," the XO said at his post in CIC. The blips on the main radar display crossed the coast right over where Targets Alfa and Bravo had been. He lifted the phone.

"Captain here."

"XO here. sir. The helos are feet-dry, going right up the corridor we made them."

"Very well. Prepare to stand-down the fire mission. We'll be HIFR-ing those helos in thirty minutes. Keep a very sharp eye on that radar, X."

"Aye, sir."

"Jesus," a radar operator observed. "What's going on here?"

"First we shoot their ass," his neighbor opined, "then we invade their ass."

Only minutes now until the Marines were on the ground. The rain remained steady though the wind had died down.

Kelly was in the open now. It was safe. He wasn't skylined. There was ample flora behind him. All of his clothing and exposed skin was colored to blend in. His eyes were sweeping everywhere, searching for danger, for something unusual, finding nothing. It was muddy as hell. The wet and the red clay of these miserable hills was part of him now, through the fabric of his uniform, into every pore.

Ten minutes out from the LZ. The distant thunder from the coast continued sporadically, and its very continuance made it less of a danger. It sounded even more like thunder now, and only Kelly knew that it was the eight-inch guns of a ship of war. He sat back, resting his elbows on his knees, sweeping the glasses over the camp. Still no lights. Still no movement. Death was racing towards them and they didn't know. He was concentrating so much with his eyes that he almost neglected his ears.

It was hard to pick it out through the rain: a distant rumble, low

and tenuous, but it didn't fade. It grew in intensity. Kelly lifted his head from the eyepieces, turning, his mouth open, trying to figure it out.

Motors.

Truck motors. Well, okay, there was a road not too far away—no, the main road is too far… other direction.

A supply truck maybe. Delivering food and mail.

More than one.

Kelly moved to the top of the hill, leaning against a tree, looking down to where this spur of a dirt road reached out to the one that traced the north bank of the river. Movement. He put the glasses on it.

Truck… two… three… four… oh, my God…

They had lights on—just slits, the headlights taped over. That meant military trucks. The lights of the second gave some illumination to the first. People in the back, lined on both sides.

Soldiers.

Wait, Johnnie-boy, don't panic. Take your time… maybe…

They turned around the base of Snake Hill. A guard in one of the towers shouted something. The call was relayed. Lights came on in the officers' quarters. Somebody came out, probably the Major, not dressed, shouting a question.

The first truck stopped at the gate. A man got out and roared for somebody to open it. The other truck stopped behind it. Soldiers dismounted. Kelly counted… ten… twenty… thirty… more… but it wasn't the number. It was what they started to do.

He had to look away. What more would fate take away from him? Why not just take his life and be done with it? But it wasn't just his life that fate was interested in. It never was. He was responsible, as always, for more than that. Kelly reached for his radio and flipped it on.

"CRICKET, this is SNAKE, over."

Nothing.

"CRICKET, this is SNAKE, over."

"What gives?" Podulski asked.

Maxwell took the microphone. "SNAKE, this is CRICKET ACTUAL, what is your message, over?"

"Abort abort abort—acknowledge," was what they all heard.

“Say again SNAKE. Say again.”

“Abort the mission,” Kelly said, too loudly for his own safety. “Abort abort abort. Acknowledge immediately.”

It took a few seconds. “We copy your order to abort. Acknowledged. Mission aborted. Stand by.”

“Roger, standing by.”

“What is it?” Major Vinh asked.

“We have information that the Americans may try to raid your camp,” the Captain replied, looking back at his men. They were deploying skillfully, half heading for trees, the other half taking positions inside the perimeter, digging in as soon as they picked their places. “Comrade Major, I am ordered to take charge of the defense until more units arrive. You are ordered to take your Russian guest to Hanoi for safety.”

“But—”

“The orders come from General Giap himself, Comrade Major.” Which settled matters very quickly indeed. Vinh went back to his quarters to dress. His camp sergeant went to awaken his driver.

Kelly could do nothing more than watch. Forty-five, maybe more. It was hard to count them as they moved. Teams digging machine gun pits. Patrol elements in the woods. That was an immediate danger to him, but he waited even so. He had to be sure that he’d done the right thing, that he hadn’t panicked, hadn’t been a sudden coward.

Twenty-five against fifty, with surprise and a plan, not hard. Twenty-five against a hundred, without surprise… hopeless. He’d done the right thing. There was no reason to add twenty-five more bodies to the ledger sheet that they kept in Washington. His conscience didn’t have room for that kind of mistake or for those kinds of lives.

“Helos coming back, sir, same way they went in,” the radar operator told the XO.

“Too fast,” the XO said.

“Goddamn it, Dutch! Now what—”

“The mission’s aborted, Cas,” Maxwell said, staring down at the chart table.

“But *why?*”

“Because Mr. Clark said so,” Ritter answered. “He’s the eyes. He

makes the call. You don't need anybody to tell you that, Admiral. We still have a man in there, gentlemen. Let's not forget that."

"We have *twenty* men in there."

"That's true, sir, but only one of them is coming out tonight." *And then only if we're lucky.*

Maxwell looked up to Captain Franks. "Let's move in towards the beach, fast as you can."

"Yes, sir."

"Hanoi? Why?"

"Because we have orders." Vinh was looking over the dispatch the Captain had delivered. "Well, the Americans wanted to come here, eh? I hope they do. This will be no Song Tay for them!"

The idea of an infantry action didn't exactly thrill Colonel Grishanov, and a trip to Hanoi, even an unannounced one, also meant a trip to the embassy. "Let me pack, Major."

"Be quick about it!" the little man snapped back, wondering if his trip to Hanoi was for some manner of transgression.

It could be worse. Grishanov now had all his notes together and slid them into a backpack. All of his work, now that Vinh had so kindly released it back to him. He'd drop it off with General Rokossovskiy, and with that in official hands, he could make his case for keeping these Americans alive. It was an ill wind, he thought, remembering the English aphorism.

He could hear them coming. Far off, moving without a great deal of skill, probably tired, but coming.

"CRICKET, this is SNAKE, over."

"We read you, SNAKE."

"I'm moving. There are people on my hill, coming my way. I will head west. Can you send a helo for me?"

"Affirmative. Be careful, son." It was Maxwell's voice, still concerned.

"Moving now. Out." Kelly pocketed the radio and headed to the crest. He took a moment to look, comparing what he saw now with what he'd seen before.

I run especially fast in the dark, he'd told the Marines. Time now to prove it. With one last listen to the approaching NVA, Kelly picked a thin spot in the foliage and headed down the hill.

30

Travel Agents

It was obvious to everyone that things were wrong. The two rescue helos touched down on *Ogden* not an hour after they'd left. One was wheeled aside at once. The other, flown by the senior pilot, was refueled. Captain Albie was out almost the second it landed, sprinting to the superstructure, where the command team was waiting for him. He could feel that *Ogden* and her escorts were racing into the beach. His dejected Marines trailed out as well, silent, looking down at the flight deck as they cleared their weapons.

"What happened?" Albie asked.

"Clark waved it off. All we know is that he's moved off his hill; he said other people were there. We're going to try to get him out. Where do you think he'll go?" Maxwell asked.

"He'll look for a place the helo can get him. Let's see the map."

Had he had the time to reflect. Kelly might have considered how quickly things could go from good to bad. But he didn't. Survival was an all-encompassing game, and at the moment it was also the only game in town. Certainly it wasn't a boring one, and with luck not overly demanding. There weren't all that many troops for the purpose of securing the camp against an assault, not enough—yet—to conduct real defensive patrols. If they were worried about another Song Tay–type mission, they'd keep their firepower in close. They'd put observation teams on hilltops, probably nothing more than that at least for the moment. The top of Snake Hill was now five hundred meters in his wake. Kelly slowed his descent, catching his breath—he was more winded from fear than effort,

though the two traded off heavily against each other. He found a secondary crest and rested on the far side of it. Standing still now, he could hear talk behind him—talk, not movement. Okay, good, he'd guessed right on the tactical situation. Probably more troops would be arriving in due course, but he'd be long gone by then.

If they can get that helo in.

Pleasant thought.

I've been in tighter spots than this, Defiance proclaimed. *When?* Pessimism inquired delicately.

The only thing that made sense at the moment was to put as much distance as possible between himself and the NVA. Next came the necessity of finding something approximating an LZ so that he could get the hell out of this place. It wasn't a time to panic, but he couldn't dally either. Come daylight there would be more troops here, and if their commander was a competent one, he'd want to know if there might be an enemy reconnaissance element on his turf. Failure to get out before dawn would materially degrade Kelly's chances of ever escaping this country. Move. Find a good spot. Call the helo. Get the hell out of here. He had four hours until dawn. The helo was about thirty minutes away. Make it two or three hours to find a spot and make the call. That didn't seem overly difficult. He knew the area around SENDER GREEN from the recon photos. Kelly took a few minutes to look around, orienting himself. The quickest way to a clear spot was that way, across a twist in the road. It was a gamble but a good one. He rearranged his load, moving his spare magazines within easier reach. More than anything else, Kelly feared capture, to be at the mercy of men like PLASTIC FLOWER, to be unable to fight back, to lose control of his life. A quiet little voice in the back of his mind told him that death was preferred to that. Fighting back, even against impossible odds, wasn't suicide. Okay. That was decided. He started moving.

"Call him?" Maxwell asked.

"No. not now." Captain Albie shook his head. "He'll call us. Mr. Clark is busy right now. We leave him be." Irvin came into the Combat Information Center.

"Clark?" the master gunnery sergeant asked.

"On the run," Albie told him.

"Want me and some people on Rescue One, riding shotgun?" That they would try to get Clark out was not a question. Marines have an

institutional loathing of leaving people behind.

"My job, Irvin," Albie said.

"Better you run the rescue, sir," Irvin said reasonably. "Anybody can shoot a rifle."

Maxwell, Podulski, and Greer stayed out of the conversation, watching and listening to two professionals who knew what they were about. The Marine commander bent to the wisdom of his most senior NCO.

"Take what you need." Albie turned to Maxwell. "Sir, I want Rescue One up now."

The Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Air) handed over the headset to a Marine officer only twenty-eight years old; with it came tactical command of the busted mission. With it went the end of Dutch Maxwell's career.

It was less fearful to be moving. Movement gave Kelly the feeling that he had control of his life. It was an illusion, and intellectually he knew it, but his body took the message that way. which made things better. He got to the bottom of the hill, into thicker growth. There. Right across the road was an open space, a meadow or something, maybe a floodplain area from the river. That would do just fine. Nothing fancy. He grabbed his radio.

"SNAKE to CRICKET, over."

"This is CRICKET. We read you, and we are standing by."

The message came in gasps, spoken one short breath at a time: "West of my hill, past the road, about two miles west of objective, open field. I'm close. Send the helo. I can mark with strobe."

Albie looked at the map, then the aerial photos. Okay, that looked easy enough. He stabbed a finger on the map, and the air-control petty officer relayed the information at once. Albie waited for the confirmation before transmitting back to Clark.

"Roger, copy. Rescue One is moving in now, two-zero minutes away."

"Copy that." Albie could hear the relief in Clark's voice through the static. "I'll be ready. Out."

Thank you, God.

Kelly took his time now, moving slowly and quietly towards the road. His second sojourn into North Vietnam wouldn't end up being

as long as the first. He didn't have to swim out this time, and with all the shots he'd gotten before coming in, maybe this time he wouldn't be getting sick from the water in that goddamned river. He didn't so much relax as lose some of his tension. As though on cue, the rain picked up, dampening noise and reducing visibility. More good news. Maybe God or fate or the Great Pumpkin hadn't decided to curse him after all. He stopped again, ten meters short of the road, and looked around. Nothing. He gave himself a few minutes to relax and let the stress bleed off. There was no sense in hurrying across just to be in open ground. Open ground was dangerous for a man alone in enemy territory. His hands were tight on his carbine, the infantryman's teddy bear, as he forced himself to breathe deeply and slowly in order to bring his heart rate down. When he felt approximately normal again, he allowed himself to approach the road.

Miserable roads, Grishanov thought, *even worse than those in Russia.* The car was something French, oddly enough. More remarkably, it ran fairly well, or would have done so, except for the driver. Major Vinh ought to have driven it himself. As an officer he probably knew how, but status-conscious fool that he was, he had to let his orderly do it, and this little lump of a peasant probably didn't know how to drive anything more complicated than an ox. The car was swerving in the mud. The driver was having trouble seeing in the rain as well. Grishanov closed his eyes in the rear seat, clutching his backpack. No sense watching. It might just scare him to watch. It was like flying in bad weather, he thought, something no pilot relished—even less so when someone else was in control.

He waited, looking before crossing, listening for the sound of a truck's engine, which was the greatest danger to him. Nothing. Okay, about five minutes on the helo now. Kelly stood erect, reaching back with his left hand for the marker-strobe. As he crossed the road, he kept looking to his left, the route that additional troop trucks would take to approach the now entirely secure prison camp. *Damn!*

Rarely had concentration ever worked against John Kelly, but it did this time. The sound of the approaching car, swishing through the muddy surface of the road, was a little too close to the environmental noises, and by the time he recognized the difference

it was too late. When the car came around the bend, he was right in the middle of the road, standing there like a deer in the headlights, and surely the driver must see him. What followed was automatic.

Kelly brought his carbine up and fired a short burst into the driver's area. The car didn't swerve for a moment, and he laid a second burst into the front-passenger seat. The car changed directions then, slamming directly into a tree. The entire sequence could not have taken three seconds, and Kelly's heart started beating again after a dreadfully long hiatus. He ran to the car. Whom had he killed?

The driver had come through the windshield, two rounds in his brain. Kelly wrenched open the passenger door. The person there was—the Major! Also hit in the head. The shots weren't quite centered, and though the man's skull was opened on the right side, his body was still quivering. Kelly yanked him out of the vehicle and had knelt down to search him before he heard a groan from the inside. He lunged inside, finding another man—Russian!—on the floor in the rear. Kelly pulled him out, too. The man had a backpack clutched in his hands.

The routine came as automatically as the shot. Kelly clubbed the Russian to full unconsciousness with his buttstock, then quickly turned back to rifle the Major's uniform for intelligence material. He stuffed all documents and papers into his pockets. The Vietnamese was looking at him, one of his eyes still functioning.

"Life's a bitch, ain't it?" Kelly said coldly as the eyes lost their animation.

"What the hell do I do with you?" Kelly asked, turning to the Russian body. "You're the guy who's been hassling our guys, aren't you?" He knelt there, opening the backpack and finding whole sheaves of paper, which answered his question for him—something the Soviet colonel was singularly unable to do.

Think fast, John—the helo isn't very far out now.

"I got the strobe!" the copilot said.

"Coming in hot." The pilot was driving his Sikorsky as hard as the engines would allow. Two hundred yards short of the clearing he pulled back sharply on the cyclic, and the forty-five-degree nose-up attitude stopped forward motion quickly—perfectly in fact, as he leveled out within feet of the blinking infrared strobe light. The rescue helicopter came to a steady hover two feet over the deck,

buffeted by the winds. The Navy commander was fighting all manner of forces to hold his aircraft steady, and was slow to respond to something his eyes had told him. He had seen the rotor wash knock his intended survivor down, but—

"Did I see *two* people out there?" he asked over the intercom.

"Go go go!" another voice said over the IC circuit. "Pax aboard now, go!"

"Getting the hell outa Dodge City, now!" The pilot pulled collective for altitude, kicked rudder pedal, and dropped his nose, heading back to the river as the helicopter accelerated. *Wasn't there just supposed to be one person?* He set it aside. He had to fly now, and it was thirty twisty miles to the water and safety.

"Who the fuck is this?" Irvin asked.

"Hitchhiker," Kelly answered over the din of the engines. He shook his head. Explanations would be lengthy and would have to wait. Irvin understood, offering him a canteen. Kelly drained it. That's when the shaking started. In front of the helicopter crew and five Marines, Kelly shivered like a man in the Arctic, huddling and clutching himself, holding his weapon close until Irvin took it away and cleared it. It had been fired, the master gunnery sergeant saw. Later he'd find out why and at what. The door gunners scanned the river valley while their aircraft screamed out, barely a hundred feet over the meandering surface. The ride proved uneventful, far different from what they had expected, as was the case with this whole night. What had gone wrong? they all wanted to know. The answer was in the man they'd just picked up. But who the hell was the other one, and wasn't that a Russian uniform? Two Marines sat over him. One of them tied his hands up. A third secured the pack's flap in place with the straps.

"Rescue One, feet-wet. We have SNAKE aboard, over."

"Rescue One, this is CRICKET, roger, copy that. Standing by. Out." Albie looked up. "Well, that's it."

Podulski took it the hardest of all. BOXWOOD GREEN had been his idea from the start. Had it been successful, it might have changed everything. It might have opened the door for CERTAIN CORNET, might have changed the course of the war—and his son's death would not have been for nothing. He looked up at the others. He almost asked if they might still try it again, but he knew better. Washout. It was a bitter concept and an even more bitter reality for

one who had served his adopted country for nearly thirty years.

"Tough day?" Frank Allen asked.

Lieutenant Mark Charon was surprisingly chipper for a man who'd been through a fatal shooting and the almost-as-rigorous interrogation that had followed it.

"The damned fool. Didn't have to happen that way," Charon said. "I guess he didn't like the idea of life on Falls Road," the narcotics-division lieutenant added, referring to the Maryland State Penitentiary. Located in downtown Baltimore, the building was so grim that its inmates referred to it as Frankenstein's Castle.

Allen didn't have to tell him much. The procedures for the incident were straightforward. Charon would go on administrative leave for ten working days while the Department made sure that the shooting had not been contrary to official policy guidelines for the use of "deadly force." It was essentially a two-week vacation with pay, except that Charon might have to face additional interviews. Not likely in this case, as several police officers had observed the whole thing, one from a mere twenty feet away.

"I've got the case, Mark," Allen told him. "I've been over the preliminaries. Looks like you'll come out okay on this. Anything you might have done to spook him?"

Charon shook his head. "No, I didn't shout or anything until he went for his piece. I tried to ease him into it, y'know, calm him down, like? But he just jumped the wrong way. Eddie Morello died of the dumbs," the Lieutenant observed, impassively enjoying the fact that he was telling the exact truth.

"Well, I'm not gonna cry over the death of a doper. Good day all around, Mark."

"How's that, Frank?" Charon sat down and stole a cigarette.

"Got a call from Pittsburgh today. Seems there may be a witness for the Fountain Murder that Em and Tom are handling."

"No shit? That's good news. What do we have?"

"Somebody, probably a girl from how the guy was talking, who saw Madden and Waters get it. Sounds like she's talking to her minister about it and he's trying to coax her into opening up."

"Great," Charon observed, concealing his inward chill as well as he'd hid his elation at his first contract murder. One more thing to clean up. With luck that would be the end of it.

The helicopter flared and made a soft landing on USS *Ogden.* As

soon as it was down, people came back out on the flight deck. Deck crewmen secured the aircraft in place with chains while they approached. The Marines came out first, relieved to be safe, but also bitterly disappointed at the way the night had turned out. The timing was nearly perfect, they knew. This was their programmed time to return to the ship, with their rescued comrades, and they'd looked forward to this moment as a sports team might anticipate the joys of a winning locker room. But not now. They'd lost and they still didn't know why.

Irvin and another Marine climbed out, holding a body, which really surprised the assembled flag officers as Kelly alighted next. The helicopter pilot's eyes grew wide as he watched. There had been two bodies in the meadow. But mainly he was relieved at achieving another semisuccessful rescue mission into North Vietnam.

"What the hell?" Maxwell asked as the ship commenced a turn to the east.

"Uh, guys, let's get this guy inside and isolated right now!" Ritter said.

"He's unconscious, sir."

"Then get a medic, too," Ritter ordered.

They picked one of *Ogden*'s many empty troop-berthing spaces for the debrief. Kelly was allowed to wash his face, but nothing else. A medical corpsman checked out the Russian, pronouncing him dazed but healthy, both pupils equal and reactive, no concussion. A pair of Marines stood guard over him.

"Four trucks," Kelly said. "They just drove right in. A reinforced platoon—weapons platoon, probably, they showed up while the assault team was inbound, started digging in right away—about fifty of 'em. I had to blow it off."

Greer and Ritter traded a look. *No coincidence.*

Kelly looked at Maxwell. "God, I'm sorry, sir." He paused. "It would not have been possible to execute the mission. I had to leave the hill because they were putting listening posts out. I mean, even if we were able to deal with that—"

"We had gunships, remember?" Podulski growled.

"Back off, Cas," James Greer warned.

Kelly looked long at the Admiral before responding to the accusation. "Admiral, the chances of success were exactly zero. You guys gave me the job of eyeballing the objective so that we could

do it on the cheap, right? With more assets, maybe we could have done it—the Song Tay team could have done it. It would have been messy, but they had enough firepower to bring it off, coming right into the objective like they did." He shook his head again.

"Not this way."

"You're sure?" Maxwell asked.

Kelly nodded. "Yes, sir. Sure as hell."

"Thank you, Mr. Clark," Captain Albie said quietly, knowing the truth of what he'd just heard. Kelly just sat there, still tensed from the night's events.

"Okay," Ritter said after a moment. "What about our guest, Mr. Clark?"

"I fucked up," Kelly admitted, explaining how the car had gotten so close. He reached into his pockets. "I killed the driver and the camp commander—I think that's what he was. He had all this on him." Kelly reached into his pockets and handed over the documents. "Lots of papers on the Russian. I figured it wasn't smart to leave him there. I figured—I thought maybe he might be useful to us."

"These papers are in Russian," Irvin announced.

"Give me some," Ritter ordered. "My Russian's pretty good."

"We need somebody who can read Vietnamese, too."

"I have one of those," Albie said. "Irvin, get Sergeant Chalmers in here."

"Aye aye, sir."

Ritter and Greer moved to a corner table "Lord," the field officer observed, flipping through the written notes. "This guy's gotten a lot… Rokossovskiy? He's in Hanoi? Here's a summary sheet."

Staff Sergeant Chalmers, an intelligence specialist, started reading through the papers taken from Major Vinh. Everyone else waited for the spooks to get through the papers.

"Where am I?" Grishanov asked in Russian. He tried to reach for his blindfold, but his hands couldn't move.

"How are you feeling?" a voice answered in the same language.

"Car smashed into something." The voice stopped. "Where am I?"

"You're aboard USS *Ogden*, Colonel," Ritter told him in English.

The body strapped in the bunk went rigid, and the prisoner immediately said, in Russian, that he didn't speak English.

"Then why are some of your notes in English?" Ritter asked reasonably.

"I am a Soviet officer. You have no right—"

"We have as much right as you had to interrogate American prisoners of war, and to conspire to kill them, Comrade Colonel."

"What do you mean?"

"Your friend Major Vinh is dead, but we have his dispatches. I guess you were finished talking to our people, right? And the NVA were trying to figure the most convenient way to eliminate them. Are you telling me you didn't know that?"

The oath Ritter heard was a particularly vile one, but the voice held genuine surprise that was interesting. This man was too injured to dissimulate well. He looked up at Greer.

"I've got some more reading to do. You want to keep this guy company?"

The one good thing that happened to Kelly that night was that Captain Franks hadn't tossed the aviator rations over the side after all. Finished with his debrief, he found his cabin and downed three stiff ones. With the release from the tension of the night, physical exhaustion assaulted the young man. The three drinks knocked him out, and he collapsed into his bunk without so much as a cleansing shower.

It was decided that *Ogden* would continue as planned, steaming at twenty knots back towards Subic Bay. The big amphibious ship became a quiet place. The crew, pumped up for an important and dramatic mission. became subdued with its failure. Watches were changed, the ship continued to function as before, but the mess rooms' only noise was that of the metal trays and utensils. No jokes, no stories. The additional medical personnel took it the hardest of all. With no one to treat and nothing to do, they just wandered about. Before noon the helicopters departed, the Cobras for Danang and the rescue birds back to their carrier. The signal-intelligence people switched over to more regular duties, searching the airways for radio messages, finding a new mission to replace the old.

Kelly didn't awaken until 1800 hours. After showering, he headed below to find the Marines. He owed them an explanation, he thought. Somebody did. They were in the same space. The sand-table model was still there as well.

"I was right up here," he said, finding the rubber band with two eyes on it.

"How many bad guys?"

"Four trucks, they came in this road, stopped here," Kelly

explained. “They were digging in crew-served weapons here and here. They sent people up my hill. I saw another team heading this way right before I moved.”

“Jesus,” a squad leader noted. “Right on our approach route.”

“Yeah,” Kelly confirmed. “Anyway, that’s why.”

“How’d they know to send in the reinforcements?” a corporal asked.

“Not my department.”

“Thanks, Snake,” the squad leader said, looking from the model that would soon be tossed over the side. “Tough call, wasn’t it?”

Kelly nodded. “I’m sorry, pal. Jesus God, I’m sorry.”

“Mr. Clark, I got a baby due in two months. ’Cept for you, well…” The Marine extended his hand across the model.

“Thank you, sir.” Kelly took it.

“Mr. Clark, sir?” A sailor stuck his head into the compartment. “The admirals are looking for you. Up in officer country, sir.”

“Doctor Rosen,” Sam said, lifting the phone.

“Hi, doctor. This is Sergeant Douglas.”

“What can I do for you?”

“We’re trying to track down your friend Kelly. He isn’t answering his phone. Do you have any idea where he is?”

“I haven’t seen him in a long time,” the surgeon said guardedly.

“You know anybody who has?”

“I’ll check around. What’s the story?” Sam added, asking what he knew might be a highly inconvenient question, wondering what sort of answer he might get.

“I, uh, can’t say, sir. I hope you understand.”

“Ummhmm. Yeah, okay, I’ll ask.”

“Feeling better?” Ritter asked first.

“Some,” Kelly allowed. “What’s the story on the Russian?”

“Clark, you just might have done something useful.” Ritter gestured to a table with no fewer than ten piles of documents on them.

“They’re planning to kill the prisoners,” Greer said.

“Who? The Russians?” Kelly asked.

“The Vietnamese. The Russians want them alive. This guy you picked up is trying to take them home,” Ritter said, lifting a sheet of paper. “Here’s his draft of the letter justifying it.”

“Is that good or bad?”

The outside noises were different, Zacharias thought. More of them, too. Shouts with purpose to them, though he didn't know what purpose. For the first day in a month, Grishanov hadn't visited him, even for a few minutes. The loneliness he felt became even more acute, and his only company was the realization that he'd given to the Soviet Union a graduate-level course in continental air-defense. He hadn't meant to do it. He hadn't even known what he was doing. That was no consolation, however. The Russian had played him for a fool, and Colonel Robin Zacharias, USAF, had just given it all up, outsmarted by some kindness and fellowship from an atheist… and drink. Stupidity and sin, such a likely combination of human weaknesses, and he'd done it all.

He didn't even have tears for his shame. He was beyond that, sitting on the floor of his cell, staring at the rough, dirty concrete between his bare feet. He'd broken faith with his God and his country, Zacharias told himself, as his evening meal was pushed through the slot at the bottom of his door. Thin, bodiless pumpkin soup and maggoty rice. He made no move towards it.

Grishanov knew he was a dead man. They wouldn't give him back. They couldn't even admit that they had him. He'd disappear, as other Russians in Vietnam had disappeared, some at SAM sites, some doing other things for those ungrateful little bastards. Why were they feeding him so well? It had to be a large ship, but it was also his first time at sea. Even the decent food was hard to get down, but he swore not to disgrace himself by succumbing to motion sickness mixed with fear. He was a fighter pilot, a good one who had faced death before, mainly at the controls of a malfunctioning aircraft. He remembered wondering at the time what they'd tell his Marina. He wondered now. A letter? What? Would his family be looked after by his fellow officers in PVO Strany? Would the pension be sufficient?

"Are you kidding me?"

"Mr. Clark, the world can be a very complicated place. Why did you think the Russians like them?"

"They give them weapons and training, don't they?"

Ritter stubbed out his Winston. "We give those things to people all over the world. They're not all nice folks, but we have to work with them. It's the same for the Russians, maybe less so, but still

pretty much the same. Anyway, this

Grishanov guy was going to a considerable effort to keep our people alive." Ritter held up another sheet. "Here's a request for better food—for a *doctor*, even."

"So what do we do with him?" Admiral Podulski asked. "That, gentlemen, is our department," Ritter said, looking at Greer, who nodded.

"Wait a minute," Kelly objected. "He was pumping them for information."

"So?" Ritter asked. "That was his job."

"We're getting away from the real issue here," Maxwell said.

James Greer poured some coffee for himself. "I know. We have to move fast."

"And finally…" Ritter tapped a translation of the Vietnamese message. "We know that somebody burned the mission. We're going to track that bastard down."

Kelly was still too drugged from sleep to follow it all, much less see far enough into the future to realize how he had assumed his place in the center of the affair.

"Where's John?"

Sandy O'Toole looked up from her paperwork. It was close to the end of her shift, and Professor Rosen's question brought to the fore a worry that she'd managed to suppress for over a week.

"Out of the country. Why?"

"I got a call today from the police. They're looking for him."

Oh, God. "Why?"

"He didn't say." Rosen looked around. They were alone at the nurses' station. "Sandy, I know he's been doing things—I mean, I think I know, but I haven't—"

"I haven't heard from him, either. What are we supposed to do?"

Rosen grimaced and looked away before replying. "As good citizens, we're supposed to cooperate with the police—but we're not doing that, are we? No idea where he is?"

"He told me, but I'm not supposed to—he's doing something with the government… over in…" She couldn't finish, couldn't bring herself to say the word. "He gave a number I can call. I haven't used it."

"I would," Sam told her. and left.

It wasn't right. He was off doing something scary and important,

only to come back to a police investigation. It seemed to Nurse O'Toole that the unfairness of life had gotten as bad as it could. She was wrong.

"Pittsburgh?"

"That's what he said," Henry confirmed.

"It's cute, by the way, having him as your man on the inside. Very professional," Piaggi said with respect.

"He said we need to take care of it quick, like. She hasn't said much yet."

"She saw it all?" Piaggi didn't have to add that he didn't think that very professional at all. "Henry, keeping people in line is one thing. Making them into witnesses is another."

"Tony, I'm going to take care of that, but we need to handle this problem right quick, y'dig?" It seemed to Henry Tucker that he was in the stretch run, and over the finish line were both safety and prosperity. That five more people had to die to get him across that line was a small matter after the race he'd already run.

"Go on."

"The family name is Brown. Her name is Doris. Her father's name is Raymond."

"You sure of this?"

"The girls talk to each other. I got the street name and everything. You got connections. I need you to use 'em fast."

Piaggi copied down the information. "Okay. Our Philly connections can handle it. It's not going to be cheap, Henry."

"I didn't expect it would be."

The flight deck looked very empty. All four of the aircraft briefly assigned to *Ogden* were gone now, and the deck reassumed its former status as the ship's unofficial town square. The stars were the same as before, now that the ship was again under clear skies, and a sliver of a waning moon was high in the sky in these early hours. No sailors were out now, however. Those awake at this hour were on duty, but for Kelly and the Marines the day/night cycle was askew, and the gray steel walls of their spaces were too confining for the thoughts they had. The ship's wake was a curious luminescent green from the photoplankton stirred up by the ship's screws, and left a long trail showing where she'd been. Half a dozen men stood well aft, staring at it without words.

“It could have been a hell of a lot worse, you know.” Kelly turned. It was Irvin. It had to be.

“Could have been a hell of a lot better, too, Guns.”

“Wasn’t no accident. them showing up like that, was it?”

“I don’t think I’m supposed to say. Is that a good enough answer?”

“Yes, sir. And Lord Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’”

“And what if they do know?”

Irvin grunted. “I think you know what my vote is. Whoever it was, they could have killed all of us.”

“You know, Guns, just once, *just one time*, I’d like to finish something the right way,” Kelly said.

“Yeah.” Irvin took a second before going on, and going back. “Why the hell would anybody do something like that?”

A shape loomed close. It was *Newport News*, a lovely silhouette only two thousand yards off, and visible in a spectral way despite the absence of lights. She, too, was heading back, the last of the Navy’s big-gun cruisers, creature of a bygone age, returning home after the same failure that Kelly and Irvin knew.

“Seven-one-three-one,” the female voice said.

“Hello, I’m trying to get Admiral James Greer,” Sandy told the secretary.

“He’s not in.”

“Can you tell me when he’ll be back?”

“Sorry, no, I don’t know.”

“But it’s important.”

“Could you tell me who’s calling, please?”

“What is this place?”

“This is Admiral Greer’s office.”

“No, I mean, is it the Pentagon?”

“Don’t you know?”

Sandy didn’t know. and that question led her off in a direction she didn’t understand. “Please, I need your help.”

“Who’s calling, please?”

“Please, I need to know where you are!”

“I can’t tell you that,” the secretary responded, feeling herself to be one of the fortress walls that protected U.S. National Security.

“Is this the Pentagon?”

Well, she could tell her that. “No, it isn’t.”

What then? Sandy wondered. She took a deep breath. “A friend of mine gave me this number to call. He’s with Admiral Greer. He said I could call here to find out if he’s okay.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Look, I *know* he went to Vietnam!”

“Miss, I cannot discuss where Admiral Greer is.” *Who violated security!* She’d have to make a report on this.

“It’s not about him, it’s about John!” *Calm down. You’re not helping anyone this way.*

“John who?” the secretary asked.

Deep breath. Swallow. “Please get a message to Admiral Greer. This is Sandy. It’s about John. He will understand. Okay? He will understand. This is most important.” She gave her home and work numbers.

“Thank you. I will do what I can.” The line went dead.

Sandy wanted to scream, and nearly did so. So the Admiral had gone, too. Okay, he’d be close to where John is. The secretary would get the message through. She would have to. People like that, if you said *most important*, didn’t have the imagination not to do it. Settle down. Anyway, where he was, the police couldn’t get him either. But for the rest of the day, and into the next, the second hand on her watch seemed to stand still.

• • •

USS *Ogden* pulled into Subic Bay Naval Station in the early afternoon. Coming alongside seemed to take forever in the moist tropical heat. Finally lines were tossed and a brow advanced to the ship’s side. A civilian sprinted up first even before it was properly secured. Soon thereafter the Marines filed off to a bus which would take them to Cubi Point. The deck division watched them walk off. A few hands were shaken as everyone tried to leave at least one good memory from the experience, but “good try” just didn’t make it, and “good luck” seemed blasphemous. Their C-141 was waiting there for the flight stateside. Mr. Clark, they saw, wasn’t with them.

“John, it seems you have a lady friend who’s worried about you,” Greer said, handing the message over. It was the friendliest of the dispatches that the junior CIA officer had brought up from Manila. Kelly scanned it while three admirals reviewed the others.

"Do I have time to call her, sir? She's worried about me."

"You left her my office number?" Greer was slightly vexed.

"Her husband was killed with the First Cav, sir. She worries," Kelly explained.

"Okay." Greer put his own troubles aside for the moment. "I'll have Barbara tell her you're safe."

The rest of the messages were less welcome. Admirals Maxwell and Podulski were being summoned back to Washington soonest to report on the failure of BOXWOOD GREEN. Ritter and Greer had similar orders, though they also had an ace in the hole. Their KC-135 was waiting at Clark Air Force Base. A puddle jumper would hop over the mountains. The best news at the moment was their disrupted sleep cycle. The flight back to the American East Coast would bring them back in just the right way.

Colonel Grishanov came into the sunlight along with the admirals. He was wearing clothing borrowed from Captain Franks—they were of approximately the same size—and escorted by Maxwell and Podulski. Kolya was under no illusions of his chance to escape anywhere, not on an American naval base located on the soil of an American ally. Ritter was talking to him quietly, in Russian, as all six men walked down to the waiting cars. Ten minutes later, they climbed into an Air Force C-12 twin-prop Beechcraft. Half an hour later that aircraft taxied right alongside the larger Boeing jet, which got off less than an hour after they'd left *Ogden.* Kelly found himself a nice wide seat and strapped himself in, asleep before the windowless transport started rolling. The next stop, they'd told him, was Hickam in Hawaii, and he didn't plan to be awake for any of that.

31

Home Is the Hunter

The flight wasn't as restful for the others. Greer had managed to get a couple of messages taken care of before the takeoff, but he and Ritter were the busiest. Their aircraft—the Air Force had lent it to them for the mission, no questions asked—was a semi-VIP bird belonging to Andrews Air Force Base, and was often used for Congressional junkets. That meant an ample supply of liquor, and while they drank straight coffee, their Russian guest's cups were laced with brandy, a little at first, then in increasing doses that his decaffeinated brew didn't begin to attenuate.

Ritter handled most of the interrogation. His first task was to explain to Grishanov that they had no plans to kill him. Yes, they were CIA. Yes, Ritter was a field officer—a spy, if you like—with ample experience behind the Iron Curtain—excuse me, working as a slinking spy in the peace-loving Socialist East Bloc—but that was his job, as Kolya—do you mind if I call you Kolya?—had *his* job. Now, please, Colonel, can you give us the names of our men? (That was already listed in Grishanov's voluminous notes.) Your friends, you say? Yes, we are very grateful indeed for your efforts to keep them alive. They all have families, you know, just like you do. More coffee, Colonel? Yes, it is good coffee, isn't it? Of *course* you'll go home to your family. What do you think we are, barbarians? Grishanov had the good manners not to answer that one *Damn*, Greer thought, *but Bob is good at this sort of thing.* It wasn't about courage or patriotism. It was about humanity. Grishanov was a tough hombre, probably a hell of a good airplane-driver—what a shame they couldn't let Maxwell or especially Podulski in on this!—but he was at bottom a man, and the quality of his character

worked against him. He didn't want the American prisoners to die. That plus the stress of capture, plus the whiplash surprise of the cordial treatment, plus a lot of good brandy, all conspired to loosen his tongue. It helped a lot more that Ritter didn't even approach matters of grave concern to the Soviet state. *Hell, Colonel, I know you're not going to give up any secrets—so why ask?*

"Your man killed Vinh, did he?" the Russian asked halfway across the Pacific.

"Yes, he did. It was an accident and—" The Russian cut Ritter off with a wave.

"Good. He was *nekulturny*, a vicious little fascist bastard. He wants to kill those men, murder them," Kolya added with the aid of six brandies.

"Well, Colonel, we're hoping to find a way to prevent that."

"Neurosurgery West," the nurse said.

"Trying to get Sandra O'Toole."

"Hold on, please. Sandy?" The nurse on desk duty held the phone up. The nursing-team leader took it.

"This is O'Toole."

"Miss O'Toole, this is Barbara—we spoke earlier. Admiral Greer's office?"

"Yes!"

"Admiral Greer told me to let you know—John is okay and he's now on his way home."

Sandy's head spun around, to look in a direction where there were no eyes to see the sudden tears of relief. A mixed blessing perhaps, but a blessing still. "Can you tell me when?"

"Sometime tomorrow, that's all I know."

"Thank you."

"Surely." The line went immediately dead.

Well, that's something—maybe a lot. She wondered what would happen when he got here, but at least he was coming back alive. More than Tim had managed to do.

The hard landing at Hickam—the pilot was tired—startled Kelly into wakefulness. An Air Force sergeant gave him a friendly shake to make sure as the aircraft taxied to a remote part of the base for refueling and servicing. Kelly took the time to get out and walk around. The climate was warm here, but not the oppressive heat of

Vietnam. It was American soil, and things were different here.…

Sure they are.

Just once, just one time… he remembered saying. *Yes, I'm going to get those other girls out just like I got Doris out. It shouldn't be all that hard. I'll get Burt next and we'll talk. I'll even let the bastard go when I'm done, probably. I can't save the whole world, but… by Jesus, I'll save some of it!*

He found a phone in the Distinguished Visitors lounge and placed a call.

"Hello?" the groggy voice said, five thousand miles away.

"Hi, Sandy. It's John!" he said with a smile. Even if those aviators weren't coming home just yet—well, he was, and he was grateful for that.

"John! Where are you?"

"Would you believe Hawaii?"

"You're okay?"

"A little tired, but, yes. No holes or anything," he reported with a smile. Just the sound of her voice had brightened his day. But not for long.

"John, there's a problem."

The sergeant at the reception desk saw the DV's face change. Then he turned back into the phone booth and became less interesting.

"Okay. It must be Doris," Kelly said. "I mean, only you and the docs know about me, and—"

"It wasn't us," Sandy assured him.

"Okay. Please call Doris and… be careful, but—"

"Warn her off?"

"Can you do that?"

"Yes!"

Kelly tried to relax a little, almost succeeding. "I'll be back in about… oh, nine or ten hours. Will you be at work?"

"I have the day off."

"Okay, Sandy. See you soon. 'Bye."

"John!" she called urgently.

"What?"

"I want… I mean…" her voice stopped.

Kelly smiled again. "We can talk about that when I get there, honey." Maybe he wasn't just going home. Maybe he was going home *to* something. Kelly made a quick inventory of everything

he'd done. He still had his converted pistol and other weapons on the boat, but everything he'd worn on every job: shoes, socks, outer clothing, even underwear, were now in whatever trash dump. He'd left behind no evidence that he knew of. The police might be interested in talking to him, fine. He did *not* have to talk to them. That was one of the nice things about the Constitution, Kelly thought as he walked back to the aircraft and trotted up the stairs.

One flight crew found the beds just aft of the flight deck while the relief crew started engines. Kelly sat with the CIA officers. The Russian, he saw, was snoring loudly and blissfully.

Ritter chuckled. "He's going to have one hell of a hangover."

"What'd you get into him?"

"Started off with good brandy. Ended up with California stuff. Brandy really messes me up the next day," Ritter said tiredly as the KC-135 started rolling. He was drinking a martini now that his prisoner was no longer able to answer questions.

"So what's the story?" Kelly asked.

Ritter explained what he knew. The camp had indeed been established as a bargaining chip for use with the Russians, but it seemed that the Vietnamese had used that particular chip in a rather inefficient way and were now thinking about eliminating it along with the prisoners.

"You mean because of the raid?" *Oh, God!*

"Correct. But settle down, Clark. We got us a Russian, and that's a bargaining chip too. Mr. Clark," Ritter said with a tight smile, "I like your style."

"What do you mean?"

"Bringing that Russian in, you showed commendable initiative. And the way you blew the mission off, that showed good judgment."

"Look, I didn't—I mean, I couldn't—"

"You didn't screw up. Somebody else might have. You made a quick decision, and it was the right decision. Interested in serving your country?" Ritter asked with an alcohol-aided smile of his own.

Sandy awoke at six-thirty, which was late for her. She got her morning paper, started the coffee, and decided to stick to toast for breakfast, watching the kitchen-wall clock and wondering how early she might call Pittsburgh.

The lead story on the front page was the drug shooting. A police

officer had gotten himself in a gunfight with a drug dealer. Well, good, she thought. Six kilograms of "pure" heroin, the news piece said—that was a lot. She wondered if this was the same bunch that… no, the leader of that group was black, at least Doris had said so. Anyway. another druggie had left the face of the planet. Another look at the clock. Still too early for a civilized call. She went into the living room to switch on the TV. It was already a hot, lazy day. She'd been up late the night before and had difficulty getting back to sleep after John's call. She tried to watch the "Today Show" and didn't quite notice that her eyes were growing heavy….

It was after ten when her eyes opened back up. Angry with herself, she shook her head clear and went back to the kitchen. Doris's number was pinned next to the phone. She called, and heard the phone ring… four—six—ten times, without an answer. Damn. Out shopping? Off to see Dr. Bryant? She'd try again in an hour. In the meantime she'd try to figure out exactly what she would say. Might this be a crime? Was she obstructing justice? How deeply was she involved in this business? The thought came as an unpleasant surprise. But she was involved. She'd helped rescue this girl from a dangerous life, and she couldn't stop now. She'd just tell Doris not to hurt the people who had helped her, to be very, very careful. Please.

Reverend Meyer came late. He'd been held up by a phone call at the parsonage and was in a profession where one couldn't say that he had to leave for an appointment. As he parked, he noticed a flower-delivery truck heading up the hill. It turned right, disappearing from view as he took the parking place it had occupied a few doors up from the Brown house. He was a little worried as he locked his car. He had to persuade Doris to speak with his son. Peter had assured him that they'd be extremely careful. Yes, Pop, we can protect her. Now all he had to do was to get that message across to a frightened young woman and a father whose love had survived the most rigorous of tests. Well, he'd handled more delicate problems than this, the minister told himself. Like shortstopping a few divorces. Negotiating treaties between nations could not be harder than saving a rocky marriage.

Even so, the way up to the front porch seemed awfully steep, Meyer thought, holding the rail as he climbed up the chipped and worn concrete steps. There were a few buckets of paint on the

porch. Perhaps Raymond was going to do his house now that it contained a family again. A good sign, Pastor Meyer thought as he pushed the button. He could hear the doorbell's two-tone chime. Raymond's white Ford was parked right here. He knew they were home… but no one came to the door. Well, maybe someone was dressing or in the bathroom, as often happened to everyone's embarrassment. He waited another minute or so, frowning as he pushed the button again. He was slow to note that the door wasn't quite closed all the way. *You are a minister*, he told himself, *not a burglar.*

With a small degree of uneasiness, he pushed it open and stuck his head inside.

"Hello? Raymond?… Doris?" he called, loudly enough to be heard anywhere in the house. The TV was on, some mindless game show playing on the living-room set. "Hellooooo!"

This was odd. He stepped inside, somewhat embarrassed with himself for doing so, wondering what the problem was. There was a cigarette burning in an ashtray here, almost down to the filter, and the vertical trail of smoke was a clear warning that something was amiss. An ordinary citizen possessed of his intelligence would have withdrawn then, but Reverend Meyer was not ordinary. He saw a box of flowers on the rug, opened, long-stem roses inside. Roses were not made to lie on the floor. He remembered his military service just then, how unpleasant it had been, but how uplifting to attend the needs of men in the face of death—he wondered why that thought had sprung so clearly into his mind; its sudden relevance started his heart racing. Meyer walked through the living room, quiet now, listening. He found the kitchen empty too, a pot of water coming to boil on the stove, cups and tea bags on the kitchen table. The basement door was open as well, the light on. He couldn't stop now. He opened the door all the way and started down. He was halfway to the bottom when he saw their legs.

Father and daughter were facedown on the bare concrete floor, and the blood from their head wounds had pooled together on the uneven surface. The horror was immediate and overwhelming. His mouth dropped open with a sudden intake of breath as he looked down at two parishioners whose funeral he would officiate in two days' time. They were holding hands, he saw, father and daughter. They'd died together, but the consolation that this tragically afflicted family was now united with their God could not stop a

scream of fury at those who had been in this home only ten minutes earlier. Meyer recovered after a few seconds, continued down the stairs and knelt, reaching down to touch the intertwined hands and entreating God to have mercy on their souls. Of that he had confidence. Perhaps she'd lost her life, but not her soul, Meyer would say over the bodies, and her father had reclaimed his daughter's love. He'd let his parishioners know that both had been saved, Meyer promised himself. Then it was time to call his son.

The stolen flower truck was left in a supermarket parking lot. Two men got out and walked into the store, just to be careful, and out the back door, where their car was parked. They drove southeast onto the Pennsylvania Turnpike for the three-hour trip back to Philadelphia. Maybe longer, the driver thought. They didn't want a state cop to stop them. Both men were ten thousand dollars richer. They didn't know the story. They had no need to know.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Brown?"

"No. Who's this?"

"This is Sandy. Is Mr. Brown there?"

"How do you know the Brown family?"

"Who is this?" Sandy asked, looking out her kitchen window with alarm.

"This is Sergeant Peter Meyer, Pittsburgh Police Department. Now, who are you?"

"I'm the one who drove Doris back—what's the matter?"

"Your name, please?"

"Are they okay?"

"They appear to have been murdered," Meyer replied in a harshly patient way. "Now, I need to know your name and—"

Sandy brought her finger down on the switch, cutting the circuit before she could hear more. To hear more might force her to answer questions. Her legs were shaking, but there was a chair close by. Her eyes were wide. It wasn't possible, she told herself. How could anyone know where she was? Surely she hadn't called the people who—no, not possible, the nurse thought.

"Why?" she whispered the question aloud. "Why, why, why?" *She couldn't hurt anyone—yes, she could… but how did they find out?*

They have the police infiltrated. She remembered the words from John's mouth. He was right, wasn't he?

But that was a side issue.

"Damn it, we saved her!" Sandy told the kitchen. Sandy could remember every minute of that nearly sleepless first week, and then the progress, the elation, the purest and best kind of professional satisfaction for a job well done, the joy of seeing the look in her dad's face. Gone. A waste of her time.

No.

Not a waste of time. That was her task in life, to make sick people well. She'd done that. She was proud of that. It was not wasted time. It was stolen time. Stolen time, two stolen lives. She started crying and had to go to the downstairs bathroom, grabbing tissue to wipe her eyes. Then she looked in the mirror, seeing eyes that she'd never beheld before. And seeing that, she truly understood.

Disease was a dragon that she fought forty hours or more per week. A skilled nurse and teacher who worked well with the surgeons on her unit, Sandra O'Toole fought those dragons in her way, with professionalism and kindness and intelligence, more often winning than losing. And every year things got better. Progress was never fast enough, but it was real and could be measured, and perhaps she'd live long enough to see the last dragon on her unit die once and for all.

But there was more than one kind of dragon, wasn't there? Some couldn't be killed with kindness and medications and skilled nursing care. She'd defeated one, but another had killed Doris anyway. *That* dragon needed the sword, in the hands of a warrior. The sword was a tool, wasn't it? A necessary tool, if you wanted to slay that particular dragon. Perhaps it was one she could never use herself, but necessary nonetheless. Someone had to hold that sword. John wasn't a bad man at all, just realistic.

She fought her dragons. He fought his. *It was the same fight.* She'd been wrong to judge him. Now she understood, seeing in her eyes the same emotion that she'd beheld months earlier in his, as her rage passed, but not very far, and the determination set in.

"Well, everybody lucked out," Hicks said, handing over a beer.

"How so, Wally?" Peter Henderson asked.

"The mission was a washout. It aborted just in time. Didn't even get anyone hurt in the process, thank God. Everyone's flying home right now."

"Good news, Wally!" Henderson said, meaning it. He didn't want

to kill anybody either. He just wanted the damned war to end, the same as Wally did. It was a shame about the men in that camp, but some things couldn't be helped. "What happened exactly?"

"Nobody knows yet. You want me to find out?"

Peter nodded. "Carefully. It's something the Intelligence Committee ought to know about, when the Agency fucks up like that. I can get the information to them. But you have to be careful."

"No problem. I'm learning how to stroke Roger." Hicks lit up his first joint of the evening, annoying his guest.

"You could lose your clearance that way, you know?"

"Well, gee, then I'll have to join Dad and make a few mill' on The Street, eh?"

"Wally, do you want to change the system or do you want to let other people keep it the same?"

Hicks nodded. "Yeah, I suppose."

The following winds had allowed the KC-135 to make the hop in from Hawaii without a refueling stop, and the landing was a gentle one. Remarkably, Kelly's sleep cycle was about right now. It was five in the afternoon, and in another six or seven hours he'd be ready for more sleep.

"Can I get a day or two off?"

"We'll want you back to Quantico for an extended debrief," Ritter told him, stiff and sore from the extended flight.

"Fine, just so I'm not in custody or anything. I could use a lift up to Baltimore."

"I'll see what I can do," Greer said as the plane came to a halt.

Two security officers from the Agency were the first up the mobile stairs, even before the oversized cargo hatch swung up. Ritter woke the Russian up.

"Welcome to Washington."

"Take me to my embassy?" he asked hopefully. Ritter almost laughed.

"Not quite yet. We'll find you a nice, comfortable place, though."

Grishanov was too groggy to object, rubbing his head and needing something for the pain. He went with the security officers, down the steps to their waiting car. It left at once for a safe house near Winchester, Virginia.

"Thanks for the try, John," Admiral Maxwell said, taking the younger man's hand.

"I'm sorry for what I said before," Cas said, doing the same. "You were right." They, too, had a car waiting. Kelly watched them enter it from the hatch.

"So what happens to them?" he asked Greer.

James shrugged, leading Kelly out and down the stairs. Noise from other aircraft made his voice hard to hear. "Dutch was in line for a fleet, and maybe the CNO's job. I don't suppose that'll happen now. The operation—well, it was his baby, and it didn't get born. That'll finish him."

"That's not fair," Kelly said loudly. Greer turned.

"No, it isn't, but that's the way things are." Greer, too, had a ride waiting. He directed his driver to head to the wing-headquarters building, where he arranged a car to take Kelly to Baltimore. "Get some rest and call me when you're ready. Bob was serious about what he said. Think it over."

"Yes, sir," Kelly replied, heading to the blue Air Force sedan.

It was amazing, Kelly thought, the way life was. Within five minutes the sergeant drove onto an interstate highway. Scarcely twenty-four hours earlier he'd been on a ship approaching Subic Bay. Thirty-six hours prior to that he'd been on the soil of an enemy country—and now here he was in the backseat of a government Chevy, and the only dangers to which he was exposed came from other drivers. At least for a little while. All the familiar things, the highway exit signs painted that pleasant shade of green, traveling in the last half of the local rush hour. Everything about him proclaimed the normality of life, when three days earlier everything had been alien and hostile. Most amazing of all, he'd adjusted to it.

The driver didn't speak a word except to inquire about directions, though he must have wondered who the man was that had arrived on a special flight. Perhaps he had many such jobs, Kelly mused as the car pulled off Loch Raven Boulevard, enough that he'd stopped wondering about things he'd never be told.

"Thanks for the lift," Kelly told him.

"Yes, sir, you're welcome." The car pulled away and Kelly walked to his apartment, amused that he'd taken his keys all the way to Vietnam and back. Did the keys know how far they had come? Five minutes later he was in the shower, the quintessentially American experience, changing from one reality into another. Another five and he was dressed in slacks and a short-sleeve shirt, and headed out the door to his Scout, parked a block away. Another ten and

he'd parked the car within sight of Sandy's bungalow. The walk from his Scout to her door was yet another transition. He'd come home to something, Kelly told himself. For the first time.

"John!" He hadn't expected the hug. Even less so the tears in her eyes.

"It's okay, Sandy. I'm fine. No holes or scratches or anything." He was slow to grasp the desperation of her hold on him, pleasant as it was. But then the face against his chest started sobbing, and he knew that this event was not for him at all. "What's wrong?"

"They killed Doris."

Time stopped again. It seemed to split into many pieces. Kelly closed his eyes, in pain at first, and in that instant he was back on his hilltop overlooking SENDER GREEN, watching the NVA troops arrive; he was in his hospital bed looking at a photograph; he was outside some nameless village listening to the screams of children. He'd come home, all right, but to the same thing he'd left. No, he realized, to the thing that he had never left, which followed him everywhere he went. Held never get away from it because he'd never really finished it, not even once. *Not even once.*

And yet there was a new element as well, this woman holding him and feeling the same blazing pain that sliced through his chest.

"What happened, Sandy?"

"We got her well, John. We took her home, and then I called today like you told me to, and a policeman answered. Doris and her father, too, both murdered."

"Okay." He moved her to the sofa. He wanted at first to let her calm down, not to hold her too close, but that didn't work. She clung to him, letting out the feelings that she'd closeted off, along with worry for his safety, and he held Sandy's head to his shoulder for several minutes. "Sam and Sarah?"

"I haven't told them yet." Her face came up, and she looked across the room, her gaze unfocused. Then the nurse in her came out, as it had to. "How are you?"

"A little frazzled from all the traveling," he said, just to put words after her question. Then he had to tell the truth. "It was a washout. The mission didn't work. They're still there."

"I don't understand."

"We were trying to get some people out of North Vietnam, prisoners—but something went wrong. Failed again," he added quietly.

"Was it dangerous?"

Kelly managed a grunt. "Yeah, Sandy, you might say that, but I came out okay."

Sandy set that one aside. "Doris said there were others, other girls, they still have 'em."

"Yeah. Billy said the same thing. I'm going to try and get them out." Kelly noticed she didn't react to his mention of Billy's name.

"It won't matter—getting them out, unless…"

"I know." The thing that kept following him around, Kelly thought. There was only one way to make it stop.

Running couldn't distance him from it. He had to turn and face it.

"Well, Henry, that little job was taken care of this morning," Piaggi told him. "Nice and clean."

"They didn't leave—"

"Henry, they were two pros, okay? They did the job and now they're back home, couple hundred miles away. They didn't leave anything behind except for the two bodies." The phone report had been very clear on that. It had been an easy job, since neither target had expected anything.

"Then that's that," Tucker observed with satisfaction. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a fat envelope. He handed it to Piaggi, who had fronted the money himself, good partner that he was.

"With Eddie out of the way, and with that leak plugged, things ought to go back to normal." *Best twenty grand I ever spent*, Henry thought.

"Henry, the other girls?" Piaggi pointed out. "You've got a real business now. People inside like them are dangerous. Take care of it, okay?" He pocketed the envelope and left the table.

"Twenty-two's, back of the head, both of 'em," the Pittsburgh detective reported over the phone. "We've dusted the whole house—nothing. The flower box—nothing. The truck—nothing. The truck was stolen sometime last night—this morning, whatever. The florist has eight of them. Hell, we recovered it before the all-points was on the air. It was wise guys, had to be. Too smooth, too clean for local talent. No word on the street. They're probably out of town already. Two people saw the truck. One woman saw two guys walking to the door. She figured it was a flower delivery, and besides she was

across the street half a block away. No description, nothing. She doesn't even remember what color they were."

Ryan and Douglas were listening on the same line, and their eyes met every few seconds. They knew it all from the tone of the man's voice. The sort of case that policemen hate and fear. No immediately apparent motive, no witnesses, no usable evidence. Nowhere to start and nowhere to go. The routine was as predictable as it was futile. They'd pump the neighbors for information, but it was a working-class neighborhood, and few had been at home at the time. People noticed mainly the unusual, and a flower truck wasn't unusual enough to attract the inquiring look that developed into a physical description. Committing the perfect murder wasn't really all that demanding, a secret known within the fraternity of detectives and belied by a whole body of literature that made them into superhuman beings they never claimed to be, even among themselves in a cop bar. Someday the case might be broken. One of the killers might be caught for something else and cop to this one in order to get a deal. Less likely, someone would talk about it, bragging in front of an informant who'd pass it along to someone else, but in either case it would take time and the trail, cold as it already was, would grow colder still. It was the most frustrating part of the business of police work. Truly innocent people had died, and there was no one to speak for them, to avenge their deaths, and other cases would come up, and the cops would set this one aside for something fresher, and from time to time someone would reopen the file and look things over, then put it back in the *Unsolved* drawer, where it would grow thicker only because of the forms that announced that there was still nothing new on the case.

It was even worse for Ryan and Douglas. Yet again there had been a possible link that might open up two of their *Unsolved* files. Everyone would care about Raymond and Doris Brown. They'd had friends and neighbors, evidently a good minister. They'd be missed, and people would think *what a shame it was*… But the files on Ryan's desk were for people about whom no one but police officers cared, and somehow that only made it worse because someone should mourn for the dead, not just cops who were paid to do so. Worse still, it was yet another MO in a string of homicides that were somehow linked, but not in a way that made any sense. This was not their Invisible Man. Yes, the weapon had been a .22, but he'd had a chance to kill the innocent twice. He'd spared Virginia

Charles, and he had somehow gone dangerously far out of his way to spare Doris Brown. He had saved her from Farmer and Grayson, probably, and someone else.…

"Detective," Ryan asked, "what was the condition of Doris's body?"

"What do you mean?"

It seemed an absurd question even as his mind formed it, but the man on the other end of the line would understand. "What was her physical condition?"

"The autopsy is tomorrow, Lieutenant. She was neatly dressed, all cleaned up, hair was nice, she looked pretty decent." *Except for the two holes in the back of her head,* the man didn't have to add.

Douglas read his lieutenant's mind and nodded. *Some-body took the time to get her well.* That was a starting place.

"I'd appreciate it if you could send me anything that might be useful. It'll work both ways," Ryan assured him.

"Some guy went way out of his way to murder them. We don't see many like this. I don't like it very much," the detective added. It was a puerile conclusion, but Ryan fully understood. How else did you say it, after all?

It was called a safe house, and it was indeed safe. Located on a hundred rolling acres in the Virginia hills, there was on the estate a stately house and a twelve-stall stable half-occupied with hunter-jumpers. The title for the house showed a name, but that person owned another place nearby and leased this one to the Central Intelligence Agency—actually to a shadow corporation that existed only as a piece of paper and a post-office box—because he'd served his time in OSS, and besides, the money was right. Nothing unusual from the outside, but a more careful inspection might show that the doors and doorframes were steel, the windows unusually thick and strong, and sealed. It was as secure from outside assault and from an internal attempt at escape as a maximum-security prison, just a lot more pleasant to behold.

Grishanov found clothing to wear, and shaving things that worked but with which he couldn't harm himself. The bathroom mirror was steel, and the cup in the holder was paper. The couple that managed the house spoke passable Russian and were just as pleasant as they could be, already briefed on the nature of their new guest—they were more accustomed to defectors, though all

their visitors were “protected” by a team of four security guards inside who came when they had “company,” and two more who lived full-time in the caretaker’s house close to the stables.

Not unusually, their guest was out of synch with local time, and his disorientation and unease made him talkative. They were surprised that their orders were to limit their conversations to the mundane. The lady of the house fixed breakfast, always the best meal for the jet-lagged, while her husband launched a discussion of Pushkin, delighted to find that like many Russians, Grishanov was a serious devotee of poetry. The security guard leaned against the doorframe, just to keep an eye on things.

“The things I have to do, Sandy—”

“John, I understand,” she told him quietly. Both were surprised at how strong her voice was, how determined. “I didn’t before, but I do now.”

“When I was over there”—was it only three days before?—“I thought about you. I need to thank you,” he told her.

“What for?”

Kelly looked down at the kitchen table. “Hard to explain. It’s scary, the things I do. It helps when you have somebody to think about. Excuse me—I don’t mean—” Kelly stopped. He did, actually, mean that. The mind wanders when alone, and his had wandered.

Sandy took his hand and smiled in a gentle way. “I used to be afraid of you.”

“Why?” he asked with considerable surprise.

“Because of the things you do.”

“I’d never hurt you,” he said without looking up, yet more miserable now that she had felt the need to fear him.

“I know that now.”

Despite her words, Kelly felt a need to explain himself. He wanted her to understand, not realizing that she already did. How to do it? Yes, he killed people, but only for a reason. How had he come to be what he was? Training was part of it, the rigorous months spent at Coronado. the time and effort spent to inculcate automatic responses, more deadly still, to learn patience. Along with that had somehow come a new way of seeing things—and then, actually seeing them and seeing the reasons why killing sometimes had to be. Along with the reasons had come a code, a modification, really, of what he’d learned from his father. His actions had to have a

purpose, usually assigned by others, but his mind was agile enough to make its own decisions, to fit his code into a different context, to apply it with care—but to apply it. A product of many things, he sometimes surprised himself with what he was. Someone had to try, and he most often was best suited to—

"You love too much, John," she said. "You're like me."

Those words brought his head up.

"We lose patients on my floor, we lose them all the time—and I *hate* it! I hate being there when life goes away. I *hate* watching the family cry and knowing that we couldn't stop it from happening. We all do our best. Professor Rosen is a wonderful surgeon, but we don't always win, and I hate it when we lose. And with Doris—we won that one, John, and somebody took her away anyway. And that wasn't disease or some damned auto accident. Somebody meant to do it. She was one of *mine*, and somebody killed her and her father. So I do understand, okay? I really do."

Jesus, she really does… better than me.

"Everybody connected with Pam and Doris, you're all in danger now."

Sandy nodded. "You're probably right. She told us things about Henry. I know what kind of person he is. I'll tell you everything she told us."

"You do understand what I'm going to do with that information?"

"Yes, John, I do. Please be careful." She paused and told him why he had to be. "I want you back."

32

Home Is the Prey

The one bit of usable information to come out of Pittsburgh was a name. *Sandy.* Sandy had driven Doris Brown back home to her father. Just one word, not even a proper name, but cases routinely broke on less than that. It was like pulling on a string. Sometimes all you got was a broken piece of thread, sometimes you got something that just didn't stop until everything unraveled into a tangled mess in your hands. Somebody named Sandy, a female voice, young. She'd hung up before saying anything, though it hardly seemed likely that she'd had anything at all to do with the murders. One might return to the scene of the crime—it really did happen—but not via telephone.

How did it fit in? Ryan leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling while his trained mind examined everything he knew.

The most likely supposition was that Doris Brown, deceased, had been directly connected with the same criminal enterprise that had killed Pamela Madden and Helen Waters, and that had also included as active members Richard Farmer and William Grayson. John Terrence Kelly, former UDT sailor, and perhaps a former Navy SEAL, had somehow happened upon and rescued Pamela Madden. He'd called Frank Allen about it several weeks later, telling him not very much. Something had gone badly wrong—short version, he'd been an ass—and Pamela Madden had died as a result. The photos of the body were something Ryan would never fully put from his mind. Kelly had been badly shot. A former commando whose girlfriend had been brutally murdered, Ryan reminded himself. Five pushers eliminated as though James Bond had appeared on the streets of Baltimore. One extraneous killing in which the murderer

had intervened in a street robbery for reasons unknown. Richard Farmer—"Rick"?—eliminated with a knife, the second possible show of rage (and the first one didn't count, Ryan reminded himself). William Grayson, probably kidnapped and killed. Doris Brown, probably rescued at the same time, cleaned up over a period of weeks and returned to her home. That meant some sort of medical care, didn't it? Probably. *Maybe*, he corrected himself. The Invisible Man… could he have done that himself? Doris, was the girl who'd brushed out Pamela Madden's hair. There was a connection.

Back up.

Kelly had rescued the Madden girl, but he'd had help getting her straightened out. Professor Sam Rosen and his wife, another physician. So Kelly finds Doris Brown—whom would he take her to? *That* was a starting place! Ryan lifted his phone.

"Hello."

"Doc, it's Lieutenant Ryan."

"I didn't know I gave you my direct line," Farber said. "What's up?"

"Do you know Sam Rosen?"

"Professor Rosen? Sure. He runs a department, hell of a good cutter, world-class. I don't see him very often, but if you ever need a head worked on, he's the man."

"And his wife?" Ryan could hear the man sucking on his pipe.

"I know her quite well. Sarah. She's a pharmacologist, research fellow across the street, also works with our drug-abuse unit. I help out with that group, too, and we—"

"Thank you." Ryan cut him off. "One more name. Sandy."

"Sandy who?"

"That's all I have," Lieutenant Ryan admitted. He could imagine Farber now, leaning away from his desk in the high-backed leather chair with his contemplative look.

"Let me make sure I understand things, okay? Are you asking me to check up on two colleagues as part of a criminal investigation?"

Ryan weighed the merits of lying. This guy was a psychiatrist. His job was looking around in people's minds. He was good at it.

"Yes, doctor, I am," the detective admitted after a pause long enough for the psychiatrist to make an accurate guess as to its cause.

"You're going to have to explain yourself," Farber announced

evenly. “Sam and I aren’t exactly close, but he is not a person who would *ever* hurt another human being. And Sarah is a damned angel with these messed-up kids we see in here. She’s setting aside some important research work to do that, stuff she could make a big reputation with.” Then Farber realized that she’d been away an awful lot in the past couple of weeks.

“Doctor, I’m just trying to develop some information, okay? I have no reason whatever to believe that either one of them is implicated in any illegal act.” His words were too formal, and he knew it. Perhaps another tack. It was even honest, maybe. “If my speculation is correct, there may be some danger to them that they don’t know about.”

“Give me a few minutes.” Farber broke the connection.

“Not bad, Em,” Douglas said.

It was bottom-fishing, Ryan thought, but, hell, he’d tried just about everything else. It seemed an awfully long five minutes before the phone rang again.

“Ryan.”

“Farber. No docs on neuro by that name. One nurse, though, Sandra O’Toole. She’s a team leader on the service. I don’t know her myself. Sam thinks highly of her, or so I just found out from his secretary. She was working something special for him, recently. He had to fiddle the pay records.” Farber had already made his own connection. Sarah had been absent from her clinical work at the same time. He’d let the police develop that themselves. He’d gone far enough—too far. These were colleagues, after all, and this wasn’t a game.

“When was that?” Ryan asked casually.

“Two or three weeks ago, lasted ten working days.”

“Thank you, doctor. I’ll be back to you.”

“Connection,” Douglas observed after the circuit was broken. “How much you want to bet that she knows Kelly, too?”

The question was more hopeful than substantive, of course. Sandra was a common-enough name. Still, they’d been on this case, this endless series of deaths, for more than six months, and after all that time spent with no evidence and no connections at all, it looked like the morning star. The problem was that it was evening now, and time to go home for dinner with his wife and children. Jack would be returning to Boston College in another week or so, Ryan thought, and he missed time with his son.

There was no easy way to get things organized. Sandy had to drive him to Quantico. It was her first time on a Marine base, but only briefly, as Kelly guided her to the marina. Already, he thought. You get home for once with your body in tune with the local day/night cycle, and already he had to break it. Sandy was not yet back on I-95 when he pulled away from the dock, heading out for the middle of the river, advancing his throttles to max-cruise as soon as he could.

The lady had brains to go with her guts, Kelly told himself, sipping his first beer in a very long time. He supposed it was normal that a clinical nurse would have a good memory. Henry, it seemed, had been a talker at certain moments, one of them being when he had a girl under his direct control. A boastful man, Kelly thought, the best sort. He still didn't have an address to go along with the phone number, but he had a new name, Tony P-something—Peegee, something like that. White, Italian, drove a blue Lincoln, along with a decent physical description. Mafia, probably, either in it or a wannabe. Somebody else named Eddie—but Sandy had matched that name with a guy who had been killed by a police officer, it had made the front page of the local paper. Kelly took it one step further: what if that cop was the man Henry had inside? It struck him as odd that a senior officer like a lieutenant would be involved in a shooting. Speculation, he told himself, but worth checking out—he wasn't sure yet exactly how. He had all night for it, and a smooth body of water to reflect his thoughts as it did the stars. Soon he passed the spot where he'd left Billy. At least someone had collected the body.

The ground was settling over the grave in a place that some still called Potter's Field, a tradition dating back to someone named Judas. The doctors at the community hospital that had treated the man were still going over the pathology report from the Medical College of Virginia. Baro-Trauma. There were fewer than ten severe cases of this condition in the whole country in a year, and all of those in coastal regions. It was no disgrace that they hadn't made the diagnosis—and, the report went on, there was no difference it could have made. The precise cause of death had been a fragment of *bone marrow* that had somehow found its way into a cerebral artery, occluding it and causing a massive, fatal stroke. Damage to other organs had been so extensive that it would only have been a

matter of a few more weeks in any case. The bone-marrow blockage was evidence of a very large pressurization imbalance, 3-bar, probably more. Even now police were inquiring about divers in the Potomac, which could be very deep in some places. There was still hope that someone would eventually claim the body, whose location was recorded in the county administrator's office. But not much.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" General Rokossovskiy demanded. "He's my man! Did you misplace him?"

"Comrade General," Giap replied sharply, "I have told you everything I know!"

"And you say an American did it?"

"You have seen the intelligence information as well as I have."

"That man has information that the Soviet Union requires. I find it hard to believe that the Americans planned a raid whose only result was the abduction of the one Soviet officer in the area. I would suggest, Comrade General, that you make a more serious effort."

"We are at war!"

"Yes, I am aware of that," Rokossovskiy observed dryly. "Why do you think I am here?"

Giap could have sworn at the taller man who stood before his desk. He was the commander of his country's armed forces, after all, and a general of no mean abilities himself. The Vietnamese general swallowed his pride with difficulty. He also needed the weapons that

only the Russians could provide, and so he had to abase himself before him for the sake of his country. Of one thing he was certain. The camp wasn't worth the trouble it had caused him.

The strange part was that the routine had become relatively benign. Kolya wasn't here. That was certain. Zacharias was sufficiently disoriented that he had difficulty determining the passage of days, but for four sleeps now he hadn't heard the Russian's voice even outside the door. By the same token, no one had come in to abuse him. He'd eaten and sat and thought in solitude. To his surprise it had made things better instead of worse. His time with Kolya had become an addiction more dangerous than his dalliance with alcohol, Robin saw now. It was loneliness that was his real enemy,

not pain, not fear. From a family and a religious community that fostered fellowship, he'd entered a profession that lived on the same, and being denied it his mind had fed on itself. Then add a little pain and fear, and what did you have? It was something far more easily seen from without than from within. Doubtless it had been apparent to Kolya. *Like you*, he'd said so often, *like you.* So, Zacharias told himself, that's how he did his job. Cleverly, too, the Colonel admitted to himself.

Though not a man accustomed to failure and mistakes, he was not immune to them. He'd almost killed himself with a youthful error at Luke Air Force Base while learning to fly fighters, and five years later, the time he'd wondered what the inside of a thunderstorm was really like and nearly ended up hitting the ground in the manner of a thunderbolt. And now he'd made another.

Zacharias didn't know the reason for his respite from the interrogations. Perhaps Kolya was off reporting on what he'd learned. Whatever the reason, he had been granted the chance to reflect. *You've sinned*, Robin told himself. *You've been very foolish. But you won't do that again.* The determination was weak, and Zacharias knew he'd have to work to strengthen it. Fortunately, he now had the time for reflection. If it was not a real deliverance, it was something. Suddenly he was shocked into full concentration, as if he were flying a combat mission. *My God*, he thought, *that word. I was afraid to pray for deliverance… and yet…* His guards would have been surprised to see the wistful smile on his face, especially had they known that he was starting to pray again. Prayer, they'd all been taught, was a farce. But that was their misfortune, Robin thought, and might yet be his salvation.

He couldn't make the call from his office. It just wouldn't do. Nor did he wish to do so from his home. The call would cross a river and a state line, and he knew that for security reasons there were special provisions for telephone calls made in the D.C. area. They were all recorded on computer tape, the only place in America where that was true. Even so, there was a procedure for what he had to do. You were supposed to have official sanction for it. You had to discuss it with your section head, then with the chief of the directorate, and it could well go all the way to the "front office" on the seventh floor. Ritter didn't want to wait that long, not with lives

at stake. He took the day off, not unreasonably claiming that he needed the time to recover from all the travel. So he decided to drive into town, and picked the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History. He walked past the elephant in the lobby and consulted the YOU ARE HERE plate on the wall to find the public telephones, into one of which he dropped a dime and called 347-1347. It was almost an institutional joke. That number connected him to a telephone that rang on the desk of the KGB *rezident*, the chief of station for Washington, D.C. They knew, and knew that people interested knew they knew. The espionage business could be so baroque, Ritter told himself.

"Yes?" a voice said. It was the first time Ritter had done this, a whole new collection of sensations—his own nervousness, the evenness of the voice at the other end, the excitement of the moment. What he had to say, however, was programmed in such a way that outsiders could not interfere with official business:

"This is Charles. There is a matter of concern to you. I propose a brief meeting and discussion. I'll be at the National Zoo in an hour, at the enclosure for the white tigers."

"How will I know you?" the voice asked.

"I'll be carrying a copy of *Newsweek* in my left hand."

"One hour," the voice grumbled. He probably had an important meeting this morning, Ritter thought. Wasn't that too bad? The CIA field officer left the museum for his car. On the right seat was a copy of *Newsweek* he'd purchased at a drugstore on the way into town.

Tactics, Kelly thought, turning to port, finally rounding Point Lookout. There was a wide selection. He still had his safe house in Baltimore with a false name on everything. The police might be interested in talking to him, but they hadn't made contact with him yet. He'd try to keep it that way. The enemy didn't know who he was. That was his starting place. The fundamental issue was the three-way balance among what he knew, what he didn't know, and how he might use the first to affect the second. The third element, the *how*, was tactics. He could prepare for what he did not yet know. He could not yet act upon it, but he actually knew what he would do. Getting to that point simply required a strategic approach to the problem. It was frustrating, though. Four young women awaited his action.

An as yet undetermined number of people awaited death.

They were driven by fear, Kelly knew. They'd been afraid of Pam, and afraid of Doris. Afraid enough to kill. He wondered if the death of Edward Morello had been a further manifestation. Certainly they had killed for their safety, and now they probably did feel safe. That was good; if fear was their driving force, then they had more of it now that they felt it a thing of their past.

The worrisome part was the time element. There was a clock on this. The police were sniffing at him. While he thought there was nothing they could possibly have to use against him, he still couldn't feel good about it. The other worry was the safety—he snorted—of those four young women. There was no such thing as a good *long* operation. Well, he'd have to be patient on one thing, and with luck, just the one.

He hadn't been to the zoo in years. Ritter thought he'd have to bring his kids here again now that they were old enough to appreciate things a little more. He took the time to look at the bear pit—there was just something interesting about bears. Kids thought of them as large, animated versions of the stuffed toys they clutched at night. Not Ritter. They were the image of the enemy, large and strong, far less clumsy and far more intelligent than they appeared. A good thing to remember, he told himself, heading over to the tiger cage. He rolled the *Newsweek* in his left hand, watching the large cats and waiting. He didn't bother checking his watch.

"Hello, Charles," a voice said beside him.

"Hello, Sergey."

"I do not know you," the *rezident* observed.

"This conversation is unofficial," Ritter explained.

"Aren't they all?" Sergey noted. He started walking. Any single place could be bugged, but not a whole zoo. For that matter, his contact could be wearing a wire, though that would not have been in accordance with the rules, such as they were. He and Ritter walked down the gentle paved slope to the next animal exhibit, with the *rezident*'s security guard in close attendance.

"I just returned from Vietnam," the CIA officer said.

"Warmer there than here."

"Not at sea. It's rather pleasant out there."

"The purpose of your cruise?" the *rezident* asked.

"A visit, an unplanned one."

"I believe it failed," the Russian said, not tauntingly, just letting "Charles" know that he knew what was going on. "Not completely. We brought someone home with us."

"Who might that be?"

"His name is Nikolay." Ritter handed over Grishanov's paybook. "It would be an embarrassment to your government if it were to be revealed that a Soviet officer was interrogating American POWs."

"Not a great embarrassment," Sergey replied, flipping briefly through the paybook before pocketing it.

"Well, actually it would be. You see, the people he's been interrogating have been reported as being dead by your little friends."

"I don't understand." He was telling the truth, and Ritter had to explain for a few minutes. "I did not know any of that," Sergey said after hearing the facts of the matter.

"It's true, I assure you. You will be able to verify it through your own means." And he would, of course. Ritter knew that, and Sergey knew that he knew.

"And where is our colonel?"

"In a safe place. He's enjoying better hospitality than our people are."

"Colonel Grishanov hasn't dropped bombs on anyone," the Russian pointed out.

"That is true, but he did take part in a process that will end with the death of American prisoners, and we have hard evidence that they are alive. As I said earlier, a potential embarrassment for your government."

Sergey Voloshin was a highly astute political observer and didn't need this young CIA officer to tell him that. He could also see where this discussion was headed.

"What do you propose?"

"It would be helpful if your government could persuade Hanoi to restore these men to life, as it were. That is, to take them to the same prison where the other prisoners are, and make the proper notifications so that their families will know they are alive after all. In return for that, Colonel Grishanov will be returned unharmed, and uninterrogated."

"I will forward that proposal to Moscow." With a favorable endorsement, his tone said clearly.

"Please be quick. We have reason to believe that the Vietnamese

may be contemplating something drastic to relieve themselves of the potential embarrassment. That would be a very serious complication," Ritter warned.

"Yes, I suppose it would be." He paused. "Your assurance that Colonel Grishanov is alive and well?"

"I can have you to him in… oh, about forty minutes if you wish. Do you think I would lie about something as important as this?"

"No, I do not. But some questions must be asked."

"Yes, Sergey Ivan'ch, I know that. We have no wish to harm your colonel. He seems to have behaved rather honorably in his treatment of our people. He was also a very effective interrogator. I have his notes." Ritter added, "The offer to meet with him is open if you wish to make use of it."

Voloshin thought about it, seeing the trap. Such an offer, if taken, would have to be reciprocated, because that was the way things were. To call Ritter's hand on this would commit his own government to something, and Voloshin didn't want to do that without guidance. Besides, it would be madness for CIA to lie in a case like this. Those prisoners could always be made to disappear. Only the goodwill of the Soviet Union could save them, and only the continuance of that goodwill would keep them healthy.

"I will take you at your word, Mister—"

"Ritter, Bob Ritter."

"Ah! Budapest."

Ritter grinned rather sheepishly. Well, after all he'd done to get his agent out, it was clear that he'd never go back into the field again, at least not in any place that mattered—which for Ritter started at the River Elbe. The Russian poked him in the chest.

"You did well getting your man out. I commend you on your loyalty to your agent." Most of all Voloshin respected him for the risk he'd taken, something not possible in the KGB.

"Thank you, General. And thank you for responding to my proposal. When can I call you?"

"I'll need two days… shall I call you?"

"Forty-eight hours from now. I'll make the call."

"Very well. Good day." They shook hands like the professionals they were. Voloshin walked back to his driver/bodyguard and headed back to the car. Their walk had ended up at the enclosure for the Kodiak bear, large, brown, and powerful. Had that been an accident? Ritter wondered.

On the walk back to his car he realized that the whole thing had been an accident of sorts. On the strength of this play, Ritter would become a section chief. Failed rescue mission or not, he'd just negotiated an important concession with the Russians, and it had all happened because of the presence of mind of a man younger than himself, scared and on the run, who'd taken the time to think. He wanted people like that in the Agency, and now he had the clout to bring him in. Kelly had demurred and temporized on the flight back from Hawaii. Okay, so he'd need a little convincing. He'd have to work with Jim Greer on that, but Ritter decided on the spot that his next mission was to bring Kelly in from the cold, or the heat, or whatever you called it.

"How well do you know Mrs. O'Toole?" Ryan asked.

"Her husband's dead," the neighbor said. "He went to Vietnam right after they bought the house, and then he was killed. Such a nice young man, too. She's not in any trouble, is she?"

The detective shook his head. "No, not at all. I've only heard good things about her."

"It's been awful busy over there," the elderly lady went on. She was the perfect person to talk to, about sixty-five, a widow with nothing to do who compensated for the empty space in her life by keeping track of everyone else's. With a little reassurance that she wasn't hurting anyone, she'd relate everything she knew.

"What do you mean?"

"I think she had a houseguest a while back. She sure was shopping a lot more than usual. She's such a nice, pretty girl. It's so sad about her husband. She really ought to start dating again. I'd like to tell her, but I don't want her to think I'm nosy. Anyway, she was shopping a lot, and somebody else came almost every day, stayed overnight a lot, even."

"Who was that?" Ryan asked, sipping his iced tea.

"A woman, short like me, but heavier, messy hair. She drove a big car, a red Buick, I think, and it had a sticker-thing on the windshield. Oh! That's right!"

"What's that?" Ryan asked.

"I was out with my roses when the girl came out, that's when I saw the sticker-thing."

"Girl?" Ryan asked innocently.

"That's who she was shopping for!" the elderly lady said, pleased

with herself for the sudden discovery. “She bought clothes for her, I bet. I remember the Hecht Company bags.”

“Can you tell me what the girl looked like?”

“Young, like nineteen or twenty, dark hair. Kinda pale, like she was sick. They drove away, when was that…? Oh, I remember. It’s the day my new roses came from the nursery. The eleventh. The truck came very early because I don’t like the heat, and I was out there working when they came out. I waved at Sandy. She’s such a nice girl. I don’t talk to her very much, but when I do she always has a kind word. She’s a nurse, you know, she works at Johns Hopkins, and—”

Ryan finished off hi; tea without letting his satisfaction show. Doris Brown had returned home to Pittsburgh on the afternoon of the eleventh. Sarah Rosen drove a Buick, and it undoubtedly had a parking sticker in the window. Sam Rosen, Sarah Rosen, Sandra O’Toole. They had treated Miss Brown. Two of them had also treated Miss Madden. They had also treated Mr. Kelly. After months of frustration, Lieutenant Emmet Ryan had a case.

“There she is now,” the lady said, startling him out of his private thoughts. Ryan turned and looked to see an attractive young lady, on the tall side, carrying a bag of groceries.

“I wonder who that man was?”

“What man?”

“He was there last night. Maybe she has a boyfriend after all. Tall, like you, dark hair—big.”

“How do you mean?”

“Like a football player, you know, big. He must be nice, though. I saw her hug him. That was just last night.”

Thank God, Ryan thought, *for people who don’t watch TV.*

For his long gun, Kelly had selected a bolt-action .22, a Savage Model 54, the lightweight version of that company’s Anschutz match weapon. It was expensive enough at a hundred fifty dollars with tax. Almost as costly were the Leupold scope and mounts. The rifle was almost too good for its purpose, which was the hunting of small game, and had a particularly fine walnut stock. It was a shame that he’d have to scar it up. It would have been more of a shame to waste the lesson from that chief machinist’s mate, however.

The one bad thing about the demise of Eddie Morello was that sweetening the deal had required the loss of a large quantity of pure, uncut heroin, a six-kilogram donation to the police evidence locker. That had to be made up. Philadelphia was hungry for more, and his New York connections were showing increasing interest now that they'd had their first taste. He'd do one last batch on the ship. Now he could change over again. Tony was setting up a secure lab that was easier to reach, more in keeping with the burgeoning success he was enjoying, but until that was ready, one more time the old way. He wouldn't make the trip himself.

"How soon?" Burt asked.

"Tonight."

"Fair enough, boss. Who goes with me?"

"Phil and Mike." two new ones were from Tony's organization, young, bright, ambitious. They didn't know Henry yet, and would not be part of his local distribution network, but they could handle out-of-town deliveries and were willing to do the menial work that was part of this business, mixing and packaging. They saw it, not inaccurately, as a rite of passage, a starting place from which their status and responsibility would grow. Tony guaranteed their reliability. Henry accepted that. He and Tony were bound now, bound in business, bound in blood. He'd accept Tony's counsel now that he trusted him. He'd rebuild his distribution network, removing the need for his female couriers, and with the removal of the need for them, so would end the reason for their lives. It was too bad, but with three defections, it was plain that they were becoming dangerous. A useful part of his operation in the growth phase, perhaps, but now a liability.

But one thing at a time.

"How much?" Burt asked.

"Enough to keep you busy for a while." Henry waved to the beer coolers. There wasn't room for much beer in them now, but that was as it should be. Burt carried them out to his car, not casual, but not tense. Businesslike, the way things should be. Perhaps Burt would become his principal lieutenant. He was loyal, respectful, tough when he had to be, far more dependable than Billy or Rick, and a brother. It was funny, really. Billy and Rick had been necessary at the beginning since the major distributors were always white, and he'd taken them on as tokens. Well, fate had settled that. Now the white boys were coming to him, weren't they?

"Take Xantha with you."

"Boss, we're going to be busy," Burt objected.

"You can leave her there when you're done." Perhaps one at a time was the best way to do it.

Patience never came easy. It was a virtue he'd learned, after a fashion, but only from necessity. Activity helped. He set the gun barrel in the vise, damaging the finish even before he started to do anything substantive. Setting the milling machine on high-speed, rotating the control wheel, he started drilling a series of holes at regular intervals in the outermost six inches of the barrel. An hour later he had a steel can–body affixed over it, and the telescopic sight attached. The rifle, as modified, proved to be quite accurate, Kelly thought.

"Tough one, Dad?"

"Eleven months' worth, Jack," Emmet admitted over dinner. He was home on time for once, to his wife's pleasure—almost.

"That awful one?" his wife asked.

"Not over dinner, honey, okay?" he replied, answering the question. Emmet did his best to keep that part of his life out of the house. He looked over at his son and decided to comment on a decision his son recently made. "Marines, eh?"

"Well, Dad, it pays for the last two years of school, doesn't it?" It was like his son to worry about things like that, about the cost of education for his sister, still in high school and away at camp for the moment. And like his father, Jack craved a little adventure before settling down to whatever place life would find for him.

"My son, a jarhead," Emmet grumbled good-naturedly. He also worried. Vietnam wasn't over, might not be over when his son graduated, and like most fathers of his generation, he wondered why the hell he'd had to risk his life fighting Germans—so that his son might have to do the same, fighting people he'd never even heard about at his son's age.

"What falls out of the sky, pop?" Jack asked with a college-boy grin, repeating something Marines like to say.

Such talk worried Catherine Burke Ryan, who remembered seeing Emmet off, remembered praying all day in St. Elizabeth Church on June 6, 1944, and many days thereafter despite the regular letters and assurances. She remembered the waiting. She knew this kind of talk worried Emmet too, though not quite in the same way.

What falls out of the sky? Trouble! the detective almost told his son, for the Airborne, too, were a proud group, but the thought stopped before it got to his lips.

Kelly. We tried calling him. We had the Coast Guard look at that island he lives on. The boat wasn't there. The boat wasn't anywhere. Where was he? He was back now, though, if the little old lady was right. What if he was away? But now he's back. The killings just plain stopped after the Farmer-Grayson-Brown incident. The marina had remembered seeing the boat about that time, but he'd left in the middle of the night—*that night*—and just vanished. Connection. Where had the boat been? Where was it now? What falls out of the sky? Trouble. That's exactly what had happened before. It just dropped out of the sky. Started and stopped.

His wife and son saw it again. Chewing on his food, his eyes focused on infinity, unable to turn his mind off as it churned his information over and over. Kelly's not really all that different from what I used to be, Ryan thought. One-Oh-One, the Screaming Eagles of the 101st Infantry Division (Airborne), who still swaggered in their baggy pants. Emmet had started off as a buck private, ended up with a late war battlefield commission to the rank he still held, lieutenant. He remembered the pride of being something very special, the sense of invincibility that strangely came arm in arm with the terror of jumping out of an aircraft, being the first on enemy territory, in the dark, carrying light weapons only. The hardest men with the hardest mission. Mission. He'd been like that once. But no one had ever killed his lady… what might have happened, back in 1946, perhaps, if someone had done that to Catherine?

Nothing good.

He'd saved Doris Brown. He'd given her over to people he trusted. He'd seen one of them last night. He knows she's dead. He saved Pamela Madden, she died, and he was in the hospital, and a few weeks after he got out people started dying in a very expert way. A few weeks… to get in shape. Then the killings just stopped and Kelly was nowhere to be found.

What if he's just been away?

He's back now.

Something's going to happen.

It wasn't a thing he could take to court. The only physical evidence they had was the imprint of a shoe sole—a common brand

of sneaker, of course, hundreds sold every day. Zilch. They had motive. But how many murders happened every year, and how many people followed up on it? They had opportunity. Could he account for his time in front of a jury? No one could. How, the detective thought, do you explain this to a judge—no, some judges would understand, but no jury would, not after a brand-new law-school graduate had explained a few things to them.

The case was solved, Ryan thought. He *knew.* But he had nothing for it but the knowledge that something was going to happen.

"Who's that, you suppose?" Mike asked.

"Some fisherman, looks like," Burt observed from the driver's seat. He kept *Henry's Eighth* well clear of the white cabin cruiser. Sunset was close. They were almost too late to navigate the tangled waters into their laboratory, which looked very different at night. Burt gave the white boat a look. The guy with the fishing rod waved, a gesture he returned as he turned to port—left, as he thought of it. There was a big night ahead. Xantha wouldn't be much help. Well, maybe a little, when they broke for meals. A shame, really. Not really a bad girl, just dumb, badly spaced out. Maybe that's how they'd do it, just give her a nice taste of real good stuff before they broke out the netting and the cement blocks. They were sitting right in the open, right in the boat, and she didn't have a clue what they were for. Well, that wasn't his lookout.

Burt shook his head. There were more important things to consider. How would Mike and Phil feel about working under him? He'd have to be polite about it, of course. They'd understand. With the money involved, they ought to. He relaxed in his chair, sipping his beer and looking for the red marker buoy.

"Lookee, lookee," Kelly breathed. It wasn't hard, really. Billy had told him all he needed to know. They had a place in there. They came in the Bay side, by boat, usually at night, and usually left the following morning. Turned in at the red lighted buoy. Hard as hell to find, almost impossible in the dark. Well, probably was if you didn't know the water. Kelly did. He reeled in the unbaited hook and lifted his binoculars. Size and color were right. *Henry's Eighth* was the name. Check. He settled back, watching it move south, then turn east at the red buoy. Kelly marked his chart. Twelve hours at least. That should be plenty of time. The problem with so secure a

place was that it depended absolutely on secrecy which, once blown, became a fatal liability. People never learned. One way in, one way out. Another clever way to commit suicide. He'd wait for sunset. While waiting, Kelly got out a can of spray paint and put green stripes on his dinghy. The inside he painted black.

33

Poisoned Charm

It usually took all night, Billy had told him. That gave Kelly time to eat, relax, and prepare. He moved *Springer* in close to the cluttered ground he would be hunting tonight and set his anchors. The meal he prepared was only sandwiches, but it was better than he'd had atop "his" hill less than a week before. *God, a week ago I was on* Ogden, *getting ready*, he thought with a rueful shake of the head. How could life be so mad as this?

His small dinghy, now camouflaged, went into the water after midnight. He'd attached a small electric trolling motor to the transom, and hoped he had enough battery power to get in and out. It couldn't be too far. The chart showed that the area was not a large one, and the place they used had to be in the middle for maximum isolation. With darkened face and hands he moved into the maze of derelicts, steering the dinghy with his left hand while his eyes and ears searched for something that didn't belong. The sky helped. There was no moon, and the starlight was just enough to show him the grass and reeds that had grown in this tidal wetland that had been created when the hulks had been left there, silting up this part of the Bay and making a place that birds loved in the fall season.

It was like before. The low hum of the trolling motor was so much like that of the sled he'd used, moving him along at perhaps two knots, conserving power, guided this time by stars. The marsh grass grew to perhaps six or seven feet above the water, and it wasn't hard to see why they didn't navigate their way in by night. It truly was a maze if you didn't know how. But Kelly did. He watched the stars, knowing which to follow and which to ignore as their

position rotated in the arching sky. It was a matter of comfort, really. They were from the city, were not seamen as he was, and as secure as they felt in their chosen place to prepare their illicit product, they weren't at ease here in this place of wild things and uncertain paths. *Won't you come into my parlor*, Kelly told himself. He was more listening than looking now. A gentle breeze rustled through the tall grass, following the widest channel here among the silted bars; twisty as it was, it had to be the one they'd followed. The fifty-year-old hulks around him looked like ghosts of another age, as indeed they were, relics of a war that had been won, cast-offs of a much simpler time, some of them sitting at odd angles, forgotten toys of the huge child their country had been, a child now grown into a troubled adult.

A voice. Kelly stopped his motor, drifting for a few seconds, pivoting his head around to get a fix on it. He'd guessed right on the channel. It looped around to the right just ahead there, and the noise had come from the right as well. Carefully now, slowly, he came around the bend. There were three of the derelicts. Perhaps they'd been towed in together. The tugboat skippers had probably tried to leave them in a perfect line as a personal conceit. The westernmost one was sitting at a slight angle, and listed seven or eight degrees to port, resting on a shifting bottom. The profile was an old one, with a low superstructure whose tall steel funnel had long since rusted away. But there was a light where the bridge ought to be. Music, he thought, some contemporary rock from a station that tried to keep truckers awake at night.

Kelly waited a few minutes, letting his eyes gather a fuller picture in the darkness, selecting his route of approach. He'd come in fine on the bow so that the body of the ship would screen him from view. He could hear more than one voice now. A sudden rolling laugh from a joke, perhaps. He paused again, searching the ship's outline for a bump, something that didn't belong, a sentry. Nothing.

They'd been clever selecting this place. It was as unlikely a spot as one might imagine, ignored even by local fishermen, but you had to have a lookout because no place was ever quite that secure… there was the boat. Okay. Kelly crept up at half a knot now, sticking close to the side of the old ship until he got to their boat. He tied his painter off to the nearest cleat. A rope ladder led up to the derelict's weather deck. Kelly took a deep breath and started climbing.

The work was every bit as menial and boring as Burt had told them it would be, Phil thought. Mixing the milk sugar in was the easy part, sifting it into large stainless-steel bowls like flour for a cake, making sure it was all evenly distributed. He remembered helping his mother with baking when he'd been a small child, watching her and learning things that a kid forgot as soon as he discovered baseball. They came back now, the rattling sound of the sifter, the way the powders came together. It was actually rather a pleasant excursion back to a time when he hadn't even had to wake up and go to school. But that was the easy part. Then came the tedious job of doling out precisely measured portions into the little plastic envelopes which had to be stapled shut, and piled, and counted, and bagged. He shared an exasperated look with Mike, who felt the same way he did. Burt probably felt the same way, but didn't let it show, and he had been nice enough to bring entertainment along. They had a radio playing, and for breaks they had this Xantha girl, half-blasted on pills, but… compliant, they'd all found out at their midnight break. They'd gotten her nice and tired, anyway. She was sleeping in the corner. There would be another break at four, allowing each of them enough time to recover. It was hard staying awake, and Phil was worried about all this powder, some of it dust in the air. Was he breathing it in? Might he get high on the stuff? If he had to do this again, he promised himself some sort of mask. He might like the idea of making money off selling the shit. but he had no desire at all to use it. Well, Tony and Henry were setting up a proper lab. Travel wouldn't be such a pain in the ass. That was something.

Another batch done. Phil was a little faster than the others, wanting to get it done. He walked over to the cooler and lifted the next one-kilo bag. He smelled it, as he had the others. Foul, chemical smell, like the chemicals used in the biology lab at his high school, formaldehyde, something like that. He slit open the bag with a penknife, dumping the contents into the first mixing bowl at arm's length, then adding a premeasured quantity of sugar and stirring with a spoon by the light of one of the Coleman lamps.

"Hello."

There had been no warning at all. Suddenly there was someone else there at the door, holding a pistol. He was dressed in military clothes, striped fatigues, and his face was painted green and black.

There wasn't any need for silence. His prey had seen to that. Kelly had reconverted his Colt back to .45 caliber, and he knew that the hole in the front of the automatic would seem large enough to park a car to the others in the room. He pointed with his left hand. "That way. On the deck, facedown, hands at the back of the neck, one at a time, you first," he said to the one at the mixing bowl.

"Who the hell are you?" the black one asked.

"You must be Burt. Don't do anything dumb."

"How you know my name?" Burt demanded as Phil took his place on the deck.

Kelly pointed at the other white one, directing him next to his friend.

"I know lots of things," Kelly said, moving towards Burt now. Then he saw the sleeping girl in the corner. "Who's she?"

"Look, asshole!" The .45 went level with his face, an arm's length away.

"What was that?" Kelly asked in a conversational voice. "Down on the deck, now." Burt complied at once. The girl, he saw, was sleeping. He'd let that continue for the moment. His first task was to search them for weapons. Two had small handguns. One had a useless little knife.

"Hey, who are you? Maybe we can talk," Burt suggested.

"We're going to do that. Tell me about the drugs," Kelly started off.

It was ten in the morning in Moscow when Voloshin's dispatch emerged from the decoding department. A senior member of the KGB's First Chief Directorate, he had a pipeline into any number of senior officers, one of whom was an academician in Service I, an American specialist who was advising the senior KGB leadership and the Foreign Ministry on this new development that the American media called *détente.* This man, who didn't hold a paramilitary rank within the KGB hierarchy, was probably the best person to get fast action, though an information copy of the dispatch had also gone to the Deputy Chairman with oversight duties for Voloshin's Directorate. Typically, the message was short and to the point. The Academician was appalled. The reduction of tension between the two superpowers, in the midst of a shooting war for one of them, was little short of miraculous, and coming as it did in parallel with the American approach to China, it could well

signal a new era in relations. So he had said to the Politburo in a lengthy briefing only two weeks earlier. The public revelation that a Soviet officer had been involved in something like this—it was madness. What cretin at GRU had thought this one up? Assuming it really was true, which was something he had to check. For that he called the Deputy Chairman.

"Yevgeniy Leonidovich? I have an urgent dispatch from Washington."

"As do I, Vanya. Your recommendations?"

"If the American claims are true, I urge immediate action. Public knowledge of such idiocy could be ruinous. Could you confirm that this is indeed under way?"

"Da. And then… Foreign Ministry?"

"I agree. The military would take too long. Will they listen?"

"Our fraternal socialist allies? They'll listen to a shipment of rockets. They've been screaming for them for weeks," the Deputy Chairman replied.

How typical, the Academician thought, *in order to save American lives we will send weapons to take more of them, and the Americans will understand.* Such madness. If there was ever an illustration as to why *détente* was necessary, this was it. How could two great countries manage their affairs when both were involved, directly or not, in the affairs of minor countries? Such a worthless distraction from important matters.

"I urge speed, Yevgeniy Leonidovich," the Academician repeated. Though far outranked by the Deputy Chairman, they'd been classmates, years earlier, and their careers had crossed many times.

"I agree completely, Vanya. I'll be back to you this afternoon."

It was a miracle, Zacharias thought, looking around. He hadn't seen the outside of his cell in months, and just to smell the air, warm and humid as it was, seemed a gift from God, but that wasn't it. He counted the others, eighteen other men in the single line, men like himself, all within the same five-year age bracket, and in the fading light of dusk he saw faces. There was the one he'd seen so long before, a Navy guy by the look of him. They exchanged a look and thin smiles as all the men did what Robin was doing. If only the guards would let them talk, but the first attempt had earned one of their number a slap. Even so, for the moment just seeing their faces was enough. To *not* be alone any longer, to know that there were

others here, just that was enough. Such a small thing. Such a large one. Robin stood as tall as his injured back allowed, squaring his shoulders while that little officer was saying something to his people, who were also lined up. He hadn't picked up enough Vietnamese to understand the rapid speech.

"This is the enemy," the Captain was telling his men. He'd be taking his unit south soon, and after all the lectures and battle practice, here was an unexpected opportunity for them to get a real look. They weren't so tough, these Americans, he told them. See, they're not so tall and forbidding, are they? They bend and break and bleed—very easily, too! And these are the elite of them, the ones who drop bombs on our country and kill our people. These are the men you'll be fighting. Do you fear them now? And if the Americans are foolish enough to try to rescue these dogs, we'll get early practice in the art of killing them. With those rousing words, he dismissed his troops, sending them off to their night guard posts.

He could do this, the Captain thought. It wouldn't matter soon. He'd heard a rumor through his regimental commander that as soon as the political leadership got their thumbs out, this camp would be closed down in a very final way, and his men would indeed get a little practice before they had to walk down Uncle Ho's trail, where they would have the chance to kill *armed* Americans next. Until then he had them as trophies to show his men, to lessen their dread of the great unknown of combat, and to focus their rage, for these *were* the men who'd bombed their beautiful country into a wasteland. He'd select recruits who had trained especially hard and well… nineteen of them, so as to give them a taste of killing. They'd need it. The captain of infantry wondered how many of them he'd be bringing home.

Kelly stopped off for fuel at the Cambridge town dock before heading back north. He had it all now—well, he had enough now, Kelly told himself. Full bunkers, and a mind full of useful data, and for the first time he'd hurt the bastards. Two weeks, maybe three weeks of their product. That would shake things loose. He might have collected it himself and perhaps used it as bait, but no, he couldn't do that. He wouldn't have it around him, especially now that he suspected he knew how it might come in. Somewhere on the East Coast, was all that Burt actually knew. Whoever this Henry Tucker was, he was on the clever side of paranoid, and

compartmentalized his operation in a way that Kelly might have admired under other circumstances. But it was Asian heroin, and the bags it arrived in smelled of death, and they came in on the East Coast. How many things from Asia that smelled of death came to the Eastern United States? Kelly could think of only one, and the fact that he'd known men whose bodies had been processed at Pope Air Force Base only fueled his anger and his determination to see this one thing through. He brought *Springer* north, past the brick tower of Sharp's Island Light, heading back into a city that held danger from more than one direction.

One last time.

There were few places in Eastern America as sleepy as Somerset County. An area of large and widely separated farms, the whole county had but one high school. There was a single major highway, allowing people to transit the area quickly and without stopping. Traffic to Ocean City, the state's beach resort, bypassed the area, and the nearest interstate was on the far side of the Bay. It was also an area with a crime rate so low as to be nearly invisible except for those who took note of a single-digit increase in one category of misbehavior or another. One lone murder could be headline news for weeks in the local papers, and rarely was burglary a problem in an area where a homeowner was likely to greet a nocturnal intruder with a 12-gauge and a question. About the only problem was the way people drove, and for that they had the State Police, cruising the roads in their off-yellow cars. To compensate for boredom the cars on the Eastern Shore of Maryland had unusually large engines with which to chase down speeders who all too often visited the local liquor stores beforehand in their effort to make a dull if comfortable area somewhat more lively.

Trooper First Class Ben Freeland was on his regular patrol routine. Every so often something real would happen, and he figured it was his job to know the area, every inch of it, every farm and crossroads, so that if he ever did get a really major call he'd know the quickest way to it.

Four years out of the Academy at Pikesville, the Somerset native was thinking about advancement to corporal when he spotted a pedestrian on Postbox Road near a hamlet with the unlikely name of Dames Quarter. That was unusual. Everybody rode down here. Even kids started using bikes from an early age, often starting to

drive well under age, which was another of the graver violations he dealt with on a monthly basis. He spotted her from a mile away—the land was very flat—-and took no special note until he'd cut that distance by three quarters. She—definitely a female now—was walking unevenly. Another hundred yards of approach told him that she wasn't dressed like a local. That was odd. You didn't get here except by car. She was also walking in zigzags, even the length of her stride changing from one step to another, and that meant possible public intoxication—a *huge* local infraction, the trooper grinned to himself—and *that* meant he ought to pull over and give her a look. He eased the big Ford over to the gravel, bringing it to a smooth and safe stop fifty feet from her, and got out as he'd been taught, putting his uniform Stetson on and adjusting his pistol belt.

"Hello," he said pleasantly. "Where you heading, ma'am?"

She stopped after a moment, looking at him with eyes that belonged on another planet. "Who're you?"

The trooper leaned in close. There was no alcohol on her breath. Drugs were not much of a problem here yet, Freeland knew. That might have just changed.

"What's your name?" he asked in a more commanding tone.

"Xantha, with a ex," she answered, smiling.

"Where are you from, Xantha?"

"Aroun'."

"Around where?"

"'Lanta."

"You're a long way from Atlanta."

"I *know* that!" Then she laughed. "He dint know I had more." Which, she thought, was quite a joke, and a secret worth confiding. "Keeps them in my brassiere."

"What's that now?"

"My pills. Keep them in my brassiere, and he dint know."

"Can I see them?" Freeland asked, wondering a lot of things and knowing that he had a real arrest to make this day.

She laughed as she reached in. "You step back, now."

Freeland did so. There was no sense alerting her to anything, though his right hand was now on his gunbelt just in front of his service revolver. As he watched, Xantha reached inside her mostly unbuttoned blouse and came out with a handful of red capsules. So that was that. He opened the trunk of his car and reached inside the evidence kit he carried to get an envelope.

"Why don't you put them in here so you don't lose any?"

"Okay!" What a helpful fellow this policeman was.

"Can I offer you a ride, ma'am?"

"Sure. Tired a' walkin'."

"Well, why don't you just come right along?" Policy required that he handcuff such a person, and as he helped her into the back of the car, he did. She didn't seem to mind a bit.

"Where we goin'?"

"Well, Xantha, I think you need a place to lie down and get some rest. So I think I'll find you one, okay?" He already had a dead-bang case of drug possession, Freeland knew, as he pulled back onto the road.

"Burt and the other two restin', too, 'cept they ain't gonna wake up."

"What's that, Xantha?"

"He killed their ass, bang bang bang." She mimed with her hand. Freeland saw it in the mirror, nearly going off the road as he did so.

"Who's that?"

"He a white boy, dint get his name, dint see his face neither, but he killed their ass, bang bang bang."

Holy shit.

"Where?"

"On the boat." Didn't everybody know that?

"What boat?"

"The one out on the water, fool!" That was pretty funny, too.

"You shittin' me, girl?"

"An' you know the funny thing, he left all the drugs right there, too, the white boy did. 'Cept'n he was *green."*

Freeland didn't have much idea what this was all about, but he intended to find out just as fast as he could. For starters he lit up his rotating lights and pushed the car just as fast as the big 427 V-8 would allow, heading for the State Police Barracks "V" in Westover. He ought to have radioed ahead, but it wouldn't really have accomplished much except to convince his captain that he was the one on drugs.

"Yacht *Springer*, take a look to your port quarter."

Kelly lifted his mike. "Anybody I know?" he asked without looking.

"Where the H have you been, Kelly?" Oreza asked.

"Business trip. What do you care?"

"Missed ya," was the answer. "Slow down some."

"Is it important? I have to get someplace, Portagee."

"Hey, Kelly, one seaman to another, back down, okay?"

Had he not known the man… no, he had to play along regardless of who it was. Kelly cut his throttles, allowing the cutter to pull alongside in a few minutes. Next he'd be asked to stop for a boarding, which Oreza had every legal right to do, and trying to evade would solve nothing. Without being so bidden, Kelly idled his engines and was soon laying to. Without asking permission, the cutter eased alongside and Oreza hopped aboard.

"Hey, Chief," the man said by way of a greeting.

"What gives?"

"I was down your sandbar twice in the last couple of weeks looking to share a beer with you, but you weren't home."

"Well, I wouldn't want to make you unfit for duty."

"Kinda lonely out here with nobody to harass." Suddenly it was clear that both men were uneasy, but neither one knew why the other was. "Where the hell were you?"

"I had to go out of the country. Business," Kelly answered. It was clear that he'd go no further than that.

"Fair enough. Be around for a while?"

"I plan to be, yeah."

"Okay, maybe I'll stop by next week and you can tell me some lies about being a Navy chief."

"Navy chiefs don't have to lie. You need some pointers on seamanship?"

"In a pig's ass! Maybe I ought to give you a safety inspection right now!"

"I thought this was a friendly visit," Kelly observed, and both men became even more uncomfortable. Oreza tried to cover it with a smile.

"Okay, I'll go easy on you." But that didn't work. "Catch you next week, Chief."

They shook hands, but something had changed. Oreza waved for the forty-one-footer to come back in, and he jumped aboard like the pro he was. The cutter pulled away without a further word.

Well, that makes sense. Kelly advanced his throttles anyway.

Oreza watched *Springer* continue north, wondering what the hell

was going on. *Out of the country*, he'd said. For sure his boat hadn't been anywhere on the Chesapeake—but where, then? Why were the cops so interested in the guy? Kelly a killer? Well, he'd gotten that Navy Cross for something. UDT guy, that much Oreza knew. Beyond that, just a good guy to have a beer with, and a serious seaman in his way. It sure got complicated when you stopped doing search-and-rescue and started doing all that other cop stuff, the quartermaster told himself, heading southwest for Thomas Point. He had a phone call to make.

"So what happened?"

"Roger, they knew we were coming," Ritter answered with a steady look.

"How, Bob?" MacKenzie asked.

"We don't know yet."

"Leak?"

Ritter reached into his pocket and extracted a photocopy of a document and handed it across. The original was written in Vietnamese. Under the text of the photocopy was the handwritten translation. In the printed English were the words "green bush."

"They knew the name?"

"That's a security breakdown on their side, Roger, but, yes, it appears that they did. I suppose they planned to use that information for any of the Marines they might have captured. That sort of thing is good for breaking people down in a hurry. But we got lucky."

"I know. Nobody got hurt."

Ritter nodded. "We put a guy on the ground in early. Navy SEAL, very good at what he does. Anyway, he was watching things when the NVA reinforcements came in. He's the guy who blew the mission off. Then he just walked off the hill." It was always far more dramatic to understate things, especially for someone who'd smelled gunsmoke in his time.

That, MacKenzie thought, was worth a whistle. "Must be rather a cool customer."

"Better than that," Ritter said quietly. "On the way out he bagged the Russian who was talking to our people, and the camp commander. We have them in Winchester. Alive," Ritter added with a smile.

"That's how you got the dispatch? I figured SigInt," MacKenzie

said, meaning signals intelligence. “How’d he manage that?”

“As you said, a cool customer.” Ritter smiled. “That’s the good news.”

“I’m not sure I want to hear the bad news.”

“We have an indicator that the other side might want to eliminate the camp and everyone in it.”

“Jesus… Henry is over in Paris right now,” MacKenzie said.

“Wrong approach. If he brings this up, even in one of the informal sessions, they’ll just deny, and it might spook them so much that they’ll try to make sure they can deny it.” It was well known that the real work at such conferences was done during the breaks, not when people had to address the issues formally over the conference table, the very shape of which had taken so much time.

“True. What then?”

“We’re working through the Russians. We have a pipeline for that. I initiated the contact myself.”

“Let me know how it turns out?”

“You bet.”

“Thanks for letting me talk to you,” Lieutenant Ryan said.

“What’s this all about?” Sam Rosen asked. They were in his office —not a large one, and the room was crowded with four people in it. Sarah and Sandy were there, too.

“It’s about your former patient—John Kelly.” That news didn’t come as much of a surprise, Ryan saw. “I need to talk to him.”

“What’s stopping you?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know where he is. I was kind of hoping you folks might.”

“About what?” Sarah asked.

“About a series of killings,” Ryan answered at once, in the hope of shocking them.

“Killing who?” This question came from the nurse.

“Doris Brown, for one, and several others.”

“John didn’t hurt her—” Sandy said before Sarah Rosen was able to touch her hand.

“Then you know who Doris Brown is,” the detective observed, just a little too quickly.

“John and I have become… friends,” Sandy said. “He’s been out of the country for the past couple of weeks. He couldn’t have killed anybody.”

Ouch, Ryan thought. That was both good and bad news. He’d

overplayed his hand on Doris Brown, though the nurse's reaction to the accusation had resulted in a little too much emotional response. He'd also just had a speculation confirmed as fact, however. "Out of the country? Where? How do you know?"

"I don't think I'm supposed to say where. I'm not supposed to know that."

"What do you mean by that?" the cop asked in surprise.

"I don't think I'm supposed to say, sorry." The way she answered the question showed sincerity rather than evasion.

What the hell did that *mean?* There was no answering that one, and Ryan decided to go on. "Someone named Sandy called the Brown house in Pittsburgh. It was you, wasn't it?"

"Officer," Sarah said, "I'm not sure I understand why you're asking all these questions."

"I'm trying to develop some information, and I want you to tell your friend that he needs to talk with me."

"This is a criminal investigation?"

"Yes, it is."

"And you're asking us questions," Sarah observed. "My brother is a lawyer. Should I ask him to come here? You seem to be asking us what we know about some murders. You're making me nervous. I have a question—are any of us under suspicion of anything?"

"No, but your friend is." If there was anything Ryan didn't need now, it was to have an attorney present.

"Wait a minute," Sam said. "If you think John might have done something wrong, and you want us to find him for you, you're saying that you think we know where he is, right? Doesn't that make us possible… helpers, accessories is the word, isn't it?"

Are you? Ryan would have liked to ask. He decided on, "Did I say that?"

"I've never had questions like this before, and they make me nervous," the surgeon told his wife. "Call your brother."

"Look, I have no reason to believe that any of you has done anything wrong. I *do* have reason to believe that your friend has. What I'm telling you is this: you'll be doing him a favor by telling him to call me."

"Who's he supposed to have killed?" Sam pressed. "Some people who deal drugs."

"You know what I do?" Sarah asked sharply. "What I spend most of my time on here, you know what it is?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do. You work a lot with addicts."

"If John's really doing that, maybe I ought to buy him a gun!"

"Hurts when you lose one, doesn't it?" Ryan asked quietly, setting her up.

"You bet it does. We're not in this business to lose patients."

"How did it feel to lose Doris Brown?" She didn't reply, but only because her intelligence stopped her mouth from reacting as it wanted to. "He brought her to you for help, didn't he? And you and Mrs. O'Toole here worked very hard to clean her up. You think I'm condemning you for that? But before he dropped her off with you, he killed two people. I *know* it. They were probably two of the people who murdered Pamela Madden, and those were his real targets. Your friend Kelly is a very tough guy, but he's not as smart as he thinks he is. If he comes in now, it's one thing. If he makes us catch him, it's something else. You tell him that. You'll be doing him a favor, okay? You'll be doing yourselves a favor, too. I don't think you've broken the law to this point. Do anything for him now except what I've told you, and you might be. I don't usually warn people this way," Ryan told them sternly. "You people aren't criminals. I know that. The thing you did for the Brown girl was admirable, and I'm sorry it worked out the way it did. But Kelly is out there killing people. and that's *wrong*, okay? I'm telling you that just in case you might have forgotten something along the way. I don't like druggies either. Pamela Madden, the girl on the fountain, that's *my* case. I *want* those people in a cage;

I want to watch them walk into the gas chamber. That's *my* job, to see that justice happens. Not his, mine. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think we do," Sam Rosen answered, thinking about the surgical gloves he'd given Kelly. It was different now. Back then he'd been distant from things—emotionally close to the terrible parts, yet far away from what his friend was doing, approving it as though reading a news article on a ballgame. It was different now, but he was involved. "Tell me, how close are you to getting the people who killed Pam?"

"We know a few things," Ryan answered without realizing that with his answer, he'd blown it after coming so close.

Oreza was back at his desk, the part of his work that he hated, and one reason he worried about striking for chief, which would entail having his own office, and becoming part of "management" instead

of just being a boat-driver. Mr. English was on leave, and his second-in-command, a chief, was off seeing to something or other, leaving him as senior man present—but it was his job anyway. The petty officer searched on his desk for the card and dialed the number.

"Homicide."

"Lieutenant Ryan, please."

"He's not here."

"Sergeant Douglas?"

"He's in court today."

"Okay, I'll call back." Oreza hung up. He looked at the clock. Pushing four in the afternoon—he'd been at the station since midnight. He pulled open a drawer and started filling out the forms accounting for the fuel he'd burned up today, making the Chesapeake Bay safe for drunks who owned boats. Then he planned to get home, get dinner, and get some sleep.

The problem was making sense out of what she said. A physician was called in from his office across the street, and diagnosed her problem as barbiturate intoxication, which wasn't exactly news, and then went on to say that they'd just have to wait for the stuff to work its way out of her system, for which two opinions he charged the county twenty dollars. Talking to her for several hours had only made her at turns amused and annoyed, but her story hadn't changed, either. Three people dead, *bang bang bang.* It was less funny to her now. She'd started remembering what Burt was like, and that talk was quite foul.

"If this girl was any higher she'd be up on the moon with the astronauts," the Captain thought.

"Three dead people on a boat somewhere," Trooper Freeland repeated. "Names and everything."

"You believe it?"

"Story stays the same, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." The Captain looked up. "You like to fish out there. What's it sound like to you, Ben?"

"Like around Bloodsworth Island."

"We'll hold her overnight on public drunkenness… we have her dead-bang on possession, right?"

"Cap'n, all I had to do was ask. She *handed* the stuff to me."

"Okay, process her all the way through."

“And then, sir?”

“Like helicopter rides?”

He picked a different marina this time. It turned out to be pretty easy, with so many boats always out fishing or partying, and this one had plenty of guest slips for transient boats which in the summer season plied up and down the coast, stopping off on the way for food and fuel and rest much as motorists did. The dockmaster watched him move in expertly to his third-largest guest slip, which didn’t always happen with the owners of the larger cruisers. He was more surprised to see the youth of the owner.

“How long you plan to be here?” the man asked, helping with the lines.

“Couple of days. Is that okay?”

“Sure.”

“Mind if I pay cash?”

“We honor cash,” the dockmaster assured him.

Kelly peeled off the bills and announced that he’d be sleeping aboard this night. He didn’t say what would be happening the next day.

34

Stalking

“We missed something, Em,” Douglas announced at eightten in the morning.

“What was it this time?” Ryan asked. Missing something wasn’t exactly a new happening in their business.

“How they knew she was in Pittsburgh. I called that Sergeant Meyer, had ’em check the long-distance charges on the house phone. None, not a single outgoing call for the last month.”

The detective lieutenant stubbed out his cigarette. “You have to assume that our friend Henry knew where she was from. He had two girls get loose from him, he probably took the time to ask where they were from. You’re right,” Ryan said after a second’s thought. “He probably assumed she was dead.”

“Who knew she was there?”

“The people who took her there. They sure as hell didn’t tell anyone.”

“Kelly?”

“Found out yesterday over at Hopkins, he was out of the country.”

“Oh, really? Where?”

“The nurse, O’Toole, she says she knows but she isn’t allowed to say, whatever the hell that means.” He paused. “Back to Pittsburgh.”

“The story is, Sergeant Meyer’s dad is a preacher. He was counseling the girl and told his son a little of what he knew. Okay. The sergeant goes up the chain to his captain. The Captain knows Frank Allen, and the sarge calls him for advice on who’s running the case. Frank refers him to us. Meyer didn’t talk to anybody else.”

Douglas lit up one of his own. “So how did the info get to our friends?”

This was entirely normal, but not particularly comfortable. Now both men thought that they had a breaking case. This was happening, it *was* breaking open. Not unusually, things were now happening too fast for the analytical process that was necessary to make sense of it all.

“As we’ve thought all along, they have somebody inside.”

“Frank?” Douglas asked. “He’s never been connected with any of the cases. He doesn’t even have access to the information that our friends would need.” Which was true. The Helen Waters case had started in the Western District with one of Allen’s junior detectives, but the Chief had turned it over to Ryan and Douglas almost immediately because of the degree of violence involved. “I suppose you could call this progress, Em. Now we’re sure. There has to be a leak inside the Department.”

“What other good news do we have?”

The State Police only had three helicopters, all Bell Jet Rangers, and were still learning how to make use of them. Getting one was not the most trivial of exercises, but the Captain running Barracks “V” was a senior man who ran a quiet county—this was less a matter of his competence than of the nature of his area, but police hierarchies tend to place stock in results, however obtained. The helicopter arrived on the barracks helicopter pad at a quarter to nine. Captain Ernest Joy and Trooper 1/c Freeland were waiting. Neither had taken a helicopter ride before, and both were a little nervous when they saw how small the aircraft was. They always look smaller close up, and smaller still on the inside. Mainly used for Medevac missions, the aircraft had a pilot and a paramedic, both of whom were gun-toting State Police officers in sporty flight suits that went well, they thought, with their shoulder holsters and aviator shades. The standard safety lecture took a total of ninety seconds, delivered so quickly as to be incomprehensible. The ground-pounders strapped in, and the helicopter spooled up. The pilot decided against jazzing up the ride. The senior man was a captain, after all, and cleaning vomit out of the back was a drag.

“Where to?” he asked over the intercom.

“Bloodsworth Island,” Captain Joy told him.

“Roger that,” the pilot replied as he thought an aviator ought,

turning southeast and lowering the nose. It didn't take long.

The world looks different from above, and the first time people go up in helicopters the reaction is always the same. The takeoff, rather like jerking aloft in an amusement-park cable-car ride, is initially startling, but then the fascination begins. The world transformed itself before the eyes of both officers, and it was as though it all suddenly made sense. They could see the roads and the farms all laid out like a map. Freeland grasped it first. Knowing his territory as he did, he instantly saw that his mental picture of it was flawed; his idea of how things really were was not quite right. He was only a thousand feet above it, a linear distance his car traversed in seconds, but this perspective was new, and he immediately started learning from it.

"That's where I found her," he told the Captain over the intercom.

"Long way from where we're going. You think she walked that far?"

"No, sir." But it wasn't that far from the water, was it? Perhaps two miles away, they saw the old dock of a farm up for sale, and that was less than five miles from where they were heading, scarcely two minutes' flying time. The Chesapeake Bay was a wide blue band now, under the morning haze. To the northwest was the large expanse of Patuxent River Naval Air Test Center, and they could both see aircraft flying there—a matter of concern to the pilot, who kept a wary eye out for low-flying aircraft. The Navy jocks liked to smoke in low.

"Straight ahead," he said. The paramedic pointed so that the passengers would know where straight-ahead was. "Sure looks different from up here," Freeland said, a boy's wonder in his voice. "I fish around there. From the surface it just looks like marshes."

But it didn't now. From a thousand feet it looked like islands at first, connected by silt and grass, but islands for all that. As they got closer, the islands took on regular shapes, lozengelike at first, and then with the fine lines of ships, grown over, surrounded by grass and reeds.

"Jeez, there's a bunch of 'em," the pilot observed. He'd rarely flown down here, and then mostly at night with accident cases.

"World War One," the Captain said. "My father said they're leftovers from the war, the ones the Germans didn't get."

"What exactly are we looking for?"

"Not sure, maybe a boat. We picked up a druggie yesterday," the Captain explained. "Said there was a lab in there, and three dead people."

"No shit? A drug lab in *there?*"

"That's what the lady said," Freeland confirmed, learning something else. As forbidding as it looked from the surface, there *were* channels in here. Probably a hell of a good place to go crabbing. From the deck of his fishing boat, it looked like one massive island, but not from up here. Wasn't that interesting?

"Got a flash down this way." The paramedic pointed the pilot over to the right. "Off glass or something."

"Let's check it out." The stick went right and down a little as he brought the Jet Ranger down. "Yeah, I got a boat by those three."

"Check it out," the paramedic ordered with a grin.

"You got it." It would be a chance to do some real flying. A former Huey driver from the 1st Air Cav, he loved being able to play with his aircraft. Anyone could fly straight and level, after all. He circled the place first, checking winds, then lowered his collective a little, easing the chopper down to about two hundred feet.

"Call it an eighteen-footer," Freeland said, and they could see the white nylon line that held it fast to the remains of the ship.

"Lower," the Captain commanded. In a few seconds they were fifty feet over the deck of the derelict. The boat was empty. There was a beer cooler, and some other stuff piled up in the back, but nothing else. The aircraft jerked as a couple of birds flew out of the ruined superstructure of the ship. The pilot instinctively maneuvered to avoid them. One crow sucked into his engine intake could make them a permanent part of this man-made swamp.

"Whoever owns that boat sure isn't real interested in us," he said over the intercom. In the back, Freeland mimed three shots with his hand. The Captain nodded.

"I think you may be right, Ben." To the pilot: "Can you mark the exact position on a map?"

"Right." He considered the possibility of going into a low hover and dropping them off on the deck. Simple enough if they had been back in the Cav, it looked too dangerous for this situation. The paramedic pulled out a chart and made the appropriate notations. "Seen what you need?"

"Yeah, head back."

Twenty minutes later, Captain Joy was on the phone.

"Coast Guard, Thomas Point."

"This is Captain Joy, State Police. We need a little help." He explained on for a few minutes.

"Take about ninety minutes," Warrant Officer English told him.

"That'd be fine."

Kelly called a Yellow Cab, which picked him up at the marina entrance. His first stop of the day was a rather disreputable business establishment called Kolonel Klunker, where he rented a 1959 Volkswagen, prepaying it for a month, with no mileage charge.

"Thank you, Mr. Aiello," the man said to a smiling Kelly, who was using the ID from a man who no longer needed it. He drove the car back to the marina and started unloading the things he needed. Nobody paid much attention, and in fifteen minutes the Beetle was gone.

Kelly took the opportunity to drive through the area he'd be hunting, checking traffic patterns. It was agreeably vacant, a part of the city he'd never visited before, off a bleak industrial thoroughfare called O'Donnell Street, a place where nobody lived and few would want to. The air was laden with the smells of various chemicals, few of them pleasant. Not as busy as it once had been, many of the buildings in the district looked unused. More to the point, there was much open ground here, many buildings separated from one another by flat areas of bare dirt which trucks used for a convenient place to reverse direction. No kids playing sandlot ball, not a single house in sight, and because of that, not a single police car to be seen. Rather a clever ploy on the part of his enemies, Kelly thought, at least from one perspective. The place he was interested in was a single freestanding building with a half-destroyed sign over the entrance. The back of it was just a blank wall. There were only three doors, and though they were on two different walls, all could be observed from a single point, and to Kelly's rear was another vacant building, a tall concrete structure with plenty of broken windows. His initial reconnaissance complete, Kelly headed north.

Oreza was heading south. He'd already been partway there, conducting a routine patrol and wondering why the hell the Coast Guard didn't start up a ministation farther down on the Eastern

Shore, or maybe by Cove Point Light, where there was an existing station for the guys who spent their waking hours, if any, making sure the light bulb at the top of the tower worked. That wasn't especially demanding duty to Oreza's mind, though it was probably all right for the kid who ran the place. His wife had just delivered twins, after all, and the Coast Guard was a family-oriented branch of the military.

He was letting one of his junior seamen do the driving, enjoying the morning, standing outside the cramped wheelhouse, drinking some of his home-brewed coffee.

"Radio," one of the crewmen said.

Oreza went inside and took the microphone. "Four-One Alfa here."

"Four-One Alfa, this is English at Thomas Base. Your pickup is at a dock at Dame's Choice. You'll see cop cars there. Got an ETA?"

"Call it twenty or twenty-five, Mr. E."

"Roger that. Out."

"Come left," Oreza said, looking at his chart. The water looked plenty deep. "One-six-five."

"One-six-five, aye."

Xantha was more or less sober, though weak. Her dark skin had a gray pallor to it, and she complained of a splitting headache that analgesics had scarcely touched. She was aware that she was under arrest now, and that her rap sheet had arrived on teletype. She was also canny enough to have requested the presence of a lawyer. Strangely, this had not bothered the police very much.

"My client," the attorney said, "is willing to cooperate." The agreement had taken all of ten minutes to strike. If she was telling the truth, and if she was not involved in a major felony, the possession charge against her would be dropped, subject to her enrollment in a treatment program. It was as good a deal as anyone had offered Xantha Matthews in some years. It was immediately apparent why this was true.

"They was gonna kill me!" she said, remembering it all now that she was outside the influence of the barbiturates, and now that her attorney gave her permission to speak.

"Who's 'they'?" Captain Joy asked.

"They dead. He killed 'em, the white boy, shot 'em dead. An' he left the drugs, whole shitload of 'em."

“Tell us about the white man,” Joy asked, with a look to Freeland that ought to have been disbelieving but was not.

“Big dude, like him”—she pointed to Freeland—“but he face all green like a leaf. He blindfold me af’er he took me down, then he put me on that pier an’ tol’ me to catch a bus or somethin’.”

“How do you know he was white?”

“Wrists was white. Hands was green, but not up here, like,” she said, indicating on her own arms. “He wear green clothes with stripes on ’em, like a soldier, carry a big .45. I was asleep when he shoot, that wake me up, see? Make me get dress, take me away, drop me off, he boat just go away.”

“What kind of boat?”

“Big white one, tall, like, big, like thirty feet Ion’.”

“Xantha, how do you know they were going to kill you?”

“White boy say so, he show me the things in the boat, the little one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Fishnet shit, like, and cement blocks. He say they tell him they do it before.”

The lawyer decided it was his turn to speak. “Gentlemen, my client has information about what may be a major criminal operation. She may require protection, and in return for her assistance, we would like to have state funding for her treatment.”

“Counselor,” Joy replied quietly, “if this is what it sounds like, I’ll fund it out of my own budget. May I suggest, sir, that we keep her in our lockup for the time being? For her own safety, the need for which seems quite apparent, sir.” The State Police captain had been negotiating with lawyers for years, and had started sounding like one, Freeland thought.

“The food here is fo’ shit!” Xantha said, her eyes closed in pain.

“We’ll take care of that, too,” Joy promised her.

“I think she needs some medical help,” the lawyer noted. “How can she get it here?”

“Doctor Paige will be here right after lunch to see her. Counselor, your client is in no condition to look after herself now. All charges against her are dropped pending verification of her story. You’ll get everything you want, in return for her cooperation. I can’t do any more than that.”

“My client agrees to your conditions and suggestions,” the lawyer said without consulting her. The county would even pay his fee.

Besides, he felt as though he might be doing the world a good deed. It was quite a change from getting drunk drivers off.

"There's a shower that way. Why not get her cleaned up? You may also wish to get her some decent things to wear. Give us the bill."

"A pleasure doing business with you, Captain Joy," he said as the barracks commander left for Freeland's car.

"Ben, you really fell into something. You handled her real nice. I won't forget. Now show me how fast this beast goes."

"You got it, Cap'n." Freeland engaged the lights before passing seventy. They made it to the dock just as the Coast Guard turned out of the main channel.

The man wore lieutenant's bars—though he called himself a captain—and Oreza saluted him as he came aboard. Both police officers were given life jackets to wear because Coast Guard regulations required them on small boats, and then Joy showed him the chart.

"Think you can get in there?"

"No, but our launch can. What gives?"

"A possible triple homicide, possible drug involvement. We overflew the area this morning. There's a fishing boat right here."

Oreza nodded as impassively as possible and took the wheel himself, pushing the throttles to the stops. It was a bare five miles to the graveyard—that was how Oreza thought of it—and he plotted his approach as carefully as possible.

"No closer? The tide's in," Freeland said.

"That's the problem. Place like this, you go it at low water so's in case you beach you can float off. From here on we use the launch." Wheels were turning in his mind while his crewmen got the fourteen-foot launch deployed. Months earlier, that stormy night with Lieutenant Charon from Baltimore, a possible drug deal that he'd expected to take place somewhere on the Bay. *Some real serious guys*, he'd told Portagee. Oreza already wondered if there might be a connection.

They motored in, powered by a ten-horse outboard. The quartermaster took note of the tidal flow, following what appeared to be a channel that meandered generally in the direction indicated by their marked-up chart. It was quiet in here, and Oreza remembered his tour of duty for Operation MARKET TIME, the Coast Guard's effort to assist the Navy in Vietnam. He'd spent time with

the brown-water guys, running Swift boats manufactured right in Annapolis by the Trumpy Yard. It was so similar, the tall grass that could, and often did, conceal people with guns. He wondered if they might be facing something similar soon. The cops were fingering their revolvers, and Oreza asked himself, too late, why he hadn't brought a Colt with him. Not that he knew how to use it. His next thought was that this would have been a good place to have Kelly with him. He wasn't quite sure what the story was on Kelly, but he suspected the man was one of the SEALs, with whom he'd worked briefly in the Mekong Delta. Sure as hell he'd gotten that Navy Cross for something, and the tattoo on his arm wasn't there by accident.

"Well, damn," Oreza breathed. "Looks like a Starcraft sixteen… no, more like eighteen." He lifted his portable radio. "Four-One Alpha, this is Oreza."

"Reading you, Portagee."

"We got the boat, right where they said. Stand by."

"Roger."

Suddenly things got very tense indeed. The two cops exchanged a look, wondering why they hadn't brought more people out. Oreza eased his launch right up to the Starcraft. The cops got aboard gingerly.

Freeland pointed to the back. Joy nodded. There were six cement blocks and a rolled-up section of nylon netting. Xantha hadn't lied about that. There was also a rope ladder going up. Joy went first, his revolver in his right hand. Oreza just watched as Freeland followed. Once they got to the deck, the men wrapped both hands around their handguns and headed for the superstructure, disappearing from view for what seemed like an hour, but in reality was only four minutes. Some birds scattered aloft. When Joy came back, his revolver wasn't visible.

"We have three bodies up here, and a hell of a large quantity of what looks like heroin. Call your boat, have them tell my barracks that we need crime lab. Sailor, you just started running a ferry service."

"Sir, fish-and-game has better boats for this. Want me to call them to support you?"

"Good idea. You might want to circle around this area some. The water looks pretty clear, and she told us that they've dumped some bodies hereabouts. See the stuff in the fishing boat?" Oreza looked,

noticing the fishnet and blocks for the first time.

Jesus. "That's how you do it. Okay, I'll motor around." Which he did, after making his radio call.

"Hi, Sandy."

"John! Where are you?"

"My place in town."

"There was a policeman in to see us yesterday. They're looking for you."

"Oh?" Kelly's eyes narrowed as he chewed on his sandwich.

"He said you should come in and talk to him, that it's better if you do it right away."

"That's nice of him," Kelly observed with a chuckle. "What are you going to do?"

"You don't want to know, Sandy."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Please, John, please think it through."

"I have, Sandy. Honest. It'll be okay. Thanks for the information."

"Something wrong?" another nurse asked after she hung up.

"No," Sandy replied, and her friend knew it was a lie.

Hmm. Kelly finished off his Coke. That confirmed his suspicion about Oreza's little visit. So things were getting complicated now, but they'd been pretty complicated the week before, too. He headed off to the bedroom, almost there when there came a knock at the door. That startled him rather badly, but he had to answer it. He'd opened windows to air the apartment out, and it was plain that someone was here. He took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Wondered where you were, Mr. Murphy," the manager said, much to Kelly's relief.

"Well, two weeks of work in the Midwest and a week's vacation down in Florida," he lied with a relaxed smile.

"You didn't get much of a tan."

An embarrassed grin. "Spent a lot of my time inside." The manager thought that was pretty good.

"Good for you, well, just wanted to see if everything was okay."

"No problems here," Kelly assured the man, closing the door before he could ask anything else. He needed a nap. It seemed that all of his work was at night. It was like being on the other side of

the world, Kelly told himself, lying down on his lumpy bed.

It was a hot day at the zoo. Better to have met in the panda enclosure. It was crowded with people who wanted to gawk at this wonderful goodwill gift from the People's Republic of China—Chinese Communists to Ritter. The place was air conditioned and comfortable, but intelligence officers usually were uncomfortable in places like that, and so today he was strolling by the remarkably large area that contained the Galapagos tortoises, or turtles—Ritter didn't know the difference, if there was one. Why they needed so large an area, he didn't know either. Certainly it seemed expansive for a creature that moved at roughly the speed of a glacier.

"Hello, Bob." "Charles" was now an unnecessary subterfuge, though Voloshin had initiated the call—right to Ritter's desk, to show how clever he was. It worked both ways in the intelligence business. In the case of a call initiated by the Russians, the code name was "Bill."

"Hello, Sergey." Ritter pointed to the reptiles. "Kind of reminds you of the way our governments work, doesn't it?"

"Not my part of it." The Russian sipped at his soft drink. "Nor yours."

"Okay, what's the word from Moscow?"

"You forgot to tell me something."

"What's that?"

"That you have a Vietnamese officer also."

"Why should that concern you?" Ritter asked lightly, clearly concealing his annoyance that Voloshin knew this, as his interlocutor could see.

"It is a complication. Moscow doesn't know yet."

"Then don't tell them," Ritter suggested. "It is, as you say, a complication. I assure you that your allies don't know."

"How can that be?" the Russian demanded.

"Sergey, do you reveal methods?" Ritter replied, ending that phase of the discussion. This part of the game had to be played very carefully indeed, and for more than one reason. "Look, General, you don't like the little bastards any more than we do, right?"

"They are our fraternal socialist allies."

"Yes, and we have bulwarks of democracy all over Latin America, too. Did you come here for a quick course in political philosophy?"

"The nice thing about enemies is that you know where they

stand. This is not always true of friends," Voloshin admitted. That also explained the comfort level of his government with the current American president. A bastard, perhaps, but a known bastard. And, no, Voloshin admitted—to himself—he had little use for the Vietnamese. The real action was in Europe. Always had been. Always would be. That was where the course of history had been set for centuries, and nothing was going to change that.

"Call it an unconfirmed report, check up on it, maybe? Delay? Please, General, the stakes here are too high for that. If anything happens to those men, I promise you, we *will* produce your officer. The Pentagon knows, Sergey, and they want those men back, and they don't care a rat-fuck about *détente."* The profanity showed what Ritter really thought.

"Do you? Does your Directorate?"

"It sure will make life a lot more predictable. Where were you in '62, Sergey?" Ritter asked—knowing and wondering what he'd say.

"In Bonn, as you know, watching your forces go on alert because Nikita Sergeyevich decided to play his foolish game." Which had been contrary to KGB and Foreign Ministry advice, as both men knew.

"We're never going to be friends, but even enemies can agree to rules for the game. Isn't that what this is about?"

A judicious man, Voloshin thought, which pleased him. It made for predictable behavior, and that above all things was what the Russians wanted of the Americans. "You are persuasive, Bob. You assure me that our allies do not know their man is missing?"

"Positive. My offer for you to meet your man is still open," he added.

"Without reciprocal rights?" Voloshin tried.

"For that I need permission from upstairs. I can try if you ask me to, but that also would be something of a complication." He dumped his empty drink cup in a bin.

"I ask." Voloshin wanted that made clear.

"Very well. I'll call you. And in return?"

"In return I will consider your request." Voloshin walked off without another word.

Gotcha! Ritter thought, heading towards where his car was parked. He'd played a careful but inventive game. There were three possible leaks on BOXWOOD GREEN. He'd visited each of them. To one he'd said that they actually had gotten a prisoner out, who had

died of wounds. To another, that the Russian was badly wounded and might not survive. But Ritter had saved his best piece of bait for the most likely leak. Now he knew. That narrowed it to four suspects. Roger MacKenzie, that prep-school-reject aide, and two secretaries. This was really an FBI job, but he didn't want any additional complications, and an espionage investigation of the Office of the President of the United States was about as complicated as things could be. Back in his car, he decided to meet with a friend in the Directorate of Science and Technology. Ritter had a great deal of respect for Voloshin. A clever man, a very careful, methodical man, he'd run agents all over Western Europe before being assigned to the Washington *rezidentura.* He'd keep his word, and to make sure he didn't get into any trouble about it, he'd play everything strictly by the exacting rules of his parent agency. Ritter was gambling big on that. Pull this one off in addition to the other coup in the works, and how much higher might he rise? Better yet, he'd be earning his way up, not some fair-haired political payoff, but the son of a Texas Ranger who'd waited tables to get his degree at Baylor. Something Sergey would have appreciated, in good Marxist-Leninist fashion, Ritter told himself, pulling onto Connecticut Avenue. Working-class kid makes good.

It was an unusual way to gather information, something he'd never done before, and pleasant enough that he might even get used to it. He sat at a corner booth in Mama Maria's, working slowly through his second course—thank you, no wine, I'm driving. Dressed in his CIA suit, well-groomed and sporting a new businesslike haircut, he enjoyed the looks of a few unattached women, and a waitress who positively doted on him, especially with his good manners. The excellence of the food explained the crowded room, and the crowding explained why it was a convenient place for Tony Piaggi and Henry Tucker to meet here. Mike Aiello had been very forthcoming about that. Mama Maria's was, in fact, owned by the Piaggi family, now in its third generation of providing food and other, less legal, services to the local community, dating back to Prohibition. The owner was a bon vivant, greeting favored customers, guiding them to their places with Old World hospitality. Snappy dresser, too, Kelly saw, recording his face and build, gestures and mannerisms, as he ate through his calamari. A black man came in, dressed in a nicely cut suit. He looked like he knew

the place, smiling at the hostess and waiting a few seconds for his reward, and Kelly's.

Piaggi looked up and headed to the front, stopping only briefly to shake hands with someone on the way. He did the same with the black man, then led him back past Kelly's table, and up the back stairs to where the private rooms were. No particular notice was taken. There were other black couples in the restaurant, treated the same as everyone else. But those others did honest work, Kelly was sure. He turned his thoughts away from the distraction. *So that's Henry Tucker. That's the one who killed Pam* He didn't look like a monster. Monsters rarely did. To Kelly he looked like a target, and his particulars went into Kelly's memory, alongside Tony Piaggi's. He was surprised when he looked down and saw that the fork in his hands was bent.

"What's the problem?" Piaggi asked upstairs. He poured each of them a glass of Chianti, good host that he was, but as soon as the door had closed, Henry's face started telling him something.

"They haven't come back."

"Phil, Mike, and Burt?"

"Yes!" Henry snarled, meaning, *no.*

"Okay, settle down. How much stuff did they have?"

"Twenty kees of pure, man. This was supposed to take care of me and Philly, and New York for a while."

"Lot of stuff, Henry." Tony nodded. "Maybe it just took them a while, okay?"

"Shoulda been back by now."

"Look, Phil and Mike are new, probably clumsy, like Eddie and me were our first time—hell, Henry, that was only five kees, remember?"

"I allowed for that," he said, wondering if he'd really be right about that or not.

"Henry," Tony said, sipping his wine and trying to appear calm and reasonable, "look, okay? Why are you getting excited? We've taken care of all the problems, right?"

"Something's wrong, man."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"Want to get a boat and go down there to see?"

Tucker shook his head. "Takes too long."

"The meet with the other guys isn't for three days. Be cool. They're probably on their way here now."

Piaggi thought he understood Tucker's sudden case of the shakes. Now it was big-time. Twenty kilograms of pure translated into a huge quantity of street drugs, and selling it already diluted and packaged made for sufficient convenience to their customers that they were for the first time paying top dollar. This was the really big score that Tucker had been working towards for several years. Just assembling all the cash to pay for it was a major undertaking. It was an understandable case of nerves.

"Tony, what if it wasn't Eddie at all?"

Exasperation: "You're the one who said it had to be, remember?"

Tucker couldn't pursue that. He'd merely wanted an excuse to eliminate the man as an unnecessary complication. His anxiety was partly what Tony thought it was, but something else, too. The things that had happened earlier in the summer, the things that had just started for no reason, then stopped with no reason—he had told himself that they were Eddie Morello's doing. He'd managed to convince himself of that, but only because he had wanted to believe it. Somewhere else the little voice that had brought him this far had told him otherwise, and now the voice was back, and there was no Eddie to be the focus for his anxiety and anger. A streetwise man who'd gotten this far through the complex equation of brain and guts and instinct, he trusted that last quality most. Now it was telling him things that he didn't understand, couldn't reason out. Tony was right. It could just be a matter of clumsiness in the processing. That was one reason they were setting their lab up in east Baltimore. They could afford that now, with experience behind them and a viable front business setting up in the coming week. So he drank his wine and settled down, the rich, red alcohol soothing his abraded instincts.

"Give 'em until tomorrow."

"So how was it?" the man at the wheel asked. An hour north of Bloodsworth Island, he figured he'd waited long enough to ask the silent petty officer who stood beside him. After all, they just stood by and waited.

"They fed a guy to the fuckin' crabs!" Oreza told them. "They took like two square yards of net and weighted it down with blocks, and just sunk his ass—practically

nothing left but the damned bones!" The police lab people were still discussing how to recover the body, for all he knew. Oreza was certain it was a sight he'd take years to forget, the skull just lying there, the bones still dressed, moving because of the water currents… or maybe some crabs inside. He hadn't cared to look that closely.

"Heavy shit, man," the helmsman agreed.

"You know who it is?"

"What d'ya mean, Portagee?"

"Back in May, when we had that Charon guy aboard—the day-sailer with the candystripe main, that's who it was, I'll bet ya."

"Oh, yeah. You could be right on that one, boss."

They'd let him see it all, just as a courtesy that in retro-spect he would as soon have done without, but which at the time had been impossible to avoid. He could not have chickened out in front of cops, since he, too, was a cop of sorts. And so he'd climbed up the ladder after reporting on the body he'd found only fifty yards from the derelict, and seen three more, all lying facedown on the deck of what had probably been the freighter's wardroom, all dead, all shot in the back of the neck, the wounds having been picked at by birds. He'd almost lost control of himself at that realization. The birds had been sensible enough not to pick at the drugs, however.

"I'm talking twenty kilograms—forty-some pounds of the shit—that's what the cops said, anyway. Like, millions of bucks," Oreza related.

"Always said I was in the wrong business."

"Jesus, the cops look like they all had hard-ons, 'specially that captain. They'll probably be there all night, way it sounded."

"Hey, Wally?"

The tape was disappointingly scratchy. That was due to the old phone lines, the technician explained. Nothing he could do about that. The switch box in the building dated back to when Alexander Graham Bell was doing hearing aids.

"Yeah, what is it?" the somewhat uneven voice replied.

"The deal with the Vietnamese officer they got. You sure about that?"

"That's what Roger told me." *Bingo!* Ritter thought.

"Where they have him?"

"I guess out at Winchester with the Russian."

"You're sure?"

"Damned right. It surprised me, too."

"I wanted to check up on that before—well, you know."

"Sure thing, man." With that the line went dead.

"Who is he?" Greer asked.

"Walter Hicks. All the best schools, James—Andover and Brown. Father's a big-time investment banker who pulled a few well-tuned political strings, and look where little Wally ends up." Ritter tightened his hand into a fist. "You want to know why those people are still in SENDER GREEN? That's it, my friend."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know." *But it won't be legal.* The tape wasn't. The tap had been set up without a court order.

"Think it over carefully, Bob," Greer warned. "I was there, too, remember?"

"What if Sergey can't get it done fast enough? Then this little *fuck* gets away with ending the lives of twenty men!"

"I don't like that very much either."

"I don't like it at all!"

"Treason is still a capital crime, Bob."

Ritter looked up. "It's supposed to be."

Another long day. Oreza found himself envying the first-class who was tending Cove Point Light. At least he had his family with him all the time. Here Oreza was with the brightest little girl in kindergarten and he hardly ever saw her. Maybe he'd take that teaching job at New London after all, Portagee thought, just so that he could have a family life for a year or two. It meant hanging out with children who would someday be officers, but at least they'd learn seamanship the right way.

Mainly he was lonely with his thoughts. His crew was bedding down now in the bunkroom that he should have gone to, but the images haunted him. The crabman, and the three bird-feeders would deny him sleep for hours unless he got it off his conscience… and he had an excuse, didn't he? Oreza rummaged around his desk, finding the card.

"Hello?"

"Lieutenant Charon? This is Quartermaster First Class Oreza, down at Thomas Point."

"It's kinda late, you know," Charon pointed out. He'd been caught

on his way to bed.

"Remember back in May, looking for that sailboat?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I think maybe we found your man, sir." Oreza thought he could hear eyeballs click.

"Tell me about it?"

Portagee did, leaving nothing out, and he could feel the horror leaving him, almost as though he were transmitting it over the phone wire. He didn't know that was precisely what he was doing.

"Who's the captain running the case for the troopers?"

"Name's Joy, sir. Somerset County. Know him?"

"No, I don't."

"Oh, yeah, something else," Oreza remembered.

"Yeah?" Charon was taking lots of notes.

"You know a Lieutenant Ryan?"

"Yeah, he works downtown, too."

"He wanted me to check up a guy for him, fellow named Kelly. Oh, yeah! You've seen him, remember?"

"What do you mean?"

"The night we were out after the day-sailer, the guy in the cruiser we saw just before dawn. Lives on an island, not far from Bloodsworth. Anyway, this Ryan guy wanted me to find him for him, okay? He's back, sir, probably up in Baltimore right now. I tried calling, sir, but he was out, and I've been running my ass off all day. Could you pass that one along, please?"

"Sure," Charon replied, and his brain was working very quickly indeed now.

35

Rite of Passage

Mark Charon found himself in rather a difficult position. That he was a corrupted cop did not make him a stupid one. In fact, his was a careful and thoroughly analytical mind, and while he made mistakes, he was not blind to them. That was precisely the case as he lay alone in bed, hanging up the phone after his conversation with the Coast Guard. The first order of business was that Henry would not be pleased to learn that his lab was gone, and three of his people with it. Worse still, it sounded as though a vast quantity of drugs had been lost, and even Henry's supply was finite. Worst of all, the person or persons who had accomplished that feat was unknown, at large, and doing—what?

He knew who Kelly was. He'd even reconstructed matters to the rather stunning coincidence that Kelly had been the one who'd picked Pam Madden off the street quite by accident the day Angelo Vorano had been eliminated, and that she'd actually been aboard his boat, not twenty feet from the Coast Guard cutter after that stormy and vomitous night. Now Em Ryan and Tom Douglas wanted to know about him, and had taken the extraordinary step of having the Coast Guard check up on him. Why? A follow-up interview with an out-of-town witness was something for the telephone more often than not. Em and Tom were working the Fountain Case, along with all the other ones that had started a few weeks later. "Rich beach bum" was what he'd told Henry, but the department's number-one homicide team was interested in him, and he'd been directly involved with one of the defectors from Henry's organization, and he had a boat, and he lived not too far from the processing lab that Henry was still foolish enough to use. That was

a singularly long and unlikely string of coincidences made all the more troubling by the realization that Charon was no longer a policeman investigating a crime, but rather a criminal himself who was *part* of the crimes being checked out.

That realization struck surprisingly hard at the Lieutenant lying in his bed. Somehow he didn't think of himself in those terms. Charon actually had believed himself above it all, watching, taking an occasional part, but not *being* part of what unfolded below him. After all, he had the longest string of successes in the history of the narcotics unit, capped off with his personal elimination of Eddie Morello, perhaps the most artful action of his professional life—doubly so in that he had eliminated a genuine dealer by premeditated murder in front of no less than six other officers, then had it pronounced a clean shooting on the spot, which had given him a paid vacation in addition to what Henry had paid him for the event. Somehow it had seemed like a particularly entertaining game, and one not too far distanced from the job the citizens of his city paid him to do. Men live by their illusions, and Charon was no different from the rest. It wasn't so much that he'd told himself what he'd been doing was all right as that he'd simply allowed himself to concentrate on the breaks that Henry had been feeding him, thus taking off the street every supplier who'd threatened the man's market standing. Able to control which of his detectives investigated what, he'd actually been able to give the entire local market to the one supplier about whom he had no real information in his files. That had enabled Henry to expand his own operation, attracting the attention of Tony Piaggi and his own East Coast connections. Soon, and he'd told Henry this, he would be forced to allow his people to nibble at the edges of the operation. Henry had understood, doubtless after counseling from Piaggi, who was sophisticated enough to grasp the finer points of the game.

But someone had tossed a match into this highly volatile mixture. The information he had led only in one direction, but not far enough. So he had to get more, didn't he? Charon thought for a moment and lifted his phone. He needed three calls to get the right number.

"State Police."

"Trying to get Captain Joy. This is Lieutenant Charon, Baltimore City Police."

"You're in luck, sir. He just got back in. Please hold." The next

voice that came on was a tired one.

"Captain Joy."

"Hello, this is Lieutenant Charon, Mark Charon, City Police. I work narcotics. I hear you just took down something big."

"You might say that." Charon could hear the man settling into his chair with a combination of satisfaction and fatigue.

"Could you give me a quick sketch? I may have some information on this one myself."

"Who told you about this anyway?"

"That Coast Guard sailor who drove you around—Oreza. I've worked with him on a couple cases. Remember the big marijuana bust, the Talbot County farm?"

"Was that you? I thought the Coasties took credit for that."

"I had to let them, to protect my informant. Look, you can call them if you want to confirm that. I'll give you the phone number, the boss of the station is Paul English." "Okay, Charon, you sold me."

"Back in May I spent a day and a night out with them looking for a guy who just disappeared on us. We never found him, never found his boat. Oreza says—"

"The crabman," Joy breathed. "Somebody got dumped in the water, looks like he's been there a while. Anything you can tell me about him?"

"His name is probably Angelo Vorano. Lived here in town, small-time dealer who was looking to make it into the bigs." Charon gave a description.

"Height's about right. We'll have to check dental records for a positive ID, though. Okay, that ought to help, Lieutenant. What do you need from me?"

"What can you tell me?" Charon took several minutes of notes. "What are you doing with Xantha?"

"Holding her as a material witness, with her lawyer's approval by the way. We want to take care of this girl. Looks like we're dealing with some pretty nasty folks here."

"I believe it," Charon replied. "Okay, let me see what I can shake loose for you at this end."

"Thanks for the assist."

"Jesus," Charon said after hanging up. *White boy… big white boat.* Burt and the two people Tony had evidently seconded to the operation, back of the head, .45s. Execution-style killings were not

yet the vogue in the drug business, and the sheer coldness of it gave Charon a chill. But it wasn't so much coldness as efficiency, was it? Like the pushers. Like the case Tom and Em were working, and they wanted to see about this Kelly guy, and he was a white guy with a big white boat who lived not far from the lab. That was too much of a coincidence.

About the only good news was that he could call Henry in safety. He knew every drug-related wiretap in the area, and not one was targeted on Tucker's operation.

"Yeah?"

"Burt and his friends are dead," Charon announced. "What's that?" said a voice that was fully waking up. "You heard me. The State Police in Somerset have them bagged. Angelo, too, what's left of him. The lab is gone, Henry. The drugs are gone, and they have Xantha in custody." There was actually some satisfaction in this. Charon was still enough of a cop that the demise of a criminal operation was not yet a matter of grief for him. "What the fuck is going on?" a shrill voice inquired.

"I think I can tell you that, too. We need to meet."

• • •

Kelly took another look at his perch, just driving by in his rented Beetle, before heading back to his apartment. He was tired, though sated from the fine dinner. His afternoon nap had been enough to keep him going after a long day, but mainly the reason was to work off the anger, which driving often did for him. He'd seen the man now. The one who had finished the process of killing Pamela, with a shoestring. It would have been so easy to take care of him there. Kelly had never killed anyone barehanded, but he knew how. A lot of skilled people had spent a lot of time at Coronado, California, teaching him the finer points until whenever he looked at any person his mind applied something like a sheet of graph paper, this place for this move, that place for that one—and seeing he'd known that, yes, it was all worth it. It was worth the danger, and it was worth the consequences… but that didn't mean that he had to embrace them, as risk of life didn't mean throwing it away. That was the other side of it.

But he could see the end now, and he had to start planning beyond the end. He had to be even more careful. Okay, so the cops knew who he was, but he was certain that they had nothing. Even if

the girl, Xantha, someday decided to talk to the cops, she'd never seen his face—the camouflage paint took care of that. About the only danger was that she'd seen the registration number on his boat as he'd backed away from that dock, but that didn't seem to be much of a worry. Without physical evidence they had nothing they could use in front of a court of law. So they knew he disliked some people—fine. So they might even know what his training was—fine. The game he played was in accordance with one set of rules. The game they played had another. On balance, the rules worked in his favor, not theirs.

He looked out the car window, measuring angle and distance, making a preliminary plan and working in several variations. They'd picked a spot where there were few police patrols and lots of open ground. No one could approach them easily without being seen… probably so that they could destroy whatever they had in there if it became necessary. It was a logical approach to their tactical problem, except for one thing. They hadn't considered a different set of tactical rules.

Not my problem, Kelly thought, heading back to his apartment.

"God almighty…" Roger MacKenzie was pale and suddenly nauseated. They were standing on the breakfast porch of his house in northwest Washington. His wife and daughter were shopping in New York for the fall season. Ritter had arrived unannounced at six-fifteen, fully dressed and grim, a discordant note for the cool, pleasant morning breezes. "I've known his father for thirty years."

Ritter sipped his orange juice, though the acid in it didn't exactly do his stomach any good either. This was treason of the worst sort. Hicks had *known* what he did would hurt fellow citizens, one of whom he knew by name. Ritter had already made his mind up on the matter, but Roger had to have his time to rattle on.

"We went through Randolph together, we were in the same Bomb Group," MacKenzie was saying. Ritter decided to let him get it all out, even though it would take a little time. "We've done deals together…" the man finished, looking down at his untouched breakfast.

"I can't fault you for taking him into your office, Roger, but the boy's guilty of espionage."

"What do you want to do?"

"It's a criminal offense, Roger," Ritter pointed out. "I'm going to

be leaving soon. They want me on the reelection team, running the whole Northeast."

"This early?"

"Jeff Hicks will be running the campaign in Massachusetts, Bob. I'll be working directly with him." MacKenzie looked across the table, speaking in barely connected bursts. "Bob, an espionage investigation in our office—it could ruin things. If what we did—if your operation became public—I mean, the way it happened and what went wrong—"

"I'm sorry about that, Roger, but this little bastard betrayed his country."

"I could pull his security clearance, kick him out—"

"Not good enough," Ritter said coldly. "People may die because of him. He is *not* going to walk away from it."

"We could order you to—"

"To obstruct justice, Roger?" Ritter observed. "Because that's what it is. That's a felony."

"Your tap was illegal."

"National-security investigation—there's a war going on, remember?—slightly different rules, and besides, all that has to happen is let him hear it and he'll split open." Ritter was sure of that.

"And run the risk of bringing down the President? Now? At this time? Do you think that'll do the country any good? What about our relations with the Russians? This is a *crucial* time, Bob." *But then, it always is, isn't it?* Ritter wanted to add, but didn't.

"Well, I'm coming to you for guidance," Ritter said, and then he got it, after a fashion.

"We can't afford an investigation that leads to a public trial. That is politically unacceptable." MacKenzie hoped that would be enough.

Ritter nodded and stood. The drive back to his office at Langley was not all that comfortable. Though it was satisfying to have a free hand, Ritter was now faced with something that, however desirable, he did not want to become a habit. The first order of business was to pull the wiretap. In one big hurry.

After everything that had happened, it was the newspaper that broke things loose. The four-column head, below the fold, announced a drug-related triple murder in sleepy Somerset County.

Ryan devoured the story, never getting to the sports page that usually occupied fifteen minutes of his morning routine.

It's got to be him, the Lieutenant thought. *Who else would leave "a large quantity" of drugs behind, along with three bodies?* He left the house forty minutes early that morning, surprising his wife.

"Mrs. O'Toole?" Sandy had just finished her first set of morning rounds, and was checking off some forms when the phone rang.

"Yes?"

"This is James Greer. You've spoken to my secretary, Barbara, I believe."

"Yes, I have. Can I help you?"

"I hate to bother you, but we're trying to track John down. He's not at home."

"Yes, I think he's in town, but I don't know where exactly."

"If you hear from him, could you please ask him to call me? He has my number. Please forgive me for asking this," the man said politely.

"I'll be glad to." *And what's that about?* she wondered.

It was getting to her. The police were after John, and she'd told him, and he hadn't seemed to care. Now somebody else was trying to get hold of him. Why? Then she saw a copy of the morning paper sitting on the table in the lounge area. The brother of one of her patients was reading something or other, but right there on the lower-right side of the front page was the headline: DRUG MURDER in SOMERSET.

"Everybody's interested in that guy," Frank Allen observed.

"What do you mean?" Charon had come into Western District on the pretense of checking up on the administrative investigation of the Morello shooting. He'd talked Allen into allowing him to review the statements of the other officers and three civilian witnesses. Since he'd graciously waived his right to counsel, and since the shooting looked squeaky clean, Allen hadn't seen any harm in the matter, so long as it was done in front of him.

"I mean, right after the call from Pittsburgh, that Brown girl who got whacked, Em called here about him. Now you. How come?"

"His name came up. We're not sure why, and it's just a quick check. What can you tell me about him?"

"Hey, Mark, you're on vacation, remember?" Allen pointed out.

"You're telling me I won't be back to work soon? I'm supposed to turn my brain off, Frank? Did I miss the article in the paper that says the crooks are taking a few weeks off?"

Allen had to concede the point. "All this attention, now I'm starting to think there might be something wrong with the guy. I suppose I have some information on him—yeah, that's right, I forgot. Wait a minute." Allen walked away from his desk toward the file room, and Charon pretended to read the statements for several minutes until he came back. A thin manila folder landed in his lap. "Here."

It was part of Kelly's service record, but not very much, Charon saw as he paged through it. It included his dive-qualification records, his instructor's rating, and a photograph, along with some other gingerbread stuff. Charon looked up. "Lives on an island? That's what I heard." "Yeah, I asked him about that. Funny story. Anyway, why are you interested?"

"Just a name that came up, probably nothing, but I wanted to check it out. I keep hearing rumbles of a bunch that works out on the water."

"I really ought to send that down to Em and Tom. I forgot I had it."

Better yet. "I'm heading that way. Want me to drop it off?"

"Would you?"

"Sure." Charon tucked it under his arm. His first stop was a branch of the Pratt Library, where he made photocopies of the documents for ten cents each. Then he hit a photo shop. His badge enabled him to have five blowups of the small ID photo made in less than ten minutes. Those he left in the car when he parked at headquarters, but he only went inside long enough to have an officer run the file up to homicide. He could have just kept the information to himself, but on reflection it seemed the more intelligent choice to act like a normal cop doing a normal task.

"So what happened?" Greer asked behind the closed door of his office.

"Roger says an investigation would have adverse political consequences," Ritter answered.

"Well, isn't that just too goddamned bad?"

"Then he said to handle it," Ritter added. *Not in so many words, but that's what he meant.* There was no sense in confusing the issue.

"Meaning what?"

"What do you think, James?"

"Where did this come from?" Ryan asked when the file landed on his desk.

"Detective handed it to me downstairs, sir," the young officer answered. "I don't know the guy, but he said it was for your desk."

"Okay." Ryan waved him off and flipped it open, for the first time seeing a photograph of John Terrence Kelly. He'd joined the Navy two weeks after his eighteenth birthday, and stayed in… six years, honorably discharged as a chief petty officer. It was immediately apparent that the file had been heavily edited. That was to be expected, as the Department had mainly been interested in his qualifications as a diver. There was his graduation date from UDT School, and his later qualification as an instructor that the Department had been interested in. The three rating sheets in the folder were all 4.0, the highest Navy grade, and there was a flowery letter of recommendation from a three-star admiral which the Department had taken at face value. The Admiral had thoughtfully tucked in a list of his decorations, the more to impress the Baltimore City Police: Navy Cross, Silver Star, Bronze Star with Combat "V" and two clusters in lieu of repeat awards of the same decoration Purple Heart with two clusters in lieu of—

Jesus, this guy's everything I thought, isn't he?

Ryan set the folder clown, seeing that it was part of the Gooding Murder file. That meant Frank Allen—again. He called him.

"Thanks for the info on Kelly. What brought it up?" "Mark Charon was over," Allen told him. "I'm doing the follow-up on his shoot and he brought the name up, says it came up in one of his cases. Sorry, pal, I forgot I had this. He said he'd drop it off. He's not the sort of guy I'd figure for being drugged up, y'know, but…" His voice went on past the point of Ryan's current interest.

This is going too fast now, too damned fast.

Charon. He keeps appearing, doesn't he?

"Frank, I got a tough one for you. When that Sergeant Meyer called in from Pittsburgh, anybody else you mention that to?"

"What do you mean, Em?" Allen asked, annoyance beginning to form in his mind at the suggestion.

"I'm not saying you called the papers, Frank."

"That was the day Charon popped the dealer, wasn't it?" Allen

thought back. “I might have said something to him… only other person I talked with that day, come to think of it.”

“Okay, thanks, Frank.” Ryan looked up the number of Barracks “V” of the State Police.

“Captain Joy,” said a very weary voice. The barracks commander would have taken a bed in his own jail if he’d had to, but by tradition a State Police barracks was just that, and he’d found a comfortable bed for his four and a half hours of sleep. Joy was already wishing that Somerset County would go back to normal, though he well might make major’s rank from this episode.

“Lieutenant Ryan, City Police homicide.”

“You big-city boys sure are interested in us now,” Joy commented wryly. “What do you want to know?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I was on my way to bed last night when another one of your people called down here, Lieutenant Chair—something like that, I didn’t write it down. Said he could ID one of the bodies… I *did* write that down somewhere. Sorry, I’m turning into a zombie.”

“Could you fill me in? I’ll take the short version.” It turned out that the short version was plenty. “The woman is in custody?”

“You bet she is.”

“Captain, you keep her that way until I say different, okay? Excuse me, *please* keep her that way. She may be a material witness in a multiple homicide.”

“Yeah, I know that, remember?”

“I mean up here, too, sir. Two bad ones, I have nine months invested in this.”

“She isn’t going anywhere for a while,” Joy promised. “We have a lot of talking to do with her ourselves, and her lawyer’s playing ball.”

“Nothing more on the shooter?”

“Just what I said: male Caucasian, six foot or so, and he painted himself green, the girl says.” Joy hadn’t included that in his initial recounting.

“What?”

“She said his face and hands were green, like camouflage stuff, I suppose. There is one more thing,” Joy added. “He’s a right good shot. The three people he whacked, one shot each, all in the X-ring —like, perfect.”

Ryan flipped the folder back open. At the bottom of Kelly’s list of

awards: Distinguished Rifleman, Master Pistol.

"I'll be back to you, Captain. Sounds like you've handled this one awfully well for a guy who doesn't get many homicides."

"I'd just as soon stick to speeders," Joy confirmed, hanging up.

"You're in early," Douglas observed, coming in late. "See the paper?"

"Our friend's back, and he got on the scoreboard again." Ryan handed the photo across.

"He looks older now," the sergeant said.

"Three Purple Hearts'll do that." Ryan filled Douglas in. "Want to drive down to Somerset and interview this girl?"

"You think…?"

"Yes, I think we have our witness. I think we have our leaker, too." Ryan explained that one quietly.

He had just called to hear the sound of her voice. So close to his goal, he was allowing himself to look beyond it. It wasn't terribly professional, but for all his professionalism, Kelly remained human.

"John, where are you?" The urgency in her voice was even greater than the day before.

"I have a place," was all he was willing to say.

"I have a message for you. James Greer, he said you should call him."

"Okay." Kelly grimaced—he was supposed to have done that the day before.

"Was that you in the paper?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," she whispered, "three dead people on the Eastern Shore!"

"I'll get back to you," he said almost as fast as the chill hit him.

Kelly didn't have the paper delivered to his apartment for the obvious reason, but now he needed one. There was a dispenser at the corner, he remembered. He only needed one look.

What does she know about me?

It was too late for recrimination. He'd faced the same problem with her as with Doris. She'd been asleep when he'd done the job, and the pistol shots had awakened her. He'd blindfolded her, dumped her, explained to her that Burt had planned to kill her, given her enough cash to catch a Greyhound to somewhere. Even with the drugs, she'd been shocked and scared. But the cops had her

already. How the hell had that happened?

Screw the how, *son, they have her.*

Just that fast the world had changed for him.

Okay, so now what do you do? It was that thought which occupied his mind for the walk back to his apartment.

For starters, he had to get rid of the .45, but he'd already decided to do that. Even if he had left no evidence at all behind, it was a link. When this mission was over, it was *over.* But now he needed help, and where else to get it but from the people for whom he had killed?

"Admiral Greer, please? This is Mr. Clark."

"Hold, please," Kelly heard, then: "You were supposed to call in yesterday, remember?"

"I can be there in two hours, sir."

"I'll be waiting."

• • •

"Where's Cas?" Maxwell asked, annoyed enough to use his nickname. The chief who ran his office understood.

"I already called his home, sir. No answer."

"That's funny." Which it wasn't, but the chief understood that, too.

"Want me to have somebody at Bolling check it out, Admiral?"

"Good idea." Maxwell nodded and returned to his office.

Ten minutes later a sergeant of the Air Force's Security Police drove from his guard shack to the collection of semidetached dwellings used by senior officers on Pentagon duty. The sign on the yard said Rear Admiral C. P. Podulski, USN, and showed a pair of aviator wings. The sergeant was only twenty-three and didn't interact with flag officers any more than he had to, but he had orders to see if there was any trouble here. The morning paper was sitting on the step. There were two automobiles in the carport, one of which had a Pentagon pass on the windshield, and he knew that the Admiral and his wife lived alone. Summoning his courage, the sergeant knocked on the door, firmly but not too noisily. No luck. Next he tried the bell. No luck. *Now what?* the young NCO wondered. The whole base *was* government property, and he had the right under regulations to enter any house on the post, and he had orders, and his lieutenant would probably back him up. He opened the door. There was no sound. He looked around the first

floor, finding nothing that hadn't been there since the previous evening. He called a few times with no result, and then decided that he had to go upstairs. This he did, with one hand on his white leather holster…

Admiral Maxwell was there twenty minutes later.

"Heart attack," the Air Force doctor said. "Probably in his sleep."

That wasn't true of his wife, who lay next to him. She had been such a pretty woman, Dutch Maxwell remembered, and devastated by the loss of their son. The half-filled glass of water sat on a handkerchief so as not to harm the wooden night table. She'd even replaced the top of the pill container before she'd lain back down beside her husband. Dutch looked over to the wooden valet. His undress white shirt was there, ready for another day's service to his adopted country, the Wings of Gold over the collection of ribbons, the topmost of which was pale blue, with five white stars. They'd had a meeting planned to talk about retirement. Somehow Dutch wasn't surprised.

"God have mercy," Dutch said, seeing the only friendly casualties of Operation BOXWOOD GREEN.

What do I say? Kelly asked himself, driving through the gate. The guard eyeballed him pretty hard despite his pass, perhaps wondering how badly the Agency paid its field personnel. He did get to park his wreck in the visitors' lot, better placement than people on the payroll, which seemed slightly odd. Walking into the lobby, Kelly was met by a security officer and led upstairs. It seemed more ominous now, walking the drab and ordinary corridors peopled with anonymous people, but only because this building was about to become a confessional of sorts for a soul who had not quite decided if he were a sinner or not. He hadn't visited Ritter's office before. It was on the fourth floor and surprisingly small. Kelly had thought the man important—and though he actually was, his office as yet was not.

"Hello, John," Admiral Greer said, still reeling from the news he'd received a half hour before from Dutch Maxwell. Greer pointed him to a seat, and the door was closed. Ritter was smoking, to Kelly's annoyance.

"Glad to be back home, Mr. Clark?" the field officer asked. There was a copy of the *Washington Post* on his desk, and Kelly was surprised to see that the Somerset County story had made the first

page there, too.

"Yes, sir, I guess you can say that." Both of the older men caught the ambivalence. "Why did you want me to come in?"

"I told you on the airplane. It may turn out that your action bringing that Russian out might save our people yet. We need people who can think on their feet. You can. I'm offering you a job in my part of the house." "Doing what?"

"Whatever we tell you to do," Ritter answered. He already had something in mind.

"I don't even have a college degree."

Ritter pulled a thick folder from his desk. "I had this brought in from St. Louis." Kelly recognized the forms. It was his complete Navy personnel-records package. "You really should have taken the college scholarship. Your intelligence scores are even higher than I thought, and it shows you have language skills that are better than mine. James and I can waive the degree requirements."

"A Navy Cross goes a long way, John," Greer explained. "What you did, helping to plan BOXWOOD GREEN and then later in the field, that sort of thing goes a long way, too." Kelly's instinct battled against his reason. The problem was, he wasn't sure which part of him was in favor of what. Then he decided that he had to tell the truth to somebody. "There's a problem, gentlemen."

"What's that?" Ritter asked.

Kelly reached across the desk and tapped the article on the front page of the paper. "You might want to read that."

"I did. So? Somebody did the world a favor," the officer said lightly. Then he caught the look in Kelly's eyes, and his voice became instantly wary. "Keep talking, Mr. Clark."

"That's me, sir."

"What are you talking about, John?" Greer asked.

"The file's out, sir," the records clerk said over the phone.

"What do you mean?" Ryan objected. "I have some copies from it right here."

"Could you hold for a moment? I'll put my supervisor on." The phone went on hold, something that the detective cordially hated.

Ryan looked out his window with a grimace. He'd called the military's central records-storage facility, located in St. Louis. Every piece of paper relating to every man or woman who had ever served in uniform was there, in a secure and carefully guarded complex,

the nature of which was a curiosity, but a useful one, to the detective, who'd more than once gotten data from the facility.

"This is Irma Rohrerbach," a voice said after some electronic chirping. The detective had the instant mental image of an overweight Caucasian female sitting at a desk cluttered with work that could have been done a week earlier.

"I'm Lieutenant Emmet Ryan, Baltimore City Police. I need information from a personnel file you have—"

"Sir, it's not here. My clerk just showed me the notes."

"What do you mean? You're not allowed to check files out that way. I know."

"Sir, that is not true. There *are* certain cases. This is one of them. The file was taken out and will be returned, but I do not know when."

"Who has it?"

"I'm not allowed to say, sir." The tone of the bureaucrat's voice showed her intensity of interest, too. The file was gone, and until it came back it was no longer part of the known universe as far as she was concerned.

"I can get a court order, you know." That usually worked on people, few of whom enjoyed the attention of a note from somebody's bench.

"Yes, you can. Is there any other way I can help you, sir?" She was also used to being blustered at. The call was from Baltimore, after all, and a letter from some judge eight hundred miles away seemed a distant and trivial thing. "Do you have our mailing address, sir?"

Actually, he couldn't. He still didn't quite have enough to take to a judge. Matters like this were handled more as a matter of courtesy than as actual orders.

"Thank you, I'll get back."

"Have a good day." The well-wish was in fact the bland dismissal of one more forgettable irrelevance in the day of a file clerk.

Out of the country. Why? For whom? What the hell's so different about this case? Ryan knew that it had many differences. He wondered if he'd ever have them all figured out.

• • •

"That's what they did to her," Kelly told them. It was the first time he'd actually said it all out loud, and in recounting the details of the

pathology report it was as though he were listening to the voice of another person. “Because of her background the cops never really assigned much of a priority to the case. I got two more girls out. One they killed. The other one, well…” He waved at the newspaper.

“Why did you just turn her loose?”

“Was I supposed to murder her, Mr. Ritter? That’s what they were planning to do,” Kelly said, still looking down. “She was more or less sober when I let her go. I didn’t have the time to do anything else. I miscalculated.”

“How many?”

“Twelve, sir,” he answered, knowing that Ritter wanted the total number of kills.

“Good Lord,” Ritter observed. He actually wanted to smile. There was talk, actually, of getting CIA involved in antidrug operations. He opposed that policy—it wasn’t important enough to divert the time of people who should be protecting their country against genuine national-security threats. But he couldn’t smile. This was far too serious for that. “The article says twenty kilograms of the stuff. Is that true?”

“Probably.” Kelly shrugged. “I didn’t weigh it. There’s one other thing. I think I know how the drugs come in. The bags smell like—embalming fluid. It’s Asian heroin.”

“Yes?” Ritter asked.

“Don’t you see? Asian stuff. Embalming fluid. Comes in somewhere on the East Coast. Isn’t it obvious? They’re using the bodies of our KIAs to bring the fucking stuff in.”

All this, and analytical ability too?

Ritter’s phone rang. It was the intercom line.

“I said no calls,” the field spook growled.

“It’s ‘Bill,’ sir. He says it’s important.”

The timing was just perfect, the Captain thought. The prisoners were brought out in the darkness. There was no electricity, again, and the only illumination came from battery-powered flashlights and a few torches that his senior sergeant had cobbled together. Every prisoner had his feet hobbled; in each case the hands and elbows were bound behind their backs. They all walked slightly bent forward. It wasn’t just to control them. Humiliation was important, too, and every man had in close attendance a conscript to chivvy him along, right to the center of the compound. His men

were entitled to this, the Captain thought. They'd trained hard, were about to begin their long march south to complete the business of liberating and reuniting their country. The Americans were disoriented, clearly frightened at this break in their daily routine. Things had gone easy for them in the past week. Perhaps his earlier assembly of the group had been a mistake. It might have fostered some semblance of solidarity among them, but the object lesson to his troops was more than worth that. His men would soon be killing Americans in larger groups than this, the Captain was sure, but they had to start somewhere. He shouted a command.

As one man, the twenty selected soldiers took their rifles and butt-stroked their individual charges in the abdomen. One American managed to remain standing after the first blow, but not after the second.

Zacharias was surprised. It was the first direct attack on his person since Kolya had stopped that one, months before. The impact drove the air from him. His back already hurt from the lingering effect of his ejection and the deliberately awkward way they'd made him walk, and the impact of the steel buttplate of the AK-47 had taken control of his weakened and abused body away from him at once. He fell to his side, his body touching that of another prisoner, trying to draw his legs in and cover up. Then the kicks started. He couldn't even protect his face with his arms bound painfully behind him, and his eyes saw the face of the enemy. Just a boy, maybe seventeen, almost girlish in appearance, and the look on his face was that of a doll, the same empty eyes, the same absence of expression. No fury, not even baring his teeth, just kicking him as a child might kick at a ball, because it was something to do. He couldn't hate the boy, but he could despise him for his cruelty, and even after the first kick broke his nose he kept watching. Robin Zacharias had seen the depths of despair, had faced the fact that he'd broken on the inside and given up things that he knew. But he'd also had the time to understand it. He wasn't a coward any more than he was a hero, Robin told himself through the pain, just a man. He'd bear the pain as the physical penalty for his earlier mistake, and he would continue to ask his God for strength. Colonel Zacharias kept his now-blackened eyes on the face of the child tormenting him. *I will survive this. I've survived worse, and even if I die I'm still a better man than you will ever be*, his face told the diminutive soldier. *I've survived loneliness, and that's worse*

than this, kid. He didn't pray for deliverance now. It had come from within, after all, and if death came, then he could face it as he had faced his weakness and his failings.

Another shouted command from their officer and they backed off. In Robin's case there was one last, final kick. He was bleeding, one eye almost shut, and his chest was racked with pain and coughs, but he was still alive, still an American, and he had survived one more trial. He looked over at the Captain commanding the detail. There was fury in his face, unlike that of the soldier who'd taken a few steps back. Robin wondered why.

"Stand them up!" the Captain screamed. Two of the Americans were unconscious, it turned out, and required two men each to lift them. It was the best he could do for his men. Better to kill them, but the order in his pocket prohibited that, and his army didn't tolerate the violation of orders.

Robin was now looking in the eyes of the boy who'd attacked him. Close, not six inches away. There was no emotion there, but he kept staring, and there was no emotion in his own eyes either. It was a small and very private test of wills. Not a word was spoken, though both men were breathing irregularly, one from exertion, the other from pain.

Care to try it again someday? Man to man. Think you can hack that, sonny? Do you feel shame for what you did? Was *it worth it? Are you more of a man now, kid? I don't*

think so, and you might cover it up as best you can, but we both know who won this round, don't we? The soldier stepped to Robin's side, his eyes having revealed nothing, but the grip on the American's arm was very tight, the better to keep him under control, and Robin took that as his victory. The kid was still afraid of him, despite everything. He was one of those who roamed the sky—hated, perhaps, but feared too. Abuse was the weapon of the coward, after all, and those who applied it knew the fact as well as those who had to accept it.

Zacharias almost stumbled. His posture made it hard to look up, and he didn't see the truck until he was only a few feet away. It was a beat-up Russian vehicle, with fence wire over the top, both to prevent escape and to let people see the cargo. They were going somewhere. Robin had no real idea where he was and could hardly speculate on where he might go. Nothing could be worse than this place had been—and yet he'd survived it somehow, Robin told

himself as the truck rumbled away. The camp faded into the darkness, and with it the worst trial of his life. The Colonel bowed his head and whispered a prayer of thanksgiving, and then, for the first time in months, a prayer for deliverance, whatever form it might take.

"That was your doing, Mr. Clark," Ritter said after a long, deliberate look at the phone he'd just replaced.

"I didn't exactly plan it that way, sir."

"No, you didn't, but instead of killing that Russian officer you brought him back." Ritter looked over at Admiral Greer. Kelly didn't see the nod that announced the change in his life.

"I wish Cas could have known."

"So what do they know?"

"They have Xantha, alive, in Somerset County jail. How much does she know?" Charon asked. Tony Piaggi was here, too. It was the first time the two had met. They were using the about-to-be-activated lab in east Baltimore. It would be safe for Charon to come here just one time, the narcotics officer thought.

"This is trouble," Piaggi observed. It seemed facile to the others until he went on. "But we can handle it. First order of business, though, is to worry about making our delivery to my friends."

"We've lost *twenty kees*, man," Tucker pointed out bleakly. He knew fear now. It was clear that there was something out there worthy of his fear.

"You have more?"

"Yeah, I have ten at my place."

"You keep it at home?" Piaggi asked. "Jesus, Henry!"

"The bitch doesn't know where I live."

"She knows your name, Henry. We can do a lot with just a name," Charon told him. "Why the hell do you think I've kept my people away from your people?"

"We've got to rebuild the whole organization," Piaggi said calmly. "We can do that, okay? We have to move, but moving's easy. Henry, your stuff comes in somewhere else, right? You move it in to here, and we move it out of here. So moving your operation is not a big deal."

"I lose my local—"

"Fuck local, Henry! I'm going to take over distribution for the

whole East Coast. Will you think, for Christ's sake? You lose maybe twenty-five percent of what you figured you were going to take in. We can make that up in two weeks. Stop thinking small-time."

"Then it's a matter of covering your tracks," Charon went on, interested by Piaggi's vision of the future. "Xantha is just one person, an addict. When they picked her up she was wasted on pills. Not much of a witness unless they have something else to use, and if you move to another area, you ought to be okay."

"The other ones have to go. Fast," Piaggi urged.

"With Burt gone, I'm out of muscle. I can get some people I know —"

"No way, Henry! You want to bring new people in now? Let me call Philly. We have two people on retainer, remember?" Piaggi got a nod, settling that issue. "Next, we have to keep my friends happy. We need twenty kees worth of stuff, processed and ready to go, and we need it right fast."

"I only have ten," Tucker noted.

"I know where there's some more, and so do you. Isn't that right, Lieutenant Charon?" That question shook the cop badly enough that he forgot to tell them something else that concerned him.

36

Dangerous Drugs

It was a time for introspection. He'd never done anything like this before at the behest of others, except for Vietnam, which was a different set of circumstances altogether. It had required a trip back to Baltimore, which was now as dangerous a thing as any he'd ever done. He had a new set of ID, but they were for a man known to be dead, if anyone took the time to check them out. He remembered almost fondly the time when the city had been divided into two zones—one relatively small and dangerous, and the other far larger and safe. That was changed. Now it was all dangerous. The police had his name. They might soon have his face, which would mean that every police car—there seemed an awful lot of them now—would have people in it who might spot him, just like that. Worse still, he couldn't defend himself against them, he could not allow himself to kill a police officer.

And now this… Things had become very confused today. Not even twenty-four hours earlier he'd seen his ultimate target, but now he wondered if it would ever be finished.

Maybe it would have been better if he had never begun, just accepted Pam's death and gone on, waiting patiently for the police to break the case. But no, they would never have broken it, would never have devoted the time and manpower to the death of a whore. Kelly's hands squeezed the wheel. And her murder would never have been truly avenged.

Could I have lived the rest of my life with that?

He remembered high school English classes, as he drove south, now on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. Aristotle's rules of tragedy. The hero had to have a tragic flaw, had to drive himself to

his fate. Kelly's flaw… he loved too much, cared too much, invested too much in the things and the people who touched his life. He could not turn away. Though it might save his life, to turn away would inevitably poison it. And so he had to take his chances and see things through.

He hoped Ritter understood it, understood why he was doing what he had been asked to do. He simply could not turn away. Not from Pam. Not from the men of BOXWOOD GREEN. He shook his head. But he wished they'd asked someone else.

The parkway became a city street, New York Avenue. The sun was long since down. Fall was approaching, the change of seasons from the moist heat of mid-Atlantic summer. Football season would soon begin, and baseball end, and the turning of the years went on.

Peter was right, Hicks thought. He had to stay in. His father was taking his own step into the system, after a fashion, becoming the most important of political creatures, a fund-raiser and campaign coordinator. The President would be reelected and Hicks would accumulate his own power. Then he could *really* influence events. Blowing the whistle on that raid was the best thing he had ever done. Yeah, yeah, it was all coming together, he thought, lighting up his third joint of the night. He heard the phone ring.

"How's it going?" It was Peter.

"Okay, man. How's with you?"

"Got a few minutes? I want to go over something with you." Henderson nearly swore to himself—he could tell Wally was stoned again.

"Half an hour?"

"See you then."

Not a minute later, there was a knock on the door. Hicks stubbed out his smoke and went to answer it. Too soon for Peter. Could it be a cop? Fortunately, it wasn't.

"You're Walter Hicks?"

"Yeah, who are you?" The man was about his age, if somewhat less polished-looking.

"John Clark." He looked nervously up and down the corridor. "I need to talk to you for a few minutes, if that's okay."

"What about?"

"BOXWOOD GREEN."

"What do you mean?"

"There's some things you need to know," Clark told him. He was working for the Agency now, so Clark was his name. It made it easier, somehow.

"Come on in. I only have a few minutes, though."

"That's all I need. I don't want to stay too long."

Clark accepted the waved invitation to enter and immediately smelled the acrid odor of burning rope. Hicks waved him to a chair opposite his.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, thanks, I'm fine," he answered, careful where he put his hands. "I was there."

"What do you mean?"

"I was at SENDER GREEN, just last week."

"You were on the team?" Hicks asked, intensely curious and not seeing the danger that had walked into his apartment.

"That's right. I'm the guy who brought the Russian out," his visitor said calmly.

"You *kidnapped* a Soviet *citizen?* Why the fuck did you do that?"

"Why I did it is not important now, Mr. Hicks. One of the documents I took off his body is. It was an order to make preparations to kill all of our POWs."

"That's too bad," Hicks said with a perfunctory shake of the head. *Oh—your dog died? That's too bad.*

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?" Clark asked. "Yes, it does, but people take chances. Wait a minute." Hicks's eyes went blank for a moment, and Kelly could see that he was trying to identify something he'd missed. "I thought we had the camp commander, too, didn't we?"

"No, I killed him myself. That bit of information was given to your boss so that we could identify the name of the guy who leaked the mission." Clark leaned forward. "That was you, Mr. Hicks. I was there. We had it wired. Those prisoners ought to be with their families right now—all twenty of them."

Hicks brushed it aside. "I didn't *want* them to die. Look, like I said, people take chances. Don't you understand, it just wasn't worth it. So what are you going to do, arrest me? For what? You think I'm dumb? That was a black operation. You can't reveal it or *you* run the risk of fucking up the talks, and the White House will never let you do that."

"That's correct. I'm here to kill you."

“What?” Hicks almost laughed.

“You betrayed your country. You betrayed twenty men.” “Look, that was a matter of conscience.”

“So’s this, Mr. Hicks.” Clark reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag. In it were drugs he’d taken off the body of his old friend Archie, and a spoon, and a glass hypodermic needle. He tossed the bag into his lap.

“I won’t do it.”

“Fair enough.” From behind his back came his Ka-Bar knife. “I’ve done people this way, too. There are twenty men over there who ought to be home. You’ve stolen their life from them. Your choice, Mr. Hicks.”

His face was very pale now, his eyes wide.

“Come on, you wouldn’t really—”

“The camp commander was an enemy of my country. So are you. You got one minute.”

Hicks looked at the knife that Clark was turning in his hand, and knew that he had no chance at all. He’d never seen eyes like those across the coffee table from him, but he knew what they held.

Kelly thought about the previous week as he sat there, remembering sitting in the mud generated by falling rain, only a few hundred yards from twenty men who ought now to be free. It became slightly easier for him, though he hoped never to have to obey such orders again.

Hicks looked around the room, hoping to see something that might change the moment. The clock on the mantel seemed to freeze as he considered what was happening. He’d faced the prospect of death in a theoretical way at Andover in 1962, and subsequently lived his life in accordance with the same theoretical picture. The world had been an equation for Walter Hicks, something to be managed and adjusted. He saw now, knowing it was too late, that he was merely one more variable in it, not the guy with the chalk looking at the blackboard. He considered jumping from the chair, but his visitor was already leaning forward, extending the knife a few inches, and his eyes fixed on the thin silvery line on the parkerized blade. It looked so sharp that he had trouble drawing breath. He looked at the clock again. The second hand had moved, after all.

Peter Henderson took his time. It was a weekday night, and

Washington went to bed early. All the bureaucrats and aides and special-assistants-to rose early and had to have their rest so that they'd be alert in the management of their country's affairs. It made for empty sidewalks in Georgetown, where the roots of trees heaved up the concrete slabs of sidewalk. He saw two elderly folk walking their little dog, but only one other, on Wally's block. Just a man about his age, fifty yards away, getting into a car whose lawnmower sound marked it as a Beetle, probably an older one. Damned ugly things lasted forever if you wanted them to. A few seconds later he knocked on Wally's door. It wasn't fully closed. Wally was sloppy about some things. He'd never make it as a spy. Henderson pushed the door open, ready to reprove his friend, until he saw him there, sitting in the chair.

Hicks had his left sleeve rolled up. His right hand had caught on his collar, as though to help himself breathe, but the real reason was on the inside of his left elbow. Peter didn't approach the body. For a moment, he didn't do anything. Then he knew he had to get out of here.

He removed a handkerchief and wiped the doorknob, closed the door, and walked away, trying to keep his stomach under control.

Damn you, Wally! Henderson raged. *I needed you. And to die like this—from a drug overdose.* The finality of death was as clear to him as it was unexpected. But there remained his beliefs, Henderson thought as he walked home. At least those hadn't died. He would see to that.

The trip took all night. Every time the truck hit a bump, bones and muscles screamed their protest. Three of the men were hurt worse than he was, two of them unconscious on the floor, and there wasn't a thing he could do for them with his hands and legs bound up. Yet there was satisfaction of a sort. Every destroyed bridge they had to drive around was a victory for them. Someone was fighting back; someone was hurting these bastards. A few men whispered things that the guard at the back of the truck didn't hear over the engine noise. Robin wondered where they were going. The cloudy sky denied him the reference of stars, but with dawn came an indication of where east was, and it was plain that they were heading northwest. Their true destination was too much to hope for, Robin told himself, but then he decided that hope really was something without limit.

Kelly was relieved it was over. There was no satisfaction in the death of Walter Hicks. He'd been a traitor and coward, but there ought to have been a better way. He was glad that Hicks had decided to take his own life, for he wasn't at all sure that he could have killed him with a knife—or any other way. But Hicks had deserved his fate, of that one thing he had no doubts. *But don't we all*, Kelly thought.

Kelly packed his clothing into the suitcase, which was large enough to contain it all, and carried it out to the rented car, and with that his residence in the apartment ended. It was after midnight when he drove south again, into the center of the danger zone, ready to act one last time.

Things had settled down for Chuck Monroe. He still responded to break-ins and all manner of other crimes, but the slaughter of pushers in his district had ended. Part of him thought it was too bad, and he admitted as much to other patrolmen over lunch—in his case, the mercifully unnamed three-in-the-morning meal.

Monroe drove his radio car in his almost-regular patrol pattern, still looking for things out of the ordinary. He noted that two new people had taken Ju-Ju's place. He'd have to learn their street names, maybe have an informant check them out. Maybe the narcs from downtown could start making a few things happen out here. Someone had, however briefly, Monroe admitted, heading west towards the edge of his patrol area. Whoever the hell it was. A street bum. That made him smile in the darkness. The informal name applied to the case seemed so appropriate. The Invisible Man. Amazing that the papers hadn't picked that one up. A dull night made for such thoughts. He was thankful for it. People had stayed up late to watch the Orioles sock it to the Yankees. He had learned that you could often track street crime by sports teams and their activities. The O's were in a pennant race and were looking to go all the way on the strength of Frank Robinson's bat and Brooks Robinson's glove. Even hoods liked baseball, Monroe thought, perplexed by the incongruity but accepting it for the fact it was. It made for a boring night, and he didn't mind. It gave him a chance to cruise and observe and learn, and to think. He knew all the regulars on the street now, and was now learning to spot what was different, to eyeball it as a seasoned cop could, to decide what to check out and what to let slide. In learning that he would come to

prevent some crimes, not merely respond to them. It was a skill that could not come too quickly, Monroe thought to himself.

The very western border of his area was a north-south street. One side was his, the other that of another officer.

He was about to turn onto it when he saw another street bum. Somehow the person looked familiar, though he was not one Monroe had shaken down several weeks earlier. Tired of sitting in his car, and bored with not having had anything more than a single traffic citation tonight, he pulled over.

"Yo, hold up there, sport." The figure kept moving, slowly, unevenly. Maybe a public-drunkenness arrest in the making, more likely a street person whose brain was permanently impaired by long nights of guzzling the cheap stuff. Monroe slid his baton into the ring holder and walked quickly to catch up. It was only a fifty-foot walk, but it was like the poor old bastard was deaf or something, he didn't even hear the click of his leather heels on the sidewalk. His hand came down on the bum's shoulder. "I said hold up, now."

Physical contact changed everything. This shoulder was firm and strong—and tense. Monroe simply wasn't ready for it, too tired, too bored, too comfortable, too sure of what he'd seen, and though his brain immediately shouted *The Invisible Man*, his body was not ready for action. That wasn't true of the bum. Almost before his hand came down, he saw the world rotate wildly from low-right to high-left, showing him a sky and then the sidewalk and then the sky again, but this time his view of the stars was interrupted by a pistol.

"Why couldn't you have just stayed in your fuckin' car?" the man asked angrily.

"Who—"

"Quiet!" The pistol against his forehead ensured that, almost. It was the surgical gloves that gave him away and forced the officer to speak.

"Jesus." It was a respectful whisper. "You're him."

"Yes, I am. Now, what the hell do I do about you?" Kelly asked.

"I ain't gonna beg." The man's name was Monroe, Kelly saw from the name tag. He didn't seem like the sort for begging.

"You don't have to. Roll over—now!" The policeman did so, with a little help. Kelly pulled the cuffs off his belt and secured them to both wrists. "Relax, Officer Monroe."

"What do you mean?" The man kept his voice even, earning his

captor's admiration.

"I mean I'm not going to kill any cops." Kelly stood him up and started walking him back to the car.

"This doesn't change anything, sport," Monroe told him, careful to keep his voice low.

"Tell me about it. Where do you keep your keys?"

"Right side pocket."

"Thank you." Kelly took them as he put the officer in the backseat of the car. There was a screen there to keep arrested passengers from annoying the driver. He quickly started the patrol car and parked it in an alley. "Your hands okay, not too tight on the cuffs?"

"Yeah, I'm just fuckin' fine back here." The cop was shaking now, mainly rage, Kelly figured. That was understandable.

"Settle down. I don't want you to get hurt. I'll lock the car. Keys'll be in a sewer somewhere."

"Am I supposed to thank you or something?" Monroe said.

"I didn't ask for that, did I?" Kelly had an overwhelming urge to apologize for embarrassing the man. "You made it easy for me. Next time be more careful, Officer Monroe."

His own release of tension almost evoked a laugh as he walked away quickly to the rear. *Thank God*, he thought, heading west again, but not for everything. They're still rousting drunks. He'd hoped that they'd gotten bored with it in the past month. One more complication. Kelly kept to the shadows and alleys as much as possible.

It was a storefront, just as Billy had told him and Burt had confirmed, an out-of-business store with vacant houses to the left and right. Such talkative people, under the proper circumstances. Kelly looked at it from across the street. Despite the vacant ground level, there was a light on upstairs. The front door, he could see, was secured with a large brass lock. The back one, too, probably. Well, he could do this one the hard way… or the other hard way. There was a clock ticking. Those cops had to have a regular reporting system. Even if not, sooner or later Monroe would be sent a call to get somebody's kitten out of a tree, and real quick his sergeant would start wondering where the hell he was, and then the cops would be all over the place, looking for a missing man. They'd look carefully and hard. That was a possibility Kelly didn't want to contemplate, and one which waiting would not improve.

He crossed the street briskly, for the first time breaking his cover

in public, such as it was, weighing risks and finding the balance evenly set on madness. But then, the whole enterprise had been mad from the start, hadn't it? First he did his best to check out the street level for people. Finding none, Kelly took the Ka-Bar from his sheath and started attacking the caulking around the full-length glass pane in the old wooden door. Perhaps burglars just weren't patient, he thought, or maybe just dumb—or smarter than he was being at the moment, Kelly told himself, using both hands to strip the caulking away. It took six endless minutes, all of it under a streetlight not ten feet away, before he was able to lower the glass, cutting himself twice in the process. Kelly swore quietly, looking at the deep cut on his left hand. Then he stepped sideways through the opening and headed for the back of the building. Some mom-and-pop store, he thought, abandoned or something, probably because the neighborhood itself was dying. Well, it could have been worse. The floor was dusty but uncluttered. There were stairs in the back. Kelly could hear noise upstairs, and he went up, his .45 leading the way.

"It's been a nice party, honey, but it's over now," a male voice said. Kelly heard the rough humor in it, followed by a female whimper.

"Please… you don't mean you're…"

"Sorry, honey, but that's just the way things are," another voice said. "I'll do the front."

Kelly eased down the corridor. Again the floor was unobstructed, just dirty. The wooden floor was old, but had been recent—

—It creaked—

"What's that?"

Kelly froze for the briefest moment, but there was neither time nor a place to hide, and he darted the last fifteen feet, then dived in low and rolled to unmask his pistol.

There were two men, both in their twenties, just shapes, really, as his mind filtered out the irrelevancies and concentrated on what mattered now: size, distance, movement. One was reaching for a gun as Kelly rolled, and even got his gun out of his belt and coming around before two rounds entered his chest and another his head. Kelly brought his weapon around even before the body fell.

"Jesus Christ! Okay! Okay!" A small chrome revolver dropped to the floor. There was a loud scream from the front of the building, which Kelly ignored as he got back to his feet, his automatic locked

on the second man as though connected by a steel rod.

"They're gonna kill us." It was a surprisingly mousy voice, frightened but slow from whatever she was using.

"How many?" Kelly snapped at her.

"Just these two, they're going to—"

"I don't think so," Kelly told her, standing. "Which one are you?"

"Paula." He was covering his target.

"Where are Maria and Roberta?"

"They're in the front room," Paula told him, still too disoriented to wonder how he knew the names. The other man spoke for her.

"Passed out, pal, okay?" *Let's talk*, the man's eyes tried to say.

"Who are you?" There was just something about a .45 that made people talk, Kelly thought, not knowing what his eyes looked like behind the sights.

"Frank Molinari." An accent, and the realization that Kelly wasn't a policeman.

"Where from, Frank?—You stay put!" Kelly told Paula with a pointed left hand. He kept the gun level, eyes sweeping around, ears searching for a danger sound.

"Philly. Hey, man, we can talk, okay?" He was shaking, eyes flickering down to the gun he'd just dropped, wondering what the hell was happening.

Why was somebody from Philadelphia doing Henry's dirty work? Kelly's mind raced. Two of the men at the lab had sounded the same way. Tony Piaggi. Sure, the

mob connection, and Philadelphia.…

"Ever been to Pittsburgh, Frank?" Somehow the question just popped out.

Molinari took his best guess. It was not a good one. "How did you know that? Who you working for?"

"Killed Doris and her father, right?"

"It was a job, man, ever do a job?"

Kelly gave him the only possible answer, and there was another scream from the front as he brought the gun back in close to his chest. Time to think. The clock was still ticking. Kelly walked over and yanked Paula to her feet.

"That hurts!"

"Come on, let's get your friends."

Maria was wearing only panties and was too stoned to do any looking. Roberta was conscious and afraid. He didn't want to look

at them, not now. He didn't have time. Kelly got them together and forced them down the stairs, then outside. None had shoes, and the combination of drugs and the grit and glass on the sidewalk made them walk in a crippled fashion, whimpering and crying on their way east. Kelly pushed at them, growled at them, making them move faster, fearing nothing more grave than a passing car, because that was enough to wreck everything he'd done. Speed was vital, and it took ten minutes as endless as his race down the hill from SENDER GREEN, but the police car was still there where he'd left it. Kelly unlocked the front and told the women to get in. He'd lied about the keys.

"What the fuck!" Monroe objected. Kelly handed the keys to Paula, who seemed the best able to drive. At least she was able to hold her head up. The other two huddled on the right side, careful to keep their legs away from the radio.

"Officer Monroe, these ladies will be driving you to your station. I have instructions for you. You ready to listen?" "I got a choice, asshole?"

"You want to play power games or do you want some good information?" Kelly asked as reasonably as he could.

Two pairs of sober eyes lingered in a long moment of contact. Monroe swallowed hard on his pride and nodded.

"Go ahead."

"Sergeant Tom Douglas is the man you want to talk to—nobody else, just him. These ladies are in some really deep shit. They can help you break some major cases. Nobody but him—that's important, okay?" *You fuck that up and we'll meet again*, Kelly's eyes told him.

Monroe caught all the messages and nodded his head. "Yeah."

"Paula, you drive, don't stop for anything, no matter what he says, you got that?" The girl nodded. She'd seen him kill two men. "Get moving!"

She really was too intoxicated to drive, but it was the best he could do. The police car crept away, scraping a telephone pole halfway down the alley. Then it turned the corner and was gone. Kelly took a deep breath, turning back to where his own auto was. He hadn't saved Pam. He hadn't saved Doris. But he had saved these three, and Xantha, at a peril to his life that had at turns been both unintentional and necessary. It was almost enough.

But not quite.

The two-truck convoy had to take a route even more circuitous than planned, and they didn't arrive at the destination until after noon. That was Hoa Lo Prison. The name meant "place of cooking fires," and its reputation was well known to the Americans. When the trucks had pulled into the courtyard and the gates were secure, the men were let down. Again, each man was given an individual guard who took him inside. They were allowed a drink of water and nothing more before assignment to individual cells that were scattered around, and presently Robin Zacharias found his. It wasn't much of a change, really. He found a nice piece of floor and sat down, tired from the journey, resting his head against the wall. It took several minutes before he heard the tapping.

Shave and a haircut, six-bits.

Shave and a haircut, six-bits.

His eyes opened. He had to think. The POWs used a communications code as simple as it was old, a graphic alphabet.

A	B	C	D	E
F	G	H	I	J
L	M	N	O	P
Q	R	S	T	U
V	W	X	Y	Z

tap-tap-tap-tap-tap pause tap-tap

5/2, Robin thought, the novelty of the moment fighting through fatigue. *Letter W. Okay, I can do this.*

2/3, 3/4, 4/2, 4/5

tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap… Robin broke that off for his reply.

4/2, 3/4, 1/2, 2/4, 3/3, 5/5, 1/1, 1/3

tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap

1/1, 3/1, 5/2, 1/1, 3/1, 3/1

Al Wallace? Al? He's alive?

tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap

HOW U? he asked his friend of fifteen years.

MAKIN IT came the reply, then an addition for his fellow Utahan.

1/3, 3/4, 3/2, 1/5, 1/3, 3/4, 3/2, 1/5, 5/4 1/5

Come, come, ye saints…

Robin gasped, not hearing the taps, hearing the Choir, hearing the music, hearing what it meant.

tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap

1/1, 3/1, 3/1 2/4, 4/3, 5/2, 1/5, 3/1, 3/1, 1/1, 3/1, 3/1 2/4, 4/3, 5/2, 1/5, 3/1, 3/1

Robin Zacharias closed his eyes and gave thanks to his God for the second time in a day and the second time in over a year. He'd been foolish, after all, to think that deliverance might not come. This seemed a strange place for it, and stranger circumstances, but there was a fellow Mormon in the next cell, and his body shuddered as his mind heard that most beloved of hymns, whose final line was not a lie at all. but an affirmation.

All is well, all is well.

• • •

Monroe didn't know why this girl, Paula, didn't listen to him. He tried reason, he tried a bellowed order, but she kept driving, albeit following his directions, creeping along the early-morning streets at all of ten miles per hour, and, at that, staying in her lane only rarely and with difficulty. It took forty minutes. She lost her way twice, mistaking right for left, and once stopped the car entirely when another of the women vomited out the window. Slowly Monroe came to realize what was happening. It was a combination of things that did it, but mainly that he had the time to dope it out.

"What did he do?" Maria asked.

"Th-th-they were going to kill us, just like the others, but he shot *them!"*

Jesus, Monroe thought. That cinched it.

"Paula?"

"Yes?"

"Did you ever know somebody named Pamela Madden?"

Her head went up and down slowly as she concentrated on the road once more. The station was in sight now.

"Dear God," the policeman breathed. "Paula, turn right into the parking lot, okay? Pull around the back… that's a good girl… you can stop right here, okay." The car jerked to a halt and Paula started crying piteously. There was nothing for him to do but wait a minute or two until she got over the worst of it, and Monroe's fear was now for them, not himself. "Okay, now, I want you to let me out."

She opened her door and then the rear one. The cop needed help getting to his feet, and she did it for him on instinct.

"The car keys, there's a handcuff key on it, can you unlock me,

miss?" It took her three tries before his hands were free. "Thank you."

"This better be good!" Tom Douglas growled. The phone cord came across his wife's face, waking her up, too.

"Sergeant, this is Chuck Monroe, Western District. I have three witnesses to the Fountain Murder." He paused.

"I think I have two more bodies for the Invisible Man, too. He told me I should only talk to you."

"Huh?" The detective's face twisted in the darkness. "Who did?"

"The Invisible Man. You want to come down here, sir? It's a long one," Monroe said.

"Don't talk to anybody else. Not anybody, you got that?"

"He told me that, too, sir."

"What is it, honey?" Beverly Douglas asked, as awake as her detective husband now.

It was eight months now since the death of a sad, petite girl named Helen Waters. Then Pamela Madden. Then Doris Brown. He was going to get the bastards now, Douglas told himself, incorrectly.

"What are you doing here?" Sandy asked the figure standing next to her car, the one he had fixed.

"Saying goodbye for a while," Kelly told her quietly. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to have to go away. I don't know for how long."

"Where to?"

"I can't really say."

"Vietnam again?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure. Honest."

It just wasn't the time for this, as though it ever was. Sandy thought. It was early, and she had to be at work at six-thirty, and though she wasn't running late, there simply weren't the minutes she needed for what had to be said

"Will you be back?"

"If you want, yes."

"I do, John."

"Thank you. Sandy… I got four out," he told her. "Four?"

"Four girls, like Pam and Doris. One's over on the Eastern Shore, the other three are here in town at a police station. Make sure

somebody takes care of them, okay?"

"Yes."

"No matter what you hear, I'll be back. Please believe that."

"John!"

"No time, Sandy. I'll be back," he promised her, walking away.

Neither Ryan nor Douglas wore a tie. Both sipped at coffee from paper cups while the lab boys did their job again.

"Two in the body," one of them was saying, "one in the head—always leaves the target dead. *This* is a professional job."

"The real kind," Ryan breathed to his partner. It was a .45. It had to be. Nothing else made that kind of mess—and besides, there were six brass cartridge cases on the hardwood floor, each circled in chalk for the photographers.

The three women were in a cell in Western District, with a uniformed officer in constant attendance. He and Douglas had spoken to them briefly, long enough to know that they had their witnesses against one Henry Tucker, murderer. Name, physical description, nothing else, but infinitely more than they'd had only hours before. They'd first check their own files for the name, then the FBI's national register of felons, then the street. They'd check motor-vehicle records for a license in that name. The procedure was entirely straightforward, and with a name they'd get him, maybe soon, maybe not. But then there was this other little matter before them.

"Both of them from out of town?" Ryan asked.

"Philadelphia. Francis Molinari and Albert d'Andino," Douglas confirmed, reading the names off their driver's licenses. "How much you want to bet…?"

"No bet, Tom." He turned, holding up a photograph. "Monroe, this face look familiar?"

The patrol officer took the small ID photo from Ryan's hand and looked at it in the poor light of the upstairs apartment. He shook his head. "Not really, sir."

"What do you mean? You were face-to-face with the guy."

"Longer hair, smudges on his face, mainly when we were up close I saw the front end of a Colt. Too fast, too dark."

It was tricky and dangerous, which wasn't unusual. There were four automobiles parked out front, and he couldn't afford to make any

noise—but it was the safest course of action as well, with those four cars parked in front. He was standing on the marginal space provided by a sill of a bricked-up window, reaching for the telephone cable. Kelly hoped nobody was using the phone as he clipped into the wires, quickly attaching leads of his own. With that done, he dropped down and started walking north along the back of the building, trailing out his own supply of commo wire, just letting it lie on the ground. He turned the corner, letting the spool dangle from his left hand like a lunch pail, crossing the little-used street, moving casually like a person who belonged here. Another hundred yards and he turned again, entering the deserted building and climbing to his perch. Once there he returned to his rented car and got out the rest of what he needed, including his trusty whiskey flask, filled with tap water, and a supply of Snickers bars. Ready, he settled down to his task.

The rifle wasn't properly sighted in. Mad as it seemed, the most sensible course of action was to use the building as his target. He shouldered the weapon in a sitting position and searched the wall for a likely spot. There, an off-color brick. Kelly controlled his breathing, with the scope dialed to its highest magnification, and squeezed gently.

It was strange firing this rifle. The .22 rimfire is a small, inherently quiet round, and with the elaborate suppressor he'd constructed on it, for the first time in his life he heard the music-note *pingggggg* of the striker hitting the firing pin, along with the muted *pop* of the discharge. The novelty of it almost distracted Kelly from hearing the far louder *swat* of the impact of the round on the target. The bullet created a puff of dust, two inches left and one inch high of his point of aim. Kelly clicked in the adjustment on the Leupold scope and fired again. Perfect. Kelly worked the bolt and then fed three rounds into the magazine, dialing the scope back to low power.

"Did you hear something?" Piaggi asked tiredly.

"What's that?" Tucker looked up from his task. More than twelve hours now, doing the scut-work that he'd thought to be behind him forever. Not even halfway done, despite the two "soldiers" that were down from Philadelphia. Tony didn't like it either.

"Like something falling," Tony said, shaking his head and getting back to it. The only good thing that could be said about this was that it would earn him respect when he related the tale to his

associates up and down the coast. A serious man, Anthony Piaggi. When everything went to shit, he'd done the work himself. He makes his deliveries and meets his obligations. You can depend on Tony. It was a rep worth earning, even if this was the price. It was a resolute thought that persisted for perhaps thirty seconds.

Tony slit open another bag, noting the evil, chemical smell on it, not quite recognizing it for what it was. The fine white powder went into the bowl. Next he dumped in the milk sugar. He mixed the two elements with spoons, stirring it slowly. He was sure there must be a machine for this operation, but it was probably too large, like what they used at commercial bakeries. Mainly his mind was protesting that this was work for little people, hirelings. Still, he had to make that delivery, and there was no one else to help out.

"What'd you say?" Henry asked tiredly.

"Forget it." Piaggi concentrated on his task. Where the hell were Albert and Frank? They were supposed to be here a couple hours ago. Thought they were special because they whacked people, like that stuff really mattered.

"Hey, Lieutenant." The sergeant who ran the central evidence storage room was a former traffic officer whose three-wheel bike had run afoul of a careless driver. That had cost him one leg and relegated him to administrative duty, which suited the sergeant, who had his desk and his donuts and his paper in addition to clerkish duties that absorbed maybe three hours of real work per eight-hour shift. It was called retirement-in-place.

"How's the family, Harry?"

"Fine, thanks. What can I do for you?"

"I need to check the numbers on the drugs I brought in last week," Charon told him. "I think there might be a mixup on the tags. Anyway"—he shrugged—"I have to check it out."

"Okay, just give me a minute and I'll—"

"Read your paper, Harry. I know where to go," Charon told him with a pat on the shoulder. Official policy was that nobody wandered around in this room without an official escort, but Charon was a lieutenant, and Harry was short one leg, and his prosthesis was giving him trouble, as it usually did.

"That was a nice shoot, Mark," the sergeant told his back. *What the hell*, he thought, *Mark whacked the guy who'd been carrying the stuff.*

Charon looked and listened for any other person who might be here, but there was none. They'd pay him big-time for this. Talk about moving their operation, eh? Leave him out in the cold, back to chasing pushers… well, not entirely a bad thing. He had a lot of money banked away, enough to keep his former wife happy and educate the three kids he'd given her, plus a little for him. He'd probably even get a promotion soon because of the work he'd done, taking down several drug distributors… there.

The ten kilos he had taken from Eddie Morello's car were in a labeled cardboard box, sitting on the third shelf, right where they were supposed to be. He took the box down and looked to be sure. Each of the ten one-kilo bags had to be opened, tested, and resealed. The lab technician who'd done it had just initialed the tags, and his initials were easy to fake. Charon reached into his shirt and pants, pulling out plastic bags of Four-X sugar, which was of the same color and consistency as the heroin. Only his office would ever touch this evidence, and he could control that. In a month he'd send a memo recommending destruction of the evidence, since the case on it was closed. His captain would approve. He'd dump it down the drain with several other people watching, and the plastic bags would be burned, and nobody would ever know. It certainly seemed simple enough. Within three minutes he was walking away from the evidence racks.

"Numbers check out?"

"Yeah, Harry, thanks," Charon said, waving on the way out.

"Somebody get the fuckin' phone," Piaggi growled. Who the hell would be calling here, anyway? It was one of the Philly guys who walked over, taking the time to light a cigarette.

"Yeah?" The man turned. "Henry, it's for you."

"What the hell?" Tucker walked over.

"Hi, Henry," Kelly said. He'd wired a field phone into the building's telephone line, cutting it off from the outside world. He sat there, next to the canvas-covered instrument, having rung the other end just by turning the crank. It seemed rather primitive, but it was something familiar and comfortable to him, and it worked.

"Who's this?"

"The name's Kelly, John Kelly," he told him.

"So who's John Kelly?"

“Four of you killed Pam. You’re the only one left, Henry,” the voice said. “I got the rest. Now it’s your turn.” Tucker turned and looked around the room as though he expected to find the voice there. Was this some kind of sick joke that they were playing on him?

“How—how’d you get this number? Where are you?”

“Close enough, Henry,” Kelly told him. “You nice and comfy in there with your friends?”

“Look, I don’t know who you are—”

“I told you who I am. You’re in there with Tony Piaggi. I saw you at his restaurant the other night. How was your dinner, by the way? Mine was just great,” the voice taunted.

Tucker stood straight up, his hand tight on the phone. “So what the fuck are you gonna do, boy?”

“I ain’t gonna kiss you on both cheeks, *boy*. I got Rick, and I got Billy, and I got Burt, and now I’m going to get you. Do me a favor, put Mr. Piaggi on the line,” the voice suggested.

“Tony, you better come here,” Tucker said.

“What is it, Henry?” Piaggi tripped on his chair getting up. *So damned tired from all this. Those bastards in Philly better have the cash all ready.* Henry handed him the phone.

“Who’s this?”

“Those two guys on the boat, the ones you gave to Henry? I got ’em. I got the other two this morning, too.”

“What the fuck is this?”

“You figure it out.” The line went dead. Piaggi looked over at his partner, and since he couldn’t get an answer from the phone, he’d get one from Tucker.

“Henry, what the hell is this?”

Okay, let’s see what that stirred up. Kelly allowed himself a sip of water and a Snickers. He was on the third story of the building. Some sort of warehouse, he thought, massively constructed of reinforced concrete, a good place to be when The Bomb went off. The tactical problem was an interesting one. He couldn’t just burst inside. Even if he’d had a machine gun—he didn’t—four against one was long odds, especially when you didn’t know what was inside the door, especially when stealth was something you couldn’t count on as an ally, and so he’d try another approach. He’d never done anything like this before, but from his perch he could cover every door of the building. The windows in the back were bricked up. The

only ways out were under his sight, and at just over a hundred yards, he hoped that they'd try it. Kelly shouldered the rifle, but kept his head up, sweeping left and right in an even, patient way.

"It's him," Henry said quietly so the others couldn't hear.

"Who?"

"The guy who did all those pushers, the guy who got Billy and the rest, the guy who did the ship. It's *him*."

"Well, who the fuck is *him*, Henry?"

"I don't know, goddamn it!" The voice was higher now, and the other two heads looked up. Tucker got more control of himself. "He says he wants us to come out."

"Oh, that's just great—what are we up against? Wait a minute." Piaggi lifted the phone but got no dial tone. "What the hell?"

Kelly heard the buzz and lifted his handset. "Yeah, what is it?"

"Who the fuck are you?"

"It's Tony, right? Why did you have to kill Doris, Tony? She wasn't any danger to you. Now I have to do you, too."

"*I* didn't—"

"You know what I mean, but thanks for bringing those two down here. I wanted to tie that loose end up, but I didn't expect to have the chance. They're in the morgue by now, I suppose."

"Trying to scare me?" the man demanded over the scratchy phone line.

"No, just trying to kill you," Kelly told him.

"Fuck!" Piaggi slammed the phone down.

"He says he saw us at the restaurant, man. He says he was right there." It was clear to the other two that something was amiss. They were looking up now, mainly curious, but wary as they saw their two superiors in an agitated state. What the hell was this all about?

"How could he know—oh," Piaggi said, his voice trailing off to a quieter tone. "Yeah, they knew me, didn't they…? Jesus."

There was only one window with clear glass. The others had glass bricks, the four-inch-square blocks favored for letting light in without being easily broken by vandals. They also prevented anyone from seeing out. The one window with clear glass had a crank, allowing the panes to open upward at an angle. This office had probably been set up by some asshole of a manager who didn't

want his secretaries looking out the windows. Well, the bastard had gotten his wish. Piaggi cranked the window open—tried to, the three moving panes had only gone forty degrees before the mechanism froze.

Kelly saw it move and wondered if he should announce his presence in a more direct way. Better not to, he thought, better to be patient. Waiting grows hard on those who don't know what's happening.

The remarkable thing was that it was ten o'clock in the morning now, a clean, sunny late-summer day. There was truck traffic on O'Donnell Street, only half a block away, and some private autos as well, driving past, going about their business. Perhaps their drivers saw the tall abandoned building Kelly was in, wondering, as he was, what it had been constructed for; seeing the four automobiles parked at the former trucking building, wondering if that business was starting up again; but if they did, it wasn't worth anything more than a passing thought for people who had work to do. The drama was being played in plain sight, and only the players knew.

"I don't see shit," Piaggi said, squatting down to look out the windows. "There's nobody around."

This is the guy who did the pushers, Tucker was telling himself as he stood away from the window. *Five or six of 'em. Killed Rick with a fuckin'* knife…

Tony had picked the building. It was to be an ostensible part of a small interstate trucking concern whose owners were connected and very careful players. Just perfect, he'd thought, so close to major highways, quiet part of town, little police activity, just an anonymous building doing anonymous work. Perfect, Henry had thought on seeing it.

Oh, yeah, just perfect…

"Let me look." It wasn't time to back off. Henry Tucker didn't think of himself as a coward. He'd fought and killed, himself, and not just women. He'd spent years establishing himself, and the first part of the process hadn't been without bloodshed. Besides, he couldn't appear to be weak now, not in front of Tony and two "soldiers." "Nothin'," he agreed.

"Let's try something." Piaggi walked to the phone and lifted it. There wasn't a dial tone, just a buzz.…

Kelly looked at the field phone, listening to the noise it made. He'd let it be for the moment, let them do the waiting now. Though the tactical situation was of his design, still his options were limited. Talk, don't talk. Shoot, don't shoot. Move, don't move. With only three basic choices to be made, he had to select his actions carefully to achieve the desired effect. This battle was not a physical one. Like most battles, it was a thing of the mind.

It was getting warm. The last hot days before the leaves started turning. Already eighty degrees, maybe going past ninety, one last time. He wiped perspiration from his face, watching the building, listening to the buzz, letting them sweat from something other than the heat of the day.

"Shit," Piaggi snarled, slamming the phone down. "You two!"

"Yeah?" It was the taller one, Bobby.

"Take a walk around the building—"

"No!" Henry said, thinking. "What if he's right outside? You can't see shit out that window. He could be standing right next to the door. You want to risk that?"

"What do you mean?" Piaggi asked.

Tucker was pacing now, breathing a little faster than usual, commanding himself to think. *How would I do it?* "I mean, the bastard cuts the phone line, makes his call, spooks us, and then he just waits for us right outside, like."

"What do you know about this guy?"

"I know he killed five pushers, and four of my people—"

"And four of mine if he ain't lyin'—"

"So we gotta outthink him, okay? How would you handle it?"

Piaggi thought that one over. He'd never killed. It had just never worked out that way. He was more the brains side of the business. He had roughed people up in his time, however, had delivered some fearful beatings, and that was close enough, wasn't it? *How would I do this?* Henry's idea made sense. You just stay out of sight, like around a corner, in an alley, in the shadows, and then you let them look the other way. The nearest door, the one they'd used, swung to the left, and you could tell that from the outside from where the hinges were. It also had the virtue of being closest to the cars, and since that was their only means of escape, that's the one he'd expect them to use.

Yeah.

Piaggi looked over to his partner. Henry was looking up. The acoustical panels had been removed from the drop ceiling. Right there, in the flat roof, was an access door. It was locked shut with a simple manual latch to keep burglars out. It would open easily, maybe even quietly, to the flat tar-and-gravel roof, and a guy could get up there, and walk to the edge, and look down, and whack whoever was waiting there next to the front door.

Yeah.

"Bobby, Fred, come here," Piaggi ordered. He filled them in on the tactical situation. By this time they'd guessed that something was gravely wrong, but it wasn't cops—that was the worst thing that could go wrong, they thought, and the assurance that it wasn't cops actually relieved both of them. Both had handguns. Both were smart, and Fred had killed once, taking care of a small family problem in riverside Philadelphia. The two of them slid a desk under the access door. Fred was eager to show that he was a serious guy, and so gain favor with Tony, who also looked like a serious guy. He stood on the desk. It wasn't quite enough. They put a chair atop the desk, which allowed him to open the door and look out on the roof.

Aha! Kelly saw the man standing there—actually only his head and chest were visible. The rifle came up, and the crosshairs found the face. He almost took the shot. What stopped him was the way the man had his hands on the door coaming, the way he was looking around, scanning the flat roof before he moved farther. He wanted to get up there. *Well, I guess I'll let him*, Kelly thought as a tractor-trailer rumbled past, fifty yards away. The man lifted himself up on the roof. Through his telescopic sight, Kelly could see a revolver in his hand. The man stood erect, looking all the way around, and then moved very slowly towards the front of the building. It wasn't bad tactics, really. Always a good thing to do your reconnaissance first… *oh, that's what they're thinking*, he thought. Too bad.

Fred had removed his shoes. The small pea-size gravel hurt his feet, and so did the heat radiating from the sticky black tar under the stones, but he had to be quiet—and besides, he was a tough customer, as someone had once learned on the bank of the Delaware River. His hands flexed familiarly on the grip of his short-barreled Smith. If the bastard was there, he'd shoot straight down.

Tony and Henry would pull the body in, and they'd pour water to wash the blood away, and get back to business, because this was an important delivery. Halfway there. Fred was very concentrated now. He approached the parapeted edge with his feet in the lead, his body leaning back until his stockinged toes got all the way to the low wall of bricks that extended above the roofline. Then, quickly, he leaned forward, gun aimed downwards at—nothing. Fred looked up and down the front of the building.

"Shit!" He turned, and called, "There's nobody here!"

"What?" Bobby's head came up in the opening to look, but Fred was now checking the cars out for someone crouching there.

Kelly told himself that patience was almost always rewarded. That thought had enabled him to fight off the buck fever that always came when you had a target in your sights. As soon as his peripheral vision caught movement at the opening, he brought the gun left. A face, white, twenties, dark eyes, looking at the other one, a pistol in his right hand. Just a target now. *Take him first.* Kelly centered the crosshairs in the bridge of the nose and squeezed gently.

Smack. Fred's head turned when he heard a sound that was both wet and hard, but when he did, there was nothing there. He'd heard nothing else but that wet, sharp sound, but now there was also a clatter, as though Bobby's chair had slipped off the desk and he'd fallen to the floor. Nothing else, but for no apparent reason the skin at the back of his neck turned to ice. He backed away from the edge of the roof, looking all around at the flat, rectangular horizon just as fast as his head could turn. Nothing.

The gun was new, and the bolt still a little stiff as he drove the second round home. Kelly brought it back to the right. Two for the price of one. The head was turning rapidly now. He could see the fear there. He knew there was danger but not where or what kind. Then the man started moving back to the opening. He couldn't allow that. Kelly applied about six inches of lead and squeezed again. *Pinggggggg.*

Smack. The sound of the impact was far louder than the muted *pop* of the shot. Kelly ejected the spent cartridge and slammed in another as a car approached on O'Donnell Street.

Tucker was still looking at Bobby's face when his head jerked upwards, hearing the thud of what had to be another body, rattling the steel-bar joists of the roof. "Oh, my God…"

37

Trial by Ordeal

“You’re looking much better than the last time, Colonel,” Ritter said pleasantly in Russian. The security officer rose and walked out of the living room, giving the two men privacy. Ritter was carrying an attaché case, which he set on the coffee table. “Feeding you well?”

“I have no complaints,” Grishanov said warily. “When can I go home?”

“This evening, probably. We’re waiting for something.” Ritter opened the case. This made Kolya uneasy, but he didn’t allow it to show. For all he knew there might be a pistol in there. Comfortable as his imprisonment had been, friendly as his conversations with the residents in this place were, he was on enemy soil, under the control of enemies. It made him think of another man in a distant place under very different circumstances. The differences ate at his conscience and shamed him for his fear.

“What is that?”

“Confirmation that our people are in Hoa Lo Prison.” The Russian lowered his head and whispered something Ritter didn’t catch. Grishanov looked up. “I am glad to hear that.”

“You know, I believe you. Your letters back and forth to Rokossovskiy make that clear.” Ritter poured himself some tea from the pot on the table, filling up Kolya’s cup also.

“You have treated me correctly.” Grishanov didn’t know what else to say, and the silence was heavy in him.

“We have a lot of experience being friendly to Soviet guests,” Ritter assured him. “You’re not the first to stay here. Do you ride?”

“No, I’ve never been on a horse.”

“Ummhmm.” The attaché case was quite full with papers, Kolya

saw, wondering what they were. Ritter took out two large cards and an ink pad. “Could I have your hands, please?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Nothing to worry about.” Ritter took his left hand and inked the fingertips, rolling them one at a time in the appropriate boxes on one card, then the other. The procedure was duplicated with the right hand. “There, that didn’t hurt, did it? You can wash your hands now, better to do it before the ink dries.” Ritter slid one of the cards into the file, substituting it for the one removed. The other just went on top. He closed the case, then carried the old card to the fireplace, where he ignited it with his cigarette lighter. It burned fast, joining the ash pile from the fires that the custodians liked to have every other night. Grishanov came back with clean hands.

“I still don’t understand.”

“It’s really nothing that need concern you. You just helped me out on something, that’s all. What say we have lunch? Then we can meet with a countryman of yours. Please be at ease, Comrade Colonel,” Ritter said as reassuringly as he could. “If your side sticks to the bargain, you’ll be on your way home in about eight hours. Fair enough?”

Mark Charon was uncomfortable coming here again, safe though the location might be this early into its use. Well, this wouldn’t take long. He pulled his unmarked Ford to the front of the building, got out, and walked to the front door. It was locked. He had to knock. Tony Piaggi yanked it open, a gun in his hand.

“What’s this?” Charon demanded in alarm.

“What’s this?” Kelly asked himself quietly. He hadn’t expected the car to come right up to the building, and had been loading two more rounds into the clip when the man pulled in and got out. The rifle was so stiff that he had trouble getting the clip back in, and by the time he had it up, the figure was moving too rapidly for a shot. Damn. Of course, he didn’t know who it was. He twisted the scope to max-power and examined the car. Cheap body… an extra radio antenna… police car? Reflected light prevented him from seeing the interior. Damn. He’d made a small mistake. He’d expected a down-time after dropping the two on the roof. *Never take anything for granted, dummy!* The slight error made him grimace.

“What the hell is going on?” Charon snapped at them. Then he saw the body on the floor, a small hole slightly above and to the left of the open right eye.

“It’s him! He’s out there!” Tucker said.

“Who?”

“The one who got Billy and Rick and Burt—”

“Kelly!” Charon exclaimed, turning around to look at the closed door.

“You know his name?” Tucker asked.

“Ryan and Douglas are after him—they want him for a string of killings.”

Piaggi grunted. “The string is longer by two. Bobby here, and Fred on the roof.” He stooped by the window again. *He’s got to be right across the road there…*

Charon had his gun out now, for no apparent reason. Somehow the bags of heroin seemed unusually heavy now, and he set his service revolver down and unloaded them from his clothing onto the table with the rest of them, along with the mixing bowl, and the envelopes, and the stapler. That activity ended his current ability to do anything but look at the other two. That was when the phone rang. Tucker got it.

“Having fun, you cocksucker?”

• • •

“Did you have fun with Pam?” Kelly asked coldly. “So,” he asked more pleasantly, “who’s your friend? Is that the cop you have on the payroll?”

“You think you know it all, don’t you?”

“No, not all. I don’t know why a man would get his rocks off killing girls, Henry. You want to tell me that?” Kelly asked.

“Fuck you, man!”

“You want to come on out and try? You swing that way too, sweetie-pie?” Kelly hoped Tucker didn’t break the phone, the way he slammed it down. He just didn’t understand the game, and that was good. If you didn’t know the rules, you couldn’t fight back effectively. There was an edge of fatigue on his voice, and Tony’s also. The one on the roof hadn’t had his shirt buttoned; it was rumpled, Kelly saw, examining the body through his sight. The trousers had creases inside the knees, as though the man had been sitting up all night. Had he merely been a slob? That didn’t seem

likely. The shoes he'd left by the opening were quite shiny. Probably up all night, Kelly judged after a few seconds' reflection. *They're tired, and they're scared, and they don't know the game. Fine.* He had his water and his candy bars, and all day.

"If you knew that bastard's name, how come you—god-damn it!" Tucker swore. "You told me he's just a rich beach bum, I *said* I could take him out in the hospital, remember, but *no!*… you said leave him fuckin' be!"

"Settle down, Henry." Piaggi said as calmly as he could manage. *This is one very serious boy we have out there. He's done six of my people. Six! Jesus. This is not the time to panic.*

"We have to think this one through, okay?" Tony rubbed the heavy stubble on his face, collecting himself, thinking it through. "He's got a rifle and he's in that big white building across the street."

"You wanna just walk over there and get him, Tony?" Tucker pointed to Bobby's head. "Look what he did here!"

"Ever hear of nightfall, Henry? There's one light out there, right over the door." Piaggi walked over to the fuse box, checked the label inside the door, and unscrewed the proper fuse. "There, the light don't work anymore. We can wait for night and make our move. He can't get us all. If we move fast enough, he might not get any."

"What about the stuff?"

"We can leave one guy here to guard it. We get muscle in here to go after that bastard, and we finish business, okay?" It was a viable plan, Piaggi thought. The other guy didn't hold all the cards. He couldn't shoot through the walls. They had water, coffee, and time on their side.

The three stories were as close to word-for-word identical as anything he might have hoped for under the circumstances. They'd interviewed them separately, as soon as they'd recovered enough from their pills to speak, and their agitated state only made things better. Names, the place it had happened, how this Tucker bastard was dealing his heroin out-of-town now, something Billy had said about the way the bags stank—confirmed by the "lab" busted on the Eastern Shore. They now had a driver's license number and possible address on Tucker. The address might be bogus—not an

unlikely situation—but they also had a car make, from which they'd gotten a tag number. He had it all, or at least was close enough that he could treat the investigation as something with an end to it. It was a time for him to stand back and let things happen. The all-points was just now going on the air. At the next series of squad-room briefings, the name Henry Tucker, and his car, and his tag number would be made known to the patrol officers who were the real eyes of the police force. They could get very lucky, very fast, bring him in, arraign him, indict him, try him, and put his ass away forever even if the Supreme Court had the bad grace to deny him the end his life had earned. Ryan was going to bag that inhuman bastard.

And yet.

And yet Ryan knew he was one step behind someone else. The Invisible Man was using a .45 now—not his silencer; he had changed tactics, was going for quick, sure kills… didn't care about noise anymore… and he'd talked to others before killing them, and probably knew even more than he did. That dangerous cat Farber had described to him was out on the street, hunting in the light now, probably, and Ryan didn't know where.

John T. Kelly, Chief Boatswain's Mate, U.S. Navy SEALs. Where the hell are you? If I were you… where would I be? Where would I go?

"Still there?" Kelly asked when Piaggi lifted the phone.

"Yeah, man, we're having a late lunch. Wanna come over and join us?"

"I had calamari at your place the other night. Not bad. Your mother cook it up?" Kelly inquired softly, wondering about the reply he'd get.

"That's right," Tony replied pleasantly. "Old family recipe, my great-grandmother brought it over from the Old Country, y'know?"

"You know, you surprise me."

"How's that, Mr. Kelly?" the man asked politely, his voice more relaxed now. He was wondering what effect it would have on the other end of the phone line.

"I expected you to try and cut a deal. Your people did, but I wasn't buying," Kelly told him, allowing irritation to show in his voice.

"Like I said, come on over and we can talk over lunch." The line

clicked off.

Excellent.

"There, that ought to give the fucker something to think about." Piaggi poured himself another cup of coffee. The brew was old and thick and rancid now, but it was so heavily laced with caffeine that his hands remained still only with concerted effort. But he was fully awake and alert, Piaggi told himself. He looked at the other two, smiling and nodding confidently.

"Sad about Cas," the Superintendent observed to his friend.

Maxwell nodded. "What can I say, Will? He wasn't exactly a good candidate for retirement, was he? Family gone, here and there both. This was his life, and it was coming to an end one way or another." Neither man wanted to discuss what his wife had done. Perhaps after a year or so they might see the poetic symmetry in the loss of two friends, but not now.

"I hear you put your papers in, too, Dutch." The Superintendent of the United States Naval Academy didn't quite understand it. Talk was about that Dutch was a sure thing for a fleet command in the spring. The talk had died only days before, and he didn't know why.

"That's right." Maxwell couldn't say why. The orders—couched as a "suggestion"—had come from the White House, through the CNO. "Long enough, Will. Time for some new blood. Us World War Two guys… well, time to make room, I guess."

"Sonny doing okay?"

"I'm a grandfather."

"Good for them!" At least there was some good news in the room when Admiral Greer entered it, wearing his uniform for once.

"James!"

"Nice principal's office," Greer observed. "Hiya, Dutch."

"So, to what do I owe all this high-level attention?"

"Will, we're going to steal one of your sailboats. You have something nice and comfortable that two admirals can handle?"

"Wide selection. You want one of the twenty-sixes?"

"That's about right."

"Well, I'll call the Seamanship Department and have them chop one loose for you." It made sense, the Admiral thought. They'd both been close with Cas, and when you said goodbye to a sailor, you did it at sea. He placed his call, and they took their leave.

“Run outa ideas?” Piaggi asked. His voice showed defiant confidence now. The momentum had passed across the street, the man thought. Why not reinforce that?

“I don’t see that you have any to speak of. You bastards afraid of the sunlight? I’ll give you some!” Kelly snarled. “Watch.”

He set the phone down and lifted the rifle, taking aim at the window.

Pop.

Crash.

“You dumb fuck!” Tony said into the phone, even though he knew it to be disconnected. “You see? He knows he can’t get us. He knows time’s on our side.”

Two panes were shattered, then the shooting stopped again. The phone rang. Tony let it ring a while before he answered.

“Missed, you jerk!”

“I don’t see you going anywhere, asshole!” The shout was loud enough that Tucker and Charon heard the buzz from ten feet away.

“I think it’s time for you to start runnin’, Mr. Kelly. Who knows, maybe we won’t catch you. Maybe the cops will. They’re after you too, I hear.”

“You’re still the ones in the trap, remember.”

“You say so, man.” Piaggi hung up on him again, showing who had the upper hand.

“And how are you, Colonel?” Voloshin asked.

“It has been an interesting trip.” Ritter and Grishanov were sitting on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, just two tourists tired after a hot day, joined by a third friend, under the watchful eyes of a security guard ten yards away.

“And your Vietnamese friend?”

“What?” Kolya asked in some surprise. “What friend?”

Ritter grinned. “That was just a little ploy on my part. We had to identify the leak, you see.”

“I thought that was your doing,” the KGB general observed sourly. It was such an obvious trap and he’d fallen right into it. Almost. Fortune had smiled on him, and probably Ritter didn’t know that.

“The game goes on, Sergey. Will you weep for a traitor?”

“For a traitor, no. For a believer in the cause of a peaceful world,

yes. You are very clever, Bob. You have done well." *Perhaps not*, Voloshin thought; *perhaps not*

as far into the trap as you believe, my young American friend. You moved too fast. You managed to kill this Hicks boy, but not CASSIUS. Impetuous, my young friend. You miscalculated and you really don't know it, do you?

Time for business. "What about our people?"

"As agreed, they are with the others. Rokossovskiy confirms. Do you accept my word, Mr. Ritter?"

"Yes, I will. Very well, there's a PanAm flight from Dulles to Paris tonight at eight-fifteen. I'll deliver him there if you wish to see him off. You can have him met at Orly."

"Agreed." Voloshin walked away.

"Why did he leave me?" Grishanov asked, more surprised than alarmed.

"Colonel, that's because he believes my word, just like I believe his." Ritter stood. "We have a few hours to kill—"

"Kill?"

"Excuse me, that's an idiom. We have a few hours of private time. Would you like to walk around Washington? There's a moon rock in the Smithsonian. People love to touch it for some reason."

Five-thirty. The sun was in his eyes now. Kelly had to wipe his face more often. Watching the partly broken window, he saw nothing except an occasional shadow. He wondered if they were resting. That wouldn't do. He lifted the field phone and turned the crank. They made him wait again.

"Who's calling?" Tony asked. He was the formidable one, Kelly thought, almost as formidable as he thought he was. It was a shame, really.

"Your restaurant do carry-out?"

"Getting hungry, are we?" Pause. "Maybe you want to make a deal with us."

"Come on outside and we can talk about it," Kelly replied. The reply was a *click*.

Just about right, Kelly thought, watching the shadows move across the floor. He drank the last of his water and ate his last candy bar, looking around the area again for any changes. He'd long since decided what to do. In a way, they'd decided that for him. There was again a clock running, ticking down to a zero-time that was

flexible but finite. He could walk away from this if he had to, but—no, he really couldn't. He checked his watch. It was going to be dangerous, and the passage of time would not change it any more than it already had. They'd been awake for twenty-four hours, probably longer. He'd given them fear and let them get comfortable with it. They thought they held a good playing hand now, just as he'd dared to hope they would.

Kelly slid backwards on the cement floor, leaving his gear behind. He'd need it no longer no matter how this turned out. Standing, he brushed off his clothes and checked his Colt automatic. One in the chamber, seven in the magazine. He stretched a little, and then he knew that he could delay no longer. He headed down the stairs, pulling out the keys to the VW. It started despite his sudden fear that it might not. He let the engine warm up while watching traffic on the north-south street in front of him. He darted across, incurring the noisy wrath of a southbound driver, but fitting neatly into the rush-hour traffic.

"See anything?"

Charon had been the one to suggest that the angles precluded Kelly from seeing all the way into their building. He might try to come across after all, they thought, but two of them could each cover one side of the white building. And they knew he was still there. They were getting to him. He hadn't thought it all the way through, Tony pronounced. He was pretty smart, but not that smart, and when it was dark, and when there were shadows, they'd make their move. It would work. A dinky little .22 wouldn't penetrate a car body if they could make it that far, and if they surprised him, they could—

"Just traffic on the other side."

"Don't get too close to the window, man."

"Fuckin' A," Henry said. "What about the delivery?"

"We got a saying in the family, man, better late than never, y'dig?"

Charon was the most uncomfortable of the three. Perhaps it was just the proximity to the drugs. Evil stuff. *A little late to think about that.* Could there be a way out of this?

The money for his delivery was right there, next to the desk. He had a gun.

To die like a criminal? He watched them there, left and right of

the window. They were the criminals. He hadn't done anything to offend this Kelly. Well, nothing that he knew about. It was Henry who'd killed the girl, and Tony who'd set the other one up. Charon was just a crooked cop. This was a *personal* matter for Kelly. Not a hard thing to understand. Killing Pam that way had been brutal and foolish. He'd told Henry that. He could come out of this a hero, couldn't he? Got a tip, walked right into it. Crazy shoot-out. He could even help Kelly. And he'd never, ever get mixed up with anything like this again. Bank the money, get the promotion, and take down Henry's organization from what he knew. They'd never bust him back after that, would they? All he had to do was to get on the phone and *reason* with the man. Except for one little thing.

Kelly turned left, proceeded west one block, then left again, heading south towards O'Donnell Street. His hands were sweating now. There were three of them, and he'd have to be very, very good. But he *was* good, and he had to finish the job, even if the job might finish him. He stopped the car a block away, getting out, locking it, and walking the rest of the way to the building. The other businesses here were closed down now—he'd counted three, up and operating throughout the day, totally unaware of what was happening… in one case just across the street.

Well, you planned that one right, didn't you?

Yeah, Johnnie-boy, but that was the easy part.

Thanks. He stood right there at the corner of the building, looking in all directions. Better from the other side… he walked to the corner with the phone and electrical service, using the same half-windowsill he'd used before, reaching for the parapet and doing his best to avoid the electrical wires.

Okay, now you just have to walk across the roof without making any noise.

On tar and gravel?

There was one alternative he hadn't considered. Kelly stood on the parapet. It was at least eight inches wide, he told himself. It was also quiet as he walked the flat brick tightrope towards the opening in the roof, wondering if they might be using the phone.

Charon had to make his move soon. He stood, looking at the others, and stretched rather theatrically before heading in their direction. His coat was off, his tie loose, and his five-shot Smith was at his

right hip. Just shoot the bastards and then talk to this Kelly character on the phone. Why not? They were *hoods*, weren't they? Why should he die for what they did?

"What are you doing, Mark?" Henry asked, not seeing the danger, too focused on the window. *Good.*

"Tired of sittin'." Charon pulled the handkerchief from his right hip pocket and wiped his face with it as he measured angles and distance, then back to the phone, where his only safety lay. He was sure of that. It was his only chance to get out of this.

Piaggi just didn't like the look in his eyes. "Why not just sit back down and relax, okay? It's going to get busy soon."

Why is he looking at the phone? Why is he looking at us?

"Back off, Tony, okay?" Charon said in a challenging voice, reaching back to replace the handkerchief. He didn't know that his eyes had given him away. His hand had barely touched the revolver when Tony aimed and fired one shot into his chest.

"Real smart guy, huh?" Tony said to the dying man. Then he noticed that the oblong rectangle of light from the roof door had a shadow in it. Piaggi was still looking at the shadow when it disappeared, replaced by a blur barely caught by his peripheral vision. Henry was looking at Charon's body.

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The shot startled him—the obvious thought was that it had been aimed at himself—but he was committed, and jumped into the square hole. It was like a parachute jump, *keep your feet together, knees bent, back straight, roll when you hit.*

He hit hard. It was a tile-over-concrete floor, but his legs took the worst of it. Kelly rolled at once, straightening his arm. The nearest one was Piaggi. Kelly brought the gun up, leveling the sights with his chest and firing twice, changing aim then and hitting the man under the chin.

Shift targets.

Kelly rolled again, trained to do so by some NVA he'd met. There he was. Time stopped in that moment. Henry had his own gun out and aimed, and their eyes met and for what seemed the longest time they simply looked, hunter and hunter, hunter and prey. Then Kelly remembered, first, what the sight picture was for. His finger depressed the trigger, delivering a finely aimed shot into Tucker's chest. The Colt jumped in his hand, and his brain was running so

fast now that he saw the slide dash backwards, ejecting the empty brass case, then dashing forward to feed another just as the tension in his wrist brought the gun back down, and that round, too, went into the man's chest. Tucker was off-balance from turning. Either he slipped on the floor or the impact of the two slugs destroyed his balance, dropping him to the floor.

Mission accomplished, Kelly told himself. At least he'd gotten one job done after all the failures of this bleak summer. He got to his feet and walked to Henry Tucker, kicking the gun from his hand. He wanted to say something to the face that was still alive, but Kelly was out of words. Maybe Pam would rest easier now, but probably not. It didn't work that way, did it? The dead were gone and didn't know or care what they'd left behind. Probably. Kelly didn't know how that worked, though he'd wondered about it often enough. If the dead still lived on the surface of this earth, then it was in the minds of those who remembered them, and for that memory he'd killed Henry Tucker and all the others. Perhaps Pam would not rest any more easily. But he would. Kelly saw that Tucker had departed this life while he'd been thinking, examining his thoughts and his conscience. No, there was no remorse for this man, none for the others. Kelly safed his pistol and looked around the room. Three dead men, and the best thing that could be said was that he wasn't one of them. He walked to the door, and out of it. His car was a block away, and he still had an appointment to keep, and one more life to end.

Mission accomplished.

The boat was where he'd left it. Kelly parked his car, an hour later, taking out the suitcase. He locked the car with the keys inside, for that too was something he'd never need again. The drive through town and into the marina had been blissfully empty of thought, mechanical action only, maneuvering the car, stopping for some lights, proceeding through others, heading for the sea, or the Bay, one of the few places where he felt he belonged. He hefted the suitcase, walked out the dock to *Springer*, and hopped aboard. Everything looked okay, and in ten minutes he'd be away from everything he'd come to associate with the city. Kelly slid open the door to the main salon and stopped dead when he first smelled smoke, then heard a voice.

"John Kelly, right?"

“Who might you be?”

“Emmet Ryan? You’ve met my partner, Tom Douglas.” “What can I do for you?” Kelly set his suitcase down on the deck, remembering the Colt automatic at the small of his back, inside the unbuttoned bush jacket.

“You can tell me why you’ve killed so many people,” Ryan suggested.

“If you think I’ve done it, then you know why.”

“True. I’m looking for Henry Tucker at the moment.” “He’s not here, is he?”

“Maybe you could help me, then?”

“Corner of O’Donnell and Mermen might be a good place to look. He’s not going anywhere,” Kelly told the detective.

“What am I supposed to do about you?”

“The three girls this morning, are they—”

“They’re safe. We’ll look after them. You and your friends did nicely with Pam Madden and Doris Brown. Not your fault it didn’t work out. Well, maybe a little.” The officer paused. “I have to take you in. you know.”

“What for?”

“For murder, Mr. Kelly.”

“No.” Kelly shook his head. “It’s only murder when innocent people die.”

Ryan’s eyes narrowed. He saw only the outline of the man, really, with the yellowing sky behind him. But he’d heard what he said, and part of him wanted to agree with it.

“The law doesn’t say that.”

“I’m not asking you to forgive me. I won’t be any more trouble to you, and I’m not going to any jail.”

“I can’t let you go.” But his weapon wasn’t out, Kelly saw. What did that mean?

“I gave you that Officer Monroe back.”

“Thank you for that,” Ryan acknowledged.

“I don’t just kill people. I’ve been trained to do it, but there has to be a reason somewhere. I had a good enough reason.”

“Maybe. Just what do you think you accomplished?” Ryan asked. “This drug problem isn’t going away.”

“Henry Tucker won’t kill any more girls. I accomplished that. I never expected to do any more, but I took that drug operation down.” Kelly paused. There was something else this man needed to

know. “There’s a cop at that building. I think he was dirty. Tucker and Piaggi shot him. Maybe he can come out of this a hero. There’s a load of stuff there. It won’t look too bad for your department that way.” *And thank God I didn’t have to kill a cop—even a bad one.* “I’ll give you one more. I know how Tucker was getting his stuff in.” Kelly elaborated briefly.

“I can’t just let you go,” the detective said again, though part of him wished it were otherwise. But that couldn’t be, and he would not have made it so, for his life had rules, too.

“Can you give me an hour? I know you’ll keep looking. One hour. It’ll make things better for everybody.”

The request caught Ryan by surprise. It was against everything he stood for—but then, so were the monsters the man had killed. *We owe him something… would I have cleared those cases without him? Who would have spoken for the dead… and besides, what could the guy do—where could he go?… Ryan, have you gone nuts?* Yes, maybe he had…

“You’ve got your hour. After that I can recommend you to a good lawyer. Who knows, a good one might just get you off.”

Ryan rose and headed for the side door without looking back. He stopped at the door just for a second.

“You spared when you could have killed, Mr. Kelly. That’s why. Your hour starts now.”

Kelly didn’t watch him leave. He hit his engine controls, warming up the diesels. One hour should just about do it. He scrambled out on the deck, slipping his lines, leaving them attached to the dock piles, and by the time he got back inside the salon, the diesels were ready for turning. They caught at once, and he pivoted the boat, heading out into the harbor. As soon as he was out of the yacht basin he firewalled both throttles, bringing *Springer* to her top speed of twenty-two knots. With the channel empty, Kelly set his autopilot and rushed to make the necessary preparations. He cut the corner at Bodkin Point. He had to. He knew who they’d send after him.

“Coast Guard, Thomas Point.”

“This is the Baltimore City Police.”

Ensign Tomlinson took the call. A new graduate of the Coast Guard Academy at New London, he was here for seasoning, and though he ranked the Chief Warrant Officer who ran the station, both the boy and the man understood what this was all about. Only

twenty-two, young enough that his gold officer's bars still had the original shine, it was time to turn him loose on a mission, Paul English thought, but only because Portagee would really be running things. Forty-One-Bravo, the second of the station's big patrol craft, was warmed up and ready. The young ensign sprinted out, as though they might leave without him, much to the amusement of CWO English. Five seconds after the lad had snapped on his life vest, Forty-One-Bravo rumbled away from the dock, turning north short of the Thomas Point Light.

The man sure didn't give me any slack, Kelly thought, seeing the cutter closing from starboard. Well, he'd asked for an hour, and an hour he'd received. Kelly almost flipped on his radio for a parting salute, but that wouldn't have been right, and more was the pity. One of his diesels was running hot, and that was also a pity, though it wouldn't be running hot much longer.

It was a kind of race now, and there was a complication, a large French freighter standing out to sea, right where Kelly needed to be, and he would soon be caught between her and the Coast Guard.

"Well, here we are," Ritter said, dismissing the security guard who'd followed them like a shadow all afternoon. He pulled a ticket from his pocket. "First class. The booze is free, Colonel." They'd been able to skip passport control on the strength of an earlier phone call.

"Thank you for your hospitality."

Ritter chuckled. "Yeah, the U.S. government's flown you three quarters of the way around the world. I guess Aeroflot can handle the rest." Ritter paused and went on formally. "Your behavior to our prisoners was as correct as circumstances allowed. Thank you for that."

"It is my wish that they get home safely. They are not bad men."

"Neither are you." Ritter led him to the gate, where a large transfer vehicle waited to take him out to a brand-new Boeing 747. "Come back sometime. I'll show you more of Washington." Ritter watched him board and turned to Voloshin.

"A good man, Sergey. Will this injure his career?"

"With what he has in his head? I think not."

"Fine with me," Ritter said, walking away.

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They were too closely matched. The other boat had a slight advantage, since it was in the lead, and able to choose, while the cutter needed her half-knot speed advantage to draw closer so painfully slowly. It was a question of skill, really, and that, too, was down to whiskers of difference from one to the other. Oreza watched the other man slide his boat across the wake of the freighter, surfing it, really, sliding her onto the front of the ship-generated wave and riding it to port, gaining perhaps half a knot's momentary advantage. Oreza had to admire it. He couldn't do anything else. The man really was sailing his boat downhill as though in a joke against the laws of wind and wave. But there was nothing funny about this, was there? Not with his men standing around the wheelhouse carrying loaded guns. Not with what he had to do to a friend.

"For Christ's sake," Oreza snarled, easing the wheel to starboard a little. "Be careful with those goddamned guns!" The other crewmen in the wheelhouse snapped the covers down on their holsters and ceased fingering their weapons.

"He's a dangerous man," the man behind Oreza said. "No, he isn't, not to us!"

"What about all the people he—"

"Maybe the bastards had it comin'!" A little more throttle and Oreza slid back to port. He was at the point of scanning the waves for smooth spots, moving the forty-one-foot patrol boat a few feet left and right to make use of the surface chop and so gain a few precious yards in his pursuit, just as the other was doing. No America's Cup race off of Newport had ever been as exciting as this, and inwardly Oreza raged at the other man that the purpose of the race should be so perverse.

"Maybe you should let—"

Oreza didn't turn his head. "Mr. Tomlinson, you think anybody else can conn the boat better'n me?"

"No, Petty Officer Oreza," the Ensign said formally. Oreza snorted at the windowglass. "Maybe call a helicopter from the Navy?" Tomlinson asked lamely.

"What for, sir? Where you think he's goin', Cuba, maybe? I have double his bunkerage and half a knot more speed, and he's only three hundred yards ahead. Do the math, sir. We're alongside in twenty minutes any way you cut it, no matter how good he is." *Treat the man with respect*, Oreza didn't say.

"But he's dangerous," Ensign Tomlinson repeated.

"I'll take my chances. There…" Oreza started his slide to port now, riding through the freighter's wake, using the energy generated by the ship to gain speed. *Interesting, this is how a dolphin does it… that got me a whole knot's worth and my hull's better at this than his is*… Contrary to everything he should have felt, Manuel Oreza smiled. He'd just learned something new about boat-handling, courtesy of a friend he was trying to arrest for murder. For murdering people who needed killing, he reminded himself, wondering what the lawyers would do about that.

No, he had to treat him with respect, let him run his race as best he could, take his shot at freedom, doomed though he might be. To do less would demean the man, and, Oreza admitted, demean himself. When all else failed there was still honor. It was perhaps the last law of the sea, and Oreza, like his quarry, was a man of the sea.

It was devilishly close. Portagee was just too damned good at driving his boat, and for that reason all the harder to risk what he'd planned. Kelly did everything he knew how. Planing *Springer* diagonally across the ship's wake was the cleverest thing he'd ever done afloat, but that damned Coastie matched it, deep hull and all. Both his engines were redlined now, and both were running hot, and this damned freighter was going just a little too fast for things. *Why couldn't Ryan have waited another ten friggin' minutes?* Kelly wondered. The control for the pyro charge was next to him. Five seconds after he hit that, the fuel tanks would blow, but that wasn't worth a damn with a Coast Guard cutter two hundred goddamned yards back.

Now what?

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"We just gained twenty yards," Oreza noted with both satisfaction and sorrow.

He wasn't even looking back, the petty officer saw. He knew. He had to know. *God, you're good*, the Quartermaster First Class tried to say with his mind, regretting all the needling he'd inflicted upon the man, but he had to know that it had only been banter, one seaman to another. And in running the race this way he, too, was doing honor to Oreza. He'd have weapons there, and he could have turned

and fired to distract and annoy his pursuers. But he didn't, and Portagee Oreza knew why. It would have violated the rules of a race such as this. He'd run the race as best he could, and when the time came he'd accept defeat, and there would be both pride and sadness for both men to share, but each would still have the respect of the other.

"Going to be dark soon," Tomlinson said, ruining the petty officer's reverie. The boy just didn't understand, but he was only a brand-new ensign. Perhaps he'd learn someday. They mostly did, and Oreza hoped that Tomlinson would learn from today's lesson.

"Not soon enough, sir."

Oreza scanned the rest of the horizon briefly. The French-flagged freighter occupied perhaps a third of what he could see of the water's surface. It was a towering hull, riding high on the surface and gleaming from a recent painting. Her crew knew nothing of what was going on. A new ship, the petty officer's brain noted, and her bulbous bow made for a nice set of bow waves that the other boat was using to surf along.

The quickest and simplest solution was to pull the cutter up behind him on the starboard side of the freighter, then duck across the bow, and *then* blow the boat up… but… there was another way, a better way…

"Now!" Oreza turned the wheel perhaps ten degrees, sliding to port and gaining fully fifty yards seemingly in an instant. Then he reversed his rudder, leaped over another five-foot roller, and prepared to repeat the maneuver. One of the younger seamen hooted in sudden exhilaration.

"You see, Mr. Tomlinson? We have a better hull form for this sort of thing than he does. He can beat us by a whisker in flat seas, but not in chop. This is what we're made for." Two minutes had halved the distance between the boats.

"You sure you want this race to end, Oreza?" Ensign Tomlinson asked.

Not so dumb after all, is he? Well, he was an officer, and they were supposed to be smart once in a while.

"All races end, sir. There's always a winner and always a loser," Oreza pointed out, hoping that his friend would understand that, too. Portagee reached in his shirt pocket for a cigarette and lit it

with his left hand while his right—just the fingertips, really—worked the wheel, making tiny adjustments as demanded by the part of his brain that read and reacted to every ripple on the surface. He'd told Tomlinson twenty minutes. He'd been pessimistic. Sooner than that, he was sure.

Oreza scanned the surface again. A lot of boats out, mostly heading in, not one of them recognizing the race for what it was. The cutter didn't have her police lights blinking. Oreza didn't like the things: they were an insult to his profession. When a cutter of the United States Coast Guard pulled alongside, you shouldn't need police lights, he thought. Besides, this race was a private thing, seen and understood only by professionals, the way things ought to be, because spectators always degraded things, distracted the players from the game.

He was amidships on the freighter now, and Portagee had swallowed the bait… as he had to, Kelly thought. Damn but that guy was good. Another mile and he'd be alongside, reducing Kelly's options to precisely zero, but he did have his plan now, seeing the ship's bulbous bow, partly exposed. A crewman was looking down from the bridge, as on that first day with Pam, and his stomach became hollow for a moment, remembering. So long ago, so many things in between. Had he done right or wrong?

Who would judge? Kelly shook his head. He'd let God do that. Kelly looked back for the first time in this race, measuring distance, and it was damnably close.

The forty-one boat was squatting back on her stern, pitched up perhaps fifteen degrees, her deep-displacement hull cutting through the choppy wake. She rocked left and right through a twenty-degree arc, her big down-rated marine diesels roaring in their special feline way. And it was all in Oreza's hands, throttles and wheels at his skilled fingertips while his eyes scanned and measured. His prey was doing exactly the same, milking every single turn from his own engines, using his skill and experience. But his assets added up short of Portagee's, and while that was too bad, that's how things were.

Just then Oreza saw the man's face, looking back for the first time.

It's time, my friend. Come on, now, let's end this honorably. Maybe

you'll get lucky and you'll get out after a while and we can be friends again.

"Come on, cut power and turn to starboard," Oreza said, hardly knowing he spoke, and each man of his crew was thinking exactly the same thing, glad to know that they and their skipper were reading things the same way. It had been only a half-hour race, but it was the sort of sea story they would remember for their whole careers.

The man's head turned again. Oreza was barely half a ship-length back now. He could easily read the name on the transom, and there was no sense stringing it out to the last foot. That would spoil the race. It would show a meanness of spirit that didn't belong on the sea. That was something done by yachtsmen, not professionals.

Then Kelly did something unexpected. Oreza saw it first, and his eyes measured the distance once, then twice, and a third time, and in every case the answer came up wrong, and he reached for his radio quickly.

"Don't try it!" the petty officer shouted onto the "guard" frequency.

"What?" Tomlinson asked quickly.

Don't do it! Oreza's mind shouted, suddenly alone in a tiny world, reading the other's mind and revolting at the thought it held. This was no way for things to end. There was no honor in this.

Kelly eased his rudder right to catch the bow wave, his eyes watching the foaming forefoot of the freighter. When the moment was right, he put the rudder over. The radio squawked. It was Portagee's voice, and Kelly smiled hearing it. What a good guy he was. Life would be so lonely without men such as he.

Springer lurched to starboard from the force of the radical turn, then even more from the small hill of water raised by the freighter's bow. Kelly held on to the wheel with his left hand and reached with his right for the air tank around which he'd strung six weight belts. *Jesus*, he thought instantly as *Springer* went over ninety degrees, *I didn't check the depth. What if the water's not deep enough—oh, God… oh, Pam.…*

The boat turned sharply to port. Oreza watched from only a hundred yards away, but the distance might as well have been a thousand miles for all the good it did, and his mind saw it before

reality caught up: already heeling hard to the right from the turn, the cruiser rode up high on the curling bow-wave of the freighter and, crosswise to it, rolled completely over, her white hull instantly disappearing in the foaming forefoot of the cargo ship…

It was no way for a seaman to die.

Forty-One-Bravo backed down hard, rocking violently with the passage of the ship's wake as she came to a stop. The freighter stopped at once, too, but it took fully two miles, and by that time Oreza and his cutter were poking through the wreckage. Searchlights came on in the gathering darkness, and the eyes of the coastguardsmen were grim.

"Coast Guard Forty-One, Coast Guard Forty-One, this is U.S. Navy sailboat on your port beam, can we render assistance, over?"

"We could use some extra eyes, Navy. Who's aboard?"

"Couple of admirals, the one talking's an aviator, if that helps."

"Join in, sir."

He was still alive. It was as much a surprise to Kelly as it would have been to Oreza. The water here was deep enough that he and the air tank had plummeted seventy feet to the bottom. He fought to strap the tank to his chest in the violent turbulence of the passing ship overhead. Then he fought to swim clear of the descending engines and heavy gear from what had seconds earlier been an expensive cruiser. Only after two or three minutes did he accept the fact that he'd survived this trial by ordeal. Looking back, he wondered just how crazy he'd been to risk this, but for once he'd felt the need to entrust his life to judgment superior to his own, prepared to take the consequences either way. And the judgment had spared him. Kelly could see the Coast Guard hull over to the east… and to the west the deeper shape of a sailboat, pray God the right one. Kelly disengaged four of the weight belts from the tank and swam towards it, awkwardly because he had it on backwards.

His head broke the surface behind the sailboat as it lay to, close enough to read the name. He went down again. It took another minute to come up on the west side of the twenty-six-footer.

"Hello?"

"Jesus—is that you?" Maxwell called.

"I think so." *Well, not exactly.* His hand reached up.

The doyen of naval aviation reached over the side, hauled the

bruised and sore body aboard, and directed him below.

"Forty-One, this is Navy to your west now… this doesn't look real good, fella."

"I'm afraid you're right, Navy. You can break off if you want. I think we'll stay a while," Oreza said. It had been good of them to quarter the surface for three hours, a good assist from a couple of flag officers. They even handled their sailboat halfway decent. At another time he'd have taken the thought further and made a joke about Navy seamanship.

But not now. Oreza and Forty-One-Bravo would continue their search all night, finding only wreckage.

It made the papers in a big way, but not in any way that made sense. Detective Lieutenant Mark Charon, following up a lead on his own time—on administrative leave following a shooting, no less—had stumbled into a drug lab and in the ensuing gun battle had lost his life in the line of duty while ending those of two major traffickers. The coincidental escape of three young women resulted in the identification of one of the deceased traffickers as a particularly brutal murderer, which perhaps explained Charon's heroic zeal, and closed a number of cases in a fashion that the police reporters found overly convenient. On page six was a squib story about a boating accident.

Three days later, a file clerk from St. Louis called Lieutenant Ryan to say that the Kelly file was back but she couldn't say from where. Ryan thanked her for her effort. He'd closed that case along with the rest, and didn't even try the FBI records center for Kelly's card, and thus made unnecessary Bob Ritter's substitution of the prints of someone unlikely ever to visit America again.

The only loose end, which troubled Ritter greatly, was a single telephone call. But even criminals got one phone call, and Ritter didn't want to cross Clark on something like that. Five months later, Sandra O'Toole resigned her position at Johns Hopkins and moved to the Virginia tidewater, where she took over a whole floor of the area's teaching hospital on the strength of a glowing recommendation from Professor Samuel Rosen.

EPILOGUE

February 12,1973

“We are honored to have the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances,” Captain Jeremiah Denton said, ending a thirty-four-word statement that rang across the ramp at Clark Air Base with “God bless America.”

“How about that,” the commentator said, sharing the experience as he was paid to do. “Right there behind Captain Denton is Colonel Robin Zacharias, of the Air Force. He’s one of the fifty-three prisoners about whom we had no information until very recently, along with…”

John Clark didn’t listen to the rest. He looked at the TV that sat on his wife’s dresser in the bedroom, at the face of a man half a world away, to whom he’d been much closer in body, closer still in spirit not so long before. He saw the man embrace his wife after what had to be five years of separation. He saw a woman who’d grown old with worry, but now was young with love for the husband she’d thought dead. Kelly wept with them, seeing the man’s face for the first time as a thing of animation, seeing the joy that really could replace pain, no matter how vast. He squeezed Sandy’s hand so hard that he almost hurt it until she rested his on her belly to feel the movement of their soon-to-be firstborn. The phone rang then, and Kelly was angry for the invasion of the moment until he heard the voice.

“I hope you’re proud of yourself, John,” Dutch Maxwell said. “We’re getting all twenty back. I wanted to make sure you knew that. It wouldn’t have happened without you.”

“Thank you, sir.” Clark hung up. There was nothing else to be said.

“Who was that?” Sandy asked, holding his hand in place.

“A friend,” Clark said, wiping his eyes as he turned to kiss his wife. “From another life.”

• • •

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Tom Clancy

is the author of *The Hunt for Red October, Red Storm Rising, Patriot Games, The Cardinal of the Kremlin, Clear and Present Danger, The Sum of All Fears, Without Remorse, Debt of Honor, Executive Orders, Rainbow Six, The Bear and the Dragon, Red Rabbit, The Teeth of the Tiger*, and *Dead or Alive*, written with Grant Blackwood. He is also coauthor of the nonfiction books *Into the Storm*, with General Fred Franks, Jr. (Ret.); *Every Man a Tiger*, with General Chuck Horner (Ret.); *Shadow Warriors*, with General Carl Stiner (Ret.); and *Battle Ready*, with General Tony Zinni (Ret.); as well as *Submarine, Armored Cav, Fighter Wing, Marine, Airborne, Carrier*, and *Special Forces*; and is a cocreator of the Op-Center, Power Plays, and Net Force series. He lives in Maryland.

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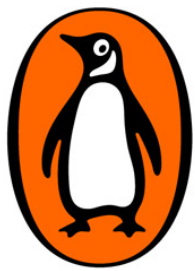

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For Mom and Dad

A man's character is his fate

—*Heraclitus*

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And Sandy for one hell of a ride in a snake.

Prologue

Sunset, Sunrise

In retrospect, it would seem an odd way to start a war. Only one of the participants knew what was really happening, and even that was a coincidence. The property settlement had been moved up on the calendar due to a death in the attorney's family, and so the attorney was scheduled for a redeye flight, two hours from now, to Hawaii.

It was Mr. Yamata's first property closing on American soil. Though he owned many properties in the continental United States, the actual title transfer had always been handled by other attorneys, invariably American citizens, who had done precisely what they had been paid to do, generally with oversight by one of Mr. Yamata's employees. But not this time. There were several reasons for it. One was that the purchase was personal and not corporate. Another was that it was close, only two hours by private jet from his home. Mr. Yamata had told the settlement attorney that the property would be used for a weekend getaway house. With the astronomical price of real estate in Tokyo, he could buy several hundred acres for the price of a modestly large penthouse apartment in his city of residence. The view from the house he planned to build on the promontory would be breathtaking, a vista of the blue Pacific, other islands of the Marianas Archipelago in the distance, air as clean as any on the face of the earth. For all those reasons Mr. Yamata had offered a princely fee, and done so with a charming smile.

And for one reason more.

The various documents slid clockwise around the circular table, stopping at each chair so that signatures could be affixed at the proper place, marked with yellow Post-it notes, and then it was time for Mr. Yamata to reach into his coat pocket and withdraw an envelope. He took out the check and handed it to the attorney.

"Thank you, sir," the lawyer said in a respectful voice, as Americans always did when money was on the table. It was remarkable how money made them do anything. Until three years before, the purchase of land here by a Japanese citizen would have been illegal, but the right lawyer, and the right case, and the right amount of money had fixed that, too. "The title transfer will be recorded this afternoon."

Yamata looked at the seller with a polite smile and a nod, then he rose and left the building. A car was waiting outside. Yamata got in the front passenger seat and motioned peremptorily for the driver to head off. The settlement was complete, and with it the need for charm.

Like most Pacific islands, Saipan is of volcanic origin. Immediately to the east is the Marianas Trench, a chasm fully seven miles deep where one

geological plate dives under another. The result is a collection of towering coneshaped mountains, of which the islands themselves are merely the tips. The Toyota Land Cruiser followed a moderately smooth road north, winding around Mount Achugao and the Mariana Country Club toward Marpi Point. There it stopped.

Yamata alighted from the vehicle, his gaze resting on some farm structures that would soon be erased, but instead of walking to the building site for his new house, he headed toward the rocky edge of the cliff. Though a man in his early sixties, his stride was strong and purposeful as he moved across the uneven field. If it had been a farm, then it had been a poor one, he saw, inhospitable to life. As this place had been, more than once, and from more than one cause.

His face was impassive as he reached the edge of what the locals called Banzai Cliff. An onshore wind was blowing, and he could see and hear the waves marching in their endless ranks to smash against the rocks at the base of the cliff—the same rocks that had smashed the bodies of his parents and siblings after they, and so many others, had jumped off to evade capture by the advancing U.S. Marines. The sight had horrified the Marines, but Mr. Yamata would never appreciate or acknowledge that.

The businessman clapped his hands once and bowed his head, both to call the attention of the lingering spirits to his presence and to show proper obeisance to their influence over his destiny. It was fitting, he thought, that his purchase of this parcel of land now meant that 50.016% of the real estate on Saipan was again in Japanese hands, more than fifty years since his family's death at American hands.

He felt a sudden chill, and ascribed it to the emotion of the moment, or perhaps the nearness of his ancestors' spirits. Though their bodies had been swept away in the endless surf, surely their *kami* had never left this place, and awaited his return. He shuddered, and buttoned his coat. Yes, he'd build here, but only after he'd done what was necessary first.

First, he had to destroy.

It was one of those perfect moments, half a world away. The driver came smoothly back, away from the ball, in a perfect arc, stopped for the briefest of moments, then accelerated back along the same path, downward now, gaining speed as it fell. The man holding the club shifted his weight from one leg to the other. At the proper moment, his hands turned over as they should, which caused the club head to rotate around the vertical axis, so that when the head hit the ball it was exactly perpendicular to the intended flight path. The sound told the tale—a perfect *tink* (it was a metal-headed driver). That, and the tactile impulse transmitted through the graphite shaft, told the golfer everything he needed to know. He didn't even have to look. The club finished its follow-through path before the man's head turned to track the flight of the ball.

Unfortunately, Ryan wasn't the one holding the club.

Jack shook his head with a rueful grin as he bent to tee up his ball. "Nice hit, Robby."

Rear Admiral (lower half) Robert Jefferson Jackson, USN, held his pose, his aviator's eyes watching the ball start its descent, then bounce on the fairway about two hundred fifty yards away. The bounces carried it another thirty or so. He didn't speak until it stopped, dead center. "I meant to draw it a little."

"Life's a bitch, ain't it?" Ryan observed, as he went through his setup ritual. Knees bent, back fairly straight, head down but not too much, the grip, yes, that's about right. He did everything the club pro had told him the previous week, and the week before that, and the week . . . bringing the club back . . . and down . . .

. . . and it wasn't too bad, just off the fairway to the right, a hundred eighty yards, the best first-tee drive he'd hit in . . . forever. And approximately the same distance with his driver that Robby would have gotten with a firm seven-iron. About the only good news was that it was only 7:45 A.M., and there was nobody around to share his embarrassment.

At least you cleared the water.

"Been playing how long, Jack?"

"Two whole months."

Jackson grinned as he headed down to where the cart was parked. "I started in my second year at Annapolis. I have a head start, boy. Hell, enjoy the day."

There was that. The Greenbrier is set among the mountains of West Virginia. A retreat that dates back to the late eighteenth century, on this October morning the white mass of the main hotel building was framed with yellows and scarlets as the hardwood trees entered their yearly cycle of autumn fire.

"Well, I don't expect to beat you," Ryan allowed as he sat down in the cart.

A turn, a grin. "You won't. Just thank God you're not working today, Jack. I am."

Neither man was in the vacation business, as much as each needed it, nor was either man currently satisfied with success. For Robby it meant a flag desk in the Pentagon. For Ryan, much to his surprise even now, it had been a return to the business world instead of to the academic slot that he'd wanted —or at least thought he'd wanted—standing there in Saudi Arabia, two and a half years before. Perhaps it was the action, he thought—had he become addicted to it? Jack asked himself, selecting a three-iron. It wouldn't be enough club to make the green, but he hadn't learned fairway woods yet. Yeah, it was the action he craved even more than his occasional escape from it.

"Take your time, and don't try to kill it. The ball's already dead, okay?"

"Yes, sir, Admiral, sir," Jack replied.

"Keep your head down. I'll do the watching."

"All *right,* Robby." The knowledge that Robby would not laugh at him, no matter how bad the shot, was somehow worse than the suspicion that he might. On last reflection, he stood a little straighter before swinging. His reward was a welcome sound:

Swat. The ball was thirty yards away before his head came up to see it, still heading left . . . but already showing a fade back to the right.

"Jack?"

"Yeah," Ryan answered without turning his head.

"Your three-iron," Jackson said, chuckling, his eyes computing the flight path. "Don't change anything. Do it just like that, every time."

Somehow Jack managed to put his iron back in the bag without trying to wrap the shaft around his friend's head. He started laughing when the cart moved again, up the right-side rough toward Robby's ball, the single white spot on the green, even carpet.

"Miss flying?" he asked gently.

Robby looked at him. "You play dirty, too," he observed. But that was just the way things went. He'd finished his last flying job, screened for flag, then been considered for the post of commander of the Naval Aviation Test Center at Naval Air Station, Patuxent River, Maryland, where his real title would have been Chief Test Pilot, U.S. Navy. But instead Jackson was working in J-3, the operations directorate for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. War Plans, an odd slot for a warrior in a world where war was becoming a thing of the past. It was more career-enhancing, but far less satisfying than the flying billet he'd really wanted. Jackson tried to shrug it off. He'd done his flying, after all. He'd started in Phantoms and graduated to Tomcats, commanded his squadron, and a carrier air wing, then screened early for flag rank on the basis of a solid and distinguished career during which he'd never put a foot wrong. His next job, if he got it, would be as commander of a carrier battle group, something that had once seemed to him a goal beyond the grasp of Fortune itself. Now that he was there, he wondered where all the time had gone, and what lay ahead. "What happens when we get old?"

"Some of us take up golf, Rob."

"Or go back to stocks and bonds," Jackson countered. *An eight-iron,* he thought, *a soft one*. Ryan followed him to his ball.

"Merchant banking," Jack proffered. "It's worked out for you, hasn't it?"

That made the aviator—active or not, Robby would always be a pilot to himself and his friends—look up and grin. "Well, you turned my hundred thou' into something special, Sir John." With that, he took his shot. It was one way to get even. The ball landed, bounced, and finally stopped about twenty feet from the pin.

"Enough to buy me lessons?"

"You sure as hell need 'em." Robby paused and allowed his face to change. "A lot of years, Jack. We changed the world." And that was a good thing, wasn't it?

"After a fashion," Jack conceded with a tight smile. Some people called it an end to history, but Ryan's doctorate was in that field, and he had trouble with the thought.

"You really like it, what you're doing now?"

"I'm home every night, usually before six. I get to see all the Little League games in the summer, and most of the soccer games in the fall. And when Sally's ready for her first date, I won't be in some goddamned VC-20B halfway to nowhere for a meeting that doesn't mean much of anything anyway." Jack smiled in a most comfortable way. "And I think I prefer that even to playing good golf."

"Well, that's a good thing, 'cuz I don't even think Arnold Palmer can fix your swing. But I'll try," Robby added, "just because Cathy asked me to."

Jack's pitch was too strong, forcing him to chip back onto the green—badly—where three putts carded him a seven to Robby's par four.

"A golfer who plays like you should swear more," Jackson said on the way to the second tee. Ryan didn't have a chance for a rejoinder.

He had a beeper on his belt, of course. It was a satellite beeper, the kind that could get you almost anywhere. Tunnels under mountains or bodies of water offered some protection, but not much. Jack plucked it off his belt. It was probably the Silicon Alchemy deal, he thought, even though he'd left instructions. Maybe someone had run out of paper clips. He looked at the number on the LCD display.

"I thought your home office was New York," Robby noted. The area code on the display was 202, not the 212 Jack had expected to see.

"It is. I can teleconference most of my work out of Baltimore, but at least once a week I have to catch the Metroliner up there." Ryan frowned. 757-5000. The White House Signals Office. He checked his watch. It was 7:55 in the morning, and the time announced the urgency of the call more clearly than anything else could. It wasn't exactly a surprise, though, was it? he asked himself. Not with what he'd been reading in the papers every day. The only thing unexpected was the timing. He'd expected the call much sooner. He walked to the cart and the golf bag, where he kept his cellular phone. It was the one thing in the bag, actually, that he knew how to use.

It took only three minutes, as an amused Robby waited in the cart. Yes, he was at The Greenbrier. Yes, he knew that there was an airport not too far from there. Four hours? Less than an hour out and back, no more than an hour at his destination. Back in time for dinner. He'd even have time to finish his round of golf, shower, and change before he left, Jack told himself, folding the phone back up and dropping it in the pocket of the golf bag. That was one advantage of the world's best chauffeur service. The problem was that once they had you, they never liked to let go. The convenience of it was designed only to make it a more comfortable mode of confinement. Jack shook his head as he stood at the tee, and his distraction had a strange effect. The drive up the second fairway landed on the short grass, two hundred ten yards downrange, and Ryan walked back to the cart without a single word, wondering what he'd tell Cathy.

The facility was brand-new and spotless, but there was something obscene about it, the engineer thought. His countrymen hated fire, but they positively loathed the class of object that this room was designed to fabricate. He couldn't shake it off. It was like the buzz of an insect in the room—unlikely, since every molecule of the air in this clean-room had gone through the best filtration system his country could devise. His colleagues' engineering excellence was a source of pride to this man, especially since he was among the best of them. It would be that pride that sustained him, he knew, dismissing the imaginary buzz as he inspected the fabrication machinery. After all, if the Americans could do it, and the Russians, and the English, and the French, and the Chinese, and even the Indians and Pakistanis, then why not them? There was a symmetry to it, after all.

In another part of the building, the special material was being roughly shaped even now. Purchasing agents had spent quite some time acquiring the unique components. There were precious few. Most had been made elsewhere, but some had been made in his country for use abroad. They had been invented for one purpose, then adapted for others, but the possibility had always existed—distant but real—that the original application beckoned. It had become an institutional joke for the production people in the various corporations, something not to take seriously.

But they'd take it seriously now, the engineer thought. He switched off the lights and pulled the door shut behind him. He had a deadline to meet, and he would start today, after only a few hours of sleep.

Even as often as he'd been here, Ryan had never lost his mystical appreciation for the place, and today's manner of arrival hadn't been contrived to make him look for the ordinary. A discreet call to his hotel had arranged for the drive to the airport. The aircraft had been waiting, of course, a twinprop business bird sitting at the far end of the ramp, ordinary except for the USAF markings and the fact that the flight crew had been dressed in olive-green nomex. Friendly smiles, again of course, deferential. A sergeant to make sure he knew how to use the seat belt, and the perfunctory discussion of safety and emergency procedures. The look-back from the pilot who had a schedule to meet, and off they went, with Ryan wondering where the briefing papers were, and sipping a U.S. Air Force Coca-Cola. Wishing he'd changed into his good suit, and remembering that he had deliberately decided not to do so. Stupid, beneath himself. Flight time of forty-seven minutes, and a direct approach into Andrews. The only thing they left out was the helicopter ride in from Andrews, but that would only have attracted attention. Met by a deferential Air Force major who'd walked him over to a cheap official car and a quiet driver, Ryan settled back in his seat and closed his eyes while the major took the front seat. He tried to nap. He'd seen Suitland Parkway before, and knew the route by heart. Suitland Parkway to I-295, immediately off that and onto I-395, take the Maine Avenue Exit. The time of day, just after lunch, guaranteed rapid progress, and sure enough, the car stopped at the guard shack on West Executive Drive, where the guard, most unusually, just waved them through. The canopied entrance to the White House basement level beckoned, as did a familiar face.

"Hi, Arnie." Jack held his hand out to the President's chief of staff. Arnold van Damm was just too good, and Roger Durling had needed him to help with the transition. Soon enough President Durling had measured his senior staffer against Arnie, and found his own man wanting. He hadn't changed much, Ryan saw. The same L. L. Bean shirts, and the same rough honesty on his face, but Arnie was older and tireder than before. Well, who wasn't? "The last time we talked here, you were kicking me loose," Jack said next, to get a quick read on the situation.

"We all make mistakes, Jack."

Uh-oh. Ryan went instantly on guard, but the handshake pulled him through the door anyway. The Secret Service agents on post had a pass all ready for

him, and things went smoothly until he set off the metal detector. Ryan handed over his hotel room key and tried again, hearing yet another ping. The only other metal on his body except for his watch turned out to be his divot tool.

"When did you take up golf?" van Damm asked with a chuckle that matched the expression of the nearest agent.

"Nice to know you haven't been following me around. Two months, and I haven't broken one-ten yet."

The chief of staff waved Ryan to the hidden stairs to the left. "You know why they call it 'golf'?"

"Yeah, because 'shit' was already taken." Ryan stopped on the landing. "What gives, Arnie?"

"I think you know," was all the answer he got.

"Hello, Dr. Ryan!" Special Agent Helen D'Agustino was as pretty as ever, and still part of the Presidential Detail. "Please come with me."

The presidency is not a job calculated to bring youth to a man. Roger Durling had once been a paratrooper who'd climbed hills in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, he was still a jogger, and reportedly liked to play squash to keep fit, but for all that he looked a weary man this afternoon. More to the point, Jack reflected quickly, he'd come straight in to see the President, no waiting in one of the many anterooms, and the smiles on the faces he'd seen on the way in carried a message of their own. Durling rose with a speed intended to show his pleasure at seeing his guest. Or maybe something else.

"How's the brokerage business, Jack?" The handshake that accompanied the question was dry and hard, but with an urgency to it.

"It keeps me busy, Mr. President."

"Not too busy. Golf in West Virginia?" Durling asked, waving Ryan to a seat by the fireplace. "That'll be all," he told the two Secret Service agents who'd followed Ryan in. "Thank you."

"My newest vice, sir," Ryan said, hearing the door close behind him. It was unusual to be so close to the Chief Executive without the protective presence of Secret Service guards, especially since he had been so long out of government service.

Durling took his seat, and leaned back into it. His body language showed vigor, the kind that emanated from the mind rather than the body. It was time to talk business. "I could say I'm sorry to interrupt your vacation, but I won't," the President of the United States told him. "You've had a two-year vacation, Dr. Ryan. It's over now."

Two years. For the first two months of it, he'd done exactly nothing, pondered a few teaching posts in the sanctity of his study, watched his wife leave early every morning for her medical practice at Johns Hopkins, fixed the kids' school lunches and told himself how wonderful it was to relax. It had taken those two months before he'd admitted to himself that the absence of activity was more stressful than anything he'd ever done. Only three interviews had landed him a job back in the investment business, enabled him to race his wife out of the house each morning, and bitch about the pace—and just maybe prevent himself from going insane. Along the way he'd made some money, but even that, he admitted to himself, had begun to pall. He still

hadn't found his place, and wondered if he ever really would.

"Mr. President, the draft ended a lot of years ago," Jack offered with a smile. It was a flippant observation, and one he was ashamed of even as he said it.

"You've said 'no' to your country once." The rebuke put an end to the smiles. Was Durling that stressed-out? Well, he had every right to be, and with the stress had come impatience, which was surprising in a man whose main function for the public was being pleasant and reassuring. But Ryan was not part of the public, was he?

"Sir, I was burned out then. I don't think I would have been—"

"Fine. I've seen your file, all of it," Durling added. "I even know that I might not be here now except for what you did down in Colombia a few years ago. You've served your country well, Dr. Ryan, and now you've had your time off, and you've played the money game some more—rather well, it would seem—and now it's time to come back."

"What post, sir?" Jack asked.

"Down the hall and around the corner. The last few residents haven't distinguished themselves there," Durling noted. Cutter and Elliot had been bad enough. Durling's own National Security Advisor had simply not been up to the task. His name was Tom Loch, and he was on the way out, the morning paper had told Ryan. It would seem that the press had it right for once. "I'm not going to beat around the bush. We need you. I need you."

"Mr. President, that's a very flattering statement, but the truth of the matter is—"

"The truth of the matter is that I have too much of a domestic agenda, and the day only has twenty-four hours, and my administration has fumbled the ball too many times. In the process we have not served the country as well as we should have. I can't say that anywhere but inside this room, but I can and must say it here. State is weak. Defense is weak."

"Fiedler in Treasury is excellent," Ryan allowed. "And if you want advice about State, move Scott Adler up. He's young, but he's very good on process and pretty good on vision."

"Not without good oversight from this building, and I don't have the time for that. I will pass your approbation on to Buzz Fiedler," Durling added with a smile.

"He's a brilliant technician, and that's what you need across the street. If you're going to catch the inflation, for God's sake, do it now—"

"And take the political heat," Durling said. "That's exactly what his orders are. Protect the dollar and hammer inflation down to zero. I think he can do it. The initial signs are promising."

Ryan nodded. "I think you're right." *Okay, get on with it.*

Durling handed over the briefing book. "Read."

"Yes, sir." Jack flipped open the binder's cover, and kept flipping past the usual stiff pages that warned of all manner of legal sanctions for revealing what he was about to read. As usual, the information United States Code protected wasn't all that different from what any citizen could get in *Time*, but it wasn't as well written. His right hand reached out for a coffee cup, annoyingly not the handleless mug he preferred. The White House china was

long on elegance but short on practicality. Coming here was always like visiting a particularly rich boss. So many of the appointments were just a little too—

"I know about some of this, but I didn't know it was this . . . interesting," Jack murmured.

"'Interesting'?" Durling replied with an unseen smile. "That's a nice choice of words."

"Mary Pat's the Deputy Director of Operations now?" Ryan looked up to see the curt nod.

"She was in here a month ago to plead her case for upgrading her side of the house. She was very persuasive. Al Trent just got the authorization through committee yesterday."

Jack chuckled. "Agriculture or Interior this time?" That part of CIA's budget was almost never in the open. The Directorate of Operations always got part of its funding through legerdemain.

"Health and Human Services, I think."

"But it'll still be two or three years before—"

"I know." Durling fidgeted in his seat. "Look, Jack, if it mattered to you that much, then why—"

"Sir, if you've read through my file, you know why." *Dear God*, Jack wanted to say, *how much am I expected to*—But he couldn't, not here, not to this man, and so he didn't. Instead he went back into the briefing book, flipping pages, and read as rapidly as comprehension permitted.

"I know, it was a mistake to downplay the human-intelligence side of the house. Trent and Fellows said so. Mrs. Foley said so. You can get overloaded in this office, Jack."

Ryan looked up and almost smiled until he saw the President's face. There was a tiredness around the eyes that Durling was unable to conceal. But then Durling saw the expression on Jack's own face.

"When can you start?" the President of the United States asked.

The engineer was back, flipping on the lights and looking at his machine tools. His supervisory office was almost all glass, and elevated slightly so that he could see all the activity in the shop with no more effort than a raised head. In a few minutes his staff would start arriving, and his presence in the office earlier than any of the team—in a country where showing up two hours early was the norm—would set the proper tone. The first man arrived only ten minutes later, hung up his coat, and headed to the far corner to start the coffee. Not tea, both men thought at the same time. Surprisingly Western. The others arrived in a bunch, both resentful and envious of their colleague, because they all noticed that the chief's office was lit and occupied. A few exercised at their worktables, both to loosen themselves up and to show their devotion. At start-time minus two hours, the chief walked out of his office and called for his team to gather around for the first morning's talk about what they were doing. They all knew, of course, but they had to be told anyway. It took ten minutes, and with that done, they all went to work. And this was not at all a strange way for a war to begin.

Dinner was elegant, served in the enormous high-ceilinged dining room to the sound of piano, violin, and the occasional *ting* of crystal. The table chatter was ordinary, or so it seemed to Jack as he sipped his dinner wine and worked his way through the main course. Sally and little Jack were doing well at school, and Kathleen would turn two in another month, as she toddled around the house at Peregrine Cliff, the dominating and assertive apple of her father's eye, and the terror of her day-care center. Robby and Sissy, childless despite all their efforts, were surrogate aunt and uncle to the Ryan trio, and took as much pride in the brood as Jack and Cathy did. There was a sadness to it, Jack thought, but those were the breaks, and he wondered if Sissy still cried about it when alone in bed, Robby off on a job somewhere. Jack had never had a brother. Robby was closer than a brother could ever have been, and his friend deserved better luck. And Sissy, well, she was just an angel.

"I wonder how the office is doing."

"Probably conjuring up a plan for the invasion of Bangladesh," Jack said, looking up and reentering the conversation.

"That was last week," Jackson said with a grin.

"How do they manage without us?" Cathy wondered aloud, probably worrying about a patient.

"Well, concert season doesn't start for me until next month," Sissy observed.

"Mmmm," Ryan noted, looking back down at his plate, wondering how he was going to break the news.

"Jack, I know," Cathy finally said. "You're not good at hiding it."

"Who—"

"She asked where you were," Robby said from across the table. "A naval officer can't lie."

"Did you think I'd be mad?" Cathy asked her husband.

"Yes."

"You don't know what he's like," Cathy told the others. "Every morning, gets his paper and grumbles. Every night, catches the news and grumbles. Every Sunday, watches the interview shows and grumbles. Jack," she said quietly, "do you think I could ever stop doing surgery?"

"Probably not, but it's not the same—"

"No, it's not, but it's the same for you. When do you start?" Caroline Ryan asked.

1

Alumni

There was a university somewhere in the Midwest, Jack had once heard on the radio, which had an instrument package designed to go inside a tornado. Each spring, graduate students and a professor or two staked out a likely swath of land, and on spotting a tornado, tried to set the instrument package, called "Toto"—what else?—directly in the path of the onrushing storm. So far they had been unsuccessful. Perhaps they'd just picked the wrong place, Ryan thought, looking out the window to the leafless trees in Lafayette Park. The office of the President's National Security Advisor was surely cyclonic enough for anyone's taste, and, unfortunately, much easier for people to enter.

"You know," Ryan said, leaning back in his chair, "it was supposed to be a lot simpler than this." *And I thought it would be,* he didn't add.

"The world had rules before," Scott Adler pointed out. "Now it doesn't."

"How's the President been doing, Scott?"

"You really want the truth?" Adler asked, meaning, *We are in the White House, remember?* and wondering if there really were tape machines covering this room. "We screwed up the Korean situation, but we lucked out. Thank God we didn't screw up Yugoslavia that badly, because there just isn't any luck to be had in that place. We haven't been handling Russia very well. The whole continent of Africa's a dog's breakfast. About the only thing we've done right lately was the trade treaty—"

"And that doesn't include Japan and China," Ryan finished for him.

"Hey, you and I fixed the Middle East, remember? That's working out fairly nicely."

"Hottest spot right now?" Ryan didn't want praise for that. The "success" had developed some very adverse consequences, and was the prime reason he had left government service.

"Take your pick," Adler suggested. Ryan grunted agreement.

"SecState?"

"Hanson? Politician," replied the career foreign-service officer. And a proud one at that, Jack reminded himself. Adler had started off at State right after graduating number one in his Fletcher School class, then worked his way up the career ladder through all the drudgery and internal politics that had together claimed his first wife's love and a good deal of his hair. It had to be love of country that kept him going, Jack knew. The son of an Auschwitz survivor, Adler cared about America in a way that few could duplicate. Better still, his love was not blind, even now that his current position was political and not a career rank. Like Ryan, he served at the pleasure of the President, and still he'd had the character to answer Jack's questions honestly.

"Worse than that," Ryan went on for him. "He's a lawyer. They always get in the way."

"The usual prejudice," Adler observed with a smile, then applied some of his own analytical ability. "You have something running, don't you?"

Ryan nodded. "A score to settle. I have two good guys on it now."

* * *

The task combined oil-drilling and mining, to be followed by exquisitely fine finishing work, and it had to be performed on time. The rough holes were almost complete. It had not been easy drilling straight down into the basaltic living rock on the valley even one time, much less ten, each one of the holes fully forty meters deep and ten across. A crew of nine hundred men working in three rotating shifts had actually beaten the official schedule by two weeks, despite the precautions. Six kilometers of rail had been laid from the nearest *Shin-Kansen* line, and for every inch of it the catenary towers normally erected to carry the overhead electrical lines instead were the supports for four linear miles of camouflage netting.

The geological history of this Japanese valley must have been interesting, the construction superintendent thought. You didn't see the sun until an hour or more after it rose, the slope was so steep to the east. No wonder that previous railway engineers had looked at the valley and decided to build elsewhere. The narrow gorge—in places not even ten meters across at its base—had been cut by a river, long since dammed, and what remained was essentially a rock trench, like something left over from a war. *Or in preparation for one*, he thought. It was pretty obvious, after all, despite the fact that he'd never been told anything but to keep his mouth shut about the whole project. The only way out of this place was straight up or sideways. A helicopter could do the former, and a train could do the latter, but to accomplish anything else required tampering with the laws of ballistics, which was a very difficult task indeed.

As he watched, a huge Kowa scoop-loader dumped another bucketload of crushed rock into a hopper car. It was the last car in the train's "consist," and soon the diesel switch engine would haul its collection of cars out to the mainline, where a standard-gauge electric locomotive would take over.

"Finished," the man told him, pointing down into the hole. At the bottom, a man held the end of a long tape measure. Forty meters exactly. The hole had been measured by laser already, of course, but tradition required that such measurements be tested by the human hand of a skilled worker, and there at the bottom was a middle-aged hard-rock miner whose face beamed with pride. And who had no idea what this project was all about.

"*Hai,*" the superintendent said with a pleased nod, and then a more formal, gracious bow to the man at the bottom, which was dutifully and proudly returned. The next train in would carry an oversized cement mixer. The preassembled sets of rebar were already stacked around this hole—and, indeed, all the others, ready to be lowered. In finishing the first hole, this team had beaten its nearest competitor by perhaps six hours, and its furthest

by no more than two days—irregularities in the subsurface rock had been a problem for Hole Number 6, and in truth they'd done well to catch up as closely as they were now. He'd have to speak to them, congratulate them for their Herculean effort, so as to mitigate their shame at being last. Team 6 was his best crew, and it was a pity that they'd been unlucky.

"Three more months, we will make the deadline," the site foreman said confidently.

"When Six is also finished, we will have a party for the men. They have earned it."

"This isn't much fun," Chavez observed.

"Warm, too," Clark agreed. The air-conditioning system on their Range Rover was broken, or perhaps it had died of despair. Fortunately, they had lots of bottled water.

"But it's a dry heat," Ding replied, as though it mattered at a hundred fourteen degrees. One could think in Celsius, instead, but that offered relief only as long as it took to take in another breath. Then you were reminded of the abuse that the superheated air had to be doing to your lungs, no matter how you kept score. He unscrewed the top from a plastic bottle of spring water, which was probably a frigid ninety-five, he estimated. Amazing how cool it tasted under the circumstances.

"Chilldown tonight, all the way to eighty, maybe."

"Good thing I brought my sweater, Mr. C." Chavez paused to wipe off some sweat before looking through the binoculars again. They were good ones, but they didn't help much, except to give a better view of the shimmering air that roiled like the surface of a stormy, invisible sea. Nothing lived out here except for the occasional vulture, and surely by now they had cleaned off the carcasses of everything that had once made the mistake of being born out here. And he'd once thought the Mojave Desert was bleak, Chavez told himself. At least coyotes lived there.

It never changed, Clark thought. He'd been doing jobs like this one for . . . thirty years? Not quite but close. Jesus, thirty years. He still hadn't had the chance to do it in a place where he could really fit in, but that didn't seem terribly important right now. Their cover was wearing thin. The back of the Rover was jammed with surveying equipment and boxes of rock samples, enough to persuade the local illiterates that there might be an enormous molybdenum deposit out there in that solitary mountain. The locals knew what gold looked like—who didn't?—but the mineral known affectionately to miners as Molly-be-damned was a mystery to the uninitiated in all but its market value, which was considerable. Clark had used the ploy often enough. A geological discovery offered people just the perfect sort of luck to appeal to their invariable greed. They just loved the idea of having something valuable sitting under their feet, and John Clark looked the part of a mining engineer, with his rough and honest face to deliver the good and very confidential news.

He checked his watch. The appointment was in ninety minutes, around sunset, and he'd shown up early, the better to check out the area. It was hot and empty, neither of which came as much of a surprise, and was located

twenty miles from the mountain they would be talking about, briefly. There was a crossroads here, two tracks of beaten dirt, one mainly north-south, the other mainly east-west, both of which somehow remained visible despite the blowing sand and grit that ought to have covered up all traces of human presence. Clark didn't understand it. The years-long drought couldn't have helped, but even with occasional rain he had to wonder how the hell anyone had lived here. Yet some people had, and for all he knew, still did, when there was grass for their goats to eat . . . and no men with guns to steal the goats and kill the herdsmen. Mainly the two CIA field officers sat in their car, with the windows open, drank their bottled water, and sweated after they ran out of words to exchange.

The trucks showed up close to dusk. They saw the dust plumes first, like the roostertails of motorboats, yellow in the diminishing light. In such an empty, desperate country, how was it possible that they knew how to make trucks run? Somebody knew how to keep them running, and that seemed very remarkable. Perversely, it meant that all was not lost for this desolate place. If bad men could do it, then good men could do it as well. And that was the reason for Clark and Chavez to be there, wasn't it?

The first truck was well in advance of the others. It was old, probably a military truck originally, though with all the body damage, the country of origin and the name of the manufacturer were matters of speculation. It circled their Rover at a radius of about a hundred meters, while the eyes of the crew checked them out at a discreet, careful distance, including one man on what looked like a Russian 12.7mm machine gun mounted in the back. "Policemen," their boss called them—once it was "technicals." After a while, they stopped, got out and just stood there, watching the Rover, holding their old, dirty, but probably functional G3 rifles. The men would soon be less important. It was evening, after all, and the caq was out. Chavez watched a man sitting in the shade of his truck a hundred meters away, chewing on the weed.

"Can't the dumb sunzabitches at least smoke it?" the exasperated field officer asked the burning air in the car.

"Bad for the lungs, Ding. You know that." Their appointment for the evening made quite a living for himself by flying it in. In fact, roughly two fifths of the country's gross domestic product went into that trade, supporting a small fleet of aircraft that flew it in from Somalia. The fact offended both Clark and Chavez, but their mission wasn't about personal offense. It was about a long-standing debt. General Mohammed Abdul Corp—his rank had largely been awarded by reporters who didn't know what else to call him—had, once upon a time, been responsible for the deaths of twenty American soldiers. Two years ago, to be exact, far beyond the memory horizon of the media, because after he'd killed the American soldiers, he'd gone back to his main business of killing his own countrymen. It was for the latter cause that Clark and Chavez were nominally in the field, but justice had many shapes and many colors, and it pleased Clark to pursue a parallel agenda. That Corp was also a dealer in narcotics seemed a special gift from a good-humored God.

"Wash up before he gets here?" Ding asked, tenser now, and showing it just a little bit. All four men by the truck just sat there, chewing their caq and

staring, their rifles lying across their legs, the heavy machine gun on the back of their truck forgotten now. They were the forward security element, such as it was, for their General.

Clark shook his head. "Waste of time."

"Shit, we've been here six weeks." All for one appointment. Well, that was how it worked, wasn't it?

"I needed to sweat off the five pounds," Clark replied with a tense smile of his own. Probably more than five, he figured. "These things take time to do right."

"I wonder how Patsy is doing in college?" Ding murmured as the next collection of dust plumes grew closer.

Clark didn't respond. It was distantly unseemly that his daughter found his field partner exotic and interesting . . . and charming, Clark admitted to himself. Though Ding was actually shorter than his daughter—Patsy took after her tall and rangy mom—and possessed of a decidedly checkered background, John had to allow for the fact that Chavez had worked as hard as any man he'd ever known to make himself into something that fate had tried very hard to deny him. The lad was thirty-one now. *Lad*? Clark asked himself. Ten years older than his little girl, Patricia Doris Clark. He could have said something about how they lived a rather crummy life in the field, but Ding would have replied that it was not his decision to make, and it wasn't. Sandy hadn't thought so either.

What Clark couldn't shake was the idea that his Patricia, his baby, might be sexually active with—Ding? The father part of him found the idea disturbing, but the rest of him had to admit that he'd had his own youth once. Daughters, he told himself, were God's revenge on you for being a man: you lived in mortal fear that they might accidentally encounter somebody like—yourself at that age. In Patsy's case, the similarity in question was just too striking to accept easily.

"Concentrate on the mission, Ding."

"Roger that, Mr. C." Clark didn't have to turn his head. He could see the smile that had to be poised on his partner's face. He could almost feel it evaporate, too, as more dust plumes appeared through the shimmering air.

"We're gonna get you, motherfucker," Ding breathed, back to business and wearing his mission face again. It wasn't just the dead American soldiers. People like Corp destroyed everything they touched, and this part of the world needed a chance at a future. That chance might have come two years earlier, if the President had listened to his field commanders instead of the U.N. Well, at least he seemed to be learning, which wasn't bad for a President.

The sun was lower, almost gone now, and the temperature was abating. More trucks. Not too many more, they both hoped. Chavez shifted his eyes to the four men a hundred yards away. They were talking back and forth with a little animation, mellow from the caq. Ordinarily it would be dangerous to be around drug-sotted men carrying military weapons, but tonight danger was inverting itself, as it sometimes did. The second truck was clearly visible now, and it came up close. Both CIA officers got out of their vehicle to stretch, then to greet the new visitors, cautiously, of course.

The General's personal guard force of elite "policemen" was no better than

the ones who had arrived before, though some of this group did wear unbuttoned shirts. The first one to come up to them smelled of whiskey, probably pilfered from the General's private stock. That was an affront to Islam, but then so was trafficking in drugs. One of the things Clark admired about the Saudis was their direct and peremptory method for processing that category of criminal.

"Hi." Clark smiled at the man. "I'm John Clark. This is Mr. Chavez. We've been waiting for the General, like you told us."

"What you carry?" the "policeman" asked, surprising Clark with his knowledge of English. John held up his bag of rock samples, while Ding showed his pair of electronic instruments. After a cursory inspection of the vehicle, they were spared even a serious frisking—a pleasant surprise.

Corp arrived next, with his most reliable security force, if you could call it that. They rode in a Russian ZIL-type jeep. The "General" was actually in a Mercedes that had once belonged to a government bureaucrat, before the government of this country had disintegrated. It had seen better times, but was still the best automobile in the country, probably. Corp wore his Sunday best, a khaki shirt outside the whipcord trousers, with something supposed to be rank insignia on the epaulets, and boots that had been polished sometime in the last week. The sun was just under the horizon now. Darkness would fall quickly, and the thin atmosphere of the high desert made for lots of visible stars even now.

The General was a gracious man, at least by his own lights. He walked over briskly, extending his hand. As he took it, Clark wondered what had become of the owner of the Mercedes. Most likely murdered along with the other members of the government. They'd died partly of incompetence, but mostly of barbarism, probably at the hands of the man whose firm and friendly hand he was now shaking.

"Have you completed your survey?" Corp asked, surprising Clark again with his grammar.

"Yes, sir, we have. May I show you?"

"Certainly." Corp followed him to the back of the Rover. Chavez pulled out a survey map and some satellite photos obtained from commercial sources.

"This may be the biggest deposit since the one in Colorado, and the purity is surprising. Right here." Clark extended a steel pointer and tapped it on the map.

"Thirty kilometers from where we are sitting . . ."

Clark smiled. "You know, as long as I've been in this business, it still surprises me how this happens. A couple of billion years ago, a huge bubble of the stuff must have just perked up from the center of the earth." His lecture was lyrical. He'd had lots of practice, and it helped that Clark read books on geology for recreation, borrowing the nicer phrases for his "pitch."

"Anyway," Ding, said, taking his cue a few minutes later, "the overburden is no problem at all, and we have the location fixed perfectly."

"How can you do that?" Corp asked. His country's maps were products of another and far more casual age.

"With this, sir." Ding handed it over.

"What is it?" the General asked.

"A GPS locator," Chavez explained. "It's how we find our way around, sir. You just push that button there, the rubber one."

Corp did just that, then held the large, thin green-plastic box up and watched the readout. First it gave him the exact time, then started to make its fix, showing that it had lock with one, then three, and finally four orbiting Global Positioning System satellites. "Such an amazing device," he said, though that wasn't the half of it. By pushing the button he had also sent out a radio signal. It was so easy to forget that they were scarcely a hundred miles from the Indian Ocean, and that beyond the visible horizon might be a ship with a flat deck. A largely empty deck at the moment, because the helicopters that lived there had lifted off an hour earlier and were now sitting at a secure site thirty-five miles to the south.

Corp took one more look at the GPS locator before handing it back. "What is the rattle?" he asked as Ding took it.

"Battery pack is loose, sir," Chavez explained with a smile. It was their only handgun, and not a large one. The General ignored the irrelevancy and turned back to Clark.

"How much?" he asked simply.

"Well, determining the exact size of the deposit will require—"

"Money, Mr. Clark."

"Anaconda is prepared to offer you fifty million dollars, sir. We'll pay that in four payments of twelve and a half million dollars, plus ten percent of the gross profit from the mining operations. The advance fee and the continuing income will be paid in U.S. dollars."

"More than that. I know what molybdenum is worth." He'd checked a copy of *The Financial Times* on the way in.

"But it will take two years, closer to three, probably, to commence operations. Then we have to determine the best way to get the ore to the coast. Probably truck, maybe a rail line if the deposit is as big as I think it is. Our up-front costs to develop the operation will be on the order of three hundred million." Even with the labor costs here, Clark didn't have to add.

"I need more money to keep my people happy. You must understand that," Corp said reasonably. Had he been an honorable man, Clark thought, this could have been an interesting negotiation. Corp wanted the additional up-front money to buy arms in order to reconquer the country that he had once almost owned. The U.N. had displaced him, but not quite thoroughly enough. Relegated to dangerous obscurity in the bush, he had survived the last year by running caq into the cities, such as they were, and he'd made enough from the trade that some thought him to be a danger to the state again, such as it was. With new arms, of course, and control over the country, he would then renegotiate the continuing royalty for the molybdenum. It was a clever ploy, Clark thought, but obvious, having dreamed it up himself to draw the bastard out of his hole.

"Well, yes, we are concerned with the political stability of the region," John allowed, with an insider's smile to show that he knew the score. Americans were known for doing business all over the world, after all, or so Corp and others believed.

Chavez was fiddling with the GPS device, watching the LCD display. At the

upper-right corner, a block went from clear to black. Ding coughed from the dust in the air and scratched his nose.

"Okay," Clark said. "You're a serious man, and we understand that. The fifty million can be paid up-front. Swiss account?"

"That is somewhat better," Corp allowed, taking his time. He walked around to the back of the Rover and pointed into the open cargo area. "These are your rock samples?"

"Yes, sir," Clark replied with a nod. He handed over a three-pound piece of stone with very high-grade Molly-be-damned ore, though it was from Colorado, not Africa. "Want to show it to your people?"

"What is this?" Corp pointed at two objects in the Rover.

"Our lights, sir." Clark smiled as he took one out. Ding did the same.

"You have a gun in there," Corp saw with amusement, pointing to a bolt-action rifle. Two of his bodyguards drew closer.

"This *is* Africa, sir. I was worried about—"

"Lions?" Corp thought that one pretty good. He turned and spoke to his "policemen," who started laughing amiably at the stupidity of the Americans. "We kill the lions," Corp told them after the laughter settled down. "Nothing lives out here."

Clark, the General thought, took it like a man, standing there, holding his light. It seemed a big light. "What is that for?"

"Well, I don't like the dark very much, and when we camp out, I like to take pictures at night."

"Yeah," Ding confirmed. "These things are really great." He turned and scanned the positions of the General's security detail. There were two groups, one of four, the other of six, plus the two nearby and Corp himself.

"Want me to take pictures of your people for you?" Clark asked without reaching for his camera.

On cue, Chavez flipped his light on and played it toward the larger of the two distant groups. Clark handled the three men close to the Rover. The "lights" worked like a charm. It took only about three seconds before both CIA officers could turn them off and go to work securing the men's hands.

"Did you think we forgot?" the CIA field officer asked Corp as the roar of rotary-wing aircraft became audible fifteen minutes later. By this time all twelve of Corp's security people were facedown in the dust, their hands bound behind them with the sort of plastic ties policemen use when they run out of cuffs. All the General could do was moan and writhe on the ground in pain. Ding cracked a handful of chemical lights and tossed them around in a circle downwind of the Rover. The first UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter circled carefully, illuminating the ground with lights.

"BIRD-DOG ONE, this is BAG MAN."

"Good evening, BAG MAN, BIRD-DOG ONE has the situation under control. Come on *down!*" Clark chuckled into the radio.

The first chopper down was well outside the lighted area. The Rangers appeared out of the shadows like ghosts, spaced out five meters apart, weapons low and ready.

"Clark?" a loud, very tense voice called.

"Yo!" John called back with a wave. "We got 'im."

A captain of Rangers came in. A young Latino face, smeared with camouflage paint and dressed in desert cammies. He'd been a lieutenant the last time he'd been on the African mainland, and remembered the memorial service for those he'd lost from his platoon. Bringing the Rangers back had been Clark's idea, and it had been easy to arrange. Four more men came in behind Captain Diego Checa. The rest of the squad dispersed to check out the "policemen."

"What about these two?" one asked, pointing to Corp's two personal bodyguards.

"Leave 'em," Ding replied.

"You got it, sir," a spec-4 replied, taking out steel cuffs and securing both pairs of wrists in addition to the plastic ties. Captain Checa cuffed Corp himself. He and a sergeant lifted the man off the ground while Clark and Chavez retrieved their personal gear from the Rover and followed the soldiers to the Blackhawk. One of the Rangers handed Chavez a canteen.

"Oso sends his regards," the staff sergeant said. Ding's head came around.

"What's he doing now?"

"First Sergeants' school. He's pissed that he missed this one. I'm Gomez, Foxtrot, Second of the One-Seventy-Fifth. I was here back then, too."

"You made that look pretty easy," Checa was telling Clark, a few feet away.

"Six weeks," the senior field officer replied in a studiously casual voice. The rules required such a demeanor. "Four weeks to bum around in the boonies, two weeks to set the meet up, six hours waiting for it to happen, and about ten seconds to take him down."

"Just the way it's supposed to be," Checa observed. He handed over a canteen filled with Gatorade. The Captain's eyes locked on the senior man. Whoever he was, Checa thought at first, he was far too old to play games in the boonies with the gomers. Then he gave Clark's eyes a closer look.

"How the fuck you do this, man?" Gomez demanded of Chavez at the door to the chopper. The other Rangers leaned in close to get the reply.

Ding glanced over at his gear and laughed. "Magic!"

Gomez was annoyed that his question hadn't been answered. "Leaving all these guys out here?"

"Yeah, they're just gomers." Chavez turned to look one last time. Sooner or later one would get his hands free—probably—retrieve a knife, and cut his fellow "policemen" free; then they could worry about the two with steel bracelets. "It's the boss we were after."

Gomez turned to scan the horizon. "Any lions or hyenas out here?" Ding shook his head. *Too bad*, the sergeant thought.

The Rangers were shaking their heads as they strapped into their seats on the helicopter. As soon as they were airborne, Clark donned a headset and waited for the crew chief to set up the radio patch.

"CAPSTONE, this is BIRD DOG," he began.

The eight-hour time difference made it early afternoon in Washington. The UHF radio from the helicopter went to USS *Tripoli*, and then it was uplinked to a satellite. The Signals Office routed the call right into Ryan's desk phone.

"Yes, BIRD DOG, this is CAPSTONE."

Ryan couldn't quite recognize Clark's voice, but the words were readable through the static: "In the bag, no friendlies hurt. Repeat, the duck is in the bag and there are zero friendly casualties."

"I understand, BIRD DOG. Make your delivery as planned."

It was an outrage, really, Jack told himself as he set the phone back. Such operations were better left in the field, but the President had insisted this time. He rose from his desk and headed toward the Oval Office.

"Get'm?" D'Agustino asked as Jack hustled down the corridor.

"You weren't supposed to know."

"The Boss was worried about it," Helen explained quietly.

"Well, he doesn't have to worry anymore."

"That's one score that needed settling. Welcome back, Dr. Ryan."

The past would haunt one other man that day.

"Go on," the psychologist said.

"It was awful," the woman said, staring down at the floor. "It was the only time in my life it ever happened, and . . ." Though her voice droned on in a level, emotionless monotone, it was her appearance that disturbed the elderly woman most of all. Her patient was thirty-five, and should have been slim, petite, and blonde, but instead her face showed the puffiness of compulsive eating and drinking, and her hair was barely presentable. What ought to have been fair skin was merely pale, and reflected light like chalk, in a flat grainy way that even makeup would not have helped very much. Only her diction indicated what the patient once had been, and her voice recounted the events of three years before as though her mind was operating on two levels, one the victim, and the other an observer, wondering in a distant intellectual way if she had participated at all.

"I mean, he's who he is, and I worked for him, and I liked *him* . . ." The voice broke again. The woman swallowed hard and paused a moment before going on. "I mean, I *admire* him, all the things he does, all the things he stands for." She looked up, and it seemed so odd that her eyes were as dry as cellophane, reflecting light from a flat surface devoid of tears. "He's so charming, and caring, and—"

"It's okay, Barbara." As she often did, the psychologist fought the urge to reach out to her patient, but she knew she had to stay aloof, had to hide her own rage at what had happened to this bright and capable woman. It had happened at the hands of a man who used his status and power to draw women toward him as a light drew moths, ever circling his brilliance, spiraling in closer and closer until they were destroyed by it. The pattern was so like life in this city. Since then, Barbara had broken off from two men, each of whom might have been fine partners for what should have been a fine life. This was an intelligent woman, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, with a master's degree in political science and a doctorate in public administration. She was not a wide-eyed secretary or summer intern, and perhaps had been all the more vulnerable because of it, able to become part of the policy team, knowing that she was good enough, if only she would do the

one more thing to get her over the top or across the line, or whatever the current euphemism was on the Hill. The problem was, that line could be crossed only in one direction, and what lay beyond it was not so easily seen from the other side.

"You know, I would have done it anyway," Barbara said in a moment of brutal honesty. "He didn't have to—"

"Do you feel guilty because of that?" Dr. Clarice Golden asked. Barbara Linders nodded. Golden stifled a sigh and spoke gently. "And you think you gave him the—"

"Signals." A nod. "That's what he said, 'You gave me all the signals.' Maybe I did."

"No, you didn't, Barbara. You have to go on now," Clarice ordered gently.

"I just wasn't in the mood. It's not that I wouldn't have done it, another time, another day, maybe, but I wasn't feeling well. I came into the office feeling fine that day, but I was coming down with the flu or something, and after lunch my stomach was queasy, and I thought about going home early, but it was the day we were doing the amendment on the civil-rights legislation that he sponsored, so I took a couple Tylenol for the fever, and about nine we were the only ones left in the office. Civil rights was my area of specialty," Linders explained. "I was sitting on the couch in his office, and he was walking around like he always does when he's formulating his ideas, and he was behind me. I remember his voice got soft and friendly, like, and he said, 'You have the nicest hair, Barbara' out of the blue, like, and I said, 'Thank you.' He asked how I was feeling, and I *told* him I was coming down with something, and he said he'd give me something he used—brandy," she said, talking more quickly now, as though she was hoping to get through this part as rapidly as possible, like a person fast-forwarding a videotape through the commercials. "I didn't see him put anything in the drink. He kept a bottle of Rémy in the credenza behind his desk, and something else, too, I guess. I drank it right down.

"He just stood there, watching me, not even talking, just watching me, like he knew it would happen fast. It was like . . . I don't know. I knew something wasn't right, like you get drunk right away, out of control." Then her voice stopped for fifteen seconds or so, and Dr. Golden watched her—like he had done, she thought. The irony shamed her, but this was business; it was clinical, and it was supposed to help, not hurt. Her patient was seeing it now. You could tell from the eyes, you always could. As though the mind really were a VCR, the scene paraded before her, and Barbara Linders was merely giving commentary on what she saw, not truly relating the dreadful personal experience she herself had undergone. For ten minutes, she described it, without leaving out a single clinical detail, her trained professional mind clicking in as it had to do. It was only at the end that her emotions came back.

"He didn't have to rape me. He could have . . . asked. I would have . . . I mean, another day, the weekend . . . I knew he was married, but I *liked* him, and . . ."

"But he did rape you, Barbara. He drugged you and raped you." This time Dr. Golden reached out and took her hand, because now it was all out in the open. Barbara Linders had articulated the whole awful story, probably for the

first time since it had happened. In the intervening period she'd relived bits and pieces, especially the worst part, but this was the first time she'd gone through the event in chronological order, from beginning to end, and the impact of the telling was every bit as traumatic and cathartic as it had to be.

"There has to be more," Golden said after the sobbing stopped.

"There is," Barbara said immediately, hardly surprised that her psychologist could tell. "At least one other woman in the office, Lisa Beringer. She . . . killed herself the next year, drove her car into a bridge support-thing, looked like an accident, she'd been drinking, but in her desk she left a note. I cleaned her desk out . . . and I found it." Then, to Dr. Golden's stunned reaction, Barbara Linders reached into her purse and pulled it out. The "note" was in a blue envelope, six pages of personalized letter paper covered with the tight, neat handwriting of a woman who had made the decision to end her life, but who wanted someone to know why.

Clarice Golden, Ph.D., had seen such notes before, and it was a source of melancholy amazement that people could do such a thing. They always spoke of pain too great to bear, but depressingly often they showed the despairing mind of someone who could have been saved and cured and sent back into a successful life if only she'd had the wit to make a single telephone call or speak to a single close friend. It took only two paragraphs for Golden to see that Lisa Beringer had been just one more needless victim, a woman who had felt alone, fatally so, in an office full of people who would have leaped to her aid.

Mental-health professionals are skilled at hiding their emotions, a talent necessary for obvious reasons. Clarice Golden had been doing this job for just under thirty years, and to her God-given talent had been added a lifetime of professional experience. Especially good at helping the victims of sexual abuse, she displayed compassion, understanding, and support in great quantity and outstanding quality, but while real, it was all a disguise for her true feelings. She loathed sexual predators as much as any police officer, maybe even more. A cop saw the victim's body, saw her bruises and her tears, heard her cries. The psychologist was there longer, probing into the mind for the malignant memories, trying to find a way to expunge them. Rape was a crime against the mind, not the body, and as dreadful as the things were that the policeman saw, worse still were the hidden injuries whose cure was Clarice Golden's life's work. A gentle, caring person who could never have avenged the crimes physically, she hated these creatures nonetheless.

But this one was a special problem. She maintained a regular working relationship with the sexual-crime units of every police department in a fifty-mile radius, but this crime had happened on federal property, and she'd have to check to see who had jurisdiction. For that she'd talk to her neighbor, Dan Murray of the FBI. And there was one other complication. The criminal in question had been a U.S. senator at the time, and indeed he still had an office in the Capitol Building. But this criminal had changed jobs. No longer a senator from New England, he was now Vice President of the United States.

* * *

ComSubPac had once been as grand a goal as any man might have, but that was one more thing of history. The first great commander had been Vice Admiral Charles Lockwood, and of all the men who'd defeated Japan, only Chester Nimitz and maybe Charles Layton had been more important. It was Lockwood, sitting in this very office on the heights overlooking Pearl Harbor, who had sent out Mush Morton and Dick O'Kane and Gene Fluckey, and the rest of the legends to do battle in their fleet boats. The same office, the same door, and even the same title on the door—Commander, Submarine Force, United States Pacific Fleet—but the rank required for it was lower now. Rear Admiral Bart Mancuso, USN, knew that he'd been lucky to make it this far. That was the good news.

The bad news was that he was essentially the receiver of a dying business. Lockwood had commanded a genuine fleet of submarines and tenders. More recently, Austin Smith had sent his forty or so around the world's largest ocean, but Mancuso was down to nineteen fast-attack boats and six boomers—and all of the latter were alongside, awaiting dismantlement at Bremerton. None would be kept, not even as a museum exhibit of a bygone age, which didn't trouble Mancuso as much as it might have. He'd never liked the missile submarines, never liked their ugly purpose, never liked their boring patrol pattern, never liked the mind-set of their commanders. Raised in fast-attack, Mancuso had always preferred to be where the action is—was, he corrected himself.

Was. It was all over now, or nearly so. The mission of the nuclear-powered fast-attack submarine had changed since Lockwood. Once the hunters of surface ships, whether merchants or men-of-war, they'd become specialists in the elimination of enemy subs, like fighter aircraft dedicated to the extermination of their foreign cousins. That specialization had narrowed their purpose, focusing their equipment and their training until they'd become supreme at it. Nothing could excel an SSN in the hunting of another.

What nobody had ever expected was that the other side's SSNs would go away. Mancuso had spent his professional life practicing for something he'd hoped would never come, detecting, localizing, closing on, and killing Soviet subs, whether missile boats or other fast-attacks. In fact, he'd achieved something that no other sub skipper had ever dreamed of doing. He'd assisted in the capture of a Russian sub, a feat of arms still among his country's most secret accomplishments—and a capture was better than a kill, wasn't it?—but then the world had changed. He'd played his role in it, and was proud of that. The Soviet Union was no more.

Unfortunately—as he thought of it—so was the Soviet Navy, and without enemy submarines to worry about, his country, as it had done many times in the past, had rewarded its warriors by forgetting them. There was little mission for his boats to do now. The once large and formidable Soviet Navy was essentially a memory. Only the previous week he'd seen satellite photos of the bases at Petropavlovsk and Vladivostok. Every boat the Soviets—Russians!—were known to have had been tied alongside, and on some of the overheads he'd been able to see the orange streaks of rust on the hulls where the black paint had eroded off.

The other possible missions? Hunting merchant traffic was largely a joke—

worse, the Orion drivers, with their own huge collection of P-3C aircraft, also designed for submarine hunting, had long since modified their aircraft to carry air-to-surface missiles, and had ten times the speed of any sub, and in the unlikely event that someone wanted to clobber a merchant ship, they could do it better and faster.

The same was true of surface warships——what there were of them. The sad truth, if you could call it that, was that the U.S. Navy, even gutted and downsized as it was, could handle any three other navies in the world in less time than it would take the enemies to assemble their forces and send out a press release of their malicious intent.

And so now what? Even if you won the Super Bowl, there were still teams to play against next season. But in this most serious of human games, victory meant exactly that. There were no enemies left at sea, and few enough on land, and in the way of the new world, the submarine force was the first of many uniformed groups to be without work. The only reason there was a ComSubPac at all was bureaucratic inertia. There was a Com-everything-else-Pac, and the submarine force had to have its senior officer as the social and military equal of the other communities, Air, Surface, and Service.

Of his nineteen fast-attack boats, only seven were currently at sea. Four were in overhaul status, and the yards were stretching out their work as much as possible to justify their own infrastructure. The rest were alongside their tenders or their piers while the ship-service people found new and interesting things to do, protecting *their* infrastructure and military/civilian identity. Of the seven boats at sea, one was tracking a Chinese nuclear fast-attack boat; those submarines were so noisy that Mancuso hoped the sonarmen's ears weren't being seriously hurt. Stalking them was about as demanding as watching a blind man on an empty parking lot in broad daylight. Two others were doing environmental research, actually tracking midocean whale populations—not for whalers, but for the environmental community. In so doing, his boats had achieved a real march on the tree-huggers. There were more whales out there than expected. Extinction wasn't nearly the threat everyone had once believed it to be, and the various environmental groups were having their own funding problems as a result. All of which was fine with Mancuso. He'd never wanted to kill a whale.

The other four boats were doing workups, mainly practicing against one another. But the environmentalists were taking their own revenge on Submarine Force, United States Pacific Fleet. Having protested the construction and operation of the boats for thirty years, they were now protesting their dismantlement, and more than half of Mancuso's working time was relegated to filing all manner of reports, answers to questions, and detailed explanations of his answers. "Ungrateful bastards," Mancuso grumbled. He was helping out with the whales, wasn't he? The Admiral growled into his coffee mug and flipped open a new folder.

"Good news, Skipper," a voice called without warning.

"Who the hell let you in?"

"I have an understanding with your chief," Ron Jones replied. "He says you're buried by paperwork."

"He ought to know." Mancuso stood to greet his guest. Dr. Jones had

problems of his own. The end of the Cold War had hurt defense contractors, too, and Jones had specialized in sonar systems used by submarines. The difference was that Jones had made himself a pile of money first. “So what’s the good news?”

“Our new processing software is optimized for listening to our warm-blooded oppressed fellow mammals. *Chicago* just phoned in. They have identified another twenty humpbacks in the Gulf of Alaska. I think I’ll get the contract from NOAA. I can afford to buy you lunch now,” Jones concluded, settling into a leather chair. He liked Hawaii, and was dressed for it, in casual shirt and no socks to clutter up his formal Reeboks.

“You ever miss the good old days?” Bart asked with a wry look.

“You mean chasing around the ocean, four hundred feet down, stuck inside a steel pipe two months at a time, smelling like the inside of an oilcan, with a touch of locker room for ambience, eating the same food every week, watching old movies and TV shows on tape, on a TV the size of a sheet of paper, working six on and twelve off, getting maybe five decent hours of sleep a night, and concentrating like a brain surgeon all the time? Yeah, Bart, those were the days.” Jones paused and thought for a second. “I miss being young enough to think it was fun. We were pretty good, weren’t we?”

“Better ’n average,” Mancuso allowed. “What’s the deal with the whales?”

“The new software my guys put together is good at picking out their breathing and heartbeats. It turns out to be a nice clear hertz line. When those guys are swimming—well, if you put a stethoscope up against them, your eardrums would probably meet in the middle of your head.”

“What was the software really for?”

“Tracking Kilo-class boats, of course.” Jones grinned as he looked out the windows at the largely empty naval base. “But I can’t say that anymore. We changed a few hundred lines of code and ginned up a new wrapper for the box, and talked to NOAA about it.”

Mancuso might have said something about taking that software into the Persian Gulf to track the Kilo-class boats the Iranians owned, but intelligence reported that one of them was missing. The submarine had probably gotten in the way of a supertanker and been squashed, simply crushed against the bottom of that shallow body of water by a tanker whose crew had never even noticed the rumble. In any case, the other Kilos were securely tied to their piers. Or maybe the Iranians had finally heard the old seaman’s moniker for submarines and decided not to touch their new naval vessels again—they’d once been known as “pigboats,” after all.

“Sure looks empty out there.” Jones pointed to what had once been one of the greatest naval facilities ever made. Not a single carrier in view, only two cruisers, half a squadron of destroyers, roughly the same number of frigates, five fleet-support ships. “Who commands Pac Fleet now, a chief?”

“Christ, Ron, let’s not give anybody ideas, okay?”

2

Fraternity

"You got him?" President Durling asked.

"Less than half an hour ago," Ryan confirmed, taking his seat.

"Nobody hurt?" That was important to the President. It was important to Ryan, too, but not morbidly so.

"Clark reports no friendly casualties."

"What about the other side?" This question came from Brett Hanson, the current Secretary of State. Choate School and Yale. The government was having a run on Yalies, Ryan thought, but Hanson wasn't as good as the last Eli he'd worked with. Short, thin, and hyper, Hanson was an in-andout guy whose career had oscillated between government service, consulting, a sideline as a talking head on PBS—where you could exercise real influence—and a lucrative practice in one of the city's pricier firms. He was a specialist in corporate and international law, an area of expertise he'd once used to negotiate multinational business deals. He'd been good at that, Jack knew. Unfortunately he'd come into his cabinet post thinking that the same niceties ought to—worse, did—apply to the business of nation-states.

Ryan took a second or two before replying. "I didn't ask."

"Why?"

Jack could have said any one of several things, but he decided that it was time to establish his position. Therefore, a goad: "Because it wasn't important. The objective, Mr. Secretary, was to apprehend Corp. That was done. In about thirty minutes he will be handed over to the legal authorities, such as they are, in his country, for trial in accordance with their law, before a jury of his peers, or however they do it over there." Ryan hadn't troubled himself to find out.

"That's tantamount to murder."

"It's not my fault his peers don't like him, Mr. Secretary. He's also responsible for the deaths of American soldiers. Had we decided to eliminate him ourselves, even that would not be murder. It would have been a straightforward national-security exercise. Well, in another age it would have been," Ryan allowed. Times *had* changed, and Ryan had to adapt himself to a new reality as well. "Instead, we are acting as good world-citizens by apprehending a dangerous international criminal and turning him over to the government of his country, which will put him on trial for drug-running, which is a felony in every legal jurisdiction of which I am aware. What happens next is up to the criminaljustice system of his country. That is a country with which we have diplomatic relations and other informal agreements of assistance, and whose laws, therefore, we must respect."

Hanson didn't like it. That was clear from the way he leaned back in his chair. But he would support it in public because he had no choice. The State Department had announced official American support for that government half a dozen times in the previous year. What stung worse for Hanson was being outmaneuvered by this young upstart in front of him.

"They might even have a chance to make it now, Brett," Durling observed gently, putting his own seal of approval on Operation WALKMAN. "And it never happened."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Jack, you were evidently right about this Clark fellow. What do we do about him?"

"I'll leave that to the DCI, sir. Maybe another Intelligence Star for him," Ryan suggested, hoping that Durling would forward it to Langley. If not, maybe a discreet call of his own to Mary Pat. Then it was time for fence-mending, a new skill for Ryan. "Mr. Secretary, in case you didn't know, our people were under orders to use nonlethal force if possible. Beyond that, my only concern is the lives of our people."

"I wish you'd cleared it through my people first," Hanson grumped.

Deep breath, Ryan commanded himself. The mess was of State's making, along with that of Ryan's predecessor. Having entered the country to restore order after it had been destroyed by local warlords—another term used by the media to give a label to common thugs—the powers-that-be had later decided, after the entire mission had gone to hell, that the "warlords" in question had to be part of the "political solution" to the problem. That the problem had been created by the warlords in the first place was conveniently forgotten. It was the circularity of the logic that offended Ryan most of all, who wondered if they taught a logic course at Yale. Probably an elective, he decided. At Boston College it had been mandatory.

"It's done, Brett," Durling said quietly, "and nobody will mourn the passing of Mr. Corp. What's next?" the President asked Ryan.

"The Indians are getting rather frisky. They've increased the operating tempo of their navy, and they're conducting operations around Sri Lanka—"

"They've done that before," SecState cut in.

"Not in this strength, and I don't like the way they've continued their talks with the 'Tamil Tigers,' or whatever the hell those maniacs call themselves now. Conducting extended negotiations with a guerrilla group operating on the soil of a neighbor is not an act of friendship."

This was a new concern for the U.S. government. The two former British colonies had lived as friendly neighbors for a long time, but for years the Tamil people on the island of Sri Lanka had maintained a nasty little insurgency. The Sri Lankans, with relatives on the Indian mainland, had asked for foreign troops to maintain a peace-keeping presence. India had obliged, but what had started in an honorable fashion was now changing. There were rumbles that the Sri Lankan government would soon ask for the Indian soldiers to leave. There were also rumbles that there would be some "technical difficulties" in effecting their removal. Concurrent with that had come word of a conversation between the Indian Foreign Minister and the U.S. Ambassador at a reception in Delhi.

"You know," the Minister had said after a few too many, but probably purposeful drinks, "that body of water to our south is called the *Indian* Ocean, and we have a navy to guard it. With the demise of the former Soviet threat, we wonder why the U.S. Navy seems so determined to maintain a force there."

The U.S. Ambassador was a political appointee—for some reason India had turned into a prestige post, despite the climate—but was also a striking exception to Scott Adler's professional snobbery. The former governor of Pennsylvania had smiled and mumbled something about freedom of the seas, then fired off an encrypted report to Foggy Bottom before going to bed that night. Adler needed to learn that they weren't all dumb.

"We see no indication of an aggressive act in that direction," Hanson said after a moment's reflection.

"The ethnic element is troubling. India can't go north, with the mountains in the way. West is out. The Pakis have nukes, too. East is Bangladesh—why buy trouble? Sri Lanka has real strategic possibilities for them, maybe as a steppingstone."

"To where?" the President asked.

"Australia. Space and resources, not many people in the way, and not much of a military to stop them."

"I just don't see that happening," SecState announced.

"If the Tigers pull something off, I *can* see India increasing its peace-keeping presence. The next step could be annexation, given the right preconditions, and then all of a sudden we have an imperial power playing games a long way from here, and making life somewhat nervous for one of our historical allies." And helping the Tigers to get something going was both easy and a time-honored tactic. Surrogates could be so useful, couldn't they? "In historical terms such ambitions are most inexpensively stopped early."

"That's why the Navy's in the Indian Ocean," Hanson observed confidently.

"True," Ryan conceded.

"Are we strong enough to deter them from stepping over the line?"

"Yes, Mr. President, at the moment, but I don't like the way our Navy is being stretched. Every carrier we have right now, except for the two in overhaul status, is either deployed or conducting workups preparatory for deployment. We have no strategic reserve worthy of the name." Ryan paused before going on, knowing that he was about to go too far, but doing so anyway: "We've cut back too much, sir. Our people are strung out very thin."

"They are simply not as capable as we think they are. That is a thing of the past," Raizo Yamata said. He was dressed in an elegant silk kimono, and sat on the floor at a traditional low table.

The others around the table looked discreetly at their watches. It was approaching three in the morning, and though this was one of the nicest geisha houses in the city, the hour *was* late. Raizo Yamata was a captivating host, however. A man of great wealth and sagacity, the others thought. Or most of them.

"They've protected us for generations," one man suggested.

"From what? Ourselves?" Yamata demanded coarsely. That was permitted

now. Though all around the table were men of the most exquisite good manners, they were all close acquaintances, if not all actually close friends, and all had consumed their personal limit of alcohol. Under these circumstances, the rules of social intercourse altered somewhat. They could all speak bluntly. Words that would ordinarily be deadly insults would now be accepted calmly, then rebutted harshly, and there would be no lingering rancor about it. That, too, was a rule, but as with most rules, it was largely theoretical. Though friendships and relationships would not end because of words here, neither would they be completely forgotten. "How many of us," Yamata went on, "have been victims of these people?"

Yamata hadn't said "barbarians," the other Japanese citizens at the table noted. The reason was the presence of the two other men. One of them. Vice Admiral V. K. Chandraskatta, was a fleet commander of the Indian Navy, currently on leave. The other, Zhang Han San—the name meant "Cold Mountain" and had not been given by his parents—was a senior Chinese diplomat, part of a trade mission to Tokyo. The latter individual was more easily accepted than the former. With his swarthy skin and sharp features, Chandraskatta was regarded by the others with polite contempt. Though an educated and very bright potential ally, he was even more *gaijin* than the Chinese guest, and the eight *zaibatsu* around the table each imagined that he could smell the man, despite their previous intake of sake, which usually deadened the senses. For this reason, Chandraskatta occupied the place of honor, at Yamata's right hand, and the zaibatsu wondered if the Indian grasped that this supposed honor was merely a sophisticated mark of contempt. Probably not. He was a barbarian, after all, though perhaps a useful one.

"They are not as formidable as they once were, I admit, Yamata-*san*, but I assure you," Chandraskatta said in his best Dartmouth English, "their navy remains quite formidable. Their two carriers in my ocean are enough to give my navy pause."

Yamata turned his head. "You could not defeat them, even with your submarines?"

"No," the Admiral answered honestly, largely unaffected by the evening's drink, and wondering where all this talk was leading. "You must understand that this question is largely a technical exercise—a science experiment, shall we say?" Chandraskatta adjusted the kimono Yamata had given him, to make him a real member of this group, he'd said. "To defeat an enemy fleet, you must get close enough for your weapons to reach his ships. With their surveillance assets, they can monitor our presence and our movements from long distance. Thus they can maintain a covering presence on us from a range of, oh, something like six hundred kilometers. Since we are unable to maintain a corresponding coverage of their location and course, we cannot maneuver them out of place very easily."

"And that's why you haven't moved on Sri Lanka yet?" Tanzan Itagake asked.

"It is one of the considerations." The Admiral nodded.

"How many carriers do they now have?" Itagake went on.

"In their Pacific Fleet? Four. Two in our ocean, two based in Hawaii."

"What of the other two?" Yamata inquired.

"*Kitty Hawk* and *Ranger* are in extended overhaul status, and will not be back at sea for one and three years, respectively. Seventh Fleet currently has all the carriers. First Fleet has none. The U.S. Navy has five other carriers in commission. These are assigned to the Second and Sixth fleets, with one entering overhaul status in six weeks." Chandraskatta smiled. His information was completely up to date, and he wanted his hosts to know that. "I must tell you that as depleted as the U.S. Navy may appear to be, compared to only—what? five years ago? Compared to five years ago, then, they are quite weak, but compared to any other navy in the world, they are still immensely strong. One of their carriers is the equal of every other aircraft carrier in the world."

"You agree, then, that their aircraft carriers are their most potent weapon?" Yamata asked.

"Of course." Chandraskatta rearranged the things on the table. In the center he put an empty sake bottle. "Imagine that this is the carrier. Draw a thousand-kilometer circle around it. Nothing exists in that circle without the permission of the carrier air group. In fact, by increasing their operating tempo, that radius extends to fifteen hundred kilometers. They can strike somewhat farther than that if they need to, but even at the minimum distance I demonstrated, they can control a vast area of ocean. Take those carriers away, and they are just another frigate navy. The difficult part of the exercise is taking them away," the Admiral concluded, using simple language for the industrialists.

Chandraskatta was correct in assuming that these merchants knew little about military affairs. However, he had underestimated their ability to learn. The Admiral came from a country with a warrior tradition little known outside its own borders. Indians had stopped Alexander the Great, blunted his army, wounded the Macedonian conqueror, perhaps fatally, and put an end to his expansion, an accomplishment the Persians and Egyptians had singularly failed to do. Indian troops had fought alongside Montgomery in the defeat of Rommel—and had crushed the Japanese Army at Imphal, a fact that he had no intention of bringing up, since one of the people at the table had been a private in that army. He wondered what they had in mind, but for the moment was content to enjoy their hospitality and answer their questions, elementary as they were. The tall, handsome flag officer leaned back, wishing for a proper chair and a proper drink. This sake these prissy little merchants served was closer to water than gin, his usual drink of choice.

"But if you can?" Itagake asked.

"As I said," the Admiral replied patiently, "then they are a frigate navy. I grant you, with superb surface ships, but the 'bubble' each ship controls is far smaller. You can protect with a frigate, you cannot *project* power with one." His choice of words, he saw, stopped the conversation for a moment.

One of the others handled the linguistic niceties, and Itagake leaned back with a long "Ahhhh," as though he'd just learned something profound. Chandraskatta regarded the point as exceedingly simple—forgetting for a moment that the profound often was. However, he recognized that something important had just taken place.

What are you thinking about? He would have shed blood, even his own, to

know the answer to that question. Whatever it was, with proper warning, it might even be useful. He would have been surprised to learn that the others around the table were churning over exactly the same thought.

"Sure are burning a lot of oil," the group-operations officer noted as he began his morning brief.

USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* was on a course of zeronine-eight degrees, east by south, two hundred nautical miles southeast of Felidu Atoll. Fleet speed was eighteen knots, and would increase for the commencement of flight operations. The main tactical display in flag plot had been updated forty minutes earlier from the radar of an E-3C Hawkeye surveillance aircraft, and, indeed, the Indian Navy was burning a good deal of Bunker-Charlie, or whatever they used now to drive their ships through the water.

The display before him could easily have been that of a U.S. Navy Carrier Battle Group. The two Indian carriers, *Viraat* and *Vikrant*, were in the center of a circular formation, the pattern for which had been invented by an American named Nimitz almost eighty years earlier. Close-in escorts were *Delhi* and *Mysore*, home-built missile destroyers armed with a SAM system about which information was thin—always a worry to aviators. The second ring was composed of the Indian version of the old Russian Kashin-class destroyers, also SAM-equipped. Most interesting, however, were two other factors.

"Replenishment ships *Rajaba Gan Palan* and *Shakti* have rejoined the battle group after a brief stay in Trivandrum—"

"How long were they in port?" Jackson asked.

"Less than twenty-four hours," Commander Ed Harrison, the group-operations officer, replied. "They cycled them pretty fast, sir."

"So they just went in for a quick fill-up. How much gas do they carry?"

"Bunker fuel, about thirteen thousand tons each, another fifteen hundred each of JP. Sister ship *Deepak* has detached from the battle group and is heading northwest, probably for Trivandrum as well, after conducting un-rep operations yesterday."

"So they're working extra hard to keep their bunkers topped off. Interesting. Go on," Jackson ordered.

"Four submarines are believed to be accompanying the group. We have rough positions on one, and we've lost two roughly here." Harrison's hand drew a rough circle on the display. "The location of number four is unknown, sir. We'll be working on that today."

"Our subs out there?" Jackson asked the group commander.

"Santa Fe in close and *Greeneville* holding between us and them. *Cheyenne* is in closer to the battle group as gatekeeper," Rear Admiral Mike Dubro replied, sipping his morning coffee.

"Plan for the day, sir," Harrison went on, "is to launch four F/A-18 Echoes with tankers to head east to this point, designated POINT BAUXITE, from which they will turn northwest, approach to within thirty miles of the Indian battle group, loiter for thirty minutes, then return to BAUXITE to tank again and recover after a flight time of four hours, fortyfive minutes." For the four aircraft to do this, eight were needed to provide midair refueling support. One

each on the way out and the return leg as well. That accounted for most of *Ike's* tanker assets.

"So we want them to think we're still over that way." Jackson nodded and smiled, without commenting on the wear-and-tear on the air crews that such a mission profile made necessary. "Still tricky, I see, Mike."

"They haven't gotten a line on us yet. We're going to keep it that way, too," Dubro added.

"How are the Bugs loaded?" Robby asked, using the service nickname for the F/A-18 Hornet, "Plastic Bug."

"Four Harpoons each. White ones," Dubro added. In the Navy, exercise missiles were color-coded blue. Warshots were generally painted white. The Harpoons were air-to-surface missiles. Jackson didn't have to ask about the Sidewinder and AMRAAM air-to-air missiles that were part of the Hornet's basic load. "What I want to know is, what the hell are they up to?" the battle-group commander observed quietly.

That was what everyone wanted to know. The Indian battle group—that was what they called it, because that's exactly what it was—had been at sea for eight days now, cruising off the south coast of Sri Lanka. The putative mission for the group was support for the Indian Army's peace-keeping team, whose job was to ameliorate the problem with the Tamil Tigers. Except for one thing: the Tamil Tigers were cosseted on the *northern* part of the island nation, and the Indian fleet was to the south. The Indian two-carrier force was maneuvering constantly to avoid merchant traffic, beyond sight of land, but within air range. Staying clear of the Sri Lankan Navy was an easy task. The largest vessel that country owned might have made a nice motor yacht for a nouveau-riche private citizen, but was no more formidable than that. In short, the Indian Navy was conducting a covertpresence operation far from where it was supposed to be. The presence of fleet-replenishment ships meant that they planned to be there for a while, and also that the Indians were gaining considerable at-sea time to conduct workups. The plain truth was that the Indian Navy was operating exactly as the U.S. Navy had done for generations. Except that the United States didn't have any ambitions with Sri Lanka.

"Exercising every day?" Robby asked.

"They're being right diligent, sir," Harrison confirmed. "You can expect a pair of Harriers to form up with our Hornets, real friendly, like."

"I don't like it," Dubro observed. "Tell him about last week."

"That was a fun one to watch." Harrison called up the computerized records, which ran at faster-than-normal speed. "Start time for the exercise is about now, sir."

On the playback, Robby watched a destroyer squadron break off the main formation and head southwest, which had happened to be directly toward the *Lincoln* group at the time, causing a lot of attention in the group-operations department. On cue, the Indian destroyers had started moving randomly, then commenced a high-speed run due north. Their radars and radios blacked out, the team had then headed east, moving quickly.

"The DesRon commander knows his stuff. The carrier group evidently expected him to head east and duck under this stationary front. As you can see, their air assets headed that way." That miscue had allowed the destroyers

to dart within missile-launch range before the Indian Harriers had leaped from their decks to attack the closing surface group.

In the ten minutes required to watch the computerized playback, Robby knew that he'd just seen a simulated attack on an enemy carrier group, launched by a destroyer team whose willingness to sacrifice their ships and their lives for this hazardous mission had been demonstrated to perfection. More disturbingly, the attack had been successfully carried out. Though the tin cans would probably have been sunk, their missiles, some of them anyway, would have penetrated the carriers' point defenses and crippled their targets. Large, robust ships though aircraft carriers were, it didn't require all that much damage to prevent them from carrying out flight operations. And that was as good as a kill. The Indians had the only carriers in this ocean, except for the Americans, whose presence, Robby knew, was a source of annoyance for them. The purpose of the exercise wasn't to take out their own carriers.

"Get the feeling they don't want us here?" Dubro asked with a wry smile.

"I get the feeling we need better intelligence information on their intentions. We don't have dick at the moment, Mike."

"Why doesn't that surprise me," Dubro observed. "What about their intentions toward Ceylon?" The older name for the nation was more easily remembered.

"Nothing that I know about." As deputy J-3, the planning directorate for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Robby had access to literally everything generated by the U.S. intelligence community. "But what you just showed me says a lot."

All you had to do was look at the display, where the water was, where the land was, where the ships were. The Indian Navy was cruising in such a way as to position itself between Sri Lanka and anyone who might approach from the south to come to Sri Lanka. Like the U.S. Navy, for example. It had practiced an attack on such a force. To that end, it was clearly prepared to remain at sea for a long time. If it was an exercise, it was an expensive one. If not? Well, you just couldn't tell, could you?

"Where are their amphibs?"

"Not close," Dubro answered. "Aside from that, I don't know. I don't have the assets to check, and I don't have any intel on them. They have a total of sixteen LSTs, and I figure twelve of them can probably operate as a group. Figure they can move a heavy brigade with them, combatloaded and ready to hit a beach somewhere. There's a few choice sites on the north coast of that island. We can't reach them from here, at least not very well. I need more assets, Robby."

"There aren't more assets to give, Mike."

"Two subs. I'm not being greedy. You can see that." The two SSNs would move to cover the Gulf of Mannar, and that was the most likely invasion area. "I need more intelligence support, too, Rob. You can see why."

"Yep." Jackson nodded. "I'll do what I can. When do I leave?"

"Two hours." He'd be flying off on an S-3 Viking antisubmarine aircraft. The "Hoover," as it was known, had good range. That was important. He'd be flying to Singapore, the better to give the impression that Dubro's battle group was southeast of Sri Lanka, not southwest. Jackson reflected that he would have flown twenty-four thousand miles for what was essentially a half hour's

worth of briefing and the look in the eyes of an experienced carrier aviator. Jackson slid his chair back on the tiled floor as Harrison keyed the display to a smaller scale. It now showed *Abraham Lincoln* heading northeast from Diego Garcia, adding an additional air wing to Dubro's command. He'd need it. The operational tempo required to cover the Indians—especially to do so deceptively—was putting an incredible strain on men and aircraft. There was just too much ocean in the world for eight working aircraft carriers to handle, and nobody back in Washington understood that. *Enterprise* and *Stennis* were working up to relieve *Ike* and Abe in a few months, and even that meant there would be a time when U.S. presence in this area would be short. The Indians would know that, too. You just couldn't conceal the return time of the battle groups from the families. The word would get out, and the Indians would hear it, and what would they be doing then?

"Hi, Clarice." Murray stood up for his luncheon guest. He thought of her as his own Dr. Ruth. Short, a tiny bit overweight, Dr. Golden was in her middle fifties, with twinkling blue eyes and a face that always seemed on the edge of delivering the punch line of a particularly good joke. It was that similarity between them that had fostered their bond. Both were bright, serious professionals, and both had elegant intellectual disguises. Hearty-fellow and hearty-ladywell-met, the life of whatever party they might attend, but under the smiles and the chuckles were keen minds that missed little and collected much. Murray thought of Golden as one hell of a potential cop. Golden had much the same professional evaluation of Murray.

"To what do I owe this honor, ma'am?" Dan asked in his usual courtly voice. The waiter delivered the menus, and she waited pleasantly for him to depart. It was Murray's first clue, and though the smile remained fixed on his face, his eyes focused in a little more sharply on his diminutive lunch guest.

"I need some advice, Mr. Murray," Golden replied, giving another signal. "Who has jurisdiction over a crime committed on federal property?"

"The Bureau, always," Dan answered, leaning back in his seat and checking his service pistol. Business to Murray was enforcing the law, and feeling his handgun in its accustomed place acted as a sort of personal touchstone, a reminder that, elevated and important as the sign on his office door said he was today, he had started out doing bank robberies in the Philadelphia Field Division, and his badge and gun still made him a sworn member of his country's finest police agency.

"Even on Capitol Hill?" Clarice asked.

"Even on Capitol Hill," Murray repeated. Her subsequent silence surprised him. Golden was never reticent about much. You always knew what she was thinking——well, Murray amended, you knew what she wanted you to know. She played her little games, just as he did. "Talk to me, Dr. Golden."

"Rape."

Murray nodded, setting the menu down. "Okay, first of all, please tell me about your patient."

"Female, age thirty-five, single, never married. She was referred to me by her gynecologist, an old friend. She came to me clinically depressed. I've had

three sessions with hour."

Only three, Murray thought. Clarice was a witch at this stuff, so perceptive. Jesus, what an interrogator she would have made with her gentle smile and quiet motherly voice.

"When did it happen?" Names could wait for the moment. Murray would start with the barest facts of the case.

"Three years ago."

The FBI agent—he still preferred "Special Agent" to his official title of Deputy Assistant Director—frowned immediately. "Long time, Clarice. No forensics, I suppose."

"No, it's her word against his—except for one thing." Golden reached into her purse and pulled out photocopies of the Beringer letter, blown up in the copying process. Murray read through the pages slowly while Dr. Golden watched his face for reaction.

"Holy shit," Dan breathed while the waiter hovered twenty feet away, thinking his guests were a reporter and a source, as was hardly uncommon in Washington. "Where's the original?"

"In my office. I was very careful handling it," Golden told him.

That made Murray smile. The monogrammed paper was an immediate help. In addition, paper was especially good at holding fingerprints, especially if kept tucked away in a cool, dry place, as such letters usually were. The Senate aide in question would have been fingerprinted as part of her security-clearance process, which meant the likely author of this document could be positively identified. The papers gave time, place, events, and also announced her desire to die. Sad as it was, it made this document something akin to a dying declaration, therefore, arguably, admissible in federal district court as evidentiary material in a criminal case. The defense attorney would object—they always did—and the objection would be overruled—it always was—and the jury members would hear every word, leaning forward as they always did to catch the voice from the grave. Except in this case it wouldn't be a jury, at least not at first.

Murray didn't like anything about rape cases. As a man and a cop, he viewed that class of criminal with special contempt. It was a smudge on his own manhood that someone could commit such a cowardly, foul act. More professionally disturbing was the troublesome fact that rape cases so often came down to one person's word against another's. Like most investigative cops, Murray distrusted all manner of eyewitness testimony. People were poor observers—it was that simple—and rape victims, crushed by the experience, often made poor witnesses, their testimony further attacked by the defense counsel. Forensic evidence, on the other hand, was something you could prove, it was incontrovertible. Murray loved that sort of evidence.

"Is it enough to begin a criminal investigation?"

Murray looked up and spoke quietly: "Yes, ma'am."

"And who he is—"

"My current job—well, I'm sort of the street-version of the executive assistant to Bill Shaw. You don't know Bill, do you?"

"Only by reputation."

"It's all true," Murray assured her. "We were classmates at Quantico, and we

broke in the same way, in the same place, doing the same thing. A crime is a crime, and we're cops, and that's the name of the song, Clarice."

But even as his mouth proclaimed the creed of his agency, his mind was saying, *Holy shit.* There was a great big political dimension to this one. The President didn't need the trouble. Well, who ever needed this sort of thing? For goddamned sure, Barbara Linders and Lisa Beringer didn't need to be raped by someone they'd trusted. But the real bottom line was simple: thirty years earlier, Daniel E. Murray had graduated from the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia, had raised his right hand to the sky and sworn an oath to God. There were gray areas. There always would be. A good agent had to use his judgment, know which laws could be bent, and how far. But not this far, and not this law. Bill Shaw was of the same cut. Blessed by fate to occupy a position as apolitical as an office in Washington, D.C., could be, Shaw had built his reputation on integrity, and was too old to change. A case like this would start in his seventh-floor office.

"I have to ask, is this for-real?"

"My best professional judgment is that my patient is telling the truth in every detail."

"Will she testify?"

"Yes."

"Your evaluation of the letter?"

"Also quite genuine, psychologically speaking." Murray already knew that from his own experience, but someone—first he, then other agents, and ultimately a jury—needed to hear it from a pro.

"Now what?" the psychologist asked.

Murray stood, to the surprised disappointment of the hovering waiter. "Now we drive down to headquarters and meet with Bill. We'll get case agents in to set up a file. Bill and I and the case agent will walk across the street to the Department and meet with the Attorney General. After that, I don't know exactly. We've never had one like this—not since the early seventies, anyway—and I'm not sure of procedure just yet. The usual stuff with your patient. Long, tough interviews. We'll talk to Ms. Beringer's family, friends, look for papers, diaries. But that's the technical side. The political side will be touchy." And for that reason, Dan knew, he'd be the man running the case. Another *Holy shit!* crossed his mind, as he remembered the part in the Constitution that would govern the whole procedure. Dr. Golden saw the wavering in his eyes and, rare for her, misread what it meant.

"My patient needs—"

Murray blinked. *So what?* he asked himself. *It's still a crime.*

"I know, Clarice. She needs justice. So does Lisa Beringer. You know what? So does the government of the United States of America."

He didn't look like a computer-software engineer. He wasn't at all scruffy. He wore a pinstriped suit, carried a briefcase. He might have said that it was a disguise required by his clientele and the professional atmosphere of the area, but the simple truth was that he preferred to look neat.

The procedure was just as straightforward as it could be. The client used

Stratus mainframes, compact, powerful machines that were easily networked —in fact they were the platform of choice for many bulletin-board services because of their reasonable price and high electronic reliability. There were three of them in the room. “Alpha” and “Beta”—so labeled with white letters on blue plastic boards—were the primaries, and took on the front-line duties on alternate days, with one always backing up the other. The third machine, “Zulu,” was the emergency backup, and whenever Zulu was operating, you knew that a service team was either already there or on the way. Another facility, identical in every way except for the number of people around, was across the East River, with a different physical location, different power source, different phone lines, different satellite uplinks. Each building was a high-rise fire-resistant structure with an automatic sprinkler system around the computer room, and a DuPont 1301 system inside of it, the better to eliminate a fire in seconds. Each system-trio had battery backups sufficient to run the hardware for twelve hours. New York safety and environmental codes perversely did not allow the presence of emergency generators in the buildings, an annoyance to the systems engineers who were paid to worry about such things. And worry they did, despite the fact that the duplication, the exquisite redundancies that in a military context were called “defense in depth,” would protect against anything and everything that could be imagined.

Well, nearly everything.

On the front service panel of each of the mainframes was an SCSI port. This was an innovation for the new models, an implicit bow to the fact that desktop computers were so powerful that they could upload important information far more easily than the old method of hanging a tape reel.

In this case, the upload terminal was a permanent fixture of the system. Attached to the overall system control panel which controlled Alpha, Beta, and Zulu was a thirdgeneration Power PC, and attached to it in turn was a Bernoulli removable-disk drive. Colloquially known as a “toaster” because its disk was about the size of a piece of bread, this machine had a gigabyte of storage, far more than was needed for this program.

“Okay?” the engineer asked.

The system controller moved his mouse and selected Zulu from his screen of options. A senior operator behind him confirmed that he’d made the right selection. Alpha and Beta were doing their normal work, and could not be disturbed.

“You’re up on Zulu, Chuck.”

“Roger that,” Chuck replied with a smile. The pinstriped engineer slid the cartridge into the slot and waited for the proper icon to appear on the screen. He clicked on it, opening a new window to reveal the contents of PORTA-1, his name for the cartridge.

The new window had only two items in it: INSTALLER and ELECTRA-CLERK-2.4.0. An automatic antivirus program immediately swept through the new files, and after five seconds pronounced them clean.

“Looking good, Chuck,” the sys-con told him. His supervisor nodded concurrence.

“Well, gee, Rick, can I deliver the baby now?”

"Hit it."

Chuck Searls selected the INSTALL icon and doubleclicked it.

ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO REPLACE "ELECTRA-CLERK 2.3.1" WITH NEW PROGRAM "ELECTRA-CLERK 2.4.0"?

a box asked him. Searls clicked the "YES" box.

ARE YOU REALLY sure????

another box asked immediately.

"Who put that in?"

"I did," the sys-con answered with a grin.

"Funny." Searls clicked YES again.

The toaster drive started humming. Searls liked systems that you could hear as they ran, the *whip-whip* sounds of the moving heads added to the whir of the rotating disk. The program was only fifty megabytes. The transfer took fewer seconds than were needed for him to open his bottle of spring water and take a sip.

"Well," Searls asked as he slid his chair back from the console, "you want to see if it works?"

He turned to look out. The computer room was walled in with glass panels, but beyond them he could see New York Harbor. A cruise liner was heading out; medium size, painted white. Heading where? he wondered. Someplace warm, with white sand and blue skies and a nice bright sun all the time. Someplace a hell of a lot different from New York City, he was sure of that. Nobody took a cruise to a place like the Big Apple. How nice to be on that ship, heading away from the blustery winds of fall. How much nicer still not to return on it, Searls thought with a wistful smile. Well, airplanes were faster, and you didn't have to ride them back either.

The sys-con, working on his control console, brought Zulu on-line. At 16:10:00 EST, the backup machine started duplicating the jobs being done by Alpha, and simultaneously backed up by Beta. With one difference. The throughput monitor showed that Zulu was running slightly faster. On a day like this, Zulu normally tended to fall behind, but now it was running so fast that the machine was actually "resting" for a few seconds each minute.

"Smokin', Chuck!" the sys-con observed. Searls drained his water bottle, dropped it in the nearest trash bucket, and walked over.

"Yeah, I cut out about ten thousand lines of code. It wasn't the machines, it was the program. It just took us a while to figure the right paths through the boards. I think we have it now."

"What's different?" the senior controller asked. He knew quite a bit about software design.

"I changed the hierarchy system, how it hands things off from one parallel board to another. Still needs a little work on synchronicity, tally isn't as fast as posting. I think I can beat that in another month or two, cut some fat out of the front end."

The sys-con punched a command for the first benchmark test. It came up at once. “Six percent faster than twopoint-three-point-one. Not too shabby.”

“We needed that six percent,” the supervisor said, meaning that he needed more. Trades just ran too heavy sometimes, and like everyone in the Depository Trust Company, he lived in fear of falling behind.

“Send me some data at the end of the week and maybe I can deliver a few more points to you,” Searls promised.

“Good job, Chuck.”

“Thanks, Bud.”

“Who else uses this?”

“This version? Nobody. A custom variation runs the machines over at CHIPS.”

“Well, you’re the man,” the supervisor noted generously. He would have been less generous had he thought it through. The supervisor had helped design the entire system. All the redundancies, all the safety systems, the way that tapes were pulled off the machines every night and driven upstate. He’d worked with a committee to establish every safeguard that was necessary to the business he was in. But the quest for efficiency—and perversely, the quest for security—had created a vulnerability to which he was predictably blind. All the computers used the same software. They had to. Different software in the different computers, like different languages in an office, would have prevented, or at the very least impeded, cross-talk among the individual systems; and that would have been self-defeating. As a result, despite all the safeguards there was a single common point of vulnerability for all six of his machines. They all spoke the same language. They had to. They were the most important, if the least known, link in the American trading business.

Even here, DTC was not blind to the potential hazard. ELECTRA-CLERK 2.4.0 would not be uploaded to Alpha and Beta until it had run for a week on Zulu, and then another week would pass before they were loaded onto the backup site, whose machines were labeled “Charlie,” “Delta,” and “Tango.” That was to ensure that 2.4.0 was both efficient and “crash-worthy,” an engineering term that had come into the software field a year earlier. Soon, people would get used to the new software, marvel at its faster speed. All the Stratus machines would speak exactly the same programming language, trade information back and forth in an electronic conversation of ones and zeros, like friends around a card table talking business.

Soon they would all know the same joke. Some would think it a good one, but not anyone at DTC.

3

Collegium

"So, we're agreed?" the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board asked. Those around the table nodded. It wasn't that hard a call. For the second time in the past three months, President Durling had made it known, quietly, through the Secretary of the Treasury, that he would not object to another half-point rise in the Discount Rate. That was the interest rate which the Federal Reserve charged to banks that borrowed money—where else would they borrow such sums, except from the Fed? Any rise in that rate, of course, was passed immediately on to the consumer.

It was a constant balancing act, for the men and women around the polished oak table. They controlled the quantity of money in the American economy. As though by turning the valve that opened or closed the floodgate on an irrigation dam, they could regulate the amount of currency that existed, trying always not to provide too much or too little.

It was more complex than that, of course. Money had little physical reality. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing, located less than a mile away, had neither the paper nor the ink to make enough one-dollar bills for what the Fed parceled out every day. "Money" was mainly an electronic expression, a matter of sending a message: *You, First National Bank of Podunk, now have an additional three million dollars which you may lend to Joe's Hardware, or Jeff Brown's Gas-and-Go, or for new homeowners to borrow as mortgage loans to pay back for the next twenty years.* Few of these people were paid in cash—with credit cards there was less for a robber to steal, an employee to embezzle, or most inconveniently of all, a clerk to count, recount, and walk to the local branch of the bank. As a result, what appeared by the magic of computer E-mail or teleprinter message was lent out by written draft, to be repaid later by yet another theoretical expression, usually a check written on a small slip of special paper, often decorated with the picture of a flying eagle or a fishing boat on some lake that didn't exist, because the banks competed for customers and people liked such things.

The power of the people in this room was so stunning that even they rarely thought about it. By a simple decision, the people around the table had just made everything in America cost more. Every adjustable-rate mortgage for every home, every auto loan, every credit card revolving line, would become more expensive every month. Because of that decision, every business and household in America would have less disposable income to spend on employee benefits or Christmas toys. What began as a press release would reach into every wallet in the nation. Prices would increase on every consumer item from home computers to bubble gum, thus reducing further still

everyone's real buying power.

And this was good, the Fed thought. All the statistical indicators said the economy was running a little too hot. There was a real danger of increasing inflation. In fact, there was always inflation to one degree or another, but the interest raise would limit it to tolerable levels. Prices would still go up somewhat, and the increase in the discount rate would make them go up further still.

It was an example of fighting fire with fire. Raising interest rates meant that, at the margin, people would borrow less, which would actually reduce the amount of money in circulation, which would lessen the buying pressure, which would cause prices to stabilize, more or less, and prevent something that all knew to be more harmful than a momentary blip in interest rates.

Like ripples expanding from a stone tossed into a lake, there would be other effects still. The interest on Treasury bills would increase. These were debt instruments of the government itself. People—actually institutions for the most part, like banks and pension funds and investment firms that had to park their clients' money somewhere while waiting for a good opportunity on the stock market—would give money, electronically, to the government for a term varying from three months to thirty years, and in return for the use of that money, the government itself had to pay interest (much of it recouped in taxes, of course). The marginal increase in the Federal-funds rate would raise the interest rate the government had to pay—determined at an auction. Thus the cost of the federal deficit would also increase, forcing the government to pull in more of the domestic money supply, reducing the pool of money available to personal and business loans and further increasing interest rates for the public through market forces over and above what the Fed enforced itself.

Finally, the mere fact that bank and T-Bill rates would increase made the stock market less attractive to investors because the government-guaranteed return was "safer" than the more speculative rate of return anticipated by a company whose products and/or services had to compete in the marketplace.

On Wall Street, individual investors and professional managers who monitored economic indicators took the evening news (increases in the Fed rate were usually timed for release after the close of the markets) phlegmatically and made the proper notes to "go short on" (sell) their positions in some issues. This would reduce the posted values of numerous stocks, causing the Dow Jones Industrial Average to sink. Actually, it was not an average at all, but the sum of the current market value of thirty blue-chip stocks, with Allied Signal on one end of the alphabet, Woolworth's on the other, and Merck in the middle. It was an indicator whose utility today was mainly that of giving the news media something to report to the public, which for the most part didn't know what it represented anyway. The dip in "the Dow" would make some people nervous, causing more selling, and more decline in the market until others saw opportunity in stock issues that had been depressed farther than they deserved to be. Sensing that the true value of those issues was higher than the market price indicated, they would buy in measured quantities, allowing the Dow (and other market indicators) to increase again until a point of equilibrium was reached, and confidence

restored. And all these multifaceted changes were imposed on everyone's individual lives by a handful of people in an ornate boardroom in Washington, D.C., whose names few investment professionals even knew, much less the general public.

The remarkable thing was that everyone accepted the entire process, seemingly as normal as physical laws of nature, despite the fact that it was really as ethereal as a rainbow. The money did not physically exist. Even "real" money was only specially made paper printed with black ink on the front and green on the back. What backed the money was not gold or something of intrinsic value, but rather the collective belief that money *had* value because it *had to have* such value. Thus it was that the monetary system of the United States and every other country in the world was entirely an exercise in psychology, a thing of the mind, and as a result, so was every other aspect of the American economy. If money was simply a matter of communal faith, then so was everything else. What the Federal Reserve had done that afternoon was a measured exercise in first shaking that faith and then allowing it to reestablish itself of its own accord through the minds of those who held it. Holders of that faith included the governors of the Fed, because they truly understood it all—or thought that they did. Individually they might joke that nobody really understood how it all worked, any more than any of them could explain the nature of God, but like theologians constantly trying to determine and communicate the nature of a deity, it was their job to keep things moving, to make the belief-structure real and tangible, never quite acknowledging that it all rested on nothing even as real as the paper currency they carried with them for the times when the use of a plastic credit card was inconvenient.

They were trusted, in the distant way that people trusted their clergy, to maintain the structure on which worldly faith always depended, proclaiming the reality of something that could not be seen, an edifice whose physical manifestations were found only in buildings of stone and the sober looks of those who worked there. And, they told themselves, it all worked. Didn't it?

In many ways Wall Street was the one part of America in which Japanese citizens, especially those from Tokyo itself, felt most at home. The buildings were so tall as to deny one a look at the sky, the streets so packed that a visitor from another planet might think that yellow cabs and black limousines were the primary form of life here. People moved along the crowded, dirty sidewalks in bustling anonymity, eyes rigidly fixed forward both to show purpose and to avoid even visual contact with others who might be competitors or, more likely, were just in the way. The whole city of New York had taken its demeanor from this place, brusque, rapid, impersonal, tough in form, but not in substance. Its inhabitants told themselves that they were where the action was, and were so fixed on their individual and collective goals that they resented all the others who felt precisely the same way. In that sense it was a perfect world. Everyone felt exactly the same. Nobody gave much of a damn about anyone else. At least, that's the way it appeared. In truth, the people who worked here had spouses and children, interests and

hobbies, desires and dreams, just like anybody else, but between the hours of eight in the morning and six in the evening all that was subordinated to the rules of their business. The business, of course, was money, a class of product that knew no place or loyalty. And so it was that on the fiftyeighth floor of Six Columbus Lane, the new headquarters building of the Columbus Group, a changeover was taking place.

The room was breathtaking in every possible aspect. The walls were solid walnut, not veneer, and lovingly maintained by a well-paid team of craftsmen. Two of the walls were polished glass that ran from the carpet to the Celotex ceiling panels, and offered a view of New York Harbor and beyond. The carpet was thick enough to swallow up shoes— and to deliver a nasty static shock, which the people here had learned to tolerate. The conference table was forty feet of red granite, and the chairs around it priced out at nearly two thousand dollars each.

The Columbus Group, founded only eleven years before, had gone from being just one more upstart, to *enfant terrible,* to bright rising light, to serious player, to among the best in its field, to its current position as a cornerstone of the mutual-funds community. Founded by George Winston, the company now controlled a virtual fleet of fundmanagement teams. The three primary teams were fittingly called Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria, because when Winston had founded the company, at the age of twenty-nine, he'd just read and been captivated by Samuel Eliot Morison's *The European Discovery of the New World*, and, marveling at the courage, vision, and sheer *chutzpah* of the restless navigators from Prince Henry's school, he'd decided to chart his own course by their example. Now forty, and rich beyond the dreams of avarice, it was time to leave, to smell the roses, to take his ninety-foot sailing yacht on some extended cruises. In fact, his precise plans were to spend the next few months learning how to sail *Cristobol* as expertly as he did everything else in his life, and then to duplicate the voyages of discovery, one every summer, until he ran out of examples to follow, and then maybe write his own book about it.

He was a man of modest size that his personality seemed to make larger. A fitness fanatic—stress was the prime killer on the Street—Winston positively glowed with the confidence imparted by his superb conditioning. He walked into the already-full conference room with the air of a President-elect entering his headquarters after the conclusion of a successful campaign, his stride fast and sure, his smile courtly and guileless. Pleased with this culmination of his professional life on this day, he even nodded his head to his principal guest.

"Yamata-san, so good to see you again," George Winston said with an extended hand. "You came a long way for this."

"For an event of this importance," the Japanese industrialist replied, "how could I not?"

Winston escorted the smaller man to his seat at the far end of the table before returning toward his own at the head. There were teams of lawyers and investment executives in between—rather like football squads at the line of scrimmage, Winston thought, as he walked the length of the table, guarding his own feelings as he did so.

It was the only way out, damn it, Winston told himself. Nothing else would have worked. The first six years running this place had been the greatest

exhilaration of his life. Starting with less than twenty clients, building their money and his reputation at the same time. Working at home, he remembered, his brain racing to outstrip his paces across the room, one computer and one dedicated phone line, worried about feeding his family, blessed by the support of his loving wife despite the fact that she'd been pregnant the first time—with twins, no less, and *still* she'd never missed a chance to express her love and confidence—parlaying his skill and instinct into success. By thirty-five it had all been done, really. Two floors of a downtown office tower, his own plush office, a team of bright young "rocket scientists" to do the detail work. That was when he'd first thought about getting out.

In building up the funds of his clients, he'd bet his own money, too, of course, until his personal fortune, after taxes, was six hundred fifty-seven million dollars. Basic conservatism would not allow him to leave his money behind, and besides, he was concerned about where the market was heading, and so he was taking it all out, cashing in and switching over to a more conservative manager. It seemed a strange course of action even to himself, but he just didn't want to be *bothered* with this business anymore. Going "conservative" was dull, and would necessarily cast away enormous future opportunities, but, he'd asked himself for years, what was the point? He owned six palatial homes, two personal automobiles at each, a helicopter, he leased a personal jet, *Cristobal* was his principal toy. He had everything he'd ever wanted, and even with conservative portfolio management, his personal wealth would continue to rise faster than the inflation rate because he didn't have the ego to spend even as much as the annualized return would generate. And so he'd parcel it out in fifty-million-dollar blocks, covering every segment of the market through investment colleagues who had not achieved his personal success, but whose integrity and acumen he trusted. The switchover had been under way for three years, very quietly, as he'd searched for a worthy successor for the Columbus Group. Unfortunately, the only one who'd stepped forward was this little bastard.

"Ownership" was the wrong term, of course. The true owners of the group were the individual investors who gave their money to his custody, and that was a trust which Winston never forgot. Even with his decision made, his conscience clawed at him. Those people relied on him and his people, but him most of all, because his was the name on the most important door. The trust of so many people was a heavy burden which he'd borne with skill and pride, but enough was enough. It was time to attend to the needs of his own family, five kids and a faithful wife who were tired of "understanding" why Daddy had to be away so much. The needs of the many. The needs of the few. But the few were closer, weren't they?

Raizo Yamata was putting in much of his personal fortune and quite a bit of the corporate funds of his many industrial operations in order to make good the funds that Winston was taking out. Quiet though Winston might wish it to be, and understandable as his action surely was to anyone with a feel for the business, it would still become cause for comment. Therefore it was necessary that the man replacing him be willing to put his own money back in. That sort of move would restore any wavering confidence. It would also cement the

marriage between the Japanese and American financial systems. While Winston watched, instruments were signed that "enabled" the funds transfer for which international-bank executives had stayed late at their offices in six countries. A man of great personal substance, Raizo Yamata.

Well, Winston corrected himself, great personal liquidity. Since leaving the Wharton School, he'd known a lot of bright, sharp operators, all of them cagey, intelligent people who'd tried to hide their predatory nature behind façades of humor and bonhomie. You soon developed an instinct for them. It was that simple. Perhaps Yamata thought that his heritage made him more unreadable, just as he doubtless thought himself to be smarter than the average bear—or bull in this case, Winston smiled to himself. Maybe, maybe not, he thought, looking down the forty-foot table. Why was there no excitement in the man? The Japanese had emotions, too. Those with whom he'd done business had been affable enough, pleased as any other man to make a big hit on the Street. Get a few drinks into them and they were no different from Americans, really. Oh, a little more reserved, a little shy, perhaps, but always polite, that's what he liked best about them, their fine manners, something that would have been welcome in New Yorkers. That was it, Winston thought. Yamata *was* polite, but it wasn't genuine. It was pro forma with him, and shyness had nothing to do with it. Like a little robot....

No, that wasn't true either, Winston thought, as the papers slid down the table toward him. Yamata's wall was just thicker than the average, the better to conceal what he felt. Why had he built such a wall? It wasn't necessary here, was it? In this room he was among equals; more than that, he was now among partners. He had just signed over his money, placed his personal well-being in the same boat as so many others. By transferring nearly two hundred million dollars, he now owned over one percent of the funds managed by Columbus, which made him the institution's largest single investor. With that status came control of every dollar, share, and option the fund had. It wasn't the largest fleet on the Street by any means, but the Columbus Group was one of the leaders. People looked to Columbus for ideas and trends. Yamata had bought more than a trading house. He now had a real position in the hierarchy of America's money-managers. His name, largely unknown in America until recently, would now be spoken with respect, which was something that ought to have put a smile on his face, Winston thought. But it didn't.

The final sheet of paper got to his chair, slid across by one of his principal subordinates, and, with his signature, about to become Yamata's. It was just so easy. One signature, a minute quantity of blue ink arranged in a certain way, and with it went eleven years of his life. One signature gave his business over to a man he didn't understand.

Well, I don't have to, do I? He'll try to make money for himself and others, just like I did. Winston took out his pen and signed without looking up. *Why didn't you look first?*

He heard a cork pop out of a champagne bottle and looked up to see the smiles on the faces of his former employees. In consummating the deal he'd become a symbol for them. Forty years old, rich, successful, retired, able to go after the fun dreams now, without having to stick around forever. That was

the personal goal of everyone who worked in a place like this. Bright as these people were, few had the guts to give it a try. Even then, most of them failed, Winston reminded himself, but he was the living proof that it could happen. Tough-minded and cynical as these investment professionals were—or pretended to be—at heart they had the same dream, to make the pile and leave, get away from the incredible stress of finding opportunities in reams of paper reports and analyses, make a rep, draw people and their money in, do good things for them and yourself—and *leave.* The pot of gold was *in* the rainbow, and at the end was an exit. A sailboat, a house in Florida, another in the Virgins, another in Aspen . . . sleeping until eight sometimes; playing golf. It was a vision of the future which beckoned strongly.

But why not now?

Dear God, what had he done? Tomorrow morning he'd wake up and not know what to do. Was it possible to turn it off just like that?

A little late for that, George, he told himself, reaching for the offered glass of Moët, taking the obligatory sip. He raised his glass to toast Yamata, for that, too, was obligatory. Then he saw the smile, expected but surprising. It was the smile of a victorious man. Why that? Winston asked himself. He'd paid top dollar. It wasn't the sort of deal in which anyone had "won" or "lost." Winston was taking his money out, Yamata was putting his money in. And yet that smile. It was a jarring note, all the more so because he didn't understand it. His mind raced even as the bubbly wine slid down his throat. If only the smile had been friendly and gracious, but it wasn't. Their eyes met, forty feet apart, in a look that no one else caught, and despite the fact that there had been no battle fought and no victors identified, it was as though a war was being fought.

Why? Instincts. Winston immediately turned his loose. There was just something—what? A nastiness in Yamata. Was he one of those who viewed everything as combat? Winston had been that way once, but grown out of it. Competition was always tough, but civilized. On the Street everyone competed with everyone else, too, for security, advice, consensus, and competition, which was tough but friendly so long as everyone obeyed the same rules.

You're not in that game, are you? he wanted to ask, too late.

Winston tried a new ploy, interested in the game that had started so unexpectedly. He lifted his glass, and silently toasted his successor while the other people in the room chattered across the table. Yamata reciprocated the gesture, and his mien actually became more arrogant, radiating contempt at the stupidity of the man who had just sold out to him.

You were so good at concealing your feelings before, why not now? You really think you're the cat's ass, that you've done something . . . bigger than I know. What?

Winston looked away, out the windows to the mirrorcalm water of the harbor. He was suddenly bored with the game, uninterested in whatever competition that little bastard thought himself to have won. *Hell*, he told himself, *I'm out of here. I've lost nothing. I've gained my freedom. I've got my money. I've got everything. Okay, fine, you can run the house and make your money, and have a seat in any club or restaurant in town, whenever you're here, and tell yourself how important you are, and if you think that's a victory, then it is.*

But it's not a victory over anyone, Winston concluded.

It was too bad. Winston had caught everything, as he usually did, identified all the right elements. But for the first time in years, he'd failed to assemble them into the proper scenario. It wasn't his fault. He understood his own game completely, and had merely assumed, wrongly, that it was the only game in town.

Chet Nomuri worked very hard not to be an American citizen. His was the fourth generation of his family in the U.S.—the first of his ancestors had arrived right after the turn of the century and before the "Gentlemen's Agreement" between Japan and America restricting further immigration. It would have insulted him had he thought about it more. Of greater insult was what had happened to his grandparents and great-grandparents despite full U.S. citizenship. His grandfather had leaped at the chance to prove his loyalty to his country, and served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, returning home with two Purple Hearts and mastersergeant stripes only to find that the family business—office supplies—had been sold off for a song and his family sent to an intern camp. With stoic patience, he had started over, built it up with a new and unequivocal name, Veteran's Office Furniture, and made enough money to send his three sons through college and beyond. Chet's own father was a vascular surgeon, a small, jolly man who'd been born in government captivity, and whose parents, for that reason—and to please *his* grandfather—had maintained some of the traditions, such as language.

Done it pretty well, too, Nomuri thought. He'd overcome his accent problems in a matter of weeks, and now, sitting in the Tokyo bathhouse, everyone around him wondered which prefecture he had come from. Nomuri had identification papers for several. He was a field officer of the Central Intelligence Agency, perversely on assignment for the U.S. Department of Justice, and completely without the knowledge of the U.S. Department of State. One of the things he had learned from his surgeon father was to fix his eyes forward to the things he could do, not back at things he couldn't change. In this the Nomuri family had bought into America, quietly, undramatically, and successfully, Chet told himself, sitting up to his neck in hot water.

The rules of the bath were perfectly straightforward. You could talk about everything but business, and you could even talk about that, but only the gossip, not the substantive aspects of how you made your money and your deals. Within those loose constraints, seemingly everything was open for discussion in a surprisingly casual forum in this most structured of societies. Nomuri got there at about the same time every day, and had been doing so long enough that the people he met were on a similar schedule, knew him, and were comfortable with him. He already knew everything there was to know about their wives and families, as they did about his—or rather, about the fictional "legend" that he'd built himself and which was now as real to him as the Los Angeles neighborhood in which he'd come to manhood.

"I need a mistress," Kazuo Taoka said, hardly for the first time. "My wife, all she wants to do is watch television since our son is born."

"All they ever do is complain," another salaryman agreed. There was a

concurring series of grunts from the other men in the pool.

"A mistress is expensive," Nomuri noted from his corner of the bath, wondering what the wives complained about in their bathing pools. "In money and time."

Of the two, time was the more important. Each of the young executives—well, not really that, but the borderline between what in America would seem a clerkship and a real decision-making post was hazy in Japan—made a good living, but the price for it was to be bound as tightly to his corporation as one of Tennessee Ernie Ford's coal miners. Frequently up before dawn, commuting to work mainly by train from outlying suburbs, they worked in crowded offices, worked hard and late, and went home most often to find wives and children asleep. Despite what he'd learned from TV and research before coming over here, it still came as a shock to Nomuri that the pressures of business might actually be destroying the social fabric of the country, that the structure of the family itself was damaged. It was all the more surprising because the strength of the Japanese family unit was the only thing that had enabled his own ancestors to succeed in an America where racism had been a seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

"Expensive, yes," Taoka agreed morosely, "but where else can a man get what he needs?"

"That is true," another said on the other side of the pool. Well, not really a pool, but too big for a tub. "It costs too much, but what is it worth to be a man?"

"Easier for the bosses," Nomuri said next, wondering where this would lead. He was still early in his assignment, still building the foundation for embarking on his real mission, taking his time, as he'd been ordered to do by Ed and Mary Pat.

"You should see what Yamata-san has going for him," another salaryman observed with a dark chuckle.

"Oh?" Taoka asked.

"He is friendly with Goto," the man went on with a conspiratorial look.

"The politician—ah, yes, of course!"

Nomuri leaned back and closed his eyes, letting the hundred-plus-degree water of the bath envelop him, not wanting to appear interested as his brain turned on its internal tape-recorder. "Politician," he murmured sleepily. "Hmph."

"I had to run some papers to Yamata-san last month, a quiet place not far from here. Papers about the deal he just made today, in fact. Goto was entertaining him. They let me in, I suppose Yamata-san wanted me to have a look. The girl with them . . ." His voice became slightly awed. "Tall and blonde, such fine bosoms."

"Where does one buy an American mistress?" another interjected coarsely.

"And she knew her place," the storyteller went on. "She sat there while Yamata-san went over the papers, waiting patiently. No shame in her at all. Such lovely bosoms," the man concluded.

So the stories about Goto are true, Nomuri thought. *How the hell do people like that make it so far in politics?* the field officer asked himself. Only a second later he reproved himself for the stupidity of the question. Such behavior in

politicians dated back to the Trojan War and beyond.

"You cannot stop there," Taoka insisted humorously. The man didn't, elaborating on the scene and earning the rapt attention of the others, who already knew all the relevant information on the wives of all present, and were excited to hear the description of a "new" girl in every clinical detail.

"Who cares about them?" Nomuri asked crossly, with closed eyes. "They're too tall, their feet are too big, their manners are poor, and—"

"Let him tell the story," an excited voice insisted. Nomuri shrugged his submission to the collegial will while his mind recorded every word. The salaryman had an eye for detail, and in less than a minute Nomuri had a full physical description. The report would go through the Station Chief to Langley, because the CIA kept a file on the personal habits of politicians all over the world. There was no such thing as a useless fact, though he was hoping to get information of more immediate use than Goto's sexual proclivities.

The debriefing was held at the Farm, officially known as Camp Peary, a CIA training facility located off of Interstate 64 between Williamsburg and Yorktown, Virginia. Cold drinks were gunned down as rapidly as the cans could be popped open, as both men went over maps and explained the six weeks in-country that had ended so well. Corp, CNN said, was going to begin his trial in the following week. There wasn't much doubt about the outcome. Somewhere back in that equatorial country, somebody had already purchased about fifteen feet of three-quarter-inch manila rope, though both officers wondered where the lumber for the gallows would come from. Probably have to ship it in, Clark thought. They hadn't seen much in the way of trees.

"Well," Mary Patricia Foley said after hearing the final version. "Sounds like a good clean one, guys."

"Thank you, ma'am," Ding replied gallantly. "John sure shovels out a nice line of BS for people."

"That's experience for you," Clark noted with a chuckle. "How's Ed doing?"

"Learning his place," the Deputy Director for Operations replied with an impish grin. Both she and her husband had gone through the Farm together, and Clark had been one of their instructors. Once the best husband-wife team the Agency had, the truth of the matter was that Mary Pat had better instincts for working the field, and Ed was better at planning things out. Under those circumstances, Ed really should have had the senior position, but Mary Pat's appointment had just been too attractive, politically speaking, and in any case they still worked together, effectively co—Deputy Directors, though Ed's actual title was somewhat nebulous. "You two are due some time off, and by the way, you have an official attaboy from the other side of the river." That was not a first for either officer. "John, you know, it's really time for you to come back inside." By which she meant a permanent return to a training slot here in the Virginia Tidewater. The Agency was upsizing its human-intelligence assets—the bureaucratic term for increasing the number of case officers (known as spies to America's enemies) to be deployed into the field. Mrs. Foley wanted Clark to help train them. After all, he'd done a good job

with her and her husband, twenty years before.

"Not unless you want to retire me. I like it out there."

"He's dumb that way, ma'am," Chavez said with a sly grin. "I guess it comes with old age."

Mrs. Foley didn't argue the point. These two were among her best field teams, and she wasn't in that much of a hurry to break up a successful operation. "Fair enough, guys. You're released from the debrief. Oklahoma and Nebraska are on this afternoon."

"How are the kids, MP?" That was her service nickname, though not everybody had the rank to use it.

"Just fine, John. Thanks for asking." Mrs. Foley stood and walked to the door. A helicopter would whisk her back to Langley. She wanted to catch the game, too.

Clark and Chavez traded the look that comes with the conclusion of a job. Operation WALKMAN was now in the books, officially blessed by the Agency, and, in this case, by the White House.

"Miller time, Mr. C."

"I guess you want a ride, eh?"

"If you would be so kind, sir," Ding replied.

John Clark looked his partner over. Yes, he had cleaned himself up. The black hair was cut short and neat, the dark, heavy beard that had blurred his face in Africa was gone. He was even wearing a tie and white shirt under his suit jacket. Clark thought of the outfit as courting clothes, though on further reflection he might have recalled that Ding had once been a soldier, and that soldiers returning from the field liked to scrape off the physical reminders of the rougher aspects of their profession. Well, he could hardly complain that the lad was trying to look presentable, could he? Whatever faults Ding might have, John told himself, he always showed proper respect.

"Come on." Clark's Ford station wagon was parked in its usual place, and after fifteen minutes they pulled into the driveway of his house. Set outside the grounds of Camp Peary, it was an ordinary split-level rancher, emptier now than it had been. Margaret Pamela Clark, his elder daughter, was away at college, Marquette University in her case. Patricia Doris Clark had chosen a school closer to home, William and Mary in nearby Williamsburg, where she was majoring in pre-med. Patsy was at the door, already alerted for the arrival.

"Daddy!" A hug, a kiss, followed by something which had become somewhat more important. "Ding!" Just a hug in this case, Clark saw, not fooled for a moment.

"Hi, Pats." Ding didn't let go of her hand as he came into the house.

4

Activity

"Our requirements are different," the negotiator insisted.

"How is that?" his counterpart asked patiently.

"The steel, the design of the tank, these are unique. I am not an engineer myself, but the people who do the design work tell me this is so, and that their product will be damaged by the substitution of other parts. Now," he went on patiently, "there is also the issue of commonality of the parts. As you know, many of the cars assembled in Kentucky are shipped back to Japan for sale, and in the event of damage or the need for replacement, then the local supply will immediately be available for use. If we were to substitute the American components which you suggest, this would not be the case."

"Seiji, we are talking about a gasoline tank. It is made of—what? Five pieces of galvanized steel, bent and welded together, with a total internal capacity of nineteen gallons. There are no moving parts," the official of the State Department pointed out, interjecting himself into the process and playing his part as he was paid to do. He'd even done a good job of feigning exasperation when he'd used his counterpart's given name.

"Ah, but the steel itself, the formula, the proportions of different materials in the finished alloy, these have been optimized to the precise specifications required by the manufacturer—"

"Which are standardized all over the world."

"Sadly, this is not the case. Our specifications are most exacting, far more so than those of others, and, I regret to say, more exacting than those of the Deerfield Auto Parts Company. For that reason, we must sadly decline your request." Which put an end to this phase of the negotiations. The Japanese negotiator leaned back in his chair, resplendent in his Brooks Brothers suit and Pierre Cardin tie, trying not to gloat too obviously. He had a lot of practice in doing so, and was good at it: it was his deck of cards. Besides, the game was just getting easier, not harder.

"That is most disappointing," the representative of the U.S. Department of Commerce said. He hadn't expected otherwise, of course, and flipped the page to go on to the next item on the agenda of the Domestic Content Negotiations. It was like a Greek play, he told himself, some cross between a Sophoclean tragedy and a comedy by Aristophanes. You knew exactly what was going to happen before you even started. In this he was right, but in a way he couldn't know.

The meat of the play had been determined months earlier, long before the

negotiations had stumbled upon the issue, and in retrospect sober minds would certainly have called it an accident, just one more of the odd coincidences that shape the fate of nations and their leaders. As with most such events, it had begun with a simple error that had occurred despite the most careful of precautions. A bad electrical wire, of all things, had reduced the available current into a dip tank, thus reducing the charge in the hot liquid into which the steel sheets were dipped. That in turn had reduced the galvanizing process, and the steel sheets were in fact given merely a thin patina, while they appeared to be fully coated. The *non*-galvanized sheets were piled up on pallets, wrapped with steel bands for stability, and covered with plastic. The error would be further compounded in the finishing and assembly process.

The plant where it had happened was not part of the assembler. As with American firms, the big auto-assembly companies—which designed the cars and put their trademarks on them—bought most of the components from smaller parts-supply companies. In Japan the relationship between the bigger fish and the smaller ones was both stable and cutthroat: stable insofar as the business between the two sets of companies was generally one of long standing; cutthroat insofar as the demands of the assemblers were dictatorial, for there was always the threat that they would move their business to someone else, though this possibility was rarely raised openly. Only oblique references, usually a kindly comment on the state of affairs at another, smaller firm, a reference to the bright children of the owner of such a firm, or how the representative of the assembler had seen him at a ball game or bathhouse the previous week. The nature of the reference was less important than the content of the message, and that content always came through loud and clear. As a result, the little parts-companies were not the showcases of Japanese heavy industry that other nationalities had come to see and respect on worldwide television. The workers didn't wear company coveralls, didn't eat alongside management in plush cafeterias, didn't work in spotless, superbly organized assembly plants. The pay for these workers was also something other than the highly adequate wage structure of the assembly workers, and though the lifelong employment covenant was becoming fiction even for the elite workers, it had never existed at all for the others.

At one of the nondescript metal-working shops, the bundles of not-quite-galvanized steel were unwrapped, and the individual sheets fed by hand to cutting machines. There the square sheets were mechanically sliced, and the edges trimmed—the surplus material was gathered and returned to the steel mill for recycling—so that each piece matched the size determined by the design, invariably to tolerances less than a millimeter, even for this fairly crude component which the owner's eyes would probably never behold. The larger cut pieces moved on to another machine for heating and bending, then were welded into an oval cylinder. Immediately thereafter the oval-cut end pieces were matched up and welded into place as well, by a machine process that required only one workman to supervise. Pre-cut holes in one side were matched up with the pipe that would terminate at the filler cap—there was another in the bottom for the line leading to the engine. Before leaving the jobber, the tanks were spray-coated with a wax-and-epoxy-based formula that

would protect the steel against rust. The formula was supposed to bond with the steel, creating a firm union of disparate materials that would forever protect the gas tank against corrosion and resultant fuel leakage. An elegant and fairly typical piece of superb Japanese engineering, only in this case it didn't work because of the bad electrical cable at the steel plant. The coating never really attached itself to the steel, though it had sufficient internal stiffness to hold its shape long enough for visual inspection to be performed, and immediately afterwards the gas tanks proceeded by roller-conveyor to the boxing shop at the end of the smallparts plant. There the tanks were tucked into cardboard boxes fabricated by yet another jobber and sent by truck to a warehouse where half of the tanks were placed aboard other trucks for delivery to the assembly plant, and the other half went into identically sized cargo containers which were loaded aboard a ship for transport to the United States. There the tanks would be attached to a nearly identical automobile at a plant owned by the same international conglomerate, though this plant was located in the hills of Kentucky, not the Kwanto Plain outside of Tokyo.

All this had taken place months before the item had come onto the agenda of the Domestic Content Negotiations. Thousands of automobiles had been assembled and shipped with defective fuel tanks, and all had slipped through the usually excellent quality-assurance procedures at the assembly plants separated by six thousand miles of land and sea. In the case of those assembled in Japan, the cars had been loaded aboard some of the ugliest ships ever made, slab-sided auto-carriers which had the riding characteristics of barges as they plodded through the autumnal storms of the North Pacific Ocean. The sea-salt in the air reached through the ships' ventilation systems to the autos. That wasn't too bad until one of the ships drove through a front, and cold air changed rapidly to warm, and the instant change in relative humidity interacted with that of the air within various fuel tanks, causing salt-heavy moisture to form on the exterior of the steel, inside the defective coating. There the salt immediately started working on the unprotected mild steel of the tank, rusting and weakening the thin metal that contained 92-octane gasoline.

Whatever his other faults, Corp met his death with dignity, Ryan saw. He had just finished watching a tape segment that CNN had judged unsuitable for its regular news broadcast. After a speech whose translation Ryan had on two sheets of paper in his lap, the noose was placed over his head and the trap was sprung. The CNN camera crew focused in on the body as it jerked to a stop, closing an entry on his country's ledger. Mohammed Abdul Corp. Bully, killer, drug-runner. Dead.

"I just hope we haven't created a martyr," Brett Hanson said, breaking the silence in Ryan's office.

"Mr. Secretary," Ryan said, turning his head to see his guest reading through a translation of Corp's last words. "Martyrs all share a single characteristic."

"What's that, Ryan?"

"They're all dead." Jack paused for effect. "This guy didn't die for God or

his country. He died for committing crimes. They didn't hang him for killing Americans. They hanged him for killing his own people and for selling narcotics. That's not the stuff martyrs are made of. Case closed," Jack concluded, sticking the unread sheets of paper in his out basket. "Now, what have we learned about India?"

"Diplomatically speaking, nothing."

"Mary Pat?" Jack asked the CIA representative.

"There's a heavy mechanized brigade doing intensive training down south. We have overheads from two days ago. They seem to be exercising as a unit."

"Humint?"

"No assets in place," Mrs. Foley admitted, delivering what had become a CIA mantra. "Sorry, Jack. It'll be years before we can field people everywhere we want."

Ryan grumbled silently. Satellite photos were fine for what they were, but they were merely photographs. Photos only gave you shapes, not thoughts. Ryan needed thoughts. Mary Pat was doing her best to fix that, he remembered.

"According to the Navy, their fleet is very busy, and their pattern of operations suggests a barrier mission." The satellites *did* show that the Indian Navy's collection of amphibious-warfare ships was assembled in two squadrons. One was at sea, roughly two hundred miles from its base, exercising together as a group. The other was alongside at the same naval base undergoing maintenance, also as a group. The base was distant from the brigade undergoing its own exercises, but there was a rail line from the army base to the naval one. Analysts were now checking the rail yards at both facilities on a daily basis. The satellites were good for that, at least.

"Nothing at all, Brett? We have a pretty good ambassador over there as I recall."

"I don't want him to press too hard. It could damage what influence and access we have," SecState announced. Mrs. Foley tried not to roll her eyes.

"Mr. Secretary," Ryan said patiently, "in view of the fact that we have neither information nor influence at the moment, anything he might develop will be useful. Do you want me to make the call or will you?"

"He works for me, Ryan." Jack waited a few beats before responding to the prod. He hated territorial fights, though they were seemingly the favorite sport in the executive branch of the government.

"He works for the United States of America. Ultimately he works for the President. My job is to tell the President what's going on over there, and I need information. Please turn him loose. He's got a CIA chief working for him. He has three uniformed attachés. I want them all turned loose. The object of the exercise is to classify what looks to the Navy and to me like preparations for a possible invasion of a sovereign country. We want to prevent that."

"I can't believe that India would really do such a thing," Brett Hanson said somewhat archly. "I've had dinner with their Foreign Minister several times, and he never gave me the slightest indication—"

"Okay." Ryan interrupted quietly to ease the pain he was about to inflict. "Fine, Brett. But intentions change, and they did give us the indicator that they want our fleet to go away. I want the information. I am requesting that

you turn Ambassador Williams loose to rattle a few bushes. He's smart and I trust his judgment. That's a request on my part. I can ask the President to make it an order. Your call, Mr. Secretary."

Hanson weighed his options, and nodded agreement with as much dignity as he could summon. Ryan had just cleared up a situation in Africa that had gnawed at Roger Durling for two years, and so was the prettiest kid on the block, for the moment. It wasn't every day that a government employee increased the chances for a President to get himself reelected. The suspicion that CIA had apprehended Corp had already made its way in the media, and was being only mildly denied in the White House pressroom. It was no way to conduct foreign policy, but that issue would be fought on another battlefield.

"Russia," Ryan said next, ending one discussion and beginning another.

The engineer at the Yoshinobu space-launch complex knew he was not the first man to remark on the beauty of evil. Certainly not in his country, where the national mania for craftsmanship had probably begun with the loving attention given to swords, the meter-long *katana* of the samurai. There, the steel was hammered, bent over, hammered again, and bent over again twenty times in a lamination process that resulted in over a million layers of steel made from a single original casting. Such a process required an immense amount of patience from the prospective owner, who would wait patiently even so, displaying a degree of downward-manners for which that period of his country was not famous. Yet so it had been, for the samurai needed his sword, and only a master craftsman could fabricate it.

But not today. Today's samurai—if you could call him that—used the telephone and demanded instant results. Well, he would still have to wait, the engineer thought, as he gazed at the object before him.

In fact, the thing before his eyes was an elaborate lie, but it was the cleverness of the lie, and its sheer engineering beauty that excited his self-admiration. The plug connections on the side of it were fake, but only six people here knew that, and the engineer was the last of them as he headed down the ladder from the top portion of the gantry tower to the next-lower level. From there, they would ride the elevator to the concrete pad, where a bus waited to carry them to the control bunker. Inside the bus, the engineer removed his white-plastic hard-hat and started to relax. Ten minutes later, he was in a comfortable swivel chair, sipping tea. His presence here and on the pad hadn't been necessary, but when you built something, you wanted to see it all the way through, and besides, Yamata-san would have insisted.

The H-11 booster was new. This was only the second test-firing. It was actually based on Soviet technology, one of the last major ICBM designs the Russians had built before their country had come apart, and Yamata-san had purchased the rights to the design for a song (albeit written in hard currency), then turned all the drawings and data over to his own people for modification and improvement. It hadn't been hard. Improved steel for the casing and better electronics for the guidance system had saved fully 1,200 kilograms of weight, and further improvements in the liquid fuels had taken the performance of the rocket forward by a theoretical 17 percent. It had been a

bravura performance by the design team, enough to attract the interest of NASA engineers from America, three of whom were in the bunker to observe. And wasn't *that* a fine joke?

The countdown proceeded according to plan. The gantry came back on its rails. Floodlights bathed the rocket, which sat atop the pad like a monument—but not the kind of monument the Americans thought.

"Hell of a heavy instrument package," a NASA observer noted.

"We want to certify our ability to orbit a heavy payload," one of the missile engineers replied simply.

"Well, here we go...."

The rocket-motor ignition caused the TV screens to flare briefly, until they compensated electronically for the brilliant power of the white flame. The H-11 booster positively leaped upward atop a column of flame and a trail of smoke.

"What did you do with the fuel?" the NASA man asked quietly.

"Better chemistry," his Japanese counterpart replied, watching not the screen but a bank of instruments. "Better quality control, purity of the oxidizer, mainly."

"They never were very good at that," the American agreed.

He just doesn't see what he sees, both engineers told themselves. Yamata-san was correct. It was amazing.

Radar-guided cameras followed the rocket upward into the clear sky. The H-11 climbed vertically for the first thousand feet or so, then curved over in a slow, graceful way, its visual signature diminishing to a white-yellow disk. The flight path became more and more horizontal until the accelerating rocket body was heading almost directly away from the tracking cameras.

"BECO," the NASA man breathed, just at the proper moment. BECO meant booster-engine cutoff, because he was thinking in terms of a space launcher. "And separation ... and second-stage ignition . . ." He got those terms right. One camera tracked the falling first stage, still glowing from residual fuel burnoff as it fell into the sea.

"Going to recover it?" the American asked.

"No."

All heads shifted to telemetric readouts when visual contact was lost. The rocket was still accelerating, exactly on its nominal performance curve, heading southeast. Various electronic displays showed the H-11's progress both numerically and graphically.

"Trajectory's a little high, isn't it?"

"We want a high-low orbit," the project manager explained. "Once we establish that we can orbit the weight, and we can certify the accuracy of the insertion, the payload will deorbit in a few weeks. We don't wish to add more junk up there."

"Good for you. All the stuff up there, it's becoming a concern for our manned missions." The NASA man paused, then decided to ask a sensitive question. "What's your max payload?"

"Five metric tons, ultimately."

He whistled. "You think you can get that much performance off this bird?" Ten thousand pounds was the magic number. If you could put that much into

low-earthorbit, you could then orbit geosynchronous communications satellites. Ten thousand pounds would allow for the satellite itself and the additional rocket motor required to attain the higher altitude. “Your trans-stage must be pretty hot.”

The reply was, at first, a smile. “That is a trade secret.”

“Well, I guess we’ll see in about ninety seconds.” The American turned in his chair to watch the digital telemetry. Was it possible they knew something he and his people didn’t? He didn’t think so, but just to make sure, NASA had an observation camera watching the H-11. The Japanese didn’t know that, of course. NASA had tracking facilities all over the world to monitor U.S. space activity, and since they often had nothing to do, they kept track of all manner of things. The ones on Johnston Island and Kwajalein Atoll had originally been set up for SDI testing, and the tracking of Soviet missile launches.

The tracking camera on Johnston Island was called *Amber Ball*, and its crew of six picked up the H-11, having been cued on the launch by a Defense Support Program satellite, which had also been designed and orbited to give notice of Soviet launches. Something from another age, they all told themselves.

“Sure looks like a -19,” the senior technician observed to general agreement.

“So does the trajectory,” another said after a check of range and flight path.

“Second stage cutoff and separation, trans-stage and payload are loose now . . . getting a small adjustment burn—whoa!”

The screen went white.

* * *

“Signal lost, telemetry signal lost!” a voice called in launch control.

The senior Japanese engineer growled something that sounded like a curse to the NASA representative, whose eyes tracked down to the graphic-display screen. Signal lost just a few seconds after the trans-stage ignition. That could mean only one thing.

“That’s happened to us more than once,” the American said sympathetically. The problem was that rocket fuels, especially the liquid fuels always used for the final stage of a space launch, were essentially high explosives. What could go wrong? NASA and the U.S. military had spent over forty years discovering every possible mishap.

The weapons engineer didn’t lose his temper as the flight-control officer had, and the American sitting close to him put it down to professionalism, which it was. And the American didn’t know that he was a weapons engineer, anyway. In fact, to this point everything had gone exactly according to plan. The trans-stage fuel containers had been loaded with high explosives and had detonated immediately after the separation of the payload package.

The payload was a conical object, one hundred eighty centimeters wide at the base and two hundred six in length. It was made of uranium-238, which would have been surprising and unsettling to the NASA representative. A

dense and very hard metal, it also had excellent refractory qualities, meaning that it resisted heat quite well. The same material was used in the payloads of many American space vehicles, but none of them was owned by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Rather, objects of very similar shapes and sizes sat atop the few remaining nuclear-tipped strategic weapons which the United States was dismantling in accordance with a treaty with Russia. More than thirty years earlier, an engineer at AVCO had pointed out that since U_{238} was both an excellent material for withstanding the heat of a ballistic reentry *and* made up the third stage of a thermonuclear device, why not make the body of the RV part of the bomb? That sort of thing had always appealed to an engineer, and the idea had been tested, certified, and since the 1960s become a standard part of the U.S. strategic arsenal.

The payload so recently part of the H-11 booster was an exact engineering mockup of a nuclear warhead, and while *Amber Ball* and other tracking devices were watching the remains of the trans-stage, this cone of uranium fell back to earth. It was not a matter of interest to American cameras, since it was, after all, just an orbit-test payload that had failed to achieve the velocity necessary to circle the earth.

Nor did the Americans know that MV *Takuyo,* sitting halfway between Easter Island and the coast of Peru, was not doing the fishery-research work it was supposed to be doing. Two kilometers to the east of *Takuyo* was a rubber raft, on which sat a GPS locator and a radio. The ship was not equipped with a radar capable of tracking an inbound ballistic target, but the descending RV gave its own announcement in the pre-dawn darkness; glowing white-hot from its reentry friction, it came down like a meteor, trailing a path of fire right on time and startling the extra lookouts on the flying bridge, who'd been told what to expect but were impressed nonetheless. Heads turned rapidly to follow it down, and the splash was a mere two hundred meters from the raft. Calculations would later determine that the impact point had been exactly two hundred sixty meters from the programmed impact point. It wasn't perfect, and, to the disappointment of some, was fully an order of magnitude worse than that of the Americans' newest missiles, but for the purposes of the test, it was quite sufficient. And better yet, the test had been carried out in front of the whole world and still not been seen. Moments later, the warhead released an inflated balloon to keep it close to the surface. A boat launched from *Takuyo* was already on the way to snag the line so that the RV could be recovered and its instrumented data analyzed.

"It's going to be very hard, isn't it?" Barbara Linders asked.

"Yes, it will." Murray wouldn't lie to her. Over the past two weeks they'd become very close indeed, closer, in fact, than Ms. Linders was with her therapist. In that time, they had discussed every aspect of the assault more than ten times, with tape recordings made of every word, printed transcripts made of the recordings, and every fact crosschecked, even to the extent that photographs of the former senator's office had been checked for the color of the furniture and carpeting. Everything had checked out. Oh, there had been a few discrepancies, but only a few, and all of them minor. The substance of the

case was unaffected. But all of that would not change the fact that, yes, it would be very hard.

Murray ran the case, acting as the personal representative of Director Bill Shaw. Under Murray were twenty-eight agents, two of them headquarters-division inspectors, and almost all the rest experienced men in their forties, chosen for their expertise (there were also a half dozen young agents to do legwork errands). The next step would be to meet with a United States Attorney. They'd already chosen the one they wanted, Anne Cooper, twenty-nine, a J.D. from the University of Indiana, who specialized in sexual-assault cases. An elegant woman, tall, black, and ferociously feminist, she had sufficient fervor for such cases that the name of the defendant wouldn't matter to her more than the time of day. That was the easy part.

Then came the hard part. The "defendant" in question was the Vice President of the United States, and the Constitution said that he could not be treated like a normal citizen. In his case, the "grand jury" would be the United States House of Representatives' Committee on the Judiciary. Anne Cooper would work technically *in cooperation with* the chairman and staffers of the committee, though as a practical matter she'd actually run the case herself, with the committee people "helping" by grandstanding and leaking things to the press.

The firestorm would start, Murray explained slowly and quietly, when the chairman of the committee was informed of what was coming. Then the accusations would become public; the political dimension made it unavoidable. Vice President Edward J. Kealty would indignantly deny all accusations, and his defense team would launch its own investigation of Barbara Linders. They would discover the things that Murray had already heard from her own lips, many of them damaging, and the public would not be told, at first, that rape victims, especially those who did not report their crimes, suffered crushing loss of self-esteem, often manifested by abnormal sexual behavior. (Having learned that sexual activity was the only thing that men wanted of them, they often sought more of it in a futile search for the self-worth ripped away from them by the first attacker.) Barbara Linders had done that, had taken antidepression medications, had skipped through half a dozen jobs and two abortions. That this was a result of her victimization, and not an indication of her unreliability, would have to be established before the committee, because once the matter became public information, she would be unable to defend herself, not allowed to speak openly, while lawyers and investigators on the other side would have every chance to attack her as thoroughly and viciously as, but far more publicly than, Ed Kealty ever had. The media would see to that.

"It's not fair," she said, finally.

"Barbara, it *is* fair. It's necessary," Murray said as gently as he could. "You know why? Because when we impeach that son of a bitch, there won't be any doubts. The trial in the U.S. Senate will be a formality. *Then* we can put him in front of a real federal district-court jury, and then he will be convicted like the criminal he is. It's going to be hard on you, but when he goes to prison, it'll be a lot harder on him. It's the way the system works. It isn't perfect, but it's the best we have. And when it's all over, Barbara, you will have your dignity

back, and nobody, ever, will take it away from you again."

"I'm not going to run away anymore, Mr. Murray." She'd come a long way in two weeks. There was metal in her backbone now. Maybe not steel, but it grew stronger every day. He wondered if it would be strong enough. The odds, he figured, were 6—5 and pick 'em.

"Please call me Dan. My friends do."

"What is it you didn't want to say in front of Brett?"

"We have a guy in Japan . . ." Mrs. Foley began, without giving Chet Nomuri's name. She went on for several minutes.

Her account wasn't exactly a surprise. Ryan had made the suggestion himself several years earlier, right here in the White House to then-President Fowler. Too many American public officials left government service and immediately became lobbyists or consultants to Japanese business groups, or even to the Japanese government itself, invariably for much higher pay than what the American taxpayer provided. The fact was troubling to Ryan. Though not illegal per se, it was, at the least, unseemly. But there was more to it than that. One didn't just change office location for a tenfold increase in income. There had to be a recruitment process, and that process had to have some substance to it. As with every other form of espionage, an agent-recruit needed to provide up-front proof that he could deliver something of value. The only way for that to happen was for those officials who yearned for higher income to give over sensitive information while they were still in government employment. And that was espionage, a felony under Title 18 of U.S. Code. A joint CIA/FBI operation was working quietly to see what it could see. It was called Operation SANDALWOOD, and that's where Nomuri came in.

"So what have we got so far?"

"Nothing on point yet," Mary Pat replied. "But we have learned some interesting things about Hiroshi Goto. He has a few bad habits." She elaborated.

"He doesn't like us very much, does he?"

"He likes female Americans just fine, if you want to call it that."

"It's not something we can use very easily." Ryan leaned back in his chair. It was distasteful, especially for a man whose elder daughter would soon start dating, something that came hard to fathers under the best of circumstances. "There's a lot of lost souls out there, MP, and we can't save them all," Jack said without much conviction in his voice.

"Something smells about this, Jack."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's the recklessness of it. This guy could be their Prime Minister in another couple of weeks. He's got a lot of support from the zaibatsu. The present government is shaky. He ought to be playing statesman, not cocksman, and putting a young girl on display like that . . ."

"Different culture, different rules." Ryan made the mistake of closing tired eyes for a moment, and as he did so his imagination conjured up an image to match Mrs. Foley's words. *She's an American citizen, Jack. They're the people who pay your salary.* The eyes opened back up. "How good's your officer?"

"He's very sharp. He's been in-country for six months."

"Has he recruited anybody yet?"

"No, he's under orders to go slow. You have to over there. Their society has different rules. He's identified a couple unhappy campers, and he's taking his time."

"Yamata and Goto ... but that doesn't make sense, does it? Yamata just took a management interest on the Street, the Columbus Group. George Winston's outfit. I know George."

"The mutual-funds bunch?"

"That's right. He just hung 'em up, and Yamata stepped up to take his place. We're talking big bucks, MP. Hundred-million minimum for the price of admission. So you're telling me that a politician who professes not to like the United States hangs out with an industrialist who just married himself to our financial system. Hell, maybe Yamata is trying to explain the facts of life to the guy."

"What do you know about Mr. Yamata?" she asked.

The question caught Jack short. "Me? Not much, just a name. He runs a big conglomerate. Is he one of your targets?"

"That's right."

Ryan grinned somewhat crookedly. "MP, you sure this is complicated enough? Maybe toss in another element?"

In Nevada, people waited for the sun to set over the mountains before beginning what had been planned as a routine exercise, albeit with some last-minute modifications. The Army warrant officers were all experienced men, and they remained bemused by their first official visit to "Dreamland," as the Air Force people still called their secret facility at Groom Lake. This was the place where you tested stealthy aircraft, and the area was littered with radar and other systems to determine just how stealthy such things really were. With the sun finally gone and the clear sky dark, they manned their aircraft and lifted off for a night's testing. The mission for tonight was to approach the Nellis flight line, to deliver some administrative ordnance, and to return to Groom Lake, all undetected. That would be hard enough.

Jackson, wearing his J-3 hat, was observing the newest entry in the stealth business. The Comanche had some interesting implications in that arena, and more still in special operations, fast becoming the most fashionable part of the Pentagon. The Army said they had a real magic show worth watching, and he was here to watch....

"Guns, guns, guns!" the warrant officer said over the guard channel ninety minutes later. Then on intercom, "God, what a beautiful sight!"

The ramp at Nellis Air Force Base was home to the Air Force's largest fighter wing, today augmented further still with two visiting squadrons for the ongoing Red Flag operation. That gave his Comanche over a hundred targets for its 20-millimeter cannon, and he walked his fire among the even rows of

aircraft before turning and exiting the area to the south. The casinos of Las Vegas were in sight as he looped around, making room for the other two Comanches, then it was back down to fifty feet over the uneven sand and a northeasterly heading.

"Getting hit again. Some Eagle jockey keeps sweeping us," the backseater reported.

"Locking up?"

"Sure as hell trying to, and—Jesus—"

An F-15C screeched overhead close enough that the wake turbulence made the Comanche rock a little. Then a voice came up on guard.

"If this was an Echo, I'd have your ass."

"I just knew you Air Force guys were like that. See you at the barn."

"Roger. Out." In the distance at twelve o'clock, the fighter lit off its afterburners in salute.

"Good news, bad news, Sandy," the backseater observed.

Stealthy, but not quite stealthy enough. The lowobservable technology built into the Comanche was good enough to defeat a missile-targeting radar, but those damned airborne early-warning birds with their big antennas and signal-processor chips kept getting hits, probably off the rotor disc, the pilot thought. They had to do a little more work on that. The good news was that the F-15C, with a superb missile-tracking radar, couldn't get lockup for his AMRAAMs, and a heat-seeker was a waste of time for all involved, even over a cold desert floor. But the F-15E, with its see-in-the-dark gear, could have blown him away with a 20mm cannon. Something to remember. So, the world was not yet perfect, but Comanche was still the baddest helicopter ever made.

CWO4 Sandy Richter looked up. In the dry, cold desert air he could see the strobe lights of the orbiting E-3A AWACS. Not all that far away. Thirty thousand feet or so, he estimated. Then he had an interesting thought. That Navy guy looked smart enough, and maybe if he presented his idea in the right way, he'd get a chance to try it out....

"I'm getting tired of this," President Durling was saying in his office, diagonally across the West Wing from Ryan's. There had been a couple of good years, but they'd come to a screeching halt in the past few months. "What was it today?"

"Gas tanks," Marty Caplan replied. "Deerfield Auto Parts up in Massachusetts just came up with a way to fabricate them into nearly any shape and capacity from standard steel sheets. It's a robotic process, efficient as hell. They refused to license it to the Japanese—"

"Al Trent's district?" the President cut in.

"That's right."

"Excuse me. Please go on." Durling reached for some tea. He was having trouble with afternoon coffee now. "Why won't they license it?"

"It's one of the companies that almost got destroyed by overseas competition. This one held on to the old management team. They smartened up, hired a few bright young design engineers, and pulled their socks up. They've come up with half a dozen important innovations. It just so happens

that this is the one that delivers the greatest cost-efficiency. They claim they can make the tanks, box 'em, and ship them to Japan cheaper than the Japanese can make them at home, and that the tanks are also stronger. But we couldn't even make the other side budge on using them in the plants they have over here. It's computer chips all over again," Caplan concluded.

"How is it they can even ship the things over—"

"The ships, Mr. President." It was Caplan's turn to interrupt. "Their car carriers come over here full and mainly return completely empty. Loading the things on wouldn't cost anything at all, and they end up getting delivered right to the company docks. Deerfield even designed a loadunload system that eliminates any possible time penalty."

"Why didn't you push on it?"

"I'm surprised he didn't push," Christopher Cook observed.

They were in an upscale private home just off Kalorama Road. An expensive area of the District of Columbia, it housed quite a few members of the diplomatic community, along with the rank-and-file members of the Washington community, lobbyists, lawyers, and all the rest who wanted to be close, but not too close, to where the action was, downtown.

"If Deerfield would only license their patent." Seiji sighed. "We offered them a very fair price."

"True," Cook agreed, pouring himself another glass of white wine. He could have said, *But, Seiji, it's their invention and they want to cash in on it*, but he didn't. "Why don't your people—"

It was Seiji Nagumo's turn to sigh. "Your people were clever. They hired a particularly bright attorney in Japan and got their patent recognized in record time." He might have added that it offended him that a citizen of his country could be so mercenary, but that would have been unseemly under the circumstances. "Well, perhaps they will come to see the light of reason."

"It could be a good point to concede, Seiji. At the very least, sweeten your offer on the licensing agreement."

"Why, Chris?"

"The President is interested in this one." Cook paused, seeing that Nagumo didn't get it yet. He was still new at this. He knew the industrial side, but not the politics yet. "Deerfield is in Al Trent's congressional district. Trent has a lot of clout on the Hill. He's chairman of the Intelligence Committee."

"And?"

"And Trent is a good guy to keep happy."

Nagumo considered that for a minute or so, sipping his wine and staring out the window. Had he known that fact earlier in the day, he might have sought permission to give in on the point, but he hadn't and he didn't. To change now would be an admission of error, and Nagumo didn't like to do that any more than anyone else in the world. He decided that he'd suggest an improved offer for licensing rights, instead—not knowing that by failing to accept a personal loss of face, he'd bring closer something that he would have tried anything to avoid.

5

Complexity Theory

Things rarely happen for a single reason. Even the cleverest and most skillful manipulators recognize that their real art lies in making use of that which they cannot predict. For Raizo Yamata the knowledge was usually a comfort. He usually knew what to do when the unexpected took place—but not always.

"It has been a troublesome time, that is true, but not the worst we have experienced," one of his guests pronounced. "And we are having our way again, are we not?"

"We've made them back off on computer chips," another pointed out. Heads nodded around the low table.

They just didn't see, Yamata told himself. His country's needs coincided exactly with a new opportunity. There was a new world, and despite America's repeated pronouncements of a new order for that new world, only disorder had replaced what had been three generations of—if not stability, then at least predictability. The symmetry of East and West was now so far back in the history of contemporary minds that it seemed like a distant and unpleasant dream. The Russians were still reeling from their misguided experiment, and so were the Americans, though most of their pain was self-inflicted and had come after the event, the fools. Instead of merely maintaining their power, the Americans had cast it aside at the moment of its ascendancy, as they had so often in their history, and in the dimming of two formerly great powers lay the opportunity for a country that *deserved* to be great.

"These are small things, my friends," Yamata said, graciously leaning across the table to refill cups. "Our national weakness is structural and has not changed in real terms in our lifetime."

"Please explain, Raizo-chan," one of his friendlier peers suggested.

"So long as we lack direct access to resources, so long as we cannot control that access ourselves, so long as we exist as the shopkeeper of other nations, we are vulnerable."

"Ah!" Across the table a man waved a dismissive hand. "I disagree. We are strong in the things that matter."

"And what are those things?" Yamata inquired gently.

"First and most importantly, the diligence of our workers, the skill of our designers ..." The litany went on while Yamata and his other guests listened politely.

"And how long will those things matter if we no longer have resources to use, oil to burn?" one of Yamata's allies inquired with a litany of his own.

"Nineteen forty-one all over again?"

“No, it will not be that way . . . exactly,” Yamata said, rejoining the conversation. “Then it was possible for them to cut off our oil because we bought almost all of it from them. Today it is more subtle. Back then they had to freeze our assets to prevent us from spending them elsewhere, yes? Today they devalue the dollar relative to the yen, and our assets are trapped there, are they not? Today they trick us into investing our money there, they complain when we do, they cheat us at every turn, they keep what we give to them for their property, and then they steal back what we’ve bought!”

This tack caused heads first to turn and then to nod. Every man in the room had lived through that experience. That one, Yamata saw, had bought Rockefeller Center in New York, had paid double what it was really worth, even in that artificially inflated real-estate market, been tricked and cheated by the American owners. Then the yen had risen relative to the dollar, which meant that the dollar had lost value relative to the yen. If he tried to sell now, everyone knew, it would be a disaster. First, the real-estate market in New York City had dropped of its own accord; second, and as a result, the buildings were worth only half of the dollars that had already been paid; third, the dollars were worth only half the value in yen that they had been in the beginning. He’d be lucky to get back a quarter of what he’d put into the deal. In fact, the rent he was earning barely paid the interest payments on the outstanding debt.

That one there, Yamata thought, had bought a major motion-picture studio, and across the table a rival had done the same. It was all Raizo could do not to laugh at the fools. What had each bought? That was simple. In each case, for a price of billions of dollars, they had purchased three hundred or so hectares of real estate in Los Angeles and a piece of paper that said they now had the ability to make movies. In both cases the previous owners had taken the money and quite openly laughed, and in both cases the previous owners had recently made a quiet offer to buy the property back for a quarter, or less, of what the Japanese businessman had paid—enough to retire the outstanding debt and not a single yen more.

It went on and on. Every time a Japanese company had taken its profits from America and tried to reinvest them back in America, the Americans screamed about how Japan was stealing their country. Then they overcharged for everything. Then their government policy made sure that the Japanese lost money on everything, *so that* Americans could then buy it all back at cut-rate prices, all the while complaining that those prices were too high. America would rejoice at recovering control of its culture, such as it was, when in reality what had happened was the largest and best concealed robbery in world history.

“Don’t you see? They’re trying to cripple us, and they are succeeding,” Yamata told them in a quiet, reasonable voice.

It was the classic business paradox which all know but all forget. There was even a simple aphorism for it: borrow one dollar and the bank owns you; borrow a million dollars and you own the bank. Japan had bought into the American auto market, for example, at a time when the U.S. auto industry, fat from its huge exclusive clientele, was driving up prices and allowing quality to stagnate while its unionized workers complained about the dehumanizing

aspects of their work—the highest-paid jobs in blue-collar America. The Japanese had started in that market at an even lower status than Volkswagen, with small, ugly cars that were not all that well made and contained unimpressive safety features, but that were superior to American designs in one way: they were fuel-efficient.

Three historical accidents had then come to Japan's aid. The American Congress, upset with the "greed" of oil companies who wanted to charge world price for their products, had placed a cap on the wellhead price of domestic crude oil. That had frozen American gasoline prices at the lowest level in the industrial world, discouraged new oil exploration, and encouraged Detroit to make large, heavy, fuel-*in*efficient cars. Then the 1973 war between Israel and the Arab states had placed American drivers in gasoline lines for the first time in thirty years, and the trauma had stunned a country that had deemed itself above such things. Then they'd realized that Detroit only made automobiles that drank gasoline as though through the floodgates of a dam. The "compact" cars that the American manufacturers had started making in the previous decade had almost immediately grown to midsize, were no more fuel-efficient than their larger cousins, and weren't all that well made in any case. Worst of all, the American manufacturers, to a man, had all recently invested money in large-car plants, a fact that had almost been the undoing of Chrysler. This oil shock had not lasted long, but long enough for America to rethink its buying habits, and the domestic companies had not possessed the capital or the engineering flexibility to change rapidly to what unaccustomedly nervous American citizens wanted.

Those citizens had immediately increased purchases of Japanese automobiles, especially in the crucial, trend-setting West Coast markets, which had had the effect of funding research and development for the Japanese firms, which in turn had hired American styling engineers to make their products more attractive to their growing market and utilized its own engineers to improve such things as safety. Thus, by the second great oil shock of 1979, Toyota, Honda, Datsun (later Nissan), and Subaru were in the right place with the right product. Those were the salad days. The low yen and high dollar had meant that even relatively low prices guaranteed a handsome profit, that their local dealers could add a surcharge of a thousand dollars or more for *allowing* people to purchase these marvelous automobiles—and *that* had given them a large, eager sales force of American citizens.

What had never occurred to any of the men at the table, Yamata knew, was the same thing that had never occurred to the executives of General Motors and the United Auto Workers union. Both had assumed that a happy state of affairs would extend into blissful eternity. Both had forgotten that there was no Divine Right of Businessmen any more than there was a Divine Right of Kings. Japan had learned to exploit a weakness of the American auto industry. In due course, America had learned from its own mistakes, and just as Japanese companies had capitalized on American arrogance, in the same way they almost immediately built—or bought—monuments to their own. Meanwhile the American companies had ruthlessly downsized everything from their automobile designs to their payrolls because they had relearned the economic facts of life even as the Japanese had allowed themselves to forget

them. The process went mainly unseen, especially by the players, who were not assisted by the media "analysts" who were too busy looking at trees to discern the shape of the cyclical forest.

To normalize things further, the exchange rate changed—as it had to change with so much money flowing in one direction—but the Japanese industrialists hadn't seen it coming any more clearly than Detroit had noted the approach of its own troubles. The relative value of the yen had gone up, and that of the dollar down, despite the best efforts of Japanese central bankers to keep their own currency weak. With that change went much of the profit margin of the Japanese firms—including the values of properties bought in America that had crashed enough in value to be seen as net losses. And you couldn't transport Rockefeller Center to Tokyo in any case.

It had to be this way. Yamata saw that even if these men did not. Business was a cycle, like riding a wave up and down, and no one had as yet found a way to make the cycle smooth out. Japan was all the more vulnerable to it, since, in serving America, Japanese industry, was really part of the American economy and subject to all of its vagaries. The Americans would not remain more foolish than the Japanese indefinitely, and with their return to sanity, they would have their advantages of power and resources yet again, and his chance would be gone forever. His country's chance, too, Yamata told himself. That was also important, but it was not the thing that made his eyes burn.

His country could not be great so long as its leaders—not in the government, but here around this table—failed to understand what greatness was. Manufacturing capacity was nothing. The simple act of cutting the shipping lanes to the sources of raw materials could idle every factory in the country, and then the skill and diligence of the Japanese worker would have no greater meaning in the great scheme of things than a Buson haiku. A nation was great because of power, and his country's power was just as artificial as a poem. More to the point, national greatness was not something awarded, but something won; it had to be acknowledged by another great nation that had been taught humility ... or more than one. Greatness came not from a single national asset. It came from many. It came from selfsufficiency in all things—well, in as many things as possible. His companions around the table had to see that before he could act on their behalf and his nation's. It was his mission to raise up his nation and to humble others. It was his destiny and his duty to make these things happen, to be the catalyst for all the energy of others.

But the time was not yet right. He could see that. His allies were many, but there were not enough of them, and those who opposed him were too fixed in their thinking to be persuaded. They saw his point, but not as clearly as he did, and until they changed their way of thinking, he could do no more than what he was doing now, offering counsel, setting the stage. A man of surpassing patience, Yamata-san smiled politely and ground his teeth, with the frustration of the moment.

* * *

"You know, I think I'm starting to get the hang of this place," Ryan said as he

took his place in the leather chair to the President's left.

"I said that once," Durling announced. "It cost me three tenths of a point of unemployment, a fight with House Ways and Means, and ten real points of approval rating." Though his voice was grave, he smiled when he said it. "So what's so hot that you're interrupting my lunch?"

Jack didn't make him wait, though his news was important enough to merit a dramatic reply: "We have our agreement with the Russians and Ukrainians on the last of the birds."

"Starting when?" Durling asked, leaning forward over his desk and ignoring his salad.

"How does next Monday grab you?" Ryan asked with a grin. "They went for what Scott said. There've been so many of these START procedures that they want just to kill the last ones quietly and announce that they're gone, once and for all. Our inspectors are already over there, and theirs are over here, and they'll just go and do it."

"I like it," Durling replied.

"Exactly forty years, boss," Ryan said with some passion, "practically my whole life since they deployed the SS-6 and we deployed Atlas, ugly damned things with an ugly damned purpose, and helping to make them go away—well, Mr. President, now I owe you one. It's going to be your mark, sir, but I can tell my grandchildren that I was around when it happened." That Adler's proposal to the Russians and Ukrainians had been Ryan's initiative might end up as a footnote, but probably not.

"Our grandchildren either won't care or they'll ask what the big deal was," Arnie van Damm observed, deadpan.

"True," Ryan conceded. Trust Arnie to put a neutral spin on things.

"Now tell me the bad news," Durling ordered.

"Five billion," Jack said, unsurprised by the hurt expression he got in return. "It's worth it, sir. It really is."

"Tell me why."

"Mr. President, since I was in grammar school our country has lived with the threat of nuclear weapons on ballistic launchers aimed at the United States. Inside of six weeks, the last of them could be gone."

"They're already aimed—"

"Yes, sir, we have ours aimed at the Sargasso Sea, and so do they, an error that you can fix by opening an inspection port and changing a printed-circuit card in the guidance system. To do that takes ten minutes from the moment you open the access door into the missile silo and requires a screwdriver and a flashlight." Actually, that was true only for the Soviet—*Russian!* Ryan corrected himself for the thousandth time—missiles. The remaining American birds took longer to retarget due to their greater sophistication. Such were the vagaries of engineering science.

"All gone, sir, gone forever," Ryan said. "I'm the hard-nosed hawk here, remember? We can sell this to the Hill. It's worth the price and more."

"You make a good case, as always," van Damm announced from his chair.

"Where will OMB find the money, Arnie?" President Durling asked. Now it was Ryan's turn to cringe.

"Defense, where else?"

"Before we get too enthusiastic about that, we've gone too far already."

"What will we save by eliminating our last missiles?" van Damm asked.

"It'll cost us money," Jack replied. "We're already paying an arm and a leg to dismantle the missile subs, and the environmentalists—"

"Those wonderful people," Durling observed.

"—but it's a one-time expense."

Eyes turned to the chief of staff. His political judgment was impeccable. The weathered face weighed the factors and turned to Ryan. "It's worth the hassle. There *will* be a hassle on the Hill, boss," he told the President, "but a year from now you'll be telling the American people how you put an end to the sword of—"

"Damocles," Ryan said.

"Catholic schools." Arnie chuckled. "The sword that's hung over America for a generation. The papers'll like it, and you just know that CNN will make a big deal about it, one of their hour-long special-report gigs, with lots of good pictures and inaccurate commentary."

"Don't like that, Jack?" Durling asked, smiling broadly now.

"Mr. President, I'm not a politician, okay? Isn't it sufficient to the moment that we're dismantling the last two hundred ICBMs in the world?" Well, that wasn't exactly true, was it? *Let's not wax too poetic, Jack. There are still the Chinese, Brits, and French*. But the latter two would fall into line, wouldn't they? And the Chinese could be made to see the light through trade negotiations, and besides, what enemies did they have left to worry about?

"Only if people see and understand, Jack." Durling turned to van Damm. Both of them ignored Jack's not-quitespoken additional concerns. "Get the media office working on this. We do the formal announcement in Moscow, Jack?"

Ryan nodded. "That was the deal, sir." There would be more to it, careful leaks, unconfirmed at first. Congressional briefings to generate more. Quiet calls to various TV networks and trusted reporters who would be in exactly the right places at exactly the right times—difficult because of the ten-hour difference between Moscow and the last American ICBM fields—to record for history the end of the nightmare. The actual elimination process was rather messy, which was why American tree-huggers had such a problem with it. In the case of the Russian birds, the warheads were removed for dismantlement, the missiles drained of their liquid fuels and stripped of valuable and/or classified electronic components, and then one hundred kilograms of high explosives were used to blast open the top of the silo, which in due course would be filled with dirt and leveled off. The American procedure was different because all the U.S. missiles used solid fuels. In their case, the missile bodies were transported to Utah, where they were opened at both ends; then the rocket motors were ignited and allowed to burn out like the world's largest highway flares, creating clouds of toxic exhaust that might snuff out the lives of some wild birds. In America the silos would also be blasted open—a United States Circuit Court of Appeals had ruled that the national-security implications of the international arms-control treaty superseded four environmental-protection statutes, despite many legal briefs and protests to the contrary. The final blast would be highly dramatic, all the more so because

its force would be about one ten-millionth of what the silo had once represented. Some numbers, and some concepts, Jack reflected, were simply too vast to be appreciated—even by people like himself.

The legend of Damocles had to do with a courtier in the circle of King Dionysius of Sicily, who had waxed eloquent on the good fortune of his king. To make a point in the cruel and heavy-handed way of "great" men, Dionysius had invited his courtier, Damocles, to a sumptuous banquet and sat him in a comfortable place directly under a sword, which in turn was suspended from the ceiling by a thread. The purpose was to demonstrate that the King's own good fortune was as tenuous as the safety of his guest.

It was the same with America. Everything it had was still under the nuclear sword, a fact made graphically clear to Ryan in Denver not too long before, and for that reason his personal mission since returning to government service had been to put the end to the tale, once and for all.

"You want to handle the press briefings?"

"Yes, Mr. President," Jack replied, surprised and grateful for Durling's stunning generosity.

" 'Northern Resource Area'?" the Chinese Defense Minister asked. He added dryly, "Interesting way of putting it."

"So what do you think?" Zhang Han San asked from his side of the table. He was fresh from another meeting with Yamata.

"In the abstract, it's strategically possible. I leave the economic estimates to others," the Marshal replied, ever the cautious one despite the quantity of mao-tai he'd consumed this evening.

"The Russians have been employing three Japanese survey firms. Amazing, isn't it? Eastern Siberia has hardly even been explored. Oh, yes, the gold deposits at Kolyma, but the interior itself?" A dismissive wave of the hand. "Such fools, and now they must ask others to do the job for them . . ." The Minister's voice trailed off, and his gaze returned to Zhang Han San. "And so, what have they found?"

"Our Japanese friends? More oil for starters, they think as big a find as Prudhoe Bay." He slid a sheet of paper across the table. "Here are the minerals they've located in the last nine months."

"All this?"

"The area is almost as large as all of Western Europe, and all the Soviets ever cared about was a strip around their damned railroads. The fools." Zhang snorted. "All their economic problems, the solution for them lay right under their feet from the moment they assumed power from the czar. In essence it's rather like South Africa, a treasure house, but including oil, which the South Africans lack. As you see, nearly all of the strategic minerals, and in such quantities. . . ."

"Do the Russians know?"

"Some of it." Zhang Han San nodded. "Such a secret is too vast to conceal entirely, but only about half—the items on the list marked with stars are those Moscow knows about."

"But not these others?"

Zhang smiled. “No.”

Even in a culture where men and women learn to control their feelings, the Minister could not conceal his amazement at the paper in his hands. They didn’t shake, but he used them to place the page flat on the polished table, smoothing it out as though it were a piece of fine silk.

“This could double the wealth of our country.”

“That is conservative,” observed the senior field officer of his country’s intelligence service. Zhang, covered as a diplomat, actually conducted more diplomacy than most of his country’s senior foreign-service officers. It was more of an embarrassment to them than to him. “You need to remember that this is the estimate the Japanese have given us, Comrade Minister. They fully expect access to half of what they discover, and since they will perforce spend most of the development money . . .”

A smile. “Yes, while we take most of the strategic risks. Offensive little people,” the Minister added. Like those with whom Zhang had negotiated in Tokyo, the Minister and the Marshal, who continued to keep his peace, were veterans of the 8th Route Army. They too had memories of war—but not of war with America. He shrugged. “Well, we need them, don’t we?”

“Their weapons are formidable,” the Marshal noted. “But not their numbers.”

“They know that,” Zhang Han San told his hosts. “It is, as my main contact says, a convenient marriage of needs and requirements, but he hopes that it will develop, in his words, into a true and cordial relationship between peoples with a true—”

“Who will be on top?” the Marshal asked, smiling coarsely.

“They will, of course. He thinks,” Zhang Han San added.

“In that case, since they are courting us, it is they who need to make the first overt moves,” the Minister said, defining his country’s policy in a way that would not offend his own superior, a small man with elfin eyes and the sort of determination to make a lion pause. He looked over at the Marshal, who nodded soberly. The man’s capacity for alcohol, both of the others thought, was remarkable.

“As I expected,” Zhang announced with a smile. “Indeed, as they expect, since they anticipate the greatest profit.”

“They are entitled to their illusions.”

“I admire your confidence,” the NASA engineer observed from the viewers’ gallery over the shop floor. He also admired their funding. The government had fronted the money for this industrial conglomerate to acquire the Soviet design and build it. Private industry sure had a lot of muscle here, didn’t it?

“We think we have the trans-stage problem figured out. A faulty valve,” the Japanese designer explained. “We used a Soviet design.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that we used their valve design for the trans-stage fuel tanks. It wasn’t a good one. They tried to do everything there with extremely light weight, but—”

The NASA representative blinked hard. “You mean to tell me that their

whole production run of the missile was—"

A knowing look cut the American off. "Yes. At least a third of them would have failed. My people believe that the test missiles were specially engineered, but that the production models were, well, typically Russian."

"Hmph." The American's bags were already packed, and a car was waiting to take him to Narita International for the interminable flight to Chicago. He looked at the production floor of the plant. It was probably what General Dynamics had looked like back in the 1960s, at the height of the Cold War. The boosters were lined up like sausages, fifteen of them in various stages of assembly, side by side, one after the other, while white-coated technicians performed their complicated tasks. "These ten look about done."

"They are," the factory manager assured him.

"When's your next test shot?"

"Next month. We've got our first three payloads ready," the designer replied.

"When you guys get into something, you don't fool around, do you?"

"It's simply more efficient to do it this way."

"So they're going to go out of here fully assembled?"

A nod. "That's right. We'll pressurize the fuel tanks with inert gas, of course, but one of the nice things about using this design is that they're designed to be moved as intact units. That way you save final-assembly time at the launch point."

"Move them out by truck?"

"No." The Japanese engineer shook his head. "By rail."

"What about the payloads?"

"They're being assembled elsewhere. That's proprietary, I'm afraid."

The other production line did not have foreign visitors. In fact it had few visitors at all despite the fact that it was located in the suburbs of Tokyo. The sign outside the building proclaimed it to be a research-and-development center for a major corporation, and those who lived nearby guessed that it was for computer chips or something similar. The power lines that went into it were not remarkable, since the most power-hungry units were the heating and air-conditioning units that sat in a small enclosure in the back. Traffic in and out was unremarkable as well. There was a modest parking lot with space for perhaps eighty automobiles, and the lot was almost always at least half full. There was a discreet security fence, pretty much like what would have been around any other light-industry facility anywhere in the world, and a security shack at both entrances. Cars and trucks came and went, and that was pretty much that for the casual observer.

Inside was something else. Although the two external security points were staffed by smiling men who politely gave directions to disoriented motorists, inside the building it was something else entirely. Each security desk featured hidden attachments which held German-made P-38 pistols, and the guards here didn't smile much. They didn't know what they were guarding, of course. Some things were just too unusual to be recognized. No one had ever produced a TV documentary on the fabrication of nuclear devices.

The shop floor was fifty meters long by fifteen wide, and there were two evenly spaced rows of machine tools, each of them enclosed with Plexiglas. Each enclosure was individually climate-controlled by a separate ventilation system, as was the room as a whole. The technicians and scientists wore white coveralls and gloves not unlike those required of workers in a computer-chip plant, and indeed when some of them stepped outside for a smoke, passersby took them for exactly that.

In the clean room, roughly shaped plutonium hemispheres came in at one end, were machined into their final shapes at several stages, and emerged from the other end so polished they looked like glass. Each was then placed in a plastic holder and hand-carried out of the machine shop to the storage room, where each was set on an individual shelf made of steel covered with plastic. Metal contact could not be allowed, because plutonium, in addition to being radioactive, and warm due to its alpha-radiation decay, was a reactive metal, quick to spark on contact with another metal, and actually flammable. Like magnesium and titanium, the metal would burn with gusto, and, once ignited, was the very devil to extinguish. For all that, handling the hemispheres—there were twenty of them—became just one more routine for the engineers. That task had long since been completed.

The harder part was the RV bodies. These were large, hollow, inverted cones, 120 centimeters in height and 50 across at the base, made of uranium-238, a darkly reddish and very hard metal. At just over four hundred kilograms each, the bulky cones had to be precisely machined for absolute dynamic symmetry. Intended to “fly” after a fashion, both through vacuum and, briefly, through air, they had to be perfectly balanced, lest they become unstable in flight. Ensuring that had to everyone’s surprise turned out to be the most difficult production task of all. The casting process had been reordered twice, and even now the RV bodies were periodically rotated, similar to the procedure for balancing an automobile tire, but with far more stringent tolerances. The exterior of each of the ten was not as finely machined as the parts that went inside, though they were smooth to the ungloved touch. Inside was something else. Slight but symmetrical irregularities would allow the “physics package”—an American term—to fit in snugly, and, if the moment came—which everyone hoped it would not, of course—the enormous flux of high-energy “fast” neutrons would attack the RV bodies, causing a “fast-fission” reaction, and doubling the energy released by the plutonium, tritium, and lithium deuteride within.

That was the elegant part, the engineers thought, especially those unfamiliar with nuclear physics who had learned the process along the way. The U-238, so dense and hard and difficult to work, was a highly refractory metal. The Americans even used it to make armor for their tanks, it resisted external energy so well. Screeching through the atmosphere at 27,000 kilometers per hour, air friction would have destroyed most materials, but not this one, at least not in the few seconds it took, and at the end of the process, the material would form part of the bomb itself. Elegant, the engineers thought, using that most favored of words in their profession, and that made it worth the time and the trouble. When each body was complete, each was loaded onto a dolly and rolled off to the storage room. Only three remained to be worked on. This part

of the project was two weeks behind schedule, much to everyone's chagrin.

RV Body #8 began the first machining process. If the bomb was detonated, the uranium-238 from which it was made would also create most of the fallout. Well, that was physics.

It was just another accident, perhaps occasioned by the early hour. Ryan arrived at the White House just after seven, about twenty minutes earlier than usual because traffic on U.S. Route 50 happened to be uncommonly smooth all the way in. As a result, he hadn't had time to read through all his early briefing documents, which he bundled under his arm at the west entrance. National Security Advisor or not, Jack still had to pass through the metal detector, and it was there that he bumped into somebody's back. The somebody in question was handing his service pistol to a uniformed Secret Service agent.

"You guys still don't trust the Bureau, eh?" a familiar voice asked the plainclothes supervisory agent.

"*Especially* the Bureau!" was the good-humored retort.

"And I don't blame them a bit," Ryan added. "Check his ankle, too, Mike."

Murray turned after passing through the magnetic portal. "I don't need the backup piece anymore." The Deputy Assistant Director pointed to the papers under Jack's arm. "Is that any way to treat classified documents?"

Murray's humor was automatic. It was just the man's nature to needle an old friend. Then Ryan saw that the Attorney General had just passed through as well, and was looking back in some annoyance. Why was a cabinet member here so early? If it were a national-security matter, Ryan would have known, and criminal affairs were rarely so important as to get the President into his office before the accustomed eight o'clock. And why was Murray accompanying him? Helen D'Agustino was waiting beyond to provide personal escort through the upstairs corridors. Everything about the accidental confrontation lit off Ryan's curiosity.

"The Boss is waiting," Murray said guardedly, reading the look in Jack's eyes.

"Could you stop by on the way out? I've been meaning to call you about something."

"Sure." And Murray walked off without even a friendly inquiry about Cathy and the kids.

Ryan passed through the detector, turned left, and headed up the stairs to his corner office for his morning briefs. They went quickly, and Ryan was settling into his morning routine when his secretary admitted Murray to his office. There was no point in beating around the bush.

"A little early for the A.G. to show up, Dan. Anything I need to know?"

Murray shook his head. "Not yet, sorry."

"Okay," Ryan replied, shifting gears smoothly. "Is it something I *ought* to know?"

"Probably, but the Boss wants it on close-hold, and it doesn't have national-security implications. What did you want to see me about?"

Ryan took a second or two before answering, his mind going at its accustomed speed in such a case. Then he set it aside. He knew that he could trust Murray's word. Most of the time.

"This is code-word stuff," Jack began, then elaborated on what he'd learned from Mary Pat the day before. The FBI agent nodded and listened with a neutral expression.

"It's not exactly new, Jack. Last few years we've been taking a quiet look at indications that young ladies have been—enticed? Hard to phrase this properly. Modeling contracts, that sort of thing. Whoever does the recruiting is very careful. Young women head over there to model, do commercials, that sort of thing, goes on all the time. Some got their American careers started over there. None of the checks we've run have turned up anything, but there are indications that some girls have disappeared. One in particular, as a matter of fact, she fits your man's description. Kimberly something, I don't recall the last name. Her father is a captain in the Seattle police department, and his nextdoor neighbor is SAC of our Seattle office. We've gone through our contacts in the Japanese police agencies, quietly. No luck."

"What does your gut tell you?" Ryan asked.

"Look, Jack, people disappear all the time. Lots of young girls just pack up and leave home to make their way in the world. Call it part feminism, part just wanting to become an independent human being. It happens all the time. This Kimberly-something is twenty, wasn't doing well at school, and just disappeared. There's no evidence to suggest kidnapping, and at twenty you're a free citizen, okay? We have no *right* to launch a criminal investigation. All right, so her dad's a cop, and his neighbor is Bureau, and so we've sniffed around a little. But we haven't turned up anything at all, and that's as far as we can take it without something to indicate that a statute may have been violated. There are no such indicators."

"You mean, a girl over eighteen disappears and you can't—"

"Without evidence of a crime, no, we can't. We don't have the manpower to track down every person who decides to make his or her own future without telling Mom and Dad about it."

"You didn't answer my initial question, Dan," Jack observed to his guest's discomfort.

"There are people over there who like their women with fair hair and round eyes. There's a disproportionate number of missing girls who're blonde. We had trouble figuring that out at first until an agent started asking their friends if they maybe had their hair color changed recently. Sure enough, the answer was yes, and then she started asking the question regularly. A 'yes' happened in enough cases that it's just unusual. So, yes, I think something may be happening, but we don't have enough to move on," Murray concluded. After a moment he added, "If this case in question has national -security implications . . . well . . ."

"What?" Jack asked.

"Let the Agency check around?"

That was a first for Ryan, hearing from an FBI official that the CIA could investigate something. The Bureau guarded its turf as ferociously as a momma grizzly bear defended her cubs. "Keep going, Dan," Ryan ordered.

“There’s a lively sex industry over there. If you look at the porn they like to watch, it’s largely American. The nude photos you see in their magazines are mainly of Caucasian females. The nearest country with a supply of such females happens to be us. Our suspicion is that some of these girls aren’t just models, but, again, we haven’t been able to turn up anything solid enough to pursue it.” And the other problem, Murray didn’t add, was twofold. If something really were going on, he wasn’t sure how much cooperation he’d receive from local authorities, meaning that the girls might disappear forever. If it were not, the nature of the investigation would be leaked and the entire episode would appear in the press as another racist piece of Japan-bashing. “Anyway, it sounds to me like the Agency has an op running over there. My best advice: expand it some. If you want, I can brief some people in on what we know. It isn’t much, but we do have some photographs.”

“How come you know so much?”

“SAC Seattle is Chuck O’Keefe. I worked under him once. He had me talk to Bill Shaw about it, and Bill okayed a quiet look, but it didn’t lead anywhere, and Chuck has enough to keep his division busy as it is.”

“I’ll talk to Mary Pat. And the other thing?”

“Sorry, pal, but you have to talk to the Boss about that.”

Goddamn it! Ryan thought as Murray walked out. Are there always secrets?

6

Looking In, Looking Out

In many ways operating in Japan was highly difficult. There was the racial part of it, of course. Japan was not strictly speaking a homogeneous society; the Ainu people were the original inhabitants of the islands but they mainly lived on Hokkaido, the northernmost of the Home Islands. Still called an aboriginal people, they were also quite isolated from mainstream Japanese society in an explicitly racist way. Similarly Japan had an ethnic-Korean minority whose antecedents had been imported at the turn of the century as cheap labor, much as America had brought in immigrants on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. But unlike America, Japan denied citizenship rights to its immigrants unless they adopted a fully Japanese identity, a fact made all the more odd in that the Japanese people were themselves a mere offshoot of the Korean, a fact proven by DNA research but which was conveniently and somewhat indignantly denied by the better sections of Japanese society. All foreigners were *gaijin,* a word which like most words in the local language had many flavors. Usually translated benignly as meaning just "foreigners," the word had other connotations—like "barbarian," Chet Nomuri thought, with all of the implicit invective that the word had carried when first coined by the Greeks. The irony was that as an American citizen he was *gaijin* himself, despite 100 percent Japanese ethnicity, and while he had grown up quietly resenting the racist policies of the U.S. government that had once caused genuine harm to his family, it had required only a week in the land of his ancestors for him to yearn for a return to Southern California, where the living was smooth and easy.

It was for Chester Nomuri a strange experience, living and "working" here. He'd been carefully screened and interviewed before being assigned to Operation SANDALWOOD. Having joined the Agency soon after graduating UCLA, not quite remembering why he'd done so except for a vague desire for adventure mixed with a family tradition of government service, he'd found somewhat to his surprise that he enjoyed the life. It was remarkably like police work, and Nomuri was a fan of police TV and novels. More than that, it was so damned *interesting.* He learned new things every day. It was like being in a living history classroom. Perhaps the most important lesson he'd learned, however, was that his great-grandfather had been a wise and insightful man. Nomuri wasn't blind to America's faults, but he preferred life there to life in any of the countries he'd visited, and with that knowledge had come pride in what he was doing, even though he still wasn't quite sure what the hell he was really up to. Of course, neither did his Agency, but Nomuri had never quite understood that, even when they'd told him so at the Farm. How could it be

possible, after all? It must have been an inside-the-institution joke.

At the same time, in a dualism he was too young and inexperienced to appreciate fully, Japan could be an easy place in which to operate. That was especially true on the commuter train.

The degree of crowding here was enough to make his skin crawl. He had not been prepared for a country in which population density compelled close contact with all manner of strangers, and, indeed, he'd soon realized that the cultural mania with fastidious personal hygiene and mannerly behavior was simply a by-product of it. People so often rubbed, bumped, or otherwise crushed into contact with others that the absence of politeness would have resulted in street killings to shame the most violent neighborhood in America. A combination of smiling embarrassment at the touches and icy personal isolation made it tolerable to the local citizens, though it was something that still gave Nomuri trouble. "Give the guy some space" had been a catch-phrase at UCLA. Clearly it wasn't here, because there simply wasn't the space to give.

Then there was the way they treated women. Here, on the crowded trains, the standing and sitting salarymen read comic books, called *manga,* the local versions of novels, which were genuinely disturbing. Recently, a favorite of the eighties had been revived, called *Rin-Tin-Tin*. Not the friendly dog from 1950s American television, but a dog with a female mistress, to whom he talked, and with whom he had ... sexual relations. It was not an idea that appealed to him, but there, sitting on his bench seat, was a middle-aged executive, eyes locked on the pages with rapt attention, while a Japanese woman stood right next to him and stared out the train's windows, maybe noticing, maybe not. The war between the sexes in this country certainly had rules different from the ones with which he'd been raised, Nomuri thought. He set it aside. It was not part of his mission, after ail—an idea he would soon find to be wrong.

He never saw the cutout. As he stood there in the third car of the train, close to the rear door, hanging on to an overhead bar and reading a paper, he didn't even notice the insertion of the envelope into the pocket of his overcoat. It was always that way—at the usual place the coat got just a touch heavier. He'd turned once to look and seen nothing. Damn, he'd joined the right outfit.

Eighteen minutes later the train entered the terminal, and the people emerged from it like a horizontal avalanche, exploding outward into the capacious station. The salaryman ten feet away tucked his "illustrated novel" into his briefcase and walked off to his job, wearing his customarily impassive mien, doubtless concealing thoughts of his own. Nomuri headed his own way, buttoning his coat and wondering what his new instructions were.

* * *

"Does the President know?"

Ryan shook his head. "Not yet."

"You think maybe he ought to?" Mary Pat Foley asked.

"At the proper time."

"I don't like putting officers at risk for—"

"At risk?" Jack asked. "I want him to develop information, not to make a contact, and not to expose himself. I gather from the case notes I've seen so far that all he has to do is make a follow-up question, and unless their locker rooms are different from ours, it shouldn't expose him at all."

"You know what I mean," the Deputy Director (Operations) observed, rubbing her eyes. It had been a long day, and she worried about her field officers. Every good DDO did, and she was a mother who'd once been picked up by the KGB's Second Chief Directorate herself.

Operation SANDALWOOD had started innocently enough, if an intelligence operation on foreign soil could ever be called innocent. The preceding operation had been a joint FBI/CIA show, and had gone very badly indeed: an American citizen had been apprehended by the Japanese police with burglar tools in his possession—along with a diplomatic passport, which in this particular case had been more of a hindrance than a help. It had made the papers in a small way. Fortunately the media hadn't quite grasped what the story was all about. People were buying information. People were selling information. It was often information with "secret" or higher classifications scrawled across the folders, and the net effect was to hurt American interests, such as they were.

"How good is he?" Jack asked.

Mary Pat's face relaxed at little. "Very. The kid's a natural. He's learning to fit in, developing a base of people he can hit for background information. We've set him up with his own office. He's even turning us a nice profit. His orders are to be very careful," Mrs. Foley pointed out yet again.

"I hear you, MP," Ryan said tiredly. "But if this is forreal—"

"I know, Jack. I didn't like what Murray sent over either."

"You believe it?" Ryan asked, wondering about the reaction he'd get.

"Yes, I do, and so does Murray." She paused. "If we develop information on this, then what?"

"Then I go to the President, and probably we extract anyone who wants to be extracted."

"I will *not* risk Nomuri that way!" the DDO insisted, a little too loudly.

"Jesus, Mary Pat, I never expected that you would. Hey, I'm tired, too, okay?"

"So you want me to send in another team, let him just bird-dog it for them?" she asked.

"It's your operation to run, okay? I'll tell you *what* to do, but not *how*. Lighten up, MP." That statement earned the National Security Advisor a crooked smile and a semiapology.

"Sorry, Jack. I keep forgetting you're the new guy on this block."

"The chemicals have various industrial uses," the Russian colonel explained to the American colonel.

"Good for you. All we can do is burn ours, and the smoke'll kill you." The rocket exhaust from the liquid propellants wasn't exactly the Breath of Spring either, of course, but when you got down to it, they *were* industrial chemicals

with a variety of other uses.

As they watched, technicians snaked a hose from the standpipe next to the missile *puskatel,* the Russian word for "silo," to a truck that would transport the last of the nitrogen tetroxide to a chemical plant. Below, another fitting on the missile body took another hose that pumped pressurized gas into the top of the oxidizer tank, the better to drive the corrosive chemical out. The top of the missile was blunt. The Americans could see where the warhead "bus" had been attached, but it had already been removed, and was now on another truck, preceded by a pair of BTR-70 infantry fighting vehicles and trailed by three more, on its way to a place where the warheads could be disarmed preparatory to complete disassembly. America was buying the plutonium. The tritium in the warheads would stay in Russia, probably to be sold eventually on the open market to end up on watch and instrument faces. Tritium had a market value of about $50,000 per gram, and the sale of it would turn a tidy profit for the Russians. Perhaps, the American thought, that was the reason that his Russian colleagues were moving so expeditiously.

This was the first SS-19 silo to be deactivated for the 53rd Strategic Rocket Regiment. It was both like and unlike the American silos being deactivated under Russian inspection. The same mass of reinforced concrete for both, though this one was sited in woods, and the American silos were all on open ground, reflecting different ideas about site security. The climate wasn't all that different. Windier in North Dakota, because of the open spaces. The base temperature was marginally colder in Russia, which balanced out the windchill factor on the prairie. In due course the valve wheel on the pipe was turned, the hose removed, and the truck started up.

"Mind if I look?" the USAF colonel asked.

"Please." The Russian colonel of Strategic Rocket Forces waved to the open hole. He even handed over a large flashlight. Then it was his turn to laugh.

You son of a bitch, Colonel Andrew Malcolm wanted to exclaim. There was a pool of icy water at the bottom of the puskatel. The intelligence estimate had been wrong again. Who would have believed it?

"Backup?" Ding asked.

"You might end up just doing sightseeing," Mrs. Foley told them, almost believing it.

"Fill us in on the mission?" John Clark asked, getting down to business. It was his own fault, after all, since he and Ding had turned into one of the Agency's best field teams. He looked over at Chavez. The kid had come a long way in five years. He had his college degree, and was close to his master's, in international relations no less. Ding's job would probably have put his instructors into cardiac arrest, since their idea of transnational intercourse didn't involve fucking other nations—a joke Domingo Chavez himself had coined on the dusty plains of Africa while reading a history book for one of his seminar groups. He still needed to learn about concealing his emotions. Chavez still retained some of the fiery nature of his background, though Clark wondered how much of it was for show around the Farm and elsewhere. In every organization the individual practitioners had to have a "service

reputation." John had his. People spoke about him in whispers, thinking, stupidly, that the nicknames and rumors would never get back to him. And Ding wanted one, too. Well, that was normal.

"Photos?" Chavez asked calmly, then took them from Mrs. Foley's hand. There were six of them. Ding examined each, handing them over one by one to his senior. The junior officer kept his voice even but allowed his face to show his distaste.

"So if Nomuri turns up a face and a location, then what?" Ding asked.

"You two make contact with her and ask if she would like a free plane ticket home," the DDO replied without adding that there would be an extensive debriefing process. The CIA didn't give out free anythings, really.

"Cover?" John asked.

"We haven't decided yet. Before you head over, we need to work on your language skills."

"Monterey?" Chavez smiled. It was about the most pleasant piece of country in America, especially this time of year.

"Two weeks, total immersion. You fly out this evening. Your teacher will be a guy named Lyalin, Oleg Yurievich. KGB major who came over a while back. He actually ran a network over there, called THISTLE. He's the guy who turned the information that you and Ding used to bug the airliner—"

"Whoa!" Chavez observed. "Without him . . ."

Mrs. Foley nodded, pleased that Ding had made the complete connection that rapidly. "That's right. He's got a very nice house overlooking the water. It turns out he's one hell of a good language teacher, I guess because he had to learn it himself." It had turned into a fine bargain for CIA. After the debriefing process, he'd taken a productive job at the Armed Forces Language School, where his salary was paid by DOD. "Anyway, by the time you're able to order lunch and find the bathroom in the native tongue, we'll have your cover IDs figured out."

Clark smiled and rose, taking the signal that it was time to leave. "Back to work, then."

"Defending America," Ding observed with a smile, leaving the photos on Mrs. Foley's desk and sure that actually having to defend his country was a thing of the past. Clark heard the remark and thought it a joke too, until memories came back that erased the look from his face.

It wasn't their fault. It was just a matter of objective conditions. With four times the population of the United States, and only one third the living space, they had to do something. The people needed jobs, products, a chance to have what everyone else in the world wanted. They could see it on the television sets that seemed to exist even in places where there were no jobs, and, seeing it, demanded a chance to have it. It was that simple. You couldn't say "no" to nine hundred million people.

Certainly not if you were one of them. Vice Admiral V. K. Chandraskatta sat on his leather chair on the flag bridge of the carrier *Viraat*. His obligation, as expressed in his oath of office, was to carry out the orders of his government, but more than that, his duty was to his people. He had to look no further than

his own flag bridge to see that: staff officers and ratings, especially the latter, the best his country could produce. They were mainly signalmen and yeomen who'd left whatever life they'd had on the subcontinent to take on this new one, and tried hard to be good at it, because as meager as the pay was, it was preferable to the economic chances they took in a country whose unemployment rate hovered between 20 and 25 percent. Just for his country to be self-sufficient in food had taken—how long? Twentyfive years. And *that* had come only as charity of sorts, the result of Western agroscience whose success still grated on many minds, as though his country, ancient and learned, couldn't make its own destiny. Even successful charity could be a burden on the national soul.

And now what? His country's economy was bouncing back, finally, but it was also hitting limits. India needed additional resources, but most of all needed space, of which there was little to be had. To his country's north was the world's most forbidding mountain range. East was Bangladesh, which had even more problems than India did. West was Pakistan, also overcrowded, and an ancient religious enemy, war with whom could well have the unwanted effect of cutting off his country's oil supply to the Muslim states of the Persian Gulf.

Such bad luck, the Admiral thought, picking up his glasses and surveying his fleet because he had nothing else to do at the moment. If they did nothing, the best his country might hope for was something little better than stagnation. If they turned outward, actively seeking room . . . But the "new world order" said that his country could not. India was denied entry into the race to greatness by those very nations that had run the race and then shut it down lest others catch up.

The proof was right here. His navy was one of the world's most powerful, built and manned and trained at ruinous expense, sailing on one of the world's seven oceans, the only one named for a country, and even here it was secondbest, subordinate to a fraction of the United States Navy. That grated even more. America was the one telling his country what it could and could not do. America, with a history of—what?—scarcely two hundred years. Upstarts. Had they fought Alexander of Macedon or the great Khan? The European "discovery" voyages had been aimed at reaching *his* country, and that land mass discovered by *accident* was now denying greatness and power and justice to the Admiral's ancient land. It was, all in all, a lot to hide behind a face of professional detachment while the rest of his flag staff bustled about.

"Radar contact, bearing one-three-five, range two hundred kilometers," a talker announced. "Inbound course, speed five hundred knots."

The Admiral turned to his fleet-operations officer and nodded. Captain Mehta lifted a phone and spoke. His fleet was off the normal commercial sea and air routes, and the timing told him what the inbound track would be. Four American fighters, F-18E Hornet attack fighters off one of the American carriers to his southeast. Every day they came, morning and afternoon, and sometimes in the middle of the night to show that they could do that, too, to let him know that the Americans knew his location, and to remind him that he didn't, couldn't know theirs.

A moment later he heard the start-up noise from two of his Harriers. Good

aircraft, expensive aircraft, but not a match for the inbound Americans. He'd put four up today, two from *Viraat* and two from *Vikrant*, to intercept the four, probably four, American Hornets, and the pilots would wave and nod in a show of good humor, but it would be a bilateral lie.

"We could light off our SAM systems, show them that we tire of this game," Captain Mehta suggested quietly. The Admiral shook his head.

"No. They know little about our SAM systems, and we will volunteer them nothing." The Indians' precise radar frequencies, pulse width, and repetition rates were not open information, and the American intelligence services had probably never troubled itself to find them out. That meant that the Americans might not be able to jam or spoof his systems—probably they could, but they wouldn't be certain of it, and it was the lack of certainty that would worry them. It wasn't much of a card, but it was the best in Chandraskatta's current hand. The Admiral sipped at his tea, making a show of his imperturbable nature. "No, we will take notice of their approach, meet them in a friendly manner, and let them go on their way."

Mehta nodded and went off without a word to express his building rage. It was to be expected. He was the fleet-operations officer, and his was the task of divining a plan to defeat the American fleet, should that necessity present itself. That such a task was virtually impossible did not relieve Mehta of the duty to carry it out, and it was hardly surprising that the man was showing the strain of his position. Chandraskatta set his cup down, watching the Harriers leap off the ski-jump deck and into the air.

"How are the pilots bearing up?" the Admiral asked his air officer.

"They grow frustrated, but performance thus far is excellent." The answer was delivered with pride, as well it might be. His pilots were superb. The Admiral ate with them often, drawing courage from the proud faces in the ready rooms. They were fine young men, the equal, man for man, of any fighter pilots in all the world. More to the point, they were eager to show it.

But the entire Indian Navy had only forty-three Harrier FRS 51 fighters. He had but thirty at sea on both *Viraat* and *Vikrant,* and that did not equal the numbers or capability aboard a single American carrier. All because they had entered the race first, won it, and then declared the games closed, Chandraskatta told himself, listening to the chatter of his airmen over an open-voice channel. It simply wasn't fair.

"So, what are you telling me?" Jack asked.

"It was a scam," Robby answered. "Those birds were maintenance-intensive. Guess what? The maintenance hasn't been done in the past couple of years. Andy Malcolm called in on his satellite brick this evening. There was water at the bottom of the hole he looked at today."

"And?"

"I keep forgetting you're a city boy." Robby grinned sheepishly, or rather like the wolf under a fleece coat. "You make a hole in the ground, sooner or later it fills with water, okay? If you have something valuable in the hole, you better keep it pumped out. Water in the bottom of the silo means that they weren't always doing that. It means water vapor, humidity in the hole. And

corrosion."

The light bulb went off. "You telling me the birds—"

"Probably wouldn't fly even if they wanted them to. Corrosion is like that. Probably dead birds, because fixing them once they're broke is a very iffy proposition. Anyway"—Jackson tossed the thin file folder at Ryan's desk —"that's the J-3 assessment."

"What about J-2?" Jack asked, referring to the intelligence directorate of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"They never believed it, but I expect they will now if we open enough holes and see the same thing. Me?" Admiral Jackson shrugged. "I figure if Ivan let us see it in number one, we'll find pretty much the same thing everywhere else. They just don't give a good fuck anymore."

Intelligence information comes from many sources, and an "operator" like Jackson was often the best source of all. Unlike intelligence officers whose job it was to evaluate the capabilities of the other side, almost always in a theoretical sense, Jackson was a man whose interest in weapons was making them work, and he'd learned from hard experience that using them was far more demanding than looking at them.

"Remember when we thought they were ten feet tall?"

"I never did, but a little bastard with a gun can still ruin your whole day," Robby reminded his friend. "So how much money have they hustled out of us?"

"Five big ones."

"Good deal, our federal tax money at work. We just paid the Russkies five thousand million dollars to 'deactivate' missiles that couldn't leave the silos unless they set the nukes off *first*. Fabulous call, Dr. Ryan."

"They need the money, Rob."

"So do I, man. Hey, boy, I'm scratching the bottom to get enough JP to keep our planes in the air." It was not often understood that every ship in the fleet and every battalion of tanks in the Army had to live on a budget. Though the commanding officers didn't keep a checkbook per se, each drew on a fixed supply of consumable stores—fuel, weapons, spare parts, even food in the case of warships—that had to last a whole year. It was by no means unknown for a man-of-war to sit several weeks alongside her pier at the end of the fiscal year because there was nothing left to make her run. Such an event meant that somewhere a job was not getting done, a crew was not being trained. The Pentagon was fairly unique as a federal agency, in that it was expected to live on a fixed, often diminishing budget.

"How much thinner do you expect us to be spread?"

"I'll tell him, Rob, okay? The Chairman—"

"Just between you and me, the Chairman thinks operations are something that surgeons do in hospitals. And if you quote me on that, no more golf lessons."

"What is it worth to have the Russians out of the game?" Jack asked, wondering if Robby would calm down a little.

"Not as much as we've lost in cuts. In case you haven't noticed, my Navy is still stretched from hell to breakfast, and we're doing business with forty percent less ships. The ocean didn't get any smaller, okay? The Army's better

off, I grant that, but the Air Force isn't, and the Marines are still sucking hind tit, and *they're* still our primary response team for the next time the boys and girls at Foggy Bottom fuck up."

"Preaching to the choir, Rob."

"More to it than just that, Jack. We're stretching the people, too. The fewer the ships, the longer they have to stay out. The longer they stay out, the worse the maintenance bills. It's like the bad old days in the late seventies. We're starting to lose people. Hard to make a man stay away from his wife and kids that long. In flying, we call it the coffin corner. When you lose experienced people, your training bills go up. You lose combat effectiveness no matter which way you go," Robby went on, talking like an admiral now.

"Look, Rob, I gave the same speech a while back on the other side of the building. I'm doing my best for you," Jack replied, talking like a senior government official. At that point both old friends shared a look.

"We're both old farts."

"It's a long time since we were on the faculty of Canoe U," Ryan allowed. His voice went on almost in a whisper. "Me teaching history, and you prostrating yourself to God every night to heal your leg."

"I should've done more of that. Arthritis in the knee," Robby said. "I have a flight physical in nine months. Guess what?"

"Down-check?"

"The big one." Jackson nodded matter-of-factly. Ryan knew what it really meant. To a man who'd flown fighter planes off carriers for over twenty years, it was the hard realization that age had come. He couldn't play with the boys anymore. You could explain away gray in the hair by citing adverse genes, but a down-check would mean taking off the flight suit, hanging up the helmet, and admitting that he was no longer good enough to do the one thing he'd yearned for since the age of ten, and at which he'd excelled for nearly all of his adult life. The bitterest part would be the memories of the things he'd said as a lieutenant, j.g., about the older pilots of his youth, the hidden smirks, the knowing looks shared with his fellow youngsters, none of whom had ever expected it would come to them.

"Rob, a lot of good guys never get the chance to screen for command of a squadron. They take the twenty-year out at commander's rank and end up flying the night shift for Federal Express."

"And make good money at it, too."

"Have you picked out the casket yet?" That broke the mood. Jackson looked up and grinned.

"Shit. If I can't dance, I can still watch. I'm telling you, pal, you want us to run all these pretty operations we plan in my cubicle, we need help from this side of the river. Mike Dubro is doing a great job hanging paper with one hand, but he and his troops have limits, y'dig?"

"Well, Admiral, I promise you this: when the time comes for you to get your battle group, there will be one for you to drive." It wasn't much of a pledge, but both men knew it was the best he could offer.

She was number five. The remarkable part was—hell, Murray thought in the

office six blocks from the White House, it was all remarkable. It was the profile of the investigation that was the most disquieting. He and his team had interviewed several women who had admitted, some shamefacedly, some without overt emotional involvement, and some with pride and humor, at having bedded Ed Kealty, but there were five for whom the act had not been entirely voluntary. With this woman, the latest, drugs had been an additional factor, and she felt the lonely personal shame, the sense that she alone had fallen into the trap.

"So?" Bill Shaw asked after what had been a long day for him, too.

"So it's a solid case. We now have five known victims, four of whom are living. Two would stand up as rapes in any courtroom I've ever been in. That does not count Lisa Beringer. The other two demonstrate the use of drugs on federal property. Those two are virtually word-for-word, they identify the label on the brandy bottle, the effects, everything."

"Good witnesses?" the FBI Director asked.

"As good as can be expected in this sort of case. It's time to move with it," Murray added. Shaw nodded in understanding. Word would soon begin to leak out. You simply couldn't run a covert investigation for very long, even under the best of circumstances. Some of the people you interviewed would be loyal to the target of the inquiry, and no matter how carefully you phrased the opening questions, they would make the not overly great leap of imagination required to discern the nature of the probe, often because they suspected it themselves. Then those non-witnesses would worry about getting back to the target to warn him, whether from conviction in his innocence or hope of deriving a personal profit. Criminal or not, the Vice President was a man with considerable political power, still able to dole out large and powerful tokens to those who won his favor. In another age, the Bureau might not have gotten this far. The President himself, or even the Attorney General, would have conveyed a quiet warning, and senior staff members would themselves have sought out the victims and offered to make amends of one sort or another, and in many cases it would have worked. The only reason they'd gotten this far, after all, was that the FBI had the permission of the President, the cooperation of the AG, and a different legal and moral climate in which to work.

"As soon as you go to talk to the Chairman . . ."

Murray nodded. "Yeah, might as well have a press conference and lay out our evidence in an organized way." But they couldn't do that, of course. Once the substance of their evidence was given over to political figures—in this case the chairman and ranking minority member of the House Committee on the Judiciary—it would leak immediately. The only real control Murray and his team would possess would be in selecting the time of day. Late enough, and the news would miss the morning papers, incurring the wrath of the editors of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. The Bureau had to play strictly by the rules. It couldn't leak anything because this was a criminal proceeding and the rights of the target had to be guarded as closely as—actually even closer than—those of the victims, lest the eventual trial be tainted.

"We'll do it here, Dan," Shaw said, reaching his decision. "I'll have the AG make the phone call and set the meet. Maybe that'll put the information on close-hold for a little while. What exactly did the President say the other day?"

"He's a standup guy," the Deputy Assistant Director reported, using a form of praise popular in the FBI. "He said, 'A crime's a crime.' " The President had also said to handle the affair in as "black" a way as possible, but that was to be expected.

"Fair enough. I'll let him know what we're doing personally."

Typically, Nomuri went right to work. It was his regular night at this bathhouse with this group of salarymen—he probably had the cleanest job in the Agency. It was also one of the slickest ways of getting information he'd ever stumbled across, and he made it slicker still by standing for a large bottle of sake that now sat, half empty, on the edge of the wooden tub.

"I wish you hadn't told me about that round-eye," Nomuri said with his own eyes closed, sitting in his usual corner and allowing his body to take in the enveloping heat of the water. At one hundred eight degrees, it was hot enough to lower blood pressure and induce euphoria. Added to it was the effect of the alcohol. Many Japanese have a genetic abnormality called "Oriental Flush" in the West, or with greater ethnic sensitivity, "pathological intoxication." It is actually an enzyme disorder, and means that for a relatively low quantity of alcoholic intake, there is a high degree of result. It was, fortunately, a trait which Nomuri's family did not share.

"Why is that?" Kazuo Taoka asked from the opposite corner.

"Because now I cannot get the gaijin witch out of my mind!" Nomuri replied good-naturedly. One of the other effects of the bathhouse was an intimate bonhomie. The man next to the CIA officer rubbed his head roughly and laughed, as did the rest of the group.

"Ah, and now you want to hear more, is it?" Nomuri didn't have to look. The man whose body rubbed on his leaned forward. Surely the rest would do it as well. "You were right, you know. Their feet are too big, and their bosoms also, but their manners . . . well, that they can learn after a fashion."

"You make us wait?" another member of the group asked, feigning a blustery anger.

"Do you not appreciate drama?" There was a merry chorus of laughs. "Well, yes, it is true that her bosoms are too big for real beauty, but there are sacrifices we all must make in life, and truly I have seen worse deformities ..."

Such a good raconteur, Nomuri thought. He did have a gift for it. In a moment he heard the sound of a cork being pulled, as another man refilled the little cups. Drink was actually prohibited in the bathhouse for health reasons, but, rarely for this country, it was a rule largely ignored. Nomuri reached for his cup, his eyes still closed, and made a great show of forming a mental picture masked by a blissful smile, as additional details slid across the steaming surface of the water. The description became more specific, fitting ever closer to the photograph and to other details he'd been passed on his early-morning train. It was hardly conclusive yet. Any of thousands of girls could fit the description, and Nomuri wasn't particularly outraged by the event. She'd taken her chances one way or another, but she was an American citizen, and if it were possible to help her, then he would. It seemed a trivial sidebar to his overall assignment, but if nothing else it had caused him to ask

a question that would make him appear even more a member of this group of men. It made it more likely, therefore, to get important information out of them at a later date.

“We have no choice,” a man said in another, similar bathhouse, not so far away. “We need your help.”

It wasn’t unexpected, the other five men thought. It was just a matter of who would hit the wall first. Fate had made it this man and his company. That did not lessen his personal disgrace at being forced to ask for help, and the other men felt his pain while outwardly displaying only dispassionate good manners. Indeed, those men who listened felt something else as well: fear. Now that it had happened once, it would be far easier for it to happen again. Who would be next?

Generally there could be no safer form of investment than real estate, real fixed property with physical reality, something you could touch and feel, build, and live on, that others could see and measure. Although there were continuing efforts in Japan to make new fill land, to build new airports, for example, the general rule was as true here as it was elsewhere: it made sense to buy land because the supply of real land was fixed, and because of that the price was not going to drop.

But in Japan that truth had been distorted by unique local conditions. Land-use policy in the country was skewed by the inordinate power of the small holders of farmland, and it was not unusual to see a small patch of land in the midst of a suburban setting allocated to the growing of a quarter hectare of vegetables. Small already—the entire nation was about the size of California, and populated with roughly half the people of the United States—their country was further crowded by the fact that little of the land was arable, and since arable land also tended to be land on which people could more easily live, the major part of the population was further concentrated into a handful of large, dense cities, where real-estate prices became more precious still. The remarkable result of these seemingly ordinary facts was that the commercial real estate in the city of Tokyo alone had a higher “book” value than that of all the land in America’s forty-eight contiguous states. More remarkably still, this absurd fiction was accepted by everyone as though it made sense, when in fact it was every bit as madly artificial as the Dutch Tulip Mania of the seventeenth century.

But as with America, what was a national economy, after all, but a collective belief? Or so everyone had thought for a generation. The frugal Japanese citizens saved a high proportion of their earnings. Those savings went into banks, in such vast quantities that the supply of capital for lending was similarly huge, as a result of which the interest rates for those loans were correspondingly low, which allowed businesses to purchase land and build on it despite prices that anywhere else in the world would have been somewhere between ruinous and impossible. As with any artificial boom, the process had dangerous corollaries. The inflated book value of owned real estate was used as collateral for other loans, and as security for stock portfolios bought on margin, and in the process supposedly intelligent and far-seeing businessmen

had in fact constructed an elaborate house of cards whose foundation was the belief that metropolitan Tokyo had more intrinsic value than all of America between Bangor and San Diego. (An additional consequence of this was a view of real-estate value that more than any other factor had persuaded Japanese businessmen that American real-estate, which, after all, looked pretty much the same as that in their own country, *had to be* worth more than what the foolish Americans charged for it.) By the early 1990s had come disquieting thoughts. The precipitous decline of the Japanese stock market had threatened to put calls on the large margin accounts, and made some businessmen think about selling their land holdings to cover their exposures. With that had come the stunning but unsurprising realization that nobody wanted to pay book value for a parcel of land; that although everyone accepted book value in the abstract, actually paying the assumed price was, well, not terribly realistic. The result was that the single card supporting the rest of the house had been quietly removed from the bottom of the structure and awaited only a puff of breeze to cause the entire edifice to collapse—a possibility studiously ignored in the discourse between senior executives.

Until now.

The men sitting in the tub were friends and associates of many years' standing, and with Kozo Matsuda's quiet and dignified announcement of his company's current cash-flow difficulties, all of them saw collective disaster on a horizon that was suddenly far closer than they had expected only two hours earlier. The bankers present could offer loans, but interest rates were higher now. The industrialists could offer favors, but those would affect the bottom-line profits of their operations, with adverse effects on already-staggering stock prices. Yes, they could save their friend from ruin, along with which, in their society, came personal disgrace that would forever remove him from this intimate group. If they didn't, he would have to take his "best" chance, to put some of his office buildings, quietly, on the market, hoping, quietly, that someone would purchase them at something akin to the assumed value. But that was most unlikely—this they knew; they themselves would not be willing to do it—and if it became known that "book value" was as fictional as the writings of Jules Verne, then they would suffer, too. The bankers would have to admit that the security of their loans, and consequently the security of their depositors' money, was also a hollow fiction. A quantity of "real" money so massive as to be comprehended only as a number would be seen to have vanished as though by some sort of evil magic. For all these reasons, they would do what had to be done, they would help Matsuda and his company, receiving concessions in return, of course, but fronting the money he and his operations needed.

The problem was that although they could do it once, probably twice, and maybe even a third time, events would soon cascade, finding their own precipitous momentum, and there would soon come a time when they could not do what was necessary to support the house of cards. The consequences were not easily contemplated.

All six of the men looked down at the water, unable to meet the eyes of the others, because their society did not easily allow men to communicate fear, and fear is what they all felt. They were responsible, after all. Their

corporations were in their own hands, ruled as autocratically as the holdings of a J. P. Morgan. With their control came a lavish lifestyle, immense personal power, and, ultimately, total personal accountability. All the decisions had been theirs, after all, and if those decisions had been faulty, then the responsibility was theirs in a society where public failure was as painful as death.

"Yamata-san is right," one of the bankers said quietly, without moving his body. "I was in error to dispute his view."

Marveling at his courage, and as though in one voice, the others nodded and whispered, "*Hai.*"

Then another man spoke. "We need to seek his counsel on this matter."

* * *

The factory worked two hectic shifts, so popular was what it turned out. Set in the hills of Kentucky, the single building occupied over a hundred acres and was surrounded in turn by a parking lot for its workers and another for its products, with an area for loading trucks, and another for loading trains, run into the facility by CSX.

The premier new car on American and Japanese markets, the Cresta was named for the toboggan run at St. Moritz, in Switzerland, where a senior Japanese auto executive, somewhat in his cups, had taken up a challenge to try his luck on one of the deceptively simple sleds. He'd rocketed down the track, only to lose control at the treacherous Shuttlecock curve, turned himself into a ballistic object and dislocated his hip in the process. To honor the course that had given him a needed lesson in humility, he'd decided in the local casualty hospital to enshrine his experience in a new car, at that time merely a set of drawings and specifications.

As with nearly everything generated by the Japanese auto industry, the Cresta was a masterpiece of engineering. Popularly priced, its front-wheel drive attached to a sporty and fuel-efficient four-cylinder, sixteen-valve engine, it sat two adults in the front and two or three children quite comfortably in the back, and had become overnight both the *Motor Trend* Car of the Year and the savior of a Japanese manufacturer that had suffered three straight years of declining sales because of Detroit's rebounding efforts to take back the American market. The single most popular car for young adults with families, it came "loaded" with options and was manufactured on both sides of the Pacific to meet a global demand.

This plant, set thirty miles outside Lexington, Kentucky, was state-of-the-art in all respects. The employees earned union wages without having had to join the UAW, and on both attempts to create a union shop, supervised by the National Labor Relations Board, the powerful organization had failed to get even as much as 40 percent of the vote and gone away grumbling at the unaccustomed stupidity of the workers.

As with any such operation, there was an element of unreality to it. Auto parts entered the building at one end, and finished automobiles exited at the other. Some of the parts were even American made, though not as many as the

U.S. government would have wished. Indeed, the factory manager would have preferred more domestic content as well, especially in the winter, when adverse weather on the Pacific could interfere with the delivery of parts—even a one-day delay in arrival time of a single ship could bring some inventories dangerously low, since the plant ran on minimal overhead—and the demand for his Crestas was greater than his ability to manufacture them. The parts arrived mostly by train-loaded containers from ports on both American coasts, were separated by type, and stored in stockrooms adjacent to the portion of the assembly line at which they would be joined with the automobiles. Much of the work was done by robots, but there was no substitute for the skilled hands of a worker with eyes and a brain, and in truth the automated functions were mainly things that people didn't enjoy anyway. The very efficiency of the plant made for the affordable cost of the Cresta, and the busy schedule, with plenty of overtime, made for workers who, with this region's first taste of really well-paying manufacturing jobs, applied themselves as diligently as their Japanese counterparts, and, their Japanese supervisors admitted quietly both to themselves and in internal company memoranda, rather more creatively. Fully a dozen major innovations suggested by workers on this line, just in this year, had been adopted at once in similar factories six thousand miles away. The supervisory personnel themselves greatly enjoyed living in Middle America. The price of their homes and the expanse of land that came with them both came as startling revelations, and after the initial discomfort of being in an alien land, they all began the process of succumbing to local hospitality, joining the local lawyers on the golf links, stopping off at McDonald's for a burger, watching their children play T-Ball with the local kids, often amazed at their welcome after what they'd expected. (The local TV cable system had even added NHK to its service, for the two hundred families who wanted the flavor of something from home.) In the process they also generated a tidy profit for their parent corporation, which, unfortunately, was now trapped into barely breaking even on the Crestas produced in Japan due to the unexpectedly high productivity of the Kentucky plant and the continuing decline of the dollar against the yen. For that reason, additional land was being bought this very week to increase the capacity of the plant by 60 percent. A third shift, while a possibility, would have reduced line maintenance, with a consequent adverse effect on quality control, which was a risk the company was unwilling to run, considering the renewed competition from Detroit.

Early in the line, two workers attached the gasoline tanks to the frames. One, off the line, removed the tank from its shipping carton and set it on a moving track that carried it to the second worker, whose job was to manhandle the light but bulky artifact into place. Plastic hangers held the tank briefly until the worker made the attachment permanent, and the plastic hangers were then removed before the chassis moved on to the next station.

The cardboard was soggy, the woman in the storage room noted. She held her hand to her nose and smelled sea salt. The container that had held this shipment of gas tanks had been improperly closed, and a stormy sea had invaded it. A good thing, she thought, that the tanks were all weathersealed and galvanized. Perhaps fifteen or twenty of the tanks had been exposed to

seawater. She considered mentioning it to the supervisor, but on looking around she couldn't see him. She had the authority on her own to stop the line —traditionally a very rare power for an auto-assembly worker—until the question of the gas tanks was cleared up. Every worker in the plant had that theoretical power, but she was new here, and really needed her supervisor to make the call. Looking around more, she almost stopped the line by her inaction, which caused an abrupt whistle from the line worker. Well, it couldn't be that big a deal, could it? She slid the tank on the track, and, opening the next box, forgot about it. She would never know that she was part of a chain of events that would soon kill one family and wound two others.

Two minutes later the tank was attached to a Cresta chassis, and the not-yet-a-car moved on down the seemingly endless line toward an open door that could not even be seen from this station. In due course the rest of the automobile would be assembled on the steel frame, finally rolling out of the plant as a candy-apple-red car already ordered by a family in Greeneville, Tennessee. The color had been chosen in honor of the wife, Candace Denton, who had just given her husband, Pierce, his first son after two twin daughters three years earlier. It would be the first new car the young couple had ever owned, and was his way of showing her how pleased he was with her love. They really couldn't afford it, but it was about love, not money, and he knew that somehow he'd find a way to make it work. The following day the car was driven onto a semitrailer transporter for the short drive to the dealer in Knoxville. A telex from the assembly plant told the salesman that it was on the way, and he wasted no time calling Mr. Denton to let him know the good news.

They'd need a day for dealer prep, but the car would be delivered, a week late due to the demand for the Cresta, fully inspected, with temporary tags and insurance. And a full tank of gas, sealing a fate already decided by a multiplicity of factors.

7

Catalyst

It didn't help to do it at night. Even the glare of lights—dozens of them—didn't replicate what the sun gave for free. Artificial light made for odd shadows that always seemed to be in the wrong places, and if that weren't bad enough, the men moving around made shadows of their own, pulling the eyes away from their important work.

Each of the SS-19/H-11 "boosters" was encapsulated. The construction plans for the capsule—called a cocoon here—had accompanied the plans for the missiles themselves, more or less as an afterthought; after all, the Japanese corporation had paid for all the plans, and they were in the same drawer, and so they went along. That was fortunate, the supervising engineer thought, because it had not seemed to have occurred to anyone to ask for them.

The SS-19 had been designed as an intercontinental ballistic missile, a weapon of war, and since it had been designed by Russians, it had also been engineered for rough handling by poorly trained conscript soldiers. In this, the engineer admitted, the Russians had showed true genius worthy of emulation. His own countrymen had a tendency to overengineer everything, which often made for a delicacy that had no place in such brutish applications as this. Forced to construct a weapon that could survive adverse human and environmental factors, the Russians had built a transport/ loading container for their "birds" that protected them against everything. In this way the assembly workers could fit all the plugs and fittings at the factory, insert the missile body into its capsule, and ship it off to the field, where all the soldiers had to do was elevate it and then lower it into the silo. Once there, a better-trained crew of three men would attach the external power and telemetry plugs. Though not as simple as loading a cartridge into a rifle, it was by far the most efficient way of installing an ICBM that anyone had ever developed—efficient enough, indeed, that the Americans had copied it for their MX "Peacekeeper" missiles, all of which were now destroyed. The cocoon allowed the missile to be handled without fear, because all the stress points had hard contact with the inside of the structure. It was rather like the exoskeleton of an insect, and was necessary because, as forbidding as the missile might appear, it was in fact as delicate as the flimsiest tissue. Fittings within the silo accepted the base of the capsule, which allowed it to be rotated to the vertical and then lowered fully into place. The entire operation, bad lighting and all, required ninety minutes—exactly what the Soviet manual had demanded of its people, remarkably enough.

In this case, the silo crew consisted of five men. They attached three power cables along with four hoses that would maintain the gas pressure in the fuel

and oxidizer tanks—the bird was not yet fueled, and the internal tanks needed pressure to maintain structural integrity. In the control bunker located six hundred meters away, within the valley's northeastern wall, the control crew of three men noted that the missile's internal systems "spun up" just as they were supposed to. It wasn't the least bit unexpected, but was gratifying even so. With that knowledge, they made a call to the phone located adjacent to the top of the silo, and the work crew waved the train off. The diesel switch engine would deposit the flatcar back on a siding and retrieve the next missile. Two would be emplaced that night, and on each of the four succeeding nights, filling all ten of the silos. The senior personnel marveled at how smoothly it had all gone, though each wondered why it should be so surprising. It was perfectly straightforward work, after all. And strictly speaking, it was, but each also knew that the world would soon be a very different place because of what they had done, and somehow they'd expected the sky to change color or the earth to move at every moment of the project. Neither had happened, and now the question was whether to be disappointed or elated by that turn of events.

"It is our opinion that you should take a harder line with them," Goto said in the sanctity of his host's office.

"But why?" the Prime Minister asked, knowing the answer even so.

"They seek to crush us. They seek to punish us for being efficient, for doing better work, for achieving higher standards than what their own lazy workers are willing to attain." The Leader of the Opposition saved his assertive speaking voice for public utterances. In private with the leader of his country's government, he was unfailingly polite in manner even as he plotted to replace this weak, indecisive man.

"That is not necessarily the case, Goto-san. You know as well as I do that we have of late reasserted our position on rice and automobiles and computer chips. It is we who have won concessions from them, and not the reverse." The Prime Minister wondered what Goto was up to. Part of it he knew, naturally enough. Goto was maneuvering with his usual crude skill to realign the various factions in the Diet. The Prime Minister had a tenuous majority there, and the reason his government had taken a hard line on trade issues had been to assuage those on the margins of his voting bloc, ordinarily minor players and parties whose alliance of convenience with the government had magnified their power to the point where the tail really could wag the dog, because the tail knew that it held the balance of power. In this the PM had played a dangerous game on the high-wire and without a net. On the one hand he'd have to keep his own diverse political allies happy, and on the other he couldn't offend his nation's most important trading partner. Worst of all, it was a tiring game, especially with people like Goto watching from below and howling at him, hoping that their noise would make him fall.

As though you could do better, the Prime Minister thought, politely refilling Goto's cup with green tea, getting a gracious nod for the gesture.

The more basic problem he understood better than the leader of his parliamentary opposition. Japan was not a democracy in any real sense.

Rather like America in the late Nineteenth Century, the government was in fact, if not in law, a kind of official shield for the nation's business. The country was really run by a relative handful of businessmen—the number was under thirty, or even under twenty, depending on how you reckoned it—and despite the fact that those executives and their corporations appeared to be cutthroat competitors, in reality they were all associates, allied in every possible way, co-directorships, banking partnerships, all manner of inter-corporate cooperation agreements. Rare was the parliamentarian who would not listen with the greatest care to a representative of one of the zaibatsu. Rarer still was the Diet member who was graced with a personal audience with one of these men, and in every such case, the elected government official came away exhilarated at his good fortune, for those men were quite effective at providing what every politician needed: funds. Consequently, their word was law. The result was a parliament as thoroughly corrupted as any on earth. Or perhaps "corrupt" was the wrong term, the PM told himself. Subservient, perhaps. The ordinary citizens of the country were often enraged by what they saw, by what a few courageous journalists proclaimed, mostly in terms that, despite appearing to Westerners to be rather weak and fawning, in local context were as damning as anything Emile Zola had ever broadsheeted across Paris. But the ordinary citizens didn't have the effective power that the zaibatsu did, and every attempt to reform the political system had fallen short. As a result, the government of one of the world's most powerful economies had become little more than the official arm of businessmen elected by no one, scarcely even beholden to their own stockholders. They had arranged his own accession to the Prime Ministership, he knew now . . . perhaps a bone thrown to the common people? he wondered. Had he been *supposed* to fail? Was that the destiny that had been constructed for him? To fail so that a return to normal could then be accepted by the citizens who'd placed their hopes in his hands?

That fear had pushed him into taking positions with America that he knew to be dangerous. And now even that was not enough, was it?

"Many would say that," Goto allowed with the most perfect manners. "And I salute you for your courage. Alas, objective conditions have hurt our country. For example, the relative change of dollar and yen has had devastating effects on our investments abroad, and these could only have been the result of deliberate policy on the part of our esteemed trading partners."

There was something about his delivery, the Prime Minister thought. His words sounded scripted. Scripted by whom? Well, that was obvious enough. The PM wondered if Goto knew that he was in even a poorer position than the man he sought to replace. *Probably not,* but that was scant consolation. If Goto achieved his post, he would be even more in the pawn of his masters, pushed into implementing policies that might or might not be well considered. And unlike himself, Goto might be fool enough to believe that he was actually pursuing policies that were both wise and his own. How long would that illusion last?

It was dangerous to do this so often, Christopher Cook knew. Often? Well,

every month or so. Was that often? Cook was a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, not an intelligence officer, and hadn't read that manual, assuming there was one.

The hospitality was as impressive as ever, the good food and wine and the exquisite setting, the slow procession through topics of conversation, beginning with the polite and entirely pro forma inquiries as to the state of his family, and his golf game, and his opinion on this or that current social topic. Yes, the weather was unusually pleasant for this time of year—a perennial remark on Seiji's part; fairly enough, since fall and spring in Washington were tolerably pleasant, but the summers were hot and muggy and the winters wet and dank. It was tedious, even to the professional diplomat well versed in meaningless chitchat. Nagumo had been in Washington long enough to run out of original observations to make, and over the past few months had grown repetitive. *Well, why should he be different from any other diplomat in the world?* Cook asked himself, about to be surprised.

"I understand that you have reached an important agreement with the Russians," Seiji Nagumo observed as the dinner dishes were cleared away.

"What do you mean?" Cook asked, thinking it a continuation of the chitchat.

"We've heard that you are accelerating the elimination of ICBMs," the man went on, sipping his wine.

"You are well informed," Cook observed, impressed, so much so that he missed a signal he'd never received before. "That's a rather sensitive subject."

"Undoubtedly so, but also a wonderful development, is it not?" He raised his glass in a friendly toast. Cook, pleased, did the same.

"It most certainly is," the State Department official agreed. "As you know, it has been a goal of American foreign policy since the late 1940s—back to Bernard Baruch, if memory serves—to eliminate weapons of mass destruction and their attendant danger to the human race. As you well know—"

Nagumo, surprisingly, cut him off. "I know better than you might imagine, Christopher. My grandfather lived in Nagasaki. He was a machinist for the naval base that was once there. He survived the bomb—his wife did not, I regret to tell you—but he was badly burned in the ensuing fire, and I can well remember his scars. The experience hastened his death, I am sorry to say." It was a card skillfully played, all the more so that it was a lie.

"I didn't know, Seiji. I'm sorry," Cook added, meaning it. The purpose of diplomacy, after all, was to prevent war whenever possible, or, failing that, to conclude them as bloodlessly as possible.

"So, as you might imagine, I am quite interested in the final elimination of those horrible things." Nagumo topped off Cook's glass. It was an excellent chardonnay that had gone well with the main course.

"Well, your information is pretty accurate. I'm not briefed in on that stuff, you understand, but I've caught a few things at the lunch room," Cook added, to let his friend know that he dined on the seventh floor of the State Department building, not in the more plebeian cafeteria.

"My interest, I admit, is personal. On the day the last one is destroyed, I plan to have a personal celebration, and to offer prayers to grandfather's spirit, to assure him that he didn't die in vain. Do you have any idea when

that day will be, Christopher?"

"Not exactly, no. It's being kept quiet."

"Why is that?" Nagumo asked. "I don't understand."

"Well, I suppose the President wants to make a big deal about it. Every so often Roger likes to spring one on the media, especially with the election year on the horizon."

Seiji nodded. "Ah, yes, I can see that. So it is not really a matter of national security, is it?" he inquired offhandedly.

Cook thought about it for a second before replying. "Well, no, I don't suppose it is, really. True, it makes us more secure, but the manner in which that takes place is ... well, pretty benign, I guess."

"In that case, could I ask a favor?"

"What's that?" Cook asked, lubricated by the wine and the company and the fact that he'd been feeding trade information to Nagumo for months.

"Just as a personal favor, could you find out for me the exact date on which the last missile will be destroyed? You see," he explained, "the ceremony I will undertake will be quite special, and it requires preparation."

Cook almost said, *Sorry, Seiji, but that is technically speaking a national-security matter, and I never agreed to give anyone that sort of information.* The hesitation on his face, and the surprise that caused it, overpowered his normal diplomat's poker face. His mind raced, or tried to in the presence of his friend. Okay, sure, for three and a half years he'd talked over trade issues with Nagumo, occasionally getting information that was useful, stuff he'd used, earning him a promotion to DASS rank, and occasionally, he'd given over information, because . . . because why? Because part of him was bored with the State Department grind and federal salary caps, and once upon a time a former colleague had remarked to him that with all the skills he'd acquired in fifteen years of government service, he really could escape into private industry, become a consultant or lobbyist, and hell, it wasn't as though he were *spying* on his country or anything, was it? Hell, no, it was just *business*, man.

Was this spying? Cook asked himself. Was it really? The missiles weren't aimed at Japan and never had been. In fact, if the papers were right, they weren't aimed at anything except the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and the net effect of their destruction was exactly zero on everyone. Nobody hurt. Nobody really helped, except in budgetary terms, and that was pretty marginal for all concerned. So, no, there wasn't a national-security element to this, was there? No. So, he could pass that information along, couldn't he?

"Okay, Seiji. I guess this once, yeah, I can see what I can find out."

"Thank you, Christopher." Nagumo smiled. "My ancestors will thank you. It will be a great day for the entire world, my friend, and it deserves proper celebration." In many sports it was called follow-through. There was no term for it in espionage.

"You know, I think it does, too," Cook said after a further moment's contemplation. It never occurred to him to be amazed that the first step over the invisible line that he had himself constructed was as easy as this.

“I am honored,” Yamata said with a great show of humility. “It is a fortunate man who has such wise and thoughtful friends.”

“It is you who honor us,” one of the bankers insisted politely.

“Are we not colleagues? Do we not all serve our country, our people, our culture, with equal devotion? You, Ichiki-san, the temples you’ve restored. Ah!” He waved his hand around the low polished table. “We’ve all done it, asking nothing in return but the chance to help our country, making it great again, and then actually doing it,” Yamata added. “So how may I be of service to my friends this evening?” His face took on a quiet, passive mien, waiting to be told that which he already knew. His closest allies around the table, whose identity was not really known to the other nineteen, were studies of curious anticipation, skilled, as he was, in concealment. But for all that there was tension in the room, an atmosphere so real that you could smell it, like the odor of a foreigner.

Eyes turned almost imperceptibly to Matsuda-san, and many actually thought that his difficulties would come as a surprise to Yamata, even though the request for the meeting must have ignited his curiosity enough to turn loose his formidable investigative assets. The head of one of the world’s largest conglomerates spoke with quiet, if sad, dignity, taking his time, as he had to, explaining that the conditions that had brought about his cash-flow problem had not, of course, been the fault of his management. It was a business that had begun with shipbuilding, branched out into construction, then delved into consumer electronics. Matsuda had ridden to its chairmanship in the mid-1980s and delivered for his stockholders such return as many only dreamed of. Matsuda-san gave the history himself, and Yamata did not show the least impatience. After all, it worked in his favor that all should hear in his words their own corporate success stories, because in seeing the similarity of success, they would also fear a similarity of personal catastrophe. That the cretin had decided to become a major player in Hollywood, pissing away an immense quantity of cash for eighty acres on Melrose Boulevard and a piece of paper that said he could make movies, well, that was his misfortune, was it not?

“The corruption and dishonor of those people is truly astounding,” Matsuda went on in a voice that a Catholic priest might hear in a confessional, causing him to wonder if the sinner was recanting his sins or merely bemoaning his bad luck. In the case at hand, two billion dollars were as thoroughly gone as if burned to cook sausages.

Yamata could have said, “I warned you,” except that he hadn’t, even after his own investment counselors, Americans in this particular instance, had examined the very same deal and warned him off in the strongest terms. Instead he nodded thoughtfully.

“Clearly you could not have anticipated that, especially after all the assurances you were given, and the wonderfully fair terms you gave in return. It would appear, my friends, that proper business ethics are lost on them.” He looked around the table to collect the nods his observation had earned. “Matsuda-san, what reasonable man could say that you were in any way at fault?”

“Many would,” he answered, rather courageously, all thought.

"Not I, my friend. Who among us is more honorable, more sagacious? Who among us has served his corporation more diligently?" Raizo Yamata shook his head sorrowfully.

"Of greater concern, my friends, is that a similar fate could await us all," a banker announced quietly, meaning that his bank held the paper on Matsuda's real-estate holdings both in Japan and America, and that the failure of that conglomerate would reduce his reserves to dangerous levels. The problem was that even though he could survive the corporate failure in both real and theoretical terms, it required only the perception that his reserves were weaker than they actually were to bring his institution down, and *that* idea could appear in a newspaper merely through the misunderstanding of a single reporter. The consequences of such a misguided report, or rumor, could begin a run on the bank, and make real what was not. Certainly the money withdrawn would then be deposited elsewhere—there was too much to go under mattresses, after all—in which case it would be lent back by a fellow corporate banker to safeguard his colleague's position, but a second-order crisis, which was quite possible, could bring everything crashing down.

What went unsaid, and for that matter largely unthought, was that the men in this room had brought the crisis upon themselves through ill-considered dealings. It was a crucial blindspot that all shared—or nearly all, Yamata told himself.

"The basic problem is that our country's economic foundation rests not on rock, but on sand," Yamata began, speaking rather like a philosopher. "As weak and foolish as the Americans are, fortune has given them things which we lack. As a result, however clever our people are, we are always at a disadvantage." He had said all of this before, but now, for the first time, they were listening, and it required all of his self-control not to gloat. Rather he dialed back his level of rhetoric even more than he had in previous discourses. He looked over to one of them, who had always disagreed with him before.

"Remember what you said, that our real strengths are the diligence of our workers and the skill of our designers? That was true, my friend. These are strengths, and more than that, they are strengths that the Americans do not have in the abundance which we enjoy, but because fortune has for reasons of her own smiled on the gaijin, they can checkmate our advantages because they have converted their good fortune into real power, and power is something we lack." Yamata paused, reading his audience once more, watching their eyes and gauging the impassivity there. Even for one born of this culture and reared in its rules, he had to take his gamble now. This was the moment. He was sure of it. "But, really, that is not entirely the case either. They *chose* to take that path, while we have *chosen* not to. And so, now, we must pay the price for that misjudgment. Except for one thing."

"And what is that?" one asked for all the others.

"Now, my friends, fortune smiles on us, and the path to real national greatness is open to us. In our adversity we may, if we choose, find opportunities."

Yamata told himself that he had waited fifteen years for this moment. Then he considered the thought, watching and waiting for a response, and realized that he'd really waited a lifetime for it, since the age of ten, when in February

1944, he alone of his family had boarded the ship that would take him from Saipan to the Home Islands. He could still remember standing at the rail, seeing his mother and father and younger siblings standing there on the dock, Raizo being very brave and managing to hold back his tears, knowing as a child knows that he would see them again, but also knowing that he would not.

They'd killed them all, the Americans, erased his family from the face of the earth, encouraged them to cast their lives away, off the cliffs and into the greedy sea, because Japanese citizens, in uniform or out, were just animals to the Americans. Yamata could remember listening to the radio accounts of the battle, how the "Wild Eagles" of the *Kido Butai* had smashed the American fleet, how the Emperor's invincible soldiers had cast the hated American Marines back into the sea, how they had later slaughtered them in vast numbers in the mountains of the island claimed from the Germans after the First World War, and even then he'd known the futility of having to pretend to believe lies, for lies they had to be, despite the comforting words of his uncle. And soon the radio reports had gone on to other things, the victorious battles over the Americans that crept ever closer to home, the uncomprehending rage he'd known when his vast and powerful country had found herself unable to stop the barbarians, the terror of the bombing, first by day and then by night, burning his country to the ground one city at a time. The orange glow in the night sky, sometimes near, sometimes far, and the lies of his uncle, trying to explain it, and last of all the relief he'd seen on the man's face when all was over. Except that it had never been relief for Raizo Yamata, not with his family gone, vanished from the face of the earth, and even when he'd seen his first American, a hugely tall figure with red hair and freckles on his milky skin who'd clipped him on the head in the friendly way one might do for a dog, even then he'd known what the enemy looked like.

It wasn't Matsuda who spoke in reply. It couldn't be. It had to be another, one whose corporation was still immensely strong, or apparently so. It also had to be one who had never agreed with him. The rule was as important as it was unspoken, and though eyes didn't turn, thoughts did. The man looked down at his half-empty cup of tea—this was not a night for alcohol—and pondered his own fate. He spoke without looking up, because he was afraid to see the identical look in the eyes arrayed around the black lacquer table.

"How, Yamata-san, would we achieve that which you propose?"

"No shit?" Chavez asked. He spoke in Russian, for you were not supposed to speak English here at Monterey, and he hadn't learned that colloquialism in Japanese yet.

"Fourteen agents," Major Oleg Yurievich Lyalin, KGB (retired), replied, as matter-of-factly as his ego allowed.

"And they never reactivated your net?" Clark asked, wanting to roll his eyes.

"They couldn't." Lyalin smiled and tapped the side of his head. "THISTLE was my creation. It turned out to be my life insurance."

No shit, Clark almost said. That Ryan had gotten him out alive was

somewhere to the right of a miracle. Lyalin had been tried for treason with the normal KGB attention to a speedy trial, had been in a death cell, and known the routine as exactly as any man could. Told that his execution date was a week hence, he'd been marched to the prison commandant's office, informed of his right as a Soviet citizen to appeal directly to the President for executive clemency, and invited to draft a handwritten letter to that end. The less sophisticated might have thought the gesture to be genuine. Lyalin had known otherwise. Designed to make the execution easier, after the letter was sealed, he would be led back to his cell, and the executioner would leap from an open door to his right, place a pistol right next to his head and fire. As a result it was not overly surprising that his hand had shaken while holding the ballpoint pen, and that his legs were rubbery as he was led out. The entire ritual had been carried out, and Oleg Yurievich remembered his amazement on actually reaching his basement cell again, there to be told to gather up what belongings he had and to follow a guard, even more amazingly back to the commandant's office, there to meet someone who could only have been an American citizen, with his smile and his tailored clothes, unaware of KGB's wry valedictory to its traitorous officer.

"I would've pissed my pants," Ding observed, shuddering at the end of the story.

"I was lucky there," Lyalin admitted with a smile. "I'd urinated right before they took me up. My family was waiting for me at Sheremetyevo. It was one of the last PanAm flights."

"Hit the booze pretty hard on the way over?" Clark asked with a smile.

"Oh, yes," Oleg assured him, not adding how he'd shaken and then vomited on the lengthy flight to New York's JFK International Airport, and had insisted on a taxi ride through New York to be sure that the impossible vision of freedom was real.

Chavez refilled his mentor's glass. Lyalin was trying to work his way off hard liquor, and contented himself with Coors Light. "I've been in a few tight places, *tovarich,* but that one must have been really uncomfortable."

"I have retired, as you see. Domingo Estebanovich, where did you learn Russian so well?"

"The kid's got a gift for it, doesn't he?" Clark noted. "Especially the slang."

"Hey, I like to read, okay? And whenever I can I catch Russian TV at the home office and stuff. What's the big deal?" The last sentence slipped out in English. Russian didn't quite have that euphemism.

"The big deal is that you're truly gifted, my young friend," Major Lyalin said, saluting with his glass.

Chavez acknowledged the compliment. He hadn't even had a high-school diploma when he'd sneaked into the U.S. Army, mainly by promising to be a grunt, not a missile technician, but it pleased him that he had indeed raced through George Mason University for his subsequent undergraduate degree, and was now within a dissertation of his master's. He marveled at his luck and wondered how many others from his barrio could have done as well, given an equal smile from Chance.

"So does Mrs. Foley know that you left a network behind?"

"Yes, but all her Japanese speakers must be elsewhere. I don't think they

would have tried to reactivate without letting me know. Besides, they will only activate if they are told the right thing."

"Jesus," Clark whispered, also in English, since one only swears in his native tongue. That was a natural consequence of the Agency's deemphasis of human intelligence in favor of electronic bullshit, which was useful but not the beall and end-all that the paper-pushers thought it to be. Of CIA's total of over *fifteen thousand* employees, somewhere around *four hundred fifty* of them were field officers, actually out on the street or in the weeds, talking to real people and trying to learn what their thoughts were instead of counting beans from overheads and reading newspaper articles for the rest. "You know, sometimes I wonder how we ever won the fuckin' war."

"America tried very hard not to, but the Soviet Union tried harder." Lyalin paused. "THISTLE was mainly concerned with gathering commercial information. We stole many industrial designs and processes from Japan, and your country's policy is not to use intelligence services for that purpose." Another pause. "Except for one thing."

"What's that, Oleg?" Chavez asked, popping another Coors open.

"There's no real difference, Domingo. Your people—I tried for several months to explain that to them. Business is the government over there. Their parliament and ministries, they are the 'legend,' the *maskirovka* for the business empires."

"In that case there's one government in the world that knows how to make a decent car." Chavez chuckled. He'd given up on buying the Corvette of his dreams—the damned things just cost too much—and settled on a "Z" that was almost as sporty for half the price. And now he'd have to get rid of it, Ding told himself. He had to be more respectable and settled if he were going to marry, didn't he?

"Nyet. You should understand this: the opposition is not what your country thinks it is. Why do you suppose you have such problems negotiating with them? I discovered this fact early on, and KGB understood it readily."

As they had to, Clark told himself, nodding. Communist theory predicted that very "fact," didn't it? Damn, wasn't that a hoot! "How were the pickings?" he asked.

"Excellent," Lyalin assured him. "Their culture, it's so easy for them to take insults, but so hard for them to respond. They conceal much anger. Then, all you need do is show sympathy."

Clark nodded again, this time thinking, *This guy is a real pro.* Fourteen well-placed agents, he still had the names and addresses and phone numbers in his head, and, unsurprisingly, nobody at Langley had followed up on it because of those damned-fool ethics laws foisted on the Agency by lawyers—a breed of government servant that sprouted up like crabgrass everywhere you looked, as though *anything* the Agency did was, strictly speaking, ethical at all. Hell, he and Ding had *kidnapped* Corp, hadn't they? In the interests of justice, to be sure, but if they had brought him to America for trial, instead of leaving him with his own countrymen, some high-priced and highly ethical defense attorney, perhaps even acting pro bono—obstructing justice for free, Clark told himself—would have ranted and raved first before cameras and later before twelve good men (and women) about how this *patriot* had resisted an

invasion of his country, et cetera, et cetera.

"An interesting weakness," Chavez noted judiciously. "People really are the same all over the world, aren't they?"

"Different masks, but the same flesh underneath," Lyalin pronounced, feeling ever more the teacher. The offhand remark was his best lesson of the day.

Of all human lamentations, without doubt the most common is, *If only I had known.* But we can't know, and so days of death and fire so often begin no differently from those of love and warmth. Pierce Denton packed the car for the trip to Nashville. It was not a trivial exercise. Both twin girls had safety seats installed in the back of the Cresta, and in between went the smaller seat for their brand-new brother, Matthew. The twin girls, Jessica and Jeanine, were three and a half years old, having survived the "terrible twos" (or rather, their parents had) and the parallel adventures of learning to walk and talk. Now, dressed in identical short purple dresses and white tights, they allowed Mom and Dad to load them into their seats. Matthew went in after them, restless and whining, but the girls knew that the vibration of the car would soon put him back to sleep, which is what he mostly did anyway, except when nursing from his mother's breasts. It was a big day, off for a weekend at Grandmother's house.

Pierce Denton, twenty-seven, was a police officer in Greeneville, Tennessee's, small municipal department, still attending night school to finish up his college degree, but with no further ambition other than to raise his family and live a comfortable life in the tree-covered mountains, where a man could hunt and fish with friends, attend a friendly community church, and generally live as good a life as any person might desire. His profession was far less stressful than that of colleagues in other places, and he didn't regret that a bit. Greeneville had its share of trouble, as did any American town, but far less than he saw on TV or read about in the professional journals that lay on tables in the station. At quarter after eight in the morning, he backed onto the quiet street and headed off, first toward U.S. Route 11E. He was rested and alert, with his usual two cups of morning coffee already at work, chasing away the cobwebs of a restful night, or as restful as one could be with an infant sleeping in the same bedroom with him and his wife, Candace. Within fifteen minutes he pulled onto Interstate Highway 81, heading south with the morning sun behind him.

Traffic was fairly light this Saturday morning, and unlike most police officers Denton didn't speed, at least not with his family in the car. Rather, he cruised evenly at just under seventy miles per hour, just enough over the posted limit of sixty-five for the slight thrill of breaking the law just a little. Interstate 81 was typical of the American interstates, wide and smooth even as it snaked southwest through the mountain range that had contained the first westward expansion of European settlers. At New Market, 81 merged with I-40, and Denton merged in with westbound traffic from North Carolina. Soon he would be in Knoxville. Checking his rearview mirror, he saw that both daughters were already lulled into a semiconscious state, and his ears told him

that Matthew was the same. To his right, Candy Denton was dozing as well. Their infant son had not yet mastered the skill of sleeping through the night, and that fact took its toll on his wife, who hadn't had as much as six straight hours of sleep since . . . well, since before Matt's birth, actually, the driver told himself. His wife was petite, and her small frame had suffered from the latter stages of pregnancy. Candy's head rested on the right-side window, grabbing what sleep she could before Matthew woke up and announced his renewed hunger, though with a little luck, that might just last until they got to Nashville.

The only hard part of the drive, if you could call it that, was in Knoxville, a medium-sized city mostly on the north side of the Tennessee River. It was large enough to have an inner ring highway, I-640, which Denton avoided, preferring the direct path west.

The weather was warm for a change. The previous six weeks had been one damned snow-and-ice storm after another, and Greeneville had already exhausted its budget for road salt and overtime for the crews. He'd responded to at least fifty minor traffic accidents and two major ones, but mainly he regretted not having gotten the new Cresta to the car wash the previous night. The bright paint was streaked with salt, and he was glad the car came with underbody coating as a "standard option," because his venerable old pickup truck didn't have that, and it was corroding down to junk even as it sat still in their driveway. Beyond that, it seemed a competent little car. A few inches more leg room would have been nice, but it was her car, not his, and she didn't really need the room. The automobile was lighter than his police radio car, and had only half the engine power. That made for somewhat increased vibration, largely dampened out by the rubberized engine mounts but still there. Well, he told himself, that helped the kids to clonk out.

They must have had even more snow here, he saw. Rock salt had accumulated in the center of his lane like a path of sand or something. Shame they had to use so much. Really tore up the cars. But not his, Denton was sure, having read through all the specifications before deciding to surprise Candy with her red Cresta.

The mountains that cut diagonally across this part of America are called the Great Smokies, a name applied, according to local lore, by Dan'l Boone himself. Actually part of a single range that ran from Georgia to Maine and beyond, changing local names almost as often as it changed states, in this area humidity from the numerous lakes and streams combined with atmospheric conditions to generate fog that occurred on a year-round basis.

Will Snyder of Pilot Lines was on overtime, a profitable situation for the union driver. The Fruehauf trailer attached to his Kenworth diesel tractor was filled with rolls of carpeting from a North Carolina mill en route to a distributorship in Memphis for a major sale. An experienced driver, Snyder was perfectly happy to be out on a Saturday, since the pay was better, and besides, football season was over and the grass wasn't growing yet. He fully expected to be home for dinner in any case. Best of all, the roads were fairly clear during this winter weekend, and he was making good time, the driver

told himself, negotiating a sweeping turn to the right and down into a valley.

"Uh-oh," he murmured to himself. It was not unusual to see fog here, close to the State Route 95 North exit, the one that headed off to the bomb people at Oak Ridge. There were a couple of trouble spots on I-40, and this was one. "Damned fog."

There were two ways to deal with this. Some braked down slowly for fuel economy, or maybe just because they didn't like going slow. Not Snyder. A professional driver who saw major wrecks on the side of the highway every week, he slowed down immediately, even before visibility dropped below a hundred yards. His big rig took its time stopping, and he knew a driver who'd converted some little Japanese roller-skate into tinfoil, along with its elderly driver, and his time wasn't worth the risk, not at time-and-a-half it wasn't. Smoothly downshifting, he did what he knew to be the smartest thing, and just to be sure, flipped on his running lights.

Pierce Denton turned his head in annoyance. It was another Cresta, the sporty C99 version that they made only in Japan so far, this one black with a red stripe down the side that whizzed past, at eighty or a little over, his trained eye estimated. In Greeneville that would have been a hundreddollar ticket and a stern lecture from Judge Tom Anders. Where had those two kids come from? He hadn't even noticed their approach in his mirror. Temporary tag. Two young girls, probably one had just got her license and her new car from Daddy to go with it and was taking her friend out to demonstrate what real freedom was in America, Officer Denton thought, freedom to be a damned fool and get a ticket your first day on the road. But this wasn't his jurisdiction, and that was a job for the state boys. Typical, he thought with a shake of the head. Chattering away, hardly watching the road, but it was better to have them in front than behind.

"Lord," Snyder breathed. Locals, he'd heard in a truck stop once, blamed it on the "crazy people" at Oak Ridge. Whatever the reason, visibility had dropped almost instantly to a mere thirty feet. Not good. He flipped his running lights to the emergency-blinker setting and slowed down more. He'd never done the calculation, but at this weight his tractortrailer rig needed over sixty feet to stop from thirty miles per hour, and that was on a dry road, which this one was not. On the other hand . . . no, he decided, no chances. He lowered his speed to twenty. So it cost him half an hour. Pilots knew about this stretch of 1-40, and they always said it was better to pay the time than to pay off the insurance deductible. With everything in hand, the driver keyed his CB radio to broadcast a warning to his fellow truckers.

It was like being inside a Ping-Pong ball, he told them over Channel 19, and his senses were fully alert, staring ahead into a white mass of water vapor when the hazard was approaching from the rear.

The fog caught them entirely by surprise. Denton's guess had been a correct one. Nora Dunn was exactly eight days past her sixteenth birthday, three days past getting her temporary permit, and forty-nine miles into her sporty new C99. First of all she'd selected a wide, nice piece of road to see how fast it would go, because she was young and her friend Amy Rice had asked. With the compact-disc player going full blast, and trading observations on various male school chums, Nora was hardly watching the road at all, because, after all, it wasn't all that hard to keep a car between the solid line to the right and the dashy one to the left, was it, and besides, there wasn't anybody in the mirror to worry about, and having a car was far better than a date with a new boy, because they always had to drive anyway, for some reason or other, as though a grown woman couldn't handle a car herself.

The look on her face was somewhat startled when visibility went down to not very much—Nora couldn't estimate the exact distance—and she took her foot off the accelerator pedal, allowing the car to slow down from the previous cruising speed of eighty-four. The road behind was clear, and surely the road ahead would be, too. Her driving teachers had told her everything she needed to know, but as with the lessons of all her other teachers, some she'd heard and some she had not. The important ones would come with experience. Experience, however, was a teacher with whom she was not yet fully acquainted, and whose grading curve was far too steep for the moment at hand.

She did see the running lights on the Fruehauf trailer, but she was new to the road, and the amber spots might have been streetlights, except that most interstate highways didn't have them, a fact she hadn't been driving long enough to learn. It was scarcely a second's additional warning in any case. By the time she saw the gray, square shadow, it was simply too late, and her speed was only down to sixty-five. With the tractor-trailer's speed at twenty, it was roughly the equivalent of hitting a thirty-ton stationary object at fortyfive miles per hour.

It was always a sickening sound. Will Snyder had heard it before, and it reminded him of a truckload of aluminum beer cans being crunched in a compressor, the decidedly unmusical *crump* of a car body's being crushed by speed and mass and laws of physics that he'd learned not in high school but rather by experience.

The jolt to the left-rear corner of the trailer slewed the front end of the forty-foot van body to the right, but fortunately, his low speed allowed him to maintain control enough to get his rig stopped quickly. Looking back and to his left, he saw the remains of that cute new Jap car that his brother wanted to get, and Snyder's first ill-considered thought was that they were just too damned small to be safe, as though it would have mattered under the circumstances. The center- and right-front were shredded, and the frame was clearly bent. A blink and further inspection showed red where clear glass was supposed to be ...

"Oh, my God."

* * *

Amy Rice was already dead, despite the flawless performance of her passenger-side air bag. The speed of the collision had driven her side of the car under the trailer, where the sturdy rear fender, designed to prevent damage to loading docks, had ripped through the coachwork like a chain saw. Nora Dunn was still alive but unconscious. Her new Cresta C99 was already a total loss, its aluminum engine block split, frame bent sixteen inches out of true, and worst of all, the fuel tank, already damaged by corrosion, was crushed between frame members and leaking.

Snyder saw the leaking gasoline. His engine still running, he quickly maneuvered his truck to the shoulder and jumped out, bringing his light red CO_2 extinguisher. That he didn't quite get there in time saved his life.

"What's the matter, Jeanine?"

"Jessica!" the little girl insisted, wondering why people couldn't tell the difference, not even her father.

"What's the matter, *Jessica,"* her father said with a patient smile.

"He's stinky!" She giggled.

"Okay," Pierce Denton sighed. He looked over to shake his wife's shoulder. That's when he saw the fog, and took his foot off the gas.

"What's the matter, honey?"

"Matt did a job."

"Okay . . ." Candace unclipped her seat belt and turned to look in the back.

"I wish you wouldn't do that, Candy." He turned too, just at the wrong time. As he did, the car drifted over to the right somewhat, and his eyes tried to observe the highway and the affairs within his wife's new car.

"Shit!" His instinct was to maneuver to the left, but he was too far over to the other side to do that, a fact he knew even before his left hand had turned the wheel all the way. Hitting the brakes didn't help either. The rear wheels locked on the slick road, causing the car to skid sideways into, he saw, another Cresta. His last coherent thought was, *Is it the same one that . . . ?*

Despite the red color, Snyder didn't see it until the collision was inevitable. The trucker was still twenty feet away, jogging in, holding the extinguisher in his arms like a football.

Jesus! Denton didn't have time to say. The first thought was that the collision wasn't all that bad. He'd seen worse. His wife was rammed by inertia into the crumpling right side, and that wasn't good, but the kids in the back were in safety seats, thank God for that, and—

The final deciding factor in the end of five lives was chemical corrosion. The gas tank, like that in the C99, never properly galvanized, had been exposed to salt on its trans-Pacific voyage, then even more on the steep roads of eastern Tennessee. The weld points on the tank were particularly vulnerable and came loose on impact. Distortion of the frame made the tank drag on the rough concrete surface; the underbody protection, never fully affixed, simply flaked off immediately, and another weak spot in the metal tank sprang open, and the body of the tank itself, made of steel, provided the spark, igniting the gasoline that spread forward, for the moment.

The searing heat of the fireball actually cleared the fog somewhat, creating a flash so bright that oncoming traffic panic-stopped on both sides of the highway. That caused a three-car accident a hundred yards away in the eastbound lanes, but not a serious one, and people leaped from their vehicles to approach. It also caught the fuel leaking from Nora Dunn's car, enveloping her with flames, and killing the girl who, mercifully, would never regain consciousness despite the blazing death that took her to his bosom.

* * *

Will Snyder was close enough that he'd seen all five faces in the oncoming red Cresta. A mother and a baby were the two he'd remember for the rest of his life, the way she was perched between the front seats, holding the little one, her face suddenly turned to see oncoming death, staring right at the truck driver. The instant fire was a horrid surprise, but Snyder, though he stopped jogging, did not halt his approach. The left-rear door of the red Cresta had popped open, and that gave him a chance, for the flames were mostly, if temporarily, on the left side of the wrecked automobile. He darted in with the extinguisher held up like a weapon as the flames came back toward the gas tank under the red Cresta. The damning moment gave him but one brief instant to act, to pick the one child among three who alone might live in the inferno that was already igniting his clothes and burning his face while the driving gloves protected the hands that blasted fire-retarding gas into the rear-seat area. The cooling CO_2 would save his life and one other. He looked amid the yellow sheets and expanding white vapor for the infant, but it was nowhere to be found, and the little girl in the left seat was screaming with fear and pain, right there, right in front of him. His gloved hands found and released the chrome buckle, and he yanked her clear of the child-safety seat, breaking her arm in the process, then jerking his legs to fling himself clear of the enveloping fire. There was a lingering snowbank just by the guardrail, and he dove into it, putting out his own burning clothing, then he covered the child with the salt-heavy slush to do the same for her, his face stinging with pain that was the barest warning of what would soon follow. He forced himself not to turn. He could hear the screaming behind his back, but to return to the burning car would be suicide, and looking might only force him into it. Instead he looked down at Jessica Denton, her face blackened, her

breathing ragged, and prayed that a cop would appear quickly, and with him an ambulance. By the time that happened, fifteen minutes later, both he and the child were deep in shock.

8

Fast-Forwarding

The slow news day and the proximity to a city guaranteed media coverage of some kind, and the number and ages of the victims guaranteed more still. One of the local Knoxville TV stations had an arrangement with CNN, and by noon the story was the lead item on CNN News Hour. A satellite truck gave a young local reporter the opportunity for a global-coverage entry in his portfolio-he didn't want to stay in Knoxville forever—and the clearing fog gave the cameras a full view of the scene.

"Damn," Ryan breathed in his kitchen at home. Jack was taking a rare Saturday off, eating lunch with his family, looking forward to taking them to evening mass at St. Mary's so that he could also enjoy a Sunday morning at home. His eyes took in the scene, and his hands set the sandwich down on the plate.

Three fire trucks had responded, and four ambulances, two of which, ominously, were still there, their crews just standing around. The truck in the background was largely intact, though its bumper was clearly distorted. It was the foreground that told the story, however. Two piles of metal, blackened and distorted by fire. Open doors into a dark, empty interior. A dozen or so state police officers standing around, their posture stiff, their lips tight, not talking, not trading the jokes that ordinarily went with their perspective on auto accidents. Then Jack saw one of them trade a remark with another. Both heads shook and looked down at the pavement, thirty feet behind the reporter who was droning on the way that they always did, saying the same things for the hundredth time in his short career. Fog. High speed. Both gas tanks. Six people dead, four of them kids. This is Bob Wright, reporting from Interstate 40, outside Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Commercial.

Jack returned to his lunch, stifling another comment on the inequity of daily life. There was no reason yet why he should know or do more.

The cars were dripping water now, three hundred air miles away from the Chesapeake Bay, because the arriving volunteer firemen had felt the need to wet everything down, knowing even then that it was an exercise wasted on the occupants. The forensic photographer shot his three rolls of 200-speed color, catching the open mouths of the victims to prove that they'd died screaming. The senior police officer responding to the scene was Sergeant Thad Nicholson. An experienced highway cop with twenty years of auto accidents behind him, he arrived in time to see the bodies removed. Pierce Denton's service revolver had fallen to the pavement, and that more than

anything had identified him as a fellow police officer even before the routine computer check of the tags had made the fact official. Four kids, two little ones and two teens, and two adults. You just never got used to that. It was a personal horror for Sergeant Nicholson. Death was bad enough, but a death such as this, how could God let it happen? Two little children . . . well . . . He did, and that was that. Then it was time to go to work.

Hollywood to the contrary, it was a highly unusual accident. Automobiles did not routinely turn into fireballs under any circumstances, and this one, his trained eyes saw at once, should not have been all that serious. Okay, there was one unavoidable fatality from the crash itself, the girl in the death seat of the first Cresta, who'd been nearly decapitated. But not the rest, there was no obvious reason for them. The first Cresta had rear-ended the truck at . . . forty or fifty miles of differential speed. Both air bags had deployed, and one of them ought to have saved the driver of the first car, he saw. The second car had hit at about a thirty-degree angle to the first. Damned fool of a cop to make a mistake like that, Nicholson thought. But the wife hadn't been belted in ... maybe she'd been attending to the kids in the back and distracted her husband. Such things happened, and nobody could undo it now.

Of the six victims, one had been killed by collision, and the other five by fire. That wasn't supposed to happen. Cars were not supposed to burn, and so Nicholson had his people reactivate a crossover half a mile back on the Interstate so that the three accident vehicles could remain in place for a while. He got on his car radio to order up additional accident investigators from Nashville, and to recommend notifying the local office of the National Transportation Safety Board. As it happened, one of the local employees of that federal agency lived close to Oak Ridge. The engineer, Rebecca Upton, was on the scene thirty minutes after receiving her call. A mechanical engineer and graduate of the nearby University of Tennessee, who'd been studying this morning for her PE exam, she donned her brand-new official coveralls and started crawling around the wreckage while the towtruck operators waited impatiently, even before the backup police team arrived from Nashville. Twenty-four, petite, and red-haired, she came out from under the once-red Cresta with her freckled skin smudged, and her green eyes teary from the lingering gasoline fumes. Sergeant Nicholson handed over a Styrofoam cup of coffee that he'd gotten from a fireman.

"What do you think, ma'am?" Nicholson asked, wondering if she knew anything. She looked like she did, he thought, and she wasn't afraid to get her clothes dirty, a hopeful sign.

"Both gas tanks." She pointed. "That one was sheared clean off. The other one was crumpled by the impact and failed. How fast was it?"

"The collision, you mean?" Nicholson shook his head. "Not that fast. Ballpark guess, forty to fifty."

"I think you're right. The gas tanks have structuralintegrity standards, and this crash shouldn't have exceeded them." She took the proffered handkerchief and wiped her face. "Thanks, Sergeant." She sipped her coffee and looked back at the wrecks, wondering.

"What are you thinking?"

Ms. Upton turned back. "I'm thinking that six people—"

"Five," Nicholson corrected. "The trucker got one kid out."

"Oh—I didn't know. Shouldn't have happened. No good reason for it. It was an under-sixty impact, nothing really unusual about the physical factors. Smart money is there's something wrong with the car design. Where are you taking them?" she asked, feeling very professional now.

"The cars? Nashville. I can hold them at headquarters if you want, ma'am."

She nodded. "Okay, I'll call my boss. We're probably going to make this a federal investigation. Will your people have any problem with that?" She'd never done that before, but knew from her manual that she had the authority to initiate a full NTSB inquiry. Most often known for handling the analysis of aircraft accidents, the National Transportation Safety Board also looked into unusual train and vehicle mishaps and had the authority to require cooperation of every federal agency in the pursuit of hard data.

Nicholson had participated in one similar investigation. He shook his head. "Ma'am, my captain will give you all the cooperation you can handle."

"Thank you." Rebecca Upton almost smiled, but this wasn't the place for it. "Where are the survivors? We'll have to interview them."

"Ambulance took them back to Knoxville. Just a guess, but they probably air-lifted them to Shriners'." That hospital, he knew, had a superb burn unit. "You need anything else, ma'am? We have a highway to clear."

"Please be careful with the cars, we—"

"We'll treat it like criminal evidence, ma'am," Sergeant Nicholson assured the bright little girl, with a fatherly smile.

All in all, Ms. Upton thought, not a bad day. Tough luck for the occupants of the cars—that went without saying, and the reality and horror of their deaths were not lost on her—but this was her job, and her first really worthwhile assignment since joining the Department of Transportation. She walked back to her car, a Nissan hatchback, and stripped off her coveralls, donning in their place her NTSB windbreaker. It wasn't especially warm, but for the first time in her government career, she felt as though she were really part of an important team, doing an important job, and she wanted the whole world to know who she was and what she was doing.

"Hi." Upton turned to see the smiling face of a TV reporter.

"What do you want?" she asked briskly, having decided to act very businesslike and official.

"Anything you can tell us?" He held the microphone low, and his cameraman, while nearby, wasn't turning tape at the moment.

"Only off the record," Becky Upton said after a second's reflection.

"Fair enough."

"Both gas tanks failed. That's what killed those people."

"Is that unusual?"

"Very." She paused. "There's going to be an NTSB investigation. There's no good reason for this to have happened. Okay?"

"You bet." Wright checked his watch. In another ten minutes he'd be live on satellite again, and this time he'd have something new to say, which was always good. The reporter walked away, head down, composing his new remarks for his global audience. What a great development: the National Transportation Safety Board was going to investigate the *Motor Trend* Car of

the Year for a potentially lethal safety defect. No good reason for these people to have died. He wondered if his cameraman could get close enough now to see the charred, empty child seats in the back of the other car. Good stuff.

* * *

Ed and Mary Patricia Foley were in their top-floor office at CIA headquarters. Their unusual status had made for some architectural and organizational problems at the Agency. Mary Pat was the one with the title of Deputy Director (Operations), the first female to make that rank in America's lead spy agency. An experienced field officer who had worked her country's best and longest-lived agent-in-place, she was the cowboy half of the best husband-wife team CIA had ever fielded. Her husband, Ed, was less flashy but more careful as a planner. Their respective talents in tactics and strategy were highly complementary, and though Mary Pat had won the top job, she'd immediately done away with her need for an executive assistant, putting Ed in that office and making him her equal in real terms, if not bureaucratic ones. A new doorway had been cut in the wall so that he could stroll in without passing the executive secretary in the anteroom, and together they managed CIA's diminished collection of case officers. The working relationship was as close as their marriage, with all the compromises that attended the latter, and the result was the smoothest leadership of the Directorate of Operations in years.

"We need to pick a name, honey."

"How about FIREMAN?"

"Not FIRE*FIGHTER?"*

A smile. "They're both men."

"Well, Lyalin says they're doing fine on linguistics."

"Good enough to order lunch and find the bathroom." Mastering the Japanese language was not a trivial intellectual challenge. "How much you want to bet they're speaking it with a Russian accent?"

A light bulb went off in both their minds at about the same time. "Cover identities?"

"Yeah ..." Mary Pat almost laughed. "Do you suppose anyone will mind?"

It was illegal for CIA officers to adopt the cover identity of journalists. American journalists, that is. The rule had recently been redrafted, at Ed's urging, to point out that quite a few of the agents his officers recruited were third-world journalists. Since both the officers assigned to the operation spoke excellent Russian, they could easily be covered as Russian journalists, couldn't they? It was a violation of the spirit of the rule, but not the letter; Ed Foley had his cowboy moments too.

"Oh, yeah," said Mary Pat. "Clark wants to know if we would like him to take a swing at reactivating THISTLE."

"We need to talk to Ryan or the President about that," Ed pointed out, turning conservative again.

But not his wife. "No, we don't. We need to get approval to make use of the network, not to see if it's still there." Her ice-blue eyes twinkled, as they usually did when she was being clever.

"Honey, that's calling it a little close," Ed warned. But that was one of the reasons he loved her. "But I like it. Okay, as long as we're just seeing that the network still exists."

"I was afraid I was going to have to pull rank on you, dear." For which transgressions her husband exacted a wonderful toll.

"Just so you have dinner ready on time, Mary. The orders'll go out Monday."

"Have to stop at the Giant on the way home. We're out of bread."

Congressman Alan Trent of Massachusetts was in Hartford, Connecticut, taking a Saturday off to catch a basketball game between U-Mass and U-Conn, both of whom looked like contenders for the regional championship this year. That didn't absolve him from the need to work, however, and so two staffers were with him, while a third was due in with work. It was more comfortable in the Sheraton hotel adjacent to the Hartford Civic Arena than in his office, and he was lying on the bed with the papers spread around him—rather like Winston Churchill, he thought, but without the champagne nearby. The phone next to his bed rang. He didn't reach for it. He had a staffer for that, and Trent had taught himself to ignore the sound of a ringing phone.

"Al, it's George Wylie, from Deerfield Auto." Wylie was a major contributor to Trent's political campaigns, and the owner of a large business in his district. For both of those reasons, he was able to demand Trent's attention whenever he desired it.

"How the hell did he track me down here?" Trent asked the ceiling as he reached for the phone. "Hey, George, how are you today?"

Trent's two aides watched their boss set his soda down and reach for a pad. The congressman always had a pen in his hand, and a nearby pad of Post-it notes. Seeing him scribble a note to himself wasn't unusual, though the angry look on his face was. Their boss pointed to the TV and said, "CNN!"

The timing turned out to be almost perfect. After the top-of-the-hour commercial and a brief intro, Trent was the next player to see the face of Bob Wright. This time he was on tape, which had been edited. It now showed Rebecca Upton in her NTSB windbreaker and the two crumbled Crestas being hauled aboard the wreckers.

"Shit," Trent's senior staffer observed.

"The gas tanks, eh?" Trent asked over the phone, then listened for a minute or so. "Those motherfuckers," the congressman snarled next. "Thanks for the heads-up, George. I'm on it." He set the phone receiver back in the cradle and sat up straighter in the bed. His right hand pointed to his senior aide.

"Get in touch with the NTSB watch team in Washington. I want to talk to that girl right away. Name, phone, where she is, track her down fast! Next, get the Sec-Trans on the phone." His head went back down to his working correspondence while his staffers got on the phones. Like most members of Congress, Trent essentially time-shared his brain, and he'd long since learned to compartmentalize his time and his passion. He was soon grumbling about an amendment to the Department of the Interior's authorization for the National Forest Service, and making a few marginal notes with a green pen.

That was his second-highest expression of outrage, though his staff saw his red pen poised near a fresh page on a legal pad. The combination of foolscap and a red pen meant that Trent was really exercised about something.

Rebecca Upton was in her Nissan, following the wreckers to Nashville, where she would first supervise the initial storage of the burned-out Crestas and then meet with the head of the local office to begin the procedures for a formal investigation—lots of paperwork, she was sure, and the engineer found it odd that she was not upset at her wrecked weekend. Along with her job came a cellular phone, which she assiduously used only for official business and only when absolutely necessary—she'd been in federal employ for just ten months—which meant in her case that she'd never even reached the basic monthly fee which the company charged the government. The phone had never rung in her car before, and she was startled by the sound when it started warbling next to her.

"Hello?" she said, picking it up, wondering if it were a wrong number.

"Rebecca Upton?"

"That's right. Who is this?"

"Please hold for Congressman Trent," a male voice told her.

"Huh? Who?"

"Hello?" a new voice said.

"Who's this?"

"Are you Rebecca Upton?"

"Yes, I am. Who are you?"

"I'm Alan Trent, Member of Congress from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts." Massachusetts, as any elected official from that state would announce at the drop of a hat, was not a mere "state." "I tracked you down through the NTSB watch center. Your supervisor is Michael Zimmer, and his number in Nashville is—"

"Okay, I believe you, sir. What can I do for you?"

"You're investigating a crash on I-40, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to fill me in on what you know."

"Sir," Upton said, slowing her car down so that she could think, "we haven't even really started it yet, and I'm not really in a position to—"

"Young lady, I'm not asking you for conclusions, just for the reason why you are initiating an investigation. I am in a position to help. If you cooperate, I promise you that the Secretary of Transportation will know what a fine young engineer you are. She's a friend of mine, you see. We worked together in Congress for ten or twelve years."

Oh, Rebecca Upton thought. It was improper, unethical, probably against the rules, and maybe even fattening to reveal information from an ongoing NTSB accident investigation. On the other hand, the investigation hadn't started yet, had it? And Upton wanted to be noticed and promoted as much as the next person. She didn't know that her brief silence was as good as mind-reading to the other person on the cellular circuit, and couldn't see the smile in the Hartford hotel room in any case.

“Sir, it appears to me and to the police who responded to the accident that both gas tanks on both cars failed, causing a fatal fire. There appears on first inspection to be no obvious mechanical reason for the tanks to have done so. Therefore I am going to recommend to my supervisor that we initiate an investigation to determine the cause of the incident.”

“Both gas tanks leaked?” the voice asked.

“Yes, sir, but it was worse than a leak. Both failed rather badly.”

“Anything else you can tell me?”

“Not really at this time, no.” Upton paused. Would this guy really mention her name to the Secretary? If so ... “Something is not right about this, Mr. Trent. Look, I have a degree in engineering, and I minored in materials science. The speed of the impact does not justify two catastrophic structural failures. There are federal safety standards for the structural integrity of automobiles and their components, and those parameters far exceed the conditions I saw at the accident scene. The police officers I spoke with agree. We need to do some tests to be sure, but that’s my gut-call for the moment. I’m sorry, I can’t tell you any more for a while.”

This kid is going far, Trent told himself in his room at the Hartford Sheraton. “Thank you, Miss Upton. I left my number with your office in Nashville. Please call me when you get in.” Trent hung up the phone and thought for a minute or so. To his junior staffer: “Call Sec-Trans and tell her that this Upton kid is very good—no, get her for me, and I’ll tell her. Paul, how good is the NTSB lab for doing scientific testing?” he asked, looking and feeling more and more like Churchill, planning the invasion of Europe. Well, Trent told himself, not quite that.

“Not bad at all, but the varsity—”

“Right.” Trent selected a free button on his phone and made another call from memory.

“Good afternoon, Congressman,” Bill Shaw said to his speakerphone, looking up at Dan Murray. “By the way, we need to see you next week and—”

“I need some help, Bill.”

“What kind of help is that, sir?” Elected officials were always “sir” or “ma’am” on official business, even for the Director of the FBI. That was especially true if the congressman in question chaired the Intelligence Committee, along with holding a seat on the Judiciary Committee, and another on Ways and Means. Besides which, for all his personal ... eccentricities . . . Trent had always been a good friend and fair critic of the Bureau. But the bottom line was simpler: all three of his committee jobs had impact on the FBI. Shaw listened and took some notes. “The Nashville S-A-C is Bruce Cleary, but we require a formal request for assistance from D-O-T before we can—okay, sure, I’ll await her call. Glad to help. Yes, sir. ’Bye.” Shaw looked up from his desk. “Why the hel is Al Trent worked up over a car wreck in Tennessee?”

"Why are we interested?" Murray asked, more to the point.

"He wants the Lab Division to back up NTSB on forensics. You want to call Bruce and tell him to get his best tech guy on deck? The friggin' accident just happened this morning and Trent wants results yesterday."

"Has he ever jerked us around on something before?"

Shaw shook his head. "Never. I suppose we want to be on his good side. He'll have to sit in on the meeting with the chairman. We're going to have to discuss Kealty's security clearance, remember?"

Shaw's phone buzzed. "Secretary of Transportation on three, Director."

"That boy," Murray observed, "is really kicking some serious ass for a Saturday afternoon." He got out of his chair and headed for a phone on the other side of the room while Director Shaw took the call from the cabinet secretary. "Get me the Nashville office."

The police impound yard, where wrecked or stolen vehicles were stored, was part of the same facility that serviced State Police cars. Rebecca Upton had never been there before, but the wrecker drivers had, and following them was easy enough. The officer in the gatehouse shouted instructions to the first driver, and the second followed, trailed by the NTSB engineer. They ended up heading to an empty area—or almost empty. There were six cars there—two marked and four unmarked police radio cars—plus ten or so people, all of them senior by the look of them. One was Upton's boss, and for the first time she was really aware of how serious this affair was becoming.

The service building had three hydraulic lifts. Both Crestas were unloaded outside it, then manhandled inside and onto the steel tracks. Both were hoisted simultaneously, allowing the growing mob of people to walk underneath. Upton was by far the shortest person there, and had to jostle her way in. It was her case after all, or she thought it was. A photographer started shooting film, and she noticed that the man's camera case had "FBI" printed on it in yellow lettering. What the hell?

"Definite structural failure," noted a captain of the State Police, the department's chief of accident investigation. Other heads nodded sagely.

"Who has the best science lab around here?" someone in casual clothing asked.

"Vanderbilt University would be a good place to start," Rebecca announced. "Better yet, Oak Ridge National Laboratory."

"Are you Miss Upton?" the man asked. "I'm Bruce Cleary, FBI."

"Why are you—"

"Ma'am, I just go where they send me." He smiled and went on. "D-O-T has requested our help on the investigation. We have a senior tech from our Laboratory Division flying down from Washington right now." On a D-O-T aircraft, no less, he didn't say. Neither he nor anyone else in his office had ever investigated an auto accident, but the orders came from the Director himself, and that was really all he needed to know.

Ms. Upton suddenly felt herself to be a sapling in a forest of giants, but she, too, had a job to do, and she was the only real expert on the scene. Taking a flashlight from her pocket, she started a detailed examination of the gas tank.

Rebecca was surprised when people gave her room. It had already been decided that her name would go on the cover of the report. The involvement of the FBI would be downplayed—an entirely routine case in interagency cooperation, backing up an inquiry initiated by a young, dedicated, bright, *female* NTSB engineer. She would take the lead on the case. Rebecca Upton would get all the credit for the work of the others, because it could not appear that this was a concerted effort toward a predetermined goal, even though that's precisely what it was. She'd also begun this thing, and for delivering political plums this large there had to be a few seeds tossed out for the little people. All the men standing around either knew or had begun to suspect it, though not all of them had begun to grasp what the real issues were. They merely knew that a congressman had gotten the immediate attention of a cabinet secretary and the director of the government's most powerful independent agency, and that he wanted fast action. It appeared that he'd get it, too. As they looked up at the underside of what only a few hours before had been a family car on the way to Grandma's house, the cause of the disaster seemed as straightforward as a punch in the nose. All that was really needed, the senior FBI representative thought, was scientific analysis of the crumpled gas tank. For that, they'd go to Oak Ridge, whose lab facilities often backed up the FBI. That would require the cooperation of the Department of Energy, but if Al Trent could shake two large trees in less than an hour, how hard would it be for him to shake another?

* * *

Goto was not a hard man to follow, though it could be tiring, Nomuri thought. At sixty, he was a man of commendable vigor and a desire to appear youthful. And he always kept coming here, at least three times per week. This was the tea house that Kazuo had identified—not by name, but closely enough that Nomuri had been able to identify, then confirm it. He'd seen both Goto and Yamata enter here, never together, but never more than a few minutes apart, because it would be unseemly for the latter to make the former wait too much. Yamata always left first, and the other always lingered for at least an hour, but never more than two. Supposition, he told himself: a business meeting followed by R&R, and on the other nights, just the R&R part. As though in some cinematic farce, Goto always came out with a blissful swagger to his stride as he made his way toward the waiting car. Certainly his driver knew—the open door, a bow, then the mischievous grin on his face as he came around to his own door. On every other occasion, Nomuri had followed Goto's car, discreetly and very carefully, twice losing him in the traffic, but on the last two occasions and three others he'd tracked the man all the way to his home, and felt certain that his destination after his trysts was always the same. Okay. Now he would think about the other part of the mission, as he sat in his car and sipped his tea. It took forty minutes.

It was Kimberly Norton. Nomuri had good eyes, and the streetlights were bright enough for him to manage a few quick frames from his camera before exiting the car. He tracked her from the other side of the street, careful not to

look directly at her, instead allowing his peripheral vision to keep her in sight. Surveillance and countersurveillance were part of the syllabus at the Farm. It wasn't too hard, and this subject made it easy. Even though she wasn't overly tall by American standards, she did stand out here, as did her fair hair. In Los Angeles she would have been unremarkable, Nomuri thought, a pretty girl in a sea of pretty girls. There was nothing unusual about her walk—the girl was adapting to local norms, slightly demure, giving way to men, whereas in America the reverse was both true and expected. And though her Western clothing was somewhat distinctive, many people on the street dressed the same way—in fact, traditional garb was in the minority here, he realized with a slight surprise. She turned right, down another street, and Nomuri followed, sixty or seventy yards behind, like he was a goddamned private detective or something. What the hell was this assignment all about? the CIA officer wondered.

"Russians?" Ding asked.

"Free-lance journalists, no less. How's your shorthand?" Clark asked, reading over the telex. Mary Pat was having another attack of the clevers, but truth be told, she was very good at it. He'd long suspected that the Agency had a guy inside the Interfax News Agency in Moscow. Maybe CIA had played a role in setting the outfit up, as it was often the first and best source of political information from Moscow. But this was the first time, so far as he knew, that the Agency had used it for a cover legend. The second page of the op-order got even more interesting. Clark handed it over to Lyalin without comment.

"Bloody about time," the former Russian chuckled. "You will want names, addresses, and phone numbers, yes?"

"That would help, Oleg Yurievich."

"You mean we're going to be in the real spy business?" Chavez asked. It would be his first time ever. Most of the time he and Clark had been paramilitary operators, doing jobs either too dangerous or too unusual for regular field officers.

"It's been a while for me too, Ding. Oleg, I never asked what language you used working your people."

"Always English," Lyalin answered. "I never let on my abilities in Japanese. I often picked up information that way. They thought they could chat right past me."

Cute, Clark thought, *you just stood there with the openmouth-dog look on your face and people never seemed to catch on.* Except that in his case, and Ding's, it would be quite real. Well, the real mission wasn't to play spymaster, was it, and they were prepared enough for what they were supposed to do, John told himself. They would leave on Tuesday for Korea.

* * *

In yet another case of interagency cooperation, a UH-1H helicopter of the

Tennessee National Guard lifted Rebecca Upton, three other men, and the gasoline tanks to Oak Ridge National Laboratory. The tanks were wrapped in clear plastic and were strapped into place as though they were passengers themselves.

Oak Ridge's history went back to the early 1940s, when it had been part of the original Manhattan Engineering Project, the cover name for the first atomic-bomb effort. Huge buildings housed the still-operating uranium-separation machinery, though much else had changed including the addition of a helipad.

The Huey circled once to get a read on the wind, then settled in. An armed guard shepherded the party inside, where they found a senior scientist and two lab techs waiting—the Secretary of Energy himself had called them in this Saturday evening.

The scientific side of the case was decided in less than an hour. More time would be required for additional testing. The entire NTSB report would address such issues as the seat belts, the efficacy of the child-safety seats in the Denton car, how the air bags had performed, and so forth, but everyone knew that the important part, the cause of five American deaths, was that the Cresta gas tanks had been made of improperly treated steel that had corroded down to a third of its expected structural strength. The rough draft of that finding was typed up—badly—on a nearby word processor, printed, and faxed to DOT headquarters, adjacent to the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington. Though PRELIMINARY FINDING was the header on the two-page memo, the information would be treated as Holy Writ. Most remarkably of all, Rebecca Upton thought, it had all been accomplished in less than sixteen hours. She'd never seen the government move so fast on anything. What a shame that it didn't always do that, she thought as she dozed off in the back of the helicopter during the return flight to Nashville.

Later that night, the University of Massachusetts lost to the University of Connecticut 108-103 in overtime. Though a fanatic follower of basketball, and a graduate of U-Mass, Trent smiled serenely as he walked out into the shopping concourse outside the Hartford Civic Arena. He'd scored in a far bigger game today, he thought—though the game was not what he thought it was.

Arnie van Damm didn't like being awakened early on a Sunday morning, especially on one that he had designated as a day of rest—a day for sleeping till eight or so, reading his papers at the kitchen table like a normal citizen, napping in front of the TV in the afternoon, and generally pretending that he was back in Columbus, Ohio, where the pace of life was a lot easier. His first thought was that there had to be a major national emergency. President Durling wasn't one to abuse his chief of staff, and few had his private number. The voice on the other end caused his eyes to open wide and glare at the far wall of his bedroom.

"Al, this better be good," he growled at quarter of seven. Then he listened for a few minutes. "Okay, wait a minute, okay?" A minute later he was lighting up his computer—even he had to use one in these advanced times—which was linked to the White House. A phone was next to it.

"Okay, Al, I can squeeze you in tomorrow morning at eight-fifteen. Are you sure about all this?" He listened for another couple of minutes, annoyed that Trent had suborned three agencies of the Executive Branch, but he was a Member of Congress, and a powerful one at that, and the exercise of power came as easily to him as swimming did to a duck.

"My question is, will the President back me up?"

"If your information is solid, yes, I expect that he will, Al."

"This is the one, Arnie. I've talked and talked and talked, but this time the bastards have killed people."

"Can you fax me the report?"

"I'm running to catch a plane. I'll have it to you as soon as I get to my office."

So why did you have to call me now? van Damm didn't snarl. "I'll be waiting for it," was what he said. His next considered move was to retrieve the Sunday papers from his front porch. Remarkable, he thought, scanning the front pages. The biggest story of the day, maybe of the year, and nobody had picked up on it yet.

Typical.

Remarkably, except for the normal activity on the fax machine, the remainder of the day went largely according to plan, which allowed the Presidential chief of staff to act like a normal citizen, and not even wonder what the following day might bring. It would keep, he told himself, dozing off on his living-room sofa and missing the Lakers and the Celts from Boston Garden.

9

Power Plays

There were more chits to be called in that Monday, but Trent had quite a few of them out there. The United States House of Representatives would open for business per usual at noon. The chaplain intoned his prayer, surprised to see that the Speaker of the House himself was in his seat instead of someone else, that there were over a hundred members to listen to him instead of the usual six or eight queued to make brief statements for the benefit of the C-SPAN cameras, and that the press gallery was almost half full instead of entirely empty. About the only normal factor was the public gallery, with the customary number of tourists and school kids. The chaplain, unexpectedly intimidated, stumbled through his prayer of the day and departed—or started to. He decided to linger at the door to see what was going on.

"Mr. Speaker!" a voice announced, to the surprise of no one on the floor of the chamber.

The Speaker of the House was already looking that way, having been prepped by a call from the White House. "The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Massachusetts."

Al Trent walked briskly down to the lectern. Once there, he took his time, setting his notes on the tilted wooden platform while three aides set up an easel, making his audience wait, and establishing the dramatic tone of his speech with eloquent silence. Looking down, he began with the required litany:

"Mr. Speaker, I request permission to revise and extend."

"Without objection," the Speaker of the House replied, but not as automatically as usual. The atmosphere was just *different,* a fact clear to everyone but the tourists, and their tour guides found themselves sitting down, which they never did. Fully eighty members of Trent's party were in their seats, along with twenty or so on the other side of the aisle, including every member of the minority leadership who happened to be in Washington that day. And though some of the latter were studies in disinterested posture, the fact that they were here at all was worthy of comment among the reporters, who had also been tipped that something big was happening.

"Mr. Speaker, on Saturday morning, on Interstate Highway 40 between Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee, five American citizens were condemned to a fiery death by the Japanese auto industry." Trent read off the names and ages of the accident victims, and his aide on the floor uncovered the first graphic, a black-and-white photo of the scene. He took his time, allowing people to absorb the image, to imagine what it must have been like for the occupants of the two cars. In the press gallery, copies of his prepared remarks

and the photos were now being passed out, and he didn't want to go too fast.

"Mr. Speaker, we must now ask, first, why did these people die, and second, why their deaths are a matter of concern to this house.

"A bright young federal-government engineer, Miss Rebecca Upton, was called to the scene by the local police authorities and immediately determined that the accident was caused by a major safety defect in both of these automobiles, that the lethal fire was in fact caused by the faulty design of the fuel tanks on both cars.

"Mr. Speaker, only a short time ago those very gasoline tanks were the subject of the domestic-content negotiations between the United States and Japan. A superior product, made coincidentally in my own district, was proposed to the Japanese trade representative. The American component is both superior in design and less expensive in manufacture, due to the diligence and intelligence of American workers, but that component was *rejected* by the Japanese trade mission because it failed to meet the supposed *high and demanding* standards of their auto industry!

"Mr. Speaker, those *high* and *demanding* standards burned five American citizens to death in an auto accident which, according to the Tennessee State Police and the National Transportation Safety Board, did not in any way exceed the safety parameters set in America by law for more than fifteen years. This should have been a survivable accident, but one family is nearly wiped out—but for the courage of a union trucker, would be entirely gone—and two other families today weep over the bodies of their young daughters *because* American workers were not *allowed* to supply a *superior* component *even* to the versions of this automobile made right here in America! One of those faulty tanks was transported six thousand miles so that it could be in one of those burned-out cars—so that it could kill a husband and a wife and a three-year-old child, and a newborn infant riding in that automobile!

"Enough is enough, Mr. Speaker! The preliminary finding of the NTSB, confirmed by the scientific staff at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, is that the auto gas tanks on both these cars, one manufactured in Japan and the other assembled right here in Kentucky, failed to meet long-standing D-O-T standards for automotive safety. As a result, first, the U.S. Department of Transportation has issued an immediate recall notice for all Cresta-type private passenger automobiles ..." Trent paused, looking around. The players in the room knew that there would be more, and they knew it would be a big one.

"Second, I have advised the President of this tragic incident and its larger ramifications. It has been also determined by the Department of Transportation that the same fuel tank for this particular brand of automobile is used in nearly every Japanese private-passenger auto imported into the United States. Accordingly, I am today introducing a bill, HR-12313, which will authorize the President to direct the Departments of Commerce, Justice and of the Treasury top . . ."

"By executive order," the White House press spokesman was saying in the White House Press Room, "and in the interest of public safety, the President

has directed the Bureau of Customs, Department of the Treasury, to inspect all imported Japanese cars at their respective ports of entry for a major safety defect which two days ago resulted in the deaths of five American citizens. Enabling legislation to formalize the President's statutory authority is being introduced today by the Honorable Alan Trent, Congressman from Massachusetts. The bill will have the full support of the President, and we hope for rapid action, again, in the interest of public safety.

"The technical term for this measure is 'sectoral reciprocity,'" she went on. "That means that our legislation will mirror-image Japanese trade practices in every detail." She looked up for questions. Oddly, there were none at the moment.

"Moving on, the President's trip to Moscow has been scheduled for—"

"Wait a minute," a reporter asked, looking up, having had a few seconds to digest the opening statement. *"What was that you said?"*

"What gives, boss?" Ryan asked, going over the briefing documents.

"Second page, Jack."

"Okay." Jack flipped the page and scanned. "Damn, I saw that on TV the other day." He looked up. "This is not going to make them happy."

"Tough cookies," President Durling replied coldly. "We actually had a good year or two closing the trade gap, but this new guy over there is so beholden to the big shots that we just can't do business with his people. Enough's enough. They stop our cars right on the dock and practically take them apart to make sure they're 'safe,' and then pass on the 'inspection' bill to their consumers."

"I know that, sir, but—"

"But enough's enough." And besides, it would soon be an election year, and the President needed help with his union voters, and with this single stroke he'd set that in granite. It wasn't Jack's bailiwick, and the National Security Advisor knew better than to make an issue of this. "Tell me about Russia and the missiles," Roger Durling said next.

He was saving the real bombshell for last. The FBI was having its meeting with the people from Judiciary the following afternoon. No, Durling thought after a moment's contemplation, he'd have to call Bill Shaw and tell him to hold off. He didn't want two big stories competing on the front pages. Kealty would have to wait for a while. He'd let Ryan know, but the sexual-harassment case would stay black for another week or so.

The timing guaranteed confusion. From a time zone fourteen hours ahead of the United States' EST, phones rang in the darkness of what in Washington was the early morning of the next day.

The irregular nature of the American action, which had bypassed the normal channels within the American government, and therefore had also bypassed the people who gathered information for their country, caught everyone completely unaware. The Japanese ambassador in Washington was

in a fashionable restaurant, having lunch with a close friend, and the hour guaranteed that the same was true of the senior staffers at the embassy on Massachusetts Avenue, NW. In the embassy cafeteria, and all over the city, beepers went off commanding an immediate call to their offices, but it was too late. The word was already out on various satellite TV channels, and those people in Japan who kept watch on such things had called their supervisors, and so on up the information chain until various zaibatsu were awakened at an hour certain to draw sharp comments. These men in turn called senior staff members, who were already awake in any case, and told them to call their lobbyists at once. Many of the lobbyists were already at work. For the most part, they had caught the C-SPAN coverage of Al Trent and gone to work on their own initiative, attempting damage control even before they received marching orders from their employers. The reception they got in every office was cool, even from members to whose campaign funds they made regular contributions. But not always.

"Look," said one senator, contemplating the commencement of his own reelection bid, and needing funds, as his visitor well knew, "I'm not going to the voters and saying that this action is unfair when eight people just burned to death. You have to give it time and let it play out. Be smart about it, okay?"

It was only five people who'd burned to death, the lobbyist thought, but the advice of his current mendicant was sound, or would have been under normal circumstances. The lobbyist was paid over three hundred thousand dollars per year for his expertise—he'd been a senior Senate staffer for ten years before seeing the light—and to be an honest broker of information. He was also paid to purvey campaign funds not-so-honestly on one hand, and to advise his employers what was possible on the other.

"Okay, Senator," he said in an understanding tone. "Please remember, though, that this legislation could cause a trade war, and that would be bad for everyone."

"Events like this have a natural life, and they don't last forever," the Senator replied. That was the general opinion reported back to the various offices by five that afternoon, which translated to seven the following morning in Japan. The error was in overlooking the fact that there had never been an event quite "like this."

Already the phones were ringing in the offices of nearly every member of both houses of Congress. Most expressed outrage at the event on I-40, which was to be expected. There were a few hundred thousand people in America, spread through every state and all four hundred thirty-five congressional districts, who never missed the chance to call their representatives in Washington to express their opinions on everything. Junior staffers took the calls and made note of the time and date, the name and address of every caller—it was often unnecessary to ask, as some callers were identifiable by voice alone. The calls would be cataloged for topic and opinion, become part of every member's morning briefing information, and in most cases just as quickly forgotten.

Other calls went to more senior staff members, and in many cases to the members themselves. These came from local businessmen, mostly manufacturers whose products either competed directly in the marketplace

with those from overseas, or, in a smaller number of cases, who had tried to do business in Japan and found the going difficult. These calls were not always heeded, but they were rarely ignored.

It was now a top story again on every news service, having briefly faded into the normal old-news obscurity. For today's newscasts family photographs were shown of the police officer, and his wife, and their three children, and also of Nora Dunn and Amy Rice, followed by a brief taped interview of the heroic truck driver, and distant views of Jessica Denton, orphan, writhing in pain from her burns inside a laminar room, being treated by nurses who wept as they debrided her charred face and arms. Now lawyers were sitting with all of the involved families, coaching them on what to tell the cameras and preparing dangerously modest statements of their own while visions of contingency fees danced in their heads. News crews asked for the reaction of family members, friends, and neighbors, and in the angry grief of people who had suffered a sudden and bitter loss, others saw either common anger or an opportunity to take advantage of the situation.

But most telling of all was the story of the fuel tank itself. The preliminary NTSB finding had been leaked moments after its existence had been announced on the floor of the House. It was just too good to pass up. The American auto companies supplied their own engineers to explain the scientific side of the matter, each of them noting with barely concealed glee that it was a simple example of poor quality-control on a very simple automobile component, that the Japanese weren't as sharp as everyone thought after all: "Look, Tom, people have been galvanizing steel for over a century," a midlevel Ford engineer explained to NBC "Nightly News." "Garbage cans are made out of this stuff."

"Garbage cans?" the anchor inquired with a blank look, since his were made from plastic.

"They've hammered us on quality control for years, told us that we're not good enough, not safe enough, not careful enough to enter their auto market —and now we see that they're not so smart after all. That's the bottom line, Tom," the engineer went on, feeling his oats. "The gas tanks on those two Crestas had less structural integrity than a garbage can made with 1890s technology. And that's why those five people burned to death."

That incidental remark proved the label for the entire event. The next morning five galvanized steel trash cans were found stacked at the entrance to the Cresta Plant in Kentucky, along with a sign that read, WHY DON'T YOU TRY THESE? A CNN crew picked it up, having been tipped off beforehand, and by noon *that* was their headline story. It was all a matter of perception. It would take weeks to determine what had really gone wrong, but by that time perception and the reactions to it would have long since overtaken reality.

The Master of MV *Nissan Courier* hadn't received any notice at all. His was a surpassingly ugly ship that looked for all the world as though she had begun life as a solid rectangular block of steel, then had its bow scooped out with a large spoon for conversion into something that could move at sea. Top-heavy and cursed with a huge sail area that often made her the plaything of even the

gentlest winds, she required four Moran tugboats to dock at the Dundalk Marine Terminal in the Port of Baltimore. Once the city's first airport, the large, flat expanse was a natural receiving point for automobiles. The ship's captain controlled the complex and tricky evolution of coming alongside, only then to notice that the enormous carpark was unusually full. That was odd, he thought. The last Nissan ship had come in the previous Thursday, and ordinarily the lot should have been half empty by now, making room for his cargo. Looking farther, he saw only three car-trailers waiting to load their own cargo for transport to the nearest distributor; normally they were lined up like taxis at a train station.

"I guess they weren't kidding," the Chesapeake Bay pilot observed. He'd boarded the *Courier* at the Virginia Capes and had caught the TV news on the pilot ship that anchored there. He shook his head and made his way to the accommodation ladder. He'd let the shipping agent give the word to the Master.

The shipping agent did just that, climbing up the ladder, then to the bridge. The storage lot had room for about two hundred additional cars, certainly not more than that, and as yet he had no instructions from the line's management on what to tell the captain to do. Ordinarily the ship would be in port for no more than twenty-four hours, the time required to unload the cars, refuel and revictual the ship for her return journey most of the way across the world, where the same routine would be followed in reverse, this time loading cars into the empty ship for yet another voyage to America. The ships of this fleet were on a boring but remorseless schedule whose dates were as fixed as the stars of the night sky.

"What do you mean?" the Master asked.

"Every car has to be safety inspected." The shipping agent waved toward the terminal. "See for yourself."

The Master did just that, lifting his Nikon binoculars to see agents from the Bureau of Customs, six of them, using a hydraulic jack to lift up a new car so that one of their number could crawl under it for some reason or other while others made notations on various official forms on their clipboards. Certainly they didn't seem to be in much of a hurry. Through the glasses he could see their bodies rock back and forth in what had to be mirth, instead of working as diligently as government employees ought. That was the reason he didn't make the connection with the odd instances on which he'd seen Japanese customs inspectors doing similar but much more stringent inspections of American, German, or Swedish cars on the docks of his home port of Yokohama.

"But we could be here for days!" the Master blurted out.

"Maybe a week," the agent said optimistically.

"But there's only space for one ship here! *Nissan Voyager* is due here in seventy hours."

"I can't help that."

"But my schedule—" There was genuine horror in the Master's voice.

"I can't help that either," the shipping agent observed patiently to a man whose predictable world had just disintegrated.

* * *

"How can we help?" Seiji Nagumo asked.

"What do you mean?" the Commerce Department official replied.

"This terrible incident." And Nagumo was genuinely horrified. Japan's historical construction of wood-and-paper had long since been replaced by more substantial buildings, but its legacy was a deep cultural dread of fire. A citizen who allowed a fire to start on his property and then to spread to the property of another still faced criminal sanctions, not mere civil liability. He felt a very real sense of shame that a product manufactured in his country had caused such a horrid end. "I have not yet had an official communique from my government, but I tell you for myself, this is terrible beyond words. I assure you that we will launch our own investigation."

"It's a little late for that, Seiji. As you will recall, we discussed this very issue—"

"Yes, that is true, I admit it, but you must understand that even if we had reached an agreement, the materials in question would still have been in the pipeline—it would not have made a difference to these people."

It was an altogether pleasant moment for the American trade-negotiator. The deaths in Tennessee, well, that was too bad, but he'd been putting up with this bastard's arrogance for three years now, and the current situation, for all its tragedy, was a sweet one.

"Seiji-san, as I said, it's a little late for that. I suppose we will be happy to have some degree of cooperation from your people, but we have our own job to do. After all, I'm sure you'll understand that the duty to protect the lives and safety of American citizens is properly the job of the American government. Clearly we have been remiss in that duty, and we must make up for our own unfortunate failings."

"What we can do, Robert, is to subsidize the operation. I have been told that our auto manufacturers will themselves hire safety inspectors to clear the vehicles in your ports, and—"

"Seiji, you know that's unacceptable. We can't have government functions carried out by industry representatives." That wasn't true, and the bureaucrat knew it. It happened all the time.

"In the interest of maintaining our friendly trade relationship, we offer to undertake any unusual expense incurred by your government. We—" Nagumo was stopped by a raised hand.

"Seiji, I have to tell you to stop there. Please—you must understand that what you propose could well be seen as an inducement to corruption under our government-ethics laws." The conversation stopped cold for several seconds.

"Look, Seiji, when the new statute is passed, this will settle out rapidly." And that wouldn't take long. A flood of mail and telegrams from rapidly organized "grass-roots" groups—the United Auto Workers, for one, smelling blood in the water as sharply as any shark—had directed every one of its members to dial up Western Union for precisely that purpose. The Trent Bill was already first in line for hearings on the Hill, and insiders gave the new

statute two weeks before it appeared on the President's desk for signature.

"But Trent's bill—"

The Commerce Department official leaned forward on his desk. "Seiji, what's the problem? The Trent Bill will allow the President, with the advice of lawyers here at Commerce, to duplicate your own trade laws. In other words, what we will do is to mirror-image your own laws over here. Now, how can it *possibly* be unfair for America to use your own, fair, trade laws on your products the same way that you use them on ours?"

Nagumo hadn't quite got it until that moment. "But you don't understand, Our laws are designed to fit our culture. Yours is different, and—"

"Yes, Seiji, I know. Your laws are designed to protect your industries against unfair competition. What we will soon be doing is the same thing. Now, that's the bad news. The good news is that whenever you open markets to us, we will automatically do the same for you. The bad news, Seiji, is that we will apply your own law to your own products, and then, my friend, we will see how fair your laws are, by your own standards. Why are you upset? You've been telling me for years how your laws are not a real boundary at all, that it's the fault of American industry that we can't trade with Japan as effectively as you trade with us." He leaned back and smiled. "Okay, now we'll see how accurate your observations were. You're not telling me now that you . . . misled me on things, are you?"

Nagumo would have thought *My God,* had he been a Christian, but his religion was animistic, and his internal reactions were different, though of exactly the same significance. He'd just been called a liar, and the worst part was that the accusation was . . . true.

The Trent Bill, now officially called the Trade Reform Act, was explained to America that very evening, now that the talking heads had used the time to analyze it. Its philosophical simplicity was elegant. Administration spokesmen, and Trent himself on "MacNeil/Lehrer," explained that the law established a small committee of lawyers and technicaltrade experts from the Commerce Department, assisted by international-law authorities from the Department of Justice, who would be empowered to analyze foreign trade laws, to draft American trade regulations that matched their provisions as exactly as possible, and then to recommend them to the Secretary of Commerce, who would advise the President. The President in turn had the authority to activate those regulations by executive order. The order could be voided by a simple majority of both houses of Congress, whose authority on such matters was set in the Constitution—that provision would avoid legal challenge on the grounds of separation of powers. The Trade Reform Act further had a "sunset" provision. In four years from enactment, it would automatically cease to exist unless reenacted by Congress and reapproved by the sitting President—that provision made the TRA appear to be a temporary provision whose sole objective was to establish free international trade once and for all. It was manifestly a lie, but a plausible one, even for those who knew it.

"Now what could be more fair than that?" Trent asked rhetorically on PBS. "All we're doing is to duplicate the laws of other countries. If their laws are

fair for American business, then those same laws must also be fair for the industries of other countries. Our Japanese friends"—he smiled—"have been telling us for years that their laws are not discriminatory. Fine. We will use their laws as fairly as they do."

The entertaining part for Trent was in watching the man on the other side of the table squirm. The former Assistant Secretary of State, now earning over a million dollars a year as senior lobbyist for Sony and Mitsubishi, just sat there, his mind racing for something to say that would make sense, and Trent could see it in his face. He didn't have a thing.

"This could be the start of a real trade war—" he began, only to be cut off at the ankles.

"Look, Sam, the Geneva Convention didn't *cause* any wars, did it? It simply applied the same rules of conduct to all sides in a conflict. If you're saying that the use of Japanese regulations in American ports will cause a war, then there already is a war and you've been working for the other side, haven't you?" His rapid-fire retort was met with five seconds of very awkward silence. There just wasn't an answer to that question.

"Whoa!" Ryan observed, sitting in the family room of his house, at a decent hour for once.

"He's got real killer instinct," Cathy observed, looking up from some medical notes.

"He does," her husband agreed. "Talk about fast. I just got briefed in on this the other day."

"Well, I think they're right. Don't you?" his wife asked.

"I think it's going a little fast." Jack paused. "How good are their docs?"

"Japanese doctors? Not very, by our standards."

"Really?" The Japanese public-health system had been held up for emulation. Everything over there was "free," after all. "How come?"

"They salute too much," Cathy replied, her head back down in her notes. "The professor's always right, that sort of thing. The young ones never learn to do it on their own, and by the time they're old enough to become professors themselves, for the most part they forget how."

"How often are you wrong, O Associate Professor of Ophthalmic Surgery, ma'am?" Jack chuckled.

"Practically never," Cathy replied, looking up, "but I never tell my residents to stop asking why, either. We have three Japanese fellows at Wilmer now. Good clinicians, good technical docs, but not very flexible. I guess it's a cultural thing. We're trying to train them out of it. It's not easy."

"The boss is always right . . ."

"Not always, he isn't." Cathy made a notation for a medication change.

Ryan's head turned, wondering if he'd just learned something important. "How good are they in developing new treatments?"

"Jack, why do you think they come here to train? Why do you suppose we have so many in the university up on Charles Street? Why do you suppose so many of them stay here?"

It was nine in the morning in Tokyo, and a satellite feed brought the American evening news shows into executive offices all over the city. Skilled translators were rendering the conversation into their native tongue. VCRs were making a permanent record for a more thorough analysis later, but what the executives heard was clear enough.

Kozo Matsuda trembled at his desk. He kept his hands in his lap and out of view so that the others in his office could not see them shake. What he heard in two languages—his English was excellent—was bad enough. What he saw was worse. His corporation was already losing money due to ... irregularities in the world market. Fully a third of his company's products went to the United States, and if that segment of his business were in any way interrupted . . .

The interview was followed by a "focus segment" that showed *Nissan Courier*, still tied up in Baltimore, with her sister ship, *Nissan Voyager,* swinging at anchor in the Chesapeake Bay. Yet another car carrier had just cleared the Virginia Capes, and the first of the trio was not even halfway unloaded yet. The only reason they'd shown those particular ships was Baltimore's convenient proximity to Washington. The same was happening in the Port of Los Angeles, Seattle, and Jacksonville. *As though the cars were being used to transport* drugs, Matsuda thought. Part of his mind was outraged, but more of it was approaching panic. If the Americans were serious, then . . .

No, they couldn't be.

"But what about the possibility of a trade war?" Jim Lehrer asked that Trent person.

"Jim, I've been saying for years that we've been in a trade war with Japan for a generation. What we've just done is to level the playing field for everyone."

"But if this situation goes further, won't American interests be hurt?"

"Jim, what are those interests? Are American business interests worth burning up little children?" Trent shot back at once.

Matsuda cringed when he heard that. The image was just too striking for a man whose earliest childhood memory was of the early morning of March 10, 1945. Not even three years old, his mother carrying him from his house looking back and seeing the towering flames caused by Curtis LeMay's 21st Bomber Command. For years he'd awakened screaming in the night, and for all his adult life he'd been a committed pacifist. He'd studied history, learned how and why the war had begun, how America had pushed his antecedents into a corner from which there had been only a single escape——and that a false one. Perhaps Yamata was right, he thought, perhaps the entire affair had been of America's making. First, force Japan into a war, then crush them in an effort to forestall the natural ascendancy of a nation destined to challenge American power. For all that, he had never been able to understand how the zaibatsu of the time, members of the Black Dragon Society, had not been able to find a clever way out, for wasn't war just too dreadful an option? Wasn't peace, however humiliating, to be preferred to the awful destruction that came with war?

It was different now. Now he was one of them, and now he saw what lay in

the abyss of not going to war. Were they so wrong then, he asked himself, no longer hearing the TV or his translator. They'd sought real economic stability for their country: the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The history books of his youth had called it all a lie, but was it?

For his country's economy to function, it needed resources, raw materials, but Japan had virtually none except coal, and that polluted the air. Japan needed iron, bauxite, petroleum, needed almost everything to be shipped in, in order to be transformed into finished goods that could be shipped out. They needed cash to pay for the raw materials, and that cash came from the buyers of the finished products. If America, his country's largest and most important trading partner, suddenly stopped trading, that cash flow would stop. Almost sixty *billion* dollars.

There would be various adjustments, of course. Today on the international money markets, the yen would plummet against the dollar and every other hard currency in the world. That would make Japanese products less expensive everywhere—

But Europe would follow suit. He was sure of that. Trade regulations already stiffer than the Americans' would become tougher still, and that trading surplus would also decline, and at the same time the value of the yen would fall all the more. It would take more cash to buy the resources without which his country would enter total collapse. Like falling from a precipice, the downward acceleration would merely grow faster and faster, and the only consolation of the moment was that he would not be there to see the end of it, for long before that happened, this office would no longer be his. He'd be disgraced, with all the rest of his colleagues. Some would choose death, perhaps, but not so many. That was something for TV now, the ancient traditions that had grown from a culture rich in pride but poor in everything else. Life was too comfortable to give it up so easily—or was it? What lay ten years in his country's future? A return to poverty . . . or ... something else?

The decision would partly be his, Matsuda told himself, because the government of his country was really an extension of the collective will of himself and his peers. He looked down at the shaking hands in his lap. He thanked his two employees, and sent them on their way with a gracious nod before he was able to lift his hands to the surface of his desk and reach for a telephone.

* * *

Clark thought of it as a "forever flight," and even though KAL had upgraded them to first-class, it really hadn't helped much; not even the charming Korean flight attendants in lovely traditional dress could make the process much better than it was. He'd seen two of the three movies—on other flights—and the third wasn't all that interesting. The skynews radio channel had held his interest for the forty minutes required to update him on the happenings of the world, but after that it became repetitive, and his memory was too finely trained to need that. The KAL magazine was only good for thirty minutes—even that was a stretch—and he was current on the American news journals.

What remained was crushing boredom. At least Ding had his course material to divert him. He was currently reading through the Masseys' classic *Dreadnought,* about how international relations had broken down a century earlier because the various European nations—more properly their leaders—had failed to make the leap of imagination required to keep the peace. Clark remembered having read it soon after publication.

"They just can't make it, can they?" he asked his partner after an hour of reading over his shoulder. Ding read slowly, taking in every word one at a time. Well, it was study material, wasn't it?

"Not real smart, John." Chavez looked up from his pages of notes and stretched, which was easier for his small frame than it was for Clark's. "Professor Alpher wants me to identify three or four crucial fault-points for my thesis, bad decisions, that sort of thing. More to it than that, y'know? What they had to do was, well, like step outside themselves and look back and see what it was all about, but the dumb fucks didn't know how to do that. They couldn't be objective. The other part is, they didn't think anything all the way through. They had all those great tactical ideas, but they never really looked at where things were leading them. You know, I can identify the goofs for the doc, wrap it up real nice just like she wants, but it's gonna be bullshit, John. The problem wasn't the decisions. The problem was the people making them. They just weren't big enough for what they were doing. They just didn't see far enough, and that's what the *peons* were paying them to do, y'know?" Chavez rubbed his eyes, grateful for the distraction. He'd been reading and studying for eleven hours, with only brief breaks for meals and head calls. "I need to run a few miles," he grumped, also weary from the flight.

John checked his watch. "Forty minutes out. We've already started our descent."

"You suppose the big shots are any different today?" Ding asked tiredly.

Clark laughed. "My boy, what's the one thing in life that never changes?"

The young officer smiled. "Yeah, and the other one is, people like us are always caught in the open when they blow it." He rose and walked to the head to wash his face. Looking in the mirror, he was glad that they'd spend a day at an Agency safe house. He'd need to wash up and shave and unwind before putting on his mission identity. And maybe make some start notes for his thesis.

Clark looked out the window and saw a Korean landscape lit up with the pink, feathery light of a breaking dawn. The lad was turning intellectual on him. That was enough for a weary, eyes-closed grin with his face turned to the plastic window. The kid was smart enough, but what would happen when Ding wrote *the dumb fucks didn't know how* into his master's thesis? He was talking about Gladstone and Bismarck, after all. That got him laughing so hard that he started coughing in the airliner-dry air. He opened his eyes to see his partner emerge from the first-class head. Ding almost bumped into one of the flight attendants, and though he smiled politely at her and stepped aside to let her pass, he didn't track her with his eyes, Clark noticed, didn't do what men usually did with someone so young and attractive. Clearly his mind was set on another female form.

Damn, this is getting serious.

Murray nearly exploded: “We can’t do that now! God *damn* it, Bill, we’ve got everything lined up, the information’s going to leak sure as hell, and that’s not even fair to Kealty, much less our witnesses.”

“We do work for the President, Dan,” Shaw pointed out. “And the order came directly from him, not even through the AG. Since when did you care about Kealty, anyway?” It was, in fact, the same line Shaw had used on President Durling. Bastard or not, rapist or not, he was entitled to due process of law and a fair crack at defending himself. The FBI was somewhat maniacal on that, but the real reason for their veneration of judicial fair-play was that when you convicted a guy after following all the rules, you knew that you’d nailed the right bastard. It also made the appeals process a lot easier to swallow.

“This accident thing, right?”

“Yeah. He doesn’t want two big stories jockeying on the front page. This trade flap is a pretty big deal, and he says Kealty can wait a week or two. Dan, our Ms. Linders has waited several years, will another couple of weeks—”

“Yes, and you know it,” Murray snapped back. Then he paused. “Sorry, Bill. You know what I mean.” What he meant was simple: he had a case ready to go, and it was time to run with it. On the other hand, you didn’t say no to the President.

“He’s already talked to the people on the Hill. They’ll sit on it.”

“But their staffers won’t.”

10

Seduction

"I agree it's not good," Chris Cook said.

Nagumo was looking down at the rug in the sitting room. He was too stunned at the events of the previous few days even to be angry. It was like discovering that the world was about to end, and that there was nothing he could do about it. Supposedly, he was a middle-level foreign-ministry official who didn't "play" in the high-level negotiations. But that was window-dressing. His task was to set the framework for his country's negotiating positions and, moreover, to gather intelligence information on what America really thought, so that his titular seniors would know exactly what opening positions to take and how far they could press. Nagumo was an intelligence officer in fact if not in name. In that role, his interest in the process was personal and surprisingly emotional. Seiji saw himself as a defender and protector of his country and its people, and also as an honest bridge between his country and America. He wanted Americans to appreciate his people and his culture. He wanted them to partake of its products. He wanted America to see Japan as an equal, a good and wise friend from whom to learn. Americans were a passionate people, so often ignorant of their real needs—as the overly proud and pampered often are. The current American stance on trade, if that was what it seemed to be, was like being slapped by one's own child. Didn't they know they needed Japan and its products? Hadn't he personally trained American trade officials for years?

Cook squirmed in his seat. He, too, was an experienced foreign-service officer, and he could read faces as well as anyone. They were friends, after all, and, more than that, Seiji was his personal passport to a remunerative life *after* government service.

"If it makes you feel any better, it's the thirteenth."

"Hmph?" Nagumo looked up.

"That's the day they blow up the last missiles. The thing you asked about? Remember?"

Nagumo blinked, slow to recall the question he'd posed earlier. "Why then?"

"The President will be in Moscow. They're down to a handful of missiles now. I don't know the exact number, but it's less than twenty on each side. They're saving the last one for next Friday. Kind of an odd coincidence, but that's how the scheduling worked out. The TV boys have been prepped, but they're keeping it quiet. There'll be cameras at both places, and they're going to simulcast the last two—blowing them up, I mean." Cook paused. "So that ceremony you talked about, the one for your grandfather, that's the day."

"Thank you, Chris." Nagumo stood and walked to the bar to pour himself

another drink. He didn't know why the Ministry wanted that information, but it was an order, and he'd pass it along. "Now, my friend, what can we do about this?"

"Not much, Seiji, at least not right away. I told you about the damned gas tanks, remember? I told you Trent was not a guy to tangle with. He's been waiting for an opportunity like this for years. Look, I was on the Hill this afternoon, talking to people. You've never seen mail and telegrams like this one, and goddamned CNN won't let the story go."

"I know." Nagumo nodded. It was like some sort of horror movie. Today's lead story was Jessica Denton. The whole country—along with a lot of the world—was following her recovery. She'd just come off the "grave" list, with her medical condition upgraded to "critical." There were enough flowers outside her laminar room to give the impression of a lavish personal garden. But the second story of the day had been the burial of her parents and siblings, delayed by medical and legal necessities. Hundreds had attended, including every member of Congress from Tennessee. The chairman of the auto company had wanted to attend as well, to pay personal respects and apologize in person to the family, but been warned off for security reasons. He'd offered a sincere apology on behalf of his corporation on TV instead and promised to cover all medical expenses and provide for Jessica's continuing education, pointing out that he also had daughters. Somehow it just hadn't worked. A sincere apology went a long way in Japan, a fact that Boeing had cashed in on when one of their 747s had killed several hundred Japanese citizens, but it wasn't the same in America, a fact Nagumo had vainly communicated to his government. The attorney for the Denton family, a famous and effective litigator, had thanked the chairman for his apology, and noted dryly that responsibility for the deaths was now on the public record, simplifying his case preparation. It was only a question of amount now. It was already whispered that he'd demand a billion dollars.

Deerfield Auto Parts was in negotiation with every Japanese auto assembler, and Nagumo knew that the terms to be offered the Massachusetts company would be generous in the extreme, but he'd also told the Foreign Ministry the American adage about closing the barn door after the horse had escaped. It would not be damage control at all, but merely a further admission of fault, which was the wrong thing to do in the American legal environment.

The news had taken a while to sink in at home. As horrid as the auto accident had been, it seemed a small thing, and TV commentators on NHK had used the 747 incident to illustrate that accidents did happen, and that America had once inflicted something similar in type but far more ghastly in magnitude on the citizens of that country. But to American eyes the Japanese story had appeared to be justification rather than comparison, and the American citizens who'd backed it up were people known to be on the Japanese payroll. It was all coming apart. Newspapers were printing lists of former government officials who had entered such employment, noting their job experience and former salaries and comparing them with what they were doing now, and for how much. "Mercenary" was the kindest term applied to them. "Traitor" was one more commonly used epithet, especially by organized labor and every member of Congress who faced election.

There was no reasoning with these people.

"What will happen, Chris?"

Cook set his drink down on the table, evaluating his own position and lamenting his remarkably bad timing. He had already begun cutting his strings. Waiting the extra few years for full retirement benefits—he'd done the calculations a few months earlier. Seiji had made it known to him the previous summer that his actual net income would quadruple to start with, and that his employers were great believers in pension planning, and that he wouldn't *lose* his federal retirement investments, would he? And so Cook had started the process. Speaking sharply to the next-higher career official to whom he reported, letting others know that he thought his country's trade policy was being formulated by idiots, in the knowledge that his views would work their way upward. A series of internal memoranda that said the same thing in measured bureaucratese. He had to set things up so that his departure would not be a surprise, and would seem to be based on principle rather than crass lucre. The problem was, in doing so he'd effectively ended his career. He would never be promoted again, and if he remained at State, at best he might find himself posted to an ambassadorship to . . . maybe Sierra Leone, unless they could find a bleaker spot. Equatorial Guinea, perhaps. More bugs.

You're committed, Cook told himself, and so he took a deep breath, and, on reflection, another sip of his drink.

"Seiji, we're going to have to take the long view on this one. TRA"—he couldn't call it the Trade *Reform* Act, not here—"is going to pass in less than two weeks, and the President's going to sign it. The working groups at Commerce and Justice are already forming up. State will participate also, of course. Cables have gone out to several embassies to get copies of various trade laws around the world—"

"Not just ours?" Nagumo was surprised.

"They're going to compare yours with others from countries with whom our trade relationships are . . . less controversial right now." Cook had to watch his language, after all. He needed this man. "The idea is to give them something to, well, to contrast your country's laws with. Anyway, getting this thing fixed, it's going to take some time, Seiji." Which wasn't an altogether bad thing, Cook reasoned. After all, it made for job security—if and when he crossed over from one employer to another.

"Will you be part of the working group?"

"Probably, yes."

"Your help will be invaluable, Chris," Nagumo said quietly, thinking more rapidly now. "I can help you with interpreting our laws—quietly, of course," he added, seizing at that particular straw.

"I wasn't really planning to stay at Foggy Bottom much longer, Seiji," Cook observed. "We've got our hearts set on a new house, and—"

"Chris, we need you where you are. We need—*I* need your help to mitigate this unfortunate set of circumstances. We have a genuine emergency on our hands, one with serious consequences for both our countries."

"I understand that, but—"

Money, Nagumo thought, *with these people it's always* money*!*

"I can make the proper arrangements," he said, more on annoyed impulse

than as a considered thought. Only after he'd spoken did he grasp what he'd done—but then he was interested to see how Cook would react to it.

The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State just sat there for a moment. He too was so caught up in the events that the real implications of the offer nearly slipped past him. Cook simply nodded without even looking up into Nagumo's eyes.

In retrospect, the first step—the turning over of national-security information—had been a harder one, and the second was so easy that Cook didn't even reflect on the fact that now he was in clear violation of a federal statute. He had just agreed to provide information to a foreign government for money. It seemed such a logical thing to do under the circumstances. They really wanted that house in Potomac, and it wouldn't be long before they'd have to start shopping for colleges.

That morning on the Nikkei Dow would long be remembered. It had taken that long for people to grasp what Seiji Nagumo now knew—that they weren't kidding this time. It wasn't rice all over again, it wasn't computer chips all over again, it wasn't automobiles or their parts, not telecommunications gear or construction contracts or cellular phones. It was, in fact, all of the above, twenty years of pent-up resentment and anger, some justified, some not, but all real and exploding to the surface at a single time. At first the editors in Tokyo just hadn't believed what they'd been told by their people in Washington and New York, and had redrafted the stories to fit their own conclusions until they themselves had thought the information through and come to the stunning realization on their own. The Trade Reform Act, the papers had pontificated only two days earlier, was just one more blip, a joke, *an expression of a few misguided people with a long history of antipathy to our country that will soon run its course*. It was now something else. Today it was *a most unfortunate development whose possibility of enactment into Federal Law cannot now be totally discounted*.

The Japanese language conveys information every bit as well as any other, once you break the code. In America the headlines are far more explicit, but that is merely an indelicate directness of expression typical of the *gaijin.* In Japan one talked more elliptically, but the meaning was there even so, just as clear, just as plain. The millions of Japanese citizens who owned stock read the same papers, saw the same morning news, and reached the same conclusions. On reaching their workplaces, they lifted phones and made their calls.

The Nikkei Dow had once ridden beyond thirty thousand yen of benchmark value. By the early 1990s, it had fallen to half of that, and the aggregate cash cost of the "write-down" was a number larger than the entire U.S. government debt at the time, a fact which had gone virtually unnoticed in the United States—but not by those who had taken their money from banks and placed it in stocks in an attempt to get something more than a 2 percent compounded annualized return. Those people had lost sizable fractions of their life savings and not known whom to blame for it.

Not this time, they all thought. It was time to cash in and put the money

back into banks—big, safe, financial institutions that knew how to protect their depositors' funds. Even if they were niggardly in paying interest, you didn't lose anything, did you?

Western reporters would use terms like "avalanche" and "meltdown" to describe what began when the trading computers went on-line. The process appeared to be orderly. The large commercial banks, married as they were to the large corporations, sent the same depositors' money that came in the front door right out the back door to protect the value of corporate stocks. There was no choice, really. They had to buy up huge portfolios in what turned out to be a vain stand against a racing tide. The Nikkei Dow lost fully a sixth of its net value in one trading day, and though analysts proclaimed confidently that the market was now grossly undervalued and a huge technical adjustment upward was inevitable, people thought in their own homes that if the American legislation really became law, the market for the goods their country made would vanish like the morning fog. The process would not stop, and though none said it, everyone knew it. This was especially clear to the bankers.

On Wall Street, things were different. Various sages bemoaned the interference of government in the marketplace; then they thought about it a little bit. It was plain to see, after all, that if Japanese automobiles had trouble clearing customs, that if the popular Cresta was now cursed with a visual event that few would soon put behind them, then American cars would sell more, and that was good. It was good for Detroit, where the cars were assembled, and for Pittsburgh, where much of the steel was still forged; it was good for all the cities in America (and Canada, and Mexico), where the thousands of components were made. It was good, further, for all the workers who made the parts and assembled the cars, who would have more money to spend in their communities for other things. How good? Well, the majority of the trade imbalance with Japan was accounted for in automobiles. The sunny side of thirty *billion* dollars could well be dumped into the American economy in the next twelve months, and *that*, quite a few market technicians thought after perhaps as much as five seconds' reflection, was just good as hell, wasn't it? Conservatively, thirty billion dollars going into the coffers of various companies, and all of it, one way or another, would show up as profits for American corporations. Even the additional taxes paid would help in lowering the federal deficit, thus lowering demands on the money pool, and lowering the cost of government bonds. The American economy would be twice blessed. Toss in a little *schadenfreude* for their Japanese colleagues, and even before the Street opened for business, people were primed for a big trading day.

They would not be disappointed. The Columbus Group turned out to be especially well set, having a few days earlier purchased options for a huge quantity of auto-related issues, and thus able to take advantage of a hundred-twelve-point upward jolt in the Dow.

In Washington, at the Federal Reserve, there was concern. They were closer to the seat of government power, and had insider information from the Treasury Department on how the mechanics of the Trade Reform Act would run, and it was clear that there would be a temporary shortage of automobiles until Detroit geared up its lines somewhat. Until the American companies could take up the slack, there would be the classic situation of too much money chasing too few cars. That meant an inflationary blip, and so later in the day the Fed would announce a quarter-point increase in the discount rate—just a temporary one, they told people, off the record and not for attribution. The Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve, however, viewed the entire development as good in the long term. It would be myopic on their part, but then that condition was worldwide at the moment.

* * *

Even before that decision was made, other men were discussing the long term as well. It required the largest hot tub in the bathhouse, which was then closed for the evening to its other well-heeled customers. The regular staff was dismissed. The clients would be served by personal assistants who, it turned out, kept their distance as well. In fact, even the normal ablutions were dispensed with. After the most cursory of greetings, the men removed their jackets and ties and sat around on the floor, unwilling to waste time with the usual preliminaries.

"It will be even worse tomorrow," a banker noted. That was all he had to say.

Yamata looked around the room. It was all he could do not to laugh. The signs had been clear as much as five years before, when the first major auto company had quietly discontinued its lifetime-employment policy. The free ride of Japanese business had actually ended then, for those who had the wit to pay attention. The rest of them had thought all the reverses to be merely temporary "irregularities," their favorite term for it, but their myopia had worked entirely in Yamata's favor. The shock value of what was happening now was his best friend. Disappointingly, but not surprisingly, only a handful of those in the room had seen it for what it was. In the main, those were Yamata-san's closest allies.

Which was not to say that he or they had been immune to the adversity that had taken the national unemployment rate to almost 5 percent, merely that they had mitigated their damage by carefully considered measures. Those measures were enough, however, to make their originators appear to be models of perspicacity.

"There is an adage from the American Revolution," one of their number noted dryly. He had a reputation as something of an intellectual. "From their Benjamin Franklin, I believe. We can either hang together or we will surely hang separately. If we do not stand together now, my friends, we will all be destroyed. One at a time or all at once, it will not matter."

"And our country with us," the banker added, earning Yamata's gratitude.

"Remember when they needed us?" Yamata asked.

"They needed our bases to checkmate the Russians, to support the Koreans, to service their ships. Well, my friends, what do they need us for now?"

"Yes, and we need them," Matsuda noted.

"Very good, Kozo," Yamata responded acidly. "We need them so much that we will ruin our national economy, destroy our people and our culture, and reduce our nation to being their vassal—*again!"*

"Yamata-san, there is no time for that," another corporate chairman chided gently. "What you proposed in our last meeting, it was very bold and very dangerous."

"It was I who requested this meeting," Matsuda pointed out with dignity.

"Your pardon, Kozo." Yamata inclined his head by way of apology.

"These are difficult times, Raizo," Matsuda replied, accepting it graciously. Then he added, "I find myself leaning toward your direction."

Yamata took a very deep breath, angry at himself for misreading the man's intent. *Kozo is right. These are difficult times*. "Please, my friend, share your thoughts with us."

"We need the Americans . . . or we need something else." Every head in the room except for one looked down. Yamata read their faces, and taking a moment to control his excitement, he realized that he saw what he wished to see. It wasn't a wish or an illusion. It was really there. "It is a grave thing which we must consider now, a great gamble. And yet it is a gamble which I fear we must undertake."

"Can we really do it?" a very desperate banker asked.

"Yes," Yamata said. "We can do it. There is an element of risk, of course. I do not discount that, but there is much in our favor." He outlined the facts briefly. Surprisingly, there was no opposition to his views this time. There were questions, numerous ones, endless ones, all of which he was prepared to answer, but no one really objected this time. Some had to be concerned, even terrified, but the simple fact, he realized, was that they were more terrified by what they knew would happen in the morning, and the next, and the next. They saw the end of their way of life, their perks, their personal prestige, and that frightened them worse than anything else. Their country *owed* them for all they had done, for the long climb up the corporate ladders, for all their work and diligence, for all the good decisions they had made. And so the decision was made—not with enthusiasm—but made even so.

Mancuso's first job of the morning was to look over the oporders. *Asheville* and *Charlotte* would have to discontinue their wonderfully useful work, tracking whales in the Gulf of Alaska, to join up for Exercise DATELINE PARTNERS, along with *John Stennis, Enterprise*, and the usual cast of thousands. The exercise had been planned months in advance, of course. It was a fortunate accident that the script for the event was not entirely divorced from what this half of Pac-Fleet was working up for. On the twenty-seventh, two weeks after the conclusion of PARTNERS, *Stennis* and *Big-E* would deploy southwest for the IO, with a single courtesy stop in Singapore, to relieve *Ike* and *Abe*.

"You know, they have us outnumbered now," Commander (Captain selectee) Wally Chambers observed. A few months earlier he'd relinquished

command of USS *Key West*, and Mancuso had asked for him to be his operations officer. The transfer from Groton, where Chambers had expected another staff job, to Honolulu had not exactly been a crushing blow to the officer's ego. Ten years earlier, Wally would have been up for a boomer command, or maybe a tender, or maybe a squadron. But the boomers were all gone, there were only three tenders operating, and the squadron billets were filled. That put Chambers in a holding pattern until his "major command" ticket could be punched, and until then Mancuso wanted him back. It was not an uncommon failing of naval officers to dip into their own former wardrooms.

Admiral Mancuso looked up, not so much in surprise as in realization. Wally was right. The Japanese Navy had twenty-eight submarines, conventionally powered boats called SSKs, and he only had nineteen.

"How many are up and running?" Bart asked, wondering what their overhaul/availability cycle was like.

"Twenty-two, according to what I saw yesterday. Hell, Admiral, they're committing *ten* to the exercise, including all the Harushios. From what I gather from Fleet Intel, they're working up real hard for us, too." Chambers leaned back and stroked his mustache. It was new, because Chambers had a baby face and he thought a commanding officer should look older than twelve. The problem was, it itched.

"Everybody tells me they're pretty good," ComSubPac noted.

"You haven't had a ride yet?" Sub-Ops asked. The Admiral shook his head.

"Scheduled for next summer."

"Well, they better be pretty good," Chambers thought. Five of Mancuso's subs were tasked to the exercise. Three would be in close to the carrier battle group, with *Asheville* and *Charlotte* conducting independent operations, which weren't really independent at all. They'd be playing a game with four Japanese subs five hundred miles northwest of Kure Atoll, pretending to do hunter-killer operations against a submarine-barrier patrol.

The exercise was fairly similar to what they expected to do in the Indian Ocean. The Japanese Navy, essentially a defensive collection of destroyers and frigates and diesel subs, would try to withstand an advance of a two-carrier battle group. Their job was to die gloriously—something the Japanese were historically good at, Mancuso told himself with a wispy smile—but also to try to make a good show of it. They'd be as clever as they could, trying to sneak their tin cans in close enough to launch their Harpoon surface-to-surface missiles, and surely their newer destroyers had a fair chance of surviving. The Kongos especially were fine platforms, the Japanese counterpart to the American Arleigh Burke class, with the Aegis radar/missile system. Expensive ships, they all had battleship names from World War II. The original *Kongo* had fallen prey to an American submarine, *Sealion II,* if Mancuso remembered properly. That was also the name of one of the few new American submarines assigned to Atlantic Fleet. Mancuso didn't have a Seawolf-class under his command yet. In any case, the aviators would have to find a way to deal with an Aegis ship, and that wasn't something they relished, was it?

All in all, it would be a good workup for Seventh Fleet. They'd need it. The Indians were indeed getting frisky. He now had seven of his boats operating

with Mike Dubro, and between those and what he had assigned to DATELINE PARTNERS, that was the whole active collection. How the mighty had fallen, ComSubPac told himself. Well, that's what the mighty usually did.

The meet procedure was not unlike the courtship ritual between swans. You showed up at a precise place at a precise time, in this case carrying a newspaper—folded, not rolled—in your left hand, and looked in a shop window at a huge collection of cameras and consumer electronics, just as a Russian would automatically do on his first trip to Japan, to marvel at the plethora of products available to those who had hard currency to spend. If he were being trailed—possible but most unlikely—it would appear normal. In due course, exactly on time, a person bumped into him.

"Excuse me," the voice said in English, which was also normal, for the person he'd inadvertently nudged was clearly gaijin.

"Quite all right," Clark replied in an accented voice, without looking.

"First time in Japan?"

"No, but my first time in Tokyo."

"Okay, it's all clear." The person bumped him again on the way down the street. Clark waited the requisite four or five minutes before following. It was always so tedious, but necessary. Japan wasn't enemy soil. It wasn't like the jobs he'd done in Leningrad (in Clark's mind that city's name would never change; besides, his Russian accent was from that region) or Moscow, but the safest course of action was to pretend that it was. Just as well that it wasn't, though. There were so many foreigners in this city that the Japanese security service, such as it was, would have gone crazy trying to track them all.

In fact it *was* Clark's first time here, aside from plane changes and stopovers, and that didn't count. The crowding on the street was like nothing he'd ever seen; not even New York was this tight. It also made him uneasy to stand out so much. There is nothing worse for an intelligence officer than *not* to be able to blend in, but his six-one height marked him as someone who didn't belong, visible from a block away to anyone who bothered to look. And so many people looked at him, Clark noted. More surprisingly, people made way for him, especially women, and children positively shrank from his presence as though Godzilla had returned to crush their city. So it was true. He'd heard the stories but never quite believed them. Hairy barbarian. *Funny, I never thought of myself that way*, John told himself, walking into a McDonald's. It was crowded at lunch hour, and after turning his head he had to take a seat with another man. *Mary Pat was right,* he thought. *Nomuri is pretty good.*

"So what's the story?" Clark asked amid the din of the fast-food place.

"Well, I've ID'd her and I've got the building she lives in."

"That's fast work."

"Not very hard. Our friend's security detail doesn't know shit about countersurveillance."

Besides, Clark didn't say, *you look like you belong, right down to the harried and tense look of a salaryman bolting down his lunch so that he can race back to his desk.* Well, that never came hard to a field spook, did it? It wasn't hard to be tense on a field assignment. The difficult part, which they emphasized at

the Farm, was to appear at ease.

"Okay, then all I have to do is get permission for the pickup." Among other things. Nomuri wasn't authorized to know about his work with THISTLE. John wondered if that would change.

"*Sayonara.*" And Nomuri made his exit while Clark attacked his rice ball. *Not bad. The kid's all business*, he thought. His next thought was, *Rice ball at* McDonald's?

The briefing documents on his desk had nothing at all to do with his being the President, but everything to do with his remaining in the office, and for that reason they were always at the top of the pile. The upward move in the approval ratings was . . . very edifying, Durling thought. Of likely voters—and they were the ones who really counted—fully 10 percent more approved of his policies than had done so last week, a numerical improvement that covered both his foreign and domestic performance. All in all, it was about what a fourth-grader might feel on bringing home a particularly good report card to doubtful parents. And that 10 percent was only the beginning, his chief pollster thought, since the implications of the policy changes were taking a little time to sink in. Already the Big Three were speculating publicly about hiring back some of the seven hundred thousand workers laid off in the previous decades, and that was just the assembly workers. Then you had to consider the people in independent parts companies, the tire companies, the glass companies, the battery companies . . . That could start to revitalize the Rust Belt, and the Rust Belt accounted for a lot of electoral votes.

What was obvious, or should have been, was that it wouldn't stop with cars. It couldn't. The United Auto Workers (cars and related parts) looked forward to the restoration of thousands of paying members. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (TVs, even VCRs?) could not be far behind, and there were additional unions that had just begun to consider how large a piece of the pie they might receive. Though simple in concept, the Trade Reform Act represented, like many simple concepts, a wide-ranging alteration in how the United States of America did business. President Durling had thought he'd understood that concept, but soon the phone on his desk would ring. Looking at it, he already knew the voices that he would hear, and it wasn't too great a stretch to imagine what words they would speak, what arguments they would put forth, and what promises they would make. And he would be amenable to accepting the promises.

He'd never really planned to be President of the United States, not as Bob Fowler had planned his entire life toward that goal, not even allowing the death of his first wife to turn him from that path. Durling's last goal had been the governorship of California, and when he'd been offered the chance for the second place on the Fowler ticket he'd taken it more out of patriotism than anything else. That was not something he'd say even to his closest advisers, because patriotism was passé in the modern political world, but Roger Durling had felt it even so, had remembered that the average citizen had a name and a face, remembered having some of them die under his command in Vietnam, and, in remembering, thought that he had to do his best for them.

But what was the best? he asked himself again, as he had done on uncounted occasions. The Oval Office was a lonely place. It was often filled with all manner of visitors, from a foreign chief of state to a schoolchild who'd won an essay contest, but in due course they all left, and the President was alone again with his duty. The oath he'd taken was so simple as to be devoid of meaning. "Faithfully execute the office of . . . to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend . . ." Fine words, but what did they *mean?* Perhaps Madison and the others had figured that he'd know. Perhaps in 1789 everyone had—it was just understood—but that was more than two hundred years in the past, and somehow they'd neglected to write it down for the guidance of future generations.

Worse still, there were plenty of people ever ready to tell you what they thought the words meant, and when you added up all the advice, 2 plus 2 ended up as 7. Labor and management, consumer and producer, taxpayer and transfer recipient. They all had their needs. They all had their agendas. They all had arguments, and fine lobbyists to make them, and the scary part was that each one made sense in one way or another, enough that many believed that 2 + 2 really did = 7. Until you announced the sum, that is, and then *everybody* said it was too much, that the country couldn't afford the *other* groups' *special* interests.

On top of all of that, if you wanted to accomplish anything at all, you had to *get* here, and having gotten here, to *stay* here, and that meant making promises you had to keep. At least some of them. And somewhere in the process, the country just got lost, and the Constitution with it, and at the end of the day you were preserving, protecting, and defending—*what?*

No wonder I never really wanted this job, Durling told himself, sitting alone, looking down at yet another position paper. It was all an accident, really. Bob had needed to carry California, and Durling had been the key, a young, popular governor of the right party affiliation. But now he was the President of the United States, and the fear was that the job was simply beyond him. The sad truth was that no single man had the intellectual capacity even to understand all the affairs the President was expected to manage. Economics, for example, perhaps his most important contemporary duty now that the Soviet Union was gone, was a field where its own practitioners couldn't agree on a set of rules that a reasonably intelligent man could comprehend.

Well, at least he understood jobs. It was better for people to have them than not to have them. It was, generally speaking, better for a country to manufacture most of its own goods than to let its money go overseas to pay the workers in another country to make them. That was a principle that he could understand, and better yet, a principle that he could explain to others, and since the people to whom he spoke would be Americans themselves, they would probably agree. It would make organized labor happy. It would also make management happy—and wasn't a policy that made *both* of them happy necessarily a good policy? It had to be, didn't it? Wouldn't it make the economists happy? Moreover, he was convinced that the American worker was as good as any in the world, more than ready to enter into a fair contest with any other, and that was all his policy was really aimed at doing . . . wasn't it?

Durling turned in his expensive swivel chair and peered out the thick windows toward the Washington Monument. It must have been a lot easier for George. Okay, so, yeah, he was the first, and he did have to deal with the Whiskey Rebellion, which in the history books didn't look to have been all that grave, and he had to set the pattern for follow-on presidents. The only taxes collected back then were of the tariff and excise sort—nasty and regressive by current standards, but aimed only at discouraging imports and punishing people for drinking too much. Durling was not really trying to stop foreign trade, just to make it *fair*. All the way back to Nixon, the U.S. government had caved in to those people, first because we'd needed their bases (as though Japan would really have struck an alliance with their ancient enemies!), later because . . . why? Because it had become expedient? Did anyone really know? Well, it would change now, and everyone would know why.

Or rather, Durling corrected himself, they'd think that they knew. Perhaps the more cynical would guess the real reason, and everyone would be partially right.

The Prime Minister's office in Japan's Diet Building—a particularly ugly structure in a city not known for the beauty of its architecture—overlooked a green space, but the man sitting in his own expensive swivel chair didn't care to look out at the moment. Soon enough he would be out there, looking in.

Thirty years, he thought. It could easily have been different. In his late twenties he'd been offered, more than once, a comfortable place in the then-ruling Liberal Democratic Party, with guaranteed upward mobility because even then his intelligence had been manifest, especially to his political enemies. And so they had approached him in the friendliest possible way, appealing to his patriotism and his vision for the future of his country, using that vision, holding it out before his young and idealistic eyes. It would take time, they'd told him, but someday he'd have his chance for this very seat in this very room. Guaranteed. All he had to do was to play ball, become part of the team, join up. . . .

He could still remember his reply, the same every time, delivered in the same tone, with the same words, until finally they'd understood that he wasn't holding out for more and left for the final time, shaking their heads and wondering why.

All he'd really wanted was for Japan to be a democracy in the true sense of the word, not a place run by a single party beholden in turn to a small number of powerful men. Even thirty years earlier the signs of corruption had been clear to anyone with open eyes, but the voters, the ordinary people, conditioned to two thousand years or more of acceptance, had just gone along with it because the roots of real democracy hadn't taken here any more than the roots of a rice plant in the pliable alluvium of a paddy. That was the grandest of all lies, so grand that it was believed by everyone within his country as well as without. The culture of his country hadn't really changed. Oh, yes, there were the cosmetic changes. Women could vote now, but like women in every other country they voted their pocketbooks, just as their men

did, and they, like their men, were part of a culture that demanded obeisance of everyone in one way or another. What came down from on high was to be accepted, and because of that his countrymen were easily manipulated.

The bitterest thing of all for the Prime Minister was that he had actually thought he'd be able to change that. His true vision, admitted to none but himself, was to change his country in a real and fundamental way. Somehow it hadn't seemed grandiose at all, back then. In exposing and crushing official corruption he'd wanted to make the people see that those on high were not worthy of what they demanded, that ordinary citizens had the honor and decency and intelligence to choose both their own path for life and a government that responded more directly to their needs.

You actually believed that, fool, he told himself, staring at the telephone. The dreams and idealism of youth died pretty hard after all, didn't they? He'd seen it all then, and it hadn't changed. Only now he knew that it wasn't possible for one man and one generation. Now he knew that to make change happen he needed economic stability at home, and that stability depended on using the old order, and the old system was corrupt. The real irony was that he'd come into office because of the failings of the old system, but at the same time needed to restore it so that he could then sweep it away. That was what he hadn't quite understood. The old system had pressed the Americans too hard, reaping economic benefits for his country such as the Black Dragons hadn't dreamed of, and when the Americans had reacted, in some ways fairly and well and in others unfairly and meanspirited, the conditions had been created for his own ascendancy. But the voters who'd made it possible for him to put his coalition together expected him to make things better for them, and quickly, and to do that he couldn't easily give more concessions to America that would worsen his own country's economic difficulties, and so he'd tried to stonewall on one hand while dealing on the other, and now he knew that it wasn't possible to do both at the same time. It required the sort of skill which no man had.

And his enemies knew that. They'd known it three years ago when he'd put his coalition together, waiting patiently for him to fail, and his ideals with him. The American actions merely affected the timing, not the ultimate outcome.

Could he fix it even now? By lifting the phone he could place a call through to Roger Durling and make a personal plea to head off the new American law, to undertake rapid negotiations. But that wouldn't work, would it? Durling would lose great face were he to do that, and though America deemed it a uniquely Japanese concept, it was as true for them as it was for him. Even worse, Durling would not believe his sincerity. The well was so poisoned by a generation of previous bad-faith negotiations that there was no reason for the Americans to suppose that things were different now—and, truth be known, he probably could not really deliver in any case. His parliamentary coalition would not survive the concessions he would have to make, because jobs were at stake, and with his national unemployment rate at an all-time high of over 5 percent, he did not have the political strength to risk increasing it further. And so, because he could not survive the political effects of such an offer, something even worse would happen, and he would not survive that either. It

was only a question, really, of whether he would destroy his own political career or let someone else do it for him. Which was the greater disgrace? He didn't know.

He did know that he could not bring himself to make the telephone call to his American counterpart. It would have been an exercise in futility, just like his entire career, he now realized. The book was already written. Let someone else provide the final chapter.

11

Sea Change

The Trade Reform Act by now had two hundred bipartisan cosponsors. Committee hearings had been unusually brief, largely because few had the courage to testify against it. Remarkably, a major Washington public-relations firm terminated its contract with a Japanese conglomerate, and since it was a PR firm, put out a press release to that effect announcing the end of a fourteen-year relationship. The combination of the event at Oak Ridge and Al Trent's often-quoted barb at a senior lobbyist had made life most uncomfortable for those in foreign employ who stalked the halls of Congress. Lobbyists didn't impede the bill at all. As a man, they reported back to their employers that the bill simply could not fail passage, that any disabling changes in the bill were quite impossible, and the only possible reaction to it would be to take the long view and ride it out. In time, their friends in Congress would be able to support them again, just not now.

Just not now? The cynical definition of a good politician was the same in Japan as it was in America: a public servant who, once bought, *stayed* bought. The employers thought of all the money contributed to so many campaign funds, the thousand-dollar dinner-plates covered with mediocre food bought by (actually for) American employees of their multinational corporations, the trips to golf courses, the entertainment on fact-finding trips to Japan and elsewhere, the personal contact—and realized that all of it mattered not a bit the one time that it really mattered. America just wasn't like Japan at all. Its legislators didn't feel the obligation to pay back, and the lobbyists, also bought and paid for, told them that it had to be this way. What, then, had they spent all that money *for?*

Take the long view? The long view was all well and good, so long as the immediate prospect was pleasant and uncluttered. Circumstances had permitted Japan the long view for nearly forty years. But today it no longer applied. On Wednesday, the Fourth, the day the Trade Reform Act cleared committee, the Nikkei Dow fell to 12,841 yen, roughly a third of what it had been in recent memory, and the panic in the country was quite real now.

" 'Plum blossoms bloom, and pleasure-women buy new scarves in a brothel room.' "

The words might have been poetic in Japanese—it was a famous haiku—but it didn't make a hell of a lot of sense in English, Clark thought. At least not to him, but the effect on the man in front of him was noteworthy. "Oleg Yurievich sends his greetings."

"It has been a long time," the man stammered after perhaps five seconds of well-concealed panic.

"Things have been difficult at home," Clark explained, a slight accent in his voice.

Isamu Kimura was a senior official in the Ministry for International Trade and Industry, MITI, the centerpiece of an enterprise once called "Japan, Inc." As such he often met with foreigners, especially foreign reporters, and so he had accepted the invitation of Ivan Sergeyevich Klerk, newly arrived in Japan from Moscow, complete with a photographer who was elsewhere shooting pictures.

"It would seem to be a difficult time for your country as well," Klerk added, wondering what sort of reaction it would get. He had to be a little tough with the guy. It was possible that he'd resist the idea of being reactivated after more than two years of no contacts. If so, KGB policy was to make it clear that once they had their hooks into you, those hooks never went away. It was also CIA policy, of course.

"It's a nightmare," Kimura said after a few seconds' reflection and a deep draft of the sake on the table.

"If you think the Americans are difficult, you should be a Russian. The country in which I grew up, which nurtured and trained me—is no more. Do you realize that I must actually support myself with my Interfax work? I can't even perform my duties on a full-time basis." Clark shook his head ruefully and emptied his own cup.

"Your English is excellent."

The "Russian" nodded politely, taking the remark as surrender on the part of the man across the table. "Thank you. I worked for years in New York, covering the U.N. for *Pravda.* Among other things," he added.

"Really?" Kimura asked. "What do you know of American business and politics?"

"I specialized in commercial work. The new world's circumstances allow me to pursue it with even more vigor, and your services are highly valued by my country. We will be able to reward you even more in the future, my friend."

Kimura shook his head. "I have no time for that now. My office is in a very confused state, for obvious reasons."

"I understand. This meeting is in the manner of a get-acquainted session. We have no immediate demands."

"And how is Oleg?" the MITI official asked.

"He has a good life now, a very comfortable position because of the fine work you did for him." Which wasn't a lie at all. Lyalin was alive, and that beat the hell out of a bullet to the head in the basement of KGB Headquarters. This man was the agent who'd given Lyalin the information which had placed them in Mexico. It seemed a shame to Clark that he couldn't thank the man personally for his part in averting a nuclear war. "So tell me, in my reporter identity: how bad is the situation with America? I have a story to file, you see." The answer would surprise him almost as much as the vehemence of its tone.

Isamu Kimura looked down. "It could bring ruin to us."

"Is it really that bad?" "Klerk" asked in surprise, taking out his pad to make

notes like a good reporter.

"It will mean a trade war." It was all the man could do to speak that one sentence.

"Well, such a war will do harm to both countries, yes?" Clark had heard that one often enough that he actually believed it.

"We've been saying that for years, but it's a lie. It's really very simple," Kimura went on, assuming that this Russian needed an education in the capitalist facts of life, not knowing that he was an American who did. "We need their market to sell our manufactured goods. Do you know what a trade war means? It means that they stop buying our manufactured goods, and that they keep their money. That money will go into their own industries, which we have trained, after a fashion, to be more efficient. Those industries will grow and prosper by following our example, and in doing so they will regain market share in areas which we have dominated for twenty years. If we lose our market position, we may never get it all back."

"And why is that?" Clark asked, scribbling furiously and finding himself actually quite interested.

"When we entered the American market, the yen had only about a third of the value it has today. That enabled us to be highly competitive in our pricing. Then as we established a place within the American market, achieved brandname recognition, and so forth, we were able to increase our prices while retaining our market share, even expanding it in many areas despite the increasing value of the yen. To accomplish the same thing today would be far more difficult."

Fabulous news, Clark thought behind a studiously passive face. "But will they be able to replace all the things you make for them?"

"Through their own workers? All of them? Probably not, but they don't have to. Last year automobiles and related products accounted for sixty-one percent of our trade with America. The Americans know how to make cars—what they did not know we have taught them," Kimura said, leaning forward. "In other areas, cameras for example, they are now made elsewhere, Singapore, Korea, Malaysia. The same is true of consumer electronics. Klerk-san, nobody really understands what is happening yet."

"The Americans can really do this much damage to you? Is it possible?" *Damn*, Clark thought, maybe it was.

"It is very possible. My country has not faced such a possibility since 1941." The statement was accidental, but Kimura noted the accuracy of it the instant it escaped his lips.

"I can't put *that* in a news story. It's too alarmist."

Kimura looked up. "That was not meant for a news story. I know your agency has contacts with the Americans. It has to. They are not listening to us now. Perhaps they will listen to you. They push us too far. The zaibatsu are truly desperate. It's happened too fast and gone too far. How would *your* country respond to such an attack on your economy?"

Clark leaned back, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes as a Russian would. The initial contact with Kimura wasn't supposed to have been a substantive intelligence-gathering session, but it had suddenly turned into one. Unprepared for this eventuality, he decided to run with it anyway. The man

before him seemed like a prime source, and made more so by his desperation. Moreover, he seemed like a good and dedicated public servant, and if that was somewhat sad, it was also the way the intelligence business worked.

"They did do it to us, in the 1980s. Their arms buildup, their insane plan to put defense systems in space, the reckless brinksmanship game their President Reagan played—did you know that when I was working in New York, I was part of Project RYAN? We thought he planned to strike us. I spent a year looking for such plans." Colonel I. S. Klerk of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service was fully in his cover identity now, speaking as a Russian would, calmly, quietly, almost pedagogically. "But we looked in the wrong place—no, that wasn't it. It was right in front of us all the time and we failed to see it. They forced us to spend more, and they broke our economy in the process. Marshal Ogarkov gave his speech, demanding more of the economy in order to keep up with the Americans, but there was no more to give. To answer your question briefly, Isamu, we had the choice of surrender or war. War was too terrible to contemplate . . . and so, here I am in Japan, representing a new country."

Kimura's next statement was as startling as it was accurate: "But you had less to lose. The Americans don't seem to understand that." He stood, leaving sufficient money on the table to cover the bill. He knew that a Russian could scarcely afford to pay for a meal in Tokyo.

Holy shit, Clark thought, watching the man leave. The meeting had been an open one, and so did not require covert procedures. That meant he could just get up and leave. But he didn't. Isamu Kimura was a very senior gent, the CIA officer told himself, sipping the last of the sake. He had only one layer of career officials over him, and beyond that was a political appointee, who was really a mouthpiece for the career bureaucrats. Like an assistant secretary of state, Kimura had access to everything. He'd proved that once, by helping them in Mexico, where John and Ding had apprehended Ismael Qati and Ibrahim Ghosn. For that reason alone, America owed this man a considerable debt of honor. More to the point, it made him a primo source of high-grade intelligence. CIA could believe almost anything he said. There could have been no planned script for this meeting. His thoughts and fears had to be genuine, and Clark knew at once that they had to get to Langley in a hurry.

It came as no surprise to anyone who really knew him that Goto was a weak man. Though that was a curse of his country's political leadership, it worked now in Yamata's favor.

"I will not become Prime Minister of my country," Hiroshi Goto announced in a manner worthy of a stage actor, "in order to become executor of its economic ruin." His language was that of the Kabuki stage, stylized and poetic. He was a literate man, the industrialist knew. He had long studied history and the arts, and like many politicians he placed a great deal of value in show and rather less in substance. Like many weak men, he made a great ceremony of personal strength and power. That was why he often had this girl Kimberly Norton in the room with him. She was learning, after a fashion, to perform the duties of an important man's mistress. She sat quietly, refilling

cups with sake or tea, and waiting patiently for Yamata-san to leave, after which, it was clear, Goto would bed the girl. He doubtless thought this made him more impressive to his guest. He was such a fool, thinking from his testicles rather than his brain. Well, that was all right. Yamata would become his brain.

"That is precisely what we face," Yamata replied bluntly. His eyes traced over the girl, partly in curiosity, partly to let Goto think that he was envious of the man's young mistress. Her eyes showed no comprehension at all. Was she as stupid as he'd been led to believe? She'd certainly been lured over here easily enough. It was a lucrative activity for the Yakuza, and one in which some of his colleagues partook. Setting Goto up with her—indirectly; Yamata didn't view himself as a pimp, and had merely seen to it that the right person had made the right suggestion to this senior political figure—had been a clever move, though Goto's personal weaknesses had been known to many and easily identified. What was that American euphemism? "Led around by the nose"? It had to mean the same thing that Yamata had done, and a rare case of delicacy of expression for the *gaijin*.

"What can we do about it?" the Leader of the Opposition—for the moment—asked.

"We have two choices." Yamata paused, looking again at the girl, wishing that Goto would dismiss her. This was a highly sensitive matter, after all. Instead, Goto stroked her fair hair, and she smiled. Well, at least Goto hadn't stripped the girl before he'd arrived, Yamata thought, as he had a few weeks ago. Yamata had seen breasts before, even large Caucasian breasts, and it wasn't as though the zaibatsu was in the dark about what Goto did with her.

"She doesn't understand a word," the politician said, laughing.

Kimba-chan smiled, and the expression caught Yamata's eye. There followed a disturbing thought: was she merely reacting politely to her master's laugh or was it something else? How old was this girl? Twenties, probably, but he was not skilled in estimating the age of foreigners. Then he remembered something else: his country occasionally provided female companionship to visiting foreign dignitaries, as Yamata did for businessmen. It was a practice that went far back in history, both to make potential deals more easily struck—a man sated by a skilled courtesan would not often be unpleasant to his companions—and because men frequently loosed their tongues along with their belts. What did Goto talk about with this girl? Whom might she be telling? Suddenly the fact that Yamata had set up the relationship didn't seem so clever at all.

"Please, Hiroshi, indulge me this one time," Yamata said reasonably.

"Oh, very well." He continued in English: "Kimba-chan, my friend and I need to speak in private for a few minutes."

She had the good manners not to object verbally, Yamata saw, but the disappointment in her face was not hidden. Did that mean she was trained not to react, or trained to react as a mindless girl would? And did her dismissal matter? Would Goto relate everything to her? Was he that much under her spell? Yamata didn't know, and not knowing, at this moment, struck him as dangerous.

"I love fucking Americans," Goto said coarsely after the door slid shut behind her. It was strange. For all his cultured language, in this one area he

spoke like someone of the streets. It was clearly a great weakness, and for that reason, a worrisome one.

"I am glad to hear that, my friend, for soon you will have the chance to do it some more," Yamata replied, making a few mental notes.

An hour later, Chet Nomuri looked up from his *pachinko* machine to see Yamata emerge. As usual, he had both a driver and another man, this one far more serious-looking, doubtless a bodyguard or security guy of some sort. Nomuri didn't know his name, but the type was pretty obvious. The zaibatsu talked to him, a short remark, and there was no telling what it was. Then all three men got into the car and drove off. Goto emerged ninety minutes later, refreshed as always. At that point Nomuri stopped playing the vertical pinball game and changed location to a place down the block. Thirty minutes more and the Norton girl came out. This time Nomuri was ahead of her, walking, taking the turn, then waiting for her to catch up. *Okay*, he thought five minutes later. He was now certain he knew what building she lived in. She'd purchased something to eat and carried it in. Good.

"Morning, MP." Ryan was just back from his daily briefing to the President. Every morning he sat through thirty or forty minutes of reports from the government's various security agencies, and then presented the data in the Oval Office. This morning he'd told his boss, again, that there was nothing all that troubling on the horizon.

"SANDALWOOD," she said for his opening.

"What about it?" Jack asked, leaning back in his chair.

"I had an idea and ran with it."

"What's that?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"I told Clark and Chavez to reactivate THISTLE, Lyalin's old net in Japan."

Ryan blinked. "You're telling me that nobody ever—"

"He was doing mainly commercial stuff, and we have that Executive Order, remember?"

Jack suppressed a grumble. THISTLE had served America once, and not through commercial espionage. "Okay, so what's happening?"

"This." Mrs. Foley handed over a single printed page, about five hundred single-spaced words once you got past the cover sheet.

Ryan looked up from the first paragraph. " 'Genuine panic in MITI'?"

"That's what the man says. Keep going." Jack picked up a pen, chewing on it.

"Okay, what else?"

"Their government's going to fall, sure as hell. While Clark was talking to this guy, Chavez was talking to another. State ought to pick up on this in another day or so, but it looks like we got it first for a change."

Jack sat forward at that point. It wasn't that much of a surprise. Brett Hanson had warned about this possibility. The State Department was, in fact, the only government agency that was leery of the TRA, though its concerns

had stayed within the family, as it were.

"There's more?"

"Well, yeah, there is. We've turned up the missing girl, all right. It appears to be Kimberly Norton, and sure enough, she's the one involved with Goto, and *he's* going to be the next PM," she concluded with a smile.

It wasn't really very funny, of course, though that depended on your perspective, didn't it? America now had something to use on Goto, and Goto looked to be the next Prime Minister. It wasn't an entirely bad thing. . . .

"Keep talking," Ryan ordered.

"We have the choice of offering her a freebie home, or we could—"

"MP, the answer to that is no." Ryan closed his eyes. He'd been thinking about this one. Before, he'd been the one to take the detached view, but he had seen a photograph of the girl, and though he'd tried briefly to retain his detachment, it had lasted only as long as it took to return home and look at his own children. Perhaps it was a weakness, his inability to contemplate the use of people's lives in the furtherance of his country's goals. If so, it was a weakness that his conscience would allow him. Besides: "Does anybody think she can act like a trained spook? Christ's sake, she's a messed-up girl who skipped away from home because she was getting crummy grades at her school."

"Jack, it's my job to float options, remember?" Every government in the world did it, of course, even America, even in these advanced feminist times. They were nice girls, everyone said, usually bright ones, government secretaries, many of them, who were managed through the Secret Service of all places, and made good money serving their government. Ryan had no official knowledge whatever of the operation, and wanted to keep it that way. Had he acquired official knowledge and not spoken out against it, then what sort of man would he be? So many people assumed that high government officials were just moral robots who did the things they had to do for their country without self-doubts, untroubled by conscience. Perhaps it had been true once—possibly it still was for many—but this was a different world, and Jack Ryan was the son of a police officer.

"You're the one who said it first, remember? That girl is an American citizen who probably needs a little help. Let's not turn into something we are not, okay? It's Clark and Chavez on this one?"

"Correct."

"I think we should be careful about it, but to offer the girl a ticket home. If she says no, then *maybe* we can consider something else, but no screwing around on this one. She gets a fair offer of a ride home." Ryan looked down at Clark's brief report and read it more carefully. Had it come from someone else, he would not have taken it so seriously, but he knew John Clark, had taken the time to learn everything about him. It would someday make for an enjoyable conversation.

"I'm going to keep this. I think maybe the President needs to read it, too."

"Concur," the DDO replied.

"Anything else like this comes in . . ."

"You'll know," Mary Pat promised.

"Good idea on THISTLE."

"I want Clark to—well, to press maybe a little harder, and see if we develop similar opinions."

"Approved," Ryan said at once. "Push as hard as you want."

Yamata's personal jet was an old Gulfstream G-IV. Though fitted with auxiliary fuel tanks, it could not ordinarily nonstop the 6,740-mile hop from Tokyo to New York. Today was different, his pilot told him. The jet stream over the North Pacific was fully one hundred ninety knots, and they'd have it for several hours. That boosted their ground speed to 782 miles per hour. It would knock two full hours off the normal flight time.

Yamata was glad. The time was important. None of what he had in his mind was written down, so there were no plans to go over. Though weary from long days that had of late stretched into longer weeks, he found that his body was unable to rest. A voracious reader, he could not get interested in any of the material that he kept on his aircraft. He was alone; there was no one with whom to speak. There was nothing at all to do, and it seemed strange to Yamata. His G-IV cruised at forty-one thousand feet, and it was a clear morning below him. He could see the surface of the North Pacific clearly, the endless ranks of waves, some of their crests decorated with white, driven by high surface winds. The immortal sea. For almost all of his life, it had been an American lake, dominated by their navy. Did the sea know that? Did the sea know that it would change?

Change. Yamata grunted to himself. It would start within hours of his arrival in New York.

"This is Bud on final. I have the ball with eight thousand pounds of fuel," Captain Sanchez announced over his radio circuit. As commander of the air wing for USS *John Stennis* (CVN-74), his F/A-18F would be the first aboard. Strangely, though the most senior aviator aboard, he was new to the Hornet, having spent all of his career in the F-14 Tomcat. Lighter and more agile, and finally with enough fuel capacity to do more than take off, circle the deck once, and return (so it often seemed), he found himself liking the chance to fly alone for a change, after a whole career spent in two-seat aircraft. *Maybe the Air Force pukes had a good idea after all. . . .*

Ahead of him, on the huge flight deck of the new carrier, enlisted men made the proper tension adjustments on the arrestor wires, took the empty weight of his attack fighter, and added the fuel amount he'd called in. It had to be done every time. *Huge flight deck*, he thought, half a mile out. For those standing on the deck it looked huge enough, but for Sanchez it increasingly looked like a matchbook. He cleared his mind of the thought, concentrating on his task. The Hornet buffeted a little coming through the burble of disturbed air caused by the carrier's massive "island" structure, but the pilot's eyes were locked on the "meatball," a red light reflected off a mirror, keeping it nicely centered. Some called Sanchez "Mister Machine," for of his sixteen hundred—odd carrier landings—you logged every one—less than fifty had failed to catch the

optimum number-three wire.

Gently, gently, he told himself, easing the stick back with his right hand while the left worked the throttles, watching his sink rate, and . . . yes. He could feel the fighter jerk from catching the wire—number three, he was sure—and slow itself, even though the rush to the edge of the angled deck seemed sure to dump him over the side. The aircraft stopped, seemingly inches from the line where black-topped steel fell off to blue water. Really, it was closet to a hundred feet. Sanchez disengaged his tail hook, and allowed the wire to snake back to its proper place. A deck crewman started waving at him, telling him how to get to where he was supposed to go, and the expensive jet aircraft turned into a particularly ungainly land vehicle on the world's most expensive parking lot. Five minutes later, the engines shut down and, tie-down chains in place, Sanchez popped the canopy and climbed down the steel ladder that his brown-jerseyed plane-captain had set in place.

"Welcome aboard, Skipper. Any problems?"

"Nary a one." Sanchez handed over his flight helmet and trotted off to the island. Three minutes after that he was observing the remainder of the landings.

Johnnie Reb was already her semiofficial nickname, since she was named for a long-term U.S. Senator from Mississippi, also a faithful friend of the Navy. The ship even smelled new, Sanchez thought, not so long out of the yards of Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock. She'd done her trials off the East Coast and sailed around the Horn to Pearl Harbor. Her newest sister, *United States*, would be ready for trials in another year, and yet another was beginning construction. It was good to know that at least one branch of the Navy was still in business—more or less.

The aircraft of his wing came in about ninety seconds apart. Two squadrons, each of twelve F-14 Tomcats, two more with an identical number of F/A-18 Hornets. One medium-attack squadron of ten A-6E Intruders, then the special birds, three E-3C Hawkeye early-warning aircraft, two C-2 CODs, four EA-6B Prowlers . . . and that was all, Sanchez thought, not as pleased as he ought to be.

Johnnie Reb could easily accommodate another twenty aircraft, but a carrier air wing wasn't what it used to be, Sanchez thought, remembering how crowded a carrier had once been. The good news was that it was easier to move aircraft around the deck now. The bad news was that the actual striking power of his wing was barely two-thirds of what it had once been. Worse, naval aviation had fallen on hard times as an institution. The Tomcat design had begun in the 1960s—Sanchez had been contemplating high school then, and wondering when he'd be able to drive a car. The Hornet had first flown as the YF-17 in the early 1970s. The Intruder had started life in the 1950s, about the time Bud had gotten his first two-wheeler. There was not a single new naval aircraft in the pipeline. The Navy had twice flubbed its chance to buy into Stealth technology, first by not buying into the Air Force's F-117 project, then by fielding the A-12 Avenger, which had turned out to be stealthy enough, just unable to fly worth a damn. And so now this fighter pilot, after twenty years of carrier operations, a "comer" being fast-tracked for an early flag—now with the last and best flying command of his career, Sanchez had

less power to wield than anyone before him. The same was true of *Enterprise*, fifty miles to the east.

But the carrier was still queen of the sea. Even in her diminished capacity, *Johnnie Reb* had more striking power than both Indian carriers combined, and Sanchez judged that keeping India from getting too aggressive ought not to be overly taxing. A damned good thing that was the only problem on the horizon, too.

"That's it," the Air Boss observed as the last EA-6B caught the number-two wire. "Recovery complete. Your people look pretty good, Bud."

"We have been working at it, Todd." Sanchez rose from his seat and headed below toward his stateroom, where he'd freshen up before meeting first with his squadron commanders, and then with the ops staff to plan the operations for DATELINE PARTNERS. It ought to be a good workup, Sanchez thought. An Atlantic Fleet sailor for most of his career, it would be his first chance to look at the Japanese Navy, and he wondered what his grandfather would have thought of this. Henry Gabriel "Mike" Sanchez had been the CAG on USS *Wasp* in 1942, taking on the Japanese in the Guadalcanal campaign. He wondered what Big Mike would have thought of the upcoming exercise.

* * *

"Come on, you have to give me something," the lobbyist said. It was a mark of just how grim things were that his employers had told him it was possible they might have to cut back on their expenditures in D.C. That was very unwelcome news. It wasn't just me, the former Congressman from Ohio told himself. He had an office of twenty people to take care of, and they were Americans, too, weren't they? And so he had chosen his target with care. This Senator had problems, a real contender in his primary, and another, equally real opponent in the general election. He needed a larger war chest. That made him amenable to reason, perhaps.

"Roy, I know we've worked together for ten years, but if I vote against TRA, I'm dead, okay? Dead. In the ground, with a wood stake through my heart, back in Chicago teaching bullshit seminars in government operations and selling influence to the highest bidder." *Maybe even ending up like you*, the Senator didn't say. He didn't have to. The message carried quite clearly. It was not a pleasant thought. Almost twelve years on the Hill, and he *liked* it here. He liked the staff, and the life, and the parking privileges, and the free plane rides back to Illinois, and being treated like he was *somebody* everywhere he went. Already he was a member of the "Tuesday-Thursday Club," flying back home every Thursday evening for a very long weekend of speeches to the local Elks and Rotary clubs, to be seen at PTA meetings, cutting ribbons for every new post office building he'd managed to scrounge money for, campaigning already, just as hard as he'd done to get this goddamned job in the first place. It was not pleasant to have to go through *that* again. It would be less pleasant still to do it in the knowledge that it was all a waste of his time. He *had* to vote for TRA. Didn't Roy know that?

"I know that, Ernie. But I need something," the lobbyist persisted. It wasn't

like working on the Hill. He had a staff of the same size, but this time it wasn't paid for by taxes. Now he actually had to work for it. "I've always been your friend, right?"

The question wasn't really a question. It was a statement, and it was both an implied threat and a promise. If Senator Greening didn't come over with *something,* then, maybe, Roy would, quietly at first, have a meeting with one of his opponents. More likely both. Roy, the Senator knew, was quite at ease working both sides of any street. He might well write off Ernest Greening as a lost cause and start currying favor with one or both possible replacements. Seed money, in a manner of speaking, something that would pay off in the long run because the Japs were good at thinking long-term. Everyone knew that. On the other hand, if he coughed up something now . . .

"Look, I can't possibly change my vote," Senator Greening said again.

"What about an amendment? I have an idea that might—"

"No chance, Roy. You've seen how the committees are working on this. Hell, the chairmen are sitting down right now at Bullfeathers, working out the last details. You have to make it clear to your friends that we've been well and truly rolled on this one."

"Anything else?" Roy Newton asked, his personal misery not quite showing. *My God, to have to go back to Cincinnati, practice law again?*

"Well, nothing on point," Greening said, "but there are a few interesting things going on, on the other side."

"What's that?" Newton asked. *Just what I need,* he thought. *Some of the usual damned gossip*. It had been fun while he'd served his six terms, but not—

"Possible impeachment hearings against Ed Kealty."

"You're kidding," the lobbyist breathed, his thoughts stopped dead in their tracks. "Don't tell me, he got caught with his zipper down again?"

"Rape," Greening replied. "No shit, rape. The FBI's been working the case for some time now. You know Dan Murray?"

"Shaw's lapdog?"

The Senator nodded. "That's the one. He briefed House Judiciary, but then this trade flap blew up and the President put it on hold. Kealty himself doesn't know yet, at least not as of last Friday—that's how tight this one is—but my senior legislative aide is engaged to Sam Fellows' chief of staff, and it really is too good to keep quiet, isn't it?"

The old Washington story, Newton thought with a smirk. *If two people know it, it's not a secret.*

"How serious?"

"From what I hear, Ed Kealty's in very deep shit. Murray made his position very clear. He wants to put Eddie-boy behind bars. There's a death involved."

"Lisa Beringer!" If there was anything a politician was good at, it was remembering names.

Greening nodded. "I see your memory hasn't failed you."

Newton almost whistled, but as a former Member, he was supposed to take such things phlegmatically. "No wonder he wants this one under wraps. The front page isn't big enough, is it?"

"That is the problem. It wouldn't affect passage of the bill—well, probably not—but who needs the complications? TRA, the Moscow trip, too. So—smart

money, it's announced when he gets back from Russia."

"He's hanging Kealty out."

"Roger never has liked him. He brought Ed on board for his legislative savvy, remember? The President needed somebody who knew the system. Well, what good will he be now, even if he's cleared? Also, a major liability for the campaign. It makes good political sense," Greening pointed out, "to toss him overboard right now, doesn't it? At least, as soon as the other stuff is taken care of."

That's interesting, Newton thought, quiet for a few seconds. *We can't stop TRA. On the other hand, what if we can curse Durling's presidency? That could give us a new Administration in one big hurry, and with the right sort of guidance, a new Administration . . .*

"Okay, Ernie, that's something."

12

Formalities

There had to be speeches. Worse, there had to be a *lot* of speeches. For something of this magnitude, each of the 435 members from each of the 435 districts had to have his or her time in front of the cameras.

A representative from North Carolina had brought in Will Snyder, his hands still bandaged, and made sure he had a front-row seat in the gallery. That gave her the ability to point to her constituent, praise his courage to the heavens, laud organized labor for the nobility of its unionized members, and introduce a resolution to give Snyder official congressional recognition for his heroic act.

Next, a member from eastern Tennessee rendered a similar panegyric to his state's highway police and the scientific resources of Oak Ridge National Laboratory—there would be many favors handed out as a result of this legislation, and ORNL would get a few more million. The Congressional Budget Office was already estimating the tax revenue to be realized from increased American auto production, and members were salivating over that like Pavlov's dogs for their bell.

A member from Kentucky went to great pains to make it clear that the Cresta was largely an *American*-made automobile, would be even more so with the additional U.S. parts to be included in the design (that had already been settled in a desperate but necessarily unsuccessful accommodation effort by the corporate management), and that he hoped none would blame the workers of his district for the tragedy caused, after all, by non-American parts. The Kentucky Cresta plant, he reminded them, was the most efficient car factory in the world, and a model, he rhapsodized, of the way America and Japan *could* and *should* cooperate! And he would support this bill only because it was a way to make that cooperation more likely. That straddled the fence rather admirably, his fellow members thought.

And so it went. The people who edited *Roll Call*, the local journal that covered the Hill, were wondering if *anyone* would dare to vote against TRA.

"Look," Roy Newton told his main client. "You're going to take a beating, okay? Nobody can change that. Call it bad luck if you want, but shit happens."

It was his tone that surprised the other man. Newton was almost being insolent. He wasn't apologizing at all for his gross failure to change things, as he was paid to do, as he had promised that he could do when he'd first been hired to lobby for Japan, Inc. It was unseemly for a hireling to speak in this way to his benefactor, but there was no understanding Americans, you gave them money to do a job, and they—

"But there are other things going on, and if you have the patience to take a longer view—" *long view* had already been tried, and Newton was grateful for the fact that his client had good-enough language skills to catch the difference —"there are other options to be considered."

"And what might those be?" Binichi Murakami asked acidly. He was upset enough to allow his anger to show for once. It was just too much. He'd come to Washington in the hope that he could personally speak out against this disastrous bill, but instead had found himself besieged with reporters whose questions had only made clear the futility of his mission. And for that reason he'd been away from home for weeks, despite all sorts of entreaties to return to Japan for some urgent meetings with his friend Kozo Matsuda.

"Governments change," Newton replied, explaining on for a minute or so.

"Such a trivial thing as that?"

"You know, someday it's going to happen in your country. You're kidding yourself if you think otherwise." Newton didn't understand how they could fail to grasp something so obvious. Surely their marketing people told them how many cars were bought in America by women. Not to mention the best lady's shaver in the world. Hell, one of Murakami's subsidiaries made it. So much of their marketing effort was aimed at attracting women customers, and yet they pretended that the same factors would never come to be in their own country. It was, Newton thought, a particularly strange blind spot.

"It really could ruin Durling?" The President was clearly getting all sorts of political capital from TRA.

"Sure, if it's managed properly. He's holding up a major criminal investigation, isn't he?"

"No, from what you said, he's asked to delay it for—"

"For political reasons, Binichi." Newton did not often first-name his client. The guy didn't like it. Stuffed shirt. But he paid very well, didn't he? "Binichi, you don't want to get caught playing with a criminal matter, especially for political reasons. *Especially* where the abuse of women is involved. It's an eccentricity of the American political system," he explained patiently.

"We can't meddle with that, can we?" It was an ill-considered question. He'd never quite meddled at this level before, that was all.

"What do you think you pay me for?"

Murakami leaned back and lit up a cigarette. He was the only person allowed to smoke in this office. "How would we go about it?"

"Give me a few days to work on that? For the moment, take the next flight home. You're just hurting yourself by being here, okay?" Newton paused. "You also need to understand, this is the most complicated project I've ever done for you. Dangerous, too," the lobbyist added.

Mercenary! Murakami raged behind eyes that were again impassive and thoughtful. Well, at least he was effective at it.

"One of my colleagues is in New York. I plan to see him and then fly home from New York."

"Fine. Just keep a real low profile, okay?"

Murakami stood and walked to the outer office, where an aide and a bodyguard waited. He was a physically imposing man, tall for a Japanese at five-ten, with jet-black hair and a youthful face that belied his fifty-seven

years. He also had a better-than-average track record for doing business in America, which made the current situation all the more offensive to him. He had never purchased less than a hundred million dollars' worth of American products in any year for the past decade, and he had occasionally spoken out, quietly, for allowing America greater access to his country's food market. The son and grandson of farmers, it appalled him that so many of his countrymen would want to do that sort of work. It was so damnably inefficient, after all, and the Americans, for all their laziness, were genuine artists at growing things. What a pity they didn't know how to plant a decent garden, which was Murakami's other passion in life.

The office building was on Sixteenth Street, only a few blocks from the White House, and, stepping out on the sidewalk he could look down and see the imposing building. Not Osaka Castle, but it radiated power.

"You Jap cocksucker!"

Murakami turned to see the face, angry and white, a working-class man by the look of him, and was so startled that he didn't have time to take offense. His bodyguard moved quickly to interpose himself between his boss and the American.

"You're gonna get yours, asshole!" the American said. He started to walk away.

"Wait. What have I done to harm you?" Murakami asked, still too surprised to be angry.

Had he known America better, the industrialist might have recognized that the man was one of Washington's homeless, and like most of them, a man with a problem. In this case, he was an alcoholic who had lost both his job and his family to drink, and his only contact with reality came from disjointed conversations with people similarly afflicted. Because of that, whatever outrages he held were artificially magnified. His plastic cup was full of an inexpensive beer, and because he remembered once working in the Chrysler assembly plant in Newark, Delaware, he decided that he didn't need the beer as much as he needed to be angry about losing his job, whenever that had been. . . . And so, forgetting that his own difficulties had brought him to this low station in life, he turned and tossed the beer all over the three men in front of him, then moved on without a word, feeling so good about what he'd done that he didn't mind losing his drink.

The bodyguard started to move after him. In Japan he would have been able to hammer the *bakayaro* to the ground. A policeman would be summoned, and this fool would be detained, but the bodyguard knew he was on unfamiliar ground, and held back, then turned to see if perhaps this had been a setup to distract him from a more serious attack. He saw his employer standing erect, his face first frozen in shock, then outrage, as his expensive English-made coat dripped with half a liter of cheap, tasteless American beer. Without a word, Murakami got into the waiting car, which headed off to Washington National Airport. The bodyguard, similarly humiliated, took his seat in the front of the car.

A man who had won everything in his life on merit, who remembered life on a postage-stamp of a vegetable farm, who had studied harder than anyone else to get ahead, to win a place at Tokyo University, who had started at the

bottom and worked his way to the top, Murakami had often had his doubts and criticisms of America, but he had deemed himself a fair and rational actor on trade issues. As so often happens in life, however, it was an irrelevancy that would change his mind.

They are barbarians, he told himself, boarding his chartered jet for the flight to New York.

"The Prime Minister is going to fall," Ryan told the President about the same time, a few blocks away.

"How sure are we of that?"

"Sure as we can be," Jack replied, taking his seat. "We have a couple of field officers working on something over there, and that's what they're hearing from people."

"State hasn't said that yet," Durling objected somewhat innocently.

"Mr. President, come on now," Ryan said, holding a folder in his lap. "You know this is going to have some serious ramifications. You know Koga is sitting on a coalition made up of six different factions, and it won't take much to blow that apart on him." *And us*, Jack didn't add.

"Okay. So what?" Durling observed, having had his polling data updated again this very day.

"So the guy most likely to replace him is Hiroshi Goto. He doesn't like us very much. Never has."

"He talks big and tough," the President said, "but the one time I met him he looked like a typical blusterer. Weak, vain, not much substance to him."

"And something else." Ryan filled the President in on one of the spinoffs of Operation SANDALWOOD.

Under other circumstances Roger Durling might have smiled, but he had Ed Kealty sitting less than a hundred feet from him.

"Jack, how hard is it for a guy *not* to fuck around behind his wife's back?"

"Pretty easy in my case," Jack answered. "I'm married to a surgeon, remember?" The President laughed, then turned serious.

"It's something we can use on the son of a bitch, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir." Ryan didn't have to add, but only with the greatest possible care, that on top of the Oak Ridge incident, it could well ignite a firestorm of public indignation. Niccolò Machiavelli himself had warned against this sort of thing.

"What are we planning to do about this Norton girl?" Durling asked.

"Clark and Chavez—"

"The guys who bagged Corp, right?"

"Yes, sir. They're over there right now. I want them to meet the girl and offer her a free ride home."

"Debrief once she gets back?"

Ryan nodded. "Yes, sir."

Durling smiled. "I like it. Good work."

"Mr. President, we're getting what we want, probably even a little more than what we really wanted," Jack cautioned. "The Chinese general Sun Tzu once wrote that you always leave your enemy a way out—you don't press a beaten enemy too hard."

"In the One-Oh-One, they told us to kill them all and count the bodies." The President grinned. It actually pleased him that Ryan was now secure enough in his position to feel free to offer gratuitous advice. "This is out of your field, Jack. This isn't a national-security matter."

"Yes, sir. I know that. Look, I was in the money business a few months ago. I do have a little knowledge about international business."

Durling conceded the point with a nod. "Okay, go on. It's not like I've been getting any contrarian advice, and I suppose I ought to hear a little of it."

"We don't want Koga to go down, sir. He's a hell of a lot easier to deal with than Goto will be. Maybe a quiet statement from the Ambassador, something about how TRA gives you authority to act, but—"

The President cut him off. "But I'm not really going to do it?" He shook his head. "You know I can't do that. It would have the effect of cutting Al Trent off at the ankles, and I can't do that. It would look like I was double-dealing the unions, and I can't do *that* either."

"Do you really plan to implement TRA fully?"

"Yes, I do. Only for a few months. I have to shock the bastards, Jack. We *will* have a fair-trade deal, after twenty years of screwing around, but they have to understand that we're serious for once. It's going to be hard on them, but in a few months they're going to be believers, and then they can change their laws a little, and we'll do the same, and things will settle down to a trading system that's completely fair for all parties."

"You really want my opinion?"

Durling nodded again. "That's what I pay you for. You think we're pushing too hard."

"Yes, sir. We don't want Koga to go down, and we have to offer him something juicy if we want to save him. If you want to think long-term on this, you have to consider who you want to do business with."

Durling lifted a memo from his desk. "Brett Hanson told me the same thing, but he's not quite as worried about Koga as you are."

"By this time tomorrow," Ryan promised, "he will be."

"You can't even walk the streets here," Murakami snarled.

Yamata had a whole floor of the Plaza Atheneé reserved for himself and his senior staff. The industrialists were alone in a sitting room, coats and ties off, a bottle of whiskey on the table.

"One never could, Binichi," Yamata replied. "Here we are the *gaijin.* You never seem to remember that."

"Do you know how much business I do here, how much I *buy* here?" the younger man demanded. He could still smell the beer. It had gotten on his shirt, but he was too angry to change clothes. He wanted the reminder of the lesson he'd learned only a few hours earlier.

"And what of myself?" Yamata asked. "Over the last few years I've put six *billion* yen into a trading company here. I finished that only a short time ago, as you will recall. Now I wonder if I'll ever get it back."

"They wouldn't do *that*."

"Your confidence in these people is touching, and does you credit," his host

observed. “When the economy of our country falls into ruin, do you suppose they will let me move here to manage my American interests? In 1941 they froze our assets here.”

“This is not 1941.”

“No, it is not, Murakami-san. It is far worse today. We had not so far to fall then.”

“Please,” Chavez said, draining the last of his beer. “In 1941 my grandfather was fighting Fascists outside St. Petersburg—”

“Leningrad, you young pup!” Clark snarled, sitting next to him. “These young ones, they lose all their respect for the past,” he explained to their two hosts.

One was a senior public-relations official from Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, the other a director of their aircraft division.

“Yes,” Seigo Ishii agreed. “You know, members of my family helped design the fighters our Navy used. I once met Saburo Sakai and Minoru Genda.”

Ding opened another round of bottles and poured like the good underling he was, dutifully serving his master, Ivan Sergeyevich Klerk. The beer was really pretty good here, especially since their hosts were picking up the tab, Chavez thought, keeping his peace and watching a master at work.

“I know these names,” Clark said. “Great warriors, but”—he held up a finger—“they fought against my countrymen. I remember that, too.”

“Fifty years,” the PR man pointed out. “And your country was also different then.”

“That is true, my friends, that is true,” Clark admitted, his head lolling to one side. Chavez thought he was overdoing the alcohol stuff.

“Your first time here, yes?”

“Correct.”

“Your impressions?” Ishii asked.

“I love your poetry. It is very different from ours. I could write a book on Pushkin, you know. Perhaps someday I will, but a few years ago I started learning about yours. You see, our poetry is intended to convey a whole series of thoughts—often tell a complex story—but yours is far more subtle and delicate, like—how do I say this? Like a flash picture, yes? Perhaps there is one you could explain to me. I can see the picture, but not understand the significance. How does it go?” Clark asked himself drunkenly. “Ah, yes: ‘Plum blossoms bloom, and pleasure-women buy new scarves in a brothel room.’ Now,” he asked the PR guy, “what is the meaning of that?”

Ding handled the eye contact with Ishii. It was amusing in a way. Confusion at first, then you could just about hear the eyeballs click when the code phrase sliced through his mind like the killing stroke of a rapier. Sasaki’s eyes zeroed in on Clark, then noticed that it was Ding who was maintaining eye contact.

That’s right. You’re back on the payroll, buddy.

“Well, you see, it’s the contrast,” the PR official explained. “You have the pleasant image of attractive women doing something—oh, feminine, is that the word? Then the end, you see that they are prostitutes, trapped in a—”

“Prison,” Ishii said, suddenly sober. “They are trapped into doing

something. And suddenly the setting and the picture are not as pleasant as they seem at all."

"Ah, yes," Clark said with a smile. "That is entirely sensible. Thank you." A friendly nod to acknowledge the important lesson.

Goddamn, but Mr. C was smooth, Chavez thought. This spy stuff had its moments. Ding almost felt sorry for Ishii, but if the dumb son of a bitch had betrayed his country before, well, no sense in shedding any tears for him now. The axiom in CIA was simple, if somewhat cruel: once a traitor, always a traitor. The corresponding aphorism in the FBI was even crueler, which was odd. The FBI boys were usually so upright and clean-cut. *Once a cocksucker, always a cocksucker*.

"Is it possible?" Murakami asked.

"Possible? It's child's play."

"But the effects . . . " Yamata's idea had obvious panache, but . . .

"The effects are simple. The damage to their economy will prevent them from building up the industries they need to replace our products. Their consumers will recover from the initial shock and, needing products which their own corporations cannot manufacture, they will again buy them from us." If Binichi thought he was going to get the whole story, that was his problem.

"I think not. You underestimate the Americans' anger at this unfortunate incident. You must also factor in the political dimension—"

"Koga is finished. That is decided," Yamata interrupted coldly.

"Goto?" Murakami asked. It wasn't much of a question. He followed his country's political scene as much as any man.

"Of course."

An angry gesture. "Goto is a fool. Everywhere he walks he's following his penis. I wouldn't trust him to run my father's farm."

"You could say that of any of them. Who really manages our country's affairs? What more could we want in a prime minister, Binichi?" Raizo asked with a jolly laugh.

"They have one like that in their government, too," Murakami noted darkly, pouring himself another generous jolt of Chivas and wondering what Yamata was really talking about. "I've never met the man, but he sounds like a swine."

"Who is that?"

"Kealty, their Vice President. You know, this upstanding President of theirs is covering it up, too."

Yamata leaned back in his chair. "I don't understand."

Murakami filled him in. The whiskey didn't impede his memory a jot, his host noted. Well, though a cautious man, and often an overly generous one in his dealings with foreigners, he was one of Yamata's true peers, and though they often disagreed on things, there was genuine respect between them.

"That is interesting. What will your people do about it?"

"They are *thinking* about it," Binichi replied with an eloquent arch of the eyebrows.

"You trust Americans on something like this? The best of them are *ronin,*

and you know what the worst are . . .” Then Yamata-san paused and took a few seconds to consider this information more fully. “My friend, if the Americans can take down Koga . . .”

Murakami lowered his head for a moment. The smell of the thrown beer was stronger than ever. The insolence of that street creature! For that matter, what of the insolence of the President? He could cripple an entire country with his vanity and his clearly feigned anger. Over what? An accident, that was all. Had the company not honorably assumed responsibility? Had it not promised to look after the survivors?

“It is a large and dangerous thing you propose, my friend.”

“It is an even more dangerous thing not to do anything.”

Murakami thought about it for a moment.

“What would you have me do?”

“The specifics about Kealty and Durling would be welcome.”

That required only a few minutes. Murakami made a call, and the information was sent to the secure fax machine in Yamata’s suite. Perhaps Raizo would be able to put it to good use, he thought. An hour later his car took him to Kennedy International, where he boarded a JAL flight to Tokyo.

Yamata’s other corporate jet was another G-IV. It would be busy. The first flight was to New Delhi. It was only on the ground for two hours before taking off on an easterly heading.

“Looks like a course change,” Fleet-Ops said. “At first we thought they were just doing some extended flight operations, but they’ve got all their birds up already and—”

Admiral Dubro nodded agreement as he looked down at the Link-11 display in the carrier’s Combat Information Center. It was relayed in from an E-2C Hawkeye surveillance aircraft. The circular formation was heading due south at a speed of eighteen knots. The carriers were surrounded by their goalkeeper force of missile-armed destroyers and cruisers, and there was also a screen of picket destroyers well in advance. All their radars were on, which was something new. The Indian ships were both advertising their presence and creating a “bubble” through which no one could pass without their knowledge.

“Looking for us, you suppose?” the Admiral asked.

“If nothing else, they can make us commit to one ops-area or another. We can be southwest of them or southeast, but if they keep coming this way, they split the difference pretty clean, sir.”

Maybe they were just tired of being shadowed, Dubro thought. Understandable. They had a respectable fleet, manned with people who had to be well drilled in their duties after the last few months. They’d just topped off their bunkers again, and would have all the fuel they needed to do . . . what?

“Intel?”

“Nothing on their intentions,” Commander Harrison replied. “Their amphibs

are still tied up. We don't have anything on that brigade J-2 was worried about. Bad weather for overheads the last few days."

"Damn those intel pukes," Dubro growled. CIA depended so much on satellite coverage that everyone pretended the cameras could see through clouds. All they had to do was put a few assets on the ground . . . was he the only one who realized that?

The computer-generated display was on a flat glass plate, a new model just installed on the ship the previous year. Far more detailed than the earlier systems, it gave superb map and chart data on which ship and aircraft locations were electronically overlaid. The beauty of the system was that it showed what you knew in exquisite detail. The problem was that it didn't show anything else, and Dubro needed better data to make his decision.

"They've had a minimum of four aircraft up for the past eight hours, sweeping south. By their operating radius I would estimate that they're carrying air-to-air missiles and aux fuel tanks for max endurance. So call it a strong effort at forward reconnaissance. Their Harriers have that new Black Fox look-down radar, and the Hummers caught some sniffs of it. They're looking as far as they can, sir. I want permission to pull the Hummer south another hundred miles or so right now, and to have them go a little covert." By which he meant the surveillance aircraft would keep its radar on only some of the time, and would instead track the progress of the Indian fleet passively, from the Indians' own radar emissions.

"No." Admiral Dubro shook his head. "Let's play dumb and complacent for a while." He turned to check the status of his aircraft. He had ample combat power to deal with the threat, but that wasn't the issue. His mission was not to defeat the Indian Navy in battle. It was to intimidate them from doing something which America found displeasing. For that matter, his adversary's mission could not have been to fight the United States Navy—could it? No, that was too crazy. It was barely within the realm of possibility that a very good and very lucky Indian fleet commander could best a very unlucky and very dumb American counterpart, but Dubro had no intention of letting that happen. More likely, just as his mission was mainly bluff, so was theirs. If they could force the American fleet south, then . . . they weren't so dumb after all, were they? The question was how to play the cards he had.

"They're forcing us to commit, Ed. Trying to, anyway." Dubro leaned forward, resting one hand on the map display and tracing around with the other. "They probably think we're southeast. If so, by moving south they can block us better, and they know we'll probably maintain our distance just to keep out of their strike range. On the other hand, if they suspect we are where we really are right now, they can accomplish the same thing, or face us with the option of looping around to the northwest to cover the Gulf of Mannar. But that means coming within range of their land-based air, with their fleet to our south, and our only exit due west. Not bad for an operational concept," the battle-group commander acknowledged. "The group commander still Chandraskatta?"

Fleet-Ops nodded. "That's right, sir. He's back after a little time on the beach. The Brits have the book on the guy. They say he's no dummy."

"I think I'd go along with that for the moment. What sort of intel you

suppose they have on us?"

Harrison shrugged. "They know how long we've been here. They have to know how tired we are." Fleet-Ops meant the ships as much as the men. Every ship in the Task Force had matériel problems now. They all carried spare parts, but ships could remain at sea only so long before refit was needed. Corrosion from salt air, the constant movement and pounding of wind and wave, and heavy equipment use meant that ships' systems couldn't last forever. Then there were the human factors. His men and women were tired now, too long at sea. Increased maintenance duties made them tireder still. The current catchphrase in the military for these combined problems was "leadership challenge," a polite expression meaning that the officers commanding both the ships and the men sometimes didn't know what the hell they were supposed to do.

"You know, Ed, at least the Russians were predictable." Dubro stood erect, looking down and wishing he still smoked his pipe. "Okay, let's call this one in. Tell Washington it looks like they might just be making a move."

"So we meet for the first time."

"It's my pleasure, sir." Chuck Searls, the computer engineer, knew that his three-piece suit and neat haircut had surprised the man. He held out his hand and bobbed his head in what he supposed was a proper greeting for his benefactor.

"My people tell me that you are very skilled."

"You're very kind. I've worked at it for some years, and I suppose I have a few small talents." Searls had read up on Japan.

And very greedy, Yamata thought, *but well-mannered.* He would settle for that. It was, all in all, a fortunate accident. He'd purchased the man's business four years earlier, left current management in place, as was his custom, then discovered that the real brains of the outfit were in this man. Searls was the nearest thing to a wizard that his executive had ever seen, the man had reported to Yamata-san, and though the American's title hadn't changed, his salary had. And then, a few years ago, Searls had remarked that he was tiring of his job . . .

"Everything is prepared?"

"Yes, sir. The initial software upgrade went in months ago. They love it."

"And the—"

"Easter egg, Mr. Yamata. That's what we call it."

Raizo had never encountered the expression. He asked for an explanation and got it—but it meant nothing to him.

"How difficult to implement it?"

"That's the clever part," Searls said. "It keys on two stocks. If General Motors and Merck go through the system at values which I built in, twice and in the same minute, the egg hatches, but only on a Friday, like you said, and only if the five-minute period falls in the proper time-range."

"You mean this thing could happen by accident?"
Yamata asked in some surprise.

"Theoretically, yes, but the trigger values for the stocks are well outside the

current trading range, and the odds of having that happen all together by accident are about thirty million to one. That's why I picked this method for hatching the egg. I ran a computer-search of trading patterns and . . ."

Another problem with mercenaries was that they could never stop themselves from telling you how brilliant they were. Even though it was probably true in this case, Yamata found it difficult to sit through the dissertation. He did it anyway. Good manners required it.

"And your personal arrangements?"

Searls merely nodded. The flight to Miami. The connecting flights to Antigua, via Dominica and Grenada, all with different names on the tickets, paid for by different credit cards. He had his new passport, his new identity. On the Caribbean island, there was a certain piece of property. It would take an entire day, but then he'd be there, and he had no plans to leave it, ever.

For his part, Yamata neither knew nor wanted to know what Searls would do. Had this been a screen drama, he would have arranged for the man's life to end, but it would have been dangerous. There was always the chance that there might be more than one egg in the nest, wasn't there? Yes, there had to be. Besides, there was honor to be considered. This entire venture was about honor.

"The second third of the funds will be transferred in the morning. When that happens, I would suggest that you execute your plans." *Ronin,* Yamata thought, but even some of them were faithful after a fashion.

"Members," the Speaker of the House said after Al Trent had concluded his final wrap-up speech, "will cast their votes by electronic device."

On C-SPAN the drone of repeated words was replaced by classical music, Bach's Italian Concerto in this case. Each member had a plastic card—it was like an automatic teller machine, really. The votes were tallied by a simple computer displayed on TV screens all over the world. Two hundred eighteen votes were needed for passage. That number was reached in just under ten minutes. Then came the final rush of additional "aye" votes as members rushed from committee hearings and constituent meetings to enter the chamber, record their votes, and return to whatever they'd been doing.

Through it all, Al Trent stayed on the floor, mainly chatting amiably with a member of the minority leadership, his friend Sam Fellows. It was remarkable how much they agreed on, both thought. They could scarcely have been more different, a gay New England liberal and a Mormon Arizonan conservative.

"This'll teach the little bastards a lesson," Al observed.

"You sure ramrodded the bill through," Sam agreed. Both men wondered what the long-term effects on employment would be in their districts.

Less pleased were the officials of the Japanese Embassy, who called the results in to their Foreign Ministry the moment the music stopped and the Speaker announced, "HR-12313, the Trade Reform Act, is approved."

The bill would go to the Senate next, which, they reported, was a formality.

The only people likely to vote against it were those furthest away from reelection. The Foreign Minister got the news from his staff at about nine local time in Tokyo and informed Prime Minister Koga. The latter had already drafted his letter of resignation for the Emperor. Another man might have wept at the destruction of his dreams. The Prime Minister did not. In retrospect, he'd had more real influence as a member of the opposition than in this office. Looking at the morning sun on the well-kept grounds outside his window, he realized that it would be a more pleasant life, after all.

Let Goto deal with this.

"You know, the Japanese make some awfully good stuff that we use at Wilmer," Cathy Ryan observed over dinner. It was time for her to comment on the law, now that it was halfway passed.

"Oh?"

"The diode laser system we use on cataracts, for one. They bought the American company that invented it. Their engineers really know how to support their stuff, too. They're in practically every month with a software upgrade."

"Where's the company located?" Jack asked.

"Someplace in California."

"Then it's an American product, Cathy."

"But not all the parts are," his wife pointed out.

"Look, the law allows for special exceptions to be made for uniquely valuable things that—"

"The government's going to make the rules, right?"

"True," Jack conceded. "Wait a minute. You told me their docs—"

"I never said they were dumb, just that they need to think more creatively. You know," she added, "just like the government does."

"I *told* the President this wasn't all that great an idea. He says the law will be in full force just a few months."

"I'll believe that when I see it."

13

Winds and Tides

"I've never seen anything like this."

"But your country made thousands of them," the PR director objected.

"That is true," Klerk agreed, "but the factories were not open to the public, and not even to Soviet journalists."

Chavez was doing the photography work, and was putting on quite a show, John Clark noted without a smile, dancing around the workers in their white coveralls and hard hats, turning, twisting, squatting, his Nikon pressed against his face, changing rolls every few minutes, and along the way getting a few hundred frames of the missile production line. They were SS-19 missile bodies, sure as hell. Clark knew the specifications, and had seen enough photos at Langley to know what they looked like—and enough to spot some local modifications. On the Russian models the exterior was usually green. Everything the Soviet Union had built for military use had to be camouflaged, even missiles inside of transport containers sitting in the bottom of concrete silos were the same pea-soup green that they liked to paint on tanks. But not these. The paint had weight, and there was no point in expending fuel to drive the few kilograms of paint to suborbital speed, and so these missile bodies were bright, shiny steel. The fittings and joints looked far more refined than he would have expected on a Russian production line.

"You've modified our original design, haven't you?"

"Correct." The PR guy smiled. "The basic design was excellent. Our engineers were very impressed, but we have different standards, and better materials. You have a good eye, Mr. Klerk. Not too long ago an American NASA engineer made the same observation." The man paused. "What sort of Russian name is Klerk?"

"It's not Russian," Clark said, continuing to scribble his notes. "My grandfather was English, a Communist. His name was Clark. In the 1920s he came to Russia to be part of the new experiment." An embarrassed grin. "I suppose he's disappointed, wherever he is."

"And your colleague?"

"Chekov? He's from the Crimea. The Tartar blood really shows, doesn't it? So how many of these will you build?"

Chavez was at the top end of the missile body at the end of the line. A few of the assembly workers were casting annoyed glances his way, and he took that to mean that he was doing his job of imitating an intrusive, pain-in-the-ass journalist right. Aside from that the job was pretty easy. The assembly bay of the factory was brightly lit to assist the workers in their tasks, and though he'd used his light meter for show, the camera's own monitoring chip told him

that he had all the illumination he needed. This Nikon F-20 was one badass camera. Ding switched rolls. He was using ASA-64 color slide film—Fuji film, of course—because it had better color saturation, whatever that meant.

In due course, Mr. C shook hands with the factory representative and they all headed toward the door. Chavez—Chekov—twisted the lens off the camera body and stowed everything away in his bag. Friendly smiles and bows sent them on their way. Ding slid a CD into the player and turned the sound way up. It made conversation difficult, but John was always a stickler for the rules. And he was right. There was no knowing if someone might have bugged their rental car. Chavez leaned his head over to the right so that he wouldn't have to scream his question.

"John, is it always this easy?"

Clark wanted to smile, but didn't. He'd reactivated yet another member of THISTLE a few hours earlier, who had insisted that he and Ding look at the assembly floor.

"You know, I used to go into Russia, back when you needed more than a passport and American Express."

"Doing what?"

"Mainly getting people out. Sometimes recovering data packs. Couple of times I emplaced cute little gadgets. Talk about lonely, talk about scary." Clark shook his head. Only his wife knew that he colored his hair, just a little, because he didn't like gray there. "You have any idea what we would have paid to get into . . . Plesetsk, I think, is where they made those things, the Chelomei Design Bureau."

"They really wanted us to see that stuff."

"Sure as hell," Clark agreed.

"What do I do with the photos?"

John almost said to toss them, but it *was* data, and they were working on company time. He had to draft and send a story to Interfax to maintain his cover—he wondered if anyone would print it. *Wouldn't that be a gas,* he thought with a shake of the head. All they were doing, really, was circling in a holding pattern, waiting for the word and the opportunity to meet Kimberly Norton. The film and a copy of his story, he decided, would find their way into the diplomatic bag. If nothing else, it was good practice for Ding—and for himself, Clark admitted.

"Turn that damned noise down," he said, and they switched to Russian. Good language practice.

"I miss the winters at home," Chekov observed.

"I don't," Klerk answered. "Where did you ever acquire the taste for that awful American music?" he asked with a growl.

"Voice of America," came the reply. Then the voice laughed.

"Yevgeniy Pavlovich, you have no respect. My ears can't tolerate that damned noise. Don't you have something else to play?"

"Anything would be an improvement," the technician observed to himself, as he adjusted his headphones and shook his head to clear them of the damned *gaijin* noise. Worse still, his own son listened to the same trash.

Despite all the denials that had gone back and forth over the past few weeks, the reality of it was finally plain for all to see. The huge, ugly car-carriers swinging at anchor in several different harbors were silent witnesses on every TV news broadcast on NHK. The Japanese car companies owned a total of a hundred nineteen of them, not counting foreign-flag ships operating under charter that were now heading back to their own home ports. Ships that never stayed still any longer than it took to load another cargo of autos now sat like icebergs, clogging anchorages. There was no sense in loading and dispatching them. Those awaiting pier space in American ports would take weeks to unload. The crews took the opportunity to do programmed maintenance, but they knew that when those make-work tasks were done, they would truly be out of business.

The effect snowballed rapidly. There was little point in manufacturing automobiles that could not be shipped. There was literally no place to keep them. As soon as the huge holding lots at the ports were filled, and the train-cars on their sidetracks, and the lots at the assembly plants, there was simply no choice. Fully a half-dozen TV crews were on hand when the line supervisor at the Nissan plant reached up and pressed a button. That button rang bells all up and down the line. Ordinarily used because of a problem in the assembly process, this time it meant that the line was *stopped*. From the beginning, where the frames were placed on the moving chain-belt, to the end, where a navy-blue car sat with its door open, awaiting a driver to take it out of the building, workers stood still, looking at one another. They'd told themselves that this could never happen. Reality to them was showing up for work, performing their functions, attaching parts, testing, checking off—very rarely finding a problem—and repeating the processes for endless numbing but well-compensated hours, and at this moment it was as if the world had ceased to rotate. They'd known, after a fashion. The newspapers and TV broadcasts, the rumors that had raced up and down the line far more quickly than the cars ever had, the bulletins from management. Despite all that, they now stood around as if stunned by a hard blow to the face.

On the floor of their national stock exchange, the traders were holding small portable televisions, a new kind from Sony that folded up and fit in the hip pocket. They saw the man ring the bell, saw the workers stop their activities. Worst of all, they saw the looks on their faces. And this was just the beginning, the traders knew. Parts suppliers would stop because the assemblers would cease buying their products. Primary-metals industries would slow down drastically because their main customers were shut down. Electronics companies would slow, with the loss of both domestic and foreign markets. Their country depended absolutely on foreign trade, and America was their primary trading partner, one hundred seventy *billion* dollars of exports to a single country, more than they sold to all of Asia, more than they sold to all of Europe. They imported ninety billion or so from America, but the surplus, the profit side of the ledger, was just over seventy billion American dollars, and that was money their economy needed to function; money that their national economy was designed to use; production capacity that it was

designed to meet.

For the blue-collar workers on the television, the world had merely stopped. For the traders, the world had, perhaps, ended, and the look on their faces was not shock but black despair. The period of silence lasted no more than thirty seconds. The whole country had watched the same scene on TV with the same morbid fascination tempered by obstinate disbelief. Then the phone began ringing again. Some of the hands that reached for them shook. The Nikkei Dow would fall again that day, down to a closing value of 6,540 yen, about a fifth of what it had been only a few years before.

The same tape was played as the lead segment on every network news broadcast in the U.S., and in Detroit, even UAW workers who had themselves seen plants close down saw the looks, heard the noise, and remembered their own feelings. Though their sympathy was tempered with the promise of their own renewed employment, it wasn't all that hard to know what their Japanese counterparts felt right now. It was far easier to dislike them when they were working and taking American jobs. Now they too were victims of forces that few of them really understood.

The reaction on Wall Street was surprising to the unsophisticated. For all its theoretical benefits to the American economy, the Trade Reform Act was now a short-term problem. American corporations too numerous to list depended on Japanese products to some greater or lesser degree, and while American workers and companies could theoretically step in to take up the slack, everyone wondered how serious the TRA provisions were. If they were permanent, that was one thing, and it would make very good sense for investors to put their money in those firms that were well placed to make up the shortfall of needed products. But what if the government was merely using it as a tool to open Japanese markets and the Japanese acted quickly to concede a few points to mitigate the overall damage? In that case, different companies, poised to place their products on Japanese shelves, were a better investment opportunity. The trick was to identify which corporations were in a position to do both, because one or the other could be a big loser, especially with the initial jump the stock market had taken. Certainly, the dollar would appreciate with respect to the yen, but the technicians on the bond market noted that overseas banks had jumped very fast indeed, buying up U.S. Government securities, paying for them with their yen accounts, and clearly betting on a major shift in values from which a short-term profit was certain to take place.

American stock values actually fell on the uncertainty, which surprised many of those who had their money on "the Street." Those holdings were mainly in mutual-funds accounts, because it was difficult, if not impossible, to keep track of things if you were a small-time holder. It was far safer to let "professionals" manage your money. The result was that there were now more mutual-funds companies than stock issues traded on the New York Stock Exchange, and they were all managed by technicians whose job it was to understand what went on in the most boisterous and least predictable economic marketplace in the world.

The initial slide was just under fifty points before stabilizing, stopped there by public statements from the Big Three auto companies that they were self-sufficient enough, thank you, in most categories of parts to maintain, and even boost, domestic auto production. Despite that, the technicians at the big trading houses scratched their heads and talked things over in their coffee rooms. *Do you have any idea how to deal with this*? The only reason only half the people asked the question was that it was the job of the other half to listen, shake its collective head, and reply, *Hell, no*.

At the Washington headquarters of the Fed, there were other questions, but just as few hard answers. The troublesome specter of inflation was not yet gone, and the current situation was unlikely to banish it further. The most immediate and obvious problem was that there would be—hell, one of the board noted, *already was!*—more purchasing power than there were products to buy. That meant yet another inflationary surge, and though the dollar would undoubtedly climb against the yen, what that really meant was that the yen would free-fall for a while and the dollar would actually fall as well with respect to other world currencies. And they couldn't have that. Another quarter point in the discount rate, they decided, effective immediately on the close of the Exchange. It would confuse the trading markets somewhat, but that was okay because the Fed knew what it was doing.

About the only good news on that score was the sudden surge in the purchase of Treasury notes. Probably Japanese banks, they knew without asking, hedging like hell to protect themselves. A smart move, they all noted. Their respect for their Japanese colleagues was genuine and not affected by the current irregularities which, they all hoped, would soon pass.

"Are we agreed?" Yamata asked.

"We can't stop now," a banker said. He could have gone on to say that they and their entire country were poised on the edge of an abyss so deep that the bottom could not be seen. He didn't have to. They all stood on the same edge, and looking down, they saw not the lacquered table around which they sat, but only an infinity with economic death at the bottom of it.

Heads nodded around the table. There was a long moment of silence, and then Matsuda spoke.

"How did this ever come to pass?"

"It has always been inevitable, my friends," Yamata-san said, a fine edge of sadness in his voice. "Our country is like . . . like a city with no surrounding countryside, like a strong arm without a heart to send it blood. We've told ourselves for years that this is a normal state of affairs—but it is not, and we must remedy the situation or perish."

"It is a great gamble we undertake."

"*Hai.*" It was hard for him not to smile.

It was not yet dawn, and they would sail on the tide. The proceedings went on

without much fanfare. A few families came down to the docks, mainly to drop the crewmen off at their ships from a last night spent ashore.

The names were traditional, as they were with most navies of the world—at least those who'd been around long enough to have tradition. The new Aegis destroyers, *Kongo* and her sisters, bore traditional battleship names, mainly ancient appellations for regions of the nation that built them. That was a recent departure. It would have struck Westerners as an odd nomenclature for ships-of-war, but in keeping with their country's poetic traditions, most names for the combat ships had lyrical meanings, and were largely grouped by class. Destroyers traditionally had names ending in *-kaze,* denoting a kind of wind; *Hatukaze*, for example, meant "Morning Breeze." Submarine names were somewhat more logical. All of those ended in *-ushio,* meaning "tide."

They were in the main handsome ships, spotlessly clean so as not to detract from their workmanlike profiles. One by one they lit off their jet-turbine engines and eased their way off the quays and into the channels. The captains and navigators looked at the shipping that was piling up in Tokyo Bay, but whatever they were thinking, for the moment the merchantmen were merely a hazard to navigation, swinging at their anchors as they were. Below, those sailors not on sea-and-anchor detail mainly stowed gear and saw to their duty stations. Radars were lit up to assist in the departure—hardly necessary since visibility conditions this morning were excellent, but good practice for the crewmen in the various Combat Information Centers. At the direction of combat-systems officers, data links were tested to swap tactical information between ships. In engine-control rooms the "snipes"—an ancient term of disparagement for the traditionally filthy enginemen—sat in comfortable swivel chairs and monitored computer readouts while sipping tea.

The flagship was the new destroyer *Mutsu.* The fishing port of Tateyame was in sight, the last town they would pass before turning sharply to port and heading east.

The submarines were already out there, Rear Admiral Yusuo Sato knew, but the commanders had been briefed in. His was a family with a long tradition of service—better still, a tradition of the sea. His father had commanded a destroyer under Raizo Tanaka, one of the greatest destroyermen who'd ever lived, and his uncle had been one of Yamamoto's "wild eagles," a carrier pilot killed at the Battle of Santa Cruz. The succeeding generation had continued in those footsteps. Yusuo's brother, Torajiro Sato, had flown F-86 fighters for the Air Self-Defense Force, then quit in disgust at the demeaning status of the air arm, and now flew as a senior captain for Japan Air Lines. The man's son, Shiro, had followed in his father's footsteps and was now a very proud young major, flying fighters on a more permanent basis. Not too bad, Admiral Sato thought, for a family that had no samurai roots. Yusuo's other brother was a banker. Sato was fully briefed on what was to come.

The Admiral stood, opened the watertight door on *Mutsu's* bridge and passed out to the starboard wing. The sailors at work there took a second to acknowledge his presence with dutiful nods, then went back to taking shoresights to update the ship's position. Sato looked aft and noted that the sixteen ships in the column were in a nearly perfect line, separated by a uniform five hundred meters, just becoming visible to the unaided eye in the

pink-orange glow of the rising sun toward which they sailed. Surely that was a good omen, the Admiral thought. At the truck of every ship flew the same flag under which his father had served; it had been denied his country's warships for so many years but was restored now, the proud red-on-white sunburst.

"Secure the sea-and-anchor detail," the Captain's voice announced on the speaker system. Already their home port was under the visible horizon, and soon the same would be true of the headlands now on the port quarter.

Sixteen ships, Sato thought. The largest force his country had put to sea as a coherent unit in—fifty years? He had to think about it. Certainly the most powerful, not one vessel more than ten years old, proud, expensive ships with proud, established names. But the one name he'd wanted with him this morning, *Kurushio,* "Black Tide," that of his father's destroyer, which had sunk an American cruiser at the Battle of Tassafaronga, unfortunately belonged to a new submarine, already at sea. The Admiral lowered his binoculars and grunted in mild displeasure. Black Tide. It was a poetically perfect name for a warship, too. A pity it had been wasted on a submarine.

Kurushio and her sisters had left thirty-six hours earlier. The lead ship of a new class, she was running at fifteen knots for her high-speed transit to the exercise area, powered by her large, efficient diesels which now drew air through the snorkel mast. Her crew often officers and sixty enlisted men was on a routine watch cycle. An officer of the deck and his junior kept the watch in the sub's control room. An engineering officer was at his post, along with twenty-four ratings. The entire torpedo department was at work in their midships station, doing electronic tests on the fourteen Type 89-Mod C torpedoes and six Harpoon missiles. Otherwise the watch bill was normal, and no one remarked on the single change. The captain, Commander Tamaki Ugaki, was known as a stickler for readiness, and though he drilled his men hard, his was a happy ship because she was always a smart ship. He was locked in his cabin, and the crew hardly knew he was aboard, the only signs of his presence the thin crack of light under the door and the cigarette smoke that came out the exhaust vent. An intense man, their skipper, the crewmen thought, doubtless working up plans and drills for the upcoming exercise against the American submarines. They'd done well the last time, scoring three first-kills in ten practice encounters. That was as good as anyone might expect. Except for Ugaki, the men joked at their lunch tables. He thought like a true samurai, and didn't want to know about being second best.

Ryan had established a routine in his first month back of spending one day per week at the Pentagon. He'd explained to journalists that his office wasn't supposed to be a cell, after all, and it was just a more efficient use of everyone's time. It hadn't even resulted in a story, as it might have done a few years earlier. The very title of National Security Advisor, everyone knew, was a thing of the past. Though the reporters deemed Ryan a worthy successor to the corner office in the White House, he was such a colorless guy. He was

known to avoid the Washington "scene" as though he feared catching leprosy, he showed up for work every day at the same time, did his job in as few hours as circumstances allowed—to his good fortune, it was rarely more than a ten-hour day—and returned to his family as though he were a normal person or something. His background at CIA was still very sketchy, and though his public acts as a private citizen and a government functionary were well known, that was old news. As a result Ryan was able to drive around in the back of his official car and few took great note of it. Everything with the man was just so routine, and Jack worked hard to keep it that way. Reporters rarely took note of a dog that didn't bark. Perhaps they just didn't read enough to know better.

"They're up to something," Robby said as soon as Ryan took his seat in the flag briefing room in the National Military Command Center. The map display made that clear.

"Coming south?"

"Two hundred miles' worth. The fleet commander is V. K. Chandraskatta, graduated Dartmouth Royal Naval College, third in his class, worked his way up. Took the senior course at Newport a few years ago. He was number one in that class," Admiral Jackson went on. "Very nice political connections. He's spent a surprising amount of time away from his fleet lately, commuting back and forth—"

"Where to?" Ryan asked.

"We assume back and forth to New Delhi, but the truth of the matter is that we don't really know. It's the old story, Jack."

Ryan managed not to groan. It was partly an old story, and partly a very new one. No military officer ever thought himself possessed of enough intelligence information, and never fully trusted the quality of what he did have. In this case, the complaint was true enough: CIA still didn't have any assets on the ground in India. Ryan made a mental note to speak to Brett Hanson about the Ambassador. Again. Psychiatrists called his form of action "passive-aggressive," meaning that he didn't resist but didn't cooperate either. It was a source of constant surprise to Ryan that important grown-ups so often acted like five-year-olds.

"Correlation between his trips ashore and his movements?"

"Nothing obvious," Robby answered with a shake of the head.

"Sigint, comint?" Jack asked, wondering if the National Security Agency, yet another shadow of its former self, had attempted to listen in on the Indian fleet's radio traffic.

"We're getting some stuff via Alice Springs and Diego Garcia, but it's just routine. Ship-movement orders, mostly, nothing with real operational significance."

Jack was tempted to grumble that his country's intelligence services never had what he wanted at the moment, but the real reason for that was simple: the intelligence he did have usually enabled America to prepare, to obviate problems before they became problems. It was the things that got overlooked that developed into crises, and they were overlooked because other things were more important—until the little ones blew up.

"So all we have is what we can infer from their operational patterns."

"And here it is," Robby said, walking to the chart.

"Pushing us off . . ."

"Making Admiral Dubro commit. It's pretty clever, really. The ocean is mighty big, but it can get a lot smaller when there's two fleets moving around it. He hasn't asked for an ROE update yet but it's something we need to start thinking about."

"If they load that brigade onto their amphibs, then what?"

An Army colonel, one of Robby's staff, answered. "Sir, if I were running this, it's real easy. They have troops on the ground already, playing games with the Tamils. That secures the beachhead pretty slick, and the landing is just administrative. Getting ashore as a cohesive unit is the hard part of any invasion, but it looks to me like that's already knocked. Their Third Armored Brigade is a very robust formation. Short version is, the Sri Lankans don't have anything with a prayer of slowing it down, much less stopping it. Next item on the agenda, you gobble up a few airfields and just fly your infantry forces in. They have a lot of people under arms. Sparing fifty thousand infantrymen for this operation would not be much of a stretch for them.

"I suppose the country could degenerate into a long-term insurgency situation," the Colonel went on, "but the first few months would go to the Indians almost by default, and with their ability to isolate the island with their navy, well, whatever insurgents have a yen to fight things out wouldn't have a source of resupply. Smart money, India wins."

"The hard part's political," Ryan mused. "The U.N. will get pretty excited. . . ."

"But projecting power into that area is a bitch," Robby pointed out. "Sri Lanka doesn't have any traditional allies, unless you count India. They have no religious or ethnic card to play. No resources for us to get hot and bothered about."

Ryan continued the thought: "Front-page news for a few days, but if the Indians are smart about it, they make Ceylon their fifty-first state—"

"More likely their *twenty-sixth* state, sir," the Colonel suggested, "or an adjunct to Tamil Nadu, for ethnic reasons. It might even help the Indians defuse their own difficulties with the Tamils. I'd guess there have been some contacts."

"Thank you." Ryan nodded to the Colonel, who had done his homework. "But the idea is, they integrate the place into their country politically, full civil rights and everything, and all of a sudden it's no story at all anymore. Slick," Ryan observed. "But they need a political excuse before they can move. That excuse has to be a resurgence of the Tamil rebels—which of course they are in a position to foment."

"That'll be our indicator," Jackson agreed. "Before that happens, we need to tell Mike Dubro what he's going to be able to do about it."

And that would not be an easy call, Ryan thought, looking at the chart. Task Group 77.I was heading southwest, keeping its distance from the Indian fleet, but though there was an ocean in which to maneuver, not far to Dubro's west was a long collection of atolls. At the end of it was the American base at Diego Garcia: a matter of some comfort, but not much.

The problem with a bluff was that the other guy might guess it for what it

was, and this game was a lot less random than a poker hand. Combat power favored the Americans, but only if they had the will to use it. Geography favored India. America really had no vital interests in the area. The U.S. fleet in the Indian Ocean was basically there to keep an eye on the Persian Gulf, after all, but instability in any region was contagious, and when people got nervous about such things, a destructive synergy took place. The proverbial stitch-in-time was as useful in this arena as any other. That meant making a decision on how far the bluff could be pressed.

"Gets tricky, doesn't it, Rob?" Jack asked with a smile that showed more amusement than he felt.

"It would be helpful if we knew what they were thinking."

"Duly noted, Admiral. I will get people cracking on that."

"And the ROE?"

"The Rules of Engagement remain the same, Robby, until the President says otherwise. If Dubro thinks he's got an inbound attack, he can deal with it. I suppose he's got armed aircraft on the deck."

"On the deck, hell! In the air, Dr. Ryan, sir."

"I'll see if I can get him to let out another foot of lead on the leash," Jack promised.

A phone rang just then. A junior staff officer—a Marine newly promoted to major's rank—grabbed it, and called Ryan over.

"Yeah, what is it?"

"White House Signals, sir," a watch officer replied. "Prime Minister Koga just submitted his resignation. The Ambassador estimates that Goto will be asked to form the new government."

"That was fast. Have the State Department's Japan desk send me what I need. I'll be back in less than two hours." Ryan replaced the phone.

"Koga's gone?" Jackson asked.

"Somebody give you a smart pill this morning, Rob?"

"No, but I can listen in on phone conversations. I hear we're getting unpopular over there."

"It has gone a little fast."

The photos arrived by diplomatic courier. In the old days, the bag would have been opened at the port of entry, but in these kinder and gentler times the long-service government employee got in the official car at Dulles and rode all the way to Foggy Bottom. There the bag was opened in a secure room, and the various articles in the canvas sack were sorted by category and priority and hand-carried to their various destinations. The padded envelope with seven film cassettes was handed over to a CIA employee, who simply walked outside to his car and drove off toward the Fourteenth Street Bridge. Forty minutes later, the cassettes were opened in a photolab designed for microfilm and various other sophisticated systems but readily adapted to items as pedestrian as this.

The technician rather liked "real" film—since it was commercial, it was far easier to work with, and fit standard and user-friendly processing equipment—and had long since stopped looking at the images except to make sure that

he'd done his job right. In this case the color saturation told him everything. Fuji film, he thought. Who'd ever said it was better than Kodak? The slide film was cut, and the individual segments fitted into cardboard holders whose only difference from those any set of parents got to commemorate a toddler's first meeting with Mickey Mouse was that they bore the legend *Top Secret*. These were numbered, bundled together, and put into a box. The box was slid into an envelope and set in the lab's out-bin. Thirty minutes later a secretary came down to collect it.

She walked to the elevator and rode to the fifth floor of the Old Headquarters Building, now almost forty years of age and showing it. The corridors were dingy, and the paint on the drywall panels faded to a neutral, offensive yellow. Here, too, the mighty had fallen, and that was especially true of the Office of Strategic Weapons Research. Once one of CIA's most important subagencies, OSWR was now scratching for a living.

It was staffed with rocket scientists whose job descriptions were actually genuine. Their job was to look at the specifications of foreign-made missiles and decide what their real capabilities were. That meant a lot of theoretical work, and also trips to various government contractors to compare what they had with what our own people knew. Unfortunately, if you could call it that, ICBMs and SLBMs, the bread-and-butter of OSWR, were almost extinct, and the photos on the walls of every office in the section were almost nostalgic in their lack of significance. Now people educated in various areas of physics were having to learn about chemical and biological agents, the mass-destruction weapons of poorer nations. But not today.

Chris Scott, thirty-four, had started in OSWR when it had really meant something. A graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, he'd distinguished himself by deducing the performance of the *Soviet* SS-24 two weeks before a highly placed agent had spirited out a copy of the manual for the solid-fueled bird, which had earned for him a pat on the head from the then-Director, William Webster. But the -24s were all gone now, and, his morning briefing material had told him, they were down to *one* SS-19, matched by a single Minuteman-III outside of Minot, North Dakota, both of them awaiting destruction; and he didn't like studying chemistry. As a result, the slides from Japan were something of a blessing.

Scott took his time. He had lots of it. Opening the box, he set the slides in the tray of his viewer and cycled them through, making notes with every one. That took two hours, taking him to lunchtime. The slides were repackaged and locked away when he went to the cafeteria on the first floor. There the topic of discussion was the latest fall from grace of the Washington Redskins and the prospects of the new owner for changing things. People were lingering at lunch now, Scott noticed, and none of the supervisory personnel were making much of a big deal about it. The main crossbuilding corridor that opened to the building's courtyard was always fuller than it had been in the old days, and people never stopped looking at the big segment of Berlin Wall that had been on display for years. Especially the old hands, it seemed to Scott, who felt himself to be one of those. Well, at least *he* had work to do this day, and that was a welcome change.

Back in his office, Chris Scott closed his drapes and loaded the slides into a

projector. He could have selected only those he'd made special notes on, but this was his work for the day—perhaps the whole week if he played his cards right—and he would conduct himself with the usual thoroughness, comparing what he saw with the report from that NASA guy.

"Mind if I join you?" Betsy Fleming stuck her head in the door. She was one of the old hands, soon to be a grandmother, who'd actually started as a secretary at DIA. Self-taught in the fields of photoanalysis and rocket engineering, her experience dated back to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Lacking a formal degree, her expertise in this field of work was formidable.

"Sure." Scott didn't mind the intrusion. Betsy was also the office's designated mom.

"Our old friend the SS-19," she observed, taking her seat. "Wow, I like what they did with it."

"Ain't it the truth?" Scott observed, stretching to shake off his postlunch drowsiness.

What had once been quite ugly was now rather beautiful. The missile bodies were polished stainless steel, which allowed a better view of the structure. In the old Russian green, it had looked brutish. Now it looked more like the space launcher it was supposed to be, sleeker somehow, even more impressive in its purposeful bulk.

"NASA says they've saved a whole lot of weight on the body, better materials, that sort of thing," Scott observed. "I really believe it now."

"Shame they couldn't do that with their g'ddamn gas tanks," Mrs. Fleming observed. Scott grunted agreement. He owned a Cresta, and now his wife refused to drive in it until the tank was replaced. Which would be a couple of weeks, his dealer had informed him. The company was actually renting a car for him in their vain effort to curry public goodwill. That had meant getting a new parking sticker, which he would have to scrape off before returning the rental to Avis.

"Do we know who got the shots?" Betsy asked.

"One of ours, all I know." Scott flipped to another slide. "A lot of changes. They almost look cosmetic," he observed.

"How much weight are they supposed to have saved?" He was right, Mrs. Fleming thought. The steel skin showed the circular patterns of the polishing rushes, almost like jeweling on a rifle bolt . . .

"According to NASA, over twelve hundred pounds on the missile body . . ." Another click of the remote.

"Hmph, but not there," Betsy noted.

"That's funny."

The top end of the missile was where the warheads went. The SS-19 was designed to carry a bunch of them. Relatively small and heavy, they were dense objects, and the missile's structure had to account for it. Any intercontinental missile accelerated from the moment its flight began to the moment the engines finally stopped, but the period of greatest acceleration came just before burnout. At that point, with most of the fuel burned off, the rate at which speed increased reached its maximum, in this case about ten gees. At the same time, the structural rigidity lent to the missile body by the quantity of fuel inside its tanks was minimal, and as a result, the structure

holding the warheads had to be both sturdy and massive so as to evenly distribute the vastly increased inertial weight of the payloads.

"No, they didn't change that, did they?" Scott looked over at his colleague.

"I wonder why? This bird's supposed to orbit satellites now . . ."

"Heavy ones, they say, communications birds . . ."

"Yeah, but look at that part . . ."

The foundation for the warhead "bus" had to be strong across its entire area. The corresponding foundation for a communications satellite was essentially a thin steel annulus, a flat, sturdy donut that invariably looked too light for its job. This one was more like an unusually heavy wagon wheel. Scott unlocked a file drawer and removed a recent photo of an SS-19 taken by an American officer on the verification team in Russia. He handed it over to Mrs. Fleming without comment.

"Look here. That's the standard structure, just what the Russians designed in, maybe with better steel, better finish. They changed almost everything else, didn't they?" Fleming asked. "Why not this?"

"Looked that way to me. Keeping that must have cost them—what? A hundred pounds, maybe more?"

"That doesn't make sense, Chris. This is the first place you want to save weight. Every kilo you save here is worth four or five on the first stage." Both stood and walked to the screen. "Wait a minute . . ."

"Yeah, this fits the bus. They didn't change it. No mating collar for a satellite. They didn't change it at all." Scott shook his head.

"You suppose they just kept the bus design for their trans-stage?"

"Even if they did, they don't need all this mass at the top end, do they?"

"It's almost like they wanted it to stay the way it was."

"Yeah. I wonder why."

14

Reflections

"Thirty seconds," the assistant director said as the final commercial rolled for the Sunday-morning audience. The entire show had centered on Russia and Europe, which suited Ryan just fine.

"The one question I can't ask." Bob Holtzman chuckled before the tape started rolling again. "What's it like to be the National Security Advisor in a country with no threat to its national security?"

"Relaxing," Ryan answered with a wary look at the three cameras. None had their telltale red lights burning.

"So why the long hours?" Kris Hunter asked in a voice less sharp than her look.

"If I don't show up for work," Jack lied, "people might notice how unimportant I am." Bad news. *They still don't know about India, but they know something's up. Damn.* He wanted to keep it quiet. It was one of those things that public pressure would hurt, not help.

"Four! Three! Two! One!" The assistant director jerked his finger at the moderator, a television journalist named Edward Johnson.

"Dr. Ryan, what does the Administration make of changes in the Japanese cabinet?"

"Well, of course, that's a result of the current difficulties in trade, which is not really in my purview. Basically what we see there is an internal political situation which the Japanese people can quite easily handle without our advice," Jack announced in his earnest-statesman's voice, the one that had taken a few elocution lessons to perfect. Mainly he'd had to learn to speak more slowly.

Kris Hunter leaned forward. "But the leading candidate to take the prime ministership is a long-standing enemy of the United States—"

"That's a *little* strong," Ryan interrupted with a good-natured smile.

"His speeches, his writings, his books are not exactly friendly."

"I suppose," Ryan said with a dismissive wave and a crooked smile. "The difference between discourse among friendly nations and unfriendly ones, oddly enough, is that the former can often be more acrimonious than the latter." *Not bad, Jack . . .*

"You are not concerned?"

"No," Ryan said with a gentle shake of the head. Short answers on a show like this tended to intimidate reporters, he thought.

"Thank you for coming in this morning, Dr. Ryan."

"A pleasure as always."

Ryan continued to smile until the camera lights blinked off. Then he

counted slowly to ten. Then he waited until the other reporters removed their microphones. Then he removed his microphone and stood up and moved away from the working part of the set. And then it was safe to speak. Bob Holtzman followed Jack into the makeup room. The cosmeticians were off drinking coffee, and Ryan took a fistful of HandiWipes and passed the container to Holtzman. Over the mirror was a large slab of wood engraved on which was, IN HERE EVERYTHING IS OFF THE RECORD.

"You know the real reason behind equal rights for women?" Holtzman asked. "It wasn't equal pay, or bras, or any of that crap."

"Right," Jack agreed. "It was forcing them to wear makeup. We deserved everything we got. God, I hate this shit!" he added, wiping the pancake off his forehead. "Makes me feel like a cheap whore."

"That isn't too unusual for a political figure, is it?" Kristyn Hunter asked, taking wipes to do the same.

Jack laughed. "No, but it's kind of impolite for you to say so, ma' am." *Am I a political figure now?* Ryan asked himself. *I suppose I am. How the hell did that happen?*

"Why the fancy footwork on my last question, Jack?" Holtzman asked.

"Bob, if you know it *was* fancy footwork, then you know why." Ryan motioned to the sign over the mirror, then decided to tap it to make sure everyone caught the message.

"I know that when the last government fell, it was us who developed the information on the bribery scandal," Holtzman said. Jack gave him a look but nothing else. Even *no comment* would have been a substantive comment under these circumstances.

"That killed Goto's first chance to become Prime Minister. He was next in line, remember?"

"Well, now he's got another. His patience is rewarded," Ryan observed. "If he can get a coalition together."

"Don't give me that." Hunter leaned toward the mirror to finish cleaning her nose off. "You've read the stuff he's been telling their papers, same as I have. He will get a cabinet formed, and you know what arguments he's been using."

"Talk is cheap, especially for somebody in that business," Jack said. He still hadn't quite made the leap of imagination to include himself "in that business." "Probably just a blip, one more politician with a few too many drinks under his belt who had a bad day at the office or the track—"

"Or the geisha house," Kris Hunter suggested. She finished removing the makeup, then sat on the edge of the counter and lit a cigarette. Kristyn Hunter was an old-fashioned reporter. Though still on the sunny side of fifty, she was a graduate of Columbia's School of Journalism and had just been appointed chief foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*. Her voice was as dry as dust. "Two years ago that bastard put a move on me. His language would shock a Marine, and his suggestions were . . . shall we say, eccentric. I presume you have information on his personal habits, Dr. Ryan?"

"Kris, never, ever, not even once will I discuss what personal stuff, if any, we have on foreign officials." Jack paused. "Wait. He doesn't speak English, does he?" Ryan closed his eyes, trying to remember what his briefing documents had said on that point.

"You didn't know? He can when it pleases him, but he doesn't when it doesn't. That day, it didn't. And his translator that day was a female, about twenty-seven. She didn't even blush." Hunter chuckled darkly. "I sure as hell did. What does that tell you, Dr. Ryan?"

Ryan had few doubts about the information that had come out of Operation SANDALWOOD. Despite that, it was very nice to hear this from a completely independent source. "I guess he likes blondes," Jack said lightly.

"So they say. They also say that he has a new one now."

"This is getting serious," Holtzman noted. "Lots of people like to fool around, Kris."

"Goto loves to show people how tough he is. Some of the rumors about Goto are downright ugly." Kris Hunter paused. "I believe them, too."

"Really?" Ryan asked with the utmost innocence. "Woman's intuition?"

"Don't be sexist," Hunter warned, too seriously for the mood of the moment.

Ryan's voice turned earnest. "I'm not. My wife has better instincts for judging people than I do. I guess it helps that she's a doc. Fair enough?"

"Dr. Ryan, I know *you* know. I know the FBI has been looking very discreetly at a few things out in the Seattle area."

"Is that so?"

Kris Hunter wasn't buying. "You don't keep secrets about this sort of thing, not if you have friends in the Bureau like I do, and not if one of the missing girls is the daughter of a police captain whose next-door neighbor is S-A-C of the FBI's Seattle Field Division. Do I need to go on?"

"Then why are you sitting on it?"

Kris Hunter's green eyes blazed at the National Security Advisor. "I'll tell you why, Dr. Ryan. I was raped in college. I thought the bastard was going to kill me. I looked at death. You don't forget that. If this story comes out the wrong way, that girl and maybe others like her could end up dead. You can recover from rape: I did. You can't recover from death."

"Thanks," Ryan said quietly. His eyes and his nod said even more. *Yes, I understand. And you know that I understand.*

"And he's the next head of that country's government." Kris Hunter's eyes were even more intense now. "He hates us, Dr. Ryan. I've interviewed him. He didn't want me because he found me attractive. He wanted me because he saw me as a blond-and-blue symbol. He's a rapist. He enjoys hurting people. You don't forget the look in the eyes once you've seen it. He's got that look. We need to watch out for this guy. You tell the President that."

"I will," Ryan said as he headed out the door.

The White House car was waiting just outside. Jack had something to think about as it headed for the Beltway.

"Softball," the Secret Service agent commented. "Except for after."

"How long you been doing this, Paul?"

"Fourteen fascinating years," Paul Robberton said, keeping an eye on things from the front seat. The driver was just a guy from the General Services Administration, but Jack rated a Secret Service bodyguard now.

"Fieldwork?"

"Counterfeiters. Never drew my weapon," Robberton added. "Had a few fair-sized cases."

"You can read people?"

Robberton laughed. "In this job, you'd better hope so, Dr. Ryan."

"Tell me about Kris Hunter."

"Smart and tough as nails. She's right: she was sexually assaulted in college, a serial rapist. She testified against the mutt. It was back when lawyers were a little . . . free with how they treated rape victims. You know—did you encourage the rat, stuff like that. It got ugly, but she rode it out and they convicted the bum. He bit the big one in prison, evidently said the wrong thing to an armed robber. Pity," Robberton concluded dryly.

"Pay attention to what she thinks, you're telling me."

"Yes, sir. She would have been a good cop. I know she's a pretty fair reporter."

"She's gathered in a lot of information," Ryan murmured. Not all of it good, not yet pulled together properly, and colored by her own life experiences, but sure as hell, she had sources. Jack looked at the passing scenery and tried to assemble the incomplete puzzle.

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"The house," Ryan said, drawing a surprised look from Robberton. In this case, "the house" didn't mean "home." "No, wait a minute." Ryan lifted his carphone. Fortunately he knew the number from memory.

"Hello?"

"Ed? Jack Ryan. You guys busy?"

"We are allowed Sunday off, Jack. The Caps play the Bruins this afternoon."

"Ten minutes."

"Fair enough." Ed Foley set the phone back in its place on the wall. "Ryan's coming over," he told his wife. *Damn it.*

Sunday was the one day they allowed themselves to sleep. Mary Pat was still in her housecoat, looking unusually frowzy. Without a word she left the morning paper and walked off toward the bathroom to fix her hair. There was a knock at the door fifteen minutes later.

"Overtime?" Ed asked at the door. Robberton came in with his guest.

"I had to do one of the morning shows." Jack checked his watch. "I'll be on in another twenty minutes or so."

"What gives?" Mary Pat entered the room, looking about normal for an American female on a Sunday morning.

"Business, honey," Ed answered. He led everyone to the basement recreation room.

"SANDALWOOD," Jack said when they got there. He could speak freely here. The house was swept for bugs every week. "Do Clark and Chavez have orders to get the girl out yet?"

"Nobody gave us the execute order," Ed Foley reminded him. "It's just about set up, but—"

"The order is given. Get the girl out now."

"Anything we need to know?" Mary Pat asked.

"I haven't been comfortable with this from the beginning. I think maybe we deliver a little message to her sugar daddy—and we do it early enough to get

his attention."

"Yeah," Mr. Foley said. "I read the paper this morning, too. He isn't saying friendly stuff, but we are laying it on them pretty hard, y'know?"

"Sit down, Jack," Mary Pat said. "Can I get you coffee or anything?'

"No, thanks, MP." He looked up after taking a place on a worn couch. "A light just went off. Our friend Goto seems to be an odd duck."

"He does have his quirks," Ed agreed. "Not terribly bright, a lot of bombast once you get through the local brand of rhetoric, but not all that many ideas. I'm surprised he's getting the chance."

"Why?" Jack asked. The State Department material on Goto had been typically respectful of the foreign statesman.

"Like I said, he's no threat to win the Nobel in physics, okay? He's an *apparatchik*. Worked his way up the way politicos do. I'm sure he's kissed his share of asses along the way—"

"And to make up for that, he has some bad habits with women," MP added. "There's a lot of that over there. Our boy Nomuri sent in a lengthy dispatch on what he's seen." It was the youth and inexperience, the DDO knew. So many field officers on their first major assignment reported everything, as though writing a book or something. It was mainly the product of boredom.

"Over here he couldn't get elected dogcatcher," Ed noted with a chuckle.

Think so? Ryan thought, remembering Edward Kealty. On the other hand, it might just turn out to be something America could use in the right forum and under the right circumstances. Maybe the first time they met, if things went badly, President Durling could make a quiet reference to his former girlfriend, and the implications of his bad habits on Japanese-American relations . . .

"How's THISTLE doing?"

Mary Pat smiled as she rearranged the Sega games on the basement TV. This was where the kids told Mario and all the others what to do. "Two of the old members are gone, one retired and one on overseas assignment, in Malaysia, as I recall. The rest of them are contacted. If we ever want to—"

"Okay, let's think about what we want them to do for us."

"Why?" MP asked. "I don't mind, but why?"

"We're pushing them too hard. I've told the President that, but he's got political reasons for pushing, and he isn't going to stop. What we're doing is going to hurt their economy pretty bad, and now it turns out that their new PM has a real antipathy to us. If they decide to push back, I want to know before it happens."

"What *can* they do?" Ed Foley sat on his son's favorite Nintendo chair.

"I don't know that, either, but I want to find out. Give me a few days to figure out what our priorities are. Damn, I don't have a few days," Jack said next. "I have to prep for the Moscow trip."

"It takes time to set up anyway. We can get our boys the comm gear and stuff."

"Do it," Jack ordered. "Tell 'em they're in the spy business for-real."

"We need presidential authorization for that," Ed warned. Activating a spy network in a friendly country was not a trivial undertaking.

"I can deliver it for you." Ryan was sure that Durling wouldn't object. "And get the girl out, earliest opportunity."

"Debrief her where?" MP asked. "For that matter, what if she says no? You're not telling us to kidnap her, are you?"

Ouch, Jack thought. "No, I don't suppose that's a good idea. They know how to be careful, don't they?"

"Clark does." Mary Pat knew from what he'd taught her and her husband at the Farm, all those years ago: *No matter where you are, it's enemy territory.* It was a good axiom for field spooks, but she'd always wondered where he'd picked it up.

Most of these people should have been at work, Clark thought—but so did they, and that was the problem, wasn't it? He'd seen his share of demonstrations, most of them expressing displeasure with his country. The ones in Iran had been especially unpleasant, knowing that there were Americans in the hands of people who thought "Death to America!" was a perfectly reasonable expression of concern with the foreign policy of his country. He'd been in the field, part of the rescue mission that had failed—the lowest point, Clark told himself, in a lengthy career. Being there to see it all fail, having to scramble out of the country, they were not good memories. This scene brought some of it back.

The American Embassy wasn't taking it too seriously. Business as usual, after a fashion, the Ambassador had all his people inside the embassy building, another example of Frank-Lloyd-Wright-Meets-the-Siegfried-Line design, this one located across from the Ocura Hotel. After all, this was a civilized country, wasn't it? The local police had an adequate guard force outside the fence, and as vociferous as the demonstrators were, they didn't seem the sort to attack the severe-looking cops arrayed around the building. But the people in the street were not kids, not students taking a day off from class—remarkably, the media never reported that so many of those student demonstrations coincided with semester finals, a worldwide phenomenon. In the main, these were people in their thirties and forties, and for that reason the chants weren't quite right. There was a remarkably soft edge on the expressions. Embarrassed to be here, somewhat confused by the event, more hurt than angry, he thought as Chavez snapped his pictures. But there were a lot of them. And there was a lot of hurt. They wanted to blame someone—the inevitable *them*, the *someone else* who always made the bad things happen. That perspective was not uniquely Japanese, was it?

As with everything in Japan, it was a highly organized affair. People, already formed into groups with leaders, had arrived mostly by crowded commuter trains, boarded buses at the stations, and been dropped off only a few blocks away. *Who chartered the buses?* Clark wondered. *Who printed the signs?* The wording on them was literate, which was odd, he was slow to realize. Though often well schooled in English, Japanese citizens messed up the foreign tongue as much as one might expect, especially on slogans. He'd seen one young man earlier in the day wearing a T-shirt with the legend "Inspire in Paradise," probably an exact representation of something in Japanese, and yet another example of the fact that no language translated precisely into another. But not these signs. The syntax was perfect in every

case he saw, better, in fact, than he might have seen in an American demonstration. Wasn't that interesting?

Well, what the hell, he thought. *I'm a journalist, right?*

"Excuse me," John said, touching a middle-aged man on the arm.

"Yes?" The man turned in surprise. He was nicely turned out, wore a dark suit, and his tie was neatly knotted in the collar of his white shirt. There wasn't even much anger on his face, nor any emotion that might have built up from the spirit of the moment. "Who are you?"

"I am a Russian journalist, for the Interfax News Agency," Clark said, showing an ID card marked in Cyrillic.

"Ah." The man smiled and bowed politely. Clark returned the gesture correctly, drawing an approving look for his good manners.

"May I please ask you some questions?"

"Certainly." The man almost seemed relieved to be able to stop shouting. A few questions established that he was thirty-seven, married with one child, a salaryman for an auto company, currently laid off, and very upset with America at the moment—though not at all unhappy with Russia, he added quickly.

He's embarrassed by all this, John thought, thanking the man for his opinion.

"What was that all about?" Chavez asked quietly from behind his camera.

"*Russkiy*," "Klerk" replied sharply.

"*Da*, *tovarisch*."

"Follow me," "Ivan Sergeyevich" said next, entering the crowd. There was something else odd, he thought, something he wasn't quite getting. Ten meters into the crowd, it was clear. The people at the periphery of the mob were supervisory. The inside was composed of blue-collar workers, more casually dressed, people with less dignity to lose. Here the mood was different. The looks he got were angrier, and though they became more polite when he identified himself as a non-American, the suspicion was real, and the answers to his questions, when he got answers, were less circumspect than he'd received before.

In due course the people moved off, guided by their senior leadership and shepherded by police to another place, one that had a stage prepared. That was where things changed.

Hiroshi Goto took his time, making them wait a long time even for an environment in which patience was a thoroughly inculcated virtue. He walked to the podium with dignity, noting the presence of his official entourage, arrayed in seats on the back of the stage. The TV cameras were already in place, and it was just a matter of waiting for the crowd to pack in tight. But he waited longer than that, standing there, staring at them, with his inaction forcing them to pack in tighter, and the additional time merely added to the tension.

Clark could feel it now. Perhaps the strangeness of the event was inevitable. These were highly civilized people, members of a society so ordered as to seem alien, whose gentle manners and generous hospitality contrasted starkly with their suspicion of foreigners. Clark's fear started as a distant whisper, a warning that something was changing, though his trained powers of observation caught nothing at all beyond the usual bullshit of politicians all

over the world. A man who'd faced combat in Vietnam and even more danger all over the world, he was again a stranger in a strange land, but his age and experience worked against him. Even the angry ones in the middle of the crowd hadn't been all that nasty—and, hell, did you expect a man to be happy when he's been laid off? So it wasn't all that big a deal—was it?

But the whispers grew louder as Goto took a sip of water, still making them wait, waving with his arms to draw his audience in closer, though this portion of the park was already jammed with people. How many? John wondered. Ten thousand? Fifteen? The crowd grew quiet of its own accord now, hardly making any noise at all. A few looks explained it. Those on the periphery were wearing armbands on their suit coats—damn, John swore at himself, that was their uniform of the day. The ordinary workers would automatically defer to those who dressed and acted like supervisors, and the armbands were herding them in closer. Perhaps there was some other sign that hushed them down, but if so Clark missed it.

Goto began talking quietly, which stilled the crowd completely. Heads automatically leaned forward a few inches in an instinctive effort to catch his words.

Damn, I wish we'd had more time to learn the language, both CIA officers thought. Ding was catching on, his superior saw, changing lenses and locking in on individual faces.

"They're getting tense," Chavez noted quietly in Russian as he read the expressions.

Clark could see it from their posture as Goto spoke on. He could catch only a few words, perhaps the odd phrase or two, basically the meaningless things that all languages had, the rhetorical devices a politician used to express humility and respect for his audience. The first roar of approval from the crowd came as a surprise, and the spectators were so tightly packed that they had to jostle one another to applaud. His gaze shifted to Goto. It was too far. Clark reached into Ding's tote bag, and selected a camera body to which he attached a long lens, the better to read the speaker's face as he accepted the approval of the people, waiting for their applause to subside before he moved on.

Really working the crowd, aren't we?

He tried to hide it, Clark saw, but he was a politician and though they had good acting skills, they fed off their audience even more hungrily than those who worked before cameras for a living. Goto's hand gestures picked up in intensity, and so did his voice.

Only ten or fifteen thousand people here. It's a test, *isn't it? He's experimenting.* Never had Clark felt more a foreigner than now. In so much of the world his features were ordinary, nondescript, seen and forgotten. In Iran, in the Soviet Union, in Berlin, he could fit in. Not here. Not now. Even worse, he wasn't getting it, not all of it, and that worried him.

Goto's voice grew louder. For the first time his fist slammed down on the podium, and the crowd responded with a roar. His diction became more rapid. The crowd was moving inward, and Clark watched the speaker's eyes notice it, welcome it. He wasn't smiling now, but his eyes swept the sea of faces, left and right, fixing occasionally in a single place, probably catching an

individual, reading him for reactions, then passing to another to see if he was having the same effect on everyone. He had to be satisfied by what he saw. There was confidence in the voice now. He had them, had them all. By adjusting his speaking pace he could see their breathing change, see their eyes go wide. Clark lowered the camera to scan the crowd and saw the collective movement, the responses to the speaker's words.

Playing with them.

John brought the camera back up, using it like a gunsight. He focused in on the suit-clad bosses on the edges. Their faces were different now, not so much concerned with their duties as the speech. Again he cursed his inadequate language skills, not quite realizing that what he saw was even more important than what he might have understood. The next demonstration from the crowd was more than just loud. It was angry. Faces were . . . illuminated. Goto owned them now as he took them further and further down the path he had selected.

John touched Ding's arm. "Let's back off."

"Why?"

"Because it's getting dangerous here," Clark replied. He got a curious look.

"Nan ja?" Chavez replied in Japanese, smiling behind his camera.

"Turn around and look at the cops," "Klerk" ordered.

Ding did, and caught on instantly. The local police were ordinarily impressive in their demeanor. Perhaps samurai warriors had once had the same confidence. Though polite and professional, there was usually an underlying swagger to the way they moved. They *were* the law here, and knew it. Their uniforms were as severely clean and pressed as any Embassy Marine's, and the handguns that hung on the Sam Browne belts were just a status symbol, never necessary to use. But now these tough cops looked nervous. They shifted on their feet, exchanged looks among themselves. Hands rubbed against blue trousers to wipe off sweat. They sensed it, too, so clearly that nothing needed to be spoken. Some were even listening intently to Goto, but even those men looked worried. Whatever was happening, if it troubled the people who customarily kept the peace on these streets, then it was serious enough.

"Follow me." Clark scanned the area and selected a storefront. It turned out to be a small tailor shop. The CIA officers took their place close to the entrance. The sidewalk was otherwise deserted. Casual strollers had joined the crowd, and the police were drawing in also, spacing themselves evenly in a blue line. The two officers were essentially alone with open space around them, a very unusual state of affairs.

"You reading this the same way I am?" John asked. That he said it in English surprised Chavez.

"He's really working them up, isn't he?" A thoughtful pause. "You're right, Mr. C. It is getting a little tense."

Goto's voice carried clearly over the speaker system. The pitch was high now, almost shrill, and the crowd answered back in the way that crowds do.

"Ever see anything like this before?" It wasn't like the job they'd done in Romania.

A curt nod. "Teheran, 1979."

"I was in fifth grade."

"I was scared shitless," Clark said, remembering. Goto's hands were flying around now. Clark re-aimed the camera, and through the lens the man seemed transformed. He wasn't the same person who'd begun the speech. Only thirty minutes before he'd been tentative. Not now. If this had begun as an experiment, then it was a successful one. The final flourishes seemed stylized, but that was to be expected. His hands went up together, like a football official announcing a touchdown, but the fists, Clark saw, were clenched tight. Twenty yards away, a cop turned and looked at the two *gaijin.* There was concern on his face.

"Let's look at some coats for a while."

"I'm a thirty-six regular," Chavez replied lightly as he stowed his camera gear.

It turned out to be a nice shop, and it did have coats in Ding's size. It gave them a good excuse to browse. The clerk was attentive and polite, and at John's insistence Chavez ended up purchasing a business suit that fit so well it might have been made for him, dark gray and ordinary, overpriced and identical to what so many salarymen wore. They emerged to see the small park empty. A work crew was dismantling the stage. The TV crews were packing up their lights. All was normal except for a small knot of police officers who surrounded three people sitting on a curb. They were an American TV news crew, one of whom held a handkerchief to his face. Clark decided not to approach. He noted instead that the streets were not terribly littered—then he saw why. A cleanup crew was at work. Everything had been exquisitely planned. The demonstration had been about as spontaneous as the Super Bowl—but the game had gone even better than planned.

"Tell me what you think," Clark ordered as they walked along streets that were turning back to normal.

"You know this stuff better than I do—"

"Look, master's candidate, when I ask a fucking question I expect a fucking answer." Chavez almost stopped at the rebuke, not from insult, but from surprise. He'd never seen his partner rattled before. As a result, his reply was measured and reasoned.

"I think we just saw something important. I think he was playing with them. Last year for one of my courses we saw a Nazi film, a classic study in how demagogues do their thing. A woman directed it, and it reminded me—"

"*Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl," Clark said. "Yeah, it's a classic, all right. By the way, you need a haircut."

"Huh?"

The training was really paying off, Major Sato knew without looking. On command, all four of the F-15 Eagles tripped their brakes and surged forward along the runway at Misawa. They'd flown more than three hundred hours in the past twelve months, a third of that in the past two alone, and now the pilots could risk a formation takeoff that would do an aerial-demonstration team proud. Except his flight of four was not the local version of the Blue Angels. They were members of the Third Air Wing. Sato had to concentrate, of

course, to watch the airspeed indicator in his heads-up display before rotating the aircraft off the concrete. Gear came up on his command, and he knew without looking that his wingman was no more than four meters off his tip. It was dangerous to do it this way, but it was also good for morale. It thrilled the ground crew as much as it impressed the curious driving by on the highway. A thousand feet off the ground, wheels and flaps up, accelerating through four hundred knots, he allowed himself a turn of the head both ways. Sure enough. It was a clear day, the cold air devoid of humidity, still lit by the late-afternoon sun. Sato could see the southernmost Kuriles to his north, once part of his country, stolen by the Russians at the end of the Second World War, and ruggedly mountainous, like Hokkaido, the northernmost of the Home Islands . . . One thing at a time, the Major told himself.

"Come right," he ordered over the radio circuit, bringing the flight to a new course of zero-five-five. They were still climbing, gradually, to save fuel for the exercise.

It was hard to believe that this aircraft design was almost thirty years old. But that was just the shape and the concept. Since the American engineers at McDonnell-Douglas had dreamed it all up, the improvements had been such as to transform everything but the silhouette. Almost everything on Sato's personal bird was Japanese-made, even the engines. Especially the electronics.

There was a steady stream of aircraft in both directions, nearly all of them commercial wide-bodies carrying businessmen to or from Japan, from or to North America, on a well-defined commercial routing that traced down the Kurile chain, past the Kamchatka Peninsula, then on to the Aleutians. If anyone wondered how important his country was, Sato thought in the privacy of his cockpit, this was it. The low-angle sun reflected off the aluminum tail fins of numerous aircraft, and from his current altitude of thirty-seven thousand feet he could see them lined up—like cars on a highway, it seemed, yellow dots preceding white trails of vapor that stretched off into infinity. Then it was time to go to work.

The flight of four split into separated pairs left and right of the airliner track. The training mission for the evening was not complex, but vital nonetheless. Behind them, over a hundred miles to the southwest, an airborne early-warning aircraft was assuming its station just off the northeastern tip of Honshu. That was an E-767. Based on the twin-engine Boeing airliner (as the American E-3A was based on the far older 707 airframe), a rotating dome sat atop the converted wide-body. Just as his F-15J was an improved local version of an American fighter plane, so the E-767 was a vastly improved Japanese interpretation of another American invention. They'd never learn, Sato thought, his eyes scanning the horizon every few seconds before returning to the forward visual display. They'd invented so much, then given the unfulfilled rights to his countrymen for further perfection. In fact the Americans had played the same game with the Russians, improving every military weapon the latter had ever made, but in their arrogance ignoring the possibility that someone could do the same with their own magical systems. The radar on the E-767 was like nothing aloft. For that reason, the radar on the nose of his Eagle was switched off.

Simple in concept, the overall system was murderously complex in

execution. The fighters had to know their precise position in three dimensions, and so did the AEW bird supporting them. Beyond that, radar pulses from the E-767 were precisely timed. The result was mere mathematics. Knowing the position of the transmitter, and their own position, the Eagles could then receive the radar reflections and plot the blips as though the data were generated by their own onboard radar systems. A meld of Soviet-developed bi-static radars and American airborne-radar technology, this system took the idea one step further. The AEW radar was frequency-agile, able to switch instantly from a longwave search mode to a shortwave fire-control mode, and it could actually guide air-to-air missiles fired by the fighters. The radar was also of sufficient size and power that it could, everyone thought, defeat stealth technology.

In only a few minutes it was clear that the system worked. The four air-to-air missiles on his wings were dummies, with no rocket motors. The seekerheads were real, however, and onboard instruments showed that the missiles were tracking inbound and outbound airliners even more clearly than they would have done from the Eagle's own radar. It was a first, a genuinely new piece of military technology. Only a few years earlier, Japan would probably have offered it for sale, almost certainly to America, because this sort of thing had value beyond gold. But the world had changed, and the Americans would probably have not seen the point in spending the money for it. Besides, Japan wasn't about to sell this to anyone. *Not now,* Sato thought. *Especially not now.*

Their hotel was not necessarily an especially good one. Though it catered to foreign visitors, the management recognized that not all *gaijin* were wealthy. The rooms were small, the corridors narrow, the ceilings low, and a breakfast of a glass of juice, a cup of coffee, and one croissant cost only fifty dollars instead of the hundred or so charged elsewhere. As the saying in the U.S. government went, Clark and Chavez were "living off the economy," frugally, as Russians would have to do. It wasn't all that great a hardship. Crowded and intense as Japan was, it was still far more comfortable than Africa had been, and the food, while strange, was exotic and interesting enough that the novelty hadn't quite worn off yet. Ding might have grumped about the desire for a burger, but to say such a thing, even in Russian, would have broken cover. Returning after an eventful day, Clark inserted the key card in the slot on the door and twisted the knob. He didn't even stop when he felt and removed the small piece of tape on the inside surface of the knob. Inside, he merely held it up to show Ding, then headed to the bathroom to flush it away.

Chavez looked around the room, wondering if it was bugged, wondering if this spook stuff was all it was cracked up to be. It certainly seemed so mysterious. The tape on the doorknob. Somebody wanted a meet. Nomuri. It had to be him. The fieldcraft was clever, Chavez told himself. Whoever had left the marker had just walked down the corridor, and his hand had probably just tapped the knob, a gesture that even a careful observer might have missed. Well, that was the idea.

"I'm going to head out for a drink," "Klerk" announced in Russian. *I'll see*

what's up.

"Vanya, you do too much of that." *Fine.* It was his regular routine in any case.

"Some Russian you are," Clark said for the microphones, if any, as he went out the door.

How the hell, Chavez wondered, *am I supposed to get any studying done?* He'd been forced to leave his books in Korea—they were all in English, of course. He couldn't take notes or go over things. *If have to lose time on my master's*, Ding thought, *I'm going to ask the Agency to reimburse me for the blown courses.*

The bar, half a block away, was most agreeable. The room was dark. The booths were small and separated by solid partitions, and a mirror behind the ranks of liquor bottles made countersurveillance easy. Better yet, the barstools were almost all taken, which forced him to look elsewhere after a show of disappointment. Clark strolled all the way to the back. Nomuri was waiting.

"Taking chances, aren't we?" John said over the music. A waitress came up. He ordered a vodka, neat, specifying a local one to save money.

"Orders from home," Nomuri told him. He stood without another word, clearly offended that a gaijin had taken the seat without asking permission first and left without even a polite bow.

Before the drink arrived, Clark reached under the table, finding a package taped in place there. In a moment it was in his lap, and would soon find its way inside his waistband behind his back. Clark always bought his working clothes in a full cut——the Russian disguise helped even more—and his shoulders provided ample overhang for hiding things, yet another reason, he thought, to stay in shape.

The drink arrived, and he took his time knocking it back, looking at the bar mirror and searching the reflections for faces that might have appeared in his memory before. It was a never-ending drill, and, tiring as it was, one he'd learned the hard way not to ignore. He checked his watch twice, both times unobtrusively, then a third time immediately before standing, leaving behind just enough cash to pay for the drink. Russians weren't known as big tippers.

The street was busy, even in the late evening. Clark had established the routine nightcap over the past week, and on every other night he would roam the local shops. This evening he selected a bookstore first, one with long, irregular rows. The Japanese were a literate people. The shop always had people in it. He browsed around, selecting a copy of *The Economist*, then wandered more, aimlessly toward the back, where he saw a few men eyeing the manga racks. Taller than they, he stood right behind a few, close but not too close, keeping his hands in front of him, shielded by his back. After five or so minutes he made his way to the front and paid for the magazine, which the clerk politely bagged for him. The next stop was an electronics store, where he looked at some CD players. This time he bumped into two people, each time politely asking their pardon, a phrase which he'd troubled himself to learn before anything else at Monterey. After that he headed back out onto the street and back to the hotel, wondering how much of the preceding fifteen minutes had been a total waste of time. *None of it*, Clark told himself. *Not a*

single second.

In the room he tossed Ding the magazine. It drew a look of its own before the younger man spoke. "Don't they have anything in Russian?"

"It's good coverage of the difficulties between this country and America. Read and learn. Improve your language skills."

Great, just fucking great, Chavez thought, reading the words for their real meaning. *We've been activated, for-real.* He'd never finish the master's now, Ding grumped. Maybe they just didn't want to jack his salary up, as CIA regulations specified for a graduate degree.

Clark had other things to do. The package Nomuri had transferred held a computer disk and a device that attached to a laptop. He switched it on, then inserted the disk into the slot. The file he opened contained only three sentences, and seconds after reading it, Clark had erased the disk. Next he started composing what to all intents and purposes was a news dispatch.

The computer was a Russian-language version of a popular Japanese model, with all the additional Cyrillic letters, and the hard part for Clark was that although he read and spoke Russian like a native, he was used to typing (badly enough) in English. The Russian-style keyboard drove him crazy, and he sometimes wondered if someone would ever pick up on this small chink in his cover armor. It took over an hour to type up the news article, and another thirty to do the more important part. He saved both items to the hard drive, then turned the machine off. Flipping it over, he removed the modem from its modular port and replaced it with the new one Nomuri had brought.

"What time is it in Moscow?" he asked tiredly.

"Same as always, six hours behind us, remember?"

"I'm going to send it to Washington, too."

"Fine," "Chekov" grunted. "I'm sure they'll love it, Ivan Sergeyevich."

Clark attached the phone line to the back of his computer and used the latter to dial up the fiberoptic line to Moscow. Transferring the report took less than a minute. He repeated the operation for the Interfax office in the American capital. It was pretty slick, John thought. The moment before the modem at one end linked up with the modem at the other sounded just like static—which it was. The mating signal was just a rough hiss unless you had a special chip, and he never called anyone but Russian press-agency offices. That the office in Washington might be tapped by the FBI was something else again. Finished, he kept one file and erased the other. Another day done, serving his country. Clark brushed his teeth before collapsing into his single bed.

"That was a fine speech, Goto-san." Yamata poured a generous amount of sake into an exquisite porcelain cup. "You made things so clear."

"Did you see how they responded to me!" The little man was bubbling now, his enthusiasm making his body swell before his host's eyes.

"And tomorrow you will have your cabinet, and the day after you will have a new office, Hiroshi."

"You're certain?"

A nod and a smile that conveyed true respect. "Of course I am. My

colleagues and I have spoken with our friends, and they have come to agree with us that you are the only man suited to save our country."

"When will it begin?" Goto asked, suddenly sobered by the words, remembering exactly what his ascension would mean.

"When the people are with us."

"Are you sure we can—"

"Yes, I am sure." Yamata paused. "There is one problem, however."

"What is that?"

"Your lady friend, Hiroshi. If the knowledge becomes public that you have an American mistress, it compromises you. We cannot afford that," Yamata explained patiently. "I hope you will understand."

"Kimba is a most pleasant diversion for me," Goto objected politely.

"I have no doubt of it, but the Prime Minister can have his choice of diversions, and in any case we will be busy in the next month." The amusing part was that he could build up the man on one hand and reduce him on the other, just as easily as he manipulated a child. And yet there was something disturbing about it all. More than one thing. How much had he told the girl? And what to do with her now?

"Poor thing, to send her home now, she will never know happiness again."

"Undoubtedly true, but it must be done, my friend. Let me handle it for you? Better it should be done quietly, discreetly. You are on the television every day now. You cannot be seen to frequent that area as a private citizen would. There is too great a danger."

The man about to be Prime Minister looked down, sipping his drink, so transparently measuring his personal pleasure against his duties to his country, surprising Yamata yet again——but no, not really. Goto was Goto, and he'd been chosen for his elevation as much—more—for his weaknesses than his strengths.

"Hai," he said after reflection. "Please see to it."

"I know what to do," Yamata assured him.

15

A Damned, Foolish Thing

Behind Ryan's desk was a gadget called a STU-6. The acronym probably meant "secure telephone unit," but he had never troubled himself to find out. It was about two feet square, and contained in a nicely made oak cabinet handcrafted by the inmates of a federal prison. Inside were a half dozen green circuit-boards, populated with various chips whose function was to scramble and unscramble telephone signals. Having one of these in the office was one of the better government status symbols.

"Yeah," Jack said, reaching back for the receiver.

"MP here. Something interesting came in. SANDALWOOD," Mrs. Foley said, her voice distinct on the digital line. "Flip on your fax?"

"Go ahead and send it." The STU-6 did that, too, fulfilling the function with a simple phone line that headed to Ryan's facsimile printer. "Did you get the word to them—"

"Yes, we did."

"Okay, wait a minute . . ." Jack took the first page and started reading it. "This is Clark?" he asked.

"Correct. That's why I'm fast-tracking it over to you. You know the guy as well as I do."

"I saw the TV coverage. CNN says their crew got a little roughed up. . . ." Ryan worked his way down the first page.

"Somebody bounced a soda can off the producer's head. Nothing more serious than a headache, but it's the first time anything like that has happened over there—that Ed and I remember, anyway."

"Goddamn it!" Ryan said next.

"I thought you'd like that part."

"Thanks for the heads-up, Mary Pat."

"Glad to help." The line went dead.

Ryan took his time. His temper, he knew, was always his greatest enemy. He decided to give himself a moment to stand and head out of his office to the nearest water cooler, which was tucked in his secretary's office. Foggy Bottom, he'd heard, had once been a nice marsh before some fool had decided to drain it. What a pity the Sierra Club hadn't been around then to force an environmental-impact statement. They were so good at obstructing things, and didn't much care whether the things they halted were useful or not, and as a result they occasionally did some public good. But not this time, Ryan told himself, sitting back down. Then he lifted the STU-6 and punched the speed-dial button for State.

"Good morning, Mr. Secretary," the National Security Advisor said

pleasantly. “What’s the story about the demonstration outside the Tokyo Embassy yesterday?”

“You saw CNN the same as I did, I’m sure,” Hanson replied, as though it were not the function of an American embassy mission to provide better information than any citizen could get with his oatmeal.

“Yes, I did, as a matter of fact, but I would really like to have the opinion of embassy personnel, like maybe the political officer, maybe even the DCM,” Ryan said, allowing a little of his irritation to show. Ambassador Chuck Whiting was a recent political appointee, a former senator who had then become a Washington lawyer, and had actually represented some Japanese business interests, but the Deputy Chief of Mission was an experienced man and a Japan specialist who knew the culture.

“Walt decided to keep his people in. He didn’t want to provoke anything. I’m not going to fault him for that.”

“That may be, but I have in my hand an eyewitness report from an experienced field officer who—”

“I have it, too, Ryan. It looks alarmist to me. Who is this guy?”

“As I said, an experienced field officer.”

“Umm-hmm, I see he knows Iran.” Ryan could hear the crackle of paper over the phone. “That makes him a spook. I guess that colored his thinking a little. How much experience in Japan?”

“Not much, but—”

“There you are. Alarmist, as I said. You want me to follow up on it, though?”

“Yes, Mr. Secretary.”

“Okay, I’ll call Walt. Anything else? I’m prepping for Moscow, too.”

“Please, let’s light a fire under them?”

“Fine, Ryan. I’ll make sure that gets through. Remember, it’s already nighttime over there, okay?”

“Fine.” Ryan replaced the phone in its cradle and swore. *Mustn’t wake up the Ambassador*. He had several options. Typically, he took the most direct. He lifted his desk phone and punched the button for the President’s personal secretary.

“I need to talk to the boss for a few.”

“Thirty minutes?”

“That’ll be fine, thank you.”

The delay was explained by a ceremony in the East Room that Ryan had had on his daily schedule sheet, too, but had forgotten about. It was just too big for the Oval Office, which suited the secretarial staff. Ten TV cameras and a good hundred or so journalists watched as Roger Durling affixed his signature to the Trade Reform Act. The nature of the legislation demanded a number of pens, one for each letter of his name, which made the signing a lengthy and haphazard process. The first went, naturally enough, to Al Trent, who had authored the bill. The rest went to committee chairmen in the House and Senate, and also to selected minority members without whom the bill could not possibly have sailed through Congress as rapidly as it had. There was the

usual applause, the usual handshakes, and a new entry was made in the United States Code, Annotated. The Trade Reform Act was now federal law.

One of the TV crews was from NHK. Their faces were glum. Next they would drive to the Commerce Department to interview the legal team that was analyzing Japanese laws and procedures for rapid duplication. It would be an unusually educational experience for the foreign journalists.

Like most senior government officials, Chris Cook had a TV in his office. He watched the signing on C-SPAN and, with it, saw the indefinite postponement of his entry into the "private" sector. It made him uneasy to accept outside payments while still a federal employee. They were going into a safe bank account, but it was illegal, wasn't it? He didn't really mean to break the law. Amity between America and Japan was important to him. It was now breaking down, and unless it could be rapidly restored, his career would stagnate and effectively end despite all the promise it had shown for so many years. And he needed the money. He had a dinner with Seiji scheduled for tonight. They had to discuss ways of making things right again, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State told himself, returning to his work.

On Massachusetts Avenue, Seiji Nagumo was watching the same TV channel and was just as unhappy. Nothing would ever be the same again, he thought. Perhaps the new government . . . no, Goto was a demagogic fool. His posturing and blustering would only make things worse. The sort of action needed was . . . what?

For the first time in his career, Nagumo had no idea what that might be. Diplomacy had failed. Lobbying had failed. Even espionage, if one could call it that, had failed. Espionage? Was that the proper term? Well, technically, yes, he admitted. He was now paying money for information. Cook and others. At least they were well placed, at least he'd been able to warn his government, At least the Foreign Ministry knew that he'd done his best, as much as any man could do—more, really. And he'd keep trying, working through Cook to affect the way the Americans interpreted Japanese laws. But the Americans had a term for it: rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*.

Reflection only made it worse, and soon the only word for what he felt was anguish. His countrymen would suffer, America, the world. All because of one traffic accident that had killed six inconsequential people. It was madness.

Madness or not, it was how the world worked. A messenger came into his office and handed over a sealed envelope for which Nagumo had to sign. He waited until his office door closed again before he opened it.

The cover sheet told him much. The dispatch was eyes-only. Even the Ambassador would never learn of what he was now reading. The instructions on the next two pages made his hand shake.

Nagumo remembered his history. Franz Ferdinand, June 28, 1914, in the cursed city of Sarajevo, a titled nonentity, a man of such little consequence that no one of importance had troubled himself to attend the funeral, but his

murder had been the “damned, foolish thing” to start the first war to span the globe. In this case the inconsequential people had been a police officer and some females.

And on such trivialities, *this* would happen? Nagumo went very pale, but he had no choice in the matter, because his life was driven by the same forces that turned the world on its axis.

Exercise DATELINE PARTNERS began at the scheduled time. Like most such war games, it was a combination of free play and strict rules. The size of the Pacific Ocean made for ample room, and the game would be played between Marcus Island, a Japanese possession, and Midway. The idea was to simulate a conflict between the U.S. Navy and a smaller but modern frigate force, played by the Japanese Navy. The odds were heavily loaded against the latter, but not completely so. Marcus Island—called Minami Tori-shima on their charts—was, for the purposes of the exercise, deemed to be a continental land mass. In fact the atoll consisted of a mere 740 acres, scarcely large enough for a meteorological station, a small fishing colony, and a single runway, from which would fly a trio of P-3C patrol aircraft. These could be administratively “shot down” by American fighters, but would return to life the next day. The commercial fishermen who also maintained a station on the island to harvest squid, kelp, and the occasional swordfish for their home markets welcomed the increased activity. The airmen had brought a cargo of beer which they would exchange for the fresh catch in what had become a friendly tradition.

Two of the three Orions lifted off before dawn, angling north and south, to search for the American carrier fleet. Their crewmen, aware of the trade problems between the two countries, concentrated on their mission. It was not an unknown mission to the Japanese Navy, after all. Their forefathers had done the same thing two generations before, in Kawasaki H8K2 flying boats—the same contractor that had built these Orions—to search for the marauding carriers commanded in turns by Halsey and Spruance. Many of the tactics they would employ today were based on lessons learned from that earlier conflict. The P-3Cs themselves were Japanese models of an American design that had begun life as turboprop airliners, then matured into rugged, powerful, if somewhat slow maritime patrol aircraft. As with most Japanese military aircraft, the American products had stopped at the basic profile. The power plants had since been developed and improved, giving the Orions a cruising speed boosted to 350 knots. The internal electronics were particularly good, especially the sensors designed to detect emissions from ships and aircraft. That was their mission for the moment, to fly out in large pie-shaped segments, listening for radar and radio signals that would announce the presence of American ships and aircraft. Reconnaissance: Find the enemy. That was the mission, and from press accounts and conversations with family members who worked in their country’s economy, thinking of Americans as the enemy didn’t even come all that hard.

Aboard *John Stennis*, Captain Sanchez watched the dawn patrol—a term beloved of all fighter pilots—shoot off the cats to establish an outer Combat Air Patrol. With the Tomcats off, next in line to go were the S-3 Vikings, antisubmarine birds with long legs to sweep the area the fleet would transit this day. Last went the Prowlers, the electronic bird-dogs, designed to detect and jam enemy radar signals. It was always exciting to watch from his perch at Pri-Fly. Almost as good as shooting off himself, but he was the CAG, and was supposed to command rather than merely lead his men now. His Alpha Strike force of Hornets was spotted on the deck, loaded with blue practice missiles for the discovery of the enemy battle force, the pilots sitting in their squadron ready rooms, mainly reading magazines or trading jokes because they were already briefed in on the mission.

Admiral Sato watched his flagship disengage from the oiler *Homana,* one of four supporting his fleet. The captain of the fleet-support ship lofted his cap and waved encouragement. Sato returned the gesture as the oiler put her rudder over to depart the battle force. He now had enough fuel to drive his ships hard. The contest was an interesting one, essentially guile against brute force, not an unusual situation for his country's navy, and for this task he would employ traditional Japanese tactics. His sixteen surface warships were split into three groups, one of eight and two of four, widely separated. Similar to Yamamoto's plan for the Battle of Midway, his operational concept was far more practical now, because with GPS navigation their position was always known, and with satellite communications links they could exchange messages in relative security. The Americans probably expected that he would keep his ships close to his "homeland," but he would not. He would take the issue to the enemy as best he could, since passive defense was not the way of his people, a fact that the Americans had learned and then forgotten, hadn't they? That was an amusing thought.

"Yes, Jack?" The President was in another good mood, flush from signing a new law which, he hoped, would solve a major problem for his country, and by the by make his reelection chances look rosy indeed. It would be a shame to ruin his day, Ryan thought, but his job wasn't political, at least not that kind of political.

"You might want to look at this." He handed the fax sheet over without sitting down.

"Our friend Clark again?" Durling asked, leaning back in his chair and reaching for his reading glasses. He had to use them for normal correspondence, though his speeches and TelePrompTers had large-enough type to protect his presidential vanity.

"I presume State has seen this. What do they say?" the President asked when he finished it.

"Hanson calls it alarmist," Jack reported. "But the ambassador kept his troops inside for the event because he didn't want to cause an 'incident.' This

is the only eyewitness report we have aside from the TV people."

"I haven't read the text of his speech yet. I have it here somewhere." Durling gestured at his desk.

"Might be a good idea to do so. I just did."

The President nodded. "And what else? I know there's more."

"And I told Mary Pat to activate THISTLE." He explained briefly what that was.

"You really should get my permission first."

"That's what I'm here for, sir. You know a little about Clark. He doesn't scare easily. THISTLE includes a couple of people in their Foreign Ministry and MITI. I think we want to know what they're thinking."

"They're not enemies," Durling observed.

"Probably not," Jack conceded, for the first time allowing for the fact that the proper response wasn't *certainly not*, a fact the President noted with a raised eyebrow. "We still need to know, sir. That's my recommendation."

"Okay. Approved. What else?"

"I also told her to get Kimberly Norton out, soonest. It ought to happen in the next twenty-four hours."

"Sending Goto a message, are we?"

"That's part of it. Simpler version is, we know she's there, and she's an American citizen and—"

"And I have kids, too. Also approved. Save the piety for church, Jack," Durling ordered with a smile. "How will it go?"

"If she agrees to come out, they drive her to the airport and fly her to Seoul. They have clothes for her, and a fresh passport, and first-class tickets for her and an escort she'll meet at the terminal. She changes planes to a KAL flight to New York. We check her into a hotel, settle her down, and debrief. We fly her parents in from Seattle, and explain to them that it's to be kept quiet. The girl will probably need psychological counseling—I mean, really need it. That will help with the low profile. The FBI will assist on that one. Her father's a cop. He should play along." And that was neat and tidy enough for anyone, wasn't it?

The President gave Ryan a nod. "So then, what do we tell Goto about it?"

"That's your decision, Mr. President. I would recommend nothing at the moment. Let's debrief the girl first. Say a week or so, and then the Ambassador will check in for the usual courtesy visit to present your greetings to a new head of government—"

"And ask him politely how his countrymen will react if Mr. Nationalist turned out to be dipping his wick in a round-eye. Then we extend a small olive branch, right?" Durling caught on quickly enough, Jack thought.

"That's my recommendation, sir."

"A very small one," the President noted dryly.

"Just one olive on it for the moment," Ryan conceded.

"Approved," Durling said again, adding more sharply, "Next are you going to suggest what olive branch to offer?"

"No, sir. Have I pushed too much?" Jack asked, realizing just how far he had gone.

Durling almost apologized for speaking crossly to his National Security

Advisor. “You know, Bob was right about you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Bob Fowler,” Durling said, waving Ryan into a chair. “You ticked me off pretty bad when I brought you in the first time.”

“Sir, I was a burn-out then, remember?” Jack did. The nightmares hadn’t stopped yet. He saw himself, sitting there in the National Military Command Center, telling people what they had to do, but in the nightmare they couldn’t see or hear him, as the Hot Line message kept coming in, taking his country closer and closer to the war he had in fact probably stopped. The full story on that had never been written in the open media. Just as well. Everyone who had been there knew.

“I didn’t understand that then. Anyway”—Durling raised his arms to stretch—“when we dropped the ball last summer, Bob and I talked some things over up at Camp David. He recommended you for the job. Surprised?” the President asked with a twisty grin.

“Very,” Jack admitted quietly. Arnie van Damm had never told him that story. Ryan wondered why.

“He said you’re one levelheaded son of a bitch when the crap hits the fan. He also said you were an opinionated, pushy son of a bitch the rest of the time. Good judge of character, Bob Fowler.” Durling gave him a moment to absorb that. “You’re a good man in a storm, Jack. Do us both a favor and remember that this is as far as you can act without my approval. You’ve already had another pissing contest with Brett, haven’t you?”

“Yes, sir.” Jack bobbed his head like a schoolboy. “Just a little one.”

“Don’t push so hard. He’s my Secretary of State.”

“I understand, sir.”

“All ready for Moscow?”

“Cathy is really looking forward to it,” Ryan answered, pleased with the change of subject and noting that Durling had handled him very well indeed.

“It’ll be good to see her again. Anne really likes her. Anything else?”

“Not right now.”

“Jack, thanks for the heads-up,” Durling said to conclude the meeting on a positive note.

Ryan left the office by the west door, walking past the (Teddy) Roosevelt Room and heading toward his office. Ed Kealty was in again, he saw, working in his office. He wondered when that one would break, realizing that the President, however pleased with the events of this day, still had that scandal hanging over him. *That sword again,* Jack thought. He had gone a little close to the edge this time, and it was his mission to make the President’s job easier, not harder. There was more to it, after all, than foreign entanglements—and politics, something he had tried to keep at arm’s length for years, was as real as anything else.

Fowler? Damn.

It would be a safe time to do it, they knew. Goto was giving a speech on TV tonight, his maiden broadcast as Prime Minister, and whatever he said, it guaranteed that he wouldn’t be with his young mistress that evening. Perhaps

the night's mission would be an interesting and useful counterpoint to what the politician had to say, a reply, of sorts, from America. They both liked that idea.

John Clark and Ding Chavez were walking along the block at the proper time, looking across the crowded street at the nondescript building. They always seemed that way, John thought. Maybe someone would tumble to the idea that a garish façade or an office tower was actually better camouflage, or maybe not. More likely it was boredom talking again. A man came out and removed his sunglasses with his left hand. He smoothed his hair, stroking the back of his head twice with his left hand, then moved off. Nomuri had never ascertained the location of Kim Norton's room. Moving in that close was a risk, but the orders had come to take that risk, and now, having given the signal, he walked off toward where he'd left his car. Ten seconds later Nomuri was lost in the crowded sidewalk, Clark saw. He could do that. He had the right height and looks. So did Ding. With his size, glossy black hair, and complexion, Chavez at a distance could almost blend in here. The haircut he'd imposed on his partner helped even more. From behind he was just another person on the sidewalk. That was useful, Clark told himself, feeling ever more conspicuous, especially at a moment like this.

"Showtime," Ding breathed. Both men crossed the street as unobtrusively as possible.

Clark was dressed as a businessman, but rarely had he felt more naked. Neither he nor Ding had so much as a folding pocket knife. Though both men were well skilled in unarmed combat, both had enough experience to prefer arms—the better to keep one's enemies at a distance.

Luck smiled on them. There was no one in the tiny lobby of the building to note their presence. The two men took the stairs up. Second floor, all the way back, left side.

Nomuri had done his job well. The corridor was empty. Clark had the lead, and headed quickly down the dimly lit passage. The lock was a simple one. With Ding standing guard, he took out his burglar tools and defeated it, then opened the door quickly. They were already inside before they realized that the mission was a bust.

Kimberly Norton was dead. She lay on a futon, wearing a medium-expensive silk kimono that was bunched just below the knees, exposing her lower legs. Postmortem lividity was beginning to color the underside of her body as gravity drew her blood downward. Soon the top of the body would be the color of ash, and the lower regions would be maroon. Death was so cruel, John thought. It wasn't enough that it stole life. It also stole whatever beauty the victim had once possessed. She'd been pretty—well, that was the point, wasn't it? John checked the body against the photograph, a passing resemblance to his younger daughter, Patsy. He handed the picture to Ding. He wondered if the lad would make the same connection.

"It's her."

"Concur, John," Chavez observed huskily. "It's her." Pause. "Shit," he concluded quietly, examining the face for a long moment that made his face twist with anger. *So*, Clark thought, *he sees it too.*

"Got a camera?"

"Yeah." Ding pulled a compact 35mm out of his pants pocket. "Play cop?"

"That's right."

Clark stooped down to examine the body. It was frustrating. He wasn't a pathologist, and though he had much knowledge of death, more knowledge still was needed to do this right. There . . . in the vein on the top of her foot, a single indentation. Not much more than that. So she'd been on drugs? If so, she'd been a careful user, John thought. She'd always cleaned the needle and . . . He looked around the room. There. A bottle of alcohol and a plastic bag of cotton swabs, and a bag of plastic syringes.

"I don't see any other needle marks."

"They don't always show, man," Chavez observed.

Clark sighed and untied the kimono, opening it. She'd been wearing nothing under it.

"Fuck!" Chavez rasped. There was fluid inside her thighs.

"That's a singularly unsuitable thing to say," Clark whispered back. It was as close as he'd come to losing his temper in many years. "*Take your pictures*."

Ding didn't answer. The camera flashed and whirred away. He recorded the scene as a forensic photographer might have done. Clark then started to rearrange the kimono, uselessly giving the girl back whatever dignity that death and men had failed to rob from her.

"Wait a minute . . . left hand."

Clark examined it. One nail was broken. All the others were medium-long, evenly coated with a neutral polish. He examined the others. There was something under them.

"Scratched somebody?" Clark asked.

"See anyplace she scratched herself, Mr. C?" Ding asked.

"No."

"Then she wasn't alone when it happened, man. Check her ankles again," Chavez said urgently.

On the left one, the foot with the puncture, the underside of the ankle revealed bruises almost concealed by the building lividity. Chavez shot his last frame.

"I thought so."

"Tell me why later. We're out of here," John said, standing.

Within less than a minute they were out the back door, down the meandering alley, and back on a main thoroughfare to wait for their car.

"That was close," Chavez observed as the police car pulled up to Number 18. There was a TV crew fifteen seconds behind.

"Don't you just love it? They're going to tie up everything real nice and neat . . . What is it, Ding?"

"Ain't right, Mr. C. Supposed to look like an OD, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You OD on smack, man, it just stops. Boom, bye-bye. I seen a guy go out like that back in the old days, never got the sticker out of his arm, okay? Heart stops, lungs stop, gone. You don't get up and set the needle down and then lay back down, okay? Bruises on the leg. Somebody stuck her. She was murdered, John. And probably she was raped, too."

"I saw the paraphernalia. All U.S.-made. Nice setup. They close the case,

blame the girl and her family, give their own people an object lesson." Clark looked over as the car pulled around the corner. "Good eye, Ding."

"Thanks, boss." Chavez fell silent again, his anger building now that he had nothing to do but think it over. "You know, I'd really like to meet that guy."

"We won't."

Time for a little perverse fantasy: "I know, but I used to be a Ninja, remember? It might be real fun, especially barehanded."

"That just breaks bones, pretty often your own bones."

"I'd like to see his eyes when it happens."

"So put a good scope on the rifle," Clark advised.

"True," Chavez conceded. "What kind of person gets off on that, Mr. C?"

"One sick motherfucker, Domingo. I met a few, once."

Just before they got into the car, Ding's black eyes locked on Clark.

"Maybe I will meet this one personally, John. *El fado* can play tricks. Funny ones."

"Where is she?" Nomuri asked from behind the wheel.

"Drive," Clark told him.

"You should have heard the speech," Chet said, moving up the street and wondering what had gone wrong.

"The girl's dead," Ryan told the President barely two hours later, 1:00 P.M., Washington time.

"Natural causes?" Durling asked.

"Drug overdose, probably not self-administered. They have photos. We ought to have them in thirty-six hours. Our guys just got clear in time. The Japanese police showed up pretty fast."

"Wait a minute. Back up. You're saying murder?"

"That's what our people think, yes, Mr. President."

"Do they know enough to make that evaluation?"

Ryan took his seat and decided that he had to explain a little bit. "Sir, our senior officer knows a few things about the subject, yes."

"That was nicely phrased," the President noted dryly. "I don't want to know any more about that subject, do I?"

"No reason for it right now, sir, no."

"Goto?"

"Possibly one of his people. Actually the best indicator will be how their police report it. If anything they tell us is at variance with what we've learned from our own people, then we'll know that somebody played with the data, and not all that many people have the ability to order changes in police reports." Jack paused for a moment. "Sir, I've had another independent evaluation of the man's character." He went on to repeat Kris Hunter's story.

"You're telling me that you believe he had this young girl killed, and will use his police to cover it up? And you already knew he likes that sort of thing?" Durling flushed. "You wanted me to extend this bastard an olive branch? What the hell's the matter with you?"

Jack took a deep breath. "Okay, yes, Mr. President, I had that coming. The question is, now what do we do?"

Durling's face changed. "You didn't deserve that, sorry."

"Actually I do deserve it, Mr. President. I could have told Mary Pat to get her out some time ago—but I didn't," Ryan observed bleakly. "I didn't see this one coming."

"We never do, Jack. Now what?"

"We can't tell the legal attaché at the embassy because we don't 'know' about this yet, but I think we prep the FBI to check things out after we're officially notified. I can call Dan Murray about that."

"Shaw's designated hitter?"

Ryan nodded. "Dan and I go back a ways. For the political side, I'm not sure. The transcript of his TV speech just came in. Before you read it, well, you need to know what sort of fellow we're dealing with."

"Tell me, how many common *bastards* like that run countries?"

"You know that better than I do, sir." Jack thought about that for a moment. "It's not entirely a bad thing. People like that are weak, Mr. President. Cowards, when you get down to it. If you have to have enemies, better that they have weaknesses."

He might make a state visit, Durling thought. *We might have to put him up at Blair House, right across the street. Throw a state dinner: we'll walk out into the East Room and make pretty speeches, and toast each other, and shake hands as though we're bosom buddies. Be damned to that!* He lifted the folder with Goto's speech and skimmed through it.

"That son of a bitch! '*America will have to understand* ,' my ass!"

"Anger, Mr. President, isn't an effective way of dealing with problems."

"You're right," Durling admitted. He was silent for a moment, then he smiled in a crooked way. "You're the one with the hot temper, as I recall."

Ryan nodded. "I've been accused of that, yes, sir."

"Well, that's two big ones we have to deal with when we get back from Moscow."

"Three, Mr. President. We need to decide what to do about India and Sri Lanka." Jack could see from the look on Durling's face that the President had allowed himself to forget about that one.

Durling had allowed himself to semiforget another problem as well.

"How much *longer* will I have to wait?" Ms. Linders demanded.

Murray could see her pain even more clearly than he heard it. How did you explain this to people? Already the victim of a vile crime, she'd gotten it out in the open, baring her soul for all manner of strangers. The process hadn't been fun for anyone, but least of all for her. Murray was a skilled and experienced investigator. He knew how to console, encourage, chivvy information out of people. He'd been the first FBI agent to listen to her story, in the process becoming as much a part of her mental-health team as Dr. Golden. After that had come another pair of agents, a man and a woman who specialized more closely in cases of this type. After them had come two separate psychiatrists, whose questioning had necessarily been somewhat adversarial, both to establish finally that her story was true in all details and to give her a taste of the hostility she would encounter.

Along the way, Murray realized, Barbara Linders had become even more of a victim than she'd been before. She'd built her self up, first, to reveal herself to Clarice, then again to do the same with Murray, then again, and yet once more still. Now she looked forward to the worst ordeal of all, for some of the members of the Judiciary Committee were allies of Ed Kealty, and some would take it upon themselves to hammer the witness hard either to curry favor with the cameras or to demonstrate their impartiality and professionalism as lawyers. Barbara knew that. Murray had himself walked her through the expected ordeal, even hitting her with the most awful of questions—always preceded with as gentle a preamble as possible, like, "One of the things you can expect to be asked is—"

It took its toll, and a heavy toll at that. Barbara—they were too close now for him to think of her as Ms. Linders—had shown all the courage one could expect of a crime victim and more besides. But courage was not something one picked out of the air. It was something like a bank account. You could withdraw only so much before it was necessary to stop, to take the time to make new deposits. Just the waiting, the not knowing when she would have to take her seat in the committee room and make her opening statement in front of bright TV lights, the certainty that she would have to bare her soul for the entire world . . . it was like a robber coming into the bank night after night to steal from her hard-won accumulation of inner resolve.

It was hard enough for Murray. He had built his case, had the prosecutor lined up, but he was the one close to her. It was *his* mission, Murray told himself, to show this lady that men were not like Ed Kealty, that a man was as repulsed by such acts as women were. He was her knight-errant. The disgrace and ultimate imprisonment of that criminal was now his mission in life even more than it was hers.

"Barb, you have to hang in there, kid. We're going to get this bastard, but we can't do it the right way unless . . ." He mouthed the words, putting conviction he didn't feel into them. Since when did politics enter into a criminal case? The law had been violated. They had their witnesses, their physical evidence, but now they were stuck in a holding pattern that was as damaging to this victim as any defense lawyer might be.

"It's taking too long!"

"Two more weeks, maybe three, and we go to bat, Barb."

"Look, I *know* something is happening, okay? You think I'm dumb? He's not out making speeches and opening bridges and stuff now, is he? Somebody told him and he's building up his case, isn't he?"

"I think what's happening is that the President is deliberately holding him in close so that when this does break, he won't be able to fall back on a high public profile as a defense. The President is on our side, Barb. I've briefed him in on this case myself, and he said, 'A criminal is a criminal,' and that's *exactly* what he should have said."

Her eyes came up to meet his. They were moist and desperate. "I'm coming apart, Dan."

"No, Barb, you're not," Murray lied. "You're one tough, smart, brave lady. You're going to come through this. He's the one who's going to come apart." Daniel E. Murray, Deputy Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau of

Investigation, reached his hand across the table. Barbara Linders took it, squeezing it as a child might with her father, forcing herself to believe and to trust, and it shamed him that she was paying such a price because the President of the United States had to subordinate a criminal case to a question of politics. Perhaps it made sense in the great scheme of things, but for a cop the great scheme of things usually came down to one crime and one victim.

16

Payloads

The final step in arming the H-11/SS-19 missiles necessarily had to await official word from the nation's Prime Minister. In some ways the final payoff was something of a disappointment. They had originally hoped to affix a full complement of warheads, at least six each, to the nose of each bird, but to do that would have meant actually testing the trans-stage bus in flight, and *that* was just a little too dangerous. The covert nature of the project was far more important than the actual number of warheads, those in authority had decided. And they could always correct it at a later date. They'd deliberately left the top end of the Russian design intact for that very reason, and for the moment a total of 10 one-megaton warheads would have to do.

One by one, the individual silos were opened by the support crew, and one by one the oversized RVs were lifted off the flatcar, set in place, then covered with their aerodynamic shrouds. Again the Russian design served their purposes very well indeed. Each such operation took just over an hour, which allowed the entire procedure to be accomplished in a single night by the crew of twenty. The silos were resealed, and it was done; their country was now a nuclear power.

"Amazing," Goto observed.

"Actually very simple," Yamata replied. "The government funded the fabrication and testing of the 'boosters' as part of our space program. The plutonium came from the Monju reactor complex. Designing and building the warheads was child's play. If some Arabs can do a crude warhead in a cave in Lebanon, how hard can it be for our technicians?" In fact, everything but the warhead-fabrication process had been government funded in one way or another, and Yamata was sure that the informal consortium that had done the latter would be compensated as well. Had they not done it all for their country? "We will immediately commence training for the Self-Defense Force personnel to take over from our own people—once you assign them to us for that purpose, Goto-san."

"But the Americans and the Russians . . . ?"

Yamata snorted. "They are down to one missile each, and those will be officially blown up this week, as we will all see on television. As you know, their missile submarines have been deactivated. Their Trident missiles are already all gone, and the submarines are lined up awaiting dismantlement. A mere ten working ICBMs give us a marked strategic advantage."

"But what if they try to build more?"

"They can't—not very easily," Yamata corrected himself. "The production lines have been closed down, and in accordance with the treaty, the tooling has all been destroyed under international inspection. To start over would take months, and we would find out very quickly. Our next important step is to launch a major naval-construction program"—for which Yamata's yards were ready—"so that our supremacy in the Western Pacific will be unassailable. For the moment, with luck and the help of our friends, we will have enough to see us through. Before they will be able to challenge us, our strategic position will have improved to the point where they will have to accept our position and then treat us as equals."

"So I must now give the order?"

"Yes, Prime Minister," Yamata replied, again explaining to the man his job function.

Goto rubbed his hands together for a moment and looked down at the ornate desk so newly his. Ever the weak man, he temporized. "It is true, my Kimba was a drug addict?"

Yamata nodded soberly, inwardly enraged at the remark. "Very sad, is it not? My own chief of security, Kaneda, found her dead and called the police. It seems that she was very careful about it, but not careful enough."

Goto sighed quietly. "Foolish child. Her father is a policeman, you know. A very stern man, she said. He didn't understand her. I did," Goto said. "She was a kind, gentle spirit. She would have made a fine geisha."

It was amazing how people transformed in death, Yamata thought coldly. That foolish, shameless girl had defied her parents and tried to make her own way in the world, only to find that the world was not tolerant of the unprepared. But because she'd had the ability to give Goto the illusion that he was a man, now she was a kind and gentle spirit.

"Goto-san, can we allow the fate of our nation to be decided by people like that?"

"No." The new Prime Minister lifted his phone. He had to consult a sheet on his desk for the proper number. "Climb Mount Niitaka," he said when the connection was made, repeating an order that had been given more than fifty years earlier.

In many ways the plane was singular, but in others quite ordinary. The VC-25B was in fact the Air Force's version of the venerable Boeing 747 airliner. A craft with fully thirty years of history in its design, and still in serial production at the plant outside Seattle, it was painted in colors that had been chosen by a politically selected decorator to give the proper impression to foreign countries, whatever that was. Sitting alone on the concrete ramp, it was surrounded by uniformed security personnel "with authorization," in the dry Pentagonese, to use their M 16 rifles far more readily than uniformed guards at most other federal installations. It was a more polite way of saying, "Shoot first and ask questions later."

There was no jetway. People had to climb stairs into the aircraft, just as in the 1950s, but there was still a metal detector, and you still had to check your baggage—this time to Air Force and Secret Service personnel who X-rayed

everything and opened much of it for visual inspection.

"I hope you left your Victoria's Secret stuff at home," Jack observed with a chuckle as he hoisted the last bag on the counter.

"You'll find out when we get to Moscow," Professor Ryan replied with an impish wink. It was her first state trip, and everything at Andrews Air Force Base was new for her.

"Hello, Dr. Ryan! We finally meet." Helen D'Agustino came over and extended her hand.

"Cathy, this is the world's prettiest bodyguard," Jack said, introducing the Secret Service agent to his wife.

"I couldn't make the last state dinner," Cathy explained. "There was a seminar up at Harvard."

"Well, this trip ought to be pretty exciting," the Secret Service agent said, taking her leave smoothly to continue her duties.

Not as exciting was my last one, Jack thought, remembering another story that he couldn't relate to anyone.

"Where's she keep her gun?" Cathy asked.

"I've never searched her for it, honey," Jack said with a wink of his own.

"Do we go aboard now?"

"I can go aboard whenever I want," her husband replied. "Color me important." So much the better to board early and show her around, he decided, heading her toward the door. Designed to carry upwards of three hundred passengers in its civilian incarnation, the President's personal 747 (there was another backup aircraft, of course) was outfitted to hold a third of that number in stately comfort. Jack first showed his wife where they would be sitting, explaining that the pecking order was very clear. The closer you were to the front of the aircraft, the more important you were. The President's accommodations were in the nose, where two couches could convert into beds. The Ryans and the van Damms would be in the next area, twenty feet or so aft in a space that could seat eight, but only five in this case. Joining them would be the President's Director of Communications, a harried and usually frantic former TV executive named Tish Brown, recently divorced. Lesser staff members were sorted aft in diminishing importance until you got to the media, deemed less important still.

"This is the kitchen?" Cathy asked.

"Galley," Jack corrected. It was impressive, as were the meals prepared here, actually *cooked* from fresh ingredients and not reheated as was the way on airliners.

"It's bigger than ours!" she observed, to the amused pleasure of the chief cook, an Air Force master sergeant.

"Not quite, but the chef's better, aren't you, Sarge?"

"I'll turn my back now. You can slug him, ma'am. I won't tell."

Cathy merely laughed at the jibe. "Why isn't he upstairs in the lounge?"

"That's almost all communications gear. The President likes to wander up there to talk to the crew, but the guys who live there are mainly cryppies."

"Cryppies?"

"Communications guys," Jack explained, leading his wife back to their seats. The seats were beige leather, extra wide and extra soft, with recently added

swing-up TV screens, personal phones, and other features which Cathy started to catalog, down to the presidential seal on the belt-buckles.

"Now I know what first-class really means."

"It's still an eleven-hour flight, babe," Jack observed, settling in while others boarded. With luck he'd be able to sleep most of the way.

The President's televised departure statement followed its own pattern. The microphone was always set up so that Air Force One loomed in the background, to remind everyone of who he was and to prove it by showing his personal plane. Roy Newton watched more for timing than anything else. Statements like this never amounted to much, and only C-SPAN carried them at all, though the network newsies were always there with cameras in case the airplane blew up on takeoff. Concluding his remarks, Durling took his wife, Anne, by the arm and walked to the stairs, where a sergeant saluted. At the door of the aircraft, the President and the First Lady turned to give a final wave as though already on the campaign trail—in a very real way this trip was part of that almost-continuous process—then went inside. C-SPAN switched back to the floor of the House, where various junior members were giving brief speeches under special orders. The President would be in the air for eleven hours, Newton knew, more time than he needed.

It was time to go to work.

The ancient adage was true enough, he thought, arranging his notes. If more than one person knew it, it wasn't a secret at all. Even less so if you both knew part of it and also knew who knew the rest, because then you could sit down over dinner and let on that you knew, and the other person would think that you knew it all, and would then tell you the parts you hadn't learned quite yet. The right smiles, nods, grunts, and a few carefully selected words would keep your source going until it was all there in plain sight. Newton supposed it was not terribly different for spies. Perhaps he would have been a good one, but it didn't pay any better than his stint in Congress—not even as well, in fact—and he'd long since decided to apply his talent to something that could make him a decent living,

The rest of the game was a lot easier. You had to select the right person to give the information to, and that choice was made merely by reading the local papers carefully. Every reporter had a hot-button item, something for which he or she had a genuinely passionate interest, and for that reason reporters were no different from anyone else. If you knew what buttons to push, you could manipulate anyone. What a pity it hadn't quite worked with the people in his district, Newton thought, lifting the phone and punching the buttons.

"Libby Holtzman."

"Hi, Libby, this is Roy. How are things?"

"A little slow," she allowed, wondering if her husband, Bob, would get anything good on the Moscow trip with the presidential party.

"How about dinner?" He knew that her husband was away.

"What about?" she asked. She knew it wasn't a tryst or something similarly foolish. Newton was a player, and usually had something interesting to tell.

"It'll be worth your time," he promised. "Jockey Club, seven-thirty?"

"I'll be there."

Newton smiled. It was all fair play, wasn't it? He'd lost his congressional seat on the strength of an accusation about influence-peddling. It hadn't been strong enough to have merited prosecution (someone else had influenced that), but it had been enough, barely, to persuade 50.7 percent of the voters in that off-year election that someone else should have the chance to represent them. In a presidential-election year, Newton thought, he would almost certainly have eked out a win, but congressional seats once lost are almost never regained.

It could have been much worse. This life wasn't so bad, was it? He'd kept the same house, kept his kids in the same school, then moved them on to good colleges, kept his membership in the same country club. He just had a different constituency now, no ethics laws to trouble his mind about—not that they ever had, really—and it sure as hell paid a lot better, didn't it?

DATELINE PARTNERS was being run out via computer-satellite relay—three of them, in fact. The Japanese Navy was linking all of its data to its fleet-operations center in Yokohama. The U.S. Navy did the same into Fleet-Ops at Pearl Harbor. Both headquarters offices used a third link to swap their own pictures. The umpires who scored the exercise in both locations thus had access to everything, but the individual fleet commanders did not. The purpose of the game was to give both sides realistic battle training, for which reason cheating was not encouraged—"cheating" was a concept by turns foreign and integral with the fighting of wars, of course.

Pacific Fleet's type commanders, the admirals in charge of the surface, air, submarine, and service forces, respectively, watched from their chairs as the game unfolded, each wondering how his underlings would perform.

"Sato's no dummy, is he?" Commander Chambers noted.

"The boy's got some beautiful moves," Dr. Jones opined. A senior contractor with his own "special-access" clearance, he'd been allowed into the center on Mancuso's parole. "But it isn't going to help him up north."

"Oh?" SubPac turned and smiled. "You know something I don't?"

"The sonar departments on *Charlotte* and *Asheville* are damned good, Skipper. My people worked with them to set up the new tracking software, remember?"

"The CO's aren't bad either," Mancuso pointed out.

Jones nodded agreement. "You bet, sir. They know how to listen, just like you did."

"God," Chambers breathed, looking down at the new four-ring shoulder boards and imagining he could feel the added weight. "Admiral, you ever wonder how we would have made it without Jonesy here?"

"We had Chief Laval with us, remember?" Mancuso said.

"Frenchy's son is the lead sonarman on *Asheville*, Mr. Chambers." For Jones, Mancuso would always be "skipper" and Chambers would always be a lieutenant. Neither officer objected. It was one of the rules of the naval service that bonded officers and (in this case, former) enlisted personnel.

"I didn't know that," SubPac admitted.

"Just joined up with her. He was on *Tennessee* before. Very sharp kid, made first-class three years out of his A-school."

"That's faster than you did it," Chambers observed. "Is he that good?"

"Sure as hell. I'm trying to recruit him for my business. He got married last year, has a kid on the way. It shouldn't be too hard to bribe him out into civilian life."

"Thanks a lot, Jonesy," Mancuso growled. "I oughta kick your ass outa here."

"Oh, come on, Skipper. When's the last time we got together for some real fun?" In addition to which, Jones's new whale-hunting software had been incorporated in what was left of the Pacific SOSUS system. "About time for an update."

The fact that both sides had observers in the other's headquarters was something of a complication, largely because there were assets and capabilities in both cases that were not strictly speaking shared. In this case, SOSUS-generated traces that might or might not be the Japanese submarine force northwest of Kure were actually better than what appeared on the main plotting board. The real traces were given to Mancuso and Chambers. Each side had two submarines. Neither American boat showed up on the traces, but the Japanese boats were conventionally powered, and had to go periodically to snorkeling depth in order to run their diesels and recharge their batteries. Though the Japanese submarines had their own version of the American Prairie-Masker systems, Jones's new software had gone a long way to defeat that countermeasure. Mancuso and the rest retired to the SubPac plotting room to examine the newest data.

"Okay, Jonesy, tell me what you see," Mancuso ordered, looking at the paper printouts from the underwater hydrophones that littered the bottom of the Pacific.

The data was displayed both electronically on TV-type displays and on fan-fold paper of the sort once used for computer printouts for more detailed analysis. For work like this, the latter was preferred, and there were two sets. One of them had already been marked up by the oceanographic technicians of the local SOSUS detachment. To make this a double-blind analysis, and to see if Jones still knew how, Mancuso kept separate the set already analyzed by his people.

Still short of forty, Jones had gray already in his thick dark hair, though he chewed gum now instead of smoking. The intensity was still there, Mancuso saw. Dr. Ron Jones flipped pages like an accountant on the trail of embezzlement, his finger tracing down the vertical lines on which frequencies were recorded.

"We assume that they'll snort every eight hours or so?" he asked.

"That's the smart thing, to keep their batteries fully charged," Chambers agreed with a nod.

"What time are they operating on?" Jones asked. Typically, American submarines at sea adjusted their clocks to Greenwich Mean Time—recently changed to "Universal Time" with the diminution of the Royal Navy, whose power had once allowed the prime meridian to be defined by the British.

"I presume Tokyo," Mancuso replied. "That's us minus five."

"So we start looking for patterns, midnight and even hours their time." There were five of the wide-folded sheets. Jones flipped one complete set at a time, noting the time references in the margins. It took him ten minutes.

"Here's one, and here's another. These two are possible. This one's also possible, but I don't think so. I'll put money down on this one . . . and this one for starters." His fingers tapped on seemingly random lines of dots.

"Wally?"

Chambers turned to the other table and flipped the marked-up sets to the proper time settings. "Jonesy, you fuckin' witch!" he breathed. It had taken a team of skilled technicians—experts all——over two hours to do what Jones had accomplished in a few minutes before their again-incredulous eyes.

The civilian contractor pulled a can of Coke from the nearby cooler and popped it open. "Gentlemen," he asked, "who's the all-time champ?"

That was only part of it, of course. The printouts merely gave bearing to a suspected noise source, but there were several of the bottom-sited SOSUS arrays, and triangulation had already been accomplished, nailing the datum points down to radii of ten to fifteen nautical miles. Even with Jones's improvements in the system, that still left a lot of ocean to search.

The phone rang. It was Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet. Mancuso took the call and made his recommendations for vectoring *Charlotte* and *Asheville* onto the suspected contacts. Jones observed the exchange and nodded approval.

"See what I mean, Skipper? You always did know how to listen."

* * *

Murray had been out discussing a few budgetary matters with the Assistant-Director-in-Charge of the Washington Field Office, therefore missing the phone call. The top-secret dispatch from the White House was tucked away in secure files, and then his secretary had been called out to bring a sick child home from school. As a result, the handwritten message from Ryan had been unconscionably late in coming to his attention.

"The Norton girl," he said, walking into Director Shaw's office.

"Bad?"

"Dead," Murray said, handing the paper over. Shaw scanned it quickly.

"Shit," the FBI Director whispered. "Did she have a prior history of drug use?"

"Not that I recall."

"Word from Tokyo?"

"I haven't checked in with the Leg-At yet. Bad timing for that, Bill."

Shaw nodded, and the thought in his mind was transparent. Ask any FBI agent for the case he bragged about, and it is always kidnapping. It was really how the Bureau had made its name back in the 1930s. The Lindbergh Law had empowered the FBI to assist any local police force as soon as the possibility existed that the victim could have been taken across a state line. With the mere possibility—the victims were rarely actually transported so far—the whole weight and power of America's premier law-enforcement agency

descended on the case like a pack of especially hungry wolves. The real mission was always the same: to get the victim back alive, and there the results were excellent. The secondary objective was to apprehend, charge, and try the subjects in question, and there the record, statistically speaking, was better still. They didn't know yet if Kimberly Norton had been a kidnap victim. They did know that she would be coming home dead. That single fact, for any FBI agent, was a professional failure.

"Her father's a cop."

"I remember, Dan."

"I want to go out there and talk it over with O'Keefe." Part of it was because Captain Norton deserved to hear it from other cops, not through the media. Part of it was because the cops on the case *had* to do it, to admit their failure to him. And part of it would be for Murray to take a look at the case file himself, to be sure for himself that all that might have been done, had been done.

"I can probably spare you for a day or two," Shaw replied. "The Linders case is going to wait until the President gets back anyway. Okay, get packed."

"This is better than the Concorde!" Cathy gushed at the Air Force corporal who served dinner. Her husband almost laughed. It wasn't often that Caroline Ryan's eyes went quite so wide, but then he was long accustomed to this sort of service, and the food was certainly better than she customarily ate in the Hopkins physicians' dining room. And there the plates didn't have gold trim, one of the reasons that Air Force One had so much pilferage.

"Wine for madam?" Ryan lifted the bottle of Russian River chardonnay and poured as his plate came down.

"We don't drink wine on the chicken farm, you see," she told the corporal with a small measure of embarrassment.

"Everybody's this way the first time, Dr. Ryan. If you need anything, please buzz me." She headed back to the galley.

"See, Cathy, I told you, stick with me."

"I wondered how you got used to flying," she noted, tasting the broccoli. "Fresh."

"The flight crew's pretty good, too." He gestured to the wineglasses. Not a ripple.

"The pay isn't all that great," Arnie van Damm said from the other side of the compartment, "but the perks ain't too bad."

"The blackened redfish isn't bad at all."

"Our chef stole the recipe from the Jockey Club. Best Cajun redfish in town," van Damm explained. "I think he had to trade his potato soup for it. Fair deal," Arnie judged.

* * *

"He gets the crust just right, doesn't he?"

One of Washington's few really excellent restaurants, the Jockey Club was located in the basement of the Ritz Carlton Hotel on Massachusetts Avenue. A quiet, dimly lit establishment, it had for many years been a place for "power" meals of one sort or another.

All the food here is good, Libby Holtzman thought, especially when someone else paid for it. The previous hour had handled all manner of small talk, the usual exchange of information and gossip that was even more important in Washington than most American cities. That was over now. The wine was served, the salad plates gone, and the main course on the table. "So, Roy, what's the big item?"

"Ed Kealty." Newton looked up to watch her eyes.

"Don't tell me, his wife is finally going to leave the rat?"

"He's probably going to be the one leaving, as a matter of fact."

"Who's the unlucky bimbo?" Mrs. Holtzman asked with a wry smile.

"Not what you think, Libby. Ed's going away." You always wanted to make them wait for it.

"Roy, it's eight-thirty, okay?" Libby observed, making her position clear.

"The FBI has a case running on Kealty. Rape. More than one, in fact. One of the victims killed herself."

"Lisa Beringer?" The reason for her suicide had never been adequately explained.

"She left a letter behind. The FBI has it now. They also have several other women who are willing to testify."

"Wow," Libby Holtzman allowed herself to say. She set her fork down. "How solid is this?"

"The man running the case is Dan Murray, Shaw's personal attack dog."

"I know Dan. I also know he won't talk about this." You rarely got an FBI agent to discuss evidentiary matters in a criminal case, certainly not before it was presented. That sort of leak almost always came from an attorney or court clerk. "He doesn't just do things by the book—he *wrote* the book." It was literally true. Murray had helped draft many of the Bureau's official procedures.

"He might, this one time."

"Why, Roy?"

"Because Durling is holding things up. He thinks he needs Kealty for his clout on the Hill. You notice that Eddie-boy has been in the White House a lot lately? Durling spilled it all to him so that he can firm up his defense. At least," Newton said to cover himself, "that's what people are telling me. It does seem a little out of character, doesn't it?"

"Obstruction of justice?"

"That's the legal term, Libby. Technically speaking, well, I'm not quite sure it meets the legal test." Now the hook was well in the water, and the bait worm was wiggling very nicely.

"What if he was just holding it off to keep it from competing with the trade bill?" The fish was giving it a look, but wondering about the shiny, barbed thing behind the worm. . . .

"This one goes back further than that, Libby. They've been sitting on it for quite a while, that's what I hear. It does make a great excuse, though, doesn't

it?" It was a very enticing worm, though.

"If you think politics takes precedence over a sexual-assault case. How solid is the case?"

"If it goes in front of a jury, Ed Kealty is going to spend time in a federal penitentiary."

"That solid?" My, what a juicy fat worm it was.

"Like you said, Murray's a good cop."

"Who's the U.S. Attorney on the case?"

"Anne Cooper. She's been full-time on this for weeks." One hell of a good worm, in fact. That barbed, shiny thing wasn't all that dangerous, was it?

Newton took an envelope from his pocket and set it on the tablecloth. "Names, numbers, details, but you didn't get them from me, okay?" The worm appeared to dance in the water, and it was no longer apparent that the hook was the thing really moving.

"What if I can't verify anything?"

"Then there's no story, and my sources are wrong, and I hope you enjoyed dinner." Of course, the worm might just go away.

"Why, Roy? Why you, why the story?" Circling, circling. But how did this worm ever get here?

"I've never liked the guy. You know that. We butted heads on two big irrigation bills, and he killed a defense project in my state. But you really want to know why? Ihave daughters, Libby. One's a senior at U-Penn. Another one's just starting University of Chicago Law School. They both want to follow in their dad's footsteps, and I don't want my little girls staffing on the Hill with *bastards* like Ed Kealty around." Who really cared how the worm got in the water, anyway?

With a knowing nod, Libby Holtzman took the envelope. It went into her purse without being opened. Amazing how they never noticed the hook until it was too late. Sometimes not even then. The waiter was disappointed when both diners passed on the dessert cart, settling for just a quick espresso before paying the bill.

"Hello?"

"Barbara Linders?" a female voice asked.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"Libby Holtzman from the *Post*. I live a few blocks away from you. I'd like to know if I might come over and talk about a few things."

"What things?"

"Ed Kealty, and why they've decided not to prosecute the case."

"They *what?*"

"That's what we're hearing," the voice told her.

"Wait a minute. They warned me about this," Linders said suspiciously, already giving part of the game away.

"They always warn you about something, usually the wrong thing. Remember, I was the one who did the story last year about Congressman Grant and that nasty little thing he had going on in his district office? And I was also the one who nailed that bastard undersecretary in Interior. I keep a

close eye on cases like this, Barbara," the voice said, sister-to-sister. It was true. Libby Holtzman had nearly bagged a Pulitzer for her reporting on political sex-abuse cases.

"How do I know it's really you?"

"You've seen me on TV, right? Ask me over and you'll see. I can be there in five minutes."

"I'm going to call Mr. Murray."

"That's fine. Go ahead and call him, but promise me one thing?"

"What's that?"

"If he tells you the same thing about why they're not doing anything, then we can talk." The voice paused. "In fact, how about I come over right now anyway? If Dan tells you the right thing, we can just have a cup of coffee and do some background stuff for later. Fair enough?"

"Okay . . . I guess that's okay. I have to call Mr. Murray now." Barbara Linders hung up and dialed another number from memory.

"Hi, this is Dan—"

"Mr. Murray!" Barbara said urgently, her faith in the world so badly shaken already.

"—and this is Liz," another voice said, obviously now on tape. "We can't come to the phone right now . . ." both voices said together—

"Where are you when I need you?" Ms. Linders demanded of the recording machine, hanging up in a despairing fury before the humorous recording delivered her to the beep. Was it possible? Could it be true?

This is Washington, her experience told her. *Anything could be true.*

Barbara Linders looked around the room. She'd been in Washington for eleven years. What did she have to show for it? A one-bedroom apartment with prints on the wall. Nice furniture that she used alone. Memories that threatened her sanity. She was so alone, so damned alone with them, and she had to let them go, get them out, strike back at the man who had wrecked her life so thoroughly. And now that would be denied her, too? Was it possible? The most frightening thing of all was that Lisa had felt this way. She knew that from the letter she'd kept, a photocopy of which was still in the jewelry box on her bureau. She'd kept it both as a keepsake of her best friend and to remind herself not to go as dangerously far into despair as Lisa had. Reading that letter a few months ago had persuaded her to open up to her gynecologist, who had in turn referred her to Clarice Golden, starting the process that had led her—where? The door buzzed then, and Barbara went to answer it.

"Hi! Recognize me?" The question was delivered with a warm and sympathetic smile. Libby Holtzman was a tall woman with thick ebony hair that framed a pale face and warm brown eyes.

"Please come in," Barbara said, backing away from the door.

"Did you call Dan?"

"He wasn't home . . . or maybe he just left the machine on," Barbara thought. "You know him?"

"Oh, yes. Dan's an acquaintance," Libby said, heading toward the couch.

"Can I trust him? I mean, *really* trust him."

"Honestly?" Holtzman paused. "Yes. If he were running the case all by

himself, yes, you could. Dan's a good man. I mean that."

"But he's not running the case by himself, is he?"

Libby shook her head. "It's too big, too political. The other thing about Murray is, well, he's a very loyal man. He does what he's told. Can I sit down, Barbara?"

"Please." Both sat on the couch.

"You know what the press does? It's our job to keep an eye on things. I like Dan. I admire him. He really is a good cop, an honest cop, and I'll bet you that everything he's done with you, well, he's acted like your big tough brother, hasn't he?"

"Every step of the way," Barbara confirmed. "He's been my best friend in all the world."

"That wasn't a lie. He's one of the good guys. I know his wife, Liz, too. The problem is, not everyone is like Dan, and that's where we come in," Libby told her.

"How do you mean?"

"When somebody tells a guy like Dan what he has to do, mostly they do it. They do it because they have to, because that's what the rules are—and you know something? He hates it, almost as much as you do. My job, Barbara, is to help people like Dan, because I can get the bastards off their backs, too."

"I can't . . . I mean, I just can't—"

Libby reached out and stopped her with a gentle touch on the hand.

"I'm not going to ask you to give me anything on the record, Barbara. That could mess up the criminal case, and you know I want this one to be handled through the system just as much as you do. But can you talk to me off the record?"

"Yes! . . . I think so."

"Do you mind if I record this?" The reporter pulled a small recorder from her purse.

"Who will hear it?"

"The only other person will be my AME—assistant managing editor. We do that to make sure that we have good sources. Except for that, it's like talking to your lawyer or doctor or minister. Those are the rules, and we never break them."

Intellectually speaking, Barbara knew that, but here and now in her apartment, the ethical rules of journalism seemed a thin reed. Libby Holtzman could see it in her eyes.

"If you want, I can just leave, or we can talk without the recorder, but"—a disarming smile—"I hate taking shorthand. You make mistakes that way. If you want to think about it a little while, that's okay, too. You've had enough pressure. I know that. I know what this can be like."

"That's what Dan says, but he *doesn't!* He doesn't *really* ."

Libby Holtzman looked straight into her eyes. She wondered if Murray had seen the same pain and felt it as deeply as she did now. Probably so, she thought, quite honestly, probably in a slightly different way, because he was a man, but he *was* a good cop, and he was probably just as mad about the way the case was going as she now felt.

"Barbara, if you just want to talk about . . . things, that's okay, too.

Sometimes we just need a friend to talk to. I don't have to be a reporter all the time."

"Do you know about Lisa?"

"Her death was never really explained, was it?"

"We were best friends, we shared everything . . . and then when he—"

"Are you sure Kealty was involved with that?"

"I'm the one who found the letter, Libby."

"What can you tell me about that?" Holtzman asked, unable to restrain her journalistic focus now.

"I can do better than tell you." Linders rose and disappeared for a moment. She returned with the photocopies and handed them over.

It only took two minutes to read the letter once and then once again. Date, place, method. *A message from beyond the grave,* Libby thought. What was more dangerous than ink on paper?

"For what's on here, and what you know, he could go to prison, Barbara."

"That's what Dan says. He smiles when he says it. He wants it to happen."

"Do you?" Holtzman asked.

"Yes!"

"Then let me help."

17

Strike One

It's called the miracle of modern communications only because nothing modern is supposed to be a curse. In fact, those on the receiving end of such information were often appalled by what they got.

It had been a smooth flight, even by the standards of Air Force One, on which many passengers—mainly the younger and more foolish White House staffers—often refused to buckle their seat belts as a show of . . . something, Ryan thought. The Air Force flight crew was as good as any, he knew, but it hadn't prevented one incident on final at Andrews, where a thunderbolt had blown the nosecone off the aircraft carrying the Secretary of Defense and his wife, rather to everyone's discomfiture. And so he always kept his belt on, albeit loosely, just as the flight crew did.

"Dr. Ryan?" The whisper was accompanied by a shake of his shoulders.

"What is it, Sarge?" There was no sense in grumbling at an innocent NCO.

"Mr. van Damm needs you upstairs, sir."

Jack nodded and moved his seat to the upright position. The sergeant handed him a coffee mug on the way. A clock told him it was nine in the morning, but it didn't say *where* it was nine in the morning, and Ryan could not at the moment remember what zone the clock was set on. It was all theoretical anyway. How many time zones could dance inside an airliner?

The upper deck of the VC-25B contrasted sharply with the lower deck. Instead of plush appointments, the compartment here was lined with military-style electronics gear whose individual boxes had chromed bars for easy removal and replacement. A sizable team of communications specialists was always at work, tapped into every source of information one might imagine: digital radio, TV, and fax, every single channel encrypted. Arnie van Damm stood in the middle of the area, and handed something over. It turned out to be a facsimile copy of the *Washington Post*'s late edition, about to hit the street, four thousand miles and six hours away.

VICE PRESIDENT IMPLICATED IN SUICIDE, the four-column headline announced. FIVE WOMEN CHARGE EDWARD KEALTY WITH SEXUAL ABUSE.

"You woke me up for this?" Ryan asked. It was nowhere near his area of responsibility, was it?

"You're named in the story," Arnie told him.

"What?" Jack scanned the piece. " 'National Security Advisor Ryan is one of those briefed in on the affair.' Okay, I guess that's true, isn't it?"

"Keep going."

" 'The White House told the FBI four weeks ago not to present the case to the Judiciary Committee.' That's not true."

"This one's a beautiful combination of what is and what isn't." The Chief of Staff was in an even fouler mood than Ryan.

"Who leaked?"

"I don't know, but Libby Holtzman ran this piece, and her husband is sleeping aft. He likes you. Get him and talk to him."

"Wait a minute, this is something that a little time and truth will settle out, Arnie. The President hasn't done anything wrong that I know about."

"His political enemies can call the delay obstruction of justice."

"Come on." Jack shook his head in disbelief. "No way that would stand up to examination."

"It doesn't have to, damn it. We're talking politics, remember, not facts, and we have *elections* coming up. Talk to Bob Holtzman. Now," van Damm ordered. He didn't do it often with Ryan, but he did have the authority.

"Tell the Boss yet?" Jack asked, folding up his copy.

"We'll let him sleep for a while. Send Tish up on the way, will you?"

"Okay." Ryan headed back down and shook Tish Brown awake, pointed upstairs, then headed aft to a flight attendant—crew member, he corrected himself. "Get Bob Holtzman up here, will you?" Through an open port he could see that it was light outside. Maybe it was nine o'clock where they were going? Yeah, they were scheduled to arrive in Moscow at two in the afternoon, local time. The head cook was sitting in his galley, reading a copy of *Time*. Ryan went in and got his own coffee refill.

"Can't sleep, Dr. Ryan?"

"Not anymore. Duty calls."

"I have rolls baking, if you want."

"Great idea."

"What is it?" Bob Holtzman asked, sticking his head in. Like every man aboard at the moment, he needed a shave. Jack merely handed over the story.

"What gives?"

Holtzman was a fast reader. "Jesus, is this true?"

"How long has Libby been on this one?"

"It's news to me—oh, shit, sorry, Jack."

Ryan nodded with more smile than he felt. "Yeah, I just woke up, too."

"Is it true?"

"This is on background?"

"Agreed."

"The FBI's been running the case for some time now. The dates in Libby's piece are close, and I'd have to check my office logs for the exact ones. I got briefed in right around the time the trade thing blew up because of Kealty's security clearance—what I can tell him, what I can't, you know how that goes, right?"

"Yes, I understand. So what's the status of the case?"

"The chairman and ranking member of Judiciary have been briefed in. So have Al Trent and Sam Fellows on Intelligence. Nobody's putting a stopper on this one, Bob. To the best of my knowledge, the President's played a straight game the whole way. Kealty's going down, and after the impeachment proceedings, if it goes that far—"

"It *has* to go that far," Holtzman pointed out.

"I doubt it." Ryan shook his head. "If he gets a good lawyer, they'll cut some sort of deal. They have to, like it was with Agnew. If he goes through impeachment and then a Senate trial, God help him in front of a jury."

"Makes sense," Holtzman conceded. "You're telling me the meat of the story's wrong."

"Correct. If there's any obstruction going on, I don't know about it, and I *have* been briefed in on this."

"Have you spoken with Kealty?"

"No, nothing substantive. On 'business' stuff I brief his national-security guy and he briefs his boss. I wouldn't be good at that, would I? Two daughters."

"So you know about the facts of the case?"

"Not the specifics, no. I don't need to know. I do know Murray pretty well. If Dan says the case is solid, well, then I figure it is." Ryan finished off the rest of his coffee and reached for a fresh roll. "The President is *not* obstructing this one. It's been delayed so it wouldn't conflict with other things. That's all."

"You're not supposed to do that either, you know," Holtzman pointed out, getting one for himself.

"Goddamn it, Bob! Prosecutors schedule cases, too, don't they? All this is, is scheduling." Holtzman read Jack's face and nodded.

"I'll pass that one along."

It was already too late for proper damage-control. Most of the political players in Washington are early risers. They have their coffee, read their papers in great detail, check their fax machines for additional material, and often take early phone calls, or in a recent development, log onto computer services to check electronic mail, all in an effort to leave their homes with a good feel for the shape the new day will take. In the case of many members, facsimile copies of the late-edition story by Liz Holtzman had brief cover pages indicating that this might be a matter of great personal interest. Different code phrases were used, depending on which PR firm had originated the transmission, but all were the same. The Members in question had been compelled to mute their opposition to TRA. This opportunity, on the other hand, was seen as something of a payback for the earlier transgression. In few cases would the opportunity be missed.

The comments were mainly delivered off the record. "This looks like a very serious matter" was the phrase most often used. "It's unfortunate that the President saw fit to interfere in a criminal matter" was another favorite. Early calls to Director William Shaw of the FBI were met with "no comment" comments, usually with the additional clarification that the policy of the FBI was to decline comment on any possible criminal case, lest the subsequent legal proceedings be tainted and the rights of the accused compromised. The clarification was rarely if ever conveyed to the public; in that way "no comment" acquired its own very special spin.

The accused in this case awoke in his house on the grounds of the Naval Observatory on Massachusetts Avenue, North West, to find his senior aides downstairs and waiting for him.

"Oh, shit," Ed Kealty observed. It was all he had to say. There was little

point in denying the story. His people knew him too well for that. He was a man of an amorous nature, they all rationalized, a trait not uncommon in public life, though he was fairly discreet about it.

"Lisa Beringer," the Vice President breathed, reading. "Can't they let the poor girl rest in peace?" He remembered the shock of her death, the way she'd died, slipping off her seat belt and driving into a bridge abutment at ninety miles per hour, how the medical examiner had related the inefficiency of the method. She'd taken several minutes to die, still alive and whimpering when the paramedics had arrived. Such a sweet, nice kid. She just hadn't understood how things were. She'd wanted too much back from him. Maybe she'd thought that it was different with her. Well, Kealty thought, everybody thought they were different.

"He's hanging you out to dry," Kealty's senior aide observed. The important part of this, after all, was the political vulnerability of their principal.

"Sure as hell." *That son of a bitch*, the Vice President thought. *After all the things I've done*. "Okay—ideas?"

"Well, of course we deny everything, indignantly at that," his chief of staff began, handing over a sheet of paper. "I have a press release for starters, then we will have a press conference before noon." He'd already called half a dozen former and current female staffers who would stand beside their boss. In every case it was a woman whose bed he had graced with his presence, and who remembered the time with a smile. Great men had flaws, too. In Edward Kealty's case, the flaws were more than balanced by his commitment to the things that mattered.

Kealty read quickly down the page. *The only defense against a completely false accusation is the truth . . . there is no basis in fact whatever to these accusations . . . my public record is well known, as is my support for women's and minority rights . . . I request* ("demand" was the wrong word to use, his personal counsel thought) *an immediate airing of the allegations and the opportunity to defend myself vigorously . . . clearly no coincidence with the upcoming election year . . . regret that such a groundless accusation will affect our great President, Roger Durling—*

"Get that son of a bitch on the phone right now!"

"Bad time for a confrontation, Mr. Vice President. You 'fully expect his support,' remember?"

"Oh, yes, I do, don't I?" That part of the release wouldn't so much be a warning shot across the bow as one aimed right at the bridge, Kealty thought. Either Durling would support him or else risk political meltdown in the primaries.

What else would happen this year? Though too late to catch the morning papers in most of America—too late even for *USA Today*—the Kealty story had been caught by the broadcast media as part of their own pre-show media surveys. For many in the investment community, that meant National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" show, a good program to listen to during the drives from New Jersey and Connecticut because of its repeating two-hour length. "A copyrighted story in this morning's *Washington Post* . . ." The coverage on it

began at the top of both hourly segments, with a preamble like a warning bell to get the listener's attention, and though political stories out of Washington were about as common as the local weather report, "rape" and "suicide" were words with unequivocal meaning.

"Shit," a thousand or so voices breathed simultaneously in the same number of expensive automobiles. *What else is going to happen?* The volatility of the market had not ended yet, and something like this was sure to exert the kind of downward pressure that never really made any economic sense but was so real that everyone knew it would happen, and because of that planned for it, and because of *that* made it even more real in what computer engineers called a feedback loop. The market would drop again today. It had trended down for eleven of the past fourteen days, and though the Dow was replete with bargains by any technical measure, the little guys would make their nervous sell orders, and the mutual funds, driven by calls from more little guys, would do the same, adding institutional momentum to a totally artificial situation. The entire system was called a true democracy, but if it was, then a herd of nervous cattle was a democracy, too.

"Okay, Arnie." President Durling didn't bother asking who had leaked it. He was a sufficiently sophisticated player in the game that he knew it didn't matter. "What do we do?"

"I talked to Bob Holtzman," Ryan told the Boss, prompted by a look from the chief of staff.

"And?"

"And, I think he believed me. Hell, I was telling the truth, wasn't I?" It was a question rather than a rhetorical expression.

"Yes, you were, Jack. Ed's going to have to handle this one himself." The relief on Ryan's face was so obvious as to offend the Chief Executive. "Did you think I was really going to do this?"

"Of course not," Ryan answered at once.

"Who knows?"

"On the airplane?" van Damm asked. "I'm sure Bob spread it around some."

"Well, let's clobber it right now. Tish," Durling said to his communications director, "let's get a release put together. The Judiciary Committee's been briefed in, and I have *not* put any pressure on them at all."

"What do we say about the delay?" Tish Brown asked.

"We decided jointly with the leadership that the matter deserved to have—what?" The President looked up at the ceiling. "It deserved to have a clear field . . ."

"Sufficiently serious—no, it is sufficiently *important* to deserve a Congress undistracted by other considerations?" Ryan offered. *Not bad,* he thought.

"I'll make a politician out of you yet," Durling said with a grudging smile.

"You're not going to say anything directly about the case," van Damm went on, giving the President advice in the form of an order.

"I know, I know. I can't say anything on the facts of the matter because I can't allow myself to interfere with the proceedings or Kealty's defense, except to say that any citizen is innocent until the facts demonstrate otherwise;

America is founded on . . . and all that stuff. Tish, write it up. I'll deliver it on the airplane before we land, and then maybe we can do what we're supposed to be doing. Anything else?" Durling asked.

"Secretary Hanson reports that everything is set up. No surprises," Ryan said, finally getting to his own briefing. "Secretary Fiedler has the monetary-support agreement ready for initialing, too. On that end, sir, it's going to be a nice, smooth visit."

"How reassuring that is," the President observed dryly. "Okay, let me get cleaned up." Air Force One or not, traveling in such close proximity to others was rarely comfortable. Presidential privacy was a tenuous commodity under the best of circumstances, but at least in the White House you had real walls between yourself and others. Not here. An Air Force sergeant strained at his leash to lay out Durling's clothing and shaving things. The man had already spent two hours turning the Presidential shoes from black leather into chrome, and it would have been ungracious to push the guy off. People were so damned eager to show their loyalty. Except for the ones you needed to, Durling thought as he entered the small washroom.

"We got more of 'em."

Sanchez emerged from the head adjacent to CIC to see people gathered around the central plotting table. There were now three groups of the diamond shapes that denoted enemy surface ships. *Charlotte*, moreover, had position on a "V" shape that meant an enemy submarine, and *Asheville* supposedly had a good sniff also. Best of all, the joint patrol line of S-3 Viking ASW aircraft two hundred miles in advance of the battle group had identified what appeared to be a patrol line of other submarines. Two had been caught snorting, one on SOSUS and one by sonobuoys, and, using a line defined by those two positions, two others had been found. Now they even had a predictable interval between boats for the aircraft to concentrate on.

"Sunset tomorrow?" the CAG asked.

"They like the rising sun, don't they? Let's catch 'em at dinner, then."

"Fine with me." Sanchez lifted the phone at his place to alert his wing operations officer.

"Takes long enough," Jones murmured.

"I seem to remember when you were able to stand watches for a real long time," Wally Chambers told the civilian.

"I was young and dumb then." *I smoked, too*, he remembered. Such good things for concentration and alertness. But most submarines didn't allow people to smoke at all. Amazing that some crews hadn't mutinied. What was the Navy coming to. "See what I told you about my software?"

"You telling us that even you can be replaced by a computer?"

The contractor's head turned. "You know, Mr. Chambers, as you get older you have to watch the coffee intake."

"You two going at it again?" Admiral Mancuso rejoined them after shaving

in the nearby head.

"I think Jonesy was planning to hit Banzai Beach this afternoon." Captain Chambers chuckled, sipping at his decaf. "He's getting bored with the exercise."

"They do take a while," SubPac confirmed.

"Hey, guys, we're validating my product, aren't we?"

"If you want some insider information, yeah, I'm going to recommend you get the contract." Not the least reason for which was that Jones had underbid IBM by a good 20 percent.

"Next step, I just hired two guys from Woods Hole. That never occurred to the suits at Big Blue."

"What do you mean?"

"We're going to decode whale talk, now that we can hear it so much better. Greenpeace is going to love us. The submarine mission for the next decade: making the seas safe for our fellow mammals. We can also track those Jap bastards who hunt them."

"What do you mean?" Chambers asked.

"You want funding? I have an idea that'll keep it for you."

"What's that, Jonesy?" Mancuso asked.

"The Woods Hole guys think they have the alarm calls for three species identified: for humpback, fins, and seis. They got them by listening in with hydrophones while they were hanging out with whalers. I can program that for active—it's in the freq range we transmit on. So what we can do is have subs trail along with the whalers and broadcast the call, and guess what? The whalers won't find shit. No whale in his right mind will get within twenty miles of another whale screaming that he's being mugged. Not much solidarity in the cetacean community."

"You turning tree-hugger on us?" Chambers wondered. But he thought about it and nodded slowly.

"All those people have to tell their friends in Congress is that we're doing good scientific work. Okay? Not that they love us, not that they approve of our power plants, just that we're doing good work. What I'm giving you guys is a mission for the next ten years." Jones was also giving his company work for at least that long, but that was beside the point. Mancuso and the submarine community needed the work. "Besides, I used to enjoy listening to them when we were on *Dallas.* "

"Signal from *Asheville,"* a communications specialist reported from the door. "They have acquired their target."

"Well, they're pretty good," Jones said, looking down at the plot. "But we're still the big kid on the block."

Air Force One floated into the usual soft landing at Sheremetyevo Airport one minute early. There was a collective sigh as the thrust-reversers cut in, slowing the heavy aircraft rapidly. Soon everyone started hearing the click of seat belts coming off.

"What woke you up so early?" Cathy asked her husband.

"Political stuff at home. I guess I can tell you now." Ryan explained on, then

remembered he had the fax still folded in his pocket. He handed it over, cautioning his wife that it wasn't all true.

"I always thought he was slimy." She handed it back.

"Oh, don't you remember when he was the Conscience of Congress?" Jack asked quietly.

"Maybe he was, but I never thought he had one of his own."

"Just remember—"

"If anybody asks, I'm a surgeon here to meet with my Russian colleagues and do a little sightseeing." Which was entirely true. The state trip would make considerable demands on Ryan's time in his capacity as a senior Presidential advisor. But it wasn't all that different from a normal family vacation either. Their tastes in sightseeing overlapped, but didn't entirely coincide, and Cathy knew that her husband loathed shopping in any form. It was something odd about men in general and her husband in particular.

The aircraft turned onto the taxiway, and things started to happen. President and Mrs. Durling emerged from their compartment, all ready to present themselves as the embodiment of their country. People remained seated to let them pass, aided by the intimidating presence of both Secret Service and Air Force security people.

"Hell of a job," Ryan breathed, watching the President put on his happy face, and knowing that it was at least partially a lie. He had to do so many things, and make each appear as though it were the only thing he had to do. He had to compartmentalize everything, when on one task to pretend that the others didn't exist. Maybe like Cathy and her patients. Wasn't that an interesting thought? They heard band music when the door opened, the local version of "Ruffles and Flourishes."

"I guess we can get up now."

The protocol was already established. People hunched at the windows to watch the President reach the bottom of the steps, shake hands with the new Russian President and the U.S. Ambassador to the Russian Republic. The rest of the official party then went down the steps, while the press deplaned from the after door.

It was very different from Ryan's last trip to Moscow. The airport was the same, but the time of day, the weather, and the whole atmosphere could not have been more different. It only took one face to make that clear, that of Sergey Nikolayevich Golovko, chairman of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, who stood behind the front rank of dignitaries. In the old days he would not have shown his face at all, but now his blue eyes were aimed right at Ryan, and they twinkled with mirth as Jack led his wife down the stairs and to their place at the bottom.

The initial signs were a little scary, as was not unusual when political factors interfered with economic forces. Organized labor was flexing its muscles, and doing it cleverly for the first time in years. In cars and their associated components alone, it was possible that hundreds of thousands of jobs would be coming back to the fold. The arithmetic was straightforward: nearly ninety billion dollars of products had arrived from overseas in the last year and

would now have to be produced domestically. Sitting down with their management counterparts, labor came to the collective decision that the only thing missing was the government's word that TRA would not be a paper tiger, soon to be cast away in the name of international amity. To get that assurance, however, they had to work Congress. So the lobbying was already under way, backed by the realization that the election cycle was coming up. Congress could not do one thing with one hand and something else with the other. Promises were made, and action taken, and for once both crossed party lines. The media were already commenting on how well it was working.

It wasn't just a matter of hiring employees. There would have to be a huge increase in capacity. Old plants and those operating under their capacity would need to be upgraded and so preliminary orders were put in for tooling and materials. The instant surge came as something of a surprise despite all the warnings, because despite their expertise even the most astute observers had not seen the bill for the revolution it really was.

But the blip on the statistical reports was unmistakable. The Federal Reserve kept all manner of measuring criteria on the American economy, and one of them was orders for such things as steel and machine tools. The period during which TRA had traveled through Congress and to the White House had seen a jump so large as to be off the graph paper. Then the governors saw a vast leap in short-term borrowing, largely from auto-related industries that had to finance their purchases from various specialty suppliers. The rise in orders was inflationary, and inflation was already a long-standing concern. The rise in borrowing would deplete the supply of money that could be borrowed. That had to be stopped, and quickly. The governors decided that instead of the quarter-point rise in the discount rate that they had already approved, and word of which had already leaked, the jump would be a full half-point, to be announced at close of business the following day.

Commander Ugaki was in the control room of his submarine, as usual chain-smoking and drinking copious amounts of tea that occasioned hourly trips to his cabin and its private head, not to mention hacking coughs that were exacerbated by the dehumidified air (kept unusually dry to protect onboard electronic systems). He knew they had to be out there, at least one, perhaps two American submarines—*Charlotte* and *Asheville*, his intelligence briefs had told him—but it wasn't the boats he feared. It was the crews. The American submarine force had been reduced drastically in size, but evidently not in quality. He'd expected to detect his adversary for DATELINE PARTNERS hours before. Perhaps, Ugaki told himself, they hadn't even had a sniff of him yet, but he wasn't sure of that, and over the past thirty-six hours he'd come fully to the realization that this was no longer a game, not since he'd received the code phrase "Climb Mount Niitaka." How confident he had been a week earlier, but now he was at sea and underwater. The transition from theory to reality was striking.

"Anything?" he asked his sonar officer, getting a headshake for an answer.

Ordinarily, an American sub on an exercise like this was "augmented," meaning that a sound source was switched on, which increased the amount of

radiated noise she put in the water. Done to simulate the task of detecting a *Russian* submarine, it was in one way arrogant and in another way very clever of the Americans. They so rarely played against allies or even their own forces at the level of their true capabilities that they had learned to operate under a handicap—like a runner with weighted shoes. As a result, when they played a game without the handicap, they were formidable indeed.

Well, so am I! Ugaki told himself. Hadn't he grown up tracking Russian subs like the Americans? Hadn't he gotten in close of a Russian Akula? Patience. The true samurai is patient. This was not a task for a merchant, after all.

"It is like tracking whales, isn't it?" Commander Steve Kennedy observed.

"Pretty close," Sonarman 1/c Jacques Yves Laval, Jr., replied quietly, watching his display and rubbing his ears, sweaty from the headphones.

"You feel cheated?"

"My dad got to play the real game. All I ever heard growing up, sir, was what he could tell me about going up north and stalking the big boys on their own turf." Frenchy Laval was a name well known in the submarine community, a great sonarman who had trained other great sonarmen. Now retired as a master chief, his son carried on the tradition.

The hell of it was, tracking whales had turned out to be good training. They were stealthy creatures, not because they sought to avoid detection, but simply because they moved with great efficiency, and the submarines had found that moving in close enough to count and identify the members of individual pods or families was at least diverting if not exactly exciting. For the sonarmen anyway, Kennedy thought. Not much for weapons department. . . .

Laval's eyes focused on the waterfall display. He settled more squarely into his chair and reached for a grease pencil, tapping the third-class next to him.

"Two-seven-zero," he said quietly.

"Yeah."

"What you got, Junior?" the CO asked.

"Just a sniff, sir, on the sixty-hertz line." Thirty seconds later: "Firming up."

Kennedy stood behind the two watch-standers. There were now two dotted lines, one in the sixty-hertz frequency portion of the display, another on a higher-frequency band. The electric motors on the Japanese Harushio-class submarine used sixty-cycle A/C electrical current. An irregular series of dots, yellow on the dark screen, started cascading down in a column under the "60" frequency heading like droplets falling in slow motion from a leaky faucet, hence the appellation "waterfall display." Junior Laval let it grow for a few more seconds to see if it might be random and decided that it was probably not.

"Sir, I think we might want to start a track now. Designate this contact Sierra-One, possible submerged contact, bearing settling down on two-seven-four, strength is weak."

Kennedy relayed the information to the fire-control tracking party fifteen feet away. Another technician activated the ray-path analyzer, a high-end Hewlett-Packard minicomputer programmed to examine the possible paths

through the water that the identified acoustical signal might have followed. Though widely known to exist, the high-speed software for this piece of kit was still one of the Navy's most closely held secrets, a product, Kennedy remembered, of Sonosystems, a Groton-based company run by one of Frenchy Laval's top protégés. The computer chewed on the input data for perhaps a thousand microseconds and displayed its reply.

"Sir, it's direct path. My initial range estimate is between eight and twelve thousand yards."

"Set it up," the approach officer told the petty officer on the fire-control director.

"This one ain't no humpback," Laval reported three minutes later. "I have three lines on the guy now, classify Sierra-One as a definite submarine contact, operating on his electric motors." Junior told himself that Laval *père* had made his rep stalking HEN-class Russian subs, which were about as hard to track as an earthquake. He adjusted his headphones. "Bearing steady at two-seven-four, getting hints of a blade rate on the guy."

"Solution light," the lead fire-controlman reported. "I have a valid solution for tube three on target Sierra-One."

"Left ten-degrees rudder, come to new course one-eight-zero," Kennedy ordered next to get a crossbearing, from which would come a better range-gate on the target, and also data on the sub's course and speed. "Let's slow her down, turns for five knots."

The stalk was always the fun part.

"If you do that, you're cutting your own throat with a dull knife," Anne Quinlan said in her customarily direct way.

Kealty was sitting in his office. Ordinarily the number-two man in any organization would be in charge when number-one was away, but the miracle of modern communications meant that Roger could do everything he needed to do at midnight over Antarctica if he had to. Including putting out a press statement from his aircraft in Moscow that he was hanging his Vice President out to dry.

Kealty's first instinct was to proclaim to the entire world that he knew he had the confidence of his President. That would hint broadly that the news stories were true, and muddy the waters sufficiently to give him room to maneuver, the thing he needed most of all.

"What we need to know, Ed," his chief of staff pointed out, not for the first time, "is who the hell started this." That was the one thing the story had left out, clever people that reporters were. She couldn't ask him how many of the women in his office he'd visited with his charms. For one thing he probably didn't remember, and for another, the hard part would be identifying those he hadn't.

"Whoever it was, it was somebody close to Lisa," another staffer observed. That insight made light bulbs flash inside every head in the office.

"Barbara."

"Good guess," the "Chief"—which was how Quinlan liked to be identified—thought. "We need to confirm that, and we need to settle her down some."

“Woman scorned,” Kealty murmured.

“Ed, I don’t want to hear any of that, okay?” the Chief warned. “When the hell are you going to learn that ‘no’ doesn’t mean ‘maybe later’? Okay, I’ll go see Barbara myself, and maybe we can talk her out of this, but, goddammit, this is the last time, okay?”

18

Easter Egg

"Is this where the dresser was?" Ryan asked.

"I keep forgetting how well informed you are," Golovko observed, just to flatter his guest, since the story was actually widely known.

Jack grinned, still feeling more than a little of Alice-through-the-Looking-Glass. There was a completely ordinary door in the wall now, but until the time of Yuri Andropov, a large wooden clothes cabinet had covered it, for in the time of Beriya and the rest, the entrance to the office of Chairman of the KGB had to be hidden. There was no door off the main corridor, and none visible even in the anteroom. The melodrama of it had to have been absurd, Ryan thought, even to Lavrentiy Beriya, whose morbid fear of assassination—though hardly unreasonable—had dreamed up this obtuse security measure. It hadn't helped him avoid death at the hands of men who'd hated him even more than they'd feared him. Still and all, wasn't it bizarre enough just for the President's National Security Advisor to enter the office of the Chairman of the *Russian* Foreign Intelligence Service? Beriya's ashes must have been stirring up somewhere, Ryan thought, in whatever sewer they'd dropped the urn. He turned to look at his host, his mind imagining the oak bureau still, and halfway wishing they'd kept the old name of KGB, Committee for State Security, just for tradition's sake.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, has the world really changed so much in the past—God, only ten years?"

"Not even that, my friend." Golovko waved Jack to a comfortable leather chair that dated back to the building's previous incarnation as home office of the Rossiya Insurance Company. "And yet we have so far to go."

Business, Jack thought. Well, Sergey had never been bashful about that. Ryan remembered looking into the wrong end of a pistol in this man's hand. But that had all taken place before the so-called end of history.

"I'm doing everything I can, Sergey. We got you the five billion for the missiles. That was a nice scam you ran on us, by the way." Ryan checked his watch. The ceremony was scheduled for the evening. One Minuteman-III and one SS-19 left—if you didn't count the SS-19s in Japan that had been reconfigured to launch satellites.

"We have many problems, Jack."

"Fewer than a year ago," Ryan observed, wondering what the next request would be. "I know you advise President Grushavoy on more than just intelligence matters. Come on, Sergey, things are getting better. You know that."

"Nobody ever told us that democracy would be so hard."

"It's hard for us, too, pal. We rediscover it every day."

"The frustration is that we know we have everything we need to make our country prosperous. The problem is in making everything work. Yes, I advise my president on many things—"

"Sergey, if you're not one of the best-informed people in your country, I would be very surprised."

"Hmm, yes. Well, we are surveying eastern Siberia, so many things, so many resources. We have to hire Japanese to do it for us, but what they are finding . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You're building up to something, Sergey. What is it?"

"We think they do not tell us everything. We dug up some surveys done in the early thirties. They were in archives in the Ministry of the Interior. A deposit of gadolinium in an unlikely place. At the time there were few uses for that metal, and it was forgotten until some of my people did a detailed search of old data. Gadolinium now has many uses, and one of their survey teams camped within a few kilometers of the deposit. We know it's real. The thirties team brought back samples for assay. But it was not included in their last report."

"And?" Jack asked.

"And I find it curious that they lied to us on this," Golovko observed, taking his time. You didn't build up to a play like this all that quickly.

"How are you paying them for the work?"

"The agreement is that they will assist us in the exploitation of many of the things they find for us. The terms are generous."

"Why would they lie?" Ryan inquired.

Golovko shook his head. "I do not know. It might be important to find out. You are a student of history, are you not?"

It was one of the things that each respected about the other. Ryan might have written off Golovko's concerns as yet another example of Russian paranoia—sometimes he thought that the entire concept had been invented in this country—but that would have been unfair. Russia had fought Japan under the Czar in 1904—1905 and lost, along the way giving the Japanese Navy a landmark victory at the Battle of the Tsushima Strait. That war had gone a long way toward destroying the Romanovs and to elevating Japan to world-power status, which had led to their involvement in two world wars. It had also inflicted a bleeding sore on the Russian psyche that Stalin had remembered well enough to recover the lost territories. The Japanese had also been involved in post—World War I efforts to topple the Bolsheviks. They'd put a sizable army into Siberia, and hadn't been all that enthusiastic about withdrawing it. The same thing had happened again, in 1938 and 1939, with more serious consequences this time, first at the hands of Marshal Blyukher, and then a guy named Zhukov. Yes, there was much history between Russia and Japan.

"In this day and age, Sergey?" Ryan asked with a wry expression.

"You know, Jack, as bright a chap as you are, you are still an American, and your experience with invasions is far less serious than ours. Are we panicked about this? No, of course not. Is it something worthy of close attention? Yes, Ivan Emmetovich, it is."

He was clearly building up to something, and with all the time he'd taken, it had to be something big, Ryan thought. Time to find out what it was: "Well, Sergey Nikolay' ch, I suppose I can understand your concern, but there isn't very much I can—" Golovko cut him off with a single word.

"THISTLE."

"Lyalin's old network. What about it?"

"You have recently reactivated it." The Chairman of RVS saw that Ryan had the good grace to blink in surprise. A bright, serious man, Ryan, but still not really someone who would have made a good field officer. His emotions were just too open. Perhaps, Sergey thought, he should read a book on Ireland, the better to understand the player in the ancient leather chair. Ryan had strengths and weaknesses, neither of which he completely understood.

"What gives you that idea?" the American asked as innocently as he could, knowing that he'd reacted, again, baited by this clever old pro. He saw Golovko smile at his discomfort and wondered if the liberalization of this country had allowed people to develop a better sense of humor. Before Golovko would just have stared impassively.

"Jack, we are professionals, are we not? I know this. How I know it is my concern."

"I don't know what cards you're holding, my friend, but before you go any further, we need to decide if this is a friendly game or not."

"As you know, the real Japanese counterintelligence agency is the Public Safety Investigation Division of their Justice Ministry." The expositional statement was as clear as it had to be, and was probably truthful. It also defined the terms of the discourse. This was a friendly game. Golovko had just revealed a secret of his own, though not a surprising one.

You had to admire the Russians. Their expertise in the espionage business was world-class. No, Ryan corrected himself. They *were* the class of the world. What better way to run agents in any foreign country than first to establish a network within the country's counterintelligence services? There was still the lingering suspicion that they had in fact controlled MI-5, Britain's Security Service, for some years, and their deep and thorough penetration of CIA's own internal-security arm was still an embarrassment to America.

"Make your play," Ryan said. *Check to the dealer* . . .

"You have two field officers in Japan covered as Russian journalists. They are reactivating the network. They are very good, and very careful, but one of their contacts is compromised by PSID. That can happen to anyone," Golovko observed fairly. He didn't even gloat, Jack saw. Well, he was too professional for that, and it was a fairly friendly game by most standards. The other side of the statement was as clear as it could be: with a simple gesture Sergey was in a position to burn Clark and Chavez, creating yet another international incident between two countries that had enough problems to settle. That was why Golovko didn't gloat. He didn't have to.

Ryan nodded. "Okay, pal. I just folded. Tell me what you want."

"We would like to know why Japan is lying to us, and anything else that in Mrs. Foley's opinion might be of interest to us. In return we are in a position to protect the network for you." He didn't add, *for the time being.*

"How much do they know?" Jack asked, considering the spoken offer.

Golovko was suggesting that Russia cover an American intelligence operation. It was something new, totally unprecedented. They put a very high value on the information that might be developed. High as hell, Jack thought. *Why?*

"Enough to expel them from the country, no more." Golovko opened a drawer and handed over a sheet of paper. "This is all Foleyeva needs to know."

Jack read and pocketed it. "My country has no desire to see any sort of conflict between Russia and Japan."

"Then we are agreed?"

"Yes, Sergey. I will recommend approval of your suggestion."

"As always, Ivan Emmetovich, a pleasure to do business with you."

"Why didn't you activate it yourself?" Ryan asked, wondering how badly rolled he'd been that day.

"Lyalin held out on the information. Clever of him. We didn't have enough time to—persuade? Yes, persuade him to give it over—before we gave him to your custody."

Such a nice turn of phrase, Jack thought. *Persuade.* Well, Golovko had come up under the old system. It was too much to expect that he would have been entirely divorced from it. Jack managed a grin.

"You know, you were great enemies." And with Golovko's single suggestion, Jack thought behind clinically impassive eyes, perhaps now there would be the beginning of something else. Damn, how much crazier would this world get?

It was six hours later in Tokyo, and eight hours earlier in New York. The fourteen-hour differential and the International Dateline created many opportunities for confusion. It was Saturday the fourteenth in some places and Friday in others.

At three in the morning, Chuck Searls left his home for the last time. He'd rented a car the previous day—like many New Yorkers, he had never troubled himself to purchase one—for the drive to La Guardia. The Delta terminal was surprisingly full for the first flight of the day to Atlanta. He'd booked a ticket through one of the city's many travel agencies, and paid cash for the assumed name he would hereafter be using from time to time, which was not the same as the one on the passport he had also acquired a few months ago. Sitting in 2-A, a first-class seat whose wide expanse allowed him to turn slightly and lean his head back, he slept most of the way to Atlanta, where his baggage was transferred to a flight to Miami. There wasn't much, really. Two lightweight suits, some shirts, and other immediate necessities, plus his laptop computer. In Miami he'd board another flight under another name and head southeast to paradise.

George Winston, former head of the Columbus Group, was not a happy man despite the plush surroundings of his home in Aspen. A wrenched knee saw to that. Though he now had the time to indulge his newly discovered passion for

skiing, he was a little too inexperienced and perhaps a little too old to use the expert slopes. It hurt like a sonuvabitch. He rose from his bed at three in the morning and limped into the bathroom for another dose of the painkiller the doctor had prescribed. Once there he found that the combination of wakefulness and lingering pain offered little hope of returning to sleep. It was just after five in New York, he thought, about the time he usually got up, always early to get a jump on the late-risers, checking his computer and the *Journal* and other sources of information so that he could be fully prepared for his opening moves on the market.

He missed it, Winston admitted to himself. It was a hell of a thing to say to the face in the mirror. Okay, so he'd worked too hard, alienated himself from his own family, driven himself into a state little different from drug addiction, but getting out was a . . . mistake?

Well, no, not exactly that, he thought, hobbling into his den as quietly as he could manage. It was just that you couldn't empty something and then attempt to fill it with nothing, could you? He couldn't sail his *Cristobol* all the time, not with kids in school. In fact there was only one thing in his life that he'd been able to do all the time, and that had damned near killed him, hadn't it?

Even so . . .

Damn, you couldn't even get the *Journal* out here at a decent hour. And this was civilization? Fortunately, they did have phone lines. Just for old times' sake, he switched on his computer. Winston was wired into nearly every news and financial service there was, and he selected his personal favorite. It was good to do it early in the morning. His wife would yell again if she saw him up to his old tricks, which meant that he was nowhere near as current on the Street as he liked to be, player or not. Well, okay, he had a few hours, and it wasn't as though he'd be riding a helicopter to the top of the mountain at dawn, was it? No skiing at all, the doc had told him firmly. Not for at least a week, and then he'd confine himself to the bunny slopes. It wouldn't look that bad, would it? He'd pretend to be teaching his kids . . . damn!

He'd gotten out too soon. No way he could have known, of course, but in the last few weeks the market had begged aloud for a person with his talents to swoop down and make his moves. He would have moved on steel three weeks ago, made his killing, and then moved on to . . . Silicon Alchemy. Yeah, that was one he would have snapped up in one big hurry. They had invented a new sort of screen for laptop computers, and now with Japan's products under a cloud, the issue had exploded. Who was it who'd quarterbacked the IPO? That Ryan guy, good instincts for the business, pissing away his time in government service now. *What a waste of talent*, Winston told himself, feeling the ache in his leg and trying not to add that he was pissing away his time in the middle of the night at a ski resort he couldn't use for the next week at best.

Everything on the Street seemed so unnecessarily shaky, he thought, checking trend lines on stocks he considered good if stealthy bellwethers. That was one of the tricks, spotting trends and indicators before the others did. One of the tricks? Hell, the *only* trick. How he did it was surprisingly hard to teach. He supposed that it was the same in any field. Some people just did it, and he was one of them. Others tried to do the same by cheating, seeking out

information in underhanded ways, or by falsely creating trends that they could then exploit. But that was . . . cheating, wasn't it? And what was the point of making money that way? Beating the others fairly and at their own game, *that* was the real art of trading, and at the end of the day what he liked to hear was the way others would come up and say, "You son of a bitch!" The tone of the comment made all the difference.

There was no reason for the market to be so unsteady, he thought. People hadn't thought the things through, that was all.

* * *

The Hornets went off behind the first wave of Tomcats. Sanchez taxied his fighter to the starboard-side bow cat, feeling the towbar that formed part of his nosewheel gear slip into the proper slot on the shuttle. His heavily loaded fighter shuddered at full power as the deck crewmen gave the aircraft a last visual check. Satisfied, the catapult officer made the ready signal, and Sanchez fired off a salute and set his head back on the back of his ejection seat. A moment later, steam power flung him off the bow and into the air. The Hornet settled a bit, a feeling that was never entirely routine, and he climbed into the sky, retracting his landing gear and heading toward the rendezvous point, his wings heavy with fuel tanks and blue practice missiles.

They were trying to be clever, and almost succeeding, but "almost" didn't really count in this game. Satellite photos had revealed the presence of the three inbound surface groups. Sanchez would lead the Alpha Strike against the big one, eight ships, all tin cans. Two separated pairs of Tomcats would deal with the P-3s they had out; for the first time they'd hunt actively with their search radars instead of being under EMCOM. It would be a single rapier thrust—no, more the descending blow of a big and heavy club. Intermittent sweeps of an E-2C Hawkeye radar aircraft determined that the Japanese had not deployed fighters to Marcus, which would have been clever if difficult for them, and in any case they would not have been able to surge enough of them to matter, not against two full carrier air wings. Marcus just wasn't a big enough island, as Saipan or Guam was. That was his last abstract thought for a while. On Bud's command via a low-power radio circuit, the formation began to disperse according to its carefully structured plan.

"Hai." Sato lifted the growler phone on *Mutsu's* bridge.

"We just detected low-power radio voice traffic. Two signals, bearing one-five-seven, and one-nine-five, respectively."

"It's about time," Sato told his group-operations officer. *I thought they'd never get around to their attack*. In a real-war situation he would do one thing. In this particular case, he'd do another. There was little point in letting the Americans know the sensitivity of his ELINT gear. "Continue as before."

"Very well. We still have the two airborne radars. They appear to be flying racetrack patterns, no change."

"Thank you." Sato replaced the phone and reached for his tea. His best technicians were working the electronic-intelligence listening gear, and they had tapes collecting the information taken down by every sensor for later study. That was really the important part of this phase of the exercise, to learn all they could about how the U.S. Navy made its deliberate attacks.

"Action stations?" *Mutsu's* captain asked quietly.

"No need," the Admiral replied, staring thoughtfully at the horizon, as he supposed a fighting sailor did.

Aboard Snoopy One, an EA-6B Prowler, the flight crew monitored all radar and radio frequencies. They found and identified six commercial-type search radars, none of them close to the known location of the Japanese formation. They weren't making it much of a contest, everyone thought. Normally these games were a lot more fun.

The captain of the port at Tanapag harbor looked out from his office to see a large car-carrier working her way around the southern tip of Managaha Island. That was a surprise. He ruffled through the papers on his desk to see where the telex was to warn him of her arrival. Oh, yes, there. It must have come in during the night. MV *Orchid Ace* out of Yokohama. Cargo of Toyota Land Cruisers diverted for sale to the local Japanese landowners. Probably a ship that had been scheduled for transit to America. So now the cars would come here and clog the local roads some more. He grumped and lifted his binoculars to give her a look and saw to his surprise another lump on the horizon, large and boxy. Another car carrier? That was odd.

Snoopy One held position and altitude, just under the visual horizon from the "enemy" formation, about one hundred miles away. The electronic warriors in the two backseats had their hands ready on the power switches for the onboard jammers, but the Japanese didn't have any of their radars up, and there was nothing to jam. The pilot allowed herself a look to the southeast and saw a few flashes, yellow glints off the gold-impregnated canopies of the inbound Alpha Strike, which was now angling down to the deck to stay out of radar coverage as long as possible before popping up to loose their first "salvo" of administrative missiles.

"Tango, tango, tango," Commander Steve Kennedy said into the gertrude, giving the code word for a theoretical or "administrative" torpedo launch. He'd held contact with the Harushio-class for nine hours, taking the time to get acquainted with the contact, and to get his crew used to something more demanding than getting heartbeats on a pregnant humpback. Finally bored with the game, it was time to light up the underwater telephone and, he was sure, scare the bejeebers out of Sierra-One after giving him ample time to

counterdetect. He didn't want anyone to say later that he hadn't given the other guy a fair break. Not that this sort of thing was supposed to be fair, but Japan and America were friends, despite the news stuff they'd been getting on the radio for the past few weeks.

"Took his time," Commander Ugaki said. They'd tracked the American 688 for almost forty minutes. So they were good, but not that good. It had been so hard for them to detect *Kurushio* that they'd made their attack as soon as they had a track, and, Ugaki thought, he'd let them have their first shot. So. The CO looked at his own fire-control director and the four red solution lights.

He lifted his own gertrude phone to reply in a voice full of good-natured surprise: "Where did you come from?"

Those crewmen who were in earshot—every man aboard spoke good English—were surprised at the captain's announcement. Ugaki saw the looks. He would brief them in later.

* * *

"Didn't even 'tango' back. I guess he wasn't at GQ." Kennedy keyed the phone again. "As per exercise instructions, we will now pull off and turn on our augmenter." On his command, USS *Asheville* turned right and increased speed to twenty knots. She'd pull away to twenty thousand yards to restart the exercise, giving the "enemy" a better chance at useful training.

"Conn, sonar."

"Conn, aye."

"New contact, designate Sierra-Five, bearing two-eight-zero, twin-screw diesel surface ship, type unknown. Blade rate indicates about eighteen knots," SM/1c Junior Laval announced.

"No classification?"

"Sounds a little, well, little, Cap'n, not the big boomin' sounds of a large merchantman."

"Very well, we'll run a track. Keep me posted."

"Sonar, aye."

It was just too easy, Sanchez thought. The *Enterprise* group was probably having a tougher time with their Kongo-class DDGs up north. He was not pressing it, but holding his extended flight of four at three hundred feet above the calm surface, at a speed of just four hundred knots. Each of the four fighter-attack aircraft of Slugger Flight carried four exercise Harpoon missiles, as did the four trailing in Mauler. He checked his heads-up display for location. Data loaded into his computer only an hour before gave him a probable location for the formation, and his GPS navigation system had brought him right to the programmed place. It was time to check to see how accurate their operational intelligence was.

"Mauler, this is lead, popping up—now!" Sanchez pulled back easily on the stick. "Going active—now!" With the second command he flipped on his search radar.

There they were, big as hell on the display. Sanchez selected the lead ship in the formation and spun up the seeker heads in the otherwise inert missiles hanging from his wings. He got four ready lights. "This is Slugger-Lead. Launch launch launch! Rippling four vampires."

"Two, launching four."

"Three, launch four."

"Four, launching three, one abort on the rail." About par for the course, Sanchez thought, framing a remark for his wing maintenance officer.

In a real attack the aircraft would have angled back down to the surface after firing their missiles so as not to expose themselves. For the purposes of the exercise they descended to two hundred feet and kept heading in to simulate their own missiles. Onboard recorders would take down the radar and tracking data from the Japanese ships in order to evaluate their performance, which so far was not impressive.

Faced with the irksome necessity of allowing women to fly in real combat squadrons off real carriers, the initial compromise had been to put them in electronic-warfare aircraft, hence the Navy's first female squadron commander was Commander Roberta Peach of VAQ-137, "The Rooks." The most senior female carrier aviator, she deemed it her greatest good fortune that *another* naval aviator, female, already had the call sign "Peaches," which allowed her to settle on "Robber," a name she insisted on in the air.

"Getting signals now, Robber," the lead EWO in the back of her Prowler reported. "Lots of sets lighting off."

"Shut 'em back down," she ordered curtly.

"Sure are a lot of 'em . . . targeting a Harm on an SPG-51. Tracking and ready."

"Launching now," Robber said. Shooting was her prerogative as aircraft commander. As long as the SPG-51 missile-illumination radar was up and radiating, the Harm antiradar missile was virtually guaranteed to hit.

Sanchez could see the ships now, gray shapes on the visual horizon. An unpleasant screech in his headphones told him that he was being illuminated with both search and fire-control radar, never a happy bit of news even in an exercise, all the more so that the "enemy" in this case had American-designed SM-2 Standard surface-to-air missiles with whose performance he was quite familiar. It looked like a Hatakaze-class. Two SPG-51C missile radars. Only one single-rail launcher. She could guide only two at a time. His aircraft represented two missiles. The Hornet was a larger target than the Harpoon was, and was not going as low or as fast as the missile did. On the other hand, he had a protective jammer aboard, which evened the equation somewhat. Bud eased his stick to the left. It was against safety rules to fly directly over a

ship under circumstances like this, and a few seconds later he passed three hundred yards ahead of the destroyer's bow. At least one of his missiles would have hit, he judged, and that one was only a five-thousand-ton tin can. One Harpoon warhead would ruin her whole day, making his follow-up attack with cluster munitions even more deadly.

"Slugger, this is lead. Form up on me."

"Two—"

"Three—"

"Four," his flight acknowledged.

Another day in the life of a naval aviator, the CAG thought. Now he could look forward to landing, going into CIC, and spending the rest of the next twenty-four hours going over the scores. It just wasn't very exciting anymore. He'd splashed real airplanes, and anything else wasn't the same. But flying was still flying.

The roar of aircraft overhead was usually exhilarating. Sato watched the last of the gray American fighters climb away, and lifted his binoculars to see their direction. Then he rose and headed below to the CIC.

"Well?" he asked.

"Departure course is as we thought." Fleet-Ops tapped the satellite photo that showed both American battle groups, still heading west, into the prevailing winds, to conduct flight operations. The photo was only two hours old. The radar plot showed the American aircraft heading to the expected point.

"Excellent. My respects to the captain, make course one-five-five, maximum possible speed." In less than a minute, *Mutsu* shuddered with increased engine power and started riding harder through the gentle Pacific swells for her rendezvous with the American battle force. Timing was important.

On the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, a young trader's clerk made a posting error on Merck stock at exactly 11:43:02 Eastern Standard Time. It actually went onto the system and appeared on the board at 23⅛, well off the current value. Thirty seconds later he typed it in again, inputting the same amount. This time he got yelled at. He explained that the damned keyboard was sticky, and unplugged it, switching it for a new one. It happened often enough. People spilled coffee and other things in this untidy place. The correction was inputted at once, and the world returned to normal. In the same minute something similar happened with General Motors stock, and someone made the same excuse. It was safe. The people at her particular kiosk didn't interact all that much with the people who did Merck. Neither had any idea what they were doing, just that they were being paid $50,000 to make an error that would have no effect on the system at all. Had they not done it—they did not know—another pair of individuals had been paid the same amount of money to do the same thing ten minutes later.

In the Stratus mainframe computers at the Depository Trust Company—

more properly in the software that resided in them—the entries were noted, and the Easter Egg started to hatch.

The cameras and lights were all set up in St. Vladimir Hall of the Great Kremlin Palace, the traditional room for finalizing treaties and a place that Jack had visited at another time and under very different circumstances. In two separate rooms, the President of the United States and the President of the Russian Republic were having their makeup put on, something that was probably more irksome to the Russian, Ryan was sure. Looking good for the cameras was not a traditional requirement for local political figures. Most of the guests were already seated, but the senior members of both official parties could be more relaxed. Final preparations were just about complete. The crystal glasses were on their trays, and the corks on the champagne bottles were unwrapped, awaiting only the word to be popped off.

"That reminds me. You never did send me any of that Georgian champagne," Jack told Sergey.

"Well, today it can be done, and I can get you a good price."

"You know, before, I would have had to turn it in because of ethics laws."

"Yes, I know that every American official is a potential crook," Golovko noted, checking around to see that everything was done properly.

"You should be a lawyer." Jack saw the lead Secret Service agent come through the door, and headed to his seat. "Some place, isn't it, honey?" he asked his wife.

"The czars knew how to live," she whispered back as the TV lights all came on. In America, all the networks interrupted their regular programming. The timing was a little awkward, with the eleven-hour differential between Moscow and the American West Coast. Then there was Russia, which had at least ten time zones of its own, a result of both sheer size and, in the case of Siberia, proximity to the Arctic Circle. But this was something everyone would want to see.

The two presidents came out, to the applause of the three hundred people present. Roger Durling and Eduard Grushavoy met at the mahogany table and shook hands warmly as only two former enemies could. Durling, the former soldier and paratrooper with Vietnam experience; Grushavoy, also a former soldier, a combat engineer who had been among the first to enter Afghanistan. Trained to hate one another in their youth, now they would put a final end to it all. On this day, they would set aside all the domestic problems that both lived with on every day of the week. For today, the world would change by their hands.

Grushavoy, the host, gestured Durling to his chair, then moved to the microphone.

"Mister President," he said through an interpreter whom he didn't really need, "it is my pleasure to welcome you to Moscow for the first time . . ."

Ryan didn't listen to the speech. It was predictable in every phrase. His eyes fixed on a black plastic box that sat on the table exactly between the chairs of the two chiefs of state. It had two red buttons and a cable that led down to the floor. A pair of TV monitors sat against the near wall, and in the rear of the

room, large projection TVs were available for everyone to watch. They showed similar sites.

"Hell of a way to run a railroad," an Army major noted, twenty miles from Minot, North Dakota. He'd just screwed in the last wire. "Okay, circuits are live. Wires are hot." Only one safety switch prevented the explosives from going, and he had his hand on it. He'd already done a personal check of everything, and there was a full company of military police patrolling the area because Friends of the Earth was threatening to protest the event by putting people where the explosives were, and as desirable as it might be just to blow the bastards up, the officer would have to disable the firing circuit if that happened. *Why the* hell, he wondered, *would anybody protest this?* He'd already wasted an hour trying to explain that to his Soviet counterpart.

"So like the steppes here," the man said, shivering in the wind. They both watched a small TV for their cue.

"It's a shame we don't have the politicians around here to give us some hot air." He took his hand off the safety switch. Why couldn't they just get on with it?

The Russian officer knew his American English well enough to laugh at the remark, feeling inside his oversized parka for a surprise he had in waiting for the American.

"Mr. President, the hospitality we have experienced in this great city is proof positive that there should be, can be, and *will* be a friendship between our two peoples—just as strong as our old feelings were, but far more productive. Today, we put an end to war," Durling concluded to warm applause, returning to shake Grushavoy's hand again. Both men sat down. Oddly, now they had to take their orders from an American TV director who held a headset to his face and talked very quickly.

"Now," men said in two languages, "if the audience will turn to the TVs . . ."

"When I was a lieutenant in the pioneers," the Russian President whispered, "I loved blowing things up."

Durling grinned, leaning his head in close. Some things were not for microphones. "You know the job I always wanted as a boy—do you have it over here?"

"What is that, Roger?"

"The guy who runs the crane with the big iron ball for knocking buildings down. It *has to be* the best job in the whole world."

"Especially if you can put your parliamentary opposition in the building first!" It was a point of view that both shared.

"Time," Durling saw from the director.

Both men put their thumbs on their buttons.

"On three, Ed?" Durling asked.

"Yes, Roger!"

"One," Durling said.

"Two," Grushavoy continued.

"Three!" both said, pressing them down.

The two buttons closed a simple electrical circuit that led to a satellite transmitter outside. It took roughly a third of a second for the signal to go up to the satellite and come back down, then another third for the result to retrace the same path, and for a long moment a lot of people thought that something had gone wrong. But it hadn't.

"Whoa!" the Major observed when a hundred pounds of Composition-Four went off. The noise was impressive, even from half a mile, and there followed the tower of flame from the ignition of the solid-fuel rocket motor. That part of the ceremony had been tricky. They'd had to make sure that the thing would burn from the top only. Otherwise the missile might have tried to fly out of the silo, and *that* would just not have done at all. In fact the whole exercise was unnecessarily complicated and dangerous. The cold wind drove the toxic exhaust smoke to the east, and by the time it got to anything important, it would just be a bad smell, which was pretty much what you could say about the political conditions that had occasioned the existence of the burning rocket motor, wasn't it? There was a certain awe to it, though. The world's largest firework, burning backwards for about three minutes before there was nothing left but smoke. A sergeant activated the silo fire-suppression system, which actually worked, rather to the Major's surprise.

"You know, we had a drawing to see who'd get to do this. I won," the officer said, getting to his feet.

"I was just ordered to come. I am glad I did. Is it safe now?"

"I think so. Come on, Valentin. We have one more job to do, don't we?"

Both men got into an HMMWV, the current incarnation of the Army jeep, and the Major started it up, heading for the silo from upwind. Now it was just a hole in the ground, generating steam. A CNN crew followed, still giving a live feed as the vehicle bumped across the uneven prairie. Their vehicle stopped two hundred yards away, somewhat to their annoyance, while the two officers dismounted their vehicle, carrying gas masks against the possibility that there was still enough smoke to be a health concern. There wasn't. Just the nasty smell. The American officer waved the TV crew in and waited for them to get ready. That took two minutes.

"Ready!" the unit director said.

"Are we in agreement that the silo and missile are destroyed?"

"Yes, we are," the Russian replied with a salute. Then he reached behind his back and pulled two crystal glasses from his pockets. "Would you hold these please, Comrade Major?"

Next came a bottle of Georgian champagne. The Russian popped the cork with a wide grin and filled both glasses.

"I teach you Russian tradition now. First you drink," he said. The TV crew loved it.

"I think I know that part." The American downed the champagne. "And now?"

"The glasses may never be used for a lesser purpose. Now you must do as I

do." With that the Russian turned and poised himself to hurl his glass into the empty hole. The American laughed and did the same.

"Now!" With that, both glasses disappeared into the last American Minuteman silo. They disappeared in the steam, but both could hear them shatter against the scorched concrete walls.

"Fortunately, I have two more glasses," Valentin said, producing them.

"Son of a bitch," Ryan breathed. It turned out that the American at the Russian silo had had a similar idea, and was now explaining what "Miller time!" meant. Unfortunately, aluminum cans didn't break when thrown.

"Overly theatrical," his wife thought.

"It isn't exactly Shakespeare, but if t'were done when t'were done, then at least it's done, honey." Then they heard the corks popping off amid the sounds of applause.

"Is the five-billion-dollars part true?"

"Yep."

"So, Ivan Emmetovich, we can be truly friends now?" Golovko asked, bringing glasses. "We finally meet, Caroline," he said graciously to Cathy.

"Sergey and I go way back," Jack explained, taking the glass and toasting his host.

"To the time I had a gun to your head," the Russian observed. Ryan wondered if it were an historical reference . . . or a toast to the event?

"What?" Cathy asked, almost choking on her drink.

"You never told her?"

"Jesus, Sergey!"

"What are you two talking about?"

"Dr. Ryan, once upon a time your husband and I had a . . . professional disagreement that ended up with myself holding a pistol in his face. I never told you, Jack, that the gun wasn't loaded."

"Well, I wasn't going anywhere anyway, was I?"

"What *are* you two talking about? Is this some inside joke?" Cathy demanded.

"Yeah, honey, that's about right. How is Andrey Il'ich doing?"

"He is well. In fact, if you would like to see him, it can be arranged."

Jack nodded. "I'd like that."

"Excuse me, but who exactly are you?"

"Honey," Jack said. "This is Sergey Nikolayevich Golovko, Chairman of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service."

"KGB? You know each other?"

"Not KGB, madam. We are much smaller now. Your husband and I have been . . . competitors for years now."

"Okay, and who won?" she asked.

Both men had the same thought, but Golovko said it first: "Both of us, of course. Now, if you will permit, let me introduce you to my wife, Yelena. She is a pediatrician." That was something CIA had never bothered to find out, Jack realized.

He turned to look at the two presidents, enjoying the moment despite being

surrounded by newsies. It was the first time he'd actually been to an event like this, but he was sure they weren't always this chummy. Perhaps it was the final release of all that tension, the realization that, yes, Virginia, it really was over. He saw people bringing in yet more champagne. It was pretty good stuff, and he fully intended to have his share of it. CNN would soon tire of the party, but these people would not. All the uniforms, and politicians, and spies, and diplomats. Hell, maybe they would all really be friends.

19

Strike Two, 1-800-RUN

Though the overall timing was fortuitous, the plan for exploiting the chance was exquisite, the product of years of study and modeling and simulation. In fact the operation had already begun when six major commercial banks in Hong Kong started going short on U.S. Treasury bonds. These had been bought a few weeks earlier, part of a complex exchange for yen holdings done as a classic hedge against monetary fluctuations. The banks themselves were about to undergo a trauma—a change in ownership of the very ground upon which they stood—and the two factors made their massive purchases seem an entirely ordinary move to maximize their liquidity and flexibility at the same time. In liquidating the bonds, they were just cashing in, albeit in a large way, on the relative change in values of dollar and yen. They would realize a 17 percent profit from the move, in fact, then buy yen, which, currency experts all over the world were now saying, had reached a hard floor and would soon rebound. Still, two hundred ninety *billion* dollars of U.S. bonds were on the market briefly, and undervalued at that. They were soon snapped up by European banks. The Hong Kong bankers made the proper electronic entries, and the transaction was concluded. Next they wired the fact to Beijing, uneasily happy to show that they had followed orders and demonstrated obeisance to their soon-to-be political masters. So much the better, all thought, that they had taken a profit on the deal.

In Japan the transaction was noted. Fourteen hours off the local time of New York City, still the world's foremost trading center, it was not terribly unusual for Tokyo traders to work hours usually associated with night watchmen, and in any case the wire services that communicated financial information never ceased transmitting data. It would have surprised some people to learn that the people in the trading offices were very senior indeed, and that a special room had been established on the top floor of a major office building during the last week. Called the War Room by its current occupants, it had telephone lines leading to every city in the world with major trading activities and computer displays to show what was happening in all of them.

Other Asian banks went next, repeating the same procedure as in Hong Kong, and the people in the War Room watched their machines. Just after noon, New York time, Friday, which was 2:03 A.M. on Saturday in Tokyo, they saw another three hundred million dollars of U.S. bonds dumped into the market, these at a price even more attractive than that just offered in Hong Kong, and these, also, were rapidly bought by other European bankers for whom the working day and week were just coming to an end. As yet nothing grossly unusual had happened. Only then did the Japanese banks make their

move, well covered by the activity of others. The Tokyo banks as well started selling off their U.S. Treasuries, clearly taking action to firm up the yen, it appeared. In the process, however, the entire world's ready surplus-dollar capacity had been used up in a period of minutes. It could be written off as a mere coincidence, but the currency traders—at least those not at lunch in New York—were now alerted to the fact that any further trading on those notes would be unsettling, however unlikely that might be, what with the known strength of the dollar.

* * *

The state dinner was reflective of traditional Russian hospitality, made all the more intense by the fact that it celebrated the end of two generations of nuclear terror. The Metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church intoned a long and dignified invocation. Himself twice the victim of political imprisonment, his invitation to rejoice was heartfelt, moving a few to tears, which were soon banished by the start of the feast. There was soup, and caviar, and fowl, and fine beef; and huge quantities of alcohol which, for just this once, everyone felt free to imbibe. The real work of the trip was done. There really were no secrets left to hide. Tomorrow was Saturday, and everyone would have the chance to sleep late.

"You, too, Cathy?" Jack asked. His wife was not normally a heavy drinker, but tonight she was knocking it back.

"This champagne is wonderful." It was her first state dinner overseas. She'd had a good day of her own with local ophthalmic surgeons, and had invited two of the best, full professors both, to come to the Wilmer Institute and acquaint themselves with her specialty area. Cathy was in the running for a Lasker Award for her work with laser surgery, the product of eleven years of clinical research, and the reason she had not accepted a department chairmanship twice offered by University of Virginia. Her big paper announcing the breakthrough would soon be published in *NEJM,* and for her as well, this night and this trip were the culmination of many things.

"You're going to pay for it tomorrow," her husband warned. Jack was going easier on all the drinks, though he had already exceeded his normal nightly limit, which was one. It was the toasts that would do everyone in, he knew, having been through Russian banquets before. It was just a cultural thing. The Russians could drink most Irishmen under any table, something he'd once learned the hard way, but most of the American party either hadn't learned that lesson or simply didn't care this night. The National Security Advisor shook his head. They'd sure as hell learn it tomorrow morning. The main course arrived just then, and deep red wine filled the glasses.

"Oh, God, my dress is going to split wide open!"

"That should add to the official entertainment," her husband observed, earning a glare from across the table.

"You are far too skinny," Golovko observed, sitting next to her and giving voice to another Russian prejudice.

"So how old are your children?" Yelena Golovko asked. Also thin by Russian

standards, she was a professor of pediatrics, and a very pleasant dinner companion.

"An American custom," Jack replied, pulling out his wallet and showing the pictures. "Olivia—I call her Sally. This is little Jack, and this is our newest."

"Your son favors you, but the girls are the image of their mother."

Jack grinned. "A good thing, too."

The great trading firms are just that, but it's a mystery to the average stockholder just how they trade. Wall Street was a vast collection of misnomers, beginning with the street itself, which is the approximate width of a back alley in most American residential areas, and even the sidewalks seem overly narrow for the degree of traffic they serve. When purchase orders came in to a major house, like the largest of them, Merrill Lynch, the traders did not go looking, physically or electronically, for someone willing to sell that particular issue. Rather, every day the company itself bought measured holdings of issues deemed likely to trade, and then awaited consumer interest in them. Buying in fairly large blocks made for some degree of volume discounting, and the sales, generally, were at a somewhat higher price. In this way the trading houses made money on what bookies called a "middle" position, typically about one eighth of a point. A point was a dollar, and thus an eighth of a point was twelve and a half cents. Seemingly a tiny margin of profit for a stock whose share value could be anything up to hundreds of dollars in the case of some blue chips, it was a margin repeated on many issues on a daily basis, compounded over time to a huge potential profit if things went well. But they didn't always go well, and it was also possible for the houses to lose vast sums in a market that fell more rapidly than their estimates. There were many aphorisms warning of this. On the Hong Kong market, a large and active one, it was said that the market "went up like an escalator and down like an elevator," but the most basic saying was hammered into the mind of every new "rocket scientist" on the huge computer-trading floor of Merrill Lynch headquarters on the Lower West Side: "Never assume that there is a buyer for what you want to sell." But everyone did assume that, of course, because there always was, at least as far back as the collective memory of the firm went, and that was pretty far.

Most of the trading was not to individual investors, however. Since the 1960s, mutual funds had gradually assumed control of the market. Called "institutions" and grouped under that title with banks, insurance companies, and pension-fund managers, there were actually far more such "institutions" than there were stock issues on the New York Stock Exchange, rather like having hunters outnumbering the game, and the institutions controlled pools of money so vast as to defy comprehension. They were so powerful that to a large extent their policies could actually have a large effect on individual issues and even, briefly, the entire market, and in many cases the "institutions" were controlled by a small number of people—in many cases, just one.

The third and largest wave of Treasury-note sales came as a surprise to everyone, but most of all to the Federal Reserve Bank headquarters in

Washington, whose staff had noted the Hong Kong and Tokyo transactions, the first with interest, the second with a small degree of alarm. The Eurodollar market had made things right, but that market was now mainly closed. These were more Asian banks, institutions that set their benchmarks not in America, but in Japan, and whose technicians had also noted the dumping and done some phoning around the region. Those calls had ended up in a single room atop an office tower, where very senior banking officials said that they'd been called in from a night's sleep to see a situation that looked quite serious to them, occasioning the second wave of sales, and that they recommended a careful, orderly, but rapid movement of position away from the dollar.

U.S. Treasury notes were the debt instruments of the United States government and also the principal retaining wall for the value of American currency. Regarded for fifty years as the safest investment on the planet, T-Bills gave both American citizens and everyone else the ability to put their capital in a commodity that represented the world's most powerful economy, protected in turn by the world's most powerful military establishment and regulated by a political system that enshrined rights and opportunities through a Constitution that all admired even though they didn't always quite understand it. Whatever the faults and failings of America—none of them mysteries to sophisticated international investors—since 1945 the United States had been the one place in all the world where money was relatively safe. There was an inherent vitality to America from which all strong things grew. Imperfect as they were, Americans were also the world's most optimistic people, still a young country by the standards of the rest of the world, with all the attributes of vigorous youth. And so, when people had wealth to protect, mixed with uncertainty on how to protect it, most often they bought U.S. Treasury notes. The return wasn't always inviting, but the security was.

But not today. Bankers worldwide saw that Hong Kong and Tokyo had bailed out hard and fast, and the excuse over the trading wires that they were moving their positions from the dollar to the yen just didn't explain it all, especially after a few phone calls were made to inquire why the move had been made. Then the word arrived that more Japanese banks were moving out their bond holdings in a careful, orderly, and rapid movement. With that, bankers throughout Asia started doing the same. The third wave of selling was close to six hundred billion dollars, almost all short-term notes with which the current U.S. administration had chosen to finance its spending deficit.

The dollar was already falling, and with the start of the third wave of selling, all in a period of less than ninety minutes, the drop grew steeper still. In Europe, traders on their way home heard their cellular phones start beeping to call them back. Something unexpected was afoot. Analysts wondered if it had anything to do with the developing sex scandal within the American government. Europeans always wondered at the American fixation with the sexual dalliances of politicians. It was foolish, puritanical, and irrational, but it was also real to the American political scene, and that made it a relevant factor in how they handled American securities. The value of three-month U.S. Treasury notes was already down 19/32 of a point—bond values were expressed in such fractions—and as a result of that the dollar had fallen four cents against the British pound, even more against the Deutschmark, and more

still again against the yen.

"What the hell is going own?" one of the Fed's board members asked. The whole board, technically known as the Open Market Committee, was grouped around a single computer screen, watching the trend in a collective mood of disbelief. There was no reason for this chaos that any of them could identify. Okay, sure, there was the flap over Vice President Kealty, but he was the *Vice* President. The stock market had been wavering up and down for some time due to the lingering confusion over the effects of the Trade Reform Act. But what kind of evil synergy was this? The problem, they knew without discussing, was that they might never really know what was happening. Sometimes there was no real explanation. Sometimes things just happened, like a herd of cattle deciding to stampede for no reason that the drovers ever understood. When the dollar was down a full hundred basis points—meaning one percent of value—they all walked into the sanctity of their boardroom and sat down. The discussion was rapid and decisive. There was a run on the dollar. They had to stop it. Instead of the half-point rise in the Discount Rate they had planned to announce at the end of the working day, they would go to a full point. A strong minority actually proposed more than that, but agreed to the compromise. The announcement would be made immediately. The head of the Fed's public-relations department drafted a statement for the Chairman to read for whatever news cameras would answer the summons, and the statement would go out simultaneously on every wire service.

When brokers returned to their desks from lunch, what had been a fairly calm Friday was something else entirely. Every office had a news board that gave shorthand announcements of national and international events, because such things had effects on the market. The notification that the Fed had jacked up its benchmark rate by a full point shocked most trading rooms to a full fifteen or thirty seconds of silence, punctuated by not a few *Holy shits*. Technical traders modeling on their computer terminals saw that the market was already reacting. A rise in the discount rate was a sure harbinger of a brief dip in the Dow, like dark clouds were of rain. This storm would not be a pleasant one.

The big houses, Merrill Lynch, Lehman Brothers, Prudential-Bache, and all the rest, were highly automated, and all were organized along similar lines. In almost every case there was a single large room with banks of computer terminals. The size of the room was invariably dictated by the configuration of the building, and the highly paid technicians were crowded in almost as densely as a Japanese corporate office, except that in the American business centers people weren't allowed to smoke. Few of the men wore their suit jackets, and most of the women wore sneakers.

They were all very bright, though their educational backgrounds might have surprised the casual visitor. Once peopled with products of the Harvard or Wharton business schools, the new crop of "rocket scientists" were just that—largely holders of science degrees, especially mathematics and physics. MIT was the current school of choice, along with a handful of others. The reason was that the trading houses all used computers, and the computers used highly complex mathematical models both to analyze and predict what the market was doing. The models were based on painstaking historical research that

covered the NYSE all the way back to when it was a place under the shade of a buttonwood tree. Teams of historians and mathematicians had plotted every move in the market. These records had been analyzed, compared with all identifiable outside factors, and given their own mathematically drawn measure of reality, and the result was a series of very precise and inhumanly intricate models for how the market had worked, did work, and would work. All of this data, however, was dedicated to the idea that dice *did* have a memory, a concept beloved of casino owners, but false.

You needed to be a mathematical genius, everyone said (especially the mathematical geniuses), to understand how this thing operated. The older hands kept out of the way for the most part. People who had learned business in business schools, or even people who had started as clerks and made their way up the ladder through sheer effort and savvy, had made way for the new generation—not really regretting it. The half-life of a computer jockey was eight years or so. The pace on the floor was killing, and you had to be young and stupid, in addition to being young and brilliant, to survive out there. The older hands who had worked their way up the hard way let the youngsters do the computer-driving, since they themselves had only a passing familiarization with the equipment, and took on the role of supervising, marking trends, setting corporate policy, and generally being the kindly uncle to the youngsters, who regarded the supervisory personnel as old farts to whom you ran in time of trouble.

The result was that nobody was really in charge of anything—except, perhaps, the computer models, and everyone used the same model. They came in slightly different flavors, since the consultants who had generated them had been directed by each trading house to come up with something special, and the result was prosperity for the consultants, who did essentially the same work for each customer but billed each for what they claimed was a unique product.

The result, in military terms, was an operational doctrine both identical and inflexible across the industry. Moreover, it was an operational philosophy that everyone knew and understood only in part.

The Columbus Group, one of the largest mutual-fund fleets, had its own computer models. Controlling billions of dollars, its three main funds, Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria, were able to purchase large blocks of equities at rock-bottom prices, and by those very transactions to affect the price of individual issues. That vast market power was in turn commanded by no more than three individuals, and that trio reported to a fourth man who made all of the really important decisions. The rest of the firm's rocket scientists were paid, graded, and promoted on their ability to make recommendations to the seniors. They had no real power per se. The word of the boss was law, and everybody accepted that as a matter of course. The boss was invariably a man with his own fortune in the group. Each of his dollars had the same value as the dollar of the smallest investor, of whom there were thousands. It ran the same risks, reaped the same benefits, and occasionally took the same losses as everyone else's dollar. That, really, was the only security built into the entire trading system. The ultimate sin in the brokerage business was to place your own interests before those of your investors. Merely by putting your interests

alongside theirs, there came the guarantee that everyone was in it together, and the little guys who had not the barest understanding of how the market worked rested secure in the idea that the big boys who did know were looking after things. It was not unlike the American West in the late nineteenth century, where small cattle ranchers entrusted their diminutive herds to those of the large ranchers for the drive to the railheads.

It was 1:50 P.M. when Columbus made its first move. Calling his top people together, Raizo Yamata's principal lieutenant briefly discussed the sudden run on the dollar. Heads nodded. It was serious. Pinta, the medium-risk fund of the fleet, had a goodly supply of Treasury notes, always a good parking place in which to put cash in anticipation of a better opportunity for later on. The value of these notes was falling. He announced that he was ordering their immediate transfer for Deutschmarks, again the most stable currency in Europe. The Pinta manager nodded, lifted his phone, and gave the order, and another huge transaction was made, the first by an American trader.

"I don't like the way this afternoon is going," the vice-chairman said next. "I want everybody close." Heads nodded again. The storm clouds were coming closer, and the herd was getting restless with the first shafts of lightning. "What bank stocks are vulnerable to a weak dollar?" he asked. He already knew the answer, but it was good form to ask.

"Citibank," the Niña manager replied. He was responsible for the blue-chip fund's management. "We have a ton of their stock."

"Start bailing out," the vice-chairman ordered, using the American idiom. "I don't like the way the banks are exposed."

"All of it?" The manager was surprised. Citibank had just turned in a pretty good quarterly statement.

A serious nod. "All of it."

"But—"

"All of it," the vice-chairman said quietly. "Immediately."

At the Depository Trust Company the accelerated trading activity was noted by the staffers whose job it was to note every transaction. Their purpose was to collate everything at the end of the trading day, to note which buyer had purchased which stock from which seller, and to post the money transfers from and to the appropriate accounts, in effect acting as the automated bookkeeper for the entire equities market. Their screens showed an accelerating pace of activity, but the computers were all running Chuck Searls' Electra-Clerk 2.4.0 software, and the Stratus mainframes were keeping up. There were three outputs off each machine. One line went to the monitor screens. Another went to tape backups. A third went to a paper printout, the ultimate but most inconvenient record-keeping modality. The nature of the interfaces demanded that each output come from a different internal board inside the computers, but they were all the same output, and as a result nobody bothered with the permanent records. After all, there were a total of six machines divided between two separate locations. This system was as secure as people could make it.

Things could have been done differently. Each sale/ purchase order could

have been sent out immediately, but that was untidy—the sheer administrative volume would have taxed the abilities of the entire industry. Instead, the purpose of DTC was to bring order out of chaos. At the end of each day, the transactions were organized by trading house, by stock issue, and by client, in a hierarchical way, so that each house would write a limited number of checks—funds transfers were mostly done electronically, but the principle held. This way the houses would both save on administrative expense and generate numerous means by which every player in the game could track and measure its own activity for the purposes of internal audit and further mathematical modeling of the market as a whole. Though seemingly an operation of incomprehensible complexity, the use of computers made it as routine and far more efficient than written entries in a passbook savings account.

"Wow, somebody's dumping on Citibank," the syscon said.

The floor of the New York Stock Exchange was divided into three parts, the largest of which had once been a garage. Construction was under way on a fourth trading room, and local doomsayers were already noting that every time the Exchange had increased its space, something bad had happened. Some of the most rational and hard-nosed business types in all the world, this community of professionals had its own institutional superstitions. The floor was actually a collection of individual firms, each of which had a specialty area and responsibility for a discrete number of issues grouped by type. One firm might have eight to fifteen pharmaceutical issues, for example. Another managed a similar number of bank stocks. The real function of the NYSE was to provide both liquidity and a benchmark. People could buy and sell stocks anywhere from a lawyer's office to a countryclub dining room. Most of the trading in major stocks happened in New York because . . . it happened in New York, and that was that. The New York Stock Exchange was the oldest. There were also the American Stock Exchange, Amex, and the newer National Association of Securities Dealers Automatic Quotation, whose awkward name was compensated for by a snappy acronym, NASDAQ. The NYSE was the most traditional in organization, and some would say that it had been dragged kicking and screaming into the world of automation. Somewhat haughty and stodgy—they regarded the other markets as the minor leagues and themselves as the majors—it was staffed by professionals who stood for most of the day at their kiosks, watching various displays, buying and selling and, like the trading houses, living off the "middle" or "spread" positions which they anticipated. If the stock market and its investors were the herd, they were the cowboys, and their job was to keep track of things, to set the benchmark prices to which everyone referred, to keep the herd organized and contained, in return for which the best of them made a very good living that compensated for a physical working environment which at best was chaotic and unpleasant, and at its worst really was remarkably close to standing in the way of a stampede.

The first rumblings of that stampede had already started. The sell-off of Treasury notes was duly reported on the floor, and the people there traded

nervous looks and headshakes at the unreasonable development. Then they learned that the Fed had responded sharply. The strong statement from the chairman didn't—couldn't—disguise his unease, and would not have mattered in any case. Few people listened to the statement beyond the announcement of a change in the Discount Rate. That was the news. The rest of it was spin control, and investors discounted all of that, preferring to rely on their own analysis.

The sell orders started coming. The floor trader who specialized in bank stocks was stunned by the phone call from Columbus, but that didn't matter. He announced that he had "five hundred Citi at three," meaning five hundred thousand shares of the stock of First National City Bank of New York at eighty-three dollars, two full points under the posted price, clearly a move to get out in a hurry. It was a good, attractive price, but the market hesitated briefly before snapping them up, and then at "two and a half."

Computers also kept track of trading because the traders didn't entirely trust themselves to stay on top of everything. A person could be on the phone and miss something, after all, and therefore, to a remarkable degree, major institutions were actually managed by computers, or more properly the software that resided on them, which was in turn written by people who established discrete sets of monitoring criteria. The computers didn't understand the market any more than those who programmed them, of course, but they did have instructions: If "A" happens, then do "B." The new generation of programs, generically called "expert systems" (a more attractive term than "artificial intelligence") for their high degree of sophistication, were updated on a daily basis with the status of benchmark issues from which they electronically extrapolated the health of whole segments of the market. Quarterly reports, industry trends, changes in management, were all given numerical values and incorporated in the dynamic databases that the expert systems examined and acted upon, entirely without the judgmental input of human operators.

In this case the large and instant drop in the value of Citibank stock announced to the computers that they should initiate sell orders on other bank stocks. Chemical Bank, which had had a rough time of late, the computers remembered, had also dropped a few points in the last week, and at the three institutions that used the same program, sell orders were issued electronically, dropping that issue an instant point and a half. That move on Chemical Bank stock, linked with the fall of Citibank, attracted the immediate attention of other expert systems with the same operational protocols but different benchmark banks, a fact that guaranteed a rippling effect across the entire industry spectrum. Manufacturers Hanover was the next major bank stock to head down, and now the programs were starting to search their internal protocols for what a fall in bank-stock values indicated as the next defensive move in other key industries.

With the money realized by the Treasury sales, Columbus started buying gold, both in the form of stocks and in gold futures, starting a trend from currency and into precious metals. The sudden jump there went out on the wires as well, and was noted by traders, both human and electronic. In all cases the analysis was pretty much the same: a sell-off of government bonds,

plus a sudden jump in the Discount Rate, plus a run on the dollar, plus a building crash in bank stocks, plus a jump in precious metals, all combined to announce a dangerous inflationary predictor. Inflation was always bad for the equities market. You didn't need to have artificial intelligence to grasp that. Neither computer programs nor human traders were panicking yet, but everyone was leaning forward and watching the wires for developing trends, and everyone wanted to be ahead of the trend, the better to protect their own and their clients' investments.

By this time the bond market was seriously rattled. Half a billion dollars, dumped at the right time, had shaken loose another ten. The Eurodollar managers who had been called back to their offices were not really in a fit state to make rational decisions. The days and weeks had been long of late with the international trade situation, and arriving singly back at their offices, each asked the others what the devil was going on, only to learn that a lot of U.S. Treasuries had been sold very short, and that the trend was continuing, now augmented by a large and very astute American institution. But *why*? they all wanted to know. That set them to looking at additional data on the wires, trying to catch up with the information streaming from America. Eyes squinted, heads shook, and these traders, lacking the time to review everything, turned to their own expert systems to make the analyses, because the reasons for the swift movements were simply not obvious enough to be real.

But it didn't really matter why, did it? It had to be real. The Fed had just gone up a full point on the discount rate, and that hadn't happened by accident. For the moment, they decided, in the absence of guidance from their governments and central banks, they would defer buying U.S. Treasuries. They also began immediate examinations of their equity holdings, because stocks looked as though they were going to drop, and drop rapidly.

" . . . between the people of Russia and the people of America," President Grushavoy concluded his toast, the host answering President Durling, the guest, as the protocol for such things went. Glasses were raised and tipped. Ryan allowed a drop or two of the vodka to pass his lips. Even with these thimble glasses, you could get pretty wasted—waiters stood everywhere to replenish them—and the toasting had just begun. He'd never been to a state affair this . . . loose. The entire diplomatic community was here—or at least the ambassadors from all the important countries were present. The Japanese Ambassador in particular seemed jovial, darting from table to table for snippets of conversation.

Secretary of State Brett Hanson stood next, raising his glass and stumbling through a prepared ode to the far-seeing Russian Foreign Ministry, celebrating their cooperation not merely with the United States, but all of Europe. Jack checked his watch: 10:03 local time. He already had three and a half drinks down, and deemed himself to be the most sober person in the room. Cathy was getting a little giggly on him. *That* hadn't happened in a very long time, and he knew that he'd be razzing her about it for years to come.

"Jack, you have no taste for our vodka?" Golovko asked. He also was hitting

it pretty hard, but Sergey appeared to be used to it.

"I don't want to make too much of a fool out of myself," Ryan replied.

"It would be difficult for you to do that, my friend," the Russian observed.

"That's because you're not married to him," Cathy noted with a twinkle in her eye.

"Now wait a minute," a bond specialist said to his computer in New York. His firm managed several large pension funds, which were responsible for the retirement security of over a million union workers. Just back from a normal lunch at his favorite deli, he was offering Treasuries at bargain prices on orders from upstairs, and for the moment they were just sitting out there awaiting a buyer. Why? A cautious order appeared from a French bank, apparently a hedge against inflationary pressure on the franc. That was a mere billion, bid at 1 7/32 off the opening value, the international equivalent of armed robbery. But Columbus, he saw, had bitten the bullet and taken the francs, converting them almost instantly into D-marks in a hedge move of its own. Still digesting his corned-beef sandwich, the man felt his lunch turn into a ball of chilled lead.

"Somebody making a run on the dollar?" he asked the trader next to him.

"Sure looks that way," she answered. In an hour, future options on the dollar had dropped the maximum-allowed limit for a day after having climbed all morning.

"Who?"

"Whoever it is, Citibank just took one in the back. Chemical's sliding, too."

"Some kind of correction?" he wondered.

"Correction *from* what? *To* what?"

"So what do I do? Buy? Sell? Hide?" He had decisions to make. He had the life savings of real people to protect, but the market wasn't acting in a way he understood. Things were going in the shitter, and he didn't know why. In order to do his job properly, he had to know.

* * *

"Still heading west to meet us, *Shoho,"* Fleet Operations told Admiral Sato. "We should have them on radar soon."

"Hai. Thank you, *Issa,"* Sato replied, an edge on his good humor now. He wanted it that way, wanted his people to see him like that. The Americans had won the exercise, which was hardly a surprise. Nor was it surprising that the crewmen he saw were somewhat depressed as a result. After all the workups and drills, they'd been administratively annihilated, and the resentment they felt, while not terribly professional, was entirely human. *Again*, they thought, the Americans have done it to us *again*. That suited the fleet commander. Their morale was one of the most important considerations in the operation, which, the crewmen didn't know, was not over, but actually about to begin.

The event that had started with T-Bills was now affecting all publicly traded bank issues, enough so that the chairman of Citibank called a press conference to protest against the collapse of his institution's stock, pointing to the most recent earnings statement and demonstrable financial health of one of the country's largest banks. Nobody listened. He would have been better advised to make a few telephone calls to a handful of chosen individuals, but that might not have worked either.

The one banker who could have stopped things that day was giving a speech at a downtown club when his beeper went off. He was Walter Hildebrand, president of the New York branch of the Federal Reserve Bank, and second in importance only to the man who ran the headquarters in Washington. Himself a man of great inherited wealth who had nonetheless started at the bottom of the financial industry (albeit living in a comfortable twelve-room condo as he did so) and earned his way to the top, Hildebrand had also earned his current job, which he viewed as his best opportunity for real public service. A canny financial analyst, he had published a book examining the crash of October 19, 1987, and the role played by his predecessor at the New York Fed, Gerry Lornigan, in saving the market. Having just delivered a speech on the ramifications of the Trade Reform Act, he looked down at his beeper, which unsurprisingly told him to call the office. But the office was only a few blocks away, and he decided to walk back instead of calling, which would have told him to go to the NYSE. It would not have mattered.

Hildebrand walked out of the building by himself. It was a clear, crisp day, a good one to walk off some of his lunch. He hadn't troubled himself to use a bodyguard, as some of his antecedents had, though he did have a pistol-carry permit and sometimes used it.

The streets of lower Manhattan are narrow and busy, populated mostly by delivery trucks and yellow-painted taxicabs that darted from corner to corner like drag racers. The sidewalks were just as narrow and crowded. Just walking around meant taking a crooked path, with many sidesteps. The clearest path was most often that closest to the curb, and that is what Hildebrand took, moving as rapidly as the circumstances permitted, the faster to get to his office. He didn't note the presence of another man, just behind him, only three feet, in fact, a well-dressed man with dark hair and an ordinary face. It was just a matter of waiting for the right moment, and the nature of the traffic here made it inevitable that the moment would come. That was a relief to the dark-haired man, who didn't want to use his pistol for the contract. He didn't like noise. Noise attracted looks. Looks could be remembered, and though he planned to be on a plane to Europe in just over two hours, there was no such thing as being too careful. So, his head swiveled, watching the traffic ahead and behind, he chose the moment with care.

They were approaching the corner of Rector and Trinity. The traffic light ahead turned green, allowing a two-hundred-foot volume of automobiles to surge forward another two hundred feet. Then the light behind changed as well, releasing the pent-up energy of a corresponding number of vehicles. Some of them were cabs, which raced especially fast because cabs loved to change lanes. One yellow cab jumped off the light and darted to its right. A

perfect situation. The dark-haired man increased his pace until he was right behind Hildebrand, and all he had to do was push. The president of the New York Fed tripped on the curb and fell into the street. The cabdriver saw it, and turned the wheel even before he had a chance to swear, but not far enough. For all that, the man in the camel-hair overcoat was lucky. The cab stopped as fast as its newly refurbished brakes allowed, and the impact speed was under twenty miles per hour, enough to catapult Walter Hildebrand about thirty feet into a steel lightpole and break his back. A police officer on the other side of the street responded at once, calling for an ambulance on his portable radio.

The dark-haired man blended back into the crowd and headed for the nearest subway station. He didn't know if the man was dead or not. It wasn't really necessary to kill him, he'd been told, which had seemed odd at the time. Hildebrand was the first banker he'd been told not to kill.

The cop hovering over the fallen businessman noted the beeper's repeated chirping. He'd call the displayed number as soon as the ambulance arrived. His main concern right now was in listening to the cabdriver protest that it wasn't his fault.

The expert systems "knew" that when bank stocks dropped rapidly, confidence in the banks themselves was invariably badly shaken, and that people would think about moving their money out of the banks that appeared to be threatened. That would force the banks in turn to pressure their borrowers to pay back loans, or, more importantly to the expert systems and their ability to read the market a few minutes faster than everyone else, because banks were turning into investment institutions themselves, to liquidate their own financial holdings to meet the demands of depositors who wanted their deposits back. Banks were typically cautious investors on the equity market, sticking mainly to blue chips and other bank stocks, and so the next dip, the computers thought, would be in the major issues, especially the thirty benchmark stocks that made up the Dow Jones Industrial Average. As always, the imperative was to see the trend first and to move first, thus safeguarding the funds that the big institutions had to protect. Of course, since all the institutions used essentially the same expert systems, they all moved at virtually the same time. With the sight of a single thunderbolt just a little too close to the herd, all of the herd members started moving away from it, in the same direction, slowly at first, but moving.

The men on the floor of the exchange knew it was coming. Mostly people who received programmed-trade orders, they had learned from experience to predict what the computers would do. *Here it comes* was the murmur heard in all three trading rooms, and the very predictability of it should have been an indicator of what was really happening, but it was hard for the cowboys just to stay outside the herd, try to find a way to direct it, turn it, pacify it—and not be engulfed by it. If *that* happened, they stood to lose because a serious downward turn could obliterate the thin margins on which their firms depended.

The head of the NYSE was now on the balcony, looking down, wondering where the hell Walt Hildebrand was. That's all they needed, really. Everybody

listened to Walt. He lifted his cellular phone and called his office again, only to hear from Walt's secretary that he hadn't returned to the office from his speech yet. Yes, she *had* beeped him. She really had.

He could see it start. People moved more rapidly on the floor. Everyone was there now, and the sheer volume of noise emanating from the floor was reaching deafening levels. Always a bad sign when people started shouting. The electronic ticker told its own tale. The blue chips, all three-letter acronyms as well known to him as the names of his children, were accounting for more than a third of the notations, and the numbers were trending sharply down. It took a mere twenty minutes for the Dow to drop fifty points, and as awful and precipitous as that was, it came as a relief. Automatically, the computers at the New York Stock Exchange stopped accepting computer-generated sell orders from their electronic brethren. The fifty-point mark was called a "speed bump." Set in place after the 1987 crash, its purpose was to slow things down to a human pace. The simple fact that everyone overlooked was that people could take the instructions—they didn't even bother calling them recommendations anymore—from their computers and forward the sell orders themselves by phone or telex or electronic mail, and all the speed bump accomplished was to add another thirty seconds to the transaction process. Thus, after a hiatus of no more than a minute, the trading pace picked up yet again and the direction was down.

By this time, the panic within the entire financial community was quite real, reflected in a tenseness and a low buzz of conversation in every trading room of every one of the large institutions. Now CNN issued a live special report from its own perch over the floor of the former NYSE garage. The stock ticker on their "Headline News" service told the tale to investors who also liked to keep track of more human events. For others, there was now a real human being to say that the Dow Jones Industrial Average had dropped fifty points in the blink of an eye, and was now down twenty more points, and the downward spiral was not reversing itself. There followed questions from the anchorperson in Atlanta, and resulting speculation on the cause of the event, and the reporter who hadn't had time to check her sources for information, winged it on her own, and said that there was a worldwide run on the dollar that the Fed had failed to stop. She couldn't have picked a worse thing to say. Now everyone knew what was happening, after a fashion, and the public got involved in the stampede.

Although investment professionals looked upon the public's lack of understanding for the investment process with contempt, they failed to recognize the crucial element of similarity they shared with them. The public merely accepted the fact that the Dow going up was good and its going down was bad. It was exactly the same for the traders, who thought they really understood the system. The investment professionals knew far more about the mechanics of the market but had lost track of the foundation of its value. For them, as for the public, reality had become trends, and they often expressed their bets by use of derivatives, which were moving numerical indicators that over the years had become increasingly disconnected from what the individual stock designations truly represented. Stock certificates were not, after all, theoretical expressions, but individual segments of ownership in corporations

that had a physical reality. Over time the "rocket scientists" on the floor of this room had forgotten that, and even schooled as they were in mathematical models and trend analysis, the underlying value of that which they traded was foreign to them—the facts had become more theoretical than the theory that was now breaking down before their eyes. Denied a foundation in what they were doing, lacking an anchor on which to hold fast in the storm sweeping across the room and the whole financial system, they simply did not know what to do, and the few supervisory personnel who did lacked the numbers and the time with which to settle their young traders down.

None of this really made sense at all. The dollar should have been strong and should grow stronger after a few minor rumbles. Citibank had just turned in a good if not spectacular earnings statement, and Chemical Bank was fundamentally healthy as well after some management restructuring, but the stocks on both issues had dropped hard and fast. The computer programs said that the combination of factors meant something very bad, and the *expert systems* were *never* wrong, were they? Their foundation was historically precise, and they saw into the future better than people could. The technical traders believed the models despite the fact that they did not see the reasoning that had led the models to make the recommendations displayed on their computer terminals; in exactly the same way, ordinary citizens now saw the news and knew that something bad was happening without understanding why it was bad, and wondered what the hell to do about it.

The "professionals" were as badly off as the ordinary citizens catching news flashes on TV or radio, or so it seemed. In fact, it was far worse for them. Understanding the mathematical models as well as they did became not an asset, but a liability. To the average citizen what he saw was incomprehensible at first, and as a result, few took any action at all. They watched and waited, or in many cases just shrugged since they had no stocks of their own. In fact they did, but didn't know it. The banks, insurance companies, and pension funds that managed the citizens' money had huge positions in all manner of public issues. Those institutions were all managed by "professionals"—whose education and experience told them that they *had to* panic. And panic they did, beginning a process that the man in the street soon recognized for what it was. That was when the telephone calls from individuals began, and the downslope became steeper for everyone.

What was already frightening became worse. The first calls came from the elderly, people who watched TV during the day and chatted back and forth on the phone, sharing their fears and their shock at what they saw. Many of them had invested their savings in mutual funds because they gave higher yields than bank accounts—which was why banks had gotten into the business as well, to protect their own profits. The mutual funds were taking huge hits now, and though the hits were limited mainly to the blue chips at the moment, when the calls came in from individual clients to cash in their money and get out, the institutions had to sell off as yet untroubled issues to make up for the losses in others that should have been safe but were not. Essentially, they were throwing away equities that had held their value to this point, for which procedure the timeless aphorism was "to throw good money after bad." It was almost an exact description for what they had to do.

The necessary result was a general run, the drop of every stock issue on every exchange. By three that afternoon, the Dow was down a hundred seventy points. The Standard and Poor's Five Hundred was actually showing worse results, but the NASDAQ Composite Index was the worst of all, as individual investors across America dialed their 1-800 numbers to their mutual funds.

The heads of all the exchanges staged a conference call with the assembled commissioners of the Securities and Exchange Commission in Washington, and for the first confused ten minutes all the voices demanded answers to the same questions that the others were simultaneously asking. Nothing at all was accomplished. The government officials requested information and updates, essentially asking how close the herd was to the edge of the canyon, and how fast it was approaching the abyss, but not contributing a dot to the effort to turn the cattle to safety. The head of the NYSE resisted his instinct to shut down or somehow slow down the trading. In the time they talked—a bare twenty minutes—the Dow dropped another ninety points, having blown through two hundred points of free-fall and now approaching three. After the SEC commissioners broke off to hold their own in-house conference, the exchange heads violated federal guidelines and talked together about taking remedial action, but for all their collective expertise, there was nothing to be done now.

Now individual investors were blinking on "hold" buttons across America. Those whose funds were managed through banks learned something especially disquieting. Yes, their funds were in banks. Yes, those banks were federally insured. But, *no,* the mutual funds the banks managed in order to serve the needs of their depositors were *not* protected by the FDIC. It wasn't merely the interest income that was at risk, but the *principal* as well. The response to that was generally ten or so seconds of silence, and, in not a few cases, people got into their cars and drove to banks to get cash for what other deposits they did have.

The NYSE ticker was now running fourteen minutes late despite the high-speed computers that recorded the changing values of issues. A handful of stocks actually managed to increase, but those were mainly precious metals. Everything else fell. Now all the major networks were running live feeds from the Street. Now everyone knew. Cummings, Cantor, and Carter, a firm that had been in business for one hundred twenty years, ran out of cash reserves, forcing its chairman to make a frantic call to Merrill Lynch. That placed the chairman of the largest house in a delicate position. The oldest and smartest pro around, he had nearly broken his hand half an hour earlier by pounding on his desk and demanding answers that no one had. Thousands of people bought stock not just through, but also in, his corporation because of its savvy and integrity. The chairman could make a strategic move to protect a fellow bulwark of the entire system against a panic with no foundation to it, or he could refuse, guarding the money of his stockholders. There was no right answer to this one. Failure to help CC&C would—could—take the panic to the next stage and so damage the market that the money he saved by not helping the rival firm would just as soon be lost anyway. Extending help to CC&C might turn into nothing more than a gesture, without stopping anything, and

again losing money that belonged to others.

"Holy shit," the chairman breathed, turning to look out the windows. One of the nicknames for the house was "the Thundering Herd." Well, the herd was sure as hell thundering now . . . He measured his responsibility to his stockholders against his responsibility to the whole system upon which they and everyone else depended. The former had to come first. Had to. There was no choice. Thus one of the system's most important players flung the entire financial network over a cliff and into the waiting abyss.

Trading on the floor of the exchange stopped at 3:23 P.M., when the Dow achieved its maximum allowable fall of five hundred points. That figure merely reflected the value of thirty stock issues, and the fall in others well exceeded the benchmark loss of the biggest of the blue chips. The ticker took another thirty minutes to catch up, offering the illusion of further activity while the people on the floor looked at one another, mostly in silence, standing on a wood floor so covered with paper slips as to give the appearance of snow. It was a Friday, they all told themselves. Tomorrow was Saturday. Everyone would be at home. Everyone would have a chance to take a few deep breaths and think. That's all that had to happen, really, just a little thought. None of it made sense. A whole lot of people had been badly hurt, but the market would bounce back, and over time those with the wit and the courage to stand fast would get it all back. *If,* they told themselves, *if everyone used the time intelligently, and if nothing else crazy happened.*

They were almost right.

At the Depository Trust Company, people sat about with ties loose in their collars, and made frequent trips to the restrooms because of all the coffee and soda they'd drunk on this most frantic of afternoons, but there was some blessing to be had. The market had closed early, and so they could start their work early. With the inputs from the major trading centers concluded, the computers switched from one mode of operation to another. The taped recordings of the day's transactions were run through the machines for collation and transmission. It was close to six in the evening when a bell sounded on one of the workstations.

"Rick, I've got a problem here!"

Rick Bernard, the senior system controller, came over and looked at the screen to see the reason for the alert bell.

The last trade they could identify, at exactly noon of that day, was for Atlas Milacron, a machine-tool company flying high with orders from the auto companies, six thousand shares at 48½. Since Atlas was listed on the New York Stock Exchange, its stock was identified by a three-letter acronym, AMN in this case. NASDAQ issues used fourletter groups.

The next notation, immediately after AMN 6000 48½, was AAA 4000 67⅛, and the one under that AAA 9000 51¼. In fact, by scrolling down, all entries made after 12:00:01 showed the same three-letter, meaningless identifier.

“Switch over to Beta,” Bernard said. The storage tape on the first backup computer system was opened. “Scroll down.”

“Shit!”

In five minutes all six systems had been checked. In every case, every single trade had been recorded as gibberish. There was no readily accessible record for any of the trades made after twelve noon. No trading house, institution, or private investor could know what it had bought or sold, to or from whom, or for how much, and none could therefore know how much money was available for other trades, or for that matter, to purchase groceries over the weekend.

20

Strike Three

The party broke up after midnight. The official entertainment was a sort of ballet-in-the-round. The Bolshoy hadn't lost its magic, and the configuration of the room allowed the guests to see the dancers at much closer hand than had ever been possible, but finally the last hand had been clapped red and hurt from the encores, and it was time for security personnel to help their charges to the door. Nearly everyone had a roll to his or her walk, and sure enough, Ryan saw, he was the most sober person in the room, including his wife.

"What do you think, Daga?" Ryan asked Special Agent Helen D'Agustino. His own bodyguard was getting coats.

"I think, just once, I'd like to be able to party with the principals." Then she shook her head like a parent disappointed with her children.

"Oh, Jack, tomorrow I'm going to feel awful," Cathy reported. The vodka here was just too smooth.

"I told you, honey. Beside," her husband added nastily, "it's *already* tomorrow."

"Excuse me, I have to help with JUMPER." Which was the Secret Service code name for the President, a tribute to his paratrooper days.

Ryan was surprised to see an American in ordinary business attire—the formal dinner had been black-tie, another recent change in the Russian social scene—waiting outside the doors. He led his wife over that way.

"What is it?"

"Dr. Ryan, I need to see the President right away."

"Cathy, could you stay here for a second." To the embassy official: "Follow me."

"Oh, Jack . . ." his wife griped.

"You have it on paper?" Ryan asked, holding his hand out.

"Here, sir." Ryan took the fax sheets and read them while walking across the room.

"Holy shit. Come on." President Durling was still chatting with President Grushavoy when Ryan appeared with the junior man in his wake.

"Some party, Jack," Roger Durling observed pleasantly. Then his face changed. "Trouble?"

Ryan nodded, adopting his Advisor's face. "We need Brett and Buzz, Mr. President, right now."

"There they are." The SPY-1D radar on *Mutsu* painted the forward edge of the American formation on the raster screen. Rear Admiral—*Shoho*—Sato looked

at his operations officer with an impassive expression that meant nothing to the rest of the bridge crew but quite a bit to the Captain—*Issa*—who knew what Exercise DATELINE PARTNERS was really all about. Now it was time to discuss the matter with the destroyer's commanding officer. The two formations were 140 nautical miles apart and would rendezvous in the late afternoon, the two officers thought, wondering how *Mutsu's* CO would react to the news. Not that he had much choice in the matter.

Ten minutes later, a *Socho*, or chief petty officer, went out on deck to check out the Mark 68 torpedo launcher on the port side. First opening the inspection hatch on the base of the mount, he ran an electronic diagnostic test on all three "fish" in the three-tube launcher. Satisfied, he secured the hatch, and one by one opened the aft hatches on each individual tube, removing the propeller locks from each Mark 50 torpedo. The *Socho* was a twenty-year veteran of the sea, and completed the task in under ten minutes. Then he lifted his tools and walked over to the starboard side to repeat it for the identical launcher on the other side of his destroyer. He had no idea why he had been ordered to perform the tasks, and hadn't asked.

Another ten minutes and *Mutsu* went to flight quarters. Modified from her original plans, the destroyer now sported a telescoping hangar that allowed her to embark a single SH-60J antisubmarine helicopter that was also useful for surveillance work. The crew had to be roused from sleep and their aircraft preflighted, which required almost forty minutes, but then it lifted off, first sweeping around the formation, then moving forward, its surface-scanning radar examining the American formation that was still heading west at eighteen knots. The radar picture was downlinked to flagship *Mutsu.*

"These will be the two carriers, three thousand meters apart," the CO said, tapping the display screen.

"You have your orders, Captain," Sato said.

"Hai," Mutsu's commander replied, keeping his feelings to himself.

"What the hell happened?" Durling asked. They had assembled in a corner, with Russian and American security personnel to keep others away.

"It looks like there was a major conniption on the Street," Ryan replied, having had the most time to consider the event. It wasn't exactly a penetrating analysis.

"Cause?" Fiedler asked.

"No reason for it that I know about," Jack said, looking around for the coffee he'd ordered. He needed some, and the other three men needed it even more.

"Jack, you have the most recent trading experience," Secretary of the Treasury Fiedler observed.

"Start-ups, IPOs, not really working the Street, Buzz." The National Security Advisor paused, gesturing to the fax sheets. "It's not as though we have a lot to go on. Somebody got nervous on T-Bills, most likely guess right now is that somebody was cashing in on relative changes between the dollar and the yen, and things got a little out of hand."

"A little?" Brett Hanson interjected, just to let people know he was here.

"Look, the Dow took a big fall, down to a hard floor, and there are two days for people to regroup. It's happened before. We're flying back tomorrow night, right?"

"We need to do something now," Fiedler said. "Some sort of statement."

"Something neutral and reassuring," Ryan suggested. "The market's like an airplane. It'll pretty much fly itself if you leave it alone. This has happened before, remember?"

Secretary Bosley Piedter—"Buzz" went back to Little League baseball—was an academic. He'd written books on the American financial system without ever having actually played in it. The good news was that he knew how to take a broad, historical view on economics. His professional reputation was that of an expert on monetary policy. The bad news, Ryan saw now, was that Fiedler had never been a trader, or even thought that much about it, and consequently lacked the confidence that a real player would have had with this situation, which explained why he had immediately asked Ryan for an opinion. Well, that was a good sign, wasn't it? He knew what he didn't know. No wonder everybody said he was smart.

"We put in speed bumps and other safeguards as a result of the last time. This event blew right through them. In less than three hours," SecTreas added uneasily, wondering, as an academic would, why good theoretical measures had failed to work as expected.

"True. It'll be interesting to see why. Remember, Buzz, it *has* happened before."

"Statement," the President said, giving a one-word order.

Fiedler nodded, thinking for a moment before speaking. "Okay, we say that the system is fundamentally sound. We have all manner of automated safeguards. There is no underlying problem with the market or with the American economy. Hell, we're growing, aren't we? And TRA is going to generate at least half a million manufacturing jobs in the coming year. That's a hard number, Mr. President. That's what I'll say for now."

"Defer anything else until we get back?" Durling asked.

"That's my advice," Fiedler confirmed. Ryan nodded agreement.

"Okay, get hold of Tish and put it out right away."

There was an unusual number of charter flights, but Saipan International Airport wasn't all that busy an airport despite its long runways, and increased business made for increased fees. Besides, it was a weekend. Probably some sort of association, the tower chief thought as the first of the 747s out of Tokyo began its final approach. Of late Saipan had become a much more popular place for Japanese businessmen. A recent court decision had struck down the constitutional provision prohibiting foreign ownership of land and now allowed them to buy up parcels. In fact, the island was more than half foreign-owned now, a source of annoyance to many of the native Chamorros people, but not so great an annoyance as to prevent many of them from taking the money and moving off the land. It was bad enough already. On any given weekend, the number of Japanese on Saipan outnumbered the citizens, and typically treated the owners of the island like . . . natives.

"Must be a bunch going to Guam, too," the radar operator noted, examining the line of traffic heading farther south.

"Weekend. Golf and fishing," the senior tower controller observed, looking forward to the end of his shift. The Japs—he didn't like them very much—were not going to Thailand as much for their sex trips. Too many had come home with nasty gifts from that country. Well, they did spend money here—a lot of it—and for the privilege of doing it for this weekend they'd boarded their jumbo-jets at about two in the morning . . .

The first JAL 747 charter touched down at 0430 local time, slowing and turning at the end of the runway in time for the next one to complete its final approach. Captain Torajiro Sato turned right onto the taxiway and looked around for anything unusual. He didn't expect it, but on a mission like this—*Mission*? he asked himself. That was a word he hadn't used since his F-86 days in the Air Self-Defense Force. If he'd stayed, he would have been a *Sho* by now, perhaps even commanding his country's entire Air Force. Wouldn't that have been grand? Instead—instead he'd left that service and started with Japan Air Lines, at the time a place of far greater respect. He'd hated that fact then, and now hoped that it would change for all time. It would be an Air *Force* now, even if someone lesser than he was actually in command.

He was still a fighter pilot at heart. You didn't have much chance to do anything exciting in a 747. He'd been through one serious inflight emergency eight years before, a partial hydraulic failure, and handled it so skillfully that he hadn't bothered telling the passengers. No one outside the flight deck had even noticed. His feat was now a routine part of the simulator training for 747 captains. Beyond that frantic but satisfying moment, he strove for precision. He was something of a legend in an airline known worldwide for its excellence. He could read weather charts like a fortune-teller, pick the precise tar-strip on a runway where his main gear would touch, and had never once been more that three minutes off an arrival time.

Even taxiing on the ground, he drove the monstrous aircraft as though it were a sports car. So it was today, as he approached the jetway, adjusted his power settings, nose-wheel steering, and finally the brakes, to come to a precise stop.

"Good luck, *Nisa,* " he told Lieutenant Colonel Seigo Sasaki, who'd ridden the jump seat in the cockpit for the approach, scanning the ground for the unusual and seeing nothing.

The commander of the special-operations group hustled aft. His men were from the First Airborne Brigade, ordinarily based at Narashino. There were two companies aboard the 747, three hundred eighty men. Their first mission was to assume control of the airport. It would not be difficult, he hoped.

The JAL personnel at the gate had not been briefed for the events of the day, and were surprised to see that all the people leaving the charter flight were men, all about the same age, all carrying identical barrel-bags, and that the first fifty or so had the tops unzipped and their hands inside. A few held clipboards on which were diagrams of the terminal, as it had not been possible to perform a proper rehearsal for the mission. While baggage handlers

struggled with the cargo containers out of the bottom of the aircraft, other soldiers headed for the baggage area, and simply walked through EMPLOYEES ONLY signs to start unpacking the heavy weapons. At another jetway, a second airliner arrived.

Colonel Sasaki stood in the middle of the terminal now, looking left and right, watching his teams of ten or fifteen men fan out and, he saw, doing their job quietly and well.

"Excuse me," a sergeant said pleasantly to a bored and sleepy security guard. The man looked up to see a smile, and down to see that the barrel bag over the man's shoulder was open, and that the hand in it held a pistol. The guard's mouth gaped comically and the private disarmed him without a struggle. In less than two minutes, the other six guards on terminal duty were similarly taken into custody. A lieutenant led a squad to the security office, where three more men were disarmed and handcuffed. All the while continuous if terse radio messages were flowing in to their colonel.

The tower chief turned when the door opened—a guard had handed over the pass card and punched in the entry code on the keypad without the need for much encouragement—to see three men with automatic rifles.

"What the hell—"

"You will continue your duties as before," a captain, or *ichii,* told him. "My English is quite good. Please do not do anything foolish." Then he lifted his radio microphone and spoke in Japanese. The first phase of Operation KABUL was completed thirty seconds early, and entirely without violence.

The second load of soldiers took over airport security. These men were in uniform to make sure that everyone knew what was going on, and they took their places at all entrances and control points, commandeering official vehicles to set additional security points on the access roads into the airport. This wasn't overly hard, as the airport was on the extreme southern part of the island, and all approaches were from the north. The commander of the second detachment relieved Colonel Sasaki. The former would control the arrival of the remaining First Airborne Brigade elements tasked to Operation KABUL. The latter had other tasks to perform.

Three airport buses pulled up to the terminal, and Colonel Sasaki boarded the last after moving around to make sure that all his men were present and properly organized. They drove immediately north, past the Dan Dan Golf Club, which adjoined the airport, then left on Cross Island Road, which took them in sight of Invasion Beach. Saipan is by no means a large island, and it was dark—there were very few streetlights—but that didn't lessen the cold feeling in Sasaki's stomach. He had to run this mission on time and on profile or risk catastrophe. The Colonel checked his watch. The first aircraft would now be landing on Guam, where the possibility of organized resistance was very real. Well, that was the job of First Division. He had his own, and it had to be done before dawn broke.

The word got out very quickly. Rick Bernard placed his first call to the chairman of the New York Stock Exchange to report his problem and to ask for guidance. On the assurance that this was no accident, he made the obvious

recommendation and Bernard called the FBI, located close to Wall Street in the Javits Federal Office Building. The senior official here was a deputy director, and he dispatched a team of three agents to the primary DTC office located in midtown.

"What seems to be the problem?" the senior agent asked. The answer required ten minutes of detailed explanation, and was immediately followed by a call direct to the Deputy-Director-in-Charge.

MV Orchid Ace had been alongside long enough to off-load a hundred cars. All of them were Toyota Land Cruisers. Taking down the security shack and its single drowsy guard proved to be another bloodless exercise, which allowed the buses to enter the fenced storage lot. Colonel Sasaki had enough men in the three buses to give each a crew of three, and they all knew what to do. The police substations at Koblerville and on Capitol Hill would be the first places approached, now that his men had the proper transport. His own part of the mission was at the latter site, at the home of the Governor.

It was really a coincidence that Nomuri had spent the night in town. He'd actually given himself an evening off, which happened rarely enough, and he found that recovery from a night on the town was facilitated by a trip to the bathhouse, something his ancestors had gotten right about a thousand years earlier. After washing, he got his towel and headed to the hot tub, where the foggy atmosphere would clear his head better than aspirin could. He would emerge from this civilized institution refreshed, he thought.

"Kazuo," the CIA officer observed. "Why are you here?"

"Overtime," the man replied with a tired smile.

"Yamata-san must be a demanding boss," Nomuri observed, sliding himself slowly into the hot water, not really meaning anything by the remark. The reply made his head turn.

"I have never seen history happen before," Taoka said, rubbing his eyes and moving around a little, feeling the tension bleed from his muscles, but altogether too keyed up to be sleepy after ten hours in the War Room.

"Well, my history for last night was a very nice hostess," Nomuri said with a raised eyebrow. A nice lady of twenty-one years, too, he didn't add. A very bright young lady, who had many other people contesting for her attention, but Nomuri was far closer to her age, and she enjoyed talking to someone like him. It wasn't all about money, Chet thought, his eyes closed over a smiling face.

"Mine was somewhat more exciting than that."

"Really? I thought you said you were working." Nomuri's eyes opened reluctantly. Kazuo had found something more interesting than sexual fantasy?

"I was."

It was just something about the way he said it. "You know, Kazuo, when you start telling a story, you must finish it."

A laugh and a shake of the head. "I shouldn't, but it will be in the papers in

a few hours."

"What's that?"

"The American financial system crashed last night."

"Really? What happened?"

The man's head turned and he spoke the reply very quietly indeed. "I helped do it to them."

It seemed very odd to Nomuri, sitting in a wooden tub filled with 107-degree water, that he felt a chill.

"Wakarémasen." I don't understand.

"It will be clear in a few days. For now, I must go back." The salaryman rose and walked out, very pleased with himself for sharing his role with one friend. What good was a secret, after all, if at least one person didn't know that you had it? A secret could be a grand thing, and one so closely held in a society like this was all the more precious.

What the hell? Nomuri wondered.

"There they are." The lookout pointed, and Admiral Sato raised his binoculars to look. Sure enough, the clear Pacific sky backlit the mast tops of the lead screen ships, FFG-7 frigates by the look at the crosstrees. The radar picture was clear now, a classic circular formation, frigates on the outer ring, destroyers inward of that, then two or three Aegis cruisers not very different from his own flagship. He checked the time. The Americans had just set the morning watch. Though warships always had people on duty, the real work details were synchronized with daylight, and people would now be rousing from their bunks, showering, and heading off for breakfast.

The visual horizon was about twelve nautical miles away. His squadron of four ships was heading east at thirty-two knots, their best possible continuous speed. The Americans were westbound at eighteen.

"Send by blinker light to the formation: Dress ships."

❄ ❄ ❄

Saipan's main satellite uplink facility was off Beach Road, close to the Sun Inn Motel, and operated by MTC Micro Telecom. It was an entirely ordinary civilian facility whose main construction concern had been protection against autumnal typhoons that regularly battered the island. Ten soldiers, commanded by a major, walked up to the main door and were able to walk right in, then approach the security guard, who simply had no idea what was happening, and, again, didn't even attempt to reach for his sidearm. The junior officer with the detail was a captain trained in signals and communications. All he had to do was point at the various instruments in the central control room. Phone uplinks to the Pacific satellites that transferred telephone and other links from Saipan to America were shut down, leaving the Japan links up—they went to a different satellite, and were backed up with cable—without interfering with downlinked signals. At this hour it was not

overly surprising that no single telephone circuit to America was active at the moment. It would stay that way for quite some time.

"Who are you?" the Governor's wife asked.

"I need to see your husband," Colonel Sasaki replied. "It's an emergency."

The fact of that statement was made immediately clear by the first shot of the evening, caused when the security guard at the legislature building managed to get his pistol out. He didn't get a round off—an eager paratrooper sergeant saw to that—but it was enough to make Sasaki frown angrily and push past the woman. He saw Governor Comacho, walking to the door in his bathrobe.

"What is this?"

"You are my prisoner," Sasaki announced, with three other men in the room now to make it clear that he wasn't a robber. The Colonel found himself embarrassed. He'd never done anything like this before, and though he was a professional soldier, his culture as much as any other frowned upon the invasion of another man's house regardless of the reason. He found himself hoping that the shots he'd just heard hadn't been fatal. His men had such orders.

"What?" Comacho demanded. Sasaki just pointed to the couch.

"You and your wife, please sit down. We have no intention of harming you."

"What is this?" the man asked, relieved that he and his wife weren't in any immediate danger, probably.

"This island now belongs to my country," Colonel Sasaki explained. It couldn't be so bad, could it? The Governor was over sixty, and could remember when that had been true before.

"A goddamned long way for her to come," Commander Kennedy observed after taking the message. It turned out that the surface contact was the *Muroto,* a cutter from the Japanese Coast Guard that occasionally supported fleet operations, usually as a practice target. A fairly handsome ship, but with the low freeboard typical of Japanese naval vessels, she had a crane installed aft for the recovery of practice torpedoes. It seemed that *Kurushio* had expected the opportunity to get off some practice shots in DATELINE PARTNERS. Hadn't *Asheville* been told about that?

"News to me, Cap'n," the navigator said, flipping through the lengthy op-order for the exercise.

"Wouldn't be the first time the clerks screwed up." Kennedy allowed himself a smile. "Okay, we've killed them enough." He keyed his microphone again. "Very well, Captain, we'll replay the last scenario. Start time twenty minutes from now."

"Thank you, Captain," the reply came on the VHF circuit. "Out."

Kennedy replaced the microphone. "Left ten-degrees rudder, all ahead one third. Make your depth three hundred feet."

The crew in the attack center acknowledged and executed the orders, taking

Asheville east for five miles. Fifty miles to the west, USS *Charlotte* was doing much the same thing, at exactly the same time.

* * *

The hardest part of Operation KABUL was on Guam. Approaching its hundredth year as an American-flag possession, this was the largest island in the Marianas chain, and possessed a harbor and real U.S. military installations. Only ten years earlier, it would have been impossible. Not so long ago, the now-defunct Strategic Air Command had based nuclear bombers here. The U.S. Navy had maintained a base for missile submarines, and the security obtaining to both would have made anything like this mission a folly. But the nuclear weapons were all gone—the missiles were, anyway. Now Andersen Air Force base, two miles north of Yigo, was really little more than a commercial airport. It supported trans-Pacific flights by the American Air Force. No aircraft were actually based there any longer except for a single executive jet used by the base commander, itself a leftover from when 13th Air Force had been headquartered on the island. Tanker aircraft that had once been permanently based on Guam were now transient reserve formations that came and went as required. The base commander was a colonel who would soon retire, and he had under him only five hundred men and women, mostly technicians. There were only fifty armed USAF Security Police. It was much the same story at the Navy base whose airfield was now co-located with the Air Force. The Marines who had once maintained security there because of the nuclear weapons stockpile had been replaced by civilian guards, and the harbor was empty of gray hulls. Still, this was the most sensitive part of the overall mission. The airstrips at Andersen would be crucial to the entire operation.

"Pretty ships," Sanchez thought aloud, looking through his binoculars from his chair in Pri-Fly. "Nice tight interval on the formation, too." The four Kongos were on a precise reciprocal heading, about eight miles out, the CAG noted.

"They have the rails lined?" the Air Boss asked. There seemed to be a white line down the sides of all four of the inbound destroyers.

"Rendering honors, yeah, that's nice of them." Sanchez lifted the phone and punched the button for the navigation bridge. "Skipper? CAG here. It seems that our friends are going formal on us."

"Thanks, Bud." The Commanding Officer of *Johnnie Reb* made a call to the battle-group commander on *Enterprise.*

"What?" Ryan said, answering the phone.

"Takeoff in two and a half hours," the President's secretary told him. "Be ready to leave in ninety minutes."

"Wall Street?"

"That's right, Dr. Ryan. He thinks we need to be home a little early. We've informed the Russians. President Grushavoy understands."

"Okay, thanks," Ryan said, not really meaning it. He'd hoped to scoot out to see Narmonov for an hour or so. Then the real fun part came. He reached over and shook his wife awake.

A groan: "Don't even say it."

"You can sleep the rest of it off on the airplane. We have to be packed and ready in an hour and a half."

"What? Why?"

"Leaving early," Jack told her. "Trouble at home. Wall Street had another meltdown."

"Bad?" Cathy opened her eyes, rubbing her forehead and thankful it was still dark outside until she looked at the clock.

"Probably a bad case of indigestion."

"What time is it?"

"Time to get ready to leave."

"We need maneuvering room," Commander Harrison said.

"No dummy is he?" Admiral Dubro asked rhetorically. The opposition, Admiral Chandraskatta, had turned west the night before, probably catching on, finally, that the *Eisenhower/Lincoln* battle force was not where he'd suspected after all. That clearly left a single alternative, and therefore he'd headed west, forcing the Americans against the island chain that India mostly owned. Half of the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet was a powerful collection of ships, but their power would be halved again if their location became known. The whole point of Dubro's operations to this point had been to keep the other guy guessing. Well, he'd made his guess. Not a bad one, either.

"What's our fuel state?" Dubro asked, meaning that of his escort ships. The carriers could steam until the food ran out. Their nuclear fuel would not do so for years.

"Everybody's up to ninety percent. Weather's good for the next two days. We can do a speed run if we have to."

"You thinking the same thing I am?"

"He's not letting his aircraft get too close to the Sri Lankan coast. They might show on air-traffic-control radars and people might ask questions. If we head northeast, then east, we can race past Dondra Head at night and curl back around south. Even money nobody sees us."

The Admiral didn't like even-money odds. That meant it was just as likely somebody *would* see the formation, and the Indian Fleet could then turn northeast, forcing either a further move by the Americans away from the coast they might or might not be protecting—or a confrontation. You could play this sort of game only so long, Dubro thought, before somebody asked to see the cards.

"Get us through today without being spotted?"

That one was obvious, too. The formation would send aircraft at the Indians directly from the south, hopefully pulling them south. Harrison presented the scheme for the coming day's air operations.

"Make it so."

Eight bells rang over the ship's 1-MC intercom system. 1600 hours. The afternoon watch was relieved and replaced with the evening watch. Officers and men, and, now, women, moved about to and from their duty stations. *Johnnie Reb's* air wing was standing down, mainly resting and going over results of the now-concluded exercise. The Air Wing's aircraft were about half parked on the flight deck, with the other half struck down in the hangar bay. A few were being worked on, but the maintenance troops were mostly standing down, too, enjoying a pastime the Navy called Steel Beach. It sure was different now, Sanchez thought, looking down at the non-skid-covered steel plates. Now there were women sunning themselves, too, which occasioned the increased use of binoculars by the bridge crew, and had generated yet another administrative problem for his Navy. What varieties of bathing suits were proper for U.S. Navy sailors? Much to the chagrin of some, but the relief of many, the verdict was one-piece suits. But even those could be worth looking at, if properly filled, the CAG thought, returning his glasses to the approaching Japanese formation.

The four destroyers came in fast and sharp, knocking down a good thirty knots, the better to make a proper show for their hosts and erstwhile enemies. The proper signal flags were snapping in the breeze, and white-clad crewmen lined the rails.

"Now hear this," the 1-MC system blared for all to hear. "Attention to port. Man the rails. Stand by to render honors." Those crewmen in presentable uniforms headed to the portside galleries off the flight deck, organized by sections. It was an awkward evolution for a carrier, and required quite a bit of time to set up, especially on a Steel Beach day. Having it done at change of watch made it a little easier. There was a goodly supply of properly uniformed sailors to perform the duty before going to their berthing spaces to change into their tanning outfits.

Sato's last important act of the operation was to send out a satellite transmission with a time check. Downlinked to fleet headquarters, it was immediately rebroadcast on a different circuit. The last chance to stop the operation had passed by. The die was now cast, if not yet thrown. The Admiral left *Mutsu's* CIC and headed back to the bridge, leaving his operations officer in charge while he conned the squadron.

The destroyer came abeam of United States Ships *Enterprise* and *John Stennis,* exactly between the two carriers, less than two thousand meters to each. She was doing thirty knots, with all stations manned except for the vacancies caused by the people standing at the ships' rails. At the moment that his bridge crossed the invisible line between those of the two American carriers, the sailors on the rails saluted port and starboard in a very precise rendition of courtesy at sea.

* * *

A single whistle from the bosun's pipe over the speakers: "Hand salute . . . Two!" the orders came over the speakers, and the sailors on the galleries of *Johnnie Reb* brought their hands down. Immediately thereafter they were dismissed with three notes from the bosun's mate of the watch.

"Gee, can we go home now?" The Air Boss chuckled. Exercise DATELINE PARTNERS was now fully concluded, and the battle force could return to Pearl Harbor for one more week of upkeep and shore leave before deploying to the 1O. Sanchez decided to stay in the comfortable leather chair and read over some documents while enjoying the breeze. The combined speed of the two intermingled formations made for a rapid passage.

"Whoa!" a lookout said.

The maneuver was German in origin, formally called a *Gefechtskehrtwendung,* "battle turn." On signal-flag hoist, all four destroyers turned sharply to the right, the aftermost ship first. As soon as her bow showed movement, the next ship put her rudder over, and the next, and then the flagship last. It was a move calculated to attract the admiration of the Americans, and something of a surprise in the close space between the two carriers. In a matter of seconds, the Japanese destroyers had smartly reversed course, now heading west at thirty knots, and overtaking the carriers they had only a moment before approached from the other direction. A few people on the bridge crew whistled approval at the ship-handling skills. Already the rails on all four of the Aegis destroyers were cleared.

"Well, that was pretty sharp," Sanchez commented, looking down at his documents again.

USS *John Stennis* was steaming normally, all four of her propellers turning at 70rpm, with Condition-Three set. That meant that all spaces were manned with the exception of the embarked air wing, which had stood down after several days on higher activity. There were lookouts arrayed around the island structure, for the most part looking in their assigned areas of responsibility, though all had sneaked at least one long look at the Japanese ships, because they were, after all, different from the U.S. ships. Some used hand-held 7 x 50 marine binoculars, many of Japanese manufacture. Others leaned on far more massive 20 x 120 "Big Eyes," spotting binoculars, which were mounted on pedestals all around the bridge.

Admiral Sato was not sitting down in his command chair, though he was holding his binoculars up. It was a pity, really. They were such proud, beautiful ships. Then he remembered that the one to port was *Enterprise*, an ancient name in the United States Navy, and that a ship that had borne the name before this one had tormented his country, escorting Jimmy Doolittle to the Japanese coast, fighting at Midway, Eastern Solomons, Santa Cruz, and every other major fleet engagement, many times hit, but never severely. The name of an honored enemy, but an enemy. That was the one he'd watch. He had no idea who *John Stennis* had been.

Mutsu had passed well beyond the carriers, almost reaching the trailing plane-guard destroyers before turning, and the overtake now seemed dreadfully slow. The Admiral wore his white gloves, and held his binoculars just below the rail, watching the angle to the carrier change.

"Bearing to Target One is three-five-zero. Target Two bearing now zero-one-zero. Solution light," the petty officer reported. The *Isso* wondered what was going on and why, most of all wondered how he might live to tell this tale someday, and thought that probably he would not.

"I'll take it now," the ops officer said, sliding into the seat. He'd taken the time to acquaint himself with the torpedo director. The order had already been given, and all he'd needed was the light. The officer turned the key in the enable-switch lock, flipped the cover off the button for the portside array, and pressed. Then he did the same for the starboard side.

The three-tube mounts on both sides of the ship snapped violently outboard to an angle of about forty degrees off the centerline. The hemispherical weather covers on all six tubes popped off. Then the "fish" were launched by compressed air, diving into the water, left and right, about ten seconds apart. The propellers were already turning when they were ejected into the sea, and each trailed control wires that connected them to *Mutsu's* Combat Information Center. The tubes, now empty, rotated back to their standby position.

"Fuck me!" a lookout said on *Johnnie Reb.*

"What was that, Cindy?"

"They just launched a fuckin' fish!" she said. She was a petite seaman (*that* term hadn't changed yet) apprentice, only eighteen years old, on her first ship, and was learning profanity to fit in with the saltier members of the crew. Her arm shot out straight. "I saw him launch—there!"

"You sure?" the other nearby lookout asked, swinging his Big Eyes around. Cindy had only hand-helds.

The young woman hesitated. She'd never done anything like this before, and wondered what her chief might do if she were wrong. "Bridge, Lookout Six, the last ship in the Jap line just launched a torpedo!" The way things were set up on the carrier, her announcement was carried over the bridge speakers.

One level down, Bud Sanchez looked up. "What was that?"

"Say again, Look-Six!" the OOD ordered.

"I said I *saw* that Jap destroyer launch a torpedo off her starboard side!"

"This is Look-Five. I didn't see it, sir," a male voice said.

"I fucking saw it!" shouted a very excited young female voice, loudly enough that Sanchez heard this exclamation over the air, rather than on the bridge speakers. He dropped his papers, jumped to his feet, and sprinted out the door to the lookout gallery. The Captain tripped on the steel ladder, ripping his pants and bloodying one knee, and was swearing when he got to the lookouts.

"Talk to me, honey!"

"I saw it, sir, I *really did!"* She didn't even know who Sanchez was, and the silver eagles on his collar made him important enough to frighten her even worse than the idea of inbound weapons, but she had seen it and she was

standing her ground.

"I didn't see it, sir," the senior seaman announced.

Sanchez trained his binoculars on the destroyer, now only about two thousand yards away. What . . . ? He next shoved the older seaman off the Big Eyes and trained them in on the quarterdeck of the Japanese flagship. There was the triple-tube launcher, trained in as it should be . . .

. . . but the fronts of the tubes were black, not gray. The weather covers were off . . . Without looking, Captain Rafael Sanchez ripped the phones off the senior lookout.

"Bridge, this is CAG. Torpedoes in the water! Torpedoes inbound from port quarter!" He trained the glasses aft, looking for trails on the surface but seeing none. Not that it mattered. He swore violently and stood back up to look at Seaman-Apprentice Cynthia Smithers. "Right or wrong, sailor, you did just fine," he told her as alarms started sounding all over the ship. Only a second later, a blinker light started flashing at *Johnnie Reb* from the Japanese flagship.

"Warning, warning, we just had a malfunction, we have launched several torpedoes," *Mutsu's* CO said into the TBS microphone, shamed by the lie as he listened to the open talk-between-ships FM circuit.

"Enterprise, this is *Fife,* there are torpedoes in the water," another loud voice proclaimed even more loudly.

"Torpedoes—where?"

"They're ours. We have a flash fire in CIC," *Mutsu* announced next. "They may be armed." *Stennis,* he saw, was turning already, the water boiling at her stern with increased power. It wouldn't matter, though with luck nobody would be killed.

"What do we do now, sir?" Smithers asked.

"A couple of Hail Marys, maybe," Sanchez replied darkly. They were ASW torpedoes, weren't they? Little warheads. They couldn't really hurt something as big as *Johnnie Reb*, could they? Looking down at the deck, people were up and running now, mainly carrying their sunbathing towels as they raced to their duty stations.

"Sir, I'm supposed to report to Damage Control Party Nine on the hangar deck."

"No, stay right here," Sanchez ordered. "You can leave," he told the other one.

John Stennis was heeling hard to port now. The radical turn to starboard was taking hold and the deck rumbled with the sudden increase of power to her engines. One nice thing about the nuclear-powered carriers. They had horses to burn, but the ship weighed over ninety thousand tons and took her time accelerating. *Enterprise*, less than two miles away, was slower on the trigger, just starting to show turn now. *Oh, shit* . . .

"Now hear this, now hear this, stream the Nixie!" the OOD's voice called over the speakers.

The three Mark 50 antisubmarine torpedoes heading toward *Stennis* were small, smart instruments of destruction designed to punch small, fatal holes into submarine hulls. Their ability to harm a ship of ninety thousand tons was small indeed, but it was possible to choose which sort of damage they would inflict. They were spaced about a hundred meters apart, racing forward at sixty knots, each guided by a thin insulated wire. Their speed advantage over the target and the short range almost guaranteed a hit, and the turn-away maneuver undertaken by the American carrier merely offered the ideal overtake angle because they were all targeted on the screws. After traveling a thousand yards, the seeker head on the first "fish" went active. The sonar picture it generated was reported back to *Mutsu's* CIC as a violently bright target of yellow on black, and the officer on the director steered it straight in, with the other two following automatically. The target area grew closer. Eight hundred meters, seven, six . . .

"I have you both," the officer said. A moment later the sonar picture showed the confused jamming from the American Nixie decoy, which mimicked the ultrasonic frequencies of the torpedo seeker-heads. Another feature built into the new ones had a powerful pulsing magnetic field to trick the under-the-keel influence-exploders the Russians had developed. But the Mark 50 was a contact weapon, and by controlling them with the wire, he could force them to ignore the acoustical interference. It wasn't fair, wasn't sporting at all, but then, who ever said war was supposed to be that way? he asked the director, who did not answer.

It was a strange disconnect of sight, sound, and feel. The ship hardly shuddered at all when the first column of water leaped skyward. The noise was unmistakably real, and, coming without warning, it made Sanchez jump on the port-after corner of the island. His initial impression was that it hadn't been all that bad a deal, that maybe the fish had exploded in *Johnnie Reb's* wake. He was wrong.

The Japanese version of the Mark 50 had a small warhead, only sixty kilograms, but it was a shaped charge, and the first of them exploded on the boss of number-two propeller, the inboard postside shaft. The shock immediately ripped three of the screw's five blades off, unbalancing a propeller now turning at a hundred-thirty RPM. The physical forces involved were immense, and tore open the shaft fittings and the skegs that held the entire propulsion system in place. In a moment the aftermost portion of the shaft alley was flooded, and water started entering the ship through her most vulnerable point. What happened forward was even worse.

Like most large warships, *John Stennis* was steam-powered. In her case two nuclear reactors generated power by boiling water directly. That steam went into a heat exchanger where other water was boiled (but not made radioactive as a result) and piped aft to a high-pressure turbine. The steam hit the turbine blades, causing them to turn much like the vanes of a windmill, which is all

the turbine really was; the steam was then piped aft to a low-pressure turbine to make use of the residual energy. The turbines had efficient turning rates, far faster than the propeller could attain, however, and to lower the shaft speed to something the ship could really use, there was a set of reduction gears, essentially a shipboard version of an automobile transmission, located between them. The finely machined barrel-shaped wheels in that bit of marine hardware were the most delicate element of the ship's drivetrain, and the blast energy from the warhead had traveled straight up the shaft, jamming the wheels in a manner that they were not designed to absorb. The added asymmetrical writhing of the unbalanced shaft rapidly completed the destruction of the entire Number Two drivetrain. Sailors were leaping from their feet with the noise even before the second warhead struck, on Number Three.

That explosion was on the outer edge of the starboard-inboard propeller, and the collateral damage took half a blade off Number Four. Damage to Number Three was identical with Number Two. Number Four was luckier. This engine-room crew threw the steam controls to reverse with the first hint of vibration. Poppet valves opened at once, hitting the astern-drive blades and stopping the shaft before the damage got as far as the reduction gears, just in time for the third torpedo to complete the destruction of the starboard-outboard prop.

The All-Stop bell sounded next, and the crewmen in all four turbine rooms initiated the same procedure undertaken moments earlier by the crew on the starboard side. Other alarms were sounding. Damage-control parties raced aft and below to check the flooding, as their carrier glided to a lengthy and crooked halt. One of her rudders was damaged as well.

"What the hell was that all about?" one engineman asked another.

"My God," Sanchez breathed topside. Somehow the damage to *Enterprise,* now two miles away, seemed even worse than that to his ship. Various alarms were still sounding, and below on the navigation bridge, voices were screaming for information so loudly that the need for telephone circuits seemed superfluous. Every ship in the formation was maneuvering radically now. *Fife*, one of the plane-guard 'cans, had reversed course and was getting the hell out of Dodge, her skipper clearly worried about other possible fish in the water. Somehow Sanchez knew there weren't. He'd seen three explosions aft on *Johnnie Reb* and three under *Enterprise*'s stern.

"Smithers, come with me."

"Sir, my battle-station—"

"They can handle it without you, and there's nothing much to look out for now. We're not going much of anywhere for a while. You're going to talk to the Captain."

"Jesus, sir!" The exclamation was not so much profanity as a prayer to be spared that ordeal.

The CAG turned. "Take a deep breath and listen to me: you might be the only person on this whole goddamned ship who did their job right over the last ten minutes. Follow me, Smithers."

"Shafts two and three are blown away, Skipper," they heard a minute later on the bridge. The ship's CO was standing in the middle of the compartment,

looking like a man who'd been involved in a traffic accident. "Shaft four is damaged also . . . shaft one appears okay at the moment."

"Very well," the skipper muttered, then added for himself, "What the hell . . ."

"We took three ASW torps, sir," Sanchez reported. "Seaman Smithers here saw the launch."

"Is that a fact?" The CO looked down at the young seaperson. "Miss, you want to sit over in my chair. When I'm finished keeping my ship afloat I want to talk to you." Then came the hard part. The Captain of USS *John Stennis* turned to his communications officer and started drafting a signal to CincPacFlt. It would bear the prefix NAVY BLUE.

"Conn, Sonar, torpedo in the water, bearing two-eight-zero, sounds like one of their Type 89s," "Junior" Laval reported, not in an overly excited way. Submarines were regularly shot at by friends.

"All ahead flank!" Commander Kennedy ordered. Exercise or not, it was a torpedo, and it wasn't something to feel comfortable about. "Make your depth six hundred feet."

"Six hundred feet, aye," the chief of the boat replied from his station as diving officer. "Ten degrees down-angle on the planes." The helmsman pushed forward on the yoke, angling USS *Asheville* toward the bottom, taking her below the layer.

"Estimated range to the fish?" the Captain asked the tracking party.

"Three thousand yards."

"Conn, Sonar, lost him when we went under the layer. Still pinging in search mode, estimate the torpedo is doing forty or forty-five knots."

"Turn the augmenter off, sir?" the XO asked.

Kennedy was tempted to say yes, the better to get a feel for how good the Japanese torpedo really was. To the best of his knowledge no American sub had yet played against one. It was supposedly the Japanese version of the American Mark 48.

"There it is," Sonar called. "It just came under the layer. Torpedo bearing steady at two-eight-zero, signal strength is approaching acquisition values."

"Right twenty degrees rudder," Kennedy ordered. "Stand by the five-inch room."

"Speed going through thirty knots," a crewman reported as *Asheville* accelerated.

"Right twenty-degrees rudder, aye, no new course given."

"Very well," Kennedy acknowledged. "Five-inch room, launch decoy now-now-now! Cob, take her up to two hundred!"

"Aye," the chief of the boat replied. "Up ten on the planes!"

"Making it hard?" the executive officer asked.

"No freebies."

A canister was ejected from the decoy-launcher compartment, called the five-inch room for the diameter of the launcher. It immediately started giving off bubbles like an Alka-Seltzer tablet, creating a new, if immobile, sonar target for the torpedo's tracking sonar. The submarine's fast turn created a

“knuckle” in the water, the better to confuse the Type 89 fish.

“Through the layer,” the technician on the bathythermograph reported.

“Mark your head!” Kennedy said next.

“Coming right through one-nine-zero, my rudder is twenty-right.”

“Rudder amidships, steady up on two-zero-zero.”

“Rudder amidships, aye, steady up on two-zero-zero.”

“All ahead one-third.”

“All ahead one-third, aye.” The enunciator changed positions, and the submarine slowed down, now back at two hundred feet, over the layer, having left a lovely if false target behind.

“Okay.” Kennedy smiled. “Now let’s see how smart that fish is.”

“Conn, Sonar, the torpedo just went right through the knuckle.” The tone of the report was just a little off, Kennedy thought.

“Oh?” the CO went forward a few steps, entering sonar. “Problem?”

“Sir, that fish just went right through the knuckle like it didn’t see it.”

“Supposed to be a pretty smart unit. You suppose it just ignores decoys like the ADCAP does?”

“Up-Doppler,” another sonarman said. “Ping-rate just changed . . . frequency change, it might have us, sir.”

“Through the layer? That is clever.” It was going a little fast, Kennedy thought, like real combat, even. Was the new Japanese torpedo really that good, had it really just ignored the decoy and the knuckle? “We recording all this?”

“You bet, sir,” Sonarman 1/c Laval said, reaching up to tap the tape machine. A new cassette was taking all this in, and another video system was recording the display on the waterfall screens. “There go the motors, just increased speed. Aspect change . . . it’s got us, zero aspect on the fish, screw noises just faded.” Meaning that the engine noise of the torpedo was now somewhat blocked by the body of the weapon. It was headed straight in.

Kennedy turned his head to the tracking party. “Range to fish?”

“Under two thousand, sir, closing fast now, estimate torpedo speed sixty knots.”

“Two minutes to overtake at this speed.”

“Look at this, sir.” Laval tapped the waterfall display. It showed the track of the torpedo, and also showed the lingering noise of the decoy, still generating bubbles. The Type 89 had drilled right through the center of it.

“What was that?” Laval asked the screen. A large low-frequency noise had just registered on the screen, bearing three-zero-five. “Sounded like an explosion, way off, that was a CZ signal, not direct path.” A convergence-zone signal meant that it was a long way away, more than thirty miles.

Kennedy’s blood turned a little cold at that piece of news. He stuck his head back into the attack center. “Where are *Charlotte* and the other Japanese sub?”

“Northwest, sir, sixty or seventy miles ”

“All ahead flank!” That order just happened automatically. Not even Kennedy knew why he’d given it.

“All ahead flank, aye,” the helmsman acknowledged, turning the enunciator dial. These exercises sure were exciting stuff. Before the engine order was acknowledged, the skipper was on his command phone again:

“Five-inch room, launch two, now-now-now!”

The ultrasonic targeting sonar on a homing torpedo is too high in frequency to be heard by the human ear. Kennedy knew that the energy was hitting his submarine, reflecting off the emptiness within, because the sonar waves stopped at the steel-air boundary, bouncing backward to the emitter that generated them.

It couldn’t be happening. If it were, others would have noted it, wouldn’t they? He looked around. The crew was at battle stations. All watertight doors were closed and dogged down as they would be in combat. *Kurushio* had launched an exercise torpedo, identical to a warshot in everything but the warhead, for which an instrument package was substituted. They were also designed *not* to hit their targets, but to turn away from them, because a metal-to-metal strike could break things, and fixing those things could be expensive.

“It’s still got us, sir.”

But the fish had run *straight through* the knuckle . . .

“Take her down fast!” Kennedy ordered, knowing it was too late for that.

USS *Asheville* dropped her nose, taking a twenty-degree down-angle, back over thirty knots with the renewed acceleration. The decoy room launched yet another bubble canister. The increased speed degraded sonar performance, but it was clear from the display that the Type 89 had again run straight through the false image of a target and just kept coming.

“Range under five hundred,” the tracking part said. One of its members noticed that the Captain was pale and wondered why. Well, nobody likes losing, even in an exercise.

Kennedy thought about maneuvering more as *Asheville* ducked under the layer yet again. It was too close to outrun. It could outturn him, and every attempt to confuse it had failed. He was just out of ideas. He’d had no time to think it all through.

“Jesus!” Laval took his headphones off. The Type 89 was now alongside the submarine’s towed-array sonar, and the noise was well off the scale. “Should turn away any second now . . .”

The Captain just stood there, looking around. Was he crazy? Was he the only one who thought—

At the last second, Sonarman 1/c Laval looked aft to his commanding officer. “*Sir, it didn’t turn!”*

21

Navy Blue

Air Force One lifted off a few minutes sooner than expected, speeded on her way by the early hour. Reporters were already up and moving before the VC-25B reached her cruising altitude, coming forward to ask the President for a statement explaining the premature departure. Cutting short a state trip was something of a panic reaction, wasn't it? Tish Brown handled the journalists, explaining that the unfortunate developments on Wall Street commanded a quick return so that the President could reassure the American people . . . and so forth. For the moment, she went on, it might be a good idea for everyone to catch up on sleep. It was, after all, a fourteen-hour flight back to Washington, with the headwinds that blew across the Atlantic at this time of year, and Roger Durling needed his sleep, too. The ploy worked for several reasons, not the least of which was that the reporters were suffering from too much alcohol and not enough sleep, like everyone else aboard—except the flight crew, all hoped. Besides, there were Secret Service agents and armed Air Force personnel between them and the President's accommodations. Common sense broke out, and everyone returned back to the seating area. Soon things were quieted down, and nearly every passenger aboard was either asleep or feigning it. Those who weren't asleep wished they were.

Johnnie *Reb's* commanding officer was, by federal law, an aviator. The statute went back to the 1930s, and had been drafted to prevent battleship sailors from taking over the new and bumptious branch of the Old Navy. As such, he had more experience flying airplanes than in driving ships, and since he'd never had a command afloat, his knowledge of shipboard systems consisted mainly of things he'd picked up along the way rather than from a matter of systematic study and experience. Fortunately, his chief engineer was a black-shoe destroyer sailor with a command under his belt. The skipper did know, however, that water was supposed to be outside the hull, not inside.

"How bad, ChEng?"

"Bad, sir." The Commander gestured to the deck plates, still covered with an inch of water that the pumps was gradually sending over the side. At least the holes were sealed now. That had taken three hours. "Shafts two and three are well and truly trashed. Bearings shot, tail shafts twisted and split, reduction gears ground up to junk—no way anybody can fix them. The turbines are okay. The reduction gears took all the shock. Number One shaft's okay. Some shock damage to the aft bearings. That I can fix myself. Number Four screw is damaged, not sure how bad, but we can't turn it without risking the shaft

bearings. Starboard rudder is jammed over, but I can deal with that, another hour, maybe, and it'll be 'midships. May have to replace it, depending on how bad it looks. We're down to one shaft. We can make ten, eleven knots, and we can steer, badly."

"Time to fix?"

"Months—four or five is my best guess right now, sir." All of which, the Commander knew, would require him to be here, overseeing the yard crews, essentially rebuilding half the ship's power plant—maybe three quarters. He hadn't fully evaluated the damage to Number Four yet. That was when the Captain really lost his temper. It was about time, the ChEng thought.

"If I could launch an air strike, I'd sink those sunzabitches!" But launching anything on the speed generated by a single shaft was an iffy proposition. Besides, it had been an accident, and the skipper really didn't mean it.

"You have my vote on that one, sir," ChEng assured him, not really meaning it either, because he added: "Maybe they'll be nice enough to pay for the repairs." His reward was a nod.

"We can start moving again?"

"Number One shaft is a little out from shock damage, but I can live with it, yes, sir."

"Okay, get ready to answer bells. I'm taking this overpriced barge back to Pearl."

"Aye aye, sir."

Admiral Mancuso was back in his office, reviewing preliminary data on the exercise when his yeoman came in with a signal sheet.

"Sir, looks like two carriers are in trouble."

"What did they do, collide?" Jones asked, sitting in the corner and reviewing other data.

"Worse," the yeoman told the civilian.

ComSubPac read the dispatch. "Oh, that's just great." Then his phone rang; it was the secure line that came directly from PacFltOps. "This is Admiral Mancuso."

"Sir, this is Lieutenant Copps at Fleet Communications. I have a submarine emergency beacon, located approximately 31-North, 175-East. We're refining that position now. Code number is for *Asheville*, sir. There is no voice transmission, just the beacon. I am initiating a SUB-MISS /SUBSUNK. The nearest naval aircraft are on the two carriers—"

"Dear God." Not since *Scorpion* had the U.S. Navy lost a sub, and he'd been in high school then. Mancuso shook his head clear. There was work to be done. "Those two carriers are probably out of business, mister."

"Oh?" Oddly enough, Lieutenant Copps hadn't heard that yet.

"Call the P-3s. I have work to do."

"Aye aye, sir."

Mancuso didn't have to look at anything. The water in that part of the Pacific Ocean was three miles deep, and no fleet submarine ever made could survive at a third of that depth. If there were an emergency, and if there were any survivors, any rescue would have to happen within hours, else the cold

surface water would kill them.

"Ron, we just got a signal. *Asheville* might be down."

"Down?" That word was not one any submariner wanted to hear, even if it was a gentler expression than *sunk*. "Frenchy's kid . . ."

"And a hundred twenty others."

"What can I do, Skipper?"

"Head over to SOSUS and look at the data."

"Aye aye, sir." Jones hustled out the door while SubPac lifted his phone and started punching buttons. He already knew that it was an exercise in futility. All PacFlt submarines now carried the AN/BST-3 emergency transmitters aboard, set to detach from their ships if they passed through crush depth or if the quartermaster of the watch neglected to wind the unit's clockwork mechanism. The latter possibility, however, was unlikely. Before the explosive bolts went, the BST made the most godawful noise to chide the neglectful enlisted man . . . *Asheville* was almost certainly dead, and yet he had to follow through in the hope of a miracle. Maybe a few crewmen had gotten off.

Despite Mancuso's advice, the carrier group did get the call. A frigate, USS *Gary,* went at once to maximum sustainable speed and sprinted north toward the area of the beacon, responding as required by the laws of man and the sea. In ninety minutes she'd be able to launch her own helicopter for a surface search and further serve as a base for other helos to continue the rescue operation if necessary. *John Stennis* turned slowly into the wind and managed to launch a single S-3 Viking ASW aircraft, whose onboard instruments were likely to be useful for a surface search. The Viking was overhead in less than an hour. There was nothing to be seen on radar except for a Japanese coast-guard cutter, heading in for the beacon, about ten miles out. Contact was established, and the white cutter verified its notice of the emergency radio and intentions to search for survivors. The Viking circled the transmitter. There was a slick of diesel oil to mark the ship's grave, and a few bits of floating debris, but repeated low passes and four sets of eyes failed to spot anything to be rescued.

The "Navy Blue" prefix on a signal denoted information that would be of interest to the entire fleet, perhaps sensitive in nature, less often highly classified; in this case it was something too big to be kept a secret. Two of Pacific Fleet's four aircraft carriers were out of business for a long time. The other two, *Eisenhower* and *Lincoln*, were in the IO, and were likely to remain there. Ships know few secrets, and even before Admiral Dubro got his copy of the dispatch, word was already filtering through his flagship. No chief swore more vilely than the battle-force commander, who already had enough to worry about. The same response greeted the signals personnel who informed the senior naval officers on Pentagon duty.

Like most intelligence officers in a foreign land in time of danger, Clark and Chavez didn't have a clue. If they had, they would probably have caught the first plane anywhere. Spies have never been popular with anyone, and the Geneva Protocols merely affirmed a rule for time of war, mandating their death as soon after apprehension as was convenient, usually by firing squad.

Peacetime rules were a little more civilized, but generally with the same end result. It wasn't something CIA emphasized in its recruiting interviews. The international rules of espionage allowed for this unhappy fact by giving as many field intelligence officers as possible diplomatic covers, along with which came immunity from harm. Those were called "legal" agents, protected by international treaty as though they really were the diplomats their passports said they were. Clark and Chavez were "illegals," and not so protected—in fact, John Clark had never once been given a "legal" cover. The importance of this became clear when they left their cheap hotel for a meeting with Isamu Kimura.

It was a pleasant afternoon made less so by the looks they got as *gaijin;* no longer a mixture of curiosity and distaste, now there was genuine hostility. The atmosphere had changed materially since their arrival here, though remarkably things immediately became more cordial when they identified themselves as Russians, which prompted Ding to speculate on how they might make their cover identity more obvious to passersby. Unfortunately civilian clothing did not offer that option, and so they had to live with the looks, generally feeling the way a wealthy American might in a high-crime neighborhood.

Kimura was waiting at the agreed-upon place, an inexpensive drinking establishment. He already had a few drinks in him.

"Good afternoon," Clark said pleasantly in English. A beat. "Something wrong?"

"I don't know," Kimura said when the drinks came. There were many ways of speaking that phrase. This way indicated that he knew something. "There is a meeting of the ministers today. Goto called it. It's been going on for hours. A friend of mine in the Defense Agency hasn't left his office since Thursday night."

"*Da*—so?"

"You haven't seen it, have you? The way Goto has been speaking about America." The MITI official finished off the last of his drink and raised his hand to order another. Service, typically, was fast.

They could have said that they'd seen the first speech, but instead "Klerk" asked for Kimura's read on the situation.

"I don't know," the man replied, saying the same thing again while his eyes and tone told a somewhat different story. "I've never seen anything like this. The—what is the word?—rhetoric. At my ministry we have been waiting for instructions all week. We need to restart the trade talks with America, to reach an understanding, but we have no instructions. Our people in Washington are doing nothing. Goto has spent most of his time with Defense, constant meetings, and with his zaibatsu friends. It's not the way things are here at all."

"My friend," Clark said with a smile, his drink now untouched after a single sip, "you speak as though there is something serious in the air."

"You don't understand. There is nothing in the air. Whatever is going on, MITI is not a part of it."

"And?"

"MITI is part of *everything* here. My Minister is there now, finally, but he hasn't told us anything." Kimura paused. Didn't these two know anything? "Who do you think makes our foreign policy here? Those dolts in the Foreign Ministry? They report to us. And the Defense Agency, who cares what they think about anything? We are the ones who shape our country's policies. We work with the zaibatsu, we coordinate, we . . . represent business in our relations with other countries and their markets, we make the position papers for the Prime Minister to give out. That's why I entered the ministry in the first place."

"But not now?" Clark asked.

"Now? Goto is meeting with them himself, and spends the rest of his time with people who don't matter, and only now is my Minister called in—well, yesterday," Kimura corrected himself. "And he's still there."

The man seemed awfully rattled, Chavez told himself, over what seemed to be little more than some bureaucratic turf-fighting. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry was being outmaneuvered by someone else. So?

"You are upset that the industry leaders meet directly with your Prime Minister," he asked.

"So much, and so long, yes. They're supposed to work through us, but Goto has always been Yamata's lapdog." Kimura shrugged. "Perhaps they want to make policy directly now, but how can they do that without us?"

Without me, the man means, Chavez thought with a smile. Dumb-ass bureaucrat. CIA was full of them, too.

It wasn't all the way thought through, but such things never were. Most of the tourists who came to Saipan were Japanese, but not quite all of them. The Pacific island was a good place for a lot of things. One of them was deep-sea fishing, and the waters here were not as crowded as those around Florida and the Gulf of California. Pete Burroughs was sunburned, exhausted, and thoroughly satisfied with an eleven-hour day at sea. It was just the perfect thing, the computer engineer told himself, sitting in the fighting chair and sipping a beer, to get a person over a divorce. He'd spent the first two hours getting offshore, then three hours trolling, then four hours fighting against the biggest goddamned albacore tuna he'd ever seen. The real problem would be convincing his fellow workers that it wasn't a lie. The monster was too big to mount over his mantel, and besides, his ex-had the house and the fireplace. He'd have to settle for a photo, and everyone knew the stories about that, damn it. Blue-screen technology had reached fishermen. For twenty bucks you could have your choice of monster fish hanging from its electronic tail behind you. Now, if he'd caught a shark, he could have taken home the jaw and teeth, but an albacore, magnificent as it was, was just tuna fish. Well, what the hell, his wife hadn't believed his stories about the late nights at work either. The bitch. Good news, bad news. She didn't like fishing either, but now he could

fish all he wanted. Maybe even fish for a new girl. He popped open another beer.

The marina didn't look very busy for a weekend. The main port area was, though, three big commercial ships, ugly ones, he thought, though he didn't know exactly what they were on first sight. His company was in California, though not close to the water, and most of his fishing was of the freshwater sort. This trip had been a life's ambition. Tomorrow, maybe, he'd get something else. For the moment, he looked left at the albacore. Had to be at least seven hundred pounds. Nowhere close to the record, but one hell of a lot bigger than the monster salmon he'd gotten the year before with his trusty Ted Williams spinning rig. The air shook again, spoiling his moment with his fish. The overhead shadow announced another goddamned 747 coming out of the airport. It wouldn't be long before this place was spoiled, too. Hell, it already was. About the only good news was that the Japanese who came here to kick loose and screw Filipina bar girls didn't like to fish much.

The boat's skipper brought them in smartly. His name was Oreza, a retired Master Chief Quartermaster, U.S. Coast Guard. Burroughs left the fighting chair, headed topside, and sat down next to him.

"Get tired of talking to your fish?"

"Don't like drinking alone, either."

Oreza shook his head. "Not when I'm driving."

"Bad habit from the old days?"

The skipper nodded. "Yeah, I guess. I'll buy you one at the club, though. Nice job on the fish. First time, you said?"

"First time in blue water," Burroughs said proudly.

"Coulda fooled me, Mr. Burroughs."

"Pete," the engineer corrected.

"Pete," Oreza confirmed. "Call me Portagee."

"You're not from around here."

"New Bedford, Massachusetts, originally. Winters are too cold. I served here once, long time back. There used to be a Coast Guard station down at Punta Arenas, closed now. The wife and I liked the climate, liked the people, and, hell, the competition statewide for this sort of business is too stiff," Oreza explained. "What the hell, the kids are all grown. So anyway, we ended up coming out here."

"You know how to handle a boat pretty well."

Portagee nodded. "I ought to. I've been doing it thirty-five years, more if you count going out with my pop." He eased to port, coming around Mañagaha Island. "The fishing out of New Bedford's gone to hell, too."

"What are those guys?" Burroughs asked, pointing to the commercial port.

"Car carriers. When I came in this morning they were moving jeeps out of that one." The skipper shrugged. "More goddamned cars. You know, when I came here it was kinda like Cape Cod in the winter. Now it's more like the Cape in the summer. Wall-to-goddamned-wall." Portagee shrugged. More tourists made for more crowding, spoiling the island, but also bringing him more business.

"Expensive place to live?"

"Getting that way," Oreza confirmed. Another 747 flew off the island.

“That’s funny . . .”

“What?”

“That one didn’t come out of the airport.”

“What do you mean?”

“That one came out of Kobler. It’s an old SAC runway, BUFF field.”

“BUFF?”

“Big Ugly Fat Fucker,” Portagee explained. “B-52s. There’s five or six runways in the islands that can take big birds, dispersal fields from the bad old days,” he went on. “Kobler’s right next to my old LORAN station. I’m surprised they still keep it up. Hell, I didn’t know they did, even.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There used to be a Strategic Air Command base on Guam. You know, nukes, all that big shit? In case the crap hit the fan, they were supposed to disperse off Andersen Air Force Base so one missile couldn’t get them all. There’s two big-bird runways on Saipan, the airport and Kobler, two more on Tinian, leftovers from World War Two, and two more on Guam.”

“They’re still good to use?”

“No reason why not.” Oreza’s head turned. “We don’t get many hard-freezes here to rip things up.” The next 747 came off Saipan International, and in the clear evening sky they could see yet another coming in from the eastern side of the island.

“This place always this busy?”

“No, most I’ve ever seen. Goddamned hotels must be packed solid.” Another shrug. “Well, that means the hotels’ll be interested in buying that fish off ya.”

“How much?”

“Enough to cover the charter, Pete. That’s one big fish you brought in. But tomorrow you have to get lucky again.”

“Hey, you find me another big boy like our friend down there, and I don’t care what you charge.”

“I love it when people say that.” Oreza eased back on the throttles as he approached the marina. He aimed for the main dock. They needed the hoist to get the fish off. The albacore was the third-largest he’d ever brought in, and this Burroughs guy wasn’t all that bad a charter.

“You make a living at this?”

Portagee nodded. “With my retirement pay, yeah, it’s not a bad life. Thirty-some years I drove Uncle’s boats, and now I get to drive me own—and she’s paid for.”

Burroughs was looking at the commercial ships now. He lifted the skipper’s binoculars. “You mind?”

“Strap around your neck if you don’t mind.” Amazing that people thought the strap was some sort of decoration.

“Sure.” Burroughs did that, adjusting the focus for his eyes and examining *Orchid Ace*. “Ugly damned things . . .”

“Not made to be pretty. Made to carry cars.” Oreza started the final turn in.

“That’s no car. Looks like some kind of construction thing, bulldozer, like . . .”

“Oh?” Portagee called for his mate, a local kid, to come topside and work the lines. Good kid, fifteen, might try for the Coast Guard and spend a few

years learning the trade properly. Oreza was working on that.

"The Army have a base here?"

"Nope. The Air Force and Navy still have some folks down on Guam, but not even much there anymore." There. He killed his throttles, and the *Springer* drifted to a halt, just perfect. Again, Oreza thought, as always taking pleasure from doing a seaman's job just so. A man on the dock turned the crank to swing the hoist over his fantail, giving a thumbs-up when he saw the size of the fish. Watching to see that the boat was tied up properly, Oreza sat back, killed his engines, and thought about the evening's first beer.

"Here, take a look." Burroughs handed the glasses over.

Portagee turned in his chair and readjusted the binoculars to his eyes before training them in on the car carrier down the coast. He knew how the ships were arranged. He'd done safety inspection on them while on shore duty with the Coast Guard. He'd inspected this very ship, in fact, one of the first built-for-the-purpose automobile ferries, designed to carry trucks and other cargo as well as private cars. Some of the decks had a lot of overhead . . .

"What?"

"You know what it is?"

"No." It was a tracked vehicle. It was in shadows because the sun was low in the sky, but the paintwork was definitely dark, and it had a large box of some sort on the back. Then something clicked. It was some kind of missile launcher. He remembered seeing them on TV during the Persian Gulf War, just before his retirement. Oreza stood to get a slightly better angle. There were two others in the parking lot.. . .

"Oh, okay, I got it, some sort of exercise," Burroughs said, heading down the ladder to the main deck. "See, that's a fighter plane over there. My cousin used to fly it before he went with American. It's an F-15 Eagle, Air Force bird."

Oreza turned the glasses and caught the fighter circling. Sure enough, there were two of them flying in a nice tight military formation, F-15 Eagle fighters, circling the center of the island in a classic display of protection for one's native soil . . . except for one thing. The national emblem on the wings was a solid red circle.

Again, Jones preferred the paper printouts to an electronic display. The latter was better for live-action, but on high-speed playback got the eyes tired too fast, and this was a job that demanded care. Lives might depend on it, he told himself, already thinking that was a lie. Two senior chief oceanographic technicians went through the pages with him. They started with midnight, and had to check carefully. The submarine-exercise area off Kure atoll had been chosen for its proximity to a series of hydrophones, part of the Pacific SOSUS system. The near array was one of the last ever implanted, and was the size of a garage or small house. Actually part of a mega-array, it was electronically linked to another installation fifty nautical miles away, but that one was older, smaller, and less capable. A cable linked them both, leading first to Kure, then to Midway, where there was a satellite uplink to back up the cable that led all the way to Pearl Harbor. The ocean was in fact crisscrossed with such cables.

For quite some time during the Cold War, the U.S. Navy had laid almost as much as Bell Telephone, occasionally chartering the latter's ships for the task.

"Okay, there's *Kurushio* snorting," Jones said, circling the black marks in red.

"How the hell did you ever beat Masker?" one of the chiefs asked in surprise.

"Well, it is a good system, but you ever really listen to it?"

"I haven't been at sea in ten years," the senior chief replied.

"When I was on *Dallas,* we played games with *Moosbrugger* for a week, down at AUTEC in the Bahamas."

"The Moose has a big rep."

"And it's a no-shit rep, too. We couldn't hold her, she couldn't hold us, it was a real mother," Jones went on, speaking now not like a civilian contractor with a doctorate, but like the proud sonarman he'd been, and, he realized, still was. "They had a helicopter pilot who was giving us fits, too. Anyway"—he flipped another page—"then I figured it out. Masker sounds like rain hitting the surface, like a spring shower. Not real noisy, but the freqs are unique, you can get a good cut on 'em. Then I realized all we had to do was see what the topside weather was like. If it's blue sky, and you hear rain bearing zero-two-zero, that's the guy. It was clear yesterday northwest of Kure. I checked with Fleet Weather before I came over."

The senior chief nodded and smiled. "I'll remember that one, sir."

"Okay, we have the Jap here at midnight. Now let's see what else we can find." He flipped forward to the next fan-fold page. Had circumstances been different he might have seen it as a paper Slinky, one of his new son's favorite toys. "That's gotta be *Asheville*, probably sprinting off to restart a scenario. She's wearing a speed screw, isn't she?"

"I don't know."

"I do. I don't think we would have gotten this many hits on her with a patrol screw. Let's plot this out."

"Running a plot, already have some of it," another chief reported. The process was largely computer-aided now. Once it had been a real black art.

"Posit?" Jones looked up.

"Position's right about here, same as the beacon, almost. Sir," the chief said patiently, making a black mark on the plastic-covered wall chart, "we know where she is, I mean, the rescue—"

"Ain't gonna be no rescue." Jones looked up and stole a cigarette from a passing seaman. *There, I finally said it out loud.*

"You can't smoke in here," one of the chiefs said. "We have to go outside—"

"Give me a light and follow me on this," Jones ordered. He flipped another page, checking the 60Hz line. "Nothing . . . nothing. Those diesel boats are pretty good . . . but if they're quiet, they ain't snorting, and if they ain't snorting they ain't going very far . . . *Asheville* sprinted out this way, and probably then she came back in . . ." Another page.

"No rescue, sir?" It had taken fully thirty seconds for the question to be asked.

"How deep's the water?"

"I know that, but the escape trunks . . . I mean, I've seen it, there's three of

them."

Jones didn't even look up, taking a puff off his first smoke in years. "Yeah, the mom's hatch, that's what we called it on *Dallas.* 'See, mom, if anything goes wrong, we can get out right there.' Chief, you don't get off one of these things, okay? You don't. That ship is dead, and so's her crew. I want to see why."

"But we already have the crush sounds."

"I know. I also know that two of our carriers had a little accident today." Those sounds were on the SOSUS printouts, too.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything." Another page. At the bottom of it was a large black blotch, the loud sound that marked the death of USS *Asheville* and all —"What the fuck is this?"

"We think it's a double-plot, sir. The bearing's almost the same as the *Asheville* sound, and we think the computer—"

"The time's off, goddamn it, a whole four minutes." He flipped back three pages. "See, that's somebody else."

"Charlotte?"

It was then that Jones felt even colder. His head swam a little from the cigarette, and he remembered why he'd quit. The same signature on the paper, a diesel boat snorting, and, later, a 688-class sprinting. The sounds were so close, nearly identical, and the coincidence of the bearing from the new seafloor array could have made almost anyone think . . .

"Call Admiral Mancuso and find out if *Charlotte* has checked in."

"But—"

"Right now, Senior Chief!"

Dr. Ron Jones stood up and looked around. It was the same as before, almost. The people were the same, doing the same work, displaying the same competence, but something was missing. The thing that wasn't the same was . . . what? The large room had a huge chart of the Pacific Ocean on its back wall. Once that chart had been marked with red silhouettes, the class shapes of Soviet submarines, boomers, and fast-attacks, often with black silhouettes in attendance, to show that Pacific SOSUS was tracking "enemy" subs, quarterbacking American fast-attacks onto them, vectoring P-3C Orion ASW birds in to follow them, and occasionally to pounce on and harry them, to let them know who owned the oceans of the world. Now the marks on the wall chart were of whales, some of them with names, just as with the Russian subs, but these names were things like "Moby and Mabel," to denote a particular pod with a well-known alphapair to track by name. There wasn't an enemy now, and the urgency had gone. They weren't thinking the way he'd once thought, heading "up north" on *Dallas,* tracking people they might one day have to kill. Jones had never really expected *that,* not really-really, but the possibility was something he'd never allowed himself to forget. These men and women, however, had. He could see it, and now he could hear it from the way the chief was talking to SubPac on the phone.

Jones walked across the room and just took the receiver away. "Bart, this is Ron. Has *Charlotte* checked in?"

"We're trying to raise her now."

"I don't think you're going to, Skipper," the civilian said darkly.

"What do you mean?" The reply caught the meaning. The two men had always communicated on a nonverbal level.

"Bart, you better come over here. I'm not kidding, Cap'n."

"Ten minutes," Mancuso promised.

Jones stubbed his smoke out in a metal waste can and returned to the printouts. It was not an easy thing for him now, but he flipped to the pages where he'd stopped. The printouts were made with pencils that were located on metal shuttle-bars, marking received noises in discrete frequency ranges, and the marks were arranged with the low frequencies on the left, and the higher ones on the right. Location within the range columns denoted bearing. The tracks meandered, looking to all the world like aerial photographs of sand dunes in some trackless desert, but if you knew what to look for, every spidery trace and twist had meaning. Jones slowed his analysis, taking in every minute's record of reception and sweeping from left to right, making marks and notes as he went. The chiefs who'd been assisting him stood back now, knowing that a master was at work, that he saw things they should have seen, but had not, and knowing why a man younger than they called an admiral by his first name.

"Attention on deck," some voice called presently, "Submarine Force, Pacific, arriving." Mancuso came in, accompanied by Captain Chambers, his operations officer, and an aide who kept out of the way. The Admiral just looked at Jones's face.

"You raise *Charlotte* yet, Bart?"

"Not."

"Come here."

"What are you telling me, Jonesy?"

Jones took the red pen to the bottom of the page. "There's the crush, that's the hull letting go."

Mancuso nodded, letting out a breath. "I know, Ron."

"Look here. That's high-speed maneuvering—"

"Something goes wrong, you go max power and try to drive her up to the roof," Captain Chambers observed, not seeing it yet, or more probably not wanting to, Jones thought. Well, Mr. Chambers had always been a pretty nice officer to work for.

"But she wasn't heading straight for the roof, Mr. Chambers. Aspect changes, here and here," Jones said, moving the pen upward on the printout page, backwards in time, marking where the width of the traces varied, and the bearings changed subtly. "She was turning, too, at max power on a speed screw. This is probably a decoy signature. And this"—his hand went all the way to the right—"is a fish. Quiet one, but look at the bearing rates. It was turning, too, chasing *Asheville,* and that gives these traces here, all the way back to this time-point here." Ron circled both traces, and though separated on the paper by fourteen inches, the shallow twists and turns were almost identical. The pen moved again, upwards on the sheet, then shot across to another frequency column. "To a launch transient. Right there."

"Fuck," Chambers breathed.

Mancuso leaned over the paper sheet, next to Jones, and he saw it all now.

“And this one?”

“That’s probably *Charlotte*, also maneuvering briefly. See, here and here, look like aspect changes on these traces to me. No transients because it was probably too far away, same reason we don’t have a track on the fish.” Jones moved the pen back to the track of USS *Asheville*. “Here. That Japanese diesel boat launched on her. Here. *Asheville* tried to evade and failed. Here’s the first explosion from the torpedo warhead. Engine sounds stop here—she took the hit from aft. Here’s the internal bulkheads letting go. Sir, *Asheville* was sunk by a torpedo, probably a Type 89, right about the same time that our two carriers had their little accident.”

“It’s not possible,” Chambers thought.

When Jones turned his head, his eyes looked like the buttons on a doll’s face. “Okay, sir, then you tell me what these signals denote.” Somebody had to goad him into reality.

“Christ, Ron!”

“Settle down, Wally,” ComSubPac said quietly, looking at the data and searching for another plausible interpretation. He had to look, even in the knowledge that there was no other possible conclusion.

“Wasting your time, Skipper.” Jones tapped the track of USS *Gary*. “Somebody better tell that frigate that it ain’t a rescue she’s on. She’s sailing in harm’s way. There’s two SSKs out there with warshots, and they already used them twice.” Jones walked to the wall chart. He had to search around for a red marker, lifted it, and drew two circles, both about thirty miles in diameter. “Somewhere here. We’ll get a better cut on them when they snort next. Who’s the surface track, by the way?”

“Reportedly a coast-guard cutter, one of theirs, heading in for the rescue,” SubPac answered.

“We might want to think about killing it,” Jones suggested, marking that contact in red also, then setting the pen down. He’d just taken the final step. The surface ship whose position he’d marked was not “she,” but rather *it*. An enemy. A target.

“We have to see CINCPAC,” Mancuso said.

Jones nodded. “Yes, sir, I think we do.”

22

The Global Dimension

The bomb was impressive. It exploded outside the Trincomalee Tradewinds, a new luxury hotel mainly built with Indian money. A few people, none closer than half a block away, would remember the vehicle, a small white delivery truck that had been big enough to contain half a ton of AMFO, an explosive mixture composed of nitrogen-based fertilizer and diesel fuel. It was a concoction easily made up in a bathtub or laundry basin, and in this case sufficient to rip the façade off the ten-story hotel, killing twenty-seven people and injuring another hundred or so in the process. Scarcely had the noise died when a telephone call came in to the local Reuters office.

"The final phase of liberation has begun," the voice said, probably reading the words off a prepared statement, as terrorists often did. "The Tamil Tigers will have their homeland and their autonomy or there will be no peace in Sri Lanka. This is only the beginning of the end of our struggle. We will explode one bomb per day until we achieve our goal." Click.

For more than a hundred years, Reuters had been one of the world's most efficient news services, and the Colombo office was no exception, even on a weekend. In ten minutes the report went out on the wire—a satellite link today—to the agency's London headquarters, where it was instantly relayed across the global news network as a "flash" story.

Many U.S. agencies routinely monitor the news-wire services, including the intelligence services, the FBI, Secret Service, and the Pentagon. This was also true of the White House Signals Office, and so it was that twenty-five minutes after the bomb went off, an Air Force sergeant put his hand on Jack Ryan's shoulder. The National Security Advisor's eyes opened to see a finger pointed topside.

"Flash traffic, sir," the voice whispered.

Ryan nodded sleepily, slipped off his seat belt, and thanked God that he hadn't drunk too much in Moscow. In the dim lights of the cabin everyone else was conked out. To keep from waking his wife it was necessary to step over the table. He almost tripped, but the sergeant grabbed his arm.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"No problem, sir." Ryan followed her to the spiral stairs and headed up to the communications area on the upper deck.

"What gives?" He resisted the temptation to ask the time. It would have begged another question: the time in Washington, the time where the plane was now, or the time where the flash traffic had originated. Just another sign of progress, Ryan thought, heading to the thermal printer, you had to ask when "now" was. The communications watch officer was an Air Force first

lieutenant, black, slim, and pretty.

"Good morning, Dr. Ryan. The National Security Office said to flag this one for you." She handed over the slippery paper Jack hated. The thermal printers were quiet, though, and this communications room, like all the others, was noisy enough already. Jack read the Reuters dispatch, too new as yet to have any analysis from CIA or elsewhere.

"That's the indicator we were looking for. Okay, let's get a secure phone."

"Some other stuff that's just come in," an airman said, handing over more papers. "The Navy had a bad day."

"Oh?" Ryan sat down in a padded chair and flipped on a reading light. "Oh, shit," he said next. Then he looked up. "Coffee, please, Lieutenant?" The officer sent an enlisted man for a cup.

"First call?"

"NMCC, the senior watch officer." The National Security Advisor checked his watch, did the arithmetic, and decided that he'd gotten about five hours of sleep total. It was not likely that he'd get much more between here, wherever that was, and Washington.

"Line three, Dr. Ryan. Admiral Jackson on the other end."

"This is SWORDSMAN," Ryan said, using his official Secret Service code name. They'd tried to hang GUN-FIGHTER on him, a token of backhanded respect for his earlier life.

"This is SWITCHBOARD. Enjoying the flight, Jack?" It was a constant amazement to Ryan that the secure digital comm links had such high transmission quality. He could recognize his friend's voice, and even his humorous tone. He could also tell that it was somewhat forced.

"These Air Force drivers are pretty good. Maybe you should think about learning from them. Okay, what gives? What are you doing in the shop?"

"Pac Fleet had a little incident a few hours ago."

"So I see. Sri Lanka first," SWORDSMAN ordered.

"Nothing much more than the wire dispatch. We have some still photos, too, and we expect video in a half-hour or so. The consulate in Trincomalee is reporting in now. They confirm the incident. One American citizen injured, they think, just one, and not real serious, but he's asking to be evac'd soonest. Mike is being painted into a corner. He's going to try an' maneuver out of it when the sun goes down. Our estimate is that our friends are starting to get real frisky. Their amphibs are still alongside, but we've lost track of that brigade. The area they've been using to play games in appears empty. We have overheads three hours old, and the field is empty."

Ryan nodded. He slid the plastic blind off the window by his chair. It was dark outside. There were no lights to be seen below. Either they were over the ocean already or there were clouds down there. All he could see was the blinking strobe on the aircraft's wingtip.

"Any immediate dangers there?"

"Negative," Admiral Jackson thought. "We estimate a week to take positive action, minimum, but we also estimate that positive action is now likely. The folks up the river concur. Jack," Robby added, "Admiral Dubro needs instructions on what he can do about things, and he needs them soon."

"Understood." Ryan was making notes on an Air Force One scratchpad that

the journalists hadn't managed to steal yet. "Stand by." He looked up at the Lieutenant. "ETA to Andrews?"

"Seven and a half hours, sir. Winds are pretty stiff. We're approaching the Icelandic coast now."

Jack nodded. "Thank you. Robby, we're seven and a half out. I'll be talking to the Boss before we get in. Start thinking about setting a briefing up two hours after we get in."

"Roger that."

"Okay. Now, what the hell happened to those carriers?"

"Supposedly one of the Jap 'cans had a little malfunction and rippled off her Mark 50s. They caught both CVNs in the ass. *Enterprise* has damage to all four shafts. *Stennis* has three down. They report no fatalities, some minor injuries."

"Robby, how the hell—"

"Hey, SWORDSMAN, I just work here, remember."

"How long?"

"Four to six months to effect repairs, that's what we have now. Wait, stand by, Jack." The voice stopped, but Ryan could hear murmurs and papers shuffling. "Wait a minute—something else just came in."

"Standing by." Ryan sipped his coffee and returned to the task of figuring out what time it was.

"Jack, something bad. We have a SUBMISS/SUBSUNK in Pac Fleet."

"What's that?"

"USS *Asheville,* that's a new 688, her BST-3 just started howling. *Stennis* has launched a bird to check it out, and a 'can's heading up there, too. This ain't good."

"What's the crew? Like a hundred?"

"More, one-twenty, one-thirty. Oh, damn. Last time this happened, I was a mid."

"We had an exercise going with them, didn't we?"

"DATELINE PARTNERS, yes, just ended yesterday. Until a couple hours ago, looked like a good exercise. Things went in the shitter in a hurry . . ." Jackson's voice trailed off. "Another signal. First report, *Stennis* launched a Hoover—"

"What?"

"S-3 Viking, ASW bird. Four-man crew. They report no survivors from the sub. Shit," Jackson added, even though it wasn't exactly a surprise. "Jack, I need to do some work here, okay?"

"Understood. Keep me posted."

"Will do. Out." The line went dead.

Ryan finished off his coffee and dropped the plastic cup into a basket bolted to the floor of the aircraft. There was no point in waking the President just yet. Durling would need his sleep. He was coming home to a financial crisis, a political mess, maybe a brewing war, in the Indian Ocean, and now the situation with Japan would only get worse after this damned-fool accident in the Pacific. Durling was entitled to a little good luck, wasn't he?

By coincidence Oreza's personal car was a white Toyota Land Cruiser, a

popular vehicle on the island. He and his charter were walking toward it when two more just like it pulled into the marina's parking lot. Six people got out and walked straight toward them. The former Command Master Chief stopped dead in his tracks. He'd left Saipan just before dawn, having picked Burroughs up at the hotel himself, the better to catch the tuna chasing their own food in the early morning. Though traffic on the way in to the dock had been . . . well, a little busier than usual, the world had held its normal shape.

But not now. Now there were Japanese fighters circling over the island, and now six men in fatigues and pistol belts were walking toward him and his charter. It was like something from a movie, he thought, one of those crazy TV minithings from when the Russians were real.

"Hello, how was the fishing?" the man asked. He had O-3 rank, Oreza saw, and a parachutist's badge on the left breast pocket. Smiling, just as pleasant and friendly as he could be.

"I bagged one hell of an albacore tuna," Pete Burroughs said, his pride amplified by the four beers he'd drunk on the way in.

A wider smile. "Ah! Can I see it?"

"Sure!" Burroughs reversed his path and led them back to the dock, where the fish was still hanging head-down from the hoist.

"This is your boat, Captain Oreza?" the soldier asked. Only one other man had followed their captain down. The others stayed behind, watching closely, as though under orders not to be too . . . something, Portagee thought. He also took note of the fact that this officer had troubled himself to learn his name.

"That's right, sir. Interested in a little fishing?" he asked with an innocent smile.

"My grandfather was a fisherman," the *ishii* told them. Portagee nodded and smiled. "So was mine. Family tradition."

"Long tradition?"

Oreza nodded as they got to *Springer*. "More than a hundred years."

"Ah, a fine boat you have. May I look at it?"

"Sure, jump aboard." Portagee went first and waved him over. The sergeant who'd walked down with his captain, he saw, stayed on the dock with Mr. Burroughs, keeping about six feet away from him. There was a pistol in the man's holster, a SIG P220, the standard sidearm of the Japanese military. By this time all kinds of alarm were lighting off in Oreza's brain.

"What does 'Springer' denote?"

"It's a kind of hunting dog."

"Ah, yes, very good." The officer looked around. "What sort of radios do you need for a boat like this. Expensive?"

"I'll show you." Oreza led him into the salon. "Your people make it, sir, NEC, a standard marine VHF and a backup. Here's my GPS nav system, depth finder, fishfinder, radar." He tapped each instrument. They were in fact all Japanese-made, high quality, reasonably priced, and reliable as hell.

"You have guns aboard?"

Click. "Guns? What for?"

"Don't many islanders own guns?"

"Not that I know of." Oreza shook his head. "Anyway, I've never been attacked by a fish. No, I don't have any, even at home."

Clearly the officer was pleased by that news. “Oreza, what sort of name is that?” It sounded native to the Ishii.

“Originally, you mean? Way back, my people come from Portugal.”

“Your family here a long time?”

Oreza nodded. “You bet.” Five years was a long time, wasn’t it? A husband and wife constituted a family, didn’t they?

“The radios, VHF you say, short-range?” The man looked around for other instruments, but clearly there were none.

“Mainly line-of-sight, yes, sir.”

The captain nodded. “Very good. Thank you. Beautiful boat. You take great pride in it, yes?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“Thank you for showing me around. You can go now,” the man said finally, not quite knowing how discordant the final sentence was. Oreza escorted him to the dock and watched him leave, rejoining his men without another word.

“What was—”

“Pete, you want to button it for a minute?” The command was delivered in his Master Chief’s voice, and had the desired effect. They walked off to Oreza’s car, letting the others pull away, marching as soldiers did to a precise one hundred twenty paces per minute, the sergeant a step to his captain’s left and half a pace behind, walking exactly in step. By the time the fisherman got to his car it was clear that yet another Toyota Land Cruiser was at the entrance to the marina parking lot, not really doing anything but sitting there, with three men inside, all in uniform.

“Some kind of exercise? War games? What gives?” Burroughs asked once they were in Oreza’s car.

“Beats the shit out of me, Pete.” He started up and headed out of the lot, turning right to go south on Beach Road. In a few minutes they passed by the commercial docks. Portagee took his time, obeying all rules and limits, and blessing his luck that he had the same model car and color the soldiers used.

Or almost. The vehicles off-loading from *Orchid Ace* now were mainly olive-green. A steady cab-rank of airport buses off-loaded people in uniforms of the same color. They appeared to be going to a central point, then dispersing either to the parked military vehicles or to the ship, perhaps to offload their assigned units.

“What are those big boxy things?”

“It’s called MLRS, Multiple-Launch Rocket System.” There were six of them now, Oreza saw.

“What’s it for?” Burroughs asked.

“Killing people,” Portagee replied tersely. As they drove by the access road to the docks, a soldier waved them on vigorously. More trucks, deuce-and-a-halfs. More soldiers, maybe five or six hundred. Oreza continued south. Every major intersection had a Land Cruiser in place, and no less than three soldiers, some with pistol belts, occasionally one with a slung rifle. It took a few minutes to realize that there wasn’t a single police car in evidence. He turned left onto Wallace Highway.

“My hotel?”

“How about dinner at my place tonight?” Oreza headed up the hill, past the

hospital, finally turning left into his development. Though a man of the sea, he preferred a house on high ground. It also afforded a fine view of the southern part of the island. His was a home of modest size with lots of windows. His wife, Isabel, was an administrator at the hospital, and the home was close enough that she could walk to work if the mood suited her. The mood this evening was not a happy one. As soon as he pulled into the driveway, his wife was out the door.

"Manni, what's going on?" Her ancestry was like his. Short, round, and dark-complected, now her swarthy skin was pale.

"Let's go inside, okay? Honey, this is Pete Burroughs. We went fishing today." His voice was calm, but his eyes swept around. The landing lights of four aircraft were visible to the east, lined up a few miles apart, approaching the island's two large runways. When the three of them were inside, and the doors shut, the talking could start.

"The phones are out. I tried to call Rachel and I got a recording. The overseas lines are down. When I went to the mall—"

"Soldiers?" Portagee asked his wife.

"Lots of 'em, and they're all—"

"Japs." Master Chief Quartermaster Manuel Oreza, United States Coast Guard, retired, completed the thought.

"Hey, that's not the polite way to—"

"Neither's an invasion, Mr. Burroughs."

"what?"

Oreza lifted the kitchen phone and hit the speed-dial button for his daughter's house in Massachusetts.

"We're sorry, but a cable problem has temporarily interrupted Trans-Pacific service. Our people are working on the problem. Thank you for your patience —"

"My ass!" Oreza told the recording. "Cable, hell, what about the satellite dishes?"

"Can't call out?" Burroughs was slow to catch on, but at least this was something he knew about.

"No, doesn't seem that way."

"Try this." The computer engineer reached into his pocket and pulled out his cellular phone.

"I have one," Isabel said. "It doesn't work either. I mean it's fine for local calls, but—"

"What number?"

"Area code 617," Portagee said, giving the rest of the number.

"Wait, I need the USA prefix."

"It's not going to work," Mrs. Oreza insisted.

"You don't have satellite phones here yet, eh?" Burroughs smiled. "My company just got us all these things. I can download on my laptop, send faxes with it, all that stuff. Here." He handed the phone over. "It's ringing."

The entire system was new, and the first such phone had not yet been sold in the islands yet, a fact that the Japanese military had troubled itself to learn in the past week, but the service was global, even if the local marketing people hadn't started selling the things here. The signal from the small device

went to one of thirty-five satellites in a loworbit constellation to the nearest ground station. Manila was the closest, beating Tokyo by a mere thirty miles, though even one mile would have been enough for the executive programming that ran the system. The Luzon ground station had been in operation for only eight weeks, and immediately relayed the call to another satellite, this one a Hughes bird in geosynchronous orbit over the Pacific, back down to a ground station in California, and from there via fiberoptic to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"Hello?" the voice said, somewhat crossly, since it was 5:00 A.M. in America's Eastern Time Zone.

"Rachel?"

"Daddy?"

"Yeah, honey."

"You okay out there?" his daughter asked urgently.

"What do you mean?"

"I tried to call Mom, but the recording said you had a big storm and the lines were down."

"There wasn't any storm, Rach," Oreza said without much thought on the matter.

"What's the matter, then?"

Jesus, where do I start? Portagee asked himself. What if nobody . . . was that possible?

"Uh, Portagee," Burroughs said.

"What is it?" Oreza asked.

"What's what, Daddy?" his daughter asked also, of course.

"Wait a minute, honey. What is it, Pete?" He put his hand over the receiver.

"You mean like, invasion, like war, taking over, all that stuff?"

Portagee nodded. "Yes, sir, that's what it looks like."

"Turn the phone off, now!" The urgency in his voice was unmistakable. Nobody had thought any of this through yet, and both were coming to terms with it from different directions and at different speeds.

"Honey, I'll be back, okay? We're fine. 'Bye." Oreza thumbed the CLEAR button. "What's the problem, Pete?"

"This isn't some joke, right? You're not doing a number to mess with my head, tourist games and all that stuff, are you?"

"Jesus, I need a beer." Oreza opened the refrigerator and took one out. That it was a Japanese brand did not for the moment matter. He tossed one to his guest. "Pete, this ain't no play-acting, okay? In case you didn't notice, we seen at least a battalion of troops, mechanized vehicles, fighters. And that asshole on the dock was real interested in the radio on my boat."

"Okay." Burroughs opened his beer and took a long pull. "Let's say this is a no-shitter. You can DF one of those things."

"Dee-eff? What do you mean?" A pause while he dusted off some long-unused memories. "Oh . . . yeah."

It was busy at the headquarters of Commander-in-Chief Pacific. CINCPAC was a Navy command, a tradition that dated back to Admiral Chester Nimitz. At

the moment people were scurrying about. They were almost all in uniform. The civilian employees were rarely in on weekends, and with a few exceptions it was too late for them anyway. Mancuso saw the collective mood as he came through security, people looking down with harried frowns, moving quickly the better to avoid the heavy atmosphere of an office in considerable turmoil. Nobody wanted to be caught in the storm.

"Where's Admiral Seaton?" ComSubPac asked the nearest yeoman. The petty officer just pointed to the office suite. Mancuso led the other two in that direction.

"Where the hell have you been?" CINCPAC demanded as they came into his inner office.

"SOSUS, sir. Admiral, you know Captain Chambers, my operations officer. This is Dr. Ron Jones—"

"The sonarman you used to brag on?" Admiral David Seaton allowed himself a pleasant moment. It was brief enough.

"That's right, sir. We were just over at SOSUS checking the data on—"

"No survivors, Bart. Sorry, but the S-3 crew says—" "Sir, they were killed," Jones interrupted, tired of the preliminaries. His statement stopped everything cold.

"What do you mean, Dr. Jones?" CINCPAC asked after perhaps as much as a second.

"I mean *Asheville* and *Charlotte* were torpedoed and sunk by Japanese submarines, sir."

"Now wait a minute, son. You mean *Charlotte*, too?" Seaton's head turned. "Bart, what is this?" SubPac didn't get a chance to answer.

"I can prove it, sir." Jones held up the sheaf of papers under his arm. "I need a table with a light over it."

Mancuso's face was pretty grim. "Sir, Jonesy appears to be right. These were not accidents."

"Gentlemen, I have fifteen Japanese officers in the operations room right now trying to explain how the fire control on their 'cans works and—"

"You have Marines, don't you?" Jones asked coldly. "They carry guns, don't they?"

"Show me what you have." Dave Seaton gestured at his desk.

Jones walked CINCPAC through the printouts, and if Seaton wasn't exactly a perfect audience, he surely was a quiet one. On further examination, the SOSUS traces even showed the surface ships and the Mark 50 antisub torpedoes that had crippled half of PacFlt's carriers. The new array off Kure was really something, Jones thought.

"Look at the time, sir. All of this happened over a period of what? Twenty minutes or so. You have two hundred fifty dead sailors out there, and it wasn't any accident."

Seaton shook his head like a horse shedding troublesome insects. "Wait a minute, I haven't had any word—I mean, the threat board is blank. There aren't any indications at all that—"

"There are now, sir." Jones wasn't letting up at all.

"But—"

"Goddamn it, Admiral!" Jones swore. "Here it is, black and white, okay?

There are other copies of this back at the SOSUS building, there's a tape record, and I can show it to you on a fucking TV screen. You want your own experts to go over there, well, shit, they're right here, ain't they?" The contractor pointed to Mancuso and Chambers. "We have been *attacked,* sir."

"What are the chances that this is some sort of mistake?" Seaton asked. His face was as ghostly pale as the cloth of his undress-white uniform shirt.

"Just about zero. I suppose you could wait for them to take an ad out in *The New York Times* if you want additional confirmation." Diplomacy had never been Jones's strongest suit, and he was too angry to consider it anyway.

"Listen, mister—" Seaton began, but then he bit off his words, and instead looked up at his type commander. "Bart?"

"I can't argue with the data, sir. If there were a way to dispute it, Wally or I would have found it. The people at SOSUS concur. It's hard for me to believe, too," Mancuso conceded. "*Charlotte* has failed to check in and—"

"Why didn't her beacon go off?" CINCPAC asked.

"The gadget is located on the sail, aft corner. Some of my skippers weld them down. The fast-attack guys resisted putting them aboard last year, remember? Anyway, the fish could have destroyed the BST or for some reason it didn't deploy properly. We have that noise indicator at *Charlotte*'s approximate location, and she has failed to respond to an emergency order to communicate with us. There is no reason, sir, to assume that she's still alive." And now that Mancuso had said it, it was official. There was one more thing that needed to be said.

"You're telling me we're at war." The statement was delivered in an eerily quiet voice. ComSubPac nodded.

"Yes, sir, I am."

"I didn't have any warning at all," Seaton objected.

"Yeah, you have to admire their sense of tradition, don't you?" Jones observed, forgetting that the last time there had been ample warning, all of it unheeded.

Pete Burroughs didn't finish his fifth beer of the day. The night had not brought peace. Though the sky was clear and full of stars, brighter lights continued to approach Saipan from the east, taking advantage of the trade winds to ease their approach into the island's two American-built runways. Each jumbo jet had to be carrying at least two hundred soldiers, probably closer to three. They could see the two airfields. Oreza's binoculars were more than adequate to pick out the aircraft and the fuel trucks that scurried about to fill up the arriving jets so that they could rapidly go home to make another shuttle run. It didn't occur to anyone to keep a count until it was a few hours too late.

"Car coming in," Burroughs warned, alerted by the glow of turning lights. Oreza and he retreated to the side of the house, hoping to be invisible in the shadows. The car was another Toyota Land Cruiser, which drove down the lane, reversed direction at the end of the cul-de-sac, and headed back out after having done not very much of anything but look around and perhaps count the cars in the various drive-ways—more likely to see if people were gathered

in an inopportune way. “You have any idea what to do?” he asked Oreza when it was gone.

“Hey, I was Coast Guard, remember? This is Navy shit. No, more like Marine shit.”

“It sure is deep shit, man. You suppose anybody knows?”

“They gotta. Somebody’s gotta,” Portagee said, lowering the glasses and heading back into the house. “We can watch from inside our bedroom. We always leave the windows open anyway.” The cool evenings here, always fresh and comfortable from the ocean breezes, were yet another reason for his decision to move to Saipan. “What exactly do you do, Pete?”

“Computer industry, several things really. I have a masters in EE. My real specialty area is communications, how computers talk to each other. I’ve done a little government work. My company does plenty, but mostly on another side of the house.” Burroughs looked around the kitchen. Mrs. Oreza had prepared a light dinner, a good one, it appeared, though it was growing cold.

“You were worried about having people track in on your phone.”

“Maybe just being paranoid, but my company makes the chips for scanners that the Army uses for just that purpose.”

Oreza sat down and started shoveling some of the stirfry onto his plate. “I don’t think anything’s paranoid anymore, man.”

“I hear ya, Skipper.” Burroughs decided to do the same, and looked at the food with approval. “Y’all trying to lose weight?”

Oreza grunted. “We both need to, Izzy and me. She’s been taking classes in low-fat stuff.”

Burroughs looked around. Though the home had a dining room, like most retired couples (that’s how he thought of them, even though they clearly were not), they ate at a small table in their kitchen. The sink and counter were neatly laid out, and the engineer saw the steel mixing and serving bowls. The stainless steel gleamed. Isabel Oreza, too, ran a tight ship, and it was plain enough who was the skipper at home.

“Do I go to work tomorrow?” she asked, her mind drifting, trying to come to terms with the change in local affairs.

“I don’t know, honey,” her husband replied, his own thoughts stopped cold by the question. What would he do? Go fishing again as though nothing at all had happened?

“Wait a minute,” Pete said, still looking at the mixing bowls. He stood, took the two steps needed to reach the kitchen counter, and lifted the largest bowl. It was sixteen inches in diameter and a good five or six inches deep. The bottom was flat, perhaps a three-inch circle, but the rest of it was spherical, almost parabolic in shape. He pulled his sat-phone out of his shirt pocket. He’d never measured the antenna, but now, extending it, he saw it was less than four inches in length. Burroughs looked over at Oreza. “You have a drill?”

“Yeah, why?”

“DF, hell. I got it!”

“You lost me, Pete.”

“We drill a hole in the bottom, put the antenna through it. The bowl’s made out of steel. It reflects radio waves just like a microwave antenna. Everything goes up. Hell, it might even make the transmitter more efficient.”

“You mean like, E.T. phone home?”

“Close enough, Cap’n. What if nobody’s phoned home on this one?” Burroughs was still trying to think it through, coming to terms slowly with a very frightening situation. “Invasion” meant “war.” War, in this case, was between America and Japan, and however bizarre that possibility was, it was also the only explanation for the things he’d seen that day. If it was a war, then he was an enemy alien. So were his hosts. But he’d seen Oreza do some very fancy footwork at the marina.

“Let me get my drill. How big a hole you need?” Burroughs handed over the sat-phone. He’d been tempted to toss it through the air, but stopped himself on the realization that it was perhaps his most valuable possession. Oreza checked the diameter of the little button at the end of the slim metal whip and went for his tool kit.

“hello?”

“Rachel? It’s Dad.”

“You sure you’re okay? Can I call you guys now?”

“Honey, we’re fine, but there’s a problem here.” How the hell to explain this? he wondered. Rachel Oreza Chandler was a prosecuting attorney in Boston, actually looking forward to leaving government service and becoming a criminal lawyer in private practice, where the job satisfaction was rarer, but the pay and hours were far better. Approaching thirty, she was now at the stage where she worried about her parents in much the same way they’d once worried about her. There was no sense in worrying Rachel now, he decided. “Could you get a phone number for me?”

“Sure, what number?”

“Coast Guard Headquarters. It’s in D.C., at Buzzard’s Point. I want the watch center. I’ll wait,” he told her.

The attorney put one line on hold and dialed D.C. information. In a minute she relayed the number, hearing her father repeat it word for word back to her. “That’s right. You sure things are okay? You sound a little tense.”

“Mom and I are just fine, honest, baby.” She hated it when he called her that, but it was probably too late to change him. Poppa would just never be PC.

“Okay, you say so. I hear that storm was really bad. You have electricity back yet?” she asked, forgetting that there hadn’t been a storm at all.

“Not yet, honey, but soon, probably,” he lied. “Later, baby.”

“Coast Guard Watch Center, Chief Petty Officer Obrecki, this is a nonsecure line,” the man said, just as rapidly as possible to prevent the person on the other end from understanding a single word.

“Are you telling me that that fuzzy-cheeked infant who sailed on *Panache* with me made *chief?”* It was good enough to startle the man at the other end, and the reply was comprehensible.

“This is Chief Obrecki. Who’s this?”

"Master Chief Oreza," was the answer.

"Well, how the hell are you, Portagee? I heard you retired." The chief of the watch leaned back in his chair. Now that he was a chief himself, he could refer to the man at the other end by his nickname.

"I'm on Saipan. Okay, kid, listen up: put your watch officer on right now."

"What's the matter, Master Chief?"

"No time, okay? Let's do it."

"Fair enough." Obrecki put the call on hold. "Commander, could you pick up on one, ma'am?"

"NMCC, this is Rear Admiral Jackson," Robby said, tired and in a very foul mood. Only reluctantly did he lift the phone, on the recommendation of a youngish Air Force major.

"Admiral, this is Lieutenant Commander Powers, Coast Guard, over at Buzzard's Point. I have a call on the line from Saipan. The caller is a retired Command Master Chief. One of ours."

Damn it, I have a broke carrier division out there, his mind raged. "That's nice, Commander. You want to clue me in fast? It's busy here."

"Sir, he reports a whole lot of Japanese troops on the island of Saipan."

Jackson's eyes came up off the dispatches on his desk. "What?"

"I can patch him over now, sir."

"Okay," Robby said guardedly.

"Who's this?" another voice asked, old and gruff. He sounded like a chief, Robby thought.

"I'm Rear Admiral Jackson, in the National Military Command Center." He didn't have to order a tape on the line. They were all taped.

"Sir, this is Master Chief Quartermaster Manuel Oreza, U.S. Coast Guard, retired, serial number three-two-eight-six-one-four-zero-three-zero. I retired five years ago and moved to Saipan. I operate a fishing boat here. Sir, there are a lot—and I mean a whole goddamned pisspot full—of Japanese troops, uniformed and carrying arms, on this-here rock, right now, sir."

Jackson adjusted his hand on the phone, gesturing for another officer to pick up. "Master Chief, I hope you understand that I find that a little bit hard to believe, okay?"

"Shit, sir, you oughta see it from my side. I am looking out my window right now. I can see down on the airport and Kobler Field. I count a total of six jumbo-jet aircraft, four at the airport and two at Kobler. I observed a pair of F-15 Eagle fighters with meatball markings circling over the island a few hours ago. Question, sir, is there any sort of joint exercise under way at this time?" the voice asked. It was stone sober, Jackson thought. It sure as hell sounded like a command master chief.

The Air Force major listening fifteen feet away was scribbling notes, though an invitation to Jurassic Park would have seemed somewhat more realistic.

"We just concluded a joint exercise, but Saipan didn't have anything to do with it."

"Sir, then this ain't no fuckin' exercise. There are three car-carrier-type merchant ships tied alongside the dock up the coast from me. One of 'em's

named *Orchid Ace*. I have personally observed military-type vehicles, I think MLRS—Mike Lima Romeo Sierra—six of those sitting in the parking lot at the commercial dock area. Admiral, you check with the Coast Guard and pull my package. I did thirty years in CG blue. I ain't dickin' around, sir. Check for yourself, the phone lines to the rock are out. The story is supposedly that we had a big windstorm, took lines down and stuff. Ain't been no windstorm, Admiral. I was out fishing all day, okay? Check with your weather pukes to confirm that one, too. There are Japanese troops on this island, wearing fatigue uniforms and under arms."

"You got a count, Master Chief?"

The best confirmation of this insane tale, Robby thought, was the embarrassed tone of the answer to that question. "No, sir, sorry, I didn't think to count the airplanes. I'd guess three to six arrivals per hour, over the last six hours at least, probably more, but that's just a guess, sir. Wait . . . Kobler, one of the birds is moving, like to take off. It's a 747, but I can't make out the markings."

"Wait. If the phones are out, how are you talking to me?" Oreza explained, giving Jackson a conventional number to call back on. "Okay, Master Chief. I'm going to do some checking here. I'll be back to you in less than an hour. Fair enough?"

"Yes, sir, I figure we done our part." The line went dead.

"Major!" Jackson shouted without looking up. When he did that, he saw the man was there.

"Sir, I know he sounded normal and all, but—"

"But call Andersen Air Force Base right now."

"Roger." The young pilot went back to his desk and flipped open his Autovon directory. Thirty seconds later he looked up and shook his head, a curious look on his face.

"Is someone telling me," Jackson asked the ceiling, "that a U.S. Air Force base dropped off the net today and nobody *noticed*?"

"Admiral, CINCPAC on your STU, sir, it's coded as CRITIC traffic." CRITIC was a classification of priority even higher than FLASH, and not a prefix often used, even by a Theater Commander in Chief. *What the hell*, Jackson thought. *Why not ask?*

"Admiral Seaton, this is Robby Jackson. Are we at war, sir?"

His part in the exercise seemed easy enough, Zhang Han San thought. Just one flight to one place, to talk first with one person, then another, and it had gone even more easily than he'd expected.

Well, he shouldn't have been surprised, he thought, returning to the airport in the back of the embassy car. Korea would be cut off, certainly for a period of months, and perhaps indefinitely. To do anything else would have carried with it great dangers for a country whose military had been downsized and whose next-door neighbor was the nation with the world's largest standing army, and an historical enemy at that. Han hadn't even been forced to bring up that unseemly thought. He'd simply delivered an observation. There seemed to be difficulties between America and Japan. Those difficulties did

not pertain directly to the Republic of Korea. Nor would it appear that the Republic had any immediate ability to ameliorate those differences, except perhaps as an honest broker of influence when diplomatic negotiations were undertaken, at which time the good offices of the Republic of Korea would be most welcome indeed by all sides in the dispute, certainly by Japan.

He'd taken no particular pleasure at the discomfort his mild words had given to his hosts. There was much to admire in the Koreans, a fact lost on Japan in their blind racism, Zhang thought. With luck, he might firm up the trading relationship between the PRC and the ROK, and they, too, would profit from the ultimate objective—and why not? The ROKs had no reason to love the Russians, and even less to love the Japanese. They simply had to get over their regrettable friendship with America and become part of a new reality. It was sufficient to the moment that they had indeed seen things his way, and that America's one remaining ally in this part of the world was off the playing field, their president and foreign minister having seen the light of reason. And with luck, the war, such as it was, might already be over for all intents and purposes.

"Ladies and gentlemen." The voice came from the living room, where Mrs. Oreza had left the TV on. "In ten minutes there will be a special announcement. Please stay tuned."

"Manni?"

"I heard it, honey."

"You have a blank tape for your VCR?" Burroughs asked.

23

Catching Up

Robby Jackson's day had started off badly enough. He'd had bad ones before, including a day as a lieutenant commander at Naval Air Test Center, Patuxent River, Maryland, in which a jet trainer had decided without any prompting at all to send him and his ejection seat flying through the canopy, breaking his leg in the process and taking him off flight status for months. He'd seen friends die in crashes of one sort or another, and even more often had participated in searches for men whom he'd rarely found alive, more often locating a slick of jet fuel and perhaps a little debris. As a squadron commander and later as a CAG, he'd been the one who'd written the letters to parents and wives, telling them that their man, and most recently, their little girl, had died in the service of their country, each time asking himself what he might have done differently to prevent the necessity of the exercise. The life of a naval aviator was filled with such days.

But this was worse, and the only consolation was that he was deputy J-3, responsible to develop operations and plans for his country's military. Had he been part of J-2, the intelligence boys, his sense of failure would have been complete indeed.

"That's it, sir, Yakota, Misawa, and Kadena are all off the net. Nobody's picking up."

"How many people?" Jackson asked.

"Total, about two thousand, mainly mechanics, radar controllers, loggies, that sort of thing. Maybe an airplane or two in transit, but not many of those. I have people checking now," the Major replied. "How about the Navy?"

"We have people at Andersen on Guam, co-located with your base. The port, too, maybe a thousand people total. It's a lot smaller than it used to be." Jackson lifted his secure phone and punched in the numbers for CINCPAC. "Admiral Seaton? This is Jackson again. Anything else?"

"We can't raise anybody west of Midway, Rob. It's starting to look real."

"How does this thing work?" Oreza asked.

"I hate to say this, but I'm not sure. I didn't bother reading the manual," Burroughs admitted. The sat-phone was sitting on the coffee table, its antenna extended through the drill hole in the bottom of the mixing bowl, which was in turn sitting atop two piles of books. "I'm not sure if it broadcasts its position to the satellites periodically or not." For which reason they felt it necessary to maintain the comical arrangement.

"You turn mine off by putting the antenna back down," Isabel Oreza

observed, causing two male heads to turn. “Or you can just take the batteries out, right?”

“Damn.” Burroughs managed to say it first, but not by much. He lifted the bowl off, put the little antenna back in its hole, then flipped off the battery cover and withdrew the two AAs. The phone was now completely off. “Ma’am, if you want to get into the master’s program at Sanford, use me as a reference, okay?”

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Heads turned in the living room to see a smiling man in green fatigues. His English was letter-perfect. “I am General Tokikichi Arima of the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Forces. Please allow me to explain what has happened today.

“First of all, let me assure you that there is no cause for alarm. There was an unfortunate shooting at the police substation adjacent to your parliament building, but the two police officers who were hurt in the exchange are both doing well in your local hospital. If you have heard rumors of violence or death, those rumors are not true,” the General assured the twenty-nine thousand citizens of Saipan.

“You probably want to know what has happened,” he went on. “Early today, forces under my command began arriving on Saipan and Guam. As you know from your history, and indeed as some of the older citizens on this island well remember, until 1944 the Mariana Islands were possessions of Japan. It may surprise some of you to know that since the court decision several years ago allowing Japanese citizens to purchase real estate in the islands, the majority of the land on Saipan and Guam is owned by my countrymen. You also know of our love and affection for these islands and the people who live here. We have invested billions of dollars here and created a renaissance in the local economy after years of shameful neglect by the American government. Therefore, we’re not really strangers at all, are we?

“You probably also know that there have been great difficulties between Japan and America. Those difficulties have forced my country to rethink our defense priorities. We have, therefore, decided to reestablish our ownership of the Mariana Islands as a purely defensive measure to safeguard our own shores against possible American action. In other words, it is necessary for us to maintain defense forces here and therefore to bring the Marianas back into our country.

“Now.” General Arima smiled. “What does this mean to you, the citizens of Saipan?

“Really, it means nothing at all. All businesses will remain open. We, too, believe in free enterprise. You will continue to manage your own affairs through your own elected officials, with the additional benefit that you will have status as Japan’s forty-eighth prefecture, with full parliamentary representation in the Diet. That is something you have not had as an American commonwealth—which is just another word for colony, isn’t it? You will have dual citizenship rights. We will respect your culture and your language. Your freedom to travel will not be impeded. Your freedoms of speech, press, religion, and assembly will be the same as those enjoyed by all Japanese citizens, and totally identical with the civil rights you now enjoy. In short, nothing is going to change in your daily life at all.” Another charming smile.

“The truth of the matter is that you will greatly benefit from this change in government. As part of Japan, you will be part of the world’s most vibrant and dynamic economy. Even more money will come to your island. You will see prosperity such as you have never dreamed of,” Arima assured his audience. “The only changes you will experience will be positive ones. On that you have my word and the word of my government.

“Perhaps you say that such words are easy to speak, and you are correct. Tomorrow you will see people on the streets and roads of Saipan, surveying, taking measurements, and interviewing local citizens. Our first important task will be to improve the roads and highways of your island, something neglected by the Americans. We want your advice on the best way to do this. In fact, we will welcome your help and participation in everything we do.

“Now,” Arima said, leaning forward somewhat, “I know that some among you will find these developments unwelcome, and I wish to apologize sincerely for that. We have no desire to harm anyone here, but you must understand that any attack upon one of my men or any Japanese citizen will be treated as a violation of the law. I am also responsible to take certain security measures to protect my troops and to bring this island into compliance with Japanese law.

“All firearms owned by private citizens on Saipan must be surrendered in the next few days. You may bring them into your local police stations. If you have a sales record for the guns, or if you can demonstrate their commercial value, we will pay you the fair cash value for them. Similarly, we must ask that any owners of ‘ham’ radios turn them over to us for a short period of time, and, please, not to use them until you do. Again, we will pay in cash the full value of your property, and in the case of the radios, when we return them to you, you may keep the money as a token of our thanks for your cooperation. Aside from that”—another smile—“you will hardly notice that we are here. My troops are under orders to treat everyone on this island as fellow citizens. If you experience or even see a single incident in which a Japanese soldier is impolite to a local citizen, I want you to come to my headquarters and report it. You see, our law applies to us, too.

“For the moment, please go about your normal lives.” A number came up on the screen. “If you have any specific questions, please call this number or feel free to come to my headquarters at your parliament building. We will be glad to help you in any way we can. Thank you for listening. Good night.”

“This message will be repeated every fifteen minutes on Channel Six, the public-access channel,” another voice said.

“Son of a bitch,” Oreza breathed.

“I wonder who their ad agency is,” Burroughs noted, going to punch the rewind button on the VCR.

“Can we believe it?” Isabel asked.

“Who knows? You have any guns?”

Portagee shook his head. “Nope. I don’t even know if this rock has a registration law. Have to be crazy to take on soldiers anyway, right?”

“It makes it a lot easier for them if they don’t have to watch their backs.” Burroughs started putting the batteries back in his sat-phone. “You have the number for that admiral?”

"Jackson."

"Master Chief Oreza, sir. You got a tape machine running?"

"Yes, I do. What you got?"

"Well, sir, it's officials," Oreza reported dryly. "They just made the announcement on TV. We taped it. I'm turning the tape on now. I'll hold the phone right next to the speaker."

General Tokikichi Arima, Jackson wrote down on a pad. He handed it to an Army sergeant. "Have the intel boys identify this name."

"Yessir." The sergeant vanished in an instant.

"Major!" Robby called next.

"Yes, Admiral?"

"The sound quality is pretty good. Have a copy of the tape run over to the spooks for voice-stress analysis. Next, I want a typed transcript ASAP ready to fax out to half a million places."

"Right."

For the rest of the time, Jackson just listened, an island of calm in a sea of madness, or so it seemed.

"That's it," Oreza told him when it ended. "You want the call-in number, Admiral?"

"Not right now, no. Good job, Master Chief. Anything else to report?"

"The airplanes are still shuttling in. I counted fourteen since we talked last."

"Okay." Robby made the proper notes. "You feel like you're in any particular danger?"

"I don't see people running around with guns, Admiral. You notice they didn't say anything about American nationals on the island?"

"No, I didn't. Good point." *Ouch.*

"I ain't real comfortable about this, sir." Oreza gave him a quick reprise of the incident on his boat.

"I can't say that I blame you, Master Chief. Your country is working on the problem, okay?"

"You say so, Admiral. I'm shutting down for a while."

"Fair enough. Hang in there," Jackson ordered. It was a hollow directive, and both men knew it.

"Roger that. Out."

Robby sat the phone back in the cradle. "Opinions?"

"You mean aside from, 'It's all fuckin' crazy'?" a staff officer inquired.

"It may be crazy to us, but it's sure as hell logical to somebody." There was no sense in clobbering the officer for the statement, Jackson knew. It would take a bit more time before they really came to terms with the situation. "Does anybody *not* believe the information we have now?" He looked around. Seven officers were present, and people weren't selected for duty in the NMCC for their stupidity.

"It may be crazy, sir, but everything keeps coming down the same way. Every post we've tried to link with is off the air. They're all supposed to have duty officers, but nobody's answering the phone. Satellite links are down. We have four Air Force bases and an Army post off the air. It's real, sir." The

staffer redeemed herself with the follow-up.

"Anything from State? Any of the spook shops?"

"Nothing," a colonel from J-2 replied. "I can give you a satellite pass over the Marianas in about an hour. I've already told NRO and I-TAC about the tasking and the priority."

"KH-11?"

"Yes, sir, and all the cameras are up. Weather is clear. We'll get good overheads," the intelligence officer assured him.

"No storm in the area yesterday?"

"Negative," another officer said. "Ain't no reason for phone service to be out. They have Trans-Pac cable and satellite uplinks. I called the contractor that operates the dishes. They had no warning at all. They've been sending their own signals to their people, requesting information, no reply."

Jackson nodded. He'd waited this long only to get the confirmation he needed to take the next step.

"Okay, let's get a warning signal drafted, distribution to all the CINCs. Alert SecDef and the Chiefs. I'm calling the President now."

"Dr. Ryan, NMCC on the STU with CRITIC traffic. Admiral Robert Jackson again." The use of "CRITIC" caused heads to turn as Ryan lifted the secure phone.

"Robby, this is Jack. What's happening?" Everyone in the communications room saw the National Security Advisor turn pale. "Robby, are you serious?" He looked at the communications watch officer. "Where are we now?"

"Approaching Goose Bay, Labrador, sir. About three hours out."

"Get Special Agent d'Agustino up here, would you, please?" Ryan took his hand off the phone. "Robby, I need hard copy . . . okay . . . he's still asleep, I think. Give me thirty minutes to get organized here. Call me if you need me."

Jack got out of his chair and made his way to the lav just aft of the flight deck. He managed to avoid looking in the mirror when he washed his hands. The Secret Service agent was waiting for him when he emerged.

"Not much sleep for you, eh?"

"Is the Boss up yet?"

"Sir, he left orders not to do that until we were an hour out. I just checked with the pilot and—"

"Kick him loose, Daga, right now. Then get Secretaries Hanson and Fiedler up. Arnie, too."

"What's the matter, sir?"

"You'll be in there to hear it." Ryan took the roll of fax paper off the secure machine and started reading. He looked up. "I'm not kidding, Daga. Right now."

"Any danger to the President?"

"Let's assume that there is," Jack replied. He thought for a second. "Where's the nearest fighter base, Lieutenant?"

The *what?* on her face was quite obvious. "Sir, there are F-15s at Otis on Cape Cod, and F-16s at Burlington, Vermont. Both are Air National Guard groups tasked to continental air defense."

"You call them and tell them that the President would like to have some friends around ASAP." The nice thing about talking to lieutenants was that they weren't used to asking why an order was given, even when there was no obvious reason for it. The same thing didn't apply to the Secret Service.

"Doc, if you need to do that, then I need to know, too, right now."

"Yeah, Daga, I guess so." Ryan tore off the top section of the thermal fax paper when he got to the second page of the transmission.

"Holy shit," the agent thought aloud, handing it back. "I'll wake the President up. You need to tell the pilot. They do things a little differently at times like this."

"Fair enough. Fifteen minutes, Daga, okay?"

"Yes, sir." She headed down the circular stairs while Jack went forward to the flight deck.

"One-six-zero minutes to go, Dr. Ryan. Has been a long one, hasn't it?" the Colonel at the controls asked pleasantly. The smile faded instantly from his face.

* * *

It was mere chance that took them past the American Embassy. Maybe he'd just wanted to see the flag, Clark thought. It was always a pleasant sight in a foreign land, even if it did fly over a building designed by some bureaucrat with the artistic sense of—

"Somebody's worried about security," Chavez said.

"Yevgeniy Pavlovich, I know your English is good. You need not practice it on me."

"Excuse me. The Japanese are concerned with a riot, Vanya? Except for that one incident, there hasn't been much hooliganism . . ." His voice trailed off. There were two squads of fully armed infantrymen arrayed around the building. That seemed very odd indeed. Over here, Ding thought, one or two police officers seemed enough to—

"Yob'tvoyu mat."

Clark was proud of the lad just then. Foul as the imprecation was, it was also just what a Russian would have said. The reason for it was also clear. The guards around the embassy perimeter were looking in as much as they were looking out, and the Marines were nowhere to be seen.

"Ivan Sergeyevich, something seems very odd."

"Indeed it does, Yevgeniy Pavlovich," John Clark said evenly. He didn't let the car slow down, and hoped the troops on the sidewalk wouldn't notice the two gaijin driving by and take down their license number. It might be a good time to change rental cars.

"The name is Arima, first name Tokikichi, sir, Lieutenant General, age fifty-three." The Army sergeant was an intelligence specialist. "Graduated their National Defense Academy, worked his way up the line as an infantryman,

good marks all the way. He's airborne qualified. Took the senior course at Carlisle Barracks eight years ago, did just fine. 'Politically astute,' the form sheet says. Well connected. He's Commanding General of their Eastern Army, a rough equivalent of a corps organization in the U.S. Army, but not as heavy in corps-level assets, especially artillery. That's two infantry divisions, First and Twelfth, their First Airborne Brigade, First Engineer Brigade, Second Anti-Air Group, and other administrative attachments."

The sergeant handed over the folder, complete with a pair of photos. *The enemy has a face now*, Jackson thought. *At least one face.* Jackson examined it for a few seconds and closed the folder back. It was about to go to Condition FRANTIC in the Pentagon. The first of the Joint Chiefs was in the parking lot, and he was the lucky son of a bitch to give them the news, such as it was. Jackson assembled his documents and headed off to the Tank, a pleasant room, actually, located on the outside of the building's E-Ring.

Chet Nomuri had spent the day meeting at irregular hours with three of his contacts, learning not very much except that something very strange was afoot, though nobody knew what. His best course of action, he decided, was to head back to the bathhouse and hope Kazuo Taoka would turn up. He finally did, by which time Nomuri had spent so much time soaking in the blisteringly hot water that his body felt like pasta that had been in the pot for about a month.

"You must have had a day like I did," he managed to say with a crooked smile.

"How was yours?" Kazuo asked, his smile tired but enthusiastic.

"There is a pretty girl at a certain bar. Three months I've worked on her. We had a vigorous afternoon." Nomuri reached below the surface of the water, feigning agony in an obvious way. "It may never work again."

"I wish that American girl was still around," Taoka said, settling in the tub with a prolonged *Ahhhhh.* "I am ready for someone like her now."

"She's gone?" Nomuri asked innocently.

"Dead," the salaryman said, easily controlling his sense of loss.

"What happened?"

"They were going to send her home. Yamata sent Kaneda, his security man, to tidy things up. But it seems she used narcotics, and she was found dead of an overdose. A great pity," Taoka observed, as if he were describing the demise of a neighbor's cat. "But there are more where she came from."

Nomuri just nodded with weary impassivity, remarking to himself that this was a side of the man he hadn't seen before. Kazuo was a fairly typical Japanese salaryman. He'd joined his company right out of college, starting off in a position little removed from clerkship. After serving five years, he'd been sent off to a business school, which in this country was the intellectual equivalent of Parris Island, with a touch of Buchenwald. There was just something outrageous about how this country operated. He expected that things would be different. It was a foreign land, after all, and every country was different, which was fundamentally a good thing. America was the proof of that. America essentially lived off the diversity that arrived at her shores,

each ethnic community adding something to the national pot, creating an often boiling but always creative and lively national mix. But now he truly understood why people came to the U.S., especially people from this country.

Japan demanded much of its citizens—or more properly, its culture did. The boss was always right. A good employee was one who did as he was told. To advance you had to kiss a lot of ass, sing the company song, exercise like somebody in goddamned boot camp every morning, showing up an hour early to show how sincere you were. The amazing part was that anything creative happened here at all. Probably the best of them fought their way to the top despite all this, or perhaps were smart enough to disguise their inner feelings until they got to a position of real authority, but by the time they got there they must have accumulated enough inner rage to make Hitler look like a pansy. Along the way they bled those feelings off with drinking binges and sexual orgies of the sort he'd heard about in this very hot tub. The stories about jaunts to Thailand and Taiwan and most recently the Marianas were especially interesting, stuff that would have made his college chums at UCLA blush. Those things were all symptoms of a society that cultivated psychological repression, whose warm and gentle façade of good manners was like a dam holding back all manner of repressed rage and frustration. That dam occasionally leaked, mostly in an orderly, controlled way, but the strain on the dam was unchanging, and one result of that strain was a way of looking at others, especially *gaijin,* in a manner that insulted Nomuri's American-cultivated egalitarian outlook. It would not be long, he realized, before he started hating this place. That would be unhealthy and unprofessional, the CIA officer thought, remembering the repeated lessons from the Farm: a good field spook identified closely with the culture he attacked. But he was sliding in the other direction, and the irony was that the deepest reason for his growing antipathy was that his roots sprang from this very country.

"You really want more like her?" Nomuri asked, eyes closed.

"Oh, yes. Fucking Americans will soon be our national sport." Taoka chuckled. "We had a fine time of it the past two days. And I was there to see it all happen," his voice concluded in awe. It had all paid off. Twenty years of toeing the line had brought its reward, to have been there in the War Room, listening to it all, following it all, seeing history written before his eyes. The salaryman had made his mark, and most importantly of all, he'd been noticed. By Yamata-san himself.

"So what great deeds have happened while I was performing my own, eh?" Nomuri asked, opening his eyes and giving off a leering smile.

"We just went to war with America, and we've won!" Taoka proclaimed.

"War? *Nan ja?* We accomplished a takeover of General Motors, did we?"

"A real war, my friend. We crippled their Pacific Fleet and the Marianas Islands are Japanese again."

"My friend, you cannot tolerate too much alcohol," Nomuri thought, really believing what he'd just said to the blowhard.

"I have not had a drink in four days!" Taoka protested. "What I told you is true!"

"Kazuo," Chet said patiently as though to a bright child, "you tell stories with a skill and style better than any man I have ever met. Your descriptions

of women make my loins swell as though I were there myself." Nomuri smiled. "But you exaggerate."

"Not this time, my friend, truly," Taoka said, really wanting his friend to believe him, and so he started giving details.

Nomuri had no real military training. Most of his knowledge of such affairs came from reading books and watching movies. His instructions for operating in Japan had nothing to do with gathering information on the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, but rather with trade and foreignaffairs matters. But Kazuo Taoka *was* a fine storyteller, with a keen eye for detail, and it took only three minutes before Nomuri had to close his eyes again, a smile fixed on his lips. Both actions were the result of his training in Yorktown, Virginia, as was that of his memory, which struggled now to record every single word while another part of his consciousness wondered how the hell he was going to get the information out. His other reaction was one that Taoka could neither see nor hear, a quintessential Americanism, spoken within the confines of the CIA officer's mind: *You mother-fuckers!*

"Okay, JUMPER is up and pretty much put together," Helen d'Agustino said. "JASMINE"—the code name for Anne Durling—"will be in another cabin. SecState and SecTreas are up and having their coffee. Arnie van Damm is probably in better shape than anybody aboard. Showtime. How about the fighters?"

"They'll join up in about twenty minutes. We went with the F-15s out of Otis. Better range, they'll follow us all the way down. I'm really being paranoid on that, ain't I?"

Daga's eyes gave off a coldly professional smile. "You know what I've always liked about you, Dr. Ryan?"

"What's that?"

"I don't have to explain security to you like I do with everybody else. You think just like I do." It was a lot for a Secret Service agent to say. "The President is waiting, sir." She led him down the stairs.

Ryan bumped into his wife on the way forward. Pretty as ever, she was not suffering from the previous night despite her husband's warning, and on seeing Jack she almost made a joke that it was he who'd had the prob—

"What's the matter?"

"Business, Cathy."

"Bad?"

Her husband just nodded and went forward, past a Secret Service agent and an armed Air Force security policeman. The two convertible couches had been made up. President Durling was sitting down in suit pants and white shirt. His tie and jacket were not in evidence at this time. A silver pot of coffee was on the low table. Ryan could see out the windows on both sides of the nose cabin. They were flying a thousand feet or so above fleecy cumulus clouds.

"I hear you've been up all night, Jack," Durling said.

"Since before Iceland, whenever that was, Mr. President," Ryan told him. He hadn't washed, hadn't shaved, and his hair probably looked like Cathy's after a long procedure under a surgical cap. Worse still was the look in his eyes as

he prepared to deliver grimmer news than he'd ever spoken.

"You look like hell. What's the problem?"

"Mr. President, based on information received over the last few hours, I believe that the United States of America is at war with Japan."

"What you need is a good chief to run this for you," Jones observed.

"Ron, one more of those, and I'll toss you in the brig, okay? You've thrown enough weight around for one day," Mancuso replied in a weary voice. "Those people were under my command, remember?"

"Have I been that much of a jerk?"

"Yeah, Jonesy, you have." Chambers handled that answer. "Maybe Seaton needed to be brought up short once, but you overdid it big-time. And now we need solutions, not smartass bullshit."

Jones nodded but kept his own counsel. "Very well, sir. What assets do we have?"

"Best estimate, they have eighteen boats deployable. Two are in overhaul status and are probably unavailable for months at least," Chambers replied, doing the enemy first. "With *Charlotte* and *Asheville* out of the game, we have a total of seventeen. Four of those are in yard-overhaul and unavailable. Four more are in bobtail-refits alongside the pier here or in 'Dago. Another four are in the IO. Maybe we can shake those loose, maybe we can't. That leaves five. Three of those are with the carriers for the 'exercise,' one's right down below at the pier. The last one's at sea up in the Gulf of Alaska doing workups. That has a new CO—what, just three weeks since he relieved?"

"Correct." Mancuso nodded. "He's just learning the job."

"Jesus, the cupboard's *that* bare?" Jones was now regretting his comment on having a good chief around. The mighty United States Pacific Fleet, as recently as five years ago the most powerful naval force in the history of civilization, was now a frigate navy.

"Five of us, eighteen of them, and they're all spun-up to speed. They've been running ops for the last couple of months." Chambers looked at the wall chart and frowned. "That's one big fuckin' ocean, Jonesy." It was the way he added the last statement that worried the contractor.

"The four in refits?"

"That order's out. 'Expedite readiness for sea.' And that brings the number to nine, in a couple of weeks, if we're lucky."

"Mr. Chambers, sir?"

Chambers turned back. "Yeah, Petty Officer Jones?"

"Remember when we used to head up north, all alone, tracking four or five of the bad guys at once?"

The operations officer nodded soberly, almost nostalgically. His reply was quiet. "Long time ago, Jonesy. We're dealing with SSKs now, on their home turf and—"

"Did you trade your balls in to get that fourth stripe on your shoulder?" Chambers turned around in an instant rage.

"You listen to me, *boy,* I—" But Ron Jones just snarled back.

" 'I,' hell, *you,* used to be a kickass *officer!* I trusted you to know what to do

with the data I gave you, just like I trusted him—" Jones pointed to Admiral Mancuso. "When I sailed with you guys, we were the class of the whole fuckin' world. And if you did your job right as a CO, and if *you*'ve been doing your job right as a type-commander, Bart, then those kids out there still are. Goddamn it! When I tossed my bag down the hatch on *Dallas* the first time, I trusted you guys to know your damned job. Was I wrong, gentlemen? Remember the motto on *Dallas?* 'First in Harm's Way'! What the hell's the matter here?" The question hung in the air for several seconds. Chambers was too angry to take it in. SubPac was not.

"We look that bad?" Mancuso asked.

"Sure as hell, sir. Okay, we took it in the ass from these bastards. Time to start thinking about catchup. We're the varsity, aren't we? Who's better suited to it than we are?"

"Jones, you always did have a big mouth," Chambers said. Then he looked back at the chart. "But I guess maybe it is time to go to work."

A chief petty officer stuck his head in the door. "Sir, *Pasadena* just checked in from down the hill. Ready in all respects to get under way, the CO requests orders."

"How's he loaded?" Mancuso replied, knowing that if he'd really done his job right over the past few days the question would have been unnecessary.

"Twenty-two ADCAPs, six Harpoons, and twelve T-LAM-Cs. They're all warshots," the chief replied. "He's ready to rock, sir."

ComSubPac nodded. "Tell him to stand by for mission orders."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Good skipper?" Jones asked.

"He got the Battle-E last year," Chamber said. "Tim Parry. He was my XO on *Key West.* He'll do."

"So now all he needs is a job."

Mancuso lifted the secure phone for CLNCPAC. "Yeah."

"Signal from State Department," the Air Force communications officer said, entering the room. "The Japanese Ambassador requests an urgent meeting with the President."

"Brett?"

"We see what he has to say," SecState said. Ryan nodded agreement.

"Any chance at all that this is some kind of mistake?" Durling asked.

"We expect some hard intelligence anytime now from a satellite pass over the Marianas. It's dark there, but that won't matter much." Ryan had finished his briefing, and on completion the data he'd managed to deliver seemed very thin. The baseline truth here was that what had evidently taken place was so wildly beyond the limits of reason that he himself would not be fully satisfied until he saw the overheads himself.

"If it's real, then what?"

"That will take a little time," Ryan admitted. "We want to hear what their ambassador has to say."

"What are they really up to?" Treasury Secretary Fiedler asked.

"Unknown, sir. Just pissing us off, it isn't worth the trouble. We have nukes.

They don't. It's all crazy . . ." Ryan said quietly. "It doesn't make any sense at all." Then he remembered that in 1939, Germany's biggest trading partner had been . . . France. History's most often repeated lesson was that logic was not a constant in the behavior of nations. The study of history was not always bilateral. And the lessons learned from history depended on the quality of the student. Worth remembering, Jack thought, because the other guy might forget.

"It's got to be some kind of mistake," Hanson announced. "A couple of accidents. Maybe our two subs collided under the water and maybe we have some excitable people on Saipan. I mean it doesn't make any sense at all."

"I agree, the data does not form any clear picture, but the individual pieces —damn it, I *know* Robby Jackson. I *know* Bart Mancuso."

"Who's that?"

"ComSubPac. He owns all our subs out there. I sailed with him once. Jackson is deputy J-3, and we've been friends since we were both teaching at Annapolis." Lo, these many years ago.

"Okay," Durling said. "You've told us everything you know?"

"Yes, Mr. President. Every word, without any analysis."

"Meaning you don't really have any?" The question stung some, but this was not a time for embroidering. Ryan nodded.

"Correct, Mr. President."

"So for now, we wait. How long to Andrews?"

Fiedler looked out a window. "That's the Chesapeake Bay below us now. We can't be too far out."

"Press at the airport?" he asked Arnie van Damm.

"Just the ones in the back of the plane, sir."

"Ryan?"

"We firm up our information as fast as we can. The services are all on alert."

"What are those fighters doing out there?" Fiedler asked. They were now flying abeam Air Force One, in a tight two-ship element about a mile away, their pilots wondering what this was all about. Ryan wondered if the press would take note of it. Well, how long could this affair remain a secret?

"My idea, Buzz," Ryan said. Might as well take responsibility for it.

"A little dramatic, don't you think?" SecState inquired.

"We didn't expect to have our fleet attacked either, sir."

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Colonel Evans. We're now approaching Andrews Air Force Base. We all hope you've enjoyed the flight. Please bring your seats back to the upright position and . . ." In the back, the junior White House aides ostentatiously refused to fasten their seat belts. The cabin crew did what they were supposed to do, of course.

Ryan felt the main gear thump down on runway Zero-One Right. For the majority of the people aboard, the press, it was the end. For him it was just the beginning. The first sign was the larger than normal complement of security police waiting at the terminal building, and some especially nervous Secret Service agents. In a way it was a relief to the National Security Advisor. Not everyone thought it was some sort of mistake, but it would be so much better, Ryan thought, if he were wrong, just this once. Otherwise they faced the most complex crisis in his country's history.

24

Running in Place

If there was a worse feeling than this one, Clark didn't know what it might be. Their mission in Japan was supposed to have been easy: evacuate an American citizen who had gotten herself into a tight spot and ascertain the possibility of reactivating an old and somewhat dusty intelligence network.

Well, that was the idea, the officer told himself, heading to his room. Chavez was parking the car. They'd decided to rent a new one, and again the clerk at the counter had changed his expression on learning that their credit card was printed in both Roman and Cyrillic characters. It was an experience so new as to have no precedent at all. Even at the height (or depths) of the Cold War, Russians had treated American citizens with greater deference than their own countrymen, and whether that had resulted from curiosity or not, the privilege of being American had been an important touchstone for a lonely stranger in a foreign and hostile land. Never had Clark felt so frightened, and it was little consolation that Ding Chavez didn't have the experience to realize just how unusual and dangerous their position was.

It was therefore something of a relief to feel the piece of tape on the underside doorknob. Maybe Nomuri could give him some useful information. Clark went in the room only long enough to use the bathroom before heading right back out. He saw Chavez in the lobby and made the appropriate gesture: *Stay put.* Clark noticed with a smile that his junior partner had stopped at a bookstore and purchased a copy of a Russian-language newspaper, which he carried ostentatiously as a kind of defensive measure. Two minutes later, Clark was looking in the window of the camera shop again. There wasn't much street traffic, but enough that he wasn't the only one around. As he stood looking at the latest automated wonder from Nikon, he felt someone bump into him.

"Watch where you're going," a gruff voice said in English and moved on. Clark took a few seconds before heading in the other direction, turning the corner and heading down an alley. A minute later he found a shadowy place and waited. Nomuri was there quickly.

"This is dangerous, kid."

"Why do you think I hit you with that signal?" Nomuri's voice was low and shaky.

It was fieldcraft from a TV series, about as realistic and professional as two kids sneaking a smoke in the boys' room of their junior high. The odd part was that, important as it was, Nomuri's message occupied about one minute. The rest of the time was concerned with procedural matters.

"Okay, number one, no contact at all with your normal rat-line. Even if

they're allowed out on the street, you don't know them. You don't go near them. Your contact points are gone, kid, you understand?" Clark's mind was going at light-speed toward nowhere at the moment, but the most immediate priority was survival. You had to be alive in order to accomplish something, and Nomuri, like Chavez and himself, were "illegals," unlikely to receive any sort of clemency after arrest and totally separated from any support from their parent agency.

Chet Nomuri nodded. "That leaves you, sir."

"That's right, and if you lose us, you return to your cover and you don't do anything. Got that? Nothing at all. You're a loyal Japanese citizen, and you stay in your hole."

"But—"

"But nothing, kid. You are under my orders now, and if you violate them, you answer to me!" Clark softened his voice. "Your first priority is always survival. We don't issue suicide pills and we don't expect movie-type bullshit. A dead officer is a dumb officer." *Damn,* Clark thought, had the mission been different from the very beginning, they would have had a routine established —dead——drops, a whole collection of signals, a selection of cutouts—but there wasn't time to do that now, and every second they talked here in the shadows there was the chance that some Tokyoite would let his cat out, see a Japanese national talking to a gaijin, and make note of it. The paranoia curve had risen fast, and would only get steeper.

"Okay, you say so, man."

"And don't forget it. Stick to your regular routine. Don't change anything except maybe to back off some. Fit in. Act like everybody else does. A nail that sticks up gets hammered down. Hammers hurt, boy. Now, here's what I want you to do." Clark went on for a minute. "Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get lost." Clark headed down the alley, and entered his hotel through the delivery entrance, thankfully unwatched at this time of night. Thank God, he thought, that Tokyo had so little crime. The American equivalent would be locked, or have an alarm, or be patrolled by an armed guard. Even at war, Tokyo was a safer place than Washington, D.C.

"Why don't you just buy a bottle instead of going out to drink?" "Chekov" asked, not for the first time, when he came back into the room.

"Maybe I should." Which reply made the younger officer's eyes jerk up from his paper and his Russian practice. Clark pointed to the TV, turned it on, and found CNN Headline News, in English.

Now for my next trick. How the hell do I get the word in? he wondered. He didn't dare use the fax machine to America. Even the Washington Interfax office was far too grave a risk, the one in Moscow didn't have the encryption gear needed, and he couldn't go through the Embassy's CIA connection either. There was one set of rules for operating in a friendly country, and another for a hostile one, and nobody had expected the rules that made the rules to change without warning. That he and other CIA officers should have provided forewarning of the event was just one more thing to anger the experienced spy; the congressional hearings on that one were sure to be entertaining if he lived long enough to enjoy them. The only good news was that he had the

name of a probable suspect in the murder of Kimberly Norton. That, at least, gave him something to fantasize about, and his mind had little other useful activity to undertake at the moment. At the half-hour it was clear that even CNN didn't know what was going on, and if CNN didn't know, then nobody did. Wasn't that just great, Clark thought. It was like the legend of Cassandra, the daughter of King Priam of Troy who always knew what was happening, and who was always ignored. But Clark didn't even have a way of getting the word out . . . did he?

I wonder if . . . ? No. He shook his head. That was too crazy.

"All ahead full," the Commanding Officer of *Eisenhower* said.

"All ahead full, aye," the quartermaster on the enunciator pushed the handles forward. A moment later the inner arrow rotated to the same position. "Sir, engine room answers all ahead full."

"Very well." The CO looked over at Admiral Dubro. "Care to lay any bets, sir?"

The best information, oddly enough, came from sonar. Two of the battle group's escorts had their towed-array sonars, called "tails," streamed, and their data, combined with that of two nuclear submarines to the formation's starboard, indicated that the Indian formation was a good way off to the south. It was one of those odd instances, more common than one might expect, where sonar far outperformed radar, whose electronic waves were limited by the curve of the earth, while sound waves found their own deep channels. The Indian fleet was over a hundred fifty miles away, and though that was spitting distance for jet attack aircraft, the Indians were looking to their south, not the north, and it further appeared that Admiral Chandraskatta didn't relish night-flight operations and the risks they entailed for his limited collection of Harriers. Well, both men thought, night landings on a carrier weren't exactly fun.

"Better than even," Admiral Dubro replied after a moment's analysis.

"I think you're right."

The formation was blacked out, not an unusual circumstance for warships, all its radars turned off, and the only radios in use were line-of-sight units with burst-transmission capability, which broadcast for hundredths of seconds only. Even satellite sets generated side-lobes that could betray their position, and their covert passage south of Sri Lanka was essential.

"World War Two was like this," the CO went on, giving voice to his nerves. They were depending on the most human of fundamentals. Extra lookouts had been posted, who used both regular binoculars and "night-eye" electronic devices to sweep the horizon for silhouettes and masttops, while others on lower decks looked closer in for the telltale "feather" of a submarine periscope. The Indians had two submarines out on which Dubro did not have even an approximate location. They were probably probing south, too, but if Chandraskatta was really as smart as he feared, he would have left one close in, just as insurance. Maybe. Dubro's deception operation had been a skillful one.

"Admiral?" Dubro's head turned. It was a signalman. "FLASH Traffic from

CINCPAC." The petty officer handed over the clipboard and held a red-covered flashlight over the dispatch so that the battle-group commander could read it.

"Did you acknowledge receipt?" the Admiral asked before he started reading.

"No, sir, you left orders to chimp everything down."

"Very good, sailor." Dubro started reading. In a second he was holding both the clipboard and the flashlight. "Son of a bitch!"

Special Agent Robberton would drive Cathy home, and with that notification, Ryan again became a government functionary rather than a human being with a wife and family. It was a short walk to Marine One, its rotor already turning. President and Mrs. Durling, JUMPER and Jasmine, had done the requisite smiles for the cameras and had used the opportunity of the long flight to beg off answering any questions. Ryan trailed behind like some sort of equerry.

"Take an hour to get caught up," Durling said as the helicopter landed on the south lawn of the White House. "When is the Ambassador scheduled in?"

"Eleven-thirty," Brett Hanson replied.

"I want you, Arnie, and Jack there for the meeting."

"Yes, Mr. President," the Secretary of State acknowledged.

The usual photographers were there, but most of the White House reporters whose shouted questions so annoyed everyone were still back at Andrews collecting their bags. Inside the ground-floor entrance was a larger contingent of Secret Service agents than normal. Ryan headed west and was in his office two minutes later, shedding his coat and sitting down at a desk already decorated with call slips. Those he ignored for the moment, as he lifted the phone and dialed CIA.

"DDO, welcome back, Jack," Mary Pat Foley said. Ryan didn't bother asking how she knew it was him. Not that many had her direct line.

"How bad?"

"Our embassy personnel are safe. The embassy has not as yet been entered, and we're destroying everything." Station Tokyo, as all CIA stations had become in the last ten years, was completely electronic now. Destroying files was a question of seconds and left no telltale smoke. "Ought to be done by now." The procedure was straightforward. The various computer disks were erased, reformatted, erased again, then subjected to powerful hand-held magnets. The bad news was that some of the data was irreplaceable, though not so much so as the people who had generated it. There was now a total of three "illegals" in Tokyo, the net human-intelligence assets of the United States in what was—probably—an enemy country.

"What else?"

"They're letting people travel back and forth to their homes, with escort. Actually they're playing it pretty cool," Mrs. Foley said, her surprise not showing. "It's not like Teheran in '79, anyway. For communications they're letting us use satellite links so far, but those are being electronically monitored. The embassy has one STU-6 operating. The rest have been deactivated. We still have TAPDANCE capability, too," she finished, mentioning the random-pad cipher that all embassies now used through the

National Security Agency's communications net.

"Other assets?" Ryan asked, hoping that his own secure line was not compromised, but using cover procedure even so.

"Without the legals they're pretty much cut off." The worry in her voice was clear with that answer, along with quite a bit of self-reproach. The Agency still had operations in quite a few countries that did not absolutely require embassy personnel as part of the loop. But Japan wasn't one of them, and even Mary Pat couldn't make hindsight retroactive.

"Do they even know what's going on?" It was an astute question, the Deputy Director (Operations) thought, and another needle in her flesh.

"Unknown," Mrs. Foley admitted. "They didn't get any word to us. They either do not know or have been compromised." Which was a nicer way of saying arrested.

"Other stations?"

"Jack, we got caught with our knickers down, and that's a fact." For all the grief that it had to cause her, Ryan heard, she was reporting facts like a surgeon on the OR. What a shame that Congress would grill her unmercifully for the intelligence lapse. "I have people in Seoul and Beijing shaking the bushes, but I don't expect anything back from them for hours."

Ryan was rummaging through his pink call sheets. "I have one here, an hour old, from Golovko . . ."

"Hell, call the bastard," Mary Pat said at once. "Let me know what he says."

"Will do." Jack shook his head, remembering what the two men had talked about. "Get down here fast. Bring Ed. I need a gut call on something but not over the phone."

"Be there in thirty," Mrs. Foley said.

Jack spread out several faxes on his desk, and scanned them quickly. The Pentagon's operations people had been faster than the other agencies, but now DIA was checking in, quickly followed by State. The government was awake—nothing like gunfire to accomplish that, Jack thought wryly—but the data was mainly repetitive, different agencies learning the same thing at different times and reporting in as though it were new. He flipped through the call sheets again, and clearly the majority of them would say the same thing. His eyes came back to the one from the chairman of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service. Jack lifted the phone and made the call, wondering which of the phones on Golovko's desk would ring. He took out a scratch pad, noting the time. The Signals Office would take note of the call, of course, and tape it. but he wanted to keep his own notes.

"Hello, Jack."

"Your private line, Sergey Nikolay'ch?"

"For an old friend, why not?" The Russian paused, ending the joviality for the day. "I presume you know."

"Oh, yeah." Ryan thought for a moment before going on. "We were caught by surprise," he admitted. Jack heard a very Russian grunt of sympathy.

"So were we. Completely. Do you have any idea what the madmen are up to?" the RVS Chairman asked, his voice a mixture of anger and concern.

"No, I see nothing at the moment that makes any sense at all." And perhaps that was the most worrying part of all.

"What plans do you have?"

"Right now? None," Ryan said. "Their ambassador is due here in less than an hour."

"Splendid timing on his part," the Russian commented. "They've done this to you before, if memory serves."

"And to you," Ryan said, remembering how the Russo-Japanese War had begun. *They do like their surprises.*

"Yes, Ryan, and to us." And *that*, Jack knew, was why Sergey had made the call, and why his voice showed genuine concern. Fear of the unknown wasn't limited to children, after all, was it? "Can you tell me what sort of assets you have in place to deal with the crisis?"

"I'm not sure at the moment, Sergey," Ryan lied. "If your Washington *rezidentura* is up to speed, you know I just got in. I need time to get caught up. Mary Pat is on her way down to my office now."

"Ah," Jack heard over the line. Well, it was an obvious lie he'd told, and Sergey was a wise old pro, wise enough to know. "You were very foolish not to have activated THISTLE sooner, my friend."

"This is an open line, Sergey Nikolay'ch." Which was partially true. The phone call was routed through the American Embassy in Moscow on a secure circuit, but from there on it was a standard commercial line, probably, and therefore subject to possible bugging.

"You need not be overly concerned, Ivan Emmetovich. Do you recall our conversation in my office?"

Oh, yeah. Maybe the Russians really did have the Japanese counterintelligence chief under their control. If so, he was in a position to know if the phone call was secure or not. And if so, there were some other cards in his hand. Nice ones. Was he offering Ryan a peek?

Think fast, Jack, Ryan commanded himself. *Okay, the Russians have another network up and running . . .*

"Sergey, this is important: you did not have any warning?"

"Jack, on my honor as a spy"—Ryan could almost hear the twisted smile that must be framing the answer—"I just had to tell my President that I was caught with my fly unbuttoned, and the embarrassment to me is even greater than what—"

Jack didn't bother listening to the embroidery. *Okay.* The Russians *did* have another spy network operating in Japan, but they had probably not received any warning either, had they? No, the danger from that sort of double-dealing was just too great. Next fact: their second network was inside the Japanese government itself; had to be if they had PSID penetrated. But THISTLE was mainly a *commercial* spy net—always had been—and Sergey had just told him that the U.S. had been foolish not to have activated it sooner. The novelty of what he knew distracted Jack from a more subtle implication surrounding the admission of fault from Moscow.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, I'm short of time here. You are building to something. What is it?"

"I propose cooperation between us. I have the approval of President Grushavoy to make the offer." He didn't say *full* cooperation, Jack noted, but the offer was startling even so.

Never, not ever, not once except in bad movies had KGB and CIA really cooperated on anything important. Sure, the world had changed plenty, but KGB, even in its new incarnation, still worked to penetrate American institutions and remained good at it. That was why you didn't let them in. But he'd just made the offer anyway. Why?

The Russians are scared. Of what?

"I will present that to my President after consulting with Mary Pat." Ryan wasn't yet sure how he would present it. Golovko, however, knew the value of what he'd just laid on the American's desk. It would not require much insight to speculate on the probable reply.

Again, Ryan could hear the smile. "If Foleyeva does not agree, I will be most surprised. I will be in my office for a few more hours."

"So will I. Thanks, Sergey."

"Good day, Dr. Ryan."

"Well, that sounded interesting," Robby Jackson said in the doorway. "Looks like you had a long night, too."

"In an airplane, yet. Coffee?" Jack asked.

The Admiral shook his head. "One more cup and I might shake apart." He came in and sat down.

"Bad?"

"And getting worse. We're still trying to tally how many uniformed people we have in Japan—there are some transients. An hour ago a C-141 landed at Yakota and promptly went off the air. The goddamned thing just headed right in," Robby said. "Maybe a radio problem, more likely they didn't have the gas to go anywhere else. Flight crew of four, maybe five—I forget. State is trying to run a tally for how many businessmen are there. It ought to generate an approximate numbers, but there are tourists to consider also."

"Hostages." Ryan frowned.

The Admiral nodded. "Figure the ten thousand as a floor figure."

"The two subs?"

Jackson shook his head. "Dead, no survivors. *Stennis* has recovered her airplane and is heading for Pearl at about twelve knots. *Enterprise* is trying to make turns on one shaft, and is under tow, she's making maybe six. Maybe none if the engine damage is as bad as the CO told us. They've sent a big salvage tug to help with that. We've sent some P-3s to Midway to do antisubmarine patrols. If I were the other side, I'd try to finish them off. *Johnnie Reb* ought to be okay, but *Big-E* is a hell of a ripe target. CINCPAC is worried about that. We're out of the power-projection business, Jack."

"Guam?"

"All the Marianas are off the air, except for one thing." Jackson explained about Oreza. "All he tells us is how bad things are."

"Recommendations?"

"I have people looking at some ideas, but for starters we need to know if the President wants us to try. Will he?" Robby asked.

"Their ambassador will be here soon."

"Good of him. You didn't answer my question, Dr. Ryan."

"I don't know the answer yet."

"There's a confidence-builder."

For Captain Bud Sanchez the experience was unique. It was not quite a miracle that he'd recovered the S-3 Viking without incident. The "Hoover" was a docile aircraft floating in, and there had been a whole twenty knots of wind over the deck. Now his entire air wing was back aboard, and his aircraft carrier was running away.

Running away. Not heading into harm's way, the creed of the United States Navy, but limping back to Pearl. The five squadrons of fighters and attack aircraft on the deck of *John Stennis* just sat there, lined up in neat rows on the flight deck, all ready for combat operations but except in a really dire emergency unable to take off. It was a question of wind and weight. Carriers turned into the wind to launch and recover aircraft, and needed the most powerful engines placed aboard ships to give the greatest possible airflow over the bow. The moving air added to the takeoff impulse generated by the steam catapults to give lift to the aircraft flung into the air. Their ability to take off was directly governed by that airflow, and more significantly from a tactical point of view, the magnitude of the airflow governed the weight they could carry aloft—which meant fuel and weapons. As it was, he could get airplanes off, but without the gas needed to stay aloft long or to hunt across the ocean for targets, and without the weapons needed to engage those targets. He judged that he had the ability to use fighters to defend the fleet against an air threat out to a radius of perhaps a hundred miles. But there was no air threat, and though they knew the position of the retiring Japanese formations, he did not have the ability to reach them with his attack birds. But then, he didn't have orders to allow him to do it anyway.

Night at sea is supposed to be a beautiful thing, but it was not so this time. The stars and gibbous moon reflected off the calm surface of the ocean, making everyone nervous. There was easily enough light to spot the ships, blackout or not. The only really active aircraft of his wing were the antisubmarine helicopters whose blinking anticollision lights sparkled mainly forward of the carriers, aided also by those of some of *Johnnie Reb*'s escorts. The only good news was that the slow fleet speed made for excellent performance by the sonar systems on the destroyers and frigates, whose large-aperture arrays were streamed out in their wakes. Not too many. The majority of the escorts had lingered behind with *Enterprise*, circling her in two layers like bodyguards for a chief of state, while one of their number, an Aegis cruiser, tried to help her along with a towing wire, increasing her speed of advance to a whole six and a half knots at the moment. Without a good storm over the bow, *Big-E* could not conduct flight operations at all.

Submarines, historically the greatest threat to carriers, might be out there. Pearl Harbor said that they had no contacts at all in the vicinity of the now-divided battle force, but that was an easy thing to say from a shore base. The sonar operators, urged by nervous officers to miss nothing, were instead finding things that weren't there: eddies in the water, echoes of conversing fish, whatever. The nervous state of the formation was manifested by the way a frigate five miles out increased speed and turned sharply left, her sonar undoubtedly pinging away now, probably at nothing more than the excited

imagination of a sonarman third-class who might or might not have heard a whale fart. Maybe two farts, Captain Sanchez thought. One of his own Seahawks was hovering low over the surface, dipping her sonar dome to do her own sniffing. *One thousand three hundred miles back to Pearl Harbor*, Sanchez thought. Twelve knots. That came to four and a half days. Every mile of it under the threat of submarine attack.

The other question was: what genius had thought that pulling back from the Western Pacific had been a good idea? Was the United States a global power or not? Projecting power around the world was important, wasn't it? Certainly it *had* been, Sanchez thought, remembering his classes at the War College. Newport had been his last "tour" prior to undertaking the position of Commander, Air Wing. The U.S. Navy had been the balance of power over the entire world for two generations, able to intimidate merely by existing, merely by letting people see the pictures in their updated copies of *Jane's Fighting Ships*. You could never know where those ships were. You could only count the empty berths in the great naval bases and wonder. Well, there wouldn't be much wondering now. The two biggest graving docks at Pearl Harbor would be full for some time to come, and if the news of the Marianas was correct, America lacked the mobile firepower to take them back, even if Mike Dubro decided to act like Seventh Cavalry and race back home.

"Hello, Chris, thank you for coming."

The Ambassador would arrive at the White House in only a few minutes. The timing was impossible, but whoever in Tokyo was making decisions had not troubled himself with Nagumo's convenience, the embassy official knew. It was awkward for another reason as well. Ordinarily a city that took little note of foreigners, Washington would soon change, and now for the first time, Nagumo was gaijin.

"Seiji, what the hell happened out there?" Cook asked.

Both men belonged to the University Club, a plush establishment located next door to the Russian Embassy and, boasting one of the best gyms in town, a favored place for a good workout and a quick meal. A Japanese commercial business kept a suite of rooms there, and though they would not be able to use this rendezvous again, for the moment it did guarantee anonymity.

"What have they told you, Chris?"

"That one of your navy ships had a little accident. Jesus, Seiji, aren't things bad enough without that sort of mistake? Weren't the goddamned gas tanks bad enough?" Nagumo took a second before responding. In a way it was good news. The overall events were being kept somewhat secret, as he had predicted and the Ambassador had hoped. He was nervous now, though his demeanor didn't show it.

"Chris, it was not an accident."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there was a battle of sorts. I mean that my country feels itself to be very threatened, and that we have taken certain defensive measures to protect ourselves."

Cook just didn't get it. Though he was part of the State Department's Japan

specialists, he'd not yet been called in for a full briefing and knew only what he'd caught on his car radio, which was thin enough. It was beyond Chris's imagination, Nagumo saw, to consider that his country could be attacked. After all, the Soviets were gone, weren't they? It was gratifying to Seiji Nagumo. Though appalled at the risks that his country was running and ignorant of the reasons for them, he was a patriot. He loved his country as much as any man. He was also part of its culture. He had orders and instructions. Within the confines of his own mind he could rage at them, but he'd decided, simply, that he was a soldier of his country, and that was that. And Cook was the real gaijin, not himself. He kept repeating it to himself.

"Chris, our countries are at war, after a fashion. You pushed us too far. Forgive me, I am not pleased by this, you must understand that."

"wait a minute." Chris Cook shook his head as his face twisted into a very quizzical expression. "You mean war? Real war?"

Nagumo nodded slowly, and spoke in a reasonable, regretful tone. "We have occupied the Mariana Islands. Fortunately this was accomplished without loss of life. The brief encounter between our two navies may have been more serious, but not greatly so. Both sides are now withdrawing away from one another, which is a good thing."

"You've killed our people?"

"Yes, I regret to say, some people may have lost their lives on both sides." Nagumo paused and looked down as though unable to meet his friend's eyes. He'd already seen there the emotions he'd expected. "Please, don't blame me for this, Chris," he went on quietly in a voice clearly under very tight control. "But these things have happened. I had no part in it. Nobody asked me for an opinion. You know what I would have said. You know what I would have counseled." Every word was true and Cook knew it.

"Christ, Seiji, what can we do?" The question was a manifestation of his friendship and support, and as such, very predictable. Also predictably, it gave Nagumo the opening he'd expected and needed.

"We have to find a way to keep things under control. I do not want my country destroyed again. We have to stop this and stop it quickly." Which was his country's objective and therefore his own. "There is no room in the world for this . . . this abomination. There are cooler heads in my country. Goto is a fool. There"—Nagumo threw up his hands—"I have said it. He is a fool. Do we allow our countries to do permanent damage to one another because of fools? What of your Congress, what of that Trent maniac with his Trade *Reform* Act. Look what his *reforms* have brought us to!" He was really into it now. Able to veil his inner feelings, like most diplomats, he was now discovering acting talents made all the more effective by the fact that he really believed in what he was saying. He looked up with tears in his eyes. "Chris, if people like us don't get this thing under control—my God, then what? The work of generations, gone. Your country and mine, both badly hurt, people dead, progress thrown away, and for what? Because fools in my country and yours could not work out difficulties on *trade?* Christopher, you must help me stop this. You must!" Mercenary and traitor or not, Christopher Cook was a diplomat, and his professional creed was to eliminate war. He had to respond, and he did.

"But what can you really do?"

"Chris, you know that my position is really more senior than my post would indicate," Nagumo pointed out. "How else could I have done the things for you to make our friendship what it is?"

Cook nodded. He'd suspected as much.

"I have friends and influence in Tokyo. I need time. I need negotiating space. With those things I can soften our position, give Goto's political opponents something to work with. We have to put that man in the asylum he belongs in—or shoot him yourself. That maniac might destroy my country, Chris! For God's sake, you must help me stop him." The last statement was an entreaty from the heart.

"What the hell can I do, Seiji? I'm just a DASS, remember? A little Indian, and there's a bunch of chiefs."

"You are one of the few people in your State Department who really understand us. They will seek your counsel." A little flattery. Cook nodded.

"Probably. If they're smart," he added. "Scott Adler knows me. We talk."

"If you can tell me what your State Department wants, I can get that information to Tokyo. With luck I can have my people inside the Foreign Ministry propose it first. If we can accomplish that much, then your ideas will appear to be our ideas, and we can more easily accommodate your wishes." It was called *judo,* "the gentle art," and consisted mainly of using an enemy's strength and movements against himself. Nagumo thought he was making a very skillful use of it now. It had to appeal to Cook's vanity that he might be able to manage foreign policy himself through cleverness. It appealed to Nagumo's that he'd thought up this gambit.

Cook's face twisted into disbelief again. "But if we're at war, how the hell will—"

"Goto is not completely mad. We will keep the embassies open as a line of communication. We will offer you a return of the Marianas. I doubt the offer will be completely genuine, but it will be placed on the table as a sign of good faith. There," Seiji said, "I have now betrayed my country." As planned.

"What will be acceptable to your government as an end-game scenario?"

"In my opinion? Full independence for the Northern Marianas; an end to their commonwealth status. For reasons of geography and economics they will fall into our sphere of influence in any case. I think it is a fair compromise. We do own most of the land there," Nagumo reminded his guest. "That is a guess on my part, but a good one."

"What about Guam?"

"As long as it is demilitarized, it remains U.S. territory. Again a guess, but a good one. Time will be necessary for a full resolution of the various issues, but I think we can stop this war before it goes further."

"What if we do not agree?"

"Then many people will die. We are diplomats, Chris. It is our mission in life to prevent that." One more time: "If you can help me, just to let us know what you want us to do so that I can get our side moving in that direction, you and I can end a war, Chris. Please, can you help met?"

"I won't take money for this, Seiji," Cook said by way of a reply.

Amazing. The man had principles after all. So much the better that they

were not accompanied by insight.

The Japanese Ambassador arrived, as instructed, at the East Wing entrance. A White House usher opened the door on the stretch Lexus, and the Marine at the door saluted, not having been told not to. He walked in alone, unaccompanied by a bodyguard, and he passed through the metal detectors without incident, then turned west, past a long corridor including, among other things, the entrance to the President's own movie theater. There were portraits of other presidents, sculptures by Frederic Remington, and other reminders of America's frontier history. The walk itself was intended to give the man a sense of the size of the country to which he represented his own. A trio of Secret Service agents escorted him up to the State Floor of the building, an area he knew well, then farther west to the wing from which the United States was administered. The looks, he saw, were not unfriendly, merely correct, but that was quite different from the cordiality he ordinarily received in this building. As a final touch, the meeting was held in the Roosevelt Room. It held the Nobel Prize won by Theodore for negotiating the end of the Russo-Japanese War.

If the mode of arrival was supposed to overawe him, the Ambassador thought, then the final act was counterproductive. The Americans, and others, were known for such foolish theatrics. The Indian Treaty Room in the adjacent Old Executive Office Building had been designed to overawe savages. This one reminded him of his country's first major conflict, which had raised Japan to the ranks of the great nations by the defeat of another member of that club, czarist Russia, a country far less great than she had appeared, internally corrupt, strewn with dissension, given to posturing and bluster. Much like America, in fact, the Ambassador thought. He needed such ideas right now to keep his knees from trembling. President Durling was standing, and took his hand.

"Mr. Ambassador, you know everyone here. Please be seated."

"Thank you, Mr. President, and thank you for receiving me on such short and urgent notice." He looked around the conference table as Durling went to his seat at the opposite end, nodding to each of them. Brett Hanson, Secretary of State; Arnold van Damm, the Chief of Staff; John Ryan, National Security Advisor. The Secretary of Defense was also in the building, he knew, but not here. How interesting. The Ambassador had served many years in Washington, and knew much of Americans. There was anger in the faces of the men seated; though the President controlled his emotions admirably, just like the security people who stood at the doors, his look was that of a soldier. Hanson's anger was outrage. He could not believe that anyone would be so foolish as to threaten his country in any way—he was like a spoiled child resenting a failing grade on an exam from a fair and scrupulous teacher. Van Damm was a politician, and regarded him as a *gaijin*—a curious little man. Ryan showed the least anger of all, though it was there, indicated more in the way he held his pen than in the fixed stare of his blue cat's eyes. The Ambassador had never dealt with Ryan beyond a few chance encounters at state functions. The same was true of most of the embassy staff, and though his background was well

known to all Washington insiders, Ryan was known to be a European specialist and therefore ignorant of Japan. That was good, the Ambassador thought. Were he more knowledgeable, he might be a dangerous enemy.

"Mr. Ambassador, you requested this meeting," Hanson said. "We will let you begin."

Ryan endured the opening statement. It was lengthy and prepared and predictable, what any country would say under these circumstances, added to which was a little national spice. It wasn't their fault; they'd been pushed, treated as lowly vassals despite years of faithful and productive friendship. They, too, regretted this situation. And so forth. It was just diplomatic embroidery, and Jack let his eyes do the work while his ears filtered out the noise.

More interesting was the demeanor of the speaker. Diplomats in friendly circumstances tended to the florid, and in hostile, they droned, as though embarrassed to speak their words. Not this time. The Japanese Ambassador showed overt strength that spoke of pride in his country and her actions. Not quite defiant, but not embarrassed either. Even the German ambassador who'd given word of Hitler's invasion to Molotov had shown grief, Jack remembered.

For his part, the President listened impassively, letting Arnie show the anger and Hanson show the shock, Jack saw. Good for him.

"Mr. Ambassador, war with the United States of America is not a trivial thing," the Secretary of State said when the opening statement was concluded.

The Ambassador didn't flinch. "It is only a war if you wish it to be. We do not have the desire to destroy your country, but we do have our own security interests." He went on to state his country's position on the Marianas. They'd been Japanese territory before, and now they were again. His country had a right to its own defensive perimeter. And that, he said, was that.

"You do know," Hanson said, "that we have the ability to destroy your country?"

A nod. "Yes, I do. We well remember your use of nuclear weapons on our country."

Jack's eyes opened a little wider at that answer. On his pad he wrote, *nukes?*

"You have something else to say," Durling observed, entering the conversation.

"Mr. President—my country also has nuclear arms."

"Delivered how?" Arnie asked with a snort. Ryan blessed him silently for the question. There were times when an ass had his place.

"My country has a number of nuclear-tipped intercontinental missiles. Your own people have seen the assembly plant. You can check with NASA if you wish." The Ambassador read off the name and the dates in a very matter-of-fact way, noting that Ryan took them down like a good functionary. The room became so quiet that he could hear the scratching of the man's pen. More interesting still were the looks on the other faces.

"Do you threaten us?" Durling asked quietly.

The Ambassador looked straight into the man's eyes, twenty feet away. "No, Mr. President, I do not. I merely state a fact. I say again, this is a war only if you wish it so. Yes, we know you can destroy us if you wish, and we cannot destroy you, though we can cause you great harm. Over what, Mr. President?

A few small islands that are historically our possessions anyway? They have been Japanese in all but name for years now."

"And the people you killed?" van Damm asked.

"I regret that sincerely. We will of course offer compensation to the families. It is our hope that we can conclude matters. We will not disturb your embassy or its personnel, and we hope that you will grant us the same courtesy, to maintain communications between our governments. Is it so hard," he asked, "to think of us as equals? Why did you feel the need to hurt us? There was a time when a single airplane crash, due to a mistake made by your people at Boeing, killed more of my citizens than the number of American lives lost in the Pacific. Did we scream at you? Did we threaten your economic security, your very national survival? No. We did not. The time has come for my country to take her place in the world. You've withdrawn from the Western Pacific. We must now look to our own defenses. To do that we need what we need. How can we be sure that, having crippled our nation in economic terms, you will not at some later time seek to destroy us physically?"

"We would never do that!" Hanson objected.

"Easily said, Mr. Secretary. You did it once before, and as you yourself just pointed out, you retain that ability."

"We didn't start that war," van Damm pointed out.

"You did not?" the Ambassador asked. "By cutting off our oil and trade, you faced us with ruin, and a war resulted. Just last month you threw our economy into chaos, and you expected us to do nothing—because we had not the ability to defend ourselves. Well, we do have that ability," the Ambassador said. "Perhaps now we can treat as equals.

"So far as my government is concerned, the conflict is over. We will take no further action against Americans. Your citizens are welcome in my country. We will amend our trade practices to accommodate your laws. This entire incident could be presented to your public as an unfortunate accident, and we can reach an agreement between ourselves on the Marianas. We stand ready to negotiate a settlement that will serve the needs of your country and of mine. That is the position of my government." With that, the Ambassador opened his portfolio and extracted the "note" which the rules of international behavior required. He rose and handed it to the Secretary of State.

"If you require my presence, I stand at your service. Good day." He walked back to the door, past the National Security Advisor, who didn't follow the Ambassador with his eyes as the others did. Ryan had said nothing at all. That might have been disturbing in a Japanese, but not in an American, really. He'd simply had nothing to say. Well, he was a European specialist, wasn't he?

The door closed and Ryan waited another few seconds before speaking.

"Well, that was interesting," Ryan observed, checking his page of notes. "He only told us one thing of real importance."

"What do you mean?" Hanson demanded.

"Nuclear weapons and the delivery systems. The rest was embroidery, really meant for a different audience. We still don't know what they're really doing."

25

All the king's Horses

It hadn't made the media yet, but that was about to change. The FBI was already looking for Chuck Searls. They already knew that it wouldn't be easy, and the truth of the matter is that all they could do, on the basis of what they had, was to question him. The six programmers who'd worked to some greater or lesser extent on the Electra-Clerk 2.4.0 program had all been interviewed, and all of them denied knowledge of what they all referred to as the "Easter Egg," in every case with a mixture of outrage at what had been done and admiration at how. Only three widely separated lines of code, and it had taken all six of them working together twenty-seven hours to find it. Then had come the really bad news: all six of them, plus Searls, had had access to the raw program. They were, after all, the six senior programmers at the firm, and like people with identical security clearances, each could access it whenever he or she wished, up to the very moment that it left the office on the toaster-disk. In addition, while there were records of access, each of them also had the ability to fiddle the coding on the master computer and either erase the access-time reference or mix it with the others. For that matter, the Easter Egg could have been in there for the months it had taken to perfect the program, so finely crafted it was. Finally, one of them admitted quite freely, any of them could have done it. There were no fingerprints on computer programs. Of greater importance for the moment, there was no way of undoing what Electra-Clerk 2.4.0 had done.

What it had done was sufficiently ghastly that the FBI agents on the case were joking grimly that the advent of sealed thermopane windows in Wall Street office buildings was probably saving thousands of lives. The last identifiable trade had been put up at 12:00:00, and beginning at 12:00:01, all the records were gobbledygook. Literally billions—in fact, hundreds of billions of dollars in transactions had disappeared, lost in the computer-tape records of the Depository Trust Company.

The word had not yet gotten out. The event was still a secret, a tactic first suggested by the senior executives of DTC, and so far approved by both the governors of the Securities and Exchange Commission and the New York Stock Exchange. They'd had to explain the reasons for it to the FBI. In addition to all the money lost in a crash such as had taken place on Friday, there would also have been quite a bit of money made through "puts," the name for derivative trades used by many brokers as hedges, and a means that allowed profit on a *falling* market. In addition, every house kept its own records of trades, and therefore, theoretically, it was possible over time to reconstruct everything that had been erased by the Easter Egg. But if word of the DTC disaster got

out, it was possible that unscrupulous or merely desperate traders would fiddle their own records. It was unlikely in the case of the larger houses, but virtually inevitable in the case of smaller ones, and such manipulation would be nearly impossible to prove—a classic case of one person's word against another's, the worst sort of criminal evidence. Even the biggest and most honorable trading houses had their miscreants, either real or potential. There was just too much money involved, further complicated by the ethical duty of traders to safeguard the money of their clients.

For that reason, over two hundred agents had visited the offices and homes of the chief executive officers of every trading establishment within a hundred-mile radius of New York. It was a feat easier than most had feared, since many of the executives were using their weekend as a frantic work period, and in most cases they cooperated, turning over their own computerized records. It was estimated that 80 percent of the trades that had taken place after noon Friday were now in the possession of federal authorities. That was the easy part. The hard part, the agents had just learned, would be to analyze them, to connect the trade made by every house with the corresponding trade of every other. As irony would have it, a programmer from Searls' company had, without prompting, sketched out the minimum requirements for the task: a high-end workstation for every company-set of records, integrated through yet another powerful mainframe no smaller than a Cray Y-MP (there was one at CIA, and three more at NSA, he told them), along with a very slick custom program. There were thousands of traders and institutions, some of whom had executed millions of transactions. The permutations, he'd said to the two agents who were able to keep up with his fast-forward discourse, were probably on the order of ten to the sixteenth power . . . maybe eighteenth. The latter number, he'd had to explain, was a million cubed, a million times a million *times* a million. A very large number. Oh, one other thing: they'd better be damned sure that they had the records of every house and every trade or the whole thing could fall apart. Time required to resolve all the trades? He'd been unwilling to speculate on that, which didn't please the agents who had to return to their office in the Javits Federal Office Building and explain all this to their boss, who refused even to use his office computer to type letters. The term *Mission: IMPOSSIBLE* came to their minds on the short drive back to their offices.

And yet it had to be done. It wasn't just a matter of stock trades, after all. Each transaction had also held a monetary value, real money that had changed electronic hands, moving from one account to another, and though electronic, the complex flow of money had to be accounted for. Until all of the transactions were resolved, the amount of money in the account of every trading house, every institution, every bank, and ultimately every private citizen in America—even those who did not play the market—could not be known. In addition to paralyzing Wall Street, the entire American banking system was now frozen in place, a conclusion that had been reached about the time that Air Force One had touched down at Andrews Air Force Base.

"Oh, shit," commented the Deputy Director in Charge of the New York Field Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In this he was more articulate than investigators from other federal agencies who were using his northwest-

corner office as a conference room. The others mainly just looked at the cheap carpet on the floor and gulped.

The situation had to get worse, and it did. One of the DTC employees told the tale to a neighbor, an attorney, who told someone else, a reporter, who made a few phone calls and drafted a story for *The New York Times*. That flagship paper called the Secretary of the Treasury who, just back from Moscow and not yet briefed on the magnitude of the situation, declined to comment but forgot to ask the *Times* to demur. Before he could correct that mistake, the story was set up to run.

Secretary of the Treasury Bosley Fiedler practically ran through the tunnel connecting the Treasury Building with the White House. Not a man accustomed to strenuous exercise, he was puffing hard when he made it into the Roosevelt Room, just missing the departure of the Japanese Ambassador.

"What is it, Buzz?" President Durling asked.

Fiedler caught his breath and gave a five-minute summary of what he'd just learned via teleconference with New York. "We can't let the markets open," he concluded. "I mean, they *can't* open. Nobody can trade. Nobody knows how much money they have. Nobody knows who owns what. And the banks . . . Mr. President, we have a major problem here. Nothing even remotely like this has ever happened before."

"Buzz, it's just money, right?" Arnie van Damm asked, wondering why it all had to happen in one day after what had been a rather pleasant few months.

"No, it's not just money." Heads turned because Ryan was the one who answered the question. "It's confidence. Buzz here wrote a book about that back when I was working for Merrill Lynch." Perhaps a friendly reference would steady the man down some, he thought.

"Thank you, Jack." Fiedler sat down and sipped a glass of water. "Use the 1929 crash as an example. What was really lost? The answer in monetary terms is, nothing. A lot of investors lost their shirts, and margin calls made it all worse, but what people don't often grasp is that the money they lost was money already given to others."

"I don't understand," Arnie said.

"Nobody really does. It's one of those things that's too simple. In the market people expect complexity, and they forget the forest is made up of individual trees. Every investor who lost money first *gave* his money to another trader, in return for which he received a stock certificate. He traded money for something of value, but that something of value fell, and that's what the crash was. *But* the first guy, the guy who gave the certificate and got the money *before the crash*—notionally he did the smart thing, he didn't lose anything, did he? Therefore the amount of money out in the economy in 1929 *did not change at all.*"

"Money doesn't just evaporate, Arnie," Ryan explained. "It goes from one place to another place. It doesn't just go away. The Federal Reserve Bank controls that." It was clear, however, that van Damm didn't understand.

"But then, why the *hell* did the Great Depression happen?"

"Confidence," Fiedler replied. "A huge number of people really got slammed

in ’29 because of margin calls. They bought stock while putting up an amount less than the value of the transaction. Today we call that sort of thing leveraging. Then they were unable to cover their exposure when they had to sell off. The banks and other institutions took a huge beating because they had to cover the margins. You ended up with a lot of little people who were left with nothing but debts they couldn’t begin to pay back, and banks who were cash-short. Under those circumstances people stop doing things. They’re *afraid* to risk what they have left. The people who got out in time and still have money—the ones who have not actually been hurt—they see what the rest of the economy is like and do nothing also, they just sit tight because it simply looks scary out there. *That*’s the problem, Arnie.

“You see, what makes an economy isn’t wealth, but the *use* of wealth, all the transactions that occur every day, from the kid who cuts your grass for a buck to a major corporate acquisition. If that stops, everything stops.” Ryan nodded approval to Fiedler. It was a superb little lecture.

“I’m still not sure I get it,” the chief of staff said. The President was still listening.

My turn. Ryan shook his head. “Not many people get it. Like Buzz said, it’s too simple. You look for activity, not inactivity, as an indication of a trend, but inactivity is the real danger here. If I decide to sit still and do nothing, then my money doesn’t circulate. I don’t buy things, and the people who make the things I would have bought are out of work. That’s a frightening thing to them, and to their neighbors. The neighbors get so scared that they hold on to their money—why spend it when they might need it to eat when they lose *their* jobs, right? And on, and on, and on. We have a real problem here, guys,” Jack concluded. “Monday morning the bankers are going to find out that they don’t know what they have, either. The banking crisis didn’t really start until 1932, well after the stock market came unglued. Not this time.”

“How bad?” The President asked this question.

“I don’t know,” Fiedler replied. “It’s never happened before.”

“ ‘I don’t know’ doesn’t cut it, Buzz,” Durling said.

“Would you prefer a lie?” the Secretary of the Treasury asked. “We need the chairman of the Fed in here. We’re facing a lot of problems. The first big one is a liquidity crisis of unprecedented proportions.”

“Not to mention a shooting war,” Ryan pointed out for those who might have forgotten.

“Which is the more serious?” President Durling asked.

Ryan thought about it for a second. “In terms of real net harm to our country? We have two submarines sunk, figure about two hundred fifty sailors dead. Two carriers crippled. They can be fixed. The Marianas are under new ownership. Those are all bad things,” Jack said in a measured voice, thinking as he spoke. “But they do not genuinely affect our national security because they do not pertain to the real strength of our country. America is a shared idea. We’re people who think in a certain way, who believe that they can do the things they want to do. Everything else follows from that. It’s confidence, optimism, the one thing that other countries find so strange about us. If you take that away, hell, we’re no different from anybody else. The short answer to your question, Mr. President, is that the economic problem is far more

dangerous to us than what the Japs just did."

"You surprise me, Jack," Durling said.

"Sir, like Buzz said, would you prefer a lie?"

"What the hell is the problem?" Ron Jones asked. The sun was already up, and USS *Pasadena* was visible, still tied to her pier, the national ensign hanging forlornly in the still air. A fighting ship of the United States Navy was doing nothing at all, and the son of his mentor was dead at the hands of an enemy. Why wasn't anyone doing something about it?

"She doesn't have orders," Mancuso said, "because I don't have orders, because CINCPAC doesn't have orders, because National Command Authority hasn't issued any orders."

"They awake there?"

"SecDef's supposed to be in the White House now. The President's been briefed in by now, probably," ComSubPac thought.

"But he can't get his thumb out," Jones observed.

"He's the President, Ron. We do what he says."

"Yeah, like Johnson sent my dad to Vietnam." Jones turned to look at the wall chart. By the end of the day the Japanese surface ships would be out of range for the carriers, which couldn't launch strikes anyway. USS *Gary* had concluded her search for survivors, mainly out of fear of lingering Japanese submarines out there, but for all the world looking as though she'd been chased off the site by a Coast Guard cutter. The intelligence they did have was based on satellite information because it hadn't been thought prudent even to send a P-3C out to shadow the surface force, much less prosecute the submarine contacts. "First out of harm's way, eh?"

Mancuso decided not to get angry this time. He was a flag officer and paid to think like one. "One thing at a time. Our most important assets at risk are those two carriers. We have to get 'em in, and we have to get 'em fixed. Wally is planning operations right now. We have to gather intelligence, think it over, and then decide what we can do."

"And then see if he'll let us?"

Mancuso nodded. "That's how the system works."

"Great."

The dawn was pleasing indeed. Sitting on the upper deck of the 747, Yamata had taken a window seat on the portside, looking out the window and ignoring the buzz of conversation around him. He had scarcely slept in three days and still the rush of power and elation filled him like a flood. This was the last prescheduled flight in. Mainly administrative personnel, along with some engineers and civilians who would start to put the new government in place. The bureaucrats with that task had been fairly clever in their way. Of course, everyone on Saipan would have a vote, and the elections would be subject to international scrutiny, a political necessity. There were about twenty-nine thousand local citizens, but that didn't count Japanese, many of

whom now owned land, homes, and business enterprises. Nor did it count soldiers, and others staying in hotels. The hotels—the largest were Japanese-owned, of course—would be considered condominiums, and all those in the condo units, residents. As Japanese citizens they each had a vote. The soldiers were citizens as well, and also had the franchise, and since their garrison status was indeterminate, they were also considered residents. Between the soldiers and the civilians, there were thirty-one thousand Japanese on the island, and when elections were held, well, his countrymen were assiduous in making use of their civil rights, weren't they? *International scrutiny,* he thought, staring out to the east, *be damned.*

It was especially pleasing to watch from thirty-seven thousand feet the first muted glow on the horizon, which seemed much like a garnish for a bouquet of still-visible stars. The glow brightened and expanded, from purple to deep red, to pink, to orange, and then the first sliver of the face of the sun, not yet visible on the black sea below, and it was as though the sunrise were for him alone, Yamata thought, long before the lower people got to enjoy and savor it. The aircraft turned slightly to the right, beginning its descent. The downward path through the early-morning air was perfectly timed, seeming to hold the sun in place all the way down, just the yellow-white sliver, preserving the magical moment for several minutes. The sheer glory moved Yamata nearly to tears. He still remembered the faces of his parents, their modest home on Saipan. His father had been a minor and not terribly prosperous merchant, mainly selling trinkets and notions to the soldiers who garrisoned the island. His father had always been very polite to them, Raizo remembered, smiling, bowing, accepting their rough jokes about his polio-shriveled leg. The boy who had watched thought it normal to be deferential to men carrying arms, wearing his nation's uniform. He'd learned different since, of course. They were merely servants. Whether they carried on the samurai tradition or not—the very word *samurai* was a derivation of the verb "to serve," he reminded himself, clearly implying a master, no?—it was they who looked after and protected their betters, and it was their betters who hired them and paid them and told them what to do. It was necessary to treat them with greater respect than they really deserved, but the odd thing was that the higher they went in rank, the better they understood what their place really was.

"We will touch down in five minutes," a colonel told him.

"Dozo." A nod rather than a bow, because he was sitting down, but even so the nod was a measured one, precisely of the sort to acknowledge the service of an underling, showing him both politeness and superiority in the same pleasant gesture. In time, if this colonel was a good one and gained general's rank, then the nod would change, and if he proceeded further, then someday, if he were lucky, Yamatasan might call his given name in friendship, single him out for a smile and a joke, invite him for a drink, and in his advancement to high command, learn who the master really was. The Colonel probably looked forward to achieving that goal. Yamata buckled his seat belt and smoothed his hair.

Captain Sato was exhausted. He'd just spent far too much time in the air, not merely breaking but shredding the crew-rest rules of his airline, but he, too, could not turn away from his duty. He looked off to the left and saw in

the morning sky the blinking strokes of two fighters, probably F-15s, one of them, perhaps, flown by his son, circling to protect the soil of what was once again their country. *Gently,* he told himself. There were soldiers of his country under his care, and they deserved the best. One hand on the throttles, the other on the wheel, he guided the Boeing airliner down an invisible line in the air toward a point his eyes had already selected. On his command to the copilot, the huge flaps went down all the way. Sato eased back on the yoke, bringing up the nose and flaring the aircraft, letting it settle, floating it in until only the screech of rubber told them that they were on the ground.

"You are a poet," the copilot said, once more impressed by the man's skill.

Sato allowed himself a smile as he engaged reversethrust. "You taxi in." Then he keyed the cabin intercom.

"Welcome to Japan," he told the passengers.

Yamata didn't shout only because the remark surprised him so. He didn't wait for the aircraft to stop before he unbuckled. The door to the flight deck was right there, and he had to say something.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Yamatat-san?"

"You understand, don't you?"

His nod was that of a proud professional, and in that moment one very much akin to the zaibatsu. "*Hai.*" His reward was a bow of the finest sincerity, and it warmed the pilot's heart to see Yamata-san's respect.

The businessman was not in a hurry, not now. The bureaucrats and administrative soldiers worked their way off the aircraft into waiting buses that would take them to the Hotel Nikko Saipan, a large modern establishment located in the center of the island's west coast, which would be the temporary administrative headquarters for the occupa—for the new government, Yamata corrected himself. It took five minutes for all of them to deplane, after which he made his own way off to another Toyota Land Cruiser whose driver, this time, was one of his employees who knew what to do without being told, and knew that this was a moment for Yamata to savor in silence.

He scarcely noticed the activity. Though he'd caused it to happen, it was less important than its anticipation had been. Oh, perhaps a brief smile at the sight of the military vehicles, but the fatigue was real now, and his eyes drooped despite an iron will that commanded them to be bright and wide. The driver had planned the route with care, and managed to avoid the major tieups. Soon they passed the Marianas Country Club again, and though the sun was up, there were no golfers in evidence. There was no military presence either except for two satellite uplink trucks on the edge of the parking lot, newly painted green after having been appropriated from NHK. No, we mustn't harm the golf course, now without a doubt the most expensive single piece of real estate on the island.

It was right about here, Yamata thought, remembering the shape of the hills. His father's rude little store had been close to the north airfield, and he could remember the A6M Type-Zero fighters, the strutting aviators, and the often overbearing soldiers. Over there had been the sugarcane processing plant of Nanyo Kohatsu Kaisha, and he could remember stealing small bits of the cane and chewing on them. And how fair the breezy mornings had been.

Soon they were on his land. Yamata shook off the cobwebs by force of will and stepped out of the car, walking north now.

It was the way his father and mother and brother and sister must have come, and he imagined he could see his father, hobbling on his crippled leg, struggling for the dignity that his childhood disease had always denied him. Had he served the soldiers in those last days, bringing them what useful things he had? Had the soldiers in those last days set aside their crude insults at his physical condition and thanked him with the sincerity of men for whom death was now something seen and felt in its approach? Yamata chose to believe both. And they would have come down this draw, their retreat toward death protected by the last rear-guard action of soldiers in their last moment of perfection.

It was called Banzai Cliff by the locals, Suicide Cliff by the less racist. Yamata would have to have his publicrelations people work on changing the name to something more respectful. July 9, 1944, the day organized resistance ended. The day the Americans had declared the island of Saipan "secure."

There were actually two cliffs, curved and facing inward as though a theater; the taller of them was two hundred forty meters above the surface of the beckoning sea. There were marble columns to mark the spot, built years earlier by Japanese students, shaped to represent children kneeling in prayer. It would have been here that they'd approached the edge, holding hands. He could remember his father's strong hands. Would his brother and sister have been afraid? Probably more disoriented than fearful, he thought, after twentyone days of noise and horror and incomprehension. Mother would have looked at father. A warm, short, round woman whose jolly musical laugh rang again in her son's ears. The soldiers had occasionally been gruff with his father, but never with her. And never with the children. And the last service the soldiers had rendered had been to keep the Americans away from them at that final moment, when they'd stepped off the cliff. Holding hands, Yamata chose to believe, each holding a child in a final loving embrace, proudly refusing to accept captivity at the hands of barbarians, and orphaning their other son. Yamata could close his eyes and see it all, and for the first time the memory and the imagined sight made his body shudder with emotion. He'd never allowed himself anything more than rage before, all the times he'd come here over the years, but now he could truly let the emotions out and weep with pride, for he had repaid his debt of honor to those who had given him birth, and his debt of honor to those who had done them to death. In full.

The driver watched, not knowing but understanding, for he knew the history of this place, and he too was moved to tears as a shaking man of sixty-odd years clapped his hands to call the attention of sleeping relatives. From a hundred meters away, he saw the man's shoulders rack with sobs, and after a time, Yamata lay down on his side, in his business suit, and went to sleep. Perhaps he would dream of them. Perhaps the spirits of whoever it was, the driver thought, would visit him in his sleep and say what things he needed to hear. But the real surprise, the driver thought, was that the old bastard had a soul at all. Perhaps he'd misjudged his boss.

“Damn if they ain’t organized,” Oreza said to himself, looking through his binoculars, the cheap ones he kept in the house.

The living-room window afforded a view of the airports, and the kitchen gave one of the harbor. *Orchid Ace* was long gone, and another car ferry had taken her berth, *Century Highway No. 5,* her name was, and this one was unloading jeep-type vehicles and trucks. Portagee was fairly strung-out, having forced himself to stay up all night. He’d now done twenty-seven hours without sleep, some of them spent working hard on the ocean west of the island. He was too old for that sort of thing, the master chief knew. Burroughs, younger and smarter, had curled up on the living-room rug and was snoring away.

Oreza wished for a cigarette for the first time in years. They were good for staying alert. You just needed them at a time like this. They were what a warrior used—at least that’s what the World War II movies proclaimed. But this wasn’t World War II, and he wasn’t a warrior. For all he’d done in his over thirty years in the United States Coast Guard, he’d never fired a shot in anger, even on his one Vietnam tour. Someone else had always been on the gun. He didn’t know *how* to fight.

“Up all night?” Isabel asked, dressed for her job. It was Monday on this side of the International Dateline, and a workday. She looked down and saw that the pad of note paper usually kept next to the phone was covered with scribbles and numbers. “Does it matter?”

“I don’t know, Izz.”

“Want some breakfast?”

“It can’t hurt,” Pete Burroughs said, stretching as he came into the kitchen. “I think I conked out around three.” A moment’s consideration. “I feel like . . . hell,” he said, in deference to the lady in the room.

“Well, I have to be at my desk in an hour or so,” Mrs. Oreza observed, pulling open the refrigerator. Breakfast in this house consisted of a selection of cold cereals and skim milk, Burroughs saw, along with toast made of the bread baked from straw. Toss in a little fruit, he thought, and he could have been back in San Jose. The coffee he could already smell. He found a cup and poured some.

“Somebody really knows how to do this right.”

“It’s Manni,” Isabel said.

Oreza smiled for the first time in hours. “I learned it from my first chief. The right blend, the right proportions, and a pinch of salt.”

Probably in the dark of the moon and after sacrificing a goat, Burroughs thought. If so, however, the goat had died for a noble cause. He took a long sip and came over to check Oreza’s tally sheet.

“That many?”

“Could be conservative. It’s two flying hours from here to Japan. That’s four on the round-trip. Let’s be generous and say ninety minutes on the ground at each end. Seven-hour cycle. Three and a half trips per airplane per day. Each flight about three hundred, maybe three-fifty soldiers per hop. That means every plane brings in a thousand men. Fifteen airplanes operating over one day, that means a whole division of troops. You suppose the Japs have more than fifteen 747s?” Portagee asked. “Like I said, conservative. Now it’s just a

matter of bringing their mobile equipment in."

"How many ships for that?"

Another frown. "Not sure. During the Persian Gulf War—I was over there then doing port-security work . . . damn. Depends on what ships you use and how you pack them. I'll be conservative again. Twenty large merchant hulls just to ferry in the gear. Trucks, jeeps, all kinds of stuff you'd never think of. It's like moving a cityful of people. They need to resupply fuel. This rock doesn't grow enough food; that has to come in by ship, too, and the population of this place just doubled. The water supply might be stretched." Oreza looked down and made a notation on that. "Anyway, they came to stay. That's for damned sure," he said, heading for the table and his Special K, wishing for three eggs up, bacon, white-bread toast with butter, hashbrowns, and all the cholesterol that went with it. Damn turning fifty!

"What about me?" the engineer asked. "I seen you pass for a local. I sure as hell can't."

"Pete, you're my charter, and I'm the captain, okay? I am responsible for your safety. That's the law of the sea, air."

"We're not at sea anymore," Burroughs pointed out.

Oreza was annoyed by the truth of the observation. "My daughter's the lawyer. I try to keep things simple. Eat your breakfast. I need some sleep, and you have to take over the forenoon watch."

"What about me?" Mrs. Oreza asked.

"If you don't show up for work—"

"—somebody will wonder why."

"It'll be nice to know if they told the truth about the cops who got shot," her husband went on. "I've been up all night, Izz. I haven't heard a single shot. Every crossroads seems to be manned, but they're not doing anything to anybody." He paused. "I don't like it either, honey. One way or another we have to deal with it."

"Did you do it, Ed?" Durling asked bluntly, his eyes boring in on his Vice President. He cursed the man for forcing him to deal with one more problem among the multiple crises hanging over his presidency now. But the *Post* piece gave him no choice.

"Why are you hanging me out to dry? Why didn't you at least *warn* me of this?"

The President waved around the Oval Office. "There are a lot of things you can do in here and there are things you can't do. One of them is to interfere with a criminal investination."

"Don't give me that! A lot of people have—"

"Yeah, and they all paid a price for it, too." *It's not my ass that needs to be covered,* Roger Durling didn't say. *I'm not risking mine for yours*. "You didn't answer my question."

"Look, Roger!" Ed Kealty snarled back. The President stopped him with a raised hand and a quiet voice.

"Ed, I have an economy in meltdown. I have dead sailors in the Pacific Ocean. I can't spare the energy for this. I can't spare the political capital. I

can't spare the time. Answer my question," Durling commanded.

The Vice President flushed, his head snapping to the right before he spoke. "All right, I like women. I've never hidden that from anyone. My wife and I have an understanding." His head came back. "But I have *never, NEVER* molested, assaulted, raped, or forced myself on anybody in my whole fucking life. Never. I don't *have* to."

"Lisa Beringer?" Durling said, consulting his notes for the name.

"She was a sweet thing, very bright, very sincere, and she begged me to—well, you can guess. I explained to her that I couldn't. I was up for reelection that year, and besides she was too young. She deserved somebody her age to marry and give her kids and a good life. She took it hard, started drinking—maybe something else, but I don't think so. Anyway, one night she headed off on the Beltway and lost it, Roger. I was there for the funeral. I still talk with her parents. Well," Kealty said, "not lately, I guess."

"She left a note, a letter behind."

"More than one." Kealty reached into his coat pocket and handed two envelopes over. "I'm surprised nobody noticed the date on the one the FBI has. Ten days before her death. This one is a week later, and this one is the day she was killed. My staff found them. I suppose Barbara Linders found the other one. None were ever mailed. I think you'll find some differences between them, all three, as a matter of fact."

"The Linders girl says that you—"

"Drugged her?" Kealty shook his head. "You know about my drinking problem, you knew it when you asked me in. Yeah, I'm an alcoholic, but I had my last drink two years ago." A crooked smile. "My sex life is even better now. Back to Barbara. She was sick that day, the flu. She went to the pharmacy on the Hill and got a prescription, and—"

"How do you know that?"

"Maybe I keep a diary. Maybe I just have a good memory. Either way, I know the date this happened. Maybe one of my staffers checked the records of the pharmacy, and maybe the medication she took had a label on the bottle, one that says don't drink while using these capsules. I didn't know that, Roger. When I have a cold—well, back then, anyway, I used brandy. Hell," Kealty admitted, "I used booze for a lot of things. So I gave some to her, and she became very cooperative. A little too cooperative, I suppose, but I was half in the bag myself, and I figured it was just my well-known charm."

"So what are you telling me? You're not guilty?"

"You want to say I'm an alley cat, can't keep it zipped? Yeah, I guess so. I've been to priests, to doctors, to a clinic once—covering that up was some task. Finally I went to the head of neuroscience at Harvard Medical School. They think there's a part of the brain that regulates our drives, just a theory, but a good one. It goes along with hyperactivity. I was a hyperactive child. I still don't ever sleep more than six hours a night. Roger, I am all those things, but I am not a rapist."

So there it was, Durling thought. Not a lawyer himself, he had appointed, consulted, and heard enough of them to know what he'd been told. Kealty could defend himself on two grounds: that the evidence against him was more equivocal than the investigators imagined, and that it wasn't really his fault.

The President wondered which of the defenses might be true. Neither? One? Both?

"So what are you going to do?" he asked the Vice President, using much the same voice he'd summoned a few hours earlier for the Ambassador from Japan. He was increasingly sympathetic with the man sitting across from him, in spite of himself. What if the guy really was telling the truth? How could he know—and that was what the jury would say, after all, if it got that far; and if a jury would think that, then what would the Judiciary hearings be like? Kealty still had a lot of markers out on the Hill.

"Somehow I just don't think anyone's going to print up DURLING/KEALTY bumper stickers this summer, right?" The question came with a smile of sorts.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," the President confirmed, cold again. This wasn't a time for humor.

"I don't want to hurt you, Roger. I did two days ago. If you'd warned me, I could have told you these things sooner, saved everybody a lot of time and trouble. Including Barbara. I lost track of her. She's very good on civil-rights stuff, a good head on her, and a good heart. It was only that one time, you know. And she stayed in my office afterwards," Kealty pointed out.

"We've covered that, Ed. Tell me what you want."

"I'll go. I'll resign. I don't get prosecuted."

"Not good enough," Durling said in a neutral voice.

"Oh, I'll admit my weaknesses. I'll apologize to you, honorable public servant that you are, for any harm I might have done to your presidency. My lawyers will meet with their lawyers, and we'll negotiate compensation. I leave public life."

"And if that's not good enough?"

"It will be," Kealty said confidently. "I can't be tried in a court until the constitutional issues are resolved. Months, Roger. All the way to summer, probably, maybe all the way to the convention. You can't afford that. I figure the worst-case scenario for you is, the Judiciary Committee sends the bill of impeachment to the floor of the House, but the House doesn't pass it, or maybe does, narrowly, and then the Senate trial ends up with a hung jury, so to speak. Do you have any idea how many favors I've done there, and in the Senate?" Kealty shook his head. "It's not worth the political risk to you, and it distracts you and Congress from the business of government. You need all the time you have. Hell, you need more than that." Kealty stood and headed toward the door to the President's right, the one that was so perfectly blended into the curved, eggshell-white walls and gold trim. He spoke his final words without turning. "Anyway, it's up to you now."

It angered President Roger Durling that, in the end, the easy way out might be the just way out, as well—but nobody would ever know. They would only know that his final action was politically expedient in a moment of history that demanded political expediency. An economy potentially in ruins, a war just started—he didn't have the time to fool with this. A young woman had died. Others claimed to have been molested. But what if the dead young girl had died for other reasons, and what if the others—*Goddamn it,* he swore in his mind. That was something for a jury to decide. But it had to pass through three separate legal procedures before a jury could decide, and then any

defense lawyer with half a brain could say that a fair trial was impossible anyway after C-SPAN had done its level best to tell the whole world every bit of evidence, tainting everything, and denying Kealty his constitutional right to a fair and impartial trial before disinterested jurors. That ruling was likely enough in a Federal district court trial, and even more so on appeal—and would gain the victims nothing. And what if the bastard actually was, technically speaking, innocent of a crime? An open zipper, distasteful though it was, did not constitute a crime.

And neither he nor the country needed the distraction. Roger Durling buzzed his secretary.

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Get me the Attorney General."

He'd been wrong, Durling thought. Sure, he could interfere with a criminal investigation. He had to. And it was easy. Damn.

26

Catch-up

"He really said that?" Ed Foley leaned forward. It was easier for Mary Pat to grasp it than for her husband.

"Sure enough, and it's all on his honor as a spy," Jack confirmed, quoting the Russian's words.

"I always did like his sense of humor," the DDO said, getting her first laugh of the day, and probably the last. "He's studied us so hard that he's more American than Russian."

Oh, Jack thought, *that's it.* That explained Ed. The opposite was true of him. A Soviet specialist for nearly all of his career, he was more Russian than American. The realization occasioned his own smile.

"Thoughts?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"Jack, it gives them the ID of the only three humint assets we have on the ground over there. Bad joss, man," Edward Foley said.

"That's a consideration," Mary Patricia Foley agreed. "But there's another consideration. Those three assets are cut off. Unless we can communicate with them, they might as well not be there. Jack, how serious is this situation?"

"We are for all practical purposes at war, MP." Jack had already relayed the gist of the meeting with the Ambassador, including his parting comment.

She nodded. "Okay, they're giving a war. Are we going to come?"

"I don't know," Ryan admitted. "We have dead people out there. We have U.S. territory with another flag flying over it right now. But our ability to respond effectively is severely compromised—and we have this little problem at home. Tomorrow the markets and the banking system are going to have to come to terms with some very unpleasant realities."

"Interesting coincidence," Ed noted. He was too old a hand in the intelligence business to believe in coincidences. "What's going to happen with that stuff, Jack? You know a lot about it."

"I don't have a clue, guys. It's going to be bad, but how bad, and how it's going to be bad . . . nobody's been here before. I suppose the good news is that things can't fall further. The bad news is the mentality that goes with the situation will be like a person trapped in a burning building. You may be safe where you are, but you can't get out, either."

"What agencies are looking into things?" Ed Foley asked.

"Just about all of them. The Bureau's the lead agency. It has the most available investigators. The SEC is better suited to it, but they don't have the troops for something this big."

"Jack, in a period of less than twenty-four hours, somebody leaked the news on the Vice President"—he was in the Oval Office right now, they all knew

—"the market went in the crapper, and we had the attack on Pacific Fleet, and you just told us the most harmful thing to us is this economic thing. If I were you, sir—"

"I see your point," Ryan said, cutting Ed off a moment too soon for a complete picture. He made a few notes, wondering how the hell he'd be able to prove anything, as complex as the market situation was. "Is anybody that smart?"

"Lots of smart people in the world, Jack. Not all of them like us." It was very much like talking with Sergey Nikolay'ch, Ryan thought, and like Golovko, Ed Foley was an experienced pro for whom paranoia was always a way of life and often a tangible reality. "But we have something immediate to consider here."

"These are three good officers," Mary Pat said, taking the ball from her husband. "Nomuri's been doing a fine job sliding himself into their society, taking his time, developing a good network of contacts. Clark and Chavez are as good a team of operators as we have. They have good cover identities and they ought to be pretty safe."

"Except for one thing," Jack added.

"What's that?" Ed Foley asked, cutting his wife off.

"The PSID knows they're working."

"Golovko?" Mary Pat asked. Jack nodded soberly. "That son of a bitch," she went on. "You know, they still are the best in the world." Which was not an altogether pleasant admission from the Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"Don't tell me they have the head of Japanese counterintel under their control?" her husband inquired delicately.

"Why not, honey? They do it to everybody else." Which was true. "You know, sometimes I think we ought to hire some of their people just to give lessons." She paused for a second. "We don't have a choice."

"Sergey didn't actually come out and say that, but I don't know how else he could have known. No," Jack agreed with the DDO, "we don't really have any choice at all."

Even Ed saw that now, which was not the same as liking it. "What's the *quid* on this one?"

"They want everything we get out of THISTLE. They're a little concerned about this situation. They were caught by surprise, too, Sergey tells me."

"But they have another network operating there. He told you that, too," MP observed. "And it has to be a good one, too."

"Giving them the 'take' from THISTLE in return for not being hassled is one thing—and a pretty big thing. This goes too far. Did you think this one all the way through, Jack? It means that they'll actually be running our people for us." Ed didn't like that one at all, but on a moment's additional consideration, it was plain that he didn't see an alternative either.

"Interesting circumstances, but Sergey says he was caught with his drawers down. Go figure." Ryan shrugged, wondering yet again how it was possible for three of the best-informed intelligence professionals in his country *not* to be able to understand what was going on.

"A lie on his part?" Ed wondered. "On the face of it, that doesn't make a

whole lot of sense."

"Neither does lying," Mary Pat said. "Oh, I love these *matryoshka* puzzles. Okay, at least we know there are things we don't know yet. That means we have a lot of things to find out, the quicker the better. If we let RVS run our people . . . it's risky, Jack, but—damn, I don't see that we have a choice."

"I tell him yes?" Jack asked. He had to get the President's approval, too, but that would be easier than getting theirs.

The Foleys traded a look and nodded.

An oceangoing commercial tug was located by a helicopter fifty miles from the *Enterprise* formation, and in a remarkable set of circumstances, the frigate Gary took custody of the barge and dispatched the tug to the carrier, where she could relieve the Aegis cruiser, and, by the way, increase *Big-E*'s speed of advance to nine knots. The tug's skipper contemplated the magnitude of the fee he'd garner under the Lloyd's Open Form salvage contract, which the carrier's CO had signed and ferried back by helicopter. The typical court award was 10 to 15 percent of the value of the property salved. A carrier, an air wing, and six thousand people, the tugboat crew thought. What was 10 percent of three billion dollars? Maybe they'd be generous and settle for five.

It was a mixture of the simple and the complex, as always. There were now P-3C Orion patrol aircraft operating out of Midway to support the retreating battle force. It had taken a full day to reactivate the facilities at the midocean atoll, possible only because there was a team of ornithologists there studying the goonies. The Orions were in turn supported by C-130s of the Hawaiian Air National Guard. However it had happened, the admiral who still flew his flag on the crippled aircraft carrier could look at a radar picture with four antisubmarine aircraft arrayed around his fleet and start to feel a little safer. His outer ring of escorts were hammering the ocean with their active sonars, and, after an initial period of near panic, finding nothing much to worry about. He'd make Pearl Harbor by Friday evening, and maybe with a little wind could get his aircraft off, further safeguarding them.

The crew was smiling now, Admiral Sato could see, as he headed down the passageway. Only two days before, they'd been embarrassed and shamed by the "mistake" their ship had made. But not now. He'd gone by ship's helicopter to all four of the Kongos personally to deliver the briefings. Two days away from the Marianas, they now knew what they had accomplished. Or at least part of it. The submarine incidents were still guarded information, and for the moment they knew that they had avenged a great wrong to their country, done so in a very clever way, allowing Japan to reclaim land that was historically hers—and without, they thought, taking lives in the process. The initial reaction had been shock. Going to war with America? The Admiral had explained that, no, it was not really a war unless the Americans chose to make an issue of it, which he thought unlikely, but also something, he warned them, for which they had to be prepared. The formation was spread out now, three

thousand meters between ships, racing west at maximum sustainable speed. That was using up fuel at a dangerous rate, but there would be a tanker at Guam to refuel them, and Sato wanted to be under his own ASW umbrella as soon as possible. Once at Guam he could consider future operations. The first one had been successful. With luck there would not have to be a second, but if there were, he had many things to consider.

"Contacts?" the Admiral asked, entering the Combat Information Center.

"Everything in the air is squawking commercial," the air-warfare officer replied.

"Military aircraft all carry transponders," Sato reminded him. "And they all work the same way."

"Nothing is approaching us." The formation was on a course deliberately offset from normal commercial air corridors, and on looking at the billboard display, the Admiral could see that traffic was in all those corridors. True, a military-surveillance aircraft could see them from some of the commercial tracks, but the Americans had satellites that were just as good. His intelligence estimates had so far proved accurate. The only threat that really concerned him was from submarines, and that one was manageable. Submarine-launched Harpoon or Tomahawk missiles were a danger with which he was prepared to deal. Each of the destroyers had her SPY-ID radar up and operating, scanning the surface. Every fire-control director was manned. Any inbound cruise missile would be detected and engaged, first by his American-made (and Japanese-improved) SM-2MR missiles, and behind those weapons were CIWS gatling-gun point-defense systems. They would stop most of the inbound "vampires," the generic term for cruise missiles. A submarine *could* close and engage with torpedoes, and one of the larger warheads could kill any ship in his formation. But they would hear the torpedo coming in, and his ASW helicopters would do their very best to pounce on the attacking sub, deny her the chance to continue the engagement, and just maybe kill her. The Americans didn't have all that many submarines, and their commanders would be correspondingly cautious, especially if he managed to add a third kill to the two already accomplished.

What would the Americans do? Well, what *could* they do now? he asked himself. It was a question he'd asked himself again and again, and he always had the same answer. They'd drawn down too much. They depended on their ability to deter, forgetting that deterrence hinged on the perceived ability to take action if deterrence failed: the same old equation of *don't-want-to* but *can*. Unfortunately for them, the Americans had leaned too much on the former and neglected the latter, and by all the rules Sato knew, by the time they *could* again, their adversary would be able to stop them. The overall strategic plan he'd helped to execute was not new at all—just better-executed than it had been the first time, he thought, standing close to the triple billboard display and watching the radar symbols of commercial aircraft march along their defined pathways, their very action proclaiming that the world was resuming its normal shape without so much as a blip.

The hard part always seemed to come after the decisions were made, Ryan

knew. It wasn't making them that wore on the soul so much as having to live with them. Had he done the right things? There was no measure except hindsight, and that always came too late. Worse, hindsight was always negative because you rarely looked back to reconsider things that had gone right. At a certain level, things stopped being clear-cut. You weighed options, and you weighed the factors, but very often you knew that no matter which way you jumped, somebody would be hurt. In those cases the idea was to hurt the least number of people or things, but even then real people were hurt who would otherwise not be hurt at all, and you were choosing, really, whose lives would be injured—or lost—like a disinterested god-figure from mythology. It was worse still if you knew some of the players, because they had faces your mind could see and voices it could hear. The ability to make such decisions was called moral courage by those who didn't have to do it, and stress by those who did.

And yet he had to do it. He'd undertaken this job in the knowledge that such moments would come. He'd placed Clark and Chavez at risk before in the East African desert, and he vaguely remembered worrying about that, but the mission had come off and after *that* it had seemed like trickor-treat on Halloween, a wonderfully clever little game played by nation against nation. The fact that a real human being in the person of Mohammed Abdul Corp had lost his life as a result—well, it was easy to say, now, that he'd deserved his fate. Ryan had allowed himself to file that entire memory away in some locked drawer, to be dredged out years later should he ever succumb to the urge to write memoirs. But now the memory was back, removed from the files by the necessity to put the lives of real men at risk again. Jack locked his confidential papers away before heading toward the Oval Office.

"Off to see the boss," he told a Secret Service agent in the north-south corridor.

"SWORDSMAN heading to JUMPER," the agent said into his microphone, for to those who protected everyone in what to them was known as the House, they were as much symbols as men, designations, really, for what their functions were.

But I'm not a symbol, Jack wanted to tell him. *I'm a* man, *with doubts.* He passed four more agents on the way, and saw how they looked at him, the trust and respect, how they *expected* him to know what to do, what to tell the Boss, as though he were somehow greater than they, and only Ryan knew that he wasn't. He'd been foolish enough to accept a job with greater responsibilities than theirs, that's all, greater than he'd ever wanted.

"Not fun, is it?" Durling said when he entered the office.

"Not much." Jack took his seat.

The President read his advisor's face and mind at the same time, and smiled. "Let's see. I'm supposed to tell you to relax, and you're supposed to tell me the same thing, right?"

"Hard to make a correct decision if you're overstressed," Ryan agreed.

"Yeah, except for one thing. If you're not stressed, then it isn't much of a decision, and it's handled at a lower level. The hard ones come here. A lot of people have commented on that," the President said. It was a remarkably generous observation, Jack realized, for it voluntarily took some of the burden

off his shoulders by reminding him that he did, after all, merely *advise* the President. There was greatness in the man at the ancient oak desk. Jack wondered how difficult a burden it was to bear, and if its discovery had come as a surprise—or merely, perhaps, as just one more necessity with which one had to deal.

"Okay, what is it?"

"I need your permission for something." Ryan explained the Golovko offers—the first made in Moscow, and the second only a few hours earlier—and their implications.

"Does this give us a larger picture?" Durling asked.

"Possibly, but we don't have enough to go with."

"And?"

"A decision of this type always goes up to your level," Ryan told him.

"Why do I have to—"

"Sir, it reveals both the identity of intelligence officers and methods of operation. I suppose technically it doesn't have to be your decision, but it is something you should know about."

"You recommend approval." Durling didn't have to ask.

"Yes, sir."

"We can trust the Russians?"

"I didn't say *trust*, Mr. President. What we have here is a confluence of needs and abilities, with a little potential blackmail on the side."

"Run with it," the President said without much in the way of consideration. Perhaps it was a measure of his trust in Ryan, thus returning the burden of responsibility back to his visitor. Durling paused for a few seconds before posing his next question. "What are they up to, Jack?"

"The Japanese? On the face of it, this makes no objective sense at all. What I keep coming back to is, why kill the submarines? Why kill *people?* It just doesn't seem necessary to have crossed that threshold."

"Why do this to their most important trading partner?" Durling added, making the most obvious observation. "We haven't had a chance to think it through, have we?"

Ryan shook his head. "Things have certainly piled up on us. We don't even know the things we don't know yet."

The President cocked his head to the side. "What?"

Jack smiled a little. "That's something my wife likes to say about medicine. You have to know the things you don't know. You have to figure out what the questions are before you can start looking for answers."

"How do we do that?"

"Mary Pat has people out asking questions. We go over all the data we have. We try to infer things from what we know, look for connections. You can tell a lot from what the other guy is trying to do and how he's going about it. My biggest one now, why did they kill the two subs?" Ryan looked past the President, out the window to the Washington Monument, that fixed, firm obelisk of white marble. "They did it in a way that they think will allow us a way out. We can claim it was a collision or something—"

"Do they really expect that we'll just accept the deaths and—"

"They offered us the chance. Maybe they don't expect it, but it's a

possibility." Ryan was quiet for perhaps thirty seconds. "No. No, they couldn't misread us that badly."

"Keep thinking out loud," Durling commanded.

"We've cut our fleet too far back—"

"I don't need to hear that now," was the answer, an edge on it.

Ryan nodded and held a hand up. "Too late to worry why or how, I know that. But the important thing is, they know it, too. Everybody knows what we have and don't have, and with the right kind of knowledge and training, you can infer what we can do. Then you structure your operations on a combination of what you can do, and what he can do about it."

"Makes sense. Okay, go on."

"With the demise of the Russian threat, the submarine force is essentially out of business. That's because a submarine is only good for two things, really. Tactically, submarines are good for killing other subs. But strategically, submarines are limited. They cannot control the sea in the same way as surface ships do. They can't project power. They can't ferry troops or goods from one place to another, and that's what sea control really means." Jack snapped his fingers. "But they *can* deny the sea to others, and Japan is an island-nation. So they're afraid of sea-denial." Or, Jack added in his own mind, maybe they just did what they could do. They crippled the carriers because they could not easily do more. Or could they? Damn, it was still too complicated.

"So we could strangle them with submarines?" Durling asked.

"Maybe. We did it once before. We're down to just a few, though, and that makes their countersub task a lot easier. But their ultimate trump against such a move on our part is their nuclear capacity. They counter a strategic threat to them with a strategic threat to us, a dimension they didn't have in 1941. There's something missing, sir." Ryan shook his head, still looking at the monument through the thick, bullet-resistant windows. "There's something big we don't know."

"The why?"

"The why may be it. First I want to know the *what.* What do they want? *What* is their end-game objective?"

"Not why they're doing it?"

Ryan turned his head back to meet the President's eyes. "Sir, the decision to start a war is almost never rational. World War One, kicked off by some fool killing some other fool, events were skillfully manipulated by Leopold something-or-other, 'Poldi,' they called him, the Austrian Foreign Minister. Skilled manipulator, but he didn't factor in the simple fact that his country lacked the power to achieve what he wanted. Germany and Austria-Hungary started the war. They both lost. World War Two, Japan and Germany took on the whole world, never occurred to them that the rest of the world might be stronger. Particularly true of Japan." Ryan went on. "They never really had a plan to defeat us. Hold on that for a moment. The Civil War, started by the South. The South lost. The Franco-Prussian War, started by France. France lost. Almost every war since the Industrial Revolution was initiated by the side which ultimately lost. Q.E.D., going to war is not a rational act. Therefore, the thinking behind it, the *why* isn't necessarily important, because it is probably

erroneous to begin with."

"I never thought of that, Jack."

Ryan shrugged. "Some things are too obvious, like Buzz Fiedler said earlier today."

"But if the *why* is not important, then the *what* isn't either, is it?"

"Yes, it is, because if you can discern the objective, if you can figure out what they want, then you can deny it to them. That's how you start to defeat an enemy. And, you know, the other guy gets so interested in what he wants, so fixed on how important it is, that he starts forgetting that somebody else might try to keep him from getting it."

"Like a criminal thinking about hitting a liquor store?" Durling asked, both amused and impressed by Ryan's discourse.

"War is the ultimate criminal act, an armed robbery writ large. And it's always about greed. It's always a nation that wants something another nation has. And you defeat that nation by recognizing what it wants and denying it to them. The seeds of their defeat are usually found in the seeds of their desire."

"Japan, World War Two?"

"They wanted a real empire. Essentially they wanted exactly what the Brits had. They just started a century or two too late. They never planned to defeat us, merely to—" He stopped suddenly, an idea forming. "Merely to achieve their goals and force us to acquiesce. Jesus," Ryan breathed. "That's it! It's the same thing all over again. The same methodology. The same objective?" he wondered aloud.

It's there, the National Security Advisor told himself. *It's all right there. If you can find it. If you can find it all.*

"But we have a first objective of our own," the President pointed out.

"I know."

George Winston supposed that, like an old fire horse, he had to respond to the bells. His wife and children still in Colorado, he was over Ohio now, sitting in the back of his Gulfstream, looking down at the crab-shape of city lights. Probably Cincinnati, though he hadn't asked the drivers about their route into Newark.

His motivation was partially personal. His own fortune had suffered badly in the events of the previous Friday, drawn down by hundreds of millions. The nature of the event, and the way his money was spread around various institutions, had guaranteed a huge loss, since he'd been vulnerable to every variety of programmed trading system. But it wasn't about money. Okay, he told himself, so I lost two hundred mill'. I have lots more where that came from. It was the damage to the entire system, and above all the damage done to the Columbus Group. His baby had taken a huge hit, and like a father returning to the side of his married daughter in time of crisis, he knew that it would always be his. I *should have been there*, Winston told himself. *I could have seen it and stopped it. At least I could have protected my investors.* The full effects weren't in yet, but it was so bad as to be almost beyond comprehension. Winston had to do something, had to offer his expertise and counsel. Those investors were still his people.

It was an easy ride into Newark. The Gulfstream touched down smoothly and taxied off to the general-aviation terminal, where a car was waiting, and one of his senior former employees. He wasn't wearing a tie, which was unusual for the Wharton School graduate.

Mark Gant hadn't slept in fifty hours, and he leaned against the car for stability because the very earth seemed to move under him, to the accompaniment of a headache best measured on the Richter Scale. For all that, he was glad to be here. If anyone could figure this mess out, it was his former boss. As soon as the private jet stopped, he walked over to stand at the foot of the stairs.

"How bad?" was the first thing George Winston said. There was warmth between the two men, but business came first.

"We don't know yet," Gant replied, leading him to the car.

"Don't know?" The explanation had to wait until they got inside. Gant handed over the first section of the *Times* without comment.

"Is this for real?" A speed-reader, Winston scanned across the opening two columns, turning back to page 21 to finish a story framed by lingerie ads.

Gant's next revelation was that the manager Raizo Yamata had left behind was gone. "He flew back to Japan Friday night. He said to urge Yamata-san to come to New York to help stabilize the situation. Or maybe he wanted to gut himself open in front of his boss. Who the fuck knows?"

"So who the hell's in charge, Mark?"

"Nobody," Gant answered. "Just like everything else here."

"Goddamn it, Mark, *somebody* has to be giving the orders!"

"We don't have any instructions," the executive replied. "I've called the guy. He's not at the office—hey, I left messages, tried his house, Yamata's house, everybody's friggin' house, everybody's friggin' office. Zip-o, George. Everybody's running for cover. Hell, for all I know the dumb fuck took a header off the biggest building in town."

"Okay, I need an office and all the data you have," Winston said.

"*What* data?" Gant demanded. "We don't have shit. The whole system went down, remember?"

"You have the records of our trades, don't you?"

"Well, yeah, I have our tapes—a copy, anyway," Gant corrected himself. "The FBI took the originals."

A brilliant technician, Gant's first love had always been mathematics. Give Mark Gant the right instructions and he could work the market like a skilled cardsharp with a new deck of Bicycles. But like most of the people on the Street, he needed someone else to tell him what the job was. Well, every man had some limitations, and on the plus side of the ledger, Gant was smart, honest, and he knew what his limitations were. He knew when to ask for help. That last quality put him in the top 3 or 4 percent.

So he must have gone to Yamata and his man for guidance . . .

"When all this was going down, what instructions did you have?"

"Instructions?" Gant rubbed his unshaven face and shook his head. "Hell, we busted our ass to stay ahead of it. If DTC gets its shit together, we'll come out with most of our ass intact. I laid a mega-put on GM and made a real killing on gold stocks, and—"

"That's not what I mean."

"He said to run with it. He got us out of the bank stocks in one big hurry, thank God. Damn if he didn't see that one coming first. We were pretty well placed before it all went down. If it hadn't been for all the panic calls—I mean, Jesus, George, it finally happened, y'know? One-eight-hundred-R-U-N. Jesus, if people had just kept their heads." A sigh. "But they didn't, and now, with the DTC fuckup . . . George, I don't know what's going to be opening up tomorrow, man. If this is true, if they can rebuild the house by tomorrow morning, hey, man, I don't know. I just don't," Gant said as they entered the Lincoln Tunnel.

The whole story of Wall Street in one exhausted paragraph, Winston told himself, looking at the glossy tile that made up the interior of the tunnel. Just like the tunnel, in fact. You could see forward and you could see behind, but you couldn't see crap to the sides. You couldn't see outside the limited perspective.

And you had to.

"Mark, I'm still a director of the firm."

"Yes, so?"

"And so are you," Winston pointed out.

"I know that, but—"

"The two of us can call a board meeting. Start making calls," George Winston ordered. "As soon as we're out of this damned hole in the ground."

"For when?" Gant asked.

"For *now*, goddamn it!" Winston swore. "Those who're out of town, I'll send my jet for."

"Most of the guys are in the office." Which was the only good news he'd heard since Friday afternoon, George thought, nodding for his former employee to go on. "I suppose most everyone else is closed."

They cleared the tunnel about then. Winston pulled the cellular phone from its holder and handed it over.

"Start calling." Winston wondered if Gant knew what he was going to request at the meeting. Probably not. A good man in a tunnel, he had never outgrown his limitations.

Why the hell did I ever leave? Winston demanded of himself. It just wasn't safe to leave the American economy in the hands of people who didn't know how it worked.

"Well, that worked," Admiral Dubro said. Fleet speed slowed to twenty knots. They were now two hundred miles due east of Dondra Head. They needed more sea room, but getting this far was success enough. The two carriers angled apart, their respective formations dividing and forming protective rings around the centerpieces, *Abraham Lincoln* and *Dwight D. Eisenhower.* In another hour the formations would be outside of visual contact, and that was good, but the speed run had depleted bunkers, and that was very bad. The nuclear-powered carriers perversely were also tankers of a sort. They carried tons of bunker fuel for their conventionally powered escorts, and were able to refuel them when the need arose. It soon would. The fleet oilers *Yukon* and

Rappahannock were en route from Diego Garcia with eighty thousand tons of distillate fuel between them, but this game was getting old in a hurry. The possibility of a confrontation compelled Dubro to keep all his ships' bunkers topped off. Confrontation meant potential battle, and battle always necessitated speed, to go into harm's way, and to get the hell out of it, too.

"Anything from Washington yet?" he asked next.

Commander Harrison shook his head. "No, sir."

"Okay," the battle-force commander said with a dangerous calm. Then he headed off to communications. He'd solved a major operational problem, for the moment, and now it was time to scream at someone.

27

Piling On

Everything was running behind, at maximum speed, largely in circles, getting nowhere at amazing speed. A city both accustomed to and dedicated to the prevention of leaks, Washington and its collection of officials were too busy with four simultaneous crises to respond effectively to any of them. None of that was unusual, a fact that would have been depressing to those who ought to be dealing with it, a digression for which, of course, they didn't have time. The only good news, Ryan thought, is that the biggest story hadn't quite leaked. Yet.

"Scott, who're your best people for Japan?"

Adler was still a smoker or had bought a pack on his way over from Foggy Bottom. It required all of Ryan's diminishing self-control not to ask for one, but neither could he tell his guest not to light up. They all had to deal with stress in their own ways. The fact that Adler's had once been Ryan's was just one more inconvenience in a weekend that had gone to hell faster than he'd thought possible.

"I can put a working group together. Who runs it?"

"You do," Jack answered.

"What will Brett say?"

"He'll say, 'Yes, sir,' when the President tells him," Ryan replied, too tired to be polite.

"They have us by the balls, Jack."

"How many potential hostages?" Ryan asked. It wasn't just the residual military people. There had to be thousands of tourists, businessmen, reporters, students . . .

"We have no way of finding out, Jack. None," Adler admitted. "The good news is that we have no indications of adverse treatment. It's not 1941, at least I don't think so."

"If that starts . . ." Most Americans had forgotten the manner of treatment accorded foreign prisoners. Ryan was not one of them. "Then we start going crazy. They have to know that."

"They know us a lot better than they did back then. So much interaction. Besides, we have tons of their people over here, too."

"Don't forget, Scott, that their culture is fundamentally different from ours. Their religion is different. Their view of man's place in nature is different. The value they place on human life is different," the National Security Advisor said darkly.

"This isn't a place for racism, Jack," Adler observed narrowly.

"Those are all facts. I didn't say they're inferior to us. I said that we're not

going to make the mistake of thinking they're motivated in the same way we are—okay?"

"That's fair, I suppose," the Deputy Secretary of State conceded.

"So I want people who really understand their culture in here to advise me. I want people who think like they do." The trick would be finding space for them, but there were offices downstairs whose occupants could move out, albeit kicking and screaming about how important protocol and political polling were.

"I can find a few," Adler promised.

"What are we hearing from the embassies?"

"Nobody knows much of anything. One interesting development in Korea, though."

"What's that?"

"The defense attaché in Seoul went to see some friends about getting some bases moved up in alert level. They said no. That's the first time the ROKs ever said no to us. I guess their government is still trying to figure all this out."

"It's too early to start that, anyway."

"Are we going to do anything?"

Ryan shook his head. "I don't know yet." Then his phone buzzed.

"NMCC on the STU, Dr. Ryan."

"Ryan," Jack said, lifting the phone. "Yes, put him through. Shit," he breathed so quietly that Adler hardly caught it. "Admiral, I'll be back to you later today."

"Now what?"

"The Indians," Ryan told him.

"I call the meeting to order," Mark Gant said, tapping the table with his pen. Only two more than half of the seats were filled, but that was a quorum. "George, you have the floor."

The looks on all the faces troubled George Winston. At one level the men and women who determined policy for the Columbus Group were physically exhausted. At another they were panicked. It was the third that caused him the most pain: the degree of hope they showed at his presence, as though he were Jesus come to clean out the temple. It wasn't supposed to be this way. No one man was supposed to have that sort of power. The American economy was too vast. Too many people depended on it. Most of all, it was too complex for one man or even twenty to comprehend it all. That was the problem with the models that everyone depended on. Sooner or later it came down to trying to gauge and measure and regulate something that simply was. It existed. It worked. It functioned. People needed it, but nobody really knew how it worked. The Marxists' illusion that they did know had been their fundamental flaw. The Soviets had spent three generations trying to command an economy to work instead of just letting it go on its own, and had ended up beggars in the world's richest nation. And it was not so different here. Instead of controlling it, they tried to live off it, but in both cases you had to have the illusion that you understood it. And nobody did, except in the broadest sense.

At the most basic level it all came down to needs and time. People had

needs. Food and shelter were the first two of those. So other people grew the food and built the houses. Both required time to do, and since time was the most precious commodity known to man, you had to compensate people for it. Take a car—people needed transportation, too. When you bought a car, you paid people for the time of assembly, for the time required to fabricate all the components; ultimately you were paying miners for the time required to dig the iron ore and bauxite from the ground. That part was simple enough. The complexity began with all of the potential options. You could drive more than one kind of car. Each supplier of goods and services involved in the car had the option to get what he needed from a variety of sources, and since time was precious, the person who used his time most efficiently got a further reward. That was called competition, and competition was a never-ending race of everyone against everyone else. Fundamentally, every business, and in a sense every single person in the American economy, was in competition with every other. Everyone was a worker. Everyone was also a consumer. Everyone provided something for others to use. Everyone selected products and services from the vast menu that the economy offered. That was the basic idea.

The true complexity came from all the possible interactions. Who bought what from whom. Who became more efficient, the better to make use of their time, benefiting both the consumers and themselves at once. With everyone in the game, it was like a huge mob, with everyone talking to everyone else. You simply could not keep track of all the conversations.

And yet Wall Street held the illusion that it could, that its computer models could predict in broad terms what would happen on a daily basis. It was not possible. You could analyze individual companies, get a feel for what they were doing right and wrong. To a limited degree, from one or a few such analyses you could see trends and profit by them. But the use of computers and modeling techniques had gone too far, extrapolating farther and farther away from baseline reality, and while it had worked, after a fashion, for years, that had only magnified the illusion. With the collapse three days earlier, the illusion was shattered, and now they had nothing to cling to. *Nothing but me,* George Winston thought, reading their faces.

The former president of the Columbus Group knew his limitations. He knew the degree to which he understood the system, and knew roughly where that understanding ended. He knew that nobody could quite make the whole thing work, and that train of thought took him almost as far as he needed to go on this dark night in New York.

“This looks like a place without a leader. Tomorrow, what happens?” he asked, and all the “rocket scientists” averted their eyes from his, looking down at the table, or in some cases sharing a glance with the person who happened to be across it. Only three days before, someone would have spoken, offered an opinion with some greater or lesser degree of confidence. But not now, because nobody knew. Nobody had the first idea. And nobody spoke up.

“You have a president. Is he telling you anything?” Winston asked next. Heads shook.

It was Mark Gant, of course, who posed the question, as Winston had known he would.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is the board of directors which selects our

president and managing director, isn't it? We need a leader now."

"George," another man asked. "Are you back?"

"Either that or I'm doing the goddamnedest out-of-body trip you people have ever seen." It wasn't much of a joke, but it did generate smiles, the beginning of a little enthusiasm for something.

"In that case, I submit the motion that we declare the position of president and managing director to be vacant."

"Second."

"There is a motion on the floor," Mark Gant said, rather more strongly. "Those in favor?"

There was a chorus of "ayes."

"Oppose?"

Nothing.

"The motion carries. The presidency of the Columbus Group is now vacant. Is there a further motion from the floor?"

"I nominate George Winston to be our managing director and president," another voice said.

"Second."

"Those in favor?" Gant asked. This vote was identical except in its growing enthusiasm.

"George, welcome back." There was a faint smattering of applause.

"Okay." Winston stood. It was his again. His next comment was desultory: "Somebody needs to tell Yamata." He started pacing the room.

"Now, first thing: I want to see everything we have on Friday's transactions. Before we can start thinking about how to fix the son of a bitch, we need to know how it got broke. It's going to be a long week, folks, but we have people out there that we have to protect."

The first task would be hard enough, he knew. Winston didn't know if anyone could fix it, but they had to start with examining what had gone so badly wrong. He knew he was close to something. He had the itchy feeling that went with the almost-enough information to move on a particular issue. Part of it was instinct, something he both depended on and distrusted until he could make the itch go away with hard facts. There was something else, however, and he didn't know what it was. He did know that he needed to find it.

Even good news could be ominous. General Arima was spending a good deal of time on TV, and he was doing well at it. The latest news was that any citizen who wanted to leave Saipan would be granted free air fare to Tokyo for later transit back to the States. Mainly what he said was that nothing important had changed.

"My ass," Pete Burroughs growled at the smiling face on the tube.

"You know, just don't believe this," Oreza said, back up after five hours of sleep.

"I do. Check out that knoll southeast of here."

Portagee rubbed his heavy beard and looked. Half a mile away, on a hilltop recently cleared for another tourist hotel (the island had run out of beach

space), about eighty men were setting up a Patriot missile battery. The billboard radars were already erected, and as he watched, the first of four boxy containers was rolled into place.

"So what are we going to do about this?" the engineer asked.

"Hey, I drive boats, remember?"

"You used to wear a uniform, didn't you?"

"Coast Guard," Oreza said. "Ain't never killed nobody. And that stuff"—he pointed to the missile site—"hell, you probably know more about it than I do."

"They make 'em in Massachusetts. Raytheon, I think. My company makes some chips for it." Which was the extent of Burroughs's knowledge. "They're planning to stay, aren't they?"

"Yeah." Oreza got his binoculars and started looking out windows again. He could see six road junctions. All were manned by what looked like ten men or so—a squad; he knew that term—with a mixture of the Toyota Land Cruisers and some jeeps. Though many had holsters on their pistol belts, no long guns were in evidence now, as though they didn't want to make it look like some South American junta from the old days. Every vehicle that passed—they didn't stop any that he saw—received a friendly wave. *PR*, Oreza thought. *Good PR.*

"Some kind of fuckin' love-in," the master chief said. And that would not have been possible unless they were confident as hell. Even the missile crew on the next hill over, he thought. They weren't rushing. They were doing their jobs in an orderly, professional way, and that was fine, but if you expected to use the things, you moved more snappily. There was a difference between peacetime and wartime activity, however much you said that training was supposed to eliminate the difference between the two. He turned his attention back to the nearest crossroads. The soldiers there were not the least bit tense. They looked and acted like soldiers, but their heads weren't scanning the way they ought to on unfriendly ground.

It might have been good news. No mass arrests and detainments, the usual handmaiden of invasions. No overt display of force beyond mere presence. You would hardly know that they were here, except that they were sure as hell here, Portagee told himself. And they planned to stay. And they didn't think anybody was going to dispute that. And he sure as hell was in no position to change their view on anything.

"Okay, here are the first overheads," Jackson said. "We haven't had much time to go over them, but—"

"But we will," Ryan completed the sentence. "I'm a carded National Intelligence Officer, remember? I can handle the raw."

"Am I cleared for this?" Adler asked.

"You are now." Ryan switched on his desk light, and Robby dialed the combination on his attaché case. "When's the next pass over Japan?"

"Right about now, but there's cloud cover over most of the islands."

"Nuke hunt?" Adler asked. Admiral Jackson handled the answer.

"You bet your ass, sir." He laid out the first photo of Saipan. There were two car-carriers at the quay. The adjacent parking lot was spotted with orderly

rows of military vehicles, most of them trucks.

"Best guess?" Ryan asked.

"An augmented division." His pen touched a cluster of vehicles. "This is a Patriot battery. Towed artillery. This looks like a big air-defense radar that's broken down for transport. There's a twelve-hundred-foot hill on this rock. It'll see a good long way, and the visual horizon from up there is a good fifty miles." Another photo. "The airports. Those are five F-15 fighters, and if you look here, we caught two of their F-3s in the air coming in on final."

"F-3?" Adler asked.

"The production version of the FS-X," Jackson explained. "Fairly capable, but really a reworked F-16. The Eagles are for air defense. This little puppy is a good attack bird."

"We need more passes," Ryan said in a voice suddenly grave. Somehow it was real now. Really real, as he liked to say, metaphysically real. It was no longer the results of analysis or verbal reports. Now he had photographic proof. His country was sure as hell at war.

Jackson nodded. "Mainly we need pros to go over these overheads, but, yeah, we'll be getting four passes a day, weather permitting, and we need to examine every square inch of this rock, and Tinian, and Rota, and Guam, and all the little rocks."

"Jesus, Robby, can we do it?" Jack asked. The question, though posed in the simplest terms, had implications that even he could not yet appreciate. Admiral Jackson was slow to lift his eyes from the overhead photos, and his voice suddenly lost its rage as the naval officer's professional judgment clicked in.

"I don't know yet." He paused, then posed a question of his own. "Will we try?"

"I don't know that, either," the National Security Advisor told him. "Robby?"

"Yeah, Jack?"

"Before we decide to try, we have to know if we can."

Admiral Jackson nodded. "Aye aye."

He'd been awake most of the night listening to his partner's snoring. What was it about this guy? Chavez asked himself groggily. How the hell could he sleep? Outside, the sun was up, and the overwhelming sounds of Tokyo in the morning beat their way through windows and walls, and still John was sleeping. Well, Ding thought, he was an old guy and maybe he needed his rest. Then the most startling event of their entire stay in the country happened. The phone rang. That caused John's eyes to snap open, but Ding got the phone first.

"Tovarorischiy," a voice said. "All this time in-country and you haven't called me?"

"Who is this?" Chavez asked. As carefully as he'd studied his Russian, hearing it on the phone here and now made the language sound like Martian. It wasn't hard for him to make his voice seem sleepy. It was hard, a moment later, to keep his eyeballs in their sockets.

A jolly laugh that had to be heartfelt echoed down the phone line. "Yevgeniy Pavlovich, who else would it be? Scrape the stubble from your face and join me for breakfast. I'm downstairs."

Domingo Chavez felt his heart stop. Not just miss a beat—he would have sworn it stopped until he willed it to start working again, and when it did, it went off at warpfactor-three. "Give us a few minutes."

"Ivan Sergeyevich had too much to drink again, *da?*" the voice asked with another laugh. "Tell him he grows too old for that foolishness. Very well, I will have some tea and wait."

All the while Clark's eyes were fixed on his, or for the first few seconds, anyway. Then they started sweeping the room for dangers that had to be around, so pale his partner's face had become. Domingo was not one to get frightened easily, John knew, but whatever he'd heard on the phone had almost panicked the kid.

Well. John rose and switched on the TV. If there were danger outside the door, it was too late. The window offered no escape. The corridor outside could well be jammed full of armed police, and his first order of business was to head for the bathroom. Clark looked in the mirror as the water ran from the flushing toilet. Chavez was there before the handle came back up.

"Whoever was on the phone called me 'Yevgeniy.' He's waiting downstairs, he says."

"What did he sound like?" Clark asked.

"Russian, right accent, right syntax." The toilet stopped running, and they couldn't speak anymore for a while.

Shit, Clark thought, looking in the mirror for an answer, but finding only two very confused faces. Well. The intelligence officer started washing up and thinking over possibilities. *Think*. If it had been the Japanese police, would they have bothered to . . .? No. Not likely. Everyone regarded spies as dangerous in addition to being loathsome, a curious legacy of James Bond movies. Intelligence officers were about as likely to start a firefight as they were to sprout wings and fly. Their most important physical skills were running and hiding, but nobody ever seemed to grasp that, and if the local cops were on to them, then . . . then he would have awakened to a pistol in his face. And he hadn't, had he? *Okay*. No immediate danger. Probably.

Chavez watched in no small amazement as Clark took his time washing his hands and face, shaving carefully, and brushing his teeth before he relinquished the bathroom. He even smiled when he was done, because that expression was necessary to the tone of his voice.

"Yevgeniy Pavlovich, we must appear *kulturny* for our friend, no? It's been so many months." Five minutes later they were out the door.

Acting skills are no less important to intelligence officers than to those who work the legitimate theater, for like the stage, in the spy business there are rarely opportunities for retakes. Major Boris Il'ych Scherenko was the deputy *rezident* of RVS Station Tokyo, awakened four hours earlier by a seemingly innocuous call from the embassy. Covered as Cultural Attaché, he'd most recently been busy arranging the final details for a tour of Japan by the St. Petersburg Ballet. For fifteen years an officer of the First Chief (Foreign) Directorate of the KGB, he now fulfilled the same function for his newer and

smaller agency. His job was even more important now, Scherenko thought. Since his nation was far less able to deal with external threats, it needed good intelligence more than ever. Perhaps that was the reason for this lunacy. Or maybe the people in Moscow had gone completely mad. There was no telling. At least the tea was good.

Awaiting him in the embassy had been an enciphered message from Moscow Center——that hadn't changed—with names and detailed descriptions. It made identification easy. Easier than understanding the orders he had.

"Vanya!" Scherenko nearly ran over, seizing the older man's hand for a hearty handshake, but forgoing the kiss that Russians are known for. That was partly to avoid offending Japanese sensibilities and partly because the American might slug him, passionless people that they were. Madness or not, it was a moment to savor. These were two senior CIA officers, and tweaking their noses in public was not without its humor. "It's been so long!"

The younger one, Scherenko saw, was doing his best to conceal his feelings, but not quite well enough. KGB/RVS didn't know anything about him. But his agency did know the name John Clark. It was only a name and a cursory description that could have fit a Caucasian male of any nationality. One hundred eighty-five to one hundred ninety centimeters. Ninety kilos. Dark hair. Fit. To that Scherenko added, blue eyes, a firm grip. Steady nerve. Very steady nerve, the Major thought.

"Indeed it has. How is your family, my friend?"

Add excellent Russian to that, Scherenko thought, catching the accent of St. Petersburg. As he cataloged the physical characteristics of the American, he saw two sets of eyes, one blue, one black, doing the same to him.

"Natalia misses you. Come! I am hungry! Breakfast!" He led the other two back to his corner booth.

"CLARK, JOHN (none?)", the thin file in Moscow was headed. A name so nondescript that other cover names were unknown and perhaps never assigned. Field officer, paramilitary type, believed to perform special covert functions. More than two (2) Intelligence Stars for courage and/ or proficiency in field operations. Brief stint as a Security and Protective Officer, during which time no one had troubled himself to get a photo, Scherenko thought. Typical. Staring at him across the table now, he saw a man relaxed and at ease with the old friend he'd met for the first time perhaps as much as two minutes earlier. Well, he'd always known that CIA had good people working for them.

"We can talk here," Scherenko said more quietly, sticking to Russian.

"Is that so . . . ?"

"Scherenko, Boris Il'ych, Major, deputy *rezident,* " he said, finally introducing himself. Next he nodded to each of his guests. "You are John Clark—and Domingo Chavez."

"And this is the fucking Twilight Zone," Ding muttered.

" 'Plum blossoms bloom, and pleasure women buy new scarves in a brothel room.' Not exactly Pushkin, is it? Not even Pasternak. Arrogant little barbarians." He'd been in Japan for three years. He'd arrived expecting to find a pleasant, interesting place to do business. He'd come to dislike many aspects of Japanese culture, mainly the assumed local superiority to everything else in

the world, particularly offensive to a Russian who felt exactly the same way.

"Would you like to tell us what this is all about, Comrade Major?" Clark asked.

Scherenko spoke calmly now. The humor of the event was now behind them all, not that the Americans had ever appreciated it. "Your Maria Patricia Foleyeva placed a call to our Sergey Nikolayevich Golovko, asking for our assistance. I know that you are running another officer here in Tokyo, but not his name. I am further instructed to tell you, Comrade *Klerk,* that your wife and daughters are fine. Your younger daughter made the dean's list at her university again, and is now a good candidate for admission to medical school. If you require further proof of my bonafides, I'm afraid I cannot help you." The Major noted a thin expression of pleasure on the younger man's face and wondered what that was all about.

Well, that settles that, John thought. *Almost.* "Well, Boris, you sure as hell know how to get a man's attention. Now, maybe you can tell us what the hell is going on."

"We didn't see it either," Scherenko began, going over all the high points. It turned out that his data was somewhat better than what Clark had gotten from Chet Nomuri, but did not include quite everything. Intelligence was like that. You never had the full picture, and the parts left out were always important.

"How do you know we can operate safely?"

"You know that I cannot—"

"Boris Il'ych, my life is in your hands. You know I have a wife and two daughters. My life is important to me, and to them," John said reasonably, making himself appear all the more formidable to the pro across the table. It wasn't about fear. John knew that he was a capable field spook, and Scherenko gave the same impression. "Trust" was a concept both central to and alien from intelligence operations. You had to trust your people, and yet you could never trust them all the way in a business where dualisms were a way of life.

"Your cover works better for you than you think. The Japanese think that you are Russians. Because of that, they will not trouble you. We can see to that," the deputy *rezident* told them confidently.

"For how long?" Clark asked rather astutely, Scherenko thought.

"Yes, there is always that question, isn't there?"

"How do we communicate?" John asked.

"I understand that you require a high-quality telephone circuit." He handed a card under the table. "All of Tokyo is now fiberoptic. We have several similar lines to Moscow. Your special communications gear is being flown there as we speak. I understand it is excellent. I would like to see it," Boris said with a raised eyebrow.

"It's just a ROM chip, man," Chavez told him. "I couldn't even tell you which one it is."

"Clever," Scherenko thought.

"How serious are they?" the younger man asked him.

"They appear to have moved a total of three divisions to the Marianas. Their navy has attacked yours." Scherenko gave what details he knew. "I should tell you that our estimate is that you will face great difficulties in taking your

islands back."

"How great?" Clark asked.

The Russian shrugged, not without sympathy. "Moscow believes it unlikely. Your capabilities are almost as puny as ours have become."

And that's why this is happening, Clark decided on the spot. That was why he had a new friend in a foreign land. He'd told Chavez, practically on their first meeting, a quote from Henry Kissinger: "Even paranoids have enemies." He sometimes wondered why the Russians didn't print that on their money, rather like America's *E pluribus unum.* The hell of it was, they had a lot of history to back that one up. And so, for that matter, did America.

"Keep talking."

"We have their government intelligence organs thoroughly penetrated, also their military, but THISTLE is a commercial network, and I gather you have developed better data than I have. I'm not sure what that means." Which wasn't strictly true, but Scherenko was distinguishing between what he knew and what he thought; and, like a good spook, giving voice only to the former for now.

"So we both have a lot of work to do."

Scherenko nodded. "Feel free to come to the chancery."

"Let me know when the communications gear gets to Moscow." Clark could have gone on, but held back. He wouldn't be completely sure until he got the proper electronic acknowledgment. So strange, he thought, that he needed it, but if Scherenko was telling the truth about his degree of penetration in the Japanese government, then he could have been "flipped" himself. And old habits died especially hard in this business. The one comforting thing was that his interlocutor knew that he was holding back, and didn't appear to mind for the moment.

"I will."

It didn't take many people to crowd the Oval Office. The premier power room in what Ryan still hoped was the world's most powerful nation was smaller than the office he'd occupied during his return to the investment business—and in fact smaller than his corner office in the West Wing, Jack realized for the first time.

They were all tired. Brett Hanson was especially haggard. Only Arnie van Damm looked approximately normal, but, then, Amie always looked as though he were coming off a bender. Buzz Fiedler looked to be in something close to despair. The Secretary of Defense was the worst of all, however. It was he who had supervised the downsizing of the American military, who had told Congress almost on a weekly basis that our capabilities were far in excess of our needs. Ryan remembered the testimony on TV, the internal memos that dated back several years, the almost desperate objections by the uniformed chiefs of staff which they had faithfully not leaked to the media. It wasn't hard to guess what SecDef was thinking now. This brilliant bureaucrat, so confident in his vision and his judgment, had just run hard into the flat, unforgiving wall called reality.

"The economic problem," President Durling said, much to SecDef's relief.

"The hard part is the banks. They're going to be running scared until we rectify the DTC situation. So many banks now make trades that they don't know what their own reserves are. People are going to try to cash in their mutualfund holdings controlled by those banks. The Fed Chairman has already started jawboning them."

"Saying what?" Jack asked.

"Saying they had an unlimited line of credit. Saying that the money supply will be enough for their needs. Saying that they can loan all the money they want."

"Inflationary," van Damm observed. "That's very dangerous."

"Not really," Ryan said. "In the short term inflation is like a bad cold, you take aspirin and chicken soup for it. What happened Friday is like a heart attack. You treat *that* first. If the banks don't open for business as usual . . . Confidence is the big issue. Buzz is right."

Not for the first time, Roger Durling blessed the fact that Ryan's first departure from government had taken him back into the financial sector.

"And the markets?" the President asked SecTreas.

"Closed. I've talked to all of the exchanges. Until the DTC records are re-created, there will be no organized trading."

"What does that mean?" Hanson asked. Ryan noticed that the Defense Secretary wasn't saying anything. Ordinarily such a confident guy, too, Jack thought, quick to render an opinion. In other circumstances he would have found the man's newly found reticence very welcome indeed.

"You don't *have* to trade stocks on the floor of the NYSE," Fiedler explained. "You can do it in the countryclub men's room if you want."

"And people will," Ryan added. "Not many, but some."

"Will it matter? What about foreign exchanges?" Durling asked. "They trade our stocks all over the world."

"Not enough liquidity overseas," Fiedler answered. "Oh, there's some, but the New York exchanges make the benchmarks that everybody uses, and without those nobody knows what the values are."

"They have records of the tickers, don't they?" van Damm asked.

"Yes, but the records are compromised, and you don't gamble millions on faulty information. Okay, it's not really a bad thing that the information on DTC leaked. It gives us a cover story that we can use for a day or two," Ryan thought. "People can relate to the fact that a system fault had knocked stuff down. It'll hold them off from a total panic for a while. How long to fix the records?"

"They still don't know," Fiedler admitted. "They're still trying to assemble the records."

"We probably have until Wednesday, then." Ryan rubbed his eyes. He wanted to get up and pace, just get his blood circulating, but only the President did that in the Oval Office.

"I had a conference call with all the exchange heads. They're calling everyone in to work, like for a normal day. They have orders to shuffle around and look busy for the TV cameras."

"Nice idea, Buzz," the President managed to say first. Ryan gave SecTreas a thumbs-up.

"We have to come up with some sort of solution fast," Fiedler went on. "Jack's probably right. By late Wednesday it's a real panic, and I can't tell you what'll happen," he ended soberly. But the news wasn't all that bad for this evening. There was a little breathing space, and there were other breaths to be taken.

"Next," van Damm said, handling this one for the Boss, "Ed Kealty is going to go quietly. He's working out a deal with Justice. So that political monkey is off our backs. Of course"—the Chief of Staff looked at the President—"then we have to fill that post soon."

"It'll wait," Durling said. "Brett . . . India."

"Ambassador Williams has been hearing some ominous things. The Navy's analysis is probably right. It appears that the Indians may be seriously contemplating a move on Sri Lanka."

"Great timing," Ryan heard, looking down, then he spoke.

"The Navy wants operational instructions. We have a two-carrier battle force maneuvering around. If it's time to bump heads, they need to know what they are free to do." He had to say that because of his promise to Robby Jackson, but he knew what the answer would be. That pot wasn't boiling quite yet.

"We've got a lot on the plate. We'll defer that one for now," the President said. "Brett, have Dave Williams meet with their Prime Minister and make it clear to her that the United States does not look kindly upon aggressive acts anywhere in the world. No bluster. Just a clear statement, and have him wait for a reply."

"We haven't talked to them that way in a long time," Hanson warned.

"It's time to do so now, Brett," Durling pointed out quietly.

"Yes, Mr. President."

And now, Ryan thought, *the one we've all been waiting for*. Eyes turned to the Secretary of Defense. He spoke mechanically, hardly looking up from his notes.

"The two carriers will be back at Pearl Harbor by Friday. There are two graving docks for repairs, but to get the ships fully mission-capable will require months. The two submarines are dead, you know that. The Japanese fleet is retiring back to the Marianas. There has been no additional hostile contact of any kind between fleet units.

"We estimate about three divisions have been airferried to the Marianas. One on Saipan, most of two others on Guam. They have air facilities that we built and maintained . . ." His voice droned on, giving details that Ryan already knew, toward a conclusion that the National Security Advisor already feared.

Everything was too small in size. America's navy was half what it had been only ten years before. There remained the ability to sea-lift only one full division of troops capable of forced-entry assault. Only one, and that required moving all the Atlantic Fleet ships through Panama and recalling others from the oceans of the world as well. To land such troops required support, but the average U.S. Navy frigate had one 3-inch gun. Destroyers and cruisers had but two 5-inch guns each, a far cry from the assembled battleships and cruisers that had been necessary to take the Marianas back in 1944. Carriers, none

immediately available, the closest two in the Indian Ocean, and those together did not match the Japanese air strength on Guam and Saipan today, Ryan thought, for the first time feeling anger over the affair. It had taken him long enough to get over the disbelief, Jack told himself.

"I don't think we can do it," SecDef concluded, and it was a judgment that no one in the room was prepared to dispute. They were too weary for recriminations. President Durling thanked everyone for the advice and headed upstairs for his bedroom, hoping to get a little sleep before facing the media in the morning.

He took the stairs instead of the elevator, thinking along the way as Secret Service agents at the top and bottom of the stairs watched. A shame for his presidency to end this way. Though he'd never really desired it, he'd done his best, and his best, only a few days earlier, hadn't been all that bad.

28

Transmissions

The United 747-400 touched down at Moscow's Scheremetyevo Airport thirty minutes early. The Atlantic jetstream was still blowing hard. A diplomatic courier was first off, helped that way by a flight attendant. He flashed his diplomatic passport at the end of the jetway, where a customs officer pointed him toward an American embassy official who shook his hand and led him down the concourse.

"Come with me. We even have an escort into town." The man smiled at the lunacy of the event.

"I don't know you," the courier said suspiciously, slowing down. Ordinarily his personality and his diplomatic bag were inviolable, but everything about this trip had been unusual, and his curiosity was thoroughly aroused.

"There's a laptop computer in your bag. There's yellow tape around it. It's the only thing you're carrying," said the chief of CIA Station Moscow, which was why the courier didn't know him. "The code word for your trip is STEAMROLLER."

"Fair enough." The courier nodded on their way down the terminal corridor. An embassy car was waiting—it was a stretched Lincoln, and looked to be the Ambassador's personal wheels. Next came a lead car which, once off the airport grounds, lit off a rotating light, the quicker to proceed downtown. On the whole it struck the courier as a mistake. Better to have used a Russian car for this. Which raised a couple of bigger questions. Why the hell had he been rousted at zero notice from his home to ferry a goddamned portable computer to Moscow? If everything was so goddamned secret, why were the Russians in on it? And if it were this goddamned important, why wait for a commercial flight? A State Department employee of long standing, he knew that it was foolish to question the logic of government operations. It was just that he was something of an idealist.

The rest of the trip went normally enough, right to the embassy, set in west-central Moscow, by the river. Inside the building, the two men went to the communications room, where the courier opened his bag, handed over its contents, and headed off for a shower and a bed, his questions never to be answered, he was sure.

The rest of the work had been done by Russians at remarkable speed. The phone line to Interfax led in turn to RVS, thence by military fiberoptic line all the way to Vladivostok, where another similar line, laid by Nippon Telephone & Telegraph, led to the Japanese home island of Honshu. The laptop had an internal modem, which was hooked to the newly installed line and switched on. Then it was time to wait, typically, though everything else had been done

at the best possible speed.

It was one-thirty when Ryan got home to Peregrine Cliff. He'd dispensed with his GSA driver, instead letting Special Agent Robberton drive him, and he pointed the Secret Service agent toward a guest room before heading to his own bed. Not surprisingly, Cathy was still awake.

"Jack, what's going on?"

"Don't you have to work tomorrow?" he asked as his first dodge. Coming home had been something of a mistake, if a necessary one. He needed fresh clothing more than anything else. A crisis was bad enough. For senior Administration officials to look frazzled and haggard was worse, and the press would surely pick up on it. Worst of all, it was visually obvious. The average Joe seeing the tape on network TV would know, and worried officers made for worried troopers, a lesson Ryan remembered from the Basic Officers' Course at Quantico. And so it was necessary to spend two hours in a car that would better have been spent on the sofa in his office.

Cathy rubbed her eyes in the darkness. "Nothing in the morning. I have to deliver a lecture tomorrow afternoon on how the new laser system works to some foreign visitors."

"From where?"

"Japan and Taiwan. We're licensing the calibration system we developed and—what's wrong?" she asked when her husband's head snapped around.

It's just paranoia, Ryan told himself. *Just a dumb coincidence , nothing more than that. Can't be anything else.* But he left the room without a word. Robberton was undressing when he got to the guest room, his holstered pistol hanging on the bedpost. The explanation took only a few seconds, and Robberton lifted a phone and dialed the Secret Service operations center two blocks from the White House. Ryan hadn't even known that his wife had a code name.

"SURGEON"—well, that was obvious, Ryan thought—"needs a friend tomorrow . . . at Johns Hopkins . . . oh, yeah, she'll be fine. See ya." Robberton hung up. "Good agent, Andrea Price. Single, willowy, brown hair, just joined the detail, eight years on the street. I worked with her dad when I was a new agent. Thanks for telling me that."

"See you around six-thirty, Paul."

"Yeah." Robberton lay right down, giving every indication of someone who could go to sleep at will. A useful talent, Ryan thought.

"What was *that* all about?" Caroline Ryan demanded when her husband returned to the bedroom. Jack sat down on the bed to explain.

"Cathy, uh, tomorrow at Hopkins, there's going to be somebody with you. Her name is Andrea Price. She's with the Secret Service. And she'll be following you around."

"Why?"

"Cathy, we have several problems now. The Japanese have attacked the U.S. Navy, and have occupied a couple of islands. Now, you can't—"

"They did *what?*"

"You can't tell that to anyone," her husband went on. "Do you understand?

You can't tell that to anybody, but since you are going to be with some Japanese people tomorrow, and because of who I am, the Secret Service wants to have somebody around you, just to make totally certain that things are okay." There would be more to it than that. The Secret Service was limited in manpower, and was not the least bit reticent about asking for assistance from local police forces. The Baltimore City Police, which maintained a high-profile presence at Johns Hopkins at all times—the hospital complex was not located in the best of areas—would probably assign a detective to back up Ms. Price.

"Jack, are we in any danger?" Cathy asked, remembering distant times and distant terrors, when she'd been pregnant with little Jack, when the Ulster Liberation Army had invaded their home. She remembered how pleased she'd been, and the shame she'd felt for it, when the last of them had been executed for multiple murder—ending, she'd thought, the worst and most fearful episode of her life.

For his part, Jack realized that it was just one more thing that they hadn't thought through. If America were at war, he was the National Security Advisor to the President, and, yes, that made him a high-value target. And his wife. And his three children. Irrational? What about war was not?

"I don't think so," he replied after a moment's consideration, "but, well, we might want to—we might have some additional houseguests. I don't know. I'll have to ask."

"You said they attacked our navy?"

"Yes, honey, but you can't—"

"That means war, doesn't it?"

"I don't know, honey." He was so exhausted that he was asleep thirty seconds after hitting the pillow, and his last conscious thought was a recognition that he knew very little of what he needed to know in order to answer his wife's questions, or, for that matter, his own.

Nobody was sleeping in lower Manhattan, at least nobody whom others might think important. It occurred to more than one tired trading executive to observe that they were really earning their money now, but the truth of the matter was that they were accomplishing very little. Proud executives all, they looked around trading rooms filled with computers whose collective value was something only the accounting department knew, and whose current utility was approximately zero. The European markets would soon open. And do what? everyone wondered. There was ordinarily a nightwatch here whose job it was to trade European equities, to keep track of the Eurodollar market, the commodities and metals market, and all the economic activity that occurred on the eastern side of the Atlantic as well as the western. On most days it was like the prologue to a book, a precursor to the real action, interesting but not overly vital except, perhaps, for flavor, because the real substance was decided here in New York City.

But none of that was true today. There was no guessing what would happen this day. Today Europe was the only game in town, and all of the rules had been swept away. The people who manned the computers for this part of the watch cycle were often considered second-string by those who showed up at

eight in the morning, which was both untrue and unfair, but in any community there had to be internal competition. This time, as they showed up at their accustomed and ungodly hour, the people who did this regularly noted the presence of front-row executives, and felt a combination of unease and exhilaration. Here was their chance to show their stuff. And here was their chance to screw up, live and in color.

It started exactly at four in the morning, Eastern Standard Time.

"Treasuries." The word was spoken simultaneously in twenty houses as European banks that still had enormous quantities of U.S. T-Bills as a hedge against the struggling European economies and their currencies suddenly felt quite uneasy about holding them. It seemed odd to some that the word had been slow to get out to their European cousins on Friday, but it was always that way, really, and the opening moves, everyone in New York thought, were actually rather cautious. It was soon clear why. There were plenty of "asks," but not many "bids." People were trying to sell Treasury Notes, but the interest in buying them was less enthusiastic. The result was prices that dropped just as fast as European confidence in the dollar.

"This is a steal, down three thirty-seconds already. What can we do?" That question, too, was asked in more than one place, and in each the answer was identical:

"Nothing," a word in every case spoken with disgust. There followed something else, usually a variant of *Fucking Europeans*, depending on the linguistic peculiarities of the senior executives in question. So it had started again, a run on the dollar. And America's biggest weapon for fighting back was out of business because of a computer program everyone had trusted. The No Smoking signs in several of the trading rooms were ignored. They didn't have to worry about ashes in the equipment, did they? They really couldn't use the fucking computers for anything today. It was, one executive snorted to a colleague, a good day for some maintenance on the systems. Fortunately, not everybody felt that way.

"Okay, here's where it started, then?" George Winston asked. Mark Gant ran his finger down the screen display.

"Bank of China, Bank of Hong Kong, Imperial Cathay Bank. They bought these up about four months ago, hedging against the yen, and very successfully, it appears. So, Friday, they dumped them to cash in and bought up a truckload of Japanese treasuries. With the movement that happened here, it looks like they turned twenty-two percent on the overall transaction."

They were the first, Winston saw, and being first in the trend, they cashed in big. That sort of hit was of a magnitude to cause more than a few expensive dinners in Hong Kong, a city well suited to the indulgence.

"Look innocent to you?" he asked Gant with a stifled yawn.

The executive shrugged. He was tired, but having the boss back in the saddle gave everyone new energy. "Innocent, hell! It's a brilliant move. They saw something coming, I suppose, or they were just lucky."

Luck, Winston thought, *there was always that*. Luck was real, something any senior trader would admit over drinks, usually after two or three, the number required to get past the usual "brilliance" bullshit. Sometimes it just felt right, and you did it because of that, and that's all there was to it. If you were lucky,

it worked, and if not, you hedged.

"Keep going," he ordered.

"Well, then other banks started doing the same thing." The Columbus Group had some of the most sophisticated computer systems on the Street, able to track any individual issue and category of issues over time, and Gant was a quintessential computer jockey. They next watched the sell-off of other T-Bills by other Asian banks. Interestingly, the Japanese banks were slower off the mark than he would have expected. It was no disgrace to be a little behind Hong Kong. The Chinese were good at this thing, especially those trained by the Brits, who had largely invented modern central banking and were still pretty slick at it. But the Japs were faster than the Thais, Winston thought, or at least they should have been . . .

It was instinct again, just the gut-call of a guy who knew how to work the Street: "Check Japanese treasuries, Mark."

Gant typed in a command, and the rapid advance in the value of the yen was obvious—so much so, in fact, that they hardly needed to track it via computer. "Is this what you want?"

Winston leaned down, looking at the screen. "Show me what Bank of China did when they cashed in."

"Well, they sold off to the Eurodollar market and bought yen. I mean, it's the obvious play—"

"But look who they bought the yen from," Winston suggested.

"And what they paid for it . . ." Gant turned his head and looked at his boss.

"You know why I was always honest here, Mark? You know why I never screwed around, not ever, not even once, not even when I had an in-the-bank sure thing?" George asked. There was more than one reason, of course, but why confuse the issue? He pressed his fingertip to the screen, actually leaving a fingerprint on the glass. He almost laughed at the symbolism. "That's why."

"That doesn't really mean anything. The Japanese knew they could jack it up some and—" Gant didn't quite get it yet, Winston saw. He needed to hear it in his own terms.

"Find the trend, Mark. Find the trend there." *Well, son of a bitch*, he told himself, heading to the men's room. *The trend is my friend.* Then he thought of something else:

Fuck with my financial market, will you?

It wasn't much consolation. He had given his business over to a predator, Winston realized, and the damage was well and truly done. His investors had trusted him and he had betrayed that trust. Washing his hands, he looked up into the mirror over the sink, seeing the eyes of a man who'd left his post, deserted his people.

But you're back now, by God, and there's a ton of work to be done.

Pasadena had finally sailed, more from embarrassment than anything else, Jones thought. He'd listened to Bart Mancuso's phone conversation with CINCPAC, explaining that the submarine was loaded with weapons and so filled up with food that her passageways were completely covered with cartons of canned goods, enough for sixty days or more at sea. That was a sign

of the not-so-good old days, Jones thought, remembering what the long deployments had been like, and so USS *Pasadena,* warship of the U.S. Navy, was now at sea, heading west at about twenty knots, using a quiet screw, not a speed screw, he thought. Otherwise he might have gotten a hit on her. The submarine had just passed within fifteen nautical miles of a SOSUS emplacement, one of the new ones that could hear the fetal heartbeat of an unborn whale calf. *Pasadena* didn't have orders yet, but she'd be in the right place if and when they came, with her crew running constant drills, leaning down, getting that at-sea feeling that came to you when you needed it. That was something.

Part of him dearly wished to be there, but that was part of his past now.

"I don't see nothin', sir." Jones blinked and looked back at the fan-fold page he'd selected.

"Well, you have to look for other things," Jones said. Only a Marine with a loaded pistol would get him out of SOSUS now. He'd made that clear to Admiral Mancuso, who had in turn made it clear to others. There had been a brief discussion of getting Jones a special commission, perhaps to Commander's rank, but Ron had quashed that idea himself. He'd left the Navy a Sonarman 1/c, and that was as good a rank as he'd ever wanted. Besides, it would not have looked good to the chiefs who really ran this place and had already accepted him as one of their own.

Oceanographic Technician 2/c Mike Boomer had been assigned to Jones as personal assistant. The kid had the makings of a good student, Dr. Jones thought, even if he'd left service in P-3s because of chronic airsickness.

"All these guys are using Prairie-Masker systems when they snort. It sounds like rain on the surface, remember? Rain on the surface is on the thousand-hertz line. So, we look for rain"—Jones slid a weather photo on the table —"where there ain't no rain. Then we look for sixty-hertz hits, little ones, short ones, brief ones, things you might otherwise ignore, that happen to be where the rain is. They use sixty-hertz generators and motors, right? Then we look for transients, just little dots that look like background noise, that are also where the rain is. Like this." He marked the sheet with a red pen, then looked to the station's command master chief, who was leaning over the other side of the table like a curious god.

"I heard stories about you when I was working the Ref-Tra at Dam Neck. I thought they were sea stories."

"Got a smoke?" the only civilian in the room asked. The master chief handed one over. The antismoking signs were gone and the ashtrays were out. SOSUS was at war, and perhaps the rest of PacFlt would soon catch up. *Jesus, I'm home,* Jones told himself. "Well, you know the difference between a sea story and a fairy tale."

"What's that, sir?" Boomer asked.

"A fairy tale starts, 'Once upon a time,' " Jones said with a smile, marking another 60hz hit on the sheet.

"And a sea story starts, 'No shit,' " the master chief concluded the joke. Except this little fucker really was that good. "I think you have enough to run a plot, Dr. Jones."

"I think we have a track on an SSK, Master Chief."

"Shame we can't prosecute."

Ron nodded slowly. "Yeah, me, too, but now we know we can get hits on the guys. It's still going to be a mother for P-3s to localize them. They're good boats, and that's a fact." They couldn't get too carried away. All SOSUS did was to generate lines of bearing. If more than one hydrophone set got a hit on the same sound source, you could rapidly triangulate bearings into locations, but those locations were circles, not points, and the circles were as much as twenty miles across. It was just physics, neither friend nor enemy. The sounds that most easily traveled long distances were of the lower frequencies, and for any sort of wave, only the higher frequencies gave the best resolution.

"We know where to look the next time he snorts, too. Anyway, you can call Fleet Operations and tell them there's nobody close to the carriers. Here, here, here, surface groups." He made marks on the paper. "Also heading west at good speed, and not being real covert about it. All target-track bearings are opening. It's a complete disengagement. They're not looking for any more trouble."

"Maybe that's good."

Jones crushed out the cigarette. "Yeah, Master Chief, maybe it is, if the flags get their shit together."

The funny part was that things had actually calmed down. Morning TV coverage of the Wall Street crash was clinically precise, and the analysis exquisite, probably better than Americans were getting at home, Clark thought, what with all the economics professors doing the play-by-play, along with a senior banker for color commentary. Perhaps, a newspaper editorialized, America will rethink her stance vis-à-vis Japan. Was it not clear that the two countries genuinely needed each other, especially now, and that a strong Japan served American interests as well as local ones? Prime Minister Goto was quoted in a conciliatory way, though not in front of a camera, in language that was for him decidedly unusual and widely covered for that reason.

"Fucking Twilight Zone," Chavez observed in a quiet moment, breaking language cover because he just had to. What the hell, he thought, they were under Russian operational control now. What rules did matter now?

"*Russkiy,*" his senior replied tolerantly.

"*Da, tovarisch,*" was the grumbled reply. "Do you have any idea what's going on. Is it a war or not?"

"The rules sure are funny," Clark said, in English, he realized. *It's getting to me, too.*

There were other *gaijin* back on the street, most of them apparently Americans, and the looks they were getting were back to the ordinary suspicion and curiosity, the current hostility level down somewhat from the previous week.

"So what do we do?"

"We try the Interfax number our friend gave us." Clark had his report all typed up. It was the only thing he knew to do, except for keeping his contacts active and fishing for information. Surely Washington knew what he had to

tell them, he thought, going back into the hotel. The clerk smiled and bowed, a little more politely this time, as they headed to the elevator. Two minutes later they were in the room. Clark took the laptop from its carry-case, inserted the phone plug in the back, and switched it on. Another minute, and the internal modem dialed the number he'd gotten over breakfast, linking to a line across the Sea of Japan to the Siberian mainland, thence to Moscow, he supposed. He heard the electronic trilling of a ringing phone and waited for linkup.

The station chief had gotten over the cringing associated with having a Russian intelligence officer in the embassy communications room, but he hadn't quite gotten to the whimsy stage yet. The noise from the computer startled him.

"Very clever technique," the visitor said.

"We try."

Anyone who had ever used a modem would recognize the sound, the rasp of running water, or perhaps a floorpolishing brush, just a digital hiss, really, of two electronic units attempting to synchronize themselves so that data could be exchanged. Sometimes it took but a few seconds, sometimes as many as five or even ten. In fact, it only took one second or so with these units, and the remaining hiss was actually the random-appearing digital code of 19,200 characters of information crossing the fiberoptic line per second—first in one direction, then the other. When the real transmission was concluded, formal lockup was achieved, and the guy at the other end sent his twenty column-inches for the day. Just to be on the safe side, the Russians would make sure that the report would be carried in two papers the next day, on page 3 in both cases. No sense in being too obvious.

Then came the hard part for the CIA station chief. On command, he printed two copies of the same report, one of which went to the RVS officer. Was Mary Pat going through change-of-life or something?

"His Russian is very literary, even classical. Who taught him my language?"

"I honestly don't know," the station chief lied, successfully as it turned out. The hell of it was, the Russian was right. That occasioned a frown.

"Want me to help with the translation?"

Shit. He smiled. "Sure, why not?"

"Ryan." A whole five hours of sleep, Jack grumped, lifting the secure carphone. Well, at least he wasn't doing the driving.

"Mary Pat here. We have something. It'll be on your desk when you get there."

"How good?"

"It's a start," the DDO said. She was very economical in her use of words. Nobody really trusted radiophones, secure or not.

“Hello, Dr. Ryan. I’m Andrea Price.” The agent was already dressed in a lab coat, complete with picture-pass clipped to the lapel, which she held up. “My uncle is a doctor, GP in Wisconsin. I think he’d like this.” She smiled.

“Do I have anything to worry about?”

“I really don’t think so,” Agent Price said, still smiling. Protectees didn’t like to see worried security personnel, she knew.

“What about my children?”

“There are two agents outside their school, and one more is in the house across from the day-care center for your little one,” the agent explained. “Please don’t worry. They pay us to be paranoid, and we’re almost always wrong, but it’s like in your business. You always want to be wrong on the safe side, right?”

“And my visitors?” Cathy asked.

“Can I make a suggestion?”

“Yes.”

“Get them all Hopkins lab coats, souvenirs, like. I’ll eyeball them all when they change.” That was pretty clever, Cathy Ryan thought.

“You’re carrying a gun?”

“Always,” Andrea Price confirmed. “But I’ve never had to use it, never even took it out for an arrest. Just think of me as a fly on the wall,” she said.

More like a falcon, Professor Ryan thought, but at least a tame one.

“How are we supposed to do that, John?” Chavez asked in English. The shower was running. Ding was sitting on the floor, and John on the toilet.

“Well, we seen ’em already, haven’t we?” the senior officer pointed out.

“Yeah, in the fuckin’ factory!”

“Well, we just have to find out where they went.” On the face of it, the statement was reasonable enough. They just had to determine how many and where, and oh, by the way, whether or not there were really nukes riding on the nose. No big deal. All they knew was that they were SS-19-type launchers, the new improved version thereof, and that they’d left the factory by rail. Of course, the country had over twenty-eight thousand kilometers of rail lines. It would have to wait. Intelligence officers often worked banker’s hours, and this was one of those cases. Clark decided to get into the shower to clean off before heading for bed. He didn’t know what to do, yet, or how to go about it, but worrying himself to death would not improve his chances, and he’d long since learned that he worked better with a full eight hours under his belt, and occasionally had a creative thought while showering. Sooner or later Ding might learn those tricks as well, he thought, seeing the expression on the kid’s face.

“Hi, Betsy,” Jack said to the lady waiting in his office’s anteroom. “You’re up early. And who are you?”

“Chris Scott. Betsy and I work together.”

Jack waved them into his office, first checking his fax machine to see if

Mary Pat had transmitted the information from Clark and Chavez, and, seeing it there, decided it could wait. He knew Betsy Fleming from his CIA days as a self-taught expert on strategic weapons. He supposed Chris Scott was one of the kids recruited from some university with a degree in what Betsy had learned the hard way. At least the younger one was polite about it, saying that he worked *with* Betsy. So had Ryan, once, years ago, while concerned with arms-control negotiations. "Okay, what do we have?"

"Here's what they call the H-11 space booster." Scott opened his case and pulled out some photos. Good ones, Ryan saw at once, made with real film at close range, not the electronic sort shot through a hole in someone's pocket. It wasn't hard to tell the difference, and Ryan immediately recognized an old friend he'd thought dead and decently buried less than a week before.

"Sure as hell, the SS-19. A lot prettier this way, too." Another photo showed a string of them on the assembly building's floor. Jack counted them and grimaced. "What else do I need to know?"

"Here," Betsy said. "Check out the business end."

"Looks normal," Ryan observed.

"That's the point. The nose assembly is normal," Scott pointed out. "Normal for supporting a warhead bus, not for a commo-sat payload. We wrote that up a while back, but nobody paid any attention to it," the technical analyst added. "The rest of the bird's been fully re-engineered. We have estimates for the performance enhancements."

"Short version?"

"Six or seven MIRVs each and a range of just over ten thousand kilometers," Mrs. Fleming replied. "Worst-case, but realistic."

"That's a lot. Has the missile been certified, tested? Have they tested a bus that we know of?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"No data. We have partial stuff on flight tests of the launcher from surveillance in the Pacific, stuff AMBER BALL caught, but it's equivocal on several issues," Scott told him.

"Total birds turned out?"

"Twenty-five we know about. Of those, three have been used up in flight tests, and two are at their launch facility being mated up with orbital payloads. That leaves twenty."

"What payloads?" Ryan asked almost on a whim.

"The NASA guys think they are survey satellites. Real-time-capable photo-sats. So probably they are," Betsy said darkly.

"And so probably they've decided to enter the overhead-intelligence business. Well, that makes sense, doesn't it?" Ryan made a couple of notes. "Okay, the downside, worst-case threat is twenty launchers with seven MIRVs each, for a total of one hundred forty?"

"Correct, Dr. Ryan." Both were professional enough that they didn't editorialize on how bad that threat was. Japan had the theoretical capacity to cut the hearts out of one hundred forty American cities. America could quickly reconstitute the ability to turn their Home Islands into smoke and fire as well, but that wasn't a hell of a lot of consolation, was it? Forty-plus years of MAD, thought to be ended less than seven days before, and now it was back again,

Ryan thought. Wasn't that just wonderful?

"Do you know anything about the assets that produced these photos?"

"Jack," Betsy said in her normal June Cleaver voice, "you know I never ask. But whoever it was, was overt. You can tell that from the photos. These weren't done with a Minox. Somebody covered as a reporter, I bet. Don't worry. I won't tell." Her usual impish smile. She had been around long enough that she knew all the tricks.

"They're obviously high-quality photos," Chris Scott went on, wondering how the hell Betsy had the clout to call this man by his first name. "Slow, small-grain film, like what a reporter uses. They let NASA guys into the factory, too. They wanted us to know."

"Sure as hell." Mrs. Fleming nodded agreement.

And the Russians, Ryan reminded himself. *Why them?* "Anything else?"

"Yeah, this." Scott handed over two more photos. It showed a pair of modified railroad flatcars. One had a crane on it. The other showed the hardpoints for installing another. "They evidently transport by rail instead of truck. I had a guy look at the railcar. It's apparently standard gauge."

"What do you mean?" Ryan asked.

"The width between the rails. Standard gauge is what we use and most of the rest of the world. Most of the railways in Japan are narrow gauge. Funny they didn't copy the road transporters the Russians made for the beast," Scott said. "Maybe their roads are too narrow or maybe they just prefer to do it this way. There's a standard-gauge line from here to Yoshinobu. I was a little surprised by the rigging gear. The cradles in the railcar seem to roughly match the dimensions of the transport cocoon that the Russians designed for the beast. So they copied everything but the transporter. That's all we have, sir."

"Where are you off to next?"

"We're huddling across the river with the guys at NRO," Chris Scott answered.

"Good," Ryan said. He pointed at both of them. "You tell them this one's hotter 'n' hell. I want these things found and found yesterday."

"You know they'll try, Jack. And they may have done us a favor by rolling these things out on rails," Betsy Fleming said as she stood.

Jack organized the photos and asked for another complete set before he dismissed his visitors. Then he checked his watch and called Moscow. Ryan supposed that Sergey was working long hours, too.

"Why the hell," he began, "did you sell them the SS-19 design?"

The reply was harsh. Perhaps Golovko was sleep-deprived as well. "For money, of course. The same reason you sold them Aegis, the F-15, and all—"

Ryan grimaced, mainly at the justice in the retort. "Thanks, pal. I guess I deserved that. We estimate they have twenty available."

"That would be about right, but we haven't had people visit their factory yet."

"We have," Ryan told him. "Want some pictures?"

"Of course, Ivan Emmetovich."

"They'll be on your desk tomorrow," Jack promised. "I have our estimate. I'd like to hear what your people think." He paused and then went on. "We are worst-casing at seven RVs per missile, for a total of one-forty."

"Enough for both of us," Golovko observed. "Remember when we first met, negotiating to remove those fucking things?" He heard Ryan's snort over the phone. He didn't hear what his colleague was thinking.

The first time I was close to those things, aboard your missile submarine, Red October, *yeah, I remember that. I remember feeling my skin crawl like I was in the presence of Lucifer himself.* He'd never had the least bit of affection for ballistic weapons. Oh, sure, maybe they'd kept the peace for forty years, maybe the thought of them had deterred their owners from the intemperate thoughts that had plagued chiefs of state for all of human history. Or just as likely, mankind had just been lucky, for once. "Jack, this is getting rather serious," Golovko said. "By the way, our officer met with your officers. He reports favorably on them—and thank you, by the way, for the copy of their report. It included data we did not have. Not vitally important, but interesting even so. So tell me, do they know to seek out these rockets?"

"The order went out," Ryan assured him.

"To my people as well, Ivan Emmetovich. We will find them, never fear," Golovko felt the need to add. He had to be thinking the same thing: the only reason the missiles had not been used was that both sides had possessed them, because it was like threatening a mirror. That was no longer true, was it? And so came Ryan's question:

"And then what?" he asked darkly. "What do we do then?"

"Do you not say in your language, 'One thing at a time'?"

Isn't this just great? Now I have a friggin' Russian *trying to cheer me up!*

"Thank you, Sergey Nikolay'ch. Perhaps I deserved that as well."

"So why did we sell Citibank?" George Winston asked.

"Well, he said to look out for banks that were vulnerable to currency fluctuations," Gant replied. "He was right. We got out just in time. Look, see for yourself." The trader typed another instruction into his terminal and was rewarded with a graphic depiction of what First National City Bank stock had done on Friday, and sure enough it had dropped off the table in one big hurry, largely because Columbus, which had purchased the issue in large quantities over the preceding five weeks, had held quite a bit, and in selling it had shaken faith in the stock badly. "Anyway, that set off an alarm in our program —"

"Mark, Citibank is one of the benchmark stocks in the model, isn't it?" Winston asked calmly. There was nothing to be gained by leaning on Mark too hard.

"Oh." His eyes opened a little wider. "Well, yes, it is, isn't it?"

That was when a very bright light blinked on in Winston's mind. It was not widely known how the "expert systems" kept track of the market. They worked in several interactive ways, monitoring both the market as a whole and also modeling benchmark stocks more closely, as general indicators of developing market trends. Those were stocks which over time had tracked closely with what everything else was doing, with a bias toward general stability, those that both dropped and rose more slowly than more speculative issues, steady performers. There were two reasons for it, and one glaring

mistake. The reasons were that while the market fluctuated every day, even in the most favorable of circumstances, the idea was to not only bag an occasional killing on a high-flyer, but also to hedge your money on safe stocks —not that any stock was truly safe, as Friday had proven—when everything else became unsettled. For those reasons, the benchmark stocks were those that over time had provided safe havens. The mistake was a common one: dice have no memory. Those benchmark stocks were such because the companies they represented had historically good management. Management could change over time. So it was not the stocks that were stable. It was the management, and that was only something from the past, whose currency had to be examined periodically—despite which, those stocks were used to grade trends. And a trend was a trend only *because people thought it was*, and in thinking so, they made it so. Winston had regarded benchmark stocks only as predictors of what the *people* in the market would do, and for him trends were always psychological, predictors of how people would follow an artificial model, not the performance of the model itself. Gant, he realized, didn't quite see it that way, like so many of the technical traders.

And in selling off Citibank, Columbus had activated a little alarm in its own computer-trading system. And even someone as bright as Mark had forgotten that Citibank was part of the goddamned model!

"Show me other bank stocks," Winston ordered.

"Well, Chemical went next," Gant told him, pulling up that track as well. "Then Manny-Hanny, and then others, too. Anyway, we saw it coming, and we jumped into metals and the gold stocks. You know, when the dust settles, it's going to turn out that we did okay. Not great, but pretty okay," Gant said, calling up his executive program for overall transactions, wanting to show something he'd done right. "I took the money from a quick flip on Silicon Alchemy and laid this put on GM and—"

Winston patted him on the shoulder. "Save that for later, Mark. I can see it was a good play."

"Anyway, we were ahead of the trends all the way. Yeah, we got a little hurt when the calls came in and we had to dump a lot of solid things, but that happened to everybody—"

"You don't see it, do you?"

"See what, George?"

"We *were* the trend."

Mark Gant blinked his eyes, and Winston could tell.

He didn't see it.

29

Written Records

The presentation went very well, and at the end of it Cathy Ryan was handed an exquisitely wrapped box by the Professor of Ophthalmic Surgery from Chiba University, who led the Japanese delegation. Unwrapping it, she found a scarf of watered blue silk, embroidered with gold thread. It looked to be more than a hundred years old.

"The blue goes so well with your eyes, Professor Ryan," her colleague said with a smile of genuine admiration. "I fear it is not a sufficiently valuable gift for what I have learned from you today. I have hundreds of diabetic patients at my hospital. With this technique we can hope to restore sight for most of them. A magnificent breakthrough, Professor." He bowed, formally and with clear respect.

"Well, the lasers come from your country," Cathy replied. She wasn't sure what emotion she was supposed to have. The gift was stunning. The man was as sincere as he could be, and his country might be at war with hers. But why wasn't it on the news? If there were a war, why was this foreigner not under arrest? Was she supposed to be gracious to him as a learned colleague or hostile to him as an enemy? What the hell was going on? She looked over at Andrea Price, who just leaned against the back wall and smiled, her arms crossed across her chest.

"And you have taught us how to use them more efficiently. A stunning piece of applied research." The Japanese professor turned to the others and raised his hands. The assembled multitude applauded, and a blushing Caroline Ryan started thinking that she just might get the Lasker statuette for her mantelpiece after all. Everyone shook her hand before leaving for the bus that waited to take them back to the Stouffer's on Pratt Street.

"Can I see it?" Special Agent Price asked after all were gone and the door safely closed. Cathy handed the scarf over. "Lovely. You'll have to buy a new dress to go with it."

"So there never was anything to worry about," Dr. Ryan observed. Interestingly, once she'd gotten fifteen seconds into her lecture, she'd forgotten about it anyway. Wasn't that interesting?

"No, like I told you, I didn't expect anything." Price handed the scarf back, not without some reluctance. The little professor was right, she thought. It did go nicely with her eyes. "Jack Ryan's wife" was all she'd heard, and then some. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Retinal surgery?" Cathy closed her notebook. "I started off working the front end of the eye, right up to the time little Jack was born. Then I had an idea about how the retina is attached naturally and how we might reattach

bad ones. Then we started looking at how to fix blood vessels. Bernie let me run with it, and I got a research grant from NIH to play with, and one thing led to another . . ."

"And now you're the best in the world at this," Price concluded the story.

"Until somebody with better hands comes along and learns how to do it, yes." Cathy smiled. "I suppose I am, for a few more months, anyway."

"So how's the champ?" Bernie Katz asked, entering the room and seeing Price for the first time. The pass on her coat puzzled him. "Do I know you?"

"Andrea Price." The agent gave Katz a quick and thorough visual check before shaking hands. He actually found it flattering until she added, "Secret Service."

"Where were the cops like you when I was a kid?" the surgeon asked gallantly.

"Bernie was one of my first mentors here. He's department chairman now," Cathy explained.

"About to be overtaken in prestige by my colleague. I come bearing good news. I have a spy on the Lasker Committee. You're in the finals, Cathy."

"What's a Lasker?" Price asked.

"There's one step up from a Lasker Prize," Bernie told her. "You have to go to Stockholm to collect it."

"Bernie, I'll never have one of those. A Lasker is hard enough."

"So keep researching, girl!" Katz hugged her and left.

I want it, I want it, I want it! Cathy told herself silently. She didn't have to give voice to the words. It was plain for Special Agent Price to see. Damn, didn't this beat guarding politicians?

"Can I watch one of your procedures?"

"If you want. Anyway, come on." Cathy led her back to her office, not minding her at all now. On the way they walked through the clinic, then one of the labs. In the middle of a corridor, Dr. Ryan stopped dead in her tracks, reached into her pocket, and pulled out a small notebook.

"Did I miss something?" Price asked. She knew she was talking too much, but it took time to learn the habits of your protectees. She also read Cathy Ryan as the type who didn't like being protected, and so needed to be made comfortable about it.

"You'll have to get used to me," Professor Ryan said, smiling as she scribbled a few notes. "Whenever I have an idea, I write it down right away."

"Don't trust your memory?"

"Never. You can't trust your memory with things that affect live patients. One of the first things they teach you in medical school." Cathy shook her head as she finished up. "Not in this business. Too many opportunities to screw up. If you don't write it down, then it never happened."

That sounded like a good lesson to remember, Andrea Price told herself, following her principal down the corridor. The code name, SURGEON, was perfect for her. Precise, smart, thorough. She might even have made a good agent except for her evident discomfort around guns.

It was already a regular routine, and in many ways that was not new. For a

generation, the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force had responded to Russian fighter activity out of the forward base at Dolinsk Sokol—at first in cooperation with the USAF—and one of the regular tracks taken by the Soviet Air Force had earned the name "Tokyo Express," probably an unknowing reference to a term invented in 1942 by the United States Marines on Guadalcanal.

For security reasons the E-767s were based with the 6th Air Wing at Komatsu, near Tokyo, but the two F-15Js that operated under the control of the E-767 now aloft over the town of Nemuro at the northeast tip of the island of Hokkaido were actually based on the Home Island at Chitose. These were a hundred miles offshore, and each carried eight missiles, four each of heat-seekers and radar-homers. All were warshots now, requiring only a target.

It was after midnight, local time. The pilots were well rested and alert, comfortably strapped into their ejection seats, their sharp eyes scanning the darkness while fingers made delicate course-corrections on the sticks. Their own targeting radars were switched off, and though their aircraft still flashed with anticollision strobe lights, those were easily switched off should the necessity arise, making them visually nonexistent.

"Eagle One-Five," the digital radio told the element leader, "check out commercial traffic fifty kilometers zerothree-five your position, course two-one-five, angels threesix."

"Roger, Kami," the pilot replied on keying his radio. Kami, the call sign for the orbiting surveillance aircraft, was a word with many meanings, most of them supernatural like "soul" or "spirit." And so they had rapidly become the modern manifestation of the spirits guarding their country, with the F-15Js as the strong arms that gave power to the will of those spirits. On command, the two fighters came right, climbing on a shallow, fuel-efficient slope for five minutes until they were at thirty-seven thousand feet, cruising outbound from their country at five hundred knots, their radars still off, but now they received a digital feed from the Kami that appeared on their own sets, one more of the new innovations and something the Americans didn't have. The element leader alternated his eyes up and down. A pity, he thought, that the hand-off display didn't integrate with his head-up display. Maybe the next modification would do that.

"There," he said over his low-power radio.

"I have it," his wingman acknowledged.

Both fighters turned to the left now, descending slowly behind what appeared to be an Air Canada 767-ER. Yes, the floodlit tail showed the maple-leaf logo of that airline. Probably the regular transpolar flight out of Toronto International into Narita. The timing was about right. They approached from almost directly astern—not quite exactly, lest an overly quick overtake result in a ramming—and the buffet told them that they were in the wake turbulence of a "heavy," a wide-bodied commercial transport. The flight leader closed until he could see the line of cabin lights, and the huge engine under each wing, and the stubby nose of the Boeing product. He keyed his radio again.

"Kami, Eagle One-Five."

"Eagle."

"Positive identification, Air Canada Seven-Six-Seven Echo Romeo, inbound

at indicated course and speed." Interestingly, the drill for the BARCAP—Barrier Combat Air Patrol—was to use English. That was the international language of aviation. All their pilots spoke it, and it worked better for important communications.

"Roger." And on further command, the fighters broke off to their programmed patrol area. The Canadian pilot of the airliner would never know that two armed fighters had closed to within three hundred meters of his aircraft—but then he had no reason to expect that any would, because the world was at peace, at least this part of it.

For their part, the fighter-drivers accepted their new duties phlegmatically along with the modification in their daily patterns of existence. For the indefinite future no less than two fighters would hold this patrol station, with two more back at Chitose at plus-five alert, and another four at plusthirty. Their wing commander was pressing for permission to increase his alert-status further still, for despite what Tokyo said, their nation *was* at war, and that was what he'd told his people. The Americans were formidable adversaries, he'd said in his first lecture to his pilots and senior ground-staff. Clever ones, devious, and dangerously aggressive. Worst of all, at their best they were utterly unpredictable, the reverse of the Japanese who, he'd gone on, tended to be highly predictable. Perhaps that was why he'd been posted to this command, the pilots thought. If things went further, the first contact with hostile American forces would be here. He wanted to be ready for it, despite the huge price of money, fuel, and fatigue that attended it. The pilots thoroughly approved. War was a serious business, and though new to it, they didn't shrink from its responsibilities.

The time factor would soon become his greatest frustration, Ryan thought. Tokyo was fourteen hours ahead of Washington. It was dark there now, and the next day, and whatever clever idea he might come up with would have to wait hours until implementation. The same was true in the IO, but at least he had direct comms to Admiral Dubro's battle force. Getting word to Clark and Chavez meant going via Moscow, and then farther either by contact via RVS officer in Tokyo—not something to be done too frequently—or by reverse-modem message whenever Clark lit up his computer for a dispatch to the Interfax News Agency. There would necessarily be a time lag in anything he did, and that could get people killed.

It was about information. It always was, always would be. The real trick was in finding out what was going on. What was the other side doing? What were they thinking?

What is it that they want to accomplish? he asked himself.

War was always about economics, one of the few things that Marx had gotten right. It was just greed, really, as he'd told the President, an armed robbery writ large. At the nation-state level, the terms were couched in terms such as Manifest Destiny or *Lebensraum* or other political slogans to grab the attention and ardor of the masses, but that's what it came down to: *They have it. We want it. Let's get it.*

And yet the Mariana Islands weren't worth it. They were simply not worth

the political or economic cost. This affair would ipso facto cost Japan her most lucrative trading partner. There could be no recovery from this, not for years. The market positions so carefully established and exploited since the 1960s would be obliterated by something politely termed public resentment but far more deeply felt than that. For what possible reason could a country so married to the idea of business turn its back on practical considerations?

But war is never rational, Jack. You told the President that yourself.

"So tell me, what the hell are they thinking?" he commanded, instantly regretting the profanity.

They were in a basement conference room. For the first meeting of the working group, Scott Adler was absent, off with Secretary Hanson. There were two National Intelligence Officers, and four people from State, and they looked as puzzled and bemused as he did, Ryan thought. Wasn't that just great. For several seconds nothing happened. Hardly unexpected, Jack thought. It was always a matter of clinical interest for him when he asked for real opinions from a group of bureaucrats: who would say what?

"They're mad and they're scared." It was Chris Cook, one of the commercial guys from State. He'd done two tours at the embassy in Tokyo, spoke the language passably well, and had run point on several rounds of the trade negotiations, always taking back seat to senior men and women, but usually the guy who did the real work. That was how things were, and Jack remembered resenting that others sometimes got the credit for his ideas. He nodded at the comment, seeing that the others around the table did the same, grateful that someone else had taken the initiative.

"I know why they're mad. Tell me why they're scared."

"Well, hell, they still have the Russians close by, and the Chinese, both still major powers, but we've withdrawn from the Western Pacific, right? In their mind, it leaves them high and dry—and now it looks to them like we've turned on them. That makes us potential enemies, too, doesn't it? Where does that leave them? What real friends do they have?"

"Why take the Marianas?" Jack asked, reminding himself that Japan had not *been* attacked by those countries in historically recent times, but had done so herself to all of them. Cook had made a perhaps unintended point. How did Japan respond to outside threats? By attacking first.

"It gives them defensive depth, bases outside their home islands."

Okay, that makes sense, Jack thought. Satellite photos less than an hour old hung on the wall. There were fighters now on the airstrips at Saipan and Guam, along with E-2C Hawkeye airborne-early-warning birds of the same type that operated off American carriers. That created a defensive barrier that extended twelve hundred miles almost due south from Tokyo. It could be seen as a formidable wall against American attacks, and was in essence a reduced version of Japanese grand strategy in the Second World War. Again Cook had made a sound observation.

"But are we really a threat to them?" he asked.

"We certainly are now," Cook replied.

"Because they forced us to be," one of the NIOs snarled, entering the discussion. Cook leaned across the table at him.

"Why do people start wars? Because they're afraid of something! For Christ's

sake, they've gone through more governments in the last five years than the Italians. The country is politically unstable. They have real economic problems. Until recently their currency's been in trouble. Their stock market's gone down the tubes because of our trade legislation, and we've faced them with financial ruin, and you ask *why* they got a little paranoid? If something like this happened to us, what the hell would we do?" the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State demanded, rather cowing the National Intelligence Officer, Ryan saw.

Good, he thought. A lively discussion was usually helpful, as the hottest fire made the strongest steel.

"My sympathy for the other side is mitigated by the fact that they have invaded U.S. territory and violated the human rights of American citizens." The reply to Cook's tirade struck Ryan as somewhat arch. The response was that of a lead hound on the scent of a crippled fox, able to play with the quarry instead of the other way around for a change. Always a good feeling.

"And we've already put a couple hundred thousand of their citizens out of work. What about their rights?"

"Fuck their rights! Whose side are you on, Cook?"

The DASS just leaned back into his chair and smiled as he slid the knife in. "I thought I was supposed to tell everyone what they're thinking. Isn't that what we're here for? What they're thinking is that we've jerked them around, bashed them, belittled them, and generally let them know that we tolerate them through sufferance and not respect since before I was born. We've never dealt with them as equals, and they think that they deserve better from us, and they don't like it. And you know," Cook went on, "I don't blame them for feeling that way. Okay, so now they've lashed out. That's wrong, and I deplore it, but we need to recognize that they tried to do it in as nonlethal a way as possible, consistent with their strategic goals. That's something we need to consider here, isn't it?"

"The Ambassador says his country is willing to let it stop here," Ryan told them, noting the look in Cook's eyes. Clearly he'd been thinking about the situation, and that was good. "Are they serious?"

He'd asked another tough question again, something that the people around the table didn't much like. Tough questions required definitive answers, and such answers could often be wrong. It was toughest for the NIOs. The National Intelligence Officers were senior people from CIA, DIA, or NSA, usually. One of them was always with the President to give him an opinion in the event of a rapidly evolving crisis. They were supposed to be experts in their fields, and they were, as, for that matter, was Ryan, who'd been an NIO himself. But there was a problem with such people. An NIO was generally a serious, tough-minded man or woman. They didn't fear death, but they *did* fear being wrong on a hard call. For that reason, even putting a gun to one's head didn't guarantee an unequivocal answer to a tough question. He looked from face to face, seeing that Cook did the same, with contempt on his face.

"Yes, sir, I think it likely that they are. It's also likely that they will offer us something back. They know that they have to let us save face here, too. We can count on it, and that will work in our favor if we choose to negotiate with them."

"Would you recommend that?"

A smile and a nod. "It never hurts you to talk with somebody, no matter what the situation is, does it? I'm a State Department puke, remember? I have to recommend that. I don't know the military side. I don't know if we can contest this thing or not. I presume we can, and that they know we can, and that they know they're gambling, and that they're even more scared than we are. We can use that in our favor."

"What can we press for?" Ryan asked, chewing on his pen.

"Status quo ante," Cook replied at once. "Complete withdrawal from the Marianas, restoration of the islands and their citizens to U.S. rule, reparations to the families of the people killed, punishment of those responsible for their deaths." Even the NIOs nodded at that, Ryan saw. He was already starting to like Cook. He spoke his mind, and what he said had a logic to it.

"What will we get?" Again the answer was plain and simple.

"Less." *Where the hell has Scott Adler been hiding this guy?* Ryan thought. *He speaks my language.* "They have to give us something, but they won't give it all back."

"And if we press?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"If we want it all back, then we may have to fight for it," Cook said. "If you want my opinion, that's dangerous." Ryan excused the facile conclusion. He was, after all, a State Department puke, and part of that culture.

"Will the Ambassador have the clout to negotiate?"

"I think so, yes," Cook said after a moment. "He has a good staff, he's a very senior professional diplomat. He knows Washington and he knows how to play in the bigs. That's why they sent him here."

Jaw, jaw is better than war, war. Jack remembered the words of Winston Churchill. And that was true, especially if the former did not entirely preclude the threat of the latter.

"Okay," Ryan said. "I have some other things that need doing. You guys stay here. I want a position paper. I want options. I want multiple opening positions for both sides. I want end-game scenarios. I want likely responses on their part to *theoretical* military moves on our part. Most of all," he said directly to the NIOs, "I want a feel for their nuclear capacity, and the conditions under which they might feel the need to make use of it."

"What warning will we have?" The question, surprisingly, came from Cook. The answer, surprisingly, came from the other NIO, who felt the need, now, to show something of what he knew.

"The Cobra Dane radar on Shemya still works. So do the DSPS satellites. We'll get launch warning and impact prediction if it comes to that. Dr. Ryan, have we done anything—"

"The Air Force has air-launched cruise missiles in the stockpile. They would be carried in by B-1 bombers. We also have the option of rearming Tomahawk cruise missiles with W-80 warheads as well for launch by submarines or surface ships. The Russians know that we may exercise that option, and they will not object so long as we keep it quiet."

"That's an escalation," Cook warned. "We want to be careful about that."

"What about their SS-19s?" the second NIO inquired delicately.

"They think they need them. It will not be easy to talk them out of 'em."

Cook looked around the table. “We have nuked their country, remember. It’s a very sensitive subject, and we’re dealing with people motivated by paranoia. I recommend caution on that issue.”

“Noted,” Ryan said as he stood. “You know what I want, people. Get to work.” It felt a little good to be able to give an order like that, but less so to have to do it, and less still in anticipation of the answers he would receive for his questions. But you had to start somewhere.

“Another hard day?” Nomuri asked.

“I thought with Yamata gone it would get easier,” Kazuo said. He shook his head, leaning back against the fine wood rim of the tub. “I was wrong.”

The others nodded curt agreement at their friend’s observation, and they all missed Taoka’s sexual stories now. They needed the distraction, but only Nomuri knew why they had ended.

“So what is going on? Now Goto says that we need America. Last week they were our enemies, and now we are friendly again? This is very confusing for a simple person like me,” Chet said, rubbing his closed eyes, and wondering what the bait would draw. Developing his rapport with these men had not been easy because they and he were so different, and it was to be expected that he would envy them, and they him. He was an entrepreneur, they thought, who ran his own business, and they the senior salarymen of major corporations. They had security. He had independence. They were expected to be overworked. He marched to his own drum. They had more money. He had less stress. And now they had knowledge, and he did not.

“We have confronted America,” one of their number said.

“So I gather. Isn’t that highly dangerous?”

“In the short term, yes,” Taoka said, letting the blisteringly hot water soothe his stress-knotted muscles. “Though I think we have already won.”

“But won *what*, my friend? I feel I have started watching a mystery in the middle of the show, and all I know is that there’s a pretty, mysterious girl on the train to Osaka.” He referred to a dramatic convention in Japan, mysteries based on how efficiently the nation’s trains ran.

“Well, as my boss tells it,” another senior aide decided to explain, “it means true independence for our country.”

“Aren’t we independent already?” Nomuri asked in open puzzlement. “There are hardly any American soldiers here to annoy us anymore.”

“And those under guard now,” Taoka observed. “You don’t understand. Independence means more than politics. It means economic independence, too. It means not going to others for what we need to survive.”

“It means the Northern Resource Area, Kazuo,” another of their number said, going too far, and knowing it from the way two pairs of eyes opened in warning.

“I wish it would mean shorter days and getting home on time for a change instead of sleeping in a damned coffintube two or three nights a week,” one of the more alert ones said to alter the course of the conversation.

Taoka grunted. “Yes, how can one get a girl in there?” The guffaws that followed that one were forced, Nomuri, thought.

"You salarymen and your secrets! Ha!" the CIA officer snapped. "I hope you do better with your women." He paused. "Will all this affect my business?" A good idea, he thought, to ask a question like that.

"For the better, I should think," Kazuo said. There was general agreement on that point.

"We must all be patient. There will be hard times before the good ones truly come."

"But they *will* come," another suggested confidently. "The really hard part is behind us."

Not if I can help it, Nomuri didn't tell them. But what the hell did "Northern Resource Area" mean? It was so like the intelligence business that he knew he'd heard something important, quite without knowing what the hell it was all about. Then he had to cover himself with a lengthy discourse on his new relationship with the hostess, to be sure, again, that they would remember this, and not his questions.

It was a shame to have to arrive in the darkness, but that was mere fortune. Half of the fleet had diverted for Guam, which had a far better natural harbor, because all the people in these islands had to see the Japanese Navy—Admiral Sato was weary of the "Self-Defense Force" title. His was a *navy* now, composed of fighting ships and fighting men that had tasted battle, after a fashion, and if historians would later comment that their battle had not been a real one or a fair one, well, what military textbook did *not* cite the value of surprise in offensive operations? None that he knew of, the Admiral told himself, seeing the loom of Mount Takpochao through his binoculars. There was already a powerful radar there, up and operating, his electronics technicians had told him an hour earlier. Yet another important factor in defending what was again his country's native soil.

He was alone on the starboard bridge wing in the predawn gloom. Such an odd term, he thought. Gloom? Not at all. There was a wonderful peace to this, especially when you were alone to keep it to yourself, and your mind started editing the distractions out. Above his head was the faint buzz of electronic gear, like a hive of slumbering bees, and that noise was soon blanked out. There was also the distant hum of the ship's systems, mostly the engines, and airconditioning blowers, he knew, shrugging it off. There were no human noises to trouble him. The captain of *Mutsu* enforced good bridge discipline. The sailors didn't speak unless they had reason to, concentrating on their duties as they were supposed to do. One by one, Admiral Sato eliminated the extraneous noises. That left only the sound of the sea, the wonderful swish of steel hull parting the waves. He looked down to see it, the fan-shaped foam whose white was both brilliant and faint at the same time, and aft the wide swath was a pleasant fluorescent green from the disturbance of phytoplankton, tiny creatures that came to the surface at night for reasons Sato had never troubled himself to understand. Perhaps to enjoy the moon and stars, he told himself with a smile in the darkness. Ahead was the island of Saipan, just a space on the horizon blacker than the darkness itself; it seemed so because it occulted the stars on the western horizon, and a seaman's mind knew that

where there were no stars on a clear night, then there had to be land. The lookouts at their stations atop the forward superstructure had seen it long before him, but that didn't lessen the pleasure of his own discovery, and as with sailors of every generation there was something special to a landfall, because every voyage ended with discovery of some sort. And so had this one.

More sounds. First the jerky whirs of electrical motors turning radar systems, then something else. He knew he was late noticing it, off to starboard, a deep rumble, like something tearing, growing rapidly in intensity until he knew it could only be the roar of an approaching aircraft. He lowered his binoculars and looked off to the right, seeing nothing until his eyes caught movement close aboard, and two dart shapes streaked overhead. *Mutsu* trembled in their wake, giving Admiral Sato a chill followed by a flush of anger. He pulled open the door to the wheelhouse.

"What the hell was that?"

"Two F-3s conducting an attack drill," the officer of the deck replied. "They've been tracking them in CIC for several minutes. We had them illuminated with our missile trackers."

"Will someone tell those 'wild eagles' that flying directly over a ship in the dark risks damage to us, and foolish death to them!"

"But, Admiral—" the OOD tried to say.

"*But* we are a valuable fleet unit and I do not wish one of my ships to have to spend a month in the yard having her mast replaced because some damned fool of an aviator couldn't see us in the dark!"

"*Hai.* I will make the call at once."

Spoiling my morning that way, Sato fumed, going back out to sit in the leather chair and doze off.

Was he the first guy to figure it out? Winston asked himself. Then he asked himself why he should find that surprising. The FBI and the rest were evidently trying to put things back together, and their main effort was probably to defend against fraud. Worse, they were also going over all the records, not just those of the Columbus Group. It had to be a virtual ocean of data, and they would have been unfamiliar with the stuff, and this was a singularly bad time for on-the-job training.

The TV told the story. The Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank had been on all the morning talk shows, which had to have kept his driver busy in D.C. this day, followed by a strong public statement in the White House Press Room, followed by a lengthy interview on CNN. It was working, after a fashion, and TV showed that as well. A lot of people had shown up at banks before lunch, surprised there to find piles of cash trucked out the previous night to make what in military terms was probably called a show of force. Though the Chairman had evidently jawboned every major banker in the country, the reverse was true of the tellers meeting depositors at their windows: *Oh, you want cash? Well, of course we have all you need.* In not a few cases, by the time people got home they started to feel a new variety of paranoia—*keep all this cash at home?*—and by afternoon some had even begun coming back to redeposit.

That would be Buzz Fiedler's work, too, and a good man he was, Winston thought, for an academic. The Treasury Secretary was only buying time, and doing so with money, but it was a good tactic, good enough to confuse the public into believing things were not as bad as they appeared.

Serious investors knew better. Things were bad, and the play in the banks was a stopgap measure at best. The Fed was dumping cash into the system. Though a good idea for a day or so, the net effect by the end of the week had to be to weaken the dollar further still, and already American T-Bills were about as popular in the global financial community as plague rats. Worst of all, though Fiedler had prevented a banking panic for the time being, you could hold back a panic only so long, and unless you could restore confidence in a real way, the longer you played stopgap games, the worse would be the renewed panic if those measures failed, for then there would be no stopping it. That was what Winston really expected.

Because the Gordian knot around the throat of the investment system would not soon be untied.

Winston thought he had decoded the likely cause of the event, but along the way he'd learned that there might not be a solution. The sabotage at DTC had been the master stroke. Fundamentally, no single person knew what he owned, what he'd paid for it, when he'd gotten it, or what cash he had left; and the absence of knowledge was metastatic. Individual investors didn't know. Institutions didn't know. The trading houses didn't know. Nobody knew.

How would the real panic start? In short order, pension funds would have to write their monthly checks—but would the banks honor them? The Fed would encourage them to do so, but somewhere along the line there would be one bank that would not, due to troubles of its own—just one, such things always began in a single place, after all—and that would start yet another cascade, and the Fed would have to step in again by boosting the money supply, and *that* could start a hyperinflationary cycle. That was the ultimate nightmare. Winston well remembered the way that inflation had affected the market and the country in the late 1970s, the "malaise" that had indeed been real, the loss of national confidence that had manifested itself with nutcases building cabins in the Northwestern mountains and bad movies about life after the apocalypse. And even then inflation had topped out at what? Thirteen percent or so. Twenty-percent interest rates. A country strangling from nothing more than the loss of confidence that had resulted from gasoline lines and a vacillating president. Those times might well seem nostalgic indeed.

This would be far worse, something not like America at all, something from the Weimar Republic, something from Argentina in the bad old days, or Brazil under military rule. And it wouldn't stop just with America, would it? Just as in 1929, the ripple effects would spread far, crippling economies across the world, well beyond even Winston's capacity for prediction. He would not be badly hurt personally, George knew. Even the 90-percent diminution of his personal wealth would leave a vast and comfortable sum—he always hedged some of his bets on issues that owned physically real things, like oil or gold; and he had his own gold holdings, real metal bars in vaults, like a miser of old—and since major depressions were ultimately *deflationary*, the relative value

of his diverse holdings would actually increase after a time. He knew that he and his family would survive and thrive, but the cost to those less fortunate than himself was economic and social chaos. And he wasn't in the business just for himself, was he? Over time he'd come to think long at night about the little guys who'd seen his TV ads and entrusted him with their savings. It was a magic word, trust. It meant that you had an obligation to the people who gave it to you. It meant that they believed what you said about yourself, and that you had to prove that it was real, not merely to them, but to yourself as well. Because if you failed, then houses were not bought, kids not educated, and the dreams of real people not unlike yourself would die aborning. Bad enough just in America, Winston thought, but this event would—could—affect the entire world.

And he had to know what he'd done. It was not an accident. It had been a well-considered plan, executed with style. *Yamata. That clever son of a bitch,* Winston thought. Perhaps the first Japanese investor he'd ever respected. The first one who'd really understood the game both tactically and strategically. Well, that was sure as hell the case. The look on his face, those dark eyes over the champagne glass. *Why didn't you see it then?* So that was the game after all, wasn't it?

But no. It couldn't be the entire game. A part of it, perhaps, a tactic aimed at something else. What? What could be so important that Raizo Yamata was willing to kiss off his personal fortune, and along the way destroy the very global markets upon which his own corporations and his own national economy depended? That was not something to enter the mind of a businessman, certainly not something to warm the soul of a maven on the Street.

It was strange to have it all figured out and yet not understand the sense of it. Winston looked out the window as the sun set on New York Harbor. He had to tell somebody, and that somebody had to understand what this was all about. Fiedler? Maybe. Better somebody who knew the Street . . . and knew other things, too. But who?

"Are they ours?" All four lay alee in Laolao Bay. One of their number was tucked alongside an oiler, doubtless taking on fuel.

Oreza shook his head. "Paint's wrong. The Navy paints its ships darker, bluer, like."

"They look like serious ships, man." Burroughs handed the binoculars back.

"Billboard radars, vertical-launch cells for missiles, antisub helicopters. They're Aegis 'cans, like our Burke class. They're serious, all right. Airplanes are afraid of'em." As Portagee watched, a helicopter lifted off one and headed for the beach.

"Report in?"

"Yeah, good idea."

Burroughs went into the living room and put the batteries back in his phone. The idea of completely depowering it was probably unnecessary, but it was safe, and neither man was interested in finding out how the Japanese treated spies, for that was what they were. It was also awkward, putting the

antenna through the hole in the bottom of the serving bowl and then holding it next to your head, but it did give a certain element of humor to the exercise, and they needed a reason to smile at something.

"NMCC, Admiral Jackson."

"You have the duty again, sir?"

"Well, Master Chief, I guess we both do. What do you have to report?"

"Four Aegis destroyers offshore, east side of the island. One's taking fuel on now from a small fleet oiler. They showed up just after dawn. Two more car carriers at the quay, another on the horizon outbound. We counted twenty fighter aircraft a while ago. About half of them are F-15s with twin tails. The other half are single tails, but I don't know the type. Otherwise nothing new to tell you about."

Jackson was looking at a satellite photo only an hour old showing four ships in line-ahead formation, and fighters dispersed at both the airfields. He made a note and nodded.

"What's it like there?" Robby asked. "I mean, they hassling anybody, arrests, that sort of thing?" He heard the voice at the other end snort.

"Negative, sir. Everybody's just nice as can be. Hell, they're on TV all the time, the public-access cable channel, telling us how much money they plan to spend here and all the things they're gonna do for us." Jackson heard the disgust in the man's voice.

"Fair enough. I might not always be here. I do have to get a little sleep, but this line is set aside for your exclusive use now, okay?"

"Roger that, Admiral."

"Play it real cool, Master Chief. No heroic shit, okay?"

"That's kid stuff, sir. I know better," Oreza assured him.

"Then close down, Oreza. Good work." Jackson heard the line go dead before he set his phone down. "Better you than me, man," he added to himself. Then he looked over at the next desk.

"Got it on tape," an Air Force intelligence officer told him. "He confirms the satellite data. I'm inclined to believe that he's still safe."

"Let's keep him that way. I don't want anybody calling out to them without my say-so," Jackson ordered.

"Roge-o, sir." I don't think we can anyway, he didn't add.

"Tough day?" Paul Robberton asked.

"I've had worse," Ryan answered. But this crisis was too new for so confident an evaluation. "Does your wife mind . . .?"

"She's used to having me away, and we'll get a routine figured out in a day or so." The Secret Service agent paused. "How's the Boss doing?"

"As usual he gets the hard parts. We all dump on him, right?" Jack admitted, looking out the window as they turned off Route 50. "He's a good man, Paul."

"So are you, doc. We were all pretty glad to get you back." He paused.

“How tough is it?” The Secret Service had the happy circumstance of needing to know almost everything, which was just as well, since they overheard almost everything anyway.

“Didn’t they tell you? The Japanese have built nukes. And they have ballistic launchers to deliver them.”

Paul’s hands tightened on the wheel. “Lovely. But they can’t be that crazy.”

“On the evening of December 7, 1941, USS *Enterprise* pulled into Pearl Harbor to refuel and rearm. Admiral Bill Halsey was riding the bridge, as usual, and looked at the mess from the morning’s strike and said, ‘When this war is over, the Japanese language will be spoken only in hell.’ ” Ryan wondered why he’d just said that.

“That’s in your book. It must have been a good line for the guys around him.”

“I suppose. If they use their nukes, that’s what’ll happen to them. Yeah, they have to know that,” Ryan said, his fatigue catching up with him.

“You need about eight hours, Dr. Ryan, maybe nine,” Robberton said judiciously. “It’s like with us. Fatigue really messes up your higher-brain functions. The Boss needs you sharp, doc, okay?”

“No argument there. I might even have a drink tonight,” Ryan thought aloud.

There was an extra car in the driveway, Jack saw, and a new face that looked out the window as the official car pulled into the parking pad.

“That’s Andrea. I already talked with her. Your wife had a good lecture today, by the way. Everything went just fine.”

“Good thing we have two guest rooms.” Jack chuckled as he walked into the house. The mood was happy enough, and it seemed that Cathy and Agent Price were getting along. The two agents conferred while Ryan ate a light dinner.

“Honey, what’s going on?” Cathy asked.

“We’re involved in a major crisis with Japan, plus the Wall Street thing.”

“But how come—”

“Everything that’s happened so far has been at sea. It hasn’t broken the news yet, but it will.”

“War?”

Jack looked up and nodded. “Maybe.”

“But the people at Wilmer today, they were just as nice—you mean they don’t know either?”

Ryan nodded. “That’s right.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

“No, honey, it sure doesn’t.” The phone rang just then, the regular house phone. Jack was the closest and picked it up. “Hello?”

“Is this Dr. John Ryan?” a voice asked.

“Yeah. Who’s this?”

“George Winston. I don’t know if you remember, but we met last year at the Harvard Club. I gave a little speech about derivatives. You were at the next table over. By the way, nice job on the Silicon Alchemy IPO.”

“Seems like a while ago,” Ryan said. “Look, it’s kinda busy down here, and —”

"I want to meet with you. It's important," Winston said.

"What about?"

"I'll need fifteen or twenty minutes to explain it. I have my G at Newark. I can be down whenever you say." The voice paused. "Dr. Ryan, I wouldn't be asking unless I thought it was important."

Jack thought about it for a second. George Winston was a serious player. His rep on the Street was enviable: tough, shrewd, honest. And, Ryan remembered, he'd sold control of his fleet to somebody from Japan. Somebody named Yamata—a name that had turned up before.

"Okay, I'll squeeze you in. Call my office tomorrow about eight for a time."

"See you tomorrow then. Thanks for listening." The line went dead. When he looked over at his wife, she was back at work, transcribing notes from her carry-notebook to her laptop computer, an Apple Powerbook 800.

"I thought you had a secretary for that," he observed with a tolerant smile.

"She can't think about these things when she writes up my notes. I can." Cathy was afraid to relate Bernie's news on the Lasker. She'd picked up several bad habits from her husband. One of them was his Irish-peasant belief in luck, and how you could spoil luck by talking about it. "I had an interesting idea today, just after the lecture."

"And you wrote it right down," her husband observed. Cathy looked up with her usual impish smile.

"Jack, if you don't write it down—"

"Then it never happened."

30

Why Not?

The dawn came up like thunder in this part of the world, or so the poem went. Sure as hell the sun was hot, Admiral Dubro told himself. It was almost as hot as his temper. His demeanor was normally pleasant, but he had simmered in both tropical heat and bureaucratic indifference for long enough. He supposed that the policy weenies and the planning weenies and the political weenies had the same take on things: he and his battle force could dance around here indefinitely without detection, doing their Ghostbusters number and intimidating the Indians without actual contact. A fine game, to be sure, but not an endless one. The idea was to get your battle force in close without detection and then *strike* at the enemy without warning. A nuclear-powered carrier was good at that. You could do it once, twice, even three times if the force commander had it together, but you couldn't do it forever, because the other side had brains, too, and sooner or later a break would go the wrong way.

In this case it wasn't the players who'd goofed. It was the water boy, and it hadn't even been much of an error. As his operations people had reconstructed events, a single Indian Sea Harrier at the very end of its patrol arc had had his look-down radar on and gotten a hit on one of Dubro's oilers, which were now racing northeast to refill his escort ships whose bunkers were nearly two thirds empty after the speed run south of Sri Lanka. An hour later another Harrier, probably stripped of weapons and carrying nothing but fuel tanks, had gotten close enough for a visual. The replenishment-group commander had altered course, but the damage was done. The placement of the two oilers and their two-frigate escort could only have meant that Dubro was now east-by-south of Dondra Head. The Indian fleet had turned at once, satellite photos showed, split into two groups, and headed northeast as well. Dubro had little choice but to allow the oilers to continue on their base course. Covertness or not, his oil-fueled escorts were dangerously close to empty bunkers, and that was a hazard he could not afford. Dubro drank his wake-up coffee while his eyes burned holes in the bulkhead. Commander Harrison sat across from the Admiral's desk, sensibly not saying much of anything until his boss was ready to speak.

"What's the good word, Ed?"

"We still have them outgunned, sir," the Force Operations Officer replied. "Maybe we need to demonstrate that."

Outgunned? Dubro wondered. Well, yes, that was true, but only two thirds of his aircraft were fully mission-capable now. They'd been away too long from base. They were running out of the stores needed to keep the aircraft

operating. In the hangar bay, aircraft sat with inspection hatches open, awaiting parts that the ship no longer had. He was depending on the replenishment ships for those, for the parts flown into Diego Garcia from stateside. Three days after delivery, he'd be back to battery, after a fashion, but his people were tired. Two men had been hurt on the flight deck the day before. Not because they were stupid. Not because they were inexperienced. Because they'd been doing it too damned long, and fatigue was even more dangerous to the mind than to the body, especially in the frenetic environment of a carrier's flight deck. The same was true of everyone in the battle force, from the lowliest striker to . . . himself. The strain of continuous decision-making was starting to tell. And all he could do about that was to switch to decaf.

"How are the pilots?" Mike Dubro asked.

"Sir, they'll do what you tell them to do."

"Okay, we do light patrolling today. I want a pair of Toms up all the time, at least four more on plus-five, fully armed for air-to-air. Fleet course is one-eight-zero, speed of advance twenty-five knots. We link up with the replenishment group and get everyone topped off. Otherwise, we do a stand-down. I want people rested insofar as that is possible. Our friend is going to start hunting tomorrow, and the game is going to get interesting."

"We start going head-to-head?" the ops officer asked.

"Yeah." Dubro nodded. He checked his watch. Nighttime in Washington. The people with brains would be heading for bed now. He'd soon make another demand for instructions, and he wanted the smart ones to pass it along, preferably with a feel for the urgency of his situation. Pay-or-play time was grossly overdue, and all he could be sure of now was that it would come unexpectedly—and after that, Japan? Harrison and his people were already spending half of their time on that.

The tradecraft, again, was of the bad-TV variety, and the only consolation was that maybe the Russians were right. Maybe Scherenko had told them the truth. Maybe they were not in any real danger from the PSID. That seemed a very thin reed to Clark, none of whose education had encouraged him to trust Russians to do anything pleasant to Americans.

"The wheel may be crooked," he whispered to himself—in English, damn it! In any event, what they'd done was laughably simple. Nomuri had parked his car in the same lease-garage that the hotel maintained for its guests, and now Nomuri had a key to Clark's rental car, and over the left-side visor was a computer disk. This Clark retrieved and handed to Chavez, who slid it into their laptop. An electronic chime announced the activation of the machine as Clark headed out into the traffic. Ding copied the file over to the hard-disk and erased the floppy, which would soon be disposed of. The report was verbose. Chavez read it silently before turning the car radio on, then relayed the high points in whispers over the noise.

"Northern Resource Area?" John asked.

"*Da.* A curious phrase," Ding agreed, thinking. It occurred to him that his diction was better in Russian than English, perhaps because he'd learned

English on the street, and Russian in a proper school from a team of people with a genuine love for it. The young intelligence officer dismissed the thought angrily.

Northern Resource Area, he thought. Why did that sound familiar? But they had other things to do, and that was tense enough. Ding found that while he liked the paramilitary end of being a field officer, this spy stuff was not exactly his cup of tea. Too scary, too paranoid.

Isamu Kimura was at the expected meeting site. Fortunately his job allowed him to be in and out a lot, and to sit down with foreigners as a matter of routine. One benefit was that he had an eye for safe places. This one was on the docks, thankfully not overly busy at the moment, but at the same time a location where such a meeting would not be overly out of character. It was also a hard one to bug. There were still harbor sounds to mask quiet conversation.

Clark was even more uneasy, if that were possible. With any covert recruitment there was a period during which open contact was safe, but the safety diminished linearly over time at a rapid but unknown rate, and there were other considerations. Kimura was motivated by—what? Clark didn't know why Oleg Lyalin had been able to recruit him. It wasn't money. The Russians had never paid him anything. It wasn't ideology. Kimura wasn't a Communist in his political creed. Was it ego? Did he think he was worthy of a better post that someone else had taken? Or, most dangerously of all, was he a patriot, the eccentric personal sort who judged what was good for his country in his own mind? Or, as Ding might have observed, was he just fucked up? Not a very elegant turn of phrase, but in Clark's experience not an unknown state of affairs, either. The simple version was that Clark didn't know; worse, any motivation for treason simply justified betraying your country to another, and there was something in him that refused to feel comfortable with such people. Perhaps cops didn't like dealing with their informants either, John told himself. Small comfort, that.

"What's so important?" Kimura asked, halfway down a vacant quay. The idle ships in Tokyo Bay were clearly visible, and he wondered if the meeting place had been selected for just that reason.

"Your country has nuclear weapons," Clark told him simply.

"What?" First the head turned, then the feet stopped, then a very pale look came over his face.

"That's what your ambassador in Washington told the American president on Saturday. The Americans are in a panic. At least that's what Moscow Center has told us." Clark smiled in a very Russian way. "I must say that you've won my professional admiration to have done it so openly, especially buying our own rockets to be the delivery vehicles. I must also tell you that the government of my country is decidedly displeased by this development."

"The rockets could easily be aimed at us." Chavez added dryly, "They make people nervous."

"I had no idea. Are you sure?" Kimura started walking again, just to get his blood flowing.

"We have a highly placed source in the U.S. government. It is not a mistake." Clark's voice, Ding noted, was coldly businesslike: *Ah, your car has a*

scratch on the bumper. I know a good man to fix it.

"So that's why they thought they could get away with it." Kimura didn't have to say any more, and it was plain that a piece of the puzzle had just dropped into place in his mind. He took a few breaths before speaking again: "This is madness."

And those were three of the most welcome words John had heard since calling home from Berlin to hear that his wife had safely delivered their second child. Now it was time for real hardball. He spoke without smiling, fully into his role as a senior Russian intelligence officer, trained by the KGB to be one of the best in the world:

"Yes, my friend. Any time you frighten a major power, that is truly madness. Whoever is playing this game, I hope they know how dangerous it is. Please heed my words, *Gospodin* Kimura. My country is gravely concerned. Do you understand? *Gravely* concerned. You've made fools of us before America and the entire world. You have weapons that can threaten my country as easily as they can threaten America. You have initiated action against the United States, and we do not see a good reason for it. That makes you unpredictable in our eyes, and a country with nuclear-tipped rockets and political instability is not a pleasant prospect. This crisis is going to expand unless sensible people take proper action. We are not concerned about your commercial disagreements with America, but when the possibility of real war exists, then we are concerned."

Kimura was still pale at the prospect.

"What is your rank, Klerk-san?"

"I am a full colonel of the Seventh Department, Line PR, the First Chief Directorate of the Committee for State Security."

"I thought—"

"Yes, the new name, the new designation, what rubbish," Clark observed with a snort. "Kimura-san, I am an intelligence officer. My job is to protect my country. I'd expected this posting to be a simple, pleasant one, but now I find myself—did I tell you about our Project RYAN?"

"You mentioned it once, but—"

"Upon the election of the American President Reagan—I was a captain then, like Chekov here—our political masters looked at the ideological beliefs of the man and feared that he might actually consider a nuclear strike against our country. We immediately launched a frantic effort to discern what those chances were. We eventually decided that it was a mistake, that Reagan, while he hated the Soviet Union, was not a fool.

"But now," Colonel Klerk went on, "what does my country see? A nation with covertly developed nuclear weapons. A nation that has for no good reason chosen to attack a country that is more business partner than enemy. A nation which more than once has attacked Russia. And so the orders I received sound very much like Project RYAN. Do you understand me now?"

"What do you want?" Kimura asked, already knowing the answer.

"I want to know the location of those rockets. They left the factory by rail. I want to know where they are now."

"How can I possibly—" Clark cut him off with a look.

"How is your concern, my friend. I tell you what I must have." He paused

for effect. “Consider this, Isamu: events like this acquire a life of their own. They suddenly come to dominate the men who started them. With nuclear weapons in the equation, the possible consequences—in a way you know about them, and in a way you do not. I do know,” Colonel Klerk went on. “I’ve seen the briefings of what the Americans were once able to do to us, and what we were able to do to them. It was part of Project RYAN, yes? To frighten a major power is a grave and foolish act.”

“But if you find out, then what?”

“That I do not know. I do know that my country will feel much safer with the knowledge than without. Those are my orders. Can I force you to help us? No, I cannot. But if you do not help us, then you help to place your country at risk. Consider that,” he said with the coldness of a coroner. Clark shook his hand in an overtly friendly way and walked off.

“Five-point-seven, five-point-six, five-point-eight from the East German judge . . .” Ding breathed when they were far enough away. “Jesus, John, you *are* a Russian.”

“You bet your ass, kid.” He managed a smile.

Kimura stayed on the dock for a few minutes, looking out across the bay at the dormant ships. Some were car carriers, more were conventional container ships, with seamanlike lines to slice through the waves as they plied their commerce on the seas. This seemingly ordinary aspect of civilization was almost a personal religion for Kimura. Trade drew nations together in need, and in needing one another they ultimately came to find a good reason to keep the peace, however acrimonious their relations might be otherwise. Kimura knew enough history to realize that it didn’t always work that way, however.

You are breaking the law, he told himself. *You are disgracing your name and your family. You are dishonoring your friends and co-workers. You are betraying your country.*

But, damn it! *whose* country was he betraying? The *people* selected the members of the Diet, and their elected representatives selected the Prime Minister—but the people really had had no say whatever in this. They, like his ministry, like the members of the Diet, were mere spectators. They were being lied to. His country was at war, and the people didn’t really know! His country had troubled itself to build nuclear arms, and the people didn’t know. Who had given that order? The government? The government had just changed over—again—and surely the time involved meant . . . what?

Kimura didn’t know. He knew the Russian was right, to some extent anyway. The dangers involved were not easily predicted. His country was in such danger as had not existed in his lifetime. His nation was descending into madness, and there were no doctors to diagnose the problem, and the only thing Kimura could be sure of was the fact that it was so far over his head that he didn’t know where or how to begin.

But someone must do something. At what point, Kimura asked himself, did a traitor become a patriot, and a patriot a traitor?

He should have been resentful, Cook thought, finally getting to bed. But he wasn't. The day had gone exceptionally well, all things considered. The others were praying for him to step on his weenie. That was plain enough, especially the two NIOs. They were so damned smart—they thought, Cook told himself with a broad smile at the ceiling. But they didn't know diddly. Did they know they didn't know? Probably not. They always acted superior, but when crunch time came and you hit them with a question—well, then, it was always *on one hand,* sir, followed by *on the other hand,* sir. How the hell could you make policy on that basis?

Cook, on the *other* hand, did know, and the fact that Ryan was aware of it, had instantly elevated him to de facto leadership of the working group, which had been met with both resentment and relief by the others around the table. *Okay*, they were now thinking, *we'll let* him *take the risks*. All in all, he thought he'd managed things rather well. The others would both back him up and distance themselves from him, making their notations on the positions he generated to cover their asses should things go badly, as they secretly hoped, but also staying within the group's overall position to bask in the light of success if things went well. They'd hope for that, too, but not as much, bureaucrats being what they were.

So the preliminaries were done. The opening positions were set. Adler would head the negotiating team. Cook would be his second. The Japanese Ambassador would lead the other side, with Seiji Nagumo as *his* second. The negotiations would follow a pattern as structured and stylized as Kabuki theater. Both sides of the table would posture and the real action would take place during coffee or tea breaks, as the members of the respective teams talked quietly with their counterparts. That would allow Chris and Seiji to trade information, to control the negotiations, and just maybe to keep this damned-fool thing from getting worse than it already was.

They're going to be giving *you money for providing information,* the voice persisted. Well, yes, but Seiji was going to be giving him information, too, and the whole point was to defuse the situation and to save lives! he answered back. The real ultimate purpose of diplomacy was to keep the peace, and that meant saving lives in the global context, like doctors but with greater efficiency, and doctors got paid well, didn't they? Nobody dumped on them for the money they made. That noble profession, in their white coats, as opposed to the cookie-pushers at Foggy Bottom. What made them so special?

It's about restoring the peace, *damn it!* The money didn't matter. That was a *side issue*. And since it *was* a side issue, he deserved it, didn't he? Of course he did, Cook decided, closing his eyes at last.

The engineers were working hard, Sanchez saw, back at his chair in Pri-Fly. They'd repacked and realigned two bearings on the tailshaft, held their collective breath, and cracked their throttles a little wider on Number One. Eleven knots, edging toward twelve, enough to launch some aircraft for Pearl Harbor, enough to get the COD aboard with a full collection of engineers to head below and help the ChEng make his evaluation of the situation. As one of

the senior officers aboard, Sanchez would learn of their evaluation over lunch. He could have flown off to the beach with the first group of fighters, but his place was aboard. *Enterprise* was far behind now, fully covered by P-3s operating out of Midway, and Fleet Intelligence was more and more confident that there were no hostiles about, enough that Sanchez was starting to believe them. Besides, the antisubmarine aircraft had dropped enough sonobuoys to constitute a hazard to navigation.

The crew was up now, and still a little puzzled and angry. They were up because they knew they'd make Pearl early, and were no doubt relieved that whatever danger they feared was diminishing. They were puzzled because they didn't understand what was going on. They were angry because their ship had been injured, and by now they had to know that two submarines had been lost, and though the powers-that-were had worked to conceal the nature of the losses, ships do not keep secrets well. Radiomen took them down, and yeomen delivered them, and stewards overheard what officers said. *Johnnie Reb* had nearly six thousand people aboard, and the facts, as reported, sometimes got lost amid the rumors, but sooner or later the truth got out. The result would be predictable: rage. It was part of the professon of arms. However much the carrier sailors might disparage the bubbleheads on the beach, however great the rivalry, they were brothers (and, now, sisters), comrades to whom loyalty was owed.

But owed how? What would their orders be? Repeated inquiries to CINCPAC had gone unanswered. Mike Dubro's Carrier Group Three had *not* been ordered to make a speedrun back to WestPac, and that made no sense at all. Was this a war or not? Sanchez asked the sunset.

"So how did you learn this?" Mogataru Koga asked. Unusually, the former prime minister was dressed in a traditional kimono, now that he was a man of leisure for the first time in thirty years. But he'd taken the call and extended the invitation quickly enough, and listened with intense silence for ten minutes.

Kimura looked down. "I have many contacts, Koga-san. In my post I must."

"As do I. Why have I not been told?"

"Even within the government, the knowledge has been closely held."

"You are not telling me everything." Kimura wondered how Koga could know that, without realizing that a look in the mirror would suffice. All afternoon at his desk, pretending to work, he'd just looked down at the papers in front of him, and now he could not remember a single document. Just the questions. What to do? Whom to tell? Where to go for guidance?

"I have sources of information that I may not reveal, Koga-san." For the moment his host accepted that with a nod.

"So you tell me that we have attacked America, and that we have constructed nuclear weapons?"

A nod. *"Hai."*

"I knew Goto was a fool, but I didn't think him a madman." Koga considered his own words for a moment. "No, he lacks the imagination to be a madman. He's always been Yamata's dog, hasn't he?"

"Raizo Yamata has always been his . . . his—"

"Patron?" Koga asked caustically. "That's the polite term for it." Then he snorted and looked away, and his anger now had a new target. *Exactly what you tried to stop. But you failed to do it, didn't you?*

"Koga often seeks his counsel, yes."

"So. Now what?" he asked a man clearly out of his depth. The answer was entirely predictable.

"I do not know. This matter is beyond me. I am a bureaucrat. I do not make policy. I am afraid for us now, and I don't know what to do."

Koga managed an ironic smile and poured some more tea for his guest. "You could well say the same of me, Kimura-san. But you still have not answered a question for me. I, too, have contacts remaining. I knew of the actions taken against the American Navy last week, after they happened. But I have not heard about the nuclear weapons." Just speaking those two words gave the room a chill for both men, and Kimura marveled that the politician could continue to speak evenly.

"Our ambassador in Washington told the Americans, and a friend at the Foreign Ministry—"

"I too have friends at the Foreign Ministry," Koga said, sipping his tea.

"I cannot say more."

The question was surprisingly gentle. "Have you been speaking with Americans?"

Kimura shook his head. "No."

The day usually started at six, but that didn't make it easy, Jack thought. Paul Robberton had gotten the papers and started the coffee, Andrea Price turned to also, helping Cathy with the kids. Ryan wondered about that until he saw an additional car parked in the driveway. So the Secret Service thought it was a war. His next step was to call the office, and a minute later his STU-6 started printing the morning faxes. The first item was unclassified but important. The Europeans were trying to dump U.S. T-Bills, and nobody was buying them, still. One such day could be seen as an aberration. Not a second one. Buzz Fiedler and the Fed Chairman would be busy again, and the trader in Ryan worried. It was like the Dutch kid with his thumb in the dike. What happened when he spotted another leak? And even if he could reach it, what about the third?

News from the Pacific was unchanged, but getting more texture. *John Stennis* would make Pearl Harbor early, but *Enterprise* was going to take longer than expected. No evidence of Japanese pursuit. Good. The nuke hunt was under way, but without results, which wasn't surprising. Ryan had never been to Japan, a failing he regretted. His only current knowledge was from overhead photographs. In winter months when the skies over the country were unusually clear, the National Reconnaissance Office had actually used the country (and others) to calibrate its orbiting cameras, and he remembered the elegance of the formal gardens. His other knowledge of the country was from the historical record. But how valid was that knowledge now? History and economics made strange bedfellows, didn't they?

The usual kisses sent Cathy and the kids on their way, and soon enough Jack was in his official car for Washington. The sole consolation was that it was shorter than the former trip to Langley.

"You should be rested, at least," Robberton observed. He would never have talked so much to a political appointee, but somehow he felt far more at ease with this guy. There was no pomposity in Ryan.

"I suppose. The problems are still there."

"Wall Street still number one?"

"Yeah." Ryan looked at the passing countryside after locking the classified documents away. "I'm just starting to realize, this could take the whole world down. The Europeans are trying to sell off their treasuries. Nobody's buying. The market panic might be starting there today. Our liquidity is locked up, and a lot of theirs is in our T-Bills."

"Liquidity means cash, right?" Robberton changed lanes and speeded up. His license plate told the state cops to leave him alone.

"Correct. Nice thing, cash. Good thing to have when you get nervous—and not being able to get it, that *makes* people nervous."

"You like talking 1929, Dr. Ryan? I mean, that bad?"

Jack looked over at his bodyguard. "Possibly. Unless they can untangle the records in New York—it's like having your hands tied in a fight, like being at a card table with no money, if you can't play, you just stand there. Damn." Ryan shook his head. "It's just never happened before, and traders don't much like that either."

"How can people so smart get so panicked?"

"What do you mean?"

"What did anybody take away? Nobody blew up the mint"—he snorted—"it would have been our case!"

Ryan managed a smile. "You want the whole lecture?"

Paul's hands gestured on the wheel. "My degree's in psychology, not economics." The response surprised him.

"Perfect. That makes it easy."

The same worry occupied Europe. Just short of noon, a conference call for the central bankers of Germany, Britain, and France resulted in little more than multilingual confusion over what to do. The past years of rebuilding the countries of Eastern Europe had placed an enormous strain on the economies of the countries of Western Europe, who were in essence paying the bill for two generations of economic chaos. To hedge against the resulting weakness of their own currencies, they'd bought dollars and American T-Bills. The stunning events in America had occasioned a day of minor activity, all of it down but nothing terribly drastic. That had all changed, however, after the last buyer had purchased the last discounted lot of American Treasuries—for some the numbers were just too good—with money taken from the liquidation of equities. That buyer already thought it had been a mistake and cursed himself for again riding the back of a trend instead of the front. At 10:30 A.M. local time, the Paris market started a precipitous slide, and inside of an hour, European economic commentators were talking about a domino effect, as the

same thing happened in every market in every financial center. It was also noted that the central banks were trying the same thing that the American Fed had attempted the previous day. It wasn't that it had been a bad idea. It was just that such ideas only worked once, and European investors weren't buying. They were bailing out. It came as a relief when people started buying up stocks at absurdly low prices, and they were even grateful that the purchases were being made in yen, whose strength had reasserted itself, the only bright light on the international financial scene.

"You mean," Robberton said, opening the basement door to the West Wing. "You mean to tell me that it's *that* screwed up?"

"Paul, you think you're smart?" Jack asked. The question took the Secret Service man aback a little.

"Yeah, I do. So?"

"So why do you suppose that anybody else is smarter than you are? They're not, Paul," Ryan went on. "They have a different job, but it isn't about brains. It's about education and experience. Those people don't know crap about running a criminal investigation. Neither do I. Every tough job requires brains, Paul. But you can't know them all. Anyway, bottom line, okay? No, they're not any smarter than you, and maybe not *as* smart *as* you. It's just that it's *their* job to run the financial markets, and your job to do something else."

"Jesus," Robberton breathed, dropping Ryan off at his office door. His secretary handed off a fistfizl of phone notes on his way in. One was marked *Urgent!* and Ryan called the number.

"That you, Ryan?"

"Correct, Mr. Winston. You want to see me. When?" Jack asked, opening his briefcase and pulling the classified things out.

"Anytime, starting ninety minutes from now. I have a car waiting downstairs, a Gulfstream with warm motors, a car waiting at D.C. National." His voice said the rest. It was urgent, and no-shit serious. On top of that came Winston's reputation.

"I presume it's about last Friday."

"Correct."

"Why me and not Secretary Fiedler?" Ryan wondered.

"You've worked there. He hasn't. If you want him to sit in on it, fine. He'll get it. I think you'll get it faster. Have you been following the financial news this morning?"

"It sounds like Europe's getting squirrelly on us."

"And it's just going to get worse," Winston said. And he was probably right, Jack knew.

"You know how to fix it?" Ryan could almost hear the head at the other end shake in anger and disgust.

"I wish. But maybe I can tell you what really happened."

"I'll settle for that. Come down as quick as you want," Jack told him. "Tell the driver West Executive Drive. The uniformed guards will be expecting you at the gate."

"Thanks for listening, Dr. Ryan." The line clicked off, and Jack wondered

how long it had been since the last time George Winston had said *that* to anyone. Then he got down to his work for the day.

The one good thing was that the railcars used to transport the "H-11" boosters from the assembly plant to wherever were standard gauge. That accounted for only about 8 percent of Japanese trackage and was, moreover, something discernible from satellite photographs. The Central Intelligence Agency was in the business of accumulating information, most of which would never have any practical use, and most of which, despite all manner of books and movies to the contrary, came from open-source material. It was just a matter of finding a railway map of Japan to see where all the standard-gauge trackage was and starting from there, but there were now over two thousand miles of such trackage, and the weather over Japan was not always clear, and the satellites were not always directly overhead, the better to see into valleys that littered a country composed largely of volcanic mountains.

But it was also a task with which the Agency was familiar. The Russians, with their genius and mania for concealing everything, had taught CIA's analysts the hard way to look for the unlikely spots first of all. An open plain, for example, was a likely spot, easy to approach, easy to build, easy to service, and easy to protect. That was how America had done it in the 1960s, banking incorrectly on the hope that missiles would never become accurate enough to hit such small, rugged point targets. Japan would have learned from that lesson. Therefore, the analysts had to look for the difficult places. Woods, valleys, hills, and the very selectivity of the task ensured that it would require time. Two updated KH-11 photosatellites were in orbit, and one KH-12 radar-imaging satellite. The former could resolve objects down to the size of a cigarette pack. The latter produced a monochrome image of far less resolution, but could see through clouds, and, under favorable circumstances, could actually penetrate the ground, down to as much as ten meters; in fact it had been developed for the purpose of locating otherwise invisible Soviet missile silos and similarly camouflaged installations.

That was the good news. The bad news was that each individual frame of imagery had to be examined by a team of experts, one at a time; that every irregularity or curiosity had to be reexamined and graded; that the time involved despite—indeed, because of—the urgency of the task was immense. Analysts from the CIA, the National Reconnaissance Office, and the Intelligence and Threat Analysis Center (I-TAC) were grouped together for the task, looking for twenty holes in the ground, knowing nothing other than the fact that the individual holes could be no less than five meters across. There could be one large group of twenty, or twenty individual and widely separated holes. The first task, all agreed, was to get new imagery of the whole length of standard-gauge rails. Weather and camera angles impeded some of that task, and now on the third day of the hunt, 20 percent of the needed mapping still remained undone. Already thirty potential sites had been identified for further scrutiny from new passes at slightly different light levels and camera angles which would allow stereo-optic viewing and additional computer enhancement. People on the analysis team were talking again about the 1991

Scud-hunts. It was not a pleasant memory for them. Though many lessons had been learned, the main one was this: it wasn't really all that hard to hide one or ten or twenty or even a hundred relatively small objects within the borders of a nation-state, even a very open, very flat one. And Japan was neither. Under the circumstances, finding all of them was a nearly impossible task. But they had to try anyway.

It was eleven at night, and his duties to his ancestors were done for the moment. They would never be fully carried out, but the promises to their spirits he'd made so many years before were now accomplished. What had been Japanese soil at the time of his birth was now again Japanese soil. What had been his family's land was now again his family's land. The nation that had humbled his nation and murdered his family had finally been humbled, and would remain so for a long, long time. Long enough to assure his country's position, finally, among the great nations of the world.

In fact, even greater than he'd planned, he noted. All he had to do was look at the financial reports coming into his hotel suite via facsimile printer. The financial panic he'd planned and executed was now moving across the Atlantic. Amazing, he thought, that he hadn't anticipated it. The complex financial maneuvers had left Japanese banks and businesses suddenly cash-rich, and his fellow zaibatsu were seizing the opportunity to buy up European equities for themselves and their companies. They'd increase the national wealth, improve their position in the various European national economies, *and* publicly appear to be springing to the assistance of others. Yamata judged that Japan would bend some efforts to help Europe out of her predicament. His country needed markets after all, and with the sudden increase in Japanese ownership of their private companies, perhaps now European politicians would listen more attentively to their suggestions. Not certain, he thought, but possible. What they would definitely listen to was power. Japan was facing down America. America would never be able to confront his country, not with her economy in turmoil, her military defanged, and her President politically crippled. And it was an election year as well. The finest strategy, Yamata thought, was to sow discord in the house of your enemy. That he had done, taking the one action that had simply not occurred to the bonehead military people who'd led his country down the path of ruin in 1941.

"So," he said to his host. "How may I be of service?"

"Yamata-san, as you know, we will be holding elections for a local governor." The bureaucrat poured a stiff shot of a fine Scotch whiskey. "You are a landowner, and have been so for some months. You have business interests here. I suggest that you might be a perfect man for the job."

For the first time in years, Raizo Yamata was startled.

In another room in the same hotel an admiral, a major, and a captain of Japan Air Lines held a family reunion.

"So, Yusuo, what will happen next?" Torajiro asked.

"What I think will happen next is that you will return to your normal flight schedule back and forth to America," the Admiral said, finishing his third drink. "If they are as intelligent as I believe them to be, then they will see that the war is already over."

"How long have you been in on this, Uncle?" Shiro inquired with deep respect. Having now learned of what his uncle had done, he was awed by the man's audacity.

"From when I was a *nisa,* supervising construction of my first command in Yamata-san's yards. What is it? Ten years now. He came down to see me, and we had dinner and he asked some theoretical questions. Yamata learns quickly for a civilian," the Admiral opined. "I tell you, I think there is much more to this than meets the eye."

"How so?" Torajiro asked.

Yusuo poured himself another shot. His fleet was safe, and he was entitled to unwind, he thought, especially with his brother and nephew, now that all the stress was behind him. "We've spoken more and more in the past few years, but most of all right before he bought that American financial house. And so, now? My little operation happens the same day that their stock market crashes . . . ? An interesting coincidence, is it not?" His eyes twinkled. "One of my first lessons to him, all those years ago. In 1941 we attacked America's periphery. We attacked the arms but not the head or the heart. A nation can grow new arms, but a heart, or a head, that's far harder. I suppose he listened."

"I've flown over the head part many times," Captain Torajiro Sato noted. One of his two normal runs was to Dulles International Airport. "A squalid city."

"And you shall do so again. If Yamata did what I think, they will need us again, and soon enough," Admiral Sato said confidently.

"Go ahead, let him through," Ryan said over the phone.

"But—"

"But if it makes you feel better, pop it open and look, but if he says not to X-ray it, don't, okay?"

"But we were told just to expect one, and there's two."

"It's okay," Jack told the head uniformed guard at the west entrance. The problem with increased security alerts was that they mainly kept you from getting the work done that was necessary to resolve the crisis. "Send them both up." It took another four minutes by Jack's watch. They probably did pop the back off the guy's portable computer to make sure there wasn't a bomb there. Jack rose from his desk and met them at the anteroom door.

"Sorry about that. Remember the old Broadway song, 'The Secret Service Makes Me Nervous'?" Ryan waved them into his office. He assumed the older one was George Winston. He vaguely remembered the speech at the Harvard Club, but not the face that had delivered it.

"This is Mark Gant. He's my best technical guy, and he wanted to bring his laptop."

"It's easier this way," Gant explained.

"I understand. I use them, too. Please sit down." Jack waved them to chairs. His secretary brought in a coffee tray. When cups were poured, he went on. "I had one of my people track the European markets. Not good."

"That's putting it mildly, Dr. Ryan. We may be watching the beginning of a global panic," Winston began. "I'm not sure where the bottom is."

"So far Buzz is doing okay," Jack replied cautiously. Winston looked up from his cup.

"Ryan, if you're a bullshitter, I've come to the wrong place. I thought you knew the Street. The IPO you did with Silicon Alchemy was nicely crafted—now, was that you or did you take the credit for somebody else's work?"

"There's only two people who talk to me like that. One I'm married to. The other has an office about a hundred feet that way." Jack pointed. Then he grinned. "Your reputation precedes you, Mr. Winston. Silicon Alchemy was *all* my work. I have ten percent of the stock in my personal portfolio. That's how much I thought of the outfit. If you ask around about my rep, you'll find I'm not a bullshitter."

"Then you know it's today," Winston said, still taking the measure of his host.

Jack bit his lip for a moment and nodded. "Yeah. I told Buzz the same thing Sunday. I don't know how close the investigators are to reconstructing the records. I've been working on something else."

"Okay." Winston wondered what else Ryan might be working on but dismissed the irrelevancy. "I can't tell you how to fix it, but I think I can show you how it got broke."

Ryan turned for a second to look at his TV. CNN Headline News had just started its thirty-minute cycle with a live shot from the floor of the NYSE. The sound was all the way down, but the commentator was speaking rapidly and her face was not smiling. When he turned back, Gant had his laptop flipped open and was calling up some files.

"How much time do we have for this?" Winston asked.

"Let me worry about that," Jack replied.

31

The How and the What

Treasury Secretary Bosley Fiedler had not allowed himself three consecutive hours of sleep since the return from Moscow, and his stride through the tunnel connecting the Treasury Building with the White House meandered sufficiently to make his bodyguards wonder if he might need a wheelchair soon. The Chairman of the Federal Reserve was hardly in better shape. The two had been conferring, again, in the Secretary's office when the call arrived —*Drop everything and come here*—peremptory even for somebody like Ryan, who frequently short-circuited the workings of the government. Fiedler started talking even before he walked through the open door.

"Jack, in twenty minutes we have a conference call with the central banks of five Euro—who's this?" SecTreas asked, stopping three paces into the room.

"Mr. Secretary, I'm George Winston. I'm president and managing director of __"

"Not anymore. You sold out," Fiedler objected.

"I'm back as of the last rump-board meeting. This is Mark Gant, another of my directors."

"I think we need to listen to what they have to say," Ryan told his two new arrivals. "Mr. Gant, please restart your rain dance."

"Damn it, Jack, I have twenty minutes. Less now," the Secretary of the Treasury said, looking at his watch.

Winston almost snarled, but instead spoke as he would have to another senior trader: "Fiedler, the short version is this: the markets were deliberately taken down by a systematic and highly skillful attack, and I think I can prove that to your satisfaction. Interested?"

The SecTreas blinked very hard. "Why, yes."

"But how . . . ?" the Fed Chairman asked.

"Sit down and we'll show you," Gant said. Ryan made way and the two senior officials took their places on either side of him and his computer. "It started in Hong Kong . . . "

Ryan walked to his desk, dialed the Secretary's office, and told his secretary to route the conference call to his room in the West Wing. A typical executive secretary, she handled the irregularity better than her boss could ever have done. Gant, Jack saw, was a superb technician, and his second stint at explaining matters was even more efficient than his first. The Secretary and the Chairman were also good listeners who knew the jargon. Questions were not necessary.

"I didn't think something like this was possible," the Chairman said eight minutes into the exposition. Winston handled the response.

"All the safeguards built into the system are designed to prevent accidents and catch crooks. It never occurred to anybody that somebody would pull something like this. Who would deliberately lose so much money?"

"Somebody with bigger fish to fry," Ryan told him.

"What's bigger than—"

Jack cut him off. "Lots of things, Mr. Winston. We'll get to that later." Ryan turned his head. "Buzz?"

"I'll want to confirm this with my own data, but it looks pretty solid." SecTreas looked over at the Chairman.

"You know, I'm not even sure it's a criminal violation."

"Forget that," Winston announced. "The real problem is still here. Crunch time is today. If Europe keeps going down, then we have a global panic. The dollar's in free-fall, the American markets can't operate, most of the world's liquidity is paralyzed, and all the little guys out there are going to catch on as soon as the media figure out what the hell is going down. The only thing that's prevented that to this point is that financial reporters don't know crap about what they cover."

"Otherwise they'd be working for us," Gant said, rejoining the conversation. "Thank God their sources are keeping it zipped for the time being, but I'm surprised it hasn't broken out all the way yet." Just maybe, he thought, the media didn't want to start a panic either.

Ryan's phone rang and he went to answer it. "Buzz, it's your conference call." The Secretary's physical state was apparent when he rose. The man wavered and grabbed the back of a chair to steady himself. The Chairman was only a touch more agile, and if anything both men were yet more shaken by what they had just learned. Fixing something that had broken was a sufficiently difficult task. Fixing something deliberately and maliciously destroyed could hardly be easier. And it had to be fixed, and soon, lest every nation in Europe and North America join the plunge into a deep, dark canyon. The climb out of it would require both years and pain, and that was under the best of political circumstances—the long-term political ramifications of such a vast economic dislocation could not possibly be grasped at this stage, though Ryan was already recoiling from that particular horror.

Winston looked at the National Security Advisor's face, and it wasn't hard to read his thoughts. His own elation at the discovery was gone now that he'd given the information over to others. There ought to have been something else for him to say: how to fix matters. But all of his intellectual energy had been expended in building his case for the prosecution, as it were. He hadn't had the chance yet to take his analysis any further.

Ryan saw that and nodded with a grim smile of respect. "Good job."

"It's my fault," Winston said, quietly so as not to disturb the conference call proceeding a few feet away. "I should have stayed in."

"I've bailed out once myself, remember?" Ryan got back into a chair. "Hey, we all need a change from time to time. You didn't see this coming. It happens all the time. Especially here."

Winston gestured angrily. "I suppose. Now we can identify the rapist, but how the hell do you get unraped? Once it's happened, it's happened. But those were my investors he fucked. Those people came to *me*. Those people *trusted*

me." Ryan admired the summation. That was how people in the business were supposed to think.

"In other words, now what?"

Gant and Winston traded a look. "We haven't figured that one out."

"Well, so far you've outperformed the FBI and SEC. You know, I haven't even bothered checking how my portfolio did."

"Your ten percent of Silicon Alchemy won't hurt you. Long term," Winston said, "new communications gadgets always make out, and they have a couple of honeys."

"Okay, that's settled for now." Fiedler rejoined the group. "All the European markets are shut down, just like we are, until we can get things sorted out."

Winston looked up. "All that means is, there's a hell of a flood, and you're building the levee higher and higher. And if you run out of sandbags before the river runs out of water, then the damage will only be worse when you lose control."

"We're all open to suggestions, Mr. Winston," Fiedler said gently. George's reply matched it in kind.

"Sir, for what it's worth, I think you've done everything right to this point. I just don't see a way out."

"Neither do we," the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board observed.

Ryan stood. "For the moment, gentlemen, I think we need to brief the President."

"What an interesting idea," Yamata said. He knew he'd had too much to drink. He knew that he was basking in the sheer satisfaction of carrying out what had to be the most ambitious financial gambit in history. He knew that his ego was expanding to its fullest size since—when? Even reaching the chairmanship of his conglomerate hadn't been this satisfactory. He'd crushed a whole nation and had altered the course of his own, and yet he had never even considered public office of any kind. And why not? he asked himself. Because that had always been a place for lesser men.

"For the moment, Yamata-san, Saipan will have a local governor. We will hold internationally supervised elections. We need a candidate," the Foreign Ministry official went on. "It must be someone of stature. It would be helpful if it were a man known and friendly to Goto-san, and a man with local interests. I merely ask that you consider it."

"I will do that." Yamata stood and headed for the door.

Well. He wondered what his father would have thought of that. It would mean stepping down from chairmanship of his corporation . . . but—but what? What corporate worlds had he failed to conquer? Was it not time to move on? To retire honorably, to enter the formal service of his nation. After the local government situation was cleared up . . . then? Then to enter the Diet with great prestige, because the insiders would know, wouldn't they? *Hai*, they would know who had truly served the interests of the nation, who more than the Emperor Meiji himself had brought Japan to the first rank of nations. When had Japan ever had a political leader worthy of her place and her people? Why should he not take the honor due him? It would all require a few

years, but he had those years. More than that, he had vision and the courage to make it real. Only his peers in business knew of his greatness now, but that could change, and his family name would be remembered for more than building ships and televisions and all the other things. Not a trademark. A name. A heritage. Would that not make his father proud?

"Yamata?" Roger Durling asked. "Tycoon, right, runs a huge company? I may have bumped into him at some reception or other when I was Vice President."

"Well, that's the guy," Winston said.

"So what are you saying he did?" the President asked.

Mark Gant set up his computer on the President's desk, this time with a Secret Service agent immediately behind him and watching every move, and this time he took it slow because Roger Durling, unlike Ryan, Fiedler, and the Fed Chairman, didn't really understand all the ins and outs. He did prove to be an attentive audience, however, stopping the presentation to ask questions, making a few notes, and three times asking for a repeat of a segment of the presentation. Finally he looked over to the Secretary of the Treasury.

"Buzz?"

"I want our people to verify the information independently—"

"That won't be hard," Winston told them. "Any one of the big houses will have records almost identical to this. My people can help organize it for you."

"If it's true, Buzz?"

"Then, Mr. President, this situation comes more under Dr. Ryan's purview than mine," SecTreas replied evenly. His relief was tempered with anger at the magnitude of what had been done. The two outsiders in the Oval Office didn't yet understand that.

Ryan's mind was racing. He'd ignored Gant's repeated explanation of the "how" of the event. Though the presentation to the President was clearer and more detailed than the first two times—the man would have made a fine instructor at a business school—the important parts were already fixed in the National Security Advisor's mind. Now he had the how, and the how told him a lot. This plan had been exquisitely planned and executed. The timing of the Wall Street takedown and the carrier/submarine attack had not been an accident. It was therefore a fully integrated plan. Yet it was also a plan which the Russian spy network had not uncovered, and that was the fact that kept repeating itself to him.

Their existing net is inside the Japanese government. It is probably concentrated on their security apparatus. But that net failed to give them strategic warning for the military side of the operation, and Sergey Nikolay'ch hasn't connected Wall Street with the naval action yet.

Break the model, Jack, he told himself. *Break the paradigm* . That's when it became clearer.

"That's why they didn't get it," Ryan said almost to himself. It was like driving through patches of fog; you got into a clear spot followed by another clouded one. "It wasn't really their government at all. It really was Yamata and the others. That's why they want THISTLE back." Nobody else in the room knew what he was talking about.

"What's that?" the President asked. Jack turned his eyes to Winston and Gant, then shook his head. Durling nodded and went on. "So the whole event was one big plan?"

"Yes, sir, but we still don't know it all."

"What do you mean?" Winston asked. "They cripple us, start a worldwide panic, and you say there's *more?"*

"George, how often have you been over there?" Ryan asked, mainly to get information to the others.

"In the last five years? I guess it comes out to an average of about once a month. My grandchildren will be using up the last of my frequent-flyer miles."

"How often have you met with government people over there?"

Winston shrugged. "They're around a lot. But they don't matter very much."

"Why?" the President asked.

"Sir, it's like this: there're maybe twenty or thirty people over there who really run things, okay? Yamata is the biggest fish in that lake. The Ministry of International Trade and Industry is the interface between the big boys in the corporate arena and the government, plus the way they grease the skids themselves with elected officials, and they do a *lot* of that stuff. It's one of the things Yamata liked to show off when we negotiated his takeover of my Group. At one party there were two ministers and a bunch of parliamentary guys, and their noses got real brown, y'know?" Winston reflected that at the time he'd thought it a good demeanor for elected officials. Now he wasn't quite so sure.

"How freely can I speak?" Ryan asked. "We may need their insights."

Durling handled that: "Mr. Winston, how good are you at keeping secrets?"

The investor had himself a good chuckle. "Just so long as you don't call it insider stuff, okay? I've never been hassled by the SEC, and I don't want to start."

"This one'll come under the Espionage Act. We're at war with Japan. They've sunk two of our submarines and crippled two aircraft carriers," Ryan said, and the room changed a lot.

"Are you serious?" Winston asked.

"Two-hundred-and-fifty-dead-sailors serious, the crews of USS *Asheville* and USS *Charlotte*. They've also seized the Mariana Islands. We don't know yet if we can take those islands back. We have upwards of ten thousand American citizens in Japan as potential hostages, plus the population of the islands, plus military personnel in Japanese custody."

"But the media—"

"Haven't caught on yet, remarkably enough," Ryan explained. "Maybe it's just too crazy."

"Oh." Winston got it after another second. "They wreck our economy, and we don't have the political will to . . . has anybody ever tried anything like this before?"

The National Security Advisor shook his head. "Not that I know of."

"But the real danger to us—is this problem here. That son of a bitch," George Winston observed.

"How do we fix it, Mr. Winston?" President Durling asked.

"I don't know. The DTC move was brilliant. The takedown was pretty cute,

but Secretary Fiedler here might have smarted his way out of that with our help," Winston added. "But with no records, everything's paralyzed. I have a brother who's a doctor, and once he told me . . ."

Ryan's eyeballs clicked at that remark, clicked hard enough that he didn't listen to the rest. Why was that important?

"The time estimate came in last night," the Fed Chairman was saying now. "They need a week. But we don't really have a week. This afternoon we're meeting with all the heads of the big houses. We're going to try and . . ."

The problem is that there are no records, Jack thought. *Everything's frozen in place because there are no records to tell people what they own, how much money they . . .*

"Europe is paralyzed, too . . ." Fiedler was talking now, while Ryan stared down at the carpet. Then he looked up:

"If you don't write it down, it never happened." Conversation in the room stopped, and Jack saw that he might as well have said, *The crayon is purple.*

"What?" the Fed Chairman asked.

"My wife—that's what she says. 'If you don't write it down, then it never happened.' " He looked around. They still didn't understand. Which wasn't overly surprising, as he was still developing the thought himself. "She's a doc, too, George, at Hopkins, and she always has this damned little notebook with her, and she's always stopping dead in her tracks to take it out and make a note because she doesn't trust her memory."

"My brother's the same way. He uses one of those electronic things," Winston said. Then his eyeballs went out of focus. "Keep going."

"There are no records, no really official records of any of the transactions, are there?" Jack went on. Fiedler handled the answer.

"No. Depository Trust Company crashed for fair. And as I just said, it'll take __"

"Forget that. We don't have the time, do we?"

That depressed SecTreas again. "No, we can't stop it."

"Sure we can." Ryan looked at Winston. "Can't we?"

President Durling had been covering the snippets of conversation like a spectator at a tennis match, and the stress of the situation had placed a short fuse on his temper. "What the hell are you people talking about?"

Ryan almost had it now. He turned to his President. "Sir, it's simple. We say it never happened. We say that after noon on Friday, the exchanges simply stopped functioning. Now, can we get away with that?" Jack asked. He didn't give anyone a chance to answer, however. "Why not? Why *can't* we get away with it? There are no records to prove that we're wrong. *Nobody* can prove a single transaction from twelve noon on, can they?"

"With all the money that everyone lost," Winston said, his mind catching up rapidly, "it won't look all that unattractive. You're saying we restart . . . Friday, maybe, Friday at noon . . . just wipe out the intervening week, right?"

"But nobody will buy it," the Fed Chairman observed.

"Wrong." Winston shook his head. "Ryan's got something here. First of all, they *have* to buy it. You can't do a transaction—you can't execute one, I mean, without written records. So nobody can prove that they did anything without waiting for reconstruction of the DTC records. Second, most people went to

the cleaners, institutions, banks, everybody, and they'll all want a second chance. Oh, yeah, they'll buy into it, pal. Mark?"

"Step in a time machine and do Friday all over again?" Gant's laugh was grim at first. Then it changed. "Where do we sign up?"

"We can't do that to everything, not all the trades," the Fed Chairman objected.

"No, we can't," Winston agreed. "The international T-Bill transactions were outside our control. But what we can do, sir, is conference with the European banks, show them what's happened, and then together with them—"

Now it was Fiedler: "Yes! They dump yen and buy dollars. Our currency regains its position and theirs falls. The other Asian banks will then think about reversing their positions. The European central banks will play ball, I think."

"You'll have to keep the Discount Rate up," Winston said. "That'll sting us some, but it's one hell of a lot better than the alternative. You keep the rate up so that people stop dumping T-Bills. We want to generate a move away from the yen, just like they did to us. The Europeans will like that because it will limit the Japs' ability to scoop up their equities like they started doing yesterday." Winston got off his chair and started pacing a little as he was wont to do. He didn't know that he was violating a White House protocol, and even the President didn't want to interrupt him, though the two Secret Service agents in the room kept a close eye on the trader. Clearly his mind was racing through the scenario, looking for holes, looking for flaws. It took perhaps two minutes, and everyone waited for his evaluation. Then his head came up. "Dr. Ryan, if you ever decide to become a private citizen again, we need to talk. Gentlemen: this will work. It's just so damned outrageous, but maybe that works in our favor."

"What happens Friday, then?" Jack asked.

Gant spoke up: "The market will drop like a rock."

"What's so damned great about that?" the President demanded.

"Because then, sir," Gant went on, "it'll bounce after about two hundred points, and close . . . ? It'll close down, oh, maybe a hundred, maybe not even that much. The following Monday everybody catches his breath. Some people look for bargains. Most, probably, are still nervous. It drops again, probably ends up pretty stagnant, down another fifty at most. The rest of the week, things settle out. Figure by the following Friday, the market has restabilized down one, maybe one-fifty, from the Friday-noon position. The drop will have to happen because of what the Fed has to do with the Discount Rate, but we're used to that on the Street." Only Winston fully appreciated the irony in the fact that Gant had it almost exactly right. He himself could hardly have done it better. "Bottom line, it's a major hiccup, but no more than that."

"Europe?" Ryan asked.

"It'll be rougher over there because they're not as well organized, but their central banks have somewhat more power," Gant said. "Their governments can also interfere more in the marketplace. That's both a help and a hurt. But the end result is going to be the same. It has to be, unless everyone signs on to the same suicide pact. People in our business don't do that."

Fiedler's turn: "How do we sell it?"

"We get the heads of the major institutions together just as fast as we can," Winston replied. "I can help if you want. They listen to me, too."

"Jack?" the President asked with a turn of the head.

"Yes, sir. And we do it right away."

Roger Durling gave it a few more seconds of thought before turning to the Secret Service agent next to his desk. "Tell the Marines to get my chopper over here. Tell the Air Force to get something warmed up for New York."

Winston. demurred. "Mr. President, I have my own."

Ryan took that one. "George, the Air Force guys are better. Trust me."

Durling rose and shook hands all around before the Secret Service agents conducted the others downstairs and out onto the South Lawn to await the helicopter flight to Andrews. Ryan stayed put.

"Will it really work? Can we really fix it that easily?" The politician in Roger Durling distrusted magic fixes to anything. Ryan saw the doubts and framed his answer appropriately.

"It ought to. They need something up there, and they will surely want it to work. The crucial element is that they have to know that the takedown was a deliberate act. That makes it artificial, and if they believe that it was artificial, then it's easier for everyone to accept an irregular fix to it."

"I guess we'll see. . ." Durling paused. "Now what does that tell us about Japan?"

"It tells us that their government isn't the prime moving force behind this. That's good news and bad news. The good news is that the effort will be poorly organized at some levels, that the Japanese people are disconnected from the effort, and that there may be elements in their government very uncomfortable with the undertaking."

"The bad news?" the President asked.

"We still don't know what their overall objective is. The government is evidently doing what it's told. It has a solid strategic position in WestPac, and we still don't know what to do about it. Most important of all—"

"The nukes." Durling nodded. "That's their trump. We've never been at war against someone with nuclear arms, have we?"

"No, sir. That's a new one, too."

The next transmission from Clark and Chavez went out just after midnight Tokyo time. This time Ding had drafted the article. John had run out of interesting things to say about Japan. Chavez, being younger, did an article that was lighter, about young people and their attitudes. It was just the cover, but you have to work hard on those, and Ding, it turned out, had learned how to write coherently at George Mason University.

"Northern Resource Area?" John asked, typing the question on the computer screen. Then he turned the machine on the coffee table.

I should have seen it sooner. It's in one of the books back at Seoul, mano. Indonesia, belonged to the Dutch back then, was the Southern Resource Area when they kicked off Big Mistake No. 2. Care to guess what the Northern one was?

Clark just took one look and pushed the computer back. "Yevgeniy Pavlovich, go ahead and send it." Ding erased the dialog on the screen and

hooked up the modem to the phone. The dispatch went out seconds later. Then the two officers traded a look. It had been a productive day after all.

The timing for once could scarcely have been better: 00:08 in Tokyo was 18:08 in Moscow and 10:08 both at Langley and in the White House, and Jack was just reentering his office after his time at the opposite corner of the West Wing when his STU-6 started warbling.

"Yeah."

"Ed here. We just got something important from our people in-country. The fax is coming over now. A copy's on the way to Sergey, too."

"Okay, standing by." Ryan flipped the proper switch and heard the facsimile printer start to turn out its copy.

Winston wasn't all that easy a man to impress. The VC-20 version of the Gulfstream-III business jet, he saw, was as nicely appointed as his personal aircraft—the seats and carpet were not as plush, but the communications gear was fabulous . . . even enough to make a real techno-weenie like Mark happy, he thought. The two older men took the chance to catch up on sleep while he observed the Air Force crewmen run through their preflight checklist. It really wasn't at all different from what his crewmen did, but Ryan had been right. It somehow made a difference to see military-type insignia on their shoulders. Three minutes later the executive jet was airborne and heading north for New York's La Guardia, with the added benefit that they already had a priority approach set up, which would save fifteen minutes at the top end of the trip. As he listened, the sergeant working the communications bay was arranging an FBI car to meet them at the general-aviation terminal, and evidently the Bureau was now calling everyone who mattered in the markets for a meeting at their own New York headquarters. How remarkable, he thought, to see the government acting in an efficient manner. What a pity they couldn't do that all the time.

Mark Gant was not paying attention to any of that. He was working on his computer, preparing what he called the case for the prosecution. He'd need about twenty minutes to get the exhibits printed up on acetate sheets for an overhead projector, something the FBI ought to be prepared for, they both hoped. From that point on . . . who would deliver the information? *Probably me*, Winston thought. He'd let Fiedler and the Fed Chairman propose the solution, and that was fair. After all, a government guy had come up with it.

Brilliant, George Winston told himself with an admiring chuckle. *Why didn't I think of that? What else . . . ?*

"Mark, make a note. We'll want to fly the European central-bank boys over here to see this. I don't think doing it over a teleconference line will really cut it."

Gant checked his watch. "We'll have to call right after we get in, George, but if we do the timing ought to work out okay. The evening flights into New York—yeah, they'll get in in the morning, and probably we can coordinate

everything for a Friday restart."

Winston looked aft. "We'll tell them when we get in. I think they need to catch some Z's for right now."

Gant nodded agreement. "It's going to work, George. That Ryan guy is pretty smart, isn't he?"

Now was a time to take it slow, Jack told himself. He was almost surprised that his phone hadn't rung yet, but on reflection he realized that Golovko was reading the same report, was looking at the same map on his wall, and was also telling himself to think it through as slowly and carefully as circumstances allowed.

It was starting to make sense. Well, almost. "Northern Resource Area" had to mean Eastern Siberia. The term "Southern Resource Area," as Chavez had stated in his report, had once been the term used by the Japanese government in 1941 to identify the Dutch East Indies, back when their prime strategic objective had been oil, then the principal resource needed for a navy and now the most important resource for any industrialized nation needing power to run its economy. Japan was the world's largest importer of oil despite an earnest effort to switch over to nuclear power for electricity. And Japan had to import so much else; only coal was in natural abundance. Supertankers were largely a Japanese invention, the more efficiently to move oil from the Persian Gulf fields to Japanese terminals. But they needed other things, too, and since she was an island nation, those commodities all had to come by sea, and Japan's navy was small, far too small to secure the sea-lanes.

On the other hand, Eastern Siberia was the world's last unsurveyed territory, and Japan was now conducting the survey, and the sea-lanes from the Eurasian mainland to Japan—*Hell, why not just build a railroad tunnel and do it the easy way?* Ryan asked himself.

Except for one thing. Japan was stretching her abilities to accomplish what she had already done, even with a gravely diminished American military *and* a five-thousand-mile buffer of Pacific waters between the American mainland and her own home islands. Russia's military capacity was even more drastically reduced than America's, but an invasion was more than a political act. It was an act against a people, and the Russians had not lost their pride. The Russians would fight, and they were still far larger than Japan. The Japanese had nuclear weapons on ballistic launchers, and the Russians, like the Americans, did not—but the Russians did have bombers, and fighter-bombers, and cruise missiles, all with nuclear capability, and bases close to Japan, and the political will to make use of them. There would have to be one more element. Jack leaned back, staring at his map. Then he lifted his phone and speed-dialed a direct line.

"Admiral Jackson."

"Robby? Jack. I have a question."

"Shoot."

"You said that one of our attaches in Seoul had a little talk with—"

"Yeah. They told him to sit tight and wait," Jackson reported.

"What *exactly* did the Koreans say?"

"They said . . . wait a minute. It's only half a page, but I have it here. Stand by." Jack heard a drawer open, probably a locked one. "Okay, paraphrasing, that sort of decision is political not military, many considerations to be looked at, concern that the Japanese could close their harbors to trade, concern about invasion, cut off from us, they're hedging. We haven't gone back to them yet," Robby concluded.

"OrBat for their military?" Jack asked. He meant "order of battle," essentially a roster of a nation's military assets.

"I have one around here."

"Short version," Ryan ordered.

"A little larger than Japan's. They've downsized since reunification, but what they retained is high-quality. Mainly U.S. weapons and doctrine. Their air force is pretty good. I've played with them and—"

"If you were an ROK general, how afraid would you be of Japan?"

"I'd be wary," Admiral Jackson replied. "Not afraid, but wary. They don't like Japan very much, remember."

"I know. Send me copies of that attaché report and the ROK OrBat."

"Aye aye." The line clicked off. Ryan called CIA next. Mary Pat still wasn't available, and her husband picked up. Ryan didn't bother with preliminaries.

"Ed, have you had any feedback from Station Seoul?"

"The ROKs seem very nervous. Not much cooperation. We've got a lot of friends in the KCIA, but they're clamming up on us, no political direction as yet."

"Anything different going on over there?"

"Well, yes," Ed Foley answered. "Their air force is getting a little more active. You know they have established a big training area up in the northern part of the country, and sure enough they're running some unscheduled combined-arms exercises. We have some overheads of it."

"Next, Beijing," Ryan said.

"A whole lot of nothing. China is staying out of this one. They say that they want no part of this, they have no interest in this. It doesn't concern them."

"Think about that, Ed," Jack ordered.

"Well, sure, it does concern them . . . oh . . ."

It wasn't quite fair and Ryan knew it. He now had fuller information than anyone else, and a huge head start on the analysis.

"We just developed some information. I'll have it sent over as soon as it's typed up. I want you down here at two-thirty for a skull session."

"We'll be there," the almost-DDO promised.

And there it was, right on the map. You just needed the right information, and a little time.

Korea was not a country to be intimidated by Japan. The latter country had ruled the former for almost fifty years earlier in the century, and the memories for Koreans were not happy ones. Treated as serfs by their conquerors, to this day there were few quicker ways to get dead than to refer to a Korean citizen as a Jap. The antipathy was real, and with the growing Korean economy and the competition to Japan that it made, the resentment was bilateral. Most fundamental of all was the racial element. Though Korea and Japan were in fact countries of the same genetic identity, the Japanese still regarded Koreans

as Hitler had once regarded Poles. The Koreans, moreover, had their own warrior tradition. They'd sent two divisions of troops to Vietnam, had built a formidable military of their own to defend against the nowdead madmen to their north. Once a beaten-down colony of Japan, they were now tough, and very, very proud. So what, then, could have cowed them out of honoring treaty commitments to America?

Not Japan. Korea had little to fear from direct attack, and Japan could hardly use her nuclear weapons on Korea. Wind patterns would transport whatever fallout resulted right back to the country that had sent the weapons.

But immediately to Korea's north was the world's most populous country, with the world's largest standing army, and *that* was enough to frighten the ROKs, as it would frighten anyone.

Japan needed and doubtless wanted direct access to natural resources. It had a superb and fully developed economic base, a highly skilled manpower pool, all manner of high-tech assets. But Japan had a relatively small population in proportion to her economic strength.

China had a vast pool of people, but not as yet highly trained, a rapidly developing economy still somewhat lacking in high technology. And like Japan, China needed better access to resources.

And to the immediate north of both China and Japan was the world's last unexploited treasure house.

Taking the Marianas would prevent or at least hinder the approach of America's principal strategic arm, the U.S. Navy, from approaching the area of interest. The only other way to protect Siberia was from the west, through all of Russia. Meaning that the area was in fact cut off from outside assistance. China had her own nuclear capacity to deter Russia, and a larger land army to defend the conquest. It was a considerable gamble, to be sure, but with the American and European economies in a shambles, unable to help Russia, yes, it did all make good strategic sense. Global war on the installment plan.

The operational art, moreover, was not new in the least. First cripple the strong enemy, then gobble up the weak one. Exactly the same thing had been attempted in 1941—1942. The Japanese strategic concept had never been to conquer America, but to cripple the larger country so severely that acquiescence to her southern conquests would become a political necessity. Pretty simple stuff, really, Ryan told himself. You just had to break the code. That's when the phone rang. It was his number-four line.

"Hello, Sergey," Ryan said.

"How did you know?" Golovko demanded.

Jack might have answered that the line was set aside for the Russian's direct access, but didn't. "Because you just read the same thing I did."

"Tell me what you think?"

"I think you are their objective, Sergey Nikolay'ch. Probably for next year." Ryan's voice was light, still in the flush of discovery, which was always pleasant despite the nature of the new knowledge.

"Earlier. Autumn, I should imagine. The weather will work more in their favor that way." Then came a lengthy pause. "Can you help us, Ivan Emmetovich? No, wrong question. *Will* you help us?"

"Alliances, like friendships, are always bilateral," Jack pointed out. "You

have a president to brief. So do I."

32

Special Report

As an officer who had once hoped to command a ship like this one, Captain Sanchez was glad he'd chosen to remain aboard instead of flying his fighter off to the Naval Air Station at Barbers Point. Six gray tugboats had nudged USS *John Stennis* into the graving dock.

There were over a hundred professional engineers aboard, including fifty new arrivals from Newport News Shipbuilding, all of them below and looking at the power plant. Trucks were lined up on the perimeter of the graving dock, and with them hundreds of sailors and civilian yard employees, like doctors or EMTs, Bud imagined, ready to switch out body parts.

As Captain Sanchez watched, a crane lifted the first brow from its cradle, and another started turning, to lift what looked like a construction trailer, probably to rest on the flight deck. The gate on the dock wasn't even closed yet. Somebody, he saw, was in a hurry.

"Captain Sanchez?"

Bud turned to see a Marine corporal. He handed over a message form after saluting. "You're wanted at CINCPACFLT Operations, sir."

"That's totally crazy," the president of the New York Stock Exchange said, managing to get the first word in.

The big conference room at the FBI's New York office looked remarkably like a courtroom, with seats for a hundred people or more. It was about half empty, and the majority of people present were government employees of one sort or another, mainly FBI and SEC officials who'd been working the takedown case since Friday evening. But the front row was filled entirely with senior traders and institution chairmen.

George had just taken them through his version of the events of the previous week, using an overhead projector to display trends and trades and going slowly because of the fatigue level that had to affect the judgment of everyone trying to understand what he was saying. The Fed Chairman just then entered the room, having made his calls to Europe. He gave Winston and Fiedler a thumbs-up and took a seat in the back for the moment.

"It may be crazy, but that's what happened."

The NYSE head thought about that. "That's all well and good," he said after a few seconds, meaning that it wasn't well and good at all, and everybody knew it. "But we're still stuck in the middle of a swamp, and the alligators are gathering around us. I don't think we can hold them off much longer." There was general agreement on that point. Everyone in the front row was surprised

to see their former colleague smile.

Winston turned to the Secretary of the Treasury. “Buzz, why don’t you deliver the good news?”

“Ladies and gentlemen, there is a way out,” Fiedler said confidently. His next sixty seconds generated incredulous silence. The traders didn’t even have the wit to turn and look at one another. But if they didn’t exactly nod with approval, neither did anyone object, even after a seemingly endless period of consideration.

The first to speak, predictably, was the managing director of Cummings, Carter, and Cantor. CCC had died around 3:15 on the previous Friday, caught moving the wrong way, its cash reserves wiped out, and then denied help from Merrill Lynch in a move which, in fairness, the managing director could not really fault.

“Is it legal?” he asked.

“Neither the United States Department of Justice nor the Securities and Exchange Commission will consider your cooperation to be any sort of violation. I will say,” Fiedler added, “that any attempt to exploit the situation will be dealt with very severely indeed—but if we all work together, antitrust and other considerations will be set aside in the interests of national security. That is irregular, but it is now on record, and you all heard me say it. Ladies and gentlemen, that is the intention and the word of the United States government.”

Well, *damn,* the assembled multitude thought. Especially the law-enforcement people.

“Well, you all know what happened to us at Triple-C,” the director said, looking around, and his natural skepticism was tempered with the beginnings of genuine relief. “I don’t have a choice here. I have to buy into this.”

“I have something to add.” Now the Fed Chairman walked to the front of the room. “I just finished calling the central-bank heads of Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. They’re all flying here tonight. We’ll get together right here tomorrow morning to set up a system by which they also can cooperate in this effort. We *are* going to stabilize the dollar. We *are* going to fix the T-Bill market. The American banking system will *not* go down on us. I am going to propose to the Open Market Committee that anyone who holds on to U.S. Treasuries—that is, extends the three-month and six-month notes for one renewal cycle—gets an *extra* fifty basis points as a reward from the U.S. government for helping us through this situation. We will also give the same bonus to anyone who buys T-Bills in the next ten days after the markets reopen.”

Smart move, Winston thought. Very *smart move*. That would draw foreign money into America, away from Japan, and really firm up the dollar——while attacking the yen. The Asian banks that dumped on the dollar would get it in the back of the neck for the move. *So two could play the game, eh?*

“You need legislation for that,” a treasuries expert objected.

“We’ll get it, we’ll have ink on paper by Friday-a-week. For the moment, that is the policy of the Federal Reserve, approved and supported by the President of the United States,” the Chairman added.

“They’re giving us our life back, people,” Winston said, pacing up and down

again in front of the wooden rail. “We have been *attacked* by people who wanted to take us down. They wanted to cut our heart out. Well, looks like we have some pretty good doctors here. We’re going to be sick for a while, but by the end of next week it’s going to be okay.”

“Friday noon, eh?” the NYSE asked.

“Correct,” Fiedler told him, staring hard now and waiting for a response. The executive gave it another few seconds of thought, then stood.

“You will have the full cooperation of the New York Stock Exchange.” And the prestige of the NYSE was enough to overcome any doubts. Full cooperation was inevitable, but speed in the decision cycle was vital, and in ten more seconds the market officials were standing, smiling, and thinking about getting their shops back together.

“There will be no program trading until further notice,” Fiedler said. “Those ‘expert systems’ nearly killed us. Friday is going to be exciting under the best of circumstances. We want people to use their brains, not their Nintendo systems.”

“Agreed,” NASDAQ said for the rest.

“We need to rethink those things anyway,” Merrill Lynch announced thoughtfully.

“We will coordinate through this office. Think things through,” the Fed Chairman told them. “If you have ideas on how to make the transition go more smoothly, we want to know about it. We will reconvene at six. Ladies and gentlemen, we are in this together. For the next week or so we are not competitors. We are team members.”

“I have about a million individual investors depending on my house,” Winston reminded them. “Some of you have more. Let’s not forget that.” There was nothing like an appeal to honor. It was a virtue that all craved, even those who lacked it. Fundamentally, honor was itself a debt, a code of behavior, a promise, something inside yourself that you owed to the others who saw it in you. Everyone in this room wanted all the others to look and see a person worthy of respect and trust, and honor. An altogether useful concept, Winston thought, most particularly in time of trouble.

And then there was one, Ryan thought. The way it always seemed to work at this level, you took care of the simple jobs first and saved the really tough ones for last.

The mission now was more to prevent war than to execute it, but the latter would be part of the former.

The control of Eastern Siberia by Japan and China would have the effect of creating a new—what? Axis? Probably not that. Certainly a new world economic powerhouse, a rival to America in all categories of power. It would give Japan and China a huge competitive advantage in economic terms.

That in and of itself was not an evil ambition. But the methods were. The world had once operated by rules as simple as those of any jungle. If you got it first, it was yours—but only if you had the strength to hold it. Not terribly elegant, nor especially fair by contemporary standards, but the rules had been accepted because the stronger nations generally gave citizens political stability

in return for loyalty, and that was usually the first step in the growth of a nation. After a while, however, the human need for peace and security had grown into something else—a desire for a stake in the governance of their country. From 1789, the year that America had ratified its Constitution, to 1989, the year that Eastern Europe had fallen, a mere two centuries, something new had come into the collective mind of mankind. It was called by many names—democracy, human rights, selfdetermination—but it was fundamentally a recognition that the human will had its own force, and mainly for good.

The Japanese plan sought to deny that force. But the time for the old rules was past, Jack told himself. The men in this room would have to see to it.

"So," his briefing concluded, "that's the overall situation in the Pacific."

The Cabinet Room was full, except for the seat of the Secretary of the Treasury, whose senior deputy was sitting in. Around the roughly diamond-shaped table were the heads of the various departments of the Executive Branch. Senior members of Congress and the military had seats against the four walls.

The Secretary of Defense was supposed to speak next. Instead of rising to the lectern as Ryan went back to his place, however, he flipped open his leather folder of notes and scarcely looked up from them.

"I don't know that we can do this," SecDef began, and with those words the men and women of the President's Cabinet shifted uneasily in their chairs.

"The problem is as much technical as anything. We cannot project sufficient power to—"

"Wait a minute," Ryan interrupted. "I want to make a few items clear for everyone, okay?" There were no objections. Even the Defense Secretary seemed relieved that he didn't have to speak.

"Guam is U.S. Territory, has been for almost a century. The people there are our citizens. Japan took the island away from us in 1941, and in 1944 we took it back. People died to do that."

"We think we can get Guam back through negotiations," Secretary Hanson said.

"Glad to hear that," Ryan replied. "What about the rest of the Marianas?"

"My people think it's unlikely that we will get them back through diplomatic means. We'll work on it, of course, but—"

"But *what?*" Jack demanded. There was no immediate answer. "All right, let's make another thing clear. The Northern Marianas were *never* a legal possession of Japan, despite what their ambassador told us. They were a Trust Territory under the League of Nations, and so they were *not* war booty to us when we took them in 1944 along with Guam. In 1947 the United Nations declared them a Trust Territory under the protection of the United States. In 1952 Japan officially renounced all claims to sovereignty to the islands. In 1978, the *people* of the Northern Marianas opted to become a Commonwealth, politically unified with the United States, and they elected their first governor —we took long enough to let them do that, but they did. In 1986 the U.N. decided that we had faithfully fulfilled our responsibilities to those people, and in the same year the people of those islands all got U.S. citizenship. In 1990 the U.N. Security Council closed out the trusteeship for good.

"Do we all have that? The citizens of those islands are *American* citizens, with U.S. passports—not because we made them do it, but because they freely chose to be. That's called self-determination. We brought the idea to those rocks, and the people there must have thought that we were serious about it."

"You can't do what you can't do," Hanson said. "We can negotiate—"

"Negotiate, hell!" Jack snarled back. "Who says we can't?"

SecDef looked up from his notes. "Jack, it could take years to rebuild . . . the things we've deactivated. If you want to blame someone, well, blame me."

"If we can't do it—what's it going to cost?" the Secretary of Health and Human Services asked. "We have things we have to do *here!*"

"So we let a foreign country strip the citizenship rights of Americans because it's *too hard* to defend them?" Ryan asked more quietly. "Then what? What about the next time it happens? Tell me, when did we stop being the United States of America? It's a matter of political will, that's all," the National Security Advisor went on. "Do we have any?"

"Dr. Ryan, we live in a real world," the Secretary of the Interior pointed out. "All those people on those islands, can we put their lives at risk?"

"We used to say that freedom had a greater value than life. We used to say the same thing about our political principles," Ryan replied. "And the result is the world which those principles built. The things we call rights—nobody just *gave* them to us. No, sir. Those ideas are things we fought for. Those are things people died for. The people on those islands are American citizens. Do we owe them anything?"

Secretary Hanson was uncomfortable with this line of thought. So were others, but they deferred to him, grateful to be able to do so. "We can negotiate from a position of strength—but we have to go carefully."

"How carefully?" Ryan asked quietly.

"Damn it, Ryan, we can't risk nuclear attack over a few thousand—"

"Mr. Secretary, what's the magic number, then? A million? Our place in the world is based on a few very simple ideas—and a lot of people lost their lives for those ideas."

"You're talking philosophy," Hanson shot back. "Look, I have my negotiating team together. We'll get Guam back."

"No, sir, we're going to get them *all* back. And I'll tell you why." Ryan leaned forward, looking up and down the table. "If we don't, then we cannot prevent a war between Russia on one side and Japan and China on the other. I think I know the Russians. They will fight for Siberia. They have to. The resources there are their best chance for bootstrapping their country into the next century. That war could go nuclear. Japan and China probably don't think it'll go that far, people, but I'm telling you it will. You know why?

"If we cannot deal with this situation effectively, then who can? The Russians will think they're alone. Our influence with them will be zero, they'll have their backs against a wall, and they'll lash out the only way they can, and the butcher's bill will be like nothing the world has ever seen, and I'm not ready for another dark age.

"So we don't have a choice. You can name any reason you want, but it all comes down to the same thing: we have a debt of honor to the people on those islands who decided that they wanted to be Americans. If we don't defend that

principle, we don't defend anything. And nobody will trust us, and nobody will respect us, not even ourselves. If we turn our back on them, then we are not the people we say we are, and everything we've ever done is a lie."

Through it all, President Durling sat quietly in his place, scanning faces, most especially his Secretary of Defense, and behind him, against the wall, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the man SecDef had picked to assist him in the dismantlement of the American military. Both men were looking down, and it was clear that both men were unworthy of the moment. It was also clear that their country could not afford to be.

"How can we do it, Jack?" Roger Durling asked.

"Mr. President, I don't know yet. Before we try, we have to decide if we are going to or not, and that, sir, is your call."

Durling weighed Ryan's words, and weighed the desirability of polling his cabinet for their opinions, but the faces told him something he didn't like. He remembered his time in Vietnam when he'd told his troopers that, yes, it all mattered, even though he knew that it was a lie. He'd never forgotten the looks on their faces, and though it was not widely known, every month or so now, in the dark of night, he'd walk down to the Vietnam Memorial, where he knew the exact location of every name of every man who had died under his command, and he visited those names one by one, to tell them that, yes, it really had mattered somehow, that in the great scheme of events their deaths had contributed to something, and that the world had changed for the better, too late for them, but not too late for their fellow citizens. President Durling thought of one other thing: nobody had ever taken land away from America. Perhaps it all came down to that.

"Brett, you will commence negotiations immediately. Make it clear that the current situation in the Western Pacific is in no way acceptable to the United States government. We will settle for nothing less than a complete restoration of the Mariana Islands to their antebellum condition. Nothing less," Durling repeated.

"Yes, Mr. President."

"I want plans and options for the removal of Japanese forces from those islands should negotiations fail," JUMPER told the Secretary of Defense. The latter nodded but his face told the tale. SecDef didn't think it could be done.

Admiral Chandraskatta thought it had taken long enough, but he was patient, and he knew that he could afford to be. *What will happen now?* he wondered.

It could have gone more quickly. He'd been a little slow in his methods and plans, trying to learn the thought patterns of his adversary, Rear Admiral Michael Dubro. He was a clever foe, skilled at maneuvering, and because he was clever, he'd been quick to think that his own foe was stupid. It had been obvious for a week that the American formation lay to the southwest, and by moving south, he'd cajoled Dubro into moving north, then east. Had his assessment been wrong, then the American fleet would still have had to go to the same spot, east of Dondra Head, forcing the fleet oilers to cut the corner. Sooner or later they would pass under the eyes of his air patrols, and, finally, they had. Now all he had to do was follow them, and Dubro couldn't divert

them except to the east. And that meant diverting his entire fleet to the east, away from Sri Lanka, opening the way for his navy's amphibious formation to load its cargo of soldiers and armored vehicles. The only alternative was for the Americans to confront his fleet and offer battle.

But they wouldn't do that—would they? No. The only sensible thing for America to do was to recall Dubro and his two carriers to Pearl Harbor, there to await the political decision on whether or not to confront Japan. They had divided their fleet, violating the dictum of Alfred Thayer Mahan, which Chandraskatta had learned at the Naval War College at Newport, Rhode Island, along with his classmate, Yusuo Sato, not so many years before, and he remembered the theoretical discussions they'd had on walks along the seawall, watching the yachts and wondering how small navies could defeat big ones.

Arriving at Pearl Harbor, Dubro would confer with the intelligence and operations staffs of his Pacific Fleet command and they would do their sums, and then they would see that it probably could not be done. How angry and frustrated they would be, the Indian Admiral thought.

But first he would teach them a lesson. Now he was hunting them. For all their speed and cleverness, they were tied to a fixed point, and sooner or later you just ran out of maneuvering room. Now he could force them away, and allow his country to take her first imperial step. A small one, almost inconsequential in the great game, but a worthy opening move nonetheless because the Americans would withdraw, allowing his country to move, as Japan had moved. By the time America had built its strength back up, it would be too late to change things. It was all about space and time, really. Both worked against a country crippled by internal difficulties and therefore robbed of her purpose. How clever of the Japanese to see to that.

"It went better than I expected," Durling said. He'd walked over to Ryan's office for the chat, a first for both of them.

"You really think so?" Jack asked in surprise.

"Remember, I inherited most of the cabinet from Bob." The President sat down. "Their focus is domestic. That's been my problem all along."

"You need a new SecDef and a new Chairman," the National Security Advisor observed coldly.

"I know that, but the timing is bad for it." Durling smiled. "It gives you a slightly wider purview, Jack. But I have a question to ask you first."

"I don't know if we can bring it off." Ryan was doodling on his pad.

"We have to take the missiles out of play first."

"Yes, sir, I know that. We'll find them. At least I expect that we will one way or another. The other wild cards are hostages, and our ability to hit the islands. This war, if that's what it is, has different rules. I'm not sure what those rules are yet." Ryan was still working on the public part of the problem. How would the American people react? How would the Japanese?

"You want some input from your commander in chief?" Durling asked.

That was good enough to generate another smile. "You bet."

"I fought in a war where the other side made the rules," Durling observed. "It didn't work out very well."

"Which leads me to a question," Jack said.

"Ask it."

"How far can we go?"

The President considered. "That's too open-ended."

"The enemy command authority is usually a legitimate target of war, but heretofore those people have been in uniform."

"You mean going after the zaibatsu?"

"Yes, sir. Our best information is that they're the ones giving the orders. But they're civilians, and going directly after them could seem like assassination."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, Jack." The President stood to leave, having said what he'd come in to say.

"Fair enough." *A slightly wider purview,* Ryan thought. That could mean many things. Mainly it meant that he had the opportunity to run with the ball, but all alone, unprotected. *Well,* Jack thought, *you've done that before*.

"What have we done?" Koga asked. "What have we allowed them to do?"

"It's so easy for them," responded a political aide of long standing. He didn't have to say who *them* was. "We cannot ourselves assert our power, and divided, it's just so easy for them to push us in any direction they want . . . and over time—" The man shrugged.

"And over time the policy of our country has been decided by twenty or thirty men elected by no one but their own corporate boardrooms. But this far?" Koga asked. "But *this* far?"

"We are where we are. Would you prefer that we deny it?" the man asked.

"And who protects the people now?" the former—that word was bitter indeed—Prime Minister asked, leading with his chin and knowing it.

"Goto, of course."

"We cannot permit that. You know what he follows." Koga's counselor nodded, and would have smiled but for the gravity of the moment. "Tell me," Mogataru Koga asked. "What is honor? What does it dictate now?"

"Our duty, Prime Minister, is to the people," replied a man whose friendship with the politician went back to Tokyo University. Then he remembered a quote from a Westerner—Cicero, he thought. "The good of the people is the highest law."

And that said it all, Koga thought. He wondered if treason always began that way. It was something he'd sleep on, except that he knew that he wouldn't sleep at all that night. *This morning,* Koga thought with a grunt, checking his watch.

"We're sure that it has to be standard-gauge track?"

"You can resection the photos we have yourself," Betsy Fleming told him. They were back in the Pentagon headquarters of the National Reconnaissance Office. "The transporter-car our people saw is standard gauge."

"Disinformation, maybe?" the NRO analyst asked.

"The diameter of the SS-19 is two-point-eight-two meters," Chris Scott

replied, handing over a fax from Russia. “Throw in another two hundred seventy centimeters for the transport container. I ran the numbers myself. The narrow-gauge track over there would be marginal for an object of that width. Possible, but marginal.”

“You have to figure,” Betsy went on, “that they’re not going to take too many chances. Besides, the Russians also considered a rail-transport mode for the Mod-4 version, and designed the bird for that, and the Russian rail gauge __”

“Yeah, I forgot that. It is larger than our standard, isn’t it?” The analyst nodded. “Okay, that does make the job easier.” He turned back to his computer and executed a tasking order that he’d drafted a few hours earlier. For every pass over Japan, the narrow-focus high-resolution cameras would track down along precise coordinates. Interestingly, AMTRAK had the best current information on Japanese railroads, and even now one of their executives was being briefed in on the security rules pertaining to overhead imagery. It was a pretty simple briefing, really. Tell anyone what you see, and figure on a lengthy vacation at Marion, Illinois.

The computer-generated order went to Sunnyvale, California, from there to a military communications satellite, and thence to the two orbiting KH-11 satellites, one of which would overfly Japan in fifty minutes, the other ten minutes after that. All three people wondered how good the Japanese were at camouflaging. The hell of it was, they might never find out. All they could do, really, was wait. They would look at the imagery in real-time as it came in, but unless there were overt signs pointing to what they sought, the real work would be done over hours and days. If they were lucky.

Kurushio was on the surface, never something to make a submarine commander happy. They wouldn’t be here long. Fuel was coming aboard through two large-diameter hoses, and other stores, mainly food, were lowered by crane to crewmen waiting on the deck. His navy didn’t have a proper submarine tender, Commander Ugaki knew. Mainly they used tank-landing ships for the purpose, but those were fulfilling other purposes now, and he was stuck with a merchantman whose crew was enthusiastic but unfamiliar with the tasks they were now attempting.

His was the last boat into Agana Harbor because he’d been the one farthest away from the Marianas when the occupation had begun. He’d fired only one torpedo, and was gratified to see how well the Type 89 had worked. That was good. The merchantmen didn’t have the equipment to reload him properly, but, the captain told himself, he had fifteen more, and four Harpoon missiles, and if the Americans offered him that many targets, so much the better.

Those crewmen not on duty loading stores on the afterdeck were crowded forward, getting some sun as submariners often did—as indeed their captain was doing, bare-chested atop the sail, drinking tea and smiling for everyone to see. His next mission was to patrol the area west of the Bonins, to intercept any American ship—more likely a submarine—that attempted to close the Home Islands. It promised to be typical submarine duty, Ugaki thought: dull but demanding. He’d have to talk to his crew about how important it was.

“So where’s the patrol line?” Jones asked, pushing the envelope again.

“Along 165-East for the moment,” Admiral Mancuso said, pointing at the chart. “We’re thin, Jonesy. Before I commit them to battle, I want them to get used to the idea. I want the COs to drill their people up. You’re never ready enough, Ron. Never.”

“True,” the civilian conceded. He’d come over with SOSUS printouts to demonstrate that all known submarine contacts were off the screen. Two hydrophone arrays that were operated from the island of Guam were no longer available. Though connected by undersea cable to the rest of the network, they’d evidently been turned off by the monitoring facility on Guam, and nobody at Pearl had yet been able to trick them back on. The good news was that a backup array off Samar in the Philippines was still operating, but it could not detect the Japanese SSKs shown by satellite to be replenishing off Agana. They’d even gotten a good count. Probably, Mancuso thought. The Japanese still painted the hull numbers on the sails, and the satellite cameras could read them. Unless the Japanese, like the Russians and then the Americans, had learned to spoof reconnaissance efforts by playing with the numbers—or simply erased them entirely.

“It would be nice to have a few more fast-attacks, wouldn’t it?” Jones observed after a minute’s contemplation of the chart.

“Sure would. Maybe if we can get some direction from Washington . . .” His voice trailed off, and Mancuso thought a little more. The location of every sub under his command was marked with a black silhouette, even the ones in overhaul status. Those were marked in white, showing availability dates, which was not much help at the moment. But there were five such silhouettes at Bremerton, weren’t there?

The *Special Report* card appeared on all the major TV networks. In every case the hushed voice of an anchorperson told people that their network shows would be interrupted by a speech from the President about the economic crisis with which his administration had been dealing since the weekend. Then came the Presidential Seal. Those who had been following the events were surprised to see the President smiling.

“Good evening.

“My fellow Americans, last week we saw a major event take place in the American financial system.

“I want to begin my report to you by saying that the American economy is strong. Now”—he smiled—“that may seem a strange pronouncement given all that you’ve heard in the media and elsewhere. But let me tell you why that is so. I’ll start off with a question:

“What has changed? American workers are still making cars in Detroit and elsewhere. American workers are still making steel. Kansas farmers have their winter wheat in and are preparing for a new planting season. They’re still making computers in the Silicon Valley. They’re still making tires in Akron. Boeing is still making airplanes. They’re still pumping oil out of the ground in Texas and Alaska. They’re still mining coal in West Virginia. All the things you

were doing a week ago, you are still doing. So what has changed?

"What changed was this: some electrons traveled along some copper wires, telephone lines like this one"—the President held up a phone cord and tossed it aside on his desk—"and that's all," he went on in the voice of a good, smart neighbor come to the house to offer some kindly advice. "Not one person has lost his life. Not a single business has lost a building. The wealth of our nation is unchanged. Nothing has gone away.

"And yet, my fellow Americans, we have begun to panic—over what?

"In the past four days we have determined that a deliberate attempt was made to tamper with the U.S. financial markets. The United States Department of Justice, with the assistance of some good Americans within those markets, is now building a criminal case against the people responsible for that. I cannot go further at the moment because even your President does not have the right to tamper with the right of any person to a fair and impartial trial. But we do know what happened and we do know that what happened is entirely artificial.

"Now, what are we going to do about it?" Roger Durling asked.

"The financial markets have been closed all week. They will reopen at noon on Friday and . . ."

33

Reversal Points

“It can’t possibly work,” Kozo Matsuda said over the translation. “Raizo’s plan was perfect—better than perfect,” he went on, talking as much to himself as the telephone receiver. Before the crash he’d worked in conjunction with a banker associate to use the opportunity to cash in on the T-Bill transactions, which had gone a long way to recapitalizing his troubled conglomerate. It had also made his cash account yen-heavy in the face of international obligations. But that was not a problem, was it? Not with the renewed strength of the yen and corresponding weakness of the American dollar. It might even make sense, he thought, to purchase American interests through intermediaries—a good strategic move once the American equities market resumed its free fall.

“When do the European markets open?” Somehow in the excitement of the moment he couldn’t remember.

“London is nine hours behind us. Germany and Holland are eight. Four this afternoon,” the man on the other end of the phone said. “Our people have their instructions.” And those were clear: to use the renewed power of their national currency to buy as many European equities as possible so that when the financial panic ended, two or three years from now, Japan would be so enmeshed in that multinational economy as to be a totally integral part of it; so vital to their survival that separation would run the renewed danger of financial collapse. And they wouldn’t risk that, not after recovery from the worst economic crisis in three generations, and certainly not after Japan had played so important and selfless a part in restoring prosperity to three hundred million Europeans. It was troubling that the Americans suspected a hand in what had taken place, but Yamata-san had assured them all that no records could possibly exist—wasn’t that the masterstroke of the entire event, the elimination of records and their replacement with chaos? Businesses could not operate without precise financial records of their transactions, and denied those, they simply stopped. Rebuilding them would require weeks or months, Matsuda was sure, during which time the paralysis would allow Japan—more precisely, his fellow zaibatsu—to cash in, in addition to the brilliant strategic moves Yamata had executed through their government agencies. The integrated nature of the plan was the reason why all his fellows had signed on to it.

“It really doesn’t matter, Kozo. We took Europe down, too, and the only liquidity left in the world is ours.”

“Good one, Boss,” Ryan said, leaning on the doorframe.

"A long way to go," Durling said, leaving his chair and heading out of the Oval Office before saying anything more. The President and National Security Advisor headed into the White House proper, past the technicians who alone had been allowed in. It wasn't time to face reporters yet.

"It's amazing how philosophical it is," Jack said as they took the elevator to the residential floor.

"Metaphysics, eh? You did go to a Jesuit school, didn't you?"

"Three, actually. What is reality?" Jack asked rhetorically. "Reality to them is electrons and computer screens, and if there's one thing I learned on the Street, it's that they don't know investments worth a damn. Except Yamata, I suppose."

"Well, he did all right, didn't he?" Durling asked.

"He should have left the records alone. If he'd left us in free-fall . . ." Ryan shrugged. "It might just have kept going. It just never occurred to him that we might not play by his rules." And that, Jack told himself, would be the key to everything. The President's speech had been a fine mix of things said and unsaid, and the targeting of the speech had been precise. It had been, in fact, the first PsyOp of a war.

"The press can't stay dumb forever."

"I know." Ryan even knew where the leak would start, and the only reason it hadn't happened already was the FBI. "But we need to keep them dumb just a little longer."

It started cautiously, not really as part of any operational plan at all, but more as a precursor to one. Four B-1B Lancer bombers lifted off from Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska, followed by two KC-10 tankers. The combination of latitude and time of year guaranteed darkness. Their bomb bays were fitted with fuel tanks instead of weapons. Each aircraft had a crew of four, pilot and copilot, plus two systems operators.

The Lancer was a sleek aircraft, a bomber equipped with a fighter's stick instead of a more conventional control yoke, and pilots who had flown both said that the B-1B felt and flew like a slightly heavy F-4 Phantom, its greater weight and larger size giving the bomber greater stability and, for now, a smoother ride. For the moment the staggered formation of six flew international route R-220, maintaining the lateral spacing expected of commercial air traffic.

A thousand miles and two hours out, passing Shemya and leaving ground-control radar coverage, the six aircraft turned north briefly. The tankers held steady while the bombers one by one eased underneath to take on fuel, a procedure that lasted about twelve minutes in each case. Finished, the bombers continued southwest while the tankers turned to land at Shemya, where they would refill their own tanks.

The four bombers descended to twenty-five thousand feet, which took them below the regular stream of commercial air traffic and allowed more freedom of maneuver. They continued close to R-220, the westernmost of the commercial flight tracks, skimming down past the Kamchatka Peninsula.

Systems were flipped on in the back. Though designed as a penetrating

bomber, the B-1B fulfilled many roles, one of which was electronic intelligence. The body of any military aircraft is studded with small structures that look for all the world like the fins on fish. These objects are invariably antennas of one sort or another, and the graceful fairing has no more sinister purpose than to reduce drag. The Lancer had many of them, designed to gather in radar and other electronic signals and pass them along to internal equipment, which analyzed the data. Some of the work was done in real-time by the flight crew. The idea was for the bomber to monitor hostile radar, the better to allow its crew to avoid detection and deliver its bombs.

At the NOGAL reporting point, about three hundred miles outside the Japanese Air Defense Identification Zone, the bombers split into a patrol line, with roughly fifty miles separating the aircraft, and descended to ten thousand feet. Crewmen rubbed their hands together, pulled their seat belts a little tighter, and started concentrating. Cockpit chatter lessened to that required by the mission, and tape recorders were flipped on. Satellite monitoring told them that the Japanese Air Force had airborne-early-warning aircraft, E-767s, operating almost continuously, and those were the defensive assets that the bomber crews feared most. Flying high, the E-767s could see far. Mobile, they could move to deal with threats with a high degree of efficiency. Worst of all, they invariably operated in conjunction with fighters, and fighters had eyes in them, and behind the eyes were brains, and weapons with brains in them were the most frightening of all.

"Okay, there's the first one," one of the systems operators said. It wasn't really the first. For practice of sorts, they'd calibrated their equipment on Russian air-defense radars, but for the first time in the collective memory of all sixteen airmen, it wasn't Russian radars and fighters which concerned them. "Low-frequency, fixed, known location."

They were receiving what operators often called "fuzz." The radar in question was under the horizon and too far away to detect their semistealthy aircraft. As you can see a person holding a flashlight long before the light reveals your presence to the holder, so it was with radar. The powerful transmitter was as much a warning beacon to unwanted guests as a lookout for its owners. The location, frequency, pulse-repetition rate, and estimated power of the radar was noted and logged. A display on the electronic-warfare officer's board showed the coverage for that radar. The display was repeated on the pilot's console, with the danger area marked in red. He'd stay well clear of it.

"Next," the EWO said. "Wow, talk about power—this one's airborne. Must be one of their new ones. It's definitely moving south-to-north, now bearing two-zero-two."

"Copy," the pilot acknowledged quietly, his eyes scanning all around the dark sky. The Lancer was really proceeding on autopilot, but his right hand was only inches from the stick, ready to jerk the bomber to the left, dive to the deck, and go to burner. There were fighters somewhere off to his right, probably two F-15s, but they would stay close to E-767s.

"Another one, one-nine-five, just appeared . . . different freq and—stand by," the electronics officer said. "Okay, major frequency change. He's probably in an overthe-horizon mode now."

"Could he have us?" the pilot asked, checking his avoidance screen again. Outside the red keep-out zone was a yellow section that the pilot thought of as the "maybe" zone. They were at most a few minutes away from entering that zone, and "maybe" seemed very worrisome indeed at the moment, nearly three thousand miles from Elmendorf Air Force Base.

"Not sure. It's possible. Recommend we come left," the EWO said judiciously. On that advice, he felt the aircraft bank five degrees. The mission wasn't about taking risks. It was about gathering information, as a gambler would observe a table before taking his seat and putting his chips in play.

* * *

"I think there's somebody out there," one of the E-767 operators said. "Zero-one-five, southerly course. Hard to hold it."

The rotodome atop the E-767 was like few others in the world, and all of them were Japanese. Three of them were operating on the eastern approaches to their country. Transmitting up to three million watts of electrical energy, it had four times the power of anything the Americans had aloft, but the true sophistication of the system lay not in its power but in its mode of delivery. Essentially a smaller version of the SPY radar carried on the Kongo-class destroyers, the array was composed of thousands of solid-state diodes that could scan both electronically and mechanically, and jump in frequency to suit the needs of the moment. For long-range detection, a relatively low frequency was best. However, though the waves curved around the visible horizon somewhat, it was at the cost of poor resolution. The operator was getting a hit on only every third sweep or so. The system software had not yet learned to distinguish clutter from the purposeful activities of a human mind, at least not in all cases, and not, unfortunately, at this frequency setting....

"Are you sure?" the senior controller asked over the intercom line. He'd just called up the display himself and didn't see anything yet.

"Here." The first man moved his cursor and marked the contact when it reappeared. He wished they could improve that software. "Wait! Look here!" He selected another blip and marked it, too. It disappeared almost at once but came back in fifteen seconds. "See, southerly course—speed five hundred knots."

"Excellent." The senior controller activated his radio microphone and reported to his ground station that Japanese air defenses were being probed for the first time. The only surprise, really, was that it had taken them so long. *This is where things get interesting,* he thought, wondering what would happen next, now that the games had begun.

"No more of those Es?" the pilot asked.

"No, just the two. I thought I had a little fuzz a minute ago," the EWO said, "but it faded out." He didn't need to explain that with the sensitivity of his instruments, he was probably getting readings on garage-door openers as well.

A moment later another ground radar was plotted. The patrol line angled back west one by one as they passed the coverage of the two E-767s, still on a southwesterly base course, now halfway down the largest home island, Honshu, which was well over three hundred miles to their right. The copilots of each of the four aircraft looked exclusively west now, while the aircraft commanders scanned for possible air traffic to their front. It was tense but routine, not unlike driving through a neighborhood in which one didn't want to live. So long as the lights were all green, you didn't get too worried—but you didn't like the looks your car got.

The crew of the third E-767 was unhappy, and their fighter escorts even more so. Enemy aircraft were looking at their coastline, and even if they were six hundred kilometers out, they still didn't belong in the neighborhood. But they switched their radar systems to standby. Probably EC-135s, they thought, surveillance aircraft, assembling an electronic order of battle for their country. And if the American mission were to gather information, then the smart thing to do was to deny them the information they wanted. And it was easy to do, or so the radar-controller officers told themselves.

We'll go closer in the next time, the aircraft commander told himself. First electronics experts would have to examine the data and try to determine what was and what wasn't safe, betting the lives of fellow Air Force officers with their conclusions. That was a happy thought. The crew relaxed, yawned, and started talking, mainly about the mission and what they had learned. Four and a half hours back to Elmendorf, and a shower, and some mandated crew rest.

The Japanese controllers were still not completely sure that they'd had contacts at all, but that would be determined by examining their onboard tapes. Their patrol patterns returned to their normal monitoring of commercial air traffic, and a few comments were exchanged on why the devil that traffic still continued. The answers were mainly shrugs and raised eyebrows and even more uncertainty than had existed when they'd thought they were tracking contacts. There was just something about looking at a radar screen for more than a few hours. Sooner or later your imagination took over, and the more you thought about it, the worse it got. But that, they knew, was the same for the other side in the game, too.

The central-bank heads were accustomed to VIP treatment. Their flights all arrived at John F. Kennedy International within the same hour. Each was met by a senior diplomat from their respective countries' U.N. delegations, whisked past customs control, and sent to the city in a car with diplomatic tags. The common destination surprised them all, but the Federal Reserve Chairman explained that for convenience the New York FBI office was a better

place for coordination than the local Federal Reserve bank, especially since it was large enough to accommodate the directors of the major trading houses—and since antitrust regulations were being suspended in the interest of American national security. That notification bemused the European visitors. Finally, they thought, America understood the national-security implications of financial matters. It had certainly taken them long enough.

George Winston and Mark Gant began their final briefing on the events of the previous week after an introduction from the Chairman and Secretary Fiedler, and by this time they had the presentation down pat.

"Bloody clever," the head of the Bank of England observed to his German counterpart.

"*Jawohl,*" was the whispered reply.

"How do we prevent something like this from happening again?" one of them wondered aloud.

"Better record-keeping systems for starters," Fiedler replied alertly after something approaching a decent night's sleep. "Aside from that . . . ? It's something we need to study for a while. Of greater interest are the remedial measures which we must now consider."

"The yen must suffer for this," the French banker observed at once. "And we must help you to protect the dollar in order to protect our own currencies."

"Yes." The Fed Chairman nodded at once. "Jean-Jacques, I'm glad you see it the same way we do."

"And to save your equities markets, what will you do?" the head of the Bundesbank asked.

"This is going to sound somewhat crazy, but we think it will work," Secretary Fiedler began, outlining the procedures that President Durling had *not* revealed in his speech and whose execution depended to a large degree on European cooperation. The visitors shared a common look, first of incredulity, then of approval.

Fiedler smiled. "Might I suggest that we coordinate our activities for Friday?"

Nine in the morning was considered an ungodly hour for the commencement of diplomatic negotiations, which helped the situation. The American delegation arrived at the Japanese Embassy on Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., in private cars, the better to conceal the situation.

The formalities were observed in all particulars. The conference room was large, with a correspondingly large table. The Americans took their places on one side and the Japanese on the other. Handshakes were exchanged because these were diplomats and such things were to be expected. Tea and coffee were available, but most just poured glasses of ice water into crystal glasses. To the annoyance of the Americans, some of the Japanese smoked. Scott Adler wondered if they did it just to unsettle him, and so to break the ice he requested and got a smoke from the Ambassador's chief aide.

"Thank you for receiving us," he began in a measured voice.

"Welcome, again, to our embassy," the Japanese Ambassador replied with a friendly if wary nod.

"Shall we begin?" Adler asked.

"Please." The Ambassador leaned back in his chair and adopted a relaxed posture to show that he was at ease and that he would listen politely to the impending discourse.

"The United States is gravely concerned with developments in the Western Pacific," Adler began. *Gravely concerned* was the right turn of phrase. When nations are gravely concerned, it usually means that they are contemplating violent action. "As you know, the inhabitants of the Mariana Islands hold American citizenship, and do so because of their own wishes, freely expressed in an election almost twenty years ago. For that reason the United States of America will not under any circumstances accept Japanese occupation of those islands, and we req—no," Adler corrected himself, "we *demand* the return of those islands to U.S. sovereignty forthwith, and the immediate and total removal of Japanese armed forces from the territories in question. We similarly require the immediate release of any and all U.S. citizens held by your government. Failure to comply with these requirements will entail the most serious possible consequences."

Everyone in the room thought the opening position statement was unequivocal. If anything it was a little too strong, the Japanese diplomats thought, even those who deemed their country's actions to be madness.

"I personally regret the tone of your statement," the Ambassador replied, giving Adler a diplomatic slap across the face. "On the substantive issues, we will listen to your position and consider its merit against our own security interests." This was a diplomat's way of saying that Adler would now have to repeat what he had just said—with amplifications. It was an implicit demand for another statement, one that conceded something, in return for which was the implied promise that there might be a concession on the part of his government.

"Perhaps I did not make myself sufficiently clear," Adler said after a sip of water. "Your country has committed an act of war against the United States of America. The consequences of such acts are very grave. We offer your country the opportunity to withdraw from those acts without further bloodshed."

The other Americans sitting at the table communicated without words and without a look: *Hardball.* There had scarcely been time for the American team to develop its thoughts and approaches, and Adler had gone further than they'd expected.

"Again," the Ambassador said after his own moment of contemplation, "I find your tone personally regrettable. As you know, my country has legitimate security interests, and has been the victim of unfortunate legal actions which can have no effect other than severe damage to our economic and physical security. Article 51 of the United Nations Charter specifically recognizes the right of any sovereign nation to self-defense measures. We have done no more than that." It was a skillful parry, even the Americans thought, and the renewed request for civility suggested a real opening for maneuver.

The initial discussions went on for another ninety minutes, with neither side budging, each merely repeating words, with hardly a change of phrase. Then it was time for a break. Security personnel opened the French doors to the embassy's elegant garden, and everyone went out, ostensibly for fresh air but

really for more work. The garden was too large to bug, especially with a brisk wind blowing through the trees.

"So, Chris, we've begun," Seiji Nagumo said, sipping his coffee—he'd chosen it to show how sympathetic he was with the American position; for the same reason, Christopher Cook was drinking tea.

"What did you expect us to say?" the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State asked.

"The opening position is not surprising," Nagumo conceded.

Cook looked away, staring at the wall that enclosed the garden. He spoke quietly. "What will you give up?"

"Guam, definitely, but it must be demilitarized," Nagumo replied in the same voice. "And you?"

"So far, nothing."

"You must give me something to work with, Chris," Nagumo observed.

"There's nothing to offer, except maybe a cessation of hostilities—before they actually start."

"When will that happen?"

"Not anytime soon, thank God. We do have time to work with. Let's make good use of it," Cook urged.

"I'll pass that along. Thank you." Nagumo wandered off to join a member of his delegation. Cook did the same, ending up three minutes later with Scott Adler.

"Guam, demilitarized. That's definite. Maybe more. That's not definite."

"Interesting," Adler thought. "So you were right on their allowing us to save face. Nice call, Chris."

"What will we offer them back?"

"*Gornisch,*" the Deputy Secretary of State said coldly. He was thinking about his father, and the tattoo on his forearm, and how he'd learned that a 9 was an upside-down 6, and how his father's freedom had been taken away by a country once allied with the owner of this embassy and its lovely if cold garden. It was somewhat unprofessional and Adler knew it. Japan had offered a safe haven during those years to a few lucky European Jews, one of whom had become a cabinet secretary under Jimmy Carter. Perhaps if his father had been one of those fortunate few, his attitude might have been different, but his father hadn't, and his wasn't. "For starters we lean on them hard and see what happens."

"I think that's a mistake," Cook said after a moment.

"Maybe," Adler conceded. "But they made the mistake first."

The military people didn't like it at all. It annoyed the civilians, who had established the site approximately five times as fast as these uniformed boneheads would have managed, not to mention doing it in total secrecy and less expensively.

"It never occurred to you to hide the site?" the Japanese general demanded.

"How could anyone find this?" the senior engineer shot back.

"They have cameras in orbit that can pick up a packet of cigarettes lying on the ground."

"And a whole country to survey." The engineer shrugged. "And we are in the bottom of a valley whose sides are so steep that an inbound ballistic warhead can't possibly hit it without striking those peaks first." The man pointed. "And now they do not even have the missiles they need to do it," he added.

The General had instructions to be patient, and he was, after his initial outburst. It was his site to command now. "The first principle is to deny information to the other side."

"So we hide it, then?" the engineer asked politely.

"Yes."

"Camouflage netting on the catenary towers?" They'd done it during the construction phase.

"If you have them, it's a good beginning. Later we can consider other more permanent measures."

"By train, eh?" The AMTRAK official noted after the completion of his briefing. "Back when I started in the business, I was with the Great Northern, and the Air Force came to us half a dozen times about how to move missiles around by rail. We ended up moving a lot of concrete in for them."

"So you've actually thought this one over a few times?" Betsy Fleming asked.

"Oh, yeah." The official paused. "Can I see the pictures now?" The goddamned security briefing had taken hours of unnecessary threats, after which he'd been sent back to his hotel to contemplate the forms—and to allow the FBI to run a brief security check, he imagined.

Chris Scott flipped the slide projector on. He and Fleming had already made their own analysis, but the purpose of having an outside consultant was to get a free and fresh opinion. The first shot was of the missile, just to give him a feel for the size of the thing. Then they went to the shot of the train car.

"Okay, it sure looks like a flatcar, longer than most, probably specially made for the load. Steel construction. The Japanese are good at this sort of thing. Good engineers. There's a crane to lift something. How much does one of these monsters weigh?"

"Figure a hundred tons for the missile itself," Betsy answered. "Maybe twenty for the transporter-container."

"That's pretty heavy for a single object, but not all that big a deal. Well within limits for the car and the roadbed." He paused for a moment. "I don't see any obvious electronics connections, just the usual brake lines and stuff. You expect them to launch off the cars?"

"Probably not. You tell us," Chris Scott said.

"Same thing I told the Air Force twenty-some years ago for the MX. Yeah, you can move them around, but it doesn't make finding them all that hard unless you assume that you're going to make a whole lot of railcars that look exactly alike—and even then, like for the mainline on the Northern, you have a fairly simple target. Just a long, thin line, and guess what, our mainline from Minneapolis to Seattle was longer than all the standard-gauge track in their country."

"So?" Fleming asked.

"So this isn't a launch car. It's just a transport car. You didn't need me to tell you that."

No, but it is nice to hear it from somebody else, Betsy thought.

"Anything else?"

"The Air Force kept telling me how delicate the damned things are. They don't like being bumped. At normal operating speeds you're talking three lateral gees and about a gee and a half of vertical acceleration. That's not good for the missile. Next problem is dimensional. That car is about ninety feet long, and the standard flatcar for their railroads is sixty or less. Their railroads are mainly narrow-gauge. Know why?"

"I just assumed that they picked—"

"It's all engineering, okay?" the AMTRAK executive said. "Narrow-gauge track gives you the ability to shoehorn into tighter spots, to take sharper turns, generally to do things smaller. But they went to standard gauge for the *Shin-Kansen* because for greater speed and stability you just need it wider. The length of the cargo and the corresponding length of the car to carry it means that if you turn too tightly, the car overlaps the next track and you run the risk of collision unless you shut down traffic coming the other way every time you move these things. That's why the missile is somewhere off the *Shin-Kansen* line. It has to be. Then next, there's the problem of the cargo. It really messes things up for everybody."

"Keep going," Betsy Fleming said.

"Because the missiles are so delicate, we would have been limited to low speed—it would have wrecked our scheduling and dispatching. We never wanted the job. The money to us would have been okay, but it would probably have hurt us in the long run. The same thing would be true of them, wouldn't it? Even worse. The *Shin-Kansen* line is a high-speed passenger routing. They meet timetables like you wouldn't believe, and they wouldn't much like things that mess them up." He paused. "Best guess? They used those cars to move the things from the factory to someplace else and that's all. I'd bet a lot of money that they did everything at night, too. If I were you I'd hunt around for these cars, and expect to find them in a yard somewhere doing nothing. Then I'd start looking for trackage off the mainline that doesn't go anywhere."

Scott changed slides again. "How well do you know their railroads?"

"I've been over there often enough. That's why they let you draft me."

"Well, tell me what you think of this one." Scott pointed at the screen.

"That's some bitchin" radar," a technician observed. The trailer had been flown up to Elmendorf to support the B-1 mission. The bomber crews were sleeping now, and radar experts, officer- and enlisted-rank, were going over the taped records of the snooper flight.

"Airborne phased array?" a major asked.

"Sure looks that way. Sure as hell isn't the APY-1 we sold them ten years back. We're talking over two million watts, and the way the signal strength jumps. Know what they've got here? It's a rotating dome, probably a single

planar array," the master sergeant said. "So it's rotating, okay. But they can steer it electronically, too."

"Track and scan?"

"Why not? It's frequency-agile. Damn, I wish we had one of these, sir." The sergeant picked up a photo of the aircraft. "This thing is going to be a problem for us. All that power—makes you wonder if they might get a hit. Makes me wonder if they were tracking the 1s, sir."

"From that far out?" The B-1B was not strictly speaking a stealthy aircraft. From nose-on it did have a reduced radar signature. From abeam the radar cross section was considerably larger, though still smaller than any conventional airplane of similar physical dimensions.

"Yes, sir. I need to play with the tapes some."

"What will you look for?"

"The rotodome probably turns at about six rpm. The pulses we're recording ought to be at about that interval. Anything else, and they were steering the beam at us."

"Good one, Sarge. Run it down."

34

All Aboard

Yamata was annoyed to be back in Tokyo. His pattern of operation in thirty years of business had been to provide command guidance, then let a team of subordinates work out the details while he moved on to other strategic issues, and he'd fully expected it to go easier in this case rather than harder. After all, the twenty most senior zaibatsu were his staff now. Not that they thought of themselves that way. Yamata-san smiled to himself. It was a heady thought. Getting the government to dance to his tune had been child's play. Getting these men onboard had taken years of cajolery. But they *were* dancing to his tune, and they just needed the bandmaster around from time to time. And so he'd flown back on a nearly empty airliner to steady down their nerves.

"It's not possible," he told them.

"But he said—"

"Kozo, President Durling can say anything he wishes. I'm telling you that it is not possible for them to rebuild their records in anything less than several weeks. If they attempt to reopen their markets today all that will result is chaos. And chaos," he reminded them, "works in our favor."

"And the Europeans?" Tanzan Itagake asked.

"They will wake up at the end of next week and discover that we have bought their continent," Yamata told them all. "In five years America will be our grocer and Europe will be our boutique. By that time the yen will be the world's most powerful currency. By that time we will have a fully integrated national economy and a powerful continental ally. Both of us will be self-sufficient in all our resource needs. We will no longer have a population that needs to abort its babies to keep from overpopulating our Home Islands. And," he added, "we will have political leadership worthy of our national status. That is our next step, my friends."

Indeed, Binichi Murakami thought behind an impassive face. He remembered that he'd signed on partly as a result of being accosted on the streets of Washington by a drunken beggar. How was it possible that someone as clever as himself could be influenced by petty anger? But it had happened, and now he was stuck with the rest. The industrialist sipped his sake and kept his peace while Yamata-san waxed rhapsodic about their country's future. He was really talking about his own future, of course, and Murakami wondered how many of the men around the table saw that. Fools. But that was hardly fair, was it? After all, he was one of them.

Major Boris Scherenko had no less than eleven highly placed agents within the

Japanese government, one of whom was the deputy head of the PSID, a man he'd compromised some years before while on a sex and gambling trip to Taiwan. He was the best possible person to have under control—it was likely that he would one day graduate to chief of the agency and enable the Tokyo *rezidentura* both to monitor and influence counterintelligence activity throughout the country. What confused the Russian intelligence officer was that none of his agents had been of much help so far.

Then there was the issue of working with the Americans. Given his professional training and experience, it was as if he were heading the welcoming committee for diplomats arriving from Mars. The dispatch from Moscow made it easier to accept. Or somewhat easier. It appeared that the Japanese were planning to rob his country of her most precious potential asset, in conjunction with China, and to use that power base to establish themselves as the world's most powerful nation. And the strangest thing of all was that Scherenko did not think the plan crazy on its face. Then came his tasking orders.

Twenty missiles, he thought. It was one area he'd never targeted for investigation. After all, *Moscow* had sold the things to them. They must have considered the possibility that the missiles could be used for——but, no, of course they hadn't. Scherenko promised himself that he'd sit down with this Clark fellow, an experienced man, and after breaking the ice with a few drinks, inquire delicately if the American's political direction was as obtuse as that which he received, regardless of the government in question. Perhaps the American would have something useful to say. After all, their governments changed every four or eight years. Perhaps they were used to it.

Twenty missiles, he thought. *Six warheads each.* Once it had been normal to think of missiles as things that flew in thousands, and both sides had actually been mad enough to accept it as a strategic fact of life. But now, the possibility of a mere ten or twenty—at whom would they really be aimed? Would the Americans really stand up for their new . . . what? Friends? Allies? Associates? Or were they merely former enemies whose new status had not yet been decided in Washington? Would they help his country against the new/old danger? What kept coming back to him was, *twenty missiles times six warheads.* They would be evenly targeted, and surely enough to wreck his country. And if that were true, they would surely be enough to deter America from helping.

Well, then Moscow is right, Scherenko judged. Full cooperation now was the best way to avoid that situation. America wanted a location on the missiles, probably with the intention of destroying them. *And if they don't, we will.*

The Major personally handled three of the agents. His subordinates handled the others, and under his direction messages were prepared for distribution to dead-drops around the city. *What do you know about . . .* How many would answer his call for information? The danger was not so much that the people under his control would not have the information he needed, but that one or more of them would take this opportunity to report in to the government. In asking for something of this magnitude, he ran the risk of giving one of his agents the chance to redeem himself by turning patriot, to reveal the new orders and absolve himself of any guilt. But some risks you had to run. After

midnight he took a walk, picking high-traffic areas to place his drops and making the appropriate wake-up signals to alert his people. He hoped that the half of PSID he controlled was the one covering this area. He thought so, but you could never be sure, could you?

Kimura knew he was running risks, but he'd gone beyond that kind of worry now. All he could really hope for was that he was acting as a patriot, and that somehow people would understand and honor that fact after his execution for treason. The other consolation was that he would not die alone.

"I can arrange a meeting with former Prime Minister Koga," he said simply.

Oh, shit, Clark thought at once. *I'm a goddamned* spy, he wanted to reply. *I'm not with the goddamned State Department.* The only good news at the moment was that Chavez didn't react at all. His heart had probably stopped, John told himself. *Like yours just did.*

"To what end?" he asked.

"The situation is grave, is it not? Koga-san has no part in this. He is still a man of political influence. His views should be of interest to your government."

Yeah, you might say that. But Koga was also a politician on the outside, and perhaps willing to trade the lives of some foreigners for an open door back into the government; or just a man who placed country ahead of personal gain —which possibility might cut in just about any direction Clark could imagine.

"Before I can commit to that, I need instructions from my government," John said. It was rarely that he temporized on anything, but this one was well beyond his experience.

"Then I would suggest that you get it. And soon," Kimura added as he stood and left.

"I always wondered if my master's in international relations would come in handy," Chavez observed, staring into his half-consumed drink. "Of course I have to live long enough to get the parchment." *Might be nice to get married, settle down, have kids, maybe even have a real life someday,* he didn't add.

"Good to see you still have a sense of humor, Yevgeniy Pavlovich."

"They're going to tell us to do it. You know that."

"*Da.*" Clark nodded, keeping his cover and now trying to think as a Russian would. Did the KGB manual have a chapter for this? he wondered. The CIA's sure as hell didn't.

As usual the tapes were clearer than the instant analysis of the operators. There had been three, perhaps four—more likely four, given American operational patterns, the intelligence officers opined—aircraft probing Japanese air defenses. Definitely not EC-135s, however. Those aircraft were based on a design almost fifty years old and studded with enough antennas to watch every TV signal in the hemisphere, and would have generated far larger radar returns. Besides, the Americans probably didn't have four such aircraft left. Therefore something else, probably their B-1B bomber, the intelligence

people estimated. And the B-1B was a *bomber*, whose purpose was far more sinister than the collection of electronic signals. So the Americans were thinking of Japan as an enemy whose defenses would have to be penetrated for the purpose of delivering death, an idea new to neither side in this war—if war it was, the cooler heads added. But what else could it be? the majority of the analysts asked, setting the tone of the night's missions.

Three E-767s were again up and operating, again with two of them active and one waiting in the ambush role. This time the radars were turned up in power, and the parameters for the signal-processing software were electronically altered to allow for easier tracking of stealthy targets at long range. It was physics they depended on. The size of the antenna combined with the power of the signal and the frequency of the electronic waves made it possible to get hits on almost anything. That was both the good news and the bad news, the operators thought, as they received all manner of signals now. There was one change, however. When they thought they had a weak return from a moving object at long range, they started directing their fighters in that direction. The Eagles never got within a hundred miles. The return signals always seemed to fade out when the E-767 switched frequency from longwave acquisition to shortwave tracking, and that didn't bode well for the Ku-band needed for actual targeting. It did show them that the Americans were still probing, and that perhaps they knew they were being tracked. And, everyone thought, if nothing else it was good training for the fighters. If this were truly a war, all the participants told themselves, then it was becoming more and more real.

"I don't buy it," the Colonel said.

"Sir, it looks to me like they were tracking you. They were sweeping you at double the rate that I can explain by the rotation of their dome. Their radar is completely electronic. They can steer their beams, and they were steering their beams." The sergeant's voice was reasonable and respectful, even though the officer who'd led the first probe was showing a little too much pride and not quite enough willingness to listen. He'd heard a little of what he was just told, but now he just shrugged it off.

"Okay, maybe they did get a few hits. We were broadside-aspect to them. Next time we'll deploy the patrol line farther out and do a direct penetration. That cuts our RCS by quite a bit. We have to tickle their line to see how they react."

Better you than me, pal, the sergeant thought. He looked out the window. Elmendorf Air Force Base was in Alaska and subject to dreadful winter weather—the worst enemy of any man-made machine. As a result the B-1s were all in hangars, which hid them from the satellite that Japan might or might not have operating. Still, nobody was sure about that.

"Colonel, I'm just a sergeant who diddles with O-scopes, but I'd be careful about that. I don't know enough about this radar to tell you for sure how good it is. My gut tells me it's pretty damned good."

"We'll be careful," the Colonel promised. "Tomorrow night we'll have a better set of tapes for you."

"Roger that, sir." *Better you than me, pal,* he thought again.

USS *Pasadena* had joined the north end of the patrol line west of Midway. It was possible for the submarines to report in with their satellite radios without revealing their positions except to PacFlt SubOps.

"Not much of a line," Jones observed, looking at the chart. He'd just come over to confer on what SOSUS had on Japanese naval movements, which was at the moment not much. The best news available was that SOSUS, even with Jones's improved tracking software, wasn't getting anything on the line of *Olympia, Helena, Honolulu, Chicago,* and now *Pasadena.* "We used to have more boats than that just to cover the Gap."

"That's all the SSNs we have available, Ron," Chambers replied. "And, yeah, it ain't much. But if they forward-deploy their diesel boats, they'd better be real careful." Washington had given them that much by way of orders. An eastward move of Japanese warships would not be tolerated, and the elimination of one of their submarines would be approved, probably. It was just that the boat holding the contact had to call it in first for political approval. Mancuso and Chambers hadn't told Jones that. There was little sense in dealing with his temper again.

"We have a bunch of SSNs in storage—"

"Seventeen on the West Coast, to be exact," Chambers said. "Minimum six months to reactivate them, not countin' getting the crews spun up."

Mancuso looked up. "Wait a minute. What about my 726s?"

Jones turned. "I thought they were deactivated."

SubPac shook his head. "The environmental people wouldn't let me. They all have caretaker crews aboard."

"All five of them," Chambers said quietly. "*Nevada, Tennessee, West Virginia, Pennsylvania,* and *Maryland.* That's worth calling Washington about, sir."

"Oh, yeah," Jones agreed. The 726-class, more commonly known by the name of the lead ship, *Ohio,* which was now high-quality razor blades, was far slower than the smaller 688-class of fast-attack boats, a lot less maneuverable and ten knots slower, but they were also quiet. More than that, they defined what quiet was.

"Wally, think we can scratch up crews for them?"

"I don't see why not, Admiral. We could have them moving in a week . . . ten days max, *if* we can get the right people."

"Well, that's something I can do." Mancuso lifted the phone for Washington.

The business day started in Central Europe at ten o'clock local time, which was nine o'clock in London, and a dark four o'clock in New York. That made it six in the evening in Tokyo after what had been at first an exciting week, then a dull one, which had allowed people to contemplate their brilliance at the killing they had made.

Currency traders in the Japanese capital were surprised when things started quite normally. Markets came up on-line much as a business might open its

doors for customers waiting outside for a long-awaited sale. It had been announced that it would happen that way. It was just that nobody here had really believed it. As one man they phoned their supervisors for instructions, surprising them with the news from Berlin and the other European centers.

At the New York FBI office, machines wired into the international trading network showed exactly the same display as those on every other continent. The Fed Chairman and Secretary Fiedler watched. Both men had phones to their ears, linked into an encrypted conference line with their European counterparts.

The Bundesbank made the first move, trading five hundred billion yen for the current equivalent in dollars to the Bank of Hong Kong, a very cautious transaction to test the waters. Hong Kong handled it as a matter of course, seeing a marginal advantage in the German mistake. The Bundesbank was foolish enough to expect that the reopening of the New York equities markets would bolster the dollar. The transaction was executed, Fiedler saw. He turned to the Fed Chairman and winked. The next move was by the Swiss, and this one was a *trillion* yen for Hong Kong's remaining holding in U.S. Treasuries. That transaction, too, went through the wires in less than a minute. The next one was more direct. The Bern Commercial Bank took Swiss francs back from a Japanese bank, trading yen holdings for them, another dubious move occasioned by a phone call from the Swiss government.

The opening of European stock markets saw other moves. Banks and other institutions that had made a strategic move to buy up Japanese equities as a counterbalance to Japanese acquisitions in European markets now started selling them off, immediately converting the yen holdings to other currencies. That was when the first alarm light went on in Tokyo. The Europeans' actions might have appeared to be mere profit-taking, but the currency conversions bespoke a belief that the yen was going to fall and fall hard, and it was a Friday night in Tokyo, and their trading floors were closed except for the currency traders and others working the European markets.

"They should be getting nervous now," Fiedler observed.

"I would," Jean-Jacques said in Paris. What nobody quite wanted to say was that the First World Economic War had just begun in earnest. There was an excitement to it, even though it ran contrary to all their instincts and experience.

"You know, I don't have a model to predict this," Gant said, twenty feet away from the two government officials. The European action, helpful as it was, confounded all computer models and preconceptions.

"Well, pilgrim, that's why we've got brains and guts," George Winston responded deadpan.

"But what are our markets going to do?"

Winston grinned. "Sure as hell we're going to find out in, oh, about seven and a half hours. And you don't even have to shell out for the E-Ticket. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I'm glad somebody's happy about this."

There were worldwide rules for currency trading. Trading stopped once a currency had fallen a certain amount, but not this time. The floor under the yen was yanked out by every European government, trading didn't stop, and the yen resumed its fall.

"They can't do that!" someone said in Tokyo. But they were doing it, and he reached for a phone, knowing even then what his instructions would be. The yen was being attacked. They had to defend it, and the only way was to trade the foreign-currency holdings they already owned in order to bring the yen holdings back home and out of the playing field of international speculation. Worst of all, there was no reason for this action. The yen was strong, especially against the American dollar. Soon it would replace it as the world's benchmark currency, especially if the American financial markets were foolish enough to reopen later in the day. The Europeans were making a sucker bet of such magnitude as to defy qualification, and since it didn't make sense, all the Japanese traders could do was to apply their own experience to the situation and act accordingly. The irony of the moment would have been delicious, had they been able to appreciate it. Their actions were virtually automatic. Francs, French and Swiss, British pounds, German D-marks, Dutch guilders, and Danish kroner were disbursed in vast quantities to purchase yen, whose relative value, everyone in Tokyo was sure, could only appreciate, especially if the Europeans pegged their currencies to the dollar.

There was an element of nervousness to it, but they did it, acting on the orders of their superiors, who were even now leaving their homes and catching cars or trains to the various commercial office buildings in which world trading was conducted. Equities were traded off in Europe as well, with the local currencies converted to yen. The expectation again was that when the American collapse resumed, the European currencies would fall, and with them the values of stock issues. Then Japan could reacquire even larger quantities of European stocks. The European moves were a sad case of misplaced loyalty, or confidence, or something, the people in Tokyo thought, but sad or not, it worked in their favor. And that was just fine. By noon London time a massive movement had taken place. Individual investors and smaller institutions, seeing what everyone else had done, had moved in—foolishly, the Japanese knew. Noon London time was seven in the morning on America's East Coast.

"My fellow Americans," President Durling said at exactly 7:05 A.M. on every TV network. "On Wednesday night I told you that today American financial markets are going to reopen . . ."

"Here it goes," Kozo Matsuda said, just back in his office and watching CNN. "He's going to say that they can't, and Europe is going to panic. Splendid," he told his aides, turning back to the TV. The American president was smiling and confident. Well, a politician had to know how to act, the better to lie to

his citizens.

"The problems which the market experienced last week came from a deliberate assault on the American economy. Nothing like this has ever happened before, and I am going to walk you through what happened, how it was done, and why it was done. We've spent an entire week accumulating this information, and even now Treasury Secretary Fiedler and the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board are in New York, working with the heads of the great American financial institutions to set things aright.

"I am also pleased to report that we have had the time to consult with our friends in Europe, and that our historic allies have chosen to stand with us as faithfully in this time of difficulty as they have in other times.

"So what really happened last Friday?" Roger Durling asked.

Matsuda sat his drink down on his desk when he saw the first chart appear on the screen.

* * *

Jack watched him go through it. The trick as always was to make a complex story simple, and that task had involved two professors of economics, half of Fiedler's personal staff, and a governor of the Securities and Exchange Commission, all working in coordination with the President's best speechwriter. Even so, it took twenty-five minutes, six flip charts, and would require a number of government spokesmen talking who were even now on background to reporters whose briefings had started at 6:30.

"I told you Wednesday night that nothing—*nothing* of consequence had happened to us. Not one piece of property has been affected. Not one farm has lost anything. Each of you is the same person you were a week ago, with the same abilities, the same home, the same job, the same family and friends. What happened last Friday was an attack not on our country itself, but on our national confidence.

"Our confidence is a harder and tougher target than people realize, and that is something we're going to prove today. "

Most of the people in the trading business were en route to their offices and missed the speech, but their employers had all taped it, and there were also printed copies on every desk and at every computer terminal. The trading day would not start until noon, moreover, and there were strategy sessions to be held everywhere, though nobody really had much idea of what to do. The most obvious response to the situation was indeed so obvious that no one knew whether or not to try it.

"They're doing it to us," Matsuda said, watching his screens. "What can we do to stop it?"

"It depends on what their stock market does," his senior technical trader replied, not knowing what else to say and not knowing what to expect, either.

“Do you think it’ll work, Jack?” Durling asked. He had two speeches sitting in folders on his desk, and didn’t know which he would be giving in the evening.

The National Security Advisor shrugged. “Don’t know. It gives them a way out. Whether or not they make use of it is up to them.”

“So now we just get to sit and wait?”

“That’s about it, Mr. President.”

The second session was held in the State Department. Secretary Hanson huddled with Scott Adler, who then met with his negotiating team and waited. The Japanese delegation arrived at 9:45.

“Good morning,” Adler said pleasantly.

“A pleasure to see you again,” the Ambassador replied, taking his hand, but not as confidently as on the day before. Not surprisingly, he had not had time to receive detailed instructions from Tokyo. Adler had halfway expected a request for a postponement of the session, but, no, that would have been too obvious a sign of weakness, and so the Ambassador, a skilled and experienced diplomat, was in the most precarious of diplomatic positions—he was forced to represent his government with nothing more to fall back on than his wits and his knowledge. Adler walked him to his seat, then returned to his side of the table. Since America was the host today, Japan got to speak first. Adler had placed a side bet with the Secretary as to the Ambassador’s opening statement.

“First of all it needs to be said that my government objects in the strongest terms to the attack on our currency engineered by the United States . . .”

That’s ten bucks you owe me, Mr. Secretary, Adler thought behind an impassive face.

“Mr. Ambassador,” he replied, “that is something we could say just as easily. In fact, here is the data which we have developed on the events of last week.” Binders appeared on the table and were slid across to the Japanese diplomats. “I need to tell you that we are now conducting an investigation that could well lead to the indictment of Raizo Yamata for wire- and securities fraud.”

It was a bold play for a number of reasons. It showed everything that the Americans knew about the attack on Wall Street and pointed to the things yet to be learned. As such, it could have no effect other than to ruin the criminal case against Yamata and his allies, should it come to that. But that was a side issue. Adler had a war to stop, and stop quickly. He’d let the boys and girls at Justice worry about the other stuff.

“It might be better of course for your country to deal with this man and his acts,” Adler offered next, giving generous maneuvering room to the Ambassador and his government. “The net effect of his actions, as may be seen today, will be to cause greater hardship to your country than to ours.

“Now, if we may, I should like us to return to the issue of the Mariana Islands.”

The one-two punch predictably staggered the Japanese delegation. As was often the case, nearly everything was left unsaid: *We know what you did. We know how you did it. We are prepared to deal with all of it.* The brutally direct

method was designed to conceal the real American problem—the inability to make an immediate military counter—but it also provided Japan with the ability to separate her government from the acts of certain of her citizens. And that, Ryan and Adler had decided the previous night, was the best means of achieving a quick and clean end to the situation. To that end, a large carrot was required.

"The United States seeks little more than a return to normal relations. The immediate evacuation of the Marianas will allow us to consider a more lenient interpretation of the Trade Reform Act. This, also, is something we are willing to place on the table for consideration." It was probably a mistake to hit him with this much, Adler thought, but the alternative was further bloodshed. By the end of the first session of formal negotiations, something remarkable had happened. Neither side had repeated a position. Rather, it had been, in diplomatic terms, a free-form exchange of views, few of them well considered.

"Chris," Adler whispered when he stood. "Find out what they're really thinking."

"Got it," Cook replied. He got himself some coffee and headed out to the terrace, where Nagumo stood on the edge, looking out toward the Lincoln Memorial.

"It's an elegant way out, Seiji," Cook offered.

"You push us too hard," Nagumo said without turning.

"If you want a chance to end this without getting people killed, this is the best one."

"The best for you, perhaps. What of our interests?"

"We'll cut a deal on trade." Cook didn't understand it all. Unschooled in financial matters, he was as yet unaware of what was happening on that front. To him the recovery of the dollar and the protection of the American economy was an isolated act. Nagumo knew different. The attack his country had begun could be balanced only by a counterattack. The effect would not be restoration of the status quo ante, but, rather, serious damage to his own country's economy on top of preexisting damage from the Trade Reform Act. In this, Nagumo knew something that Cook did not: unless America acceded to Japanese demands for some territorial gain, then the war was quite real.

"We need time, Christopher."

"Seiji, there *isn't* time. Look, the media haven't picked up on this yet. That can change at any moment. If the public finds out, there's going to be hell to pay." Because Cook was right, he'd given Nagumo an opening.

"Yes, there may well be, Chris. But I am protected by my diplomatic status and you are not." He didn't need to say more than that.

"Now, wait a minute, Seiji ..."

"My country needs more than what you offer," Nagumo replied coldly.

"We're giving you a way out."

"We must have more." There was no turning back now, was there? Nagumo wondered if the ambassador knew that yet. Probably not, he judged, from the way the senior diplomat was looking in his direction. It was suddenly clear to him. Yamata and his allies had committed his country to action from which there was no backing away, and he couldn't decide if they'd known it or not when they'd begun. But that didn't matter now. "We must have something,"

he went on, “to show for our actions.”

At about that time, Cook realized how slow he’d been on the uptake. Looking in Nagumo’s eyes, he saw it all. Not so much cruelty as resolve. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State thought about the money sitting in a numbered account, and the questions that would be asked, and what possible explanation he might have for it.

It sounded like an old-fashioned school bell when the digital clock turned from 11:59:59 to 12:00:00.

“Thank you, H. G. Wells,” a trader breathed, standing on the wooden floor of the New York Stock Exchange. The time machine was in operation. For the first time in his memory, at this hour of the day the floor was clean. Not a single paper slip lay there. The various traders at their kiosks looked around and saw some signs of normality. The ticker had been running for half an hour, showing the same data it had displayed the previous week, really as a way of synchronizing their minds with the new day, and everyone used it as a touchstone, a personal contact with reality that both was and was not.

It was a hell of a speech the President had given five hours earlier. Everyone on the floor had seen it at least once, most of them right here, followed by a pep talk from the head of the NYSE that would have done Knute Rockne proud. They had a mission that day, a mission that was more important than their individual well-being, and one that, if accomplished, would see to their long-term security as well as that of the entire country. They had spent the day reconstructing their activities of the previous Friday, to the point where every trader knew what quantities of which stock he or she held, what every position was. Some even remembered the moves they’d been planning to make, but most of those had been “up” moves rather than “down” ones, and their collective memory would not allow them to follow through on them.

On the other hand, they remembered well the panic of the afternoon seven days before, and, knowing that it had been both artificial and malicious, no one wished to start it afresh. And besides, Europe had signaled its confidence in the dollar in the strongest terms. The bond market was as solidly fixed as though set in granite, and the first moves of the day had been to buy U.S. Treasuries to take advantage of the stunning deal offered by the Fed Chairman. That move was the best confidence-builder they’d ever seen.

For over ninety seconds by one trader’s watch, exactly *nothing* happened on the floor of the exchange. The ticker simply displayed nothing. The phenomenon evoked snorts of disbelief from men whose minds raced to understand it. The little-guy investors, without a clue, were making few calls, and those who did were told by their brokers to sit tight. And for the most part that was what they did. Those who did make sell orders had them handled in-house by their brokerage houses from the reservoir of issues that they had on hand, left over from the previous week. But the big traders weren’t doing anything, either. Each of them was waiting for somebody else to do something. The inactivity of merely a minute and a half seemed an eternity to people accustomed to frantic action, and when the first major play happened, it came as a relief.

That first big move of the day, predictably, came from the Columbus Group. It was a massive purchase of Citibank common. Seconds later, Merrill Lynch pushed the button for a similar acquisition of Chemical Bank.

"Yeah," a few voices said on the floor. It made sense, didn't it? Citibank was vulnerable to a fall in the dollar, but the Europeans had seen to it that the dollar was rising in value, and that made First National City Bank a good issue to pick up on. As a result, the first tick of the Dow Jones Industrial Average was *up,* defying every prediction of every computer.

"Yeah, we can do this," another floor trader observed. "I want a hundred Manny-Hanny at six," he announced. That would be the next bank to benefit from the increasing strength of the dollar, and he wanted a supply that he could move out at six and a quarter. The stocks that had led the slide the previous week would now lead a rise, and for the same reasons as before. Mad as it sounded, it made perfect sense, they all realized. And as soon as the rest of the market figured it out, they could all cash in on it.

The news ticker on the wall was up and running, again giving shorthand selections off the wire services. GM, it said, was rehiring twenty thousand workers for its plants around Detroit in anticipation of increased auto sales. The callback would take nine months, the announcement didn't say, and was the result of a call from the Secretaries of Commerce and Labor, but it was enough to excite interest in auto stocks, and that excited interest in machine tools. By 12:05:30, the Dow was up five points. Hardly a hiccup after the five-hundred-point plummet seven days before, but it looked like Everest on a clear day from the floor of the NYSE.

"I don't believe this," Mark Gant observed, several blocks away in the Javits Federal Office Building.

"Where the hell is it written down that computers are always right?" George Winston inquired with another forced grin. He had his own worries. Buying up Citibank was not without dangers, but his move, he saw, had the proper effect on the issue. When it had moved up three points, he initiated a slow sell-off to cash in, as other fund managers moved in to follow the trend. Well, that was predictable, wasn't it? The herd just needed a leader. Show them a trend and wait for them to follow, and if it was contrarian, so much the better.

"First impression—it's working," the Fed Chairman told his European colleagues. All the theories said it should, but theories seemed thin at moments like this. Both he and Secretary Fiedler were watching Winston, now leaning back in his chair, chewing on a pen and talking calmly into a phone. They could hear what he was saying. At least his voice was calm, though his body was that of a man in a fight, every muscle tense. But after another five minutes they saw him stretch tense muscles and smile and turn and say something to Gant, who merely shook his head in wonderment as he watched his computer screen do things that it didn't believe possible.

"Well, how about that," Ryan said.

“Is it good?” President Durling asked.

“Let’s put it this way: if I were you I’d give your speechwriter a dozen long-stemmed red roses and tell her to plan on working here another four years or so.”

“It’s way too early for that, Jack,” the President replied somewhat crossly.

Ryan nodded. “Yes, sir, I know. What I mean to tell you is, you did it. The markets may—hell, *will* fluctuate the rest of the day, but they’re not going to free-fall like we initially expected. It’s about confidence, Boss. You restored it, and that’s a fact.”

“And the rest of it?”

“They’ve got a chance to back down. We’ll know by the end of the day.”

“And if they don’t?”

The National Security Advisor thought about that. “Then we have to figure a way to fight them without hurting them too badly. We have to find their nukes and we have to settle this thing down before it really gets out of control.”

“Is that possible?”

Ryan pointed to the screen. “We didn’t think this was possible, did we?”

35

Consequences

It happened in Idaho, in a community outside Mountain Home Air Force Base. A staff sergeant based there had flown out to Andersen Air Force Base on Guam to work on the approach-control radars. His wife had delivered a baby a week after his departure, and she attempted to call him that evening to tell him about his new daughter, only to learn that the phones were out due to a storm. Only twenty years old and not well educated, she'd accepted the news with disappointment. The military comm links were busy, an officer had told her, convincingly enough that she'd gone home with tears in her eyes. A day later she'd talked to her mother and surprised her with the news that her husband didn't know about his daughter yet. Even in time of war, her mother thought, such news always got through—and what storm could possibly be worse than fighting a war?

So she called the local TV station and asked for the weatherman, a sagacious man of fifty who was excellent at predicting the tornadoes that churned through the region every spring, and, it was widely thought, saved five or ten lives each year with his instant analysis of which way the funnel clouds moved.

The weatherman in turn was the kind who enjoyed being stopped in the local supermarkets with friendly comments, and took the inquiry as yet another compliment for his professional expertise, and besides, he'd never checked out the Pacific Ocean before. But it was easy enough. He linked into the NOAA satellite system and used a computer to go backwards in time to see what sort of storm had hammered those islands. The time of year was wrong for a typhoon, he knew, but it was the middle of an ocean, and storms happened there all the time.

But not this year and not this time. The satellite photos showed a few wispy clouds, but otherwise fair weather. For a few minutes he wondered if the Pacific Ocean, like Arkansas, was subject to fair-weather gales, but, no, that wasn't likely, since those adiabatic storms resulted mainly from variations in temperature and land elevation, whereas an ocean was both flat and moderate. He checked with a colleague who had been a Navy meteorologist to confirm it, and found himself left only with a mystery. Thinking that perhaps the information he had was wrong, he consulted his telephone book and dialed 011-671-555-1212, since a directory-assistance call was toll-free. He got a recording that told him that there had been a storm. Except there had *not* been a storm. Was he the first guy to figure that out?

His next move was to walk across the office to the news department. Within minutes an inquiry went out on one of the wire services.

“Ryan.”

“Bob Holtzman, Jack. I have a question for you.”

“I hope it’s not about Wall Street,” Jack replied in as unguarded a voice as he could muster.

“No, it’s about Guam. Why are the phone lines out?”

“Bob, did you ask the phone company that?” Ryan tried.

“Yeah. They say there was a storm that took a lot of lines down. Except for a couple of things. One, there wasn’t any storm. Two, there’s an undersea cable *and* a satellite link. Three, a week is a long time. What’s going on?” the reporter asked.

“How many people are asking?”

“Right now, just me and a TV station in Little Rock that put a request up on the AP wire. Another thirty minutes and it’s going to be a lot more. What gives? Some sort of—”

“Bob, why don’t you come on down here,” Ryan suggested. *Well, it’s not as though you expected this to last forever* , Jack told himself. Then he called Scott Adler’s office. *But why couldn’t it have waited one more day?*

Yukon was fueling her second set of ships. The urgency of the moment meant that the fleet oiler was taking on two escorts at a time, one on either beam, while her helicopter transferred various parts and other supplies around the formation, about half of them aircraft components to restore *Ike*’s aircraft to full-mission status. The sun would set in another thirty minutes, and the underway-replenishment operations would continue under cover of darkness. Dubro’s battle force had darted east, the better to distance itself from the Indian formation, and again had gone to EMCON, with all radars off, and a deceptive placement of their surveillance aircraft. But they’d lost track of the two Indian carriers, and while the Hawkeyes probed cautiously, Dubro sweated.

“Lookouts report unknown aircraft inbound at two-one-five,” a talker called.

The Admiral swore quietly, lifted his binoculars, and turned to the southwest. There. Two Sea Harriers. Playing it smart, too, he saw. They were at five thousand feet or so, tucked into the neat two-plane element used for tactical combat and air shows, flying straight and level, careful not to overfly any ship directly. Before they had passed over the first ring of escorts, a pair of Tomcats were above and behind them, ready to take them out in a matter of seconds if they showed hostile intent. But hostile intent meant loosing a weapon first, and in this day and age a loosed weapon most probably meant a hit, whatever happened to the launch aircraft. The Harriers flew overhead one time only. They seemed to be carrying extra fuel tanks and maybe a reconnaissance pod, but no weapons, this time. Admiral Chandraskatta was no fool, but then Dubro had never made that assumption. His adversary had played a patient game, sticking to his own mission and biding his time, and learning from every trick the Americans had shown him. None of this was of

much comfort to the battle-force commander.

"Follow them back?" Commander Harrison asked dispassionately.

Mike Dubro shook his head. "Pull one of the Hummers in close and track by radar."

When the hell would Washington realize he had an imminent confrontation brewing?

"Mr. Ambassador," Scott Adler said, folding up the note an aide had just delivered. "It is likely that in the next twenty-four hours your occupation of the Marianas will become public knowledge. At that point the situation will go beyond our control. You have plenipotentiary powers to resolve this affair . . ."

But he didn't, as Adler had begun to suspect, despite assurances to the contrary. He could also see that he'd pushed the man too hard and too fast. Not that he'd had a choice in the matter. The entire affair had been going on for barely a week. In normal diplomatic practice it took that long just to select the kind of chairs the negotiators sat in. In that respect everything had been doomed from the beginning, but Adler was a professional diplomat for whom hope was never dead. Even now as he concluded his latest statement, he looked into the man's eyes for something he'd be able to report to the White House.

"Throughout our talks we have heard about America's demands, but we have not heard a single word concerning my country's legitimate security interests. Today you have conducted a systematic attack on our financial and economic foundations and—"

Adler leaned forward. "Mr. Ambassador! A week ago your country did the same thing to us, as the information in front of you demonstrates. A week ago your country conducted an attack on the United States Navy. A week ago your country seized U.S. territory. In equity, sir, you have no place to criticize us for efforts necessary to the restoration of our own economic stability." He paused for a moment, reproving himself for the decidedly undiplomatic language of his outburst, but events had gone beyond such niceties—or they soon would. "We have offered you the opportunity to negotiate in good faith for a mutually acceptable interpretation of the Trade Reform Act. We will accept an apology and reparations for the losses to our Navy. We *require* the immediate evacuation of Japanese military forces from the Mariana Islands."

But things had already gone too far for that, and everyone at the table knew it. There just wasn't time. Adler felt the dreadful weight of inevitability. All his skills were useless now. Other events and other people had taken matters out of his hands, and the Ambassador's hands as well. He saw the same look on the man's face that must have been on his own.

His voice was mechanical. "Before I can respond to that, I must consult with my government. I propose that we adjourn so that consultations may be carried out."

Adler nodded more with sadness than anger. "As you wish, Mr. Ambassador. If you should need us, we will be available."

“My God, you kept all that quiet? *How?”* Holtzman demanded.

“Because you guys were all looking the other way,” Jack answered bluntly. “You’ve always depended too much on us for information anyway.” He instantly regretted those words. It had come out as too much of a challenge. *Stress*, *Jack.*

“But you lied to us about the carriers and you never told us about the submarines at all!”

“We’re trying to stop this thing before it gets worse,” President Durling said. “We’re talking to them over at State right now.”

“You’ve had a busy week,” the journalist acknowledged. “Kealty’s out?”

The President nodded. “He’s talking with the Justice Department and with the victims.”

“The big thing was getting the markets put back in place,” Ryan said. “That was the real—”

“What do you mean? They’ve *killed* people!” Holtzman objected.

“Bob, why have you guys been hammering the Wall Street story so hard all week? Damn it, what was really scary about their attack on us was the way they wrecked the financial markets and did their run on the dollar. We had to fix that first.”

Bob Holtzman conceded the point. “How the hell did you pull that one off?”

“God, who would have thunk it?” Mark Gant asked. The bell had just rung to close the abbreviated trading day. The Dow was down four and a quarter points, with four hundred million shares traded. The S&P 500 was actually up a fraction, as was NASDAQ, because the blue-chip companies had suffered more from general nerves than the smaller fry. But the bond market was the best of all, and the dollar was solid. The Japanese yen, on the other hand, had taken a fearful beating against every Western currency.

“The changes in bonds will drop the stock market next week,” Winston said, rubbing his face and thanking Providence for his luck. Residual nerves in the market would encourage people to seek out safer places for their money, though the strength of the dollar would swiftly ameliorate that.

“By the end of the week?” Gant wondered. “Maybe. I’m not so sure. A lot of manufacturing stocks are still undervalued.”

“Your move on Citibank was brilliant,” the Fed Chairman said, taking a place next to the traders.

“They didn’t deserve the hit they took last week, and everyone knew it. I was just the first to make the purchase,” Winston replied matter-of-factly. “Besides, we came out ahead on the deal.” He tried not to be too smug about it. It had just been another exercise in psychology; he’d done something both logical and unexpected to initiate a brief trend, then cashed in on it. Business as usual.

“Any idea how Columbus made out today?” Secretary Fiedler asked.

“Up about ten,” Gant replied at once, meaning ten million dollars, a fair day’s work under the circumstances. “We’ll do better next week.”

An FBI agent came over. “Call in from DTC. They’re posting everything

normally. That part of the system seems to be back to normal."

"What about Chuck Searls?" Winston asked.

"Well, we've taken his apartment completely apart. He had two brochures about New Caledonia, of all places. That's part of France, and we have the French looking for him."

"Want some good advice?"

"Mr. Winston, we always look for advice," the agent replied with a grin. The mood in the room was contagious.

"Look in other directions, too."

"We're checking everything."

"Yeah, Buzz," the President said, lifting the phone. Ryan, Holtzman, and two Secret Service agents saw JUMPER close his eyes and let out a long breath. He'd been getting reports from Wall Street all afternoon, but it wasn't official for him until he heard it from Secretary Fiedler. "Thanks, my friend. Please let everybody know that I—good, thanks. See you tonight." Durling replaced the phone. "Jack, you are a good man in a storm."

"One storm left."

"So does that end it?" Holtzman asked, not really understanding what Durling had said. Ryan took the answer.

"We don't know yet."

"But—"

"But the incident with the carriers can be written off as an accident, and we won't know for sure what happened to the submarines until we look at the hulls. They're in fifteen thousand feet of water," Jack told him, cringing inwardly for saying such things. But this was war, and war was something you tried to avoid. *If possible,* he reminded himself. "There's the chance that we can both back away from this, write it off to a misunderstanding, a few people acting without authority, and if they get hammered for it, nobody else dies."

"And you're telling me all this?"

"It traps you, doesn't it?" Jack asked. "If the talks over at State work out, then you have a choice, Bob. You can either help us keep things quiet, or you can have a shooting war on your conscience. Welcome to the club, Mr. Holtzman."

"Look, Ryan, I can't—"

"Sure you can. You've done it before." Jack noted that the President sat there and listened, saying nothing. That was partly to distance himself from Ryan's maneuvering, but another part, perhaps, liked what he saw. And Holtzman was playing along.

"So what does all this mean?" Goto asked.

"It means that they will bluster," Yamata told him. *It means that our country needs leadership*, he couldn't say. "They cannot take the islands back. They lack the resources to attack us. They may have patched up their financial markets for now, but Europe and America cannot survive without us indefinitely, and

by the time they realize that, we will not need them as we do now. Don't you see? This has always been about *independence* for us! When we achieve that, everything will change."

"And for now?"

"Nothing changes. The new American trade laws would have the same effect as hostilities. At least this way we get something for it, and we will have the chance of ruling our own house."

That's what it really came down to, the one thing that nobody but he ever quite saw. His country could make products and sell them, but so long as his country needed markets more than the markets needed his country, trade laws could cripple Japan, and his country would have no recourse at all. Always the Americans. It was always them, forcing an early end to the Russo-Japanese War, denying their imperial ambitions, allowing them to build up their economy, then cutting the legs out from under them, three times now, the same people who'd killed his family. Didn't they see? Now Japan had struck back, and timidity still prevented people from seeing reality. It was all Yamata could manage to rein in his anger at this small and foolish man. But he needed Goto, even though the Prime Minister was too stupid to realize that there was no going back.

"You're sure that they cannot . . . respond to our actions?" Goto asked after a minute or so of contemplation.

"Hiroshi, it is as I have been telling you for months. We cannot fail to win—unless we fail to try."

"Damn, I wish we could use these things to do our surveys." The real magic of overhead imagery lay not in individual photographs, but rather in pairs of photographs, generally taken a few seconds apart from the same camera, then transmitted down to the ground stations at Sunnyvale and Fort Belvoir. Real-time viewing was all well and good to excite the imagination of congressmen privy to such things or to count items in a hurry. For real work, you used prints, set in pairs and viewed through a stereoscope, which worked better than the human eyes for giving precise threedimensionality to the photos. It was almost as good as flying over in a helicopter. *Maybe even better*, the AMTRAK official thought, *because you could go backwards as well as forwards* .

"The satellites cost a lot of money," Betsy Fleming observed.

"Yeah, like our whole budget for a year. This one's interesting." A team of professional photo-interpretation experts was analyzing every frame, of course, but the plain truth of the matter was that CIA and NRO had stopped being interested in the technical aspects of railroad-building decades ago. Tracking individual trains loaded with tanks or missiles was one thing. This was something else.

"How so?"

"The *Shin-Kansen* line is a revenue maker. This spur isn't going to make much money for them. Maybe they can cut a tunnel up here," he went on, manipulating the photos. "Maybe they can make it into that city—but me, I'd come the other way and save the money on engineering. Of course it could just be a shunt to use for servicing the mainline."

"Huh?"

He didn't even lift his eyes from the stereo-viewer. "A place to stash work cars, snowblowers, that sort of thing. It is well sited for that purpose. Except that there's no such cars there."

The resolution on the photos was just fantastic. They'd been taken close to noon local time, and you could see the sun's glint on the rails of the mainline, and the spur as well. He figured that the width of the rails was about the resolution limit of the cameras, an interesting fact that he couldn't relay to anyone else. The ties were concrete, like the rest of the Bullet Train line, and the quality of the engineering was, well, something he'd envied for a long time. The official looked up reluctantly.

"No way it's a revenue line. The turns are all wrong. You couldn't do thirty miles per hour through there, and the train sets on that line cruise over a hundred. Funny, though, it just disappears."

"Oh?" Betsy asked.

"See for yourself." The executive stood to stretch, giving Mrs. Fleming a place at the viewer. He picked up a large-scale map of the valley and looked to see where things went. "You know, when Hill and Stevens built the Great Northern . . ."

Betsy wasn't interested. "Chris, take a look at this."

Their visitor looked up from the map. "Oh. The truck? I don't know what color they paint their—"

"Not green."

Time usually worked in favor of diplomacy, but not in this case, Adler thought as he entered the White House. He knew the way, and had a Secret Service agent to conduct him in case he got lost. The Deputy Secretary of State was surprised to see a reporter in the Oval Office, even more so when he was allowed to stay.

"You can talk," Ryan told him. Scott Adler took a deep breath and started his report.

"They're not backing down on anything. The Ambassador isn't very comfortable with the situation, and it shows. I don't think he's getting much by way of instructions out of Tokyo, and that worries me. Chris Cook thinks they're willing to let us have Guam back in a demilitarized condition, but they want to keep the rest of the islands. I dangled the TRA at them, but no substantive response." He paused before going on. "It's not going to work. We can keep at it for a week or a month, but it's just not going to happen. Fundamentally they don't know what they're into. They see a continuum of engagement between the military and economic sides. They don't see the firebreak between the two. They don't see that they've crossed over a line, and they don't see the need to cross back."

"You're saying there's a war happening," Holtzman observed, to make things clear. It made him feel foolish to ask the question. He didn't notice the same aura of unreality surrounding everyone else in the room.

Adler nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"So what are we going to do about it?"

“What do you suppose?” President Durling asked.

Commander Dutch Claggett had never expected to be in this situation. A fast-track officer since his graduation from the U.S. Naval Academy twenty-three years earlier, his career had come to a screeching halt aboard USS *Maine*, when as executive officer he’d been present for the only loss of an American fleet-ballistic-missile submarine. The irony was that his life’s ambition had been command of a nuclear submarine, but command of *Tennessee* meant nothing at all now. It was just an entry on his first resume when he entered the civilian job market. Her designed mission was to carry Trident-II sea-launched ballistic missiles, but the missiles were gone and the only reason that she still existed at all was because the local environmental movement had protested her dismantlement to Federal District Court, and the judge, a lifelong member of the Sierra Club, had agreed to the arguments, which were again on their way back to the United States Court of Appeals. Claggett had been in command of *Tennessee* for nine months now, but the only time he’d been under way had been to move from one side of the pier to another. Not exactly what he’d had in mind for his career. *It could be worse,* he told himself in the privacy of his cabin. He could have been dead, along with so many of the others from USS *Maine*.

But *Tennessee* was still all his——he didn’t even share her with a second CO—and he was still a naval officer in command of a man-o’-war, technically speaking, and his reduced crew of eighty-five drilled every day because that was the life of the sea, even tied alongside a pier. His reactor plant, known to its operators as Tennessee Power and Light Company, was lit up at least once per week. The sonarmen played acquisition-and-tracking games against audiotapes, and the rest of those aboard operated every shipboard system, down to tinkering with the single Mark 48 torpedo aboard. It had to be this way. The rest of the crew wasn’t being SERB’d, after all, and it was his duty to them to maintain their professional standing should they get the transfers they all wanted to a submarine that actually went to sea.

“Message from SubPac, sir,” a yeoman said, handing over a clipboard. Claggett took the board and signed first for receipt.

Report earliest date ready to put to *sea.*

“What the hell?” Commander Claggett asked the bulkhead. Then he realized that the message ought to have come through Group at least, not straight from Pearl. He lifted his phone and dialed SubPac from memory. “Admiral Mancuso, please. *Tennessee* calling.”

“Dutch? What’s your matériel condition?” Bart Mancuso asked without preamble.

“Everything works, sir. We even had our ORSE two weeks ago, and we maxed it.” Claggett referred to the Operational Reactor Safeguards Examination, still the Holy Grail of the Nuclear Navy, even for razor-blade fodder.

“I know. How soon?” Mancuso asked. The bluntness of the question was like something from the past.

“I need to load food and torps, and I need thirty people.”

"Where are you weak?"

Claggett thought for a moment. His officers were on the young side, but he didn't mind that, and he had a good collection of senior chiefs. "Nowhere, really. I'm working these people hard."

"Okay, good. Dutch, I'm cutting orders to get you ready to sail ASAP. Group is getting into gear now. I want you moving just as fast as you can. Mission orders are on the way. Be prepared to stay at sea for ninety days."

"Aye aye, sir." Claggett heard the line go dead. A moment later he lifted his phone and called for his department heads and chiefs to meet in the wardroom. The meeting had not yet started when the phone rang again. It was a call from Group asking for Claggett's precise manpower needs.

"Your house has a fine view. Is it for sale?"

Oreza shook his head. "No, it's not," he told the man at the door.

"Perhaps you would think about it. You are a fisherman, yes?"

"Yes, sir, I am. I have a charter boat—"

"Yes, I know." The man looked around, clearly admiring the size and location of what was really a fairly ordinary tract house by American standards. Manuel and Isabel Oreza had bought it five years earlier, just barely beating the real-estate boom on Saipan. "I would pay much for this," the man said.

"But then where would I live?" Portagee asked.

"Over a million American dollars," the man persisted.

Strangely enough, Oreza felt a flash of anger at the offer. He still had a mortgage, after all, and paid the bill every month—actually his wife did, but that was beside the point. The typical American monthly ritual of pulling the ticket out of the book, filling out the check, tucking both in the preprinted envelope, and dropping it in the mail on the first day of the month—the entire procedure was proof to them that they did indeed own their first house after thirtyplus years of being government-service tumbleweeds. The house was *theirs.*

"Sir, this house is mine, okay? I live here. I like it here."

The man was as friendly and polite as he could be, in addition to being a pushy son of a bitch. He handed over a card. "I know. Please excuse my intrusion. I would like to hear from you after you have had a chance to consider my offer." And with that he walked to the next house in the development.

"What the hell?" Oreza whispered, closing the door.

"What was that all about?" Pete Burroughs asked.

"He wants to pay me a million bucks for the house."

"Nice view," Burroughs observed. "On the California coast this would go for a nice price. But not that much. You wouldn't believe what Japanese real-estate prices are."

"A million bucks?" *And that was just his opening offer,* Oreza reminded himself. The man had his Toyota Land Cruiser parked in the cul-de-sac, and was clearly walking from one house to another, seeing what he could buy.

"Oh, he'd turn it over for a lot more, or maybe if he was smart, just rent it."

"But then where would we live?"

"You wouldn't," Burroughs replied. "How much you want to bet they give you a first-class ticket stateside at the settlement. Think about it," the engineer suggested.

"Well, that's interesting," Robby Jackson thought. "Anything else happening?"

"The 'cans we saw before are gone now. Things are settling back down to—hell, they *are* normal now except for all the soldiers around."

"Any trouble?"

"No, sir, nothing. Same food ships coming in, same tankers, same everything. Air traffic has slowed down a lot. The soldiers are sort of dug in, but they're being careful how they do it. Not much visible anymore. There's still a lot of bush country on the island. I guess they're all hid in there. I ain't been goin' lookin', y'know?" Jackson heard him say.

"That's fine. Just stay cool, Master Chief. Good report. Let me get back to work."

"Okay, Admiral."

Jackson made his notes. He really should have turned this stuff over to somebody else, but Chief Oreza would want a familiar voice on the other end of the circuit, and everything was taped for the intelligence guys anyway.

But he had others things to do, too. The Air Force would be running another probe of Japanese air defenses tonight. The SSN patrol line would move west another hundred miles, and people would gather a lot of intelligence information, mainly from satellites. *Enterprise* would make Pearl Harbor today. There were two complete carrier air wings at Barbers Point Naval Air Station, but no carriers to put them on. The Army's 25th Infantry Division (Light) was still based at Schofield Barracks a few miles away, but there were no ships to put them on, either. The same was true of the First Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, California. The last time America had struck at the Mariana Islands, Operation FORAGER, 15 June 1944, he'd troubled himself to find out, there had been 535 ships, 127,571 troops. The combined ships of the entire U.S. Navy and every merchant ship flying the Stars and Stripes did not begin to approach the first number; the Army and Marines combined would have been hard pressed to find enough light-infantry troops to meet the second. Admiral Ray Spruance's Fifth Fleet—which no longer existed—had consisted of no less than *fifteen* fast carriers. PacFlt now had none. Five divisions had been tasked to the mission of retaking the islands, supported by over a thousand tactical aircraft, battleships, cruisers, destroyers....

And you're the lucky son of a bitch who has to come up with a plan to take the Marianas back. With what?

We can't deal with them force-on-force, Jackson told himself. They did hold the islands, and their weapons, mainly American-designed, were formidable. The worst complication was the quantity of civilians. The "natives"—all of them American citizens—numbered almost fifty thousand, most of whom lived on Saipan, and any plan that took many of those lives in the name of liberation would be a weight his conscience was unready to bear. It was a whole new kind of war, with a whole new set of rules, few of which he had

figured out yet. But the central issues were the same. The enemy has taken something of ours, and we have to take it back or America was no longer a great power. Jackson hadn't spent his entire adult life in uniform so that he could be around when that bit of history got written. Besides, what would he say to Master Chief Manuel Oreza?

We can't do it force-on-force. America no longer had the ability to move a large army except from one base to another. There was really no large army to move, and no large navy to move it. There were no useful advance bases to support an invasion. Or were there? America still owned most of the islands in the Western Pacific, and every one had an airstrip of one kind or other. Airplanes flew farther now, and could refuel in midair. Ships could stay at sea almost indefinitely, a skill invented by the U.S. Navy eighty years earlier and made more convenient still by the advent of nuclear power. Most importantly, weapons technology had improved. You didn't need a bludgeon anymore. There were rapiers now. And overhead imagery. *Saipan.* That's where the issue would be decided. Saipan was the key to the island chain. Jackson lifted his phone.

"Ryan."

"Robby. Jack, how free a hand do we have?"

"We can't kill many people. It's not 1945 anymore," the National Security Advisor told him. "And they have nuclear missiles."

"Yeah, well, we're looking for those, so they tell me, and I know that's our first target if we can find them. What if we can't?"

"We have to," Ryan replied. *Have to?* he wondered. His best intelligence estimate was that the command-and-control over those missiles was in the hands of Hiroshi Goto, a man of limited intelligence and genuine antipathy to America. A more fundamental issue was that he had no confidence at all in America's ability to predict the man's actions. What might seem irrational to Ryan could seem reasonable to Goto—and to whoever else he depended upon for advice, probably Raizo Yamata, who had begun the entire business and whose personal motivations were simply unknown. "Robby, we have to take them out of play, and to do that, yeah, you have a free hand. I'll clear that with NCA," he added, meaning National Command Authority, the dry Pentagon term for the President.

"Nukes?" Jackson asked. It was his profession to think in such terms, Ryan knew, however horrid the word and its implications were.

"Rob, we don't want to do that unless there's no choice at all, but you are authorized to consider and plan for the possibility."

"I just had a call from our friend on Saipan. It seems somebody wants to pay top dollar for his house."

"We think they may try to stage elections—a referendum on sovereignty. If they can move people off the island, then, well, it makes them some points, doesn't it?"

"We don't want that to happen, do we?"

"No, we don't. I need a plan, Rob."

"We'll get one for you," the Deputy J-3 promised.

Durling appeared on TV again at nine in the evening, Eastern Time. There were already rumbles out. The TV anchors had followed their stories about developments on Wall Street with confused references to the carrier accident the previous week and to urgent negotiations between Japan and the United States over the Mariana Islands, where, they noted, communications were out following a storm that might never have happened. It was very discomforting for them to say what they didn't know. By this time Washington correspondents were trading information and sources, amazed at having missed something of this magnitude. That amazement translated itself into rage at their own government for concealing something of this dimension. Background briefings that had begun at eight helped to assuage them somewhat. Yes, Wall Street was the big news. Yes, it was more vital to the overall American well-being than some islands that not a few of their number had to be shown on a map. But, no, damn it, the government didn't have the right not to tell the media what was going on. Some of them, though, realized that the First Amendment guaranteed their freedom to find things out, not to demand information from others. Others realized that the Administration was trying to end the affair without bloodshed, which went part of the way to calming them down. But not all of the way.

"My fellow Americans," Durling began for the second time in the day, and it was immediately apparent that, as pleasing as the events of the afternoon had been, the news this evening would be bad. And so it was.

There is something about inevitability that offends human nature. Man is a creature of hope and invention, both of which belie the idea that things cannot be changed. But man is also a creature prone to error, and sometimes that makes inevitable the things that he so often seeks to avoid.

The four B-1B Lancer bombers were five hundred miles offshore now, again spread on a line centered due east of Tokyo. This time they turned directly in, took an exact westerly heading of two-seven-zero degrees, and dropped down to a low-penetration altitude. The electronic-warfare officers aboard each of the aircraft now knew more than they had two nights earlier. Now at least they could ask the right questions. Additional satellite information had fixed the location of every air-defense radar site in the country, and they knew they could beat those. The important part of this night's mission was to get a feel for the capabilities of the E-767s, and that demanded more circumspection.

The B-1B had been reworked many times since the 1970s. It had actually become slower rather than faster, but it had also become stealthy. Especially from nose-on, the Lancer had the radar cross section—the RCS—of a large bird, as opposed to the B-2A, which had the RCS of a sparrow attempting to hide from a hawk. It also had blazing speed at low-level, always the best way to avoid engagement if attacked, which the crews hoped to avoid. The mission for tonight was to "tickle" the orbiting early-warning aircraft, wait for them to react electronically, and then turn and run back to Elmendorf with better data

than what they had already developed, from which a real attack plan could be formulated. The flight crews had forgotten only one thing. The air temperature was 31 degrees Fahrenheit on part of their aircraft and 35 on another.

Kami-Two was flying one hundred miles east of Choshi, following a precise north-south line at four hundred knots. Every fifteen minutes the aircraft reversed course. It had been up on patrol for seven hours, and was due to be relieved at dawn. The crew was tired but alert, not yet quite settled into the numbing routine of their mission.

The real problem was technical, which affected the operators badly. Their radar, sophisticated as it was, did them fewer favors than one might imagine. Designed to make the detection of stealthy aircraft possible, it had achieved its goal, perhaps—they didn't really know yet—through a number of incremental improvements in performance. The radar itself was immensely powerful, and being of solid-state construction, both highly reliable and precise in its operation. Internal improvements included reception gear cooled with liquid nitrogen to boost sensitivity by a factor of four, and signal-processing software that missed little. That was really the problem. The radar displays were TV tubes that showed a computer-generated picture called a raster-scan, rather than the rotating-analog readout known since the invention of radar in the 1930s. The software was tuned to find anything that generated a return, and at the power and sensitivity settings being used now, it was showing things that weren't really there. Migratory birds, for example. The software engineers had programmed in a speed gate to ignore anything slower than one hundred thirty kilometers per hour, else they would have been tracking cars on the highways to their west, but the software took every return signal before deciding whether to show it to the operator, and if anything lay on or beyond that ring a few seconds later, it was plotted as a possible moving aircraft contact. In that way, two albatrosses a few thousand meters apart became a moving aircraft in the mind of the onboard computer. It was driving the operators mad, and along with them the pilots of the two Eagle fighters that flew thirty kilometers outboard of the surveillance aircraft. The result of the software problem was irritation that had already transformed itself into poor judgment. In addition, with the current sensitivity of the overall system, the still-active streams of commercial aircraft looked for all the world like fleets of bombers, and the only good news was that Kami-One to their north was dealing with them, classifying and handing them off.

"Contact, one-zero-one, four hundred kilometers," a captain on one of the boards said into the intercom. "Altitude three thousand meters . . . descending. Speed five hundred knots."

"Another bird?" the colonel commanding the mission asked crossly.

"Not this one . . . contact is firming up."

* * *

Another aviator with the rank of colonel eased his stick down to take his bomber lower. The autopilot was off now. *In and out,* he told himself, scanning the sky ahead of him.

"There's our friend," one of the EWOs said. "Bearing two-eight-one."

Automatically, both pilot and copilot looked to their right. Unsurprisingly, they saw nothing. The copilot looked back in. At night you wanted to keep an eye on instruments. The lack of good external references meant you ran the risk of vertigo, the loss of spatial orientation, which all aviators feared. They seemed to be approaching some layered clouds. His eyes checked the external temperature gauges. Thirty-five, and that was good. Two or three degrees lower and you ran the risk of icing, and the B-1, like most military aircraft, didn't have deicing equipment. Well, the mission was electronic, not visual, and clouds didn't mean much to radar transmission or reception.

But clouds did mean moisture, and the copilot allowed himself to forget that the temperature gauge was in the nose, and the tail was quite a bit higher. The temperature there was thirty-one, and ice started forming on the bomber's tailfin. It wasn't even enough to cause any degradation in the controls. But it was enough to make a subtle change in the shape of the aircraft, whose radar cross section depended on millimeter tolerances.

"That's a hard contact," the Captain said on Kami-Two. He worked his controls to lock on it, transmitting the contact to the Colonel's own display. "Maybe another one now."

"I have it." The contact, he saw, was leveling out and heading straight for Tokyo. It could not possibly be an airliner. No transponder. The base course was wrong. The altitude was wrong. The penetration speed was wrong. It had to be an enemy. With that knowledge, he told his two fighters to head for it.

"I think I can start interrogating it more—"

"No," the Colonel replied over the IC phones.

The two F-15J fighters had just topped off their tanks and were well sited for the interception. The alpha-numeric symbols on the Kami's screens showed them close, and aboard the fighters the pilots could see the same display and didn't have to light off their own targeting radars. With their outbound speed of five hundred knots, and a corresponding speed on the inbound track, it wouldn't be long.

At the same time a report was downlinked to the regional air-defense headquarters, and soon many people were watching the electronic drama. There were now three inbound aircraft plotted, spaced out as though to deliver an attack. If they were B-1 bombers, everyone knew, they could be carrying real bombs or cruise missiles, and they were well within the launch radius for the latter. That created a problem for the air-defense commander, and the time of day did not make it better. His precise instructions were not yet precise enough, and there was no command guidance he could depend on in Tokyo. But the inbounds were within the Air Defense Identification Zone, and they were probably bombers, and—what? the General asked himself. For now he ordered the fighters to split up, each closing on a separate target. It was going too fast. He should have known better, but you couldn't plan for

everything, and they were bombers, and they were too close, and they were heading in fast.

"Are we getting extra hits?" the aircraft commander asked. He planned to get no closer than one hundred miles to the airborne radar, and he already had his escape procedures in mind.

"Sir, that's negative. I'm getting a sweep every six seconds, but no electronic steering on us yet."

"I don't think they can see us this way," the pilot thought aloud.

"If they do, we can get out of Dodge in a hurry." The copilot flexed his fingers nervously and hoped his confidence was not misplaced.

There could be no tally-ho call. The fighters were above the cloud layer. Descending through clouds under these circumstances ran risks. The orders came as something of an anticlimax after all the drills and preparation, and a long, boring night of patrolling. Kami-Two changed frequencies and began electronic beam-steering on all three of her inbound contacts.

"They're hitting us," the EWO reported at once. "Freq change, pulsing us hard on the Ku-band."

"Probably just saw us." That made sense, didn't it? As soon as they plotted an inbound track, they'd try to firm it up. It gave him a little more time to work with. He'd keep going in for another few minutes, the Colonel thought, just to see what happened.

"He's not turning," the Captain said. He should have turned away immediately, shouldn't he? everyone aboard wondered. There could only be one good reason why he hadn't, and the resulting order was obvious. Kami-two changed frequencies again to fire-control mode, and an Eagle fighter loosed two radar-homing missiles. To the north, another Eagle was still just out of range of its newly assigned target. Its pilot punched burner to change that.

"Lock-up—somebody's locked-up on us!"

"Evading left." The Colonel moved the stick and increased power for a screaming dive down to the wavetops. A series of flares combined with chaff clouds emerged from the bomber's tail. They stopped almost at once in the cold air and hovered nearly motionless. The sophisticated radar aboard the E-767 identified the chaff clouds and automatically ignored them, steering its pencil-thin radar beam on the bomber, which was still moving. All the missile had to do was follow it in. All the years of design work were paying off now, and the onboard controllers commented silently to themselves on the unexpected situation. The system had been designed to protect against Russians, not Americans. How remarkable.

“I can’t break lock.” The EWO tried active jamming next, but the pencil beam that was hammering the aluminum skin of their Lancer was two million watts of power, and his jammers couldn’t begin to deal with it. The aircraft lurched into violent corkscrew maneuvers. They didn’t know where the missiles were, and they could only do what the manual said, but the manual, they realized a little late, hadn’t anticipated this sort of adversary. When the first missile exploded on contact with the right wing, they were too close to the water for their ejection seats to be of any help.

The second B-1 was luckier. It took a hit that disabled two engines, but even with half power it was able to depart the Japanese coast too rapidly for the Eagle to catch up, and the flight crew wondered if they would make Shemya before something else important fell off of their hundred-million-dollar aircraft. The rest of the flight retreated as well, hoping that someone could tell them what had gone wrong.

Of greater moment, yet another hostile act had been committed, and four more people were dead, and turning back would now be harder still for both sides in a war without any discernible rules.

36

Consideration

It wasn't that much of a surprise, Ryan told himself, but it would be of little consolation to the families of the four Air Force officers. It ought to have been a simple, safe mission, and the one bleak positive was that sure enough it had learned something. Japan had the world's best air-defense aircraft. They would have to be defeated if they were ever to take out their intercontinental missiles—but taken out the missiles had to be. A considerable pile of documents lay on his desk. NASA reports of the Japanese SS-19. Tracking on the observed test-firings of the birds. Evaluation of the capabilities of the missiles. Guesses about the payloads. They were all guesses, really. He needed more than that, but that was the nature of intelligence information. You never had enough to make an informed decision, and so you had to make an uninformed decision and hope that your hunches were right. It was a relief when the STU-6 rang, distracting him from the task of figuring what he could tell the President about what he didn't know.

"Hi, MP. Anything new?"

"Koga wants to meet with our people," Mrs. Foley replied at once. "Preliminary word is that he's not very pleased with developments. But it's a risk," she added.

It would be so much easier if I didn't know those two, Ryan thought. "Approved," was what he said. "We need all the information we can get. We need to know who's really making the decisions over there."

"It's not the government. Not really. That's what all the data indicates. That's the only plausible reason why the RVS didn't see this coming. So the obvious question is—"

"And the answer to that question is yes, Mary Pat."

"Somebody will have to sign off on that, Jack," the Deputy Director (Operations) said evenly.

"Somebody will," the National Security Advisor promised.

He was the Deputy Assistant Commercial Attaché, a young diplomat, only twenty-five, who rarely got invited to anything important, and when he was, merely hovered about like a court page from a bygone era, attending his senior, fetching drinks, and generally looking unimportant. He was an intelligence officer, of course, and junior at that job as well. His was the task of making pickups from dead-drops while on his way into the embassy every morning that the proper signals were spotted, as they were this morning, a Sunday in Tokyo. The task was a challenge to his creativity because he had to

make the planned seem random, had to do it in a different way every time, but not so different as to seem unusual. It was only his second year as a field intelligence officer, but he was already wondering how the devil people maintained their careers in this business without going mad.

There it was. A soda can—a red Coca-Cola in this case—lying in the gutter between the left-rear wheel of a Nissan sedan and the curb, twenty meters ahead, where it was supposed to be. It could not have been there very long. Someone would have picked it up and deposited it in a nearby receptacle. He admired the neatness of Tokyo and the civic pride it represented. In fact he admired almost everything about these industrious and polite people, but that only made him worry about how intelligent and thorough their counterintelligence service was. Well, he did have a diplomatic cover, and had nothing more to fear than a blemish on a career that he could always change —his cover duties had taught him a lot about business, should he decide to leave the service of his government, he kept telling himself. He walked down the crowded morning sidewalk, bent down, and picked up the soda can. The bottom of the can was hollow, indented for easy stacking, and his hand deftly removed the item taped there, and then he simply dropped the can in the trash container at the end of the block before turning left to head for the embassy. Another important mission done, even if all it had appeared to be was the removal of street litter from this most fastidious of cities. Two years of professional training, he thought, to be a trash collector. Perhaps in a few years he would start recruiting his own agents. At least your hands stayed clean that way.

On entering the embassy he found his way to Major Scherenko's office and handed over what he'd retrieved before heading off to his own desk for a brief morning's work.

Boris Scherenko was as busy as he'd ever expected to be. His assignment was supposed to be a nice, quiet, commercial-spying post, learning industrial techniques that his country might easily duplicate, more a business function than one of pure espionage. The loss of Oleg Lyalin's THISTLE network had been a professional catastrophe that he had labored for some time to correct without great success. The traitor Lyalin had been a master at insinuating himself into business operations while he himself had worked to effect a more conventional penetration of the Japanese government organs, and his efforts to duplicate the former's achievements had barely begun to bear fruit when his tasking had changed back to something else entirely, a mission as surprising to him as the current situation doubtless was to the Americans who had been so badly stung by their erstwhile allies. Just one more truism that the Americans had allowed themselves to forget. You couldn't trust anyone.

The package just delivered on his desk was at least easy to work with: two frames of thirty-five-millimeter film, black and white, already developed as a photographic negative. It was just a matter of peeling off the gray tape and unfolding it, a task that took some minutes. As sophisticated as his agency was, the actual work of espionage was often as tedious as assembling a child's birthday toys. In this case, he used a pocket knife and a bright light to remove the film, and nearly cut himself in the process. He placed the two frames in cardboard holders, which went one at a time into a slideviewer. The next task

was to transcribe the data onto a paper pad, which was just one more exercise in tedium. It was worth it, he saw at once. The data would have to be confirmed through other sources, but the news was good.

"There's your two cars," the AMTRAK executive said. It had been so obvious a place to look that a day had been required to realize it. The two oversized flatcars were at the Yoshinobu launch facility, and beside them were three transporter-containers for the SS-19/H-11 booster, just sitting there in the yard. "This might be another one, sticking out of the building."

"They have to have more than two, don't they?" Chris Scott asked.

"I would," Betsy Fleming replied. "But it could just mean a place to stash the cars. And it's the logical place."

"Here or at the assembly plant," Scott agreed with a nod.

Mainly they were waiting now for nonvisual data. The only KH-12 satellite in orbit was approaching Japan and already programmed to look at one small patch of a valley. The visual information had given them a very useful cue. Another fifty meters of the rail spur had disappeared from view between one KH-11 pass and another. The photos showed the catenary towers ordinarily used for stringing the overhead power lines needed for electrically powered trains, but the towers did not have wires on them. They had possibly been erected to make the spur look normal to commuters who traveled the route in the Bullet Trains, just one more exercise in hiding something in plain sight.

"You know, if they'd just left it alone . . ." the AMTRAK guy said, looking at the overheads again.

"Yeah," Betsy responded, checking the clock. But they hadn't. Somebody was hanging camouflage netting on the towers, just around the first turn in the valley. The train passengers wouldn't notice, and, given slightly better timing, the three of them wouldn't have either. "If you were doing this, what would you do next?"

"To hide it from you guys? That's easy," the executive said. "I'd park track-repair cars there. That way it would look ordinary as hell, and they have the room for it. They should have done it before. Do people make mistakes like this all the time?"

"It isn't the first," Scott said.

"And now you're waiting for what?" the man asked.

"You'll see."

Launched into orbit eight years earlier by the Space Shuttle Atlantis, the TRW-built KH-12 satellite had actually survived far beyond its programmed life, but as was true of many products made by that company—the Air Force called it "TR-Wonderful"—it just kept on ticking. The radarreconnaissance satellite was completely out of maneuvering fuel, however, which meant you had to wait for it to get to a particular place and hope that the operating altitude was suitable to what you wanted.

It was a large cylindrical craft, over thirty feet in length, with immense

“wings” of solar receptors to power the onboard Ku-band radar. The solar cells had degraded over the years in the intense radiation environment, allowing only a few minutes of operation per revolution. The ground controllers had waited what seemed a long time for this opportunity. The orbital track was northwest-to-southeast, within six degrees of being directly overhead, close enough to see straight down into the valley. They already knew a lot. The geological history of the place was clear. A river now blocked with a hydroelectric dam had cut the gorge deep. It was more canyon than valley at this point, and the steep sides had been the deciding factor in putting the missiles here. The missiles could launch vertically, but incoming warheads would be blocked from hitting them by the mountains to east and west. It didn’t make any difference whose warheads they were. The shape and course of the valley would have had the same effect on Russian RVs as Americans’. The final bit of genius was that the valley was hard rock. Each silo had natural armor. For all those reasons, Scott and Fleming had bet much of their professional reputations on the tasking orders for the KH-12.

“Right about now, Betsy,” Scott said, checking the wall clock.

“What exactly will you see?”

“If they’re there, we’ll know it. You follow space technology?” Fleming asked.

“You’re talking to an original Trekkie.”

“Back in the 1980s, NASA orbited a mission, and the first thing they downloaded was a shot of the Nile delta, underground aquifers that feed into the Mediterranean Sea. We mapped them.”

“The same one did the irrigation canals down in Mexico, right, the Mayans, I think. What are you telling me?” the AMTRAK official asked.

“It was our mission, not NASA’s. We were telling the Russians that they couldn’t hide their silos from us. They got the message, too,” Mrs. Fleming explained. Right about then the secure fax machine started chirping. The signal from the KH-12 had been crosslinked to a satellite in geostationary orbit over the Indian Ocean, and from there to the U.S. mainland. Their first read on the signals would be unenhanced, but, they hoped, good enough for a fast check. Scott took the first image off the machine and set it on the table under a bright light, next to a visual print of the same place.

“Tell me what you see.”

“Okay, here’s the mainline . . . oh—this thing picks up the ties. The rails are too small, eh?”

“Correct.” Betsy found the spur line. The concrete rail ties were fifteen centimeters in width, and made for a good, sharp radar return that looked like a line of offset dashes.

“It goes quite a way up the valley, doesn’t it?” The AMTRAK guy’s face was down almost on the paper, tracing with his pen. “Turn, turn. What are these?” he asked, touching the tip to a series of white circles.

Scott placed a small ruler on the sheet. “Betsy?”

“Dense-packed it, too. My, aren’t we clever. It must have cost a fortune to do this.”

“Beautiful work,” Scott breathed. The rail spur curved left and right, and every two hundred meters was a silo, not three meters away from the marching ranks of rail ties. “Somebody really thought this one through.”

“You lost me.”

“Dense-pack,” Mrs. Fleming said. “It means that if you attempt to hit the missile field, the first warhead throws so much debris into the air that the next warhead gets trashed on the way in.”

“It means that you can’t use nuclear weapons to take these boys out—not easily anyway,” Scott went on. “Summarize what you know for me,” he ordered.

“This is a rail line that doesn’t make any commercial sense. It doesn’t go anywhere, so it can’t make money. It’s not a service siding, too long for that. It’s standard gauge, probably because of the cargo-dimension requirements.”

“And they’re stringing camouflage netting over it,” Betsy finished the evaluation, and was already framing the National Intelligence Estimate they had to draft tonight. “Chris, this is the place.”

“But I only count ten. There’s ten more we have to find.”

It was hard to think of it as an advantage, but the downsizing of the Navy had generated a lot of surplus staff, so finding another thirty-seven people wasn’t all that hard. That brought *Tennessee*’s complement to one hundred twenty, thirty-seven short of an Ohio’s normal crew size, a figure Dutch Claggett could accept. He didn’t need the missile technicians, after all.

His crew would be heavy on senior petty officers, another burden he would bear easily, the CO told himself, standing atop the sail and watching his men load provisions under the glaring lights. The reactor plant was up and running. Even now his engineering officer was conducting drills. Just forward of the sail, a green Mark 48 ADCAP torpedo was sliding backwards down the weapons-loading hatch under the watchful eyes of a chief torpedoman. There were only sixteen of those torpedoes to be had, but he didn’t expect to need that many for the mission he anticipated. *Asheville* and *Charlotte.* He’d known men on both, and if Washington got its thumb out, maybe he’d do something about that.

A car pulled up to the brow, and a petty officer got out, carrying a metal briefcase. He made his way aboard, dodging around the crewmen tossing cartons, then down a hatch.

“That’s the software upgrade for the sonar systems,” Claggett’s XO said. “The one they’ve been tracking whales with.”

“How long to upload it?”

“Supposedly just a few minutes.”

“I want to be out of here before dawn, X.”

“We’ll make it. First stop Pearl?”

Claggett nodded, pointing to the other Ohios, also loading men and chow. “And I don’t want any of those turkeys beating us there, either.”

It wasn't a comfortable feeling, but the sight was worth it. *Johnnie Reb* rested on rows of wooden blocks, and towered above the floor of the dry dock like some sort of immense building. Captain Sanchez had decided to give things a look, and stood alongside the ship's commanding officer. As they watched, a traveling crane removed the remains of the number-three screw. Workers and engineers in their multicolored hard hats made way, then converged back on the skeg, evaluating the damage. Another crane moved in to begin the removal of number-four tailshaft. It had to be pulled straight out, its inboard extremity already disconnected from the rest of the assembly.

"Bastards," the skipper breathed.

"We can fix her," Sanchez noted quietly.

"Four months. If we're lucky," the Captain added. They just didn't have the parts to do it any faster. The key, unsurprisingly, was the reduction gears. Six complete gear sets would have to be manufactured, and that took time. *Enterprise*'s entire drivetrain was gone, and the efforts to get the ship to safety as quickly as possible had wrecked the one gear set that might have been repairable. Six months for her, *if* the contractor could get spun up in a hurry, and work three-shift weeks to get the job done. The rest of the repairs were straightforward.

"How quick to get number-one shaft back to battery?" Sanchez asked.

The Captain shrugged. "Two-three days, for what that's worth."

Sanchez hesitated before asking the next question. He should have known the answer, and he was afraid it would sound really stupid—oh, what the hell? He had to go off to Barbers Point anyway. And the only dumb questions, he'd told people for years, were the ones you didn't ask.

"Sir, I hate to sound stupid, but how fast will she go on two shafts?"

Ryan found himself wishing that the Flat Earth Society was right. In that case the world could have been a single time zone. As it was, the Marianas were fifteen hours ahead, Japan fourteen, Moscow eight. Western Europe's principal financial markets were five and six ahead, depending on the country. Hawaii was five hours behind. He had contacts in all of those places, and everyone was working on local time, and it was so different in every case that just keeping track of who was probably awake and who was probably asleep occupied much of his thoughts. He grunted to himself in bed, remembering with nostalgia the confusion that always came to him on long flights. Even now people were working in some of those places, none under his control; and he knew he had to sleep if he were going to be able to deal with any of them when the sun returned to where he lived and worked. But sleep wasn't coming, and all he saw was the pine decking that made up his bedroom ceiling.

"Any ideas?" Cathy asked.

Jack grunted. "I wish I'd stuck with merchant banking."

"And then who'd be running things?"

A long breath. "Somebody else."

"Not as well, Jack," his wife suggested.

"True," he admitted to the ceiling.

"How do you think people will react to this?"

"I don't know. I'm not even sure how I'm reacting to it," Jack admitted. "It's not supposed to be like this at all. We're in a war that doesn't make any sense. We just got rid of the last nuclear missiles ten days ago, and now they're back, and pointed at us, and we don't have any to point back at them, and if we don't stop this thing fast—I don't know, Cathy."

"Not sleeping doesn't help."

"Thank God, married to a doctor." He managed a smile. "Well, honey, you got us out of one problem anyway."

"How did I do that?"

"By being smart." By using your head all the time, his mind went on. His wife didn't do anything without thinking it through first. She worked pretty slowly by the standards of her profession. Perhaps that was normal for someone pushing the frontiers back, always considering and planning and evaluating—like a good intelligence officer, in fact—and then when everything was ready and you had it all figured out, *zap* with her laser. Yeah, that wasn't a bad way to operate, was it?

"Well, I think they've learned one lesson," Yamata said. A rescue aircraft had recovered two bodies and some floating debris from the American bomber. The bodies would be treated with dignity, it had been decided. The names had already been telexed to Washington via the Japanese Embassy, and in due course the remains would be returned. Showing mercy was the proper thing to do, for many reasons. Someday America and Japan would be friends again, and he didn't want to poison that possibility. It was also bad for business.

"The Ambassador reports that they do not offer us anything," Goto replied after a moment.

"They have not as yet evaluated their position, and ours."

"Will they repair their financial systems?"

Yamata frowned. "Perhaps. But they still have great difficulties. They still need to buy from us, they still need to sell to us—and they cannot strike us effectively, as four of their airmen, possibly eight, just learned to their sorrow." Things had not gone entirely in accord with his plans, but, then, when had things ever really done that? "What we must do next is to show them that the people who live on Saipan prefer our rule to theirs. Then world opinion will work in our favor, and that will defuse the situation greatly."

And until then, Yamata thought, things were going well. The Americans would not soon again probe his country's mainland. They didn't have the ability to retake the islands, and by the time they did, well, Japan would have a new ally, and perhaps even new political leadership, wouldn't it?

"No, I am not being watched," Koga assured them.

"As a reporter—no, you know better than that, don't you?" Clark asked.

"I know you are an intelligence officer. I know Kimura here has been in contact with you." They were in a comfortable teahouse close to the Ara

River. Nearby was the boatracing course built for the 1964 Olympics. It was also conveniently close to a police station, John reminded himself. Why, he wondered, had he always feared the attention of police officers? Under the circumstances, it seemed the proper thing to nod his understanding of the situation.

"In that case, Koga-san, we are at your mercy."

"I presume your government now knows what is going on. All of it," Koga went on distastefully. "I've spoken with my own contacts as well."

"Siberia," Clark said simply.

"Yes," Koga responded. "That is part of it. Yamata-san's hatred for America is another part, but most of all, it's pure madness."

"The Americans' reaction is not really a matter of my immediate concern, but I can assure you that my country will not meekly submit to an invasion of our soil," John said calmly.

"Even if China is involved?" Kimura asked.

"Especially if China is involved," Chavez said just to let everyone know he was there. "I presume that you study history, as we do."

"I fear for my country. The time for such adventures is long past, but the people who—do you really understand how policy decisions are made here? The will of the people is an irrelevance. I tried to change that. I tried to bring an end to the corruption."

Clark's mind was racing, trying to decide if the man was sincere or not. "We face similar problems, as you have probably heard. The question is, what do we do now?"

The torment on the man's face was clear. "I do not know. I asked for this meeting in the hope that your government will understand that not everyone here is mad."

"You must not think of yourself as a traitor, Koga-san," Clark said after a moment's consideration. "Truly you are not. What does a man do when he feels that his government is taking incorrect action? And you are correct in your judgment that the possible consequences of this current course of action could well be serious. My country has neither the time nor the energy to waste on conflict, but if it is forced on us, well, then we must react. Now I must ask you a question."

"Yes, I know." Koga looked down at the table. He thought about reaching for his drink, but was too afraid that his hand would shake.

"Will you work with us to prevent this from happening?" *This is something for somebody a hell of a lot more senior than I am,* John told himself, but he was here, and the senior pukes were not.

"Doing what?"

"I lack the seniority to tell you exactly what that might be, but I can convey requests from my government. At the very least we will ask you for information, and perhaps for influence. You are still respected within government circles. You still have friends and allies in the Diet. We will not ask you to compromise those things. They are too valuable to be thrown away."

"I can speak out against this madness. I can—"

"You can do many things, Koga-san, but please, for the sake of your country

and mine, please do nothing without first considering the effects you will achieve by taking action." *My next career change,* Clark thought. *Political counselor.* "We are agreed, are we not, that the objective here is to avoid a major war?"

"*Hai.*"

"Any fool can start a war," Chavez announced, thanking Providence for his master's courses. "It takes a better man to prevent one, and it takes careful thought."

"I will listen to your counsel. I do not promise you that I will follow it. But I will listen."

Clark nodded. "That is all we can ask." The rest of the meeting was procedural. Another such rendezvous would be too dangerous. Kimura would handle messages from this point on. Clark and Chavez left first, heading back to their hotel by foot. It was a very different affair from dealing with Mohammed Abdul Corp. Koga was honorable, bright, and wanted to do the right thing, even if it entailed treason. But John realized that his words to the man hadn't just been part of the seduction dance. At a certain point, state policy became a matter of conscience, and he was grateful that this man seemed to have one.

"Straight board shut," the chief of the boat announced from his post on the port-forward corner of the attack center. As was normal, the submarine's most senior enlisted man was the diving officer. Every opening in the ship's hull was closed tight, the red circles on the diving board replaced now with red horizontal dashes. "Pressure in the boat."

"All systems aligned and checked for dive. The compensation is entered. We are rigged for dive," the OOD announced.

"Okay, let's take her down. Dive the ship. Make your depth one hundred feet." Claggett looked around the compartment, first checking the status boards, then checking the men. *Tennessee* hadn't been underwater for more than a year. Neither had her crew, and he looked around for any first-dive nerves as the officer of the deck gave the proper commands for the evolution. It was normal that a few of the younger men shook their heads, reminding themselves that they were submariners, after all, and supposedly used to this. The sounds of escaping air made that clear enough. *Tennessee* took a gentle five-degree down angle at the bow. For the next few minutes the submarine would be checked for trim to see that the ship was properly balanced and that all onboard systems really did work, as all tests and inspections had already made certain. That process required half an hour. Claggett could well have gone faster, and the next time he certainly would, but for the moment it was time to get everyone comfortable again.

"Mr. Shaw, come left to new course two-one-zero."

"Aye, helm, left ten degrees rudder, come to new course two-one-zero." The helmsman responded properly, bringing the submarine to her base course.

"All ahead full," Claggett ordered.

"All ahead full, aye." The full-speed bell would take *Tennessee* to twenty-six knots. There were actually four more knots of speed available with a flank

bell. It was a little-known fact that someone had made a mistake with the Ohio-class of boomers. Designed for a maximum speed of just over twenty-six knots, the first full-power trials on the lead boat in the class had topped out at just over twenty-nine, and later models had been marginally faster still. Well, Claggett thought with a smile, the U.S. Navy had never been especially interested in slow ships; they were less likely to dodge out of harm's way.

"So far, so good," Claggett observed to his OOD.

Lieutenant Shaw nodded. Another officer on his way out of the Navy, he'd been tapped as the boat's navigator, and having served with Dutch Claggett before, he'd not objected to coming back one more time. "Speed's coming up nicely, Cap'n."

"We've been saving a lot of neutrons lately."

"What's the mission?"

"Not sure yet, but damned if we aren't the biggest fast-attack submarine ever made," Claggett observed.

"Time to stream."

"Then do it, Mr. Shaw."

A minute later the submarine's lengthy towed-sonar was allowed to deploy aft, guided into the ship's wake via the starboard-side after diving plane. Even at high speed, the thin-line array immediately began providing data to the sonarmen forward of the attack center. *Tennessee* was at full speed now, diving deeper to eight hundred feet. The increased water pressure eliminated the chance of cavitation coming off her sophisticated screw system. Her natural-circulation reactor plant gave off no pump noise. Her smooth lines created no flow noise at all. Inside, crewmen wore rubber-soled shoes. Turbines were mounted on decks connected to the hull via springs to isolate and decouple propulsion sounds. Designed to radiate no noise at all, and universally referred to even by the fast-attack community as "black holes," the class really was the quietest thing man had ever put to sea. Big, with nowhere near the speed and maneuverability of the smaller attack boats, *Tennessee* and her sisters were still ahead in the most important category of performance. Even whales had a hard time hearing one.

Force-on-force, Robby Jackson thought again. If that's impossible, then what? "Well, if we can't play this like a prizefight, then we play it like a card game," he said to himself, alone in his office. He looked up in surprise, then realized that he'd heard his own words spoken aloud.

It wasn't very professional to be angry, but Rear Admiral Jackson was indulging himself with anger for the moment. The enemy—that was the term he was using now—assumed that he and his colleagues in J-3 could not construct an effective response to their moves. To them it was a matter of space and time and force. Space was measured in thousands of miles. Time was being measured in months and years. Force was being measured in divisions and fleets.

What if they were wrong? Jackson asked himself.

Shemya to Tokyo was two thousand miles. Elmendorf to Tokyo was another thousand. But space *was* time. Time to them was the number of months or years required to rebuild a navy capable of doing what had been done in 1944, but that wasn't in the cards, and therefore was irrelevant. And force

wasn't everything you had. Force was what you managed to deliver to the places that needed to be hit. Everything else was wasted energy, wasn't it?

More important still was perception. His adversaries *perceived* that their own limiting factors applied to others as well. They defined the contest in their terms, and if that's how America played the game, then America would lose. So his most important task was to make up his own set of rules. And so he would, Jackson told himself. That's where he began, on a clear sheet of unlined white paper, with frequent looks at the world map on his wall.

Whoever had run the night watch at CIA was intelligent enough, Ryan thought. Intelligent enough to know that information received at three in the morning could wait until six, which bespoke a degree of judgment rare in the intelligence community, and one for which he was grateful. The Russians had transmitted the dispatch to the Washington *rezidentura,* and from there it had been hand-carried to CIA. Jack wondered what the uniformed guards at CIA had thought when they had let the Russian spooks through the gate. From there the report had been driven to the White House, and the courier had been waiting for Ryan in his anteroom when he came in.

"Sources report a total of nine (9) 'H-11' rockets at Yoshinobu. Another missile is at the assembly plant, being used as an engineering test-bed for a proposed structural upgrade. That leaves ten (10) or eleven (11) rockets unaccounted for, more probably the former, location as yet unknown. Good news, Ivan Emmetovich. I presume your satellite people are quite busy. Ours are as well. Golovko."

"Yes, they are, Sergey Nikolay'ch," Ryan whispered, flipping open the second folder the courier had brought down. "Yes, they are."

Here goes nothing, thought Sanchez.

AirPac was a vice admiral, and in as foul a mood as every other officer at the Pearl Harbor Naval Base. Responsible for every naval aircraft and flight deck from Nevada west, his ought to have been the point command for the war that had begun only a few days earlier, but not only could he not tell his two active carriers in the Indian Ocean what he wanted, he could see his other two carriers, sitting side by side in dry docks. And likely to remain there for months, as a CNN camera crew was now making clear to viewers across the entire world.

"So what is it?" he asked his visitors.

"Do we have plans for visiting WestPac?" Sanchez asked.

"Not anytime soon."

"I can be ready to move in less than ten days," *Johnnie Reb's* CO announced.

"Is that a fact?" AirPac inquired acidly.

"Number-one shaft's okay. If we fix number four, I can do twenty-nine, maybe thirty knots. Probably more. The trials on two shafts had the wheels attached. Eliminate the drag from those, maybe thirty-two."

"Keep going," the Admiral said.

"Okay, the first mission has to be to eliminate their airplanes, right?" Sanchez said. "For that I don't need Hoovers and 'Truders. *Johnnie Reb* can handle four squadrons of Toms and four more of Plastic Bugs, Robber's det of Queers to do the jamming, plus an extra det of Hummers. And guess what?"

AirPac nodded. "That almost equals their fighter strength on the islands." It was dicey. One carrier deck against two major island bases wasn't exactly . . . but the islands were pretty far apart, weren't they? Japan had other ships out there, and submarines, which is what he feared in particular. "It's a start, maybe."

"We need some other elements," Sanchez agreed. "Anybody going to say no when we ask?"

"Not at this end," the Admiral said after a moment's thought.

The CNN reporter had made her first live feed from atop the edge of the dry dock, and it showed the two nuclear-powered carriers sitting on their blocks, not unlike twin babies in side-by-side cradles. Somebody in CINCPAC's office must have paid a price for letting her in, Ryan thought, because the second feed was from much farther away, the flattops across the harbor but still clearly visible behind her back, as she said much the same things, adding that she had learned from informed sources that it could be as much as six months before *Stennis* and *Enterprise* could again put to sea.

Isn't that just great, Jack grumbled to himself. Her estimate was as good as the one sitting on his desk with *Top* Secret written on the folder in red lettering. Maybe it was even better, since her source was probably a yard worker with real experience in that largest of body and fender shops. She was followed by a learned commentator—this one a retired admiral working at a Washington think-tank-who said that taking the Marianas back would be extremely difficult at best.

The problem with a free press was that it gave out information to everyone, and over the past two decades it had become so good a source of information that his country's own intelligence services used it for all manner of time-critical data. For its part, the public had grown more sophisticated in its demands for news, and the networks had responded by improving both its collection and analysis. Of course, the press had its weaknesses. For real insider information it depended too much on leaks and not enough on shoeleather, especially in Washington, and for analysis it often selected people motivated less by facts than by an agenda. But for things that one could see, the press often worked better than trained intelligence officers on the government payroll.

The other side depended on it too, Jack thought. Just as he was watching his office TV, so were others, all over the world....

"You look busy," Admiral Jackson said from the door.

"I'm waiting just as fast as I can." Ryan waved him to a seat. "CNN just reported on the carriers."

"Good," Robby replied.

"Good?"

"We can have *Stennis* back to sea in seven to ten days. Old pal of mine, Bud

Sanchez, is the CAG aboard her, and he has some ideas I like. So does AirPac."

"A week? Wait a minute." Yet another effect of TV news was that people often believed it over official data, even though in this case the classified report was identical with—

Three were still in Connecticut, and the other three were undergoing tests in Nevada. Everything about them was untraditional. The fabrication plant, for example, was more like a tailor shop than an aircraft factory. The basic material for the airframe arrived in rolls, which were laid out on a long, thin table where computer-driven laser cutters sliced out the proper shapes. Those were then laminated and baked in an oven until the carbon-fiber fabric formed a sandwich stronger than steel, but far lighter—and, unlike steel, transparent to electromagnetic energy. Nearly twenty years of design work had gone into this, and the first pedestrian set of requirements had grown into a book as thick as a multivolume encyclopedia. A typical Pentagon program, it had taken too long and cost too much, but the final product, if not exactly worth the wait, was certainly worth having, even at twenty million dollars per copy, or, as the crews put it, ten million dollars per seat.

The three in Connecticut were sitting in an open-sided shed when the Sikorsky employees arrived. The onboard systems were fully functional, and they had each been flown only just enough by the company test pilots to make sure that they could fly. All the systems had been checked out properly through the onboard diagnostic computer which, of course, had also diagnosed itself. After fueling, the three were wheeled out onto the ramp and flown off just after dark, north to Westover Air Force Base, in western Massachusetts, where they would be loaded in a Galaxy transport of the 327th Military Airlift Squadron for a flight to a place northeast of Las Vegas that wasn't on any official maps, though its existence wasn't much of a secret. Back in Connecticut, three wooden mockups were wheeled into the shed, its open side visible from the residential area and highway three hundred yards uphill. People would even be seen to work on them all week.

Even if you didn't really know the mission yet, the requirements were pretty much the same. *Tennessee* reduced speed to twenty knots, five hundred miles off the coast.

"Engine room answers all ahead two-thirds, sir."

"Very well," Commander Claggett acknowledged. "Left twenty-degrees rudder, come to new course zero-three-zero." The helmsman repeated that order back, and Claggett's next command was, "Rig ship for ultraquiet."

He already knew the physics of what he was doing, but moved aft to the plotting table anyway, to recheck the ship's turning circle. The Captain, too, had to check everything he did. The sharp course reversal was designed to effect a self-noise check. All over the submarine, unnecessary equipment was switched off, and crewmen not on duty got into their individual bunks as their ship turned. The crew, Claggett noted, was already getting into the swing.

Trailing behind *Tennessee* at the end of a thousand-yard cable was her towed sonar array, itself a thousand feet long. In another minute the submarine was like a dog chasing her own lengthy tail, a bare thousand yards abeam of it, and still doing twenty knots while sonarmen listened on their own systems for noise from their own ship. Claggett's next stop was the sonar room, so that he could watch the displays himself. It was electronic incest of sorts, the best sonar systems ever made trying to locate the quietest ship ever made.

"There we are, sir." The lead sonarman marked his screen with a grease pencil. The Captain tried not to be too disappointed. *Tennessee* was doing twenty knots, and the array was only a thousand yards off for the few seconds required for the pass to be made.

"Nobody's that invisible, sir," Lieutenant Shaw observed.

"Bring her back to base course. We'll try it again at fifteen knots." To the sonar chief: "Put a good man on the tapes. So let's find that rattle aft, shall we?" Ten minutes later *Tennessee* commenced another self-noise check.

"It's all going to be done in the saddle, Jack. As I read this, time works for them, not for us." It wasn't that Admiral Jackson liked it. There didn't appear to be another way, and this war would be come-as-you-are and make up your own rules as you went along.

"You may be right on the political side. They want to stage the elections soon, and they seem awfully confident—"

"Haven't you heard? They're flying civilians in hand over fist," Jackson told him. "Why do that? I think they're all going to become instant residents, and they're all going to vote *Ja* on the *Anschluss.* Our friends with the phone can see the airport. The inbound flights have slacked off some, but look at the numbers. Probably fifteen thousand troops on the island. They can all vote. Toss in the Japanese tourists already there, and those who've flown in, and that's all she wrote, boy."

The National Security Advisor winced. "That is simple, isn't it?"

"I remember when the Voting Rights Act got passed. It made a big difference in Mississippi when I was a kid. Don't you just love how people can use law to their benefit?"

"It sure is a civilized war, isn't it?" *Nobody ever said they were stupid,* Jack told himself. The results of the election would be bogus, but all they really had to do was muddle things. The use of force required a clear cause. So negotiations were part of the strategy of delay. The other side was still determining the rules of the game. America did not yet have a strategy of action.

"That's what we need to change."

"How?"

Jackson handed over a folder. "Here's the information I need."

Mutsu had satellite communications, which included video that could be uplinked from fleet headquarters at Yokohama. It was a pretty sight, really,

Admiral Sato thought, and so good of CNN to give it to him. *Enterprise* with three propellers wrecked, and the fourth visibly damaged. *John Stennis* with two already removed, a third clearly beyond repair; the fourth, unfortunately, seemed to be intact. What was not visible was internal damage. As he watched, one of the huge manganese-bronze propellers was removed from the latter ship, and another crane maneuvered in, probably, the destroyer's engineering officer observed, to withdraw part of the starboard outboard shaft.

"Five months," he said aloud, then heard the reporter's estimate of six, pleasantly the opinion of some unnamed yard worker.

"That's what headquarters thinks."

"They can't defeat us with destroyers and cruisers," *Mutsu's* captain observed. "But will they pull their two carriers out of the Indian Ocean?"

"Not if our friends continue to press them. Besides," Sato went on quietly, "two carriers are not enough, not against a hundred fighters on Guam and Saipan—more if I request it, as I probably will. It's really a political exercise now."

"And their submarines?" the destroyer's CO wondered, very nervous.

"So why can't we?" Jones asked.

"Unrestricted warfare is out," SubPac said.

"It worked before."

"They didn't have nuclear weapons before," Captain Chambers said.

"Oh." There was that, Jones admitted to himself. "Do we have a plan yet?"

"For the moment, keeping them away from us," Mancuso said. It wasn't exactly a mission to thrill Chester Nimitz, but you had to start somewhere. "What do you have for me?"

"I've gotten a couple of hits on snorting subs east of the islands. Nothing good enough to initiate a hunt, but I don't suppose we're sending P-3s in there anyway. The SOSUS troops are up to speed, though. Nothing's going to slip past us." He paused. "One other thing. I got one touch"—a touch was less firm than a hit—"on somebody off the Oregon coast."

"*Tennessee,*" Chambers said. "That's Dutch Claggett. He's due in here zero-two-hundred Friday."

Jones was impressed with himself. "Damn, a hit on an Ohio. How many others?"

"Four more, the last one leaves the pier in about an hour." Mancuso pointed at his wall chart. "I told each one to run over that SOSUS array for a noise check. I knew you'd be around to sniff after them. Don't get too cocky about it. They're doing a speed run into Pearl."

Jones nodded and turned. "Good one, Skipper."

"We haven't completely lost it yet, Dr. Jones."

* * *

“Goddamn it, Chief!” Commander Claggett swore.

“My fault, sir. Sure as hell.” He took it like a man. It was a toolbox. It had been found stuck between a seawater pipe and the hull, where minor vibrations off the springsuspended deck had made the wrenches inside rattle, enough that the submarine-towed sonar had detected the noise. “It isn’t one of ours, probably a yard worker left it aboard.”

Three other chief petty officers were there to share the experience. It could have happened to anyone. They knew what was coming next, too. Their captain took a deep breath before going on. A good show of anger was required, even for his chiefs.

“Every inch of the hull from the collision bulkhead to the tailshaft. Every loose nut, every bolt, every screwdriver. If it’s layin’ on the deck, pick it up. If it’s loose, tighten it. No stoppin’ till it’s done. I want this ship so quiet I can hear the dirty jokes you’re thinking about me.”

“It’ll get done, sir,” the Chief of the Boat promised. *Might as well get used to no sleep,* he didn’t say, and sure enough—

“You got it, COB, no sleep until this boat makes a tomb look noisy.” On reflection, Claggett thought he could have picked a better metaphor.

The CO made his way back forward, reminding himself to thank his sonar chief for isolating the source of the noise. It was better to have found it the first day out, and he had to raise hell about it. Those were the rules. He had to command himself not to smile. The Captain, after all, was *supposed* to be a stern son of a bitch—when he found something wrong, that is, and in a few minutes the chiefs would relay all his wrath on to others and feel the same way about it.

Things had already changed, he saw, as he passed through the reactor spaces. Like doctors in an operating room, the reactor watch sat or stood as their assignments dictated, mainly watching, making a few notes at the proper times. At sea for less than a day, and already Xerox copies of *Think Quiet* were taped to both sides of every watertight door. Those few crewmen he encountered in the passageways made way for him, often with a curt, proud nod. *Yeah, we’re pros, too, sir*. Two men were jogging in the missile room, a long and now useless compartment, and Claggett, as service etiquette dictated, made way for them, almost smiling again as he did so.

“Toolbox, right?” the executive officer asked when the CO reentered the Attack Center. “I had that happen to me on *Hampton* after our first refit.”

“yet.” Claggett nodded. “Turn of the next watch, we do a fore-and-aft walkdown.”

“Could be worse, sir. Once coming out of a yard overhaul, a guy I know had to reenter the dry dock. They found a friggin’ extension ladder in the forward ballast tank.” Stories like that made submariners shiver.

“Toolbox, sir?” the sonar chief asked.

Now he could smile. Claggett leaned against the doorframe and nodded as he pulled out a five-dollar bill. “Good call, Chief.”

“Wasn’t all that much.” But the chief petty officer pocketed the five anyway. On *Tennessee*, as on a lot of sub–marines, every wrench aboard had its handle dipped in liquid vinyl, which both gave a slightly better grip, especially to a sweaty hand, and also cut way back on the chance of rattling. “Some yard

puke, I bet," he added with a wink.

"I only pay once," Claggett observed. "Any new contacts?"

"Single-screw low-speed diesel surface ship bearing three-four-one, way out. It's a CZ contact, designated Sierra-Thirty. They're working a plot now, sir." He paused for a moment, and his mood changed. "Cap'n?"

"What is it, Chief?"

"*Asheville* and *Charlotte*— is it true?"

Commander Claggett nodded again. "That's what they told me."

"We'll even the score, sir."

Roger Durling lifted the sheet of paper. It was handwritten, which was something the President rarely saw. "This is rather thin, Admiral."

"Mr. President, you're not going to authorize a systematic attack on their country, are you?" Jackson asked.

Durling shook his head. "No, that's more than I want. The mission is to get the Marianas back and to prevent them from carrying through on the second part of their plan."

Robby took a deep breath. This was what he'd been preparing for.

"There's a third part, too," Jackson announced.

The two men with him froze.

"What's that, Rob?" Ryan asked after a moment.

"We just figured it out, Jack. The Indian task-force commander, Chandraskatta? He went to Newport a while back. Guess who was in the same class." He paused. "A certain Japanese admiral named Sato."

Ryan closed his eyes. Why hadn't somebody turned this up before? "So, three countries with imperial ambitions . . ."

"It looks that way to me, Jack. Remember the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere? Good ideas keep coming back. We need to stop it all," Jackson said forcefully. "I spent twenty-some years training for a war that nobody wanted to fight—with the Russians. I'd rather train to keep the peace. That means stopping these guys right now."

"Will this work?" the President asked.

"No guarantees, sir. Jack tells me there's a diplomatic and political clock on the operation. This isn't Iraq. Whatever international consensus we have is just with the Europeans, and that'll evaporate sooner or later."

"Jack?" Durling asked.

"If we're going to do it, this is probably the way."

"Risky."

"Mr. President, yes, sir, it's risky," Robby Jackson agreed. "If you think diplomacy will work to get the Marianas back, fine. I don't especially want to kill anybody. But if I were in their shoes, I would not give those islands back. They need them for Phase Two, and if that happens, even if the Russians don't go nuke . . ."

A giant step backwards, Ryan thought. A new alliance of sorts, one that could stretch from the Arctic Circle to Australia. Three countries with nuclear capacity, a huge resource base, massive economies, and the political will to use violence to achieve their ends. The Nineteenth Century all over again,

played on a far larger field. Economic competition backed by force, the classic formula for unending war.

"Jack?" the President asked again.

Ryan nodded slowly. "I think we have to. You can pick any reason you want. They all come out the same way."

"Approved."

37

Going Deep

"Normalcy" was the word the various commentators consistently used, usually with adjectives like "eerie" and/or "reassuring" to describe the week's routine. People on the political left were gratified that the government was using diplomatic means to address the crisis, while those on the political right were enraged that the White House was lowkeying everything. Indeed, it was the absence of leadership, and the absence of real policy statements that showed everyone that Roger Durling was a domestic-policy president who didn't have much of a clue on how to handle international crises. Further criticism found its way to the National Security Advisor, John P. Ryan, who, though he had supposedly good credentials in intelligence, had never really established himself as a player in national-security matters per se, and certainly was not taking a very forceful position now. Others found his circumspection admirable. The downsizing of the American military, pundits observed, made effective counteraction extremely difficult at best, and though lights remained on at the Pentagon throughout the nights, there obviously was no way to deal with the situation in the Marianas. As a result, other observers said in front of any TV camera with a red light, the Administration would do its best to appear to remain calm and steady while doing the best it could. Hence the illusion of normalcy to conceal the inherent weakness of the American position.

"You ask us to do nothing?" Golovko asked in exasperation.

"It's our battle to fight. If you move too soon, it alerts China, and it alerts Japan." Besides, Ryan could not add, what *can* you do? The Russian military was in far worse shape than America's. They could move additional aircraft to Eastern Siberia. Moving ground troops to firm up the light-strength formations of border guards could well trigger a Chinese response. "Your satellites are telling you the same thing ours are, Sergey. China isn't mobilizing."

"Yet." The single word had a sting to it.

"Correct. Not yet. And if we play our cards right, that won't happen." Ryan paused. "Any further information on the missiles?"

"We have several sites under surveillance," Golovko reported. "We have confirmed that the rockets at Yoshinobu are being used for civilian purposes. That is probably a cover for military testing, but nothing more than that. My technical people are quite confident."

"Don't you just love how confident they can be," Ryan observed.

"What are you going to do, Jack?" the Chairman of the RVS asked directly.

"Even as we speak, Sergey Nikolay'ch, we are telling them that their occupation of the islands is not acceptable." Jack paused for a breath and reminded himself that like it or not, he had to trust the man. "And if they don't leave on their own, we'll find a way to force them off."

"But *how?"* the man demanded, looking down at the estimates prepared by military experts in the nearby Defense Ministry.

"Ten, fifteen years ago, did you tell your political masters that we were worthy of your fear?"

"As you did of us," Golovko confirmed.

"We are more fortunate now. They don't fear us. They think they've already won. I cannot say more at the moment. Perhaps by tomorrow," Jack thought. "For now, instructions are on the way for you to relay to our people."

"It will be done," Sergey promised.

"My government will honor the wishes of the people on all of the islands," the Ambassador repeated, then added a new provision. "We also may be willing to discuss the difference in status between Guam and the rest of the Mariana Archipelago. American interest in that island does go back nearly a hundred years," he allowed for the first time.

Adler accepted the statement impassively, as the rules of the proceedings required. "Mr. Ambassador, the people of all those islands are American citizens. They are so by their own choice."

"And they will again have the opportunity to express that choice. Is it the position of your government that self-determination is only *allowed* one time?" he asked in reply. "That seems quite odd for a country with a tradition of easy immigration *and* emigration. As I have stated earlier, we will gladly permit dual citizenship for those natives who prefer to keep their American passports. We will compensate them for their property should they decide to leave, and . . ." The rest of his statement was the same.

As often as he had observed or engaged in it, diplomatic exchange, Adler thought, combined the worst aspects of explaining things to a toddler and talking with a mother-in-law. It was dull. It was tedious. It was exasperating. And it was necessary. A moment earlier, Japan had conceded something. It hadn't been unexpected. Cook had wheedled the information out of Nagumo the previous week, but now it was on the table. That was the good news. The bad news was that he was now expected to offer something in return. The rules of diplomatic exchange were based on compromise. You never got all of what you wanted, and you never gave the other guy all of what he wanted. The problem was that diplomacy assumed that neither side would ever be forced to give away anything of vital interest—and that both sides recognized what those vital interests were. But so often they didn't, and then diplomacy was fated to fail, much to the chagrin of those who falsely believed that wars were always the product of inept diplomats. Much more often they were the result of national interests so incompatible that compromise simply was not possible. And so now the Ambassador expected Adler to give just a little ground.

"Speaking for myself, I am gratified that you acknowledge the unconditional

rights of the Guamian people to remain American citizens. I am further pleased to note that your country allows the people of the Northern Marianas to determine their own destiny. Do you assure me that your country will abide by the results of the election?"

"I believe we have made that clear," the Ambassador replied, wondering if he'd just won something or not.

"And the elections will be open to—"

"All residents of the islands, of course. My country believes in universal suffrage, as does yours. In fact," he added, "we will make an additional concession. In Japan the vote comes at age twenty, but for the purposes of this election, we will lower the voting age to eighteen. We want no one to protest that the plebiscite is unfair in any way."

You clever bastard, Adler thought. It made such good sense, too. All the soldiers there could now vote, and the move would look just ducky to international observers. The Deputy Secretary of State nodded as though surprised, then made a note on his pad. Across the table, the Ambassador made a mental note that he'd just scored a point of his own. It had taken long enough.

"It's real simple," the National Security Advisor said. "Will you help us?"

The rules of the meeting were not calculated to make anyone happy. It had begun with an explanation from a Justice Department lawyer of how the Espionage Act, Title 18 United States Code, Section 793E, applied to all American citizens, and how the freedoms of speech and the press did not extend to violation of that statute.

"You're asking us to help you lie," one of the senior journalists said.

"Exactly right," Ryan responded.

"We have a professional obligation—"

"You're American citizens," Jack reminded them. "So are the people on those islands. My job is not to exercise the rights you're thinking about now. My job is to *guarantee* those rights to you and everyone else in this country. Either you help us or you don't. If you do, then we can do our job more easily, cheaply, and with less bloodshed. If you don't, then some additional people are probably going to get hurt."

"I doubt that Madison and the rest ever intended the American press to help an enemy in time of war," the lady from Justice said.

"We would never do that," the man from NBC protested. "But to take action in the other direction—"

"Ladies and gentlemen, I do not have time for a discourse on constitutional law. This is quite literally a matter of life and death. Your government is asking for your help. If you do not give that help, you will sooner or later have to explain to the American people why you did not." Jack wondered if anyone had ever threatened them in this way. Turnabout, he supposed, was fair play, though he didn't expect they would see things quite the same way. It was time for the olive branch. "I will take the heat on this. If you help us out, no one will ever hear it from me."

"Don't give me that. It'll get out," CNN protested.

"Then you will have to explain to the American people that you acted as patriotic citizens."

"I didn't mean it that way, Dr. Ryan!"

"I did," Jack said with a smile. "Think about it. How will it hurt you? Besides, how will it get out? Who else is going to report it?"

The journalists were cynical enough—it was almost a professional requirement—to see the humor, but it was Ryan's earlier statement that had scored. They were in a profound professional quandary, and the natural result was to evade it by thinking in other terms. In this case, business. Failure to act in support of their country, however much they might proclaim principle and professional ethics—well, the people who watched their TV were not as impressed with those high-flying standards as they ought to be. And besides, Ryan wasn't asking all that much. Just one thing, and if they were clever about it, maybe nobody really would notice.

The news executives would have preferred to leave the room and discuss the request in privacy, but no one offered that opportunity, and none of them had the nerve to ask. So they looked at one another, and all five nodded.

You'll pay for this one someday, their eyes told Ryan. It was something he was willing to deal with, he thought.

"Thank you." When they made their way out, Ryan walked toward the Oval Office.

"We got it," he told the President.

"I'm sorry I couldn't back you up on that."

"It's an election year," Jack acknowledged. The Iowa caucuses were two weeks away, then New Hampshire, and though Durling had no opposition in his party, he would on the whole have preferred to be elsewhere. He could also not afford offending the media. But that's why he had a National Security Advisor. Appointed officials were always expendable.

"When this is all over . . ."

"Back to golfing? I need the practice."

That was another thing he liked about him, Durling told himself. Ryan didn't mind telling a joke once in a while, though the circles under his eyes duplicated his own. It was one more reason to thank Bob Fowler for his contrarian advice, and perhaps a reason to lament Ryan's choice of political affiliation.

"He wants to help," Kimura said.

"The best way for him to do that," Clark replied, "is to act normally. He's an honorable man. Your country needs a voice of moderation." It wasn't exactly the instructions he'd expected, and he found himself hoping that Washington knew what the hell it was doing. The orders were coming through Ryan's office, which was some consolation but not all that much. At least his agent-in-place was relieved.

"Thank you. I do not wish to put his life at risk."

"He's too valuable for that. Perhaps America and Japan can reach a diplomatic solution." Clark didn't believe it, but saying such things always made diplomats happy. "In that case, Goto's government will fall, and perhaps

Koga-san will regain his former place."

"But from what I hear, Goto will not back down."

"It is also what I hear, but things can change. In any case, that is our request for Koga. Further contact between us is dangerous," "Klerk" went on. "Thank you for your assistance. If we need you again, we will contact you through normal channels."

In gratitude, Kimura paid the bill before leaving.

"That's all, eh?" Ding asked.

"Somebody thinks it's enough, and we have other things to do."

Back in the saddle again, Chavez thought to himself. But at least they had orders, incomprehensible though they might be. It was ten in the morning, local time, and they split up after hitting the street, and spent the next several hours buying cellular phones, three each of a new digital model, before meeting again. The units were compact and fit into a shirt pocket. Even the packing boxes were small, and neither officer had the least problem concealing them.

Chet Nomuri had already done the same, giving his address as an apartment in Hanamatsu, a preselected cover complete with credit cards and driver's license. Whatever was going on, he had less than thirty days in-country to accomplish it. His next job was to return to the bathhouse one last time before disappearing from the face of the earth.

"One question," Ryan said quietly. The look in his eyes made Trent and Fellows uneasy.

"Are you going to make us wait for it?" Sam asked.

"You know the limitations we face in the Pacific."

Trent stirred in his seat. "If you mean that we don't have the horses to—"

"It depends on which horses we use," Jack said. Both insiders considered that for a moment.

"Gloves off?" Al Trent asked.

Ryan nodded. "All the way off. Will you hassle us about it?"

"Depends on what you mean by that. Tell us," Fellows ordered. Ryan did.

"You're really willing to stick it out that far?" Trent asked.

"We don't have a choice. I suppose it would be nice to fight it out with cavalry charges on the field of honor and all that stuff, but we don't have the horses, remember? The President needs to know if Congress will back him up. Only you people will know the black part. If you support us, then the rest of the people on the Hill will fall in line."

"If it doesn't work?" Fellows wondered.

"Then there's a hanging party for all hands. Including you," Ryan added.

"We'll keep the committee in line," Trent promised. "You're playing a high-risk game, my friend."

"True enough," Jack agreed, thinking of the lives at risk. He knew that Al Trent was talking about the political side, too, but Ryan had commanded

himself to set those thoughts aside. He couldn't say so, of course. Trent would have considered it a weakness. It was remarkable how many things they could disagree on. But the important thing was that Trent's word was good.

"Keep us informed?"

"In accordance with the law," the National Security Advisor replied with a smile. The law required that Congress be notified *after* "black" operations were carried out.

"What about the Executive Order?" An Order dating back to the Ford administration prohibited the country's intelligence agencies from conducting assassinations.

"We have a Finding," Ryan replied. "It doesn't apply in time of hostilities." A Finding was essentially a Presidential decree that the law meant what the President thought it meant. In short, everything that Ryan had proposed was now, technically speaking, legal, so long as Congress agreed. It was a hell of a way to run a railroad, but democracies were like that.

"Then the *i*'s are dotted," Trent observed. Fellows concurred with a nod: "And the t's are crossed." Both congressmen watched their host lift a phone and punch a speeddial button.

"This is Ryan. Get things moving."

* * *

The first move was electronic. Over the outraged protests of CINCPAC, three TV crews set up their cameras on the edge of the side-by-side dry docks now containing *Enterprise* and *John Stennis.*

"We're not allowed to show you the damage to the ships' sterns, but informed sources tell us that it's even worse than it appears to be," the reporters all said, with only minor changes. When the live reports were done, the cameras were moved and more shots made of the carriers, then still more from the other side of the harbor. They were just backgrounders, like file footage, and showed the ships and the yards without any reporters standing in the way. These tapes were turned over to someone else and digitalized for further use.

"Those are two sick ships," Oreza observed tersely. Each one represented more than the aggregate tonnage of the entire U.S. Coast Guard, and the Navy, clever people that they were, had let both of them take a shot in the ass. The retired master chief felt his blood pressure increase.

"How long to get them well?" Burroughs asked.

"Months. Long time. Six months . . . puts us into typhoon season," Portagee realized to his further discomfort. It got worse with additional consideration. He didn't exactly relish the idea of being on an island assaulted by Marines, either. Here he was, on high ground, within sight of a surface-to-air missile battery that was sure to draw fire. Maybe selling out for a million bucks wasn't so bad an idea after all. With that sort of money he could buy another

boat, another house, and do his fishing out of the Florida Keys. “You know, you can fly out of here if you want.”

“Oh, what’s the hurry?”

Election posters were already being printed and posted. The public-access channel on the island’s cable system updated notices every few hours about the plans for Saipan. If anything, the island was even more relaxed now. Japanese tourists were unusually polite, and for the most part the soldiers were unarmed now. Military vehicles were being used for roadwork. Soldiers were visiting schools for friendly introductions. Two new baseball fields had been created, virtually overnight, and a new league started up. There was talk that a couple of Japanese major-league teams would commence spring training on Saipan, for which a stadium would have to be constructed, and maybe, it was whispered now, Saipan would have its own team. Which made sense, Oreza supposed. The island was closer to Tokyo than Kansas City was to New York. It wasn’t that the residents were happy with the occupation. It was just that they did not see any salvation, and so like most people in such a spot they learned to live with it. The Japanese were going far out of their way to make it as comfortable a process as possible.

For the first week there had been daily protests. But the Japanese commander, General Arima, had come out to meet every such group, TV cameras all around, and invited the leaders into his office for a chat, often televised live. Then came the more sophisticated responses. Government civilians and businessmen held a lengthy press conference, documenting how much money they had invested in the island, showing in graphic form the difference they’d made for the local economy, and promising to do more. It wasn’t so much that they had eliminated resentment as shown tolerance of it, promising at every turn to abide by the results of the elections soon to be held. *We live here, too*, they kept saying. *We live here, too*.

There had to be hope. Two weeks tomorrow, Oreza thought, and all they heard were reports on goddamned negotiations. Since when had America ever negotiated something like this? Maybe that was it. Maybe it was just his country’s obvious sign of weakness that gave him a sense of hopelessness. Nobody was fighting back. Tell us that the government is *doing* something, he wanted to say to the Admiral at the other end of the satellite phone. . . .

“Well, what the hell.” Oreza walked into the living room, put the batteries back in the phone, slid the antenna into the bottom of the mixing bowl, and dialed the number.

“Admiral Jackson,” he heard.

“Oreza here.”

“Anything new to report?”

“Yeah, Admiral. How the elections are going to go.”

“I don’t understand, Master Chief.”

“I see CNN telling us we got two carriers with their legs cut off and people saying we can’t do shit, sir. Jesus, Admiral, even when the Argentineans took the goddamned Falklands the Brits said they were coming back. I ain’t hearing that. What the hell are we supposed to think?”

Jackson weighed his reply for a few seconds. “I don’t need to tell you the rules on talking about operational stuff. Your job’s to give me information,

remember?"

"All we keep hearing is how they're going to hold elections, okay? The missile site east of us is camouflaged now—"

"I know that. And the search radar on top of Mount Takpochao is operating, and there's about forty fighter aircraft based at the airport and Kobler. We count sixty more at Andersen on Guam. There are eight 'cans cruising east of you, and an oiler group approaching them for an unrep. Anything else you want to know?" Even if Oreza was "compromised," a polite term for being under arrest, which Jackson doubted, this was nothing secret. Everyone knew America had reconnaissance satellites. On the other hand, Oreza needed to know that Jackson was up-to-date and, more importantly, interested. He was slightly ashamed of what he had to say next. "Master Chief, I expected better from a guy like you." The reply made him feel better, though.

"That's what I needed to hear, Admiral."

"Anything new happens, you tell us about it."

"Aye aye, sir."

Jackson broke the connection and lifted a recently arrived report on *Johnnie Reb*.

"Soon, Master Chief," he whispered. Then it was time to meet with the people from MacDill Air Force Base, who were, perversely, all wearing Army green. He didn't know that they would remind him of something he'd seen a few months earlier.

The men all had to be Spanish speakers, and look Spanish. Fortunately that wasn't hard. A documents expert flew from Langley to Fort Stewart, Georgia, complete with all the gear he needed, including ten blank passports. For purposes of simplicity, they'd use their real names. First Sergeant Julio Vega sat down in front of the camera, wearing his best suit.

"Don't smile," the CIA technician told him. "Europeans don't smile for passports."

"Yes, sir." His service nickname was *Oso*, "bear," but only his peers called him that now. To the rest of the Rangers in Foxtrot Company, Second Battalion, 175th Ranger Regiment, his only name was "First Sergeant," and they knew him as an experienced NCO who would back up his captain on the mission for which he'd just volunteered.

"You need better clothes, too."

"Who's buyin'?" Vega asked, grinning now, though the picture would show the dour face he usually reserved for soldiers who failed to meet his standards of behavior. That would not be the case here, he thought. Eight men, all jumpqualified (as all Rangers were), all people who'd seen combat action in one place or another—and unusually for members of the 175th, all men who hadn't shaved their heads down to stubbly Mohawks. Vega remembered another group like this one, and his grin stopped. Not all of them had come out of Colombia alive.

Spanish speakers, he thought as he left the room. Spanish was probably the language in the Marianas. Like most senior Army noncommissioned officers, he had gotten his bachelor's degree in night school, having majored in

military history—it had just seemed the right thing to do for one of his profession, and besides, the Army had paid for it. If Spanish were the language on those rocks, then it gave him an additional reason to think in positive terms about the mission. The name of the operation, which he'd overheard in a brief conversation with Captain Diego Checa, also seemed auspicious. It was called Operation ZORRO, which had amused the Captain enough to allow him to confide in his first sergeant. The "real" Zorro had been named Don Diego, hadn't he? He had forgotten the bandit's surname, but his senior NCO had not. *With a name like Vega, how can I turn down a mission like this?* Oso asked himself.

It was a good thing he was in shape, Nomuri thought. Just breathing here was hard enough. Most Western visitors to Japan stayed in the major cities and never realized that the country was every bit as mountainous as Colorado. Tochimoto was a small hill settlement that languished in the winter and expanded in summer as local citizens who grew tired of the crowded sameness of the cities moved into the country to explore. The hamlet, at the end of National Route 140, had essentially pulled in its sidewalks, but Chet was able to find a place to rent a small four-wheel all-terrain cycle, and had told the owner that he just needed a few hours to get away. In return for his money and a set of keys he'd received a stern warning, albeit polite, about following the trail and being careful, for which he'd graciously thanked the man and gone on his way, following the River Taki—more a nice brook than a river—up into the mountains. After the first hour, and about seven miles, he reckoned, he'd switched off the motor, pulled out his earplugs, and just listened.

Nothing. He hadn't seen a track in the mud and gravel path alongside the cascading stream, nor any sign of occupancy in the handful of rustic summer homes he'd passed along the way, and now, listening, he heard nothing at all but for the wind. There was a ford on his map, two more miles up, and sure enough it was both marked and usable, and allowed him to go east toward Shiraishi-*san*. Like most mountains, it had sides sculpted by time and water into numerous dead-end valleys, and Mount Shiraishi had a particularly nice valley, as yet unmarred by house or cabin. Perhaps Boy Scouts came here in summer to camp and commune with the nature the rest of their country had worked so hard to extinguish. More likely it was just a spot with no minerals valuable enough to justify a road or rail line. It was also one hundred air miles from Tokyo, and for all practical purposes might as easily have been in Antarctica.

Nomuri turned south, and climbed a smooth part of the slope to the crest of the southern ridge. He wanted a further look and listen, and, while he spotted a single half-built dwelling a few miles below, he saw no column of smoke from a wood fire, nor the rising steam from someone's hot tub, and he heard nothing at all that was not of nature. Nomuri spent thirty minutes scanning the area with a pair of compact binoculars, taking his time and making sure, then turned to look north and west, finding the same remarkable absence of human presence. Finally satisfied, he headed back down to the Taki, following

the path back to the town.

"We never see anyone now," the rental agent said when Nomuri finally got back, just after sunset. "May I offer you some tea?"

"*Dozo,*" the CIA officer said. He took his tea with a friendly nod. "It's wonderful here."

"You were wise to come this time of year." The man wanted conversation more than anything else. "In the summer the trees are full and beautiful, but the noise from these things"—he gestured at the ranks of cycles—"well, it ruins the peace of the mountain. But it supports me well," the man allowed.

"I must come back again. Things are so hectic at my office. To come here and feel the silence."

"Perhaps you will tell some friends," the man suggested. Clearly he needed the money to sustain him in the off-season.

"Yes, I will certainly do that," Nomuri assured him. A friendly bow sent him on his way, and the CIA officer started his car for the three-hour drive back to Tokyo, still wondering why the Agency had given him an assignment calculated to make him feel better about his mission.

"Are you guys really comfortable with this?" Jackson asked the people from SOCOM.

"Funny time for second thoughts, Robby," the senior officer observed. "If they're dumb enough to let American civilians roam around their country, well, let's take advantage of it."

"The insertion still worries me," the Air Force representative noted, looking by turns at the air-navigation charts and the satellite photos. "We have a good IP—hell, the navigational references are pretty good—but somebody's gotta take care of those AWACS birds for this to work."

"It's covered," the colonel from Air Combat Command assured him. "We're going to light up the sky for them, and you do have that gap to use." He tapped his pointer on the third chart.

"The helo crews?" Robby asked next.

"They're working on their sims now. If they're lucky they'll get to sleep on the flight over."

The mission-planning simulator was real enough to fool Sandy Richter's inner ears. The device was halfway between his youngest son's new Nintendo VR System and a full-up aircraft simulator, the oversized helmet he wore identical with the one he used in his Comanche, but infinitely more sophisticated. What had begun with a monocle display on the AH-64 Apache was now like an I-MAX-theater view of the world that you wore on your head. It needed to be more sophisticated yet, but it did give him a view of the computer-generated terrain along with all his flight information, and his hands were on the stick and throttle of another virtualhelicopter as he navigated across the water toward approaching bluffs.

"Coming right for the notch," he told his backseater, who was actually

sitting beside him, because the simulator didn't require that sort of fidelity. In this artificial world, they saw what they saw regardless of where they were, though the backseater sitting next to him had two additional instruments.

What they saw was the product of six hours of supercomputer time. A set of satellite photographs taken over the last three days had been analyzed, folded, spindled, and mutilated into a three-dimensional display that looked like a somewhat grainy video.

"Population center to the left."

"Roger, I see it." What he saw was a patch of fluorescent blue which in reality would have been yellow-orange quartz lighting, and out of deference to it he increased altitude from the fifty feet he'd followed for the past two hours. He eased the sidestick over, and the others in the darkened room, who were observing the flight crew, were struck by the way both bodies tilted to deal with the g-forces of a turn that existed only in the computer running the simulation. They might have laughed except that Sandy Richter was not somebody you laughed at.

From the moment he crossed the virtual coast, he climbed up to a crest and ran along it. That was Richter's idea. There were roads and houses in the river valleys that ended at the Sea of Japan. Better, the pilot thought, to stay acoustically covert as much as possible and take his chances with the look-down capability. In a just world he'd be able to deal with that threat on the inbound leg, but this was not exactly a just world.

"Fighters overhead," a female voice warned, just as it would on the real mission.

"Coming down some," Richter replied to the computer voice, slipping down below the ridgeline to the right. "If you can find me fifty feet off the ground, then I lose, honey."

"I hope this stealth shit really works." The initial intelligence reports were very concerned with the radar in the Japanese F-15s. Somehow it had taken down one B-1 and crippled another, and nobody was quite sure how it had happened.

"We're gonna find that one out." What else could the pilot say? In this case the computer decided that the stealth shit really did work. The last hour of the virtual flight was routine terrain-dodging, but strenuous enough that when he landed his Comanche, Richter needed a shower which, he was sure, would not be available where they were going. Though a pair of skis might be useful.

"What if the other guys—"

"Then I suppose we learn to like rice." You couldn't worry about everything. The lights came on, the helmets came off, and Richter found himself sitting in a mediumsized room.

"Successful insertion," the major grading the exercise decided. "You gents ready for a little trip?"

Richter picked up a glass of ice water from the table in the back of the room. "You know, I never really thought I'd drive a snake that far."

"What about the rest of the stuff?" his weaponsoperator wanted to know.

"It'll be uploaded when you get there."

"And the way out?" Richter asked. It would have been better had they briefed him in on that one.

“You have a choice of two. Maybe three. We haven’t decided that one yet. It’s being looked at,” the SOCOM officer assured them.

The good news was that they all seemed to have penthouse apartments. That was to be expected, Chavez thought. Rich dudes like these bastards would have the whole top floor of whatever building they picked. It made people like that feel big, he supposed, to be able to look down on everyone else, like people in the L.A. high-rises had looked down on the barrios of his youth. None of them had ever been soldiers, though. You never wanted to skyline yourself that way. Better to be down in the weeds with the mice and the peons. Well, everybody had their limitations, Ding told himself.

It was just a matter, then, of finding a tall spot. That proved easy. Again the pacific nature of the city worked in their favor. They merely picked the proper building, walked in, took the elevator to the top floor, and from there walked to the roof. Chavez set up his camera on a tripod, selected his longest lens, and started shooting. Even doing it all in daylight was no hardship, the instructions had told them, and the weather gods cooperated, giving them a gray, overcast afternoon. He shot ten frames of each building, rewinding and ejecting the film cassettes, which went back into their boxes for labeling. The entire operation took half an hour.

“You get used to trusting the guy?” Chavez asked after they made the pass.

“Ding, I just got used to trusting you,” Clark replied quietly, easing the tension of the moment.

38

The River Rubicon

"So?"

Ryan took his time considering the answer. Adler deserved to know something. There was supposed to be honor in negotiations. You never really told the whole truth, but you weren't supposed to lie either.

"So continue as before," the National Security Advisor said.

"We're doing something." It was not a question.

"We're not sitting on our hands, Scott. They're not going to cave in, are they?"

Adler shook his head. "Probably not."

"Encourage them to rethink their position," Jack suggested. It wasn't very helpful, but it was something to say.

"Cook thinks there are political forces working over there to moderate matters. His counterpart on the other side is giving him encouraging information."

"Scott, we have a couple of CIA officers working over there, covered as Russian journalists. They've been in contact with Koga. He's not very happy with developments. We've told him to act normally. There's no sense in harming the guy, but if . . . best move, have Cook feel the guy out on what the opposition elements in their government really are, and what power they might have. He must *not* reveal who we're in contact with."

"Okay, I'll pass that one along. Otherwise keep the same line?" Adler asked.

"Don't give them anything of substance. Can you dance some?"

"I think so." Adler checked his watch. "It's at our place today. I have to sit down with Brett before it starts."

"Keep me posted."

"Will do," Adler promised.

It was still before dawn at Groom Lake. A pair of C-5B transports taxied to the end of the runway and lifted off. The load was light, only three helicopters each and other equipment, not much for aircraft designed to carry two tanks. But it would be a long flight for one of them, over five thousand miles, and adverse winds would require two midair refuelings, in turn necessitating a full relief crew for each transport. The additional flight crewmen relegated the passengers to the space aft of the wing box, where the seats were less comfortable.

Richter removed the dividers from the three-seat set and put his earplugs in. As soon as the aircraft lifted off, his hand moved automatically for the pocket

of his flight suit where he kept his cigarettes—or had until he'd quit a few months earlier. Damn. How could you go into combat without a smoke? he asked himself, then leaned against a pillow and faded off to sleep. He didn't even feel the buffet of the aircraft as it climbed into the jetstream over the Nevada mountains.

Forward, the flight crew turned north. The sky was dark and would remain so for almost all of the flight. Their most important task would be to stay alert and awake. Automated equipment would handle the navigation, and the hour was such that the red-eye commercial flights were already out of the way and the regular day's business hops had hardly begun. The sky was theirs, such as it was, with broken clouds and bitterly cold air outside the aluminum skin of the aircraft, on their way to the goddamnedest destination the reserve crew had ever considered. The second Galaxy's crew was luckier. It turned southwest, and in less than an hour was over the Pacific Ocean for their shorter flight to Hickam Air Force Base.

USS *Tennessee* entered Pearl Harbor an hour early and proceeded under her own power to an outlying berth, dispensing with the harbor pilot and depending on a single Navy tugboat to bring her alongside. There were no lights, and the evolution was accomplished by the glow of the other lit-up piers of the harbor. The one surprising thing was the presence of a large fuel truck on the quay. The official car and the admiral standing next to it were to be expected, Commander Claggett thought. The gangway was rigged quickly, and ComSubPac hustled across even before the ensign was rigged on the after part of the sail. He saluted that way anyway.

"Welcome aboard, Admiral," the CO called from his control station, then headed down the ladder to meet Admiral Mancuso in his own cabin.

"Dutch, I'm glad you managed to get her under way," Mancuso said with a smile tempered by the situation.

"Glad I finally got to dance with the girl," Claggett allowed. "I have all the diesel Ineed, sir," he added.

"We have to pump out one of your tanks." Large as she was, *Tennessee* had more than one fuel bunker for her auxiliary diesel.

"What for, sir?"

"Some JP-5." Mancuso opened his briefcase and pulled out the mission orders. The ink was hardly dry on them. "You're going to start off in the special-ops business." The automatic tendency was for Claggett to ask *Why me?* but he restrained himself. Instead he flipped over the cover page of the orders and started checking his programmed position.

"I might get a little business there, sir," the Captain observed.

"The idea is to stay covert, but the usual rule applies." The usual rule meant that Claggett would always be free to exercise his command judgment.

"Now hear this," the 1-MC announcing system told everyone. "The smoking lamp is out throughout the ship. The smoking lamp is out throughout the ship."

"You let people smoke aboard?" ComSubPac asked. Quite a few of his skippers did not.

"Command judgment, remember?"

Thirty feet away, Ron Jones was in the sonar room, pulling a computer disk out of his pocket.

"We've had the upgrade," the chief told him.

"This one's brand-new." The contractor slipped it into the slot on the backup computer. "I got a hit on you first night out when you ran over the Oregon SOSUS array. Something loose aft?"

"Toolbox. It's gone now. We ran over two more later," the chief pointed out.

"How fast?" Jones asked.

"The second one was just under flank, and we curlicued overtop the thing."

"I got a twitch, nothing more, and that one had the same software I just uploaded for you. You got a quiet boat here, Chief. Walk down?"

"Yeah, the Cap'n tore a few strips off, but there ain't no loose gear aboard now." He paused. "Less'n you count the ends on the toilet-paper rolls."

Jones settled into one of the chairs, and looked around the crowded working space. This was his place. He'd only had a hint of the ship's mission orders—Mancuso had asked his opinion of water conditions and worried if the Japanese might have taken the U.S. Navy's SOSUS station on Honshu intact, and that had been enough, really. She was sure as hell going in harm's way, perhaps the first PacFlt sub to do so. *God, and a boomer, too*, he thought. *Big and slow*. One hand reached out and touched the workstation.

"I know who you are, Dr. Jones," the chief said, reading the man's thoughts. "I know my job, too, okay?"

"The other guy's boats, when they snort—"

"The thousand-hertz line. We have the dash-five tail and all the upgrades. Including yours, I guess." The chief reached for his coffee, and on reflection, poured a mug for his visitor.

"Thank you."

"Asheville and *Charlotte?*"

Jones nodded, looking down at his coffee. "You know Frenchy Laval?"

"He was one of the instructors in my A-School, long time back."

"Frenchy was my chief on *Dallas,* working for Admiral Mancuso. His son was aboard *Asheville*. I knew him. It's personal."

"Gotcha." It was all the chief had to say.

"The United States of America does *not* accept the current situation, Mr. Ambassador. I thought that I'd made that clear," Adler said two hours into the current session. In fact he'd made it clear at least eight times every day since the negotiations had begun.

"Mr. Adler, unless your country wishes to continue this war, which will profit no one at all, all you need do is abide by the elections which we plan to stage—with full international supervision."

Somewhere in California, Adler remembered, was a radio station that for weeks had played every known recorded version of "Louie Louie." Perhaps the State Department could pipe that into the building instead of Muzak. It would have been superb training for this. The Japanese Ambassador was waiting for an American response to his country's gracious offer of returning Guam—as

though it had not been taken by force in the first place—and was now showing exasperation that Adler wasn't conceding anything in return for the friendly gesture. Did he have another card to play? If so, he wouldn't set it down until Adler showed him something.

"We are gratified, of course, that your country will agree to international scrutiny of the elections, and pleased also at your pledge to abide by the results, but that does not change the fact that we are talking about sovereign national territory with a population which has *already* freely chosen political association with the United States. Unfortunately, our ability to accept that pledge at face value is degraded by the situation which prompts it."

The Ambassador raised his hands, distressed at the diplomatic version of being called a liar. "How could we make it more clear?"

"By evacuating the islands now, of course," Adler responded. But he'd already made a concession of sorts. By saying that America was not entirely displeased by Japan's promise of elections, he'd given the Ambassador something back. Not much, certainly not as much as he'd wanted—acceptance of the idea of elections to determine the fate of the islands—but something. Mutual positions were restated one more time each before the morning recess allowed a chance for everyone to stretch.

The terrace was cold and windy, and as before, Adler and the Ambassador withdrew to opposite sides of the topfloor deck which in summer was an outdoor dining area, while their staff members mingled to explore options with which the respective chief negotiators could not appear to be directly involved.

"Not much of a concession," Nagumo observed, sipping his tea.

"You're lucky to get that much, but then, we know that not everyone in your government supports the action you've taken."

"Yes," Seiji replied. "I told you that."

Chris Cook fought the urge to look around for eavesdroppers. It would have been far too theatrical. Instead he sipped at his cup, looking southwest toward the Kennedy Center. "There have been informal contacts."

"With whom?"

"Koga," Cook said quietly. If Adler couldn't play the game properly, then at least he could.

"Ah. Yes, that is the logical person to speak with."

"Seiji, if we play this right, we can both come out of this heroes." Which would be the ideal solution for everyone, wouldn't it?

"What sort of contacts?" Nagumo asked.

"All I know is that it's very irregular. Now, I need to ask you, is Koga leading the opposition you're reporting to?"

"He is one of them, of course," Nagumo replied. It really was the perfect bit of information. The Americans were conceding very little, and now the reason was clear: they hoped that Goto's fragile parliamentary coalition would collapse in the combination of time and uncertainty. And all he had to do was to break the Americans' spirits and thus win his country's position . . . yes, that was elegant. And Chris's prediction on the heroic end-game would be half-right, wouldn't it?

"Are there others?" Cook asked. The reply was predictable and automatic.

"Of course there are, but I don't dare to reveal their names to you." Nagumo was thinking the scenario through now. If the Americans were banking on the political subversion of his country, then it had to mean that their military options were weak. What splendid news that was.

The first KC-10 tanker staged out of Elmendorf, linking up with the C-5 just east of Nome. It required a few minutes to find air smooth enough for the evolution, and even then it was tricky performing what had to be the most unnatural act known to man, a pair of multi-hundred-ton aircraft linking in midair like mayflies. It was all the more dangerous in that the C-5 pilot couldn't actually see much more than the nose of the tanker and had to fly in close formation for twenty-five minutes. Worst of all, the tail-mounted engine of the three-engine KC-10 threw its jet exhaust directly on the T-shaped tail of the Galaxy, creating a strong and continuous buffet that required constant control corrections. That, the pilot thought, sweating inside his flight suit, is why they pay us so much. Finally the tanks were topped off and the planes broke free, the Galaxy taking a shallow dive while the tanker turned right. Aboard the transport, stomachs settled back down as the flight path took them west across the Bering Strait. Another tanker would soon lift off from Shemya and would also enter Russian air space. Unknown to them, another American aircraft had already done so, leading the secret procession to a place marked on American air-navigation charts as Verino, a town on the Trans-Siberian Railroad that dated back to the turn of the century.

* * *

The new tailshaft was finally in place after what seemed to the skipper the longest and most tedious mechanical repair job he'd ever experienced. Inside the ship's hull, bearings were reseated and seals reinstalled throughout the shaft alley. A hundred men and women were working on that detail. The engineering crew had been working on twenty-hour days, scarcely longer than the shifts that had been demanded and gotten from the civilian yard workers who manned the heavy equipment around the enormous concrete box. The last task would soon be under way. Already the immense traveling gantry started to move a shiny new screw back toward the far end of the shaft. Thirty feet across and precisely balanced, in another two hours it would be fully attached to what would soon be the world's most expensive twin-screw ship.

The CNN report coincided with the local dawn. The shot, Ryan saw, was from across the harbor, with the female reporter holding up her microphone, and a "Live" caption in the lower-right corner of the screen. There was nothing new to report in Pearl Harbor, she said.

"As you can see behind me, USS *Enterprise* and *John Stennis* remain in dry dock. Two of the most expensive warships ever made now depend on an army

of workers to make them whole again, an effort that will require . . .”

“Months,” Ryan said, completing the statement. “Keep telling them that.”

The other network news shows would soon give out the same information, but it was CNN that he was depending on. The source of record for the whole world.

Tennessee was just diving, having passed the sea buoy a few minutes earlier. Two ASW helicopters had followed her out, and a Spruance-class destroyer was also in view, conducting hurried workups and requesting by blinker light that the submarine pass her close aboard for a quick tracking exercise.

Five U.S. Army personnel had come aboard just before sailing. They were assigned space according to rank. The officer, a first lieutenant, got a berth that would have belonged to a missile officer, had the boomer carried any of those. The senior NCO, being an E-7, was titularly a chief petty officer and was given a space in the goat locker. The rest were berthed with the enlisted crewmen. The first order of business was to give them all new shoes with rubber soles along with a briefing on the importance of being quiet.

“Why? What’s the big deal?” the senior NCO asked, looking at his bunk in the chiefs’ spaces and wondering if a coffin would be any more comfortable if he lived long enough for one.

Ba-Wah!

“That’s why,” a chief electrician’s mate replied. He didn’t quite shiver, but added, “I never have gotten used to that sound.”

“Jesus! What the hell was that?”

“That’s an SQS-53 sonar on a tin can. And if you hear it that loud, it means that they know we’re here. The Japs have ’em, too, Sarge.”

“Just ignore it,” the sonar chief said, forward at his duty station. He stood behind a new sonarman, looking at the display. Sure enough, the new software upgrade made Prairie /Masker a lot easier to pick up, especially if you knew there was a blue sky overhead and no reason to suspect a rainstorm pelting the surface.

“He’s got us cold, Chief.”

“Only ‘cause the Cap’n said it was okay for him to track us for a little while. An’ we ain’t giving out any more freebies.”

Verino, was just one more former MiG base in an area with scores of them. Exactly whom the Russians had been worried about was up for grabs. From this place they could have struck at Japan or China, or defended against attacks from either place, depending on who was paranoid and who was pissed at any particular political moment, the pilot thought. He’d never been anywhere close to here before, and even with the changes in relations between the two countries hadn’t expected to do much more than maybe make a friendly visit to European Russia, as the U.S. Air Force did periodically. Now there was a Sukhoi-27 interceptor a thousand yards to his two o’clock, with real missiles hanging on the airframe, and probably a whimsical thought or

two in the mind of the driver. *My, what a huge target.* The two disparate aircraft had linked up an hour before because there hadn't been time to get a Russian-speaking officer on the mission, and they didn't want to risk English chatter on the air-control frequency. So the transport followed the fighter rather like a sheepdog obediently trailing a terrier.

"Runway in view," the copilot said tiredly. There was the usual low-altitude buffet, increased as the flaps and gear went down, spoiling the airflow. For all that the landing was routine, until just before touchdown the pilot noticed a pair of C-17s on the ramp. So he wasn't the first American aircraft to visit this place. Maybe the two other crews could tell him where to go for some crew-rest.

The JAL 747 lifted off with all its seats full, heading west into the prevailing winds over the Pacific and leaving Canada behind. Captain Sato wasn't quite sure how to feel about everything. He was pleased, as always, to bring so many of his countrymen back home, but he also felt that in a way they were running away from America, and he wasn't so sure he liked that. His son had gotten word to him of the B-1 kills, and if his country could cripple two American aircraft carriers, destroy two of their supposedly invincible submarines, and then also take out one or two of their vaunted strategic bombers, well, then, what did they have to fear from these people? It was just a matter of waiting them out now, he thought. To his right he saw the shape of another 747, this one in the livery of Northwest/KLM, inbound from Japan, doubtless full of American businessmen who were running away. It wasn't that they had anything to fear. Perhaps it was shame, he thought. The idea pleased him, and Sato smiled. The rest of the routing was easy. Four thousand six hundred nautical miles, a flight time of nine and a half hours if he'd read the weather predictions correctly, and his load of three hundred sixty-six passengers would be home to a reborn country, guarded by his son and his brother. They'd come back to North America in due course, standing a little straighter and looking a little prouder, as would befit people representing his nation, Sato told himself. He regretted that he was no longer part of the military that would cause that renewed pride of place, but he'd made his mistake too long ago to correct it now. So he'd do his small part in the great change in history's shape, driving his bus as skillfully as he could.

The word got to Yamata early in the morning of the day he'd planned to return to Saipan to begin his campaign for the island's governorship. He and his colleagues had gotten the word out through the government agencies. Everything that went to Goto and the Foreign Minister now came directly to them, too. It wasn't all that hard. The country was changing, and it was time for the people who exercised the real power to be treated in accordance with their true worth. In due course it would be clearer to the common people, and by that time they would recognize who really mattered in their country, as the bureaucrats were even now acknowledging somewhat belatedly.

Koga, you traitor, the industrialist thought. It wasn't entirely unexpected. The former Prime Minister had such foolish ideas about the purity of the governmental process, and how you had to seek the approval of common working people, how typical of his outlook that he would feel some foolish nostalgia for something that had never really existed in the first place. *Of course* political figures needed guidance and support from people such as himself. *Of course* it was normal for them to display proper, and dignified, obeisance to their masters. What did they do, really, but work to preserve the prosperity that others, like Yamata and his peers, had worked so hard to achieve for their country? If Japan had depended on her government to provide for the ordinary people, then where would the country have been? But all people like Koga had were ideals that went nowhere. The common people—what did *they* know? What did they *do?* They *knew* and *did* what their betters told them, and in doing that, in acknowledging their state in life and working in their assigned tasks, they had brought a better life to themselves and their country. Wasn't that simple enough?

It wasn't as though it were the classical period, when the country had been run by a hereditary nobility. That system of rule had sufficed for two millennia, but was not suited to the industrial age. Noble bloodlines ran thin with accumulated arrogance. No, his group of peers consisted of men who had earned their place and their power, first by serving others in lowly positions, then by industry and intelligence—and luck, he admitted to himself—risen to exercise power won on merit. It was they who had made Japan into what she was. They who had led a small island nation from ashes and ruin to industrial preeminence. They, who had humbled one of the world's "great" powers, would soon humble another, and in the process raise their country to the top of the world order, achieving everything that the military boneheads like Tojo had failed to do.

Clearly Koga had no proper function except to get out of the way, or to acquiesce, as Goto had learned to do. But he did neither. And now he was plotting to deny his country the historic opportunity to achieve true greatness. Why? Because it didn't fit his foolish aesthetic of right and wrong—or because it was dangerous, as though true achievement ever came without some danger.

Well, he could not allow that to happen, Yamata told himself, reaching for his phone to call Kaneda. Even Goto might shrink from this. Better to handle this one in-house. He might as well get used to the exercise of personal power.

At the Northrop plant the aircraft had been nicknamed the armadillo. Though its airframe was so smooth that nature might have given its shape to a wandering seabird, the B-2A was not everything it appeared to be. The slate-gray composites that made up its visible surface were only part of the stealth technology built into the aircraft. The inside metal structure was angular and segmented like the eye of an insect, the better to reflect radar energy in a direction away from that of the transmitter it hoped to defeat. The graceful exterior shell was designed mainly to reduce drag, and thus increase range and fuel efficiency. And it all worked.

At Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, the 509th Bomb Group had led a quiet existence for years, going off and doing its training missions with little fanfare. The bombers originally designed for penetrating Soviet air defenses and tracking down mobile intercontinental missiles for selective destruction—never a realistic tasking, as its crewmen knew—*did* have the ability to pass invisibly through almost any defense. Or so people had thought until recently.

"It's big, and it's powerful, and it snuffed a B-1," an officer told the Group operations officer. "We finally figured it out. It's a phased array. It's frequency-agile, and it can operate in a fire-control mode. The one that limped back to Shemya"—it was still there, decorating the island's single runway while technicians worked to repair it enough to return to the Alaskan mainland—"the missile came in from one direction, but the radar pulses came from another."

"Cute," observed Colonel Mike Zacharias. It was instantly clear: the Japanese had taken a Russian idea one technological step further. Whereas the Soviets had designed fighter aircraft that were effectively controlled from ground stations, Japan had developed a technique by which the fighters would remain totally covert even when launching their missiles. That was a problem even for the B-2, whose stealthing was designed to defeat longwave search radars and high-frequency airborne tracking- and targeting radars. Stealth was technology; it was not quite magic. An airborne radar of such great power and frequency-agility just might get enough of a return off the -2 to make the proposed mission suicidal. Sleek and agile as it was, the B-2 was a bomber, not a fighter, and a huge target for any modern fighter aircraft. "So what's the good news?" Zacharias asked.

"We're going to play some more games with them and try to get a better feel for their capabilities."

"My dad used to do that with SAMs. He ended up getting a lengthy stay in North Vietnam."

"Well, they're working on a Plan B, too," the intelligence officer offered.

"Oh, that's nice," Chavez said.

"Aren't you the one who doesn't like being a spook?" Clark asked, closing his laptop after erasing the mission orders. "I thought you wanted back in to the paramilitary business."

"Me and my big mouth." Dying moved his backside on the park bench.

"Excuse me," a third voice said. Both CIA officers looked up to see a uniformed police officer, a pistol sitting in its holster on his Sam Browne belt.

"Hello," John said with a smile. "A pleasant morning, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," the policeman replied. "Is Tokyo very different from America?"

"It is also very different from Moscow this time of year."

"Moscow?"

Clark reached into his coat and pulled out his passport. "We are Russian journalists."

The cop examined the booklet and handed it back. "Much colder in Moscow this time of year?"

"Much," Clark confirmed with a nod. The officer moved off, having handled

his curiosity attack for the day.

"Not so sure, Ivan Sergeyevich," Ding observed when he'd gone. "It can get pretty cold here, too."

"I suppose you can always get another job."

"And miss all this fun?" Both men rose and walked toward their parked car. There was a map in the glove box.

The Russian Air Force personnel at Verino had a natural curiosity of their own, but the Americans weren't helping matters. There were now over a hundred American personnel on their base, barracked in the best accommodations. The three helicopters and two vehicular trailers had been rolled into hangars originally built for MiG-25 fighters. The transport aircraft were too large for that, but had been rolled inside as much as their dimensions allowed, with the tails sticking out in the open, but they could as easily have been mistaken for IL-86s, which occasionally stopped off here. The Russian ground crewmen established a secure perimeter, which denied contact of any sort between the two sets of air-force personnel, a disappointment for the Russians.

The two trailers inside the easternmost hangar were electronically linked with a thick black coaxial cable. Another cable ran outside to a portable satellite link that was similarly guarded.

"Okay, let's rotate it," a sergeant said. A Russian officer was watching—protocol demanded that the Americans let someone in; this one was surely an intelligence officer—as the birdcage image on the computer screen turned about as though on a phonograph. Next the image moved through a vertical axis, as if it were flying over the stick image. "That's got it," the sergeant observed, closing the window on the computer screen and punching UPLOAD to transmit it to the three idle helicopters.

"What did you just do? May I ask?" the Russian inquired.

"Sir, we just taught the computers what to look for." The answer made no sense to the Russian, true though it was.

The activity in the second van was easier to understand. High-quality photos of several tall buildings were scanned and digitalized, their locations programmed in to a tolerance of only a few meters, then compared with other photos taken from a very high angle that had to denote satellite cameras. The officer leaned in close to get a better feel for the sharpness of the imagery, somewhat to the discomfort of the senior American officer—who, however, was under orders to take no action that might offend the Russians in any way.

"It looks like an apartment building, yes?" the Russian asked in genuine curiosity.

"Yes, it does," the American officer replied, his skin crawling despite the hospitality they had all experienced here. Orders or not, it was a major federal felony to show this kind of thing to anyone who lacked the proper clearances, even an American.

"Who lives there?"

"I don't know." *Why can't this guy just go away?*

By evening the rest of the Americans were up and moving.

Incomprehensibly with shaggy hair, not like soldiers at all, they started jogging around the perimeter of the main runway. A few Russians joined in, and a race of sorts started, with both groups running in formation. What started off friendly soon became grim. It was soon clear that the Americans were elite troops unaccustomed to being bested in anything, against which the Russians had pride of place and better acclimatization. *Spetznaz,* the Russians were soon gasping to one another, and because it was a dull base with a tough-minded commander, they were in good enough shape that after ten kilometers they managed to hold their own. Afterward, both groups mingled long enough to realize that language barriers prevented much in the way of conversation, though the tension in the visitors was clear enough without words.

"Weird-looking things," Chavez said.

"Just lucky for us that they picked this place." It was security again, John thought, just like the fighters and bombers at Pearl Harbor had all been bunched together to protect against sabotage or some such nonsense because of a bad intelligence estimate. Another factor might have been the convenience of maintenance at a single location, but they hadn't been assigned to this base originally, and so the hangars weren't large enough. As a result, six E-767s were sitting right there in the open, two miles away and easily distinguished by their odd shape. Better yet, the country was just too crowded for the base to be very isolated. The same factors that placed cities in the flat spots also placed airfields there, but the cities had grown up first. There were lightindustrial buildings all around, and the mainly rectangular air base had highways down every side. The next obvious move was to check the trees for wind direction. Northwesterly wind. Landing aircraft would come in from the southeast. Knowing that, they had to find a perch.

Everything was being used now. Low-orbit electronicintelligence satellites were also gathering signals, fixing the patrol locations of the AEW aircraft, not as well as the ELINT aircraft could, but far more safely. The next step would be to enlist submarines in the job, but that could take time, someone had told them. Not all that many submarines to go around, and those that were left had a job to do. Hardly a revelation. The electronic order of battle was firming up, and though not everything the ELINT techs discovered was good news, at least they did have the data from which the operations people might formulate some sort of plan or other. For the moment, the locations of the racetrack patterns used by three orbiting E-767s were firmly plotted. They seemed to stay fairly stationary from day to day. The minor daily variations might have had as much to do with local winds as anything else, which made it necessary to downlink information to their ground-control centers. And that was good news, too.

The medium-price hotel was more than they could ordinarily afford, but for all that it lay right under the approach to runway three-two-left of the nearby air base. Perhaps the noise was just so normal to the country that people filtered it out, Chavez thought, remembering the incessant street racket from their hostelry in Tokyo. The back was better, the clerk assured them, but the best he could offer was a corner room. The really offensive noise was at the front of the hotel: the runway terminated only half a kilometer from the front door. It was the takeoffs that really shook things up. Landings were far easier to sleep through.

"I'm not sure I like this," Ding observed when he got to the room.

"Who said we were supposed to?" John moved a chair to the window and took the first watch.

"It's like murder, John."

"Yeah, I suppose it is." The hell of it was, Ding was right, but somebody else had said it wasn't and that's what counted. Sort of.

"No other options?" President Durling asked.

"No, sir, none that I see." It was a first for Ryan. He'd managed to stop a war, after a fashion. He'd terminated a "black" operation that would probably have caused great political harm to his country. Now he was about to initiate one—well, not exactly, he told himself. Somebody else had started this war, but just though it might be, he didn't exactly relish what he was about to do. "They're not going to back off."

"We never saw it coming," Durling said quietly, knowing that it was too late for such thoughts.

"And maybe that's my fault," Ryan replied, feeling that it was his duty to take the blame. After all, national security was his bailiwick. People would die because of what he'd done wrong, and die from whatever things he might do right. For all the power exercised from this room, there really were no choices, were there?

"Will it all work?"

"Sir, that is something we'll just have to see."

It turned out to be easier than expected. Three of the ungainly twin-engine aircraft taxied in a line to the end of the runway, where each took its turn to face into the northwest winds, stopping, advancing its engines to full power, backing off to see if the engines would flame out, and when they didn't, going again to full power, but this time slipping the brakes and accelerating into its takeoff roll. Clark checked his watch and unfolded a road map of Honshu.

All that was required was a phone call. The Boeing Company's Commercial Airplane Group issued an Emergency Airworthiness Directive, called an E-AD, concerning the auto-landing system on its 767 commercial aircraft. A fault of unknown origin had affected the final approach of a TWA airliner on final into

St. Louis, and until determination of the nature of the fault, operators were strongly advised to deactivate that feature of the flight-control systems until further notice. The directive went out by electronic mail, telex, and registered mail to all operators of the 767.

39

Eyes First

It came as no particular surprise that the Japanese consulates in Honolulu, San Francisco, New York, and Seattle were closed. FBI agents showed up at all of them simultaneously and explained that they had to be vacated forthwith. After perfunctory protests, which received polite but impassive attention, the diplomatic personnel locked up their buildings and walked off under guard—mainly to protect them against ragtag protesters, in every case watched by local police—into buses that would conduct them to the nearest airport for a flight to Vancouver, B.C. In the case of Honolulu, the bus went close enough to the Pearl Harbor naval base that officials got a last look at the two carriers in their graving docks, and photos were shot from the bus to record the fact. It never occurred to the consulate official who shot the pictures that the FBI personnel at the front of the bus did not interfere with his action. After all, the American media were advertising everything, as they'd been expected to do. The operation, they saw, was handled professionally in every detail. Their bags were X-rayed for weapons and explosives—there was none of that nonsense, of course—but not opened, since these were diplomatic personnel with treaty-guaranteed immunity. America had chartered an airliner for them, a United 737, which lifted off and, again, managed to fly directly over the naval base, allowing the official to shoot another five photos through the double windows from an altitude of five thousand feet. He congratulated himself on his foresight in keeping his camera handy. Then he slept through most of the five-hour flight to Vancouver.

"One and four are good as new, Skipper," the ChEng assured *Johnnie Reb's* CO. "We'll give you thirty, maybe thirty-two knots, whenever you ask."

Two and three, the inboard shafts, were closed off, the hull openings into the skegs welded shut, and with them the top fifteen or so knots of *John Stennis*'s real top speed, but the removal of the propellers also cut down on drag, allowing a quite respectable max speed that would have to do. The most ticklish procedure had been resetting the number-four drivetrain, which had to be more finely balanced than the wheel of a racing car, lest it destroy itself at max revolutions. The testing had been accomplished the same way, by turning the screw and checking every bearing along the lengthy shaft. Now it was done, and the dry dock could be flooded tonight. The commanding officer walked tiredly up the concrete steps to the top of the immense man-made canyon, and from there the brow. It was quite a climb all the way to his at-sea cabin aft of the bridge, from which he made a telephone call.

It was just about time. Clark looked southeast out the back window of their room. The cold air was clear and dry, with a few light clouds in the distance, still white in the direct sunlight while the ground was beginning to darken with twilight.

"Ready?" he asked.

"You say so, man." Ding's large metal camera case was open on the floor. The contents had cleared customs weeks before, and appeared unremarkable, typical of what a news photographer might take with him, if a somewhat lighter load than most carried. The foam-filled interior included cutout spaces for three camera bodies and a variety of lenses, plus other cavities for photographic lights that also appeared entirely ordinary but were not. The only weapons with them did not appear to be weapons at all, a fact that had also worked well for them in East Africa. Chavez lifted one of them, checking the power meter on the battery pack and deciding not to plug it into the wall. He flipped the switch to standby and heard the thin electronic whistle of the charging capacitors.

"There it is," John said quietly when he saw the incoming lights, not relishing the job any more than his partner. But you weren't supposed to, were you?

The inbound E-767 had turned on its inboard recognition lights while descending through ten thousand feet, and now lowered its landing gear. The outboard landing lights came on next. Five miles out and two thousand feet over the industrial area surrounding the air base, the pilot saw the runway lights and told himself not to relax after the long, boring patrol flight.

"Flaps twenty-five," he said.

"Flaps twenty-five," the copilot acknowledged, reaching for the control lever that deployed the landing flaps off the rear of the wing surfaces and the slats at the front, which gave the wing needed extra lift and control at the diminishing speed.

"Kami-Three on final, runway in sight," the pilot said, this time over the radio to the approach-control officer who had guided him unnecessarily to this point. The tower responded properly and the pilot tightened his grip slightly on the controls, more thinking the slight control movements than actually moving, adjusting to the low-altitude winds and scanning for possible unnoticed aircraft in the restricted airspace. Most aircraft accidents, he knew, occurred on landing, and that was why the flight crew had to be especially alert at this time.

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"I got it," Chavez said, no emotion at all in his voice as he told his conscience to be still. His country was at war. The people in the airplane wore

uniforms, were fair game because of it, and that was that. It was just too damned easy, though he remembered the first time he had killed, which, in retrospect, had also been so easy as to constitute murder. He'd actually felt elation at the time, Chavez remembered with passing shame.

"I want a hot tub and a massage," the copilot said, allowing himself a personal thought as his eyes checked around, two miles out. "All clear to the right. Runway is clear."

The pilot nodded and reached for the throttles with his right hand, easing them back and allowing air friction to slow the aircraft further for its programmed touchdown speed of 145 knots, high because of the extra fuel reserves the Kami aircraft carried. They always flew heavy.

"Two kilometers, everything is normal," the copilot said.

"Now," Chavez whispered. The barrel-like extension of the light was on his shoulder, aimed almost like a rifle, or more properly like an antitank rocket launcher, at the nose of the approaching aircraft. Then his finger came down on the button.

The "magic" they had used in Africa was conceptually nothing more than a souped-up flashlight, but this one had a xenon-arc bulb and put out three million candlepower. The most expensive part of the assembly was the reflector, a finely machined piece of steel alloy that confined the beam to a diameter of about forty feet at a distance of one mile. One could easily read a newspaper by the illumination provided at that distance, but to look directly into the light, even at that distance, was quite blinding. Designed and issued as a nonlethal weapon, the bulb was shielded for ultraviolet light, which could do permanent damage to the human retina. The thought passed through Ding's mind when he triggered the light. *Nonlethal. Sure*.

* * *

The intensity of the blue-white light seared the pilot's eyes. It was like looking directly at the sun, but worse, and the pain made his hands come off the controls to his face, and he screamed into the intercom phones. The copilot had been looking off-axis to the flash, but the human eye is drawn to light, especially in darkness, and his mind didn't have time to warn him off from the entirely normal reaction. Both airmen were blinded and in pain, with their aircraft eight hundred feet off the ground and a mile from the landing threshold. Both were highly trained men, and highly skilled as well. His eyes still shut from the pain, the pilot's hands reached down to find the yoke and tried to steady it. The copilot did exactly the same thing, but their control movements were not quite the same, and in an instant they were fighting each other rather than the aircraft. They were both also entirely without visual references, and the viciously instant disorientation caused vertigo in both men

that was necessarily different. One airman thought their aircraft was veering in one direction, and the other tried to yank the controls to correct a different movement, and with only eight hundred feet of air under them, there wasn't time to decide who was right and the fighting on the yoke only meant that when the stronger of the two got control, his efforts doomed them all. The E-767 rolled ninety degrees to the right, veering north toward empty manufacturing buildings, falling rapidly as it did so. The tower controllers shouted into the radio, but the aviators didn't even hear the warnings. The pilot's last action was to reach for the go-around button on the throttle in a despairing attempt to get his bird safely back in the sky. His hand had hardly found it when his senses told him, a second early, that his life was over. His last thought was that a nuclear bomb had gone off over his country again.

"*Jesucristo,*" Chavez whispered. Just a second, not even that. The nose of the aircraft flared in the dusky sky as though from some sort of explosion, and then the thing had just veered off to the north like a dying bird. He forced himself to look away from the impact area. He just didn't want to see or know where it hit. Not that it mattered. The towering fireball lit up the area as though from a lightning strike. It hit Ding like a punch in the stomach to realize what he'd done, and there came the sudden urge to vomit.

Kami-Five saw it, ten miles out, the sickening flare of yellow on the ground short and right of the airfield that could only mean one thing. Aviators are disciplined people. For the pilot and copilot of the next E-767 there also came a sudden emptiness in the stomach, a tightening of muscles. They wondered which of their squadron mates had just smeared themselves into the ground, which families would receive unwanted visitors, which faces they would no longer see, which voices they would no longer hear, and punished themselves for not paying closer attention to the radio, as though it would have mattered. Instinctively both men checked their cockpit for irregularities. Engines okay. Electronics okay. Hydraulics okay. Whatever had happened to the other one, their aircraft was fine.

"Tower, Five, what happened, over?"

"Five, Tower, Three just went in. We do not know why. Runway is clear."

"Five, roger, continuing approach, runway in sight." He took his hand off the radio button before he could say something else. The two aviators traded a look. Kami-three. Good friends. Gone. Enemy action would have been easier to accept than the ignominy of something as pedestrian as a landing crash, whatever the cause. But for now their heads turned back to the flight path. They had a mission to finish, and twenty-five fellow crewmen aft to deliver safely home despite their sorrow.

"Want me to take it?" John asked.

"My job, man." Ding checked the capacitor charge again, then wiped his

face. He clenched his fists to stop the slight trembling he noticed, both ashamed and relieved that he had it. The widely spaced landing lights told him that this was another target, and he was in the service of his country, as they were in the service of theirs, and that was that. But better to do it with a proper weapon, he thought. Perhaps, his mind wandered, the guys who preferred swords had thought the same thing when faced with the advent of muskets. Chavez shook his head one last time to clear it, and aimed his light through the open window, working his way back from the opening as he lined up on the approaching aircraft. There was a shroud on the front to prevent people outside the room from seeing the flash, but he didn't want to take any more chances than he had to ... ... right about . . . . . now . . .

He punched the button again, and again the silvery aluminum skin around the aircraft's cockpit flared brightly, for just a second or so. Off to the left he could hear the warbling shriek of fire engines, doubtless heading to the site of the first crash. *Not like the fire sirens at home*, he thought irrelevantly. The E-767 didn't do anything at first, and he wondered for a second if he'd done it right. Then the angle of the nose light changed downward, but the airplane didn't turn at all. It just increased its rate of descent. Maybe it would hit them in the hotel room, Chavez thought. It was too late to run away, and maybe God would punish him for killing fifty people. He shook his head and dismantled the light, waiting, finding comfort in concentrating on a mechanical task.

Clark saw it, too, and also knew that there was no purpose in darting from the room. The airplane should be flaring now . . . perhaps the pilot thought so, too. The nose came up, and the Boeing product roared perhaps thirty feet over the roof of the building. John moved to the side windows and saw the wingtip pass over, rotating as it did so. The aircraft started to climb, or attempt to, probably for a go-around, but without enough power, and it stalled halfway down the runway, perhaps five hundred feet in the air, falling off on the port wing and spiraling in for yet another fireball. Neither he nor Ding thanked God for a deliverance that they might not have deserved in any case.

"Pack the light and get your camera," Clark ordered.

"why?"

"We're reporters, remember?" he said, this time in Russian.

Ding's hands were shaking enough that he had trouble disassembling the light, but John didn't move to help him. Everyone needed time to deal with feelings like this. They hadn't killed bad men deserving of death, after all. They had erased the lives of people not unlike themselves, doomed by their oaths of service to someone who didn't merit their loyalty. Chavez finally got a camera out, selected a hundredmillimeter lens for the Nikon F5 body, and followed his boss out the door. The hotel's small lobby was already filled with people, almost all of them Japanese. "Klerk" and "Chekov" walked right through them, running across the highway to the airport's perimeter fence, where the latter started taking pictures. Things were sufficiently confused that it was ten minutes before a policeman came over.

"What are you doing!" Not so much a question as an accusation.

"We are reporters," "Klerk" replied, handing over his credentials.

"Stop what you are doing!" the cop ordered next.

"Have we broken a law? We were in the hotel across the road when this happened." Ivan Sergeyevich turned, looking down at the policeman. He paused. "Oh! Have the Americans attacked you? Do you want our film?"

"Yes!" the officer said with a sudden realization. He held out his hand, gratified at their instant cooperative response to his official authority.

"Yevgeniy, give the man your film right now."

"Chekov" rewound the roll and ejected it, handing it over.

"Please return to the hotel. We will come for you if we need you."

I bet you will. "Room four-sixteen," Clark told him. "This is a terrible thing. Did anyone survive?"

"I don't know. Please go now," the policeman said, waving them across the road.

"God have mercy on them," Chavez said in English, meaning it.

Two hours later a KH-11 overflew the area, its infrared cameras scanning the entire Tokyo area, among others. The photorecon experts at the National Reconnaissance Office took immediate note of the two smoldering fires and the aircraft parts that littered the area around them. Two E-767s had bitten the dust, they saw with no small degree of satisfaction. They were mainly Air Force personnel and, distant from the human carnage of the scene, all they saw was two dead targets. The imagery was real-timed to several destinations. In the J-3 area of the Pentagon, it was decided that Operation ZORRO'S first act had gone about as they had planned. They would have said as *hoped*, but that might have spoiled the luck. Well, they thought, CIA wasn't quite entirely useless.

It was dark at Pearl Harbor. Flooding the dry dock had required ten hours, which had rushed the time up to and a little beyond what was really safe, but war had different rules on safety. With the gate out of the way, and with the help of two large harbor tugs, *John Stennis* drove out of the dock and, turning, left *Enterprise* behind. The harbor pilot nervously got the ship out in record time, then to be ferried back to shore by helicopter, and before midnight, *Johnnie Reb* was in deep water and away from normal shipping channels, heading west.

The accident-investigation team showed up almost at once from their headquarters in Tokyo. A mixed group consisting of military and civilian personnel, it was the latter element that owned the greater expertise because this was really a civil aircraft modified for military use. The "black box" (actually painted Day-Glo orange) flight recorder from Kami-Five was recovered within a few lucky minutes, though the one from Kami-Three proved harder to find. It was taken back to the Tokyo lab for analysis. The problem for the Japanese military was rather more difficult. Two of their precious ten E-767s were now gone, and another was in its service hangar for

overhaul and upgrade of its radar systems. That left seven, and keeping three on constant duty would be impossible. It was simple arithmetic. Each aircraft had to be serviced, and the crews had to rest. Even with nine operational aircraft, keeping three up all the time, with three more down and the other three in standby, was murderously destructive to the men and equipment. There was also the question of aircraft safety. A member of the investigation team discovered the Airworthiness Directive on the 767 and determined that it applied to the model the Japanese had converted to AEW use. Immediately, the autolanding systems were deactivated, and the natural first conclusion from the civilian investigators was that the flight crews, perhaps weary from their long patrol flights, had engaged it for their approaches. The senior uniformed officer was tempted to accept it, except for one thing: few airmen liked automaticlanding systems, and military airmen were the least likely of all to turn their aircraft over to something which operated on microchips and software to safeguard their lives. And yet the body of -Three's pilot had been found with his hand on the throttle controls. It made little sense, but the evidence pointed that way. A software conflict, perhaps, somewhere in system —a foolish and enraging reason for the loss of two priceless aircraft, even though it was not without precedent in the age of computer-controlled flight. For the moment, the reality of the situation was that they could only maintain a two-aircraft constant patrol, albeit with a third always ready to lift off at an instant's notice.

Overflying ELINT satellites noted the continued patrol of three E-767s for the moment, and nervous technicians at Air Force Intelligence and the National Security Agency wondered if the Japanese Air Force would try to defy the rules of aircraft operation. They checked their clocks and realized that another six hours would tell the tale, while satellite passes continued to record and plot the electronic emissions.

Jackson now concerned himself with other satellite information. There were forty-eight fighters believed based on Saipan, and another sixty-four at Guam's former Andersen Air Force Base, whose two wide runways and huge underground fuel-storage tanks had accommodated the arriving aircraft very comfortably indeed. The two islands were about one hundred twenty miles apart. He also had to consider the dispersal facilities that SAC had constructed in the islands during the Cold War. The closed Northwest Guam airfield had two parallel runways, both usable, and there was Agana International in the middle of the island. There was also a commercial airfield on Rota, another abandoned base on Tinian, and Kobler on Saipan in addition to the operating airport. Strangely, the Japanese had ignored all of the secondary facilities except for Kobler Field. In fact, satellite information showed that Tinian was not occupied at all—at least the overhead photos showed no heavy military vehicles. There had to be some light forces there, he reasoned, probably supported by helicopter from Saipan—the islands were separated by only a

narrow channel.

One hundred twelve fighters was Admiral Jackson's main consideration. There would be support from E-2 AEW aircraft, plus the usual helicopters that armies took wherever they went. F-15s and F-3s, supported further by SAMs and triple-A. It was a big job for one carrier, even with Bud Sanchez's idea for making the carrier more formidable. The key to it, however, wasn't fighting the enemy's arms. It was to attack his mind, a constant fact of war that people alternately perceived and forgot over the centuries. He hoped he was getting it right. Even then, something else came first.

The police never came back, somewhat to Clark's surprise. Perhaps they'd found the photos useful, but more probably not. In any case, they didn't hang around to find out. Back in their rental car, they took a last look at the charred spot beyond the end of the runway just as the first of three AEW aircraft landed at the base, quite normally to everyone's relief. An hour earlier, he'd noted, two rather than the regular three E-767s had taken off, indicating, he hoped, that their grisly mission had borne fruit of a sort. That fact had already been confirmed by satellite, giving the green light for yet another mission about which neither CIA officer knew anything.

The hard part still was believing it all. The Englishlanguage paper they'd bought in the hotel lobby at breakfast had news on its front page not terribly different than they'd read on their first day in Japan. There were two stories from the Marianas and two items from Washington, but the rest of the front page was mainly economic news, along with an editorial about how the restoration of normal relations with America was to be desired, even at the price of reasonable concessions at the negotiations table. Perhaps the reality of the situation was just too bizarre for people to accept, though a large part of it was the close control of the news. There was still no word, for example, of the nuclear missiles squirreled away somewhere. Somebody was being either very clever or very foolish—or possibly both, depending on how things turned out. John and Ding both came back to the proposition that none of this made the least bit of sense, but that observation would be of little consolation for the families of the people killed on both sides. Even in the madly passionate war over the Falkland Islands, there had been inflammatory rhetoric to excite the masses, but in this case it was as though Clausewitz had been rewritten to say that war was an extension of economics rather than politics, and business, while cutthroat in its way, was still a more civilized form of activity than that engaged in on the political stage. But the truth of the madness was before him. The roads were crowded with people doing their daily routine, albeit with a few stares at the wreckage on the air base, and in the face of a world that seemed to be turning upside down, the ordinary citizen clung to what reality he knew, relegating the part he didn't understand to others, who in turn wondered why nobody else noticed.

Here he was, Clark told himself, a foreign spy, covered with an identity from yet a third country, doing things in contravention of the Geneva protocols of civilized war—*that* was an arcane concept in and of itself. He'd helped kill fifty people not twelve hours before, and yet he was driving a

rental car back into the enemy capital, and his only immediate worry was to remember to drive on the left side of the road and avoid collision with all the commuters who thought anything more than a ten-foot space with the car ahead meant that you weren't keeping up with the flow.

All that changed three blocks from their hotel, when Ding spotted a car parked the wrong way with the passengerside visor turned down. It was a sign that Kimura needed an urgent meet. The emergency nature of the signal came as something of a reassurance that it wasn't all some perverted dream. There was danger in their lives again. At least something was real.

Flight operations had commenced just after dawn. Four complete squadrons of F-14 Tomcats and four more of F/A-18 Hornets were now aboard, along with four E-3C Hawkeyes. The normal support aircraft were for the moment based on Midway, and the one-carrier task force would for the moment use Pacific Islands as auxiliary support facilities for the cruise west. The first order of business was to practice midair refueling from Air Force tankers that would follow the fleet west as well. As soon as they had passed Midway, a standing combat air patrol of four aircraft was established, though without the usual Hawkeye support. The E-2C made a lot of electronic noise, and the main task of the depleted battle force was to remain stealthy, though in the case of *Johnnie Reb*, that entailed making something invisible that was the size of the side of an island.

Sanchez was down in air-operations. His task was to take what appeared to be a very even battle and make it onesided. The idea of a fair fight was as foreign to him as to any other person in uniform. One only had to look around to see why. He *knew* the people in this working space. He did not know the airmen on the islands, and that was all he cared about. They might be human beings. They might have wives and kids and houses and cars and every other ordinary thing the men in Navy khaki had, but that didn't matter to the CAG. Sanchez would not order or condone such movie fantasies as wasting ammunition on men in parachutes—people in that condition were too hard to target in any case—but he had to kill their airplanes, and in an age of missiles that most often meant that the driver would probably not get the opportunity to eject. Fortunately, it was hard enough in the modern age to see your target as anything more than a dot that had to be circled by the head-up display of the fire-control system. It made things a lot easier, and if a parachute emerged from the wreckage, well, he didn't mind making a SAR call for a fellow aviator, once the man was incapable of harming one of his own.

* * *

"Koga has disappeared," Kimura told them, his voice urgent and his face pale.

"Arrested?" Clark asked.

"I don't know. Do we have anyone inside your organization?"

John turned very grim. "Do you know what we do to traitors?" Everyone

knew. “My country depends on this man, too. We will get to work on it. Now, go.”

Chavez watched him walk away before speaking. “A leak?”

“Possibly. Also possible that the guys running the show don’t want any extraneous opposition leaders screwing things up for the moment.” *Now I’m a political analyst,* John told himself. Well, he was also a fully accredited reporter from the Interfax News Agency. “What do you say we visit our embassy, Yevgeniy?”

Scherenko was on his way out to a meet of his own when the two people showed up at his office door. Wasn’t this an unusual occurrence, he thought for a brief moment, two CIA officers entering the Russian Embassy for a business meeting with the RVS. Then he wondered what would make them do it.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, and John Clark handled the answer:

“Koga’s vanished.” Major Scherenko sat down, waving his visitors to seats in his office. They didn’t need to be told to close the door. “Is it something that might have happened all on its own,” Clark asked, “or did somebody leak it?”

“I don’t think PSID would have done it. Even on orders from Goto. It’s too political without real evidence. The political situation here is—how well do you know it?”

“Brief us in,” Clark said.

“The government is very confused. Goto has control, but he is not sharing information with many people. His coalition is still thin. Koga is very respected, too much so to be publicly arrested.” *I think*, Scherenko didn’t add. What might have been said with confidence two weeks earlier was a lot more speculative now.

It actually made sense to the Americans. Clark thought for a second before speaking. “You’d better shake the tree, Boris Il’ych. We both need that man.”

“Did you compromise him?” the Russian asked.

“No, not at all. We told him to act as he normally would—and besides, he thinks we’re Russians. I had no instructions other than to check him out, and trying to direct a guy like that is too risky. He’s just as liable to turn superpatriot on us and tell us to shove it. People like that, you just let them do the right thing all by themselves.” Scherenko reflected again that the file in Moscow Center on this man was correct. Clark had all the right instincts for field-intelligence work. He nodded and waited for Clark to go on. “If you have PSID under your control, we need to find out immediately if they have the man.”

“And if they do?”

Clark shrugged. “Then you have to decide if you can get him out. That part of the operation is yours. I can’t make that call for you. But if it’s somebody else who bagged him, then maybe we can do something.”

“I need to talk to Moscow.”

“We figured that. Just remember, Koga’s our best chance for a political solution to this mess. Next, get the word to Washington.”

“It will be done,” Scherenko promised. “I need to ask a question—the two

aircraft that crashed last night?"

Clark and Chavez were already on the way out the door. It was the younger man who spoke without turning. "A terrible accident, wasn't it?"

"You're insane," Mogataru Koga said.

"I am a patriot," Raizo Yamata replied. "I will make our country truly independent. I will make Japan great again." Their eyes met from opposite ends of the table in Yamata's penthouse apartment. The executive's security people were outside the door. These words were for two men alone.

"You have cast away our most important ally and trading partner. You are bringing economic ruin to us. You've killed people. You've suborned our country's government and our military."

Yamata nodded as though acknowledging a property acquisition. "*Hai*, I have done all these things, and it was not difficult. Tell me, Koga, how hard is it to get a politician to do anything?"

"And your friends, Matsuda and the rest?"

"Everyone needs guidance from time to time." *Almost everyone,* Yamata didn't say. "At the end of this, we will have a fully integrated economy, two firm and powerful allies, and in time we will again have our trade because the rest of the world needs us." Didn't this politician see that? Didn't he understand?

"Do you understand America as poorly as that? Our current difficulties began because a single family was burned alive. They are not the same as us. They think differently. Their religion is different. They have the most violent culture in the world, yet they worship justice. They venerate making money, but their roots are found in ideals. Can't you grasp that? *They will not tolerate* what you have done!" Koga paused. "And your plan for Russia—do you really think that—"

"With China helping us?" Yamata smiled. "The two of us can handle Russia."

"And China will remain our ally?" Koga asked. "We killed twenty million Chinese in the Second World War, and their political leadership has not forgotten."

"They need us, and they know they need us. And together—"

"Yamata-san," Koga said quietly, politely, because it was his nature, "you do not understand politics as well as you understand business. It will be your downfall."

Yamata replied in kind. "And treason will be yours. I know you have contacts with the Americans."

"Not so. I have not spoken with an American citizen in weeks." An indignant reply would not have carried the power of the matter-of-fact tone.

"Well, in any case, you will be my guest here for the time being," Raizo told him. "We will see how ignorant of political matters I am. In two years I will be Prime Minister, Koga-san. In two years we will be a superpower." Yamata stood. His apartment covered the entire top floor of the forty-story building, and the Olympian view pleased him. The industrialist stood and walked toward the, floor-toceiling windows, surveying the city which would soon be

his capital. What a pity that Koga didn't understand how things really worked. But for the moment he had to fly back to Saipan, to begin his political ascendancy. He turned back.

"You will see. You are my guest for the moment. Behave yourself and you will be treated well. Attempt to escape, and your body will be found in pieces on some railroad tracks along with a note apologizing for your political failures."

"You will not have that satisfaction," the former Prime Minister replied coldly.

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Foxes and Hounds

Scherenko had planned to do the meet himself, but urgent business had prevented him from doing so. It turned out to be just as well. The message, delivered via computer disk, was from his top agent-in-place, the Deputy Director of the PSID. Whatever the man's personal habits, he was a canny political observer, if somewhat verbose in his reports and evaluations. The Japanese military, he said, was not the least displeased by their immediate prospects. Frustrated by years of having been labeled as a "self-defense force" and relegated in the public's mind to getting in the way of Godzilla and other unlikely monsters (usually to their misfortune), they deemed themselves custodians of a proud warrior tradition, and now, finally, with political leadership worthy of their mettle, their command leadership relished the chance to show what they could do. Mainly products of American training and professional education, the senior officers had made their estimate of the situation and announced to everyone who would listen that they could and would win this limited contest—and, the PSID director went on, they thought the chances of conquering Siberia were excellent.

This evaluation and the report from the two CIA officers were relayed to Moscow at once. So there was dissension in the Japanese government, and at least one of its professional departments had a slight grasp on reality. It was gratifying to the Russian, but he also remembered how a German intelligence chief named Canaris had done much the same thing in 1939, and had completely failed to accomplish anything. It was an historical model that he intended to break. The trick with wars was to prevent them from growing large. Scherenko didn't hold with the theory that diplomacy could keep them from starting, but he did believe that good intelligence and decisive action could keep them from going too far—if you had the political will to take the proper action. It worried him, however, that it was Americans who had to show that will.

"It's called Operation ZORRO, Mr. President," Robby Jackson said, flipping the cover off the first chart. The Secretaries of State and Defense were there in the Situation Room, along with Ryan and Arnie van Damm. The two cabinet secretaries were ill at ease right now, but then so was the Deputy J-3. Ryan nodded for him to go on.

"The mission is to dislocate the command leadership of the other side by precisely targeting those individuals who—"

"You mean murder them?" Brett Hanson asked. He looked over at SecDef,

who didn't react at all.

"Mr. Secretary, we don't want to engage their civilian population. That means we cannot attack their economy. We can't drop bridges in their cities. Their military is too decentralized in location to—"

"We can't do this," Hanson interrupted again.

"Mr. Secretary," Ryan said coolly, "can we at least hear what the plan is before we decide what we should and should not do?"

Hanson nodded gruffly, and Jackson continued his brief. "The pieces," he concluded, "are largely in place now. We've eliminated two of their air-surveillance assets—"

"When did that happen? How did we do it?"

"It happened last night," Ryan answered. "How we did it is not your concern, sir."

"Who ordered it?" This question came from President Durling.

"I did, sir. It was well covered, and the operation went off without a hitch." Durling replied with his eyes that Ryan was pushing his limits again.

"How many people did that kill?" the Secretary of State demanded.

"About fifty, and that's two hundred or so less than the number of our people whom they killed, Mr. Secretary."

"Look, we can talk them out of the islands if we just take the time," SecState said, and now the argument was bilateral, with all the others watching.

"That's not what Adler says."

"Chris Cook thinks so, and he's got a guy inside their delegation."

Durling watched impassively, again letting his staff people—that's how he thought of them—handle the debate. For him there were other questions. Politics would again raise its ugly head. If he failed to respond to the crisis effectively, then he was *out*. Someone else would be President then, and that someone else would be faced in the following year at the latest with a wider crisis. Even worse, if the Russian intelligence estimate were correct and if Japan and China made their move on Siberia in the coming autumn, then another, larger crisis would strike during an American election cycle, seriously impeding his country's ability to deal with it, making everything a political debate, with an economy still trying to recover from a hundred-billiondollar trade shortfall.

"If we fail to act now, Mr. Secretary, there's no telling how far this thing might go," Ryan was saying now.

"We can work this out diplomatically," Hanson insisted.

"And if not?" Durling asked.

"Then in due course we can consider a measured military response." SecState's confidence was not reflected in SecDef's expression.

"You have something to add?" the President asked him.

"It will be some time—years—before we can assemble the forces necessary to—"

"We don't *have* years," Ryan snapped.

"No, I don't think that we do," Durling observed. "Admiral, will it work?"

"I think it can, sir. We need a few breaks to come our way, but we got the biggest one last night."

"We don't have the necessary forces to assure success," SecDef said. "The

Task Force commander just sent in his estimate and—"

"I've seen it," Jackson said, not quite able to conceal his uneasiness at the truth of the report. "But I know the CAG, Captain Bud Sanchez. Known him for years, and he says he can do it, and I believe him. Mr. President, don't be overly affected by the numbers. It isn't about numbers. It's about fighting a war, and we have more experience in that than they do. It's about psychology, and playing to our strengths rather than theirs. War isn't what it used to be. Used to be you needed huge forces to destroy the enemy's capacity to fight and his ability to coordinate and command his forces. Okay, fifty years ago you needed a lot to do that, but the targets you want to hit are actually very small, and if you can hit those small targets, you accomplish the same thing now as you used to need a million men to do before."

"It's cold-blooded murder," Hanson snarled. "That's what it is."

Jackson turned from his place at the lectern. "Yes, sir, that's exactly what war is, but this way we're not killing some poor nineteen-year-old son of a bitch who joined up because he liked the uniform. We're going to kill the bastard who sent him out to die and doesn't even know his name. With all due respect, sir, I have killed people, and I know exactly what it feels like. Just once, just one time, I'd like a crack at the people who give the orders instead of the poor dumb bastards who're stuck with carrying them out."

Durling almost smiled at that, remembering all the fantasies, and even a TV commercial once, about how different it might be if the president and prime ministers and other senior officials who ordered men off to the field of battle instead met and slugged it out personally.

"You're still going to have to kill a lot of kids," the President said. Admiral Jackson drew back from his angry demeanor before answering.

"I know that, sir, but with luck, a lot less."

"When do you have to know?"

"The pieces are largely in place now. We can initiate the operation in less than five hours. After that, we're daylight limited. Twenty-four-hour intervals after that."

"Thank you, Admiral Jackson. Could you all excuse me for a few minutes?" The men filed out until Durling had another thought. "Jack? Could you stay a minute?" Ryan turned and sat back down.

"It had to be done, sir. One way or another, if we're going to take those nukes out—"

"I know." The President looked down at his desk. All the briefing papers and maps and charts were spread out. All the order-of-battle documents. At least he'd been spared the casualty estimates, probably at Ryan's direction. After a second they heard the door close.

Ryan spoke first. "Sir, there's one other thing. Former Prime Minister Koga has been arrested—excuse me, we only know that he's kinda disappeared."

"What does that mean? Why didn't you bring that up before?"

"The arrest happened less than twenty-four hours after I told Scott Adler that Koga had been contacted. I didn't even tell him whom he'd been in contact with. Now, that could be a coincidence. Goto and his master just might not want him making political noise while they carry out their operation. It could also mean that there's a leak somewhere."

"Who on our side knows?"

"Ed and Mary Pat at CIA. Me. You. Scott Adler and whomever Scott told."

"But we don't know for sure that there's a leak."

"No, sir, we don't. But it is extremely likely."

"Set it aside for now. What if we don't do anything?"

"Sir, we have to. If we don't, then sometime in the future you can expect a war between Russia on one hand and Japan and China on the other, with us doing God knows what. CIA is still trying to do its estimate, but I don't see how the war can fail to go nuclear. ZORRO may not be the prettiest thing we've ever tried to do, but it's the best chance we have. The diplomatic issues are not important," Ryan went on. "We're playing for much higher stakes now. But if we can kill off the guys who initiated this mess, then we can cause Goto's government to fall. And then we can get things back under some sort of control."

The odd part, Durling realized, was the trade-off concerning which side was pitching which sort of moderation. Hanson and SecDef took the classical diplomatic line—they wanted to take the time to be sure there was no other option to resolve the crisis through peaceful means, but if diplomacy failed, then the door was opened for a much wider and bloodier conflict. Ryan and Jackson wanted to apply violence at once in the hope of avoiding a wider war later. The hell of it was, either side could be right or wrong, and the only way to know for sure was to read the history books twenty years from now.

"If the plan doesn't work . . ."

"Then we've killed some of our people for nothing," Jack said honestly. "You will pay a fairly high price yourself, sir."

"What about the fleet commander—I mean the guy commanding the carrier group. What about him?"

"If he chokes, the whole thing comes apart."

"Replace him," the President said. "The mission is approved." There was one other item to be discussed. Ryan walked the President through that one, too, before leaving the room and making his phone calls.

The perfect Air Force mission, people in blue uniforms liked to say, was run by a mere captain. This one was commanded locally by a special-operations colonel, but at least he was a man who'd been recently passed over for general's rank, a fact that endeared him to his subordinates, who knew why he'd failed to screen for flag rank. People in spec-ops just didn't fit in with the button-down ideal of senior leadership. They were too . . . eccentric for that.

The final mission brief evolved from data sent by real-time link from Fort Meade, Maryland, to Verino, and the Americans still cringed at the knowledge that Russians were learning all sorts of things about America's ability to gather and analyze electronic data via satellite and other means—after all, the capability had been developed for use against *them.* The exact positions of two operating E-767s were precisely plotted. Visual satellite data had counted fighter aircraft—at least those not in protective shelters——and the orbiting KH-12's last pass had counted airborne aircraft and their positions. The colonel commanding the detachment went over the penetration course that he

had personally worked out with the flight crew, and while there were worries, the two young captains who would fly the C-17A transport chewed their gum and nodded final approval. One of them even joked about how it was time a "trash-hauler" got a little respect.

The Russians had their part to play, too. From Vuzhno-Sakalinsk South on the Kamchatka Peninsula, eight MiG-31 interceptors lifted off for an air-defense exercise, accompanied by an IL-86 Mainstay airborne-early-warning aircraft. Four Sukhoi fighters took off ten minutes later from Sokol to act as aggressors. The Sukhois with long-range fuel tanks headed southeast, remaining well outside Japanese airspace. The controllers in both Japanese E-767s recognized it for what it was: a fairly typical and stylized Russian training exercise. Nevertheless, it *did* involve warplanes, and merited their close attention, all the more so that it was astride the most logical approach route for American aircraft like the B-1s that had so recently "tickled" their air defenses. It had the effect of drawing the E-767s both north and east somewhat, and with them their fighter escorts. The reserve AWACS aircraft was almost ordered aloft, but the groundbased air-defense commander decided sensibly merely to increase his alert state a bit.

The C-17A Globemaster-III was the newest and most expensive air-transport aircraft ever to force its way through the Pentagon's procurement system. Anyone familiar with that procedural nightmare would have preferred flak, because at least bombing missions were designed to succeed, whereas the procurement system seemed most often designed to fail. That it didn't was a tribute of sorts to the ingenuity of the people dedicated to confounding it. No expense had been spared, and a few new ones located for use, but what had resulted was a "trash-hauler" (the term most often used by fighter pilots) with pretensions of the wild life.

This one took off just after local midnight, heading south-southwest as though it were a civil flight to Vladivostok. Just short of that city it took fuel from a KC-135 tanker—the Russian midair refueling system was not compatible with American arrangements—and departed the Asian mainland, now heading due south exactly on the 132nd Meridian.

The Globemaster was the first-ever cargo aircraft designed with special-operations in mind. The normal flight crew of only two was supplemented with two "observer" positions for which modular instrument packages were provided. In this case, both were electronics-warfare officers now keeping tabs on the numerous air-defense radar sites that littered the Russian, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese coasts, and directing the flight crew to thread their way through as many null areas as was possible. That soon required a rapid descent and a turn east.

"Don't you just love this?" First Sergeant Vega asked his commander. The Rangers were sitting on fold-down seats in the cargo area, dressed in combat gear that had made them waddle like ducks aboard the aircraft an hour earlier

under the watchful eyes of the loadmaster. It was widely believed within the Army's airborne community that the Air Force awarded points to its flight crews for making their passengers barf, but in this case there would be no complaints. The most dangerous part of the mission was right now, despite their parachutes, something the Air Force crewmen, significantly, didn't bother with. They would be of little use in any case should a stray fighter happen upon their transport at almost any time up to the programmed jump.

Captain Checa just nodded, mainly wishing he were on the ground, where an infantryman belonged, instead of sitting as helpless as an unborn child in the womb of a woman addicted to disco dancing.

Forward, the EWO displays were coloring up. The rectangular TV-type tube displayed a computer memory of every known radar installation on Japan's western coast. It hadn't been hard to input the information, as most of them had been established a generation or two earlier by Americans, back when Japan had been a massive island base for use against the Soviet Union and liable to Russian attack for that reason. The radars had been upgraded along the way, but any picket line had its imperfections, and these had been mostly known to the Americans beforehand, and then reevaluated by ELINT satellites in the last week. The aircraft was heading southeast now, leveling out two hundred feet over the water and tooling along at its maximum low-level speed of three hundred fifty knots. It made for a very bumpy ride, which the flight crew didn't notice, though everyone else did. The pilot wore low-light goggles, and swept his head around the sky while the copilot concentrated on the instruments. The latter crewman was also provided with a head-up display just like that on a fighter. It displayed compass heading, altitude, airspeed, and also gave him a thin green line to indicate the horizon, which he could sometimes see depending on the state of the moon and clouds.

"I have strobes very high at ten o'clock," the pilot reported. Those would be airliners on a standard commercial routing. "Nothing else."

The copilot gave her screen another look. The radar plot was exactly as programmed, with their flight path following a very narrow corridor of black amid radial spikes of red and yellow, which indicated areas covered by defense and air-control radars. The lower they flew, the wider was the black-safe zone, but they were already as low as they could safely fly.

"Fifty miles off the coast."

"Roger," the pilot acknowledged. "How're you doing?" he asked a second later. Low-level penetrations were stressful on everyone, even with a computer-controlled autopilot handling the stick work.

"No prob," she replied. It wasn't exactly true, but it was the thing she was supposed to say. The most dangerous part was right here, passing the elevated radar site at Aikawa. The weakest part of Japan's low-level defense perimeter, it was a gap between a peninsula and an island. Radars on both beams almost covered the seventy-mile gap, but they were old ones, dating back to the 1970s, and had not been upgraded with the demise of the Communist regime in North Korea. "Easing down," she said next, adjusting the altitude control on the autopilot to seventy feet. Theoretically they could fly safely at fifty over a flat surface, but their aircraft was riding heavy, and now her hand was on the sidestick control, itself another illusion that this was actually a fighter plane. If

she saw so much as a fishing boat, she'd have to yank the aircraft to higher altitude for fear of a collision with somebody's masthead.

"Coast in five," one of the electronic-warfare officers announced. "Recommend come right to one-six-five."

"Coming right." The aircraft banked slightly.

There were only a few windows in the cargo area. First Sergeant Vega had one and looked out to see the wingtip of the aircraft dip toward a barely perceived black surface dotted with the occasional whitecap. The sight made him turn back in. He couldn't help things anyway, and if they hit and cartwheeled in, he'd have no time at all to comprehend it. Or so he'd been told once.

"I got the coast," the pilot said, catching the glow of lights first through his goggles. It was time to switch them off and help fly the aircraft. "My airplane."

"Pilot's airplane," the copilot acknowledged, flexing her hand and allowing herself a deep breath.

They crossed the coast between Omi and Ichifuri. As soon as land was visible, the pilot started climbing the aircraft. The automated terrain-avoidance system had three settings. He selected the one labeled *Hard*, which was rough on the airplane and rougher on the passengers, but ultimately safer for all concerned. "What about their AWACS?" he asked the EWOs.

"I've got emissions on one, nine o'clock, very weak. If you keep us in the weeds, we'll be okay."

"Get out the barf bags, guys." To the loadmaster: "Ten minutes."

"Ten minutes," the Air Force sergeant announced in the back. Just then the aircraft lurched up and to the right, dodging around the first coastal mountain. Then it dropped down rapidly again, like a particularly unpleasant amusement-park ride, and Julio Vega remembered once swearing that he'd never subject himself to anything like this again. It was a promise that had been broken many times, but this time, again, there were people on the ground with guns. And they weren't Colombian druggies this time, but a trained professional army.

"Jesus, I hope they give us two minutes of easy ride to walk to the door," he said between gulps.

"Don't count on it," Captain Checa said, just before he used his barf bag. It started a series of such events among the other Rangers.

The trick was to keep mountaintops between them and the radar transmitters. That meant flying in valleys. The Globemaster was slower now, barely two hundred thirty knots of indicated airspeed, and even with flaps and slats extended, and even with a computer-aided flight-control system, it made for a ride that wallowed on one hand and jerked on the other, something that changed from one second to the next. The head-up display now showed the mountainous corridor they were flying, with red warning messages appearing before the eyes of the pilots that the autopilot handled quite well, thank you, but not without leading the two drivers in their front seats to genuine fear. Aviators never really trusted the things, and now two hands were on their stick controllers, almost flinching and taking control away from the computer, but not quite, in what was almost a highly sophisticated game of chicken, with

the computer trying in its way to outgut the trained aviators who had to trust the microchips to do things their own reflexes were unable to match. They watched green jagged lines that represented real mountains, ranks of them, fuzzy on the edges from the trees that grew to the tops of most, and for the most part the lines were well above the flight level of their aircraft until the last second, when the nose would jerk upwards and their stomachs would struggle to catch up, and then the aircraft would dive again.

"There's the IP. Five minutes," the pilot called aft.

"*Stand up!*" the loadmaster yelled at his passengers. The aircraft was going down again, and one of the Rangers almost came off the floor of the aircraft when he stood. They moved aft toward the portside passenger door, which was now opened. As they hooked up their static lines, the rear cargo hatch dropped down, and two Air Force enlisted men removed the safety hooks from the palletized cargo that occupied the middle of the sixty-five-foot cargo bay. The Globemaster leveled out one last time, and out the door, Checa and Vega could see the shadowy valley below their aircraft, and a towering mountain to the left of them.

"Five hundred feet," the pilot said over intercom. "Let's get it done."

"Winds look good," the copilot announced, checking the computer that controlled drops. "One minute."

The green light by the passenger door turned on. The loadmaster had a safety belt attached to his waist, standing by the door, blocking the way of the Rangers. He gave them a sideways look.

"You guys be careful down there, y'hear?"

"Sorry about the mess," Captain Checa said. The loadmaster grinned.

"I've cleaned up worse." Besides, he had a private to do that. He gave the area a final check. The Rangers were safely in their places, and nobody was in the way of the cargo's roller-path. The first drop would be done from the front office. "All clear aft," he said over his intercom circuit. The loadmaster stepped away from the door, allowing Checa to take his place, one hand on either side, and his left foot just over the edge.

"Ten seconds," the copilot said forward.

"Roger, ten seconds." The pilot reached for the release switch, flipping off the safety cover and resting his thumb on the toggle.

"Five."

"Five."

"Three—two—one—*now!*"

"Cargo away." The pilot had already flipped it at the proper moment.

Aft, the Rangers saw the pallets slide out through the cavernous door. The aircraft took a major dip at the tail, then snapped back level. A second after that, the green light at the door started blinking.

"Go go go!" the loadmaster screamed over the noise.

Captain Diego Checa, U.S. Army Rangers, became the first American to invade the Japanese mainland when he took his step out the door and fell into the darkness. A second later the static line yanked his chute open, and the black nylon umbrella came to full blossom a bare three hundred feet from the ground. The stiff and often hurtful opening shock came as a considerable relief. Jumping at five hundred feet made the use of a backup chute a useless

extravagance. He first looked up and to his right to see that the others were all out, their chutes opening as his had just done. The next order of business was to look down and around. There was the clearing, and he was sure he'd hit it, though he pulled on one riser to spill air from his parachute in the hope of hitting the middle of it and increasing the safety margin that was as much theoretical as real for a night drop. Last of all he released his pack, which fell fifteen feet to the end of a safety line. Its sixty pounds of gear would hit the ground first, lessening his landing shock so long as he didn't land right on the damned thing and break something in the process. Aside from that he barely had time to think before the barely visible valley raced up to greet him. Feet together, knees bent, back straight, roll when you hit, the sudden lung-emptying shock of striking the ground, and then he was on his face, trying to decide if all his bones were intact or not. Seconds later he heard the muted thuds and *oofs* of the rest of the detail as they also made it to earth. Checa allowed himself a full three seconds to decide that he was more or less in one piece before standing, unclipping his back, and racing to collapse his chute. That task done, he came back, donned his low-light goggles, and assembled his people.

"Everybody okay?"

"Good drop, sir." Vega showed up first with two others in tow. The rest were heading in, all carrying their black chutes.

"Let's get to work, Rangers."

The Globemaster continued almost due south, going "feetwet" just west of Nomazu, and again hugging the water, kept a mountainous peninsula between itself and the distant E-767s for as long as possible, then turned southwest to distance itself further still from them until, two hundred miles off the coast of Japan, it was safe to climb back to a safe cruising altitude into commercial airline routing G223. The only remaining question was whether the KC-10 tanker that was supposed to meet them would show up and allow them to complete their flight to Kwajalein. Only then could they break radio silence.

The Rangers were able to do it first. The communications sergeant broke out a satellite transmitter, oriented it toward the proper azimuth, and transmitted a five-letter group, waiting for an acknowledgment.

"They're down okay," an Army major told Jackson at his desk in the National Military Command Center.

The real trick is going to be getting them out, the Admiral thought. *But one thing at a time.* He lifted his phone to call the White House.

"Jack, the Rangers are in."

"Good one, Rob. I need you over here," Ryan told him.

"What for? It's busy here and—"

"Now, Robby." The line clicked off.

The next order of business was to get the cargo moved. It had landed within two hundred meters of the nominal location, and the plan had allowed for quite a bit more than that. One by one, pairs of Rangers struggled with empty fuel bladders, carrying them uphill to the treeline that bordered what seemed to be a highlands meadow. With that done, a hose was strung, and twenty thousand pounds of JP-5 pumped from one large rubber bladder into six other, smaller ones arranged in pairs at preselected spots. That operation took an hour, while four of their number patrolled the immediate area for signs of human presence, but finding nothing but the tracks of a four-wheel cycle, which they'd been told to expect. When the pumping operation was finished, the original fuel bladder was folded and dumped into a hole, then carefully covered up with sod. Next, the solid cargo had to be manhandled into place and covered with camouflage netting. That required another two hours, straining the Rangers to the limit of their conditioning with the combination of heavy work and building stress. Soon the sun would be up, and the area could not look as though there were people here. First Sergeant Vega supervised the cover-up operation. When all was done, the Rangers still outside the treeline walked in single file toward it, with the last man in line working on the grass to reduce the signs of their passage. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do. By dawn, at the end of what had been for them a twenty-hour day as unpleasant as anyone could have contrived to make, they were in place, unwelcome guests on the soil of a foreign land, mainly shivering in the cold, unable to light a fire for warmth, eating cold MRE rations.

"Jack, I got work to do over there, damn it," Robby said on his way through the door.

"Not anymore. The President and I talked it over last night."

"What do you mean?"

"Get packed. You're taking over the *Stennis* battle group." Ryan wanted to grin at his friend, but couldn't quite bring himself to that. Not when he was sending his friend into danger. The news stopped Jackson in his tracks.

"You sure?"

"It's decided. The President has signed off on it. CINCPAC knows. Admiral Seaton—"

Robby nodded. "Yeah, I've worked for him before."

"You have two hours. There's a Gulfstream waiting for you at Andrews. We need somebody," the National Security Advisor explained, "who knows the political limits on the mission. Take it right to the edge, Rob, but no further. We have to smart our way through this."

"I understand."

Ryan stood and walked to his friend. "I'm not sure I like doing this . . ."

"It's my job, Jack."

Tennessee arrived at her station off the Japanese coast and finally slowed to her normal patrol speed of five knots. Commander Claggett took a required

moment to get a position fix on a rocky outcropping known to sailors as Lot's Wife, then dived his boat below the layer to a depth of six hundred feet. The sonar showed nothing at the moment, odd for the normally busy shipping lanes, but after four and a half days of dangerously high-speed running, it came as a considerable relief to everyone aboard. The Army personnel had adapted well enough and joined sailors for their jogs in the missile room. For the moment, the mission orders were little different from those the boomer had been designed to do: remain undetected, with the additional assignment of gathering whatever information on enemy movements that came her way. It wasn't exactly exciting, but only Claggett knew at the moment how important it was.

The satellite link told Sandy Richter and his colleagues that the mission was a probable "go." It meant more simulator time for all of them while ground crews prepped their Comanches for business. Unfortunately, that meant affixing decidedly unstealthy wing fittings to the side of each aircraft, along with long-range ferry tanks, but he'd known that from the beginning, and nobody had bothered asking how much he liked the idea. There were three scenarios on the sim now, and one by one the flight crews went through them, their bodies gyrating, quite unaware of what they were doing in the real world while their minds and bodies played in the virtual one.

"How the hell do we do that?" Chavez demanded.

Russians would not have questioned the orders in quite that way, Scherenko thought. "I only relay orders from your own agency," he told them. "I also know that Koga's disappearance was not caused by any official agency."

"Yamata, you suppose?" Clark asked. That piece of information narrowed the possibilities somewhat. It also made the impossible merely dangerous.

"A good guess. You know where he lives, yes?"

"We've seen it from a distance," Chavez confirmed.

"Ah, yes—your photos." The Major would have loved to know what those had been about, but it would have been foolish to ask the question, and it was not certain that these two Americans knew the answer in any case. "If you have other assets in-country, I suggest you make use of them. We are making use of ours as well. Koga is probably the political solution to this crisis."

"If there is one," Ding noted.

"Good to fly with you again, Captain Sato," Yamata said pleasantly. The invitation to the flight deck pleased him. The pilot, he saw, was a patriot, a man of both pride and skill who really understood what was happening. What a pity he'd chosen such a lowly path for his life.

Sato took off his headset and relaxed in his command seat. "This is a pleasant change from the Canadian flights."

"How does that go?"

“I’ve spoken with a few executives on the way home. They say the Americans are more confused than anything else.”

“Yes.” Yamata smiled. “They confuse easily.”

“Can we hope for a diplomatic settlement to this business, Yamata-san?”

“I think so. They lack the ability to attack us effectively.”

“My father commanded a destroyer in the war. My brother—”

“Yes, I know him well, Captain.” That remark, he saw, lit up the pilot’s eyes with pride.

“And my son is a fighter pilot. He flies the Eagle.”

“Well, they have done well so far. They recently killed two American bombers, you know. The Americans tested our air defenses,” the industrialist said. “It was they who failed.”

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CTF-77

"You're back!" the rental agent said with some pleasure.

Nomuri smiled and nodded. "Yes. I had a particularly good day at the office yesterday. I do not need to tell you how stressful such a 'good' day can be, do I?"

The man grunted agreement. "In the summer my best days are those when I get no sleep. Please excuse how I appear," he added. He'd been working on some of his machines all morning, which for him had begun just after five. The same was true of Nomuri, but for a different reason.

"I understand. I own my own business, too, and who works harder than a man who works for himself, eh?"

"Do you suppose the zaibatsu understand that?"

"Not the ones I've met. Even so, you are fortunate to live in so peaceful an area."

"Not always peaceful. The Air Force must have been playing games last night. A jet flew close by and very low. It woke me up, and I never really got back to sleep afterward." He wiped his hands and poured two cups of tea, offering one to his guest.

"*Dozo,*" Nomuri said graciously. "They are playing very dangerous games now," he went on, wondering what response he'd get.

"It's madness, but who cares what I think? Not the government, surely. All they listen to are the 'great' ones." The equipment owner sipped at his tea and looked around his shop.

"Yes, I am concerned, too. I hope Goto can find a way out of this before things spin completely out of control." Nomuri looked outside. The weather was turning gray and threatening. He heard a decidedly angry grunt.

"Goto? Just one more like all the rest. Others lead him by the nose—or some other part if the rumors about him are correct."

Nomuri chuckled. "Yes, I have heard the stories, too. Still, a man of some vigor, eh?" He paused. "So can I rent another of your cycles today?"

"Take number six." The man pointed. "I just finished servicing it. Pay attention to the weather," he warned. "Snow tonight."

Nomuri held up his backpack. "I want to take some pictures of cloudy mountains for my collection. The peace here is wonderful, and fine for thinking."

"Only in the winter," the dealer said, returning to his work.

Nomuri knew the way now, and followed the Taki uphill over a trail crusty from cold and frost. He would have felt a little better about it if the damned four-wheeled cycle had a better muffler. At least the heavy air would help

attenuate the sound, or so he hoped, as he headed up the same path he'd taken a few days earlier. In due course he was looking down at the high meadow, seeing nothing out of the ordinary and wondering if—wondering a lot of things. What if the soldiers had run into an ambush? *In that case*, Nomuri told himself, *I'm toast.* But there was no turning back. He settled back into the seat and steered his way down the hillside, stopping as he was supposed to in the middle of the clearing and taking the hood down off his red parka. On closer examination, he saw that some sod had been disturbed, and he saw what might have been a trail of sorts into the woodline. That was when a single figure appeared, waving him up. The CIA officer restarted the cycle and headed that way.

The two soldiers who confronted him didn't point weapons. They didn't have to. Their faces were painted and their camouflage uniforms told him everything he needed to know.

"I'm Nomuri," he said. "The password is Foxtrot."

"Captain Checa," the officer replied, extending his hand. "We've worked with the Agency before. Are you the guy who picked this spot?"

"No, but I checked it out a couple days ago."

"Nice place to build a cabin," Checa thought. "We even saw a few deer, little ones. I hope it isn't hunting season." The remark caught Nomuri short. He hadn't considered that possibility, and didn't know anything about hunting in Japan. "So what do you have for me?"

"These." Nomuri took off his backpack and pulled out the cellular phones.

"Are you kiddin' me?"

"The Japanese military has good stuff for monitoring military communications. Hell, they invented a lot of the technology our people use. But these"—Nomuri grinned—"everybody has 'em, and they're digitally encrypted, and they cover the whole country. Even here. There's a repeater tower down on that mountain. Anyway, it's safer than using your regular comms. The bill's paid to the end of the month," he added.

"Be nice to call home and tell my wife that everything's going fine," Checa thought aloud.

"I'd be careful about that. Here are the numbers you can call." Nomuri handed over a sheet. "That's one's mine. That one's a guy named Clark. That one's another officer named Chavez—"

"Ding's over here?" First Sergeant Vega asked.

"You know 'em?"

"We did a job in Africa last fall," Checa replied. "We get a lot of 'special' work. You sure you can tell us their names, man?"

"They have covers. You're probably better off speaking in Spanish. Not as many people here speak that language. I don't need to tell you to keep your transmissions short," Nomuri added. He didn't. Checa nodded and asked the most important question.

"And getting out?"

Nomuri turned to point, but the terrain feature in question was covered in clouds. "There's a pass there. Head for it, then downhill to a town called Hirose. I pick you up there, put you on a train to Nagoya, and you fly off to either Taiwan or Korea."

"Just like that." The comment wasn't posed as a question, but the dubious nature of the response was clear anyway.

"There are a couple of hundred thousand foreign businesspeople here. You're eleven guys from Spain trying to sell wine, remember?"

"I could use some sangria right now, too." Checa was relieved to see that his CIA contact had been briefed in on the same mission. It didn't always work out that way. "Now what?"

"You wait for the rest of the mission force to arrive. If something goes wrong, you call me and head out. If I drop out of the net, you call the others. If everything goes to hell, you find another way out. You should have passports, clothes, and—"

"We do."

"Good." Nomuri took his camera out of his backpack and started shooting photos of the cloud-shrouded mountains.

"This is CNN, live from Pearl Harbor," the reporter ended, and a commercial cut in. The intelligence analyst rewound the tape to examine it again. It was both amazing and entirely ordinary that he'd be able to get such vital information so easily. The American media really ran the country, he'd learned over the years, and perhaps more was the pity. The way they'd played up the unfortunate incident in Tennessee had inflamed the entire country into precipitous action, then driven his country into the same, and the only good news was what he saw on the TV screen: two fleet carriers still in their dry docks, with two more still in the Indian Ocean, according to the latest reports from that part of the world, and Pacific Fleet's other two in Long Beach, also dry-docked and unable to enter service—and that, really, was that, so far as the Marianas were concerned. He had to formalize his intelligence estimate with a few pages of analytical prose, but what it came down to was that America could sting his country, but her ability to project real power was now a thing of the past. The realization of that meant that there was little likelihood of a serious contest for the immediate future.

Jackson didn't mind being the only passenger in the VC-20B. A man could get used to this sort of treatment, and he had to admit that the Air Force's executive birds were better than the Navy's—in fact the Navy didn't have many, and those were mainly modified P-3 Orions whose turboprop engines provided barely more than half the speed of the twin-engine executive jet. With only a brief refueling stop at Travis Air Force Base, outside San Francisco, he'd made the hop to Hawaii in under nine hours, and it was something to feel good about until on final approach to Hickam he got a good look at the naval base and saw that *Enterprise* was still in the graving dock. The first nuclear-powered carrier and bearer of the U.S. Navy's proudest name would be out of this one. The aesthetic aspect of it was bad enough. More to the point, it would have been far better to have two decks to use instead of one.

"You have your task force, boy," Robby whispered to himself. And it was the one every naval aviator wanted. Task Force 77, titularly the main air arm of Pacific Fleet, and, one carrier or not, it was his, and about to sail in harm's way. Perhaps fifty years earlier there had been an excitement to it. Perhaps when PacFlt's main striking arm had sailed under Bill Halsey or Ray Spruance, the people in command had looked forward to it. The wartime movies said so, and so did the official logs, but how much of that had been mere posturing, Jackson wondered now, contemplating his own command. Did Halsey and Spruance lose sleep with the knowledge that they were sending young men to death, or was the world simply a different place then, where war was considered as natural an event as a polio epidemic—another scourge that was now a thing of the past. To be Commander Task Force 77 was a life's ambition, but he'd never really wanted to fight a war—oh, sure, he admitted to himself, as a new ensign, or even as far as lieutenant's rank, he'd relished the idea of air combat, knowing that as a U.S. naval aviator he was the best in the world, highly trained and exquisitely equipped, and wanting to prove it someday. But over time he'd seen too many friends die in accidents. He'd gotten a kill in the Persian Gulf War, and four more over the Med one clear and starry night, but those last four had been an accident. He'd killed men for no good reason at all, and though he never spoke of it to others, not even his wife, it gnawed at him that he had in effect been tricked into killing other human beings. Not his fault, just some sort of enforced mistake. But that's what war was for the warriors most of the time, just a huge mistake, and now he had to play his part in another such mistake instead of using TF-77 the way it was supposed to be used, just *to be,* and, merely by being, to prevent wars from happening. The only consolation of the moment was that, again, the mistake, the accident, wasn't of his making.

If wishes were horses, he told himself as the aircraft taxied to a stop. The flight attendant opened the door and tossed Jackson's one bag out to another Air Force sergeant, who walked the Admiral to a helicopter for his next flight, this one to CINCPAC, Admiral Dave Seaton. It was time to don his professional personality. Misused or not, Robby Jackson was a warrior about to assume command of others. He'd examined his doubts and questions, and now it was time to put them away.

"We're going to owe them big-time for this," Durling noted, flipping off the TV with his remote.

The technology had been developed for advertising during baseball games, of all things. An adaptation of the blue-screen systems used in the production of movies, advanced computer systems allowed it to be used in real-time, and thus the background behind the batter at the plate could be made to appear to be an advertisement for a local bank or car dealer when in fact it was just the usual green used at ballparks. In this case, a reporter could make his or her live feed from Pearl Harbor—outside the naval base, of course—and the background was that of two carrier profiles, with birds flying past and the antlike shapes of yard workers moving in the distance, and it looked as real as anything else on the TV screen which, after all, was just a collection of

multicolored dots.

"They're Americans," Jack said. And besides, he was the one who'd bullied them into it, again insulating the President from the politically dangerous task. "They're supposed to be on our side. We just had to remind them of that."

"Will it work?" That was the harder question.

"Not for long, but maybe for long enough. It's a good plan we have in place. We need a few breaks, but we've gotten two in the bag already. The important thing is, we're showing them what they expect to see. They expect both carriers to be there, and they expect the media to tell the whole world about it. Intelligence people are no different from anybody else, sir. They have preconceptions, and when they see them in real life, it just reinforces how brilliant they think they are."

"How many people do we have to kill?" the President wanted to know next.

"Enough. We don't know how big the number is, and we're going to try an' keep it as low as possible—but, sir, the mission is—"

"I know. I know about missions, remember?" Durling closed his eyes, remembering Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, half a lifetime before. The mission comes first. It was the only way a lieutenant could think, and now for the first time he realized that a president had to think the same way. It hardly seemed fair.

They didn't see much sun this far north at this time of year, and that suited Colonel Zacharias. The flight from Whiteman to Elmendorf had taken a mere five hours, all of it in darkness because the B-2A flew only in daylight to show itself to people, which was not something for which the aircraft had been conceived. It flew very well indeed, belated proof that Jack Northrop's idea dating back to the 1930s had been correct: an aircraft consisting exclusively of wing surfaces was the most efficient possible aerodynamic shape. It was just that the flight-control systems required for such an aircraft needed computerized flight controls for proper stability, something that had not been available until just before the engineer's death. At least he'd seen the model, if not the actual aircraft itself.

Almost everything about it was efficient. Its shape allowed easy storage—three could fit in a hangar designed for one conventional aircraft. It climbed rather like an elevator, and, able to cruise at high altitude, it drank its fuel in cups rather than gallons, or so the wing commander liked to say.

The shot-up B-1B was about ready to fly back to Elmendorf. It would do so on three engines, not a major problem as the aircraft would be carrying nothing more than fuel and its crew as a payload. There were other aircraft based at Shemya now. Two E-3B AWACS birds dispatched from Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma maintained a partial airbornealert patrol, though this island had power radars of its own, the largest of which was the powerful Cobra Dane missiledetection system built in the 1970s. There was the theoretical possibility that the Japanese could, using tankers, manage a strike against the

island, duplicating in length an Israeli mission against the PLO headquarters in North Africa, and though the possibility was remote, it did have to be considered.

Defending against that were the Air Force's only four F-22A Rapier fighters, the world's first true stealth fighter aircraft, taken from advanced testing at Nellis Air Force Base and dispatched with four senior pilots and their support crews to this base at the edge of the known universe. But the Rapier—known to the pilots by the name the manufacturer, Lockheed, had initially preferred, "Lightning-II"—hadn't been designed for defense, and now, with the sun back down after its brief and fitful appearance, it was time for the original purpose. As always the tanker lifted off first, even before the fighter pilots walked from the briefing hut to their aircraft shelters for the start of the night's work.

* * *

"If he flew out yesterday, why are there lights on?" Chavez asked, looking up at the penthouse apartment.

"Timer on the lights to scare burglars away?" John wondered lightly.

"This ain't L.A., man."

"Then I suppose there's people there, Yevgeniy Pavlovich." He turned the car onto another street.

Okay, we know that Koga wasn't arrested by the local police. We know that Yamata is running this whole show. We know that his security chief, Kaneda, probably killed Kimberly Norton. We know that Yamata is out of town. And we know that his apartment has lights on. . . .

Clark found a place to park the car. Then he and Chavez went walking, first of all circling the block, looking around for patterns and opportunities in a process called reconnaissance that started at the ground level and seemed more patient than it really was.

"A lot we don't know, man," Chavez breathed.

"I thought you wanted to see somebody's eyes, Domingo," John reminded his partner.

He had singularly lifeless eyes, Koga thought, not like a human at all. They were dark and large, but seemingly dry, and they just looked at him—or perhaps they just pointed in his direction and lingered there, the former Prime Minister wondered. Whatever they were, they gave no clue as to what lay behind them. He'd heard about Kiyoshi Kaneda, and the term most often used to describe him was *ronin,* a historical reference to samurai warriors who'd lost their master and couldn't find another, which was deemed a great disgrace in the culture of the time. Such men had turned into bandits, or worse, after they'd lost contact with the *bushido* code that had for a thousand years sustained the elements of the Japanese population entitled to carry and use weapons. Such men, once they found a new master to serve, became fanatics, Koga remembered, so fearful of returning to their former status that

they would do nearly anything to avoid that fate.

It was a foolish reverie, he knew, looking at the man's back as he watched TV. The age of the samurai was past, and along with it the feudal lords who had ruled them, but there the man was, watching a samurai drama on NHK, sipping his tea and taking in every scene. He didn't react at all, as though hypnotized by the highly stylized tale, which was really the Japanese version of American Westerns from the 1950s, highly simplified melodramas of good and evil, except that the heroic figure, always laconic, always invincible, always mysterious, used a sword instead of a six-gun. And this fool Kaneda was devoted to such stories, he'd learned over the past day and a half.

Koga stood and started moving back to the bookcase, and that was all he had to do for the man's head to turn and look. *Watchdog,* Koga thought without looking back as he selected another book to read. And a formidable one, especially with four others about, two sleeping now, one in the kitchen, and one outside the door. He hadn't a chance of escaping, the politician knew. Perhaps a fool, but the sort that a careful man feared.

Who was Kaneda, really? he wondered. A former Yakuza, probably. He didn't show any of the grotesque tattoos that people in that subculture affected, deliberately making themselves different in a culture that demanded conformity—but at the same time demonstrating conformity in a society of outcasts. On the other hand, he just sat there wearing a business suit whose only concession to comfort was the unbuttoned jacket. Even the ronin's posture was rigid as he sat there erect, Koga saw, himself sitting back down with a book but looking over it at his captor. He knew he couldn't fight the man and win—Koga had never troubled himself to learn any of the martial arts that his country had helped develop, and the man was physically formidable. And he was not alone.

He *was* a watchdog. Seemingly impassive, seemingly at rest, he was in fact more like a coiled spring, ready to leap and strike, and civilized only so long as those around him acted in such a way as not to arouse him, and so obvious about it that you just knew that it was madness to offend him. It shamed the politician that he was so easily cowed, but cowed he was, because he was a bright and thoughtful man, unwilling to squander his one chance, if he had that much, in a foolish gesture.

Many of the industrialists had men like this one. Some of them even carried handguns, which was almost unthinkable in Japan, but the right person could make the right sort of approach to the right official, and a very special permit could be issued, and that possibility didn't so much frighten Koga as revolt him. The sword of a ronin was bad enough, and in this context would merely have been theatrical, but a gun for Koga was pure evil, something that didn't belong in his culture, a coward's weapon. That was what he was dealing with, really. Kaneda was undoubtedly a coward, unable to master his own life, able even to break the law only on orders from others, but with those orders he could do anything. What a dreadful commentary on his country. People like this were used by their masters to strong-arm unions and business competitors. People like Kaneda had assaulted demonstrators, sometimes even in the open, and gotten away with it because the police had looked the other way or managed not to be present, even though reporters and photographers

had come to find the scene of the day's interest. People like this and their masters held his country back from true democracy, and the realization was all the more bitter for Koga because he'd known it for years, dedicated his life to changing it, and failed; and so here he was in Yamata's penthouse apartment, under guard, probably to be released someday as the political irrelevance he already was or would soon become, then to watch his country fall totally under the control of a new kind of master—or an old one, he told himself. And not a thing he could do about it, which was why he sat with a book in his hands while Kaneda sat in front of a TV watching some actor perform in a drama whose beginning, middle, and end were all foretold a thousand times, pretending that it was both real and new, when it was neither.

Battles like this one had been fought only in simulation, or perhaps in the Roman arenas of a different age. At both ends were the AEW aircraft, E-767s on the Japanese side and E-3Bs on the American, so far apart that neither really "saw" the other even on the numerous radar screens that both carried, though both monitored the signals of the other on different instruments. In between were the gladiators, because for the third time the Americans were testing the air defenses of Japan, and, again, failing.

The American AWACS aircraft were six hundred miles off Hokkaido, with the F-22A fighters a hundred miles in front of them, "trolling," as the flight leader put it, and the Japanese F-15s were coming out as well, entering the radar coverage of the American surveillance aircraft but not leaving the coverage of their own.

On command, the American fighters split into two elements of two aircraft each. The lead element darted due south, using their ability to supercruise at over nine hundred miles per hour, closing obliquely with the Japanese picket line.

"They're fast," a Japanese controller observed. It was hard to hold the contact. The American aircraft was somewhat stealthy, but the size and power of the Kami aircraft's antenna defeated the low-observable technology again, and the controller started vectoring his Eagles south to cover the probe. Just to make sure that the Americans knew they were being tracked, he selected the appropriate blips with his electronic pointer and ordered the radar to steer its beams on them every few seconds and hold them there. They had to know that they were being followed through every move, that their supposedly radar-defeating technology was not good enough for something new and radical. Just to make it a little more interesting, he switched the frequency of his transmitter to fire-control mode. They were much too far away actually to guide a missile at this range, but even so, it would be one more proof to them that they could be lit up brightly enough for a kill, and that would teach them a lesson of its own. The signal faded a bit at first, almost dropping off entirely, but then the software picked them out of the clutter and firmed up the blip as

he jacked up the power down the two azimuths to the American fighters, as fighters they had to be. The B-1, though fast, was not so agile. Yes, this was the best card the Americans had to play, and it was not good enough, and maybe if they learned that, diplomacy would change things once and for all, and the North Pacific Ocean would again be at peace.

* * *

"See how their Eagles move to cover," the senior American controller observed at his supervisory screen.

"Like they're tied to the 7s with a string," his companion noted. He was a fighter pilot just arrived from Langley Air Force Base, headquarters of Air Combat Command, where his job was to develop fighter tactics.

Another plotting board showed that three of the E-767s were up. Two were on advanced picket duty while the third was orbiting in close, just off the coast of Honshu. That was not unexpected. It was, in fact, the predictable thing to do because it was also the smart thing to do, and all three surveillance aircraft had their instruments dialed up to what had to be maximum power, as they had to do to detect stealthy aircraft.

"Now we know why they hit both the Lancers," the man from Virginia observed. "They can jump to high freqs and illuminate for the Eagles. Our guys never thought they were being shot at. Cute," he thought.

"Would be nice to have some of those radars," the senior controller agreed.

"But we know how to beat it now." The officer from Langley thought he saw it. The controller wasn't so sure.

"We'll know that in another few hours."

Sandy Richter was even lower than the C-17 had dared to go. He was also slower, at a mere one hundred fifty knots, and already tired from the curious mixture of tension and boredom on the overwater flight. The previous night he and the other two aircraft in his flight had staged to Petrovka West, yet another mothballed MiG base near Vladivostok. There they'd gotten what would surely be their last decent sleep for the next few days, and lifted off at 2200 hours to begin their part in Operation ZORRO. Each aircraft now had wing sponsons attached, and on each were two extra fuel tanks, and while they were needed for the range of this flight, they were decidedly unstealthy even though the tanks themselves had been made out of radar-transparent fiberglass in an effort to improve things a little bit. The pilot was wearing his normal flight gear plus an inflatable life jacket. It was a concession to regulations about flying over water rather than as anything really useful. The water fifty feet below was too cold for long survival. He put the thought aside as best he could, settled into his seat, and concentrated on the flying while the gunner in back handled the instruments.

"Still okay, Sandy." The threat screen was still more black than anything else as they turned east toward Honshu.

"Rog." Behind them at ten-mile intervals, two more Comanches were

heading in.

Though small and a mere helicopter, the RAH-66A was in some ways the most sophisticated aircraft in the world. It carried in its composite airframe the two most powerful computers ever taken aloft, and one of them was merely a backup in case the first should break. Their principal task for the moment was to plot the radar coverage that they had to penetrate to compute the relative radar cross-section of their airframe against the known or estimated capabilities of the electronic eyes now sweeping the area. The closer they got to the Japanese mainland, the larger grew the yellow areas of maybe-detect and the red areas of definite-detect.

"Phase Two," the man from Air Combat Command said quietly aboard the AWACS.

The F-22 fighters all carried jamming gear, the better to accentuate their stealth capabilities, and on command these were switched on.

"Not smart," the Japanese controller thought. *Good. They must know that we can track them.* His screen was suddenly littered with spots and spokes and flashes as the electronic noise generated by the American fighters muddled his picture. He had two ways of dealing with that. First he increased his power further; that would burn through much of what the Americans were attempting. Next he told the radar to start flipping through frequencies at random. The first measure was more effective than the second, he saw, since the American jammers were also frequency-agile. It was an imperfect measure, but still a troublesome one. The computer software that was doing the actual tracking was based on assumptions. It started with known or estimated positions of the American aircraft, and, knowing their speed range, sought returns that matched their base courses and speeds, just as had happened with the bombers that had once probed his defense line. The problem was that at this power output, he was again detecting birds and air currents, and picking the actual contacts out was becoming increasingly difficult until he punched yet another button that tracked the jamming emissions that were more powerful than the actual returning signals. With that additional check, he reestablished a firm track on both pairs of targets. It had required only ten seconds, and that was fast enough. Just to show the Americans he hadn't been fooled, he maxed-out his power, flipped briefly to fire-control mode, and zapped all four of the American fighters hard enough that if their electronic systems were not properly shielded, the incoming radar signals would burn some of them out. That would be an interesting kill, he thought, and he remembered how a pair of German Tornado fighters had once been destroyed by flying too close to an FM radio tower. To his disappointment, the Americans simply turned away.

"Somebody just set off some mongo jammers to the northeast."

“Good, right on time,” Richter replied. A quick look at the threat screen showed that he was within minutes of entering a yellow area. He felt the need to rub his face, but both his hands were busy now. A check of the fuel gauges showed that his pylon-mounted tanks were about empty. “Punching off the wings.”

“Roger—that’ll help.”

Richter flipped the safety cover off the jettison switch. It was a late addition to the Comanche design, but it had finally occurred to someone that if the chopper was supposed to be stealthy, then it might be a good idea to be able to eliminate the unstealthy features in flight. Richter slowed the aircraft briefly and flipped the toggle that ignited explosive bolts, dumping the wings and their tanks into the Sea of Japan.

“Good separation,” the backseater confirmed. The threat screen changed as soon as the items were gone. The computer kept careful track of how stealthy the aircraft was. The Comanche’s nose dipped again, and the aircraft accelerated back to its cruising speed.

“They’re predictable, aren’t they?” the Japanese controller observed to his chief subordinate.

“I think you just proved that. Even better, you just proved to them what we can do.” The two officers traded a look. Both had been worried about the capabilities of the American Rapier fighter, and now both thought they could relax about it. A formidable aircraft, and one their Eagle drivers needed to treat with respect, but not invisible.

“Predictable response,” the American controller said. “And they just showed us something. Call it ten seconds?”

“Thin, but long enough. It’ll work,” the colonel from Langley said, reaching for a coffee. “Now, let’s reinforce that idea.” On the main screen, the F-22s turned back north, and at the edge of the AWACS detection radius, the F-15Js did the same, covering the American maneuver like sailboats in a tacking duel, striving to stay between the American fighters and their priceless E-767s, which the dreadful accidents of a few days before had made even more precious.

Landfall was very welcome indeed. Far more agile than the transport had been the previous night, the Comanche selected a spot completely devoid of human habitation and then started flying down cracks in the mountainous ground, shielded from the distant air-surveillance aircraft by solid rock that even their powerful systems could not penetrate.

“Feet dry,” Richter’s backseater said gratefully. “Forty minutes of fuel remaining.”

“You good at flapping your arms?” the pilot inquired, also relaxed, just a little, to be over dry land. If something went wrong, well, eating rice wasn’t all

that bad, was it? His helmet display showed the ground in green shadows, and there were no lights about from streetlights or cars or houses, and the worst part of the flight in was over. The actual mission was something he'd managed to set aside. He preferred to worry about only one thing at a time. You lived longer that way.

The final ridgeline appeared just as programmed. Richter slowed the aircraft, circling to figure out the winds as he looked down for the people he'd been briefed to expect. There. Somebody tossed out a green chem-light, and in his low-light vision systems it looked as bright as a full moon.

"ZORRO Lead calling ZORRO Base, over."

"Lead, this is Base. Authentication Golf Mike Zulu, over," the voice replied, giving the okay-code he'd been briefed to expect. Richter hoped the voice didn't have a gun to its head.

"Copy. Out." He spiraled down quickly, flaring his Comanche and settling on what appeared to be an almostflat spot close to the treeline. As soon as the aircraft touched down, three men appeared from the trees. They were dressed like U.S. Army soldiers, and Richter allowed himself a chance to breathe as he cooled off the engines prior to shutdown. The rotor had not yet completed its final revolution before a hose came out to the aircraft's fuel connection.

"Welcome to Japan. I'm Captain Checa."

"Sandy Richter," the pilot said, climbing out.

"Any problems coming in?"

"Not anymore." *Hell, I* got *here, didn't I?* he wanted to say, still tense from the three-hour marathon to invade the country. Invade? Eleven Rangers and six aviators. *Hey,* he thought, *you're all under arrest!*

"There's number two . . ." Checa observed. "Quiet babies, aren't they?"

"We don't want to advertise, sir." It was perhaps the most surprising aspect of the Comanche. The Sikorsky engineers had long known that most of the noise generated by a helicopter came from the tail rotor's conflict with the main. The one on the RAH-66 was shrouded, and the main rotor had five fairly thick composite blades, resulting in a helicopter with less than a third of the acoustical signature of any other rotary-wing aircraft yet built. And the area wouldn't hurt, Richter thought, looking around. All the trees, the thin mountain air. Not a bad place for the mission, he concluded as the second Comanche settled down on its landing pad, fifty meters away. The men who had fueled his aircraft were already stringing camouflage netting over it, using poles cut from the pine forest.

"Come on, let's get some food in you."

"Real food or MREs?" the chief warrant officer asked.

"You can't have everything, Mr. Richter," Checa told him.

The aviator remembered when Army C-Rations had also included cigarettes. No longer, what with the new healthy Army, and there wasn't much sense in asking a Ranger for a smoke. Damned athletes.

The Rapiers turned away an hour later, convinced, the Japanese air-defense people were sure, that they could not penetrate the Kami-Eagle line that guarded the northeast approaches to the home islands. Even the best

American aircraft and best systems could not defeat what they had to face, and that was good. On their screens they watched the contacts fade off, and soon the emissions from the E-3Bs faded as well, heading back to Shemya to report their failure to their masters.

The Americans were realists. Courageous warriors, to be sure—the officers in the E-767s would not make the mistake as their forebears had of thinking that Americans lacked the ardor for real combat operations. That error had been a costly one. But war was a technical exercise, and they had allowed their strength to fall below a line from which recovery was not technically possible. And that was too bad for them.

The Rapiers had to tank on the way back, and didn't use their supercruise ability, because wasting fuel was not purposeful. The weather was again crummy at Shemya, and the fighters rode down under positive ground-control to their safe landings, then taxied off to their hangars, which were more crowded now with the arrival of four F-15E Strike Eagles from Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho. They also regarded the mission as a success.

42

Lightning Strikes

"Are you mad?" Scherenko asked.

"Think about it," Clark said, again back in the Russian Embassy. "We want a political solution to this, don't we? Then Koga's our best chance. You told us the government didn't put him in the bag. Who does that leave? He's probably right there." You could even see the building out Scherenko's window, as luck would have it.

"Is it possible?" the Russian asked, worried that the Americans would ask for assistance that he was quite unsuited to provide.

"There's a risk, but it's unlikely he has an army up there. He wouldn't be keeping the guy there unless he wanted to be covert about it. Figure five or six people, max."

"And two of you!" Scherenko insisted.

"Like the man said," Ding offered with a very showy smile, "no big deal."

So the old KGB file was true. Clark was not a real intelligence officer, but a paramilitary type, and the same was true of his arrogant young partner who mostly just sat there, looking out the window.

"I can offer you nothing by way of assistance."

"How about weapons?" Clark asked. "You going to tell me you don't have anything here we can use? What kind of *rezidentura* is this?" Clark knew that the Russian would have to temporize. Too bad that these people weren't trained to take much initiative.

"I need permission before I can do any of that."

Clark nodded, congratulating himself on making a good guess. He opened his laptop computer. "So do we. You get yours. I'll get mine."

Jones stubbed out his cigarette in the Navy-style aluminum ashtray. The pack had been stuck away in a desk drawer, perhaps in anticipation of just such an occasion as this. When a war started, the peacetime rules went out the window. Old habits, especially bad ones, were easy to fall back into—but then that's what war was, too, wasn't it? He could also see that Admiral Mancuso was wavering on the edge of bumming one, and so he made sure the butt was all the way out.

"What do you have, Ron?"

"You take the time to work this gear and you get results. Boomer and me have been tweaking the data all week. We started on the surface ships." Jones walked to the wall chart. "We've been plotting the position of the 'cans—"

"All the way from—" Captain Chambers interrupted, only to be cut off.

"Yes, sir, all the way from mid-Pac. I've been playing broadband and narrow-band, and checking weather, and I've plotted them." Jones pointed at the silhouettes pinned to the map.

"That's fine, Ron, but we have satellite overheads for that," ComSubPac pointed out.

"So am I right?" the civilian asked.

"Pretty close," Mancuso admitted. Then he pointed to the other shapes pinned to the wall.

"Yeah, that's right, Bart. Once I figured how to track the 'cans, then we started working on the submarines. And guess what? I can still bag the fuckers when they snort. Here's your picket line. We get them about a third of the time by my reckoning, and the bearings are fairly constant."

The wall chart showed six firm contacts. Those silhouettes were within circles between twenty and thirty miles in diameter. Two more were overlaid with question marks.

"That still leaves a few unaccounted for," Chambers noted.

Jones nodded. "True. But I got six for sure, maybe eight. We can't get good cuts off the Japanese coast. Just too far. I'm plotting merchantmen shuttling back and forth to the islands, but that's all," he admitted. "I'm also tracking a big two-screw contact heading west toward the Marshalls, and I kinda noticed that there's an empty dry dock across the way this morning."

"That's secret," Mancuso pointed out with a quiet smile.

"Well, if I were you guys, I'd tell *Stennis* to watch out for this line of SSKs, gentlemen. You might want to let the subs head into the briarpatch first, to clean things out, like."

"We can do that, but I'm worried about the others," Chambers admitted.

"Conn, sonar."

"Conn, aye." Lieutenant Ken Shaw had the midwatch.

"Possible sonar contact bearing zero-six-zero ... probably a submerged contact . . . very faint, sir," the sonar chief reported.

The drill was automatic after all the practice they'd undergone on the trips from Bremerton and Pearl. The fire-control-tracking party immediately started a plot. A tech on the ray-path analyzer took data directly from the sonar instruments and from that tried to determine the probable range to the target. The computer required only a second.

"That's a direct-path signal, sir. Range is under twenty thousand yards."

Dutch Claggett hadn't really been asleep. In the way of captains, he'd been lying in his bunk, eyes closed, even dreaming something meaningless and confusing about a day fishing on the beach with the fish behind him on the sand and creeping closer to his back, when the call had gone out from sonar. Somehow he'd come completely awake, and was now in the attack center, standing barefoot in his underwear. He checked the room to determine depth, course, and speed, then headed into sonar to get his own look at the instruments.

"Talk to me, Chief."

"Right here on the sixty-hertz line." The chief tapped the screen with his

grease pencil. It came and went and came and went, but kept coming back, just a series of dots trickling down the screen, all on the same frequency line. The bearing was changing slowly right to left.

"They've been at sea for more than three weeks . . ." Claggett thought aloud.

"Long time for a diesel boat," the chief agreed. "Maybe heading back in for refueling?"

Claggett leaned in closer, as though proximity to the screen would make a difference. "Could be. Or maybe he's just changing position. Makes sense that they'd have a patrol line offshore. Keep me posted."

"Aye, Cap'n."

"Well?" Claggett asked the tracking party.

"First cut on range is fourteen thousand yards, base course is westerly, speed about six knots."

The contact was easily within range of his ADCAP torpedoes, Claggett saw. But the mission didn't allow him to do anything about it. Wasn't that just great?

"Let's get two weapons warmed up," the Captain said. "When we have a good track on our friend, we evade to the south. If he closes on us, we try to keep out of his way, and we can shoot only if there's no choice." He didn't even have to look around to know what his crewmen thought of that. He could hear the change in how they breathed.

"What do you think?" Mary Pat Foley asked.

"Interesting," Jack said after a moment's contemplation of the fax from Langley.

"It's a long-ball opportunity." This was the voice of Ed Foley. "But it's one hell of a gamble."

"They're not even sure he's there," Ryan said, rereading the signal. It bore all the marks of something from John Clark. Honest. Decisive. Positive. The man knew how to think on his feet, and though often a guy at the bottom of the food chain, he tended to see the big picture very clearly from down there. "I have to go upstairs with this one, guys."

"Don't trip on the way," MP advised with a smile he could almost hear. She was still a cowgirl on field operations. "I recommend a *Go-Mission* on this one."

"And you, Ed?" Jack asked.

"It's a risk, but sometimes you go with what the guy in the field says. If we want a political resolution for this situation, well, then we have to have a tame political figure to lean on. We need the guy, and this might be our only way to get him out alive." The National Security Advisor could hear the gritted teeth on the other end of the STU-6 circuit. Both the Foleys were true to form. More importantly, they were in agreement.

"I'll be back to you in twenty minutes." Ryan switched over to his regular phone. "I need to see the Boss right now," he told the President's executive secretary.

The sun was rising for yet another hot, windless day. Admiral Dubro realized that he was losing weight. The waistband on his khaki trousers was looser than usual, and he had to reef in his belt a little more. His two carriers were now in regular contact with the Indians. Sometimes they came close enough for a visual, though more often some Harrier's look-down radar just took a snapshot from fifty or so miles away. Worse, his orders were to let them see his ships. Why the *hell* wasn't he heading east for the Straits of Malacca? There was a real war to fight. He'd come to regard the possible Indian invasion of Sri Lanka as a personal insult, but Sri Lanka wasn't U.S. territory, and the Marianas were, and his were the only carriers Dave Seaton had.

Okay, so the approach wouldn't exactly be covert. He had to pass through one of several straits to reenter the Pacific Ocean, all of them about as busy as Times Square at noon. There was even the off-chance of a sub there, but he had ASW ships, and he could pounce on any submarine that tried to hinder his passage. But his orders were to remain in the 10, and to be *seen* doing so.

The word was out among the crew, of course. He hadn't made even a token effort to keep things quiet. It would never have worked in any case, and his people had a right to know what was going on, in anticipation of entering the fray. They needed to know, to get their backs up, to generate an extra determination before shifting from a peacetime mentality to that of a shooting war—but once you were ready, you had to *do* it. And they weren't.

The result was the same for him as for every other man or woman in the battle force: searing frustration, short temper, and a building rage. The day before, one of his Tomcat drivers had blown *between* two Indian Harriers, with perhaps ten feet of separation, just to show them who knew how to fly and who didn't, and while that had probably put the fear of God into the visitors, it wasn't terribly professional ... even though Mike Dubro could remember what it was like to be a lieutenant, junior grade, and could also imagine himself doing the same thing. That hadn't made the personal dressing-down any easier. He'd had to do it, and had also known afterward that the flight crew in question would go back to their quarters muttering about the dumb old fart on the flag bridge who didn't know what it was like to drive fighter planes, 'cause the Spads he'd grown up with had probably used windup keys to get off the boat . . .

"If they take the first shot, we're going to get hurt," Commander Harrison observed after announcing that *their* dawn patrol had shown up right on schedule.

"If they put an Exocet into us, we'll pipe 'Sweepers, man your brooms,' Ed." It was a lame attempt at humor, but Dubro didn't feel very humorous at the moment.

"Not if they get lucky and catch a JP bunker." Now his operations officer was turning pessimistic. *Not good,* the battle-force commander thought.

"Show 'em we care," Dubro ordered.

A few moments later the screening ships lit off their fire-control radars and locked on to the Indian intruders. Through his binoculars Dubro could see that the nearest Aegis cruiser had white missiles sitting in her launch rails, and then they trained out, as did the target-illumination radars. The message was

clear: *Keep away.*

He could have ordered another wrathful dispatch to Pearl Harbor, but Dave Seaton had enough on his plate, and the real decisions were being made in Washington by people who didn't understand the problem.

"Is it worth doing?"

"Yes, sir," Ryan replied, having come to his own conclusion on the walk to the President's office. It meant putting two friends at additional risk, but that was their job, and making the decision was his—partly anyway. It was easy to say such things, even knowing that because of them he'd sleep badly if at all. "The reasons are obvious."

"And if it fails?"

"Two of our people are in grave danger, but—"

"But that's what they're for?" Durling asked, not entirely kindly.

"They're both friends of mine, Mr. President. If you think I like the idea of —"

"Settle down," the President said. "We have a lot of people at risk, and you know what? *Not* knowing who they are makes it harder instead of easier. I've learned that one the hard way." Roger Durling looked down at his desk, at all the administrative briefing papers and other matters that didn't have the first connection to the crisis in the Pacific but had to be handled nonetheless. The government of the United States of America was a huge business, and he couldn't ignore any of it, no matter how important some area might have suddenly become. Did Ryan understand that?

Jack saw the papers, too. He didn't have to know what they were, exactly. None had classified cover sheets on them. They were the ordinary day-to-day crap that the man had to deal with. The Boss had to time-share his brain with so many tasks. It hardly seemed fair, especially for someone who hadn't exactly gone looking for the job. But that was destiny at work, and Durling had voluntarily undertaken the Vice President's office because his character required service to others, as, indeed, did Ryan's. They really were two of a kind, Jack thought.

"Mr. President, I'm sorry I said that. Yes, sir, I have considered the risks, but also, yes, that is their job. Moreover, it's John's recommendation. His idea, I mean. He's a good field officer, and he knows both the risks and the potential rewards. Mary Pat and Ed agree, and also recommend a Go on this one. The decision necessarily is yours to make, but those are the recommendations."

"Are we grasping at straws?" Durling wanted to know.

"Not a straw, sir. Potentially a very strong branch."

"I hope they're careful about it."

"Oh, this is just great," Chavez observed. The Russian PSM automatic pistol was of .215 caliber, smaller in diameter even than the .22 rimfire that American kids—at least the politically incorrect ones—learned to shoot at Boy Scout camps. It was also the standard sidearm of the Russian military and

police forces, which perhaps explained why the Russian criminal element had such contempt for the local cops.

"Well, we do have our secret weapon out in the car," Clark said, hefting the gun in his hand. At least the silencer improved its balance somewhat. It was renewed proof of something he'd thought for years. Europeans didn't know beans about handguns.

"We're going to need it, too." The Russian Embassy did have a pistol range for its security officers. Chavez clipped a target to the rack and cranked it downrange.

"Take the suppressor off," John said.

"Why?" Ding asked.

"Look at it." Chavez did, and saw that the Russian version was filled with steel wool. "It's only good for five or six shots."

The range did have ear protectors, at least. Clark filled a magazine with eight of the bottle-necked rounds, pointed downrange, and fired off three shots. The gun was quite noisy, its high-powered cartridge driving a tiny bullet at warp speed. He longed for a suppressed .22 automatic. Well, at least it was accurate.

Scherenko watched in silence, angered at the Americans' distaste for his country's weapons and embarrassed because they might well be right. He'd learned to shoot years before, and hadn't shown much aptitude for it. It was a skill rarely used by an intelligence officer, Hollywood movies notwithstanding. But it was clearly not true of the Americans, both of whom were hitting the bull's-eye, five meters away, firing pairs of shots called "double-taps" in the business. Finished, Clark cleared his weapon, reloaded a magazine, and took another, which he filled and slid into a back pocket. Chavez did the same.

"If you ever come to Washington," Ding observed, "we'll show you what we use."

"And the 'secret weapon' you mentioned?" Scherenko asked the senior man.

"It's a secret." Clark headed for the door, with Chavez in his wake. They had all day to wait for their chance, if that was what it was, and get their nerves even more frayed.

It was a characteristically stormy day at Shemya. Sleet driven by a fifty-knot gale pelted the base's single runway and the noise threatened to disturb the sleep of the fighter pilots. Inside the hangars, the eight fighter aircraft were crammed together to protect them from the elements. It was especially necessary for the F-22s, as no one had yet fully determined what damage the elements could do to their smooth surfaces, and thus the radar cross section. This was not the time to find out. The storm's precipitation should pass in a few hours, the weather weenies said, though the gale-force winds could well last another month. Outside, the ground crews worried about the tie-downs on the tanker and AWACS birds, and struggled around in bulky cold-weather gear to make certain everything was secure.

The other aspects of base-security were handled at the Cobra Dane array. Though it looked like the screen from an old drive-in theater, it was in fact a massive version of the solid-state radar array used by the Japanese E-767s, or

for that matter the Aegis cruisers and destroyers in both contending navies. Originally emplaced to monitor Soviet missile tests and later to do SDI research, it was powerful enough to scan thousands of miles into space, and hundreds in the atmosphere. Its electronic probes swept constantly now, searching for intruders, but so far finding only commercial airliners—but those were watched very closely indeed. An F-15E Strike Eagle loaded with air-to-air missiles could be sent aloft in ten minutes if one of them looked the least bit dangerous.

The dreary routine continued through the day. For a brief few hours there was enough gray illumination through the clouds to suggest that the sun might be up, in a theoretical sense, but by the time the pilots were roused, the view out the windows of their quarters might as well have been painted black, for even the runway lights were out, lest they give some unwelcome visitor a visual aid in finding the base through the gloom.

"Questions?"

The operation had been planned rapidly but carefully, and the four lead pilots had taken a hand in it, then tested it the night before, and while there were risks, well, hell, there always were.

"You Eagle jocks think you can handle this?" the most senior Rapier driver asked. He was a lieutenant colonel, which didn't protect him from the reply.

"Don't worry, sir," a major said. "It's such a *nice* ass to look at." Then she blew a kiss.

The Colonel, actually an engineering test pilot pulled away from developmental work under way on the F-22 with the 57th Weapons Wing at Nellis Air Force Base, knew the "old" Air Force only from the movies and stories he'd heard when he'd been a youngster coming up the line, but he took the insult in the spirit in which it had been offered. The Strike Eagles might not be stealthy, but they were pretty damned mean. They were about to engage in a combat mission, and rank didn't matter as much as competence and confidence.

"Okay, people"—once he would have just said *men*—"we're time-critical on this one. Let's get it on."

The tanker crews chuckled to themselves about the fighter-jock mentality, and how the women in the Air Force had really bought into it. The Major was a dish, one of them thought. Maybe when she grew up she could come and fly United, he observed to the captain who'd be right-seating for him.

"A man could do worse," the Southwest Airlines first officer noted. The tankers got off twenty minutes later, followed by one of the E-3Bs.

The fighters, typically, went off last. The crews all wore their cold-weather nomex flight-suits and made the proper gestures about survival gear, which was really a joke over the North Pacific this time of year, but rules were rules. G-suits went on last of all, uncomfortable and restrictive as they were. One by one, the Rapier drivers walked to their birds, the Eagle crews two-by-two. The colonel who'd lead the mission ostentatiously tore off the Velcro RAPIER patch and replaced it with the counterculture one Lockheed employees had made up, the silhouette of the original P-38 Lightning overlaid with the

graceful profile of the company's newest steed, and further decorated with a whiteyellow thunderbolt. Tradition, after all, the Colonel thought, even though he hadn't been born until the last of the twinboom -38s had been sold to the strippers. He did remember building models of the first American long-range fighter, used only one time for their actual designed purpose, for which a driver named Tex Lamphier had won a little immortality. This one would not be terribly different from that day over the northern Solomons.

The fighters had to be towed out into the open, and even before they started engines, every crew member could feel the wind buffeting the fighters. It was the time when the fingers tingle on the controls and the pilots shift around a little in the seats to make everything just so. Then, one by one, the fighters lit off and taxied down to the runway's edge. The lights came back on, blue parallel lines stretching off into the gloom, and the fighters lifted off singly, a minute apart, because paired takeoffs in these weather conditions were too dangerous, and this wasn't a night for unnecessary mistakes. Three minutes later, the two flights of four formed up over the top of the clouds, where the weather was clear, with bright stars and the multicolored aurora to their right, curtains of changing colors, greens and purples as the stellar wind affected charged particles in the upper atmosphere. The curtain effect was both lovely and symbolic to the Lightning pilots.

The first hour was routine, the two quartets of aircraft cruising southwest, their anticollision lights blinking away to give visual warning of the close proximity. Systems checks were performed, instruments monitored, and stomachs settled as they approached the tanker aircraft.

The tanker crews, all reservists who flew airliners in civilian life, had taken care to locate smooth-weather areas, which the fighter drivers appreciated even though they deemed everyone else second best. It took more than forty minutes to top off everyone's fuel tanks, and then the tankers resumed their orbit, probably so that their crews could catch up on their *Wall Street Journals,* the fighter pilots all thought, heading southwest again.

Things changed now. It was time for business. Their kind.

Sandy Richter drew the mission, of course, because it had been his idea from the start, months before at Nellis Air Force Base. It had worked there, and all he had to figure out was whether it would work here as well. On that he was probably betting his life.

Richter had been in that business since he was seventeen—when he'd lied about his age and gotten away with it, being large and tough. Along the way, he'd corrected his official package, but he was still in his twenty-ninth year of service and soon to retire to a quieter life. All that time, Richter had driven snakes and only snakes. If a helicopter didn't carry weapons, then he wasn't interested. Starting with the AH-1 Huey Cobra, he had in time graduated to the AH-64 Apache and driven it into his second, briefer war in the skies over the Arabian Peninsula. Now with the last bird he would ever fly, he started the engines on the Comanche and began his 6,751st hour of flight, according to the log book.

The twin turboshaft engines spun up normally and the rotor began its

rotation. The ersatz ground crew of Rangers were hamming it up with the one fire extinguisher they had. It was about large enough to put out a cigarette, Richter thought crossly as he increased power and lifted off. The thin mountain air had a negative effect on performance, but not that much, and he'd soon be down at sea level anyway. The pilot gave his head the usual shake to make sure the helmet was securely in place and headed eastward, tracing up the wooded slopes of Shiraishi-*san*.

"There they are," the lead F-22 pilot said to himself. The first sign was chirping in his headset, immediately followed by information on his threat receiver: AIR DEFENSE RADAR, AIRBORNE, TYPE J, BEARING 213. Next came data linked over from the E-3B, which had been in place long enough to plot its location. The Sentry wasn't using its radar at all tonight. After all, the Japanese had taught the Americans a lesson the night before, and they needed time to absorb such lessons . . . RANGE TO TARGET 1 456 MILES. Still well under the horizon from the Japanese aircraft, he gave his first vocal command of the mission.

"Lightning Lead to Flight. Split into elements, now!"

Instantly, the two sets of four aircraft divided into pairs, separated by two thousand yards. In both cases the F-22s held the lead, and in both cases the trailing F-15Es tucked in dangerously close to create a radar overlap. The colonel in command flew as straight and level as his practiced skills allowed, and he smiled to himself at the memory of the major's remark. Nice ass, eh? She was the first woman to fly with the Thunderbirds. Strobe lights went off, and he hoped that the low-light gear she was wearing was working properly. The northern E-767 was now four hundred miles away. The fighters cruised in at five hundred knots, altitude thirty-five thousand feet for fuel economy.

The work schedule typical of Japanese executives made the entry less obvious than would have been the case in America. A man was in the lobby, but he was watching TV, and Clark and Chavez walked through as though they knew where they were going, and crime was not a problem in Tokyo anyway. Breathing a little rapidly, they got into an elevator and punched a button, trading a relieved look that soon changed to renewed apprehension. Ding was carrying his briefcase. Clark was not, and both were dressed in their best suits and ties and white shirts, looking for all the world like businesspeople coming in for a late night's conference on something or other. The elevator stopped five floors from the top, a level selected because of the lack of lights in the windows. Clark stuck his head out, knowing that it looked vaguely criminal to do so, but the corridor was empty.

They moved quickly and quietly around the central bearing core of the building, found the fire stairs, and started to climb. They looked for security cameras, and again, thankfully, there were none on this level. Clark checked up and down. No one else was in the stairwell. He continued to head up, looking and listening before every movement.

“Our friends are back,” one of the airborne controllers announced over the intercom. “Bearing zero-three-three, range four-two-zero kilometers. One—no, two contacts, close formation, military aircraft inbound, speed five hundred knots,” he concluded the announcement rapidly.

“Very well,” the senior controller responded evenly, selecting the display for his screen as he switched channels on his command phones. “Any radar activity to the northeast?”

“None,” the electronic-countermeasures officer replied at once. “He could be out there monitoring us, of course.”

“Wakarémas.”

The next order of business was to release the two fighters orbiting east of the Kami aircraft. Both F-15Js had recently arrived on station, and had nearly full fuel tanks. An additional call ordered two more up from Chitose Air Base. They would need about fifteen minutes to get on station, but that was fine, the senior controller thought. He had the time.

“Lock on to them,” he ordered the operator.

“Got us already, do you?” the Colonel asked himself. “Good.” He held course and speed, wanting them to get a good feel for his location and activities. The rest was mainly a matter of arithmetic. *Figure the Eagles were now about two hundred miles away, closing speed about a thousand. Six minutes to separation.* He checked his clock and commanded his eyes to sweep the skies for something a little too bright to be a star.

There was a camera on the top level of the stairs. So Yamata was a little paranoid. But even paranoids had enemies, Clark thought, noticing that the body of the camera appeared to be pointed at the next landing. Ten steps to the landing, and ten more to the next, where the door was. He decided to take a moment to think about that. Chavez turned the knob on the door to his right. It didn’t appear to be locked. Probably fire codes, Clark thought, acknowledging the information with a nod but getting out his burglar tools anyway.

“Well, what d’ya think?”

“I think I’d rather be somewhere else.” Ding had his light in his hand as John took his pistol out and screwed the suppressor in place. “Fast or slow?”

That was the only remaining choice, really. A slow approach, like people on regular business, lost, perhaps . . . no, not this time. Clark held up one finger, took a deep breath and bounded upwards. Four seconds later he twisted the knob at the top landing and flung the door open. John dove to the floor, his pistol out and training in on the target. Ding jumped past him, stood, and aimed his own weapon.

The guard outside the door had been looking the other way when the stairway entrance swung open. He turned in automatic alarm and saw a large

man lying sideways on the floor and possibly aiming a gun at him. That caused him to reach for his own as his eyes locked on the potential targets. There was a second man, holding something else that—

At this range the light had almost a physical force. The three million candles of energy turned the entire world into the face of the sun, and then the energy overload invaded the man's central nervous system along the trigeminal nerve, which runs from the back of the eye along the base of the brain, branching out through the neural network that controls the voluntary muscles. The effect, as in Africa, was to overload the guard's nervous system. He fell to the floor like a rag doll, his twitching right hand still grasping a pistol. The light was sufficiently bright that reflection from the whitepainted walls dazzled Chavez slightly, but Clark had remembered to shut his eyes and raced for the double doors, which he drove apart with his shoulder.

One man was in view, just getting up from a chair in front of the TV, his face surprised and alarmed at the unannounced entry. There wasn't time for mercy. Clark brought the gun up in both hands and squeezed twice, both shots entering the man's forehead. John felt Ding's hand on his shoulder, which allowed him to move right, almost running now, down a hallway, looking into each room. *Kitchen,* he thought. *You always found people in the—*

He did. This man was almost his height, and his gun was already out as he moved for the hallway that led to the foyer, calling out a name and a question, but he, too, was a little slow, and his gun was still down, and he met a man with his pistol up and ready. It was the last thing he would ever see. Clark needed another half a minute to check out the rest of the luxury apartment, but found only empty rooms.

"Yevgeniy Pavlovich?" he called.

"Vanya, this way!"

Clark moved back left, taking a quick look at both of the men he'd killed as he did so, just to make sure, really. He knew that he'd remember these bodies, as he did all the others, knew that they'd come back to him, and he'd try to explain away their deaths, as he always did.

Koga was sitting there, remarkably pale as Chavez/ Chekov finished checking out the room. The guy in front of the TV hadn't managed to clear the pistol from his shoulder holster—probably an idea he'd gotten from a movie, Clark thought. The things were damned near useless if you needed your weapon in a hurry.

"Clear left," Chavez said, remembering to speak in Russian.

"Clear right." Clark commanded himself to calm down, looking at the guy by the TV, wondering which of the people they'd killed had been responsible for the death of Kim Norton. Well, probably not the one outside.

"Who are you?" Koga demanded with a mixture of shock and anger, not quite remembering that they had met before. Clark took a breath before answering.

"Koga-san, we are the people who are rescuing you."

"You killed them!" The man pointed with a shaking hand.

"We can speak about that later, perhaps. Will you come with us, please? You are not in danger from us, sir."

Koga wasn't inhuman. Clark admired his concern for the dead men, even

though they had clearly not been friends. But it was time to get him the hell out of here.

"Which one was Kaneda?" Chavez asked. The former Prime Minister pointed to the one in the room. Ding walked over for a last look and managed not to say anything before directing his eyes to Clark, his expression one that only the two could possibly understand.

"Vanya, time to leave."

His threat receiver was going slightly nuts. The screen was all reds and yellows, and the female voice was telling him that he'd been detected, but in this case he knew better than the computer did, Richter thought, and it was nice to know that the goddamned things didn't quite get everything right.

Just the flying part was hard enough, and though the Apache might have had the agility for the mission, it was better to be in the RAH-66. His body displayed no obvious tension. Years of practice allowed him to sit comfortably in the armored seat, his right forearm resting on the space provided while his hand worked the sidestick controller. His head traced regularly around the sky, and his eyes automatically compared the real horizon with the one generated by the sensing gear located in the aircraft's nose. The Tokyo skyline was just perfect for what he was doing. The various buildings had to be generating all manner of confusing signals for the radar aircraft he was closing on, and the best of computer systems could not defeat this sort of clutter. Better yet, he had the time to do it right.

The river Tone would take him most of the way he needed to go, and on the south side of the river was a rail line, and on the rail line was a train that would go all the way to Choshi. The train was cruising at over a hundred knots, and he took position right over it, one eye on the train below while another kept track of a moving indicator on his threatreceiver display. He held one hundred feet over the tops of the catenary towers, pacing the train exactly, just over the last car in the "consist."

"That's funny." The operator on Kami-Two noticed a blip, enhanced by the computer systems, closing in on the position of his aircraft. He keyed the intercom for the senior controller. "Possible low-level inbound," he reported, highlighting the contact and crossloading it for the crew commander.

"It's a train," the man replied at once, comparing the location with a map overlay. The problem with flying these damned things too close to land. The standard discrimination software, originally purchased from the Americans, had been modified, but not in all details. The airborne radar could track anything that moved, but there wasn't enough computer power in all the world to classify and display all the contacts that would develop from cars and trucks moving on the highways under the aircraft. To de-clutter the screens, nothing going slower than one hundred fifty kilometers per hour was passed through the computer-filtering system, but over land even that was not good enough, not over the country with the world's finest trains. Just to be sure, the

senior officer watched the blip for a few seconds. Yes, it was following the mainline from Tokyo to Choshi. It couldn't possibly be a jet aircraft. A helicopter, theoretically, could do something like this, but from the weak character of the signal, it was probably just scatter off the metal roof of the train, and probably reflection off the catenary towers.

"Adjust your MTI-discriminator to two hundred," he ordered his people. It took three seconds for all of them to do that, and sure enough, that moving blip by the Tone and two other more obvious ground contacts disappeared. They had more interesting things to do, since -Two was crossloading the "take" from Kamis Four and Six and then downloading it to the Air Defense HQ just outside Tokyo. The Americans were probing their defenses again, and probably, again, with their advanced F-22s, trying to see if they could defeat the Kamis. Well, this time the reception wouldn't be quite so friendly. Eight F-15 Eagle interceptors were now up, four under the control of each E-767. If the American fighters came closer, they'd be made to pay for it.

He had to risk one open transmission, and even over an encrypted burst-channel it made the Colonel nervous, but the business entailed risks under the best of circumstances.

"Lightning Lead to flight. Separate in five—four—three—two—one—*Separate!"*

He pulled back on the stick, jerking his fighter up and away from the Strike Eagle that had spent the last half hour in his jetwash. At the same instant his right hand flipped off the radar transponder that he'd had on to boost the return signal the Japanese AEW aircraft had been taking off his aircraft. Behind and below, the F-15E and its female flight crew would be diving slightly and turning left. The Lightning climbed rapidly, in the process losing almost all of its forward velocity. The Colonel punched burners for rapid acceleration and used the thrust-vector capability of the aircraft to initiate a radical maneuver in the opposite direction, greatly speeding the separation.

The Japanese radar might or might not have gotten some sort of return off his fighter, the Colonel knew, but he knew how the radar system was working now: It was operating at high power and getting all sorts of spurious returns as a result, which the computer system had to classify before presenting them to the system controllers. In essence it did a job no different from that of human operator, albeit more quickly and efficiently, but it was not perfect, as he and the other three Lightnings were about to prove.

"Turning south," the controller reported—unnecessarily, as four separate people were now monitoring the progress of the inbounds. Neither he nor his fellows could know that the computer had noted a few ghostly returns turning north, but these had been weaker than other returns that were not moving rapidly enough to be classified as aircraft. Nor did they mimic the probable flight paths of aircraft. Then things got harder.

"Getting jamming from the inbounds."

* * *

The lead Lightning was now in a nearly vertical climb. There was danger in this, since the flight profile offered the E-767 the least stealthy aspect of the aircraft, but it was also offered no lateral motion to speak of, and so could well appear to be a ghost return, especially in the electronic clutter being generated by the powerful jammers on the Strike Eagles. In less than thirty seconds, the Lightnings tipped over to level flight at an altitude of fifty-five thousand feet. The Colonel was paying very close attention to his threat systems now. If the Japanese had him, they would show it by using their electronic scanning to hammer his fighter with radar energy . . . but they weren't. The stealthy nature of his fighter was enough that he was lost amid the trash-returns. The system caught side lobes now. The E-767 had shifted to its high-frequency fire-control mode, and was *not* targeted on him. Okay. He boosted power to supercruise, and his Lightning accelerated to a thousand miles per hour as the pilot selected fire-control mode for his HUD system.

"One o'clock high. I have him, Sandy," the backseater reported. "He even has his a/c lights on."

The train had stopped at a suburban station, and the Comanche had left it behind, cruising now at one hundred twenty knots toward the coastal town. Richter flexed his fingers one last time, looked up, and saw the aircraft's strobe lights far overhead. He was almost under it now, and good as its radar might be, it wouldn't be able to look straight down through the body of the airframe itself . . . yes, the center of his threat screen was black now.

"Here we go," he said over the intercom. He jammed his throttles to the firewall, deliberately overspooling the engines as he pulled back sharply in the sidestick. The Comanche leaped upwards in a spiraling climb. The only real worry here was his engine temperature. They were designed to take abuse, but this would take it to the very limit. A warning indicator appeared in his helmet display, a vertical bar that started growing in height and changing color almost as rapidly as the numbers changed on the altitude display.

"Whoa," the backseater breathed, then he looked down and selected the weapons display for his screens, the better to utilize his time before going back to scanning outside. "Negative traffic."

Which figured, Richter thought. They wouldn't want people cluttering up the air around something as valuable as this target. That was fine. He could see it now, as his helicopter shot through ten thousand feet, climbing like the fighter plane it really was, rotor-driven or not.

He could see it in his targeting display now, still too far away to shoot, but there, a blip in a little box in the center of the head-up display. Time for a check. He activated his missile illumination systems. The F-22 had an LPI radar, meaning that there was a low probability of interception at the other end. That proved optimistic.

“We just took a hit,” the countermeasures officer said. “We just took a high-frequency hit, bearing unknown,” he went on, looking at his instruments for additional data.

“Probably a scatter from us,” the senior controller said, busy now with vectoring his fighters onto the stillinbound contacts.

“No, no, frequency wasn’t right for that.” The officer ran another instrument check, but there was nothing else to support the odd feeling that had just turned his arms cold.

“Engine-heat warning. Engine-heat warning,” the voice was telling him because he’d ignored the visual display rather blatantly, the onboard computer thought.

“I know, honey,” Richter replied.

Over the Nevada desert, he’d managed a zoom-climb to twenty-one thousand feet, so far beyond the normal flight envelope of a helicopter that it had actually frightened him, Richter remembered, but that had been in relatively warm air, and it was colder here. He blazed through twenty thousand feet, still with a respectable climb rate, just as the target changed course, turning away from him. It seemed to be orbiting at about three hundred knots, probably using one engine for propulsion and the other to generate power for its radar. He hadn’t been briefed on it, but it seemed reasonable enough. What mattered was that he had seconds to get within range, but the huge turbofan engines on the converted airliner were inviting targets for his Stingers.

“Just in range, Sandy.”

“Roger.” His left hand selected missiles from his weapons panel. The side doors on the aircraft snapped open. Attached to each of them were three Stinger missiles. With his last vestige of control, he slued the aircraft around, flipped the cover off the trigger switch, and squeezed six times. All of the missiles blazed off their rails, arcing upwards toward the aircraft two miles away. With that, Richter eased way back on the throttles and nosed over, diving and cooling his abused engines, watching the ground while his backseater followed the progress of the missiles.

The first Stinger burned out and fell short. The remaining five did better, and though two of them lost power before reaching the target, four of them found it, three to the right engine and one to the left.

“Hits, multiple hits.”

The E-767, at low speed, didn’t have much of a chance. The Stingers had small warheads, but the civilian-spec engines on the aircraft were poorly designed to deal with damage. Both immediately lost power, and the one that had actually been powering the aircraft came apart first. Fragments of turbine blades exploded through the safety casing and ripped into the right wing, severing the flight controls and destroying aerodynamic performance. The converted airliner rolled immediately right, and did not recover, its flight crew surprised at the unannounced disaster and quite unable to deal with it. Half of the starboard wing separated from the aircraft almost at once, and on the ground, radar operators saw the alpha-numeric display marking the position of Kami-Two flip to the emergency setting of 7711 and then simply disappear.

"That's a hard kill, Sandy."

"Roger." The Comanche was falling rapidly now, heading toward the clutter of the coast. Engine temps were back to normal, and Richter hoped he hadn't done them permanent harm. As for the rest, he'd killed people before.

"Kami-Two just dropped off the air," the communications officer reported.

"What?" the senior controller asked, distracted by his intercept mission.

"Garbled call, explosion, something like that, then the data links just dropped off."

"Stand by, I have to vector my Eagles in."

It had to be getting twitchy for the 15-Echoes, the Colonel knew. Their job for the moment was to be bait, to draw the Japanese Eagles out farther over the water while the Lightnings went in behind them to chop down their AEW support and spring the trap. The good news for the moment was that the third E-767 had just gone off the air. So the other side of the mission had happened as planned. That was nice for a change. And so, for the rest . . .

"Two, this is lead, executing, now!" The Colonel flipped his illumination radars on, twenty miles from the orbiting AEW aircraft. Next he opened the weapons-bay doors to give the AMRAAM missiles a chance to see their quarry. Both One and Two had acquisition, and he triggered both off. "Fox-Two, Fox-Two on the North Guy with two Slammers!"

The opening of the weapons bay instantly made the Lightnings about as stealthy as a tall building. Blips appeared on five different screens, along with additional warnings as to the speed and heading of the newly discovered aircraft. The additional word from the countermeasures officer was the final voice of doom.

"We're being illuminated at very close range, bearing zero-two-seven!"

"What? Who is that?" He had problems of his own, with his Eagles about to launch missiles at the incoming Americans. Kami-Six had just switched to fire-control mode, to allow the interceptors to fire in the blind-launch mode, as they'd done with the B-1 bombers. He couldn't stop that now, the senior officer told himself.

The last warning was far too late for counteraction. Just five miles out, the two missiles switched on their own homing radars. They were coming in at Mach-3+, driven by solid-fuel rocket motors toward a huge radar target, and the AIM-120 AMRAAM, known to its users as the Slammer, was one of the new generation of brilliant weapons The pilot finally got the word, listening in to the countermeasures channel. He rolled his aircraft left, attempting a nearly impossible split-S dive that he knew was a waste of effort because at the last second he saw the yellow glow of rocket exhaust.

"Kill," Lightning Lead whispered to himself. "Lightning Flight, this is lead. North Guy is down."

"Lead, this is Three, South Guy is down," he heard next.

And now, the Colonel thought, using a particularly cruel Air Force

euphemism, it was time to kill some baby seals. The four Lightnings were between the Japanese coast and eight F-15J Eagle interceptors. To seaward of them, the F-15E Strike Eagles would be turning back in, lighting off their own radars and loosing their own AMRAAMs. Some would make kills, and the Japanese fighters that survived them would run for home, right into his flight of four.

The ground-control radars couldn't see the aerial combat taking place. It was too far out and below the radar horizon. They did see one aircraft racing for their coast, one of theirs by the transponder code. Then it stopped cold in the air, and the transponder went off. In the air-defense headquarters, data downloaded from the three dead AEW aircraft gave no clues, except for one fact—the war their country had started was now very real and had taken an unexpected turn.

43

Dancing to the Tune

"I know you're not Russians," Koga said, sitting in the back of the car with Chavez while Clark did the driving.

"Why would you think that?" John asked innocently.

"Because Yamata thinks that I have been in contact with Americans. You two are the only gaijin with whom I have spoken since this madness began. What is going on here?" the politician demanded.

"Sir, what is going on right now is that we rescued you from people who wanted you dead."

"Yamata would not be so foolish as that," Koga retorted, not yet recovered from the shock of seeing violence uncontained by the borders of a TV cabinet.

"He has started a war, Koga-san. What is your death against that?" the man in the driver's seat inquired delicately.

"So you are Americans," he persisted.

Oh, what the hell, Clark thought. "Yes, sir, we are."

"Spies?"

"Intelligence officers," Chavez preferred. "The man who was in the room with you—"

"The one *you* killed, you mean? Kaneda?"

"Yes, sir. He murdered an American citizen, a girl named Kimberly Norton, and I am actually rather happy that I took him down."

"Who was she?"

"She was Goto's mistress," Clark explained. "And when she became a political threat to your new Prime Minister, Raizo Yamata decided to have her eliminated. We came to your country just to get her home. That was all," Clark went on, telling what was partially a lie.

"None of this is necessary," Koga said discordantly. "If your Congress had just given me a chance to—"

"Sir, maybe that's right. I don't know if it is or not, but maybe it is," Chavez said. "That doesn't much matter now, does it?"

"Tell me, then, what does matter?"

"Ending this goddamned thing before too many people get hurt," Clark suggested. "I've fought in wars and they are not fun. Lots of young kids get to die before they have the chance to get married and have kids of their own, and that's bad, okay?" Clark paused before going on. "It's bad for my country, and for damned sure it's going to be worse for yours."

"Yamata thinks—"

"Yamata is a businessman," Chavez said. "Sir, you'd better understand this. He doesn't know what he's started."

"Yes, you Americans are very good at killing. I saw that myself fifteen minutes ago."

"In that case, Mr. Koga, you also saw that we left one man alive."

Clark's angry reply stopped conversation cold for several seconds. Koga was slow to realize that it was true. The one outside the door had been alive when they'd walked over his body, moaning and shuddering as though from electric shocks, but definitely alive.

"Why didn't you . . . ?"

"There was no reason to kill him," Chavez said. "I'm not going to apologize for that Kaneda bastard. He had it coming, and when I came into the room, he was reaching for a weapon, and that's tough cookies, sir. But this isn't a movie. We don't kill people for amusement, and we came in to rescue you because somebody has to end this goddamned war—okay?"

"Even then—even then, what your Congress did . . . how can my country survive economically—"

"Will it be better for anybody if the war goes on?" Clark asked. "If Japan and China kick off against Russia, what happens to you then? Who do you suppose will really pay the price for that mistake? China? I don't think so."

The first word in Washington came via satellite. One of NSA's orbiting "hitchhiker" ELINT birds happened to be overhead to record the termination of signal—that was the NSA term for it—from three AEW aircraft. Other NSA listening posts recorded radio chatter that lasted for several minutes before ending. Analysts were trying to make sense of it now, the report in Ryan's hands told him.

Only one kill, the Colonel told himself. Well, he'd have to be content with that. His wingman had bagged the last of the -15Js. The southern element had gotten three, and the Strike Eagles had gotten the other four when their support had been cut off, leaving them suddenly and unexpectedly vulnerable. Presumably the ZORRO team had gotten the third E-767. On the whole, not a bad night's work, but a long one, he thought, forming his flight of four back up for the rendezvous with the tanker and the three hours back to Shemya. The hardest part was the enforced radio silence. Some of his people had to be counting coup in a big way, full of themselves in the way of fighter pilots who had done the job and lived to tell the tale, and wanting to talk through it. That would change shortly, he thought, the enforced silence forcing him to think about his first-ever air-to-air kill. Thirty people on the aircraft. Damn, he was supposed to feel *good* about a kill, wasn't he? So why didn't he?

Something interesting had just happened, Dutch Claggett thought. They were still catching bits and pieces of the SSK in their area, but whoever it was, it had turned north and away from them, allowing *Tennessee* to remain on station. In the way of submarines on patrol, he'd come close enough to the

surface to put up his ESM antenna and track the Japanese radar aircraft for the past day or so, learning what he could for possible forwarding to others. Electronicintelligence gathering had been a submarine mission since before his application to Annapolis, and his crew included two electronics techs who showed a real aptitude for it. But they'd had two on the monitoring systems that had just gone—poof! Then they'd caught some radio chatter, excited by the sound of it, and one by one those voices had gone off the air, somewhere to his north.

"You suppose we just got up on the scoreboard, Cap'n?" Lieutenant Shaw asked, expecting the Captain to know, because captains were supposed to know everything, even though they didn't.

"Seems that way."

"Conn, sonar."

"Conn, aye."

"Our friend is snorting again, bearing zero-zero-nine, probable CZ contact," the sonar chief thought.

"I'll start the track," Shaw said, heading aft for the plotting table.

"So what happened?" Durling asked.

"We killed three of their radar aircraft, and the strike force annihilated their fighter patrol." This was not a time, however, for gloating.

"This is the twitchiest part?"

Ryan nodded. "Yes, sir. We need them confused for a while longer, but for now they know something is happening. They know—"

"They know it might be a real war after all. Any word on Koga?"

"Not yet."

It was four in the morning and all three men were showing it. Koga was over the stress period, for the moment, trying to use his head instead of his emotions while his two hosts— that was how he thought of them, rather to his surprise—drove him around and wondered how smart it was to have left the one guard alive outside Yamata's condo. He would be up and moving by now? Would he call the police? Someone else? What would result from the night's adventure?

"How do I know that I can trust you?" Koga asked after a lengthy silence.

Clark's hands squeezed the wheel hard enough to leave fingerprints in the plastic. It was the movies and TV that caused dumbass questions like that. In those media, spies did all manner of complicated things in the hope of outsmarting the equally brilliant adversaries against whom they were pitted. Reality was different. You kept operations as simple as you could because even the simplest things could blow up on you, and if the other guy was so goddamned brilliant, you wouldn't even know who the hell he was; and tricking people into doing the things you wanted them to do was something that only worked if you arranged a single option for the other guy, and even then he'd often as not do something unexpected anyway.

"Sir, we just put our lives at risk for you, but, okay, don't trust us at all. I'm not dumb enough to tell you what to do. I don't know your politics well enough for that. What I'm telling you is very simple. We will be doing things —what all of them are, I do not know anyway, so I can't tell you. We want to end this war with a minimum of violence, but there will be violence. You also want the war to end, right?"

"Of course I want it to end," Koga said, his manners not helped by his fatigue.

"Well, sir, you do whatever you think is best, okay? You see, Mr. Koga, you don't have to trust us, but we sure as hell have to trust you to do what's best for your country and for ours." Clark's comment, exasperated as it was, turned out to be the best thing he could have said.

"Oh." The politician thought that one over. "Yes. That's right, isn't it?"

"Where can we drop you off?"

"Kimura's home," Koga said at once.

"Fine." Clark dredged up the location and turned the car onto Route 122 to head for it. Then he reminded himself that he'd learned one highly important thing this night, and that after getting this guy to a place of relative safety, his top priority was getting *that* information to Washington. The empty streets helped, and though he wished for coffee to keep himself alert, it was a mere forty minutes to the crowded neighborhood of diminutive tract homes where the MITI official lived. The lights were already on when they pulled up to the house, and they just let Koga out to walk to the door. lsamu Kimura answered the door and took his guest inside with a mouth almost as wide as the entrance to his home.

Who ever said these people didn't show emotion? Clark asked himself.

"Who do you suppose the leaker is?" Ding asked, still in the backseat.

"Good boy—you caught that, too."

"Hey, I'm the only college graduate in the car, Mr. C." Ding opened the computer to draft the dispatch to Langley, again via Moscow.

"They did *what?*" Yamata snarled into the phone.

"This is serious." It was General Arima, and he'd just gotten the word from Tokyo himself. "They smashed our air defenses and just went away afterwards."

"How?" the industrialist demanded. Hadn't they told him that the Kami aircraft were invincible?

"They don't know how yet, but I'm telling you this is very serious. They have the ability to raid the Home Islands now."

Think, Yamata told himself, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. "General, they still cannot invade our islands, can they? They can sting us, but they cannot really hurt us, and as long as we have nuclear weapons . . ."

"Unless they try something else. The Americans are not acting as we have been given to expect."

That remark stung the next Governor of Saipan. Today was supposed to have been the day on which he'd begin his campaign. Well, yes, he'd overestimated the effect his action would have on the American financial

markets, but they *had* crippled the American fleet, and they *had* occupied the islands, and America did *not* have the ability to storm even one of the Marianas, and America did not have the political will to launch a nuclear attack on his country. Therefore they were still ahead of the game. Was it to be expected that America would not fight back somewhat? Of course not. Yamata lifted his TV controller and switched it on, catching the beginning of a CNN Headline News broadcast, and there was the American correspondent, standing right on the edge of some dock or other, and there behind her were two American carriers, still in their docks, still unable to do anything.

"What does intelligence tell us about the Indian Ocean?" he asked the General.

"The two American carriers are still there," Arima assured him. "They were seen both visually and on radar yesterday, within four hundred kilometers of Sri Lanka."

"Then they cannot really hurt us, can they?"

"Well, no, really they cannot," the General admitted. "But we must make other arrangements."

"Then I suggest you make them, Arima-san," Yamata replied in a voice so polite as to constitute a stinging insult.

The worst part was not knowing what had happened. The data links from the three dead Kami aircraft had ended with the elimination of -Two. All the rest of their information was inferred rather than actually known. Ground-based monitoring stations had copied the emissions of -Four and -Six and then seen those emissions stop within the same minute. There had been no obvious alarm for any of the three radar aircraft. They'd just stopped transmitting, leaving nothing more behind than floating debris on the rolling ocean. The fighters—well, they did have tapes of the radio conversations. It had taken less than four minutes for that. First the confident, professionally laconic comments of fighter pilots closing on targets, then a series of *What?*s, followed by hurried calls to go active with their radars, more calls that they'd been illuminated. One pilot had reported a hit, then immediately gone off the air—but a hit from *what?* How could the same aircraft that killed the Kamis have gotten the fighters, too? The Americans had only four of their expensive new F-22s. And the Kamis had been tracking those. What evil magic had . . . ? But that was the problem. They didn't know.

The air-defense specialists, and the engineers who had developed the world's finest airborne radar systems, shook their heads, looking down, feeling immense personal disgrace and not knowing why. Of the ten such aircraft built, five were destroyed, and only four others available for service, and all they knew for sure was that they couldn't risk them over water anymore. Orders were also issued to deploy the standby E-2C aircraft that the E-767s had replaced, but those were less capable American designs, and the officers had to accept the fact that somehow the air defenses of their country had been severely compromised.

It was seven in the evening, and Ryan was about to leave for home when the secure fax machine started buzzing. His phone started ringing even before paper appeared.

"Can't you people ever keep secrets?" an accented voice demanded angrily.

"Sergey? What's the problem?"

"Koga is our best chance for terminating hostilities, and someone on your side told the Japanese that he's in contact with you!" Golovko nearly shouted from his home, where it was three in the morning. "Do you want to kill the man?"

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, will you for Christ's sake settle the hell down?" Jack sat back down in his chair, and by this time he had the page to read. It had come directly from the U.S. Embassy communications people in Moscow, doubtless on orders of a sort from the RVS. "Oh, shit." Pause. "Okay, we got him out of trouble, didn't we?"

"You're penetrated at a high level, Ivan Emmetovich."

"Well, you should know how easy it is to do that."

"We're working to find out who it is, I assure you." The voice was still angry.

Wouldn't that be great? Jack thought behind painfully closed eyes. *The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service testifies in Federal District Court.*

"Not many people know this. I'll get back to you."

"I am so pleased to hear that you restrict sensitive information to such trustworthy people, Jack." The line went dead. Ryan depressed the switch and punched up another number from memory.

"Murray."

"Ryan. Dan, I need you here in a hurry." Jack's next call was to Scott Adler. Then he walked off again toward the President's office. The positive news he had to report, Ryan supposed, was that the other side had used important information clumsily. Yamata again, he was sure, acting like a businessman rather than a professional spook. He hadn't even troubled himself to disguise the information he had, not caring that it would also reveal its source. The man didn't know his limitations. Sooner or later he'd pay dearly for that weakness.

Jackson's last set of orders before heading off to the Pacific had involved ordering twelve B-1B bombers of the 384th Bomb Wing to fly east from their base in southern Kansas, first to Lajes in the Azores, staging on from there toward Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. The flight of ten thousand miles took more than a day, and when the aircraft arrived at the base farthest from America of any, the crews were thoroughly exhausted. The three KC-lOs that brought along ground crewmen and support equipment landed soon thereafter, and the entire assembly of people was soon asleep.

"What do you mean?" Yamata demanded. It was a chilling thought. His own

home had been invaded. By whom?

"I mean Koga has disappeared and Kaneda is dead. One of your security people is still alive, but all he saw was two or three *gaijin*. They disabled him and he doesn't even know how."

"What is being done?"

"It's being handled as a police matter," Kazuo Taoka told his boss. "Of course I didn't tell them about Koga."

"He must be found, and quickly." Yamata looked out the window. Luck was still with him. The call, after all, had caught him at home.

"I don't know—"

"I do. Thank you for the information." Yamata killed the line, then placed another call.

Murray hurried through White House security, having left his service pistol in his official car. His month had not been any better than the rest of the government's. He'd blown the Linders case with a rookie mistake. Brandy plus a cold medication, he said to himself yet again, wondering just what Ryan and the President would have to say to him about that. The criminal case had come apart, and his only satisfaction was that at least he had not brought a possibly innocent man to trial and further embarrassed the Bureau. Whether or not Ed Kealty was really guilty of anything was a side issue for the FBI executive. If you couldn't prove it to a jury, then the defendant was innocent, and that was that. And the man would soon be leaving government service for good. That was something, Murray told himself as a Secret Service agent conducted him not to Ryan's office, but to the one at the opposite corner of the West Wing.

"Hi, Dan," Jack said, standing when he came in.

"Mr. President," Murray said first. He didn't know the other man in the room.

"Hi, I'm Scott Adler."

"Hello, sir." Murray took his hand. Oh, that was the guy running the negotiations with the Japs, he realized.

Some work had already been accomplished. Ryan could not believe that Adler was the leak. The only others who knew were himself, the President, Brett Hanson, Ed and Mary Pat, and perhaps a few secretaries. And Christopher Cook.

"How close are we keeping tabs on Japanese diplomats?" Ryan asked.

"They don't move around without somebody keeping an eye on them," Murray assured them. "We're talking espionage?"

"Probably. Something very important leaked out."

"It has to be Cook," Adler said. "It just has to be."

"Okay, there are some things you need to know," the National Security Advisor said. "Less than three hours ago we slam-dunked their air defenses. We think we killed ten or eleven aircraft." He could have gone further, but did not. It was still possible that Adler was the leak, after all, and the next step of Operation ZORRO had to come as a surprise.

"That's going to make them nervous, and they still have nuclear weapons. A

bad combination, Jack," the Deputy Secretary of State pointed out.

Nukes? Murray thought. *Jesus.*

"Any changes in their negotiating position?" the President asked.

Adler shook his head. "None, sir. They will offer us Guam back, but they want the rest of the Marianas for themselves. They're not backing off a dot from that, and nothing I've said has shaken them loose."

"Okay." Ryan turned. "Dan, we've been in contact with Mogataru Koga—"

"He's the ex-Prime Minister, right?" Dan asked, wanting to make sure he was up to speed on this. Jack nodded.

"Correct. We have two CIA officers in Japan covered as Russians, and they met with Koga under that cover. But Koga got himself kidnapped by the guy who we think is running the whole show. He told Koga that he knew about contacts with *Americans*."

"It has to be Cook," Adler said again. "Nobody else on the delegation knows, and Chris does my informal contacts with their number-two, Seiji Nagumo." The diplomat paused, then let his anger show. "It's just perfect, isn't it?"

"Espionage investigation?" Murray asked. Significantly, he saw, the President let Ryan handle the answer.

"Fast and quiet, Dan."

"And then?" Adler wanted to know.

"If it's him, we flip the bastard right over." Murray nodded at once on hearing the FBI euphemism.

"What do you mean, Jack?" Durling asked.

"It's a real opportunity. They think they have a good intel source, and they've shown the willingness to use the information from it. Okay," Jack said, "we can use that to our advantage. We give them some juicy information and then we stick it right up their ass."

* * *

The most immediate need was to buttress the air defenses for the Home Islands. That realization caused no small amount of thinking at Japanese defense headquarters, and most uncomfortably, it was based on partial information, not the precise sort of data that had been used to prepare the overall operational plan that the military high command was trying to stick with. The best radar warning systems their country owned were seaborne on the four Kongo-class Aegis destroyers patrolling off the northern Marianas. They were formidable ships with self-contained air-defense systems. Not quite as mobile as the E-767s, they were more powerful, however, and able to take care of themselves. Before dawn, therefore, an order was flashed out for the four-ship squadron to race north to establish a radar-picket line east of the Home Islands. After all, the U.S. Navy wasn't doing anything, and if their country's defenses came back together, there was yet a good chance for a diplomatic solution.

On *Mutsu*, Admiral Sato saw the logic of it when he receipted the signal and gave orders for his ships to go to their maximum sustained speed. Nonetheless, he was concerned. He knew that his SPY radar systems *could* detect stealthy

aircraft, something the Americans had demonstrated in tests against their own, and his ships were sufficiently powerful that American aircraft would not lightly engage them. What worried him was that for the first time his country was not acting but *re*acting to American moves. That, he hoped, was temporary.

"That's interesting," Jones observed at once. The traces were only a few minutes old, but there were two of them, probably representing more than two ships in a tight formation, making noise and with a slight northerly bearing change.

"Surface ships, sure as hell," OT2/c Boomer observed. "This looks like pounding—" He stopped when Jones circled another trace in red.

"And that's a blade-rate. Thirty-plus knots, and that means warships in one big hurry." Jones walked over to the phone and called ComSubPac. "Bart? Ron? We have something here. That 'can squadron that's been operating around Pagan,"

"What about it?" Mancuso asked.

"They seem to be doing a speed-run north. We have anybody up waiting for them?" Then Jones remembered several inquiries about the waters around Honshu. Mancuso wasn't telling him everything, as was to be expected for operational matters. The way he evaded the question would be the real answer, the civilian thought.

"Can you plot me a course?"

Bingo. "Give us a little while, an hour maybe? The data is still a little fuzzy, Skipper."

The voice was not overly disappointed at the answer, Jones noted. "Aye, sir. We'll keep you posted."

"Good work, Ron."

Jones replaced the phone and looked around. "Senior Chief? Let's start doing a plot on these traces." Somewhere north, he thought, somebody was waiting. He wondered who it might be, and came up with one answer.

Time was working in the opposite direction now. Hiroshi Goto opened his cabinet meeting at ten in the morning, local time, which was midnight in Washington, where his negotiators were. It was clear that the Americans were making a contest of it, though some in the room thought that it could just be a negotiating ploy, that they had to make some show of force in order to be taken seriously at the negotiating table. Yes, they had stung the air-defense people badly, but that was all. America could not and would not launch systematic attacks against Japan. The risks were too great. Japan had nuclear-tipped missiles, for one thing. For another, Japan had sophisticated air defenses despite the events of the previous night, and then there was simple arithmetic. How many bombers did America have? How many could strike at their country even if there were nothing to stop them? How long would such a bombing campaign take? Did America have the political will for it? The

answers to all of these questions were favorable to their country, the cabinet members thought, their eyes still fixed on the ultimate goal, whose shining prize glittered before them, and besides, each man in this room had a patron of sorts to make sure that they took the proper spin on things. Except Goto, they knew, whose patron was elsewhere at the moment.

For the moment, the Ambassador in Washington would object strongly to the American attack on Japan, and note that it was not a helpful act, and that there would be no further concessions until they were stopped. It would be further noted that any attack on the Japanese mainland would be considered an exceedingly grave matter; after all, Japan had not attacked vital American interests directly . . . yet. That threat, behind the thinnest of veils, would surely bring some rationality to the situation.

Goto nodded agreement to the suggestions, wishing that his own patron were about to support him and knowing that Yamata had already bypassed him and spoken with defense officials directly. He'd have to talk to Raizo about that.

"And if they come back?" he asked.

"We'll have our defenses at maximum alert tonight, and when the destroyers arrive on station, they will be as formidable as before. Yes, they have made their show of force, but they have not as yet so much as flown over our territory."

"We must do more than that," Goto said, recalling his instructions. "We can put more pressure on the Americans by making our ultimate weapons public."

"No!" a minister said at once. "That will cause chaos *here!*"

"It will also cause chaos there," Goto replied, somewhat weakly, the rest of the cabinet thought. Again, they saw, he was voicing the thoughts and orders of someone else. They knew who that was. "It will force them to alter the tone of their negotiations."

"It could easily force them to consider a grave attack on us."

"They have too much to lose," Goto insisted.

"And we do not?" the Minister shot back, wondering just where his loyalty to his patron ended and his loyalty to his countrymen began. "What if they decide to preempt?"

"They cannot. They don't have the weapons to do it. Our missiles have been very carefully located."

"Yes, and our air-defense systems are invincible, too," another minister snorted.

"Perhaps the best thing to do is for our ambassador to suggest that we might reveal that we have the atomic weapons. Perhaps that would be enough," a third minister suggested. There were some nods around the table, and Goto, despite his instructions, agreed to that.

The hardest part was keeping warm, despite all the coldweather gear they had brought along. Richter snuggled himself into the sleeping bag, and allowed himself to be vaguely guilty for the fact that the Rangers had to maintain listening outposts around the rump airfield they'd established on this frigid mountainside. His principal worry was a system failure in one of the three

aircraft. Despite all the redundancies built into them, there were several items which, if they broke, could not be fixed. The Rangers knew how to fuel the birds, and how to load weapons, but that was about it. Richter had already decided to let them worry about ground security. If so much as a platoon showed up in this high meadow, they were doomed. The Rangers could kill every intruder, but one radio call could have a battalion here in hours, and there was no surviving that. Special-operations, he thought. They were good so long as they worked, just like everything else you did in uniform, but the current situation had a safety margin so thin that you could see through it. Then there was the issue of getting out, the pilot reminded himself. He might as well have joined the Navy.

"Nice house."

The rules were different in time of war, Murray told himself. Computers made it easier, a fact that the Bureau had been slow to learn. Assembling his team of young agents, the first task had been to run nothing more sophisticated than a credit check, which gave an address. The house was somewhat upscale, but within the reach, barely, of a supergrade federal employee if he'd saved his pennies over the years. That was something Cook had not done, he saw. The man did all his banking at First Virginia, and the FBI had a man able to break into the bank records, far enough to see that, like most people, Christopher Cook had lived largely from one biweekly paycheck to the next, saving a mere fourteen thousand dollars along the way, probably for the college education of his kids, and that, Murray knew, was on the dumb side of optimistic, what with the cost of American higher education. More to the point, when he'd settled on the new house, the savings had gone untouched. He had a mortgage, but the amount was less than two hundred thousand dollars, and with the hundred-eighty realized from the sale of his previous home, that left a sizable gap that bank records could not explain. Where had the other money come from? A call to a contact at the IRS, proposing a possible case of tax evasion, had turned up other computerized records, enough to show that there was no additional family income to explain it; a check of antecedents showed that the parents of both the Cooks, all deceased, had not left either husband or wife with a windfall. Their cars, a further check showed, were paid for, and while one of them was four years old, another was a Buick that probably had the original smell still inside, and that also had been purchased with cash. What they had was a man living beyond his means, and while the government had often enough failed to make note of that in espionage cases, it had learned a little of late.

"Well?" Murray asked his people.

"It's not a case yet, but it sure as hell smells like one," the next-senior agent thought. "We need to visit some banks and get a look at more records." For which a court order was required, but they already knew which judge to go to for that. The FBI always knew which judges were tame and which were not.

Similar checks, of course, had been run on Scott Adler, who, they found, was divorced, living alone in a Georgetown flat, paying alimony and child support, driving a nice car, but otherwise very normal. Secretary Hanson was

quite wealthy from years of practicing law, and a poor subject for attempted bribery. The extensive background checks run on all the subjects for their government offices and security clearances were reexamined and found to be normal, except for Cook's recent auto and home purchases. Somewhere along the line they'd find a canceled check drawn on some bank or other to explain the easy house settlement. That was one nice thing about banks. They had records on everything, and it was always on some sort of paper, and it always left a trail.

"Okay, we will proceed on the assumption that he's our boy." The Deputy Assistant Director looked around at the bright group of agents who, like him, had neglected to consider the possibility that Barbara Linders had been on a prescription medication that had acted with the brandy Ed Kealty had once kept close at all times. Their collective embarrassment was as great as his own. Not an entirely bad thing, Dan thought. You worked hard to restore your credibility after a goof.

Jackson felt the hard thump of the carrier landing, then the snapping deceleration of the arrestor wire as he was pressed hard into the back-facing passenger seat of the COD. Another odious experience over, he thought. He much preferred to land on a carrier with his own hands on the controls, uncomfortable with trusting his life to some teenage lieutenant, or so they now all looked to the Admiral. He felt the aircraft turn to the right, heading off to an unoccupied portion of the flight deck, and presently a door opened and he hustled out. A deck crewman saluted, pointing him to an open door in the carrier's island structure. The ship's bell was there, and as soon as he got under cover, a Marine saluted, and a bosun's mate worked the striker on the bell, announcing into the 1-MC system, "Task Force Seventy-Seven, arriving."

"Welcome aboard, sir," Bud Sanchez said with a grin, looking very natty in his flight suit. "Captain's on the bridge, sir."

"Then let's get to work."

"How's the leg, Robby?" the CAG asked halfway up the third ladder.

"Stiff as hell after all the sitting." It had taken time. The briefing at Pearl Harbor, the Air Force flight to Eniwetok, then waiting for the C-2A to show up to bring him to his command. Jackson was beyond jet lag, but for all that, eager now, about noon, he thought, according to where the sun was.

"Is the cover story holding?" Sanchez asked next.

"No telling, Bud. Until we get there." Jackson allowed a Marine to open the door to the wheelhouse. His leg really was stiff, just one more reminder that flight operations were over for him.

"Welcome aboard, sir," the CO said, looking up from a sheaf of dispatches.

The roar of afterburners told Jackson that *Johnnie Reb* was conducting flight operations, and he looked quickly forward to see a Tomcat leap off the port-forward cat. The carrier was about halfway between the Carolines and Wake. The latter island was somewhat closer to the Marianas, and for that reason was not being used for anything. Wake had a fine airfield, still supported by the Air Force. Eniwetok was just a recovery field, known to be such, and therefore made a more covert base for staging aircraft, if a far less convenient

one for maintaining them.

"Okay, what's been happening since I left Pearl?" Jackson asked.

"Some good news." The CO handed over one of the dispatches.

"It's definite as hell," Jones said, leaning over the sonar traces.

"They sure are in a hurry," Mancuso agreed, his eyes plotting speed and distance and not liking what they saw, further confirming what Jones suspected.

"Who's waiting for them?"

"Ron, we can't—"

"Sir, I can't be much help to you if I don't know," Jones observed reasonably. "You think I'm a security risk or something?"

Mancuso thought for a few seconds before answering. "*Tennessee*'s lying right overtop the Eshunadaoki Seamount, supporting a special operation that goes off in the next twenty-four hours."

"And the rest of the Ohios?"

"Just off Ulithi Atoll, heading north a little slower now. The SSN force will lead the carrier in. The Ohios are tasked to get inside early." Which all made sense, Jones thought. The boomers were too slow to operate effectively with a carrier task force, which he'd also been tracking on SOSUS, but they were ideal for getting inside a patrol line of SSKs . . . so long as the skippers were smart about it. There was always that consideration.

"The Jap 'cans will be about on top of *Tennessee* right about—"

"I know."

"What else do you have for me?" ComSubPac asked briskly.

Jones led him over to the wall chart. There were now seven SSK-silhouettes circled on the display, with only one "?" -marked. That one, they saw, was in the passage between the northernmost of the Marianas, called Moug, and the Bonins, the most famous of which was Iwo Jima.

"We've been trying to concentrate on this passage," Jones said. "I've gotten a few twitches, but nothing firm enough to plot. If I were them, though, I'd cover that area."

"So would I," Chambers confirmed. One likely move for the Americans would be to put a submarine patrol line astride the Luzon Strait, to attempt to interdict oil traffic to the Japanese mainland. That was a political decision, however. Pacific Fleet did not yet have authorization to attack Japanese merchantmen, and intelligence reported that at the moment most of the tanker traffic in and out was composed of flag-of-convenience shipping, attacks on which had all sorts of political ramifications. *We couldn't risk offending Liberia*, Mancuso told himself with a grimace. *Could we?*

"Why the speed-run for the 'cans back home?" Jones asked. It was not something that appeared very sensible.

"We hammered their air defenses last night."

"Okay, so they'll scoot west of the Bonins . . . that means I'll lose them soon. Anyway, their speed of advance is thirty-two, and their course is still a little fuzzy, but homeward bound, sure as hell." Jones paused. "We're starting to play with their heads, eh?"

Mancuso allowed himself a smile for once. “Always.”

44

from one who knows the score . . .

"Does it have to be this way?" Durling asked.

"We've run the simulation twenty times," Ryan said, flipping through the data yet again. "It's a matter of certainty. Sir, we have to take them all the way out."

The President looked at the satellite overheads again. "We're still not one hundred percent sure, are we?"

Jack shook his head. "Nothing is ever that sure, no. Our data looks pretty good—the overheads, I mean. The Russians have developed data, too, and they have as much reason to want to be right as we do. There are ten birds here. They're dug in deep, and the site seems to have been selected deliberately for relative immunity from attack. Those are all positive indicators. This is not a deception operation. The next question is making sure that we can hit them all. And we have to do it quickly."

"Why?"

"Because they're moving ships back toward the coast that are marginally capable of detecting the aircraft."

"No other way?"

"No, Mr. President. If this is going to work, it has to be tonight." And the night, Ryan saw, checking his watch, had already started on the far side of the world.

"We protest in the strongest terms the American attack on our country," the Ambassador began. "We have refrained at all times from doing such things, and we expected a similar courtesy from the United States."

"Mr. Ambassador, I am not consulted on military operations. Have American forces struck your mainland?" Adler asked by way of reply.

"You know quite well what they have done, and you must also know that it is a precursor move to a full attack. It is important that you understand," the diplomat went on, "that such an attack could result in the gravest possible consequences." He let that phrase hang in the air like a cloud of lethal gas. Adler took a moment before responding.

"I would remind you first of all that we did not begin this conflict. I would further remind you that your country made a deliberate attack to cripple our economy—"

"As you have done!" the Ambassador shot back, showing real anger that might have been a cover for something else.

"Excuse me, sir, but I believe it is my turn to speak." Adler waited patiently

for the Ambassador to calm down; it was plain that neither one had gotten a full night's sleep. "I would further remind you that your country has killed American servicemen, and if you expected us to refrain from corresponding moves, then you were possibly mistaken in that expectation."

"We have never attacked vital American interests."

"The freedom and security of American citizens is ultimately my country's *only* vital interest, sir."

The acrimonious change in atmosphere could hardly have been more obvious, as was the reason for it. America was making a move of some sort, and the move would clearly not be a subtle one. The people on both sides of the table, again on the top floor of the State Department, might well have been carved from stone. No one wanted to concede anything, not even a blink, at the formal sessions. Heads might have turned fractionally when the leaders of the respective delegations took their turns to speak, but no more than that. The absence of facial expressions would have done professional gamblers proud—but that was precisely the game being played, even without cards or dice. The discussions never got as far before the first recess as a return to the possession of the Marianas.

"Christ, Scott," Cook said, walking through the doors to the terrace. From the circles under his eyes, the chief negotiator, he saw, had been up most of the night, probably at the White House. The primary season would be driving this mess now. The media were harping on the crippled ships at Pearl Harbor, and TV coverage was also coming from Saipan and Guam now, people speaking with obscured faces and disguised voices—on one hand about how they wanted to be American citizens, and on the other how much they feared being on those islands if a real counterattack developed. The ambivalence was exactly the sort of thing to confuse the public, and opinion polls were divided, though with a majority expressing outrage at what had been done, and a slightly smaller majority expressing the wish for a diplomatic solution. If possible. A plurality of 46 percent, the *Washington Post*/ABC poll had stated this morning, didn't see much hope of that. The wild card, however, was the Japanese possession of nuclear arms, which had been announced by neither country, in both cases for fear of panicking the respective populations. Everyone in these sessions had really hoped for a peaceful settlement, but much of that hope had just evaporated, and in a period of a mere two hours.

"It's being politically driven now," Adler explained, looking away to let out his own tension with a long breath. "It had to happen, Chris."

"What about their nukes?"

The Deputy Secretary of State shrugged uneasily. "We don't think they're that crazy."

"We don't *think* they are? What genius came up with that assessment?" Cook demanded.

"Ryan, who else?" Adler paused. "He's running this. He thinks the next smart move is to blockade—well, declare a maritime exclusion zone, like the Brits did down at the Falklands. Cut off their oil," Adler explained.

"Nineteen forty-one all over again? I thought that bonehead was a historian! That's what *started* a world war, in case anybody forgot!"

"The threat of it—well, if Koga has the guts to speak out, we think their

government'll come apart. So," Scott went on, "find out what the other side—I mean, what sort of strength the opposition really has."

"It's a dangerous game we're playing, man."

"Sure enough," Adler agreed, looking right in the man's eyes.

Cook turned and walked to the other side of the terrace. Before, it had seemed a normal part of the proceedings to Adler, part of the rubric of serious negotiations, and how stupid that had been, for the real proceedings to be handled over coffee and tea and cookies because the real negotiators didn't want to risk making statements that . . . well, those *were* the rules, he reminded himself. And the other side had made very skillful use of them. He watched the two men talk. The Japanese Ambassador looked far more uneasy than his principal subordinate. *What are you really thinking?* Adler would have killed to know that. It was too easy to think of the man as a personal enemy now, which would be a mistake. He was a professional, serving his country as he was paid and sworn to do. Their eyes met briefly, both of them deliberately looking away from Nagumo and Cook, and the professional impassivity broke for a moment, just an instant really, as both men realized that it was war they were talking about, life and death, issues imposed on them by others. It was a strange moment of comradeship as both men wondered how things had broken down so badly and how grossly their professional skills were being misused by others.

"That would be a very foolish move," Nagumo said pleasantly, forcing a smile.

"If you have a pipeline to Koga, you better start using it."

"I have, but it's too soon for that, Christopher. We need *something back*. Don't your people understand that?"

"Durling can't get reelected if he trades away thirty-some-thousand U.S. citizens." It really was that simple. "If it means killing a few thousand of your people, he'll do that. And he probably thinks that threatening your economy directly is a cheap way out."

"That would change if your people knew—"

"And how will your citizens react when they find it out?" Cook knew Japan well enough to understand that the ordinary men and women on the street regarded nuclear arms with revulsion. Interestingly, Americans had come to the same view. Maybe sense was breaking out, the diplomat thought, but not quickly enough, and not in this context.

"They will understand that those weapons are vital to our new interests," Nagumo answered quickly, surprising the American. "But you are right, it is also vital that they never be used, and we must forestall your efforts to strangle our economy. People will die if that happens."

"People are dying now, Seiji, from what your boss said earlier." With that, the two men headed back to their respective leaders.

"Well?" Adler asked.

"He says he's been in contact with Koga."

That part of it was so obvious that the FBI hadn't thought of it, and then nearly had had kittens when he'd suggested it, but Adler knew Cook. He was enjoying his part in this diplomatic effort, enjoying it just a little too much,

enjoying the importance he'd acquired. Even now Cook did not know what he had blurted out, just like that. Not quite definite evidence of wrongdoing, but enough to persuade Adler that Cook was almost certainly the leak, and now Cook had probably just leaked something else, though it was something Ryan had thought up. Adler reminded himself that years ago, when Ryan had just been part of an outside group brought in to review CIA procedures, he'd come to high-level attention from his invention of the Canary Trap. Well, it had been sprung again.

The weather this morning was cold enough that the delegations headed back inside a little early for the next set of talks. This one might actually go somewhere, Adler told himself.

* * *

Colonel Michael Zacharias handled the mission briefing. It was routine despite the fact that the B-2*s* had never fired a shot in anger—actually *dropped* a shot, but the principle held. The 509th Bomb Group dated back to 1944, formed under the command of one Colonel Paul Tibbets, U.S. Army Air Force, fittingly, the Colonel thought, at a base in Utah, his own family home. The wing commander, a brigadier, would fly the lead aircraft. The wing XO would fly number two. As deputy commander operations, he would take in number three. His was the most distasteful part of the job, but it was sufficiently important that he'd considered the rules on ethics in war and decided that the mission parameters fell within the confines that lawyers and philosophers had placed upon warriors.

It was bitterly cold at Elmendorf, and vans conveyed the flight crews to the waiting bombers. That night they would fly with crews of three. The B-2 had been designed for a pilot and copilot only, with provision for a third crewman to work defensive systems which, the contractor had promised, the copilot could do, really. But real combat operations always required a safety margin, and even before the Spirits had left Missouri, the additional three hundred pounds of gear had been added along with the additional two hundred or so pounds of electronic-warfare officer.

There was so much that was odd about the aircraft. Traditionally U.S. Air Force birds had tail numbers, but the B-2 didn't *have* a tail, and so it was painted on the door for the nose gear. A penetrating bomber, it flew at high altitude rather than low—though the contract had been altered in mid-design to allow for a low-flight profile—like an airliner for good fuel economy. One of the most expensive aircraft ever built, it combined the wingspan of a DC-10 with neartotal invisibility. Painted slate gray for hiding in the night sky, it was now the shining hope for ending a war. A bomber, it was hoped that its mission would go as peacefully as possible. Strapping in, it was easier for Zacharias to think of it as a bombing mission.

The four GE engines lit off in turn, the ribbon gauges moving to full idle, already drinking fuel at the same rate as if it were at full power at cruising altitude, while the copilot and EWO checked out their onboard systems and found them good. Then, one at a time, the trio of bombers taxied off the ramp

and into the runway.

“They’re making it easy,” Jackson thought aloud, now in the carrier’s Combat Information Center, below the flight deck. His overall operational plan had allowed for the possibility, but he hadn’t allowed himself to expect it. His most dangerous adversary was the four Aegis destroyers the Japanese had dispatched to guard the Marianas. The Navy had not yet learned to defeat the radar-missile combination, and he expected the job to cost him aircraft and crews, but sure enough, America now had the initiative of sorts. The other side was moving to meet his possible actions, and that was always a losing game.

Robby could feel it now. *John Stennis* was moving at full power, heading northwest at thirty knots or so. He checked his watch and wondered if the rest of the operations he’d planned in the Pentagon were going off.

This was a little different. Richter powered up his Comanche as he had the night before, wondering how often he could get away with this, and reminding himself of the axiom in military operations that the same thing rarely worked more than once. A pity that the guy who’d thought this idea up had not known that fact. His last mental lapse was to wonder whether it had been that Navy fighter jock he’d met at Nellis all those months before. Probably not, he judged. That guy was too much of a pro.

Again the Rangers stood by with their dinky little extinguishers, and again they proved unnecessary, and again Richter lifted off without incident, climbing immediately up the slopes of Shuraishi-*san*, east for Tokyo, but this time with two other aircraft behind him.

“He wants to see Durling personally,” Adler said. “He said that at the end of the morning session.”

“What else?” Ryan asked. Typically, the diplomat had covered his business first.

“Cook’s our boy. He told me that his contact has been working with Koga.”

“Did you—”

“Yes, I told him what you wanted. What about the Ambassador?”

Ryan checked his watch. The timing had to be so close, and he didn’t need this complication, but neither had he expected the other side to cooperate. “Give it ninety minutes. I’ll clear it with the Boss.”

The electronic-warfare officer also drew the duty of checking out the weapons systems. Able to carry eighty 500-pound bombs, the bomb bays were large enough for only eight of the two-thousand-pound penetrators, and 8 times 3 made 24. It was another exercise in arithmetic that made the final part of the mission necessary, which the carriage of nuclear weapons would have made

entirely unnecessary, but the orders didn't contemplate that, and Colonel Zacharias didn't object. He had a conscience to live with.

"Everything's green, sir," the EWO said. Not too surprising, as every weapon had been checked out personally by a senior weapons officer, a chief master sergeant, and an engineer from the contractor, individually run through a dozen simulations, and then handled like fresh fruit all the way into the bomb bay. They had to be if they wanted to maintain the manufacturer's guaranteed P_k of 95%, though even that wasn't enough for certainty. They needed more aircraft for the mission, but there were no more aircraft to be had, and working three Spirits together was tricky enough.

"Starting to get some fuzz, bearing two-two-five. Looks like an E-2 for starters," the EWO reported. Ten minutes later it was clear that every ground-based radar in the country was lit up to full power. Well, that's why they'd built the thing, all three members of the crew thought.

"Okay, give me a course," Zacharias ordered, checking his own screen.

"One-nine-zero looks good for the moment." The instruments identified every radar by type, and the smartest move was to exploit the oldest of them, happily enough an American design whose characteristics they knew quite well.

Forward of the B-2s, the Lightnings were working again, this time alone and covertly, approaching Hokkaido from the east while the bombers behind took a more southerly course. The exercise was more mental than physical now. One of the E-767s was up, this time well back over land, and probably with fighters in close attendance while the less capable E-2Cs patrolled just offshore. They'd be working the fighter pilots hard now, and sure enough, his threat receiver showed that some Eagles were searchlighting their APG-70 radars around the sky. *Well, time to make them pay for that.* His two-plane element turned slightly right and headed for the two nearest Eagles.

Two were still on the ground, one of them with a scaffolding around the radome. Maybe that was the one undergoing overhaul, Richter thought, approaching cautiously from the west. There were still hills to hide behind, though one of them had a radar on it, a big, powerful air-defense system. His onboard computer plotted a null-area for him, and he flew lower to follow that in. He ended up three miles from the radar site, but below it, and then it was time to do what the Comanche was designed for.

Richter lifted up over the final hilltop, and his Longbow radar swept the area before him. Its computerized memory selected the two E-767s from its library of hostile shapes and lit them up on the weapons display. The touch screen at Richter's left knee showed them as icons numbered 1 and 2 and identified as what they were. The pilot selected Hellfire from his short list of weapons options, the weapons-bay doors opened, and he fired twice. The Hellfire missiles roared off the rails, heading downhill toward the air base, five miles away.

Target Four was an apartment building, happily the top floor. ZORRO-Three had taken a southerly route into the city, and now its pilot slewed his helicopter sideways, worried about being spotted from the ground but wanting to find a window with a light on. There. Not a light, the pilot thought. More like a TV. Good enough in any case. He used the manual-guidance mode to lock on the spot of blue light.

Kozo Matsuda now wondered how he'd gotten into this mess in the first place, but the answer always came up the same. He'd overextended his business, and then been forced to ally himself with Yamata—but where was his friend now? Saipan? Why? They needed him here. The Cabinet was getting nervous, and though Matsuda had his man in that room to do what he was told to do, he'd learned a few hours earlier that the ministers were thinking on their own now, and that wasn't good—but neither were recent developments. The Americans had breached his country's defenses to some extent, a most unwelcome surprise. Didn't they understand that the war had to be ended, the Marianas secured once and for all, and America forced to accept the changes? It seemed that power was the only thing they understood, but while Matsuda and his colleagues had thought that they had the ability to employ power, the Americans weren't intimidated the way they were supposed to be.

What if they . . . what if they don't *cave in?* Yamata-san had assured them all that they had to, but he'd assured them also that he could wreak chaos in their financial system, and somehow the bastards had reversed that more adroitly than one of Mushashi's swordfights, such as he was now watching on late-night TV. There was no way out now. They had to see it through or they would all face a ruin worse than what his . . . faulty judgment had almost inflicted on his conglomerate. Faulty judgment? Matsuda asked himself. Well, yes, but he'd weathered that by allying himself with Yamata, and if his colleague would only return to Tokyo and help them all keep the government in line, then maybe—

The channel on the TV changed. Odd. Matsuda picked up the controller and changed it back. Then it changed again.

* * *

Fifteen seconds out, the pilot of ZORRO-Three activated the infrared laser used to guide the antitank missile in for terminal flight. His Comanche was in autohover now, allowing him essentially to hand-fly the weapon. It never occurred to him that the infrared beam of the laser was on the same frequency as the simple device his kids used at home to switch from Nickelodeon to the Disney Channel.

Damn the thing! Matsuda flipped the channel back a third time, and still it reverted back to a news broadcast. He hadn't seen this movie in years, and what was wrong with the damned TV? It was even one of his own large-screen models. The industrialist got out of bed and walked over to it, aiming the channel-controller right at the receptor on the front of the TV. And it changed again.

"Bakayaro!" he growled, kneeling down in front of it and changing the channel manually, and yet once more it filipped back to the news. The lights were out in his bedroom, and at the last second Matsuda saw a yellow glow on the screen of the TV. A reflection? Of what? He turned to see a yellow semicircle of flame approaching his window, a second or so before the Hellfire missile struck the steel I-beam just next to his bed.

ZORRO-Three noted the explosion on the top floor of the apartment building, turned abruptly left, and tracked in on the next target. This was really something, the pilot thought, better even than his minor part in Task Force NORMANDY, six years before. He'd never really wanted to be a snakeeater, but here he was, doing their work. The next shot was similar to the first. He had to blink his eyes clear, but he was sure that anyone within twenty meters of the missile hit would not have lived to tell the tale.

The first Hellfire took the plane with crewmen around it. Mercifully it hit the E-767 right on the nose, and the explosion may have spared some of them, Richter thought. The second missile, like the first guided exclusively by the computer, blew the tail off the other one. Japan was down to two of the things now, both probably aloft somewhere, and he couldn't do anything about that. They wouldn't even come back here, but to make sure of it, Richter turned, selected his cannon, and strafed the air-defense radar site on the way out.

Binichi Murakami was just leaving the building after a lengthy chat with Tanzan Itagake. He would meet with his friends in the Cabinet tomorrow and counsel them to stop this madness before it grew too late. Yes, his country had nuclear missiles, but they had been built in the expectation that their mere existence would be sufficient to prevent their use. Even the thought of revealing their presence on his country's soil—rock, as it turned out—threatened to destroy the political coalition that Goto had in place, and he understood now that you could order political figures only so far before they realized that they did have power of a sort.

A beggar in the street was the thought that kept coming back. But for that, he might not have been swayed by Yamata's arguments. But for that, he tried to tell himself. Then the sky turned white over his head. Murakami's bodyguard was next to him and flung him to the ground next to the car while glass rained on them. The sound of the event had hardly passed before he heard the echoes of another several kilometers away.

"What is this?" he tried to ask, but when he moved, he felt liquid on his face, and it was blood from his employee's arm, slashed open from glass. The man bit his lip and kept his dignity, but he was badly hurt. Murakami helped him into the car and ordered his driver to head for the nearest hospital. As the man nodded at the order, yet another flash appeared in the sky.

"Two more baby seals," the Colonel said quietly to himself. He'd gotten within five miles before launching his Slammers from behind them, and only one of the Eagles had even attempted to evade, that one too late, though the pilot punched out and was now floating to the ground. That was enough for now. He turned his Lightning northeast and headed out at Mach 1.5. His flight of four had slashed a hole in the Hokkaido defenses, and behind them the Japanese Air Force would move aircraft to plug the gap, fulfilling his mission for the night. For years the Colonel had told everyone who would listen that combat wasn't about fairness, and he'd laughed at the cruel euphemism for a stealthy aircraft in combat against a conventional plane. Killing baby seals. But they weren't seals, and it was the next thing to murder, and the officer raged at the necessity for what he was doing.

The EWO had steered them between two air-defense radars, and within a hundred miles of an orbiting E-2C. There was all manner of radio chatter, terse and excited, from ground stations to fighters, all to their north now. Landfall was over a town named Arai. The B-2A was at forty-three thousand feet, cruising smoothly at just under six hundred knots. Under the first layer of the fabric-based skin, a copper mesh absorbed much of the electronic energy now sweeping over their aircraft. It was part of the stealth design to be found in any high-school physics book. The copper filaments gathered in much of the energy, much like a simple radio antenna, converting it to heat that dissipated in the cold night air. The rest of the signals hit the inner structure, to be deflected elsewhere, or so everyone hoped.

Ryan met the Ambassador and escorted him into the West Wing, further surrounded by five Secret Service agents. The atmosphere was what diplomats called "frank." There was no overt impoliteness, but the atmosphere was tense and minus the usual pleasantries that marked such meetings. No words were exchanged beyond those required, and by the time they entered the Oval Office Jack was mainly worried about what threat, if any, would be delivered at this most inopportune of moments.

"Mr. Ambassador, won't you please take a seat," Durling said.

"Thank you, Mr. President."

Ryan picked one between the visiting diplomat and Roger Durling. It was an automatic action to protect his president, but unnecessary. Two of the agents had come in and would not leave the room. One stood at the door. The other stood directly behind the Ambassador.

"I understand you have something you wish to tell me," Durling observed.

The diplomat's delivery was matter-of-fact. "My government wishes me to inform you that we will soon make public our possession of strategic weapons. We wish to give you fair warning of that."

"That will be seen as an overt threat to our country, Mr. Ambassador," Ryan said, performing his task of shielding the President from the necessity of speaking directly.

"It is only a threat if you make it so."

"You are aware," Jack noted next, "that we too have nuclear arms which can be delivered to your country."

"As you have already done," the Ambassador replied at once. Ryan nodded.

"Yes, in the case of another war begun by your country."

"We keep telling you, this is only a war if you make it so."

"Sir, when you attack American territory and kill American servicemen, that is what makes it a war."

Durling watched the exchange with no more reaction than a tilted head, playing his part as his National Security Advisor played his own. He knew his subordinate well enough now to recognize the tension in him, the way his feet crossed at the bottom of his chair while his hands clasped lightly in his lap, his voice soft and pleasant-sounding despite the nature of the conversation. Bob Fowler had been right all along, more so than either the former President or the current one had realized. *Good man in a storm*, Roger Durling thought yet again, a saying that dated as far back as men had gone to sea. Headstrong and hot-tempered though he sometimes was, in a crisis Ryan settled down rather like a doctor in an operating room. Something he'd learned from his wife? the President wondered, or perhaps something he'd learned because it had been forced upon him in the past ten or twelve years, in and out of government service. Good brains, good instinct, and a cool head when needed. What a shame the man had avoided politics. That thought almost made Durling smile, but this wasn't the place for it. No, Ryan would not be good at politics. He was the sort who sought to handle problems directly. Even his subtlety had a sharp point to it, and he lacked the crucial ability to lie effectively, but for all that, a good man for dealing with a crisis.

"We seek a peaceful conclusion to this episode," the Ambassador was saying now. "We are willing to concede much."

"We require nothing more than a return to status quo ante," Ryan replied, taking a chance that made his shoes turn under him. He hated this, hated taking the point, but now he had to float the ideas that he and the President had discussed, and if something went wrong, it would merely be remembered that it was Ryan who misspoke and not Roger Durling. "And the elimination of your nuclear arms under international inspection."

"You force us to play a very dangerous game."

"The game is of your making, sir." Ryan commanded himself to relax. His right hand was over his left wrist now. He could feel his watch, but didn't dare to look down at it for fear of giving an indication that something time-related was now under way. "You are already in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. You have violated the U.N. Charter, which your government has also signed. You are in violation of several treaty relationships with the United

States of America, and you have launched a war of aggression. Do you expect us to accept all of this, *and* your enslavement of American citizens? Tell me, how will your citizens react when they learn all of this?" The events of the previous night over Northern Japan had not become public yet. They had controlled their media far more thoroughly than Ryan's own play with the American TV networks, but there was a problem with that sort of thing. The truth always got out. Not a bad thing if the truth worked for you, it could be a terrible thing if it did not.

"You must offer us something!" the Ambassador insisted, visibly losing his diplomatic composure. Behind him, the Secret Service agent's hands flexed a little.

"What we offer you is the chance to restore the peace honorably."

"That is nothing!"

"This is more properly a subject for Deputy Secretary Adler and his delegation. You are aware of our position," Ryan said. "If you choose to go public with your nuclear weapons, we cannot stop you from doing so. But I caution you that it would be a grave psychological escalation which neither your country nor ours needs."

The Ambassador looked at Durling now, hoping for a reaction of some sort. lowa and New Hampshire would be happening soon, and this man had to start off well . . . was that the reason for the hard line? the diplomat wondered. His orders from Tokyo commanded him to get some maneuvering room for his country, but the Americans weren't playing, and the culprit for that had to be Ryan.

"Does Dr. Ryan speak for the United States?" His heart skipped a beat when he saw the President shake his head slightly.

"No, Mr. Ambassador. Actually, I speak for the United States." Durling paused for a cruel instant before adding, "But Dr. Ryan speaks for me in this case. Do you have anything else for us?"

"No, Mr. President."

"In that case we will not detain you further. We hope that your government will see that the most profitable way out of this situation is what we propose. The other alternatives do not bear inspection. Good day, sir." Durling didn't stand, though Ryan did, to walk the man out. He was back in two minutes.

"When?" the President asked.

"Anytime."

"This had better work."

The sky was clear below them, though there were some wisps of cirrus clouds at fifty thousand feet. Even so, the Initial Point, called the IP, was too difficult for the unaided human eye to see. Worse, the other aircraft in the flight of three were quite invisible, though they were programmed to be only four and eight miles ahead, respectively. Mike Zacharias thought of his father, all the missions he'd flown into the most sophisticated defenses of his time, and how he'd lost his professional gamble, just once, and miraculously survived a camp supposed to be a final resting place. This was easier, after a fashion, but also harder, since the B-2 could not maneuver at all except to adjust its position

slightly for winds.

"Patriot battery around here, off at two o'clock," the captain on the electronic-warfare board warned. "It just lit off."

Then Zacharias saw why. There were the first flashes on the ground, a few miles ahead. *So the intelligence resorts were right*, the Colonel thought. The Japanese didn't have many Patriots, and they wouldn't put them out here for the fun of it. Just then, looking down, he saw the moving lights of a train just outside the valley they were about to attack.

"Interrogate-one," the pilot ordered. Now it got dangerous.

The LPI radar under the nose of his bomber aimed itself at the piece of ground the satellite-navigation system told it to, instantly fixing the bomber's position with respect to a known ground reference. The aircraft then swept into a right turn and two minutes later it repeated the procedure—

"Missile-launch warning! Patriot is flying now—make that two," the EWO warned.

"That's -Two," Zacharias thought. *Must have caught him with the doors open*. The bomber wasn't stealthy with its bomb bay open, but that only took a few seconds before—

There. He saw the Patriots coming up from behind a hill, far faster than the SA-2s that his father had dodged, not like rockets at all, more like some sort of directed-energy beams, so fast the eye could hardly follow them, so fast he didn't have much chance to think. But the two missiles, only a few hundred meters apart, didn't alter their path at all, blazing toward a fixed point in space, and streaking past his bomber's altitude, exploding like fireworks at about sixty thousand feet. *Okay, this stealth stuff really does work against Patriot, as all the tests said it did.* The operators on the ground must be going crazy, he thought.

"Starting the first run," the pilot announced.

There were ten target points—missile silos, the intelligence data said, and it pleased the Colonel to be eliminating the hateful things, even though the price of that was the lives of other men. There were only three of them, and his bomber, like the others, carried only eight weapons. The total number of weapons carried for the mission was only twenty-four, with two designated for each silo, and Zacharias's last four for the last target. Two bombs each. Every bomb had a 95 percent probability of hitting within four meters of the aim point, pretty good numbers really, except that this sort of mission had precisely no margin for error. Even the paper probability was less than half a percent chance of a double miss, but that number times ten targets meant a five percent chance that one missile would survive, and that could not be tolerated.

The aircraft was under computer control now, which the pilot could override but would not unless something went badly wrong. The Colonel pulled his hands back from the controls, not touching them lest he interfere with the process that required better control than he could deliver.

"Systems?" he asked over the intercom.

"Nominal," the EWO replied tensely. His eyes were on the GPS navigation system, which was taking its signals from four orbiting nuclear clocks and fixing the aircraft's exact position in three dimensions, along with course and

groundspeed and wind-drift figure generated by the bomber's own systems. The information was crossloaded to the bombs, already programmed to know the exact location of their targets. The first bomber had covered targets 1 through 8. The second bomber had covered 3 through 10. His third bomber would take the second shots at 1, 2, 9, and 10. This would theoretically ensure that since no single aircraft handled both shots at one target, an electronic fault would not guarantee the survival of one of the missiles on the ground.

"That Patriot battery is still looking. It seems to be at the entrance to the valley."

Too bad for them, Zacharias thought.

"Bomb doors coming open—now!" the copilot said. The resulting news from the third crewman was instant.

"He's got us-the SAM site has us now," the EWO said as the first weapon fell free. "Lock-on, he has lock-on . . . launch launch launch!"

"It takes a while, remember," Zacharias said, far more coolly than he felt. The second bomb was now out. Then came a new thought—how smart was that battery commander? Had he learned something from his last chance at a bomber? *God, the mission could still fail if he—*

Two seconds later the fourth weapon dropped free, and the bomb doors closed, returning the B-2 Spirit to electronic invisibility.

"It's a stealth bomber, it has to be," the intercept controller said. "Look!"

The large, inviting contact that had suddenly appeared just over their heads was gone. The big phased-array acquisition radar had announced the target's presence visually and with a tone, and now the screen was blank, but not completely. Now there were four objects descending, just as there had been eight only a minute before. Bombs. The battery commander had felt and heard the impact up-valley from his launch vehicles. The last time, he'd gone for the bombers, wasting two precious missiles; and the two he'd just fired would also go wild . . . but. . .

"Reengage now!" the battery commander shouted at his people.

"They're not guiding on us," the EWO said with more hope than conviction. The tracking radar was searchlighting now, then it steadied down, but not on them.

To make it even less likely, Zacharias turned the aircraft, which was necessary for the second part of the mission anyway. It would take him off track for the programmed path of the missiles and avoid the chance possibility of a skin-skin contact.

"Talk to me!" the pilot ordered.

"They're past us by now—" A thought confirmed by one, then another bright flash of light that lit up the clouds over their heads. Though the three crewmen cringed at the light, there wasn't a sound or even a buffet from the explosions, they must have been so far behind them.

Okay, that's that . . . I hope.

"He's stifl—lock-on-signal!" the EWO shouted. "But—"
"On us?"
"No, something else—I don't know—"
"The bombs. Damn it," Zacharias swore. "He's tracking the bombs!"

There were four of them, the smartest of smart bombs, falling rapidly now, but not so fast as a diving tactical aircraft. Each one knew where it was in space and time and knew where it was supposed to go. Data from the B-2s' onboard navigation systems had told them where they were—the map coordinates, the altitude, the speed and direction of the aircraft, and against that the computers in the bombs themselves had compared the location of their programmed targets. Now, falling, they were connecting the invisible dots in three-dimensional space, and they were most unlikely to miss. But the bombs were not stealthy, because it hadn't occurred to anyone to make them so, and they were also large enough to track.

The Patriot battery still had missiles to shoot, and a site to defend, and though the bomber had disappeared, there *were* four objects on the screen, and the radar could see them. Automatically, the guidance systems tracked in on them as the battery commander swore at himself for not thinking of this sooner. His operator nodded at the command and turned the key that "enabled" the missile systems to operate autonomously, and the computer didn't know or care that the inbound targets were not aircraft. They were moving through the air, they were within its hemisphere of responsibility, and the human operators said, *kill.*

The first of four missiles exploded out of its boxlike container, converting its solid-rocket fuel into a white streak in the night sky. The guidance system was one that tracked targets via the missile itself, and though complex, it was also difficult to jam and exceedingly accurate. The first homed in on its target, relaying its own signals to the ground and receiving tracking instructions from the battery's computers. Had the missile a brain, it would have felt satisfaction as it led the falling target, selecting a point in space and time where both would meet . . .

"Kill!" the operator said, and night turned to day as the second SAM tracked in on the next bomb.

The light on the ground told the tale. Zacharias could see the strobelike flashes reflected off the rocky hillsides, too soon for bomb hits on the ground. So whoever had drawn up the mission parameters hadn't been paranoid after all.

"There's IP Two," the copilot said, recalling the aircraft commander back to the mission.

"Good ground-fix," the EWO said.

Zacharias could see it clearly this time, the wide flat path of deep blue, different from the broken, darker ground of this hill country, and the pale wall

that held it back. There were even lights there for the powerhouse.

"Doors coming open now."

The aircraft jumped upwards a few feet when the six weapons fell free. The flight controls adjusted for that, and the bomber turned right again for an easterly course, while the pilot felt better about what he'd been ordered to do.

The battery commander slammed his hand down on his instrument panel with a hoot of satisfaction. He'd gotten three of the four, and the last explosion, though it had been a miss, might well have knocked the bomb off-target, though he felt the ground shake with its impact on the ground. He lifted his field phone for the missile command bunker.

"Are you all right?" he asked urgently.

"What the hell hit us?" the distant officer demanded. The Patriot commander ignored that foolish question.

"Your missiles?"

"Eight of them are gone—but I think I have two left. I have to call Tokyo for instructions." It was amazing to the officer at the other end, and his immediate thought was to credit the site selection. His silos were drilled into solid rock, which had made a fine armor for his ICBMs after all. What orders would he receive now that the Americans had tried to disarm him and his nation?

I hope they tell you to launch, the SAM officer didn't quite have the courage to say aloud.

The last four bombs from the third B-2 tracked in on the hydroelectric dam at the head of the valley. They were programmed to strike from bottom to top in the reinforced-concrete face of the structure, the timing and placement of the target points no less crucial than those of the weapons that had tracked in on the missile silos. Unseen and unheard by anyone, they came down in a line, barely a hundred feet separating one from another.

The dam was a hundred thirty meters high and almost exactly that thick at its base, the structure narrowing as it rose to a spillway width of only ten meters. Strong, both to withstand the weight of the reservoir it held back and also to withstand the earthquakes that plague Japan, it had generated electricity for more than thirty years.

The first bomb hit seventy meters below the spillway. A heavy weapon with a thick case of hardened steel, it burrowed fifteen meters into the structure before exploding, first ripping a miniature cavern in the concrete, the shock of the event rippling through the immense wall as the second weapon struck, about five meters over the first.

A watchman was there, awakened from a nap by the noise from downvalley, but he'd missed the light show and was wondering what it had been when he saw the first muted flash that seemed to come from inside his dam. He heard the second weapon hit, then the delay of a second or so before the shock almost lifted him off his feet.

“Jesus, did we get them all?” Ryan asked. Contrary to popular belief, and contrary now to his own fervent wishes, the National Reconnaissance Office had never extended realtime capability to the White House. He had to depend on someone else, watching a television in a room at the Pentagon.

“Not sure, sir. They were all close hits—well, I mean, some were, but some of the bombs appeared too premature—”

“What does that mean?”

“They seem to have exploded in midair—three of them, that is, all from the last bomber. We’re trying to isolate in on the individual silos now and—”

“Are there any left intact, damn it?” Ryan demanded. Had the gamble failed?

“One, maybe two, we’re not sure. Stand by, okay?” the analyst asked rather plaintively. “We have another bird overhead in a few minutes.”

The dam might have survived two, but the third hit, twenty meters from the spillway, opened a gap—really, it dislodged a chunk of concrete triangular in shape. The section jerked forward, then stopped, held in place by the immense friction of the man-made rock, and for a second the watchman wondered if the dam might hold. The fourth hit struck in the center of that section and fragmented it. By the time the dust cleared, it had been replaced with fog and vapor as the water started pouring through the thirty-meter gap carved in the dam’s face. That gap grew before the watchman’s eyes, and only then did it occur to him to race for his shack and lift a phone to warn the people downstream. By that time, a river reborn after three decades of enforced sleep was racing down a valley it had carved over hundreds of millennia.

“Well?” the man in Tokyo demanded.

“One missile seems to be fully intact. That’s number nine. Number two—well, there may be some minor damage. I have my people checking them all now. What are my orders?”

“Prepare for a possible launch and stand by.”

“*Hai.*” The line clicked off.

Now what do I do? the watch officer wondered. He was new at this, new at the entire idea of managing nuclear weapons, a job he’d never wanted, but nobody had ever asked him about that. His remembered protocol of orders came quickly to him, and he lifted a phone—just an ordinary black instrument; there hadn’t been time for the theatrics the Americans had affected—for the Prime Minister.

“Yes, what is this?”

“Goto-san, this is the Ministry. There has been an attack on our missiles!”

“What? When?” the Prime Minister demanded. “How bad?”

“One, possibly two missiles are operational. The rest may be destroyed. We’re checking them all now.” The senior watch officer could hear the rage at

the other end of the line.

"How quickly can you get them ready for launch?"

"Several minutes. I have already given the order to bring them to launch status." The officer flipped an order book open to determine the procedures to actually launch the things. He'd been briefed in on it, of course, but now, in the heat of the moment, he felt the need to have it in writing before him as the others in the watch center turned and looked at him in an eerie silence.

"I'm calling my cabinet now!" And the line went dead.

The officer looked around. There was anger in the room, but even more, there was fear. It had happened again, a systematic attack, and now they knew the import of the earlier American actions. Somehow they had learned the location of the camouflaged missiles, and then they had used timed attacks on the Japanese air-defense system to cover what they really wanted to do. So what would they themselves be ordered to do now? Launch a nuclear attack? That was madness. The General thought so, and he could see that the cooler heads in his command center felt the same way.

It was a miracle of sorts. Missile Number Nine's silo was nearly intact. One bomb had exploded a mere six meters away, but the rock around the—no, the officer saw, the bomb hadn't exploded at all. There was a hole in the rocky floor of the valley, but in the light of his flashlight he could see right there, amid the broken rock, the afterpart of something—a fin, perhaps. A dud, he realized, a smart bomb with a faulty fuse. Wasn't that amusing? He raced off next to see
Number Two. Running down the valley, he heard some sort of alarm horn and wondered what that was all about. It was a frightening trip, and he marveled at the fact that the Americans hadn't attempted to attack the control bunker. Of the ten missiles in the collection, eight were certainly destroyed. He choked with the fumes of the remaining propellants, but most of that had fireballed into the sky already, leaving behind only noxious gas that the night winds were sweeping away. On reflection he donned a gas mask that covered his face, and, fatally, his ears.

Silo two had taken a single bomb hit—near miss, he corrected himself. This bomb had missed the center target by perhaps twelve meters, and though it had thrown tons of rock about and cracked the concrete liner, all they had to do was sweep off the debris from the access hatch, then go down to see if the missile was intact.

Damn the Americans for this! he raged, lifting his portable radio and calling the control bunker. Strangely, there was no reply. Then he noticed that the ground was shaking, but halfway wondered if it might be his own trembling. Commanding himself to be still, he took a deep breath, but the rumbling didn't stop. An earthquake . . . and what was that howling outside his gas mask? Then he saw it, and there wasn't time to race for the valley walls.

The Patriot crew heard it also, but ignored it. It was the reload crew who got

the only warning. Set in the wye of the railroad tracks, they were rigging a launch canister of four more missiles when the white wall exploded out the entrance to the valley. Their shouts went unheard, though one of their number managed to scramble to safety before the hundredfoot wave engulfed the site.

Two hundred miles over his head, an orbiting camera overflew the valley from southwest to northeast, all nine of its cameras following the same rush of water.

45

Line of Battle

"There they go," Jones said. The shuttling pencils on the fan-fold paper showed nearly identical marks, the thin traces on the 1000hz line indicated that Prairie-Masker systems were in use, and similarly faint lower-frequency marks denoted the use of marine diesel engines. There were seven of them, and though the bearings were not showing much change as yet, they soon would. The Japanese submarines were all now at snorting depth, and the time was wrong. They snorted on the hour, usually, typically one hour into a watch cycle, which allowed the officers and men on duty time to get used to the ship after a rest period, and also to do a sonar check before entering their most vulnerable evolution. But it was twenty-five after the hour now, and they'd all started snorting within the same five-minute period, and that meant movement orders. Jones lifted the phone and punched the button for SubPac.

"Jones here."

"What's happening, Ron?"

"Whatever bait you just dropped in the water, sir, they just took after it. I have seven tracks," he reported. "Who's waiting for them?"

"Not on the phone, Ron," Mancuso said. "How are things over there?"

"Pretty much under control," Jones replied, looking around at the chiefs. Good men and women already, and his additional training had put them fully on-line.

"Why don't you bring your data over here, then? You've earned it."

"See you in ten," the contractor said.

"We got 'em," Ryan said.

"How sure are you?" Durling asked.

"Here, sir." Jack put three photos on the President's desk, just couriered over from NRO.

"This is what it looked like yesterday." There was nothing to see, really, except for the Patriot missile battery. The second photo showed more, and though it was a radar photo in black and white, it had been computer-blended with another visual overhead to give a more precise picture of the missile field. "Okay, this is seventy minutes old," Ryan said, setting the third one down.

"It's a lake." He looked up, surprised even though he'd been briefed.

"The place is under about a hundred feet of water, will be for another few hours," Jack explained. "Those missiles are dead—"

"Along with how many people?" Durling asked.

"Over a hundred," the National Security Advisor reported, his enthusiasm for the event instantly gone. "Sir—there wasn't any way around that."

The President nodded. "I know. How sure are we that the missiles . . . ?"

"Pre-flood shots showed seven of the holes definitely hit and destroyed. One more probably wrecked, and two unknowns, but definitely with shock damage of some sort. The weather seals on the holes won't withstand that much water pressure, and ICBMs are too delicate for that sort of treatment. Toss in debris carried downstream from the flooding. The missiles are as dead as we can make them without a nuclear strike of our own, and we managed to do the mission without it." Jack paused. "It was all Robby Jackson's plan. Thanks for letting me reward him for it."

"He's with the carrier now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it would seem that he's the man for the job, wouldn't it?" the President asked rhetorically, clearly relieved at the evening's news. "And now?"

"And now, Mr. President, we try to settle this one down once and for all."

The phone rang just then. Durling lifted it. "Oh. Yes, Tish?"

"There's an announcement from the Japanese government that they have nuclear weapons and they hope—"

"Not anymore, they don't," Durling said, cutting off his communications director. "We'd better make an announcement of our own."

"Oh, yeah," Jones said, looking at the wall chart. "You did that one in a big hurry, Bart."

The line was west of the Marianas. *Nevada* was the northernmost boat. Thirty miles south of her was *West Virginia.* Another thirty and there was *Pennsylvania. Maryland* was the southernmost former missile submarine. The line was ninety miles across, and really extended a theoretical thirty more, fifteen to the north and south of the end-boats, and they were two hundred miles west of the westward-moving line of Japanese SSKs. They had just arrived in place after the warning from Washington that the word had been leaked somehow or other to the Japanese.

"Something like this happened once before, didn't it?" Jones asked, remembering that these were all battleship names, and more than that, the names of battlewagons caught alongside the quays one morning in December, long before his birth. The original holders of the names had been resurrected from the mud and sent off to take islands back, supporting soldiers and Marines under the command of Jesse Oldendorf, and one dark night in Surigao Strait . . . but it wasn't a time for history lessons.

"What about the 'cans?" Chambers asked.

"We lost them when they went behind the Bonins, sir. Speed and course were fairly constant. They ought to pass over *Tennessee* around midnight, local time, but by that time our carriers—"

"You have the operation all figured out," Mancuso observed.

"Sir, I've been tracking the whole ocean for you. What d'ya expect?"

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the President said in the White House Press Room. He was winging it, Ryan saw, just working off some scribbled notes, never something to make the Chief Executive comfortable. “You’ve just this evening heard an announcement by the Japanese government that they have fabricated and deployed nuclear-tipped intercontinental missiles.

“That fact has been known to your government for several weeks now, and the existence of those weapons is the reason for the careful and circumspect way in which the Administration has dealt with the Pacific Crisis. As you can well imagine, that development has weighed heavily on us, and has affected our response to Japanese aggression against U.S. soil and citizens in the Marianas.

“I can now tell you that those missiles have been destroyed. They no longer exist,” Durling said in a forceful voice.

“The current situation is this: the Japanese military still hold the Marianas Islands. That is not acceptable to the United States of America. The people living on those islands are American citizens, and American forces will do anything necessary to redeem their freedom and human rights. I repeat: we will do anything necessary to restore those islands to U.S. rule.

“We call tonight on Prime Minister Goto to announce his willingness to evacuate Japanese forces from the Marianas forthwith. Failure to do so will compel us to use whatever force is necessary to remove them.

“That is all I have to say right now. For whatever questions you have on the events of this evening, I turn you over to my National Security Advisor, Dr. John Ryan.” The President walked toward the door, ignoring a riot of shouted questions, while a few easels were set up for visual displays. Ryan stood at the lectern, making everyone wait as he told himself to speak slowly and clearly.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this was called Operation TIBBETS. First of all let me show you what the targets were.” The cover came off the first photo, and for the first time the American people saw just what the nation’s reconnaissance satellites were capable of. Ryan lifted his pointer and started identifying the scene for everyone, giving the cameras time to close in on them.

“Holy shit,” Manuel Oreza observed. “That’s why.”

“Looks like a pretty good reason to me,” Pete Burroughs observed. Then the screen went blank.

“We’re sorry, but a technical problem has temporarily interrupted the CNN satellite feed,” a voice told them.

“My ass!” Portagee snarled back.

“They’ll come here next, won’t they?”

“About fuckin’ time, too,” Oreza thought.

“Manny, what about that missile thing on the next hill?” his wife wanted to know.

“We’re preparing copies of all these photos for you. They should be ready in about an hour or so. Sorry for the delay,” Jack told them. “It’s been rather a busy time for us.

“Now, the mission was carried out by B-2 bombers based at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri—”

“Staging out of where?” a reporter asked.

“You know we’re not going to discuss that,” Jack said in reply.

“That’s a nuclear-weapons platform,” another voice said. “Did we—”

“No. The strike was carried out with precision-guided conventional munitions. Next card, please,” Ryan said to the man at the easel. “As you can see here, the valley is largely intact . . .” It was easier than he’d expected, and perhaps better that he’d not had much time to worry about it, and Ryan remembered his first time delivering a briefing in the White House. It had been harder than this one, despite the blaze of TV lights now in his face.

“You destroyed a dam?”

“Yes, we did. It was necessary to be completely certain that these weapons were destroyed and—”

“What about casualties?”

“All of our aircraft are on their way back—might already be there, but I haven’t—”

“What about Japanese deaths?” the reporter insisted.

“I don’t know about that,” Jack replied evenly.

“Do you care?” she demanded, wondering what sort of answer she’d get.

“The mission, ma’am, was to eliminate nuclear arms targeted on the United States by a country that has already attacked U.S. forces. Did we kill Japanese citizens in this attack? Yes, we did. How many? I do not know. Our concern in this case was American lives at risk. I wish you would keep in mind that we didn’t start this war. Japan did. When you start a war you take risks. This is one risk they undertook—and in this case they lost. I am the President’s National Security Advisor, and my job description is to help President Durling safeguard this country first of all. Is that clear?” Ryan asked. He’d allowed just a little anger to enter his reply, and the indignant look on the reporter’s face didn’t prevent a few nods from her colleagues.

“What about asking the press to lie in order to—”

“Stop!” Ryan commanded, his face reddening. “Do you wish to place the lives of American servicemen at risk? Why do that? Why the hell would you want to do that?”

“You bullied the networks into—”

“This feed is going worldwide. You do know that, don’t you?” Ryan paused to take a breath. “Ladies and gentlemen, I would remind you that most of the people in this room are American citizens. Speaking for myself now”—he was afraid to look to where the President was standing—“you do realize that the President is responsible to the mothers and fathers and wives and children of the people who wear our country’s uniform for their safety. Real people are at risk today, and I wish you folks in the press would bear that in mind from time to time.”

“Jesus,” Tish Brown whispered behind Durling. “Mr. President, it might be a good idea to—”

"No." He shook his head. "Let him go on."

The Press Room became silent. Someone whispered something sharp to the standing journalist, who managed to take her seat, flushing as she did so.

"Dr. Ryan, Bob Holtzman of the *Washington Post,*" he said unnecessarily. "What are the chances of ending this conflict without further violence?"

"Sir, that is entirely up to the Japanese government. The citizens of the Marianas are, as the President said, *American* citizens, and this country does not allow other nations to change such things. If Japan is willing to withdraw her forces, they may do so in peace. If not, then other operations will take place."

"Thank you, Dr. Ryan," Holtzman said loudly, effectively ending the press conference. Jack hustled toward the door, ignoring the additional questions.

"Nice job," Durling said. "Why don't you go home for some sleep?"

"And what is this?" the customs officer asked.

"My photographic equipment," Chekov replied. He opened the case without an order to do so. It was warm in the terminal, the noon tropical sun beating through the wall of windows and overpowering the air conditioning for the moment. Their newest orders had been easily implemented. The Japanese wanted journalists in the islands, both to check up on the election campaign and to safeguard against American attack by their mere presence in the islands.

The customs officer looked at the cameras, gratified to see that it was all Japanese. "And this?"

"My lighting equipment is Russian," Ding explained in slow English. "We make very fine lights. Perhaps one day we will sell them in your country," he added with a smile.

"Yes, perhaps so," the official said, closing the case and marking it with chalk. "Where will you be staying?"

"We weren't able to make hotel arrangements," "Klerk" replied. "We'll check the local hotels."

Good luck, the official didn't say. This idea had come off half-baked, and every hotel room on Saipan, he was sure, was already filled. Well, that wasn't his problem.

"Can we rent a car?"

"Yes, over that way." The man pointed. The older Russian looked nervous, he thought.

"You're late."

"Well, sorry about that," Oreza replied tersely. "There's nothing new happening at all. Well, maybe the fighters are a little more active, but not much, and they've been pretty busy anyw—"

"You're going to get some company soon," the National Military Command Center told him.

"Who?"

"Two reporters. They have some questions for you," was the answer because of the renewed concern for Oreza's secure status.

"When?"

"Anytime, probably today. Everything okay with you, Chief?"

Master Chief, you turkey, Portagee didn't say. "Just great. We saw part of the President's speech, and we're a little worried because that missile site is so close to us and—"

"You'll have enough warning. Does your house have a basement?" the voice asked.

"No, it doesn't."

"Well, that's okay. We'll let you know, okay?"

"Sure, sir. Out." *Does your house have a basement?* No. *Well, that's okay.* If it's okay, why did you ask, goddamn it? Oreza deactivated the phone after taking it out of the mixing bowl and walked to the window. Two Eagles were taking off. Such a mechanical thing to watch. Something was happening. He didn't know what. Perhaps their pilots didn't either, but you couldn't tell what they were thinking from looking at their aircraft.

Shiro Sato reefed his F-15J into a right turn to clear the civilian air traffic. If the Americans attacked, they would do it as the attacks on the Home Islands had come, off island bases, supported by tankers, from a long way off. Wake was a possibility, and so were a few other islands. He'd face aircraft not unlike his own. They would have airborne radar support, and so would he. It would be a fair fight unless the bastards brought down their stealth aircraft. Damn the things. Damn their ability to defeat the Kamis! But the Americans had only a few of them, and if they flew in daylight, he'd take his chances. At least there would be no real surprises. There was a huge air-defense radar on Saipan's highest point, and with the squadrons based on Guam, this would be a real fight, he told himself, climbing up to patrol altitude.

"So what's the big deal?" Chavez asked, playing with the map.

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"Well, take the next left, I think, by Lizama's Mobil." Chavez looked up from the map. There were soldiers everywhere, and they were digging in, something they ought to have done sooner, he thought. "Is that a Patriot battery?"

"Sure looks like one to me." *How the hell am I going to handle this?* Clark asked himself, finding the last turn and heading into the cul-de-sac. The house number was the one he'd memorized. He pulled into the driveway and got out, heading for the front door.

Oreza had been in the bathroom, finishing a needed shower while Burroughs handled the running count on the aircraft in and out of Kobler when the doorbell rang.

"Who are you?"

"Didn't they tell you?" Clark asked, looking around. Who the hell was this guy?

"Reporters, right?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Okay." Burroughs opened the door with a look up and down the street.

"Who are you, anyway? I thought this was the house of—"

"You're dead!" Oreza was standing in the hall, wearing just khaki shorts, his chest a mass of hair as thick as the remaining jungle on the island. The hair looked especially dark now, with the rest of the man's skin turning rapidly to the color of milk. "You're fuckin' dead!"

"Hi, Portagee," Klerk/Clark/Kelly said with a smile. "Long time."

He couldn't make himself move. "I saw you die. I went to the goddamned memorial service. I was *there!*"

"Hey, I know you," Chavez said. "You were on the boat our chopper landed on. What the hell is this? You Agency?"

It was almost too much for Oreza. He didn't remember the little one at all, but the big one, the old one, his age, about, was—couldn't be—was. It wasn't possible. Was it?

"John?" he asked after a few seconds of further incredulity.

It was too much for the man who used to be known as John Kelly. He set his bag down and came over to embrace the man, surprised by the tears in his eyes. "Yeah, Portagee—it's me. How you doin', man?"

"But how—"

"At the memorial service, did they use the line about 'sure and certain hope that the sea will give up its dead'?" He paused, then he had to grin. "Well, it did."

Oreza closed his eyes, thinking back over twenty years. "Those two admirals, right?"

"You got it."

"So—what the hell have you been—"

"CIA, man. They decided they needed somebody who could, well—"

"I remember that part." He really hadn't changed all that much. Older, but the same hair, and the same eyes, warm and open to him as they had always been, Portagee thought, but underneath always the hint of something else, like an animal in a cage, but an animal who knew how to pick the lock whenever he wanted.

"I hear you've been doing okay for a retired coastie."

"Command Master Chief." The man shook his head. The past could wait. "What's going on?"

"Well, we've been out of the loop for a few hours. Anything new that you know?"

"The President was on. They cut him off, but—"

"Did they really have nukes?" Burroughs asked.

" 'Did'?" Ding asked. "We got 'em?"

"That what he said. Who the hell are you, by the way?" Oreza wanted to know.

"Domingo Chavez." The young man extended his hand. "I see you and Mr. C

know each other."

"I go by 'Clark' now," John explained. It was odd how good it felt to talk with a man who knew his real name.

"Does he know?"

John shook his head. "Not many people know. Most of them are dead. Admiral Maxwell and Admiral Greer both. Too bad, they saved my ass."

Oreza turned to his other new guest. "Tough luck, kid. It's some fuckin' sea story. You still drink beer, John?"

"Especially if it's free," Chavez confirmed.

"Don't you see? It's finished now!"

"Who else did they get?" Yamata asked.

"Matsuda, Itagake—they got every patron of every minister, all except you and me," Murakami said, not adding that they had nearly gotten him. "Raizo, it is time to put an end to this. Call Goto and tell him to negotiate a peace."

"I will not!" Yamata snarled back.

"Don't you see? Our missiles are destroyed and—"

"And we can make new ones. We have the ability to make more warheads, and we *have* more missiles at Yoshinobu."

"If we attempt that, you know what the Americans will do, you fool!"

"They wouldn't dare."

"You told us that they could not repair the damage you did to their financial systems. You told us that our air defenses were invincible. You told us that they could never strike back at us effectively." Murakami paused for a breath. "You told us all these things—and you were wrong. Now I am the last one to whom you may speak, and I am not listening. *You* tell Goto to make peace!"

"They'll never take these islands back. Never! They do not have the ability."

"Say what you please, Raizo-chan. For my part it is over."

"Find a good place to hide then!" Yamata would have slammed the phone down, but a portable didn't offer that option. "Murderers," he muttered. It had taken most of the morning to assemble the necessary information. Somehow the Americans had struck at his own council of zaibatsu. How? Nobody knew. Somehow they'd penetrated the defenses that every consultant had told him were invincible, even to the point of destroying the intercontinental missiles. "How?" he asked.

"It would seem that we underestimated the quality of their remaining air forces," General Arima replied with a shrug. "It is not the end. We still have options."

"Oh?" *Not everyone was giving up, then?*

"They will not wish to invade these islands. Their ability to perform a proper invasion is severely compromised by their lack of amphibious-assault ships, and even if they managed to put people on the island—to fight amidst so many of their own citizens? No." Arima shook his head. "They will not risk it. They will seek a negotiated peace. There is still a chance—if not for complete success, then for a negotiated peace that leaves our forces largely intact."

Yamata accepted that for what it was, looking out the windows at the island

that he wanted to be his. The elections, he thought, could still be won. It was the political will of the Americans that needed attacking, and he still had the ability to do that.

It didn't take long to turn the 747 around, but the surprise to Captain Sato was that the aircraft was half full for the flight back to Narita. Thirty minutes after lift-off, a stewardess reported to him by phone that of the eleven people she'd asked, all but two had said that they had pressing business that required their presence at home. *What pressing business might that be?* he wondered, with his country's international trade for the most part reduced to ships traveling between Japan and China.

"This is not turning out well," his copilot observed an hour out. "Look down there."

It was easy to spot ships from thirty thousand feet, and of late they'd taken to carrying binoculars to identify surface ships. Sato lifted his pair and spotted the distinctive shapes of Aegis destroyers still heading north. On a whim he reached down to flip his radio to a different guard frequency.

"JAL 747 calling *Mutsu,* over."

"Who is this?" a voice instantly replied. "Clear this frequency at once!"

"This is Captain Torajiro Sato. Call your fleet commander!" he ordered with his own command voice. It took a minute.

"Brother, you shouldn't be doing this," Yusuo chided. Radio silence was as much a formality as a real military necessity. He knew that the Americans had reconnaissance satellites, and besides, his group's SPY radars were all up and radiating. If American snooper aircraft were about, they'd know where his squadron was. It was something he would have considered with confidence a week before, but not now.

"I merely wanted to express our confidence in you and your men. Use us for a practice target," he added.

In *Mutsu's* CIC, the missile techs were already doing exactly that, but it wouldn't do to say so, the Admiral knew. "Good to hear your voice again. Now you must excuse me. I have work to do here."

"Understood, Yusuo. Out." Sato took his finger off the radio switch. "See," he said over the intercom. "They're doing their job and we have to do ours."

The copilot wasn't so sure, but Sato was the captain of the 747, and he kept his peace, concentrating on navigational tasks. Like most Japanese he'd been raised to think of war as something to be avoided as assiduously as plague. The overnight development of a conflict with America, well, it had felt good for a day or so to teach the arrogant gaijin a lesson, but that was fantasy talking, and this was increasingly real. Then the double-barreled notification that his country had fielded nuclear arms—that was madness enough—only immediately to be followed by the American claim that the weapons had been

destroyed. This *was* an American aircraft, after all, a Boeing 747-400PIP, five years old but state-of-the-art in every respect, reliable and steady. There was little America had to learn about the building of aircraft, and if this one was as good as he knew it to be, then how much more formidable still were their military aircraft? The aircraft his country's Air Force flew were copies of American designs—except for the AEW 767s he'd heard so much about, first about how invincible they were, and more recently about how there were only a few left. This madness had to stop. Didn't everyone see that? Some must, he thought, else why was his airliner half full of people who didn't want to be on Saipan despite their earlier enthusiasm?

But his captain did not see that at all, did he? the copilot asked himself. Torajiro Sato was sitting there, fixed as stone in the left seat, as though all were normal when plainly it was not.

All he had to do was look down in the afternoon sunlight to see those destroyers—doing what? They were guarding their country's coast against the possibility of attack. Was that normal?

"Conn, Sonar."

"Conn, aye." Claggett had the conn for the afternoon watch. He wanted the crew to see him at work, and more than that, wanted to keep the feel for conning his boat.

"Possible multiple contacts to the south," the sonar chief reported. "Bearing one-seven-one. Look like surface ships at high speed, sir, getting pounding and a very high blade rate."

That was about right, the CO thought, heading for the sonar room again. He was about to order a track to be plotted, but when he turned to do so, he saw two quartermasters already setting it up, and the ray-path analyzer printing its first cut on the range. His crew was fully drilled in now, and things just happened automatically, but better. They were thinking as well as acting.

"Best guess, they're a ways off, but look at all this," the chief said. It was clearly a real contact. Data was appearing on four different frequency lines. Then the chief held up his phones. "Sounds like a whole bunch of screws turning—a lot of racing and cavitation, has to be multiple ships, traveling in column."

"And our other friend?" Claggett asked.

"The sub? He's gone quiet again, probably just tooling along on batteries at five or less." That contact was a good twenty miles off, just beyond the usual detection range.

"Sir, initial range cut on the new contacts is a hundred-plus-thousand yards, CZ contact," another tech reported.

"Bearing is constant. Not a wiggle. They heading straight for us or close to it. They pounding hard. What are surface conditions like, sir?"

"Waves eight to ten feet, Chief." A hundred thousand yards plus. More than fifty nautical miles, Claggett thought. Those ships were driving hard. Right to him, but he wasn't supposed to shoot. Damn. He took the required three steps back into control. "Right ten-degrees rudder, come to new course two-seven-zero."

Tennessee came about to a westerly heading, the better to give her sonar operators a range for the approaching destroyers. His last piece of operational intelligence had predicted this, and the timing of the information was as accurate as it was unwelcome.

In a more dramatic setting, in front of cameras, the atmosphere might have been different, but although the setting was dramatic in a distant sense, right now it was merely cold and miserable. Though these men were the most elite of troops, it was far easier to rouse yourself for combat against a person than against unremitting environmental discomfort. The Rangers, in their mainly white camouflage overclothing, moved about as little as possible, and the lack of physical activity merely made them more vulnerable to the cold and to boredom, the soldier's deadliest enemy. And yet that was good, Captain Checa thought. For a single squad of soldiers four thousand miles from the nearest U.S. Army base—and *that* base was Fort Wainwright in Alaska—it was a hell of a lot safer to be bored than to be excited by the stimulus of a combat action without any hope of support. Or something like that. Checa faced the problem common to officers: subject to the same discomfort and misery as his men, he was not allowed to bitch. There was no other officer to bitch to in any case, and to do so in front of the men was bad for morale, even though the men probably would have understood.

"Be nice to get back to Fort Stewart, sir," First Sergeant Vega observed. "Spread on that sunblock and catch some rays on the beach."

"And miss all this beautiful snow and sleet, Oso?" At least the sky was clear now.

"Roge-o, Captain. But I got my fill o' this shit when I was a kid in Chicago." He paused, looking and listening around again. The noise-disciphne of the other Rangers was excellent, and you had to look very closely indeed to see where the lookouts were standing.

"Ready for the walk out tonight?"

"Just so's our friend is waiting on the far side of that hill."

"I'm sure he will be," Checa lied.

"Yes, sir. I am, too." *If one could do it, why not two?* Vega thought. "Did all this stuff work?"

The killers in their midst were sleeping in their bags, in holes lined with pine branches and covered with more branches for additional warmth. In addition to guarding the pilots, the Rangers had to keep them healthy, like watching over infants, an odd mission for elite troops, but troops of that sort generally drew the oddest.

"So they say." Checa looked at his watch. "We shake them loose in another two hours."

Vega nodded, hoping that his legs weren't too stiff for the trek south.

The patrol pattern had been set in the mission briefing. The four boomers had thirty-mile sectors, and each sector was divided into three ten-mile segments.

Each boat could patrol in the center slot, leaving the north and south slots empty for everything but weapons. The patrol patterns were left to the judgment of individual skippers, but they worked out the same way. *Pennsylvania* was on a northerly course, trolling along at a mere five knots, just as she'd done for her nowended deterrence patrols carrying Trident missiles. She was making so little noise that a whale might have come close to a collision, if it were the right time for whales in this part of the Pacific, which it wasn't. Behind her, at the end of a lengthy cable, was her towed-array sonar, and the two-hour north-south cycle allowed it to trail straight out in a line, with about ten minutes or so required for the turns at the end of the cycles to get it straight again for maximum performance.

Pennsylvania was at six hundred feet, the ideal sonar depth given today's water conditions. It was just sunset up on the roof when the first trace appeared on her sonar screens. It started as a series of dots, yellow on the video screen, trickling down slowly with time, and shifting a little to the south in bearing, but not much. Probably, the lead sonarman thought, the target had been running on battery for the past few hours, else he would have caught the louder signals of the diesels used to charge them, but there the contact was, on the expected 60hz line. He reported the contact data to the fire-control tracking party.

Wasn't this something, the sonarman thought. He'd spent his entire career in missile boats, so often tracking contacts which his submarine would maneuver to avoid, even though the boomer fleet prided itself on having the best torpedomen in the fleet. *Pennsylvania* carried only fifteen weapons aboard—there was a shortage of the newest version of the ADCAP torpedo, and it had been decided not to bother carrying anything less capable under the circumstances. It also had three other torpedolike units, called LEMOSSs, for Long-Endurance Mobile Submarine Simulator. The skipper, another lifelong boomer sailor, had briefed the crew on his intended method of attack, and everyone aboard approved. The mission, in fact, was just about ideal. The Japanese had to move through their line. Their operational pattern was such that for them to pass undetected through the Line of Battle, as the skipper had taken to calling it, was most unlikely.

"Now hear this," the Captain said over the 1-MC announcing system—every speaker had been turned down, so that the announcement came as a whisper that the men strained to hear. "We have a probable submerged contact in our kill zone. I am going to conduct the attack just as we briefed it. Battle stations," he concluded in the voice of a man ordering breakfast at HoJo's.

There came sounds so faint that only one experienced sonarman could hear them, and that mostly because he was just forward of the attack center. The watch had changed there so that only the most experienced men—and one woman, now—would occupy the weapons consoles. Those people too junior for a place on the sub's varsity assembled throughout the boat in damage-control parties. Voices announced to the attack-center talker that each space was fully manned and ready, and then the ship grew as silent as a graveyard on Halloween.

"Contact is firming up nicely," the sonarman said over his phones. "Bearing is changing westerly, bearing to target now zero-seven-five. Getting a faint

blade-rate on the contact, estimate contact speed is ten knots."

That made it a definite submarine, not that there was much doubt. The diesel sub had her own towed-array sonar and was doing a sprint-and-drift of her own, alternately going at her top speed, then slowing to detect anything that she might miss with the increased flow noise.

"Tubes one, three, and four are ADCAPs," a weapons technician announced. "Tube two is a LEMOSS."

"Spin 'em all up," the Captain said. Most COs liked to say *warm 'em up,* but otherwise this one was by-the-book.

"Current range estimate is twenty-two thousand yards," the tracking party chief announced.

The sonarman saw something new on his screen, then adjusted his headphones.

"Transient, transient, sounds like hull-popping on Sierra-Ten. Contact is changing depth."

"Going up, I bet," the Captain said a few feet away. *That's about right*, the sonarman thought with a nod of his own. "Let's get the MOSS in the water. Set its course at zero-zero-zero. Keep it quiet for the first ten thousand yards, then up to normal radiating levels."

"Aye, sir." The tech dialed in the proper settings on her programming board, and then the weapons officer checked the instructions and pronounced them correct.

"Ready on two."

"Contact Sierra-Ten is fading somewhat, sir. Probably above the layer now."

"Definite direct-path to Sierra-Ten," the ray-path technician said next. "Definitely not a CZ contact, sir."

"Ready on tube two," the weapons tech reported again.

"Fire two," the CO ordered at once. "Reload another MOSS," he said next.

Pennsylvania shuddered ever so slightly as the LEMOSS was ejected into the sea. The sonar picked it up at once as it angled left, then reversed course, heading north at a mere ten knots. Based on an old Mark 48 torpedo body, the LEMOSS was essentially a huge tank of the OTTO fuel American "fish" used, plus a small propulsion system and a large sound-transducer that gave out the noise of an engine plant. The noise was the same frequencies as those of a nuclear power plant, but quite a bit louder than those on an Ohio-class. It never seemed to matter to people that the thing was too loud. Attack submarines almost always went for it, even American ones who should have known better. The new model with the new name could move along for over fifteen hours, and it was a shame it had been developed only a few months before the boomers had been fully and finally disarmed.

Now came the time for patience. The Japanese submarine actually slowed a little more, doubtless doing its own final sonar sweep before they lit off the diesels for their speedy passage west. The sonarman tracked the LEMOSS north. The signal was just about to fade out completely before the sound systems turned on, five miles away. Two miles after that, it jumped over the thermocline layer of cold and warm water and the game began in earnest.

"Conn, Sonar, Sierra-Ten just changed speed, change in the blade-rate, slowing down, sir."

"He has good sonar," the Captain said, just behind the sonarman. *Pennsylvania* had risen somewhat, floating her sonar tail over the layer for a better look at the contact while the body of the submarine stayed below. He turned and spoke more loudly. "Weapons?"

"One, three, and four are ready for launch, solutions on all of them."

"Set four for a stalking profile, initial course zero-twozero."

"Done. Set as ordered, sir. Tube four ready in all respects."

"Match bearings and shoot," the Captain ordered from the door of the sonar room, adding, "Reload another ADCAP."

Pennsylvania shuddered again as the newest version of the venerable Mark 48 torpedo entered the sea, turning northeast and controlled by an insulated wire that streamed out from its tailfin.

This was like an exercise, the sonarman thought, but easier.

"Additional contacts?" the skipper asked, behind him again.

"Not a thing, sir." The enlisted man waved at his scopes. Only random noise showed, and an additional scope was running diagnostic checks every ten minutes to show that the systems were all functioning properly. It was quite a payoff: after nearly forty years of missile-boat operations, and close to fifty of nuclear-sub ops, the first American sub kill since World War II would come from a boomer supposedly on her way to the scrapyard.

Traveling far more rapidly, the ADCAP torpedo popped over the layer somewhat aft of the contact. It immediately started radiating from its own ultrasonic sonar and fed the picture back along the wire to *Pennsylvania.*

"Hard contact, range three thousand and close to the surface. Lookin' good," sonar said. The same diagnosis came from the weapons petty officer with her identical readout.

"Eat shit and die," the male member of the team whispered, watching the two contact lines close on the display. Sierra Ten went instantly to full speed, diving at first below the layer, but his batteries were probably a little low, and he didn't make more than fifteen knots, while the ADCAP was doing over sixty. The one-sided chase lasted a total of three and a half minutes and ended with a bright splotch on the screen and a noise in the headphones that stung his ears. The rest was epilogue, concluding with a ripping screech of steel being crushed by water pressure.

"That's a kill, sir. I copy a definite kill." Two minutes later, a distant low-frequency to the north suggested that *West Virginia* had achieved the same goal.

"Christopher Cook?" Murray asked.

"That's right."

It *was* a very nice house, the Deputy Assistant Director thought as he pulled out his identification folder. "FBI. We'd like to talk to you about your conversations with Seiji Nagumo. Could you get a coat?"

The sun had a few more hours to go when the Lancers taxied out. Angered by

the loss of one of their number not so long before, the crews deemed themselves to be in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing, but nobody had troubled himself to ask their opinion, and their job was written down. Their bomb bays taken up with fuel tanks, one by one the bombers raced down the runway and lifted off, turning and climbing to their assembly altitude of twenty thousand feet for the cruise northeast.

It was another goddamned demonstration, Dubro thought, and he wondered how the hell somebody like Robby Jackson could have thought it up, but he, too, had orders, and each of his carriers turned into the wind, fifty miles apart to launch forty aircraft each, and though these were all armed, they were not to take action unless provoked.

46

Detachment

"We're almost empty," the copilot said in a neutral voice, checking the manifest as part of the preflight ritual.

"What is the matter with these people?" Captain Sato growled, looking over the flight plan and checking the weather. That was a short task. It would be cool and clear all the way down, with a huge high-pressure area taking charge of the Western Pacific. Except for some high winds in the vicinity of the Home Islands, it would make for a glassysmooth ride all the way to Saipan, for the thirty-four passengers on the flight. *Thirty-four!* he raged. *In an aircraft built for over three hundred!*

"Captain, we will be leaving those islands soon. You know that." It was clear enough, wasn't it? The people, the average men and women on the street, were no longer so much confused as frightened—or maybe even that wasn't the proper word. He hadn't seen anything like it. They felt—betrayed? The first newspaper editorials had come out to question the course their country had taken, and though the questions asked were mild, the import of them was not. It had all been an illusion. His country had not been prepared for war in a psychological sense any more than a physical one, and the people were suddenly realizing what was actually going on. The whispered reports of the murder—what else could one call it?—of some prominent zaibatsu had left the government in a turmoil. Prime Minister Goto was doing little, not even giving speeches, not even making appearances, lest he have to face questions for which he had no answers. But the faith of his captain, the copilot saw, had not yet been shaken.

"No, we will not! How can you say that? Those islands are ours."

"Time will tell," the copilot observed, returning to his work and letting it go at that. He did have his job to do, rechecking fuel and winds and other technical data necessary for the successful flight of a commercial airliner, all the things the passengers never saw, assuming that the flight crew just showed up and turned it on as though it were a taxicab.

"Enjoy your sleep?"

"You bet, Captain. I dreamed of a hot day and a hot woman." Richter stood up, and his movements belied his supposed comfort. *I really am too old for this shit,* the chief warrant officer thought. It was just fate and luck—if you could call it that—that had put him on the mission. No one else had as much time on the Comanche as he and his fellow warrants did, and somebody had decided that they had the brains to do it, without some goddamned colonel

around to screw things up. And now he could boogie on out of here. He looked up to see a clear sky. Well, could be better. For getting in and getting out, better to have clouds.

"Tanks are topped off."

"Some coffee would be nice," he thought aloud.

"Here you go, Mr. Richter." It was Vega, the first sergeant. "Nice iced coffee, like they serve in the best Florida hotels."

"Oh, thanks loads, man." Richter took the metal cup with a chuckle. "Anything new on the way out?"

* * *

This was not good, Claggett thought. The Aegis line had broken up, and now he had one of the goddamned things ten miles away. Worse still, there had been a helicopter in the air not long before, according to his ESM mast, which he'd briefly risked despite the presence of the world's best surveillance radar. But three Army helicopters were depending on him to be here, and that was that. Nobody had ever told him that harm's way was a safe place. Not for him. Not for them, either.

"And our other friend?" he asked his sonar chief. The substantive reply was a shake of the head. The words merely confirmed it.

"Off the scope again."

There were thirty knots of surface wind, which was whipping up the waves somewhat and interfering with sonar performance. Even holding the destroyer was becoming difficult now that it was slowed to a patrol speed of no more than fifteen knots. The submarine off to the north was gone again. Maybe really gone, but it was dangerous to bank on that. Claggett checked his watch. He'd have to decide what to do in less than an hour.

They would be going in blind, but that was an awkward necessity. Ordinarily they'd gather information with snooper aircraft, but the real effort here was to achieve surprise, and they couldn't compromise that. The carrier task force had avoided commercial air lanes, hidden under clouds, and generally worked very hard to make itself scarce for several days. Jackson felt confident that his presence was a secret, but maintaining it meant depending on spotty submarine reports of electronic activity on the islands, and all these did was to confirm that the enemy had several E-2C aircraft operating, plus a monster air-defense radar. It would be an encounter battle aloft. Well, they'd been training for that over the past two weeks.

"Okay, last check," Oreza heard over the phone. "Kobler is exclusively military aircraft?"

"That is correct, sir. Since the first couple of days, we haven't seen any commercial birds on that runway." He really wanted to ask what the questions

were all about, but knew it was a waste of time. Well, maybe an oblique question: “You want us to stay awake tonight?”

“Up to you, Master Chief. Now, can I talk to your guests?”

“John? Phone,” Portagee announced, then was struck nearly dumb by the normality of what he’d just said.

“Clark,” Kelly said, taking it. “Yes, sir . . . Yes, sir. Will do. Anything else? Okay, out.” He hit the kill button. “Whose idea was this friggin’ umbrella?”

“Mine,” Burroughs said, looking up from the card table. “It works, doesn’t it?”

“Sure as hell,” John said, returning to the table and tossing a quarter in the pot. “Call.”

“Three ladies,” the engineer announced.

“Lucky son of a gun, too,” Clark said, tossing his in.

“Lucky hell! These sunzabitches ruined the best fishing trip I ever had.”

“John, you want I should make some coffee for tonight?”

“He makes the best damned coffee, too.” Burroughs collected the pot. He was six dollars ahead.

“Portagee, it has been a while. Sure, go ahead. It’s called black-gang coffee, Pete. Old seaman’s tradition,” Clark explained, also enjoying the pleasant inactivity.

“John?” Ding asked.

“Later, my boy.” He picked up the deck and started shuffling adeptly. It would wait.

“Sure you have enough fuel?” Checa asked. The supplies that had been dropped in included auxiliary tanks and wings, but Richter shook his head.

“No prob. Only two hours to the refueling point.”

“Where’s that?” The signal over the satcomm had said nothing more than PROCEED PRIMARY, whatever that meant.

“About two hours away,” the warrant officer said. “Security, Captain, security.”

“You realize we’ve made a little history here.”

“Just so I live to tell somebody about it.” Richter zipped up his flight suit, tucked in his scarf, and climbed aboard. “Clear!”

The Rangers stood by one last time. They knew the extinguishers were worthless, but somebody had insisted on packing them along. One by one the choppers lifted off, their green bodies soon disappearing into the darkness. With that, the Rangers started dumping the remaining equipment into holes dug during the day. That required an hour, and all that remained was their walk to Hirose. Checa lifted his cellular phone and dialed the number he’d memorized.

“Hello?” a voice said in English.

“See you in the morning, I hope?” The question was in Spanish.

“I’ll be there, Señor.”

“Montoya, lead off,” the Captain ordered. They’d keep to the treeline as far as they could. The Rangers clasped weapons so far unused, hoping to keep it that way.

“I recommend two weapons,” Lieutenant Shaw said. “Spread the bearings about ten degrees, converge them in from under the layer, and nail him fore and aft.”

“I like it.” Claggett walked over to the plot for a final examination of the tactical situation. “Set it up.”

“So what gives?” one of the Army sergeants asked at the entrance to the attack center. The trouble with these damned submarines was that you couldn’t just hang around and watch stuff.

“Before we can refuel those helos of yours, we have to make that ’can go away,” a petty officer explained as lightly as he could.

“Is it hard?”

“I guess we’d prefer he was someplace else. It puts us on the surface with—well, somebody’s gonna know there’s somebody around.”

“Worried?”

“Nah,” the sailor lied. Then both men heard the Captain speak.

“Mr. Shaw, let’s go to battle stations torpedo. Firingpoint procedures.”

* * *

The Tomcats went off first, one every thirty seconds or so until a full squadron of twelve was aloft. Next went four EA-6B jammers, led by Commander Roberta Peach. Her flight of four broke up into elements of two, one to accompany each of the two probing Tomcat squadrons.

Captain Bud Sanchez had the lead division of four, unwilling to entrust the attack of his air group to anyone else. They were five hundred miles out, heading southwest. In many ways the attack was a repeat of another action in the early days of 1991, but with a few nasty additions occasioned by the few airfields available to the enemy and weeks of careful analysis of operational patterns. The Japanese were very regular in their patrols. It was a natural consequence of the orderliness of military life and for that reason a dangerous trap to fall into. He gave one look back at the formation’s sparkling wakes and then focused his mind on the mission.

“Set on one and three.”

“Match generated bearings and shoot,” Claggett said calmly.

The weapons technician turned his handle all to the left, then back to the right, repeating the exercise for the second tube.

“One and three away, sir.”

“One and three running normal,” sonar reported an instant later.

“Very well,” Claggett acknowledged. He *had* been aboard a submarine and heard those words before, and that shot had missed, to which fact he owed his life. This was tougher. They didn’t have as good a feel for the location of the destroyer as they would have liked, but neither did he have much choice in

the matter. The two ADCAPs would run slow under the layer for the first six miles before shifting to their highest speed setting, which was seventy-one knots. With luck the target wouldn't have much chance to figure where the fish had come from. "Reload one and three with ADCAPs."

* * *

Timing, as always, was crucial. Jackson left the flag bridge after the fighters got off, and headed below to the combat information center, the better to coordinate an operation already figured out down to the minute. The next part was for his two Spruance destroyers, now thirty miles south of the carrier group. That made him nervous. The Spruances were his best ASW ships, and though SubPac reported that the enemy sub screen was withdrawing west, hopefully into a trap, he worried about the one SSK that might be left behind to cripple Pacific Fleet's last carrier deck. So many things to worry about, he thought, looking at the sweep hand on the bulkhead-mounted clock.

Precisely at 11:45:00 local time, destroyers *Cushing* and *Ingersoll* turned broadside to the wind and began launching their Tomahawk missiles, signaling this fact by a five-element satellite transmission. A total of forty cruise missiles angled up into the sky, shed their solid-fuel boosters, then angled down for the surface. After the six-minute launch exercise, the destroyers increased speed to rejoin the battle group, wondering what their Tomahawks would accomplish.

"I wonder which one it is?" Sato murmured. They'd passed two already, the Aegis destroyers visible only from their wakes now, the barely visible arrowhead at the front of the spreading V of white foam.

"Call them up again?"

"It will anger my brother, but it must be lonely down there." Again Sato switched his radio setting, then depressed the switch on the wheel.

"JAL 747 Flight calling *Mutsu.*"

Admiral Sato wanted to grumble, but it was a friendly voice. He took the headset from the junior communications officer and closed his thumb on the switch. "Torajiro, if you were an enemy I would have you now."

He checked the radar display—only commercial targets were on the two-meter-square tactical-display screen. The SPY-1D radar showed everything within a hundred-plus miles, and most things out to nearly three hundred. The ship's SH-60J helicopter had just refueled for another antisub sweep, and though he was still at sea in time of war, he could allow himself a joke with his brother, flying up there in the big aluminum tub, doubtless filled with his countrymen.

“Time, sir,” Shaw said, checking his electronic stopwatch. Commander Claggett nodded.

“Weps, bring them up and go active.”

The proper command went to the torpedoes, now nearly two miles apart on either side of the target. The ADCAP—“additional capability”—version of the Mark 48 had a huge solid-state sonar system built into its twenty-oneinch nose. The unit launched from tube one was slightly closer, and its advanced imaging system acquired the destroyer’s hull on the second sweep. Immediately, the torpedo turned right to home in, relaying its display to the launch point as it did so.

“Hydrophone effects, bearing two-three-zero! Enemy torpedo bearing two-three-zero!” a sonar officer shouted. “Its seeker is active!”

Sato’s head turned sharply toward the sonar room, and instantly a new item appeared on the tactical display. Damn, he thought, and *Kurushio* said the area was safe. The SSK was only a few miles off.

“Countermeasures!” *Mutsu*’s captain ordered at once. In seconds the destroyer streamed an American-designed Nixie decoy off her fantail. “Launch the helicopter at once!”

“Brother, I am somewhat busy now. Have a good flight. Good-bye for now.” The radio circuit went dead.

Captain Sato first wrote off the end of the conversation to the fact that his brother *did* have duties to perform, then before his eyes he saw the destroyer five miles below him turn sharply to the left, with more boiling foam at her stern to indicate a sudden increase in speed.

“Something’s wrong here,” he breathed over the intercom.

“We got him, sir. One or both,” the fire-controlman announced.

“Target is increasing speed and turning to starboard,” sonar reported. “Both units are in acquisition and closing. Target isn’t pinging anything yet.”

“Unit one range to target is now two thousand yards. Unit three is twenty-two hundred out. Both units are tracking nicely, sir.” The petty officer’s eyes were locked on the weapons display, ready to override a possible mistake made by the automated homing systems. The ADCAP was at this point not unlike a miniature submarine with its own very precise sonar picture, enabling the weapons tech to play vicarious kamikaze, in this case two at once, a skill that nicely complemented his skill on the boat’s Nintendo system. The really good news for Claggett was that he wasn’t trying a counterdetection, but rather trying to save his ship first. Well, that was a judgment call, wasn’t it?

“There’s another one forward of us, bearing one-four-zero!”

“They have us,” the Captain said, looking at the display and thinking that probably two submarines had shot at him. Still, he had to try, and ordered a crash turn to port. Top-heavy like her American Aegis cousins, *Mutsu* heeled violently to the right. As soon as the turn was made, the CO ordered full astern, hoping that the torpedo might miss forward.

It couldn’t be anything else. Sato was losing sight of the battle, and overrode the autopilot, turning his aircraft into a tight left bank, leaving it to his right-seater to hit the seat belt signs for the passengers. He could see it all in the clear light of a quarter moon. *Mutsu* had executed one radical turn and then twisted into another. There were flashing lights on her stern as the ship’s antisub helicopter started turning its rotor, struggling to get off and hunt whatever—yes, it had to be a submarine, Captain Sato thought, a sneaking, cowardly submarine attacking his brother’s proud and beautiful destroyer. He was surprised to see the ship slow—to stop almost dead with the astern thrust of her reversible propeller—and wondered why *that* maneuver had been attempted. Wasn’t it the same as for aircraft, whose rule was the simple axiom: Speed Is Life . . .

“Major cavitation sounds, maybe a crash-stop, sir,” the sonar chief said. The weapons tech didn’t give Claggett a chance to react.

“Don’t matter. I have him cold on both, sir. Setting three for contact explosion, getting some magnetic interference from—they must use our Nixie, eh?”

“Correct, sailor.”

“Well, we know how that puppy works. Unit one is five hundred out, closing fast.” The technician cut one of the wires, letting unit one go on its own now, rising to thirty feet and fully autonomous, activating its onboard magnetic field and seeking the metal signature of the target, then finding it, letting it grow and grow . . .

The helicopter just got off, its strobe lights looping away from the now-stationary destroyer. The moment seemed fixed in time when the ship started turning again, or seemed to, then a violent green flash appeared in the water on both sides of the ship, just forward of the bridge under the vertical launch magazine for her surface-to-air missiles. The knifelike shape of the hull was backlit in an eerie, lethal way. The image fixed in Sato’s mind for the quarter second it lasted, and then one or more of the destroyer’s SAMs exploded, followed by forty others, and *Mutsu*’s forward half disintegrated. Three seconds later, another explosion took place, and when the white water returned back to the surface, there was little more to be seen than a patch of burning oil. Just like her namesake in Nagasaki harbor in 1943 . . .

“Captain!” The copilot had to wrench the controlwheel level away from the

Captain before the Boeing went into a stall. “Captain, we have passengers aboard!”

“That was my brother . . .”

“We have *passengers* aboard, damn you!” Without resistance now, he brought the 747 back to level flight, looking at his gyrocompass for the proper heading. *“Captain!”*

Sato turned his head back into the cockpit, losing sight of his brother’s grave as the airliner changed its heading back to the south.

“I am sorry, Captain Sato, but we also have a job we must do.” He engaged the autopilot before reaching out to the man. “Are you all right now?”

Sato looked forward into the empty sky. Then he nodded and composed himself. “Yes, I am quite all right. Thank you. Yes. I am quite all right now,” he repeated more firmly, required by the rules of his culture to set his personal emotions aside for now. Their father had survived his destroyer command, had moved on to captain a cruiser on which he had died off Samar, the victim of American destroyers and their torpedoes . . . and now again . . .

“What the hell was that?” Commander Ugaki demanded of his sonar officers.

“Torpedoes, two of them, from the south,” the junior lieutenant replied. “They’ve killed *Mutsu.*”

“What from?” was the next angry shout.

“Something undetected, Captain,” was the weak reply.

“Come south, turns for eight knots.”

“That will take us right through the disturbance from—”

“Yes, I know that.”

“Definite kill,” sonar told him. The signature on the sonar screen was definite. “No engine sounds from target bearing, but breakup noises, and this here was one big secondary sexplosion. We got him, sir.”

* * *

Richter crossed over the same town the C-17 had overflown a few days earlier, and though somebody might have heard him, that was less of a concern now. Besides, at night a chopper was a chopper, and there were plenty of them here. He settled his Comanche to a cruising altitude of fifty feet and headed due south, telling himself that, sure, the Navy would be there, and sure, he could land on a ship, and sure, everything was going to go just fine. He was grateful for the tailwind until he saw the waves it was whipping up. Oh, shit . . .

“Mr. Ambassador, the situation has changed, as you know,” Adler said gently.

The room had never heard the sound of more than one voice, but somehow it seemed far quieter now.

Seiji Nagumo, sitting next to his senior, noted that the chair next to Adler was occupied by someone else, another Japanese specialist from the fourth floor. Where was Chris Cook? he asked himself as the American negotiator went on. Why was he not here—and what did it mean?

"As we speak, American aircraft are attacking the Marianas. As we speak, American fleet units are engaging your fleet units. I must tell you that we have every reason to believe that our operations will be successful and that we will be able to isolate the Marianas from the rest of the world. The next part of the operation, if it becomes necessary, will be to declare a maritime exclusion zone around your Home Islands. We have no wish to attack your country directly, but it is within our capabilities to cut off your maritime trade in a matter of days.

"Mr. Ambassador, it is time to put an end to this . . ."

"As you see," the CNN reporter said from her perch next to USS *Enterprise*. Then the camera panned to her right, showing an empty box. "USS *John Stennis* has left her dry dock. We are informed that the carrier is even now launching a strike against the Japanese-held Marianas. We were asked to cooperate with government deception operations, and after careful consideration, it was decided that CNN is, after all, an *American* news service . . ."

"Bastards!" General Arima breathed, looking at the empty concrete structure, occupied only by puddles and wooden blocks now. Then his phone rang.

When it was certain that the Japanese E-2Cs had them, two Air Force AWACS aircraft flipped their radars on, having staged in from Hawaii, via Dyess on Kwajalein Atoll. In electronic terms it would be an even fight, but the Americans had more aircraft up to make sure it was fair in no other way. Four Japanese Eagles were aloft, and their first instinctive action was to turn northeast toward the intruders, the better to give their comrades standing ground alert time to get aloft and join the air battle before the incoming attack got close enough to catch their comrades on the ground. Simultaneously the ground defenses were warned to expect inbound hostile aircraft.

Sanchez lit off his own targeting radar as he saw the Japanese fighters just over a hundred miles away, heading in to launch their missiles. But they were armed with AMRAAMs, and he was armed with Phoenix, which had about double the range. He and three other aircraft launched two each for a max-range engagement. The eight missiles went into ballistic arcs, heading up to a hundred thousand feet before tipping over at Mach-5 and heading back down, their height giving them the largest possible radar cross section to home on. The Eagles detected the attack and tried to maneuver clear, but seconds later two of the F-15Js were blotted from the sky. The remaining pair kept driving

in. The second wave of Phoenixes took care of that.

"What the hell?" Oreza wondered.

The sound of many jet engines starting up interrupted the card game, and all four men in the room went to the windows. Clark remembered to turn all the lights out, and stole the only set of binoculars in the house. The first pair of aircraft blazed off Kobler Field just as he brought them to his eyes. They were single-engine aircraft judging by their afterburner flames.

"What's happening, John?"

"Nobody told me, really, but it shouldn't be too hard to figure out."

Lights were on all over the field. What mattered was getting the fighters off as rapidly as possible. The same thing would be happening on Guam, probably, but Guam was a good ways off, and the two fighter groups would be engaging the Americans separately, negating the Japanese numerical advantage.

"What are those?"

Commander Peach and her jammers were also at work now. The search radar was powerful, but like all of its type it also transmitted low-frequency waves, and those were easily jammed. The massive collection of false dots both confused their understanding of the developing air action and knocked back their ability to detect the small but unstealthy cruise missiles. Fighters that might have tried to engage them had in fact overrun the inbound targets, giving them a free advance to the island's targets. The search radar atop Mount Takpochao picked them up barely thirty miles out instead of the hoped-for hundred, and was also trying to get a count on the inbound fighters. That gave the three operators on the set a complex task, but they were trained men, and they bent to the demands of the moment, one of their number sounding the alarm to get the island's Patriot missile batteries alerted.

The first part of the operation was going well. The standing Combat Air Patrol had been eliminated without loss, Sanchez saw, wondering if it had been one of his missiles that scored. No one would ever know about that. The next task was to take out the Japanese radar aircraft before the rest of their fighters arrived. To accomplish that, a division of four Tomcats went to burner and rocketed straight for them, rippling off all their missiles for the task.

They were just too brave for their own good, Sanchez saw. The Japanese Hawkeyes should have pulled back, and the defending Eagles should have done the same, but true to the fighter pilot's ethos they'd come out to engage the first wave of raiders instead of waiting. Probably because they thought this was a genuine raid instead of a mere fightersweep. The flanking division of four, called *Blinder Flight,* fulfilled its limited mission of killing the airborne-radar birds, then turned back to *John Stennis* to refuel and rearm. Now the only airborne radar was American. The Japanese came on, trying to blunt the

attack that really did not exist, seeking to engage targets whose only goal had been the attention of the outbound interceptors.

It was obvious to the radar operators that the majority of the missiles were headed for them instead of the airfield. They didn't trade remarks about that. There wasn't time. They watched as the E-2s fell from the sky, too far away for them to guess exactly why, but the remaining AEW aircraft was still on the runway at Kobler as the fighters were racing to get off, and the first of them were approaching the distant American aircraft, which were, surprisingly, not headed in as expected. Guam was on the radio now, requesting information at the same time it announced that its fighters were scrambling off the ground to deal with the attack.

"Two minutes on the cruise missiles," one of the operators said over the interphones.

"Tell Kobler to get its E-2 up immediately," the senior officer in the control van said when he saw that the two already up were gone. Their van was a hundred yards from the radar transmitter, but it hadn't been dug in yet. It had been planned for the coming week.

"Wow!" Chavez observed. They were outside now. Some clever soul had killed the electrical power for their part of the island, which allowed them to step out of the house for a better view of the light show. Half a mile to their east, the first Patriot blew out of its box-launcher. The missile streaked only a few hundred meters up before its thrustvector controls turned it as sharply as a billiard ball off a rail, aiming it down below the visible horizon. Three more followed a few seconds later.

"Cruise missiles coming in." This remark came from Burroughs. "Over to the north, looks like."

"Going for the radar on that hilltop, I bet," Clark thought. There followed a series of flashes that outlined the high ground to their east. The thunder of the explosions they represented took a few seconds more. Additional Patriots went off, and the civilians watched as the battery crew erected another box-launcher on its truck-transporter. They could also see that the process was taking too long.

The first wave of twenty Tomahawks was climbing now. They'd streaked in a bare three meters over the wave tops toward the sheer cliffs of Saipan's eastern coast. Automated weapons, they did not have the ability to avoid or even to detect fire directed at them, and the first ripple of Patriot SAMs did well, with twelve shots generating ten kills, but the remaining ten were climbing now, all targeted on the same spot. Four more of the cruise missiles fell to SAMs, and a fifth lost power and slammed into the cliff face at Laolao Kattan. The SAM radars lost them at that point, and the battery commanders called a warning to the radar people, but it was far too late to be helpful, and,

one by one, five thousand-pound warheads exploded over the top of Mount Takpochao.

"That takes care of that," Clark said when the sound passed. Then he paused to listen. Others were out in the open now, standing around the cul-de-sac neighborhood. Individual hoots joined into a chorus of cheers that drowned out the shouts of the missile crew on the hilltop to the east.

Fighters were still rocketing off Kobler Field below them, generally taking off in pairs, with some singles. The blue flames of their afterburners turned in the sky before blinking off, as the Japanese fighters turned to form up and meet the inbound raid. Last of all, Clark and the others heard the electric-fan sound of the last remaining Hawkeye, heading off last of all despite the advice of the now-dead radar crew.

The island grew silent for a few moments, a strange emptiness to the air as people caught their breath and waited for the second act of the midnight drama.

Only fifty miles offshore, USS *Pasadena* and three other SSNs came to antenna depth and launched six missiles each. Some of them were aimed at Saipan. Four went to Tinian. Two to Rota. The rest skimmed the wave tops for Andersen Air Force Base on Guam.

"Up scope!" Claggett ordered. The search periscope hissed up on hydraulic power. "Hold!" he called as the top of the instrument cleared the water. He turned slowly, looking for lights in the sky. None.

"Okay, the antenna next." Another hiss announced the raising of the UHF whip antenna. The Captain kept his eyes on the scope, still looking around. His right hand waved. There were some fuzzy radar signals from distant transmitters, but nothing able to detect the submarine.

"INDY CARS, this is PIT CREW, over," the communications officer said into a microphone.

"Thank God," Richter said aloud, keying his microphone. "PIT CREw, this is INDY LEAD, authenticate, over."

"Foxtrot Whiskey."

"Charlie Tango," Richter replied, checking the radio codes on his knee pad. "We are five out, and we sure could use a drink, over."

"Stand by," he heard back.

"Surface the ship," Claggett ordered, lifting the 1-MC.
"Now hear this, we're surfacing the ship, maintain battle stations. Army crews,

stand by."

The proper gear was sitting next to the midships escape trunk and the larger capsule hatch designed to handle the guidance packages for ballistic missiles. One of *Tennessee*'s damage-control parties stood by to pass the gear, and a chief would work the fueling-hose connector hidden in the casing over the missile room.

"What's that?" INDY-TWO asked over the radio circuit. "Lead, this is Three, chopper to the north. Say again, chopper to the north, big one."

"Take him out!" Richter ordered at once. There could be no friendly choppers about. He turned and increased altitude for a look of his own. The guy even had his strobes on. "PIT CREW, this is INDY LEAD, there's chopper traffic up here to the north. What gives, over?"

Claggett didn't hear that. *Tennessee*'s sail had just broken the surface, and he was standing by the ladder to the top of the sail. Shaw took the microphone.

"That's probably an ASW helo from the destroyer we just sunk—splash him, splash him *now!*"

"Aerial radar to the north!" an ESM tech called a second later. "Helicopter radar close aboard!"

"Two, take him out now!" Richter relayed the order.

"On the way, Lead," the second Comanche responded, turning and dipping his nose to increase speed. Whoever it was, that was just too bad. The pilot selected guns. Under his aircraft the 20-millimeter cannon emerged from its canoelike enclosure and turned forward. The target was five miles out and didn't see the inbound attack chopper.

It was another Sikorsky, Two's pilot saw, possibly assembled in the same Connecticut plant as his Comanch', the Navy version of the UH-60, a big target. His chopper blazed directly at it, hoping to get his kill before it could get a radio call out. Not much chance of that, and the pilot cursed himself for not engaging with a Stinger, but it was too late for that now. His helmet pipper locked on to the target and he triggered off fifty rounds, most of which found the nose of the approaching gray helicopter. The results were instant.

"Kill," he announced. "I got him, Lead."

"Roger, what's your fuel state?"

"Thirty minutes," Two replied.

"Circle and keep your eyes open," Lead commanded.

"Roger, Leader." As soon as he got to three hundred feet came another unwelcome surprise. "Lead, Two, radar to the north, system says it's a Navy billboard one."

"Great," Richter snarled, circling the submarine. It was large enough to land on, but it would have been easier if the goddamned thing wasn't rolling around like the beer barrel at an Irish wake. Richter brought his chopper into

hover, approaching from straight aft, and lowered his wheels for landing.

"Come left into the wind," Claggett told Lieutenant Shaw.
"We have to cut the rolls down for 'em."

"Gotcha, Skipper." Shaw made the necessary orders, and *Tennessee* steadied up on a northwesterly heading.

"Stand by the escape and capsule hatches!" the CO ordered next. As he watched, the helo came down slowly, carefully, and as usual, landing a helicopter aboard a ship reminded him of two porcupines making love. It wasn't lack of willingness; it was just that you couldn't afford any mistakes.

They were lined up like an army of mounted knights now, Sanchez thought, with the Japanese two hundred miles off Saipan's northeast tip, and the Americans a hundred miles beyond. This game had been played out many times by both sides, and often enough in the same war game centers. Both sides had their tracking radars on and searching. Both sides could now see and count the strength of the other. It was just a question of who would make the first move. The Japanese were at the disadvantage and knew it. Their remaining E-2C was not yet in position, and worse than that, they could not be entirely sure who the opposition was. On Sanchez's command, the Tomcats moved off first, going to afterburner and climbing high to volley off their remaining Phoenix missiles. They fired at a range of fifty miles, and over a hundred of the sophisticated weapons turned into a wave of yellow flames climbing higher still before tipping over while their launch aircraft turned and retreated.

That was the signal for a general melee. The tactical situation had been clear, and then became less so as the Japanese fighters also went to maximum speed to close the Americans, hoping to duck under the Phoenix launch to launch their own fire-and-forget missiles. It was a move that required exquisite timing, which was hard to do without expert quarterbacking from a command-and-control aircraft, for which they had not waited.

It hadn't been possible to train Navy personnel to do it quickly enough, though a party of sailors did hold the wings up as the trained Army ground crewmen attached them to hardpoints on the side of the first Comanche. Then the fuel hoses were snaked to the openings, and the ship's pumps were switched on, filling all the tanks as rapidly as possible. Another Navy crewman tossed Richter a phone on the end of an ordinary wire.

"How did it go, Army?" Dutch Claggett asked.

"Kinda exciting. Y'all got some coffee, like hot maybe?"

"On the way, soldier." Claggett made the necessary call to the galley.

"Who was that chopper from?" Richter asked, looking back at the fueling operations.

"We had to take out a 'can about an hour ago. He was in the way. I guess

the helo was from him. Ready to copy your destination?"

"Not Wake?"

"Negative. There's a carrier waiting for you at twenty-five north, one-fifty east. Say again, two-five north, one-five-zero east."

The warrant officer repeated the coordinates back twice, getting an additional confirmation. *A whole carrier to land on? Damn*, Richter thought. "Roger that, and thank you, sir."

"Thanks for splashing the helo, INDY."

A Navy crewman stepped up and banged on the side of the aircraft, giving a thumbs-up sign. He also handed over a *Tennessee* ball cap. Then Richter saw that the breast pocket on his shirt had a bulge in it. Most impolitely, he reached down and plucked out the half-pack of cigarettes. The sailor laughed over the noise and tossed a lighter to go along with it.

"Stand clear!" Richter shouted. The deck crewmen retreated, but then another man jumped out of the hatch with a thermos bottle, which was passed up. With that, the canopy came down and Richter started his engines back up. Barely a minute later, the Comanche lifted off, making room for -Two as his lead aircraft took an orbit position over the sub. Thirty seconds after that, the pilot was sipping coffee. It was different from the Army brew, far more civilized. A little Hennessey, he thought, and it would be about perfect.

"Sandy, look north!" his backseater said as -Two me down on the deck of the submarine.

Six Eagles fell to the first volley of missiles, with two more damaged and withdrawing, the AWACS controllers said. Sanchez couldn't see, as he was heading away from the advancing enemy fighters, the Tomcats making room now for the Hornets. It was working. The Japanese were pursuing, coming away from their island at high-power settings, driving the Americans away, or so they thought. His threat receiver said that there were enemy missiles in the air now, but they were American-designed missiles, and he knew what they could do.

"What's that?" Oreza wondered.

Just a shadow at first. The airfield lights were still on for some reason or other, and they saw a single white streak crossing the end of Kobler's runway. It banked sharply over the threshold and tracked down the center of the single strip. Then it changed shape, the nose blowing off, and small objects sprinkling down on the concrete. A few exploded. The rest just disappeared, too small to see unless they were moving. Then came another, and another, all doing the same thing, except for one that headed straight for the tower, and blew the top right off of it, and along with it, the fighter wing's radios.

Farther south, the commercial airfield was also lit up still, four 747s sitting at the terminal or elsewhere on the ramp. Nothing seemed to approach the airport. To their east, several more missile launches lit up the Patriot battery, but they'd shot off their first load of missiles, and the crews now had to erect

additional box launchers, then connect them to the command van, and that took time. They were getting kills, but not enough.

"Not going for the SAMs," Chavez noted, thinking that they really ought to be under cover for all this, but . . . but nobody else was, as though this were some sort of glorious Fourth of July display.

"Avoiding civilian areas, Ding," Clark replied.

"Nice trick. By the way, what's this Kelly stuff?"

"My real name," the senior officer observed.

"John, how many of the bastards did you kill?" Oreza wanted to know.

"Huh?" Chavez asked.

"Back when we were both children, your boss here did a little private hunting, drug dealers, as I recall."

"It never happened, Portagee. Honest." John shook his head and grinned. "Well, not that anybody can prove," he added. "I really am dead, you know?"

"In that case you got the right set of initials for the new name, man." Oreza paused. "Now what?"

"Beats me, pal." Oreza wasn't cleared for his new orders, and he didn't know that they were possible anyway. A few seconds later it occurred to someone to switch off the remaining electrical power on the south end of the island.

Mutsu's helicopter had announced the presence of a submarine on the surface, but nothing more. That had caused *Kongo* to launch her Seahawk, now coming south. Two P-3C Orion antisub aircraft were approaching as well, but the helicopter would get in first, carrying two torpedoes. That aircraft was coming in at two hundred feet, without its look-down radar on, but with flashing strobes that looked very bright in Richter's headset.

"Sure is busy here," Richter said. He was at five hundred feet, with a new target just on the horizon. "PIT CREW, this is INDY LEAD, we have another chopper in the neighborhood."

"Splash him!"

"Copy that." Richter increased speed for his intercept. The Navy didn't have any problems making decisions. The closure speed guaranteed a rapid intercept. Richter selected STINGER and fired at five miles. Whoever it was, he didn't expect hostile aircraft in the area, and the cold water under him made a fine contrast background for the heat-seeking missile. The Seahawk spun in, leaving Richter to wonder if there might be survivors. But he didn't have the ability to perform a rescue, and didn't close in to see.

-Two was up now, and took the protective orbit position, allowing the leader to turn for the rendezvous. He gave the submarine a low saluting pass and headed off. He had neither the fuel nor the time to linger.

"You realize we're an aircraft carrier?" Ken Shaw asked, watching the deck crew finishing up refueling for the third and last visitor. "We scored kills and everything."

“Just so we live long enough to be a submarine again,” Claggett replied tensely. As he watched, the canopy came down and the crewmen started securing topside. Two minutes later his deck was nearly clear. One of his chiefs tossed extraneous gear over the side, waved to the sail, and disappeared down the capsule hatch.

“Clear the bridge!” Claggett ordered. He took one last look around before keying the microphone one last time. “Take her down.”

“We don’t have a straight board yet,” the Chief of the Boat objected in the attack center.

“You heard the man,” the officer of the deck snapped back. With that command the vents were opened and the main ballast tanks flooded. The topside bridge hatch changed a second later from a circle to a dash, and Claggett appeared a moment later, closing the bottom-end hatch to the bridge, making a straight board.

“Rigged for dive. Get us out of here!”

* * *

“That’s a submarine,” the Lieutenant said. “Diving—venting his tanks.”

“Range?”

“I have to go active for that,” the sonar officer warned.

“Then do it!” Ugaki hissed.

“What are those flashes?” the copilot wondered. They were just over the horizon to the left of their flight path, no telling the distance, but however far away they were, they were bright, and one turned into a streak that cometed down into the sea. More streaks erupted in the darkness, lines of yellow-white going mainly right-to-left. That made it clear. “Oh.”

“Saipan Approach, this is JAL Seven-Oh-Two, two hundred miles out. What is happening, over?” There was no reply.

“Return to Narita?” the copilot asked.

“No! No, we will not do that!” Torajiro Sato replied.

It was a tribute to his professionalism that rage didn’t quite overcome his training. He’d already dodged two missiles to this point, and Major Shiro Sato did not panic despite the ill-luck that had befallen his wingman. His radar showed more than twenty targets, just out of missile range, and though some others of his squadron mates had fired their AMRAAMs, he wouldn’t until he had a better chance. He also showed multiple radars tracking his aircraft, but there was no helping that. He jerked his Eagle around the sky, taking hard turns and heavy gees as he closed on burner. What had begun as an organized battle was now a wild melee, with individual fighters entirely on their own, like samurai in the darkness. He turned north now, selecting the nearest blips. The IFF systems automatically interrogated them, and the answer was not

what he expected. With that Sato triggered off his fire-and-forget missiles, then turned back sharply to the south. It wasn't at all what he'd hoped for, not a fair fight, skill against skill in a clear sky. This had been a chaotic encounter in darkness, and he simply didn't know who had won or lost. He had to turn and run now. Courage was one thing, but the Americans had drawn them out so that he scarcely had the fuel remaining for his home field. He'd never know if his missiles had scored. Damn.

He increased power one last time, going to burner to disengage, angling right to keep clear of the fighters advancing in from the south. Those were the planes from Guam, probably. He wished them luck.

"TURKEY, this is TURKEY LEAD. Disengage now. I say again, disengage now!" Sanchez was well behind the action now, wishing that he were in his Hornet instead of the larger Tomcat. Acknowledgments came in, and though he'd lost a few aircraft, and though the battle had not been entirely to his liking, he knew that it had been a success. He headed north to clear the area, checking his fuel state. Then he saw strobe lights at his ten o'clock and turned further to investigate.

"Jesus, Bud, it's an airliner," his radar-intercept officer said. "JAL markings." That was obvious from the stylized red crane on the high tailfin.

"Better warn him off." Sanchez turned on his own strobes and closed from the portside. "JAL 747, JAL 747, this is U.S. Navy aircraft to your portside."

"Who are you?" the voice asked over the guard frequency.

"We are a U.S. Navy aircraft. Be advised there is a battle going on here. I suggest you reverse course and head back home. Over."

"I don't have the fuel for that."

"Then you can bingo to Iwo Jima. There's a field there, but watch out for the radio tower southwest of the strip, over."

"Thank you," was the terse reply. "I will continue on my flight plan. Out."

"Dumbass." Sanchez didn't put on the air, though his backseater fully agreed. In a real war they would have just shot him down, but this wasn't a real war, or so some people had decided. Sanchez would never know the magnitude of his error.

* * *

"Captain, that is very dangerous!"

"Iwo Jima is not lighted. We'll approach from the west and stay clear," Captain Sato said, unmoved by all that he'd heard. He altered course to the west, and the copilot kept his peace on the matter.

"Active sonar to starboard, bearing zero-one-zero, low-frequency, probably a sub." And that was not good news.

"Snapshot!" Claggett ordered at once. He'd drilled his crew mercilessly on

this scenario, and the boomers did have the best torpedomen in the fleet.

"Setting up on tube four," the weapons petty officer answered. On command, the torpedo was activated. "Flooding four. Tube four is flooded. Weapon is hot."

"Initial course zero-one-zero," the weapons officer said, checking the plot, which didn't reveal much. "Cut the wires, set to go active at one thousand!"

"Set!"

"Match and shoot!" Claggett ordered.

"Fire four, four away!" The sailor nearly broke the firing handle.

"Range four thousand meters," the sonar officer reported. "Large submerged target, beam aspect. Transient—he's launched!"

"So can we. Fire one, fire two!" Ugaki shouted. "Left full rudder," he added the moment the second tube was clear. "Ahead flank!"

"Torpedo in the water. Two torpedoes in the water, bearing zero-one-zero. Ping-and-listen, the torpedoes are in search mode!" sonar reported.

"Oh, shit. We've been here before," Shaw noted, recalling an awful experience on USS *Maine.* The Army officer aboard and his senior sergeant had just come into the attack center to thank the Captain for his part in the helicopter mission. They stopped cold on the portside, looking around and seeing the tension in the compartment.

"Six-inch room, launch decoy, now!"

"Launching now." There was slight noise a second later, just a jolt of compressed air.

"We have a MOSS set up?" Claggett asked, even though he'd given orders for exactly that.

"Tube two, sir," the weapons tech replied.

"Warm it up."

"Done, sir."

"Okay." Commander Claggett allowed himself a deep breath and time to think. He didn't have much, but he had some. How smart was that Japanese fish? *Tennessee* was doing ten knots, not having had rudder or speed orders after submerging, and was at three hundred feet of keel depth. Okay.

"Six-inch room, set up a spread of three canisters to launch on my command."

"Standing by, sir."

"Weps, set the MOSS for three hundred feet, circling as tight as you can at this depth. Make it active as soon as it clears the tube."

"Stand by . . . set. Tube is flooded."

"Launch."

"MOSS away, sir."

"Six-inch room, launch now!"

Tennessee shuddered again, with three decoys ejected into the sea along with the torpedo-based lure. The approaching torpedo now had a very attractive

false target to track.

"Surface the ship! Emergency surface!"

"Emergency surface, aye," the chief of the boat replied, reaching himself for the air manifold. "Full rise on the planes!"

"Full rise, aye!" the helmsman repeated, pulling back on his control yoke.

"Conn, sonar, the inbound torpedoes are still in ping-and-listen. Our outbound unit is now on continuous pinging. It has a sniff."

"Their fish is like an early -48, troops," Claggett said calmly. His demeanor was a lie, and he knew that, but the crew might not. "Remember the three rules of a -48. It has to be a valid target, it has to be over eight hundred yards, and it has to have a bearing rate. Helm, all stop."

"All stop, aye. Sir, engine room answers all stop."

"Very well, we'll let her coast up now," the Captain said, out of things to say now. He looked over at the Army people and winked. They looked rather pale. Well, that was one advantage of being black, wasn't it? Claggett thought.

Tennessee took a thirty-degree up-angle, killing a lot of her forward speed as she rose and tumbling several people to the deck, it came so abruptly. Claggett held on to the redand-white periscope-control wheel to steady himself.

"Depth?"

"Breaking the surface now, sir!" the COB reported. A second later came a rush of exterior noise, and then the submarine crashed sickeningly back down.

"Rig for ultraquiet."

The shaft was stopped now. *Tennessee* wallowed on the surface while three hundred feet down and half a mile aft, the MOSS was circling in and out of the decoy bubbles. He'd done all that he could do. A crewman reached into his pocket for a smoke, then realized that he'd lost his pack topside.

"Our unit is in acquisition!" sonar reported.

"Come right!" Ugaki said, trying to be calm and succeeding, but the American torpedo had run straight through the decoy field . . . just as his had done, he remembered. He looked around his control room. The faces were on him, just as they had been the other time, but this time the other boat had shot first despite his advantage, and he only needed a look at the plot to see that he'd never know if his second submarine attack had succeeded or not.

"I'm sorry," he said to his crew, and a few heads had time to nod at his final, sincere apology to them.

"Hit!" sonar called next.

"Thank you, Sonar," Claggett acknowledged.

"The enemy fish are circling below us, sir . . . they seem to be . . . yeah, they're chasing into the decoy . . . we're getting some pings, but . . ."

"But the early -48s didn't track stationary surface targets, Chief," Claggett said quietly. The two men might have been the only people breathing aboard. Well, maybe Ken Shaw, who was standing at the weapons panel. It only made things worse that you couldn't hear the ultrasonic noise of a torpedo sonar.

"The damned things run forever."

"Yep." Claggett nodded. "Raise the ESM," he added as an afterthought. The sensor mast went up at once, and people cringed at the noise.

"Uh, Captain, there's an airborne radar bearing three-five-one."

"Strength?"

"Low but increasing. Probably a P-3, sir."

"Very well."

It was too much for the Army officer. "We just sit still?"

"That's right."

Sato brought the 747 in largely from memory. There were no runway lights, but he had enough from the moon to see what he was doing, and once again his copilot marveled at the man's skill as the aircraft's landing lights caught reflections from lights on the ground. The landing was slightly to the right of the centerline, but Sato managed a straight run to the end, this time without his usual look over at the junior officer. He was bringing the aircraft right onto the taxiway when there was a flash in the distance.

Major Sato's was the first Eagle back to Kobler, actually having passed two damaged aircraft on his way in. There was activity on the ground, but the only radio chatter was incoherent. He had little choice in any case. His fighter was running on vapors and memory now, all the fuel gauges showing almost nothing. Also without lights, the aviator chose the proper glide-slope and touched down in exactly the right spot. He didn't see the softball-size submunition that his nosegear hit. The fighter's nose collapsed, and the Eagle slid, pinwheeling off the end of the runway. There was just enough vapor in the tanks to start a fire, then an explosion to scatter parts over the Kobler runway. A second Eagle, half a mile behind Sato's, found another bomblet and exploded. The twenty remaining fighters angled away, calling on their radios for instructions. Six of them turned for the commercial field. The rest looked for and approached the large twin runways on Tinian, not knowing that they, too, had been sprinkled with cluster munitions from a series of Tomahawk missiles. Roughly half survived the landing without hitting anything.

Admiral Chandraskatta was in his control room, watching the radar display. He'd have to recall his fighters soon. He didn't like risking his pilots in night operations, but the Americans were up in strength, doing another of their shows of force. And surely they could attack and destroy his fleet if they wished, but now? With a war against Japan under way, would America choose to initiate another combat action? No. His amphibious force was now at sea, and in two days, at sunset, the time would come.

The B-ls were lower than the flight crews had ever driven them. These were

reservists, mostly airline pilots, assigned by a particularly beneficent Pentagon (with the advice of a few senior members of Congress) to a real combat aircraft for the first time in years. For practice bombing missions over land, they had a standard penetration altitude of no less than two hundred feet, more usually three hundred, because even Kansas farms had windmills and people erected radio towers in the damnedest places—but not at sea. Here they were down to fifty feet, and smokin', one pilot observed, nervously entrusting his aircraft to the terrain-avoidance system. His group of eight was heading due south, having turned over Dondra Head. The other four were heading northwest after using a different navigational marker. There was lots of electronic activity ahead, enough to make him nervous, though none of it was on him yet, and he allowed himself the sheer exhilaration of the moment, flying over Mach-1, and doing it so low that his bomber was trailing a different sort of vapor trail, more like an unlimited-class racing boat, and maybe cooking some fish along the way . . .

There.

"Low-level contacts from the north!"

"What?" The Admiral looked up. "Range?"

"Less than twenty kilometers, coming in very fast!"

"Are they missiles?"

"Unknown, Admiral!"

Chandraskatta looked down at his plot. There they were, the opposite direction from the American carrier aircraft. His fighters were not in a position to—

"Inbound aircraft!" a lookout called next.

"Engage?" Captain Mehta asked.

"Shoot first without orders?" Chandraskatta ran for the door, emerging onto the flight deck just in time to see the white lines in the water even before the aircraft causing them.

"Coming up now," the pilot said, aiming himself just at the carrier's bridge. He pulled back on the stick, and when it vanished under his nose, checked his altitude indicator.

"Pull up!" the voice-warning system told him in the usual sexy voice.

"I already did, Marilyn." It sounded like a Marilyn to the TWA pilot. Next he checked his speed. Just under nine hundred knots. Wow. The noise this big mother would make . . .

The sonic boom generated by the huge aircraft was more like a bomb blast, knocking the Admiral off his feet and shattering glass on the wheelhouse well over his head and wrecking other topside gear. Another followed seconds later, and then he heard more still as the massive aircraft buzzed over his fleet. He was slightly disoriented as he stood, and there were glass fragments

on the flight deck as he made his way back under cover. Somehow he knew his place was on the bridge.

"Two radars are out," he heard a petty officer say. "*Rajput* reports her SAMs are down."

"Admiral," a communications lieutenant called, holding up a growler phone.

"Who is this?" Chandraskatta asked.

"This is Mike Dubro. The next time we won't be playing. I am authorized to tell you that the U.S. Ambassador is now meeting with your Prime Minister . . ."

"It is in everyone's best interest that your fleet should terminate its operations," the former Governor of Pennsylvania said after the usual introductory pleasantries.

"You may not order us about, you know."

"That was not an order, Madame Prime Minister. It was an observation. I am also authorized to tell you that my government has requested an emergency session of the U.N. Security Council to discuss your apparent intentions to invade Sri Lanka. We will offer to the Security Council the service of the U.S. Navy to safeguard the sovereignty of that country. Please forgive me for speaking bluntly, but my country does not intend to see the sovereignty of that country violated by anyone. As I said, it is in everyone's interest to prevent a clash of arms."

"We have no such intentions," the Prime Minister insisted, taken very aback by the directness of this message after the earlier one she'd ignored.

"Then we are agreed," Ambassador Williams said pleasantly. "I will communicate that to my government at once."

It took nearly forever, in this case just over half an hour, before the first, then the second torpedo stopped circling, then stopped pinging. Neither found the MOSS a large-enough target to engage, but neither found anything else, either.

"Strength on that P-3 radar?" Claggett asked.

"Approaching detection values, sir."

"Take her down, Mr. Shaw. Let's get below the layer and tool on out of here."

"Aye, Cap'n." Shaw gave the necessary orders. Two minutes later, USS *Tennessee* was underwater, and five minutes after that at six hundred feet, turning southeast at a speed of ten knots. Soon thereafter they heard splashes aft, probably sonobuoys, but it took a long time for a P-3 to generate enough data to launch an attack, and *Tennessee* wasn't going to linger about.

47

Brooms

"Not with a bang but a whimper?" the President asked.

"That's the idea," Ryan said, setting the phone down. Satellite imagery showed that whatever the losses had been in the air battle, the Japanese had lost another fourteen aircraft due to cluster munitions on their airfields. Their principal search radars were gone, and they'd shot off a lot of SAMs. The next obvious step was to isolate the islands entirely from air and sea traffic, and that could be done before the end of the week. The press release was already being prepared if the necessity presented itself.

"We've won," the National Security Advisor said. "It's just a matter of convincing the other side."

"You've done well, Jack," Durling said.

"Sir, if I'd managed to get the job done properly, it never would have started in the first place," Ryan replied after a second's pause. He remembered getting things started along those lines . . . about a week too late to matter. Damn.

"Well, we seem to have done that with India, according to what Dave Williams just cabled in." The President paused. "And what about this?"

"First we worry about concluding hostilities."

"And then?"

"We offer them an honorable way out." Upon elaboration, Jack was pleased to see that the Boss agreed with him.

There would be one more thing, Durling didn't say, but he needed just a little more thinking about it. For the moment it was enough that America looked to be winning this war, and with it he'd won reelection for saving the economy and safeguarding the rights of American citizens. It had been quite an interesting month, the President thought, looking at the other man in the room and wondering what might have come to pass without him. After Ryan left, he placed a telephone call to the Hill.

One other advantage of airborne-radar aircraft was that they made counting coup a lot easier. They could not always show which missile killed which aircraft, but they did show them dropping off the screen.

"*Port Royal* reports recovery complete," a talker said.

"Thank you," Jackson said. He hoped the Army aviators weren't too disappointed to have landed on a cruiser instead of *Johnnie Reb,* but he needed his deck space.

"I count twenty-seven kills," Sanchez said. Three of his own fighters had

fallen, with only one of the pilots rescued. The casualties were lighter than expected, though that fact didn't make the letter-writing any easier for the CAG.

"Well, it's not exactly like the Turkey Shoot, but it wasn't bad. Tack on fourteen more from the Tomahawks. That's about half their fighter strength—most of their F-15s—and they only have the one Hummer left. They're on the short end from now on." The battle-force commander went over the other data. A destroyer gone and the rest of their Aegis ships in the wrong place to interfere with the combat action. Eight submarines definitely destroyed. The overall operational concept had been to detach the arms from the body first, just as had been done in the Persian Gulf, and it had proved to be even easier over water than over land. "Bud, if you were commanding the other side, what would you try next?"

"We still can't invade." Sanchez paused. "It's a losing game any way you cut it, but the last time we had to come this way . . ." He looked at his commander.

"There is that. Bud, get a Tom ready for a flight with me in the back."

"Aye aye, sir." Sanchez made his way off.

"You thinking what I—" *Stennis*'s captain asked with a raised eyebrow.

"What do we got to lose, Phil?"

"A pretty good admiral, Rob," he replied quietly.

"Where do you keep your radios in this barge?" Jackson asked with a wink.

"Where have you been?" Goto asked in surprise.

"In hiding, after your patron kidnapped me." Koga walked in without so much as an announcement, took a seat without being bidden, and generally displayed the total lack of manners that proclaimed his renewed power. "What do you have to say for yourself?" the former Prime Minister demanded of his successor.

"You cannot talk to me that way." But even these words were weak.

"How marvelous. You lead our nation to ruin, but you insist on deference from someone whom your master almost killed. With your knowledge?" Koga asked lightly.

"Certainly not—and who murdered the—"

"Who murdered the criminals? Not I," Koga assured him. "There is a more important question: what are you going to do?"

"Why, I haven't decided that yet." This attempt at a strong statement fell short on several counts.

"You haven't spoken to Yamata yet, you mean."

"I decide things for myself!"

"Excellent. Do so now."

"You cannot order me about."

"And why not? I will soon be back in that seat. You have a choice. Either you will resign your position this morning or this afternoon I will speak in the Diet and request a vote of no-confidence. It is a vote you will not survive. In either case you are finished." Koga stood and started to leave. "I suggest you do so honorably."

* * *

People were lined up in the terminal, standing in line at the counters to get tickets home, Captain Sato saw, as he walked past with a military escort. He was only a young lieutenant, a paratrooper still apparently eager to fight, which was more than could be said for the others in the building. The waiting jeep raced away, heading for the military airfield. The natives were out now, unlike before, carrying signs urging the "Japs" to leave. Some of them ought to be shot for their insolence, Sato thought, still coming to terms with his grief. Ten minutes later, he entered one of Kobler's hangars. Fighters were circling overhead, probably afraid to stray offshore, he thought.

"In here, please," the Lieutenant said.

He walked into the building with consummate dignity, his uniform cap tucked inside his left arm, his back erect, hardly looking at anything, his eyes fixed on the distant wall of the building until the Lieutenant stopped and pulled the rubber sheet off the body.

"Yes, that is my son." He tried not to look, and blessedly the face was not grossly disfigured, possibly protected by the flight helmet while the rest of the body had burned as he sat trapped in his wrecked fighter. But when he closed his eyes he could see his only child writhing in the cockpit, less than an hour after his brother had drowned. Could destiny be so cruel as this? And how was it that those who had served his country had to die, while a mere transporter of civilians was allowed to pass through the American fighters with contempt?

"The squadron command believes that he shot down an American fighter before coming back," the Lieutenant offered. He'd just made that up, but he had to say something, didn't he?

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I have to return to my aircraft now." No more words were passed on the way back to the airport. The army officer left the man with his grief and his dignity.

Sato was on his flight deck twenty minutes later, the 747 already preflighted, and, he was sure, completely filled with people returning home under the promise of safe passage by the Americans. The ground tractor pushed the Boeing away from the jetway. It was driven by a native, and the gesture he flashed to the cockpit on decoupling from their aircraft was not exactly a friendly one. But the final insult came as he waited for clearance to take off. A fighter came in to land, not a blue Eagle, it was a haze-gray aircraft with NAVY painted on the engine nacelles.

"Nice touch, Bud. Grease job," Jackson said as the canopy came up.

"We aim to please, sir," Sanchez replied nervously. As he taxied off to the right, the welcoming committee, such as it was, all wore green fatigues and carried rifles. When the aircraft stopped, an aluminum extension ladder was laid alongside the aircraft. Jackson climbed out first, and at the bottom of the ladder a field-grade officer saluted him correctly.

“That’s a Tomcat,” Oreza said, handing over the binoculars. “And that officer ain’t no Jap.”

“Sure as hell,” Clark confirmed, watching the black officer get into a jeep. What effect would this have on his tentative orders? Attractive as it might be to put the arm on Raizo Yamata, even getting close enough to evaluate the possibility—his current instructions—was not a promising undertaking. He had also reported on conditions on Saipan, and that word, he thought, was good. The Japanese troops he’d seen earlier in the day were not the least bit jaunty, though some officers, especially the junior ones, seemed very enthusiastic about their mission, whatever that was right now. It was about what you expected of lieutenants in any army.

The Governor’s house, set on the local Capitol Hill next to the convention center, seemed a pleasant enough structure. Jackson was sweating now. The tropical sun was hot enough, and his nomex flight suit was just too good an insulator. Here a colonel saluted him and led him inside.

Robby knew General Arima on sight, remembering the intelligence file he’d seen in the Pentagon. They were of about the same height and build, he saw. The General saluted. Jackson, bareheaded and under cover, was not allowed to do so under naval regulations. It seemed the proper response not to, anyway. He nodded his head politely, and left it at that.

“General, can we speak in private?”

Arima nodded and led Jackson into what looked like a combination den/office. Robby took a seat, and his host was kind enough to hand over a glass of ice water.

“Your position is . . . ?”

“I am Commander Task Force Seventy-Seven. I gather you are the commander of Japanese forces on Saipan.” Robby drank the water down. It annoyed him greatly to be sweating, but there was no helping that.

“Correct.”

“In that case, sir, I am here to request your surrender.” He hoped the General knew the semantic difference between “request” and “demand,” the customary verb for the occasion.

“I am not authorized to do that.”

“General, what I’m about to say to you is the position of my government. You may leave the islands in peace. You may take your light weapons with you. Your heavy equipment and aircraft will remain behind for later determination of status. For the moment we require that all Japanese citizens leave the island, pending the restoration of normal relations between our countries.”

“I am not authorized to—”

“I’ll be saying the same thing on Guam in two hours, and the American Ambassador in Tokyo is now requesting a meeting with your government.”

“You do not have the ability to take this one island back, much less all of them.”

“That is true,” Jackson conceded. “It is also true that we can easily stop all

ships from entering or leaving Japanese ports for the indefinite future. We can similarly cut off this island from air and sea traffic."

"That is a threat," Arima pointed out.

"Yes, sir, it is. In due course your country will starve. Its economy will come to a complete halt. That serves no one's purposes." Jackson paused. "Up until this point only military people have suffered. They pay us to take chances. If it goes any further, then everyone suffers more, but your country most of all. It will also generate additional bad feelings on both sides, when our actions should be to restore normal relations as rapidly as circumstances allow."

"I am not authorized to—"

"General, fifty years ago you could have said that, and it was the custom of your armed forces to fight to the last man. It was also the custom of your armed forces to deal with people in the lands you occupied in a way that even you must find barbaric—I say that because you have behaved honorably in all respects—or so all my information tells me. For that I thank you, sir," Jackson went on, speaking evenly and politely. "This is not the nineteen-forties. I wasn't born before the end of that war, and you were a toddler then. That sort of behavior is a thing of the past. There is no place for it in the world today."

"My troops have behaved properly," Arima confirmed, not knowing what else to say under the circumstances.

"Human life is a precious commodity, General Arima, far too precious to be wasted unnecessarily. We have limited our combat actions to militarily important targets. We have not as yet inflicted harm on the innocent, as you have not. But if this war continues, that will change, and the consequences will be harder on you than on us. There is no honor in that for either side. In any case, I must now fly to Guam. You know how to reach me by radio." Jackson stood.

"I must await orders from my government."

"I understand," Robby replied, thankful that Arima meant that he would follow those orders—from his *government*.

Usually when Al Trent came to the White House it was in the company of Sam Fellows, the ranking minority member of the Select Committee, but not this time, because Sam was in the other party. A member of his party's Senate leadership was there also. The hour made this a political meeting, with most of the White House staffers gone for the day, and a President allowing himself a release from the stress of his office.

"Mr. President, I gather that things have gone well?"

Durling nodded cautiously. "Prime Minister Goto is not yet able to meet with the Ambassador. We're not sure why, but Ambassador Whiting says not to worry. The public mood over there is shifting our way rapidly."

Trent took a drink from the Navy steward who served in the Oval Office. That part of the White House staff must have kept a list of the favored drinks for the important. In Al's case it was vodka and tonic, Finnish Absolut vodka, a habit begun while a student at Tufts University, forty years earlier.

"Jack said all along that they didn't know what they were getting into."

"Bright boy, Ryan," the senior Senator agreed. "He's done you quite a few

favors, Roger." Trent noted with annoyance that this stalwart member of what he liked to call "the upper house" felt the right to first-name the President in private. Typical senator, the House member thought.

"Bob Fowler gave you some good advice," Trent allowed.

The President nodded agreement. "True, and you're the one who put the bug in his ear, Al, aren't you?"

"Guilty." The word was delivered with a laugh.

"Well, I have an idea I want to float on the both of you," Durling said.

Captain Checa's squad of Rangers made the last treeline just after noon, local time, concluding a thoroughly murderous trek through snow and mud. There was a single-lane road below. This part of town must have been some sort of summer resort, the Captain thought. The hotel parking lots were almost entirely empty, though one had a minibus in it. The Captain pulled the cellular phone from his pocket and speed-dialed the proper number.

"Hello?"

"Señor Nomuri?"

"Ah, Diego! I've been waiting for hours. How was your nature hike?" the voice asked with a laugh.

Checa was formulating his answer when the lights on the minibus flashed twice. Ten minutes later all the men were inside, where they found some hot drinks and room to change their clothing. On the drive down the mountain, the CIA officer listened to the radio, and the soldiers could see his demeanor relax as he did so. It would be a while longer before the Rangers did the same.

Captain Sato performed another perfect landing at Narita International Airport, entirely without thinking about it, not even hearing the congratulatory comment of his copilot as he completed the run-out. Outwardly calm, inside the pilot was a vacuum, performing his customary job robotically. The copilot did not interfere, thinking that the mechanics of handling the aircraft would itself be some solace to his captain, and so he watched Sato taxi the 747 right up to the jetway, stopping again with the usual millimetric precision. In less than a minute the doors were opened and passengers clambered off. Through the windows of the terminal they could see a crowd of people waiting at the gate, mainly the wives and children of people who had flown so recently to Saipan in order to establish themselves as . . . citizens, able to vote in the newest Home Island. But not now. Now they were coming home, and families welcomed them as those who might have been lost, now safe again where they belonged. The copilot shook his head at the absurdity of it all, not noticing that Sato's face still hadn't changed at all. Ten minutes later the flight crew left the aircraft. A relief crew would take it back to Saipan in a few hours to continue the exodus of special flights.

Out in the terminal, they saw others waiting at other gates, outwardly nervous from their expressions, though many were devouring afternoon papers just delivered to the airport's many gift shops.

Goto Falls was the headline: *Koga to Form New Government.*

The international gates were rather less full than was the norm. Caucasian businessmen stood about, clearly leaving the country, but now looking about in curiosity, so many of them with little smiles as they scanned the terminal, looking mainly at the flights inbound from Saipan. Their thoughts could hardly have been more obvious, especially the people waiting to board flights eastward.

Sato saw it too. He stopped and looked at a paper dispenser but only needed to see the headline to understand. Then he looked at the foreigners at their gates and muttered, "*Gaijin* . . ." It was the only unnecessary word he'd spoken in two hours, and he said nothing else on the way to his car. Perhaps some sleep would help him, the copilot thought, heading off to his own.

"Aren't we supposed to go back out and—"

"And do what, Ding?" Clark asked, pocketing the car keys after a thirty-minute spin around the southern half of the island. "Sometimes you just let things be. I think this is one of those times, son."

"You saying it's over?" Pete Burroughs asked.

"Well, take a look around."

Fighters were still orbiting overhead. Cleanup crews had just about cleared the debris from the periphery of Kobler Field, but the fighters had not moved over to the international airport, whose runways were busy with civilian airliners. To the east of the housing tract the Patriot crews were also standing alert, but those not in the control vans were standing together in small knots, talking among themselves instead of doing the usual soldierly make-work. Local citizens were demonstrating now, in some cases loudly, at various sites around the island, and nobody was arresting them. In some cases officers backed up by armed soldiers asked, politely, for the demonstrators to stay away from the troops, and the local people prudently heeded the warnings. On their drive, Clark and Chavez had seen half a dozen such incidents, and in all cases it was the same: the soldiers not angered so much as embarrassed by it all. It wasn't the sign of an army ready to fight a battle, John thought, and more importantly, the officers were keeping their men under tight control. That meant orders from above to keep things cool.

"You think it's over?" Oreza asked.

"If we're lucky, Portagee."

* * *

Prime Minister Koga's first official act after forming a cabinet was to summon Ambassador Charles Whiting. A political appointee whose last four weeks in the country had been very tense and frightening indeed, Whiting noted first of all that the guard detail around the embassy was cut by half. His official car had a police escort to the Diet Building. There were cameras to record his arrival at the VIP entrance, but they were kept well back, and two brand-new

ministers conducted him inside.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Mr. Whiting."

"Mr. Prime Minister, speaking for myself, I am very pleased to answer your invitation." The two men shook hands, and really that was it, both of them knew, though their conversation had to cover numerous issues.

"You are aware that I had nothing at all to do—"

Whiting just raised his hand. "Excuse me, sir. Yes, I know that, and I assure you that my government knows that. Please, we do not need to establish your goodwill. This meeting," the Ambassador said generously, "is proof positive of that."

"And the position of your government?"

At exactly nine in the morning, Vice President Edward Kealty's car pulled into the underground parking garage of the State Department. Secret Service agents conducted him to the VIP elevator that took him to the seventh floor, where one of Brett Hanson's personal assistants led him to the double doors of the office of the Secretary of State.

"Hello, Ed," Hanson said, standing and coming to meet the man he'd known in and out of public life for two decades.

"Hi, Brett." Kealty was not downcast. In the past few weeks he'd come to terms with many things. Later today he would make his public statement, apologizing to Barbara Linders and several other people by name. But before that he had to do what the Constitution required. Kealty reached into his coat pocket and handed over an envelope to the Secretary of State. Hanson took it and read the two brief paragraphs that announced Kealty's resignation from his office. There were no further words. The two old friends shook hands and Kealty made his way back out of the building. He would return to the White House, where his personal staff was already collecting his belongings. By evening the office would be ready for a new occupant.

"Jack, Chuck Whiting is delivering our terms, and they're pretty much what you suggested last night."

"You might catch some political heat from that," Ryan observed, inwardly relieved that President Durling was willing to run the risk.

The man behind the ornate desk shook his head. "I don't think so, but if it happens, I can take it. I want orders to go out for our forces to stand down, defensive action only."

"Good."

"It's going to be a long while before things return to normal."

Jack nodded. "Yes, sir, but we can still manage things in as civilized a way as possible. Their citizens were never behind this. Most of the people responsible for it are already dead. We have to make that clear. Want me to handle it?"

"Good idea. Let's talk about that tonight. How about you bring your wife in for dinner? Just a private one for a change," the President suggested with a

smile.

"I think Cathy would like that."

Professor Caroline Ryan was just finishing up a procedure. The atmosphere in the operating room was more akin to something in an electronics factory. She didn't even have to wear surgical gloves, and the scrub rules here were nothing like those for conventional surgery. The patient was only mildly sedated while the surgeon hovered over the gunsight-like controls of her laser, searching around for the last bad vessel on the surface of the elderly man's retina. She lined up the crosshairs as carefully as a man taking down a Rocky Mountain sheep from half a mile, and thumbed the control. There was a brief flash of green light and the vein was "welded" shut.

"Mr. Redding, that's it," she said quietly, touching his hand.

"Thank you, doctor," the man said somewhat sleepily.

Cathy Ryan flipped off the power switch on the laser system and got off her stool, stretching as she did so. In the corner of the room, Special Agent Andrea Price, still disguised as a Hopkins faculty member, had watched the entire procedure. The two women went outside to find Professor Bernard Katz, his eyes beaming over his Bismarck mustache.

"Yeah, Bernie?" Cathy said, making her notes for Mr. Redding's chart.

"You have room on the mantel, Cath?" *That* brought her eyes up. Katz handed over a telegram, still the traditional way of delivering such news. "You just bagged a Lasker Award, honey." Katz then delivered a hug that almost made Andrea Price reach for her gun.

"Oh, Bernie!"

"You earned it, doctor. Who knows, maybe you'll get a free trip to Sweden, too. Ten years of work. It's one hell of a clinical breakthrough, Cathy."

Other faculty members came up then, applauding and shaking her hand, and for Caroline Muller Ryan, M.D., F.A.C.S., it was a moment to match the arrival of a baby. *Well,* she thought, *almost. . . .*

Special Agent Price heard her beeper go off and headed to the nearest phone, taking the message down and returning to her principal.

"Is it really that good?" she finally asked.

"Well, it's about the top American award in medicine," Katz said while Cathy basked in the glow of respect from her colleagues. "You get a nice little copy of a Greek statue, the Winged Victory of Samothrace, I think, the Goddess Nike. Some money, too. But mainly what you get is the knowledge that you really made a difference. She's a great doc."

"Well, the timing is pretty good. I have to get her home and changed," Price confided.

"What for?"

"Dinner in the White House," the agent replied with a wink. "Her husband did a pretty good job, too." Just how good was a secret from nearly everyone, but not from the Service, from whom nothing was secret.

“Ambassador Whiting, I wish to apologize to you, to your government, and to your people for what has happened. I pledge to you that it will not happen again. I also pledge to you that the people responsible will answer to our law,” Koga said with great if somewhat stiff dignity.

“Prime Minister, your word is sufficient to me and to my government. We will do the utmost to restore our relationship,” the Ambassador promised, deeply moved by the sincerity of his host, and wishing, as many had, that America had not cut his legs out only six weeks earlier. “I will communicate your wishes to my government immediately. I believe that you will find our response to your position is highly favorable.”

“I need your help,” Yamata said urgently.

“What help is that?” Tracking down Zhang Han San had taken most of the day, and now the man’s voice was as cold as his name.

“I can get my jet here, and from here I can fly directly to—”

“That could be viewed as an unfriendly act against two countries. No, I regret that my government cannot allow that.” *Fool,* he didn’t add. *Don’t you know the price for this sort of failure?*

“But you—we are allies!”

“Allies in what?” Zhang inquired. “You are a businessman. I am a government official.”

The conversation might have gone on with little point, but then the door to Yamata’s office opened and General Tokikichi Arima came in, accompanied by two other officers. They hadn’t troubled themselves to talk with the secretary in the anteroom.

“I need to speak with you, Yamata-san,” the General said formally.

“I’ll get back to you,” the industrialist said into the phone. He hung up. He couldn’t know that at the other end the official instructed his staff not to put the calls through. It would not have mattered in any case.

“Yes—what is it?” Yamata demanded. The reply was equally cold.

“I am ordered to place you under arrest.”

“By whom?”

“By Prime Minister Koga himself.”

“The charge?”

“Treason.”

Yamata blinked hard. He looked around the room at the other men, now flanking the General. There was no sympathy in their eyes. So there it was. These mindless automatons had orders, but not the wit to understand them. But perhaps they still had honor.

“With your permission, I would like a few moments alone.” The meaning of the request was clear.

“My orders,” Arima said, “are to return you to Tokyo alive.”

“But—”

“I am sorry, Yamata-san, but you are not to avail yourself of that form of escape.” With that the General motioned to the junior officer, who took three steps and handcuffed the businessman. The coldness of the steel startled the industrialist.

"Tokikichi, you can't—"

"I must." It pained the General not to allow his . . . friend? No, they'd not been friends, not really. Even so it pained him not to allow Yamata to end his life by way of atonement, but the orders from the Prime Minister had been explicit on that score, and with that, he led the man from the building, off to the police station adjacent to his soon-to-be-vacated official quarters, where two men would keep an eye on him to prevent any attempt at suicide.

When the phone rang, it surprised everyone that it was *the* phone, and not Burroughs' satellite instrument. Isabel Oreza got it, expecting a call from work or something. Then she turned and called., "Mr. Clark?"

"Thank you." He took it. "Yes?"

"John, Mary Pat. Your mission is over. Come on home."

"Maintain cover?"

"Affirmative. Good job, John. Tell Ding the same thing." The line went dead. The DDO had already violated security in a major way, but the call had taken only a few seconds, and using the civilian line made it even more official than the covert sort could.

"What gives?" Portagee asked.

"We've just been ordered home."

"No shit?" Ding asked. Clark handed the phone over.

"Call the airport. Tell them that we're accredited newsies and we might just get a priority." Clark turned. "Portagee, could you do me a favor and forget you ever saw me?"

The signal was welcome though surprising. *Tennessee* immediately turned due east and increased speed to fifteen knots for the moment, staying deep. In the wardroom, the gathered officers were still joshing their Army guest, as was also happening with the enlisted men.

"We need a broom," the engineering officer said after some deep thought.

"Do we have one aboard?" Lieutenant Shaw asked.

"Every submarine is issued a broom, Mr. Shaw. You've been around long enough to know that," Commander Claggett observed with a wink.

"What are you guys talking about?" the Army officer asked. Were they jerking him around again?

"We took two shots and both were kills," the engineer explained. "That's a clean sweep, and that means when we enter Pearl, we have a broom tied to the number-one periscope. Tradition."

"You squids do the weirdest things," the lone man in green fatigues observed.

"Do we claim the helos?" Shaw asked his CO.

"We shot them down," the ground-pounder objected.

"But they flew off our deck!" the Lieutenant pointed out.

"Jesus!" All this over breakfast. What would the squids do for lunch?

The dinner was informal, up on the bedroom level of the White House, with what passed for a light buffet, albeit one cooked by a staff good enough to upgrade the rating of any restaurant in America.

"I understand congratulations are in order," Roger Durling said.

"Huh?" The National Security Advisor hadn't heard yet.

"Jack, I, uh, got the Lasker," Cathy said from her seat across the table.

"Well, that's two in your family who're the best around," Al Trent observed, saluting with his wineglass.

"And this one's for you, Jack," the President said, lifting his glass. "After all the grief I've gotten on foreign affairs, you've saved me, and you've saved a lot of other things. Well done, *Mister* Dr. Ryan."

Jack nodded at the toast, but this time he knew. He'd been around Washington long enough, finally, to hear the falling sandbag. The trouble was that he didn't know exactly why it was falling toward his head.

"Mr. President, the satisfaction comes from—well, from service, I guess. Thanks for trusting me, and thanks for putting up with me when I—"

"Jack, people like you, well, where would our country be?" Durling turned. "Cathy, do you know everything Jack has done over the years?"

"Jack? Tell me secrets?" She had a good laugh at that.

"Al?"

"Well, Cathy, it's time you learned," Trent observed, much to Jack's discomfort.

"There is one thing I've always wondered about," she said at once. "I mean, you two are so friendly, but the first time you two met several years ago, I—"

"The dinner, the one before Jack flew off to Moscow?" Trent took a sip of the California chardonnay. "That was when he set up the defection of the head of the old KGB."

"What?"

"Tell the story, Al, we have lots of time," Durling urged. His wife, Anne, leaned in to hear this one, too. Trent ended up speaking for twenty minutes, telling more than one old tale in the process despite the look on Jack's face.

"That's the sort of husband you have, Dr. Ryan," the President said when the stories were ended.

Jack looked over at Trent now, a rather intense stare. What was at the end of this?

"Jack, your country needs you for one last thing, and then we'll let you go," the Congressman said.

"What's that?" *Please, not an ambassadorship,* he thought, the usual kiss-off for a senior official.

Durling set his glass down. "Jack, my main job for the next nine months is to get reelected. It might be a tough campaign, and it's going to absorb a lot of my time under the best of circumstances. I need you on the team."

"Sir, I already am—"

"I want you to be my Vice President," Durling said calmly. The room got very quiet then. "The post is vacant as of today, as you know. I'm not sure yet who I want for my second term, and I am not suggesting that you fill the post for more than—what? Not even eleven months. Like Rockefeller did for Gerry

Ford. I want somebody whom the public respects, somebody who can run the shop for me when I'm away. I need somebody heavy in foreign affairs. I need somebody who can help me put my foreign-policy team together. And," he added, "I know you want out. You've done enough. And so, after this, you *can't* be called back for a permanent post."

"Wait a minute. I'm not even in your party," Jack managed to say.

"As the Constitution was originally drafted, the Vice President was supposed to be the loser in the general election. James Madison and the others assumed that patriotism would triumph over partisanship. Well, they were wrong," Durling allowed. "But in this case—Jack, I know you. I will not use you in a political sense. No speeches and baby-kissing."

"Never pick up a baby to kiss it," Trent said. "They always puke on you, and somebody always gets a picture. Always kiss the baby in the mom's arms." The good political advice was sufficient to lighten the atmosphere a little.

"Your job will be to get the White House organized, to manage national-security affairs, really to help me strengthen my foreign-policy team. And then I'll let you go and nobody will ever call you back. You'll be a free man, Jack," Durling promised. "Once and for all."

"My God," Cathy said.

"It's what you wanted, too, isn't it?"

Caroline nodded. "Yes, it is. But—but, I don't know anything about politics. I—"

"Lucky you," Anne Durling observed. "You won't have to get stuck with it."

"I have my work and—"

"And you'll still do it. A nice house comes along with the job," the President went on. "And it's temporary." He turned his head. "Well, Jack?"

"What makes you think that I can be confirmed—"

"Leave that to us," Trent said in a way that announced quite clearly that it had already been settled.

"You won't ask me to—"

"My word on it," the President promised. "Your obligation ends next January."

"What about—I mean, that makes me President of the Senate, and in the event of a close vote—"

"I suppose I ought to say that I'll tell you how I want you to vote, and I will, and I hope you'll listen, but I know you'll vote your conscience. I can live with that. As a matter of fact, if you were any other way, I wouldn't be making this offer."

"Besides, nothing on the schedule will be that close," Trent assured him. They'd talked that one over, too, the night before.

"I think we should pay more attention to the military," Jack said.

"If you make your recommendations, I'll incorporate them in the budget. You've taught me a lesson on that, and I may need you to help me hammer it through Congress. Maybe that will be your valedictory."

"They'll listen to you, Jack," Trent assured him.

Jesus, Ryan thought, wishing that he'd gone easier on the wine. Predictably he looked over to his wife. Their eyes met, and she nodded. *You sure?* his eyes asked. She nodded again.

"Mr. President, under the terms of your offer, and just to the end of your term, yes, I will do it."

Roger Durling motioned to a Secret Service agent, letting her know that Tish Brown could make the press release in time for the morning papers.

Oreza allowed himself to board his boat for the first time since Burroughs had landed his albacore. They left the pier at dawn, and by nightfall the engineer was able to conclude his fishing vacation with another sizable game fish before catching a Continental flight to Honolulu. His return to work would include more than a fish story, but he wouldn't mention the gear that the boat's skipper had dumped over the side as soon as they were out of sight of land. It was a shame to dump the cameras and the expensive lights, but he supposed there was some reason for it.

Clark and Chavez, still covered as Russians, managed to bully their way onto a JAL flight to Narita. On the way aboard they saw a well-dressed man in handcuffs with a military escort, and from twenty feet away, as they moved the man into the first-class cabin, Ding Chavez looked into the eyes of the man who had ordered the death of Kimberly Norton. He briefly wished for his light or a gun, or maybe even a knife, but that was not in the cards. The flight to Japan took just over two boring hours, and both men walked their carry-ons across the international terminal. They had first-class reservations on another JAL flight to Vancouver, and from there they would fly to Washington on an American carrier.

"Good evening," the Captain said first in Japanese, then in English. "This is Captain Sato. We expect this to be a smooth flight, and the winds are good for us. With luck we should be in Vancouver at about seven in the morning, local time." The voice sounded even more mechanical than the cheap ceiling speakers, but pilots liked talking like robots.

"Thank God," Chavez observed quietly in English. He did the mental arithmetic and decided that they'd be in Virginia around nine or ten in the evening.

"About right," Clark thought.

"I want to marry your daughter, Mr. C. I'm going to pop the question when I get back." There, he'd finally said it. The look his offhand remark generated made him cringe.

"Someday you'll know what words like that do to a man, Ding." *My little baby?* he thought, as vulnerable to the moment as any man, perhaps more so.

"Don't want a greaser in the family?"

"No, not that at all. It's more—oh, what the hell, Ding. Easier to spell Chavez than Wojohowitz. If it's okay with her, then I suppose it's okay with me."

That easy? "I expected you to bite my head off."

Clark allowed himself a chuckle. "No, I prefer guns for that sort of thing. I thought you knew that."

“The President could not have made a better selection,” Sam Fellows said on “Good Morning, America.” “I’ve known Jack Ryan for nearly eight years. He’s one of the brightest people in government service. I can tell you now that he is one of the men most responsible for the rapid conclusion of hostilities with Japan, and was also instrumental in the recovery of the financial markets.”

“There have been reports that his work at CIA—”

“You know that I am not free to reveal classified information.” Those leaks would be handled by others, and the proper senators on both sides of the aisle were being briefed in this morning as well. “I can say that Dr. Ryan has served our country with the utmost personal honor. I cannot think of another intelligence official who has earned the trust and respect that Jack Ryan has.”

“But ten years ago—the incident with the terrorists. Have we ever had a Vice President who actually—”

“Killed people?” Fellows shook his head at the reporter. “A lot of Presidents and Vice Presidents have been soldiers. Jack defended his family against a vicious and direct attack, like any American would. I can tell you that out where I live in Arizona, nobody would fault the man for that.”

“Thanks, Sam,” Ryan said, watching his office TV. The first wave of reporters was scheduled to assault him in thirty minutes, and he had to read over briefing materials, plus a sheet of instructions from Tish Brown. Don’t speak too fast. Don’t give a direct answer to any substantive political question.

“I’m just glad to be here,” Ryan said to himself. “I just play them one game at a time. Isn’t that what they tell rookie ballplayers to say?” he wondered aloud.

The 747 touched down even earlier than the pilot had promised, which was fine but wouldn’t help on the connecting flight. The good news for the moment was that the first-class passengers got off first, and better still, a U.S. consular official met Clark and Chavez at the gate, whisking them through customs. Both men had slept on the flight, but their bodies were still out of synch with the local time. An aging Delta L-1011 lifted off two hours later, bound for Dulles International.

Captain Sato remained in his command seat. One problem with international air travel was the sameness of it all. This terminal could have been almost anywhere, except that all of the faces were gaijin. There would be a day-long layover before he flew back, doubtless full again of Japanese executives running away.

And this was the remainder of his life, ferrying people he didn’t know to places he didn’t care about. If only he’d stayed in the Self-Defense Forces—maybe he would have done better, maybe it would have made a difference. He was the best pilot in one of the world’s best airlines, and those skills might have . . . but he’d never know, would he, and he’d never make a difference, just one more captain of one more aircraft, flying people to and from a nation that had forfeited its honor. *Well.* He climbed out of his seat, collected his

flight charts and other necessary papers, tucked them in his carry-bag and headed out of the aircraft. The gate was empty now, and he was able to walk down the bustling but anonymous terminal. He saw a copy of *USA Today* at a shop and picked it up, scanning the front page, seeing the pictures there. Tonight at nine o'clock? It all came together at that moment, really just an equation of speed and distance.

Sato looked around once more, then headed off to the airport administrative office. He needed a weather map. He already knew the timing.

"One thing I'd like to fix," Jack said, more at ease than ever in the Oval Office.

"What's that?"

"A CIA officer. He needs a pardon."

"What for?" Durling asked, wondering if a sandbag was descending toward his own head.

"Murder," Ryan replied honestly. "As luck would have it, my father worked the case back when I was in college. The people he killed had it coming—"

"Not a good way to look at things. Even if they did."

"They did." The Vice President-designate explained for two or three minutes. The magic word was "drugs," and soon enough the President nodded.

"And since then?"

"One of the best field officers we've ever had. He's the guy who bagged Qati and Ghosn in Mexico City."

"That's the guy?"

"Yes, sir. He deserves to get his name back."

"Okay. I'll call the Attorney General and see if we can do it quietly. Any other favors that you need taken care of?" the President asked. "You know, you're picking this political stuff up pretty fast for an amateur. Nice job with the media this morning, by the way."

Ryan nodded at the compliment. "Admiral Jackson. He did a nice job, too, but I suppose the Navy will take good care of him."

"A little presidential attention never hurt any officer's career. I want to meet him anyway. You're right, though. Flying into the islands to meet with them was a very astute move."

* * *

"No losses," Chambers said, and a lot of kills. Why didn't he feel good about that?

"The subs that killed *Charlotte* and *Asheville?*" Jones asked.

"We'll ask when the time comes, but probably at least one of them." The judgment was statistical but likely.

"Ron, good job," Mancuso said.

Jones stubbed out his cigarette. Now he'd have to break the habit again. And now, also, he understood what war was, and thanked God that he'd never really had to fight in one. Perhaps it was just something for kids to do. But he'd done his part, and now he knew, and with luck he'd never have to see

one happen again. There were always whales to track.

"Thanks, Skipper."

"One of our 747s has mechanical'd rather badly," Sato explained. "It will be out of service for three days. I have to fly to Heathrow to replace the aircraft. Another 747 will replace mine on the Pacific run." With that he turned over the flight plan.

The Canadian air-traffic official scanned it. "Pax?"

"No passengers, no, but I'll need a full load of fuel."

"I expect your airline will pay for that, Captain," the official observed with a smile. He scribbled his approval on the flight plan, keeping one copy for his records, and gave the other back to the pilot. He gave the form a last look. "Southern routing? It's five hundred miles longer."

"I don't like the wind forecast," Sato lied. It wasn't much of a lie. People like this rarely second-guessed pilots on weather calls. This one didn't either.

"Thank you." The bureaucrat went back to his paperwork.

An hour later, Sato was standing under his aircraft. It was at an Air Canada service hangar—the space at the terminal was occupied again by another international carrier. He took his time preflighting the airliner, checking visually for fluid leaks, loose rivets, bad tires, any manner of irregularity—called "hangar rash"—but there was none to be seen. His copilot was already aboard, annoyed at the unscheduled flight they had to make, even though it meant three or four days in London, a city popular with international aircrew. Sato finished his walk-around and climbed aboard, stopping first at the forward galley.

"All ready?" he asked.

"Preflight checklist complete, standing by for beforestart checklist," the man said just before the steak knife entered his chest. His eyes were wide with shock and surprise rather than pain.

"I'm very sorry to do this," Sato told him in a gentle voice. With that he strapped into the left seat and commenced the engine-start sequence. The ground crew was too far away to see into the cockpit, and couldn't know that only one man was alive on the flight deck.

"Vancouver tower, this is JAL ferry flight five-zero-zero, requesting clearance to taxi."

"Five-Zero-Zero Heavy, roger, you are cleared to taxi runway Two-Seven-Left. Winds are two-eight-zero at fifteen."

"Thank you, Vancouver, Five-Zero-Zero Heavy cleared for Two-Seven Left." With that the aircraft started rolling. It took ten minutes to reach the end of the departure runway. Sato had to wait an extra minute because the aircraft ahead of his was another 747, and they generated dangerous wake turbulence. He was about to violate the first rule of flight, the one about keeping your number of takeoffs equal to that for landings, but it was something his countrymen had done before. On clearance from the tower, Sato advanced the throttles to the takeoff power, and the Boeing, empty of everything but fuel, accelerated rapidly down the runway, rotating off before reaching six thousand feet, and immediately turning north to clear the controlled air space

around the airport. The lightly loaded airliner positively rocketed to its cruising altitude of thirty-nine thousand feet, at which point fuel efficiency was optimum. His flight plan would take him along the Canadian-U.S. border, departing land just north of the fishing town of Hopedale. Soon after that, he'd be beyond ground-based radar coverage. Four hours, Sato thought, sipping tea while the autopilot flew the aircraft. He said a prayer for the man in the right seat, hoping that the copilot's soul would be at peace, as his now was.

* * *

The Delta flight landed at Dulles only a minute late. Clark and Chavez found that there was a car waiting for them. They took the official Ford and headed down to Interstate-64, while the driver who'd brought it caught a cab.

"What do you suppose will happen to him?"

"Yamata? Prison, maybe worse. Did you get a paper?" Clark asked.

"Yeah." Chavez unfolded it and scanned the front page. "Holy shit!"

"Huh?"

"Looks like Dr. Ryan's getting kicked upstairs." But Chavez had other things to think about for the drive down toward the Virginia Tidewater, like how he was going to ask Patsy the Big Question. What if she said no?

A joint session of Congress is always held in the House chamber due to its larger size, and also, members of the "lower" house noted, because in the Senate seats were reserved, and those bastards didn't let anyone else sit in *their* place. Security was usually good here. The Capitol building had its own police force, which was used to working with the Secret Service. Corridors were closed off with velvet ropes, and the uniformed officers were rather more alert than usual, but it wasn't that big a deal.

The President would travel to the Hill in his official car, which was heavily armored, accompanied by several Chevy Suburbans that were even more heavily protected, and loaded with Secret Service agents carrying enough weapons to fight off a company of Marines. It was rather like a traveling circus, really, and like people in the circus, they were always setting up and taking down. Four agents, for example, humped their Stinger missile containers to the roof, going to the customary spots, scanning the area to see if the trees had grown a little too much—they were trimmed periodically for better visibility. The Secret Service's Counter-Sniper Team took similar perches atop the Capitol and other nearby buildings. The best marksmen in the country, they lifted their custom-crafted 7mm Magnum rifles from foamlined containers and used binoculars to scan the rooftops they didn't occupy. There were few enough of those, as other members of "the detail" took elevators and stairs to the top of every building close to the one JUMPER would be visiting tonight. When darkness fell, light-amplification equipment came out, and the agents drank hot liquids in order to keep alert.

Sato thanked Providence for the timing of the event, and for the TCAS System. Though the transatlantic air routes were never empty, travel between Europe and America was timed to coincide with human sleep patterns, and this time of day was slack for westbound flights. The TCAS sent out interrogation signals, and would alert him to the presence of nearby aircraft. At the moment there was nothing close—his display said CLEAR OF CONFLICT, meaning that there was no traffic within eighty miles. That enabled him to slip into a westbound routing quite easily, tracking down the coast, three hundred miles out. The pilot checked his time against his memorized flight plan. Again he'd figured the winds exactly right in both directions. His timing had to be exact, because the Americans could be very punctual. At 2030 hours, he turned west. He was tired now, having spent most of the last twenty-four hours in the air. There was rain on the American East Coast, and while that would make for a bumpy ride lower down, he was a pilot and hardly noticed such things. The only real annoyance was all the tea he'd drunk. He really needed to go to the head, but he couldn't leave the flight deck unattended, and there was less than an hour to endure the discomfort.

"Daddy, what does this mean? Do we still go to the same school?" Sally asked from the rear-facing seat in the limousine. Cathy handled the answer. It was a mommy-question.

"Yes, and you'll even have your own driver."

"Neat!" little Jack thought.

Their father was having second thoughts, as he usually did after making an important decision, even though he knew it was too late for that. Cathy looked at his face, read his mind, and smiled at him.

"Jack, it's only a few months, and then . . ."

"Yeah." Her husband nodded. "I can always work on my golf game."

"And you can finally teach. That's what I want you to do. That's what you need to do."

"Not back to the banking business?"

"I'm surprised you lasted as long as you did in that."

"You're an eye-cutter, not a shrink."

"We'll talk about it," Professor Ryan said, adjusting Katie Ryan's dress. It was the eleven-months part that appealed to her. After this post, he'd never come back to government service again. What a fine gift President Durling had given them both.

The official car stopped outside the Longworth House Office Building. There were no crowds there, though some congressional staffers were heading out of the building. Ten Secret Service agents kept an eye on them and everything else, while four more escorted the Ryans into the building. Al Trent was at the corner entrance.

"You want to come with me?"

"Why—"

"After you're confirmed, we walk you in to be sworn, and then you take your seat behind the President, next to the Speaker," Sam Fellows explained.

"It was Tish Brown's idea. It'll look good."

"Election-year theatrics," Jack observed coolly.

"What about us?" Cathy asked.

"It's a nice family picture," Al thought.

"I don't know why I'm so darned excited about this," Fellows grumbled in his most good-natured way. "This is going to make November hard for us. I suppose that never occurred to you?"

"Sorry, Sam, no, it didn't," Jack replied with a sheepish grin.

"This hovel was my first office," Trent said, opening the door on the bottom floor to the suite of offices he'd used for ten terms. "I keep it for luck. Please—sit down and relax a little." One of his staffers came in with soft drinks and ice, under the watchful eyes of Ryan's protective detail. Andrea Price started playing with the Ryan kids again. It looked unprofessional but was not. The kids had to be comfortable around her, and she'd already made a good start at that.

President Durling's car arrived without incident. Escorts conveyed him to the Speaker's official office adjacent to the chamber, where he went over his speech again. JASMINE, Mrs. Durling, with her own escorts, took an elevator to the official gallery. By this time the chamber was half-filled. It wasn't accepted for people to be fashionably late, perhaps the only such occasion for members of the Congress. They assembled in little knots of friends for the most part, and walked in by party, the seats divided by a very real if invisible line. The rest of the government would come in later. All nine justices of the Supreme Court, all members of the Cabinet who happened to be in town (two were not), and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in their beribboned uniforms were led to the front row. Then the heads of independent agencies. Bill Shaw of the FBI. The Chairman of the Federal Reserve. Finally, under the nervous eyes of security people and the usual gaggle of advance personnel, it was ready, on time, as it always seemed to happen.

The seven networks interrupted their various programming. Anchorpersons appeared to announce that the Presidential Address was about to begin, giving the viewers enough information that they could head off to the kitchen and make their sandwiches without really missing anything.

The Doorkeeper of the House, holder of one of the choicest patronage jobs in the country—a fine salary and no real duties—walked halfway down the aisle and performed his one public function with his customary booming voice:

"Mr. Speaker, the President of the United States."

Roger Durling entered the chamber, striding down the aisle with brief stops to shake hands, his red-leather folder tucked under his arm. It held a paper copy of his speech in the event that the TelePrompTers broke. The applause was deafening and sincere. Even those in the opposition party recognized that Durling had kept his promise to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, and as powerful a force as politics was, there was also still honor and patriotism in the room, especially at times like this. Durling reached the well, then climbed up to his place on the podium, and it was time

for the Speaker of the House to do his ceremonial duty:

"Members of the Congress, I have the distinct privilege, and high honor, to introduce the President of the United States." And the applause began afresh. This time there was the usual contest between the parties to see who could clap and cheer the loudest and the longest.

"Okay, remember what happens—"

"Okay, Al! I go in, the Chief Justice swears me in, and I take my seat. All I have to do is repeat it all back." Ryan sipped a glass of Coke and wiped sweaty hands on his trousers. A Secret Service agent fetched him a towel.

"Washington Center, this is KLM-Six-Five-Niner. We have an onboard emergency, sir." The voice was in clipped aviatorese, the sort of speech that people used when everything was going to hell.

The air-traffic controller outside Washington noted the alpha-numeric icon had just tripled in size on his scope and keyed his own microphone. The display gave course, speed, and altitude. His first impression was that the aircraft was making a rapid descent.

"Six-Five-Niner, this is Washington Center. State your intentions, sir."

"Center, Six-Five-Niner, number-one engine has exploded, engines one and two lost. Structural integrity in doubt. So is controllability. Request radar vector direct Baltimore."

The controller waved sharply to his supervisor, who came over at once.

"Wait a minute. Who is this?" He interrogated the computer and found no "strip" information for KLM-659.

The controller keyed his radio. "Six-Five-Niner, please identify, over." This reply was more urgent.

"Washington Center, this is KLM-Six-Five-Niner, we are 747 charter inbound Orlando, three hundred pax," the voice replied. "Repeating: we have two engines out and structural damage to port wing and fuselage. I am descending one-zero thousand now. Request immediate radar vector direct Baltimore, over!"

"We can't dick around with this," the supervisor thought. "Take him. Get him down."

"Very well, sir. Six-Five-Niner Heavy. Radar contact. I read you one-four thousand descending and three hundred knots. Recommend left turn two-niner-zero and continue descent and maintain one-zero-thousand."

"Six-Five-Niner, descending one-zero thousand, turning left two-niner-zero," Sato said in reply. English was the language on international air travel, and his was excellent. So far so good. He had more than half of his fuel still aboard, and was barely a hundred miles out, according to his satellite-navigation system.

At Baltimore-Washington International Airport, the fire station located near the main terminal was immediately alerted. Airport employees who ordinarily had other jobs ran or drove to the building, while controllers decided quickly which aircraft they could continue to land before the wounded 747 got close and which they would have to stack. The emergency plan was already written here, as for every major airport. Police and other services were alerted, and literally hundreds of people were snatched away from TV sets.

"I want to tell you the story of an American citizen, the son of a police officer, a former Marine officer crippled in a training accident, a teacher of history, a member of America's financial community, a husband and father, a patriot and public servant, and a genuine American hero," the President said on the TV. Ryan cringed to hear it all, especially when followed by applause. The cameras panned over Secretary of the Treasury Fiedler, who had leaked Jack's role in the Wall Street recovery to a group of financial reporters. Even Brett Hanson was clapping, and rather graciously.

"It's always embarrassing, Jack," Trent said with a laugh.

"Many of you know him, many of you have worked with him. I have spoken today with the members of the Senate." Durling motioned to the Majority and Minority leaders, both of whom smiled and nodded for the C-SPAN cameras. "And with your approval, I wish now to submit the name of John Patrick Ryan to fill the post of Vice President of the United States. I further request the members of the Senate to approve this nomination tonight by voice vote."

"That's pretty irregular," a commentator observed while the two senators stood to walk down to the well.

"President Durling has done his homework well on this," the political expert replied. "Jack Ryan is about as noncontroversial as people can be in this town, and the bipartisan—"

"Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, members of the Senate, and our friends and colleagues of the House," the Majority Leader began. "It is with great satisfaction that the Minority Leader and I . . ."

"Are we sure this is legal?" Jack wondered aloud.

"The Constitution says that the Senate has to approve you. It doesn't say how," Sam Fellows said.

"Baltimore Approach, this is Six-Five-Niner. I have a problem here."

"Six-Five-Niner Heavy, what is the problem, sir?" the tower controller

asked. He could already see part of it on his scope. The inbound 747 hadn't turned to his most recent command as sharply as he had ordered a minute earlier. The controller wiped his hands together and wondered if they'd be able to get this one down.

"My controls are not responding well . . . not sure I can . . . Baltimore, I see runway lights at my one o'clock . . . I don't know this area well . . . busy here . . . losing power . . ."

The controller checked the direction vector on his scope, extending it to—

"Six-Five-Niner Heavy, that is Andrews Air Force Base. They have two nice runways. Can you make the turn for Andrews?"

"Six-Five-Niner, I think so, I think so."

"Stand by." The controller had a hot line to the Air Force base. "Andrews, do you—"

"We've been following it," the senior officer in that tower said. "Washington Center clued us in. Do you need help?"

"Can you take him?"

"Affirmative."

"Six-Five-Niner Heavy, Baltimore. I am going to hand you off to Andrews Approach. Recommend turn right three-five-zero . . . can you do that, sir?" the controller asked.

"I think I can, I think I can. The fire's out, I think, but hydraulics are bottoming out on me, I think the engine must have . . ."

"KLM-Six-Five-Niner Heavy, this is Andrews Approach Control. Radar Contact. Two-five miles out, heading three-four-zero at four thousand feet descending. Runway Zero-One-Left is clear, and our fire trucks are already moving," the Air Force captain said. He'd already punched the base panic button, and his trained people were moving out smartly. "Recommend turn right zero-one-zero and continue descent."

"Six-Five-Niner," was the only acknowledgment.

The irony of the situation was something Sato would never learn. Though there were numerous fighter aircraft based at Andrews, at Langley Air Force Base, at Patuxent River Naval Air Test Center, and at Oceana NAS, all within a hundred miles of Washington, it had never occurred to anyone to have fighter aircraft aloft over the capital on any other night like this one. His elaborate lies and maneuvers were hardly necessary at all. Sato brought his aircraft around at a painfully slow rate to simulate a crippled jumbo, coached every degree of the way by a very concerned and professional American controller. And that, he thought, was too bad.

"Aye!"

"Opposed?" There was silence after that, followed a moment later by applause. Then the Speaker stood.

"The Doorkeeper of the House will escort the Vice President into the chamber so that he can be properly sworn."

“That’s your cue. Break a leg,” Trent said, standing and heading for the door. The Secret Service agents fanned out along the corridor, leading the procession to the tunnel connecting this building with the Capitol. Entering it, Ryan looked along the curving structure, painted an awful off-yellow and lined, oddly enough, mostly with pictures done by schoolchildren.

“I don’t see any obvious problem, no smoke or fire.” The tower controller had his binoculars on the incoming aircraft. It was only a mile out now. “No gear, no gear!”

“Six-Five-Niner, your gear is up, say again your gear is up!”

Sato could have replied, but chose not to. It was really all decided now. He advanced his throttles, accelerating his aircraft up from approach speed of one-hundred-sixty knots, holding to his altitude of one thousand feet for the moment. The target was in view now, and all he had to do was turn forty degrees left. On reflection, he lit up his aircraft, displaying the red crane on the rudder fin.

“What the hell is he doing?”

“That’s not KLM! Look!” the junior officer pointed. Directly over the field, the 747 banked left, clearly under precise control, all four engines whining with increased power. Then the two looked at each other, knowing exactly what was going to happen, and knowing that there was literally nothing that could be done. Calling the base commander was just a formality that would not affect events at all. They did that anyway, then alerted the First Helicopter Squadron as well. With that, they ran out of options, and turned to watch the drama whose conclusion they’d already guessed. It would take a little over a minute to conclude.

Sato had been to Washington often and done all the usual tourist things, including visiting the Capitol Building more than once. It was a grotesque piece of architecture, he thought again, as it grew larger and larger, and he adjusted his flight path so that he was now roaring right up Pennsylvania Avenue, crossing the Anacostia River.

The sight was sufficiently stunning that it momentarily paralyzed the Secret Service agent standing atop the House Chamber, but it was only a moment, and ultimately meaningless. The man dropped to his knees and flipped the cover off the large plastic box.

“Get JUMPER moving! Now!” the man screamed, taking out the Stinger.

“Let’s go!” an agent shouted into his microphone, loudly enough to hurt the

ears of the protective detail inside. A simple phrase, for the Secret Service it meant to get the President away from wherever he was. Instantly, agents as finely trained as any NFL backfield started moving even though they had no idea what the danger was. In the gallery over the chamber, the First Lady's detail had a shorter distance to go, and though one of the agents tripped on the step, she was able to grab Anne Durling's arm and start dragging her away.

"What?" Andrea Price was the only one to speak in the tunnel. The rest of the agents around the Ryan family instantly drew their weapons, pistols for the most part, though two of their number pulled out submachine guns. All of them brought their weapons up and scanned the yellow-white corridor for danger, but there was none to be seen.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

On the floor of the chamber, six men raced to the podium, also scanning about with drawn weapons in a moment that millions of television viewers would fix in their minds forever. President Durling looked at his chief agent in genuine puzzlement, only to hear a screamed entreaty to move at once.

The Stinger agent atop the building had his weapon shouldered in record time, and the beeping from the missile tracker told him that he had acquisition. Not a second later he loosed his shot, knowing even then that it didn't matter a damn.

Ding Chavez was sitting on the couch, holding Patsy's hand—the one with the ring now on it—until he saw the people with guns. The soldier he would always be leaned into the TV to look for danger, but seeing none, he knew that it was there even so.

The streak of light startled Sato, and he flinched somewhat from surprise rather than fear, then saw the missile heading for his left-inboard engine. The explosion was surprisingly loud, and alarms told him that the engine was totally destroyed, but he was a mere thousand meters away from the white building. The aircraft dipped and yawed slightly to the left. Sato compensated for it without a thought, adjusting trim and nosing down for the south side of the American house of government. They would all be there. The President, the parliamentarians, all of them. He selected his point of impact just as finely as any routine landing, and his last thought was that if they could kill his family and disgrace his country, then they would pay a very special price for that. His last voluntary act was to select the point of impact, two thirds of the way up the stone steps. That would be just about perfect, he knew . . .

Nearly three hundred tons of aircraft and fuel struck the east face of the building at a speed of three hundred knots. The aircraft disintegrated on impact. No less fragile than a bird, its speed and mass had already fragmented the columns outside the walls. Next came the building itself. As soon as the

wings broke up, the engines, the only really solid objects on the aircraft, shot forward, one of them actually smashing into and beyond the House Chamber. The Capitol has no structural steel within its stone walls, having been built in an age when stone piled on stone was deemed the most longlasting form of construction. The entire east face of the building's southern half was smashed to gravel, which shot westward—but the real damage took a second or two more, barely time for the roof to start falling down on the nine hundred people in the chamber: one hundred tons of jet fuel erupted from shredded fuel tanks, vaporizing from the passage through the stone blocks. A second later it ignited from some spark or other, and an immense fireball engulfed everything inside and outside of the building. The volcanic flames reached out, seeking air and corridors that held it, forcing a pressure wave throughout the building, even into the basement.

The initial impact was enough to drop them all to their knees, and now the Secret Service agents were on the edge of real panic. Ryan's first instinctive move was to grab his youngest daughter, then to push the rest of the family to the floor and cover them with his body. He was barely down when something made him look back, north up the tunnel. The noise came from there, and a second later there was an advancing orange wall of flame. There was not even time to speak. He pushed his wife's head down, and then two more bodies fell on top to cover them. There wasn't time for anything else but to look back at the advancing flames—

—over their heads, the fireball had already exhausted the supply of oxygen. The mushrooming cloud leaped upwards, creating its own ministorm and sucking air and gas out of the building whose occupants it had already killed —

—it stopped, not a hundred feet away, then pulled away as rapidly as it had advanced, and there was an instant hurricane in the tunnel, going the other way. A door was wrenched off its hinges, sliding toward them but missing. His little Katie screamed with terror and pain at all the weight on her. Cathy's eyes were wide, looking at her husband.

"Let's go!" Andrea Price screamed before anyone else, and with that, the agents lifted every member of the family, carrying-dragging them back to the Longworth Building, leaving the two House members to catch up on their own. That required less than a minute, and then Special Agent Price was the first again:

"Mr. President, are you okay?"

"What the hell . . ." Ryan looked around, moving to his kids. Their clothing was disheveled but they seemed otherwise intact. "Cathy?"

"I'm okay, Jack." She checked the children next, as she had once done for him in London. "They're okay, Jack. You?" There was a thundering crash that made the ground shake, and again Katie Ryan screamed.

"Price to Walker," the female agent said into her microphone. "Price to Walker—anybody, check in now!"

"Price, this is LONG RIFLE THREE, it's all gone, man, the dome just went down, too. IS SWORDSMAN okay?"

"What the hell was that?" Sam Fellows gasped from his knees. Price didn't have time even to hear the question.

"Affirmative, affirmative, SWORDSMAN, SURGEON, and—shit, we don't have names for them yet. The kids are—everybody's okay here." Even she knew that was an exaggeration. Air was still racing past them into the tunnel to feed the flames in the Capitol building.

The agents were recovering their composure somewhat now. Their guns were still out, and had so much as a janitor appeared in the corridor right then, his life might have been forfeit, but one by one they breathed deeply and relaxed just a little, at the same time trying to focus in on what they had been trained to do.

"This way!" Price said, leading with her pistol in both hands. "RIFLE THREE, get a car to the southeast corner of Longworth—and do it now!"

"Roger."

"Billy, Frank, take point!" Price commanded next. Jack hadn't thought she was the senior agent on the detail, but the two male agents weren't arguing. They sprinted ahead to the end of the corridor. Trent and Fellows just watched, waving the others on their way.

"Clear!" the one with the Uzi said at the far end of the corridor.

"Are you okay, Mr. President?"

"Wait a minute, what about—"

"JUMPER is dead," Price said simply. The other agents had heard the same radio chatter and had formed a very tight ring around their principal. Ryan had not and was still disoriented and trying to catch up.

"We have a Suburban outside!" Frank called. "Let's go!"

"Okay, sir, the drill is to get you the hell away from here. Please follow me," Andrea Price said, lowering her weapon just a little.

"Wait, now wait a minute, what are you saying? The President, Helen—"

"RIFLE THREE, this is Price. Anybody get out?"

"No chance, Price. No chance," the sniper replied.

"Mr. President, we have to get you to a place of safety. Follow me, please."

It turned out that there were two of the oversized vehicles. Jack was forcibly separated from his family and pushed into the first one.

"What about my family?" he demanded, now seeing the orange pyre that had been the centerpiece of America's government only four minutes earlier. "Oh, my God . . ."

"We'll take them to—to—"

"Take them to the Marine Barracks at Eighth and I streets. I want Marines around them now, okay?" Later, Ryan would remember that his first presidential order was something from his own past.

"Yes, sir." Price keyed her mike. "SURGEON and kids go to Eighth and I. Tell the Marines they're coming!"

His vehicle just headed down New Jersey Avenue, away from the Hill, Ryan saw, and for all their sophisticated training the Secret Service people were mainly trying to clear the area.

"Come around north," Jack told them.

"Sir, the White House—"

"A place with TVs, and right now. I think we need a judge, too." That idea didn't come from reason or analysis, Jack realized. It just came.

The Chevy Suburban headed well west before turning north and looping

back toward Union Station. The streets were alive now with police and fire vehicles. Air Force helicopters from Andrews were circling overhead, probably to keep news choppers away. Ryan got out of the car under his own power and walked within his protective ring to the entrance of the building where CNN operated. It was just the closest. More agents were arriving now, enough that Ryan actually felt safe, knowing how foolish that feeling was. He was taken upstairs to a holding room until another agent arrived with someone else a few minutes later.

"This is Judge Peter Johnson, D.C. Federal Court," an agent told Jack.

"Is this what I think?" the judge asked.

"I'm afraid so, sir. I'm not a lawyer. Is this legal?" the President asked.

Again it was Agent Price: "President Coolidge was sworn by his father, a county justice of the peace. It's legal," she assured both men.

A camera came close. Ryan put his hand on the Bible, and the judge went from memory.

"I—state your name, please."

"I, John Patrick Ryan—"

"Do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States."

"Do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States . . . and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, so help me God." Jack completed the oath from memory. It was little different, really, from the one he had sworn as a Marine officer, and it meant the same thing.

"You hardly needed me at all," Johnson said quietly. "Congratulations, Mr. President." To both men it seemed an odd thing to say, but Ryan took his hand anyway. "God bless you."

Jack looked around the room. Out the windows he could see the fires on the Hill. Then he turned back to the camera, for beyond it were millions, and like it or not, they were looking back at him, and to him. Ryan took a breath, not knowing that his tie was crooked in his collar.

"Ladies and gentlemen, what happened tonight was an attempt by someone to destroy the government of the United States. They killed President Durling, and I guess they killed most of the Congress—it's too soon, I'm afraid, to be sure of much.

"But I am sure of this: America is much harder to destroy than people are. My dad was a cop, as you heard. He and my mom were killed in a plane crash, but there are still cops. A lot of fine people were killed only a few minutes ago, but America is still here. We've fought another war and won it. We've survived an attack on our economy and we'll survive this too.

"I'm afraid I'm too new at this to say it properly, but what I learned in school is that America is a dream, it's—it's the ideas we all share, it's the things we all believe in, most of all it's things we all do, and how we do them. You can't destroy things like that. Nobody can, no matter how hard they might try, because we are who and what we choose to be. We invented that idea here, and nobody can destroy that either.

"I'm not really sure what I'm going to do right now, except to make sure my wife and children are really safe first, but now I have this job, and I just

promised God that I'd do it the best way I can. For now, I ask you all for your prayers and your help. I'll talk to you again when I know a little more. You can turn the camera off now," he concluded. When the light went off, he turned to Special Agent Price.

"Let's get to work."

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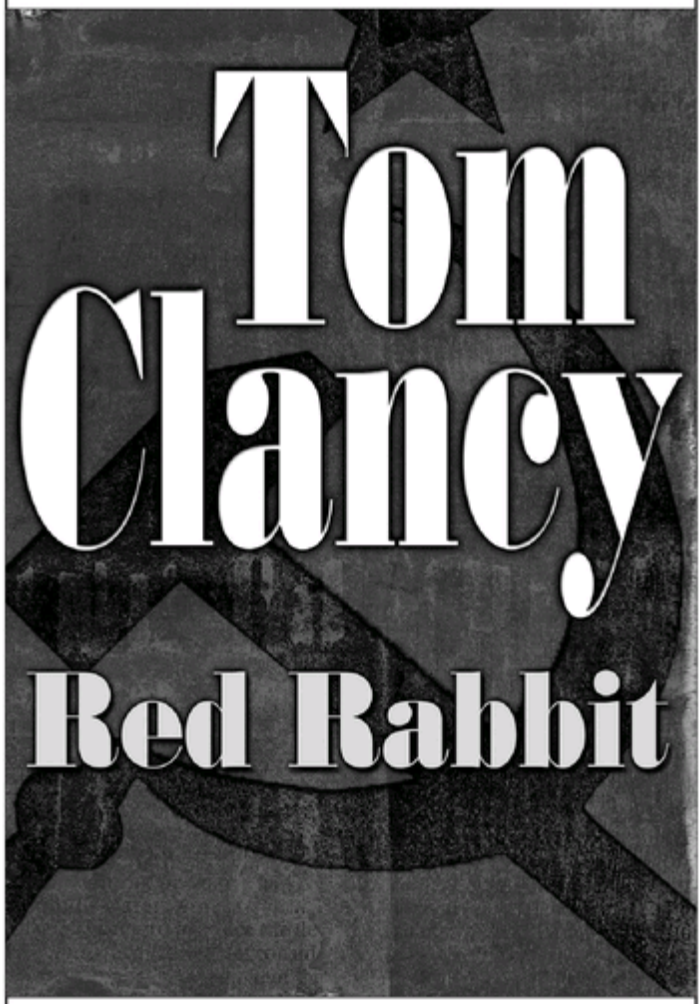

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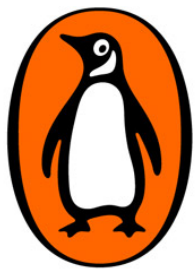

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TO
RONALD WILSON REAGAN,
FORTIETH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES:
THE MAN WHO WON THE WAR

In the original hardcover edition of *Without Remorse* are the words of a poem which I found by accident and whose title and author I was unable to identify. I found in them the perfect remembrance for my "little buddy," Kyle Haydock, who succumbed to cancer at the age of eight years and twenty-six days—to me he will never really be gone.

Later I learned that the title of this poem is "Ascension," and that the author who penned these magnificent words is Colleen Hitchcock, a poet of rare talent living in Minnesota. I wish to take this opportunity to commend her work to all students of the lyric phrase. As her words caught and excited my attention, I hope they will have the same effect on others.

The poem reads as follows:

Ascension

And if I go,
while you're still here. . .
Know that I live on,
vibrating to a different measure
-behind a thin veil you cannot see through.
You will not see me,
so you must have faith.
I wait for the time when we can soar together again,
-both aware of each other.
Until then, live your life to its fullest.
And when you need me,
Just whisper my name in your heart,
. . .I will be there.

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I pray Heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this house and on all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof.

JOHN ADAMS, SECOND PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES LETTER TO ABIGAIL, NOVEMBER 2, 1800, ON MOVING INTO THE WHITE HOUSE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Again, I needed a lot of help:
Peggy, for some valued insights;
Mike, Dave, John, Janet, Curt, and Pat
at the Johns Hopkins Hospital;
Fred and his pals at the USSS;
Pat, Darrell, and Bill, all repeat offenders at the FBI;
Fred and Sam, men who've honored the uniform with their service;
H. R., Joe, Dan, and Doug, who still do.
America is because of people like this.

PROLOGUE:

STARTING HERE

IT HAD TO BE THE SHOCK of the moment, Ryan thought. He seemed to be two people at the same time. One part of him looked out the window of the lunchroom of CNN's Washington bureau and saw the fires that grew from the remains of the Capitol building—yellow points springing up from an orange glow like some sort of ghastly floral arrangement, representing over a thousand lives that had been snuffed out not an hour earlier. Numbness suppressed grief for the moment, though he knew that would come, too, as pain always followed a hard blow to the face, but not right away. Once more, Death in all its horrid majesty had reached out for him. He'd seen it come, and stop, and withdraw, and the best thing to be said about it was that his children didn't know how close their young lives had come to an early conclusion. To them, it had simply been an accident they didn't understand. They were with their mother now, and they'd feel safe in her company while their father was away somewhere. It was a situation to which both they and he long since had unhappily become accustomed. And so John Patrick Ryan looked at the residue of Death, and one part of him as yet felt nothing.

The other part of him looked at the same sight and knew that he had to *do* something, and though he struggled to be logical, logic wasn't winning, because logic didn't *know* what to do or where to start.

"Mr. President." It was the voice of Special Agent Andrea Price.

"Yes?" Ryan said without turning away from the window. Behind him—he could see the reflections in the window glass—six other Secret Service agents stood with weapons out to keep the others away. There had to be a score of CNN employees outside the door, gathered together partly from professional interest—they were newspeople, after all—but mostly from simple human curiosity at being face-to-face with a moment in history. They were wondering what it looked like to be there, and didn't quite get the fact that such events were the same for everyone. Whether presented with an auto accident or a sudden grave illness, the unprepared human mind just stopped and tried to make sense of the senseless—and the graver the test, the harder the recovery period. But at least people trained in crisis had procedures to fall back upon.

"Sir, we have to get you to—"

"Where? A place of safety? Where's that?" Jack asked, then quietly reproached himself for the cruelty of the question. At least twenty agents were part of the pyre a mile away, all of them friends of the men and women standing in the lunchroom with their new President. He had no right to transfer his discomfort to them. "My family?" he asked after a moment.

"The Marine Barracks, Eighth and I streets, as you ordered, sir."

Yes, it was good for them to be able to report that they'd carried out orders, Ryan thought with a slow nod. It was also good for him to know that his orders had been carried out. He had done one thing right, anyway. Was that something to build on?

"Sir, if this was part of an organized—"

"It wasn't. They never are, Andrea, are they?" President Ryan asked. He was surprised how tired his voice sounded, and reminded himself that shock and stress were more tiring than the most strenuous exercise. He didn't even seem to have the energy to shake his head and clear it.

"They can be," Special Agent Price pointed out.

Yes, I suppose she's right. "So what's the drill for this?"

"Kneecap," Price replied, meaning the National Emergency Airborne Command Post, a converted 747 kept at Andrews Air Force Base. Jack thought about the suggestion for a moment, then frowned.

"No, I can't run away. I think I have to go back there." President Ryan pointed to the glow. *Yes, that is where I belong, isn't it?*

"No, sir, that's too dangerous."

"That's my place, Andrea."

He's already thinking like a politician, Price thought, disappointed.

Ryan saw the look on her face and knew he'd have to explain. He'd learned something once, perhaps the only thing that applied at this moment, and the thought had appeared in his mind like a flashing highway sign. "It's a leadership function. They taught me that at Quantico. The troops have to see you doing the job. They have to know you're there for them." *And I have to be sure that it's all real, that I actually am the President.*

Was he?

The Secret Service thought so. He'd sworn the oath, spoken the words, invoked the name of God to bless his effort, but it had all been too soon and too fast. Hardly for the first time in his life, John Patrick Ryan closed his eyes and willed himself to awaken from this dream that was just too improbable to be real, and yet when he opened his eyes again the orange glow was still there, and the leaping yellow flames. He knew he'd spoken the words—he'd even given a little speech, hadn't he? But he could not remember a single word of it now.

Let's get to work, he'd said a minute earlier. He did remember that. An automatic thing to say. Did it mean anything?

Jack Ryan shook his head—it seemed a major accomplishment to do even that—then turned away from the window to look directly at the agents in the room.

"Okay. What's left?"

"Secretaries of Commerce and Interior," Special Agent Price responded, having been updated by her personal radio. "Commerce is in San Francisco. Interior is in New Mexico. They've already been summoned; the Air Force will bring them in. We've lost all the other Cabinet secretaries: Director Shaw, all nine Supreme Court justices, the Joint Chiefs. We're not sure how many members of Congress were absent when it happened."

"Mrs. Durling?"

Price shook her head. "She didn't get out, sir. The kids are at the White

House."

Jack nodded bleakly at the additional tragedy, compressed his lips, and closed his eyes at the thought of one more thing he had to do personally. For the children of Roger and Anne Durling, it wasn't a public event. For them it was immediately and tragically simple: Mom and Dad had died, and they were now orphans. Jack had seen them, spoken with them—really nothing more than the smile and the "Hi" that one gave to another man's kids, but they were real children with faces and names—except their surnames were all that was left, and the faces would be contorted with shock and disbelief. They'd be like Jack, trying to blink away a nightmare that would not depart, but for them it'd be all the harder because of their age and vulnerability. "Do they know?"

"Yes, Mr. President," Andrea said. "They were watching TV, and the agents had to tell them. They have grandparents still alive, other family members. We're bringing them in, too." She didn't add that there was a drill for this, that at the Secret Service's operations center a few blocks west of the White House was a security file cabinet with sealed envelopes in which were contingency plans for all manner of obscene possibilities; this was merely one of them.

However, there were hundreds—no, thousands—of children without parents now, not just two. Jack had to set the Durling children aside for the moment. Hard as it was, it was also a relief to close the door on that task for the moment. He looked down at Agent Price again.

"You're telling me I'm the whole government right now?"

"It would seem that way, Mr. President. That's why we—"

"That's why *I* have to do the things I have to do." Jack headed to the door, startling the Secret Service agents into action by his impulse. There were cameras in the corridor. Ryan walked right past them, the leading wave of two agents clearing the rows of newspeople too shocked themselves to do much more than operate their cameras. Not a single question. That, Jack thought without a smile, was a singular event. It didn't occur to him to wonder what his face looked like. An elevator was waiting, and thirty seconds later, he emerged into the capacious lobby. It had been cleared of people, except for agents, more than half of whom had submachine guns out, and pointed up at the ceiling. They must have come from elsewhere—there were more than he remembered from twenty minutes earlier. Then he saw that Marines stood outside, most of them improperly uniformed, some shivering in their red T-shirts over camouflaged "utility" trousers.

"We wanted the additional security," Price explained. "I asked for the assistance from the barracks."

"Yeah." Ryan nodded. Nobody would think it unseemly for the President of the United States to be surrounded by U.S. Marines at a time like this. They were kids, most of them, their smooth young faces showing no emotion at all—a dangerous state for people carrying weapons—their eyes surveying the parking lot like watchdogs, while tight hands gripped their rifles. A captain stood just outside the door, talking to an agent. When Ryan walked out, the Marine officer braced stiffly and saluted. *So, he thinks it's real, too.* Ryan nodded his acknowledgment and gestured to the nearest HMMWV.

"The Hill," President John Patrick Ryan ordered curtly.

The ride was quicker than he'd expected. Police had cordoned off all the main streets, and the fire trucks were already there, probably a general alarm, for whatever good it might do. The Secret Service Suburban—a cross between a stationwagon and a light truck—led off, its lights flashing and siren screaming, while the protective detail sweated and probably swore under its collective breath at the foolishness of their new "Boss," the in-house term for the President.

The tail of the 747 was remarkably intact—at least the rudder fin was, recognizable, like the fletching of an arrow buried in the side of a dead animal. The surprising part for Ryan was that the fire still burned. The Capitol had been a building of stone, after all, but inside were wooden desks and vast quantities of paper, and God only knew what else that surrendered its substance to heat and oxygen. Aloft were military helicopters, circling like moths, their rotors reflecting the orange light back down at the ground. The red-and-white fire trucks were everywhere, their lights flashing red and white as well, giving additional color to the rising smoke and steam. Firefighters were racing about, and the ground was covered in hoses snaking to every hydrant in sight, bringing water to the pumpers. Many of the couplings leaked, producing little sprays of water that quickly froze in the cold night air.

The south end of the Capitol building was devastated. One could recognize the steps, but the columns and roof were gone, and the House chamber itself was a crater hidden by the rectangular lip of stones, their white color scorched and blackened with soot. To the north, the dome was down, sections of it recognizable, for it had been built of wrought iron during the Civil War, and several of the pie-slice sections had somehow retained their shape. A majority of the firefighting activity was there, where the center of the building had been. Countless hoses, some on the ground, some directed from the tips of aerial ladders and cherry-picker water towers, sprayed water in the hope of stopping the fire from spreading further, though from Ryan's vantage point there was no telling how successful the effort might be.

But the real story of the scene was the collection of ambulances, several knots of them, their paramedic crews standing with bitter idleness, folding stretchers before them, empty, the skilled crews with nothing to do but look at the white rudder fin with the red crane painted on it, also blackened from the fire, but still hatefully recognizable. Japan Airlines. The war with Japan had ended, everyone thought. But had it? Was this one lone, last act of defiance or revenge? Or just some hideously ironic accident? It hit Jack that the scene was very much like an auto accident, at least in kind if vastly different in scale, and for the trained men and women who'd responded, it was the same story as with so many other calls—too late. Too late to stop the fire in time. Too late to save the lives they were sworn to rescue. Too late to make much of a difference at all.

The HMMWV pulled in close to the southeast corner of the building, just outside the gaggle of fire trucks, and before Ryan could step out, a full squad of Marines had him surrounded again. One of them, the captain, opened the door for the new President.

"So, who's in charge?" Jack asked Agent Price. For the first time he noticed how bitterly cold the night was.

"I guess one of the firemen."

"Let's find him." Jack started walking toward a collection of pumpers. He was already starting to shiver in his light wool suit. The chiefs would be the ones with the white hats, right? And the regular cars, he remembered from his youth in Baltimore. Chiefs didn't ride in trucks. He spotted three red-painted sedans and angled that way.

"Damn it, Mr. President!" Andrea Price fairly screamed at him. Other agents ran to get in front, and the Marines couldn't decide whether to lead the group or to follow. There wasn't an entry in anyone's manual for this, and what rules the Secret Service had, their Boss had just invalidated. Then one of them had a thought and sprinted off to the nearest ladder truck. He returned with a rubberized turnout coat.

"This'll keep you warm, sir," Special Agent Raman promised, helping Ryan into it, and disguising him as one of the several hundred firefighters roaming around. Special Agent Price gave him an approving wink and nod, the first moment of almost-levity since the 747 had arrived at Capitol Hill. All the better that President Ryan didn't grasp the real reason for the heavy coat, she thought. This moment would be remembered by the protective Detail as the beginning of the management race, the Secret Service vs. the President of the United States, generally a contest of ego against cajolery.

The first chief that Ryan found was talking into a handheld radio and trying to direct his firefighters closer into the flames. A person in civilian clothes was close by, holding a large paper roll flat on the car's hood. Probably plans of the building, Jack thought. Ryan waited a few feet away, while the two men moved hands left and right over the plans and the chief spoke staccato instructions into his radio.

"And, for Christ's sake, be careful with all those loose stones," Chief Paul Magill finished his last command. Then he turned around and rubbed his eyes. "Who the hell are you?"

"This is the President," Price informed him.

Magill's eyes blinked. He took a quick look at the people with guns, then back at Ryan. "This is pretty damned bad," the chief said first.

"Anyone get out?"

Magill shook his head. "Not from this side. Three people on the other side, all beat up. We think they were in the Speaker's cloak room, someplace around there, probably the explosion just shot them through the windows. Two pages and a Secret Service guy, all burned and busted up. We're conducting a search—well, we're trying to, but so far even the people who weren't roasted—they had the oxygen sucked right out of them, asphyxia, you're just as dead." Paul Magill was Ryan's height, but a barrel-chested black man. His hands were mottled with large pale areas that gave testament to a very intimate battle with fire sometime in his professional past. His rugged face showed only sadness now, for fire wasn't a human enemy, just a mindless thing that scarred the fortunate and killed the rest. "We might get lucky. Some people in small rooms, doors closed, like that, sir. There's a million damned rooms in this place, 'cording to these here plans. We might get a couple people out alive. I seen it happen before. But most of'em . . ." Magill just shook his head for a moment. "The line's holding, ought not to spread much more."

"Nobody from the chamber?" Agent Raman asked. He really wanted to know the name of the agent who'd been blown clear, but it would not have been professional to ask. Magill just shook his head in any case.

"No." He stared off at the diminishing glow, and added, "It would have been real quick." Magill shook his head again.

"I want to see," Jack said impulsively.

"No," Magill replied at once. "Too dangerous. Sir, it's my fire, and my rules, okay?"

"I *have* to see," Ryan said, more quietly. The two pairs of eyes met and communicated. Magill still didn't like it. He saw the people with guns again, and decided, wrongly, that they would support this new President, if that's what he was. Magill hadn't been watching TV when the call had come.

"Ain't gonna be pretty, sir."

• • •

IT WAS JUST after sundown in Hawaii. Rear Admiral Robert Jackson was landing at Barbers Point Naval Air Station. His peripheral vision took note of the well-lit hotels on Oahu's south shore, and a passing thought wondered what it cost to stay in one of them now. He hadn't done it since his early twenties, when two or three naval aviators would share accommodations in order to save money for hitting the bars and impressing the local women with their worldly panache. His Tomcat touched down gently, despite the lengthy ride and three aerial refuelings, because Robby still thought of himself as a fighter pilot, and therefore an artist of sorts. The fighter slowed down properly during its run-out, then turned right onto the taxiway.

"Tomcat Five-Zero-Zero, continue down to the end—"

"I've been here before, miss," Jackson replied with a smile, breaking the rules. But he was an admiral, wasn't he? Fighter pilot *and* admiral. Who cared about rules?

"Five-Zero-Zero, there's a car waiting."

"Thank you." Robby could see it, there by the farthest hangar, along with a sailor waving the usual lighted wands.

"Not bad for an old guy," the backseater noted as he folded up his maps and other unnecessary but gravely important papers.

"Your vote of approval is noted." *I was never this stiff before,* Jackson admitted to himself. He shifted himself in the seat. His butt felt like painful lead. How could all feeling be gone, yet there still be pain? he asked himself with a rueful smile. *Too old,* was how his mind answered the question. Then his leg made its presence known. *Arthritis, damn it.* He'd had to make it an order to get Sanchez to release the fighter to him. It was too far for a COD to take him from USS *John C. Stennis* back to Pearl, and the orders had been specific enough: *Expedite return*. On that basis he'd borrowed a Tom whose fire-control system was down, and therefore was non-mission-capable anyway. The Air Force had supplied the tankers. So after seven hours of blessed silence, he'd flown half the Pacific in a fighter—doubtless for the last time. Jackson moved again as he turned the fighter toward the parking spot, and was

rewarded with a back spasm.

"Is that CINCPAC?" Jackson asked, spotting the whiteclad figure by the blue Navy car.

Admiral David Seaton it was, and not standing erect, but leaning against the car and flipping through messages as Robby cut the engines and opened the canopy. A sailor rolled up a stepladder, the sort used by mechanics, to make Robby's descent easier. Another enlisted man—woman, actually—extracted the arriving admiral's bag from the storage compartment underneath. Somebody was in a hurry.

"Trouble," Seaton said the moment Robby had both boots on the ground.

"I thought we won," Jackson replied, stopping dead still on the hot concrete of the ramp. His brain was tired, too. It would be a few minutes before his thinking ran at the customary speed, though his instincts were telling him that something unusual was afoot.

"The President's dead—and we got a new one." Seaton handed over the clipboard. "Friend of yours. We're back to DEFCON Three for the time being."

"What the hell . . ." Admiral Jackson said, reading the first page of dispatches. Then he looked up. "Jack's the new . . . ?"

"Didn't you know about him becoming VP?"

Jackson shook his head. "I was tied up with other things before I got off the boat this morning. Holy God," Robby concluded with another shake of the head.

Seaton nodded. Ed Kealty resigned because of that sex scandal, the President persuaded Ryan to take the vice presidency until the elections next year, the Congress confirmed him, but before he could enter the chamber well, you can see what happened. Plane hit down center. "The JCSs are all gone. The deputies are stepping in. Mickey Moore"—Army General Michael Moore, the Deputy Chairman of the Joint Chiefs—"has put in a call for all the CINCs to come into D.C., ASAP. We have a KC-10 waiting for us at Hickam."

"Threat board?" Jackson asked. His permanent job, insofar as any uniformed posting was permanent, was Deputy J-3, the number-two planning officer for the Joint Chiefs.

Seaton shrugged. "Theoretically, it's blank. The IO's calmed down. The Japanese are out of the war business—"

Jackson finished the statement: "But America's never been hit like this before."

"The plane's waiting. You can change aboard. Neatness doesn't count at the moment, Robby."

AS ALWAYS, THE world was divided by time and space, especially time, she would have thought had she a moment to think, but she rarely did. She was over sixty, her small frame bowed down by years of selfless work, made all the worse because there were so few young ones to give her rest. That wasn't fair, really. She'd spelled others in her time, and those of generations past had done the same in their time, but not now, not for her. She did her best to put that thought aside. It was unworthy of her, unworthy of her place in the world, and certainly unworthy of her promises, made to God more than forty years

before. She now had doubts about those promises, but she'd admitted them to no one, not even her confessor. Her failure to discuss them was more troubling to her conscience even than the doubts were, though she vaguely knew that her priest would speak gently to her about her sin, if that's what it was—was it? she wondered. Even if it were, yes, he'd speak gently about it. He always did, probably because he had such doubts himself, and both of them were of the age when one looks back and wonders what might have been, despite all the accomplishments of a productive and useful life.

Her sister, every bit as religious as she, had chosen the most common of the vocations and was now a grandmother, and Sister M. Jean Baptiste wondered what that was like. She'd made her choice a long time ago, in a youth she could still remember, and like all such decisions it had been made with poor reflection, however correct the choice itself had been. It had seemed simple enough at the time. They were respected, the ladies in black. In her distant youth she could recall seeing the German occupation troops nod politely to their passing, for even though it was widely suspected that the nuns aided Allied airmen, and maybe even Jews trying to escape, it was also known that the nursing order treated everyone equally and fairly, because God required it. Besides even the Germans wanted their hospital when they were wounded, because you had a better chance there than anywhere else. It was a proud tradition, and even though Pride was a sin, it was one the dark ladies had committed after a fashion, telling themselves that perhaps God didn't mind, because the tradition was in His Holy Name. And so when the time had been right, she'd made the decision, and that was that. Some had left, but the critical time for her to make such a choice had been difficult, what with the condition of the country after the war, and the need for her skills, and a world that had not yet changed enough for her to see her options for what they were. So she had thought about leaving, briefly, and put the idea aside, and stayed with her work.

Sister Jean Baptiste was a skilled and experienced nurse. She'd come to this place when it had still belonged to her parent country, and stayed after its status had changed. In that time she'd done her job the same way, with the same skill, despite the tornadic political changes that had gone on around her, no matter that her patients were African or European. But forty years, more than thirty of that in this same place, had taken their toll.

It wasn't that she didn't care anymore. Certainly it wasn't that. It was just that she was almost sixty-five, and that was just too old to be a nurse with too few aides, often as not working fourteen-hour days, with a few hours for prayer tossed in, good for her soul but tiring for everything else. In younger years her body had been robust not to say rugged—and healthy, and more than one of the physicians had called her Sister Rock, but the physicians had gone their way, and she had stayed and stayed and stayed, and even rocks can be worn down. And with fatigue came mistakes.

She knew what to be wary of. You could not be a health-care professional in Africa and not be careful if you wanted to live. Christianity had been trying to establish itself here for centuries, but while it had made some inroads, it might never make others. One of those problems was sexual promiscuity, a local proclivity that had horrified her on her arrival nearly two generations earlier,

but was now just . . . normal. But all too often lethally so. Fully a third of the patients in the hospital had what was known locally as “the thin disease” and elsewhere as AIDS. The precautions for that ailment were set in stone, and Sister Jean Baptiste had taught them in courses. The sad truth was that, as with the plagues of old, all that the medical professionals could really do with this modern curse was to protect themselves.

Fortunately with this patient, that was not a concern. The boy was only eight, too young to be sexually active. A handsome boy, well formed and bright, he’d been an honor student at the nearby Catholic school, and an acolyte. Perhaps he’d hear the call someday and become a priest—that was easier for the Africans than the Europeans, since the Church, in quiet deference to African customs, allowed priests down here to marry, a secret that was not widely known through the rest of the world. But the boy was ill. He’d come in only a few hours earlier, at midnight, driven in by his father, a fine man who was a senior official in the local government and had a car of his own. The doctor on call had diagnosed the boy with cerebral malaria, but the entry on the chart wasn’t confirmed by the usual laboratory test. Perhaps the blood sample had gotten lost. Violent headaches, vomiting, shaking of the limbs, disorientation, spiking fever. Cerebral malaria. She hoped *that* wasn’t going to break out again. It was treatable, but the problem was getting people *to* treatment.

The rest of the ward was quiet this late at—no, early in the morning, actually—a pleasant time in this part of the world. The air was as cool as it would get in any twenty-four-hour period, and still, and quiet—and so were the patients. The boy’s biggest problem at the moment was the fever, and so she pulled back the sheet and sponged him down. It seemed to calm his restless young body, and she took the time to examine him for other symptoms. The doctors were doctors, and she but a nurse—even so, she’d been here for a very long time, and knew what to look for. There wasn’t much really, except for an old bandage on his left hand. How had the doctor overlooked that? Sister Jean Baptiste walked back to the nurses’ station, where her two aides were dozing. What she was about to do was properly their job, but there was no sense in waking them. She returned to the patient with fresh dressings and disinfectant. You had to be careful with infections down here. Carefully, slowly, she peeled off the bandage, herself blinking with fatigue. A bite, she saw, like one from a small dog . . . or a monkey. That made her blink hard. Those could be dangerous. She ought to have walked back to the station and gotten rubber gloves, but it was forty meters away, and her legs were tired, and the patient was resting, the hand unmoving. She uncapped the disinfectant, then rotated the hand slowly and gently to fully expose the injury. When she shook the bottle with her other hand, a little escaped from around her thumb and it sprinkled on the patient’s face. The head came up, and he sneezed in his sleep, the usual cloud of droplets ejected into the air. Sister Jean Baptiste was startled, but didn’t stop; she poured the disinfectant on a cotton ball, and carefully swabbed the wound. Next she capped the bottle and set it down, applied the new bandage, and only then did she wipe her face with the back of her hand, without realizing that when her patient had sneezed, his wounded hand in hers had jerked, depositing blood there, and

that it had been on her hand as it had swept across her eyes. The gloves, therefore, might not have mattered at all, a fact that would have been of scant comfort even if she had remembered it, three days hence.

SHOULD HAVE STAYED put, Jack told himself. Two paramedics had guided him up a clear corridor on the east steps, along with the gaggle of Marines and agents, all moving upward with guns still out in a scene of grimly obscene humor, no one knowing quite what to do. They then had encountered a nearly solid line of firefighters and hoses, spraying their water, much of which blew back in everyone's faces in the sort of chill that ran straight into the bones. Here the fire had been smothered by the water fog, and though the hoses continued to wet things down, it was safe for rescue personnel from the ladder companies to creep into the remains of the chamber. One didn't have to be an expert to understand what they found. No lifted heads, no urgent gestures, no shouts. The men—and women, though one couldn't tell at this distance—picked their way carefully, more mindful of their own safety than anything else, because there was plainly no reason to risk one's life on behalf of the dead.

Dear God, he thought. People he knew were here. Not just Americans. Jack could see where a whole section of gallery had fallen down to the well of the chamber. The diplomatic gallery, if he remembered correctly. Various dignitaries and their families, many of whom he'd known, who had come to the Hill for the purpose of seeing him sworn. Did that make their deaths his fault?

He'd left the CNN building because of the need to do something, or that was what he'd told himself. Ryan wasn't so sure now. Just a change of scenery, perhaps? Or was he merely drawn to the scene the same way the people at the perimeter of the Capitol grounds were, standing silently as he was, just looking, as he was, and not doing anything, as he was. The numbness hadn't gone away. He'd come here expecting to find something to see and feel and then to do, but only discovered something else for his soul to shrink from.

"It's cold here, Mr. President. At least get out of this damned spray," Price urged.

"Okay." Ryan nodded and headed back down the steps. The coat, he found, wasn't all that warm. Ryan was shivering again, and he hoped it was merely from the cold.

The cameras had been slow setting up, but they were there now, Ryan saw. The little portable ones—Japanese made, all of them, he noted with a grunt—with their small, powerful lights. Somehow they'd managed to get past the police lines and the fire chiefs. Before each of them stood a reporter—the three he could see were all men—holding a microphone and trying to sound as though he knew more than anyone else did. Several lights were trained his own way, Jack noted. People all over the country and the world were watching him, expecting him to know what to do. How did such people ever adopt the illusion that senior government officials were any brighter than their family physician, or lawyer, or accountant? His mind trekked back to his first week as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps, when the institution

which he'd served then had similarly assumed that he knew how to command and lead a platoon—and when a sergeant ten years his senior had come to him with a family problem, expecting the "ell-tee," who lacked both a wife and children, to know what to say to a man who had trouble with both. Today, Jack reminded himself, such a situation was called a "leadership challenge," meaning that you didn't have a clue about what to do next. But there were the cameras, and he had to do something.

Except he still didn't have a clue. He'd come here hoping to find a catalyst for action, only to find increased feelings of helplessness. And maybe a question.

"Arnie van Damm?" He'd need Arnie, sure as hell.

"At the House, sir," Price replied, meaning the White House.

"Okay, let's head over there," Ryan ordered.

"Sir," Price said, after a moment's hesitation, "that's probably not safe. If there was—"

"I can't run away, damn it. I can't fly away on Kneecap. I can't sneak off to Camp David. I can't crawl into some damned hole. Can't you see that?" He was frustrated rather than angry. His right arm pointed to the remains of the Capitol building. "Those people are dead, and I *am* the government for now, God help me, and the government doesn't run away."

"THAT LOOKS LIKE President Ryan there," an anchorman said in his warm, dry studio. "Probably trying to get a handle on rescue operations. Ryan is a man not unaccustomed to crisis, as we all know."

"I've known Ryan for six years," a more senior network analyst opined, studiously not looking at the camera, so as to give the appearance of instructing the more highly paid anchorman who was trying to report on the event. Both had been in the studio to provide commentary for President Durling's speech, and had read all the briefing material on Ryan, whom the analyst didn't really know, though they'd bumped into each other at various dinners during the past few years. "He's a remarkably low-key gentleman, but without question one of the brightest people in government service." Such a statement could not go unchallenged. Tom the anchor leaned forward, half-looking at his colleague, and half at the cameras.

"But, John, he's not a politician. He has no political background or experience. He's a national-security specialist in an age when national security is not the issue it once was," he pontificated.

John the analyst managed to stifle the reply that the statement so richly deserved. Someone else did not.

"Yeah," Chavez grumbled. "And that airplane that took the building out was really a Delta flight that got lost. Jesus!" he concluded.

"It's a great country we serve, Ding, my boy. Where else do people get paid five mill' a year to be stupid?" John Clark decided to finish his beer. There was no sense in driving back to Washington until Mary Pat called. He was a worker bee, after all, and only the top-floor CIA types would be racing around now. And racing around they would be. They wouldn't be accomplishing much, but at times like this you *didn't* really accomplish much of anything,

except to look harried and important . . . and to the worker bees, ineffective.

WITH LITTLE TO show the public, the network reran tape of President Durling's speech. The C-SPAN cameras in the chamber had been remotely controlled, and controlroom technicians froze various frames to show the front row of senior government officials, and, again, the roll of the dead was cataloged: All but two of the Cabinet secretaries, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, senior agency directors, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Director Bill Shaw of the FBI, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, the Administrator of NASA, all nine Justices of the Supreme Court. The anchorman's voice listed the names and the positions they'd held, and the tape advanced frame by frame until the moment when the Secret Service agents were shown racing into the chamber, startling President Durling and causing some brief confusion. Heads turned, looking for danger, and perhaps the quicker-minded among them had wondered about the presence of a gunman in the galleries, but then came three frames from a wide-shot camera that showed the blurred displacement of the back wall, followed by blackness. Anchor and commentator were then back on-screen, staring down at their desktop monitors, then back up at each other, and perhaps only now the full enormity of the event finally began to hit them, as it was hitting the new President.

"President Ryan's principal task will be to rebuild the government, if he can," John the analyst said, after a long moment's pause. "My God, so many good men and women . . . dead. . . ." It had also occurred to him that a few years earlier, before becoming the senior network commentator, he would have been in that chamber, along with so many of his professional friends; and for him, also, the event finally broke past the shock, and his hands started quivering below the top of the desk. An experienced pro who did not allow his voice to shake, he nonetheless could not totally control the look on his face, which sagged with sudden, awful grief, and on the screen his face went ashen under the makeup.

"God's judgment," Mahmoud Haji Daryaei muttered over six thousand miles away, lifting the controller and muting the sound to eliminate extraneous twaddle.

God's judgment. That made sense, didn't it? America. The colossus that had thwarted so many, a godless land of godless people, at the pinnacle of her power, winner of yet another contest—now, grievously harmed. How else but by God's will could such a thing happen? And what else could it mean but God's own judgment, and God's own blessing? Blessing on what? he wondered. Well, perhaps that would be clear with reflection.

He'd met Ryan once before, found him spiteful and arrogant—typically American—but not now. The cameras momentarily zoomed in to show a man clutching at his coat, his head turning left and right, mouth slightly open. No, not arrogant now. Stunned, not even aware enough to be frightened. It was a look he'd seen on men's faces before. How interesting.

THE SAME WORDS and the same images were flooding the world now, delivered by satellites to over a billion pairs of eyes that'd been watching the news coverage, or been alerted to the event and had changed channels from morning shows in some countries, lunch and evening shows in others. History had been made, and there was an imperative to watch.

This was particularly true of the powerful, for whom information was the raw material of power. Another man in another place looked at the electronic clock that sat next to the television on his desk and did some simple arithmetic. A horrid day was ending in America, while a morning was well begun where he sat. The window behind his desk showed a wide expanse of paving stones, a huge square, in fact, crisscrossed by people mainly traveling by bicycle, though the number of cars he saw was now substantial, having grown by a factor often over the past few years. But still bicycles were the main mode of transportation, and that wasn't fair, was it?

He'd planned to change that, quickly and decisively in historical terms—and he was a serious student of history only to have his carefully laid plan killed aborning by the Americans. He didn't believe in God, never had and never would, but he did believe in Fate, and Fate was what he saw before his eyes on the phosphor screen of a television set manufactured in Japan. A fickle woman, Fate was, he told himself as he reached for a handleless cup of green tea. Only days before she had favored the Americans with luck, and now, this. . . . So what was the intention of the Lady Fate? His own intentions and needs and will mattered more, the man decided. He reached for his phone, then thought better of it. It would ring soon enough, and others would ask his opinion, and he would have to answer with something, and so it was time to think. He sipped his tea. The heated water stung his mouth, and that was good. He would have to be alert, and the pain focused his mind inward, where important thoughts always began.

Undone or not, his plan hadn't been a bad one. Poorly executed by his unwitting agents, largely because of the Lady Fate and her momentary largesse to America—but it had been a fine plan, he told himself yet again. He'd have another chance to prove that. Because of the Lady Fate. The thought occasioned a thin smile, and a distant look, as his mind probed the future and liked what it saw. He hoped the phone would not ring for a while, because he had to look further still, and that was best done without interference. It came to him after a moment's further thought that the real objective of his plan had been accomplished, hadn't it? He'd wished America to be crippled, and crippled America now was. Not in the manner he'd chosen, but crippled even so. *Even better?* he asked himself.

Yes.

And so, the game could go on, couldn't it?

It *was* the Lady Fate, toying as she did with the ebb and flow of history. She wasn't a friend or enemy of any man, really—or was she? The man snorted. Maybe she just had a sense of humor.

FOR ANOTHER PERSON, the emotion was anger. Days before had come the

humiliation, the bitter humiliation of being told by a foreigner—nothing more than a former provincial governor!—what her sovereign nation must do. She'd been very careful, of course. Everything had been done with great skill. The government itself had not been implicated in anything more than extensive naval exercises on the open sea, which was, of course, free for the passage of all. No threatening notes had been dispatched, no official démarche issued, no position taken, and for their part the Americans hadn't done anything more than—what was their arrogant phrase, "rattle their cage"?—and call for a meeting of the Security Council, at which there was nothing to be said, really, since nothing official had taken place, and her country had made no announcement. What they had done was nothing more than *exercises*, weren't they? *Peaceful* exercises. Of course, those exercises had helped split the American capability against Japan—but she couldn't have known ahead of time, could she? Of course not.

She had the document on her desk at this very moment: the time required to restore the fleet to full capability. But, no, she shook her head, it wouldn't be enough. Neither she nor her country could act alone now. It would take time and friends, and plans, but her country had needs, and it was her job to see to those needs. It was not her job to accept commands from others, was it?

No.

She also drank tea, from a fine china cup, with sugar and a little milk in the English way, a product of her birth and station and education, all of which, along with patience, had brought her to this office. Of all the people around the world watching the same picture from the same satellite network, she probably understood the best what the opportunity was, how vast and appealing it had to be, all the sweeter that it had come so soon after she'd been dictated to in this very office. By a man who was now dead. It was too good to pass up, wasn't it?

Yes.

"THIS IS SCARY. Mr. C." Domingo Chavez rubbed his eyes—he'd been awake for more hours than his jet-lagged brain could compute—and tried to organize his thoughts. He was sprawled back on the living-room couch, shoeless feet up on the coffee table. The womenfolk in the house were off to bed, one in anticipation of work the next day, and the other with a college exam to face. The latter hadn't figured that there might not be any school tomorrow.

"Tell me why, Ding," John Clark commanded. The time for worrying himself about the relative skills of various TV personalities had passed, and his young partner *was*, after all, pursuing his master's degree in international relations.

Chavez spoke without opening his eyes. "I don't think anything like this has ever happened in peacetime before. The world ain't all that different from what it was last week, John. Last week, it was real complicated. We kinda won that little war we were in, but the world ain't changed much, and we're not any stronger than we were then, are we?"

"Nature abhors a vacuum?" John asked quietly.

"Sum'tim like that." Chavez yawned. "Damned if we ain't got one here and

now."

"NOT ACCOMPLISHING VERY much, am I?" Jack asked, in a voice both quiet and bleak. It was hitting him full force now. There was still a glow, though most of what rose into the sky now was steam rather than smoke. What went into the building was the most depressing sight. Body bags. Rubberized fabric with loop handles at the ends, and some sort of zipper in the middle. Lots of them, and some were coming out now, carried by pairs of firefighters, snaking down the wide steps around the fragments of broken masonry. It had just started, and would not end soon. He hadn't actually seen a body during his few minutes up top. Somehow, seeing the first few bags was worse.

"No, sir," Agent Price said, her face looking the same as his. "This isn't good for you."

"I know." Ryan nodded and looked away.

I don't know what to do, he told himself. *Where's the manual, the training course for this job? Whom do I ask? Where do I go?*

I don't want *this job!* his mind screamed at itself. Ryan reproached himself for the venality of the thought, but he'd come to this newly dreadful place as some sort of leadership demonstration, parading himself before the TV cameras as though he knew what he was about—and that was a lie. Perhaps not a malicious one. Just stupid. *Walk up to the fire chief and ask how it's going, as though anyone with eyes and a second-grade education couldn't figure that one out!*

"I'm open to ideas," Ryan said at last.

Special Agent Andrea Price took a deep breath and fulfilled the fantasy of every special agent of the United States Secret Service all the way back to Pinkerton: "Mr. President, you really need to get your, cr, stuff" she couldn't go *that* far—"together. Some things you can do and some things you can't. You have people working for you. For starters, sir, figure out who they are and let them do their jobs. Then, maybe, you can start doing yours."

"Back to the House?"

"That's where the phones are, Mr. President."

"Who's head of the Detail?"

"It was Andy Walker." Price didn't have to say where he was now. Ryan looked down at her and made his first presidential decision.

"You just got promoted."

Price nodded. "Follow me, sir." It pleased the agent to see that this President, like all the others, could learn to follow orders. Some of the time, anyway. They'd made it all of ten feet before Ryan slipped on a patch of ice and went down, to be picked back up by two agents. It only made him look all the more vulnerable. A still photographer captured the moment, giving *Newsweek* its cover photo for the following week.

"AS YOU SEE, President Ryan is now leaving the Hill in what looks like a military vehicle instead of a Secret Service car. What do you suppose he's up

to?" the anchor asked.

"In all fairness to the man," John the commentator said, "it's unlikely that he knows at the moment."

That opinion rang across the globe a third of a second later, to the general agreement of all manner of persons, friends and enemies alike.

SOME THINGS HAVE to be done fast. He didn't know if they were the right things—well, he did, and they weren't—but at a certain level of importance the rules got a little muddled, didn't they? The scion of a political family whose public service went back a couple of generations, he'd been in public life practically since leaving law school, which was another way of saying that he hadn't held a real job in his entire life. Perhaps he had little practical experience in the economy except as its beneficiary—his family's financial managers ran the various trusts and portfolios with sufficient skill that he almost never bothered meeting with them except at tax time. Perhaps he had never practiced law though he'd had a hand in passing literally thousands of them. Perhaps he had never served his country in uniform—though he deemed himself an expert in national security. Perhaps a lot of things militated against doing anything. But he knew government, for that had been his profession for all of his active—not to say "working"—life, and at a time like this, the country needed someone who really knew government. The country needed healing, Ed Kealty thought, and he knew about that.

So, he lifted his phone and made a call. "Cliff, this is Ed . . ."

1

STARTING NOW

THE FBI'S EMERGENCY command center on the fifth floor of the Hoover building is an odd-shaped room, roughly triangular and surprisingly small, with room for only fifteen or so people to bump shoulders. Number sixteen to arrive, tieless and wearing casual clothes, was Deputy Assistant Director Daniel E. Murray. The senior watch officer was his old friend, Inspector Pat O'Day. A large-framed, rugged man who raised beef cattle as a hobby at his northern Virginia home—this "cowboy" had been born and educated in New Hampshire, but his boots were custom-made—O'Day had a phone to his car, and the room was surprisingly quiet for a crisis room during a real crisis. A curt nod and raised hand acknowledged Murray's entry. The senior agent waited for O'Day to conclude the call.

"What's going on, Pat?"

"I was just on the phone with Andrews. They have tapes of the radar and stuff. I have agents from the Washington Field Office heading there to interview the tower people. National Transportation Safety Board will have people there, too, to assist. Initial word, looks like a Japan Airlines 747 kamikaze'd in. The Andrews people say the pilot declared an emergency as an unscheduled KLM flight and drove straight over their runways, hung a little left, and . . . well . . ." O'Day shrugged. "WFO has people on the Hill now to commence the investigation. I'm assuming this one goes on the books as a terrorist incident, and that gives us jurisdiction."

"Where's the ADIC?" Murray asked, meaning the Assistant Director in Charge of the Bureau's Washington office, quartered at Buzzard's Point on the Potomac River.

"St. Lucia with Angie, taking a vacation. Tough luck for Tony." The inspector grunted. Tony Caruso had gotten away only three days earlier. "Tough day for a lot of people. The body count's going to be huge, Dan, lots worse'n Oklahoma. I've sent out a general alert for forensics experts. Mess like this, we'll have to identify a lot of bodies from DNA. Oh, the TV guys are asking how it's possible for the Air Force to let this happen." A shake of the head accompanied the conclusion. O'Day needed somebody to dump on, and the TV commentators were the most attractive target of opportunity. There would be others in due course; both hoped the FBI would not be one of them.

"Anything else we know?"

Pat shook his head. "Nope. It's going to take time, Dan."

"Ryan?"

"Was on the Hill, should be on his way to the White House. They caught him on TV. He looks kinda rocky. Our brothers and sisters at USSS are having

a really bad night, too. The guy I talked to ten minutes ago almost lost it. We might end up having a jurisdictional conflict over who runs the investigation."

"Great." Murray snorted. "We'll let the AG sort that one—" But there wasn't an Attorney General, and there wasn't a Secretary of the Treasury for him to call.

Inspector O'Day didn't have to run through it. A federal statute empowered the United States Secret Service as lead agency to investigate any attack on the President. But another federal statute gave FBI jurisdiction over terrorism. A local statute for murder also brought the Washington Metropolitan Police in, of course. Toss in the National Transportation Safety Board—until proven otherwise, it could merely be a horrible aircraft accident—and that was just the beginning. Every agency had authority and expertise. The Secret Service, smaller than the FBI, and with fewer resources, did have some superb investigators, and some of the finest technical experts around. NTSB knew more about airplane crashes than anyone in the world. But the Bureau had to be the lead agency for this investigation, didn't it? Murray thought. Except that Director Shaw was dead, and without him to swing the clout club . . .

Jesus, Murray thought. He and Bill went back to the Academy together. They'd worked in the same squad as rookie street agents in riverside Philadelphia, chasing bank robbers . . .

Pat read his face and nodded. "Yeah, Dan, takes time to catch up, doesn't it? We've been gutted like a fish, man." He handed over a sheet from a legal pad with a handwritten list of known dead.

A nuclear strike wouldn't have hurt us this badly, Murray realized as he scanned the names. A developing crisis would have given ample strategic warning, and slowly, quietly, senior people would have left Washington for various places of safety, many of them would have survived—or so the planners went—and after the strike there would have been some sort of functioning government to pick up the pieces. But not now.

RYAN HAD COME to the White House a thousand times, to visit, to deliver briefings, for meetings important and otherwise, and most recently to work in his own office as National Security Advisor. This was the first time he hadn't had to show ID and walk through the metal detectors—more properly, he did walk straight through one from force of habit, but this time, when the buzzer went off, he just kept walking without even reaching for his keys. The difference in demeanor of the Secret Service agents was striking. Like anyone else, they were comforted by familiar surroundings, and though the entire country had just had another lesson in how illusory "safety" was, the illusion was real enough for trained professionals to feel more at ease within the substance of a lie. Guns were holstered, coats buttoned, and long breaths taken as the entourage came in through the East Entrance.

An inner voice told Jack that this was now his house, but he had no wish to believe it. Presidents liked to call it the People's House, to use the political voice of false modesty to describe a place for which some of them would have willingly run over the bodies of their own children, then say that it wasn't really all that big a thing. If lies could stain the walls, Jack reflected, then this

building would have a very different name. But there was greatness here, too, and that was more intimidating than the pettiness of politics. Here James Monroe had promulgated the Monroe Doctrine and propelled his country into the strategic world for the first time. Here Lincoln had held his country together through the sheer force of his own will. Here Teddy Roosevelt had made America a real global player, and sent his Great White Fleet around the world to announce America. Here Teddy's distant cousin had saved his country from internal chaos and despair, with little more than a nasal voice and an up-angled cigarette holder. Here Eisenhower had exercised power so skillfully that hardly anyone had noticed his doing anything at all. Here Kennedy had faced down Khrushchev, and nobody had cared that doing so had covered a multitude of blunders. Here Reagan had plotted the destruction of America's most dangerous enemy, only to be accused of sleeping most of the time. What ultimately counted more—the achievements or the dirty little secrets committed by imperfect men who only briefly stepped beyond their weaknesses? But those brief and halting steps made up the sort of history that lived, while the rest was, mainly, forgotten—except by revisionist historians who just didn't get the fact that people weren't supposed to be perfect.

But it still wasn't his house.

The entrance was a tunnel of sorts, which headed under the East Wing, where the First Lady—until ninety minutes earlier Anne Durling had her offices. By law the First Lady was a private citizen—an odd fiction for someone with a paid staff—but in reality her functions were often hugely important, however unofficial they might be. The walls here were those of a museum, not a home, as they walked past the small White House theater, where the President could watch movies with a hundred or so close personal friends. There were several sculptures, many by Frederic Remington, and the general motif was supposed to be "pure" American. The paintings were of past presidents, and Ryan's eyes caught them—their lifeless eyes seemed to look down at him with suspicion and doubt. All the men who had gone before, good and bad, whether judged well or poorly by historians, they looked at him —

I'm an historian, Ryan told himself. *I've written a few books. I've judged the actions of others from a safe distance of both time and space. Why didn't he see this? Why didn't he do* that? Now, too late, he knew better. He was *here* now, and from the inside it looked very different. From the outside you could see in, looking around first to catch all the information and analyze it as it passed by, stopping it when you had to, even making it go backward, the better to understand it all, taking your time to get things exactly right.

But from the inside it wasn't that way at all. Here everything came directly at you like a series of onrushing trains, from all directions at once, moving by their own time schedules, leaving you little room to maneuver or reflect. Ryan could sense that already. And the people in the paintings had mainly come to this place with the luxury of time to think about their ascension, with the luxury of trusted advisers, and of good will. Those were benefits he didn't have. To historians, however, they wouldn't matter for much more than a cursory paragraph, or maybe even a whole page, before the writer moved on with pitiless analysis.

Everything he said or did, Jack knew, would be subjected to the 20/20 vision of hindsight—and not just from this moment forward. People would now look into his past for information on his character, his beliefs, his actions good and bad. From the moment the aircraft had struck the Capitol building, he was President, and every breath he'd drawn since would be examined in a new and unforgiving light for generations to come. His daily life would have no privacy, and even in death he would not be safe from scrutiny by people who had no idea what it was like merely to walk into this oversized dwelling-office-museum and know that it was your prison into all eternity. The bars were invisible, perhaps, but even more real because of it.

So many men had lusted for this job, only to find how horrid and frustrating it was. Jack knew *that* from his own historical readings, and from seeing three men at close quarters who'd occupied the Oval Office. At least they had come here with eyes supposedly open, and perhaps they could be blamed for having minds smaller than their egos. How much the worse for someone who'd never wished for it? And would history judge Ryan more kindly for it? That was worth an ironic snort. No, he'd come to this House at a time when his country *needed*, and if he didn't meet that need, then he'd be cursed for all future time as a failure, even though he'd come to the job only by accident—condemned by a man now dead to do the job which the other man had craved.

For the Secret Service, this was a time to relax a little. Lucky them, Ryan thought, allowing bitterness to creep into his mind, unfair or not. It was their job to protect him and his family. It was his job now to protect them and theirs, and those of millions of others.

"This way, Mr. President." Price turned left into the ground-floor corridor. Here Ryan first saw the White House staff people, standing there to see their new charge, the man whom they would serve to the best of their abilities. Like everyone else, they just stood and looked, without knowing what to say, their eyes evaluating the man and without revealing what they thought, though they would surely exchange views in the privacy of their locker or lunchrooms at the first possible moment. Jack's tie was still crooked in his collar, and he still wore the turnout coat. The water spray that had frozen in his hair and given him an undeserved gray look was melting now. One of the staff members raced out of sight as the entourage continued west. He reappeared a minute later, darting through the security detail and handing Ryan a towel.

"Thank you," Jack said in surprise. He stood still for a moment and started drying his hair. There he saw a photographer running backward and aiming his camera, snapping merrily away. The Secret Service didn't impede him in any way. That, Ryan thought, made him a member of the staff, the official White House photographer whose job it was to memorialize everything. *Great, my own people spy on me!* But it wasn't time to interfere with anything, was it?

"Where are we going, Andrea?" Jack asked as they passed yet more portraits of Presidents and First Ladies, all staring at him . . .

"The Oval Office. I thought . . ."

"Situation Room." Ryan stopped dead, still toweling off. "I'm not ready for that room yet, okay?"

"Of course, Mr. President." At the end of the wide corridor they turned left into a small foyer walled with cheap looking wood latticework, and then right

to go outside again, because there wasn't a corridor from the White House into the West Wing. That's why no one had taken his coat, Jack realized.

"Coffee," Jack ordered. At least the food service would be good here. The White House Mess was run by Navy stewards, and his first presidential cup of coffee was poured into an exquisite cup from a silver pot, by a sailor whose smile was both professional and genuine, and who, like everyone else, was curious about the new Boss. It occurred to Ryan that he was like a creature in the zoo. Interesting, even fascinating—and how would he adapt to the new cage?

Same room, different seat. The President sat in the middle of the table so that aides could assemble on both sides. Ryan picked his place and sat in it naturally enough. It was only a chair, after all. The so-called trappings of power were merely things, and the power itself was an illusion, because such power was always accompanied by obligations that were greater still. You could see and exercise the former. The latter could only be felt. Those obligations came with the air, which suddenly seemed heavy in this windowless room. Jack sipped at his coffee briefly, looking around. The wall clock said 11:14 P.M. He'd been President for . . . what? Ninety minutes? About the time for the drive from his home to . . . his new home . . . depending on traffic.

"Where's Arnie?"

"Right here, Mr. President," Arnold van Damm said as he came through the door. Chief of staff to two Presidents, he would now set an all-time record as chief of staff to a third. His first President had resigned in disgrace. His second was dead. Would the third one be the charm—or did bad things always come in threes? Two adages, equally quoted, and mutually exclusive. Ryan's eyes just bored in on him, asking the question that he couldn't voice: *What do I do now?*

"Good statement on TV, just about right." The chief of staff sat down on the other side of the table. He appeared quiet and competent, as always, and Ryan didn't reflect on the effort such an appearance required of a man who'd lost more friends than Ryan had.

"I'm not even sure what the hell I said," Jack replied, searching his mind for memories that had vanished.

"That's about normal for an ad-lib," van Damm allowed. "It was still pretty good. I always thought your instincts were okay. You're going to need 'em."

"First thing?" Jack asked.

"Banks, stock markets, all federal offices are closed, call it 'til the end of the week—maybe beyond that. We have a state funeral to plan for Roger and Anne. National week of mourning, probably a month for the flags to be at half-staff. We had a bunch of ambassadors in the chamber, too. That means a ton of diplomatic activity on top of everything else. We'll call that housekeeping stuff—I know," van Damm said with a raised hand. "Sorry. You have to call it something."

"Who—"

"We have a Protocol Office here, Jack," van Damm pointed out. "They're already in their cubbyholes and working on this for you. We have a team of speechwriters; they'll prepare your official statements. The media people will

want to see you—what I mean by that is, you have to appear in public. You have to reassure people. You have to instill confidence—"

"When?"

"In time for the morning TV shows at the latest, CNN, all the networks. I'd prefer that we go on camera within the hour, but we don't have to. We can cover that by saying you're busy. You will be," Arnie promised. "You'll have to be briefed on what you can say and what you can't before you go on TV. We'll lay the law down to the newsies on what they may and may not ask, and in a case like this they'll cooperate. Figure you have a week of kind treatment to lean on. That's your press honeymoon, and that's as long as it'll last."

"And then?" Jack asked.

"And then you're the by-God President and you'll have to act like it, Jack," van Damm said bluntly. "You didn't have to take the oath, remember?"

That statement made Ryan's head jerk back as his peripheral vision caught the stony looks on the others in the room—all of them Secret Service at the moment. He was the new Boss, and their eyes weren't so very different now from those in the portraits on the walk in from the East Wing. They *expected* him to do the right thing. They'd support him, protect him from others and from himself, but he had to do the job. They wouldn't let him run away, either. The Secret Service was empowered to protect him from physical danger. Arnie van Damm would try to protect him from political danger. Other staffers would serve and protect, too. The housekeeping staff would feed him, iron his shirts, and fetch coffee. But none of them would allow Ryan to run away, either from his place or his duties.

It was a prison.

But what Arnie had just said was true. He could have refused to take the oath, couldn't—no, Ryan thought, looking down at the polished oak tabletop. Then he would have been damned for all eternity as a coward—worse, he would have been damned in his own mind as the same thing, for he had a conscience that was more harmful an enemy than any outsider. It was his nature to look in the mirror and see not enough there. As good a man as he knew himself to be, he was never good enough, driven by—what? The values he'd learned from his parents, his educators, the Marine Corps, the many people he'd met, the dangers he'd faced? All those abstract values, did he use them, or did they use him? What had brought him to this point? What had made him what he was and what, really, was John Patrick Ryan? He looked up, around the room, wondering what *they* thought he was, but they didn't know, either. He was the President now, the giver of orders, which they would carry out; the man who made speeches which others would analyze for nuance and correctness; the man who decided what the United States of America would do, then to be judged and criticized by others who never really knew how to do the thing to which they objected. But that wasn't a person; that was a job description. Inside of that had to be a man—or someday soon, a woman—who thought it through and tried to do the right thing. And for Ryan, less than an hour and a half before, the right thing had been to take the oath. And to try to do his best. The judgment of history was ultimately less important than what he'd judge of himself, looking in the mirror every morning at not enough. The real prison was, and would always be, himself.

Damn.

THE FIRE WAS out now, Chief Magill saw. His people would have to be careful. There were always hot spots, places where the fire had died, not from the cooling water but rather from lack of oxygen, and waited for the chance to flare back up, to surprise and kill the unwary. But his people were wary, and those little flares of malevolent life would not be important in the greater scheme of things for this fire site. Hoses were already being rolled, and some of his people were taking their trucks back to their houses. He'd stripped the entire city of apparatus for this fire, and he had to send much of it back, lest a new fire go unanswered, and more people die unnecessarily.

He was surrounded by others now, all wearing one-layer vinyl jackets with large yellow letters to proclaim who they were. There was an FBI contingent, another from Secret Service, the D.C. Metropolitan Police, NTSB, the Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and his own fire investigators, all looking for someone to be in charge so that they could claim command themselves. Instead of holding an informal meeting and establishing their own chain of command, they stood mostly in homogeneous little knots, probably waiting for someone else to tell them who was running things. Magill shook his head. He'd seen it before.

The bodies were coming out faster now. For the moment they were being taken to the D.C. Armory, about a mile north of the Hill just off the railroad tracks. Magill didn't envy the identification teams, though he hadn't yet troubled himself to descend into the crater—that's how he thought of it at the moment—to see how badly destroyed things were.

"Chief?" a voice asked behind him. Magill turned.

"Yeah?"

"NTSB. Can we start looking for the flight recorder?" The man pointed to the rudder fin. Though the tail assembly of the aircraft was anything but intact, you could tell what it had once been, and the so-called black box—actually painted Day-Glo orange—would be somewhere in there. The area was actually fairly clean. The rubble had been catapulted westward for the most part, and they might actually have a chance of recovering it quickly.

"Okay." Magill nodded and pointed to a pair of firefighters to accompany the crash team.

"Could you also tell your people as much as possible not to move the aircraft parts around? We need to reconstruct the event, and it helps to leave things pretty much in place."

"The people—the bodies come first," Magill pointed out. The federal official nodded with a grimace. This wasn't fun for anyone.

"I understand." He paused. "If you find the flight crew, please don't move them at all. Call us, and we'll handle it. Okay?"

"How will we know?"

"White shirts, shoulder boards with stripes on them, and they'll be Japanese, probably."

It should have sounded crazy, but it didn't. Magill knew that bodies often did survive airplane crashes in the most incredible outward condition, so

intact that only a trained eye could see the signs of fatal injury on first inspection. It often unnerved the civilians who were usually the first to arrive at a scene. It was so strange that the human body seemed more robust than the life it contained. There was a mercy to it, for the survivors were spared the hellish ordeal of identifying a piece of burned, torn meat, but that mercy was balanced by the cruelty of recognizing someone that could not talk back. Magill shook his head and had one of his senior people relay the special order.

The firefighters down below had enough of them already. The first special order, of course, had been to locate and remove the body of President Roger Durling. Everything was secondary to that, and a special ambulance was standing by for his body alone. Even the First Lady, Anne Durling, would have to wait a little for her husband, one last time. A contractor's mobile crane was maneuvering into the far side of the building to lift out the stone cubes that covered the podium area like a battered pile of children's hardwood blocks; in the harsh light it seemed that only the letters and numbers painted on their sides were lacking to make the illusion complete.

PEOPLE WERE STREAMING in to all the government departments, especially the senior officials. It was hardly the usual thing for the VIP parking slots to fill up at midnight, but this night they did, and the Department of State was no exception. Security personnel were called in as well, for an attack on one government agency was an attack on all, and even though the nature of the attack on the government devalued the advantage of calling in people armed with handguns, it didn't really matter. When A happened, B resulted, because it was written down somewhere that B was what you did. The people with the handguns looked at one another and shook their heads, knowing that they'd be getting overtime pay, which put them one up on the big shots who'd storm in from their places in Chevy Chase and suburban Virginia, race upstairs, and then just chat with one another.

One such person found his parking place in the basement and used his key-card to activate the VIP elevator to the seventh floor. What made him different was that he had a real mission for the evening, albeit one he'd wondered about all the way in from his Great Falls home. It was what he thought of as a gut check, though that term hardly applied here. Yet what else could he do? He owed Ed Kealty everything, his place in Washington society, his career at State, so many other things. The country needed someone like Ed right now. So Ed had told him, making a strong case for the proposition, and what he himself was doing was . . . what? A small voice in the car had called it treason, but, no, that wasn't so, because "treason" was the only crime defined in the Constitution, cited there as giving "aid and comfort" to the enemies of his country, and whatever Ed Kealty was doing, he wasn't doing *that,* was he?

It came down to loyalty. He was Ed Kealty's man, as were many others. The relationship had started at Harvard, with beers and double dates and weekends at his family's house on the water, the good times of a lively youth. He'd been the working-class guest of one of America's great families—why? Because he'd caught Ed's youthful eye. But why that? He didn't know, had never asked, and probably would never find out. That was the way of

friendship. It just happened, and only in America could a working-class kid who'd scratched into Harvard on a scholarship get befriended by the great son of a great family. He would have done well on his own, probably. No one but God had given him his native intelligence. No one but his parents had encouraged his development of that gift and taught him manners and . . . values. The thought caused his eyes to close as the elevator doors opened. Values. Well, loyalty was one of those values, wasn't it? Without Ed's patronage he would have topped out, maybe, as a DAS, a *Deputy* Assistant Secretary of State. The first word had long since been expunged from the title painted in gold letters on his office door. In a just world, he would have been in the running for the removal of the next word from the title as well, for wasn't he as good with foreign policy as anyone else on the seventh floor? Yes, he surely was, and that would not have come to be without his having been Ed Kealty's man. Without the parties where he'd met the other mover-shakers, and talked his way to the top. And the money. He'd never taken a bribe of any sort, but his friend had advised him wisely (the advice having come from his own advisers, but that didn't matter) on investments, allowing him to build up his own financial independence and, by the way, buy a five-thousand-square-foot home in Great Falls, and to put his own son into Harvard, *not* on a scholarship, for Clifton Rutledge III was the son of *somebody* now, not merely the issue of a worker's loins. All the work he might have done entirely on his own would not have brought him to this place, and loyalty was owed, wasn't it?

That made it a little easier for Clifton Rutledge II (actually his birth certificate said Clifton Rutledge, *Junior*, but "Jr." wasn't quite the suffix for a man of his station), Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs.

The rest was mere timing. The seventh floor was always guarded, all the more so now. But the guards all knew him, and it was merely a matter of looking like he knew what he was doing. Hell, Rutledge told himself, he might just fail, and that could well be the best possible outcome—"Sorry, Ed, it wasn't there. . . ." He wondered if that was an unworthy thought as he stood there by his office door, listening for footsteps that would match in speed the beating of his heart. There would be two guards on the floor now, walking about separately. Security didn't have to be all that tight at a place like this. Nobody got into State without a reason. Even in daytime, when visitors came in, they needed escorts to wherever they were going. At this time of night, things were tighter still. The number of elevators in service was reduced. Key-card access was needed to get all the way to the top floor, and a third guard was always at the elevator banks. So it was just timing. Rutledge checked his watch for several cycles of footsteps, and found that the intervals were regular to within ten seconds. Good. He just had to wait for the next one.

"Hi, Wally."

"Good evening, sir," the guard replied. "Bad night."

"Do us a favor?"

"What's that, sir?"

"Coffee. No secretaries to get the machines going. Could you skip down to the cafeteria and have one of their people bring an urn up here? Have them set it up in the conference room up the hall. We'll be having a meeting in a

few minutes."

"Fair enough. Right away?"

"If you could, Wally."

"Be back in five, Mr. Rutledge." The guard strode off with purpose, turned right twenty yards away and disappeared from view.

Rutledge counted to ten and headed the other way. The double doors to the Secretary of State's office were not locked. Rutledge walked right in through the first set, then through the second, turning on the lights as he did so. He had three minutes. Half of him hoped that the document would be locked away in Brett Hanson's office vault. In that case he would surely fail, since only Brett, two of his assistants, and the chief of security had the combination, and *that* did have an anti-tamper alarm on it. But Brett had been a gentleman, and a careless one at that, always so trusting on the one hand and forgetful on the other, the sort who never locked his car or even his house, unless his wife made him. If it were in the open, it would be in one of two places. Rutledge pulled open the center drawer of the desk and found the usual array of pencils and cheap pens (he was always losing them) and paper clips. One minute gone, as Rutledge carefully shuffled through the desk. Nothing. It was almost a relief, until he examined the desktop, and then he nearly laughed. Right there on the blotter, tucked into the leather edging, a plain white envelope addressed to the Secretary of State, but without a stamp. Rutledge took it from its place, holding the envelope by the edges. Unsealed. He moved the flap and extracted the contents. A single sheet of paper, two typed paragraphs. It was at this point that Cliff Rutledge got a chill. The exercise had been theoretical to this point. He could just replace it, forget he'd been here, forget about the phone call, forget about everything. Two minutes.

Would Brett have receipted it? Probably not. Again, he'd been a gentleman about everything. He would not have humiliated Ed that way. Ed had done the honorable thing by resigning, and Brett would have responded honorably, undoubtedly shaken his hand with a sorrowful look, and that would have been that. Two minutes fifteen.

Decision. Rutledge tucked the letter in his jacket pocket, headed for the door, switched off the lights, and returned to the corridor, stopping short of his own office door. There he waited half a minute.

"Hi, George."

"Hello, Mr. Rutledge."

"I just sent Wally down to get coffee for the floor."

"Good idea, sir. Bad night. Is it true that "

"Yeah, afraid so. Brett was probably killed with all the rest."

"Damn."

"Might be a good idea to lock his office up. I just checked the door and—"

"Yes, sir." George Armitage pulled out his key ring and found the proper one. "He's always so—"

"I know." Rutledge nodded.

"You know, two weeks ago I found his vault unlocked. Like, he turned the handle but forgot to spin the dial." A shake of the head. "I guess he never got hisself robbed, eh?"

"That's the problem with security," the Under Secretary of State for Political

Affairs sympathized. “The big boys never seem to pay attention, right?”

HOW BEAUTIFUL IT was. Who had done it? The question had a cursory answer. The TV reporters, with little else to do, kept telling their cameras to look at the tail fin. He remembered the logo well enough, having long ago participated in an operation that had blown up an aircraft with the red crane on its rudder fin. He almost regretted it now, but envy prevented that. It was a matter of propriety. As one of the world’s foremost terrorists—he used the word within his own mind, and in that private place relished the term, though he couldn’t use it elsewhere—such an event ought to have been his doing, not the work of some amateur. For that’s who it had been. An amateur whose name he would learn in due course, along with everyone else on earth—from television coverage. The irony was striking enough. Since puberty he’d devoted himself to the study and practice of political violence, learning, thinking, planning—and executing such acts, first as a participant, then as a leader/commander. And now what? Some *amateur* had outstripped him, had outstripped the entire clandestine world to which he belonged. It would have been embarrassing except for the beauty of the event.

His trained mind ran over the possibilities, and the analysis came rapidly. A single man. Perhaps two. More likely one. As always, he thought with a tight-lipped nod, one man willing to die, to sacrifice himself for the Cause—whatever Cause he might have served—could be more formidable than an army: In the case at hand, the man in question had possessed special skills and access to special means, both of which had served his purpose well.

That was luck, as was the single-actor aspect to the feat. It was easy for a single man to keep a secret. He grunted. That was the problem he’d always faced. The really hard part was finding the right people, people whom he could trust, who wouldn’t boast to or confide in others, who shared his own sense of mission, who had his own discipline, and who were truly willing to risk their lives. That last criterion was the price of entry, once easy enough to establish, but now it was becoming so much harder in a changing world. The well into which he dipped was running dry, and it did no good to deny it. He was running out of the truly devoted.

Always smarter and farther-seeing than his contemporaries, he himself had faced the necessity of participating in three real operations, and though he’d had the steel in his soul to do what had to be done, he didn’t crave to repeat it. It was too dangerous, after all. It wasn’t that he feared the consequences of his action—it was that a dead terrorist was as dead as his victims, and dead men carried out no more missions. Martyrdom was something he’d been prepared to risk, but nothing he’d ever really sought. He wanted to *win*, after all, to reap the benefits of his action, to be recognized as a winner, liberator, conqueror, to be in the books which future generations would read as something other than a footnote. The successful mission on the TV in his bedroom would be remembered as an awful *thing* by most. Not the act of a man, but something akin to a natural disaster, because, elegant as it was, it served no political purpose. And that was the problem with the mad act of one dedicated martyr. Luck wasn’t enough. There had to be a reason, a result.

Such a successful act was only so if it led to something else. This manifestly had not. And that was too bad. It wasn't often that—

No, the man reached for his orange juice and sipped it before he allowed his mind to proceed. Wasn't *often?* This had never happened, had it? That was a largely philosophical question. He could say, harkening back to history, that the Assassins had been able to topple or at least decapitate governments, but back then such a task had meant the elimination of a single man, and for all the bravura shown by emissaries of that hilltop fortress, the modern world was far too complex. Kill a president or prime minister—even one of the lingering kings some nations clung to—and there was another to step into the vacant place. As had evidently happened in this case. But this one was different. There was no Cabinet to stand behind the new man, to show solidarity and determination and continuity on their angry faces. If only something else, something larger and more important had been ready when the aircraft had made its fall, then this thing of beauty would have been more beautiful still. That it hadn't could not be changed, but as with all such events, there was much to learn from both its success and failure, and its aftermath, planned or not, was very, very real.

In that sense it was tragic. An opportunity had been wasted. If only he'd known. If only the man who'd flown that airplane to its final destination had let someone know what was planned. But that wasn't the way of martyrs, was it? The fools had to think alone, act alone, and die alone; and in their personal success lay ultimate failure. Or perhaps not. The aftermath was still there. . . .

"MR. PRESIDENT?" A Secret Service agent had picked up the phone. Ordinarily it would have been a Navy yeoman, but the Detail was still a little too shell-shocked to allow just anyone into the Sit Room. "FBI, sir."

Ryan pulled the phone from its holder under the desktop. "Yes?"

"Dan Murray here." Jack nearly smiled to hear a familiar voice, and a friendly one at that. He and Murray went back a very long way indeed. At the other end, Murray must have wanted to say *Hi, Jack*, but he wouldn't—couldn't be so familiar without being so bidden—and even if Jack had encouraged him, the man would have felt uncomfortable to do so, and would have run the further risk of being thought an ass-kisser within his own organization. One more obstacle to being normal, Jack reflected. Even his friends were now distancing themselves.

"What is it, Dan?"

"Sorry to bother you, but we need guidance on who's running the investigation. There's a bunch of people running around on the Hill right now, and—"

"Unity of command," Jack observed sourly. He didn't have to ask why Murray was calling him. All those who could have decided this issue at a lower level were dead. "What's the law say for this?"

"It doesn't, really," Murray replied. The discomfort in his voice was clear. He didn't wish to bother the man who had once been his friend, and might still be, in less official circumstances. But this was business, and business had to be carried out.

"Multiple jurisdictions?"

"To a fare-thee-well," Murray confirmed with an unseen nod.

"I guess we call it a terrorist incident. We have a tradition of that, you and I, don't we?" Jack asked.

"That we do, sir."

Sir, Ryan thought. *Damn it*. But he had another decision to make. Jack scanned the room before replying.

"The Bureau is the lead agency on this. Everybody reports to you. Pick a good man to run things."

"Yes, sir."

"Dan?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Who's senior over at FBI?"

"The Associate Director is Chuck Floyd. He's down at Atlanta to give a speech and—" Then there would be the Assistant Directors, all senior to Murray . . .

"I don't know him. I do know you. You're acting Director until I say otherwise." That shook the other side of the connection, Ryan immediately sensed.

"Uh, Jack, I—"

"I liked Shaw, too, Dan. You've got the job."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Ryan replaced the phone and explained what he'd just done.

Price objected first: "Sir, any attack on the President is under the jurisdiction of " Ryan cut her off.

"They have more resources, and somebody has to be in command. I want this one settled as quickly as possible."

"We need a special commission." This was Arnie van Damm.

"Headed by whom?" President Ryan asked. "A member of the Supreme Court? Couple of senators and congressmen? Murray's a pro from way back. Pick a good—whoever's the senior career member of the Department of Justice's Criminal Division will oversee the investigation. Andrea, find me the best investigator in the Service to be Murray's chief assistant. We don't have outsiders to use, do we? We run this from the inside. Let's pick the best people and let them run with it. Like, we act as though we trust the agencies who're supposed to do the work." He paused. "I want this investigation to run fast, okay?"

"Yes, Mr. President." Agent Price bobbed her head, and Ryan caught an approving nod from Arnie van Damm. Maybe he was doing something right, Jack allowed himself to think. The satisfaction was short-lived enough. Against the wall in the far corner was a bank of television sets. All showed essentially the same picture now, and the flash of a photographer's strobe on all four sets caught the President's eyes. He turned to see four iterations of a body bag being carried down the steps of the Capitol building's west wing. It was one more cadaver to identify—large or small, male or female, important or not, one couldn't tell from the rubberized fabric of the bag. There were only the strained, cold, sad faces of the firefighters carrying the damned thing, and that had attracted the attention of a nameless newspaper photographer and his

camera and his flash, and so brought their President back to a reality he now, again, shrank from. The TV cameras followed the trio, two living, one dead, down the steps to an ambulance whose open doors revealed a pile of such bags. The one they were carrying was passed across gently, the professionals showing mercy and solicitude to the body which the living world had forsaken. Then they headed back up the steps to get the next one. The Situation Room fell silent as all eyes took in the same picture. A few deep breaths were taken, and eyes were too steely or too shocked as yet for tears as, two by two, they turned away to stare down at the polished oak of the table. A coffee cup scraped and rattled its way from a saucer. The slight noise only made the silence worse, for no one had the words to fill the void.

"What else has to be done now?" Jack asked. It hit him so hard, the fatigue of the moment. The earlier racing of his heart in the face of death and in fear for his family and in agony at the loss was taking its toll on him now. His chest seemed empty, his arms weighed down, as though the sleeves of his coat were made of lead, and suddenly it was an effort just to hold up his head. It was 11:35, after a day that had begun at 4:10 in the morning, filled with interviews about a job he'd held for all of eight minutes before his abrupt promotion. The adrenaline rush which had sustained him was gone, its two-hour duration making him all the more exhausted for its length. He looked around with what seemed an important question:

"Where do I sleep tonight?" Not here, Ryan decided instantly. Not in a dead man's bed on dead man's sheets a few feet from a dead man's kids. He needed to be with his own family. He needed to look at his own children, probably asleep by now, because children slept through anything; then to feel his wife's arms around him, because that was the one constant in Ryan's world, the single thing that he would never allow to change despite the cyclonic events that had assailed a life he had neither courted nor expected.

The Secret Service agents shared a look of mutual puzzlement, before Andrea Price spoke, taking command as was her nature and now her job.

"Marine Barracks? Eighth and I?"

Ryan nodded. "That'll do for now."

Price spoke into her radio microphone, which was pinned to the collar of her suit jacket. "SWORDSMAN is moving. Bring the cars to the West Entrance."

The agents of the Detail rose. As one person they unbuttoned their coats, and as they passed out the door, hands reached for their pistols.

"We'll shake you loose at five," van Damm promised, adding, "Make sure you get the sleep you need." His answer was a brief, empty stare, as Ryan left the room. There a White House usher put a coat on him—whose it was or where it might have come from, Jack didn't think to ask. He climbed into the Chevy Suburban backseat, and it moved off at once, with an identical vehicle in front, and three more behind. Jack could have avoided the sights, but not the sounds, for sirens were still wailing beyond the armored glass, and it would have been cowardice to look away in any case. The fire glow was gone, replaced by the sparkling of lights from scores of emergency vehicles, some moving, most not, on or around the Hill. The police were keeping downtown streets clear, and the presidential motorcade headed rapidly east, ten minutes

later arriving at the Marine Barracks. Here everyone was awake now, properly uniformed, and every Marine in sight had a rifle or pistol in evidence. The salutes were crisp.

The home of the commandant of the Marine Corps dated back to the early nineteenth century, one of the few official buildings that hadn't been burned by the British during their visit in 1814. But the commandant was dead. A widower with grown children, he'd lived here alone until this last night. Now a full colonel stood on the porch in pressed utilities with a pistol belt around his waist and a full platoon spread around the house.

"Mr. President, your family is topside and all secure," Colonel Mark Porter reported immediately. "We have a full rifle company deployed on perimeter security, and another one is on the way."

"Media?" Price asked.

"I didn't have any orders about that. My orders were to protect our guests. The only people within two hundred meters are the ones who belong here."

"Thank you, Colonel," Ryan said, not caring about the media, and heading for the door. A sergeant held it open, saluting as a Marine ought, and without thinking, Ryan returned it. Inside, a more senior NCO pointed him up the stairs—this one also saluted, as he was under arms. It was clear to Ryan now that he couldn't go anywhere alone. Price, another agent, and two Marines followed him up the stairs. The second-floor corridor had two Secret Service agents and five more Marines. Finally, at 11:54, he walked into a bedroom to find his wife sitting.

"Hi."

"Jack." Her head turned. "It's all true?"

He nodded, then he hesitated before coming to sit next to Cathy. "The kids?"

"Asleep." A pause. "They don't really know what's going on. I guess that makes four of us," she added.

"Five."

"The President's dead?" Cathy turned to see her husband nod. "I hardly got to know him."

"Good guy. Their kids are at the House. Asleep. I didn't know if I was supposed to do anything. So I came here." Ryan reached for his collar and pulled the tie loose. It seemed to take a considerable effort to do so. Better not to disturb the kids, he decided. It would have been hard to walk that far anyway.

"And now?"

"I have to sleep. They get me up at five."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know." Jack managed to get out of his clothes, hoping that the new day would contain some of the answers that the night merely concealed.

2

PRE-DAWN

IT WAS TO BE EXPECTED that they'd be as exactly punctual as their electronic watches could make them. It seemed to Ryan that he'd hardly closed his eyes when the gentlest of taps at the door startled him off the pillow. There came the brief moment of confusion normal to the moment of awakening in any place other than one's own bed: *Where am I?* The first organized thought told him that he'd dreamed a lot of things, and maybe—But hard on the heels of that thought was the internal announcement that the worst of the dream was still real. He was in a strange place, and there was no other explanation for it. The tornado had swept him up into a whirling mass of terror and confusion, and then deposited him here, and *here* was neither Kansas nor Oz. About the best thing he could say, after five or ten seconds of orientation, was that he didn't have the expected headache from sleep-deprivation, and that he wasn't quite so tired. He slid out from under the covers. His feet found the floor, and he made his way to the door.

"Okay, I'm up," he told the wooden door. Then he realized that his room didn't have an attached bathroom, and he'd have to open the door. That he did.

"Good morning, Mr. President." A young and rather earnest-looking agent handed him a bathrobe. Again, it was the job of an orderly, but the only Marine he saw in the corridor was wearing a pistol belt. Jack wondered if there had been another turf fight the night before between the Marine Corps and the Secret Service to see who had primacy of place in the protection of their new Commander-in-Chief. Then he realized with a start that the bathrobe was his own.

"We got some things for you last night," the agent explained in a whisper. A second agent handed over Cathy's rather tattered maroon housecoat. So, someone had broken into their home last night—must have, Jack realized, as he hadn't handed over his keys to anyone; *and* defeated the burglar alarm he'd installed a few years earlier. He padded back to the bed and deposited the housecoat there before heading back out. Yet a third agent pointed him down the hall to an unoccupied bedroom. Four suits were hanging on a poster bed, along with four shirts, all newly pressed by the look of them, along with half a score of ties and everything else. It wasn't so much pathos as desperation, Jack realized. The staff knew, or at least had an idea of what he was going through, and every single thing they could do to make things easier for him was being done with frantic perfection. Someone had even spit-shined his three pair of black shoes to Marine specifications. They'd never looked so good before, Ryan thought, heading for the bathroom—where, of course, he found all of his

things, even his usual bar of Zest soap. Next to *that* was the skin-friendly stuff Cathy used. Nobody thought that being President was easy, but he was now surrounded by people who were grimly determined to eliminate every *small* worry he might have.

A warm shower helped loosen his muscles, and clouded the mirror with mist, which made things even better when he shaved. The usual morning mechanics were finished by 5:20, and Ryan made his way down the stairs. Outside, he saw through a window, a phalanx of camouflage-clad Marines stood guard on the quad, their breathing marked by little white puffs. Those inside braced to attention as he passed. Perhaps he and his family had gotten a few hours of sleep, but no one else had. That was something he needed to remember, Jack told himself as the smells drew him to the kitchen.

"Attention on deck!" The voice of the sergeant-major of the Marine Corps was muted in deference to the sleeping children upstairs, and for the first time since dinner the previous night, Ryan managed a smile.

"Settle down, Marines." President Ryan headed toward the coffeepot, but a corporal beat him there. The correct proportions of cream and sugar were added to the mug—again, someone had done some homework—before she handed it across.

"The staff is in the dining room, sir," the sergeant-major told him.

"Thank you." President Ryan headed that way.

They looked the worse for wear, making Jack feel briefly guilty for his shower-fresh face. Then he saw the pile of documents they'd prepared.

"Good morning, Mr. President," Andrea Price said. People started to rise from their chairs. Ryan waved them back down and pointed to Murray.

"Dan," the President began. "What do we know?"

"We found the body of the pilot about two hours ago. Good ID. His name was Sato, as expected. Very experienced airplane driver. We're still looking for the co-pilot." Murray paused. "The pilot's body is being checked for drugs, but finding that would be a surprise. NTSB has the flight recorder—they got that around four, and it's being checked out right now. We've recovered just over two hundred bodies—"

"President Durling?"

Price handled that one with a shake of the head. "Not yet. That part of the building—well, it's a mess, and they decided to wait for daylight to do the hard stuff."

"Survivors?"

"Just the three people who we know to have been inside that part of the building at the time of the crash."

"Okay." Ryan shook his head as well. That information was important, but irrelevant. "Anything important that we know?"

Murray consulted his notes. "The aircraft flew out of Vancouver International, B.C. They filed a false flightplan for London Heathrow, headed east, departed Canadian airspace at 7:51 local time. All very routine stuff. We assume that he headed out a little while, reversed course, and headed southeast toward D.C. After that he bluffed his way through air-traffic control."

"How?"

Murray nodded to someone Ryan didn't know. "Mr. President, I'm Ed Hutchins, NTSB. It's not hard. He claimed to be a KLM charter inbound to Orlando. Then he declared an emergency. When there's an in-flight emergency, our people are trained to get the airplane on the ground ASAP. We were up against a guy who knew all the right buttons to push. There's no way anyone could have prevented this," he concluded defensively.

"Only one voice on the tapes," Murray noted.

"Anyway," Hutchins continued, "we have tapes of the radar tracks. He simulated an aircraft with control difficulties, asked for an emergency vector to Andrews, and got what he wanted. From Andrews to the Hill is barely a minute's flying time."

"One of our people got a Stinger off," Price said, with somewhat forlorn pride.

Hutchins just shook his head. It was the gesture for this morning in Washington. "Against something that big, might as well have been a spitball."

"Anything from Japan?"

"They're in a national state of shock." This came from Scott Adler, the senior career official in the State Department, and one of Ryan's friends. "Right after you turned in, we got a call from the Prime Minister. It's not as though he hasn't had a bad week himself, though he sounds happy to be back in charge. He wants to come over to apologize personally to us. I told him we'd get back—"

"Tell him yes."

"You sure, Jack?" Arnie van Damm asked.

"Does anybody think this was a deliberate act?" Ryan countered.

"We don't know," Price responded first.

"No explosives aboard the aircraft," Dan Murray pointed out. "If there had been—"

"I wouldn't be here." Ryan finished his coffee. The corporal refilled it at once. "This is going to come down to one or two nuts, just like they all do."

Hutchins nodded tentative agreement. "Explosives are fairly light. Even a few tons, given the carrying capacity of the 747-400, would not have compromised the mission at all, and the payoff would have been enormous. What we have here is a fairly straightforward crash. The residual damage was done by about half a load of jet fuel—upwards of eighty tons. That was plenty," he concluded. Hutchins had been investigating airplane accidents for almost thirty years.

"It's much too early to draw conclusions," Price warned.

"Scott?"

"If this was—hell," Adler shook his head. "This was not an act by their government. They're frantic over there. The newspapers are calling for the heads of the people who suborned the government in the first place, and Prime Minister Koga was nearly in tears over the phone. Put it this way, if somebody over there planned this, they'll find out for us."

"Their idea of due process isn't quite as stringent as ours," Murray added. "Andrea is right. It is too early to draw conclusions, but all of the indications so far point to a random act, not a planned one." Murray paused for a moment. "For that matter, we know the other side developed nuclear

weapons, remember?" Even the coffee turned cold with that remark.

THIS ONE HE found under a bush while moving a ladder from one part of the west face to another. The firefighter had been on duty for seven straight hours. He was numb by now. You can take only so much horror before the mind starts regarding the bodies and pieces as mere things. The remains of a child might have shaken him, or even a particularly pretty female, since this fireman was still young and single, but the body he'd accidentally stepped on wasn't one of those. The torso was headless, and parts of both legs were missing, but it was clearly the body of a man, wearing the shredded remains of a white shirt, with epaulets at the shoulders. Three stripes on each of them, he saw. He wondered what that meant, too tired to do much in the way of thinking. The fireman turned and waved to his lieutenant, who in turn tapped the arm of a woman wearing a vinyl FBI windbreaker.

This agent walked over, sipping at a plastic cup and wishing she could light a cigarette—still too many lingering fumes for that, she grumbled.

"Just found this one. Funny place, but—"

"Yeah, funny." The agent lifted her camera and snapped a couple of pictures which would have the exact time electronically preserved on the frame. Next she took a pad from her pocket and noted the placement for body number four on her personal list. She hadn't seen many for her particular area of responsibility. Some plastic stakes and yellow tape would further mark the site; she started writing the tag for it. "You can turn him over."

Under the body, they saw, was an irregularly shaped piece of flat glass—or glass-like plastic. The agent snapped another photo, and through the viewfinder things somehow looked more interesting than with the naked eye. A glance up showed a gap in the marble balustrade. Another look around revealed a lot of small metallic objects, which an hour earlier she'd decided were aircraft parts, and which had attracted the attention of an NTSB investigator, who was now conferring with the same firedepartment officer with whom she'd been conferring a minute earlier. The agent had to wave three times to get his attention.

"What is it?" The NTSB investigator was cleaning his glasses with a handkerchief.

The agent pointed. "Check the shirt out."

"Crew," the man said, after putting them back on. "Maybe a driver. What's this?" It was his turn to point.

There was a strange delicacy to it. The white uniform shirt had a hole in it just to the right of the pocket. The hole was surrounded by a red-rust stain. The FBI agent held her flashlight close, and that showed that the stain was dried. The current temperature was just under twenty degrees. The body had been thrown into this harsh environment virtually at the moment of impact, and the blood about the severed neck was frozen, the purple-red color of some horrid plum sherbet. The blood on the shirt, she saw, had dried before having the chance to freeze.

"Don't move the body anymore," she told the fireman. Like most FBI agents, she'd been a local police officer before applying to the federal agency. It was

the cold that made her face pale.

"First crash investigation?" the NTSB man asked, seeing her face, and mistaking her pallor.

She nodded. "Yes, it is, but it's not my first murder." With that she switched on her portable radio to call her supervisor. For this body she wanted a crime-scene team and full forensics.

THE TELEGRAMS CAME from every government in the world. Most were long, and all had to be read—well, at least the ones from important countries. Togo could wait.

"Interior and Commerce are in town and standing by for a Cabinet meeting along with all the deputies," van Damm said while Ryan flipped through the messages, trying to read and listen at the same time. "The Joint Chiefs, all the vices, are assembled, along with all the command CINCs to go over national security—-"

"Threat Board?" Jack asked without looking up. Until the previous day he'd been President Durling's National Security Advisor, and it didn't seem likely that the world had changed too much in twenty-four hours.

Scott Adler handled the answer: "Clear."

"Washington is pretty much shut down," Murray said. "Radio and TV announcements for people to stay home, except for essential services. The D.C. National Guard is out. We need the warm bodies for the Hill, and the D.C. Guard is a military-police brigade. They might actually be useful. Besides, the firemen must be about worn out by now."

"How long before the investigation gives us hard information?" the President asked.

"There's no telling that, Ja—Mister—"

Ryan looked up from the official Belgian telegram. "How long since we've known each other, Dan? I'm not God, okay? If you use my name once in a while, nobody's going to shoot you for it."

It was Murray's turn to smile. "Okay. You can't predict with any major investigation. The breaks just come, sooner or later, but they do come," Dan promised. "We have a good team of investigators out there."

"What do I tell the media?" Jack rubbed his eyes, already tired from reading. Maybe Cathy was right. Maybe he did need glasses, finally. Before him was a printed sheet for his morning TV appearances, which had been selected by lot. CNN at 7:08, CBS at 7:20, NBC at 7:37, ABC at 7:50, Fox at 8:08, all from the Roosevelt Room of the White House, where the cameras were already set up. Someone had decided that a formal speech was too much for him, and not really appropriate to the situation until he had something substantive to deliver. Just a quiet, dignified, and above all, intimate introduction of himself to people reading their papers and drinking their morning coffee.

"Softball questions. That's already taken care of," van Damm assured him. "Answer them. Speak slowly, clearly. Look as relaxed as you can. Nothing dramatic. The people don't expect that. They want to know that somebody's in charge, answering the phones, whatever. They know it's too soon for you to

say or do anything decisive."

"Roger's kids?"

"Still asleep, I expect. We have the family members in town. They're at the White House now."

President Ryan nodded without looking up. It was hard to meet the eyes of the people sitting around the breakfast table, especially on things like that. There was a plan for this, too. Movers were already on the way, probably. The Durling family—what was left of it—would be removed from the White House kindly but quickly, because it wasn't their house anymore. The country needed someone else in there, and that someone needed to be as comfortable as possible, and *that* meant eliminating all visible reminders of the previous occupant. It wasn't brutal, Jack realized. It was business. They doubtless had a psychologist standing by to assist the family members with their grief, to "process" them through it as best as medical science allowed. But the country came first. In the unforgiving calculus of life, even so sentimental a nation as the United States of America had to move on. When it came time for Ryan to leave the White House, one way or another, the same thing would happen. There had been a time when an ex-President had walked down the hill to Union Station from his successor's inauguration to get a train ticket home. Now they used movers, and doubtless the family would fly out on Air Force transport, but go the children would, leaving behind schools and such friends as they had made, returning to California and whatever life their family members could reconstruct for them. Business or not, it *was* cold, Ryan thought while staring mindlessly at the Belgian telegram. How much the better for everyone if the aircraft had not fallen on the Capitol building . . .

On top of all that, Jack had rarely been called upon to console the children of a man he knew, and damned sure hadn't ever taken their home away. He shook his head. It wasn't his fault, but it was his job.

The telegram, he saw on returning to it, noted that America had twice helped to save that small country within a space of less than thirty years, then protected it through the NATO alliance, that there was a bond of blood and friendship between America and a nation which most American citizens would have been taxed to locate on a globe. And that was true. Whatever the faults of his country, whatever her imperfections, however unfeeling some of her actions might seem to be, the United States of America had done the right thing more often than not. The world was far the better for it, and that was why business had to be carried out.

INSPECTOR PATRICK O'DAY was grateful for the cold. His investigative career had stretched over almost thirty years, and this was not his first time in the presence of multiple bodies and their separated parts. His first had been in Mississippi one May, a Sunday school bombed by the Ku Klux Klan, with eleven victims. At least here the cold eliminated the ghastly odor of dead human bodies. He'd never really wanted a high rank in the Bureau —"inspector" was a title with variable importance in the sense of seniority. In his case, much like Dan Murray, O'Day worked as a troubleshooter, often dispatched from Washington to assist on touchy ones. Widely recognized as a

superb street agent, he'd been able to stick to real cases, large and small, instead of high-level supervision, which he found boring.

Assistant Director Tony Caruso had gone along another track. He'd been special agent-in-charge of two field offices, risen to head the Bureau's Training Division, then taken over the Washington Field Office, which was sufficiently large to merit "AD" rank for its commander, along with one of the worst office locations in North America. Caruso enjoyed the power, prestige, higher pay, and reserved parking place which his status accorded him, but part of him envied his old friend, Pat, for his often dirty hands.

"What do you figure?" Caruso asked, staring down at the body. They still needed artificial light. The sun was rising, but on the far side of the building.

"You can't take it to court yet, but this guy was dead hours before the bird came down."

Both men watched a gray-haired expert from Headquarters Laboratory Division hover over the body. There were all manner of tests to be carried out. Internal body temperature was one—a computer model allowed for environmental conditions, and while the data would be far less reliable than either senior official would want, anything prior to 9:46 P.M. the previous evening would tell them what they needed to know.

"Knifed in the heart," Caruso said, shivering at the thought. You never really got over the brutality of murder. Whether a single person or a thousand, wrongful death was wrongful death, and the number just told you how many *individual* records had been tied. "We got the pilot."

O'Day nodded. "I heard. Three stripes, makes him the co-pilot, and he was murdered. So maybe it was just one guy."

"What's the crew on one of these?" Caruso asked the NTSB supervisor.

"Two. The earlier ones had a flight engineer, but the new ones don't bother with it. For really long flights they might have a backup pilot, but these birds are pretty automated now, and the engines hardly ever break."

The lab tech stood and waved in the people with the body bag before joining the others. "You want the early version?"

"You bet," Caruso replied.

"Definitely dead before the crash took place. No bruising from the crash trauma. The chest wound is relatively old. There should be contusions from the seat belts, but there aren't, just scrapes and gouges, with damn little blood there. Not enough blood from the severed head. In fact, not enough blood anywhere in the remains right here. Let's say he was murdered in his seat in the aircraft. The belts hold him in a sitting position. Postmortem lividity drains all the blood down to the lower extremities, and the legs are torn off when the bird hits the building—that's why there's so little blood. I got a lot of homework to do, but quick-and-dirty, he was dead three hours at least before the plane got here." Will Gettys handed over the wallet. "Here's the guy's ID. Poor bastard. I guess he wasn't a part of this at all."

"What chance you could be wrong on any of that?" O'Day had to ask.

"I'd be real surprised, Pat. An hour or two on time of death—earlier rather than later—yeah, that's possible. But there's nowhere near enough blood for this guy to have been alive at time of impact. He was dead before the crash. You can take that to the bank," Gettys told the other agents, knowing that his

career rode on that one, and comfortable with the wager.

"Thank God for that," Caruso breathed. It did more than make things easier for the investigation. There would be conspiracy theories for the next twenty years, and the Bureau would proceed on its business, checking out every possibility, aided, they were sure, by the Japanese police, but one guy alone had driven this aircraft into the ground, and that made it extremely likely that this *grand mal* assassination, like most of the others, was the work of a single man, demented or not, skilled or not, but in any case alone. Not that everyone would ever believe that.

"Get the information to Murray," Caruso ordered. "He's with the President."

"Yes, sir." O'Day walked over toward where his diesel pickup was parked. He probably had the only one in town, the inspector thought, with a police light plugged into the cigarette lighter. You didn't put something like this over a radio, encrypted or not.

• • •

REAR ADMIRAL JACKSON changed into his blue mess jacket about ninety minutes out from Andrews, having managed about six hours of needed sleep after being briefed on things that didn't really matter very much. The uniform was the worse for having been packed in his travel bag, not that it would matter all that much, and the navy blue wool hid wrinkles fairly well anyway. His five rows of ribbons and wings of gold attracted the eye, anyway. There must have been an easterly wind this morning, for the KC-10 flew in from Virginia, and a muttered, "Jesus, look at that!" from a few rows aft commanded all in the forward part of the aircraft to crowd at the windows like the tourists they were not. Between the beginnings of dawn and the huge collection of lights on the ground it was plain that the Capitol building, the centerpiece of their country's first city, wasn't the same as it had been. Somehow this was more immediate and real than the pictures many of them had seen on TV before boarding the plane in Hawaii. Five minutes later, the aircraft touched down at Andrews Air Force Base. The senior officers found an aircraft of the Air Force's First Heli Squadron waiting to take them to the Pentagon's pad. This flight, lower and slower, gave them a better look still at the damage to the building.

"Jesus," Dave Seaton said over the intercom. "Did anybody get out of there alive?"

Robby took his time before responding. "I wonder where Jack was when it happened. . . ." He remembered a British Army toast—"Here's to bloody wars and sickly seasons!"—which referred to a couple of sure ways for officers to be promoted into vacant slots. Surely quite a few people would fleet up from this incident, but none really wanted advancement this way, least of all his closest friend, somewhere down there in the wounded city.

THE MARINES LOOKED very twitchy, Inspector O'Day saw. He parked his truck on Eighth Street, S.E. The Marine Barracks were thoroughly barricaded.

The curbs were fully blocked with parked cars, the gaps in the buildings doubly so. He dismounted his truck and walked toward an NCO; he was wearing his FBI windbreaker, and carrying his ID in his right hand.

"I have business inside, Sergeant."

"Who with, sir?" the Marine asked, checking the photo against the face.

"Mr. Murray."

"You mind leaving your side arm here with us, sir? Orders," the sergeant explained.

"Sure." O'Day handed over his fanny pack, inside of which was his Smith & Wesson 1076 and two spare magazines. He didn't bother with a backup piece on headquarters duty. "How many people you have around now?"

"Two companies, near enough. There's another one setting up at the White House."

There was no better time to lock the barn door than after the horse got out, Pat knew. It was all the more grim since he was delivering the news that it was all unnecessary, but nobody would really care about that. The sergeant waved to a lieutenant who had nothing better to do—the NCOs ran things like this—than to conduct visitors across the quad. The lieutenant saluted for no more reason than being a Marine.

"Here to see Daniel Murray. He's expecting me."

"Please follow me, sir."

The inner corners of the buildings on the quad had yet another line of Marines, with a third on the quad itself, complete with a heavy machine gun. Two companies amounted to upwards of three hundred rifles. Yeah, President Ryan was fairly safe here, Inspector O'Day thought, unless some other maniac driving an airplane was around. Along the way, a captain wanted to compare the photo on his ID with the face again. It was being overdone. Somebody had to point that out before they started parking tanks on the street.

Murray came out to meet him on the porch. "How good is it?"

"Pretty good," the inspector replied.

"Come on." Murray waved him in, and led his friend into the breakfast room. "This is Inspector O'Day. Pat, I think you know who these people are."

"Good morning. I've been on the Hill, and we found something a little while ago that you need to know," he began, going on for another couple of minutes.

"How solid is it?" Andrea Price asked.

"You know how this works," O'Day responded. "It's preliminary, but it looks pretty solid to me, and we'll have good test data after lunch. The ID's already being run. That may be a little shaky, because we don't have a head to work with, and the hands are all ripped up. We're not saying that we've closed the case. We're saying that we have a preliminary indication that supports other data."

"Can I mention this on TV?" Ryan asked everyone around the table.

"Definitely not," van Damm said. "First, it's not confirmed. Second, it's too soon for anyone to believe it."

Murray and O'Day traded a look. Neither of them was a politician. Arnie van Damm was. For them, information control was about protecting evidence so that a jury saw it clean. For Arnie, information control was about

protecting people from things he didn't think they could understand until it was spin-controlled and spoon-fed, one little gulp at a time. Both wondered if Arnie had ever been a father, and if his infant had starved to death waiting for his strained carrots. Both noted next that Ryan gave his chief of staff a long look.

The well known black box really wasn't much more than a tape recorder whose leads trailed off to the cockpit. There they collected data from engine and other flight controls, plus, in this case, the microphones for the flight crew. Japan Airlines was a government-run carrier, and its aircraft had the latest of everything. The flight-data recorder was fully digitized. That made for rapid and clear transcription of the data. First of all, a senior technician made a clean, high-speed copy of the original metallic tape, which was then removed to a vault while he worked on the copy. Someone had thought to have a Japanese speaker standing by.

"This flight data looks like pure vanilla on first inspection. Nothing was broken on the aircraft," an analyst reported, scanning the data on a computer screen. "Nice easy turns, steady on the engines. Textbook flight profile . . . until here"—he tapped the screen–"here he made a radical turn from zero-six-seven to one-niner-six . . . and settles right back down again until his penetration."

"No chatter in the cockpit at all." Another tech ran the voice segment of the tape back and forth, finding only routine traffic between the aircraft and various groundcontrol stations. "I'm going to back it up to the beginning." The tape didn't really have a beginning. Rather it ran on a continuous loop, on this machine, because the 747 7 routinely engaged in long, over-water flights, forty hours long. It took several minutes for him to locate the end of the immediately preceding flight, and here he found the normal exchange of information and commands between two crewmen, and also between the aircraft and the ground, the former in Japanese and the latter in English, the language of international aviation.

That stopped soon after the aircraft had halted at its assigned jetway. There was a full two minutes of blank tape, and then the recording cycle began again when the flightdeck instruments were powered up during the preflight procedures. The Japanese speaker—an Army officer in civilian clothes—was from the National Security Agency.

The sound pickup was excellent. They could hear the clicks of *switches* being thrown, and the background whirs of various instruments, but the loudest sound was the breathing of the co-pilot, whose identity was specified by the track on the recording tape.

"Stop," the Army officer said. "Back it up a little. There's another voice, can't quite. . . Oh, okay. 'All ready, question mark.' Must be the pilot. Yeah, that was a door closing, pilot just came in. 'Preflight checklist complete . . . standing by for before-start checklist. . . .' Oh . . . oh, God. He killed him. Back it up again." The officer, a major, didn't see the FBI agent don a second pair of headphones.

It was a first for both of them. The FBI agent had seen a murder on a bank video system, but neither he nor the intelligence officer had ever heard one, a grunt from an impact, a gasp of breath that conveyed surprise and pain, a

gurgle, maybe an attempt at speech, followed by another voice.

"What's that?" the agent asked.

"Run it again." The officer's face stared at the wall. " 'I am very sorry to do this.' " That was followed by a few more labored breaths, then a long sigh. "Jesus." The second voice came on a different vox channel less than a minute later, to notify the tower that the 747 was starting its engines.

"That's the pilot, Sato," the NTSB analyst said. "The other voice must be the co-pilot."

"Not anymore." The only remaining noise over the copilot's channel was spill-over and background sounds.

"Killed him," the FBI agent agreed. They'd have to run the tape a hundred more times, for themselves and for others, but the conclusion would be the same. Even though the formal investigation would last for several months, the case was effectively closed less than nine hours after it had begun.

THE STREETS OF Washington were eerily empty. Normally at this time of day, Ryan knew all too well from his own experience, the nation's capital was gridlocked with the automobiles of federal employees, lobbyists, members of Congress and their staffers, fifty thousand lawyers and their secretaries, and all the private-industry service workers who supported them all. Not today. With every intersection manned by a radio car of the Metropolitan Police or a camouflage-painted National Guard vehicle, it was more like a holiday weekend, and there was actually more traffic heading away from the Hill than toward it, the curious turned away from their place of interest ten blocks from their intended destination.

The presidential procession headed up Pennsylvania. Jack was back in the Chevy Suburban, and there were still Marines leading and following the collection of Secret Service vehicles. The sun was up now. The sky was mainly clear, and it took a moment to realize that the skyline was wrong.

The 747 hadn't even harmed the trees, Ryan saw. It hadn't wasted its energy on anything but the target. Half a dozen cranes were working now, lifting stone blocks from the crater that had been the House chamber, depositing them onto trucks that were taking them off somewhere. Only a few fire trucks remained. The dramatic part was over for now. The grim part remained.

The rest of the city seemed intact enough at 6:40 A.M. Ryan gave the Hill a final sideways look through the darkened windows as his vehicle headed downhill on Constitution Avenue. If cars were being turned away, the usual morning collection of joggers was not. Perhaps they'd run to the Mall as part of the normal morning ritual, but there they stopped. Ryan watched their faces, some of which turned to see his vehicle pass before returning their gaze eastward, talking in little knots, pointing and shaking their heads. Jack noticed that the Secret Service agents in the Suburban with him turned to watch them, perhaps expecting one to pull a bazooka from under his sweats.

It was novel to drive so fast in Washington. Partly it was because a rapidly moving target was harder to hit, and partly because Ryan's time was far more valuable now, and not to be wasted. More than anything else it meant that he was speeding toward something he would just as soon have avoided. Only a

few days before, he'd accepted Roger Durling's invitation for the vice-presidency, but he'd done so mainly as a means of relieving himself from government service once and for all. That thought evoked a pained look behind closed eyes. Why was it that he'd never been able to run away from anything? Certainly it didn't seem like courage. It actually seemed the reverse. He'd so often been afraid, afraid to say no and have people think him a coward. Afraid to do anything but what his conscience told him, and so often what it had told him had been something he hated to do or was afraid to do, but there wasn't ever an honorable alternative that he could exercise.

"It'll be okay," van Damm told him, seeing the look, and knowing what the new President had to be thinking.

No, it won't, Jack could not reply.

3

SCRUTINY

THE ROOSEVELT ROOM IS named for Teddy, and on the east wall was his Nobel Peace Prize for his "successful" mediation of the Russo-Japanese War. Historians could now say that the effort had only encouraged Japan's imperial ambitions, and so wounded the Russian soul that Stalin—hardly a friend of the Romanov dynasty!—had felt the need to avenge his country's humiliation, but that particular bequest of Alfred Nobel had always been more political than real. The room was used for medium-sized lunches and meetings, and was conveniently close to the Oval Office. Getting there proved to be harder than Jack had expected. The corridors of the White House are narrow for such an important building, and the Secret Service was out in force, though here their firearms were not in evidence. That was a welcome relief. Ryan walked past ten new agents over and above those who had formed his mobile guard force, which evoked a sigh of exasperation from SWORDSMAN. Everything was new and different now, and the protective Detail that in former times had seemed businesslike, sometimes even amusing, was just one more reminder that his life had been traumatically changed.

"Now what?" Jack asked.

"This way." An agent opened a door, and Ryan found the presidential makeup artist. It was an informal arrangement, and the artist, a woman in her fifties, had everything in a large fake-leather case. As often as he'd done TV—rather a lot in his former capacity as National Security Advisor—it was something Jack had never come to love, and it required all of his self-control not to fidget as the liquid base was applied with a foam sponge, followed by powder and hair spray and fussing, all of which was done without a word by a woman who looked as though she might burst into tears at any moment.

"I liked him, too," Jack told her. Her hands stopped, and their eyes met.

"He was always so nice. He hated this, just like you do, but he never complained, and he usually had a joke to tell. Sometimes I'd do the children just for fun. They liked it, even the boy. They'd play in front of the TV, and the crews would give them tapes and . . ."

"It's okay." Ryan took her hand. Finally he'd met someone on the staff who wasn't all business, and who didn't make him feel like an animal in the zoo. "What's your name?"

"Mary Abbot." Her eyes were running, and she wanted to apologize.

"How long have you been here?"

"Since right before Mr. Carter left." Mrs. Abbot wiped her eyes and steadied down.

"Well, maybe I should ask you for advice," he said gently.

"Oh, no, I don't know anything about that." She managed an embarrassed smile.

"Neither do I. I guess I'll just have to find out." Ryan looked in the mirror. "Finished?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Thank you, Mrs. Abbot."

They sat him in an armed wooden chair. The lights were already set up, which brought the room temperature into the low eighties, or so it felt. A technician clipped a two-headed microphone to his tie with movements as delicate as Mrs. Abbot's, all because there was a Secret Service agent hovering over every member of the crew, with Andrea Price hovering over them all from the doorway. Her eyes were narrow and suspicious, despite the fact that every single piece of gear in the room had been inspected, every visitor scanned continuously by eyes as casually intense and thorough as a surgeon's. One really could make a pistol out of non-metallic composites—the movie was right about that—but pistols were still bulky. The palpable tension of the Detail carried over to the TV crew, who kept their hands in the open, and only moved them slowly. The scrutiny of the Secret Service could rattle almost anyone.

"Two minutes," the producer said, cued by his earpiece. "Just went into commercial."

"Get any sleep last night?" CNN's chief White House correspondent asked. Like everyone else, he wanted a quick and clear read on the new President.

"Not enough," Jack replied, suddenly tense. There were two cameras. He crossed his legs and clasped his hands in his lap in order to avoid nervous movements. How, exactly, was he supposed to appear? Grave? Grief-stricken? Quietly confident? Overwhelmed? It was a little late for that now. Why hadn't he asked Arnie before?

"Thirty seconds," the producer said.

Jack tried to compose himself. His physical posture would keep his body still. *Just answer the questions. You've been doing that long enough.*

"Eight minutes after the hour," the correspondent said directly into the camera behind Jack. "We're here in the White House with President John Ryan.

"Mr. President, it's been a long night, hasn't it?"

"I'm afraid it has," Ryan agreed.

"What can you tell us?"

"Recovery operations are under way, as you know. President Durling's body has not yet been found. The investigation is going on under the coordination of the FBI."

"Have they discovered anything?"

"We'll probably have a few things to say later today, but it's too early right now." Despite the fact that the correspondent had been fully briefed on that issue, Ryan saw the disappointment in his eyes.

"Why the FBI? Isn't the Secret Service empowered to—"

"This is no time for a turf fight. An investigation like this has to go on at once. Therefore, I decided that the FBI would be the lead agency—under the Department of Justice, and with the assistance of other federal agencies. We

want answers, we want them fast, and this seems the best way to make that happen."

"It's been reported that you've appointed a new FBI Director."

Jack nodded. "Yes, Barry, I have. For the moment I've asked Daniel E. Murray to step in as acting Director. Dan is a career FBI agent whose last job was special assistant to Director Shaw. We've known each other for many years. Mr. Murray is one of the best cops in government service."

"MURRAY?"

"A policeman, supposed to be an expert on terrorism and espionage," the intelligence officer replied.

"Hmm." He went back to sipping his bittersweet coffee.

"WHAT CAN YOU tell us about preparation for—I I mean, for the next several days?" the correspondent asked next.

"Barry, those plans are still being made. First and foremost, we have to let the FBI and other law-enforcement agencies do their job. There will be more information coming out later today, but it's been a long and difficult night for a lot of people." The correspondent nodded at that, and decided it was time for a human-interest question.

"Where did you and your family sleep? I know it wasn't here."

"The Marine Barracks, at Eighth and I," Ryan answered.

"Oh, *shit*, Boss," Andrea Price muttered, just outside the room. Some media people had found out, but the Service hadn't confirmed it to anyone, and most news organizations had reported that the Ryan family was at "an undisclosed location." Well, they'd be sleeping somewhere else tonight. And the location would not be disclosed this time. Damn.

"Why there?"

"Well, it had to be somewhere, and that seemed convenient. I was a Marine myself once, Barry," Jack said quietly.

"REMEMBER WHEN WE blew them up?"

"A fine night." The intelligence officer remembered watching through binoculars from the top of the Beirut Holiday Inn. He'd helped set that mission up. The only hard part, really, had been selecting the driver. There was an odd cachet about the American Marines, something seemingly mystical about them that this Ryan's nation clung to. But they died just like any other infidel. He wondered with amusement if there might be a large truck in Washington that one of his people might buy or lease. . . . He set the amusing thought aside. There was work to be done. It wasn't practical, anyway. He'd been to Washington more than once, and the Marine Barracks was one of the places he'd examined. It was too easily defended. Too bad, really. The political significance of the target made it highly attractive.

“NOT SMART,” DING observed over his morning coffee.

“Expect him to hide?” Clark asked.

“You know him, Daddy?” Patricia asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. Ding and I used to look after him back when we were SPOs. I knew his father, once . . . ,” John added without thinking, which was very unusual for him.

“What’s he like, Ding?” Patsy asked her fiance, the ring still fresh on her finger.

“Pretty smart,” Chavez allowed. “Kinda quiet. Nice guy, always has a kind word. Well, usually.”

“He’s been tough when he had to be,” John observed with an eye to his partner and soon-to-be son-in-law, which thought almost occasioned a chill. Then he saw the look in his daughter’s eyes, and the chill became quite real. Damn.

“That’s a fact,” the junior man agreed.

THE LIGHTS MADE HIM sweat under his makeup, and Ryan fought the urge to scratch the itches on his face. He managed to keep his hands still, but his facial muscles began a series of minor twitches that he hoped the camera didn’t catch.

“I’m afraid I can’t say, Barry,” he went on, holding his hands tightly together. “It’s just too soon to respond substantively to a lot of questions right now. When we’re able to give hard answers, we will. Until then, we won’t.”

“You have a big day ahead,” the CNN reporter said sympathetically.

“Barry, we all do.”

“Thank you, Mr. President.” He waited until the light went off and he heard a voice-over from the Atlanta headquarters before speaking again. “Good one. Thank you.”

Van Damm came in then, pushing Andrea Price aside as he did so. Few could touch a Secret Service agent without seriously adverse consequences, much less bustle one, but Arnie was one who could.

“Pretty good. Don’t do anything different. Answer the questions. Keep your answers short.”

Mrs. Abbot came in next to check Ryan’s makeup. A gentle hand touched his forehead while the other adjusted his hair with a small brush. Even for his high-school prom—what *was* her name? Ryan asked himself irrelevantly—neither he nor anyone else had been so fussy about his coarse black hair. Under other circumstances it would have been something to laugh about.

The CBS anchor was a woman in her middle thirties, and proof positive that brains and looks were not mutually exclusive.

“Mr. President, what is left of the government?” she asked after a couple of conventional get-acquainted questions.

“Maria”—Ryan had been instructed to address each reporter by the given name; he didn’t know why, but it seemed reasonable enough—“as horrid as the last twelve hours have been for all of us, I want to remind you of a speech President Durling gave a few weeks ago: America is still America. All of the

federal executive agencies will be operating today under the leadership of the sitting deputy secretaries, and—"

"But Washington—"

"For reasons of public safety, Washington is pretty well shut down, that is true—" She cut him off again, less from ill manners than from the fact that she only had four minutes to use, and she wanted to use them.

"The troops in the street . . . ?"

"Maria, the D.C. police and fire departments had the roughest night of all. It's been a long, cold night for those people. The Washington, D.C., National Guard has been called out to assist the civilian agencies. That also happens after hurricanes and tornadoes. In fact, that's really a municipal function. The FBI is working with the mayor to get the job done." It was Ryan's longest statement of the morning, and almost left him breathless, he was wound so tightly. That was when he realized that he was squeezing his hands to the point that his fingers were turning white, and Jack had to make a conscious effort to relax them.

"LOOK AT HIS arms," the Prime Minister observed. "What do we know of this Ryan?"

The chief of her country's intelligence service had a file folder in his lap which he had already memorized, having had the luxury of a working day to familiarize himself with the new chief of state.

"He's a career intelligence officer. You know about the incident in London, and later in the States some years ago—"

"Oh, yes," she noted, sipping her tea and dismissing that bit of history. "So, a spy . . ."

"A well-regarded one. Our Russian friends think very highly of him indeed. So does Century House," said the army general, whose training went back to the British tradition. Like his Prime Minister, he'd been educated at Oxford, and, in his case, Sandhurst. "He is highly intelligent. We have reason to believe that in his capacity as Durling's National Security Advisor he was instrumental in controlling American operations against Japan—"

"And us?" she asked, her eyes locked on the screen. How convenient it was to have communications satellites—and the American networks were all global now. Now you didn't have to spend a whole day in an aircraft to go and see a rival chief of state—and then under controlled circumstances. Now she could see the man under pressure and gauge how he responded to it. Career intelligence officer or not, he didn't look terribly comfortable. Every man had his limitations.

"Undoubtedly, Prime Minister."

"He is less formidable than your information would suggest," she told her adviser. *Tentative, uncomfortable, rattled . . . out of his depth.*

"WHEN DO YOU expect to be able to tell us more about what happened?" Maria asked.

"I really can't say right now. It's just too soon. Some things can't be rushed, I'm afraid," Ryan said. He vaguely grasped that he'd lost control of this interview, short as it was, and wasn't sure why. It never occurred to him that the TV reporters were lined up outside the Roosevelt Room like shoppers in a checkout line, that each one wanted to ask something new and different after the first question or two—and that each wanted to make an impression, not on the new President, but on the viewers, the unseen people behind the cameras who watched each morning show out of loyalty which the reporters had to strengthen whenever possible. As gravely wounded as the country was, reporting the news was the business which put food on their family tables, and Ryan was just one more subject of that business. That was why Arnie's earlier advice on how they'd been instructed on what questions to ask had been overly optimistic, even coming from an experienced political pro. The only really good news was that the interviews were all time-limited—in this case by local news delivered by the various network affiliates at twenty-five minutes after the hour. Whatever tragedy had struck Washington, people *needed* to know about local weather and traffic in the pursuit of their daily lives, a fact perhaps lost on those inside the D.C. Beltway, though not lost on the local stations across the country. Maria was more gracious than she felt when the director cut her off. She smiled at the camera—

"We'll be back."

—and Ryan had twelve minutes until NBC had at him. The coffee he'd had at breakfast was working on him now, and he needed to find a bathroom, but when he stood, the microphone wire nearly tripped him.

"This way, Mr. President," Price pointed to the left, down the corridor, then right toward the Oval Office, Jack realized too late. He stopped cold on entering the room. It was still someone else's in his mind, but a bathroom was a bathroom, and in this case, it was actually part of a sitting room off the office itself. Here, at least, there was privacy, even from the Praetorian Guard, which followed him like a pack of collies protecting a particularly valuable sheep. Jack didn't know that when there was someone in this particular head, a light on the upper door frame lit up, and that a peephole in the office door allowed the Secret Service to know even that aspect of their President's daily life.

Washing his hands, Ryan looked in the mirror, always a mistake at times like this. The makeup made him appear more youthful than he was, which wasn't so bad, but also phony, the false ruddiness which his skin had never had. He had to fight off the urge to wipe it all off before coming back out to face NBC. This anchor was a black male, and on shaking hands with him, back in the Roosevelt Room, it was of some consolation that his makeup was even more grotesque than his own. Jack was oblivious to the fact that the TV lights so affected the human complexion that to appear normal on a television screen, one had to appear the clown to non-electronic eyes.

"What will you be doing today, Mr. President?" Nathan asked as his fourth question.

"I have another meeting with acting FBI Director Murray—actually we'll be meeting twice a day for a while. I also have a scheduled session with the national security staff, then with some of the surviving members of Congress.

This afternoon, we have a Cabinet meeting."

"Funeral arrangements?" The reporter checked off another question from the list in his lap.

Ryan shook his head. "Too soon. I know it's frustrating for all of us, but these things do take time." He didn't say that the White House Protocol Office had fifteen minutes of his afternoon to brief him on what was being planned.

"It was a Japanese airliner, and in fact a government owned carrier. Do we have any reason to suspect—"

Ryan leaned forward at that one: "No, Nathan, we don't. We've had communications with the Japanese government. Prime Minister Koga has promised full cooperation, and we are taking him at his word. I want to emphasize that hostilities with Japan are completely over. What happened was a horrible mistake. That country is working to bring to justice the people who caused that conflict to take place. We don't yet know how everything happened—last night, I mean—but 'don't know' means *don't know*. Until we do, I want to discourage speculation. That can't help anything, but it can hurt, and there's been enough hurt for a while. We have to think about healing now."

"DOMO ARIGATO," MUTTERED the Japanese Prime Minister. It was the first time he'd seen Ryan's face or heard his voice. Both were younger than he'd expected, though he'd been informed of Ryan's particulars earlier in the day. Koga noted the man's tension and unease, but when he had something to say other than an obvious answer to an inane question—why did the Americans tolerate the insolence of their media?—the voice changed somewhat, as did the eyes. The difference was subtle, but Koga was a man accustomed to noting the smallest of nuance. It was one advantage of growing up in Japan, and all the more so for having spent his adult life in politics.

"He was a formidable enemy," a Foreign Ministry official noted quietly. "And in the past he showed himself to be a man of courage."

Koga thought about the papers he'd read two hours earlier. This Ryan had used violence, which the Japanese Prime Minister abhorred. But he had learned from two shadowy Americans who had probably saved his life from his own countrymen that violence had a place, just as surgery did, and Ryan had taken violent action to protect others, suffered in the process, then done so again before returning to peaceful pursuits. Yet again he'd displayed the same dichotomy, against Koga's country, fighting with skill and ruthlessness, then showing mercy and consideration. A man of courage . . .

"And honor, I think." Koga paused for a moment. So strange that there should already be friendship between two men who had never met, and who had only a week before been at war. "He is samurai."

THE ABC CORRESPONDENT, female and blond, had the name of Joy, which for some reason struck Ryan as utterly inappropriate to the day, but it was probably the name her parents had given her, and that was that. If Maria from

CBS had been pretty, Joy was stunning, and perhaps a reason ABC had the top-rated morning show. Her hello handshake was warm and friendly—and something else that almost made Jack's heart stop.

"Good morning, Mr. President," she said softly, in a voice better suited to a dinner party than a morning TV news show.

"Please." Ryan waved her to the chair opposite his.

"Ten minutes before the hour. We're here in the Roosevelt Room of the White House to speak with President John Patrick Ryan," her voice cooed to the camera. "Mr. President, it's been a long and difficult night for our country. What can you tell us?"

Ryan had it down sufficiently pat that the answer came out devoid of conscious thought. His voice was calm and slightly mechanical, and his eyes locked on hers, as he'd been told to do. In this case it wasn't hard to concentrate on her liquid brown eyes, though looking so deeply into them this early in the morning was disconcerting. He hoped it didn't show too much.

"Mr. President, the last few months have been very traumatic for all of us, and last night was only more so. You will be meeting with your national security staff in a few minutes. What are your greatest concerns?"

"Joy, a long time ago an American President said that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. Our country is as strong today as yesterday—"

"YES, THAT IS true." Daryaei had met Ryan once before. He'd been arrogant and defiant then, in the way of a dog standing before his master, snarling and brave—or seemingly so. But now the master was gone, and here was the dog, eyes fixed on a beautiful but sluttish woman, and it surprised Daryaei that his tongue wasn't out and drooling. Fatigue had something to do with it. Ryan was tired; that was plain to see. What else was he? He was like his country, the Ayatollah decided. Outwardly strong, perhaps. Ryan was a young man still, broad of shoulder, erect of posture. His eyes were clear, and his voice firm, but when asked of his country's strength, he spoke of fear and the fear of fear. Interesting.

Daryaei knew well enough that strength and power were things of the mind more than the body, a fact as true of nations as of men. America was a mystery to him, as were America's leaders. But how much did he have to know? America was a godless country. That was why this Ryan boy talked of fear. Without God, both the country and the man lacked direction. Some had said that the same was true of Daryaei's country, but if that were true at all, it was for a different reason, he told himself.

Like people all over the world, Daryaei concentrated on Ryan's face and voice. The answer to the first question was obviously mechanical. Whatever America knew about this glorious incident, they weren't telling. Probably they didn't know very much, but that was to be understood. His had been a long day, and Daryaei had used it profitably. He'd called his Foreign Ministry and had the chief of the America desk (actually a whole department in the official building in Tehran) order a paper on the working of the American government. The situation was even better than Daryaei had hoped. They could make no new laws, could levy no new taxes, could spend no new money

until such time as their Congress was reconstituted, and that would require time. Almost all of their ministries were headless. This Ryan boy—Daryaei was seventy-two-was the American government, and he was not impressed with what he saw.

The United States of America had thwarted him for years. So much power. Even after reducing its might following the downfall of the Soviet Union—the "lesser Satan"—America could do things possible for no other nation. All it needed was political resolve, and though that was rare enough, the threat of it was ever daunting. Every so often the country would rally behind a single purpose, as had happened not so long before against Iraq, with consequences so startlingly decisive as compared with what little his own country had managed in a shooting war that had lasted nearly a full decade. That was the danger of America. But America was a thinner reed now—or rather, America was, if not quite headless, then nearly so. The strongest body was rendered crippled and useless by an injury to its neck, the more so from one to its head. . . .

Just one man, Daryaei thought, not hearing the words from the television now. The words didn't matter now. Ryan wasn't saying anything of substance, but telling the man half a world away much with his demeanor. The new head of that country had a neck that became the focus of Daryaei's gaze. Its symbolism was clear. The technical issue, after all, was to complete the separation of head from body, and all that stood between the two was the neck.

"TEN MINUTES TO the next one," Arnie said after Joy left to catch her car to the airport. The Fox reporter was in makeup.

"How am I doing?" Jack disconnected the mike wire before standing this time. He needed to stretch his legs.

"Not bad," van Damm judged, charitably. He might have said something else to a career politician, but a real politico would have had to field really tough questions. It was as though a golfer were playing against his handicap instead of a tour-pro partner, and that was fair, as far as it went. Most important, Ryan needed to have his confidence built up if he were to function at all. The presidency was hard enough at the best of times, and while every holder of that office had wished more than once to be rid of Congress and other agencies and departments as well, it was Ryan who would have to learn how indispensable the whole system of government was—and he'd learn the hard way.

"I have to get used to a lot, don't I?" Jack leaned against the wall outside the Roosevelt Room, looking up and down the corridor.

"You'll learn," the chief of staff promised him.

"Maybe so." Jack smiled, not realizing that the activity of the morning—the recent activity—had given his mind something to shunt aside the other circumstances of the day. Then a Secret Service agent handed him a slip of paper.

HOWEVER UNFAIR IT was to the other families, it was to be understood that the first priority had to be the body of President Durling. No fewer than four mobile cranes had been set up on the west side of the building, operating under the direction of hard-hatted construction foremen standing with a team of skilled workers on the floor of the chamber, much too close for safety, but OSHA wasn't around this morning. The only government inspectors who mattered were Secret Service—the FBI might have had overall jurisdiction, but no one would have stood between them and their own mournful quest. There was a doctor and a team of paramedics standing by as well, on the unlikely chance that someone might have survived despite everything to the contrary. The real trick was coordinating the actions of the cranes, which dipped into the crater—that's how it looked—like a quartet of giraffes drinking from the same water hole, never quite banging together due to the skill of the operators.

"Look here!" The construction supervisor pointed. In the blackened claw of a dead hand was an automatic pistol. It had to be Andy Walker, principal agent of Roger Durling's Detail. The last frame of TV had shown him within feet of his President, racing to spirit him off the podium, but too late to accomplish anything more than his own death in the line of duty.

The next dip of the next crane. A cable was affixed around a block of sandstone, which rose slowly, twirling somewhat with the torsion of the steel cable. The remainder of Walker's body was now visible, along with the trousered legs of someone else. All around both were the splintered and discolored remains of the oak podium, even a few sheets of charred paper. The fire hadn't really reached through the pile of stones in this part of the ruined building. It had burned too rapidly for that.

"Hold it!" The construction man grabbed the arm of the Secret Service agent and wouldn't let him move. "They're not going anywhere. It's not worth getting killed for. Couple of more minutes." He waited for one crane to clear the path for the next, and waved his arms, telling the operator how to come in, where to dip, and when to stop. Two workers slipped a pair of cables around the next stone block, and the foreman twirled his hand in the air. The stone lifted.

"We have JUMPER," the agent said into his microphone. The medical team moved in at once, over the warning shouts of several construction men, but it was plain from twenty feet away that their time was wasted. His left hand held the binder containing his last speech. The falling stones had probably killed him before the fire had reached in far enough to singe his hair. Much of the body was misshapen from crushing, but the suit and the presidential tieclasp and the gold watch on his wrist positively identified President Roger Durling. Everything stopped. The cranes stood still, their diesel engines idling while their operators sipped their coffee or lit up smokes. A team of forensic photographers came in to snap their rolls of film from every possible angle.

They took their time. Elsewhere on the floor of the chamber, National Guardsmen were bagging bodies and carrying them off—they'd taken over this task from the firefighters two hours before—but for a fifty-foot circle, there were only Secret Service, performing their last official duty to JUMPER, as

they had called the President in honor of his service as a lieutenant in the 82nd Airborne. It had gone on too long for tears, though for all of the assembled agents those would come again, more than once. When the medics withdrew, when the photographers were satisfied, four agents in SECRET SERVICE windbreakers made their way down over the remaining stone blocks. First they lifted the body of Andy Walker, whose last conscious act had been to protect his "principal," and lowered it gently into the rubberized bag. The agents held it up so that another pair of their fellows could lift it clear and take it on its way. The next task was President Durling. This proved difficult. The body was askew in death, and the cold had frozen it. One arm was at a right angle to the rest of the body and would not fit into the bag. The agents looked at one another, not knowing what to do about it. The body was evidence and could not be tampered with. Perhaps more important was their horror at hurting a body already dead, and so President Durling went into the bag with the arm outstretched like Captain Ahab's. The four agents carried it out, making their way out of the chamber, around all of the fallen blocks, and then down toward an ambulance waiting for this single purpose. That tipped off the press photographers near and far, who snapped away, or zoomed in their TV cameras to capture the moment.

The moment cut into Ryan's Fox interview, and he watched the scene on the monitor that sat on the table. Somehow in his mind that made it official. Durling really was dead, and now he really was the President, and that was that. The camera in the room caught Ryan's face as it changed, as he remembered how Durling had brought him in, trusted him, leaned on him, guided him. . . .

That was it, Jack realized. He'd always had someone to lean on before. Sure, others had leaned on him, asked his opinion, given him his head in a crisis, but there was always someone to come back to, to tell him he'd done the right thing. He could do that now, but what he'd receive in return would be just opinions, not judgments. The judgments were his now. He'd hear all manner of things. His advisers would be like lawyers, some arguing one way, some arguing another, to tell him how he was both right and wrong at the same time, but when it was all over, the decision was his alone.

President Ryan's hand rubbed his face, heedless of the makeup, which he smeared. He didn't know that what Fox and the other networks were sending out was splitscreened now, since all had access to the pool feed from the Roosevelt Room. His head shook slightly from side to side in the way of a man who had to accept something he didn't like, his face too blank now for sadness. Behind the Capitol steps, the cranes started dipping again.

"Where do we go from here?" the Fox reporter asked. That question wasn't on his list. It was just a human reaction to a human scene. The cut to the Hill had bitten deep into the allotted time for the interview, and for another subject they would have carried over into the next segment, but the rules in the White House were adamantine.

"Quite a lot of work to be done," Ryan answered.

"Thank you, Mr. President. Fourteen minutes after the hour."

Jack watched the light on the TV camera blink off. The originating producer waited a few seconds before waving his hand, and the President detached his

microphone and cable. His first press marathon was over. Before leaving the room, he looked more carefully at the cameras. Earlier in his life he'd taught classes in history, and more recently he'd delivered briefings, but all of those had gone to a live audience whose eyes he could see and read, and from their reaction he would adjust his delivery somewhat, speeding up or slowing down, maybe tossing in a little humor if circumstances allowed, or repeating something to make his point clearer. Now his intimate chats would be directed to a *thing*. Something else not to like. Ryan left the room, while all over the world, people evaluated what they'd seen of the new American President. Television commentators would discuss him in fifty or more countries while he found the bathroom again.

"THIS IS THE best thing that's happened to our country since Jefferson." The older man rated himself a serious student of history. He liked Thomas Jefferson for his statement about how a country governed least was governed best, which was about all he knew of the adages from the Sage of Monticello.

"And it took a Jap to do it, looks like." The statement was trailed by an ironic snort. Such an event could even invalidate his closely held racism. Couldn't have that, could he?

They'd been up all night—it was 5:20 local time—watching the TV news coverage, which hadn't stopped. The newsies, they noted, looked even more wasted than this Ryan guy. Time zones did have an advantage. Both had stopped drinking beer around midnight, and had switched to coffee two hours later when they'd both started dozing. Couldn't have that. What they saw, switching through channels downloaded on a large satellite dish outside the cabin, was like some sort of fantastic telethon, except this one wasn't about raising money for crippled children or AIDS victims or nigger schools. This one was fun. All those Washington bastards, must have been burned to a crisp, most of them.

"Bureaucrat barbecue," Peter Holbrook said for the seventeenth time since 11:30, when he'd come up with his summation of the event. He'd always been the creative one in the movement.

"Aw, *shit*, Pete!" gasped Ernest Brown, spilling some of his coffee into his lap. It was *still* funny, enough so that he didn't leap immediately to his feet from the uncomfortable feeling that resulted from his slip.

"Has been a long night," Holbrook allowed, laughing himself. They'd watched President Durling's speech for a couple of reasons. For one, all of the networks had preempted normal programs, as was usually the case for an important event; but the truth of the matter was that their satellite downlink gave them access to a total of 117 channels, and they didn't even have to switch the set off to avoid input from the government they and their friends despised. The deeper reason was that they cultivated their anger at their government, and usually watched such speeches—both men caught at least an hour a day of C-SPAN-1 and–2—to fuel those feelings, trading barbed comments back and forth every minute of a presidential speech.

"So, who is this Ryan guy, really?" Brown asked, yawning.

"Another 'crat, looks like. A bureaucrat talking bureaucrap."

"Yeah," judged Brown. "With nothing to back him up, Pete."

Holbrook turned and looked at his friend. "It's really som'thin', isn't it?" With that observation he got up and walked to the bookshelves that walled the south side of his den. His copy of the Constitution was a well-thumbed pamphlet edition which he read as often as he could, so as to improve his understanding of the *intent* of the drafters. "You know, Pete, there's nothing in here to cover a situation like this."

"Really?"

Holbrook nodded. "Really."

"No shit." That required some thought, didn't it?

"MURDERED?" PRESIDENT RYAN asked, still wiping the makeup off his face with wet towelettes of the same sort he'd used to clean off baby bottoms. At least it made his face feel clean when he'd finished.

"That's the preliminary indication, both from a cursory examination of the body and from a quick-and-dirty examination of the cockpit tapes." Murray flipped through the notes faxed to him only twenty minutes before.

Ryan leaned back in his chair. Like much else in the Oval Office, it was new. On the credenza behind him, all of Durling's family and personal photos had been removed. The papers on the desk had been taken away for examination by the presidential secretarial staff. What remained or what had been substituted were accoutrements from White House stores. The chair at least was a good one, expensively designed to protect the back of its occupant, and it would soon be substituted for a custom designed chair fitted to his own back by a manufacturer who performed the service for free and—remarkably—without public fanfare. Sooner or later he'd have to work in this place, Jack had decided a few minutes earlier. The secretaries were here, and it wasn't fair to make them trek across the building, up and down stairs. Sleeping in this place was another issue entirely—for the moment; that, too, had to change, didn't it? So, he thought, staring across the desk at Murray, *murder*.

"Shot?"

Dan shook his head. "Knife right in the heart, only one penetration. The wound looked to our agent to be from a thin blade, like a steak knife. From the cockpit tapes, it appears that it was done prior to takeoff. Looks like we can time-stamp that pretty exactly. From just prior to engine start-up to the moment of impact, the only voice on the tapes is the pilot. His name was Sato, a very experienced command pilot. The Japanese police have gotten a pile of data to us. It would seem that he lost a brother and a son in the war. The brother commanded a destroyer that got sunk with all hands. The son was a fighter pilot who cracked up on landing after a mission. Both on the same day or near enough. So, it was personal. Motive and opportunity, Jack," Murray allowed himself to say, for they were almost alone in the office. Andrea Price was there, too. She didn't quite approve; she had not yet been told exactly how far back the two men went.

"That's pretty fast on the ID," Price observed.

"It has to be firmed up," Murray agreed. "We'll do that with DNA testing just to be sure. The cockpit tape is good enough for voice-print analysis, or so

they told our agent. The Canadians have radar tapes tracking the aircraft out of their airspace, so confirming the timing of the event is simple. We have the aircraft firmly ID'd from Guam to Japan to Vancouver, and into the Capitol building. Like they say, it's all over but the shouting. There *will* be a lot of shouting. Mr. President"—Andrea Price felt better this time–"it will be at least two months before we have every lead and tidbit of information nailed down, and I suppose it's possible that we could be wrong, but for all practical purposes, in my opinion and that of our senior agents at the scene, this case is well on its way to being closed."

"What could make you wrong?" Ryan asked.

"Potentially quite a few things, but there are practical considerations. For this to be anything other than the act of a single fanatic—no, that's not fair, is it? One very angry man. Anyway, for this to be a conspiracy, we have to assume detailed planning, and that's hard to support. How would they know the war was going to be lost, how did they know about the joint session—and if it were planned as a war operation, like the NTSB guy said, hell, ten tons of high explosives would have been simple to load aboard."

"Or a nuke," Jack interjected.

"Or a nuke." Murray nodded. "That reminds me: the Air Force attaché is going to see their nuclear-weapons-fabrication facility today. It took the Japanese a couple of days to figure out where it was. We're having a guy who knows the things flying over there right now." Murray checked his notes. "Dr. Woodrow Lowell—oh, I know him. He runs the shop at Lawrence Livermore. Prime Minister Koga told our ambassador that he wants to hand over the damned things PDQ and get them the hell out of his country."

Ryan turned his chair around. The windows behind him faced the Washington Monument. That obelisk was surrounded by a circle of flagpoles, all of whose flags were at half-staff. But he could see that people were lined up for the elevator ride to the top. Tourists who'd come to D.C. to see the sights. Well, they were getting a bargain of sorts, weren't they? The Oval Office windows, he saw, were incredibly thick, just in case one of those tourists had a sniper rifle tucked under his coat. . . .

"How much of this can we release?" President Ryan asked.

"I'm comfortable with releasing a few things," Murray responded.

"You sure?" Price asked.

"It's not as though we have to protect evidence for a criminal trial. The subject in the case is dead. We'll chase down all the possibilities of co-conspirators, but the evidence we let go today will not compromise that in any way. I'm not exactly a fan of publicizing criminal evidence, but the people out there want to know something, and in a case like this one, you let them have it."

Besides, Price thought, *it makes the Bureau look good*. With that silent observation, at least one government agency started returning to normal.

"Who's running this one at Justice?" she asked instead.

"Pat Martin."

"Oh? Who picked him?" she asked. Ryan turned to see the discourse on this one.

Murray almost blushed. "I guess I did. The President said to pick the best

career prosecutor, and that's Pat. He's been head of the Criminal Division for nine months. Before that he ran Espionage. Ex-Bureau. He's a particularly good lawyer, been there almost thirty years. Bill Shaw wanted him to become a judge. He was talking to the AG about it only last week."

"You sure he's good enough?" Jack asked. Price decided to answer.

"We've worked with him, too. He's a real pro, and Dan's right, he's real judge material, tough as hell, but also extremely fair. He handled a mob counterfeiting case my old partner ramrodded in New Orleans."

"Okay, let him decide what to let out. He can start talking to the press right after lunch." Ryan checked his watch. He'd been President for exactly twelve hours.

COLONEL PIERRE ALEXANDRE, U.S. Army, retired, still looked like a soldier, tall and thin and fit, and that didn't bother the dean at all. Dave James immediately liked what he saw as his visitor took his seat, liked him even more for what he'd read in the man's c.v., and more still for what he'd learned over the phone. Colonel Alexandre—"Alex" to his friends, of which he had many—was an expert in infectious disease who'd spent twenty productive years in the employ of his government, divided mainly between Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington and Fort Detrick in Maryland, with numerous field trips sprinkled in. Graduate of West Point and the University of Chicago Medical School, Dr. James saw. Good, his eyes again sweeping over the residency and other professional-experience entries. The list of published articles ran to eight single-spaced pages. Nominated for a couple of important prizes, but not lucky yet. Well, maybe Hopkins could change that. His dark eyes were not especially intense at the moment. By no means an arrogant man, Alexandre knew who and what he was—better yet, knew that Dean James knew.

"I know Gus Lorenz," Dean James said with a smile. "We interned together at Peter Brent Brigham." Which Harvard had since consolidated into Brigham and Women's.

"Brilliant guy," Alexandre agreed in his best Creole drawl. It was generally thought that Gus's work on Lassa and Q fever put him in the running for a Nobel Prize. "And a great doc."

"So, why don't you want to work with him in Atlanta? Gus tells me he wants you pretty bad."

"Dean James—"

"Dave," the Dean said.

"Alex," the colonel responded. There was something to be said for civilian life, after all. Alexandre thought of the dean as a three-star equivalent. Maybe four stars. Johns Hopkins carried a lot of prestige. "Dave, I've worked in a lab damned near all my life. I want to treat patients again. CDC would just be more of the same. Much as I like Gus—we did a lot of work together in Brazil back in 1987; we get along just fine," he assured the dean. "I am *tired* of looking at slides and printouts all the time." And for the same reason he'd turned down one hell of an offer from Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, to head up one of their new labs. Infectious diseases were a coming thing in medicine, and

both men hoped that it wasn't too late. Why the *hell*, James wondered, hadn't this guy made general-officer rank? Maybe politics, the dean thought. The Army had that problem, too, just as Hopkins did. But their loss . . .

"I talked about you with Gus last night."

"Oh?" Not that it was surprising. At this level of medicine everyone knew everyone else.

"He says just hire you on the spot—"

"Good of him," Alexandre chuckled.

"—before Harry Tuttle at Yale gets you for his lab."

"You know Harry?" Yep, and everybody knew what everybody else was doing, too.

"Classmates here," the dean explained. "We both dated Wendy. He won. You know, Alex, there isn't much for me to ask you."

"I hope that's good."

"It is. We can start you off as an associate professor working under Ralph Forster. You'll have a lot of lab work—good team to work with. Ralph has put a good shop together in the last ten years. But we're starting to get a lot of clinical referrals. Ralph's getting a little old to travel so much, so you can expect to get around the world some. You'll also be in charge of the clinical side in, oh, six months to get your feet good and wet . . . ?"

The retired colonel nodded thoughtfully. "That's just about right. I need to relearn a few things. Hell, when does learning ever stop?"

"When you become an administrator, if you're not careful."

"Yeah, well, now you know why I hung up the green suit. They wanted me to command up a hospital, you know, punch the ticket. Damn it, I know I'm good in a lab, okay? I'm very good in a lab. But I signed on to treat people once in a while—and to teach some, naturally, but I like to see sick people and send them home healthy. Once upon a time somebody in Chicago told me that's what the job was."

If this was a selling job, Dean James thought, then he'd taken lessons from Olivier. Yale could offer him about the same post, but this one would keep Alexandre close to Fort Detrick, and ninety minutes' flying time to Atlanta, and close to the Chesapeake Bay—in the resume, it said Alexandre liked to fish. Well, that figured, growing up in the Louisiana bayous. In sum total, that was Yale's bad luck. Professor Harold Tuttle was as good as they came, maybe a shade better than Ralph Forster, but in five years or so Ralph would retire, and Alexandre here had the look of a star. More than anything else, Dean James was in the business of recruiting future stars. In another reality, he would have been the G.M. for a winning baseball team. So, that was settled. James closed the folder on his desk.

"Doctor, welcome to the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine."

"Thank you, sir."

4

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THE REST OF THE DAY WAS a blur. Even while living through it, Ryan knew that he'd never really remember more than snippets. His first experience with computers had been as a student at Boston College. Before the age of personal computing, he'd used the dumbest of dumb terminals—a teletype—to communicate with a mainframe somewhere, along with other BC students, and more still from other local schools. That had been called "time-sharing," just one more term from a bygone age when computers had cost a million or so dollars for performance that now could be duplicated in the average man's watch. But the term still applied to the American presidency, Jack learned, where the ability to pursue a single thought through from beginning to end was the rarest of luxuries, and work consisted of following various intellectual threads from one separate meeting to the next, like keeping track of a whole group of continuing TV series from episode to episode, trying not to confuse one with another, and knowing that avoiding that error was totally impossible.

After dismissing Murray and Price, it had begun in earnest.

Ryan's introduction began with a national-security briefing delivered by one of the national intelligence officers assigned to the White House staff. Here, over a period of twenty-six minutes, he learned what he already knew because of the job he'd held until the previous day. But he had to sit through it anyway, if for no other reason than to get a feel for the man who would be one of his daily briefing team. They were all different. Each one had an individual perspective, and Ryan had to understand the nuances peculiar to the separate voices he'd be hearing.

"So, nothing on the horizon for now?" Jack asked.

"Nothing we see at the National Security Council, Mr. President. You know the potential trouble spots as well as I do, of course, and those change on a day-to-day basis." The man hedged with the grace of someone who'd been dancing to this particular brand of music for years. Ryan's face didn't change, only because he'd seen it before. A real intelligence officer didn't fear death, didn't fear finding his wife in bed with his best friend, didn't fear any of the normal vicissitudes of life. A national intelligence officer *did* fear being found wrong on anything he said in his official capacity. To avoid that was simple, however: you never took a real stand on any single thing. It was a disease not limited to elected officials, after all. Only the President *had* to take a stand, and it was his good fortune to have such trained experts to supply him with the information he needed, wasn't it?

"Let me tell you something," Ryan said after a few seconds of reflection.

"What is that, sir?" the NIO asked cautiously.

"I don't just want to hear what you know. I also want to hear what you and your people *think*. You are responsible for what you know, but I'll take the heat for acting on what you think. I've been there and done that, okay?"

"Of course, Mr. President." The man allowed himself a smile that masked his terror at the prospect. "I'll pass that along to my people."

"Thank you." Ryan dismissed the man, knowing then and there that he needed a National Security Advisor he could trust, and wondering where he'd get one.

The door opened as though by magic to let the NIO out—a Secret Service agent had done that, having watched through the spy hole for most of the briefing. The next in was a DOD briefing team.

The senior man was a two-star who handed over a plastic card.

"Mr. President, you need to put this in your wallet."

Jack nodded, knowing what it was before his hands touched the orange plastic. It looked like a credit card, but on it was a series of number groups. . . .

"Which one?" Ryan asked.

"You decide, sir."

Ryan did so, reading off the third such group twice. There were two commissioned officers with the general, a colonel and a major, both of whom wrote down the number group he'd selected and read it back to him twice. President Ryan now had the ability to order the release of strategic nuclear weapons.

"Why is this necessary?" he asked. "We trashed the last ballistic weapons last year."

"Mr. President, we still have cruise missiles which can be armed with W-80 warheads, plus B-61 gravity bombs assigned to our bomber fleet. We need your authorization to enable the Permissible Action Links—the PALs—and the idea is that we enable them as early as possible, just in case "

Ryan completed the sentence: "I get taken out early."

You're really important now, Jack, a nasty little voice told him. *Now you can initiate a nuclear attack*. "I hate those goddamned things. Always have."

"You aren't supposed to like them, sir," the general sympathized. "Now, as you know, the Marines have the VMH-1 helicopter squadron that's always ready to get you out of here and to a place of safety at a moment's notice, and . . ."

Ryan listened to the rest while his mind wondered if he should do what Jimmy Carter had done at this point: *Okay, let's see, then. Tell them I want them to pick me up* Now. Which presidential command had turned into a major embarrassment for a lot of Marines. But he couldn't do that now, could he? It would get out that Ryan was a paranoid fool, not someone who wanted to see if the system really worked the way people said it would. Besides, today VMH-1 would definitely be spun up, wouldn't it?

The fourth member of the briefing team was an Army warrant officer in civilian clothes who carried a quite ordinary-looking briefcase known as "the football," inside of which was a binder, inside of which was the attack plan—actually a whole set of them . . .

"Let me see it." Ryan pointed. The warrant hesitated, then unlocked the case and handed over the navy blue binder, which Ryan flipped open.

"Sir, we haven't changed it since—"

The first section, Jack saw, was labeled MAJOR ATTACK OPTION. It showed a map of Japan, many of whose cities were marked with multicolored dots. The legend at the bottom showed what the dots meant in terms of delivered megatonnage; probably another page would quantify the predicted deaths. Ryan opened the binder rings and removed the whole section. "I want these pages burned. I want this MAO eliminated immediately." That merely meant that it would be filed away in some drawer in Pentagon War Plans, and also in Omaha. Things like this never died.

"Sir, we have not yet confirmed that the Japanese have destroyed all of their launchers, nor have we confirmed the neutralization of their weapons. You see—"

"General, that's an order," Ryan said quietly. "I can give them, you know."

The man's back braced to attention. "Yes, Mr. President."

Ryan flipped through the rest of the binder. Despite his previous job, what he found was a revelation. Jack had always avoided too-intimate knowledge of the damned things. He'd never expected them to be used. After the terrorist incident in Denver and all the horror that had swept the surface of the planet in its aftermath, statesmen across continents and political beliefs had indulged themselves in a collective think about the weapons under their control. Even during the shooting war with Japan just ended, Ryan had known that somewhere, some team of experts had concocted a plan for a nuclear retaliatory strike, but he'd concentrated his efforts at making it unnecessary, and it was a source of considerable pride to the new President that he'd never even contemplated implementing the plan whose summary was still in his left hand. LONG RIFLE, he saw, was the code name. Why did the names have to be like that, virile and exciting, as though for something that one could be proud of?

"What's this one? LIGHT Switch . . . ?"

"Mr. President," the general answered, "that's a method of using an EMP attack. Electromagnetic pulse. If you explode a device at very high altitude, there's nothing—no air, actually—to absorb the initial energy of the detonation and convert it into mechanical energy—no shock wave, that is. As a result all the energy goes out in its original electromagnetic form. The resulting energy surge is murder on power and telephone lines. We always had a bunch of weapons fused for high-altitude burst in our SIOPs for the Soviet Union. Their telephone system was so primitive that it would have been easy to destroy. It's a cheap mission-kill, won't really hurt anybody on the ground."

"I see." Ryan closed the binder and handed it back to the warrant officer, who immediately locked the now lighter document away. "I take it there's nothing going on which is likely to require a nuclear strike of any kind?"

"Correct, Mr. President."

"So, what's the point of having this man sitting outside my office all the time?"

"You can't predict all possible contingencies, can you, sir?" the general asked. It must have been difficult for him to deliver the line with a straight

face, Ryan realized, as soon as the shock went away.

"I guess not," a chastised President replied.

THE WHITE HOUSE Protocol Office was headed by a lady named Judy Simmons, who'd been seconded to the White House staff from the State Department four months earlier. Her office in the basement of the building had been busy since just after midnight, when she'd arrived from her home in Burke, Virginia. Her thankless job was to prepare arrangements for what would be the largest state funeral in American history, a task on which over a hundred staff members had already kibitzed, and it was not yet lunchtime.

The list of all the dead still had to be compiled, but from careful examination of the videotapes it was largely known who was in the chamber, and there was biographical information on all of them—married or single, religion, etc.—from which to make the necessary, if preliminary, plans. Whatever was finally decided, Jack would be the master of the grim ceremony, and had to be kept informed of every step of the planning. A funeral for thousands, Ryan thought, most of whom he hadn't known, for most of whose as yet unrecovered bodies waited wives and husbands and children.

"National Cathedral," he saw, turning the page. The approximate numbers of religious affiliations had been compiled. That would determine the clergy to take the various functions in the ecumenical religious service.

"That's where such ceremonies are usually carried out, Mr. President," a very harried official confirmed. "There will not be room for all of the remains"—she didn't say that one White House staffer had suggested an outdoor memorial service at RFK Stadium in order to accommodate all the victims "but there will be room for the President and Mrs. Durling, plus a representative sampling of the congressional victims. We've contacted eleven foreign governments on the question of the diplomats who were present. We also have a preliminary list of foreign government representatives who will be coming in to attend the ceremony." She handed over that sheet as well.

Ryan scanned it briefly. It meant that after the memorial service he'd be meeting "informally" with numerous chiefs of state to conduct "informal" business. He'd need a briefing page for each meeting, and in addition to whatever they all might ask or want, every one would be checking him out. Jack knew how that worked. All over the world, presidents, prime ministers, and a few lingering dictators would now be reading briefing documents of their own—who was this John Patrick Ryan, and what can we expect of him? He wondered if they had a better idea of the answer than he did. Probably not. Their NIOs wouldn't be all that different from his, after all. And so a raft of them would come over on government jets, partly to show respect for President Durling and the American government, partly to eyeball the new American President, partly for domestic political consumption at home, and partly because it was expected that they should do so. And so this event, horrific as it was for uncounted thousands, was just one more mechanical exercise in the world of politics. Jack wanted to cry out in rage, but what else was there to do? The dead were dead, and all his grief could not bring them back, and the business of his country and others would go on.

"Have Scott Adler go over this, will you?" Somebody would have to determine how much time he should spend with the official visitors, and Ryan wasn't qualified to do that.

"Yes, Mr. President."

"What sort of speeches will I have to deliver?" Jack asked.

"We have our people working on that for you. You should have preliminary drafts by tomorrow afternoon," Mrs. Simmons replied.

President Ryan nodded and slid the papers into his out-pile. When the Chief of Protocol left, a secretary came in—he didn't know this lady's name—with a pile of telegrams, the leftovers from Eighth and I that he hadn't gotten to, plus another sheet of paper that showed his activities for the day, prepared without his input or assistance. He was about to grumble about that when she spoke.

"We have over ten thousand telegrams and e-mails from—well, from citizens," she told him.

"Saying what?"

"Mainly that they're praying for you."

"Oh." Somehow that came as a surprise, and a humbling one at that. But would God listen?

Jack went back to reading the official messages, and the first day went on.

THE COUNTRY HAD essentially come to a halt, even as its new President struggled to come to terms with his new job. Banks and financial markets were closed, as were schools and many businesses. All the television networks had moved their broadcast headquarters to the various Washington bureaus in a haphazard process that had them all working together. A gang of cameras sited around the Hill kept up a continuous feed of recovery operations, while reporters had to keep talking, lest the airwaves be filled with silence. Around eleven that morning, a crane removed the remains of the 747's tail, which was deposited on a large flatbed trailer for transport to a hangar at Andrews Air Force Base. That would be the site for what was called the "crash investigation," for want of a better term, and cameras tracked the vehicle as it threaded its way along the streets. Two of the engines went out shortly thereafter in much the same way.

Various "experts" helped fill the silence, speculating on what had happened and how. This was difficult for everyone involved, as there had been few leaks as yet those who were trying to find out what had happened were too busy to talk with reporters on or off the record, and though the journalists couldn't say it, their most fertile source of leaks lay in ruin before thirty-four cameras. That gave the experts little to say. Witnesses were interviewed for their recollections—there was no tape of the inbound aircraft at all, much to the surprise of everyone. The tail number of the aircraft was known—it could hardly be missed, painted as it was on the wreckage of the aircraft, and that was as easily checked by reporters as by federal authorities. The ownership of the aircraft by Japan Airlines was immediately confirmed, along with the very day the aircraft had rolled out of the Boeing plant near Seattle. Officials of that company submitted to interviews, and along the way it was determined that the 747-400 (PIP) aircraft weighed just over two hundred tons empty, a

number doubled with the mass of fuel, passengers, and baggage it could pull into the air. A pilot with United Airlines who was familiar with the aircraft explained to two of the networks how a pilot could approach Washington and then execute the death dive, while a Delta colleague did the same with the others. Both airmen were mistaken in some of the particulars, none of them important.

"But the Secret Service is armed with antiaircraft missiles, isn't it?" one anchor asked.

"If you've got an eighteen-wheeler heading for you at sixty miles an hour, and you shoot out one of the tires on the trailer, that doesn't stop the truck, does it?" the pilot answered, noting the look of concentrated intelligence on the face of a highly paid journalist who understood little more than what appeared on his TelePrompTer. "Three hundred tons of aircraft doesn't just *stop*, okay?"

"So, there was no way to stop it?" the anchor asked with a twisted face.

"None at all." The pilot could see that the reporter didn't understand, but he couldn't come up with anything to clarify matters further.

The director, in his control room off of Nebraska Avenue, changed cameras to follow a pair of Guardsmen bringing another body down the steps. An assistant director was keeping an eye on that set of cameras, trying to maintain a running tally of the number of bodies removed. It was now known that the bodies of President and Mrs. Durling had been recovered and were at Walter Reed Army Medical Center for autopsy—required by law for wrongful death—and disposition. At network headquarters in New York, every foot of videotape of or about Durling was being organized and spliced for presentation throughout the day. Political colleagues were being sought out and interviewed. Psychologists were taken on to explain how the Durling children could deal with the trauma, and then expanded their horizons to talk about the impact of the event on the country as a whole, and how people could deal with it. About the only thing not examined on the television news was the spiritual aspect; that many of the victims had believed in God and attended church from time to time was not worthy of air time, though the presence of many people in churches was deemed newsworthy enough for three minutes on one network—and then, because each was constantly monitoring the others for ideas, that segment was copied by the others over the next few hours.

IT ALL CAME down to this, really, Jack knew. The numbers only added individual examples, identical to this one in magnitude and horror. He'd avoided it for as much of the day as had been possible, but finally his cowardice had run out.

The Durling kids hovered between the numbness of denial, and terror of a world destroyed before their eyes as they'd watched their father on TV. They'd never see Mom and Dad again. The bodies were far too damaged for the caskets to be open. No last good-byes, no words, just the traumatic removal of the foundation that held up their young lives. And how were children supposed to understand that Mom and Dad weren't just Mom and Dad, but

were had been—something else to someone else, and for that reason, their deaths had been necessary to someone who hadn't known or cared about the kids?

Family members had descended on Washington, most of them flown in by the Air Force from California. Equally shocked, they nevertheless, in the presence of children, had to summon from within themselves the strength to make things somewhat easier for the young. And it gave them something to do. The Secret Service agents assigned to JUNIPER and JUNIOR were probably the most traumatized of all. Trained to be ferociously protective of any "principal," the agents who looked after the Durling kids—more than half were women—carried the additional burden of the normal solicitude any human held for any child, and none of them would have hesitated a microsecond to give his or her life to protect the youngsters–in the knowledge that the rest of the Detail would have weapons out and blazing. The men and women of this sub-detail had played with the kids, had bought them Christmas and birthday presents, had helped with homework. Now they were saying good-bye, to the kids, to the parents, and to colleagues. Ryan saw the looks on their faces, and made a mental note to ask Andrea if the Service would assign a psychologist to them.

"No, it didn't hurt." Jack was sitting down so that the kids could look level into his eyes. "It didn't hurt at all."

"Okay," Mark Durling said. The kids were immaculately dressed. One of the family members had thought it important that they be properly turned out to meet their father's successor. Jack heard a gasp of breath, and his peripheral vision caught the face of an agent—this one a man—who was on the edge of losing it. Price grabbed his arm and moved him toward the door, before the kids could take note of it.

"Do we stay here?"

"Yes," Jack assured him. It was a lie, but not the sort to hurt anyone. "And if you need anything, anything at all, you can come and see me, okay?"

The boy nodded, doing his best to be brave, and it was time to leave him to his family. Ryan squeezed his hand, treating him like the man he ought not to have become for years, for whom the duties of manhood were arriving all too soon. The boy needed to cry, and Ryan thought he needed to do that alone, for now.

Jack walked out the door into the oversized hall of the bedroom level. The agent who'd left, a tall, rugged-looking black man, was sobbing ten feet away. Ryan went over to him.

"You okay?"

"Fuck—sorry—I mean—shit!" the agent shook his head, ashamed at the display of emotion. His father had been lost in an Army training accident at Fort Rucker, Price knew, when he was twelve years old, and Special Agent Tony Wills, who'd played tight end at Grambling before joining the Service, was unusually good with kids. At times like this, strengths often became weaknesses.

"Don't apologize for being human. I lost my mom and dad, too. Same time," Ryan went on, his voice dreamy and uneven with fatigue. "Midway Airport, 737 landed short in snow. But I was all grown up when it happened."

"I know, sir." The agent wiped his eyes and stood erect with a shudder. "I'll be okay."

Ryan patted him on the shoulder and headed for the elevator. To Andrea Price: "Get me the hell out of here."

The Suburban headed north, turning left onto Massachusetts Avenue, which led to the Naval Observatory and the oversized Victorian-gingerbread barn which the country provided for the sitting Vice President. Again, it was guarded by Marines, who let the convoy through. Jack walked into the house. Cathy was waiting at the entry. She only needed one look.

"Tough one?"

All Ryan could do was nod. He held her tight, knowing that his tears would start soon. His eyes caught the knot of agents around the periphery of the entry hall of the house, and it occurred to him that he'd have to get used to them, standing like impassive statues, present in the most private of moments.

I hate this job.

BUT BRIGADIER GENERAL Marion Diggs loved his. Not everyone had stood down. As the Marine Barracks in Washington had gone to a high level of activity, then to be augmented from the sprawling base at Quantico, Virginia, so other organizations remained busy or became busier, for they were people who were not really allowed to sleep anyway—at least not all of them at once. One of these organizations was at Fort Irwin, California. Located in the high Mojave Desert, the base really did sprawl, over an area larger than the state of Rhode Island. The landscape was bleak enough that ecologists had to struggle to find an ecology there among the scrawny creosote bushes, and over drinks even the most dedicated of that profession would confess to finding the surface of the moon far more interesting. Not that they hadn't made his life miserable, Diggs thought, fingering his binoculars. There was a species of desert tortoise, which was distinguished from a turtle somehow or other (the general didn't have a clue), and which soldiers had to protect. To take care of that, his soldiers had collected all the tortoises they could find and then relocated them to an enclosure large enough that the reptiles probably didn't notice the fence at all. It was known locally as the world's largest turtle bordello. With that out of the way, whatever other wildlife existed at Fort Irwin seemed quite able to look after itself. The occasional coyote appeared and disappeared, and that was that. Besides, coyotes were not endangered.

The visitors were. Fort Irwin was home to the Army's National Training Center. The permanent residents of that establishment were the OpFor, "the opposing force." Originally two battalions, one of armor and the other of mechanized infantry, the OpFor had once styled itself the "32nd Guards Motor Rifle Regiment," a *Soviet* designation, because at its opening in the 1980s, the NTC had been designed to teach the U.S. Army how to fight, survive, and prevail in a battle against the Red Army on the plains of Europe. The soldiers of the "32nd" dressed in Russian-style uniforms, drove Soviet-like equipment (the real Russian vehicles had proved too difficult to maintain, and American gear had been modified to Soviet shapes), employed Russian tactics, and took pride in kicking the hell out of the units that came to play on their turf. It

wasn't strictly fair. The OpFor lived here and trained here, and hosted regular units up to fourteen times per year, whereas the visiting team might be lucky to come here once in four years. But nobody had ever said war was fair.

Times had changed with the demise of the Soviet Union, but the mission of the NTC had not. The OpFor had recently been enlarged to three battalions—now called "squadrons," because the unit had assumed the identity of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, the Blackhorse Cav—and simulated brigade or larger enemy formations. The only real concession to the new political world was that they didn't call themselves Russians anymore. Now they were "Krasnovians," a word, however, derived from *krasny,* Russian for "red."

General-Lieutenant Gennady Tosefovich Bondarenko knew most of this—the turtle bordello was something on which he'd not been briefed; his initial tour of the base had taken care of that, however—and was as excited as he had ever been.

"You started in Signal Corps?" Diggs asked. The base commander was terse of speech and efficient of movement, dressed in desert-camouflage fatigues called "chocolate chip" from their pattern. He, too, had been fully briefed, though, like his visitor, he had to pretend that he hadn't been.

"Correct." Bondarenko nodded. "But I kept getting into trouble. First Afghanistan, then when the Mudje raided into Soviet Union. They attacked a defense research facility in Tadzhik when I was visitor there. Brave fighters, but unevenly led. We managed to hold them off," the Russian reported in a studied monotone. Diggs could see the decorations that had resulted; he had commanded a cavalry squadron leading Barry McCaffrey's 24th Mechanized Infantry Division in a wild ride on the American left during Desert Storm, then gone on to command the 10th "Buffalo" ACR, still based in the Negev Desert, as part of America's commitment to Israeli security. Both men were forty-nine. Both had smelled the smoke. Both were on the way up.

"You have country like this at home?" Diggs asked.

"We have every sort of terrain you can imagine. It makes training a challenge, especially today. There," he said. "It's started."

The first group of tanks was rolling now, down a broad, U-shaped pass called the Valley of Death. The sun was setting behind the brown-colored mountains, and darkness came rapidly here. Scuttling around also were the HMMWVs of the observer-controllers, the gods of the NTC, who watched everything and graded what they saw as coldly as Death himself. The NTC was the world's most exciting school. The two generals could have observed the battle back at base headquarters in a place called the Star Wars Room. Every vehicle was wired, transmitting its location, direction of movement, and when the time came, where it was shooting and whether it scored a hit or not. From that data, the computers at Star Wars sent out signals, telling people when they had died, though rarely why. That fact they learned later from the observer-controllers. The generals didn't want to watch computer screens, however Bondarenko's staff officers were doing that, but the place for their general was here. Every battlefield had a smell, and generals had to have the nose for it.

"Your instrumentation is like something from a science novel."

Diggs shrugged. "Not much changed from fifteen years ago. We have more

TV cameras on the hilltops now, though." America would be selling much of that technology to the Russians. That was a little hard for Diggs to accept. He'd been too young for Vietnam. His was the first generation of flag officers to have avoided that entanglement. But Diggs had grown up with one reality in his life: fighting the Russians in Germany. A cavalry officer for his entire career, he'd trained to be in one of the forwarddeployed regiments—really, augmented brigades—to make first contact. Diggs could remember a few times when it had seemed pretty damned likely that he'd find his death in the Fulda Gap, facing somebody like the man standing next to him, with whom he'd killed a six-pack the night before over stories of how turtles reproduced.

"In," Bondarenko said with a sly grin. Somehow the Americans thought Russians were humorless. He *had* to correct that misimpression before he left.

Diggs counted ten before his deadpan reply: "Out."

Ten more seconds: "In." Then both started laughing. When first introduced to the favorite base joke, it had taken half a minute for Bondarenko to get it. But the resulting laughter had ended up causing abdominal pain. He recovered control and pointed. "This is the way war should be."

"It gets pretty tense. Wait and see."

"You use *our* tactics!" That was plain from the way the reconnaissance screen deployed across the valley.

Diggs turned. "Why not? They worked for me in Iraq."

The scenario for this night—the first engagement for the training rotation—was a tough one: Red Force in the attack, advance-to-contact, and eliminate the Blue Force reconnaissance screen. The Blue Force in this case was a brigade of the 5th Mechanized Division conducting hasty defense. The overall idea was that this was a very fluid tactical situation. The 11th ACR was simulating a division attack on a newly arrived force one third its theoretical size. It was, really, the best way to welcome people to the desert. Let them eat dirt.

"Let's get moving." Diggs hopped back into his HMMWV, and the driver moved off to a piece of high ground called the Iron Triangle. A short radio message from his senior OC made the American general growl. "God damn it!"

"Problem?"

General Diggs held up a map. "That hill is the most important piece of real estate in the valley, but they didn't see it. Well, they're going to pay for that little misjudgment. Happens every time." Already, the OpFor had people racing for the unoccupied summit.

"To push that far that fast, is it prudent for Blue?"

"General, it sure as hell ain't prudent not to, as you will see."

"WHY HASN'T HE spoken more, appeared in public more?"

The intelligence chief could have said many things. President Ryan was undoubtedly busy. So many things to do. The government of his country was in shambles, and before he could speak, he had to organize it. He had a state funeral to plan. He had to speak to numerous foreign governments, to give them the usual assurances. He had to secure things, not the least of which was his own personal safety. The American Cabinet, the President's principal

advisers, was gone and had to be reconstituted . . . but that was not what he wanted to hear.

"We have been researching this Ryan," was the answer given. Mainly from newspaper stories-a lot of them—faxed from his government's UN mission. "He has made few public speeches before this day, and then only to present the thoughts of his masters. He was an intelligence officer—actually an 'inside' man, an analyst. Evidently a good one, but an inside person."

"So, why did Durling elevate him so?"

"That was in the American papers yesterday. Their government requires a vice-presidential presence. Durling also wanted someone to firm up his international-affairs team, and in this Ryan had some experience. He performed well, remember, in their conflict with Japan."

"An assistant then, not a leader."

"Correct. He has never aspired to high office. Our information is that he agreed to the second post as a caretaker, for less than a year."

"I am not surprised." Daryaei looked at the notes: *assistant* to Vice Admiral James Greer, the DDI/CIA; briefly the *acting* DDI; then *Deputy* Director of Central Intelligence; then National Security *Advisor* to President Durling; finally he'd accepted the *temporary* post of *Vice* President. His impressions of this Ryan person had been correct from the very beginning: a helper. Probably a skilled one, as he himself had skilled assistants, none of whom, however, could assume his own duties. He was not dealing with an equal. Good. "What else?"

"As an intelligence specialist, he will be unusually well informed of foreign affairs. In fact, his knowledge of such things may be the best America has had in recent years, but at the cost of near-ignorance of domestic issues," the briefing officer went on. This tidbit had come from the *New York Times*.

"Ah." And with that bit of information, the planning started. At this point it was merely a mental exercise, but that would soon change.

"SO, HOW ARE things in your army?" Diggs asked. The two generals stood alone atop the principal terrain feature, watching the battle play out below them with low-light viewing gear. As predicted, the 32nd—Bondarenko *had* to think of them that way—had overwhelmed the Blue Force reconnaissance screen, maneuvered to the left, and was now rolling up the "enemy" brigade. With the lack of real casualties, it was a lovely thing to watch as the blinking yellow "dead" lights lit up one by one. Then he had to answer the question.

"Dreadful. We face the task of rebuilding everything from the ground up."

Diggs turned. "Well, sir, that's where I came in at." At *least you don't have to deal with drugs*, the American thought. He could remember being a new second lieutenant, and afraid to enter barracks without sidearms. If the Russians had made their move in the early 1970s . . . "You really want to use our model?"

"Perhaps." The only thing the Americans got wrong—and right—was that the Red Force allowed tactical initiative for its sub-unit commanders, something the Soviet Army would never have done. But, combined with doctrine developed by the Voroshilov Academy, the results were plain to see. That was something to remember, and Bondarenko had broken rules in his

own tactical encounters, which was one reason why he was a living three-star instead of a dead colonel. He was also the newly appointed chief of operations for the Russian Army. “The problem is money, of course.”

“I’ve heard that song before, General.” Diggs allowed himself a rueful chuckle.

Bondarenko had a plan for that. He wanted to cut the size of his army by fifty percent, and the money saved would go directly into training the remaining half. The results of such a plan he could see before him. Traditionally, the Soviet Army had depended on mass, but the Americans had proven both here and in Iraq that training was master of the battlefield. As good as their equipment was—he’d get his matériel briefing tomorrow—he envied Diggs his personnel more than anything. Proof of that arrived the moment he formed the thought.

“General?” The new arrival saluted. “Blackhorse! We stripped their knickers right off.”

“This is Colonel Al Hamm. He’s CO of the 11th. His second tour here. He used to be OpFor operations officer. Don’t play cards with him,” Diggs warned.

“The general is too kind. Welcome to the desert, General Bondarenko.” Hamm extended a large hand.

“Your attack was well executed, Colonel.” The Russian examined him.

“Thank you, sir. I have some great kids working for me. Blue Force was overly tentative. We caught them between two chairs,” Hamm explained. He looked like a Russian, Bondarenko thought, tall and meaty with a pale, florid complexion surrounding twinkling blue eyes. For this occasion, Hamm was dressed in his old “Russian”-style uniform, complete with a red star on the tanker’s beret, and his pistol belt outside the over-long blouse. It didn’t quite make the Russian feel at home, but he appreciated the respect the Americans showed him.

“Diggs, you were right. Blue should have done everything to get here first. But you made them start too far back to make that option seem attractive.”

“That’s the problem with battlefields,” Hamm answered for his boss. “Too much of the time they choose you instead of the other way around. That’s lesson number one for the boys of the 5th Mech. If you let anybody else define the terms of the battle, well, it isn’t much fun.”

5

ARRANGEMENTS

IT TURNED OUT THAT both Sato and his co-pilot had donated blood for purposes of helping casualties in the abortive war with America, and the blessedly small numbers of wounded had never called that blood into use. Located by computer search by the Japanese Red Cross, samples had been obtained by the police and dispatched by messenger to Washington, via Vancouver—Japanese commercial aircraft were, understandably, still not permitted to fly into the United States, even Alaska—and an Air Force VC-20 from there to Washington. The courier was a senior police officer, with the aluminum case handcuffed to his left wrist. A trio of FBI agents met him at Andrews and drove him to the Hoover building at Tenth and Pennsylvania. The FBI's DNA lab took the samples and went to work to compare them with blood and other tissue specimens from the bodies. They already had matches for the blood types, and the results of the tests seemed a foregone conclusion, which would, nonetheless, be treated as though they were the only tenuous clue in a baffling case. Dan Murray, the acting Director, wasn't exactly a slave to "the book" in criminal investigations, but for the purposes of this case, the book was Holy Writ. Backing him up were Tony Caruso, back from his vacation and working around the clock to head up the Bureau's side of the investigation, Pat O'Day in his capacity as roving inspector, and a cast of hundreds, if not quite thousands yet. Murray met the Japanese representative in the Director's conference room. He, too, found it hard to move into Bill Shaw's office right away.

"We are performing our own tests," Chief Inspector Jisaburo Tanaka said, checking his watches—he had decided to wear two, one each for Tokyo and Washington time. "They will be faxed here as soon as they are completed." Then he opened his briefcase again. "Here is our reconstruction of Captain Sato's schedule for the last week, notes of interviews with family members and colleagues, background on his life."

"Fast work. Thank you." Murray took the pages, not quite sure what to do next. It was clear that his visitor wanted to say more. Murray and Tanaka had never met, but the word on his guest was impressive enough. A skilled and experienced investigator, Tanaka had specialized in political-corruption violations, a specialty that had kept him very busy. Tanaka had the Cromwellian look of such a policeman. His professional life had turned him into a priest of the sort used by the Spanish to burn people at the stake. That made him perfect for this case.

"You will have our total cooperation. In fact, if you wish to send a senior official from your agency to oversee our investigation, I am authorized to tell

you that we will welcome it." He paused for a few seconds, looking down before proceeding. "This is a disgrace for my country. The way those people *used* us all . . ." For a representative of a country incorrectly known for its lack of emotional display, Tanaka was a surprise. His hands balled tightly, and his dark eyes burned with anger. From the conference room, both men could look down Pennsylvania Avenue to a Capitol Hill scarred by the crash, still lit in the pre-dawn darkness by the hundreds of work lights.

"The co-pilot was murdered," Murray said. Maybe that would help a little.

"Oh?"

Dan nodded. "Stabbed, and it appears as though that took place prior to the take-off. It appears at the moment that Sato acted alone—at least as far as flying the airplane was concerned." The lab had already determined that the weapon used was a thin-bladed steak knife with a serrated edge, of the sort used on the airline. As long as he'd been in the investigative business, it still amazed Murray what the lab techs could discern.

"I see. That makes sense," Tanaka observed. "The co-pilot's wife is pregnant, with twins, in fact. She is in the hospital now under close observation. What we have learned to date makes him appear to be a devoted husband and a man of no special political interests. My people thought it unlikely that he would end his life in this way."

"Did Sato have any connections with—"

A shake of the head. "None that we have found. He flew one of the conspirators to Saipan, and they spoke briefly. Aside from that, Sato was an international pilot. His friends were his colleagues. He lived quietly in a modest house near Narita International Airport. But his brother was a senior officer in the Maritime Self-Defense Force, and his son was a fighter pilot. Both died during the hostilities."

Murray already knew that. *Motive and opportunity*. He scribbled a note to have the legal attaché in Tokyo take up the offer to participate in the Japanese investigation—but he'd have to get approval from Justice and/or State about that. For damned sure the offer seemed sincere enough. Good.

"LOVE THE TRAFFIC." Chavez observed. They were coming up I-95, passing the Springfield Mall. Normally at this time of day—it was still dark—the highway was wall-to-wall with bureaucrats and lobbyists. Not today, though John and Ding had been called in, confirming their "essential" status to any who might have doubted it. Clark didn't respond, and the junior officer continued, "How do you suppose Dr. Ryan is doing?"

John grunted and shrugged. "Probably rolling with the punches. Better him than me."

"Roge-o, Mr. C. All my friends at George Mason are going to have a fine old time."

"Think so?"

"John, he's got a government to rebuild. This will be a textbook case in real life. Ain't nobody ever done that before,'*mano*. You know what we're going to find out?"

A nod. "Yeah, if this place really works or not." Better *him than me*, John

thought again. They'd been called in for their mission debriefing on operations in Japan. That was ticklish enough. Clark had been in the business for quite a while, but not long enough to be especially happy about telling others the things he'd done. He and Ding had killed—not for the first time—and now they'd get to describe it in detail to people, most of whom had never even held a gun, much less fired one in anger. Secrecy oaths or not, some of them might talk someday, the least consequence of which would be embarrassing revelations in the press. Somewhere in the middle came sworn testimony before a congressional committee—well, not anytime soon on that, John corrected himself—questioning under oath and the necessity of answering questions from people who didn't understand any better than the CIA weenies who sat at desks and judged people in the field for a living. The worst case was an actual prosecution, because while the things he had done weren't exactly illegal, they weren't exactly legal, either. Somehow the Constitution and the United States Code, Annotated, had never quite reconciled themselves with the activities the government carried out but did not wish to admit in open fora. Though his conscience was clear on that and many other things, his views on tactical morality wouldn't strike everyone as reasonable. Probably Ryan would understand, though. That was something.

"WHAT'S NEW THIS morning?" Jack asked.

"We expect recovery operations to be completed by this evening, sir." It was Pat O'Day doing the morning FBI brief. He'd explained that Murray was busy. The inspector passed over a folder with the numbers of bodies recovered. Ryan gave it a quick scan. How the hell was he supposed to eat breakfast with such facts before him? the President wondered. Fortunately, there was just coffee at the moment.

"What else?"

"Things seem to be dropping into place. We've recovered what we think is the body of the co-pilot. He was murdered hours before the crash, leading us to believe that the pilot acted alone. We'll be doing DNA tests on the remains to confirm identities." The inspector flipped through his notes, not trusting to memory to get things right. "Drug and alcohol tests on both bodies proved negative. Analysis of the flight-data recorder, tapes of radio traffic, radar tapes, everything we've managed to pull together, it all leads to the same picture, one guy acting alone. Dan's meeting with a senior Japanese cop right now."

"Next step?"

"It will be a textbook investigation process. We reconstruct everything Sato —that's the pilot's name—did over the last month or so, and take it back from there. Phone records, where he went, whom he saw, friends and associates, diary if any, everything we can get our hands on. The idea is to rebuild the guy completely and determine if he was part of any possible conspiracy. It will take time. It's a fairly exhaustive process."

"Best guess for now?" Jack asked.

"One guy acting alone," O'Day said again, rather more positively this time.

"It's too damned early for any conclusion," Andrea Price objected. O'Day

turned.

"It's not a conclusion. Mr. Ryan asked for a best guess. I've been in the investigation business for quite a while. This looks like a fairly elaborate impulse crime. The method of the co-pilot's murder, for example. He didn't even move the body out of the cockpit. He *apologized* to the guy right after he stabbed him, according to the tapes."

"*Elaborate* impulse crime?" Andrea objected.

"Airline pilots are highly organized people," O'Day replied. "Things that would be highly complex for the layman are as natural to them as pulling up your zipper. Most assassinations are carried out by dysfunctional individuals who get lucky. In this case, unfortunately, we had a very capable subject who largely made his own luck. In any event, that's what we have at the moment."

"For this to have been a conspiracy, what would you look for?" Jack asked.

"Sir, successful criminal conspiracies are difficult to achieve under the best of circumstances." Price bristled again, but Inspector O'Day went on: "The problem is human nature. The most normal of us are boastful; we like to share secrets to show how bright we are. Most criminals talk their way right into prison one way or another. Okay, in a case like this we're not talking about your average robber, but the principle holds. To build any sort of conspiracy takes time and talk, and as a result, things leak. Then there's the problem of selecting the . . . 'shooter,' for want of a better term. Such time did not exist. The joint session was set up too late for much in the way of discussions to have taken place. The nature of the co-pilot's murder is very suggestive of a spur-of-the-moment method. A knife is less sure than a gun, and a steak knife isn't a good weapon, too easily bent or broken on a rib."

"How many murders have you handled?" Price asked.

"Enough. I've assisted on plenty of local police cases, especially here in D.C. The Washington Field Office has backed up the D.C. police for years. Anyway, for Sato to have been the 'shooter' in a conspiracy, he would have had to meet with people. We can track his free time, and we'll do that with the Japanese. But to this point there is not a single indicator that way. Quite the contrary, all circumstances point to someone who saw a unique opportunity and made use of it on an impulse."

"What if the pilot wasn't—"

"Ms. Price, the cockpit tapes go back before the takeoff from Vancouver. We've voice-printed everything in our own lab—it's a digital tape and the sound quality is beautiful. The same guy who took off from Narita flew the airplane into the ground here. Now, if it wasn't Sato, then why didn't the co-pilot—they flew together as a team—notice? Conversely, if the pilot and co-pilot were showups, then both were part of the conspiracy from the beginning, then why was the co-pilot murdered prior to takeoff from Vancouver? The Canadians are interviewing the rest of the crew for us, and all the service personnel say that the flight crew was just who they were supposed to be. The DNA-ID process will prove that beyond doubt."

"Inspector, you are very persuasive," Ryan observed.

"Sir, this investigation will be rather involved, what with all the facts that have to be checked out, but the meat of the issue is fairly simple. It's damned hard to fake a crime scene. There's just too many things we can do. Is it

theoretically possible to set things up in such a way as to fool our people?" O'Day asked rhetorically. "Yes, sir, maybe it is, but to do that would take months of preparation, and they didn't have months. It really comes down to one thing: the decision to call the joint session happened while that aircraft was over mid-Pacific."

Much as she wanted to, Price couldn't counter that argument. She'd run her own quick investigation on Patrick O'Day. Emil Jacobs had reinstituted the post of roving inspector years before, and collected people who preferred investigation to management. O'Day was an agent for whom running a field division had little appeal. He was part of a small team of experienced investigators who worked out of the Director's office, an unofficial inspectorate which went into the field to keep an eye on things, mainly sensitive cases. He was a good cop who hated desk work, and Price had to concede that he knew how to run an investigation, better yet was someone outside the chain of command who wouldn't ham things up in order to get a promotion. The inspector had driven to the House in a four-by-four pickup—he wore cowboy boots! she noticed—and probably wanted publicity about as much as he wanted the pox. So Assistant Director Tony Caruso, titularly in charge of the investigation, would report to the Department of Justice, but Patrick O'Day would short-circuit the chain to report directly to Murray—who would, in turn, farm O'Day to the President so as to garner personal favor. She'd figured Murray for a sharp operator. Bill Shaw, after all, had used him as personal troubleshooter. And Murray's loyalty would be to the institution of the FBI. A man could have a worse agenda, she admitted to herself. For O'Day it was simpler still. He investigated crimes for a living, and while he appeared to jump too quickly to conclusions, this transplanted cowboy was doing it all by the book. You had to watch the good ol' boys. They were so good at hiding their smarts. But he would never have made the Detail, she consoled herself.

"ENJOY YOUR VACATION?" Mary Pat Foley was either in very early or in very late, Clark saw. It came to him again that of all the senior people in government, President Ryan was probably getting the most sleep, little though that might be. It was a hell of a way to run a railroad. People simply didn't perform well when denied rest for an extended period of time, something he'd learned the hard way in the field, but put a guy into high office, and he immediately forgot that—such pedestrian items as human factors faded into the mist. And then a month later, they wondered how they'd screwed up so bad. But that was usually after they got some poor line-animal killed in the field.

"MP, when the hell is the last time you slept?" Not many people could talk to her that way, but John had been her training officer, once upon a time.

A wan smile. "John, you're not Jewish, and you're not my mother."

Clark looked around. "Where's Ed?"

"On his way back from the Gulf. Conference with the Saudis," she explained. Though Mrs. Foley technically ranked Mr. Foley, Saudi culture wasn't quite ready to deal with a female King Spook—Queen Spook, John corrected himself with a smile—and Ed was probably better on the

conferences anyway.

"Anything I need to know about?"

She shook her head. "Routine. So, Domingo, did you drop the question?"

"You are playing rough this morning," Clark observed before his partner could speak.

Chavez just grinned. The country might be in turmoil, but some things were more important. "Could be worse, Mr. C. I'm not a lawyer, am I?"

"There goes the neighborhood," John grumbled. Then it was time for business. "How's Jack doing?"

"I'm scheduled to see him after lunch, but it wouldn't surprise me if they canceled out. The poor bastard must be buried alive."

"What I saw about how he got roped into this, is what the papers said true?"

"Yes, it is. So, we have a Kelly Girl for President," the Deputy Director (Operations) posed as a multifaceted inside joke. "We're going to do a comprehensive threat assessment. I want you two in on it."

"Why us?" Chavez asked.

"Because I'm tired of having all that done by the Intelligence Directorate. I tell you one thing that's going to happen: we have a President now who understands what we do here. We're going to beef up Operations to the point where I can pick up a phone, ask a question, and get an answer I can understand."

"PLAN BLUE?" Clark asked, and received a welcome nod. "Blue" had been his last function before leaving the CIA's training facility, known as "the Farm," down near the Navy's nuclear-weapons locker at Yorktown, Virginia. Instead of hiring a bunch of Ivy League intellectuals—at least they didn't smoke pipes anymore—he had proposed that the Agency recruit cops, police officers right off the street. Cops, he reasoned, knew about using informants, didn't have to be taught street smarts, and knew about surviving in dangerous areas. All of that would save training dollars, and probably produce better field officers. The proposal had been File-13'd by two successive DDOs, but Mary Pat had known about it from the beginning, and approved the concept. "Can you sell it?"

"John, you're going to help me sell it. Look how well Domingo here has turned out."

"You mean I'm not affirmative action?" Chavez asked.

"No, Ding, that's only with his daughter," Mrs. Foley suggested. "Ryan will go for it. He isn't very keen on the Director. Anyway, for now I want you two to do your debrief on SANDALWOOD."

"What about our cover?" Clark asked. He didn't have to explain what he meant. Mary Pat had never got her hands dirty in the field—she was espionage, not the paramilitary side of the Operations Directorate—but she understood just fine.

"John, you were acting under presidential orders. That's written down and in the book. Nobody's going to second-guess anything you did, especially with saving Koga. You both have an Intelligence Star coming for that. President Durling wanted to see you and present the medals himself up at Camp David. I suppose Jack will, too."

Whoa, Chavez thought behind unblinking eyes, but nice as that thought

was, he'd been thinking about something else on the three-hour drive up from Yorktown. "When's the threat-assessment start?"

"Tomorrow for our side of it. Why?" MP asked.

"Ma'am, I think we're going to be busy."

"I hope you're wrong," she replied, after nodding.

"I HAVE TWO procedures scheduled for today," Cathy said, surveying the breakfast buffet. Since they didn't know what the Ryans liked to have in the morning, the staff had prepared some—actually quite a lot—of everything. Sally and Little Jack thought that was just great—even better, schools were closed. Katie, a recent graduate to real foods, gnawed at a piece of bacon in her hand while contemplating some buttered toast. For children, the immediate has the greatest importance. Sally, now fifteen (going on thirty, her father sometimes lamented), took the longest view of the three, but at the moment that was limited to how her social life would be affected. For all of them, Daddy was still Daddy, whatever job he might hold at the moment. They'd learn different, Jack knew, but one thing at a time.

"We haven't figured that out," her husband replied, selecting scrambled eggs and bacon for his plate. He'd need his energy today.

"Jack, the deal was that I could still do my work, remember?"

"Mrs. Ryan?" It was Andrea Price, still hovering around like a guardian angel, albeit with an automatic pistol. "We're still figuring out the security issues and—"

"My patients need me. Jack, Bernie Katz and Hal Marsh can backstop me on a lot of things, but one of my patients today needs *me*. I have teaching rounds to prep for, too." She checked her watch. "In four hours." Which was true, Ryan didn't have to ask. Professor Caroline Ryan, M.D., F.A.C.S., was top-gun for driving a laser around a retina. People came from all over the world to watch her work.

"But schools are—" Price stopped, reminding herself that she knew better.

"Not medical schools. We can't send patients home. I'm sorry. I know how complicated things are for everybody, but I have people who depend on me, too, and I have to be there for them." Cathy looked at the adult faces in the kitchen for a decision that would go her way. The kitchen staff—all sailors—moved in and out like mobile statues, pretending not to hear anything. The Secret Service people adopted a different blank expression, one with more discomfort in it.

The First Lady was supposed to be an unpaid adjunct to her husband. That was a rule which needed changing at some point. Sooner or later, after all, there would be a female President, and *that* would really upset the applecart, a fact well known but studiously ignored to this point in American history. The usual political wife was a woman who appeared at her husband's side with an adoring smile and a few carefully picked words, who endured the tedium of a campaign, and the surprisingly brutal handshakes—certainly Cathy Ryan would not subject her surgeon's hands to *that*, Price thought suddenly. But *this* First Lady actually had a job. More than that, she was a physician with a Lasker Memorial Public Service Award shortly to sit on her mantel (the

awards dinner had yet to he held), and if she had learned anything about Cathy Ryan, Price knew that she was dedicated to her profession, not merely to her husband. However admirable that might be, it would be a royal pain in the ass to the Service, Price was sure. Worse yet, the principal agent assigned to *Mrs*. Dr. Ryan was Roy Altman, a tall bruiser of a former paratrooper whom she'd not yet met. That decision had been made for Roy's size as well as his savvy. It never hurt to have one obvious bodyguard close aboard, and since the First Lady appeared to many as a soft target, one of Roy's functions was to make the casual troublemaker think twice on that basis alone. Other members of her Detail would be virtually invisible. One of Altman's other functions was to use his bulk to block bullets, something the agents trained for but didn't dwell on.

Each of the Ryan kids would have to be protected as well, in a sub-detail that routinely split into segments. Katie's had been the hardest to select—because agents had fought for the job. The boss there would be the oldest member of the team, a grandfather named Don Russell. Little Jack would get a youngish male principal who was a serious sports fan, while Sally Ryan drew a female agent just over thirty, single, and hip (Price's term rather than the agent's), wise in the ways of young men and mall-shopping. The idea was to make the family as comfortable as was possible with the necessity of being followed everywhere except the bathroom by people with loaded firearms and radios. It was, in the end, a hopeless task, of course. President Ryan had the background to accept the need for all of this. His family would learn to endure it.

"Dr. Ryan, when will you have to leave?" Price asked.

"About forty minutes. It depends on traf——"

"Not anymore," Price corrected the First Lady. The day would be bad enough. The idea had been to use the previous day to brief the *Vice* President's family in on all the things that had to be done, but that plan had been shot completely to hell, along with so many other things. Altman was in another room, going over maps. There were three viable land routes to Baltimore: Interstate-95, the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, and US Route 1, all of them packed every morning with rush-hour traffic which a Secret Service convoy would disrupt to a fare-thee-well; worse, for any potential assassin, the routes were too predictable, narrowing down as they did on nearing Baltimore. Johns Hopkins Hospital had a helicopter pad atop its pediatrics building, but nobody had yet considered the political fallout that could result from hopping the First Lady to work every day in a Marine Corps VH-60. Maybe that was a viable option now, Price decided. She left the room to confer with Altman, and suddenly the Ryan family was alone, having breakfast as though they were still a normal family.

"My God, Jack," Cathy breathed.

"I know." Instead of talking, they enjoyed the silence for a full minute, both of them looking down at their breakfast, poking things around with forks instead of eating.

"The kids need clothes for the funeral," Cathy said finally.

"Tell Andrea?"

"Okay.

"Do you know when it'll be?"

"I should find out today."

"I'll still be able to work, right?" With Price gone she could allow her concern to show.

Jack looked up. "Yes. Look, I'm going to try my best to keep us as normal as we can, and I know how important your work is. Matter of fact, I haven't had much chance to tell you what **I** think of that prize you just bagged." He smiled. "I'm damned proud of you, babe."

Price came back in. "Dr. Ryan?" she said. And, of course, both heads turned. They could see it on her face. The most basic of issues hadn't been discussed yet. Did they call her *Doctor* Ryan, *Missus* Ryan, or

"Make it easier on everyone, okay? Call me Cathy."

Price couldn't do *that*, but she let it slide for the moment. "Until we figure things out, we'll fly you there. The Marines have a helicopter on the way here."

"Isn't that expensive?" Cathy asked.

"Yes, it is, but we have to figure out procedures and things, and for the moment this is the easiest thing to do. Also"—a very large man came into the room—"this is Roy Altman. He'll be your principal agent for a while."

"Oh," was all Cathy was able to say at the moment. Six feet three and 220 pounds of Roy Altman came into the room. He had thinning blond hair, pale skin, and a sheepish expression that made him seem embarrassed by his bulk. Like all Secret Service agents, his suit coat was cut a little big to help conceal his service automatic, and in his particular case hiding a machine gun would have been fairly easy. Altman came over to shake her hand, which he did with considerable delicacy.

"Ma'am, you know what my job is. I'll try to keep as much out of the way as possible." Two more people came into the room. Altman introduced them as the rest of her Detail for the day. All of them were temporary. They all had to get along with their principal, and that wasn't all so easy to predict, even with amiable principals, as all the Ryans seemed thus far to be.

Cathy was tempted to ask if all this was really necessary, but she knew better. On the other hand, how would she shepherd this mob around the Maumenee Building? She traded a look with her husband, and reminded herself that they would not be in this unhappy predicament had she not agreed to Jack's elevation to the vice presidency, which had lasted all of—what? Five minutes? Maybe not even that long. Just then came the roar of the Sikorsky Black Hawk helicopter, landing up the hill from the house and creating a mini-blizzard on what had once been the site of a small astronomical observatory. Her husband looked at his watch and realized that the Marines of VMH-1 were indeed operating off a short fuse. How long, he wondered, before the smothering attention drove them all mad?

"THIS SHOT IS *live* from the grounds of the Naval Observatory on Massachusetts Avenue," the NBC reporter said, cued by the director. "That looks like one of the Marine helicopters. I suppose the President is going somewhere." The camera zoomed in as the snow cloud settled down

somewhat.

"An American Black Hawk, extensively modified," the intelligence officer said. "See there? That's a 'Black Hole' infrared suppression system to protect against ground-to-air missiles that track engine heat."

"How effective?"

"Very, but not against laser-guided weapons," he added. "Nor is it useful against guns." No sooner had the aircraft's main rotor stopped turning than a squad of Marines surrounded it. "I need a map of the area. Wherever that camera is, a mortar would also be effective. The same is true of the White House grounds, of course." And anybody, they knew, could use a mortar, all the more so with the new laser-guided rounds first developed by the British and soon thereafter copied by the rest of the world. In a way it was the Americans who showed the way. It was their aphorism, after all: *If you can see it, you can hit it. If you can hit it, you can kill it.* And everyone inside of it, whatever "it" might be.

With that thought, a plan began to form. He checked his watch, which had a stop-watch function button, placing his finger there and waiting. The TV director, six thousand miles away, had nothing better to do than keep on that long-lens camera. Presently, a large vehicle approached the helicopter, and four people got out. They walked right to the aircraft, whose crewman held the sliding door open.

"That's Mrs. Ryan," the commentator said. "She's a surgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore."

"You suppose she's flying to work?" the reporter asked.

"We'll know in a minute."

Which was about right. The intelligence officer pushed the watch button the moment the door closed. The rotor started turning a few seconds later, building power from the two turbine engines, and then the helicopter lifted off, nose-down as they all did, gaining altitude as it headed off, probably to the north. He checked his watch to see the elapsed time from door-close to liftoff. This aircraft had a military crew, and they would take pride in doing everything the same way every time. More than enough time for a mortar round to travel three times the necessary distance, he judged.

IT WAS HER first time in a helicopter. They had Cathy sit in the jump seat behind and between the two pilots. They didn't tell her why. The Black Hawk's rugged airframe was designed to absorb fully fourteen g's in the event of a crash, and this seat was statistically the safest in the bird. The four-bladed rotor made for a smooth ride, and about the only objection she had to the experience was the cold. No one had yet designed a military aircraft with an efficient heating system. It would have been enjoyable but for the lingering embarrassment, and the fact that the Secret Service agents were scanning out the doors, obviously looking for some sort of danger or other. It was becoming clear that they could take the fun out of anything.

“I GUESS SHE’S commuting to work,” the reporter decided. The camera had tracked the VH-60 until it disappeared into the tree line. It was a rare moment of levity. All of the networks were doing the same thing they’d done after the assassination of John Kennedy. Every single regular show was off the air while the networks devoted every waking hour—twenty-four hours per day now, which had not been the case in 1963 to coverage of the disaster and its aftermath. What that really meant was a bonanza for the cable channels, as had been proven by tracking information through the various ratings services, but the networks had to be responsible, and doing *this* was responsible journalism.

“Well, she *is* a physician, isn’t she? It’s easy to forget that, despite the disaster that has overtaken our government, outside the Beltway, there are still people who do real work. Babies are being born. Life goes on,” the commentator observed pontifically, as was his job.

“And so does the country.” The reporter looked directly at the camera for the transition to commercial. He didn’t hear the voice from so far away.

“For now.”

THE KINDS WERE shepherded away by their bodyguards, and the real work of the day began. Arnie van Damm looked like hell. He was about to hit the wall, Jack decided; the combination of grueling work and grief was about to destroy the man. All well and good that the President should be spared as much as possible, Ryan knew, but not at the cost of wrecking the people upon whom he depended so much.

“Say your piece, Arnie, then disappear for a while and get some rest.”

“You know I can’t do that—”

“Andrea?”

“Yes, Mr. President?”

“When we’ve finished here, have somebody drive Arnie home. You will not allow him back in the House until four this afternoon.” Ryan shifted his gaze. “Arnie, you will *not* burn out on me. I need you too much.”

The chief of staff was too tired to show any gratitude. He handed over a folder. “Here are the plans for the funeral, day after tomorrow.”

Ryan flipped open the folder, his demeanor deflated as suddenly as he had exercised another dollop of presidential authority.

Whoever had put the plan together had been clever and sensitive about it. Maybe somewhere there had been a contingency plan for this sort of thing, a question Ryan would never bring himself to ask, but whatever the truth was, someone had done well. Roger and Anne Durling would lie in state in the White House, since the Capitol Rotunda was not available, and for twenty-four hours people would be allowed to walk through, entering through the front, and exiting from the East Wing. The sadness of the event would be muted for the mourners by later exposure to the Americana and presidential portraits. The Durlings would be taken by hearse to National Cathedral the next morning, along with three members of the Congress, a Jew, a Protestant, and a Catholic, for the interdenominational memorial service. Ryan had two major speeches to give. The text of both was in the back of the folder.

“WHAT’S THAT FOR?” Cathy was wearing a crash helmet with full connections into the helicopter’s intercom. She pointed at another aircraft fifty yards to their right rear.

“We always fly with a backup aircraft, ma’am. In case something breaks and we have to land,” the pilot explained from the right-front seat, “we don’t want to delay you unnecessarily.” He didn’t say that in the back-up helicopter were four more Secret Service agents with heavier weapons.

“How often does that happen, Colonel?”

“Not since I’ve been around, ma’am.” Nor did he say that one of the Marine Black Hawks had crashed into the Potomac in 1993, killing all hands. Well, it had been a long time. The pilot’s eyes were scanning the air constantly. Part of VMH-1’s institutional memory was what had seemed to be an attempted ramming over the California home of President Reagan. In fact it had been a screwup by a careless private pilot. After his interview with the Secret Service, the poor bastard had probably given up flying entirely. They were the most humorless people, Colonel Hank Goodman knew from long experience. The air was clear and cold, but pretty smooth. He controlled the stick with his fingertips as they followed I-95 northeast. Baltimore was already in view, and he knew the approach into Hopkins well enough from previous duty at Naval Air Station Patuxent River, whose Navy and Marine helos occasionally helped fly accident victims. Hopkins, he remembered, got the pediatric trauma cases for the state’s critical-care system.

The same sobering thought hit Cathy when they flew past the University of Maryland’s Shock-Trauma building. This *wasn’t* her first flight in a helicopter, was it? It was just that for the other one she’d been unconscious. People had tried to kill her and Sally, and all the people around her were in jeopardy if somebody else made another try—why? Because of who her husband was.

“Mr. Altman?” Cathy heard over the intercom.

“Yeah, Colonel?”

“You called ahead, right?”

“Yes, they know we’re coming, Colonel,” Altman assured him.

“No, I mean, is the roof checked out for a–60?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean this bird is heavier than the one the state troopers use. Is the pad certified for us?” Silence provided the answer. Colonel Goodman looked over at his co-pilot and grimaced. “Okay, we can handle that this one time.”

“Clear left.”

“Clear right,” Goodman replied. He circled once, checking the wind sock on the roof of the building below. Just puffs of wind from the northwest. The descent was gentle, and the colonel kept a close eye on the radio whips to his right. He touched down soft, keeping his rotor turning to prevent the full weight of the aircraft from resting on the reinforced-concrete roof. It probably wasn’t necessary, of course. Civil engineers always put more strength into buildings than they actually needed. But Goodman hadn’t made the rank of bird-colonel by taking chances for the fun of it. His crew chief moved to pull the door open. The Secret Service agents went first, scanning the building

while Goodman kept his hand on the collective, ready to yank up and rocket from the building. Then they helped Mrs. Ryan out, and he could get on with his day.

"When we get back, call this place yourself and get the rating on the roof. Then ask for plans for our files."

"Yes, sir. It just went too fast, sir."

"Tell me about it." He switched to the radio link. "Marine Three, Marine Two."

"Two," the orbiting backup aircraft responded at once.

"On the go." Goodman pulled the collective and angled south off the roof. "She seems nice enough."

"Got nervous just before we landed," the crew chief observed.

"So was I," Goodman said. "*I'll* call them when we get back."

THE SECRET SERVICE *had* called ahead to Dr. Katz, who was waiting inside, along with three Hopkins security officers. Introductions were exchanged. Nametags were passed out, making the three agents ostensible staff members of the medical school, and the day of Associate Professor Caroline M. Ryan, M.D., F.A.C.S., began.

"How's Mrs. Hart doing?"

"I saw her twenty minutes ago, Cathy. She's actually rather pleased to have the First Lady operating on her." Professor Katz was surprised at Professor Ryan's reaction.

6

EVALUATION

IT TOOK A LOT TO CROWD Andrews Air Force Base, whose expansive concrete ramps looked to be the approximate size of Nebraska, but the security police force there was now patrolling a collection of aircraft as dense and as diverse as the place in Arizona where they kept out-of-work airliners. Moreover, each bird had its own security Detail, all of whom had to be coordinated with the Americans in an atmosphere of institutional distrust, since the security people were all trained to regard everyone in sight with suspicion. There were two Concordes, one British and one French, for sex appeal. The rest were mainly wide-bodies of one sort or another, and most of them liveried in the colors of the nation-flag carrier of their country of origin. Sabena, KLM, and Lufthansa led off the NATO row. SAS handled each of the three Scandinavian countries, each with its own 747. Chiefs of state traveled in style, and not one of the aircraft, large or small, had flown as much as a third full. Greeting them was a task to tax the skills and patience of the combined White House and State Department offices of protocol, and word was sent through the embassies that President Ryan simply didn't have the time to give everyone the attention he or she deserved. But the Air Force honor guard got to meet them all, forming, dismissing, and reforming more than once an hour while the red VIP carpet stayed in place, and one world leader followed another—at times as quickly as one aircraft could be rolled to its parking place and another could taxi to the specified arrival point with band and podium. Speeches were kept brief and somber for the ranks of cameras, and then they were moved off briskly to the waiting ranks of cars.

Moving them into Washington was yet another headache. Every car belonging to the Diplomatic Protection Service was tied up, forming four sets of escorts that hustled in and out of town, convoying the embassy limousines and tying up Suitland Parkway and Interstate 395. The most amazing part, perhaps, was that every president, prime minister, and even the kings and serene princes managed to get delivered to the proper embassy—most of them, fortunately, on Massachusetts Avenue. It proved to be a triumph of improvised organization in the end.

The embassies themselves handled the quiet private receptions. The statesmen, all in one place, had to meet, of course, to do business or merely to chat. The British Ambassador, the most senior of both the NATO countries and his nation's Commonwealth, would this night host an "informal" dinner for twenty-two national leaders.

"Okay, his gear *is* down this time," the Air Force captain said, as darkness fell on the base.

The tower crew at Andrews was, perversely, the same one which had been on duty on That Night, as people had taken to call it. They watched as the JAL 747 floated in on runway Zero-One Right. The flight crew might have noticed that the remains of a sister aircraft were to be found in a large hangar on the east side of the base—at this moment a truck was delivering the distorted remains of a jet engine, recently extracted from the basement of the Capitol building, but the jetliner completed its rollout, following directions to turn left and taxi behind a vehicle to the proper place for deplaning its passengers. The pilot did notice the cameras, and the crewmen walking from the relative warmth of a building to their equipment for the latest and most interesting arrival. He thought to say something to his co-pilot, but decided not to. Captain Torajiro Sato had been, well, if not a close friend, then a colleague, and a cordial one at that, and the disgrace to his country, his airline, and his profession would be a difficult thing to bear for years. It could only have been worse had Sato been carrying passengers, for protecting them was the first rule of their lives, but even though his culture respected suicide for a purpose as an honorable exercise, and beyond that awarded status to the more dramatic exits from corporeal life, this example of it had shocked and distressed his country more than anything in living memory. The pilot had always worn his uniform with pride. Now he would change out of it at the earliest opportunity, both abroad and at home. The pilot shook off the thought, applied the brakes smoothly, and halted the airliner so that the old-fashioned wheeled stairway was exactly even with the forward door of the Boeing airliner. It was then that he and his co-pilot turned inward to share a look of irony and shame at having performed their job with skill. Instead of sleeping over at the usual mid-level Washington hotel, they would be quartered in officers'accommodations on the base, and, probably, with someone to watch over them. With a gun.

The door of the airliner opened under the gentle ministrations of the senior stewardess. Prime Minister Mogataru Koga, his coat buttoned, and his tie straightened in his collar by a flustered aide, stood in the door briefly, assaulted by a blast of cold February air, and headed down the steps. The Air Force band struck up "Ruffles and Flourishes."

Acting Secretary of State Scott Adler was waiting at the bottom. The two had never met, but both had been fully briefed, Adler rather more quickly, as this was his fourth and most important arrival of the day. Koga looked just like his pictures. The man was grossly ordinary, about five feet six inches in height, of middle age, with a full head of black hair. His dark eyes were neutral—or tried to be, Adler thought on closer examination. There was sadness there. Hardly a surprise, the diplomat thought as he extended his hand.

"Welcome, Mr. Prime Minister."

"Thank you, Mr. Adler." The two men walked to the podium. Adler spoke a few muted words of welcome—this speech, drafted at Foggy Bottom, had taken an hour to get right, which amounted to about a minute to the world. Then Koga came to the microphone.

"First of all, I must thank you, Mr. Adler, and thank your country, for allowing me to come today. As surprising as this gesture is, I have come to

understand that such things are a tradition in your vast and generous country. I come to represent my country today on a sad but necessary mission. I hope it will be a mission of healing for your country and for mine. I hope that your citizens and ours can see in this tragedy a bridge to a peaceful future." Koga stepped back, and Adler led him off down the red carpet, as the assembled band played *Kimagayo*, the brief anthem of Japan which had actually been written by an English composer a hundred years earlier. The Prime Minister looked at the honor guard and tried to read the young faces, looking for hatred or disgust in them, but finding only impassivity on the way to the waiting car. Adler got in behind him.

"How are you feeling, sir?" SecState asked.

"Well, thank you. I slept on the flight." Koga assumed that the question was a mere pleasantry, then learned that it was not. It had been Ryan's idea, not Adler's, oddly enough, made somewhat more convenient by the time of day. The sun was down below the horizon now, and the sunset would be a brief one, as clouds rolled in from the northwest.

"If you wish, we can see President Ryan on the way to your embassy. The President instructed me to say that if you would prefer not to do so, because of the lengthy flight or other reasons, he will not be offended." Scott was surprised that Koga didn't hesitate an instant.

"I gladly accept this honor."

The acting Secretary of State pulled a portable radio from his coat pocket. "EAGLE to SWORDBASE. Affirmative." Adler had chuckled a few days earlier to learn his Secret Service code-name. "EAGLE" was the English counterpart to his German-Jewish surname.

"SWORDBASE copies affirmative," the encrypted radio crackled back.

"EAGLE, out."

The motorcade speeded up Suitland Parkway. Under other circumstances a news helicopter might have tracked them with a live camera, but Washington airspace was effectively shut down for the moment. Even National Airport was closed, with its flights shunted to Dulles or Baltimore-Washington International. Koga hadn't noticed the driver, who was American. The car turned right off the parkway, then hopped a block to the ramp for I-295, which turned almost immediately into I-395, a bumpy thoroughfare that led across the Anacostia River toward downtown Washington. As it merged with the main roadway, the stretch Lexus in which he was sitting veered to the right. Another identical car took its place as his formed up with three Secret Service Suburbans in a maneuver that took a mere five seconds. The empty streets made the rest of the trip easy, and in but a few minutes, his car turned onto West Executive Drive.

"Here they come, sir," Price said, notified by the uniformed guard at the gatehouse.

Jack walked outside just as the car halted, not sure of the protocol for this—one more thing he'd yet to figure out about his new job. He almost moved to pull open the door himself, but a Marine corporal got there first, yanking the door and saluting like a robot.

"Mr. President," Koga said on standing up.

"Mr. Prime Minister. Please come this way." Ryan gestured with his hand.

Koga had never been to the White House before, and it struck him that had he flown over—what? three months earlier—to discuss the trade problems that had led to a shooting war . . . yet another shameful failure. Then Ryan's demeanor came through the haze. He'd read once that the full ceremonies of a state arrival were not the sign of importance here—well, that was not possible or appropriate in any case, Koga told himself. But Ryan had stood alone at the door, and that must have meant something, the Japanese Prime Minister told himself on the way up the stairs. A minute later, whizzed through the West Wing, he and Ryan were alone in the Oval Office, separated only by a low table and a coffee tray.

"Thank you for this," Koga said simply.

"We had to meet," President Ryan said. "Any other time and we'd have people watching and timing us and trying to read our lips." He poured a cup for his guest and then himself.

"Hai, the press in Tokyo have become much more forward in the past few days." Koga made to lift his cup, but stopped. "Whom do I thank for rescuing me from Yamata?"

Jack looked up. "The decision was made here. The two officers are in the area, if you want to see them again personally."

"If it is convenient." Koga sipped at his cup. He would have preferred tea, but Ryan was doing his best to be a host, and the quality of the gesture impressed his guest. "Thank you for letting me come, President Ryan."

"I tried to talk to Roger about the trade problem, but . . . but I wasn't persuasive enough. Then I worried that something might be happening with Goto, but I didn't move quickly enough, what with the Russian trip and everything. It was all a great big accident, but I suppose war usually is. In any case, it is up to the two of us to heal that wound. I want it done as rapidly as possible."

"The conspirators are all under arrest. They will appear in court for treason," Koga promised.

"That is your affair," the President replied. Which wasn't really true. Japan's legal system was a curious one in which courts often enough violated the country's constitution in favor of broader but unwritten cultural mores, something unthinkable to Americans. Ryan and America expected that the trials would go by the book with no such variations. Koga understood that fully. A reconciliation between America and Japan depended absolutely on that, along with a multitude of other understandings which could not be spoken, at least not at this level. For his own part, Koga had already made sure that the judges selected for the various trials understood what the rules were.

"I never thought it possible that such a thing could happen, and then, that madman Sato . . . My country and my people are shamed by it. I have so much to do, Mr. Ryan."

Jack nodded. "We both do. But it will be done." He paused. "The technical issues can be handled at the ministerial level. Between ourselves, I only wanted to be sure that we understood each other. I will trust your goodwill."

"Thank you, Mr. President." Koga set his cup down to examine the man on the opposite sofa. He was young for such a job, though not the youngest

American president. Theodore Roosevelt would probably hold that distinction into eternity. On the lengthy flight from Tokyo he'd read up on John Patrick Ryan. The man had killed with his own hand more than once, had been threatened with his own death and that of his family, and had done other things which his intelligence advisers only speculated about. Examining his face over a brief span of seconds, he tried to understand how such a person could also be a man of peace, but the clues were not there to be seen, and Koga wondered if there was something in the American character that he'd never quite understood. He saw the intelligence and the curiosity, one to measure and the other to probe. He saw fatigue and sadness. His recent days must have been the purest form of hell, Koga was sure. Somewhere still in this building, probably, were the children of Roger and Anne Durling, and that would be like a physical weight for the man to carry about. It struck the Prime Minister that Ryan, like most Westerners, was not very skilled at concealing his inner thoughts, but that wasn't true, was it? There had to be other things happening behind those blue eyes, and those things were not being advertised. They were not in any way threatening, but they were there. This Ryan *was* samurai, as he'd said in his office a few days earlier, but there was an additional layer of complexity as well. Koga set that aside. It wasn't all that important, and there was something that he had to ask, a personal decision he'd made over mid-Pacific.

"I have a request, if that is permitted."

"What is that, sir?"

"MR. PRESIDENT, this is not a good idea," Price objected a few minutes later.

"Good or not, we're going to do it. Get it organized," Ryan told her.

"Yes, sir." Andrea Price withdrew from the room.

Koga watched the exercise and learned something else. Ryan was a man capable of making decisions and giving orders entirely without histrionics.

The cars were still at the West Entrance, and it was simply a matter of donning coats and getting into them. A total of four Suburbans U-turned in the parking area, heading south, then east toward the Hill. The motorcade this time didn't use sirens and lights, instead proceeding almost in accord with the traffic laws—but not quite. The empty streets made it easy for them to jump lights, and soon enough they turned left onto Capitol Street, and left again toward the building. There were fewer lights now in evidence. The steps had been cleared, allowing an easy climb up once the cars had parked and the Secret Service agents deployed. Ryan led Koga upwards, and presently they were both looking down into the now-empty bowl that had been the House chamber.

The Japanese Prime Minister stood erect at first. He clapped his hands loudly, once, to garner the attention of the spirits who, his religious beliefs told him, would still be here. Then he bowed formally, and said his prayers for them. Ryan was moved to do the same. There were no TV cameras present to record the moment—actually there were still a few network cameras about, but the evening news broadcasts were over, and the instruments stood idle, their crews in the control vans drinking coffee and unaware of what was

taking place a hundred yards away. It took only a minute or two in any case. When it was over, an American hand was extended, and a Japanese hand took it, and two pairs of eyes came to an understanding that ministers and treaties could never really have achieved, and in the harsh February wind, peace was finally and completely made between two countries. Standing ten feet away, Andrea Price was glad that the White House photographer had come along, and the tears she blinked away from her eyes were not from the wind. Then she conducted the two men back down the steps and into separate cars.

"WHY DID THEY overreact so?" the Prime Minister asked, before sipping her sherry.

"Well, as you know I have not been fully briefed," the Prince of Wales replied, first qualifying himself, since he didn't really speak for Her Majesty's Government. "But your naval exercises did have the appearance of a threatening act."

"Sri Lanka must come to terms with the Tamils. They've shown a regrettable reluctance to enter into substantive negotiations, and we were trying to influence them. After all, we have our own troops deployed as peacekeepers, and we don't want them to be held hostage to the overall situation."

"Quite so, but then, why don't you withdraw your peacekeepers as the government requested?"

The Indian Prime Minister sighed tiredly—it had been a long flight for her, too, and under the circumstances a little exasperation was permissible. "Your Royal Highness, if we withdraw our troops and then the situation flares up yet again, we will face difficulties with our own Tamil citizens. This is truly a most unhappy situation. We attempted to help assuage a difficult political impasse, entirely at our own expense, but then the Sri Lankan government finds itself unable to take the remedial action necessary to prevent an embarrassment to my country, and a continuing rebellion in their own. *Then* the Americans interfere without any real cause, and only bolster the intransigence of the Sri Lankans."

"When does their Prime Minister arrive?" the Prince asked. The substantive reply was a shrug, followed by verbiage. "We offered the chance to fly over together so that we might discuss the situation, but he regrettably declined. Tomorrow, I think. If his aircraft doesn't malfunction," she added. That national-flag carrier had all manner of technical problems, not to mention a long-lived security threat.

"If you wish, the ambassador can probably arrange a quiet meeting."

"Perhaps that would not be entirely useless," the Prime Minister allowed. "I also wish the Americans would get the proper spin on things. They've always been so hopeless on our part of the world."

Which was the point of the exercise, the Prince understood. He and President Ryan had been friends for years, and India wanted him to be the intercessor. It would hardly have been the first time for such a mission on his part, but in all such cases the Heir Apparent was constrained to seek guidance from the government, which, in this case, meant the ambassador. Someone in Whitehall had decided that His Royal Highness's friendship with the new

American President was more important than a government-to-government contact, and besides, it would make the monarchy look good at a time when such appearances were both useful and necessary. It also gave His Highness an excuse to visit some land in Wyoming which was quietly owned by the Royal Family, or "the Firm," as it was sometimes called by insiders.

"I see," was as substantive a reply as he could make, but Britain had to take a request from India seriously. Once the brightest diadem in a world-spanning crown, that country was still an important trading partner, bloody nuisance though it might frequently be. A direct contact between the two heads of government might be embarrassing. The American harassment of the Indian fleet was not widely publicized, falling as it had toward the end of hostilities between America and Japan, and it was in everyone's interest that things should remain that way. President Ryan had enough on his plate, his old friend knew. The Prince hoped that Jack was getting some rest. For the people in the reception room, sleep was just a defense against jet lag. For Ryan it was necessary fuel, and he'd need plenty for the next two days.

THE LINE WAS endless, the typical cliché. It stretched well beyond the Treasury building, and the far end of it was like the ragged end of a rope, with new people forming up and tightening into the line so that it appeared to generate itself out of air, constantly replenishing as its members moved slowly forward in the cold air. They entered the building in groups of fifty or so, and the opening-closing cycle of the doors was regulated by someone with a watch, or maybe just counting slowly. There was an honor guard, an enlisted member of each uniformed service. The Detail was commanded by an Air Force captain at the moment. They and the caskets stood still while the people shuffled past.

Ryan examined their faces on his office TV just after he came in, again before sunrise, wondering what they thought and why they'd come. Few had actually voted for Roger Durling. He'd been the number-two man on the ticket, after all, and he'd taken over the job only with the resignation of Bob Fowler. But America embraced her presidents, and in death Roger was the recipient of love and respect that had never seemed all that close to him in life. Some of the mourners turned away from the coffins to look around at the entry hall of a building which many had probably never seen before, using their few seconds of time there strangely to look away from the reason for their having come, then to go down the steps and out the East Entrance, no longer a line, but in groups of friends or family members, or even alone, to leave the city and do their business. Then it was time for him to do the same—more properly, to head back to his family, and study up for the tasks of the following day.

WHY NOT? THEY'D decided on arriving at Dulles. Lucky enough to find a cheap motel at the end of the Metro's Yellow Line, they'd ridden the subway into town, and gotten off at the Farragut Square station, only a few blocks

from the White House so that they could take a look. It would be a first for both of them—many firsts, in fact, since neither had ever visited Washington, the cursed city on a minor river that polluted the entire country from which it sucked blood and treasure—these were favored lines of the Mountain Men. Finding the end of the line had taken time, and they'd shuffled along for several hours, with the only good news being that they knew how to dress for cold, which was more than they could say for the East Coast idiots in the line with them, with their thin coats and bare heads. It was all Pete Holbrook and Ernest Brown could do to keep from cracking their jokes about what had happened. Instead they listened to what other people in line said. That turned out to be disappointing. Maybe a lot of them were federal employees, both men thought. There were a few whimpers about how sad it all was, how Roger Durling had been a very nice man, and how attractive his wife had been, and how cute the children were, and how awful it must be for them.

Well, the two members of the Mountain Men had to agree between themselves, yeah, sure enough it was tough on the kids—and who didn't like kids?—but scrambling eggs was probably something mama chicken didn't like to see, right? And how much suffering had their father inflicted on honest citizens who only wanted to have their constitutional right to be left alone by all these useless Washington jerks? But they didn't say that. They kept their mouths mostly shut as the line wended its way along the street. Both knew the story of the Treasury building, which sheltered them from the wind for a while, how Andy Jackson had decided to move it so that he couldn't see the Capitol building from the White House (it was still too dark for them to make out very much), causing the famous and annoying jog in Pennsylvania Avenue —not that *that* mattered anymore, since the street had been closed in front of the White House. And why? To protect the President from the *citizens!* Couldn't trust the citizens to get too close to the Grand Pooh-Bah. They couldn't say that, of course. It was something the two had discussed on the flight in. There was no telling how many government spy types might be around, especially in the line to the White House, a name for the structure they'd accepted only since it had allegedly been selected by Davy Crockett. Holbrook had recalled that from a movie he'd seen on TV, though he couldn't remember which movie, and ol' Davy was without a doubt their kind of American, a man who'd named his favorite rifle. Yeah.

It wasn't really a bad-looking house, and some good men had lived there. Andy Jackson, who'd told the Supreme Court where to get off. Lincoln, a tough old son of a bitch. What a shame he'd been killed before implementing his plan to ship the niggers back to Africa or Latin America . . . (Both rather liked James Monroe as well for starting that idea by helping to establish Liberia as a place to ship the slaves back to; a pity that nobody had followed up on it.) Teddy Roosevelt, who had a lot of good things going for him, a hunter and outdoorsman and soldier who'd gone a little far in "reforming" the government. Not many since, though, both men judged, but it wasn't the building's fault that it had more recently been occupied by people they didn't like. That was the problem with Washington buildings. The Capitol had once been home to Henry Clay and Dan'l Webster, after all. Patriots, unlike the bunch who'd been roasted by that Jap pilot.

Things got a little bit tense when they turned into the White House grounds, like entering enemy territory. There were guards at the gatehouse of the Secret Service's uniformed division, and inside were Marines. Wasn't that a shame? Marines. Real Americans, even the colored ones, probably, 'cause they went through the training same as the white ones, and probably some of them were patriots, too. Too bad they were niggers, but it couldn't be helped. And all the Marines did what they were told by the 'crats. That made the looks a little hard to take. They were just kids, though, and maybe they'd learn. After all, the Mountain Men had a few ex-military in it. The Marines were shivering in their long coats and white fairy gloves, and finally one of them, a buck sergeant by the stripes, opened the door.

Some house, Holbook and Brown thought, looking up and around the towering foyer. It was easy to see how somebody who lived here might think himself king-shit. You had to watch out for stuff like that. Lincoln had grown up in a log cabin, and Teddy had known life in a tent, hunting up in the mountains, but nowadays whoever lived here was just another damned 'crat. Inside were more Marines, and the honor guard around the two boxes, and most disquieting of all, people in civilian clothes with little plastic curly things that led from their suit collars to their ears. Secret Service. Federal cops. The face of the enemy, members of the same government department that held the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. That figured. The first instance of citizens' objecting to the government had been about alcohol, the Whiskey Rebellion—which was why the Mountain Men were equivocal in their admiration for George Washington. The more liberal of them remarked that even a good man can have a bad day, and George wasn't a guy to fuck with. Brown and Holbrook didn't look directly at the Secret Service pukes. You had to be careful fucking with them, too.

SPECIAL AGENT PRICE walked into the foyer then. Her principal was safe in his office, and her responsibilities as Detail commander extended throughout the entire building. The procession wasn't a security threat to the House. In terms of security it was just a nuisance. Even if a gang of gunmen had secreted itself in the line, behind the closed doors all around this area were twenty armed agents, many of them with Uzi submachine guns in their fast-action-gun bags, unkindly known as FAG bags. A metal detector hidden in the doorway told a crew from the Technical Security Division whom to look at, and other agents concealed in their hands photos stacked together like a deck of cards, which they shuffled through constantly until every face coming through the door could be compared with known or suspected troublemakers. For the rest they depended on instincts and training, and that came down to people who looked "funny," the usual Americanism for inappropriate demeanor. The problem with that was the cold weather outside. People came in, and a lot of them looked funny. Some stamped their feet a little. Others shoved hands into pockets, or adjusted coats, or shivered, or just looked around oddly—all of which was calculated to attract the attention of somebody on the Detail. On those occasions when the gestures came from one who had pinged the metal detector, an agent would raise his or her hand as

though scratching one's nose and speak into a microphone. "Blue coat, male, six feet," for example, would cause four or five heads to turn for a closer look at, in that case, a dentist from Richmond who had just switched his pocket hand warmer from one side to the other. His physical dimensions were checked against threat photos of similarly sized subjects and found not to match—but they watched him anyway, and a hidden TV camera zoomed in to record his face. In a few more extreme cases, an agent would join up with the exiting mourners and follow a subject to a car to catch the tag number. The long-since-deestablished Strategic Air Command had taken as its official motto PEACE is OUR PROFESSION. For the Secret Service the business was paranoia, the necessity for which was made plain by the two caskets in the White House foyer.

BROWN AND HOLBROOK had their five seconds of direct viewing. Two expensive boxes, doubtless purchased at government expense, and blasphemously, they thought, draped with the Stars and Stripes. Well, maybe not for the wife. After all, the womenfolk were supposed to be loyal to their men, and that couldn't be helped. The flow of the crowd took them to the left, and velvet ropes guided them down the steps. They could feel the change in the others. A collective deep breath, and some sniffles of people wiping their eyes of tears—mainly the womenfolk. The two Mountain Men stayed impassive, as most of the men did. The Remington sculptures on the way out caused both to stop and admire briefly, and then it was back into the open, and the fresh air was a welcome cleansing after the few minutes of federal steam heat. They didn't speak until they were off the grounds and away from others.

"Nice boxes we bought them," Holbrook managed to say first.

"Shame they weren't open." Brown looked around. Nobody was close enough to hear his indiscretion. "They do have kids," Pete pointed out. He headed south so that they could see down Pennsylvania Avenue.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. And they'll grow up to be 'crats, too." They walked a few more yards. "Damn!"

There was nothing else one could say, except maybe, "Fuck!" Holbrook thought, and he didn't like repeating things Ernie said.

The sun was coming up, and the absence of tall buildings to the east of the Hill meant that the white building was beautifully silhouetted. Though it was the first trip to Washington for both, either man could have done a reasonably accurate sketch of the building from memory, and the *wrongness* of the horizon could not have been more obvious. Pete was glad that Ernie had talked him into coming. Just the sight made all the travel hassles worth it. This time he managed the first collective thought: "Ernie," Holbrook said in awe, "it's inspirational."

"Yeah."

ONE PROBLEM WITH the disease was that the warning signs were equivocal,

and her main concern was one of her patients. He was such a nice boy, but—but he was gravely ill, Sister Jean Baptiste saw now that his fever had spiked to 40.4 degrees Celsius, and that was deadly enough, but the other signs were worse. The disorientation had gotten worse. The vomiting had increased, and now there was blood in it. There were indications of internal bleeding. All that, she knew, could mean one of several things—but the one she worried about was called Ebola Zaire. There were many diseases in the jungle of this country—she still thought of it occasionally as the Belgian Congo—and while the competition for the absolute worst was stiffer than one might imagine, Ebola was at the bottom of that particular pit. She had to draw blood for another test, and this she did with great care, the first sample having been lost somehow or other. The younger staff here weren't as thorough as they ought. . . . His parents held the arm while she drew the blood, her hands fully protected with latex gloves. It went smoothly—the boy was not even semiconscious at the moment. She withdrew the needle and placed it immediately in a plastic box for disposal. The blood vial was safe, but that, too, went into another container. Her immediate concern was the needle. Too many people on staff tried to save money for the hospital by reusing instruments, this despite AIDS and other diseases communicated by blood products. She'd handle this one herself, just to make sure.

She didn't have time to look more at the patient. Leaving the ward, she walked through the breezeway to the next building. The hospital had a long and honorable history, and had been built to allow for local conditions. The many low frame buildings were connected by covered walkways. The laboratory building was only fifty meters away. This facility was blessed; recently the World Health Organization had established a presence here, along with which had come modern equipment and six young physicians—but, alas, no nurses. All were British–or American trained.

Dr. Mohammed Moudi was at the lab bench. Tall, thin, swarthy, he was somewhat cold in his demeanor, but he was proficient. He turned as he saw her approach, and took note of the way she disposed of the needle.

"What is it, Sister?"

"Patient Mkusa. Benedict Mkusa, African male, age eight." She handed the paperwork over. Moudi opened the folder and scanned it. For the nurse—Christian or not, she was a holy woman, and a fine nurse—the symptoms had occurred one at a time. The paper presentation to the physician was far more efficient. Headache, chills, fever, disorientation, agitation, and now signs of an internal bleed. When he looked up his eyes were guarded. If petechia appeared on his skin next . . .

"He's in the general ward?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Move him to the isolation building at once. I'll be over there in half an hour."

"Yes, Doctor." On the way out she rubbed her forehead. It must have been the heat. You never really got used to it, not if you came from northern Europe. Maybe an aspirin after she saw to her patient.

7

PUBLIC IMAGE

IT STARTED EARLY. WHEN two E-3B Sentry aircraft which had deployed from Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma to Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina took off from the latter at 0800 local time and headed north. It had been decided that closing down all the local airports would have been too much. Washington National remained closed—and with no congressmen to race there for a flight to their districts (their special parking lot was well known), it even appeared that the facility might remain that way—and at the other two, Dulles and Baltimore-Washington International, controllers were under very precise instructions. Flights in and out were to avoid a "bubble" more than twenty miles in diameter and centered on the White House. Should any aircraft head toward the "bubble" it would instantly be challenged. If the challenge were ignored, it would soon find a fighter aircraft off its wingtip. If that didn't work, the third stage would be obvious and spectacular. Two flights, each of four F-16 fighters, were orbiting the city in relays at an altitude of eighteen and twenty thousand feet, respectively. The altitude kept the noise down (it also would enable them to tip over and reach supersonic speed almost immediately), but the white contrails made patterns in the blue sky as obvious as those the 8th Air Force had once traced over Germany.

About the same time, the 260th Military Police Brigade of the Washington, D.C., National Guard redeployed to maintain "traffic control." More than a hundred HMMWVs were in side streets, each with a police or FBI vehicle in close attendance, controlling traffic by blocking the streets. An honor guard assembled from all the services lined the streets to be used. There was no telling which of the rifles might be equipped with a full magazine.

Some people had actually expected the security precautions to be kept quiet because armored vehicles had been dispensed with.

There was a total of sixty-one chiefs of state in the city; the day would be security hell for everyone, and the media made sure that everyone would share the experience.

For the last one of these, Jacqueline Kennedy had decided on morning clothes, but thirty-five years had passed, and dark business suits would now suffice, except for those foreign government officials who wore uniforms of various sorts (the Prince of Wales *was* a commissioned officer), or visitors from tropical countries. Some of them would wear their national garb, and would suffer the consequences in the name of national dignity. Just getting them around town and into the White House was a nightmare. Then came the problem of how to line them up in the procession. Alphabetically by country? Alphabetically by name? By seniority in office would have given undue

primacy of place to a few dictators who had come to find for themselves some legitimacy in the diplomatic major leagues—bolstering the status of countries and governments with which America had friendly relations but for which America had little love. They all came to the White House, marching past the coffins after the last of the line of American citizens had been cut off, pausing to pay personal respects, and from there into the East Room, where a platoon of State Department officials struggled to get things organized over coffee and Danish.

Ryan and his family were upstairs, putting the finishing touches on their dark clothes, attended by White House staff members. The children handled it the best, accustomed to having Mom and Dad brush their hair on the way out the door, and amused to see Mom and Dad being treated the same way. Jack was holding a copy of his first speech. It was past time for him to close his eyes and wish everything away. Now he felt like a boxer, overmatched by his opponent but unable to take a dive, taking every punch as best he could and trying not to disgrace himself. Mary Abbot applied the final touches to his hair and locked everything in place with spray, something Ryan had never used voluntarily in his life.

"They're waiting, Mr. President," Arnie said.

"Yeah." Jack handed the speech binder to one of the Secret Service agents. He headed out of the room, followed by Cathy, who held Katie. Sally took Little Jack's hand to follow them into the corridor and down the stairs. President Ryan walked slowly down the square spiral of steps, then turned left to the East Room. As he entered the room, heads turned. Every eye in the room looked at him, but these looks were in no way casual, and few of them were sympathetic. Almost every pair belonged to a chief of state. Those that did not belonged to an ambassador, each of whom would this night draft a report on the new American President. It was Ryan's good fortune that the first to approach him was one who would not need to do anything of the sort.

"Mr. President," said the man in the Royal Navy mess jacket. His ambassador had positioned things nicely. On the whole, London rather liked the new arrangement. The "special relationship" would become more special, as President Ryan was an (honorary) Knight Commander of the Victorian Order.

"Your Highness." Jack paused, and allowed himself a smile as he shook the offered hand. "Long time since that day in London, pal."

"Indeed."

THE SUN WASN'T as warm as it should have been the wind saw to that—its hard-cast shadows merely making things appear colder. The D.C. police led off with a rank of motorcycles, then three drummers followed by marching soldiers—they were a squad from 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, First Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne, which had once been Roger Durling's own—then the riderless horse, boots reversed in the stirrups, and the gun carriages, side by side for this funeral, husband and wife. Then the lines of cars. The cold air did one other thing. The drums' brutal thunder echoed sharply up and down the man-made canyons. As the procession

headed northwest, the soldiers, sailors, and Marines came to present arms, first for the old President, then for the new. Men mainly removed whatever hats they might be wearing (some forgot) for the former.

Brown and Holbrook didn't forget. Durling may just have been another 'crat, but the Flag was the Flag, and it wasn't the Flag's fault that it was draped there. The soldiers strutted up the street, incongruously wearing battledress uniforms with red berets and bloused jump boots because, the radio commentator said, Roger Durling had been one of their own. Before the gun carriage walked two more soldiers, the first carrying the presidential flag, and the second with a framed plaque which contained Durling's combat decorations. The deceased President had won a medal for rescuing a soldier under fire. That former soldier was somewhere in the procession, and had already been interviewed about a dozen times, soberly recounting the day on which a President-to-be had saved his life. A shame he'd gone wrong, the Mountain Men reflected, but more likely he'd been a politician the whole time.

The new President appeared presently, his automobile identifiable by the four Secret Service agents pacing alongside it. This new one was a mystery to the two Mountain Men. They knew what they'd seen on TV and read in the papers. A shooter. He'd actually killed two people, one with a pistol and one with an Uzi. Ex-Marine, even. That excited a little admiration. Other TV coverage, repeated again and again, mainly showed him doing Sunday talk shows and briefings. In most of the former he looked competent. In the latter he often appeared uncomfortable.

Most of the car windows in the procession had the dark plastic coating that prevented people from seeing who rode inside, but not the President's car, of course. His three children sitting ahead of him and facing back from the jump seat, with his wife at his side, President John Ryan was easy to see from the sidewalk.

"WHAT DO WE really know about Mr. Ryan?"

"Not much," the commentator admitted. "His government service has been almost exclusively in CIA. He has the respect of Congress, on both sides of the aisle. He's worked with Alan Trent and Sam Fellows for years—that's one of the reasons both members are still alive. We've all heard the story of the terrorists who attacked him—"

"Like something out of the Wild West," the anchor interjected. "What do you think about having a President who's—"

"Killed people?" the commentator returned the favor. He was tired from days of long duty, and just a little tired of this coiffeured airhead. "Let's see. George Washington was a general. So was Andy Jackson. William Henry Harrison was a soldier. Grant, and most of the post-Civil War presidents. Teddy Roosevelt, of course. Truman was a soldier. Eisenhower. Jack Kennedy was in the Navy, as were Nixon, and Jimmy Carter, *and* George Bush . . ." The impromptu history lesson had the visual effect of a cattle prod.

"But he was selected as Vice President really in a caretaker status, wasn't he, and as payback for his handling of the conflict"—nobody really called it a

"war"—"with what turned out to be Japanese business interests." There, the anchor thought, that would put this overaged foreign correspondent in his place. Who ever said that a President was entitled to any honeymoon at all, anyway?

RYAN WANTED TO look over his speech, but he found that he couldn't. It was pretty cold out there. It wasn't exactly warm in the car, but thousands of people stood out there in twenty-nine-degree air, five to ten deep on the sidewalks, and their faces tracked his car as it passed by. They were close enough that he could see their expressions. Many pointed and said things to the people standing next to them—*there he is, there's the new one.* Some waved, small embarrassed gestures from people who were unsure if it was okay to do so, but wanting to do something to show that they cared. More nodded respect, with the tight smile that you saw in a funeral home *hope you'll be okay*. Jack wondered if it was proper to wave back, but decided that it wasn't, bound by some unwritten rule that applied to funerals. And so he just looked at them, his face, he thought, in a neutral mien, without saying anything because he didn't know what to say, either. Well, he had a speech to handle that, Ryan thought, frustrated with himself.

"NOT A HAPPY camper," Brown whispered to Holbrook. They waited a few minutes for the crowd to loosen up. Not all of the spectators were interested in the procession of foreign dignitaries. You couldn't see into the cars anyway, and keeping track of all the flags that flew on the front bumpers merely started various versions of "Which one is that one?"—often with an incorrect answer. So, like many others, the two Mountain Men shouldered their way back from the curb into a park.

"He ain't got it," Holbrook replied, finally.

"He's just a 'crat. Remember the Peter Principle?" It was a book which, both thought, had been written to explain government workers. In any hierarchy, people tended to rise to their level of incompetence. "I think I like this."

His comrade looked back at the street and the cars and the fluttering little flags. "I think you may be right."

SECURITY AT THE National Cathedral was airtight. In their hearts the Secret Service agents knew that, and knew that no assassin—the idea of professional assassins was largely a creation of Hollywood anyway—would risk his life under these circumstances. Every building with a direct line of sight to the Gothic-style church had several policemen, or soldiers, or USSS special agents atop it, many of them armed with rifles, and their own Counter-Sniper Team armed with the finest of all, $10,000 handmade instruments that could reach more than half a mile and touch someone in the head the team, which won competition shoots with the regularity of the tides, was probably the best collection of marksmen the world had ever seen, and practiced every day to

keep that way. Anyone who wanted to do mischief would either know all these things and stay away, or, in the case of an amateur madman, would see the massive defensive arrangements and decide this wasn't a good day to die.

But things were tense anyway, and even as the procession appeared in the distance, agents were hustling around. One of them, exhausted from thirty hours of continuous duty, was drinking coffee when he tripped on the stone steps and spilled the cup. Grumbling, he crushed the plastic foam in his hand, stuffed it in his pocket, and told his lapel-mounted radio microphone that everything was clear at his post. The coffee froze almost instantly on the shaded granite.

Inside the cathedral, yet another team of agents checked out every shadowed nook one more time before taking their places, allowing protocol officers to make final preparations, referring to seating instructions faxed to them only minutes before and wondering what would go wrong.

The gun carriages came to a halt in front of the building, and the cars came up one at a time to discharge their passengers. Ryan got out, followed by his family, moving to join the Durlings. The kids were still in shock, and maybe that was good, or maybe it was not. Jack didn't know. At times like this, what did a man do? He placed his hand on the son's shoulder while the cars came, dropped off their passengers, and pulled rapidly away. The other official mourners—the senior ones—would form up behind him. Less senior ones would be entering the church now from side entrances, passing through portable metal detectors, while the churchmen and choir, having already done the same, would be taking their places.

Roger must have remembered his service in the 82nd with pride, Jack thought. The soldiers who'd led the procession stacked arms and prepared to do their duty under the supervision of a young captain, assisted by two serious-looking sergeants. They all looked so young, even the sergeants, all with their heads shaved nearly down to stubble under their berets. Then he remembered that his father had served in the rival 101st Airborne more than fifty years before, and had looked just like these kids, though probably with a little more hair, since the bald look hadn't been fashionable in the 1940s. But the same toughness, the same fierce pride, and the same determination to get the job done, whatever it might be. It seemed to take forever. Ryan, like the soldiers, couldn't turn his head. He had to stand at attention as he'd done during his own service in the Marine Corps, though allowing his eyes to scan around. His children turned their heads and shifted on their feet with the cold, while Cathy kept her eyes on them, worrying as her husband did about the exposure to the cold, but caught in a situation where even parental concerns were subordinated to something else. What was it, she wondered, this thing called duty that even orphaned children knew that they had to stand there and just take it?

Finally the last of the official procession alighted from their cars and took their places. Someone gave it a fivecount, and the soldiers moved to the gun carriages, seven to each. The officer in charge of them unscrewed one clamp, then the other, and the caskets were lifted and moved off in robotic side-steps. The soldier holding the presidential flag started up the steps, followed by the caskets. The President's was in front, led by the captain and followed by the

sergeant in charge of the sub-detail.

It wasn't anybody's fault. There were three soldiers on either side, marching to the slow cadence called by the sergeant. They were stiff from standing fifteen minutes at parade rest after a healthy morning walk up Massachusetts Avenue. The middle one on the right slipped on the frozen coffee just as all were taking a step. He slid inward, not outward, and in going down his legs swept away the soldier behind him. The total load was over four hundred pounds of wood, metal, and body, and it all came down on the soldier who'd been first to slip, breaking both his legs in an instant on the granite steps.

A collective gasp came up from the thousands of people watching. Secret Service agents raced in, fearing that a shot might have felled the soldiers. Andrea Price moved in front of Ryan, her hand inside her coat and obviously holding her service automatic, ready to draw it out, while other agents poised to drag the Ryans and the Durlings clear of the area. The soldiers were already moving the casket off their fallen comrade, his face suddenly white with pain.

"Ice," he told the sergeant through clenched teeth. "Slipped." The soldier even had enough self-control to refrain from the profanity that echoed through his mind at the shame and embarrassment of the moment. An agent looked at the step and saw it there, a white-brown mound that reflected light. He made a gesture that told Price she could stand down, which command was instantly radioed out to all the agents in sight:

"Just a slip, just a slip."

Ryan winced to see what had happened. Roger Durling would not have felt it, his mind thought, but the insult to him was an insult to his children, who cringed and snapped their heads away when their father bounced on the stone steps. The son turned back first, taking it all in, the child part of him wondering why the fall hadn't awakened his father. Only hours before he'd risen during the night and walked to the door of his room, wanting to open it, wanting to cross the hall and knock on his parents' door to see if they might be back.

"OH, GOD," the commentator groaned.

The cameras zoomed in as two of the 3rd Regiment soldiers pulled the injured paratrooper clear. The sergeant took his place. The casket was lifted back up in seconds, its polished oak clearly gouged and defaced by the fall.

"OKAY. SOLDIERS," the sergeant said from his new place. "By the left."

"Daddy," whimpered Mark Durling, age nine. "Daddy." Everyone close by heard it in the silence that had followed the accident. The soldiers bit their lips. The Secret Service agents, already shamed and wounded by the loss of a President, took a second to look down or at one another. Jack instinctively wrapped his arms around the boy, but still didn't know what the hell he was supposed to say. What else could possibly go wrong? the new President wondered as Mrs. Durling followed her husband up the steps and inside.

"Okay, Mark." Ryan placed his arm around the youngster's shoulder and

guided him to the door, without thinking about it taking the place of a favored uncle for a few yards. If there were only a way to take away their sorrow, even for a few seconds. The thought was an impossible one, and all it did for Jack was to give him another layer of sadness, as what he added to himself didn't detract a whit from what the children felt.

It was warmer inside, which was noticed by those less caught up in the emotion of the moment. Fluttering protocol officers took their places. Ryan and his family went to the first pew on the right. The Durling party went opposite them. The caskets sat side by side on catafalques in the sacristy, and beyond them were three more, those of a senator and two members of the House, "representing" one last time. The organ played something Ryan had heard before but didn't recognize. At least it wasn't Mozart's grim Masonic procession with its repeating, brutal chant, about as uplifting as a film of the Holocaust. The clergymen were lined up in front, their faces professionally composed. In front of Ryan, in the slot usually occupied by hymnals, was another copy of his speech.

THE SCENE ON the TV screen was such to make anyone in his chosen profession either ill or excited in a manner beyond sex. If only . . . but such opportunities as this one only happened by accident, never allowing the time to prepare anything. Preparation was everything for a mission like this. Not that it would have been technically hard, and he allowed his mind to consider the method. A mortar, perhaps. You could mount one of those in the back of an ordinary delivery truck such as one might find in any city in the known world. Walk the rounds down the roof of the building, dropping it on the targets. You'd get off at least ten, maybe fifteen or twenty, and though the selection would be random, a target was a target, and terror was terror, and that was his profession.

"Look at them all," he breathed. The cameras traced along the pews. Mostly men, some women, sitting in no order that he could discern, some chatting in whispers, most not, with blank expressions as their eyes surveyed the inside of the church. Then the children of the dead American President, a son and a daughter with the beaten look of those who'd been touched by the harsh reality of life. Children bore the burden surprisingly well, didn't they? They'd survive, all the more so that they were no longer of any political significance, and so his interest in them was as clinical as it was pitiless. Then the camera was on Ryan again, closing in on his face and allowing some careful examination.

HE HADN'T SAID good-bye to Roger Durling yet. There hadn't been time for Jack to compose his mind and concentrate on the thought, the week had been so busy, but now he found his eyes staring at just that one coffin. He'd hardly known Anne, and the three others in the sacristy were strangers to him, actually chosen at random for their religious affiliations. But Roger had been a friend. Roger had brought him back from private life, given him an important

job, and trusted him to run it, taking Jack's advice most of the time, confiding in him, chiding and disciplining on occasion, but always as a friend. It had been a tough job, all the harder with the conflict that had developed with Japan—even for Jack, now that it was over, it was no longer a "war," because war was a thing of the past. No longer a part of the real world that was progressing beyond such barbarism. Durling and Ryan had gotten through that, and while the former had wanted to move on to finish the job in other ways, he had also recognized that for Ryan the race had ended. And so, as a friend, he'd given Jack a golden bridge back to private life, a capstone on a career of public service that had turned into a trap.

But if he'd offered the job to someone else, where would I have been that night? Jack asked himself. The answer was simple. He would have been in the front row of the House chamber, and now he would have been dead. President Ryan blinked hard at the realization. *Roger had saved his life.* Probably not just his own. Cathy—and maybe the kids—would have been in the gallery, along with Anne Durling. . . . Was life really that fragile as to turn on such small events? Throughout the city at this moment, other bodies lay in other caskets for other ceremonies, most for adults but some for the children of other victims who'd chosen that night to bring their families to the joint session.

Mark Durling was whimpering now. His elder sister, Amy, pulled his head inward to her. Jack turned his head slightly, allowing his peripheral vision to take it in. *They're just kids, dear God, why do kids have to go through this?* The thought hammered home in an instant. Jack bit his lip and looked down at the floor. There was no one to be a target for his anger. The perpetrator of this crime was dead himself, his body in yet another box in the Washington, D.C., morgue, and some thousands of miles away, such family as the man had left behind bore the additional burden of shame and guilt placed on them. This was why people called all violence senseless. There was nothing to learn from any of this, only the lingering harm of lives lost and lives wrecked—and lives spared for no particular reason other than mere chance. Like cancer or other serious illness, this sort of violence struck with no discernible plan, and no real defense, just one dead man who had decided not to enter alone such afterlife as he believed in. What the hell was anyone supposed to learn from this? Ryan, long a student of human behavior, grimaced and continued to look down, his ears focusing on the sounds of an orphaned child in the hollow echoes of a stone church.

HE'S WEAK. IT was obvious on his face. This supposed man, this *President,* was struggling to hold back tears. Didn't he know that death was part of life? He'd caused death, hadn't he? Didn't he know what death was? Was he only learning now? The other faces did know. One could see that. They were somber, because at a funeral it was expected that one had to be somber, but all life came to an end. Ryan ought to know. He'd faced danger—but that was long ago, he reminded himself, and over time men forget such things. Ryan had had ample cause to forget life's vulnerabilities, protected as he'd been as a government official. It amazed the man how much one could learn from a few seconds' examination of a human face.

That made things easier, didn't it?

SHE WAS FIVE rows back, but was on the aisle, and though the Prime Minister of India could see only the back of President Ryan's head, she, too, was a student of human behavior. A chief of state couldn't act like this. A chief of state was, after all, an actor on the world's most important stage, and you had to learn what to do and how to behave. She'd been going to funerals of various sorts all of her life, because political leaders had associates not always friends—young and old, and one had to show respect by appearing, even for those one had detested. In the latter case, it could be amusing. In her country the dead were so often burned, and then she could tell herself that, perhaps, the body was still alive as it burned. Her eyebrows flickered up and down in private amusement at the thought. *Especially for the ones you detested.* It was such good practice. To appear saddened. *Yes, we had our differences, but he was always someone to be respected, someone you could work with. someone whose ideas were always worth serious attention.* With practice over the years, you got good enough that the survivors believed the lies—partly because they wanted to believe. You learned to smile just so, and to show grief just so, and to speak just so. You had to. A political leader could rarely allow true feelings to show. True feelings told others what your weaknesses were, and there were always those to use them against you—and so over the years you hid them more and more, until eventually you had few, if any, true feelings left. And that was good, because politics wasn't about feelings.

Clearly this Ryan fellow didn't know that, the Prime Minister of "the world's largest democracy" told herself. As a result, he was showing what he really was, and worse still, for him, he was doing so in front of a third of the world's highest political leaders, people who would see and learn and file their thoughts away for future use. Just as she was doing. Marvelous, she thought, keeping her face somber and sad in honor of someone she'd thoroughly detested. When the organist began the first hymn, she lifted her book, turned the page to the proper number, and sang along with everyone else.

THE RABBI WENT first. Each clergyman was given ten minutes, and each of them was an expert—more properly, each was a genuine scholar in addition to his calling as a man of God. Rabbi Benjamin Fleischman spoke from the Talmud and the Torah. He spoke of duty and honor and faith, of a merciful God. Next came the Reverend Frederick Ralston, the Senate Chaplain—he'd been out of town that night, and so spared of a more restrained participation in the events of the day. A Southern Baptist and distinguished authority on the New Testament, Ralston spoke of Christ's Passion in the garden, of his friend Senator Richard Eastman of Oregon, who lay in the sacristy, universally respected as an honorable member of the Congress, segueing then into praise of the fallen President, a devoted family man, as all knew. . . .

There was no "right" way to handle such things, Ryan thought. Maybe it would be easier if the minister/ priest/rabbi had time to sit with the grieving,

but that hadn't happened in this case, and he wondered—

No, this isn't right! Jack told himself. This was theater. It wasn't supposed to be that. There were *kids* sitting a few feet across the aisle to his left, and for them this wasn't theater at all. This was a lot simpler for them. It was *Mom* and *Dad,* ripped out of their lives by a senseless act, denying them the future that life was supposed to guarantee them, love and guidance, a chance to grow in a normal way into normal people. Mark and Amy were the important ones here, but the lessons of this service, which were supposed to help them, were instead aimed at others. This whole event was a *political* exercise, something to reassure the country, renew people's faith in God and the world and their country, and maybe the people out there behind the twenty-three cameras in the church needed that, but there were people in greater need, the children of Roger and Anne Durling, the grown sons of Dick Eastman, the widow of David Kohn of Rhode Island, and the surviving family of Marissa Henrik of Texas. Those were real people, and their personal grief was being subordinated to the needs of the country. *Well, the country be damned!* Jack thought, suddenly angry at what was happening, and at himself for not grasping it early enough to change things around. The country had needs, but those needs could not be so great as to overshadow the horror fate had inflicted on kids. Who spoke for them? Who spoke to them?

Worst of all for Ryan, a Catholic, Michael Cardinal O'Leary, Archbishop of Washington, was no better. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called . . ." For Mark and Amy, Jack's mind raged, their father wasn't a peacemaker. He was Dad, and Dad was gone, and that wasn't an abstraction. Three distinguished, learned, and very decent members of the clergy were preaching to a nation, but right before them were children who got a few kind words of lip service, and that was all. Somebody had to speak to them, for them, about their parents. Somebody had to try to make things better. It wasn't possible, but someone had to try, damn it! Maybe he was President of the United States. Maybe he had a duty to the millions behind the cameras, but Jack remembered the time his wife and daughter had been in Baltimore's Shock-Trauma Center, hovering between life and death, and that hadn't been a damned abstraction, either. *That* was the problem. *That* was why his family had been attacked. *That* was why all these people had died—because some misguided fanatic had seen them all as abstractions instead of human beings with lives and hopes and dreams—and kids. It was Jack's job to protect a nation. He'd sworn to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, and he would do that to the best of his ability. But the purpose of the *Constitution* was pretty simple—to secure the blessings of liberty for *people,* and that included kids. The country he served and the government he was trying to lead were nothing more or less than a mechanism to protect individual people. *That* duty was not an abstraction. The reality of that duty sat ten feet to his left, holding back tears as best they could, and probably failing, because there was no feeling lonelier than what those kids were suffering right now, while Mike O'Leary spoke to a country instead of a family. The theater had lasted long enough. There came another hymn, and then it was Ryan's turn to rise and walk to the pulpit.

Secret Service agents turned around, again sweeping the nave, because now

SWORDSMAN was an ideal target. Getting to the lectern, he saw that Cardinal O'Leary had done as instructed and set the presidential binder on the wooden top. No, Jack decided. No. His hands grasped the sides of the lectern to steady himself. His eyes swept briefly across the assembly, and then looked down on the children of Roger and Anne Durling. The pain in their eyes broke his heart. They'd borne all the burdens placed on them by duties never theirs to carry. They'd been told by some unnamed "friends" to be braver than would have been asked of any Marine at such a time, probably because, "Mom and Dad would want you to." But bearing pain in quiet dignity was not the business of children. That was what adults were supposed to do, as best they could. *Enough*, Jack told himself, *my duty starts here.* The first duty of the strong was ever to protect the weak. His hands squeezed on the polished oak, and the self-inflicted pain helped compose his thoughts.

"Mark, Amy, your father was my friend," he said gently. "It was my honor to work for him and help him as best I could——but you know, he was probably even more help for me. I know you always had to understand that Dad and Mom had important jobs, and didn't always have time for the really important things, but I can tell you that your father did everything he could to spend time with you, because he loved you more than anything in the world, more than being President, more than all the things that came along with that, more than anything—except maybe your Mom. He loved her a lot, too. . . ."

WHAT RUBBISH! YES, one cared for children. Daryaei did, but children grew to adulthood no matter what. Their place was to learn, and to serve, and someday to do the deeds of adults. Until then, they were children, and the world told them what must be. Fate did. Allah did. Allah was merciful, even though life was hard. He had to admit that the Jew had spoken well, citing scripture quoted exactly the same way in their Torah and his Holy Koran. He would have chosen a different passage, but that was a matter of taste, wasn't it? Theology allowed such things. It had all been a wasted exercise, but formal occasions such as this usually were. This Ryan fool was wasting his chance to rally his nation, to appear strong and sure, thus to consolidate his hold on his government. Talking to children at such a time!

HIS POLITICAL HANDLERS must be having a collective heart attack, the Prime Minister thought, and it required all of the self-control learned over a political lifetime to keep her face composed. Then she decided to change her expression to sympathy. After all, he might be watching her, and she was a woman and a mother, after all, and she would be meeting with him later today. She tilted her head slightly to the right, so as to give herself a better view of the scene and the man. He might like that, too. In another minute or so, she'd pull a tissue from her purse to wipe her eyes.

"I wish I'd had the chance to get to know your mom better. Cathy and I were looking forward to that. I wanted Sally and Jack and Katie and you to become friends. Your dad and I talked a little about that. I guess that won't be

happening the way we wanted it to." That impromptu thought made Jack's stomach do a flip. They were crying now, because he'd told them without words that now it was okay to cry. Jack couldn't let himself do that. Not for the others. He had to be strong now for them, and so he gripped the lectern harder still until his hands really hurt, and he welcomed the pain for the discipline it imposed on him.

"You probably want to know why this had to happen. I don't know, kids. I wish I did. I wish *somebody* did, so that I could go to that person for the answers. But I've never found that person," Jack went on.

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"JESUS," CLARK MANAGED to say in the grumbly voice that men used to prevent a sob. In his CIA office, as with all senior officials, was a TV set, and every channel was covering this. "Yeah, I've looked once or twice myself, man."

"You know something, John?" Chavez was under more control. It was a man's place to be calm at such times, so that the women and kids could cling to him. Or so his culture told him. Mr. C., on the other hand, was just full of surprises. As always.

"What's that, Domingo?"

"He gets it. We're working for somebody who gets it."

John turned at that. Who'd believe it? Two CIA paramilitary officers, thinking the same thoughts as their President. It was nice to know that he'd read Ryan correctly from the first moment. *Damn, just like his dad.* A pity Fate had denied him the chance to know that Ryan. He next wondered if Jack would succeed as President. He wasn't acting like one of the others. He was acting like a real person. But why was that so bad? Clark asked himself.

"I WANT YOU to know that you can come to Cathy and me whenever you want. You're not alone. You will *never* be alone. You have your family with you, and now you have my family, too," he promised them from the pulpit. It just got harder. He had to say what he'd just said. Roger was a friend, and you looked after their kids when you had to. He'd done it for Buck Zimmer's family, and now he'd do it for Roger's.

"I want you to be proud of Mom and Dad. Your father was a fine man, a good friend. He worked very hard to make things better for people. It was a big job, and it denied him a lot of time with you, but your father was a big man, and big men do big things. Your mother was always there, too, and she also did big things. Kids, you will always have them in your heart. Remember all the things they told you, all the little things, and the games, and the tricks, and the jokes, all the ways moms and dads show love for their children. You will never lose that. Never," Jack assured them, stretching and hoping for something that could soften the blow Fate had dealt them. He couldn't find anything better. It was time to end it.

"Mark, Amy, God decided He wanted your mom and dad back. He doesn't

explain why in ways that are easy for us to understand, and we can't . . . we can't fight it when that happens. We just can't—" Ryan's voice finally cracked.

HOW COURAGEOUS OF the man, Koga thought, to allow his emotions to show. Anyone could have stood up there and spoken the usual political drivel, and most would have—in or from any country—but this Ryan wasn't like that at all. Speaking to the children in this way was brilliant—or so he'd thought at the outset. But it wasn't that at all. Inside the President was a *man*. He wasn't an actor. He didn't care about showing strength and resolve. And Koga knew why. More than anyone else in this church, Koga knew what Ryan was made of. He'd guessed right in his own office a few days before. Ryan was samurai, and even more. He did what he did, not caring what others thought. The Japanese Prime Minister hoped that wasn't a mistake as he watched the President of the United States come down the steps, then approach the Durling children. He embraced them, and the audience watched tears well up on Ryan's face. There were sobs around him in the chiefs-of-state seating, but he knew that most of those were forced or feigned—or at most brief, fleeting moments of residual humanity, soon to be forgotten. He regretted that he couldn't join in that, but the rules of his culture were stern, all the more so as he bore the shame of one of his citizens having caused this monstrous tragedy. He *had* to play the political game, much as he would have preferred otherwise, and it wasn't so much that Ryan didn't have to play the game as that he didn't care. He wondered if America realized her good fortune.

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"HE DIDN'T USE his prepared speech at all," the anchorman objected. The speech had been distributed to all the news networks, and all the copies had been highlighted and excerpted already so that the reporters could repeat favored passages, so to reinforce the important things the President had to say for the viewing public. Instead the anchor had been forced to take notes, which he did badly, long past his time as a working reporter.

"You're right," the commentator reluctantly agreed. Things just weren't done this way. On his monitor, Ryan was still holding the Durling children, and that was going too long as well. "I guess the President decided that this was an important personal moment for them "

"And it surely is," the anchorman inserted.

"But Mr. Ryan's job is to govern a nation." The commentator shook his head, clearly thinking something he couldn't say quite yet: *not presidential.*

JACK HAD TO let go, finally. There was only hurt in their eyes now. The objective part of his mind thought that was probably good—they had to let it out—but that made it no easier to see, for children of that age weren't supposed to have such things at all. But these children did, and there was

nothing to be done for it but to try, somehow, to ease the pain. He looked over at the uncles and aunts who'd accompanied them. They were weeping also, but through their tears he saw a grateful look, and that, at least, told him that he'd done something. Nodding, he turned to return to his seat. Cathy looked at him, and there were tears in her eyes, too, and though she couldn't speak, she gripped his hand. Jack saw one more example of his wife's intelligence. She'd worn no eye makeup to run from her tears. Inwardly, he smiled. He didn't like makeup, and his wife didn't really need it.

"WHAT DO WE know of her?"

"She's a physician, an eye surgeon, actually, supposed to be a good one." He checked his notes. "The American news media say that she is continuing to work at her profession despite her official duties."

"And their children?"

"There's nothing on that, though . . . I should be able to find out what school they attend." He saw the quizzical look and went on. "If the wife will continue to do her medical work, then I would guess that the children will continue to attend the same schools."

"How do you find that out?"

"Easily. All American news stories can be accessed by computer. Ryan has been the subject of numerous news pieces. I can find out anything I want." In fact he already had, but not information about his family. The modern age had made the life of an intelligence officer so much easier. He already knew Ryan's age, height, weight, color of hair and eyes, and much of his personal habits, favorite food and drink, the golf clubs he belonged to, all manner of trivia, none of which was trivial to a man in his line of work. He didn't have to ask what his boss was thinking. The opportunity which both had missed with all of the chiefs of state at the National Cathedral was gone forever, but it would not be the only one.

WITH ONE FINAL hymn, it was over. The soldiers returned to collect the caskets, and the procession began again in reverse. Mark and Amy collected themselves well, aided by their relatives, and followed their parents. Jack led his family just after them. Katie was mainly bored and glad to be moving. Jack Jr. was sad for the Durling kids. Sally looked worried. He'd have to talk to her about that. Down the aisle he looked closely into a number of faces, distantly surprised that the first four or five rows of them looked not at the caskets, but at him. They never turned it off, did they? His fellow chiefs of state, Jack thought, wondering just what sort of club he'd just entered. A few faces were friendly. The Prince of Wales, who was not a chief of state and therefore placed by protocol behind the others—some of whom were outright thugs, but that could not be helped—gave a friendly nod. Yeah, he would understand, Jack thought. The new President wanted to check his watch, so tired he felt from the events of a day yet young, but he'd been sternly lectured about looking at one's watch, to the point of being advised to take it off. A President

didn't need a watch. There were always people to tell him what came next, just as there were now people searching coat racks, ready to hand Ryan and his family what they needed before going back outside. There was Andrea Price, and other members of the Detail. Outside would be more: a not-so-small army of people with guns and fears, and a car to take him to his next destination, where he would perform more official duties, then be whisked off to the next set, and on, and on.

He couldn't let all this take control of his life. Ryan frowned at the thought. He'd do the work, but he couldn't make the mistake Roger and Anne had made. He thought of the faces he'd seen walking out of the church and knew that it was a club he might be forced to enter but which he would never join. Or so he told himself.

8

CHANGE OF COMMAND

THE PART AT ANDREWS was mercifully short. From the Cathedral, the caskets had traveled in hearses, with the large official party left behind to disperse throughout Embassy Row. Air Force One was waiting on the ramp to take the Durlings back to California one last time. It seemed far more desultory now. There was yet another honor guard to salute the flagdraped coffins, but this was different. The crowd was smaller, composed mostly of Air Force and some other military personnel who had worked directly with the presidential party in one way or another. At the family's request, the actual burial ceremony would be smaller, and limited to relatives only, which was probably better for everybody. And so here at Andrews came the last "Ruffles and Flourishes" and the last "Hail to the Chief." Mark stood at attention, holding his hand over his heart in a gesture sure to be on the cover of all the news magazines. A good kid, doing his best, and being more manly than he would ever know. A scissors lift took the caskets to the cargo door, for at this point that's what the bodies were; mercifully, that part of the transfer was hidden from view. Then it was time. The family walked up the steps into the VC-25 for their last ride. It wouldn't even have the Air Force One call sign anymore, because that label went with the President, and the President wasn't aboard. Ryan watched the aircraft taxi off, then rumble down the runway. TV cameras tracked it until it was a mere dot in the sky. Ryan's eyes did the same. By that time, a flight of F-16s, relieved of their guard duty over Washington, landed one by one. When that was done, Ryan and his family climbed aboard a Marine helicopter to return to the White House. The flight crew smiled and fussed over his children. Little Jack got a unit patch after he buckled in. The mood of the day changed with that. The Marines of VMH-1 had a new family to take care of, and life for them moved on.

Already the White House staff was at work, moving their things in (they'd labored throughout the morning moving the Durlings' things out), changing some furniture, and tonight his family would sleep in the same house first occupied by John Adams. The kids, being kids, looked out the windows as the helicopter began its descent. The parents, being parents, looked at each other.

Things changed at this point. At a private family funeral, this would have been the wake. The sadness was supposed to be left behind, and the mourners would remember what a great guy Roger was, and then talk about what new things were going on in their lives, how the kids were doing at school, discussions of the baseball offseason trades. It was a way for things to return to normal after a sad and stressful day. And so it was in this case, if on a somewhat broader scale. The White House photographer was waiting there on

the South Lawn as the helicopter touched down. The stairs were lowered, and a Marine corporal stood at the bottom of them. President Ryan came out first, getting a salute from the corporal in dress blues, which he automatically returned, so ingrained were the lessons from Quantico, Virginia, more than twenty years before. Cathy came down behind, and then the kids. The Secret Service agents formed a loose corridor which told them where to head. News cameras were off to the west, their left, but no questions were shouted—this time; that would change very quickly, too. Inside the White House, the Ryans were directed to the elevators for a rapid trip to the second, bedroom floor. Van Damm was waiting there.

"Mr. President."

"Do I change, Arnie?" Jack asked, handing his coat to a valet. Ryan stopped cold, if only for a second or two, in surprise at how easy that simple activity was. He was President now, and in small ways he had automatically started to act like one. Somehow that was more remarkable than the duties he'd already undertaken.

"No. Here." The chief of staff handed over a list of the guests already downstairs in the East Room. Jack scanned it, standing there in the middle of the hall. The names weren't so much people as countries, many friendly, many acquaintances, some genuine strangers, and some . . . Even as a former National Security Advisor, he didn't know everything he ought to have known about them. While he read, Cathy hustled the kids off to the bathroom—or started to. An agent from the Detail had to assist in locating them. Ryan walked into his own, checking his hair in the mirror. He managed to comb it himself, without the ministrations of Mrs. Abbot, under van Damm's scrutiny. *Not even safe in here*, the President told himself.

"How long will this go, Arnie?"

"No telling, sir."

Ryan turned. "When we're alone, the name's still Jack, remember? I've been afflicted, not anointed."

"Okay, Jack."

"Kids, too?"

"That'll be a nice touch. . . . Jack, so far, you've been doing well."

"Do I have my speechwriter mad at me?" he asked, checking his tie and leaving the bathroom.

"Your instincts weren't so bad, but next time we can have a speech prepared for that."

Ryan thought about that, handing the list back to van Damm. "You know, just because I'm President doesn't mean I stopped being a person."

"Jack, get used to it, okay? You're not allowed to be 'just a person' anymore. Okay, you've had a few days to get used to the idea. When you walk downstairs, you are the United States of America, *not* just a person. That goes for you, that goes for your wife, and to some degree that goes for your kids." For his revelation, the chief of staff got a poisonous look that may have lasted a second or two. Arnie ignored it. It was just personal, not business. "Ready, Mr. President?"

Jack nodded, wondering if Arnie was right or not, and wondering why the observation had angered him so much. And then wondering again how true it

was. You couldn't tell with Arnie. He was and would continue to be a teacher, and as with most skilled teachers, he would occasionally tell lies as harsh exemplars of a deeper truth.

Don Russell appeared in the corridor, leading Katie by the hand. She had a red ribbon in her hair as she broke free and ran to her mother. "Look what Uncle Don did!" At least one member of the Detail was already a member of the family.

"You may want to get them all into the bathroom now, Mrs. Ryan. There are no restrooms on the State Floor."

"None?"

Russell shook his head. "No, ma'am, they sort of forgot when they built the place."

Caroline Ryan grabbed the two youngest and led them off, doing her motherly duty. She returned in a couple of minutes.

"Want me to carry her downstairs for you, ma'am?" Russell asked with a grandfatherly smile. "The stairs are a little tricky in heels. I'll hand her off at the bottom."

"Sure." People started heading for the stairwell, and Andrea Price keyed her microphone.

"SWORDSMAN and party are moving from the residence to the State Floor."

"Roger," another agent responded from downstairs.

They could hear the noise even before making the last turn on the marble steps. Russell set Katie Ryan on the floor next to her mother. The agents faded away, becoming strangely invisible as the Ryans, the First Family, walked into the East Room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," a staff member announced, "the President of the United States, Dr. Ryan, and family." Heads turned. There was a brief wave of applause which quickly faded, but the looks continued. They appeared friendly enough, Jack thought, knowing that not all were. He and Cathy moved a little to the left, and formed the receiving line.

They came mainly one by one, though some of the visiting chiefs of state had brought wives. A protocol officer at Ryan's left whispered the name of each into his ear, making Jack wonder how she knew all of these people by sight. The procession to him wasn't quite as haphazard as it appeared. The ambassadors representing countries whose heads had chosen not to make the trip held back, but even those, standing about in little knots of associates and sipping at their Perrier-with-a-twist, didn't hide their professional curiosity, checking out the new President *and* the way he greeted the men and women who came up to him.

"The Prime Minister of Belgium, M. Arnaud," the protocol officer whispered. The official photographer started clicking away to record every official greeting, and two TV cameras were doing the same, albeit more quietly.

"Your telegram was very gracious, Mr. Prime Minister, and it came at a sensitive moment," Ryan said, wondering if the truth sounded good enough, wondering if Arnaud had even read it—well, of course he had, though he probably hadn't drafted it.

"Your talk to the children was very moving. I'm sure everyone here thinks the same," the P.M. replied, gripping Ryan's hand, testing it for firmness,

looking hard and deep into his eyes, and rather pleased with himself for the very skilled mendacity of his greeting. For all that, he had read the telegram and pronounced it fitting, and was gratified at hearing Ryan's reaction to it. Belgium was an ally, and Arnaud had been well briefed by the chief of his country's military-intelligence service, who'd worked with Ryan at several NATO conferences, and always liked the American's read on the Soviets—and now, the Russians. An unknown quantity as a political leader, the gist of the briefing had been, but a bright and capable analyst. Arnaud did his own reading now, first in line mainly by accident, by grip and look and many years of experience in such things. Then he moved on.

"Dr. Ryan, I have heard so much about you." He kissed her hand in a very graceful Continental way. He hadn't been told how attractive the new First Lady was, and how dainty her hands were. Well, she was a surgeon, wasn't she? New to the game and uncomfortable with it, but playing along as she had to.

"Thank you, Prime Minister Arnaud," Cathy replied, informed by her own protocol officer (this one was just behind her) who this gentleman was. The hand business, she thought, was very theatrical . . . but nice.

"Your children are angels."

"How nice of you to say that." And he moved on, to be replaced by the President of Mexico.

News cameras floated around the room, along with fifteen reporters, because this was a working function of sorts. The piano in the room's northeast corner played some light classical—not quite what on the radio was called "easy listening," but close.

"And how long have you known the President?" The question came from the Prime Minister of Kenya, pleased to find a black admiral in the room.

"We go back quite a ways, sir," Robby Jackson replied.

"Robby! Excuse me, *Admiral* Jackson," the Prince of Wales corrected himself.

"Captain." Jackson shook his hand warmly. "It's been a while, sir."

"You two know—ah! Yes!" the Kenyan realized. Then he saw his counterpart from Tanzania and moved off to conduct business, leaving the two alone.

"How is he doing—really, I mean," the Prince asked, vaguely saddening Jackson. But this man had a job. Sent over as a friend in what Robby knew to have been a political decision, he would, on his return to Her Britannic Majesty's embassy, dictate a contact report. It was business. On the other hand, the question deserved an answer. The three of them had "served" together briefly one hot, stormy summer night.

"We had a short meeting with the acting chiefs a couple of days ago. There'll be a working session tomorrow. Jack'll be okay," the J-3 decided he would say. He put some conviction behind it. He had to. Jack was now NCA—National Command Authority—and Jackson's loyalty to him was a matter of law and honor, not mere humanity.

"And your wife?" He looked over to where Sissy Jackson was talking with Sally Ryan.

"Still number two piano for the National Symphony."

"Who's the lead?"

"Miklos Dimitri. Bigger hands," Jackson explained. He decided it would be impolitic to ask any family questions of his own.

"You did well in the Pacific."

"Yeah, well, fortunately we didn't have to kill all that many people." Jackson looked his almost-friend in the eye. "That really stopped being fun, y'know?"

"Can he handle the job, Robby? You know him better than I do."

"Captain, he *has* to handle the job," Jackson answered, looking over at his Commander-in-Chief-friend, and knowing how much Jack detested formal occasions. Watching his new President endure the circulating line, it was impossible to avoid thinking back. "Long way from teaching history at the Trade School, Your Highness," the admiral observed in a whisper.

For Cathy Ryan, it was more than anything else an exercise in protecting her hand. Oddly she knew the formal occasion drill better than her husband. As a senior physician at Johns Hopkins's Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute, she'd had to deal with numerous formal fund-raisers over the years, essentially a high-class version of begging—most of which occasions Jack had missed, often to her displeasure. So, here she was, again, meeting people she didn't know, would never have the chance to like, and not one of whom would support her research programs.

"The Prime Minister of India," her protocol officer said quietly.

"Hello." The First Lady smiled her greeting, shook the hand, which was blessedly light.

"You must be very proud of your husband."

"I've always been proud of Jack." They were of the same height. The Prime Minister's skin was swarthy, and she squinted her eyes behind her glasses, Cathy saw. She probably needed a prescription change, and she probably got headaches from her out-of-date one. Strange. They had some pretty good doctors in India. Not all of them came to America.

"And such lovely children," she added.

"How nice of you to say that." Cathy smiled again, in an automatic sort of way, to an observation that was as perfunctory as a comment on the clouds in the sky. A closer look at the woman's eyes told Cathy something she didn't like. *She thinks she's better than me*. But why? Because she was a politician and Caroline Ryan a mere surgeon? Would it be different had she chosen to become a lawyer? No, probably not, her mind went on, racing as it sometimes did when a surgical procedure went bad unexpectedly. No, it wasn't that at all. Cathy remembered a night right here in the East Room, facing off with Elizabeth Elliot. It was the same supercilious mind-set: *I'm better than you because of who I am and what I do.* SURGEON—that was her Secret Service code name, which had not displeased her at all, really—looked more deeply into the dark eyes before hers. There was even more to it than that. Cathy let go of her hand as the next big shot came through the mill.

The Prime Minister departed the line and headed for a circulating waiter, from whom she took a glass of juice. It would have been too obvious to do what she really wanted to do. That would come the next day, in New York. For now she looked at one of her fellow Prime Ministers, this one representing

the People's Republic of China. She raised her glass a centimeter or so, and nodded without smiling. A smile was unnecessary. Her eyes conveyed the necessary message.

"Is it true they call you SWORDSMAN?" Prince Ali bin Sheik asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Yes, and, yes, it is because of what you gave me," Jack told him. "Thank you for flying over."

"My friend, there is a bond between us." His Royal Highness was not quite a chief of state, but with the current illness of his sovereign, Ali was taking over more and more of the Kingdom's duties. He was now in charge of foreign relations *and* intelligence, the former schooled by Whitehall, the latter by Israel's Mossad, in one of the most ironic and least-known contradictions in a part of the world known for its interlocking non sequiturs. On the whole, Ryan was pleased by that. Though he had much on his plate, Ali was capable.

"You've never met Cathy, have you?"

The Prince shifted his gaze. "No, but I have met your colleague, Dr. Katz. He trained my own eye doctor. Indeed, your husband is a fortunate man, Dr. Ryan."

And the Arabs were supposed to be cold, humorless, and disrespectful of women? Cathy asked herself. Not this guy. Prince Ali took her hand gently.

"Oh, you must have met Bernie when he went over in 1994." Wilmer had helped establish the eye institute in Riyadh, and Bernie had stayed five months to do some clinical instruction.

"He performed surgery on a cousin who was injured in a plane crash. He's back flying. And those are your children over there?"

"Yes, Your Highness." This one went into the card file as a good guy.

"Would you mind if I spoke with them?"

"Please." The Prince nodded and moved off.

Caroline Ryan, he thought, making his mental notes. *Highly intelligent, highly perceptive. Proud. Will be an asset to her husband if he has the wit to make use of her.* What a pity, he thought, that his own culture utilized its women so inefficiently—but he wasn't King yet, might never be, and even if he were to become so, there were limits to the changes he could make under the best of circumstances. His nation still had far to go, though many forgot how breathtakingly far the Kingdom had come in two generations. Even so, there was a bond between him and Ryan, and because of that, a bond between America and the Kingdom. He walked over to the Ryan family, but before he got there he saw what he needed. The children were slightly overwhelmed by everything. The smallest daughter was having the easiest time of it, sipping at a soft drink under the watchful eye of a Secret Service agent, while a few diplomatic wives attempted to talk to her. She was accustomed to being doted on, as so small a child ought to be. The son, older, was the most disoriented, but that was normal for a lad of his age, no longer a child but not yet a man. The eldest, Olivia to the briefing documents but Sally to her father, was dealing well with the most awkward age of all. What struck Prince Ali was that they were *not* used to all this. Their parents had protected them from Jack's official life. Spoiled as they undoubtedly were in some ways, they did not have the bored, haughty look of other such kids. You could tell much of a

man and woman by examining their children. A moment later, he bent down over Katie. Initially she was taken aback by his unusual clothing—Ali had feared frostbite only two hours before—but in a moment his warm smile had her reaching up to touch his beard while Don Russell stood a meter away like a watch-bear. He took the time to catch the agent's eye, and the two traded a quick look. He knew that Cathy Ryan would be watching, too. What better way to befriend people than to show solicitude to their children? But it was more than that, and in his written report to his ministers, he would warn them not to judge Ryan by his somewhat awkward funeral speech. That he was not the usual sort to lead a country didn't mean that he was unfit to do so.

But some were.

Many of them were in this room.

SISTER JEAN BAPTISTE had done her best to ignore it, working through the heat of the day to sunset, trying to deny the discomfort that soon grew into genuine pain, hoping it would fade away, as minor ailments did—always did. She'd come down with malaria virtually her first week in this country, and that disease had never really gone away. At first she'd thought that's what it was, but it wasn't. The fever she'd written off to a typically hot Congo day wasn't that, either. It surprised her that she was afraid. For as often as she'd treated and consoled others, she'd never really understood the fear they had. She knew they were afraid, understood the fact that fear existed, but her response to it was succor and kindness, and prayer. Now for the first time, she was beginning to understand. Because she thought she knew what it was. She'd seen it before. Not often. Most of them never got this far. But Benedict Mkusa had gotten here, for what little good it had done. He would surely be dead by the end of the day, Sister Maria Magdalena had told her after morning mass. As little as three days before she would have sighed—but consoled herself with the thought that there would be another angel in heaven. Not this time. Now she feared that there might be two. Sister Jean Baptiste leaned against the door frame. What had she done wrong? She was a careful nurse. She didn't *make* mistakes. Well.

She had to leave the ward. She did so, walking down the breezeway to the next building, directly into the lab. Dr. Moudi was, as usual, at his workbench, concentrating as he always did, and didn't hear her walk in. When he turned, rubbing his eyes after twenty minutes on the microscope, he was surprised to see the holy woman with her left sleeve rolled up, a rubber strip tight around her upper arm, and a needle in her antecubital vein. She was on her third 5cc test tube, and discarding that, expertly drew a fourth.

"What is the matter, Sister?"

"Doctor, I think these need to be tested at once. Please, you will wish to put on a fresh pair of gloves."

Moudi walked over to her, staying a meter away while she withdrew the needle from her arm. He looked at her face and eyes—like the women in his home city of Qom, she dressed in a very chaste and proper manner. There was much to admire about these nuns: cheerful, hardworking, and very devoutly in service to their false god—that wasn't strictly true. They were People of the

Book, respected by the Prophet, but the Shi'a branch of Islam was somewhat less respectful of such people than . . . no, he would save those thoughts for another time. He could see it in her eyes, even more clearly than the overt symptoms which his trained senses were beginning to discern, he saw what she already knew.

"Please sit down, Sister."

"No—I must—"

"Sister," the physician said more insistently. "You are a patient now. You will please do as I ask, yes?"

"Doctor, I—"

His voice softened. There was no purpose in being harsh, and truly this woman did not deserve such treatment before God. "Sister, with all the care and devotion you have shown to others in this hospital, please, allow this humble visitor to show some of it to you."

Jean Baptiste did as she was told. Dr. Moudi first donned a fresh pair of latex gloves. Then he checked her pulse, 88, her blood pressure, 138/90, and took her temperature, 39—all the numbers were high, the first two because of the third, and because of what she thought it was. It could have been any of a number of ailments, from trivial to fatal, but she'd treated the Mkusa boy, and that luckless child was dying. He left her there, carefully picking up the test tubes and moving them to his laboratory bench.

Moudi had wanted to become a surgeon. The youngest of four sons, all nephews of his country's leader, he'd waited impatiently to grow up, watching his elder brothers march off to war against Iraq. Two of them had died, and the other had come back maimed, later to die by his own despairing hand, and he'd thought to be a surgeon, the better to save the lives of Allah's warriors, so that they could fight another day in His Holy Cause. That desire had changed, and instead he'd learned about infectious diseases, because there was more than one way to fight for the Cause, and after years of patience, his way was finally appearing.

Minutes later, he walked to the isolation ward. There is an aura to death, Moudi knew. Perhaps the image before him was something of the imagination, but the fact of it was not. As soon as the sister had brought the blood sample, he'd divided it in two, sending one carefully packed test tube by air express to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A., the global center for the analysis of exotic and dangerous agents. The other he'd kept in cold storage to await developments. CDC was as efficient as ever. The telex had arrived hours earlier: Ebola Zaire was the identification, followed by a lengthy set of warnings and instructions which were entirely unnecessary. As was the diagnosis, really. Few things killed like this, and none of them so fast.

It was as if Benedict Mkusa had been cursed by Allah Himself, something Moudi knew not to be true, for Allah was a God of Mercy, who did not deliberately afflict the young and innocent. To say "it was written" was more accurate, but hardly more merciful for the patient or his parents. They sat by the bedside, dressed in protective garb, watching their world die before their eyes. The boy was in pain—horrid agony, really. Parts of his body were already dead and rotting while his heart still tried to pump and his brain to reason. The only other thing that could do this to a human body was a

massive exposure to ionizing radiation. The effects were grossly similar. One by one at first, then in pairs, then in groups, then all at once, the internal organs became necrotic. The boy was too weak to vomit now, but blood issued from the other end of his GI tract. Only the eyes were something close to normal, though blood was there as well. Dark, young eyes, sad and not understanding, not comprehending that a life so recently begun was surely ending now, looking to his parents to make things right, as they always had during his eight years. The room stank of blood and sweat and other bodily fluids, and the look on the boy's face became more distant. Even as he lay still he seemed to draw away, and truly Dr. Moudi closed his eyes and whispered a prayer for the boy, who was just a boy, after all, and though not a Muslim, still a religious lad, and a person of the Book unfairly denied access to the words of the Prophet. Allah was merciful above all things, and surely He would show mercy to this boy, taking him safely into Paradise. And better it were done quickly.

If an aura could be black, then this one was. Death enveloped the young patient one centimeter at a time. The painful breaths grew more shallow, the eyes, turned to his parents, stopped moving, and the agonized twitches of the limbs traveled down the extremities until just the fingers moved, ever so slightly, and presently that stopped.

Sister Maria Magdalena, standing behind and between mother and father, placed a hand on the shoulder of each, and Dr. Moudi moved in closer, setting his stethoscope on the patient's chest. There was some noise, gurgles and faint tears as the necrosis destroyed tissue—a dreadful yet dynamic process, but of the heart there was nothing. He moved the ancient instrument about to be sure, then he looked up.

"He is gone. I am very sorry." He might have added that for Ebola this death had been merciful, or so the books and articles said. This was his first direct experience with the virus, and it had been quite dreadful enough.

The parents took it well. They'd known for more than a day, long enough to accept, short enough that the shock hadn't worn off. They would go and pray, which was entirely proper.

The body of Benedict Mkusa would be burned, and the virus with it. The telex from Atlanta had been very clear on that. Too bad.

RYAN FLEXED HIS hand when the line finally ended. He turned to see his wife massaging hers and taking a deep breath. "Get you something?" Jack asked.

"Something soft. Two procedures tomorrow morning." And they still hadn't come up with a convenient way of getting Cathy to work. "How many of these things will we have to do?" his wife asked.

"I don't know," the President admitted, though he knew that the schedule was set months in advance, and that most of the program would have to be adhered to regardless of his wishes. As each day passed, it amazed him more and more that people sought after this job—the job had so many extraneous duties that it could scarcely be done. But the extraneous duties in a real sense *were* the job. It just went round and round. Then a staffer appeared with soft drinks for the President and First Lady, summoned by another who'd heard

what Cathy had said. The paper napkins were monogrammed—stamped, whatever the process was called—with the image of the White House, and under it the words, THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE. Husband and wife both noticed that at the same moment, then allowed their eyes to meet.

"Remember the first time we took Sally to Disney World?" Cathy asked.

Jack knew what his wife meant. Just after their daughter's third birthday, not long before their trip to England . . . and the beginning of a journey which, it seemed, would never end. Sally had fixed on the castle in the center of the Magic Kingdom, always looking to see it no matter where they were at the time. She'd called it Mickey's House. Well, they had their own castle now. For a while, anyway. But the rent was pretty high. Cathy wandered over to where Robby and Sissy Jackson were speaking with the Prince of Wales. Jack found his chief of staff.

"How's the hand?" Arnie asked.

"No complaints."

"You're lucky you're not campaigning. Lots of people think a friendly handshake is a knuckle-buster—man-to-man and all that. At least these people know better." Van Damm sipped at his Perrier and surveyed the room. The reception was going well. Various chiefs of state and ambassadors and others were engaged in friendly conversation. There were a few discreet laughs at the exchange of jokes and pleasantries. The mood of the day had changed.

"So, how many exams did I pass and fail?" Ryan asked quietly.

"Honest answer? No telling. They all looked for something different. Remember that." And some of them really didn't give a damn, having come for their own domestic political reasons, but even under these circumstances it was impolitic to say so.

"Kinda figured that out on my own, Arnie. Now I circulate, right?"

"Hit India," van Damm advised. "Adler thinks it's important."

"Roger." At least he remembered what she looked like. So many of the faces in the line had turned immediately into blurs, just as happened at an over-large party of any sort. It made Ryan feel like a fraud. Politicians were supposed to have a photographic memory for names and faces. He did not, and wondered if there were some sort of training method to acquire one. Jack handed his glass off to an attendant, wiped his hands with one of the special napkins, and headed off to see India. Russia stopped him first.

"Mr. Ambassador," Jack said. Valeriy Bogdanovich Lermonsov had been through the receiving line, but there hadn't been time then for whatever he wanted to say. They shook hands again anyway. Lermonsov was a career diplomat, popular in the local community of his peers. There was talk that he'd been KGB for years, but that was hardly something Ryan could hold against him.

"My government wishes to ask if an invitation to Moscow could be entertained."

"I have no objection to it, Mr. Ambassador, but we were just over a few months ago and my time has many demands on it right now."

"I have no doubt of that, but my government wishes to discuss several questions of mutual interest." That code phrase made Ryan turn his body fully to face the Russian.

"Oh?"

"I feared that your schedule would be a problem, Mr. President. Might you then receive a personal representative for a quiet discussion of issues?"

That could only be one person, Jack knew. "Sergey Nikolay'eh?"

"Would you receive him?" the Ambassador persisted.

Ryan had a brief moment of, if not panic, then disquiet. Sergey Golovko was the chairman of the RVS—the reborn, downsized, but still formidable KGB. He also was one of the few people in the Russian government who had both brains and the trust of the current Russian president, Eduard Petravich Grushavoy, himself one of the few men in the world with more problems than Ryan had. Moreover, Grushavoy was keeping Golovko as close as Stalin had kept Beriya, needing a counselor with brains, experience, and muscle. The comparison wasn't strictly fair, but Golovko would not be coming over to deliver a recipe for borscht. "Items of mutual interest" usually meant serious business; coming directly to the President and not working through the State Department was another such indicator, and Lermonsov's persistence made things seem more serious still.

"Sergey's an old friend," Jack said with a friendly smile. *All the way back to when he had a pistol in my face.* "He's always welcome in my house. Let Arnie know about the scheduling?"

"I will do that, Mr. President."

Ryan nodded and moved off. The Prince of Wales had the Indian Prime Minister in a holding pattern, awaiting Ryan's appearance.

"Prime Minister, Your Highness," Ryan said with a nod.

"We thought it important that some matters be clarified."

"What might those be?" the President asked. He had an electrical twitch under his skin, from knowing what had to be coming now.

"The unfortunate incident in the Indian Ocean," the Prime Minister said. "Such misunderstandings."

"I'm—glad to hear that . . ."

EVEN THE ARMS takes days off, and the funeral of a President was one such day. Both Blue Force and OpFor had taken a day to stand down. That included the commanders. General Diggs's house was on a hilltop overlooking a singularly bleak valley, but for all that it was a magnificent sight, and the desert was warm that day from Mexican winds, which allowed a barbecue on his walled and hedged back yard.

"Have you met President Ryan?" Bondarenko asked, sipping an early-afternoon beer.

Diggs shook his head as he flipped the burgers and reached for his special sauce. "Never. Evidently he had a piece of getting the 10th ACR deployed to Israel, but, no. I know Robby Jackson, though. He's J-3 now. Robby speaks very well of him."

"This is American custom, what you do?" The Russian gestured to the charcoal burner.

Diggs looked up. "Learned it from my daddy. Could you pass my beer over, Gennady?" The Russian handed the glass to his host. "I do hate missing

training days, but . . .” But he liked a day off as much as the next guy.

“This place you have here is amazing, Marion.” Bondarenko turned to survey the valley. The immediate base area looked typically American, with its grid of roads and structures, but beyond that was something else. Scarcely anything grew, just what the Americans called creosote bushes, and they were like some sort of flora from a distant planet. The land here was brown, even the mountains looked lifeless. Yet there was something magnificent about the desert—and it reminded him of a mountaintop in Tajikistan. Maybe that was it.

“So, exactly how did you get those ribbons, General?” Diggs didn’t know all the story. His guest shrugged.

“The Mudjeheddin decided to visit my country. It was a secret research facility, since closed down—it’s a separate country now, as you know.”

Diggs nodded. “I’m a cavalryman, not a high-energy physicist. You can save the secret stuff.”

“I defended an apartment building—the home for the scientists and their families. I had a platoon of KGB border guards. The Mudje attacked us in company strength under cover of night and a snowstorm. It was rather exciting for an hour or so,” Gennady admitted.

Diggs had seen some of the scars—he’d caught his visitor in the shower the previous day. “How good were they?”

“The Afghans?” Bondarenko grunted. “You did not wish to be captured by them. They were absolutely fearless, but sometimes that worked against them. You could tell which bands had competent leadership and which did not. That one did. They wiped out the other half of the facility, and on my side”—a shrug—“we were bloody lucky. At the end we were fighting on the ground floor of the building. The enemy commander led his people bravely—but I proved to be a better shot.”

“Hero of the Soviet Union,” Diggs remarked, checking his burgers again. Colonel Hamm was listening, quietly. This was how members of that community measured one another, not so much by what they had done as by how they told the story.

The Russian smiled. “Marion, I had no choice. There was no place to run away, and I knew what they did to captured Russian officers. So, they give me medal and promotion, and then my country—how you say? Evaporate?” There was more to it, of course. Bondarenko had been in Moscow during the coup, and for the first time in his life faced with making a moral decision, he’d made the right one, attracting the notice of several people who were now highly placed in the government of a new and smaller country.

“How about a country reborn?” Colonel Hamm suggested. “How about, we can be friends now?”

“Da. You speak well, Colonel. And you command well.”

“Thank you, sir. Mainly I just sit back and let the regiment run itself.” That was a lie that any really good officer understood as a special sort of truth.

“Using Sov—Russian tactical doctrine!” It just seemed so outrageous to the Russian general.

“It works, doesn’t it?” Hamm finished his beer.

It would work, Bondarenko promised himself. It would work for his army as

it had worked for the American, once he got back and got the political support he needed to rebuild the Russian Army into something it had never been. Even at its fighting peak, driving the Germans back to Berlin, the Red Army had been a heavy, blunt instrument, depending on the shock value of mass more than anything else. He also knew what a role luck had played. His former country had fielded the world's finest tank, the T-34, blessed with a diesel engine designed in France to power dirigibles, a suspension system designed by an American named J. Walter Christie, and a handful of brilliant design innovations from young Russian engineers. That was one of the few instances in the history of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in which his countrymen had managed to turn out a world-class product and in this case it had been the right one at the right time—without which his country would surely have died. But the time was past for his country to depend on luck and mass. In the early 1980s the Americans had come up with the right formula: a small, professional army, carefully selected, exquisitely trained, and lavishly equipped. Colonel Hamm's OpFor, this 11th Cavalry Regiment, was like nothing he'd ever seen. His pre-travel brief had told him what to expect, but that was different from believing it. You had to see it to believe. In the right terrain, that one regiment could take on a division and destroy it in hours. The Blue Force was hardly incompetent, though its commander had declined the chance to come and eat here in order to work with his sub-unit leaders this day, so badly had they been mauled.

So much to learn here, but the most important lesson of all was how the Americans faced their lessons. Senior officers were humiliated regularly, both in the mock battles and afterward in what they called the AAR, "after action review," during which the observer-controller officers analyzed everything that had taken place, reading their notes off multicolored file cards like hospital pathologists.

"I tell you," Bondarenko said after a few seconds of reflection, "in my army, people would start fistfights during—"

"Oh, we came close to that in the beginning," Diggs assured him. "When they started this place up, commanders got relieved for losing battles, until everybody took a deep breath and realized that it was supposed to be tough here. Pete Taylor is the guy who really got the NTC running right. The OCs had to learn diplomacy, and the Blue Force people had to learn that they were *here* to learn, but I'll tell you, Gennady, there isn't another army in the world that inflicts humiliation on its commanders the way we do."

"That's a fact, sir. I was talking with Sean Connolly the other day—he's CO of the 10th ACR in the Negev Desert," Hamm explained to the Russian. "The Israelis still haven't got it all the way figured out. They still bitch about what the OCs tell 'em."

"We keep installing more cameras over there." Diggs laughed as he started shoveling burgers onto the plate. "And sometimes the Israelis don't believe what happened even after we show them the videotapes."

"Still too much *hoo-uh* over there," Hamm agreed. "Hey, I came here as a squadron commander, and I got my ass handed to me more'n once."

"Gennady, after the Persian Gulf War, 3rd ACR came here for their regular rotation. Now, you remember, they led Barry McCaffrey's 24th Mech—"

"Kicked ass and took names for two hundred twenty miles in four days," Hamm confirmed. Bondarenko nodded. He'd studied that campaign in detail.

"Couple months later, they came here and got the shit kicked outa them. That's the point, General. The training here is *tougher* than combat. There's no unit in the world as smart and fast and tough as Al's Blackhorse Cav—"

"Except your old Buffalo Soldiers, General," Hamm interjected.

Diggs smiled at the reference to the 10th. He was used to Hamm's interruptions anyway. "That's a fact, Al. Anyway, if you can just break even against the OpFor, you're ready to take on anybody in the world, on the wrong side of three-to-one odds, and kick their ass into the next time zone."

Bondarenko nodded, smiling. He was learning fast. The small staff that had come with him was still prowling the base, talking with counterpart officers, and learning, learning, learning. Being on the wrong side of three-to-one odds wasn't the tradition of Russian armies, but that might soon change. The threat to his country was China, and if that battle were ever fought, it would be at the far end of a lengthy supply line, against a huge conscript army. The only answer to that threat was to duplicate what the Americans had done. Bondarenko's mission was to change the entire military policy of his country. Well, he told himself, he'd come to the right place to learn how.

BULLSHIT. THE PRESIDENT thought behind an understanding smile. It was hard to like India. They called themselves the world's largest democracy, but that wasn't especially true. They talked about the most high-minded principles, but had, when convenient, muscled neighbors, developed nuclear weapons, and in asking America to depart the Indian Ocean—"It is, after all, called the *Indian* Ocean," a former P.M. had told a former American Ambassador—decided that the doctrine of Freedom of the Seas was variably applicable. And for damned sure, they'd been ready to make a move on Sri Lanka. It was just that now, the move having been foiled, they were saying that no such move had ever been planned. But you couldn't look in the eyes of a chief of state and smile, and say, "Bullshit."

It just wasn't done.

Jack listened patiently, sipping at another glass of Perrier fetched for him by a nameless aide. The situation in Sri Lanka was complex, and did, unfortunately, lend itself to misunderstanding, and India regretted that, and there were no hard feelings at all, but wouldn't it be better if both sides stood down. The Indian fleet was withdrawing back to its bases, training complete, and a few ships damaged by the American demonstration, which, the Prime Minister said without so many words, wasn't exactly cricket. Such bullies.

And what does Sri Lanka think of you? Ryan could have asked, but didn't.

"If only you and Ambassador Williams had communicated more clearly on the issue," Ryan observed sadly.

"Such things happen," the Prime Minister replied. "David—frankly, pleasant man though he is, I fear the climate is too hot for one of his age." Which was as close as she could come to telling Ryan to fire the man. Declaring Ambassador Williams persona non grata was far too drastic a step. Ryan tried not to change his expression, but failed. He needed Scott Adler over here, but

the acting SecState was somewhere else at the moment.

"I hope you can appreciate the fact that I am really not in a position to make serious changes in the government at the moment." *Drop dead.*

"Please, I wasn't suggesting that. I fully appreciate your situation. My hope was to allay at least one supposed problem, to make your task easier." *Or I could make it harder.*

"Thank you for that, Prime Minister. Perhaps your Ambassador here could discuss things with Scott?"

"I'll be sure to speak to him on the matter." She shook Ryan's hand again and walked away. Jack waited for several seconds before looking at the Prince.

"Your Highness, what do you call it when a high-ranking person lies right in your face?" the President asked with a wry smile.

"Diplomacy."

9

DISTANT HOWLS

GOLOVKO READ OVER Ambassador Lermonsov's report without sympathy for its subject. Ryan looked "harried and uncomfortable," "somewhat overwhelmed," and "physically tired." Well, that was to be expected. His speech at President Durling's funeral, the diplomatic community agreed—along with the American media, which was straining its capacity for politeness—was not presidential. Well, anyone who knew Ryan knew him to be sentimental, especially when it came to the welfare of children. Golovko could easily forgive that. Russians were much the same. He ought to have done otherwise—Golovko had read over the official, undelivered oration; it was a good one, full of assurances for all listeners—but Ryan had always been what the Americans called a maverick (he'd had to look up the word, discovering that it denoted a wild, untamed horse, which was not far off the mark). That made Ryan both easy and impossible for the Russian to analyze. Ryan was an American, and Americans were and had always been devilishly unpredictable from Golovko's perspective. He'd spent a professional lifetime, first as a field intelligence officer, then as a rapidly climbing staff officer in Moscow, trying to predict what America would do in all manner of situations, and only avoiding failure because he'd never failed to present three possible courses of action in his reports to his superiors.

But at least Ivan Emmetovich Ryan was predictably unpredictable, and Golovko flattered himself to think of Ryan as a friend—perhaps that was going a bit far, but the two men had played the game, most of the time from opposite sides of the field, and for the most part both had played it skillfully and well, Golovko the more experienced professional, Ryan the gifted amateur, blessed by a system more tolerant of mavericks. There was respect between them.

"What are you thinking now, Jack?" Sergey whispered to himself. Right now the new American President was sleeping, of course, fully eight hours behind Moscow, where the sun was only beginning to rise for a short winter day.

Ambassador Lermonsov had not been overly impressed, and Golovko would have to append his own notes to the report lest his government give *that* evaluation too much credence. Ryan had been far too skilled an enemy to the USSR to be taken lightly under any circumstances. The problem was that Lermonsov had expected Ryan to fit into one mold, and Ivan Emmetovich was not so easily classified. It wasn't so much complexity as a different variety of complexity. Russia didn't have a Ryan—it was not likely that he could have survived in the Soviet environment which still pervaded the Russian Republic,

especially in its official bureaucracies. He was easily bored, and his temper, though kept under tight control at most times, was always there. Golovko had seen it bubbling more than once, but only heard of times when it had broken loose. Those stories had percolated out of CIA to ears which reported to Dzerzhinskiy Square. God help him as a head of government.

But that wasn't Golovko's problem.

He had enough of his own. He hadn't entirely relinquished control of the Foreign Intelligence Service President Grushavoy had little reason to trust the agency which had once been the "Sword and Shield of the Party," and wanted someone he could rely upon to keep an eye on that tethered predator; Golovko, of course—and at the same time, Sergey was the principal foreign-policy adviser to the beleaguered Russian President. Russia's internal problems were so manifest as to deny the President the ability to evaluate foreign problems, and *that* meant that for all practical purposes the former spy gave advice that his President almost invariably followed. The chief minister—that's what he was, with or without the title—took the burden seriously. Grushavoy had a domestic hydra to deal with—like the mythical beast of old, every head cut off just gave room for another to grow into its place. Golovko had fewer to deal with, but they made up for it in size. And part of him wished for a return to the old KGB. Only a few years before, it would have been child's play. Lift a phone, speak a few words, and the criminals would have been picked up, and that would have been that not really, but it would have made things more . . . peaceful. More predictable. More orderly. And his country needed order. But the Second Chief Directorate, the "secret police" division of the agency, was gone, spun off into an independent bureau, its powers diminished, and its public respect—fear bordering on outright terror in the not-so-old days—had evaporated. His country had never been under the degree of control expected by the West, but now it was worse. The Russian Republic teetered on the edge of anarchy as her citizens groped for something called democracy. Anarchy was what had brought Lenin to power, for the Russians craved strong rule, scarcely having known anything else, and while Golovko didn't want that—as a senior KGB officer he knew better than any what damage Marxism-Leninism had done to his nation—he desperately needed an organized country behind him, because the problems within attracted problems without. And so it was that his unofficial post as chief minister for national security was hostage to all manner of difficulties. His were the arms of an injured body, trying to fend off the wolves while it tried to heal.

And so he had little pity for Ryan, whose nation may have taken a severe blow to the head, but was otherwise healthy. However differently it might appear to others, Golovko knew better, and because he did, he would be asking Ryan for help.

China. The Americans had defeated Japan, but the real enemy hadn't *been* Japan. He had a desk covered with overhead photographs just brought down from a reconnaissance satellite. Too many divisions of the People's Liberation Army were exercising in the field. Chinese nuclear-rocket regiments were still at a somewhat increased alert status. His own country had discarded its ballistic weapons—despite the threat from China, the huge resulting

development loans from American and European banks had made the gamble look attractive only a few months before. Besides, his country, like America, still had bombers and cruise missiles which could be armed with atomic warheads, and so the disadvantage was far more theoretical than real. If one assumed that the Chinese subscribed to the same theories, that is. The Chinese were in any case maintaining their armed forces at a high state of readiness, and Russia's Far Eastern group of forces was at a historic low. He consoled himself that with Japan taken out of play, the Chinese would not move. Probably not move, he corrected himself. If the Americans were hard to understand, the Chinese might as easily have been aliens from another planet. It was enough to remember that the Chinese had been as far as the Baltic once before. Like most Russians, Golovko had a deep respect for history. There he was, Sergey thought, lying on the snow, a stick in his hand to fight off the wolf while he tried to heal. His arm was still strong enough, and the stick still long enough to keep the fangs away. But what if there came another wolf? A document to the left of the satellite photographs was the first harbinger of that, like a distant howl on the horizon, the sort to make blood chill. Golovko didn't reflect far enough. Lying down on the ground, the horizon could be surprisingly close.

THE AMAZING THING was that it had taken so long. Protecting an important person against assassination is a complex exercise at best, all the more so when that person went out of his way to create enemies. Ruthlessness helps. The ability to snatch people off the street, to make them disappear, was a deterrent of no small value. The further willingness to take away not just a single person, but an entire family—sometimes an entire extended family—and do the same was more effective still. One selected the people to be "disappeared," an unhappy pseudo-verb that had originated in Argentina, through intelligence. That was a polite term for informers, paid in the coin of the realm or in power, which was better still. They would report conversations for their seditious content, to the point that a mere joke about someone's mustache could entail the sentence of death for its raconteur; and soon enough, because institutions were institutions, informers had quotas to fill, and since the informers were themselves human beings with likes and dislikes, their reports as often as not reflected personal slights or jealousy, because the delegated power of life and death was as corrupting to the small as to the great. Eventually a corrupt system was itself corrupted, and the logic of terror reached its logical conclusion: a humble rabbit, cornered by a fox, has nothing to lose by striking out, and rabbits have teeth, and sometimes the rabbit gets lucky.

Because terror was not enough, there were passive measures as well. The task of assassinating an important man can be made difficult by the simplest of procedures, especially in a despotic state. A few lines of guards to limit approach. Multiple identical cars in which the target might travel—often as many as twenty in this case—denied one the ability to know which car to engage. The life of such a person was busy, and so it was both a convenience and a protective measure to have a double or two, to appear, and give a

speech, and take the risk in return for a comfortable life as the staked goat on the public stage.

Next came the selection of the protectors—how did one pick truly reliable fish from a sea of hatred? The obvious answer here was to pick people from one's extended family, then to give them a lifestyle that depended absolutely upon the survival of their leader, and finally to link them so closely with his protection and its necessary ramifications that his death would mean far more than the loss of a highly paid government job. That the guards' lives depended on the guarded one was an effective incentive toward efficiency.

But really it all came down to one thing. A person was invincible only because people thought him to be so, and therefore that person's security was, like all of the important aspects of life, a thing of the mind.

But human motivation is also a thing of the mind, and fear has never been the strongest emotion. Throughout history, people have risked their lives for love, for patriotism, for principle, and for God far more often than fear has made them run away. Upon that fact depends progress.

The colonel had risked his life in so many ways that he could scarcely remember them all, and done that just to be noticed, just to be asked to be a small part in a larger machine, then to rise within it. He'd taken a long time to get this close to the Mustache. Eight years, in fact. In that time he'd tortured and killed men, women, and children from behind blank and pitiless eyes. He'd raped daughters before their fathers' eyes, mothers before their sons'. He'd committed crimes to damn the souls of a hundred men, because there was no other way. He'd drunk liquor in quantities to impress an infidel in order to defile that law of his religion. All of this he had done in God's name, praying for forgiveness, desperately telling himself that it was written that his life should be so, that, no, he didn't enjoy any of it, that the lives he took were sacrifices necessary to some greater plan, that they would have died in any case, and that in this way their deaths by his hand could serve a Holy Cause. He had to believe in all of that lest he go mad—he'd come close enough in any case, until his fixed purpose passed far beyond the meaning of "obsession," and he became that which he did in every possible way, all with one objective, that he would get close enough and trusted enough for a single second's work, to be followed instantly by his own death.

He knew he had become that which he and everyone around him were trained to fear above all things. All the lectures and the drinking sessions with his peers always came back to the same thing. They spoke of their mission and the dangers of that mission. And *that* always came down to one subject. The lone dedicated assassin, the man willing to throw away his own life like a gambling chip, the patient man who waited his chance, *that* was the enemy whom every protective officer in the world feared, drunk or sober, on duty or off, even in his dreams. And that was the reason for all the tests required to protect the Mustache. To get here, you had to be damned before God and men, because when you got here, you saw what really was.

The Mustache was what he called his target. Not a man at all, an apostate before Allah who desecrated Islam without a thought, a criminal of such magnitude as to deserve a newly designed room in Perdition. From afar the Mustache looked powerful and invincible, but not up close. His bodyguards

knew better because they knew all. They saw the doubts and the fears, the petty cruelties inflicted on the undeserving. He'd seen the Mustache murder for amusement, maybe just to see if his Browning pistol worked today. He'd seen him look out the window of one of his white Mercedes autos, spot a young woman, point, give a command, then use the hapless girl for one night. The lucky ones returned home with money and disgrace. The unlucky floated down the Euphrates with their throats cut, not a few by the Mustache himself, if they'd resisted a little too well in the protection of their virtue. But powerful as he was, clever and cunning as he was, heartlessly cruel as he was, no, he was not invincible. And it was now his time to see Allah.

The Mustache emerged from the building onto the expansive porch, his bodyguards behind him, his right arm outstretched to salute the assembled multitude. The people in the square, hastily assembled, roared their adoration, which fed the Mustache as surely as sunlight fed the flower. And then, from three meters away, the colonel drew his automatic pistol from its leather holster, brought it up in one hand, and fired a single aimed round straight into the back of his target's head. Those in the front of the crowd saw the bullet erupt from their dictator's left eye, and there followed one of those moments in history, the sort when the entire earth seemed to stop its spin, hearts paused, and even the people who'd been screaming their loyalty to a man already dead would remember only silence.

The colonel didn't bother with another shot. He was an expert marksman who practiced with his comrades almost every day, and his open, blank eyes had seen the impact of his round. He didn't turn, and didn't waste time in fruitless efforts at self-defense. There was no point in killing the comrades with whom he'd drunk liquor and raped children. Others would see to that soon enough. He didn't even smile, though it was very funny indeed, wasn't it, that the Mustache had one instant looked at the square full of the people whom he despised for their adoration of himself—then to look Allah in the face and wonder what had happened. That thought had perhaps two seconds to form itself before he felt his body jerk with the impact of the first bullet. There was no pain. He was too focused on his target, now on the flat paving stones of the porch, already a pool of blood draining rapidly from the ruined head. More bullets hit, and it seemed briefly strange that he could feel them yet not the pain of their passage, and in his last seconds he prayed to Allah for forgiveness and understanding, that all his crimes had been committed in the name of God and His Justice. To the last, his ears reported not the sound of the shots, but the lingering cries of the mob, not yet grasping that their leader was dead.

"WHO IS IT?" Ryan checked his clock. *Damn, the extra forty minutes of sleep would have been nice*.

"Mr. President, my name is Major Canon, Marine Corps," the unknown voice announced.

"That's nice, Major, who are you?" Jack blinked his eyes and forgot to be polite, but probably the officer understood.

"Sir, I'm the watch officer in Signals. We have a report with high confidence

that the President of Iraq was assassinated about ten minutes ago."

"Source?" Jack asked at once.

"Kuwait and Saudi both, sir. It was on Iraqi TV live, some sort of event, and we have people over there to monitor their TV. We have a tape being uplinked to us right now. The initial word is a pistol right in the head, at close range." The tone of the officer's voice wasn't exactly regretful. *Well, they finally popped that fucker!* Of course, you couldn't exactly say that to the President.

And you needed to figure who "they" was.

"Okay, Major, what's the drill?" The answer came quickly enough. Ryan replaced the phone.

"Now what?" Cathy asked. Jack swung his feet out of bed before answering.

"The President of Iraq was just killed."

His wife almost said, *Good*, but stopped. The death of such a person was not as distant a concept as it had once been. How odd to feel that way about someone who could best serve the world by leaving it.

"Is that important?"

"In about twenty minutes, they'll tell me." Ryan coughed before going on. "What the hell, I used to be competent in those areas. Yeah, it's potentially very important." With that he did what every man in America did in the morning. He headed to the bathroom ahead of his wife. For her part, Cathy lifted the remote and performed the other ordinarily male function of clicking on the bedroom TV, surprised to find that CNN didn't have anything on but reports on which airports were operating behind schedule. Jack had told her a few times just how good the White House Signals Office was.

"Anything?" her husband asked, coming back out.

"Not yet." Then it was her turn.

Jack had to think about where his clothes were, wondering how a President was supposed to dress. He found his robe—moved in from the Naval Observatory after having been moved there from Eighth and I, after having been removed from their home . . . damn—and opened the bedroom door. An agent in the hall handed him three morning papers. "Thanks."

Cathy saw that and stopped cold in her tracks, belatedly realizing that there had been people just outside her bedroom door all night. Her face turned away, forming the sort of smile generated by finding an unexpected mess in the kitchen.

"Jack?"

"Yes, honey?"

"If I kill you in bed some night, will those people with guns get me right away, or will it wait until morning?"

THE REAL WORK was being done at Fort Meade. The video had traveled from one monitoring station on the Kuwait-Iraq border and another in Saudi Arabia, known as PALM BOWL and STORM TRACK, respectively, the latter set up to record all signals out of Baghdad, and the former watching the southeastern part of the country, around Basra. From both places the information traveled by fiber-optic cable to the National Security Agency's deceptively small building in King Khalid Military City (KKMC) and uplinked

to a communications satellite, which then shot it back to NSA headquarters. There in the watch room, ten people summoned by one of the junior watch officers huddled around a TV monitor to catch the tape, while the more senior troops, in a separate glass-walled office, sipped their coffee soberly.

"Yes!" an Air Force sergeant observed on seeing the shot, "Nothin' but net!" Several high fives were exchanged. The senior watch officer, who'd already called White House Signals, nodded his more restrained approval and relayed the original signal along the way, and ordered a digital enhancement, which would take a few minutes—only a few frames were all that important, and they had a massive Cray supercomputer to handle that.

RYAN REMARKED QUIETLY that while Cathy was getting the kids ready for school, and herself ready to operate on people's eyes, here he was in Signals watching the instant replay of a murder. His designated national intelligence officer was still at CIA, finishing his morning intake of information, which he would then regurgitate to the President by way of the morning intelligence briefing. The post of National Security Advisor was currently vacant—one more thing to address today.

"Whoa!" Major Canon breathed.

The President nodded, then reverted to his former life as an intelligence officer. "Okay, tell me what we know."

"Sir, we know that somebody got killed, probably the Iraqi President."

"Double?"

Canon nodded, "Could be, but STORM TRACK is now reporting a *lot* of VHF signals that started all of a sudden, police and military nets, and the activity is radiating out from Baghdad." The Marine officer pointed to his computer monitor, which displayed real-time "take" from the NSA's many outposts. "Translations will take a little time, but I do traffic analysis for a living. It looks pretty real, sir. I suppose it could be faked, but I wouldn't—there!"

A translation was coming up, identified as emanating from a military command net. He's dead, he's dead, *stsnd your regiment to and be prepared to move into the city imediately—recipient is Replican Gurds Special Operations regiment at Salman Pak—reply is: Yes I will yes I will, who is giving the oders, what are my orders—*

"Typos and all," Ryan noted.

"Sir, it's hard for our people to translate and type it at the same time. Usually we clean it up before "

"Relax, Major. I only use three fingers myself. Tell me what you think."

"Sir, I'm only a junior officer here, that's why I draw the midwatch and—"

"If you were stupid, you wouldn't be here."

Canon nodded. "He's deader 'n hell, sir. Iraq needs a new dictator. We have the imagery, we have unusual signal traffic that fits the pattern of an unusual event. That's my estimate." He paused and went on to cover himself, like a good spook. "Unless it's a deliberate exercise to smoke out disloyal people inside his government. That's possible, but unlikely. Not in public like this."

"Kamikaze play?"

"Yes, Mr. President. Something you can only do once, and dangerous the

first time."

"Agreed." Ryan walked to the coffee urn—the White House Office of Signals was mainly a military operation, and they made their own. Jack got two cups and came back, handing one to Major Canon, rather to the horror of everyone else in the room. "Fast work. Send a 'thanks' to the guys working this, okay?"

"Aye aye, sir."

"Who do I talk to to get things happening around here?"

"We got the phones right here, Mr. President."

"I want Adler in here ASAP, the DCI . . . who else? State and CIA desks for Iraq. DIA estimate of the state of their military. Find out if Prince Ali is still in town. If he is, ask him to please stand by. I want to talk to him this morning if possible. I wonder what else . . . ?" Ryan's voice trailed off.

"CENTCOM, sir. He'll have the best military-intelligence troops down at Tampa, most familiar with the area, I mean."

"Get him up here—no, we'll do that by landline, and we give him time to get briefed in."

"We'll get it all going for you, sir." Ryan patted the officer on the shoulder and headed out of the room. The heavy door closed behind him before Major Charles Canon spoke again. "Hey, NCA knows his shit."

"Is it what I heard?" Price asked, coming up the corridor.

"Do you ever sleep?" Then he thought about it. "I want you in on this."

"Why me, sir, I'm not—"

"You're supposed to know about assassinations, right?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Then right now you're more valuable to me than a spook."

THE TIMING COULD have been better. Daryaei had been surprised by the information just delivered. Not in the least bit displeased by it—except maybe the timing. He paused for a moment, whispering a prayer first of thanks to Allah, then for the soul of the unknown assassin assassin? he asked himself. Perhaps "judge" would be a better term for the man, one of many who'd been infiltrated into Iraq ages ago, while the war had still been going on. Most had merely disappeared, probably shot one way or another. The overall mission had been his idea, not nearly dramatic enough for the "professionals" working in his intelligence service. Largely leftovers from the Shah's Savak—trained by the Israelis in the 1960s and 1970s—they were effective, but they were mercenaries at heart however much they might protest their religious fervor and their loyalty to the new regime. They'd proceeded along "conventional" lines for the unconventional mission, trying bribes of various sorts or testing the waters for dissidents, only to fail at every turn, and for years Daryaei had wondered if the target of all that attention might have Allah's perverse blessings somehow or other but that had been the counsel of despair, not of reason and faith, and even Daryaei was subject to human weakness. Surely the Americans had tried for him also, and probably in the same way, trying to identify military commanders who might like to try out the seat of power, trying to initiate a coup d'état such as they had done often enough in other parts of the world. But, no, this target was too skilled for that, and at every

turn he'd become more skilled, and so the Americans had failed, and the Israelis, and all the others. *All but me*.

It was tradition, after all, all the way back to antiquity. One man, operating alone, one faithful man who would do whatever was necessary to accomplish his mission. Eleven such men had been dispatched into Iraq for this specific purpose, told to go deep under cover, trained to forget everything they had ever been, entirely without contact or control officers, and all records of their existence destroyed so that even an Iraqi spy in his own agencies could not discover the mission without a name. Within an hour, some of his own cronies would come into this office, praising God and lauding their leader for his wisdom. Perhaps so, but even they didn't know all the things he had done, or all the people he'd dispatched.

THE DIGITIZED RENDITION of the event didn't change much, though now he had a more professional opinion of the options:

"Mr. President, a guy with a Silicon Graphics workstation could fake this," the NIO told him. "You've seen movies, and movie film has much higher resolution than a TV set. You can fake almost anything now."

"Fine, but your job is to tell me what did happen," Ryan pointed out. He'd seen the same few seconds of tape eight times now, and was growing tired of instant replay.

"We can't say with absolute certainty."

Maybe it was the week's sleep deprivation. Maybe it was the stress of the job. Maybe it was the stress of having to face his *second* crisis. Maybe it was the fact that Ryan was himself still a carded national intelligence officer. "Look, I'm going to say this once: Your job isn't to cover your ass. Your job is to cover *mine!"*

"I know that, Mr. President. That's why I'm giving you all the information I have. . .." Ryan didn't have to listen to the rest of the speech. He'd heard it all before, a couple of hundred times. There had even been cases when he'd said similar things himself, but in Jack's case, he'd always hung his hat on one of the options.

"Scott?" Jack asked the acting SeeState.

"The son of a bitch is dead as yesterday's fish," Adler replied.

"Disagreement?" President Ryan asked the others in the room. Nobody contradicted the assessment, giving it a sort of blessing. Even the NIO would not *disagree* with the collective opinion. He'd delivered his assessments, after all. Any mistakes now were the Secretary of State's problem. Perfect.

"Who was the shooter?" Andrea Price asked. The answer came from CIA's Iraq-desk officer.

"Unknown. I have people running tapes of previous appearances just to make sure that he's been around before. Look, from all appearances it was a senior member of his protection detail, with the rank of an army colonel, and —"

"And I damned well know everybody on my detail," Price concluded the statement. "So, whoever it was, he belonged there, and that means whoever pulled this off managed to get somebody all the way inside, close enough to

make the hit, and committed enough to pay the price for it. It must have taken years." The continuation of the tape—they'd watched that only five times—showed the man crumble after a cavalcade of pistol shots at point-blank range. That struck Agent Price as odd. You damned well wanted to bag such people alive. Dead men still didn't tell any tales, and executions could always be arranged. Unless he'd been killed by other members of a conspiracy. But how likely was it that more than one assassin had made it that far? Price reflected that she could ask Indira Gandhi that someday. Her whole detail had turned on her one afternoon in a garden. For Price that was the final infamy, killing the person you were sworn to defend. But, then, she hadn't sworn to defend such people as that. One other thing on the tape got her attention: "Did you notice the body language?"

"What do you mean?" Ryan asked.

"The way the gun came up, the way he took the shot, the way he just stood there and watched. Like a golfer, it's called follow-through. He must have waited a long time for the chance. He damned sure thought about it for a long, long time. He must have dreamed about it. He wanted the moment to be perfect. He wanted to see it and enjoy it before he went down." She shook her head slowly. "That was one focused, dedicated killer." Price was actually enjoying herself, chilling though the subject of the meeting was. More than one President had treated the Secret Service agents as if they were furniture, or at best nice pets. It wasn't often that big shots asked their opinion of much more than narrow professional areas, like where a bad guy might be in a particular crowd.

"Keep going," CIA said.

"He must have been from outside, a guy with a totally clean record, no connection at all with anybody who made noise in Baghdad. This wasn't a guy getting even for somebody taking his mother out, okay? It was somebody who worked his way up the system, slow and careful all the way."

"Iran," CIA said. "Best guess, anyway. Religious motivation. No way he'd walk away from the hit, so it had to be somebody who didn't care. That could also mean straight revenge, but Ms. Price is correct: his people were clean in that respect. Anyway, it wasn't the Israelis, wasn't the French. The Brits don't do this anymore. The domestic angle is probably taken out by their vetting procedures. So it wasn't for money. It wasn't for personal or family motives. I think we can discount political ideology. That leaves religion, and *that* means Iran."

"I can't say I'm familiar with all the intelligence side, but from looking at the tape, yeah," Andrea Price agreed. "It's like he was saying a prayer, the way he killed the guy. He just wanted the moment to be perfect. He didn't care about anything else."

"Somebody else to check that out?" Ryan asked.

"FBI, their Behavioral Sciences people are pretty good at reading minds. We work with them all the time," Price responded.

"Good idea," CIA agreed. "We'll rattle the bushes to ID the shooter, but even if we can get good information, it might not mean anything."

"What about the timing?"

"If we can stipulate that the shooter was there for a white—we have enough

tapes of public appearances to determine that—then timing is an issue," CIA thought.

"Oh, that's just great," the President opined. "Scott, now what?"

"Bert?" SeeState said to his desk officer. Bert Vasco was the State Department senior desk officer for that country. Rather like a specialist in the trading industry, he concentrated his efforts on learning everything he could about one particular country.

"Mr. President, as we all know, Iraq is a majority Shi'a Muslim country ruled by a Sunni minority through the Ba'ath political party. It has always been a concern that the elimination of our friend over there could topple—"

"Tell me what I don't know," Ryan interrupted.

"Mr. President, we simply do not know the strength of any opposition group that may or may not exist. The current regime has been very effective at cutting the weeds down early. A handful of Iraqi political figures has defected to Iran. None are top-quality people, and none ever had the chance to develop a firm political base. There are two radio stations that broadcast from Iran into Iraq. We know the names of the defectors who use those transmitters to talk to their countrymen. But there's no telling how many people listen and pay attention. The regime isn't exactly popular, we know that. We do not know the strength of the opposition, or what sort of organization exists to make use of an opportunity such as this one."

CIA nodded. "Bert's right. Our friend was awfully good at identifying potential enemies and taking them out of play. We tried to help during and after the Persian Gulf War, but all we really managed to do was get people killed. For sure nobody over there trusts us."

Ryan sipped at his coffee and nodded. He'd made his own recommendations back in 1991, and they hadn't been exercised. Well, he'd still been a junior executive then.

"Do we have any options to play?" the President asked next.

"Honestly, no," Vasco answered.

CIA agreed: "No assets in place. What few people we have operating in that country are tasked to coverage of weapons development: nuclear, chemical, and so forth. Nobody on the political side. We actually have more people in Iran looking at the political side. We can rattle those bushes some, but not in Iraq."

Fabulous, Jack thought, a country may or may not go down in one of the most sensitive areas of the world, and the world's most powerful nation could do nothing more than watch television coverage of the event. So much for the power of the American presidency.

"Arnie?"

"Yes, Mr. President," the chief of staff replied.

"We bumped Mary Pat off the schedule a couple days ago. I want her in today if we can work the schedule."

"I'll see what we can do on that, but—"

"But when something like this happens, the President of the United States is supposed to have more than his dick in his hand." Ryan paused. "Is Iran going to make a move?"

10

POLITICS

PRINCE ALI BIN SHEIK HAD been ready to fly home on his personal aircraft, an aging but beautifully appointed Lockheed L-1011, when the call came in from the White House. The Saudi embassy was located close to the Kennedy Center, and the ride correspondingly short in his official limousine, accompanied by a security force almost as large as Ryan's and made up of American Diplomatic Protection Service personnel, plus the Prince's own detail, composed of former members of Britain's Special Air Service. The Saudis, as always, spent a lot of money and bought quality with it. Ali was no stranger to the White House, or to Scott Adler, who met him at the door and conducted him upstairs and east into the Oval Office.

"Mr. President," His Royal Highness said, walking in from the secretaries' room.

"Thank you for coming over on such short notice." Jack shook his hand and waved him to one of the room's two sofas. Some thoughtful person had started a fire in the fireplace. The White House photographer snapped a few shots, and was dismissed. "I imagine you've seen the news this morning."

Ali managed a worried smile. "What does one say? We will not mourn his passing, but the Kingdom has serious concerns."

"Do you know anything we don't?" Ryan asked.

The Prince shook his head. "I was as surprised as everyone else."

The President grimaced. "You know, with all the money we spend on—" His visitor raised a tired hand.

"Yes, I know. I will have the same conversation with my own ministers as soon as my airplane lands back home."

"Iran."

"Undoubtedly."

"Will they move?"

The Oval Office got quiet then, just the crackling of the seasoned oak in the fireplace as the three men, Ryan, Ali, and Adler, traded looks across the coffee table, the tray and cups on it untouched. The issue was, of course, oil. The Persian—sometimes called the *Arabian*—Gulf was a finger of water surrounded by, and in some places sitting atop, a sea of oil. Most of the world's known supply was there, divided mainly among the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran, along with the smaller United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar. Of these countries, Iran was by far the largest in terms of population. Next came Iraq. The nations of the Arabian Peninsula were richer, but the land atop their liquid wealth had never supported a large population, and there was the rub, first exposed in 1991, when Iraq had invaded Kuwait

with all the grace of a schoolyard bully's attack on a smaller child. Ryan had more than once said that aggressive war was little more than an armed robbery writ large, and such had been the case in the Persian Gulf War. Seizing upon a minor territorial dispute and some equally trivial economic issues as an excuse, Saddam Hussein had attempted at a stroke to double his country's inherent wealth, and then threatened to double down his bets yet again by attacking Saudi Arabia—the reason he'd stopped at the Kuwait-Saudi border would now remain forever unexplained. At the most easily understood level, it was about oil and oil's resulting wealth.

But there was more to it than that. Hussein, like a Mafia don, had thought about little more than money and the political power that money generated. Iran was somewhat more farsighted.

All the nations around the Gulf were Islamic, most of them very strictly so. There were the exceptions of Bahrain and Iraq. In the former case, the oil had essentially run out, and that country—really a city-state separated from the Kingdom by a causeway—had evolved into the same function that Nevada exercised for the western United States, a place where the normal rules were set aside, where drinking, gambling, and other pleasures could be indulged a convenient distance from a more restrictive home. In the latter case, Iraq was a secular state which paid scant lip service to the state religion, which largely explained its President's demise after a long and lively career.

But the key to the region was and would always be religion. The Saudi Kingdom was the living heart of Islam. The Prophet had been born there. The holy cities of Mecca and Medina were there, and from that point of origin had grown one of the world's great religious movements. The issue was less about oil than about faith. Saudi Arabia was of the Sunni branch, and Iran of the Shi'a. Ryan had once been briefed on the differences, which had at the time seemed so marginal that he'd made no effort to remember them. That, the President told himself now, was foolish. The differences were large enough to make two important countries into enemies, and that was as large as any difference needed to be. It wasn't about wealth per se. It was about a different sort of power, the sort that grew from the mind and the heart—and from there into something else. Oil and money just made the struggle more interesting to outsiders.

A lot more interesting. The industrial world depended on that oil. Every state on the Gulf feared Iran for its size, for its large population, and for the religious fervor of its citizens. For the Sunni religious, the fear was about a perceived departure from the true course of Islam. For everyone else, it was about what would happen to them when "heretics" assumed control of the region, because Islam is a comprehensive system of beliefs, spreading out into civil law and politics and every other form of human activity. For Muslims the Word of God was Law Itself. For the West it was continuing their economies. For the Arabs—Iran is *not* an Arab country—it was the most fundamental question of all, a man's place before his God.

"Yes, Mr. President," Prince Ali bin Sheik replied after a moment. "They will move."

His voice was admirably calm, though Ryan knew that inwardly he must be anything but. The Saudis had never wanted Iraq's President to fall. Enemy

though he was, apostate though he was, aggressor though he was, he had fulfilled a useful strategic purpose for his neighbors. Iraq had long been a buffer between the Gulf states and Iran. It was a case in which religion played second fiddle to politics, which thereby served religious purposes. By rejecting the Word of Allah, Iraq's majority Shi'a population was taken out of play, and the dual border with Kuwait and the Kingdom was one of mere politics, not religion. But if the Ba'ath Party fell along with its leader, then Iraq might revert to majority religious rule. That would put a Shi'a country on the two borders, and the leader of the Shi'a branch of Islam was Iran.

Iran would move, because Iran had been moving for years. The religion systematized by Mohammed had spread from the Arabian Peninsula to Morocco in the west and the Philippines in the east, and with the evolution of the modern world was represented in every nation on earth. Iran had used its wealth and its large population to become the world's leading Islamic nation, by bringing in Muslim clergy to its own holy city of Qom to study, by financing political movements throughout the Islamic world, and by funneling weapons to Islamic peoples who needed help—the Bosnian Muslims were a case in point, and not the only one.

"Anschluss," Scott Adler thought aloud. Prince Ali just looked over and nodded.

"Do we have any sort of plan to help prevent it?" Jack asked. He knew the answer. No, nobody did. That was the reason the Persian Gulf War had been fought for limited military objectives, and not to overthrow the aggressor. The Saudis, who had from the beginning charted the war's strategic objectives, had never allowed America or her allies even to consider a drive to Baghdad, and this despite the fact that with Iraq's army deployed in and around Kuwait, the Iraqi capital had been as exposed as a nudist on a beach. Ryan had remarked at the time, watching the talking heads on various TV news shows, that not a single one of the commentators remarked that a textbook campaign would have totally ignored Kuwait, seized Baghdad, and then waited for the Iraqi army to stack arms and surrender. Well, not everyone could read a map.

"Your Highness, what influence can you exercise there?" Ryan inquired next.

"In practical terms? Very little. We will extend the hand of friendship, offer loans—by the end of the week we will ask America and the U.N. to lift sanctions with an eye to improving economic conditions, but . . ."

"Yeah, but," Ryan agreed. "Your Highness, please let us know what information you can develop. America's commitment to the Kingdom's security is unchanged."

Ali nodded. "I will convey that to my government."

"NICE, PROFESSIONAL JOB," Ding observed, catching the enhanced instant replay. " 'Cept for one little thing."

"Yeah, it is nice to collect the paycheck before your will is probated." Clark had once been young enough and angry enough to think in such terms as the shooter whose death he'd just seen repeated, but with age had come circumspection. Now, he'd heard, Mary Pat wanted him to try again for a

White House appearance, and he was reading over a few documents. Trying to, anyway.

"John, ever read up on the Assassins?" Chavez asked, killing the TV with the remote.

"I saw the movie," Clark replied without looking up.

"They were pretty serious boys. They had to be. Using swords and knives, well, you have to get pretty close to do the job. Decisively engaged, like we used to say in the 7th Light." Chavez was still short of his master's degree in international relations, but he blessed all the books that Professor Alpher had forced him to read. He waved at the TV. "This guy was like one of them, a two-legged smart bomb—you self-destruct, but you take out the target first. The Assassins were the first terrorist state. I guess the world wasn't ready for the concept back then, but that one little city-state manipulated a whole region just 'cuz they could get one of their troops in close enough to do the job on anybody."

"Thanks for the history lesson, Domingo, but—"

"Think, John. If they could get close to him, they can get close to anybody. Ain't no pension plan in the dictator business, y'know? The security around him is, like, real, real tight—but somebody got a shooter in close and blew him into the next dimension. That's scary, Mr. C."

John Clark continually had to remind himself that Domingo Chavez was no dummy. He might still speak with an accent—not because he had to, but because it was natural for him to; Chavez, like Clark, had a gift for language—and he might still interlace his speech with terms and grammar remembered from his days as an Army sergeant, but God damn if he wasn't the quickest learner John had ever met. He was even learning to control his temper and passion. When it suited him to, John corrected himself.

"So? Different culture, different motivation, different—"

"John, I'm talking about a capability. The political will to use it, 'mano. And patience. It must have taken years. Sleeper agents I know about. First time I saw a sleeper shooter."

"Could have been a regular guy who just got pissed and—"

"Who was willing to die? I don't think so, John. Why not pop the guy on the way to the latrine at midnight and try to get the hell out of Dodge? No way, Mr. C. Gomer there was making a statement. Wasn't just his, either. He was delivering a message for his boss, too."

Clark looked up from his briefing papers and thought about that one. Another government employee might have dismissed the observation as something out of his purview, but Clark had been suborned into government service as a result of his inability to see limits on his activities. Besides that, he could remember being in Iran, being part of a crowd shouting "Death to America!" at blindfolded captives from the U.S. embassy. More than that, he remembered what members of that crowd had said after Operation Blue Light had gone to shit, and how close it had been—how near the Khomeini government had been to taking out its wrath on Americans and turning an already nasty dispute into a shooting war. Even then, Iranian fingerprints were on all manner of terrorist operations worldwide, and America's failure to address the fact hadn't helped matters.

"Well, Domingo, that's why we need more field officers."

• • •

SURGEON HAD ONE more reason not to like her husband's presidency. She couldn't see him on the way out the door, for one thing. He was in with somebody—well, it had to do with what she'd seen on the morning news, and that was business, and sometimes she'd had to scoot out of the house unexpectedly for a case at Hopkins. But she didn't like the precedent.

She looked at the motorcade. Nothing else to call it, a total of six Chevy Suburbans. Three were tasked to getting Sally (now code-named SHADOW) and Little Jack (SHORTSTOP) to school. The other three would conduct Katie (SANDBOX) to her day-care center. Partly, Cathy Ryan admitted, that was her fault. She didn't want the children's lives disrupted. She wouldn't countenance changing their schools and friends because of the misfortune that had dropped on their lives. None of this was the kids' fault. She'd been dumb enough to agree to Jack's new post, which had lasted all of five minutes, and as with many things in life, you had to accept the consequences. One consequence was increased travel time to their classes and finger-painting, just to keep friends, but, damn it . . . there was no right answer.

"Good morning, Katie!" It was Don Russell, squatting down for a hug and a kiss from SANDBOX. Cathy had to smile at that. This agent was a godsend. A man with grandchildren of his own, he truly loved kids, especially little ones. He and Katie had hit it right off. Cathy kissed her youngest good-bye, and her bodyguard—it was just outrageous, a child needed a bodyguard! But Cathy remembered her own experiences with terrorists, and she had to accept that, too. Russell lifted SANDBOX into her car seat, strapped her in, and the first set of three vehicles pulled away.

"Bye, Mom." Sally was going through a phase in which she and Mom were friends, and didn't kiss. Cathy accepted that without liking it. It was the same with Little Jack: "See ya, Mom." But John Patrick Ryan Jr. was boy enough to demand a front seat, which he'd get this one time. Both sub-details were augmented due to the manner in which the Ryan family had come to the White House, with a total of twenty agents assigned to protect the children for the time being. That number would come down in a month or so, they'd told her. The kids would ride in normal cars instead of the armored Suburbans. In the case of SURGEON, her helicopter was waiting.

Damn. It was all happening again. She'd been pregnant with Little Jack, then to learn that terrorists were . . . why the *hell* had she ever agreed to this? The greatest indignity of all, she was married to supposedly the world's most powerful man, but he and his family both had to take orders from other people.

"I know, Doc." It was the voice of Roy Altman, *her* principal agent. "Hell of a way to live, isn't it?"

Cathy turned. "You read minds?"

"Part of the job, ma'am, I know—"

"Please, my name is Cathy. Jack and I are both 'Doctor Ryan.' "

Altman nearly blushed. More than one First Lady had taken on royal airs with the accession of her husband to POTUS, and the children of politicians weren't always fun to guard, but the Ryan family, the Detail members had already agreed, were not at all like the people they usually had to guard. In some ways that was bad news, but it was hard not to like them.

"Here." He handed over a manila folder. It was her caseload for the day.

"Two procedures, then follow-ups," she told him. Well, at least she could do paperwork on the flight. That was convenient, wasn't it?

"I know. We've arranged with Professor Katz to keep us posted—so we can keep up with your schedule," Altman explained.

"Do you do background checks on my patients, too?" Cathy asked, thinking it a joke.

It wasn't. "Yes. Hospital records provide names, birthdays, and Social Security numbers. We run NCIC checks, and checks against our own file of—uh, of people we keep an eye on."

The look that pronouncement generated wasn't exactly friendly, but Altman didn't take it personally. They walked back into the building, then back out a few minutes later to the waiting helicopter. There were news cameras, Cathy saw, to record the event, as Colonel Hank Goodman lit up his engines.

In the operations room for the U.S. Secret Service, a few blocks away, the status board changed. POTUS (President of the United States) was shown by the red LED display as in the White House. FLOTUS (First Lady of the United States) was shown as in transit. SHADOW, SHORTSTOP, and SANDBOX were covered on a different board. The same information was relayed by secure digital radio link to Andrea Price, sitting and reading the paper outside the Oval Office. Other agents were already at St. Mary's Catholic School and the Giant Steps Day Care Center, both near Annapolis, and at Johns Hopkins Hospital. The Maryland State Police knew that the Ryan children were rolling along U.S. Route 50, and had additional cars posted along the travel route for an obvious police presence. At the moment, yet another Marine helicopter was following SURGEON'S, and a third, with a team of heavily armed agents aboard, was pacing the three children. Were there a serious assassin out there, then he would see the overt display of force. The agents in the moving vehicles would be at their usual alert state, scanning for cars, filing them away for the chance that the same one would show up a little too much. Unmarked Secret Service cars would maneuver around independently, doing much the same thing while being disguised as ordinary commuters. The Ryans would never really know how much security was arrayed around them, unless they asked, and few ever wanted to know.

A normal day was under way.

THERE WAS NO denying it now. She didn't need Dr. Moudi to tell her. The headaches had worsened, the fatigue had gotten worse. As with young Benedict Mkusa, she'd thought, then hoped it might be a recurrence of her old malaria, the first time she'd ever entertained that sort of thought. But then the pains had come, not in the joints, but in the stomach first of all, and that had been like watching an advancing weather front, the tall white clouds that led a

massive, violent storm, and there was nothing for her to do but wait and dread what was approaching, for she knew everything that was to be. Part of her mind still denied it, and another part tried to hide away in prayer and faith, but as with a person at a horror movie, face covered by denying hands, her eyes still peeked sideways to see what was coming, the horror all the worse because of her useless retreat from it.

The nausea was worse, and soon she'd be unable to control it with her will, strong as that was.

She was in one of the hospital's few private rooms. The sun was still bright outside, the sky clear, a beautiful day in the unending African spring-summer season. An IV tree was next to her bed, running sterile saline into her arm, along with some mild analgesics and nutrients to fortify her body, but really it was a waiting game. Sister Jean Baptiste could do little else but wait. Her body was limp with fatigue, and so pained that turning her head to look at the flowers out the window required a minute of effort. The first massive surge of nausea came almost as a surprise, and somehow she managed to grasp the emesis tray. She was still nurse enough and detached enough to see the blood there, even as Maria Magdalena took the tray away from her, to empty it into a special container. Fellow nurse, and fellow nun, she was dressed in sterile garb, wearing rubber gloves and a mask as well, her eyes unable to conceal her sorrow.

"Hello, Sister." It was Dr. Moudi, dressed much the same way, his darker eyes more guarded above the green mask. He checked the chart hanging at the foot of the bed. The temperature reading was only ten minutes old, and still rising. The telex from Atlanta concerning her blood had arrived even more recently, inspiring his immediate walk to the isolation building. Her fair skin had been pale only a few hours earlier. Now it appeared slightly flushed, and dry. Moudi thought they'd work to cool the patient down with alcohol, maybe ice later, to fight the fever. That would be bad for the Sister's dignity. They did indeed dress chastely, as women should, and the hospital gown she now wore was ever demeaning to that virtue. Worse still, however, was the look in her eyes. She knew. But he still had to say it.

"Sister," the physician told her, "your blood has tested positive for Ebola antibodies."

A nod. "I see."

"Then you also know," he added gently, "that twenty percent of the patients survive this disease. You are not without hope. I am a good doctor. Sister Magdalena here is a superb nurse. We will support you as best we can. I am also in contact with some of my colleagues. We will not give up on you. I require that you do not give up on yourself. Talk to your God, good lady. He will surely listen to someone of your virtue." The words came easily, for Moudi was after all a physician, and a good one. He surprised himself by half wishing for her survival.

"Thank you, Doctor."

Moudi turned to the other nun before leaving. "Please keep me informed."

"Of course, Doctor."

Moudi walked out of the room, turning left toward the door, removing his protective garb as he went, and dumping the articles into the proper

container. He made a mental note to speak to the administrator to be sure that the necessary precautions were strictly enforced. He wanted this nun to be the last Ebola case in this hospital. Even as he spoke, part of the WHO team was on its way to the Mkusa family, where they would interview the griefstricken parents, along with neighbors and friends, to learn where and how Benedict might have encountered the infection. The best guess was a monkey bite.

But only a guess. There was little known about Ebola Zaire, and most of the unknowns were important. Doubtless it had been around for centuries, or even longer than that, just one more lethal malady in an area replete with them, not recognized as anything more than "jungle fever" by physicians as recently as thirty years before. The focal center of the virus was still a matter of speculation. Many *thought* a monkey carried it, but which monkey no one knew—literally thousands had been trapped or shot in the effort to determine that, with no result. They weren't even sure that it was really a tropical disease—the first properly documented outbreak of this class of fever had actually taken place in Germany. There was a very similar disease in the Philippines.

Ebola appeared and disappeared, like some sort of malignant spirit. There was an apparent periodicity to it. The recognized outbreaks had occurred at eight- to ten-year intervals—again, unexplained and slightly suspect, because Africa was still primitive, and there was ample reason to believe that victims could contract the disease and die from it in but a few days, without the time to seek medical help. The structure of the virus was somewhat understood and its symptoms recognized, but its mechanism was still a mystery. That was troubling to the medical community, because Ebola Zaire had a mortality rate of roughly eighty percent. Only one in five of its victims survived, and why that happened was just one more entry in the "unknown" column. For all of those reasons, Ebola was perfect.

So perfect that it was one of the most feared organisms known to man. Minute quantities of the virus were in Atlanta, the Pasteur Institute in Paris, and a handful of other institutions, where it was studied under conditions resembling those of a science-fiction novel, the doctors and technicians in virtual space suits. There wasn't even enough known about Ebola to do work on a vaccine. The four known varieties the fourth had been discovered in a bizarre incident in America; but *that* strain, while uniformly lethal to monkeys, incomprehensibly had *no* serious effects on humans—were too different. Even now scientists in Atlanta, some of whom he knew, were peering into electron microscopes to map the structure of this new version, later to compare it with samples of other known strains. That process could take weeks and, probably, as with all previous efforts, would yield only equivocal results.

Until the true focal center of the disease was discovered, it remained an alien virus, something almost from another planet, deadly and mysterious. Perfect.

Patient Zero, Benedict Mkusa was dead, his body incinerated by gasoline, and the virus dead with him. Moudi had a small blood sample, but that wasn't really good enough. Sister Jean Baptiste was something else, however. Moudi thought about it for a moment, then lifted the phone to call the Iranian

embassy in Kinshasa. There was work to be done, and more work to prepare. His hand hesitated, the receiver halfway from the desk to his ear. What if God did listen to her prayers? He might, Moudi thought, He just might. She was a woman of great virtue who spent as much of her day in prayer as any Believer in his home city of Qom, whose faith in her God was firm, and who had devoted her life to service of those in need. Those were three of Islam's Five Pillars, to which he could add a fourth—the Christian Lent wasn't so terribly different from the Islamic Ramadan. These were dangerous thoughts, but if Allah heard her prayers, then what he intended to do was not written, and would not happen, and if her prayers were not heard . . . ? Moudi cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder and made the call.

"MR, PRESIDENT, WE can't ignore it anymore."

"Yeah, I know, Arnie."

It came down to a technical issue, oddly enough. The bodies had to be identified positively, because a person wasn't dead until there was a piece of paper that said so, and until that person was declared dead, if that person had been a senator or congress-person, then his or her post wasn't vacant, and no new person could be selected for it, and Congress was an empty shell. The certificates would be going out today, and within an hour, governors of "the several states" would be calling Ryan for advice or to advise what they would be doing unbidden. At least one governor would today resign his post and be appointed to the United States Senate by his succeeding lieutenant governor in an elegant, if obvious, political payoff, or so the rumors said.

THE VOLUME OF information was stunning, even to someone familiar with the sources. It went back over fourteen years. The timing could scarcely have been better, however, since that was about the time the major newspapers and magazines had gone to electronic media, which was easily cross-loaded to the World Wide Web, and for which the media empires could charge a modest fee for material which otherwise would have been stored in their own musty basements or at most sold to college libraries for practically nothing. The WWW was still a fairly new and untested source of income, but the media had seized it by the throat, since now for the first time news was less volatile than it had been in the past. It was now a ready source for its own reporters, for students, for those with individual curiosity, and for those whose curiosity was more strictly professional. Best of all, the huge number of people doing a keyword search would make it impossible for anyone to check all the inquiries.

He was careful anyway—rather, his people were. The inquiries being made on the Web were all happening in Europe, mainly in London, through brand-new Internet access accounts which would last no longer than the time required to download the data, or which came from academic accounts to which numerous people had access. Keywords RYAN JOHN PATRICK, RYAN JACK, RYAN CAROLINE, RYAN CATHY, RYAN CHILDREN, RYAN FAMILY,

and a multitude of others were inputted, and literally thousands of “hits” had resulted. Many were spurious because “Ryan” was not that uncommon a name, but the vetting process was not all that difficult.

The first really interesting clips came when Ryan had been thirty-one and had first come into the public spotlight in London. Even the photos were there, and though they took time to download, they were worth waiting for. Especially the first. That one showed a young man sitting on a street, covered with blood. Well, wasn’t that inspirational ? The subject of the photograph actually looked quite dead in it, but he knew that wounded people often appeared that way. Then had come another set of photos of a wrecked automobile and a small helicopter. In the intervening years the data on Ryan was surprisingly scarce, mainly squibs about his testifying before the American Congress behind closed doors. There were additional hits concerning the end of the Fowler presidency—immediately after the initial confusion it had been reported that Ryan himself had prevented a nuclear-missile launch . . . and Ryan himself had hinted at it to Daryaei . . . but that story had never been officially confirmed, and Ryan himself had never discussed the matter with anyone. That was important. That said something about the man. But that could also be set aside.

His wife. There was ample press coverage on her, too, including in one article the number of her office at her hospital. A skilled surgeon. That was nice—a recent piece said that she’d continue that. Excellent. They knew where to look for her.

The children. The youngest—yes, the youngest used the same day-care center that the oldest had used. There was a photo of that, too. A feature article on Ryan’s first White House job had even identified the school the older ones attended. . . .

This was all quite amazing. He’d initiated the research effort in the knowledge that he’d get all or most of this information, but even so, here was in a single day more information than ten people in the field could have gathered—at considerable risk of exposure—in a week. The Americans were so foolish. They practically invited attack. They had no idea of secrecy or security. It was one thing for a leader to appear in public with his family from time to time—everyone did that. It was quite another to let everyone know things that nobody really needed to know.

The document package—it came to over 2,500 pages—would be collated and cross-referenced by his staff. There were no plans to take action on any of it. It was just data. But that could change.

“YOU KNOW, I think I like flying in,” Cathy Ryan observed to Roy Altman.

“Oh?”

“Less wear and tear on the nerves than driving myself. I don’t suppose that’ll last,” she added, moving into the food line.

“Probably not.” Altman was constantly looking around, but there were two other agents in the room, doing their best to look invisible and failing badly at it. Though Johns Hopkins was an institution with fully 2,400 physicians, it was still a professional village of sorts where nearly everyone knew nearly

everyone else, and doctors didn't carry guns. Altman was staying close, the better to learn his principal's routine, and she didn't seem to mind. He'd been in with her for the two morning procedures, and teacher that she was, Cathy had explained every step of the process in minute detail. This afternoon she'd be doing teaching rounds with a half dozen or so students. It was Altman's first educational experience on the job—at least in something that had value in an area other than politics, a field he'd learned to detest. His next observation was that SURGEON ate like the proverbial bird. She got to the end of the line and paid for her lunch and Altman's, over his brief protest.

"This is my turf, Roy." She looked around, and spotted the man she wanted to lunch with, heading that way with Altman in tow. "Hey, Dave."

Dean James and his guest stood up. "Hi, Cathy! Let me introduce a new faculty member, Pierre Alexandre. Alex, this is Cathy Ryan—"

"The same one who—"

"Please, I'm still a doctor, and—"

"You're the one on the Lasker list, right?" Alexandre stopped her cold with that one. Cathy's smile lit up the room.

"Yes."

"Congratulations, Doctor." He held out his hand. Cathy had to set her tray down to take it. Altman watched with eyes that tried to be neutral, but conveyed something else. "You must be with the Service."

"Yes, sir. Roy Altman."

"Excellent. A lady this lovely and this bright deserves proper protection," Alexandre pronounced. "I just got out of the Army, Mr. Altman. I've seen you guys at Walter Reed. Back when President Fowler's daughter came back from Brazil with a tropical bug, I managed the case."

"Alex is working with Ralph Forster," the dean explained as everyone sat down.

"Infectious diseases," Cathy told her bodyguard.

Alexandre nodded. "Just learning the ropes at the moment. But I have a parking pass, so I guess I really belong."

"I hope you're as good a teacher as Ralph is."

"A great doc," Alexandre agreed. Cathy decided she'd like the newbie. She next wondered about the accent and the southern manners. "Ralph flew down to Atlanta this morning."

"Anything special happening?"

"A possible Ebola case in Zaire, African male, age eight. The e-mail came through this morning."

Cathy's eyes narrowed at that. Though she was in a completely different field of medicine, like all physicians she got *Morbidity and Mortality Report,* and she kept current on everything she could. Medicine is a field in which education never stops. "Just one?"

"Yep." Alexandre nodded. "Seems the kid had a monkey bite on his arm. I've been over there. I deployed out of Detrick for the last mini-outbreak in 1990."

"With Gus Lorenz?" Dean James asked. Alexandre shook his head.

"No, Gus was doing something else then. The team leader was George Westphal."

"Oh, yeah, he—"

"Died," Alex confirmed. "We, uh, kept it quiet, but he got it. I attended him. It wasn't real great to watch."

"What did he do wrong? I didn't know him well," James said, "but Gus told me he was a rising star. UCLA, as I recall."

"George was brilliant, best man on structures I ever met, and he was as careful as any of us, but he got it anyway, and we never figured out how that happened. Anyway, that mini-outbreak killed sixteen people. We had two survivors, both females, both in their early twenties, and nothing remarkable about them that we could ever find. Maybe they were just lucky," Alexandre said, not really believing it. Things like this happened for some reason or other. It was just that he hadn't found it, though it was his job to find it. "In any case, only eighteen total victims, and that *was* lucky. We were over there for six or seven weeks. I took a shotgun into the woods and blew up about a hundred monkeys, trying to find a carrier. No dice. That strain is called Ebola Zaire Mayinga. I imagine right now they're comparing it to what this little kid contracted. Ebola's a slippery little bastard."

"Just one?" Cathy asked.

"That's the word. Method of exposure unknown, as usual."

"Monkey bite?"

"Yeah, but we'll never find the monkey. We never do."

"It's that deadly?" Altman asked, unable to hold back from joining the conversation.

"Sir, the official guess is eighty percent mortality. Put it this way. If you pull your pistol out and shoot me in the chest, right here, right now, my odds are better than beating this little bug." Alexandre buttered his roll and remembered visiting Westphal's widow. It was bad for the appetite. "Probably a lot better, what with the surgeons we have working over in Halstead. You have much better odds with leukemia, much better odds with lymphoma. Somewhat worse odds with AIDS, but that agent gives you ten years. Ebola gives you maybe ten days. That's about as deadly as it gets."

11

MONKEYS

RYAN HAD DONE ALL OF his own writing. He'd published two books on naval history—that now seemed like a previous lifetime summoned to memory on a hypnotist's couch—and uncounted papers for CIA. Each of these he had done himself, once on a typewriter and later on a series of personal computers. He had never enjoyed the writing—it was ever difficult work—but he had enjoyed the solitude of it, alone in his own little intellectual world and safe from any sort of interruption as he formed his thoughts and adjusted their method of presentation until they were as close to perfect as he could achieve. In that way, they were always his thoughts, and there was integrity in the process.

No longer.

The chief speechwriter was Callie Weston, short, petite, dirty blond, and a wizard with words who, like many of the enormous White House staff, had come aboard with President Fowler and never managed to leave.

"You didn't like my speech for the church?" She was also irreverent.

"Honestly, I just decided that I had to say something else." Then Jack realized he was defending himself to someone he scarcely knew.

"I cried." She paused for effect, staring into his eyes with the unblinking gaze of a poisonous snake for several seconds, manifestly sizing him up. "You're different."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you have to understand, Mr. President. President Fowler kept me around because I made him sound compassionate—he's rather a cold fish in most things, poor guy. President Durling kept me around because he didn't have anybody better. I bump heads all the time with staffers across the street. They like to edit my work. I don't like being edited by drones. We fight. Arnie protects me a lot because I went to school with his favorite niece—and I'm the best around at what I do—but I'm probably the biggest pain in the ass on your staff. You need to know that." It was a good explanation, but not to the point.

"Why am I different?" Jack asked.

"You say what you really think instead of saying what you think people think they want to hear. It's going to be hard writing for you. I can't dip into the usual well. I have to learn to write the way I used to like to write, not the way I'm paid to write, and I have to learn to write like you talk. It's going to be tough," she told him, already girding herself for the challenge.

"I see." Since Ms. Weston was not an inner-circle staff member, Andrea Price was leaning against the wall (it would have been in a corner, except the Oval Office didn't have one) and observing everything with a poker face—or

trying to. Ryan was learning to read her body language. Clearly Price didn't much care for Weston. He wondered why. "Well, what can you turn out in a couple of hours?"

"Sir, that depends on what you want to say," the speechwriter pointed out. Ryan told her in a few brief sentences. She didn't take notes. She merely absorbed it, smiled, and spoke again.

"They're going to destroy you. You know that. Maybe Arnie hasn't told you yet, maybe nobody on the staff has, or ever will, but it's going to happen." That remark jolted Agent Price from her spot on the wall, just enough that her body was standing instead of leaning.

"What makes you think I want to stay here?"

She blinked. "Excuse me. I'm not really used to this."

"This could be an interesting conversation, but I—"

"I read one of your books day before yesterday. You're not very good with words—not very elegant, that's a technical judgment—but you do say things clearly. So I have to dial back my rhetoric style to make it sound like you. Short sentences. Your grammar is good. Catholic schools, I guess. You don't bullshit people. You say it straight." She smiled. "How long for the speech?"

"Call it fifteen minutes."

"I'll be back in three hours," Weston promised, and stood. Ryan nodded, and she walked out of the room. Then the President looked at Agent Price.

"Spit it out," he ordered.

"She's the biggest pain in the ass over there. Last year she *attacked* some junior staffer over something. A guard had to pull her off him."

"Over what?"

"The staffer said some nasty things about one of her speeches, and speculated that her family background was irregular. He left the next day. No loss," Price concluded. "But she's an arrogant prima donna. She shouldn't have said what she did."

"What if she's right?"

"Sir, that's not my business, but any—"

"Is she right?"

"You are different, Mr. President." Price didn't say whether she thought that was a good or bad thing, and Ryan didn't ask.

The President had other things to do in any case. He lifted his desk phone, and a secretary answered.

"Could you get me George Winston at the Columbus Group?"

"Yes, Mr. President, I'll get him for you." She didn't have that number immediately to mind, and so she lifted another phone for the Signals Office. Down there a Navy petty officer had the number on a Post-It note, and read it off. A moment later he handed the Post-It to the Marine in the next chair over. The Marine fished in her purse, found four quarters, and handed them over to the smirking squid.

"Mr. President, I have Mr. Winston," the intercom phone said.

"George?"

"Yes, sir."

"How fast can you get down here?"

"Jack—Mr. President, I'm trying to put my business back together and—"

"How fast?" Ryan asked more pointedly.

Winston had to think for a second. His Gulfstream crew wasn't standing by for anything today. Getting to Newark Airport . . . "I can catch the next train."

"Let me know which one you're on. I'll have someone waiting for you."

"Okay, but you need to know that I can't—"

"Yes, you can. See you in a few hours." Ryan hung up, then looked up to Price. "Andrea, have an agent and a car meet him at the station."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Ryan decided that it was nice to give orders and have them carried out. A man could get used to this.

"I DON'T LIKE guns!" She said it loudly enough that a few heads turned, though the kids immediately turned back to their blocks and crayons. There was an unusual number of adults around, three of whom had spiraling cords leading to earpieces. Those heads all turned to see a "concerned" (that was the word everyone used in such a case) mother. As head of this detail, Don Russell walked over.

"Hello." He held up his Secret Service ID. "Can I help you?"

"Do you have to be here!"

"Yes, ma'am, we do. Could I have your name, please?"

"Why?" Sheila Walker demanded.

"Well, ma'am, it's nice to know who you're talking to, isn't it?" Russell asked reasonably. It was also nice to get background checks on such people.

"This is Mrs. Walker," said Mrs. Marlene Daggett, owner-operator of Giant Steps Day Care Center.

"Oh, that's your little boy over there, Justin, right?" Russell smiled. The four-year-old was building a tower with hardwood blocks, which he would then tip over, to the general amusement of the room.

"I just don't like guns, and I don't like them around children."

"Mrs. Walker, first of all, we're cops. We know how to carry our firearms safely. Second, our regulations require us to be armed at all times. Third, I wish you would look at it this way: your son is as safe here with us as he's ever going to be. You'll never have to worry about having somebody come over and steal a kid off the playground outside, for example."

"Why does she have to be here?"

Russell smiled reasonably. "Mrs. Walker, Katie over there didn't become President. Her father did. Isn't she entitled to a normal kid's life, just like your Justin?"

"But it's dangerous and—"

"Not while we're around, it isn't," he assured her. She just turned away.

"Justin!" Her son turned to see his mother holding his jacket. He paused for a second, and with one finger pushed the blocks a fraction of an inch, waiting for the four-foot pile to teeter over like a falling tree.

"Budding engineer," Russell heard through his earpiece. "I'll check her tag number." He nodded to the female agent in the doorway. In twenty minutes they'd have a new dossier to look over. Probably it would just say that Mrs. Walker was a New Age pain in the ass, but if she had a history of mental

problems (possible), or a criminal record (unlikely), it would be something to remember. He scanned the room automatically, then shook his head. SANDBOX was a normal kid surrounded by normal kids. At the moment she was crayoning a blank sheet of paper, her face screwed into a look of intense concentration. She'd been through a normal day, a normal lunch, a normal nap, and soon would have an abnormal trip back to a decidedly abnormal home. She hadn't noticed the discussion he'd just had with Justin's mother. Well, kids were smart enough to be kids, which was more than one could say for a lot of their parents.

Mrs. Walker guided her son to the family car, a Volvo wagon to no one's surprise, where she dutifully strapped him into the safety seat in the back. The agent memorized the tag number for processing, knowing that it would turn nothing of real importance, and knowing that they'd run it anyway, because there was always the off chance that...

It all came back just then, the reason why they had to be careful. Here they were, at Giant Steps, the same day-care center the Ryans had used since SHADOW was a munchkin, just off Ritchie Highway above Annapolis. The bad guys had used the 7-Eleven just across the road to stake out the location, then followed SURGEON in her old Porsche, using a custom van, and on the Route 50 bridge they'd pulled off a sweet little ambush, and later killed a state trooper in their escape. Dr. Ryan had been pregnant with SHORTSTOP then. SANDBOX had been far off into a future yet undreamed of at the time. All of this had a strange effect on Special Agent Marcella Hilton. Unmarried, again—she was twice divorced, with no kids of her own—being around kids had made her heart flutter a little, tough professional that she was. She figured it was part of her hormones, or the way the female brain was wired, or maybe she just liked kids and wished she had one of her own. Whatever it was, the thought that people would deliberately hurt little kids made her blood chill for a brief moment, like a blast of cold wind that came and went.

This place was too vulnerable. And there really were people out there who didn't care a rat's ass about hurting kids. And that 7-Eleven was still there. There were six agents on the SANDBOX detail now. That would be down to three or four in a couple of weeks. The Service wasn't the all-powerful agency people thought it was. Oh, sure, it had a lot of muscle, and investigative clout which few suspected. Alone of the federal police forces, the United States Secret Service could knock on somebody's door and walk in and conduct a "friendly" interview with someone who might represent a threat—an assumption based on evidence which might or might not be usable in a court of law. The purpose of such an interview would be to let the person know that he or she had an eye fixed firmly on him or her, and though that wasn't strictly true—the Service had only about 1,200 agents nationwide—the mere thought of it was enough to scare the hell out of people who'd said the wrong thing into the wrong ear.

But those people weren't the threat. As long as the agents did their job correctly, the casual threat wasn't a deadly one. Those people almost always tipped their hand, and people like her knew what to look for. It was the ones their intelligence division didn't hear about who constituted the real threat. Those *could* be deterred somewhat through a massive show of force, but the

massive show was too expensive, too oppressive, too obvious not to attract notice and adverse comment. Even then ---she remembered another event, months after the near death of SURGEON, SHADOW, and the yet unborn SHORTSTOP. *A whole squad*, she thought. It was a case study at the Secret Service Academy at Beltsville. The Ryan house had been used to film a re-creation of the event. Chuck Avery—a good, experienced supervisory agent—and his whole squad taken out. As a rookie she'd watched the taped analysis of what had gone wrong, and even then she'd chilled at how easy it had been for that team to make a small mistake, that to be compounded by bad luck and bad timing. . . .

"Yeah, I know." She turned to see Don Russell, sipping from a plastic coffee cup while he got some fresh air. Another agent was on post inside.

"Did you know Avery?"

"He was two years ahead of me at the academy. He was smart, and careful, and a damned good shot. He dropped one of the bad guys then, in the dark from thirty yards, two rounds in the chest." A shake of the head. "You don't make little mistakes in this business, Marci."

That is when the second chill came, the one that made you want to reach for your weapon, just to be sure that it was there, to tell yourself that you were ready to get the job done. That's when you remembered, in this case, how cute a little kid could be, and how even if you took the hits you'd make damned sure your last conscious act on the planet would be to put every round through the bastard's X-ring. Then you blinked, and the image went away.

"She's a beautiful little girl, Don."

"I've rarely seen an ugly one," Russell agreed. This was the time when one was supposed to say, *Don't worry, we'll take good care of her*. But they didn't say that. They didn't even think it. Instead they looked around at the highway and the trees and the 7-Eleven across Ritchie Highway, wondering what they'd missed, and wondering how much money they could spend on surveillance cameras.

• • •

GEORGE WINSTON WAS used to being met. It was the ultimate perk, really. You got off the airplane—almost always an airplane in his case—and there was somebody to meet you and take you to the car whose driver knew the quickest way to where you were going. No hassles with Hertz and figuring the useless little maps out, and getting lost. It cost a lot of money, but it was worth it, because time was the ultimate commodity, and you were born with only so much to spend, and there was no passbook to tell you the exact amount. The Metroliner pulled into Union Station's track 6. He'd gotten some reading done, and had himself a nice nap between Trenton and Baltimore. A pity the railroad couldn't make money carrying passengers, but you didn't have to buy air to fly in, while it was necessary to build a right-of-way for ground transport. Too bad. He collected his coat and briefcase and headed for the door, tipping the first-class attendant on the way out.

"Mr. Winston?" a man asked.

"That's right." The man held up a leather ID holder, identifying himself as a federal agent. He had a partner, Winston noted, standing thirty feet away with his topcoat unbuttoned.

"Follow me, please, sir." With that they were merely three more busy people heading off to an important meeting.

THERE WERE MANY such dossiers, each of them so large that the data had to be edited so as not to overflow the file cabinets, and it was still more convenient to do it with paper than a computer, because it was hard to get a computer that worked well in his native language. Checking up on the data would not be difficult. For one thing, there would be more press coverage to confirm or alter what he had. For another, he could confirm a lot very simply, merely by having a car drive past a few places once or twice, or by observing roads. There was little danger in that. However careful and thorough the American Secret Service might be, they were not omnipotent. This Ryan fellow had a family, a wife who worked, children who went to school; and Ryan himself had a schedule he had to keep. In their official home they were safe—reasonably so, he corrected himself, since no fixed place was ever truly safe—but that safety did not follow them everywhere, did it?

It was more than anything else a matter of financing and planning. He needed a sponsor.

"HOW MANY DO you need?" the dealer asked.

"How many do you have?" the prospective buyer asked.

"I can get eighty, certainly. Perhaps a hundred," the dealer thought aloud, sipping at his beer.

"When?"

"A week will suffice?" They were in Nairobi, capital of Kenya, and a major center for this particular trade. "Biological research?"

"Yes, my client's scientists have a rather interesting project under way."

"What project might that be?" the dealer asked.

"That I am not at liberty to say," was the not unexpected answer. Nor would he say who his client was. The dealer didn't react, and didn't particularly care. His curiosity was human, not professional. "If your services are satisfactory, we may be back for more." The usual enticement. The dealer nodded and commenced the substantive bargaining.

"You must understand that this is not an inexpensive undertaking. I must assemble my people. They must find a small population of the creature you desire. There are the problems of capture and transport, export licenses, the usual bureaucratic difficulties." By which he meant bribes. Trade in African green monkeys had picked up in the last few years. Quite a few companies used them for various experimental purposes. That was generally bad for the monkeys, but there were a lot of monkeys. The African green was in no way endangered, and even if they were, the dealer didn't especially care. Animals

were a national resource for his country, as oil was for the Arabs, to be marketed for hard currency. He didn't get sentimental about them. They bit and spat, and were generally unpleasant little beggars, "cute" though they might appear to the tourists at Treetops. They also ate the crops tended by the numerous small farmers in the country, and were thoroughly detested for that reason, whatever the game wardens might say.

"These problems are not strictly our concern. Speed is. You will find that we are willing to reward you handsomely in return for reliable service."

"Ah." The dealer finished his beer, and, lifting his hand, snapped his fingers for a refill. He named his price. It included his overhead, pay to the gatherers, the customs people, a policeman or two, and a mid-level government bureaucrat, plus his own net profit, which in the terms of the local economy was actually quite fair, he thought. Not everyone did.

"Agreed," the buyer said without so much as a sip of his soft drink.

It was almost a disappointment. The dealer enjoyed haggling, so much a part of the African marketplace. He'd scarcely begun to depose on how difficult and involved his business was.

"A pleasure doing business with you, sir. Call me in . . . five days?"

The buyer nodded. He finished his drink and took his leave. Ten minutes after that, he made a call, the third such communication to the embassy in the day, and all for the same purpose. Though he didn't know it, yet more such calls had been made in Uganda, Zaire, Tanzania, and Mali.

JACK REMEMBERED HIS first time in the Oval Office, the way you shuffled left to right from the secretaries' room through what turned out to be a molded door set in a curved wall, much in the manner of an eighteenth-century palace, which the White House actually was, if a modest one in the context of the times. You tended to notice the windows first of all, especially on a sunny day. Their thickness made them look green, rather like the glass walls of an aquarium designed for a very special fish. Next you saw the desk, a large wooden one. It was always intimidating, all the more so if the President was standing there, waiting for you. All this was good, the President thought. It made his current job all the easier.

"George," Ryan said, extending his hand.

"Mr. President," Winston responded pleasantly, ignoring the two Secret Service agents standing immediately behind him, there to grab him if he did something untoward. You didn't have to hear them. The visitor could feel their eyes on the back of his neck, rather like laser beams. He shook Ryan's hand anyway, and managed a crooked smile. Winston didn't know Ryan very well. They'd worked together well during the Japanese conflict. Previously they'd bumped into each other at a handful of minor social functions, and he knew of Ryan's work in the market, discreet but effective. All that time in the intelligence business hadn't been entirely wasted.

"Sit down." Jack waved to one of the couches. "Relax. How was the trip down?"

"The usual." A Navy mess steward appeared seemingly from nowhere and poured two cups of coffee, because it was that time of the day. The coffee, he

found, was excellent, and the china exquisite with its gold trim.

"I need you," Ryan said next.

"Sir, look, there was a lot of damage done to my—"

"Country."

"I've never wanted a government job, Jack," Winston replied at once, speaking rapidly.

Ryan didn't even touch his cup. "Why do you think I want you? George, I've been there and done that, okay? More than once. I have to put a team together. I'm going to give a speech tonight. You might like what I'm going to say. Okay, first, I need somebody to run Treasury. Defense is okay for the moment. State's in good hands with Adler. Treasury is first on my list of things that have to be filled with somebody new. I need somebody good. You're it. Are you clean?" Ryan asked abruptly.

"What—bet your ass I am! I made all my money within the rules. Everybody knows that." Winston bristled until he realized that he was expected to.

"Good. I need somebody who has the confidence of the financial community. You do. I need somebody who knows how the system really works. You do. I need somebody who knows what's broke and needs fixing, and what isn't and doesn't. You do. I need somebody who isn't political. You aren't. I need a dispassionate pro—most of all, George, I need somebody who's going to hate his job as much as I hate mine."

"What exactly do you mean by that, Mr. President?"

Ryan leaned back for a second and closed his eyes before going on. "I started working inside when I was thirty-one. I got out once, and I did okay on the Street, but I got sucked back, and here I am." The eyes opened. "Ever since I started with the Agency, I've had to watch how things work on the inside, and guess what? I never did like it. I started on the Street, remember, and I did okay then, too, remember? I figured I'd become an academic after I made my pile. History's my first love, and I thought I'd teach and study and write, figure out how things worked and pass my knowledge along. I almost made it, and maybe things didn't work out that way, exactly, but I've done a lot of studying and learning. So, George, I'm going to put a team together."

"To do what?"

"Your job is to clean up Treasury. You've got monetary and fiscal policy."

"You mean—"

"Yes."

"No political bullshit?" He had to ask that.

"Look, George, I don't know *how* to be a politician, and I don't have time to learn. I never liked the game. I never liked most of the people in it. I just kept trying to serve my country as best I could. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. I didn't have a choice. You remember how it started. People tried to kill me and my family. I didn't want to get sucked in, but God damn it, I learned that *somebody* has to try to get the job done. I'm not going to do it alone anymore, George, and I'm not going to fill all the vacant posts with ticket-punchers who know how to work 'the system,' okay? I want people with ideas in here, not politicians with agendas."

Winston set his cup down, managing not to rattle the saucer as he did so. He was a little surprised that his hand wasn't shaking. The length and breadth of

what Ryan proposed was quite a bit more than the job which he'd had every intention of declining. It would mean more than was obvious. He'd have to cut himself off from his friends—well, not really, but it meant that he would not make executive decisions based on what campaign contributions the Street would give the President as a result of the nice things that Treasury did for the trading houses up there. That's the way the game had always been played, and though he'd never been a player, he'd talked often enough with those who were, working the system in the same old way, because that was how things were.

"Shit," he whispered half to himself. "You're serious, aren't you?"

As founder of the Columbus Group, he'd assumed a duty so basic that few ever thought about it, beyond those who actually undertook it—and not always enough of them. Literally millions of people, directly or indirectly, entrusted their money to him, and that gave him the theoretical ability to be a thief on the cosmic scale. But you couldn't do that. For one thing, it was illegal, and you ran the risk of rather substandard federal housing as a result of it, with very substandard neighbors to boot. But that wasn't the reason you didn't. The reason was that those were people out there, and they trusted you to be honest *and* smart, and so you treated their money the same as you treated your own, or maybe even a little better, because they couldn't gamble the way a rich man did. Every so often you'd get a nice letter from some widow, and that was nice, but it really came from inside. Either you were a man of honor or you were not, and honor, some movie writer had once said, was a man's gift to himself. Not a bad aphorism, Winston told himself. It was also profitable, of course. You did the job in the right way, and chances were that people would reward you for it, but the real satisfaction was playing the game well. The money was merely a result of something more important, because money was transitory, but honor wasn't.

"Tax policy?" Winston asked.

"We need Congress put back together first, remember?" Ryan pointed out. "But, yes."

Winston took a deep breath. "That's a very big job, Ryan."

"You're telling *me* that?" the President demanded ... then grinned.

"It won't make me any friends."

"You also become head of the Secret Service. They'll protect you, won't they, Andrea?"

Agent Price was not used to being pulled into these conversations, but she feared she'd have to get used to it. "Uh, yes, Mr. President."

"Things are just so damned inefficient," Winston observed.

"So fix it," Ryan told him.

"It might be bloody."

"Buy a mop. I want your department cleaned up, streamlined, and run like you want it to make a profit someday. How you do that is your problem. For Defense, I want the same thing. The biggest problem over there is administrative. I need somebody who can run a business and make a profit to cull the bureaucracy out. That's the biggest problem of all, for all the agencies."

"You know Tony Bretano?"

"The TRW guy? He used to run their satellite division. . . ." Ryan remembered his name as a former candidate for a senior Pentagon post, which offer he'd turned down flat. A lot of good people declined such offers. That was the paradigm he had to break.

"Lockheed-Martin is going to steal him away in a couple weeks, at least that's what my sources tell me. That's why Lockheed's stock is nudging up. We have a buy-advisory on it. He gave TRW a fifty-percent profit increase in two years, not bad for an engineer who isn't supposed to know beans about management. I play golf with him sometimes. You should hear him scream about doing business with the government."

"Tell him I want to see him."

"Lockheed's board is giving him a free hand to—"

"That's the idea, George."

"What about my job, I mean, what you want me to do. The rule is—"

"I know. You'll be acting Secretary until we get things put back together."

Winston nodded. "Okay. I need to bring a few people down with me."

"I'm not going to tell you how to do it. I'm not even going to tell you all the things you have to do. I just want it to get done, George. You just have to tell me ahead of time. I don't want to read about it in the papers first."

"When would I start?"

"The office is empty right now," Ryan told him.

A final hedge: "I have to talk to my family about it."

"You know, George, these government offices have phones and everything." Jack paused. "Look, I know what you are. I know what you do. I might have turned out the same way, but I just never found it . . . satisfactory, I guess, just to make money. Getting start-ups off the ground, that was something different. Okay, managing money is important work. I didn't like it myself, but I never wanted to be a doctor, either. Fine, different strokes and all that. But I *know* you've sat around a lot of tables with beer and pretzels talking about how screwed up this town is. Here's your chance. It will never come again, George. Nobody will ever have an opportunity to be SecTreas without political considerations. Never. You can't turn it down, because you'd never forgive yourself if you did."

Winston wondered how one could be so adroitly cornered in a room with curved walls. "You're learning the political stuff, Jack."

"Andrea, you have a new boss," the President told his principal agent.

For her part, Special Agent Price decided that Callie Weston might be wrong after all.

THE NOTICE THAT there would be a presidential address tonight upset a carefully considered timetable, but only by a day. More of concern was the coordination of that event with another. Timing was everything in politics, as much as in any other field, and they'd spent a week working on this. It wasn't the usual illusion of experts moving with practiced skill. There had never been practice in this particular exercise. It was all guesses, but they'd all made guesses before, and mostly good ones, else Edward J. Kealty would never have risen as far as he had, but like compulsive gamblers, they never really trusted

the table or the other players, and every decision carried with it a lot of ifs.

They even wondered about right and wrong on this one—not the "right and wrong" of a political decision, the considered calculation of who would be pleased and who offended by a sudden stand on the principle du jour, but whether or not the action they were contemplating was objectively correct—honest, *moral!*—and that was a rare moment for the seasoned political operatives. It helped that they'd been lied to, of course. They knew they'd been told lies. They knew *he* knew that *they* knew that he'd lied to them, but that was an understood part of the exercise. To have done otherwise would have violated the rules of the game. They had to be protected so long as they did not break faith with their principal, and being protected from adverse knowledge was part of that covenant.

"So you never really resigned, Ed?" his chief of staff asked. He wanted the lie to be clear, so that he could tell everyone that it was the Lord's truth, to the best of his knowledge.

"I still have the letter," the former Senator and former Vice President, and that was the rub, replied, tapping his jacket pocket. "Brett and I talked things over and we decided that the wording of the letter had to be just so, and what I had with me wasn't quite right. I was going to come back the next day with a new one, dated properly, of course, and it would have been handled quietly—but who would have thought . . . ?"

"You could just, well, forget about it." This part of the dance had to be stepped out in accordance with the music.

"I wish I could," Kealty said after a moment's sincere pause, followed by a concerned, passionate voice. This was good practice for him, too. "But, dear God, the shape the country's in. Ryan's not a bad guy, known him for years. He doesn't know crap about running a government, though."

"There's no law on this, Ed. None. No constitutional guidance at all, and even if there were, no Supreme Court to rule on it." This came from Kealty's chief legal adviser, formerly his senior legislative aide. "It's strictly political. It won't look good," he had to say next. "It won't look—"

"That's the point," the chief of staff noted. "We're doing this for apolitical reasons, to serve the interests of the country. Ed knows he's committing political suicide." To be followed by instant and glorious resurrection, live on CNN.

Kealty stood and started walking around the room, gesturing as he spoke. "Take politics out of this, damn it! The government's been *destroyed!* Who's going to put it back together? Ryan's a goddamned CIA spook. He knows *nothing* about government operations. We have a Supreme Court to appoint, policy to carry out. We have to get Congress put back together. The country needs leadership, and he doesn't have a clue on how to do that. I may be digging my own political grave, but somebody has to step up and protect our country."

Nobody laughed. The odd thing was that it never occurred to them to do so. The staffers, both of whom had been with EJK for twenty years or more, had so lashed themselves to this particular political mast that they had no choice in the matter. This bit of theater was as necessary as the passage of the chorus in Sophocles, or Homer's invocation of the Muse. The *poetics* of politics had to

be observed. It was about the country, and the country's needs, and Ed's duty to the country over a generation and a half, because he'd been there and done it for all that time, knew how the system worked, and when it all came down, only a person like he could save it. The government was the country, after all. He'd spent his professional lifetime devoted to that proposition.

They actually believed all that, and no less than the two staffers, Kealty was lashed to the same mast. How much he was responding to his own ambition even he could no longer say, because belief becomes fact after a lifetime of professing it. The country occasionally showed signs of drifting away from his beliefs, but as an evangelist has no choice but to entreat people back to the True Faith, so Kealty had a duty to bring the country back to its philosophical roots, which he'd espoused for five terms in the Senate, and a briefer time as Vice President. He'd been called the Conscience of the Senate for more than fifteen years, so named by the media, which loved him for his views and his faith and his political family.

It would have been well for him to consult the media on this call, as he'd done often enough in the past, briefing them on a bill or amendment, asking their views—the media *loved* for people to ask their opinion on things—or just making sure they came to all the right parties. But not in this case. No, he couldn't do that. He had to play everything straight. The appearance of currying favor could not be risked, whereas the deliberate avoidance of that maneuver would give the patina of legitimacy to his actions. High-minded. That was the image to project. He'd forgo all of the political tapestry for the first time in his life, and in so doing embroider a new segment. The only thing to consider now was timing. And *that* was something his media contacts could help with.

"WHAT TIME?" RYAN asked.

"Eight-thirty Eastern," van Damm replied. "There are a couple of specials tonight, sweeps week, and they've asked us to accommodate them."

Ryan might have growled about that, but didn't. His thoughts showed clearly on his face anyway.

"It means you get a lot of West Coast people on their car radios," Arnie explained. "We have all five networks, plus CNN and C-SPAN. That's not a given, you know. It's a courtesy. They don't have to let you on at all. They play that card for political speeches—"

"Damn it, Arnie, this *isn't* political, it's—"

"Mr. President, get used to it, okay? Every time you take a leak, it's political. You can't escape that. Even the absence of politics is a political statement." Arnie was working very hard to educate his new boss. He listened well, but he didn't always hear.

"Okay. The FBI says I can release all of this?"

"I talked to Murray twenty minutes ago. It's okay with him. I have Callie incorporating that in the speech right now."

SHE COULD HAVE had a better office. As the number-one presidential speechwriter, she could have asked for and gotten a gold-plated personal computer sitting on a desk of Carrara marble. Instead she used a ten-year-old Apple Macintosh Classic, because it was lucky and she didn't mind the small screen. Her office might have been a closet or storeroom once upon a time, back when the Indian Treaty Room had really been used for Indian treaties. The desk had been made at a federal prison, and while the chair was comfortable, it was thirty years old. The room had high ceilings. That made it easier for her to smoke, in violation of federal and White House rules, which were in her case not enforced. The last time someone had tried to muscle her, a Secret Service agent really had been forced to pull her off the male staffer lest she scratch his eyes out. That she had not been terminated at once was a sign to the rest of the personnel in the Old Executive Office Building. Some staff people could not be touched. Callie Weston was one of those.

There were no windows in her room. She didn't want them. For her, reality was her computer and the photographs on her walls. One was of her dog, an aging English sheepdog named Holmes (Oliver Wendell, not Sherlock; she admired the prose of the Yankee from Olympus, an accolade she accorded few others). The rest were of political figures, friends and enemies, and she studied them constantly. Behind her was a small TV and VCR, the former usually tuned to C-SPAN-1 and -2 or CNN, and the latter used to review tapes of speeches written by others and delivered in all manner of places. The political speech, she thought, was the highest form of communication. Shakespeare might have had two or three hours in one of his plays to get his idea across. Hollywood tried the same thing in much the same time. Not her. She had fifteen minutes at the bottom end, and maybe forty-five at the top, and her ideas had to count. They had to sway the average citizen, the seasoned pol, and the most cynical reporter. She studied her subject, and she was studying Ryan now, playing and replaying the few words he'd said on the night of his accession, then the TV spots the next morning. She watched his eyes and his gestures, his tension and intensity, his posture and body language. She liked what she saw in the abstract sense. Ryan was a man she'd trust as an investment adviser, for example. But he had a lot to learn about being a politician, and somebody had to teach him or maybe not? She wondered. Maybe . . . by *not* being a politician. . .

Win or lose, it would be fun. For the first time, fun, not work.

Nobody wanted to admit it, but she was one of the most perceptive of the people working here. Fowler had known that, and so had Durling, which was why they put up with her eccentricities. The senior political staff hated her, treated her as a useful but minor functionary, and seethed at how she could stroll across the street and go right into the Oval Office, because the President trusted her as he trusted few others. That had finally occasioned a comment suggesting that the President had a rather special reason for calling her over, and, after all, people from her part of the country were known to be a little loose when it came to ... She wondered if he'd managed to get it up lately. The agent had pulled her hands off the little prick's face, but he'd been too slow to contain her knee. It hadn't even made the papers. Arnie had explained to him that a return to the Center of Power would be impeded by a charge of sexual

misconduct—and then blacklisted him anyway. She liked Arnie.

She liked the speech, too. Four hours instead of the three she'd promised, a lot of effort for twelve minutes and thirty seconds—she tended to write them a little short because presidents had a way of speaking slowly. Most did. Ryan would have to learn that. She typed CONTROL P to print up the speech in Helvetica 14-point, three copies. Some political pukes would look things over and try to make corrections. That wasn't as much a problem now as it had been. When the printer stopped, she collated the pages, stapled them together, and lifted her phone. The topmost speed-dial button went to the proper desk across the street.

"Weston to see the Boss," she told the appointments secretary.

"Come right over."

And with that everything was as it should be.

GOD HAD NOT heard her prayers, Moudi saw. Well, the odds had been against that. Mixing his Islamic faith with scientific knowledge was as much a problem for the doctor as for his Christian and pagan colleagues—the Congo had been exposed to Christianity for over a hundred years, but the old, animistic beliefs still prospered, and that made it easier for Moudi to despise them. It was the old question, if God were a God of mercy, then why did injustice happen? That might have been a good question to discuss with his imam, but for now it was enough that such things did happen, even to the just.

They were called petechiae, a scientific name for blotches of subcutaneous bleeding, which showed up very plainly on her pale north European skin. Just as well that these nuns didn't use mirrors—thought a vanity in their religious universe, and one more thing for Moudi to admire, though he didn't quite understand that particular fixation. Better that she should not see the red blotches on her face. They were unsightly all by themselves, but worse than that, they were the harbingers of death.

Her fever was 40.2 now, and would have been higher still but for the ice in her armpits and behind her neck. Her eyes were listless, her body pulled down with induced fatigue. Those were symptoms of many ailments, but the petechia told him that she was bleeding internally. Ebola was a hemorrhagic fever, one of a group of diseases that broke down tissue at a very basic level, allowing blood to escape everywhere within the body, which could only lead to cardiac arrest from insufficient blood volume. That was the killing mechanism, though how it came about, the medical world had yet to learn. There was no stopping it now. Roughly twenty percent of the victims did survive; somehow their immune systems managed to rally and defeat the viral invader—how that happened was one more unanswered question. That it would not happen in this case was a question asked and answered.

He touched her wrist to take the pulse, and even through his gloves the skin was hot and dry and . . . slack. It was starting already. The technical term was systemic necrosis. The body had already started to die. The liver first, probably. For some reason—not understood—Ebola had a lethal affinity for that organ. Even the survivors had to deal with lingering liver damage. But

one didn't live long enough to die from that, because all the organs were dying, some more rapidly than others, but soon all at once.

The pain was as ghastly as it was invisible. Moudi wrote an order to increase the morphine drip. At least they could attenuate the pain, which was good for the patient and a safety measure for the staff. A tortured patient would thrash about, and that was a risk for those around a fever victim with a blood-borne disease and widespread bleeding. As it was, her left arm was restrained to protect the IV needle. Even with that precaution, the IV looked iffy at the moment, and starting another would be both dangerous and difficult to achieve, so degraded was her arterial tissue.

Sister Maria Magdalena was attending her friend, her face covered, but her eyes sad. Moudi looked at her and she at him, surprised to see the sympathy on his face. Moudi had a reputation for coldness.

"Pray with her, Sister. There are things I must do now." And swiftly. He left the room, stripping off his protective garb as he did so and depositing it in the proper containers. All needles used in this building went into special "sharps" containers for certain destruction—the casual African attitude toward those precautions had resulted in the first major Ebola outbreak in 1976. That strain was called Ebola Mayinga, after a nurse who had contracted the virus, probably through carelessness. They'd learned better since, but Africa was still Africa.

Back in his office, he made another call. Things would begin to happen now. He wasn't sure what, exactly, though he'd help determine whatever they were, and he did that by commencing an immediate literature search for something useless.

"I'M GOING TO save you." The remark made Ryan laugh and Price wince. Arnie just turned his head to look at her. The chief of staff took note of the fact that she still didn't dress the part. That was actually a plus-point for the Secret Service, who called the sartorially endowed staffers "peacocks," which was more polite than other things they might have said. Even the secretaries spent more on clothes than Callie Weston did. Arnie just held his hand out. "Here you go."

President Ryan was quietly grateful for the large type. He wouldn't have to wear his glasses, or disgrace himself by telling somebody to increase the size of the printing. Normally a fast reader, he took his time on this document.

"One change?" he said after a moment.

"What's that?" Weston asked suspiciously.

"We have a new SecTreas. George Winston."

"The zillionaire?"

Ryan flipped the first page. "Well, I could have picked a bum off a park bench, but I thought somebody with knowledge of the financial markets might be a good idea."

"We call them 'homeless people,' Jack," Arnie pointed out.

"Or I could have chosen an academic, but Buzz Fiedler would have been the only one I'd trust," Jack went on soberly, remembering again. A rare academic, Fiedler, a man who knew what he didn't know. Damn. "This is

good, Ms. Weston."

Van Damm got to page three. "Callie . . ."

"Arnie, baby, you don't write Olivier for George C. Scott. You write Olivier for Olivier, and Scott for Scott." In her heart, Callie Weston knew that she could hop a flight from Dulles to LAX, rent a car, go to Paramount, and in six months she'd have a house in the Hollywood Hills, a Porsche to drive to her reserved parking place off Melrose Boulevard, *and* that gold-plated computer. But no. All the world might be a stage, but the part she wrote for was the biggest and the brightest. The public might not know who she was, but she knew that her words changed the world.

"So, what am I, exactly?" the President asked, looking up.

"You're different. I told you that."

12

PRESENTATION

THERE WERE FEW ASPECTS of life more predictable, Ryan thought. He'd had a light dinner so that his stomach flutters would not be too painful, and largely ignored his family as he read and reread the speech. He'd made a few penciled changes, almost all of them minor linguistic things to which Callie had not objected, and which she herself modified further. The speech had been transmitted electronically to the secretaries' room off the Oval Office. Callie was a writer, not a typist, and the presidential secretaries could type at a speed that made Ryan gasp to watch. When the final draft was complete, it was printed on paper for the President to hold, while another version was electronically uploaded onto the TelePrompTer. Callie Weston was there to be sure that both versions were exactly the same. It was not unknown for someone to change one from the other at the last minute, but Weston knew about that and guarded her work like a lioness over newborn cubs.

But the predictably awful part came from van Damm: *Jack, this is the most important speech you will ever give. Just relax and do it.*

Gee, thanks, Arnie. The chief of staff was a coach who'd never really played the game, and expert as he was, he just didn't know what it was like to go out on the mound and face the batters.

The cameras were being set up: a primary and a backup, the latter almost never used, both of them with TelePrompTers. The blazing TV lights were in place, and for the period of the speech the President would be silhouetted in his office windows like a deer on a ridgeline, one more thing for the Secret Service to worry about, though they had confidence in the windows, which were spee'd to stop a .50-caliber machine-gun round. The TV crews were all known to the Detail, who checked them out anyway, along with the equipment. Everyone knew it was coming. The evening TV shows had made the necessary announcements, then moved on to other news items. It was all a routine exercise, except to the President, of course, for whom it was all new and vaguely horrifying.

HE'D EXPECTED THE phone to ring, but not at this hour. Only a few had the number of his cellular. It was too dangerous to have a real number for a real, hard-wired phone. The Mossad was still in the business of making people disappear. The newly found peace in the Middle East hadn't changed that, and truly they had reason to dislike him. They'd been particularly clever in killing a colleague through his cellular phone, first disabling it via electronic signal, and then arranging for him to get a substitute . . . with ten grams of high

explosive tucked into the plastic. The man's last phone message, or so the story went, had come from the head of the Mossad: "Hello, this is Avi ben Jakob. Listen closely, my friend." At which point the Jew had thumbed the # key. A clever ploy, but good only for a single play.

The trilling note caused his eyes to open with a curse. He'd gone to bed only an hour earlier.

"Yes."

"Call Yousif." And the circuit went dead. As a further security measure, the call had come through several cutouts, and the message itself was too short to give much opportunity to the electronic-intelligence wizards in the employ of his numerous enemies. The final measure was more clever still. He immediately dialed yet another cellular number and repeated the message he'd just heard. A clever enemy who might have tracked the message through the cellular frequencies would probably have deemed him just another cutout. Or maybe not. The security games one had to play in this modern age were a genuine drag on day-to-day life, and one could never know what worked and what did not—until one died of natural causes, which was hardly worth waiting for.

Grumbling all the more, he rose and dressed and walked outside. His car was waiting. The third cutout had been his driver. Together with two guards, they drove to a secure location, a safe house in a safe place. Israel might be at peace, and even the PLO might have become part of a democratically elected regime—was the world totally mad?—but Beirut was still a place where all manner of people could operate. The proper signal was displayed there—it was the pattern of lighted and unlighted windows—showing that it was safe for him to exit the car and enter the building. Or so he'd find out in thirty seconds or so. He was too drowsy to care. Fear became boring after a lifetime of it.

There was the expected cup of coffee, bittersweet and strong, on the plain wooden table. Greetings were exchanged, seats taken, and conversation begun.

"It is late."

"My flight was delayed," his host explained. "We require your services."

"For what purpose?"

"One might call it diplomacy," was the surprising answer. He went on to explain.

"TEN MINUTES," the President heard.

More makeup. It was 8:20. Ryan was in place. Mary Abbot applied the finishing touches to his hair, which merely increased the feeling that Ryan was an actor instead of a . . . politician? No, not that. He refused to accept the label, no matter what Arnie or any of the others might say. Through the open door to his right, Callie Weston stood by the secretary's desk, giving him a smile and a nod to mask her own unease. She had written a masterpiece—she always felt that way—and now it would be delivered by a rookie. Mrs. Abbot walked around to the front of the desk, occulting some of the TV lights to look at her work from the perspective of the viewer, and pronounced it good. Ryan

merely sat there and tried not to fidget, knowing that soon he'd start sweating under the makup again, and that it would itch like a son of a bitch, and that he couldn't scratch at it no matter what, because Presidents didn't itch or scratch. There were probably people out there who didn't think that Presidents had to use the toilet or shave or maybe even tie their shoes.

"Five minutes, sir. Mike check."

"One, two, three, four, five," Ryan said dutifully.

"Thank you, Mr. President," the director called from the next room.

Ryan had occasionally wondered about this sort of thing. Presidents delivering these official statements—a tradition going back at least as far as FDR and his "fireside chats," which he'd first heard about from his mother—always seemed confident and at ease, and he'd always wondered how they ever managed to bring that off. He felt neither. One more layer of tension for him. The cameras were probably on now, so that the directors could be sure they were working, and somewhere a tape machine was recording the look on his face and the way his hands were playing with the papers in front of him. He wondered if the Secret Service had control of that tape, or whether they trusted the TV people to be honorable about such things . . . surely their own anchorpeople occasionally tipped over their coffee cups or sneezed or snarled at an assistant who messed up right before airtime . . . oh, yes, those taped segments were called bloopers, weren't they . . . ? He was willing to bet, right there, right then, that the Service had a lengthy tape of presidential miscues.

"Two minutes."

Both cameras had TelePrompTers. These were odd contraptions. A TV set actually hung from the front of each camera, but on those small sets the picture was inverted left-to-right because just above it was a tilted mirror. The camera lens was behind the mirror, shooting through it, while on it the President saw the text of his speech reflected. It was an otherworldly feeling talking to a camera you couldn't really see to millions of people who weren't really there. He'd actually be talking to his speech, as it were. Ryan shook his head as the speech text was fast-tracked, to make sure the scrolling system worked.

"One minute, stand by."

Okay. Ryan adjusted himself in the scat. His posture worried him. Did he plant his arms on the desktop? Did he hold his hands in his lap? He'd been told not to lean back in the chair, because it was both too casual and too arrogant-looking, but Ryan tended to move around a lot, and holding still made his back hurt—or was it something he just imagined? A little late for that now. He noted the fear, the twisting heat in his stomach. He tried to belch, and then stifled it.

"Fifteen seconds."

Fear almost became panic. He couldn't run away now. He had to do the job. This was important. People depended on him. Behind each camera was an operator. There were three Secret Service agents to watch over them. A director-assistant was there as well. They were his only audience, but he could barely make them out, hidden as they were in the glare of the lights, and they wouldn't react anyway. How would he know what his real audience thought?

Oh, shit.

A minute earlier, network anchors had come on to tell people what they already knew. Their evening TV shows would be put back a time for a presidential address. Across the country an indeterminate number of people lifted their controllers to switch to a cable channel as soon as they saw the Great Seal of the President of the United States of America. Ryan took a deep breath, compressed his lips, and looked into the nearer of the two cameras. The red light went on. He counted to two and began.

"Good evening.

"My fellow Americans, I'm taking this time to report to you on what has been happening in Washington for the past week, and to tell you about what will be happening over the next few days.

"First of all, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Justice, assisted by the Secret Service, the National Transportation Safety Board, and other federal agencies, have taken the lead in investigating the circumstances surrounding the tragic deaths of so many of our friends, with praiseworthy assistance from the Japanese national police and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Full information will be released this evening, and will be in your morning papers. For now I will give you the results of the investigation to date.

"The crash of the Japan Airlines 747 into the Capitol building was the deliberate act of one man. His name was Torajiro Sato. He was a senior captain with that airline. We've learned quite a lot about Captain Sato. We know that he lost both a brother and a son during our conflict with his country. Evidently he was unbalanced by this, and decided, on his own, to take his revenge.

"After flying his airliner to Vancouver, Canada, Captain Sato faked a flight order to London, ostensibly to replace a disabled aircraft with his own. Prior to takeoff, Captain Sato murdered his co-pilot in cold blood, a man with whom he had worked for several years. He then continued on entirely alone, the whole time with a dead man strapped in the seat next to him." Ryan paused, his eyes tracking the words on the mirror. His mouth felt like raw cotton as a cue on the TelePrompTer told him to turn the page.

"Okay, how can we be sure of this?

"First, the identities of both Captain Sato and his co-pilot have been verified by the FBI, using DNA testing. Separate tests conducted by the Japanese national police have produced identical results. An independent laboratory checked these tests with their own, and again the results were the same. The possibility of a mistake in these tests is virtually zero.

"The other flight-crew members who remained in Vancouver have been interviewed both by the FBI and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and they are certain that Captain Sato was aboard the aircraft. We have similar eyewitness reports from local officials of the Canadian Ministry of Transport, and from American passengers on the flight—more than fifty people have positively identified him. We have Captain Sato's fingerprints on the bogus flight plan. Voice-print analysis of the cockpit tapes also confirms the pilot's identity. There is, therefore, no question of the identity of the flight crew of the aircraft.

"Second, the cockpit tapes from the aircraft's flight recorder give us an exact

time for the first murder. We even have the voice of Captain Sato on the tape, apologizing to the man as he killed him. After that time, the only voice on the tapes is that of the pilot. The cockpit tapes have been checked against other recordings of Captain Sato's voice, and also have positively established his identity.

"Third, forensic tests have proven that the co-pilot was dead at least four hours before the crash. This unfortunate man was killed with a knife in the heart. There is no reason to believe that he had anything at all to do with what came later. He was merely the first innocent victim in a monstrous act. He left behind a pregnant wife, and I would ask all of you to think about her loss and remember her and her children in your prayers.

"The Japanese police have cooperated fully with the FBI, even allowing us full access to their investigation and to conduct our own interviews of witnesses and others. We now have a full record of everything Captain Sato did during the last two weeks of his life, where he ate, when he slept, with whom he talked. We have found no evidence to suggest even the possibility of a criminal conspiracy, or that what this demented man did was part of some larger plan on the part of his government or anyone else. Those investigations will continue until every leaf and stone has been turned, until every possibility, however remote, has been fully checked, but the information we have now would be more than sufficient to convince a jury, and that is why I can give it to you now." Jack paused, allowing himself to lean forward a few inches.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the conflict between our country and Japan is over. Those who caused it will face justice. Prime Minister Koga has personally assured me of that.

"Mr. Koga is a man of honor and courage. I can tell you now for the first time that he was himself kidnapped and nearly murdered by the same criminals who started the conflict between his country and ours. He was rescued from his kidnappers by Americans, assisted by Japanese officials, in a special operation right in downtown Tokyo, and after his rescue he worked at great personal risk to bring an early end to the conflict, and so save his country and ours from further damage. Without his work, many more lives might have been lost, on both sides. I am proud to call Minoru Koga my friend.

"Just a few days ago, minutes after he arrived in our country, the Prime Minister and I met privately, right here in the Oval Office. From here we drove to the Capitol building, and together we prayed there. That's a moment I will never forget.

"I was there, too, when the aircraft struck. I was in the tunnel between the House Office Building and the Capitol, with my wife and children. I saw a wall of flame race toward us, and stop, and pull back. I'll probably never forget that. I wish I could. But I have put those memories aside as best I can.

"Peace between America and Japan is now fully restored. We do not now have, nor did we ever have a dispute with the citizens of that country. I call on all of you to set aside whatever ill feelings you might have toward the Japanese now and for all time to come."

He paused again and watched as the text stopped scrolling. He turned the

page on his printed text again.

"Next, we all have a major task before us.

"Ladies and gentlemen, one man, one disturbed and demented individual, thought that he could do fatal damage to our country. He was wrong. We have buried our dead. We will mourn their loss for a long time to come. But our country lives, and the friends we lost on that horrible night would have it no other way.

"Thomas Jefferson said that the Tree of Liberty often requires blood to grow. Well, the blood has been shed, and now it's time for the tree to grow again. America is a country that looks forward, not backward. None of us can change history. But we can learn from it, building on our past successes, and correcting our mistakes.

"For the moment, I can tell you that our country is safe and secure. Our military is on duty around the world, and our potential enemies know that. Our economy has taken a nasty shock, but survived, and is still the strongest in the world. This is still America. We are still Americans, and our future starts with every new day.

"I have today selected George Winston to be acting Secretary of the Treasury. George heads up a large New York mutual-fund company which he founded. He was instrumental in repairing the damage done to our financial markets. He's a self-made man—as America is a self-made country. I will soon be making other Cabinet appointments, and I will report each of those to you as they are made.

"George cannot become a full Cabinet secretary, however, until we restore the United States Senate, whose members are charged by the Constitution to advise and consent to such appointments. Selecting new senators is the job of the governors of the several states. Starting next week, the governors will pick individuals to fill the posts left vacant." Next came the tricky part. He leaned forward again.

"My fellow Americans—wait, that's a phrase I don't like very much. I never have." Jack shook his head slightly, hoping that it didn't look overly theatrical.

"My name is Jack Ryan. My dad was a cop. I started in government service as a Marine, right after I graduated from Boston College. That didn't last very long. I got hurt in a helicopter crash, and my back didn't get better for years. When I was thirty-one, I got in the way of some terrorists. You've all heard the story, and how it ended, but what you don't know is, that incident is why I reentered government service. I enjoyed my life until that point. I'd made a little money as a stock trader, and then left that business to go back to history, my first love. I taught history—I loved teaching—at the Naval Academy, and I think I would have been content to stay there forever, just as my wife, Cathy, likes nothing more than to practice medicine and look after me and our kids. We would have been perfectly content to live in our house and do our jobs and raise our children. I know I would have.

"But I couldn't do that. When those terrorists attacked my family, I decided that I had to do something to protect my wife and children. I soon learned that it wasn't just us who needed protecting, and that I had a talent for some things, and so I joined the government and left behind my love for teaching.

"I've served my country—you—for quite a few years now, but I've never been a politician, and as I told George Winston today in this office, I do not have time to learn how to become one. But I have been inside the government for most of my working life, and I have learned a few things about how government is supposed to work.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a time for us to do the usual things in the usual way. We need to do better. We can do better.

"John Kennedy once told us, 'Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.' Those are good words, but we've forgotten them. We need to bring them back. Our country needs all of us.

"I need your help to do my job. If you think I can do it alone, you're wrong. If you think the government can fix itself by itself, you're wrong. If you think the government, fixed or not, can take care of you in every way, you're wrong. It's not supposed to be like that. You men and women out there, you *are* the United States of America. I work for you. My job is to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, and I will do that to the best of my ability, but each one of you is on the team as well.

"We need our government to do for us the things we cannot do for ourselves, like providing for the common defense, enforcing the law, responding to disaster. That's what the Constitution says. That document, the one I swore to protect and defend, is a set of rules written by a small group of fairly ordinary men. They weren't even all lawyers, and yet they wrote the most important political document in human history. I want you to think about that. They were fairly ordinary people who did something extraordinary. There's no magic to being in government.

"I need a new Congress to work with me. The Senate will arrive first, because the governors will appoint replacements for the ninety-one men and women we lost last week. The House of Representatives, however, has always been the People's House, and it's *your* job to pick those, in a voting booth, exercising your rights." *Here we go, Jack.*

"Therefore, to you, and to the fifty governors, I have a request. Please, do not send me politicians. We do not have the time to do the things that must be done through that process. I need people who do real things in the real world. I need people who do not want to live in Washington. I need people who will not try to work the system. I need people who will come here at great personal sacrifice to do an important job, and then return home to their normal lives.

"I want engineers who know how things are built. I want physicians who know how to make sick people well. I want cops who know what it means when your civil rights are violated by a criminal. I want farmers who grow real food on real farms. I want people who know what it's like to have dirty hands, and pay a mortgage bill, and raise kids, and worry about the future. I want people who know they're working for you and not themselves. That's what I want. That's what I need. I think that's what a lot of you want, too.

"Once those people get here, it's your job to keep an eye on them, to make sure they keep their word, to make sure they keep faith with you. This is *your* government. A lot of people have told you that, but I mean it. Tell your governors what you expect of them when they make their appointments to the Senate, and then *you* select the right people for the House. These are the

people who decide how much of your money the government takes, and then how it is spent. It's your money, not mine. It's your country. We all work for you.

"For my part, I will pick the best Cabinet people I can find, people who know their business, people who have done real work and produced real results. Each of them will have the same orders from this office: to take charge of his or her department, to establish priorities, and to make every government agency run efficiently. That's a big order, and one which you've all heard before. But this President didn't run an election campaign to get here. I have no one to pay off, no rewards to deliver, no secret promises to keep. I will do my damnedest to execute my duties to the best of my ability. I may not always be right, but when I'm not, it's your job, and that of the people you select to represent you, to tell me about it, and I'll listen to them and to you.

"I will report to you regularly on what is going on, and what your government is doing.

"I want to thank you for listening to me. I will do my job. I need you to do yours.

"Thank you, and good night."

Jack waited and counted to ten before he was sure the cameras were dead. Then he lifted the water glass and tried to drink from it, but his hand was shaking so badly that he nearly spilled it. Ryan stared at it in quiet rage. Why was he shaking now? The tense part was over, wasn't it?

"Hey, you didn't puke or anything," Callie Weston said, suddenly standing next to him.

"Is that good?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. President. Vomiting on national television tends to upset people," the speechwriter answered with a hooting laugh.

Andrea Price fantasized about drawing her automatic at that moment.

Arnie van Damm merely looked worried. He knew that he couldn't turn Ryan away from his course. The usual strictures that Presidents listened to—*if you want to get reelected, pay attention!*—simply didn't apply. How could he protect someone who didn't care about the only thing that mattered?

"REMEMBER *The Gong Show?"* Ed Kealty asked.

"Who wrote this abortion manual?" his legal aide chimed in. Then all three men in the room returned their attention to the TV set. The picture changed from an external shot of the White House to the network studio.

"Well, that was a most interesting political statement," Tom the anchor observed with the expressionless voice of a poker player. "I see that this time the President stayed with his prepared speech."

"Interesting and dramatic," John the commentator agreed. "This was not your usual presidential speech."

"Why, John, does President Ryan insist so strongly on inexperienced people to assist him in running the government ? Don't we need experienced hands to put the system back together?" Tom asked.

"That's a question many will ask, especially in this town—"

"You bet we will," Kealty's chief of staff observed.

"—and what's most interesting about it is that he must know that, and even if he didn't, Chief of Staff Arnold van Damm, as canny a political operator as this city has ever seen, must have made that very clear to Mr. Ryan."

"What about his first Cabinet appointment, George Winston?"

"Winston heads the Columbus Group, a mutual-fund company which he founded. He's enormously wealthy, as President Ryan told us, a self-made man. Well, we want a Treasury Secretary who knows money and the financial markets, and surely Mr. Winston does, but many will complain—"

"That he's an insider." Kealty smirked.

"—with too many contacts in the system," John went on.

"How do you think official Washington will react to this speech?" Tom asked.

"WHAT OFFICIAL WASHINGTON?" Ryan growled. This was a first. The two books he'd published had been treated generally well by reviewers, but back then you had to wait a few weeks for people to make comments. It was probably a mistake to watch the instant analysis, but it was also impossible to avoid. The hardest part was keeping track of all the TVs that were running at the same time.

"Jack, 'official Washington' is fifty thousand lawyers and lobbyists," Arnie pointed out. "They may not be elected or appointed, but they're official as hell. So is the media."

"So I see," Ryan replied.

"—AND WE NEED experienced professionals to get the system put back together. That's what they'll say, and a lot of people in this town will agree."

"What did you think of his revelation on the war and the crash?"

"What interested me the most was his 'revelation' that Prime Minister Koga was first kidnapped by his own countrymen and then rescued—by Americans. It would be interesting to learn more about that. The President is to be commended for his clear desire to settle things between our country and Japan, and I'd give him high marks for it. A photograph came to us along with the President's speech." The network picture changed, showing Ryan and Koga at the Capitol. "This is a truly moving moment captured by the White House photographer—"

"But the Capitol building is still ruined, John, and just as we need good architects and skilled workers to rebuild it, so, I think, we need something other than amateurs to restore the government." Tom turned to stare right into the camera. "So that was the first official speech from President Ryan. We'll have more news as it develops. Now we return you to our regularly scheduled programming."

"That's our theme, Ed." The chief of staff rose and stretched. "That's what we need to say, and *that's* why you've decided to come back into the political arena, however damaging to your reputation it may be."

“Start making your calls,” Edward J. Kealty ordered.

“MR. PRESIDENT.” The chief usher presented a silver tray with a drink on it. Ryan took it and sipped his sherry.

“Thanks.”

“Mr. President, finally—”

“Mary Pat, how long have we known each other?” It seemed to Ryan that he was always saying this.

“At least ten years,” Mrs. Foley replied.

“New presidential rule, executive order, even: after hours, when we’re serving drinks, my name is Jack.”

“Muy bien, jefe, ” Chavez observed, humorously but with a guarded look.

“Iraq?” Ryan asked curtly.

“Quiet but very tense,” Mary Pat replied. “We’re not hearing much, but what we are getting is that the country’s under lock-down. The army is in the streets, and the people are in their homes watching TV. The funeral for our friend will be tomorrow. After that, we don’t know yet. We have one fairly well-placed agent in Iran, he’s on the political beat. The assassination came as a total surprise, and he’s not hearing anything, aside from the expected praise to Allah for taking our friend back.”

“Assuming God wants him. It was a beautiful job,” Clark said next, speaking from authority. “Fairly typical in a cultural sense. One martyr, sacrificing himself and all that. Getting him inside must have taken years, but our friend Daryaei is a patient sort. Well, you’ve met him. You tell us, Jack.”

“Angriest eyes I ever saw,” Ryan said quietly, sipping his drink. “That man knows how to hate.”

“He’s going to make a move, sure as hell.” Clark had a Wild Turkey and water. “The Saudis must be a little tense about this.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Mary Pat said. “Ed’s staying over for a few days, and that’s what he’s getting. They’ve increased the readiness state of their military.”

“And that’s all we’ve got,” President Ryan summarized.

“For all practical purposes, yes. We’re getting a lot of SigInt out of Iraq, and what we’re getting is predictable. The lid is screwed down tight, but the pot’s boiling underneath. It has to be. We’ve increased coverage with the satellites, of course—”

“Okay, Mary Pat, give me your speech,” Jack ordered. He didn’t want to hear about satellite photos right now.

“I want to increase my directorate.”

“How much?” Then he watched her take a deep breath. It was unusual to see Mary Patricia Foley tense about anything.

“Triple. We have a total of six hundred fifty-seven field officers. I want to jack that number up to two thousand over the next three years.” She delivered the words in a rush, watching Ryan’s face for a reaction.

“Approved, *if* you can figure a payroll-neutral way to bring it off.”

“That’s easy, Jack,” Clark observed with a chuckle. “Fire two thousand desk weenies, and you still save money.”

"They're people with families, John," the President told him.

"The Directorates of Intelligence and Administration are featherbedded all to hell and gone. You've been there. You know that. It's worth doing just to ease the parking situation. Early retirement will handle most of it."

Ryan thought that one over for a second. "I need somebody to swing the axe. MP, can you handle being under Ed again?"

"It's the usual position, Jack," Mrs. Foley replied with a twinkle in her fey blue eyes. "Ed's better at administration than I am, but I was always better in the street."

"Plan Blue?"

Clark answered that. "Yes, sir. I want us to go after cops, young detectives, regular blue-suits. You know why. They're largely pre-trained. They have street smarts."

Ryan nodded. "Okay. Mary Pat, next week I'm going to accept with regret the resignation letter of the DCI and appoint Ed in his place. Have him present me with a plan for increasing the DO and decreasing the DI and DA. I will approve that in due course."

"Great!" Mrs. Foley toasted her Commander-in-Chief with her wineglass.

"There's one other thing. John?"

"Yes, sir?"

"When Roger asked me to step up, I had a request for him."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to issue a presidential pardon for a gentleman named John T. Kelly. That will be done this year. You should have told me that Dad worked your case."

For the first time in a very long time, Clark went pale as a ghost. "How did you know?"

"It was in Jim Greer's personal files. They were sort of conveyed to me a few years ago. My father worked the case, I remember it well. All those women who were murdered. I remember how twisted he was about it, and how happy he was to put it behind him. He never really talked about that one, but I knew how he felt about it." Jack looked down into his drink, swirling the ice around the glass. "If you want a good guess, I think he'd be happy about this, and I think he'd be happy to know you didn't go down with the ship."

"Jesus, Jack . . . I mean . . . Jesus."

"You deserve to have your name back. I can't condone the things you did. I'm not allowed to think that way now, am I? Maybe as a private citizen I could—but you deserve your name back, Mr. Kelly."

"Thank you, sir."

Chavez wondered what it was all about. He remembered that guy on Saipan, the retired Coast Guard chief, and a few words about killing people. Well, he knew Mr. C. didn't faint at the thought, but this story must be a good one.

"Anything else?" Jack asked. "I'd like to get back to my family before all the kids go to bed."

"Plan Blue is approved, then?"

"Yes, it is, MP. As soon as Ed writes up a plan for implementing it."

"I'll have him heading back as soon as they can light up his airplane," MP

promised.

"Fine." Jack rose and headed for the door. His guests did the same.

"Mr. President?" It was Ding Chavez.

Ryan turned. "Yeah?"

"What's going to happen with the primaries?"

"What do you mean?"

"I stopped over at school today, and Dr. Alpher told me that all of the serious candidates in both parties were killed last week, *and* the filing deadlines for all the primaries have passed. Nobody new can file. We have an election year, and nobody's running. The press hasn't said much about that yet."

Even Agent Price blinked at that, but an instant later they all knew that it was true.

"PARIS?"

"Professor Rousseau at the Pasteur Institute thinks he's developed a treatment. It's experimental, but it's the only chance she has."

They spoke in the corridor outside Sister Jean Baptiste's room, both wearing blue-plastic "space suits" and sweating inside of them despite the environmental-control packs that hung on the belts. Their patient was dying, and while that was bad enough, the manner of her protracted death would be horrid beyond words. Benedict Mkusa had been fortunate. For some reason or other, the Ebola had attacked his heart earlier than usual; it had been a rare act of mercy, which allowed the boy to expire much more quickly than usual. This patient wasn't quite so lucky. Blood tests showed that her liver was being attacked, but slowly. Heart enzymes were actually normal. Ebola was advancing within her body at a rapid but uniform rate. Her gastrointestinal system was quite literally coming apart. The resulting bleeding, both from vomiting and diarrhea, was serious, and the pain from it was intense, but the woman's body was fighting back as best it could in a valiant but doomed effort to save itself. The only reward for that struggle would be increasing pain, and already the morphine was losing its battle to stay ahead of the agony.

"But how would we—" She didn't have to go on. Air Afrique had the only regular service to Paris, but neither that carrier nor any other would transport an Ebola patient, for the obvious reasons. All of this suited Dr. Moudi just fine.

"I can arrange transport. I come from a wealthy family. I can have a private jet come in and fly us to Paris. It's easier to take all of the necessary precautions that way."

"I don't know. I'll have to—" Maria Magdalena hesitated.

"I will not lie to you, Sister. She will probably die in any case, but if there is any chance, it is with Professor Rousseau. I studied under him, and if he says he has something, then he does. Let me call for the aircraft," he insisted.

"I cannot say no to that, but I must—"

"I understand."

THE AIRCRAFT IN question was a Gulfstream G-IV, and it was just landing at Rashid Airfield, located to the east of a wide meandering loop of the River Tigris, known locally as the Nahr Dulah. The registration code near the aircraft's tail denoted Swiss registry, where it was owned by a corporation that traded in various things and paid its taxes on time, which ended official interest on the part of the Swiss government. The flight in had been short and unremarkable, except perhaps for the time of day, and the routing, Beirut to Tehran to Baghdad.

His real name was Ali Badrayn, and while he'd lived and worked under several others names, he'd finally returned to his own because it was Iraqi in origin. His family had left Iraq for the supposed economic opportunity in Jordan, but then been caught up like everyone else in the region's turmoil, a situation not exactly helped by their son's decision to become part of the movement which would put an end to Israel. The threat perceived by the Jordanian king, and his subsequent expulsion of the threatening elements, had ruined Badrayn's family, not that he'd especially cared at the time.

Badrayn cared now, somewhat. The life of a terrorist paled with the accumulating years, and though he was one of the best in that line of work, especially at gathering information, he had little to show for it beyond the undying enmity of the world's most ruthless intelligence service. A little comfort and security would have been welcome. Perhaps this mission would allow that. His Iraqi identity and the activities of his life had garnered him contacts throughout the region. He'd provided information for Iraqi intelligence, and helped finger two people they had wished to eliminate, both successfully. That had given him entree, and that was why he'd come.

The aircraft finished its rollout, and the co-pilot came aft to lower the steps. A car pulled up. He entered it, and it pulled off.

"Peace be with you," he told the other man in the back of the Mercedes.

"Peace?" The general snorted. "The whole world cries out that we have little enough of that." Clearly the man hadn't slept since the death of his president, Badrayn saw. His hands shook from all the coffee he'd drunk, or perhaps from the alcohol he'd used to counteract it. It would not be a pleasant thing to look into the coming week and wonder if one would live to see the end of it. On the one hand one needed to stay awake. On the other, one needed to escape. This general had a family and children in addition to his mistress. Well, they probably all did. Good.

"Not a happy situation, but things are under control, yes?" The look this question generated was answer enough. About the only good thing that could be said was that had the President merely been wounded, this man would now be dead for failing to detect the assassin. It was a dangerous job, being intelligence chief for a dictator, and one which made many enemies. He'd sold his soul to the devil, and told himself that the debt would never be collected. How could a bright man be such a fool?

"Why are you here?" the general asked.

"To offer you a golden bridge."

13

TO THE MANNER BORN

THERE WERE TANKS IN the streets, and tanks were "sexy" things for the "overhead imagery" people to look at and count. There were three KH-11-class reconnaissance satellites in orbit. One of them, eleven years old, was dying slowly. Long since out of maneuvering fuel, and with one of its solar panels degraded to the point that it could barely power a flashlight, it could still take photos through three of its cameras and relay them to the geosynchronous communications bird over the Indian Ocean. Less than a second later they were downlinked and forwarded to various interpretation offices, one of them at CIA.

"That ought to cut down on pursesnatchings." The analyst checked his watch and added eight hours. Okay, approaching ten A.M. "Lima," or local time. People should have been out on the streets, working, moving around, socializing at the many sidewalk restaurants, drinking the awful local version of coffee. But not today. Not with tanks in the streets. A few individuals were moving around, mainly women by the look of them, probably shopping. A main battle tank was parked about every four blocks on the main thoroughfares—and one at every traffic circle, of which there were many—supported by lighter vehicles on the side streets. Little knots of soldiers stood at every intersection. The photos showed that all of them carried rifles, but couldn't determine rank or discern unit patches.

"Get a count," his supervisor instructed.

"Yes, sir." The analyst didn't grumble. Counting the tanks was something they always did. He'd even type them, mainly by checking the main gun. By doing this they'd be able to determine how many of the tanks regularly counted in their regimental laagers had turned their engines over and moved from one place to another. The information had importance to someone or other, though for the past ten years they'd been doing the same thing, generally to learn that whatever the faults and flaws of the Iraqi military, it did its maintenance well enough to keep the engines running. It was rather less diligent about its gunnery, which they'd learned in the Persian Gulf War, but as the analyst had already noted, you look at a tank and assume that it works. It was the only prudent course. He hunched down over the viewer and saw that a white car, probably a Mercedes from the shape, was driving up National Route 7. A more detailed look at the photos would have showed it heading toward the Sibaq' al Mansur racetrack, where he would have seen more automobiles of the same type, but he'd been told to count the tanks.

IRAQ'S CLIMATIC VARIATIONS are more striking than in most places in the world. This February morning, with the sun high in the sky, it was barely above freezing, though in the summer 115 degrees Fahrenheit attracted little in the way of notice. The assembled officers, Badrayn saw, were in their winter wool uniforms, with high collars and voluminous gold braid; most of them were smoking, and all of them were worried. His host introduced the visitor to those who didn't know him. He didn't bother wishing peace unto them. They weren't in the mood for the traditional Islamic greeting. These men were surprisingly Western and totally secular in their outlook and demeanor. Like their departed leader, they gave mere lip service to their religion, though at the moment they all wondered if the teachings of eternal damnation for a sinful life were true or not, knowing that some of them would probably find out soon enough. That possibility worried them enough that they had left their offices and come to the racetrack to hear him speak.

The message Badrayn had to deliver was a simple one. This he did.

"How can we believe you?" the army chief asked when he'd finished.

"It is better for everyone this way, is it not?"

"You expect us to abandon our motherland to . . . *him?*" a corps commander demanded, disguising frustration as anger.

"What you decide to do is your concern, General. If you desire to stand and fight for what is yours, the decision is clearly yours as well. I was asked to come here and deliver a message as an honest broker. This I have done," Badrayn replied evenly. There was no sense getting excited about things like this, after all.

"With whom are we supposed to negotiate?" This was the chief of the Iraqi air force.

"You may make your reply to me, but as I have already told you, there really is nothing to negotiate. The offer is a fair one, is it not?" *Generous* would be a better term. In addition to saving their own skins, and the skins of those close to them, they would all emerge from their country wealthy. Their president had salted away huge sums of money, little of which had ever actually been detected and seized. They all had access to travel documents and passports from any country in the known world. In that particular area the Iraqi intelligence service, assisted by the engraving bureau of its treasury, had long since established its expertise. "You have his word before God that you will not be harassed, wherever you may go." And that was something they had to take seriously. Badrayn's sponsor was their enemy. He was as bitter and spiteful as any man on earth. But he was also a man of God, and not one to invoke His name lightly.

"When do you need your reply?" the army chief asked, more politely than the others.

"Tomorrow would be sufficient, or even the day after. Beyond that, I cannot say. My instructions," Badrayn went on, "go only that far."

"And the arrangements?"

"You may set them yourselves, within reason." Badrayn wondered how much more they could possibly expect from him, or his sponsor.

But the decision he demanded was harder than one might imagine. The patriotism of the assembled general officers was not of the usual sort. They

loved their country, largely because they controlled it. They had power, genuine life-and-death power, a far greater narcotic than money, and one of the things for which a man would risk his life and his soul. One of their number, many of them thought—hoped—just might pull it off. One of them just might assume the presidency of their country successfully, and together they just might calm things down and continue as before. They'd have to open their nation up somewhat, of course. They'd have to allow U.N. and other inspectors to see everything, but with the death of their leader they'd have the chance to start anew, even though everyone would know that nothing new at all was happening. Such were the rules of the world. A promise here or there, a few remarks about democracy and elections, and their former enemies would fall all over themselves giving them and their nation a chance. A further incentive was the sheer opportunity of it. Not one of them had felt truly secure in years. Everyone knew of colleagues who had died, either at the hands of their dead leader, or under circumstances euphemistically called "mysterious"—helicopter crashes had been a favorite ploy of their fallen and beloved President. Now they had a chance to live lives of power with much greater confidence, and against that was a life of indolence in some foreign place. Each of them already had a life of every luxury a man could imagine—*plus* power. Each could snap his fingers and the people who jumped were not servants but soldiers. . . .

Except for one thing. To stay would be the greatest and most dangerous gamble of their lives. Their country was now under the strictest control they could remember, and there was a reason for it. The people who'd roared their love and affection for the dead one—what did they really think? It hadn't mattered a week before, but it mattered now. The soldiers they commanded came from the same human sea. Which of them had the charisma to assume the leadership of the country? Which of them had the keys to the Ba'ath Party? Which of them could rule by the force of will? Because only then could they look into the future, if not without fear, then with a small enough quantity of it that their experience and courage could deal with the chances they would be taking. Each of them, standing at the racetrack, looked around the assembly of brother officers and wondered the same question: *Which one*?

That was the problem, because if there had been one of their number to do it, he would already have been dead, probably in a tragic helicopter mishap. And a dictatorship was not operated by a committee. Strong as they all felt themselves to be, each looked at the others and saw potential weakness. Private jealousies would destroy them. Jockeying and rivalries would, probably, cause such internal turmoil that the iron hand needed to control the people would weaken. And in a few months, probably, it would come apart. They had all seen it happen before, and the ultimate result was foretold in their deaths, standing before a line of their own soldiers, and a wall to their backs.

There was no ethos for these men other than power and its exercise. That sufficed for one man, but not for many. *Many* needed to be unified around something, whether it be the rule imposed by one superior, or a commonly held idea, but it had to be something that imposed a common outlook. No one of them could do the former, and collectively they lacked the latter. Powerful

as they each might be, they were also weak in a fundamental way, and as the officers stood there, looking around at one another, they all knew it. At base, they believed in nothing. What they enforced with weapons they could not impose with will. They could command from behind, but not lead from the front. At least most of them were intelligent enough to know it. That was why Badrayn had flown to Baghdad.

He watched their eyes and knew what they were thinking, however impassive their faces might have been. A bold man would have spoken up with confidence, and thus assumed leadership of the group. But the bold ones were long since dead, cut down by one bolder and more ruthless, only to be cut down by the unseen hand of someone more patient and more ruthless still —enough so that he could now make a generous offer. Badrayn knew what the answer had to be, and so did they. The dead Iraqi President had left nothing behind to replace himself, but that was the way of men who believed in nothing except themselves.

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THE PHONE RANG at 6:05 this time. Ryan didn't mind awakening before 7:00. It had been his custom for years, but back then he'd had to drive in to work. Now the job was an elevator ride away, and he'd expected that the time previously spent in a car could now be spent in bed. At least he'd been able to doze in the back of his official car.

"Yes?"

"Mr. President?" Jack was surprised to hear Arnie's voice. Even so, he was tempted to demand who the hell else would pick the phone up.

"What is it?"

"Trouble."

VICE PRESIDENT EDWARD J. Kealty had not slept all night, but one would not have known it from looking at him. Shaved pink, clear of eye, and straight of back, he strode into the CNN building with his wife and his aides, there to be met by a producer who whisked him into an elevator for the trip upstairs. Only the usual pleasantries were exchanged. The career politician just stared forward, as though trying to convince the stainless-steel doors that he knew what he was about. And succeeding.

The preparatory calls had been made over the previous three hours, starting with the head of the network. An old friend, the TV executive had been thunderstruck for the first time in his career. One halfway expected airplane crashes, train wrecks, violent crimes—the routine disasters and sorrows from which the media made its living—but something like this was the occurrence of a lifetime. Two hours earlier, he'd called Arnie van Damm, another old friend, because one had to cover one's bases as a reporter; besides, there was also a love of country in him that he rarely expressed but it was there nonetheless, and the CNN president didn't have a clue where this story would go. He'd called on the network's legal correspondent, a failed trial attorney,

who in turn was now on the phone with a professor friend at Georgetown University Law School. Even now, the CNN president called into the green room.

"Are you really sure, Ed?" was all he had to ask.

"I don't have a choice. I wish I didn't have to." Which was the expected answer.

"Your funeral. I'll be watching." And the line went dead. At the far end there was a form of rejoicing. It would be a *hell* of a story, and it was CNN's job to report the news, and that was that.

"ARNIE, IS THIS totally crazy or am I still dreaming?" They were in an upstairs sitting room. Jack had thrown on some casual clothes. Van Damm didn't have his tie on yet, and his socks were mismatched, Ryan noticed. Worst of all, van Damm looked rattled, and he'd never seen that before.

"I guess we'll just have to wait and see." Both men turned when the door opened.

"Mr. President?" A fiftyish man came in, properly dressed in a business suit. He was tall and harried-looking. Andrea followed him in. She, too, had been briefed, insofar as that was possible.

"This is Patrick Martin," Arnie said.

"Criminal Division at Justice, right?" Jack rose to shake hands and waved him to the coffee tray.

"Yes, sir. I've been working with Dan Murray on the crash investigation."

"Pat's one of our better trial lawyers. He also lectures at George Washington on constitutional law," the chief of staff explained.

"So, what do you think of all this?" the President asked, his voice still somewhere between whimsy and outright disbelief.

"I think we need to see what he has to say." The quintessential lawyer's reply.

"How long at Justice?" Jack asked next, returning to his seat.

"Twenty-three years. Four years in the FBI before that." Martin poured a cup and decided to stand.

"Here we go," van Damm observed, unmuting the TV.

"Ladies and gentlemen, with us here in our Washington bureau is Vice President Edward J. Kealty." CNN's chief political correspondent also looked as though he'd been dragged from his bed and genuinely shaken. Ryan noted that, of all the people he'd seen that day, Kealty looked the most normal. "Sir, you have something unusual to say."

"Yes, I do, Barry. I probably need to start by saying that this is the most difficult thing I've ever had to do in over thirty years of public life." Kealty's voice was quiet and restrained, speaking in the tone of an essay by Emerson, slow and clear, and painfully earnest. "As you know, President Durling asked me to resign from my post. The reason for this was a question of my conduct while a senator. Barry, it's no secret that my personal conduct has not always been as exemplary as it should have been. That's true of many people in public life, but it's no excuse, and I do not claim that it is. When Roger and I discussed the situation, we agreed that it would be best for me to resign my

office, allowing him to select a new running mate for the elections later this year. It was his further intention to have John Ryan fill my post as interim Vice President.

"Barry, I was content with that. I've been in public life for a very long time, and the idea of retiring to play with my grandchildren and maybe teach a little bit actually looked pretty attractive. And so I agreed to Roger's request in the interests of—well, really for the good of the country.

"But I never actually resigned."

"Okay," the correspondent said, holding his hands up as though to catch a baseball. "I think we need to be really clear on this, sir. What exactly did happen?"

"Barry, I drove over to the State Department. You see, the Constitution specifies that when the President or Vice President resigns, the resignation is presented to the Secretary of State. I met with Secretary Hanson privately to discuss the issue. I actually had a letter of resignation prepared, but it was in the wrong form, and Brett asked me to redraft it. So I drove back, thinking that I could have it done and resubmitted the following day.

"None of us expected the events of that evening. I was badly shaken by them, as were many. In my case, as you know, well, so many of the friends with whom I'd worked for years were just snuffed out by that brutal and cowardly act. But I never actually resigned my office." Kealty looked down for a moment, biting his lip before going on. "Barry, I would have been content even with that. I gave my word to President Durling, and I had every intention of keeping it.

"But I can't. I just can't," Kealty went on. "Let me explain.

"I've known Jack Ryan for ten years. He's a fine man, a courageous man, and he's served our country honorably, but he is, unfortunately, not the man to heal our country. What he said last night, trying to speak to the American people, proves it. How can we possibly expect our government to work under these circumstances without experienced, capable people to fill the offices left vacant?"

"But he is the President—isn't he?" Barry asked, scarcely believing what he was doing and what he was hearing.

"Barry, he doesn't even know how to do a proper investigation. Look at what he said last night about the plane crash. Hardly a week has passed and already he says he knows what happened. Can anyone believe that?" Kealty asked plaintively. "Can anyone really believe that? Who has oversight over this investigation? Who's actually running it? To whom are they reporting? And to have conclusions in a *week?* How can the American people have confidence in that? When President Kennedy was assassinated, it took months. The investigation was run by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Why? Because we had to be sure, that's why."

"Excuse me, Mr. Vice President, but that really doesn't answer my question."

"Barry, Ryan was never Vice President, because I never resigned. The post was never vacant, and the Constitution allows only one Vice President. He never even took the oath associated with the office."

"But—"

"You think I want to do this? I don't have a choice. How can we rebuild the Congress and the executive branch with amateurs? Last night Mr. Ryan told the governors of the states to send him people with no experience in government. How can laws be drafted by people who don't know how?

"Barry, I've never committed public suicide before. It's like being one of the people, one of the senators at the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson. I'm looking down into my open political grave, but I have to place the country first. I have to." The camera zoomed in on his face, and the anguish there was manifest. One could almost see tears in his eyes as his voice proclaimed his selfless patriotism.

"He always was good on TV," van Damm noted.

"I do have trouble believing all this," Ryan said after a moment.

"Believe it," Arnie told him. "Mr. Martin? We could use some legal guidance."

"First of all, get someone over to State and check the Secretary's office out."

"FBI?" van Damm asked.

"Yes." Martin nodded. "You won't find anything, but that's how it has to start. Next, check phone logs and notes. Next, we start interviewing people. That's going to be a problem. Secretary Hanson's dead, along with his wife, and President and Mrs. Durling, of course. Those are the people most likely to have knowledge on the facts of the issue. I would expect that we will develop very little hard evidence, and not very much useful circumstantial evidence."

"Roger told me that—" Martin cut him off.

"Hearsay. You're telling me that someone said to you what he was told by somebody else—not much use in any court of law."

"Go on," Arnie said.

"Sir, there really is no constitutional or statutory law on this question."

"And there's no Supreme Court to rule on the issue," Ryan pointed out. To that pregnant pause, he added: "What if he's telling the truth?"

"Mr. President, whether or not he's telling the truth is really beside the point," Martin replied. "Unless we can prove that he's lying, which is unlikely, then he has a case of sorts. By the way, on the issue of the Supreme Court, assuming that you get a new Senate and make your nominations, all of the new Justices would ordinarily have to recuse themselves because you selected them. That probably leaves no legal solution possible."

"But if there's no law on this issue?" the President—was he?—asked.

"Exactly. This is a beauty," Martin said quietly, trying to think. "Okay, a President or Vice President stops holding office when he or she resigns. Resignation happens when the office holder conveys the instrument of resignation—a letter suffices to the proper official. But the man who accepted the instrument is dead, and we will doubtless find that the instrument is missing. Secretary Hanson probably called the President to inform him of the resignation—"

"He did," van Damm confirmed.

"But President Durling is also dead. His testimony would have had evidentiary value, but that isn't going to happen, either. That puts us back to square one." Martin didn't like what he was doing, and he was having enough trouble trying to talk and think about the law at the same time. This was like a

chessboard with no squares, just the pieces arrayed at random.

"But—"

"The phone logs will show there was a call, fine. Secretary Hanson might have said that the letter was poorly worded and would be fixed the following day. This is politics, not law. So long as Durling was President, Kealty had to leave, because—"

"Of the sexual harassment investigation." Arnie was getting it now.

"You got it. His TV statement even covered that, and he did a nice job of neutralizing the issue, didn't he?"

"We're back to where we started," Ryan observed.

"Yes, Mr. President." That elicited a wry smile.

"Nice to know that somebody believes."

INSPECTOR O'DAY AND three other agents from Headquarters Division left their car right in front of the building. When a uniformed guard came over to object, O'Day just flashed his ID and kept on going. He stopped at the main security desk and did the same.

"I want your chief to meet me on the seventh floor in one minute," he told the guard. "I don't care what he's doing. Tell him to come up right now." Then he and his team walked to the elevator bank.

"Uh, Pat, what the hell—"

The other three had been picked more or less at random from the Bureau's Office of Professional Responsibility. That was the FBI's own internal-affairs department. All experienced investigators with supervisory rank, their job was to keep the Bureau clean. One of them had even investigated a former Director. OPR's charter was to respect nothing but the law, and the surprising thing was that, unlike similar organizations in city police forces, it retained, for the most part, the respect of the street agents.

The lobby guard had called ahead to the guard post on the top floor. It was George Armitage this morning, working a different shift from the previous week.

"FBI," O'Day announced as the elevator door opened. "Where's the Secretary's office?"

"This way, sir." Armitage led them down the corridor.

"Who's been using the office?" the inspector asked.

"We're getting ready to move Mr. Adler in. We've just about got Mr. Hanson's things out and—"

"So people have been going in and out?"

"Yes, sir."

O'Day hadn't expected that it would be much use bringing in the forensics team, but that would be done anyway. If there had ever been an investigation that had to go strictly by the book, this was the one.

"Okay, we need to talk to everyone who's been in or out of the office since the moment Secretary Hanson left it. Every single one, secretaries, janitors, everybody."

"The secretarial staff won't be in for another half hour or so."

"Okay. You want to unlock the door?"

Armitage did so, letting them into the secretaries' room, and then through the next set of doors into the office itself. The FBI agents stopped cold there, the four of them just looking at first. Then one of them took post at the door to the main corridor.

"Thank you, Mr. Armitage," O'Day said, reading the name tag. "Okay, for the moment, we're treating this as a crime scene. Nobody in or out without our permission. We need a room where we can interview people. I'd like you to make a written list of everyone you know to have been in here, with date and time if that's possible."

"Their secretaries will have that."

"We want yours, too." O'Day looked up the corridor and was annoyed. "We asked for your department chief to join us. Where do you suppose he is?"

"He usually doesn't get in until eight or so."

"Could you call him, please? We need to talk to him right now."

"You got it, sir." Armitage wondered what the hell this was all about. He hadn't seen the TV this morning, nor heard what was going on yet. In any case, he didn't care all that much. Fifty-five and looking forward to retirement after thirty-two years of government service, he just wanted to do his job and leave.

"GOOD MOVE, DAN," Martin said into the phone. They were in the Oval Office now. "Back to you." The attorney hung up and turned.

"Murray sent one of his roving inspectors over, Pat O'Day. Good man, troubleshooter. He's being backed up by OPR guys"—Martin explained briefly what that meant—"another smart move. They're apolitical. With that done, Murray has to back away from things."

"Why?" Jack asked, still trying to catch up.

"You appointed him acting Director. I can't be involved much with this, either. You need to select someone to run the investigation. He has to be smart, clean, and not the least bit political. Probably a judge," Martin thought. "Like a Chief Judge of a U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. There's lots of good ones."

"Any ideas?" Arnie asked.

"You have to get that name from somebody else. I can't emphasize enough, this has to be clean in every possible respect. Gentlemen, we're talking about the Constitution of the United States here." Martin paused. He had to explain things. "That's like the Bible for me, okay? For you, too, sure, but I started off as an FBI agent. I worked mainly civil-rights stuff, all those sheet-heads in the South. Civil rights are important, I learned that looking at the bodies of people who died trying to secure those rights for other people they didn't even know. Okay, I left the Bureau, entered the bar, did a little private practice, but I guess I never stopped being a cop, and so I came back in. At Justice, I've worked OC, I've worked espionage, and now I just started running the Criminal Division. This is important stuff to me. You have to do it the right way."

"We will," Ryan told him. "But it would be nice to know how."

That evoked a snort. "Damned if I know. On the substance of the issue,

anyway. On the form, it has to appear totally clean, no questions at all. That's impossible, but you have to try anyway. That's the legal side. The political side I leave to you."

"Okay. And the crash investigation?" Ryan was slightly amazed with himself. He'd actually turned away from the investigation to something else. Damn.

This time Martin smiled. "That pissed me off, Mr. President. I don't like having people to tell me how to run a case. If Sato were alive, I could take him into court today. There won't be any surprises. The thing Kealty said about the JFK investigation was pretty disingenuous. You handle one of these cases by running a thorough investigation, not by turning it into a bureaucratic circus. I've been doing that my whole life. This case is pretty simple—big, but simple—and for all practical purposes it's already closed. The real help came from the Mounties. They did a nice job for us, a ton of corroborative evidence, time, place, fingerprints, catching people from the plane to interview. And the Japanese police—Christ, they're ready to eat nails, they're so angry about what happened. They're talking to all of the surviving conspirators. You, and we, don't want to know their interrogation methods. But their due process is not our problem. I'm ready to defend what you said last night. I'm ready to walk through everything we know."

"Do that, this afternoon," van Damm told him. "I'll make sure you get the press coverage."

"Yes, sir."

"So you can't be part of the Kealty thing?" Jack asked.

"No, sir. You cannot allow the process to be polluted in any way."

"But you can advise me on it?" President Ryan went on. "I need legal counsel of some sort."

"That you do, and, yes, Mr. President, I can do that."

"You know, Martin, at the end of this—"

Ryan cut his chief of staff off cold, even before the attorney could react. "No, Arnie, none of that. God damn it! I will not play that game. Mr. Martin, I like your instincts. We play this one absolutely straight. We get professionals to run it, and we trust them to be pros. I am sick and fucking tired of special prosecutors and special this and special that. If you don't have people you can trust to do the job right, then what the hell are they doing there in the first place?"

Van Damm shifted in his seat. "You're a naïf, Jack."

"Fine, Arnie, and we've been running the government with politically aware people since before I was born, and look where it's gotten us!" Ryan stood to pace around the room. It was a presidential prerogative. "I'm tired of all this. What ever happened to honesty, Arnie? What ever happened to telling the goddamned truth? It's all a fucking game here, and the object of the game isn't to do the right thing, the object of the game is to *stay* here. It's not supposed to be that way! And I'll be *damned* if I'll perpetuate a game I don't like." Jack turned to Pat Martin. "Tell me about that FBI case."

Martin blinked, not knowing why that had come up, but he told the story anyway. "They even made a bad movie about it. Some civil-rights workers got popped by the local Klukkers. Two of them were local cops, too, and the case

wasn't going anywhere, so the Bureau got involved under interstate commerce and civil rights statutes. Dan Murray and I were rookies back then. I was in Buffalo at the time. He was in Philly. They brought us down to work with Big Joe Fitzgerald. He was one of Hoover's roving inspectors. I was there when they found the bodies. Nasty," Martin said, remembering the sight and the horrid smell. "All they wanted to do was to get citizens registered to vote, and they got killed for it, and the local cops weren't doing anything about it. It's funny, but when you see that sort of thing, it isn't abstract anymore. It isn't a document or a case study or a form to fill out. It just gets real as hell when you look at bodies that've been in the ground for two weeks. Those Klukker bastards broke the law and killed fellow citizens who were doing something the Constitution says isn't just okay—it's a *right.* So, we got 'em, and put 'em all away."

"Why, Mr. Martin?" Jack asked. The response was exactly what he expected.

"Because I swore an oath, Mr. President. That's why."

"So did I, Mr. Martin." *And it wasn't to any goddamned game.*

THE CUEING WAS somewhat equivocal. The Iraqi military used hundreds of radio frequencies, mainly FM VHF bands, and the traffic, while unusual for the overall situation, was routine in its content. There were thousands of messages, as many as fifty going at any given moment, and STORM TRACK didn't begin to have enough linguists to keep track of them all, though it had to do just that. The command circuits for senior officers were well known, but these were encrypted, meaning that computers in KKMC had to play with the signals in order to make sense of what sounded like static. Fortunately a number of defectors had come across with examples of the encryption hardware, and others trickled over various borders with daily keying sequences, all to be handsomely rewarded by the Saudis.

The use of radios was more now rather than less. The senior Iraqi officers were probably less concerned with electronic intercepts than with who might be listening in on a telephone line. That simple fact told the senior watch officers a lot, and a document was even now being prepared to go up the ladder to the DCI for delivery to the President.

STORM TRACK looked like most such stations. One huge antenna array, called an Elephant Cage for its circular configuration, both detected and localized signals, while other towering whip antennas handled other tasks. The listening station had been hastily built during the buildup for DESERT STORM as a means of gathering tactical intelligence for allied military units, then to be expanded for continuing interest in the region. The Kuwaitis had funded the sister station, PALM BOWL, for which they were rewarded with a good deal of the "take."

"That's three," a technician said at the latter station, reading off his screen. "Three senior officers heading to the racetrack. A little early in the day to play the ponies, isn't it?"

"A meet?" his lieutenant asked. This was a military station, and the technician, a fifteen-year sergeant, knew quite a bit more about the job than his new boss. At least the elltee was smart enough to ask questions.

“Sure looks like it, ma’am.”

“Why there?”

“Middle of town, not in an official building. If you’re out to meet your honey, you don’t do it at home, do you?” The screen changed. “Okay, we cracked another one. The Air Force chief is there, too—was, probably. Traffic analysis seems to show that the meet broke up an hour or so ago. I wish we could crack their crypto gear faster . . .”

“content?”

“Just where to go and when, ma’am, nothing substantive, nothing about what they’re meeting for.”

“When’s the funeral, Sergeant?”

“Sunset.”

“YES?” RYAN LIFTED the phone. You could pretty much tell how important the call was from the line that was lit. This one was Signals.

“Major Canon, sir. We’re getting feed from Saudi. The intel community is trying to make sense of it now. They told me to cue you on that.”

“Thank you.” Ryan replaced the phone. “You know, it would be nice to have ’em come in one at a time. Something happening in Iraq, but they’re not sure what yet,” he told his guests. “I guess I have to start paying attention. Anything else I have to do now?”

“Put Secret Service protection on Vice President Kealty,” Martin suggested. “He’s entitled to it anyway under the law as a former VP—for six months?” the attorney asked Price.

“That’s correct.”

Martin thought about that. “Did you have any discussions on that issue?”

“No, sir.”

“Pity,” Martin thought.

14

BLOOD IN THE WATER

ED FOLEY'S EXECUTIVE aircraft was big and ugly, a Lockheed C-141B cargo carrier, known to the fighter community as a "trash hauler," in whose cargo area was a large trailer. The trailer's history was interesting. It had originally been built by the Airstream company as a receiving facility for the Apollo astronauts, though this one was a backup and had never actually been used for that purpose. It allowed senior officials to travel with homelike amenities and was used almost exclusively by senior intelligence officers. This way they could travel in both anonymity and comfort. There were lots of Air Force Starlifters, and from the outside Foley's looked like any other—big, green, and ugly.

It touched down at Andrews just before noon, after an exhausting flight of almost seven thousand miles, seventeen hours, and two aerial refuelings. Foley had traveled with a staff of three, two of them security and protection officers, called SPOs. The ability to shower had improved the attitude of each, and their night's sleep hadn't been interrupted by the signals that had started to arrive a few hours earlier. By the time the cargo lifter stopped rolling and the doors opened, he was refreshed and informed. That didn't happen often enough for the ADDO to regard it as anything short of a miracle. So much the better that his wife was there to greet him with a kiss. It was enough that the Air Force ground crew wondered what the hell this was all about. The flight crew was too tired to care.

"Hi, honey."

"We really need to fly together this way once," her husband observed with a twinkle in his eye. Then he shifted gears in a heartbeat. "What's the word on Iraq?"

"Something's happening. At least nine, probably twenty or so senior officers got together for a quiet little meeting. We don't know what about, but it wasn't to pick the menu for the wake." They got in the back of the car, and she handed over a folder. "You're getting promoted, by the way."

"What?" Ed's head came up from the document package.

"DCI. We're moving with Plan Blue, and Ryan wants you to front it for the Hill. I stay DDO, and I get to run my shop the way I want to, don't I, honey?" She smiled sweetly. Then she explained the other problem of the day.

CLARK HAD HIS own office at Langley, and his seniority guaranteed him a view of the parking lot and the trees beyond, which beat a windowless cubby. He even shared a pool secretary with four other senior field officers. In many

ways Langley was alien country for him. His official job title was that of a training officer down at the Farm. He came to headquarters to deliver reports and get briefed in on new jobs, but he didn't like it here. There was a smell to any headquarters facility. The desk weenies wanted things their way. They didn't want irregularities. They didn't care to work overtime, and miss favorite TV shows as a result. They didn't much like surprises and data that made them rethink stuff. They were the bureaucratic tail in an intelligence agency, but at CIA the tail had become so massive that it wagged the dog without ever moving itself. The phenomenon wasn't exactly unusual, but when things went bad, his was the life at risk in the field, and if he were ever killed out there, he'd turn into one residual memo, to be quickly filed and forgotten by people who did National Intelligence Estimates based often as not on newspaper stories.

"Catch the news this morning, Mr. C.?" Chavez asked lightly on entering the room.

"I got in at five." He held up a folder with PLAN BLUE printed on it. Because he so hated paperwork, when he did it he worked with supreme intensity, the more quickly to be rid of it.

"Then turn your set to CNN." John did, expecting a news story that would surprise his Agency. And that's what he got, but not quite what he'd expected.

• • •

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, the President."

He had to get out in public fast. Everyone agreed on that. Ryan walked into the press room, stood behind the podium, and looked down at his notes. It was easier than looking out at the room, smaller and shabbier than most parts of the building, built atop the former swimming pool. There were eight rows of six seats each. Every one, he'd seen on the way in, was full.

"Thank you for coming in so early," Jack said in as relaxed a voice as he could manage.

"Recent events in Iraq affect the security of a region which is of vital interest to America and her allies. We note without grief the death of the Iraqi President. As you know, this individual was responsible for the instigation of two wars of aggression, the brutal suppression of that country's Kurdish minority, and the denial of the most fundamental human rights to his own citizens.

"Iraq is a nation which should be prosperous. It has a sizable fraction of the world's petroleum reserves, a respectable industrial base, and a substantial population. All that is lacking in that country is a government which looks after the needs of its citizens. We would hope that the passing of the former leader offers an opportunity for just this." Jack looked up from his notes.

"America therefore extends the hand of friendship to Iraq. We hope that there will be an opportunity to normalize relations, and to put an end once and for all to the hostility between Iraq and its Gulf neighbors. I have directed acting Secretary of State Scott Adler to make contact with the Iraqi government, and to offer the chance of a meeting to discuss matters of mutual

interest. In the event that the new regime is willing to address the question of human rights, and to commit to free and fair elections, America is willing to address the question of the removal of economic sanctions, and the rapid restoration of normal diplomatic relations.

"There has been enough enmity. It is unseemly for a region of such natural wealth to be the site of discord, and America is willing to do her part as an honest broker to assist in bringing peace and stability, along with our friends among the Gulf states. We await a favorable reply from Baghdad so that initial contacts might be established." President Ryan folded the paper away.

"That's the end of my official statement. Any questions?" That took about a microsecond.

"Sir, this morning, as you know," the *New York Times* shouted first, "Vice President Edward Kealty claimed that he is the President and you are not. What do you have to say about that?"

"The allegation by Mr. Kealty is groundless and totally without value," Jack replied coldly. "Next question."

Having forsworn the game, Ryan was now condemned to playing it. Nobody in the room was the least bit fooled by his appearance. The announcement he'd just made could as easily have been delivered by his press secretary or the official State Department spokesman. Instead, he was here in front of the lights, looking at the assembled faces, and feeling rather like a lone Christian in a Colosseum full of lions. Well, that's what the Secret Service was for.

"A follow-up—what if he actually didn't resign?" the *Times* insisted over the shouts of others.

"He *did* actually resign. Otherwise, I could not have been appointed. Therefore your question has no meaning."

"But, sir, what if he is telling the truth?"

"He isn't." Ryan took a breath, as Arnie had told him to do, and then went on, saying what Arnie had told him to say. "Mr. Kealty resigned his position at the request of President Durling. You all know the reason. He was under investigation by the FBI for sexual misconduct while he was a senator. The investigation was in the matter of a sexual assault—not to say"—which Ryan then said—"rape of one of his Senate aides. His resignation was part of a ... deal, a plea bargain, I guess, to avoid criminal prosecution." Ryan paused just then, somewhat surprised to see the assembled faces go a little pale. He'd just hurled down a gauntlet, and it made a loud noise on the floor. The next one was even louder. "You know who the President is. Now, shall we get on with the business of the country?"

"What are you doing about this?" ABC asked.

"You mean Kealty or Iraq?" Ryan asked. His tone indicated what the subject ought to be.

"The Kealty question, sir."

"I've asked the FBI to check into it. I expect them to report back to me later today. Aside from that, we have enough things to be done."

"Follow-up—what about what you said to the governors in your speech last night, and what Vice President Kealty said this morning? Do you really want inexperienced people to—"

"Yes, I do. First of all, what people do we have who are experienced in the

workings of Congress? The answer is, not very many. We have the few survivors, people fortunate enough to have been elsewhere that night. Aside from that—what? People defeated in the last election? Do you want them back? I want, and I think the country needs, people who know how to do things. The plain truth is that government is by nature inefficient. We can't make it more efficient by selecting people who've always worked in government. The idea the Founding Fathers had was for citizen legislators, not for a permanent ruling class. In that I think I am in agreement with the intentions of the framers of our Constitution. Next?"

"But who will decide the question?" the *Los Angeles Times* asked. It wasn't necessary to say which question.

"The question is decided," Ryan told him. "Thanks for coming. If you will excuse me, I have a lot of work to do today." He picked up his opening statement and walked off to his right.

"Mr. Ryan!" The shout came from a good dozen voices. Ryan walked through the door and around the corner. Arnie was waiting.

"Not bad under the circumstances."

"Except for one thing. Not one of them said 'Mr. President.'"

MOUDI TOOK THE call, which required only a few seconds. With that he walked over to the isolation ward. Outside, he donned protective gear, carefully checking the plastic fabric for leaks. The suit was made by a European company, modeled on the American Racal. The thick plastic was an incongruous powder blue, reinforced with Kevlar fiber. At the back on the web belt hung the ventilation unit. This pumped filtered air into the suit, and did so with a slight overpressure so that a tear would not suck environmental air inside. It wasn't known if Ebola was airborne or not, and nobody wanted to be the first to prove that it was. He opened the door to go inside. Sister Maria Magdalena was there, attending her friend, dressed the same way. Both knew all too well what it meant for a patient to see her attendants dressed in a way that so clearly denoted their fear of what she carried within her.

"Good afternoon, Sister," he said, his gloved hands lifting the chart off the foot of the bed. Temperature 41.4, despite the ice. Pulse rapid at 115. Respiration 24 and shallow. Blood pressure was starting to fall from the internal bleeding. The patient had received a further four units of whole blood—and probably lost at least that much, most of it internally. Her blood chemistry was starting to go berserk. The morphine was as high as he could prescribe without risking respiratory failure. Sister Jean Baptiste was semiconscious—she should have been virtually comatose from the drugs, but the pain was too severe for that.

Maria Magdalena just looked over at him through the plastic of her mask, her eyes beyond sadness into a despair that her religion forbade. Moudi and she had seen all manner of deaths, from malaria, from cancer, from AIDS. But there was nothing so brutally cruel as this. It hit so fast that the patient didn't have the time to prepare, to steel the mind, to fortify the soul with prayer and faith. It was like some sort of traffic accident, shocking but just long enough in duration for the suffering to—if there were a devil in creation, then this was

his gift to the world. Physician or not, Moudi put that thought aside. Even the devil had a use.

"The airplane is on the way," he told her.

"What will happen?"

"Professor Rousseau has suggested a dramatic treatment method. We will do a complete blood-replacement procedure. First the blood supply will be removed completely, and the vascular system flushed out with oxygenated saline. Then he proposes to replace the blood supply completely with whole blood in which he has Ebola antibodies. Theoretically, in this way the antibodies will attack the virus systemically and simultaneously."

The nun thought about that. It wasn't quite as radical as many would imagine. The total replacement of a body's blood supply was a procedure dating back to the late 1960s, having been used in the treatment of advanced meningitis. It wasn't a treatment that could be used routinely. It required a heart-lung-bypass machine. But this was her friend, and she was well past thinking of other patients and practicality.

Just then, Jean Baptiste's eyes opened wide. They looked at nothing, unfocused, and the very slackness of the face proclaimed her agony. She might not even have been conscious. It was just that the eyes could not remain closed in severe pain. Moudi looked over at the morphine drip. If pain had been the only consideration, he might well have increased it and taken the risk of killing the patient in the name of mercy. But he couldn't chance it. He had to deliver her alive, and though her fate might be a cruel one, he hadn't chosen it for her.

"I must travel with her," Maria Magdalena said quietly.

Moudi shook his head. "I cannot allow that."

"It is a rule of our order. I cannot allow her to travel unaccompanied by one of us."

"There is a danger, Sister. Moving her is a risk. In the aircraft we will be breathing recirculated air. There is no need to expose you to the risk as well. Her virtue is not in question here." And one death was quite enough for his purposes.

"I have no choice."

Moudi nodded. He hadn't chosen her destiny either, had he? "As you wish."

THE AIRCRAFT LANDED at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport ten miles outside Nairobi and taxied to the cargo terminal. It was an old 707, once part of the Shah's personal fleet, the internal furnishings long since ripped out to reveal a metal deck. The trucks were waiting. The first of them backed up to the rear door, located on the right side, which opened a minute after the chocks secured the wheels in place on the ramp.

There were a hundred fifty cages, in each of them an African green monkey. The black workers all wore protective gloves. The monkeys, as if sensing their fate, were in an evil mode, using every opportunity to bite and scratch at the handlers. They screeched, urinated, and defecated as well, but to little avail.

Inside, the flight crew watched, keeping their distance. They wanted no part of the transfer. These noisy, small, nasty little creatures might not have been

designated as unclean by the Koran, but they were clearly unpleasant enough, and after this job was over, they'd have the aircraft thoroughly washed and disinfected. The transfer took half an hour. The cages were stacked and tied down in place, and the handlers moved off, paid in cash and pleased to be done with the job, and their truck was replaced by a low-slung fuel bowser.

"Excellent," the buyer told the dealer.

"We were lucky. A friend had a large supply ready to go, and his buyer was slow getting the money. In view of this ..."

"Yes, an extra ten percent?"

"That would be sufficient," the dealer said.

"Gladly. You will have the additional check tomorrow morning. Or would you prefer cash?"

Both men turned as the 707 lit off its engines. In minutes it would take off, this flight a short hop to Entebbe, Uganda.

"I DON'T LIKE the smell of this," Bert Vasco said, handing the folder back.

"Explain," Mary Pat commanded.

"I was born in Cuba. Once my dad told me about the night Batista bugged out. The senior generals had a little meeting and started boarding airplanes, quick and quiet, off to where their bank accounts were, and left everybody else holding the bag." Vasco was one of the State Department people who enjoyed working with CIA, probably as a result of his Cuban birth. He understood that diplomacy and intelligence each worked better when working together. Not everyone at Foggy Bottom agreed. That was their problem. They'd never been chased out of their homelands.

"You think that's what's happening here?" Mary Pat asked, beating Ed by half a second.

"That's the morning line from where I sit."

"You feel confident enough to tell the President that?" Ed Foley asked.

"Which one?" Vasco asked. "You should hear what they're saying over at the office. The FBI just took over the seventh floor. That has things a little shook up. Anyway, yes. It's just a guess, but it's a good guess. What we need to know is, who, if anyone, has been talking to them. Nobody on the ground, eh?"

The Foleys both looked down, which answered the question.

"MR. RYAN'S ALLEGATIONS show that he's learned the shabby part of politics faster than the proper ones," Kealty said, in a voice more hurt than angry. "I had honestly expected better of him."

"So, you deny the allegations?" ABC asked.

"Of course I do. It's no secret that I once had an alcohol problem, but I overcame it. And it's no secret that my personal conduct has at times been questionable, but I've changed that, too, with help from my church, and the love of my wife," he added, squeezing her hand as she looked on with soft compassion and ironclad support. "That really has nothing to do with the issue

here. We have to place the interests of our country first. Personal animosity has no place in this, Sam. We're supposed to rise above that."

"You bastard," Ryan breathed.

"This is not going to be pleasant," van Damm said.

"How can he win, Arnie?"

"Depends. I'm not sure what game he's playing."

"—could say things about Mr. Ryan, too, but that isn't the sort of thing we need to do now. The country needs stability, not discord. The American people are looking for leadership—experienced, seasoned leadership."

"Arnie, how much has this—"

"I remember when he'd fuck a snake, if somebody held it straight for him. Jack, we can't think about that sort of thing. Remember what Allen Drury said, this is a town in which we deal with people not as they are, but as they are reputed to be. The press likes Ed, always has. They like him. They like his family. They like his social conscience—"

"My ass!" Ryan nearly shouted.

"You listen to me right now. You want to be the President? You're not *allowed* to have a temper. You hold on to that thought, Jack. When the President loses his temper, people die. You've seen how that happens, and the people out there want to know that you are calm and cool and collected *at all times,* got it?"

Ryan swallowed and nodded. Every so often it was good to lose one's temper, and Presidents *were* allowed. But you had to know when, and that was a lesson as yet unlearned. "So what are you telling me?"

"You *are* the President. Act like it. Do your job. Look presidential. What you said at the press conference was okay. Kealty's claim is groundless. You're having the FBI check out his claim, but the claim doesn't matter. You swore the oath, you live here, and that's that. Make him irrelevant and he'll go away. Focus on this thing and you give him legitimacy."

"And the media?"

"Give them a chance, and they'll get things right."

"FLYING HOME TODAY, Ralph?"

Augustus Lorenz and Ralph Forster were of an age, and a profession. Both men had begun their medical careers in the United States Army, one a general surgeon, the other an internist. Assigned to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MAC-V), in the time of President Kennedy, long before the war had heated up, both men had at the same time discovered things in the real world that they'd studied and passed over in *Principles of Internal Medicine.* There were diseases out in the remote sections of the world that killed people. Brought up in urban America, they were old enough to remember the conquest of pneumonia, tuberculosis, and poliomyelitis. Like most men of their generation, they'd thought that infectious diseases were a defeated enemy. In the jungles of a relatively peaceful Vietnam, they'd learned different, occasionally seeing healthy, fit young men, American and Vietnamese soldiers, die before their eyes from bugs they had never learned about and which they could not combat. It wasn't supposed to be that way,

they both had decided one night in the Caravelle Bar, and like the idealists and scientists they were, both went back to school and started relearning their profession, and in that process beginning yet another process that would not end in their lifetimes. Forster had wound up at Johns Hopkins, Lorenz at Atlanta, head of the Special Pathogens Branch of the Centers for Disease Control. Along the way they'd flown more miles than some airline captains, and to more exotic places than any photographer for *National Geographic,* almost always in pursuit of something too small to see, and too deadly to ignore.

"I'd better, before the new kid takes my department over."

The Nobel candidate chuckled. "Alex is pretty good. I'm glad he got out of the Army. We did some fishing together down in Brazil, back when they had the . . ." In the hot lab, a technician made a final adjustment on the electron microscope. "There," Lorenz said. "There's our friend."

Some called it the Shepherd's Crook. Lorenz thought it more like an ankh, but that wasn't right, either. It was in any case not a thing of beauty. To both men it was evil incarnate. The vertical, curved strand was called RNA, ribonucleic acid. That contained the genetic code of the virus. At the top was a series of curled protein structures whose function wasn't yet understood, but which probably, both thought, determined how the disease acted. Probably. They didn't know, despite fully twenty years of intensive study.

The damned thing wasn't even alive, but it killed even so. A true living organism had both RNA and DNA, but a virus had only one or the other. It lived, somehow, in a dormant state until it came in contact with a living cell. Once there, it came to murderous life, like some sort of alien monster waiting its chance, able to live and grow and reproduce only with the help of something else, which it would destroy, and from which it would try to escape, then to find another victim.

Ebola was elegantly simple and microscopically tiny. A hundred thousand of them, lined up head to tail, would scarcely fill out an inch on a ruler. Theoretically one could kill and grow and migrate and kill again. And again. And again.

Medicine's collective memory wasn't as long as either physician would have liked. In 1918, the "Spanish flu," probably a form of pneumonia, had swept the globe in nine months, killing at least twenty million people—probably quite a few more—and some so rapidly that there had been victims who went to sleep healthy and failed to wake up the next day. But while the symptoms of the disease had been fully documented, the state of medical science hadn't yet progressed to the point of understanding the disease itself, as a result of which nobody knew what that outbreak had actually been about—to the point that in the 1970s suspected victims buried in permafrost in Alaska had been exhumed in the hope of finding samples of the organism for study; a good idea that hadn't worked. For the medical community, that disease was largely forgotten, and most assumed that should it reappear, it would be defeated with modern treatment.

Specialists in infectious disease weren't so sure. That disease, like AIDS, like Ebola, was probably a virus, and medicine's success in dealing with viral disease was precisely—

Zero.

Viral diseases could be prevented with vaccines, but once infected, a patient's immune system either won or lost, with the best of physicians standing by and watching. Doctors, as with any other profession, frequently preferred to ignore that which they didn't see and didn't understand. That was the only explanation for the medical community's inexplicably slow recognition of AIDS and its lethal implications. AIDS was another exotic pathogen which Lorenz and Forster studied, and another gift from the jungles of Africa.

"Gus, sometimes I wonder if we'll ever figure these bastards out."

"Sooner or later, Ralph." Lorenz backed away from the microscope—it was, actually, a computer monitor—and wished he could smoke his pipe, a vice he didn't really want to break, though working in a government building made it hard for him to indulge. He thought better with a pipe, Gus told himself. Both men stared at the screen, looking at the curlicue protein structures. "This one is from the kid."

They walked in the footsteps of a handful of giants. Lorenz had written a paper on Walter Reed and William Gorgas, the two Army doctors who had defeated Yellow fever with a combination of systematic investigation and ruthless application of what they had learned. But learning in this business came so slow and so dear.

"Put up the other one, Kenny."

"Yes, Doctor," the intercom replied. A moment later, a second image came up alongside the first.

"Yep," Forster said. "Looks pretty much the same."

"That's from the nurse. Watch this." Lorenz hit the button on the phone. "Okay, Kenny, now hit the computer." Before their eyes a computer image of both examples appeared. The computer rotated one to match the other, then overlaid them. They matched exactly.

"At least it hasn't mutated."

"Hasn't had much of a chance. Two patients. They've done a good job of isolating. Maybe we were lucky. The kid's parents have been tested. They seem to be clean, or so the telex says. Nothing else from his neighborhood. The WHO team is checking around the area. The usual, monkeys, bats, bugs. So far, nothing. Could just be an anomaly." It was as much a hope as a judgment.

"I'm going to play with this one a little. I've ordered some monkeys. I want to grow this one, get it into some cells, and then, Ralph, I'm going to examine what it does on a minute-by-minute basis. Get the infected cells, and pull a sample out every minute, slice it down, burn it with UV, freeze it in liquid nitrogen, and put it under the scope. I want to look at how the virus RNA gets going. There's a sequencing issue here . . . can't quite say what I'm thinking. The thought's kind of lurking out there on me. Damn." Gus opened his desk drawer, pulled out his pipe, and lit it with a kitchen match. It *was* his office, after all, and he *did* think better with a pipe in his mouth. In the field he said that the smoke kept the bugs away, and besides, he didn't inhale. Out of politeness, he cracked open the window.

The idea for which he had just received funding was more complicated than

his brief expression, and both men knew it. The same experimental procedure would have to be repeated a thousand times or more to get a correct read on how the process took place, and that was just the baseline data. Every single sample would have to be examined and mapped. It could take years, but if Lorenz were right, at the end of it, for the first time, would be a blueprint of what a virus did, how its RNA chain affected a living cell.

"We're playing with a similar idea up in Baltimore."

"Oh?"

"Part of the genome project. We're trying to read the complex interactions. The process—*how* this little bastard attacks the cells down at the molecular level. How Ebola replicates without a proper editing function in the genome. There's something to be learned there. But the complexity of the issue is a killer. We have to figure out the questions to ask before we can start looking for answers. And then we need a computer genius to tell a machine how to analyze it."

Lorenz's eyebrows went up. "How far along are you?"

Forster shrugged. "Chalk on a blackboard."

"Well, when I get my monkeys, I'll let you know what we develop here. If nothing else, the tissue samples ought to shed a little light."

• • •

THE FUNERAL WAS epic, with a ready cast of thousands, howling their loyalty to a dead man and concealing their real thoughts; you could almost feel them looking around and wondering what came next. There was the gun carriage, the soldiers with reversed rifles, the riderless horse, the marching soldiers, all captured off Iraqi TV by STORM TRACK and uplinked to Washington.

"I wish we could see more faces," Vasco said quietly.

"Yeah," the President agreed. Ryan didn't smile but wanted to. He'd never really stop being an intelligence officer. Jack was sure of that. He wanted the data fresh, not massaged and presented to him by others. In this case he got to watch it live, with his color commentators at his side.

In America, a generation earlier, it would have been called a happening. People showed up and acted out because it was an expected thing. A literal sea of people filled the square—it had a name, but nobody seemed to know it —and even those who couldn't see . . . oh, a new camera gave the answer to the question. Big-screen TVs showed everyone what was happening. Jack wondered if they'd do an instant replay. Two lines of generals marched behind the gun carriage, and were keeping step, Ryan saw.

"How much farther you think they'll walk?"

"Hard to say, Mr. President."

"It's Bert, right?" the President asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Bert, I can call in one of my NIOs to tell me he doesn't know."

Vasco blinked, as expected. Then he decided, what the hell? "Eight out often, they bug out."

"Those are betting odds. Tell me why."

"Iraq has nothing to fall back on. You don't run a dictatorship by committee, at least not for long. Not one of those people has the stones to take over on his own. If they stay put and the government changes, it won't change into something nice for them. They'll end up like the Shah's general staff did, backs to a wall, looking at guns. Maybe they'll try to fight it out, but I doubt it. They must have money salted away somewhere. Drinking daiquiris on a beach may not be as much fun as being a general, but it beats the hell out of looking at flowers from the wrong side. They have families to worry about, too."

"So we should plan on a completely new regime in Iraq?" Jack asked.

Vasco nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Iran?"

"I wouldn't bet against it," Vasco answered, "but we just don't have good enough information to make any kind of prediction. I wish I could tell you more, sir, but you don't pay me to speculate."

"That's good enough for now." Actually it wasn't, but Vasco had given Ryan the best he had. "There's not a thing we can do, is there?" This one was for the Foleys.

"Not really," Ed replied. "I suppose we could get someone over there, maybe fly one of our people up from the Kingdom, but the problem then is, whom does he try to meet? We have no way of knowing who's in command there."

"If anyone," Mary Pat added, looking at the marching men. None of them took the lead.

"WHAT DO YOU mean?" the buyer asked.

"You didn't pay me on time," the dealer explained with a belch after draining his first beer. "I had another buyer."

"I was only two days late," the buyer protested. "There was an administrative problem getting the funds transferred."

"You have the money now?"

"Yes!"

"Then I will find you some monkeys." The dealer lifted his hand, snapped his fingers, and caught the attention of the bar boy. An English planter could not have done it better, in this same bar, fifty years earlier. "It isn't all *that* hard, you know. A week? Less?"

"But CDC wants them at once. The aircraft is already on the way."

"I will do my best. Please explain to your client that if they want their consignment on time, then they should pay their bills on time as well. Thank you," he added for the bar boy. "One for my friend, too, if you please." He could afford that, what with the payment he'd just accepted.

"How long?"

"I told you. A week. Perhaps less." Why was the chap so excited over a few days?

The buyer had no choice, at least not in Kenya. He decided to drink his beer down and speak of other things. Then he'd make a telephone call to Tanzania. After all, the African green monkey was "abundant" throughout Africa. It

wasn't as though there were a shortage of the things, he told himself. Two hours later, he learned something different. There *was* a shortage, though it would last only a few days, as long as it took for the trappers to find a few more troops of the long-tailed pests.

VASCO HANDLED THE translation in addition to his commentary duties. " 'Our wise and beloved leader who has given our country so much . . .' "

"Like population control the hard way," Ed Foley snorted.

The soldiers, all guardsmen, moved the coffin into the prepared tomb, and with that, two decades of Iraqi history passed into the books. More likely a loose-leaf binder, Ryan thought. The big question was, who would write the next chapter?

15

DELIVERIES

SO?" PRESIDENT RYAN asked, after dismissing his latest set of guests.

"The letter, if there ever was one, is missing, sir," Inspector O'Day replied. "The most important bit of information developed to the moment is that Secretary Hanson wasn't all that scrupulous in his document-security procedures. That comes from the State's security chief. He says he counseled the Secretary on several occasions. The people I took over with me are interviewing various people to determine who went in and out of the office. It will go on from there."

"Who's running it?" Ryan remembered that Hanson, good diplomatic technician though he might have been, had never listened all that well to anybody.

"Mr. Murray had designated OPR to continue the investigation independently of his office. That means I'm out, too, because I have reported directly to you in the past. This will be my last direct involvement with the case."

"Strictly by the book?"

"Mr. President, it has to be that way," the inspector said with a nod. "They'll have additional help from the Legal Counsel Division. Those are agents with law degrees who act as in-house legal beagles. They're good troops." O'Day thought for a moment. "Who's been in and out of the Vice President's office?"

"Here, you mean?"

"Yes, sir."

Andrea Price answered that one: "Nobody lately. It's been unused since he left. His secretary went with him and—"

"You might want to have someone check the typewriter. If it uses a carbon-tape ribbon—"

"Right!" She almost moved right out of the Oval Office. "Wait. Have your people—"

"I'll make the call," O'Day assured her. "Sorry, Mr. President. I should have thought of that sooner. Please seal the office for us?"

"Done," Price assured him.

THE NOISE WAS unbearable. The monkeys were social animals, who customarily lived in "troops" of up to eighty individuals that populated mainly the margins of forests on the edge of the broad savannas, the easier to come down from their trees and raid the surrounding open land for food. They had

learned in the past hundred years to raid farms, which was easier and safer than what Nature had programmed into their behavior, because the humans who operated the farms typically controlled the predators which ate the monkeys. An African green was a tasty morsel for a leopard or hyena, but so was a calf, and farmers had to protect those. What resulted was a curious bit of ecological chaos. To protect livestock, the farmers, legally or not, eliminated the predators. That allowed the monkey population to expand rapidly, and the hungry African greens would then attack the cereal and other crops which fed both the farmers and their livestock. As a complication, the monkeys also ate insects which preyed on the crops as well, leading local ecologists to suggest that eliminating the monkeys was bad for the ecology. For the farmers it was much simpler. If it ate their livestock, it was killed. If it ate their crops, it was killed also. Bugs might not be large enough to see, but monkeys were, and so few farmers objected when the trappers came.

Of the family *cercopithecus,* the African green has yellow whiskers and a gold-green back. It can live to thirty years of age—more likely in comfortable captivity than in the predator-infested wild—and has a lively social life. The troops are made of female families, with male monkeys joining the troops individually for periods of a few weeks or months before moving on. An abundance of females in mating season allows a number of males cooperatively to enjoy the situation, but that was not the case in the aircraft. Rather, the cages were stacked like a truckload of chicken coops on the way to market. Some females *were* in season but totally inaccessible, frustrating the would-be suitors. Males stacked next to the cages of other males hissed, clawed, and spat at their unwilling neighbors, all the more unhappy that their captors had not noted the simple fact that same-sized cages were used to imprison different-sized monkeys—the male African green is fully double the size of the female—and cramping males who could smell that most welcome of natural signals, so near and yet so far. Added to the unfamiliar smells of the aircraft and the absence of food and water, the crowding caused nothing short of a simian riot, and since the issue could not be resolved by combat, all that resulted was a collective screech of rage from hundreds of individuals which far outstripped the sound of the JT-8 engines driving the aircraft east over the Indian Ocean.

Forward, the flight crew had their cabin door firmly shut and their headphones clamped tightly over their ears. That attenuated the sound, but not the fetid smell which the aircraft's recirculation systems cycled back and forth, both further enraging the cargo and sickening the crew.

The pilot, normally an eloquent man with his invective, had run out of curses and had tired of entreating Allah to expunge these horrid little creatures from the face of the earth. In a zoo, perhaps, he would have pointed to the long-tailed creatures, and his twin sons would have smiled and perhaps tossed some peanuts to their amusing captives. No more. With his tolerance gone, the pilot reached for the emergency oxygen mask and switched the flow on, wishing then he might blow open the cargo doors, depressurize the aircraft and thus both extinguish the monkeys and vent the dreadful smell. He would have felt better had he known what the monkeys knew. Something evil was afoot for them.

BADRAYN MET THEM again in a communications bunker. It didn't give him the sense of security that all the massed concrete might have. The only reason this one still stood was that it was concealed under the falsework of an industrial building—a bookbindery, in fact, which actually turned out a few books. This one and a handful of others had survived the war with America only because the Americans' intelligence had been faulty. Two "smart bombs" had targeted a building directly across the road. You could still see the crater where the Americans had thought this structure to be. There was a lesson in that, Badrayn thought, still waiting. You had to see it, really, to believe it. It wasn't the same to look at a TV screen or hear about it. There were five meters of rebarred concrete over his head. Five meters. It was solid, built under the supervision of well-paid German engineers. You could still see the impression of the plywood sheets which had held the wet concrete in place. Not a crack to be seen—and yet the only reason this place still stood was because the Americans had bombed the wrong side of the street. Such was the power of modern weapons, and though Ali Badrayn had existed in the world of arms and struggle for all of his life, this was the first time he fully appreciated that fact.

They were good hosts. He had a full colonel to look after him. Two sergeants fetched snacks and drinks. He'd watched the funeral on the TV. It was as predictable as one of the American police programs that blanketed the world. You always knew how it would end. The Iraqis, like most people in the region, were a passionate race, particularly when assembled in large numbers and encouraged to make the proper noises. They were easily led and easily moved, and Badrayn knew that it didn't always matter by whom. Besides, how much of it had been genuine? The informers were still out there to note who didn't cheer or grieve. The security apparatus which had failed the dead President still operated, and everyone knew it. And so little of the emotion which had flowed so freely on the screen and across the broad plazas was real. He chuckled to himself. Like a woman, Badrayn told himself, feigning her moment of supreme pleasure. The question was, would the men who so often took their pleasure without giving it notice the difference?

They arrived singly, lest a pair or small group travel together and discuss things which the entire assembly needed to hear as one. A fine wooden cabinet was opened to reveal bottles and glasses, and the laws of Islam were violated. Badrayn didn't mind. He had a glass of vodka, for which he'd acquired the taste twenty years earlier in Moscow, then the capital of a country now vanished.

They were surprisingly quiet for such powerful men, all the more so for people attending the wake of a man they'd never loved. They sipped their drinks—mainly scotch—and again they mainly looked at one another. On the television, still switched on, the local station was replaying the funeral procession, the announcer extolling the surpassing virtue of the fallen leader. The generals looked on and listened, but the look on their faces was not one of sadness, but fear. Their world had come to an end. They were not moved by the shouts of the citizens or the words of the news commentator. They all

knew better.

The last of them arrived. He was the intelligence chief who'd met Badrayn earlier in the day, fresh from having stopped in at his headquarters. The others looked to him, and he answered without the necessity of hearing the question.

"Everything is quiet, my friends."

For now. That terse observation didn't have to be spoken either.

Badrayn could have spoken, but didn't. His was an eloquent voice. Over the years he'd had to motivate many persons, and he knew how, but this was a time when silence was the most powerful statement of all. He merely looked at them, and waited, knowing that his eyes spoke far more loudly than any voice could have done.

"I don't like this," one of them said finally. Not a single face changed. Hardly surprising. None of them liked it. The one who spoke merely affirmed what all thought, and showed himself in doing so to be the weakest of the group.

"How do we know we can trust your master?" the head of the Guards asked.

"He gives you his word in the name of God," Badrayn replied, setting down his glass. "If you wish, a delegation of your number may fly to see him. In that case, I will remain here as your hostage. But if you wish that, it must be done quickly."

They all knew that, too. The thing they feared was as likely to happen before their possible departure as after. There followed another period of silence. They were scarcely even sipping at their drinks now. Badrayn could read their faces. They all wanted someone else to make a stand, and then that stand could be agreed to or disputed, and in the process the group would reach a collective position with which all would probably abide, though there might be a faction of two or three to consider an alternative course of action. That depended on which of them placed his life on the scales and tried to weigh it against an unknown future. He waited vainly to see who would do that. Finally, one of them spoke.

"I was late marrying," the air force chief said. His twenties and thirties had been the life of a fighter pilot on the ground if not quite in the air. "I have young children." He paused and looked around. "I think we all know the possible—the *likely*—outcome for our families should things

. . . develop unfavorably." It was a dignified gambit, Badrayn thought. They could not be cowardly. They were soldiers, after all.

Daryaei's promise in God's name was not overly convincing to them. It had been a very long time since any of them had visited a mosque for any purpose other than to be photographed there in his simulated devotions, and though it was very different for their enemy, trust in another's religion begins in one's own heart.

"I presume that finances are not at issue here," Badrayn said, both to be sure that it was not, and to make them examine that option themselves. A few heads turned with looks that were close to amusement, and the question was answered. Though official Iraqi accounts had long been frozen, there were other such accounts which had not. The nationality of a bank account was, after all, fungible, all the more so with the size of the account. Each of these men, Badrayn thought, had personal access to nine figures of some hard

currency, probably dollars or pounds, and this was not the time to worry about whose money it should have been.

The next question was, Where could they go, and how could they get there safely? Badrayn could see that in their faces, and yet he could do nothing at the moment. The irony of the situation, which only he was in a position to appreciate, was that the enemy whom they feared and whose word they distrusted wished nothing more than to allay their fear and keep his word. But Ali knew him to be a surpassingly patient man. Else he would not have been here at all.

"YOU'RE QUITE SURE?"

"The situation is nearly ideal," Daryaei's visitor told him, explaining further.

Even for a religious man who believed in the Will of God, the confluence of events was just too good to be true, and yet it was or appeared to be so.

"And?"

"And we are proceeding according to the plan."

"Excellent." It wasn't. Daryaei would have much preferred to deal with each in turn, the better to concentrate his formidable intellect on the three developing situations one at a time, but this was not always possible, and perhaps that was the sign. In any case, he had no choice. How strange that he should feel trapped by events resulting from plans he himself had set in motion.

THE HARDEST PART was dealing with his World Health Organization colleagues. That was only possible because the news was good so far. Benedict Mkusa, the "Index Patient" or "Patient Zero," depending on one's favored terminology, was dead, and his body was destroyed. A team of fifteen had scoured the family's neighborhood and found nothing as yet. The critical period had yet to run out—Ebola Zaire had a normal incubation period of four to ten days, though there were extreme cases as brief as two days and as long as nineteen but the only other case was before his eyes. It turned out that Mkusa was a budding naturalist, who spent much of his free time in the bush, and so now there was a search team in the tropical forest, catching rodents and bats and monkeys to make yet another attempt to discover the "host," or carrier of the deadly virus. But above all they hoped that, for once, fortune had smiled on them. The Index Patient had come directly to hospital because of his family status. His parents, educated and affluent, had let health-care professionals treat the boy instead of doing so themselves, and in that they had probably saved their own lives, though even now they were waiting out the incubation period with what had to be stark terror that surpassed even their grief at the loss of a son. Every day they had their blood drawn for the standard IFA and antigen tests, but the tests could be misleading, as some insensitive medico had foolishly told them. Regardless, the WHO team was allowing itself to hope that this outbreak would stop at two patient-victims, and because of that, they were willing to consider what Dr. Moudi proposed to

do.

There were objections, of course. The local Zairean physicians wanted to treat her here. There was merit to that. They had more experience with Ebola than anybody, though it had done little good to anyone, and the WHO team was reluctant for political reasons to insult their colleagues. There had been some unfortunate incidents before, with the natural hauteur of the Europeans resented by the local doctors. There was justice on both sides. The quality of the African doctors was uneven. Some were excellent, some terrible, and some ordinary. The telling argument was that Rousseau in Paris was a genuine hero to the international community, a gifted scientist and a ferociously dedicated clinician who refused to accept the fact that viral diseases could not be treated effectively. Rousseau, in the tradition of Pasteur before him, was determined to break that rule. He'd tried ribavirin and interferon as treatments for Ebola, without positive result. His latest theoretical gambit was dramatic and likely to be ineffective, but it had shown some small promise in monkey studies, and he wanted to try it on a human patient under carefully controlled conditions. Though his proposed method of treatment was anything but practical for real clinical application, you had to start somewhere.

The deciding factor, predictably, was the identity of the patient. Many of the WHO team knew her from the last Ebola outbreak at Kikwit. Sister Jean Baptiste had flown to that town to supervise the local nurses, and doctors no less than others could be moved by familiarity with those under their care. Finally, it was agreed that, yes, Dr. Moudi could transport the patient.

The mechanics of the transfer were difficult enough. They used a truck rather than an ambulance, because a truck would be easier to scrub down afterward. The patient was lifted on a plastic sheet onto a gurney and wheeled out into the corridor. That was cleared of other people, and as Moudi and Sister Maria Magdalena wheeled the patient toward the far door, a group of technicians dressed in plastic "space suits" sprayed the floor and walls, the very air itself, with disinfectant in a smelly man-made chemical fog that trailed the procession like exhaust from an overaged car.

The patient was heavily sedated and firmly restrained. Her body was cocooned to prevent the release of virus-rich bleeding. The plastic sheet under her had been sprayed with the same neutralizing chemicals, so that leaks would immediately find a very adverse environment for the virus particles they carried. As Moudi pushed the gurney from behind, he marveled at his own madness, taking such chances with something as deadly as this. Jean Baptiste's face, at least, was placid from the dangerously high dosage of narcotics, marked though it was with the growing petechia.

They moved outdoors onto the loading dock where supplies arrived at the hospital. The truck was there, its driver seated firmly behind the wheel and not even looking backward at them, except perhaps in the mirror. The interior of the van body had likewise been sprayed, and with the door closed and the gurney firmly locked in place, it drove off with a police escort, never exceeding thirty kilometers per hour for the short trip to the local airport. That was just as well. The sun was still high, and its heat rapidly turned the truck into a mobile oven, boiling off the protective chemicals into the enclosed space. The smell of the disinfectant came through the suit's filtration system.

Fortunately, the doctor was used to it.

The aircraft was waiting. The G-IV had arrived only two hours earlier after a direct flight from Tehran. The interior had been stripped of everything but two seats and a cot. Moudi felt the truck stop and turn and back up. Then the cargo door opened, dazzling them with the sun. Still the nurse, and still a compassionate one, Sister Maria Magdalena used her hand to shield the eyes of her colleague.

There were others there, of course. Two more nuns in protective garb were close by, and a priest, with yet more farther away. All were praying as some other lifted the patient by the plastic sheet and carried her slowly aboard the white-painted business jet. It took five careful minutes before she was firmly strapped in place, and the ground crewmen withdrew. Moudi gave his patient a careful look, checking pulse and blood pressure, the former rapid and the latter still dropping. That worried him. He needed her alive as long as possible. With that done, he waved to the flight crew and strapped into his own seat.

Sitting down, he took the time to look out his window, and Moudi was alarmed to see a TV camera pointed at the aircraft. At least they kept their distance, the doctor thought, as he heard the first engine spool up. Out the other window, he saw the cleanup crew respraying the truck. That was overly theatrical. Ebola, deadly as it was, appeared to be a delicate organism, soon killed by the ultraviolet of direct sunlight, vulnerable also to heat. That was why the search for the host was so frustrating. *Something* carried this dreadful "bug." Ebola could not exist on its own, but whatever it was that provided a comfortable home to the virus, whatever it was that Ebola rewarded for the service by not harming it, whatever the living creature was that haunted the African continent like a shadow, was as yet undiscovered. The physician grunted. Once he'd hoped to discover that host and so make use of it, but that hope had always been in vain. Instead he had something almost as good. He had a living patient whose body was now breeding the pathogen, and while all previous victims of Ebola had been burned, or buried in soil soaked with chemicals, this one would have a very different fate. The aircraft started moving. Moudi checked his seat belt again and wished he could have something to drink.

Forward, the two pilots were wearing flight suits of protective nomex previously sprayed. Their face masks muffled their words, forcing repetition of their request for clearance, but finally the tower got things right, and the Gulfstream began its takeoff roll, rotating swiftly into the clean African sky, and heading north. The first leg of their trip would be 2,551 miles, and would last just over six hours.

Another, nearly identical G-IV had already landed at Benghazi, and now its crew was being briefed on emergency procedures.

"CANNIBALS." HOLBROOK SHOOK his head in temporary disbelief. He'd slept very late, having been up late the night before, watching all manner of talking heads on C-SPAN discuss the confusing situation with Congress after this Ryan guy's speech. Not a bad speech, considering. He'd seen worse. All lies, of

course, kind of like a TV show. Even the ones you liked, well, you just knew that they weren't real, funny though they might be in ways intended and not. Some talented man had written the speech, with the purpose of getting just the right points across. The skill of those people was impressive. The Mountain Men had worked for years to develop a speech they could use to get people mobilized to their point of view. Tried and tried, but they just couldn't ever get it right. It wasn't that their beliefs had anything wrong with them, of course. They all knew that. The problem was packaging, and only the government and its ally, Hollywood, could afford the right people to develop the ideas that twisted the minds of the poor dumb bastards who didn't really get it—that was the only possible conclusion.

But now there was discord in the enemy camp.

Ernie Brown, who'd driven over to wake his friend up, muted the TV. "I guess there just isn't enough room for both of them in that there town, Pete."

"You think one will be gone by sundown?" Holbrook asked.

"I wish." The legal commentary they'd just watched on the CNN political hour had been as muddled as a nigger march on Washington to increase welfare. "Well, uh, gee, the Constitution doesn't say what to do in a case like this. I suppose they *could* settle it with forty-fours on Pennsylvania Avenue at sundown," Ernie added with a chuckle.

Pete turned his head and grinned. "Wouldn't that be a sight?"

"Too American." Brown might have added that Ryan *had* actually been in a position like that once, or so the papers and TV said. Well, yeah, it was true. Both vaguely remembered the thing in London, and truth be told, they'd both been proud to see an American showing the Europeans how a gun is used—foreigners didn't know dick about guns, did they? They were as bad as Hollywood. It was a shame Ryan had gone bad. What he'd said in his speech, that was why he'd entered the government—that's what they *all* said. At least with that Kealty puke, he could fall back on family and stuff. They were all crooks and thieves, and that's just how the guy was brought up, after all. At least he wasn't a hypocrite about it. A high-class gypsy or . . . coyote? Yeah, that was right. Kealty was a lifetime political crook, and he was just being what he was. You couldn't blame a coyote for crooning at the moon; he was just being himself, too. Of course, coyotes were pests. Local ranchers could kill all they wanted . . . Brown tilted his head. "Pete?"

"Yeah, Ernie?" Holbrook reached for the TV controller and was about to unmute it.

"We got a constitutional crisis, right?"

It was Holbrook's turn to look. "Yeah, that's what all the talking heads say."

"And it just got worse, right?"

"The Kealty thing? Sure looks that way." Pete set the controller down. Ernie was having another idea attack.

"What if, um . . ." Brown started and stopped, staring at the silent TV. It took time for his thoughts to form, Holbrook knew, though they were often worth waiting for.

THE 707 LANDED, finally, at Tehran-Mehrabad International Airport, well

after midnight. The crew were zombies, having flown almost continuously for the past thirty-six hours, well over the cautious limits of civil aviation, abused all the more by the nature of their cargo, and in so foul a mood from it all that angry words had been traded during the long descent. But the aircraft touched down with a heavy thump, and with that came relief and embarrassment, which each of the three felt as they took a collective sigh. The pilot shook his head and rubbed his face with a tired hand, taxiing south, steering between the blue lights. This airport is also the site of Iranian military and air force headquarters. The aircraft completed its turn, reversing directions and heading for the spacious air force ramp area—though its markings were civil, the 707 actually belonged to the Iranian air force. Trucks were waiting there, the flight crew was glad to see. The aircraft stopped. The engineer switched off the engines. The pilot set the parking brakes. The three men turned inward.

"A long day, my friends," the pilot said by way of apology.

"God willing, a long sleep to follow it," the engineer—he'd been the main target of his captain's temper—replied, accepting it. They were all too weary to sustain an argument in any case, and after a proper rest they wouldn't remember the reasons for it anyway.

They removed their oxygen masks, to be greeted by the thick fetid smell of their cargo, and it was everything they could do not to vomit as the cargo door was opened in the rear. They couldn't leave just yet. The aircraft was well and truly stuffed with cages, and short of climbing out the windows—which was too undignified—they'd have to await their freedom, rather like passengers at any international terminal.

Soldiers did the unloading, a process made all the more difficult by the fact that no one had warned their commander to issue gloves, as the Africans had done. Every cage had a wire handle at the top, but the African greens were every bit as testy as the men up front, clawing and scratching at the hands trying to lift them. Reactions differed among the soldiers. Some slapped at the cages, hoping to cow the monkeys into passivity. The smart ones removed their field jackets and used them as a buffer when they handled the cages. Soon a chain of men was established, and the cages were transferred, one at a time, to a series of trucks.

The procedure was noisy. It was barely fifty degrees in Tehran that night, far below what the monkeys were accustomed to, and that didn't help their collective mood any more than anything else that had happened to them over the past few days. They responded to the newest trauma with screeches and howls that echoed across the ramp. Even people who'd never heard monkeys before would not mistake it for anything else, but that could not be helped. Finally it was done. The cabin door opened, and the crew had a chance to look at what had become of their once-spotless aircraft. It would be weeks before they got the smell out, they were sure, and just scrubbing it down would be an onerous task best not considered at the moment. Together they walked aft, then down the stairs and off to where their cars were parked.

The monkeys headed north in what for them was their third or fourth—and last—journey by truck. It was a short one, up a divided highway, over a cloverleaf interchange built under the reign of the Shah, then west to Hasanabad. Here there was a farm, long since set aside for the same purpose

which had occasioned the transport of the monkeys from Africa to Asia. The farm was state-owned, used as an experimental station to test new crops and fertilizers, and it had been hoped that the produce grown here would feed the new arrivals, but it was still winter and nothing was growing at the moment. Instead, several truckloads of dates from the southeastern region of the country had just arrived. The monkeys smelled them as their transport pulled up to the new three-story concrete building that would be their final home. It only agitated them all the more, since they'd had neither food nor water since leaving the continent of their birth, but at least it gave them the hope of a meal, and a tasty one at that, as a last meal is supposed to be.

THE GULFSTREAM G-IV touched down at Benghazi exactly on its flight plan. It had actually been as pleasant a journey as was possible under the circumstances. Even the normally roiled air over the central Sahara had been calm, making for a smooth ride. Sister Jean Baptiste had remained unconscious for most of the flight, drifting into semi-awareness only a few times, and soon drifting back out again, actually more comfortable than the other four people aboard, whose protective garb prevented even a sip of water.

The doors never opened on the aircraft. Instead fuel trucks pulled up and their drivers dismounted to attach hoses to the caps in the long white wings. Dr. Moudi was still tensely awake. Sister Maria Magdalena was dozing. She was as old as the patient, and had scarcely slept in days, devoted as she was to her colleague. It was too bad, Moudi thought, frowning as he looked out the window. It was unjust. He didn't have it in his heart to hate these people anymore. He'd felt that way once. He'd thought all Westerners were enemies of his country, but these two were not. Their home country was essentially neutral toward his. They were not the animistic pagans of Africa, ignorant and uncaring of the true God. They'd devoted their lives to service in His name, and both had surprised him by showing respect for his personal prayers and devotions. More than anything, he respected their belief that faith was a path to progress rather than acceptance of preordained destiny, an idea not totally congruent with his Islamic beliefs, but not exactly contrary to them either. Maria Magdalena had a rosary in her hands—disinfected—which she used to organize her prayers to Mary, mother of Jesus the prophet, venerated as thoroughly in the Koran as in her own abbreviated scriptures, and as fine a model for women to follow as any woman who had ever lived ...

Moudi snapped his head away from them to look outside. He couldn't allow such thoughts. He had a task, and here were the instruments of that task, one's fate assigned by Allah, and the other's chosen by herself—and that was that. The task was without, not within, not one of his making, a fact made clear when the fuel trucks pulled away and the engines started up again. The flight crew was in a hurry, and so was he, the better to get the troublesome part of his mission behind, and the mechanical part begun. There was reason to rejoice. All those years among pagans, living in tropical heat, not a mosque within miles of his abode. Miserable, often tainted food, always wondering if it was clean or unclean, and never really being sure. That was behind him.

What lay before was service to his God and his country.

Two aircraft, not one, taxied off to the main north-south runway, jostling as they did so on concrete slabs made uneven by the murderous desert heat of summer and the surprising cold of winter nights. The first of them was not Moudi's. That G-IV, outwardly identical in every way but a single digit's difference on the tail code, streaked down the runway and lifted off due north. His aircraft duplicated the takeoff roll, but as soon as the wheels were up, this G-IV turned right for a southeasterly heading toward Sudan, a lonely aircraft in a lonely desert night.

The first turned slightly west, and entered the normal international air corridor for the French coast. In due course, it would pass near the island of Malta, where a radar station existed to serve the needs of the airport at Valetta and also to perform traffic-control duties for the central Mediterranean. The crew of this aircraft were all air force types who customarily flew political and business luminaries from point to point, which was safe, well paid, and boring. Tonight would be different. The co-pilot had his eyes fixed jointly on his knee chart and the GPS navigation system. Two hundred miles short of Malta, at a cruising altitude of 39,000 feet, he took the nod from the pilot and flipped the radar transponder setting to 7711.

"VALETTA APPROACH, VALETTA Approach, this is November-Juliet-Alpha, Mayday, Mayday, Mayday."

The controller at Valetta immediately noted the triple-bogie signature on his scope. It was a quiet watch at the traffic-control center, the normally sparse air traffic to monitor, and this night was as routine as any other—he keyed his microphone at once as his other hand waved for his supervisor.

"Juliet-Alpha, Valetta, are you declaring an emergency, sir?"

"Valetta, Juliet-Alpha, affirmative. We are medical evacuation flight inbound Paris from Zaire. We just lost number-two engine and we have electrical problems, stand by—"

"Juliet-Alpha, Valetta, standing by, sir." The scope showed the aircraft's altitude as 390, then 380, then 370. "Juliet-Alpha, Valetta, I show you losing altitude."

The voice in his headphones changed. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday! Both engines out, both engines out. Attempting restart. This is Juliet-Alpha."

"Your direct penetration course Valetta is three-four-three, say again, direct vector Valetta three-four-three. We are standing by, sir."

A terse, clipped "Roger" was all the controller got back. The altitude readout was 330 now.

"What's happening?" the supervisor asked.

"He says both engines out, he's dropping rapidly." A computer screen showed the aircraft to be a Gulfstream, and the flight plan was confirmed.

"It glides well," the supervisor offered optimistically; 310, they both saw. The G-IV didn't glide all that well, however.

"Juliet-Alpha, Valetta."

Nothing.

"Juliet-Alpha, this is Valetta Approach."

“What else is—” The supervisor checked the screen himself. No other aircraft in the area, and all one could do was watch anyway.

THE BETTER TO simulate the in-flight emergency, the pilot throttled his engines back to idle. The tendency was to ham things up, but they wouldn’t. In fact, they’d say nothing else at all. He pushed the yoke farther forward to increase his rate of descent, then turned to port as though angling toward Malta. That should make the tower people feel good, he thought, passing through 25,000 feet. It actually felt good. He’d been a fighter pilot for his country once, and missed the delightful feelings you got from yanking and banking an airplane around the sky. A descent of this speed would have his passengers white-faced and panicking. For the pilot it just felt like what flying was supposed to be.

“HE MUST BE very heavy,” the supervisor said.

“Cleared into Paris De Gaulle.” The controller shrugged and grimaced. “Just topped off in Benghazi.”

“Bad fuel?” The answer was merely another shrug.

It was like watching death on television, all the more horrible that the alpha-numeric blip’s altitude digits were clicking down like the symbols on a slot machine.

The supervisor lifted a phone. “Call the Libyans. Ask if they can get a rescue aircraft up. We have an aircraft about to go down in the Gulf of Sidra.”

“Valetta Approach, this is USS *Radford,* do you copy, over.”

“*Radford,* Valetta.”

“WE HAVE YOUR contact on radar. Looks like he’s coming down hard.” The voice was that of a junior-grade lieutenant who had the CIC duty this night. *Radford* was an aging Spruance-class destroyer heading for Naples after an exercise with the Egyptian navy. Along the way she had orders to enter the Gulf of Sidra to proclaim freedom-of-navigation rights, an exercise which was almost as old as the ship herself. Once the source of considerable excitement, and two pitched air-sea battles in the 1980s, it was now boringly routine, else *Radford* wouldn’t be going it alone. Boring enough that the CIC crewmen were monitoring civilian radio freqs to relieve their torpor. “Contact is eight-zero miles west of us. We are tracking.”

“Can you respond to a rescue request?”

“Valetta, I just woke the captain up. Give us a few to get organized here, but we can make a try for it, over.”

“Dropping like a rock,” the petty officer on the main scope reported. “Better pull out soon, fella.”

“Target is a Gulf-Four business jet. We show him one-six-thousand and descending rapidly,” Valetta advised.

“Thank you, that’s about what we have. We are standing by.”

"What gives?" the captain asked, dressed in khaki pants and a T-shirt. The report didn't take long. "Okay, get the rotor heads woke up." Next the commander lifted a growler phone. "Bridge, CIC, captain speaking. All ahead full, come right to new course—"

"Two-seven-five, sir," the radar man advised. "Target is two-seven-five and eighty-three miles."

"New course two-seven-five."

"Aye, sir. Coming right to two-seven-five, all ahead full, aye," the officer of the deck acknowledged. On the bridge the quartermaster of the watch pushed down the direct engine-control handles, dumping additional fuel into the big GE jet-turbines. *Radford* shuddered a bit, then settled at the stern as she began to accelerate up from eighteen knots. The captain looked around the capacious combat information center. The crewmen were alert, a few shaking their heads to come fully awake. The radar-men were adjusting their instruments. On the main scope, the display changed, the better to lock in the descending aircraft.

"Let's go to general quarters," the skipper said next. Might as well get some good training time out of this. In thirty seconds, everyone aboard was startled into consciousness and running to stations.

YOU HAVE TO be careful descending to the ocean surface at night. The pilot of the G-IV kept a close eye on his altitude and rate of descent. The lack of good visual references made it all too easy to slam into the surface, and while that might have made their evening's mission perfect, it wasn't supposed to be *that* perfect. In another few seconds they'd drop off the Valetta radar scope, and then they could start pulling out of the dive. The only thing that concerned him now was the possible presence of a ship down there, but no wakes were visible before him in the light of a quarter moon.

"I have it," he announced when the aircraft dropped through five thousand feet. He eased back on the yoke. Valetta might note the change in descent rate from his transponder, if they were still getting a signal, but even if they did, they'd assume that after diving to get airflow into his engines, the better to achieve a restart, he was now trying to level out for a controlled landing on the calm sea.

"LOSING HIM," THE controller said. The display on the screen blinked a few times, came back, then went dark.

The supervisor nodded and keyed his microphone. "*Radford,* this is Valetta. Juliet-Alpha has dropped off our screen. Last altitude reading was six thousand and descending, course three-four-three."

"VALETTA, ROGER, WE still have him, now at four thousand, five hundred, rate of descent has slowed down some, course three-four-three," the CIC officer replied. Just six feet away from him, the captain was talking with the

commander of *Radford*'s air detachment. It would take more than twenty minutes to get the destroyer's single SH-60B Seahawk helicopter launched. The aircraft was now being pre-flighted prior to being pulled out onto the flight deck. The helicopter pilot turned to look at the radar display.

"Calm seas. If he has half a brain, somebody might just walk away from this. You try to splash down parallel to the ground swells and ride it out. Okay, we're on it, sir." With that, he left the CIC and headed aft.

"Losing him under the horizon," the radar man reported. "Just passed through fifteen hundred. Looks like he's going in."

"Tell Valetta," the captain ordered.

THE G-IV LEVELED out at five hundred feet by the radar altimeter. It was as low as the pilot cared to risk. With that done, he powered the engines back up to cruising power and turned left, south, back toward Libya. He was fully alert now. Flying low was demanding under the best circumstances, and far more so over water at night, but his orders were clear, though their purpose was not. It went rapidly in any case. At just over three hundred knots, he had forty minutes to the military airfield, at which he'd refuel one more time for a flight out of the area.

RADFORD WENT TO flight quarters five minutes later, altering course slightly to put the wind over the deck from the proper direction. The Seahawk's tactical navigation system copied the needed data from the ship's CIC. It would search a circle of water fifteen miles in diameter in a procedure that would be tedious, time-consuming, and frantic. There were people in the water, and rendering assistance to those in need was the first and oldest law of the sea. As soon as the helicopter lifted off, the destroyer came back left and raced off with all four main engines turning full power, driving the ship at thirty-four knots. By this time the captain had radioed his situation to Naples, requesting additional assistance from any nearby fleet units—there were no American ships in the immediate vicinity, but an Italian frigate was heading south for their area, and even the Libyan air force asked for information.

THE "LOST" G-IV landed just as the U.S. Navy helicopter reached the search area. The crew left the aircraft for refreshments while their business jet was fueled. As they watched, a Russian-made AN-10 "Cub" four-engine transport fired up its engines to participate in the search-and-rescue mission. The Libyans were cooperating now with such things, trying to rejoin the world community, and even their commanders didn't know very much indeed, hardly anything at all—of what had gone on. Just a few phone calls had made the arrangements, and whoever had taken the call and cooperated knew only that two aircraft would be landing to fuel and move on. An hour later, they lifted off again for the three-hour flight to Damascus, Syria. It had been originally thought that they would fly right back to their home base in

Switzerland, but the pilot had pointed out that two aircraft of the same ownership flying over the same spot at nearly the same time would cause questions. He turned the aircraft east during the climb-out.

Below to his left, in the Gulf of Sidra, they saw the flashing lights of aircraft, one of them a helicopter, they were surprised to note. People were burning fuel and spending time and all for nothing. That thought amused the pilot as he reached his cruising altitude and relaxed, letting the auto-pilot do the work for the remainder of a long day's flying.

"ARE WE THERE yet?"

Moudi turned his head. He'd just changed the IV bottle for their patient. Inside his plastic helmet his face itched from his growing beard. He saw that Sister Maria Magdalena had the same crawly, unwashed feeling he had. Her first action on waking was to move her hands to her face, stopped short by the clear plastic.

"No, Sister, but soon. Please, rest yourself. I can do this."

"No, no, you must be very tired, Dr. Moudi." She started to rise.

"I am younger and better rested," the physician replied with a raised hand. Next he replaced the morphine bottle with a fresh one. Jean Baptiste was, thankfully, still too heavily drugged to be a problem.

"What time is it?"

"Time for you to rest. You will attend your friend when we arrive, but then other doctors will be able to relieve me. Please, conserve your strength. You will need it." Which was true enough.

The nun didn't reply. Accustomed to following the orders of doctors, she turned her head, probably whispered a prayer, and allowed her eyes to close. When he was sure that she was back asleep, he moved forward.

"How much longer?"

"Forty minutes. We'll land a little early. The winds have been good to us," the co-pilot answered.

"So, before dawn?"

"Yes."

"What is her problem?" the pilot asked, not turning, but sufficiently bored that he wanted to hear something new.

"You do not wish to know," Moudi assured him.

"She will die, this woman?"

"Yes, and the aircraft must be completely disinfected before it is used again."

"That's what they told us." The pilot shrugged, not knowing how frightened he should be of what he was carrying. Moudi did. The plastic sheet under his patient would now contain a pool of infected blood. They'd have to be extremely careful unloading her.

BADRAYN WAS GRATEFUL that he'd avoided alcohol. He was the most conscious man in the room. Ten hours, he thought, looking at his watch. Ten

hours they'd talked and disputed like a bunch of old women in a market.

"He will agree to this?" the Guards commander asked.

"It is not unreasonable in the least," Ali replied. Five senior mullahs would fly to Baghdad, offering themselves as hostage to—if not the goodwill, then the good word of their leader. It actually worked out better than the assembled generals knew, not that they really cared. With that settled, the general officers looked at one another, and one by one they nodded.

"We accept," the same general said, speaking for the group. That hundreds of lesser officers would be left behind to face whatever music was in store for them was, after all, a small thing. The lengthy discussion hadn't touched on that subject very much.

"I require a telephone," Badrayn told them next. The intelligence chief led him to a side room. There had always been a direct line to Tehran. Even during hostilities there had been a communications link—that one via microwave tower. The next one was a fiber-optic cable whose transmissions could not be intercepted. Under the watchful eyes of the Iraqi officer he punched the numbers he'd memorized several days earlier.

"This is Yousif. I have news," he told the voice which answered.

"Please wait," was the reply.

• • •

DARYAEI DIDN'T ENJOY being awakened early any more than a normal person, the less so that he'd slept poorly over the last few days. When his bedside phone rang, he blinked his eyes for several rings before reaching to lift it.

"Yes?"

"This is Yousif. It is agreed. Five friends are required."

All praise to Allah, for He is beneficent, Daryaei thought to himself. All the years of war and peace had come to fruition in this moment. No, no, that was premature. There was much yet to be done. But the most difficult thing *was* done now.

"When shall we begin?"

"As quickly as possible."

"Thank you. I will not forget." With that he came fully awake. This morning, the first in many years, he forgot his morning prayers. God would understand that His work must be done quickly.

HOW WEARY SHE must have been, Moudi thought. Both nuns started to wakefulness when the aircraft touched down. There came the usual jolting as the aircraft slowed, and a watery sound announced the fact that Jean Baptiste had indeed bled out as he'd expected. So, he'd gotten her here alive at least. Her eyes were open, though confused as an infant's as she stared at the curving ceiling of the cabin. Maria Magdalena took a moment to look out the windows, but all she saw was an airport, and those appeared the same all over the world, particularly at night. In due course the aircraft stopped, and the

door dropped open.

Again they would travel in a truck. Four people came into the aircraft, all of them dressed in protective plastic. Moudi loosened the straps on his patient, waving the other nun to stay in place. Carefully, the four army medics lifted the sturdy plastic sheet by the corners and moved toward the door. As they did so, Moudi saw something drip onto the flat-folded seat which had served their patient as a bed. He shook it off. The flight crew had their orders, and the orders had been repeated often enough. When the patient was safely on the truck, Moudi and Maria Magdalena walked down the steps as well. Both removed their headgear, allowing themselves to breathe fresh, cool air. He took a canteen from one of the armed party around the aircraft and offered it to her, as he fetched another for himself. Both drained a full liter of water before entering the truck. Both were disoriented by the long flight, she the more so for not knowing where she really was. Moudi saw the 707 which had arrived shortly before with the monkeys, though he didn't know that was the cargo.

"I've never seen Paris—well, except flying through, all these years," she said, looking around before the back flap was dropped, cutting off the view.

A pity you never will.

16

THE IRAQI TRANSFER

A WHOLE LOT OF NOTHING here," the pilot observed. The Seahawk was circling at a thousand feet, scanning the surface with a search radar acute enough to detect wreckage—it was designed to spot a submarine's periscope—but finding not so much as a floating bottle of Perrier. Both also wore low-light goggles, and they should have turned up a slick of jet fuel from the oily shine, but that also was negative.

"Must have hit pretty hard not to leave anything," the co-pilot replied over the intercom.

"Unless we're looking in the wrong spot." The pilot looked down at his tactical navigation system. They were in the right place. They were down to an hour's fuel. Time to start thinking about landing back on *Radford,* which was now combing the search area herself. The searchlights looked theatrical in the pre-dawn darkness, like something out of a World War II movie. A Libyan Cub was circling around, too, trying to be helpful but mainly being a pain in the ass.

"Anything at all?" the controller on *Radford* asked.

"Negative. Nothing, say again nothing, down there that we can see. One hour's worth of gas here, over."

"Copy one hour gas," *Radford* acknowledged.

"Sir, the target's last course was three-four-three, speed two-nine-zero knots, rate of descent three thousand foot per minute. If he ain't in this footprint, I don't know why," a chief operations specialist said, tapping the chart. The captain sipped at his coffee and shrugged. Topside, the fire-and-rescue party was standing by. Two swimmers were in wetsuits, with a boat crew standing by the launch. There was a lookout posted for every set of binoculars aboard, looking for strobe lights or anything else, and sonar was listening for the high-frequency ping of the aircraft's emergency locator. Those instruments were designed to survive a severe impact, were automatically activated when exposed to seawater, and had battery power to operate for several days. *Radford*'s sonar was sensitive enough to detect the damned thing from thirty miles away, and they were right over the impact zone predicted by the radar crew. Neither the ship nor her crew had ever done a rescue like this, but it was something for which they regularly drilled, and every procedure had been executed as perfectly as the CO could wish.

"USS *Radford,* USS *Radford,* this is Valetta Approach, over."

The captain lifted the microphone. "Valetta, this is *Radford.*"

"Have you located anything, over?"

"Negative, Valetta. Our helo's been all over the area, nothing to report yet."

They'd already queried Malta for corrected data on the aircraft's last speed and heading, but it had dropped off the civilian radar even before departing the destroyer's more precise coverage. On both ends of the radio link, men sighed. They all knew how this would play out now. The search would continue for a day, no more, no less, and nothing would be found, and that was that. A telex had already gone to the manufacturer, informing them that one of their aircraft was lost at sea. Gulfstream representatives would fly to Bern to go over maintenance records and other printed data on the aircraft, hoping to garner a clue, and probably finding nothing, and this whole case would go into the "unknown" column in somebody's ledger book. But the game had to be played out, and, hell, it was still good training time for the crew of USS *Radford.* The crew would shrug it off. It wasn't anyone they knew, however desirable and uplifting a successful rescue would have been.

IT WAS PROBABLY the smell that told her what was wrong. The drive from the airport had been brief. It was dark outside still, and when the truck stopped, both doctor and nurse were still suffering from the lengthy time in movement. They arrived, and the first business was to get Sister Jean Baptiste inside. Only then did both of them remove their plastic garb for the last time. Maria Magdalena smoothed her short hair and breathed heavily, finally taking the time to look around, then was surprised at what she saw. Moudi saw the confusion, and led her inside before she could comment on it.

That was when the smell hit them, a familiar African smell from the entry of the monkeys a few hours earlier, decidedly not something one would associate with Paris or a place as clean and orderly as the Pasteur Institute had to be. Next, Maria Magdalena looked around and realized that the signs on the walls were not in French. There was no way she could know what the situation was, there were merely grounds for confusion, to be followed by questions—and then, just as well, it was time, before the questions could be asked. A soldier appeared and took her arm and led her away, too uncomprehending still to say anything. She merely looked over her shoulder at an unshaven man in surgical greens, a sad look on his face giving greater substance to her confusion.

"What is this? Who is she?" the director of the project asked.

"It is a rule of their religion that they cannot travel alone. To protect their chastity," Moudi explained. "Otherwise I could not have come here with our patient."

"She is still alive?" He hadn't been there for the arrival.

Moudi nodded. "Yes, we should be able to keep her going another three days, maybe four," he thought.

"And the other?"

Moudi dodged: "That is not for me to say."

"We could always have another—"

"No! That would be barbaric," Moudi protested. "Such things are hateful to God."

"And what we plan to do is not?" the director asked. Clearly Moudi had been in the bush for too long. But it wasn't worth fighting over. One fully

infected Ebola patient was all they needed. “Get cleaned up and we will go up to see her.”

Moudi headed off to the doctors’ lounge on the second floor. The facility was actually more private than its Western counterparts, as people in this part of the world had higher standards of body modesty. The plastic suit, he saw with some surprise, had survived the trip without a single tear. He dumped it in a large plastic bin before heading into a shower whose hot water was supplemented with chemicals—he hardly noticed the smell anymore—and there he enjoyed five minutes of sanitary bliss. On the flight he’d wondered if he would ever be clean again. In the shower now, his mind asked a similar question, but more quietly. He emerged to don fresh greens fresh everything, in fact—and to complete his normally fastidious routine. A medical orderly had placed a brand-new suit in the lounge for him, this one a blue American Racal fresh out of its box, which he put on before heading out into the corridor. The director, similarly dressed, was waiting for him, and together they walked down toward the suite of treatment rooms.

There were only four of them, behind sealed, guarded doors. The Iranian army ran this facility. The doctors were military physicians, and the orderlies all men with battlefield experience. Security was tight, as one would expect. Moudi and the director had cleared security on the first floor, however, and the guard at the post touched the buttons to open the doors into the air lock. These opened with a hiss of hydraulics to reveal a second set, and they could see that smoke from the soldier’s cigarette was sucked into the secure area. Good. The air system was working properly. Both men had a strange prejudice against their own countrymen. It would have been preferable for this entire facility to have been built by foreign engineers—Germans were popular in the Middle East for such things—but Iraq had made that mistake to its sorrow. The orderly Germans kept plans of everything they built, as a result of which so many of their projects had been bombed to dust. And so while a lot of the building’s hardware had been bought elsewhere, the facility had been constructed locally. Their very lives depended on the exact performance of every subsystem here, but that could not be helped now. The inner doors would not open unless the outer ones were locked tight. That worked. The director activated them, and they proceeded.

Sister Jean Baptiste was in the last room on the right. Three medical orderlies were in with her. They’d already cut off all her clothing, revealing a death in progress. The soldiers were repulsed by what they saw, her condition more terrible than any battlefield injury. Quickly, they cleaned off her body, then covered it, respectful of the woman’s modesty as their culture insisted. The director looked at the morphine drip and immediately turned it back by a third.

“We want to keep her alive as long as possible,” he explained.

“The pain from this—”

“Cannot be helped,” he responded coldly. He thought to reproach Moudi, but stopped himself. He was a physician, too, and knew that it was hard to regard one’s patient with harshness. Elderly Caucasian female, he saw, stuporous from the morphine, respiration too slow for his liking. The orderlies attached leads for the electrocardiograph, and he was surprised at how well

her heart was working. Good. Blood pressure was low, as expected, and he ordered two units of whole blood to be hung on the IV tree. The more blood the better.

The orderlies were well drilled. Everything that had come in with the patient had already been bagged, then double-bagged. One of their number carried the bundle out of the room and off to the gas-fired incinerator which would leave behind nothing but sterilized ashes. The main issue here was management of the virus. The patient was their culture dish. Previously, such victims had had a few cc's of blood drawn for analysis, and the patient in due course would die, and the body was either burned or sprayed and buried in chemically treated ground. Not this time. He would have in his control, in due course, the largest quantity of the virus ever seen, and from that he would grow more, all virulent, all powerful. He turned.

"So, Moudi, how did she contract it?"

"She was treating the Index Patient."

"The Negro boy?" the director asked, standing in the corner.

Moudi nodded. "Yes."

"What did she do wrong?"

"We never found out. I asked her when she was still lucid. She never gave the boy an injection, and Sister was always very careful with 'sharps.' She's an experienced nurse," Moudi reported mechanically. He really was too tired to do much of anything but report what he knew, and that, the director thought, was just fine. "She worked with Ebola before, at Kikwit and other places. She taught procedures to staff."

"Aerosol transmission?" the director asked. It was too much to hope for.

"CDC believes that this is the Ebola Mayinga sub-type. You will recall that this strain is named for a nurse who contracted the disease through unknown means."

That statement made the director look hard into Moudi's eyes. "You're quite sure of what you said?"

"I'm not sure of anything at the moment, but I also interviewed staff at the hospital, and all injections were given to the Index Patient by others, not Sister here. So, yes, this may be a case of aerosol transmission."

It was a classic case of good news and bad news. So little was known of Ebola Zaire. It *was* known that the disease could be passed on by blood and other bodily fluids, even by sexual contact—that was almost entirely theoretical, since an Ebola victim was hardly in a position to engage in such practices. It was further believed that the virus fared poorly out of a living host, quick to die in the open. For that reason it was not believed that the disease could be spread through the air in the manner of pneumonia or other common ailments. But at the same time every outbreak of the virus produced cases which could not be explained. The unfortunate nurse Mayinga had given her name to a strain of the disease which had reached out to claim her life through an unknown means. Had she lied about something, or forgotten something, or had she searched her mind and reported the truth, and thus memorialized a sub-type of Ebola which *did* survive in the air long enough to be transmitted as readily as the common cold? If so, that would make the patient before them the carrier of a biological weapon of such power as to

make the entire world shake.

Such a possibility also meant that they were quite literally dicing with Death himself. The smallest mistake could be lethal. Without conscious thought, the director looked upward at the air-conditioning vent. The building had been designed with that very contingency in mind. The incoming air was all clean, sucked in through a vent located at the end of two hundred meters of piping. The air exiting from the "hot" areas passed through a single plenum chamber before leaving the building. There it was subjected to blazingly powerful ultraviolet lights, since that frequency of radiation destroyed viruses with total reliability. The air filters were soaked with chemicals—phenol was one of them to achieve the same end. Only then was it ejected to the outside, where other environmental factors also could be depended upon to deny the disease a chance to survive. The filters—three separate banks of them—were changed with religious precision every twelve hours. The UV lights, five times the number required for the task, were constantly monitored. The Hot Lab was kept at intentionally low ambient air pressure to prevent a leak, and that fact enabled the building to be evaluated for structural integrity. For the rest, he thought, well, that was why they'd all trained so carefully in suit-safety and sharps procedures.

The director, too, was a physician, trained in Paris and London, but it had been years since he'd treated a human patient. Mainly he'd devoted the last decade to molecular biology, most particularly to the study of viruses. He knew as much as any man about them, though that was little enough. He knew how to make them grow, for example, and before him now was a perfect medium, a human being converted by fate into a factory for the deadliest organism known to man. He'd never known her healthy, had never spoken with her, never seen her at work. That was good. Perhaps she had been an effective nurse, as Moudi said, but that was all in the past, and there was little point in getting overly attached to someone who would be dead in three days, four at the most. The longer the better, though, for the factory to do its work, using this human body for its raw material as it turned out its product, turning Allah's finest creation into His most deadly curse.

For the other question, he'd given the order while Moudi had been showering. Sister Maria Magdalena was taken to another cleanup area, issued clothing, and left to herself. There she had showered in privacy, wondering as she did so what was going on—where was she? She was still too confused to be truly afraid, too disoriented to understand. Like Moudi, she showered long, and the procedure did clear her head somewhat, as she tried to form the right questions to pose. She'd find the doctor in a few minutes to ask what was happening. Yes, that's what she would do, Maria Magdalena thought as she dressed. There was a comfortable familiarity to the medical garb, and she still had her rosary, taken into the shower with her. It was a metal one rather than the formal rosary that went along with her religious habit, the same one given to her when she'd taken her final vows more than forty years before. But the metal one was more easily disinfected, and she'd taken the time in the shower to clean it. Outside, dressed, she decided that prayer would be the best preparation for her quest for information, and so she knelt, blessed herself, and began her prayers. She didn't hear the door open behind her.

The soldier from the security force had his orders. He could have done it a few minutes earlier, but to invade a woman's privacy while nude and bathing would have been a hateful act, and she wasn't going anywhere. It pleased him to see that she was praying, her back to him, plainly comfortable and well practiced with her devotions. This was proper. A condemned criminal was invariably given the chance to speak to Allah; to deny that chance was a grave sin. So much the better, he thought, raising his 9mm automatic. She was speaking to her God now ...

... and now she was doing so more directly. He de-cocked the hammer, holstered his weapon, and called for the two orderlies outside to clean up the mess. He'd killed people before, had participated in firing parties for enemies of the state, and that was duty, sometimes distasteful, but duty nonetheless. This one made him shake his head. This time, he was sure, he'd sent a soul to Allah. How strange to feel good about an execution.

TONY BRETANO HAD flown in on a TRW-owned business jet. It turned out that he hadn't yet decided to accept the offer from the Lockheed-Martin board, and it was pleasing to Ryan that George Winston's information was incorrect. It showed that he wasn't privy to this particular piece of insider information, at least.

"I've said 'no' before, Mr. President."

"Twice." Ryan nodded. "To head ARPA and to be Deputy Secretary for Technology. Your name came up for NRO also, but they never called you about it."

"So I heard," Bretano acknowledged. He was a short man, evidently with short-man complex, judging by his combativeness. He spoke with the accent of someone from Manhattan's Little Italy, despite many years on the West Coast, and that also told Ryan something. He liked to proclaim who and what he was, this despite a pair of degrees from MIT, where he might as easily have adopted a Cambridge accent.

"And you turned the jobs down because it's a great big clusterfuck over there across the river, right?"

"Too much tail and not enough teeth. If I ran my business that way, the stockholders would lynch me. The Defense bureaucracy—"

"So fix it for me," Jack suggested.

"Can't be done."

"Don't give me that, Bretano. Anything man can make, he can unmake. If you don't think you have the stuff to get the job done, fine, tell me that, and you can head back to the coast."

"Wait a minute—"

Ryan cut him off again.

"No, you wait a minute. You saw what I said on TV, and I'm not going to repeat it. I need to clean up a few things, and I need the right people to do it, and if you don't have it, fine, I'll find somebody tough enough to—"

"Tough?" Bretano nearly came off his seat. "*Tough?* I got news for you, *Mister* President, my papa sold fruit from a cart on the corner. The world didn't give me shit!" Then he stopped short when Ryan laughed, and thought

a moment before going on. “Not bad,” he said more sedately, in the manner of the corporate chairman he was.

“George Winston says you’re feisty. We haven’t had a halfway decent SecDef in ten years. Good. When I’m wrong, I need people to tell me so. But I don’t think I’m wrong about you.”

“What do you want done?”

“When I pick up the phone, I want things to happen. I want to know that if I have to send kids into harm’s way, they’re properly equipped, properly trained, and properly supported. I want people to be afraid of what we can do. It makes life a lot easier for the State Department,” the President explained. “When I was a little kid in east Baltimore and I saw a cop walking up Monument Street, I knew two things. I knew it wasn’t a good idea to mess with him, and I also knew I could trust him to help me if I needed it.”

“In other words, you want a product that we can deliver whenever we have to.”

“Correct.”

“We’ve drawn down a long way,” Bretano said warily.

“I want you to work with a good team—you pick it—to draw up a force structure that meets our needs. Then I want you to rebuild the Pentagon to deliver it.”

“How much time do I have?”

“I’ll give you two weeks on the first part.”

“Not long enough.”

“Don’t give me that. We study things so much I’m surprised the paper all those things are printed on hasn’t consumed every tree in the country. Hell, *I* know what the threats are out there, remember? That used to be *my* business. A month ago we were in a shooting war, sucking air because we were out of assets to use. We got lucky. I don’t want to depend on luck anymore. I want you to clear out the bureaucracy, so if we need to do something it gets done. In fact, I want things done before we have to do them. If we do the job right, nobody’ll be crazy enough to take us on. Question is, are you willing to take it on, Dr. Bretano?”

“It’ll be bloody.”

“My wife’s a doc,” Jack told him.

“Half the job’s getting good intelligence,” Bretano pointed out.

“I know that, too. We’ve already started on CIA. George ought to be okay at Treasury. I’m checking out a list of judges to head Justice. I said it all on TV. I’m putting a team together. I want you on it. I made my way on my own, too. You think two people like us would have got this far anywhere else? Payback time, Bretano.” Ryan leaned back, pleased with himself for the delivery.

There was no fighting it, the executive knew. “When do I start?”

Ryan checked his watch. “Tomorrow morning suit you?”

THE MAINTENANCE CREW showed up just after dawn. The aircraft had a military guard arrayed around it to keep the curious away, though this airport was already more secure than most of its international counterparts because of the Iranian air force presence. The crew foreman’s clipboard told him what

had to be done, and the long list of procedures had him curious, but little else. Aircraft of this type always got special treatment, because the people who flew in them deemed themselves the elect of God, or something even higher still. Not that it mattered. He had his procedures, and the advice for extra caution was hardly necessary. His people were always thorough. The aircraft maintenance sheet said that it was time to replace two cockpit instruments, and two replacements were ready, still in the manufacturer's boxes; those would have to be calibrated after installation. Two other members of his crew would refuel the aircraft and change the engine oil. The rest would work on the cabin under the foreman's supervision.

They'd scarcely begun when a captain showed up with fresh orders, predictably ones which contradicted the first set. The seats had to be replaced quickly. The G-IV would be taking off in a few hours for another flight. The officer didn't say where to, and the foreman didn't care to ask. He told his instrument mechanic to hurry with his assigned task. That was fairly easy in the G-IV with its modular instrument arrangement. A truck appeared with the seats that had been taken out two days earlier, and the cleanup crewmen assisted, manhandling them into place before they could properly begin. The foreman wondered why they'd been removed in the first place, but it wasn't his place to ask, and the answer would not have made much sense anyway. A pity everyone was in a hurry. It would have been easier to do the cleaning with so much open space. Instead, the fourteen-seat configuration was quickly reestablished, making the aircraft back into a mini-airliner, albeit a very comfortable one. The replacement seating had been dry-cleaned in the hangar as it always was, the ashtrays emptied and swabbed out. The caterer showed up next with food for the galley, and soon the aircraft was overcrowded with workers, each getting in the other's way, and in the resulting confusion, work was not done properly, but that was not the foreman's fault. Things just accelerated from there. The new flight crew showed up with their charts and flight plans. They found a mechanic lying half on the pilot's seat and half on the cabin floor, finishing his work on the digital engine instruments. Never patient with mechanics, the pilot merely stood and glared as the man did his work—for his part, the mechanic didn't care at all what pilots thought. He attached the last connector, wriggled his way free, and ran a test program to make sure it was working properly, without so much as a look at the aviators who would be sure to curse him all the louder if he failed to install the electronics properly. He'd not yet left the area when the co-pilot took his place and ran the same test program again. Leaving the aircraft to get out of the way, the mechanic saw the reason for the rush.

Five of them, standing there on the ramp, looking impatient and important as they stared at the white-painted executive jet, excited about something. The mechanic and everyone else on the crew knew them all by name, they appeared so often on TV. All of them nodded deference to the mullahs and speeded their efforts, as a result of which not everything got done. The cleanup crew was called off the aircraft, and limited their efforts to wiping a few surfaces down after getting all the seats reinstalled. The VIP passengers boarded at once, heading to the after portion of the cabin so that they could confer. The flight crew started up, and the Guards force and the trucks hardly

had a chance to withdraw before the G-IV taxied off to the end of the runway.

IN DAMASCUS, THE second member of that small executive fleet touched down, to discover that it had orders to return to Tehran at once. The crew swore, but did as they were told, limiting their time on the ground to a scant forty minutes before lifting off again in their turn for the short hop into Iran.

IT WAS A busy time at PALM BOWL. Something was going on. You could tell that by what wasn't going on. Traffic on the encrypted channels used by senior Iraqi generals had peaked and zeroed, then peaked again, and zeroed again. At the moment it was back at zero. Back at KKMC in Saudi Arabia, the computers were grinding through solutions to the chip-controlled scrambling systems used on Iraqi tactical radios. It took time in every case. Encryption technology, once the province only of affluent countries, had, with the advent of personal computers, become readily available to the humblest citizen in America and other technically advanced countries, and an unexpected spin-off of that fact was the current availability of highly advanced communications-security apparatus to the humblest nations. Now Malaysia had codes nearly as hard to break as Russia's—and so did Iraq, courtesy of Americans who worried about having the FBI read their fictitious e-mail adulteries. The encryption systems on tactical radios were necessarily somewhat simpler, and still breakable, but even that required a Cray computer that had been flown to the Saudi Kingdom years earlier. Another factor was that PALM BOWL was in Kuwait, and had indeed been fully financed by the local government, for which courtesy a return courtesy was required. They got to see the "take" from the NSA station. That was only fair, but the NSA and military-intelligence personnel hadn't been trained to consider what "fair" was. They had their orders, even so.

"They're talking about their families?" a USAF sergeant asked himself aloud. That was new. PALM BOWL had tapped into intimate information on this network before, and learned more than a few things about the personal habits of senior Iraqi generals, along with some crude jokes which alternately did and did not translate well into English, but this was a first.

"Evac," the Chief Master Sergeant next to him observed. "It's a bug-out. Lieutenant!" he called. "Something happening here."

The junior watch officer was working on something else. The radar at Kuwait International Airport was an unusually powerful one, installed since the war, and it operated in two modes, one for the aircraft controllers, and another for the Kuwaiti air force. It could see a good, long way. For the second time in as many days, there was a business jet heading toward Baghdad from Iran. The flight path was identical with the previous trip, and the transponder code was the same. The distance between the two capitals was a mere four hundred miles, just enough distance to make it worthwhile for a business jet to climb up to cruising altitude and so make efficient use of its fuel—and, by the way, touch the fringe of their radar coverage. There would be a circling

E-3B AWACS around, too, but that reported directly to KKMC and not to PALM BOWL. It was a matter of professional pride for the uniformed spooks at the ground station to beat the airborne people at their own game, all the more so since most of them were themselves USAF personnel. The lieutenant made a mental note of that information, then walked across the room to where the sergeants were.

"What is it, Chief?" she asked.

The chief master sergeant scrolled his computer screen, showing the translated content of several "cracked" conversations, tapping his finger on the screen to call attention to the times. "We have some folks getting the hell outa Dodge City, ma'am." A moment later, a Kuwaiti major slid alongside. Ismael Sabah was distantly related to the royal family, Dartmouth-educated, and rather liked by the American personnel. During the war he'd stayed behind and worked with a resistance group—one of the smart ones. He'd laid low, gathered information on the movement and disposition of Iraqi military units, and gotten it out, mainly using cellular phones which were able to reach into a Saudi civilian network just across the border, and which the Iraqis had been unable to track. Along the way, he'd lost three close family members to the Iraqi terror. He'd learned all manner of lessons from the experience, the least of which was a hatred for the country to his north. A quiet, insightful man in his middle thirties now, he seemed to get smarter every day. Sabah leaned in to scan the translations on the computer screen.

"How do you say, the rats are leaving the ship?"

"You think so, too, sir?" the chief asked, before his lieutenant could.

"To *Iran?*" the American officer asked. "I know it looks that way, but it doesn't make sense, does it?"

Major Sabah grimaced. "Sending their air force to Iran didn't make sense either, but the Iranians kept the fighter planes and let the pilots go home. You need to learn more of the local culture, Lieutenant."

I've learned that nothing here makes much sense, she couldn't say.

"What else do we have?" Sabah asked the sergeant.

"They talk and go quiet and then they talk some more and go quiet. There's traffic under way now, but KKMC is still trying to crack it."

"Radar surveillance reports an inbound from Mchrabad to Baghdad, coded as a business jet."

"Oh? Same one as before?" Sabah asked the American lieutenant.

"Yes, Major."

"What else? Anything?" The chief master sergeant handled the answer.

"Major, that's probably what the computers are cooking on right now. Maybe in thirty minutes."

Sabah lit a cigarette. PALM BOWL was technically a Kuwaiti-owned facility, and smoking was permitted, to the relief of some and the outrage of others. His relatively junior rank did not prevent him from being a fairly senior member of his country's intelligence service, all the more so that he was modest and businesslike in manner, a useful contrast with his war record, on which he'd lectured in Britain and America.

"Opinions?" he asked, already having formed his own.

"You said it, sir. They're bugging out," the chief master sergeant replied.

Major Sabah completed the thought. “In hours or days, Iraq will not have a government, and Iran is assisting in the transition to anarchy.”

“Not good,” the chief breathed.

“The word ‘catastrophe’ comes to mind,” Sabah observed mildly. He shook his head and smiled in a grim sort of way, earning additional admiration from the American spooks.

THE GULFSTREAM LANDED in calm air after the sixty-five-minute flight in from Tehran, timed by Badrayn’s watch. As punctual as Swissair, he noted. Well, that was to be expected. As soon as it stopped, the door dropped open and the five passengers deplaned, to be met with elaborately false courtesy, which they returned in kind. A small convoy of Mercedes sedans spirited them off at once to regal accommodations awaiting them in the city center, where they would, of course, be murdered if things went poorly. Scarcely had their cars pulled off when two generals, their wives, their children, and one bodyguard each emerged from the VIP terminal and walked to the aircraft. They quickly boarded the G-IV. The co-pilot lifted the door back into place, and the engines started up, all in less than ten additional minutes by Badrayn’s Seiko. Just that fast, it taxied off to make the return flight to Mehrabad International. It was something too obvious for the tower personnel to miss. That was the problem with security, Badrayn knew. You really couldn’t keep some things secret, at least not something like this. Better to use a commercial flight, and treat the departing generals as normal passengers on a normal trip, but there were no regular flights between the two countries, and the generals would not have submitted themselves to such plebeian treatment in any case. And so the tower people would know that a special flight had come in and out under unusual circumstances, and so would the terminal employees who’d been required to fawn on the generals and their retinues. For one such flight, that might not be important. But it would matter for the next.

Perhaps that was not overly important in the Great Scheme of Things. There was now no stopping the events he had helped to set in motion, but it offended Ali Badrayn in a professional sense. Better to keep everything he did secret. He shrugged as he walked back to the VIP terminal. No, it didn’t matter, and through his actions he’d won the gratitude of a very powerful man in charge of a very powerful country, and for doing no more than talking, telling people what they already knew, and helping them to make a decision which could not have been avoided, whatever their efforts to the contrary. How curious life was.

“SAME ONE. JEEZ, he wasn’t on the ground very long.” Through a little effort, the radio traffic for that particular aircraft was isolated and playing in the earphones of an Army spec-6 language expert. Though the language of international aviation was English, this aircraft was speaking in Farsi. Probably thought a security measure, it merely highlighted that aircraft, tracked by radar and radio-direction finders. The voice traffic was wholly

ordinary except for that, and for the fact that the aircraft hadn't even been on the ground long enough to refuel. That meant the whole thing was preplanned, which was hardly a surprise under the circumstances, but enlightening even so. Aloft, over the far northwest end of the Persian Gulf, an AWACS was now tracking the aircraft as well. Interest, cued by PALM BOWL, had perked up enough to move the E-3B off its normal patrol station, now escorted by four Saudi F-15 Eagle fighters. Iranian and Iraqi electronic-intelligence troops would take note of this and know that someone was interested in what was going on—and wonder why, because *they* didn't know. The game was ever a fascinating one, neither side knowing all it wished, and assuming the other side—at the moment there were actually *three* sides in the game—knew too much, when in fact none of the three knew much of anything.

ABOARD THE G-IV, the language was Arabic. The two generals chatted quietly and nervously in the rear, their conversation masked by engine sounds. Their wives just sat, more nervous still, while the various children read books or napped. It was hardest on the bodyguards, who knew that if anything went wrong in Iran they could do nothing but die uselessly. One of these sat in the middle of the cabin and found that his seat was wet, with what he didn't know, but it was sticky and ... red? Tomato juice or something, probably. Annoyed, he went to the lavatory and washed his hands off, taking a towel back to wipe the seat off. He returned the towel to the lav before he reseated himself, then looked down at the mountains and wondered if he'd live to see another sunrise, not knowing that he'd just limited the number to twenty.

"HERE WE GO," the chief master sergeant said. "That was the vice-chief of their air force, and the commanding general of Second Iraqi Army Corps—*plus* families," he added. The decryption had required just over two hours from the time the scrambled signal had been copied down.

"Expendables?" the USAF lieutenant asked. She was learning, the other spooks thought.

"Relatively so," Major Sabah agreed with a nod. "We need to look for another aircraft lifting off from Mehrabad soon after this one lands."

"Where to, sir?"

"Ah. Lieutenant, that is the question, is it not?"

"Sudan," the chief thought. He'd been in-country for two years, and it was his second tour at PALM BOWL.

"I would not wager against you on that, Sergeant," Sabah observed with a wink. "We should confirm that through the time cycle of the flights out of Baghdad." And he really couldn't make a judgment call on the entire exercise until then, though he already had flagged his own superiors that something unusual was afoot. Soon it would be time for the Americans to do the same.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, a preliminary report was on its way from KKMC to Fort Meade, Maryland, where the vagaries of time landed it in the watch center just after midnight. From the National Security Agency it was cross-decked by fiber-optic cable to Langley, Virginia, into Mercury, the CIA's communications-watch facility, then upstairs to the CIA's Operations Center, room 7-F-27 in the old headquarters building. At every stop, the information was handed over raw, sometimes with the local assessment, but more often without, or if it were, placed at the bottom so that the national intelligence officers in charge of the various watches could make their own assessments, and duplicate the work of others. Mostly this made sense, but in fast-breaking situations it very often did not. The problem was that one couldn't tell the difference in a crisis.

The national intelligence officer in charge of the watch at CIA was Ben Goodley, a fast-riser in the Directorate of Intelligence, recently awarded his NIO card, along with the worst duty schedule because of his lack of seniority. As usual, he showed his good sense by turning to his area-specialist and handing over the printout just as fast as he could read the pages and tear the sheets away from the staple.

"Meltdown," the area-specialist said by the end of page three. Which was not unexpected, but neither was it pleasant.

"Doubts?"

"My boy"—the area specialist had twenty years on his boss—"they ain't going to Tehran to shop."

"SNIE?" Goodley asked, meaning a Special National Intelligence Estimate, an important official document meant for unusual situations.

"I think so. The Iraqi government is coming down." It wasn't all that much of a surprise.

"Three days?"

"If that much."

Goodley stood. "Okay, let's get it drafted."

17

THE REVIVAL

IT IS TO BE EXPECTED THAT important things never happen at convenient times. Whether the birth of a baby or a national emergency, all such events seem to find the appropriate people asleep or otherwise indisposed. In this case, there was nothing to be done. Ben Goodley determined that CIA had no assets in place to confirm the signal-intelligence take, and interested though his country was in the region, there was no action that could be taken. The public news organizations hadn't twigged to this development, and as was often the case, CIA would play dumb until they did. In doing so, the Central Intelligence Agency would give greater substance to the public belief that the news organizations were as efficient as the government in finding things out. It wasn't always the case, but was more frequently so than Goodley would have preferred.

This SNIE would be a short one. The substance of it didn't require a great deal of pontificating, and the fact of it didn't take long to present. Goodley and his area specialist took half an hour to draft it. A computer printer generated the hard copy for in-house use, and a modem transmitted it via secure lines to interested government agencies. With that done, the men returned to the Operations Center.

GOLOVKO WAS DOING his best to sleep. Aeroflot had just purchased ten new Boeing 777 jetliners for use in its international service to New York, Chicago, and Washington. They were far more comfortable, and reliable, than the Soviet airliners in which he'd traveled for so many years, but he was less than enthralled with the idea of flying so far on two engines, American-made or not, rather than the usual four. The seats, at least, were comfortable here in first class, and the vodka he'd had soon after takeoff was a premium Russian label. The combination had given him five and a half hours of sleep until the usual disorientation of travel clicked in, waking him up over Greenland, while his bodyguard next to him managed to remain in whatever dreamland his profession allowed. Somewhere aft, the stewardesses were probably sleeping as well as they could in their folding seats.

In previous times, Sergey Nikolayevich knew, it wouldn't have been like this. He would have flown on a special charter with full communications gear, and if something had taken place in the world, he'd be informed just as quickly as the transmission towers outside of Moscow could dot-dash the information out. All the more frustrating was the fact that something was happening. Something had to be. It was always this way, he thought in the

noisy darkness. You traveled for an important meeting because you expected something to take place, and then it happened while you were on the move and, if not totally out of touch, then at least denied the chance to confer with your senior aides. Iraq *and* China. Thankfully, there was a wide separation between the two hot spots. Then Golovko reminded himself that there was a wider separation still between Washington and Moscow, one which lasted about as long as an overnight flight on a twin-engine aircraft. With that pleasant realization, he turned slightly and told himself that he'd need all the sleep he could get.

THE HARD PART wasn't getting them out of Iraq. The hard part would be getting them from Iran to Sudan. It had been a long while since flights from Iran had been allowed to overfly the Saudi Kingdom, and the only exceptions were the pilgrimage flights into Mecca during the annual hajj. Instead, the business jet had to skirt around the Arabian Peninsula, then up the Red Sea before turning west to Khartoum, tripling both time and distance on the delivery leg of the process, and the next short flight couldn't begin until the first long one had arrived in Africa, *and* the VIPs had arrived at their hastily prepared quarters, *and* found them satisfactory, *and* made a phone call with the inevitable code word confirming that all was well. It would have been so much easier had it been possible to load them all onto a single airliner for a single Baghdad-Tehran-Khartoum cycle, but that wasn't possible. Neither was it possible to take the far shorter air routing directly from Baghdad to Khartoum through the simple expedient of overflying Jordan. But that meant passing close to Israel, not a prospect to make the Iraqi generals happy. And then there was the secrecy issue, too, to make things inconvenient.

A lesser man than Daryaei would have found it enraging. Instead he stood alone at the window of a closed portion of the main terminal, watching the G-IV stop alongside another, watching the doors open, watching the people scurry down one staircase and immediately onto another, while baggage handlers transferred what few belongings they'd brought along—doubtless jewels and other items of high value and portability, the holy man thought without a smile. It took only a few minutes, and then the waiting aircraft started moving.

It was foolish, really, to have come down just to see something so pedestrian and tedious as this, but it represented fully two decades of effort, and man of God though he was, Mahmoud Haji Daryaei was still human enough to want to see the fruits of his labor. A lifetime had gone into this, and even so it was a task not even half done. And his time was running out ...

As it was for every man, Daryaei reminded himself, one second, one minute, one hour, one day at a time, the same for all, but somehow it seemed to run faster when one was over seventy years of age. He looked down at his hands, the lines and scars of a lifetime there, some natural, some not. Two of his fingers had been broken while a guest of Savak, the Shah's Israeli-trained security service. He remembered the pain of it. He remembered even better the reckoning with the two men who'd interrogated him. Daryaei hadn't spoken a word. He'd just looked at them, stood there like a statue, as they

were taken off to the firing squad. Not very much satisfaction in it, really. They'd been functionaries, doing a job assigned to them by others, without really caring who he was or why they were supposed to hate him. Another mullah had sat with each in turn to pray with them, because to deny anyone a chance to reconcile himself with Allah was a crime—and what did it hurt? They died just as quickly that way as any other. One small step in a lifetime's journey, though theirs had ultimately been far shorter than his.

All the years spent for his single-minded purpose. Khomeini had taken his exile in France, but not Daryaei. He'd remained in the background, coordinating and directing for his leader. Picked up that one time, he'd been let go because he hadn't talked, nor had anyone close to him. That had been the Shah's mistake, one of many. The man had ultimately succumbed to indecision. Too liberal in his policies to make the Islamic clergy happy, too reactionary to please his Western sponsors, trying vainly to find a middle ground in a part of the world where a man had only two choices. Only one, really, Daryaei corrected himself as the Gulfstream jet lifted off. Iraq had tried the other path, away from the Word of God, and what had it profited them? Hussein had started his war with Iran, thinking the latter country weak and leaderless, and achieved nothing. Then he had struck out to the south and accomplished even less, all in the sole quest for temporal power.

It was different for Daryaei. He'd never lost sight of his goal, as Khomeini had not, and though the latter was dead, his task lived on. His objective lay behind him as he faced north, too far to see, but there even so, in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina ... and Jerusalem. He'd been to the first two, but not the third. As a boy, young and pious, he'd wanted to see the Rock of Abraham, but something, he didn't remember what, had prevented his merchant father from taking him there. Perhaps in time. He'd seen the city of the Prophet's birth, however, and of course made the pilgrimage to Mecca, the hajj, more than once despite the political and religious differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia. He wished to do so again, to pray before the veiled Kaaba. But there was more to it than that, even.

Titular chief of state, he wanted more. Not so much for himself. No, he had a larger task at the bottom of his humble life. Islam stretched from the extreme west of Africa to the extreme east of Asia, not counting the small pockets of the Faith's adherents in the Western Hemisphere, but the religion had not had a single leader and a single purpose for over a thousand years. It caused Daryaei pain that this should be so. There was but one God and one Word, and it must have saddened Allah that His Word was so tragically misunderstood. That was the only possible reason for the failure of all men to grasp the True Faith, and if he could change that, then he could change the world and bring all of mankind to God. But to do that—

The world was the world, an imperfect instrument with imperfect rules for imperfect men, but Allah had made it so, and that was that. Worse, there were those who would oppose everything he did, Believers and un-Believers both, another cause more for sadness than for anger. Daryaei didn't hate the Saudis and the others on the far side of the Persian Gulf. They were not evil men. They were Believers, and despite their differences with him and his country, they'd never be denied access to Mecca. But their way wasn't *the* Way, and

that couldn't be helped. They'd grown fat and rich and corrupt, and that had to be changed. Daryaei had to control Mecca in order to reform Islam. To do that meant acquiring worldly power. It meant making enemies. But that wasn't new, and he'd just won his first major battle.

If only it didn't take so long. Daryaei often spoke of patience, but his was the work of a lifetime, and he was seventy-two, and he didn't want to die as his mentor had, with the work not even half done. When there came his moment to face Allah, he wanted to speak of accomplishment, of successfully fulfilling the noblest task any man could have, the reunification of the True Faith. And Daryaei was willing to do much for that goal. He himself didn't even know how much it was that he was willing to undertake, because not all the questions had yet been asked. And because his goal was so pure and bright, and his remaining time so short, he'd never asked himself how deeply he would cross into darkness in order to get there.

Well. He turned away from the window and walked off with his driver to the car. The process had begun.

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PEOPLE IN THE intelligence community are not paid to believe in coincidences, and these particular people had maps and watches to predict them. The unrefueled range of the G-IV was well known, and the distances to be covered were easily computed. The circling AWACS aircraft established a track heading south from Tehran. Transponder settings told them the type of aircraft, along with speed, heading, and altitude, the last being 45,000 feet for maximum fuel efficiency. Timing was checked between one such flight and another. The course told them even more.

"Sudan," Major Sabah confirmed. It could have gone elsewhere. He almost thought that Brunei was a possible option, but, no, that would be too far from Switzerland, and Switzerland was where the money was—had to be.

With that judgment, a satellite signal was sent to America, again to CIA, and this one occasioned waking a senior DO official up merely to say yes to a brief question. The answer was relayed back to PALM BOWL out of courtesy to the Kuwaitis. Then it was just a matter of waiting.

THE CIA HAD a small presence in Khartoum, really just a station chief and a couple of field officers and a secretary whom they shared with the NSA-run signals section. The station chief was a good one, however, who had recruited a number of local citizens to act as agents. It helped that the Sudanese government had little to hide, most of the time, too poor to be of interest as much of anything. In previous times the government had used its geographic location as a ploy to play East against West, garnering cash and weapons and favor out of the bargain, but the USSR had fallen and with it the Great Power Game which had sustained the Third World for two generations. Now the Sudanese had to depend on their own resources, which were slim, and the few crumbs tossed their way by whichever country had transitory need for what

little they had. The country's leaders were Islamic, and in proclaiming it as loudly as they could lie—they were no more devout than their Western counterparts they managed to get aid from Libya and Iran and others, in return for which they were expected to make life hard on the pagan animists in the southern part of the country, plus risk a rising Islamic political tide in their own capital, people who knew the real level of devotion of the country's leaders, and wanted to replace them with people who truly believed. On the whole the political leaders of that impoverished nation thought it was easier to be religious and rich than religious and poor.

What that meant to the American embassy personnel was great unpredictability. Sometimes Khartoum was safe, when the fundamentalist troublemakers were under control. Sometimes it was not, because they were not. At the moment, the former seemed to be the case, and all the American foreign service officers had to worry about were the environmental conditions, which were vile enough to place this post in the bottom ten of global embassy assignments even without a terrorist threat. For the station chief it meant early advancement, though his wife and two children remained home in Virginia, because most of the official American residents didn't feel safe enough to set up their families here. Almost as bad, AIDS was becoming a threat sufficient to deny much in the way of nightlife to them, not to mention the question of getting safe blood in the event of an injury. The embassy had an Army doctor to handle those issues. He worried a lot.

The station chief shook that off. He'd jumped a whole pay grade on taking this assignment. He'd performed well, with one especially well-placed agent in the Sudanese foreign ministry to inform America about everything that country did. That his country didn't do all that much was not important to the desk-sitters at Langley. Better to know everything about nothing than nothing about everything.

He'd handle this one himself. Checking time and distance against his own maps, the station chief had an early lunch and drove off to the airport, only a few miles out of town. Security there was African-casual, and he found a shady spot outside. It was easier to cover the private terminal than the public one, especially with a 500mm lens on his camera. He even had time to make sure he had the aperture right. A buzz on his cellular phone from the NSA people at the embassy confirmed that the inbound aircraft was on final, a fact further verified by the arrival of some official-looking cars. He'd already memorized two photographs faxed to him from Langley. Two senior Iraqi generals, eh? he thought. Well, with the death of their boss, it wasn't all that surprising. The problem with the dictatorship business was that there wasn't much of a retirement plan for any of those near the top of it.

The white business jet floated in with the customary puffs of rubber smoke. He locked the camera on it and shot a few frames of high-speed black-and-white to make sure the motor drive worked. The only worry now was whether the bird would stop in such a way that he could cover the exit with the camera—the bastards could always face the wrong way and spoil the whole thing for him. In that he had little choice. The Gulfstream stopped. The door dropped open, and the station chief started shooting frames. There was a middle-level official there to do the semi-official greeting. You could tell who

was important by who got the hugs and kisses—and from the sweep-around look they gave the area. *Click. Click.* He recognized one face for sure, and the other was a probable hit. The transfer took only a minute or two. The official cars pulled off, and the station chief didn't much care where they were heading at the moment. His agent in the foreign ministry would fill that one in. He shot the remaining eight frames of the aircraft, already being refueled, and decided to wait to see what it would do. Thirty minutes later, it lifted off yet again, and he headed back to the embassy. While one of his junior people handled the developing, he made a call to Langley.

"CONFIRMATION," GOODLEY SAID, approaching the end of his watch. "Two Iraqi generals touched down at Khartoum fifty minutes ago. It's a bug-out."

"Makes the SNIE look pretty good, Ben," the area specialist observed, with a raised eyebrow. "I hope they pay attention to the time stamp on it."

The national intelligence officer managed a smile. "Yeah, well, the next one has to say what it means." The regular analysts, just starting to arrive for a day's work, would fiddle around with that.

"Nothing good." But you didn't need to be a spook to figure that one out.

"Photos coming in," a communications officer called.

THE FIRST CALL had to go to Tehran. Daryaei had told his ambassador to make things as clear as possible. Iran would assume responsibility for all expenses. The best possible accommodations were to be provided, with every level of comfort that the country could arrange. The overall operation would not cost a great amount of money, but the savages in that country were impressed by small sums, and ten million American dollars—a pittance—had already been transferred electronically to ensure that everything went well. A call from the Iranian ambassador confirmed that the first pickup had gone properly and that the aircraft was on its way back.

Good. Now perhaps the Iraqis would begin to trust him. It would have been personally satisfying to have these swine eliminated, and that would not have been difficult to arrange under the circumstances, but he'd given his word, and besides, this wasn't about personal satisfaction. Even as he set the phone down, his air minister was calling in additional aircraft to expedite the transfer. This was better done quickly.

BADRAYN WAS TRYING to make the same point. The word was going to get out, probably in one day, certainly no more than two. They were leaving people behind who were too senior to survive the coming upheaval, and too junior to merit the solicitude the Iranians were willing to show the generals. Those officers, colonels and brigadiers, would not be overly happy at the prospect of becoming the sacrificial goats necessary to assuage the awakening rage of the mob. This fact was becoming clear, but instead of making them more eager to leave, it emerged as a nonspecific fear that made all the other

fears loom larger in the unknown darkness ahead. They stood on the deck of a burning ship off an unfriendly shore, and they didn't know how to swim all that well. But the ship was still afire. He had to make them grasp that.

IT WAS ROUTINE enough by now that Ryan was becoming used to it, at home with it, even comfortable with the discreet knock on the door, more startling in its way than the clock-radio which had begun his days for twenty years. Instead his eyes opened at the muted knock, and he rose, put on his robe, walked the twenty feet from the bed to the door, and got his paper, along with a few sheets of his daily schedule. Next, he headed to the bathroom, and then to the sitting room adjoining the presidential bedroom, while his wife, a few minutes behind him, started her wake-up routine.

Jack missed the normality of merely reading the paper. Though it wasn't nearly as good—usually—as the intelligence documents waiting on the table for him, the *Washington Post* also covered things whose interest was not strictly governmental, and so was fuel for his normal desire to keep abreast of things. But the first order of business was a SNIE, an urgent official document stapled inside a manila folder. Ryan rubbed his eyes before reading it.

Damn. Well, it could have been worse, the President told himself. At least this time they hadn't awakened him to let him know about something he couldn't change. He checked the schedule. Okay, Scott Adler would be in to discuss that one, along with that Vasco guy. Good. Vasco seemed to know his stuff. Who else today? He skimmed down the page. Sergey Golovko? Was that today? Good luck for a change. Brief press conference to announce Tony Bretano's appointment as SecDef, with a list of possible questions to worry about, and instructions from Arnie—ignore the Kealty question as much as possible. Let Kealty and his allegations die from apathy—*oh, yeah,* that's *a good one-liner!* Jack coughed as he poured some coffee—getting himself the right to do that alone had entailed direct orders; he hoped the Navy mess stewards didn't take it as a personal insult, but Ryan was used to doing *some* things for himself. Under the current arrangement, the stewards set up breakfast in the room and let the Ryans serve themselves, while others hovered in the corridor outside.

"Morning, Jack." Cathy's head appeared in his view. He kissed her lips and smiled.

"Morning, honey."

"Is the world still out there?" she asked, getting her own coffee. That told the President that the First Lady wasn't operating today. She never touched coffee on a surgery day, saying that she couldn't risk the slight tremor that caffeine might impart to her hands when she was carving up somebody's eyeball. The image always made him shudder, even though she mainly operated with lasers now.

"Looks like the Iraqi government is falling."

A female snort. "Didn't that happen last week?"

"That was act one. This is act three." *Or maybe act four.* He wondered what act five would be.

"Important?" Jack also heard the toast go down.

"Could be. What's your day like?"

"Clinic and follow-ups, budget meeting with Bernie."

"Hmph." Jack next started looking at the *Early Bird,* a collection of government-edited clippings from the major papers. Cathy appeared again in his peripheral vision, as she looked at his office schedule.

"Golovko ... ? Didn't I meet him in Moscow—he's the one who joked about having a gun on you!"

"Wasn't a joke," Ryan told his wife. "It really happened."

"Come on!"

"He said later that the gun wasn't loaded." Jack wondered if that was true. Probably, he thought.

"But he was telling the truth?" she asked incredulously.

The President looked up and smiled. Amazing, he thought, that it seemed funny now. "He was very pissed with me at the time. That's when I helped with the defection of the KGB chairman."

She lifted her morning paper. "Jack, I never know when you're kidding or not."

Jack thought about that. The First Lady was, technically, a private citizen. Certainly in Cathy's case, since she was not a political wife but a working physician who had about as much interest in politics as she did in group sex. She was also, therefore, *not* technically the holder of a security clearance, but it was assumed that the President would confide in his spouse just as any normal person did. Besides, it made sense. Her judgment was every bit as good as his, and unschooled as she might be in international relations, every day she made decisions that directly affected the lives of real people in the most immediate way. If she goofed, they went blind.

"Cathy, I think it's about time to tell you some of the things I've been stuck with over the years, but for now, yeah, Golovko had a pistol to my head once, on one of the runways at Moscow airport, because I helped two very senior Russians skip the country. One of them was his boss at KGB."

That made her look up, and wonder again about the nightmares that had plagued her husband for months, a few years ago. "So where is he now?"

"In the D.C. area, I forget exactly where, Virginia horse country, I think." Jack vaguely remembered hearing that the daughter, Katryn Gerasimov, was engaged to some old-money fox-killer out around Winchester, having changed from one form of nobility to another. Well, the stipend CIA had paid to the family was enough to maintain a very comfortable lifestyle.

Cathy was used to her husband's jokes. Like most men, he would tell amusing little stories whose humor was in their exaggeration—and besides, his ancestry was Irish—but now she marked the fact that his revelation was as casual as a report of the baseball scores. He didn't see her stare at the back of his head. *Yes*, she decided, as the kids entered the room, *I'd like to hear the stories.*

"Daddy!" Katie said, seeing Jack first. "Mommy!" With that the morning routine stopped, or rather changed over to something more immediately important than world news and events. Katie was already in her school clothes, like most small children, able to awaken in a good mood.

"Hi," Sally said, coming next, clearly vexed.

"What's the matter?" Cathy asked her elder daughter.

"All those people out there! You can't even walk around here without people seeing you everywhere!" she grumped, getting a glass of juice off the tray. And she didn't feel like Frosted Flakes this morning. She'd rather have Just Right. But that box was all the way down on the ground floor in the capacious White House kitchen. "It's like living in a hotel, but not as private."

"What exam is it today?" Cathy asked, reading the signals for what they were.

"Math," Sally admitted.

"Did you study?"

"Yes, *Mom.*"

Jack ignored that problem, and instead fixed cereal for Katie, who liked Frosted Flakes. Little Jack arrived next and turned on the TV, selecting the Cartoon Channel for his morning ration of Road Runner and Coyote, which Katie also approved.

Outside, the day was starting for everyone else. Ryan's personal NIO was putting the finishing touches on his dreaded morning intelligence brief. This President was far too hard to please. The chief usher was in early to supervise some maintenance on the State Floor. In the President's bedroom, the valet was setting out clothes for POTUS and FLOTUS. Cars were waiting to take the children off to school. Maryland State Police officers were already checking out the route to Annapolis. The Marines were warming up their helicopter for the trip to Baltimore—*that* problem had still not been worked out. The entire machine was already in motion.

GUS LORENZ WAS in his office early because of a telephone call from Africa returning his call from Atlanta. Where, he demanded, were his monkeys? His purchasing agent explained from eight time zones away that, because CDC had fumbled getting the money cleared, somebody else had bought up the shipment, and that a new batch had to be obtained from out in the bush. A week, perhaps, he told the American doctor.

Lorenz grumbled. He'd hoped to start his new study this week. He made a note on his desk pad, wondering who the hell would have bought so many African greens just like that. Was Rousseau starting something new in Paris? He'd call the guy a little later, after his morning staff conference. The good news, he saw, was that—oh, that was too bad. The second patient, killed in a plane crash, the telex from WHO said. But there were no new cases reported, and it had been long enough from Number Two that they could say now, rather than hope, that this micro-outbreak was over—probably, maybe, hopefully, Lorenz added with his thoughts. That was good news. It looked like the Ebola Zaire Mayinga strain under the electron microscope, and that was the worst of the sub-types of the virus. It could still be that the host was out there, waiting to infect someone else, but the Ebola host was the most bafflingly elusive quarry since malaria—"bad air," in Italian, which was what people had thought caused it. Maybe, he thought, the host was some rodent that had gotten run over by a truck. He shrugged. It was possible, after all.

With the reduction in her morphine drip, Patient Two was semiconscious at the Hasanabad facility. She was aware enough to know, and to feel, the pain, but not to understand what was really happening. The pain would have taken over in any case, all the worse because Jean Baptiste knew what every twinge meant. The abdominal pain was the worst, as the disease was destroying her gastrointestinal tract throughout its ten-meter length, quite literally *eating* the delicate tissues designed to convert food into nutrients, and dumping infected blood down toward her rectum.

It felt as though her entire body were being twisted and crushed and burned at the same time. She needed to move, to do *something* to make things different, just to make the pain come briefly from a new direction, and so briefly relieve that which tormented her, but when she tried to move she found that every limb was restrained with Velcrocoated straps. The insult of that was somehow worse than the pain, but when she tried to object it only caused violent nausea that started her gagging. At that indication the blue-coated spaceman rotated the bed—what sort of bed was this? she wondered—which allowed her to vomit into a bucket, and what she saw there was black, dead blood. It distracted her from the pain for a second, but all the distraction told her was that she could not survive, that the disease had gone too far, that her body was dying, and then Sister Jean Baptiste started praying for death, because this could have only one end, and the pain was such that the end needed to come soon, lest she lose her faith in the process. The prospect sprang out into her diminished consciousness like a jack-in-the-box. But this childhood toy had horns and hooves. She needed a priest at hand. She needed where was Maria Magdalena? Was she doomed to die alone? The dying nurse looked at the space suits, hoping to find familiar eyes behind the plastic shields, but though the eyes she saw were sympathetic, they were not familiar. Nor was their language, as two of them came close.

The medic was very careful drawing blood. First he checked to see that the arm was fully restrained, unable to move more than a centimeter. Then he had a comrade hold the arm in his two strong hands, careful himself to keep those hands well away from the needle. With a nod of agreement, the first selected the proper vein and stabbed the needle in. He was lucky this time. The needle went right in on the first try. To the back of the needle-holder he attached a 5cc vacuum tube, which took in blood that was darker than the usual purple. When it was full, he withdrew it, and set it carefully in a plastic box, to be followed by three more. He withdrew the needle next, and placed gauze on the puncture, which wouldn't stop bleeding. The medic released the arm, noting that their brief grasp had discolored the skin badly. A cover was placed on the box, and the first medic walked it out of the room, while the second went to the corner to spray his gloves and arms with dilute iodine. They'd been fully briefed on how dangerous this duty was, but in the way of normal men they hadn't really believed it, despite all the repetitions and the films and the slides. Both men believed it now, every cursed word, and to a man the army medics wished and prayed for Death to come and spirit this woman off to whatever destination Allah had planned for her. Watching her body disintegrate was bad enough. The thought of following her in this horrid

journey was enough to quail the stoutest heart. It was like nothing they'd ever seen. This woman was *melting* from the inside out. As the medic finished cleaning the outside of his suit, he turned, startled by her cry of pain, as if from an infant tortured by the hands of the devil himself. Eyes open, mouth wide, a rasping, liquid cry escaped into the air and penetrated the plastic of his suit.

The blood samples were handled quickly, but under the greatest care, in the Hot Lab up the corridor. Moudi and the project director were in their offices. It wasn't strictly necessary for them to be in the lab for this, and it was easier for them to view the tests without the hindrance of the protective garb.

"So fast, so remarkably fast." The director shook his head in awe.

Moudi nodded. "Yes, it overwhelms the immune system like a tidal wave." The display on the computer screen came off an electron microscope, which showed the field full of the shepherd-staff-configured viruses. A few antibodies were visible on the screen, but they might as well have been individual sheep in a pride of lions for all the good they might do. The blood cells were being attacked and destroyed. Had they been able to take tissue samples of the major organs, they could have found that the spleen was turning into something as hard as a rubber ball, full of little crystals which were like transport capsules for the Ebola virus particles. It would, in fact, have been interesting, and maybe even scientifically useful, to do laparoscopic examination of the abdomen, to see exactly what the disease did to a human patient over measured time intervals, but there was the danger of accelerating the patient's death, which they didn't want to risk.

Samples of her vomitus showed tissue fragments from her upper GI, and those were interesting because they were not merely torn loose, but dead. Large sections of the patient's still-living body had already died, come loose from the living remainder, and been ejected as the corporate organism fought vainly to survive. The infected blood would be centrifuged and deep-frozen for later use. Every drop that came out was useful, and because of that, more blood was dripped into her via rubber IV tubes. A routine heart-enzyme test showed that her heart, unlike that of the Index Patient, was still normal and healthy.

"Strange how the disease varies in its mode of attack," the director observed, reading the printout.

Moudi just looked away, imagining that he could hear her cries of anguish through the multiple concrete walls of the building. It would have been an act of supreme mercy to walk into the room and push in 20ccs of potassium, or just to turn the morphine drip all the way open and so kill her with respiratory arrest.

"Do you suppose the African boy had a preexisting cardiovascular problem?" his boss asked.

"Perhaps. It wasn't diagnosed if he did."

"Liver function is failing rapidly, as expected." The director scanned the blood-chemistry data slowly. All the numbers were well out of normal ranges, except the heart indicators, and those but barely. "It's a textbook case, Moudi."

"Indeed it is."

"This strain of the virus is even more robust than I'd imagined." He looked up. "You've done well."

Oh, yes.

". . . ANTHONY BRETANO has two doctorates from MIT, Mathematics and Optical Physics. He has an impressive personal record in industry and engineering, and I expect him to be a uniquely effective Secretary of Defense," Ryan said, concluding his statement. "Questions?"

"Sir, Vice President Kealty—"

"*Former* Vice President," Ryan interrupted. "He resigned. Let's get that right."

"But he says he didn't," the *Chicago Tribune* pointed out.

"If he said he had a talk with Elvis, would you believe that?" Ryan asked, hoping that he'd delivered the prepared line properly. He scanned faces for the reaction. Again, all forty-eight seats were filled, with twenty more reporters standing. Jack's scornful remark made them all blink, and a few even allowed themselves a smile. "Go ahead, ask your question."

"*Mister* Kealty has requested a judicial commission to ascertain the facts of the matter. How do you respond to that?"

"The question is being investigated by the FBI, which is the government's principal investigative agency. Whatever the facts are, they have to be established before anyone can make a judgment. But I think we all know what is going to happen. Ed Kealty resigned, and you all know why. Out of respect for the constitutional process, I have directed the FBI to look into the matter, but my own legal advice is absolutely clear. Mr. Kealty can talk all he wants. I have a job to do here. Next question?" Jack asked confidently.

"Mr. President"—Ryan nodded fractionally at hearing the *Miami Herald* say that—"In your speech the other night, you said that you're not a politician, but you are in a political job. The American people want to know your views on a lot of issues."

"That makes good sense. Like what?" Jack asked.

"Abortion, for one," the *Herald* reporter, a very liberated woman, asked. "What exactly is your position?"

"I don't like it," Ryan answered, speaking the truth before thinking about it. "I'm Catholic, as you probably know, and on that moral issue I think my Church is correct. However, *Roe v. Wade* is the law of the land until such time as the Supreme Court might reconsider the ruling, and the President isn't allowed to ignore the rulings of the federal courts. That puts me in a somewhat uncomfortable position, but as President I have to execute my office in accordance with the law. I swore an oath to do that." *Not bad, Jack*, Ryan thought.

"So you do not support the right of a woman to choose?" the *Herald* asked, smelling the blood.

"Choose what?" Ryan asked, still comfortable. "You know, somebody once tried to kill my wife while she was pregnant with our son, and soon thereafter I watched my oldest child lying near death in a hospital. I think life is a very precious commodity. I've learned that lesson the hard way. I'd hope that

people would think about that before deciding to have an abortion."

"That doesn't answer the question, sir."

"I can't stop people from doing it. Like it or not, it's the law. The President may not break the law." Wasn't this obvious?

"But in your appointments for the Supreme Court, will you use abortion as a litmus-test issue? Would you like to have *Roe v. Wade* overturned?" Ryan scarcely noticed the cameras changing focus, and the reporters concentrating on their scribbled notes.

"I don't like *Roe v. Wade*, as I said. I think it was a mistake. I'll tell you why. The Supreme Court interjected itself into what should have been a legislative matter. The Constitution doesn't address this issue, and on issues where the Constitution is mute, we have state and federal legislatures to write our laws." This civics lesson was going well. "Now, for the nominations I have to make to the Supreme Court, I will look for the best judges I can find. That's something we will be addressing shortly. The Constitution is sort of the Bible for the United States of America, and the justices of the Supreme Court are the—theologians, I guess, who decide what it means. They aren't supposed to write a new one. They're supposed to figure out what it means. When a change in the Constitution is needed, we have a mechanism to change it, which we've used more than twenty times."

"So, you will select only strict-constructionists who are likely to overturn *Roe.* "

It was like hitting a wall. Ryan paused noticeably before answering. "I hope to pick the best judges I can find. I will not interrogate them on single issues."

The *Boston Globe* leaped to his feet. "Mr. President, what about where the life of the mother is in danger, the Catholic Church—"

"The answer to that is obvious. The life of the mother is the paramount consideration."

"But the Church used to say—"

"I don't speak for the Catholic Church. As I said earlier, I cannot violate the law."

"But you want the law changed," the *Globe* pointed out.

"Yes, I think it would be better for everybody if the matter was returned to the state legislatures. In that way the people's elected representatives can write the laws in accordance with the will of their electorates."

"But then," the *San Francisco Examiner* pointed out, "we'd have a hodgepodge of laws across the country, and in some areas abortion would be illegal."

"Only if the electorate wants it that way. That's how democracy works."

"But what about poor women?"

"It's not for me to say," Ryan replied, feeling the beginnings of anger, and wondering how he'd ever gotten into this mess.

"So, do you support a constitutional amendment against abortion?" the *Atlanta Constitution* demanded.

"No, I don't think that's a constitutional question. I think it is properly a legislative question."

"So," the *New York Times* summarized, "you are personally against abortion on moral and religious grounds, but you will not interfere with women's

rights; you plan to appoint conservative justices to the new Supreme Court who will probably overturn *Roe*, but you don't support a constitutional amendment to outlaw freedom of choice." The reporter smiled. "Exactly what *do* you believe in on this issue, sir?"

Ryan shook his head, pursed his lips, and bit off his first version of an answer to the impertinence. "I thought I just made that clear. Shall we go on to something else?"

"Thank you, Mr. President!" a senior reporter called loudly, so advised by the frantic gestures of Arnold van Damm. Ryan left the podium puzzled, walked around the corner, then another until he was out of sight. The chief of staff grabbed the President by the arm, and nearly pushed him against the wall, and this time the Secret Service didn't move a muscle.

"Way to go, Jack, you just pissed off the entire country!"

"What do you mean?" the President replied, thinking, *Huh?*

"I mean you don't pump gas in your car when you're smoking a cigarette, God damn it! Jesus! Don't you know what you just did?" Arnie could see that he didn't. "The pro-choice people now think you're going to take their rights away. The pro-life people think you don't care about their issue. It was just perfect, Jack. You alienated the whole fucking country in five minutes!" Van Damm stormed off, leaving his President outside the Cabinet Room, afraid that he'd really lose his temper if he said anything more.

"What's he talking about?" Ryan asked. The Secret Service agents around him didn't say anything. It wasn't their place—politics—and besides, they were split on the issue as much as the country was.

IT WAS LIKE taking candy from a baby. And after the initial shock, the baby cried pretty loud.

"BUFFALO Six, this is GUIDON Six, over." Lieutenant Colonel Herbert Masterman—"Duke" to his peers—stood atop "Mad Max II," his M1A2 Abrams command tank, microphone in one hand, and binoculars in the other. Before him, spread over about ten square miles in the Negev Training Area, were the Merkava tanks and infantry carriers of the Israeli army's 7th Armored Brigade, all with yellow lights blinking and purple smoke rising from their turrets. The smoke was an Israeli innovation. When tanks were hit in battle, they burned, and when the MILES gear receptors recorded a laser "hit" they set off the marker. But the idea had been for the Israelis to count coup that way on the OpFor. Only four of Masterman's tanks and six of his M3 Bradley Scout tracks were similarly "dead."

"GUIDON, BUFFALO," came the return call from Colonel Sean Magruder, commander of the 10th "Buffalo" Armored Cavalry Regiment.

"I think this one's about concluded, Colonel, over. The fire sack is full."

"Roger that, Duke. Come on down for the AAR. We're going to have one really pissed Israeli in a few minutes." Just as well the radio link was encrypted.

"On the way, sir." Masterman stepped down off the turret as his HMMVW pulled up. His tank crew started back up, heading down toward the squadron laager.

It didn't get much better than this. Masterman felt like a football player allowed to play every day. He commanded 1st "Guidon" Squadron of the 10th ACR. It would have been called a battalion, but the Cav was different, to the yellow facings on their shoulder straps and the red-and-white unit guidons, and if you weren't Cav, you weren't shit.

"Kickin' some more ass, sir?" his driver asked as his boss lit up a Cuban cigar.

"Lambs to the slaughter, Perkins." Masterman sipped some water from a plastic bottle. A hundred feet over his head, some Israeli F-16 fighters roared past, showing outrage at what had happened below them. Probably a few of them had run afoul of the administrative SAM "launches." Masterman had been especially careful today siting his Stinger-Avenger vehicles, and sure enough, they'd come in just as he'd expected. Tough.

The local "Star Wars Room" was a virtual twin to the original one at Fort Irwin. A somewhat smaller main display screen, and nicer seats, and you could smoke in this one. He entered the building, shaking the dust off his chocolate-chip cammies and striding like Patton into Bastogne. The Israelis were waiting.

Intellectually, they had to know how useful the exercise had been to them. Emotionally, it was something else. The Israeli 7th Armored was as proud an outfit as any in the world. Practically alone, it had stopped an entire Syrian tank corps on the Golan Heights back in 1973, and their current CO had been a lieutenant then who'd taken command of a headless company and fought brilliantly. Not accustomed to failure, he'd just seen the brigade in which he'd practically grown up annihilated, in thirty brutal minutes.

"General," Masterman said, extending his hand to the chastened brigadier. The Israeli hesitated before taking it.

"Not personal, sir, just business," said Lieutenant Colonel Nick Sarto, who commanded the 2nd "Bighorn" Squadron, and who had just played hammer to Masterman's anvil. With the Israeli 7th in the middle.

"Gentlemen, shall we begin?" called the senior observer-controller. As a sop to the Israeli Army, the OC team here was a fifty-fifty mix of experienced American and Israeli officers, and it was hard to determine which group was the more embarrassed.

There was, first, a quick-time replay of the theoretical engagement. The Israeli vehicles in blue marched into the shallow valley to meet GUIDON'S reconnaissance screen, which leapfrogged back rapidly, but not toward the prepared defense positions of the rest of the squadron, instead leading them away at an angle. Thinking it a trap, the Israeli 7th had maneuvered west, so as to loop around and envelop their enemies, only to walk into a solid wall of dug-in tanks, and then to have Bighorn come in from the east much faster than expected—so fast that Doug Mills's 3rd "Dakota" Squadron, the regimental reserve, never had a chance to come into play for the pursuit phase. It was the same old lesson. The Israeli commander had guessed at his enemy's positions instead of sending his reconnaissance screen to find out.

The Israeli brigadier watched the replay, and it seemed that he deflated like a balloon. The Americans didn't laugh. They'd all been there before, though it was far nicer to be on the winning side.

“Your reconnaissance screen wasn’t far forward enough, Benny,” the senior Israeli OC said diplomatically.

“Arabs don’t fight that way!” Benjamin Eitan replied.

“They’re supposed to, sir,” Masterman pointed out. “This is standard Soviet doctrine, and that’s who trained’em all, remember. Pull ’em into the fire sack and slam the back door. Hell, General, that’s exactly what you did with your Centurions back in ’73. I read your book on the engagement,” the American added. It defused the mood at once. One of the other things the American officers had to exercise here was diplomacy. General Eitan looked sideways and managed something approaching a smile.

“I did, didn’t I?”

“Sure as hell. You clobbered that Syrian regiment in forty minutes, as I recall.”

“And you, at 73 Easting?” Eitan responded, grateful for the compliment, even though he knew it was a deliberate effort to calm his temper.

It was no accident that Magruder, Masterman, Sarto, and Mills were here. All four had participated in a vicious combat action in the Persian Gulf War, where three troops of the 2nd “Dragoon” Cav had stumbled into an elite Iraqi brigade force under very adverse weather conditions—too bad for the regimental aircraft to participate, even to warn of the enemy’s presence—and wiped it out over a period of a few hours. The Israelis knew it, and therefore couldn’t complain that the Americans were book soldiers playing theoretical games.

Nor was the result of this “battle” unusual. Eitan was new, only a month in command, and he would learn, as other Israeli officers had learned, that the American training model was more unforgiving than real combat. It was a hard lesson for the Israelis, so hard that nobody really learned it until he’d visited the Negev Training Area, the NTA, and had his head handed to him. If the Israelis had a weakness, it was pride, Colonel Magruder knew. The OpFor’s job here, as in California, was to strip that away. A commander’s pride got his soldiers dead.

“Okay,” the senior American OC said. “What can we learn from this?”

Don’t fuck with the Buffalo Soldiers, all three squadron commanders thought, but didn’t say. Marion Diggs had reestablished the regiment’s gritty reputation in his command tour before moving on to command Fort Irwin. Though the word was still percolating down through the Israeli Defense Forces, the troopers of the 10th had adopted a confident strut when they went out shopping, and for all the grief they caused the Israeli military on the playing fields of the NTA, they were immensely popular. The 10th ACR, along with two squadrons of F-16 fighters, was America’s commitment to Israeli security, all the more so that they trained the Jewish state’s ground forces to a level of readiness they hadn’t known since the Israeli army had nearly lost its soul in the hills and towns of Lebanon. Eitan would learn, and learn fast. By the end of the training rotation he’d give them trouble. Maybe, the three squadron commanders thought. They weren’t in the business of giving freebies.

“I REMEMBER WHEN you told me how delightful democracy was, Mr.

President," Golovko said chirpily, as he walked through the door.

"You must have caught me on TV this morning," Ryan managed to reply.

"I remember when such comments would have gotten such people shot." Behind the Russian, Andrea Price heard the comment and wondered how this guy had the chutzpah to twist the President's tail.

"Well, we don't do that here," Jack responded, taking his seat. "That will be all for now, Andrea. Sergey and I are old friends." This was to be a private conversation, not even a secretary present to take notes, though hidden microphones would copy down every word for later transcription. The Russian knew that. The American knew that he knew that, but the symbolism of no other people in the room was a compliment to the visitor, another fact which the American knew the Russian to know as well. Jack wondered how many sets of interlocking wheels he was supposed to keep track of, just for an informal meeting with a foreign representative.

When the door closed behind the agent, Golovko spoke on. "Thank you."

"Hell, we are old friends, aren't we?"

Golovko smiled. "What a superb enemy you were."

"And now . . . ?"

"How is your family adjusting?"

"About as well as I am," Jack admitted, then shifted gears. "You had three hours at the embassy to get caught up."

Golovko nodded; as usual, Ryan was well briefed for this meeting, covert though it was. The Russian embassy was only a few blocks up Sixteenth Street, and he'd walked down to the White House, a simple way to avoid notice in a town where official people traveled in official cars. "I didn't expect things in Iraq to fall so quickly."

"Neither did we. But that's not why you came over, Sergey Nikolay'ch. China?"

"I presume your satellite photos are as clear as ours on the issue. Their military is at an unusually high state of readiness."

"Our people are divided on that," Ryan said. "They might be building up to put some more pressure on Taiwan. They've been building their navy up."

"Their navy isn't ready for combat operations yet. Their army still is, and their rocket forces. Neither is going to cross the Formosa Strait, Mr. President."

That made the reason for his trip clear enough. Jack paused to look out the window at the Washington Monument, surrounded as it was by a circle of flagpoles, rather like a garland. What was it George had said about avoiding entangling foreign alliances? But it had been a far simpler world back then, two months to cross the Atlantic, not six or seven hours....

"If you are asking what I think you are, yes—or should I say, no."

"Could you clarify?"

"America would not look kindly upon an attack by China against Russia. Such a conflict would have very adverse effects upon world stability, and would also impede your progress to full democratic status. America wants to see Russia become a prosperous democracy. We were enemies long enough. We should be friends, and America wants her friends safe and peaceful."

"They hate us, they covet what we have," Golovko went on, not satisfied

with America's statement.

"Sergey, the time for nations to steal what they cannot earn is past. It's history, and not to be repeated."

"And if they move on us anyway?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, Sergey," the President answered. "The idea is to prevent such actions. If it appears that they are really thinking about a move, we'll counsel them to reconsider. We are keeping an eye on things."

"I don't think you understand them." Another push, Ryan saw. They really were worked up about this.

"Do you think anyone does? Do you think they themselves know what they want?" The two intelligence officers—that was how both men would always think of themselves—shared a look of professional amusement.

"That is the problem," Golovko admitted. "I try to explain to my President that it is difficult to predict the behavior of undecided people. They have capabilities, but so do we, and the calculus of the matter appears different from both sides—and then the personalities come into play. Ivan Emmetovich, those are old men with old ideas. Their personalities are the major consideration here."

"And history, and culture, and economics, and trade—and I haven't had the chance to look them in the eye yet. I'm weak on that part of the world," Jack reminded his guest. "I spent most of my life trying to figure you people out."

"So you will stand with us?"

Ryan shook his head. "It's too early and too speculative to go that far. We will do everything in our power, however, to prevent a possible conflict between the PRC and Russia. If it happens, you'll go nuclear. I know it. You know it. I think they know it."

"They don't believe it."

"Sergey, nobody's that stupid." Ryan made a mental note to discuss this with Scott Adler, who knew the region far better than he did. It was time to close the book on that issue for the moment, and open another. "Iraq. What are your people saying?"

Golovko grimaced. "We had a network go down three months ago. Twenty people, all shot or hanged—after interrogation, that is. What we have left doesn't tell us much, but it appears that senior generals are preparing to do something."

"Two of them just showed up in the Sudan this morning," Ryan told him. It wasn't often he caught Golovko by surprise.

"So fast?"

Ryan nodded, handing over the photographs from the Khartoum airport. "Yep."

Golovko scanned them, not knowing the faces, but not really needing to. Information passed along at this level was never, ever faked. Even with enemies and former enemies, a nation had to keep its word on some things. He handed the photos back. "Iran, then. We have some people there, but we've heard nothing in the last few days. It's a dangerous environment in which to operate, as you know. We expect that Daryaei had something to do with the assassination, but we have no evidence to support it." He paused.

“The implications of this are serious.”

“You’re telling me that you can’t do anything about it, either, then?”

“No, Ivan Emmetovich, we cannot. We have no influence there, and neither do you.”

18

LAST PLANE OUT

THE NEXT SHUTTLE FLIGHT got off early. The shell corporation's third and last business jet was recalled from Europe, and with a change of flight crews, was ready three hours early. That meant that the first of the G-IVs could fly to Baghdad, pick up two more generals, and return. Badrayn felt rather like a travel agent or dispatcher in addition to his unusual role as diplomat. He just hoped it wouldn't take too long. It might be dangerous to be a passenger on the last plane, because the last one—well, there was no telling *which* would be the last, was there? The generals didn't grasp that yet. The last one might well be pursued by tracer fire, leaving people on the ground to face the music, and Badrayn knew he would be with them ... in a region where selectivity wasn't an integral part of the justice system. Well, he shrugged, life had risks, and he was being well paid. They'd told him, at least, that there would be another pickup flight in less than three hours, and a fourth five hours beyond that one. But the sum total would be ten or eleven, and that would go for another three days on the current schedule, and three days could be a lifetime.

Beyond the confines of this airport, the Iraqi army was still in the streets, but there would be a change now. Those conscript soldiers, and even the elite guardsmen, would have been out there for several days, settled into a dull and purposeless routine, and *that* was something destructive to soldiers. They'd be shuffling around on their feet, smoking cigarettes, starting to ask questions amongst themselves: *What exactly is going on?* Initially there would be no answers. Their sergeants would tell them to mind their duties, so advised by their company officers, so advised in turn from battalion staffs, and so on all the way up the line ... until somewhere that same question would be repeated, and there would *be* no one farther up the chain of command to tell the questioner to sit down and shut up. At that point the question would rebound back *down* the line. It was something an army could sense, as a thorn in the foot instantly told the brain that something was amiss. And if the thorn was dirty, then an infection would follow that could spread and kill the entire body. The generals were supposed to know such things—but, no, they didn't anymore. Something very foolish happened to generals, especially in this part of the world. They forgot. It was that simple. They just forgot that the villas and the servants and the cars were not a divine bequest, but a temporal convenience that could disappear as quickly as morning fog. They were still more afraid of Daryaei than of their own people, and that was foolish. It would have merely been annoying to Badrayn, except that his life now depended on theirs.

THE SEAT ON the right side of the cabin was still damp. This time it was occupied by the youngest daughter of the general who had, until minutes before, commanded the 4th Guards Division (Motorized), and who was now conferring with an air force colleague. The child felt the lingering damp on her hand and, puzzled, licked at it, until her mother saw it and sent her off to wash her hands. Then the mother complained to the Iranian steward who rode in the back with this group. He had the child moved, and made a note to have the seat cleaned or replaced at Mehrabad. There was less tension now. The first pair of officers had reported in from Khartoum that all was well. A Sudanese army platoon guarded the large house which they shared, and all appeared to be secure. The generals had already determined that they would make a sizable "contribution" to that country's treasury, to ensure their own safety for the time—hopefully brief—they'd spend in that country before moving on. Their intelligence chief, still back in Baghdad, was on the phone now, calling around to various contacts in various countries to find secure permanent housing for them. Switzerland? They wondered. A cold country in terms of both climate and culture, but a safe one, and for those with money to invest, an anonymous one.

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"WHO OWNS THREE G-IVs over there?"

"The registration of the aircraft is Swiss, Lieutenant," Major Sabah reported, having just learned the fact. From the photos shot at Khartoum he'd gotten the tail number, and that was easily checked on a computer database. He flipped the page to determine the ownership. "A corporately owned jet. They have three of them, and a few smaller turboprops for flying around Europe. We'll have to check further to learn more about the corporation." But somebody would be working on that, and they'd find the obvious. Probably some import-export concern, more a letter-drop than anything else, perhaps with a small storefront that conducted real, if negligible, business for appearance's sake. The corporation would have a medium-sized account in a commercial bank; it would have a law firm to make sure that it scrupulously obeyed every local rule; its employees would be fully briefed on how to behave—Switzerland was a law-abiding country—and how to keep everything in order; the corporation would vanish into the woodwork, because the Swiss didn't trouble people who deposited money in their banks and kept within their laws. Those who broke the rules severely could find the country as inhospitable as the one the generals were leaving. That was well understood, too.

The pity of it, Sabah thought, was that he knew the first two faces, and probably also knew the faces now in transit. It would have been pleasing to get them before the bar of justice, especially a Kuwaiti bar. They'd been more junior, most of them, when Iraq had invaded his country. They would have participated in the pillaging. Major Sabah remembered prowling the streets, trying to look as inconspicuous and harmless as possible while other Kuwaiti subjects had resisted more actively, which had been brave, but dangerous.

Most of them had been caught and killed, along with family members, and though the survivors were now famous and well rewarded, those few had operated on information he'd gathered. The major didn't mind. His family was wealthy enough, and he *liked* being a spook. Even more, he was damned sure his country would never be surprised like that again. He would see to that personally.

In any case, the generals who were leaving were less a concern than the ones who would replace them. That had the major worried.

"WELL, I'M AFRAID it was a pretty weak performance in all respects for Mr. Ryan," Ed Kealty said on the noon news-interview show. "Dr. Bretano is, first of all, an industry official who has long since opted out of public service. I was there when his name came up before, and I was there when he refused to consider a high government position—so that he could stay where he was to make money, I suppose. He's a talented man, evidently a good engineer," Kealty allowed with a tolerant smile, "but a Secretary of Defense, no." A shake of the head emphasized it.

"What did you think of President Ryan's position on abortion, sir?" Barry asked on CNN.

"Barry, that's the problem. He's *not* really the President," Kealty replied in a mild, businesslike tone. "And we need to correct that. His lack of understanding for the public showed clearly in that contradictory and ill-considered statement in the Press Room. *Roe v. Wade* is the law of the land. That's all he had to say. It's not necessary that the President should like the laws, but he has to enforce them. Of course, for any public official not to understand how the American people think on this issue doesn't so much show insensitivity to the rights of women to choose, as simple incompetence. All Ryan had to do was listen to his briefers on what to say, but he didn't even do that. He's a loose cannon," Kealty concluded. "We don't need one of those in the White House."

"But your claim—" A raised hand stopped the correspondent cold.

"It's not a claim, Barry. It's a fact. I never resigned. I never actually left the vice-presidency. Because of that, when Roger Durling died, I became President. What we have to do right now, and Mr. Ryan will do this if he cares about his country, is to form a judicial panel to examine the constitutional issues and decide who the President really is. If Ryan does not do that—well, he's putting himself before the good of the country. Now, I must add that I fully believe that Jack Ryan is acting in good conscience. He's an honorable man, and in the past he's shown himself to be a courageous man. Unfortunately, right now, he's confused, as we saw at the press conference this morning."

"A pat of butter would not melt in his mouth, Jack," van Damm observed, turning the sound down. "You see how good he is at this?"

Ryan nearly came out of his chair. "God damn it, Arnie, that's what I said! I must have said it three or four times—that's the law, and I can't break the law. *That's what I said!"*

"Remember what I told you about keeping your temper under control?" The

chief of staff waited for Ryan's color to go back down. He turned the sound back up.

"What's most disturbing, however," Kealty was saying now, "is what Ryan said about his appointments to the Supreme Court. It's pretty clear he wants to turn the clock back on a lot of things. Litmus tests on issues like abortion, appointing only strict-constructionists. It makes you wonder if he wants to overturn affirmative action, and heaven knows what else. Unfortunately, we find ourselves in a situation where the sitting President will exercise immense power, particularly in the courts. And Ryan just doesn't know how, Barry. He doesn't, and what we learned today about what he wants to do—well, it's just plain frightening, isn't it?"

"Am I on a different planet, Arnie?" Jack demanded. "I didn't say 'litmus test.' A reporter did. I didn't say 'strict-constructionist.' A reporter did."

"Jack, it isn't what you say. It's what people hear."

"Just how much damage do you think President Ryan could do, then?" Barry asked on the TV. Arnie shook his head in admiration. Kealty had seduced him right out of his shorts, right on live television, and Barry had responded perfectly, framing the question to show that he still called Ryan the President, but then asking the question in a form that would shake people's faith in him. It was no wonder that Ed was so good with the ladies, was it? And the average viewer would never grasp the subtlety with which he'd pulled Barry's drawers off. What a pro.

"In a situation like this, with the government decapitated? It could take years to fix what he might break," Kealty said with the grave concern of a trusted family physician. "Not because he's an evil person. He certainly is not. But because he simply doesn't know how to execute the office of President of the United States. He just doesn't, Barry."

"We'll be back after these messages from our cable operators," Barry told the camera. Arnie had heard enough, and didn't need to see the commercials. He lifted the controller and clicked the TV off.

"Mr. President, I wasn't worried before, but I'm worried now." He paused for a moment. "Tomorrow you will see some editorials in a few of the major papers agreeing that a judicial commission is necessary, and you'll have no choice but to let it go forward."

"Wait a minute. The law doesn't say that—"

"The law doesn't say anything, remember? And even if it did, there's no Supreme Court to decide. We're in a democracy, Jack. The will of the people will decide who's the President. The will of the people will be swayed by what the media says, and you'll never be as good at working the media as Ed is."

"Look, Arnie, *he* resigned. *I* got confirmed by the Congress as VP, Roger got killed, and *I* became President, and that's the fucking law! And *I* have to abide by the law. I swore an oath to do that, and I will. I never wanted this fucking job, but I've never run away from anything in my life, either, and I'll be damned if I'll run away from this!" There was one other thing. Ryan despised Edward Kealty. Didn't like his political views, didn't like his Harvard hauteur, didn't like his private life, damned sure didn't like his treatment of women. "You know what he is, Arnie?" Ryan snarled.

"Yes, I do. He's a pimp, a hustler, a con man. He has no convictions at all.

He's never even practiced law, but he's helped write thousands of them. He's not a doctor, but he's established national health policy. He's been a professional politician his whole life, always on the public payroll. He's never generated a product or a service in the private sector of the economy, but he's spent his life deciding how high the taxes should be, and how that money should be spent. The only black people he ever met as a kid were the maids who picked up his bedroom, but he's a champion of minority rights. He's a hypocrite. He's a charlatan. And he's going to win unless you get your shit together, Mr. President," Arnie said, pouring dry ice over Ryan's fiery temper. "Because he knows how to play the game, and you don't."

THE PATIENT, THE records said, had taken a trip to the Far East back in October, and in Bangkok had indulged himself in the sexual services for which that country was well known. Pierre Alexandre, then a captain assigned to a military hospital in the tropical country, had once indulged in them himself. His conscience didn't trouble him about it. He'd been young and foolish, as people of that age were supposed to be. But that had been before AIDS. He'd been the guy to tell the patient, male, Caucasian, thirty-six, that he had HIV antibodies in his blood, that he could not have unprotected sex with his wife, and that his wife should have her blood tested at once. Oh, she was pregnant? Immediately, right away. Tomorrow if possible.

Alexandre felt rather like a judge. It wasn't the first time he'd delivered news like this, and damned sure it wouldn't be the last, but at least when a judge pronounced a sentence of death it was for a serious crime, and there was an appeals process. This poor bastard was guilty of nothing more than being a man twelve time-zones from home, probably drunk and lonely. Maybe he'd had an argument over the phone with his wife. Maybe she'd been pregnant then, and he wasn't getting any. Maybe it had just been the exotic locations, and Alex remembered well how seductive those childlike Thai girls could be, and what the hell, who'd ever know? Now a lot of people would, and there was no appeals process. That could change, Dr. Alexandre thought. He had just told the patient that. You couldn't take their hope away. That's what oncologists had told their patients for two generations. That hope was real, was true, wasn't it? There were some smart people working on this one—Alexandre was one of them—and the breakthrough could happen tomorrow, for all he knew. Or it could take a hundred years. The patient, on the form card, had ten.

"You don't look very happy."

He looked up. "Dr. Ryan."

"Dr. Alexandre, and I think you know Roy." She gestured at the table with her tray. The dining area was packed today. "Mind?"

He got halfway to his feet. "Please."

"Bad day?"

"E-Strain case," was all he had to say.

"HIV, Thailand? Over here now?"

"You *do* read *M&M."* He managed a smile.

"I have to keep up with my residents. E-Strain? You're sure?" Cathy asked.

"I reran the test myself. He got it in Thailand, business trip, he said. Pregnant wife," Alex added. Professor Ryan grimaced at the addition.

"Not good."

"AIDS?" Roy Altman asked. The rest of SURGEON'S detail was spread around the room. They would have preferred that she ate in her office, but Dr. Ryan had explained that this was one of the ways in which Hopkins docs kept up with one another, and was for her a regular routine. Today it was infectious disease. Tomorrow pediatrics.

"E-Strain," Alexandre explained with a nod. "America is mostly B-Strain. Same thing in Africa."

"What's the difference?"

Cathy answered. "B-Strain is pretty hard to get. It mainly requires direct contact of blood products. That happens with IV drug users who share needles or through sexual contact, but mainly it's still homosexuals who have tissue lesions either from tearing or more conventional venereal diseases."

"You forgot bad luck, but that's only one percent or so." Alexandre picked up the thread. "It's starting to look as though E-Strain—that cropped up in Thailand—well, that it makes the heterosexual jump a lot more easily than B. It's evidently a heartier version of our old friend."

"Has CDC quantified that yet?" Cathy asked.

"No, they need a few more months, least that's what I heard a couple weeks ago."

"How bad?" Altman asked. Working with SURGEON was turning into an educational experience.

"Ralph Forster went over five years ago to see how bad things were. Know the story, Alex?"

"Not all of it, just the bottom line."

"Ralph flew over on a government ticket, official trip and all that, and first thing happens off the plane, the Thai official meets him at customs, walks him to the car and says, 'Want some girls for tonight?' That's when he knew there was a real problem."

"I believe it," Alex said, remembering when he would have smiled and nodded. This time he managed not to shudder. "The numbers are grim. Mr. Altman, right now, nearly a third of the kids inducted into the Thai army are HIV positive. Mainly E-Strain." The implications of that number were unmistakable.

"A third? A *third* of them?"

"Up from twenty-five percent when Ralph flew over. That's a hard number, okay?"

"But that means—"

"It might mean in fifty years, no more Thailand," Cathy announced in a matter-of-fact voice that masked her inner horror. "When I was going to school here, I thought oncology was the place to be for the supersmart ones"—she pointed for Altman's benefit—"Marty, Bert, Curt, and Louise, those guys in the corner over there. I didn't think I could take it, take the stress, so I cut up eyeballs and fix 'em. I was wrong. We're going to beat cancer. But these damned viruses, I don't know."

"The solution, Cathy, is in understanding the precise interactions between

the gene strings in the virus and the host cell, and it shouldn't be all *that* hard. Viruses are such tiny little sunzabitches. They can only do so many things, not like the interaction of the entire human genome at conception. Once we figure that one out, we can defeat all the little bastards." Alexandre, like most research docs, was an optimist.

"So, researching the human cell?" Altman asked, interested in learning this. Alexandre shook his head.

"A lot smaller than that. We're into the genome now. It's like taking a strange machine apart, every step you're trying to figure what the individual parts do, and sooner or later you got all the parts loose, and you know where they all go, and then you figure out what they all do in a systematic way. That's what we're doing now."

"You know what it's going to come down to?" Cathy suggested with a question, then answered it: "Mathematics."

"That's what Gus says down at Atlanta."

"Math? Wait a minute," Altman objected.

"At the most basic level, the human genetic code is composed of four amino acids, labeled A, C, G and T. How those letters—the acids, I mean—are strung together determines everything," Alex explained. "Different character sequences mean different things and interact in different ways, and probably Gus is right: the interactions are mathematically defined. The genetic code really is a code. It *can* be cracked, and it *can* be understood." *Probably someone will assign a mathematical value to them . . . complex polynomials . . .* he thought. Was that important?

"Just nobody smart enough to do it has come along yet," Cathy Ryan observed. "That's the home-run ball, Roy. Someday, somebody is going to step up to the plate, and put that one over the fence, and it will give us the key to defeating all human diseases. All of them. Every single one. The pot of gold at the end of that rainbow is medical immortality—and who knows, maybe human immortality."

"Put us all out of business, especially you, Cathy. One of the first things they'll edit out of the human genome is myopia, and diabetes and that—"

"It'll unemploy you before it unemploys me, Professor," Cathy said with an impish smile. "I'm a surgeon, remember? I'll still have trauma to fix. But sooner or later, you're going to win your battle."

But would it be in time for this morning's E-Strain patient? Alex wondered. Probably not. Probably not.

SHE WAS CURSING them now, mainly in French, but Flemish also. The army medics didn't understand either language. Moudi spoke the former well enough to know that, vile as the imprecations were, they were not the product of a lucid mind. The brain was now being affected, and Jean Baptiste was unable to converse even with her God. Her heart was under attack, finally, and that gave the doctor hope that Death would come for her and show some belated mercy for a woman who deserved far more than she had received from life. Maybe delirium was a blessing for her. Maybe her soul was detached from her body. Maybe in not knowing where she was, who she was, what was

wrong, the pain didn't touch her anymore, not in the places that mattered. It was an illusion the doctor needed, but if what he saw was mercy, it was a ghastly variety of it.

The patient's face was a mass of rashes now, almost as though she'd been brutally beaten, her pale skin like an opaque window onto misplaced blood. He couldn't decide if her eyes were still working. There was bleeding both on the surface and the interior of each, and if she could still see, it wouldn't last much longer. They'd almost lost her half an hour earlier, occasioning his rush to the treatment room to see her choking on aspirated vomit and the medics trying both to clear her airway and keep their gloves intact. The restraints that held her in place, coated though they were with smooth plastic, had abraded away her skin, causing more bleeding and more pain. The tissues of her vascular system were breaking down as well, and the IV leaked as much out on the bed as went into the arms and legs, all of the fluids as deadly as the most toxic poison. Now the medical corpsmen were truly frightened even of touching the patient, gloves or not, suits or not. Moudi saw that they'd gotten a plastic bucket and filled it with dilute iodine, and as he watched, one of them dipped his gloves into it, shaking them off but not drying them, so that if he touched her there would be a chemical barrier against the pathogens that might leap at him from her body. Such precautions weren't necessary—the gloves were thick—but he could hardly blame the men for their fear. At the turning of the hour, the new shift arrived, and the old one left. One of them looked back on his way out the door, praying with silent lips that Allah would take the woman before he had to come back in eight hours. Outside the room, an Iranian army doctor similarly dressed in plastic would lead the men to the disinfection area, where their suits would be sprayed before they took them off, and then their bodies, while the suits were burned to ashes in the downstairs incinerator. Moudi had no doubts that the procedures would be followed to the letter—no, they would be exceeded in every detail, and even then the medics would be afraid for days to come.

Had he possessed a deadly weapon right then and there, he might have used it on her, and to hell with the consequences. A large injection of air might have worked a few hours before, causing a fatal embolism, but the breakdown of her vascular system was such that he couldn't even be sure of that. It was her strength that made the ordeal so terrible. Small though she was, she'd worked forty years of long hours, and earned surprisingly good health as a result. The body which had sustained her courageous soul for so long would not give up the battle, futile as it was.

"Come, Moudi, you know better than this," the director said behind him.

"What do you mean?" he asked without turning.

"If she were back in the hospital in Africa, what would be different? Would they not treat her the same way, taking the same measures to sustain her? The blood, and the IV fluids, and everything else. It would be exactly the same. Her religion does not allow euthanasia. If anything, the care here is better," he pointed out, correctly, if coldly, then turned away to check the chart. "Five liters. Excellent."

"We could start—"

"No." The director shook his head. "When her heart stops, we will drain all

her blood. We will remove the liver, kidneys and spleen, and then our real work begins."

"Someone should at least pray for her soul."

"You will, Moudi. You are a fine doctor. You care even for an infidel. You may be proud of that. If it were possible to save her, you would have done so. I know that. You know that. She knows that."

"What we are doing, to inflict this on—"

"On unbelievers," the director reminded him. "On those who hate our country and our Faith, who spit upon the words of the Prophet. I will even agree that this is a woman of virtue. Allah will be merciful with her, I am sure. You did not choose her fate. Neither did I." He had to keep Moudi going. The younger man *was* a brilliant physician. If anything, too good. The director for his part thanked Allah that he'd spent the last decade in laboratories, else he might have succumbed to the same human weaknesses.

BADRAYN INSISTED. This time, three generals. Every seat full, and one of them with two small children strapped in together. They understood now. They had to. He'd explained it to them, pointing to the tower, whose controllers had watched every flight in and out, and who *had to know* what was going on by now, and arresting them would do little good, as their families would miss them, and if their families were picked up, the neighbors would know, wouldn't they?

Well, yes, they had agreed.

Just send a damned airliner next time, he wanted to tell Tehran, but no, someone would have objected, here or there, it didn't matter, because no matter what you said, no matter how sensible it was, somebody would object to it. Whether on the Iranian side or the Iraqi, that didn't matter, either. Either way it would get people killed. It certainly would. There was nothing for him to do but wait now, wait and worry. He could have had a few drinks, but he decided against it. He'd had alcohol more than once. All those years in Lebanon. As Bahrain still was, Lebanon had been, and probably would be again, a place where the strict Islamic rules could be violated, and there he had indulged in Western vice along with everyone else. But not now. He might be close to death and, sinner or not, he was a Muslim, and he would face death in the proper way. And so he drank coffee for the most part, staring out the windows from his seat, next to the phone, telling himself that the caffeine was making his hands shake, and nothing else.

"YOU'RE JACKSON?" Tony Bretano asked. He'd spent the morning with the acting chiefs. Now it was time for the worker bees.

"Yes, sir, J-3. I guess I'm your operations officer," Robby replied, taking his seat and not, for once, carrying a bundle of papers and scurrying around like the White Rabbit.

"How bad is it?"

"Well, we're spread pretty thin. We still have two carrier battle-groups in

the IO looking after India and Sri Lanka. We're flying a couple battalions of light infantry to the Marianas to reassert control there and supervise the withdrawal of Japanese personnel. That's mainly political, we don't expect any problems. Our forward-deployed air assets have been recalled to CON US to refit. That aspect of operations against Japan went well."

"You will want me to speed production of the F-22 and restart B-2 production, then? That's what the Air Force said."

"We just proved that Stealth is one hell of a force-multiplier, Mr. Secretary, and that's a fact. We need all of those we can get."

"I agree. What about the rest of the force structure?" Bretano asked.

"We're too damned thin for all the commitments we have. If we had to go to Kuwait again, for example, like we did in 1991, we can't do it. We literally do not have all that force to project anymore. You know what my job is, sir. I have to figure out how to do the things we have to do. Okay, operations against Japan took us as far as we could go, and—"

"Mickey Moore said a lot of nice things about the plan you put together and executed," the SecDef pointed out.

"General Moore is very kind. Yes, sir, it worked, but we were on a shoestring the whole time, and that's not the way American forces are supposed to go out into harm's way, Mr. Secretary. We're supposed to scare the bejeebers out of people the moment the first private steps off the airplane. I *can* improvise if I have to, but that's not supposed to be my job. Sooner or later, I goof, or somebody goofs, and we end up with dead people in uniform."

"I agree with that, too." Bretano took a bite of his sandwich. "The President's given me a free hand to clean this department out, do things my way. I have two weeks to put the new force requirements together."

"Two weeks, sir?" If Jackson were able to go pale, that would have done it to him.

"Jackson, how long you been in uniform?" the SecDef asked.

"Counting time at the Trade School? Call it thirty years."

"If you can't do it by tomorrow, you're the wrong guy. But I'll give you ten days," Bretano said generously.

"Mr. Secretary, I'm Operations, not Manpower, and—"

"Exactly. In my way of looking at things, Manpower fills the needs that Operations defines. Decisions in a place like this are supposed to be made by the shooters, not the accountants. That's what was wrong at TRW when I moved in. Accountants were telling engineers what they could have to be engineers. No." Bretano shook his head. "That didn't work. If you build things, your engineers decide how the company runs. For a place like this, the shooters decide what they need, and the accountants figure out how to shoehorn it into the budget. There's always a struggle, but the product end of the business makes the decisions."

Well, damn. Jackson managed not to smile. "Parameters?"

"Figure the largest credible threat, the most serious crisis that's likely, not possible, and design me a force structure that can handle it." Even that wasn't good enough, and both men knew it. In the old days there had been the guideline of two and a half wars, that America could deploy to fight two major conflicts, plus a little brush fire somewhere else. Few had ever admitted that

this “rule” had always been a fantasy, all the way back to the Eisenhower presidency. Today, as Jackson had just admitted, America lacked the wherewithal to conduct a single major military deployment. The fleet was down to half of what it had been ten years earlier. The Army was down further. The Air Force, ever sheltering behind its high-tech, was formidable, but had still retired nearly half its total strength. The Marines were still tough and ready, but the Marine Corps was an expeditionary force, able to deploy in the expectation that reinforcements would arrive behind them, and dangerously light in its weapons. The cupboard wasn’t exactly bare, but the enforced diet hadn’t really done anyone much good.

“Ten days?”

“You’ve got what I need sitting in a desk drawer right now, don’t you?” Planning officers always did, Bretano knew.

“Give me a couple days to polish it up, sir, but, yes, we do.”

“Jackson?”

“Yes, Mr. Secretary?”

“I kept track of our operations in the Pacific. One of my people at TRW, Skip Tyler, used to be pretty good at this stuff, and we looked over maps and things every day. The operations you put together, they were impressive. War isn’t just physical. It’s psychological, too, like all life is. You win because you have the best people. Guns and planes count, but brains count more. I’m a good manager, and one hell of a good engineer. I’m not a fighter. I’ll listen to what you say, ’cause you and your colleagues know how to fight. I’ll stand up for you wherever and whenever I have to. In return for that, I want what you really need, not what you’d like to have. We can’t afford that. We can cut bureaucracy. That’s Manpower’s job, civilian and uniform. I’ll lean this place out. At TRW I got rid of a lot of useless bodies. That’s an engineering company, and now it’s run by engineers. This is a company that does operations, and it ought to be run by operators, people with notches cut in their gun grips. Lean. Mean. Tough. Smart. You get what I’m saying?”

“I think so, sir.”

“Ten days. Less if you can. Call me when you’re ready.”

“CLARK,” JOHN SAID, picking up his direct line.

“Holtzman,” the voice said. The name made John’s eyes go a little wide.

“I suppose I could ask how you got this number, but you’d never reveal your source.”

“Good guess,” the reporter agreed. “Remember that dinner we had a while back at Esteban’s?”

“Vaguely,” Clark lied. “It’s been a long time.” It hadn’t actually been a dinner, but the tape machine that had to be on the phone didn’t know that.

“I owe you one. How about tonight?”

“I’ll get back to you.” Clark hung up and stared down at his desk. What the hell was this about?

“COME ON, THAT’S not what Jack said,” van Damm told the *New York Times.*

“That’s what he meant, Arnie,” the reporter responded. “You know it. I know it.”

“I wish you’d go easy on the guy. He’s not a politician,” the chief of staff pointed out.

“Not my fault, Arnie. He’s in the job. He has to follow the rules.”

Arnold van Damm nodded agreement, concealing the anger that had risen in an instant at the correspondent’s casual remark. Inwardly he knew that the reporter was right. That’s how the game was played. But he also knew that the reporter was wrong. Maybe he’d grown too attached to President Ryan, enough so that he’d actually absorbed some of his flaky ideas. The media, exclusively composed of the employees of private businesses—most of them corporations with publicly traded stock—had grown in power to the point that they *decided* what people said. That was bad enough. What was worse, they enjoyed their jobs too much. They could make or break anyone in this town. They made the rules. He who broke them could himself be broken.

Ryan *was* a naif. There was no denying it. In his defense, he’d never sought his current job. He’d come here by accident, having sought nothing more than a final opportunity to serve, and then to leave once and for all, to return to private life. He’d not been elected to his post. But neither had the media, and at least Ryan had the Constitution to define his duties. The media was crossing the line. They were taking sides in a constitutional matter, and they were taking the wrong side.

“Who makes the rules?” Arnie asked.

“They just are,” the *Times* answered.

“Well, the President isn’t going to attack *Roe*. He never said that he would. And he’s not going to pick Justices off park benches, either. He isn’t going to pick liberal activists, and he isn’t going to pick conservative activists, and I think you know that.”

“So Ryan misspoke himself?” The reporter’s casual grin said it all. He’d report this as spin control by a senior administration official, “ ‘clarifying,’ which means correcting, what the President said,” the article would read.

“Not at all. You misunderstood him.”

“It sounded pretty clear to me, Arnie.”

“That’s because you’re used to listening to professional politicians. The President we have now says things straight. Actually I kind of like that,” van Damm went on, lying; it was driving him crazy. “And it might even make life easier for you. You don’t have to check the tea leaves anymore. All you have to do is take proper notes. Or maybe just judge him by a fair set of rules. We’ve agreed that he’s not a politician, but you’re treating him as if he were. Listen to what he’s really saying, will you?” Or maybe even look at the videotape, he didn’t add. He was skating on the edge now. Talking to the media was like petting a new cat. You never knew when they’d reach up and scratch.

“Come on, Arnie. You’re the most loyal guy in this town. Damn, you would have been a great family doctor. We all know that. But Ryan doesn’t have a clue. The speech at National Cathedral, that loony speech from the Oval Office. He’s about as presidential as the chairman of the Rotary in Bumfuck,

Iowa."

"But who decides what's presidential and what isn't?"

"In New York, I do." The reporter smiled again. "For Chicago, you have to ask somebody else."

"He is the President of the United States."

"That's not what Ed Kealty says, and at least Ed *acts* presidential."

"Ed's out. He resigned. Roger took the call from Secretary Hanson, and told me about it. Damn it, *you* reported that yourself."

"But what possible motive could he have for "

"What motive could he have for boffing every skirt that crossed his bow?" the chief of staff demanded. *Great,* he thought, *now I'm losing control of the media!*

"Ed's always been a ladies' man. He's gotten better since he got off the booze. It never affected his duties," the White House correspondent made clear. Like his paper, he was a strong proponent of women's rights. "This one will have to play out."

"What position will the *Times* take?"

"I'll get you a copy of the editorial," the reporter promised.

HE COULDN'T STAND it anymore. He lifted the phone and dialed the six digits while staring out at the darkness. The sun was down now, and clouds were rolling in. It would be a cold, rainy night, leading to a dawn which might or might not take place before his eyes.

"Yes?" a voice said halfway through the first ring.

"Badrayn here. It would be more convenient if the next aircraft were larger."

"We have a 737 standing by, but I need authorization to have it sent."

"I will work on this end."

It was the TV news which had gotten him moving. Even more muted than usual, there had not been a single political story. Not one, in a nation where political commentary often as not displaced the weather forecasts. Most ominously of all, there was a story about a mosque, an old Shi'a mosque, one that had fallen into disrepair. The story lamented that fact, citing the building's long and honorable history, and ignoring the fact that it had fallen into disrepair because it had once been a meeting place for a group charged, perhaps truthfully, with plotting the demise of Iraq's fallen, beloved, great, and evidently soon-to-be-forgotten political leader. Worst of all, the taped footage had shown five mullahs standing outside the mosque, not even looking directly at the camera, merely gesturing at the faded blue tile on the wall and probably discussing what needed to be done. The five were the same ones who'd flown in to be hostages. But not a single soldier was in sight on the TV screen, and the faces of at least two of the mullahs were well known to Iraqi audiences. Somebody had gotten to the TV station, more precisely to the people who worked there. If the reporters and others wanted to retain their jobs and their heads, it was time to face a new reality. Were the brief few moments on the screen enough for the common folk to see and recognize the visitors' faces—and get the message? Finding out the answer to that question

could be dangerous.

But the common people didn't matter. Colonels and majors did. Generals not on the proper list did. Quite soon they'd know. Probably some already did. They'd be on the phone, first calling up the line to see what was going on. Some would hear lies. Some would hear nothing. They'd start thinking. They'd start making contacts. Over the next twelve hours they'd talk among themselves and have to make hard decisions. These were the men who were identified with the dying regime. The ones who couldn't run, who had no place to run to and no money to run with, the ones who had to stay. Their identification with the past regime could be a death sentence—for many, certainly would be so. For others, there was a chance. To survive, they would have to do what criminals all over the world did. They would save their own lives by offering up a larger fish. So it always was. The colonels would overthrow the generals.

Finally, the generals understood.

"There is a 737 standing by. Enough room for all. It can be here in ninety minutes," he told them.

"And they will not kill us at Mehrabad Airport?" the deputy chief of staff of the Iraqi army demanded.

"Would you prefer to die here?" Badrayn asked in reply.

"What if it's all a trap?"

"There is that risk. In that case, the five television personalities will die." Of course they wouldn't. That would have to be the act of troops loyal to generals already dead. That sort of loyalty didn't exist here. They all knew that. The mere act of taking hostages had been an instinctive gesture, and one already invalidated by someone, perhaps in the media, but maybe the colonel who'd headed the guard force over the Iranian clerics. *He* was supposed to be a trusted intelligence specialist, Badrayn remembered on reflection, a loyal Sunni officer, son of a Ba'ath Party member. That could mean that the Ba'ath Party was already being suborned. It was going too fast now. The mullahs would not have concealed the nature of their mission, would they? But none of that mattered. Killing the hostages would accomplish nothing. The generals were doomed if they stayed here, and martyrdom wasn't exactly offensive to Iranian clerics. It was an integral part of the Shi'a tradition.

No, the decision had already been irreversibly made. These senior commanders hadn't grasped that. They hadn't thought it all the way through.

Well, had they been truly competent officers, they would have been killed ages ago, by their beloved leader.

"Yes," the most senior of them said.

"Thank you. Badrayn lifted the phone and punched the buttons again.

THE DIMENSIONS OF the constitutional crisis in which America has found itself were not apparent until yesterday. Although the issue may seem to be technical, the substance of it is not.

John Patrick Ryan is a man of ability, but whether or not he has the necessary talent to perform his presidential duties has yet to be established. The initial indications are less than promising. Government service is not a job for amateurs.

Our country has often enough turned to such people, but always in the past they have been in the minority, able to grow into their duties in an orderly way.

There is nothing orderly about the crisis facing the country. To this point Mr. Ryan has done a proper and careful job of stabilizing the government. His interim appointment to head the FBI, for example, Daniel Murray, is an acceptable choice. Similarly, George Winston is probably a fair interim choice for the Department of the Treasury, though he is politically unschooled. Scott Adler, a highly talented, lifelong foreign service officer, may be the best member of the current cabinet . . . Ryan skipped the next two paragraphs.

Vice President Edward Kealty, whatever his personal failings, knows government, and his middle-of-the-road position on most national issues offers a steady course until elections can select a new administration. But are his claims true?

"Do you care?" Ryan asked the lead editorial for the next day's *Times*.

"They know him. They don't know you," Arnie answered. Then the phone rang.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Foley for you, Mr. President. He says it's important."

"Okay ... Ed? Putting you on speaker." Jack pushed the proper button and replaced the receiver. "Arnie's listening in."

"It's definite. Iran's making a move, big and fast. I have a TV feed for you if you have the time."

"Roll it." Jack knew how to do that. In this office and others were televisions fed off secure fiber-optic cables to the Pentagon and elsewhere. He pulled the controller from a drawer and turned the set on. The "show" lasted only fifteen seconds, was rerun again, then freeze-framed.

"Who are they?" Jack asked.

Foley read off the names. Ryan had heard two of them before. "Mid- and top-level advisers to Daryaei. They're in Baghdad, and somebody decided to get the word out. Okay, we know senior generals are flying out. Now we have five mullahs talking about rebuilding an important mosque on national TV. Tomorrow they'll be talking louder," the DCI-designate promised.

"Anything from people on the ground?"

"Negative," Ed admitted. "I was talking to station chief Riyadh about sneaking up there for a sit-down, but by the time he gets there, there won't be anyone to sit down with."

"THAT'S A LITTLE big," an officer said aboard the duty AWACS. He read off the alpha-numeric display. "Colonel," the lieutenant called over the command line, "I have what appears to be a 737 charter inbound Mehrabad to Baghdad, course two-two-zero, speed four-five-zero knots, twenty thousand feet. PALM BOWL reports encrypted voice traffic to Baghdad from that track."

Farther aft, the senior officer commanding the aircraft checked his display. The elltee in front was right. The colonel lit up his radio to report to KKMC.

THE REST OF them arrived together. They should have waited longer,

Badrayn thought. Better to show up with the aircraft already here, the quicker to—but, no.

It was amusing to see them this way, these powerful men. A week earlier they'd strutted everywhere, sure of their place and their power, their khaki shirts decorated with various ribbons denoting some heroic service or other. That was unfair. Some *had* led men into battle, once or twice. Maybe one or two of them had actually killed an enemy. Iranian enemies. The same people to whom they would now entrust their safety, because they feared their own countrymen more. So now they stood about in little worried knots, unable to trust even their own bodyguards. Especially them. They had guns and were close, and they would not have been in this fix had bodyguards been trustworthy.

Despite the danger to his own life, Badrayn could not help but be amused by it. He'd spent his entire adult life dedicated to bringing about a moment such as this. How long had he dreamed of seeing senior Israeli officials standing about an airport like this—leaving their own people to an uncertain fate, defeated by his . . . *that* irony was not amusing, was it? Over thirty years, and all he'd accomplished was the destruction of an *Arab* country? Israel still stood. America still protected her, and all he was doing was adjusting the chairs of power around the Persian Gulf.

He was running away no less than they were, Badrayn admitted. Having failed in the mission of his life, he had done this one mercenary job, and then what? At least these generals had money and comfort before them. He had nothing ahead, and only failure behind. With that thought, Ali Badrayn swore, and sat back in his seat, just in time to see a dark shape race across the near runway in its rollout. A bodyguard at the door gestured at the people in the room. Two minutes later, the 737 came back into view. Additional fuel was not needed. The truck-borne stairway headed off, stopping only when the aircraft did. The stairs were in place before the door opened, and the generals, and their families, and one bodyguard each, and for most of them a mistress, hurried out the door into the cold drizzle that had just begun. Badrayn walked out last. Even then he had to wait. The Iraqis had all arrived at the bottom of the stairs in a tight little knot of jostling humanity, forgetting their importance and their dignity as they elbowed their way onto the steps. At the top was a uniformed crew member, smiling a mechanical greeting to people he had every reason to hate. Ali waited until the stairs were clear before heading up, arriving at the small platform and turning to look back. There hadn't really been all that much reason to rush. There were as yet no green trucks approaching with their confused soldiers. Another hour, it turned out, would have been fine. In due course they'd come here and find nothing but an empty lounge. He shook his head and entered the aircraft. The crewman closed the door behind him.

Forward, the flight crew radioed the tower for clearance to taxi, and that came automatically. The tower controllers had made their calls and passed along their information, but without instructions, they just did their jobs. As they watched, the aircraft made its way to the end of the runway, increased power, and lifted off into the darkness about to descend on their country.

19

RECIPES

"IT'S BEEN A WHILE, MR. Clark."

"Yes, Mr. Holtzman, it has," John agreed. They were in the same booth as before, all the way in the back, close to the jukebox. Esteban's was still a nice family place off Wisconsin Avenue, and still well patronized by nearby Georgetown University. But Clark remembered that he'd never told the reporter what his name was.

"Where's your friend?"

"Busy tonight," Clark replied. Actually Ding had left work early and driven down to Yorktown, and was taking Patsy out to dinner, but the reporter didn't need to know that. It was clear from his face that he already knew too much. "So, what can I do for you?" the field officer asked.

"We had a little deal, you'll recall."

Clark nodded. "I haven't forgotten. That was for five years. Time isn't up yet." The reply wasn't much of a surprise.

"Times change." Holtzman lifted the menu and scanned it. He liked Mexican food, though of late the food didn't seem to like him very much.

"A deal's a deal." Clark didn't look at his menu. He stared straight across the table. His stare was something people often had trouble dealing with.

"The word's out. Katryn is engaged to be married to some fox-chaser out in Winchester."

"I didn't know," Clark admitted. Nor did he especially care.

"Didn't think you would. You're not an SPO anymore. Like it back in the field?"

"If you want me to talk about that, you know I can't—"

"More's the pity. I've been checking up on you for a couple of years now," the reporter told his guest. "You have one hell of a service reputation, and the word is that your partner is a comer. You were the guy in Japan," Holtzman said with a smile. "You rescued Koga."

A scornful look concealed John's real feelings of alarm. "What the hell would give you that idea?"

"I talked with Koga when he was over. Two-man rescue team, he said. Big guy, little guy. Koga described your eyes—blue, hard, intense, he said, but he also said that you were a reasonable man in your speech. How smart do I have to be to figure that one out?" Holtzman smiled. "Last time we talked, you said I would have made a good spook." The waiter showed up with two beers. "Ever have this before? Pride of Maryland, a new local micro on the Eastern Shore." Then the waiter went away. Clark leaned across the table.

"Look, I respect your ability, and the last time we talked, you played ball,

kept your word, and I respect that, too, but I would like you to remember that when I go out in the field, my life rides on—"

"I won't reveal your identity. I don't do that. Three reasons, it's wrong, it's against the law, and I don't want to piss off somebody like you." The reporter sipped his beer. "Someday I'd sure as hell like to do a book about you. If half the stories are true—"

"Fine, get Val Kilmer to play me in the movies."

"Too pretty." Holtzman shook his head with a grin. "Nick Cage has a better stare. Anyway, what this meet is about . . ." He paused. "It was Ryan who got her father out, but I'm not clear on how. You went on the beach and got Katryn and her mother out, took them out by boat to a submarine. I don't know which one, but I know it was one of our nuclear subs. But that's not the story."

"What is?"

"Ryan, like you, the Quiet Hero." Robert Holtzman enjoyed seeing the surprise in Clark's eyes. "I like the guy. I want to help him."

"Why?" John asked, wondering if he could believe his host.

"My wife, Libby, got the goods on Kealty. Published it too soon, and we can't go back to it now. He's scum, even worse than most of the people down there. Not everybody in the business feels that way, but Libby's talked to a couple of his victims. Once upon a time a guy could get away with that, especially if his politics were 'progressive.' Not anymore. Not supposed to, anyway," he corrected himself. "I'm not so sure Ryan's the right guy, either, okay? But he's honest. He'll try to do the right thing, for the right reasons. As Roger Durling liked to say, he's a good man in a storm. I have to sell my editors on that idea."

"How do you do that?"

"I do a story about how he did something really important for his country. Something old enough that it isn't sensitive anymore, and recent enough that people know it's the same guy. Jesus Christ, Clark, he *saved* the Russians! He prevented an internal power play that could have dialed the Cold War back in for another decade. That's a big *fucking* deal—and he *never* told anybody about it. We'll make it clear that Ryan didn't leak this. We'll even approach him before we run it, and you know what he'll say—"

"He'd tell you not to run it," Clark agreed. Then he wondered whom Holtzman might have talked with. Judge Arthur Moore? Bob Ritter? Would they have talked? Ordinarily he'd be sure the answer to that one was an emphatic no, but now? Now he wasn't so sure. You got to a certain level and people figured breaking the rules was part of some higher duty to the country. John knew about "higher duty" stuff. It had landed him in all manner of trouble, more than once.

"But it's too good a story not to run. It took me years to figure it all out. The public has a right to know what kind of man is sitting in the Oval Office, especially if he's the right man," the reporter went on. Holtzman clearly was a man who could talk a nun right out of her habit.

"Bob, you don't know the half of it." Clark stopped talking an instant later, annoyed with himself for saying that much. This was deep water, and he was trying to swim with a weight belt on. Oh, what the hell . . . "Okay, tell me

what you know about Jack."

• • •

IT WAS AGREED that they'd use the same aircraft, and somewhat to the relief of both sides, that they wouldn't stay one unnecessary minute in Iran. There was the problem that the 737 didn't have the range of the smaller G-IVs, however, and it was agreed that the airliner would land in Yemen to refuel. The Iraqis never left the plane at Mehrabad, but when the stairs pulled up, Badrayn did, without a single word of thanks from the people he'd saved. A car was waiting. He didn't look back. The generals were part of his past, and he part of theirs.

The car took him into town. There was just a driver, who took his time negotiating the streets. Traffic wasn't all that dense at this time of night, and the going was easy. Forty minutes later, the car stopped in front of a three-story building. Here there was security. So, Badrayn thought, he was living in Tehran now? He got out of the car on his own. A uniformed security guard compared a photograph with his face and gestured him toward the door. Inside another guard, this one a captain by the three pips at his shoulders, patted him down politely. From there it was upstairs to a conference room. By now it was three in the morning, local time.

He found Daryaei sitting in a comfortable chair reading some papers stapled together at the corner, the quintessential government briefing document instead of the Holy Koran. Well, Daryaei must have had it memorized by now, so long had he studied it.

"Peace be unto you," Ali said.

"And unto you, peace," Daryaei replied, not so mechanically as Badrayn had expected. The older man rose and came to him for the expected embrace. The face was far more relaxed than he'd expected. Tired, certainly, since it had been a long day or two for the cleric, but old or not, the man was buoyed by the events. "You are well?" he asked solicitously, waving his guest to a chair.

Ali allowed himself a long breath as he took his seat. "I am now. I'd wondered how long the situation in Baghdad would remain stable."

"There was nothing to be gained from discord. My friends tell me that the old mosque is in need of repair."

Badrayn might have said that he didn't know—he didn't—but the reason was that he hadn't seen the inside of a mosque in rather a long time, a fact not calculated to please Daryaei. "There is much to do," he decided to respond.

"Yes, there is." Mahmoud Haji Daryaei returned to his chair, setting the papers aside. "Your services were very valuable. Were there any difficulties?"

Badrayn shook his head. "Not really, no. It's surprising how fearful such men can be, but I was prepared for that. Your proposal was generous. They had no choice but to take it. You will not . . . ?" Ali allowed himself to ask.

He shook his head. "No, they shall go in peace."

And that, if true, was something of a surprise, though Ali didn't allow his face to show it. Daryaei had little reason to love those men. All had played a role in the Iran-Iraq war, and been responsible for the deaths of thousands, a

wound still raw on this nation. So many young men had died. The war was one of the reasons why Iran had played no major role in the world for years. But that was about to change, wasn't it?

"So, may I ask what you will do next?"

"Iraq has been a sick country for so long, kept away from the True Faith, wandering in the darkness."

"And strangled by the embargo," Badrayn added, wondering what information this observation would elicit.

"It is time for that to end," Daryaei agreed. Something in his eyes congratulated Ali for the observation. Yes, that was the obvious play, wasn't it? A sop to the West. The embargo would be lifted. Food would then flood the country, and the population would be delighted with the new regime. He would please everybody at once, all the while planning to please no one but himself. And Allah, of course. But Daryaei was one of those who was sure that his policies were inspired by Allah, an idea Badrayn had long since disposed of.

"America will be a problem, as will others closer to you."

"We are examining those issues." This statement was delivered comfortably. Well, that made sense. He must have been thinking about this move for years, and at a moment like this one he must have felt invincible. That also made sense, Badrayn knew. Daryaei always thought Allah was on his side—*at* his side was more accurate. And perhaps He was, but there was much more to it than that. There had to be if you wanted success. Miracles most often appeared when summoned by preparation. Why not a play to see if he might take a hand in the next miracle, Ali thought.

"I've been looking at the new American leader."

"Oh?" Daryaei's eyes focused a little more tightly.

"It's not difficult, gathering information in the modern age. The American media publishes so much, and it can all be easily accessed now. I have some of my people working on it even now, building a careful dossier." Badrayn kept his voice casual. It wasn't hard. He was bone-tired. "It really is quite remarkable how vulnerable they are now.

"Indeed. Tell me more."

"The key to America is this Ryan fellow. Is that not obvious?"

"THE KEY TO changing America is a constitutional convention," Ernie Brown said, after long days of silent contemplation. Pete Holbrook was flipping the controller on his slide projector. He'd shot three rolls of film of the Capitol building, and a few more of other buildings like the White House, unable completely to avoid being the tourist. He grumbled, seeing that one of the slides was in the caddie upside-down. This idea had gestated long enough, and the result wasn't all that impressive.

"We've talked about that for a long time," Holbrook agreed as he lifted the caddie off the projector. "But how do you—"

"Force it? Easy. If there's no President and no way to select one within the Constitution, then *something* has to happen, doesn't it?"

"Kill the President?" Pete snorted. "*Which* one?"

There was the problem. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure that one out. Take out Ryan, and Kealty would step in. Take out Kealty, and Ryan was in like Flynn. It would be tough enough now. Both men remembered all the security they'd seen at the White House. Kill either one, and the American SS would put a wall around the one who was left that you'd need a nuke to breach. The Mountain Men didn't have any of those. They preferred traditional American weapons, like rifles. Even those had their limitations. The South Lawn of the White House was thoroughly forested with trees, and, they'd noticed, also shielded by skillfully concealed earthen berms. Just seeing the White House was possible down only one visual avenue, past the fountain at the building itself. The surrounding buildings were all government-owned, and atop them would always be people with binoculars—and rifles. The American SS were determined to keep the people away from "their" President, the servant of the people, whose guards didn't trust the people at all. But if the man who lived in that house was really one of the people, there would have been no need, would there? Once Teddy Roosevelt had thrown open the doors and shaken hands with ordinary citizens for four whole hours. No way *that* would happen anymore!

"Both at once. The way I figure, Ryan will be the hard target, right?" Brown asked. "I mean, he's *there* where most of the protection is. Kealty has to move around a lot, talking to the newspaper pukes, and he won't be as well protected, will he?"

Holbook replaced the slide caddie. "Okay, that makes sense."

"So, if we figure a way to do Ryan, taking Kealty out will be much easier to do on the fly." Brown took the cellular phone out of his pocket. "Easy to coordinate."

"Keep going."

"It means getting a fix on his schedule, learning his routine, and picking our time."

"Expensive," Holbrook observed, flipping to the next slide. It was one so often taken by so many people, from the top of the Washington Monument, the tiny north window, looking down on the White House. Ernie Brown had taken one, too, and had the print blown up to poster size in the local photo shop. Then he'd stared at it for hours. Then he'd gotten a map and checked the scale. Then he'd done some rough calculations.

"The expensive part's buying the cement truck, and renting a place not too far out of town."

"What?"

"I know what the spot is, Pete. And I know how to bring it off. Just a matter of picking the time."

SHE WOULDN'T LIVE through the night, Moudi decided. Her eyes were open now. What they saw was anyone's guess. Finally, mercifully, she was beyond pain. That happened. He'd seen it before, with cancer patients, mostly, and it was always the harbinger of death. His knowledge of neurology was insufficient to understand the reason for it. Maybe the electro-chemical pathways got overloaded, or maybe there was some editing function in the

brain. The body knew what was happening, that the time for battle had ended, and since the nervous system reported pain mainly as a warning system, when the time for warning was past, so was the time for pain. Or maybe it was all his imagination. Possibly her body was simply too damaged to react to anything. Certainly the intra-ocular bleeding had her blind. The last blood line had fallen out, so damaged were her veins now, and she was bleeding from that point in addition to so many others. Only the morphine drip remained, held in place with tape. The heart was being starved of blood, and trying ever harder to pump what diminished supply it had left, it was exhausting itself.

Jean Baptiste still made noises difficult to hear through the Racal suit—the occasional whimper, and the timing of them made the physician wonder if they might be prayers. They probably were, he decided. Robbed of sanity along with her life, the one thing that remained in her would be the endless hours of prayer, the discipline which had ruled her life, and she'd return to that in her madness because her mind had nowhere else to go. The patient cleared her throat, choking, really, but then murmuring more clearly, and Moudi leaned his head down to listen.

". . .—ther of God, pray for us sinners . . ."

Oh, that one. Yes, it would have to be her favorite prayer.

"Fight no more, lady," Moudi told her. "It is your time. Fight no more."

The eyes changed. Even though she could not see, the head turned and she stared at him. It was a mechanical reflex, the physician knew. Blind or not, years of practice told the muscles what to do. The face instinctively turned to a source of noise, and the eyes—the muscles still worked—focused in the direction of interest.

"Dr. Moudi? Are you there?" The words came slowly, and not all that clearly, but understandable even so.

"Yes, Sister. I am here." He touched her hand automatically, then was dumbfounded. *She was* still *lucid?*

"Thank you for . . . helping me. I will pray for you."

She would. He knew that. He patted her hand again, and with the other increased the morphine drip. Enough was enough. They could put no more blood into her to be polluted with the virus strands. He looked around the room. Both army medics were sitting in the corner, quite content to let the doctor stand with the patient. He walked over to them and pointed to one.

"Tell the director—soon."

"At once." The man was very pleased to leave the room. Moudi counted to ten before speaking to the other.

"Fresh gloves, please." He held up his hands to show that he didn't like touching her either. That medic left, too. Moudi figured he had a minute or so.

The medication tray in the corner had what he needed. He took a 20cc needle from its holder and stuck it into the vial of morphine, pulling in enough to fill the plastic cylinder completely. Then he returned to the bedside, pulled the plastic sheet back and looked for . . . there. The back of her left hand. He took it in his and slid the needle in, immediately pushing down the plunger.

"To help you sleep," he told her, moving back across the room. He didn't look to see if she responded to his words or not. The needle went into the red-

plastic sharps container, and by the time the medic came back with new gloves, everything was as before.

"Here."

Moudi nodded and stripped the overgloves off into their disposal container, replacing them with a new set. Back at the bedside, he watched the blue eyes close for the last time. The EKG display showed her heart rate at just over one-forty, the spiky lines shorter than they should have been, and irregularly spaced. Just a matter of time now. She was probably praying in her sleep, he thought, dreaming prayers. Well, at least he could be sure now that she was in no pain. The morphine would be well into her diminishing blood supply now, the chemical molecules finding their way to the brain, fitting into the receptors, and there releasing dopamine, which would tell the nervous system . . . yes.

Her chest rose and fell with the labored respiration. There was a pause, almost like a hiccup, and the breathing restarted, but irregularly now, and the flow of oxygen to the bloodstream was now diminishing. The heart rate changed, becoming yet more rapid. Then respiration ceased. The heart still didn't stop at once, so strong it was, so valiant, the doctor thought sadly, admiring this undying part of a person already dead, but that couldn't last long, and with a few final traces on the screen, it, too, ceased to function. The EKG machine began making a steady alarm tone. Moudi reached up and shut it off. He turned to see the medics sharing a look of relief.

"So soon?" the director asked, coming into the room and seeing the flat, silent line on the EKG readout.

"The heart. Internal bleeding." Moudi didn't have to say anything else.

"I see. We are ready, then?"

"Correct, Doctor."

The director motioned to the medics, who had one last job to do. One of them bundled up the plastic sheeting to contain drips. The other disconnected the last IV and the electronic EKG leads. This was done expeditiously, and when the former patient was wrapped like a piece of slaughtered meat, the locks on the wheels were kicked loose, and the two soldiers wheeled her out the door. They would return to clean the room so thoroughly as to make sure that nothing could live on the walls, floor, or ceiling.

Moudi and the director followed them to "Post," a room in the same confined area behind the double doors. Here was an autopsy table made of smooth, cold stainless steel. They wheeled the treatment bed beside it, uncovering the body and rolling it to a facedown position on the steel, while the doctors observed from the corner, each donning surgical gowns over his protective suit—more from habit than necessity; some habits are just that. Next the plastic sheets were lifted, held by the edges to form a U shape that allowed the accumulated blood to be poured into a container. About half a liter, the doctors estimated. The sheets were carefully carried to a large bin. The medics stuffed them in and left the room, wheeling the bin with them, off to the incinerator. Nervous as they were, it didn't appear that they'd spilled a drop anywhere.

"Very well." The director pressed a button and the table elevated from the far end. Out of long-standing professionalism, he touched his fingertips to the

left carotid artery to make sure there was no pulse, then to the right, where again there was none. When the body was at a twenty-degree angle, he took a large scalpel and cut both arteries, along with the parallel jugular veins. Blood poured out onto the table, pulled by gravity out of the body, channeled into grooves leading in turn to a drain, and over the next several minutes four liters of blood were captured in a plastic container. The body went pale so quickly, Moudi saw. Moments earlier, the skin had been mottled red and purple. It seemed to fade before his eyes, or perhaps it was just imagination. A laboratory technician came to collect the blood container, which he placed on a small wheeled cart. Nobody wanted to carry something like that, even for a short distance.

"I've never posted an Ebola victim," the director observed. Not that this was a proper postmortem examination. For all the care the director had just shown for the patient's departed humanity, bleeding her out like that, he might have slaughtered a lamb.

They still had to be careful, however. In cases like this, only one pair of hands worked within the surgical field, and Moudi let the director do that, as he made rough, wide incisions. Stainless-steel retractors pulled back the flaps of skin and muscle. Moudi handled those, his eyes locked on the scalpel in the director's gloved hands. In another minute, the left kidney was fully exposed. They waited for the medical corpsmen to return. One of them set a tray on the table next to the cadaver. Moudi was revolted by what he saw next. One effect of the Ebola virus and its disease process was to break down tissue. The exposed kidney was half liquefied, and when the director reached in to remove it, the organ actually broke—pulled itself apart into two pieces like a horrid red-brown pudding. The director clucked at himself with annoyance. He'd known what to expect, but forgotten even so.

"Remarkable what happens to the organs, isn't it?"

"Expect the same from the liver, but the spleen "

"Yes, I know. The spleen will be like a brick. Watch your hands, Moudi," the director warned. He lifted a fresh retractor—the instrument was shaped rather like a scoop—to remove the remaining kidney fragment. This went onto the tray. He nodded, and the medic took it off to the lab. The right kidney went more smoothly. At the director's insistence, after all the muscle and blood vessels were disconnected, both doctors used their hands to remove it, and this one stayed reasonably intact—until it landed on the tray. There the organ deformed and split open. The only good thing about it was that the softness of the tissue would not compromise the integrity of their doubled gloves. That fact didn't prevent both doctors from cringing.

"Here!" The director flicked his hand for the orderlies to approach. "Turn it over."

The medics did so, one grasping the shoulders, and the other the knees, flipping the body over as briskly as they could. That caused blood and some tissue to spatter on their cloth gowns. The orderlies pulled back, keeping as far away as possible.

"I want the liver and spleen, that's all," the director told Moudi, looking up. He turned to the orderlies. "Then you will wrap the body and remove it to the incinerator. This room will then be disinfected thoroughly."

Sister Jean Baptiste's eyes were open, as sightless now as they had been thirty minutes earlier. The doctor took a cloth and covered the face, murmuring a prayer for her soul which the director heard.

"Yes, Moudi, she is doubtless in Paradise. Now, shall we continue?" he asked brusquely. He made the usual Y-shaped incision to open the thorax, deep and crude as before, peeling back the layers quickly, more like a meat-cutter than a physician. What they saw there even shocked the director. "How did she live so long like this . . . ?" the man breathed.

Moudi thought back to his medical-school days, remembering a life-sized plastic model of the human body in his first anatomy class. It was as though someone had taken the model and poured in a bucket of powerful solvent. Every exposed organ was misshapen. The surface tissue layer on most of them was . . . dissolved. The abdomen was a sea of black blood. All they'd put in, Moudi thought ... not even half of it had leaked out. Amazing.

"Suction!" the director commanded. An orderly appeared at his side with a plastic tube leading to a vacuum bottle, and the sound of it was obscene. The process lasted fully ten minutes, with the doctors standing back while the orderly moved the suction tube around, like a maid cleaning a house. Another three liters of contaminated, virus-rich blood for the lab.

The body was supposed to be a Temple of Life, the Holy Koran taught. Moudi looked down to see one transformed into—what? A factory of death, more surely than the building in which he stood. The director moved back in, and Moudi watched his hands uncover the liver, more carefully than before. Perhaps he'd been spooked by the blood in the abdominal cavity. Again the blood vessels were cut, the connective tissue cut away. The director set his instruments down, and without being so bidden, Moudi reached in to lift out the organ and set it on the tray which, again, an orderly removed.

"I wonder why the spleen behaves so differently?"

DOWNSTAIRS, OTHER MEDICAL orderlies were at work. One by one, the monkey cages were lifted from the orderly piles in the storage room. The African greens had been fed, and they were still recovering from the shock of their travel. That somewhat reduced their ability to scratch and bite and fight the gloved hands moving the cages. But the panic of the animals returned soon enough when they arrived in another room. This part of the operation was being handled ten at a time. Once in the killing room, when the doors were all tightly closed, the monkeys knew. The unlucky ones got to watch as one cage at a time was set on a table. The door to each was opened, and into the cage went a stick with a metal-band loop on the end. The loop went over the head of each monkey and was yanked tight, usually to the faint crackling sound of the broken neck. In every case the animal went taut, then fell limp, usually with the eyes open and outraged at the murder. The same instrument pulled the dead animal out. And when the loop was loosened, the body was tossed to a soldier, who carried it to the next room. The others saw and screeched their rage at the soldiers, but the cages were too small to give them room to dodge. At best one might interpose an arm in the loop, only to have that broken as well. Intelligent enough to see and know and understand what was happening

to them, the African greens found it not unlike sitting in a lone tree on the savanna, watching a leopard climb up, and up, and up . . . and there was nothing they could do but screech. The noise was troublesome to the soldiers, but not that troublesome.

In the next room, five teams of medical corpsmen worked at five separate tables. Clamps affixed at the neck and at the base of the tail helped keep the bodies in place. One soldier, using a curved knife, would slice open the back, tracing up the backbone, and then the other would make a perpendicular cut, pulling the hide apart to expose the inner back. The first would then remove the kidneys and hand them to the second, and while the small organs went into a special container, he would remove the body, tossing it into a plastic trash barrel for later incineration. By the time he returned to pick up his knife, the other team member would have the next monkey corpse fixed in place. It took about four minutes per iteration of the procedure. In ninety minutes, all the African green monkeys were dead. There was some urgency to this. All the raw material for their task was biological, and all subject to biological processes. The slaughtering crew handed off their product through double-doored openings cut into the walls, leading to the Hot Lab.

There things were different. Every man in the large room wore the blue plastic suit. Every motion was slow and careful. They'd been well drilled and well briefed, and what little might have been overlooked in their training had recently been recounted by the medical corpsmen selected by lot to treat the Western woman upstairs, in every dreadful detail. When something was carried from one place to another, an announcement was made, and people made a path.

The blood was in a warming tank, and air bubbled through it. The simian kidneys, two large buckets of them, were taken to a grinding machine—actually not terribly different from the kind of food processor found in gourmet kitchens. This reduced the kidneys to mush, which was moved from one table to another and layered onto trays, along with some liquid nutrients. It struck more than one of the people in the lab that what they were doing was not at all unlike baking a cake or other confection. The blood was poured generously into the trays. About half was used in that way. The rest, divided into plastic containers, went into a deep-freezer cooled by liquid nitrogen. The Hot Lab was kept warm and moist, not at all unlike the jungle. The lights were not overly bright, and shielded to contain whatever ultra-violet radiation the fluorescent might emit. Viruses didn't like UV. They needed the right environment in which to grow, and the kidneys of the African green monkey were just that, along with nutrients, proper temperature, correct humidity, and just a pinch of hate.

"YOU'VE LEARNED SO much?" Daryaei asked.

"It's their media, their newspeople," Badrayn explained.

"They're all spies!" the mullah objected.

"Many think so," Ali said with a smile. "But they aren't, really. They are—how does one explain them? Like medieval heralds. They see what they see and they tell what they see. They are loyal to no one except themselves and

their profession. Yes, it is true that they spy, but they spy on *everyone,* their own people most of all. It's mad, I admit, but it's true even so."

"Do they believe in anything?" That was a hard one for his host to grasp.

Another smile. "Nothing that I've ever identified. Oh, yes, the American ones are devoted to Israel, but even that is an exaggeration. It took me years to understand that. Like dogs, they will turn on anyone, bite any hand, no matter how kind. They search and they see and they tell. And so, on this Ryan fellow, I've been able to learn everything—his home, his family, the schools his children attend, the number of the office his wife works in, everything."

"What if some of the information is lies?" Daryaei asked suspiciously. As long as he'd dealt with the West, the nature of their reporters was just too foreign to him to be fully understood.

"It's all easily verified. His wife's workplace, for example. I'm sure there must be some of the faithful on staff at that hospital. It's simply a matter of approaching one and asking a few harmless questions. Their home, well, that will be guarded. The same is true of the children. It's a conundrum for all such people. They must have some protection to move about, but the protection can be seen, and that tells one where they are, and who they are. Given the information I've developed, we even know where to start looking." Badrayn kept his remarks short and simple. It wasn't that Daryaei was a fool he most assuredly was not—just that he was insular. One advantage to all his years in Lebanon was that Ali had been exposed to much and had learned much. Most of all, he'd learned that he needed a sponsor, and in Mahmoud Haji Daryaei he had a prospective one. This man had plans. He needed people. And for one reason or another, he didn't fully trust his own. Badrayn didn't wonder why. Whatever the reason was, it was good fortune, and not to be questioned.

"How well protected are such people?" the mullah asked, his hand playing with his beard. The man hadn't shaved in nearly twenty-four hours.

"Very well indeed," Badrayn replied, noting something odd about the question and filing that fact away. "American police agencies are quite effective. The crime problem in America has nothing to do with their police. They simply don't know what to do after the criminals are caught. As applied to their President . . . ?" Ali leaned back for a stretch. "He will be surrounded by a highly trained group of expert marksmen, well motivated, and utterly faithful." Badrayn added these words to his presentation to see if his interlocutor's eyes changed. Daryaei was weary, and there was such a change. "Otherwise, protection is protection. The procedures are straightforward. You do not need my instruction on that."

"America's vulnerability?"

"It's severe. Their government is in chaos. Again, you know this."

"They are difficult to measure, these Americans . . . ," Daryaei mused.

"Their military might is formidable. Their political will is unpredictable, as someone we both . . . knew found out to his misfortune. It is a mistake to underestimate them. America is like a sleeping lion, to be treated with care and respect."

"How does one defeat a lion?"

That one caught Badrayn short for a second or two. Once on a trip to Tanzania he'd been advising the government on how to deal with insurgents—

he'd gone into the bush for a day, driving with a colonel in that country's intelligence service. There he'd spotted a lion, an old one which had nonetheless managed a kill all by himself. Perhaps the wildebeest had been crippled. Then there came into view a troop of hyenas, and seeing that, the Tanzanian colonel had stopped the Soviet-made Zil jeep and handed binoculars to Badrayn, and told him to observe and so learn a lesson about insurgents and their capacities. It was something he'd never forgotten. The lion, he remembered, was a large one, perhaps old, perhaps slowed down from his prime, but still powerful and forbidding to behold, even from two hundred meters away, a creature of undeniable magnificence. The hyenas were smaller, doglike creatures, with their broken-back gait, an odd canter that must have been very efficient. They gathered first in a little group, twenty meters from the lion, which was trying to feed on his kill. And then the hyenas had moved, forming a circle around the lion, and whichever one was directly behind the powerful cat would move in to nip at the hindquarters, and the lion would turn and roar and dart a few meters, and that hyena would withdraw quickly —but even as that happened, another one would advance behind the lion for another nip. Individually, the hyenas would have had no more chance against this king of the grasslands than a man with a knife would have against a soldier armed with a machine gun, but try though he might, the lion could not protect his kill—nor even himself—and in just five minutes the lion was on the defensive, unable even to run properly, because there was always a hyena behind him, nipping at his balls, forcing the lion to run in a way that was pathetically comical, dragging his bottom on the grass as he tried to maneuver. And finally the lion just went away, without a roar, without a backward glance, while the hyenas took the kill, cackling in their odd, laughing barks, as though finding amusement in their usurpation of the greater animal's labor. And so the mighty had been vanquished by the lesser. The lion would get older, and weaker, and someday would be unable to defeat a real hyena attack aimed at his own flesh. Sooner or later, his Tanzanian friend had told him, the hyenas got them all. Badrayn looked at his host's eyes again.

"It can be done."

20

NEW ADMINISTRATIONS

THERE WERE THIRTY OF them in the East Room—all men, much to his surprise—with their wives. As Jack walked into the reception his eyes scanned the faces. Some pleased him. Some did not. Those who did were as scared as he was. It was the confident, smiling ones who worried the President.

What was the right thing to do with them? Even Arnie didn't know the answer, though he had run through several approaches. Be very strong and intimidate them? Sure, Ryan thought, and tomorrow the papers would say he was trying to be King Jack I. Take it easy? Then he'd be called a wimp who was unable to take his proper leadership position. Ryan was learning to fear the media. It hadn't been all that bad before. As a worker bee, he'd been largely ignored. Even as Durling's National Security Advisor, he'd been thought of as a ventriloquist's dummy. But now the situation was very different, and there was not a single thing he could say that could not, and *would* not, be twisted into whatever the particular listener wanted to say himself. Washington had long since lost the capacity for objectivity. Everything was politics, and politics was ideology, and ideology came down to personal prejudices rather than the quest for truth. Where had all these people been educated that the truth didn't matter to them?

Ryan's problem was that he really didn't *have* a political philosophy per se. He believed in things that worked, that produced the promised results and fixed whatever was broken. Whether those things adhered to one political slant or another was less important than the effects they had. Good ideas worked, even though some of them might seem crazy. Bad ideas didn't, even though some of them seemed sensible as hell. But Washington didn't think that way. Ideologies *were* facts in this city, and if the ideologies didn't work, people would deny it; and if the ones with which they disagreed *did* worlc, those who'd been opposed would never admit it, because admitting error was more hateful to them than any form of personal misconduct. They'd sooner deny God than deny their ideas. Politics had to be the only arena known to man in which people took great action without caring much for the realworld consequences, and to which the real world was far less important than whatever fantasy, right, left, or center, they'd brought to this city of marble and lawyers.

Jack looked at the faces, wondering what political baggage they'd brought along with their hanging bags. Maybe it was a weakness that he didn't understand how that all worked, but for his part, he had lived a life in which mistakes got real people killed—and in Cathy's case, made people blind. For Jack, the victims were people with real names and faces. For Cathy, they were

those whose faces she had *touched* in an operating room. For political figures, they were abstractions far more distant than their closely held ideas.

"Like being in a zoo," Caroline Ryan, FLOTUS, SURGEON, observed to her husband, behind a charming smile. She'd raced home—the helicopter helped—just in time to change into a new white slinky dress and a gold necklace that Jack had bought her for Christmas . . . a few weeks, he remembered, before the terrorists had tried to kill her on the Route 50 bridge in Annapolis.

"With golden bars," her husband, POTUS, SWORDSMAN, replied, fronting a smile of his own that was as fake as a three-dollar bill.

"So what are we?" she asked as the assembled senators designate applauded their entrance. "Lion and lioness? Bull and cow? Peacock and peahen? Or two lab bunnies waiting to have shampoo poured in our eyes?"

"Depends on who's doing the beholding, baby." Ryan was holding his wife's hand, and together they walked to the microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Washington." Ryan had to pause for another round of applause. That was something else he'd have to learn. People applauded the President for damned near anything. Just as well that his bathroom had a door. He reached into his pocket and pulled out some three-by-five cards, the way Presidents always kept their speaking points. The cards had been prepared by Callie Weston, and the hand-printing was large enough that he didn't need his reading glasses. Even so he'd come to expect a headache. He had one every day from all the reading.

"Our country has needs, and they're not small ones. You're here for the same reason I am. You've been appointed to fill in. You have jobs which many of you never expected, and which some of you may not have wanted." This was vain flattery, but the sort they wanted to hear—more accurately, which they wanted to be *seen* to hear on the C-SPAN cameras in the corners of the room. There were perhaps three people in the room who were not career politicians, and one of those was a governor who'd done the me-you dance with his lieutenant governor and so come to Washington to fill out the term of a senator from another party. That was a curveball which the papers had only started writing about. The polarity of the Senate would change as a result of the 747 crash, because the control of thirty-two of America's state houses hadn't quite been in line with the makeup of the Congress.

"That's good," Ryan told them. "There is a long and honorable tradition of citizens in service to their nation that goes back at least as far as Cincinnatus, the Roman citizen who more than once answered his country's call, then returned to his farm and his family and his work. One of our great cities is named in memory of that gentleman," Jack added, nodding to a new senator from Ohio—his home was in Dayton, which was close enough.

"You would not be here if you didn't understand what many of those needs are. But my real message for you, today, is that we must work together. We do not have the time and our *country* does not have the time for us to bicker and fight." He had to pause for applause again. Annoyed by the delay, Ryan managed to look up with an appreciative smile and nod.

"Senators, you will find me an easy man to work with. My door is always open, I know how to answer a phone, and the street goes both ways. I will discuss any issue. I will listen to any point of view. There are no rules other

than the Constitution which I have sworn to preserve, protect, and defend.

"The people out where you come from, out there beyond Interstate 495, expect all of us to get the job done. They don't expect us to get reelected. They expect us to work for them to the best of our ability. We work for them. They don't work for us. We have the duty to perform for them. Robert E. Lee once said that 'duty' is the most sublime word in our language. It's even more sublime and even more important now, because none of us has been elected to our offices. We represent the people of a democracy, but in every case we have come here in a way that simply wasn't supposed to happen. How much greater, then, is our personal duty to fulfill our roles in the best possible manner?" More applause.

"There is no higher trust than that which fate has conferred on us. We are not medieval noblemen blessed by birth with high station and great power. We are the servants, not the masters, to those whose consent gives us what power we have. We live in the tradition of giants. Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John Calhoun, and so many other members of your house of the Congress must be your models. 'How stands the Union?' Webster is said to ask from his grave. We will determine that. The Union is in our hands. Lincoln called America the last and best hope of mankind, and in the past twenty years America has given truth to that judgment by our sixteenth President. America is still an experiment, a collective idea, a set of rules called the Constitution to which all of us, within and without the Beltway, give allegiance. What makes us special is that brief document. America isn't a strip of dirt and rock between two oceans. America is an idea and a set of rules we all follow. That's what makes us different, and in holding true to that, we in this room can make sure that the country we pass on to our successors will be the same one entrusted to us, maybe even a little bit improved. And now"—Ryan turned to the Chief Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Judicial Circuit, the nation's most senior appellate judge, up from Richmond—"it's time for you to join the team."

Judge William Staunton came to the microphone. Every senatorial spouse held a Bible, and every senatorial appointee placed his left hand on it, raising the other.

"I—state your name . . ."

As Ryan watched, the new senators were duly sworn. At least it looked solemn enough. The oaths were spoken. A few of the new legislators kissed the Bibles, either from personal religious conviction or because they were close to the cameras. Then they kissed their wives, most of whom beamed. There was a collective intake of breath, and then they all looked around at one another, and the White House staff came into the room with drinks just after the cameras were turned off, because now the real work started. Ryan got himself a glass of Perrier and walked into the middle of the room, smiling despite his fatigue and his unease at performing political duties.

THE PHOTOS CAME in one more time. Security at Khartoum airport had not improved, and this time three American intelligence officers were snapping photos of the people walking down the stairs. Everyone around was surprised

that no newspeople had yet twigged to the story. A stream of official cars—probably the entire complement for this poor nation—ferried the visitors away. When the process was complete, the 737 airliner went back east, and the spooks drove off to the embassy. Two others of their number were camped out at the dwellings assigned to the Iraqi generals—this tidbit had come from the station chief's contact in the Sudanese Foreign Ministry. When those photos had been taken, the additional officers also drove back, and in the embassy darkroom the frames were processed, blown up, and faxed off via satellite. At Langley, Bert Vasco identified every face, assisted by a pair of CIA desk officers and a set of mug shots in the CIA files.

"That's it," the State Department officer pronounced. "That's the whole military leadership. But not one civilian out of the Ba'ath Party."

"So we know who the sacrificial goats are." That observation came from Ed Foley.

"Yep," Mary Pat answered with a nod. "And it gives a chance for the senior surviving officers to arrest them, 'process' them, and show loyalty to the new regime. Shit," she concluded. "Too fast." Her station chief in Riyadh was all dressed up with no place to go. The same was true of some Saudi diplomats who'd hastily put together a program of fiscal incentives for the notional new Iraqi regime. It would now be unnecessary.

Ed Foley, the new DCI-designate, shook his head in admiration. "I didn't think they had it in 'em. Killing our friend, sure, but coaxing the leadership out this fast and this smooth, who would've thunk it?"

"You got me there, Mr. Foley," Vasco agreed. "Somebody must have brokered the deal—but who?"

"Get buzzin', worker bees," Ed Foley told the desk officers, with a wry smile. "Everything you can develop, ASAP."

IT LOOKED LIKE some sort of awful stew, the darkened human blood and the red-brown nephritic mush of monkey kidneys, just sitting there, marinating in flat, shallow glass trays under dim lights shielded to keep ultraviolet light from harming the viruses. There wasn't much to do at this point except to monitor the environmental conditions, and simple analog instruments did that. Moudi and the director walked in, wearing their protective garb, to check the sealed culturing chambers for themselves. Two-thirds of Jean Baptiste's blood was now deep-frozen in case something went wrong with their first effort at reproducing the Ebola Mayinga virus. They also checked the room's multi-stage ventilation systems, because now the building was truly a factory of death. The precautions were double-sided. As in this room they strove to give the virus a healthy place to multiply, just outside the door the army medical corpsmen were spraying every square millimeter to make sure that it was the only such place—and so the virus had to be isolated and protected from the disinfectant as well. Thus the air drawn into the culture chambers had to be carefully filtered, lest in their effort to stay alive the people in the building killed that which might kill them if they made another sort of mistake.

"So you really think this version might be airborne?"

"As you know, the Ebola Zaire Mayinga strain is named for a nurse who became infected despite all conventional protective measures. Patient Two"—he had decided it was easier not to speak her name—"was a skilled nurse with Ebola experience; she did not give any injections; and she didn't know how she might have contracted the virus. Therefore, yes, I believe this is possible."

"That would be very useful, Moudi," the director whispered, so faintly that the junior physician had trouble hearing it. He heard it even so. The thought alone was loud enough. "We can test for it," the older man added.

That would be easier on him, Moudi thought. At least he wouldn't know those people by name. He wondered if he was right about the virus. Might Patient Two have made a mistake and forgotten it? But, no, he *had* examined her body for punctures, as had Sister Marin Magdalena, and it wasn't as though she might have licked secretions from the young Benedict Mkusa, was it? So what did that have to mean? It meant that the Mayinga strain survived for a brief period of time in air, and that meant they had a potential weapon such as man had never before encountered, worse than nuclear weapons, worse than chemical weapons. They had a weapon which could reproduce itself and be spread by its own victims, one to another and another until the disease outbreak burned out in due course. It *would* burn out. All the outbreaks did. It had to burn out, didn't it?

Didn't it?

Moudi's hand came up to rub his chin, a contemplative gesture stopped short by the plastic mask. He didn't know the answer to that one. In Zaire and the few other African countries afflicted by this odious disease, the outbreaks, frightening though they were, all did burn out—despite the ideal environmental conditions which protected and sustained the virus strands. But on the other side of that equation was the primitive nature of Zaire, the horrible roads and the absence of efficient transport. The disease killed people before they could get far. Ebola wiped out villages, but did little more. But nobody really knew what would happen in an advanced country. Theoretically, one could infect an aircraft, say an international flight into Kennedy. The travelers would leave one aircraft and fan out into others. Maybe they'd be able to spread the disease through coughs and sneezes immediately, or maybe not. It didn't matter, really. Many of them would fly again in a few days, wondering if they had the flu, and then they'd be able to communicate the virus, and so infect more.

The question of how an epidemic spread was one of time and opportunity more than anything else. The more rapidly it got out from the focal center, and the more rapid the instrumentalities of travel, the farther a disease could spread laterally through a population. There were mathematical models, but they were all theoretical, dependent on a multitude of individual variables, each of which could affect the entire threat equation by at least one order of magnitude. To say the epidemic would die out in time was correct. The question was *how fast?* That would determine the number of people infected before protective measures took effect. One percent invasion of a society, or ten percent, or fifty percent? America wasn't a provincial society. Everyone interacted with everyone else. A truly airborne virus with a three-day incubation period . . . there was no model for that known to Moudi. The

deadliest recent Zaireian outbreak in Kikwit had claimed fewer than three hundred lives, but it had started with one unfortunate woodcutter, then his family, then their neighbors. The trick, then, if you wanted to create a much wider outbreak, was to increase the number of index cases. If you could do that, the initial blossoming of Ebola Zaire Mayinga *America* could be so large as to invalidate conventional control measures. It would spread not from one man and one family, but from hundreds of individuals and families—or thousands? Then the next generational leap could involve hundreds of thousands. About this time, the Americans would realize that something evil was afoot, but there would be time for one more generational leap, and that would be an order of magnitude greater still, perhaps into the millions. At that point, medical facilities would be overwhelmed . . .

. . . and there might be no stopping it at all. Nobody knew the possible consequences of a deliberate mass infection in a highly mobile society. The implications might be truly global. But probably not. Almost certainly not, Moudi judged, looking down at the glass culture trays behind thick wire-glass panels, through the plastic of his mask. The first generation of this disease had come from an unknown host and killed a young boy. The second generation had claimed but a single victim, due to fate and luck and his own competence as a physician. The third generation would grow before his eyes. How far that might spread was undetermined, but it was generations Four, Five, Six, and perhaps even Seven which would determine the fate of an entire country—which happened to be the enemy of his own.

It was easier now. Jean Baptiste had had a face and a voice and a life which had touched his own. He could not make that mistake again. She'd been an infidel, but a righteous one, and she was now with Allah, because Allah was truly merciful. He'd prayed for her soul, and surely Allah would hear his prayers. Few in America or elsewhere could possibly be as righteous as she had been, and he knew well that Americans hated his country and distrusted his religious faith. They might have names and faces, but he didn't see them here and he never would, and they were all ten thousand kilometers away, and it was easy to switch the television off.

"Yes," Moudi agreed. "Testing for it will be easy enough."

"LOOK." GEORGE WINSTON was telling a knot of three new senators, "if the federal government made cars, a Chevy pickup would cost eighty thousand dollars and have to stop every ten blocks to fill up the tank. You guys know business. So do I. We can do better."

"It is really that bad?" the (alphabetically) senior senator from Connecticut asked.

"I can show you the comparative-productivity numbers. If Detroit ran this way, we'd all be driving Japanese cars," Winston replied, jabbing his finger into the man's chest, and reminding himself to get rid of his Mercedes 500SEL, or at least garage it for a while.

"It's like having one cop car to cover East L.A.," Tony Bretano was saying to five more, two of them from California. "I don't have the forces I need to cover *one* MRC. That's major regional conflict," he explained to the new

people and their spouses. “And we’re supposed to—on paper, I mean—we’re supposed to be able to cover two of them at the same time, plus a peacekeeping mission somewhere else. Okay? Now, what I need at Defense is a chance to reconfigure our forces so that the shooters are the most important, and the rest of the outfit supports them, not the other way around. Accountants and lawyers are useful, but we have enough of them at Treasury and Justice. My side of the government, we’re the cops, and I don’t have enough cops on the street.”

“But how do we pay for that?” Colorado the younger asked. The senior senator from the Rocky Mountain State had been at a fund-raiser in Golden that night.

“The Pentagon isn’t a jobs program. We have to remember that. Now, next week I’ll have a full assessment of what we need, and then I’m going to come to the Hill, and together we’ll figure how to make that happen at the least possible cost.”

“See, what did I tell you?” Arnie van Damm said quietly, passing behind Ryan’s back. “Let them do it for you. You just stay pleasant.”

“What you said was right, Mr. President,” the new senator from Ohio professed to believe, sipping a bourbon and water now that the cameras were off. “You know, once in school, I did a little history paper on Cincinnatus, and . . .”

“Well, all we have to do is remember to put the country first,” Jack told him.

“How do you manage to do your job and—I mean,” the wife of the senior senator from Wisconsin explained, “you still do your surgery?”

“And teaching, which is even more important,” Cathy said with a nod, wishing she were upstairs and doing her patient notes. Well, there was the helicopter ride in tomorrow. “I will *never* stop doing my work. I give blind people their sight back. Sometimes I take the bandages off myself, and the look on their faces is the best thing in the world. The best,” she repeated.

“Even better than me, honey?” Jack asked, placing his arm around her shoulder. This might even be working, he thought. Charm them, Arnie and Callie had told him.

THE PROCESS HAD already started. The colonel assigned to guard the five mullahs had followed them into the mosque, where, moved by the moment, he’d worshiped with them. At the conclusion of the devotions, the senior of their number had spoken to him, quietly and politely, touching on a favored passage in the Holy Koran, so as to establish some common ground. It brought to the colonel a memory of his youth and his own father, a devout and honorable man. It was the usual thing in dealing with people, no matter the place or the culture. You got them talking, read their words, and chose the proper path for continuing the conversation. The mullah, a member of the Iranian clergy for over forty years, had counseled people on their faith and on their troubles for all that time, and so it was not hard for him to establish a rapport with his captor, a man supposedly sworn to kill him and his four colleagues should those orders arrive from his superiors. But in picking a man

deemed faithful, the departing generals had chosen a little too wisely, because men who display true loyalty are men of thoughts and principles, and such men are ever vulnerable to ideas demonstrably better than those to which they adhere. There could be no real contest. Islam was a religion with a long and honorable history, neither of which attribute attached to the dying regime which the colonel had sworn to uphold.

"It must have been a hard thing, fighting in the swamps," the mullah told him a few minutes later, as the conversation turned to relations between the two Islamic countries.

"War is evil. I never took pleasure in killing," the colonel admitted. It was rather like being a Catholic in the confessional, and all at once the man's eyes teared up, and he related some of the things he'd done over the years. He could see now that while he'd never taken such pleasure, he had hardened his heart to it, finally not distinguishing the innocent from the guilty, the just from the corrupt, and done what he'd been told *because* he'd been told, not because it had been in any way the right thing to do. He saw that now.

"Man falls often, but through the words of the Prophet we may always find our way back to a merciful God. Men are forgetful of their duties, but Allah is never forgetful of His." The mullah touched the officer's arm. "I think your prayers are not finished this day. Together we will pray to Allah, and together we will find peace for your soul."

After that, it had been very easy indeed. On learning that the generals were even now leaving the country, the colonel had two good reasons for cooperating. He had no wish to die. He was quite willing to follow the will of his God in order to stay alive and serve. In demonstration of his devotion, he assembled two companies of soldiers to meet with the mullahs and get their orders. It was very easy for the soldiers. All they had to do was follow the orders of their officers. To do anything else was a thought that never occurred to any of them.

It was now dawn in Baghdad, and at a score of large houses, doors were kicked in. Some occupants they found awake. Some were drunkenly asleep. Some were packed to leave and trying to figure a place to go and a way to get there. All were a little too late in their understanding of what was going on around them, in a place where a minute's error was the difference between prosperous life and violent death. Few resisted, and the one man who came closest to doing so successfully was cut nearly in half by a twenty-round burst from an AK-47, along with his wife. Mostly they were led barefoot from their homes into waiting trucks, heads down to the sidewalk, knowing the way this particular drama would end for them.

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THESE TACTICAL RADIO nets were not encrypted, and the faint VHF signals were monitored, this time at STORM TRACK, which was closer to Baghdad. Names were spoken, more than once in every case as the pickup teams reported back to their dispatchers, which made life easy for the ELINT teams close to the border and at King Khalid Military City. The watch officers called

in their supervisors, and CRITIC-priority dispatches were shot off via satellite.

RYAN HAD JUST walked the last of the new senators to the door when Andrea Price walked up.

"My shoes are killing me, and I have a procedure at—" Cathy stopped talking.

"FLASH Traffic coming in now, sir."

"Iraq?" Jack asked.

"Yes, Mr. President."

The President kissed his wife. "I'll be up in a little while."

Cathy had no choice but to nod and head to the elevator, where one of the ushers was waiting to take the First Couple upstairs. The kids would already be in bed. Their homework was all done, probably in some cases with the help of their bodyguards. Jack turned right, trotted down the stairs, then right again, left to get outside of the building, then back inside the West Wing and the Situation Room.

"Talk to me," the President commanded.

"It's started," Ed Foley's face said on the wall-mounted TV. And all they could do was watch.

IRAQI NATIONAL TELEVISION greeted a new day and a new reality. This was clear when the newsreaders commenced their daily presentation with an invocation of Allah's name, not for the first time, but never with this degree of fervor. "Gimme that ol' time religion, it's good enough for me—now," observed the chief master sergeant at PALM BOWL, because the transmission was national, and repeated from the transmitters in nearby Basra. He turned and waved. "Major Sabah?"

"Yes, Chief, yes," the Kuwaiti officer replied with a nod as he came over. He hadn't had much in the way of doubt before. His superiors had expressed reservations. They always did, they were never quite as close to the pulse of their enemy as the major was, thinking politics instead of ideas. He checked his watch. They'd be in their offices in two hours after the normal morning routine, and that didn't matter now. Hurrying wouldn't change anything. The dam had broken, and the water would spill out. The time to stop it had passed, assuming that such a chance had ever existed.

The Iraqi military had taken over, the TV news broadcast said. This was announced as though the situation were unique. A council of revolutionary justice had been formed. Those guilty of crimes against the people (a good catchall term which meant very little but was understood by all) were being arrested, and would face the judgment of their countrymen. The nation needed calm most of all, the TV told them. Today would be a national holiday. Only those in essential public-service jobs were expected to go to work. For the rest of the country's citizens, it was advised that they consider this a day of prayer and reconciliation. For the rest of the world, the new regime promised peace. The rest of the world would have all day to think about that.

DARYAEI HAD ALREADY done a good deal of thinking about it. He'd managed three hours of sleep before awakening for morning prayers. He found that as he aged he needed less and less. Perhaps the body understood that, with little time remaining, there was no longer time for rest, though there was for dreams, and he'd dreamed of lions in the early hours of this day. Dead lions. The lion had also been the symbol of the Shah's regime, and truly Badrayn had been correct. Lions could be killed. The real ones had once been native to Iran—Persia, in the old style—and had been hunted down to extinction in classical times. The symbolic ones, the Pahlavi dynasty, had similarly been eradicated with a combination of patience and ruthlessness. He'd played a role in that. It hadn't always been pretty. He'd ordered and supervised an atrocity, the fire-bombing of a crowded theater filled with people more interested in Western decadence than their Islamic faith. Hundreds had died horribly, but—but it had been necessary, a needed part of the campaign to bring his country and his people back to the True Path, and while he regretted that particular incident, and regularly prayed in atonement for the lives taken, no, he didn't regret it. He was an instrument of the Faith, and the Holy Koran itself told of the need for war, Holy War, in defense of the Faith.

Another gift of Persia (some said India) to the world was the game of chess, which he had learned as a child. The very word for the end of the game, *checkmate,* came from the Persian *shah mat*—"the king is dead"—something he had himself helped to achieve in real life, and while Daryaei had long since stopped playing mere games, he remembered that a good player thought not move by move, but four, or even more, moves ahead. One problem with chess, as with life, was that the next move could sometimes be seen, especially when the other player was skilled—to assume him to be anything else could be dangerous. But by playing ahead, it was far more difficult to see what was coming, until the very end, at which point the opponent could see clearly but, maneuvered out of position, depleted of his players, power, and options, he had no choice but to resign the game. Such had been the case in Iraq until this morning. The other player—actually, many of them—had resigned and run away, and Daryaei had been pleased to allow it. It was even more delicious when the other player could not run, but the point was winning, not satisfaction, and winning meant thinking farther and faster than the other player, so that the next move *was* a surprise, so that the other player was harried and confused, would be forced to take time to react, and in a chess match, as in life, time was limited. It was all a thing of the mind, not the body.

So it was with lions, it would seem. Even one so powerful could be outmaneuvered by lesser creatures if the time and the setting were right, and that was both the lesson and the task of the day. Finished with his prayers, Daryaei called for Badrayn. The younger man was a skilled tactician and gatherer of information. He needed the direction of one schooled in strategy, but with that guidance he would be very useful indeed.

IT HAD BEEN conclusively decided in an hour's conversation with his country's leading experts that the President could do absolutely nothing at all. The next move was simply to wait and watch and see. Any citizen could do it, but America's leading experts could wait and watch and see a little faster than anyone else, or so they told themselves. That would all be done for the President, of course, and so Ryan walked out of the Situation Room, up the steps, and outside to see wet, cold rain falling on the South Lawn beyond the overhang of the walkway. The coming day promised to be blustery, with March arriving, typically, like a lion, then to be replaced by a lamb. Or so the aphorism went. At the moment it just looked gloomy, however nurturing the rain might be to ground recovering from a cold, bitter winter.

"This will finish off the last of the snow," Andrea Price said, surprising herself by speaking unbidden to her principal.

Ryan turned and smiled. "You work harder than I do, Agent Price, and you're a—"

"Girl?" she asked with a weary smile.

"My chauvinism must be showing. I beg your pardon, ma'am. Sorry, I was just wishing for a cigarette. Quit years ago—Cathy bullied me into it. More than once," Jack admitted with good humor. "It can be tough, being married to a doctor."

"It can be tough, being married." Price was wedded to her job, with two failed relationships to prove it. Her problem, if one could call it that, was in possessing the same devotion to duty that only men were supposed to have. It was a simple enough fact, but one which first a lawyer and then an advertising executive had failed to grasp.

"Why do we do it, Andrea?" Ryan asked.

Special Agent Price didn't know, either. The President necessarily was a father figure to her. He was the man supposed to have the answers, but after years on the Detail, she knew better. Her father had always had such answers, or so it had seemed in her youth. Then she'd grown, finished her education, joined the Service, worked her way rapidly up a steep and slippery ladder, and in the process lost her way in life somehow. Now she was at the pinnacle of her profession, alongside the nation's "father," only to learn that life didn't allow people to know what they wanted and needed to know. Her job was hard enough. His was infinitely worse, and maybe it was better for the President to be something other than the decent and honorable gentleman John Patrick Ryan was. Maybe a son of a bitch could survive better here . . .

"No answer?" Ryan smiled at the rain. "I think you're supposed to say that *somebody* has to do it. Jesus, I just tried to seduce thirty new senators. You know that? Seduce," Jack repeated. "Like they were girls or something, and like I was that kind of guy—and I don't have a fucking clue." The voice stopped cold and the head shook in surprise at what he'd said. "Sorry, excuse me."

"That's okay, Mr. President. I've heard the word before, even from other presidents."

"Who do you talk to?" Jack asked. "Once upon a time, I'd talk to my father, my priest, to James Greer when I worked for him, or Roger, until a few weeks

ago. Now they all ask me. You know, they told me at Quantico, at the Basic Officers' School, that command could be lonely. Boy, they weren't kidding. They really weren't kidding."

"You have one hell of a good wife, sir," Price pointed out, envying both of them for that.

"There's always supposed to be somebody smarter than you. The person you go to when you're just not sure. Now they come to me. I'm not smart enough for that." Ryan paused, just then hearing what Price had told him. "You're right, but she's busy enough, and I'm not supposed to burden her with my problems."

Price decided to laugh. "You *are* a chauvinist, Boss."

That snapped his head around. "I beg your pardon, Ms. Price!" Ryan said in a voice that sounded cross until a presidential laugh followed it. "Please don't tell the media I said that."

"Sir, I don't tell reporters where the bathroom is."

The President yawned. "What's tomorrow look like?"

"Well, you're in the office all day. I imagine this Iraq business will wreck your morning. I'll be out early, back in the afternoon. I'm going to do a walk-around tomorrow, to check security arrangements for all the kids. We have a meeting to see if there's a way to get SURGEON to work and back without the helicopter—"

"That is funny, isn't it?" Ryan observed.

"A FLOTUS with a real job is something the system never really allowed for."

"Real job, hell! She makes more money than *I* do, has for ten years, except for when I was back in the market. The papers haven't picked up on that, either. She's a great doc."

His words were meandering, Price saw. He was too tired to think straight. Well, that happened to Presidents, too. Which was why she was around.

"Her patients love her, that's what Roy says. Anyway, I'm going to look over arrangements for all your children—routine, sir, I'm responsible for all of the arrangements for your family. Agent Raman will stand post with you for most of the day. We're moving him up. He's coming along very nicely," Special Agent Price reported.

"The one who got the fire coat to disguise me back on the first night?" Jack asked.

"You knew?" Price asked in return. The President turned to enter the White House proper. The grin was one of exhaustion, but for all that the blue eyes twinkled at his principal agent.

"I'm not *that* dumb, Andrea."

No, she decided, it wasn't better to have a son of a bitch as POTUS.

21

RELATIONSHIPS

PATRICK O'DAY WAS A widower whose life had changed in a particularly cruel and abrupt way after a late-life marriage. His wife, Deborah, had been a fellow agent in the Laboratory Division, an expert on forensic investigation, which had occasioned a great deal of travel out of headquarters, until one afternoon, flying into Colorado Springs, her aircraft had crashed into the ground for reasons still undetermined. It had been her first field assignment after maternity leave, and she'd left behind a daughter, Megan, aged fourteen weeks.

Megan was two and a half now, and Inspector O'Day was still wrestling with how he should introduce Megan to her mother. He had videotapes and photographs, but were he to point to dyed paper or a phosphor screen and tell his daughter, "That's Mommy," might it make her think that all life was artificial? What effect would it have on her development? It was one more question in the life of a man supposed to find answers. The single fatherhood enforced on him by fate had made him all the more devoted as a father, and this on top of a professional career in which he'd worked no less than six kidnappings all the way to conclusion. Six four, two hundred wiry pounds, he had sacrificed his Zapata mustache to the requirements of Headquarters Division, but tough guy among tough guys, his attention to his daughter would have made his colleagues chuckle. Her hair was blondish and long, and each morning he brushed it to silky smoothness after dressing her in colorful toddler clothes and helping her with her tiny sneaks. For Megan, Daddy was a great big protective bear who towered into the blue sky, and snatched her off the ground like a rocket so that she could wrap her arms around his neck.

"Oof!" Daddy said. "You hug too hard!"

"Did I hurt?" Megan asked in mock alarm. It was part of the morning routine.

A smile. "No, not this time." With that, he walked out of the house and opened the door to his muddy pickup, carefully strapped her into her car seat, and set her lunch box and blanky between them. It was six-thirty, and they were on their way to a new day-care center. O'Day could not start his truck without looking down at Megan, the image of her mother, a daily realization that always made him bite his lip and close his eyes and shake his head, wondering again why the 737 had rolled and plunged straight into the ground with his wife of sixteen months in seat 18-F.

The new day-care center was more convenient to his route to work, and the people next door loved it for their twin boys. He turned left onto Ritchie Highway, and found the place right across from a 7-Eleven where he could get

a pint of coffee for the commute in on U.S. 50. Giant Steps, nice name.

Hell of a way to make a living, Pat thought, parking his truck. Marlene Daggett was always there at six, tending to the children of the bureaucrats who trekked to D.C. every morning. She even came out to meet them for the first arrival.

"Mr. O'Day! And this is Megan!" the teacher announced with stunning enthusiasm for so early an hour. Megan had her doubts, and looked up at her daddy. She turned back in surprise to see something special. "Her name is Megan, too. She's *your* bear, and she's been waiting all day for you."

"Oh." The little girl seized the brown-furred creature and hugged it, name tag and all. "Hello."

Mrs. Daggett looked up in a way that told the FBI agent, *it works every time.* "You have your blanky?"

"Right here, ma'am," O'Day told her, also handing over the forms he'd completed the night before. Megan had no medical problems, no allergies to medicine, milk, or food; yes, in case of a real emergency you can take her to the local hospital; and the inspector's work and pager numbers, and his parents' number, and the number of Deborah's parents, who were damned good grandparents. Giant Steps was well organized. O'Day didn't know how well organized only because there was something Mrs. Daggett wasn't supposed to talk casually about. His identity was being checked out by the Secret Service.

"Well, Miss Megan, I think it's time for us to play and make some new friends." She looked up. "We'll take good care of her."

O'Day got back into his truck with the usual minor pain that attended leaving his daughter behind—anywhere, no matter the time or place—and jumped across the street to the 7-Eleven for his commute coffee. He had a conference scheduled at nine o'clock to go over further developments on the crash investigation—they were down to T-crossing and I-dotting now—followed by a day of administrative garbage which would at least not prevent him from picking his little girl up on time. Forty minutes later, he pulled into FBI Headquarters at Tenth and Pennsylvania. His post as roving inspector gave him a reserved parking place. From there he walked, this morning, to the indoor pistol range.

An expert marksman since Boy Scouts, Pat O'Day had also been a "principal firearms instructor" at several FBI field offices, which meant that he'd been selected by the SAC to supervise weapons training for the other agents—always an important part of a cop's life, even though few ever fired their side arms in anger.

The range was rarely busy this time of day—he got in at 7:25—and the inspector selected two boxes of Federal 10mm hollow-points for his big stainless Smith & Wesson 1076 automatic, along with a couple of standard "Q" targets and a set of ear protectors. The target was a simple white cardboard panel with an outline of the vital parts of a human body. The shape resolved itself into the rough size and configuration of a farmer's steel milk can, with the letter "Q" in the center, about where the heart would be. He attached the target to the spring-clip on the traveler, set the distance for thirty feet, and hit the travel switch. As it moved downrange, he let his thoughts idle,

contemplating the sports page and the new Orioles lineup in spring-training camp. The range hardware was programmable. On arriving at its destination, the target turned sideways, and became nearly invisible. Without looking, O'Day dialed the timer to a random setting and continued to look downrange, his hands at his side. Now his thinking changed. There was a Bad Guy there. A serious Bad Guy. Convicted felon, now cornered. A Bad Guy who had told informants that he'd never go back inside, never be taken alive. In his long career, Inspector O'Day had heard that one many times, and whenever possible he'd given the subject the opportunity to keep his word—but they all folded, dropped their gun, wet their pants, or even broke down into tears when confronted by real danger instead of the kind more easily considered over beers or a joint. But not this time. This Bad Guy was serious. He had a hostage. A child, perhaps. Maybe even his own little Megan. The thought made his eyes narrow. A gun to her head. In the movies, the Bad Guy would tell you to drop your weapon, but if you did that, all you were guaranteed was a dead cop *and* a dead hostage, and so you talked to your Bad Guy. You made yourself sound calm and reasonable and conciliatory, and you waited for him to relax, just a little, just enough to move the gun away from the hostage's head. It might take hours, but sooner or later——

—the timer clicked, and the target card turned to face the agent. O'Day's right hand moved in a blur, snatching the pistol from its holster. Simultaneously, his right foot moved backward, his body pivoted and crouched slightly, and the left hand joined the right on the rubber grips when the gun was halfway up. His eyes acquired the gunsights at the bottom of his peripheral vision, and the moment they were aligned with the head of the "Q" target, his finger depressed the trigger twice, Bring so fast that both ejected cartridge cases were in the air at the same time. It was called a double-tap, and O'Day had practiced it for so many years that the sounds almost blended in the air, and the two-shot echo was just returning from the steel backstop when the empty cases pinged off the concrete floor, but by then there were two holes in the head of the target, less than an inch apart, between and just above where the eyes would be. The target flipped side-on, less than a second after it had turned, rather nicely simulating the fall of the subject to the ground.

Yes.

"I think you got 'em there, Tex."

O'Day turned, startled from his fantasy by a familiar voice. "Morning, Director."

"Hey, Pat." Murray yawned, a set of ear protectors dangling in his left hand. "You're pretty fast. Hostage scenario?"

"I try to train for the worst possible situation."

"Your little girl." Murray nodded. They all did that, because the hostage had to be important enough in your mind. "Well, you got him. Show me again," the Director ordered. He wanted to watch O'Day's technique. There was always something to learn. After the second iteration, there was one ragged hole in the target's notional forehead. It was actually rather intimidating for Murray, though he considered himself an expert marksman. "I need to practice more."

O'Day relaxed his routine now. If you could do it with your first shot of the day—and he'd done it with all four—you still had it figured out. Two minutes and twenty shots later, the target's head was an annulus. Murray, in the next lane, was busy in the standard Jeff Cooper technique, two rapid shots into the chest, followed by a slower aimed round into the head. When both were satisfied that their targets were dead, it was time to contemplate the day.

"Anything new?" the Director asked.

"No, sir. More follow-up interviews on the JAL case are coming in, but nothing startling."

"What about Kealty?"

O'Day shrugged. He was not allowed to interfere with the OPR investigation, but he did get daily summaries. A case of this magnitude had to be reported to somebody, and though supervision of the case was entirely under the purview of OPR, the information developed also went to the Director's office, filtered through his lead roving inspector. "Dan, enough people went in and out of Secretary Hanson's office that anybody could have walked off with the letter, assuming there was one, which, our people think, there probably was. At least Hanson talked to enough people about it—or so those people tell us."

"I think that one will just blow over," Murray observed.

"GOOD MORNING, Mr. President."

Another day in the routine. The kids were off. Cathy was off. Ryan emerged from his quarters suited and tied—his jacket was buttoned, which was unusual for him, or had been until moving in here—and his shoes shined by one of the valet staff. Except that Jack still couldn't think of this place as a home. More like a hotel, or the VIP quarters he'd had while traveling on Agency business, albeit far more ornate and with much better service.

"You're Raman?" the President asked.

"Yes, sir," Special Agent Aref Raman replied. He was six feet and solidly built, more a weight lifter than a runner, Jack thought, though that might come from the body armor that many of the Detail members wore. Ryan judged his age at middle thirties. Good-looking in a Mediterranean sort of way, with a shy smile and eyes as blue as SURGEON'S. "SWORDSMAN is moving," he said into his microphone. "To the office."

"Raman, where's that from?" Jack asked, on the way to the elevator.

"Mother Lebanese, father Iranian, came over in '79, when the Shah had his problems. Dad was close to the regime."

"So what do you think of the Iraq situation?" the President asked.

"Sir, I hardly even speak the language anymore." The agent smiled. "Now, if you want to ask me about who's lookin' good in the NCAA finals, I'm your man."

"Kentucky," Ryan said decisively. The White House elevator was old, pre—Art Deco in the interior finishings, with worn black buttons, which the President wasn't allowed to push. Raman did that for him.

"Oregon's going all the way. I'm never wrong, sir. Ask the guys. I won the last three pools. Nobody'll bet against me anymore. The finals will be Oregon

and Duke—my school—and Oregon will win by six or eight. Well, maybe less if Maceo Rawlings has a good night," Raman added.

"What did you study at Duke?"

"Pre-law, but I decided I didn't want to be a lawyer. Actually I decided that criminals shouldn't have any rights, and so I figured I'd rather be a cop, and I joined the Service."

"Married?" Ryan wanted to know the people around him. At one level, it was mere good manners. At another, these people were sworn to defend his life, and he couldn't treat them like employees.

"Never found the right girl—at least not yet."

"Muslim?"

"My parents were, but after I saw all the trouble religion caused them, well"—he grinned—"if you ask around, they'll tell you my religion is ACC basketball. I never miss a Duke game on the TV. Damned shame Oregon's so tough this year. But that's one thing you can't change."

The President chuckled at the truth of that statement. "Aref, you said, your first name?"

"Actually, they call me Jeff. Easier to pronounce," Raman explained as the door opened. The agent positioned himself in the center of the doors, blocking a direct line of sight to POTUS. A member of the Uniform Division was standing there, along with two more of the Detail, all of them known by sight to Raman. With a nod, he walked out, with Ryan in tow, and the group turned west, past the side corridor that led to the bowling alley and the carpenter shops.

"Okay, Jeff, an easy day planned," Ryan told him unnecessarily. The Secret Service knew his daily schedule before he did.

"Easy for us, maybe."

They were waiting for him in the Oval Office. The Foleys, Bert Vasco, Scott Adler, and one other person stood when the President walked in. They'd already been scanned for weapons and nuclear material.

"Ben!" Jack said. He paused to set his early morning papers on the desk, and joined his guests.

"Mr. President," Dr. Ben Goodley replied with a smile.

"Ben's prepared the morning brief," Ed Foley explained.

Since not all of the morning visitors were part of the inner circle, Raman would stay in the room, lest somebody leap across the coffee table and try to strangle the President. A person didn't need a firearm to be lethal. A few weeks of study and practice could turn any reasonably fit person into enough of a martial-arts expert to kill an unwary victim. For that reason, members of the Detail carried not only pistols, but also Asps, police batons made of telescoping steel segments. Raman watched as this Goodley—a carded national intelligence officer—handed out the briefing sheets. Like many members of the Secret Service, he got to hear nearly everything. The "EYES-ONLY PRESIDENT" sticker on a particularly sensitive folder didn't really mean that. There was almost always someone else in the room, and while the Detail members professed even among themselves not to pay any attention to such things, what that really meant was that they didn't discuss them very much. Not hearing and not remembering were something else. Cops were not trained

or paid to forget things, much less to ignore them.

In that sense, Raman thought, he was the perfect spy. Trained by the United States of America to be a law enforcement officer, he had performed brilliantly in the field, mainly in counterfeiting cases. He was a proficient marksman, and a very organized thinker—a trait revealed all the way back in his schooling; he'd graduated from Duke summa cum laude, with nothing less than an A grade on his transcript, plus he'd been a varsity wrestler. It was useful for an investigator to have a good memory, and he did. Photographic, in fact, a talent which had attracted the Detail leadership to him early on, because the agents protecting the President needed to be able to recognize a particular face instantly from the scores of photographs which they carried when the Boss was out pressing flesh. During the Fowler administration, as a junior agent gazetted to the Detail from the St. Louis field office to cover a fundraising dinner, he'd ID'd and detained a suspected presidential stalker who'd turned out to have a .22 automatic in his pocket. Raman had pulled the man from the crowd so quietly and skillfully that the subject's processing into the Missouri state mental-health system had never made the papers, which was just what they tried to achieve. The young agent had "Detail" written all over him, the then-Director of the United States Secret Service had decided on reviewing the case, and so Raman had been transferred over soon after Roger Durling's ascension to the Presidency. As a junior member of the Detail he'd stood boring hours on post, run alongside the Presidential limousine, and gradually worked his way up rather rapidly for a young man. He'd worked the punishing hours without complaints, only commenting from time to time that, as an immigrant, he knew how important America was, and as his distant ancestors might have served Darius the Great as one of the "Immortals," so he relished doing the same for his new country. It was so easy, really, much easier than the task his brother—ethnic, not biological—had performed in Baghdad a short time earlier. Americans, whatever they might say to pollsters, truly loved immigrants in their large and foolish hearts. They knew much, and they were always learning, but one thing they had yet to learn was that you could never look into *another* human heart.

"No assets we can use on the ground," Mary Pat was saying.

"Good intercepts, though," Goodley went on. "NSA is really coming through for us. The whole Ba'ath leadership is in the jug, and I don't think they're going to be coming out, at least not standing up."

"So Iraq is fully decapitated?"

"A military ruling council, colonels and junior generals. Afternoon TV showed them with an Iranian mullah. No accident," Bert Vasco said positively. "The least that comes out of this is a rapprochement with Iran. At most, the two countries merge. We'll know that in a couple of days—two weeks at the outside."

"The Saudis?" Ryan asked.

"They're having kittens, Jack," Ed Foley replied at once. "I talked with Prince Ali less than an hour ago. They cobbled together an aid package that would just about have paid off *our* national debt in an effort to buy the new Iraqi regime—did it overnight, biggest goddamned letter of credit ever drafted—but nobody's answering the phone. That has 'em shook in Riyadh. Iraq's

always been willing to talk business. Not now."

And that would be what frightened all the states on the Arabian Peninsula, Ryan knew. It wasn't well appreciated in the West that the Arabs were businessmen. Not ideologues, not fanatics, not lunatics, but businessmen. Theirs was a maritime trading culture that predated Islam, a fact remembered in America only in remakes of Sinbad the Sailor movies. In that sense they were very like Americans, despite the difference in language, clothing, and religion, and just like Americans they had trouble understanding people who were not willing to do business, to reach an accommodation, to make some sort of exchange. Iran was such a country, changed from the previous state of affairs under the Shah by the Ayatollah Khomeini into a theocracy. *They're not like us* was the universal point of concern for any culture. *They're not like us ANYMORE* would be a very frightening development for Gulf States who'd always known that, despite political differences, there had always been an avenue of commonality and communication.

"Tehran?" Jack asked next. Ben Goodley took the question unto himself.

"Official news broadcasts welcome the development—the routine offers of peace and renewed friendship, but nothing beyond that at this point," Goodley said. "Officially, that is. Unofficially, we're getting all sorts of intercept traffic. People in Baghdad are asking for instructions, and people in Tehran are giving them. For the moment they're saying to let the situation develop apace. The revolutionary courts come next. We're seeing a lot of Islamic clergy on TV, preaching love and freedom and all that nice stuff. When the trials start, and people start backing into walls to pose for rifle-fire, then there's going to be a total vacuum."

"Then Iran takes over, probably, or maybe runs Iraq like a puppet on a string," Vasco said, flipping through the latest set of intercepts. "Goodley may be right. I'm reading this SIGINT stuff for the first time. Excuse me, Mr. President, but I've been concentrating on the political side. This stuff is more revealing than I expected it to be."

"You're saying it means *more* than I think it does?" the NIO asked.

Vasco nodded without looking up. "I think it might. This is not good," the desk officer opined darkly.

"Later today, the Saudis are going to ask us to hold their hand," Secretary Adler pointed out. "What do I tell them?"

Ryan's reply was so automatic that it startled him. "Our commitment to the Kingdom is unchanged. If they need us, we're there, now and forever." And with two sentences, Jack thought a second later, he had committed the full power and credibility of the United States of America to a non-democratic country seven thousand miles away. Fortunately, Adler made it easier for him.

"I fully agree, Mr. President. We can't do anything else." Everyone else nodded agreement, even Ben Goodley. "We can do that quietly. Prince Ali understands, and he can make the King understand that we're not kidding."

"Next stop," Ed Foley said, "we have to brief Tony Bretano in. He's pretty good, by the way. Knows how to listen," the DCI-designate informed the President. "You plan to do a cabinet meeting about this?"

Ryan shook his head. "No. I think we should play this one cool. America is observing regional developments with interest, but there's nothing for us to

get excited about. Scott, you handle the press briefing through your people."

"Right," SecState replied.

"Ben, what do they have you doing at Langley now?"

"Mr. President, they went and made me a senior watch officer for the Operations Center."

"Good briefing," Ryan told the younger man, then turned to the DCI. "Ed, he works for me now. I need an NIO who speaks my language."

"Gee, do I at least get a decent relief pitcher back?" Foley replied with a laugh. "This kid's a good prospect, and I expect to be in the pennant race this fall."

"Nice try, Ed. Ben, your hours just got worse. For now, you can have my old office around the corner. The food's a lot better here," the President promised.

Throughout it all, Aref Raman stood still, leaning against the white-painted walls while his eyes flickered automatically from one visitor to another. He was trained not to trust anyone, with the possible exceptions of the President's wife and kids. No one else. Of course, they all trusted him, including the ones who had trained him not to trust anyone, because everybody had to trust somebody.

It was just a matter of timing, really, and one of the things his American education and professional training had conferred upon him was the patience to wait for the chance to make the proper move. But other events on the other side of the globe were bringing that moment closer. Behind expressionless eyes Raman thought that maybe he needed guidance. His mission was no longer the random event he'd promised to fulfill twenty years earlier. That he could do almost any time, but he was *here* now, and while anyone could kill, and while a dedicated person could kill almost anyone, only a truly skilled assassin could kill the proper person at the proper moment in pursuit of a larger goal. So deliciously ironic, he thought, that while his mission came from God, every factor in its accomplishment had come directly from the Great Satan himself, embodied in the life of one man who could best serve Allah by departing this life at just the proper moment. Picking the moment would be the hard part, and so after twenty years, Raman decided that he might just have to break cover after all. There was a danger in that, but, he judged, a slight one.

"YOUR OBJECTIVE IS a bold one," Badrayn said calmly. Inwardly he was anything but calm. It was breathtaking.

"The meek do not inherit the earth," Daryaei replied, having for the first time explained his mission in life to someone outside his own inner circle of clerics.

It was a struggle for both of them to act like gamblers around a poker table, while they discussed a plan that would change the shape of the world. For Daryaei it was a concept toward which he'd labored and thought and planned for more than a generation, the culmination of everything he'd ever done in life, the fulfillment of a dream, and such a goal as to put his name aside that of the Prophet himself—if he achieved it. The unification of Islam. That was how he typically expressed it in his inner circle.

Badrayn merely saw the power. The creation of a new superstate centered on the Persian Gulf, a state with immense economic power, a huge population, self-sustaining in every detail and able to expand across Asia and Africa, perhaps fulfilling the wishes of the Prophet Mohammed, though he didn't pretend to know what the founder of his religion would or would not have wished. He left that to men like Daryaei. For Badrayn the game was simply power, and religion or ideology merely defined the team identities. His team was this one because of where he'd been born, and because he'd once looked closely at Marxism and decided it was insufficient to the task.

"It is possible," Badrayn said after a few more seconds of contemplation.

"The historical moment is unique. The Great Satan"—he didn't really like to fall into ideological cant in discussions of statecraft, but sometimes there was no avoiding it—"is weak. The Lesser Satan is destroyed, with its Islamic republics ready to fall into our laps. They need an identity, and what better identity could there be than the Holy Faith?"

And that was entirely true, Badrayn agreed with a silent nod. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its replacement with the so-called Confederation of Independent States had merely generated a vacuum not yet filled. The southern tier of "republics" were still economically tied to Moscow, rather like a series of carts hitched to a dying horse. They'd always been rebellious, unsettled mini-nations whose religion had set them apart from the atheist empire, and now they were all struggling to establish their own economic identity so that they could once and for all separate themselves from the center of a dead country to which they'd never truly belonged. But they couldn't sustain themselves economically, not in the modern age. They all needed another patron, another guide into the new century. That new leadership had to mean money, and lots of it, plus the unifying banner of religion and culture long denied them by Marxism-Leninism. In return, the republics would provide land and people. And resources.

"The obstacle is America, but you do not need me to tell you that," Badrayn observed unnecessarily. "And America is too large and powerful to destroy."

"I've met this Ryan. But first, you tell me what you think of him."

"He's no fool, and no coward," Badrayn said judiciously. "He has shown physical bravery, and he is well versed in intelligence operations. He is well educated. The Saudis trust him, as do the Israelis." Those two countries mattered at this moment. So did a third: "The Russians know and respect him."

"What else?"

"Do not underestimate him. Do not underestimate America. We have both seen what happens to those who do," Badrayn said.

"But America's current state?"

"What I have seen tells me that President Ryan is working hard to reconstitute the government of his country. It is a huge task, but America is a fundamentally stable country."

"What about the problem in the succession?"

"This I do not understand," Badrayn admitted. "I haven't seen enough news reports to understand the issues."

"I have met Ryan," Daryaei said, finally revealing his own thoughts. "He is

an assistant, nothing more. He appears strong, but is not. Were he a man of strength, he would deal with this Kealty directly. The man commits treason, does he not? But this is not important. Ryan is one man. America is one country. Both can be attacked, at the same time, from more than one direction."

"Lion and hyenas," Badrayn noted, then explained himself. Daryaei was so pleased with the idea that he didn't object to his own place in the metaphor.

"Not one great attack, but many small ones?" the cleric asked.

"It has worked before."

"And what of many large ones? Against America, and against Ryan. For that matter, what if Ryan were to fall? What would happen then, my young friend?"

"Within their system of government, chaos would result. But I would counsel caution. I would also recommend allies. The more hyenas and the more directions, the better to harry the lion. As for attacking Ryan personally," Badrayn went on, wondering why his host had said that, and wondering if it was an error, "the President of the United States is a difficult target, well protected and well informed."

"So I am told," Daryaei replied, behind dark eyes devoid of expression. "What other countries would you recommend as our allies?"

"Have you paid close attention to the conflict between Japan and America?" Badrayn asked. "Did you ever wonder why some large dogs did not bark at all?" It was a funny thing about large dogs. They were always hungry. More than once now, however, Daryaei had talked about Ryan and his protection. One dog was the hungriest of all. It would make for an interesting pack.

"MAYBE IT JUST malfunctioned."

The Gulfstream representatives were sitting in a room with Swiss civil-aviation officials, along with the chief of flight operations of the corporation which owned the jets. His written records showed that the aircraft had been properly maintained by a local firm. All parts had come from the approved suppliers. The Swiss corporation which did the maintenance had ten years of accident-free history behind it, regulated in turn by the same government agency which oversaw the investigation.

"It wouldn't be the first time," the Gulfstream rep agreed. The flight-data recorder was a robust piece of hardware, but they didn't always survive crashes, because every crash was different. A careful search by USS *Radford* had failed to turn up the locator pings. Absent that, the bottom was too deep for an undirected search, and then there was the issue of the Libyans, who didn't want ships poking around their waters. Had the missing aircraft been an airliner, the issue might have been pushed, but a business jet with a crew of two and three reported passengers—one of them with a deadly plague—wasn't important enough. "Without the data, there isn't much to be said. Engine failure was reported, and that could mean bad fuel, bad maintenance—"

"Please!" the maintenance contractor objected.

"I'm speaking theoretically," Gulfstream pointed out. "Or even pilot error of some sort or other. Without hard data, our hands are pretty well tied."

"The pilot had four thousand hours in type. The copilot had over two thousand," the owner's representative said for the fifth time this afternoon.

They were all thinking the same thing. The aircraft manufacturer had a superb safety record to defend. There were relatively few airliner manufacturers for the big carriers to choose from, and as important as safety was for them, it was even more so for the builders of business jets, for whom competition was stiffer. The buyers of such corporate toys had long memories, and without hard information to hang their hats on about the few crashes which took place, all they remembered was a missing aircraft with missing passengers.

The maintenance contractor had no wish to be firmly associated with a fatal accident, either. Switzerland had a lot of airfields, and a lot of business aircraft. A bad maintainer could lose business as well, not to mention the trouble from the Swiss government for violating its stringent civil-aviation rules.

The corporate owner had the least to lose in terms of reputation, but *amour propre* would not allow him to assume responsibility without real cause.

And there was no real cause for any of them to take the blame, not without the flight-data recorder. The men looked at one another around the table, thinking the same thought: good people *did* make mistakes, but rarely did they wish to admit them, and never when they didn't have to. The government representative had gone over the written records and been satisfied that the paperwork was all correct. Beyond that there was nothing any of them could do except talk to the engine manufacturer and try to get a sample of the fuel. The former was easy. The latter was not. In the end, they'd know little more than they knew now. Gulfstream might lose a plane or two in sales. The maintenance contractor would undergo increased government scrutiny. The corporation would have to buy a new jet. To show loyalty, it would be another G-class business jet and with the same maintenance contractor. That would please everybody, even the Swiss government.

BEING A ROVING Inspector paid more than being a street agent, and it was more fun than sitting behind a desk all the time, but Pat O'Day still chafed at spending most of his day reading over written reports generated by agents or their secretaries. More junior people cross-checked the data for inconsistencies, though he did the same, keeping careful penciled notes on his own yellow pad, which his secretary would collate for his summary reports to Director Murray. Real agents, O'Day believed implicitly, didn't type. Well, that's what his instructors at Quantico would have said, probably. He finished his meetings early down at Buzzard's Point and decided that his office in the Hoover Building didn't need him. The investigation was indeed at the point of diminishing returns. The "new" information was all interviews, every single one of which confirmed information already developed and already verified by voluminous cross-referenced documents.

"I've always hated this part," ADIC Tony Caruso said. It was the point when the United States Attorney had everything he needed to get a conviction, but, being a lawyer, never had enough—as though the best way to convict a hood

were to bore the jury to death.

"Not even a sniff of contrary data. This one's in the bag, Tony." The two men had long been friends. "Time for me to get something new and exciting."

"Lucky you. How's Megan?"

"New day-care center, started today. Giant Steps, on Ritchie Highway."

"Same one," Caruso observed. "Yeah, I guess it would be."

"Huh?"

"The Ryan kids—oh, you weren't here back then when those ULA bastards hit it."

"She didn't—the owner of the place didn't say anything about . . . well, I guess she wouldn't, would she?"

"Our brethren are a little tight-assed about that. I imagine the Service gave her a long brief on what she can and cannot say."

"Probably an agent or two helping with the finger painting." O'Day thought for a second. There was a new clerk at the 7-Eleven across the street. He'd remembered thinking when he'd gotten his coffee that the guy was a little too clean-cut for that early in the morning. Hmph. Tomorrow he'd eyeball the guy for a weapon, as the clerk had surely done with him already, and out of professional courtesy he'd show his ID, along with a wink and a nod.

"Kinda overqualified," Caruso agreed. "But what the hell, can't hurt to know there's coverage where your kid is."

"You bet, Tony." O'Day stood. "Anyway, I think I'll go and pick her up."

"Headquarters puke. Eight-hour day," the Assistant Director in Charge of the Washington Field Office grumped.

"You're the one wanted to be a bigshot, Don Antonio."

It was always liberating to leave work. The air smelled fresher on the way out than on the way in. He walked out to his truck, noting that it hadn't been touched or stolen. There was an advantage to dirt and mud. He shed his suit jacket—O'Day rarely bothered with an overcoat—and slipped into his ten-year-old leather one, a Navy-type flight jacket worn just enough to be comfortable. The tie was disposed of next. Ten minutes later, he was outbound on Route 50 toward Annapolis, just ahead of the bow wave of government commuters, and listening to C&W on the radio. Traffic was especially favorable today, and just before the hourly news he pulled into the Giant Steps parking lot, this time looking for official cars. The Secret Service was fairly clever about that. Like the Bureau, its automobiles were randomly tagged, and they'd even learned not to go with the obvious cheap-body, neutral paint motif that fingered so many unmarked cop cars. He spotted two even so, and confirmed his suspicions by parking next to one and looking down inside to see the radio. That done, he wondered about his own disguise, and decided to see how good *they* were, then realized that if they were halfway competent, they'd already checked out his ID through the documents he'd handed over to Mrs. Daggett that very morning, or more likely even before. There was a considerable professional rivalry between the FBI and the USSS. In fact, the former had been started with a handful of Secret Service agents. But the FBI had also grown much larger, and along the way accumulated far more corporate experience in criminal investigation. Which was not to say the Service wasn't damned good, though as Tony Caruso had truthfully observed,

very tight-assed. Well, they were probably the world's foremost baby-sitters.

He walked across the parking lot with his jacket zipped up, and spotted a big guy just inside the door. Would he stay covert? O'Day walked right past him, just another father in to pick up his munchkin. Inside, it was just a matter of checking out the clothes and the earpieces. Yep, two female agents wearing long smocks, and under them would be SigSauer 9mm automatics.

"Daddy!" Megan hooted, leaping to her feet. Next to her was another child of similar age and looks. The inspector headed over, bending down to look at the day's crayoning.

"Excuse me." And he felt light hand pressure through the jacket, on his service automatic.

"You know who I am," he said without turning.

"Oh! I do now." And then O'Day recognized the voice. He turned to see Andrea Price.

"Demoted?" He stood to look her in the face. The two female agents mingled with the kids were also watching him closely, alerted by the bulge under the leather jacket. Not bad, O'Day thought. They'd had to look closely; the bulk of the leather was good concealment. Both had their gun hands off whatever educational task they'd been performing, and the looks in their eyes would appear casual only to the unschooled.

"Sweep. Checking out arrangements for all the kids," she explained.

"This is Katie," Megan said, introducing her new friend. "And that's my daddy."

"Well, hello, Katie." He bent down again to shake her hand, then stood again. "Is she . . . ?"

"SANDBOX, First Toddler of the United States," Price confirmed.

"And one across the street?" Business first.

"Two, relays."

"She looks like her mom," Pat said of Katie Ryan. And just to be polite he pulled out his official ID and tossed it to the nearest female agent, Marcella Hilton.

"You want to be a little careful testing us, okay?" Price asked.

"Your man at the door knew who I was coming in. He looks like he's been around the block."

"Don Russell, and he has, but—"

"But ain't no such thing as 'too careful,' " Inspector O'Day agreed. "Yeah, okay, I admit it, I wanted to see how careful you were. Hey, my little girl's here, too. I guess this place is a target now." *Damn,* he didn't say aloud.

"So do we pass?"

"One across the street, three I can see here. I bet you have three more camped out within a hundred yards, want me to look for the Suburban and the long guns?"

"Look hard. We've got them well concealed." She didn't mention the one in the building he hadn't spotted.

"I bet you do, Agent Price," O'Day agreed, catching the clue and looking around some more. There were two disguised TV cameras that must have gone in recently. That also explained the faint smell of paint, which in turn explained the lack of little hand-prints on the walls. The building was

probably wired like a pinball machine. “I must admit, you guys are pretty smooth. Good,” he concluded.

“Anything new on the crash?”

Pat shook his head. “Not really. We went over some additional interviews at WFO today. The only inconsistencies are too minor to count for much of anything. The Mounties are doing a hell of a job for us, by the way. So are the Japs. I think they’ve talked to everybody from Sato’s kindergarten teacher on up. They even turned two stewardesses he was playing with on the side. This one’s in the bag, Price.”

“Andrea,” she replied.

“Pat.” And they both smiled.

“What do you carry?”

“Smith 1076. Better than that 9mm mouse gun you guys pack.” This was delivered with a somewhat superior attitude. O’Day believed in making big holes, to date only in targets, but in people if necessary. The Secret Service had its own weapons policy, and in that area he was sure the Bureau had better ideas. She didn’t bite.

“Do us a favor? Next time you come in, show your ID to the agent out front. Might not always be the same one.” She didn’t even ask him to leave it in his truck. Damn, there was professional courtesy.

“So, how’s he doing?”

“SWORDSMAN?”

“Dan—Director Murray—thinks the world of him. They go back a ways. So do Dan and I.”

“Tough job, but you know—Murray’s right. I’ve met worse men. He’s smarter than he lets on, too.”

“The times I’ve been around him, he listens well.”

“Better than that, he asks questions.” They both turned when a kid yelled, swept the room at the same time and in the same way, then turned back to the two little girls, who were sharing crayons for their respective works of art. “Yours and ours seem to get along.”

Ours, Pat thought. That said it all. The big old bruiser at the door, Russell, she’d said. He’d be the chief of the sub-detail, and sure as hell that was one experienced agent. They’d have selected younger ones, both women, for inside work, the better to blend in. They’d be good, but not as good as he was. *Ours* was the key word, though. Like lions around their cubs, or just one cub in this case. O’Day wondered how he’d handle this job. It would be boring, just standing post like that, but you couldn’t allow yourself to get bored. That would be a fight. He’d done his share of “discreet surveillance” assignments, quite a feat for one of his size, but this would be far worse. Even so, a cop’s eye saw the difference between them and the other preschool teachers in the room.

“Andrea, looks to me like your people know their job. Why so many?”

“I know we have this one overmanned.” Price tilted her head. “We’re still figuring this one out. Hey, we took a big hit on the Hill, y’know? Ain’t gonna be any more, not on my watch, not while I run the Detail, and if the press makes noise about it, fuck ’em.” She even talked like a real cop.

“Ma’am, that’s just fine with me. Well, with your permission, I have to go

home and make cheese and macaronis." He looked down. Megan was about finished with her masterpiece. The two little girls were difficult to tell apart, at least for the casual observer. That was distantly worrisome, but that was also the reason the Service was here.

"Where do you practice?" He didn't have to say practice *what*.

"There's a range in the old Post Office building, convenient to the White House. Every week," she told him. "There's not an agent here who's short of 'expert,' and I'll put Don up against anybody in the world."

"Really." O'Day's eyes sparkled. "One day we'll have to see."

"Your place or mine?" Price asked, with a twinkle of her own.

"MR. PRESIDENT, Mr. Golovko on three." That was the direct line. Sergey Nikolayevich was showing off again.

Jack pushed the button. "Yes, Sergey?"

"Iran."

"I know," the President said.

"How much?" the Russian asked, his bags already packed to go home.

"We'll know in ten days or so for sure."

"Agreed. I offer cooperation."

This was getting to be habit forming, Jack thought, but it was always something to think over first. "I will discuss that with Ed Foley. When will you be back home?"

"Tomorrow."

"Call me then." Amazing that he could speak so efficiently with a former enemy. He'd have to get Congress trained that way, the President thought with a smile. Ryan stood from his desk and headed into the secretaries' room. "How about some munchies before my next appointment—"

"Hello, Mr. President," Price said. "Have a minute?"

Ryan waved her in while his number-two secretary called the mess. "Yes?"

"Just wanted to tell you, I looked over the security arrangements for your children. It's pretty tight." If this was supposed to please POTUS, he didn't show it, Andrea thought. But that was understandable. *Hey, we have enough bodyguards on your children.* What a world it was. Two minutes later, she was talking with Raman, who was ready to head off duty, having arrived in the White House at 5:00 A.M. There was, as usual, nothing to report. It had been a quiet day in the House.

The younger agent walked out to his car and drove off the compound, first showing his pass to the gate guards and waiting for the fortified gate to open —a nine-inchsquare post held the leaves in place, and looked strong enough to stop a dump truck. From there he made his way through the concrete barricades on Pennsylvania Avenue—which until fairly recently had been a public street. He turned west and headed toward Georgetown, where he had a loft apartment, but this time he didn't go all the way home. Instead he turned onto Wisconsin Avenue, then right again to park.

It was vaguely amusing that the man should be a rug merchant. So many Americans thought that Iranians became either terrorists, rug merchants, or impolite physicians. This one had left Persia—but most Americans didn't

connect Persian rugs with Iran, as though they were two distinct nations—more than fifteen years before. On his wall was a photograph of his son who, he told those who asked, had been killed in the Iran-Iraq war. That was quite true. He also told those who expressed interest that he hated the government of his former country. That was not true. He was a sleeper agent. He'd never had a single contact with anyone even connected at third hand with Tehran. Maybe he'd been checked out. More likely he had not. He belonged to no association, didn't march, speak out, or otherwise do anything but conduct a prosperous business—like Raman, he didn't even attend a mosque. He had, in fact, never met Raman, and so when the man walked in the front door, his interest only concerned which of his wide selection of handmade rugs the man might want. Instead, after determining that there was no one else in the shop at the moment, his visitor went directly to the counter.

"The picture on the wall. He looks like you. Your son?"

"Yes," the man replied with a sadness which had never left him, promises of Paradise or not. "He was killed in the war. "

"Many lost sons in that conflict. Was he a religious boy?"

"Does it matter now?" the merchant asked, blinking hard.

"It always matters," Raman said, in a voice that was totally casual.

With that, both men went over to the nearer of two rug piles. The dealer flipped a few corners.

"I am in position. I require instructions on timing." Raman didn't have a code name, and the code phrase he'd just exchanged was only known to three men. The dealer didn't know anything beyond that, except to repeat the nine words he'd just heard to someone else, then wait for a reply, and pass that along.

"Would you mind filling out a card for my client list?"

That Raman did, putting down the name and address of a real person. He'd picked the name in the phone book—actually a crisscross directory right in the White House, which had made it easy to select a number that was one digit off his own. A tick mark over the sixth digit told the dealer where to add 1 to 3 to get 4 and so complete the call. It was excellent tradecraft, taught to his Savak instructor by an Israeli more than two decades earlier and not forgotten, just as neither man from the holy city of Qom had forgotten much of anything.

22

TIME ZONES

THE SIZE OF THE EARTH and the location of the trouble spots made for great inconvenience. America was going to sleep when other parts of the world were just waking up to a new day, a situation made even more difficult by the fact that the people eight or nine hours ahead were also the ones making decisions to which the rest of the world had to react. Added to that was the fact that America's vaunted CIA had little in the way of agents or officers to predict what was happening. That left to STORM TRACK and PALM BOWL the duty of reporting mainly what the local press and TV were saying. And so while the U.S. President slept, people struggled to collect and analyze information which, when he saw it, would be late by a working day, and the analysis of which might or might not be accurate. Even then, the best of the spooks in Washington were in the main too senior to be stuck with night duty they had families, after all—and so they also had to be brought up to speed before they could make their own pronouncements, which involved discussion and debate, further delaying presentation of vital national-security information. In military terms it was called "having the initiative"—making the first move, physical, political, or psychological. How much the better if the other side in the race started off a third of a day behind.

Things were slightly better in Moscow, which was only an hour off Tehran time, and in the same time zone with Baghdad, but here for once the RVS, successor to the KGB, was in the same unhappy position as CIA, with nearly all of its networks wiped out in both countries. But for Moscow the problems were also somewhat closer to home, as Sergey Golovko would find out when his aircraft landed at Sheremetyevo.

The largest problem at the moment would be reconciliation. Morning TV in Iraq announced that the new government in Baghdad had informed the United Nations that all international inspection teams were to be given full freedom to visit any facility in the country, entirely without interference—in fact, Iraq requested that the inspections be carried out as rapidly as possible—that full cooperation with any requests would be instantly provided; that the new Baghdad government was desirous of removing any obstacle to full restoration of their country's international trade. For the moment, the neighboring country of Iran, the announcement said, would begin trucking in foodstuffs in accordance with Islamic ancient guidelines on charity for those in need; this in anticipation of the former nation's willingness to reenter the community of nations. Video copied at PALM BOWL from Basra TV showed the first convoy of trucks carrying wheat down the twisting Shahabad Highway and crossing into Iraqi territory at the foot of the mountains which separated the two

countries. Further pictures showed Iraqi border guards removing their obstacles and waving the trucks through, while their Iranian counterparts stood peacefully aside on their side of the border, no weapons in evidence.

At Langley, people ran calculations on the number of trucks, the tonnage of their cargo, and the number of loaves of bread which would result. They concluded that shiploads of wheat would have to be delivered to make more than a symbolic difference. But symbols *were* important, and the ships were even now being loaded, a set of satellite overheads determined. United Nations officials in Geneva, only three hours behind the time, received the Baghdad requests with pleasure and sent immediate orders to their inspection teams, which found Mercedes automobiles waiting for them, to be escorted to the first entries on their inspection lists by wailing police cars. Here they also found TV crews to follow them around, and friendly installation staffs, who professed delight at their newfound ability to tell all they knew and to offer suggestions on how to dismantle, first, a chemical-weapons facility disguised as an insecticide plant. Finally, *Iran* requested a special meeting of the Security Council to consider the lifting of the remaining trade sanctions, something as certain as the rising of the sun, even late, over the American East Coast. Within two weeks, the average Iraqi's diet would increase by at least five hundred calories. The psychological impact wasn't difficult to figure, and the lead country in restoring normality to the oil-rich but isolated nation was its former enemy, Iran—as always, citing religion as the motivating factor in offering aid.

"Tomorrow we will see pictures of bread being distributed for free from mosques," Major Sabah predicted. He could have added the passages from the Koran which would accompany the event, but his American colleagues were not Islamic scholars and would not have grasped the irony terribly well.

"Your estimate, sir?" the senior American officer asked.

"The two countries will unite," Sabah replied soberly. "And soon."

There was no particular need to ask why the surviving Iraqi weapons plants were being exposed. Iran had all it needed.

THERE IS NO such thing as magic. That was merely the word people used to explain something so cleverly done that there was no ready explanation for it, and the simplest technique employed by its practitioners was to distract the audience with one moving and obvious hand (usually in a white glove) while the other was doing something else. So it was with nations as well. While the trucks rolled, and the ships were loaded, and the diplomats were summoned, and America was waking up to figure out what was going on, it was, after all, evening in Tehran.

Badrayn's contacts were as useful as ever, and what he could not do, Daryaei could. The civilian-marked business jet lifted off from Mehrabad and turned east, heading first over Afghanistan, then Pakistan, in a two-hour flight that ended at the obscure city of Rutog near the Pakistani-Indian-Kashmiri border. The city was in the former country's Kunlun Mountains, and home to some of China's Muslim population. The border town had an air force base with some locally manufactured MiG fighters, and a single landing strip, all

separate from the city's small regional airport. The location was ideal for everyone's purpose, as it was a bare 600 miles from New Delhi, though perversely the longest flight came from Beijing, nearly two thousand miles away, even though the real estate was Chinese-owned. The three aircraft landed a few minutes apart, soon after local sunset, taxied to the far end of the ramp, and parked. Military vehicles took their occupants to the ready room for the local MiG contingent. The Ayatollah Mahmoud Haji Daryaei was accustomed to cleaner accommodations and, worse, he could smell the odor of cooked pork, always a part of the Chinese diet but quite nauseating to him. This he put aside. He wasn't the first of the faithful who'd had to treat with pagans and unbelievers.

The Indian Prime Minister was cordial. She'd met Daryaei before at a regional trade conference and found him withdrawn and misanthropic. That, she saw, had not changed very much.

Last to arrive was Zhang Han San, whom the Indian had met as well. He was a rotund, seemingly jolly man until one watched his eyes closely. Even his jokes were told with an aim to learn something of his companions. Of the three, he was the only one whose job was not really known to the others. It was clear, however, that he spoke with authority, and since his country was the most powerful of the three, it was not regarded as an insult that a mere minister-without-portfolio was treating with chiefs of state. The meeting was conducted in English, except for Zhang's dismissal of the general officer who'd handled the greetings.

"Please forgive me for not being here when you arrived. The . . . irregularity in protocol is sincerely regretted." Tea was served, along with some light snacks. There hadn't been time to prepare a proper meal, either.

"Not at all," Daryaei responded. "Speed makes for inconvenience. For myself, I am most grateful for your willingness to meet under such special circumstances." He turned. "And to you, Madam Prime Minister, for joining us. God's blessing on this meeting," he concluded.

"My congratulations on developments in Iraq," Zhang said, wondering if the agenda was now entirely in Daryaei's hands, so skillfully had he posed the fact that he'd convened the assembly. "It must be very satisfying after so many years of discord between your two nations."

Yes, India thought, sipping her tea. *So clever of you to murder the man in such a timely fashion.* "So how may we be of service?" she asked, thus giving Daryaei and Iran the floor, to the impassive annoyance of China.

"You've met this Ryan recently. I am interested in your impressions."

"A small man in a large job," she replied at once. "The speech he gave at the funeral, for example. It would have been better suited to a private family ceremony. For a President, bigger things are expected. At the reception later, he seemed nervous and uneasy, and his wife is arrogant—a physician, you see. They often are."

"I found him the same when we met, some years ago," Daryaei agreed.

"And yet he controls a great country," Zhang observed.

"Does he?" Iran asked. "Is America still great? For where comes the greatness of a nation, except in the strengths of its leaders?" And that, the other two knew at once, was the agenda.

"JESUS," RYAN WHISPERED to himself, "this is a lonely place." The thought kept returning to him, all the more so when alone in this office with its curving walls and molded three-inch doors. He was using his reading glasses all the time now—Cathy's recommendation—but that merely slowed down the headaches. It wasn't as though he were a stranger to reading. Every job he'd held in the past fifteen years had required it, but the continual headaches were something new. Maybe he should talk to Cathy or another doc about it? No. Ryan shook his head. It was just job stress, and he just had to learn to deal with it.

Sure, it's just stress. And cancer is just a disease.

The current task was politics. He was reading over a position paper prepared by the political staffers across the street in the OEOB. It was a source of amusement, if not consolation, that they didn't know what to advise him. Ryan had never belonged to a political party. He'd always registered himself as an independent, and that had managed to keep him from getting solicitation letters from the organized parties, though he and Cathy had always ticked the box on their tax returns to contribute their one dollar to the government slush fund. But the President was not only supposed to be a member of a party—but also the *leader* of that party. The parties were even more thoroughly decapitated than the three branches of government were. Each of them still had a chairman, neither of whom knew what to do at the moment. For a few days, it had been assumed that Ryan was a member of the same party as Roger Durling, and the truth had only been discovered by the press a few days before, to the collective *oh, shit!* of the Washington establishment. For the ideological mavens of the federal city, it was rather like asking what 2 + 2 equaled, and finding out that the answer was, "Chartreuse." His position paper was predictably chaotic, the product of four or so professional political analysts, and you could tell who had written the different paragraphs, which resolved into a multi-path tug of war. Even his intelligence staff did better than this, Jack told himself, tossing the paper into the out basket and wishing, again, for a cigarette. That was stress talking, too, he knew.

But he still had to go out to the *hustings,* a word whose meaning he'd never learned, and *campaign* for people, or at least give speeches. Or something. The position paper's guidance hadn't exactly been clear on that. Having already shot himself in the foot on the issue of abortion—higher up and more to the centerline, Arnie van Damm had remarked acidly the previous day, to reinforce his earlier lesson—now Ryan would have to make his political stance clear on a multitude of issues: affirmative action at one end of the alphabet, and welfare at the other, with taxes, the environment, and God only knew what else in between. Once he'd decided where he stood on such things, Callie Weston would write a series of speeches for him to deliver from Seattle to Miami and God only knew where else in between. Hawaii and Alaska were left out because they were small states in terms of political importance, and poles apart ideologically, anyway. They would only confuse matters, or so the position paper told him.

"Why can't I just stay here and work, Arnie?" Ryan asked his arriving chief of staff.

"Because out there is work, Mr. President." Van Damm took his seat to commence the latest class in Presidency 101. "Because, as you put it, 'It's a leadership function'—did I get that right?" Arnie asked with a sardonic growl. "And leading means getting out with the troops, or, in this case, the citizens. Are we clear on that, Mr. President?"

"Are you enjoying this?" Jack closed his eyes and rubbed them under the glasses. He hated the goddamned glasses, too.

"About as much as you are." Which was an altogether fair comment.

"Sorry."

"Most people who come here genuinely like escaping from this museum and meeting real people. Of course, it makes people like Andrea nervous. They'd probably agree with keeping you here all the time. But it already feels like a prison, doesn't it?" Arnie asked.

"Only when I'm awake."

"So get out. Meet people. Tell them what you think, tell them what you want. Hell, they might even listen. They might even tell you what *they* think, and maybe *you* will learn something from it. In any case, you can't *be* President and not do it."

Jack lifted the position paper he'd just finished. "Did you read this thing?"

Arnie nodded. "Yep."

"It's confusing garbage," Ryan said, quite surprised.

"It's a political document. Since when is politics consistent or sensible?" He paused. "The people I've worked with for the last twenty years got this sort of thing with their mother's milk—well, they were probably all bottle babies."

"What?"

"Ask Cathy. It's one of those behavioral theories, that New Age stuff that's supposed to explain everything about everything to everybody everywhere. Politicians are all bottle babies. Mommy never nursed them, and they never bonded properly, felt rejected and all that, and so as compensation they go out and make speeches and tell people in different places the different things they want to hear so that they can get the love and devotion from strangers that their mothers denied them—not to mention the ones like Kealty, who're getting laid all the time. Properly nurtured infants, on the other hand, grow up to become—oh, doctors, I suppose, or maybe rabbis "

"What the *hell!*" the President nearly shouted. His chief of staff just grinned.

"Had you going for a second, didn't I? You know," van Damm went on, "I figured out what we really missed when we set this country up."

"Okay, I'll bite," Jack said, eyes still closed, and finding the humor in the moment. Damn, but Arnie knew how to run a classroom.

"A court jester, make it a Cabinet post. You know, a dwarf—excuse me, a male person with an unusually large degree of vertical challenge—dressed in multicolored tights and the funny hat with bells on it. Give him a little stool in the corner—'course, there isn't a corner here, but what the hell—and every fifteen minutes or so, he's supposed to jump up on your desk and shake his rattle in your face just to remind you that you have to take a leak every so often, just like the rest of us. Do you get it now, Jack?"

"No," the President admitted.

"You dumbass! This job can be *fun!* Getting out and seeing your citizens is *fun.* Learning what they want is important, but there's also an exhilaration to it. They *want* to love you, Jack. They *want* to support you. They *want* to know what you think. They most of all *want* to know that you're one of them—and you know what? You're the first President in one hell of a long time who really *is!* So get the hell off the bench, tell the air scouts to fire up the Big Blue Bird, and play the damned game." He didn't have to add that the schedule was already set sufficiently in stone that he couldn't back out.

"Not everybody will like what I say and believe, Arnie, and I'll be damned if I'm going to lie to people just to kiss ass or get votes or whatever."

"You expect everybody to love you?" van Damm asked, sardonic again. "Most Presidents will settle for fifty-one percent. Quite a few have had to settle for less. I tore your head off over your abortion statement—why? Because your statement was confused."

"No, it wasn't, I—"

"You going to listen to your teacher or not?"

"Go ahead," the President said.

"Start off, about forty percent of the people vote Democrat. About forty percent vote Republican. Of those eighty percent, most wouldn't change their votes if Adolf Hitler was running against Abe Lincoln—or against FDR, just to cover both sides."

"But why—"

Exasperation: "Why is the sky blue, Jack? It just is, okay? Even if you can explain why, and I suppose there is a reason some astronomer can explain, the sky is blue, and so let's just accept the fact, okay? That leaves twenty percent of the people who swing back one way or another. Maybe they're the true independents, like you. That twenty percent controls the destiny of the country, and if you want things to happen your way, those are the people you have to reach. Now, here's the funny part. Those twenty percent don't especially care what you think." This conclusion was delivered with a wry smile.

"Wait a minute—"

Arnie held up his hand. "You keep interrupting teacher. The hard eighty percent that votes the party line doesn't care much about character. They vote party because they believe in the philosophy of the party—or because Mom and Dad always voted that way; the reason doesn't really matter. It happens. It's a fact. Deal with it. Now, back to the twenty percent that *does* matter. They care less about what you believe than they do in *you.* There is your advantage, Mr. President. Politically speaking, you have as much place in this office as a three-year-old has in a gun shop, but you have character up the ass. That's what we play on."

Ryan frowned at the "play on" part, but this time kept his peace. He nodded for the chief of staff to go on.

"Just tell the people what you believe. Make it simple. Good ideas are expressed simply and efficiently. Make it consistent. That twenty percent wants to believe that you really do believe in what you say. Jack, do you respect a man who says what he believes, even if you disagree with it?"

"Of course, that's what—"

"A man is supposed to do," Arnie said, completing the thought. "So does the twenty percent. They will respect you and support you even though in some cases they disagree with you. Why? Because they will know that you are a man of your word. And they want the occupant of this office to be a man of character and integrity. Because if things go to shit, you can depend on somebody like that to at least try to do the right thing."

"Oh."

"The rest is packaging. And don't disparage packaging and handling, okay? There's nothing wrong about being intelligent about how you get your ideas across. In the book you wrote about Halsey, *Fighting Sailor*, you chose your words carefully to present your ideas, right?" The President nodded. "So it is with these ideas—hell, these ideas are even more important, and so you have to package them with proportionately greater skill, don't you?" The lesson plan was moving along nicely, the chief of staff thought.

"Arnie, how many of those ideas will you agree with?"

"Not all of them. I think you're wrong on abortion—a woman should have the right to choose. I bet you and I disagree on affirmative action and a passel of other things, but you know, Mr. President, I've never doubted your integrity for one single minute. I can't tell you what to believe, but you know how to listen. I love this country, Jack. My family escaped from Holland, crossed the English Channel in a boat when I was three years old. I can still remember puking my guts out."

"You're Jewish?" Jack asked in surprise. He had no idea what church, if any, Arnie attended.

"No, my father was in the Resistance and got himself fingered by a German plant. We skipped just in time, or he would have been shot, and Mom and I would have ended up in the same camp as Anne Frank. Didn't do the rest of the family much good, though. His name was Willem, and after the war ended, he decided that we'd come over here, and I grew up hearing about the old country, and how this place was different. It is different. I became what I am to protect the system. What makes America different? The Constitution, I guess. People change, governments change, ideologies change, but the Constitution stays pretty much the same. You and Pat Martin both swore an oath. So did I," van Damm went on. "Except mine was made to me, and my mom and my dad. I don't have to agree with you on all the issues, Jack. I know you'll try to do the right thing. My job, then, is to protect you so that you can. That means you have to listen, and that you'll sometimes have to do things you don't like, but this job you have, Mr. President, has its own rules. You have to follow them," the chief of staff concluded quietly.

"How have I been doing, Arnie?" Ryan asked, absorbing the largest lesson of the week.

"Not bad, but you have to do better. Kealty is still an annoyance rather than a real threat to us. Getting out and looking presidential will further marginalize him. Now, something else. As soon as you go out, go off campus, people are going to start asking you about reelection. So what will you say?"

Ryan shook his head emphatically. "I do not want this job, Arnie. Let somebody else take over when—"

"In that case, you're screwed. Nobody will take you seriously. You will not get the people in Congress you want. You will be crippled and unable to accomplish the things you're thinking about. You will become politically ineffective. America cannot afford that, Mr. President. Foreign governments—those are run by politicians, remember—will not take you seriously, and *that* has national security implications, both immediate and long-term. So what do you say when reporters ask you that question?"

The President felt like a student holding up his hand in third grade. "I haven't decided yet?"

"Correct. You are carrying out your job of reconstituting the government, and that is a question which you will address in due course. I will quietly leak the fact that you're thinking about staying on, that you feel your first duty is to the country, and when reporters ask you about *that*, you will simply repeat your original position. That sends out a message to foreign governments that they will understand and take seriously, and the American people will also understand and respect it. As a practical matter, the presidential primaries for both parties will not select the marginal candidates who didn't get wiped out on the Hill. They'll vote for uncommitted delegations. We might even want you to speak on that issue. I'll talk that one over with Callie." He didn't add that the media would just *love* that prospect. Covering two brokered, wide-open political conventions was a dream such as few of them had ever dared to consider. Arnie was keeping it as simple as he could. No matter what positions Ryan took, as soon as he took them, no less than forty percent of the people would object to it, and probably more. The funny thing about the twenty percent he kept harping on was that they covered the whole political spectrum—like himself, less concerned with ideology than with character. Some of them would object vociferously, and in that they would be indistinguishable from whichever forty percent grouping shared that particular ideological stance, though at the end of the day they would vote the man. They always did, honest people that they were, placing country before prejudice, but joining in a process that most often honestly selected people who lacked the honor of their electors. Ryan didn't yet grasp the opportunity he held in his hands, and it was probably better that he didn't, for in thinking about it too much—perhaps at all—he would try to control the spin, which he'd never learn to do well. Even honorable men could make mistakes, and Ryan was no different from the rest. That was why people like Arnold van Damm existed, to teach and to guide from the inside and the outside of the system at the same time. He looked at his President, noting the confusion that came along with new thoughts. He was trying to make sense of it, and he'd probably succeed, because he was a good listener and a particularly adept processor of information. He wouldn't see it through to the natural conclusion, however. Only Arnie and maybe Callie Weston were able to look that far into the future. In the past weeks, van Damm had decided that Ryan had the makings of a real President. It would be his job, the chief of staff decided, to make sure that Jack stayed here.

"WE CANNOT DO that," the Indian Prime Minister protested, with the

admission: “We only recently had a lesson from the American navy.”

“It was a harsh one,” Zhang agreed. “But it did no permanent harm. I believe the damage to your ships will be made good in two more weeks.” That statement turned India’s head around. She’d learned that fact herself only a few days earlier. The repairs were using up a sizable portion of the Indian navy’s annual operating budget, which had been her principal concern. It wasn’t every day that a foreign country, particularly one which had once been a shooting enemy, revealed its penetration of another’s government.

“America is a facade, a giant with a sick heart and a damaged brain,” Daryaei said. “You told us yourself, Prime Minister. President Ryan is a small man in a large job. If we make the job larger and harder, then America will lose its ability to interfere with us, for a long enough time that we can achieve our goals. The American government is paralyzed, and will remain so for some weeks to come. All we need do is to increase the degree of paralysis.”

“And how might one do that?” India asked.

“Through the simple means of stretching their commitments while at the same time disturbing their internal stability. On the one hand, mere demonstrations will suffice on your part. On the other, that is my concern. It is better, I think, that you have no knowledge of it.”

Had he been able to do so, Zhang would not even have breathed at the moment, the better to control his feelings. It wasn’t every day that he met someone more ruthless than himself, and, no, he didn’t want to know what Daryaei had in mind. Better for another country to commit an act of war. “Do go on,” he said, reaching inside his jacket for a cigarette.

“Each of us represents a country with great abilities and greater needs. China and India have large populations and need both space and resources. I will soon have resources, and the capital that comes with them, and also the ability to control how both are distributed. The United Islamic Republic will become a great power, as you are already great powers. The West has dominated the East for too long.” Daryaei looked directly at Zhang. “To our north is a rotting corpse. Many millions of the Faithful are there and require liberation. There are also resources and space which your country needs. These I offer to you, if you will in turn offer the lands of the Faithful to me.” Then he looked at the Indian Prime Minister. “To your south lies an empty continent with the space and resources you need. For your cooperation, I think the United Islamic Republic and the People’s Republic are willing to offer their protection. From each of you I ask only quiet cooperation without direct risk.”

India remarked to herself that she’d heard that one before, but her needs had not changed from before, either. China immediately came up with a means of providing a distraction that offered little in the way of danger. It had happened before. Iran—what *was* this United Islamic Republic . . . oh, of course, Zhang thought. Of course. The UIR would take all the real risks, though it would seem that those were unusually well calculated. He would do his own check of the correlation of forces on his return to Beijing.

“I ask no commitments at this point, obviously. You will need to assure yourselves that I am serious in my abilities and intentions. I do ask that you give full consideration to my proposed—informal—alliance.”

“Pakistan,” the Prime Minister said, foolishly tipping her hand, Zhang

thought.

"Islamabad has been an American puppet for too long, and cannot be trusted," Daryaei replied at once, having thought that one through already, though he hadn't really expected India to jump so readily. This woman hated America as much as he did. Well, the "lesson" as she'd called it must have injured her pride even more deeply than his diplomats had told him. How typical for a woman to value her pride so highly. And how weak. Excellent. He looked over at Zhang.

"Our arrangements with Pakistan are commercial only, and as such are subject to modification," China observed, equally delighted at India's weakness. It was no one's fault but her own. She'd committed forces to the field—well, the sea—in support of Japan's inefficient attack on America . . . while China had done nothing and risked nothing, and emerged from the "war" unhurt and uninvolved. Even Zhang's most cautious superiors had not objected to his play, failed though it was. And now, again, someone else would take the risks, and India would move in pacifist support, and China would have to do nothing but repeat an earlier policy that seemingly had nothing to do with this new UIR, but was rather a test of a new American President, and that sort of thing happened all the time anyway. Besides, Taiwan was still an annoyance. It was so curious. Iran, motivated by religion of all things. India, motivated by greed and anger. China, on the other hand, thought for the long term, dispassionately, seeking what really mattered, but with circumspection, as always. Iran's goal was self-evident, and if Daryaei was willing to risk war for it, then, why not watch in safety, and hope for his success? But he wouldn't commit his country now. Why appear too eager? India *was* eager, enough so to overlook the obvious: If Daryaei was successful, then Pakistan would make its peace with the new UIR, perhaps even join it, and then India would be isolated and vulnerable. Well, it was dangerous to be a vassal, and all the more so if you had aspirations to graduate to the next level—but without the wherewithal to make it happen. One had to be careful choosing allies. Gratitude among nations was a hothouse flower, easily wilted by exposure to the real world.

The Prime Minister nodded in acknowledgment of her victory over Pakistan, and said no more.

"In that case, my friends, I thank you for graciously agreeing to meet with me, and with your permission, I will take my leave." The three stood. Handshakes were exchanged, and they headed to the door. Minutes after that, Daryaei's aircraft rotated off the bumpy fighter strip. The mullah looked at the coffeepot and decided against it. He wanted a few hours of sleep before morning prayers. But first—

"Your predictions were entirely correct."

"The Russians called these things 'objective conditions.' They are and remain unbelievers, but their formulas for analysis of problems have a certain precision to them," Badrayn explained. "That is why I have learned to assemble information so carefully."

"So I have seen. Your next task will be to sketch in some operations." With that, Daryaei pushed back his seat and closed his eyes, wondering if he would dream again of dead lions.

MUCH AS HE wished for a return to clinical medicine, Pierre Alexandre didn't especially like it, at least this matter of treating people who would not survive. The former Army officer in him figured that defending Bataan had been like this. Doing all you could, firing off your best rounds, but knowing that relief would never come. At the moment, it was three AIDS patients, all homosexual men, all in their thirties, and all with less than a year to live. Alexandre was a fairly religious man, and he didn't approve of the gay lifestyle, but nobody deserved to die like this. And even if they did, he was a physician, not God sitting in judgment. Damn, he thought, walking off the elevator and speaking his patient notes into a mini—tape recorder.

It's part of a doctor's job to compartmentalize his life. The three patients on his unit would still be there tomorrow, and none of them would require emergency attention that night. Putting their problems aside was not cruel. It was just business, and their lives, were they to have any hope at all, would depend on his ability to turn away from their stricken bodies and back to researching the microsized organisms that were attacking them. He handed the tape cassette to his secretary, who'd type up the notes.

"Dr. Lorenz down in Atlanta returned your call returning his call returning your original call," she told him as he passed. As soon as he sat down, he dialed the direct line from memory.

"Yes?"

"Gus? Alex here at Hopkins. Tag," he chuckled, "you're it." He heard a good laugh at the other end of the line. Phone tag could be the biggest pain in the ass.

"How's the fishing, Colonel?"

"Would you believe I haven't had a chance yet? Ralph's working me pretty hard."

"What did you want from me—you did call first, didn't you?" Lorenz wasn't sure anymore, another sign of a man working too hard.

"Yeah, I did, Gus. Ralph tells me you're starting a new look at the Ebola structure—from that mini-break in Zaire, right?"

"Well, I would be, except somebody stole my monkeys," the director of CDC reported sourly. "The replacement shipment is due in here in a day or two, so they tell me."

"You have a break-in?" Alexandre asked. One of the troublesome developments for labs that had experimental animals was that animal-rights fanatics occasionally tried to bust in and "liberate" the animals. Someday, if everyone wasn't careful, some screwball would walk out with a monkey under his arm and discover it had Lassa fever—or worse. How the hell were physicians supposed to study the goddamned bug without animals—and who'd ever said that a monkey was more important than a human being? The answer to that was simple: in America there were people who believed in damned near anything, and there was a constitutional right to be an ass. Because of that, CDC, Hopkins, and other research labs had armed guards, protecting monkey cages. And even *rat* cages, which really made Alex roll his eyes to the ceiling.

"No, they were highjacked in Africa. Somebody else is playing with them now. Anyway, so it kicks me back a week. What the hell. I've been looking at this little bastard for fifteen years."

"How fresh is the sample?"

"It's off the Index Patient. Positive identification, Ebola Zaire, the Mayinga strain. We have another sample from the only other patient. That one disappeared—"

"What?" Alexandre asked in immediate alarm.

"Lost at sea in a plane crash. They were evidently flying her to Paris to see Rousseau. No further cases, Alex. We dodged the bullet this time for a change," Lorenz assured his younger colleague.

Better, Alexandre thought, *to crunch in a plane crash than bleed out from that little fucker.* He still thought like a soldier, profanity and all. "Okay."

"So, why did you call?"

"Polynomials," Lorenz heard.

"What do you mean?" the doctor asked in Atlanta.

"When you map this one out, let's think about doing a mathematical analysis of the structure."

"I've been playing with that idea for a while. Right now, though, I want to examine the reproduction cycle and—"

"Exactly, Gus, the mathematical nature of the interaction. I was talking to a colleague up here—eye cutter, you believe? She said something interesting. If the amino acids have a quantifiable mathematical value, and they should, then *how* they interact with other codon strings may tell us something." Alexandre paused and heard a match striking. Gus was smoking his pipe in the office again.

"Keep going."

"Still reaching for this one, Gus. What if it's like you've been thinking, it's all an equation? The trick is cracking it, right? How do we do that? Okay, Ralph told me about your time-cycle study. I think you're onto something. If we have the virus RNA mapped, and we have the host DNA mapped, then—"

"`! The interactions will tell us something about the values of the elements in the polynomial—"

"And that will tell us a lot about how the little fuck replicates, and just maybe—"

"How to attack it." A pause, and a loud puff came over the phone line. "Alex, that's pretty good."

"You're the best guy for the job, Gus, and you're setting up the experiment anyway."

"Something's missing, though."

"Always is."

"Let me think about that one for a day or so and get back to you. Good one, Alex."

"Thank you, sir." Professor Alexandre replaced the phone and figured he'd done his duty of the day for medical science. It wasn't much, and there *was* an element missing from the suggestion.

23

EXPERIMENTS

IT TOOK SEVERAL DAYS TO get everything in place. President Ryan had to meet with yet another class of new senators—some of the states were a little slow in getting things done, mainly because some of the governors established something akin to search committees to evaluate a list of candidates. That was a surprise to a lot of Washington insiders who'd expected the state executives to do things as they'd always been done to appoint replacements to the upper house just as soon as the bodies were cold—but it turned out that Ryan's speech had mattered a little bit. Eight governors had realized that this situation was unique, and had therefore acted in a different way, earning, on reflection, the praise of their local papers, if not the complete approval of the establishment press.

Jack's first political trip was an experimental one. He rose early, kissed his wife and kids on the way out the door, and boarded the helicopter on the South Lawn just before seven in the morning. Ten minutes later, he left the aircraft to trot up the stairs onto Air Force One, technically known to the Pentagon as a VC-25A, a 747 expensively modified to be the President's personal conveyance. He boarded just as the pilot, a very senior colonel, was making his airline-like preflight announcements. Looking aft, Ryan could see eighty or so reporters belting into their better-than-first-class leather seats—actually some *didn't* strap in, because Air Force One generally rode more smoothly than an ocean liner on calm seas—and when he turned to head forward, he heard, *"And this is a nonsmoking flight!"*

"Who said that?" the President asked.

"One of the TV pukes," Andrea replied. "He thinks it's his airplane."

"In a way, it is," Arnie pointed out. "Remember that."

"That's Tom Donner," Callie Weston added. "The NBC anchor. His personal feces are not odorific, and he uses more hair spray than I do. But part of it's glued on."

"This way, Mr. President." Andrea pointed forward. The President's cabin in Air Force One is in the extreme nose on the main deck, where there are regular, if very plush, seats, plus a pair of couches that fold out into beds for long trips. As the principal agent watched, her principal strapped in. Passengers could get away with breaking the rules—the USSS wasn't all that concerned with journalists—but not POTUS. When that was done, she waved to an Air Force crewman, who lifted a phone and told the pilot that he could go now. With that, the engines started up. Jack had mostly lost his fear of flying, but this was the part of the flight where he closed his eyes and thought (earlier in his life he'd whispered) a prayer for the collective safety of the

people aboard——in the belief that praying merely for yourself might appear selfish to God. About the time that was finished, the takeoff roll began, rather more quickly than was normal on a 747. Lightly loaded, it felt like an airplane instead of a train pulling out of a station.

"Okay," Arnie said, as the nose lifted off. The President studiously did not grip the armrests as he usually did. "This is going to be an easy one. Indianapolis, Oklahoma City, and back home for dinner. The crowds will be friendly, and about as reactionary as you are," he added with a twinkle. "So you don't really have anything to worry about."

Special Agent Price, sitting in the same compartment for the takeoff, hated it when anybody said that. Chief of Staff van Damm—CARPENTER to the Secret Service; Callie Weston was CALLIOPE—was one of the staffers who never quite appreciated the headaches the Service went through. He thought of danger as a political hazard, even after the 747 crash. Remarkable, she thought. A few feet aft, Agent Raman was in an aft-facing seat watching access forward, in case a reporter showed up with a gun instead of a pencil. There were six more agents aboard to keep an eye on everyone, even the uniformed crewmen, and a platoon of them standing by in each of the two destination cities, along with a huge collection of local cops. At Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City, the fuel truck was already under USSS guard, lest someone contaminate the JP to go into the presidential aircraft; it would remain so until well *after* the 747 returned to Andrews. A C-5B Galaxy transport was already in Indianapolis, having ferried the presidential automobiles there. Moving the President around was rather like transporting the Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus, except people generally didn't worry about people trying to assassinate the man on the flying trapeze.

Ryan, Agent Price saw, was going over his speech. That was one of his few normal acts. They were almost always nervous about speeches—generally not so much stage fright as concern for the content spin. The thought made Price smile. Ryan wasn't worried about the content, but *was* worried about blowing the delivery. Well, he'd learn, and his good fortune was that Callie Weston, administrative pain in the ass that she was, wrote one hell of a speech.

"Breakfast?" a steward asked now that the aircraft was leveled off. The President shook his head.

"Not hungry, thanks."

"Get him ham and eggs, toast, and decaf," van Damm ordered.

"Never try to give a speech on an empty stomach," Callie advised. "Trust me."

"And not too much real coffee. Caffeine can make you jumpy. When a President gives a speech," Arnie explained for this morning's lesson, "he's—Callic, help me out here?"

"Nothing dramatic for these two today. You're the smart neighbor coming over because the guy next door wants your advice on something he's been thinking about. Friendly. Reasonable. Quiet. 'Gee, Fred, I really think you might want to do it this way,' " Weston explained with raised eyebrows.

"Kindly family doctor telling a guy to go easy on the greasy food and maybe play an extra round of golf—exercise is supposed to be fun, that sort of thing," the chief of staff explained on. "You do it all the time in real life."

"Just do it this morning in front of four thousand people, right?" Ryan asked.

"And C-SPAN cameras, and it'll be on all the evening network news broadcasts—"

"CNN will be doing it live, too, 'cuz it's your first speech out in the country," Callie added. No sense lying to the man.

Jesus. Jack looked back down at the text of his speech. "You're right, Arnie. Better decaf." He looked up suddenly. "Any smokers aboard?"

It was the way he asked it that made the Air Force steward turn. "Want one, sir?"

The answer was somewhat shameful, but—"Yes."

She handed him a Virginia Slim and lit it with a warm smile. It wasn't every day one got a chance to provide so personal a service to the Commander-in-Chief. Ryan took a puff and looked up.

"If you tell my wife, Sergeant—"

"Our secret, sir." She disappeared aft to get breakfast, her day already made.

THE FLUID WAS surprisingly horrid in color, deep scarlet with a hint of brown. They'd monitored the process with small samples under an electron microscope. The monkey kidneys exposed to the infected blood were composed of discrete and highly specialized cells, and for whatever reason, Ebola loved those cells as a glutton loves his chocolate mousse. It had been both fascinating and horrifying to watch. The micron-sized virus strands touched the cells, penetrated them—and started to replicate in the warm, rich biosphere. It was like something from a science-fiction movie, but quite real. This virus, like all the others, was only equivocally alive. It could act only with help, and that help had to come from its host, which by providing the means for the virus to activate, also conspired at its own death. The Ebola strands contained only RNA, and for mitosis to take place, both RNA and DNA are required. The kidney cells had both, the virus strands sought them out, and when they were joined, the Ebola started to reproduce. To do that required energy, and that energy was supplied by the kidney cells, which were, of course, completely destroyed in the process. The multiplication process was a microcosm of the disease process in a human community. It started slowly, then accelerated geometrically—the faster it went, the faster it went: 2–4–16–256–65,536—until all of the nutrients were eaten up and only virus strands remained, then went dormant and awaited their next opportunity. People applied all manner of false images to disease. It would lie in wait for its chance; it would kill without mercy; it would seek out victims. All of that was anthropomorphic rubbish, Moudi and his colleague knew. It didn't think. It didn't do anything overly malevolent. All Ebola did was to eat and reproduce and go back to its dormant state. But as a computer is only a collection of electrical switches which can only distinguish between the numerals 1 and 0—but does so more rapidly and efficiently than its human users—so Ebola was supremely well adapted to reproduce so rapidly that the human body's immune system, ordinarily a ruthlessly effective defense mechanism, was simply overwhelmed, as though by an army of carnivorous

ants. In that lay Ebola's historic weakness. It was *too* efficient. It killed *too* fast. Its survival mechanism within the human host also tended to kill the host before it could pass the disease along. It was also super-adapted to a specific ecosystem. Ebola didn't survive long in the open, and only then in a jungle environment. For this reason, and since it could not survive in a human host without killing that host in ten days or less, it had also evolved slowly—without taking the next evolutionary step of becoming airborne.

Or so everyone thought. Perhaps "hoped" would be a better word, Moudi reflected. An Ebola variant that could be spread by aerosol would be catastrophically deadly. It was possible they had exactly that. This was the Mayinga strain, as repeated microscopy had established, and *that* strain was suspected to be capable of aerosol transmission, and that was what they had to prove.

Deep-freezing, using liquid nitrogen as the refrigerant, for example, killed most normal human cells. When they froze, the expansion of the water, which accounted for most of the cellular mass, burst the cell walls, leaving nothing behind but wreckage. Ebola, on the other hand, was too primitive for that to happen. Too much heat could kill it. Ultraviolet light could kill it. Micro-changes in the chemical environment could kill it. But give it a cold, dark place to sleep, and it was content to slumber in peace.

They worked in a glove box. It was a highly controlled and lethally contaminated environment bordered with clear lexan strong enough to stop a pistol bullet. On two sides holes were cut into the sturdy plastic, and riveted at each workstation was a pair of heavy rubber gloves. Moudi withdrew 10cc's of the virus-rich liquid and transferred it to a small container, which he sealed. The sluggishness of the process was less from physical danger than from the awkwardness of the gloves. When the container was sealed, he transferred it from one gloved hand to another, then off to the director, who performed a similar switch, finally moving it into a small airlock. When that door was closed, as indicated by a light which read off a pressure sensor, the small compartment was flooded with disinfectant spray—dilute phenol—and allowed to sit for three minutes, until it was certain that the air and the transfer container were safe to release. Even then no one would touch it with ungloved hands, and despite the safety of the glove box, both physicians also wore full protective gear. The director removed the container, cradling it in both hands for the three-meter walk to the worktable.

For experimental purposes, the aerosol can was of the type used for insect spray, the sort one can place on a floor, activate, and leave to fog a whole room. It had been fully disassembled, cleaned out three times with live steam, and put back together—the plastic parts had been a problem, but that had been figured out a few months earlier. It was a crude device. The production versions would be far more elegant. The only danger here was from the liquid nitrogen, a watery-appearing fluid which, if spilled on the gloves, would freeze them immediately and soon thereafter cause them to fragment like black crystal glass. The director stood aside as Moudi poured the cryogenic liquid around the pressure vessel. Only a few cc's were required for the purpose of the experiment. Next, the Ebola-rich liquid was injected into the stainless-steel inner container, and the top screwed in place. When the cap

was sealed, the new container was sprayed with disinfectant, then washed with sterile saline. The smaller transfer container went into a disposal bin for incineration.

"There," the director said. "We are ready."

Inside the spray can, the Ebola was already deep-frozen, but not for long. The nitrogen would boil off relatively rapidly, and the sample would thaw. In that time, the rest of the experiment would be set up. And in that time, the two physicians would remove their protective clothing and have dinner.

THE COLONEL DRIVING the airplane touched down with consummate skill. It was his first time flying this President, and he had something to prove. The rollout was routine, with the reverse-thrusters slowing the jumbo to auto-speed before the nose came around to the left. Out the windows, Ryan could see hundreds—no, he realized, *thousands*—of people. *All there to see me?* he wondered. *Damn*. In their hands, dangling over the low perimeter fence, were the red, white, and blue colors of the national flag, and when the aircraft finally stopped, those flags came up at one time, as though in a wave. The mobile stairs came to the door, which was opened by the steward—to call her a steward *ess* would have been incorrect—who'd given him a cigarette.

"Want another one?" she whispered.

Ryan grinned. "Maybe later. And thanks, Sarge."

"Break a leg, Mr. President—but not on the stairs, okay?" She got a chuckle as reward.

"All ready for the Boss," Price heard over her radio circuit from the leader of the advance team. With that, she nodded at President Ryan.

"Showtime, Mr. President."

Ryan took a deep breath and stood in the center of the door, looking out into the bright Midwestern sunlight.

The protocol was that he had to walk down first and alone. Barely had he stood in the opening when a cheer went up, and this from people who scarcely knew a thing about him. His coat buttoned, his hair combed down and sprayed into place despite his objections, Jack Ryan walked down the steps, feeling more like a fool than a President until he got to the bottom. There an Air Force chief master sergeant snapped a salute, which Ryan, so imprinted by his brief months in the Marine Corps, returned smartly—and another cheer went up. He looked around to see Secret Service and other Treasury agents deployed around, almost all of them looking outward. The first person to come close was the governor of the state.

"Welcome to Indiana, Mr. President!" He seized Ryan's hand and shook it vigorously. "We're honored to host your first official visit."

They'd laid out everything for this one. A company of the local National Guard was formed up. The band crashed out "Ruffles and Flourishes," immediately followed by "Hail to the Chief," and Ryan felt himself to be a singular fraud. With the governor to his left and half a step behind, Ryan followed the red—what else?—carpet. The assembled soldiers came to present arms, and their ancient regimental standard dipped, though not the Stars and Stripes, of course, which, an American athlete had once proclaimed, dips to no

earthly king or potentate (he'd been an Irish-American unwilling so to honor the King of England at the 1908 Olympiad). Jack moved his right hand over his heart as he passed, a gesture remembered from his youth, and looked at the assembled guardsmen. He was their commander-in-chief now, the President told himself. He could give orders sending them off to the field of battle, and he had to look at their faces. There they were, clean-shaven and young and proud, as he would have been twenty-odd years earlier. They were here for him. And he always had to be there for them. *Yeah,* Jack told himself. *Have to remember that.*

"May I introduce you to some local citizens, sir?" the governor asked, pointing to the fence. Ryan nodded and followed.

"Heads up, pressin' flesh," Andrea called over her radio microphone. For as many times as they'd seen it happen, the agents on presidential Detail detested this above all things. Price would be with POTUS at all times. Raman and three others hovered on both sides of him, their eyes scanning the crowd from behind dark sunglasses, looking for guns, for the wrong expression, for faces memorized from photographs, for anything out of the ordinary.

There were so many of them, Jack thought. None of them had voted for him, and until very recently few had even known his name. Yet they were here. Some, perhaps, state-government employees getting half a day off, but not the ones holding kids, not all of them, and the looks in their eyes stunned the President, who'd never in his life experienced anything even close to this. Hands extended frantically, and he shook all that he could, moving to his left down the line, trying to hear individual voices through the cacophony of screams.

"Welcome to Indiana!"—"How are ya!"—"MISTER PRESIDENT!"—"We trust you!"—"Good job so far!"—"We're with ya!"

Ryan tried to answer back, achieving little more than a repeated thank-you, his mouth mainly open in surprise at the overpowering warmth of the moment, and all directed at him. It was enough to make him overlook the pain in his hand, but finally he had to step away from the fence and wave, to yet another roar of love for the new President.

Damn. If they only knew what a fraud he was, Jack thought, what would they do then? *What the hell am I doing here?* his mind demanded, as he headed for the open door of the presidential limousine.

THERE WERE TEN of them, down in the basement of the building. All were men. Only one was a political prisoner, and his crime was apostasy. The rest were singularly undesirable people, four murderers, a rapist, two child molesters, and two thieves who were repeat offenders and, under the Koranic law of their nation, subject to removal of their right hands. They were in a single, climate-controlled room, each of them secured to the foot of the bed by leg cuffs. All were condemned to death, except the thieves who were only supposed to be mutilated, and knew it, and wondered why they were here with the rest. Why the others were still alive was a mystery to them, which none questioned but from which none took satisfaction, either. Their diet over the past few weeks had been particularly poor, enough to reduce their

physical energy and their level of alertness. One of their number stuck a finger in his mouth to feel his sore and bleeding gums. The finger came out when the door opened.

It was someone in a blue plastic suit, which none of them had seen before. The person—a man, though they could barely make out the face through the plastic mask—set a cylindrical container down on the concrete floor, took off the blue plastic cap, and pressed down on a button. Then he hastily withdrew. Scarcely had the door closed when there came a hiss from the container, and a steamlike fog sprayed up into the room.

One of their number screamed, thinking that it was a poison gas, seizing the thin bedsheet and clasping it over his face. The one closest to the spray was slower-witted and merely watched, and when the cloud came over him, he looked around at it while the others waited for him to die. When he didn't, they were more curious than fearful. After a few minutes, the incident passed into their limited history. The lights were turned off, and they went to sleep.

"Three days to find out," the director said, turning off the TV that fed from the cell. "The spray system appears to work well, proper dispersion. They had a problem with the delay device. On the production version, it has to be good for—what? Five minutes, I think."

Three days, Moudi thought. Seventy-two hours to see what evil they had wrought.

FOR ALL THE money and hype, for all the exquisite planning, Ryan was sitting on a simple folding metal chair, the sort to make a person's rump sore. In front of him was a wooden rail covered with red, white, and blue bunting. Under the bunting was sheet steel supposed to stop a bullet. The podium was similarly armored—steel *and* Kevlar in this case; Kevlar is both stronger and lighter—and would protect nearly all of his body below the shoulders. The university field house—a very large gymnasium, though not the one used for the school's basketball team, already eliminated in the NCAA tournament—was packed "to the rafters," reporters would probably say, that being the stock phrase for a building with all its seats occupied. Most of the audience were probably students, but it was hard to tell. Ryan was the target of numerous bright lights, and the flood of brilliance denied him the ability to see most of the crowd. They'd arrived via the back door, walking through a smelly locker room because the President took the fast way in and out. The motorcade had come down a highway for most of the way, but in the regular city streets that had occupied maybe a quarter of the distance, there had been people on the sidewalks, waving to him while their governor extolled the virtues of the city and the Hoosier State. Jack had thought to ask the origin of "Hoosier," but decided not to.

The governor was talking again now, succeeding three others. A student, followed by the university president, followed by the mayor of the local town. The President actually tried listening to the speeches, but while on one hand they all said mainly the same thing, on the other little of it was true. It was as though they were speaking of someone else, a theoretical President with generic virtues to deal with the misstated duties. Maybe it was just that the

local speechwriters dealt with local issues only, Jack decided. So much the better for them.

". . . my great honor to introduce the President of the United States." The governor turned and gestured. Ryan rose, approached the podium, shook the governor's hand. As he set his speech folder on the top of the podium, he nodded embarrassed appreciation at the crowd he could barely see. In the first few rows, right on the hardwood of the basketball court, were local big shots. In other times and circumstances, they'd be major contributors. In this case, Ryan didn't know. Maybe from both parties, even. Then he remembered that major contributors donated money to *both* parties anyway, to hedge their bets by guaranteeing themselves access to power no matter who was there. They were probably already trying to figure how to donate money to *his* campaign.

"Thank you, Governor, for that introduction." Ryan turned to gesture to the people on the dais with him, naming them from the list on the first page of his speech folder, good friends whom he'd never see again after this first time, whose faces were illuminated by the simple fact that he spoke their names in the correct order.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I've never been to Indiana before. This is my first visit to the Hoosier State, but after experiencing your welcome, I hope it won't be the last—"

It was as though someone had held up the APPLAUSE sign on a TV show. He'd just spoken the truth, followed by something that might or might not have been a lie, and while they had to know it, they didn't care a whit. And then Jack Ryan learned something important for the first time.

God, it's like a narcotic, Jack thought, understanding just then why people entered politics. No man could stand here like this, hearing the noise, seeing the faces, and not love the moment. It came through the stage fright, through the overwhelming sense of not belonging. Here he was, before four thousand people, fellow citizens each of them, equal to him before the law, but in their minds he was something else entirely. He was the United States of America. He was their President, but more than that, he was the embodiment of their hopes, their desires, the image of their own nation, and because of that they were willing to love someone they didn't know, to cheer his every word, to hope that for a brief moment they could believe that he'd looked directly into each individual pair of eyes so that the moment would be forever special, never to be forgotten. It was power such as he had never known to exist. This crowd was his to command. *This* was why men devoted their lives to seeking the presidency, to bathe in this moment like a warm ocean wave, a moment of utter perfection.

But why did they think he was so different? What made him special in their minds? Ryan wondered. It was only chance in his case, and in every other instance, it was they who'd done the choosing, they who had elevated the man to the podium, they who by their act had changed the ordinary into something else—and perhaps not even that. It was only perception. Ryan was the same man he'd been a month or a year before. He'd acquired little in the way of new knowledge and less in the way of wisdom. He was the same person with a different job, and while the trappings of the new post were all around him, the person within the protective ring of bodyguards, the person surrounded by a

flood of love which he'd never sought, was merely the product of parents, a childhood, an education, and experiences, just as they all were. They thought him different and special and perhaps even great, but that was perception, not reality. The reality of the moment was sweaty hands on the armored podium, a speech written by someone else, and a man who knew that he was out of place, however pleasant the moment might be.

So, what do I do now? the President of the United States asked himself, his mind racing as the current wave of applause diminished. He'd never be what they thought he was. He was a good man, he thought, but not a great one, and the presidency was a job, a post, a government office that came with duties defined by James Madison, and, as with all things in life, a place of transition from one reality to another. The past was something you couldn't change. The future was something you tried to see. The present was where you were, and that's where you had to do your best—and if you were lucky, maybe you'd be worthy of the moment. It wasn't enough to feel the love. He had to earn it, to make the looks on the assembled faces something other than a lie, for in giving power they also gave responsibility, and in giving love they demanded devotion in return. Chastened, Jack looked at the glass panel that reflected the text of his speech, took a deep breath, and started talking as he'd done as a history instructor in Annapolis.

"I come here today to speak to you about America . . ."

Below the President were five Secret Service agents standing in line, their sunglasses shielding their eyes so that those in the audience could not always tell where they were looking, and also because people without eyes are intimidating at a visceral level. Their hands were clasped in front, and radio earpieces kept them in contact with one another as they scanned the crowd. In the rear of the field house were others, this group scanning with binoculars, because they knew that the love in the building was not uniform, or even that there were some who sought to kill the things they loved. For that reason, the advance team had erected portable metal-detector arches at all the entrances. For that reason Belgian Malinois dogs had sniffed the building for explosives. For that reason they watched everything in the same way an infantryman in a combat zone was careful to examine every shadow.

"... and the strength of America lies not in Washington, but in Indiana, and New Mexico, and in every place Americans live and work, wherever it might be. We in Washington are not America. You are," the President's voice boomed through the PA system—not a good system, the agents thought, but this event had been laid on a little fast. "And we work for you." The audience cheered again anyway.

The TV cameras all fed into vans outside the building, and those had uplink dishes to relay the sound and pictures to satellites. The reporters were mainly in the back today, taking notes despite the fact that they had the full text, along with a written promise that the President really would deliver this one. "The President's speech today," all would say this evening, but it wasn't really the President's speech at all. They knew who'd written it. Callie Weston had already talked to several of their number about it. They read the crowd, an easier task for them because they didn't have the klieg lights in their faces.

". . . is not an opportunity, but a responsibility which we all share, because

if America belongs to us all, so then the duty for running our country starts here, not in Washington." More applause.

"Good speech," Tom Donner observed to his commentator /analyst, John Plumber.

"Pretty good delivery, too. I talked to the superintendent of the Naval Academy. They say he was an excellent teacher once," Plumber replied.

"Good audience for him, mainly kids. And he's not talking major policy issues."

"Getting his feet wet," John agreed. "You have a team working the other segment for tonight, right?"

Donner checked his watch and nodded. "Should be there now."

"SO, DR. RYAN, how do you like being First Lady?" Krystin Matthews asked, with a warm smile.

"I'm still figuring it out." They were talking in Cathy's cubbyhole office overlooking central Baltimore. It had barely enough room for a desk and three chairs (a good one for the doctor, one for the patient, and the other for the spouse or mother of the patient), and with all the cameras and lights in the room, she felt trapped. "You know, I miss cooking for my family."

"You're a surgeon—and your husband expects you to cook, too?" the NBC co-anchor asked, in surprise bordering on outrage.

"I've always loved cooking. It's a good way for me to relax when I get home." *Instead of watching TV,* Professor Caroline Ryan didn't add. She was wearing a new starched lab coat. She'd had to take fifteen minutes with her hair and makeup, and she had patients waiting. "Besides, I'm pretty good at it."

Ah, well, that was different. A cloying smile: "What's the President's favorite meal?"

A smile returned. "That's easy. Steak, baked potato, fresh corn on the cob, and my spinach salad—and I know, the physician in me tells him that it's a little heavy on the cholesterol. Jack's pretty good with a grill. In fact, he's a pretty handy man to have around the house. He doesn't even mind cutting the grass."

"Let me take you back to the night your son was born, that awful night when the terrorists—"

"I haven't forgotten," Cathy said in a quieter voice.

"Your husband has killed people. You're a doctor. How does that make you feel?"

"Jack and Robby—he's Admiral Jackson now—Robby and Sissy are our closest friends," Cathy explained. "Anyway, they did what they had to do, or we would not have survived that night. I don't like violence. I'm a surgeon. Last week I had a trauma case, a man lost his eye as a result of a fistfight in a bar a few blocks from here. But what Jack did is different from what *they* did. My husband fought to protect me and Sally, and Little Jack, who wasn't even born yet."

"You like being a doctor?"

"I love my work. I wouldn't leave it for anything."

"But usually a First Lady—"

"I know what you want to say. I'm not a political wife. I practice medicine. I'm a research scientist, and I work in the best eye institute in the world. I have patients waiting for me now. They need me—and you know, I need them, too. My job is who I am. I'm also a wife and a mother, and I like nearly everything about my life."

"Except this?" Krystin asked, with a smile.

Cathy's blue eyes twinkled. "I really don't have to answer that, do I?" And Matthews knew she had the tagline for the interview.

"What sort of man is your husband?"

"Well, I can't be totally objective, can I? I love him. He's risked his life for me and my children. Whenever I've needed him, he was there. And I do the same for him. That's what love and marriage mean. Jack is smart. He's honest. I guess he's something of a worrier. Sometimes he'll wake up in the middle of the night—at home, I mean—and spend half an hour looking out the windows at the water. I don't think he knows that I know that."

"Does he still do that?"

"Not lately. He's pretty tired when he gets to bed. These are the worst hours he's ever worked."

"His other government posts, at CIA, for example, there are reports that he —"

Cathy stopped that one with a raised hand. "I do not have a security clearance. I don't know, and probably I don't want to know. It's the same with me. I am not allowed to discuss confidential patient information with Jack, or anyone else outside the faculty here."

"We'd like to see you with patients and—" FLOTUS shook her head, stopping the question dead.

"No, this is a hospital, not a TV studio. It's not so much my privacy as that of my patients. To them, I am not the First Lady. To them, I am Dr. Ryan. I'm not a celebrity. I'm a physician and a surgeon. To my students, I'm a professor and teacher."

"And reportedly one of the best in the world at what you do," Matthews added, just to see the reaction.

A smile resulted. "Yes, I've won the Lasker prize, and the respect of my colleagues is a gift that's worth more than money—but you know, that isn't it, either. Sometimes—not very often—but sometimes after a major procedure, I'm the one who takes the bandages off in a darkened room, and we turn the lights up slowly, and I see it. I can see it on the patient's face. I fixed the eyes, and they work again, and the look you see on his or her face—well, nobody's in medicine for the money, at least not here at Hopkins. We're here to make sick people well, and for me to preserve and restore sight, and the look you see when that job is done is like having God tap you on the shoulder and say, 'Nice job.' That's why I'll never, *never* leave medicine," Cathy Ryan said, almost lyrically, knowing that they'd use this on TV tonight, and hoping that maybe some bright young high-school kid would see her face and hear the words and decide to think about medicine. If she had to put up with this waste of her time, perhaps she could use it to serve her art.

It was a pretty good sequence, Krystin Matthews thought, but with only two

minutes and thirty seconds of air time, they would not be able to use it. Better the part about how she hated being First Lady. Everybody was used to hearing doctors talk.

24

ON THE FLY

THE RETURN TO THE AIRplane was quick and efficient. The governor went his way. The people who'd lined the sidewalks were mainly back to their jobs, and those who turned and looked were shoppers who probably wondered what the sirens were all about—or if they knew, were annoyed with the noise. Ryan was able to lean back in the plush leather seats, deflated by the fatigue that comes after a stressful moment.

"So, how'd I do?" he asked, looking out the window as Indiana passed by at seventy miles per hour. He smiled inwardly at the thought of driving this fast in the outskirts of a city without getting a ticket.

"Very well, actually," Callie Weston said first. "You talked like a teacher."

"I *was* a teacher once," the President said. *And with luck, I may be again someday.*

"That's okay for a speech like this, but for others you'll need a little fire," Arnie observed.

"One thing at a time," Callie advised the chief of staff. "You crawl before you walk."

"Same speech in Oklahoma, right?" POTUS asked.

"A few changes, but no big deal. Just remember you're not in Indiana anymore. Sooner State, not Hoosier State. Same line about tornadoes, but football instead of basketball."

"They also lost both senators, but they still have a congressman left, and he'll be on the dais with you," van Damm advised.

"How'd he make it?" Jack asked idly.

"Probably getting laid that night," was the curt answer. "You'll announce a new contract for Tinker Air Force Base. It means about five hundred new jobs, consolidating a few operations at the new location. That'll make the local papers happy."

• • •

BEN GOODLEY DIDN'T know if he was the new National Security Advisor or not. If so, he was rather young for the job, but at least the President he served was well grounded in foreign affairs. That made him more a high-class secretary than an adviser. It was a function he didn't mind. He'd learned much in his brief time at Langley, and had advanced rapidly, becoming one of the youngest men ever to win the coveted NIO card because he knew how to organize information, and because he had the political savvy to grade the

important stuff. He especially liked working directly for President Ryan. Goodley knew that he could play it straight with the Boss, and that Jack he still thought of him by that name, though he could no longer use it—would always let him know what he was thinking. It would be another learning experience for Dr. Goodley, and a priceless one for someone whose new life dream was someday becoming DCI on merit and not through politics.

On the wall opposite his desk was the sort of clock that shows the sun position for the entire world. He'd ordered it the very day he'd arrived—and to his surprise it had appeared literally overnight, instead of perking its way through five levels of procurement bureaucracy. He'd heard stories that the White House was one portion of the government that actually did work, and had not believed them the Harvard graduate had been in government service about four years now, and figured he knew what worked and what didn't. The surprise was welcome, and the clock, he'd found from his work in the CIA Operations Center, was an instant reference, better than the array of regular clocks that some places had. Your eye instantly saw where noon was and could automatically grasp what time it was anywhere in the world. More to the point, you instantly knew if something was happening at an unusual hour, and that told you as much as the Signals Intelligence—SIGINT—bulletin. Such as the one that had just come in over his personal fax machine that was connected to his STU-4 secure phone.

The National Security Agency was in the habit of posting periodic summaries of activity across the world. Its own watch center was staffed by senior military people, and while their outlook was more technical and less political than his own, they were not fools. Ben had gotten to know many of them by name in addition to reputation, and had also learned their individual strengths. The USAF colonel who had command of the NSA Watch Center on weekday afternoons didn't bother people with trivia. That was left to lower-level people and lower-level signals. When the colonel put his name on something, it was usually worth reading. And so it was just after noon, Washington time.

Goodley saw that the FLASH concerned Iraq. That was another thing about the colonel. He didn't go using CRITIC headers for the fun of it, as some did. Ben looked up to check the wall clock. After sundown, local time, a time of relaxation for some, and action for others. The action would be the sort to last all night, the better to get things accomplished without interference, so that the next day would be genuinely new, and genuinely different.

"Oh, boy," Goodley breathed. He read down the page again, then turned his swivel chair and picked up the phone, touching the #3 speed-dial button.

"Director's office," a fiftyish female voice answered.

"Goodley for Foley."

"Please hold, Dr. Goodley." Then: "Hi, Ben."

"Hello, Director." He felt it improper to first-name the DCI. He'd probably go back to work at Langley within the year, and not as a seventh-floor-rank official. "You have what I have?" The page was still warm in his hand from the printer.

"Iraq?"

"Right."

"You must have read it twice, Ben. I just told Bert Vasco to get his ass up here." CIA's own Iraq desk was weak, both thought, while this State guy was very good indeed.

"Looks pretty hot to me."

"Agreed," Ed Foley replied, with an unseen nod. "Jesus, but they're moving fast over there. Give me an hour, maybe ninety minutes."

"I think the President needs to know," Goodley said, with a voice that concealed the urgency he felt. Or so he thought.

"He needs to know more than we can tell him now. Ben?" the DCI added.

"Yes, Director?"

"Jack won't kill you for patience, and we can't do any more than watch it develop anyway. Remember, we can't overload him with information. He doesn't have the time to see it all anymore. What he sees has to be concise. That's your job," Ed Foley explained. "It'll take you a few weeks to figure it out. I'll help," the DCI went on, reminding Goodley how junior he was.

"Okay. I'll be waiting." The line clicked off.

Goodley had about a minute during which he reread the NSA bulletin, and then the phone rang again.

"Dr. Goodley."

"Doctor, this is the President's office," one of the senior secretaries said. "I have a Mr. Golovko on the President's private line. Can you take the call?"

"Yes," he replied, thinking, *Oh, shit.*

"Go ahead, please," she said, clicking off the line.

"This is Ben Goodley."

"This is Golovko. Who are you?"

"I am acting National Security Advisor to the President." *And I know who you are.*

"Goodley?" Ben could hear the voice searching his memory. "Ah, yes, you are national intelligence officer who just learned to shave. My congratulations on your promotion."

The gamesmanship was impressive, though Goodley figured that there was a file on the Russian's desk with everything down to his shoe size. Even Golovko's memory couldn't be that good, and Goodley had been in the White House long enough that the word would have gotten out, and the RVS/KGB would have done its homework.

"Well, somebody has to answer the phones, Minister." Gamesmanship could go two ways. Golovko wasn't really a minister, though he acted as such, and that was technically a secret. It was a weak reply, but it was something. "What can I do for you?"

"You know the arrangement I have with Ivan Emmetovich?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Very well, tell him that a new country is about to be born. It will be called the United Islamic Republic. It will include, for the moment, Iran and Iraq. I rather suspect that it will wish to grow further."

"How reliable is that information, sir?" Better to be polite. It would make the Russian feel bigger.

"Young man, I would not make a report to your President unless I felt it to be reliable, but," he added generously, "I understand you must ask the

question. The point of origin for the report does not concern you. The reliability of the source is sufficient for me to pass the information along with my own confidence. There will be more to follow. Do you have similar indications?"

The question froze Goodley's eyeballs in place, staring down at a blank spot on his desk. He had no guidance on this. Yes, he'd learned that President Ryan had discussed cooperation with Golovko, that he'd also discussed the matter with Ed Foley, and that both had decided to go forward with it. But nobody had told him the parameters for giving information back to Moscow, and he didn't have time to call Langley for instructions, else he would appear weak to the Russians, and the Russians didn't want America to appear weak at the moment, and he was the man on the spot, and he had to make a decision. That entire thought process required about a third of a second.

"Yes, Minister, we do. Your timing is excellent. Director Foley and I were just discussing the development."

"Ah, yes, Dr. Goodley, I see that your signals people are as efficient as ever. What a pity that your human sources do not match their performance."

Ben didn't dare to respond at all to the observation, though its accuracy caused his stomach to contract. Goodley had more respect for Jack Ryan than he did for any man, and now he remembered the admiration Jack had often expressed for the man on the other end of the phone. Welcome to the bigs, kid. Don't hang any curveballs. He ought to have said that Foley had called *him.*

"Minister, I will be speaking to President Ryan within the hour, and I will pass your information along. Thank you for your timely call, sir."

"Good day, Dr. Goodley."

United Islamic Republic, Ben read on his desk pad. There had once been a United Arab Republic, an unlikely alliance between Syria and Egypt doomed to failure in two respects. The separated countries had been fundamentally incompatible, and the alliance had been made only to destroy Israel, which had objected to the goal, and done so effectively. More to the point, a United *Islamic* Republic was a religious statement as much as a political one, because Iran was not an Arab nation—as Iraq was—but rather an Aryan one with different ethnic and linguistic roots. Islam was the world's only major religion to condemn in its scripture all forms of racism and proclaim the equality of all men before God, regardless of color—a fact often overlooked by the West. So, Islam was overtly designed to be a unifying force, and this new notional country would play on that fact with its very name. That said a lot, enough that Golovko didn't even need to explain it, and it also said that Golovko felt that he and Ryan were on the same wavelength. Goodley checked the wall clock again. It was nighttime in Moscow, too. Golovko was working late—well, not all *that* late for a senior official. Ben lifted the phone and hit #3 again. It took him less than a minute to summarize the call from Moscow.

"We can believe anything he says—on this issue, anyway. Sergey Nikolay'ch is a pro from way back. I imagine he twisted your tail just a little, right?" the DCI asked.

"Ruffled the fur some," Goodley admitted.

"It's a carryover from old days. They do like their status games. Don't let it

bother you, and don't shoot back. Better just to ignore it," Foley explained. "Okay, what's he worried about?"

"A lot of republics with '-stan' at the end," Goodley blurted out, without thinking.

"Concur." This came from another voice.

"Vasco?"

"Yeah, just walked in." And then Goodley had to repeat what he'd told Ed Foley. Probably Mary Pat was there, too. Individually, both were good at what they did. In the same room, thinking together, they were a deadly weapon. It was something you had to see to understand, Ben knew.

"This looks to me like a big deal," Goodley observed.

"Looks that way to me, too," Vasco said over the speakerphone. "Let us kick a few things around. Be back to you in fifteen or twenty."

"Would you believe Avi ben Jakob is checking in with us?" Ed reported, after a background noise on the line. "They must be having a really tough day."

For the moment it was just irony that the Russians were both the first to check in with America (and that they were doing so at all), and that they were the only ones calling straight into the White House, beating the Israelis on both scores. But the amusement wouldn't last, and all the players knew that. Israel was probably having the worst day of all. Russia was merely having a very bad one. And America was getting to share the experience.

IT WOULD HAVE been uncivilized to deny them a chance at prayer. Cruel though they were, and criminals though they had been, they had to have their chance at prayer, albeit a brief one. Each was in the presence of a learned mullah, who, with firm but not unkind voice, told them of their fates, and cited scripture, and spoke to them of their chance to reconcile with Allah before meeting Him face to face. Every one did—whether they believed in what they did was another issue, and one left for Allah to judge, but the mullahs had done their duty—and then every one was led out into the prison yard.

It was a sort of assembly-line process, carefully timed so that the three clergymen gave each condemned criminal exactly three times the interval required to take each out in his turn, tie him to the post, shoot him, remove the body, and restart the process. It worked out to five minutes per execution and fifteen minutes for prayer.

The commanding general of the 41 st Armored Division was typical, except that his religion was something more than vestigial. His hands were bound in his cell before his imam—the general preferred the Arabic term to the Farsi one—and he was led out by soldiers who a week before would have saluted and trembled at his passage. He'd reconciled himself to his fate, and he would not give the Persian bastards he'd fought in the border swamps the least bit of satisfaction, though inwardly he cursed to God the cowardly superiors who had skipped the country and left him behind. Perhaps he might have killed the President himself and taken over, he thought as his handcuffs were looped to the post. The general took a moment to look back at the wall to gauge how

good was the marksmanship of the firing squad. He found strange humor in the fact that it might take him a few extra seconds to die, and he snorted in disgust. Russian-trained and competent, he'd tried to be an honest soldier—nonpolitical, following his orders faithfully and without question, whatever they might be—and therefore had never been fully trusted by his country's political leadership, and this was his reward for it. A captain came up with a blindfold.

"A cigarette, if you please. You may keep *that* for when you sleep later tonight."

The captain nodded without expression, his emotions already numbed by the ten killings done in the past hour. Shaking a cigarette from his pack, he put it into the man's lips and lit it with a match. That done, he said what he felt he must:

"Salaam alaykum." Peace be unto you.

"I will have more than you, young man. Do your duty. Make sure your pistol is loaded, will you?" The general closed his eyes for a long, pleasurable puff. His doctor had told him only a few days before that it was bad for his health. Wasn't that a joke? He looked back on his career, marveling that he was still alive after what the Americans had done to his division in 1991. Well, he'd avoided death more than once, and that was a race a man could lengthen, but never win, not really. And so it was written. He managed another long puff. An American Winston. He recognized the taste. How did a mere captain ever get a pack of those? The soldiers brought their rifles up to "aim." There was no expression on their faces. Well, killing did that to men, he reflected. What was supposed to be cruel and horrible just became a job that—

The captain came over to the body that was slumped forward, suspended by the nylon rope that looped around the handcuffs. Again, he thought, drawing his 9mm Browning and aiming from a meter away. A final crack put an end to the groans. Then two soldiers cut the rope and dragged the body off. Another soldier replaced the rope on the post. A fourth used a gardener's rake to move the dirt around, not so much to conceal the blood as to mix dirt with it, because blood was slippery to walk on. The next one would be a politician, not a soldier. The soldiers, at least, died with dignity for the most part, as the last one had. Not the civilians. They whimpered and wept and cried out to Allah. And they always wanted the blindfold. It was something of a learning experience for the captain, who'd never done anything like this before.

IT HAD TAKEN a few days to get things organized, but they were all now in separate houses in separate parts of town—and once that had been accomplished, the generals and their entourages had started worrying about it. Separately quartered, they'd all thought, they could be picked up one by one and jailed preparatory to a return flight to Baghdad, but it wouldn't really have mattered very much. None of the families had more than two bodyguards, and what could they do, really, except to keep beggars away when they went outside? They met frequently—every general had a car assigned—mainly with the purpose of making further travel arrangements. They also bickered over whether they should continue to travel together to a

new collective home or begin to go their separate ways. Some argued that it would be both more secure and more cost-effective to buy a large piece of land and build on it, for example. Others were making it clear that now that they were out of Iraq once and for all (two of them had illusions about going back in triumph to reclaim the government, but that was fantasy, as all but those two knew), they would be just as happy not to see some of their number ever again. The petty rivalries among them had long concealed genuine antipathy, which their new circumstances didn't so much exacerbate as liberate. The least of them had personal fortunes of over $40 million—one had nearly $300 million salted away in various Swiss banks—more than enough to live a comfortable life in any country in the world. Most chose Switzerland, always a haven to those with money and a desire to live quietly, though a few looked farther to the cast. The Sultan of Brunei wanted some people to reorganize his army, and three of the Iraqi generals thought to apply for the job. The local Sudanese government had also begun informal discussions about using a few as advisers for ongoing military operations against animist minorities in the southern part of that country—the Iraqis had long experience dealing with Kurds.

But the generals had more to worry about than themselves alone. All had brought their families out. Many had brought mistresses, who now lived, to everyone's discomfort, in the homes of their patrons. These were as ignored now as they had been in Baghdad. That would change.

Sudan is mostly a desert country, known for its blistering dry heat. Once a British protectorate, its capital has a hospital catering to foreigners, with a largely English staff. Not the world's best facility, it was better than most in Saharan Africa, staffed mostly with young and somewhat idealistic physicians who'd arrived with romantic ideas about both Africa and their careers (the same thing had been going on for over a hundred years). They learned better, but they did their best and that, for the most part, was pretty good.

The two patients arrived scarcely an hour apart. The young girl came in first, accompanied by her worried mother. She was four years old, Dr. Ian MacGregor learned, and had been a healthy child, except for a mild case of asthma, which, the mother correctly said, ought not to have been a problem in Khartoum, with its dry air. Where were they from? Iraq? The doctor neither knew nor cared about politics. He was twenty-eight, newly certified for internal medicine, a small man with prematurely receding sandy hair. What mattered was that he'd seen no bulletin concerning that country and a major infectious disease. He and his staff had been alerted about the Ebola blip in Zaire, but it had been only a blip.

The patient's temperature was 38.0, hardly an alarming fever for a child, all the more so in a country where the noon temperature was always at least that high. Blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration were unremarkable. She appeared listless. How long in Khartoum, did you say? Only a few days? Well, it could be merely jet lag. Some people were more sensitive to it than others, MacGregor explained. New surroundings, and so forth, could make a child out of sorts. Maybe a cold or the flu, nothing serious. Sudan has a hot climate, but really a fairly healthy one, you see, not like other parts of Africa. He slipped his hands into rubber gloves, not for any particular need but because his

medical training at the University of Edinburgh had drilled it into him that you did it the same way every time, because the one time you forgot, you might end up like Dr. Sinclair—oh, didn't you hear how he caught AIDS from a patient? One such story was generally enough. The patient was not in great distress. Eyes a little puffy. Throat slightly inflamed, but nothing serious. Probably a good night's sleep or two. Nothing to be prescribed. Aspirin for the fever and aches, and if the problem persists, please call me. She's a lovely child. I'm sure she'll be fine. Mother took child away. The doctor decided it was time for a cup of tea. Along the way to the doctor's lounge, he stripped off the latex gloves which had saved his life, and dropped them in the disposal bin.

The other came in thirty minutes later, male, thirtythree, looking rather like a thug, surly and suspicious toward the African staff, but solicitous to the Europeans. Obviously a man who knew Africa, MacGregor thought. Probably an Arab businessman. Do you travel a great deal? Recently? Oh, well, that could be it. You want to be careful drinking the local water, that could explain the stomach discomfort. And he, too, went home with a bottle of aspirin, plus an over-the-counter medication for his GI problems, and presently MacGregor went off duty after one more routine day.

"MR. PRESIDENT? Ben Goodley coming through on the STU," a sergeant told him. Then she showed him how the phones worked up front.

"Yeah, Ben?" Jack said.

"We have reports of a lot of Iraqi big shots getting put up against the wall. I'm faxing the report down to you. The Russians and the Israelis both confirm." And on cue, another Air Force NCO appeared and handed Ryan three sheets of paper. The first one merely said TOP SECRET—PRESIDENT'S EYES ONLY, even though three or four communications types had seen it, and that was just in the airplane, now beginning its descent into Tinker.

"Got it now, let me read it." He took his time, first scanning the report, then going back to the beginning for a slower read. "Okay, who's going to be left?"

"Vasco says nobody worth mentioning. This is the entire Ba'ath Party leadership and all the remaining senior military commanders. That leaves nobody with status behind. Okay, the scary part comes from PALM BOWL, and —"

"Who's this Major Sabah?"

"I called on that myself, sir," Goodley replied. "He's a Kuwaiti spook. Our people say he's pretty swift. Vasco concurs in his assessment. It's going down the track we were afraid of, and it's going real fast."

"Saudi response?" Ryan was jolted by a minor bump as the VC-25A came through some clouds. It looked to be raining outside.

"None yet. They're still talking things over."

"Okay, thanks for the heads-up, Ben. Keep me posted."

"Will do, sir."

Ryan put the phone back in its cradle and frowned.

"Trouble?" Arnie asked.

"Iraq, it's going fast. They're executing people at a brisk clip at the

moment." The President handed the pages over to his chief of staff.

There was always a huge sense of unreality to it. The NSA report, as amended and augmented by CIA and others, gave a list of men. Had he been in his office, Ryan would also have looked at photos of men he'd never met, and now never would, because while he was descending into Oklahoma to give a nonpolitical political speech, the lives of the men on that list were ending more likely already had. It was rather like listening to a ballgame on the radio, except in this game real people were being shot. Reality was coming to an end for human beings seven thousand miles away, and Ryan was hearing about it from radio intercepts made even farther away and relayed to him, and it was real, but at the same time not real. There was just something about distance which did that—and his surroundings. *A hundred or so senior Iraqi officials are being shot—want a sandwich before you get off the airplane?* The dualism might have been amusing except for the foreign-policy implications. No, that wasn't true, either. There wasn't anything funny about it at all.

"What are you thinking?" van Damm asked.

"I ought to be back at the office," Ryan replied. "This is important, and I need to keep track of it."

"Wrong!" Arnie said at once with a shake of the head and a pointing finger. "You are not the National Security Advisor anymore. You have people to do that for you. You're the President, and you have a lot of things to do, and they're all important. The President never gets tied down on one issue and he never gets trapped in the Oval Office. The people out there don't want to see that. It means you're not in control. It means events are controlling you. Ask Jimmy Carter about how great his second term was. Hell, this isn't all *that* important."

"It could be," Jack protested, as the aircraft touched down.

"What's important right now is your speech for the Sooner State." He paused before going on. "It isn't just charity that begins at home. It's political power, too. It starts right out there." He pointed out the windows, as Oklahoma slowed to a halt outside.

Ryan looked, but what he saw was the *United Islamic Republic*.

IT HAD ONCE been hard to enter the Soviet Union. There had been a vast organization called the Chief Border Guards Directorate of the Committee for State Security which had patrolled the fences—in some cases minefields and genuine fortifications, as well—with the dual purpose of keeping people both in and out, but these had long since fallen into disrepair, and the main purpose of the border checkpoints today was for the new crop of regional border guards to accept the bribes that came from smugglers who now used large trucks to bring their wares into the nation that had once been ruled with an iron hand in Moscow, but was now a collection of semi-independent republics that were mostly on their own in economic, and because of that, political terms as well. It hadn't been planned that way. When he'd established the country's central-planned economy, Stalin had made a deliberate effort to spread out production sites, so that each segment of the vast empire would depend for vital commodities upon every other, but he'd overlooked the

discordant fact that if the entire economy went to pot, then needing something you couldn't get from one source meant that you had to get it from another, and with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, smuggling, which had been well controlled under Communist rule, had become a genuine industry of its own. And with wares also came ideas, hard enough to stop, and impossible to tax.

The only thing lacking was a welcoming committee, but that wouldn't have done. The corruption of the border guards went both ways. They might well have told their superiors about things while sharing the requisite percentage of the loot from their informal tariff collection, and so the representative merely sat in the right seat of the truck while the driver handled business—out the back of the truck in this case, an offer to the guards of a selection of his cargo. They weren't the least bit greedy about it, instead taking little more than they could easily conceal in the back of their personal automobiles. (The only concession to the illegality of the entire business was that it took place at night.) With that, the proper stamps were affixed to the proper documents, and the truck pulled off, heading down the cross-border highway, which was probably the only decently surfaced road in the area. The remaining drive took a little over an hour, and then, entering the large town which had once serviced the caravan trade, the truck stopped briefly and the representative got out and walked to a private automobile to continue his journey, carrying only a small bag with a change of clothes or two.

The president of this semiautonomous republic claimed to be a Muslim, but he was mainly an opportunist, a former senior party official who as a matter of course had denied God regularly to ensure his political advancement and then, with the changing of the political wind, embraced Islam with public enthusiasm and private disinterest. His faith, if one could call it that, was entirely about his secular well-being. There were several passages in the Koran concerning such people, none of them flattering. He lived a comfortable life in a comfortable personal palace which had once quartered the party boss of this former Soviet republic. In that official residence, he drank liquor, fornicated, and ruled his republic with a hand that was by turns too firm and too gentle. Too firmly he controlled the regional economy (with his Communist training, he was hopelessly inept) and too gently he allowed Islam to flourish, so, he thought, to give his people the illusion of personal freedom (and in that he clearly misunderstood the nature of the Islamic Faith he professed to have, for Islamic law was written to apply to the secular as well as the spiritual). Like all presidents before him, he thought himself beloved of his people. It was, the representative knew, a common illusion of fools. In due course, the representative arrived at the modest private home of a friend of the local religious leader. This was a man of simple faith and quiet honor, beloved by all who knew him and disliked by no one, for his was a kindly voice in most things, and his occasional anger was founded on principles that even unbelievers could respect. In his middle fifties, he'd suffered at the hands of the previous regime, but never wavered in the strength of his beliefs. He was perfectly suited to the task at hand, and around him were his closest associates.

There were the usual greetings in God's Holy Name, followed by the serving of tea, and then it was time for business.

“It is a sad thing,” the representative began, “to see the faithful living in such poverty.”

“It has always been so, but today we can practice our religion in freedom. My people are coming back to the Faith. Our mosques have been repaired, and every day they are more full. What are material possessions compared to the Faith?” the local leader responded, with the reasonable voice of a teacher.

“So true that is,” the representative agreed. “And yet Allah wishes for His Faithful to prosper, does He not?” There was general agreement. Every man in the room was an Islamic scholar, and few prefer poverty to comfort.

“Most of all, my people need schools, proper schools,” was the reply. “We need better medical facilities—I grow weary of consoling the parents of a dead child who needed not to have died. We need many things. I do not deny that.”

“All these things are easily provided if one has money,” the representative pointed out.

“But this has always been a poor land. We have resources, yes, but they have never been properly exploited, and now we have lost the support of the central government—at the very moment when we have the freedom to control our own destiny, while that fool of a president we have gets drunk and abuses women in his palace. If only he were a just man, a faithful man, for then we might bring prosperity to this land,” he observed, more in sadness than in anger.

“That, and a little foreign capital,” one of the more economically literate of his retinue suggested modestly. Islam has never had a rule against commercial activity. Though it is remembered by the West for spreading by the sword, it had gone east on the ships of traders, much as Christianity had spread through the word and example of its own adherents.

“In Tehran, it is thought that the time has arrived for the faithful to act as the Prophet commands. We have made the error common to unbelievers, of thinking in terms of national greed rather than the needs of all people. My own teacher, Mahmoud Haji Daryaei, has preached of the need to return to the foundations of our Faith,” the representative said, sipping his tea. He spoke as a teacher himself, his voice quiet. Passion he saved for the public arena. In a closed room, sitting on the floor with men as learned as himself, he, too, spoke only with reason’s voice. “We have wealth—such wealth as only Allah could have awarded by His own plan. And now we have the moment as well. You men in this room, you kept the Faith, honored the Word in the face of persecution, while others of us grew rich. It is now our obligation to reward you, to welcome you back into the fold, to share our bounty with you. This is what my teacher proposes.”

“It is good to hear such words,” was the cautious reply. That the man was primarily a man of God did not make him naive. He guarded his thoughts with the greatest care—growing up under Communist rule had taught him that—but what he had to be thinking was obvious.

“It is our hope to unite all Islam under one roof, to bring the Faithful together as the Prophet Mohammed, blessings and peace be upon him, desired. We are different in place, in language, often in color, but in our Faith we are one. We *are* the elect of Allah.”

“And so?”

"And so, we wish your republic to join our own so that we may be as one. We will bring you schools and medical assistance for your people. We will help you take control of your own land, so that what we give you will be returned to all many-fold, and we shall be as the brothers Allah intends us to be."

The casual Western observer might have remarked that these men all appeared unsophisticated, due to their less-than-splendid clothing, their simple mode of speech, or merely the fact that they sat on the floor. Such was not exactly the case, and what the visitor from Iran proposed was hardly less startling than an embassy from another planet might have been. There were differences between his nation and this one, between his people and theirs. Language and culture, for starters. They had fought wars over the centuries, there had been banditry and brigandage, this despite the most serious strictures in the Holy Koran about armed conflict between Islamic nations. There was, in fact, virtually no common ground between them at all—except for one. That one might have been called accidental, but the truly Faithful didn't believe in accidents. When Russia, first under the czars and then under Marxism-Leninism, had conquered their land (a lengthy process rather than an event), they'd stripped so much away. Culture, for one. History and heritage; everything but language, a sop to what the Soviets for generations had uneasily called "the nationalities question." They'd brought schooling aimed first at destroying everything and then at rebuilding it in a new and godless mode, until the only unifying force left to the people was their Faith, which they'd tried hard to suppress. And even that was good, they all thought now, because the Faith could never be suppressed, and such attempts only made the truly Faithful more determined. It might even—had to have been a plan from Allah Himself, to show the people that their one salvation could only be the Faith. Now they were coming back to it, to the leaders who had kept the flame alight, and now, all in the room reflected, as their visitor knew they must, Allah Himself had washed away their petty differences so that they could unify as their God wished. So much the better to do so with the promise of material prosperity, as Charity was one of the Pillars of Islam, and so long denied by people calling themselves faithful to the Holy Word. And now the Soviet Union was dead, and its successor state crippled, and the distant and unloved children of Moscow left largely on their own, all of them governed by an echo of what was gone. If it were not a sign from Allah that this opportunity should present itself, then what was it? they all asked themselves.

They only had to do one thing to bring it all about. And *he* was an unbeliever. And Allah would judge him through their hands.

"AND ALTHOUGH I can't say that I liked the way you treated my Boston College Eagles last October," Ryan said, with a smile, to the assembled NCAA football champions from the University of Oklahoma at Norman, "your tradition of excellence is part of the American soul." Which hadn't been much of a pleasure for the University of Florida in the last Orange Bowl, in a 35—10 blowout.

And the people applauded again. Jack was so pleased by this that he almost

forgot the fact that the speech was not really his. His smile, crooked teeth and all, lit up the arena, and he waved his right hand, this time not tentatively. One could tell the difference on the C-SPAN cameras.

"He's a fast learner," Ed Kealty said. He was objective about such matters. His public face was one thing, but politicians are realists, at least in the tactical sense.

"He's very well coached, remember," the former Vice President's chief of staff reminded his boss. "They don't come any better than Arnie. Our initial play got their attention, Ed, and van Damm must have laid the word on Ryan pretty hard and pretty fast."

He didn't have to add that their "play" had gone nowhere fast after that. The newspapers had written their initial editorials, but then reflected a little and backed off—not editorially, since the media rarely admits to error, but the news stories coming from the White House press room, if not praising Ryan, hadn't used the usual assassination buzzwords: *unsure, confused*, *disorganized,* and the like. No White House with Arnie van Damm in it would ever be disorganized, and the whole Washington establishment knew it.

Ryan's major Cabinet appointments had shaken things up, but then the officials had all started doing the right things. Adler was another insider who'd worked his way to the top; as a junior official he'd briefed in too many foreign-affairs correspondents over the years for them to turn on him—and he never lost a chance to extol Ryan's expertise on foreign policy. George Winston, outsider and plutocrat though he was, had initiated a "quiet" reexamination of his entire department, and Winston had on his Rolodex the number of every financial editor from Berlin to Tokyo, and was seeking out their views and counsel on his internal study. Most surprising of all was Tony Bretano in the Pentagon. A vociferous outsider for the last ten years, he'd promised the defense-reporting community that he'd clean out the temple or die in the attempt, that the Pentagon *was* wasteful now as they'd always proclaimed, but that he, with the President's approval, was going to do his damnedest to de-corrupt the acquisition process once and for all. It was a singularly uncharming collection of people, Washington outsiders all, but, damn it, they were charming the media in the best possible way, quietly, in the back rooms of power. Most disturbingly of all, the *Washington Post*, an internal spy had told Kealty earlier in the day, was preparing a multipart story about Ryan's history at CIA, and it would be a canonization piece by no less than Bob Holtzman. Holtzman was the quintessential media insider, and for reasons unknown, he liked Ryan personally—and he had one hell of a source inside somewhere. That was the Trojan horse. If the story ran, and if it were picked up around the nation—both likely, since it would increase the prestige both of Holtzman and the *Post*—then his media contacts would back away rapidly; the editorials would counsel him to withdraw his claim for the good of the nation and he'd have no leverage at all, and his political career would end in greater disgrace than he'd accepted only a short time before. Historians who might have overlooked his personal indiscretions would instead focus on his overreaching ambition, and instead of seeing it as an irregularity, would then fold it back into his entire career, questioning everything he'd ever done, seeing him in a different and unfavorable light at every step, saying that the

good things he'd done were the irregularities. Kealty wasn't so much looking into his political grave as at eternal damnation.

"You left out Callie," Ed grumped, still watching the speech, listening to the content and paying close attention to the delivery—academic, he thought, fitting for an audience mainly of students, who cheered this Ryan as though he were a football coach or someone of similar irrelevance.

"One of her speeches could make Pee-Wee Herman look presidential," the chief of staff agreed. And that was the greatest danger of all. To win, Ryan just had to *appear* presidential, whether he really was or not—and he *wasn't,* of course, as Kealty kept reminding himself. How could he be?

"I never said he was stupid," Kealty admitted. He had to be objective. This wasn't a game anymore. It was even more than life.

"It's gotta happen soon, Ed."

"I know." But he had to have something bigger to shoot, Kealty told himself. It was a curious metaphor for someone who'd advocated gun control all of his political life.

25

BLOOMS

THE FARM HAD COME with a barn. It mainly served as a garage now. Ernie Brown had been in the construction business, and had earned a good deal of money, first in the late 1970s as a union plumber, then he'd established his own business in the 1980s to partake in the California building boom. Though a pair of divorces had depleted his funds, the selling of the business had been well timed, and he'd taken the money and run, and bought a sizable parcel of land in an area not yet chic enough to have its property values driven up by Hollywood types. What had resulted was almost a full "section"—a square mile—of privacy. Actually more than that, because the neighboring ranches were dormant at this time of year, the pastures frozen, and the cattle in pens comfortably eating silage. You could go several days without seeing so much as another car on the road, or so it seemed out in Big Sky Country. School buses, they told themselves, didn't count.

A five-ton flatbed truck also had been conveyed with the ranch—a diesel, conveniently enough—along with a buried two-thousand-gallon fuel tank right by the barn. The family that had sold off the ranch and barn and house to the newcomer from California hadn't known that they were giving over title to a bomb factory. The first order of business for Ernie and Pete was to get the old truck started up. That proved to be a forty-minute exercise, because it wasn't just a case of a dead battery, but Pete Holbrook was a competent mechanic, and in due course the truck's engine roared to unmuffled life and showed every sign of remaining with the living. The truck was not licensed, but that wasn't terribly unusual in this area of huge holdings, and their drive of forty miles north to the farm-supplies store was untroubled.

It could hardly have been a better portent of spring for the store. Planting season was coming (there were a lot of wheat farmers around), and here was the first major customer for the virtual mountain of fertilizer just trucked in from the distributor's warehouse in Helena. The men bought four tons, not an unusual quantity, which a propane-powered forklift deposited on the flatbed of the truck, and they paid cash for it, then drove off with a handshake and a smile.

"This is going to be hard work," Holbrook observed, halfway back.

"That's right, and we're going to do it all ourselves." Brown turned. "Or do you want to bring in somebody who might be an informer?"

"I hear you, Ernie," Pete replied, as a state police car went the other way. The cop didn't even turn his head, chilling though the moment was for the two Mountain Men. "How much more?"

Brown had done the calculations a dozen times. "One more truckload. It's a

shame this stuff is so bulky." They'd make the second purchase tomorrow, at a store thirty miles southwest of the ranch. This evening would be busy enough, unloading all this crap inside the barn. A good workout. Why didn't the goddamn farm have a forklift? Holbrook wondered. At least when they refilled the fuel tank, the local oil company would do it. That was some consolation.

IT WAS COLD on the Chinese coast, and that made things easier for the satellites to see a series of thermal blooms at two naval bases. Actually, the "Chinese navy" was the naval service of the People's Liberation Army, so gross a disregard for tradition that Western navies ignored the correct name in favor of custom. The imagery was recorded and cross-linked to the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon, where the senior watch officer turned to his intelligence specialist.

"Do the Chinese have an exercise laid on?"

"Not that we know of." The photos showed that twelve ships, all of them alongside, had their engines running, instead of the normal procedure by which they drew electrical power from the dock. A closer look at the photo showed a half-dozen tugboats moving around the harbor, as well. The intel specialist for this watch was Army. He called a naval officer over.

"Sailing some ships," was the obvious analysis.

"Not just doing an engineering exam or something?"

"They wouldn't need tugboats for that. When's the next pass?" the Navy commander asked, meaning a satellite pass, checking the time reference on the photo. It was thirty minutes old.

"Fifty minutes."

"Then it ought to show three or maybe four ships standing out to sea at both bases. That'll make it certain. For right now, two chances out of three, they're laying on a major exercise." He paused. "Any political hoo-rah going on?"

The senior watch officer shook his head. "Nothing."

"Then it's a FleetEx. Maybe somebody decided to check out their readiness." They would learn more with a press release from Beijing, but that was thirty minutes into a future they couldn't see, paid though they were to do so.

THE DIRECTOR WAS a religious man, as was to be expected, what with the sensitivity of his post. Gifted physician that he had been, and scientist-virologist that he still was, he lived in a country where political reliability was measured by devotion to the Shi'a branch of Islam, and in this there was no doubt. His prayers were always on time, and he scheduled his laboratory work around them. He required the same of his people, for such was his devotion that he went beyond the teachings of Islam without even knowing it, bending such rules as stood in his way as though they were made of rubber, and at the same time telling himself that, no, he never violated the Prophet's Holy Word, or Allah's Will. How could he be doing that? He was helping to bring the world back to the Faith.

The prisoners, the experimental subjects, were all condemned men in one

way or another. Even the thieves, lesser criminals, had four times violated the Holy Koran, and they had probably committed other crimes as well, perhaps—probably, he told himself—those worthy of death. Every day they were informed of the time for prayer, and though they knelt and bowed and mouthed the prayers, you could tell by watching them on the TV monitor that they were merely going through the ritual, not truly praying to Allah in the manner prescribed. That made them all apostates and apostasy was a capital crime in their country—even though only one had been convicted of that crime.

That one was of the Baha'i religion, a minority almost stamped out, a belief structure that had evolved *after* Islam. Christians and Jews were at least People of the Book; however misguided their religions, at least they acknowledged the same God of the Universe, of whom Mohammed was the final messenger. The Baha'i had come later, *inventing* something both new and false that relegated them to the status of pagans, denying the True Faith, and earning the wrath of their government. It was fitting that this man was the first to show that the experiment was successful.

It was remarkable that the prisoners were so braindulled by their conditions that the onset of flu symptoms caused no special reaction at first. The medical corpsmen went in, as always in full protective gear, to take blood samples, and one additional benefit of the prisoners' condition was that they were far too cowed to make trouble. All of them had been in prison for some time, subject to a deficient diet which had its own effects on their energy levels, plus a discipline regime so harsh that they didn't dare resist. Even the condemned prisoners who knew they faced death had no wish to accelerate the process. All meekly submitted to having their blood drawn by exquisitely careful medics. The test tubes were carefully labeled in accordance with the numbers on the beds, and the medics withdrew.

In the lab, it was Patient Three's blood which went under the microscope first. The antibody test was prone to give some false positive readings, and this was too important to risk error. So slides were prepared and placed under the electron microscopes, first set at magnification 20,000 for area search. The fine adjustments for the instruments were handled by exquisitely machined gears, as the slide was moved left and right, up and down, until . . .

"Ah," the director said. He centered the target in the viewing field and increased the magnification to 112,000 . . . and there it was, projected onto the computer monitor inblack-and-white display. His culture knew much of shepherding, and the aphorism "Shepherd's Crook" seemed to him a perfect description. Centered was the RNA strand, thin and curved at the bottom, with the protein loops at the top. These were the key to the action of the virus, or so everyone thought. Their precise function was not understood, and that also pleased the director's identity as a bio-war technician. "Moudi," he called.

"Yes, I see it," the younger doctor said, with a slow nod, as he walked to that side of the room. Ebola Zaire Mayinga was in the apostate's blood. He'd just run the antibody test as well, and watched the tiny sample change color. This one was not a false positive.

"Airborne transmission is confirmed."

"Agreed." Moudi's face didn't change. He was not surprised.

"We will wait another day—no, two days for the second phase. And then we will know." For now, he had a report to make.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT IN Beijing caught the American embassy by surprise. It was couched in routine terms. The Chinese navy would be holding a major exercise in the Taiwan Strait. There would be some live firings of surface-toair and surface-to-surface missiles on dates yet unspecified (weather considerations had yet to be resolved, the release said). The People's Republic of China government was issuing Notice to Airmen and Notice to Mariner alerts, so that both airlines and shipping companies would be able to adjust their routings accordingly. Other than that, the release said nothing at all, and that was somewhat disturbing to the deputy chief of mission in Beijing. The DCM immediately conferred with his military attaches and the CIA chief of station, none of whom had any insights to offer, except that the release had nothing at all to say about the Republic of China government on Taiwan. On the one hand, that was good news—there was no complaint about the continued political independence of what Beijing deemed a rebel province. On the other hand, it was bad news—the release did *not* say that this was a routine exercise and not intended to disturb anyone. The notice was just that, with no explanation at all attached to it. The information was dispatched to the NMCC in the Pentagon, to the State Department, and to CIA headquarters at Langley.

DARYAEI HAD TO search his memory for the face that went with the name, and the face he remembered was the wrong one, really, for it was that of a boy from Qom, and the message came from a grown man half a world away. Raman . . . oh, yes, Aref Raman, what a bright lad he'd been. His father had been a dealer in automobiles, Mercedes cars, and had sold them in Tehran to the powerful, a man whose faith had wavered. But his son's had not. His son had not even blinked on learning of the death of his parents, killed by accident, really, at the hands of the Shah's army, for having been on the wrong street at the wrong time, caught up in a civil disturbance in which they'd had no part at all. Together, he and his teacher had prayed for them. Dead by the hands of those they trusted was the lesson from that event, but the lesson had not been a necessary one. Raman had already been a lad of deep faith, offended by the fact that his elder sister had taken up with an American officer, and so disgraced her family and his own name. She, too, had disappeared in the revolution, condemned by an Islamic court for adultery, which left only the son. They could have used him in many ways, but the chosen one had been Daryaei's own doing. Linked up with two elderly people, the new "family" had fled the country with the Raman family wealth and gone first to Europe and then almost immediately thereafter to America. There they had done nothing more than live quietly; Daryaei imagined they were dead by now. The son, selected for the mission because of his early mastery of English, had continued his education and entered government service, performing his

duties with all the excellence he'd displayed in the revolution's earliest phases, during which he'd killed two senior officers in the Shah's air force while they drank whiskey in a hotel bar.

Since then, he'd done as he'd been told. Nothing. Blend in. Disappear. Remember your mission, *but do nothing.* It was gratifying for the Ayatollah that he'd judged the boy well, for now he knew from the brief message that the mission was almost fully accomplished.

The word *assassin* is itself derived from *hashshash,* the Arabic word for the narcotic hashish, the tool once used by members of the Nizari subsect of Islam to give themselves a drug-induced vision of Paradise prior to setting out on missions of murder. In fact, they'd been heretics to Daryaei's way of thinking —and the use of drugs was an abomination. They'd been weak-minded but effective servants of a series of master terrorists such as Hasan and Rashid ad-Din, and, for a time that stretched between two centuries, had served the political balance of power in a region stretching from Syria to Persia. But there was a brilliance in the concept which had fascinated the cleric since learning of it as a boy. To get one faithful agent inside the enemy's camp. It was the task of years, and for that reason a task of faith. Where the Nizaris had failed was that they were heretics, separate from the True Faith, able to recruit a few extremists into their cult, but not the multitude, and so they served a single man and not Allah, and so they needed drugs to fortify themselves, as an unbeliever did with liquor. A brilliant idea flawed. But a brilliant idea nonetheless. Daryaei had merely perfected it, and so now he had a man close, something he'd hoped for but not known. Better yet, he had a man close and waiting for instructions, at the far end of an unknown message path that had never been used, all composed of people who'd gone abroad no more recently than fifteen years ago, an altogether better state of affairs than that which he'd set in place in Iraq, for in America people who might be scrutinized were either arrested or cleared, or if they were watched, only for a little while, until the watchers became bored and went on to other tasks. In some countries when that happened, the watchers became bored, picked up those whom they watched, and frequently killed them.

So it was just timing before Raman completed his mission, and after all these years, he still used his head, unaddled by drugs and trained by the Great Satan himself. The news was too sublime even to occasion a smile.

Then the phone rang. The private one. "Yes?"

"I have good news," the director said, "from the Monkey Farm."

"YOU KNOW, ARNIE, you were right," Jack said, in the breezeway to the West Wing. "It was great to get the hell out of here."

The chief of staff noted the spring in his step, but didn't get overly excited about it. Air Force One had brought the President back in time for a quiet dinner with his family instead of the usual rigors of three or four such speeches, endless hours of schmoozing with major contributors, and the usual four-hour night that resulted—and that, often enough, in the aircraft—followed by a quick shower and a working day artificially extended by the revelries in the hustings. It was remarkable, he thought, that any President

was able to do any work at all. The real duties of the office were difficult enough, and those were almost always subordinated to what was little more than public relations, albeit a necessary function in a democracy, in which the people needed to see the President doing more than sitting at his desk and doing . . . his work. The presidency was a job which one could love without liking it, a phrase seemingly contradictory until you came here and saw it.

"You did just fine," van Damm said. "The stuff on TV was perfect, and the segment NBC ran with your wife was okay, too."

"She didn't like it. She didn't think they used her best line," Ryan reported lightly.

"Could have been a lot worse." *They didn't ask her about abortion,* Arnie thought. To keep that from happening, he'd used up a few large markers with NBC, and made sure that Tom Donner had been treated at least as well as a senator, maybe even a Cabinet member, on the flight the previous day, including a rare taped segment in flight. The following week, Donner would be the first network anchor to have a one-on-one with the President in the upstairs sitting room, and for that there was no agreement on the scope of the questions, meaning that Ryan would have to be briefed for hours to make sure he didn't step on the presidential crank. But for now the chief of staff allowed his President to bask in the afterglow of what had been a pretty good day in the Midwest, whose real mission, aside from getting Ryan out of Washington and so get a feel for what the presidency really was, was to have him look like a President, and further marginalize that bastard Kealty.

The Secret Service people were as upbeat as their President, as they so often drew their mood from POTUS, returning his smiles and nods with spoken greetings of their own: "Good morning, Mr. President!" repeated by four of them as Ryan passed, finding his way to the Oval Office.

"Good morning, Ben," Ryan said cheerily, heading to his desk and falling into the comfortable swivel chair. "Tell me how the world looks."

"We may have a problem. The PRC navy's putting to sea," the acting National Security Advisor said. The Secret Service had just assigned him a code name, CARDSHARP.

"And?" Ryan asked, annoyed that the morning might be spoiled.

"And it looks like a major fleet exercise, and they're saying there will be live-fire missile shoots. No reaction from Taipei yet."

"They don't have elections or anything coming up, do they?" Jack asked.

Goodley shook his head. "No, not for another year. The ROC has continued to spend money with the UN, and they're quietly lobbying a lot of countries in case they go through with a request for representation, but nothing remarkable about that, either. Taipei is playing its cards close to the vest, and not making any noise to offend the mainland. Their commercial relationship is stable. In short, we have no explanation for the exercise."

"What do we have in the area?"

"One submarine in the Formosa Strait, keeping an eye on a Chinese SSN."

"Carriers?"

"Nothing closer than the Indian Ocean. *Stennis* is back in Pearl for engine repairs, along with *Enterprise,* and they'll be there for a while. The cupboard is still pretty bare." CARDSHARP reminded the President what he had himself

said to *his* President only months before.

"What about their army?" the President asked next.

"Again, nothing new. We have higher-than-usual levels of activity, like the Russians said, but that's been going on for a while."

Ryan leaned back in his chair and contemplated a cup of decaf. He'd found on his speechifying trip that his stomach really did feel better that way, and remarked on it to Cathy, who'd merely smiled and said *I told you so!* "Okay, Ben, speculate."

"I talked it over with some China people at State and the Agency," Goodley replied. "Maybe their military is making a political move, interior politics, I mean, increasing their readiness state to let the other people on the Beijing Politburo know that they're still around and still matter. Aside from that, anything else is *pure* speculation, and I'm not supposed to do that here, boss, remember?"

"And 'don't know' means *don't know,* doesn't it?" It was a rhetorical question, and one of Ryan's favored aphorisms.

"You taught me that on the other side of the river, Mr. President," Goodley agreed, but without the expected smile. "You also taught me not to like things I can't explain." The national intelligence officer paused. "They know we'll know, and they know we'll be interested, and they know you're new here, and they know you don't need a hassle. So, why do it?" Goodley asked, also rhetorically.

"Yeah," the President agreed quietly. "Andrea?" he said. Price, as usual, was in the room, pretending not to pay attention.

"Yes, sir?"

"Where's the nearest smoker?" Ryan said it entirely without shame.

"Mr. President, I don't—"

"The hell you don't. I want one."

Price nodded and disappeared into the secretaries' room. She knew the signs as well as anyone. Switching from regular coffee to decaf, and now a smoke. In a way it was surprising that it had taken this long, and it told her more about the intelligence briefing than the words of Dr. Benjamin Goodley did.

It had to be a woman smoker, the President saw a minute later. Another one of the thin ones. Price even brought a match and an ashtray along with her disapproving look. He wondered if they'd acted the same way with FDR and Eisenhower.

Ryan took his first drag, deep in thought. China had been the silent partner in the conflict—he still couldn't use the word *war*, not even in his own mind—with Japan. At least that was the supposition. It all made sense, and it all fitted together nicely, but there was no proof of the sort to flesh out a SNIE—a Special National Intelligence Estimate—much less present to the media, which often as not required the same degree of reliability as an especially conservative judge. *So* . . . Ryan lifted the phone. "I want Director Murray."

One of the nice things about the presidency was the use of the telephone. "Please hold for the President," a simple phrase spoken by a White House secretary in the same voice one might use for ordering out a pizza, never failed to cause an instant, almost panicked, reaction on the other end of whatever line she might use. It rarely took longer than ten seconds to get the

call through. This time it took six.

"Good morning, Mr. President."

"Morning, Dan. I need something. What's the name of that Japanese police inspector who came over?"

"Jisaburo Tanaka," Murray replied at once.

"Is he any good?" Jack said next.

"Solid. As good as anybody I have working here. What do you want from him?"

"I presume they're talking a lot with that Yamata guy."

"You may safely assume that a wild bear goes potty in the woods, too, Mr. President," the acting Director of the FBI managed to say without a laugh.

"I want to know about his conversations with China, especially who his contact was."

"That we can do. I'll try to get him right now. Call back to you?"

"No, brief Ben Goodley in, and he'll coordinate with the people down the hall," Ryan said, using an old catch-phrase between the two. "Ben's here now in my old office."

"Yes, sir. Let me do it now. It's heading up to midnight in Tokyo."

"Thanks, Dan. Bye." Jack put the phone back. "Let's start figuring this one out."

"You got it, boss," Goodley promised.

"Anything else happening in the world? Iraq?"

"Same news as yesterday, lots of people executed. The Russians fed us this 'United Islamic Republic' thing, and we all think it likely, but no overt move yet. That's what I'd planned to do today, and—"

"Okay, then, get to it."

"OKAY, WHAT'S THE drill for this?" Tony Bretano asked.

Robby Jackson didn't especially like doing things on the fly, but that was the job of the newly promoted J-3, Director of Operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In the previous week, he'd come to like the designate—Secretary of Defense. Bretano was one tough-minded little guy, but his snarl was mainly for show, and concealed a very thoughtful brain able to make quick decisions. And the man was an engineer—he knew what he didn't know, and was quick to ask questions.

"We have *Pasadena*—fast-attack sub—in the strait already doing routine surveillance. We break her off the current job of trailing the PRC SSN and have her move northwest. Next, we move two or three additional boats into the area, assign them operating areas, and let them keep an eye on things. We open a line of communications with Taipei and have them feed us what they see and know. They'll play ball. They always do. Ordinarily, we'd move a carrier a little closer, but this time, well, we don't have one very close, and absent a political threat to Taiwan, it would appear to be an overreaction. We stage electronics-intelligence aircraft over the area out of Anderson Air Force Base in Guam. We're hampered by the lack of a nearby base."

"So, essentially we gather intelligence information and do nothing substantive?" the SecDef asked.

"Gathering intelligence is substantive, sir, but, yes."

Bretano smiled. "I know. I built the satellites you'll be using. What will they tell us?"

"We'll probably get a lot of in-the-clear chatter that'll use up every Mandarin-speaker they have at Fort Meade and tell us not very much about their overall intentions. The operational stuff will be useful—it'll tell us a lot about their capabilities. If I know Admiral Mancuso—COM-SUBPAC—he'll have one or two of his boats play a little fast and loose to see if the Chinese can acquire one and prosecute it, but nothing overt. That's one of our options if we don't like the way this exercise is going."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if you really want to put the fear of God in a naval officer, you let him know there's a submarine around which is to say, Mr. Secretary, one appears unexpectedly in the middle of your formation and immediately disappears again. It's a head game, and a nasty one. Our people are good at that, and Bart Mancuso knows how to use his boats. We couldn't have defeated the Japanese without him," Jackson said positively.

"He's that good?" Mancuso was just a name to the new SecDef.

"None better. He's one of the people you listen to. So's your CINCPAC, Dave Seaton."

"Admiral DeMarco told me—"

"Sir, may I speak freely?" the J-3 asked.

"Jackson, in here that's the only way."

"Bruno DeMarco was made Vice Chief of Naval Operations for a reason."

Bretano got it at once. "Oh, to give speeches and not do anything that can hurt the Navy?" Robby's reply was a nod. "Noted, Admiral Jackson."

"Sir, I don't know much about industry, but there's something you need to learn about this building. There's two kinds of officers in the Pentagon, operators and bureaucrats. Admiral DcMarco has been here for more than half of his career. Mancuso and Seaton are operators, and they try very hard to stay out of this building."

"So have you," Bretano observed.

"I guess I just like the smell of salt air, Mr. Secretary. I'm not polishing my own apple here, sir. You'll decide if you like me or not—what the hell, I'm out of the flying business anyway, and that's what I signed up to do. But, damn it, when Seaton and Mancuso talk, I hope you'll listen."

"What's the matter with you, Robby?" the SecDef asked with sudden concern. He knew a good employee when he saw one.

Jackson shrugged. "Arthritis. Runs in the family. Could be worse, sir. It won't hurt my golf game, and flag officers don't get to fly very much anyway."

"You don't care about getting promoted, do you?" Bretano was about to recommend another star for Jackson.

"Mr. Secretary, I'm the son of a preacher man in Mississippi. I got into Annapolis, flew fighters for twenty years, and I'm still alive to talk about it." All too many of his friends were not, a fact Robby never forgot. "I can retire whenever I want and get a good job. I figure I'm ahead of the game whatever happens. But America's been pretty good to me, and I owe something back. What I owe, sir, is to tell the truth and do my best and screw the

consequences."

"So you're not a bureaucrat, either." Bretano wondered what Jackson's degree was in. He sure talked like a competent engineer. He even smiled like one.

"I'd rather play piano in a whorehouse, sir. It's more honest work."

"We're going to get along, Robby. Put a plan together. Let's keep a close eye on the Chinese."

"Actually, I'm just supposed to advise and—"

"Then coordinate with Seaton. I imagine he listens to you, too."

THE UN INSPECTION teams had become so accustomed to frustration that they hardly knew how to deal with satisfaction. The various staffs at the various facilities had given over reams of paper, still photographs, and videotapes, and practically raced the inspectors through the installations, pointing out the important aspects of the workings, and often demonstrating the easiest method of deactivating the more offensive features. There was the minor problem that the difference between a chemical-weapons plant and a factory for insecticide was essentially nil. Nerve gas had been an accidental invention of research into killing bugs (most insecticides are nerve poisons), and what it came down to, really, were the chemical ingredients, called "precursors." Besides which, any country with oil resources and a petrochemical industry routinely produced all manner of specialized products, most of them toxic to humans anyway.

But the game had rules, and one of the rules was that honest people were assumed not to produce forbidden weapons, and overnight Iraq had become an honest member of the world community.

This fact was made clear at the meeting of the United Nations Security Council. The Iraqi ambassador spoke from his seat at the annular table, using charts to show what had already been opened to the inspection teams, and lamenting the fact that he'd been unable to speak the truth before. The other diplomats in the room understood. Many of them lied so much that they scarcely knew what the truth was. And so it was now that they saw truth and didn't recognize the lie behind it.

"In view of the full compliance of my country with all United Nations resolutions, we respectfully request that, in view of the needs of the citizens of my country, the embargo on foodstuffs be lifted as quickly as possible," the ambassador concluded. Even his tone was reasonable now, the other diplomats noted with satisfaction.

"The chair recognizes the ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran," said the Chinese ambassador, who currently had the rotating chairmanship for the Security Council.

"No country in this body has greater reason to dislike Iraq. The chemical-weapons plants inspected today manufactured weapons of mass destruction which were then used against the people of my country. At the same time, we feel it is incumbent upon us to recognize the new day that has dawned over our neighbor. The citizens of Iraq have suffered long because of the actions of their former ruler. That ruler is gone, and the new government shows every

sign of reentering the community of nations. In view of that, the Islamic Republic of Iran will support an immediate suspension of the embargo. We will, moreover, initiate an emergency transfer of foodstuffs to bring relief to the Iraqi citizens. Iran proposes that the suspension should be conditional upon Iraq's continued good faith. To that end, we submit Draft Resolution 3659 . . ."

Scott Adler had flown up to New York to take the American seat at the Council. The American ambassador to the UN was an experienced diplomat, but for some situations the proximity of Washington was just too convenient, and this was one. For what little good it did, Adler thought. The Secretary of State had no cards to play at all. Often the cleverest ploy in diplomacy was to do exactly what your adversary requested. That had been the greatest fear in 1991, that Iraq could have simply withdrawn from Kuwait, leaving America and her allies with nothing to do, and preserving the Iraqi military to fight another day. It had been, fortunately, an option just a little too clever for Iraq to exercise. But someone had learned from that. When you demanded that someone should do something or else be denied something that he needed, and then that person did it—well, then you could no longer deny what he wanted, could you?

Adler had been fully briefed on the situation, for all the good it did him. It was rather like sitting at a poker game with three aces after the draw, only to learn that your opponent had a straight flush. Good information didn't always help. The only thing that could delay the proceedings was the turgid pace of the United Nations, and even that had limitations when diplomats had an attack of enthusiasm. Adler could have asked for a postponement of the vote to ensure Iraqi compliance with the long-standing UN demands, but Iran had already handled that by submitting a resolution that specified the temporary and conditional nature of the embargo suspension. They'd also made it very clear that they were going to ship food anyway—in fact already had, via truck, on the theory that doing something illegal in public made it acceptable. The SecState looked over at his ambassador—they'd been friends for years—and caught the ironic wink. The British ambassador was looking down at a pad of penciled doodles. The Russian one was reading dispatches. Nobody was listening, really. They didn't have to. In two hours, the Iranian resolution would pass. Well, it could have been worse. At least he'd have a chance to speak face-to-face with the Chinese ambassador and ask about their naval maneuvers. He knew the answer he'd get, but he wouldn't know if it was the truth or not. Of course. *I'm the Secretary of State of the world's most powerful nation,* Adler thought, *but I'm just a spectator today*.

26

WEEDS

THERE WERE FEW THINGS sadder than a sick child. Sohaila, her name was, Dr. MacGregor remembered. A pretty name, for a pretty, elfin little girl. Her father carried her in his arms. He appeared to be a brutish man—that was MacGregor's first impression, and he'd learned to trust them—but if so, one transformed by concern for his child. His wife was in his wake, along with another Arabic-appearing man wearing a jacket, and behind *him* was an official-looking Sudanese, all of which the physician noted and ignored. They weren't sick. Sohaila was.

"Well, hello again, young lady," he said, with a comforting smile. "You are not feeling at all well, are you? We'll have to see about that, won't we? Come with me," he said to the father.

Clearly these people were important to someone, and they would be treated accordingly. MacGregor led them to an examining room. The father set the little girl down on the table and backed away, letting his wife hold Sohaila's hand. The bodyguards—that's what they had to be—remained outside. The physician touched his hand to the child's forehead. She was burning up—39 at least. Okay. He washed his hands thoroughly and donned gloves, again because this was Africa, and in Africa you took every precaution. His first considered action was to take her temperature via the ear: 39.4. Pulse was rapid but not worrisome for a child. A quick check with a stethoscope confirmed normal heart sounds and no particular problem with the lungs, though her breathing was rapid as well. So far she had a fever, something hardly uncommon with young children, especially those recently arrived into a new environment. He looked up.

"What seems to be the problem with your daughter?" The father answered this time.

"She cannot eat, and her other end—"

"Vomiting and diarrhea?" MacGregor asked, checking her eyes out next. They seemed unremarkable as well.

"Yes, Doctor."

"You've arrived here recently, I believe?" He looked up when the answer was hesitation. "I need to know."

"Correct. From Iraq, just a few days."

"And your daughter has a mild case of asthma, nothing else, no other health problems, correct?"

"That is true, yes. She's had all her shots and such. She's never been ill like this." The mother just nodded. The father clearly had taken over, probably to get the feeling of authority, to make things happen, the physician surmised. It

was fine with him.

"Since arriving here, any unusual things to cat? You see," MacGregor explained, "travel can be very unsettling to some people, and children are unusually vulnerable. It could just be the local water."

"I gave her the medicine, but it got worse," the mother said.

"It is not the water," the father said positively. "The house has its own well. The water is good."

As though on cue, Sohaila moaned and turned, vomiting off the examining table and onto the tile floor. It wasn't the right color. There were traces of red and black. Red for new blood, black for old. It wasn't jet lag or bad water. Perhaps an ulcer? Food poisoning? MacGregor blinked and instinctively checked to be sure his hands were gloved. The mother was looking for a paper towel to—

"Don't touch that," he said mildly. He next took the child's blood pressure. It was low, confirming an internal bleed. "Sohaila, I'm afraid you will be spending the night with us so that we can make you well again."

It could have been many things, but the doctor had been in Africa long enough to know that you acted as though it were the worst. The young physician consoled himself with the belief that it couldn't be all *that* bad.

IT WASN'T QUITE like the old days—what was?—but Mancuso enjoyed the work. He'd had a good war—*he* thought of it as a war; his submarines had done exactly what they'd been designed to do. After losing *Asheville* and *Charlotte*—those before the known commencement of hostilities—he'd lost no more. His boats had delivered on every mission assigned, savaging the enemy submarine force in a carefully planned ambush, supporting a brilliant special operation, conducting deep-strike missile launches, and, as always, gathering vital tactical intelligence. His best play, COMSUBPAC judged, had been in recalling the boomers from retirement. They were too big and too unwieldy to be fast-attack boats, but God damn if they hadn't done the job for him. Enough so that they were all down the hill from his headquarters, tied alongside, their crews swaggering around town a bit, with brooms still prominent on their sails. Okay, so he wasn't Charlie Lockwood exactly, modesty told him. He'd done the job he'd been paid to do. And now he had another.

"So what are they supposed to be up to?" he asked his immediate boss, Admiral Dave Scaton.

"Nobody seems to know." Seaton had come over to look around. Like any good officer, he tried to get the hell out of his office as much as possible, even if it only meant visiting another. "Maybe just a FleetEx, but with a new President, maybe they want to flex their muscles and see what happens." People in uniform did not like such international examinations, since they were usually the ones whose lives were part of the grading procedure.

"I know this guy, boss," Bart said soberly.

"Oh?"

"Not all that well, but you know about *Red October."* Seaton grinned. "Bart, if you ever tell me that story, one of us has to kill the other, and I'm bigger."

The story, one of the most closely guarded secrets in the Navy's history, still was not widely known, though the rumors—one could never stop those were many and diverse.

"You need to know, Admiral. You need to know what National Command Authority has hanging between his legs. I've been shipmates with the guy."

That earned Mancuso a hard blink from CINCPAC. "You're kidding."

"Ryan was aboard the boomer with me. Matter of fact, he got aboard before I did." Mancuso closed his eyes, delighted that he could finally tell this sea story and get away with it. Dave Seaton was a theater commander-in-chief, and he had a right to know what sort of man was sending the orders down from Washington.

"I heard he was involved in the operation, even that he got aboard, but I thought that was at Norfolk, when they parked her at the Eight-Ten Dock. I mean, he's a spook, right, an intel weenie . . ."

"Not hardly. He killed a guy—shot him, right in the missile room—before I got aboard. He was on the helm when we clobbered the Alfa. He was scared shitless, but he didn't cave. This President we've got's been there and done that. Anyway, if they want to test our President, my money's on him. Two big brass ones, Dave, that's what he's got hangin'. He may not look like it on TV, but I'll follow that son of a bitch anywhere." Mancuso surprised himself with the conclusion. It was the first time he'd thought it all the way through.

"Good to know," Seaton thought.

"So what's the mission?" SUBPAC asked.

"J-3 wants us to shadow."

"You know Jackson better than I do. What are the parameters?"

"If this is a FleetEx and nothing else, we observe covertly. If things change, we let them know we care. You've got point, Bart. My cupboard's pretty damned bare."

They had only to look out the windows to see that. *Enterprise* and *John Stennis* were both in drydock. CINCPAC did not have a single carrier to deploy, and wouldn't for two more months. They'd run *Johnnie Reb* on two shafts for the retaking of the Marianas, but now she lay alongside her older sister, with huge holes torched from the flight deck down to the first platform level while new turbines and reduction gears were fabricated. The aircraft carrier was the usual means for the United States Navy to make a show of force. Probably that was part of the Chinese plan, to see how America would react when a substantive reaction was not possible, or so it would appear to some.

"Will you cover for me with DeMarco?" Mancuso asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Bruno's from the old school. He thinks it's bad to get detected. Personally, I think sometimes it can be a good thing. If you want me to rattle John Chinaman's cage, he has to hear the bars shake, doesn't he?"

"I'll write the orders accordingly. How you run it is your business. For the moment, if some 'can skipper talks to his XO about getting laid on the beach, I want it on tape for my collection."

"Dave, that's an order a man can understand. I'll even get you the phone number, sir."

“AND NOT A damned thing we can do,” Cliff Rutledge concluded his assessment.

“Gee, Cliff,” Scott Adler responded. “I kinda figured that one out for myself.” The idea was that subordinates gave you alternatives instead of taking them away—or in this case, telling you what you already knew.

They’d been fairly lucky to this point. Nothing much had gotten out to the media. Washington was still too shell-shocked, the junior people filling senior posts were not yet confident enough to leak information without authorization, and the senior posts President Ryan had filled were remarkably loyal to their Commander-in-Chief, an unexpected benefit of picking outsiders who didn’t know from politics. But it couldn’t last, especially with something as juicy as a new country about to be born from two enemies, both of whom had shed American blood.

“I suppose we could always just do nothing,” Rutledge observed lightly, wondering what the reaction would be. This alternative was distinct from not being able to do anything, a metaphysical subtlety not lost on official Washington.

“Taking that position only encourages developments adverse to our interests,” another senior staffer observed crossly.

“As opposed to proclaiming our impotence?” Rutledge replied. “If we say we don’t like it, and then we fail to stop it, that’s worse than our taking no position at all.”

Adler reflected that you could always depend on a Harvard man for good grammar and finely split hairs and, in Rutledge’s case, not much more than that. This career foreign service officer had gotten to the seventh floor by never putting a foot wrong, which was another way of saying that he’d never led a dance partner in his life. On the other hand, he was superbly connected —or had been. Cliff had the deadliest disease of a FSO, however. Everything was negotiable. Adler didn’t think that way. You had to stand and fight for some things, because if you didn’t, the other guy would decide where the battlefield was, and then he had control. The mission of diplomats was to prevent war, a serious business, Adler thought, which one accomplished by knowing where to stand firm and where the limits on negotiation were. For the Assistant Secretary of State for Policy, it was just an unending dance. With someone else leading. Alas, Adler didn’t yet have the political capital to fire the man, or maybe make him an ambassador to some harmless post. He himself still had to be confirmed by the new Senate, for example.

“So just call it a regional issue?” another senior diplomat asked. Adler’s head turned slowly. Was Rutledge building a consensus?

“No, it is not that,” the Secretary of State pronounced, making his stand within his own conference room. “It is a vital security interest of the United States. We have pledged our support to the Saudis.”

“Line in the sand?” Cliff asked. “There’s no reason to do that yet. Look, let’s be sensible about this, okay? Iran and Iraq merge and form this new United Islamic Republic, fine. Then what? It takes them years to get the new country organized. In that time, forces which we know to be under way in Iran weaken the theocratic regime that’s been giving us such a royal pain in the

butt. This is not a one-way deal, is it? We can expect that from the influence the secular elements in Iraqi society will necessarily have in Iran. If we panic and get pushy, we make life easier for Daryaei and his fanatics. But if we take it easy, then we lessen the imperative for them to stoke up the rhetoric against us. Okay, we can't stop this merger, can we?" Rutledge went on. "So if we can't, what do we do? We think of it as an opportunity to open a dialogue with the new country."

There was a certain logic to the proposal, Adler noted, noting also the tentative nods around the conference table. He knew the proper buzzwords. Opportunity. Dialogue.

"That'll really make the Saudis feel warm and fuzzy," a voice objected from the far end of the table. It was Bert Vasco, the most junior man here. "Mr. Rutledge, I think you underestimate the situation. Iran managed the assassination—"

"We have no proof of that, do we?"

"And Al Capone was never convicted for Valentine's Day, but I saw the movie." Being called into the Oval Office had enlivened the desk officer's rhetoric. Adler raised an amused eyebrow. "Somebody is orchestrating this, starting with the shooting, continuing with the elimination first of the military high command, and then second with the slaughter of the Ba'ath Party leadership. Next, we have this religious revival now under way. The picture I have of this is one of renewed national and religious identity. *That* will attenuate the moderating influences you referred to. The internal dissent in Iran will be knocked back a full year at least by these developments—and we don't know what else might be going on. Daryaei's a plotter, and a good one. He's patient, dedicated, and one ruthless son of a bitch—"

"Who's on his last legs," one of Rutledge's allies in the room objected.

"Says who?" Vasco shot back. "He's managed this one pretty sharp."

"He's in his seventies."

"He doesn't smoke or drink. Every tape we have of him in public, he looks vigorous enough. Underestimating this man is a mistake we've made before."

"He's out of touch with his own people."

"Maybe he doesn't know that. He's having a good year so far, and everybody likes a winner," Vasco concluded.

"Bert, maybe you're just worried about losing your desk when they form the UIR," someone joked. It was a low blow, aimed by a senior man at a junior, with chuckles around the table to remind him of that. The resulting silence told the Secretary of State that there was a consensus forming, and not the one he wanted. Time to take control again.

"Okay, moving on," Adler said. "The FBI will be back tomorrow to talk to us about the purloined letter. And guess what they'll be bringing?"

"Not the Box again," someone groaned. Nobody noticed the way Rutledge's head turned.

"Just think of it as a routine test for our security clearances," SecState told his principal subordinates. Polygraphs weren't exactly unknown for the senior people here.

"God damn it, Scott," Cliff said, speaking for the others. "Either we're trusted or we're not. I've already wasted hours with those people."

"You know, they never found Nixon's letter of resignation, either," another said.

"Maybe Henry kept it," a third joked.

"Tomorrow. Starting at ten o'clock. Myself included," Adler told them. He thought it a waste of time as well.

HIS SKIN WAS very fair, his eyes gray, and his hair had a reddish tinge, the result, he thought, of an Englishwoman somewhere in his ancestry, or such was the family joke. One advantage was his ability to pass for any Caucasian ethnicity. That he could still do so was the result of his caution. On his few "public" operations, he'd tinted his hair, worn dark glasses, and let his beard grow—that was black—which resulted in jokes within his own community: "Movie star," they said. But many of the jokers were dead, and he was not. Perhaps the Israelis had photos of him one never knew about them, but one did know that they rarely shared information with anyone, even their American patrons, which was foolish. And you couldn't worry about everything, even photographs in some Mossad file cabinet.

He came through Dulles International Airport after the flight from Frankfurt, with the requisite two bags of the serious businessman he was, with nothing more to declare than a liter of Scotch purchased in a German dutyfree store. Purpose of his visit to America? Business and pleasure. Is it safe to move around Washington now? Terrible thing, saw the replay on the TV news, must be a thousand times, dreadful. It is? Really? Things are back to normal now? Good. His rental car was waiting. He drove to a nearby hotel, tired from the long flight. There he purchased a paper, ordered dinner in, and switched on the TV. That done, he plugged his portable computer into the room's phone they all had data jacks now—and accessed the Net to tell Badrayn that he was safely in-country for his reconnaissance mission. A commercial encryption program transformed what was a meaningless code phrase into total gibberish.

"WELCOME ABOARD. My name is Clark," John told the first class of fifteen. He was turned out much better than was his custom, wearing a properly tailored suit, buttondown shirt, and a striped tie. For the moment, he had to impress in one way. Soon he'd do it in another. Getting the first group in had been easier than expected. The CIA, Hollywood notwithstanding, is an agency popular among American citizens, with at least ten applications for every opening, and it was just a matter of doing a computer search of the applications to find fifteen which fit the parameters of Clark's PLAN BLUE. Every one was a police officer with a college degree, at least four years of service, and an unblemished record which would be further checked by the FBI. For the moment, all were men, probably a mistake, John thought, but for the moment it wasn't important. Seven were white, two black, and one Asian. They were, mainly, from big-city police forces. All were at least bilingual.

"I am a field intelligence officer. Not an 'agent,' not a 'spy,' not an 'operative.' An *officer,"* he explained. "I've been in the business for quite some

time. I'm married and I have two children. If any of you have ideas about meeting a sleek blonde and shooting people, you can leave now. This business is mainly dull, especially if you're smart enough to do it right. You're all cops, and therefore you already know how important this job is. We deal with high-level crime, and the job is about getting information so that those major crimes can be stopped before people get killed. We do that by gathering information and passing it on to those who need it. Others look at satellite pictures or try to read the other guy's mail. We do the hard part. We get our information from *people*. Some are good people with good motives. Some are not such good people who want money, who want to get even, or who want to feel important. What these people are doesn't matter. You've all worked informants on the street, and they're not all Mother Teresa, are they? Same thing here. Your informants will often be better educated, more powerful people, but they won't be very different from the ones you've been working with. And just like your street informants, you have to be loyal to them, you have to protect them, and you'll have to wring their scrawny little necks from time to time. If you fuck up, those people die, and in some of the places you'll be working, their wives and children will die, too. If you think I'm kidding on that, you're wrong, people. You will work in countries where due process of law means whatever somebody wants it to mean. You've seen that on television just in the last few days, right?" he asked. Some of the Ba'ath officials shot in Baghdad had made world news telecasts, with the usual warnings about children and the sensitive, who invariably watched anyway. The heads nodded soberly.

"You will, for the most part, *not* be armed in the field. You will survive by your wits. You will sometimes be at risk of your life. I've lost friends in the field, some in places you know about, and some in places you don't. The world may be kinder and gentler now, but not everywhere. You're not going to be going to the nice places, guys," John promised them. In the back of the room, Ding Chavez was struggling hard not to smile. *That little greasy guy is my partner and he's engaged to my little girl.* No sense, Domingo knew, in scaring them all away.

"What's good about the job? Well, what's good about being a cop? Answer: every bad guy you put away saves lives on the street. In this job, getting the right information to the right people saves lives, too. Lots," Clark emphasized. "When we do the job right, wars *don't* happen.

"Anyway, welcome aboard. I am your supervising teacher. You will find the training here stimulating and difficult. It starts at eight-thirty tomorrow morning." With that John left the podium and walked to the back of the room. Chavez opened the door for him and they walked out into the fresh air.

"Gee, Mr. C., where do I sign up?"

"God damn it, Ding, I had to say *something.*" It had been John's longest oration in some years.

"So, to get these rookies aboard, what did Foley have to do?"

"The RIFs have begun, m'boy. Hell, Ding, we had to get things started, didn't we?"

"I think you should have waited a few weeks. Foley isn't confirmed by the Senate yet. Better to wait," Chavez thought. "But I'm just a junior spook."

"I keep forgetting how smart you've gotten."

"SO WHO THE hell is Zhang Han San?" Ryan asked.

"Somewhere in his fifties, but young looking for his age, ten kilos overweight, five four or so, medium everything, so says our friend," Dan Murray reported from his written notes. "Quiet and thoughtful, and he stiffed Yamata."

"Oh?" Mary Pat Foley said. "How so?"

"Yamata was on Saipan when we got control of things. He placed a call to Beijing, looking to bug out to a safe place. Mr. Zhang reacted as though it were a cold call. 'What deal? We don't have any deal,' " the FBI Director mimicked. "And after that, the calls didn't go through at all. Our Japanese friend regards that as a personal betrayal."

"Sounds as though he's singing like a canary," Ed Foley observed. "Does that strike anybody as suspicious?"

"No," Ryan said. "In World War Two, what Japanese prisoners we took talked plenty."

"The President's right," Murray confirmed. "I asked Tanaka about that myself. He says it's a cultural thing. Yamata wants to take his own life—the honorable way out in their cultural context—but they've got him on suicide watch—not even shoestrings. The resulting disgrace is so great for the guy that he has no particular reason to keep secrets. Hell of an interrogation technique. Anyway, Zhang is supposedly a diplomat—Yamata said he was titularly part of a trade delegation—but State's never heard of him. The Japanese have no records of the name on any diplomatic list. That makes him a spook, as far as I'm concerned, and so . . ." He looked over at the Foleys.

"I ran the name," Mary Pat said. "Zippo. But who's to say it's a real name?"

"Even if it were," her husband added, "we don't know that much about their intelligence people. If I had to guess"—and he did—"he's political. Why? He cut a deal, a quiet one but a big one. Their military is still on an increased readiness and training regime because of that deal, which is why the Russians are still nervous. Whoever this guy is, best guess, he's a very serious player." Which wasn't exactly an earth-shaking revelation.

"Anything you can do to find out?" Murray inquired delicately.

Mrs. Foley shook her head. "No assets in place, at least nothing we can use for this. We have a good husband-wife team in Hong Kong, setting up a nice little network. We have a couple of assets in Shanghai. In Beijing we have some low-level agents in the defense ministry, but they're long-term prospects and using them on this issue wouldn't accomplish much more than to endanger them. Dan, the problem we have with China is that we don't really know how their government works. It has levels of complexity that we can only guess at. The Politburo members, we know who they are—we think. One of the biggies might be dead now, and we've been fishing for that tidbit for over a month. Even the Russians let us know when they buried people," the DDO noted, as she sipped her wine. Ryan had come to like bringing his closest advisers in for drinks after the close of regular office hours. It hadn't quite occurred to him that he was extending their working day. He was also short-

circuiting his own National Security Advisor, but as loyal and clever as Ben Goodley was, Jack Ryan still wanted to hear it directly when he could.

Ed took up the explanation. “You see, sure, we think we know the political varsity over there, but we’ve never had a real handle on the second-string players. The dynamic is simple when you think about it, but it took us long enough to twig to it. We’re talking elderly folks over there. They can’t get around all that well. They need mobile eyes and ears, and over the years those gofers have accumulated a lot of power. Who’s really calling the shots? We don’t know for sure, and without ID’ing people, we can’t find out.”

“I can dig it, guys.” Murray grunted, and reached for his beer. “When I was working OC—organized crime sometimes we ID’d Mafia *capi* by who held the car door open for whom. Hell of a way to do business.” It was the friendliest thing the Foleys remembered hearing from the FBI about CIA. “Operational security really isn’t all that hard if you think about it a little.”

“Makes a good case for PLAN BLUE,” Jack said next.

“Well, then you might be pleased to know the first fifteen are in the pipeline even as we speak. John should have given them their welcoming speech a few hours ago,” the DCI announced.

Ryan had gone over Foley’s reduction-in-force plan for CIA. Ed planned to swing a mean ax, ultimately reducing the Agency budget by $500 million over five years while increasing the field force. It was something to make people on the Hill happy, though with much of CIA’s real budget in the black part of federal expenditures, few would ever know. Or maybe not, Jack thought. That was likely to leak.

Leaks. He’d hated them over his entire career. But now they were part of statecraft, weren’t they? the President reflected. But what was he supposed to think? That leaks were *okay* now that he was the one doing it or allowing it? Damn. Laws and principles weren’t supposed to work that way, were they? What exactly, what idea or ideal or principle or rock was he supposed to hold on to?

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THE BODYGUARD’S NAME was Saleh. He was a physically robust individual, as his work demanded, and, as such, one who tried to deny illness or discomfort of any sort. A man of his station in life simply did not admit to difficulty. But when discomfort didn’t go away as he’d expected and as the doctor had told him—Saleh knew that all men were vulnerable to stomach problems—and then he saw blood in the toilet . . . it was that, really. The body isn’t supposed to issue blood except from a shaving cut or a bullet wound. Not in any case from moving one’s bowels, and it was the sort of indicator certain to shake any man, all the more so a strong and otherwise confident one. Like many, he delayed somewhat, asking himself if it might be a temporary problem that would go away, that the discomfort would peak and abate, as flu symptoms always did. But these kept getting worse, and finally his fear got the better of him. Before dawn he left the villa, taking the car and driving to the hospital. Along the way he had to stop the car to vomit,

deliberately not looking to see what he'd left on the street before heading on, his body weakening with every minute, until the walk from the car to the door seemed to take every bit of energy he had. In what passed here for an emergency room, he waited while people searched for his records. It was the smell of hospitals which frightened him, the same disinfectant odor which makes a dog stop dead and strain backward at the leash and whimper and pull away, because the smell is associated with pain, until finally a black nurse called his name, and then he rose, assembled his dignity and composure, and walked into the same examining room he'd visited before.

THE SECOND GROUP often criminals was little different from the first, except that in this one there was not a condemned apostate. It was easy to dislike them, Moudi thought, looking at the group with their sallow faces and slinking mannerisms. It was their expressions most of all. They looked like criminals, never quite meeting his eyes, glancing this way and that, always, it seemed, searching for a way out, a trick, an angle, something underhanded. The combination of fear and lingering brutality on their faces. They were not just men, and while that seemed to the doctor a puerile observation, it did mark them as different from himself and the people he knew, and therefore as the bearers of lives which were unimportant.

"We have some sick people here," he told them. "You have been assigned to look after them. If you do this job well, you will be trained as hospital aides for work at your prisons. If not, you will be returned to your cells and your sentences. If any of you misbehaves, your punishment will be immediate and severe." They all nodded. They knew about severe treatment. Iranian prisons were not noted for their amenities. Nor, it would seem, for good food. They all had pale skin and rheumy eyes. Well, what solicitude did such people merit? the physician asked himself. Each of them was guilty of known crimes, all of them serious, and what unknown crimes lay in their pasts only the criminals and Allah knew. What pity Moudi felt for them was residual, a result of his medical training, which compelled him to view them as human beings no matter what. That he could overcome. Robbers, thieves, pederasts all, they'd violated the law in a country where law was a thing of God, and if it was stern, it was also fair. If their treatment was harsh by Western standards—Europeans and Americans had the strangest ideas about human rights; what of the rights of the victims of such people?—that was just too bad, Moudi told himself, distancing himself from the people before him. Amnesty International had long since stopped complaining about his country's prisons. Perhaps they could devote their attention to other things, like the treatment of the Faithful in other lands. There was not a Sister Jean Baptiste among them, and she was dead, and that was written, and what remained was to see if their fates had been penned by the same hand in the book of life and death. He nodded to the head guard, who shouted at the new "aides." They even stood insolently, Moudi saw. Well, they'd all see about that.

They'd all been pre-processed, stripped, showered, shaved, disinfected, and dressed in surgical greens with single-digit numbers on the back. They wore cloth slippers. The armed guards led them off to the air-lock doors, inside of

which were the army medics, supplemented by a single armed guard, who kept his distance, a pistol in his gloved hands. Moudi returned to the security room to watch on the TV system. On the black-and-white monitors he watched them pad down the corridor, eyes shifting left and right in curiosity—and doubtless looking for a way out. All the eyes lingered on the guard, who was never less than four meters distant. Along the way, each of the new arrivals was handed a plastic bucket with various simple tools inside—the buckets also were numbered.

They'd all started somewhat at seeing the medics in their protective suits, but shuffled along anyway. It was at the entrance of the treatment room that they stopped. It must have been the smell, or perhaps the sight. Slow to pick up on the situation, one of their number had finally realized that whatever this was—

On the monitor, a medic gestured at the one who froze in the doorway. The man hesitated, then started speaking back. A moment later, he hurled his bucket down at the floor and started shaking his fist, while the others watched to see what would result. Then the security guard appeared out of the corner of the picture, his arm coming up and his pistol extended. At a range of two meters, he fired—so strange to see the shot but not hear it—straight into the criminal's face. The body fell to the tile floor, leaving a pattern of black spots on the gray wall. The nearest medic pointed to one of the prisoners, who immediately retrieved the fallen bucket and went into the room. There would be no more disciplinary trouble with this group. Moudi shifted his gaze to the next monitor.

This one was a color camera. It had to be. It could also be panned and zoomed. Moudi indicated the corner bed, Patient 1. The new arrival with *I* on his back and bucket just stood there at the foot of the bed at first, bucket in his hand, not knowing what he beheld. There was a sound pickup for this room, but it didn't work terribly well because it was a single nondirectional mike, and the security staff had long since turned it down to zero, because the sound was so piteous as to be debilitating to those who listened—moans, whimpers, cries from dying men who in their current state did not appear so sinister. The apostate, predictably, was the worst. He prayed and even tried to comfort those he could reach from his bed. He'd even attempted to lead a few in prayer, but they'd been the wrong prayers, and his roommates were not of the sort to speak to God under the best of circumstances.

Aide 1 continued to stand for a minute or so, looking down at Patient 1, a convicted murderer, his ankle chained to the bed. Moudi took control of the camera and zoomed it in further to see that the shackles had worn away the skin. There was a red stain on the mattress from it. The man—the *condemned patient,* Moudi corrected himself—was writhing slowly, and then Aide 1 remembered what he'd been told. He donned his plastic gloves, wet his sponge, and rubbed it across the patient's forehead. Moudi backed the camera off. One by one, the others did the same, and the army medics withdrew.

The treatment regime for the patients was not going to be a serious one. There was no point in it, since they'd already fulfilled their purpose in the project. That made life much easier on everyone. No IV lines to run, no needles to stick—and no "sharps" to worry about. In contracting Ebola, they'd

confirmed that the Mayinga strain was indeed airborne, and now all that was left was to prove that the virus had not attenuated itself in the reproductive process . . . and that it could be passed on by the same aerosol process which had infected the first grouping of criminals. Most of the new arrivals, he saw, did what they'd been told to do—but badly, crassly, wiping off their charges with quick, ungentle strokes of the sponges. A few seemed genuinely compassionate. Perhaps Allah would notice their charity and show them mercy when the time came, less than ten days from now.

"REPORT CARDS," CATHY said when Jack came into the bedroom.

"Good or bad?" her husband asked.

"See for yourself," his wife suggested.

Uh-oh, the President thought, taking them from her hand. For all that, it wasn't so bad. The attached commentary sheets—every teacher did a short paragraph to supplement the letter grade—noted that the quality of the homework turned in had improved in the past few weeks ... so, the Secret Service agents *were* helping with that, Jack realized. At one level, it was amusing. At another—strangers were doing the father's job, and that thought made his stomach contract a little. The loyalty of the agents merely illustrated something that he was failing to do for his own kids.

"If Sally wants to get into Hopkins, she's going to have to pay more attention to her science courses," Cathy observed.

"She's just a kid." To her father she'd always be the little girl who—

"She's growing up, and guess what? She's interested in a young soccer player. Name of Kenny, and he's way Cool," SURGEON reported. "Also needs a haircut. His is longer than mine."

"Oh, shit," SWORDSMAN replied.

"Surprised it took this long. I started dating when I was—"

"I don't want to hear about it—"

"I married you, didn't I?" Pause. "Mr. President . . ."

Jack turned. "It has been a while."

"Any way we can get to the Lincoln Bedroom?" Cathy asked. Jack looked over and saw a glass on her nightstand. She'd had a drink or two. Tomorrow wouldn't be a surgery day.

"He never slept there, babe. They call it that because—"

"The picture. I know. I asked. I like the bed," she explained with a smile. Cathy set her patient notes down and took off her reading glasses. Then she held her arms up, almost like a toddler soliciting a pickup and a hug. "You know, I've never made love to the most powerful man in the world before—at least not this week."

"What about the timing?" Cathy had never used the pill.

"What *about* the timing?" she replied. And she'd always been as regular as a metronome.

"You don't want another—"

"Maybe I don't especially care."

"You're forty," POTUS objected.

"Well, thank you! That's well short of the record. What are you worried

about?”

Jack thought about that for a moment. “Nothing, I guess. Never did get that vasectomy, did I?”

“Nope, you never even talked to Pat about it like you said you would—and if you do it now,” FLOTUS went on with a positively wicked grin, “it’ll be in *all* the papers. Maybe even on live TV. Arnie might tell you that it’ll set a good example for the Zero Population Growth people, and you’ll cave on that. Except for the national security implications . . .”

“What?”

“President of the United States has his nuts cut, and they won’t respect America anymore, will they?”

Jack almost started laughing, but stopped himself. The Detail people in the corridor might hear and—

“What got into you?”

“Maybe I’m finally getting comfortable with all this—or maybe I just want to get laid,” she added.

That’s when the phone next to the bed rang. Cathy’s face made a noiseless snarl as she reached for it. “Hello? Yes, Dr. Sabo. Mrs. Emory? Okay . . . no, I don’t think so ... No, definitely not, I don’t care if she’s agitated or not, not till tomorrow. Get her something to help her sleep ... whatever it takes. The bandages stay on till I say otherwise, and make sure that’s on her chart, she’s too good at whining. Yes. Night, Doctor.” She replaced the phone and grumbled. “The lens replacement I did the other day. She doesn’t like being blindfolded, but if we take the coverings off too soon—”

“Wait a minute, he called—”

“They have our number at Wilmer.”

“The direct residence?” That one even bypassed Signals, though it, like all White House lines, was bugged. Or probably was. Ryan hadn’t asked, and probably didn’t want to know.

“They had it for home, didn’t they?” Cathy asked. “Me surgeon, me treat patients, me professor, always on call when me have patients—especially the pain-in-the-ass ones.”

“Interruptions.” Jack lay down next to his wife. “You don’t really want another baby, do you?”

“What I want is to make love to my husband. I can’t be picky about timing anymore, can I?”

“Has it been that bad?” He kissed her gently.

“Yes, but I’m not mad about it. You’re trying very hard. You remind me of my new residents—older, though.” She touched his face and smiled. “If something happens, it happens. I like being a woman.”

“I rather like it myself.”

27

RESULTS

SOME OF THEM HAD DEGREES in psychology. It was a common and favored degree for law-enforcement officers. Some even had advanced degrees, and one member of the Detail had a doctorate, having done his dissertation on the sub-specialty of profiling criminals. All were at the least gifted amateurs in the science of reading minds; Andrea Price was one of these. SURGEON had a spring in her step as she walked out to her helicopter. SWORDSMAN walked her out to the groundfloor door and kissed her good-bye—the kiss was routine, the walk-out and the hand-holding were not, or hadn't been lately. Price shared a glance with two of her agents, and they read one another's minds, as cops can do, and they judged it to be good, except for Raman, who was as smart as the rest of them, but rather more straitlaced. He devoted more passion to sports than anything else, and Price imagined him in front of his TV every night. He probably knew even how to program his VCR. Well, there were many personality types in the Service.

"What's today look like?" POTUS asked, turning away when the Black Hawk lifted off.

"SURGEON is airborne," Andrea heard in her earpiece. "Everything's clear," the overwatch people reported from their perches on the government buildings around the White House. They'd been scanning the perimeter for the last hour, as they did every day. There were the usual people out there, the "regulars," known by sight to the Detail members. These were people who seemed to turn up a lot. Some were just fascinated by the First Family, whichever family it might be. For them, the White House was America's real soap opera, *Dallas* writ large, and the trappings, the mechanics, really, of life in this most famous of dwellings drew them for some reason that Service psychologists struggled to understand, because for the armed agents on the Detail, "regulars" were dangerous by their very existence. And so the snipers on the Old Executive Office Building—OEOB—and Treasury knew them all by sight through their powerful spotting glasses, and knew them all by name, too, because Detail members were out there, too, disguised as street rats or passersby. At one time or another, the "regulars" had all been trailed to whatever homes they might have, and identified, and investigated, quietly. Those with irregularities were profiled for personality type—they all had a few kinks—and then they'd be carefully scanned by the Detail members who worked outside for weapons—up to and including being bumped into by a "jogger" and expertly groped while being helped to their feet during the embarrassed apology. But that danger was past, for now.

"Didn't you check your schedule last night?" Price asked, distracted from

her duties into asking a dumb question.

"No, decided to catch some TV," SWORDSMAN lied, not knowing that they spotted the lie. He didn't even blush, Price saw. For her part, she didn't allow her face to change. Even POTUS was allowed to have a secret or two, or at least the illusion of it.

"Okay, here's my copy." She handed it over. Ryan scanned the first page, which took him to lunch. "SecTreas is on the way in for breakfast right after CARDSHARP."

"What do you guys call George?" Jack asked, entering the West Wing.

"TRADER. He likes that," Andrea reported.

"Just so you pronounce it right." Which wasn't a bad line for 7:50 A.M., POTUS thought. But it was hard to tell. The Detail liked nearly all of his jokes. Maybe they were just being polite?

"Good morning, Mr. President." Goodley stood, as usual, when Jack entered the Oval Office.

"Hi, Ben." Ryan dropped the schedule down on his desk, made a quick scan for important documents, and took his seat. "Go."

"You stole my thunder talking with the crew last night. We have *gornischt* on Mr. Zhang. I could give you the long version, but I imagine you've already heard it." The President nodded for him to go on.

"Okay, developments in the Taiwan Strait. The PRC has fifteen surface ships at sea, two formations, one of six, one of nine. I have compositions if you want, but they're all destroyers and frigates. Deployed in regular squadron groupings, the Pentagon tells us. We have an EC-135 listening in. We have a submarine, *Pasadena,* camped between the two groups, with two more boats en route from central Pacific, timed to arrive in-area in thirty-six and fifty hours, respectively. CINCPAC, Admiral Seaton, is up to speed and tasking out a full surveillance package. His parameters are on Secretary Bretano's desk now. I've discussed it over the phone. Sounds like Seaton knows his business.

"Political side, the ROC government is taking no official notice of the exercise. They put out a press release to that effect, *but* their military is in contact with ours—through CINCPAC. We'll have people in their listening posts"—Goodley checked his watch—"may be there already. State doesn't think this is a very big deal, but they're watching."

"Overall picture?" Ryan asked.

"Could just be routine, but we wish their timing was a little better. They're not overtly pushing anything."

"And until they do, we don't push back. Okay, we take no official notice of this exercise. Let's keep our deployments quiet. No press releases, no briefings to the media. If we get any questions, it's no big deal."

Goodley nodded. "That's the plan, Mr. President.

"Next, Iraq, again, we have little in the way of direct information. Local TV is on a religious kick. It's all Shi'a. The Iranian clergymen we've been seeing are getting a lot of air time. The TV news coverage is almost entirely religion-based. The anchors are getting rhapsodic. The executions are done. We don't have a full body count, but it's over one hundred. That appears to be over. The Ba'ath leadership is gone for good. The littler fish are in the can. There was some stuff about how merciful the provisional government was to the 'lesser

criminals'—that's a quote. The 'mercy' is religiously justified, and it seems that some of the 'lesser criminals' have come back to Jesus excuse me, back to Allah—in one big hurry. There's TV pictures of them sitting with an imam and discussing their misdeeds.

"Next indicator, we're seeing more organized activity within the Iranian military. Troops are training. We're getting intercepts of tactical radio traffic. It's routine, but there's a lot of it. They had an all-nighter at Foggy Bottom to go over all this stuff. The Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Rutledge, set it up. He evidently ran the I and R division pretty ragged." The State Department's Office of Intelligence and Research was the smaller and much poorer cousin to the intelligence community, but in it were a handful of very astute analysts whose diplomatic perspective occasionally gave insights the intelligence community missed.

"Conclusions?" Jack asked. "From the all-nighter, I mean."

"None." *Of course,* Goodley could have added, but didn't. "I'll be talking to them in an hour or so."

"Pay attention to what I and R says. Pay particular attention to—"

"Bert Vasco. Yes," Goodley agreed. "He's all right, but I'll bet the seventh floor is giving him a pain in the ass. I talked to him twenty minutes ago. He says, are you ready, forty-eight hours. Nobody agrees with that. *Nobody,*" CARDSHARP emphasized.

"But . . . ?" Ryan rocked back in his chair.

"But I won't bet against him, boss. I have nothing to support his assessment. Our desk people at CIA don't agree. State won't back him up—they didn't even give it to me; I got it from Vasco directly, okay? But, you know, I am not going to say he's wrong." Goodley paused, realizing that he was not sounding like every other NIO. "We have to consider this one, boss. Vasco has good instincts, and he's got balls, too."

"We'll know quickly enough. Right or wrong, I agree that he's the best guy over there. Make sure Adler talks to him, and tell Scott I don't want him stomped, regardless of how it turns out."

Ben nodded emphatically as he made a note. "Vasco gets high-level protection. I like that, sir. It might even encourage other people to make a gut call once in a while."

"The Saudis?"

"Nothing from them. Almost like they're catatonic. I think they're afraid to ask for any help until there's a reason for it."

"Call Ali within the hour," the President ordered. "I want his opinion."

"Yes, sir."

"And if he wants to talk to me, at any time, night or day, tell him he's my friend, and I always have time for him."

"And that's the morning news, sir." He rose and stopped. "Who ever decided on CARDSHARP, by the way?"

"We did," Price said from the far end of the room. Her left hand went up to her earpiece. "It's in your file. You evidently played a good game of poker in your frat house."

"I won't ask you what my girlfriends said about me," the acting National Security Advisor said, on his way out the door.

"I didn't know that, Andrea."

"He's even won some money at Atlantic City. Everybody underestimates him 'cause of his age. TRADER just pulled in."

Ryan checked his agenda. Okay, this was about George's appearance before the Senate. The President took a minute to review his morning appointment list, while a Navy mess steward brought in a light breakfast tray.

"Mr. President, the Secretary of the Treasury," Agent Price announced at the side door to the corridor.

"Thank you, we can handle this alone," Ryan said, rising from his desk as George Winston came in.

"Morning, sir," SecTreas said, as the door closed quietly. He was dressed in one of his handmade suits, and was carrying a manila folder. Unlike his President, the Secretary of the Treasury was used to wearing a jacket most of the time. Ryan took his off and dropped it on the desk. Both sat on the twin couches, with the coffee table between them.

"Okay, how are things across the street?" Ryan asked, pouring himself some coffee, with the caffeine in this morning.

"If I ran my brokerage house like that, the SEC would have my hide on the barn door, my head over the fireplace, and my ass in Leavenworth. I'm going to—hell, I've already started bringing in some of my administrative folks down from New York. There are just too many people over there whose only job is looking at each other and telling them how important they all are. Nobody's *responsible* for anything. Damn it, at Columbus Group, we often make decisions by committee, but we make by-God *decisions* in time for them to matter. There are too many people, Mr. Pres—"

"You can call me Jack, at least in here, George, I—" The door to the secretaries' room opened and the photographer came in with his Nikon. He didn't say anything. He rarely did. He just snapped away, and the rubric was for everyone to pretend he simply wasn't there. It would have been a hell of an assignment for a spy, Ryan thought.

"Fine. Jack, how far can I go?" TRADER asked.

"I already told you that. It's your department to run. Just so you tell me about it first."

"I'm telling you, then. I'm going to cut staff. I'm going to set that department up like a business." He stopped for a second. "And I'm going to rewrite the tax code. God, I didn't know how screwed up it was until two days ago. I had some in-house lawyers come in and—"

"It has to be revenue-neutral. We can't go dicking around with the budget. None of us has the expertise yet, and until the House of Representatives is reconstituted—" The photographer left, having caught the President in a great pose, both hands extended over the coffee tray.

"Playmate of the Month," Winston said, with a hearty laugh. He lifted a croissant and buttered it. "We've run the models. The effect on revenue will be neutral on the basis of raw numbers, Jack, but there will probably be an overall increase in usable funds."

"Are you sure? Don't you need to study all the—"

"No, Jack. I don't need to study anything. I brought Mark Gant in to be my executive assistant. He knows computer modeling better than anybody I've

ever met. He spent last week chewing through the—didn't anybody ever tell you? They never *stop* looking at the tax system over there. Study? I pick up the phone, and inside half an hour I'll have a thousand-page document on my desk telling me how things were in 1952, what the tax code *then* did in every segment of the economy—or what people think it did, as opposed to what they thought *then* that it did, or as opposed to what the studies in the 1960s said *they* thought that it did." SecTreas paused for a bite. "Bottom line? Wall Street is far more complex, and uses simpler models, and those models *work*. Why? Because they're simpler. And I'm going to tell the Senate that in ninety minutes, with your permission."

"You're sure you're right on this, George?" POTUS asked. That was one of the problems, perhaps the largest of all. The President couldn't check everything that was done in his name—even checking one percent would have been an heroic feat—but he was responsible for it all. It was that knowledge that had doomed so many Presidents to micro-managerial failure. "Jack, I'm sure enough to bet my investors' money on it."

Two pairs of eyes met over the table. Each man knew the measure of the other. The President could have said that the welfare of the nation was a matter of greater moment than the few billions of dollars Winston had managed at the Columbus Group, but he didn't. Winston had built his investment house from nothing. Like Ryan, a man of humble origins, he'd created a business in a ferociously competitive environment on the basis of brains and integrity. Money entrusted to him by his clients had to be *more* precious than his own, and because it had always been so, he'd grown rich and powerful, but never forgotten the how and why of it all. The first important public-policy statement to be made by Ryan's administration would ride on Winston's savvy and honor. The President thought it over for a second, and then he nodded.

"Then run with it, TRADER." But then Winston had his misgivings. It was instructive to the President that even so powerful a figure as the Secretary of the Treasury lowered his eyes for a second, and then said something quieter and less positive than his confident assertion of five seconds earlier.

"You know, politically this is going to—"

"What you're going to say to the Senate, George, is it good for the country as a whole?"

"Yes, sir!" An emphatic nod of the head.

"Then don't wimp out on me."

SecTreas wiped his mouth with the monogrammed napkin, and looked down again. "You know, after this is all over and we go back to normal life, we really have to find a way to work together. There aren't many people like us, Ryan."

"Actually there are," the President said, after a moment's reflection. "The problem is that they never come here to work. You know who I learned that from? Cathy," Jack told him. "She fucks up, somebody goes blind, but she can't run away from making the call, can she? Imagine, you fuck up, and somebody loses his sight forever—or dies. The guys who work the emergency room are really on the ragged edge, like when Cathy and Sally went into Shock-Trauma. You blow the call, and somebody is gone forever. Big deal,

George, bigger than trading equities like we used to do. Same thing with cops. Same thing with soldiers. You have to make the call, right now, or something really bad happens. But those kinds of people don't come here to Washington, do they? And mainly that sort of guy goes to the place he—or she—has to be, where the real action is," Ryan said, almost wistfully. "The really good ones go where they're needed, and they always seem to know where that is."

"But the really good ones don't like the bullshit. So they don't come here?" Winston asked, getting his own course in Government 101, and finding Ryan a teacher of note.

"Some do. Adler at State. Another guy over there I've discovered, name of Vasco. But those are the ones who buck the system. The system works against them. Those are the ones we have to identify and protect. Mostly little ones, but what they do isn't little. They keep the system running, and mainly they go unnoticed because they don't care much about being noticed. They care about getting it done, serving the people out there. You know what I'd really like to do?" Ryan asked, for the first time revealing something from the depths of his soul. He hadn't even had the guts to say this to Arnie.

"Yeah, set up a system that really works, a system that recognizes the good ones and gives them what they deserve. You know how hard that is in *any* organization? Hell, it was a struggle at my shop, and Treasury has more janitors than I had trading executives. I'm not even sure where to start a job like that," Winston said. He would be one to grasp the scope of the dream, his President thought.

"Harder than you think, even. The guys who really do the work don't want to be bosses. They want to work. Cathy could be an administrator. They offered her the chair at the University of Virginia Medical School—and that would have been a big deal. But it would have cut her patient time in half, and she likes doing what she does. Someday Bernie Katz at Hopkins is going to retire, and they'll offer his chair to her, and she'll turn *that* down. Probably," Jack thought. "Unless I can talk her out of it."

"Can't be done, Jack." TRADER shook his head. "Hell of an idea, though."

"Grover Cleveland reformed the Civil Service over a hundred years ago," POTUS reminded his breakfast guest. "I know we can't make it perfect, but we *can* make it better. You're already trying—you just told me that. Think about it some."

"I'll do that," SecTreas promised, standing. "But for now, I have another revolution to foment. How many enemies can we afford to make?"

"There's always enemies, George. Jesus had enemies."

HE LIKED THE sobriquet "Movie Star," and having learned of it fifteen years before, he had also learned to make it work for him. The mission was reconnaissance, and the weapon was charm. He had a choice of accents in his repertoire. Since he had German travel documents, he affected the speech of a person from Frankfurt to go along with German clothing, complete to shoes and wallet, all purchased with money that came from whatever sponsor Ali Badrayn had recently found. The rental-car company had provided him with excellent maps, all spread on the bucket seat next to his. That saved him from

memorizing all his routes, which was tiresome, and wasteful of both his time and his photographic memory.

The first stop was St. Mary's School, located a few miles outside Annapolis. It was a religious school, Roman Catholic, that ran from pre-kindergartcn to twelfth grade, and had just under six hundred students. That made it a borderline case in terms of economics. The Star would get two or perhaps three passes, made somewhat easier by the fact that the school was on a point of land that had once been a sizable farm which the Catholic Church had talked out of some wealthy family or other. There was only one access road. The school's land ended at the water, and there was a river on the far side, past the athletic fields. The road had houses on one side, a residential development perhaps thirty years old. The school had eleven buildings, some closely bunched, others more spread out. Movie Star knew the ages of the targets, and from that it was easy enough to guess the buildings where they would spend much, if not all, of their time. The tactical environment was not a favorable one, and became less so when he spotted the protection. The school had plenty of land—at least two hundred hectares—and that made for a sizable defense perimeter, penetrating which had instant risks. He spotted a total of three large, dark vehicles, Chevy Suburbans, which could not have been more obviously the transport for the targets and their protectors. How many? He saw two people standing in the open, but the vehicles would have at least four guards each. The vehicles would be armored, and equipped with heavy weapons. One way in, and one way out. Almost a kilometer out to the main road. What about the water? Movie Star thought, driving to the end. Ah. There was a Coast Guard cutter there, a small one, but it would have a radio, and that made it large enough.

He stopped the car at the cul-de-sac, getting out to look at a house with a for-sale sign in the yard. He retrieved the morning paper from the car, ostentatiously checking the folded page against the number, then looking around some more. He had to be quick about it. The guards would be wary, and though they couldn't check everything—even the American Secret Service had limits on its time and resources—he couldn't afford to dawdle. His initial impressions were not at all favorable. Access was limited. So many students—picking out the right two would be difficult. The guards were many and dispersed. That was the bad part. Numbers mattered less than physical space. The most difficult defense to breach was a defense in depth, because depth meant both space *and* time. You could neutralize any number of people in a matter of seconds if you had the proper weapons and they were bunched up. But give them anything more than five seconds, and their training would kick in. The guards would be well-drilled. They'd have plans, some predictable, some not. That Coast Guard boat, for example, could dart into shore and take the targets clear. Or the guards could retreat with their charges to an isolated point and fight it out, and Movie Star had no illusions about their training and dedication. Give them as much as five minutes, and they'd win. They'd call in help from the local police force—which even had helicopters; he'd checked—and the attacking force would be cut off. No, this was not a favored site. He tossed the newspaper back into the car and drove off. On the way out, he looked on the street for a covert vehicle. There were a few vans parked in

driveways, none of them with darkened plastic on the windows which might conceal a man with a camera. His peripheral vision confirmed his assessment. This was not a good location. To take these targets, it would be far better to do it on the fly. On the road, more correctly. But not much better. The protection for that would probably be excellent. Kevlar panels. Lexan windows. Special tires. And doubtless overhead protection in the form of helicopters. That didn't even count the unmarked cars and ready access to supplementary police reinforcement.

Okay, Movie Star thought, using in his mind an Americanism that had universal application. Giant Steps Day Care Center and Nursery School, Ritchie Highway above Joyce Lane. Only one target there, but a better one, and probably, Movie Star hoped, a more favorable tactical environment.

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WINSTON HAD BEEN in the business of selling himself and his ideas for more than twenty years. Along with it had come a certain theatrical sense. Better yet, the stage fright went in both directions. Only one of the senators on the committee had previous experience, and he was in the minority party—the polarity of the Senate had changed with the 747 crash, and done so in his ideological favor. As a result, the men and women taking their seats behind the massive oak bench were every bit as nervous as he was. While he took his seat and set out his papers, a total of six people were piling up huge bound volumes on the next table over. Winston ignored them. The C-SPAN cameras did not.

It soon got better. While the Secretary-designate chatted with Mark Gant, the latter's portable computer open and operating in front of him, the table to their left groaned and crashed, spilling the pile of books to the floor, to the collective gasp of everyone in the room. Winston turned, startled and pleased. His gofers had done exactly what he'd told them, piling the collected volumes of the United States Tax Code right in the middle of the table instead of distributing the load evenly.

"Oh, shit, George," Gant whispered, struggling not to laugh.

"Maybe God really is on our side." He jumped up to see that nobody had been hurt. Nobody had. The first oaken cry of protest had made the people stand back. Now security guards darted in, only to see that nothing, really, had happened. Winston leaned into the microphone.

"Mr. Chairman, sorry about that, but it doesn't really hurt anything. Can we proceed without further delay?"

The chairman gaveled the room to order, without taking his eyes off the disaster. A minute later, George Winston was sworn.

"Do you have an opening statement, Mr. Winston?"

"Sir, I did." SecTreas shook his head and stifled a laugh, though not quite all the way. "I guess I have to apologize to the members of the committee for our little accident. I'd meant that to be an illustration of one of my points, but . . . well . . ." He rearranged his papers and sat more erect in his chair.

"Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is George Winston,

and President Ryan has asked me to step away from my business to serve my country in the capacity of Secretary of the Treasury. Let me tell you a little bit about myself . . .”

“WHAT DO WE know about him?” Kealty asked.

“Plenty. He’s smart. He’s tough. He’s pretty honest. And he’s richer ’n God.” *Even richer than you,* the aide didn’t say.

“Ever investigated?”

“Never.” His chief of staff shook his head. “Maybe he’s skated on thin ice, but—no, Ed, I can’t even say that. The book on Winston is that he plays by the rules. His investment group is highly rated for performance and integrity. He had a bad trader working for him eight years ago, and George personally testified against him in court. He also made good the guy’s shenanigans out of his own pocket. His own *personal* pocket, that is. Forty million dollars’ worth. The crook served five years. He’s a good choice for Ryan. He’s no politician, but he’s well respected on the Street.”

“Shit,” Kealty observed.

“MR. CHAIRMAN, THERE are a lot of things that need to be done.” Winston set his opening statement aside and continued off the cuff. Or so it seemed. He jerked his left hand to the pile of books. “That broken table over there. That’s the U.S. Tax Code. It’s a principle of common law that ignorance of the law is not a defense before the bar of justice. But that doesn’t make sense anymore. The Treasury Department and the Internal Revenue Service both promulgate and enforce the tax law of our country. Excuse me, those laws are passed by the Congress, as we all know, but mainly they happen because my department submits the proposed set of rules, and the Congress modifies and approves them, and then we enforce them. In many cases, the interpretation of the code you pass is left to people who work for me, and as we all know, the interpretation can be as important as the laws themselves. We have special tax courts to make further rulings—but what we end up with is that pile of printed paper over there, and I would submit to this committee that nobody, not even an experienced member of the bar, can possibly understand it all.

“We even have the absurd situation that when a citizen brings his tax records and return forms into an IRS office for assistance from the people who enforce the law, and those IRS employees make a mistake, then the *citizen* who comes to his government for help is responsible for the mistakes the *government* makes. Now, when I was in the trading business, if I gave my client a bad piece of advice, I had to take the responsibility for it.

“The purpose of taxes is to provide revenue for the country’s government so that the government can serve the people. But along the way we’ve created an entire industry that takes billions of dollars from the public. Why? To explain a tax code that gets more complex every year, a code that the enforcement people themselves do not understand with a sufficient degree of confidence to undertake responsibility for getting it right. You already know, or you

should"—they didn't—"the amount of money we spend on enforcing that tax code, and that's not especially productive, either. We're supposed to be working for the people, not confusing them.

"And so, Mr. Chairman, there are some things I hope to be able to accomplish during my term at Treasury, if the committee sees fit to confirm my nomination. First, I want the tax code completely rewritten into something a normal person can understand. I want that tax code to make sense. I want a code with no special breaks. I want the same rules to apply equally to everybody. I am prepared to present a proposal to do exactly that. I want to work with the committee to make that into law. I want to work with you ladies and gentlemen. I will not let any corporate or any other form of lobbyist into my office to discuss this matter, and here and now, I beseech you to do the same. Mr. Chairman, when we start talking to every Tom, Dick, and Harry who has a little suggestion to take care of a special group with special needs, we end up with that!" Winston pointed to the broken table again. "We're all Americans. We're supposed to work together, and in the long run, tweaking the tax laws of our country for every lobbyist with an office and a clientele ultimately takes *more* money from everybody. The laws of our country are not supposed to be a jobs program for accountants and lawyers in the private sector, and bureaucrats in the public sector. The laws which you pass and which people like me enforce are supposed to serve the needs of the citizens, not the needs of the government.

"Second, I want my department to run efficiently. *Efficiency* is not a word that government knows how to spell, much less implement. That has to change. Well, I can't change this whole city, but I *can* change the department with which the President has entrusted me, and which, I hope, you will let me have. I know how to run a business. The Columbus Group serves literally millions of people, directly and indirectly, and I've borne that burden with pride. I will, in the next few months, submit a budget for a Department of the Treasury that doesn't have so much as one excess position." It was a considerable exaggeration, but nonetheless an impressive one. "This room has heard such claims before, and I will not blame you for taking my words with a ton of salt, but I am a man accustomed to backing up my words with results, and that's going to happen here, too.

"President Ryan had to yell at me to get me to move into Washington. I don't *like* it here, Mr. Chairman," Winston told the committee. He had them now. "I want to do my job and leave. But the job is going to get done, if you let me. That concludes my opening statement."

The most experienced people in the room were the reporters in the second row—the first row had Winston's wife and family. They knew how things were done and how things were said. A cabinet officer was supposed to wax rhapsodic about the honor of being allowed to serve, about the joy of being entrusted with power, about the responsibility that would bear heavily upon him or her.

I don't like it here? The reporters stopped writing their notes and looked up, first at the dais, and then at one another.

MOVIE STAR LIKED what he saw. Though the danger to him was greater, the risk was balanced. Here there was a main four-lane highway within a few meters of the objective, and that led to an infinite network of side roads. Best of all, you could see almost everything. Directly behind the objective was a clump of woods, dense enough that it could not hold a support vehicle. There had to be one, and where would it be . . . ? Hmm, *there,* he thought. There was one house close enough with an attached garage that actually faced the day-care center and that one . . . yes. Two cars parked right in front of that house —why weren't they parked inside? So probably the Secret Service had made an arrangement with the owners. It was ideal, fifty meters from the demi-school, facing in the right direction. If something untoward happened, the alarm would be issued, and the support vehicle would instantly be manned, the garage door opened, and out it would race like a tank, except that it wasn't a tank.

The problem with security in a case such as this was that you had to set your procedures in stone, and clever as the Secret Service people undoubtedly were, their arrangements had to fit parameters both known and predictable. He checked his watch. How to confirm his suspicions? For starters, he needed a few minutes at rest. Directly across from Giant Steps was a convenience store, and that he'd check, because the enemy would have a person there, maybe more than one. He pulled in, parked the car, and went in, spending a minute or so blundering about.

"Can I help you?" a voice asked. Female, twenty-five—no older than that, but trying to look young. One did that with the cut of the hair and a little makeup, Movie Star knew. He'd used female operatives himself, and that's what he'd told them. Younger people always appear less threatening, especially the females. With a smile of confusion and embarrassment, he walked to the counter.

"I'm looking for your maps," he said.

"Right there under the counter." The clerk pointed with a smile. She was Secret Service. The eyes were too bright for the person to be in such a menial job.

"Ach," he said in disgust, selecting a large book map that would show every residential street in the district county, they called them in America. He lifted it and flipped pages, one eye trained across the street. The children were being led outside to the playground. Four adults with them. Two would have been the normal number. So, at least two—three, he realized, spotting a man in the shadows, hardly moving at all. Large man, 180 centimeters or so, wearing casual clothes. Yes, the playground faced the dwelling with the garage. The watchers *had* to be there. Two more, perhaps three, would be in the dwelling, always watching. This would not exactly be easy, but he *would* know where the opposition was. "How much for the map?"

"Printed right there on the cover."

"Ach, ja, excuse me." He reached into his pocket. "Five dollar, ninety-five," he said to himself, fishing for the change.

"Plus tax." She rang it up on the register. "Are you new to the area?"

"Yes, I am. I am teacher."

"Oh, what do you teach?"

"German," he replied, taking his change, and counting it. "I want to see what houses are like here. Thank you for the map. I have much to do." A curt European nod punctuated the encounter, and he left without a further look across the street. Movie Star had a sudden chill. The clerk had definitely been a police type. She'd be watching him right now, probably taking down his license number, but if she did, and if the Secret Service ran the number, they'd find that his name was Dieter Kolb, a German citizen from Frankfurt, a teacher of English, currently out of the country, and unless they pressed, that cover would be sufficient. He pulled north on Ritchie Highway, turning right at the first opportunity. There was a community college on a hill nearby, and in America those all had parking lots.

It was just a matter of finding a good spot. This was it. The intervening woods would soon fill out with the coming of spring, blocking visual access to Giant Steps. The rear of the house whose garage probably held the Chevy Suburban support vehicle had only a few windows facing in this direction, and those were curtained. The same was true of the preschool itself. Movie Star/Kolb lifted a pair of compact binoculars and scanned. It wasn't easy with all the tree trunks between him and the objective, but thorough as the American Secret Service was, its people weren't perfect. None were. More to the point, Giant Steps was not a favorable location for quartering so important a child, but that wasn't surprising. The Ryan family had sent all of its children here. The teachers were probably excellent, and Ryan and his physician wife probably knew them and were friendly with them, and the news stories he'd copied down from the Internet emphasized the fact that the Ryans wanted to keep their family life intact. Very human. And foolish.

He watched the children cavort on the playground. It seemed to be covered with wood chips. How natural it all was, the little ones cocooned in bulky winter clothes—the temperature was eleven or twelve, he estimated—and running about, some on the monkey bars, others on swings, still more playing in what dirt they could find. The manner of dress told him that these children were well lookedafter, and they were, after all, children. Except for one. Which one he couldn't tell from this distance—they'd need photos for that, when the time came—but that one wasn't a child at all. That one was a political statement for someone to make. Who would make the statement, and exactly why the statement would be made didn't concern Movie Star. He'd remain in his perch for several hours, not thinking at all about what might result from his activities. Or might not. He didn't care. He'd write up his memorized notes, draw his detailed maps and diagrams, and forget about it. "Kolb" was years past caring about it all. What had begun with religious fervor for the liberating Holy War of his people had, with the passage of time, become work for which he was paid. If, in the end, something happened which he found politically beneficial, so much the better, but somehow that had never taken place, despite all the hopes and dreams and fiery rhetoric, and what sustained him was the work and his skill at it. How strange, Movie Star thought, that it should have become so, but the passionate ones were mainly dead, victims of their own dedication. His face grimaced at the irony of it. The true believers done in by their own passion, and those who sustained the hope of his people were those who . . . didn't care anymore? Was that

true?

"MANY PEOPLE WILL object to the nature of your proposed tax plan. A really fair plan is progressive," the senator went on. Predictably, he was one of the survivors, not one of the new arrivals. He had the mantra down. "Doesn't this place rather a high burden on working Americans?"

"Senator, I understand what you're saying," Winston replied after taking a sip from his water glass. "But what do you mean when you say 'working' Americans? I work. I built my business from the ground up and, believe me, that's work. The First Lady, Cathy Ryan, makes something like four hundred thousand dollars per year—much more than her husband, I might add. Does that mean she doesn't work? I think she does. She's a surgeon. I have a brother who's a physician, and I know the hours he works. True, those two people make more than the average American does, but the marketplace has long since decided that the work they do is more valuable than what some other people do. If you're going blind, a union auto worker can't help you; neither can a lawyer. A physician can. That doesn't mean that the physician doesn't *work,* Senator. It means that the work requires higher qualifications and much longer training, and that as a result the work is more highly compensated. What about a baseball player? That's another category of skilled work, and nobody in this room objects to the salary paid Ken Griffey, Jr., for example. Why? Because he's superb at what he does, one of the—what?—four or five best in the entire world, and he is lavishly compensated for it. Again, that's the marketplace at work.

"In a broader sense, speaking in my capacity as a mere citizen instead of a Secretary-designate, I object strongly to the artificial and mainly false dichotomy that some people in the political arena place between blue-collar and white-collar workers. There is no way to earn an honest living in this country except by providing a product or a service to the public and, generally speaking, the harder and smarter you work, the more money you make. It's just that some people have greater abilities than others. If there is an idle-rich class in America, I think the only place you find them is in the movies. Who in this room, if you had the choice, would not instantly trade places with Ken Griffey or Jack Nicklaus? Don't all of us dream about being that good at something? I do," Winston admitted. "But I can't swing a bat that hard.

"Okay, what about a really talented software engineer? I can't do that, either. What about an inventor? What about an executive who transforms a company from a loser to a profit-maker—remember what Samuel Gompers said? The worst failure of a captain of industry is to fail to show a profit. Why? Because a profitable company is one that does its job well, and only those companies can compensate their workers properly, and at the same time return money to their shareholders—and those are the people who invest their money in the *company* which generated *jobs* for its *workers.*

"Senator, the thing we forget is why we're here and what we're trying to do. The government doesn't provide productive jobs. That's not what we're supposed to do. General Motors and Boeing and Microsoft are the ones who employ workers to turn out products the people need. The job of government

is to protect the people, to enforce the law, and to make sure people play by the rules, like the umpires on a ball field. It's not supposed to be our job, I think, to punish people for playing the game well.

"We collect taxes so that the government can perform its functions. But we've gotten away from that. We should collect those taxes in such a way as to do minimum harm to the economy as a whole. Taxes are by their very nature a negative influence, and we can't get away from that, but what we can do is at least structure the tax system in such a way that it does minimum harm, and maybe even encourages people to use their money in such a way as to encourage the overall system to work."

"I know where you're going. You're going to talk about cutting capital-gains taxes, but that benefits only the few, at the cost of—"

"Senator, excuse me for interrupting, but that simply is not true, and you know it's not true," Winston chided brusquely. "Reducing the rate of tax on capital gains means the following: it encourages people to invest their money —no, let me back up a little.

"Let's say I make a thousand dollars. I pay taxes on that money, pay my mortgage, pay for food, pay for the car, and what I have left I invest in, oh, XYZ Computer Company. XYZ takes my money and hires somebody. That person works at his job like I work at mine, and from what work he does—he's making a product which the public likes and buys, right?—the company generates a profit, which the company shares with me. *That* money is taxed as regular income. Then I sell the stock and buy into another company, so that it can hire somebody else. The money realized from selling the stock issue is capital gains. People don't put their money under the mattress anymore," he reminded them, "and we don't want them to. We want them to invest in America, in their fellow citizens.

"Now, I've already paid tax on the money which I invested, right? Okay, then I help give some fellow citizen a job. That job makes something for the public. And for *helping* give a worker a job, and for *helping* that worker make something for the public, I get a modest return. That's good for that worker I helped to hire, and good for the public. Then I move on to do the same thing somewhere else. Why punish me for that? Doesn't it make more sense to *encourage* people to do that? And, remember, we've already taxed that investment money once anyway—in actual practice, more than once.

"That isn't good for the country. It's bad enough that we take so much, but the manner in which we take it is egrcgiously counterproductive. Why are we here, Senator? We're supposed to be *helping* things along, not hurting. And the net result, remember, is a tax system so complicated that we need to collect billions to administer it—and *that* money is totally wasted. Toss in all the accountants and tax lawyers who make their living off something the public can't understand," SecTreas concluded.

"America isn't about envy. America isn't about class rivalry. We don't *have* a class system in America. Nobody tells an American citizen what they can do. Birth doesn't count for much. Look at the committee members. Son of a farmer, son of a teacher, son of a truck driver, son of a lawyer, you, Senator Nikolides, son of an immigrant. If America was a class-defined society, then how the heck did you people get here?" he demanded. His current questioner

was a professional politician, son of another, not to mention an arrogant son of a bitch, Winston thought, and didn't get classified. Everyone he'd just pointed to *kvelled* a little at being singled out for the cameras. "Gentlemen, let's try and make it easier for people to do what we've all done. If we have to skew the system, then let's do it in such a way that it encourages our fellow citizens to help one another. If America has a structural economic problem, it's that we don't generate as many opportunities as we should and can do. The system isn't perfect. Fine, let's try to fix it some. That's why we're all here."

"But the system must demand that everyone pay their fair share," the senator said, trying to take the floor back.

"What does 'fair' mean? In the dictionary, it means that everyone has to do about the same. Ten percent of a million dollars is still ten times more than ten percent of a hundred thousand dollars, and *twenty* times more than ten percent of fifty thousand. But 'fairness' in the tax code has come to mean that we take all the money we can from successful people and dole it back—and, oh, by the way, those rich people hire lawyers and lobbyists who talk to people in the political arena and get a million special exceptions written into the system so that they don't get totally fleeced—and they don't, and we all know that—and what do we end up with?" Winston waved his hand at the pile of books on the floor of the committee room. "We end up with a jobs program for bureaucrats, and accountants, and lawyers, and lobbyists, and somewhere along the way the taxpaying citizens are just plain forgotten. We don't care that they can't make sense of the system that's supposed to serve them. It's not supposed to be that way." Winston leaned into the microphone. "I'll tell you what I think 'fair' means. I think it means that we all bear the same burden in the same proportion. I think it means that the system not only allows but encourages us to participate in the economy. I think it means that we promulgate simple and comprehensible laws so that people know where they stand. I think 'fair' means that it's a level playing field, and everybody gets the same breaks, and that we don't punish Ken Griffey for hitting home runs. We admire him. We try to emulate him. We try to make more like him. And we keep out of his way."

"Let 'em eat cake?" the chief of staff said.

"We can't say hot dogs, can we?" Kealty asked. Then he smiled broadly. "Finally."

"Finally," another aide agreed.

THE RESULTS WERE *all* equivocal. The FBI polygrapher had been working all morning, and every single set of tracings on the fan-fold paper was iffy. It couldn't be helped. An all-night session, they'd all told him, looking into something important which he wasn't cleared for. That made it the Iran/Iraq situation, of course. He could watch CNN as well as anyone. The men he'd put on the box were all tired and irritable, and some had fluttered badly on telling him their proper names and job descriptions, and the whole exercise had been useless. Probably.

"Did I pass?" Rutledge asked, when he took off the pressurized armband in the manner of someone who'd done this all before.

"Well, I'm sure you've been told before—"

"It's not a pass-or-fail examination process," the Under Secretary of State said tiredly. "Yeah, tell that to somebody who lost his clearance because of a session on the box. I hate the damned things, always have."

It was right up—or down—there with being a dentist, the FBI agent thought, and though he was one of the best around at this particular black art, he'd learned nothing this day that would help the investigation.

"The session you had last night—"

Rutledge cut him off cold. "Can't discuss it, sorry."

"No, I mean, this sort of thing normal here?"

"It will be for a while, probably. Look, you know what it's about, probably." The agent nodded, and the Under Secretary did the same. "Fine. Then you know it's a big deal, and we're going to be burning a lot of midnight oil over it, especially my people. So, lots of coffee and long hours and short tempers." He checked his watch. "My working group gets together in ten minutes. Anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Thanks for a fun ninety minutes," Rutledge said, heading for the door. It was so easy. You just had to know how the things worked. They wanted relaxed and peaceful subjects to get proper results—the polygraph essentially measured tension induced by awkward questions. So make everybody tense. That was simple enough. And really the Iranians were doing the work. All he had to do was stoke the fires a little. That was good for a smile as he entered the executive washroom.

THERE. MOVIE STAR checked his watch and made a further mental note. Two men walked out of the private dwelling. One of them turned to say something as he closed the door. They walked to the parking lot of Giant Steps, eyes scanning around in a way that identified them as positively as uniforms and rifles. The Chevy Suburban emerged from the private garage. A good hiding place, but a little too obvious to the skilled observer. Two children came out together, one led by a woman, the other by a man . . . yes, the one who'd been in the shadowed doorway when they'd gone out for their afternoon playtime. Large man, formidable one. Two women, one in front, one behind. All the heads turning and scanning. They took the child to a plain car. The Suburban halted in front of the driveway, and the other cars followed it down the highway, with a police car, he saw, fifteen seconds behind.

It would be a difficult task, but not an impossible one, and the mission had several different outcomes, all acceptable to his patrons. Just as well that he didn't get sentimental about children. He'd been involved in such missions before, and you simply couldn't look at them as children at all. The one who'd been led by the large hand of her bodyguard was what he'd decided before, a political statement to be made by someone else. Allah would not have approved. Movie Star knew that. There was not a religion in the world that sanctioned harm to a child, but religions were not instruments of statecraft, regardless of what Badrayn's current superior might believe. Religions were something for an ideal world, and the world wasn't ideal. And so one might

use unusual means to serve religious goals, and that meant . . . something he simply didn't think about. It was business, his business, to see what could be done, rules or not, and Movie Star wasn't the least bit sanctimonious about it, which, he thought, was probably why he was still alive while others were not —and, if he read this properly, still others would not be.

28

. . . BUT A WHIMPER

POLITICIANS RARELY LIKE surprises. Much as they enjoy dropping them on others—mainly other politicians, usually in public, and invariably delivered with all the care and planning of a jungle ambush—they reciprocally detest being on the receiving end. And that was just the political sort, in countries where politics was a fairly civilized business.

In Turkmenistan, things had not gotten that far yet. The Premier—he had a wide variety of titles to choose from, and he liked this one better than "president"—enjoyed everything about his life and his office. As a chieftain of the semi-departed Communist Party, he would have lived under greater personal restrictions than were now the case, and would always be at the end of a telephone line to Moscow, like a brook fish at the end of a long leader. But not now. Moscow no longer had the reach, and he had become too large a fish. He was a vigorous man in his late fifties and, as he liked to joke, a man of the people. The "people" in this case had been an attractive clerk of twenty years who, after an evening of fine dining and a little ethnic dancing (at which he excelled), had entertained him as only a young woman could, and now he was driving back to his official residence under a clear, starry sky, sitting in the right-front seat of his black Mercedes with the sated smile of a man who'd just proven that that's what he was, in the best possible way. Perhaps he'd wangle a promotion for the girl . . . in a few weeks. His was the exercise of, if not absolute power, then surely enough for any man, and with that came near-utter contentment. Popular with his people as an earthy, commonfolk sort of leader, he knew how to act, how to sit with the people, how to grasp a hand or a shoulder, always in front of TV cameras to show that he was one of them. "Cult of personality" was what the former regime had called it, and that's what it was, and that, he knew for sure, was what all politics had to be. His was a great responsibility, and he met that duty, and in return he was owed some things. One of them was this fine German automobile—smuggling that into the country had been an exercise in panache rather than corruption—and another was now returning to her bed with a smile and a sigh. And life was good. He didn't know he had less than sixty seconds of it left.

He didn't bother with a police escort. His people loved him. He was sure of that, too, and besides it was late. But there was a police car, he saw, at an intersection, its light turning and flashing, blocking the way, just beyond the cross street. A dismounted policeman raised his hand while talking into his radio, hardly even looking at them. The Premier wondered what the problem was. His driver/ bodyguard slowed the Mercedes with an annoyed snort, stopping it right in the intersection and making sure his pistol was readily

accessible. Barely had the official car stopped when both of them heard a noise to their right. The Premier turned that way, and scarcely had time for his eyes to go wide before the Zil-157 truck hit him at forty kilometers per hour. The high military-style bumper hit just at the bottom of the door glass, and the official car was thrown ten meters to the left, stopping when it hit the stone walls of an office building. Then it was time for the policeman to walk over, assisted by two others who had appeared from the shadows. The driver was dead from a broken neck. The policemen could see that from the angle of his head, and one of them reached through the shattered windshield to shake it around, just to make sure. But the Premier, to everyone's astonishment, was still moaning, despite his injuries. Due to all the drink, they thought, his body limp and limber. Well, that was easily fixed. The senior cop walked to the truck, flipped open the tool box, took a tire iron, returned, and smashed it against the side of his Premier's head just forward of the ear. That task completed, he tossed the tool back to the truck driver, and the premier of Turkmenistan was dead as the result of an auto accident. Well, then, their country would have to have elections, wouldn't it? That would be something of a first, and it would call for a leader whom the people knew and respected.

"SENATOR, IT'S BEEN a long day," Tony Bretano agreed. "And it's been rather a long couple of weeks for me, learning the ropes and meeting the people, but, you know, management is management, and the Department of Defense has been without it for quite some time. I am especially concerned with the procurement system. It takes too long and costs too much. The problem isn't so much corruption as an attempt to impose a standard of fairness so exacting that—well, as a pedestrian example, if you bought food the way DOD is forced to buy weapons, you'd starve to death in the supermarket while trying to decide between Libby and DelMonte pears. TRW is an engineering company, and to my way of thinking, a very good one. There's no way I could run my company like this. My stockholders would lynch me. We can do better, and I intend to see that we do."

"Mr. Secretary-designate," the senator asked, "how much longer does this have to go on? We just won a war and—"

"Senator, America has the best medical care in the world, but people still die from cancer and heart disease. The best isn't always good enough, is it? But more than that, and more to the point, we can do better for less money. I am not going to come to you with a request for increased overall funding. Acquisition funding will have to be higher, yes. Training and readiness will be higher also. But the real money in defense goes out in personnel costs, and that is where we can make a difference. The whole department is overmanned in the wrong places. That wastes the taxpayers' money. I know. I pay a lot of taxes. We do not utilize our people effectively, and nothing, Senator, is more wasteful than that. I think I can promise you a net reduction of two or three percent. Maybe more if I can get a handle on the acquisition system. For the latter, I need statutory assistance. There's no reason why we have to wait eight to twelve years to field a new airplane. We study things to death. That was once meant to save money, and maybe once it was a good idea, but now we

spend more money on studies than we do on real R and D. It's time to stop inventing the wheel every two years. Our citizens work for the money we spend, and we owe it to them to spend it intelligently.

"Most important of all, when America sends her sons and daughters into harm's way, they must be the besttrained, best-supported, best-equipped forces we can put into the field. The fact of the matter is that we can do that and save money also, by making the system work more efficiently." The nice thing about this new crop of senators, Bretano reflected, was they didn't know what was impossible. He would never have gotten away with what he'd just said as recently as a year earlier. Efficiency was a concept foreign to most government agencies, not because there was anything wrong with the people, but because nobody had ever told them to do better. There was much to be said for working at the place that printed the money, but there was much to be said for eating eclairs, too, until your arteries clogged up. If the heart of America were its government, the nation would long since have fallen over dead. Fortunately, his country's heart was elsewhere, and surviving on healthier food.

"But why do we need so much defense in an age when—"

Bretano cut him off again. It was a habit he'd have to break, which he knew even as he did it—but this was too much. "Senator, have you checked the building across the street lately?"

It was amusing to see the way the man's head jerked back, even though the aide to Bretano's left flinched almost as badly. That senator had a vote, both on the committee and on the floor of the Senate chamber, which was still open for business now that they'd gotten the smoke out of the building. But the point got across to most of the others, and the SecDef was willing to settle for that. In due course, the chairman gaveled the session to a close, and scheduled a vote for the following morning. The senators had already made their votes clear with their praise for Bretano's forthright and positive statement, pledging their desire to work with him in words almost as naive as his own, and with that another day ended on one place, with a new one soon to begin in another.

NO SOONER HAD the UN resolution passed, than the first ship had sailed for the brief steam to the Iraqi port of Bushire, there to be unloaded by the huge vacuum cleanerlike structures, and from that point on, things had gone quickly. For the first morning in many years, there would be bread enough on the breakfast tables of Iraq for everyone. Morning television proclaimed the fact for all—with the predictable live shots of neighborhood bakeries selling off their wares to happy, smiling crowds—and then concluding with word that the new revolutionary government was meeting today to discuss other matters of national importance. These signals were duly copied down at PALM BOWL and STORM TRACK and passed along, but the real news that day came from another source.

Golovko told himself that the Turkoman Premier might well have died in an accident. His personal proclivities were well known to the RVS, and vehicle accidents were hardly unknown in his country or any other—in fact, auto

mishaps had been hugely disproportionate in the Soviet Union, especially those associated with drink. But Golovko had never been one to believe in coincidences of any sort, most particularly those which happened in ways and at times inconvenient to his country. It didn't help that he had ample assets in place to diagnose the problem. The Premier was dead. There would be elections. The likely winner was obvious because the departed politician had been wonderfully effective stifling political opposition. And now also, he saw, Iranian military units were forming up for road marches to their west. Two dead chiefs of state, in such a short time, within such a short radius, both in countries bordering Iran . . . no, even if it had been a coincidence, he would not have believed it. With that, Golovko changed hats—the Western aphorism—and lifted his phone.

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USS *PASADENA* WAS positioned between the two PRC surface-action groups, currently operating about nine miles apart. The submarine had a full load of weapons, war shots all, but for all that, it was rather like being the only cop in Times Square at midnight on New Year's, trying to keep track of everything at the same time. Having a loaded gun didn't amount to very much. Every few minutes he deployed his ESM mast to get a feel for the electronic signals being radiated about, and his sonar department also fed data to the tracking party in the after portion of the attack center—as many men as could fit around the chart table were busily keeping tabs on the various contacts. The skipper ordered his boat to go deep, to three hundred feet, just below the layer, so that he could take a few minutes to examine the plot, which had become far too complex for him to keep it all in his head. With the boat steadied up on her new depth, he took the three steps aft to look.

It was a FleetEx, but the type of FleetEx wasn't quite . . . ordinarily one group played the "good guys" against the theoretical "bad guys" in the other group, and you could tell what was what by the way the ships were arrayed. Instead of orienting toward each other, however, both groups were oriented to the east. This was called the "threat axis," meaning the direction from which the enemy was expected to strike. To the east lay the Republic of China, which comprised mainly the island of Taiwan. The senior chief operations specialist supervising the plot was marking up the acetate overlay, and the picture was about as clear as it needed to be.

"Conn, sonar," came the next call.

"Conn, aye," the captain acknowledged, taking the microphone.

"Two new contacts, sir, designate Sierra Twenty and Twenty-one. Both appear to be submerged contacts. Sierra Twenty, bearing three-two-five, direct path and faint . . . stand by . . . okay, looks like a Han-class SSN, good cut on the fifty-Hertz line, plant noise also. Twenty-one, also submerged contact, at three-three-zero, starting to look like a Xia, sir."

"A boomer in a FleetEx?" the senior chief wondered.

"How good's the cut on Twenty-one?"

"Improving now, sir," the sonar chief replied. The entire sonar crew was in

their compartment, just forward of the attack center on the starboard side. "Plant noise says Xia to me, Cap'n. The Han is maneuvering south, bearing now three-two-one, getting a blade rate . . . call its speed eighteen knots."

"Sir?" The operations chief made a quick, notional plot. The SSN and the boomer would be behind the northern surface group.

"Anything else, sonar?" the captain asked.

"Sir, getting a little complicated with all these tracks."

"Tell me about it," someone breathed at the tracking table, while making another change.

"Anything to the east?" the CO persisted.

"Sir, easterly we have six contacts, all classified as merchant traffic."

"We got 'em all here, sir," the operations chief confirmed. "Nothing yet from the Taiwan navy."

"That's gonna change," the captain thought aloud.

GENERAL BONDARENKO DIDN'T believe in coincidences, either. More than that, the southern part of the country once known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics held little charm for him. His time in Afghanistan and a frantic night in Tajikistan had seen to that. In the abstract he would not have minded the total divorce of the Russian Republic from the Muslim proto-nations arrayed on his country's southern border, but the real world wasn't abstract.

"So, what do you think is going on?" the general-lieutenant asked.

"Are you briefed in on Iraq?"

"Yes, I am, Comrade Chairman."

"Then you tell me, Gennady Iosefovich," Golovko commanded.

Bondarenko leaned across the map table, and spoke while moving a finger about. "I would say that what concerns you is the possibility that Iran is making a bid for superpower status. In uniting with Iraq, they increase their oil wealth by something like forty percent. Moreover, that would give them contiguous borders with Kuwait and the Saudi kingdom. The conquest of those nations would redouble their wealth-one may safely assume that the lesser nations would fall as well. The objective circumstances here are self-evident," the general went on, speaking in the calm voice of a professional soldier analyzing disaster. "Combined, Iran and Iraq outnumber the combined populations of the other states by a considerable margin—five to one, Comrade Chairman? More? I do not recall exactly, but certainly the manpower advantage is decisive, which would make outright conquest or at least great political influence likely. That alone would give this new United Islamic Republic enormous economic power, the ability to choke off the energy supply to Western Europe and Asia at will.

"Now, Turkmenistan. If this is, as you suspect, not a coincidence, then we see that Iran wishes to move north also, perhaps to absorb Azerbaijan"—his finger traced along the map—"Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, at least part of Kazakhstan. That would triple their population, add a significant resource base to their United Islamic Republic, and next, one assumes, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and we have a new nation stretching from the Red Sea to the Hindu

Kush—*nyet*, more to the point, from the Red Sea to China, and then our southern border is completely lined with nations hostile to us." Then he looked up.

"This is much worse than I had been led to expect, Scrgcy Nikolay'ch," he concluded soberly. "We know the Chinese covet what we have in the east. This new state threatens *our* southern oil fields in the Transcaucasus—I cannot defend this border. My God, defending against Hitler was child's play compared to this."

Golovko was on the other side of the map table. He'd called Bondarenko for a reason. The senior leadership of his country's military was composed of holdovers from the earlier era—but these were finally dying off, and Gennady Iosefovich was one of the new breed, battle-tested in the misbegotten Afghan War, old enough to know what battle was—perversely, this made him and his peers the superiors of those whom they would soon replace—and young enough that they didn't have the ideological baggage of the former generation, either. Not a pessimist, but an optimist ready to learn from the West, where he'd just spent over a month with the various NATO armies, learning everything he could—especially, it would seem, from the Americans. But Bondarenko was looking down at the map in alarm.

"How long?" the general asked. "How long to establish this new state?"

Golovko shrugged. "Who can say? Three years, perhaps two at the worst. At best, five."

"Give me five years and the ability to rebuild our country's military power, and we can . . . probably . . . no." Bondarenko shook his head. "I can give you no guarantee. The government will not give me the money and resources I require. It can't. We do not have the money to spend."

"And then?" The general looked up, straight into the RVS chairman's eyes.

"And then I would prefer to be the operations officer for the other side. In the east we have mountains to defend, and that is good, but we have only two rail lines for logistical support, and that is *not* so good. In the center, what if they absorb all of Kazakhstan?" He tapped the map. "Look how close that puts them to Moscow. And what about alliances? With Ukraine, perhaps? What about Turkey? What about Syria? All of the Middle East will have to come to terms with this new state . . . we lose, Comrade Chairman. We can threaten to use nuclear arms but what real good does that do us? China can afford the loss of five hundred million, and still outnumber us. Their economy grows strong while ours continues to stagnate. They can afford to buy weapons from the West, or better yet to license the designs to manufacture their own. Our use of nuclear arms is dangerous, both tactically and strategically, and there is the political dimension which I will leave to you. Militarily, we will be outnumbered in all relevant categories. The enemy will have superiority in terms of arms, manpower, and geographic location. Their ability to cut off the oil supply to the rest of the world limits our hope of securing foreign help—assuming that any Western nation will have such a desire in the first place. What you have shown me is the potential destruction of our country." That he delivered this assessment calmly was the most disturbing fact of all. Bondarenko was not an alarmist. He was merely stating objective fact.

"And to prevent it?"

"We cannot permit the loss of the southern republics, but at the same time, how do we hold them? Take control of Turkmenistan? Fight the guerrilla campaign that would surely result? Our army is in no shape to fight that sort of war—not even one of them, and it won't be just one, will it?" Bondarenko's predecessor had been fired over the failure of the Red Army—the term and the thought died hard—to deal effectively with the Chechens. What should have been a relatively simple effort at pacification had advertised to the world that the Russian army was scarcely a shadow of what it had been only a few years before.

The Soviet Union had operated on the principle of fear, they both knew. Fear of the KGB had kept the citizens in line, and fear of what the Red Army could and would do to any systematic rebellion had prevented large-scale political disturbances. But what happened when the fear went away? The Soviet failure to pacify Afghanistan, that despite the most brutal measures imaginable, had been a signal to the Muslim republics that their fear was misplaced. Now the Soviet Union was gone, and what remained was a mere shadow, and now that shadow could be erased by a brighter sun to the south. Golovko could see it on his visitor's face. Russia didn't have the power she needed. For all the bluster his country could still summon to awe the West—the West still remembered the Warsaw Pact, and the specter of the massive Red Army, ready to march to the Bay of Biscay—other parts of the world knew better. Western Europe and America still remembered the steel fist which they'd seen but never felt. Those who *had* felt it knew at once when the grip lessened. More to the point, they knew the significance of the relaxed grip.

"What will you need?"

"Time and money. Political support to rebuild our military. Help from the West." The general was still staring at the map. It was, he reflected, like being the scion of a powerful capitalist family. The patriarch had died, and he was the heir to a vast fortune—only to discover that it was gone, leaving only debts. He'd come back from America upbeat, feeling that he'd seen the way, seen the future, found a way to secure his country and do it in the proper way, with a professional army composed of long-service experts, held together by esprit de corps, proud guardians and servants of a free nation, the way the Red Army had been on its march to Berlin. But that would take years to build. As it was . . . if Golovko and the RVS were right, then the best he could hope for was that his nation would rally as it had in 1941, trade space for time, as it had in 1941, and struggle back as it had in 1942—43. The general told himself that no one could see the future; that was a gift given to no man. And perhaps that was just as well, because the past, which all men knew, rarely repeated itself. Russia had been lucky against the fascists. One could not depend upon luck.

One could depend on a cunning and unpredictable adversary. Other people could look at a map the same as he, see the distances and obstacles, discern the correlation of forces, and know that the wild card lay on another sheet of printed paper, on the other side of the globe. The classical formula was first to cripple the strong, then crush the weak, and then, later, confront the strong again in one's own good time. Knowing that, Bondarenko could do nothing

about it. He was the weak one. He had his own problems. His nation could not count on friends, only the enemies she had labored so long and so hard to create.

SALEH HAD NEVER known such agony. He'd seen it, and had even inflicted it in his time as part of his country's security service—but not like this, not this bad. It was as though he were now paying for every such episode all at once. His body was racked with pain throughout its entire length. His strength was formidable, his muscles firm, his personal toughness manifest. But not now. Now every gram of his tissue hurt, and when he moved slightly to assuage the hurt, all he accomplished was to move it about to a fractionally different place. The pain was so great as to blot out even the fear which should have attended it.

But not for the doctor. Ian MacGregor was wearing full surgical garb, a mask over his face, and his hands gloved—only his concentration prevented them from shaking. He'd just drawn blood with the greatest care of his life, more than he'd ever exercised with AIDS patients, with two male orderlies clamping the patient's arm while he took the samples. He'd never seen a case of hemorrhagic fever. It had been for him nothing more than an entry in a textbook, or an article in the *Lancet.* Something intellectually interesting, and distantly frightening, as was cancer, as were other African diseases, but this was here and now.

"Saleh?" the physician asked.

". . . yes." A word, a gasp.

"You came here how? I must know if I am to help you."

There was no mental hesitation, no consideration of secrets or security. He paused only to take a breath, to summon the energy to answer the question. "From Baghdad. Airplane," he added unnecessarily.

"Africa? Have you visited Africa recently?"

"Never before." The head turned left and right not so much as a centimeter, the eyes screwed shut. The patient was trying to be brave, and largely succeeding. "First time Africa." -

"Have you had sexual relations recently? Last week or so," MacGregor clarified. It seemed so cruel a question. One could theoretically get such diseases through sexual contact—maybe a local prostitute? Perhaps there was another case of this at another local hospital and it was being hushed up . . . ?

It took a moment for the man to realize what the man was asking, then another shake. "No, no women in long time." MacGregor could see it on his face: *Never again, not for me ...*

"Have you had any blood lately, been given blood, I mean?"

"No."

"Have you been in contact with anyone who had traveled anywhere?"

"No, only Baghdad, only Baghdad, I am security guard for my general, with him all time, nothing else."

"Thank you. We're going to give you something for the pain. We're going to give you some blood, too, and try to cool you down with ice. I'll be back in a little while." The patient nodded, and the doctor left the room, carrying the

blood-filled tubes in his gloved hands. “Bloody hell,” MacGregor breathed.

While the nurses and orderlies did their job, MacGregor had his to do. One of the blood samples he split into two, packing both with the greatest care, one for Paris and the Pasteur Institute, and the other for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. They’d go out via air express. The rest went to his lead technician, a competent Sudanese, while the doctor drafted a fax. Possible hemorrhagic fever case, it would read, giving country, city, and hospital—but first . . . he lifted his phone and called his contact in the government health department.

“Here?” the government doctor asked. “In Khartoum? Are you sure? Where is the patient from?”

“That is correct,” MacGregor replied. “The patient says that he came here from Iraq.”

“Iraq? Why would this disease come from there? Have you tested for the proper antibodies?” the official demanded.

“The test is being set up right now,” the Scot told the African.

“How long?”

“An hour.”

“Before you make any notifications, let me come over to see,” the official directed.

To supervise, the man meant. MacGregor closed his eyes and tightened his grip on the phone. This putative physician was a government appointee, the son of a longtime minister, and the best that could be said for this professional colleague was that while seated in his plush office he didn’t endanger any living patients. MacGregor had to struggle to keep his temper in check. It was the same all over Africa. It was as though the local government were desirous to protect their tourist industry—something Sudan singularly lacked, except for some anthropologists doing digs for primitive man down south, near the Ethiopian border. But it was the same everywhere on this lush continent. The government health departments denied everything, one reason why AIDS was so out of control in central Africa. They’d all denied and denied, and they would keep denying until what percentage of their populations were dead? Ten? Thirty? Fifty? But everyone was afraid to criticize African governments and their bureaucrats. It was so easy to be called a racist—and so, better to keep quiet . . . and let people die.

“Doctor,” MacGregor persisted, “I am confident in my diagnosis, and I have a professional duty to—”

“It can wait until I come over,” was the casual reply. It was just the African way, MacGregor knew, and there was no sense in fighting it. This battle he could not win. The Sudanese health department could have his visa lifted in minutes, and then who would treat his patients?

“Very well, Doctor. Please come over directly,” he urged.

“I have a few things I must do, and then I will come over.” That could mean all day, or even longer, and both men knew it. “The patient is isolated?”

“Full precautions are in place,” MacGregor assured him.

“You are a fine physician, Ian, and I know I can trust you to see to it that nothing serious will happen.” The line clicked off. He’d scarcely replaced the phone receiver when the instrument rang again.

"Yes?"

"Doctor, please come to Twenty-four," a nurse's voice told him.

He was there in three minutes. It was Sohaila. An orderly was carrying out the emesis tray. There was blood in it. She also had come here from Iraq, MacGregor knew. Oh, my God.

• • •

"NONE OF YOU have anything to fear."

The words were somewhat reassuring, though not as much as the members of the Revolutionary Council would have liked. The Iranian mullahs were probably telling the truth, but the colonels and generals around the table had fought against Iran as captains and majors, and one never forgets battlefield enemies.

"We need you to take control of your country's military," the senior one went on. "As a result of your cooperation, you will retain your positions. We require only that you swear your loyalty to your new government in God's name." There would be more to it than that. They'd be watched closely. The officers all knew that. If they put a single foot wrong, they'd be shot for it. But they had nothing in the way of options, except perhaps to be taken out and shot this afternoon. Summary execution was not exactly unknown in either Iran or Iraq, an efficient way of dealing with dissidents, real or imagined, in both countries.

Facing such a thing was so different from one side to the other. On the side of the guns, one saw it as a quick, efficient, and final way of settling things in one's favor. From the other side, it had the abrupt injustice of a helicopter crash—just enough time for your spirit to scream *No!* before the racing earth blotted everything out, the disbelief and outrage of it. Except that in this case, they actually had a choice of sorts. Certain death now, or the chance of death later. The senior surviving officers of the Iraqi military shared furtive looks. They were *not* in control of their country's military. The military, the soldiers, were with the people, or with their company officers. The former was pleased to have a surplus of food to eat for the first time in almost a full decade. The latter was pleased as well to see a new day for their country. The break from the old regime was complete. It was just a bad memory now, and there was no return to it. The men in this room could reestablish control only through the good offices of the former enemies who stood at the end of the table with the serene smiles that went along with winning, that went along with holding the gift of life in their hands like pocket change, easily given and just as easily put away. They offered no choice, really.

The titular leader of the council nodded his submission, followed in seconds by all the others, and with the gesture, the identity of their country faded into history.

From that point on, it was just a matter of making some telephone calls.

THE ONLY SURPRISE was that it didn't happen on television. For once, the

listening posts at STORM TRACK and PALM BOWL were beaten by analysts elsewhere. The TV cameras were in place, as would later be seen, but first there was business to be done, and that was recorded on satellite.

The first Iranians across the border were in motorized units which speeded down the highways under radio silence, but it was daylight, and overhead came two KH-11 satellites which cross-linked their signals to communications birds, and from there down to the reception points. The nearest to Washington were at Fort Belvoir.

"Yes," Ryan said, lifting the phone to his ear.

"It's Ben Goodley, Mr. President. It's happening now. Iranian troops are crossing the border without any opposition we can see."

"Announcement?"

"Nothing as yet. It looks like they want to be in control first."

Jack checked the clock on the night table. "Okay, we'll handle it at the morning brief." There was no sense in ruining his sleep. He had people who would work through the night for him, Ryan told himself. He'd done it often enough himself.

"Yes, sir."

Ryan replaced the phone, and was able to go back to sleep. It was one presidential skill he was learning to master. Maybe, he thought, as he faded out again, maybe he'd learn to play golf during a crisis . . . wouldn't that be...

• • •

FITTINGLY, IT WAS one of the pederasts. He'd been looking after a fellow criminal—this one was a murderer—and doing a proper job of it, judging by the videotapes, which had accelerated the process.

Moudi had been careful to tell the medical orderlies to supervise the new caregivers closely. The latter had taken the ordinary precautions, wearing their gloves, washing up carefully, keeping the room clean, mopping up all the fluids. This last task had become increasingly difficult with the advancing disease process in the first group of exposed subjects. Their collective moans came through the sound pickup with enough clarity for him to know what they were going through, especially with the absence of pain medications—a violation of the Muslim rules of mercy, which Moudi set aside. The second group of subjects were doing what they'd been told, but they'd not been issued masks, and that was for a reason.

The pederast was a young man, perhaps early twenties, and he'd been surprisingly attentive to his charge. Whether out of an appreciation for the murderer's pain or just to appear to be worthy of mercy himself, it didn't matter. Moudi zoomed the camera in. The man's skin was flushed and dry, his movements slow and achy. The doctor lifted the phone. A minute later, one of the army medics came into the picture. He spoke briefly with the pederast, then poked the thermometer into his ear before leaving the room and lifting a corridor phone.

"Subject Eight has a temperature of thirty-nine-pointtwo and reports fatigue and aches in his extremities. His eyes are red and puffy," the medic reported

brusquely. It was to be expected that the medics would not feel the same degree of empathy for any of the test subjects that they'd felt for Sister Jean Baptiste. Even though the latter had been an infidel, at least she'd been a woman of virtue. That was manifestly not true of the men in the room, and it made things easier for everyone.

"Thank you."

So, it was true, Moudi told himself. The Mayinga strain was indeed airborne. Now it only remained to be seen if it had fully transmitted itself, that this new victim would die from it. When half of the second group showed symptoms, they would be moved across the hall to a treatment room of their own, and the first group—they were all fatally afflicted with the Ebola—would be medically terminated.

The director would be pleased, Moudi knew. The latest step in the experiment had been as successful as those before. It was now increasingly certain that they had a weapon in their hands such as no man had ever wielded. Isn't that wonderful, the physician observed to himself.

THE FLIGHT OUT was always easier on the disposition. Movie Star walked through the metal detector, stopped, had the magic wand waved over him, resulting in the usual embarrassment over his gold Cross pen, and then he walked to the first-class lounge, without even looking around for the policemen who, if they were about, would stop him here and now. But they weren't, and they didn't. His carry-on bag had a leather-bound clipboard in it, but he wouldn't take that out quite yet. The flight was called in due course, and he walked to the jetway, and quickly found his seat in the front of the 747. The flight was only half full, and that made things very convenient. No sooner had the aircraft lifted off than he took out his pad and started recording all the things he'd not wished to commit to paper just yet. As usual, his photographic memory helped, and he worked for three solid hours until, over mid-Atlantic, he succumbed to the need for sleep. He suspected, correctly, that he'd need it.

29

FULL COURT

IT MIGHT BE HIS LAST shot, Kealty knew, again using in his own mind a metaphor denoting firearms. The irony of it never registered. He had more important things to do. The previous evening he had been summoning his remaining press contacts—the reliable ones. Others had, if not exactly backed away, at least maintained a discreet distance in their uncertainty, but for most, it wasn't all that hard to get their attention, and his two-hour midnight meeting had been called on the basis of a few key words and phrases known to excite their professional sensibilities. After that all he had to do was set the rules. This was all on background, not for attribution, not to be quoted. The reporters agreed, of course.

"It's pretty disturbing. The FBI subjected the whole top floor of the State Department to lie-detector tests," he told them. It was something they'd heard about but not yet confirmed. This would count as confirmation. "But more disturbingly, look at the policies we're seeing now. Build up defense under this Bretano guy—a guy who's grown up within the military-industrial complex. He says he wants to eliminate all the safeguards within the procurement system, wants to slash congressional oversight. And George Winston, what does he want to do? Wreck the tax system, make it more regressive, do away with capital-gains entirely—and why? To lay the country's whole tax burden on the middle and working classes and give the big shots a free ride, that's why.

"I never figured Ryan for a professional, for a competent sort of man to occupy the presidency, but I have to tell you, this is not what I expected. He's a reactionary, a radical conservative—I'm not sure what you'd call him."

"Are you sure about the thing at State?" the *New York Times* asked.

Kealty nodded. "Positive, hundred percent. You mean you people haven't—come on, are you doing *your* job?" he asked tiredly. "In the middle of a Mideast crisis, he has the FBI harassing the most senior people we have, trying to accuse them of stealing a letter that was never there."

"And now," Kealty's chief of staff added, seeming to speak out of turn, "we have the *Washington Post* about to run a canonization piece on Ryan."

"Wait a minute," the *Post* reporter said, straightening his back, "that's Bob Holtzman, not my doing. I *told* my AME that it wasn't a good idea."

"Who's the leak?" Kealty asked.

"I don't have a clue. Bob never lets that out. You know that."

"So what is Ryan doing at CIA? He wants to *triple* the Directorate of Operations the spies. Just what the country needs, right? What is Ryan doing?" Kealty asked rhetorically. "Beefing up defense. Rewriting the tax code

to benefit the fat cats. And taking CIA back to the days of the Cold War. We're going back to the 1950s—*why?"* Kealty demanded. *"Why* is he doing all this? What is he thinking about? Am I the only one in this city asking questions? When are you people going to do your job? He's trying to bully Congress, and succeeding, and where is the media? Who's protecting the people out there?"

"What are you saying, Ed?" the *Times* asked.

The gesture of frustration was done with consummate skill. "I'm standing in my own political grave here. I have nothing to gain by this, but I *can't* just stand by and do nothing. Even if Ryan has the entire power of our government behind him, I can't just let him and his cronies try to concentrate all of the power of our government in a few hands, increase their own ability to spy on us, load the tax system in such a way as to further enrich people who've never paid their fair share, reward the defense industry—what's next, trashing the civil rights laws? He's flying his wife to work every day, and you people haven't even remarked that that's never happened before. This is an imperial presidency like Lyndon Johnson never dreamed of, *without* a Congress to do anything about it. You know what we have here now?" Kealty gave them a moment. "King Jack the First. Somebody's supposed to care about that. Why is it that you people don't?"

"What do you know about the Holtzman piece?" the *Boston Globe* wanted to know.

"Ryan has a lively history in CIA. He's killed people."

"James fucking Bond," Kealty's chief of staff said on cue. The Post reporter then had to defend his publication's honor:

"Holtzman doesn't say that. If you mean the time the terrorists came to—"

"No, not that. Holtzman's going to write about the Moscow thing. Ryan didn't even set that up. It was Judge Arthur Moore, when he was DCI. Ryan was the front man. It's bad enough anyway. It interfered with the inner workings of the old Soviet Union, and it never occurred to anyone that *maybe* that wasn't such a great idea—I mean, what the hell, right, screwing around with the government of a country with ten thousand warheads pointed at us—you know, people, that's called an act of war, like? And why? To rescue their head thug from a purge for stepping over the line *so that* we could crack a spy ring inside CIA. I bet he didn't tell Holtzman that, did he?"

"I haven't seen the story," the *Post* reporter admitted. "I've only heard a few things." It was almost worthy of a smile. Kealty's sources inside the paper were better than those of the senior political reporter. "Okay, you say Ryan has killed people like James Bond. Support that," he said in a flat voice.

"Four years ago, remember the bombs in Colombia, took out some cartel members?" Kealty waited for the nod. "That was a CIA operation. Ryan went to Colombia—and that was *another* act of war, people. That's two that I know about."

It was amusing to Kealty that Ryan was so skillfully conniving at his own destruction. The PLAN BLUE move within CIA was already rippling through the Directorate of Intelligence, many of whose senior people faced either early retirement or the diminution of their bureaucratic empires, and many of those enjoyed walking the corridors of power. It was easy for them to think that they were vital to the security of their country, and thinking that, they had to

do something, didn't they? More than that, Ryan had stepped on a lot of bureaucratic toes at Langley, and now it was payback time, all the better that he was a higher target than ever before, that the sources were, after all, merely talking to the former Vice President of the United States—maybe even the real President, they could say—and not to the media, which was, after all, against the law, as opposed to a legitimate discussion of vital national policy.

"How sure of that are you?" the *Globe* asked.

"I have dates. Remember when Admiral James Greer died? He was Ryan's mentor. He probably set up the operation from his deathbed. Ryan didn't attend the funeral. He was in Colombia then. That's a fact, and you can check it," Kealty insisted. "Probably that's why James Cutter committed suicide—"

"I thought that was an accident," the *Times* said. "He was out jogging, and —"

"And he just happened to step in front of a transit bus? Look, I'm not saying that Cutter was murdered. I am saying that he was implicated in the illegal operation that Ryan was running, and he didn't want to face the music. That gave Jack Ryan the chance to cover his tracks. You know," Kealty concluded, "I've underestimated this Ryan fellow. He's as slick an operator as this town has seen since Allen Dulles, maybe Bill Donovan—but the time for that is past. We don't need a CIA with three times as many spies. We don't need to pile more dollars into defense. We don't need to redraft the tax code to protect the millionaires Ryan hangs out with. For sure we don't need a President who thinks the 1950s were just great. He's doing things to our country which we cannot allow to happen. I don't know"—another gesture of frustration —"maybe I have to go it all alone on this. I'm—I know I risk ruining my reputation for all history, standing up like this ... but, damn it, once I swore an oath to the Constitution of our country ... first time," he went on in a quiet, reflective voice, "when I won my first House scat ... then into the Senate ... and then when Roger asked me to step up and be his Vice President. You know, you don't forget that sort of thing ... an', an', an' maybe I'm not the right guy for this, okay? Yes, I've done some pretty awful things, betrayed my wife, lived in a bottle for so many years. The American people probably deserve somebody better than me to stand up and do what's right ... but I'm all there is, and I can't—I *can't* break faith with the people who sent me to this town, no matter what it costs. Ryan is not the President of the United States. He knows that. Why else is he trying to change so many things so fast? Why is he trying to bully the senior people at State into lying? Why is he playing with abortion rights? Why is he playing with the tax code through this plutocrat Winston? He's trying to buy it. He's going to continue to bully Congress until the fat cats try to have him elected king or something. I mean, who represents the *people* right now?"

"I just don't see him that way, Ed," the *Globe* responded, after a few seconds. "His politics are pretty far to the right, but he comes across as sincere as hell."

"What's the first rule of politics?" the *Times* asked with a chuckle. Then he continued: "I tell you, if this stuff about Russia and Colombia is true ... whoa! It is the '50s, fucking around with other governments that way. We're not supposed to do that anymore, sure as hell not at that level."

"You never got this from us, and you can't reveal the source at Langley." The chief of staff handed out tape cassettes. "But there are enough verifiable facts here to back up everything we've told you."

"It's going to take a couple of days," the *San Francisco Examiner* said, fingering the cassette and looking at his colleagues. The race started now. Every reporter in the room would want to be the first to break the story. That process would start with them playing their tapes in their cars during the drive to their homes, and the one with the shortest drive had the advantage.

"Gentlemen, all I can say is, this is an important story, and you have to apply your best professional conduct to it. It's not for me," Kealty said. "I wish I could pick someone else to do this, someone with a better record—but I can't. Not for me. It's for the country, and that means you have to play it as straight as you can."

"We will, Ed," the *Times* promised. He checked his watch. Almost three in the morning. He'd work all day to make the ten P.M. deadline. In that time he'd have to verify, re-verify, and conference in with his assistant managing editor to make sure that he got the front page, above the fold. The West Coast papers had the advantage—three more hours because of time zones—but he knew how to beat them to the punch. The coffee cups went down on the table, and the journalists rose, tucking their personal mini-tape machines in their jacket pockets, and each holding his personal cassette in the left hand while the right fished for the car keys.

"TALK TO ME, BEN." Jack commanded barely four hours later.

"Still nothing on the local TV, but we've caught microwave stuff transmitted for later broadcast." Goodley paused as Ryan took his seat behind the desk. "Quality is too poor to show you, but we have the audio tracks. Anyway, they spent all day consolidating power. Tomorrow, they go public. Probably the word's out on the street, and the official stuff will be for the rest of the world."

"Smart," the President observed.

"Agreed." Goodley nodded. "New wild card. The Premier of Turkmenistan bit the big one, supposedly an automobile accident. Golovko called me about —just after five, I think to let us know. He ain't a real happy camper at the moment. He thinks that Iraq and Turko-land are part of the same play—"

"Do we have anything to support that?" Ryan asked, tying his necktie. It was a dumb question.

"You kidding, boss? We don't have crap, not even overheads in this case."

Jack looked down at his desktop for a second. "You know, for all the things people say about how powerful CIA is—"

"Hey, I work there, remember? Thank God for CNN. Yeah, I know. Good news, the Russians are telling us at least some of what they know."

"Scared," the President observed.

"Very," the national intelligence officer agreed.

"Okay, we have Iran taking over Iraq. We have a dead leader in Turkmenistan. Analysis?" Jack asked.

"I won't contradict Golovko on this one. He doubtless does have agents in place, and it sounds like he's in the same situation we're in. He can watch and

worry, but he doesn't have any real operational possibilities. Maybe it's a coincidence, but spooks aren't supposed to believe in such things. Damned sure Sergey doesn't. He thinks it's all one play. I think that's a definite possibility. I'll be talking to Vasco about that, too. What he says is shaping up is starting to look a little scary. We'll be hearing from the Saudis today." And Israel could not be far behind, Ryan knew.

"China?" the President asked next. Maybe the other side of the world was a little better. It wasn't.

"Major exercise. Surface and sub-surface combatants, no air yet, but the overheads show the fighter bases are tooling up—"

"Wait a minute—"

"Yes, sir. If it's a planned exercise, why weren't they ready for it? I'll be talking to the Pentagon about that one at eight-thirty. The ambassador had a little talk with a foreign ministry type. Feedback is, no big deal, the ministry didn't even know about it, routine training."

"Bullshit."

"Maybe. Taiwan is still low-keying it, but they'll be sending some ships out today—well, tonight over there. We have assets heading to the area. The Taiwanese are playing ball, full cooperation with our observers in their listening posts. Soon they will ask us what we will do if 'A' or 'B' happens. We need to think about that. The Pentagon says that the PRC doesn't have the assets to launch an invasion, same as back in '96. The ROC air force is stronger now than it was. So, I don't see that this is likely to lead anywhere. Maybe it really is just an exercise. Maybe they want to see how we—you, that is—will react."

"What's Adler think?"

"He says to ignore it. I think he's right. Taiwan is playing low-key. I think we do the same. We move ships, especially subs, but we keep them out of sight. CINCPAC seems to have a handle on it. We let him run it for the time being?"

Ryan nodded. "Through SecDef, yes. Europe?"

"Nice and quiet, ditto our hemisphere, ditto Africa. You know, if the Chinese are just being their usual obnoxious selves, then the only real problem is the Persian Gulf—and the truth of the matter is that we've been there and done that, sir. We've told the Saudis that we're not going to back off of them. That word will get to the other side in due course, and it ought to make the other side stop and think before making any plans to go farther. I don't like the UIR thing, but I think we can deal with it. Iran is fundamentally unstable; the people in that country want more freedom, and when they get a taste, that country will change. We can ride it out."

Ryan smiled and poured himself a cup of decaf. "You're getting very confident, Dr. Goodley."

"You pay me to think. I might as well tell you what's moving around between the ears, boss."

"Okay, get on with your work and keep me posted. I have to figure a way to reconstitute the Supreme Court today." Ryan sipped his coffee and waited for Arnie to come in. This job wasn't all that tough, was it? Not when you had a good team working for you.

“IT’S ABOUT SEDUCTION,” Clark said to the shiny new faces in the auditorium, catching Ding’s grin in the back of the room and cringing. The training film they’d just watched had gone over the history of six important cases. There were only five prints of the film, and this one was already being rewound for the walk back to the vault. Two of the cases he’d worked himself. One of the agents had been executed in the basement of 2 Dzerzhinskiy Square after being burned by a KGB mole inside Langley. The other had a small farm in the birch country of northern New Hampshire, probably still wishing that he could go home—but Russia was still Russia, and the narrow view their culture took of high treason wasn’t an invention of the previous regime. Such people were forever orphans ... Clark turned the page and continued from his notes.

“You will seek out people with problems. You will sympathize with those problems. The people with whom you will work are not perfect. They will all have beefs. Some of them will come to you. You don’t have to love them, but you do have to be loyal to them.

“What do I mean by seduction? Everyone in this room has done it once or twice, right? You listen more than you talk. You nod. You agree. Sure, you’re smarter than your boss—I know about him, we have the same sort of jerk in our government. I had a boss like that once myself. It’s hard to be an honest man in that kind of government, isn’t it? You bet, honor really is important.

“When they say *that,* you know they want money. That’s fine,” Clark told them. “They never expect as much as they ask for. We have the budget to pay anything they want—but the important thing is getting them on the hook. Once they lose their virginity, people, they can’t get it back.

“Your agents, the people you recruit, will get addicted to what they do. It’s *fun* to be a spy. Even the most ideologically pure people you recruit will giggle from time to time because they know something nobody else knows.

“They will *all* have something wrong with them. The most idealistic ones are often the worst. They experience guilt. They drink. Some might go to their priest, even—I’ve had that happen to me. Some break the rules for the first time and figure no rules matter anymore. Those kind will start boffing every girl that crosses their path and taking all sorts of chances.

“Handling agents is an art. You are mother, father, priest, and teacher to them. You have to settle them down. You have to tell them to look after their families, and look after their own ass, especially the ‘good’ ideological recruits. They’re dependable for a lot of things, but one of them is to get too much into it. A lot of these agents self-destruct. They can turn into crusaders. Few of the crusaders,” Clark went on, “died of old age.

“The agent who wants money is often the most reliable. They don’t take too many chances. They want out eventually, so they can live the good life in Hollywood and get laid by a starlet or something. Nice thing about agents who work for money—they want to live to spend it. On the other hand, when you need something done in a hurry, when you need somebody to take a risk, you can use a money guy—just be ready to evac him the next day. Sooner or later he’ll figure that he’s done enough, and demand to be got out.

"What am I telling you? There are no hard and fast rules in this business. You have to use your heads. You have to know about people, how they are, how they act, how they think. You must have genuine empathy with your agents, whether you like them or not. Most you will not like," he promised them. "You saw the film. Every word was real. Three of those cases ended with a dead agent. One ended with a dead officer. Remember that.

"Okay, you now have a break. Mr. Revell will have you in the next class." Clark assembled his notes and walked to the back of the room while the trainees absorbed the lessons in silence.

"Gee, Mr. C., does that mean seduction is okay?" Ding asked.

"Only when you get paid for it, Domingo."

ALL OF GROUP Two was sick now. It was as though they'd all punched in on some sort of time clock. Within ten hours, they'd all complained of fever and aches—flu symptoms. Some knew, Moudi saw, or certainly suspected what had happened to them. Some of them continued to help the sicker subjects to whom they were assigned. Others called for the army medics to complain, or just sat on the floor in the treatment room and did nothing but savor their own illness in fear that they would become what they saw. Again the conditions of their prior imprisonment and diet worked against them. The hungry and debilitated are more easily controlled than the healthy and well fed.

The original group was deteriorating at the expected rate. Their pain grew worse, to the point that their slow writhing lessened because it hurt more to move than to remain still. One seemed very close to death, and Moudi wondered if, as with Benedict Mkusa, this victim's heart was unusually vulnerable to the Ebola Mayinga strain—perhaps this sub-type of the disease had a previously unsuspected affinity for heart tissue? That would have been interesting to learn in the abstract, but he'd gone well beyond the abstract study of the disease.

"We gain nothing by continuing this phase, Moudi," the director observed, standing beside the younger man and watching the TV monitors. "Next step."

"As you wish." Dr. Moudi lifted the phone and spoke for a minute or so.

It took fifteen minutes to get things moving, and then the medical orderlies entered the picture, taking all of the nine members of the second group out of that room, then across the corridor to a second large treatment room, where, on a different set of monitors, the physicians saw that each was assigned a bed and given a medication which, in but a few minutes, had them all asleep. The medics then returned to the original group. Half of them were asleep anyway, and all the others stuporous, unable to resist. The wakeful ones were killed first, with injections of Dilaudid, a powerful synthetic narcotic into whatever vein was the most convenient. The executions took but a few minutes and were, in the end, merciful. The bodies were loaded one by one onto gurneys for transport to the incinerator. Next the mattresses and bedclothes were bundled for burning, leaving only the metal frames of the beds. These, along with the rest of the room, were sprayed with caustic chemicals. The room would be sealed for several days, then sprayed again, and the collective

attention of the facility's staff would transfer to Group Two, nine condemned criminals who had proven, or so it would seem, that Ebola Zaire Mayinga could be transmitted through the air.

THE HEALTH DEPARTMENT official took a whole day to arrive, doubtless delayed, Dr. MacGregor suspected, by a pile of paperwork on his desk, a fine dinner, and a night with whatever woman spiced up his daily life. And probably the paperwork was still there on his desk, the Scot told himself.

At least he knew about the proper precautions. The government doctor barely entered the room at all he had to come an additional, reluctant step so that the door could be closed behind him, but moved no farther than that, standing there, his head tilting and his eyes squinting, the better to observe the patient from two meters away. The lights in the room were turned down so as not to hurt Saleh's eyes. Despite that the discoloration of his skin was obvious. The two hanging units of type-O blood and the morphine drip told the rest, along with the chart, which the government official held in his gloved, trembling hands.

"The antibody tests?" he asked quietly, summoning his official dignity.

"Positive," MacGregor told him.

The first documented Ebola outbreak—no one knew how far back the disease went, how many jungle villages it might have exterminated a hundred years earlier, for example—had gone through the nearest hospital's staff with frightening speed, to the point that the medical personnel had left the facility in panic. And that, perversely, had helped end the outbreak more rapidly than continued treatment might have done—the victims died, and nobody got close enough to them to catch what they had. African medics now knew what precautions to take. Everyone was masked and gloved, and disinfection procedures were ruthlessly enforced. As casual and careless as many African personnel often were, this was one lesson they'd taken to heart, and with that feeling of safety established, they, like medical personnel all over the world, did the best they could.

For this patient, that was very little use. The chart showed that, too.

"From *Iraq?"* the official asked.

Dr. MacGregor nodded. "That is what he told me."

"I must check on that with the proper authorities."

"Doctor, I have a report to make," MacGregor insisted. "This is a possible outbreak and—"

"No." The official shook his head. "Not until we know more. When we make a report, if we do, we must forward all of the necessary information for the alert to be useful."

"But—"

"But this is *my* responsibility, and it is *my* duty to see that the responsibility is properly executed." He pointed the chart to the patient. His hand wasn't shaking now that he had established his power over the case. "Does he have a family? Who can tell us more about him?"

"I don't know."

"Let me check that out," the government doctor said. "Have your people

make copies of all records and send them to me at once." With a stern order given, the health department representative felt as though he had done his duty to his profession and his country.

MacGregor nodded his submission. Moments like this made him hate Africa. His country had been here for more than a century. A fellow Scot named Gordon had come to the Sudan, fallen in love with it—was the man mad? MacGregor wondered—and died right in this city 120 years earlier. Then the Sudan had become a British protectorate. A regiment of infantry had been raised from this country, and that regiment had fought bravely and well under British officers. But then Sudan had been returned to the Sudanese—too quickly, without the time and money spent to create the institutional infrastructure to turn a tribal wasteland into a viable nation. The same story had been told in the same way all over the continent, and the people of Africa were still paying the price for that disservice. It was one more thing neither he nor any other European could speak aloud except with one another—and sometimes not even then—for fear of being called a racist. But if he were a racist, then *why* had he come here?

"You will have them in two hours."

"Very well." The official walked out the door. There the head nurse for the unit would take him to the disinfection area, and for that the official would follow orders like a child under the eye of a stern mother.

• • •

PAT MARTIN CAME in with a well-stuffed briefcase, from which he took fourteen folders, laddering them across the coffee table in alphabetical order. Actually they were labeled *A* to *M,* because President Ryan had specifically asked that he not know the names at first.

"You know, I'd feel a lot better if you hadn't given me all this power," Martin said without looking up.

"Why's that?" Jack asked.

"I'm just a prosecutor, Mr. President. A pretty good one, sure, and now I run the Criminal Division, and that's nice, too, but I'm only—"

"How do you think I feel?" Ryan demanded, then softened his voice. "Nobody since Washington has been stuck with this job, and what makes you think *I* know what I'm supposed to be doing? Hell, I'm not even a lawyer to understand all this stuff without a crib sheet."

Martin looked up with half a smile. "Okay, I deserved that."

But Ryan had set the criteria. Before him was a roster of the senior federal judiciary. Each of the fourteen folders gave the professional history of a judge in the United States Court of Appeals, ranging from one in Boston to another in Seattle. The President had ordered Martin and his people to select judges of no less than ten years' experience, with no less than fifty important written decisions (as distinguished from routine matters like which side won in a liability case), none of which had been overturned by the Supreme Court—or if one or two had been overturned, had been vindicated by a later reversal in Washington.

"This is a good bunch," Martin said.

"Death penalty?"

"The Constitution specifically provides for that, remember. Fifth Amendment," Martin quoted from memory: " 'Nor shall any person be subject for the same offense to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.' So *with* due process, you can take a person's life, but you can only try him once for it. The Court established the criteria for that in a number of cases in the '70s and '80s —guilt trial followed by penalty trial, with the penalty phase dependent upon 'special' circumstances. All of these judges have upheld that rule—with a few exceptions. *D* here struck down a Mississippi case on the basis of mental incompetence. That was a good call, even though the crime was pretty gruesome—the Supreme Court affirmed it without comment or hearing. Sir, the problem with the system is one that nobody can really fix. It's just the nature of law. A lot of legal principles are based on decisions from unusual cases. There's a dictum that hard cases make for bad law. Like that case in England, remember? Two little kids murder a younger kid. What the hell is a judge supposed to do when the defendants are eight years old, definitely guilty of a brutal murder, but only eight years old? What you do then is, you pray some other judge gets stuck with it. Somehow we all try to make cohesive legal doctrine out of that. It's not really possible, but we do it anyway."

"I figure you picked tough ones, Pat. Did you pick fair ones?" the President asked.

"Remember what I said a minute ago? I don't want this sort of power? I didn't dare do otherwise. *E* here reversed a conviction one of my best people got on a technicality—an issue of admissibility—and when he did it, we were all pretty mad. The issue was entrapment, where the line is. The defendant was guilty as hell, no doubt of it. But Judge ... *E*looked at the arguments and probably made the right call, and that ruling is part of FBI guidelines now."

Jack looked at the folders. It would be a full week's reading. This, as Arnie had told him a few days before, would be his most important act as President. No Chief Executive since Washington had been faced with the necessity of appointing the entire Supreme Court, and even that had been in an age when the national consensus on law had been far firmer and deeper than what existed in America now. Back then "cruel and unusual punishment" had meant the rack and burning at the stake—both of those things that *had* been used in pre-Revolutionary America—but in more recent rulings had been taken to mean the absence of cable television and denial of sex-change operations, or just overcrowding in the prisons. *So fine,* Ryan thought, *the prisons are too crowded, and then why not release dangerous criminals on society for fear of being cruel to convicted felons?*

Now he had the power to change that. All he had to do was select judges who took as harsh a view on crime as he did, an outlook he'd learned from listening to his father's occasional rant about a particularly vile crime, or an especially bat-brained judge who hadn't ever viewed a crime scene, and therefore never really known what the issues were. And for Ryan there was

the personal element. He'd been the subject of attempted murder, as had his wife and children. He *knew* what it was all about, the outrage at facing the fact that there were people who could take a life as easily as buying candy at a drug store, who preyed on others as though they were game animals, and whose actions cried out for retribution. He could remember looking into Sean Miller's eyes more than once and seeing *nothing,* nothing in there at all. No humanity, no empathy, no feelings—not even hatred, so outside the human community he'd taken himself that there was no returning ...

And yet.

Ryan closed his eyes, remembering the moment, a loaded Browning pistol in his grip, his blood boiling in his veins but his hands like ice, the exquisite moment at which he could have ended the life of the man who had so wanted to end his own—and Cathy's, and Sally's, and Little Jack, yet unborn. Looking in his eyes, and finally seeing the fear at last, breaking through the shell of inhumanity ... but how many times had he thanked a merciful God that he'd neglected to cock the hammer on his pistol? He would have done it. He'd wanted to do it more than anything in his life, and he *could* remember pulling the trigger, only to be surprised when it hadn't moved—and then the moment had passed away. Jack could remember killing. The terrorist in London. The one in the boat at the base of his cliff. The cook on the submarine. Surely he'd killed others—that horrible night in Colombia which had given him nightmares for years after. But Sean Miller was different. It hadn't been necessity for Miller. For him it had been justice of a sort, and he'd been there, and he'd been the Law, and, God, how he'd wanted to take that worthless life! But he hadn't. The Law that had ended the life of that terrorist and his colleagues had been well considered, cold and detached ... as it had to be—and for *that* reason he had to select the best possible people to repopulate the Court, because the decisions they would make were not about one enraged man trying at the same time to protect and avenge his family. They would say what the law was for everyone, and that wasn't about personal desires. This thing people called civilization was about something more than one man's passion. It had to be. And it was his duty to make sure that it was, by picking the right people.

"Yeah," Martin said, reading the President's face. "Big deal, isn't it?"

"Wait a minute." Jack rose and walked out the door to the secretaries' room. "Which one of you smokes?" he asked there.

"It's me," said Ellen Sumter. She was of Jack's age, and probably trying to quit, as all smokers of that age at least claimed. Without another question, she handed her President a Virginia Slim—the same as the crewwoman on his airplane, Jack realized-and a butane lighter. The President nodded his thanks and walked back into his office, lighting it. Before he could close the door, Mrs. Sumter raced to follow him with an ashtray taken from her desk drawer.

Sitting down, Ryan took a long drag, eyes on the carpet, which was of the Great Seal of the President of the United States, covered though it was with furniture.

"How the hell," Jack asked quietly, "did anybody ever decide that one man could have this much power? I mean, what I'm doing here—"

"Yes, sir. Kind of like being James Madison, isn't it? You pick the people

who decide what the Constitution really means. They're all in their late forties or fifties, and so they'll be there for a while," Martin told him. "Cheer up. At least it's not a game for you. At least you're doing it the right way. You're not picking women because they're women, or blacks because they're black. I gave you a good mix, color, bathrooms, and everything, but all the names have been redacted out—and you won't be able to tell who's who unless you follow cases, which you probably don't. I give you my word, sir, they're all good ones. I spent a lot of time assembling the list for you. Your guidelines helped, and they were good guidelines. For what it's worth, they're all people who think the way you do. People who like power scare me," the attorney said. "Good ones reflect a lot on what they're doing before they do it. Picking real judges who've made some hard calls—well, read their decisions. You'll see how hard they worked at what they did."

Another puff. He tapped the folders. "I don't know the law well enough to understand all the points in there. I don't know crap about the law, except you're not supposed to break it."

Martin grinned at that one: "Not a bad place to start when you think about it." He didn't have to go any further. Not every occupant of this office had thought of things quite that way. Both men knew it, but it wasn't the sort of thing one said to the sitting President.

"I know the things I don't like. I know the things I'd like to see changed, but, God damn it"—Ryan looked up, eyes wide now—"do I have the *right* to make that sort of call?"

"Yes, Mr. President, you do, because the Senate has to look over your shoulder, remember? Maybe they'll disagree on one or two. All these judges have been checked out by the FBI. They're all honest. They're all smart. None of them ever wanted or expected to make it to the Supreme Court except through a certiori grant. If you can't come up with nine you like, we'll search some more—better then if you have somebody else do it. The head of the Civil Rights Division is also a pretty good man—he's off to my left some, but he's another thinker."

Civil rights, Jack thought. Did he have to make government policy on *that,* too? How was he supposed to know what might be the right way to treat people who might or might not be a little different from everybody else? Sooner or later you lost the ability to be objective, and then your beliefs took over—and were you then making policy based on personal prejudice? How were you supposed to know what was right? Jesus.

Ryan took a last puff and stubbed the cigarette out, rewarded as always by a dizzying buzz from the renewed vice. "Well, I guess I have a lot of reading to do."

"I'd offer you some help, but probably better that you try to do it yourself. That way, nobody pollutes the process—more than I've already done, that is. You want to keep that in mind. I might not be the best guy for this, but you asked me, and that's the best I have."

"I suppose that's all any of us can do, eh?" Ryan observed, staring at the pile of folders.

THE CHIEF OF the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice was a political appointee dating back to President Fowler. Formerly a corporate lawyer and lobbyist—it paid far better than the academic post he'd held before his first political appointment—he'd been politically active since before his admission to law school, and as with so many occupants of official offices he had become, if not his post, then his vision of it. He had a constituency, even though he'd never been elected to anything, and even though his government service had been intermittent, a series of increasingly high posts made possible by his proximity to the power that rested in this city, the power lunches, the parties, the office visits made while representing people he might or might not really care about, because a lawyer had an obligation to serve the interests of his clients—and the clients chose him, not the reverse. One often needed the fees of the few to serve the needs of the many—which was, in fact, his own philosophy of government. Thus he'd unknowingly come to live Ben Jonson's dictum about "speaking to mere contraries, yet all be law." But he'd never lost his passion for civil rights, and he'd never lobbied for anything contrary to that core belief—of course, nobody since the 1960s had lobbied *against* civil rights *per se,* but he told himself that was important. A white man with stock originating well before the Revolutionary War, he spoke at all the right forums, and from that he'd earned the admiration of people whose political views were the same as his. From that admiration came power, and it was hard to say which aspect of his life influenced the other more. Because of his early work in the Justice Department he'd won the attention of political figures. Because he'd done that work with skill, he'd also earned the attention of a powerful Washington law firm. Leaving the government to enter that firm, he'd used his political contacts to practice his profession more effectively, and from that effectiveness he'd generated additional credibility in the political world, one hand constantly washing the other until he couldn't really discern which hand was which. Along the way the cases he argued had become his identity in a process so gradual and seemingly so logical that he hardly knew what had taken place. He was what he'd argued for over the years.

And that was the problem right now. He knew and admired Patrick Martin as a lesser legal talent who'd advanced at Justice by working exclusively in the courts—never even a proper United States Attorney (those were political appointments, mainly selected by senators for their home states), but rather one of the apolitical professional worker bees who did the real casework while their appointed boss worked on speeches, caseload management, and political ambition. And the fact of the matter was that Martin was a gifted legal tactician, fortyone and one in his formal trials, better yet as a legal administrator guiding young prosecutors. But he didn't know much about politics, the Civil Rights chief thought, and for that reason he was the wrong man to advise President Ryan.

He had the list. One of his people had helped Martin put it together, and his people were loyal, because they knew that the real path to advancement in this city was to move in and out as their chief had done, and their chief could by lifting a phone get them that job at a big firm, and so one of them handed his chief the list, with the names not redacted out.

The chief of the Civil Rights Division had only to read off the fourteen names. He didn't need to call up the paperwork on their cases. He knew them all. This one, at the Fourth Circuit in Richmond, had reversed a lower-court ruling and written a lengthy opinion questioning the constitutionality of affirmative action—too good a discourse, it had persuaded the Supreme Court in a sharply divided 5-4 decision. The case had been a narrow one, and the affirmation of it in Washington had been similarly narrow, but the chief didn't like *any* chips in that particular wall of stone.

That one in New York had affirmed the government's position in another area, but in doing so had limited the applicability of the principle—and *that* case hadn't gone further, and was law for a large part of the country.

These were the wrong people. Their view of judicial power was too circumscribed. They deferred too much to Congress and the state legislatures. Pat Martin's view of law was different from his own. Martin didn't see that judges were *supposed* to right what was wrong—the two had often debated the issue over lunch in conversations spirited but always good-natured. Martin was a pleasant man, and a sufficiently good debater that he was hard to move off any position, whether he was wrong or not, and while that made him a fine prosecutor he just didn't have the temperament, he just didn't *see* the way things were supposed to be, and he'd picked judges the same way, and the Senate might be dumb enough to consent to the selections, and that *couldn't happen.* For this sort of power, you had to pick people who knew how to exercise it in the proper way.

He really had no choice. He bundled the list into an envelope and tucked it into the pocket of his jacket and made a phone call for lunch with one of his many contacts.

30

PRESS

THEY DID IT FOR THE morning news, so pervasive had become the influence of television. This was how reality was defined, changed, and announced. A new day had surely dawned. The viewer was left in little doubt. There was a new flag hanging behind the announcer, a green field, the color of Islam, with two small gold stars. He started off with an invocation from the Koran, and then went into political matters. There was a new country. It was called the United Islamic Republic. It would be comprised of the former nations of Iran and Iraq. The new nation would be guided by the Islamic principles of peace and brotherhood. There would be an elected parliament called a majlis. Elections, he promised, would be held by the end of the year. In the interim there would be a revolutionary council comprised of political figures from both countries, in proportion to population—which gave Iran the whip hand, the announcer didn't say; he didn't have to.

There was no reason, he went on, for any other country to fear the UIR. The new nation proclaimed its goodwill for all Muslim nations, and all nations who had friendly relations with the former divided segments of the new land. That this statement was contradictory in numerous ways was not explored. The other Gulf nations, all of them Islamic, had *not* actually enjoyed friendly relations with either of the partners. The elimination of the former Iraqi weapons facilities would continue apace so that there would be no question of hostility to the international community. Political prisoners would be freed at once—

"And now they can make room for the new ones," Major Sabah observed at PALM BOWL. "So, it's happened." He didn't have to phone anyone. The TV feed was being viewed all over the Gulf, and in every room with a functioning television the only happy face was the one on the screen—that is, until the scene changed to show spontaneous demonstrations at the various mosques, where people made their morning prayers, and walked outside to display their joy.

"HELLO, ALI," Jack said. He'd stayed up reading the folders Martin had left, knowing that the call would come, suffering, again, from a headache that he seemed to acquire just from walking into the Oval Office. It was surprising that the Saudis had been so long in authorizing the call from their Prince/Minister-Without-Portfolio. Maybe they'd just hoped to wish it away, a characteristic not exactly unique to that part of the world. "Yes, I'm watching the TV now." At the bottom of the display, like the captioning for the hearing-

impaired, was a dialogue box being typed by intelligence specialists at the National Security Agency. The rhetoric was a little flowery, but the content was clear to everyone in the room. Adler, Vasco, and Goodley had come in as soon as the feed arrived, liberating Ryan from his reading, if not his headache.

"This is very unsettling, if not especially surprising," the Prince said over the encrypted line.

"There was no stopping it. I know how it looks to you, Your Highness," the President said tiredly. He could have indulged in coffee, but he did want to get *some* sleep tonight.

"We are going to place our military at a higher state of readiness."

"Is there anything you want us to do?" Ryan asked.

"For the moment, just to know that your support has not changed."

"It hasn't. I've told you before. Our security commitment to the Kingdom remains the same. If you want us to do something to demonstrate that, we're ready to take whatever steps seem reasonable and appropriate. Do you—"

"No, Mr. President, we have no formal requests at this time." That statement was delivered in a tone that made Jack's eyes flicker off the speakerphone and to his visitors.

"In that case, might I suggest that you have some of your people discuss options with some of mine?"

"It must be kept quiet. My government has no wish to inflame the situation."

"We'll do what we can. You can start talking to Admiral Jackson—he's J-3 in the—"

"Yes, Mr. President, I met him in the East Room. I will have our working-level people contact him later today."

"Okay. If you need me, Ali, I'm always at the end of the phone."

"Thank you, Jack. I hope you will sleep well." *You'll* need it. *We all will.* And the line went dead. Ryan killed the button on the phone to make sure.

"Opinions?"

"Ali wants us to do something, but the King hasn't decided yet," Adler said.

"They'll try to establish contacts with the UIR." Vasco took up the conversation. "Their first instinct will be to get a dialogue going, try to do a little business. The Saudis will take the lead. Figure Kuwait and the rest of the lesser states will let them handle the contacts, but we'll be hearing from them soon, probably through channels."

"We have a good ambassador in Kuwait?" the President asked.

"Will Bach," Adler said, with an emphatic nod. "Career FSO. Good man. Not real imaginative, but a good plugger, knows the language and culture, lots of friends in their royal family. Good commercial guy. He's been pretty effective as a middleman between our businesspeople and their government."

"Good deputy chief of mission to back him up," Vasco went on, "and the attaches there are tops, all spooks, good ones."

"Okay, Bert." Ryan took off his reading glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Tell me what happens next."

"The whole south side of the Gulf is scared shitless. This is their nightmare come true."

Ryan nodded and shifted his gaze. "Ben, I want CIA's assessment of the

UIR's intentions, and I want you to call Robby and see what kind of options we have. Get Tony Bretano into the loop. He wanted to be SecDef, and I want him to start thinking about the non-admin part of the job."

"Langley doesn't have much of a clue," Adler pointed out. "Not their fault, but that's how it is." And so their assessment would present a range of potential options, from theater nuclear war—Iran might have nukes, after all—to the Second Coming, and three or four options in between, each with its theoretical justification. That way, as usual, the President had the chance to choose the wrong one, and it wouldn't be anyone's fault but his own.

"Yeah, I know. Scott, let's see if we can establish some contacts with the UIR, too."

"Extend the olive branch?"

"You got it," the President agreed. "Everyone figure they need time to consolidate before they do anything radical?" There were nods with the President's assessment, but not from everyone.

"Mr. President?" Vasco said.

"Yeah, Bert—by the way, good call. You weren't exactly right on timing, but damned if you weren't right enough."

"Thanks. Mr. President, on the consolidation issue, that's about people, right?"

"Sure." Ryan and the rest nodded. Consolidating a government meant little more than that the people got used to the new system of rule and accepted it.

"Sir, if you look at the number of people in Iraq who have to get used to this new government, compare that number to the population of the Gulf states. It's a big jump in terms of distance and territory, but not in terms of population," Vasco said, reminding them that although Saudi Arabia was larger than all of America east of the Mississippi, it had fewer people than the Philadelphia metropolitan area.

"They're not going to do anything right away," Adler objected.

"They might. Depends on what you mean by 'right away,' Mr. Secretary."

"Iran has too many internal problems," Goodley started to say.

Vasco had come to like presidential access and attention, and decided to seize the floor. "Don't underestimate the religious dimension," he warned. "That is a unifying factor which could erase or at least suppress their internal problems. Their flag says it. The name of the country says it. People all over the world like a winner. Daryaei sure looks like a winner now, doesn't he? One other thing."

"What's that, Bert?" Adler asked.

"You notice the flag? The two stars are pretty small," Vasco said pensively.

"So?" This was Goodley. Ryan looked back at the TV and the announcer. The flag was still there behind him and—

"So, there's plenty of room for more."

IT WAS A moment such as he had dreamed of, but the culmination of such a dream is always better than its contemplation, because now the cheers were real, striking his ears from the outside, not the inside. Mahmoud Haji Daryaei had flown in before dawn, and with the rising of the sun he'd walked into the

central mosque, removing his shoes, washing his hands and forearms, because a man was supposed to be clean before his God. Humbly, he'd listened to the incantation from the minaret, calling the faithful to prayer, and this day people didn't roll back over and try to capture a few more hours of sleep. Today they flocked to the mosque from blocks around in a gesture of devotion that moved their visitor to his core. Daryaei took no special place, but he appreciated the singularity of the moment, and tears streamed down his dark, deeply lined cheeks at the overwhelming emotion of the moment. He had fulfilled the first of his tasks. He had fulfilled the wishes of the Prophet Mohammed. He had restored a measure of unity to the Faith, the first step in his holy quest. In the reverent hush following the conclusion of morning prayers, he rose and walked out into the street, and there he was recognized. To the despairing panic of his security guards, he walked along the street, returning the greetings of people at first stupefied and then ecstatic to see the former enemy of their country walking among them as a guest.

There were no cameras to record this. It was not a moment to be polluted by publicity, and though there was danger, he accepted it. What he was doing would tell him much. It would tell him of the power of his Faith, and the renewed faith of these people, and it would tell him whether or not he had Allah's blessing on his quest, for Daryaei truly was a humble man, doing what he had to do, not for himself, but for his God. Why else, he often asked himself, would he have chosen a life of danger and denial? Soon the sidewalk traffic turned into a crowd, and from a crowd to a mob. People he'd never met appointed themselves to be his guardians, forcing a path for him through the bodies and the cheers as his aged legs made their way while his now-serene dark eyes swept left and right, wondering if danger would come, but finding only joy that reflected his own. He gazed and gestured to the crowd as a grandfather might greet his progeny, not smiling, but composed, accepting their love and respect, and with his benign eyes promising greater things, because great deeds had to be followed by greater ones, and the moment was right.

"SO, WHAT SORT of man is he?" Movie Star asked. His flight to Frankfurt had been followed by one to Athens, and from there to Beirut, and from there to Tehran. He knew Daryaei only by reputation.

"He knows power," Badrayn answered, listening to the demonstrations outside. There was something about peace, he imagined. The war between Iraq and Iran had lasted close to a decade. Children had been sent off to die. Rockets had blasted the cities of both countries. The human cost would never be fully assessed, and though the war had ended years before, now it was truly ended—a thing of the heart rather than of law, perhaps. Or maybe a thing of God's law, which was different from that of man. The resulting euphoria was something he'd once felt himself. But now he knew better. Feelings like that were weapons of statecraft, things to be used. Outside were people who a short time before had chafed at what they had and what they did not have, who questioned the wisdom of their leader, who bridled—as much as one could in so tightly controlled a society as this one was—at the freedoms they

lacked. That was gone now, and it would remain gone for—how long? That was the question, and that was why such moments had to be properly used. And Daryaei knew all of those things.

"So," Badrayn said, turning off the outside noise of the faithful, "what have you learned?"

"The most interesting things I learned from watching television. President Ryan is doing well, but he has difficulties. The government is not yet fully functional. The lower house of their parliament has not yet been replaced—the elections for that will begin to take place next month. Ryan is popular. The Americans love to poll one another," he explained. "They call people on the telephone and ask questions—only a few thousand, often not that many, and from this they report to one another what everyone thinks."

"The result?" Badrayn asked.

"A large majority seems to approve what he is doing—but he isn't really doing anything except to continue. He hasn't even chosen a Vice President yet."

Badrayn knew that, but not the reason. "Why?" he asked.

Movie Star grinned. "I asked that question myself. The full parliament must approve such a thing, and the full parliament has not yet been reestablished. It will not be so for some time. Moreover, there is the problem with the former Vice President, that Kealty fellow, who claims that he is the President—and this Ryan has not imprisoned him. Their legal system doesn't deal with treason effectively."

"And if we were able to kill Ryan ... ?"

Movie Star shook his head. "Very difficult. I took an afternoon to walk around Washington. Security at the palace is very strict. It is not open to public tours. The street in front of the building is closed. I sat on a bench for an hour, reading, and watched for signs around the place. Riflemen on all the buildings. I suppose we would have a chance on one of his official trips, but that would require extensive planning for which we lack the necessary time. And so, that leaves us with—"

"His children," Badrayn observed.

JESUS, I HARDLY see them anymore, Jack thought. He'd just gotten off the elevator, accompanied by Jeff Raman, and checked his watch. Just after midnight. Damn. He'd managed to sit through a hurried dinner with them and Cathy before hustling back downstairs for his reading and meetings, and now ... everyone was asleep.

The upstairs corridor was a lonely place, too wide for the intimacy of a real home. Three agents were in view, "standing post," as they called it, and the warrant officer with "the Football" full of its nuclear codes. It was quiet because of the time of night, and the overall impression was rather like that of an upscale funeral home, not a house with a family in it. No clutter, no toys lying on the rug, no empty glasses in front of a TV. Too neat, too tidy, too cold. Always somebody around. Raman traded looks with the other agents, whose nods meant "Okay, everything clear." *Nobody with guns around,* Ryan thought. *Super.*

The bedrooms were too far apart up here. He turned left, heading for Katie's room first. Opening the door, he saw his youngest, recently graduated from crib to bed, lying on her side, a fuzzy brown teddy bear next to her. She still wore sleepers with feet on them. Jack could remember when Sally had worn the same, and how cute children looked that way, like little packages. But Sally now looked forward to the day she'd buy things from Victoria's Secret, and Little Jack—he had taken to objecting to that label of late—now insisted on boxer shorts because that was the new "in" thing for boys of his age group, and they had to be pulled down low, because the "in" thing was to risk having them fall off. Well, he still had a toddler. Jack approached the bed, and stood there for a minute, just looking at Katie and quietly enjoying the status of fatherhood. He looked around, and again the room was unnaturally neat. Everything was picked up. Not a loose item on the floor. Her clothing for the coming day was neatly laid out on a wooden valet. Even the white socks were folded next to the diminutive sneakers with cartoon animals on them. Was this a way for a child to live? It seemed like a Shirley Temple movie from when his mom and dad were kids—some upper-class thing that he'd always wondered about: *Did people really live that way*?

Not real people, just royalty, and the family of the man sentenced to the presidency. Jack smiled, shook his head, and left the room. Agent Raman closed the door for him, not even letting POTUS do that. Somewhere else in the building, Ryan was sure, an electronic status board showed that the door had been opened and closed, probably sensors told that someone had entered the room, and probably someone had asked over the radio link the Service people used to be told that SWORDSMAN was tucking SANDBOX in.

He stuck his head in Sally's room. His elder daughter was similarly asleep, doubtless dreaming of some boy or other in her class—Kenny or something, wasn't it? Somebody who was way cool. Little Jack's bedroom floor was actually polluted by the presence of a comic book, but his white shirt was pressed and hanging on another valet, and someone had shined his shoes.

Another day shot to hell, the President thought. He turned to his bodyguard. "Night, Jeff."

"Good night, sir," Agent Raman said outside the door to the master bedroom. Ryan nodded his farewell to the man, and Raman waited for the door to shut. Then he looked left and right at the other Detail agents. His right hand brushed against the service pistol under his jacket, and his eyes smiled in a private way, knowing what might so easily have been. Word had not come back. Well, his contact was doubtless being careful, as well he should. Aref Raman had the duty tonight as supervisor for the Detail. He walked up the corridor, nodding to the agents on post, asked one innocuous question, then headed down the elevator to the State Floor, and outside to get some air, stretch, and look at the perimeter guard posts, where, also, everything was quiet. There were some protesters in Lafayette Park across the street, this time of night huddled together, many of them smoking—exactly what he didn't know but had suspicions. Maybe hashish? he wondered with a cryptic smile. Wouldn't that be funny. Beyond that there were only the traffic sounds, a distant siren to the east, and people standing at their posts, trying to stay alert by talking about basketball, or hockey, or spring training for baseball, eyes

sweeping outward, looking for dangers in the shadows of the city. The wrong place to look, Raman thought, turning back to head for the command post.

"IS IT POSSIBLE to kidnap them?"

"The two older ones, no, too inconvenient, too difficult, but the youngest, that is possible. It could be both dangerous and costly," Movie Star warned.

Badrayn nodded. That meant picking especially reliable people. Daryaei had such people. That was obvious from what had taken place in Iraq. He looked over the diagrams in silence for a few minutes while his guest stood to look out the window. The demonstration was still under way. Now they were shouting "Death to America!" The crowds and the cheerleaders who organized them had long experience with that particular mantra. Then his intelligence man came back.

"What exactly," Movie Star asked, "is the mission, Ali?"

"The strategic mission would be to prevent America from interfering with us." Badrayn looked up. Us now meant whatever Daryaei wanted it to mean.

ALL NINE OF them, Moudi saw. He ran the antibody tests himself. He actually did each three times, and the tests were all positive. Every one of them was infected. For the sake of security, they were given drugs and told that they'd be all right—as they would until it was determined that the disease had been transmitted in its full virulence, not attenuated by reproduction in the previous set of hosts. Mainly they were dosed with morphine, the better to keep them quiet and stuporous. So first Benedict Mkusa, then Sister Jean Baptiste, then ten criminals, and now nine more. Twenty-two victims, if one also counted Sister Maria Magdalena. He wondered if Jean Baptiste was still praying for him in Paradise and shook his head.

SOHAILA, DR. MACGREGOR thought, looking over his notes. She was ill, but she had stabilized. Her temperature had abated a whole degree. She was occasionally alert. He'd thought jet lag at first, until there had been blood in her vomit and stool, but that had stopped ... Food poisoning ? That had seemed the likely diagnosis. She'd probably eaten the same things as the rest of her family, but it could have been one bad piece of meat, or maybe she'd done what every child did, and swallowed the wrong thing. It happened literally every week in every doctor's office in the world, and was particularly common among the Western community in Khartoum. But she was from Iraq, too, just as Patient Saleh was. He'd rerun the antibody tests on the latter, and there was no doubt. The bodyguard fellow was gravely ill, and unless his immune system rallied itself—

Children, MacGregor remembered, somewhat startled by the connection, have powerful immune systems, rather more so than adults had. Though every parent knew that every child could come down with a disease and high fever in a matter of hours, the reason was simply that children, as they grew, were

exposed to all manner of ailments for the first time. Each organism attacked the child, and in each child the immune system fought back, generating antibodies which would forever defeat that particular enemy (measles, mumps, and all the rest) whenever it again appeared—and rapidly defeating it the first time in nearly all cases, which was why a child could spike a high fever one day and be out playing the next, another characteristic of childhood that first terrified and then vexed parents. The so-called childhood diseases were those *defeated* in childhood. An adult exposed to them for the first time was in far greater distress—mumps could render a healthy man impotent; chicken pox, a childhood annoyance, could *kill* adults; measles had killed off whole peoples. Why? Because for all its apparent frailty, the human child was one of the toughest organisms known to exist. Vaccines for the childhood diseases had been developed not to save the many, but the few who for whatever reason—probably genetic, but that was still being investigated—were unusually vulnerable. Even polio, a devastating neuro-muscular disease, had done permanent harm to only a fraction of its victims—but they were mostly children, and adults protected children with a ferocity usually associated with the animal kingdom—and properly so, MacGregor thought, because the human psyche was programmed to be solicitous to children—which was why so much scientific effort had been devoted to childhood disease over the years.... Where was this line of thought taking him? the doctor wondered. So often his brain went off on its own, as though wandering in a library of thoughts, searching for the right reference, the right connection ...

Saleh had come from Iraq.

Sohaila had also come from Iraq.

Saleh had Ebola.

Sohaila showed symptoms of flu, or food poisoning, or—

But Ebola initially presented itself as flu ...

"My God," MacGregor breathed. He rose from his desk and his notes and walked to her room. Along the way he got a syringe and some vacuum tubes. There was the usual whining from the child about a needle, but MacGregor had a good touch, and it was all over before she was able to start crying, which problem he left to her mother, who'd slept overnight in the room.

Why didn't I run this test before? the young doctor raged at himself. *Damn.*

"THEY ARE NOT officially here," the foreign ministry official told the health department official. "What exactly is the problem?"

"He seems to have Ebola virus." That got the other man's attention. His eyes blinked hard, and he leaned forward across his desk.

"Are you certain?"

"Quite," the Sudanese physician confirmed with a nod. "I've seen the test data. The doctor on the case is Ian MacGregor, one of our British visitors. He's actually a fine practitioner."

"Has anyone been told?"

"No." The doctor shook his head emphatically. "There is no cause to panic. The patient is fully isolated. The hospital staff know their business. We are

supposed to make the proper notifications to the World Health Organization, informing them of the case and—"

"You are certain there is no risk of an epidemic?"

"None. As I said, full isolation procedures are in place. Ebola is a dangerous disease, but we know how to deal with it," the physician answered confidently.

"Then why must you notify the WHO?"

"In these cases, they dispatch a team to oversee the situation, to advise on procedures, and to look for the focal source of the infection so that—"

"This Saleh chap, he didn't catch the disease here, did he?"

"Certainly not. If we had that problem here, I would know of it straightaway," he assured his host.

"So, there is no danger of spreading the disease, and he brought it in with him, so there is no question that there is a public-health danger to our country?"

"Correct."

"I see." The official turned to look out the window. The presence of the former Iraqi officers in Sudan was still a secret, and it was in his country's interest to make sure it stayed that way. Keeping secrets meant keeping secrets from everyone. He turned back. "You will *not* notify the World Health Organization. If the presence of this Iraqi in our country became widely known, it would be a diplomatic embarrassment for us."

"That might be a problem. Dr. MacGregor is young and idealistic and—"

"You tell him. If he objects, I will have someone else speak to him," the official said, with a raised eyebrow. Such warnings, properly delivered, rarely failed to get someone's attention.

"As you wish."

"Will this Saleh fellow survive?"

"Probably not. The mortality rate is roughly eight of ten, and his symptoms are advancing rapidly."

"Any idea how he contracted the disease?"

"None. He denies ever having been in Africa before, but such people do not always speak the truth. I can speak with him further."

"That would be useful."

PRESIDENT EYES CONSERVATIVES FOR THE SUPREME COURT, the headline ran. The White House staff never sleeps, though this privilege is occasionally granted to POTUS. Copies of various papers arrived while the rest of the city slept, and staff workers would take one of the copies and scan it for items of particular interest to the government. Those stories would be clipped, pasted to- . gether, and photocopied for the *Early Bird*, an informal publication which allowed the powerful to find out what was happening or at least what the press thought was happening, which was sometimes true, sometimes false, and mainly in between.

"We got a major leak," one of them said, using an X-Acto knife to cut out the story from the *Washington Post.*

"Look like it. Looks like it gets around, too," her counterpart on the *Times*

agreed.

An internal Justice Department document lists the judges being reviewed by the Ryan administration for possible nomination to fill the hine vacant seats on the Supreme Court.

Each of the jurists listed is a senior appeals court judge. The list is a highly conservative roster. Not a single judicial appointee from presidents Fowler or Durling is to be,found on it.

Ordinarily such nominees are first submitted to a committee of the American Bar Association, but in this case the list was prepared internally by senior career officials at the Justice Department, overseen by Patrick J. Martin, a career prosecutor and chief of the Criminal Division.

"The press doesn't like this."

"Think that's bad? Check this editorial out. Boy, they really responded fast to this one."

THEY'D NEVER WORKED so hard on anything. The mission had turned into sixteen-hour days, not much beer in the evenings, hasty pre-cooked meals, and only a radio for entertainment. That had to be played loud at the moment. They had lead boiling. The rig was the same as that used by plumbers, a propane tank with a burner on top, like an inverted rocket being static-tested, and atop that was a metal pot filled with lead kept in a liquid state by the roaring flame. A ladle came with the pot and this was dipped, then poured into bullet molds. The latter were .58 caliber, 505-grain, made for muzzle-loading rifles, rather like what the original mountain men had carried west back in the 1820s. These had been ordered from catalogs. There were ten of the molds, with four cavities per mold.

So far, Ernie Brown thought, things were going well, especially on the security side. Fertilizer was not a controlled substance. Neither was diesel fuel. Neither was lead, and every purchase had been made at more than one place, so that no single acquisition was so large as to cause comment.

It was still time-consuming menial labor, but as Pete had remarked, Jim Bridger hadn't come west by helicopter. No, he'd traveled the distance on horseback, doubtless with a packhorse or two, making maybe fifteen or twenty miles per day, then trapping his beaver one at a time, doing everything the hard way, the individual way, occasionally bumping into another of his kind and trading for jugged liquor or tobacco. So what they did was in the tradition of their kind. That was important.

The timing worked out nicely. Pete was doing the ladle work now, and from the time he poured into the first mold-set until he poured the last, the first set hardened enough that, when dipped in water and opened—the twopiece tool was like a pair of pliers—the minié-ball-type projectiles were fully formed and solid. These were tossed into an empty oil drum, and the molds replaced in their holders. Ernie collected the spilled lead and dumped it back in the pot so that none would be wasted.

The only hard part was getting the cement truck, but a search of local papers had found an auction sale for a contractor going out of business, and for a mere $21,000 they'd acquired a three-year-old vehicle with a Mack truck

body, only 70,567.1 miles on the odometer, and in pretty good running shape. They'd driven that down at night, of course, and it was now parked in the barn, sitting twenty feet away, its headlights watching them like a pair of eyes.

The work was menial and repetitive, but even that helped. Hanging on the barn wall was a map of downtown Washington, and as Ernie stirred the lead, he turned to look at it, his brain churning over the flat paper image and his own mental picture. He knew all the distances, and distance was the prime factor. The Secret Service thought it was pretty smart. They'd closed off Pennsylvania Avenue for the very purpose of keeping bombs away from the President's house. Well, hell, weren't they smart. They'd overlooked only one little thing.

"BUT I HAVE TO," MacGregor said. "We're *required* to."

"You will not," the health department official told him. "It is not necessary. The Index Patient brought the disease with him. You have initiated proper containment procedures. The staff are doing their job—you trained them well, Ian," he added to assuage the heat of the moment. "It would be inconvenient for my country for this word to go out. I discussed it with the foreign ministry, and word will *not* go out. Is that clear?"

"But—"

"If you pursue this, we will have to ask you to leave the country."

MacGregor flushed. He had a pale, northern complexion, and his face too easily showed his emotional state. This bastard could and would make another telephone call, and he would have a policeman—so they called them here, though they were decidedly not the civilized, friendly sort he'd known in Edinburgh—come to his house to tell him to pack his things for the ride to the airport. It had happened before to a Londoner who'd lectured a government official a little too harshly about AIDS dangers. And if he left, he'd be leaving patients behind, and that was his vulnerability, as the official knew, and as MacGregor knew that he knew. Young and dedicated, he looked after his patients as a doctor should, and leaving them to another's care wasn't something he could do easily, not here, not when there were just too few really competent physicians for the patient load.

"How is Patient Saleh?"

"I doubt he will survive."

"That is unfortunate, but it cannot be helped. Do we have any idea how this man was exposed to the disease?"

The younger man flushed again. "No, and that's the point!"

"I will speak to him myself."

Bloody hard thing to do from three meters away, MacGregor thought. But he had other things to think about.

Sohaila had tested positive for antibodies also. But the little girl was getting better. Her temperature was down another half a degree. She'd stopped her GI bleeding. MacGregor had rerun a number of tests, and baselined others. Patient Sohaila's liver function was nearly normal. He was certain she'd survive. Somehow she'd been exposed to Ebola, and somehow she'd defeated

it—but without knowing the former, he could only guess at the reason for the latter. Part of him wondered if Sohaila and Saleh had been exposed in the same way—no, not exactly. As formidable as a child's immune defenses were, they were not all *that* much more powerful than a healthy adult's, and Saleh showed no underlying health problems. But the adult was surely dying while the child was going to live. Why?

What other factors had entered into the two cases? There was no Ebola outbreak in Iraq—there had never been such a thing, and in a populous country like that—didn't Iraq have a bio-war program? Could they have had an outbreak and hushed it up? But, no, the government of that country was in turmoil. So said the SkyNews service he had at his apartment, and in such circumstances secrets like this could not be kept. There would be panic.

MacGregor was a doctor, not a detective. The physicians who could do both worked for the World Health Organization, at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, and at CDC in America. Not so much brighter than he as more experienced and differently trained.

Sohaila. He had to manage her case, keep checking her blood. Could she still infect others? MacGregor had to check the literature on that. All he knew for sure was that one immune system was losing and another was winning. If he were to figure anything out, he had to stay on the case. Maybe later he could get the word out, but he had to stay here to accomplish anything.

Besides, before telling anyone, he had gotten the blood samples out to Pasteur and CDC. This strutting bureaucrat didn't know that, and the phone calls, if they came, would come to this hospital and to MacGregor. He *could* get some word out. He could tell them what the political problem was. He could ask some questions, and relay others. He had to submit.

"As you wish, Doctor," he told the official. "You will, of course, follow the necessary procedures."

31

RIPPLES AND WAVES

THE PAYOFF WAS THIS morning, and again President Ryan suffered through the ordeal of makeup and hair spray.

"We should at least have a proper barber chair," Jack observed while Mrs. Abbot did her duty. He'd just learned the day before that the presidential barber came to the Oval Office and did *his* job at the President's swivel chair. That must be a real treat for the Secret Service, he thought, having a man with scissors and a straight razor an inch from his carotid artery. "Okay, Arnie, what do I do with Mr. Donner?"

"Number one, he asks any question he wants. That means you have to think about the answers."

"I do try, Arnie," Ryan observed with a frown.

"Emphasize the fact that you're a citizen and not a politician. It might not matter to Donner, but it will matter to the people who watch the interview tonight," van Damm advised. "Expect a hit on the court thing."

"Who leaked that?" Ryan demanded crossly.

"We'll never know, and trying to find out only makes you look like Nixon."

"Why is it that no matter what I do, somebody—damn," Ryan sighed as Mary Abbot finished with his hair. "I told George Winston that, didn't I?"

"You're learning. If you help some little old lady to cross the street, some feminist will say that it was condescending. If you don't help her, the AARP will say you're insensitive to the needs of the elderly. Throw in every other interest group there is. They all have agendas, Jack, and those agendas are a lot more important to them than you are. The idea is to offend as few people as possible. That's different from offending nobody. Trying to do that offends everybody," the chief of staff explained.

Ryan's eyes went wide. "I got it! I'll say something to piss everybody off—and then they'll all love me."

Arnie wasn't buying: "And every joke you tell will piss somebody off. Why? Humor is always cruel to someone, and some people just don't have a sense of humor to begin with."

"In other words, there's people out there who *want* to get mad at something, and I'm the highest-profile target."

"You're learning," the chief of staff observed with a grim nod. He was worried about this one.

"WE HAVE MARITIME Pre-Positioning Ships at Diego Garcia," Jackson said, touching the proper point on the map.

"How much is there?" Bretano asked.

"We just reconfigured the TOE—"

"What's that?" SecDef asked.

"Table of Organization and Equipment." General Michael Moore was the Army's chief of staff. He'd commanded a brigade of the First Armored Division in the Persian Gulf War. "The load-out is enough for a little better than a brigade, a full-sized heavy Army brigade, along with all the consumables they need for a month's combat operations. Added to that, we have some units set in Saudi Arabia. The equipment is almost all new, M1A2 main battle tanks, Bradleys, MLRS. The new artillery tracks will be shipped out in three months. The Saudis," he added, "have been helping on the funding side. Some of the equipment is technically theirs, supposedly reserve equipment for their army, but we maintain it, and all we have to do is fly our people over to roll it out of the warehouses."

"Who would go first, if they ask for help?"

"Depends," Jackson answered. "Probably the first out would be an ACR—Armored Cavalry Regiment. In a real emergency, we'd airlift the personnel from the 10th ACR in the Negev Desert. That can be done in as little as a single day. For exercises, the 3rd ACR out of Texas or the 2nd out of Louisiana."

"An ACR, Mr. Secretary, is a well-balanced brigadesized formation. Lots of teeth, but not much tail. It can take care of itself, and people will think twice before taking it on," Mickey Moore explained, adding, "Before they can deploy for a lengthy stay, however, they need a combat-support battalion—supply and repair troops."

"We still have a carrier in the Indian Ocean—she's at Diego now with the rest of the battle group to give the crews some shore leave," Jackson went on. Which just about covered that atoll with sailors, but it was something. At least they could have a beer or two, and stretch their legs and play softball. "We have an F-16 wing—well, most of one—in the Negev as well, as part of our commitment to Israeli security. That and the 10th Cav are pretty good. Their continuing mission is to train up the IDF, and it keeps them busy."

"Soldiers love to train, Mr. Secretary. They'd rather do that than anything," General Moore added.

"I need to get out and see some of this stuff," Bretano observed. "Soon as I get the budget thing worked out—the start of it, anyway. It sounds thin, gentlemen."

"It is, sir," Jackson agreed. "Not enough to fight a war, but probably enough to deter one, if it comes to that."

"WILL THERE BE another war in the Persian Gulf?" Tom Donner asked.

"I see no reason to expect it," the President replied. The hard part was controlling his voice. The answer was wary, but his words had to sound positive and reassuring. It was yet another form of lying, though telling the truth might change the equation. That was the nature of "spin," a game so false and artificial that it became a kind of international reality. Saying what wasn't true in order to serve the truth. Churchill had said it once: in time of

war, truth was so precious as to need a bodyguard of lies. But in peacetime?

"But our relations with Iran and Iraq have not been friendly for some time."

"The past is the past, Tom. Nobody can change it, but we can learn from it. There is no good reason for animosity between America and the countries in that region. Why should we be enemies?" the President asked rhetorically.

"So will we be talking to the United Islamic Republic?" Donner asked.

"We are always willing to talk to people, especially in the interest of fostering friendly relations. The Persian Gulf is a region of great importance to the entire world. It is in everyone's interest for that region to remain peaceful and stable. There's been enough war. Iran and Iraq fought for—what?—eight years, at enormous human cost to both countries. Then all the conflicts between Israel and her neighbors. Enough is enough. Now we have a new nation being born. This new country has much work to do. Its citizens have needs, and fortunately they also have the resources to address those needs. We wish them well. If we can help them, we will. America has always been willing to extend the hand of friendship."

There was a brief break, which probably denoted a commercial. The interview would run this evening at nine o'clock. Then Donner turned to his senior colleague, John Plumber, who took the next segment.

"So, how do you like being President?"

Ryan tilted his head and smiled. "I keep telling myself that I wasn't elected, I was sentenced. Honestly? The hours are long, the work is hard, much harder than I ever appreciated, but I've been pretty lucky. Arnie van Damm is a genius at organization. The staff here at the White House is just outstanding. I've gotten tens of thousands of letters of support from the people outside the Beltway, and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank them, and to let them know that it really helps."

"Mr. Ryan" Jack supposed that his Ph.D. didn't count anymore—"what things are you going to try and change?" Plumber asked.

"John, that depends on what you mean by 'change.' My foremost task is to keep the government operating. So, not 'change,' but 'restore,' is what I'm trying to do. We still don't really have a Congress yet—not until the House of Representatives is reestablished—and so I cannot submit a budget. I've tried to pick good people to take over the major Cabinet departments. Their job is to run those departments efficiently."

"Your Secretary of the Treasury, George Winston, has been criticized for his rather abrupt desire to change the federal tax code," Plumber said.

"All I can say is that I support Secretary Winston fully. The tax code is unconscionably complicated, and that is fundamentally unfair. What he wants to do will be revenue-neutral. Actually, that may be overly pessimistic. The net effect will be to enhance government revenues because of administrative savings in other areas."

"But there has been a lot of adverse comment about the regressive nature—"

Ryan held up his hand. "Wait a minute, John, one of the problems in this town is that the language used by people has been warped. Charging everyone the same is not regressive. That word means a backward step, charging the poor more than the rich. We will *not* be doing that. When you use that word in the incorrect way, you're misleading people."

"But that's the way people have described the tax system for years." Plumber hadn't had his grammar challenged in years.

"That doesn't make it right," Jack pointed out. "In any case, as I keep saying, I am not a politician, John. I only know how to talk straight. Charging everyone the same tax rate fulfills the dictionary's definition of 'fair.' Come on, John, you know how the game is played. You and Tom make a lot of money—far more than I do—and every year your lawyer and accountant go over everything. You probably have investments that are designed to reduce your tax payments, right? How did those loopholes happen? Easy, lobbyists talked Congress into changing the law a little. Why? Because rich people paid them to do so. So what happens? The supposedly 'progressive' system is manipulated in such a way that the increased rates for the rich don't actually apply, because their lawyers and accountants tell them how to beat the system, and they *do* beat the system, for a fee. So, the increased rates they pay are a lie, aren't they? Politicians know all this when they pass the laws.

"You see where all this takes us? Nowhere, John. It takes us nowhere. It's a great big game, that's all. Just a game that wastes time, misleads the public, and makes a lot of money for people who work the system—and where does the money come from? The citizens, the people who pay for everything that happens. So George Winston wants to change the system—and we agreed on that—and what happens? The people who play the game and work the system use the same misleading words to make it look as though we're doing something unfair. These insiders are the most dangerous and pernicious special-interest group there is."

"And you don't like that." John smiled.

"Everyjob I've ever had, stock broker, history teacher, everything else, I've had to tell the truth as best I could. I'm not going to stop that now. Maybe some things do need changing, and I'll tell you what one of them is:

"Every parent in America sooner or later tells every child that politics is a dirty business, a rough business, a nasty business. Your dad told you. My dad told me—and we accept that as though it makes sense, as though it's normal and right and proper. But it's *not*, John. For years we've accepted the fact that politics—wait, let's define terms, shall we? The political system is the way we govern the country, pass the laws we all have to follow, levy taxes. These are important things, aren't they? But at the same time we accept people into that system whom we would not willingly invite into our homes, whom we would not trust to baby-sit our children. Does this strike you as just a little odd, John?

"We allow people into the political system who routinely distort facts, who twist laws in order to suit patrons who give them campaign money. Some of whom just plain lie. And we accept this. You people in the media do. You would not accept that sort of behavior in your own profession, would you? Or in medicine, or in science, or in business, or in law enforcement.

"There's something wrong here," the President went on, leaning forward and talking passionately for the first time. "This is our *country* we're talking about, and the standards of behavior we demand of our representatives shouldn't be lower—they should be higher. We should demand intelligence and integrity. That's why I've been giving speeches around the country. John,

I'm a registered independent. I don't *have* a party affiliation. I don't have an agenda except for wanting to make things work for everyone. I swore an oath to do that, and I take my oaths seriously. Well, I've learned that this upsets people, and I'm sorry about that, but I will *not* compromise my beliefs to accommodate every special group with an army of paid lobbyists. I'm here to serve everybody, not just to serve the people who make the most noise and offer the most money."

Plumber didn't show his pleasure at the outburst. "Okay, Mr. President, for starters, then, what about civil rights?"

"The Constitution is color-blind as far as I am concerned. Discrimination against people because of how they look, how they sound, what church they go to, or the country their ancestors came from is against the laws of our country. Those laws will be enforced. We are all supposed to be equal in the eyes of the law, whether we obey them or break them. In the latter case, those people will have the Department of Justice to worry about."

"Isn't that idealistic?"

"What's wrong with idealism?" Ryan asked in return. "At the same time, what about a little common sense once in a while? Instead of a lot of people chiseling for advantages for themselves or whatever small group they represent, why can't we all work together? Aren't we all Americans before we're anything else? Why can't we all try a little harder to work together and find reasonable solutions to problems? This country wasn't set up to have every group at the throat of every other group."

"Some would say that's the way we fight things out to make sure that everyone gets a fair share," Plumber observed.

"And along the way, we corrupt the political system."

They had to stop for the crew to change tapes on their cameras. Jack looked longingly at the door to the secretaries' office, wishing for a smoke. He rubbed his hands together, trying to look relaxed, but though he'd been given the chance to say things he'd wanted to say for years, the opportunity to do so only made him more tense.

"The cameras are off," Tom Donner said, settling back in his seat a little. "Do you really think you can bring *any* of this off?"

"If I don't try, what does that make me?" Jack sighed. "The government's a mess. We all know that. If nobody tries to fix it, then it'll just get worse."

Donner almost felt sympathy for his subject at that point. This Ryan guy's sincerity was manifest, as though his heart were beating right there on the sleeve of his jacket. But he just didn't get it. It wasn't that Ryan was a bad guy. He was just out of his depth, just as everyone else said. Kealty was right, and because he was right, Donner had his job to do.

"Ready," the producer said.

"The Supreme Court," Donner said, taking up the questioning from his colleague. "It's been reported that you are now looking over a list of prospective justices for submission to the Senate."

"Yes, I am," Ryan replied.

"What can you tell us about them?"

"I instructed the Justice Department to send me a list of experienced appeals-court judges. That's been done. I'm looking over the list now."

"What exactly are you looking for?" Donner asked next.

"I'm looking for good judges. The Supreme Court is our nation's primary custodian of the Constitution. We need people who understand that responsibility, and who will interpret the laws fairly."

"Strict-constructionists?"

"Tom, the Constitution says that the Congress makes the law, the Executive Branch enforces the law, and the courts explain the law. That's called checks and balances."

"But historically the Supreme Court has been an important force for change in our country," Donner said.

"And not all of those changes have been good ones. *Dred Scott* started the Civil War. *Plessy v. Ferguson* was a disgrace that set our country back seventy years. Please, you need to remember that as far as the law is concerned, I'm a layman—"

"That's why the American Bar Association routinely goes over judicial appointments. Will you submit your list to the ABA?"

"No." Ryan shook his head. "First, all of these judges have already passed that hurdle in order to get where they are. Second, the ABA is also an interest group, isn't it? Fine, they have a right to look out for the interests of their members, but the Supreme Court is the body of government which decides the law for everybody, and the ABA is the organization of people who use the law to make a living. Isn't it a conflict of interest for the group which makes use of the law to select the people who define the law? It would be in any other field, wouldn't it?"

"Not everyone will see it that way."

"Yes, and the ABA has a big office here in Washington, and it's full of lobbyists," the President agreed. "Tom, my job isn't to serve the interest groups. My job is to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution to the best of my ability. To help me do that, I'm trying to find people who think the same way I do, that the oath means what it says, without any game-playing under the table."

Donner turned. "John?"

"You spent many years at the Central Intelligence Agency," Plumber said.

"Yes, I did," Jack agreed.

"Doing what?" Plumber asked.

"Mainly I worked in the Directorate of Intelligence, going over information that came in through various means, trying to figure out what it meant, and then passing it on to others. Eventually I headed the Intelligence Directorate, then under President Fowler I became Deputy Director. Then, as you know, I became National Security Advisor to President Durling," Jack answered, trying to steer the talk forward rather than backward.

"Along the way, did you ever go out into the field?" Plumber asked.

"Well, I advised the arms-control negotiations team, and I went off to a lot of conferences," the President replied.

"Mr. Ryan, there are reports that you did more than that, that you participated in operations that resulted in the deaths of, well, the deaths of Soviet citizens."

Jack hesitated for a moment, long enough that he knew the impression he'd

be giving to the viewers for this "special." "John, it's been a principle of our government for many years that we never comment on intelligence operations. I will not change that principle."

"The American people have a right and a need to know what sort of man sits in this office," Plumber insisted.

"This administration will never discuss intelligence operations. As far as what sort of person I am, that's the purpose of this interview. Our country has to keep some secrets. So do you, John," Ryan said with a level gaze into the commentator's eyes. "If you reveal sources, you're out of business. If America does the same thing, people get hurt.

"But—"

"The subject is closed, John. Our intelligence services operate under congressional oversight. I've always supported that law, and I will continue to uphold it, and that's it on this subject."

Both reporters blinked pretty hard at that, and surely, Ryan thought, that part of the tape wouldn't make it onto the network tonight.

BADRAYN NEEDED TO select thirty people, and while the number wasn't especially difficult—nor was the required dedication—brains were. He had the contacts. If there was a surplus of anything in the Middle East, it was terrorists, men like himself, if somewhat younger, who had dedicated their lives to the Cause, only to have it wither before their eyes. And that only made their anger and dedication worse—and better, depending on one's point of view. On reflection, he needed only twenty smart ones. The rest just had to be dedicated, with one or two intelligent overseers. They all had to follow orders. They all had to be willing to die, or at least to take the chance. Well, that wasn't much of a problem, either. Hezbollah still had a supply of people willing to strap explosives to their bodies, and there were others.

It was part of the region's tradition—probably not one that Mohammed would have approved entirely, but Badrayn wasn't particularly religious, and terrorist operations were his business. Historically, Arabs had not been the world's most efficient soldiers. Nomadic tribesmen for most of their history, their military tradition was one of raiding, later quantified as guerrilla tactics, rather than set-piece battle, which was, in fact, an invention of the Greeks, passed along to the Romans and thence to all Western nations. Historically, a single person would step forward to become a sacrifice—in Viking tradition the person was called a "berzerker," and in Japan they'd been part of the special attack corps also known as kamikaze—on the field of battle, to swing his sword gloriously, and take as many of his foes off to be his servants in Paradise as possible. This was especially true in a *jihad,* or "holy war," whose objective was to serve the interests of the Faith. It ultimately proved that Islam, like any religion, could be corrupted by its adherents. For the moment, it meant that Badrayn had a supply of people who would do what he told them to do, his instructions relayed from Daryaei, who would also tell them that this was, indeed, a *jihad* service in which lay their individual keys to a glorious afterlife.

He had his list. He made three telephone calls. The calls were relayed

through several cutout chains, and in Lebanon and elsewhere, people made travel plans.

"SO, HOW'D WE do, coach?" Jack asked with a smile.

"The ice got pretty thin, but I guess you didn't get wet," Arnie van Damm said with visible relief. "You hit the interest groups pretty hard."

"Isn't it okay to trash the special interests? Hell, everybody else does!"

"It depends on which groups and which interests, Mr. President. They all have spokespersons, too, and some of them can come across like Mother Teresa after a nicepill—right before they slash your throat with a machete." The chief of staff paused. "Still, you handled yourself pretty well. You didn't say anything they could turn against you too badly. We'll see how they cut it up for tonight, and then what Donner and Plumber say at the end. The last couple of minutes count the most."

THE TUBES ARRIVED in Atlanta in a very secure container called a "hatbox" because of its shape. It was in its way a highly sophisticated device, designed to hold the most dangerous of materials in total safety, multiple-sealed, and spec'd to survive violent impacts. It was covered with biohazard warning labels and was treated with great respect by the handlers, including the FedEx deliveryman who'd handed it over this morning at 9:14.

The hatbox was taken to a secure lab, where the outside was checked for damage, sprayed with a powerful chemical disinfectant, and then opened under strict containment procedures. The accompanying documents explained why this was necessary. The two blood tubes were suspected to contain viruses which caused hemorrhagic fever. That could mean any of several such diseases from Africa—the indicated continent of origin—all of which were things to be avoided. A technician working in a glove box made the transfer after examining the containers for leaks. There were none he could see, and more disinfectant spray made sure of that. The blood would be tested for antibodies and compared with other samples. The documentation went off to the office of Dr. Lorenz in the Special Pathogens Branch.

"GUS, ALEX," Dr. Lorenz heard on the phone.

"Still not getting any fishing in?"

"Maybe this weekend. There's a guy in neurosurgery with a boat, and we have the house pretty well set up, finally." Dr. Alexandre was looking out the window of his office at east Baltimore. One could see the harbor, which led to the Chesapeake Bay, and there *were* supposed to be rockfish out there.

"What's happening?" Gus asked, as his secretary came in with a folder.

"Just checking in on the outbreak in Zaire. Anything new?"

"Zip, thank God. We're out of the critical time. This one burned out in a hurry. We were very—" Lorenz stopped when he opened the folder and scanned the cover sheet. "Wait a minute. Khartoum?" he muttered to himself.

Alexandre waited patiently. Lorenz was a slow, careful reader. An elderly man, rather like Ralph Forster, he took his time with things, which was one of the reasons he was a brilliant experimental scientist. Lorenz rarely took a false step. He thought too much before moving his feet.

"We just had two samples come in from Khartoum. Cover sheet is from a Dr. MacGregor, the English Hospital in Khartoum, two patients, adult male and fouryear-old female, possible hemorrhagic fever. The samples are in the lab now."

"Khartoum? Sudan?"

"That's what it says," Gus confirmed.

"Long way from the Congo, man."

"Airplanes, Alex, airplanes," Lorenz observed. If there was one thing that frightened epidemiologists, it was international air travel. The cover sheet didn't say much, but it did give phone and fax numbers. "Okay, well, we have to run the tests and see."

"What about the samples from before?"

"Finished the mapping yesterday. Ebola Zaire, Mayinga sub-type, identical with the samples from 1976, down to the last amino acid."

"The airborne one," Alexandre muttered, "the one that got George Westphal."

"That was never established, Alex," Lorenz reminded him.

"George was careful, Gus. You know that. You trained him." Pierre Alexandre rubbed his eyes. Headaches. He needed a new desk light. "Let me know what those samples tell you, okay?"

"Sure. I wouldn't worry too much. Sudan is a crummy environment for this little bastard. Hot, dry, lots of sunlight. The virus wouldn't last two minutes in the open. Anyway, let me talk to my lab chief. I'll see if I can micrograph it myself later today—no, more likely tomorrow morning. I have a staff meeting in an hour."

"Yeah, and I need some lunch. Talk to you tomorrow, Gus." Alexandre—he still thought of himself more as "Colonel" than "Professor"—replaced the phone and walked out, heading off to the cafeteria. He was pleased to find Cathy Ryan in the food line again, along with her bodyguard.

"Hey, Prof."

"How's the bug business?" she asked, with a smile.

"Same-o, same-o. I need a consult, Doctor," he said, selecting a sandwich off the counter.

"I don't do viruses." But she did enough work with AIDS patients whose eye troubles were secondary to their main problem. "What's the problem?"

"Headaches," he said on the way to the cashier.

"Oh?" Cathy turned and took his glasses right off his face. She held them up to the light. "You might try cleaning them once in a while. You're about two diopters of minus, pretty strong astigmatism. How long since you had the prescription checked?" She handed them back with a final look at the encrusted dirt around the lenses, already knowing the answer to her question.

"Oh, three"

"Years. You should know better. Have your secretary call mine and I'll have you checked out. Join us?"

They selected a table by the window, with Roy Altman in tow, scanning the room, and catching looks from the other detail members doing the same. All clear.

"You know, you might be a good candidate for our new laser technique. We can re-shape your cornea and bring you right down to 20-20," she told him. She'd helped ramrod that program, too.

"Is it safe?" Professor Alexandre asked dubiously.

"The only unsafe procedures I perform are in the kitchen," Professor Ryan replied with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, ma'am." Alex grinned.

"What's new on your side of the house?"

IT WAS ALL in the editing. Well, mostly in the editing, Tom Donner thought, typing on his office computer. From that he would slide in his own commentary, explaining and clarifying what Ryan had really meant with his seemingly sincere ... seemingly? The word had leaped into his mind of its own accord, startling the reporter. Donner had been in the business for quite a few years, and before his promotion to network anchor, he'd been in Washington. He'd covered them all and knew them all. On his well-stuffed Rolodex was a card with every important name and number in town. Like any good reporter, he was *connected.* He could lift a phone and get through to anyone, because in Washington the rules for dealing with the media were elegantly simple: either you were a source or a target. If you didn't play ball with the media, they would quickly find an enemy of yours who did. In other contexts, the technical term was "blackmail."

Donner's instincts told him that he'd never met anyone like President Ryan before, at least not in public life ... or was that true? The I'm-one-of-you, Everyman stance went at least as far back as Julius Caesar. It was always a ploy, a sham to make voters think that the guy really was like them. But he never was, really. Normal people didn't get this far in any field. Ryan had advanced in CIA by playing office politics just like everyone else—he must have. He'd made enemies and allies, as everyone did, and maneuvered his way up. And the leaks he'd gotten about Ryan's tenure at CIA ... could he use them? Not in the special. Maybe in the news show, which would contain a teaser anyway to make people watch it instead of their usual evening TV fare.

Donner knew he had to be careful on this. You didn't go after a sitting President for the fun of it—well, that wasn't true, was it? Going after a President was the best sort of fun, but there were rules about how you did it. Your information had to be pretty solid. That meant multiple sources, and they had to be good sources. Donner would have to take them to a senior official of his news organization, and people would hem and haw, and then they'd go over the copy for his story, and then they'd let him run it.

Everyman. But Everyman didn't work for CIA and go into the field to be a spy, did he? Damned sure Ryan was the first spy who'd ever made it to the Oval Office ... was that good?

There were so many blanks in his life. The thing in London. He'd killed there. The terrorists who'd attacked his home—he'd killed at least one of them

there, too. This incredible story about stealing a Soviet submarine, during which, his source said, he'd killed a Russian sailor. The other things. Was this the sort of person the American people wanted in the White House?

And yet he tried to come across as ... Everyman. Common sense. This is what the law says. I take my oaths seriously.

It's a lie, Donner thought. *It has to be a lie.*

You're one clever son of a bitch, Ryan, the anchorman thought.

And if it was that he was clever, and if it *was* a lie, then what? Changing the tax system. Changes in the Supreme Court. Changes in the name of efficiency, Secretary Bretano's activities at Defense ... damn.

The next leap of imagination was that CIA and Ryan had had a role in the crash at the Capitol—no, that was too crazy. Ryan was an opportunist. They all were, the people Donner had covered for all of his professional life, all the way back to his first job at the network affiliate in Des Moines, where his work had landed a county commissioner in jail, and so gotten Donner noticed by the network executives at 30 Rock. Political figures. Donner reported on all manner of news from avalanches to warfare, but it was politicians whom he had studied as a profession and a hobby.

They were all the same, really. Right place, right time, and they already had the agenda. If he'd learned anything at all, he'd learned that. Donner looked out his window and lifted his phone with one hand while flipping the Rolodex with the other.

"Ed, this is Tom. Just how good are those sources, and how quickly can I meet them?" He couldn't hear the smile on the other end of the line.

SOHAILA WAS SITTING up now. Such situations provided a relief that never failed to awe the young doctor. Medicine was the most demanding of the professions, MacGregor believed. Every day, to a greater or lesser degree, he diced with Death. He didn't think of himself as a soldier, or a warrior knight on a bloodied charger, at least not in conscious terms, because Death was an enemy who never showed himself—but he was always there, even so. Every patient he treated had that enemy inside, or hovering about somewhere, and his job as a physician was to discover his hiding place, seek him out, and destroy him, and you saw the victory in the face of the patient, and you savored every one.

Sohaila was still unwell, but that would pass. She was on liquids now, and she was keeping them down. Still weak, she would grow no weaker. Her temperature was down. All her vital signs were either stabilized or heading back to normal. This was a victory. Death wouldn't claim this child. In the normal course of events, she would grow and play and learn and marry and have children of her own.

But it was a victory for which MacGregor could not really take credit, at least not all of it. His care for the child had been merely supportive, not curative. Had it helped? Probably, he told himself. You couldn't know where the line was between what would have happened on its own and what had made a real difference. Medicine would be far easier if its practitioners possessed that degree of sight, but they didn't yet and probably never would.

Had he not treated her—well, in this climate, just the heat might have done it, or certainly the dehydration, or maybe some opportunistic secondary infection. People so often expired not from their primary ailment, but from something else that took hold from the general weakening of the body. And so, yes, he *would* claim this victory, better yet that it was the life of a charming and attractive little girl who would in just a short time learn to smile again. MacGregor took her pulse, savoring the touch of the patient as he always did, and the remote contact with a heart that would still be beating a week from now, and as he watched, she fell off to sleep. He gently replaced the hand on the bed and turned.

"Your daughter will recover fully," he told the parents, confirming their hopes and crushing their fears with five quiet words and a warm smile.

The mother gasped as though punched, her mouth open, tears exploding from her eyes as she covered her face with her hands. The father took the news in what he deemed a more manly way, his face impassive—but not his eyes, which relaxed and looked up to the ceiling in relief. Then he seized the doctor's hand, and his dark eyes came back down to bore in on MacGregor's.

"I will not forget," the general told him.

Then it was time to see Saleh, something he'd consciously delayed. MacGregor left the room and walked down the corridor. Outside he changed into a different set of clothing. Inside he saw a defeat. The man was under restraints. The disease had entered his brain. Dementia was yet another symptom of Ebola, and a merciful one. Saleh's eyes were vacant and stared at the water marks on the ceiling. The nurse in attendance handed him the chart, the news on which was uniformly bad. MacGregor scanned it, grimaced, and wrote an order to increase the morphine drip. Supportive care in this case hadn't mattered a damn. One victory, one loss, and if he'd had the choice of which to save and which to lose, this was how he'd have written the story, for Saleh was grown and had had a life of sorts. That life had but five days to run, and MacGregor could do nothing now to save it, only a few things to make its final passage less gruesome for the patient—and the staff. After five minutes he left the room, stripped off his protective garb, and walked to his office, his face locked in a frown of thought.

Where had it come from? Why would one survive and one die? What didn't he know that he needed to know? The physician poured himself a cup of tea and tried to think past the victory and the defeat in order to find the information that had decided both issues. Same disease, same time. Two very different outcomes. Why?

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RERUNS

I CAN'T GIVE THIS TO YOU, and I can't let you copy any of it, but I can let you look at it." He handed the photo over. He had light cotton gloves on, and he'd already given a pair to Donner. "Fingerprints," he explained quietly.

"Is this what I think it is?" It was a black-and-white photograph, eight-by-ten glossy, but there was no classification stamp on it, at least not on the front. Donner didn't turn it over.

"You really don't want to know, do you?" It was a question and a warning.

"I guess not." Donner nodded, getting the message. He didn't know how the Espionage Act—18 U.S.C. §793E—interacted with his First Amendment rights, but if he didn't know that the photo was classified, then he didn't have to find out.

"That's a Soviet nuclear missile submarine, and that's Jack Ryan on the gangway. You'll notice he's wearing a Navy uniform. This was a CIA operation, run in cooperation with the Navy, and that's what we got out of it." The man handed over a magnifying glass to make sure that the identifications were positive. "We conned the Soviets into thinking she'd exploded and sunk about halfway between Florida and Bermuda. They probably still think that."

"Where is it now?" Donner asked.

"They sank her a year later, off Puerto Rico," the CIA official explained.

"Why there?"

"Deepest Atlantic water close to American territory, about five miles down, so nobody will ever find her, and nobody can even look without us knowing."

"This was back—I remember!" Donner said. "The Russians had a big exercise going and we raised hell about it, and they actually lost a submarine, didn't—"

"Two." Another photo came out of the folder. "See the damage to the submarine's bow? *Red October* rammed and sank another Russian sub off the Carolinas. It's still there. The Navy didn't recover that one, but they sent down robots and stripped a lot of useful things off the hulk. It was covered as salvage activity on the first one, that sank from a reactor accident. The Russians never found out what happened to the second Alfa."

"And this never leaked?" It was pretty amazing to a man who'd spent years extracting facts from the government, like a dentist with an unwilling patient.

"Ryan knows how to hush things up." Another photo. "That's a body bag. The person inside was a Russian crewman. Ryan killed him—shot him with a pistol. That's how he got his first Intelligence Star. I guess he figured we couldn't risk having him tell—well, isn't too hard to figure, is it?"

"Murder?"

"No." The CIA man wasn't willing to go that far. "The official story is that it was a real shoot-out, that other people got hurt also. That's how the documents read in the file, but . . ."

"Yeah. You have to wonder, don't you?" Donner nodded, staring down at the photos. "Could this possibly be faked?"

"Possibly, yes," he admitted. "But it's not. The other people in the photo: Admiral Dan Foster, he was Chief of Naval Operations back then. This one is Commander Bartolomeo Mancuso. Back then he commanded USS *Dallas.* He was transferred to Red October to facilitate the defection. He's still on active duty, by the way, an admiral now. He commands all the submarines in the Pacific. And that one is Captain Marko Aleksandrovich Ramius of the Soviet navy. He was the captain of *Red October.* They're all still alive. Ramius lives in Jacksonville, Florida, now. He works at the Navy's base at Mayport under the name Mark Ramsey. Consulting contract," he explained. "The usual thing. Got a big stipend from the government, too, but God knows he earned it."

Donner noted the details, and he recognized one of the extraneous faces. Sure as hell this wasn't faked. There were rules for that, too. If somebody lied to a reporter, it wasn't all that hard to make sure the right people found out who had broken the law—worse yet, that person became a target, and the media was in its way a crueler prosecutor than anyone in the Justice Department could ever hope to be. The court system, after all, required due process of law.

"Okay," the journalist said. The first set of photos went back in their folder. Another folder appeared, and from it a photograph.

"Recognize this guy?"

"He was—wait a minute. Gera-something. He was—"

"Nikolay Gerasimov. He was chairman of the old KGB."

"Killed in a plane crash back in—"

Another photo went down. The subject was older, grayer, and looking far more prosperous. "This picture was taken in Winchester, Virginia, two years ago. Ryan went to Moscow, covered as a technical adviser to the START talks. He got Gerasimov to defect. Nobody's exactly sure how. His wife and daughter got out, too. That op was run directly out of Judge Moore's office. Ryan worked that way a lot. He was never really part of the system. Ryan knows—well, look, in fairness to the guy, he's one hell of a spook, okay? He supposedly worked directly for Jim Greer as part of the DI, not the DO. A cover within a cover. Ryan's never made an operational mistake that I know of, and that's some record. Not too many others can claim that, but one reason for it is he's one ruthless son of a bitch. Effective, yes, but ruthless. He cut through all the bureaucracy whenever he wanted. He does it his way every time, and if you get in his way—well, there's one dead Russian we buried off the Red October, and a whole Alfa crew off the Carolinas, to keep that op a secret. This one, I'm not sure. Nothing in the file, but the file has a lot of blanks. How the wife and daughter got out, it's not in the file. All I have for that are rumors, and they're pretty thin."

"Damn, I wish I'd had this a few hours ago."

"Rolled you, did he?" This question came from Ed Kealty over a speaker phone.

"I know the problem," the CIA official said. "Ryan is slick. I mean, *slick.* He's skated through CIA like Dorothy Hamill at Innsbruck, done it for years. Congress loves him. Why? He comes across as the most straightforward guy this side of Honest Abe. Except he's killed people." The man's name was Paul Webb, and he was a senior official in the Directorate of Intelligence, but not senior enough to prevent his whole unit from ending up on the RIF list. He should have been DDI now, Webb thought, and he would have been except for the way Ryan had gotten James Greer's ear and never let go of it. And so his career had ended as an entry-level supergrade at CIA, and now *that* was being taken away from him. He had his retirement. Nobody could take that away well, if it became known that he'd smuggled these files out of Langley, he'd be in very deep trouble ... or maybe not. What really happened to whistle-blowers, after all? The media protected them pretty well, and he had his time in service, and ... he didn't *like* being part of a reduction-in-force exercise. In another age, though he didn't admit it even to himself, his anger might have prompted him to make contact with—no, not that. Not to an enemy. But the media wasn't an enemy, was it? He told himself that it was not, despite an entire career of thinking otherwise.

"You've been rolled, Tom," Kealty said again over the phone line. "Welcome to the club. *I* don't even know all the stuff he can pull off. Paul, tell him about Colombia."

"There's no file on that one that I can find," Webb admitted. "Wherever it is—well, there are special files, the ones with date-stamps on them. Like 2050 at the earliest. Nobody sees those."

"How does *that* happen?" Donner demanded. "I've heard that before, but I've never been able to confirm—"

"How they keep those off the books? It's a deal that has to go through Congress, an unwritten part of the oversight process. The Agency goes there with a little problem, asks for special treatment, and if Congress agrees, off the file goes into the special vault—hell, for all I know, the whole thing's been shredded and turned into compost, but I can give you a few verifiable facts," Webb concluded with an elegant dangle.

"I'm listening," Donner replied. And so was his tape recorder.

"How do you suppose the Colombians broke up the Medellin cartel?" Webb asked, drawing Donner in further. It wasn't all that hard. These people thought they knew about intrigue, Webb thought with a benign smile.

"Well, they had some sort of internal faction fight, a couple of bombs went off and—"

"They were CIA bombs. Somehow—I'm not sure exactly how, we initiated the faction fight. This I do know: Ryan was down there. His mentor at Langley was James Greer—they were like father and son. But when James died, Ryan wasn't there for the funeral, and he wasn't at home, and he wasn't away on CIA business—he'd just come *back* from a NATO conference in Belgium. But then he just dropped off the map, like he's done any number of times. Soon thereafter the President's National Security Advisor, Jim Cutter, is *accidentally* run down by a D.C. transit bus on the G.W., right? He didn't look? He just ran in front of a bus. That's what the FBI said, but the guy running that was Dan Murray, and what job does he have now? FBI Director, right? It just so

happens he and Ryan go back more than ten years. Murray was the 'special' guy for both Emil Jacobs *and* Bill Shaw. When the Bureau needed something done quietly, they called in Murray. Before that he was legal attaché in London—that's a spook post, lots of contacts with the intelligence communities over there; Murray's the black side of FBI, big time and well connected. And *he* picked Pat Martin to advise Ryan on Supreme Court appointments. Is the picture becoming clear?"

"Wait a minute. I *know* Dan Murray. He's a tough son of a bitch, but he's an honest cop—"

"He was in Colombia with Ryan, which is to say, he was off the map at exactly the same time. Okay, remember, I do *not* have the file on this operation, okay? I can't prove any of this. Look at the sequence of events. Director Jacobs and all the others were killed, and right after that we have bombs going off in Colombia, and a lot of the cartel boys go to talk it over with God—but a lot of innocent people got killed, too. That's the problem with bombs. Remember how Bob Fowler made an issue of that? So what happens then? Ryan disappears. Murray does, too. I figure they went down to turn the operation off before it got totally out of hand—and then Cutter dies at a very convenient moment. Cutter didn't have the balls for wet work, he probably knew that, and people probably were afraid he'd crack because he just didn't have the nerve. But Ryan sure as hell did—and still does. Murray—well, you kill the FBI Director, and you piss off a very serious organization, and I can't say I disapprove. Those Medellin bastards stepped way over the line, and they did it in an election year, and Ryan was in the right place to play a little catch-up ball, and so somebody issued him a hunting license, and maybe things got a little out of hand—it happens—and so he goes down there to shut it down. Successfully," Webb emphasized. "In fact, the whole operation was a success. The cartel came apart—"

"Another one took its place," Donner objected. Webb nodded with an insider's smile.

"True, and they haven't killed any American officials, have they? Somebody explained to them what the rules are. Again, I will not say that what Ryan did was wrong, except for one little thing."

"What's that?" Donner asked, disappointing Webb, though he was fully caught up in the story now.

"When you deploy military forces into a foreign country, and kill people, it's called an act of war. But, again, Ryan skated. The boy's got some beautiful moves. Jim Greer trained him well. You could drop Ryan in a septic tank and he'll come out smelling like Old Spice."

"So, what's your beef with him?"

"You finally asked," Webb observed. "Jack Ryan is probably the best intelligence operator we've had in thirty years, the best since Allen Dulles, maybe the best since Bill Donovan. *Red October* was a brilliant coup. Getting the chairman of KGB out was even better. The thing in Colombia, well, they twisted the tiger's tail, and they forgot that the tiger has great big claws. Okay," Webb allowed. "Ryan's a king spook—but he needs somebody to tell him what the law is, Tom."

"A guy like this would never get elected," Kealty observed, straining himself

to say as little as possible. Three miles away his own chief of staff almost pulled the phone away from him, they were so close to getting the message across. Fortunately, Webb carried on.

"He's done a great job at the Agency. He was even a good adviser for Roger Durling, but that's not the same as being President. Yeah, he rolled you, Mr. Donner. Maybe he rolled Durling—probably not, but who can say? But this guy is rebuilding the whole fucking government, and he's building it in *his* image, in case you didn't notice. Every appointment he's made, they're all people he's worked with, some for a long time—or they were selected for him by close associates. Murray running the FBI. Do you want Dan Murray in charge of America's most powerful law enforcement agency? You want these two people picking the Supreme Court? Where will he take us?" Webb paused, and sighed. "I hate doing this. He's one of us at Langley, but he isn't supposed to be President, okay? I have an obligation to my country, and my country isn't Jack Ryan." Webb collected the photos and tucked them back in the folders. "I gotta get back. If anyone finds out what I've done, well, look what happened to Jim Cutter . . ."

"Thank you," Donner said. Then he had some decisions to make. His watch said three-fifteen, and he had to make them fast. Driving that decision would be a well-understood fact. There was something in creation even more furious than a woman scorned. It was a reporter who'd discovered that he'd been rolled.

ALL NINE WERE dying. It would take from five to eight days, but they were all doomed, and they all knew it. Their faces stared at the overhead cameras, and they had no illusions now. Their executions would be even crueller than the courts had decided for them. Or so they thought. This group promised to be more dangerous than the first—they just knew more of what was going on—and as a result they were more fully restrained. As Moudi watched, the army medics went in to draw blood samples from the subjects, which would be necessary to confirm and then to quantify the degree of their infection. On their own, the medics had come up with a way to keep the "patients" from struggling during the process—a jerked arm at the wrong moment could make one of the medical corpsmen stab the needle into the wrong body, and so while one man did the sample, the other held a knife across the subject's throat. Doomed though the criminals believed themselves to be, they *were* criminals, and cowards, and therefore unwilling to hasten their deaths. It wasn't good medical technique, but then nobody in the building was practicing good medicine. Moudi watched the process for a few minutes and left the monitoring room.

They'd been overly pessimistic on many things, and one of them was the quantity of virus that would be needed. In the culturing tank, the Ebola had consumed the monkey kidneys and blood with a gusto whose results chilled even the director. Though it happened fundamentally at the molecular level, overall it was like seeing ants going after dead fruit, seeming to come from nowhere and then covering it, turning it black with their bodies. So it was with the Ebola virus; even though it was too small to see, there were literally

trillions of them eating and displacing the tissue offered them as food. What had been one color was now another, and you didn't have to be a physician to know that the contents of the chamber were hateful beyond words. It chilled his blood merely to look at the dreadful "soup." There were liters of it now, and they were growing more, using human blood taken from the Tehran central blood bank.

The director was examining a sample under the electron microscope, comparing it with another. As Moudi approached, he could see the date-stamp labels on each. One was from Jean Baptiste. The other was newly arrived from a "patient" in the second group of nine.

"They're identical, Moudi," he said, turning when the younger man approached.

This was not as much to be expected as one might think. One of the problems with viruses was that, since they were scarcely alive at all, they were actually ill suited for proper reproduction. The RNA strand lacked an "editing function" to ensure that each generation would fully follow in the footsteps of its predecessor. It was a serious adaptive weakness of Ebola, and many other similar organisms. Sooner or later each Ebola outbreak petered out, and this was one of the reasons. The virus itself, maladapted to the human host, became less virulent. And *that* was what made it the ideal biological weapon. It would kill. It would spread. Then it would die before doing too much of the latter. How much it did of the former was a function of the initial distribution. It was both horribly lethal and also self-limiting.

"So, we have at least three generations of stability," Moudi observed.

"And by extrapolation, probably seven to nine." The project director, whatever his perversion of medical science, was a conservative on technical issues. Moudi would have said nine to eleven. Better that the director was right, he admitted to himself, turning away.

On a table at the far wall were twenty cans. Similar to the ones used to infect the first collection of criminals, but slightly modified, they were labeled as economy-size cans of a popular European shaving cream. (The company was actually American-owned, which amused everyone associated with the project.) They'd been exactly what they said, and been bought singly in twelve different cities in five different countries, as the lot numbers inked on their curving bottoms showed. Here in the Monkey House they'd been emptied and carefully disassembled for modification. Each would contain a half liter of the thinnedout "soup," plus a neutral-gas propellant (nitrogen, which would not involve any chemical reaction with the "soup" and would not support combustion) and a small quantity of coolant. Another part of the team had already tested the delivery system. There would be no degradation of the Ebola at all for more than nine hours. After that, with the loss of the coolant, the virus particles would start to die in a linear function. At 9 + 8 hours, less than ten percent of the particles would be dead—but those, Moudi told himself, were the weak ones anyway, and probably the particles that would be unlikely to cause illness. At 9 + 16 hours, fifteen percent would be dead. Thereafter, experiments had revealed, every eight hours—for some reason the numbers seemed to track with thirds of days—an additional five percent would die. And so ...

It was simple enough. The travelers would all fly out of Tehran. Flight time to London, seven hours. Flight time to Paris, thirty minutes less. Flight time to Frankfurt, less still. Much of that factor was the time of day, Moudi had learned. In the three cities there would be easy connecting flights. Baggage would not be checked because the travelers would be moving on to another country, and therefore customs inspection wasn't necessary, and therefore no one would notice the cans of unusually cold shaving cream. About the time the coolant ran out, the travelers would be in their first-class seats, climbing to cruising altitude to their cities of final destination, and there again international air travel worked out nicely. There were direct flights from Europe to New York, to Washington, to Boston, to Philadelphia, to Chicago, to San Francisco, to Los Angeles, to Atlanta, to Dallas, to Orlando, and regular connecting flights to Las Vegas, and Atlantic City—in fact to all of America's convention cities. The travelers would all fly first class, the quicker to claim their luggage and get through customs. They would have good hotel reservations, and return tickets that took them out from different airports. From time-zero to delivery no more than twenty-four hours would pass, and therefore eighty percent of the Ebola released would be active. After that, it was all random, in Allah's hands—*no!* Moudi shook his head. He was not the director. He would not apply this act to the will of his God. Whatever it might be, however necessary it was to his country—and a new one at that—he would not defile his religious beliefs by saying or even thinking *that.*

Simple enough? It had been simple once, but then—it was a legacy of sorts. Sister Jean Baptiste, her body long since incinerated . . . instead of leaving children behind as a woman's body ought, disease was its only physical legacy, and that was an act of such malignance that surely Allah must be offended. But she'd left something else, too, a real legacy. Moudi had once hated all Westerners as unbelievers. In school he'd learned of the Crusades, and how those supposed soldiers of the prophet Jesus had slaughtered Muslims, as Hitler had later slaughtered Jews, and from that he'd taken the lesson that all Westerners and all Christians were something less than the people of his own Faith, and it was easy to hate such people, easy to write them off as irrelevancies in a world of virtue and belief. But that one woman. What was the West and what was Christianity? The criminals of the eleventh century, or a virtuous woman of the twentieth who denied every human wish she might have had—and for what? To serve the sick, to teach her faith. Always humble, always respectful. She'd never broken her vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience—Moudi was sure of that—and though those vows and those beliefs might have been false, they hadn't been *that* false. He'd learned from her the same thing that the Prophet had learned. There was but one God. There was but one Book. She had served both with a pure heart, however misguided her religious beliefs might have been.

Not just Sister Jean Baptiste, he reminded himself. *Sister Maria Magdalena, too.* And she had been murdered—and why? Loyalty to her faith, loyalty to her vows, loyalty to her friend, not one of which the Holy Koran found the least bit objectionable.

It would have been so much easier for him had he only worked with black Africans. Their religious beliefs were things the Koran abhorred, since many of

them were still pagans in deed if not in word, ignorant of the One God, and he could easily have looked down on them, and not worried at all about Christians—but he had met Jean Baptiste and Maria Magdalena. Why? Why had that happened?

Unfortunately for him it was too late to ask such questions. What was past was past. Moudi walked to the far corner of the room and got himself some coffee. He'd been awake for more than a day, and with fatigue came doubts, and he hoped the drink would chase them away until sleep could come, and with it rest, and with that, perhaps, peace.

"YOU HAVE TO be kidding!" Arnie snarled into the phone.

Tom Donner's voice was as apologetic as it could be. "Maybe it was the metal detectors on the way out. The tape—I mean, it's damaged. You can still see it and hear it just fine, but there's a little noise on the audio track. Not broadcast quality. The whole hour's worth is shot. We can't use it."

"So?" van Damm demanded.

"So, we have a problem, Arnie. The segment is supposed to run at nine."

"So, what do you want me to do about it?"

"Is Ryan up to redoing it live? We'll get better share that way," the anchorman offered.

The President's chief of staff almost said something else. If this had been sweeps week—during which the networks did their best to inflate their audiences in order to get additional commercial fees—he might have accused Donner of having done this deliberately. No, that was a line even *he* couldn't cross. Dealing with the press on this level was rather like being Clyde Beatty in center ring, armed with a bottomless chair and a blank-loaded revolver, holding great jungle cats at bay for the audience, having the upper hand at all times, but knowing that the cats needed to get lucky only once. Instead he just offered silence, forcing Donner to make the next move.

"Look, Arnie, it'll be the same agenda. How often do we give the President a chance to rehearse his lines? And he did fine this morning. John thinks so, too."

"You can't retape?" van Damm asked.

"Arnie, I go on the air in forty minutes, and I'm wrapped till seven-thirty. That gives me thirty minutes to scoot down to the White House, set up and shoot, and get the tape back here, all before nine? You want to lend me one of his helicopters?" He paused. "This way—tell you what. I will say on the air that we goofed on the tape, and that the Boss graciously agreed to go live with us. If that isn't a network blow job, I don't know what is."

Arnold van Damm's alarm lights were all flashing red. The good news was that Jack had handled himself pretty well. Not perfect, but pretty well, especially on the sincerity. Even the controversial stuff, he'd come across as believing what he'd said. Ryan took coaching well, and he learned fast. He hadn't looked as relaxed as he should, but that was okay. Ryan *wasn't* a politician—he'd said that two or three times—and therefore looking a little tense was all right. Focus groups in seven different cities all said that they liked Jack because he acted like one of them. Ryan didn't know that Arnie and

the political staff were doing that. *That* little program was as secret as a CIA operation, but Arnie justified it to himself as a reality check on how the President could best project his agenda and his image in order to govern effectively—and no President had ever known all the things done in his name. So, yes, Ryan *did* come across as presidential—not in the normal way, but in *his own* way, and that, the focus groups all agreed, was good, too. And going live, yes, that would *really* look good, and it *would* get a lot more people to flip the channel to NBC, and Arnie wanted the people to get to know Ryan better.

"Okay, Tom, a tentative yes. But I *do* have to ask him."

"Fast, please," Donner replied. "If he cancels out, then we have to jerk around the whole network schedule for tonight, and that could mean *my* ass, okay?"

"Back to you in five," van Damm promised. He killed the button on the phone and hustled out of the room, leaving the receiver on his desk pad.

"On the way to see the Boss," he told the Secret Service agents in the east-west corridor. His stride told them to jump out of his way even before they saw his eyes.

"Yes?" Ryan said. It wasn't often his door opened without warning.

"We have to redo the interview," Arnie said somewhat breathlessly.

Jack shook his head in surprise. "Why? Didn't I have my fly zipped?"

"Mary always checks that. The tape got screwed up, and there isn't time to reshoot. So Donner asked me to ask you if you would do it live at nine o'clock. Same questions and everything—no, no," Arnie said, thinking fast. "What about we get your wife down here, too?"

"Cathy won't like that. Why?" the President asked.

"Really, all she has to do is sit there and smile. It will look good for the people out there. Jack, she has to act like the First Lady occasionally. This should be an easy one. Maybe we can even bring the kids in toward the end —"

"No. My kids stay out of the public eye, period. Cathy and I have talked about that."

"But—"

"No, Arnie, no now, no tomorrow, no in the future, no." Ryan's voice was as final as a death sentence.

The chief of staff figured he couldn't talk Ryan into everything. This would take a little time, but he'd come around eventually. You couldn't be one of the people without letting them meet your kids, but now wasn't the time to press on that one. "Will you ask Cathy?"

Ryan sighed and nodded. "Okay."

"Right, okay, I'll tell Donner that she might be on, but we're not sure yet because of her medical obligations. It'll give him something to think about. It will also take some of the heat off you. That's the First Lady's main job, remember."

"You want to tell her that, Arnie? Remember, she's a surgeon, good with knives."

Van Damm laughed. "I'll tell you what she is. She's a hell of a lady, and she's tougher than either one of us. Ask nicely," he advised.

"Yeah." Right before dinner, Jack thought.

"OKAY, HE'LL DO it. But we want to ask his wife to join us, too."

"Why?"

"Why not?" Arnie asked. "Not sure yet. She isn't back from work," he added, and that was a line that made the reporters smile.

"Okay, Arnie, thanks, I owe you one." Donner turned off the speakerphone.

"You realize that you just lied to the President of the United States," John Plumber observed pensively. Plumber was an older pro than Donner. He wasn't of the Edward R. Murrow generation—quite. Pushing seventy now, he'd been a teenager in World War II, but had gone to Korea as a young reporter, and been foreign correspondent in London, Paris, Bonn, and finally Moscow. Plumber had been ejected from Moscow, and his somewhat left political stance had nonetheless never turned into sympathy with the Soviet Union. But more than that, though he was not of Murrow's generation, he had grown up listening to the immortal CBS correspondent, and he could still close his eyes and hear the gravelly voice which had somehow carried a measure of authority usually associated with the clergy. Maybe it was because Ed had started on the radio, when one's voice was the currency of the profession. He'd certainly known language better than most of his own time, and infinitely better than the semi-literate reporters and newswriters of the current generation. Plumber was something of a scholar in his own right, a devoted student of Elizabethan literature, and he tried to draft his copy and his spontaneous comments with an elegance in keeping with that of the teacher he'd only watched and heard, but never actually met. More than anything else, people had listened to Ed Murrow because of his honor, John Plumber reminded himself. He'd been as tough as any of the later generation of "investigative journalists" that the schools turned out now, but you always knew that Ed Murrow was fair. And you knew that he didn't break the rules. Plumber was of the generation that believed that his profession was supposed to have rules, one of which was you *never* told a lie. You could bend, warp, and twist the truth in order to get information out of someone—that was different—but you *never* told someone something that was deliberately and definitely false. That troubled John Plumber. Ed would never have done that. Not a chance.

"John, he rolled us."

"You think."

"The information I got—well, *what* do you think?" It had been a frantic two hours, with the entire network research staff running down bits of such minor trivia that even two or three of the pieces, put together, didn't amount to much of anything. But they'd *all* checked out, and that was something else entirely.

"I'm not sure, Tom." Plumber rubbed his eyes. "Is Ryan a little out of his depth? Yes, he is. But is he trying pretty hard? Definitely. Is he honest? I think so. Well, as honest as any of them ever can be," he amended himself.

"Then we'll give him the chance to prove it, won't we?" Plumber didn't say anything. Visions of ratings, and maybe even an Emmy, were dancing in the eyes of his junior colleague like sugar plums on Christmas Eve. In any case,

Donner was the anchor, and Plumber was the commentator, and Tom had the ear of the front office in New York, which had once been peopled by men of his own generation, but was now entirely populated by people of Donner's, businessmen more than journalists, who saw ratings as the Holy Grail on their quarterly earnings statements. Well, Ryan liked businessmen, didn't he?

"I suppose."

THE HELICOPTER LANDED on the South Lawn pad. The crew chief jerked the door open and jumped out, next helping the First Lady out with a smile. Her portion of the Detail followed, walking up the gentle slope to the south entrance, then to the elevator, where Roy Altman pushed the button for her, since the First Lady wasn't allowed to do that, either.

"SURGEON is in the elevator, heading for the residence," Agent Raman reported from the ground floor.

"Roger," Andrea Price acknowledged upstairs. She'd already had some people from the Technical Security Unit check all the metal detectors the NBC crew had passed on the way out. The TSU chief commented that occasionally they got a little fluky, and the large-format Beta tapes the networks used could easily be damaged—but he didn't think so. Maybe a line surge, she'd asked. No chance, he'd replied, reminding her archly that even the *air* in the White House was checked continuously by his people. Andrea debated discussing that with the chief of staff, but it would have been no use. Damn the reporters anyway. They were the biggest pain in the ass on the campus.

"Hi, Andrea," Cathy said, breezing past her.

"Hello, Dr. Ryan. Dinner is just coming up now."

"Thank you," SURGEON replied on her way into the bedroom. She stopped on entering, seeing that a dress and jewelry were on her valet. Frowning, she kicked off her shoes and got casual clothes for dinner, wondering, as always, if there were cameras hidden somewhere to record the event.

The White House cook, George Butler, was by far her superior. He'd even improved on her spinach salad, adding a pinch of rosemary to the dressing she'd perfected over the years. Cathy kibitzed with him at least once a week, and in turn he showed her how to use the institutional-class appliances. She sometimes wondered how good a cook she might have become had she not opted for medicine. The executive chef hadn't told her that she had a gift for it, being fearful of patronizing her—SURGEON was a surgeon, after all. Along the way he'd learned the family preferences, and cooking for a toddler, he'd discovered, was a treat, especially when she occasionally came down with her towering bodyguard to search for snacks. Don Russell and she had milk and cookies at least twice a week. SANDBOX had become the darling of the staff.

"Mommy!" Katie Ryan said when Cathy came through the door.

"Hi, honey." SANDBOX got the first hug and kiss. POTUS got the second. The older kids resisted, as always. "Jack, why are my clothes out?"

"We're going to be on TV tonight," SWORDSMAN replied warily.

"Why?"

"The tape from this morning got all farbled up, and they want to do it live at nine, and if you're willing, I want you to be there, too."

"To answer what?"

"About what you'd expect as far as I'm concerned."

"So, what do I do, walk in with a tray of cookies?"

"George makes the *best* cookies!" SANDBOX added to the conversation. The other kids laughed. It broke the tension somewhat.

"You don't *have* to if you don't want, but Arnie thinks it's a good idea."

"Great," Cathy observed. Her head tilted as she looked at her husband. Sometimes she wondered where the puppet strings were, the ones Arnie used to jerk her husband around.

BONDARENKO WAS WORKING late—or early, depending on one's point of view. He'd been at his desk for twenty hours, and since his promotion to general officer he'd learned that life was far better as a colonel. As a colonel he'd gotten out to jog, and even managed to sleep with his wife most of the time. Now—well, he'd always aspired to higher rank. He'd always had ambition, else why would a Signal Corps officer have gone into the Afghan mountains with the Spetznaz? Recognized for his talent, his colonelcy had almost been his undoing, as he'd worked as a close aide for another colonel who'd turned out to be a spy—that fact still boggled him. Misha Filitov a spy for the West? It had shaken his faith in many things, most of all his faith in his country—but then the country had died. The Soviet Union which had raised him and uniformed him and trained him had died one cold December night, to be replaced with something smaller and more . . . comfortable to serve. It was easier to love Mother Russia than a huge polyglot empire. Now it was as though the adopted children had all moved away, and the true children remained, and that made for a happier family.

But a poorer one. Why hadn't he seen it before? His country's military had been the world's largest and most impressive, or so he had once thought, with its huge masses of men and arms, and its proud history of destroying the German invaders in history's most brutal war. But that military had died in Afghanistan, or if not quite that, then lost its soul and its confidence, as America's had done in Vietnam. But America had recovered, a process his country had yet to begin.

All that money wasted. Wasted on the departed provinces, those ungrateful wretches whom the Union had supported for generations, now gone, taking so much wealth with them, and in some cases turning away to join with others, then, he feared, to turn back as enemies. Just like unfaithful adopted children.

Golovko was right. If that danger was to be stopped, it had to be stopped early. But how? Dealing with a few bandit Chechens had proved difficult enough.

He was operations chief now. In five more years, he'd be commanding general. Bondarenko had no illusions about that. He was the best officer of his age group, and his performance in the field had won him high-level attention, ever the determining factor in the ultimate advancement. He could get that job just in time to fight Russia's last losing battle. Or maybe not. In five years, given funding and a free hand to reshape doctrine and training, he might just convert the Russian army into a force such as it had never been. He would

shamelessly use the American model, as the Americans had shamelessly used Soviet tactical doctrine in the Persian Gulf War. But for that to happen he needed a few years of relative peace. If his forces were to be trapped into fighting brushfires all along its southern periphery, he would not have the needed time or funding to save the army.

So what was he supposed to do? He was the operations chief. He was supposed to know. It was his job to know. Except he didn't. Turkmenistan was first. If he didn't stop it there, he never would. On the left side of his desk was a roster of available divisions and brigades, with their supposed states of readiness. On the right side was a map. The two made a poor match.

"YOU HAVE SUCH nice hair," Mary Abbot said.

"I didn't do surgery today," Cathy explained. "The cap always ruins it."

"You've had the same hairstyle for how long?"

"Since we got married."

"Never changed it?" *That* surprised Mrs. Abbot. Cathy just shook her head. She thought that she looked rather like the actress Susannah York—or at least she'd liked the look from a movie she'd seen while in college. And the same was true of Jack, wasn't it? He'd never changed *his* haircut, except when he didn't have the time to get a trim, something else the White House staff took care of, every two weeks. They were far better at managing Jack's life than she'd ever been. They probably just did things and scheduled things instead of asking first, as she had always done. A much more efficient system, Cathy told herself.

She was more nervous than she let on, worse than the first day of medical school, worse than her first surgical procedure, when she'd had to close her eyes and scream inwardly at her hands to keep them from shaking. But at least they'd listened then, and they listened now, too. Okay, she thought, that was the key. This was a surgical procedure, and she was a surgeon, and a surgeon was always in control.

"I think that does it," Mrs. Abbot said.

"Thank you. Do you like working with Jack?"

An insider's smile. "He *hates* makeup. But most men do," she allowed.

"I have a secret for you—so do I."

"I didn't do much," Mary observed at once. "Your skin doesn't need much."

The woman-to-woman observation made Dr. Ryan smile. "Thank you."

"Can I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"Let your hair grow another inch, maybe two. It would complement the shape of your face better."

"That's what Elaine says—she's my hairdresser in Baltimore. I tried it once. The surgical caps make it all scrunchy."

"We can make bigger caps for you. We try to take care of our First Ladies."

"Oh!" *And why didn't* I *think of that?* Cathy asked herself. It had to be cheaper than taking the helicopter to work . . . "Thank you!"

"This way." Mrs. Abbot led FLOTUS to the Oval Office.

Surprisingly, Cathy had been in the room only twice before, and only once

to see Jack there. It suddenly struck her as odd. Her bedroom wasn't fifty yards away from her husband's place of work, after all. The desk struck her as grossly old-fashioned, but the office itself was huge and airy compared to hers at Hopkins, even now with the TV lights and cameras set up. Over the mantel opposite the desk was what the Secret Service called the world's most photographed plant. The furniture was too formal to be comfortable, and the rug with the President's Seal embroidered on it was downright tacky, she thought. But it wasn't a normal office for a normal person.

"Hi, honey." Jack kissed her and handled introductions. "This is Tom Donner and John Plumber."

"Hello." Cathy smiled. "I used to listen to you while fixing dinner."

"Not anymore?" Plumber asked with a smile.

"No TV in the dining room upstairs, and they won't let me fix dinner."

"Doesn't your husband help?" Donner asked.

"Jack in the kitchen? Well, he's okay on a grill, but the kitchen is my territory." She sat down, looking at their eyes. It wasn't easy. The TV lights were already on. She made the extra effort. Plumber she liked. Donner was hiding something. The realization made her blink, and her face changed over to her doctor's look. She had the sudden desire to say something to Jack, but there wasn't—

"One minute," the producer said. Andrea Price, as always, was in the room, standing by the door to the secretaries' space, and the door behind Cathy was open to the corridor. Jeff Raman was there. He was another odd duck, Cathy thought, but the problem with the White House was that everyone treated you like you were Julius Caesar or something. It was so hard just being friendly with people. It seemed that there was always something in the way. Fundamentally, neither Jack nor Cathy was used to having servants. Employees, yes, but not servants. She was popular with her nurses and technicians at Hopkins because she treated them all like the professionals they were, and she was trying to do the same thing here, but for some reason it didn't work quite the same way, and that was bothersome in a distant way.

"Fifteen seconds."

"Are we having fun yet?" Jack whispered.

Why couldn't you just have stayed at Merrill Lynch? Cathy almost said aloud. He would have been a senior VP by now but, no. He would never have been happy. Jack was as driven to do his work as she was to fix people's eyes. In that they were the same.

"Good evening," Donner said to the camera behind the Ryans. "We're here in the Oval Office to speak with President Jack Ryan and the First Lady. As I said on *NBC Nightly News,* a technical glitch damaged the taping we did earlier today. The President has graciously allowed us to come back and talk live." His head turned. "And for that, sir, we thank you."

"Glad to see you again, Tom," the President said, comfortably. He was getting better at concealing his thoughts.

"Also joining us is Mrs. Ryan—"

"Please," Cathy said, with a smile of her own. "It's Dr. Ryan. I worked pretty hard for that."

"Yes, ma'am," Donner said with a charm that made Cathy think about a bad

trauma case rolling off on Monument Street at lunchtime. “You’re both doctors, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Mr. Donner, Jack in history, and me in ophthalmology.”

“And you’re a distinguished eye surgeon with the Lasker Public Service Award,” he observed, applying his anchorman’s charm.

“Well, I’ve been working in medical research for over fifteen years. At Johns Hopkins we’re all clinicians and researchers, too. I work with a wonderful group of people, and, really, the Lasker Prize is more a tribute to them than it is to me. Back fifteen years ago, Professor Bernard Katz encouraged me to look into how we could use lasers to correct various eye problems. I found it interesting, and I’ve been working in that area ever since, in addition to my normal surgical practice.”

“Do you really make more money than your husband?” Donner asked with a grin for the cameras.

“Lots,” she confirmed with a chuckle.

“I always said that Cathy was the brains of the outfit,” Jack went on, patting his wife’s hand. “She’s too modest to say that she’s just about the best in the world at what she does.”

“So, how do you like being First Lady?”

“Do I have to answer?” A charming smile. Then she turned serious. “The way we got here—well, it’s not something anyone would wish for, but I guess it’s like what I do at the hospital. Sometimes a trauma case comes in, and that person didn’t choose to be injured, and we try our best to fix what’s wrong. Jack’s never turned away from a problem or a challenge in his life.”

Then it was time for business. “Mr. President, how do you like *your* job?”

“Well, the hours are pretty long. As much time as I have spent in government service, I don’t think I ever really understood how difficult this job is. I am blessed with a very fine staff, and our government has thousands of dedicated workers doing the public’s business. That helps a lot.”

“As you see it, sir, what is *your* job?” John Plumber asked.

“The oath says to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States,” Ryan replied. “We’re working to restore the government. We now have the Senate fully in place, and as the several states get on with their elections, we’ll soon have a new House of Representatives. I’ve got most of the Cabinet posts filled—for HHS and Education, we still have the sitting Deputy Secretaries doing a fine job.”

“We spoke this morning about events in the Persian Gulf. What are the problems there as you see them?” It was Plumber again. Ryan was handling himself well, much more relaxed, and Plumber noted the look in his wife’s eyes. She was smart.

“The United States wants nothing more than peace and stability in that region. We have every wish to establish friendly relations with the new United Islamic Republic. There’s been enough strife there and elsewhere in the world. I’d like to think that we’ve turned the corner on that. We’ve made peace—a real peace, not just the absence of war—with the Russians, after generations of turmoil. I want us to build on that. Maybe the world’s never been fully at peace, but that is no reason why we can’t do it. John, we’ve come a very long way in the past twenty years. There’s a lot more for us to do, but we have a lot

of good work to build on."

"We'll be back after this break," Donner told the cameras. He could see that Ryan was pretty pleased with himself. Excellent.

A staffer came in from the back door with water glasses. Everyone had a sip while they waited for the two commercials to run. "You really hate all this, don't you?" he asked Cathy.

"As long as I can do my work, I can live with almost anything, but I do worry about the kids. After this is over, they have to go back to being normal children, and we didn't raise them for all this hoopla." Then everyone was quiet for the rest of the commercial time.

"We're back on the Oval Office with the President and First Lady. Mr. President," Donner asked, "what about the changes you are making?"

"Mainly my job isn't to 'change,' Tom, it's to 'restore.' Along the way we will try to do a few things. I've tried to select my new Cabinet members with an eye toward making the government function more efficiently. As you know, I've been in government service for quite a while, and along the way I've seen numerous examples of inefficiency. The citizens out there pay a lot of money in taxes, and we owe it to them to see that the money is spent wisely—and efficiently. So I've told my Cabinet officers to examine all of the executive departments with an eye to doing the same work for less cost."

"A lot of presidents have said that."

"This one means it," Ryan said seriously.

"But your first major policy act has been to attack the tax system," Donner observed.

"Not 'attack,' Tom. 'Change.' George Winston has my full support. The tax code we have now is totally unfair—and I mean unfair in many ways. People can't understand it, for one. That means that they have to hire people to explain the tax system to them, and it's hard to see how it makes sense for people to pay good money for people to explain how the law takes more of their money away—especially when the government writes the laws. Why make laws that the people can't understand? Why make laws that are so complicated?" Ryan asked.

"But along the way, your administration's goal is to make the tax system *re*gressive, not *pro*gressive."

"We've been over that," the President replied, and Donner knew he had him then. It was one of Ryan's more obvious weaknesses that he didn't like repeating himself. He really was *not* a politician. They loved to repeat themselves. "Charging everyone the same amount is just as fair as anything can be. Doing so in a way that everyone can understand will actually *save* money for people. Our proposed tax changes will be revenue-neutral. Nobody's getting any special breaks."

"But the tax rates for the rich will fall dramatically."

"That's true, but we'll also eliminate all the breaks that their lobbyists have written into the system. They'll actually end up paying the same, or more probably, a little more than they already do. Secretary Winston has studied that very carefully, and I concur in his judgment."

"Sir, it's hard to see how a thirty percent rate reduction will make them pay more. That's fourth-grade arithmetic."

"Ask your accountant." Ryan smiled. "Or for that matter, look at your own tax returns, if you can figure them out. You know, Tom, I used to be an accountant—I passed the exam before I went into the Marine Corps—and *I* can't even figure the darned things out. The government does not serve the public interest by doing things that the people can't understand. There's been too much of that. I'm going to try to dial it back a bit."

Bingo. To Donner's left, John Plumber grimaced. The director with his selection of camera feeds made sure that one didn't go out. Instead he picked Donner's winning anchorman smile.

"I'm glad you feel that way, Mr. President, because there are many things that the American people would like to know about government operations. Nearly all of your government service has been in the Central Intelligence Agency."

"That's true but, Tom, as I told you this morning, no President has ever spoken about intelligence operations. There's a good reason for that." Ryan was still cool, not knowing what door had just opened.

"But, Mr. President, you have personally been involved in numerous intelligence operations which had important effects on bringing that end to the Cold War. For example, the defection of the Soviet missile submarine *Red October.* You played a personal part in that, didn't you?"

The director, cued ahead of time to the question, had selected the camera zeroed in on Ryan's face just in time to see his eyes go as wide as doorknobs. He really wasn't all that good at controlling his emotions. "Tom, I—"

"The viewers should know that you played a decisive role in one of the greatest intelligence coups of all time. We got our hands on an intact Soviet ballistic-missile submarine, didn't we?"

"I won't comment on that story." By this time his makeup couldn't hide the pale look. Cathy turned to look at her husband, having felt his hand in hers turn to ice.

"And then less than two years later, you personally arranged the defection of the head of the Russian KGB."

Jack managed to control his face, finally, but his voice was wooden. "Tom, this has to stop. You're making unfounded speculations."

"Mr. President, that individual, Nikolay Gerasimov, formerly of the KGB, now lives with his family in Virginia. The captain of the submarine lives in Florida. It's not a 'story'"—he smiled—"and you know it. Sir, I don't understand your reticence. You played a major role in bringing that peace to the world that you talked about a few minutes ago."

"Tom, let me make this clear. I will not ever discuss intelligence operations in any public forum. Period."

"But the American people have a right to know what sort of man sits in this office." The same thing had been said eleven hours before by John Plumber, who winced inwardly to hear himself quoted in this way, but who could not turn on his own colleague in public.

"Tom, I have served my country to the best of my ability for a number of years, but just as you cannot reveal your news sources, so our intelligence agencies cannot reveal many of the things they do, for fear of getting real people killed."

"But, Mr. President, you have done that. You have killed people."

"Yes, I have, and more than one President has been a soldier or—"

"Wait a minute," Cathy interrupted, and now her eyes were flaring. "I want to say something. Jack joined CIA after our family was attacked by terrorists. If he hadn't done those things back then, none of us would be alive. I was pregnant with our son then, and they tried to kill me and our daughter in my car in Annapolis and—"

"Excuse me, Mrs. Ryan, but we have to take a break now."

"This has to stop, Tom. This has to stop right now," Ryan said forcefully. "When people talk about field operations in the open, real people can get killed. Do you understand that?" The camera lights were off, but the tapes were still rolling.

"Mr. President, the people have a right to know, and it's my job to report the facts. Have I lied about anything?"

"I can't even comment on that, and you know it," Ryan said, having almost snarled an accurate answer. *Temper, Jack, temper,* he reminded himself. *A President can't have a temper, damned sure not on live TV.* Damn, Marko would never cooperate with the—or would he? He was Lithuanian, and maybe he might like the idea of becoming a national hero, though Jack figured he might just talk him out of such a thing. But Gerasimov was something else. Ryan had disgraced the man, threatened him with death—at the hands of his own countrymen, but that didn't matter to a man like him—and stripped him of all his power. Gerasimov now enjoyed a life far more comfortable than anything he might have enjoyed in the Soviet Union, which he had sought to maintain and rule, but he wasn't the sort of man to enjoy comfort so much as power. Gerasimov had aspired to the sort of position Ryan now enjoyed himself, and would have felt very comfortable in this office or another like it. But those who aspired to power were most often those who misused it, which distinguished him from Jack in one more way. Not that it mattered at the moment. Gerasimov would talk. Sure as hell. And they knew where he was.

So what do I do now?

"We're back in the Oval Office with President and Mrs. Ryan," Donner intoned for anyone who might have forgotten.

"Mr. President, you are an expert in national security and foreign affairs," Plumber said before his colleague could speak. "But our country faces more problems than that. You now have to reestablish the Supreme Court. How do you propose to do that?"

"I asked the Justice Department to send me a list of experienced judges from federal appeals courts. I'm going over that list now, and I hope to make my nominations to the Senate in the next two weeks."

"Normally the American Bar Association assists the government in screening such judges, but evidently that's not being done in this case. May I ask why, sir?"

"Tom, all of the judges on the list have been through that process already, and since then all have sat on the appeals bench for a minimum of ten years."

"The list was assembled by prosecutors?" Donner asked.

"By experienced professionals in the Justice Department. The head of the search group is Patrick Martin, who just took over the Criminal Division. He

was assisted by other Justice Department officials, like the head of the Civil Rights Division, for example."

"But they're all prosecutors, or people whose job it is to prosecute cases. Who suggested Mr. Martin to you?"

"It's true that I don't personally know the Department of Justice all that well. Acting FBI Director Murray recommended Mr. Martin to me. He did a good job supervising the investigation of the airplane crash into the Capitol building, and I asked him to assemble the list for me."

"And you and Mr. Murray have been friends for a long time."

"Yes, we have." Ryan nodded.

"On another of those intelligence operations, Mr. Murray accompanied you, didn't he?"

"Excuse me?" Jack asked.

"The CIA operation in Colombia, when you played a role in breaking up the Medellin cartel."

"Tom, I'm going to say this one last time: I will not discuss intelligence operations, real ones or made-up ones, at all—ever. Are we clear on that?"

"Mr. President, that operation resulted in the death of Admiral James Cutter. Sir," Donner went on, a sincerely pained expression on his face, "a lot of stories are coming out now about your tenure at CIA. These stories are going to break, and we really want you to have the chance to set the record straight as rapidly as possible. You were not elected to this office, and you have never been examined in the way that political candidates usually are. The American people want to know the man who sits in this office, sir."

"Tom, the world of intelligence is a secret world. It has to be. Our government has to do many things. Not all of those things can be discussed openly. Everyone has secrets. Every viewer out there has them. You have them. In the case of the government, keeping those secrets is vitally important to the well-being of our country, and also, by the way, to the safety of the lives of the people who do our country's business. Once upon a time the media respected that rule, especially in times of war, but also in other times. I wish you still did."

"But at what point, Mr. President, does secrecy work against our national interests?"

"That's why we have a law that mandates Congress's right to oversee intelligence operations. If it were just the Executive Branch making these decisions, yes, you would have just cause to worry. But it isn't that way. Congress also examines what we do. I have myself reported to Congress on many of these things."

"Was there a secret operation to Colombia? Did you participate in it? Did Daniel Murray accompany you there after the death of then-FBI Director Emil Jacobs?"

"I have nothing to say on that or on any of the other stories you brought up."

And there was another commercial break.

"Why are you doing this?" To everyone's surprise, the question came from Cathy.

"Mrs. Ryan—"

"Dr. Ryan," she said at once.

"Excuse me. Dr. Ryan, these allegations must be laid to rest."

"We've been through this before. Once people tried to break our marriage up—and that was all lies, too, and"

"Cathy," Jack said quietly. Her head turned toward his.

"I know about that one, Jack, remember?" she whispered.

"No, you don't. Not really."

"That's the problem," Tom Donner pointed out. "These stories will be followed up. The people want to know. The people have a right to know."

Had the world been just, Ryan thought, he would have stood, tossed the microphone to Donner, and asked him to leave his house, but that wasn't possible, and so here he was, supposedly powerful, trapped by circumstance like a criminal in an interrogation room. Then the camera lights came back on.

"Mr. President, I know this is a difficult subject for you."

"Tom, okay, I will say this. As part of my service with CIA, I occasionally had to serve my country in ways that cannot be revealed for a very long time, but at no time have I ever violated the law, and every such activity was fully reported to the appropriate members of the Congress. Let me tell you why I joined CIA.

"I didn't want to. I was a teacher. I taught history at the Naval Academy. I love teaching, and I had time to write a couple of history books, and I like that, too. But then a group of terrorists came after me and my family. There were two very serious attempts to kill us—all of us. You know that. It was all over the media when it happened. I decided then that my place was in the Agency. Why? To protect others against the same sort of dangers. I never liked it all that much, but it was the job I decided I had to do. Now I'm here, and you know what? I don't much like this job, either. I don't like the pressure. I don't like the responsibility. No one person should have this much power. But I *am* here, and I swore an oath to do my best, and I'm doing that."

"But, Mr. President, you are the first person to sit in this office who's never been a political figure. Your views on many things have never been shaped by public opinion, and what is disturbing to a lot of people is that you seem to be leaning on others who have never achieved high office, either. The danger, as some people see it, is that we have a small group of people who lack political experience but who are shaping policy for our country for some time to come. How do you answer that concern?"

"I haven't even *heard* that concern anywhere, Tom."

"Sir, you've also been criticized for spending too much time in this office and not enough out among the people. Could that be a problem?" Now that he'd sunk the hook, Donner could afford to appear plaintive.

"Unfortunately I do have a lot of work to do, and this is where I have to do that work. For the team I've put together, where do I start?" Jack asked. Next to him, Cathy was seething. Now her hand felt cold in his. "Secretary of State, Scott Adler, a career foreign service officer, son of a Holocaust survivor. I've known Scott for years. He's the best man I know to run State. Treasury, George Winston, a self-made man. He was instrumental in saving our financial system during the conflict with Japan; he has the respect of the financial

community, and he's a real thinker. Defense, Anthony Bretano, is a highly successful engineer and businessman who's already making needed reforms at the Pentagon. FBI, Dan Murray, a career cop, and a good one. You know what I'm doing with my choices, Tom? I'm picking pros, people who know the work because they've done it, not political types who just talk about it. If you think that's wrong, well, I'm sorry about that, but I've worked my way up inside the government, and I have more faith in the professionals I've come to know than I do in the political appointees I've seen along the way. And, oh, by the way, how is that different from a politician who selects the people he knows—or, worse, people who contributed to his campaign organization?"

"Some would say that the difference is that ordinarily people selected to high office have much broader experience.

"I would not say that, and I have worked under such people for years. The appointments I've made are all people whose abilities I know. Moreover, a President is supposed to have the right, with the assent of the people's elected representatives, to pick people he can work with."

"But with so much to do, how do you expect to succeed without experienced political guidance? This is a political town."

"Maybe that's the problem," Ryan shot back. "Maybe the political process that we've all studied over the years gets in the way more than it helps. Tom, I didn't ask for this job, okay? The idea, when Roger asked me to be Vice President, was that I serve out the remaining term and leave government service for good. I wanted to go back to teaching. But then that dreadful event happened, and here I am. I am not a politician. I never wanted to be one, and as far as I'm concerned, I'm not a politician now. Am I the best man for this job? Probably not. I am, however, the President of the United States, and I have a job to do, and I'm going to do it to the best of my ability. That's all I can do."

"And that's the last word. Thank you, Mr. President." Jack barely waited for the camera lights to go off a final time before unclipping the microphone from his tie and standing. The two reporters didn't say a word. Cathy glared at them.

"Why did you do that?"

"Excuse me?" Donner replied.

"Why do people like you always attack people like us? What have we done to deserve it? My husband is the most honorable man I know."

"All we do is ask questions."

"Don't give me that! The way you ask them and the questions you choose, you give the answers before anyone has a chance to say anything."

Neither reporter responded to that. The Ryans left without another word. Then Arnie came in.

"Okay," he observed, "who set this up?"

"THEY GUTTED HIM like a fish," Holbrook thought aloud. They were due for some time off, and it was always a good thing to know your enemy.

"This guy's scary," Ernie Brown thought, considering things a little more deeply. "At least, politicians you can depend on to be crooks. This guy, Jesus,

he's going to try to we're talking a police state here, Pete."

It was actually a frightening thought for the Mountain Man. He'd always thought that politicians were the worst thing in creation, but suddenly he realized that they were not. Politicians played the power game because they liked it, liked the idea of power and jerking people around because it made them feel big. Ryan was worse. He thought it was *right*.

"God damn," he breathed. "The court he wants to appoint . . ."

"They made him look like a fool, Ernie."

"No, they didn't. Don't you get it? They were playing *their* game."

33

REBOUNDS

THE EDITORIALS WERE ESTABLISHED by front-page stories in every major paper. In the more enterprising of them, there were even photographs of Marko Ramius's house—it turned out that he was away at the moment—and that of the Gerasimov famiiy—he was home, but a security guard managed to persuade people to leave, after getting his own photo shot a few hundred times.

Donner came into work very early, and was actually the most surprised by all of that. Plumber walked into his office five minutes later, holding up the front page of the *New York Times.*

"So who rolled whom, Tom?"

"What do you—"

"That's a little weak," Plumber observed acidly. "I suppose after you walked out of the meeting, Kealty's people had another little kaffeeklatsch. But you've trapped everybody, haven't you? If it ever gets out that your tape wasn't"

"It won't," Donner said. "And all this coverage does is make our interview look better."

"Better to whom?" Plumber demanded on his way out the door. It was early in the day for him, too, and his first irrelevant thought of the day was that Ed Murrow would never have used hair spray.

DR. GUS LORENZ finished his morning staff meeting early. Spring was coming early to Atlanta. The trees and bushes were budding, and soon the air would be filled with the fragrances of all the flowering plants for which the southern city was so famous—and a lot of pollen, Gus thought, which would get his sinuses all stuffed, but it was a fair trade for living in a vibrant and yet gracious southern city. With the meeting done, he donned his white lab coat and headed off to his own special fiefdom in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC ("and P" had never been added to the acronym) was one of the government's crown jewels, an elite agency that was one of the world's important centers of medical research—many would say the most important. For that reason the center in Atlanta attracted the best of the profession. Some stayed. Some left to teach at the nation's medical schools, but all were forever marked as CDC people, as others might boast of having served their time in the Marine Corps, and for much the same reason. They were the first people their country sent to trouble spots. They were the first to fight diseases, instead of armed enemies, and that cachet engendered an *esprit de corps* which more often than not retained the best of them despite the capped government

salaries.

"Morning, Melissa," Lorenz said to his chief lab assistant—she had a master's and was finishing up her doctorate in molecular biology at nearby Emory University, after which she'd get a sizable promotion.

"Good morning, Doctor. Our friend is back," she added.

"Oh?" The specimen was all set up on the microscope. Lorenz took his seat, careful as always to take his time. He checked the paperwork to identify the proper sample against the record he'd had on his desk: 98-3-063A. Yes, the numbers matched. Then it was just a matter of zooming in on the sample . . . and there it was, the Shepherd's Crook.

"You're right. Got the other one set up?"

"Yes, Doctor." The computer screen split into two vertical halves, and next to the first was a specimen from 1976. They weren't quite identical. The curve at the bottom of the RNA chain was seemingly never the same way twice, as snowflakes had almost infinite patterns, but that didn't matter. What mattered was the protein loops at the top, and those were—

"Mayinga strain." He spoke the words matter-offactly.

"I agree," Melissa said from just behind him. She leaned across to type on the keyboard, calling up -063B. "These were a lot harder to isolate, but—"

"Yes, identical again. This one's from the child?"

"A little girl, yes." Both voices were detached. One can only bear so much exposure to sadness before the mind's defense mechanism kicks in, and the samples become samples, disembodied from the people who donated them.

"Okay, I have some calling to do."

THE TWO GROUPS were kept separate for obvious reasons, and in fact neither knew of the existence of the other. Badrayn spoke to one group of twenty. The Movie Star spoke to the second group, composed of nine. For both groups there were similarities of preparation. Iran was a nation-state, with the resources of a nation-state. Its foreign ministry had a passport office, and its treasury had a department of printing and engraving. Both allowed the printing of passports from any number of countries and the duplication of entry-exit stamps. In fact such documents could be prepared in any number of places, mostly illegally, but this source made for somewhat higher quality without the risk of revealing the place of origin.

The more important of the two missions was, perversely, the safer in terms of actual physical danger—well, depending on how one looked at it. Badrayn could see the looks on their faces. The very idea of what they were doing was the sort of thing to make a person's skin crawl, though in the case of these people, it was merely one more example of the vagaries of human nature. The job, he told them, was simple. Get in. Deliver. Get out. He emphasized that they were completely safe, as long as they followed the procedures on which they would be fully briefed. There would be no contacts on the other side. They needed none, and doing without them just made things safer. Each had a choice of cover stories, and such were the parameters of the mission that having more than one of the group select the same one didn't matter. What did matter was that the stories could be plausibly presented, and so each

traveler would pick a field of business activity in which he had some knowledge. Nearly all had a university degree, and those who didn't could talk about trading or machine tools or some field better known to them than any customs official asking questions out of mere boredom.

The Movie Star's group was far more comfortable with their task. He supposed it was some flaw in the character of his culture that this was so. This group was younger and less experienced, and part of it was that the young simply know less of life, and therefore less of death. They were motivated by passion, by a tradition of sacrifice, and by their own hatreds and demons, all of which clouded their judgment in a way that pleased the masters, who always felt free to expend the hatreds and the passions, along with the people who bore them. This briefing was more detailed. Photographs were displayed, along with maps and diagrams, and the group drew closer, the better to see the details. None of them remarked on the character of the target. Life and death was so simple a question to those who didn't know the ultimate answers —or who thought they did, even if they did not—and that was better for all, really. With an answer to the Great Question fixed in their minds, the lesser ones would not even occur to them. The Movie Star had no such illusions. He asked the questions within his own mind, but never answered them. For him the Great Question had become something else. For him it was all a political act, not a matter of religion, and one didn't measure one's destiny by politics. At least not willingly. He looked at their faces, knowing that they were doing exactly that, but without realizing it. They were the best sort of people for the task, really. They thought they knew everything, but in reality they knew very little, only the physical tasks.

The Movie Star felt rather like a murderer, but it was something he'd done before, at secondhand, anyway. Doing it firsthand was dangerous, and this promised to be the most dangerous such mission in years.

How remarkable that they didn't know better. Each of them inwardly styled himself the stone in Allah's own sling, without reflecting that such stones are by their very nature thrown away. Or maybe not. Perhaps they would be lucky, and for that eventuality he gave them the best data he'd managed to generate, and that data was pretty good. The best time would be afternoon, just before people got out from work, the better to use crowded highways to confuse their pursuers. He himself would go into the field again, he told them, to facilitate their ultimate escape—he didn't tell them, *if it came to that.*

"OKAY, ARNIE, WHAT'S going on?" Ryan asked. It was just as well that Cathy didn't have any procedures scheduled for today. She had seethed all night and was not in a proper mental state to do her normal work. He wasn't feeling much better, but there was neither justice nor much point in snapping at his chief of staff.

"Well, for damned sure there's a leak at CIA, or maybe in the Hill, somebody who knows about some of the things you did."

"Colombia, the only people who know are Fellows and Trent. And they also know that Murray wasn't there not exactly, anyway. The rest of that operation is locked up tight."

"What actually happened?" And need-to-know applied to Arnie now. The President gestured and spoke as one explaining something to a parent:

"There were two operations, SHOWBOAT and RECIPROCITY. One of them involved putting troops into Colombia, the idea was to bird-dog drug flights. Those flights were then splashed—"

"What?"

"Shot down, by the Air Force—well, some were intercepted, the crews arrested and processed quietly. Some other things happened, and then Emil Jacobs got killed, and RECIPROCITY got laid on. We started dropping bombs on places. Things got a little out of hand. Some civilians got killed, and it all started coming apart."

"How much did you know?" van Damm asked.

"I didn't know jack shit until late in the game. Jim Greer was dying then, and I was handling his work, but that was mostly NATO stuff. I was cut out of it until after the bombs started falling—I was in Belgium when that happened. I saw it on TV, would you believe? Cutter was actually running the operation. He suckered Judge Moore and Bob Ritter into starting it, and then he tried to close it down. That's when things got crazy. Cutter tried to cut off the soldiers—the idea was that they'd just disappear. I found out. I got into Ritter's personal records vault. So I went down into Colombia with the rescue crew, and we got most of them out. It wasn't much fun," Ryan reported. "There was some shooting involved, and I worked one of the guns on the chopper. A crewman, a sergeant named Buck Zimmer, got killed on the last extraction, and I've been looking after his family ever since. Liz Elliot got a hold of that and tried to use it against me a while later."

"There's more to it," Arnie said quietly.

"Oh, yeah. I had to report the operations to the Select Committee, but I didn't want to rip the government apart. So I talked it over with Trent and Fellows, and I came in to see the President. We talked for a while, and then I stepped out of the room, and Sam and Al talked with him for a while. I'm not exactly sure what they agreed on, but—"

"But he threw the election. He dumped his campaign manager and his campaign was for crap the whole way. Christ, Jack, what did you do?" Arnie demanded. His face was pale now, but for political reasons. And all along van Damm had figured that he'd run a brilliant and successful campaign for Bob Fowler, unseating a popular sitting President. And so, a fix had been in? And he'd never found out?

Ryan closed his eyes. He'd just forced himself to relive a dreadful night. "I terminated an operation that was technically legal, but teetering right on the edge. I closed it down quietly. The Colombians never found out. I thought I prevented another Watergate, domestically—and a godawful international incident. Sam and Al signed off on it, the records are sealed until long after we're all dead. Whoever leaked that must have picked up on a couple of rumors and made a few good guesses. What did *I* do? I think I obeyed the law as best I could—no, Arnie, I did *not* break the law. I followed the rules. It wasn't easy, but I did." The eyes opened. "So, Arnie, how will that play in Peoria?"

"Why couldn't you have just reported to Congress and—"

"Think back," the President said. "It wasn't just the one thing, okay? That's when Eastern Europe was coming unglued, the Soviet Union was still there but teetering, some really big things were happening, and if our government had come apart, right then, with everything else happening, hell, it could have been a mess like nobody's ever seen. America couldn't—we would not have been able to help settle Europe down if we'd been pissing around with a domestic scandal. And I was the guy who had to make the call and take the action, *right now, or* those soldiers would have been killed. Think about the box I was in, will you?

"Arnie, I couldn't go to anybody for guidance on that one, okay? Admiral Greer was dead. Moore and Ritter were compromised. The President was up to his eyeballs in it; at the time I thought *he* was running the show through Cutter—he wasn't; he got finessed into it by that incompetent political bastard. I didn't know where to go, so I went to the FBI for help. I couldn't trust *anybody* but Dan Murray and Bill Shaw, and one of our people at Langley on the operational side. Bill—did you know he was a J.D.?—worked me through the law part of it, and Murray helped with the recovery operation. They had an investigation started on Cutter. It was a code-word op, I think they called it ODYSSEY, and they were about to go to a U.S. magistrate for criminal conspiracy, but Cutter killed himself. There was an FBI agent fifty yards behind him when he jumped in front of the bus. You've met him, Pat O'Day. Nobody ever broke the law except for Cutter. The operations themselves were within the Constitution—at least that's what Shaw said."

"But politically. . ."

"Yeah, even I'm not that ignorant. So here I am, Arnie. I didn't break the law. I served my country's interests as best I could under the circumstances, and look what good it's done me."

"Damn. How is it that Bob Fowler never was told?"

"That was Sam and Al. They thought it would have poisoned Fowler's presidency. Besides, I don't really *know* what the two of them said to the President, do I? I never wanted to know, I never found out, and all I have is speculation—pretty good speculation," Ryan admitted, "but that's all."

"Jack, it's not often I don't know what to say."

"Say it anyway," the President ordered.

"It's going to get out. The media has enough now to put some pieces together, and that will force Congress to launch an investigation. What about the other stuff?"

"It's all true," Ryan said. "Yeah, we got our hands on *Red October,* yeah, I got Gerasimov out myself. My idea, my operation, nearly got my ass killed, but there you go. If we hadn't, then Gerasimov was poised to launch his own coup to topple Andrey Narmonov and then there might still be a Warsaw Pact, and the bad old days might never have gone away. So we compromised the bastard, and he didn't have any choices but to get on the airplane. He's still pissed despite all we did to get him set up over here, but I understand his wife and daughter like America just fine."

"Did you kill anybody?" Arnie asked.

"In Moscow, no. In the sub—he was trying to selfdestruct the submarine. He killed one of the ship's officers and shot up two others pretty bad, but I

punched his ticket myself—and I had nightmares about it for years."

In another reality, van Damm thought, his President would be a hero. But reality and public politics had little in common. He noted that Ryan hadn't recounted his story about Bob Fowler and the aborted nuclear launch. The chief of staff had been around for that one, and he knew that three days later, J. Robert Fowler had come nearly apart at the realization at how he'd been saved from mass murder on a Hitlerian scale. There was a line in Hugo's *Les Miserables* that had struck the older man when he'd first read the book in high school: "What evil good can be." Here was another case. Ryan had served his country bravely and well more than once, but not one of the things he'd done would survive public scrutiny. Intelligence, love of country, and courage merely added up to a series of events which anyone could twist out of recognition into scandal. And Ed Kealty knew how to do just that.

"How do we spin-control all this?" the President asked.

"What else do I need to know?"

"The files on *Red October* and Gerasimov are at Langley. The Colombian thing, well, you know what you need to know. I'm not sure even I have the legal right to unseal the records. On the other hand, you want to destabilize Russia? This will do it."

RED OCTOBER, GOLOVKO thought, then he looked up at the high ceiling of his office. "Ivan Emmetovich, you clever bastard. *Zvo tvoyu maht!"*

The curse was spoken in quiet admiration. From the first moment he'd met Ryan, he'd underestimated him, and even with all the contacts, direct and indirect, that had followed, he had to admit, he'd never stopped doing it. So *that* was how he'd compromised Gerasimov! And in so doing, he'd saved Russia, perhaps—but a country was supposed to be saved from within, not without. Some secrets were supposed to be kept forever, because they protected everyone equally. This was such a secret. It would embarrass both countries now. For the Russians, it was the loss of a valuable national asset through high treason—worse still, something their intelligence organs had not discovered, which was quite incredible on reflection, but the cover stories had been good ones, and the loss of two hunter submarines in the same operation had made the affair something that the Soviet navy had every desire to forget—and so they hadn't looked far beyond the cover story.

Sergey Nikolay'ch knew the second part better than the first. Ryan had forestalled a coup d'état. Golovko supposed that Ryan might as easily have told him what was happening and left it to the Soviet Union's internal organs—but, no. Intelligence services turned everything to their advantage, and Ryan would have been mad not to have done so here. Gerasimov must have sung like a canary—he knew the Western aphorism—and given up everything he'd known; Ames, for one, had been identified that way, he was sure, and Ames had been a virtual diamond mine for KGB.

And you always told yourself that Ivan Emmetovich was a gifted amateur, Golovko thought.

But even his professional admiration was tempered. Russia might soon need help. How could she go for that help to someone who, it would now be

known, had tampered with his country's internal politics like a puppeteer? That realization was worth another oath, not spoken in admiration of anything.

PUBLIC WATERWAYS ARE free for the passage of all, and so the Navy couldn't do anything more than prevent the charter boat from getting too close to the Eight-Ten Dock. Soon it was joined by another, then more still, until a total of eleven cameras were pointing at the covered graving dock, now empty with the demise of most of America's missile submarines, and also empty of another which had briefly lived there, not American, or so the story went.

It was possible to access the Navy's personnel records via computer, and some were doing that right now, checking for former crewmen of USS *Dallas*. An early-morning call to COMSUBPAC concerning his tenure as commanding officer of *Dallas* got no farther than his public affairs officer, who was well-schooled in no-commenting sensitive inquiries. Today he'd get more than his fair share. So would others.

"THIS IS RON Jones."

"This is Tom Donner at NBC News."

"That's nice," Jonesy said diffidently. "I watch CNN myself."

"Well, maybe you want to watch our show tonight. I'd like to talk to you about—"

"I read the *Times* this morning. It's delivered up here. No comment," he added.

"But—"

"But, yes, I used to be a submariner, and they call us the Silent Service. Besides, that was a long time ago. I run my own business now. Married, kids, the whole nine yards, y'know?"

"You were lead sonar man aboard USS *Dallas* when—"

"Mr. Donner, I signed a secrecy agreement when I left the Navy. I don't talk about the things we did, okay?" It was his first encounter with a reporter, and it was living up to everything he'd ever been told to expect.

"Then all you have to do is tell us that it never happened."

"That what never happened?" Jones asked.

"The defection of a Russian sub named Red *October."*

"You know the craziest thing I ever heard as a sonar man?"

"What's that?"

"Elvis." He hung up. Then he called Pearl Harbor.

WITH DAYLIGHT, THE TV trucks rolled through Winchester, Virginia, rather like the Civil War armies that had exchanged possession of the town over forty times.

He didn't actually own the house. It could not even be said that CIA did.

The land title was in the name of a paper corporation, in turn owned by a foundation whose directors were obscure, but since real-property ownership in America is a matter of public record, and since all corporations and foundations were also, that data would be run down in less than two days, despite the tag on the files which told the clerks in the county courthouse to be creatively incompetent in finding the documents.

The reporters who showed up had still photos and taped file footage of Nikolay Gerasimov, and long lenses were set up on tripods to aim at the windows, a quarter mile away, past a few grazing horses which made for a nice touch on the story: CIA TREATS RUSSIAN SPYMASTER LIKE VISITING KING.

The two security guards at the house were going ape, calling Langley for instructions, but the CIA's public affairs office—itself rather an odd institution—didn't have a clue on this one, other than falling back on the stance that this was private property (whether or not that was legally correct under the circumstances was something CIA's lawyers were checking out) and that, therefore, the reporters couldn't trespass.

It had been years since he'd had much to laugh about. Sure, there had been the occasional light moment, but this was something so special that he'd never even considered its possibility. He'd always thought himself an expert on America. Gerasimov had run numerous spy operations against the "Main Enemy," as the United States had once been called in the nonexistent country he'd once served, but he admitted to himself that you had to come here and live here for a few years to understand how incomprehensible America was, how nothing made sense, how literally anything could happen, and the madder it was, the more likely it seemed. No imagination was sufficient to predict what would happen in a day, much less a year. And here was the proof of it.

Poor Ryan, he thought, standing by the window and sipping his coffee. In his country—for him it would always be the Soviet Union—this would never have happened. A few uniformed guards and a hard look would have driven people off, or if the look alone didn't, then there were other options. But not in America, where the media had all the freedom of a wolf in the Siberian pines—he nearly laughed at *that* thought, too. In America, wolves were a protected species. Didn't these fools know that wolves killed people?

"Perhaps they will go away," Maria said, appearing at his side.

"I think not."

"Then we must stay inside until they do," his wife said, terrified at the development.

He shook his head. "No, Maria."

"But what if they send us back?"

"They won't. They can't. One doesn't do that with defectors. It's a rule," he explained. "We never sent Philby, or Burgess, or MacLean back—drunks and degenerates. Oh, no, we protected them, bought them their liquor, and let them diddle with their perversions, because that's the rule." He finished his coffee and walked back to the kitchen to put the cup and saucer in the dishwasher. He looked at it with a grimace. His apartment in Moscow and his dacha in the Lenin Hills—probably renamed since his departure—hadn't had

an appliance like that one. He'd had servants to do such things. No more. In America convenience was a substitute for power, and comfort the substitute for status.

Servants. It could all have been his. The status, the servants, the power. The Soviet Union could still have been a great nation, respected and admired across the world. He would have become General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He could then have initiated the needed reforms to clear out the corruption and get the country moving again. He would probably have made a full rapprochement with the West, and made a peace, but a peace of equals it would have been, not a total collapse. He'd never been an ideologue, after all, though poor old Alexandrov had thought him so, since Gerasimov had always been a Party man—well, what else could you be in a one-party state? Especially if you knew that destiny had selected you for power.

But, no. Destiny had betrayed him, in the person of John Patrick Ryan, on a cold, snowy Moscow night, sitting, he recalled, in a streetcar barn, sitting in a resting tram. And so now he had comfort and security. His daughter would soon be married to what the Americans called "old money," what other countries called the nobility, and what he called worthless drones—the very reason the Communist Party had won its revolution. His wife was content with her appliances and her small circle of friends. And his own anger had never died.

Ryan had robbed him of his destiny, of the sheer joy of power and responsibility, of being the arbiter of his nation's path—and then Ryan had taken to himself that same destiny, and the fool didn't know how to make use of it. The real disgrace was to have been done in by such a person. Well, there was one thing to be done, wasn't there? Gerasimov walked into the mud room that led out the back, selected a leather jacket, and walked outside. He thought for a moment. Yes, he'd light a cigarette, and just walk up the driveway to where they were, four hundred meters away. Along the way he would consider how to couch his remarks, and his gratitude to President Ryan. He'd never stopped studying America, and his observations on how the media thought would now stand him in good stead, he thought.

"DID I WAKE you up, Skipper?" Jones asked. It was about four in the morning at Pearl Harbor.

"Not hardly. You know, my PAO is a woman, and she's pregnant. I hope all this crap doesn't put her into early labor." Rear Admiral (Vice Admiral selectee, now) Mancuso was at his desk, and his phone, on his instructions, wasn't ringing without a good reason. An old shipmate was such a reason.

"I got a call from NBC, asking about a little job we did in the Atlantic."

"What did you say?"

"What do you think, Skipper? Zip." In addition to the honor of the situation, there was also the fact that Jones did most of his work with the Navy. "But—"

"Yeah, but somebody is gonna talk. Somebody always does."

"They know too much already. The *Today Show* is doing a live shot from Norfolk, the Eight-Ten Dock. You can guess what they're saying."

Mancuso thought about flipping his office TV on, but it was still too early for the NBC morning news show—no. He did flip it on and selected CNN. They were doing sports now, and the top of the hour was coming.

"Next they might ask about another job we did, the one involving a swimmer."

"Open line, Dr. Jones," COMSUBPAC warned.

"I didn't say where, Skipper. It's just something you'll want to think about."

"Yeah," Mancuso agreed.

"Maybe you can tell me one thing."

"What's that, Ron?"

"What's the big deal? I mean, sure, I won't talk and neither will you, but somebody will, sure as hell. Too good a sea story not to tell. But what's the big deal, Bart? Didn't we do the right thing?"

"I think so," the admiral replied. "But I guess people just like a story."

"You know, I hope Ryan runs. I'll vote for him. Pretty cool stuff, bagging the head of the KGB and—"

"Ron!"

"Skipper, I'm just repeating what they're saying on TV, right? I have no personal knowledge of that at all." *Damn,* Jonesy thought, *what a sea story this one is. And it's all true.*

At the other end of the line the "Breaking News" graphic came up on Mancuso's TV screen.

"YES, I AM Nikolay Gerasimov," the face said on screens all over the world. There were at least twenty reporters clustered on the other side of the stone fence, and the hard part was hearing one of the shouted questions.

"Is it true that you were—"

"Are you—"

"Were you—"

"Is it true that—"

"Silence, please." He held up his hand. It took fifteen seconds or so. "Yes, I was at one time the chairman of KGB. Your President Ryan induced me to defect, and I have lived in America ever since, along with my family."

"How did he get you to defect?" a reporter shouted.

"You must understand that the intelligence business is, as you say, rough. Mr. Ryan plays the game well. At the time there was ongoing power struggle. CIA opposed my faction in favor of Andrey Il'ych Narmonov. So, he came to Moscow under cover of advisor to START talks. He claimed that he wanted to give me information to make the meeting happen, yes?" Gerasimov had decided that downgrading his English skills would make him seem more credible to the cameras and microphones. "Actually, you can say he trap me with accusation that I was going to create, how you say, treason? Not true, but effective, and so I decide to come to America with my family. I come by airplane. My family come by submarine."

"What? Submarine?"

"Yes, was submarine *Dallas."* He paused and smiled rather grimly. "Why are you so hard on President Ryan? He serve his country well. A master spy,"

Gerasimov said admiringly.

"WELL, THERE GOES that story." Bob Holtzman muted his television and turned to his managing editor.

"Sorry, Bob." The editor handed the copy back. It was to have run in three days. Holtzman had done a masterful job of assembling his information, and then taken the time to integrate it all into a cohesive and flattering picture of the man whose office was only five blocks from his own. It was about spin, that most favored of Washington words. Somebody had changed the spin, and that was that. Once the initial story went out, it was impossible even for an experienced journalist like Holtzman to change it, especially if his own paper didn't support him.

"Bob," the editor said with a measure of embarrassment, "your take on this is different than mine. What if this guy's a cowboy? I mean, okay, getting the submarine was one thing, Cold War and all that, but tampering with internal Soviet politics—isn't that close to an act of war?"

"That's not what it was really about. He was trying to get an agent out, code name CARDINAL. Gerasimov and Aleksandrov were using that spy case to topple Narmonov and kill off the reforms he was trying to initiate."

"Well, Ryan can say that all day if he wants. That's not how it's going to come across. 'Master spy'? Just what we need to run the country, hmph?"

"Ryan isn't like that, God damn it!" Holtzman swore. "He's a straight shooter right out of—"

"Yeah, he shoots straight, all right. He's killed at least three people. *Killed,* Bob! How the hell did Roger Durling ever get it into his head that this was the right guy to be Vice President. I mean, Ed Kealty isn't much of a prize, but at least—"

"At least he knows how to manipulate us, Ben. He suckered that airhead on TV, and then he suckered the rest of us into following the story his way."

"Well . . ." Ben Saddler ran out of things to say at that point. "It's factual, isn't it?"

"That isn't the same as 'true,' Ben, and you know it."

"This is going to have to be looked into. Ryan looks like a guy who's played fast and loose with everything he's touched. Next, I want this Colombian story run down. Now, can you do it? Your contacts at the Agency are pretty good, but I have to tell you, I worry about your objectivity on this."

"You don't have a choice, Ben. If you want to keep up, it's my story—course you can always just reword what the *Times* says," Holtzman added, making his editor flush. Life could be tough in the media, too.

"Your story, Bob. Just make sure you deliver. Somebody broke the law, and Ryan's the one who covered everything up and came out smelling like a rose. I want that story." Saddler stood. "I have an editorial to write."

DARYAEI COULD SCARCELY believe it. The timing could scarcely have been better. He was days away from his next goal, and his target was about to

descend into the abyss entirely without his help. With his help, of course, the fall would be farther still.

"Is that what it appears to be?"

"It would seem so," Badrayn replied. "I can do some quick research and be back to you in the morning."

"Is it truly possible?" the Ayatollah persisted.

"Remember what I told you about lions and hyenas? For America it is a national sport. It is no trick. They don't do such tricks. However, let me make sure. I have my methods."

"Tomorrow morning, then."

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HE HAD MUCH WORK TO do along those lines anyway. Back in his office, Badrayn activated his desktop computer. This had a high-speed modem and a dedicated fiber-optic telephone line that ran to an Iranian—UIR, now—embassy in Pakistan, and from there another line to London, where he could link into the World Wide Web without fear of a trace. What had once been a fairly simple exercise for police agencies—that's what counterespionage and counterterrorism was, after all was now virtually impossible. Literally millions of people could access all the information mankind had ever developed, and more quickly than one could walk to one's car for a trip to the local library. Badrayn started by hitting press areas, major newspapers from the *Times* in Los Angeles to the *Times* in London, with Washington and New York in between. The major papers all presented much the same basic story—quicker on the Web than in the printed editions, in fact—though the initial editorial comment differed somewhat from one to another. The stories were vague on dates, and he had to remind himself that the mere repetition of the content didn't guarantee accuracy, but it *felt* real. He knew Ryan had been an intelligence officer, knew that the British, the Russians, *and* the Israelis respected him. Surely stories such as these would explain that respect. They also made him slightly uneasy, a fact which would have surprised his master. Ryan was potentially a more formidable adversary than Daryaei appreciated. He knew how to take decisive action in difficult circumstances, and such people were not to be underestimated.

It was just that Ryan was out of his element now, and that was plain from the news coverage. As he changed from one home page to another, a brand-new editorial came up. It called for a congressional inquiry into Ryan's activities at CIA. A statement from the Colombian government asked in clipped diplomatic terms for an explanation of the allegations and *that* would start another firestorm. How would Ryan respond to the charges and the demands? An open question, Badrayn judged. He was an unknown quantity. That was disturbing. He printed up the more important articles and editorials for later use, and then went on with his real business.

There was a dedicated home page for conventions and trade shows in America. Probably for the use of travel agents, he thought. Well, that wasn't far off. Then it was just a matter of selecting them by city. That told him the identity of the convention centers, typically large barnlike buildings. Each of those had a home page as well, to boast of their capabilities. Many showed diagrams and travel directions. All gave phone and fax numbers. These he collected as well until he had twenty-four, a few extra, just in case. One could

not send one of his travelers to a ladies' underwear show, for example—although ... he chuckled to himself. Fashion and fabric shows—these would be for the winter season, though summer had not yet come even to Iran. Automobile shows. These, he saw, traced across America as the various car and truck manufacturers showed their wares like a traveling circus . . . so much the better.

Circus, he thought, and punched up another home page—but, no, it was just a few weeks too early in the year for that. Too bad. Too bad indeed! Badrayn groused. Didn't the big circuses travel in private trains? Damn. But that was just bad timing, and bad timing could not be helped. The auto show would have to do.

And all the others.

GROUP TWO'S MEMBERS were all fatally ill now, and it was time to end their suffering. It wasn't so much mercy as efficiency. There was no point at all in risking the lives of the medical corpsmen by treating people condemned to death by law and science both, and so like the first group they were dispatched by large injections of Dilaudid, as Moudi watched the TV. The relief for the medics was visible, even through the cumbersome plastic suits. In just a few minutes all of the test subjects were dead. The same procedures as before would be exercised, and the doctor congratulated himself that they'd worked so well, and no extraneous personnel had been infected. That was mainly because of their ruthlessness. Other places proper hospitals—would not be so lucky, he knew, already mourning the loss of fellow practitioners.

It was a strange truism of life that second thoughts came only when it was too late for them. He could no more stop what was to come than he could stop the turning of the earth.

The medics started loading the infected bodies on the gurneys, and he turned away. He didn't need to see it again. Moudi walked into the lab.

Another set of technicians was now loading the "soup" into containers known as flasks. They had a thousand times more than was needed for the operations, but the nature of the exercise was such that it was actually easier to make too much than it was to make just enough and, the director had explained offhandedly, one never knew when more might be needed. The flasks were all made of stainless steel, actually a specialized alloy that didn't lose its strength in extreme cold. Each was three-quarters filled and sealed. Then it would be sprayed with a caustic chemical to make certain the outside was clean. Next it would be placed on a cart and rolled to the cold-storage locker in the building's basement, there to be immersed in liquid nitrogen. The Ebola virus particles could stay there for decades, too cold to die, completely inert, waiting for their next exposure to warmth and humidity, and a chance to reproduce and kill. One of the flasks stayed in the lab, sitting in a smaller cryogenic container, about the size of an oil drum but somewhat taller, with an LED display showing the interior temperature.

It was something of a relief that his part in the drama would soon be over. Moudi stood by the door, watching the lesser personnel do their jobs, and probably they felt the same. Soon the twenty spray containers would be filled

and removed from the building, and every square centimeter of the building would be rigorously cleaned, marking everything safe again. The director would spend all of his time in his office, and Moudi—well, he couldn't reappear at the WHO, could he? He was dead, after all, killed in the airplane crash just off the Libyan coast. Someone would have to generate a new identity and passport for him before he could travel again, assuming that he ever could. Or perhaps as a security measure—no, even the director wasn't that ruthless, was he?

"HELLO, I'M CALLING for Dr. Ian MacGregor."

"Who's calling, please?"

"This is Dr. Lorenz at CDC Atlanta."

"Wait, please."

Gus had to wait for two minutes, by his watch, long enough to light his pipe and open a window. The younger staffers occasionally chided him about the habit, but he didn't inhale, and it was good for thinking . . .

"This is Dr. MacGregor," a young voice said.

"This is Gus Lorenz in Atlanta."

"Oh! How do you do, Professor?"

"How are your patients doing?" Lorenz asked from seven time zones away. He liked the sound of MacGregor, clearly working a little late. The good ones did a lot of that.

"The male patient isn't doing well at all, I'm afraid. The child, however, is recovering nicely."

"Indeed? Well, we examined the specimens you sent. Both contained the Ebola virus, Mayinga sub-strain."

"You're quite certain?" the younger man asked.

"No doubt about it, Doctor. I ran the tests myself."

"I was afraid of that. I sent another set to Paris, but they haven't got back to me yet."

"I need to know a few things." On his end of the line, Lorenz had a pad out. "Tell me more about your patients."

"There's a problem with that, Professor Lorenz," MacGregor had to say. He didn't know if the line might be bugged, but in a country like Sudan, it was not something he could discount. On the other hand, he had to say something, and so he started picking his way through the facts he could disclose.

• • •

"I SAW YOU on TV last night." Dr. Alexandre had decided to see Cathy Ryan at lunch again for that very reason. He'd taken a liking to her. Who would have expected an eye cutter and laser jockey (for Alex, these were more mechanical specialties than the true medicine he practiced—even that profession had its rivalries, and he felt that way about almost all surgical specialties) to take an interest in genetics? Besides, she probably needed a friendly voice.

"That's nice," Caroline Ryan replied, looking down at her chicken salad as he took his seat. The bodyguard, Alexandre saw, merely looked unhappily tense.

"You did okay."

"Think so?" She looked up, saying evenly: "I wanted to rip his face off."

"Well, that didn't quite come across. You were pretty supportive of your husband. You came across smart."

"What is it with reporters? I mean, why—"

Alex smiled. "Doctor, when a dog urinates on a fire hydrant, he's not committing vandalism. He's just being a dog." Roy Altman nearly choked on his drink.

"Neither one of us ever wanted this, you know?" she said, still unhappy enough to miss the jibe.

Professor Alexandre held his hands up in mock surrender. "Been there, done that, ma'am. Hey, I never wanted to join the Army. They drafted me right out of med school. It turned out all right, making colonel and all. I found an interesting field to keep the brain busy, and it pays the bills, y'know?"

"*I* don't get paid for this abuse!" Cathy objected, albeit with a smile.

"And your husband doesn't get paid enough," Alex added.

"He never has. Sometimes I wonder why he doesn't just do the job for free, turn the checks back in, just to make the point that he's worth more than they pay him."

"You think he would have made a good doc?"

Her eyes brightened. "I've told him that. Jack would have been a surgeon, I think—no, maybe something else, like what you're in. He's always liked poking around and figuring things out."

"And saying what he thinks."

That almost started a laugh. "Always!"

"Well, guess what? He comes across as a good guy. I've never met him, but I liked what I saw. Sure as hell he's no politician, and maybe that's not a bad thing once in a while. You want to lighten up a little, Doctor? What's the worst thing that can happen? He leaves the job, goes back to whatever he wants to do—teaching, I guess from what he said—and you're still a doc with a Lasker on the wall."

"The worst thing that can happen—"

"You have Mr. Altman here to take care of that, don't you?" Alexandre looked him over. "I imagine you're big enough to stand in the way of the bullet." The Secret Service agent didn't reply, but his look at Alex told the tale. Yes, he'd stop one for his principal. "You guys can't talk about this sort of thing, can you?"

"Yes, sir, we can, if you ask." Altman had wanted to say this all day. He'd seen the TV special, too, and as had often happened before, there was light talk in the Detail this morning about popping a cap on the reporter in question. The Secret Service had a fantasy life, too. "Dr. Ryan, we like your family a lot, and I'm not just saying that to be polite, okay? We don't always like our principals. But we like all of you."

"Hey, Cathy." It was Dean James, passing by with a smile and a wave.

"Hi, Dave." Then she noted a few waves from faculty friends. So, she wasn't

as alone as she thought.

"Okay, Cathy, are you married to James Bond or what?" In a different context the question might have set her off, but Alexandre's Creole eyes were twinkling at her.

"I know a little. I got briefed in on some of it when President Durling asked Jack to be Vice President, but I can't—"

He held up his hand. "I know. I still have a security clearance because I still drive up to Fort Detrick once in a while."

"It isn't like the movies. You don't do stuff like that and have a drink, kiss the girl, and drive away. He used to have nightmares and I—well, I'd hug him in his sleep and usually that calmed him down, then when he wakes up, he pretends it never happened at all. I know some of it, not all. When we were in Moscow last year, a Russian comes up and says that he had a gun to Jack's head once"—Altman's head turned at that one—"but he said it like a joke or something, then he said the gun wasn't loaded. Then we had dinner together, like we were pals or something, and I met his wife—pediatrician, would you believe it? She's a doc and her husband is the head Russian spy and—"

"It does sound a little far-fetched," Dr. Alexandre agreed with a judiciously raised eyebrow, and then a real laugh happened on the other side of the table.

"It's all so crazy," she concluded.

"You want crazy? We have two Ebola cases reported in Sudan." Now that her mood had changed, he could talk about his problems.

"Funny place for that virus to turn up. Did they come in from Zaire?"

"Gus Lorenz is checking that out. I'm waiting for him to get back to me," Professor Alexandre reported. "It can't be a local outbreak."

"Why's that?" Altman asked.

"Worst possible environment," Cathy explained, finally picking at her lunch. "Hot, dry, lots of direct sun. The UV from the sunlight kills it."

"Like a flamethrower," Alex agreed. "And no jungle for a host animal to live in."

"Only two cases?" Cathy asked with a mouthful of salad. At least, Alexandre thought, he'd gotten her to eat. Yep, he still had a good bedside manner, even in a cafeteria.

He nodded. "Adult male and a little girl, that's all I know right now. Gus is supposed to run the tests today, probably already has."

"Damn, that's a nasty little bug. And you still don't know the host."

"Twenty years of looking," Alex confirmed. "Never found one sick animal—well, the host wouldn't be sick, but you know what I mean."

"Like a criminal case, eh?" Altman asked. "Poking around for physical evidence?"

"Pretty much," Alex agreed. "Just we're trying to search a whole country, and we've never figured exactly what we're looking for."

DON RUSSELL WATCHED as the cots went out. After lunch—today it was ham-and-cheese sandwiches on wheat bread, glass of milk, and an apple—the kids all went down for their afternoon nap. An altogether good idea, all the adults thought. Mrs. Daggett was a superb organizer, and the kids all knew the

routine. The beds came out of the storage room, and the kids knew their spaces. SANDBOX was getting along well with young Megan O'Day. Both usually dressed in Oshkosh B'gosh outfits decorated with flowers or bunnies—at least a third of the kids had them; it was a popular label. The only hard part was parading the children into the bathrooms so that no "accidents" happened during the naps some happened anyway, but that was kids for you. It took fifteen minutes, less than before because two of his agents helped. Then the kids were all down in their cots, with their blankets and bears, and the lights went down. Mrs. Daggett and her helpers found chairs to sit in and books to read.

"SANDBOX is sleeping," Russell said, stepping outside for some fresh air.

"Sounds like a winner," the mobile team thought, sitting in the den of the house across the street. Their Chevy Suburban was parked in the family garage. There were three agents there, two of whom were always on watch, seated close to the window which faced Giant Steps. Probably playing cards, ever a good way to pass dead time. Every fifteen minutes—not quite regularly in case someone was watching—Russell or another of the crew would walk around the grounds. TV cameras kept track of traffic on Ritchie Highway. One of the inside people was always positioned to cover the doors in and out of the center. At the moment it was Marcella Hilton; young and pretty, she always had her purse with her. A special purse of a type made for female cops, it had a side pocket she could just reach into for her SigSauer 9mm automatic, and two spare magazines. She was letting her hair grow to something approaching hippie length (he'd had to tell her what a hippie was) to accentuate her "disguise."

He still didn't like it. The place was too easy to approach, too close to the highway with its heavy volume of traffic, and there was a parking lot within plain sight, a perfect spot for notional bad guys to do surveillance. At least reporters had been shooed away. On that one SURGEON had been ruthlessly direct. After an initial spate of stories about Katie Ryan and her friends, the foot had come down hard. Now visiting journalists who called were told, firmly but politely, to stay away. Those who came anyway had to talk to Russell, whose grandfatherly demeanor was saved for the children at Giant Steps. With adults he was simply intimidating, usually donning his Secret Service sunglasses, the better to appear like Schwarzenegger, who was shorter than he by a good three inches.

But his sub-detail had been cut down to six. Three directly on site, and three across the street. The latter trio had shoulder weapons, Uzi submachine guns and a scoped M-16. In another location, six would have been plenty, but not this one, he judged. Unfortunately, any more than that would have made this day-care center appear to be an armed camp, and President Ryan was having trouble enough.

"WHAT'S THE WORD, Gus?" Alexandre asked, back in his office before starting afternoon rounds. One of his AIDS patients had taken a bad turn, and Alex was trying to figure what to do about it.

"ID is confirmed. Ebola Mayinga, same as the two Zairean cases. The male

patient isn't going to make it, but the child is reportedly recovering nicely."

"Oh? Good. What's the difference in the cases?"

"Not sure, Alex," Lorenz replied. "I don't have much patient information, just first names, Saleh for the male and Sohaila for the child, ages and such."

"Arabic names, right?" But Sudan was an Islamic country.

"I think so."

"It would help to know what's different about the cases."

"I made that point. The attending physician is an Ian MacGregor, sounds pretty good, University of Edinburgh, I think he said. Anyway, he doesn't know any differences between them. Neither has any idea how they were exposed. They appeared at the hospital at roughly the same time, in roughly the same shape. Initial presentation was as flu and/or jet lag, he said—"

"Travel from where, then?" Alexandre interrupted.

"I asked. He said he couldn't say."

"How come?"

"I asked that, too. He said he couldn't say that, either, but that it had no apparent connection with the cases." Lorenz's tone indicated what he thought of that. Both men knew it had to be local politics, a real problem in Africa, especially with AIDS.

"Nothing more in Zaire?"

"Nothing," Gus confirmed. "That one's over. It's a head-scratcher, Alex. Same disease turned up in two different places, two thousand miles apart, two cases each, two dead, one dying, one apparently recovering. MacGregor has initiated proper containment procedures at his hospital, and it sounds as though he knows his business." You could almost hear the shrug over the phone.

What the Secret Service guy had said over lunch was right on target, Alexandre thought. It was more detective work than medicine, and this one didn't make a hell of a lot of sense, like some sort of serial-murder case with no clues. Entertaining in book form, maybe, but not in reality.

"Okay, what *do* we know?"

"We know that Mayinga strain is alive and kicking. Visual inspection is identical. We're running some analysis on the proteins and sequences, but my gut says it's a oneto-one match."

"God damn, what's the host, Gus? If we could only find that!"

"Thank you for that observation, Doctor." Gus was annoyed—enraged—in the same way and for the same reason. But it was an old story for both of them. Well, the older man thought, it had taken a few *thousand* years to figure malaria out. They'd been playing with Ebola for only twenty-five or so. The bug had been around, probably, for at least that long, appearing and disappearing, just like a fictional serial killer. But Ebola didn't have a brain, didn't have a strategy, didn't even move of its own accord. It was super-adapted to something very limited and exceedingly narrow. But they didn't know what. "It's enough to drive a man to drink, isn't it?"

"I imagine a stiff shot of bourbon will kill it, too, Gus. I have patients to see."

"How do you like regular clinical rounds, Alex?" Lorenz missed them, too.

"Good to be a real doc again. I just wish my patients had a little more hope.

But that's the job, ain't it?"

"I'll fax you data on the structural analysis on the samples if you want. The good news is that it seems pretty well contained," Lorenz repeated.

"I'd appreciate it. See ya, Gus." Alexandre hung up. *Pretty well contained? That's what we thought before ...* But then his thoughts shifted, as they had to. *White male patient, thirty-four, gay, resistant TB that came out of left freld. How do we stabilize him?* He lifted the chart and walked out of his office.

"SO I'M THE wrong guy to help with the court selections?" Pat Martin asked.

"Don't feel too bad," Arnie answered. "We're *all* the wrong guy for everything."

"Except you," the President noted with a smile.

"We all make errors of judgment," van Damm admitted. "I could have left with Bob Fowler, but Roger said he needed me to keep this shop running, and —"

"Yeah." Ryan nodded. "That's how I got here, too. So, Mr. Martin?"

"No laws were broken by any of this." He'd spent the last three hours going over the CIA files and Jack's dietated summary of the Colombian operations. Now one of his secretaries, Ellen Sumter, knew about some rather restricted things—but she was a *presidential* secretary, and besides, Jack had gotten a smoke out of it. "At least not by you. Ritter and Moore could be brought up on failure to fully report their covert activities to the Congress, but their defense would be that the sitting President told them to do it that way, and the Special and Hazardous Operations guidelines appended to the oversight statute give them an arguable defense. I suppose I could get them indicted, but I wouldn't want to prosecute the case myself," he went on. "They were trying to work on the drug problem, and most jurors wouldn't want to hurt them for doing so, especially since the Medellin cartel came apart partly as a result. The real problem on that one is the international-relations angle. Colombia's going to be pissed, sir, and with very good reason. There are issues of international law and treaties which applied to the activity, but I'm not good enough in that field to render an opinion. From the domestic point of view, it's the Constitution, the supreme law of the land. The President is Commander-in-Chief. The President decides what is or is not in the country's security interest as part of his executive powers. The President can, therefore, take whatever action he deems appropriate to protect those interests—that's what *executive* power means. The brake on that, aside from statutory violations that mainly apply *inside* the country, is found in the checks and balances exercised by the Congress. They can deny funds to prevent something, but that's about all. Even the War Powers Resolution is written in such a way as to let you act first before they try and stop you. You see, the Constitution is flexible on the really important issues. It's designed for reasonable people to work things out in a reasonable way. The elected representatives are supposed to know what the people want, and act accordingly, again, within reasonable limits."

The people who wrote the Constitution, Ryan wondered to himself, *were* they *politicians or something else?*

"And the rest?" the chief of staff asked.

"The CIA operations? Not even close to any sort of violation, but again the problem is one of politics. Speaking for myself—I used to run espionage investigations, remember—Mr. President, what beautiful jobs they were. But the media is going to have a ball," he warned.

Arnie thought that was a pretty good start. His third President didn't have to worry about going to jail. The political stuff came *after* that, which was, for him, a first of sorts.

"Closed hearings or open?" van Damm asked.

"That's political. The main issue there is the international side. Best to kick that one around with State. By the way, you've got me right against the edge here, ethically speaking. Had I discovered a possible violation against you in any of these three cases, I'd be unable to discuss them with you. As it is, my cover is to say that you, Mr. President, asked me for an opinion on the possible criminal violations of others, to which inquiry I must, as a federal official, respond as part of my official duties."

"You know, it would be nice if everybody around me didn't talk like a lawyer all the time," Ryan observed crossly. "I have real problems to deal with. A new country in the Middle East that doesn't like us, the Chinese making trouble at sea for reasons I don't understand, and I still don't have a Congress."

"This *is* a real problem," Arnie told him. Again.

"I can read." Ryan gestured to the pile of clippings on his desk. He'd just discovered that the media graced him with early drafts of adverse editorials scheduled to run the next day. How nice of them. "I used to think CIA was Alice in Wonderland. That's not even Triple-A ball. Okay, the Supreme Court. I've read over about half of the list. They're all good people. I'll have my selections this time next week."

"ABA is going to raise hell," Arnie said.

"Let 'em. I can't show weakness. I've learned that much last night. What's Kealty going to do?" the President asked next.

"The only thing he can do, weaken you politically, threaten you with scandal, and force you to resign." Arnie held his hand up again. "I'm not saying it makes sense."

"Damned little in this town does, Arnie. That's why I'm trying."

ONE CRUCIAL ELEMENT in the consolidation of the new country was, of course, its military. The former Republican Guards divisions would keep their identity. There had to be a few adjustments in the officer corps. The executions of previous weeks hadn't totally expunged undesirable elements, but in the interest of amity, the new eliminations were made into simple retirements—the departure briefings were forcefully direct: *Step out of line and disappear.* It was not a warning to be disregarded. The departing officers invariably nodded their submission, grateful to be allowed to live.

These units had mainly survived the Persian Gulf War—at least a majority of their personnel had, and the shock of their treatment at American hands had been assuaged by their later campaigns to crush rebellious civilian elements, replacing part of their swagger and much of their bravado. Their

equipment had been replaced from stocks and other means, and that would soon be augmented as well.

The convoys moved out of Iran, down the Abadan highway, through border checkpoints already dismantled. They moved under cover of darkness, and with a minimum of radio traffic, but that didn't matter to satellites.

"THREE DIVISIONS, HEAVIES at that," was the instant analysis at I-TAC, the Army's Intelligence and Threat Analysis Center, a windowless building located in the Washington Navy Yard. The same conclusion was rapidly reached at DIA and CIA. A new Order of Battle assessment for the new country was already under way, and though it was not yet complete, the first back-of-theenvelope calculations showed that the UIR had more than double the military power of all the other Gulf states combined. It would probably be worse when all the factors were fully evaluated.

"Headed where, exactly, I wonder," the senior watch officer said aloud as the tapes were rewound.

"Bottom end of Iraq has always been Shi'a, sir," a warrant officer area specialist reminded the colonel.

"And that's the closest part to our friends."

"Roge-o."

MAHMOUD HAJI DARYAEI had much to think about, and he usually tried to do it outside, not inside, a mosque. In this case it was one of the oldest in the former country of Iraq, within sight of the world's oldest city, Ur. A man of his God and his Faith, Daryaei was also a man of history and political reality who told himself that all came together in a unified whole that defined the shape of the world, and that all had to be considered. It was easy in moments of weakness or enthusiasm (the two were the same in his mind) to tell himself that certain things were written by Allah's own immortal hand, but circumspection was also a virtue taught by the Koran, and he found he was able to achieve that most easily by walking outside a holy place, usually in a garden, such as this mosque had.

Civilization had started here. Pagan civilization, to be sure, but all things began somewhere, and it was not the fault of those who had first built this city five thousand years before that God had not yet fully revealed Himself. The faithful who had built this mosque and its garden had also rectified the oversight.

The mosque was in disrepair. He bent down to pick up a piece of tile that had fallen off the wall. It was blue, the color of the ancient city, a color somewhere between that of sky and sea, made by local artisans to the same shade and texture for more than fifty centuries, adopted in turn for temples to pagan statues, palaces of kings, and now a mosque. One could pluck a new one off a building or dig ten meters into the earth to find one over three thousand years old, and the two would be indistinguishable. In that there was such continuity here as at no other place in the world. A kind of peace came

from it, especially in the chill of a cloudless midnight, when he alone was walking here, and even his bodyguards were out of sight, knowing their leader's mood.

A waning moon was overhead, and that gave emphasis to the numberless stars which kept him company. To the west was ancient Ur, once a great city as things had been reckoned, and surely even today it would be a noteworthy sight, with its towering brick walls and its towering ziggurat to whatever false god the people here had worshiped. Caravans would travel in and out of the fortified gates, bringing everything from grain to slaves. The surrounding land would be green with planted fields instead of mere sand, and the air alive with the chatter of merchants and tradesmen. The tale of Eden itself had probably begun not far from here, somewhere in the parallel valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates that emptied into the Persian Gulf. Yes, if humanity were all one vast tree, then the oldest roots were right here, virtually in the center of the country he had just created.

The ancients would have had the same sense of centrality, he was sure. Here are *we,* they would have thought, and out there were . . . *they*, the universal appellation for those who were not part of one's own community. They were dangerous. At first *they* would have been nomadic travelers for whom the idea of a city was incomprehensible. How could one stay in one place and live? Didn't the grass for the goats and sheep run out? On the other hand, what a fine place to raid, they would have thought. That was why the city had sprouted defensive walls, further emphasizing the primacy of place and the dichotomy of we and *they*, the civilized and the uncivilized.

And so it was today, Daryaei knew, Faithful and Infidel. Even within the first category there were differences. He stood in the center of a country which was also the center of the Faith, at least in geographic terms, for Islam had spread west and east. The true center of his religion lay in the direction in which he always prayed, southwest, in Mecca, home of the Ka'aba stone, where the Prophet had taught.

Civilization had begun in Ur, and spread, slowly and fitfully, and in the waves of time, the city had risen and fallen because, he thought, of its false gods, its lack of the single unifying idea which civilization needed.

The continuity of this place told him much about the people. One could almost hear their voices, and they were no different, really, from himself. They'd looked up on quiet nights into the same sky and wondered at the beauty of the same stars. They'd heard the silence, the best of them, just as he did, and used it as a sounding board for their most private thoughts, to consider the Great Questions and find their answers as best they could. But they'd been flawed answers, and that was why the walls had fallen, along with all the civilizations here—but one.

And so, his task was to restore, Daryaei told the stars. As his religion was the final revelation, so his culture would grow from here, down-river from the original Eden. Yes, he'd build his city here. Mecca would remain a holy city, blessed and pure, not commercialized, not polluted. There was room here for the administrative buildings. A fresh beginning would take place on the site of the oldest beginning, and a great new nation would grow.

But first . . .

Daryaei looked at his hand, old and gnarled, scarred by torture and persecution, but still the hand of a man and the servant of his mind, an imperfect tool, as he himself was an imperfect tool for his God, but a faithful tool even so, able to smite, able to heal. Both would be necessary. He knew the entire Koran by heart—memorization of the entire book was encouraged by his religion—and more than that he was a theologian who could quote a verse to any purpose, some of them contradictory, he admitted to himself, but it was the Will of Allah that mattered more than His words. His words often applied to a specific context. To kill for murder was evil, and the Koranic law on that was harsh indeed. To kill in defense of the Faith was not. Sometimes the difference between the two was clouded, and for that one had the Will of Allah as a guide. Allah wished the Faithful to be under one spiritual roof, and while many had attempted to accomplish that by reason and example, men were weak and some had to be shown more forcefully than others—and perhaps the differences between Sunni and Shi'a *could* be resolved in peace and love, with his hand extended in friendship and both sides giving respectful consideration to the views of the other—Daryaei was willing to go that far in his quest—but first the proper conditions had to be established. Beyond the horizon of Islam were others, and while God's Mercy applied to them as well, after a fashion, it did not apply while they sought to injure the Faith. For those people, his hand was for smiting. There was no avoiding it.

Because they *did* injure the Faith, polluting it with their money and strange ideas, taking the oil away, taking the children away to educate them in corrupt ways. They sought to limit the Faith even as they did business with those who called themselves Faithful. They would resist his efforts to unify Islam. They'd call it economics or politics or something else, but really they knew that a unified Islam would threaten their apostasy and temporal power. They were the worst kind of enemies in that they called themselves friends, and disguised their intentions well enough to be mistaken for such. For Islam to unify, they had to be broken.

There really was no choice for him. He'd come here to be alone and to think, to ask God quietly if there might be another way. But the blue piece of tile had told him of all that had been, the time that had passed, the civilizations that had left nothing behind but imperfect memories and ruined buildings. He had the idea and the faith that they had all lacked. It was merely a question of applying those ideas, guided by the same Will that had placed the stars in the sky. His God had brought flood and plague and misfortune as tools of the Faith. Mohammed had himself fought wars. And so, reluctantly, he told himself, would he.

35

OPERATIONAL CONCEPT

WHEN MILITARY FORCES move, other forces watch with interest, though what they do about it depends on the instructions of their leaders. The move of Iranian forces into Iraq was entirely administrative. The tanks and other tracked vehicles came by low-hauler trailers, while the trucks rolled on their own wheels. There were the usual problems. A few units took wrong turns, to the embarrassment of their officers and the rage of superiors, but soon enough each of the three divisions had found a new home, in every case co-located with a formerly Iraqi division of the same type. The traumatically enforced downsizing of the Iraqi army had made for almost enough room for the new occupants of the bases, and scarcely had they arrived but the staffs were integrated in corps units, and joint exercises began to acquaint one grouping with the other. Here, too, there were the usual difficulties of language and culture, but both sides used much the same weapons and doctrine; and the staff officers, the same all over the world, worked to hammer out a common ground. This, too, was watched from satellite.

"How much?"

"Call it three corps formations," the briefing officer told Admiral Jackson. "One of two armored divisions, and two of an armored and a heavy mechanized. They're a little light in artillery, but they have all the rolling stock they need. We spotted a bunch of command-and-control vehicles running around in the desert, probably doing unit-movement simulations for a CPX." That was a Command-Post Exercise, a war game for professionals.

"Anything else?" Robby asked.

"The gunnery ranges at this base here, west of Abu Sukayr, are being bulldozed and cleaned up, and the air base just north at Nejef has a few new tenants, MiGs and Sukhois, but on IR their engines are cold."

"Assessment?" This came from Tony Bretano.

"Sir, you can call it anything," the colonel replied. "New country integrating their military, there's going to be a lot of getting-to-know-you stuff. We're surprised by the integrated corps formations. It's going to pose administrative difficulties, but it might be a good move from the political-psychological side. This way, they're acting like they really are one country."

"Nothing threatening at all?" the SecDef asked.

"Nothing overtly threatening, not at this time."

"How quick could that corps move to the Saudi border?" Jackson asked, to make sure his boss got the real picture.

"Once they're fully fueled and trained up? Call it forty-eight to seventy-two hours. We could do it in less than half the time, but we're trained better."

"Force composition?"

"Total for the three corps, we're talking six heavy divisions, just over fifteen hundred main battle tanks, over twenty-five hundred infantry fighting vehicles, upwards of six hundred tubes—still haven't got a handle on their red team, Admiral. That's artillery, Mr. Secretary," the colonel explained. "Logistically they're on the old Soviet model."

"What's that mean?"

"Their loggies are organic to the divisions. We do that also, but we maintain separate formations to keep our maneuver forces running."

"Reservists for the most part," Jackson told the Secretary. "The Soviet model allows for a more integrated maneuver force, but only for the short term. They can't sustain operations as long as we can, in terms of time or distance."

"The admiral is correct, sir," the briefing officer went on. "In 1990, when the Iraqis jumped into Kuwait, they went about as far as their logistical tail allowed. They had to stop to replenish."

"That's part of it. Tell him the other part," Jackson ordered.

"After a pause of from twelve to twenty-four hours, they *were* ready to move again. The reason they didn't was political."

"I always wondered about that. Could they have taken the Saudi oil fields?"

"Easy," the colonel said. "He must have thought a lot about that in later months," the officer added without sympathy.

"So, we have a threat here?" Bretano was asking simple questions and listening to the answers. Jackson liked that. He knew what he didn't know, and wasn't embarrassed about learning things.

"Yes, sir. These three corps represent a potential striking force about equal in power to what Hussein used. There would be other units involved, but they're just occupying forces. That's the fist right here," the colonel said, tapping the map with his pointer.

"But it's still in their pocket. How long to change that?"

"A few months at minimum to do it right, Mr. Secretary. It depends most of all on their overall political intentions. All of these units are individually trained up to snuff by local standards. Integrating their corps staffs and organizations is the real task ahead for them."

"Explain," Bretano ordered.

"Sir, I guess you could call it a management team. Everybody has to get to know everybody else so that they can communicate properly, start thinking the same way."

"Maybe it's easier to think of it as a football team, sir." Robby took it further. "You don't just take eleven guys and put them in a huddle together and expect them to perform properly. You have to have everybody reading out of the same playbook, and everybody has to know what everybody else is able to do."

SecDef nodded. "So it's not the hardware we're worried about. It's the people."

"That's right, sir," the colonel said. "I can teach you to drive a tank in a few minutes, but it'll be a while before I want you driving around in my brigade."

"That's why you people must love having a new Secretary come in every few years," Bretano observed with a wry smile.

"Mostly they learn pretty fast."

"So, what do we tell the President?"

THE CHINESE AND Taiwanese navies were keeping their respective distances, as though an invisible line were drawn north-south down the Formosa Strait. The latter kept pacing the former, interposing itself between its island home, but informal rules were established and so far none was being violated.

This was good for the CO of USS *Pasadena,* whose sonar and tracking parties were trying to keep tabs on both sides, all the while hoping that a shooting war wouldn't start with them in the middle. Getting killed by mistake seemed such a tawdry end.

"Torpedo in the water, bearing two-seven-four!" was the next call from the sonar compartment. Heads turned and ears perked up at once.

"Stay cool," the captain ordered quietly. "Sonar, Conn, I need more than that!" That statement was not quiet.

"Same bearing as contact Sierra Four-Two, a Luda IICLASS'can, sir, probably launched from there."

"Four-Two is bearing two-seven-four, range thirty thousand yards," a petty officer in the tracking party interjected at once.

"Sounds like one of their new homers, sir, six blades, turning at high speed, bearing is changing north to south, definite side aspect on the fish."

"Very well," the captain said, allowing himself to stay as calm as he pretended to be.

"Could be targeted on Sierra-Fifteen, sir." That contact was an old Ming-class submarine, a Chinese copy of the old Russian Romeo-class, a clunker whose design dated from the 1950s which had snorted less than an hour before to recharge batteries. "He's at two-six-one, range about the same." That came from the officer in charge of the tracking party. The senior chief at his left nodded agreement.

The captain closed his eyes and allowed himself a breath. He'd heard the stories about the Good Old Days of the Cold War, when people like Bart Mancuso had gone Up North into the Barents Sea and, occasionally, found themselves right in the middle of a live-fire ShootEx of the Soviet navy—perhaps mistaken for practice targets, even. A fine opportunity to figure out how good Soviet weapons really were, they joked now, sitting in their offices. Now he knew what they'd really felt at the time. Fortunately, his private head was a mere twenty feet away, if it came to that . . .

"Transient, transient, mechanical transient bearing two-six-one, sounds like a noisemaker, probably released by contact Sierra-Fifteen. The torpedo bearing is now two-six-seven, estimated speed four-four knots, bearing continues to change north to south," sonar reported next. "Hold it—*another* torpedo in the water bearing two-fivefive!"

"No contact on that bearing, could be a helo launch," the senior chief said.

He'd have to discuss one of those sea stories with Mancuso when he got back to Pearl, the captain thought.

"Same acoustical signature, sir, another homing fish, drifting north, could also be targeted on Sierra-Fifteen."

"Bracketed the poor bastard." This came from the XO.

"It's dark topside, isn't it?" the captain thought suddenly. Sometimes it was easy to lose track.

"Sure is, sir." From the XO again.

"Have we seen them do night helo ops this week?"

"No, sir. Intel says they don't like to fly off their 'cans at night."

"That just changed, didn't it? Let's see. Raise the ESM mast."

"Raise the ESM, aye." A sailor pulled the proper handle and the reed-thin electronics-sensor antenna hissed up on hydraulic power. *Pasadena* was running at periscope depth, her long sonar "tail" streamed out behind her as the submarine stayed roughly on what they hoped was the borderline between the two enemy fleets. It was the safest place to be until such time as real shooting started.

"Looking for—"

"Got it, sir, a Ku-band emitter at bearing two-fivefour, aircraft type, frequency and pulse-repetition rate like that new French one. Wow, *lots* of radars turning, sir, take a while to classify them."

"French Dauphin helos on some of their frigates, sir," the XO observed.

"Doing night ops," the captain emphasized. That was unexpected. Helicopters were expensive, and landing on tin cans at night was always dicey. The Chinese navy was training up to do something.

THINGS COULD BE slippery in Washington. The nation's capital invariably panics at the report of a single snowflake despite the realization that a blizzard might do little more than fill the potholes in the street, if only people would plow the snow that way. But there was more to it than that. As soldiers once followed flags onto a battlefield, so senior Washington officials follow leaders or ideologies, but near the top it got slippery. A lower- or middle-level bureaucrat might just sit at his post and ignore his sitting department Secretary's identity, but the higher one went, the closer one came to something akin to decision or policy making. In such positions, one actually had to do things, or tell others to do things, from time to time, other than what someone else had already written down. One regularly went in and out of top-floor offices and became identified with whoever might be there, ultimately all the way to the President's office in the West Wing, and though access to the top meant power of a sort, and prestige, and an autographed photo on the office wall to tell *your* visitors how important you were, if something happened to the *other* person in the photo, then the photo and its signature might become a liability rather than an asset. The ultimate risk lay in changing from an insider, always welcome, to an outsider, if not quite *always* shunned, then forced to earn one's way back inside, a prospect not attractive to those who had spent so much time getting there in the first place.

The most obvious defense, of course, was to be *networked* , to have a circle of friends and associates which didn't have to be deep so much as broad, and include people in all parts of the political spectrum. You had to be known by a sufficiently wide number of fellow insiders so that no matter what happened at the very top there was always a safe platform just below, a safety net of

sorts. The net was close enough to the top that the people in it had the upward access without the risk of falling off. With care, those at the top positions enjoyed its protection, too, always able to slide in and out of appropriate postings, to and from other offices not too far away—usually less than a mile—to await the next opportunity, and so even though *out*, to remain in the Network, to retain the access, and also rent out that access to those who needed it. In that sense, nothing had changed since the pharaonic court in the ancient Nile city of Thebes, where knowing a nobleman who had access to Pharaoh gave one a power which translated into both money and the pure joy of being important enough to bow and scrape for profit.

But in Washington as in Thebes, being too close to the wrong leader's court meant you ran the risk of becoming tarnished, especially when the Pharaoh didn't play ball (actually jackals and hounds in the Middle Kingdom) with the system.

And President Ryan didn't. It was as though a foreigner had usurped the throne, not necessarily a bad man, but a *different* man who didn't assemble people from the Establishment. They'd waited patiently for him to come to them, as all Presidents did, to seek their wisdom and counsel, to give access and get it in return, as courtiers had for centuries. They handled things for a busy chief, doling out justice, seeing to it that things were done in the same old way, which had to be the right way, since all of their number agreed with it while serving and being served by it.

But the old system hadn't so much been destroyed as ignored, and that befuddled the thousands of members of the Great Network. They held their cocktail parties and discussed the new President over Perrier and pate, smiling tolerantly at his new ideas and waiting for him to see the light. But it had been quite a while now since that awful night, and it hadn't happened yet. Networked people still working inside as appointees of the Fowler-Durling administration came to the parties and reported that they didn't understand what was going on. Senior lobbyists tried to make appointments through the office of the President, only to be told that the President was extremely tied up, and didn't have time.

Didn't have time?

Didn't have time for *them?*

It was as though Pharaoh had told all the nobles and courtiers to go home and tend their estates up and down the river kingdom, and *that* was no fun—to live in the provinces . . . with the . . . common folk?

Worse, the new Senate, or a large part of it, was following the President's example. Worst of all, many, if not most, were curt with them. A new senator from Indiana was reported to have a kitchen timer on his desk and to twist it to a mere five minutes for lobbyists, and to none at all for people talking to him about the *absurd* ideas for rewriting the tax code. Worst of all, he even lacked the courtesy to have his executive secretary deflect appointment requests. He'd actually *told* the chief of a powerful Washington law firm—a man who'd only wanted to educate the newcomer from Peoria—that he would *not* listen to such people, ever. Told the man himself. In another context it would have been an amusing story. Such people occasionally came to Washington with such purity of purpose as to justify a white horse, but in due

course they would learn that horses were out of date—and in most cases, they were merely doing it for show anyway.

But not this time. The story had spread. First reported in the local D.C. papers with whimsy, it had been picked up in Indianapolis as something genuinely new and decidedly "Hoosier," and then respread through a couple of the news syndicates. This new senator had talked forcefully with his new colleagues, and won a few converts. Not all that many, but enough to be worrisome. Enough to give him a chairmanship of a powerful subcommittee, what was too bully a pulpit for one such as he, especially since he had a flair for the dramatic and an effective, if not exactly nice, turn of phrase that reporters couldn't avoid quoting. Even reporters in the Great Network enjoyed reporting genuinely new things—which was what "news" meant, something everyone mainly forgot.

At the parties, people joked that it was a fad, like hula hoops, amusing to watch and soon to fade, but every so often one of them would worry. The tolerant smile would freeze on his or her face in mid-joke, and they'd wonder if something genuinely new might be happening.

No, nothing genuinely new ever happened here. Everybody knew that. The system had rules, and the rules had to be obeyed.

Even so, a few of them worried at their dinner parties in Georgetown. They had expensive houses to pay off, children to educate, and status to maintain. All had come from somewhere else, and none wanted to go back there.

It was just so outrageous. How did the newcomers expect to find out what they needed to, without lobbyists from the Network to guide and educate them—and didn't *they* represent the people, too? Weren't they paid to do exactly that? Didn't *they* tell the elected representatives—worse, these new ones weren't elected, they were all appointed, many of them by governors who, in their wish to get reelected themselves, had bowed to President Ryan's impassioned but utterly unrealistic televised speech. As though some new religion had broken out.

At the parties in Chevy Chase, many of them worried that the new laws these new senators would pass would be ... laws, just like the ones produced by the system, at least in their power if not in their wisdom. These new people could actually pass new laws without being "helped." That was so genuinely new an idea as to be ... frightening. But only if you really believed it.

And then there were the House races, just about to start around the country, the special elections required to repopulate the People's House, as everyone liked to call it, which was Disneyland for lobbyists, so many meetings all in one convenient complex of buildings, 435 lawmakers and their staffs within a mere twenty acres. Polling data that had been reported mainly in local papers was now being picked up by the national media in shocked disbelief. There were people running who had never run for anything before; businessmen, community leaders who had never worked the system, lawyers, ministers, even some physicians. Some of them might win as they spewed forth neo-populist-type speeches about supporting the President and "restoring America"—a phrase that had gained wide currency. But America had never died, the Network people told themselves. *They* were still here, weren't they?

It was all Ryan's doing. He'd never been one of them. He'd actually said

more than once that he didn't like being President!

Didn't like it?

How could any man "person" to the Network Establishment in the new age of enlightenment—not *like* having the ability to do so much, to pass out so many favors, to be courted and flattered like a king of old?

Didn't like it?

Then he didn't belong, did he?

They knew how to handle that. Someone had already started it. Leaks. Not just from inside. Those were little people with lesser agendas. There was more. There was the big picture, and for that, access still counted, because the Network had many voices, and there were still ears to listen. There would be no plan and no conspiracy *per se*. It would all happen naturally, or as naturally as anything happened here. In fact, it had already begun.

FOR BADRAYN, AGAIN, it was time on his computer. The task, he learned, was time-critical. Such things often were, but the reason was new in this case. The travel time itself had to be minimized, rather than arranged in such a way as to meet a specific deadline or rendezvous. The limiting factor here was the fact that Iran was still something of an outlaw country with surprisingly little in the way of air travel options.

Flights with convenient times were astoundingly limited:

KLM 534 to Amsterdam left just after one A.M., and arrived in Holland at 6:10 A.M. after an intermediary stop;

Lufthansa's nonstop 601 left at 2:55, and got to Frankfurt at 5:50;

Austrian Airlines 774, leaving at 3:40 A.M., arrived in Vienna nonstop at 6:00 A.M.;

Air France 165 left at 5:25 A.M., arrived at Charles de Gaulle at nine A.M.;

British Airways 102 left at six A.M., stopping en route, arriving at Heathrow at 12:45 P.M.;

Aeroflot 516 left at three A.M. for Moscow, arrived there at 7:10.

Only one nonstop to Rome, no direct flights to Athens, not even a nonstop to Beirut! He could have his people connect through Dubai—remarkably, Emirates Airlines *did* fly out of Tehran into its own international hub, as did Kuwait's flag carrier, but they, he thought, were not a very good idea.

Just a handful of flights to use, all of them easily observed by foreign intelligence services—if they were competent, as he had to assume they were, either they'd have their own people aboard the flights or the cabin staff would be briefed on what to look for and how to report it while the aircraft was still in the air. So, it wasn't just time, was it?

The people he'd selected were good ones; educated for the most part, they knew how to dress respectably, how to carry on a conversation, or at least to deflect one politely—on international flights the easiest thing was to feign the need for sleep, which most often wasn't feigned anyway. But only one mistake, and the consequences could be serious. He'd told them that, and all had listened.

Badrayn had never been given a mission like this one, and the intellectual challenge was noteworthy. Just a handful of really usable flights out, and the

one to Moscow wasn't all that attractive. The gateway cities of London, Frankfurt, Paris, Vienna, and Amsterdam would have to do------and one flight each per day. The good news was that all five of them offered a wide choice of connections via American and other flag carriers. So one group would take 601 to Frankfurt, and there, some would disperse through Brussels (Sabena to New York-JFK) and Paris (Air France to Washington-Dulles; Delta to Atlanta; American Airlines to Orlando; United to Chicago) via conveniently timed connecting flights, while others took Lufthansa to Los Angeles. The British Airways team had the most options of all. One would take Concorde Flight 3 into New York. The only trick was getting them through the first series of flights. After that, the whole massive system of international air travel would handle the dispersal.

Still, twenty people, twenty possible mistakes. Operational security was always a worry. He'd spent half his life trying to outfox the Israelis, and while his continued life was some testimony to his success—or lack of total failure, which was somewhat more honest the hoops he'd had to leap through had nearly driven him mad more than once. Well. At least he had the flights figured out. Tomorrow he would brief them in. He checked his watch. Tomorrow wasn't all that far away.

NOT EVERY INSIDER agreed. Every group had its cynics and rebels, some good, some bad, some not even outcasts. Then there was also anger. The Network members, when thwarted by other members in one of their endeavors, often took a philosophical view of the matter—one could always get even later, and still stay friends—but not always. This was especially true of the media members who both were and were not part of it all. They were, in the sense that they did have their own personal relationships and friendships with the government in and out people; they could go to them for information and insights, and stories about their enemies. They were not, in that the insiders never really trusted them, because the media could be used and fooled—most often cajoled, which was easier for one side of the political spectrum than the other. But trust? Not exactly. Or more exactly, not at all.

Some of them even had principles.

"Arnie, we need to talk."

"I think we do," van Damm agreed, recognizing the voice that had come in on *his* direct line.

"Tonight?"

"Sure. Where?"

"My place?"

The chief of staff gave it a few seconds of consideration. "Why not?"

THE DELEGATION CAME just in time for evening prayers. The greetings were cordial and modest on both sides, and then all three of them entered the mosque and performed their daily ritual. Ordinarily, all would have felt purified by their devotions as they walked back out to the garden. But not this

time. Only long practice in the concealment of emotions prevented overt displays of tension, but even that told much to all three, and especially to the one.

"Thank you for receiving us," Prince Ali bin Sheik said first of all. He didn't add that it had taken long enough.

"I am pleased to welcome you in peace," Daryaei replied. "It is well that we should pray together." He led them to a table prepared by his security people, where coffee was served, the strong, bitter brew favored in the Middle East. "The blessings of God on this meeting, my friends. How may I be of service?"

"We are here to discuss recent developments," the Royal Prince observed after a sip. His eyes locked in on Daryaei. His Kuwaiti colleague, Mohammed Adman Sabah, his country's foreign minister, remained quiet for the moment.

"What do you wish to know?" Daryaei asked.

"Your intentions," Ali replied bluntly.

The spiritual head of the United Islamic Republic sighed. "There is much work to be done. All the years of war and suffering, all the lives lost to so many causes, the destruction to so much. Even this mosque"—he gestured to the obvious need for repairs—"is a symbol of it all, don't you think?"

"There has been much cause for sorrow," Ali agreed.

"My intentions? To restore. These unhappy people have been through so much. Such sacrifices—and for what? The secular ambitions of a godless man. The injustice of it all cried out to Allah, and Allah answered the cries. And now, perhaps, we can be one prosperous and godly people." The *again* hung unspoken on the end of the statement.

"That is the task of years," the Kuwaiti observed.

"Certainly it is," Daryaei agreed. "But now with the embargo lifted, we have sufficient resources to see to the task, and the will to see it done. There will be a new beginning here."

"In peace," Ali added.

"Certainly in peace," Daryaei agreed seriously.

"May we be of assistance? One of the Pillars of our Faith is charity, after all," Foreign Minister Sabah observed.

A gracious nod. "Your kindness is noted with gratitude, Mohammed Adman. It is well that we should be guided by our Faith rather than worldly influences that have so sadly swept over this region in recent years, but for the moment, as you can see, the task is so vast that we can scarcely begin to determine what things need to be done, and in what order. Perhaps at a later time we might discuss that again."

It wasn't quite a flat rejection of aid, but close. The UIR wasn't interested in doing business, just as Prince Ali had feared.

"At the next meeting of OPEC," Ali offered, "we can discuss the rearrangement of production quotas so that you can share more fairly in the revenue we collect from our clients."

"That would indeed be useful," Daryaei agreed. "We do not ask for all that much. A minor adjustment," he allowed.

"Then on that we are agreed?" Sabah asked.

"Certainly. That is a technical issue which we can delegate to our respective functionaries."

Both visitors nodded, noting to themselves that the allocation of oil production quotas was the most rancorous of issues. If every country produced too much, then the world price would fall, and all would suffer. On the other hand, if production were overly restricted, the price would rise, damaging the economies of their client states, which would then reduce demand and revenues with it. The proper balance—hard to strike, like all economic issues—was the yearly subject of high-level diplomatic missions, each with its own economic model, no two ever the same, and considerable discord within the mainly Muslim association. This was going far too easily.

"Is there a message you wish to convey to our governments?" Sabah asked next.

"We desire only peace, peace so that we can accomplish our tasks of restoring our societies into one, as Allah intends it to be. There is nothing for you to fear from us."

"SO WHAT DO you think?" Another training rotation was completed. Present at the final review of operations were some very senior Israeli officers, at least one of whom was a senior spook. Colonel Sean Magruder was a cavalryman, but in a real sense every senior officer was an intelligence consumer, and willing to shop at any source.

"I think the Saudis are very nervous, along with all their neighbors."

"And you?" Magruder asked. He'd unconsciously adopted the informal and direct mode of address common in the country, especially its military.

Avi ben Jakob, still titularly a military officer—he was wearing a uniform now—was deputy chief of the Mossad. He wondered how far he could go, but with his job title, that was really for him to decide.

"We are not pleased at all by the development."

"Historically," Colonel Magruder observed, "Israel has had a working relationship with Iran, even after the Shah fell. That goes all the way back to the Persian Empire. I believe your festival of Purim results from that period. Israeli air force pilots flew missions for the Iranians during the Iran-Iraq war and—"

"We had a large number of Jews then in Iran, and that was intended to get them out," Jakob said quickly.

"And the arms-for-hostages mess that Reagan got into went through here, probably your agency," Magruder added, just to show that he, too, was a player in the game.

"You are well informed."

"That's my job, part of it anyway. Sir, I am not making value judgments here. Getting your people out of Iran back then was, as we say at home, business, and all countries have to do business. I'm just asking what you think of the UIR."

"We think Daryaei is the most dangerous man in the world."

Magruder thought of the eyes-only brief he'd had earlier in the day about the Iranian troop movements into Iraq. "I agree."

He'd come to like the Israelis. That hadn't always been true. For years, the United States Army had cordially disliked the Jewish state, along with the

other branches of the service, mainly because of the corporate arrogance adopted by the small nation's senior military officers. But the IDF had learned humility in Lebanon, and learned to respect American arms as observers in the Persian Gulf War—after literally months of telling American officers that they needed advice on how to fight first the air war and then the ground war, they'd quickly taken to asking, politely, to look over some of the American plans because there *might* be some few *minor* things worthy of a *little* study.

The descent of the Buffalo Cav into the Negev had changed things some more. America's tragedy in Vietnam had broken another type of arrogance, and from that had grown a new type of professionalism. Under Marion Diggs, first CO of the reborn 10th United States Cavalry, quite a few harsh lessons had been handed out, and while Magruder was continuing that tradition, the Israeli troopers were learning, just as Americans had done at Fort Irwin. After the initial screams and near fistfights, common sense had broken out. Even Benny Eitan, commander of the Israeli 7th Armored Brigade, had rallied from the first set of drubbings to finish his training rotation with a pair of break-evens, and come away thanking his American hosts for the lessons—and promising to kick their asses when he returned the next year. In the central computer in the local Star Wars building, a complex mathematical model said that the performance of the Israeli army had improved by fully forty percent in just a few years, and now that they again had something to be arrogant about, the Israeli officers were showing disarming humility and an almost ruthless desire to learn—ever signs of truly professional soldiers.

And now one of their head spooks wasn't talking about how his forces could handle anything the Islamic world might throw at his country. That was worth a contact report to Washington, Magruder thought.

THE BUSINESS JET once "lost" in the Mediterranean could no longer leave the country. Even using it to ferry the Iraqi generals to Sudan had been a mistake, but a necessary one, and perhaps the odd covert mission was all right as well, but for the most part it had become Daryaei's personal transport, and a useful one, for his time was short, and his new country large. Within two hours of seeing his Sunni visitors off, he was back in Tehran.

"So?"

Badrayn laid out his papers on the desk, showing cities and routes and times. It was mere mechanics. Daryaei looked the plans over with a cursory eye, and while they seemed overly complex, that was not a major concern for him. He'd seen maps before. He looked up for the explanation that had to come with the paperwork.

"The primary issue is time," Badrayn said. "We want to have each traveler to his destination no more than thirty hours after departure. This one, for example, leaves Tehran at six A.M., and arrives in New York at two A.M. Tehran time, elapsed time twenty hours. The trade show he will attend—it is at the Jacob Javits Center in New York—will be open past ten in the evening. This one departs at 2:55 A.M., and ultimately arrives in Los Angeles twenty-three hours later—early afternoon, local time. His trade show will be open all day. That is the most lengthy in terms of distance and time, and his 'package'

will still be more than eighty-five percent effective."

"And security?"

"They are all fully briefed. I have selected intelligent, educated people. All they need do is be pleasant en route. After that, a little caution. Twenty at once, yes, that is troublesome, but those were your orders."

"And the other group?"

"They will go out two days later via similar arrangements," Badrayn reported. "That mission is far more dangerous."

"I am aware of that. Are the people faithful?"

"They are that." Badrayn nodded, knowing that the question really asked if they were fools. "The political risks concern me."

"Why?" The observation didn't surprise Daryaei, but he wanted the reason.

"The obvious question of discovering who sent them, though their travel documents will be properly prepared, and the usual security measures put in place. No, I mean the American political context. An unhappy event to a politician can often create sympathy for him, and from that sympathy can come political support."

"Indeed! It does not make him appear weak?" That was rather much to swallow.

"In our context, yes, but not necessarily in theirs."

Daryaei considered that and compared it with other analyses he'd ordered and reviewed. "I have met Ryan. He is weak. He does *not* deal effectively with his political difficulties. He still has no true government behind him. Between the first mission and the second, we will break him—or at least we will distract him long enough to achieve our next goal. After that is accomplished, America becomes irrelevant."

"Better the first mission only," Badrayn advised.

"We must shake their people. If what you say of their government is true, we will do such harm as they have never known. We will shake their leader, we will shake his confidence, we will shake the confidence of the people in him."

He had to respond to that carefully. This was a Holy Man with a Holy Mission. He was not fully amenable to reason. And yet there was one other factor which he didn't know about. There had to be. Daryaei was more given to wishes than considered action—no, that wasn't true, was it? He united the two while giving another impression entirely. What the cleric did appreciate was that the American government was still vulnerable, since its lower house of parliament had not yet been replaced, a process just beginning.

"Best of all merely to kill Ryan, if we could. An attack on children will inflame them. Americans are very sentimental about little ones."

"The second mission goes on only after the first is known to be successful?" Daryaei demanded.

"Yes, that is true."

"Then that is sufficient," he said, looking back down at the travel arrangements, and leaving Badrayn to his own thoughts.

There is a third element. There had to be.

“HE SAYS HIS intentions are peaceful.”

“So did Hitler, Ali,” the President reminded his friend. He checked his watch. It was after midnight in Saudi Arabia. Ali had flown back and conferred with his government before calling Washington, as one would expect. “You know about the troop movement.”

“Yes, your people briefed our military earlier today. It will be some time before they are ready to make any threat. Such things take time. Remember, I was once in uniform.”

“True, that’s what they told me, too.” Ryan paused. “Okay, what does the Kingdom propose?”

“We will observe closely. Our military is training. We have your pledge of support. We are concerned, but not overly so.”

“We could schedule some joint exercises,” Jack offered.

“That might only inflame matters,” the Prince replied. The absence of total conviction in his voice was not accidental. He’d probably fielded the idea in council himself and gotten a negative reply.

“Well, I guess you’ve had a long day. Tell me, how did Daryaei look? I haven’t seen the guy since you introduced him to me.”

“His health appears good. He looks tired, but he’s had a busy time.”

“I can relate to that. Ali?”

“Yes, Jack?”

The President stopped then, reminding himself that he was unschooled in diplomatic exchange. “How concerned should I be about all this?”

“What do your people tell you?” the Prince replied.

“About the same as you do, but not all of them. We need to keep this line open, my friend.”

“I understand, Mr. President. Good-bye for now.”

It was an unsatisfactory conclusion to an unsatisfactory call. Ryan replaced the phone and looked around at his empty office. Ali wasn’t saying what he wanted to say because the position of his government was different from what he thought it should be. The same had happened to Jack often enough, and the same rules applied. Ali had to be loyal to that government—hell, it was mainly his own family—but he had allowed himself one slip, and the Prince was too clever to do that sort of thing by mistake. It probably would have been easier before, when Ryan had not been President and both could talk without the worry of making policy with every word. Now Jack was America to those beyond the borders, and governmental officials could talk to him only that way, instead of remembering that he was also a thinking man who needed to explore options before making decisions. Maybe if it hadn’t been over the phone, Jack thought. Maybe face-to-face would have been better. But even Presidents were limited by time and space.

36

TRAVELERS

KLM—ROYAL DUTCH AIRLINES—FLIGHT 534—left the gate on time at 1:10 A.M. The aircraft was full at this hour, full of weary people who stumbled to their seats, strapped in, and accepted pillows and blankets. The more experienced travelers among them waited for the sound of the wheels being retracted, then pushed their seats as far back as they could go, and closed their eyes in the hope of a smooth ride and something akin to real sleep.

Five of Badrayn's men were aboard, two in first class, three in business. They all had baggage in the cargo hold, and a carry-on tucked under the seat in front. All had a minor case of nerves, and all would have had a drink to ameliorate it—religious prohibition or not—but the aircraft had landed in an Islamic airport and would not serve alcohol until it had left United Islamic Republic airspace. To a man, they considered their situation and bowed to circumstance. They'd been well briefed and properly prepared. They'd come through the airport like ordinary travelers, and submitted their carry-ons to X-ray inspection by security personnel who were every bit as careful as their Western counterparts actually more so, since the flights were relatively few, and the local paranoia relatively greater. In every case, the X-ray display had shown a shaving kit, along with papers, books and other sundries.

They were all educated men, many of them having attended the American University of Beirut, some to obtain degrees, the others simply to learn about the enemy. They were dressed neatly, all with ties, loose now in their collars, and their coats hung in the mini-closets throughout the aircraft. Within forty minutes, they, along with the rest of the passengers, were fitfully asleep.

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"SO WHAT'S YOUR take on all this?" van Damm asked.

Holtzman swirled his drink, watching the ice cubes circle around. "Under different circumstances I might call it a conspiracy, but it's not. For a guy who says he's just trying to put things back together, Jack sure is doing a lot of new and crazy things."

" 'Crazy' is a little strong, Bob."

"Not for them, it isn't. Everybody's saying 'he isn't one of us,' and they're reacting strongly to his initiatives. Even you have to admit that his tax ideas are a little way off the usual playing field, but that's the excuse for what's happening—one of the excuses, anyway. The game's the same one it always was. A couple of leaks, and the manner of their presentation, that's what

determines how it's played."

Arnie had to nod. It was like highway littering. If someone dumped all the trash in the proper barrel, then things were neat, and the task was done in a few seconds. If that same someone tossed it all out the window of a moving car, then you had to spend hours picking it all up. The other side was now dumping the trash haphazardly, and the President was having to use his limited time doing wasteful and unproductive things instead of the real work of driving down the road. The simile was ugly, but apt. Politics was so often less about doing constructive work than about spreading garbage around for others to clean up.

"Who leaked?"

The reporter shrugged. "I can only guess. Somebody in the Agency, probably somebody who's being RIF'd. You have to admit that building up the spy side of the house looks kind of Neanderthal. How far are they cutting the Intelligence Directorate?"

"More than enough to compensate for the new field people. The idea is to save money overall, better information, more efficient overall performance, that sort of thing. I don't," he added, "tell the President how to do intelligence stuff. On that, he really is an expert."

"I know that. I had my story almost ready to run. I was about to call you for an interview with him when the bubble broke."

"Oh? And—"

"What was my angle? He's the most contradictory son of a bitch in this town. In some ways he's brilliant—but in others? Babe-in-the-woods is charitable."

"Go on."

"I like the guy," Holtzman admitted. "For damned sure, he's honest—not relatively honest, really honest. I was going to tell it pretty much the way it was. You want to know what has *me* pissed?" He paused for a sip of the bourbon, hesitated again before proceeding, and then spoke with unconcealed anger. "Somebody at the *Post* leaked my story, probably to Ed Kealty. Then Kealty probably arranged a leak to Donner and Plumber."

"And they used your story to hang him?"

"Pretty much," Holtzman admitted.

Van Damm nearly laughed. He held it back for as long as he could, but it was too delicious to resist: "Welcome to Washington, Bob."

"You know, some of us really do take our professional ethics seriously," the reporter shot back, rather lamely. "It was a good story. I researched the hell out of it. I got my own source in CIA—well, I have several, but I got a new one for this, somebody who really knew the stuff. I took what he gave me, and I back-checked the hell out of it, verified everything I could, wrote the piece stating what I knew and what I thought—careful to explain the difference at all times," he assured his host. "And you know? Ryan comes out looking pretty good. Yeah, sure, sometimes he short-circuits the system, but the guy's never broken the rules far as I can tell. If we ever have a major crisis, that's the guy I want in the Oval Office. But some son of a *bitch* took *my* story, *my* information from *my* sources, and played with it, I don't like that, Arnie. *I* have a public trust, too, and so does my paper, and somebody *fucked* with

that." He set his drink down. "Hey, I know what you think about me and my"

"No, you don't," van Damm interrupted.

"But you've always—"

"I'm the chief of staff, Bob. I *have* to be loyal to my boss, and so I have to play the game from my side, but if you think I don't respect the press, you're not as smart as you're supposed to be. We're not always friends. Sometimes we're enemies, but we need you as much as you need us. For Christ's sake, if I didn't respect you, why the hell are you drinking my booze?"

It was either an elegant roll or a truthful statement, Holtzman thought, and Arnie was too skillful a player for him to tell the difference right off. But the smart thing to do was finish the drink, which he did. A pity that his host preferred cheap booze to go along with his L. L. Bean shirts. Arnie didn't know how to dress, either. Or maybe that was a considered part of his mystique. The political game was so intricate as to be a cross between classical metaphysics and experimental science. You could never know it all, and finding out one part as often as not denied you the ability to find out another, equally important part. But that was why it was the best game in town.

"Okay, Arnie, I'll accept that."

"Good of you." Van Damm smiled, and refilled the glass. "So why did you call me?"

"It's almost embarrassing." Another pause. "I will not participate in the public hanging of an innocent man."

"You've done that before," Arnie objected.

"Maybe so, but they were all politicians, and they all had it coming in one way or another. I don't know what—okay, how about I'm not into child abuse? Ryan deserves a fair chance."

"And you're pissed about losing your story and the Pulitzer that—"

"I have two of them already," Holtzman reminded him. Otherwise, he would have been taken off the story by his managing editor, but internal politics at the *Washington* Post were as vicious as those elsewhere in the city.

"So?"

"So, I need to know about Colombia. I need to know about Jimmy Cutter and how he died."

"Jesus, Bob, you don't know what our ambassador went through down there today."

"Great language for invective, Spanish." A reporter's smile.

"The story can't be told, Bob. It just can't."

"The story *will* be told. It's just a question of who tells it, and that will determine *how* it's told. Arnie, I know enough now to write something, okay?"

As so often happened in Washington at times like this, everyone was trapped by circumstance. Holtzman had a story to write. Doing it the right way would, perhaps, resurrect his original story, put him in the running for another Pulitzer—it was still important to him, previous denials notwithstanding, and Arnie knew it—and tell whoever had leaked his story to Ed Kealty that he or she had better leave the Post before Holtzman nailed that name down and wrecked his or her career with a few well-placed whispers and more than a few dead-end assignments. Arnie was trapped by his duty to protect his President, and the only way to do it was to violate the law and his

President's trust. There had to be an easier way, the chief of staff thought, to earn a living. He could have made Holtzman wait for his decision, but that would have been mere theatrics, and both men were past that.

"No notes, no tape recorder."

"Off the record. 'Senior official,' not even 'senior administration official,' " Bob agreed.

"And I can tell you who to confirm it with."

"They know it all?"

"Even more than I do," van Damm told him. "Hell, I just found out about the important part."

A raised eyebrow. "That's nice, and the same rules will apply to them. Who really knows about this?"

"Even the President doesn't know it all. I'm not sure if anybody knows it all."

Holtzman took another sip. It would be his last. Like a doctor in an operating room, he didn't believe in mixing alcohol and work.

FLIGHT 534 TOUCHED down at Istanbul at 2:55 A.M. local time, after a flight of 1,270 miles and three hours, fifteen minutes. The passengers were groggily awake, having been roused by the cabin staff thirty minutes earlier and told to put their seat-backs to the upright position in a series of languages. The landing was smooth, and a few of them raised the plastic shades on the windows to see that they were indeed on the ground at one more anonymous piece of real estate with white runway lights and blue taxiway lights, just like those all over the world. Those getting out stood at the proper time to stumble off into the Turkish night. The rest pushed their seats back for another snooze during the forty-five-minute layover, before the aircraft left yet another gate at 3:40 A.M. for the second half of the trip.

Lufthansa 601 was a European-made Airbus 310 twinjet, roughly the same as the KLM Boeing in size and capacity This one, too, had five travelers aboard, and left its gate at 2:55 for the nonstop flight to Frankfurt. The departure was routine in all details.

"THAT'S SOME STORY, Arnie."

"Oh, yeah. I didn't know the important parts until this week."

"How sure are you of this?" Holtzman asked.

"The pieces all fit." He shrugged again. "I can't say I liked hearing it. I think we would have won the election anyway, but, Jesus, the guy threw it. He tanked on a presidential election, but you know," van Damm said wistfully, "that might have been the most courageous and generous political act of the century. I didn't think he had it in him."

"Does Fowler know?"

"I haven't told him. Maybe I should."

"Wait a minute. Remember how Liz Elliot planted a story on me about Ryan and how—"

"Yes, that all folds into this. Jack went down personally to get those soldiers out. The guy next to him in the chopper was killed, and he's looked after the family ever since. Liz paid for it. She came apart the night the bomb went off in Denver."

"And Jack really did . . . you know that's one story that never came out all the way. Fowler lost it and almost launched a missile at Iran—it was Ryan, wasn't it? He's the one who stopped it." Holtzman looked down at his drink and decided on another sip. "How?"

"He got onto the Hot Line," Arnie replied. "He cut the President off and talked directly with Narmonov, and persuaded him to back things off some. Fowler flipped out and told the Secret Service to go arrest him, but by the time they got to the Pentagon, things *were* calmed down. It worked, thank God."

It took Holtzman a minute or so to absorb that, but again, the story fit with the fragments he knew. Fowler had resigned two days later, a broken man, but an honorable one who knew that his moral right to govern his country had died with his order to launch a nuclear weapon at an innocent city. And Ryan had also been shaken by the event, badly enough to leave government service at once, until Roger Durling had brought him back in.

"Ryan's broken every rule there is. Almost as if he likes it." But that wasn't fair, was it?

"If he hadn't, we might not be here." The chief of staff poured himself another. Holtzman waved him off. "You see what I mean about the story, Bob? If you tell it all, the country gets hurt."

"But then why did Fowler recommend Ryan to Roger Durling?" the reporter asked. "He couldn't stand the guy and—"

"Whatever his faults, and he has them, Bob Fowler is an honest politician, that's why. No, he doesn't like Ryan personally, maybe it's chemistry, I don't know, but Ryan saved him and he told Roger—what was it? 'Good man in a storm.' That's it," Arnie remembered.

"Shame he doesn't know politics."

"He learns pretty fast. Might surprise you."

"He's going to gut the government if he gets the chance. I can't—I mean, I *do* like the guy personally, but his policies . . ."

"Every time I think I have him figured out, he swerves on me, and then I have to remind myself that he doesn't have an agenda," van Damm said. "He just does the job. I give him papers to read, and he acts on them. He listens to what people tell him—asks good questions, and always listens to the answers—but he makes his own decisions, as though he knows what's right and what's wrong—but the hell of it is, mostly he does. Bob, he's rolled *me!* But that's not it, either. Sometimes I'm not sure what it is with him, you know?"

"A total outsider," Holtzman observed quietly. "But—"

The chief of staff nodded. "Yeah, *but. But* he's being analyzed as though he's an insider with a hidden agenda, and they're playing the insider games as if they apply to him, but they don't."

"So the key to the guy is there's nothing to figure out ... son of a bitch," Bob concluded. "He hates the job, doesn't he?" "Most of the time. You should have been there when he spoke in the Midwest. He got it then. All those people

loving him, and he loved them back, and it showed—and it scared the shit out of him. Nothing to figure out? Exactly. Like they say in golf, the hardest thing to do is to hit a straight ball, right? Everybody's looking for curves. There aren't any."

Holtzman snorted. "So, what's the angle if there isn't an angle?"

"Bob, I just try to control the media, remember? Damned if I know how you report this, except to state the facts—you know, like you're *supposed* to do."

That was a lot for the journalist to take. He'd been in Washington for all of his professional life. "And every politician is *supposed* to be like Ryan. But they're not."

"This one is," Arnie shot back.

"How am I supposed to tell my readers that? Who'll believe it?"

"Ain't that the problem?" he breathed. "I've been in politics all my life, and I thought I knew it all. Hell, I *do* know it all. I'm one of the best operators ever was, everybody knows that, and all of a sudden this yahoo comes into the Oval Office and says the emperor's naked, and he's right, and nobody knows what to do about it except to say that he isn't. The system isn't ready for this. The system is only ready for itself."

"And the system will destroy anybody who says different." Holtzman snorted with the thought: If Hans Christian Andersen had written "The Emperor's Clothes" about Washington, then the kid who'd spoken the truth out loud would have been killed on the spot by the assembled crowd of insiders.

"It'll try," Arnie agreed.

"And what are we supposed to do about it?"

"You're the one who said that you don't want to officiate at the hanging of an innocent man, remember?"

"Where's that leave us?"

"Maybe to talk about the unruly mob," Arnie suggested, "or the emperor's corrupt court."

NEXT TO GO was Austrian Airlines 774. It was down to a routine now, and the arrangements were well within the technical parameters. The cans of shaving cream had been filled a bare forty minutes before departure. The proximity of the Monkey House to the airport helped, as did the time of day, and having people race the last few hundred meters to the gate was not unusual anywhere in the world, particularly for flights like this one. The "soup" was sprayed into the bottom of the can, by a plastic valve that was invisible to X-ray examination. The nitrogen went in the top to a separate insulated container located in the center of the cans. The process was clean and safe—for extra but really unnecessary safety, the cans were sprayed and wiped; that was just to make the travelers happy. The cans were quite cold, of course, though not dangerously so. As the liquid nitrogen boiled off, it would vent through a pressure valve into the ambient atmosphere, where it merely joined the air. Though nitrogen is an important element in explosives, by itself it is totally inert, clear, and odorless. Nor would it react chemically with the contents of the cans, and so the pressure-relief valve retained a precise

quantity of the warming gas to act as a safe propellant for the “soup” when the time came.

The filling was done by the medical corpsmen in their protective suits—they refused to work without them, and ordering them otherwise would only have made them nervous and sloppy, and so the director indulged their fears. Two groups of five remained to be done. The cans could really all have been prepared at the same time, Moudi knew, but no unnecessary chances were being taken, a thought that made him stop cold. No unnecessary chances? Sure.

DARYAEI DIDN’T SLEEP that night, which was unusual for him. Though with increasing years he found that he needed less of it, getting off to sleep had never been difficult for him. On a really quiet night, if the winds were right, he could hear the airliners bring their engines to the roar of takeoff power—a distant sound, rather like a waterfall, he sometimes thought, or perhaps an earthquake. Some fundamental sound of nature, distant and foreboding. And now he found himself listening for it, and with his imagination, wondering if he heard it or not.

Had he gone too fast? He was an old man in a country where so many died young. He remembered the diseases of his youth, and later he’d learned their scientific causes, mainly poor water and sanitation, for Iran had been a backward country for most of his lifetime, despite its long history of civilization and power. Then it had been resurrected by oil and the immense riches that had come with it. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Shahanshah—*King of kings!* the phrase proclaimed—had begun to raise the country, but made the mistake of moving too fast and making too many enemies. In Iran’s dark age, as in every other such time, secular power had devolved to the Islamic clergy, and in liberating the nation’s peasantry, he’d trod on too many toes, making enemies of people whose power was spiritual and to whom the common folk looked for order in lives made chaotic by change. Even so, the Shah had almost succeeded, but not quite, and *not quite* was as damning a curse as the world produced for those who would be great.

What did such men think? Just as he himself was old, so the Shah had grown old and sick with cancer, and watched the work of a lifetime evaporate in a matter of weeks, his associates executed in a brief orgy of settled scores, bitter at his betrayal by his American friends. Had he thought that he’d gone too far—or not far enough? Daryaei didn’t know, and now he would have liked to know, as he listened for the distant sounds of waterfalls in the still of a Persian night.

To move too fast was a grievous error, which the young learned and the old knew, but not to move enough, fast enough, far enough, strongly enough, that was what really denied goals to those who would be great. How bitter it must be to lie in bed, without the sleep one needed to think clearly, and wonder and curse oneself for chances missed and chances lost.

Perhaps he knew what the Shah had thought, Daryaei admitted to himself. His own country was drifting again. Even insulated as he was, he knew the signs. It showed up as subtle differences in dress, especially the dress of

women. Not much, not quite enough for his true believers to persecute them, for even the true believers had softened their devotion, and there were gray areas into which people could venture to see what might happen. Yes, the people still believed in Islam, and yes, they still believed in him, but, really, the Holy Koran wasn't *that* strict, and their nation was rich, and to grow richer it needed to do business. How could it be a champion of the Faith unless it grew richer, after all? The best and brightest of Iran's young went abroad to be educated, for his country did not possess the schools that the infidel West had—and, for the most part, they came back, educated in skills which his country needed. But they also came back with other things, invisible, doubts and questions, and memories of a freewheeling life in a different society where the pleasures of the flesh were available to the weak, and all men were weak. What if all Khomeini and he had accomplished was to delay what the Shah had started? The people who had come back to Islam in reaction to Pahlavi were now drifting back to the promise of freedom he'd offered them. Didn't they *know*? Didn't they *see?* They could have all the trappings of power and all the blessings of what people called civilization and still remain faithful, still have the spiritual anchor—without which all was nothing.

But to have all that, his country needed to be more than it was, and so he could not afford to be *not quite.* Daryaei had to deliver the things that would show he'd been right all along, that uncompromising faith was the true root of power.

The assassination of the Iraqi leader, the misfortune that had befallen America—these things had to be a sign, didn't they? He'd studied them carefully. Now Iraq and Iran were one, and *that* had been the quest of decades —and at virtually the same instant, America had been crippled. It wasn't just Badrayn who was telling him things. He had his own America experts who knew the workings of that country's government. He knew Ryan from a single important meeting, had seen his eyes, heard the bold but hollow words, and so he knew the measure of the man who might be his principal adversary. He knew that Ryan had not, and by the laws of his country *could* not, have a replacement selected for himself, and so there was only this moment, and he had to act in it, or else assume for himself the curse of *not quite.*

No, he would not be remembered as another Mohammad Pahlavi. If he did not covet the trappings of power, he lusted for the fact of it. Before his death he would lead all Islam. In a month he would have the oil of the Persian Gulf and the keys to Mecca, secular *and* spiritual power. From that his influence would expand in all directions. In but a few years his country would be a superpower in every way, and he would leave to his successors a legacy such as the world hadn't seen since Alexander, but with the added security that it was founded in the words of God. To achieve that end, to unite Islam, to fulfill the Will of Allah and the words of the Prophet Mohammed, he would do what was needed, and if that meant moving fast, then he would move fast. Overall, the process was a simple one, three simple steps, the third and most difficult of which was already established and nothing could stop, even if Badrayn's plans all failed completely.

Was he moving too fast? Daryaei asked himself for the last time. No, he was moving decisively, with surprise, with calculation, with boldness. That was

what history would say.

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"FLYING AT NIGHT is a big deal?" Jack asked.

"Sure is, for them it is," Robby replied. He liked briefing the President this way, late evening in the Oval Office, with a drink. "They've always been more parsimonious with equipment than they are with people. Helicopters—French ones in this case, same model the Coast Guard has a bunch of—cost money, and we haven't seen much in the way of night operations. The operation they're running is heavy on ASW. So maybe they're thinking about dealing with all those Dutch subs the Republic of China bought last year. We're also seeing a lot of combined operations with their air force."

"Conclusion?"

"They're training up for something." The Pentagon's Director of Operations closed his briefing book. "Sir, we—"

"Robby," Ryan said, looking over the new reading glasses Cathy had just gotten him, "if you don't start calling me 'Jack' when we're alone, I'm going to break you back to ensign by executive order."

"We're not alone," Admiral Jackson objected, nodding toward Agent Price.

"Andrea doesn't count—oh, shit, I mean—" Ryan blushed.

"He's right, Admiral, I don't count," she said, with a barely contained laugh. "Mr. President, I've been waiting *weeks* for you to say that."

Jack looked down at the table and shook his head. "This is no way for a man to live. Now my best friend calls me 'sir,' and I'm being impolite to a lady."

"Jack, you are my commander-in-chief," Robby pointed out, with a relaxed grin at his friend's discomfort. "And I'm just a poor sailor man."

First things first, the President thought: "Agent Price?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Pour yourself a drink and sit down."

"Sir, I'm on duty, and regulations—"

"Then make it a light one, but that's an order from your President. Do it!"

She actually hesitated, but then decided that POTUS was trying to make some sort of point. Price poured a large thimbleful of whiskey into the Old Fashioned glass and added a lot of ice and Evian to it. Then she sat next to the J-3. His wife, Sissy, was upstairs in the House with the Ryan family.

"As a practical matter, people, the President needs to relax, and it's easier for me to do that if I don't make ladies stand up, and my friend can call me by my name once in a while. Are we agreed on that?"

"Aye aye," Robby said, still smiling but seeing the logic and desperation of the moment. "Yes, Jack, we are all relaxed now, and we *will* enjoy it." He looked over at Price. "You're here to shoot me if I misbehave, right?"

"Right in the head," she confirmed.

"I prefer missiles myself. Safer," he added.

"You did okay with a shotgun one night, or so the Boss has told me. By the way, thanks."

"Huh?"

"For keeping him alive. We actually like taking care of the Boss, even if he gets too familiar with the hired help."

Jack freshened his drink while they relaxed on the other sofa. Remarkable, he thought. For the first time, there was a genuinely relaxed atmosphere in the office, to the point that two people could joke about him, right in front of him, as though he were a human being instead of POTUS.

"I like this a lot better." The President looked up. "Robby, this gal has been around more crap than we have, listened in on all sorts of things. She has a master's degree, she's smart, but I'm supposed to treat her like she's a knuckle-dragger."

"Well, hell, I'm just a fighter jock with a bad knee."

"And I still don't know what the hell I'm supposed to be. Andrea?"

"Yes, Mr. President?" Getting her to call him by his name was an impossible goal, Jack knew.

"China, what do you think?"

"I think I'm no expert, but since you ask, I don't know."

"You're expert enough," Robby observed with a grunt. "All the king's horses and all the king's men don't know much, either. The additional subs are arriving," he told the President. "Mancuso wants them on the north-south line between the two navies. I've concurred on that, and the Secretary's signed off on it."

"How's Bretano doing?"

"He knows what he doesn't know, Jack. He listens to us on operational stuff, asks good questions, and listens some more. He wants to start getting out into the field next week, poke around and see the kids at work to educate himself. His managerial skills are downright awesome, but he's swinging a big ax—he's going to, that is. I've seen his draft plan for downsizing the bureaucracy. Whoa," Admiral Jackson concluded, with an eye-roll.

"You have problems with that?" Jack asked.

"No way. It's about fifty years overdue. Ms. Price, I'm an operator," he explained. "I like greasy flight suits and the smell of jet fuel and pulling g's. But us guys at the sharp end always have the desk-sitters after us like a bunch of little dogs at our ankles all the time. Bretano loves engineers and people who do things, but along the way he's learned to hate bureaucrats and cost accountants. My kind of guy."

"Back to China," Ryan said.

"Okay, we still have the electronics-intelligence flights working out of Kadena. We're getting routine training stuff. We do not know what intentions the ChiComs have. CIA isn't giving us much. Signal intelligence is unremarkable. State says that their government says, 'What's the big deal?' And that's it. The Taiwanese navy is big enough to handle the threat, if there is one, unless they get coldcocked. That's not going to happen. They're brighteyed and bushy-tailed, doing their own training ops. A lot of sound and fury, signifying nothing I can make out."

"The Gulf?"

"Well, we're hearing from our people in Israel that they're taking a very close look, but I gather they're not getting much in the way of hard intel.

Whatever sources they had were probably with the generals who bugged out to Sudan—aides and such, probably. I got a fax in from Sean Magruder—"

"Who's that?" Ryan asked.

"He's an Army colonel, boss-man of the 10th Cav in the Negev. I met him last year; he's a guy we listen to. 'Most dangerous man in the world,' is what our good pal Avi ben Jakob says of Daryaei. Magruder thought that was insightful enough to pass it along."

"And?"

"And we need to keep an eye on it. It's probably a ways off, but Daryaei has imperial ambitions. The Saudis are playing it wrong. We should have people on the way over now, maybe not many, but some, to show the other side that we're in the game."

"I talked to Ali about that. His government wants to cool it."

"Wrong signal," Jackson observed.

"Agreed." POTUS nodded. "We'll work on that."

"What's the state of the Saudi military?" Price asked.

"Not as good as it ought to be. After the Persian Gulf War, it got fashionable to join their National Guard, and they bought equipment like it was a bunch of Mercedes cars from a wholesaler. For a while they had themselves a fine old time playing soldier, but then they found out that you have to maintain the stuff. They hired people to do that for them. Kinda like squires and knights back in the old days. Ain't the same," Jackson said. "And now they're not training. Oh, sure, they run around in their tanks, and they do their gunnery—the M1 is a fun tank to shoot, and they do a lot of that—but they're not training in units. Knights and squires. Their tradition is guys on horses going after other guys on horses-one-on-one, like in the movies. War ain't like that. War is a great big team working together. Their culture and history are against that model, and they haven't had the chance to learn. Bottom line, they're not as good as they think they are. If the UIR gets its military act together someday and comes south, the Saudis are outgunned and damned sure outmanned."

"How do we fix that?" Ryan asked.

"For starters, get some of our people over there, and some of their people over here, out to the National Training Center for a crash course in reality. I've talked it over with Mary Diggs at the NTC—"

"Mary?"

"General Marion Diggs. 'Mary' goes back to the Point. It's a uniform thing," Robby told Price. "I'd like to fly a Saudi heavy battalion over here and have the OpFor pound them into the sand for a few weeks to get the message across. That's how our people learned. That's how the Israelis learned. And that's how the Saudis are going to have to learn, damned sight easier that way than in a shooting war. Diggs is for it, big time. Give us two or three years, maybe less if we set up a proper training establishment in Saudi, and we can snap their army into shape—except for politics," he added.

POTUS nodded. "Yeah, it'll make the Israelis nervous, and the Saudis have always worried about having too strong a military, for domestic reasons."

"You could tell them the story about the three little pigs. It might not fly with their culture, but the big bad wolf just moved in next door to them, and

they'd better start paying attention before he starts a-huffin' and a-puffin'."

"I hear you, Robby. I'll have Adler and Vasco think that one over." Ryan checked his watch. Another fifteenhour day. One more drink would have been nice, but as it was, he'd be lucky to get six hours of sleep, and he didn't want to wake up with a larger headache than necessary. He set his drink down and waved for the other two to follow, down the ramp and out the door.

"SWORDSMAN heading to the residence," Andrea spoke into her radio mike. A minute later, they were in the elevator and going up.

"Try not to let the booze show," Jack remarked to his principal agent.

"What *are* we going to do with you?" she asked the ceiling, as the doors opened.

Jack walked out first, leaving the other two behind as he took his jacket off. He hated wearing a jacket all the time.

"Well, now you know," Robby said to the Secret Service agent. She turned to look in his eyes.

"Yeah." Actually she'd known for quite a while, but she kept learning more and more about SwoRDSMAN.

"Take good care of him, Price. When he escapes from this place, I want my friend back."

THE VAGARIES OF winds made the Lufthansa flight first to arrive at the international terminal in Frankfurt, Germany. For the travelers it was like an inverted funnel. The jetway was the narrow part, and on entering the concourse they all spread out, checking the video monitors for their gates. The layovers ranged from one to three hours, and their luggage would be automatically transferred from one aircraft to another—for all the complaints about airport luggage-handlers, 99.9 percent is a passing grade in most human endeavors; and the Germans were notoriously efficient. Customs control points didn't worry them, because none of them were spending any more time in Europe than was necessary. They studiously avoided eye contact, even when three of them entered a coffee shop, and all three, on reflection, decided on decaf. Two walked into the men's rooms for the usual reason, and then looked into the mirrors to check their faces. They'd all shaved just before leaving, but one of them, especially heavilybearded, saw that his jaw was already shadowed. Perhaps he should shave? Not a good idea, he thought, smiling at the mirror. Then he lifted his carry-on bag and walked off to the first-class lounge to wait for the flight to Dallas-Fort Worth.

"LONG DAY?" JACK asked, after everyone had gone home, and just the usual squad of guards patrolled outside.

"Yeah. Grand rounds tomorrow with Bernie. Some procedures the next day, though." Cathy changed into her nightgown, as tired as her husband was.

"Anything new?"

"Not in my shop. Had lunch with Pierre Alexandre. He's a new associate professor working under Ralph Forster, ex-Army, pretty smart."

"Infectious diseases?" Jack vaguely remembered meeting the guy at some function or other. "AIDS and stuff?"

"Yeah."

"Nasty," Ryan observed, getting into bed.

"They just dodged a bullet. There was a mini-outbreak of Ebola in Zaire," Cathy said, getting in the other side. "Two deaths. Then two more cases turned up in Sudan, but it doesn't look like it's going anywhere."

"Is that as bad as people say?" Jack turned the light off.

"Eighty percent mortality—pretty bad." She adjusted the covers and moved toward him. "But enough of that stuff. Sissy says she's got a concert scheduled for two weeks from now at Kennedy Center. Beethoven's Fifth, with Fritz Bayerlein conducting, would you believe? Think we can get tickets?" He could sense his wife's smile in the dark.

"I think I know the theater owner. I'll see what I can do." A kiss. A day ended.

"SEE YOU IN the morning, Jeff." Price went to the right for her car. Raman went to the left for his.

A mind could be dulled by this job, Aref Raman told himself. The sheer mechanics of it, the hours, the watching and waiting and doing nothing—but always being ready.

Hmph. Why should he complain about that? It was the story of his adult life. He drove north, waited for the security gate to open and headed northwest. The empty streets made it go quickly. By the time he got to his home, the bled-off stress of working the Detail in the White House had him nodding, but there were still mechanics.

Unlocking the door, he next turned off the security system, picked up the mail that had come through the slot in the door and scanned it. One bill, and the rest was junk mail offering him the chance of a lifetime to buy things he didn't need. He hung up his coat, removed the pistol and holster from his belt, and walked into the kitchen. The light was blinking on the answering machine. There was one message.

"Mr. Sloan," the digital recorder said to him in a voice that was familiar, though he'd only heard it once before, "this is Mr. Alahad. Your rug just came in, and is ready for delivery."

37

DISCHARGES

AMERICA WAS SLEEPING when they boarded their flights in Amsterdam, and London, and Vienna, and Paris. This time no two were on the same aircraft, and the schedules were staggered so that the same customs inspector would not have the chance to open two shaving kits and find the same brand of cream and then wonder about it, however unlikely that might be. The real risk had been in placing so many men on the same flights out of Tehran, but they'd been properly briefed on how to act. While the ever-watchful German police, for example, might have taken note of a gaggle of Middle Eastern men huddling together after arriving on the same flight, airports have always been anonymous places full of semi-confused wandering people, often tired and usually disoriented, and one lonely, aimless traveler looked much like another.

The first to board a transatlantic flight walked onto a Singapore Airlines 747 at Amsterdam's Schiphol International Airport. Coded as SQ26, the airliner pulled away at eight-thirty A.M. and got into the air on time, then angled northwest for a great-circle course that would take it over the southern tip of Greenland. The flight would last just under eight hours. The traveler was in a first-class window seat, which he tilted all the way back. It was not even three in the morning in his next destination city, and he preferred sleep to a movie, along with most of the other people in the nose of the aircraft. He had his itinerary memorized, and if his memory failed, with the confusion of long-distance travel, he still had his tickets to remind him of what to do next. For the moment, sleep was enough, and he turned his head on the pillow, soothed by the swish of passing air outside the double windows.

Around him, in the air, were other flights, with other travelers heading for Boston, Philadelphia, Washington-Dulles, Atlanta, Orlando, Dallas-Fort Worth, Chicago, San Francisco, Miami, and Los Angeles, the ten principal gateway cities into America. Each of them had a trade show or convention of some sort underway now. Ten other cities, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Nashville, Atlantic City, Las Vegas, Seattle, Phoenix, Houston, and New Orleans, also had events, and each was but a brief flight—in two cases, a drive—from the nearest port of entry.

The traveler on SQ26 thought about that as he faded off. The shaving kit was tucked in his carry-on bag under the seat in front of him, carefully insulated and wrapped, and he made certain that his feet didn't touch, much less kick, the bag.

IT WAS APPROACHING noon outside Tehran. The Movie Star watched as his

group conducted weapons practice. It was a formality really, designed more for morale than anything else. They all knew how to shoot, having learned and practiced in the Bekaa Valley, and though they weren't using the same weapons they'd have in America, it didn't really matter. A gun was a gun, and targets were targets, and they knew about both. They couldn't simulate everything, of course, but all of them knew how to drive, and they spent hours every day going over the diagram and the models. They would go in during the late afternoon, when parents came in to pick up their children for the daily trip home, when the bodyguards would be tired and bored from a day of watching the children doing childish things. Movie Star had gotten descriptions of several of the "regular" cars, and some were common types which could be rented. The opposition was as trained and experienced as they had to be, but they were not supermen. Some were even women, and for all his exposure to the West, the Movie Star could not take women seriously as adversaries, guns or no guns. But their biggest tactical advantage was that his team was willing to use deadly force with profligate abandon. With over twenty toddlers about, plus the school staff, and probably a few parents in the way as well, the opposition would be greatly hampered. So, no, the initial part of the mission was the easiest. The hard part would be getting away—if things got that far. He had to tell his team that they would get away, and that there was a plan. But really it didn't matter, and in their hearts all of them knew it.

They were all willing to become sacrifices in the unannounced *jihad,* else they would never have joined Hezbollah in the first place. They were also willing to see their victims as sacrifices. But that was just a convenient label. Religion was really nothing more than a façade for what they did and who they were. A true scholar of their religion would have blanched at their purpose, but Islam had many adherents, and among them were many who chose to read the scriptures in unconventional ways, and they too, had their following. What Allah might have thought of their actions was not something they considered very deeply, and the Movie Star didn't trouble himself to think about it at all. For him, it was business, a political statement, a professional challenge, one more task to occupy his days. Perhaps, too, it was a step toward a larger goal, the achievement of which would mean a life of comfort, and perhaps even some personal power and stability—but in his heart he didn't really believe that, either. At first, yes, he'd thought that Israel might be overthrown, the Jews expunged from the face of the earth, but those careless beliefs of his youth had long since faded. For him, it was all mere process now, and this was one more task. The substance of the task didn't really matter all that much, did it? he asked himself, watching the team's grimly enthusiastic faces, as the men hit the targets. Oh, it seemed to matter to them. But he knew better.

THE DAY BEGAN at five-thirty A.M. for Inspector Patrick O'Day. A clock-radio roused him from his bed, then off to the bathroom for the usual start-up functions, a look in the mirror, and off to the kitchen to get the coffee going. It was the quiet of the day. Most people (the sensible ones) weren't up yet. No traffic on the streets. Even the birds still slumbering on their perches. Outside

to get the papers, he could feel the silence and wonder why the world wasn't always this way. Through the trees to the east was the glow of a coming dawn, though the stronger of the stars still burned overhead. Not a single light showing in the rest of the houses in the development. Damn. Was he the only one who had to work such punishing hours?

Back inside, he took ten minutes to scan the morning *Post* and *Sun*. He kept track of the news, especially crime cases. As a roving inspector working directly out of the office of the Director, he never knew from one day to the next when he might be sent off on a case, which often meant calling in a sitter, to the point that he sometimes thought about getting a full-time nanny. He could afford it—the insurance settlement for his wife's death in the plane crash had actually given him a measure of financial independence, though its circumstances seemed altogether blasphemous, but they had offered it and he, on advice of counsel, had taken it. But a nanny? No. It would be a woman, and Megan would think of her as Mommy, and, no, he couldn't have that. Instead, he did the hours and denied himself so that he could be both parents, and no grizzly bear had ever been more protective of a cub. Maybe Megan didn't know the difference. Maybe kids thrived under the care of a mother and bonded firmly to her but could as easily bond to a father. When asked about her mommy by other kids, she explained that Mommy had gone to heaven early—and this is my daddy! Whatever the psychological circumstances, the closeness of the two which seemed so natural to Megan—she'd scarcely had the chance to know anything else—was something that occasionally brought tears to her father's eyes. The love of a child is ever unconditional, all the more so when there is but one object for it. Inspector O'Day was sometimes grateful for the fact that he hadn't worked a kidnapping in years. Were he to do so today . . . he took a sip of coffee and admitted to himself that he might just find himself searching for an excuse not to bring the subject in. There were always ways. He'd worked on six of those cases as a young agent—kidnapping for money was a very rare crime today; the word had gotten out that it was a losing game, that the full power of the FBI descended on such cases like the wrath of God—and only now did he understand how hateful such crimes were. You had to be a parent, you had to know the feel of tiny arms around your neck to understand the magnitude of such a violation—but then your blood turned to ice, and you didn't so much turn off your emotions as block them out for as long as you had to before letting them free again. He remembered his first squad supervisor, Dominic DiNapoli—"the toughest wop this side of the Gambino family" was the office joke—crying like a baby himself as he carried the living victim of such a crime to see her parents. Only now did he understand how it was just one more sign of Dom's toughness. Yeah. And *that* subject would *never* get out of Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.

Then it was time to get Megan up. She was curled up in her full-body sleeper, the blue one with Casper the Friendly Ghost on it. She was outgrowing it, he saw. Her little toes were pushing at the plastic feet. They did grow so fast. He tickled her nose, and her eyes opened.

"Daddy!" She sat up, then stood to give him a kiss, and Pat wondered how kids woke up with a smile. No adult ever did. And the day began in earnest with another trip to the bathroom. He noted with pleasure that her training

pants were dry. Megan was catching on to sleeping through the night—it had been a struggle for a while—though it seemed a very strange thing to be proud about, he thought. He started to shave, a daily event that utterly fascinated his daughter. Done, he bent down so that she could feel his face and pronounce it, "Okay!"

Dinner this morning was oatmeal with sliced banana and a glass of apple juice, and watching the Disney Channel on the kitchen TV while Daddy returned to his paper. Megan took her bowl and glass to the dishwasher all by herself, a very serious task which she was learning to master. The hard part was getting the bowl into the holder properly. Megan was still working on that. It was harder than doing her own shoes, which had Velcro closures. Mrs. Daggett had told him that Megan was an unusually bright child, one more thing to beam with pride about, followed by the sadness, always, of remembering his wife. Pat told himself that he could see Deborah's face in hers, but the honest part of the agent occasionally wondered how much of that was a wish and how much fact. At least she seemed to have her mother's brains. Maybe the bright expression was what he saw?

The ride in the truck was routine. The sun was up now, and the traffic still light. Megan was in her safety seat, as usual looking at the other cars with wonderment.

The arrival was routine also. There was the agent working in the 7-Eleven, of course, plus the advance team at Giant Steps. Well, nobody would ever kidnap *his* little girl. At the working level, rivalry between the Bureau and the Service largely disappeared, except for the occasional inside joke or two. He was glad they were there, and they didn't mind having *this* armed man come in. He walked Megan in, and she immediately ran off to hug Mrs. Daggett and put her blanky in her cubby in the back, and her day of learning and play began.

"Hey, Pat," the agent at the door greeted him.

" 'Morning, Norm." Both men enjoyed an early-morning yawn.

"Your schedule's as screwed up as mine," Special Agent Jeffers replied. He was one of the agents who rotated on and off the SANDBOX detail, this morning working as part of the advance team.

"How's the wife?"

"Six more weeks, and then we have to think about shopping for a place like this. Is she as good as she seems?"

"Mrs. Daggett? Ask the President," O'Day joked. "They've sent all their kids here."

"I guess it can't be too bad," the Secret Service man agreed. "What's the story on the Kealty case?"

"Somebody at State is lying. That's what the OPR guys think." He shrugged. "Not sure which. The polygraph data was worthless. Your guys picking up on anything?"

"You know, it's funny. He sends his detail off a lot. He's actually said to them that he doesn't want to put them in a position where they'd have to—"

"Gotcha." Pat nodded. "And they have to play along?"

"No choice. He's meeting with people, but we don't always know who, and we're not allowed to find out what he's doing against SWORDSMAN." A wry

shake of the head. “Don’t you love it?”

“I like Ryan.” His eyes scanned the area, looking for trouble. It was automatic, just like breathing.

“We love the guy,” Norm agreed. “We think he’s going to make it. Kealty’s full of crap. Hey, I worked his detail back when he was V.P., okay? I fuckin’ stood post outside the door while he was inside boffin’ some cookie or other. Part of the job,” he concluded sourly. The two federal agents shared a look. This was an inside story, to be repeated only within the federal law-enforcement community, and while the Secret Service was paid to protect their principals and keep all the secrets, that didn’t mean they liked it.

“I think you’re right. So things here okay?”

“Russell wants three more people, but I don’t think he’s going to get it. Hell, we have three good agents inside, and three doing overwatch next door”—he wasn’t revealing anything; O’Day had figured that one out—“and—”

“Yeah, across the street. Russell looks like he knows his stuff.”

“Grandpa’s the best,” Norm offered. “Hell, he’s trained half the people in the Service, and you oughta see him shoot. Both hands.”

O’Day smiled. “People keep telling me that. One day I’ll have to invite him over for a friendly match.”

A grin. “Andrea told me. She, uh, pulled your Bureau file—”

“What?”

“Hey, Pat, it’s business. We check everybody out. We have a principal in here every day, y‘dig?” Norm Jeffers went on. “Besides, she wanted to see your firearms card. I hear you’re pretty decent, but I’m telling you, man, you want to play with Russell, bring money, y’hear?”

“That’s what makes a horse race, Mr. Jeffers.” O’Day loved such challenges, and he’d yet to lose one.

“Bet your white ass, Mr. O’Day.” His hand went up. He checked his earpiece, then his watch. “They just started moving. SANDBOX is on the way. Our kid and your kid are real buddies.”

“She seems like a great little girl.”

“They’re all good kids. A couple of rough spots, but that’s kids. SHADOW is going to be a handful when she starts dating for real.”

“I don’t want to hear it!”

Jeffers had a good laugh. “Yeah, I’m hoping ours’ll be a boy. My dad—he’s a city police captain in Atlanta—he says that daughters are God’s punishment on ya for being a man. You live in fear that they’ll meet somebody like you were at seventeen.”

“Enough! Let me go to work and deal with some criminals.” He slapped Jeffers on the shoulder.

“She’ll be here when you get back, Pat.”

O’Day passed on the usual coffee refill across Ritchie Highway, instead heading south to Route 50. He had to admit that the Service guys knew their stuff. But there was at least one aspect of presidential security that the Bureau was handling. He’d have to talk to the OPR guys this morning—informally, of course.

ONE DIED, ONE went home, and at roughly the same time. It was MacGregor's first Ebola death. He'd seen enough others, heart-attack failures-to-resuscitate, strokes, cancer, or just old age. More often than not, doctors weren't there, and the job fell on nurses. But he was there for this one. At the end, it wasn't so much peace as exhaustion. Saleh's body had fought as best it could, and his strength had merely extended the struggle and the pain, like a soldier in a hopeless battle. But his strength had given out, finally, and the body collapsed, and waited for death to come. The alarm chirp on the cardiac monitor went off, and there was nothing to do but flip it off. There would be no reviving this patient. IV leads were removed, and the sharps carefully placed in the red-plastic container. Literally everything that had touched the patient would be burned. It wasn't all that remarkable. AIDS and some hepatitis victims were similarly treated as objects of deadly contamination. Just with Ebola, burning the bodies was preferable—and besides, the government had insisted. So, one battle lost.

MacGregor was relieved, somewhat to his shame, as he stripped off the protective suit for the last time, washed thoroughly, then went to see Sohaila. She was still weak, but ready to leave to complete her recovery. The most recent tests showed her blood full of antibodies. Somehow her system had met the enemy and passed the test. There was no active virus in her. She could be hugged. In another country she would have been kept in for further tests, and would have donated a good deal of blood for extensive laboratory studies, but again the local government had said that such things would not take place, that she was to be released from the hospital the first minute that it was safe to do so. MacGregor had hedged on that, but now he was certain that there would be no more complications. The doctor himself lifted her and placed her in the wheelchair.

"When you feel better, will you come back to see me?" he asked, with a warm smile. She nodded. A bright child. Her English was good. A pretty child, with a charming smile despite her fatigue, glad to be going home.

"Doctor?" It was her father. He must have had a military background, so straight of back was he. What he was trying to say was evident on his face, before he could even think the words.

"I did very little. Your daughter is young and strong, and that is what saved her."

"Even so, I will not forget this debt." A firm handshake, and MacGregor remembered Kipling's line about East and West. Whatever this man was—the doctor had his suspicions—there was a commonality among all men.

"She will be weak for another fortnight or so. Let her eat whatever she wants, and best to let her sleep as long as possible."

"It will be as you say," Sohaila's father promised.

"You have my number, here and at home, if you have any questions at all."

"And if you have any difficulties, with the government, for example, please let me know." The measure of the man's gratitude came across. For what it was worth, MacGregor had a protector of sorts. It couldn't hurt, he decided, walking them to the door. Then it was back to his office.

"So," the official said after listening to the report, "everything is stabilized."

"That is correct."

"The staff have been checked?"

"Yes, and we will rerun the tests tomorrow to be sure. Both patient rooms will be fully disinfected today. All contaminated items are being burned right now."

"The body?"

"Also bagged and to be burned, as you directed."

"Excellent. Dr. MacGregor, you have done well, and I thank you for that. Now we can forget that this unhappy incident ever happened."

"But *how* did the Ebola get here?" MacGregor demanded—plaintively, which was as far as he could go.

The official didn't know, and so he spoke confidently: "That does not concern you, and it does not concern me. It will not be repeated. Of that I am certain."

"As you say." After a few more words, MacGregor hung the phone up and stared at the wall. One more fax to CDC, he decided. The government couldn't object to that. He had to tell them that the outbreak, such as it was, was closed out. And that was a relief, too. Better to go back to the normal practice of medicine, and diseases he could defeat.

IT TURNED OUT that Kuwait had been more forthcoming than Saudi on forwarding the substance of the meeting, perhaps because the Kuwaiti government really was a family business, and their establishment happened to be on a very dangerous street corner. Adler handed the transcript over. The President scanned it quickly.

"It reads like, 'Get lost.' "

"You got it," the Secretary of State agreed.

"Either Foreign Minister Sabah edited all the polite stuff out, or what he heard scared him. I'm betting on number two," Bert Vasco decided.

"Ben?" Jack asked.

Dr. Goodley shook his head. "We may have a problem here."

" 'May'?" Vasco asked. "This goes beyond 'may.' "

"Okay, Bert, you're our champ prognosticator for the Persian Gulf," the President observed. "How about another forecast?"

"The culture over there is one of bargaining. There are elaborate verbal rituals for important meetings. 'Hi, how are you?' can take an hour. If we're to believe that such things did not take place, there's a message in their absence. You said it, Mr. President: *Get lost.*" Though it was interesting, Vasco thought, that they'd begun by praying together. Perhaps that was a signal that had meant something to the Saudis but not the Kuwaitis? Even he didn't know every aspect of the local culture.

"Then why are the Saudis low-keying this?"

"You told me that Prince Ali gave you another impression?"

Ryan nodded. "That's right. Go on."

"The Kingdom is a little schizophrenic. They like us, and they trust us as strategic partners, but they also dislike us and distrust us as a culture. It's not even that simple, and it goes round and round, but they're afraid that too much exposure to the West will adversely affect their society. They're highly

conservative on what we call social issues, like when our Army was over there in '91, and they requested that Army chaplains remove the religious insignia from their uniforms, and seeing women drive cars and carry guns drove them a little nuts. So, on one hand, they depend on us as guarantor of their security —Prince Ali keeps asking you about that, right?—but on the other hand they worry that in protecting them we might mess up their country. It keeps coming back to religion. They'd probably prefer to make a deal with Daryaei than to have to invite us back to guard their border, and so the majority of their government is going to run down that track in the knowledge that we *will* come in if asked. Kuwait's going to be a different story. If we ask to be allowed to stage an exercise, they'll say 'yes' in a heartbeat, even if the Saudis ask them not to. Good news, Daryaei knows that, and he can't move all that fast. If he starts moving troops south—"

"The Agency will give us warning," Goodley said confidently. "We know what to look for, and they're not sophisticated enough to hide it."

"If we run troops into Kuwait now, it will be perceived as an aggressive act," Adler warned. "Better we should meet with Daryaei first and sound him out."

"Just so we give him the right signal," Vasco put in.

"Oh, we won't make that mistake, and I think he knows that the status of the Gulf countries is a topdrawer item with us. No mixed signals this time." Ambassador April Glaspie had been accused of giving such a signal to Saddam Hussein in the summer of 1990—but she'd denied Hussein's account, and the latter wasn't all that reliable a source of information. Maybe it had been a linguistic nuance. Most likely of all, he'd heard exactly what he'd wanted to hear and not what had actually been said, a habit frequently shared by heads of state and children.

"How fast can you set it up?" the President asked.

"Pretty fast," the Secretary of State replied.

"Do it," Ryan ordered. "All possible speed. Ben?"

"Yes, sir."

"I talked with Robby Jackson already. Coordinate with him for a plan to get a modest security force rapiddeployed over there. Enough to show that we're interested, not enough to provoke them. Let's also call Kuwait and tell them that we're here if they need us, and that we *can* deploy to their country if they so request. Who's ondeck for this?"

"Twenty-fourth Mech, Fort Stewart, Georgia. I checked," Goodley said, rather proud of himself. "Their second brigade is on rotating alert-status now. Also a brigade of the 82nd at Fort Bragg. With the equipment warehoused in Kuwait, we can do the match-up and be rolling in as little as forty-eight hours. I'd also advise increasing the readiness state of the Maritime Pre-Positioning Ships at Diego Garcia. That we can do quietly."

"Nice job, Ben. Call the SecDef and tell him I want it done—quietly."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"I'll tell Daryaei that we offer a friendly hand to the United Islamic Republic," Adler said. "Also that we're committed to peace and stability in that region, and that means territorial integrity. I wonder what he'll say . . . ?"

Eyes turned to Bert Vasco, who was learning to curse his newly acquired

status as resident genius. “He might just have wanted to rattle their cage. I don’t think he wants to rattle ours.”

“That’s your first hedge,” Ryan observed.

“Not enough information,” Vasco replied. “I don’t see that he wants a conflict with us. That happened once, and everybody watched. Yes, he doesn’t like us. Yes, he doesn’t like the Saudis or any of the other states. But, no, he doesn’t want to take us on. Maybe he *could* knock them all off. That’s a military call, and I’m just an FSO. But not with us in the game, and he knows it. So, political pressure on Kuwait and the Kingdom, sure. Beyond that, however, I don’t see enough to be worried about.”

“Yet,” the President added.

“Yes, sir, *yet,* Vasco agreed.

“Am I leaning on you too hard, Bert?”

“It’s okay, Mr. President. At least you listen to me. It wouldn’t hurt for us to generate a Special National Intelligence Estimate of the UIR’s full capabilities and intentions. I need broader access to what the intel community’s generating.”

Jack turned. “Ben, the SNIE is ordered. Bert’s on the team with full access, by my order. You know, guys, giving orders can be fun,” the President added, with a smile to break up the tension that the meeting had generated. “This is a potential problem, but not a ball-buster yet, correct?” There were nods. “Okay. Thank you, gentlemen. Let’s keep an eye on this one.”

SINGAPORE AIRLINES FLIGHT 26 landed five minutes later, coming to the terminal at 10:25 A.M. The first-class passengers, having enjoyed wider, softer seats, now enjoyed quicker access to the entry rigmarole which America inflicts on her visitors. The traveler recovered his two-suiter from the carousel, and with his carry-on slung on his other shoulder, picked a line to stand in, in his hand held his entry card, which declared nothing of interest to the United States government. The truth would not have been pleasing to them in any case.

“Hello,” the inspector said, taking the card and scanning it. The passport came next. It seemed an old one, its pages liberally covered with exit and entry stamps. He found a blank page and prepared to make a new mark. “Purpose of your visit to America?”

“Business,” the traveler replied. “I am here for the auto show at Javits Center.”

“Uh-huh.” The inspector had scarcely heard the answer. The stamp was placed and the visitor pointed to another line. There his bags were X-rayed instead of opened. “Anything to declare?”

“No.” Simple answers were best. Another inspector looked at the TV display of the bag and saw nothing interesting. The traveler was waved through, and he collected his bags from the conveyor and walked out to where the taxis were.

Amazing, he thought, finding a place in another line, and getting into a cab in less than five minutes. His first concern, being caught at the customs checkpoint, was behind him. For his next, the taxi he was in could not have

been pre-selected for him. He'd fumbled with his bags and let a woman go ahead of him in order to keep that from happening. Now he slumped back in his seat and made a show of looking around, while in reality looking to see if there was a car following the cab into town. The prelunchtime traffic was so dense that it hardly seemed possible, all the more so that he was in one of thousands of yellow vehicles, darting in and out of traffic like cattle in a stampede. About the only bad news was that his hotel was sufficiently far from the convention center that he'd need another cab. Well, that couldn't be helped, and he needed to check in first anyway.

Another thirty minutes and he was in the hotel, in the elevator, going up to the sixth floor, a helpful bellman holding his two-suiter while the traveler retained his carry-on. He tipped the bellman two dollars—he'd been briefed on what to tip; better to give a modest one than to be remembered as one who'd tipped too much or not at all—which was taken with gratitude, but not too much. With his entry tasks complete, the traveler unpacked his suits and shirts, also removing extraneous items from his carry-on. The shaving kit he left in, using what the hotel provided to re-shave his bristly face after a cleansing shower. Despite the tension, he was amazed at how good he felt. He'd been on the go for—what? Twenty-two hours? Something like that. But he'd gotten a lot of sleep, and air travel didn't make him anxious, as it did for so many. He ordered lunch from the room-service menu, then dressed, and slinging his carry-on over his shoulder, walked downstairs and got a cab for the Javits Center. The auto show, he thought. He'd always liked cars.

Behind him in space and time, most of the nineteen others were still in the air. Some were just landing—Boston first, then more in New York, and one at Dulles—to make their own way through customs, testing their knowledge and their luck against the Great Satan, or whatever rubbish Daryaei termed their collective enemy. Satan, after all, had great powers and was worthy of respect. Satan could look in a man's eyes and see his thoughts, almost as Allah could. No, these Americans were functionaries, only dangerous to them if given warning.

"YOU HAVE TO know how to read people," Clark told them. It was a good class. Unlike people in a conventional school, they all wanted to learn. It almost took him back to his own days here at the Farm, at the height of the Cold War, when everyone had wanted to be James Bond and actually believed a little in it despite everything the instructors had said. Most of his classmates had been recent college grads, well educated from books but not yet from life. Most had learned pretty well. Some hadn't, and the flunking grade out in the field could be more than a red mark on a blue book, but mainly it had been less dramatic than what they showed in the movies. Just the realization that it was time for a career change. Clark had higher hopes for this bunch. Maybe they hadn't arrived with degrees in history from Dartmouth or Brown, but they had studied something, somewhere, then learned more on the streets of some big cities. Maybe they even knew that *everything* they learned would be important to them someday.

"Will they lie to us—our agents, I mean?"

"You're from Pittsburgh, Mr. Stone, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"You worked confidential informants on the street. They ever lie to you?"

"Sometimes," Stone admitted.

"There's your answer. They will lie about their importance, the danger they're in, damned near anything, depending on how they feel today. You have to know them and know their moods. Stone, did you know when your informants were telling sea stories?"

"Most of the time."

"How did you tell?" Clark asked.

"Whenever they know a little too much, whenever it doesn't fit—"

"You know," their instructor observed with a grin, "you people are so smart that sometimes I wonder what I'm doing here. It's about knowing people. In your careers at the Agency, you will always be running into folks who think they can tell it all from overheads—the satellite knows all and tells all. Not exactly," Clark went on. "Satellites can be fooled, and it's easier than people like to admit. People have their weaknesses, too, ego foremost among them, and there is never a substitute for looking them in the eyes. But the nice thing about working agents in the field is, even their lies will reveal some of the truth to you. Case in point, Moscow, Kutuzovkiy Prospyekt, 1983. This agent we brought out, and he'll be here next week for you to meet. He was having a hard time with his boss and—"

Chavez appeared at the back door and held up a phonemessage form. Clark hurried through the rest of the lesson and handed the class over to his assistant.

"What is it, Ding?" John asked.

"Mary Pat wants us up in D.C. in a hurry, something about an SNIE."

"The United Islamic Republic, I bet."

"Hardly worth taking the message down, Mr. C," Chavez observed. "They want us up in time for dinner. Want me to drive?"

THERE WERE FOUR Maritime Pre-Positioning Ships at Diego Garcia. They were relatively new ships, built for their purpose, which was to be floating parking garages for military vehicles. A third of those were tanks, mobile artillery, and armored personnel carriers, and the rest were the less dramatic "trains," vehicles pre-loaded with everything from ammunition to rations to water. The ships were painted Navy gray, but with colored bands around their funnels to designate them as part of the National Defense Reserve Fleet, crewed by merchant sailors whose job was to maintain them. That wasn't overly difficult. Every few months they'd light off the huge diesel engines and sail around for a few hours, just to be absolutely sure everything worked. This evening they got a new message to increase their alert status.

One by one, the engine-room crews went below and fired up the engines. Fuel quantities were verified against written records, and various benchmark tests made to ensure that the ship was ready to sail—which was why they were maintained so lovingly. Testing the engines was not abnormal. Testing all at the same time was, and the collection of monster engines made for a

thermal bloom that was obvious to infrared detectors overhead, especially at night.

That came to the attention of Sergey Golovko within thirty minutes of its detection, and like intelligence chiefs all over the world, he assembled a team of specialists to discuss it.

"Where is the American carrier battle group?" he asked first of all. America loved to throw them around the oceans of the world.

"They left the atoll yesterday, heading east."

"Away from the Persian Gulf?"

"Correct. They have exercises scheduled with Australia. It's called SOUTHERN CUP. We have no information to suggest that the exercise is being canceled."

"Then why exercise their troopships?"

The analyst gestured. "It could be an exercise, but the turmoil in the Persian Gulf suggests otherwise."

"Nothing in Washington?" Golovko asked.

"Our friend Ryan continues to navigate the political rapids," the chief of the American political section reported. "Badly."

"Will he survive?"

"Our ambassador believes so, and the *rezident* concurs, but neither thinks he is firmly in command. It's a classic muddle. America has always prided herself on the smooth transition of government power, but their laws did not anticipate such events as we have seen. He cannot move decisively against his political enemy—"

"What Kealty's doing is state treason," Golovko observed, the penalty for which in Russia had always been severe. Even the phrase was enough to lower the temperature of a room.

"Not according to their law, but my legal experts tell me that the issue is sufficiently confused that there will be no clear winner, and in such a case Ryan remains in command because of his position—he got there first."

Golovko nodded, but his expression was decidedly unhappy. *Red October* and the Gerasimov business should never have become public knowledge. He and his government had known the latter, but only suspected the former. On the submarine business, American security had been superb—so *that* was the card Ryan had played to make Kolya defect. It had to be. It all made sense from the distance of time, and a fine play it had been. Except for one thing: it had become public knowledge in Russia as well, and he was now forbidden to contact Ryan directly until the diplomatic fallout had been determined. America was doing something. He did not yet know what that was, and instead of calling to ask, and perhaps even getting a truthful answer, he'd have to wait for his field officers to discern it on their own. The problem lay in the harm that had been done to the American government, and in Ryan's own habit, learned at CIA, of working with a small number of people instead of playing the entire bureaucracy like a symphony orchestra. Instinct told him that Ryan would be cooperative, he'd trust former enemies to act in collective self-interest, but one thing the traitor Kealty had accomplished—who else could have told the American press those stories!—was to create a political impasse. Politics!

Politics had once been the center of Golovko's life. A party member since the age of eighteen, he'd studied his Lenin and Marx with all the fervor of a theology student, and though the fervor had changed over time to something else, those logical but foolish theories *had* shaped his adult life, until they'd evaporated, leaving him, at least, a profession at which he excelled. He'd been able to rationalize his previous antipathy to America in historical terms, two great powers, two great alliances, two differing philosophies acting in perverse unison to create the last great world conflict. National pride still wished that his nation had won, but the *Rodina* hadn't, and that was that. The important part was that the Cold War was over, and with it the deadly confrontation between America and his country. Now they could actually recognize their common interests, and at times act in cooperation. It had actually happened already. Ivan Emmetovich Ryan had come to him for help in the American conflict with Japan, and together the two countries had accomplished a vital goal—something still secret. Why the hell, Golovko thought, couldn't the traitor Kealty have revealed *that* secret instead of the others? But, no, now his country was embarrassed, and while the newly freed media had as great a field day with this story as the Americans were having—or even more—he was unable to make a simple phone call.

Those ships were turning their engines for a reason. Ryan was doing something or thinking about doing something, and instead of merely asking, he had to be a spy again, working against another spy instead of working with an ally. Well, he had no choice.

"Form a special study group for the Persian Gulf. Everything we have, bring it together as quickly as possible. America will have to react somehow to the developing situation. First, we must determine what is happening. Second, what America probably knows. Third, what America will do. That general, G. I. Bondarenko, get him involved. He just spent time with their military."

"Immediately, Comrade Chairman," his principal deputy replied for the rest of the meeting. At least *that* hadn't changed!

CONDITIONS, HE THOUGHT, were excellent. Not too hot, not too cold. The Javits Center was right on the river, and that made for relatively high local humidity, and that was good also. He'd be inside, and so there was no concern about ultraviolet radiation harming the contents of his container. For the rest, the theory of what he was doing was not his concern; he'd been briefed on it and would do exactly what he'd been told. Whether or not it worked, well, that was in Allah's hands, wasn't it? The traveler got out of his cab and walked in.

He'd never been in so capacious a building, and there was a little disorientation after he got his visitor's badge and program book, which showed a map of the interior. With that came an index that allowed him to see the location of various exhibits, and with a muted smile he decided that he had hours to accomplish his goal, and would spend the time looking at cars, just like everybody else.

There were lots of them, sparkling like jewels, some on turntables for those too lazy to walk around them, many with scantily clad women gesturing at

them as though one might have sexual relations with them—the cars, that is, though some of the women might be possibilities, he thought, watching their faces with concealed amusement. He'd known intellectually that America made millions of cars, and in almost that many shapes and colors. It seemed hugely wasteful—what was a car, after all, except for a method of moving from one place to another, and in the course of use they got damaged and dirty, and the show here was a lie in that it showed them as they would be for less time than it took to drive one home even in America, as he'd seen in the drive here from his hote!—

But it was a pleasant experience even so. He would have thought of it as shopping, but this was not the souk which he connected with the process, not an alley full of small shops operated by merchants for whom bargaining was as important as the air. No, America was different. Here they prostituted women to sell things for a predetermined price. It wasn't that he was personally against such use of women; the traveler was not married and had the usual carnal desires, but to proclaim it in this way attacked the puritanical modesty of his culture, and so while he never once looked away from the women standing by the cars, he was glad that none of them was from his part of the world.

All the makes and models. Cadillac had a huge display in the General Motors section. Ford had another area of its own for all of its trademark products. He wandered through the Chrysler section, and then off to the foreign makers. The Japanese section, he saw, was being avoided, doubtless as a result of the American conflict with that country—though above many of the displays were signs proclaiming **MADE IN AMERICA BY AMERICANS!** in three-meter letters to those few who seemed to care. Toyota, Nissan, and the rest would have a bad year, even the sporty Cressida, regardless of where they might be assembled. You could tell that by the lack of people in the area, and with that realization, his interest in Asian cars died. No, he decided, not around here.

European cars were profiting from Japan's misfortune, he saw. Mercedes especially was drawing a huge crowd, especially a new model of their most expensive sports car, painted a glossy midnight black that reflected the overhead lighting like a piece of the clear desert sky. Along the way, the traveler picked up a brochure at every booth from a friendly manufacturer's representative. These he tucked into his carry-on bag so as to make himself look like every other visitor. He found a food booth and got something to eat —it was a hot dog, and he didn't worry if it had pork in it or not; America wasn't an Islamic country, after all, and he didn't have to worry about such things. He spent a good deal of time looking at all-terrain vehicles, first wondering if they'd survive the primitive roads of Lebanon and Iran, and deciding that they probably would. One was based on a military type he'd seen before, and if he'd had a choice, it would have been that one, wide and powerful. He got the entire publicity package for that one, then leaned against a post so that he might read it. Sports cars were for the effete. This was something of substance. What a pity he'd never own one. He checked his watch. Early evening. More visitors were crowding in as work let out and people took the evening to indulge their fantasies. Perfect.

Along the way he'd noted the air conditioning. It would have been better to set his canister in the system itself, but he'd been briefed on that, too. The Legionnaire's disease outbreak years before in Philadelphia had taught Americans about the need for keeping such systems clean; they often used chlorine to treat the condensate water which humidified the recirculating air, and chlorine would kill the virus as surely as a bullet killed a man. Looking up from the color-printed brochure, he noted the huge circular vents. Cool air descended from them, and washed invisibly along the floor. On being heated by the bodies in the room, the warm air would rise back into the returns and go through the system for cooling—and some degree of disinfection. So he had to pick a spot where the air flow would be his ally, not his enemy, and he considered that, standing there like an interested car shopper. He started wandering more, walking under some of the vents, feeling the gentle, cooling breeze with his skin, evaluating one and another and looking for a good spot to leave his canister. The latter was equally important. The spray period would last for about fifteen seconds. There would be a hissing sound—probably lost in the noise of the crowded building-and a brief fog. The cloud would turn invisible in just a few more seconds; the particulate matter was so small and, being as dense as the surrounding air, would become part of the ambient atmosphere and spread around randomly for at least thirty minutes, perhaps more, depending on the efficiency of the environmental systems in the center. He wanted to expose as many people as possible, consistent with those parameters, and with that renewed thought in his mind, he started wandering again.

It helped that, vast as the auto show was, it did not fill the Javits Center. Every exhibit was constructed of prefabricated parts like those in a business office, and behind many of those were large swatches of cloth, like vertical banners, whose only purpose was to break up the line of sight to empty portions of the building. They were easily accessible, the traveler saw. Nothing was fenced off. You simply ducked around an exhibit. He saw some people holding mini-meetings there, and some circulating maintenance personnel, but little else. The maintenance personnel were a potential problem, though. It wouldn't do to have his canister picked up before it discharged. But such people would be on regular routines, wouldn't they? It was just a matter of discerning the patterns of their movement. Of course. So, he thought, where is the best spot? The show would be open for several more hours. He wanted to pick a perfect place and time, but he'd been briefed not to worry too greatly about that. He took that advice to heart. Better to be covert. That was his primary mission.

The main entrance is . . . there. People entered and left through the same side of the building. Emergency exits were everywhere, all of them properly marked, but with alarm buzzers on them. At the entrance was a bank of airconditioning vents to form a thermal barrier of sorts, and the returns were mainly in the center of the exhibit hall. So the air flow was designed to move inward from the periphery ... and everyone had to come in and out the same way . . . how to make that work for him . . . ? A bank of rest rooms was on that side, with regular traffic back and forth—too dangerous; someone might see the can and pick it up and put it in a trash can. He walked to the other

side, fumbling with his program as he did so, bumping into people, and finding himself again at the edge of the General Motors section. Beyond that were Mercedes and BMW, all on the way to the returns, and there were lots of people in all three areas—plus the downward bloom of the air would wash across part of the entrance/exit. The green banners blocked view of the wall, but there was space under them, open area . . . partially shielded from view. This was it. He walked away, checking his watch and then the program for the show's hours. The program he tucked into the carry-on bag while his other hand unzipped the shaving kit. He circulated around one more time, looking for another likely place, and while he found one, it wasn't as good as the first. Then he made a final check to see if someone might be following him. No, nobody knew he was here, and he wouldn't announce his presence or his mission with a burst from an AK-47 or the crash of a tossed grenade. There was more than one way to be a terrorist, and he regretted not having discovered this one sooner. How much he might have enjoyed setting a canister like this one into a theater in Jerusalem . . . but, no, the time for that would come later, perhaps, once the main enemy of his culture was crippled. He looked at the faces now, these Americans who so hated him and his people. Shuffling around, like cattle, purposeless. And then it was time.

The traveler ducked behind an exhibit, extracted the can and set it on its side on the concrete floor. It was weighted to roll to the proper position, and, lying on its side, it would be harder to see. With that done, he pressed the simple mechanical timer and walked away, back into the exhibition area, turning left to leave the building. He was in a taxi in five minutes, on the way back to his hotel. Before he got there, the timer-spring released the valve, and for fifteen seconds the canister emptied its contents into the air. The noise was lost in the cacophony of the crowd. The vapor cloud dispersed before it could be seen.

IN ATLANTA, IT was the Spring Boat Show. About half of the people there might have serious thoughts of buying a boat, this year or some other. The rest were just dreaming. Let them dream, this traveler thought on the way out.

IN ORLAN DO, IT was recreational vehicles. That was particularly easy. A traveler looked under a Winnebago, as though to check the chassis, slid his canister there, and left.

IN CHICAGO'S MCCORMICK Center, it was housewares, a vast hall full of every manner of furniture and appliance, and the women who wished to have

them.

IN HOUSTON, IT was one of America's greatest horse shows. Many of them were Arabians, he was surprised to note, and the traveler whispered a prayer that the disease didn't hurt those noble creatures, so beloved of Allah.

IN PHOENIX, IT was golf equipment, a game that the traveler didn't know a thing about, though he had several kilos of free literature which he might read on the flight back to the Eastern Hemisphere. He'd found an empty golf bag with a hard-plastic lining that would conceal the canister, set the timer, and dropped it in.

IN SAN FRANCISCO, it was computers, the most crowded show of all that day, with over twenty thousand people in the Moscone Convention Center, so many that this traveler feared he might not get outside to the garden area before the can released its contents. But he did, walking upwind to his hotel, four blocks away, his job complete.

THE RUG SHOP was just closing down when Aref Raman walked in. Mr. Alahad locked the front door and switched off the lights.

"My instructions?"

"You will do nothing without direct orders, but it is important to know if you are able to complete your mission."

"Is that not plain?" Raman asked in irritation. "Why do you think"

"I have my instructions," Alahad said gently.

"I am able. I am ready," the assassin assured his cutout. The decision had been made years before, but it was good to say it out loud to another, here, now.

"You will be told at the proper time. It will be soon."

"The political situation . . ."

"We are aware of that, and we are confident of your devotion. Be at peace, Aref. Great things are happening. I know not what they are, merely that they are under way, and at the proper time, your act will be the capstone of the Holy Jihad. Mahmoud Haji sends his greetings and his prayers."

"Thank you." Raman inclined his head at word of the distant but powerful blessing. It had been a very long time since he'd heard the man's voice over anything but a television, and then he'd been forced to turn away, lest others see his reaction to it.

"It has been hard for you," Alahad said.

"It has." Raman nodded.

"It will soon be over, my young friend. Come to the back with me. Do you have time?"

"I do."

“It is time for prayer.”

38

GRACE PERIOD

I'M NOT AN AREA SPECIAList," Clark objected. He'd been to Iran before.

Ed Foley would have none of that: "You've been on the ground there, and I think you're the one who always talks about how there's no substitute for dirty hands and a good nose."

"He was just laying more of that on the kiddies at the Farm this afternoon," Ding reported with a sly look. "Well, today it was about reading people by lookin' in their eyes, but it's the same thing. Good eye, good nose, good senses." *He* hadn't been to Iran, and they wouldn't send Mr. C. alone, would they?

"You're in, John," Mary Pat Foley said, and since she was the DDO, that was that. "Secretary Adler may be flying over real soon. I want you and Ding to go over as SPOs. Keep him alive, and sniff around, nothing covert or anything. I want your read on what the street feels like. That's all, just a quick recon." It was the sort of thing usually done by watching footage on CNN, but Mary Pat wanted an experienced officer to take the local pulse, and it was her call.

If there were a curse in being a good training officer, it was that the people you trained often got promoted, and remembered their lessons—and worse, who'd taught them. Clark could recall both of the Foleys in his classes at the Farm. From the start, she'd been the cowboy—well, cow*girl*—of the pair, with brilliant instincts, fantastically good Russian skills, and the sort of gift for reading people more often found in a professor of psychiatry . . . but somewhat wanting in caution, trusting a little too much on the baby blues and dumb blonde act to keep her safe. Ed lacked her passion but had the ability to formulate The Big Picture, to take a long view that made sense most of the time. Neither was quite perfect. Together they were a piece of work, and John took pride in having taught them his way. Most of the time.

"Okay. We have anything in the way of assets over there?"

"Nothing useful. Adler wants to eyeball Daryaei and tell him what the rules are. You'll be quartered in the French embassy. The trip is secret. VC-20 to Paris, French transport from there. In and out in a hurry," Mary Pat told them. "But I want you to spend an hour or two walking around, just to get a feel for things, price of bread, how people dress, you know the drill."

"And we'll have diplomatic passports, so nobody can hassle us," John added wryly. "Yeah, heard that one before. So did everyone else in the embassy back in 1979, remember?"

"Adler's Secretary of State," Ed reminded him.

"I think they know that." *They know he's Jewish, too,* he didn't add.

THE FLIGHT INTO Barstow, California, was how the exercise always started. Buses and trucks rolled up to the airplanes, and the troops came down the stairs for the short drive up the only road into the NTC. General Diggs and Colonel Hamm watched from their parked helicopter as the soldiers formed up. This group was from the North Carolina National Guard, a reinforced brigade. It wasn't often that the Guard came to Fort Irwin, and this one was supposed to be pretty special. Because the state was blessed with very senior senators and congressmen—well, until recently—over the years, the men from Carolina had gotten the very best in modern equipment, and been designated a round-out brigade for one of the Regular Army's armored divisions. Sure enough, they strutted like real soldiers, and their officers had been prepping for a year in anticipation of this training rotation. They'd even managed to get their hands on additional fuel with which they'd trained a few extra weeks. Now the officers formed their men up in regular lines before putting them on the transport, and from a distance of a quarter mile, Diggs and Hamm could see their officers talking to their men over the noise of the arriving aircraft.

"They look proud, boss," Hamm observed.

They heard a distant shout, as a company of tankers told their captain they were ready to kick some ass. A news crew was even out there to immortalize the event for local TV.

"They *are* proud," the general said. "Soldiers should be proud, Colonel."

"Only one thing missing, sir."

"What's that, Al?"

"*Baaaaaaaaa,"* Colonel Hamm said around his cigar. "Lambs to the slaughter." The two officers shared a look. The first mission of the OpFor was to take away that pride. The Blackhorse Cav had never lost so much as a single simulated engagement to anything other than a regular formation—and that rarely enough. Hamm didn't plan to start this month. Two battalions of Abrams tanks, one more of Bradleys, another of artillery, a cavalry company, and a combat-support battalion against his three squadrons of Opposing Force. It hardly seemed fair. For the visitors.

TIIEY WERE ALMOST done. The most annoying work of all was mixing the AmFo, which turned out to be a pretty good upper-body workout for the Mountain Men. The proper proportions of the fertilizer (which was mainly an ammonia-based chemical compound) and the diesel fuel came from a book. It struck both men as amusing that plants should like to eat a deadly explosive. The propellant used in artillery rounds was also ammonia-based, and once upon a time, in post-World War I Germany, a chemical plant making fertilizer had exploded and wiped out the neighboring village. The addition of diesel fuel was partly to provide an additional element of chemical energy, but mainly to act as a wetting agent, the better for the internal shock wave te propagate within the explosive mass and hasten the detonation. They used a large tub for the mixing, and an oar, like a canoe's, to stir the mass into the proper consistency (that came from a book also). The resuit was a large glob of mud-like slurry which formed into blocks of a sort. These they lifted by

hand.

It was dirty and smelly and a little dangerous inside the drum of the cement truck. They took turns doing the filling. The access hatch, which was designed to admit semiliquid cement, was just over three feet in diameter. Holbrook had rigged an electric fan to blow fresh air into the drum, because the fumes from the fresh AmFo mix were unpleasant and possibly dangerous—it gave them headaches, which was warning enough. It was the work of over a week, but now the drum was as filled as they needed it to be, about three-quarters, when the last block was nested in with all the rest. Every layer had been somewhat uneven, and the void spaces were filled with a mix that was more liquid and had been handed in by bucket, so that the circular body of the drum was as full as two men working alone could make it. If one could have seen through the steel, it would have looked like a pie chart, the unfilled part a V-shape, facing upwards.

"I think that does it, Pete," Ernie Brown said. "We have about another hundred pounds or so, but—"

"No place for it to go," Holbrook agreed, climbing out. He clambered down the ladder and the two walked outside, sat in lawn chairs and got some fresh air. "Damn, I'm glad *that's* done!"

"You bet." Brown rubbed his face and took a deep breath. His head hurt so badly that he wondered if his face might come off. They'd stay out here for a long while, until they got all those goddamned fumes out of their lungs.

"This has got to be bad for us," Pete said.

"Sure as hell gonna be bad for somebody. Good idea on the bullets," he added. There were two oil drums full of them inside, probably too many, but that was okay.

"What's a brownie without some walnuts?" Holbrook asked.

"You bastard!" Brown laughed so hard he nearly came out of the chair. "Oh, Jesus, my head hurts!"

APPROVAL FOR FRENCH cooperation on the meeting came from the Quai d'Orsay with remarkable speed. France had diplomatic interests with every country bordering on the Gulf that connected to all manner of commercial relationships, from tanks to pharmaceuticals. French troops had deployed in the Persian Gulf War to find themselves fighting against French products, but that sort of thing wasn't all that unusual. It made for lots of markets. Approval of the mission was phoned to the American Ambassador at nine in the morning, who telexed Foggy Bottom in less than five minutes, where it was relayed to Secretary Adler while he was still in his bed. Action officers made other notifications, first of all to the 89th Military Airlift Wing at Andrews Air Force Base.

Getting the Secretary of State out of town quietly was never the easiest of tasks. People tended to notice empty offices of that magnitude, and so an easy cover story was laid on. Adler was going to consult with European allies on several issues. The French were far better able to control their media, a task which was more than anything else a matter of timing.

"Yeah?" Clark said, lifting the phone at the Marriott closest to Langley.

"It's on for today," the voice said.

A blink. A shake of the head. "Super. Okay, I'm packed." Then he rolled back over for some more sleep. At least there didn't have to be a mission brief for this one. Keep an eye on Adler, take a walk, and come home. There wasn't any real worry about security. If the Iranians—UIR-ians was a phrase he hadn't come to terms with yet—wanted to do something, two men with pistols wouldn't be able to do much about it except hand their weapons over unused, and either locals or Iranian security would keep the hostile peons away. He was going to be there for show, because it was something you did, for some reason or other.

"We goin'?" Chavez asked from the other bed.

"yep."

"*Bueno.*"

DARYAEI CHECKED HIS desk clock, subtracting eight, nine, ten, and eleven hours, and wondering if anything had gone wrong. Second thoughts were the bane of people in his position. You made your decisions and took the action, and only then did you really worry, despite all the planning and thought that might have gone into what you did. There was no royal road to success. You had to take risks, a fact never appreciated by those who merely *thought* about being a chief of state.

No, nothing had gone wrong. He'd received the French Ambassador, a very pleasant unbeliever who spoke the local language so beautifully that Daryaei wondered what it might be like to have him read some of his country's poetry. And a courtly man, ever polite and deferential, he'd posed his secondhand request like a man arranging a marriage of family alliance, his hopeful smile also conveying the wishes of his government. The Americans would not have made the request if they'd had any pre-warning of Badrayn's people and their mission. No, in a case like that, the meeting would have been on neutral ground—Switzerland was always a possibility—for informal but direct contact. In this case, they would send their own Foreign Minister into what they had to consider to be enemy country—and a Jew at that! *Friendly contact, friendly exchange of views, friendly offers of friendly relations,* the Frenchman had said, pitching the meeting, doubtless hoping that if it went well, then France would be remembered as the country that fostered a new friendship—well, maybe a "working relationship"—and if the meeting went badly, then all that would be remembered was that France had tried to be an honest broker. Had Daryaei known about ballet, he would have used it as a visual image for the exchange.

Damn the French, anyway, he thought. *Had their warrior chief Martel not stopped 'Abd-ar-Rahman in 732 at Poitiers, then the whole world might be . . .* but even Allah couldn't change history. Rahman had lost that battle because his men had grown greedy, fallen away from the purity of the Faith. Exposed to the riches of the West, they'd stopped fighting and started looting, and given Martel's forces the chance to re-form and counterattack. Yes, that was the lesson to be remembered. There was always time for looting. You had to win the battle first. First destroy the enemy's forces, and *then* take that which you

wanted to take.

He walked from his office into the next room. There on the wall was a map of his new country and its neighbors, and a comfortable seat from which to view it. There came the usual error from looking at maps. Distances were truncated. Everything seemed so close, all the more so after all the lost time of his life. Close enough to reach. Close enough to grasp. Nothing could go wrong now. Not with everything so close.

LEAVING WAS EASIER than arriving. Like most Western countries, America was more concerned with what people might bring in than with what they might take out—and properly so, the first traveler thought, as his passport was processed at JFK. It was 7:05 A.M., and Air France Flight 1, a supersonic Concorde, was waiting to take him part of the way home. He had a huge collection of auto brochures, and a story he'd spent some time concocting should anyone ask about them, but his cover wasn't challenged, or even examined. He was leaving, and that was okay. The passport was duly stamped. The customs agent didn't even ask why he had come one day and left the next. Business travelers were business travelers. Besides, it was early in the morning, and nothing important happened before ten.

The Air France first-class lounge served coffee, but the traveler didn't want any. He was almost done. Only now did his body want to tremble. It was amazing how easily it had gone. Badrayn's mission brief had told them how easy it would be, but he hadn't quite believed it, used, as he was, to dealing with Israeli security with their numberless soldiers and guns. After all the tension he'd felt, like being wrapped tightly with rope, it was all diminishing now. He'd slept poorly in his hotel the previous night, and now he'd get on the aircraft and sleep all the way across. On getting back to Tehran, he'd look at Badrayn and laugh and ask for another such mission. On passing the buffet, he saw a bottle of champagne, and poured himself a glass. It made him sneeze, and it was contrary to his religion, but it was the Western way to celebrate, and indeed he had something to celebrate. Twenty minutes later, his flight was called, and he walked off to the jetway with the others. His only concern now was jet lag. The flight would leave at eight sharp, then arrive in Paris at 5:45 P.M.! From breakfast to dinner without the intervening midday meal. Well, such was the miracle of modern travel.

THEY DROVE SEPARATELY to Andrews, Adler in his official car, Clark and Chavez in the latter's personal auto, and while the Secretary of State was waved through the gate, the CIA officers had to show ID, which at least earned them a salute from the armed airman.

"You really don't like the place, do you?" the junior officer asked.

"Well, Domingo, back when you were taking the training wheels off your bike, I was in Tehran with a cover so thin you could read an insurance policy through it, yelling 'Death to America!' with the gomers and watching our people being paraded around blindfolded by a bunch of crazy kids with guns.

For a while there, I thought they were going to be lined up against a wall and hosed. I knew the station chief. Hell, I recognized him. They had him in the bag, too, gave him a rough time." Just standing there, he remembered, only fifty yards away, not able to do a damned thing . . .

"What were you doing?"

"First time, it was a quick recon for the Agency. Second time, it was to be part of the rescue mission that went tits-up at Desert One. We all thought it was bad luck at the time, but that operation really scared me. Probably better it failed," John concluded. "At least we got them all out alive in the end."

"So, bad memories, you don't like the place?"

Clark shrugged. "Not really. Never figured them out. The Saudis I understand—I like 'em a lot. Once you get through the crust, they make friends for life. Some of the rules are a little funny to us, but that's okay. Kinda like old movies, sense of honor and all that, hospitality," he went on. "Anyway, lots of good experiences there. Not on the other side of the Gulf. Just as soon leave that place alone." Ding parked his car. Both men retrieved their bags as a sergeant came up to them.

"Going to Paris, Sarge," Clark said, holding up his ID again.

"You gentlemen want to come with me?" She waved them toward the V1P terminal. The low, one-story building had been cleared of other distinguished visitors. Scott Adler was on one of the couches, going over some papers.

"Mr. Secretary?"

Adler looked up. "Let me guess, this one is Clark, and this one is Chavez."

"You might even have a future in the intelligence business." John smiled. Handshakes were exchanged.

"Good morning, sir," Chavez said.

"Foley says, with you, my life is in good hands," SecState offered, closing his briefing book.

"He exaggerates." Clark walked a few feet to get a Danish. Was it nerves? John asked himself. Ed and Mary Pat were right. This should be a routine operation, in and out, Hi, how are you, eat shit and die, so long. And he'd been in tighter spots than Tehran in 1979-80—not many, but some. He frowned at the pastry. Something had brought the old feeling back, the creepy-crawly sensation on his skin, like something was blowing on the hairs there, the one that told him to turn around and look real hard at things.

"He also tells me you're on the SNIE team, and I should listen to you," Adler went on. At least he seemed relaxed, Clark saw.

"The Foleys and I go back some," John explained.

"You've been there before?"

"Yes, Mr. Secretary." Clark followed with two minutes of explanation that earned a thoughtful nod from the senior official.

"Me, too. I was one of the people the Canadians snuck out. Just showed up a week before. I was out apartmenthunting when they seized the embassy. Missed all the fun," SecState concluded. "Thank God."

"So you know the country some?"

Adler shook his head. "Not really. A few words of the language. I was there to learn up on the place, but it didn't work out, and I branched off into other areas. I want to hear more about your experiences, though."

"I'll do what I can, sir," John told him. Then a young captain came in to say that the flight was ready. A sergeant got Adler's things.

The CIA officers lifted their own bags. In addition to two changes of clothes, they had their sidearms—John preferred his Smith & Wesson; Ding liked the Beretta 40—and compact cameras. You never knew when you might see something useful.

BOB HOLTZMAN 11AD a lot to think about, as he sat alone in his office. It was a classic newsman's place of work, the walls glass, which allowed him a modicum of acoustic privacy while also letting him see out into the city room and the reporters there to see in. All he really needed was a cigarette, but you couldn't smoke in the Post building anymore, which would have amused the hell out of Ben Hecht.

Somebody'd got to Tom Donner and John Plumber. It had to be Kealty. Holtzman's views on Kealty were an exact mirror image of his feelings toward Ryan. Kcalty's political ideas, he thought, were pretty good, progressive and sensible. It was just the man who was useless. In another age, his womanizing would have been overlooked, and in fact, Kealty's political career had straddled those ages, the old and the new. Washington was full of women drawn to power like bees to honey—or like flies to something else—and they got used. Mainly they went away sadder and wiser; in the age of abortion on demand, more permanent consequences were a thing of the past. Politicians were so charming by nature that most of the cookies—that euphemism went *way* back—even went away with a smile, hardly realizing how they'd been used. But some got hurt, and Kealty had hurt several. One woman had even committed suicide. Bob's wife, Libby Holtzman, had worked that story, only to see it lost in the shuffle during the brief conflict with Japan, and in the interim the media had decided in some collective way that the story was history, and Kealty had been rehabilitated in everyone's memory. Even women's groups had looked at his personal behavior, then compared it with his political views, and decided that the balance fell one way and not another. It all offended Holtzman in a distant way. People had to have *some* principles, didn't they?

But this was Washington.

Kealty had got to Donner and Plumber, and must have done so between the taped morning interview and the live evening broadcast. And that meant . . .

"Oh, shit," Holtzman breathed, when the lightbulb flashed on in his head.

That was a story! Better yet, it was a story his managing editor would love. Donner had said on live TV that the morning tape had been damaged. *It had to be a lie*. A reporter who lied directly to the public. There weren't all that many rules in the business of journalism, and most of them were amorphous things that could be bent or skirted. But not that one. The print and TV media didn't get along all that well. They competed for the same audience, and the lesser of the two was winning. *Lesser?* Holtzman asked himself. Of course. TV was flashy, that was all, and maybe a picture was worth a thousand words, but not when the frames were selected with an eye more toward entertainment than information. TV was the girl you looked at. The print media was the one who had your kids.

But how to prove it?

What could be sweeter? He could destroy that peacock, with his perfect suits and his hair spray. He could cast a pall over all television news, and wouldn't that boost circulation ! He could couch it all as a religious ceremony on the altar of Journalistic Integrity. Wrecking careers was part of his business. He'd never broken a fellow reporter before, but there was an anticipatory delight in drumming this one out of the corps.

But what about Plumber? Holtzman knew and respected him. Plumber had come to TV at a different time, when the industry had been trying to gain respectability, and hired journalistic craftsmen on the basis of their professional reputations rather than their movie-star looks. Plumber had to know. And he probably didn't like it.

RYAN COULDN'T *NOT* see the Colombian Ambassador. The latter, he saw, was a career diplomat from the aristocracy, immaculately dressed for a meeting with the American chief of state. The handshake was strong and cordial. The usual pleasantries were exchanged in front of the official photographer, and then it was time to talk business.

"Mr. President," he began formally, "my government has instructed me to inquire about some unusual allegations in your news media."

Jack nodded soberly. "What do you wish to know?"

"It has been reported that some years ago the United States government may have invaded my country. We find this assertion disturbing, not to mention a violation of international law and various treaty relationships between our two democracies."

"I understand your feelings on the matter. In your position I would feel much the same way. Let me say now that my administration will not countenance such action under any circumstances. On that, sir, you have my personal word, and I trust you will convey it to your government." Ryan decided to pour the man some coffee. He'd learned that such small personal gestures were vastly powerful in diplomatic exchanges, for reasons he didn't quite understand, but was quite willing to accept when they worked for him. It worked this time, too, and broke the tension of the moment.

"Thank you," the ambassador said, lifting his cup.

"I believe it's even Colombian coffee," the President offered.

"Regrettably, not our most famous export product," Pedro Ochoa admitted.

"I don't blame you for that," Jack told his visitor.

"Oh?"

"Mr. Ambassador, I am fully aware that your country has paid a bitter price for America's bad habits. While I was at CIA, yes, I did look over all manner of information concerning the drug trade and the effects it's had in your part of the world. I had no part at all in initiating any improper activity in your country, but, yes, I did look over a lot of data. I know about the policemen who've been killed—my own father was a police officer, as you know—and the judges, and the journalists. I know that Colombia has worked harder and longer than any other country in your region to bring about a true democratic government, and I will say one more thing, sir. I am ashamed at some of the

things that have been said in this city about your country. The drug problem does not begin in Colombia, or Ecuador, or Peru. The drug problem starts here, and you are as much a victim as we are—actually more so. It's American money that's poisoning your country. It is not you who hurts us. It is we who hurt you."

Ochoa had expected many things from this meeting, but not this. He set his cup down, and his peripheral vision suddenly reported that they were alone in the room. The bodyguards had withdrawn. There wasn't even an aide to take notes. This was unusual. More than that, Ryan had just admitted that the stories were true—partly true, anyway.

"Mr. President," he said, in English learned at home and polished at Princeton, "we have not often heard such words from your country."

"You're hearing them now, sir." Two very level pairs of eyes crossed the table. "I will not criticize your country unless you deserve it, and on the basis of what I know, such criticism is not deserved. Diminishing the drug trade, most of all, means attacking the demand side, and that will be a priority of this administration. We are now drafting legislation to punish those who *use* drugs, not merely those who sell them. When the Congress is properly reestablished, I will press hard for passage of that legislation. I also wish to establish an informal working group, composed of members of my government and yours, to discuss how we may better assist you in your part of the problem—but always with full respect for your national integrity. America has not always been a good neighbor to you. I can't change the past, but I can try to change the future. Tell me, might your President accept an invitation so that we could discuss this issue face-to-face?" *I want to make up for all this lunacy*.

"I think it likely that he would view such an invitation favorably, with due consideration for time and other duties, of course." Which meant, *damned right he will!*

"Yes, sir, I am myself learning just how demanding such a job can be. Perhaps," Jack added with a smile, "he might give *me* some advice."

"Less than you think." Ambassador Ochoa was wondering how he'd explain this meeting to his government. Clearly, the basis of a deal was on the table. Ryan was offering what could only be seen in South America as an elaborate apology for something that would never be admitted, and whose full revelation could only damage everyone involved. And yet this was not being done for political reasons, was it?

Was it?

"Your proposed legislation, Mr. President, what will you seek to accomplish?"

"We're studying that now. For the most part, believe, people use drugs because it's fun—escape from reality, whatever you might want to call it—it comes down to personal amusement of one sort or another. Our data suggests that at least half of the drugs sold in the country are for recreational users rather than true addicts. I think we should make the use of drugs un-fun, by which I mean some form of punishment for any level of possession or intoxication. Obviously, we do not have the prison space for all the drug users in America, but we do have lots of streets that need sweeping. For recreational users, thirty days—for the first offense—of sweeping streets and collecting

garbage in an economically disadvantaged area, wearing distinctive clothing, of course, will take much of the fun out of it. You are Catholic, I believe?"

"Yes, I am, as you are."

Ryan grinned. "Then you know about shame. We learned it in school, didn't we? It's a starting place, that's all it is for the moment. The administrative issues need to be looked at. Justice is also examining some constitutional questions, but those appear to be less troublesome than I expected. I want this to be law by the end of the year. I've got three kids, and the drug problem here frightens the hell out of me at the personal level. This isn't a perfect response to the problem. The truly addicted people need professional help of one sort or another, and we're now looking at a variety of state and local programs for things that really work—but, hell, if we can kill off recreational use, that's at least half of the trade, and where I come from, half is a good start."

"We will watch this process with great interest," Ambassador Ochoa promised. Cutting the income of the drug traffickers by that much would reduce their ability to buy protection, and help his government do what it had so earnestly tried to do, for the monetary power of the drug trade was a political cancer in the body of his country.

"I regret the circumstances that brought this meeting about, but I am glad that we've had a chance to discuss the issues. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for being so forthright. I want you to know that I am always open to any exchange of views. Most of all, I want you and your government to know that I have great respect for the rule of law, and that respect does not stop at our borders. Whatever may have happened in the past, I propose a new beginning, and I will back up my words with action."

Both men stood, and Ryan took his hand again, and led him outside. There followed a few minutes on the edge of the Rose Garden in front of some TV cameras. The White House Press Office would release a statement about a friendly meeting between the two men. The photos would run on the news to show that it might not be a lie.

"It promises to be a good spring," Ochoa said, noting the clear sky and warming breezes.

"But summers here can be very unpleasant. Tell me, what's it like in Bogotá?"

"We are high up. It's never terribly hot, but the sun can be punishing. This is a fine garden. My wife loves flowers. She's becoming famous," the ambassador said. "She's developed her own new type of rose. Somehow she crossbred yellow and pink and produced something that's almost golden in color."

"What does she call it?" Ryan's entire knowledge of roses was that you had to be careful about the branches, or stalks, or whatever you called the thorny part. But the cameras were rolling.

"In English, it would be 'Dawn Display.' All the good names for roses, it seems, have already been taken," Ochoa noted, with a friendly smile.

"Perhaps we might have some for the garden here?"

"Maria would be greatly honored, Mr. President."

"Then we have more than one agreement, *señor*." Another handshake.

Ochoa knew the game, too. For the cameras his Latin face broke into the friendliest of diplomatic smiles, but the handshake also had genuine warmth in it. “Dawn Display—for a truly new day between us, Mr. President.”

“My word on it.” And they took their leave. Ryan walked back into the West Wing. Arnie was waiting inside the door. It was widely known but little acknowledged that the Oval Office was wired like a pinball machine—or more properly, a recording studio.

“You’re learning. You’re really learning,” the chief of staff observed.

“That one was easy, Arnie. We’ve been fucking those people over for too long. All I had to do was tell the truth. I want that legislation fast-tracked. When will the draft be ready?”

“Couple of weeks. It’s going to raise some hell,” van Damm warned.

“I don’t care,” the President replied. “How about we try something that might work instead of spending money for show all the time? We’ve tried shooting the airplanes down. We’ve tried murder. We’ve tried interdiction. We’ve tried going after pushers. We’ve exhausted all the other possibilities, and they don’t work because there’s too much money involved for people not to give it a go. How about we go after the source of the problem for a change? That’s where the problem starts, and that’s where the money comes from.”

“I’m just telling you it’s going to be hard.”

“What useful thing isn’t?” Ryan asked, heading back to his office. Instead of the direct door off the corridor, he went through the secretaries’ room. “Ellen?” he said, gesturing to the Oval Office.

“Am I corrupting you?” Mrs. Sumter asked, bringing her cigarettes, to the semi-concealed smiles of the other ladies in the room.

“Cathy might see it that way, but we don’t have to tell her, do we?” In the sanctity of his office, the President of the United States lit up a skinny woman’s cigarette, celebrating with one addiction an attack on another—and, oh, by the way, having neutralized a potential diplomatic carthquake.

THE LAST OF the travelers left America, strangely enough, from Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, via Northwest and KLM flights. Badrayn would sweat it out for hours more. In the interest of security, none of them had so much as a telephone number to call to announce success, warn of failure, or to give to whomever might have arrested them, tying them to the UIR with something more than their own words. Instead, Badrayn had people at all of the return airports with flight schedules. When the travelers got off their flights in Europe and were visually recognized, *then* calls would be made circuitously, from public phones, using pre-paid and anonymous calling cards.

The successful return of the travelers to Tehran would start the next operation. Sitting in an office there, Badrayn had nothing more to do than look at the clock and worry. He was logged onto the Net via his computer, and had been scanning the news wires, and finding nothing of note. Nothing would be certain until all the travelers got back and made their individual reports. Not even then, really. It would take three or four days, maybe five, before the e-mail lines to CDC would be screaming. Then he’d know.

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FACE TIME

THE FLIGHT ACROSS THE pond was pleasant. The VC-20B was more a mini-airliner than a business jet, and the Air Force crewmen, who looked to Clark as though they might be old enough to take driving lessons, kept things smooth. The aircraft began its descent into the enveloping darkness of the European night, finally landing at a military airfield west of Paris.

There was no arrival ceremony *per se,* but Adler was an official of ministerial rank, and he had to be met, even on a covert mission. In this case, a high-level official—a civil servant—walked up to the aircraft as soon as the engines wound down. Adler recognized him as the stairs descended.

"Claude!"

"Scott. Congratulations on your promotion, my old friend!" In deference to American tastes, kisses were not exchanged.

Clark and Chavez scanned the area for danger, but all they saw were French troops, or maybe police—they couldn't tell at this distance—standing in a circle, with weapons in evidence. Europeans had a penchant for showing people machine guns, even on city streets. It probably had a salutary effect on street muggings, John thought, but it seemed a little excessive. In any case, they'd expected no special dangers in France, and indeed there were none. Adler and his friend got in an official vehicle. Clark and Chavez got in the chase car. The flight crew would head off for mandated crew rest, which was USAF-talk for having a few with their French colleagues.

"We go to the lounge for a few minutes before your aircraft is ready," a French air force colonel explained. "Perhaps you wish to freshen up?"

"Merci, mon commandant," Ding replied. Yeah, he thought, the Frenchies do know how to make you feel safe.

"Thank you for helping to arrange this," Adler said to his friend. They'd been FSOs together, once in Moscow and once more in Pretoria. Both had specialized in sensitive assignments.

"It is nothing, Scott." Which it wasn't, but diplomats talk like diplomats even when they don't have to. Claude had once helped him get through a divorce in a uniquely French way, all the while speaking as though conducting treaty negotiations. It was almost a joke between the two. "Our ambassador reports that he will be receptive to the right sort of approach."

"And what might that be?" SecState asked his colleague. They got out at what appeared to be the base officers club, and a minute later found themselves in a private dining room, with a carafe of fine Beaujolais on the table. "What's your take on this, Claude? What does Daryaei want?"

The shrug was as much a part of the French character as the wine, which

Claude poured. They toasted, and the wine was superb even by the standards of the French diplomatic service. Then came business.

"We're not sure. We wonder about the death of the Turkoman Premier."

"You don't wonder about the death of—"

"I do not believe anyone has doubts about that, Scott, but that is a long-standing business, is it not?"

"Not exactly." Another sip. "Claude, you're still the best authority on wine I know. What's he thinking about?"

"Probably many things. His domestic troubles—you Americans don't appreciate them as well as you should. His people are restless, less so now that he's conquered Iraq, but the problem is still there. We feel that he must consolidate before he does anything else. We also feel that the process may turn out to be unsuccessful. We are hopeful, Scott. We are hopeful that the extreme aspects of the regime will moderate over time, perhaps not very much time. It must. It is no longer the eighth century, even in that part of the world."

Adler took a few seconds to consider that, then nodded thoughtfully. "Hope you're right. The guy's always scared me."

"All men are mortal. He is seventy-two, and he works a hard schedule. In any case, we have to check on him, do we not? If he moves, then we will move, together, as we have done in the past. The Saudis and we have talked on this matter also. They are concerned, but not overly so. Our assessment is the same. We counsel you to keep an open mind."

Claude might be correct, Adler thought. Daryaei *was* old, and consolidating the rule over a newly acquired country wasn't exactly a trivial undertaking. More than that, the easiest way to bring a hostile country down, if you have the patience for it, was to be nice to the bastards. A little trade, a few journalists, some CNN, and a couple of G-rated movies, such things could do wonders. If you have the patience. If you had the time. There were plenty of Iranian kids in American universities. That could be the most effective means for America to change the UIR. Problem was, Daryaei had to know that, too. And so here he was, Scott Adler, Secretary of State, a post he'd never expected to approach, much less have, and he was supposed to know what to do next. But he'd read enough diplomatic history to know better.

"I'll listen to what he has to say, and we're not looking to make any new enemies, Claude. I think you know that."

"D'accord." He topped off Adler's glass. "Unfortunately, you will find none of this in Tehran."

"And two is my limit when I'm working."

"Your flight crew is excellent," Claude assured him. "They fly our own ministers."

"When has your hospitality ever been lacking?"

FOR CLARK AND Chavez it was Perrier, cheaper to buy here, they both imagined, though the lemons probably were not.

"So how are things in Washington?" a French counterpart asked, just killing time, or so it seemed.

"Pretty strange. You know, it's amazing how quiet the country is. Maybe having a lot of the government turned off helps," John said, trying to dodge.

"And this talk of your President and his adventures?"

"Sounds like a lot of movie stuff to me," Ding said, with the open face of honesty.

"Stealing a Russian sub? All by himself? Damn." Clark grinned. "I wonder who made *that* up?"

"But the Russian spy chief," their host objected. "It is he, and he's been on the television."

"Yeah, well, I bet we paid him a ton of money to come across, too."

"Probably wants to do a book and make some more." Chavez laughed. "Sumbitch'll get it, too. Hey, *mon ami,* we're just worker bees, okay?"

It didn't fly any better than a lead glider. Clark looked into their interrogator's eyes and they just clicked. The man was DGSE, and he knew Agency when he saw it.

"Then be careful of the nectar you will find where you are going, my young friend. It is, perhaps, too sweet." It was like the start of a card game. The deck was out, and he was shuffling. Probably just one hand, and maybe a friendly one, but the hand had to be played.

"What do you mean?"

"The man you go to meet, he is dangerous. He has the look of one who sees what we do not."

"You've worked the country?" John asked.

"I have traveled through the country, yes."

"And?" This was Chavez.

"And I have never understood them."

"Yeah," Clark agreed. "I know what you're saying."

"An interesting man, your President," the Frenchman said again, and it was pure curiosity, actually an endearing thing to see in the eyes of an intelligence officer.

John looked right in those eyes and decided to thank the man for his warning, one pro to another. "Yeah, he is. He's one of us," Clark assured him.

"And those entertaining stories?"

"I cannot say." Delivered with a smile. *Of course they're true. You think reporters have the wit to make such things up?*

Both men were thinking the same thing, and both men knew it, though neither could speak it aloud: *A shame we cannot get together some evening for a dinner and some stories.* But it just wasn't done.

"On the way back, I will offer you a drink."

"On the way back, I will have it."

Ding just listened and watched. The old bastard still had it, and there were still lessons to learn from how he did it. "Nice to have a friend," he said five minutes later on the way to the French aircraft.

"Better than a friend, a pro. You listen to people like him, Domingo."

NOBODY HAD EVER said that governance was easy, even for those who invoked the word of God for nearly everything. The disappointment, even for

Daryaei, who'd been governing Iran for nearly twenty years in one capacity or another, was in all the petty administrative rubbish that reached his desk and took from his time. He'd never grasped that it was almost entirely his fault. His rule was fair by his own reckoning, but harsh by most others. Most violations of the rules mandated death for the miscreant, and even small administrative errors on the part of bureaucrats could entail the end of a career—that degree of mercy depended on the magnitude of the error, of course. A bureaucrat who said no to everything, noting that the law was clear on an issue, whether it was or not, rarely got into trouble. One who broadened the scope of the government's power over the most minor of day-to-day activities was merely adding to the scope of Daryaei's rule. Such decisions came easily and caused little in the way of difficulty to the arbiter in question.

But real life wasn't that simple. Practical questions of commerce, for example, just the way in which the country did business in everything from the sale of melons to the honking of auto horns around a mosque required a certain degree of judgment, because the Holy Koran hadn't anticipated every situation, and neither had the civil law been based upon it. But to liberalize anything was a major undertaking, because any liberalization of any rule might be seen as a theological error—this in a country where apostasy was a capital crime. And so the lowest-level bureaucrats, when stuck with the necessity of saying yes to a request, from time to time, tended to hem and haw and kick things upstairs, which gave a higher-level official the chance to say no, which came just as easily to them after a career of doing so, but with somewhat greater authority, somewhat greater responsibility, and far more to lose in the event that someone higher still disagreed with the rare and erroneous yes decision. All that meant was that such calls kept perking up the pyramid. In between Daryaei and the bureaucracy was a council of religious leaders (he'd been a member under Khomeini), and a titular parliament, and experienced officials, but, disappointingly to the new UIR's religious leader, the principle held, and he found himself dealing with such weighty issues as the business hours for markets, the price of petrol, and the educational syllabus of grade-school females. The sour expression he'd adopted for such trivial issues merely made his lesser colleagues all the more obsequious in their presentation of the pros and cons, which added an additional measure of gravity to the absurd, while they sought favor for being strict (opposing whatever change was on the table) or for being practical (supporting it). Earning Daryaei's favor was the biggest political game in town, and he inevitably found himself as tied down as an insect in amber by small issues, while he needed all his time to deal with the big ones. The amazing part is that he never understood why people couldn't take *some* initiative, even as he destroyed people on occasion for taking any.

So it was that he landed in Baghdad this evening to meet with local religious leaders. The issue of the day was which mosque in need of repair would get repaired first. It was known that Mahmoud Haji had one personal favorite for his own prayers, another for its architectural beauty, and yet a third for its great historical significance, while the people of the city loved yet another—and wouldn't it be a better idea, politically, to deal with the maintenance needs of that one first, the better to ensure the political stability

of the region? After that came a problem with the right of women to drive cars (the previous Iraqi regime had been overly liberal on that!), which was objectionable, but was it not difficult to take away a right already possessed, and what of women who lacked a man (widows, for example) to drive them, and also lacked the money with which to hire one? Should the government look after their needs? Some—physicians for one example, teachers for another—were important to the local society. On the other hand, since Iran and Iraq were now one, the law had to be the same, and so did one grant a right to Iranian women or deny it to the Iraqi? For these weighty issues and a few others, he had to take an evening flight to Baghdad.

Daryaei, sitting in his private jet, looked over the agenda for the meeting and wanted to scream, but he was too patient a man for that—or so he told himself. He had something important to prepare for, after all. In the morning he'd be meeting with the Jew American foreign minister. His expression, as he looked through the papers, frightened even the flight crew, though Mahmoud Haji didn't notice that, and even if he had, would not have understood why.

Why couldn't people take some *initiative!*

THE JET WAS a Dassault Falcon 900B, about nine years old, similar in basic type and function to the USAF VC-20B twin-jet. The two-man flight crew was a pair of French air force officers, both rather senior for this "charter," and there was also a pair of cabin attendants, both female and as charming as they could be. At least one, Clark figured, was a DGSE spook. Maybe both. He liked the French, especially their intelligence services. As troublesome an ally as France occasionally was, when the French did business in the black world, they damned well did business as well as any and better than most. Fortunately, in the case at hand, aircraft are noisy and hard to bug. Perhaps that explained why one attendant or the other would come back every fifteen minutes or so to ask if they needed anything.

"Anything special we need to know?" John asked, when the latest offer was declined with a smile.

"Not really," Adler replied. "We want to get a feel for the guy, what he's up to. My friend Claude, back at Paris, says that things are not as bad as they look, and his reasoning seems pretty sound. Mainly I'm delivering the usual message."

"Behave yourself," Chavez said, with a smile.

The Secretary of State smiled. "Somewhat more diplomatically, but yes. What's your background, Mr. Chavez?"

Clark liked that one: "You don't want to know where we got him from."

"I just finished my master's thesis," the young spook said proudly. "Get hooded in June."

"Where?"

"George Mason University. Professor Alpher."

That perked Adler's interest. "Really? She used to work for me. What's the thesis on?"

"It's called 'A Study in Conventional Wisdom: Erroneous Diplomatic Maneuvers in Turn-of-the-Century Europe.'"

"The Germans and the Brits?"

Ding nodded. "Mainly, especially the naval races."

"Your conclusion?"

"People couldn't recognize the differences between tactical and strategic goals. The guys supposed to be thinking 'future' were thinking 'right now,' instead. Because they confused politics with statecraft, they ended up in a war that brought down the entire European order, and replaced it with nothing more than scar tissue." It was remarkable, Clark thought, listening to the brief discourse, that Ding's voice changed when discussing his school work.

"And you're an SPO?" SecState asked, with a certain degree of incredulity.

A very Latino grin reappeared. "Used to be. Sorry if I don't drag my knuckles on the ground like I'm supposed to, sir."

"So why did Ed Foley lay you two on me?"

"My fault," Clark said. "They want us to take a little stroll around and get a smell for things."

"Your fault?" Scott asked.

"I was their training officer, once upon a time," John explained, and that changed the complexion of the conversation entirely.

"You're the guys who got Koga out! You're the guys who—"

"Yeah, we were there," Chavez confirmed. SecState was probably cleared for all that. "Lots of fun."

The Secretary of State told himself that he should be offended that he had two field spooks with him—and the younger one's remark about being a knuckle-dragger wasn't that far off. But a master's from George Mason . . .

"You're also the guys who sent that report that Brett Hanson pooh-poohed, the one about Goto. That was good work. In fact, it was excellent work." He'd wondered what these two were doing on the SNIE team for the UIR situation. Now he knew.

"But nobody listened," Chavez pointed out. It may have been a deciding factor in the war with Japan, and a very hairy time for them in that country. But it had also given him some real insight into how diplomacy and statecraft hadn't changed very much since 1905. It was an ill wind that blew no one good.

"I'll listen," Adler promised. "Let me know what your little stroll turns up, okay?"

"Sure will. I guess you have need-to-know on this," John observed, with a raised eyebrow.

Adler turned and waved to one of the attendants, the pretty brunette one whom Clark had tagged as a certain spook. She was just as charming as hell, and drop-dead pretty, but seemed a little too clumsy in the galley to be a full-time flight attendant.

"Yes, Monsieur Minister?"

"How long until we land?"

"Four hours."

"Okay, then, could we have a deck of cards and a bottle of wine?"

"Certainly." She hustled the twelve feet to get them.

"Not supposed to drink on duty, sir," Chavez said.

"You're off-duty until we land," Adler told them. "And I like to play cards

before I go into one of these sessions. Good for the nerves. You gentlemen up to a friendly game?"

"Well, Mr. Secretary, if you insist," John replied. Now they'd all get a read on the mission. "A little five-card stud, maybe?"

EVERYBODY KNEW WHERE the line was. No official communiques had been exchanged, at least not between Beijing and Taipei, but it was known and understood even so, because people in uniform tend to be practical and observant. The PRC aircraft never flew closer than ten nautical miles (fifteen kilometers) to a certain north-south line, and the ROC aircraft, recognizing that fact, kept the same distance from the same invisible bit of longitude. On either side of the line, people could do anything they wanted, appear as aggressive as they wished, expend all the ordnance they could afford, and that was agreed to without so much as a single tactical radio message. It was all in the interest of stability. Playing with loaded guns was always dangerous, as much so for nation-states as for children, though the latter were more easily disciplined—the former were too big for that.

America now had four submarines in the Formosa Strait. These were spotted on—under—the invisible line, which was the safest place to be. A further collection of three ships was now at the north end of the passage, a cruiser, USS *Port Royal*, along with destroyers *The Sullivans* and *Chandler*. All were SAM ships, equipped with a total of 250 SM2-MR missiles. Ordinarily, they were tasked to guard a carrier from air attack, but "their" carrier was in Pearl Harbor having her engines replaced. *Port Royal* and *The Sullivans*—named for a family of sailors wiped out on the same ship in 1942—were both Aegis ships with powerful SPY radars, which were now surveilling air activity while the submarines were handling the rest. *Chandler* had a special ELINT team aboard to keep track of voice radio transmissions. Like a cop on the beat, they were not so much there to interfere with anyone's exercises as to let people know that The Law was around, in a friendly sort of way, and as long as they were, things would not get out of hand. At least that was the idea. And if anyone objected to the presence of the American ships, their country would note that the seas were free for the innocent passage of all, and they weren't in anyone's way, were they? That they were actually part of someone *else's* plan was not immediately apparent to anyone. What happened next confused nearly everyone.

It was dawn in the air, if not yet on the surface, when a flight of four PRC fighters came off the mainland, heading east, followed five minutes later by four more. These were duly tracked by the American ships at the extreme range of their billboard radars. Routine track numbers were assigned, and the computer system followed their progress to the satisfaction of the officers and men in the CIC of *Port Royal.* Until they didn't turn. Then a lieutenant lifted a phone and pushed a button.

"Yes?" a groggy voice answered.

"Captain, Combat, we have a flight of PRC aircraft, probably fighters, about to cross the line, bearing two-one-zero, altitude fifteen thousand, course zero-niner-zero, speed five hundred. There's a flight of four more a few minutes

behind."

"On the way." The captain, partially dressed, arrived in the combat information center two minutes later, not in time to see the PRC fighters break the rules, but in time to hear a petty officer report something:

"New track, four or more fighters coming west."

For the purposes of convenience, the computer had been told to assign "enemy" designator-graphics to the mainland fighters and "friendly" symbols to the Taiwanese. (There were also a few American aircraft around from time to time, but these were electronic-intelligence gatherers and well out of harm's way.) At this point, there were two immediately converging flights of four each, about thirty miles apart, but with a closure speed of over a thousand miles per hour. The radar was also tracking six commercial airliners, all on the east side of the line, minding their own business as they skirted the agreed-upon "exercise" arcas.

"Raid Six is turning," a sailor reported next. This was the first outbound flight off the mainland, and as the captain watched, the velocity vector turned southward, while the outbound flight off Taiwan bored in on them.

"Illuminators coming on," the chief at the ESM console said. "The ROCs are lighting up Raid Six. Their radars seem to be in tracking mode."

"Maybe that's why they turned," the captain thought.

"Maybe they got lost?" the CIC officer wondered.

"Still dark out. Maybe they just went too far." They didn't know what sort of navigation gear the ChiCom fighters might have had, and driving a single-seat aircraft over the sea at night was not a precise business.

"More airborne radars coming on, easterly direction, probably Raid Seven," the ESM chief said. This was the second flight off the mainland.

"Any electronic activity from Raid Six?" the CIC officer asked.

"Negative, sir." These fighters continued their turn and were now heading west, back for the line, with the ROC F-16s in pursuit. It was at this point that things changed.

"Raid Seven is turning, course now zero-nine-seven."

"That puts them on the -16s . . . and they're illuminating . . .," the lieutenant observed, with the first hint of worry in his voice. "Raid Seven is lighting up the F-16's, radars in tracking mode."

The Republic of China F-16s then turned also. They'd been getting a lot of work. The newer, American-made fighters and their elite pilots comprised only about a third of their fighter force, and were drawing the duty of covering and responding to the flight exercises of their mainland cousins. Leaving Raid Six to return, they necessarily got more interested in the trailing flight, still heading east. The closure rate was still a thousand miles per hour, and both sides had their missile-targeting radars up and running, aimed at each other. That was internationally recognized as an unfriendly act, and one to be avoided for the simple reason that it was the aerial equivalent of aiming a rifle at someone's head.

"Uh-oh," the petty officer on the ESM board said. "Sir, Raid Seven, their radars just shifted to tracking mode." Instead of just searching for targets, the airborne systems were now operating in the manner used to guide air-to-air missiles. What had been merely unfriendly a few seconds ago now became

overtly hostile.

The F-16s broke into two pairs—elements—and began maneuvering freely. The outbound PRC fighters did the same. The original flight of four, Raid Six, was now across the line, heading west on what appeared to be a direct line to their airfield.

"Oh, I think I know what's going on here, sir, look how—"

A very small pip appeared on the screen, leaving one of the ROC F-16s—

"Oh, shit," a sailor said. "We have a missile in the air "

"Make that two," his chief said.

Aloft, a pair of American-made AIM-120 missiles were now taking separate paths to separate targets.

"They thought it was an attack. Oh, Christ," the captain said, turning to his communications. "Get me CINCPAC right now!"

It didn't take long. One of the mainland fighters turned into a puff on the screen. Warned, the other jinked hard and dodged its missile at the last second.

Then it turned back. The southern PRC fighter element maneuvered also, and Raid Six turned radically to the north, its illumination radars now on. Ten seconds later, six more missiles were airborne and tracking targets.

"We got a battle on our hands!" the chief of the watch said. The captain lifted the phone:

"Bridge, combat, general quarters, general quarters!" Then he grabbed the TBS microphone, getting the captains of his two companion ships, both ten miles away, east and west of his cruiser as the alarm gong started sounding on USS *Port Royal.*

"I have it," *The Sullivans* reported. That destroyer was outboard.

"Me, too," *Chandler* chimed in. That one was closer to the island nation, but getting the radar picture from the Aegis ships via data link.

"That's a kill!" Another ChiCom fighter took its hit and headed down to the still-dark surface. Five seconds later, an F-16 died. More crewmen arrived in CIC, taking their battle stations.

"Captain, Raid Six was just trying to simulate—"

"Yeah, I see that now, but we have a train wreck on our hands."

And then, predictably, a missile went wild. These were so small as to be hard for the Aegis radar to track, but a technician boosted power, throwing six million watts of RF energy into the "exercise" area, and the picture became more clear.

"Oh, shit!" a chief said, pointing to the main tactical display. "Captain, look there!"

It was instantly obvious. Someone had loosed what was probably an infra-red-seeking missile, and the hottest target in town was an Air China Airbus 310, with two huge General Electric CF6 turbofans—the same basic engines as those which powered all three of the American warships—which looked like the sun to its single red eye.

"Chief Albertson, get him on guard!" the skipper shouted.

"Air China Six-Six-Six, this is a U.S. Navy warship, you have a missile inbound on you from the northwest, I say again, maneuver immediately, you have a missile tracking you from the northwest!"

"What, what?" But the plane started moving, turning left and descending. Not that it mattered.

The plotted velocity vector of the missile never wavered from the target. There was a hope that it would burn out and fall short, but the missile was going at mach 3, and the Air China flight was already slowed down, commencing its approach to its home field. When the pilot put his nose down, he just made things easier for the missile.

"It's a big airplane," the captain said.

"Only two engines, sir," the weapons officer pointed out.

"That's a hit," a radarman said.

"Get her down, pal, get her down. Oh, fuck," the captain breathed, wanting to turn away. On the display, the 310's blip tripled in size and flashed the emergency code.

"He's calling Mayday, sir," a radioman said. "Air China flight triple-six is calling Mayday . . . engine and wing damage . . . possible fire aboard."

"Only about fifty miles out," a chief said. "He's vectoring for a direct approach into Taipei."

"Captain, all stations report manned and ready. Condition One is set throughout the ship," the IC man of the watch told the skipper.

"Very well." His eyes were locked on the center of the three radar displays. The fighter engagement, he saw, had ended as quickly as it had started, with three fighters splashed, another possibly damaged, and both sides withdrawing to lick their wounds and figure out what the hell had happened. On the Taiwanese side, another flight of fighters was up and forming just off their coast.

"Captain!" It was the ESM console. "Looks like every radar on every ship just lit off. Sources all over the place, classifying them now."

But that didn't matter, the captain knew. What mattered now was that Airbus 310 was slowing and descending, according to his display.

"CINCPAC Operations, sir." The radio chief pointed.

"This is *Port Royal,* " the captain said, lifting the phonetype receiver for the satellite radio link. "We just had a little air battle here—and a missile went wild and it appears that it hit an airliner inbound from Hong Kong to Taipei. The aircraft is still in the air, but looks to be in trouble. We have two ChiCom MiGs and one ROC F-16 splashed, maybe one more -16 damaged."

"Who started it?" the watch officer asked.

"We think the ROC pilots fired the first missile. It could have been a screwup." He explained on for a few seconds. "I'll upload our radar take as quick as I can."

"Very well. Thank you, Captain. I'll pass that along to the boss. Please keep us informed."

"Will do." The skipper killed the radio link and turned to the IC man of the watch. "Let's get a tape of the battle set up for uplinking to Pearl."

"Aye, sir."

Air China 666 was still heading toward the coast, but the radar track showed the aircraft snaking and yawing around its straight-line course into Taipei. The ELINT team on *Chandler* was now listening in on the radio circuits. English is the language of international aviation, and the pilot in command of

the wounded airliner was speaking quickly and clearly, calling ahead for emergency procedures, while he and his co-pilot struggled with their wounded airliner. Only they, really, knew the magnitude of the problem. Everyone else was just a spectator, rooting and praying that he'd keep it together for another fifteen minutes.

THIS ONE WENT up the line fast. The communications nexus was Admiral David Seaton's office on the hilltop overlooking Pearl Harbor. The senior communications watch officer changed buttons on his phone to call the theater commander-in-chief, who immediately told him to shoot a CRITIC-level flash message to Washington. Seaton next ordered an alert message to the seven American warships in the area—mainly the submarines—to perk their ears up. After that, a message went off to the Americans who were "observing" the exercise in various Republic of China military command posts—these would take time to get delivered. There was still no American embassy in Taipei, and therefore no attaches or CIA personnel to hustle down to the airport to see if the airliner made it in safely or not. At that point, there was nothing to do but wait, in anticipation of the questions that would start arriving from Washington, and which as yet he was in no real position to answer.

"YES?" RYAN SAID, lifting the phone.

"Dr. Goodley for you, sir."

"Okay, put him on." Pause. "Ben, what is it?"

"Trouble off Taiwan, Mr. President; could be a bad one." The National Security Advisor explained on, telling what he knew. It didn't take long.

It was, on the whole, an impressive exercise in communications. The Airbus was still in the air, and the President of the United States knew that there was a problem—and nothing else.

"Okay, keep me posted." Ryan looked down at the desk he was about to leave. "Oh, shit." It was such a pleasure, the power of the presidency. Now he had virtually instant knowledge of something he could do nothing about. Were there Americans on the aircraft? What did it all mean? What was happening?

IT COULD HAVE been worse. Daryaei got back on the aircraft after having been in Baghdad for less than four hours, having dealt with the problems even more tersely than usual, and taking some satisfaction from the fear he'd struck into a few hearts for having bothered him with such trivial matters. His sour stomach contributed to an even more sour expression as he boarded and found his seat, and waved to the attendant to tell the flight crew to get moving—the sort of wrist-snapping gesture that looked like *off with their heads* to so many. Thirty seconds later, the stairs were up and the engines turning.

“WHERE DID YOU learn this game?” Adler asked.

“In the Navy, Mr. Secretary,” Clark answered, collecting the pot. He was ten dollars up now, and it wasn’t the money. It was the principle of the thing. He’d just bluffed the Secretary of State out of two bucks. Miller Time.

“I thought sailors were crummy gamblers.”

“That’s what some people say.” Clark smiled, as he piled the quarters up.

“Watch his hands,” Chavez advised.

“I *am* watching his hands.” The attendant came aft and poured out the rest of the wine. Not even two full glasses for the men, just enough to pass the time. “Excuse me, how much longer?”

“Less than an hour, Monsieur Minister.”

“Thank you.” Adler smiled at her as she moved back forward.

“King bets, Mr. Secretary,” Clark told him.

Chavez checked his hole card. Pair of fives. Nice start. He tossed a quarter into the center of the table after Adler’s.

THE EUROPEAN-MADE Airbus 310 had lost its right-side engine to the missile, but that wasn’t all. The heat-seeker had come in from the right rear and impacted on the side of the big GE turbofan, with fragments from the explosion ripping into the outboard wing panels. Some of these sliced into a fuel cell—fortunately almost empty—which trailed some burning fuel, panicking those who could look out their windows and see. But that wasn’t the frightening part. Fire behind the aircraft couldn’t hurt anyone, and the vented fuel tank didn’t explode, as it might have done had it been hit as little as ten minutes earlier. The really bad news was the damage to the aircraft’s control surfaces.

Forward, the two-man flight crew was as experienced as that of any international airline. The Airbus could fly quite well, thank you, on one engine, and the left-side engine was undamaged, and now turning at full power while the co-pilot shut down the right side of the aircraft and punched the manual controls on the elaborate fire-suppression systems. In seconds, the fire-warning alarms went silent and the co-pilot started breathing again.

“Elevator damage,” the pilot reported next, working the controls and finding that the Airbus wasn’t responding as it should.

But the problem wasn’t with the flight crew, either. The Airbus actually flew via computer software, a huge executive program that took inputs directly from the airframe as well as from the control movements of the pilots, analyzed them, and then told the control surfaces what to do next. Battle damage was not something the software engineers had anticipated in the design of the aircraft. The program noted the traumatic loss of the engine and decided it was an engine explosion, which it had been taught to think about. The onboard computers evaluated the damage to the aircraft, what control surfaces worked and how well, and adjusted itself to the situation.

“Twenty miles,” the co-pilot reported, as the Airbus settled in on its direct-penetration vector. The pilot adjusted his throttle, and the computers—the aircraft actually had seven of them—decided this was all right, and lowered engine power. The aircraft, having burned off most of its fuel, was light. They

had all the engine power they needed. The altitude was low enough that depressurization was not an issue. They could steer. They just might make this, they decided. A “helpful” fighter aircraft pulled alongside to look over their damage and tried to call them on the guard frequency, only to be told to keep out of the way, in very irate Mandarin.

The fighter could see skin peeling off the Airbus, and tried to report that, only to be rebuffed. His F-5E backed off to observe, talking to his base all the while.

“Ten miles.” Speed was below two hundred knots now, and they tried to lower flaps and slats, but the ones on the right side didn’t deploy properly, and the computers, sensing this, didn’t deploy them on the left side, either. The landing would have to be overly fast. Both pilots frowned, cursed, and got on with it.

“Gear,” the pilot ordered. The co-pilot flipped the levers, and the wheels went down—and locked in place, which was worth a sigh of relief to both drivers. They couldn’t tell that both tires on the right side were damaged.

They had the field in view now, and both could see the flashing lights of emergency equipment as they crossed the perimeter fencing, and the Airbus settled. Normal approach speed was about 135 knots. They were coming in at 195. The pilot knew he’d need every available foot of space, and touched down within two hundred meters of the near edge.

The Airbus hit hard, and started rolling, but not for long. The damaged right-side tires lasted about three seconds before they both lost pressure, and one second after that, the metal strut started digging a furrow in the concrete. Both men and computers tried to maintain a straight-line course for the aircraft, but it didn’t work. The 310 yawed to the right. The left-side gear snapped with a cannon-shot report, and the twin-jet bellied out. For a second, it appeared that it might pinwheel onto the grass, but then a wingtip caught, and the plane started turning over. The fuselage broke into three uneven sections. There was a gout of flame when the left wing separated—mercifully, the forward bit of fuselage shot clear, as did the after section, but the middle section stopped almost cold in the middle of the burning jet fuel, and all the efforts of the racing firefighters couldn’t change that. It would later be determined that the 127 people killed quickly asphyxiated. Another 104 escaped with varying degrees of injury, including the flight crew. The TV footage would be uplinked within the hour, and a full-blown international incident was now world news.

CLARK FELT A slight chill as his aircraft touched down. Looking out the window, he imagined a certain familiarity, but admitted it was probably imaginary, and besides, all international airports looked pretty much alike in the dark. Forward, the French aviators followed directions, taxiing to the air force terminal for security, instructed to follow another business-type jet which had landed a minute ahead of them.

“Well, we’re here,” Ding said, with a yawn. He had two watches on, one for local time and one for Washington, and from them he tried to decide what time his body thought it was. Then he looked outside with all the curiosity of

a tourist, and suffered the usual disappointment. It might as easily have been Denver from what he could see.

"Excuse me," the brunette attendant said. "They've instructed us to remain in the aircraft while another is serviced first."

"What's a few more minutes?" Secretary Adler thought, as tired as the rest of them.

Chavez looked out the window. "There, he must have gotten in ahead of us."

"Kill the cabin lights, will you?" Clark asked. Then he pointed at his partner.

"Why—" Clark cut the SecState off with a gesture. The attendant did as she was told. Ding took his cue and pulled the camera out of his bag.

"What gives?" Adler asked more quietly, as the lights went off.

"There's a G right in front of us," John replied, taking his own look. "Not many of them around, and he's going to a secure terminal. Let's see if we can tell who it is, okay?"

Spooks had to be spooks, Adler knew. He didn't object. Diplomats gathered information, too, and knowing who had access to such expensive official transport could tell them something about who really rated in the UIR government. In a few seconds, just as their own wheels were chocked, a parade of cars rolled up to the Gulfstream fifty meters away from them on the Iranian—UIR-ian—air force ramp.

"Somebody important," Ding said.

"How you loaded?"

"ASA 1200, Mr. C.," Chavez replied, selecting the telephoto setting. The whole aircraft fit into the frame. He couldn't zoom any closer. He started shooting as the steps came down.

"Oh," Adler said first. "Well, that shouldn't be much of a surprise."

"Daryaei, isn't it?" Clark asked.

"That's our friend," SecState confirmed.

Hearing this, Chavez got off ten rapid frames, showing the man getting off, to be greeted by some colleagues, who embraced him like a long-lost uncle, then guided him into the car. The vehicles pulled off. Chavez fired off one more, then put the camera back in his bag. They waited another five minutes before they were allowed to de-plane.

"Do I want to know what time it is?" Adler asked, heading for the door.

"Probably not," Clark decided. "I guess we'll get a few hours of rack time before the meeting."

At the bottom of the steps was the French ambassador, with one obvious security guard, and ten more locals. They would travel to the French embassy in two cars, with two Iranian vehicles leading and two more trailing the semi-official procession. Adler went with the ambassador in the first one. Clark and Chavez bundled into the second. They had a driver and another man in the front seat. Both would have to be spooks.

"Welcome to Tehran, my friends," the guy riding shotgun said.

"Merci," Ding replied, with a yawn.

"Sorry to get you up so early," Clark added. This one would probably be the station chief. The people he and Ding had sat with at Paris would have called ahead to let him know that they were probably not State Department security

types.

The Frenchman confirmed it. “Not your first time, I am told.”

“How long have you been here?” John asked.

“Two years. The car is safe,” he added, meaning that it probably wasn’t bugged.

“We have a message for you from Washington,” the ambassador told Adler in the leading car. Then he relayed what he knew about the Airbus incident at Taipei. “You will be busy when you return home, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, Christ!” the Secretary observed. “Just what we need. Any reaction yet?”

“Nothing I know of. But that will change within hours. You are scheduled to see the Ayatollah Daryaei at ten-thirty, so you have time for some sleep. Your flight back to Paris will leave just after lunch. We will give you all the assistance you request.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.” Adler was too tired to say much else.

“Any idea what happened?” Chavez asked in the trail car.

“We have only what your government has told us to pass along. Evidently there was a brief clash over the Strait of Taiwan, and a missile hit an unintended target.”

“Casualties?” Clark said next.

“Unknown at this time,” the local DGSE station chief said.

“Kinda hard to hit an airliner without killing somebody.” Ding closed his eyes in anticipation of a soft bed at the embassy.

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THE SAME NEWS was given to Daryaei at exactly the same time. He surprised his fellow cleric by taking it without a visible reaction. Mahmoud Haji had long since decided that people who didn’t know anything couldn’t interfere with much.

FRENCH HOSPITALITY WAS not disgraced even by its transplantation to a place which could hardly have been more different from the City of Light. Inside the compound, three uniformed soldiers collected the Americans’ bags, while another man in some sort of livery conducted them to their quarters. The beds were turned down, and there was ice water on the nightstands. Chavez checked his watches again, groaned, and collapsed into the bed. For Clark, sleep came harder. The last time he’d looked at an embassy compound in this city . . . *what was it?* he asked himself. What was bothering him so much about this?

ADMIRAL JACKSON DID the brief, complete with videotape.

“This is the upload from *Port Royal*. We have a similar tape from *The Sullivans,* no real differences, so we’ll just use the one,” he told those in the Sit

Room. He had a wooden pointer and started moving it around the large-screen TV display.

"This is a flight of four fighters, probably Jianjiji Hongzhaji-7s—we call it the B-7 for the obvious reason. Two engines and two seats, performance and capabilities like an old F-4 Phantom. The flight departs the mainland, and comes out a little too far. There's a no-man's-land right about here that neither side had violated until today. Here's another flight, probably the same aircraft and—"

"You're not sure?" Ben Goodley asked.

"We've ID'd the aircraft from their avionics, their radar emissions. A radar can't directly identify an airplane by type," Robby explained. "You have to deduce types by what they do, or from the electronic signatures of their equipment, okay? Anyway, the lead group is coming east, and crosses the invisible line here." The pointer moved. "Here's a flight of four Taiwanese F-16s with all the bells and whistles. They see the lead PRC group come too far and vector in on them. Then the lead group turns back west. Soon thereafter, right about . . . now, the trailing group lights off their radars, but instead of tracking their own lead group, they're hitting the F-16s."

"What are you saying, Rob?" the President asked.

"What this looks like, the lead group was simulating a dawn attack on the mainland, and the trail group was supposed to defend against the simulated attack. On the surface, it looks like a fairly standard training exercise. The trail group, however, lit up the wrong people, and when they shifted radar modes to the attack setting, one of the Taiwanese pilots must have thought he was under attack and so he pickled off a missile. Then his wingman did the same. Zap! Right here, a B-7 eats a Slammer, but this one evades it—damned lucky for him—and he gets off a missile of his own. Then everybody starts shooting. This F-16 jinks around one but walks right into another—see here, the pilot ejects, and we think he survived. But this element launches four missiles, and one of those acquires this airliner. Must have just barely made it all the way. We've checked the range, and it's actually two miles over what we thought the missile could do. By the time it caught up and hit, the fighters have all turned back, the PRC guys because they were probably bingo-fuel, and the ROC guys because they were Winchester—out of missiles. All in all, it was a fairly sloppy engagement on both sides."

"You're saying it was a goof?" This came from Tony Bretano.

"It certainly looks that way, except for one thing—"

"Why carry live missiles on an exercise?" Ryan said.

"Close, Mr. President. The ROC pilots, sure, they're carrying white ones because they see the whole PRC exercise as a threat—"

"White ones?" It was Bretano again.

"Excuse me, Mr. Secretary. White missiles are war shots. Exercise missiles are usually painted blue. The PRC guys, though, why carry heat-seekers? In situations like this, we usually don't, because you can't turn them off—once they go they're entirely on their own, fire-and-forget, we call it. One other thing. All the birds fired at the F-16s were radar-homers. This one, the one that went for the airliner, seems to be the *only* heat-seeker that was launched. I don't much like the smell of that."

"Deliberate act?" Jack asked quietly.

"That is a possibility, Mr. President. The whole show looks just like a screwup, classic case. A couple fighter jocks get really hyped on something, you have an instant fur-ball, some people get killed, and we'll never be able to prove otherwise, but if you look at this two-plane element, I think they were aiming for the airliner all along—unless they took it for a ROC fighter, and I don't buy that—"

"Why?"

"It was heading the wrong way all the time," Admiral Jackson answered.

"Buck fever," Secretary Bretano offered.

"Why not engage people heading right for you instead of somebody heading away? Mr. Secretary, I'm a fighter pilot. I don't buy it. If I'm in an unexpected combat situation, first thing I do is identify the threats to me and shoot 'em right in the lips."

"How many deaths?" Jack asked bleakly.

Ben Goodley handled that one: "News reports say over a hundred. There are survivors, but we don't have any kind of count yet. And we should expect that there were some Americans aboard. A lot of business goes on between Hong Kong and Taiwan."

"Options?"

"Before we do anything, Mr. President, we need to know if any of our people are involved. We only have one carrier anywhere close, the *Eisenhower* battle group on the way to Australia for SOUTHERN CUP. But it's a good bet that this won't exactly help things out between Beijing and Taipei."

"We'll need some kind of press release," Arnie told the President.

"We need to know if we lost any citizens first," Ryan said. "If we did . . . well, what do we do, demand an explanation?"

"They'll say it was a mistake," Jackson repeated. "They might even blame the Taiwanese for shooting first and starting it, then disclaim all responsibility."

"But you don't buy it, Robby?"

"No, Jack—excuse me, no, Mr. President, I don't think so. I want to go over the tapes with a few people, to back-check me some. Maybe I'm wrong . . . but I don't think so. Fighter pilots are fighter pilots. The only reason to shoot the guy who's running away instead of the guy who's closing in is because you want to."

"Move the *Ike* group north?" Bretano wondered.

"Get me contingency plans to do just that," the President said.

"That leaves the Indian Ocean uncovered, sir," Jackson pointed out. *"Carl Vinson* is most of the way home to Norfolk now. *John Stennis* and *Enterprise* are still in the yard at Pearl, and we do not have a deployable carrier in the Pacific. We're out of carriers on that whole half of the world, and we'll need a month at best to move another one in from LantFleet."

Ryan turned to Ed Foley. "What are the chances this could blow all the way up?"

"Taiwan's going to be pretty unhappy about this. We have shots fired and people dead. National-flag airline clobbered. Countries tend to be protective of those," the DCI observed. "It's possible."

"Intentions?" Goodley asked the DCI.

"If Admiral Jackson is correct—I'm not ready to buy into that yet, by the way," Ed Foley added for Robby's benefit. He got an understanding nod. "Then we have something going on, but what it is, I don't know. Better for everybody if this was an accident. I can't say I like the idea of pulling the carrier out of the Indian Ocean with the developing situation in the Persian Gulf."

"What's the worst thing that can happen between the PRC and Taiwan?" Bretano asked, annoyed that he had to ask the question at all. He was still too new in his job to be as effective as his President needed.

"Mr. Secretary, the People's Republic has nuclear-tipped missiles, enough to turn Formosa into a cinder, but we have reason to believe that the Republic of China has them too and—"

"Roughly twenty," Foley interrupted. "And those F-16s can one-way a couple all the way to Beijing if they want. They can't destroy the People's Republic, but twenty thermonuclear weapons will knock their economy back at least ten years, maybe twenty. The PRC does not want that to happen. They're not crazy, Admiral. Keep it conventional, okay?"

"Very well, sir. The PRC does *not* have the ability to invade Taiwan. They lack the necessary amphibious assets to move large numbers of troops for a forced-entry assault. So what happens if things blow up anyway? Most likely scenario is a nasty air and sea battle, but one that leads to no resolution, since neither side can finish off the other. That also means a shooting war astride one of the world's most important trade routes, with all sorts of adverse diplomatic consequences for all the players. I can't see the purpose in doing this intentionally. Just too destructive to be deliberate policy . . . I think." He shrugged. It didn't make sense, but neither did a deliberate attack on a harmless airliner—and he'd just told his audience that *had* probably been deliberate.

"And we have large trade relationships with both," the President noted. "We want to prevent that, don't we? I'm afraid it's looking like we have to move that carrier, Robby. Let's get some options put together, and let's *try* to figure out what the hell the PRC might be up to."

CLARK WOKE UP first, feeling quite miserable. But that wasn't allowed under the circumstances. Ten minutes later, he was shaved, dressed, and heading out the door, leaving Chavez in bed. Ding didn't speak the language anyway.

"Morning walk?" It was the guy who'd brought them in from the airport.

"I could use a stretch," John admitted. "And you are?"

"Marcel Lefevre."

"Station chief?" John asked bluntly.

"Actually, I am the commercial attaché," the Frenchman replied—meaning, *yes*. "You mind if I come along?"

"Not at all," Clark replied, surprising his companion as they headed for the door. "Just wanted to take a walk. Any markets around here?"

"Yes, I will show you."

Ten minutes later, they were in a street of commerce. Two Iranian shadows

were fifty feet behind them, and obvious about it, though they did nothing more than to observe.

The sounds brought it all back. Clark's Farsi was not all that impressive, especially since it was over fifteen years since he'd practiced it, but though his speech might not have been terribly good, his hearing clicked back in, soon catching the chatter and bargaining as the two Westerners passed stalls on both sides of the street.

"How are food prices?"

"Fairly high," Lefevre answered. "Especially with all the supplies they shipped to Iraq. A few grumbles about that."

There was something lacking, John saw, after a few minutes of contemplation. Passing half a block of food stalls, they were now in another area—gold, always a popular trade item in this part of the world. People were buying and selling. But there wasn't the enthusiasm he remembered from before. He looked at the stalls as he passed, trying to figure what it was.

"Something for your wife?" Lefevre asked.

Clark tried an unconvincing smile. "Oh, you never know. Anniversary coming up soon." He stopped to look at a necklace.

"Where are you from?" the dealer asked.

"America," John replied, also in English. The man had picked out his nationality at once, probably from his clothes, and taken the chance to speak in that language.

"We do not see many Americans here."

"Too bad. In my younger days I traveled here quite a lot." It was actually rather a nice necklace, and on checking the price tag and doing the mental calculation, the cost was reasonable as hell. And he *did* have an anniversary approaching.

"Perhaps someday that will change," the goldsmith said.

"There are many differences between my country and yours," John observed sadly. Yes, he *could* afford it, and as usual he had plenty of cash with him. One nice thing about American currency was that it was damned near universally accepted.

"Things change," the man said next.

"Things have changed," John agreed. He looked at a slightly more expensive necklace. It wasn't any problem handling them. One thing about Islamic countries, they had a way of discouraging thieves. "There's so little smiling here, and this is a market street."

"You have two men following you."

"Really? Well, I'm not breaking any laws, am I?" Clark asked with some obvious concern.

"No, you are not." But the man was nervous.

"This one," John said, handing it to the goldsmith.

"How will you pay?"

"American dollars, is that okay?"

"Yes, and the price is nine hundred of your dollars."

It required all of his control not to show surprise. Even in a New York wholesale shop, this necklace would have been triple that, and while he wasn't quite prepared to spend that much, haggling was part of the fun of

shopping in this part of the world. He'd figured that he could talk the guy down to maybe fifteen hundred, still a considerable bargain. Had he heard the man properly?

"Nine hundred?"

An emphatic finger pointed right at his heart. "Eight hundred, not a dollar less—you wish to ruin me?" he added loudly.

"You bargain hard." Clark adopted a defensive posture for the benefit of the watchers, who were coming closer.

"You are an unbeliever! You expect charity? This is a fine necklace, and I hope you will give it to your honorable wife and not a lesser, debauched woman!"

Clark figured he'd put the man in enough danger. He pulled out his wallet and counted off the bills, handing them over.

"You pay me too much, I am not a thief!" The goldsmith handed one back.

Seven hundred dollars for this?

"Excuse me, I meant no insult," John said, pocketing the necklace, which the man not quite tossed to him without a case.

"We are not all barbarians," the dealer said quietly, abruptly turning his back a split-second later. Clark and Lefevre walked to the end of the street and headed to the right. They moved quickly, forcing their tail to follow.

"What the hell?" the CIA officer observed. He hadn't expected anything like that to happen.

"Yes. The enthusiasm for the regime has abated somewhat. What you saw is representative. That was nicely done, Monsieur Clark. How long in the Agency?"

"Long enough that I don't like being surprised that much. I believe your word is *merde*. "

"So, is it for your wife?"

John nodded. "Yeah. Will he get into any trouble?"

"Unlikely," Lefevre said. "He may have lost money on the exchange, Clark. An interesting gesture, was it not?"

"Let's get back. I have a Cabinet secretary to wake up." They were back in fifteen minutes. John went right to his room.

"What's the weather like outside, Mr. C.?" Clark reached into his pocket and tossed something across the room. Chavez caught it. "Heavy."

"What do you suppose it costs, Domingo?"

"Looks like twenty-one carat, feels like it too.... coupla grand, easy."

"Would you believe seven hundred?"

"You related to the guy, John?" Chavez asked with a laugh. The laugh stopped. "I thought they didn't like us here?"

"Things change," John said quietly, quoting the goldsmith.

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"HOW BAD WAS it?" Cathy asked.

"One hundred four survivors, it says, some pretty beat up, ninety confirmed dead, about thirty still unaccounted for, meaning they're dead, too, just

haven't identified the body parts yet," Jack said, reading the dispatch just brought to the bedroom door by Agent Raman. "Sixteen Americans in the survivor category. Five dead. Nine unknown and presumed dead. Christ, there were forty PRC citizens aboard." He shook his head.

"How come—if they don't get along—"

"Why do they do so much business? They do, and that's a fact, honey. They spit and snarl at each other like alley cats, but they need each other, too."

"What will we do?" his wife asked.

"I don't know yet. We're saving the press release for tomorrow morning, when we have more information. How the hell am I supposed to sleep on a night like this?" the President of the United States asked. "We have fourteen dead Americans halfway around the world from here. I was supposed to protect them, wasn't I? I'm not supposed to let people kill our citizens."

"People die every day, Jack," the First Lady pointed out.

"Not from air-to-air missiles." Ryan put the dispatch on his night table and switched off the light, wondering when sleep would come, wondering how the meeting would go in Tehran.

IT STARTED WITH handshakes. A foreign ministry official met them outside the building. The French ambassador handled introductions, and everyone swiftly moved inside, the better to avoid the coverage of a TV camera, though none appeared to be in evidence on the street. Clark and Chavez played their parts, standing close to their principal, but not too close, looking around nervously, as they were supposed to do.

Secretary Adler followed the official, with everyone else in trail. The French ambassador stopped in the anteroom with the others, as Adler and his guide went all the way into the rather modest official office of the UIR's spiritual leader.

"I welcome you in peace," Daryaei said, rising from his chair to greet his guest. He spoke through an interpreter. It was a normal ploy for such meetings. It made for greater precision in communications—and also if something went badly wrong, it could be said that the interpreter had made the mistake, which gave both sides a convenient way out. "Allah's blessing on this meeting."

"Thank you for receiving me on such short notice," Adler said, taking his seat.

"You have come far. Your journey was a good one?" Daryaei inquired pleasantly. The entire ritual would be pleasant, or at least the beginning of it.

"It was uneventful," Adler allowed. He struggled not to yawn or show fatigue. Three cups of strong European coffee helped, though they made his stomach a little jumpy. Diplomats in serious meetings were supposed to act like surgeons in an operating room, and he had long practice in showing none of his emotions, jumpy stomach or not.

"I regret that we cannot show you more of our city. There is so much history and beauty here." Both men waited for the words to be translated. The translator was thirtyish, male, intense, and, Adler saw . . . afraid of Daryaei? he wondered. He was probably a ministry official, dressed in a suit that

needed a little pressing, but the Ayatollah was in robes, emphasizing his national and clerical identity. Mahmoud Haji was grave, but not hostile in demeanor—and, strangely, he seemed totally lacking in curiosity.

"Perhaps the next time I visit."

A friendly nod. "Yes." This was said in English, which reminded Adler that the man understood his visitor's language. Nothing all that unusual in form, SecState noted.

"It has been a long time since there were direct contacts between your country and mine, certainly at this level."

"This is true, but we welcome such contacts. How may I be of service to you, Secretary Adler?"

"If you do not object, I would like to discuss stability in this region."

"Stability?" Daryaei asked innocently. "What do you mean?"

"The establishment of the United Islamic Republic has created the largest country in the region. This is a matter of concern to some."

"I would say that we have improved stability. Was not the Iraqi regime the destabilizing influence? Did not Iraq start two aggressive wars? We certainly did no such thing."

"This is true," Adler agreed.

"Islam is a religion of peace and brotherhood," Daryaei went on, speaking as the teacher he'd been for years. *Probably a tough one*, Adler thought to himself, *with steel under the gentle voice.*

"That is also true, but in the world of men the rules of religion are not always followed by those who call themselves religious," the American pointed out.

"Other countries do not accept the rule of God as we do. Only in the recognition of that rule can men hope to find peace and justice. That means more than saying the words. One must also live the words."

And thank you for the Sunday school lesson, Adler thought, with a respectful nod. *Then why the hell do you support Hezbollah?*

"My country wishes no more than peace in this region—throughout the world, for that matter."

"As is indeed the wish of Allah, as revealed to us through the Prophet."

He was sticking to the script, Adler saw. Once upon a time, President Jimmy Carter had dispatched an emissary to visit this man's boss, Khomeini, at his exile home in France. The Shah had been in deep political trouble then, and the opposition had been sounded out, just to hedge America's bets. The emissary had come home after the meeting to tell his President that Khomeini was a "saint." Carter had accepted the report at face value, and brought about the removal of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, allowing the "saint" to supplant him.

Oops.

The next administration had dealt with the same man and gotten nothing more for it than a scandal and world ridicule.

Ouch.

Those were mistakes Adler was determined not to repeat.

"It is also one of my country's principles that international borders are to be honored. Respect for territorial integrity is the sine qua non of regional and global stability."

"Secretary Adler, all men are brothers, this is the will of Allah. Brothers may quarrel from time to time, but to make war is hateful to God. In any case, I find the substance of your remarks somewhat unsettling. You seem to suggest that we have unfriendly intentions to our neighbors. Why do you say such a thing?"

"Excuse me, I think you misunderstand. I make no such suggestions. I have come merely to discuss mutual concerns."

"Your country and its associates and allies depend on this region for their economic health. We will not do harm to that. You need our oil. We need the things that oil money can buy. Ours is a trading culture. You know that. Our culture is also Islamic, and it is a source of great pain to me that the West seems never to appreciate the substance of our Faith. We are not barbarians, despite what your Jewish friends may say. We have, in fact, no religious quarrel with the Jews. Their patriarch, Abraham, came from this region. They were the first to proclaim the true God, and truly there should be peace between us."

"It pleases me to hear those words. How may we bring this peace about?" Adler asked, wondering when the last time had been that someone had tried to drop a whole olive *tree* on his head.

"With time, and with talk. Perhaps it is better that we should have direct contacts. They, too, are people of trade in addition to being people of faith."

Adler wondered what he meant by that. Direct contacts with Israel. Was it an offer, or a sop to toss at the American government?

"And your Islamic neighbors?"

"We share the Faith. We share oil. We share a culture. We are already one in so many ways."

OUTSIDE, CLARK, CHAVEZ, and the ambassador sat quietly. The office personnel studiously ignored them, after having provided the usual refreshments. The security people stood about, not looking at the visitors, but not looking away from them, either. For Chavez it was a chance to meet a new people. He noted that the setting was old-fashioned, and oddly shabby, as though the building hadn't changed much since the departure of the previous government—a long time ago, he reminded himself—and it wasn't so much that things were run down as that they weren't modern. There was a real tension here, though. That he could feel in the air. An American office staff would have looked at him with curiosity. The six people in this room did not. Why?

Clark had expected that. Being ignored didn't surprise him. He and Ding were here as security troops, and they were just furniture, unworthy of notice. The people here would be trusted aides and underlings, faithful to their boss because they had to be. They had a measure of power because of him. These visitors would either ratify that power in the international sense or threaten it, and while that was important to their individual well-being, they could no more affect it than they could affect the weather, and so they just tuned their visitors out, except for the security pukes, who were trained to view everyone as a threat even though protocol disallowed them from the physical

intimidation which they would have preferred to show.

For the ambassador it was one more exercise in diplomacy, conversations in carefully chosen words selected to show little on the one hand, and to uncover much on the other. He could guess at what was being said by both sides. He could even guess at the real meaning of the words. It was their truth that interested him. What *did* Daryaei have planned? The ambassador and his country hoped for peace in the region, and so he and his colleagues had prepped Adler to feel open to that possibility, while at the same time not knowing how this would really go. An interesting man, Daryaei. A man of God who had surely murdered the Iraqi President. A man of peace and justice who ruled his country with an iron hand. A man of mercy who clearly had his own personal staff terrified of him. You had only to look around the room to see that. A modern, Middle Eastern Richelieu? There was a novel thought, the Frenchman joked to himself, behind an impassive face. He'd have to run that idea past his ministry later today. And in with him right now was a brand-new American minister. He allowed for the fact that Adler had a fine reputation as a career diplomat, but was he good enough for *this* task?

"WHY DO WE discuss this? Why should I have territorial ambitions?" Daryaei asked, almost pleasantly, but telegraphing his irritation. "My people desire only peace. There has been too much strife here. For all my life I have studied and taught the Faith, and now, finally, in the closing days of my life, there *is* peace."

"We have no more wish for this region than that, except perhaps to reestablish our friendship with your country."

"On that we should talk further. I thank your country for not hindering the removal of trade sanctions against the former country of Iraq. Perhaps that is a beginning. At the same time, we would prefer that America did not interfere in the internal affairs of our neighbors."

"We are committed to the integrity of Israel," Adler pointed out.

"Israel is not, strictly speaking, a neighbor," Daryaei replied. "But if Israel can live in peace, then we can also live in peace."

The guy was good, Adler thought. He wasn't revealing very much, just denying everything. He made no policy statements aside from the usual protestations of peaceful intent. Every chief of state did that, though not many invoked the name of God so much. Peace. Peace. Peace.

Except that Adler didn't believe him for an instant on the subject of Israel. If he'd had peaceful intentions, he would have told Jerusalem first, the better to get them on his side for dealing with Washington. Israel had been the unnamed middleman for the arms-for-hostages disaster, and they'd been suckered, too.

"I hope that is a foundation upon which we can build."

"If your country treats my country with respect, then we can talk. Then we can discuss an improvement in relations."

"I will tell my President that."

"Your country, too, has endured much sorrow of late. I wish him the strength to heal your nation's wounds."

“Thank you.” Both men stood. Handshakes were exchanged again, and Daryaei conducted Adler to the door.

CLARK NOTED THE way the office staff jumped to their feet. Daryaei conveyed Adler to the outer door, took his hand one more time, and let the man leave with his escorts. Two minutes later, they were in their official cars and on the way directly to the airport.

“I wonder how that went?” John asked nobody in particular. Everyone else wondered the same thing, but not another word was spoken. Thirty minutes later, aided by their official escort, the cars were back at Mehrabad International, and pulling up to the air force part of the facility, where their French jet was waiting.

There had to be a departure ceremony, too. The French ambassador talked with Adler for several minutes, all the while holding his hand in an extended farewell shake. With ample UIR-ian security, there was nothing for Clark and Chavez to do but look around, as they were supposed to do. In plain view were six fighter aircraft, with maintenance people working on them. The mechanics walked in and out of a large hangar that had doubtless been built under the Shah. Ding looked inside, and nobody made a fuss about it. Another airplane was in there, seemingly half disassembled. An engine was sitting on a cart, with another team of people tinkering with it.

“Chicken coops, you believe it?” Chavez asked.

“What’s that?” Clark said, looking the other way.

“Check it out, Mr. C.”

John turned. Stacked against the far wall of the hangar were rows of wire cages, about the size of those used for moving poultry. Hundreds of them. Funny thing for an air force base, he thought.

ON THE OTHER side of the airport, the Movie Star watched the last of his team board a flight to Vienna. He happened to gaze across the expansive vista to see the private jets on the far side, with some people and cars close to one of them. He wondered briefly what that was about. Probably some government function. So was what he had planned, of course, but one that would never be acknowledged. The Austrian Airlines flight pulled away from the gate on time, and would head off just behind the business jet, or whatever it was. Then he walked to another gate to board his own flight.

40

OPENINGS

MOST AMERICANS WOKE up to learn what their President already knew. Eleven American citizens were dead, with three more unaccounted for, in an airliner disaster on the opposite side of the world. A local TV crew had made it to the airport just in time, having learned of the emergency from a helpful source at the terminal. Their video showed little more than a distant fireball erupting into the sky, followed by some closer shots that were so typical that they, too, might have come from anywhere. Ten fire trucks surrounded the burning wreckage, blasting it with foam and water, both too late to save anyone. Ambulances scurried about. Some people, obvious survivors, wandered in the haze of shock and disorientation. Others, their faces blackened, staggered into the arms of rescue personnel. There were wives without husbands, parents without children, and the sort of chaos that always appeared dramatic but which passed on nothing in the way of explanation, even as it cried out for action of some kind.

The Republic of China's government issued a blistering statement about air piracy, then requested an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council. Beijing issued its own statement minutes later, stating that its aircraft, on a peaceful training exercise, had been attacked entirely without provocation, then returned fire in self-defense. Beijing totally disavowed any involvement in the damage to the airliner, and blamed the entire episode on their rebellious province.

"So, what else have we turned up?" Ryan asked Admiral Jackson at seven-thirty.

"We went over both tapes for about two hours. I brought in a few fighter pilots I've worked with, and a pair of Air Force guys, and we kicked it around some. Number one, the ChiComs—"

"Not supposed to call them that, Robby," the President observed.

"Old habit, sorry. The *gentlemen* of the PRC—hey, they knew we had ships there. The electronic signature of an Aegis ship is like Mount St. Helens with an attitude, okay? And the capabilities of the ships ain't exactly a secret. They've been in service for almost twenty years. So they knew we were watching, and they knew we'd see everything. Let's keep that one in mind."

"Keep going," Jack told his friend.

"Number two, we have a spook team on the *Chandler,* listening in on radio chatter. We have translated the voice transmissions of the Chinese fighter pilots. Quoting now—this is thirty seconds into the engagement—'I have him, I have him, taking the shot.' Okay, the time stamp on that is exactly the same as the heat-seeker launch on the airliner.

"Number three, every driver I talked to said the same as I did—why shoot at an airliner on the edge of your missile range when you have fighters in your face? Jack, this one smells—real bad, man.

"Unfortunately, we can't prove the voice transmission came from the fighter that launched on the Airbus, but it is my opinion, and that of my pals across the river, that this was a deliberate act. They tried to splash that airliner on purpose," the Pentagon's director of operations concluded. "We're lucky anybody got off at all."

"Admiral," Arnie van Damm asked, "could you take that into a court of law?"

"Sir, I'm not a lawyer. I'm an airplane driver. I don't have to prove things for a living, but I'm telling you, it's a hundred-to-one against that we're wrong on this."

"I can't say this in front of the cameras, though," Ryan said, checking his watch. He'd have to do makeup in a few minutes. "If they did it on purpose—"

"No 'if,' Jack, okay?"

"Damn it, Robby, I heard you the first time!" Ryan snapped. He paused and took a breath. "I can't accuse a sovereign country of an act of war without absolute proof. Next, okay, fine, they *did* do it on purpose, and they did it with the knowledge that we'd know they did. What's that *mean?*"

Jack's national security team had had a long night. Goodley took the lead. "Hard to say, Mr. President."

"Are they making a move on Taiwan?" the President asked.

"They *can't,"* Jackson said, shaking off his Commander-in-Chief's tantrum. "They do not have the physical ability to invade. There is no sign of unusual activity in their ground forces in this area, just the stuff they've been doing in the northwest that has the Russians so annoyed. So from a military point of view the answer is no.

"Airborne invasion?" Ed Foley asked. Robby shook his head.

"They don't have the airlift capacity, and even if they tried, the ROC has enough air-defense assets to turn it into early duck season. They could stage an air-sea battle like I told you last night, but it'll cost them ships and planes—*for what purpose?"* the J-3 asked.

"So did they splash an airliner to test *us?"* POTUS wondered. "That doesn't make sense, either."

"If you say 'me' instead of 'us,' that's a possibility," the DCI said quietly.

"Come on, Director," Goodley objected. "There were two hundred people on that plane, and they must have thought they'd kill them all."

"Let's not be too naive, Ben," Foley observed tolerantly. "They don't share our sentimentality for human life over there, do they?"

"No, but—"

Ryan interrupted: "Okay, hold it. We think this was a deliberate act, but we don't have positive proof, and we have no idea what its purpose might have been—and if we don't, I can't call it a deliberate act, right?" There were nods. "Fine, now in fifteen minutes I have to go down to the Press Room and deliver this statement and then the reporters will ask me questions, and the only answers I can give them will be lies."

"That about sums it up, Mr. President," van Damm confirmed.

"Well, isn't that just *great*," Jack snarled. "And Beijing will know, or at least suspect, that I'm lying."

"Possible, but not certain on that," Ed Foley observed.

"I'm not good at lying," Ryan told them.

"Learn how," the chief of staff advised. "Quickly."

THERE WAS NO talking on the flight from Tehran to Paris. Adler took a comfortable seat in the back, got out a legal pad, and wrote the whole way, using his trained memory to reconstruct the conversation, then added a series of personal observations on everything from Daryaei's physical appearance to the clutter on his desk. After that, he examined the notes for an hour, and started making analytical comments. In the process, he wore down half a dozen pencils. The layover in Paris lasted less than an hour, enough for Adler to spend a little time with Claude again and for his escorts to have a quick drink. Then it was off again in their Air Force VC-20B.

"How'd it go?" John asked.

Adler had to remind himself that Clark was on the SNIE team, and not just a gun-toting SPO.

"First, what did you find out on your walk?"

The senior CIA officer reached in his pocket and handed the Secretary of State a gold necklace.

"Does this mean we're engaged?" Adler asked, with a surprised chuckle.

Clark gestured to his partner. "No, sir. He's engaged."

Now that they were aloft, the cabin crewman who ran the communications panel turned on his equipment. The fax machine started chirping at once.

"... WE HAVE CONFIRMED eleven American deaths, with three more U.S. citizens missing. Four of the American survivors are injured and are being treated in local hospitals. That concludes my opening statement," the President told them.

"Mister President!" thirty voices called at once.

"One at a time, please." Jack pointed to a woman in the front row.

"Beijing claims that Taiwan shot first. Can we confirm that?"

"We are examining some information, but it takes a while to figure these things out, and until such time as we have definitive information, I do not think it proper to draw any conclusions at this time."

"But both sides traded shots, didn't they?" she asked as a follow-up.

"That would seem to be the case, yes."

"So then do we know whose missile hit the Airbus?"

"As I said, we are still examining the data." *Keep it short, Jack,* he told himself. And that wasn't quite a lie, was it? "Yes?" He pointed to another reporter.

"Mr. President, with so many American citizens lost, what action will you be taking to ensure this does not happen again?" At least this one he could answer truthfully.

"We are examining options right now. Beyond that, I have nothing to say, except that we call on both Chinas to step back and think about their actions. The loss of innocent life is in the interest of no country. Military exercises there have been ongoing for some time now, and the resulting tension is not helpful to regional stability."

"So you're asking both countries to suspend their exercises?"

"We're going to ask them to consider that, yes."

"Mr. President," said John Plumber, "this is your first foreign policy crisis and . . ."

Ryan looked down at the elderly reporter and wanted to observe that his first *domestic* crisis had been of *his* making, but you couldn't afford to make enemies of the press, and you could only make friends with them if they liked you—an altogether unlikely possibility, he'd come to understand.

"Mr. Plumber, before you do anything, you have to find out the facts. We're working on that just as hard as we can. I had my national security team in this morning "

"But not Secretary Adler," Plumber pointed out. Good reporter that he was, he'd checked the official cars on West Executive Drive. "Why wasn't he here?"

"He'll be in later today," Ryan dodged.

"Where is he now?" Plumber persisted.

Ryan just shook his head. "Can we limit this to just one topic? It's a little early in the morning for so many questions, and as you pointed out, I *do* have a situation to deal with, Mr. Plumber."

"And he is your principal foreign policy adviser, sir. Where is he now?"

"Next question," the President said tersely. He got about what he deserved from Barry of CNN:

"Mr. President, a moment ago you said *both* Chinas. Sir, does this signal a change in our China policy, and if so—"

IT WAS JUST after eight in the evening in Beijing, and things were good. He could see it on TV. How strange to watch a political figure so singularly lacking in charm and adroitness, especially an American. Zhang Han San lit a cigarette and congratulated himself. He'd done it again. There had been a danger in staging the "exercise," most particularly the recent air sorties—but then the Republic's aviators had so kindly obliged by shooting first, just as he'd hoped they would, and now there was a crisis which he could control precisely, and end it at any time, merely by recalling his own forces to their bases. He'd force America to react not so much by action as by inaction—and then someone else would take the lead in provoking its new President. He had no idea what Daryaei had in mind. An assassination attempt, perhaps? Something else? All he had to do was watch, as he was doing now, and reap the harvest when the opportunity arose, which it surely would. America couldn't stay lucky forever. Not with this young fool in the White House.

"BARRY, ONE COUNTRY calls itself the People's Republic of China, and the

other calls itself the Republic of China. I have to call them something, don't I?" Ryan asked testily. *Oh, shit, have I done it* again?

"Yes, Mr. President, but—"

"But we probably have fourteen American citizens dead, and this is not a time to worry about semantics." *There, take that.*

"What are we going to do?" a female voice demanded.

"First, we're going to try to find out what took place. *Then* we can start thinking about reactions."

"But *why* don't we know yet?"

"Because as much as we would like to know everything that takes place in the world every minute, it's simply impossible."

"Is that why your administration is radically increasing the size of the CIA?"

"As I have said before, we do not discuss intelligence matters, ever."

"Mr. President, there are published reports that—"

"There are published reports that UFOs land here on a regular basis," Ryan shot back. "Do you believe *that,* too?"

The room actually went quiet for a moment. It wasn't every day that you saw a President lose his temper. They loved it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I regret the fact that I cannot answer all your questions to your satisfaction. In fact, I am asking some of the same questions myself, but correct answers take time. If I have to wait for the information, so do you," he said, trying to get the news conference back on track.

"Mr. President, a man who looks very much like the former Chairman of the Soviet KGB has appeared on live television and—" The reporter stopped, as he saw Ryan's face glow red under the makeup. He expected another blowup, but it didn't happen. The President's knuckles went ivory-white on the lectern, and he took a breath.

"Please go on with your question, Sam."

"And that gentleman said that he is who he is. Now, sir, the cat is well out of the bag, and I think my question is a legitimate one."

"I haven't heard a question yet, Sam."

"Is he who he says he is?"

"You don't need me to tell you that."

"Mr. President, this event, this . . . operation has great international significance. At some point, intelligence operations, sensitive though they may well be, have a serious effect on our foreign relations. At that point, the American people want to know what such things are all about."

"Sam, I will say this one last time: I will never, not ever, discuss intelligence matters. I am here this morning to inform our citizens of a tragic and so far unexplained incident in which over a hundred people, including fourteen American citizens, have lost their lives. This government will do its utmost to determine what took place, and then to decide upon a proper course of action."

"Very well, Mr. President. Do we have a one-China policy, or a two-China policy?"

"We have made no changes."

"Might a change result from this incident?"

"I will not speculate on something so important as that. And now, with your

permission, I have to get back to work."

"Thank you, Mr. President!" Jack heard on his way out the door. Just around the corner was a well-hidden gun cabinet. POTUS slammed it with his hand hard enough to rattle a few of the Uzis inside.

"God damn it!" he swore on the fifty-yard walk back to his office.

"Mr. President?" Ryan spun around. It was Robby, holding his briefcase. It seemed so out of place for an aviator to be toting one of those.

"I owe you an apology," Jack said, before Robby could get another word out. "Sorry I blew up."

Admiral Jackson popped his friend on the arm. "Next time we play golf, it's a buck a hole, and if you're going to get mad, do it at me, not them, okay? I've seen your temper before, man. Dial it back. A commander can only get pissed in front of the troops for show—leadership technique, we call it—not for real. Yelling at staff is something else. I'm staff," Robby said. "Yell at me."

"Yeah, I know. Keep me posted and—"

"Jack?"

"Yeah, Rob?"

"You're doing fine, just keep it cool."

"I'm not supposed to let people kill Americans, Robby. That's not what I'm here for." His hands balled into fists again.

"Shit happens, Mr. President. If you think you can stop it all, you're just kidding yourself. And I don't have to tell you that. You're not God, Jack, but you are a pretty good guy doing a pretty good job. We'll have more information for you as soon as we can put it together."

"When things settle down, how about another golf lesson?"

"I am yours to command." The two friends shook hands. It wasn't enough for either of them at this moment, but it had to do. Jackson headed for the door, and Ryan turned back toward his office. "Mrs. Sumter!" he called on the way in. Maybe a smoke would help.

"SO WHAT GIVES, Mr. Secretary?" Chavez asked. The three-page fax off the secure satellite link told them everything the President had. He'd let them read it, too.

"I don't know," Adler admitted. "Chavez, that thesis paper you told me about?"

"What about it, sir?"

"You should have waited to write it. Now you know what it's like up here. Like playing dodge ball as a kid, except it ain't a rubber ball we're trying to dodge, is it?" The Secretary of State tucked his notes into his briefcase and waved to the Air Force sergeant who was supposed to look after them. He wasn't as cute as the French attendant had been.

"Yes, sir?"

"Did Claude leave us anything?"

"A couple of bottles from the Loire Valley," the NCO replied, with a smile.

"You want to uncork one and get some glasses out?"

"Cards?" John Clark asked.

"No, I think I'm going to have a glass or two, and then I'm going to get a

little sleep. Looks like I have another trip laid on," SecState told them.

"Beijing." No surprise, John thought.

"It won't be Philadelphia," Scott said, as the bottle and glasses arrived. Thirty minutes later, all three men pushed their seat backs down all the way. The sergeant closed the window shades for them.

This time Clark got some sleep, but Chavez did not. There was truth in what Adler had remarked to him. His thesis had savagely attacked turn-of-the-century statesmen for their inability to see beyond immediate problems. Now Ding did know a little better. It was hard to tell the difference between an immediate tactical problem and a truly strategic one when you were dodging the bullets on a minute-to-minute basis, and history books couldn't fully convey the temper, the *feel* of the times on which they supposedly reported. Not all of it. They also gave the wrong impression of people. Secretary Adler, now snoring in his leather reclining seat, was a career diplomat, Chavez reminded himself, and he'd earned the trust and respect of the President—a man he himself deeply respected. He wasn't stupid. He wasn't venal. But he was merely a man, and men made mistakes . . . and great men made big ones. Someday some historian would write about this trip they'd just taken, but would that historian really know what it had been like and, not knowing, how could he really comment on what had taken place?

What's going on? Ding asked himself. Iran gets real frisky and knocks over Iraq and starts a new country, and just as America is trying to deal with that, something else happens. An event minor in the great scheme of things, perhaps—but you never knew that until it was all over, did you? How could you tell? That was always the problem. Statesmen over the centuries had made mistakes because when you were stuck in the middle of things, you couldn't step outside and take a more detached look. That's what they were paid to do, but it *was* pretty hard, wasn't it? He had just finished his master's thesis, and he'd get hooded later this year, and officially proclaimed an expert in international relations. But that was a lie, Ding thought, settling back into his own seat. A flippant observation he'd once made on another long flight came back to him. All too often international relations was simply one country fucking another. Domingo Chavez, soon-to-be master in international relations, smiled at the thought, but it wasn't very funny, really. Not when people got killed. Especially not when he and Mr. C. were front-line worker-bees. Something happening in the Middle East. Something else happening with China . . . four thousand miles away, wasn't it? Could those two things be related? What if they were? But how could you tell? Historians assumed that people *could* tell if only they'd been smart enough. But historians didn't have to do the work . . .

"NOT HIS BEST performance," Plumber said, sipping his iced tea.

"Twelve hours, not even that much, to get a handle on something halfway 'round the world, John," Holtzman suggested.

It was a typical Washington restaurant, pseudo-French with cute little tassels on a menu listing overpriced dishes of mediocre quality—but, then, both men were on expense accounts.

"He's supposed to handle himself better," Plumber observed.

"You're complaining that he can't lie effectively?"

"That's one of the things a President is supposed to do—"

"And when we catch him at it ..." Holtzman didn't have to go on.

"Who ever said it was supposed to be an easy job, Bob?"

"Sometimes I wonder if we're really supposed to make the job harder." But Plumber didn't bite.

"Where do you suppose Adler is?" the NBC correspondent wondered aloud.

"That was a good question this morning," the *Post* reporter granted, lifting his glass. "I have somebody looking into that."

"So do we. All Ryan had to do was say he was preparing to meet with the PRC ambassador. That would have covered things nicely."

"But it would have been a lie."

"It would have been the *right* lie. Bob, that's the game. The government tries to do things in secret, and we try to find out. Ryan likes this secrecy stuff a little too much."

"But when we burn him for it, whose agenda are we following?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, John. Ed Kealty leaked all that stuff to you. I don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure that one out. Everybody knows it." Bob picked at his salad.

"It's all true, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Holtzman admitted. "And there's a lot more."

"Really? Well, I know you had a story working." He didn't add that he was sorry to have scooped the younger man, mainly because he wasn't.

"Even more than I can write about."

"Really?" That got John Plumber's attention. Holtzman was one of the younger generation in relation to the TV correspondent, and one of the older generation for the newest class of reporters—which regarded Plumber as a fuddy-duddy even as they attended his seminars at Columbia University's journalism program.

"Really," Bob assured him.

"Like?"

"Like things that I can't write about," Holtzman repeated. "Not for a long time, anyway. John, I've been on part of this story for years. I know the CIA officer who got Gerasimov's wife and daughter out. We have a little deal. In a couple years he tells me how it was done. The submarine story is true and—"

"I know. I've seen a photograph of Ryan on the boat. Why he doesn't let that one leak is beyond me."

"He doesn't break the rules. Nobody ever explained to him that it's okay to do that—"

"He needs more time with Arnie—"

"As opposed to Ed."

"Kealty knows how the game is played."

"Yes, he does, John, maybe a little too well. You know, there's one thing I've never quite been able to figure out," Bob Holtzman remarked.

"What's that?"

"The game we're in, are we supposed to be spectators, referees, or players?"

"Bob, our job is to report the truth to our readers—well, viewers for me."

"Whose facts, John?" Holtzman asked.

"A FLUSTERED AND angry President Jack Ryan . . ." Jack picked up the remote and muted the CNN reporter who'd zapped him with the China question. "Angry, yes, flustered, n—"

"Also yes," van Damm said. "You bungled the thing on China, and where Adler is—where is he, by the way?"

The President checked his watch. "He should be getting into Andrews in about ninety minutes. Probably over Canada now, I guess. He comes straight here, and then probably off again to China. What the *hell* are they up to?"

"You got me," the chief of staff admitted. "But that's why you have a national security team."

"I know as much as they do, and I don't know shit," Jack breathed, leaning back in his chair. "We've *got* to increase our human-intelligence capability. The President can't be stuck here all the time not knowing what's going on. I can't make decisions without information, and all we have now are guesses—except for what Robby told us. That's a hard data-point, but it doesn't make sense, because it doesn't fit in with anything else."

"You have to learn to wait, Mr. President. Even if the press doesn't, you do, and you have to learn to focus on what you can do when you can do it. Now," Arnie went on, "we have the first set of House elections coming up next week. We have you scheduled to go out and make speeches. If you want the right kind of people in Congress, then that's what you have to go out and do. I have Callie preparing a couple of speeches for you."

"What's the focus?"

"Tax policy, management improvement, integrity, all your favorites. We'll have the drafts to you tomorrow morning. Time to spend some more time out among the people. Let them love you some, and you can love them back some more." The chief of staff earned himself a wry look. "I've told you before, you can't be trapped in here, and the radios on the airplane work just fine."

"A change of scenery would be nice," POTUS admitted.

"You know what would really be good now?"

"What's that?"

Arnie grinned. "A natural disaster, gives you the chance to fly out and look presidential, meet people, console them and promise federal disaster relief and —"

"God damn it!" It was so loud the secretaries heard it through the three-inch door.

Arnie sighed. "You gotta learn to take a joke, Jack. Put that temper of yours in a box and lock it the hell up. I just set you off for fun, and I'm on *your* side, remember?" Arnie headed back to his office, and the President was alone again.

Yet another lesson in Presidency 101. Jack wondered when they would stop. Sooner or later he'd have to *act* presidential, wouldn't he? But he hadn't quite made it yet. Arnie hadn't said that, exactly, and neither had Robby, but they didn't have to. He still didn't belong. He was doing his best, but his best

wasn't good enough—yet, his mind added. Yet? Maybe never. *One thing at a time*, he thought. What every father said to every son, except they never warned you that one at a time was a luxury some people couldn't afford. Fourteen dead Americans on a runway on an island eight thousand miles away, killed on purpose probably, for a purpose he could scarcely guess at, and he was supposed to set that fact aside and get on with other things, like a trip back out to meet the people he was supposed to preserve, protect, and defend, even as he tried to figure out how he'd failed to do so for fourteen of them. What was it you needed in order to do this job? Turn off dead citizens and fix on other things? You had to be a sociopath to accomplish that, didn't you? Well, no. Others had to—doctors, soldiers, cops. And now him. *And* control his temper, salve his frustration, and focus on something else for the rest of the day.

MOVIE STAR LOOKED down at the sea, six kilometers below, he estimated. To the north he could see an iceberg on the blue-gray surface, glistening in the bright sunlight. Wasn't that remarkable? As often as he'd flown, he'd never seen one of those before. For someone from his part of the world, the sea was strange enough, like a desert, impossible to live on, though a different way. Strange how it looked like the desert in all but color, the surface crinkling in almost-regular parallel lines just like dunes, but uninvitingly. Despite his looks—about which he was quite vain; he liked the smiles he got from flight attendants, for example—almost nothing was inviting to him. The world hated him and his kind, and even those who made use of his services preferred to keep him at arm's length, like a vicious but occasionally useful dog. He grimaced, looking down. Dogs were not favored animals in his culture. And so here he was, back on another airplane, alone, with his people on other aircraft in groups of three, heading to a place where they would be decidedly not welcome, sent from a place where they were scarcely more so.

Success would bring him—what? Intelligence officers would seek to identify and track him, but the Israelis had been doing that for years, and he was still alive. What was he doing this *for?* Movie Star asked himself. It was a little late for that. If he canceled the mission, then he wouldn't be welcome anywhere at all. He was supposed to be fighting for Allah, wasn't he? *Jihad.* A holy war. It was a religious term for a military-religious act, one meant to protect the Faith, but he didn't really believe that anymore, and it was vaguely frightening to have no country, no home, and then . . . no faith? Did he even have *that* anymore? He asked himself, then admitted that if he had to ask—he didn't. He and his kind, at least the ones who survived, became automatons, skilled robots—computers in the modern age. Machines that did things at the bidding of others, to be thrown away when convenient, and below him the surface of the sea or the desert never changed. Yet he had no choice.

Perhaps the people who were sending him on the mission would win, and he would have some sort of reward. He kept telling himself that, after all, even though there was nothing in his living experience to support the belief—and if he'd lost his faith in God, then why was it that he could remain faithful to a profession that even his employers regarded with distaste?

Children. He'd never married, never fathered one to his knowledge. The women he'd had, perhaps—but, no, they were debauched women, and his religious training had taught him to despise them even as he made use of their bodies, and if they produced offspring, then the children, too, would be cursed. How was it that a man could chase an idea for all his life and then realize that here he was, looking down at the most inhospitable of scenes—a place where neither he nor any man could live—and be more at home here than anyplace else? And so he would assist in the deaths of children. Unbelievers, political expressions, things. But they were not. They were innocent of any guilt at that age, their bodies not yet formed, their minds not yet taught the nature of good and evil.

Movie Star told himself that such thoughts had come to him before, that doubts were normal to men on difficult tasks, and that each previous time he'd set them aside and gotten on with it. If the world had changed, then perhaps—

But the only changes that had taken place were contrary to his lifelong quest, and was it that having killed for nothing, he had to keep killing in the hope of achieving *something?* Where did that path lead? If there were a God and there were a Faith, and there were a Law, then—

Well, he had to believe in something. He checked his watch. Four more hours. He had a mission. He had to believe in that.

THEY CAME BY car instead of helicopter. Helicopters were too visible, and maybe this way nobody would notice. To make things more covert still, the cars came to the East Wing entrance. Adler, Clark, and Chavez walked into the White House the same way Jack had on his first night, hustled along by the Secret Service, and they managed to arrive unseen by the press. The Oval Office was a little crowded. Goodley and the Foleys were there, as well, along with Arnie, of course.

"How's the jet lag, Scott?" Jack asked first, meeting him at the door.

"If it's Tuesday, it must be Washington," the Secretary of State replied.

"It isn't Tuesday," Goodley observed, not getting it.

"Then I guess the jet lag is pretty bad." Adler took his seat and brought out his notes. A Navy mess steward came in with coffee, the fuel of Washington. The arrivals from the UIR all had a cup.

"Tell us about Daryaei," Ryan commanded.

"He looks healthy. A little tired," Adler allowed. "His desk is fairly clean. He spoke quietly, but he's never been one to raise his voice in public, to the best of my knowledge. Interestingly, he was getting into town about the same time we were."

"Oh?" Ed Foley said, looking up from some of his own notes.

"Yeah, he came in on a business jet, a Gulfstream," Clark reported. "Ding got a few pictures."

"So, he's hopping around some? I guess that makes sense," POTUS observed. Strangely, Ryan could identify with Daryaei's problems. They weren't all that different from his own, though the Iranian's methods could hardly have been more different.

"His staffs afraid of him," Chavez added impulsively. "Like something from

an old World War II Nazi movie. The staff in his outer office was pretty wired. If somebody had yelled 'boo,' they would have hit the ceiling."

"I'd agree with that," Adler said, not vexed at the interruption. "His demeanor with me was very old-world, quiet, platitudes, that sort of thing. The fact of the matter is that he said nothing of real significance—maybe good, maybe bad. He's willing to have continued contacts with us. He says he desires peace for everybody. He even hinted at a certain degree of goodwill for Israel. For a lot of the meeting, he lectured me on how peaceful he and his religion are. He emphasized the value of oil and the resulting commercial relationships for all parties involved. He denied having any territorial ambitions. No surprises in any of it."

"Okay," the President said. "What about body language?"

"He appears very confident, very secure. He likes where he is now."

"As well he might." It was Ed Foley again.

Adler nodded. "Agreed. If I had to describe him in one word, it would be 'serene.' "

"When I met him a few years ago," Jack remembered, "he was aggressive, hostile, looking for enemies, that sort of thing."

"None of that earlier today." SecState stopped and asked himself if it was still the same day. Probably, he decided. "Like I said, serene, but then on the way back, Mr. Clark here brought something up."

"What's that?" Goodley asked.

"It set off the metal detector." John pulled the necklace out again, and handed it to the President.

"Get some shopping done?"

"Well, everybody wanted me to do a walkabout," he reminded his audience. "What better place than a market?" Clark went on to report the incident with the goldsmith, while POTUS examined the necklace.

"If he sells these things for seven hundred bucks, maybe we should all get his address. Isolated incident, John?"

"The French station chief was walking with me. He said that this guy was pretty representative."

"So?" van Damm asked.

"So maybe Daryaei doesn't have much to be all that serene about," Scott Adler suggested.

"People like that don't always know what the peasants are thinking," the chief of staff thought.

"That's what brought the Shah down," Ed Foley told him. "And Daryaei is one of the people who made that happen. I don't think it likely that he's forgotten that particular lesson . . . and we know that he's still cracking down on people who step out of line." The DCI turned to look at his field officer. "Good one, John."

"Lefevre—the French spook—told me twice that we don't have a very good feel for the mood in the street over there. Maybe he was shining me on," Clark continued, "but I don't think so."

"We know there's dissent. There always is," Ben Goodley said.

"But we don't know how much." It was Adler again. "On the whole, I think we have a man here who wants to project serenity for a reason. He's had a

couple of good months. He's knocked over a major enemy. He has some internal problems whose magnitude we need to evaluate. He's hopping back and forth to Iraq—we saw that. He's tired-looking. Tense staff. I'd say he has a full plate right now. Okay, he told me how he wants peace. I almost buy it. I think he needs time to consolidate. Clark here tells me that food prices are high. That's an inherently rich country, and Daryaei can best quiet things down by playing on his political success and turning that into economic success as quickly as possible. Putting food on the table won't hurt. For the moment, he needs to look in instead of looking out.

"So I think it's possible that we have a window of opportunity here," SecState concluded.

"Extend the open hand of friendship?" Arnie asked.

"I think we keep the contacts quiet and informal for the time being. I can pick somebody to handle the meetings. And then we see what develops."

The President nodded. "Good one, Scott. Now I guess we'd better get you up to speed on China."

"When do I leave?" SecState inquired, with a pained expression.

"You'll have a bigger airplane this time," his President promised him.

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HYENAS

MOVIE STAR FELT THE main landing gear thump down at Dulles International Airport. The physical sensation didn't exactly end his doubts, but it did announce that it was time to put them aside. He lived in a practical world. The entry routine was—routine, again.

"Back so soon?" the immigration officer asked, flipping to the last entry in the passport.

"Ja, doch." Movie Star replied in his German identity. "Perhaps I get apartment here soon."

"The prices in Washington are kinda steep," the man reported, stamping the booklet yet again. "Have a pleasant stay, sir."

"Thank you."

It wasn't that he had anything to fear. He was carrying nothing illegal, except what was in his head, and he knew that American intelligence had virtually never caused substantive harm to a terrorist group, but this trip was different, even if only he knew it, as he walked alone in the mob of the terminal. As before, no one would meet him. They had a rendezvous to which he would be the last to arrive. He was more valuable than the other members of the team. Again he rented a car, and again he drove toward Washington, checking his mirror, taking the wrong exit deliberately and watching to see if anyone followed as he reversed direction to get back on the proper road. Again as before, the coast was clear. If there were anyone on him, the coverage was so sophisticated that he had no chance at all to survive. He knew how that worked: multiple cars, even a helicopter or two, but such an investment of time and resources only happened if the opposition knew nearly everything—it took time to organize—and that could only mean deep penetration of his group by the American CIA. The Israelis were capable of such a thing, or so everyone in the terrorist movement feared, but over the years a brutally Darwinian process had ended the lives of all the careless men; the Israeli Mossad had never once blanched at the sight of Islamic blood, and had he been discovered by that agency, he would long since have been dead. Or that's what he told himself, still watching his rearview mirror because that was how he stayed alive.

On the other hand, it amused him greatly that this mission would not have been possible without the Israelis. Islamic terrorist groups existed in America, but they had all the hallmarks of amateurs. They were overtly religious. They held meetings in known places. They talked among themselves. They could be seen, spotted, and positively identified as being *different* from the other fish in their adopted sea. And then they wondered how they were caught. *Fools*,

Movie Star thought. But they served their purpose. In being visible, they attracted attention, and the American FBI had only so many assets. However formidable the world's intelligence services, they were also human institutions, and humans universally pounded on the nails that stuck up.

Israel had taught him that, after a fashion. Before the fall of the Shah, his own intelligence service, the Savak, had received training from the Israeli Mossad, and not all Savak members had been executed with the arrival of the new Islamic regime. The tradecraft they'd learned had also been taught to those like Movie Star, and the truth of the matter was that it was very easy to understand. The more important the mission, the more caution was required. If you wanted to avoid being spotted, then you had to disappear into your surroundings. In a secular country, do not be obviously devout. In a Christian and Jewish country, do not be Muslim. In a nation that had learned to distrust people from the Middle East, be from somewhere else—or better yet, on occasion, be truthful after a fashion. Yes, I come from *there*, but I am a Christian, or a Baha'i, or a Kurd, or an Armenian, and *they* persecuted my family cruelly, and so I came to America, the land of opportunity, to experience true freedom. And if you followed those simple rules, the opportunity was quite real, for America made it so easy. This country welcomed foreigners with an openness that reminded Movie Star of his own culture's stern law of hospitality.

Here he was in the camp of his enemy, and his doubts faded, as the exhilaration of it increased his heart rate and brought a smile to his face. He was the best at what he did. The Israelis, having trained him at second hand, had never gotten close to him, and if they couldn't, then neither could the Americans. You just had to be careful.

In each team of three there was one man like him, not quite as experienced as he was, but close enough. Able to rent a car and drive safely. To know to be polite and friendly with all he met. If a policeman were to stop him, he knew to be contrite and apologetic, to ask what he'd done wrong, and then ask for directions, because people remembered hostility more clearly than amity. To profess to be a physician or engineer or something else respectable. It was easy if you were careful.

Movie Star reached his first destination, a middle-level hotel on the outskirts of Annapolis, and checked in under his cover name, Dieter Kolb. The Americans were so foolish. Even their police thought that all Muslims were Arabs, never remembering that Iran was an Aryan country—the very same ethnic identity which Hitler had claimed for his nation. He went to his room, and checked his watch. If everything went according to plan, they would meet in two hours. To be sure, he placed a call to the 1-800 numbers for the proper airlines—and inquired about arriving flights. They'd all arrived on time. There might have been a problem with customs, or bad traffic, but the plan had allowed for that. It was a cautious one.

THEY WERE ALREADY on the road for their next stop, which was Atlantic City, New Jersey, where there was a huge convention center. The various new-model and "concept" cars were wrapped in covers to protect their finish, most

of them on conventional auto trailers, but a few in covered trailers like those used by racing teams. One of the manufacturer's representatives was going over handwritten comments his company had solicited from people who'd stopped by to look at their products. The man rubbed his eyes. Damned headache, sniffles. He hoped he wasn't coming down with something. Achy, too. That's what you got for standing around all day right under the air-conditioning vent.

THE OFFICIAL TELEGRAM was hardly unexpected. The American Secretary of State requested an official consultation with his government to discuss matters of mutual interest. Zhang knew there was no avoiding this, and all the better to receive him in a friendly way, protesting innocence—and inquiring delicately if the American President had merely misspoken himself or had changed long-standing U.S. policy at his press conference. That side issue alone would tie up Adler for some hours, he imagined. The American would probably offer to be an intermediary between Beijing and Taipei, to shuttle back and forth between the two cities, hoping to calm things down. That would be very useful.

For the moment, the exercises were continuing, albeit with somewhat greater respect for the neutral space between the two sets of forces. The heat was still on, but at the "simmer" setting. The People's Republic, the ambassador had already explained in Washington, had done nothing wrong, had *not* fired the first shot, and had no desire to initiate hostilities. The problem was with the breakaway province, and if only America would accede to the obvious solution to the problem—there is *one* China—then the matter would be settled, and quickly.

But America had long held to a policy that made sense to none of the countries involved, wanting to be friendly with Beijing *and* Taipei, treating the latter as the lesser nation it was, but unwilling to take that to its logical conclusion. Instead, America said that, yes, there was only one China, but that the one China did not have the right to enforce its rule on the "other" China, which, according to official American policy, didn't actually exist. Such was American consistency. It would be such a pleasure to point this out to Secretary Adler.

"'THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC is pleased to welcome Secretary Adler in the interests of peace and regional stability.' Well, isn't that nice of them," Ryan said, still in his office at nine in the evening, and wondering what TV his kids were watching without him. He handed the message back to Adler.

"You're really sure they did it?" SecState asked Admiral Jackson.

"If I go over it any more, the tape will wear out."

"You know, sometimes people just screw up."

"Sir, this is not one of those times," Robby said, wondering if he'd have to run the videotape *again*. "And they've been exercising their fleet for quite a while now."

"Oh?" Ryan asked.

"To the point that they must be wearing things out by now. They're not as good on maintenance as we are. Besides that, they're using up a lot of fuel. This is the most at-sea time we've ever seen them do. Why are they stringing things out? This shoot-down looks to me like a great excuse to call it a day and head back to port and say they've made their point."

"National pride," Adler suggested. "Face saving."

"Well, since then they've curtailed operations somewhat. Not approaching the line I showed you. The Taiwanese are really at full alert now. Hell, maybe that's it," the J-3 opined. "You don't attack a pissed-off enemy. You let him relax some first."

"Rob, you said that a real attack isn't possible," Ryan said.

"Jack, in the absence of knowledge of their intentions, I have to go by capabilities. They *can* stage a major engagement in the strait, and they will probably come off winners if they do. Maybe that will put sufficient political pressure on Taiwan to force some sort of major concession. They killed people," Jackson reminded the other two. "Sure, the value they place on human life isn't the same as ours, but when you kill people you cross another invisible line—and they know how *we* feel about that."

"Move the carrier up," Adler said.

"Why, Scott?"

"Mr. President, it gives me a face card to lay on the table. It shows that we're taking this seriously. As Admiral Jackson just told us, we *do* take the loss of life seriously, and they will just have to accept the fact that we don't want and might not *allow* this to go any further."

"What if they press anyway—what if there's another 'accident' that might involve us?"

"Mr. President, that's operations, and that's my business. We'd park *Ike* on the east side of the island. They can't get to her by accident then. They'd have to come through three defense belts to do so, the ROC one over the strait, then Taiwan itself, and then the wall the battle-group commander puts up. I could also spot an Aegis at the bottom end of the strait to give us full radar coverage of the entire passage. If, that is, you order us to move *Ike.* The advantage for Taiwan, well, four squadrons of fighters, plus airborne radar coverage. That should make them feel more secure."

"Which will allow me to play a better game if I shuttle back and forth," the Secretary concluded.

"But that still leaves the IO uncovered. It's been a long time since we did that." Robby kept coming back to that, the other two noticed.

"Nothing else there?" Jack asked. He realized that he should have found out before.

"A cruiser, *Anzio,* two destroyers, plus two frigates guarding an under way-replenishment group based at Diego Garcia. We never leave Diego uncovered by warships, not with the Pre-Positioning Ships there. We have a 688-class sub in the area, too. It's enough to matter, but not enough to project power. Mr. Adler, you understand what a carrier means."

SecState nodded. "People take them seriously. That's why I think we need it off China."

"He makes a good case, Rob. Where is *Ike* now?"

"Between Australia and Sumatra, should be approaching the Sunda Strait. Exercise SOUTHERN CUP is supposed to simulate an Indian attack on their northwest coast. If we move her now, she can get to Formosa in four days plus a couple hours."

"Get her moving that way, Rob, all possible speed."

"Aye aye, sir," Jackson acknowledged, his doubts still visible on his face. He gestured to the phone and, getting a nod, he called the National Military Command Center. "This is Admiral Jackson with orders from National Command Authority. Execute GREYHOUND BLUE. Acknowledge that, Colonel." Robby listened and nodded. "Very well, thank you." Then he turned to his President. "Okay, *Ike* will turn north in about ten minutes and make a speed run to Taiwan."

"That fast?" Adler allowed himself to be impressed.

"The miracle of modern communications, and we already had alert orders to Admiral Dubro. This won't be a covert move. The battle group will head through several narrows, and people will notice," he warned.

"Press release won't hurt," Adler said. "We've done it before."

"Well, there's your card to play in Beijing and Taipei," Ryan said, having exercised yet another executive order, but distantly concerned that Robby was unhappy about it. The really difficult matter was fuel. A fleet-replenishment group would have to move as well, to refill the bunkers of *Eisenhower's* non-nuclear escort ships.

"Will you let on that we know about the shoot-down?"

Adler shook his head. "No, definitely not. It will be more unsettling to them if they think we don't know."

"Oh?" This came from a somewhat surprised President.

"Then I can decide *when* we 'find out,' Boss, and when that happens, I have another card to play—that way I can make it a big card." He turned. "Admiral, don't overestimate the intelligence of your enemy. Diplomats like me aren't all that savvy on the technical aspects of what you do. That applies to people in foreign countries, too. A lot of our capabilities are unknown to them."

"They have spooks to keep them informed," Jackson objected.

"You think they always listen? Do we?"

The J-3 blinked at that lesson and filed it away for future use.

IT HAPPENED IN a large shopping mall, an American invention that seemed designed for covert operations, with its many entrances, bustling people, and near-perfect anonymity. The first rendezvous wasn't really a meeting at all. Nothing more than eye contact was made, and that not at a distance closer than ten meters, as the groups strolled past one another. Instead, each of the sub-groups performed a count, confirmed identity visually, and then each checked to be sure that there was no surveillance on the others. With that done, they all returned to their hotel accommodations. The real rendezvous would take place tomorrow.

Movie Star was pleased. The sheer audacity of this was very exciting indeed. This wasn't the relatively simple task of getting one bomb-clad fool—*heroic*

martyr, he corrected himself—into Israel, and the beauty of it was that had one of his teams been spotted, the enemy couldn't possibly risk ignoring them. You *could* force the opposition into showing its hand, and so much the better to do it at a point in time when none of your people had done anything more than enter the country with false travel documents.

Doubts be damned, the leader of the operation told himself. There was the sheer beauty of being ready to do something right in the lion's own den, and *that* was what kept him in the business of terrorism. In the lion's own den? He smiled at the cars as he walked across the parking lot. The lion's own *cubs.*

"SO WHAT ARE you doing?" Cathy asked in the dark.

"Scott leaves for China tomorrow morning," Jack answered, lying next to his wife. People said that the President of the United States was the world's most powerful man, but at the end of every day the exercise of that power surely seemed to exhaust him. Even his time at Langley, with an auto commute each way every day, hadn't worn him out as this job did.

"To say what?"

"Try to get them calmed down, defuse the situation."

"You're really sure that they deliberately—"

"Yes. Robby is positive, about as much as you are with a diagnosis," her husband confirmed, staring up at the ceiling.

"And we're going to negotiate with them?" SURGEON asked.

"Have to."

"But—"

"Honey, sometimes—hell, most of the time a nation-state commits murder, they get away with it. I'm supposed to think about 'the big picture,' 'the larger issues,' and all that stuff."

"That's awful," Cathy told him.

"Yes, it sure is. This game you have to play by its own rules. If you mess up, more people suffer. You can't talk to a nation-state the way you talk to a criminal. There are thousands of Americans over there, businessmen and like that. If I get too far out of line, then things might happen to some of them, and then things escalate and get worse," POTUS explained to her.

"What's worse than killing people?" his physician-wife asked.

Jack didn't have an answer. He'd come to accept the fact that he didn't have all the answers for press conferences, or for all the people out there, or even for his own staff sometimes. Now he didn't even have a single answer for his wife's simple and logical question. Most powerful man in the world? Sure. With that thought, another day ended at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

EVEN IMPORTANT PEOPLE got careless, an eventuality made easier by a little creativity on the part of more careful folk. The National Reconnaissance Office was working hard to keep track of two places. Every pass of the reconsats over the Middle East and now the Formosa Strait resulted in copious numbers of download pictures, literally thousands of images which photo-interpretation

specialists had to examine one by one in their new building close to Dulles Airport. It was just one more task that couldn't be done by computer. The readiness state of the UIR military had become the number-one priority item for the American government, as part of the Special National Intelligence Estimate now in preparation on White House orders. That meant the entire attention of the team fell that way, and for the other things, more people were called in to work overtime. These looked continuously at the photos downloaded from over China. If the PRC was going to make a real military move, then it would show in many ways. People's Liberation Army troops would be out training and maintaining their equipment, or loading their tanks onto trains and the parking areas would look different. Aircraft would have weapons hanging from their wings. These were things a satellite photo would reveal. More care was taken to spot ships at sea—that was far harder, since they were not in fixed locations. America still had three photographic satellites aloft, each making two passes per day over the areas of interest, and they were spaced so that there was little "sad time." That made the technicians feel pretty good about things. They had a continuous feed of data with which to firm up their estimates and so do their duty for their President and their country.

But they couldn't watch everything everywhere, and one place they didn't watch was Bombay, western headquarters of the Indian navy. The orbits of the American KH-11 satellites were well defined, as were their schedules. Just after the newest satelite swept over the area, with the other new one on the far side of the world, came a four-hour window, which would end with the overhead passage of the oldest and least reliable of the trio. Happily, it also coincided with a high tide.

Two carriers, their repairs recently completed, and their escorts, slipped their mooring lines and stood out to sea. They would be conducting training exercises in the Arabian Sea, in case anyone noticed and asked about it.

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DAMN. THE COBRA representative woke up, feeling a little feverish. It took him a few seconds to orient himself. Different motel, different city, different room lights. He fumbled for the proper switch, then put on his glasses, squinting in the uncomfortable light, and spotted his bag. Yeah. Shaving kit. He took that into the bathroom, pulled the paper cover off the glass, and half filled it with water. Then he worked the childproof top on the aspirin bottle, tipped two tablets into his hand and washed them down. He ought not to have had all those beers after dinner, the sales rep told himself, but he'd made a fairly decent deal with a couple of club pros, and beer was always a good lubricant for the golf business. He'd feel better in the morning. A former touring professional who hadn't been quite good enough to make it big, he was now a very successful manufacturer's representative. What the hell, he thought, heading back to his bed. He still had a minus handicap, the pace was easier, and he was making a pretty good living—plus being able to play a new course practically every week, the better to demonstrate his wares. He hoped

the aspirin would work. He had an eight-thirty tee time.

STORM TRACK AND PALM BOWL were connected by a fiber-optic communications cable, the better to share information. Another training exercise was under way in the former Iraq and this one wasn't a CPX. The three heavy corps of integrated Iraqi and Iranian units were in the field. Direction-finding radios placed them well away from the Saudi and Kuwaiti borders, and so no special danger was attached to their activities, but the ELINT troops were listening closely to get a feel for the skill level of the commanders who were moving tanks and infantry fighting vehicles across the broad, dry plains southeast of Baghdad.

"Here's good news, Major," the American lieutenant said, handing over a telex. The UIR SNIE had generated something positive for a change.

Two hundred miles northwest of Kuwait, at a spot five miles south of the "berm"—actually a man-made dune—that marked the border between the Kingdom and the UIR, a deuce-and-a-half truck stopped. The crew got out, attached the extension to the launch ramp and fired up their Predator drone. But "drone" was an obsolete term. This mini-aircraft was an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, or UAV, a blue-gray-colored, propeller-driven spy. It took about twenty minutes to attach the wings, run diagnostics on the electronics, and spin up the engine, and then it was launched, the annoying buzz of its engine fading rapidly as it climbed to its operating altitude and headed north.

The product of three decades of research, Predator was fairly stealthy, difficult to detect on radar due to its small size, the inclusion of radar-absorbing material in its design, and the fact that its operating speed was so slow that modern computer-controlled radars, if they caught it at all, classified it as a bird and erased it from the operator's scope. The paint covering the airframe was the same IR-suppresive product the Navy had taken to using. It was both ugly and prone to provide a sticky home to anything that touched it —the technicians had to brush sand off their baby all the time—but that was balanced by the fact that the color blended in with the sky exceedingly well. Armed only with a TV camera, this one soared up to ten thousand feet, and cruised north under the control of another team at STORM TRACK, the better to keep an eye on the UIR exercises. It was a technical violation of the new country's sovereignty, but two pounds of explosive in the UAV would ensure that if it hit the ground in the wrong place, no one would be able to tell what it was. A directional antenna beamed the "take" from the camera to receivers in the Kingdom.

The fiber-optic data link crossloaded the same signal to PALM BOWL, and when a USAF enlisted woman switched on the room's monitor, they were looking down at a nearly featureless landscape while the Predator was guided to its destination by its operators.

"It'll be good to see if they know what they're doing," the lieutenant observed to Major Sabah.

"Better if we see that they don't," the Kuwaiti officer replied thoughtfully. Other members of his extended family were increasingly concerned. Enough so, the major thought, that their country's military was quietly ramping up to

a very high state of readiness. Like the Saudis, the Kuwaiti citizens who'd flocked enthusiastically to man the best equipment that their small but wealthy country could obtain felt that maintenance of their tanks was a task for lesser men, but, unlike their Saudi cousins, they had experience with being on the bottom side of conquest. Many of them had lost family members, and a long memory was characteristic of this part of the world. For that reason, they trained with a will. They weren't yet near the level of the Americans who taught them or the Israelis who held them in distant contempt, Major Sabah knew. His countrymen had first of all learned how to shoot. They'd burned out at least one gun tube per tank in the pure joy of learning that skill, and they had been firing real rounds, not just practice—war shots fly straighter and farther—as they combined a diverting hobby with a national survival skill. Able now to hit their targets, their current task was to learn to maneuver and fight on the move. Again, they couldn't do it well, not yet, but they were learning. The developing crisis put emphasis on their training, and even now his countrymen were leaving their banking, oil, and trading offices to mount their vehicles. An American advisory team would take them into the field again, give them a battle problem, and watch their performance. While it pained the major that his countrymen, many of them relatives, were not yet ready, it was a source of pride to him that they were making a real effort. Bright as he was, however, it never occurred to him how close his military was to the Israeli model: citizen soldiers learning to fight after the harsh lesson of not having known.

"SWORDSMAN IS AWAKE," Andrea Price heard in her earpiece. They were in the kitchen, the Detail commander with her sub-detail chiefs, standing and sipping coffee around one of the stainless-steel countertops used for preparing food. "Roy?"

"Another routine day," Special Agent Altman said. "She's got three procedures scheduled for the morning, then a lecture to some Spanish docs in the afternoon—University of Barcelona, ten of them, eight males, two females. We checked the names with the Spanish police. They're all clean. No special threats reported against SURGEON. Looks like a normal day at the office."

"Mike?" she asked Special Agent Michael Brennan, principal agent to Little Jack.

"Well, SHORTSTOP has a first-period biology test today and baseball practice after school. Pretty good with a glove, but his batting needs help," the agent added. "Otherwise, same-o same-o."

"Wendy?" Special Agent Gwendolyn Merritt was principal agent for Sally Ryan.

"Chemistry exam for SHADOW in third period today. She's getting very interested in Kenny. Nice kid, needs a haircut and a new tie. She's thinking about going out for the girls' lacrosse team." A few faces winced at that revelation. How do you protect someone being chased by teenagers with sticks?

"What's the family background on Master Kenny again?" Price asked. Even she couldn't remember everything.

"Father and mother both lawyers, tax stuff mainly."

"SHADOW needs better taste," Brennan observed to general amusement around the counter. He was the joker on the crew. "There is a potential threat there, Wendy."

"Huh? What?"

"If POTUS gets the new tax laws passed, they're in the shitter."

Andrea Price made another check mark on her morning list. "Don?"

"Today's routine is the same as usual, Introductory Crayon. I'm still not happy with the setup, Andrea. I want some more people, one more inside, and two more for overwatch on the south side," Don Russell announced. "We're too exposed. We just don't have enough defensive depth there. The outer perimeter is essentially the only one, and I am not comfortable with that."

"SURGEON doesn't want us to overpower the place. You have yourself and two agents inside, three for immediate backup, and one surveillance agent across the road," Price reminded him.

"Andrea, I want three more. We're too exposed there," Russell repeated. His voice was reasonable and professional as ever. "The family has to listen to us on professional questions."

"How about I come over tomorrow afternoon to look things over again?" Price asked. "If I agree, then I go to the Boss."

"Fine." Special Agent Russell nodded.

"Any more problems with Mrs. Walker?"

"Sheila tried to get a petition drive started with the other Giant Steps parents—get SANDBOX out of there, that sort of thing. It turns out that Mrs. Daggett gets a lot of repeat business, and more than half the parents know the Ryans and like 'em. So, that crapped out in a hurry. You know what the only real problem is?"

"What's that, Don?"

He smiled. "At that age—sometimes I turn around and the kids move and when I turn back I can't tell which one SANDBOX is. You know there's only two kinds of haircuts for little girls, and half the mothers there think Oshkosh is the only brand of kid's clothes."

"Don, it's a woman thing," Wendy Merritt observed. "If the First Toddler wears it, it has to be fashionable."

"Probably the same thing with the hair," Andrea added. "By the way, I forgot to tell you, Pat O'Day wants a little match with you," she told the Detail's most senior member.

"The Bureau guy?" Russell's eyes lit up. "Where? When? Tell him to bring money, Andrea." It occurred to Russell that he was due to have some playtime of his own. He hadn't lost a pistol match in seven years—his last bout with the flu.

"We all set?" Price asked her senior agents.

"How's the Boss doing?" Altman asked.

"They're keeping him pretty busy. Cutting into his sleep time."

"Want me to talk to SURGEON about it? She keeps a good eye on him," Roy told her.

"Well—"

"I know how. Gee, Dr. Ryan, is the Boss doing okay? He looked a little tired

this morning . . . ," Altman suggested.

The four agents exchanged looks. President-management was their most delicate duty. This President listened to his wife almost as though he were a normal husband. So why not make SURGEON into an ally? All four nodded at once.

"Go with it," Price told him.

"SON OF A BITCH," Colonel Hamm said inside his command track.

"Surprised you, did they?" General Diggs inquired delicately.

"They have a ringer in there?" the CO of the Blackhorse Cav wanted to know.

"No, but they sprung one on me, Al. They didn't let anybody know they had IVIS training. Well, that is, I found out last night."

"Nice guy, sir."

"Surprises work both ways, Colonel," Diggs reminded him.

"How the *hell* did they get the funding for that?"

"Their fairy god-senators, I suppose."

Visiting units didn't bring their own equipment to Fort Irwin, for the obvious reason that it was too expensive to transport it all back and forth. Instead they mated up with vehicle sets permanent to the base, and those were top-of-the-linc. Included in all of them was IVIS, the Inter-Vehicle Information System, a battlefield data link that projected data onto a computer screen inside the tanks and Bradleys. It was something the 11th Cav had been issued for only its own vehicles (their real ones, not the simulated enemy sets) six months earlier. Seemingly a simple system for trading data—it even ordered spare parts automatically when something broke it presented the crew with a comprehensive overview of the battlefield, and converted hard-won reconnaissance information into general knowledge in a matter of seconds. No longer was data on a developing engagement limited to a harried and distracted unit commander. Now sergeants knew everything the colonel did, and information was still the most valuable commodity known to man. The visiting tankers from the Carolina Guard were fully trained up on its use. So were the troopers of the Blackhorse, but their pseudo-Soviet OpFor vehicles didn't have it.

"Colonel, now we really know how good the system is. It beat you."

The simulated engagement had been a bloody one. Hamm and his operations officer had contrived a devilish ambush, only to have the Weekend Warriors detect it, avoid it, and enter into a battle of maneuver which had caught the OpFor leaning the wrong way. A daring counterstroke by one of his squadron commanders had almost saved the day, and killed off half of the Blue Force, but it hadn't been enough. The first night engagement had gone to the good guys, and the Guardsmen were whooping it up as if after an ACC basketball game.

"I'll know better next time," Hamm promised.

"Humility is good for the soul," Marion Diggs said, enjoying the sunrise.

"Death is bad for the body, sir," the colonel reminded him.

"Baaaaaaaaa," Diggs said, grinning on the way to his personal Hummer.

Even Al Hamm needed the occasional lesson.

THEY TOOK THEIR time. Movie Star handled the car rentals. He had duplicate IDs, enough to rent four vehicles, three four-door private cars and a U-Haul van. The former had been selected to match vehicles owned by parents who had children at the nursery school. The latter was for their escape—an eventuality which he now thought likely and not merely possible. His men were smarter than he'd appreciated. Driving past the objective in their rented cars, they didn't turn their heads to stare, but allowed their peripheral vision to take in the scene. They already had exact knowledge from the model they'd built, based on data from their leader's photographs. Driving past the site gave them a better full-size, three-dimensional view, and added more substance to their mental image, and to their growing confidence. With that task done, they drove west, turned off Route 50 and proceeded to a lonely farmhouse in southern Anne Arundel County.

The house was owned by a man thought by his neighbors to be a Syrian-born Jew who'd lived in the area for eleven years, but who was a sleeper agent. Over the past few years, he'd made discreet purchases of arms and ammunition, all of them legal, and all made before restrictive laws on some of the weapons had been passed—he could have evaded them anyway. In his coat pocket were airline tickets under a different name and passport. This was the final rendezvous point. They would bring the child here. Then six of them would leave the country at once, all on separate flights, and the remaining three would enter the homeowner's personal car and drive to yet another pre-determined location to await developments. America was a vast country, with many roads. Cellular telephones were difficult to track. They'd give a devil of a time to their pursuers, Movie Star thought. He knew how he'd do things, if it got that far. The team with the child would have one phone. He would have two, one to make brief calls to the American government, and another to call his friends. They would demand much for the life of the child, enough to throw this country into chaos. Perhaps the child might even be set free alive. He wasn't sure about that, but he supposed it was possible.

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PREDATOR/PREY

CIA HAS ITS OWN PHOTO shop, of course. The film shot out the aircraft window by Field Officer Domingo Chavez was tagged by the technician in a manner little different from that used by commercial shops, and then processed on standard equipment. There the routine treatment stopped. The grainy ASA-1200 film produced a poor-quality image, and one couldn't give *that* to the people on the seventh floor. The employees in the photo shop knew about the RIF order, and the best way to avoid being laid off, in this or any other business, was to be indispensable. So the developed roll of film went into a computer-enhancement system. It took only three minutes per frame to convert the images into something that might have been shot by an expert with a Hasselblad under studio conditions. Less than an hour after the film's arrival, the tech produced a set of eight-by-ten glossies that positively identified the airplane passenger as the Ayatollah Mahmoud Haji Daryaei, and provided a shot of his aircraft, so clear and dramatic that the manufacturer might have used it on a sales brochure. The film was put in an envelope and sent off to secure storage. The photos themselves were stored in digital form on tape, their precise identity—date, time of day, location, photographer, and subject—also coded into a computer register for extensive cross-referencing. It was standard procedure. The technician had long since stopped caring about what he developed, though he still did see the occasional frame showing someone on the news in a position that never made the TV screen . . . but not this guy. From what he'd heard about Daryaei, the man probably didn't have much interest in boys or girls, and the dour expression on his face seemed to confirm it. What the hell, he did have nice taste in airplanes, a G-IV, it looked like. Odd, wasn't that a Swiss registration code on the tail, though . . . ?

When the photos went upstairs, one complete set was also set aside for a different kind of analysis. A physician would examine them closely. Some diseases left visible signs, and the Agency always kept an eye on the health of foreign leaders.

"... SECRETARY ADLER will be leaving for Beijing this morning," Ryan told *them*. Arnie had told *him* that, as unpleasant as these news appearances were, being seen on TV doing presidential things was good for him politically—and *that*, Arnie always went on, meant being more effective in the job. The President also remembered hearing from his mom how important it was to go to the dentist twice a year, too, and just as the antiseptic smells of that place were certain to frighten a child, so he had come to loathe the damp of this

room. The walls leaked, some of the windows were cracked, and this part of the West Wing of the White House was about as neat and well kept as a high-school locker room, something the citizens couldn't tell from watching TV. Though the area was only a few yards from his own office, nobody really cared much about tidying things up. Reporters were such slobs, the staff claimed, that it wouldn't have mattered much anyway. What the hell, the reporters didn't seem to worry about it.

"Mr. President, have we learned anything more about the airliner incident?"

"It's been announced that the body count is complete. The flight-data recorders have been recovered and—"

"Will we have access to the black-box information?"

Why did they call it the *black* box when it was *orange?* Jack had always wondered about that, but knew he'd never get a sensible answer. "We've asked for that access, and the Republic of China government has promised its full cooperation. They don't have to do that. The aircraft is registered in that country, and the aircraft is made in Europe. But they are being helpful. We acknowledge that with thanks. I should add that none of the Americans who survived the crash itself are in any medical danger—some of the injuries are severe, but not life-threatening."

"Who shot it down?" another reporter asked.

"We're still examining the data, and—"

"Mr. President, the Navy has two Aegis-class ships in that immediate area. You must have a good idea of what happened." This guy had done his homework.

"I really can't comment further on that. Secretary Adler will discuss the incident with the parties concerned. We want, first of all, to make sure that no further loss of life takes place."

"Mr. President, a follow-up: you *must* know more than you're saying. Fourteen Americans were killed in this incident. The American people have a right to know why."

The hell of it was, the man was right. The hell of it also was that Ryan had to evade: "We really do not know exactly what happened yet. I cannot make a definitive statement until we do." Which was philosophically true, anyway. He knew who'd taken the shot. He didn't know why. Adler had made a good point yesterday on keeping that knowledge close.

"Mr. Adler returned from somewhere yesterday. Why is that a secret?" It was Plumber again, chasing down his question from the previous day.

I'm going to kill Arnie for exposing me this way all the time. "John, the Secretary was engaged in some important consultations. That's all I have to say on the issue."

"He was in the Middle East, wasn't he?"

"Next question?"

"Sir, the Pentagon has announced that the carrier *Eisenhower* is moving into the South China Sea. Did you order that?"

"Yes, I did. We feel that the situation warrants our close attention. We have vital interests in that region. I point out that we are not taking sides in this dispute, but we are going to look after our own interests."

"Will moving the carrier cool things down or heat them up?"

"Obviously, we're not trying to make things worse. We're trying to make them better. It's in the interests of both parties to take a step back and think about what they are doing. Lives have been lost," the President reminded them. "Some of those were American lives. That gives us a direct interest in the matter. The reason we have a government and a military is to look after American interests and to protect the lives of our citizens. The naval forces heading for the region will observe what is happening and conduct routine training operations. That is all."

ZHANG HAN SAN checked his watch again and remarked to himself that it was becoming a fine way to end his working day—the sight of the American President doing exactly what he wanted him to do. Now China had fulfilled her obligations to that Daryaei barbarian. The Indian Ocean was devoid of a major American naval presence for the first time in twenty years. The American foreign minister would leave Washington in another two hours or so. Another eighteen hours to fly to Beijing, and then the platitudes could be exchanged. He'd see what concessions he could wring out of America and the Taiwanese puppet state. Maybe a few good ones, he thought, with the trouble America was sure to face elsewhere....

ADLER WAS IN his office. His bags were packed and in his official car, which would take him to the White House to catch a helicopter to Andrews after a presidential handshake and a brief departure statement which would be as bland as oatmeal. The more dramatic departure would look good on TV, make his mission appear to be a matter of importance, and cause additional wrinkling to his clothes—but the Air Force crew had an ironing board on the plane.

"What do we know?" Under Secretary Rutledge asked of the Secretary's senior staff.

"The missile was shot by a PRC aircraft. That's pretty positive from the Navy's radar tapes. No idea why, though Admiral Jackson is very positive in saying that it was not an accident."

"How was it in Tehran?" another assistant secretary inquired.

"Equivocal. I'll get that written up on the flight and fax it back here." Adler, too, was pressed for time and hadn't had enough to think through his meeting with Daryaei.

"We need that if we're going to be much use on the SNIE," Rutledge pointed out. He really wanted *that* document. With it, Ed Kealty could prove that Ryan was up to his old tricks, playing secret agent man, and even suborning Scott Adler into doing the same. It was out there somewhere, the key to destroying Ryan's political legitimacy. He was dodging and counterpunching well, doubtless due to Arnie van Damm's coaching, but his gaffe yesterday on China policy had sent rumbles throughout the building. Like many people at State, he wished that Taiwan would just go away, and enable America to get on with the business of conducting normal relations with the world's newest

superpower.

"One thing at a time, Cliff."

The meeting returned to the China issue. By mutual consent, it was decided that the UIR problem was on the back burner for the next few days.

"Any change in China policy from the White House?" Rutledge asked.

Adler shook his head. "No, the President was just trying to talk his way through things—and, yeah, I know, he shouldn't have called the Republic of China China, but maybe it rattled their cage just a little in Beijing, and I'm not all that displeased about it. They do need to learn about not killing Americans. We have crossed a line here, people. One of the things I have to do is let them know that we take that line seriously."

"Accidents happen," someone observed.

"The Navy says it wasn't an accident."

"Come on, Mr. Secretary," Rutledge groaned. "Why the hell would they do that on purpose?"

"It's our job to find out. Admiral Jackson made a good case for his position. If you're a cop on the street and you have an armed robber in front of you, why shoot the little old lady down the block?"

"Accident, obviously," Rutledge persisted.

"Cliff, there are accidents, and there are accidents. This one killed Americans, and in case anybody in this room forgot, we are supposed to take that seriously."

They weren't used to that sort of reprimand. What was *with* Adler, anyway? The job of the State Department was to maintain the peace, to forestall conflict that killed people in the thousands. Accidents were accidents. They were unfortunate, but they happened, like cancer and heart attacks. State was supposed to deal with the Big Picture.

"THANK YOU, Mr. President." Ryan left the podium, having again survived the slings and arrows of the media. He checked his watch. Damn. He'd missed seeing the kids off to school—again—and hadn't kissed Cathy good-bye, either. Where in the Constitution, he wondered, was it written down that the President wasn't a human being?

On reaching his office, he scanned the printed sheet of his daily schedule. Adler was due over in an hour for the send-off to China. Winston at ten o'clock to go over the details of his administrative changes across the street at Treasury. Arnie and Callie at eleven to go through his speeches for next week. Lunch with Tony Bretano. A meeting after lunch with—who? The Anaheim Mighty Ducks? Ryan shook his head. Oh. They'd won the Stanley Cup, and this would be a photo opportunity for them and for him. He had to talk to Arnie about that political crap. Hmph. Ought to have Ed Foley over for that, Jack smiled to himself. He was a hockey fanatic . . .

"YOU'RE RUNNING LATE," Don Russell said, as Pat O'Day dropped Megan off.

The FBI inspector continued past him, saw to Megan's coat and blanky, then

returned. “The power went off last night and reset my clock-radio for me,” he explained.

“Big day planned?”

Pat shook his head. “Desk day. I have to finish up a few things—you know the drill.” Both did. It was essentially editing and indexing reports, a secretarial function which on sensitive cases was often done by sworn, gun-toting agents.

“I hear you want to have a little contest,” Russell said.

“They say you’re pretty good.”

“Oh, fair, I guess,” the Secret Service agent allowed.

“Yeah, I try to keep the shots inside the lines, too.”

“Like the SigSauer?”

The FBI agent shook his head. “Smith 1076 stainless.”

“The ten-millimeter.”

“It makes a bigger hole,” O’Day pointed out.

“Nine’s always been enough for me,” Russell reported. Then both men laughed.

“You hustle pool, too?” the FBI agent asked.

“Not since high school, Pat. Shall we set the amount of the wager?”

“It has to be serious,” O’Day thought.

“Case of Samuel Adams?” Russell suggested.

“An honorable bet, sir,” the inspector agreed.

“How about at Beltsville?” That was the site of the Secret Service Academy. “The outside range. Indoors is always too artificial.”

“Standard combat match?”

“I haven’t shot bull’s-eye in years. I don’t ever expect one of my principals to be attacked by a black dot.”

“Tomorrow?” It seemed a good Saturday diversion.

“That’s probably a little quick. I can check. I’ll know this afternoon.”

“Don, you have a deal. And may the best man win.” They shook hands.

“The best man will, Pat. He always does.” Both men knew who it would be, though one of them would have to be wrong. Both also knew that the other would be a good guy to have at your back, and that the beer would taste pretty good either way when the issue was decided.

THE WEAPONS WEREN’T fully automatic. A good machinist could have changed that, but the sleeper agent wasn’t one of those. Movie Star and his people didn’t mind all that much. They were trained marksmen and knew that full-auto was only good for three rounds unless you had the arms of a gorilla —after that, the gun jumped up and you were just drilling holes in the sky instead of the target, who just might fire back at you. There was neither time nor space for another round of shooting, but they were familiar with the weapon type, the Chinese knock-off of the Soviet AK-47, itself a development of a German weapon from the 1940s. It fired a short-case 7.62mm cartridge. The magazines held thirty rounds each. The team members used duct tape to double them up, inserting and ejecting the magazines to be sure that everything fit properly. With that task completed, they resumed their

examination of the objective. Each of them knew his place and his task. Each also knew the dangers involved, but they didn't dwell on that. Nor, Movie Star saw, did they dwell on the nature of the mission. They were so dehumanized by their years of activity within the terrorist community that, though this was the first real mission, for most of them, all they really thought about was proving themselves. How they did it, exactly, was less important.

"THEY'RE GOING TO bring up a lot of things," Adler said.

"Think so?" Jack asked.

"You bet. Most-favored nation, copyright disputes, you name it, it'll all come up."

The President grimaced. It seemed obscene to place the copyright protection for Barbra Streisand CDs alongside the deliberate killing of so many people, but—

"Yeah, Jack. They just don't think about stuff the same way we do."

"Reading my mind?"

"I'm a diplomat, remember? You think I just listen to what people say out loud? Hell, we'd never get any negotiations done that way. It's like playing a long low-stakes card game, boring and tense all at the same time."

"I've been thinking about the lives lost . . ."

"I have, too," SecState replied with a nod. "You can't dwell on it—it's a sign of weakness in their context—but I won't forget it, either." That got a rise out of his Commander-in-Chief.

"Why is it, Scott, that we always have to respect their cultural context? Why is it that they never seem to respect ours?" POTUS wanted to know.

"It's always been that way at State."

"That doesn't answer the question," Jack pointed out.

"If we lean too hard on that, Mr. President, it's like being a hostage. Then the other side always knows that they can hang a couple of lives over us and use it to pressure us. It gives them an advantage."

"Only if we allow it. The Chinese need us as much as we need them—more, with the trade surplus. Taking lives is playing rough. We can play rough, too. I've always wondered why we don't."

SecState adjusted his glasses. "Sir, I do not disagree with that, but it has to be thought through very carefully, and we do not have the time to do that now. You're talking a doctrinal change in American policy. You don't shoot from the hip on something that big."

"When you get back, let's get together over a weekend with a few others and see if there are any options. I don't like what we've been doing on this issue in a moral sense, and I don't like it because it makes us a little too predictable."

"How so?"

"Playing by a given set of rules is all well and good, as long as everybody plays by the same rules, but playing by a known set of rules when the other guy *doesn't* just makes us an easy mark," Ryan speculated. "On the other hand, if somebody else breaks the rules and then we break them, too, maybe in a different way, but break them even so, it gives him something to think about.

You want to be predictable to your friends, yes, but what your enemy needs to predict is that messing with you gets him hurt. How hurt he gets, that part we make unpredictable."

"Not without merit, Mr. President. Sounds like a nice subject for a weekend up at Camp David." Both men stopped talking when the helicopter came down on the pad. "There's my driver. Got your statement?"

"Yeah, and about as dramatic as a weather report on a sunny day."

"That's how the game is played, Jack," Adler pointed out. He reflected that Ryan was hearing a lot of that song. No wonder he was bridling at it.

"I've never run across a game where they never change the rules. Baseball went to a designated hitter to liven things up," POTUS remarked casually.

Designated hitter, SecState wondered on his way out the door. *Great choice of words . . .*

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Ryan watched the helicopter lift off. He'd done the handshake for the cameras, made his brief statement for the cameras, looked serious but upbeat for the cameras. Maybe C-SPAN had covered it live, but nobody else would. Were it to be a slow news day—Friday in Washington often was—it might get a minute and a half on one or two of the evening news shows. More likely not. Friday was their day to summarize the week's events, recognize some person or other for doing something or other, and toss in a fluff story.

"Mr. President!" Jack turned to see TRADER, his Secretary of the Treasury, walking over a few minutes early.

"Hi, George."

"That tunnel between here and my building?"

"What about it?"

"I took a look at it this morning. It's a real mess. You have any beefs about cleaning it up?" Winston asked.

"George, that's a Secret Service function, and *you* own them, remember?"

"Yeah, I know, but it does come to your house, and so I thought I ought to ask. Okay, I'll get it taken care of. Might be nice for when it rains."

"How's the tax plan coming?" Ryan asked, on his way to the door. An agent yanked it open and held it for him. Such things still made Jack uncomfortable. A man had to do *some* things for himself.

"We'll have the computer models done next week. I really want the case tight on this one, revenue-neutral, easier on the little guy, fair on the big guy, and I have my people jumping through hoops on the administrative savings. Jesus, Jack, was I wrong about that!"

"What do you mean?" They turned the corner for the Oval Office.

"I thought I was the only guy pissing money away to work the tax code. Everybody does. It's a huge industry. It'll put a lot of people out of work—"

"I'm supposed to be happy about that?"

"They'll all find honest work, except for the lawyers, maybe. And we'll save the taxpayers a few billion dollars by giving them a tax form they can figure out from fourth-grade math. Mr. President, the government doesn't insist that people buy buggy whips, does it?"

Ryan told his secretary to call Arnie in. He'd want a little political guidance on the ramifications of George's plan.

"YES, ADMIRAL?"

"You asked for a report on the *Eisenhower* group," Jackson said, walking to the large wall map and consulting a slip of paper. "They're right here, making good speed." Then Robby's pager started vibrating in his pocket. He pulled it out and checked the number. His eyebrows went up. "Sir, do you mind . . . ?"

"Go ahead," Secretary Bretano said. Jackson took the phone on the other side of the room, dialing five digits. "J-3 here . . . oh? Where are they? Then let's find out, shall we, Commander? Correct." He put the phone back. "That was the NMCC. The NRO reports that the Indian navy's missing—their two carriers, that is."

"What does that mean, Admiral?"

Robby walked back to the map and walked his hand across the blue part west of the Indian subcontinent. "Thirty-six hours since the last time we checked. Figure three hours to clear the port and form up . . . twenty knots times thirty-three is six hundred sixty nautical miles, that's seven hundred sixty statute miles . . . about halfway between their home port and the Horn of Africa." He turned. "Mr. Secretary, they have two carriers, nine escorts, and an UNREP group missing from their piers. The fleet oilers mean they might be planning to stay out for a while. We had no intelligence information to warn us about this." *As usual,* he didn't add.

"So where exactly are they?"

"That's the point. We don't know. We have some P-3 Orion aircraft based at Diego Garcia. They're going to launch a couple to go looking. We can task some satellite assets to the job also. We need to tell State about this. Maybe the embassy can find out something."

"Fair enough. I'll tell the President in a few minutes. Anything to worry about?"

"Could be they're just putting out after completing repairs—we rattled their cage pretty hard a while back, as you know."

"But now the only two aircraft carriers in the Indian Ocean are somebody else's?"

"Yes, sir." *And our nearest one is heading the wrong way*. But at least SecDef was catching on some.

ADLER WAS IN a former Air Force One, an old but solid version of the venerable 707-320B. His official party comprised eight people, with five Air Force stewards to look after them. For the moment, he looked at his watch, computed the travel time—they had to stop for fuel at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska—and decided he'd catch up on his sleep during the last leg. What a shame, he thought, that the government didn't award frequent-flyer miles. He'd be traveling free for the rest of his life. For now, he took out his Tehran notes and started examining them again. He closed his eyes, trying to

recall additional details as he relived the experience from his arrival at Mehrabad to the departure, visualizing every single episode. Every few minutes, he opened his eyes, flipped to the page in his notes, and made a few marginal comments. With luck, he'd be able to have them typed up and sent by secure fax to Washington for the SNIE team.

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"DING, MAYBE YOU have another career ahead of you," Mary Pat observed, as she examined the photo through a magnifying glass. Her voice went on in some disappointment. "He looks healthy."

"You suppose being a son of a bitch is good for longevity?" Clark asked.

"Worked for you, Mr. C.," Chavez joked.

"I may have to put up with this for the next thirty years."

"But such handsome grandsons you will have, *jefe.* And bilingual."

"Back to business, shall we?" Mrs. Foley suggested, Friday afternoon or not.

IT'S NEVER FUN to be ill on an airplane. He wondered what he'd eaten, or maybe he'd picked up something in San Francisco at the computer show, all those damned people around. The executive was an experienced traveler, and his personal "first-aid kit" never left his side. In with his razor and such he found some Tylenol. He washed two down with a glass of wine and decided that he'd just try to sleep it off. With luck, he'd feel better by the time his flight made it into Newark. Sure as hell, he didn't want to drive home feeling like this. He eased the seat all the way back, clicked off the light, and closed his eyes.

IT WAS TIME. The rental cars pulled away from the farmhouse. Each driver knew the route to and from the objective. There were no maps or other written material in their vehicles aside from photos of their prey. If any of them had uneasy feelings about kidnapping a small child, none showed it. Instead, their weapons were loaded and set on safe, and in every case sat on the floor, covered with a blanket or cloth. All wore suits and ties so that if a police car pulled alongside, a look would reveal only three well-groomed men, probably businessmen in nice private cars. The team thought that last part amusing. The Movie Star was a stickler for proper appearance, probably, they all thought, because of his vanity.

PRICE WATCHED THE arrival of the Mighty Ducks with no small amusement. She'd seen it all before. The most powerful of men walked into this place and were turned into children by it. What to her and her colleagues was just part of the scenery, the paintings and so forth, was to others the trappings of ultimate power. And in a way, she admitted to herself, they were right and she

was wrong. Anything can become routine after sufficient repetition, whereas the new visitor, seeing everything for the first time, may have seen more clearly. The processing helped make it that way, as they came through the metal detectors under the watchful eyes of members of the USSS Uniformed Division. They'd get a quick walk-around while the President finished his meeting with the SecDef, which was reportedly running very late. The hockey players, bearing gifts for the President—the usual sticks, pucks, and a jersey-sweater with his name on it (actually they had them for the whole family)—shuffled through the passage from the East Entrance, their eyes sweeping left and right over the decorations on the white-painted walls of what for Andrea was a place of work and for them something else, powerful and special. An interesting dualism, she thought, walking over to Jeff Raman.

"I'm heading over to check out arrangements for SAND-BOX."

"I heard Don was getting a little antsy. Anything I need to know?"

She shook her head. "POTUS isn't planning anything special. Callie Weston will be over later. They changed her slot. Otherwise, everything's routine."

"Fair enough," Raman acknowledged.

"This is Price," she said into her microphone. "Show me in transit to SANDBOX."

"Roger that," the command post replied.

The Detail chief headed out the way the Mighty Ducks had come in, and turned left for her personal vehicle, a Ford Crown Victoria. The vehicle looked ordinary, but wasn't. Under the hood was the biggest standard engine Ford made. There were two cellular phones and a pair of secure radios. The tires had steel disks inside so that were one to be flattened, the car could still drive. Like all members of the Detail, she'd been trained in the Service's special evasive-driving course at Beltsville—it was something they all loved. And in her purse was her SigSauer 9mm automatic, along with two spare clips, plus her lipstick and credit cards.

Price was a fairly ordinary-looking woman. Not as pretty as Helen D'Agustino . . . she sighed at the memory. Andrea and Daga had been close. The latter had helped her through a divorce and gotten her some dates. Good friend, good agent, dead with all the rest that night on the Hill. Daga—nobody in the Service had called her Helen—had been blessed with Mediterranean features that stopped just short of voluptuous, and that had made for a fine disguise. She just hadn't looked at all like a cop. Presidential aide, secretary, or mistress, maybe . . . but Andrea was more ordinary, and so she donned the sunglasses that agents on the Detail adopted. She was no-nonsense, maybe a little strident? They'd said that about her once, back when it had been a novelty for women to join up and carry guns. The system was over that now. Now she was one of the boys, to the point that she laughed at the jokes and told some of her own. Her instant assumption of command on that night with SWORDSMAN, getting his family to safety—she owed Ryan, Andrea knew. He'd made the call because he liked the way she did things. She would never have made Detail chief so rapidly but for his instant decision. Yes, she had the savvy. Yes, she knew the personnel very well. Yes, she genuinely loved the work. But she was young for the responsibility—and female. POTUS didn't seem to care, however. He hadn't picked her because she was female and it

might therefore look good to the voting public. He'd done it because she'd gotten the job done during a tough time. That made it right, and that made SWORDSMAN special. He even asked her questions about things. That was unique.

She didn't have a husband. She didn't have kids, probably never would. Andrea Price wasn't one of those who sought to escape her womanhood in pursuit of a career. She wanted it all, but she hadn't quite managed that. Her career was important—she could think of nothing more vital to her country than what she did—and the good news was that it was so all-encompassing that she rarely had the time to dwell on what was missing . . . a good man to share her bed, and a small voice to call her Mommy. But on drives alone, she did think about it, like now, heading up New York Avenue.

"Not all that liberated at all, are we?" she asked the windshield. But the Service didn't pay her to be liberated. It paid her to look after the First Family. Her personal life was supposed to run on her personal time, though the Service didn't issue her any of that, either.

INSPECTOR O'DAY WAS already on Route 50. Friday was best of all. He'd done his duty for the week. His tie and suit jacket were on the seat next to him, and he was back in his leather bomber jacket and his lucky John Deere ballcap, without which he'd never consider playing golf or going out to hunt. This weekend he had a ton of things to do around the house. Megan would help with many of them. Somehow she knew. Pat didn't fully understand it. Maybe it was instinct. Maybe she just responded to her father's devotion. However it came about, the two were inseparable. At home, she left his side only to sleep, and only then after a major hug and kiss, her little arms tight around his neck. O'Day chuckled to himself.

"Tough guy."

RUSSELL SUPPOSED IT was the grandfather in him. All these little munchkins. They were playing outside now, every one in his or her parka, about half with the hoods up, because little kids liked that for some reason. Serious playtime here. SANDBOX was in the sandbox, along with the O'Day kid who so closely resembled her, and a little boy—the Walker kid, the rather nice young son of that pain in the ass with the Volvo wagon. Agent Hilton was out, too, supervising. Strangely, they could relax more out here. The playground was on the north side of the Giant Steps building, under the direct view of the support team just across the street. The third member of the team was inside on the phone. She ordinarily worked the back room, where the TV monitors were. The kids knew her as Miss Anne.

Too thin, Russell told himself, even as he watched the toddlers having the purest sort of fun. In the extreme case, somebody could drive by on Ritchie Highway and hose the place. Trying to talk the Ryans out of sending Katie here was a wasted effort, and, sure, they wanted their youngest to be a normal kid. But . . .

But it was all insane, wasn't it? Russell's entire professional life had revolved around the knowledge that there were people who hated the President and everyone around him. Some were truly crazy. Some were something else. He'd studied the psychology of it. He had to, since learning about them helped to predict what to look for, but that wasn't the same as understanding it. These were kids. Even the fucking Mafia, he knew, didn't mess with children. He sometimes envied the FBI for its statutory authority to track down kidnappers. To rescue a child and apprehend the criminal in that sort of case must be a sweet moment indeed, though part of him wondered how hard it was to bring in alive that kind of subject instead of just sending him off to have his Miranda rights read to him by God Himself. That random thought evoked a smile. Or maybe what really happened was better yet. Kidnappers had a *very bad time* in prison. Even hardened robbers couldn't stomach the abusers of children, and so that variety of hood learned a whole new form of recreation in the federal corrections system: survival.

"Russell, Command Post," his earpiece said.

"Russell."

"Price is heading out here like you requested," Special Agent Norm Jeffers said from the house across the street. "Forty minutes, she says."

"Right. Thanks."

"I see the Walker lad is continuing his engineering studies," the voice continued.

"Yeah, maybe he'll do bridges next," Don agreed. The youngster had the second level building on his sand castle, to the rapt admiration of Katie Ryan and Megan O'Day.

"MR. PRESIDENT," THE team captain said, "I hope you'll like this."

Ryan had a good laugh and donned the team jersey for the cameras. The team bunched around him for the shot.

"My CIA Director is a big hockey fan," Jack said.

"Really?" Bob Albertsen asked. He was a very physical defenseman, the terror of his conference for his board checking, but as docile as a kitten in this setting.

"Yeah, he has a kid who's pretty good, played in the kids' leagues in Russia."

"Then maybe he learned something. Where's he go to school?"

"I'm not sure what colleges they're thinking about. I think they said Eddie wants to study engineering." It was so damned pleasant, Jack thought, to talk about normal things like a normal person to other normal people once in a while.

"Tell them to send the kid to Rensselaer. It's a good tech school up by Albany."

"Why there?"

"Those damned nerds win the college championship every other year. I went to Minnesota, and they cleaned our clock twice in a row. Send me his name and I'll see he gets some stuff. His dad, too, if that's okay, Mr. President."

"I'll do that," the President promised. Six feet away, Agent Raman heard the exchange and nodded.

O'DAY ARRIVED JUST as the kids were trooping back in the side door for bathroom call. This, he knew, was a major undertaking. He pulled his diesel pickup in just after four. He watched the Secret Service agents switch positions. Russell appeared at the front door, his regular post for when the children were inside.

"We got us a match for tomorrow?"

Russell shook his head. "Too quick. Two weeks from tomorrow, two in the afternoon. It'll give you a chance to practice."

"And you won't?" O'Day asked, passing inside. He watched Megan enter the girls' bathroom without seeing her daddy in the room. Well, then. He squatted down outside the door to surprise her when she came out.

MOVIE STAR, TOO, was at his surveillance position in the school parking lot to the northeast. The trees were starting to fill in, he realized. He could see, but his view was somewhat obstructed. Things appeared normal even so, and from this point on, it was in Allah's hands, he told himself, surprised that he used the term for a decidedly ungodly act. As he watched, Car I turned right just north of the day-care center. It would proceed down the street, reverse directions, and head back.

Car 2 was a white Lincoln Town Car, the twin of one belonging to a family with a child here. That family comprised two physicians, though none of the terrorists knew that. Immediately behind it was a red Chrysler whose twin belonged to the again-pregnant wife of an accountant. As Movie Star watched, both pulled into parking spaces opposite each other, as close to the highway as the parking lot allowed.

PRICE WOULD BE here soon. Russell took note of the cars' arrival, thinking over his arguments for the Detail chief. The afternoon sun reflected off the windshields, preventing him from seeing anything more inside than the outline of the drivers. Both cars were early, but it was a Friday . . .

... the tag numbers . . . ?

... his eyes narrowed slightly as he shook his head, asking himself why he hadn't—

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SOMEONE ELSE HAD. Jeffers lifted his binoculars, scanning the arriving cars as part of his surveillance duties. He didn't even know he had a photographic memory. Remembering things was as natural to him as breathing. He thought everyone could do it.

"Wait, wait, something's wrong here. They're not—" He lifted the radio mike. "Russell, those are not our cars!" It was almost in time.

IN ONE SMOOTH motion, two drivers opened their car doors and swung their legs out, lifting their weapons off the front seats as they did so. In the back of both cars, two pairs of men came up, also armed.

RUSSELL'S RIGHT HAND moved back and down, reaching for his automatic while his left lifted the collar-mounted radio microphone: *"Gun!"*

Inside the building, Inspector O'Day heard something but wasn't sure what, and he was facing the wrong way to see how Agent Marcella Hilton turned away from a child who was asking her a question and shoved her hand into her gun purse.

It was the simplest of code words. An instant later, he heard the same word repeated over his earpiece as Norm Jeffers shouted it from the command post. The black agent's hand pushed another button, activating a radio link to Washington. *"SANDSTORM SANDSTORM SANDSTORM!"*

LIKE MOST CAREER cops, Special Agent Don Russell had never fired his side arm in anger, but years of training made his every action as automatic as gravity. The first thing he'd seen was the elevated front sight of an AK-47-class automatic rifle. With that, as though a switch had been thrown, he changed from a watchful cop into a guidance system for a firearm. His SigSauer was out now. His left hand was racing to meet his right on the grip of the weapon, as the rest of his body dropped to one knee to lower his profile and give him better control. The man with the rifle would get the first shot off, but it would miss high, Russell's mind reported. Three such rounds did, passing over his head into the door frame as the area exploded with staccato noise. While that was happening, his tritium-coated front sight matched up with the face behind the weapon. Russell depressed the trigger, and from fifteen yards, he fired a round straight into the shooter's left eye.

INSIDE, O'DAY'S OWN instincts were just lighting off when Megan emerged from the bathroom, struggling with the suspender clips on her Oshkosh coveralls. Just then, the agent the kids knew as Miss Anne bolted out of the back room, her pistol in both hands and pointed up.

"Jesus," the FBI inspector had time to say, when Miss Anne bounded right through him like an NFL fullback, knocking him down at his daughter's feet and banging his head against the wall in the process.

ACROSS THE STREET, two agents ran out the front door of the residence, both

holding Uzi submachine guns while Jeffers worked the communications inside. He'd already gotten the emergency code word to headquarters. Next he activated the direct drop lines to Barracks J of the Maryland State Police on Rowe Boulevard in Annapolis. There was noise and confusion, but the agents were expertly drilled. Jeffers's function was to make sure that the word got out, then to back up the other two members of his team, already crossing the lawn of the house—

—they never had a chance. From fifty yards away, the shooters from Car 1 dropped both of them with aimed fire. Jeffers watched them go down while he got the word to the state police. He didn't have time for shock. As soon as his information was acknowledged, he lifted his M-16 rifle, flipped off the safety, and moved for the door.

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RUSSELL SHIFTED FIRE. Another shooter made the mistake of standing to get a better shot. He never made it. Two quick rounds exploded his head like a melon, saw the agent, who was not thinking, not feeling, not doing anything but servicing targets as quickly as he could identify them. The enemy rounds were still going over his head. Then he heard a scream. His mind reported that it was Marcella Hilton, and he felt something heavy fall on his back and knock him to the ground. Dear God, it had to be Marcella. Her body—something—was on his legs, and as he rolled to get clear of the obstruction, four men came into view, advancing toward him, now with a clear line of sight to where he was. He fired one round that scored, drilling one of them right through the heart. The man's eyes went wide with the shock of the impact, until a second round took him in the face. It was like he'd always dreamed it would be. The gun was doing all the work. His peripheral vision showed movement to his left —the support group—but no, it was a car, driving across the playground right at them—not the Suburban, something else. He scarcely could tell as his pistol centered on another shooter, but that man went down, shot three times by Anne Pemberton in the doorway behind him. The remaining two—only two, he had a chance—then Annie got one in the chest, then fell forward, and Russell knew he was alone, all alone now, only him between SANDBOX and these motherfuckers.

Don Russell rolled to his right to avoid fire on the ground to his left, shooting as his body turned, getting off two rounds that went wild. Then his Sig locked open on an empty magazine. He had another ready, and instantly he ejected the empty and slapped in a full one, but that took time and he felt a round enter his lower back, the impact like a kick that shook his body, as his right thumb dropped the slide lever and another bullet struck him in the left shoulder, ripping all the way down his torso to exit out his right leg. One more round, but he couldn't get the gun high enough, something wasn't working right, and he hit somebody straight through the kneecap an instant before a series of shots lowered his face to the ground.

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O'DAY WAS JUST trying to get up when two men came through the door, both armed with AKs. He looked around the room, now full of stunned, silent kids. The silence seemed to hang for a long moment, then turn to the shrill screams of toddlers. One of the men had blood all over his leg, and was gritting his teeth in pain and rage.

OUTSIDE, THE THREE men from Car 1 surveyed the carnage. Four men were dead, they saw, as they jumped out of the car, but they'd done for the covering group and—

—the first one out the right-rear door fell facedown. The other two turned around to see a black man in a white shirt with a gray rifle.

"Eat shit and die." His memory would fail him on this occasion. Norman Jeffers would never remember saying that as he shifted to the next target and squeezed off a three-round burst into his head. The third man of the team which had killed his two friends dropped behind the front of his car, but the car was stuck in the middle of the playground with open air to the left and right. "Come on, stick it up and say hi, Charlie," the agent breathed—

and sure enough he did, swinging his weapon around to shoot back at the remaining bodyguard, but not fast enough. His eyes as open and unblinking as an owl's, Jeffers watched the blood cloud fly back as the target disappeared.

"Norm!" It was Paula Michaels, the afternoon surveillance agent from the 7-Eleven across the street, her pistol out and in both hands.

Jeffers dropped to one knee behind the car whose occupants he'd just killed. She joined him, and with the sudden negation of activity, both agents started breathing heavily, their hearts racing, their heads pounding.

"Get a count?" she asked.

"At least one made it inside—"

"Two, I saw two, one hit in the leg. Oh, Jesus, Don, Anne, Marcella—"

"Save it. We got kids in there, Paula. Fuck!"

SO. MOVIE STAR thought, it wasn't going to work out after all. Damn it, he swore silently. He'd *told* them there were *three* people in the house to the north. Why hadn't they waited to kill the third? They could have had the child away from here by now! Well. He shook his head clear. He'd never fully expected the mission to succeed. He'd warned Badrayn of that—and picked his people accordingly. Now all he had to do was watch to make sure—what? Would they kill the child? That was something they'd discussed. But they might not fulfill their duty before they died.

PRICE HAD BEEN five miles out when the emergency call had come over her radio. In less than two seconds, she'd had the pedal to the floor, and the car

accelerating through traffic, the flashing light in place, and siren screaming. Turning north onto Ritchie Highway, she could see cars blocking the road. Immediately, she maneuvered left onto the median, the car side-slipping as it clawed its way across the inward-sloping surface. She arrived a few seconds ahead of the first olive-and-black Maryland State Police radio car.

"Price, is that you?"

"Say who?" she replied.

"Norm Jeffers. I think we have two subjects inside. We have five agents down. Michaels is with me now. I'm sending her around the back."

"There in a second."

"Watch your ass, Andrea," Jeffers warned.

O'DAY SHOOK HIS head. His ears were still ringing and his head sore from the hit on the wall. His daughter was next to him, shielded by his body from the two—terrorists—who were now sweeping their weapons left and right around the room while the children screamed. Mrs. Daggett moved slowly, standing between them and "her" kids, instinctively holding her hands in the open. Around them, all the kids were cowering. There were cries for Mommy—none for Daddy, oddly enough, O'Day realized. And a lot of wet pants.

"MR. PRESIDENT?" RAMAN said, pressing his earpiece in tight. *What the hell was this?*

AT ST. MARY'S, the call of "SANDSTORM" over the radio links had hit the SHADOW/SHORTSTOP details with a thunderbolt. Agents standing outside the classrooms of the Ryan kids slammed in, weapons drawn, to drag their protectees out to the corridor. Questions were asked, but none answered, as the Detail fell into the pre-set plan for such an event. Both kids entered the same Chevy Suburban, which drove not out to the road but off to a service building across the athletic field. One way in, one way out of this place, and an ambush team might be right out there, disguised as Christ knew what. In Washington, a Marine helicopter spooled up to fly to the school and extract the Ryan children. The second Suburban took position on the field, one hundred fifty yards from where the kids were. The class that had been doing gym outside was chased off, and agents stood behind their kevlar-armored vehicle, heavy weapons out, looking for targets.

"DOC!"

Cathy Ryan looked up from her desk. Roy had never called her that before. He'd never had his pistol out in her presence, either, knowing that she was not fond of firearms. Her reaction was probably instinctive. Cathy's face went as white as her lab coat.

"Is it Jack or—"

"It's Katie. That's all I know, Doc. Please come with me right now."

"No! Not again, not again!" Altman wrapped his arm around SURGEON to guide her out into the corridor. Four more agents were there, weapons out and faces grim. Hospital security people kept out of the way, though uniformed Baltimore City Police made up an outer perimeter, all of them trying to remember to look outward toward a possible threat, not inward toward a mother whose child was in peril.

RYAN STRETCHED OUT his arm, placed his hand against the wall of his office, looked down, and bit his lip for a second before speaking: "Tell me what you know, Jeff."

"Two subjects are in the building. Don Russell is dead, so are four other agents, sir, but we have it contained, okay? Let us do the work," Agent Raman said, touching the extended arm to steady the President.

"Why my kids, Jeff? I'm the one—here. If people get mad, it's supposed to be at me. Why do people like this go after children, tell me that . . ."

"It's a hateful act, Mr. President, hateful to God and man," Raman said, as three more agents came into the Oval Office. What was he doing now? the assassin asked himself. What in hell was he doing? Why had he said *that?*

THEY WERE TALKING in a language he didn't understand. O'Day stayed down, sitting on the floor with his little girl, holding her in his lap with both arms and trying to look as harmless as she did. Dear God, all the years he'd trained for things like this—but never to be inside, never to be *in* the crime scene while the crime happened. Outside, you knew what to do. He knew exactly what was happening. If any Service people were left—probably some, yes, there had to be. Somebody had fired three or four bursts with an M-16—O'Day knew the distinctive chatter of that weapon. No more bad guys had entered. His mind added those facts up. Okay, there were good guys outside. First they'd establish a perimeter to make sure nobody got in or out. Next they'd call in—who? The Service probably had its own SWAT team, but also close by would be the FBI Hostage Rescue Team, with its own choppers to get them here. Almost on cue, he heard a helicopter overhead.

"THIS IS TROOPER three, we're orbiting the area now," a voice said over the radio. "Who's in charge down there?"

"This is Special Agent Price, United States Secret Service. How long you with us, Trooper?" she asked over a state police radio.

"We have gas for ninety minutes, and then another chopper will relieve us. Looking down now, Agent Price," the pilot reported. "I have one individual to the west, looks like a female behind a dead tree, looking into the scene. She one of yours?"

"Michaels, Price," Andrea said over her personal radio system. "Wave to the chopper."

"Just waved at us," Trooper Three reported at once.

"Okay, that's one of mine, covering the back."

"All right. We have no movement around the building, and no other people within a hundred yards. We will continue to orbit and observe until you say otherwise."

"Thank you. Out."

THE MARINE VH-60 landed on the athletic field. Sally and Little Jack were fairly thrown aboard, and Colonel Goodman lifted off at once, heading east toward the water, which, the Coast Guard had told him moments before, was free of unknown craft. He rocketed the Black Hawk to altitude, going north over the water. To his left he could see the shape of a French-made police helicopter orbiting a few miles north of Annapolis. It didn't require much insight to explain it, and behind calm eyes he wished for a couple of squads of recon Marines to deliver to the site. He'd once heard that criminals who hurt children faced a rough go in prison, but that wasn't half of what Marines would do if they got the chance. His reverie ended there. He didn't even look back to see how the other two kids were doing. He had an aircraft to fly. That was his function. He had to trust others to do theirs.

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THEY WERE LOOKING out the windows now. They were being careful about it. While the wounded one stood leaning against the wall—looked like a kneecap, O'Day saw; good—the other one allowed his eye to peer around the edge. It wasn't too hard to guess what he saw. Sirens announced the arrival of police cars. Okay, they probably had the perimeter forming now. Mrs. Daggett and her three women helpers had the kids in a single bunch on the corner, while the two subjects traded words. Good, that was smart. They weren't doing all that well, O'Day thought. One of them was always sweeping the room with eyes and muzzle, but they hadn't

Just then one of them reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a photo. He said something else in whatever tongue they spoke. Then he closed the shades. Damn. That would prevent scoped rifles from seeing inside. They were smart enough to know that people might just shoot. Few of the kids here were tall enough to look out and—

The one with the photo held it up again and walked toward the kids. He pointed.

"That one."

Strangely, it was only now, it seemed, that they saw O'Day in the room. The knee-shot one blinked his eyes and aimed the AK right at him. The inspector took his arms from around his daughter's chest and held them up.

"Enough people been hurt, pal," he said. It didn't require all that much effort to make his voice shake. He'd made a mistake, too, holding his Megan that way. That fuck might shoot through her to get to me, he realized, a sudden wave of nausea rippling through his stomach at the thought. Slowly,

carefully, he lifted her and moved her off his lap, and onto the floor to his left.

"No!" It was Marlene Daggett's voice.

"Bring her to me!" the man insisted.

Do it, do it, O'Day thought. *Save your resistance for when it counts. It doesn't change anything right now*. But she couldn't hear his thoughts.

"Bring her!" the shooter repeated.

"No!"

The man shot Daggett in the chest from a range of three feet.

"WHAT WAS THAT?" Price snapped. Ambulances were coming up Ritchie Highway now, their whooping sirens different from the monotonal screams of the police cars. Down to her left, state troopers were trying to get the road clear, shunting traffic away from the area while their hands rubbed on their holsters, wishing they were there to help. Their angry gestures conveyed their mental state to the puzzled drivers.

Closer to Giant Steps, those immediately outside heard a renewed wave of screams, little kids in terror, for what reason they could only guess.

THE LEATHER JACKET rode up when you were sitting down like this. If anyone had been behind him, he'd see the holster in the small of his back, the inspector knew. He'd never seen a murder before. He'd investigated his share of them, but to see one . . . a lady who worked with kids. The shock on his face was as real as any man's, watching life vanish . . . innocent life, his mind added. So he really had no choice.

When he next looked at Marlene Daggett, he wished that he might tell her that her murderers would not be leaving this building alive.

It was miraculous that none of the kids were wounded as yet. All the shooting had gone high, and he realized that had Miss Anne not knocked him down, he might be dead beside his daughter now. There were holes in the wall, and the bullets that had made them would have transited the space he'd been in a second or two before. He looked down a second, to see his hands shaking. His hands knew what they had to do. They knew their task and they didn't understand why they weren't doing it, why the mind which commanded them hadn't yet given them the release. But his hands had to be patient. This was a job of the mind.

The subject lifted Katie Ryan by her arm, wrenching it, making her cry out as he twisted it. O'Day thought about his first supervisor, working that first kidnapping case, Dom DiNapoli, that big, tough guinea who'd wept bringing the child back to her family: "Never forget, they're *all* our kids."

They might just as easily have selected Megan, they were so close—and that thought *did* cross from mind to mind as the one with SANDBOX looked at the photo again, and over toward Pat O'Day.

"Who are you?" the voice demanded, while his partner moaned with increasing pain.

"What d'ya mean?" the inspector asked in nervous reply. *Look dumb and*

scared.

"Whose child is that?" He pointed at Megan.

"She's mine, okay? I don't know who that one belongs to," the FBI agent lied.

"She is the one we want, she is President's child, yes?"

"How the hell should I know? My wife usually picks Megan up, not me. Do what you gotta do and get the fuck outa here, okay?"

"You inside," a female voice boomed from outside. "This is the United States Secret Service. We want you to come out. You will not be hurt if you do. You have no place to go. Come out where we can see you, and you will not be hurt."

"That's good advice, man," Pat told him. "Nobody's gonna get out of here, you know?"

"You know who this girl is? She is daughter of your President Ryan! They will not dare shoot me!" the subject proclaimed. His English was pretty good, O'Day noted, nodding.

"What about all the other kids, man? That's the only one you want, that's the only other one that matters—hey, why not, you know, like, let some out, eh?"

The man was partly right. The Service guys wouldn't shoot at one target for fear that someone else might be in here, as one surely was, his rifle leveled at Pat's chest. And they were smart enough that they were never less than five feet apart. Shooting them would take two separate moves.

What really scared O'Day was the casual, reflexive way he'd killed Marlene Daggett. They just plain didn't care. You couldn't predict that sort of criminal. You could talk to them, try to calm them down, distract them, but beyond that, there was only one way to deal with them.

"We give them children, they give us car, yes?"

"Hey, that works for me, okay? I think that's just fine. I just want to get my daughter home tonight, y'know?"

"Yes, you take good care of your little one. Sit there."

"No problem." He relaxed his hands, bringing them closer to his chest, right at the top of the zipper on his jacket. Undo that and the leather would hang better, concealing his gun.

"Attention," the voice called again. "We want to talk."

CATHY RYAN JOINED her children in the helicopter. The agents' faces were grim enough. Sally and Jack were coming out of the initial shock and sobbing now, looking to their mother for solace as the Black Hawk leaped into the sky again, heading southwest for Washington with another in trail. The pilot, she saw, was not taking the usual route, but was instead going directly west, away from where Katie was. That was when SURGEON collapsed into the arms of her kids.

"O'DAY IS IN there," Jeffers told her.

"You sure, Norm?"

"That's his truck. I saw him going in right before this went down."

"Shit," Price swore. "That's probably the shot we heard."

"Yah." Jeffers nodded grimly.

THE PRESIDENT WAS in the Situation Room, the best spot to keep track of things. Perhaps he might have been elsewhere, but he couldn't face his office, and he wasn't President enough to pretend that—

"Jack?" It was Robby Jackson. He came over as his President stood, but they'd been friends much longer than that, and the two shared an embrace. "Been here before, man. It worked out then, too, remember?"

"We have tag numbers off the cars in the parking lot. Three are rentals. We're running them now," Raman said, a phone to his ear. "Should be able to get some kind of ID."

HOW DUMB MIGHT they be? O'Day asked himself. They'd have to be pretty fucking stupid to think they had any chance at all of getting out of here . . . and if they didn't have that hope, then they had nothing to lose . . . not a damned thing . . . and they didn't seem to care about killing. It had happened before, in Israel, Pat remembered. He didn't recall the name or the date, but a couple of terrorists had had a bunch of kids and hosed them before the commandos were able to ...

He'd taught tactics for every possible situation, or so he'd thought, and would have said as recently as twenty minutes before—but to have your only child next to you . . .

They're all *our kids,* Dom's voice told him again.

The unhurt killer had Katie Ryan by the upper arm. She was only whimpering now, exhausted from her earlier screams, almost hanging from his hand as the subject stood there to the left of the wounded one. His right hand held the AK. If he'd had a pistol, he could have held that weapon to her head, but the AK was too lengthy for that. Ever so slowly, Inspector O'Day moved his hand down, opening the zipper on his jacket.

They started talking back and forth again. The wounded one was in considerable discomfort. At first, the adrenaline rush had blocked it out, but now things were settling down somewhat, and with the release of tension also went the pain-blocking mechanism that protected the body in periods of great stress. He was saying something, but Pat couldn't tell what it was. The other one snarled a reply, gesturing to the door, speaking with passion and frustration. The scary part would come when they came to a decision. They might just shoot the kids. Those outside would probably rush the building if they heard more than a shot or two. They might be fast enough to save some of the kids, but . . .

He started thinking of them as Hurt and Unhurt. They were pumped up but confused, excited but undecided, wanting to live but coming to the realization that they would not . . .

"Hey, uh, guys," Pat said, holding his arms up and moving them to distract them from the open zipper. "Can I say something?"

"What?" Hurt demanded, as Unhurt watched.

"All these kids you have here, it's like too many to cover, right?" he asked, with an emphatic nod to get the idea across. "How about I take my little girl out and some of the others, okay? Make things easier for you, maybe?"

That generated some more jabbering. The idea actually seemed attractive to Unhurt, or so it appeared to O'Day.

"Attention, this is the Secret Service!" the voice called yet again. It sounded like Price, the FBI agent thought. Unhurt was looking toward the door, and his body language was leaning him that way, and to get there he had to pass in front of Hurt.

"Hey, come on, okay, let some of us go, will ya?" O'Day pleaded. "Maybe I can tell them to give you a car or something."

Unhurt waved his rifle in the inspector's direction. "Stand!" he commanded.

"Okay, okay, be cool, all right?" O'Day stood slowly, keeping his hands well away from his body. Would they see his holster if he turned around? The Service people had spotted it the first time he'd come in, and if he fucked this one up, then Megan . . . there was no turning back. There just wasn't.

"You tell them, you tell them they give us car or I kill this one and all the rest!"

"Let me take my daughter with me, okay?"

"No!" Hurt said.

Unhurt said something in his native tongue, looking down at Hurt, his weapon still pointed at the floor while Hurt's was aimed at O'Day's chest.

"Hey, whatcha got to lose?"

It was almost as though Unhurt said the same thing to his wounded friend, and with that he gave Katie Ryan a yank on the arm. She cried out loudly again as he walked across the room, pushing her ahead of him, blocking Hurt's field of view as he did so. It had taken twenty minutes to achieve. Now he had one second to see if it would work.

The drill was the same for O'Day as it had been for Don Russell. His right hand raced back, whipped inside the jacket, and pulled the pistol out, as he dropped to one knee. The moment Unhurt's body cleared the target, the Smith 1076 loosed two perfect rounds, both of the stainless-steel cases flying in the air, as Hurt became Dead. Unhurt's eyes went wide in surprise, as the children's screams erupted again.

"DROP IT," O'Day bellowed at him.

Unhurt's first reaction was to yank again at Katie Ryan's arm, and at the same time the gun started to move up, as though it were a pistol, but the AK was far too heavy to be used that way. O'Day wanted him alive, but there wasn't the time for chances. His right index finger pushed back on the trigger, then pushed again. The body fell straight down, behind it a red shadow on the white walls of Giant Steps.

Inspector Patrick O'Day jumped across the room, kicking one, then the other rifle free of their dead owners' hands. He gave each body a careful look, and for all the years of practice and instruction he'd given and taken, it still came as a surprise that it all had worked. Only then did his heart start beating

again, or so it seemed, as a vacuum filled his chest. His body slumped down for a moment. Then he tensed his muscles and knelt beside the body of Katie Ryan, SANDBOX to the Secret Service, and a *thing* to the people he'd just killed.

"You okay, honey?" he asked. She didn't answer. She was holding her arm and sobbing, but there was no blood on her. "Come on," he said gently, wrapping his arms around a daughter who now would forever be partly his. Next he picked up his Megan and walked to the door.

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"THERE'S SHOOTING IN the building!" a voice said on the desk-mounted speaker. Ryan just froze. The rest of the people in the Sit Room cringed.

"Sounded like a pistol. Do they have pistols?" another voice asked on the same radio circuit.

"Holy shit, look there!"

"Who's that?"

"COMING OUT!" A voice called. "Coming out!"

"HOLD FIRE!" Price called over the loudspeaker. Guns didn't move away from the door, but hands relaxed a fraction.

"Jesus!" Jeffers said, standing and racing to join him in the doorway.

"Both subjects dead, Mrs. Daggett, too," O'Day said. "All clear, Norm. All clear."

"Let me—"

"No!" Katie Ryan screamed.

He had to get out of the way. Pat looked down to see the blood-soaked clothing of three agents of his rival agency. There were at least ten rounds by Don Russell's body, and an empty magazine. Beyond were four dead criminals. Two, he saw, walking to the perimeter, head shots. He stopped by his pickup. His knees were a little weak now, and he set the kids down, sitting himself on the bumper. A female agent came up. Pat took the Smith from his belt and handed it over without really looking.

"You hurt?" It was Andrea Price.

He shook his head; it took him a moment to speak again. "I might start shaking in a minute." The agent looked at his two little girls. A state trooper scooped Katie Ryan up, but Megan refused to leave his side. That was when he hugged his daughter to his chest, and the tears began for both of them.

"SANDBOX is safe!" he heard Price say. "SANDBOX is safe and unhurt!"

Price looked around. Backup Service agents hadn't arrived yet, and most of the law-enforcement personnel on the scene were troopers of the Maryland State Police in their starched khaki shirts. Ten of them formed a ring around SANDBOX, guarding her like a pride of lions.

Jeffers rejoined them. O'Day had never fully appreciated the way time changed in such moments as this. When he looked up, the children were being let out the side door. Paramedics were flooding the area, going to the children

first. “Here,” the black agent said, handing over a handkerchief.

“Thanks, Norm.” O’Day wiped his eyes, blew his nose, and stood. “Sorry about that, guys.”

“It’s okay, Pat, you did—”

“Better if I’d’ve taken the last one alive, but couldn’t ... couldn’t take the chance.” He was able to stand now, as he held Megan by the hand. “Oh, damn,” he added.

“I think we should get you out of here,” Andrea observed. “We can do the interviews in a better place than this.”

“Thirsty,” O’Day said next. He shook his head again. “Never expected this, Andrea. Kids around. Not supposed to be this way, is it?” Why was he babbling? the inspector asked himself.

“Come on, Pat. You did just fine.”

“Wait a minute.” The FBI inspector rubbed his face with two large hands, took a deep breath, and looked around the crime scene. Christ, what a mess. Three dead just this side of the playground. That would be Jeffers, he thought, with his M-16. Not bad. But there was one other thing he had to do. By each of the rented cars was a body, each a head shot. Another one, one round in the chest, and one in the head, it looked like. The fourth, he wasn’t sure who’d gotten him. Probably one of the girls. Ballistics tests would determine which one, he knew. O‘Day walked back toward the front door, to the body of Special Agent Donald Russell. There he turned, looking back at the parking lot. He’d seen his share of crime scenes. He knew the signs, knew how to figure things out. No warning, not a damned bit, maybe a second, no more than that, and he’d stood his ground against six armed subjects and gotten three of them. Inspector Patrick O’Day knelt beside the body. He removed the Sig pistol from Russell’s hand, gave it to Price, then took the hand in his own for what seemed a long time.

“See y‘around, champ,” O’Day whispered, letting go after a few seconds. It was time to leave.

43

RETREAT

THE NEAREST CONVENIENT place to land a Marine helicopter was the Naval Academy, and the hard part was finding available Secret Service personnel to ride with SANDBOX. Andrea Price, senior agent on the crime scene as well as Detail chief, had to stay at Giant Steps, so USSS personnel racing to Annapolis were diverted, met the state troopers at the Academy, and took custody of Katie. And so it happened that the first team of federal officers to arrive at the scene were FBI agents from the small Annapolis office, a satellite of the Baltimore Field Division. What orders they needed they took from Price, but for the moment their duties were straightforward, and quite a few more were on the way.

O'Day walked across the street to the house which had been Norm Jeffers' local command post, whose owner, a grandmother, overcame her shock to make coffee. A tape recorder was set up, and the FBI inspector ran through an uninterrupted narrative, really just a long ramble which was actually the best way to get fresh information. Later, they would walk him back through it, probing for additional facts. From where he was sitting, O'Day could see out the window. Ambulance crews were standing by to remove the bodies, but first, photographers had to record the event for posterity.

They couldn't know that Movie Star was still looking down, along with what was now a crowd of several hundred, students and teachers from the community college plus others who'd guessed the nature of the event and wanted to watch. Movie Star had already seen enough, however, and he made his way to his car, picking his way across the parking lot, and then drove north on Ritchie Highway.

"Hey, I gave him a chance. I told him to drop his weapon," O'Day said. "I yelled so loud I'm surprised you didn't hear it outside, Price. But the gun started moving, and I wasn't in a mood to take chances, you know?" His hands were steady now. The immediate shock period was over. Others would come later.

"Any idea who they were?" Price asked, after he'd gone through it the first time.

"They were talking in some language, but I don't know what one. Wasn't German or Russian—aside from that, I don't know. Foreign languages sound like foreign languages. I couldn't recognize any words or phrases. Their English was pretty good, accented, but again, not sure what the accent was. Physical appearance, Mediterranean. Maybe from the Middle East. Maybe from some other place. Absolutely ruthless. He shot Mrs. Daggett down, not a blink, no emotion—no, that's wrong. He was pissed, very pumped up. No

hesitation at all. *Boom,* she's down. Nothing I could have done," the inspector went on. "The other one had his gun on me, and it happened so fast, I didn't really see that happening so fast."

"Pat." Andrea took his hand. "You did great."

THE HELICOPTER LANDED on the White House pad, just south of the ground-floor entrance. Again a ring of agents with weapons was in evidence, as Ryan ran to the aircraft while the rotor was still turning, and nobody tried to stop him. A Marine crewman in a green flight suit pulled the door open and stepped out, which allowed the agents on the helicopter to carry SANDBOX off and hand her off to her father.

Jack cradled her like the baby she no longer was but always would be in his mind, and walked up the slope to the house, where the rest of his family was waiting under cover. News cameras recorded the event, though no reporter got within fifty yards of POTUS. The Secret Service members of the Detail were in a mood to kill; for the first time in the memory of the White House press corps, they looked overly dangerous.

"Mommy!" Katie twisted in her father's arms, reaching for her mother, who took her away from Jack at once. Sally and Little Jack closed in on the pair, leaving their father standing alone. That didn't last for long.

"How you doing?" Arnie van Damm asked quietly.

"Better now, I guess." His face was still ashen, his body limp but still able to stand. "Do we know any more?"

"Look, first thing, how about we get all of you out of here? Up to Camp David. You can calm down there. Security is airtight. It's a good place to relax."

Ryan thought about that. The family hadn't been up there yet, and he'd only been there twice, most recently on a dreadful January day several years before. "Arnie, we don't have clothes or—"

"We can take care of that," the chief of staff assured him.

The President nodded. "Get it set up. Fast," he added. While Cathy took the kids upstairs, Jack headed back out and over to the West Wing. Two minutes later, he was back in the Situation Room. The mood was better there. The initial shock and fear were gone, replaced with a quiet determination.

"Okay," Ryan said quietly. "What do we know?"

"Is that you, Mr. President?" It was Dan Murray on the table-mounted speakerphone.

"Talk to me, Dan," SWORDSMAN commanded.

"We had a guy inside, one of mine. You know him. Pat O'Day, one of my roving inspectors. His daughter—Megan, I think—goes there, too. He got the drop on the subjects and blew 'em both away. The Secret Service people killed the rest—the total count is nine, two by Pat and the rest by Andrea's people. There are five Service agents dead, plus Mrs. Daggett. No children were wounded, thank God. Price is interviewing Pat right now. I have about ten agents on the scene to assist with the investigation, with a lot of Service people on the way there, too."

"Who runs the investigation?" POTUS asked.

“Two statutes on this one. An attack on you or any member of your family is under the purview of the Secret Service. Terrorism is our bailiwick. I’d give the Service lead on this one, and we’ll provide all possible assistance,” Murray promised. “No pissin’ contest on this one, my word on it. I’ve already called Justice. Martin will assign us a senior attorney to coordinate the criminal investigation. Jack?” the FBI Director added.

“What, Dan?”

“Get your family put back together. We know how to do this. I know you’re the President, but for the next day or two, just be a guy, okay?”

“Good advice, Jack,” Admiral Jackson observed.

“Jeff?” Ryan said to Agent Raman. All his friends were saying the same thing. They were probably right.

“Yes, sir?”

“Let’s get us the hell out of town.”

“Yes, Mr. President.” Raman left the room.

“Robby, how about you and Sissy fly up, too. I’ll have a helo waiting for you here.”

“Anything you say, pal.”

“Okay, Dan,” Ryan told the speakerphone. “We’re going to Camp David. Keep me informed.”

“Will do,” the FBI Director promised.

THEY HEARD IT on the radio. Brown and Holbrook were heading north on US Route 287 to join Interstate 90-East. The cement truck drove like a pig, even with its multirange gearbox, top-heavy, slow to accelerate, and almost as slow to brake. Maybe the interstate would be better driving, they hoped. But it did have a decent radio.

“Damn,” Brown said, adjusting the dial.

“Kids.” Holbrook shook his head. “We have to make sure no kids are around, Ernie.”

“I think we can handle that, Pete, assuming we can horse this rig all the way there.”

“What do you figure?”

A grunt. “Five days.”

DARYAEI TOOK IT well, Badrayn saw, especially with the news that all of them were dead.

“Forgive me for saying so, but I did warn you that—”

“I know. I remember,” Mahmoud Haji acknowledged. “The success of this mission was never really necessary, so long as the security arrangements were properly looked after.” With that, the cleric looked closely at his guest.

“They all had false travel documents. None had a criminal file anywhere in the world, so far as I know. None had anything to connect him with your country. Had one been taken alive, there was a chance, and I warned you about that, but it appears that none were.”

The Ayatollah nodded, and spoke their epitaph: "Yes, they were faithful."

Faithful to what? Badrayn asked himself. Overtly religious political leaders weren't exactly uncommon in this part of the world, but it was tiresome to hear. Now, supposedly, all nine of them were in Paradise. He wondered if Daryaei actually believed that. He probably did; he was probably so sure that he believed that he could speak with God's own voice, or at least had told himself so often that he thought he did. One could do that to himself, Ali knew, just keep repeating any idea enough, and however it had first entered one's mind—for political advantage, personal revenge, greed, any of the baser motivations—after enough repetitions it became an article of faith, as pure in purpose as the words of the Prophet himself. Daryaei was seventy-two, Badrayn reminded himself, a long life of self-denial, focused on something outside himself, continuing on a journey that had begun in his youth with shining purpose toward a holy goal. He was a long way from the beginning now, and very close to the end. Now the goal could be seen so clearly that the purpose itself could be forgotten, couldn't it? That was the trap for all such men. At least he knew better, Badrayn told himself. For him it was just business, devoid of illusions and devoid of hypocrisy.

"And the rest?" Daryaei asked, after a prayer for their souls.

"We will know by Monday, perhaps, certainly by Wednesday," Ali replied.

"And security for that?"

"Perfect." Badrayn was totally confident. All of the travelers had returned safely, and reported in every case that their missions had been properly carried out. Whatever physical evidence they'd left behind—just the spray cans—would have been collected as trash and carted away. The plague would appear, and there would never be any evidence of how it might have gotten there. And so what had apparently failed today was not a failure at all. This Ryan fellow, relieved though he might be at the rescue of his child, was now a weakened man, as America was a weakened country, and Daryaei had a plan. A good one, Badrayn thought, and for his help in implementing it, his life would change forever now. His days as an international terrorist were a thing of the past. He might have some position in the expanding UIR government—security or intelligence, probably, with a comfortable office and a sizable stipend, able finally to settle down in peace and safety. Daryaei had his dream, and might even achieve it. For Badrayn, the dream was closer still, and he need now not do a thing more to make it a reality. Nine men had died to make it so. That was their misfortune. Were they truly in Paradise for their sacrificial act? Perhaps Allah truly was that merciful, enough to forgive any act done in His Name, mistakenly or not. Perhaps.

It didn't really matter, did it?

THEY TRIED TO make the departure look normal. The kids had changed clothes. Bags were packed and would go out on a later flight. Security looked tighter than usual, but not grossly so. That was mistaken. Atop the Treasury Building to the east and the Old Executive Office Building to the west, the Secret Service people who usually crouched were now standing, showing their full profiles as they scanned the area with their binoculars. Beside each was a

man with a rifle. Eight agents were on the south perimeter fence, examining the people who were passing by or had come just to be there after hearing the horrid news, for whatever purpose. Most had probably come because they cared to some degree or another, maybe even to offer a prayer for the Ryans' safety. For those who had some other purpose, the agents watched, and this time, as with all the others, saw nothing unusual.

Jack strapped in, as did the rest of his family. The engines over their heads started whining, and the rotor turning. Inside with them were Agent Raman and another guard, plus the Marine crew chief. The VH-3 helicopter vibrated, then lifted off, climbing rapidly into the westerly wind, first heading toward the OEOB, then south, then northwest, its curving flight path designed to confuse someone who might be out there with a surface-to-air missile. Light conditions were good enough that such a person would probably be spotted—it takes a few seconds to make a successful launch—and anyway the helicopter was equipped with the newest variant of the Black Hole IR-suppression system, which made Marine One a hard kill. The pilot—it was Colonel Hank Goodman again—knew all this, took the proper protective measures, and did his best to forget about it as he did so.

It was quiet in the back. President Ryan had his thoughts. His wife had hers. The kids looked out the windows, for helicopter flying is one of the greatest thrill rides known to man. Even little Katie twisted in her seat belt to look down, her dreadful afternoon suppressed by the wonder of the moment. Jack turned, and seeing that, he decided that the short attention span of children was as much a blessing as a curse. His own hands were shaking a little now. Fear or rage, he couldn't tell. Cathy just looked bereft, her face slack in the golden light of sunset. Their talk tonight would not be a pleasant one.

Behind them, a Secret Service car had collected Cecilia Jackson from their Fort Myers home. Admiral Jackson and his wife boarded a backup VH-60, along with some carry-on bags, and more substantial luggage for the Ryan family. There were no cameras to record this. The President and First Family were gone, and the cameras with them, while pundits put together their thoughts for the evening news broadcasts, trying to find a deeper significance in the events of the day, coming to conclusions well in advance of the federal officers who only now were allowing the ambulance crews to remove the thirteen bodies from the crime scene. The flashing police lights looked dramatic as TV crews set up to do live broadcasts, one of them from the very spot where Movie Star had observed the burned operation.

He had prepared for this eventuality, of course. He drove north on Ritchie Highway—the traffic wasn't bad at all, considering the police still had the road blocked at Giant Steps—and at Baltimore-Washington International he even had time to turn in his rental car and catch the British Airways 767 for Heathrow. Not first-class this time, he realized. The aircraft was all business class. He didn't smile. He had hoped the kidnapping might actually succeed, though from the beginning he had planned also for its failure. For Movie Star the mission hadn't failed at all. He was still alive, and escaping yet again. Here he was, lifting off, soon to be in another country, and there to disappear completely, even while the American police were trying to establish if there might have been another member of the criminal conspiracy. He decided to

have a few glasses of wine, the better to help him sleep after a very stressful day. The thought that it was against his religion made him smile. What aspect of his life wasn't?

SUNSET COMES QUICKLY. By the time they started circling at Camp David, the ground was an undulating shadow punctuated by the stationary lights of private homes and the moving lights of automobiles. The helicopter descended slowly, flared out fifty feet above the ground, then settled vertically for a whisper-soft landing. There were few lights beyond the square landing pad's perimeter. When the crew chief opened the door, Raman and the other agent stepped down first. The President undid his lap belt and walked forward. He stopped just behind the flight crew, tapping the pilot on the shoulder.

"Thanks, Colonel."

"You have a lot of friends, Mr. President. We're here when you need us," Goodman told his Commander-in-Chief.

Jack nodded, went down the steps, and beyond the lights he saw the spectral outlines of Marine riflemen in camouflaged utilities.

"Welcome to Camp David, sir." It was a Marine captain.

Jack turned to help his wife down. Sally led Katie down. Little Jack came out last. It hit Ryan that his son was almost as tall as his mother now. He might have to call his son something else.

Cathy looked around nervously. The captain saw it. "Ma'am, there's sixty Marines out there," he assured her. He didn't have to add what they were there for. He didn't have to tell the President how alert they were.

"Where?" Little Jack asked, looking and seeing nothing.

"Try this." The captain handed over his PVS-7 night-vision goggles. SHORTSTOP held them to his eyes.

"Cool!" His arm reached out, pointing to those he could see. Then he lowered the goggles, and the Marines turned invisible again.

"They're great for spotting deer, and there's a bear that wanders on and off the grounds every so often. We call him Yogi." Captain Larry Overton, USMC, congratulated himself for calming them down, and led them toward the HMMWVs that would transport them to quarters. Yogi, he'd explain later, had a radio collar on so that he wouldn't surprise anybody, least of all a Marine with a loaded rifle.

The quarters at Camp David appeared rustic, and truly were not anywhere near as plush as those in the White House, but could accurately be described as the sort of hideaway a millionaire might set up for himself outside Aspen—in fact, Presidential Quarters are officially known as Aspen Cottage. Maintained by Naval Surface Detachment, Thurmont (Maryland), and guarded by a short company of handpicked Marines, the compound was as remote and secure a location as anything within a hundred miles of Washington could possibly be. There were Marines at the presidential cabin to let them in, and inside were sailors to guide each to a private bedroom. Outside were twelve additional cottages, and the closer you were to Aspen, of course, the more important you were.

"What's for dinner?" Jack Junior asked.

"Just about anything you want," a Navy chief steward replied.

Jack turned to Cathy. She nodded. This would be a whatever-you-want night. The President took off his jacket and tie. A steward darted up to collect them. "The food is great here, Mr. President," he promised.

"That's a fact, sir," the chief confirmed. "We have a deal with some local folks. Fresh everything, right off the farm. Can I get you something to drink?" he asked hopefully.

"That sounds like a great plan, chief. Cathy?"

"White wine?" she asked, the stress bleeding off her, finally.

"We have a pretty good selection, ma'am. For domestic, how about a Chateau Ste. Michelle reserve chardonnay? It's a 1991 vintage, and about as good as a chardonnay gets."

"You're a Navy chief?" POTUS asked.

"Yes, sir. I used to take care of admirals, but I got promoted, and if I may say so, sir, I do know my wines."

Ryan held up two fingers. The chief nodded and went out the door.

"This is insane," Cathy said after he left.

"Don't knock it." While they waited for drinks, the two big kids agreed on a pizza. Katie wanted a burger and fries. They heard the buzz of another helicopter coming into the pad. Cathy was right, her husband thought. This is insane.

The door reopened, and the chief returned with two bottles and a silver bucket. Another steward followed with glasses.

"Chief, I just meant two glasses."

"Yes, Mr. President, but we have two more guests arriving, Admiral and Mrs. Jackson. Mrs. Jackson likes a good white also, sir." He popped the cork and poured a splash for SURGEON. She nodded.

"Doesn't it have a wonderful nose?" He filled her glass and one other, handing that to the President. Then he withdrew.

"They always told me the Navy had guys like that, but I never believed it."

"Oh, Jack." Cathy turned. The kids were watching TV, all three sitting on the floor, even Sally, who was trying to become an elegant lady. They were retreating into the familiar, while their parents did what parents always did, came to terms with a new reality, in order to buffer their children from the world.

Jack saw the lights of a HMMWV go past to the left. Robby and Sissy would have their own cabin, he imagined. They'd change before coming over. He turned back and wrapped his arms around his wife from behind. "It's okay, babe."

Cathy shook her head. "It'll never be okay, Jack. It'll never be okay again. Roy told me, as long as we live, we'll have bodyguards with us. Everywhere we go, we'll need protection. Forever," she said, sipping her wine, not so much angry as resigned, not so much dazed as comprehending something she'd never dreamed. The trappings of power were seductive sometimes. A helicopter to work. People to take care of your clothes, look after the kids, whatever food you wanted as close as the phone, escorts everywhere, fast track into everything.

But the price of it? No big deal. Just every so often somebody might try to

murder one of your children. There was no running away from it. It was as though she'd been given a diagnosis of cancer, of the breast, the ovaries, something else. Horrible as it was, you had to do what you had to do. Crying didn't help, though she'd do a lot of that, SURGEON was sure. Screaming at Jack wouldn't help—and she wasn't a screamer anyway, and it wasn't Jack's fault, was it? She just had to roll with the punch, like patients at Hopkins did when you told them they had to go see the Oncology Department—*oh, please, don't worry. They're the best, the very best, and times have changed, and they really know what they're doing now*. Her colleagues in the Department of Oncology were the best. And they had a nice new building now. But who really wanted to go there?

And so she and Jack had a nice house of sorts, with a wonderful staff, some of whom were even wine experts, she thought, taking another sip from her glass. *But who really wants to go there?*

SO MANY AGENTS were assigned to the case that they didn't know what to do yet. They didn't have enough rough information to generate leads, but that was changing fast. Most of the dead terrorists had been photographed—two of them, shot from behind by Norm Jeffers' M-16 rifle, didn't have faces to photograph—and all of the bodies fingerprinted. Blood samples would be taken for DNA records in case that later became useful—a possibility, since identity *could* be confirmed by a genetic match with close relatives. For now they went with the photos. These were transmitted to the Mossad first of all. The terrorists had probably been Islamic, everyone thought, and the Israelis had the best data on them. CIA handled the initial notice, followed by the FBI. Full cooperation was promised at once, personally, by Avi ben Jakob.

All of the bodies were taken to Annapolis for postmortem examination. This was required by law, even in cases where the cause of death was as obvious as an earthquake. The pre-death condition of each body would be established, plus a full blood-toxicology check to see if any were on drugs.

The clothing of each was removed for full examination at the FBI laboratory in Washington. The brand names were established first of all to determine country of origin. That, and general condition, would determine time of purchase, which could be important. More than that, the technicians now working overtime on a Friday evening would use ordinary Scotch tape to collect loose fibers, and especially pollen particles, which could determine many things, because some plants grew only in limited regions of the world. Such results could take weeks, but with a case such as this, there was no limit on resources. The FBI had a lengthy roster of scientific experts to consult.

Tag numbers for the cars had been transmitted even before O'Day had done his shooting, and already agents were at the car-rental agencies, checking the computerized records.

At Giant Steps, the adult survivors were being interviewed. They mainly confirmed O'Day's reportage. Some of the details were askew, but that was not unexpected. None of the young women recognized the language the terrorists had spoken. The children were subjected to far gentler interrogations, in every case sitting on a parent's lap. Two of the parents were from the Middle East,

and it was thought that perhaps the children knew something of foreign languages, but that proved to be a false hope.

The weapons had all been collected, and their serial numbers checked with a computerized database. The date of manufacture was easily established, and the makers' records checked to see which distributor had purchased them, and from there which store had sold them. That trail proved cold indeed. The weapons were old ones, a fact belied by their new condition, which was established by visual inspection of the barrel and bolt mechanisms. They hardly had any wear at all. That tidbit of information went up the line even before they had a purchaser's name.

"DAMN, I WISH Bill was here," Murray said aloud, for the first time in his career feeling inadequate to a task. His division chiefs were arrayed around his conference table. From the first it was certain that this investigation would be a joint venture between the Criminal and Foreign Counter-Intelligence divisions, aided, as always, by Laboratory. Things were moving so rapidly that there wasn't yet a Secret Service official to join them. "Thoughts?"

"Dan, whoever bought these guns has been in-country a long time," FCI said.

"Sleeper." Murray nodded agreement.

"Pat didn't recognize their language. He would probably have recognized a European one. Has to be the Middle East," Criminal said. This wasn't exactly Nobel-class work, but even the FBI had to follow form in what it did. "Well, Western Europe, anyway. I suppose we have to consider the Balkan countries." There was reluctant agreement around the table.

"How old are those guns again?" the Director asked.

"Eleven years. Long before the ban was passed," Criminal answered for FCI. "They may have been totally unused until today, virgins, Dan."

"Somebody's set up a network that we didn't know about. Somebody real patient. Whoever the purchaser turns out to be, I think we'll find that it's a nicely faked ID, and he's already flown the coop. It's a classic intelligence job, Dan," FCI went on, saying what everybody was thinking. "We're talking pros here."

"That's a little speculative," the Director objected.

"When's the last time I was wrong, Danny?" the assistant director asked.

"Not lately. Keep going."

"Maybe the Lab guys can develop some good forensic stuff"—he nodded to the assistant director for the Laboratory Division—"but even then, what we're going to end up with won't be good enough to take into a court, unless we get real lucky and bag either the purchaser, or the other people who had to be involved in this mission."

"Flight records and passports," Criminal said. "Two weeks back for starters. Look for repeaters. Somebody reconned the objective. Must have been since Ryan became President. That's a start." Sure, he didn't go on, only about ten million records to check. But that was what cops did.

"Christ, I hope you're wrong on the sleeper," Murray said, after a further moment's reflection.

"So do I, Dan," FCI replied. "But I'm not. We'll need time to ID his house, assembly point, whatever, interview his neighbors, check the real-estate records to come up with a cover name and try to proceed from there. He's probably already gone, but that's not the scary part, is it? Eleven years at least he's been here. He was bankrolled. He was trained. He kept the faith all the way to today to help with that mission. All that time, and he still believed enough to help kill kids."

"He won't be the only one," Murray concluded bleakly.

"I don't think so."

"WILL YOU COME with me, please?"

"I've seen you before, but—"

"Jeff Raman, sir."

The admiral took his hand. "Robby Jackson."

The agent smiled. "I know that, sir."

It was a pleasant walk, though it would have been more so without the obvious presence of armed men. The mountain air was cool and clear, lots of stars blinking overhead.

"How's he doing?" Robby asked the agent.

"Tough day. A lot of good people dead."

"And some bad ones, too." Jackson would always be a fighter pilot, for whom inflicted death was part of the job description. They turned into the Presidential Quarters.

Both Robby and Sissy were struck by the scene. Not parents themselves—Cecilia's medical problem had not allowed it, despite the best of efforts—they didn't fully understand how it was with kids. The most horrific events, if followed by a parent's hug and other signs of security, were usually set aside. The world, especially for Katie, had resumed its proper shape. But there would be nightmares, too, and those would last for weeks, maybe longer, until the memories faded. Embraces were exchanged, and then also as usual, man paired with man and woman with woman. Robby got himself a glass of wine and followed Jack outside.

"How you doing, Jack?" By unspoken agreement, here and now Ryan wasn't the President.

"The shock comes and goes," he admitted. "It's all come back from before. The bastards can't just come after me—oh, no, they have to go for the soft targets. *Those cowardly fucks!"* Jack cursed as it came back again.

Jackson sipped at his glass. There wasn't a whole hell of a lot to be said right now, but that would change.

"It's my first time here," Robby said, just to say something.

"My first time—would you believe we buried a guy up here?" Jack remarked, remembering. "He was a Russian colonel, an agent we had in their Defense Ministry. Hell of a soldier, hero of the Soviet Union, three or four times, I think, we buried him in his uniform with all the decorations. I read off the citations myself. That's when we got Gerasimov out."

"The KGB head. So, that's true, eh?"

"Yep." Ryan nodded. "And you know about Colombia, and you know about

the submarine. How the hell did those newsies find out, though?"

Robby almost laughed aloud, but settled for a chuckle. "Holy God, and I thought my career was eventful."

"You volunteered for yours," Jack observed crossly.

"So did you, my friend."

"Think so?" Ryan went back inside for a refill. He returned with the night-vision goggles and switched them on, scanning the surroundings. "I didn't volunteer for having my family guarded by a company of Marines. There's three of them down there, flak jackets, helmets, and rifles—and why? Because there's people in the world who want to kill us. Why? Because—"

"I'll tell you why. Because you're better than they are, Jack. You stand for things, and they're good things. Because you've got balls, and you don't run away from shit. I don't want to hear this, Jack," Robby told his friend. "Don't give me this 'oh, my God' stuff, okay? I know who you are. I'm a fighter pilot because I chose to be one. You're where you are because you chose, too. Nobody ever said it was supposed to be easy, okay?"

"But—"

"But, my ass, Mr. President. There's people out there who don't like you? Okay, fine. You just figure out how to find them, and then you can ask those Marines out there to go take care of business. You know what they'll say. You may be hated by some, but you're respected and loved by a lot more, and I'm telling you now, there's not one person in our country's uniform who isn't willing to dust *anybody* who fucks with you and your family. It's not just what you are, it's who you are, okay?"

Who am I? SWORDSMAN asked himself. At that moment, one of his weaknesses asserted itself.

"Come on." Ryan walked over to the west. He'd just seen a sudden flare of light, and thirty seconds later, at the corner of another cabin, he found a Navy cook smoking a cigarette. President or not, he wasn't going to be overly proud tonight. "Hello."

"Jesus!" the sailor blurted, snapping to attention and dropping his smoke into the grass. "I mean, hello, Mr. President."

"Wrong the first time, right the second time. Got a smoke?" POTUS asked, entirely without shame, Robby Jackson noted.

"You bet, sir." The cook fished one out and lit it.

"Sailor, if the First Lady sees you do that again, she'll have the Marines shoot you," Jackson warned.

"Admiral Jackson!" Those words made the kid brace again. "I think the Marines work for me. How's dinner coming?"

"Sir, the pizza is being cut right now. Baked it myself, sir. They oughta like it," he promised.

"Settle down. Thanks for the cigarette."

"Anytime, sir." Ryan shook his hand and wandered off with his friend.

"I needed that," Jack admitted, somewhat shamefully, taking a long drag.

"If I had a place like this, I'd use it a lot. Almost like being at sea," Jackson went on. "Sometimes you go outside, stand on one of the galleries off the flight deck, and just sort of enjoy the sea and the stars. The simple pleasures."

"It's hard to turn it off, isn't it? Even when you went communing with the

sea and the stars, you didn't turn it off, not really."

"No," the admiral admitted. "It makes thinking a little easier, makes the atmosphere a little less intense, but you're right. It doesn't really go away." And it didn't now, either.

"Tony said India's navy's gone missing on us."

"Both carriers at sea, with escorts and oilers. We're looking for them."

"What if there's a connection?" Ryan asked.

"With what?"

"The Chinese make trouble in one place, the Indian navy goes to sea again, and *this* happens to me—am I being paranoid?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"Probably. Could be the Indians put out when they finished their repairs, and maybe to show us that we didn't teach them all that big a lesson. The China thing, well, it's happened before, and it's not going anywhere, especially after Mike Dubro gets there. I know Mike. He'll have fighters up and poking around. The attempt on Katie? Too early to say, and it's not my field. You have Murray and the rest for that. In any case, they failed, didn't they? Your family's in there, watching TV, and it'll be a long time before somebody tries anything else."

IT WAS BECOMING an all-nighter all over the world. In Tel Aviv, where it was now after four in the morning, Avi ben Jakob had called in his top terrorism experts. Together they went over the photos transmitted from Washington and were comparing them with their own surveillance photographs that had been taken over the years in Lebanon and elsewhere. The problem was that many of their photos showed young men with beards—the simplest method of disguise known to man—and the photos were not of high quality. By the same token, the American-transmitted images were not exactly graduation pictures, either.

"Anything useful?" the director of Mossad asked.

Eyes turned to one of the Mossad's experts, a fortyish woman named Sarah Peled. Behind her back, they called her the witch. She had some special gift for ID'ing people from photographs, and was right just over half the time in cases where other trained intelligence officers threw up their hands in frustration.

"This one." She slid two photos across the table. "This is a definite match."

Ben Jakob looked at the two side by side—and saw nothing to confirm her opinion. He'd asked her many times what keyed her in on such things. Sarah always said it was the eyes, and so Avi took another look, comparing the eyes of one with the eyes of the other photo. All he saw were eyes. He turned the Israeli photo over. The printed data on the back said that he was a suspected Hezbollah member, name unknown, age about twenty in their photo, which was dated six years earlier.

"Any others, Sarah?" he asked.

"No, none at all."

"How confident are you on this one?" one of the counterintelligence people asked, looking at the photos himself now and, like Avi, seeing nothing.

"One hundred percent, Benny. I said 'definite,' didn't I?" Sarah was often testy, especially with unbelieving men at four in the morning.

"How far do we go on this?" another staff member asked.

"Ryan is a friend of our country, and President of the United States. We go as far as we can. I want inquiries to go out. All contacts, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran, everywhere."

"SWINE." BONDARENKO RAN a hand through his hair. His tie was long since gone. His watch told him it was Saturday, but he didn't know what that day was anymore.

"Yes," Golovko agreed.

"A black operation—a 'wet' one, you used to call it?" the general asked.

"Wet and incompetent," the RVS chairman said crossly. "But Ivan Emmetovich was lucky, Comrade General. This time."

"Perhaps," Gennady Iosefovich allowed.

"You disagree?"

"The terrorists underestimated their opponents. You will recall that I recently spent time with the American army. Their training is like nothing else in the world, and the training of their presidential guard must be equally as expert. Why is it that people so often underestimate the Americans?" he wondered.

That was a good question, Sergey Nikolay'ch recognized, nodding for the chief of operations to go on.

"America often suffers from a lack of political direction. That is not the same as incompetence. You know what they are like? A vicious dog held on a short leash—and because he cannot break the leash, people delude themselves that they need not fear him, but within the are of that leash he is invincible, and a leash, Comrade Chairman, is a temporary thing. You know this Ryan fellow."

"I know him well," Golovko agreed.

"And? The stories in their press, are they true?"

"All of them."

"I tell you what I think, Sergey Nikolay'ch. If you regard him as a formidable adversary, and he has that vicious dog on the leash, I would not go far out of my way to offend him. An attack on a child? *His* child?" The general shook his head.

That was it, Golovko realized. They were both tired, but here was a moment of clarity. He'd spent too much time reading over the political reports from Washington, from his own embassy, and directly from the American media. They all said that Ivan Emmetovich ... was that the key? From the beginning he'd called Ryan that, thinking to honor the man with the Russian version of his name and the Russian patronymic. And an honor it was in Golovko's context . . .

"You are thinking what I am thinking, *da?"* the general asked, seeing the man's face and gesturing for him to speak.

"Someone has made a calculation . . ."

"And it is not an accurate one. I think we need to find out who has done so. I think a systematic attack on American interests, an attempt to weaken America, Comrade Chairman, is really an attack against our interests. Why is

China doing what she is doing, eh? Why did they force America to change her naval dispositions? And now this? American forces are being stretched, and at the same time a strike at the very heart of the American leader. This is no coincidence. Now we can stand aside and do nothing more than observe, or—"

"There is nothing we can do, and with the revelations in the American press—"

"Comrade Chairman," Bondarenko interrupted. "For seventy years, our country has confused political theory with objective fact, and that was almost our undoing as a nation. There are objective conditions here," he went on, using a phrase beloved of the Soviet military—a reaction, perhaps, to their three generations of political oversight. "I see the patterns of a clever operation, a coordinated operation, but one which has a fatal flaw, and that flaw is a misestimation of the American President. Do you disagree?"

Golovko gave that a few seconds of thought, noting also that Bondarenko might just be seeing something real—but did the Americans? It was so much harder to see something from the inside than the outside. A coordinated operation? Back to Ryan, he told himself.

"No. I made that mistake myself. Ryan appears much less than what he is. The signs are all there, but people don't see them."

"When I was in America, that General Diggs told me the story of the time terrorists attacked Ryan's house. He took up arms and defeated them, courageously and decisively. From what you say, it appears he is also highly effective as an intelligence officer. His only flaw, if one may call it that, is that he is not politically adept, and politicians invariably take that for weakness. Perhaps it is," Bondarenko allowed. "But if this is a hostile operation against America, then his political weaknesses are far less important than his other gifts."

"And?"

"Help the man," the general urged. "Better that we should be on the winning side, and if we do not help, then we might be on the other. Nobody will attack America directly. We are not so fortunate, Comrade Chairman." He was almost right.

44

INCUBATION

RYAN AWOKE AT DAWN, wondering why. The quiet. Almost like his home on the Bay. He strained to listen for traffic or other sounds, but there were none. Moving out of the bed was difficult. Cathy had decided to have Katie in with them, and there she was in her pink sleeper, looking angelic as toddlers did, still babies at that age whatever others might say. He had to smile, then made his way to the bathroom. Casual clothes had been set out in the dressing room, and he put them on, with a pair of sneaks and a sweater, to head outside.

The air was brisk, with traces of frost on the boxwoods, and the sky clear. Not bad. Robby was right. This wasn't a bad place to come to. It put a distance between himself and other things, and he needed that right now.

"Morning, sir." It was Captain Overton.

"Not bad duty, is it?"

The young officer nodded. "We do the security. The Navy does the petunias. It's a fair division of labor, Mr. President. Even the Secret Service guys can sleep in here, sir."

Ryan looked around and saw why. There were two armed Marines immediately around the cabin, and three more within fifty yards. And those were just the ones he could see.

"Get you anything, Mr. President?"

"Coffee'll do for a start."

"Follow me, sir."

"Attention on deck!" a sailor shouted a few seconds later, when Ryan went into the cook shed—or whatever they called it here.

"As you were," the President told them. "I thought this was the Presidential Retreat, not boot camp." He picked a seat at the table the staff used. Coffee appeared as if by magic. Then more magic happened.

"Good morning, Mr. President."

"Hi, Andrea. When did you get in?"

"Around two, helicopter," she explained.

"Get any sleep?"

"About four hours."

Ryan took a sip. Navy coffee was still Navy coffee. "And?"

"The investigation is under way. The team's put together. Everybody's got a seat at the table." She handed over a folder, which Ryan would get to read before his morning paper. Anne Arundel County and Maryland State Police, Secret Service, FBI, ATF, and all the intelligence agencies were working the case. They were running IDs on the terrorists, but the two whose documents

had so far been checked turned out to be non-persons. Their papers were false, probably of European origin. Big surprise. Any competent European criminal, much less a terrorist organization, could procure phony passports. He looked up.

"What about the agents we lost?"

A sigh, a shrug. "They all have families."

"Let's get it set up so that I can meet with them . . . should it be all at once or one at a time?"

"Your choice, sir," Price told him.

"No, it has to be what's best for them. They're your people, Andrea. You work that out for me, okay? I owe them my daughter's life, and I have to do what's right for them," POTUS said soberly, remembering why he was in this quiet and peaceful place. "And I presume that they will be properly looked after. Get me the details on that, insurance, pensions, and stuff, okay? I want to look that over."

"Yes, sir."

"Do we know anything important yet?"

"No, not really. The terrorists who've been posted, their dental work definitely isn't American, that's it for now."

Ryan flipped through the papers he had. One preliminary conclusion leaped off the page at him: "Eleven years?"

"Yes, sir."

"So this is a major operation for somebody—a country."

"That's a real possibility."

"Who else would have the resources?" he asked, and Price reminded herself that he'd been an intelligence officer for a long time.

Agent Raman came in and took his seat. He'd heard that observation, and he and Price traded a look and a nod.

The wall phone rang. Captain Overton walked over to get it. "Yes?" He listened for a few minutes, then turned. "Mr. President, this is Mrs. Foley at CIA."

The President went to take the call. "Yeah, Mary Pat." "Sir, we had a call a few minutes ago from Moscow. Our friend Golovko asks if he can be of any assistance. I recommend a 'yes' on that."

"Agreed. Anything else?"

"Avi ben Jakob wants to talk to you later today. Earsonly," the DDO told him.

"About an hour, let me get woke up first."

"Yes, sir.... Jack?"

"Yeah, MP?"

"Thank God about Katie," she said, mother to father, then going on as mother alone: "If we can get a line on this, we will."

"I KNOW YOU'RE our best," Mrs. Foley heard. "We're doing okay right now."

"Good. Ed and I will be in all day." She hung up.

"How's he sound?" Clark asked.

"He'll make it, John."

Chavez rubbed his hand over the night's growth of beard. The three of them plus quite a few others had spent the night reviewing everything CIA had on terrorist groups. "We have to do something about this, guys. This is an act of war." His voice was devoid of accent now, as it tended to be when he got serious enough to call on his education instead of his L.A. origins.

"We don't know much. Hell," the DDO said, "we don't know anything yet."

"Shame he couldn't have taken one alive." This observation, to the surprise of the two others, came from Clark.

"He probably didn't have much of a chance to snap the cuffs on the guy," Ding replied.

"True." Clark lifted the set of crime-scene photos that had been couriered over from the FBI just after midnight. He'd worked the Middle East, and it had been hoped that he might have recognized a face, but he hadn't. Mainly he'd learned that whichever FBI puke had been inside, the gent could shoot as well as he ever had. Lucky man, to have been there, to have had that chance, and to take it.

"Somebody's taking one hell of a big chance," John said.

"That's a fact," Mary Pat agreed automatically, but then they all wondered about it.

The question was not how big the chance was, but rather how big the chance was perceived to be by whoever had tossed the dice. The nine terrorists had all been throwaways, as surely marked for death as the Hezbollah fanatics who'd gone strolling down Israeli streets in clothing made by DuPont—that was the CIA joke about it, though in fact the plastic explosives had probably come from the Skoda Works in the former Czechoslovakia. "Not-so-smart bombs" was the other in-house sobriquet. Had they really believed that they could pull it off? The problem with some of the fanatics was that they didn't weigh things very well . . . maybe they hadn't even cared.

That was also the problem of those who sent them. This mission had been different, after all. Ordinarily, terrorists boasted widely of what they did, however odious the act, and at CIA and elsewhere they'd waited for fifteen hours for the press release. But it never came, and if it hadn't by now, then it never would. If they didn't make the release, then they didn't want anyone to know. But that was an illusion. Terrorists always proclaimed their acts, but they didn't always appreciate that police agencies could figure things out anyway.

Nation-states knew better, or were supposed to. Okay, fine, the dealers hadn't had anything that could identify their point of origin—or so some might think. But Mary Pat was under no such illusions. The FBI was better than good, good enough that the Secret Service was letting the Bureau handle all of the forensics. And so it was likely that whoever had initiated the mission might actually expect that the story would eventually unravel. Knowing that—probably—they'd gone ahead with it anyway. If this line of speculation were true, then—

"Part of something else?" Clark asked. "Not a standalone. Something else, too."

"Maybe," Mary Pat observed.

"If it is, it's big," Chavez went on for them. "Maybe that's why the Russians called in to us."

"So big . . . so big that even if we figure it out, it won't matter when we do."

"That's pretty big, Mary Pat," Clark said quietly. "What could it be ...?"

"Something permanent, something we can't change after it's done," Domingo offered. His time at George Mason University hadn't been wasted.

Mrs. Foley wished her husband were in on this, but Ed was meeting with Murray right now.

SATURDAYS IN THE spring are often days of dull but hopeful routine, but in just over two hundred homes little was done. Gardens were not planted. Cars were not washed. Garage sales were not attended. Paint cans went unopened. That wasn't counting government employees or news personnel working the big story of the week. Mainly the people suffering from the flu were men. Thirty of them were in hotel rooms. Several even tried to work, attending their trade shows in the new cities. Wiping their faces, blowing their noses, and wishing the aspirin or Tylenol would kick in. Of the last group, most went back to the hotel rooms to relax—no sense in getting the customers sick, was there? In not a single case did anyone seek medical attention. There was the usual winter/spring flu bug circulating around, and everybody got it sooner or later. They weren't that sick, after all, were they?

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NEWS COVERAGE OF the incident at Giant Steps was entirely predictable, starting with camera shots taken from about fifty yards away, and the same words repeated by all of the correspondents, followed by the same words delivered by "experts" in terrorism and/or other fields. One of the networks took the viewer all the way back to Abraham Lincoln for no other reason than that it was otherwise a very slow news day. All of the coverage pointed to the Middle East, though the investigating agencies had declined any comment at all on the event so far, except to cite an FBI agent's heroic interference and the spirited battle put up by the Secret Service bodyguards of little Katie Ryan. Words like "heroic," "dedicated," and "determined" were bandied about with great frequency, leading to the "dramatic conclusion."

Something very simple had gone wrong, Badrayn was certain, though he wouldn't know for sure until his colleague got back to Tehran from London, via Brussels and Vienna, on several different sets of travel documents.

"The President and his family are at the Presidential Retreat at Camp David," the reporter concluded, "to recover from the shock of this dreadful event just north of peaceful Annapolis, Maryland. This is . . ."

"Retreat?" Daryaei asked.

"It means many things in English, first among them is to run away," Badrayn answered, mainly because he was sure that's what his employer would like to hear.

"If he thinks he can run away from me, he is mistaken," the cleric observed

in dark amusement, the spirit of the moment getting the better of his discretion.

Badrayn didn't react to the revelation. It was easy at the instant of his realization, since he was looking at the TV and not at his host, but things then became more clear. There was not all that much risk at all, was there? Mahmoud Haji had a way to kill this man, perhaps whenever he wished to do so, and it was all being orchestrated. Could he really do it? But, of course, he already had.

IVIS MADE LIFE hard on the OpFor. Not all that hard. Colonel Hamm and the Blackhorse had won this one, but what only a year before would have been a wipeout of cosmic proportions—Fort Irwin *was* in California, and some linguistic peculiarities were inevitable—had been a narrow victory. War was about information. It was always the lesson of the National Training Center: Find the enemy. Don't let the enemy find you. Reconnaissance. Reconnaissance. Reconnaissance. The IVIS system, operated by halfway competent people, shot the information out to everyone so fast that the soldiers were leaning in the right direction even before the orders came down. That had nearly negated a maneuver on the OpFor's part, which would have been worthy of Erwin Rommel on his best day, and as he watched the fast-play of the exercise on the big screen in the Star Wars Room, Hamm saw just how close it had been. If one of those Blue Force tank companies had moved just five minutes faster, he would have lost this one, too. The NTC would surely lose its effectiveness if the Good Guys won regularly.

"That was a beautiful move, Hamm," the colonel of the Carolina Guard admitted, reaching in his pocket for a cigar and handing it over. "But we'll whip your ass tomorrow."

Ordinarily, he would have smiled and said, *Sure you will*. But the cracker son of a bitch just might pull it off, and that would take a lot of the fun out of Hamm's life. The colonel of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment would now have to come up with ways of spoofing IVIS. It was something he'd thought about, and had been the subject of a few discussions over beers with his operations officer, but so far they had only agreed that it was no small feat, probably involving dummy vehicles . . . like Rommel had used. He'd have to get funding for those. He walked outside to smoke his cigar. It had been honorably won. He found the Guard colonel there, too.

"For Guardsmen, you're pretty damned good," Hamm had to admit. He'd never said such a thing to a Guard formation before. He rarely said it to anyone at all. Except for one deployment error, the Blue Force plan had been a thing of beauty.

"Thank you for saying that, Colonel. IVIS came as a rude surprise, didn't it?"

"You might say that."

"My people love it. A lot come in on their own time to play on the simulators. Hell, I'm surprised you took us on this one."

"Your reserve was too close in," Hamm told him. "You thought you knew what to exploit. Instead, I caught you out of position to meet my counterattack." It wasn't a revelation. The senior observer/controller had

made that lesson clear to the momentarily contrite tank commander.

"I'll try to remember that. Catch the news?"

"Yeah, that sucks," Hamm thought aloud.

"Little kids. I wonder if they award medals to the Secret Service?"

"They have something, I imagine. I can think of worse things to die for." And that's what it was all about. Those five agents had died doing their jobs, running to the sound of the guns. They must have made some mistakes, but sometimes you didn't have a choice in the matter. All soldiers knew that.

"God rest their brave souls." The man sounded like Robert Edward Lee. It triggered something in Hamm.

"What's the story on you guys? You, Colonel Eddington, you're not supposed—what the hell do you do in real life?" The guy was over fifty, very marginal for an officer in command of a brigade, even in the Guard.

"I'm professor of military history at the University of North Carolina. What's the story? This brigade was supposed to be the round-out for 24th Mech back in 1991, and we came here for workups and got our ass handed to us. Never got to deploy. I was a battalion XO then, Hamm. We wanted to go. Our regimental standards go back to the Revolution. It hurt our pride. We've been waiting to come back here near on ten years, boy, and this IVIS box gives us a fair chance." He was a tall, thin man, and when he turned, he was looking down at the regular officer. "We are going to make use of that chance, son. I know the theory. I been readin' and studyin' on it for over thirty years, and my men ain't'a'gonna roll over and die for you, you he'ah?" When aroused, Nicholas Eddington tended to adopt an accent.

" 'Specially not for Yankees?"

"Damn right!" Then it was time for a laugh. Nick Eddington was a teacher, with a flair for the impromptu dramatic. The voice softened. "I know, if we didn't have IVIS, you'd murder us—"

"Ain't technology wonderful?"

"It almost makes us your equal, and your men are the best. Everybody knows that," Eddington conceded. It was a worthy peace gesture.

"With the hours we keep, kinda hard to get a beer at the club when you need one. Can I offer you one at my home, sir?"

"Lead on, Colonel Hamm."

"What's your area of specialty?" BLACKHORSE SIX asked on the way to his car.

"My dissertation was on the operational art of Nathan Bedford Forrest."

"Oh? I've always admired Buford, myself."

"He only had a couple of days, but they were all good days. He might have won the war for Lincoln at Gettysburg."

"The Spencer carbines gave his troopers the technical edge," Hamm announced. "People overlook that factor."

"Choosing the best ground didn't hurt, and the Spencers helped, but what he did best was to remember his mission," Eddington replied.

"As opposed to Stuart. Jeb definitely had a bad day. I suppose he was due for one." Hamm opened the car door for his colleague. It would be a few hours before they had to prepare for the next exercise, and Hamm was a serious student of history, especially of the cavalry. This would be an interesting

breakfast: beer, eggs, and the Civil War.

THEY BUMPED INTO each other in the parking lot of the 7-Eleven, which was doing a great business in coffee and donuts at the moment.

"Hi, John," Holtzman said, looking at the crime scene from across the street.

"Bob," Plumber acknowledged with a nod. The area was alive with cameras, TV and still, recording the scene for history.

"You're up early for a Saturday—TV guy, too," the *Post* reporter noted with a friendly smile. "What do you make of it?"

"This really is a terrible thing." Plumber was himself a grandfather many times over. "Was it Ma'alot, the one in Israel, back—what? 1975, something like that?" They all seemed to blend together, these terrorist incidents.

Holtzman wasn't sure, either. "I think so. I have somebody checking it back at the office."

"Terrorists make for good stories, but, dear God, we'd be better off without them."

The crime scene was almost pristine. The bodies were gone. The autopsies were complete by now, they both imagined. But everything else was intact, or nearly so. The cars were there, and as the reporters watched, ballistics experts were running strings to simulate shots at mannequins brought in from a local department store, trying to re-create every detail of the event. The black guy in the Secret Service windbreaker was Norman Jeffers, one of the heroes of the day, now demonstrating how he'd come down from the house across the street. Inside was Inspector Patrick O'Day. Some agents were simulating the movements of the terrorists. One man lay on the ground by the front door, aiming a red plastic "play gun" around. In criminal investigations, the dress rehearsals always came after the play.

"His name was Don Russell?" Plumber asked.

"One of the oldest guys in the Service," Holtzman confirmed.

"Damn." Plumber shook his head. "Horatius at the bridge, like something from a movie. 'Heroic' isn't a word we use often, is it?"

"No, that isn't something we're supposed to believe in anymore, is it? We know better. Everybody's got an angle, right?" Holtzman finished off his coffee and dumped the cup in the trash bin. "Imagine, giving up your life to protect other people's kids."

Some reports talked about it in Western terms. "Gunfight at the Kiddy Corral" some local TV reporter had tried out, winning the low-taste award for last night, and earning his station a few hundred negative calls, confirming to the station manager that his outlet had a solid nighttime viewership. None had been more irate about that than Plumber, Bob Holtzman noted. He still thought it was supposed to mean something, this news business they both shared.

"Any word on Ryan?" Bob asked.

"Just a press release. Callie Weston wrote it, and Arnie delivered it. I can't blame him for taking the family away. He deserves a break from somebody, John."

"Bob, I seem to remember when—"

"Yeah, I know. I got snookered. Elizabeth Elliot fed me a story on Ryan back when he was Deputy at CIA." He turned to look at his older colleague. "It was all a lie. I apologized to him personally. You know what it was really all about?"

"No," Plumber admitted.

"The Colombian mission. He was there, all right. Along the way, some people got killed. One of them was an Air Force sergeant. Ryan looks after the family. He's putting them all through college, all on his own."

"You never printed that," the TV reporter objected.

"No, I didn't. The family—well, they're not public figures, are they? By the time I found out, it was old news. I just didn't think it was newsworthy." That last word was one of the keys to their profession. It was news personnel who decided what got before the public eye and what did not, and in choosing what got out and what didn't, it was they who controlled the news, and decided what, exactly, the public had a right to know. And in so choosing, they could make or break everyone, because not every story started off big enough to notice, especially the political ones.

"Maybe you were wrong."

Holtzman shrugged. "Maybe I was, but I didn't expect Ryan to become President any more than he did. He did an honorable thing—hell, a lot more than honorable. John, there are things about the Colombian story that can't ever see the light of day. I think I know it all now, but I can't write it. It would hurt the country and it wouldn't help anybody at all."

"What did Ryan do, Bob?"

"He prevented an international incident. He saw that the guilty got punished one way or another—"

"Jim Cutter?" Plumber asked, still wondering what Ryan was capable of.

"No, that really was a suicide. Inspector O'Day, the FBI guy who was right there across the street?"

"What about him?"

"He was following Cutter, watched him jump in front of the bus."

"You're sure of this?"

"As sure as I've ever been. Ryan doesn't know that I'm into all this. I have a couple of good sources, and everything matches up with the known facts. Either it's all the truth or it's the cleverest lie I've ever run into. You know what we have in the White House, John?"

"What's that?"

"An honest man. Not 'relatively honest,' not 'hasn't been caught yet.' Honest. I don't think he's ever done a crooked thing in his life."

"He's still a babe in the woods," Plumber replied. It was almost bluster, if not disbelief, because his conscience was starting to make noise.

"Maybe he is. But who ever said we were wolves? No, that's not right. We're supposed to chase after the crooks, but we've been doing it so long and so well that we forgot that there are some people in government who aren't." He looked over at his colleague again. "And so then we play one off against another to get our stories and along the way we got corrupted, too. What do we do about that, John?"

"I know what you're asking. The answer is no."

"In an age of relative values, nice to find an absolute, Mr. Plumber. Even if it is the wrong one," Holtzman added, getting the reaction he'd hoped for.

"Bob, you're good. Very good, in fact, but you can't roll me, okay?" The commentator managed a smile, though. It was an expert attempt, and he had to admire that. Holtzman was a throwback to the days Plumber remembered so fondly.

"What if I can prove I'm right?"

"Then why didn't you write the story?" Plumber demanded. No real reporter could turn away from this one.

"I didn't print it. I never said I didn't write it," Bob corrected his friend.

"Your editor would fire you for—"

"So? Aren't there things you never did, even after you had everything you needed?"

Plumber dodged that one: "You talked about proof."

"Thirty minutes away. But this story can't ever get out."

"How can I trust you on that?"

"How can I trust you, John? What do we put first? Getting the story out, right? What about the country, what about the people? Where does professional responsibility end and public responsibility begin? I didn't run this one because a family lost a father. He left a pregnant wife behind. The government couldn't acknowledge what happened, and so Jack Ryan stepped in himself to make things right. He did it with his own money. He never expected people to find out. So what was I supposed to do? Expose the family? For what, John? To break a story that hurts the country—no, that hurts one family that doesn't need any more hurt. It could jeopardize the kids' educations. There's plenty of news we can cover without that. But I'm telling you this, John: You've hurt an innocent man, and your friend with the big smile *lied* to the public to do it. We're supposed to care about that."

"So why don't you write *that*?"

Holtzman made him wait a few seconds for the answer. "I'm willing to give you the chance to set things right. That's why. You were there, too. But I have to have your word, John. I'll take yours."

There was more to it than that. There had to be. For Plumber, it was a matter of two professional insults. First, that he'd been steamrolled by his younger associate at NBC, one of the new generation who thought journalism was how you looked in front of a camera. Second, that he'd also been rolled by Ed Kealty—used ... to hurt an innocent man? If nothing else, he had to find out. He had to, otherwise he'd be spending a lot of time looking in mirrors.

The TV commentator took Holtzman's mini—tape recorder from his hand and punched the record button.

"This is John Plumber, it's Saturday, seven-fifty in the morning, and we're standing across the street from the Giant Steps Day Care Center. Robert Holtzman and I are about to leave this location to go somewhere. I have given my word that what we are about to investigate will remain absolutely confidential between us. This tape recording is a permanent record of that promise on my part. John Plumber," he concluded, "NBC News." He clicked it off, then clicked it back on again. "However, if Bob has misrepresented himself to me, all bets are off."

"That's fair," Holtzman agreed, removing the tape cassette from the recorder and pocketing it. The promise had no legal standing at all. Even if it had been a contractual agreement, the First Amendment would probably negate it, but it was a man's word, and both of the reporters knew that something had to hold up, even in the modern age. On the way to Bob's car, Plumber grabbed his field producer.

"We'll be back in an hour or so."

THE PREDATOR WAS circling at just under ten thousand feet. For purposes of convenience, the three UIR army corps were identified as I, II, and III by the intelligence officers at STORM TRACK and PALM BOWL. The UAV was circling I Corps now, a reconstituted Iraqi Republican Guard armored division and a similar division from the former Iranian army, "The Immortals," it was called, harkening back to the personal guard of Xerxes. The deployment was conventional. The regimental formations were in the classic two-up/one-back disposition, a triangle of sorts, with the third forming the divisional reserve. The two divisions were abreast. Their frontage was surprisingly narrow, however, with each division covering a mere thirty kilometers of linear space, and only a five-kilometer gap between the two.

They were training hard. Every few kilometers were targets, plywood cutouts of tanks. When they came into view, they were shot at. The Predator couldn't tell how good the gunnery was, though most of the targets were knocked over by the time the first echelon of fighting vehicles passed. The vehicles were mainly of Russian/Soviet origin. The heavy ones were T-72 and T-80 main battle tanks made at the huge Chelyabinsk works. The infantry vehicles were BMPs. The tactics were Soviet, too. That was evident from the way they moved. Sub-units were kept under tight control. The huge formations moved with geometric precision, like harvesting machines in a Kansas wheatfield, sweeping across the terrain in regular lines.

"Geez, I've seen the movie," the chief master sergeant observed at the Kuwaiti ELINT station.

"Yes?" Major Sabah asked.

"The Russians—well, the Soviets, used to make movies of this, sir."

"How would you compare the two?" And *that*, the NCO intelligence-specialist thought, was a pretty good question.

"Not much different, Major." He pointed to the lower half of the screen. "See here? The company commander has everything on line, proper distance and interval. Before, the Predator was over the division reconnaissance screen, and that was right out of the book, too. Have you read up on Soviet tactics, Major Sabah?"

"Only as the Iraqis implemented them," the Kuwaiti officer admitted.

"Well, it's pretty close. You hit hard and fast, just go right through your enemy, don't give him a chance to react. You keep your own people under control. It's all mathematics to them."

"And the level of their training?"

"Not bad, sir."

“ELLIOT HAD SURVEILLANCE on Ryan, right over there,” Holtzman pointed as he brought the car into the 7-Eleven.

“She was having him followed?”

“Liz hated his guts. I never—well, okay, I did figure it out. It was personal. She really had it in for Ryan, something that happened before Bob Fowler got elected. Enough that she leaked a story that was supposed to hurt his family. Nice, eh?”

Plumber wasn’t all that impressed. “That’s Washington.”

“True, but what about using official government assets for a personal vendetta? That may be real Washington, too, but it’s against the law.” He switched off the car and motioned for Plumber to get out.

Inside they found a diminutive owner, female, and a bunch of Amerasian kids stocking the shelves on this Saturday morning.

“Hello,” Carol Zimmer said. She recognized Holtzman from previous visits to buy bread and milk—and to eyeball the establishment. She had no idea he was a reporter. But she did recognize John Plumber. She pointed. “You on TV!”

“Yes, I am,” the commentator admitted with a smile.

The eldest son—his name tag said Laurence—came up with a less friendly look on his face. “Can I help you with something, sir?” His voice was unaccented, his eyes bright and suspicious.

“I’d like to talk to you, if I might,” Plumber asked politely.

“About what, sir?”

“You know the President, don’t you?”

“Coffee machine’s that way, sir. You can see where the doughnuts are.” The young man turned his back. His height must have come from his father, Plumber saw, and he had education.

“Wait a minute!” Plumber said.

Laurence turned back. “Why? We have a business to run here. Excuse me.”

“Larry, be nice to man.”

“Mom, I told you what he did, remember?” When Laurence looked back at the reporters, his eyes told the tale. They wounded Plumber in a way he hadn’t known in years.

“Excuse me. Please,” the commentator said. “I just want to talk to you. There aren’t any cameras with me.” “Are you in medical school now, Laurence?” Holtzman asked.

“How did you know that? Who the hell are you?”

“Laurence!” his mother objected.

“Wait a minute, please.” Plumber held his hands up. “I just want to talk. No cameras, no recorders. Everything is off the record.”

“Oh, sure. You give us your word on that?”

“Laurence!”

“Mom, let me handle this!” the student snapped, then instantly apologized. “Sorry, Mom, but you don’t know what this is about.”

“I’m just trying to figure out—”

“I saw what you did, Mr. Plumber. Didn’t anybody tell you? When you spit on the President, you spit on my father, too! Now, why don’t you buy what

you need and take a hike." The back turned again.

"I didn't know," John protested. "If I've done something wrong, then why don't you tell me about it? I promise, you have my word, I will not do anything to hurt you or your family. But if I've done something wrong, please tell me."

"Why you hurt Mr. Ryan?" Carol Zimmer asked. "He good man. He look after us. He—"

"Mom, please. These people don't care about that!" Laurence had to come back and handle this. His mom was just too naive.

"Laurence, my name is Bob Holtzman. I'm with the *Washington Post*. I've known about your family for several years now. I never ran the story because I didn't want to invade your privacy. I know what President Ryan is doing for you. I want John to hear it from you. It will not become public information. If I wanted that to happen, I would have done it myself."

"Why should I trust you?" Laurence Zimmer demanded. "You're reporters." That remark broke through Plumber's demeanor hard and sharp enough to cause physical pain. Had his profession sunk so low as that?

"You're studying to be a doctor?" Plumber asked, starting at square one.

"Second year at Georgetown. I have a brother who's a senior at MIT, and a sister who just started at UVA."

"It's expensive. Too expensive for what you make off this business. I know. I had to educate my kids."

"We all work here. I work weekends."

"You're studying to be a physician. That's an honorable profession," Plumber said. "And when you make mistakes, you try to learn from them. So do I, Laurence."

"You sure talk the talk, Mr. Plumber, but lots of people do that."

"The President helps, doesn't he?"

"If I tell you something off the record, does that mean you can't report it at all?"

"No, actually 'off the record' doesn't quite mean that. But if I tell you, right here and right now, that I will never use it in any way—and there are other people around to back you up—and then I break my word, you can wreck my career. People in my business are allowed to get away with a lot, maybe even too much," Plumber conceded, "but we can't lie." And that was the point, wasn't it?

Laurence looked over to his mother. Her poor English did not denote a poor mind. She nodded to him.

"He was with my dad when he got killed," the youth reported. "He promised Pop that he would look after us. He does, and yeah, he pays for school and stuff, him and his friends at CIA."

"They had some trouble here with some rowdies," Holtzman added. "A guy I know at Langley came over here and—"

"He shouldna done that!" Laurence objected. "Mr. Clar—well, he didn't have to."

"How come you didn't go to Johns Hopkins?" Holtzman asked.

"They accepted me," Laurence told them, hostility still in his voice. "This way I can commute easier, and help out here with the store. Dr. Ryan—Mrs.

Ryan, I mean—she didn't know at first, but when she found out, well, 'nother sister starts at the university this fall. Pre-med, like me."

"But why . . . ?" Plumber's voice trailed off.

" 'Cuz maybe that's the kind of guy he is, and you fucked him over."

"Laurence!"

Plumber didn't speak for fifteen seconds or so. He turned to the lady behind the counter. "Mrs. Zimmer, thank you for your time. None of this will ever be repeated. I promise." He turned. "Good luck with your studies, Laurence. Thank you for telling me that. I will not be bothering you anymore."

The two reporters walked back outside, straight to Holtzman's Lexus.

Why should I trust you? You're reporters. The artless words of a student, perhaps, but deeply wounding even so. Because those words had been earned, Plumber told himself.

"What else?" he asked.

"As far as I know they don't even know the circumstances of Buck Zimmer's death, just that he died on duty. Evidently, Carol was pregnant with their youngest when he died. Liz Elliot tried to get a story out that Ryan was fooling around and the baby was his. I got suckered."

A long breath. "Yeah. Me, too."

"So, what are you going to do about it, John?"

He looked up. "I want to confirm a few things."

"The one at MIT is named Peter. Computer science. The one going to Charlottesville, I think her name is Alisha. I don't know the name of the one graduating high school, but I could look that up. I have dates for the purchase of this business. It's a sub-chapter-S corporation. It all tallies with the Colombian mission. Ryan does Christmas for them every year. Cathy, too. I don't know how they'll work that now. Pretty well, probably." Holtzman chuckled. "He's good at keeping secrets."

"And the CIA guy who—"

"I know him. No names. He found out that some punks were annoying Carol. He had a little chat with them. The police have records. I've seen them," Holtzman told him. "He's an interesting guy. He's the one who got Gerasimov's wife and daughter out. Carol thinks he's a great big teddy bear. He's also the guy who rescued Koga. Serious player."

"Give me a day. One day," Plumber said.

"Fair enough." The drive back to Ritchie Highway passed without another word.

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"DR. RYAN?" BOTH heads turned. It was Captain Overton, sticking his head in the door.

"What. is it?" Cathy asked, looking up from a journal article.

"Ma'am, there's something happening that the kids might like to see, with your permission. All of you, if you want."

Two minutes later they were all in the back of a Hummer, heading into the woods, close to the perimeter fence. The vehicle stopped two hundred yards

away. The captain and a corporal led them the rest of the way, to within fifty feet.

"Shh," the corporal said to SANDBOX. He held binoculars to her eyes.

"Neat!" Jack Junior thought.

"Will she be scared of us?" Sally asked.

"No, nobody hunts them here, and they're used to the vehicles," Overton told them. "That's Elvira, she's the second-oldest doe here."

She'd given birth only minutes before. Elvira was getting up now, licking the newborn fawn whose eyes were confused by a new world it had no reason to expect.

"Bambi!" Katie Ryan observed, being an expert on the Disney film. It only took minutes, and then the fawn wobbled to its—they couldn't tell the gender yet—feet.

"Okay. Katie?"

"Yes?" she asked, not looking away.

"*You* get to give her her name," Captain Overton told the toddler. It was a tradition here.

"Miss Marlene," SANDBOX said without hesitation.

45

CONFIRMATION

AS THE SAYING WENT, miles and miles of miles and miles. The road was about as boring as any civil engineer could make, but it hadn't been anyone's fault. So was the land. Brown and Holbrook now knew why the Mountain Men had become Mountain Men. At least there was scenery there. They could have driven faster, but it took time to learn the handling characteristics of this beast, and so they rarely got above fifty. That earned them the poisonous looks of every other driver on 1-90, especially the cowboy-hatted K-Whopper owner-operators who thought the unlimited speed limit in eastern Montana was just great, plus the occasional lawyer—they *had* to be lawyers—in German muscle cars who blazed by their truck as though it were a cattle-feeder.

They also found it was hard work. Both men were pretty tired from all the preparation. All the weeks of effort to set up the truck, mix the explosives, cast the bullets, and then embed them. It had all made for little sleep, and there was nothing like driving a western interstate highway to put a man to sleep. Their first overnight was at a motel in Sheridan, just over the line into Wyoming. Getting that far, their first day driving the damned thing, had almost been their undoing, especially negotiating the split of 1-90 and 1-94 in Billings. They'd known that the cement truck would corner about as well as a hog on ice, but actually experiencing it had exceeded their worst fears. They ended up sleeping past eight that morning.

The motel was actually a truck stop of sorts that catered both to private cars and to interstate freight carriers. The dining room served a hearty breakfast, wolfed down by a lot of rugged-looking independent men, and a few similarly minded women. Breakfast conversation was predictable.

"Gotta be rag-head sunzabitches," opined a big-bellied trucker with tattoos on his beefy forearms.

"Think so?" Ernie Brown asked from down the counter, hoping to get a feel for how these kindred souls felt about things.

"Who *else* would go after younguns? Sunzabitches." The driver returned to his blueberry pancakes.

"If the TV has it right, those two cops got it done," a milk hauler announced. "Five head shots. Whoa!"

"What about the one guy who went down hard, standing up like that against six riflemen! With a *pistol*. Dropped three of them, maybe four. There died a real American lawman." He looked up from his pancakes again. This one had a load of cattle. "He's earned his place in Valhalla, and that's for *damn* sure."

"Hey, they were feds, man," Holbrook said, chewing on his toast. "They ain't heroes. What about—"

"You can stick that one, good buddy," the milk hauler warned. "I don't wanna hear it. There was twenty, thirty children in that place."

Another driver chimed in. "And that black kid, rollin' on in with his -16. Damn, like when I was in the Cav for the Second of Happy Valley. I wouldn't mind buying that boy a beer, maybe shake his hand."

"You were AirCav?" the cattle hauler asked, turning away from his breakfast.

"Charlie, First of the Seventh." He turned to show the oversized patch of the First Air Cavalry Division on his leather jacket.

"Gary Owen, bro'! Delta, Second/Seventh." He stood up from the counter and walked over to take the man's hand. "Where you outa?"

"Seattle. That's mine out there with the machine parts. Heading for St. Louis. Gary Owen. Jesus, nice to hear that one again."

"Every time I drive through here . . ."

"You bet. We got brothers buried out yonder at Little Big Horn. Always say a little prayer for 'em when I come through."

"Shit." The two men shook hands again. "Mike Fallon."

"Tim Yeager."

The two Mountain Men had not just come into the room for breakfast. These were their kind of people. Supposed to be, anyway. Rugged individualists. Federal cops as heroes? What the hell was that all about?

"Boy, we find out who bankrolled this job, I hope that Ryan fella knows what to do 'bout it," machine parts said.

"Ex-Marine," cattle replied. "He ain't one of them. He's one of us. Finally."

"You may be right. Somebody's gotta pay for this one, and I hope we get the right people to do the collectin'."

"Damn right," the milk hauler agreed from his spot on the counter.

"Well." Ernie Brown stood. "Time for us to boogie on down the road."

The others nearby took a cursory look, and that was all, as the truckers returned to their informal opinion poll.

"IF YOU DON'T feel better by tomorrow, you're going to the doctor, and that's final!" she said.

"Oh, I'll be all right." But that protestation came out as a groan. He wondered if this was Hong Kong flu or something else. Not that he knew the difference. Few people did, and in a real sense that included docs and he did know that. What would they tell him? Rest, liquids, aspirin, which he was already doing. He felt as though he'd been placed in a bag and beaten with baseball bats, and all the traveling didn't help. Nobody liked traveling. Everyone liked *being* somewhere else, but getting there was always a pain in the . . . everywhere, he grumped. He allowed himself to fade back off to sleep, hoping his wife wouldn't worry too much. He'd feel better by tomorrow. These things always went away. He had a comfortable bed, and a TV controller. As long as he didn't move around it didn't hurt . . . much. It couldn't get any worse. Then it would get better. It always did.

WHEN PEOPLE GOT to a certain point, their work never really stopped. They could go away, but then the work came to them, found them wherever they might be, and the only issue, really, was how expensive it was to bring the work to them. That was a problem for both Jack Ryan and Robby Jackson.

For Jack it was the speeches Callie Weston had prepared for him—he'd be flying tomorrow, to Tennessee, then to Kansas, then to Colorado, then to California, and finally back to Washington, arriving at three in the morning on what was going to be the biggest special-election day in American history. Just over a third of the House seats vacated by that Sato guy would be selected, with the remainder to be done over the following two weeks. Then he'd have a full Congress to work with, and maybe, just maybe, he could get some real work done. Pure politics loomed in his immediate future. This coming week he'd be going over the detailed plans to streamline two of the government's most powerful bureaucracies, Defense and Treasury. The rest were in the works, too.

Since he was here with the President, Admiral Jackson was also getting everything developed by the office of J-2, the Pentagon's chief of intelligence, so that he could conduct the daily around-the-world brief. It took him an hour just to go over the materials.

"What's happening, Rob?" Jack asked, and instead of a friendly inquiry into how a guy's week was going, the President was asking the state of the entire planet. The J-3's eyebrows jerked up.

"Where do you want me to start?"

"Pick a spot," the President suggested.

"Okay, Mike Dubro and the *Ike* group are still heading north to China, making good time. Good weather and calm seas, they're averaging twenty-five knots. That advances their ETA by a few hours. Exercises continue on the Formosa Strait, but both sides are hugging their coasts now. Looks like maybe the shoot-downs got everybody to calm down a bit. Secretary Adler is supposed to be in there right now, talking to them about things.

"Middle East. We're watching the UIR military run exercises, too. Six heavy divisions, plus attachments and tactical air. Our people on the scene have Predators up and watching pretty closely—"

"Who authorized that?" the President asked.

"I did," Jackson replied.

"Invading another country's airspace?"

"J-2 and I are running this. You want us to know what they're up to and what their capabilities are, don't you?"

"Yes, I need that."

"Good, you tell me what to do, and let me worry about how, all right? It's a stealthy platform. It self-destructs if it goes out of control or the guys directing it don't like something, and it gives us very good real-time data we can't get from satellites, or even from J-STARS, and we don't have one of those over there at the moment. Any other questions, Mr. President?"

"Touché, Admiral. What's the take look like?"

"They're looking better than our initial intelligence assessment led us to

expect. Nobody's panicking yet, but this is starting to get our attention."

"What about Turkestan?" Ryan asked.

"They're evidently trying to get elections going, but that's old information, and that's all we know on the political side. The overall situation there is quiet at the moment. Satellites show increased cross-border traffic—mainly trade, the overhead-intelligence guys think, nothing more than that."

"Anybody looking at Iranian—damn, UIR—troop dispositions on the border?"

"I don't know. I can check." Jackson made a note. "Next, we've spotted the Indian navy."

"How?"

"They're not making a secret of anything. I had 'em send a pair of Orions off from Diego Garcia. They spotted our friends from three hundred miles out, electronic emissions. They are about four hundred miles offshore from their base. And, by the way, that places them directly between Diego and the entrance to the Persian Gulf. Our defense attaché will drop in tomorrow to ask what they're up to. They probably won't tell him very much."

"If they don't, I think maybe Ambassador Williams will have to make a call of his own."

"Good idea. And that's the summary of today's news, unless you want the trivia." Robby tucked his documents away. "What do your speeches look like?"

"The theme is common sense," the President reported.

"In Washington?"

ADLER WAS NOT overly pleased. On arriving in Beijing, he'd learned that the timing wasn't good. His aircraft had gotten in on what had turned out to be a Saturday evening—the date line again, he realized—then he learned that the important ministers were out of town, studiously downplaying the significance of the air battle over the strait, and giving him a chance to recover from jet lag so that he would be up to a serious meeting. Or so they'd said.

"What a pleasure to have you here," the Foreign Minister said, taking the American's hand and guiding him into his private office. Another man was waiting in there. "Do you know Zhang Han San?"

"No, how do you do, Minister?" Adler asked, taking his hand as well. *So, this was what he looked like.*

People took their seats. Adler was alone. In addition to the two PRC ministers, there was an interpreter, a woman in her early thirties.

"Your flight was a pleasant one?" the Foreign Minister inquired.

"Coming to your country is always pleasant, but I do wish the flight were faster," Adler admitted.

"The effects of travel on the body are often difficult, and the body does affect the mind. I trust you have had some time to recover. It is important," the Foreign Minister went on, "that high-level discussions, especially in times of unpleasantness, are not clouded by extraneous complications."

"I am well rested," Adler assured them. He'd gotten plenty of sleep. It was just that he wasn't sure what time it was in whatever location his body

thought itself to be. “And the interests of peace and stability compel us to make the occasional sacrifice.”

“That is so true.”

“Minister, the unfortunate events of the last week have troubled my country,” SecState told his hosts.

“Why do those bandits seek to provoke us?” the Foreign Minister asked. “Our forces are conducting exercises, that is all. And they shot down two of our aircraft. The crewmen are all dead. They have families. This is very sad, but I hope you have noted that the People’s Republic has not retaliated.”

“We have noted this with gratitude.”

“The bandits shot first. You also know that.”

“We are unclear on that issue. One of the reasons for my coming here is to ascertain the facts,” Adler replied.

“Ah.”

Had he surprised them? SecState wondered. It was like a card game, though the difference was that you never really knew the value of the cards in your own hand. A flush still beat a straight, but the hole card was always down, even for its owner. In this case, he had lied, but while the other side might suspect the lie, they didn’t know for sure, and that affected the game. If they thought he knew, they would say one thing. If they thought he didn’t know, they’d say another. In this case, they thought he knew, but they weren’t sure. He’d just told them otherwise, which could be a lie or the truth. Advantage, America. Adler had thought about this all the way over.

“You have said publicly that the first shot was taken by the other side. Are you sure of this?”

“Completely,” the Foreign Minister assured him.

“Excuse me, but what if the shot were taken by one of your lost pilots? How would we ever know?”

“Our pilots were under strict orders not to fire except in self-defense.”

“That is both a reasonable and prudent guide for your personnel. But in the heat of battle—or if not battle, a somewhat tense situation, mistakes do happen. We have the problem ourselves. I find aviators to be impulsive, especially the young, proud ones.”

“Is not the same true of the other side as well?” the Foreign Minister asked.

“Certainly,” Adler admitted. “That is the problem, isn’t it? Which is why,” he went on, “it is the business of people like ourselves to ensure that such situations do not arise.”

“But they always provoke us. They hope to garner your favor, and we find it troubling that this may have succeeded.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your President Ryan spoke of *two* Chinas. There is only one China, Secretary Adler. I’d thought that issue settled a long time ago.”

“That was a semantic error on the President’s part, a linguistic nuance,” Adler replied, dismissing the observation. “The President has many qualities, but he has yet to learn the niceties of diplomatic exchange, and then a foolish reporter seized on the issue. Nothing more than that. There have been no changes in our policies toward this region.” But Adler had deliberately *not* said “our policies,” and “have been” instead of “are.” There were times when he

thought that he might have made a fortune for himself by drafting insurance policies.

"Such linguistic errors can be seen as things other than errors," the Foreign Minister replied.

"Have I not made our position clear on this issue? You will recall that he was responding to a most unfortunate incident in which American lives were lost, and in searching for words to use, he selected words which have one meaning in our language, and another in yours." This was going a lot easier than he'd expected.

"Chinese lives were lost as well."

Zhang, Adler saw, was doing a lot of listening but wasn't uttering a single word. In the Western context, that made him an aide, a technical assistant, there to assist his minister on an issue of law or interpretation. He wasn't so sure that rule applied in this case. More likely, the reverse applied. If Zhang were what the American thought him to be, and if Zhang were smart enough to suspect that the American would be thinking along those lines—then why the hell was he here?

"Yes, and various others, to little purpose and great sorrow. I hope you will understand that our President takes such things seriously."

"Indeed, and I am remiss in not saying sooner that we view with horror the attack on his daughter. I trust you will convey to President Ryan our heartfelt sympathy at this inhuman act, and our pleasure that no harm has come to his child."

"I thank you on his behalf, and I will pass your good wishes along." Twice in a row now the Foreign Minister had temporized. He had an opening. He reminded himself that his interlocutors thought themselves smarter and shrewder than everybody else. "My President is a sentimental man," the Secretary admitted. "It is an American trait. Moreover, he feels strongly about his duty to protect all of our citizens."

"Then you need to speak to the rebels on Taiwan. We believe that it is they who destroyed the airliner."

"But why do such a thing?" Adler asked, ignoring the really surprising part. Was it a slip? Talk to Taiwan. The PRC was asking him to do that?

"To foment this incident, obviously. To play upon your President's personal feelings. To cloud the real issues between the People's Republic and our wayward province."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes, we do," the Foreign Minister assured him. "We do not wish to have hostilities. Such things are so wasteful of people and resources, and we have greater concerns for our country. The Taiwan issue will be decided in due course. So long as America does not interfere," he added.

"As I have already told you, Minister, we have made no policy changes. All we wish is the restoration of peace and stability," Adler said, the obvious import being the indeterminate maintenance of the status quo, which was decidedly *not* part of the People's Republic game plan.

"Then we are agreed."

"You will not object to our naval deployments?"

The Foreign Minister sighed. "The sea is free for the innocent passage of all.

It is not our place to give orders to the United States of America, as it is not your place to give orders to the People's Republic. The movement of your forces gives the impression that you will influence local events, and we will make pro forma comments on this. But in the interests of peace," he went on in a voice that was both patient and weary, "we will not object too strongly, especially if it encourages the rebels to cease their foolish provocations."

"It would be useful to know if your naval exercises will end soon. That would be a very favorable gesture."

"The spring maneuvers will continue. They do not threaten anyone, as your increased naval presence will determine quite clearly. We do not ask you to take our word. Let our deeds speak for us. It would be well also if our rebellious cousins reduce their own activities. Perhaps you might speak to them on this?" Twice now? He hadn't misspoken before, then.

"If you request it, yes, I would be pleased to add my voice and that of my country to the quest for peace."

"We value the good offices of the United States, and we trust you to be an honest broker for this occasion, in view of the fact that, regrettably, American lives were lost in this tragic incident."

Secretary Adler yawned. "Oh, excuse me."

"Travel is a curse, is it not?" These words came from Zhang, speaking for the first time.

"It truly can be," Adler agreed. "Please allow me to consult my government. I think our response to your request will be favorable."

"Excellent," the Foreign Minister observed. "We seek to make no precedent here. I hope you understand this, but in view of the singular circumstances here, we welcome your assistance."

"I shall have a reply for you in the morning," Adler promised, rising. "Forgive me for extending your day."

"Such is duty, for all of us."

Scott Adler took his leave, wondering what exactly this bombshell was that had landed on him. He wasn't sure who'd won the card game, and realized that he wasn't even sure what game it had been. It certainly hadn't gone as expected. It seemed like he'd won, and won easily. The other side had been more accommodating than he would have been in their place.

SOME CALLED IT checkbook journalism, but it wasn't new, and it wasn't expensive at the working level. Any experienced reporter had people he could call, people who, for a modest fee, would check things. It wasn't in any way illegal, to ask a favor of a friend, at least not grossly so. The information was rarely sensitive—and in this case was public record. It was just that the offices weren't always open on Sunday.

A mid-level bureaucrat in the office of Maryland's Secretary of State drove into his office in Baltimore, used his card-pass to get to his parking place, then walked in and unlocked the right number of doors until he got to a musty file room. Finding the right cabinet, he pulled open a drawer and found a file. He left a marker in the drawer and carried the file to the nearest copying machine. Copies of all the documents were made in less than a minute, and

then he replaced everything. With that task done, he walked back to his car and drove home. He did this often enough that he had a personal fax machine at home, and within ten minutes, the documents had been sent off, then taken to the kitchen and dumped in the trash. For this he would receive five hundred dollars. He got extra for working weekends.

JOHN PLUMBER WAS reading the documents even before the transmission was complete. Sure enough, a Ryan, John P., had established a sub-S corporation at the time Holtzman had told him. Control of that corporation had conveyed to Zimmer, Carol (none), four days later (a weekend had stood in the way), and that corporation now owned a 7-Eleven in southern Maryland. The corporate officers included Zimmer, Laurence; Zimmer, Alisha; and one other child, and the stockholders all shared the same surname. He recognized Ryan's signature on the transfer documents. The legal work had been done by a firm in Washington—a big one, he knew that name, too. There had been some tricky, but entirely legal, maneuvering to make the transaction tax-free for the Zimmer family. There was no further paperwork on that subject. Nothing else was needed, really.

He had other documents as well. Plumber knew the registrar at MIT, and had learned the previous evening, also via fax, that the tuition and housing expenses for Peter Zimmer were paid by a private foundation, the checks issued and signed by a partner in the same law firm that had set up the sub-S corp for the Zimmer family. He even had a transcript for the graduating senior. Sure enough, he was in computer science, and would be staying in Cambridge for his graduate work in the MIT Media Lab. Aside from mediocre marks in his freshman literature courses—even MIT wanted people to be literate, but evidently Peter Zimmer didn't care for poetry—the kid was straight A.

"So, it's true." Plumber settled back in his swivel chair and examined his conscience. " 'Why should I trust you? You're reporters,' " he repeated to himself.

The problem with his profession was one that its members almost never talked about, just as a wealthy man will not often bemoan low taxes. Back in the 1960s, a man named Sullivan had sued the *New York Times* over defamation of character, and had demonstrated that the newspaper had not been entirely correct in its commentary. But the paper had argued, and the court had agreed, that in the absence of true malice, the mistake was not really culpable, and that the public's interest in learning the goings-on in their nation superseded protection of an individual. It left the door open for suits, technically, and people did still bring action against the media, and sometimes they even won. About as often as Slippery Rock University knocked off Penn State.

That court ruling was necessary, Plumber thought. The First Amendment guaranteed freedom of the press, and the reason for it was that the press was America's first and, in many ways, only guardian of freedom. People lied all the time. Especially people in government, but others, too, and it was the job of the media to get the facts—the *truth*—out to the people, so that they could

make their own choices.

But there was a trap built into the hunting license the Supreme Court had issued. The media could destroy people. There was recourse against almost any improper action in American society, but reporters had such protections as those once enjoyed by kings, and, as a practical matter, his profession was above the law. As a practical matter, also, it worked hard to stay that way. To admit error was not only a legal faux pas, for which money might have to be paid. It would also weaken the faith of the public in their profession. And so they never admitted error when they didn't have to, and when they did, the retractions were almost never given the prominence of the initial, incorrect, assertions—the minimum necessary effort defined by lawyers who knew exactly the height of the castle walls they defended. There were occasional exceptions, but everyone knew that exceptions they were.

Plumber had seen his profession change. There was too much arrogance, and too little realization of the fact that the public they served no longer trusted them—and *that* wounded Plumber. He deemed himself worthy of that trust. He deemed himself a professional descendant of Ed Murrow, whose voice *every* American had learned to trust. And that was how it was supposed to be. But it wasn't, because the profession could not be policed from without, and it would never be trusted again until it was policed from within. Reporters called down every other profession—medicine, law, politics—for failing to meet a level of professional responsibility which they would allow no one to enforce on themselves, and which they themselves would too rarely enforce on their own. *Do as I say, not as I do* was something you couldn't say to a six-year-old, but it had become a ready cant for grown-ups. And if it got any worse, then what?

Plumber considered his situation. He could retire whenever he wanted. Columbia University had more than once invited him in to be an adjunct professor of journalism ... and ethics, because his was a trusted voice, a reasoned voice, an honest voice. An old voice, he added to himself. Maybe the last voice?

But it all came down, really, to one man's conscience, to ideas inculcated by parents long dead, and teachers whose names he had forgotten. He had to be loyal to something. If he were to be loyal to his profession, then he had to be loyal to its foundation. To tell the truth and let the chips fall. He lifted his phone.

"Holtzman," the reporter answered, because it was the business line in his Georgetown home.

"Plumber. I've done some checking. It appears you were right."

"Okay, now what, John?"

"I have to do this myself. I'll give you the exclusive on print coverage."

"That's generous, John. Thank you," Bob acknowledged.

"I still don't like Ryan very much as a President," Plumber added, rather defensively, the other thought. That made sense. He couldn't appear to be doing this to curry favor.

"You know that's not what this is about. That's why I talked to you about it. When?" Bob Holtzman asked.

"Tomorrow night, live."

"How about we sit down and work out a few things? This will be a biggie for the *Post*. Want to share the byline?"

"I might just be looking for another job by tomorrow night," Plumber observed, with a rueful chuckle. "Okay, we'll do that."

"SO, WHAT'S THAT mean?" Jack asked.

"They do not mind anything we're doing. It's almost like they want the carrier there. They have requested that I shuttle back and forth to Taipei—"

"Directly?" The President was astonished. Such direct flights would give the appearance of legitimacy to the Republic of China government. An American Secretary of State would be shuttling back and forth, and a ministerial official did so only between capitals of sovereign countries. Lesser disputes were left to "special envoys," who might carry the same power, but nothing approaching the same status.

"Yeah, that kinda surprised me, too," Adler replied over the encrypted channel. "Next, the dogs that didn't bark: a cursory objection to your 'two Chinas' gaffe at the press conference, and trade never raised its ugly head. They're being real docile for people who killed a hundred-plus airline passengers."

"Their naval exercises?"

"They will continue, and they practically invited us to observe how routine they are."

Admiral Jackson was listening on the speakerphone. "Mr. Secretary? This is Robby Jackson."

"Yes, Admiral?"

"They staged a crisis, we move a carrier, and now they say they want us around, am I getting this right?"

"That's correct. They do not know that we know, at least I don't think they do—but you know, I'm not sure that matters at the moment."

"Something's wrong," the J-3 said immediately. "Big-time wrong."

"Admiral, I think you might be correct on that one, too."

"Next move?" Ryan asked.

"I guess I go to Taipei in the morning. I can't evade this one, can I?"

"Agreed. Keep me informed, Scott."

"Yes, Mr. President." The line went dead.

"Jack—no, Mr. President, I just had a big red flashing light go off."

Ryan grimaced. "I have to go be political tomorrow, too. I fly out at, uh"—he checked his schedule—"leave the House at six-fifty, to speak in Nashville at eight-thirty. We need an assessment on this in one big hurry. Shit. Adler's over there, I'm on the road, and Ben Goodley isn't experienced enough for this. I want you there, Rob. If there's operational ramifications to this, that's your bailiwick. The Foleys. Arnie on the political side. We need a good China hand from State . . ."

ADLER WAS SETTLING into his bed in the embassy VIP quarters. He went

over his notes, trying to figure the angle. People made mistakes at every level. The wide belief that senior officials were canny players was not nearly as true as people thought. They made mistakes. They made slips. They loved to be clever.

"Travel is a curse," Zhang had said. His only words. Why then, and why those? It was so obvious that Adler didn't get it then.

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"BEDFORD FORREST, EH?" Diggs said, spreading relish on his hot dog.

"Best cavalry commander we've ever had," Eddington said.

"You'll pardon me, Professor, if I show diminished enthusiasm for the gentleman," the general observed. "The son of a bitch *did* found the Ku Klux Klan."

"I never said the man was politically astute, sir, and I do not defend his personal character, but if we've ever had a better man with a cavalry command, I have not learned his name," Eddington replied.

"He's got us there," Hamm had to admit.

"Stuart was overrated, sometimes petulant, and very lucky. Nathan had the *Fingerspitzengefühl,* knew how to make decisions on the fly, and damned if he made many bad ones. I'm afraid we just have to overlook his other failings."

History discussions among senior Army officers could last for hours, as this one had, and were as learned as those in any university's seminar room. Diggs had come over for a chat with Colonel Hamm, then found himself embroiled in the millionth refighting of the Civil War. Millionth? Diggs wondered. No, a *lot* more than that.

"What about Grierson?" Diggs asked.

"His deep raid was a thing of beauty, but he didn't actually conceive it, remember. Actually, I think his best work was as commander of the 10th."

"Now you're talking, Dr. Eddington."

"See how the boss's eyes just lit up. You—"

"That's right! You had that regiment until a little while ago. Ready and Forward!" the colonel of the Carolina Guard added.

"You even know our regimental motto?" Maybe this guy was a serious historian after all, even if he did admire that racist murderer, Diggs thought.

"Grierson built that regiment from the ground up, mainly illiterate troopers. He had to grow his own NCOs, and they drew every shit job in the Southwest, but they're the ones who defeated the Apaches—and only one damned movie ever made about 'em. I've been thinking about a book on the subject after I retire. He was our first real desert fighter, and he figured things out in a hurry. He knew about deep strike, he knew how to pick his fights, and once he got hold, he didn't let go. I was glad to see that regimental standard come back."

"Colonel Eddington, I take back what I was thinking." Diggs lifted his beer can in salute. "That's what the cav is all about."

46

OUTBREAK

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER to come back Monday morning, but it would have meant getting the kids up too early. As it was, Jack Junior and Sally had to study for tests, and for the moment, Katie needed new arrangements of her own. Camp David had been so different it was very much like returning from a vacation, and coming back was something of a shock. As soon as the Executive Mansion appeared in the windows of the descending helicopter, faces and moods changed. Security was vastly increased. The body count around the perimeter was noticeably different, and that, too, was a reminder of how undesirable this place and the life it contained were for them. Ryan stepped off first, saluted the Marine at the bottom of the stairs then looked up at the south face of the White House. It was like a slap in the face. Welcome back to reality. After seeing his family safely inside, President Ryan headed west for his office.

"Okay, what's happening?" he asked van Damm, who hadn't had much of a weekend himself—but then, nobody was trying to kill him or his family, either.

"The investigation hasn't turned up much of anything yet. Murray says to be patient, things are happening. Best advice, Jack, just keep going with it," the chief of staff advised. "You have a full day tomorrow. The country's mood is for you. There's always an outpouring of sympathy in times like—"

"Arnie, I'm not going out after votes for myself, remember? It's nice that people think better of me after some terrorists attack my daughter, but, you know, I really don't want to look at things in those terms," Jack observed, his anger returning after two days of relief. "If I ever had thoughts about staying in this job, last week cured me."

"Well, yes, but—"

" 'But,' hell! Arnie, when it's all said and done, what will I take away from this place? A place in the history books? By the time that's written, I'll be dead, and I won't be around to care what historians say, will I? I have a friend in the history business who says that all history is really nothing more than the application of ideology to the past—and I won't be around to read it anyway. The only thing I want to take away from here is my life and the lives of my family. That's all. If somebody else wants the pomp and circumstance of this fucking prison, then let 'em have it. I've learned better. Fine," POTUS said bitterly, his mood totally back in his office now. "I'll do the job, make the speeches, and try to get some useful work done, but it ain't worth it all, Arnie. For goddamned sure it isn't worth having nine terrorists try to kill your daughter. There's only one thing you leave behind on this planet. That's your

kids. Everything else, hell, other people just make it up to suit themselves anyway, just like the news."

"It's been a rough couple of days, and—"

"What about the agents who died? What about their families? I had a nice two-day vacation. They sure as hell didn't. I've gotten used enough to this job that I hardly thought about them at all. Over a hundred people worked hard to make sure I forgot about it. And I let them do it! It's important that I don't dwell on such things, right? What am I supposed to concentrate on? 'Duty, Honor, Country'? Anybody who can do that and turn his humanity off doesn't belong here, and that's what this job is turning me into."

"You finished, or do I have to get a box of Kleenex for you?" For one brief moment the President looked ready to punch van Damm. Arnie plunged on. "Those agents died because they chose jobs they thought were important. Soldiers do the same thing. What's with you, anyway, Ryan? How the hell do you think a country happens? You think it's just nice thoughts? You weren't always that stupid. You were a Marine once. You did other stuff for CIA. You had balls then. You have a job. You didn't get drafted, remember? You volunteered for this, whether you admit it or not. You knew it was possible this would happen. And so now you're here. You want to run away, fine—run away. But don't tell me it isn't worth it. Don't tell me it doesn't matter. If people *died* to protect your family, don't you fucking *dare* tell me it doesn't matter!" Van Damm stormed out of the office, without even bothering to close the door behind him.

Ryan didn't know what to do right then. He sat down behind his desk. There were the usual piles of paper, neatly arrayed by a staff that never slept. Here was China. Here was the Middle East. Here was India. Here was advance information on the leading economic indicators. Here were political projections for the 161 House seats to be decided in two days. Here was a report on the terrorist incident. Here was a list of the names of the dead agents, and under each was a list of wives and husbands, parents and children, and in the case of Don Russell, grandchildren. He knew all the faces, but Jack had to admit that he hadn't remembered all the names. They'd died to protect his child, and he didn't even know all the names. Worst of all, he'd allowed himself to be carted away, to indulge himself in yet more artificial comfort—and forget. But here it all was, on his desk, waiting for him, and it wouldn't go away. And he couldn't run away, either. He stood and walked out the door, heading left for the chief of staff's corner office, passing Secret Service agents who'd heard the exchange, probably traded looks, certainly developed their own thoughts, and now concealed them.

"Arnie?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"I'm sorry."

"OKAY, HONEY," HE groaned. He'd go to see the doctor tomorrow morning. It hadn't gotten better at all. If anything, it had gotten worse. The headaches were punishing, and that despite two extra-strength Tylenol every four hours. If only he could sleep it off, but that was proving hard. Only exhaustion

allowed him an hour here and an hour there. Just getting up to use the bathroom required a few minutes of concentrated effort, enough that his wife offered to help, but, no, a man didn't need an escort for that. On the other hand, she was right. He did need to see a doctor. Would have been smarter to do it yesterday, he thought. Then he might have felt better now.

IT HAD BEEN easy for Plumber, at least on the procedural side. The tape-storage vault was the size of a respectable public library, and finding things was easy. There, on the fifth shelf, were three boxed Beta-format cassettes. Plumber took them down, removed the tapes from the boxes, and replaced them with blanks. The three tapes he placed in his briefcase. He was home twenty minutes later. There, for his own convenience, he had a commercial-type Betamax, and he ran the tapes of the first interview, just to make sure, just to confirm the fact that the tapes were undamaged. And they were. These would have to be sent to a secure place.

Next, John Plumber drafted his three-minute commentary piece for the next day's evening news broadcast. It would be a mildly critical piece on the Ryan presidency. He spent an hour on it, since, unlike the current crop of TV reporters, he liked to achieve a certain elegance in his language, a task which came easily to him, as his grammar was correct. This he printed up and read over because he both edited and detected errors more easily on paper than on a computer monitor. Satisfied, he copied the piece over to disk, which would later be used at the studio to generate copy for the TelePrompTer. Next, he composed another commentary piece of the same overall length (it turned out to be four words shorter), and that he printed also. Plumber spent rather more time with this one. If it were to be his professional swan song, then it had to be done properly, and this reporter, who had drafted quite a few obituaries for others, both admired and not, wanted his own to be just right. Satisfied with the final copy, he printed that up as well, tucking the pages into his briefcase, with the cassettes. This one he would not copy to disk.

"I GUESS THEY'RE finished," the chief master sergeant said.

The take from the Predator showed the tank columns heading back to their laagers, hatches open on the turrets, crewmen visible, mainly smoking. The exercise had gone well for the newly constituted UIR army, and even now they were conducting their road movement in good order.

Major Sabah spent so much time looking over this man's shoulder that they really should have spoken on a more informal basis, he thought. It was all routine. Too routine. He'd expected—hoped—that his country's new neighbor would require much more time to integrate its military forces, but the commonality of weapons and doctrine had worked in their favor. Radio messages copied down here and at STORM TRACK suggested that the exercise was concluded. The TV coverage from the UAV confirmed it, however, and confirmation was important.

"That's funny . . ." the sergeant observed, to his own surprise.

"What is that?" Sabah asked.

"Excuse me, sir." The NCO stood and walked over to a corner cabinet, from which he extracted a map, and brought it back to his workstation. "There's no road there. Look, sir." He unfolded the map, matched the coordinates with those on the screen—the Predator had its own Global Positioning Satellite navigation system and automatically told its operators where it was—and tapped the right section on the paper. "Sec?"

The Kuwaiti officer looked back and forth from map to screen. On the latter, there was a road, now. But that was easily explained. A column of a hundred tanks would convert almost any surface into a hard-packed highway of sorts, and that had happened here.

But there hadn't been a road there before. The tanks had made it over the last few hours.

"That's a change, Major. The Iraqi army was always road-bound before."

Sabah nodded. It was so obvious that he hadn't seen it. Though native to the desert, and supposedly schooled in traveling there, the Iraqi army in 1991 had connived at its own destruction by sticking close to roads, because its officers always seemed to get lost when moving cross-country. Not as mad as it sounded—the desert was essentially as featureless as the sea—it had made their movements predictable, never a good thing in a war, and given advancing allied forces free rein to approach from unexpected directions.

That had just changed.

"You suppose they have GPS, too?" the chief master sergeant asked.

"We couldn't expect them to stay stupid forever, could we?"

PRESIDENT RYAN KISSED his wife on the way to the elevator. The kids weren't up yet. One sort of work lay ahead. Another sort lay behind. Today there wasn't time for both, though some efforts would be made. Ben Goodley was waiting on the helicopter.

"Here's the notes from Adler on his Tehran trip." The National Security Advisor passed them over. "Also the write-up from Beijing. The working group is getting together at ten to go over that situation. The SNIE team will be meeting at Langley later today, too."

"Thanks." Jack strapped into his seat and started reading. Arnie and Callie came aboard and took their seats forward of his.

"Any ideas, Mr. President?" Goodley asked.

"Ben, you're supposed to tell me, remember?"

"How about I tell you that it doesn't make much sense?"

"I already know that part. You guard the phones and faxes today. Scott should be in Taipei now. Whatever comes from him, fast-track it to me."

"Yes, sir."

The helicopter lurched aloft. Ryan hardly noticed that. His mind was on the job, crummy though it was. Price and Raman were with him. There would be more agents on the 747, and more still waiting even now in Nashville. The presidency of John Patrick Ryan went on, whether he liked it or not.

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THIS COUNTRY MIGHT be small, might be unimportant, might be a pariah in the international community—not because of anything it had done, except perhaps to prosper, but because of its larger and less prosperous neighbor to the west—but it did have an *elected* government, and that was supposed to count for something in the community of nations, especially those with popularly elected governments themselves. The People's Republic had come to exist by force of arms—well, most countries did, SecState reminded himself—and had immediately thereafter slaughtered millions of its own citizens (nobody knew how many; nobody was terribly interested in finding out), launched into a revolutionary development program ("the Great Leap Forward"), which had turned out more disastrously than was the norm even for Marxist nations; and launched yet another internal "reform" effort ("the Cultural Revolution") which had come *after* something called the "Hundred Flowers" campaign, whose real purpose had been to smoke out potential dissidents for later elimination at the hands of students whose revolutionary enthusiasm had indeed been revolutionary toward Chinese culture—they'd come close to destroying it entirely, in favor of *The Little Red Book*. Then had come more reform, the supposed changeover from Marxism to something else, another student revolution—this one against the existing political system—arrogantly cut down with tanks and machine guns on global television. Despite all that, the rest of the world was entirely willing to let the People's Republic crush their cousins on Taiwan.

This was called *realpolitik,* Scott Adler thought. Something similar had resulted in an event called the Holocaust, an event his father had survived, with a number tattooed on his forearm to prove it. Even his own country officially had a one-China policy, though the unspoken codicil was that the PRC would not attack the ROC—and if it did, then America might just react. Or might not.

Adler was a career diplomat, a graduate of Cornell and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He loved his country. He was often an instrument of his country's policy, and now found himself to be his country's very voice of international affairs. But what he often had to say was not terribly just, and at moments like this, he wondered if he might himself be doing the same things that had been done sixty years earlier by other Fletcher grads, well-educated and well-meaning, who, after it was all over, wondered how the hell they'd been so blind as not to have seen it coming.

"We have fragments—and actually some rather large pieces from the missile that were lodged in the wing. It is definitely of PRC origin," the ROC Defense Minister said. "We will allow your technical people to look them over and make your own tests to confirm matters."

"Thank you. I will discuss that with my government."

"So." This was the Foreign Minister. "They allow a direct flight from Beijing to Taipei. They do not object privately to the dispatch of an aircraft carrier. They disclaim any responsibility for the Airbus incident. I confess I see no rationale for this behavior."

"I am gratified that they express interest only in the restoration of regional

stability."

"How good of them," Defense said. "After they deliberately upset it."

"This has caused us great economic harm. Again, foreign investors get nervous, and with the flight of their capital, we face some minor embarrassments. Was that their plan, do you suppose?"

"Minister, if that were the case, why did they ask me to fly here directly?"

"Some manner of subterfuge, obviously," the Foreign Minister answered, before Defense could say anything.

"But if so, what for?" Adler wanted to know. Hell, *they* were Chinese. Maybe they could figure it out.

"We are secure here. We know that, even if foreign investors do not. Even so, the situation is not an entirely happy one. It is rather like living in a castle with a moat. Across the moat is a lion. The lion would kill and eat us if he had the chance. He cannot leap the moat, and he knows that, but he keeps trying to do so, even with that knowledge. I hope you can understand our concern."

"I do, sir," SecState assured him. "If the PRC reduces the level of its activity, will you do the same?" Even if they couldn't figure out what the PRC was up to, perhaps they could de-stress the situation anyway.

"In principle, yes. Exactly how, is a technical question for my colleague here. You will not find us unreasonable."

And the entire trip had been staged for that simple statement. Now Adler had to fly back to Beijing to deliver it. Matchmaker, matchmaker . . .

HOPKINS HAD ITS own day-care center, staffed by permanent people and always some students from the university doing lab work for their child-care major. Sally walked in, looked around and was pleased by the multicolored environment. Behind her were four agents, all male, because there weren't any unassigned women. One carried a FAG bag. Nearby was a trio of plainclothes officers of the Baltimore City Police, who exchanged credentials with the USSS to confirm identity, and so another day started for SURGEON and SANDBOX. Katie had enjoyed the helicopter ride. Today she'd make some new friends, but tonight, her mother knew, she'd ask where Miss Marlene was. How did one explain death to a not-yet-three-year-old?

THE CROWD APPLAUDED with something more than the usual warmth. Ryan could feel it. Here he was, not yet three days after an attempt on the life of his youngest daughter, doing his job for them, showing strength and courage and all that other bullshit, POTUS thought. He'd led off with a prayer for the fallen agents, and Nashville was the Bible Belt, where such things were taken seriously. The rest of the speech had actually been pretty good, the President thought, covered things he really believed in. Common sense. Honesty. Duty. It was just that hearing his own voice speaking words written by somebody else made it seem hollow, and it was hard to keep his mind from wandering so early in the morning.

"Thank you, and God bless America," he concluded. The crowd stood and

cheered. The band struck up. Ryan turned away from the armored podium to shake hands again with the local officials, and made his way off the stage, waving as he did so. Arnie was waiting behind the curtain.

"For a phony, you still do pretty good." Ryan didn't have time to respond to that before Andrea came up.

"FLASH-traffic waiting for you on the bird, sir. From Mr. Adler."

"Okay, let's roll. Stay close," he told his principal agent on the way out the back.

"Always," Price assured him.

"Mr. President!" a reporter shouted. There were a bunch of them. He was the loudest this morning. He was one of the NBC team. Ryan turned and stopped. "Will you press Congress for a new gun-control law?"

"What for?"

"The attack on your daughter was—"

Ryan held his hand up. "Okay. As I understand it, the weapons used were of a type already illegal. I don't see how a new law would accomplish much, unfortunately."

"But gun-control advocates say—"

"I know what they say. And now they're using an attack on my little girl, and the deaths of five superb Americans, to advance a political agenda of their own. What do you think of that?" the President asked, turning away.

"WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?"

He described his symptoms. His family physician was an old friend. They even played golf together. It wasn't hard. At the end of every year, the Cobra representative had plenty of demonstrator clubs in nearly mint condition. Most were donated to youth programs or sold to country clubs as rental sticks. But some he could give to his friends, not to mention some Greg Norman autographs.

"Well, you have a temperature, one hundred and three, and that's a little high. Your BP's one hundred over sixty-five, and that's a little low for you. Your color's rotten—"

"I know, I feel sick."

"You are sick, but I wouldn't worry about it. Probably a flu bug you picked up in some bar, and all the air travel doesn't help much, either—and I've been telling you for years about cutting back on the booze. What happened is you picked something up, and other factors worsened it. Started Friday, right?"

"Thursday night, maybe Friday morning."

"Played a round anyway?"

"Ended up with a snowman for my trouble," he admitted, meaning a score of 80.

"I'd settle for that myself, healthy and stone-sober." The doctor had a handicap of twenty. "You're over fifty and you can't wallow with the pigs at night and expect to soar with the eagles in the morning. Complete rest. A lot of liquids-non-alcoholic. Stay on the Tylenol."

"No prescription?"

The doc shook his head. "Antibiotics don't work on viral infections. Your

immune system has to handle those, and it will if you let it. But while you're here, I want to draw some blood. You're overdue for a cholesterol check. I'll send my nurse in. You have somebody here to drive you home?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to drive myself."

"Good. Give it a few days. Cobra can do without you, and the golf courses will still be there when you feel better."

"Thanks." He felt better already. You always did when the doc told you that you weren't going to die.

"HERE YOU GO." Goodley handed the paper over. Few office buildings, even secure government ones, had the communications facilities that were shoehorned into the upper-level lounge area of the VC-25, whose call sign was Air Force One. "Not bad news at all," Ben added.

SWORDSMAN skimmed it once, then sat down to read it more slowly. "Okay, fine, he thinks he can defuse the situation," Ryan noted. "But he still doesn't know what the goddamned situation is."

"Better than nothing."

"Does the working group have this?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Maybe they can make some sense out of it. Andrea?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Tell the driver it's time to get moving." He looked around. "Where's Arnie?"

"I'M CALLING YOU on a cellular," Plumber said.

"Fine," van Damm replied. "I'm on one, too, as a matter of fact." The instruments on the aircraft were also secure, with STU-4 capability. He didn't say that. He just needed a retort. John Plumber was no longer on his Christmas card list. Unfortunately, his direct line was still on Plumber's Rolodex. What a shame he couldn't change it. And he'd have to tell his secretary *not* to put this guy through anymore, at least not when he was traveling.

"I know what you're thinking."

"Good, John. Then I don't have to say what I think."

"Catch the broadcast tonight. I'll be on at the end."

"Why?"

"See for yourself, Arnie. So long."

The chief of staff thumbed the kill switch on the phone and wondered what Plumber meant. He'd once trusted the man. Hell, he'd once trusted the man's colleague. He could have told the President about the call, but decided not to. He'd just delivered a pretty good speech, distractions and all, doing well in spite of himself, because the poor son of a bitch really did believe in more than he knew. It wouldn't be smart to drop something else on him. They'd tape the speech on the flight into California, and if it were fit to view, then he'd show it to POTUS.

“I DIDN’T KNOW there was a flu bug around,” he said, putting his shirt back on. It took time. The auto executive was sore all over.

“There always is. Just it doesn’t always make the news,” the physician replied, looking over the vital signs his nurse had just written down. “And you got it.”

“So?”

“So, take it easy. Don’t go to the office. No sense infecting your whole company. Ride it out. You should be fine by the end of the week.”

• • •

THE SNIE TEAM met at Langley. A ton of new information had come across from the Persian Gulf region, and they were sorting through it in a conference room on the sixth floor. Chavez’s photo of Mahmoud Haji Daryaei had been blown up by the in-house photo lab and was now hanging on the wall. Maybe somebody would throw darts at it, Ding thought.

“Track toads,” the former infantryman snorted, watching the Predator video.

“Kinda big to take on with a rifle, Sundance,” Clark observed. “Those things always scared the hell out of me.”

“LAWS rocket’ll do ’em fine, Mr. C.”

“What’s the range on a LAWS, Domingo?”

“Four, five hundred meters.”

“Those guns shoot two or three kilometers,” John pointed out. “Think about it.”

“I’m not up on the hardware,” Bert Vasco said. He waved at the screen. “What’s this mean?”

The answer came from one of CIA’s military analysts. “It means the UIR military is in much better shape than we’d expected.”

An Army major brought over from the Defense Intelligence Agency didn’t dispute that. “I’m fairly impressed. It was a pretty vanilla exercise, nothing really complicated on the maneuver side, but they kept themselves organized for all of it. Nobody got lost—”

“You suppose they’re using GPS now?” the CIA analyst asked.

“Anybody who subscribes to *Yachting* magazine can buy the things. The price is down to four hundred bucks, last time I looked,” the officer told his civilian counterpart. “It means they can navigate their mobile forces a lot better. More than that, it means their artillery will become a whole lot more effective. If you know where your guns are, where your forward observer is, and where the target is in relation to him, then your first round is going to be pretty much on the money.”

“Fourfold increase in performance?”

“Easy,” the major replied. “That elderly gent on the wall has a big stick to wave at his neighbors. I imagine he’ll let them know about it, too.”

“Bert?” Clark asked.

Vasco squirmed in his seat. “I’m starting to worry. This is going faster than I expected. If Daryaei didn’t have other things to worry about, I’d be more worried.”

“Like?” Chavez asked.

“Like he has a country to consolidate, and he has to know that if he starts rattling sabers, we’ll react.” The FSO paused. “Sure as hell, he wants to let his neighbors know who the big boy on the block is. How close is he to being able to do something?”

“Militarily?” the civilian analyst asked. He gestured to the guy from DIA.

“If we were not in the picture, now. But we are in the picture.”

“I ASK NOW that you will join me in a moment of silence,” Ryan told the audience in Topeka. It was eleven here. That made it noon back home. Next stop Colorado Springs, then Sacramento, then, blessedly, home.

“YOU HAVE TO ask yourself what kind of man we have here,” Kealty said in front of cameras of his own. “Five men and women dead, and he doesn’t see the need for a law to control these guns. It’s just beyond my comprehension how anyone can be as coldly heartless as that. Well, if he doesn’t care about those brave agents, I do. How many Americans will have to die before he sees the need for this? Will he have to actually lose a family member? I’m sorry, I just can’t believe that remark,” the politician went on for the minicam.

“WE CAN ALL remember when people ran for reelection to Congress, and one of the things they told us was, ‘Vote for me, because for every dollar that taxes take from this district, a dollar-twenty comes back.’ Do you remember those claims?” the President asked.

“What they didn’t say was—well, it was actually a lot of things. Number one, who ever said that you depend on the government for money? We don’t vote for Santa Claus, do we? It’s the other way around. The government can’t exist unless *you* give *it* money.

“Number two, are they telling you, ‘Vote for me, ’cause I really stick it to those rotten people in North Dakota’? Aren’t they Americans, too?

“Number three, the real reason this happens is that the government deficit means every district gets more in federal payments than it lost in federal taxes —excuse me, I mean *direct* federal taxes. The ones you can see.

“So they were bragging to you that they were spending more money than they had. If your next-door neighbor told you he was kiting checks drafted on your personal bank, you think maybe you might call the police about it?

“We all know that the government *does* take more than it gives back. They’ve just learned to hide it. The federal budget deficit means that every time you borrow money, it costs more than it should—why? Because the government borrows so much money that it drives up interest rates.

“And so, ladies and gentlemen, every house payment, every car payment,

every credit-card bill is also a *tax*. And maybe they give you a tax break on interest payments. Isn't that nice?" POTUS asked. "Your government gives you a tax break on money you ought not to have to pay in the first place, and then it tells you that you get back more than you pay out." Ryan paused.

"Does anybody out there really believe that? Does anybody really believe it when people say that the United States can't *afford—not* to spend more money than it has? Are these the words of Adam Smith or Lucy Ricardo? I have a degree in economics, and *I Love Lucy* wasn't on the course.

"Ladies and gentlemen. I am not a politician, and I am not here to speak on behalf of any of your local candidates for the vacant seats in the People's House. I am here to ask you to think. You, too, have a duty. The government belongs to you. You don't belong to it. When you go out to vote tomorrow, please take the time to think about what the candidates say and what they stand for. Ask yourself, 'Does this make sense?' and then make the best choice you can—and if you don't like any of them, go to the polls anyway, go into the voting booth, and then go home without giving your vote to anyone, but at least show up. You owe that to your country."

THE HEATING AND air-conditioning van pulled up the driveway, and a pair of men got out and walked up to the porch. One of them knocked.

"Yes?" the lady of the house asked in puzzlement.

"FBI, Mrs. Sminton." He showed his credentials. "Could we come in, please?"

"Why?" the sixty-two-year-old widow asked.

"We'd like you to help us with something, if you might." It had taken longer than expected. The guns used in the SANDBOX case had been traced to a manufacturer, from the manufacturer to a wholesaler, from the wholesaler to a dealer, and from the dealer to a name, and from a name to an address. With the address, the Bureau and Secret Service had gone to a United States District Court judge for a search-and-seizure warrant.

"Please come in."

"Thank you. Mrs. Sminton, do you know the gentleman who lives next door?"

"Mr. Azir, you mean?"

"That's right."

"Not very well. Sometimes I wave."

"Do you know if he's home now?"

"His car's not there," she replied, after looking. The agents already knew that. He owned a blue Oldsmobile wagon with Maryland tags. Every cop in two hundred miles was looking for it.

"Do you know when the last time was you saw him?"

"Friday, I guess. There were some other cars there, and a truck."

"Okay." The agent reached in his coveralls pocket and pulled out a radio. "Move in, move in. Bird is probably—say again, *probably*—out of the coop."

Before the widow's astonished eyes, a helicopter appeared directly over the house three hundred yards away. Zip lines dropped from both sides, and armed agents slid down them. At the same time, four vehicles converged from

both directions on the country road, all of them driving off the road, onto the wide lawn straight toward the dwelling. Ordinarily, things would have gone slower, with some period of discreet surveillance, but the word was out on this one. Front and back doors were kicked in—and thirty seconds later, a siren went off. Mr. Azir, it seemed, had a burglar alarm. Then the radio crackled.

"Clear, building is clear. This is Betz. Search complete, building is clear. Bring in the lab troops." With that, two vans appeared. These proceeded up the driveway, and one of the first things the passengers did was to take samples of the gravel there, plus grass, to match with scrapings from the rented cars left at Giant Steps.

"Mrs. Sminton, could we sit down, please? There are a couple questions we'd like to ask you about Mr. Azir."

"SO?" MURRAY ASKED, arriving in the FBI Command Center.

"No joy," the agent at the console said.

"Damn." It wasn't said with passion. He'd never really expected it. But he expected some important information anyway. The Lab had collected all manner of physical evidence. Gravel samples could match the driveway. Grass and dirt found on the inside offenders and bumpers could link the vehicles to the Azir house. Carpet fibers—maroon wool—on the shoes of the dead terrorists could put them inside the house. Even now, a team of ten agents was beginning the process of discovering exactly who "Mordecai Azir" was. Smart money was that he was about as Jewish as Adolf Eichmann. Nobody was covering that wager.

"Commander Center, this is Betz." Billy Betz was assistant special agent in charge of the Baltimore Field Division, and a former HRT shooter, hence his dramatic descent from the helicopter, leading his men . . . and a woman.

"Billy, this is Dan Murray. What do you have?"

"Would you believe it? A half-empty crate of seven-six-two ball ammo, and the lot numbers match, Director. Living room has a dark red wool rug. This is our place. Some clothes missing from the master-bedroom closet. I'd say nobody's been here for a couple of days. Location is secure. No booby traps. The lab troops are starting their routine." And all eighty minutes from the time the Baltimore SAC had walked into the Garmatz Federal Courthouse. Not fast enough, but fast.

The forensics experts were a mix of Bureau, Service, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, a troubled agency whose technical staff was nonetheless excellent. They'd all be shaking the house for hours. Everyone wore gloves. Every surface would be dusted for fingerprints to match with those of the dead terrorists.

"SOME WEEKS AGO you saw me take an oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. That's the second time I did that. The first time was as a brand-new Marine second lieutenant, when I graduated from Boston College. Right after that, I read the Constitution, to make sure I

knew what it was that I was supposed to be defending.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we often hear politicians saying how they want government to empower you, so that you can do things.

"That's not the way it is," Ryan told them forcefully. "Thomas Jefferson wrote that governments derive their just powers from the *consent* of the governed. That's you. The Constitution is something you should all read. The Constitution of the United States was not written to tell you what to do. The Constitution establishes the relationship among the three branches of government. It tells the government what it may do, and it also tells the government what it may *not* do. The government may *not* restrict your speech. The government may *not* tell you how to pray. The government may *not* do a lot of things. Government is a lot better at taking things away than it is at giving, but most of all, the government does not empower you. You empower the government. Ours is a government of the people. You are *not* people who belong to the government.

"Tomorrow you will not be electing masters, you will be choosing employees, servants of your will, guardians of your rights. We do not tell you what to do. You tell us what to do.

"It is not my job to take your money and give it back. It is my job to take what money I must have to protect and serve you—and to do that job as efficiently as possible. Government service may be an important duty, and a great responsibility, but it is not supposed to be a blessing for those who serve. It is your government servants who are supposed to sacrifice for you, not you who sacrifice for them.

"Last Friday, three good men and two good women lost their lives in the service of our country. They were there to protect my daughter, Katie. But there were other children there, too, and in protecting one child, you protect all children. People like that do not ask for much more than your respect. They deserve that. They deserve it because they do things that we cannot easily do for ourselves. That's why we hire them. They sign on because they know that service is important, because they care about us, because they *are* us. You and I know that not all government employees are like that. That's not their fault. That's *your* fault. If you do not demand the best, you will not get the best. If you do not give the right measure of power to the right kind of people, then the wrong people will take more power than they need and they will use it the way they want, not the way you want.

"Ladies and gentlemen, that's why your duty tomorrow to elect the right people to serve you is so important. Many of you operate your own businesses and you hire people to work for you. Most of you own your own homes, and sometimes you hire plumbers, electricians, carpenters to do work for you. You try to hire the right people for the work because you pay for that work, and you want it done right. When your child is sick, you try to pick the best physician—and you pay attention to what that doctor does and how well he or she does it. Why? Because there is nothing more important to you than the life of your child.

"America is also your child. America is a country forever young. America needs the right people to look after her. It is *your* job to pick the right people, regardless of party, or race, or gender, or anything other than talent and

integrity. I can't and I won't tell you which candidate merits your vote. God gave you a free will. The Constitution is there to protect your right to exercise that will. If you fail to exercise your will intelligently, then you have betrayed yourselves, and neither I nor anyone else can fix that for you.

"Thank you for coming to see me on my first visit to Colorado Springs. Tomorrow is your day. Please use it to hire the right people."

"IN A SERIES OF speeches clearly designed to reach conservative voters, President Ryan is stumping the country on the eve of the House elections, but even as federal officials investigate the vicious terrorist attack on his own daughter, the President flatly *rejected* the idea of improved gun-control laws. We have this report from NBC correspondent Hank Roberts, traveling with the presidential party today." Tom Donner continued looking into the camera until the red light went off.

"I thought he said some pretty good things today," Plumber observed while the tape ran.

"Invoking *I Love Lucy* must have come from Callie Weston on a serious PMS day," Donner observed, flipping through his copy. "Funny, she used to do great speeches for Bob Fowler."

"Did you *read* the speech?"

"John, come on, we don't have to read what he says. We *know* what he's going to say."

"Ten seconds," the director called over their earpieces.

"Nice copy for later, by the way, John." The face broke into the smile at "three."

"A huge federal task force is now investigating Friday's attack on the President's daughter. We have this report from Karen Stabler in Washington."

"I thought you'd like it, Tom," Plumber replied, when the light went dark again. So much the better, he thought. His conscience was clear now.

THE VC-25 LIFTED off on time, and headed north to avoid some adverse weather over northern New Mexico. Arnie van Damm was topside in the communications area. There were enough important-looking boxes to run half the world here, or so it seemed, and hidden in the skin of the aircraft was a satellite dish whose expensive aiming system could track almost anything. At the chief of staff's direction, it was now getting the NBC feed off a Hughes bird.

"WE HAVE THIS closing comment from special correspondent John Plumber." Donner turned graciously. "John."

"Thank you, Tom. The profession of journalism is one I entered many years ago, because I was inspired in my youth. I remember my crystal radio set—those of you old enough might recall how you had to ground them to a pipe," he explained, with a smile. "I remember listening to Ed Murrow in London

during the blitz, to Eric Sevareid from the jungles of Burma, to all the founding fathers—giants, really—of our profession. I grew up with pictures in my mind painted by the words of men whom all America could trust to tell the truth to the best of their ability. I decided that finding the truth and communicating it to people was as noble a calling as any to which a man—or woman—could aspire.

"We're not always perfect in this profession. No one is," Plumber went on.

To his right, Donner was looking at the TelePrompTer in puzzlement. This *wasn't* what was rolling in front of the camera lens, and he realized that, though Plumber had printed pages in front of him, he was giving a *memorized* speech. Imagine that. Just like the old days, apparently.

"I would like to say that I am proud to be in this profession. And I was, once.

"I was on the microphone when Neil Armstrong stepped down on the moon, and on sadder occasions, like the funeral of Jack Kennedy. But to be a professional does not mean merely being there. It means that you have to profess something, to believe in something, to stand *for* something.

"Some weeks ago, we interviewed President Ryan twice in one day. The first interview in the morning was taped, and the second one was done live. The questions were a little different. There's a reason for that. Between the first interview and the second, we were called over to see someone. I will not say who that was right now. I will later. That person gave us information. It was sensitive information aimed at hurting the President, and it looked like a good story at the time. It wasn't, but we didn't know that then. At the time, it seemed as though we had asked the wrong questions. We wanted to ask better ones.

"And so we lied. We lied to the President's chief of staff, Arnold van Damm. We told him that the tape had been damaged somehow. In doing that, we also lied to the President. But worst of all, we lied to you. I have the tapes in my possession. They are not damaged in any way.

"No law was broken. The First Amendment allows us to do almost anything we want, and that's all right, because you people out there are the final judge of what we do and who we are. But one thing we may not do is to break faith with you.

"I have no brief for President Ryan. Speaking personally, I disagree with him on many policy issues. If he should run for reelection, I will probably vote for someone else. But I was part of that lie, and I cannot live with it. Whatever his faults, John Patrick Ryan is an honorable man, and I am not supposed to allow my personal animus for or against anyone or anything to affect my work.

"In this case, I did. I was wrong. I owe an apology to the President, and I owe an apology to you. This might well be the end of my career as a broadcast journalist. If so, I want to leave it as I entered it, telling the truth as best I can.

"Good night, from NBC News." Plumber took a very deep breath as he stared at the camera.

"What the hell was *that* all about?"

Plumber stood before he answered. "If you have to ask that question, Tom —"

The phone on his desk rang—actually, it had a blinking light. Plumber decided not to answer it, and instead walked to his dressing room. Tom Donner would have to figure it out all by himself.

TWO THOUSAND MILES away, over Rocky Mountain National Park, Arnold van Damm stopped the machine, ejected the tape, and carried it down the circular stairs to the President's compartment in the nose. He saw Ryan going over his next and final speech of the day.

"Jack, I think you will want to see this," the chief of staff told him, with a broad grin.

THERE HAS TO be a first one of everything. This time it happened in Chicago. She'd seen her physician on Saturday afternoon and been told the same as everyone else. Flu. Aspirin. Liquids. Bed rest. But looking in the mirror, she saw some discoloration on her fair skin, and that frightened her even more than the other symptoms she'd had to that point. She called her doctor, but she got only an answering machine, and those blotches could not wait, and so she got in her car and drove to the University of Chicago Medical Center, one of America's finest. She waited in the emergency room for about forty minutes, and when her name was called, she stood and walked toward the desk, but she didn't make it, instead falling to the tile floor in sight of the administrative people. That caused some instant reactions, and a minute later, two orderlies had her on a gurney and were wheeling her back to the treatment area, her paperwork carried behind by one of the admissions people.

The first physician to see her was a young resident most of the way through his first year of post-graduate study in internal medicine, doing his ER rotation and liking it.

"What's the problem?" he asked, as the nursing staff went to work, checking pulse, blood pressure, and respiration.

"Here," the woman from admissions said, handing over the paper forms. The physician scanned them.

"Flu symptoms, looks like, but what's this?"

"Heart rate is one twenty, BP is—wait a minute." The nurse ran it again. "Blood pressure is ninety over fifty?" She looked much too normal for that.

The doctor was unbuttoning the woman's blouse. And there it was. The clarity of the moment made passages from his textbooks leap into his mind. The young resident held up his hands.

"Everybody, stop what you're doing. We may have a major problem here. I want everybody regloved, everybody masked, right now."

"Temp is one-oh-four-point-four," another nurse said, stepping back from the patient.

"This isn't flu. We have a major internal bleed, and those are petechiae." The resident got a mask and changed gloves as he spoke. "Get Dr. Quinn over here."

A nurse trotted out, while the resident looked again at the admission papers. Might be vomiting blood, darkened stool. Depressed blood pressure, high fever, and subcutaneous bleeding. But this was Chicago, his mind protested. He got a needle.

"Everybody stay clear, okay, nobody get close to my hands and arms," he said, slipping the needle into the vein, then drawing four 5cc tubes.

"What gives?" Dr. Joe Quinn asked. The resident recited the symptoms, and posed his own question as he moved the blood tubes onto a table.

"What do you think, Joe?"

"If we were somewhere else . . ."

"Yeah. Hemorrhagic fever, if that's possible."

"Anybody ask her where she's been?" Quinn asked.

"No, Doctor," the admissions clerk replied.

"Cold packs," the head nurse said, handing over an armload of them. These went under the armpits, under the neck, and elsewhere to bleed off the body's potentially lethal heat.

"Dilantin?" Quinn wondered.

"She's not convulsing yet. Hell." The chief resident took out his surgical scissors and cut off the patient's bra. There were more petechiae forming on her torso. "We have a very sick lady here. Nurse, call Dr. Klein in infectious disease. He'll be at home now. Tell him we need him here at once. We have to get her temp down, wake her up, and find out where the hell she's been."

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INDEX CASE

MARK KLEIN WAS A FULL professor at the medical school, and therefore a man accustomed to regular working hours. Getting called in at almost nine in the evening wasn't the usual thing for him, but he was a physician, and when called, he went. It was a twenty-minute drive on this Monday night to his reserved parking space. He walked through the security staff with a nod, changed into scrubs, came into the emergency room from the back, and asked the charge nurse where Quinn was.

"Isolation Two, Doctor."

He was there in twenty seconds, and stopped cold when he saw the warning signs posted on the door. Okay, he thought, donning a mask and gloves, then walking in.

"Hi, Joe."

"I don't want to make this call without you, Professor," Quinn said quietly, handing the chart over.

Klein scanned it, then his brain stopped cold, and he started from the beginning, looking up to compare the patient with the data. Female Caucasian, yes, age forty-one, about right, divorced, that was her business, apartment about two miles away, fine, temperature on admission 104.4, pretty damn high, BP, that was awfully low. Petechiae?

"Let me take a look here," Klein said. The patient was coming around. The head was moving a little, and she was making some noise. "What's her temp now?"

"One-oh-two-two, coming down nicely," the admitting resident replied, as Klein pulled the green sheet back. The patient was nude now, and the marks could hardly have been more plain on her otherwise very fair skin. Klein looked at the other doctors.

"Where's she been?"

"We don't know," Quinn admitted. "We looked through her purse. It seems she's an executive with Sears, office over in the tower."

"Have you examined her?"

"Yes, Doctor," Quinn and the younger resident said together.

"Animal bites?" Klein asked.

"None. No evidence of needles, nothing unusual at all. She's clean."

"I'm calling it possible hemorrhagic fever, method of transmission unknown for now. I want her upstairs, total isolation, full precautions. I want this room scrubbed—everything she touched."

"I thought these viruses only passed—"

"Nobody knows, Doctor, and things I can't explain scare me. I've been to

Africa. I've seen Lassa and Q fever. Haven't seen Ebola. But what she has looks a hell of a lot like one of those," Klein said, speaking those awful names for the first time.

"But how—"

"When you don't know, it means you don't know," Professor Klein said to the resident. "For infectious diseases, if you do not know the means of transmission, you assume the worst. The worst case is aerosol, and that's how this patient will be handled. Let's get her moved up to my unit. Everybody who's been in contact with her, I want you to scrub down. Like AIDS or hepatitis. Full precautions," he emphasized again. "Where's the blood you drew?"

"Right there." The admitting physician pointed to a red plastic container.

"What's next?" Quinn asked.

"We get a sample off to Atlanta, but I think I'm going to take a look myself." Klein had a superb laboratory in which he worked every day, mainly on AIDS, which was his passion.

"Can I come with you?" Quinn asked. "I go off duty in a few minutes anyway." Monday was usually a quiet day for emergency rooms. Their hectic time was generally weekends.

"Sure."

• • •

"I KNEW HOLTZMAN would come through for me," Arnie said. He was having a drink to celebrate, as the 747 began its descent into Sacramento.

"What?" the President asked.

"Bob's a tough son of a bitch, but he's an honest son of a bitch. That also means that he will honestly burn you at the stake if he thinks you have it coming. Always remember that," the chief of staff advised.

"Donner and Plumber lied," Jack said aloud. "Damn."

"Everybody lies, Jack. Even you. It's a question of context. Some lies are designed to protect the truth. Some lies are designed to conceal it. Some are designed to deny it. And some lies happen because nobody gives a damn."

"And what happened here?"

"A combination, Mr. President. Ed Kealty wanted 'em to ambush you for him, and he suckered them. But I got that treacherous bastard for you. I'll bet that tomorrow there will be a front-page article in the Post exposing Kealty as the guy who suborned two very senior reporters, and the press will turn on him like a pack of wolves." The reporters riding in the back of the plane were already buzzing about it. Arnie had seen to it that the NBC news tape had run on the cabin video system.

"Because he's the one who made them look bad . . ."

"You got it, boss," van Damm confirmed, tossing off the remainder of his drink. He couldn't add that it might not have happened without the attack on Katie Ryan. Even reporters felt sympathy on occasion, which might have been decisive in Plumber's change of heart on the matter. But he was the one who'd made the carefully measured leaks to Bob Holtzman. He decided that he'd

have a Secret Service agent find him a good cigar once they got on the ground. He felt like having one right now.

ADLER'S BODY CLOCK was totally confused now. He found that catching catnaps helped, and it also helped that the message he was delivering was a simple and favorable one. The car stopped. A minor official opened the door for him and bowed curtly. Adler stifled a yawn as he walked into the ministry building.

"So good to see you again," the PRC Foreign Minister said, through his interpreter. Zhang Han San was there again, too, and made his own greeting.

"Your gracious agreement to allow direct flights certainly makes the process easier for me. Thank you for that," SecState replied, taking his seat.

"Just so you understand that these are exceptional circumstances," the Foreign Minister observed.

"Of course."

"What news do you bring us from our wayward cousins?"

"They are entirely willing to match your reductions in activity, with an eye toward reducing tension."

"And their insulting accusations?"

"Minister, that issue never arose. I believe that they are as interested as you in returning to peaceful circumstances."

"How good of them," Zhang commented. "They initiate hostilities, shoot down two of our aircraft, damage one of their own airliners, kill over a hundred people, whether by deliberate act or by incompetence, and then they say that they will match *us* in reducing provocative acts. I hope your government appreciates the forbearance we are showing here."

"Mr. Minister, peace serves everyone's best interests, does it not? America appreciates the actions of both parties in these informal proceedings. The People's Republic has indeed been gracious in more than one way, and the government in Taiwan is willing to match your actions. What more is required than that?"

"Very little," the Foreign Minister replied. "Merely compensation for the deaths of our four aviators. Each of them left a family behind."

"Their fighters did shoot first," Zhang pointed out.

"That may be true, but the question of the airliner is still undetermined."

"Certainly, *we* had nothing to do that that." This came from the Foreign Minister.

There were few things more boring than negotiations between countries, but there was actually a reason for that. Sudden or surprise moves could force a country into making impromptu decisions. Unexpected pressure caused anger, and anger had no place in high-level discussions and decisions. Therefore, important talks were almost never decisive, but were, rather, evolutionary in nature, which gave each side time to think through its position, and that of the other side, carefully, so to arrive at a final communique with which both sides could be relatively content. Thus the demand for compensation was a violation of the rules. More properly done, this would have been said at the first session, and Adler would have taken it to Taipei and probably presented

it as his own suggestion after the Republic of China government had agreed to cooperate in the reduction of tension. But they had already done that, and now the PRC wanted him to take back the request for compensation instead of a formula for local detente. That was an insult to the Taiwanese government, and also a measured insult to the American government for having been used as a stalking horse for another country.

This was all the more true since Adler and the ROC knew who'd killed the airliner, and who had therefore shown contempt for human life—for which the PRC now demanded compensation! And now Adler wondered again how much of what he knew of the incident was known to the PRC. If they knew a lot, then this was definitely a game whose rules had yet to be decoded.

"I think it would be more useful if both sides were to cover their individual losses and needs," Secretary Adler suggested.

"I regret that we cannot accept that. It is a matter of principle, you see. He who commits the improper act must make amends."

"But what if—I do not have any evidence to suggest this, but what if it is determined that the PRC inadvertently damaged the airliner? In such a case your request for compensation might appear unjust."

"That is not possible. We have interviewed our surviving pilots and their reports are unequivocal." Again it was Zhang.

"What precisely do you request?" Adler asked.

"Two hundred thousand dollars for each of the four aviators lost. The money will go to their families, of course," Zhang promised.

"I can present this request to—"

"Excuse me. It is not a request. It is a requirement," the Foreign Minister told Adler.

"I see. I can present your position to them, but I must urge you not to make this a condition of your promise to reduce tension."

"That *is* our position." The Foreign Minister's eyes were quite serene.

"... AND GOD BLESS America," Ryan concluded. The crowd stood and cheered. The band struck up—there had to be a band everywhere he went, Jack supposed—and he made his way off the dais behind a wall of nervous Secret Service agents. Well, the President thought, no gunfire out of the blinding lights this time, either. He stifled another yawn. He'd been on the move for over twelve hours. Four speeches didn't seem to be all that much physical work, but Ryan was learning just how exhausting public speaking could be. You had the shakes every time before getting up there, and though you got over it in a few minutes, the accumulated stress did take its toll. The dinner hadn't helped much. The food had been bland, so carefully chosen to offend no one that it wasn't worth anyone's attention. But it had given him heartburn anyway.

"Okay," Arnie told him, as the presidential party assembled to head out the back door. "For a guy who was ready to chuck it yesterday, you did awfully well."

"Mr. President!" a reporter called.

"Talk to him," Arnie whispered.

"Yes?" Jack said, walking over, to the displeasure of his security force.

"Do you know about what John Plumber said this evening on NBC?" The reporter was ABC, and unlikely to pass on the chance to slam a competing network.

"Yes, I've heard about it," the President replied soberly.

"Do you have any comment?"

"Obviously, I do not like learning about all this, but as far as Mr. Plumber is concerned, that's as gracious an act of moral courage as I've seen in quite a while. He's okay in my book."

"Do you know who it was who—"

"Please, let Mr. Plumber handle that. It's his story, and he knows how to tell it. Now if you will excuse me, I have a plane to catch."

"Thank you, Mr. President," the ABC reporter said to Ryan's back.

"Just right," Arnie said, with a smile. "We've had a long day, but it's been a good day."

Ryan let out a long breath. "You say so."

"OH, MY GOD," Professor Klein whispered. There it was on the display monitor. The Shepherd's Crook, right out of a medical text. How the hell had it come to Chicago?

"That's Ebola," Dr. Quinn said, adding, "That's not possible."

"How thorough was your physical examination?" the senior man asked again.

"Could have been better, but—no bite marks, no needle marks. Mark, it's *Chicago*. I had *frost* on my windshield the other day."

Professor Klein pressed his hands together, and pushed his gloved fingers up against his nose. Then he stopped the gesture when he realized that he was still wearing a surgical mask. "Keys in her purse?"

"Yes, sir."

"First, we have cops around the ER. Get one, tell him we need a police escort to go to her apartment and allow us to look around. Tell him this woman's life is in danger. Maybe she's got a pet, a tropical plant, something. We have the name of her physician. Get him up, get him in here. We need to find out what he knows about her."

"Treatment?"

"We cool her down, we keep her hydrated, we medicate for pain, but there isn't anything that really works on this. Rousseau in Paris has tried interferon and a few other things, but no luck so far." He frowned at the display again. "How'd she get it? How the hell did she contract this little bastard?"

"CDC?"

"You get the cop up here. I'll get a fax off to Gus Lorenz." Klein checked his watch. Damn.

THE PREDATOR DRONES were back in Saudi, having never been discovered. It was felt that having them circle over a stationary position, like a divisional

encampment, was a little too dangerous, however, and now the overhead work was being done by satellites, whose photos downloaded to the National Reconnaissance Office.

"Check this out," one of the night crew said to the guy at the next workstation. "What are these?"

The tanks of the UIR "Immortals" division were grouped in what was essentially a large parking lot, all evenly spaced in long, regular lines so that they could be counted—a stolen tank with a full basic load of shells was a dangerous thing to have on the loose, and all armies took security of the tank laagers seriously. It also made things more convenient for the maintenance personnel to have them all together. Now they were all back, and men were swarming over the tanks and other fighting vehicles, doing the normal maintenance that followed a major exercise. In front of every tank in the first row were two dark lines, each about a meter across, and ten meters long. The man on the screen was ex—Air Force, and more expert on airplanes than land-combat vehicles.

His neighbor only needed one look. "Tracks."

"What?"

"They're rotating the tires, like. Tracks wear out, and you put new ones on. The old ones go into the shop to be worked on, replacing pads and stuff," the former soldier explained. "It's no big deal."

Closer examination showed how it was done. The new tracks were laid in front of the old ones. The old ones were then disconnected, and attached to the new, and the tank, its motor running, simply drove forward, the sprocket wheel pulling the new track in place over the road wheels. It required several men and was hot, heavy work, but it could be done by a well-trained tank crew in about an hour under ideal conditions, which, the ex-soldier explained, these were. Essentially, the tank drove onto the new tracks.

"I never knew how they did that."

"Beats having to jack the sumbitch off the ground."

"What's a track good for?"

"On one of these, cross-country in a desert? Oh, call it a thousand miles, maybe a little less."

SURE ENOUGH, THE two couches in Air Force One's forward cabin folded out to make beds. After dismissing his staff, Ryan hung up his clothes and lay down. Clean sheets and everything, and he was weary enough that he didn't mind being on an airplane. Flight time to Washington was four and a half hours, and then he'd be able to sleep some more in his own bed. Unlike normal red-eye travelers, he might even be able to do some useful work the next day.

In the big cabin, aft, the reporters were doing the same, having decided to leave the issue of Plumber's astounding revelation to the next day. They had no choice in the matter; a story of this magnitude was handled at least at the assistant managing editor level. Many of the print journalists were dreaming about the editorials that would appear in the papers. The TV reporters were trying not to cringe at what this would mean to their credibility.

In between were the President's staff members. They were all smiles, or nearly so.

"Well, I finally saw his temper," Arnie told Callic Weston. "Big-time."

"And I bet he saw yours, too."

"And mine won." Arnie sipped at his drink. "You know, the way things are going, I think we have a pretty good President here."

"He hates it." Weston had one of her own.

Arnie van Damm didn't care: "Fabulous speeches, Callie."

"There's such an engaging way about how he delivers them," she thought. "Every time, he starts off tight, embarrassed, and then the teacher in him takes over, and he really gets into it. He doesn't even know it, either."

"Honesty. It really does come out, doesn't it?" Arnie paused. "There's going to be a memorial service for the dead agents."

"I'm already thinking about it," Weston assured him. "What are you going to do about Kealty?"

"I'm thinking about *that*. We're going to sink that bastard once and for all."

BADRAYN WAS BACK on his computer, checking the proper Internet sites. Still nothing. In another day he might start worrying, though it wasn't really his problem if nothing happened, was it? Everything he'd done had gone perfectly.

PATIENT ZERO OPENED her eyes, which got everyone's attention. Her temperature was down to 101.6, entirely due to the cold packs that now surrounded her body like a fish in the market. The combination of pain and exhaustion was plain on her face. In that way, she looked like a patient with advanced AIDS, a disease with which the physician was all too familiar.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Klein," the professor told her from behind his mask. "You had us a little worried there for a minute, but things are under control now."

"Hurts," she said.

"I know, and we're going to help you with that, but I need to ask you a few questions. Can you help me with a few things?" Klein asked.

"Okay."

"Have you been doing any traveling lately?"

"What do you mean?" Every word she spoke drew down on her energy reserves.

"Have you been out of the country?"

"No. Flew to Kansas City ... ten days ago, that's all. Day trip," she added.

"Okay." It wasn't. "Have you had any contact with someone who's been out of the country?"

"No." She tried to shake her head. It moved maybe a quarter inch.

"Forgive me, but I have to ask this. Do you have any ongoing sexual relationships at the moment?"

That question shook her. "AIDS?" she gasped, thinking that was the worst thing she might have.

Klein shook his head emphatically. “No, definitely not. Please don’t worry about that.”

“Divorced,” the patient said. “Just a few months. No new . . . men in my life yet.”

“Well, as pretty as you are, that’ll have to change soon,” Klein observed, trying to get a smile out of her. “What do you do at Sears?”

“Housewares, buyer. Just had ... big show ... McCormick Center . . . lots of paperwork, orders and things.”

This was going nowhere. Klein tried a few more questions. They led nowhere. He turned and pointed to the nurse.

“Okay, we’re going to do something about the pain now,” the professor told her. He stepped away so as not to crowd the nurse when she started the morphine on the IV tree. “This will start working in a few seconds, okay? I’ll be back soon.”

Quinn was waiting out in the hall with a uniformed police officer, a checkerboard band around his cap.

“Doc, what’s the story?” the cop asked.

“The patient has something very serious, possibly very contagious. I need to look over her apartment.”

“That’s not really legal, you know. You’re supposed to go to a judge and get —”

“Officer, there’s no time for that. We have her keys. We could just break in, but I want you there so that you can say we didn’t do anything wrong.” And besides, if she had a burglar alarm, it wouldn’t do for them to be arrested. “There’s no time to waste. This woman is very sick.”

“Okay, my car is outside.” The cop pointed and the doctors followed.

“Get the fax off to Atlanta?” Quinn asked. Klein shook his head.

“Let’s look at her place first.” He decided not to wear a coat. It was cold outside, and the temperature would be very inhospitable to the virus in the unlikely event that it had somehow gotten on his scrubs. Reason told him that there was no real danger here. He’d never encountered Ebola clinically, but he knew as much about it as any man could. It was regrettably normal for people to show up with diseases whose presence they could not explain. Most of the time, careful investigation would reveal how it had been contracted, but not always. Even with AIDS, there was the handful of unexplained cases. But only a handful, and you didn’t start with one of those as your Index Case. Professor Klein shivered when he got outside. The temperature was in the low thirties, with a north wind blowing down off Lake Michigan. But that wasn’t the reason for his shaking.

PRICE OPENED THE door to the nose cabin. The lights were off except for a few faint indirect ones. The President was lying on his back and snoring loudly enough to be heard over the whining drone of the engines. She had to resist the temptation to tiptoe in and cover him with a blanket. Instead, she smiled and closed the door.

“Maybe there is such a thing as justice, Jeff,” she observed to Agent Raman.

“The newsie thing, you mean?”

"Yeah."

"Don't bet on it," the other agent said.

They looked around. Finally everyone was asleep, even the chief of staff. Topside, the flight crew was doing their job, along with the other USAF personnel, and it really was like a red-eye flight back to the East Coast, as Air Force One passed over central Illinois. The two agents moved back to their seating area. Three members of the Detail were playing cards, quietly. Others were reading or dozing.

An Air Force sergeant came down the circular steps, holding a folder.

"FLASH-traffic for the Boss," she announced.

"Is it that important? We get into Andrews in about ninety minutes."

"I just take 'em off the fax machine," the sergeant pointed out.

"Okay." Price took the message and headed aft. To where Ben Goodley was. It was his job to be around to tell the President what he needed to know about the important happenings in the world—or, in this case, to evaluate the importance of a message. Price shook the man's shoulder. The national intelligence officer opened one eye.

"Yeah?"

"Do we wake the Boss for this?"

The intelligence specialist scanned it and shook his head. "It can wait. Adler knows what he's doing, and there's a working group at State for this." He turned back into his seat without another word.

"DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING," Klein told the policeman. "Best for you to stand right by the door, but if you want to follow us around, don't touch a thing. Wait." The physician reached into the plastic trash bag he'd brought along, and pulled out a surgical mask in a sterile container. "Put this on, okay?"

"Anything you say, Doc."

Klein handed over the house key. The police officer opened the door. It turned out that there was an alarm system. The control panel was just inside the door, but not turned on. The two physicians put on their own masks and donned latex gloves. First, they turned on all the lights.

"What are we looking for?" Quinn asked.

Klein was already looking. No cat or dog had come to note their arrival. He saw no bird cages—part of him had hoped for a pet monkey, but somehow he knew that wasn't in the cards. Ebola didn't seem to like monkeys very much, anyway. It killed them with all the alacrity it applied to human victims. Plants, then, he thought. Wouldn't it be odd if Ebola's host was something other than an animal? That would be a first of sorts.

There were plants, but nothing exotic. They stood in the center of the living room, not touching anything with their gloved hands or even with their green-trousered legs, as they turned around slowly, looking.

"I don't see anything," Quinn reported.

"Neither do I. Kitchen."

There were some more plants there, two that looked like herbs in small pots. Klein didn't recognize their type and decided to lift them.

"Wait. Here," Quinn said, opening a drawer and finding freezer bags. The

plants went into those bags, which the younger physician sealed carefully. Klein opened the refrigerator. Nothing unusual there. The same was true of the freezer. He'd thought it possible that some exotic food product . . . but, no. Everything the patient ate was typically American.

The bedroom was a bedroom and nothing more. No plants there, they saw.

"Some article of clothing? Leather?" Quinn asked. "Anthrax can—"

"Ebola can't. It's too delicate. We know the organism we're dealing with. It can't survive in this environment. It just *can't,"* the professor insisted. They didn't know much about the little bastard, but one of the things they did at CDC was to establish the environmental parameters, how long the virus could survive in a whole series of conditions. Chicago at this time of year was as inhospitable to that sort of virus as a blast furnace. Orlando, some place in the South, maybe. But Chicago? "We got nothing," he concluded in frustration.

"Maybe the plants?"

"You know how hard it is to get a plant through customs?"

"I've never tried."

"I have, tried to bring some wild orchids back from Venezuela once . . ." He looked around some more. "There's nothing here, Joe."

"Is her prognosis as bad as—"

"Yeah." A pair of gloved hands rubbed against the scrub pants. Inside the latex rubber, his hands were sweating now. "If we can't determine where it came from . . . if we can't explain it ..." He looked at his younger, taller colleague. "I have to get back. I want to take another look at that structure."

"HELLO," GUS LORENZ said. He checked his clock. What the hell?

"Gus?" the voice asked.

"Yes, who's this?"

"Mark Klein in Chicago."

"Something wrong?" Lorenz asked groggily. The reply opened his eyes all the way.

"I think—no, Gus, I *know* I have an Ebola case up here."

"How can you be sure?"

"I have the crook. I micrographed it myself. It's the Shepherd's Crook, and no mistake, Gus. I wish it were."

"Where's he been?"

"It's a she, and she hasn't been anywhere special." Klein summarized what he knew in less than a minute. "There is no immediately apparent explanation for this."

Lorenz could have objected that this was not possible, but the medical community is an intimate one at its higher levels; he knew Mark Klein was a full professor at one of the world's finest medical schools. "Just one case?"

"They all start with one, Gus," Klein reminded his friend. A thousand miles away, Lorenz swung his legs off the bed and onto the floor.

"Okay. I need a specimen."

"I have a courier on the way to O'Hare now. He'll catch the first flight down. I can e-mail you the micrographs right now."

"Give me about forty minutes to get in."

"Gus?"

"Yes?"

"Is there anything on the treatment side that I don't know? We have a very sick patient here," Klein said, hoping that for once maybe he wasn't fully up to speed on something in his field.

" 'Fraid not, Mark. Nothing new that I know about."

"Damn. Okay, we'll do what we can here. Call me when you get there. I'm in my office."

Lorenz went into the bathroom and ran some water to splash in his face, proving to himself that this wasn't a dream. No, he thought. Nightmare.

THIS PRESIDENTIAL PERK was one even the press respected. Ryan walked down the steps first, saluted the USAF sergeant at the bottom, and walked the fifty yards to the helicopter. Inside, he promptly buckled his belt and went back to sleep. Fifteen minutes later he was roused from his seat again, walked down another set of stairs, saluted a Marine this time, and headed into the White House. Ten minutes after that, he was in a sleeping place that didn't move.

"Good trip?" Cathy asked, one eye partly open.

"Long one," her husband reported, falling back to sleep.

THE FIRST FLIGHT from Chicago to Atlanta left the gate at 6:15 A.M., Central Time. Before then, Lorenz was in his office, on his computer terminal, dialed into the Internet and on the phone at the same time.

"I'm downloading the image now."

As the older man watched, the micrograph grew from top to bottom, one line at a time, faster than a fax would come out of a machine, and far more detailed.

"Tell me I'm wrong, Gus," Klein said, no hope in his voice at all.

"I think you know better, Mark." He paused as the image finished forming. "That's our friend."

"Where's he been lately?"

"Well, we had a couple of cases in Zaire, and two more reported in Sudan. That's it, as far as I know. Your patient, has she been—"

"No. There aren't any risk factors that I have been able to identify so far. Given the incubation period, she must almost certainly have contracted it here in Chicago. And that's not possible, is it?"

"Sex?" Lorenz asked. He could almost hear the shake of the head over the phone.

"I asked. She says she's not getting any of that. Any reports anyplace else?"

"None, none anywhere. Mark, are you sure of what you've told me?" As insulting as the question was, it had to be asked.

"I wish I weren't. The micrograph I sent is the third one, I wanted good isolation for it. Her blood is full of it, Gus. Wait a minute." He heard a muffled conversation. "She just came around again. Says she had a tooth extracted a

week or so ago. We have the name of her dentist. We'll run that one down. That's all we have here."

"All right, let me get set up for your sample. It's only one case. Let's not get too excited."

RAMAN GOT HOME shortly before dawn. It was just as well that the streets were almost entirely devoid of traffic at this time of day. He was in no condition for safe driving. Arriving home, he followed the usual routine. On his answering machine was another wrong number, the voice of Mr. Alahad.

THE PAIN WAS so severe that it woke him up from the sleep of exhaustion. Just walking the twenty feet around the bed and into the bathroom seemed like a marathon's effort, but he managed to stagger that far. The cramping was terrible, which amazed him, because he hadn't eaten all that much in the past couple of days despite his wife's insistence on chicken soup and toast, but with all the urgency he could suffer, he dropped his shorts and sat down just in time. Simultaneously, his upper GI seemed to explode as well, and the former golf pro doubled over, vomiting on the tiles. There was an instant's embarrassment at having done so unmanly a thing. Then he saw what was there at his feet.

"Honey?" he called weakly. "Help . . ."

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HEMORRHAGE

SIX HOURS OF SLEEP, maybe a little more, was better than nothing. This morning, Cathy got up first, and the father of the First Family came into the breakfast room unshaven, following the smell of coffee.

"When you feel this rotten, you should at least have a hangover to blame it on," the President announced. His morning papers were in the usual place. A Post-it note was affixed to the front page of the *Washington Post*, just over an article bylined to Bob Holtzman and John Plumber. Now, *there* was something to start off his day, Jack told himself.

"That's really sleazy," Sally Ryan said. She'd already heard TV coverage of the controversy. "What finks." She would have said "dicks," a newly favored term among the young ladies at St. Mary's School, but Dad wasn't ready to acknowledge the fact that his Sally was talking like a grown-up.

"Uh-huh," her father replied. The story gave far more detail than was possible in a couple of minutes of air time. And it named Ed Kealty, who had, it seemed—unsurprisingly, but still against the law—a CIA source who had leaked information which, the story explained, had not been entirely truthful and, even worse, had been a deliberate political attack on the President, using the media as an attack dog. Jack snorted. As though that were new. The *Post*'s emphasis was on the gross violation of journalistic integrity. Plumber's recantation of his actions was very sincere, it said. The article said that senior executives at NBC's news division had declined comment, pending their own inquiry. It also said that the *Post* had custody of the tapes, which were entirely undamaged.

The *Washington Times*, he saw, was just as irate but not in quite the same way. There would be a colossal internecine battle in the Washington press corps over this, something, the *Times* editorial observed, that the politicians would clearly watch with amusement.

Well, Ryan told himself, *that ought to keep them off* my *back for a while*.

Next, he opened the manila folder with the secret-tape borders on it. This document, he saw, was pretty old.

"Bastards," POTUS whispered.

"They really did it to themselves this time," Cathy said, reading her own paper.

"No," SWORDSMAN replied. "China."

IT WASN'T AN epidemic yet, because nobody knew about it. Doctors were already reacting in surprise to telephone calls. Excited, if not frantic, calls to

answering services had already awakened over twenty of them across the country. Bloody vomit and diarrhea were reported in every case, but only one to a customer, and there were various medical problems that could explain that. Bleeding ulcers, for example, and many of the calls came from businesspeople for whom stress came with the tic and white shirt. Most were told to drive to the nearest hospital's emergency room, and in nearly all cases the doctor got dressed to meet his or her patient there, or to have a trusted associate do so. Some were instructed to be at the office first thing, usually between eight and nine in the morning, to be the first patient of the day and thus not interfere with the daily schedule.

GUS LORENZ HADN'T felt like being in his office alone, and had called in a few senior staff members to join him at his computer. They noted that his pipe was lit when they came in. One of them might have objected—it was contrary to federal regulations—but she stopped short, looking at the image on the screen.

"Where's this one from?" the epidemiologist asked.

"Chicago."

"*Our* Chicago?"

• • •

PIERRE ALEXANDRE ARRIVED at his office on the eleventh floor of the Ross Building just before eight. His morning routine began with checking his fax machine. Attending physicians with AIDS cases regularly sent him patient information that way. It allowed him to monitor a large number of patients, both to advise treatment options and to increase his own knowledge base. There was only one fax this morning, and it was relatively good news. Merck had just fielded a new drug which the FDA was fast-tracking into clinical trials, and a friend of his at Penn State was reporting some interesting results. That's when his phone rang.

"Dr. Alexandre."

"This is the ER, sir. Could you come down here? I got a patient here, Caucasian male, thirty-seven. High fever, internal bleeding. I don't know what this is—I mean," the resident said, "I mean, I know what it looks like, but "

"Give me five minutes."

"Yes, sir," she acknowledged.

The internist/virologist/molecular biologist donned his starched lab coat, buttoned it, and headed down toward the emergency room, which was in a separate building on the sprawling Hopkins campus. Even in the military, he'd dressed the same way. The Doctor Look, he called it. Stethoscope in the right-side pocket. Name embroidered onto the left side. A calm expression on his face as he walked into the largely idle ER. Nighttime was the busy period here. There she was, cute as a button . . . putting on a surgical mask, he saw. What could be all that wrong this early on a spring day?

"Good morning, Doctor," he said, in his most charming Creole accent.

“What seems to be the problem?” She handed him the chart and started talking while he read.

“His wife brought him in. High fever, some disorientation, BP is low, probable internal bleed, bloody vomit and stool. And there are some marks on his face,” she reported. “And I’m not sure enough to say.”

“Okay, let’s take a look.” She sounded like a promising young doc, Alexandre thought pleasantly. She knew what she didn’t know, and she’d called for consultation ... but why not one of the internal-medicine guys? the former colonel asked himself, taking another look at her face. He put on mask and gloves and walked past the isolation curtain.

“Good morning, I’m Dr. Alexandre,” he said to the patient. The man’s eyes were listless, but it was the marks on his cheeks that made Alexandre’s breath stop. It was George Westphal’s face, come back from more than a decade in Alex’s past.

“How did he get here?”

“His personal physician told his wife to drive him in. He has privileges at Hopkins.”

“What’s he do? News photographer? Diplomat? Something to do with traveling?”

The resident shook her head. “He sells Winncbagos, RVs and like that, dealership over on Pulaski Highway.”

Alexandre looked around the area. There were a medical student and two nurses, in addition to the resident who was running the case. All gloved, all masked. Good. She was smart, and now Alex knew why she was scared.

“Blood?”

“Already taken, Doctor. Doing the cross-match now, and specimens for analysis in your lab.”

The professor nodded. “Good. Admit him right now. My unit. I need a container for the tubes. Be careful with all the sharps.” A nurse went off to get the things.

“Professor, this looks like—I mean, it can’t be, but—”

“It can’t be,” he agreed. “But it does look that way. Those are petechiae, right out of the book. So we’ll treat it like it is for the moment, okay?” The nurse returned with the proper containers. Alexandre took the extra blood specimens. “As soon as you send him upstairs, everybody strip, everybody scrub. There’s not that much danger involved, as long as you take the proper precautions. Is his wife around?”

“Yes, Doctor, out in the waiting room.”

“Have somebody bring her up to my office. I have to ask her some things. Questions?” There were none. “Then let’s get moving.”

Dr. Alexandre visually checked the plastic container for the blood and tucked it into the left-side pocket of his lab coat, after determining that it was properly sealed. The calm Doctor’s Look was gone, as he walked to the elevator. Looking at the burnished steel of the automatic doors, he told himself that, no, this wasn’t possible., Maybe something else. But what? Leukemia had some of the same symptoms, and as dreaded as that diagnosis was, it was preferable to what it looked like to him. The doors opened, and he headed off to his lab.

"Morning, Janet," he said, walking into the hot lab.

"Alex," replied Janet Clemenger, a Ph.D. molecular biologist.

He took the plastic box from his pocket. "I need this done in a hurry. Like, immediately."

"What is it?" She wasn't often told to stop everything she was doing, especially at the start of a working day.

"Looks like hemorrhagic fever. Treat it as level . . . four."

Her eyes went a little wide. "Here?" People were asking the same question all over America, but none of them knew it yet.

"They should be bringing the patient up now. I have to talk to his wife."

She took the container and set it gently on the worktable. "The usual antibody tests?"

"Yes, and please be careful with it, Janet."

"Always," she assured him. Like Alexandre, she worked a lot of AIDS experiments.

Alexandre next went to his office to call Dave James.

"How certain are you?" the dean asked two minutes later.

"Dave, it's just a heads-up for now, but—I've seen it before. Just like it was with George Westphal. I have Jan Clemenger working on it right now. Until further notice, I think we have to take this one seriously. If the lab results are what I expect, I get on the phone to Gus and we declare a for-real alert."

"Well, Ralph gets back from London day after tomorrow. It's your department for the moment, Alex. Keep me posted."

"Roger," the former soldier said. Then it was time to speak to the patient's wife.

In the emergency room, orderlies were scrubbing the floor where the bed had been, overseen by the ER charge nurse. Overhead they could hear the distinctively powerful sound of a Sikorsky helicopter. The First Lady was coming to work.

THE COURIER ARRIVED at CDC, carrying his "hatbox," and handed it over to one of Lorenz's lab technicians. From there everything was fast-tracked. The antibody tests were already set up on the lab benches, and under exquisitely precise handling precautions, a drop of blood was dipped into a small glass tube. The liquid in the tube changed color almost instantly.

"It's Ebola, Doctor," the technician reported. In another room a sample was being set up for the scanning electron microscope. Lorenz walked there, his legs feeling tired for so early in the morning. The instrument was already switched on. It was just a matter of getting things aimed properly before the images appeared on the TV display.

"Take your pick, Gus." This was a senior physician, not a lab tech. As the magnification was adjusted, the picture was instantly clear. This blood sample was alive with the tiny strands. And soon it would be alive with nothing else. "Where's this one from?"

"Chicago," Lorenz answered.

"Welcome to the New World," he told the screen as he worked the fine control to isolate one particular strand for full magnification. "You little son of

a bitch."

Next came a closer examination to see if they could subtype it. That would take a while.

"AND SO HE has not traveled out of the country?" Alex was running down his list of stock questions.

"No, no he hasn't," she assured him. "Just to the big RV show. He goes to that every year."

"Ma'm, I have to ask a number of questions, and some of them may seem offensive. Please understand that I have to do this in order to help your husband." She nodded. Alexandre had a quiet way of getting past that problem. "Do you have any reason to suspect that your husband has been seeing other women?"

"No."

"Sorry, I had to ask that. Do you have any exotic pets?"

"Just two Chesapeake Bay retrievers," she replied, surprised at the question.

"Monkeys? Anything from out of the country?"

"No, nothing like that."

This isn't going anywhere. Alex couldn't think of another relevant question. They were supposed to say *yes* to the travel one. "Do you know anybody, family member, friend, whatever, who does a lot of traveling?"

"No—can I see him?"

"Yes, you can, but first we have to get him settled into his room and get some treatment going."

"Is he going to—I mean, he's never been sick at all, he runs and doesn't smoke and doesn't drink much and we've always been careful." And then she started losing control.

"I won't lie to you. Your husband appears to be a very sick man, but your family doctor sent you to the best hospital in the world. I just started here. I spent more than twenty years in the Army, all of that in the area of infectious diseases. So you are in the right place, and I am the right doc." You had to say things like that, empty words though they might be. The one thing you could never, ever, do was take hope away. The phone rang.

"Dr. Alexandre."

"Alex, it's Janet. Antibody test is positive for Ebola. I ran it twice," she told him. "I have the spare tube packaged to go to CDC, and the microscopy will be ready to go in about fifteen minutes."

"Very well. I'll be over for that." He hung up. "Here," he told the patient's wife. "Let me get you out to the waiting room and introduce you to the nurses. We have some very good ones on my unit."

This was not the fun part, even though infectious diseases was not a particularly fun field. In trying to give her hope, he'd probably given her too much. Now she'd listen to him, thinking that he spoke with God's voice, but right now God didn't have any answers, and next he had to explain to her that the nurses would be taking some of her blood for examination, too.

“WHAT GIVES, SCOTT?” Ryan asked across thirteen time zones.

“Well, they sure as hell tossed a wrench into it. Jack?”

“Yes?”

“This guy Zhang, I’ve met him twice now. He doesn’t talk a hell of a lot, but he’s a bigger fish than we thought. I think he’s the one keeping an eye on the Foreign Minister. He’s a player, Mr. President. Tell the Foleys to open a file on the guy and put a big flag on it.”

“Will Taipei spring for compensation?” SWORDSMAN asked.

“Would you?”

“My instinct would be to tell them where they could shove it, but I’m not supposed to lose my temper, remember?”

“They will listen to the demand, and then they will ask me where the United States of America stands. What do I tell them?”

“For the moment, we stand for renewed peace and stability.”

“I can make that last an hour, maybe two hours. Then what?” SecState persisted.

“You know that area better than I do. What’s the game, Scott?”

“I don’t know. I thought I did, but I don’t. First, I kinda hoped it was an accident. Then I thought they might be rattling their cage—Taiwan’s, I mean. No, it’s not that. They’re pushing too hard and in the wrong way for that. Third option, they’re doing all this to test you. If so, they’re playing very rough—too rough. They don’t know you well enough yet, Jack. It’s too big a pot for the first hand of the night. Bottom line, I do not know what they’re thinking. Without that, I can’t tell you how to play it out.”

“We know they were behind Japan—Zhang personally was behind that Yamata bastard and—”

“Yes, I know. And they must know that we know, and that’s one more reason not to piss us off. There are a lot of chips on the table, Jack,” Adler emphasized again. “And I do not see a reason for this.”

“Tell Taiwan we’re behind them?”

“Okay, if you do that, and it gets out, and the PRC ups the ante, we have thousands—hell, close to a hundred thousand citizens over here, and they’re hostages. I won’t go into the trade considerations, but that’s a big chip in political-economic terms.”

“But if we don’t back Taiwan up, then they’ll think they’re on their own and cornered—”

“Yes, sir, and the same thing happens from the other direction. My best suggestion is to ride with it. I deliver the demand, Taipei says no, then I suggest that they suggest the issue is held in abeyance until the issue of the airliner is determined. For that, we call in the U.N. We, that is, the United States, call the question before the Security Council. That strings it out. Sooner or later, their friggin’ navy’s gotta run out of fuel. We have a carrier group in the neighborhood, and so nothing *can* happen, really.”

Ryan frowned. “I won’t say I like it, but run with it. It’ll last a day or two anyway. My instinct is to back up Taiwan and tell the PRC to suck wind.”

“The world isn’t that simple, and you know it,” Adler’s voice told him.

“Ain’t it the truth. Run with what you said, Scott, and keep me posted.”

"Yes, sir."

ALEX CHECKED HIS watch. Next to the electron microscope was Dr. Clemenger's notebook. At 10:16, she lifted it, made a time notation, and described how both she and her fellow associate professor confirmed the presence of the Ebola virus. On the other side of the lab, a technician was running a test on blood drawn from the wife of Patient Zero. It was positive for Ebola antibodies. She had it, too, though she didn't know it yet.

"They have any children?" Janet asked, when the news arrived.

"Two, both away in school."

"Alex, unless you know something I don't . . . I hope their insurance is paid up." Clemenger didn't quite have the status of an M.D. here, but at moments like this she didn't mind. Physicians got to know the patients a lot better than the pure scientists did.

"What else can you tell me?"

"I need to map the genes out a little, but look here." She tapped the screen. "See the way the protein loops are grouped, and this structure down here?" Janet was the lab's top expert on how viruses were formed.

"Mayinga?" *Christ, that's what got George* . . . And nobody knew how George had gotten it, and he didn't know now how this patient . . .

"Too early to be sure. You know what I have to do to run that down, but . . ."

"It fits. No known risk factors for him, maybe not for her, either. Jesus, Janet, if this is airborne."

"I know, Alex. You call Atlanta or me?"

"I'll do it."

"I'll start picking the little bastard apart," she promised.

It seemed a long walk from the lab back to his office. His secretary was in now, and noticed his mood.

"DR. LORENZ IS in a meeting now," another secretary said. That usually put people off. Not this time:

"Break in, if you would, please. Tell him it's Pierre Alexandre at Johns Hopkins, and it's important."

"Yes, Doctor. Please hold." She pressed one button and then another, ringing the line in the conference room down the hall. "Dr. Lorenz, please, it's urgent."

"Yes, Marjorie?"

"I have Dr. Alexandre holding on three. He says it's important, sir."

"Thank you." Gus switched lines. "Talk fast, Alex, we have a developing situation here," he said in an unusually businesslike voice.

"I know. Ebola's made it to this side of the world," Alexandre announced.

"Have you been talking to Mark, too?"

"Mark? Mark who?" the professor asked.

"Wait, wait, back up, Alex. Why did you call here?"

"We have two patients on my unit, and they've both got it, Gus."

"In Baltimore?"

"Yes, now what—where else, Gus?"

"Mark Klein in Chicago has one, female, forty-one. I've already micrographed the blood sample." In two widely separated cities, two world-class experts did exactly the same thing. One pair of eyes looked at a wall in a small office. The other pair looked down a conference table at ten other physicians and scientists. The expressions were exactly the same. "Has either one been to Chicago or Kansas City?"

"Negative," the former colonel said. "When did Klein's case show up?"

"Last night, ten or so. Yours?"

"Just before eight. Husband has all the symptoms. Wife doesn't, but her blood's positive . . . oh, shit, Gus . . ."

"I have to call Detrick next."

"You do that. Keep an eye on the fax machine, Gus," Professor Alexandre advised. "And hope it's all a fucking mistake." But it wasn't, and both knew it now.

"Stay close to the phone. I may want your input."

"You bet." Alex thought about that as he hung up. He had a call to make, too.

"Dave, Alex."

"Well?" the dean asked.

"Husband and wife both positive. Wife is not yet symptomatic. Husband is showing all the classic signs."

"So what's the story, Alex?" the dean asked guardedly.

"Dave, the story is I caught Gus at a staff meeting. They were discussing an Ebola case in Chicago. Mark Klein called it in around midnight, I gather. No commonalties between that one and our Index Case here. I, uh, think we have a potential epidemic on our hands. We need to alert our emergency people. There might be some very dangerous stuff coming in."

"Epidemic? But—"

"That's my call to make, Dave. CDC is talking to the Army. I know exactly what they're going to say up at Detrick. Six months ago it would have been me making that call, too." Alexandre's other line started ringing. His secretary got it in the outer office. A moment later, her head appeared in the doorway.

"Doctor, that's ER, they say they need you stat." Alex relayed that message to the dean.

"I'll meet you there, Alex," Dave James told him.

"AT THE NEXT call on your machine, you will be free to complete your mission," Mr. Alahad said. "The timing is yours to decide." He didn't have to add that it would be better for him if Raman erased all his messages. To do so would have appeared venal to one who was willing to sacrifice himself. "We will not meet again in this lifetime."

"I must go to my workplace." Raman hesitated. So the order had really come, after a fashion. The two men embraced, and the younger one took his leave.

“CATHY?” SHE LOOKED up to see Bernie Katz’s head sticking in her office door.

“Yeah, Bernie?”

“Dave has called a department head meeting in his office at two. I’m leaving for New York to do that conference at Columbia, and Hal’s operating this afternoon. Sit in for me?”

“Sure, I’m clear.”

“Thanks, Cath.” His head vanished again. SURGEON went back to her patient records.

ACTUALLY THE DEAN had told his secretary to call the meeting on his way out the door. David James was in the emergency room. Behind the mask he looked like any other physician.

This patient had nothing at all to do with the other two. Watching from ten feet away in a corner of the ER already set aside for the situation, they watched him vomit into a plastic container. There was ample evidence of blood.

It was the same young resident working this one, too. “No traveling to speak of. Says he was in New York for some stuff. Theater, auto show, regular tourist stuff. What about the first one?”

“Positive for Ebola virus,” Alex told her. That snapped her head around like an owl’s.

“Here?”

“Here. Don’t be too surprised, Doctor. You called me, remember?” He turned to Dean James and raised an eyebrow.

“All department heads in my office at two. I can’t go any faster, Alex. A third of them are operating or seeing patients right now.”

“Ross for this one?” the resident asked. She had a patient to deal with.

“Quick as you can.” Alexandre took the dean by the arm and walked him outside. There, dressed in greens, he lit a cigar, to the surprise of the security guards, who enforced a smoking ban out there.

“What the hell’s going on?”

“You know, there is something to be said for these things.” Alex took a few puffs. “I can tell you what they’re going to say up at Detrick, sure as hell.”

“Go on.”

“Two separate index cases, Dave, a thousand miles apart in distance, and eight hours apart in time. No connection of any kind. No commonalties at all. Think it through,” Pierre Alexandre said, taking another worried puff.

“Not enough data to support it,” James objected.

“I hope I’m wrong. They’re going to be scrambling down in Atlanta. Good people down there. The best. But they don’t look at this sort of the thing the way I do. I wore that green suit a long time. Well”—another puff—“we’re going to see what the best possible supportive care can do. We’re better than anyplace in Africa. So’s Chicago. So are all the other places that are going to

phone in, I suppose."

"Others?" As fine a physician as he was, James still wasn't getting it.

"The first attempt at biological warfare was undertaken by Alexander the Great. He launched bodies of plague victims into a besieged city with catapults. I don't know if it worked or not. He took the city anyway, slaughtered all the citizens, and moved on."

He got it now, Alex could see. The dean was as pale as the new patient inside.

"JEFF?" RAMAN WAS in the local command post going over the coming schedule for POTUS. He had a mission to complete now, and it was time to start doing some planning. Andrea walked over to him. "We have a trip to Pittsburgh on Friday. You want to hop up there with the advance team? There are a couple local problems that have cropped up at the hotel."

"Okay. When do I leave?" Agent Raman asked.

"Flight leaves in ninety minutes." She handed him a ticket. "You get back tomorrow night."

How much the better, Raman thought, if he might even survive. Were he to structure all the security at one of these events, that might actually be possible. The idea of martyrdom didn't turn his head all that much, but if survival were possible, then he would opt for that.

"Fair enough," the assassin replied. He didn't have to worry about packing. The agents on the Detail always had a bag in the car.

IT TOOK THREE satellite passes before NRO was willing to make its estimate of the situation. All six of the UIR heavy divisions which had participated in the war game were now in a full-maintenance stand-down. Some might say that such a thing was normal. A unit went into a heavy-maintenance cycle after a major training exercise, but six divisions—three heavy corps—at once was a bit much. The data was immediately forwarded to the Saudi and Kuwaiti governments. In the meantime, the Pentagon called the White House.

"Yes, Mr. Secretary," Ryan said.

"The SNIE isn't ready yet for the UIR, but we have received ... well, some disturbing information. I'll let Admiral Jackson present it."

The President listened, and didn't need much in the way of analysis, though he wished the Special National Intelligence Estimates were on his desk to give him a better feel for the UIR's political intentions. "Recommendations?" he asked, when Robby was done.

"I think it's a good time to get the boats at Diego moving. It never hurts to exercise them. We can move them to within two steaming days of the Gulf without anybody noticing. Next, I recommend that we issue warning orders to XVIII Airborne Corps. That's the 82nd, 101st, and 24th Mechanized."

"Will it make noise?" Jack asked.

"No, sir. It's treated as a practice alert. We do those all the time. All it really does is to get staff officers thinking."

"Make it so. Keep it quiet."

"This would be a good time to do a joint training exercise with friendly nations in the region," J-3 suggested.

"I'll see about that. Anything else?"

"No, Mr. President," Bretano replied. "We'll keep you informed."

BY NOON, THE fax count at CDC Atlanta was over thirty, from ten different states. These were forwarded to Fort Detrick, Maryland, home of the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases—USAMRIID—the military counterpart to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. As chilling as the data was, it was just a little too chilling for snap judgment. A major staff meeting was called for just after lunch, while the commissioned officers and civilians tried to get their data organized. More senior officers from Walter Reed got in their staff cars for the ride up Interstate-70.

"DR. RYAN?"

"Yes?" Cathy looked up.

"The meeting in Dr. James's office has been moved up," her secretary said. "They want you over there right now."

"I guess I better head over, then." She stood and headed for the door. Roy Altman was standing there.

"Anything I need to know about?" SURGEON'S principal agent asked.

"Something's up. I don't know what it is."

"Where is the dean's office?" He'd never been there before. All of the staff meetings she'd attended recently were in Maumenee.

"That way." She pointed. "Other side of Monument Street in the admin building."

"SURGEON is moving, going north to Monument." The agents just appeared out of nowhere, it seemed. It might have seemed funny except for recent events. "If you don't mind, I'll stand in the room. I'll keep out of the way," Altman assured her.

Cathy nodded. There was no fighting it. He'd hate the dean's office for all the big windows there, she was sure. It was a ten-minute walk over, almost all of it undercover. She headed outdoors to cross the street, wanting a little fresh air. Entering the building, she saw a lot of her friends, either department chairmen or senior staffers standing in as she was doing. The director-level people were always traveling, one reason why she wasn't sure if she ever wanted to be that senior herself. Pierre Alexandre stormed in, wearing greens, carrying a folder, and looking positively grim as he almost bumped into her. A Secret Service agent prevented that.

"Glad you're here, Cathy," he said on the way past. "Them, too."

"Nice to be appreciated," Altman observed to a colleague, as the dean appeared at the door.

"Come in."

One look at the conference room convinced Altman to lower the shades with his own hands. The windows faced a street of anonymous brick houses. A few of the doctors looked on with annoyance, but they knew who he was and didn't object.

"Calling the meeting to order," Dave James said, before everyone was seated. "Alex has something important to tell us."

There was no preamble: "We have five Ebola cases in Ross right now. They all came in today."

Heads turned sharply. Cathy blinked at her seat at the end of the table.

"Students from someplace?" the surgery director asked. "Zaire?"

"One auto dealer and his wife, a boat salesman from Annapolis, three more people. Answering your question, no. No international travel at all. Four of the five are fully symptomatic. The auto dealer's wife shows antibodies, but no symptoms as yet. That's the good news. Our case wasn't the first. CDC has cases reported in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Dallas. That's as of an hour ago. Total reported cases is twenty, and that number doubled between ten and eleven. Probably still going up."

"Jesus Christ," the director of medicine whispered.

"You all know what I did before I got here. Right now I imagine they're having a staff meeting at Fort Detrick. The conclusion from that meeting will be that this is not an accidental outbreak. Somebody has initiated a biological-warfare campaign against our country."

Nobody objected to Alexandre's analysis, Cathy saw. She knew why. The other physicians in the room were so bright that sometimes she wondered if she belonged on the same faculty with them—she had never considered that most of them might harbor the same thoughts. All of them were world experts in their fields, at least four the very best there was. But all of them also spent time as she did, having lunch with a colleague in a different field to exchange information, because, like her, they were all truly fanatical about learning. They all wanted to know everything, and even though they knew that such a thing was impossible, even within one professional field, that didn't stop them from trying. In this case, the suddenly rigid faces concealed the same analytical process.

Ebola was an infectious disease, and such diseases started from a single place. There was always a first victim, called Patient Zero or the Index Case, and it spread from there. No disease just exploded in this way. CDC and USAMRIID, which had to make that conclusion official, would have the duty to assemble, organize, and present information in what was almost a legalistic structure to prove their case. For their medical institution, it was simpler, all the more so because Alex had commanded one of the divisions at Fort Detrick. Moreover, since there was a plan for everything, Johns Hopkins was one of the institutions tapped to receive cases in the event something like this took place.

"Alex," the director of urology said, "the literature says that Ebola is only spread by large particles of liquid. How could it explode so fast, even at the local level?"

"There's a sub-strain called Mayinga. It's named for a nurse who picked it up and died. The method of her infection was never determined. A colleague of mine, George Westphal, died of the same thing in 1990. We never

determined the means of transmission in his case, either. There is thought that this sub-strain may spread by aerosol. It's never been proven one way or the other," Alex explained. "Besides, there are ways to fortify a virus, as you know. You admit some cancer genes into the structure."

"And there's no treatment, nothing experimental even?" Urology asked.

"Rousseau is doing some interesting work at Pasteur, but so far he hasn't produced any positive results."

A physical reaction, ripped down the conference table from one physician to another. They were among the best in the world, and they knew it. They also knew now that it didn't matter against this enemy.

"How about a vaccine?" Medicine asked. "That shouldn't be too hard."

"USAMRIID has been playing with that for about ten years. The first issue is that there seems to be a specificity problem. What works for one sub-strain may not always work with another. Also, the quality-control issue is a killer. Studies I've seen predict a two-percent infection rate from the vaccine itself. Merck thinks they can do better, but trials take time to run."

"Ouch," Surgery commented with a wince. Giving one person out of fifty a disease with an eighty-percent mortality rate—twenty thousand people infected per million doses, of whom roughly sixteen thousand might die from it. Applied to the population of the United States, it could mean three *million* deaths from an attempt to safeguard the population. "Hobson's choice."

"But it's too early to determine the extent of the notional epidemic, and we do not have hard data on the ability of the disease to spread in existing environmental conditions," Urology thought. "So we really aren't sure what measures need to be taken yet."

"Correct." At least it was easy to explain things to these people.

"My people will see it first," Emergency said. "I have to get them warned. We can't risk losing our people unnecessarily."

"Who tells Jack?" Cathy wondered aloud. "He's got to know, and he's got to know fast."

"Well, that's the job of USAMRIID and the Surgeon General."

"They're not ready to make the call yet. You just said that," Cathy replied. "You're sure about this?"

"Yes."

SURGEON turned to Roy Altman: "Get my helicopter up here stat."

49

REACTION TIME

COLONEL GOODMAN WAS surprised by the call. He was having a late lunch after a check-flight for a spare VH-60 just out of the maintenance shop for engine replacement. The one he used for SURGEON was on the ramp. The three-man crew walked out to it and spooled up the engines, not knowing why the schedule for the day had changed. Ten minutes after the call, he was airborne and heading northeast. Twenty minutes after that, he was circling the landing pad. Well, there was SURGEON, with SANDBOX by her side, and the Secret Service squad . . . and one other he didn't know, wearing a white coat. The colonel checked the wind and began his descent.

The faculty meeting had gone on until five minutes before. Decisions had to be made. Two complete medical floors would be cleared and tooled up for possible Ebola arrivals. The director of emergency medicine was even now assembling his staff for a lecture. Two of Alexandre's people were on the phone to Atlanta, getting updates on the total number of known cases, and announcing that Hopkins had activated its emergency plan for this contingency. It meant that Alex hadn't been able to go to his office and change clothes. Cathy was wearing her lab coat, too, but in her case it was over a normal dress. He'd been wearing greens—his third set of the day—for the meeting, and still was. Cathy told him not to worry about it. They had to wait for the rotor to stop before the Secret Service allowed their protectees to board the aircraft. Alex noted the presence of a backup chopper, circling a mile away, and a third circling closer in. It looked like a police bird, probably for security, he imagined.

Everyone was bundled aboard. Katie—he'd never met her before—got the jump seat behind the pilots, supposedly the safest place on the aircraft. Alexandre hadn't ridden in a Black Hawk in years. The four-point safety belt still worked, though. Cathy snapped hers right in place. Little Katie had to be helped, but she loved her helmet, painted pink, with a bunny on it, doubtless some Marine's idea. Seconds later the rotor started turning.

"This is going a little fast," Alex said over the intercom.

"You really think we should wait?" Cathy replied, keying her microphone.

"No." And it wouldn't do to say that he wasn't dressed for seeing the President. The aircraft lifted off, climbed about three hundred feet, and turned south.

"Colonel?" Cathy said to the pilot in the right-front seat.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Make it fast," she ordered.

Goodman had never heard SURGEON talk like a surgeon before. It was a

voice of command that any Marine would recognize. He dropped the nose and brought the Black Hawk to 160 knots.

"You in a hurry, Colonel?" the backup chopper called.

"The lady is. Bravo routing, direct approach." Next he called to BWI Airport to tell the controllers to hold arrivals and departures until he'd passed overhead. It wouldn't take long. Nobody on the ground really noticed, but two USAir 737s had to go around once, to the annoyance of their passengers. Watching from the jump seat, SANDBOX thought it was pretty neat.

"MR. PRESIDENT?"

"Yes, Andrea?" Ryan looked up.

"Your wife is inbound from Baltimore. She needs to see you about something. I don't know what. About fifteen minutes," Price told him.

"Nothing's wrong?" Jack asked.

"No, no, everybody's fine, sir. SANDBOX is with her," the agent assured him.

"Okay." Ryan went back to the most recent update of the investigation.

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"WELL, IT'S OFFICIALLY a clean shoot, Pat." Murray wanted to tell his inspector that himself. There hadn't been much doubt of that, of course.

"Wish I could have taken the last one alive," O'Day remarked with a grimace.

"You can stow that one. There was no chance, not with kids around. I think we'll probably arrange a little decoration for you."

"We have anything on that Azir guy yet?"

"His driver's license photo and a lot of written records, but aside from that, we'd have a hard time proving he ever existed." It was a classic set of circumstances. Sometime Friday afternoon, "Mordecai Azir" had driven his car to Baltimore-Washington International Airport and caught a flight to New York-Kennedy. They knew that much from the USAir desk clerk who'd issued him the ticket in that name. Then he'd disappeared, like a cloud of smoke on a windy day. He doubtless had had a virgin set of travel documents. Maybe he'd used them in New York for an international flight. If he'd really been smart, he would have caught a cab to Newark or LaGuardia first, and taken an overseas flight from the former, or maybe a flight to Canada from the latter. Even now agents from the New York office were interviewing people at every airline counter. But nearly every airline in the world came into Kennedy, and the clerks there saw thousands per day. Maybe they would establish what flight he'd taken. If so, he'd be on the moon before they managed that feat.

"Trained spook," Pat O'Day observed. "It's really not all that hard, is it?"

What came back to Murray were the words of his FCI chief. If you could do it once, you could do it more than once. There was every reason to believe that there was a complete espionage—worse, a terrorist—network in his country, sitting tight and waiting for orders . . . to do what? And to avoid

detection, all its members really had to do was *nothing*. Samuel Johnson had once remarked that everybody could manage that feat.

• • •

THE HELICOPTER FLARED and landed, rather to the surprise of the newspeople who always kept an eye out. Anything unexpected at the White House was newsworthy. They recognized Cathy Ryan. Her white doctor's coat was unusual, however, and on seeing another person dressed in the same way but wearing greens, the immediate impression was of a medical emergency involving the President. This was actually correct, though a spokesman came over to say that, no, the President was fine, working at his desk; no, he didn't know why Dr. Ryan had come home early.

I'm not dressed for this, Alex thought. The looks of the agents on the way to the West Wing confirmed that, and now a few of *them* wondered if SWORDSMAN might be ill, resulting in a few radio calls that were immediately rebuffed. Cathy led him down the corridor, then tried the wrong door until an agent pointed and opened the one into the Oval Office. They noted that she didn't bother with anger or embarrassment at the mistake. They'd never seen SURGEON so focused.

"Jack, this is Pierre Alexandre," she said without a greeting.

Ryan stood. He didn't have any major appointments for another two hours, and had shed his suit coat. "Hello, Doctor," he said, extending his hand and taking in the manner of his visitor's dress. Then he realized that Cathy had her work coat on as well. "What's going on, Cathy?" he asked his wife.

"Alex?" Nobody had even sat down yet. Two Secret Service agents had followed the physicians in, and the tension in the room was like an alarm bell for them, though they didn't know what was going on, either. Roy Altman was in another room, talking to Price.

"Mr. President, do you know what the Ebola virus is?"

"Africa," Jack said. "Some jungle disease, right? Deadly as hell. I saw a movie—"

"Pretty close," Alexandre confirmed. "It's a negative-strand RNA virus. We don't know where it lives—I mean, we know the place but not the host. That's the animal it lives in," he explained. "And it's a killer, sir. The crude mortality rate is eighty percent."

"Okay," POTUS said, still standing. "Go on."

"It's here now."

"Where?"

"At last count we had five cases at Hopkins. More than twenty countrywide —that number is about three hours old now. Can I use the phone?"

GUS LORENZ WAS alone in his office when the phone rang. "It's Dr. Alexandre again."

"Yes, Alex?"

"Gus, what's the count now?"

"Sixty-seven," the speakerphone replied. Alex was leaning over it.

"Where?"

"Mainly big cities. The reports are coming in mostly from major medical centers. Boston, New Haven, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, one in Richmond, seven right here in Atlanta, three in Orlando . . ." They could hear a door open and a paper being handled. "Eighty-nine, Alex. They're still coming in."

"Has USAMRIID put the alert out yet?"

"I expect that within the hour. They are having a meeting to determine—"

"Gus, I am in the White House right now. The President is here with me. I want you to tell him what you think," Alexandre commanded, speaking like an Army colonel again.

"What—how did you—Alex, it's not sure yet."

"Either you say it or I will. Better that you do."

"Mr. President?" It was Ellen Sumter at the side door. "I have a General Pickett on the phone for you, sir. He says it's most urgent."

"Tell him to stand by."

"John's good, but he's a little conservative," Alex observed. "Gus, talk to us!"

"Sir, Mr. President, this appears to be something other than a natural event. It looks very much like a deliberate act."

"Biological warfare?" Ryan asked.

"Yes, Mr. President. Our data isn't yet complete enough for a real conclusion, but naturally occurring epidemics don't start this way, not all over the place."

"Mrs. Sumter, can you put the general on this line?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. President?" a new voice asked.

"General, I have a Dr. Lorenz on the line, and next to me is Dr. Alexandre from up the road at Hopkins."

"Hi, Alex."

"Hi, John," Alexandre responded.

"Then you know."

"How confident are you in this estimate?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"We have at least ten focal centers. A disease doesn't get around like that by itself. The data is still coming in, sir. All these cases appearing in twenty-four hours, it's no accident, and it's no natural process. You have Alex there to explain things further. He used to work for me. He's pretty good," Pickett told his commander-in-chief.

"Dr. Lorenz, you concur in this?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Jesus." Jack looked at his wife. "What's next?"

"Sir, we have some options," Pickett replied. "I need to get down to see you."

Ryan turned: "Andrea!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Get a chopper up to Fort Detrick, right now!"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"I'll be waiting, General. Dr. Lorenz, thank you. Anything else I need to know now?"

"Dr. Alexandre can handle that."

"Very well, I will put Mrs. Sumter on the phone to give you the direct lines to this office." Jack walked to the door. "Get on and give them what they need. Then get Arnie and Ben in here."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Jack walked back to sit on the edge of his desk. He was silent for a moment. In a way, he was now grateful for the failed attack on his daughter. That had hit him with a dreadful immediacy. This one as yet had not, and though intellectually he knew that the ramifications were far worse, he didn't need the emotional impact for the time being.

"What do I need to know?"

"Most of the important stuff we can't tell you yet. The issues are technical," Alex explained. "How easily the disease spreads, all we have now is anecdotal and unreliable. That's the key issue. If it spreads easily by aerosol—"

"What's that?" POTUS asked.

"Spray, little droplets, like a cough or a sneeze. If it spreads that way, we're in very deep trouble."

"It's not supposed to," Cathy objected. "Jack, this bug is very delicate. It doesn't last in the open for more than—what, Alex, a few seconds?"

"That's the theory, but some strains are more robust than others. Even if it can survive just a few minutes in the open—that's pretty damned bad. If this is a strain we call Mayinga, well, we just don't know how robust it is. But it goes farther than that. Once a person gets it, then they take it home. A house is a pretty benign environment for pathogens. We have heating and air-conditioning to make it that way, and family members are in close contact. They hug. They kiss. They make love. And once somebody has it in their system, they're always pumping the things out."

"Things?"

"Virus particles, Mr. President. The size of these things is measured in microns. They're far smaller than dust particles, smaller than anything you can see."

"You used to work at Detrick?"

"Yes, sir, I was a colonel, head of pathogens. I retired, and Hopkins hired me."

"So you have an idea what General Pickett's plans are, the options, I mean?"

"Yes, sir. That stuff is reevaluated at least once a year. I've sat in on the committee that draws the plans up."

"Sit down, Doctor. I want to hear this."

THE MARITIME PRE-POSITION Ships had just gotten back from an exercise, and what little maintenance had been required was already done. On receiving orders from CIN-CLANTFLT, they initiated engine-start procedures, which mainly meant warming up the fuel and lubricating oils. To the north, the cruiser *Anzio*, plus destroyers *Kidd* and *O'Bannon,* got orders of their own and turned west for a projected rendezvous point. The senior officer present

was the skipper of the Aegis cruiser, who wondered how the hell he was supposed to get those fat merchants into the Persian Gulf without air cover, if it came to that. The United States Navy didn't go anywhere without air cover, and the nearest carrier was *Ike*, 3,000 miles away, with Malaya in the way. On the other hand, it wasn't all that bad to be a mere captain in command of a task force without an admiral to look over his shoulder.

The first of the MPS ships to sortie from the large anchorage was USNS *Bob Hope*, a newly built military-type roll-on/roll-off transport displacing close to 80,000 tons, and carrying 952 vehicles. Her civilian crew had a little tradition for their movements. Oversized speakers blared "Thanks for the Memories" at the naval base as she passed by, just after midnight, followed by four of her sisters. Aboard, they had the full vehicle complement for a reinforced heavy brigade. Passing the reef-marked entrance, the handles were pushed down on the enunciators, demanding twenty-six knots of the big Colt-Pielstick diesels.

THEY WAITED FOR Goodley and van Damm to come in, and then it took ten minutes to bring them up to speed on what was going on. By this time, the enormity of it was sinking into the President's consciousness, and he had to struggle with emotions now in addition to intellect. He noted that Cathy, though she had to be as horrified as he was, was taking everything calmly, at least outwardly so. Well, it was her field, wasn't it?

"I didn't think Ebola could survive outside a jungle," Goodley said.

"It can't, at least not long-term, or it would have traveled around the world by now."

"It kills too fast for that," SURGEON objected.

"Cathy, we've had jet travel for over thirty years now. This little bastard is delicate. That works for us."

"How do we find out who did it?" This came from Arnie.

"We interview all the victims, find out where they've been, and try to narrow the focal centers down to one point if we can. That's an investigative function. Epidemiologists are pretty good at that . . . but this one's a little big," Alexandre added.

"Could the FBI help, Doctor?" van Damm asked.

"Can't hurt."

"I'll get Murray over here," the chief of staff told the President.

"You can't treat it?" POTUS asked.

"No, what happens is the epidemic burns itself out over several generational cycles. What I mean by that—okay, one person gets it. The virus reproduces in them, and then they pass it on to somebody else. Every victim becomes an imperfect host. As the disease reproduces and kills the victim, the victim passes it on to the next one. *But*, and here's the good news, Ebola doesn't reproduce efficiently. As it goes through these generational cycles, it becomes less virulent. Most of the survivors in an outbreak happen toward the end, because the virus progressively mutates itself into a less dangerous form. The organism is so primitive that it doesn't do everything well."

"How many cycles before that happens, Alex?" Cathy asked.

He shrugged. "It's empirical. We know the process, but we can't quantify it."

"Lots of unknowns." She grimaced.

"Mr. President?"

"Yes, Doctor?"

"The movie you saw?"

"What about it?"

"The budget for that movie is quite a bit more than all the funding for research in virology. Keep that in mind. I guess it isn't sexy enough." Arnie started to say something. Alex cut him off with a raised hand. "I'm not on the government payroll anymore, sir. I don't have any empire to build. My research is privately funded. I'm just stating a fact. What the hell, I guess we can't fund everything."

"If we can't treat it, how do we stop it?" Ryan asked, getting things back on track. His head turned. A shadow crossed the South Lawn, and the roar of a helicopter came through the bulletproof windows.

"AHII," BADRAYN OBSERVED with a smile. The Internet was designed to give access to information, not to conceal it, and from a friend of a friend of a friend who was a medical student at Emory University in Atlanta, he had the password to crack into that medical center's electronic mail. Another keyword eliminated all of the clutter, and there it was. It was 1400 hours on America's east coast, and Emory reported to CDC that it now had six cases of suspected hemorrhagic fever. Better yet, CDC had already replied, and that told him a lot more. Badrayn printed up both letters, and made a telephone call. Now he really had good news to deliver.

RAMAN FELT THE DC-9 thump down in Pittsburgh after a brief flight that had allowed him to sit alone and think through several options. His colleague—brother—in Baghdad had been a little too sacrificial in his attitude, a little too dramatic, and the detail around the Iraqi leader had been pretty large, actually larger than the one on which he himself served. How to do it? The trick was to create as much confusion as possible. Perhaps when Ryan walked into the crowd to press the flesh. Take the shot, kill one or two of the other agents, then race into the crowd. If he could make it past the first line or two of spectators, all he had to do was hold up his Secret Service TD, better than a gun for getting through things—everyone would think that he was chasing the subject. The key to escaping from an assassination—the USSS had taught him this—was in the first thirty seconds. Survive that, and you have a better-than-even chance of surviving it all. And he would be the one setting all the security arrangements for the Friday trip. How, then, could he get the President to a spot in which he would have that option? Take POTUS. Take Price. Take one other. Then melt into the crowd. Probably better to fire from the hip. Best if the citizens didn't see the gun in his hand until after the shots. Yes, that might work, he thought, taking off the lap belt and standing. There would be a local Treasury agent at the end of the jetway. They'd go right to the hotel whose large dining room would host President Ryan's speech. Raman

would have all day and part of tomorrow to think it through, under the very eyes of fellow agents. How challenging.

MAJOR GENERAL JOHN Pickett, it turned out, was a graduate of Yale Medical School, added to which were a pair of doctorates—molecular biology from Harvard, and public health from UCLA. He was a pale, spare man who looked small in his uniform—he hadn't had time to change and was wearing camouflage BDUs—making his parachutist's wings look very out of place. Two colonels came with him, followed by Director Murray of the FBI, who'd raced over from the Hoover Building. The three officers came to attention as they walked in, but now the Oval Office was too small, and the President led them across the hall into the Roosevelt Room. On the way a Secret Service agent handed the general a fax that was still warm from the machine in the secretaries' room.

"Case count is now one hundred thirty-seven, according to Atlanta," Pickett said. "Fifteen cities, fifteen states, coast-to-coast."

"Hi, John," Alexandre said, taking his hand. "I've seen three of them myself."

"Alex, glad to see you, buddy." He looked up. "I guess Alex has briefed everybody in on the baseline stuff?"

"Correct," Ryan said.

"Do you have any immediate questions, Mr. President?"

"You're certain that this is a deliberate act?"

"Bombs do not go off by accident." Pickett unfolded a map. A number of cities were marked with red dots. One of his attending colonels placed three more down: San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas.

"Convention cities. Just how I would have done it," Alexandre breathed. "Looks like Bio-War 95, John."

"Close. That's a wargame we played with the Defense Nuclear Agency. We used anthrax for that one. Alex here was one of our best for planning offensive bio," Pickett told his audience. "He was Red Team commander for this."

"Isn't that against the law?" Cathy said, her face outraged at the revelation.

"Offense and defense are two sides of the same coin, Dr. Ryan," Pickett replied, defending his former subordinate. "We have to think like the bad guys do if we're going to stop them."

"Operational concept?" the President asked. He understood that better than his wife did.

"Biological warfare at the strategic level means starting a chain reaction within your target population. You try to infect as many people as possible—and that's not very many; we're not talking nuclear weapons here. The idea is for the people, the victims, to spread it for you. That's the elegance of bio-warfare. Your victims actually do most of the killing. Any epidemic starts low and ramps up, slowly at first, like a tangential curve, and then it rockets up geometrically. So, if you're using bio in the offensive role, you try to jump-start it by infecting as large a number of people as you can, and you opt for people who travel. Las Vegas is the tip-off. It's a convention city, and sure enough they just had a big one. The conventioneers get infected, get on the

airplanes to fly home, and they spread it for you."

"Any chance of discovering how they did it?" Murray asked. He showed his ID so that the general would know who he was.

"Probably a waste of time. The other nice thing about bio weapons is—well, in this case the incubation period is a minimum of three days. Whatever distribution system was used has been picked up, bagged, and trucked off to a landfill. No physical evidence, no proof of who did it to us."

"Save that for later, General. What do we do? I see a lot of states with no infection—"

"That's just for now, Mr. President. There's a three- to ten-day lead time on Ebola. We don't know how far it's gotten already. The only way we can find out is by waiting."

"But we have to initiate CURTAIN CALL, John," Alexandre said. "And we have to do it fast."

MAHMOUD HAJI WAS reading. He had an office adjoining his bedroom, and actually preferred working here because of the familiar surroundings. He did not enjoy being disturbed here, however, and so his security people were surprised at his response to the telephone call. Twenty minutes later, they let the visitor in, without an escort.

"Has it begun?"

"It has begun." Badrayn handed over the CDC printout. "We will know more tomorrow."

"You have served well," Daryaei told him, dismissing him. When the door was closed, he made a telephone call.

ALAHAD DIDN'T KNOW how circuitous the link to him was, merely that it was an overseas call. He suspected London, but he didn't know and wouldn't ask. The inquiry was entirely routine, except for the time of day—it was evening in England, after business hours. The variety of the rug and the price were the key parts, telling him what he needed to know, in a code long since memorized and never written down. In knowing little, he could reveal little. That part of the tradecraft he did fully understand. His own part came next. Placing the Back in a Few Minutes sign in his window, he walked out, locked the door, and went around the corner, proceeding two blocks to a pay phone. There he made a call to pass on his last order to Aref Raman.

THE MEETINGS HAD started in the Oval Office, were transferred to the Roosevelt Room, and were now all the way down the hall in the Cabinet Room, where more than one image of George Washington could watch the proceedings. The Cabinet secretaries arrived almost together, and their arrival couldn't be a secret. Too many official cars, too many guards, too many faces known to the reporters.

Pat Martin came, representing Justice. Bretano was SecDef, with Admiral

Jackson sitting on the wall behind him. (Everyone brought a deputy of some sort, mainly to take notes.) Winston was SecTreas, having walked from across the street. Commerce and Interior were survivors from the Durling presidency, actually having been appointed by Bob Fowler. Most of the rest were of undersecretary rank, holding on from presidential apathy in some cases, and in others because they appeared to know what they were doing. But none of them knew what he was doing now. Ed Foley arrived, summoned by the President despite CIA's previous loss of Cabinet rank. Also present were Arnie van Damm, Ben Goodley, Director Murray, the First Lady, three Army officers, and Dr. Alexandre.

"We will be in order," the President said. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. There's no time for a preamble here. We face a national emergency. The decisions we make here today will have serious effects on our country. In the corner is Major General John Pickett. He's a physician and scientist, and I will now turn the meeting over to him. General, do your brief."

"Thank you, Mr. President. Ladies and gentlemen, I am commanding general at Fort Detrick. Earlier today, we started getting some very disturbing reports . . ."

Ryan tuned the general out. He'd heard it all twice now. Instead he read over the file Pickett had handed him. The folder was bordered in the usual red-and-white-striped tape. The sticker in the center read TOP SECRET - AFFLICTION, rather an appropriate code name for the special-access compartment this one was in, SWORDSMAN thought. Then he opened the folder and started reading OPPLAN CURTAIN CALL. There were four variants of the plan, Jack saw. He turned to Option Four. That was called SOLITARY, and that name, too, was appropriate. Reading through the executive summary chilled him, and Jack found himself turning to look over at George, hanging there on the wall, and wanting to ask, *Now what the hell do I do?* But George wouldn't have understood. He didn't know from airliners and viruses and nuclear weapons, did he?

"How bad is it now?" HHS asked.

"Just over two hundred cases have been reported to CDC as of fifteen minutes ago. I emphasize that these have all appeared in less than twenty-four hours," General Pickett told the Secretary.

"Who did it?" Agriculture asked.

"Set that aside," the President said. "We will address that issue later. What we have to decide now is the best chance we have to contain the epidemic."

"I just can't believe that we can't treat—"

"Believe it," Cathy Ryan said. "You know how many viral diseases we know how to cure?"

"Well, no," HUD admitted.

"None." It constantly amazed her how ignorant some people could be on medical issues.

"Therefore containment is the only option," General Pickett went on.

"How do you contain a whole country?" It was Cliff Rutledge, Assistant Secretary of State for Policy, sitting in for Scott Adler.

"That's the problem we face," President Ryan said. "Thank you, General. I'll take it from here. The only way to contain the epidemic is to shut down all

places of assembly—theaters, shopping malls, sports stadia, business offices, everything—and also to shut off all interstate travel. To the best of our information, at least thirty states are so far untouched by this disease. We would do well to keep it that way. We can accomplish that by preventing all interstate travel until such time as we have a handle on the severity of the disease organism we are facing, and then we can come up with less severe countermeasures."

"Mr. President, that's unconstitutional," Pat Martin said at once.

"Explain," Ryan ordered.

"Travel is a constitutionally protected right. Even inside states, any restriction of travel is a constitutional violation under the Lemuel Penn case—he was a black Army officer who was murdered by the Klan in the sixties. That's a Supreme Court precedent," the head of the Criminal Division reported.

"I understand that I—excuse me, just about everybody in the room—was sworn to uphold the Constitution. But if upholding it means killing off a few million citizens, what have we accomplished?" POTUS asked.

"We can't *do* that!" HUD insisted.

"General, what happens if we don't?" Martin asked, surprising Ryan.

"There is no precise answer. There cannot be, because we do not know the ease of transmission for this virus yet. If it is an aerosol, and there is reason to suspect that it is—well, we've got a hundred computer models we can use. Problem is deciding which one. Worst case? Twenty million deaths. At that point, what happens is that society breaks down. Doctors and nurses flee the hospitals, people lock themselves in their homes, and the epidemic burns out pretty much like the Black Death did in the fourteenth century. Human interactions cease, and because of that the disease stops spreading."

"Twenty million? How bad was the Black Death?" Martin asked, his face somewhat ashen.

"Records are sketchy. There was no real census system back then. Best data is England," Pickett replied. "It depopulated that country by half. The plague lasted about four years. Europe took about one hundred fifty years to return to the 1347 population level."

"Shit," breathed Interior.

"Is it really that dangerous, General?" Martin persisted.

"Potentially yes. The problem, sir, is that if you take no action at all, and then you find out that it is that virulent, then it's just too late."

"I see." Martin turned. "Mr. President, I do not see that we have much of a choice here."

"You just said it was against the law, damn it!" HUD shouted.

"Mr. Secretary, the Constitution is not a suicide pact, and although I think I know how the Supreme Court would rule on this, there has never been a case in point, and it could be argued, and the process would have to deal with it."

"What changed your mind, Pat?" Ryan asked.

"Twenty million reasons, Mr. President."

"If we flout our own laws, then what are we?" Cliff Rutledge asked.

"Alive," Martin answered quietly. "Maybe."

"I am willing to listen to arguments for fifteen minutcs," Ryan said. "Then

we have to come to a decision."

It was lively.

"If we violate our own Constitution," Rutledge said, "then nobody in the world can trust us!" HUD and HHS agreed.

"What about the practical considerations?" Agriculture objected. "People have to eat."

"What kind of country are we going to turn over to our children if we—"

"What do we turn over to them if they're dead?" George Winston snapped back at HUD.

"Things like this don't happen today!"

"Mr. Secretary, would you like to come up to my hospital and see, sir?" Alexandre asked from his seat in the corner.

"Thank you," Ryan said, checking his watch. "I am calling the issue on the table."

Defense, Treasury, Justice, and Commerce voted aye. All the rest voted no. Ryan looked at them for a long few seconds.

"The ayes have it," the President said coldly. "Thank you for your support. Director Murray, the FBI will render all assistance required by CDC and USAMRIID to ascertain the focal centers of this epidemic. That has absolute and unconditional priority over any other matter."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Mr. Foley, every intelligence asset we have goes into this. You will also work in conjunction with the medical experts. This came from somewhere, and whoever did it has committed an act of war, using weapons of mass destruction against our country. We need to find out who that was, Ed. All the intelligence agencies will report directly to you. You have statutory authority to coordinate all intelligence activities. Tell the other agencies that you have my order to exercise it."

"We'll do our best, sir."

"Secretary Bretano, I am declaring a state of national emergency. All Reserve and National Guard formations are to be activated immediately and placed under federal command. You have this contingency plan in the Pentagon." Ryan held the CURTAIN CALL folder up. "You will execute Option Four, SOLITARY, at the earliest possible moment."

"I will do that, sir."

Ryan looked down the table at the Secretary of Transportation. "Mr. Secretary, the air-traffic-control system belongs to you. When you get back to your office, you will order all aircraft in flight to proceed to their destinations and stop there. All aircraft on the ground will remain there, commencing at six o'clock this evening."

"No." SecTrans stood. "Mr. President, I will not do that. I believe it to be an illegal act, and I will not break the law."

"Very well, sir. I will accept your resignation effective immediately. You're the deputy?" Ryan said to the woman sitting behind him.

"Yes, Mr. President, I am."

"Will you execute my order?"

She looked around the room without really knowing what to do. She'd heard it all, but she was a career civil servant, unaccustomed to making a hard

call without political coverage.

"I don't like it, either," Ryan said. The room was invaded by the roar of jet engines, an aircraft taking off from Washington National. "What if that airplane's carrying death somewhere? Do we just let it happen?" he asked so quietly she could barely hear.

"I will carry out your order, sir."

"You know, Murray," the former—he wasn't sure yet—SecTrans said, "you could arrest the man right now. He's breaking the law."

"Not today, sir," Murray replied, staring at his President. "Somebody's going to have to decide what the law is first."

"If anyone else in the room feels the need to leave federal service over this issue, I will accept your resignations without prejudice—but *please* think what you are doing. If I'm wrong on this, fine, I'm wrong, and I'll pay the price for that. But if the doctors are right and we do nothing, we've got more blood on our hands than Hitler ever did. I need your help and your support." Ryan stood and walked out of the room as the others struggled to their feet. He moved fast. He had to. He entered the Oval Office, turned right to the presidential sitting room, and barely made it to the bathroom in time. Seconds later, Cathy found him there, flushing down a bowlful of vomit. "Am I doing the right thing?" he asked, still on his knees.

"You've got my vote, Jack," SURGEON told him.

"You look great," van Damm observed, catching POTUS in rather an undignified posture.

"Why didn't you say anything, Arnie?"

"Because you didn't need me to, Mr. President," the chief of staff replied.

General Pickett and the other physicians were waiting when he came back into the office. "Sir, we just had a fax from CDC. There are two cases at Fort Stewart. That's the 24th Mech's home base."

50

SPECIAL REPORT

IT STARTED WITH NATIONAL Guard armories. Virtually every city and town in America had one, and in each was a duty sergeant, or perhaps an officer, sitting at a desk to answer the phone. When the phone rang, a voice from the Pentagon spoke a code word that designated an activation order. The duty person in the armory would then alert the unit commander, and more calls were made, branching out like the limbs of a tree, with every recipient detailed to call several others. It usually took an hour or so for everyone to get the word—or nearly everyone, as some were inevitably out of town, traveling for either work or vacation. Senior Guard commanders usually worked directly for the governors of the several states, as the National Guard is a hybrid institution, partly a state militia and partly United States Army (or Air Force, in the case of the Air National Guard, which gave many of the state governors access to state-of-the-art fighter aircraft). These senior Guard officers, surprised by the activation orders, reported the situation to their governors, asking for guidance which the state executives were as yet in no position to give, since mainly they didn't know what was going on yet, either. But at the company and battalion level, officers and men (and women) hurried home from their civilian jobs, citizen soldiers that they were, donned their woodland-pattern BDU fatigues, buffed their boots, and drove to the local armory to form up with their squads and platoons. Once there they were startled to see that they were supposed to draw weapons and, more disturbingly, their MOPP gear. MOPP, for Mission-Oriented Protective Posture, was the chemical-warfare equipment in which they had all trained at one time or another, and which every person in uniform cordially detested. There were the usual jokes and good humor, stories of work, tales of spouses and children, while the officers and senior non-coms met in conference rooms to find out what the hell was going on. They emerged from those brief meetings angry, confused, and for the better informed of them, frightened. Outside the armories, vehicles were fired up. Inside, TV sets were switched on.

IN ATLANTA, THE special agent in charge of the FBI's Atlanta Field Division drove with sirens screaming to CDC, followed by ten more agents. In Washington, a number of CIA and other intelligence officers drove more sedately to the Hoover Building to set up a joint task force. In both cases, the job was to figure out how the epidemic had started and from that to try to determine its point of origin. These people were not all civilians. The Defense Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency were mainly uniformed

organizations, and among that grouping grim-faced officers let everyone know that something new in American history had taken place. If this truly were a deliberate attack against the United States of America, then a nation-state had made use of what was delicately termed a “weapon of mass destruction.” Then they explained to their civilian counterparts what had been U.S. policy for two generations for responding to such an eventuality.

IT WAS ALL happening too fast, of course, since emergencies are by definition things for which one cannot plan terribly well. That extended to the President himself, who walked into the White House press room, accompanied by General Pickett of USAMRIID. Only thirty minutes earlier the White House had told the major networks that the President had an announcement to make, and that on this occasion, the government would exercise its option to demand airtime instead of requesting it—since the 1920s, the government had adopted the position that it owned the airwaves—thus supplanting all the talk shows and other programming which preceded the evening news. Lead-in commentary told viewers that nobody knew what this was about, but that there had been an emergency Cabinet meeting only minutes before.

“My fellow Americans,” President Ryan began, his face in most American homes, and his voice in every car on the road. Those who had become accustomed to their new President took note of the pale face (Mrs. Abbot hadn’t had time to do his makeup) and grim voice. The message was grimmer still.

THE CEMENT TRUCK had a radio, of course. It even had a tape and CD player, since, work-vehicle or not, it had been designed for the use of an American citizen. They were in Indiana now, having crossed both the Mississippi River and Illinois earlier in the day on their trek to their nation’s capital. Holbrook, who had no use for the words of any President, hit the scan button, only to find that the same voice was on all the stations. That was sufficiently unusual that he stayed with one of them. Brown, driving the truck, saw that cars and trucks were pulling over—not many at first, but more and more as the speech progressed, their drivers, like himself, leaning down to listen to the radio.

“ACCORDINGLY, BY EXECUTIVE order of the President, your government is taking the following actions:

“One, until further notice, all schools and colleges in the country will be closed.

“Two, all businesses except for those providing essential services—the media, health care, food, law-enforcement, and fire protection—will also be closed until further notice.

“Three, all places of public assembly, theaters, restaurants, bars and the like, will be closed.

"Fourth, all interstate travel is suspended until further notice. This means all commercial air travel, interstate trains and buses, and private-passenger automobiles. Trucks carrying foodstuffs will be allowed to travel under military escort. The same is true of essential supplies, pharmaceuticals and the like.

"Fifth, I have activated the National Guard in all the fifty states and placed it under federal control to maintain public order. A state of martial law is now in force throughout the country.

"We urge our citizens—no, let me speak more informally. Ladies and gentlemen, all that is required for us to weather this crisis is a little common sense. We do not yet know how dangerous this disease is. The measures I have ordered today are precautionary in nature. They seem, and indeed they are, extreme measures. The reason for that, as I have told you, is that this virus is potentially the most deadly organism on the planet, but we do not yet know how dangerous it is. We *do* know that a few simple measures can limit its spread, no matter how deadly it is, and in the interest of public safety, I have ordered those measures. This action is being taken on the best scientific advice available. To protect yourselves, remember how the disease is spread. I have General John Pickett, a senior Army physician and an expert in the field of infectious diseases, to provide medical advice to all of us. General?" Ryan stepped away from the microphone.

"WHAT THE FUCK!" Holbrook shouted. "He can't do that!"

"Think so?" Brown followed an eighteen-wheeler onto the shoulder. They were a hundred miles from the Indiana-Ohio border. About two hours driving this pig, he thought. No way he'd get there before the local Guard closed the road.

"I think we better find a motel, Pete."

"SO WHAT DO I do?" the FBI agent asked in Chicago.

"Strip. Hang your clothes on the door." There was no time and little spare room for the niceties, and he was, after all, a physician. His guest didn't blush. Dr. Klein decided, on full surgical garb, long-sleeve greens instead of the more popular sort. There were not enough of the plastic space suits to go around, and his staff would use all of those. They had to. They got closer. They handled liquids. They touched the patients. His medical center now had nine symptomatic patients who tested positive. Six of those were married, and of the spouses, four tested positive for Ebola antibodies. The test gave an occasional false-positive reading; even so it was not the least bit pleasant to tell someone—well, he did that often enough with AIDS patients. They were testing children now. That really hurt.

The protective outfit he gave the agent was made of the usual cotton, but the hospital had taken a number of sets and sprayed them with disinfectant, especially the masks. The agent also was given a pair of laboratory glasses, the broad plastic ones known to chemistry students.

"Okay," Klein told the agent. "Don't get close. No closer than six feet, and you should be completely safe. If she vomits or coughs, if she has a convulsion, stay clear. Dealing with that sort of thing is our job, not yours. Even if she dies right in front of you, don't touch anything."

"I understand. You going to lock the office up?" She pointed to the gun hanging with her clothes.

"Yes, I will. And when you're done, give me your notes. I'll run them through the copying machine."

"How come?"

"It uses a very bright light to make copies. The ultraviolet will almost certainly kill any virus particle that might find its way to the paper," Professor Klein explained. Even now in Atlanta, rapid experiments were under way to determine just how robust the Ebola particles were. That would help define the level of precaution that was necessary in hospitals first of all, and perhaps also provide useful guidance for the general population.

"Uh, Doc, why not just let me make the copies?"

"Oh." Klein shook his head. "Yes, I suppose that will work, too, won't it?"

"MR. PRESIDENT." IT was Barry of CNN. "These steps you're taking, sir, are they legal?"

"Barry, I do not have the answer to that," Ryan said, his face tired and drawn. "Whether they're legal or not, I am convinced that they are necessary." As he spoke, a White House staffer was passing out surgical masks for the assembled reporters. That was Arnie's idea. They'd been procured from the nearby George Washington University Hospital.

"But, Mr. President, you can't break the law. What if you're wrong?"

"Barry, there's a fundamental difference between what I do in my job and what you do in yours. If you make a mistake, you can make a retraction. We just saw that, only yesterday, with one of your colleagues, didn't we? But, Barry, if I make a mistake in a situation like this, how do I retract a death? How do I retract thousands of deaths? I don't have that luxury, Barry," the President said. "If it turns out that what I am doing is wrong, then you can have at me all you want. That's part of my job, too, and I'm getting used to that. Maybe I'm a coward. Maybe I'm just afraid of letting people die for no good reason when I have the power to prevent it."

"But you don't really know, do you?"

"No," Jack admitted, "none of us really knows. This is one of those times when you have to go with your best guess. I wish I could sound more confident, but I can't, and I won't lie about it."

"Who did it, Mr. President?" another reporter asked.

"We don't know, and for the moment I will not speculate as to the origin of this epidemic." And that was a lie, Ryan knew even as he was saying it, speaking the lie right after stating that he wouldn't lie, because the situation demanded that, too. What a crazy fucking world it was.

IT WAS THE worst interview of her life. The woman, she saw, called the Index Case, was attractive, or had been so a day or two previously. Now skin that had so recently qualified as a peaches-and-cream complexion was sallow and mottled with red-purple blotches. Worst of all, she knew. She had to know, the agent thought, hiding behind her mask, holding her felt-tip pen in the rubber gloves (nothing sharp that might penetrate the thin latex), taking her notes, and learning not very much. She had to know that this sort of medical care was not the usual thing, that the medics were afraid to touch her, and that now a special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation would not even approach her bed.

"Aside from the trip to Kansas City?"

"Nothing really," the voice replied, as though from the bottom of a grave. "Working at my desk, getting ready for the fall orders. Went to the housewares show at McCormick Center two days."

There were some more questions, none of which turned up any immediately useful information. The woman in the agent wanted to reach out, touch her hand, provide some measure of comfort and sympathy but no. The agent had just learned the previous week that she was pregnant with her first child. She had custody of two lives now, not just her own, and it was all she could do to keep her hand from shaking.

"Thank you. We'll be back to you," the agent said, rising from her metal chair and moving to the door. Opening it, she pulled her shoulders in so as not to touch the door frame, and proceeded to the next room down the hall for the next interview. Klein was in the corridor, discussing something with another staffer—doc or nurse, the agent couldn't tell.

"How'd it go?" the professor asked.

"What are her chances?" the agent asked.

"Essentially zero," Mark Klein replied. For diseases like this one, Patient Zero was just that.

"COMPENSATION? THEY ASK *us* for compensation!" the Defense Minister demanded before the Foreign Minister could speak.

"Minister, I merely convey the words of others," Adler reminded his hosts.

"We have had two officers from your Air Force examine the missile fragments. Their judgment confirms our own. It is a Pen-Lung-13, their new heat-seeker with the long range, a development of a Russian weapon. It's definite now, in addition to the radar evidence developed from your ships," Defense added. "The shooting of the airliner was a deliberate act. You know that. So do we. So, tell me, Mr. Adler, where does America stand in this dispute?"

"We wish nothing more than the restoration of peace," SecState replied, confirming his own predictions. "I would also point out that the PRC, in allowing my direct flights between their capital and yours, are showing a measure of goodwill."

"Quite so," the Foreign Minister replied. "Or so it might seem to the casual observer, but tell me, Mr. Adler, what do they really want?"

So much, the American Secretary of State told himself, for settling the

situation down. These two were as smart as he was, and even more angry. Then that changed.

A secretary knocked, then entered, annoying his boss until they exchanged a few words in Mandarin. A telex was passed over and read. Then another was given directly to the American.

"It seems that there is a serious problem in your country, Mr. Secretary."

THE PRESS CONFERENCE was cut off. Ryan left the room, returned to the Oval Office and sat on the couch with his wife.

"How did it go?"

"Didn't you watch?" Jack asked.

"We were talking over some things," Cathy explained. Then Arnie came in.

"Not bad, boss," the chief of staff opined. "You will have to meet with people from the Senate this evening. I just worked that out with the leadership on both sides. This will make the elections today a little interesting and—"

"Arnie, until further notice we will not discuss politics in this building. Politics is about ideology and theory. We have to deal with cold facts now," SWORDSMAN said.

"You can't get away from it, Jack. Politics *is* real, and if this is the deliberate attack the general here says it is, then it's war, and war *is* a political act. You're leading the government. You have to lead the Congress, and that is a political act. You're not a philosopher king. You're the President of a democratic country," van Damm reminded him.

"All right." Ryan sighed his surrender to the moment. "What else?"

"Bretano called. The plan is being implemented right now. In a few minutes, the air-traffic system tells all the airliners to stop flying. There's probably a lot of chaos in the airports right now."

"I bet." Jack closed his eyes, and rubbed them.

"Sir, you don't have much choice in the matter," General Pickett told the President.

"How do I get back to Hopkins?" Alexandre asked. "I have a department to run and patients to treat."

"I told Bretano that people will be allowed to leave Washington," van Damm informed the others in the room. "The same will be true of all big cities with borders nearby. New York, Philadelphia and like that. We have to let people go home, right?"

Pickett nodded. "Yes, they're safer there. It's unrealistic to assume that the plan will be properly implemented until midnight or so."

Then Cathy spoke: "Alex, I guess you'll come with me. I have to fly up, too."

"What?" Ryan's eyes opened.

"Jack, I'm a doctor, remember?"

"You're an *eye* doctor, Cathy. People can wait to get new glasses," Jack insisted.

"At the staff meeting today, we agreed that everybody has to pitch in. We can't just leave it to the nurses and the kids—the residents—to treat these patients. I'm a clinician. We all have to take our turn on this, honey," SURGEON told her husband.

"No! No, Cathy, it's too dangerous." Jack turned to face her. "I won't let you."

"Jack, all those times you went away, the things you never told me about, the dangerous things, you were doing your job," she said reasonably. "I'm a doctor. I have a job, too."

"It's not all that dangerous, Mr. President," Alexandre put in. "You just have to follow the procedures. I work with AIDS patients every day and—"

"No, God damn it!"

"Because I'm a girl?" Caroline Ryan asked gently. "It worries me some, too, Jack, but I'm a professor at a medical school. I teach students how to be doctors. I teach them what their professional responsibilities are. One of those responsibilities is to be there for your patients. You can't run away from your duties. I can't, either, Jack."

"I'd like to see the procedures you've set up, Alex," Pickett said.

"Glad to have you, John."

Jack continued to look in his wife's face. He knew she was strong, and he'd always known that she sometimes treated patients with contagious diseases—AIDS produced some serious eye complications. He'd just never thought much about it. Now he had to: "What if—"

"It won't. I have to be careful. I think you did it to me again." She kissed him in front of the others. "My husband has the most remarkable timing," she told the audience.

It was too much for Ryan. His hands started to shake a little and his eyes teared up. He blinked them away. "Please, Cathy . . ."

"Would you have listened to me on the way to that submarine, Jack?" She kissed him again and stood.

THERE WAS RESISTANCE, but not all that much. Four governors told their adjutant generals—the usual title for a state's senior National Guard officer—not to obey the presidential order, and three of those wavered until the Secretary of Defense called to make the order clear and personal, threatening them with immediate relief, arrest, and court-martial. Some talked about organizing protests, but that took time, and the green vehicles were already starting to move, their orders modified in many cases, like the Philadelphia Cavalry, one of the Army's most ancient and revered units, whose members had escorted George Washington to his inauguration more than two centuries earlier, and whose current troopers now headed for the bridges on the Delaware River. Local TV and radio told people that commuters would be allowed to go home without inhibitions until nine that night, and until midnight with identification check. If it was easy, people would be allowed to get home. That happened in most cases, but not all, and motels filled up all across America.

Children, told that schools would be closed for at least a week, greeted the news with enthusiasm, puzzled at the concern and even outright fear their parents displayed.

Pharmacies which sold things like surgical masks ran out of them in a matter of minutes, their clerks mainly not knowing why until someone

switched on a radio.

IN PITTSBURGH, STRANGELY, the Secret Service agents going over security arrangements for President Ryan's coming visit were late getting the word. While most on the advance team hustled into the bar to watch the President on TV, Raman broke away to make a phone call. He called his home, waited for the four rings until his answering machine kicked in, then punched the code to access the messages. It was a false one, as before, announcing the arrival of a rug he hadn't ordered and a price he would not have to pay. Raman experienced a slight chill. He was now free to complete his mission at his discretion. That meant soon, as it was expected that he would die in the effort. This he was willing to do, though he thought he might have a chance now, as he walked to the bar. The other three agents stood right by the TV. When someone objected to their blockage of his view, a set of credentials were held up.

"Holy shit!" the senior man from the Pittsburgh office said for the rest. "Now what do we do?"

IT WAS TRICKY with international flights. The word was only now getting to the embassies in Washington. They communicated the nature of the emergency to their governments, but for the European ones, senior officials were at home, many getting into bed when the calls came. These had to get into their offices, have their own meetings, and decide what to do, but the long duration of over-water flights mainly gave time for that. Soon it was decided that all passengers on flights from America would be quarantined—how long, they didn't know yet. Urgent calls to the American Federal Aviation Administration made arrangements to allow flights to America to sit on the ground, be refueled, and then depart for their points of origin. These aircraft were identified as uncontaminated, their passengers allowed to proceed home, though there would be bureaucratic mistakes along the way.

That the financial markets would be closed was made apparent by an Ebola case which arrived in Northwestern University Medical Center. He was a commodities trader who customarily worked on the raucous floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, and the news was quick to get out. All the exchanges would be closed, and the next worry for the business and financial community was the effect this would have on their activities. But mainly people watched the TV coverage. Every network found its medical expert and gave him or her free rein to explain the problem, usually in too much detail. Cable channels ran science specials on Ebola outbreaks in Zaire, showing just how far flu symptoms might lead. What resulted was a quiet, private sort of panic throughout the nation, people in their homes, inspecting their pantries to see how much food they had, watching TV and worrying as they also struggled to ignore. When neighbors talked, it was at a distance.

THE CASE COUNT reached five hundred just before eight o'clock in Atlanta. It had been a long day for Gus Lorenz, gyrating as he did between his laboratory and his office. There was danger for him and his staff. Fatigue made for errors and accidents. Normally a sedate establishment, one of the world's finest research laboratories, the people there were accustomed to working in a calm, orderly way. Now it was frantic. Blood samples couriered to them had to be tagged and tested, and the results faxed to the hospital of origin. Lorenz struggled throughout the day to reorganize his people and their functions, so as to keep staff on duty around the clock, but also not to overly fatigue anyone. He had to apply that to himself as well, and when he returned to his office to catch a nap, he found someone waiting inside.

"FBI," the man said, holding up his ID folder. It was actually the local SAC, a very senior agent who'd been running his own office over a cellular phone. He was a tall, quiet man, slow to excite. In crisis situations, he told his force of agents, you think first. There was always time to screw things up, and there had to be time to get them right, too.

"What can I do for you?" Lorenz asked, taking his seat.

"Sir, I need you to brief me in. The Bureau is working with a few other agencies to see how this all started. We're interviewing every victim to try and determine where they got sick, and we figure you're the expert to ask about the overall situation. Where did all this start?"

THE MILITARY DIDN'T know where it had started, but it was rapidly becoming apparent where it had gotten to. Fort Stewart, Georgia, had only been the first. Nearly every Army base was near some big city or other. Fort Stewart was within easy driving distance of Savannah and Atlanta. Fort Hood was close to Dallas—Fort Worth. Fort Campbell an hour from Nashville, where Vanderbilt had already reported cases. The personnel lived mainly in barracks, where they shared common showers and toilet facilities, and at these bases the senior medical officers were quite literally terrified. Naval personnel lived the most closely of all. Their ships were enclosed environments. Those ships at sea were instantly ordered to remain there while the shoreside situation was evaluated. It was soon determined that every major base was at risk, and though some units—mainly infantry and military police—deployed to augment the National Guard, medics kept an eye on every soldier and Marine. Soon they started finding men and women with flu symptoms. These were instantly isolated, put in protective MOPP gear and flown by helicopter to the nearest hospital that was receiving suspected Ebola cases. By midnight it would be clear that, until further notice, the U.S. military was a contaminated instrument. Urgent calls into the National Military Command Center reported which units had found cases, and on that information whole battalions were separated from others and kept that way, the personnel eating combat rations because their mess halls were closed, and thinking about an enemy they couldn't see.

“JESUS, JOIIN,” CHAVEZ said in the latter’s office.

Clark nodded silently. His wife, Sandy, was an instructor in nursing in a teaching hospital, and her life, he knew, might be at risk. She worked a medical floor. If an infected patient arrived, he would come to her unit, and Sandy would take the lead to show her students how to treat such patients safely.

Safely? he asked himself. Sure. The thought brought back dark memories and the sort of fear he hadn’t known in many years. This attack on his country —Clark hadn’t been told yet, but he never had learned to believe in coincidences—didn’t put him at risk, but it put his wife at risk.

“Who do you suppose did it?” It was a dumb question, and it generated a dumber reply.

“Somebody who doesn’t like us a whole hell of a lot,” John answered crossly.

“Sorry.” Chavez looked out the window and thought for a few seconds. “It’s one hell of a gamble, John.”

“If we find out it is ... and operational security on something like this is a motherfucker.”

“Roge-o, Mr. C. The people we’ve been looking at?”

“That’s a possibility. Others, too, I suppose.” He checked his watch. Director Foley should be back from Washington by now, and they should head up to his office. It took only a couple of minutes.

“Hi, John,” the DCI said, looking up from his desk. Mary Pat was there, too.

“Not an accident, is it?” Clark asked.

“No, it’s not. We’re setting up a joint task force. The FBI is talking to people inside the country. If we get leads, it’ll be our job to work outside the borders. You two will stand by to handle that. I’m trying to figure a way now to get people overseas.”

“The SNIE?” Ding asked.

“Everything else is on the back burner now. Jack even gave me authority to order NSA and DIA around.” Though the DCI by law had the power to do just that, in fact the other large agencies had always been their own independent empires. Until now.

“How are the kids, guys?” Clark asked.

“Home,” Mary Pat replied. Queen spook or not, she was still a mother with a mother’s concerns. “They say they feel fine.”

“Weapons of mass destruction,” Chavez said next. He didn’t have to say anything more.

“Yeah.” The DCI nodded. Somebody either had overlooked or didn’t care about the fact that United States policy for years had been explicit on that issue. A nuke was a germ was a gas shell, and the reply to a germ or a gas shell was a nuke, because America had those, and didn’t have the others. Foley’s desk phone rang. “Yes?” He listened for a few seconds. “Fine, could you send a team here for that? Good, thank you.”

“What was that?”

“USAMRIID at Fort Detrick. Okay, they’ll be here in an hour. We can send people overseas, but they have to have their blood tested first. The European countries are—well, you can imagine. Shit, you can’t take a fucking *dog* into

England without leaving him in a kennel for a month to make sure he doesn't have rabies. You'll probably have to be tested on the other side of the pond, too. Flight crew also," the DCI added.

"We're not packed," Clark said.

"Buy what you need over there, John, okay?" Mary Pat paused. "Sorry."

"Do we have any leads to run down?"

"Not yet, but that will change. You can't do something like this without leaving *some* footprints."

"Something's strange here," Chavez observed, looking down the long, narrow top-floor office. "John, remember what I said the other day?"

"No," Clark said. "What do you mean?"

"Some things you can't retaliate about, some things you can't reverse. Hey, if this was a terrorist op—"

"Too big," Mary Pat objected. "Too sophisticated."

"Fine, ma'am, even if it was, hell, we could turn the Bekaa Valley into a parking lot, and send the Marines in to paint the lines after it cools down. That ain't no secret. Same thing's true of a nation-state, isn't it? We ditched the ballistic missiles, but we still have nuclear bombs. We can burn any country down to bedrock, and President Ryan would do it least I wouldn't bet the house against it. I've seen the guy in action, and he ain't no pantywaist."

"So?" the DCl asked. He didn't say that it wasn't that simple. Before Ryan or anyone else initiated a nuclear-release order, the evidence would have to be of the sort to pass scrutiny with the Supreme Court, and he *didn't* think Ryan was the sort to do such a thing under most circumstances.

"So whoever ran this op is thinking one of two things. Either it won't matter if we find out, or we can't respond that way, or ..." There was a third one, wasn't there? It was almost there, but not quite.

"Or they take the President out but then why try for his little girl first?" Mary Pat asked. "That just increases security around him, makes the job harder instead of easier. We have things happening all over. The Chinese thing. The UIR. The Indian navy sneaked out to sea. All the political crap here, and now this Ebola. There's no picture. All these things are unconnected."

"Except they're all making *our* life hard, aren't they?" The room got quiet for a few seconds.

"The boy's got a point," Clark told the other two.

"IT ALWAYS STARTS in Africa," Lorenz said, filling his pipe. "That's where it lives. There was an outbreak in Zaire a few months ago."

"Didn't make the news," the FBI agent said.

"Only two victims, a young boy and a nurse—nursing nun, I think, but she was lost in a plane crash. Then there was a mini-break in Sudan, again two victims, an adult male and a little girl. The man died. The child survived. That was weeks ago, too. We have blood samples from the Index Case. We've been experimenting with that one for a while now."

"How do you do that?"

"You culture the virus in tissue. Monkey kidneys, as a matter of fact—oh, yeah," he remembered.

"What's that?"

"I put in an order for some African greens. That's the monkey we use. You euthanatize them and extract the kidneys. Somebody got there first, and I had to wait for another order."

"Do you know who it was?"

Lorenz shook his head. "No, never found out. Put me back a week, ten days, that's all."

"Who else would want the monkeys?" the SAC asked.

"Pharmaceutical houses, medical labs, like that."

"Who would I talk to about that?"

"You serious?"

"Yes, sir."

Lorenz shrugged and pulled the card off his Rolodex. "Here."

THE BREAKFAST MEETING had taken a little time to arrange. Ambassador David L. Williams left his car, then was escorted into the Prime Minister's official residence. He was grateful for the time of day. India could be a furnace, and at his age the heat became increasingly oppressive, especially since he had to dress like an Ambassador, instead of a governor of Pennsylvania, where it was okay to look working class. In this country, working class meant even more informal clothing, and that made the upper crust even haughtier with their beloved symbols of status. World's largest democracy they liked to call this place, the retired politician thought. Sure.

The P.M. was already seated at the table. She rose when he entered the room, took his hand and conveyed him to his seat. The china was gold-trimmed, and a liveried servant came in to serve coffee. Breakfast started with melon.

"Thank you for receiving me," Williams said.

"You are always welcome in my house," the P.M. replied graciously. About as much as a snake, the Ambassador knew. The hi-how-are-you chitchat lasted for ten minutes. Spouses were fine. Children were fine. Grandchildren were fine. Yes, it was warming up with the approach of summer. "So what business do we have to discuss?"

"I understand that your navy has sailed."

"Yes, it has, I believe. After the unpleasantness your forces inflicted on us, they had to make repairs. I suppose they are making sure all their machines work," the P.M. replied.

"Just exercises?" Williams asked. "My government merely asks the question, madam."

"Mr. Ambassador, I remind you that we are a sovereign nation. Our armed forces operate under our law, and you keep reminding us that the sea is free for the innocent passage of all. Are you now telling me that your country wishes to deny us that right?"

"Not at all, Prime Minister. We merely find it curious that you are evidently staging so large an exercise." He didn't add, *with your limited resources.*

"Mr. Ambassador, no one likes to be bullied. Only a few months ago you falsely accused us of harboring aggressive intentions to a neighbor. You

threatened our country. You actually staged an attack on our navy and damaged our ships. What have we done to merit such unfriendly acts?" she asked, leaning back in her chair.

Unfriendly acts was not a phrase used lightly, the Ambassador noted, and was not accidentally spoken here.

"Madam, there has been no such act. I would suggest that if there were misperceptions, perhaps they were mutual, and to prevent further such errors, I come here to ask a simple question. America makes no threats. We simply inquire as to the intentions of your naval forces."

"And I have answered. We are conducting exercises." A moment before, Williams noted, she had *supposed* that something was going on. Now she seemed more certain of it. "Nothing more."

"Then my question is answered," Williams commented with a benign smile. Jesus, but she thought she was clever. Williams had grown up in one of America's most complex political environments, the Pennsylvania Democratic party, and had fought his way to the top of it. He'd met people like her before, just less sanctimonious. Lying was such a habit for political figures that they thought they could always get away with it. "Thank you, Prime Minister."

THE ENGAGEMENT WAS a wipeout, the first such in this training rotation. Pretty bad timing, Hamm thought, watching the vehicle returning up the dirt roads. They'd headed into it just after the President's announcement. They were Guardsmen, and they were far from home, and they were worried about their families. That had distracted them badly, since they hadn't had time to let things settle down a little, to call home and make sure things were okay with Mom and Dad, or honey and the kids. And they'd paid for it, but professional soldier that he was, Hamm knew it wasn't fair to mark this one down against the Carolina brigade. This sort of thing wouldn't happen in the field. Realistic as the NTC was, it was still play. Nobody died here except by accident, while at home the real thing might well be taking place. That wasn't how it was supposed to be with soldiers, was it?

CLARK AND CHAVEZ had their blood drawn by an Army medic who also ran the screening test. They watched it with morbid fascination, especially since the medic wore thick gloves and a mask.

"You're both clean," he told them, with a sigh of his own.

"Thanks, Sarge," Chavez said. It was very real now. His dark Latino eyes were showing something other than relief. Like John, Domingo was putting on his mission face.

With that, they bundled into an official car for the drive to Andrews. The streets in the Washington metropolitan area were unusually empty. It made for a swift passage that didn't assuage the sense of foreboding they both felt. Crossing one of the bridges, they stopped and had to wait for three other vehicles to pass a checkpoint. There was a National Guard Hummer in the middle of the eastbound lanes, and when Clark pulled up, he showed his CIA

picture-pass.

"Agency," he told the MP.

"Pass," the Spec-4 replied.

"So, where we going, Mr. C.?"

"Africa, via the Azores."

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INVESTIGATIONS

THE MEETING WITH THE Senate leadership went predictably. Issuing them surgical masks had set the tone of the evening for them—again, van Damm's idea. General Pickett had been to Hopkins to review procedures there, then flown back to give the main part of the briefing. The fifteen senators assembled in the East Room listened gravely, only their eyes showing above the masks.

"I'm not comfortable with your actions, Mr. President," one of them said. Jack couldn't tell which one.

"You think *I* am?" he replied. "If anybody has a better idea, let's hear it. I have to go with the best medical advice. If this thing is as deadly as the general says, then any mistake could kill people in the thousands—even millions. If we err, we have to err on the side of caution."

"But what about civil liberties?" another one demanded.

"Does any of those come before life?" Jack asked. "People, if anyone wants to give me a better option, I will listen—we have one of our experts here to help evaluate it. *But* I will *not* listen to objections that are not based on scientific fact. The Constitution and the law cannot anticipate every eventuality. In cases like this, we're supposed to use our heads—"

"We're supposed to be guided by principle!" It was the civil liberties Senator again.

"Fine, then let's talk about it. If there's a balance between what I have done and whatever else will keep the country moving—*and safe!*—let's find it. I *want* options! *Give me something I can use!*" There followed a silence and a lot of crossed looks. Even that was hard. The senators were spaced out in their seating.

"Why did you have to move so fast?"

"People may be dying, you jackass!" another senator snarled at his good friend and distinguished colleague. He had to be one of the new crop, Jack thought. Someone who didn't know the mantras yet.

"But what if you're wrong?" a voice asked.

"Then you can hold your impeachment trial after the House indicts me," Jack replied. "Then somebody else can make these decisions, and God help him. Senators, my wife is in Hopkins right now, and she's going to take her turn treating these people. I don't like *that*, either. I would like to have your support. It's lonely standing up by myself like this, but whether you support your President or not, I have to do the best I can. I'll say it one more time: if anybody here has a better idea, let's hear it."

But nobody did, and it wasn't their fault. As little time as he'd had to come

to terms with the situation, they'd had less.

THE AIR FORCE had managed tropical uniforms for them out of the Andrews Post Exchange—a medium-sized department store—since their Washington clothes were a little too heavy for a tropical environment. It made for good cover, too. Clark wore the silver eagles of a colonel, and Chavez was a major, complete with silver pilot's wings and ribbons donated by the flight crew of their VC-20B. There were, in fact, two sets of pilots. The backup crew was sleeping in the two most-forward passenger seats.

"Not bad for a retired E-6," Ding noted, though the uniform didn't fit all that well.

"Not bad for a retired E-7, either, and that's 'sir,' to you, Major Chavez."

"Three bags full, sir." It was their only light moment. The military version of the Gulfstream business jet had a ton of communications gear, and a sergeant to run it. The documents coming over the equipment threatened to exhaust the on-board supply of paper as they passed over Cape Verde, inbound to Kinshasa.

"Second stop is Kenya, sir." The communications sergeant was really an intelligence specialist. She read all the inbound traffic. "You have to see a man about some monkeys."

Clark took the page—he was the colonel, after all—and read it, while Chavez figured out how the ribbons went on the blue uniform shirt. He decided he didn't have to be too careful. It wasn't as though the Air Force were really a military service—at least according to the Army in which he'd once served, where it was an article of faith.

"Check this out," John said, handing the page over.

"That's a lead, Mr. C.," Ding observed at once. They traded a look. This was a pure intelligence mission, one of the few on which they'd been dispatched. They were tasked to gather vitally important information for their country, and nothing else. For now. Though they didn't say so, neither would have objected to doing something more. Though both were field officers of the CIA's Directorate of Operations, both were also former combat soldiers (in Clark's case, a former SEAL) who more often than not dropped into the DO's paramilitary side, where they did things that the pure spooks regarded as a little too exciting. But often satisfying, Chavez told himself. Very satisfying. He was learning to control his temper—in fact, that part of his genetic heritage, as he called it now, had always been under tight control—but it didn't stop him from thinking about finding whoever it was who had attacked his country, and then dealing with him as soldiers did.

"You know him better than I do, John. What's he going to do?"

"Jack?" Clark shrugged. "That depends on what we get for him, Domingo. That's our job, remember?"

"Yes, sir," the younger man said seriously.

THE PRESIDENT DID not sleep well that night, though he told himself, and

was told by others, that sleep was a prerequisite to making good decisions—and *that*, everyone emphasized, was his only real function. It was what the citizens expected him to do above all other things. He'd only had about six hours the previous day after an exhausting schedule of travel and speeches, but even so, sleep came hard. His staff and the staffs of many other federal agencies slept less, because, as sweeping as the executive orders were, they had to be implemented in a practical world, and that meant interpretation of the orders in the context of a living nation. A final complication was the fact that there was a problem with the two Chinas, who were thirteen hours ahead of Washington; another potential problem with India, ten hours ahead; and the Persian Gulf, eight hours ahead; in addition to the major crisis in America, which stretched across seven time zones all by itself, if one counted Hawaii—or even more if you added lingering possessions in the Pacific. Lying in bed on the residence floor of the White House, Ryan's mind danced around the globe, finally wondering what part of the world *wasn't* an area of some kind of concern. Around three he gave up the effort and rose, put on casual clothes and headed to the West Wing for the Signals Office, with members of the Detail in tow.

"What's happening?" he asked the senior officer present. It was Major Charles Canon, USMC, who'd been the one to inform him of the Iraqi assassination . . . which had seemed to start everything, he remembered. People started to jump to their feet. Jack waved them back into their seats. "As you were."

"Busy night, sir. Sure you want to be up for all this?" the major asked.

"I don't feel much like sleeping, Major," Ryan replied. The three Service agents behind him made faces behind SWORDSMAN'S back. They knew better even if POTUS didn't.

"Okay, Mr. President, we're linked in now with CDC and USAMRIID communications lines, so we're copying all their data. On the map there we have all the cases plotted." Canon pointed. Someone had installed a new, large map of the United States mounted on a corkboard. Red pushpins obviously designated Ebola cases. There was a supply of black ones, too, whose import was all too obvious, though none were on the board yet. The pins were mainly clustered in eighteen cities now, with seemingly random singles and pairs spread all over the map. There were still a number of states untouched. Idaho, Alabama, both the Dakotas, even, strangely, Minnesota with its Mayo Clinic, were among the states so far protected by Ryan's executive order—or chance, and how did one tell the difference? There were several computer printouts—the printers were all running now. Ryan picked one up. The victim-patients were listed alphabetically by name, by state, by city, and by occupation. Roughly fifteen percent of them were in the "maintenance custodial" category, and that was the largest statistical grouping other than "sales marketing." This data came from the FBI and CDC, which were working together to study patterns of infection. Another printout showed suspected sites of infection, and that confirmed General Pickett's statement that trade shows had been selected as primary targets.

In all his time at CIA, Ryan had studied all manner of theoretical attacks against his country. Somehow this sort had never made it to his desk.

Biological warfare was beyond the pale. He'd spent thousands of hours thinking about nuclear attack. What we had, what they had, what targets, what casualties, the hundreds of possible targeting options selected for political, military, or economic factors, and for each option there was a range of possible outcomes depending on weather, time of year, time of day, and other variables until the result could be addressed only by computers, and even then the likely results were only expressions of probability calculations. He'd hated every moment of that, and rejoiced at the end of the Cold War and its constant, implied threat of megadeaths. He'd even lived through a crisis that might have led that far. The nightmares from that, he remembered ...

The President had never taken a course in government per se, just the usual political-science courses at Boston College in pursuit of his first degree in economics. Mainly he remembered the words of an aristocratic planter, written almost thirty years before his ascension to become the country's third President: "... Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just Powers from the consent of the governed." That was the mission statement right there. The Constitution he'd sworn to Preserve, Protect, and Defend was itself designed to preserve, protect, and defend the lives and rights of the people out there, and he wasn't supposed to be here going over lists of names and places and occupations of people, at least eighty percent of whom were going to die. They were entitled to their lives. They were entitled to their liberty. They were entitled to the pursuit—by which Jefferson had meant the *vocation of,* not the chase after—of happiness. Well, somebody was taking lives. Ryan had ordered the suspension of their liberty. Sure as hell not many were happy right now . . .

"Here's actually a little bit of good news, Mr. President." Canon handed over the previous day's election results. It startled Ryan. He'd allowed himself to forget about that. Someone had compiled a list of the winners by profession, and less than half of them were lawyers. Twenty-seven were physicians. Twenty-three were engineers. Nineteen were farmers. Eighteen were teachers. Fourteen were businessmen of one sort or another. Well, that was something, wasn't it? Now he had about a third of a House of Representatives. How to get them to Washington, he wondered. They could not be impeded from that. The Constitution was explicit on that issue. While Pat Martin might argue that the suspension of interstate travel had never been argued before the high court, the Constitution mandated that members of the Congress could not be stopped from coming to a session except on cause of treason . . . ? Something like that. Jack couldn't remember exactly, but he knew that congressional immunity was a big deal.

Then a telex machine started chattering. An Army Spec-5 walked over to it.

"FLASH-traffic from State, from Ambassador Williams in India," he announced.

"Let's see." Ryan walked over, too. It wasn't good news. Neither was the next one from Taipei.

THE PHYSICIANS WERE working four-hour shifts. For every young resident

there was a senior staff member. They were largely doing nurses' work, and though they mainly were doing it well, they also knew that it wouldn't matter all that much.

It was Cathy's first time in a space suit. She'd operated on thirty or so AIDS patients for eye complications of their disease, but that hadn't been terribly difficult. You used regular gloves, and the only real worry was the number of hands allowed in the surgical field, and for ophthalmic surgery that wasn't nearly the problem it was for thoracic. You went a little slower, were a little more careful in your movements, but that was it, really. Not now. Now she was in a big, thick plastic bag, wearing a helmet whose clear faceplate often fogged from her breath, looking at patients who were going to die despite the attention of professor-rank physicians.

But they had to try anyway. She was looking down at the local Index Case, the Winnebago dealer whose wife was in the next room. There were two IVs running, one of fluids and electrolytes and morphine, the other of whole blood, both held rigidly in place so as not to damage the steel-vein interface. The only thing they could do was to support. It had once been thought that interferon might help, but that hadn't worked. Antibiotics didn't touch viral diseases, a fact which was not widely appreciated. There was nothing else, though a hundred people were now examining options in their labs. No one had ever taken the time with Ebola. CDC, the Army, and a few other labs across the world had done some work, but there hadn't been the effort devoted to other diseases that raged through "civilized" countries. In America and Europe research priority went to diseases that killed many, or which attracted a lot of political attention, because the allocation of government research money was a political act, and for private funding it tracked with what rich or prominent person had been unlucky. Myasthenia gravis had killed Aristotle Onassis, and the resultant funding, while not fast enough to help the shipping magnate, had made significant progress almost overnight—largely luck, Dr. Ryan knew, but true even so, and a blessing to other victims. The same principle extended to oncology, where the funding for breast cancer, which attacked roughly one woman in ten, far outstripped research in prostate cancer, which afflicted roughly half of the male population. A huge amount went into childhood cancers, which were statistically quite rare—only twelve cases a year per hundred thousand kids—but what was more valuable than a child? Nobody objected to that; certainly she did not. It came down to minuscule funding for Ebola and other tropical diseases because they didn't have a high profile in the countries which spent the money. That would change now, but not soon enough for the patients filling up the hospital.

The patient started gagging and turned to his right. Cathy grabbed the plastic trash can—emesis trays were too small and tended to spill—and held it for him. Bile and blood, she saw. Black blood. Dead blood. Blood full of the little crystalline "bricks" of Ebola virus. When he was done, she gave him a water container, the sort with a straw that gave a little bit of water from a squeeze. Just enough to wet his mouth.

"Thanks," the patient groaned. His skin was pale except in the places where it was blotched from subcutaneous bleeding. Petechiae. Must be Latin, Cathy thought. A dead language's word to designate the sign of approaching death.

He looked at her, and he knew. He had to know. The pain was fighting up against the border of the current morphine dosage, reaching his consciousness in waves, like the battering of a tide against a seawall.

"How am I doing?" he asked.

"Well, you're pretty sick," Cathy told him. "But you're fighting back very well. If you can hang in there long enough, your immune system can beat this thing down, but you have to hang tough for us." And that wasn't quite a lie.

"I don't know you. You a nurse?"

"No, I'm actually a professor." She smiled at him through the plastic shield.

"Be careful," he told her. "You really don't want this. Trust me." He even managed to smile back in the way that severely afflicted patients did. It nearly tore Cathy's heart from her chest.

"We're being careful. Sorry about the suit." She so needed to touch the man, to show that she really did care, and you couldn't do that through rubber and plastic, damn it!

"Hurts real bad, Doc."

"Lie back. Sleep as much as you can. Let me adjust the morphine for you." She walked to the other side of the bed to increase the drip, waiting a few minutes before his eyes closed. Then she walked back to the bucket and sprayed it with a harsh chemical disinfectant. The container was already soaked in it, to the point that the chemical had impregnated the plastic, and anything alive that fell into it would quickly be extinguished. Spraying the thirty or so cc's that he'd brought up was probably unnecessary, but there was no such thing as too many precautions now. A nurse came in and handed over the printout with the newest blood work. The patient's liver function was nearly off the scale, automatically highlighted by asterisks as though she wouldn't have noticed. Ebola had a nasty affinity for that organ. Other chemical indicators confirmed the start of systemic necrosis. The internal organs had started to die, the tissues to rot, eaten by the tiny virus strands. It was theoretically possible that his immune system could still summon its energy and launch a counterattack, but that was only theory, one chance in several hundred. *Some* patients *did* fight this off. It was in the literature which she and her colleagues had studied over the last twelve hours, and in that case, they were already speculating, if they could isolate the antibodies, they might have something they could use therapeutically.

If—maybe—might—could—possibly.

That wasn't medicine as she knew it. Certainly it wasn't the clean, antiseptic medicine she practiced at Wilmer, fixing eyes, restoring and perfecting sight. She thought again about her decision to enter ophthalmology. One of her professors had pressed her hard to look at oncology. She had the brains, she had the curiosity, she had the gift for connecting things, he'd told her. But looking down at this sleeping, dying patient, she knew that, no, she didn't have the heart to do this every day. Not to lose so many. So did that make her a failure? Cathy Ryan asked herself. With this patient, she had to admit, yes, it did.

"DAMN," CHAVEZ SAID. "It's like Colombia."

"Or Vietnam," Clark agreed on being greeted with the tropical heat. There was an embassy official, and a representative of the Zaire government. The latter wore a uniform and saluted the arriving "officers," which courtesy John returned.

"This way, if you please, Colonel." The helicopter, it turned out, was French, and the service was excellent. America had dropped a lot of money into this country. It was payback time now.

Clark looked down. Triple-canopy jungle. He'd seen that before, in more than one country. In his youth, he'd been underneath, looking for enemies, and with enemies looking for him—little men in black pajamas or khaki uniforms, carrying AK-47s, people who wanted to take his life. Now he appreciated the fact that there was something down there even smaller, that was not carrying any weapon, and was targeted not merely on him, but at the heart of his country. It seemed so damned unreal. John Clark was a creature of his country. He'd been wounded in combat operations and other, more personal events, and every time was restored quickly to full health. There had been that one time, when he'd rescued an A-6 pilot up some river in North Vietnam whose namc he couldn't remember anymore. He'd gotten cut, and the polluted river had infected him, and *that* had been fairly unpleasant, but drugs and time had fixed it. He'd come away from all the experiences with a deeply held belief that his country produced doctors who could fix just about anything—not old age, and not cancer, yet, but they were working on it, and in due course they'd win their battles as he'd won most of his. That was an illusion. He had to admit that now. As he and his country had lost their struggle in a jungle like this one, a thousand feet below the racing helicopter, so now the jungle was reaching out, somehow. No. He shook that off. The jungle wasn't reaching out. People had done that.

THE FOUR RO/RO ships formed up six hundred miles north-northwest of Diego Garcia. They were in a box formation, spaced a thousand yards abeam and a thousand yards fore and aft. The destroyer *O'Bannon* took position five thousand yards dead ahead. *Kidd* was ten thousand yards northeast of the ASW ship, with *Anzio* twenty miles in advance of the rest. The replenishment group with its two frigates was westbound and would join up around sunset.

It was a good opportunity for an exercise. Six P-3C Orion aircraft were based at Diego Garcia—the number had once been larger—and one of them was patrolling ahead of the mini-convoy, dropping sonobuoys, a complex undertaking for so rapidly moving a formation, and listening for possible submarines. Another Orion was well in advance, tracking the Indian navy's two-carrier battle group from their radar emissions while staying well out of detection range. The lead Orion was not armed with anything but anti-sub weapons at the moment, and its mission was routine surveillance.

"YES, MR. PRESIDENT," the J-3 said. *Why aren't you asleep, Jack?* he couldn't say.

"Robby, did you see this thing from Ambassador Williams?"

"It got my attention," Admiral Jackson confirmed.

David Williams had taken his time drafting the communiqué. That had annoyed people at State, and caused two requests for his report which he had ignored. The former governor was drawing on all of his political savvy to consider the words the Prime Minister had chosen, her tone, her body language—the look in her eyes most of all. There was no substitute for that. Dave Williams had learned that lesson more than once. One thing he hadn't learned was diplomatic verbiage. His report was straightfrom-the-shoulder, and his conclusion was that India was up to something. He further noted that the Ebola crisis in America had not come up. Not a word of sympathy. That, he wrote, was probably a mistake in one sense, and a very deliberate act in another. India should have cared about it, or should have expressed concern even if she didn't. Instead it had been ignored. If asked, the Prime Minister would have said that she hadn't yet been informed, but that would be a lie, Williams added. In the age of CNN, things like that never went unnoticed. Instead, she had harped on being bullied by America, reminded him of the "attack" on her navy not once but twice, and then extended the remark into calling it an "unfriendly act," a phrase used in diplomacy right before a hand descended toward the holster. He concluded that India's naval exercise was not a mistake in either timing or location. The message hc'd received was: *In your face!*

"So, what do you think, Rob?"

"I think Ambassador Williams is one shrewd son of a bitch, sir. The only thing he didn't say is something he didn't know: we don't have a carrier there. Now, the Indians haven't been tracking us in any way, but it's public knowledge that *Ike* is heading toward China, and if their intcl officers are halfway competent, they definitely *do* know. Then, *shazam*, they put out to sea. And now, we get this from the Ambassador. Sir—"

"Stow that, Robby," Ryan told him. "You've said that enough for one day."

"Fine. Jack, we have every reason to believe that China and India were working together before. So what happens now? China stages an incident. It gets nastier. We move a carrier. The Indians put to sea. Their fleet is on a direct line between Diego Garcia and the Persian Gulf. The Persian Gulf heats up."

"And we have a plague," Ryan added. He leaned forward on the cheap desk in Signals. He couldn't sleep, but that didn't mean he was fully awake, either. "Coincidences '?"

"Maybe. Maybe the Indian Prime Minister is pissed at us because we rattled their cage a while back. Maybe she just wants to show us that we can't push her around. Maybe it's petty bullshit, Mr. President. But maybe it ain't."

"Options?"

"We have a surface-action group in the Eastern Med, two Aegis cruisers, a Burke-class 'can, and three figs. The Med's quiet. I suggest that we consider moving that group through Suez to back up the *Anzio* group. I further suggest that we consider moving a carrier from WestLant to the Med. That will take a while, Jack. It's six thousand miles; even with a speed of advance of twenty-five knots that's almost nine days just to get a carrier close. We have more

than a third of the world without a carrier handy, and the part that isn't covered is starting to make me nervous. If we have to do something, Jack, I'm not sure we can."

"HELLO, SISTER," CLARK said, taking her hand gently. He hadn't seen a nun in quite a few years.

"Welcome, Colonel Clark. Major." She nodded to Chavez.

"Afternoon, ma'am."

"What brings you to our hospital?" Sister Mary Charles's English was excellent, almost as though she taught it, with a Belgian accent that sounded just like French to the two Americans.

"Sister, we're here to ask about the death of one of your colleagues, Sister Jean Baptiste," Clark told her.

"I see." She waved to the chairs. "Please sit down."

"Thank you, Sister," Clark said politely.

"You are Catholic?" she asked. It was important to her.

"Yes, ma'am, we both are." Chavez nodded agreement with the "colonel."

"Your education?"

"Actually all Catholic schools for me," Clark said, indulging her. "Grade school was the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and Jesuits after that."

"Ah." She smiled, pleased at the news. "I have heard of the sickness that has broken out in your country. This is very sad. And so you are here to ask about poor Benedict Mkusa, Sister Jean, and Sister Maria Magdalena. But I fear we cannot be of much help to you."

"Why is that, Sister?"

"Benedict died and his body was cremated on government order," Sister Mary Charles explained. "Jean was taken ill, ycs, but she left for Paris on a medical evacuation flight, you see, to visit the Pasteur Institute. The airplane crashed into the sea, however, and all were lost."

"All?" Clark asked.

"Sister Maria Magdalena flew off also, and Dr. Moudi, of course."

"Who was he?" John inquired next.

"He was part of the World Health Organization mission to this area. Some of his colleagues are in the next building." She pointed.

"Moudi, you said, ma'am?" Chavez asked, taking his notes.

"Yes." She spelled it for him. "Mohammed Moudi. A good doctor," she added. "It was very sad to lose them all."

"Mohammed Moudi, you said. Any idea where he was from?" It was Chavez again.

"Iran—no, that's just changed, hasn't it? He was educated in Europe, a fine young physician, and very respectful of us."

"I see." Clark adjusted himself in his seat. "Could we talk with his colleagues?"

"I THINK THE President's gone much too far," the doctor said on TV. He had

to be interviewed in a local affiliate since he was unable to drive from Connecticut to New York this morning.

"Why is that, Bob?" the host asked. He'd come in from his home in New Jersey to the New York studio off Central Park West, just before the bridges and tunnels had been closed, and was sleeping in his office now. Understandably, he wasn't very happy about it.

"Ebola is a nasty one. There's no doubt of that," said the network's medical correspondent. He was a physician who didn't practice, though he spoke the language quite well. He mainly presented medical news, in the morning concentrating on the benefits of jogging and good diet. "But it's never been here, and the reason is that the virus can't survive here. However these people contracted it—and for the moment I will leave speculation on that aside—it *can't* spread very far. I'm afraid the President's actions are precipitous."

"And unconstitutional," the legal correspondent added. "There's no doubt of that. The President has panicked, and that's not good for the country in medical or legal terms."

"Thanks a bunch, fellas," Ryan said, muting the set.

"We have to work on this," Arnie said.

"How?"

"You fight bad information with good information."

"Super, Arnie, except that proving I did the right thing means people have to die."

"We have a panic to prevent, Mr. President."

So far that hadn't happened, which was remarkable. Timing had helped. The news had mainly hit people in the evening. For the most part, they'd gone home, they had enough food in the pantry to see them through a few days, and the news had shocked enough that there had not been a nationwide raid on supermarkets. Those things would change today, however. In a few hours people would be protesting. The news media would cover that, and some sort of public opinion would form. Arnie was right. He had to do something about it. But what?

"How, Arnie?"

"Jack, I thought you'd never ask."

THE NEXT STOP was the airport. There it was confirmed that, yes, a privately owned, Swiss-registered G-IV business jet had indeed lifted off with a flight plan taking it to Paris via Libya, for refueling. The chief controller had a Xerox copy of the airport records and the aircraft's manifest ready for the visiting Americans. It was a remarkably comprehensive document, since it had to allow for customs control as well. Even the names for the flight crew were on it.

"Well?" Chavez asked.

Clark looked at the officials. "Thank you for your valuable assistance." Then he and Ding headed for the car that would take them to their aircraft.

"Well?" Ding repeated.

"Cool it, partner." The five-minute ride passed in silence. Clark looked out the window. Thunderheads were building. He hated flying in the things.

"No way. We wait a few minutes." The backup pilot was a lieutenant colonel. "We have rules."

Clark tapped the eagles on his epaulets and leaned right into his face. "Me colonel. Me say go, air scout. Right the *fuck* now!"

"Look, Mr. Clark, I know who you are and—"

"Sir," Chavez said, "I'm only an artificial major, but this mission's more important than your rules. Steer around the worst parts, will ya? We have barf bags if we need'em." The pilot glared at them, but moved back into the front office. Chavez turned. "Temper, John."

Clark handed over the paper. "Check the names for the flight crew. They ain't Swiss, and the registration of the aircraft is."

Chavez looked for that. HX-NJA was the registration code. And the names for the flight crew wcren't Germanic, Gallic, or Italian.

"Sergeant?" Clark called as the engines started up.

"Yes, sir!" The NCO had seen this man tear the driver a new asshole.

"Fax this to Langley, please. You have the right number to use. Quick as you can, ma'am," he added, since she was a lady, and not just a sergeant. The NCO didn't get it, but didn't mind, either.

"Cinch those belts in tight," the pilot called over the intercom as the VC-20B started to taxi.

IT TOOK THREE tries because of electrical interference from the storm, but the facsimile transmission went through the satellite, downlinked to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and reappeared in Mercury, the Agency's communications nexus. The senior watch officer had his deputy run it to the seventh floor. By that time, Clark was on the phone to him.

"Getting some interference," the watch officer said. Digital satellite radio and all, a thunderstorm was still a thunderstorm.

"It's a little bumpy at the moment. Run the registration number and the names on that manifest. Everything you can get on them."

"Say again."

Clark did. It got through this time.

"Will do. Somebody's got a file on this. Anything else?"

"Back to you later. Out," he heard.

"SO?" DING ASKED, reefing his belt in tighter as the G took a ten-foot drop.

"Those names are in Farsi, Ding—oh, shit." Another major bump. He looked out the window. It was like a huge arena, a cylindrical formation of clouds with lightning all over the place. It wasn't often he looked down at that. "The bastard's doing this on purpose."

But he wasn't. The lieutenant colonel on the controls was scared. Air Force regulations not to mention common sense prohibited what he was doing. The weather radar in the nose showed red twenty degrees left and right of his projected course to Nairobi. Left looked better. He turned thirty degrees, banking the executive jet like a fighter, searching for a smooth spot as he

continued the climb-out. What he found wasn't smooth, but it was better. Ten minutes later the VC-20B broke into sunlight.

One of the spare pilots turned in her front row seat: "Satisfied, Colonel?" she asked.

Clark unbuckled his belt in defiance of the sign and went to the lavatory to splash water in his face. Then he knelt down on the floor next to her and showed her the paper that had just been transmitted. "Can you tell me anything about this?" She only needed one look.

"Oh, yeah," the captain said. "We got a notice on that."

"What?"

"This is essentially the same aircraft. When one breaks, the manufacturer tells everybody about it—I mean, we'd ask anyway, but it's almost automatic. He came out of here, flew north to Libya, landed to refuel, right? Took off right away, practically—medical flight, I think, wasn't it?"

"Correct. Go on."

"He called emergency, said he lost power on one engine, then the other, and went in. Three radars tracked it. Libya, Malta, and a Navy ship, destroyer, I think."

"Anything funny about it, Captain?"

She shrugged. "This is a good airplane. I don't think the military's ever broke one. You just saw how good. A couple of those bumps were two and a half, maybe three gees, and the engines—Jerry, have we ever lost an engine in flight on a -20?"

"Twice, I think. First one there was a defect on the fuel pump—Rolls-Royce sent out a fix on all of those. The other one, it was in November, a few years back. They ate a goose.

"That'll do it every time," she told Clark. "Goose weighs maybe fifteen, twenty pounds. We try to keep clear of them."

"This guy lost both engines, though?"

"They haven't figured out why yet. Maybe bad fuel. That happens, but the engines are isolated units, sir. Separate everything, pumps, electronics, you name it—"

"Except fuel," Jerry said. "That all comes out of one truck."

"What else? What happens when you lose an engine?"

"If you're not careful you can lose control. You get a full shutdown, the aircraft yaws into the dead engine. That changes airflow over the control surfaces. We lost a Lear, a VC-21, that way once. If it catches you in a transition maneuver when it happens, well, then it can get a little bit exciting. But we train for that, and the flight crew on this one, that was in the report. They were both experienced drivers, and they go in the box—the training simulator—pretty regular. You have to, or they take your insurance away. Anyway, the radar didn't show them maneuvering. So, no, that shouldn't have done it to them. The best guess was bad fuel, but the Libyans said the fuel was okay."

"Unless the crew just totally screwed up," Jerry added. "But even that's hard. I mean, they make these things so you really have to try to break 'em, y'know? I got two thousand hours."

"Two and a half for me," the captain said. "It's safer'n driving a car in D.C.,

sir. We all love these things."

Clark nodded and went forward.

"Enjoying the ride?" the pilot in command said over his shoulder. His voice wasn't exactly friendly, and he didn't exactly have to worry about insubordination. Not with an "officer" wearing his own ribbons.

"I don't like leaning on people, Colonel. This is very important shit. That's all I can say."

"My wife's a nurse in the base hospital." He didn't have to say more. He was worried about her.

"So's mine, down in Williamsburg." The pilot turned on learning that, and nodded at his passenger.

"No real harm done. Three hours to Nairobi, Colonel."

"WELL, HOW DO *I* get back?" Raman asked over the phone.

"You don't for now," Andrea told him. "Sit tight. Maybe you can help the FBI with the investigation they have running."

"Well, that's just great!"

"Deal with it, Jeff. I don't have time for this," she told her subordinate crossly.

"Sure." He hung up.

That was odd, Andrea thought. Jeff was always one of the cool ones. But who was cool at the moment?

52

SOMETHING OF VALUE

EVER BEEN HERE BEFORE, John?" Chavez asked as their aircraft descended to meet its shadow on the runway.

"Passed through once. Didn't see much more than the terminal." Clark slipped off his belt and stretched. Sunset was descending here, too, and with it *not* the end of a very long day for the two intelligence officers. "Most of what I know comes from books by a guy named Ruark, hunting and stuff."

"You don't hunt—not animals, anyway," Ding added.

"Used to. I still like reading about it. Nice to hunt things that don't shoot back." John turned with part of a smile.

"Not as exciting. Safer, maybe," the junior agent allowed. How dangerous could a lion really be? he wondered.

The rollout took them to the military terminal. Kenya had a small air force, though what it did was a mystery to the visiting CIA/Air Force "officers," and seemed likely to remain so. The aircraft was met, again, by an embassy official, this one the Defense attaché, a black Army officer with the rank of colonel, and a Combat Infantryman's Badge that marked him as a veteran of the Persian Gulf War.

"Colonel Clark, Major Chavez." Then his voice stopped. "Chavez, do I know you?"

"Ninja!" Ding grinned. "You were brigade staff then, First of the Seventh."

"Cold Steel! You're one of the guys who got lost. I guess they found you. Relax, gentlemen, I know where you're from, but our hosts do not," the officer warned.

"Where's the CIB from, Colonel?" the former staff sergeant asked on the walk over to where the cars were.

"I had a battalion of the Big Red One in Iraq. We kicked a few and took a few." Then his mood changed. "So how are things at home?"

"Scary," Ding replied.

"Something to remember, bio-war is mainly a psychological weapon, like the threat of gas was against us back in '91. "

"Maybe so," Clark responded. "It sure as hell's got my attention, Colonel."

"Got mine, too," the Defense attaché admitted. "I got family in Atlanta. CNN says there's cases there."

"Rcad fast." John handed over the last data sent to them on the airplane. "This ought to be better than what's on TV." Not that *better* was the right word, he thought.

The colonel rated a driver, it seemed. He took the front seat in the embassy car and flipped through the pages.

"No official greeting this time?" Chavez asked.

"Not here. We'll have a cop where we're going. I asked my friends in the ministry to low-profile this one. I have some pretty good contacts around town."

"Good call," Clark said as the car started moving. Getting there only took ten minutes.

The animal dealer had his place of business on the outskirts of the city, conveniently located to the airport and the main highway west into the bush, but not too close to much else. The CIA officers soon discovered why.

"Christ," Chavez observed, getting out of the car.

"Yeah, they're noisy, aren't they? I was here earlier today. He's getting a shipment of greens ready for Atlanta." He opened a briefcase and handed something over. "Here, you'll need this."

"Right." Clark slid the envelope into his clipboard.

"Hello!" the dealer said, coming out of his office. He was a big man and, judging by his gut, knew his way around a case of beer. With him was a uniformed police officer, evidently a senior one. The attaché went to speak with him, and move him aside. The cop didn't seem to object. This infantry colonel, Clark saw, knew how the game was played.

"Howdy," John said, taking his hand. "I'm Colonel Clark. This is Major Chavez."

"You are American Air Force?"

"That's right, sir," Ding replied.

"I love airplanes. What do you fly?"

"All sorts of things," Clark answered. The local businessman was already half in the bag. "We have a few questions, if you don't mind."

"About monkeys? Why are you interested in monkeys? The chief constable didn't explain."

"Is it all that important?" John asked, handing over an envelope. The dealer pocketed it without opening it to count. He'd felt how thick it was.

"Truly it is not, but I do love to watch airplanes. So what can I tell you?" he asked next, his voice friendly and open.

"You sell monkeys," John said.

"Yes, I deal in them. For zoos, for private collectors, and for medical laboratories. Come, I will show you." He led them toward a three-sided building made of corrugated iron, it looked like. Two trucks were there, and five workers were loading cagcs onto it, their hands in thick leather gloves.

"We just had an order from your CDC in Atlanta," the dealer explained, "for a hundred greens. They are pretty animals, but very unpleasant. The local farmers hate them."

"Why?" Ding asked, looking at the cages. They were made of steel wire, with handles at the top. From a distance they appeared to be of the size used to transport chickens to market . . . viewed closer, they were a little large for that, but ...

"They ravage crops. They are a pest, like rats, but more clever, and people from America think they are gods or something, the way they complain on how they are used in medical experiments." The dealer laughed. "As though we would run out of them. There are millions. We raid a place, take thirty,

and a month later we can come back and take thirty more. The farmers beg us to come and trap them."

"You had a shipment ready for Atlanta earlier this year, but you sold them to someone else, didn't you?" Clark asked. He looked over to his partner, who didn't approach the building. Rather, he separated from Clark and the dealer, and walked on a line away from it. He seemed to be staring at the empty cages. Maybe the smell bothered him. It was pretty thick.

"They did not pay me on time, and another customer came along, and he had his money all ready," the dealer pointed out. "This is a business, Colonel Clark."

John grinned. "Hey, I'm not here from the Better Business Bureau. I just want to know who you sold them to."

"A buyer," the dealer said. "What else do I need to know?"

"Where was he from?" Clark persisted.

"I do not know. He paid me in dollars, but he was probably not an American. He was a quiet fellow," the dealer remembered, "not very friendly. Yes, I know I was late getting the new shipment to Atlanta, but they were late in paying me," he reminded his guest. "You, fortunately, were not."

"They went out by air?"

"Yes, it was an old 707. It was full. They were not just my monkeys. They had gotten them elsewhere, too. You see, the green is so common. It lives all over Africa. Your animal worshippers need not worry about extinction for the green. The gorilla, now, I admit that is something else." Besides, they mainly lived in Uganda and Rwanda, and more was the pity. People paid real money for them.

"Do you have records? The name of the buyer, the manifest, the registration of the airplane?"

"Customs records, you mean." He shook his head. "Sadly, I do not. Perhaps they were lost."

"You have an arrangement with the airport officials," John said with a smile that he didn't feel.

"I have many friends in the government, yes." Another smile, the sly sort that confirmed his arrangement. Well, it wasn't as though there was no such thing as official corruption in America, was it? Clark thought.

"And you don't know where they went, then?"

"No, there I cannot help you. If I could, I would gladly do so," the dealer replied, patting his pocket. Where the envelope was. "I regret to say that my records are incomplete for some of my transactions."

Clark wondered if he could press the man further on this issue. He suspected not. He'd never worked Kenya, though he had worked Angola, briefly, in the 1970s, and Africa was a very informal continent, and cash was the lubricant. He looked over to where the Defense attaché was talking to the chief constable—the title was a holdover from British rule, which he'd read about in one of Ruark's books, and so were the shorts and kneesocks. He was probably confirming that, no, the dealer wasn't a criminal, just creative in his relationships with local authorities who, for a modest fee, looked the other way when asked. And monkeys were hardly a vital national commodity, assuming the dealer was truthful about the numbers of the things. And he

probably was. It sounded true. The farmers would probably be just as happy to be rid of the damned things just to make the noise stop. It sounded like a riot in the biggest bar in town on a Friday night. And they were nasty little bastards, reaching and snapping at the gloved hands transferring the cages. What the hell, they were having a bad day. And on getting to CDC Atlanta, it wouldn't get much better, would it? Were they smart enough to know? Damned sure Clark knew. You didn't ship this many to pet stores. But he didn't have enough solicitude to waste on monkeys at the moment.

"Thank you for your help. Perhaps someone will be back to speak with you."

"I regret that I could not tell you more." He was sincere enough about it. For five thousand dollars in cash, he thought he should do more. Not that he'd return any, of course.

The two men walked back toward the car. Chavez joined up, looking pensive, but not saying anything. As they approached, the cop and the attaché shook hands. Then it was time for the Americans to leave. As the car pulled off, John looked back to see the dealer take the envelope from his pocket and extract a few bills to hand over to the friendly chief constable. That made sense, too.

"What did you learn?" the real colonel asked.

"No records," John replied.

"It's the way they do business here. There's an export fee for those things, but the cops and the customs people usually have an—"

"Arrangement," John interrupted with a frown.

"That's the word. Hey, my father came from Mississippi. They used to say down there that one term as county sheriff fixed a guy up for life, y'know?"

"Cages," Ding said suddenly.

"Huh?" Clark asked.

"Didn't you see, John, the cages! We seen 'em before, just like those—in Tehran, in the air force hangar." He'd kept his distance in order to duplicate what he'd seen at Mehrabad. The relative size and proportions were the same. "Chicken coops or cages or whatever in a hangar with fighter planes, remember?"

"Shit!"

"One more indicator, Mr. C. Them coincidences are piling up, 'mano. Where we goin' next?"

"Khartoum."

"I saw the movie."

NEWS COVERAGE CONTINUED, but little else. Every network affiliate became more important as the "name" correspondents were trapped in their base offices of New York, Washington, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and the news devoted a great deal of time to visuals of National Guardsmen on the major interstate highways, blocking the roads physically with Hummers or medium trucks. No one really tried to run the blockades there. Food and medical supply trucks were allowed through, after each was inspected, and in a day or two, the drivers would be tested for Ebola antibodies, and given picture passes

to make their way more efficiently. The truckers were playing ball.

It was different for other vehicles and other roads. Though most interstate highway traffic went on the major highways, there was not a state in the Union that didn't have an extensive nctwork of side roads that interconnected with those of neighboring states, and all of these had to be blocked, too. That took time to accomplish, and there were interviews of people who'd gotten across and thought it something of a joke, followed by learned commentary that this proved that the President's order was impossible to implement completely, in addition to being wrong, stupid, and unconstitutional.

"It just isn't possible," one transportation expert said on the morning news.

But that hadn't accounted for the fact that National Guardsmen lived in the country they guarded, and could read maps. They were also offended by the implied statcment that they were fools. By noon on Wednesday there was a vehicle on every country road, crewed by men with rifles and wearing the chemical-protective suits that made them look like men (and women, though that was almost impossible to tell) from Mars.

On the side roads, if not the main ones, there were clashes. Some were mere words—my family is right over there, give a guy a break, okay? Sometimes the rule was enforced with a little common sense, after an identification check and a radio call. In other cases, the enforcement was literal, and here and there words were exchanged, some of them heated, and some of those escalated, and in two cases shots were fired, and in one of them a man was killed. Reported rapidly up the line, it was national news in two hours, and again commentators wondered at the wisdom of the President's order. One of them laid the death on the front steps of the White House.

For the most part, even those most determined to make their way to their cross-border destinations saw the uniformed men with guns and decided that it wasn't worth the risk.

The same applied to international borders. The Canadian military and police closed all border-crossing points. American citizens in Canada were asked to report to the nearest hospital for testing, and there they were detained, in a civilized way. Something similar happened in Europe, though there the treatment differed from one country to another. For the first time, it was the Mexican army which closed America's southern border, in cooperation with U.S. authorities, this time against traffic mainly moving south.

Some local traffic was moving. Supermarkets and convenience stores allowed people in, mainly in small numbers, to purchase necessities. Pharmacies sold out of surgical masks. Many called local hardware and paint dealers to get protective masks made for other uses, and TV coverage helped there by telling people that such masks, sprayed with common household disinfectants, offered better protection against a virus than the Army's chemical gear. But inevitably, some people overdid the spraying, and that resulted in allergic reactions, respiratory difficulties, and a few deaths.

Physicians all across the country were frantically busy. It was rapidly known that the initial presentation of Ebola was similar to flu symptoms, and any doctor could relate that people could *think* themselves into those. Telling the truly sick from the hypochondriac was rapidly becoming the most demanding of medical skills.

Despite it all, however, people dealt with it, watched their televisions, looked at one another, and wondered how much substance there was to the scare.

THAT WAS THE job of CDC and USAMRIID, aided by the FBI. There were now five hundred confirmed cases, each of which had been tied directly or indirectly to eighteen trade shows. That gave them time references. It also identified four other trade shows from which no illnesses had as yet developed. All twenty-two had been visited by agents, all of whom learned that in every case the rubbish from the shows had long since been hauled off. There was some thought that the trash might be picked through, but USAMRIID waved the Bureau off, and said that identifying the distribution system would mean comparing the contents of thousands of tons of material, a task that simply was not possible, and might even be dangerous. The important discovery was the time window. That information was made public at once. Americans who had traveled out of the country prior to the start dates of the trade shows that were known to have been focal centers were not dangerous. That fact was made known to national health services worldwide, most of which tacked on from two days to a full week. From them, the information became global knowledge within a few hours. There was no stopping it, and there was no purpose in keeping the secret, even if it were possible to do so.

“WELL. THAT MEANS we’re all safe,” General Diggs told his staff at the morning conference. Fort Irwin was one of the most isolated encampments in America. There was only one way in and out, and that road was now blocked by a Bradley.

That wasn’t true of other military bases; the problem was global. A senior Army officer from the Pentagon had flown to Germany to hold a conference with V Corps headquarters, and two days later collapsed, in the process infecting a doctor and two nurses. The news had shaken NATO allies, who instantly quarantined American encampments that dated back to the 1940s. The news was also instantly on global TV. What was worse in the Pentagon was that nearly every base had a case, real or suspected. The effect on unit morale was horrific, and that information, also, was impossible to conceal. Transatlantic phone lines burned with worry headed in both directions.

THINGS WERE FRANTIC in Washington, too. The joint task force included members of all the intelligence services, plus FBI and the federal law-enforcement establishment. The President had given them a lot of power to use, and they intended to use it. The manifest of the lost Gulfstream business jet had started things moving in a new and unexpected direction, but that was the way of investigations.

In Savannah, Georgia, an FBI agent knocked on the door of the president of

Gulfstream and handed him a surgical mask. The factory was shut down, as were most American businesses, but that executive order would be bent today. The president called his chief safety officer and told him to head in, along with the firm's senior test pilot. Six FBI agents sat down with them for a lengthy chat. That soon evolved into a conference call. The most important immediate result was the discovery that the lost aircraft's flight recorder hadn't been recovered. *That* resulted in a call to the CO of USS *Radford,* who confirmed that his ship, now in drydock, had tracked the lost aircraft and then had searched for the sonar pings of the black box, but to no avail. The naval officer could not explain that. Gulfstream's chief test pilot explained that if the aircraft hit hard enough, the instrument could break despite its robust design. But it hadn't been going all *that* fast, the *Radford*'s skipper remembered, and no debris had been found, either. As a result of that, the FAA and NTSB were called in and told to produce records instantly.

In Washington—the working group was in the FBI Building—looks were exchanged over the masks everyone was wearing. The FAA part of the team had run down the identity of the flight crew and their qualifications. It turned out that they were both former Iranian air force pilots, trained in America in the late 1970s. From that came photos and fingerprints. Another pair of pilots, flying the same sort of aircraft for the same Swiss corporation, had similar training, and the FBI's legal attaché in Bern made an immediate call to his Swiss colleagues to request assistance in interviewing them.

"Okay," Dan Murray summarized. "We got a sick Belgian nun and a friend with an Iranian doctor. They fly off in a Swiss-registered airplane that disappears without a trace. The airplane belongs to a little trading company the leg-alt will run that down for us pretty fast, but we know the flight crew was Iranian."

"It does seem to be heading in a certain direction, Dan," Ed Foley said. Just then an agent came in with a fax for the CIA Director. "Check this out." He slid it across the table. It wasn't a long message.

"People think they're so fuckin' smart," Murray told the people around the table. He passed the new dispatch around.

"Don't underestimate 'em," Ed Foley warned. "We don't have anything hard yet. The President can't take any action at all on anything until we do." And maybe not even then, his mind went on, as gutted as the military is right now. There was also the thing Chavez had said before flying off. Damn, but that kid was getting smart. Foley wondered whether to bring that up. There were more pressing matters for now, he decided. He could discuss it with Murray privately.

CHAVEZ DIDN'T FEEL smart as he dozed in his leather seat. It was another three-hour hop to Khartoum, and he was having dreams, fitful ones. He'd done his share of flying as a CIA officer, but even on a plush executive jet with all the bells and whistles, you got tired of it in a hurry. The diminished air pressure meant diminished oxygen, and that made you tired. The air was dry, and that dehydrated you. The noise of the engines made it like sleeping out in the boonies with insects swarming around all the time, always ready to suck

your blood, and you could never make the little bastards go away.

Whoever was doing whatever was happening wasn't all that smart. Okay, an airplane had disappeared with five people aboard, but that wasn't necessarily a dead end, was it? HX-NJA, he remembered from the customs document. Hmph. They'd probably kept records because they were shipping out people, rather than monkeys. HX for Switzerland. Why HX? he wondered. "H" for Helvetia, maybe? Wasn't that an old name for Switzerland? Didn't some languages still call it that? He seemed to remember that some did. German, maybe. NJA to identify the individual aircraft. They used letters instead of numbers bccause it made for more permutations. Even this one had such a code, with an "N" prefix because American aircraft used that letter code. NJA, he thought with his eyes closed. NJA. Ninja. That generated a smile. The sobriquet for his old outfit, 1st Battalion of the 17th Infantry Regiment. "We own the night!" Yeah, those were the days, humping the hills at Fort Ord and Hunter-Liggett. But the 7th Infantry Division (Light) had been deestablished, its standards furled and cased for retirement, or maybe later use ... Ninja. That seemed important. Why?

His eyes opened. Chavez stood, stretched, and went forward. There he woke the pilot with whom Clark had had that little tiff. "Coloncl?"

"What is it?" Only one eye opened.

"What's one of these things cost?"

"More 'n either one of us can afford." The eye closed back down.

"Seriously."

"Upwards of twenty million dollars, depending on the version and the avionics package. If somebody makes a better business jet, I don't know what it is."

"Thanks." Chavez returned to his seat. There was no sense in trying to fade back out. He felt the nose lower and heard the engines reduce their annoying sound. They were starting their descent into Khartoum. The local CIA station chief would be meeting—excuse me, he thought to himself. Commercial attaché. Or was it political officer? Whatever. He knew that this city wouldn't be as friendly as the last two.

THE HELICOPTER LANDED at Fort McHenry, close to the statue of Orpheus that someone had decided was appropriate to honor the name of Francis Scott Key, Ryan noted irrelevantly. About as irrelevant as Arnie's idea for a fucking photo opportunity. He had to show he was concerned. Jack wondered about that. Did people think that at times like this the President threw a party? Hadn't Poe written a story like that? "The Mask of the Red Death"? Something like that. But that plague had gotten into the party, hadn't it? The President rubbed his face. *Sleep*. *Have to sleep*. *Thinking crazy shit*. It was like flashbulbs. Your mind got tired and random thoughts blinked into your mind for no apparent reason, and then you had to fight them back, and get your mind going on the important stuff.

The usual Chevy Suburbans were there, but not the presidential limo. Ryan would ride in the obviously armored vehicle. There were cops around, too, looking grim. Well, everybody else did, too. Why not them?

He, too, was wearing a mask, and there were three TV cameras to record the fact. Maybe it was going out live. He didn't know, and scarcely looked at the cameras on the short walk to the cars. They started moving almost at once, up Fort Avenue, then north onto Key Highway. It was ten fast minutes over vacated city streets, heading toward Johns Hopkins, where the President and First Lady would show how concerned they were for other cameras. A leadership function, Arnie had told him, picking a phrase he was sure to recognize as something he had to respect whether he liked it or not. And the hell of it was, Arnie was right. He was the President, and he couldn't isolate himself from the people-whether he could do anything substantive to help them or not, they had to see him being concerned. It was something that did and didn't make sense, all at the same time.

The motorcade pulled into the Wolfe Street entrance. There were soldiers there, Guardsmen of the 175th Infantry Regiment, the Maryland Line. The local commander had decided that all hospitals had to be guarded, and Ryan supposed that was one of the things that did make sense. The Detail was nervous to have men around with loaded rifles, but they were soldiers, and that was that—disarming them might have made the news, after all. They all saluted, masked as they were in their MOPP gear, rifles slung over their shoulders. Nobody had threatened the hospital. Perhaps they were the reason why, or maybe it was just that people were scared. Enough that one cop had remarked to a Service agent that street crime had dropped to almost nil. Even the drug dealers were nowhere to be seen.

There were not very many people to be seen anywhere at this hour, but all of them were masked, and even the lobby was heavy with the chemical smell that was now the national scent. How much of that was a necessary physical measure, and how much psychological? Jack wondered. But, then, that's what his trip was.

"Hi, Dave," the President said to the dean. He was wearing greens instead of his suit, masked like everyone else, and gloved, too. They didn't shake hands.

"Mr. President, thank you for coming." There were cameras in the lobby—they'd followed him in from outside. Before any of the reporters could shout a request for a statement, Jack pointed, and the dean led the party off. Ryan supposed it would look businesslike. Secret Service agents hustled to get ahead as they walked from the elevator bank to the medical floor. The doors slid open to reveal a busy corridor. Here there was bustle and people.

"What's the score, Dave?"

"We have thirty-four patients admitted here. Total for the area is one hundred forty—well, was the last time I checked. We have all the space we need for now, and all the staff, too. We've released about half of our patients, the ones we could sign out safely. All elective procedures are canceled for now, but there is the usual activity. I mean, babies are being born. People get sick from the normal diseases. Some outpatient treatments have to be continued, epidemic or not."

"Where's Cathy?" Ryan asked, as the next elevator arrived with a single camera whose tape would be pooled with all the networks. The hospital didn't want or need to be crowded with extraneous people, and while media management people had made a little noise, their field personnel weren't all

that eager, either. Maybe it was the antiseptic smell. Maybe it affected people the same way it affected dogs taken to the vet. It was the smell of danger for everyone.

"This way. Let's get you suited up." The floor had a doctors' lounge, and one for nurses. Both were being used. The one at the far end was "hot," used for disrobing and decontamination. The near one was supposed to be safe, used for suiting up. There wasn't time or space for all the niceties. The Secret Service agents went in first and saw a woman in bra and panties, picking a plastic suit that was her size. She didn't blush. It was her fourth shift on the unit, and she was beyond that.

"Hang your clothes over there." She pointed. "Oh!" she added, recognizing the President.

"Thank you," Ryan said, taking his shoes off and taking a clothes hanger from Andrea. Price examined the woman briefly. Clearly she wasn't carrying a weapon. "How is it?" Jack asked.

She was the charge nurse for the floor. She didn't turn to answer. "Pretty bad." She paused for a second and then decided she had to turn. "We appreciate the fact that your wife is up here with us."

"I tried to talk her out of it," he admitted to her. He didn't feel the least bit guilty about it, either, and wondered if he should or not.

"So'd my husband." She came over. "Here, the helmet goes on like this." Ryan experienced a brief moment of panic. It was a most unnatural act to put a plastic bag over one's head. The nurse read his face. "Me, too. You get used to it."

Across the room, Dean James was already in his. He also came over to check the President's protective gear.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yeah." Jack was sweating now, despite the portable air-conditioning pack that hooked on his belt.

The dean turned to the Secret Service personnel. "From here on, I'm the boss," he told them. "I won't let him get into any danger, but we don't have enough suits for you people. If you stay in the corridors, you'll be safe. Don't touch anything. Not the walls, not the floors, nothing. Somebody goes past you with a cart, get out of the way. If you can't get out of the way, walk to the end of the corridor. If you see any kind of plastic container, stay clear of it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." For once, Andrea Price was cowed, POTUS saw. As was he. The psychological impact of this was horrific. Dr. James tapped the President on the shoulder.

"Follow me. I know it's scary, but you are safe in this thing. We all had to get used to it, too, didn't we, Tisha?"

The nurse turned, now fully in hers. "Yes, Doctor."

You could hear your breathing. There was the whir of the A/C pack, but everything else was muted. Ryan felt a frightening sense of confinement as he walked behind the dean.

"Cathy's in here." He opened the door. Ryan entered.

It was a child, a boy, aged eight or so, Jack saw. Two blue-clad figures were ministering to him. From behind he couldn't tell which one was his wife. Dr.

James held his hand up, forbidding Ryan from taking another step. One of the two was trying to restart an IV, and there couldn't be any distractions. The child was moaning, writhing on the bed. Ryan couldn't see much of him, but he saw enough for his stomach to turn.

"Hold still now. This will make you feel better." It was Cathy's voice; evidently she was doing the stick. The other two hands were holding the arm in place. "... there. Tape," she added, lifting her hands.

"Good stick, Doctor."

"Thank you." Cathy went to the electronic box that controlled the morphine and pushed in the right numbers, checking to be sure that the machine started functioning properly. With that done, she turned. "Oh."

"Hi, honey."

"Jack, you don't belong here," SURGEON told him firmly.

"Who does?"

"OKAY. I HAVE a line on this Dr. MacGregor," the station chief told them, driving his red Chevy. His name was Frank Clayton, a graduate of Grambling, whom Clark had seen through the Farm some years earlier.

"Then let's go see him, Frank." Clark checked his watch, did the calculations, and decided that it was two hours after midnight. He grunted. Yeah, that was about right. First stop was the embassy, where they changed clothes. American military uniforms weren't all that welcome here. In fact, the station chief warned, few things American were. Chavez noted that a car followed them in from the airport.

"Don't sweat it. We'll lose him at the embassy. You know, sometimes I wonder if it wasn't a good deal when my folks got kidnapped out of Africa. Don't tell anybody I said that, okay? South Alabama is like heaven on earth compared to this shithole."

He parked the car in the embassy's back lot and took them inside. A minute later one of his people walked out, started the Chevy, and headed right back out. The tail car went with him.

"Shirts," the CIA resident officer said, handing them over. "I suppose you can leave the pants on."

"Have you talked to MacGregor?" Clark asked.

"On the phone a few hours ago. We're going to drive over to where he lives, and he's going to get into the car. I have a nice quiet parking spot picked out for our chat," Clayton told them.

"Any danger to him?"

"I doubt it. The locals are pretty sloppy. If we have anybody tailing us, I know what to do about it."

"Then let's move, buddy," John said. "We're burning moonlight."

MacGregor's quarters weren't all that bad, located in a district favored by Europeans, and, the station chief related, fairly secure. He lifted his cellular phone and dialed the doctor's beeper number——there was a local paging service. Less than a minute later his door opened, and a figure walked to the car, got in the back, and closed the door a second before it moved off.

"This is rather unusual for me." He was younger than Chavez, John was

surprised to note, and eager in rather a shy way. “Who exactly are you chaps?”

“CIA,” Clark told him.

“Indeed!”

“Indeed, Doctor,” Clayton said from the front seat. His eyes checked the mirrors. They were clear. Just to make sure, he took the next left, then a right, and then another left. Good.

“Are you allowed to tell people that?” MacGregor asked as the car pulled back onto what passed locally as the main drag. “Do you have to kill me now?”

“Doc, save that for the movies, okay?” Chavez suggested. “Real life ain’t like that, and if we told you we were from the State Department, you wouldn’t believe us anyway, right?”

“You don’t look like diplomats,” MacGregor decided.

Clark turned in the front seat. “Sir, thank you for agreeing to meet with us.”

“The only reason I did so—well, the local government forced me to disregard normal procedures for my two cases. There’s a reason for those procedures, you know.”

“Okay, first of all, could you please tell me all you can about them?” John asked, switching on the tape recorder.

• • •

“YOU LOOK TIRED, Cathy.” Not that it was all that easy to tell through the plastic mask. Even her body language was disguised.

SURGEON looked over to the wall clock behind the nursing station. She was technically off duty now. She would never learn that Arnie van Damm had called the hospital to make sure the timing went right for this. It would have enraged her, and she was mad enough at the whole world already.

“The kids started arriving this afternoon. Second-generation cases. That one in there must have got it from his father. His name is Timothy. He’s in the third grade. His dad’s on the next floor up.”

“Rest of the family?”

“His mom tested positive. They’re admitting her now. He has a big sister. She’s clean so far. We have her sitting over in the outpatient building. They set up a holding area there for people who’ve been exposed but don’t test out. Come on. I’ll show you around the floor.” A minute later they were in Room 1, temporary home of the Index Case.

Ryan thought he must be imagining the smell. There was a dark stain on the bedclothes which two people—nurses, doctors, he couldn’t tell—were struggling to change. The man was semiconscious, and fighting the restraints that held his arms to the bed bars. That had the two medics concerned, but they had to change the sheets first. Those went into a plastic bag.

“They’ll get burned,” Cathy said, pressing her helmet against her husband’s. “We’ve really dialed up the safety precautions.”

“How bad?”

She pointed back to the door and followed Jack into the corridor. Once

there, with the door closed behind them, she poked an angry finger into his chest. “Jack, you never, *ever* discuss a patient’s prognosis in front of them, unless you know it’s good. *Never!*” She paused, and went on without an apology for the outburst: “He’s three days into frank symptoms.”

“Any chance?”

Her head shook inside the helmet. They walked back up the corridor, stopping in some more rooms where the story was dismally the same.

“Cathy?” It was the dean’s voice. “You’re off duty. Move,” he commanded.

“Where’s Alexandre?” Jack asked on the way to the former physicians’ lounge.

“He’s got the floor upstairs. Dave has taken this one himself. We hoped Ralph Forster would get back and help out, but there aren’t any flights.” Then she saw the cameras. “What the hell are *they* doing here?”

“Come on.” Ryan led his wife into the changing room. The clothing he’d worn to the hospital was bagged somewhere. He put on scrubs, in front of three women and a man who didn’t seem all that interested in ogling any of the females. Leaving the room, he headed for the elevator.

“Stop!” a female voice called. “There’s a case coming up from ER! Use the stairs.” And obediently, the Secret Service Detail did just that. Ryan led his wife down to the main floor, and from there out front, still wearing masks.

“How are you holding up?”

Before she could answer, a voice screamed, *“Mr. President!”* Two Guardsmen got in the way of the reporter and cameraman, but Ryan waved them off. The pair approached under armed scrutiny, uniformed and plainclothes.

“Yes, what is it?” Ryan asked, pulling his mask down. The reporter held the microphone at full arm’s length. It would have been comical under other circumstances. Everybody was spooked.

“What are you doing here, sir?”

“Well, I guess it’s part of my job to see what’s going on, and also I wanted to see how Cathy is doing.”

“We know the First Lady is working upstairs. Are you trying to make a statement to the nation—”

“I’m a *doctor!*” Cathy snapped. “We’re all taking turns up there. It’s my job.”

“Is it bad?”

Ryan spoke before she could explode at them. “Look, I know you have to ask that question, but you know the answer. These people are extremely ill, and the docs here, and everyplace else, are doing their best. It’s hard on Cathy and her colleagues. It’s really hard on the patients and their families.”

“Dr. Ryan, is Ebola really as deadly as everyone has been saying?”

She nodded. “It’s pretty awful, yes. But we’re giving these people the best we got.”

“Some have suggested that since the hope for the patients is so bleak, and since their pain is so extreme—”

“What are you saying? Kill them?”

“Well, if they’re really suffering as much as everyone reports—”

“I’m not that kind of doctor,” she replied, her face flushed. “We’re going to save some of these people. From those we save, maybe we can learn to save more, and you don’t learn *anything* by giving up. That’s why real doctors don’t

kill patients! What is the matter with you? Those are *people* in there, and my job is fighting for their lives—and don't you dare tell me how to do it!" She stopped when her husband's arm squeezed her shoulder. "Sorry. It's a little tough in there."

"Could you excuse us for a few minutes?" Ryan asked. "We haven't talked since yesterday. You know, we are husband and wife, just like real pcople."

"Yes, sir." They pulled back, but the camera stayed on them.

"Comc here, babe." Jack embraced her for the first time in more than a day.

"We're going to lose them all, Jack. Every one, starting tomorrow or the next day," she whispered. Then she started crying.

"Yeah." He lowered his head on hers. "You know, you're allowed to be human, too, Doctor."

"How do they think we learned anything? Oh, we can't fix it, so let 'em all die with dignity. Give up. That's not what they taught me here."

"I know."

She sniffed and wiped her eyes on his shirt. "Okay, back under control now. I'm off duty for eight hours."

"Where are you sleeping?"

A deep breath. A shudder. "Maumenee. They have some cots set up. Bernie's up in New York, helping out at Columbia. They have a couple hundred cases there."

"You're pretty tough, Doctor." He smiled down at his wife.

"Jack, if you find out who did this to us ..."

"Working on it," POTUS said.

"KNOW ANY OF these people?" The station chief handed over some photos he'd shot himself. He handed over a flashlight, too.

"That's Saleh! Who was he, exactly? He didn't say and I never found out."

"These are all Iraqis. When the government came down, they flew here. I have a bunch of photos. You're sure of this one?"

"Quite sure, I treated him for over a week. The poor chap died." MacGregor went through some more. "And that looks like Sohaila. She survived, thank God. Lovely child—and that's her father."

"What the hell?" Chavez asked. "Nobody told us that."

"We were at the Farm then, weren't we?"

"Back to being a training officer, John?" Frank Clayton grinned. "Well, I got the word, and so I went out to shoot the pictures. They came in first class, by God, a big ol' G. Here, see?"

Clark looked at it and grunted—it was almost a twin to the one they were using for their round-the-world jaunt. "Nice shots."

"Thank you, sir."

"Let me see that." Chavez took the photo. He held the light right up against it. *"Ninja, "* he whispered. "Fucking *ninja* ..."

"What?"

"John, read those letters off the tail," Ding said quietly.

"HX-NJA ... my God."

"Clayton," Chavez said, "is that cellular phone secure?"

The station chief turned it on and punched in three digits. “It is now. Where do you want to call?”

“Langley.”

“MR. PRESIDENT, CAN we talk to you now?”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, sure, come on.” He needed to walk some, and waved for them to follow. “Maybe I should apologize for Cathy. She’s not like that. She’s a good doc,” SWORDSMAN said tiredly. “Thcy‘rc all pretty stressed out up there. The first thing they teach ’em here, I think it goes *primum non nocere*, ‘First of all, do no harm.’ It’s a pretty good rule. Anyway, my wife’s had a couple of hard days in there. But so have all of us.”

“It is possible that this was a deliberate act, sir?”

“We’re not sure, and I can’t talk about that until I have good information one way or the other.”

“You’ve had a busy time, Mr. President.” The reporter was local, not part of the Washington scene. He didn’t know how to talk to a President, or so others might think. Regardless, this one was going out live on NBC, though even the reporter didn’t know that.

“Yeah, I guess I have.”

“Sir, can you give us any hope?”

Ryan turned at that. “For the people who’re sick, well, the hope comes from the docs and the nurses. They’re fine people. You can see that here. They’re fighters, warriors. I’m very proud of my wife and what she does. I’m proud of her now. I asked her not to do this. I suppose that’s selfish of me, but I said it anyway. Some people tried to kill her once before, you know. I don’t mind danger to me, but my wife and kids, no, it’s not supposed to happen to them. Not supposed to happen to any of these people. But it did, and now we have to do our best to treat the sick ones and make sure people don’t get sick unnecessarily. I know my executive order has upset a lot of people, but I can’t live with not doing something that might save lives. I wish there were an easier way, but if there is, nobody’s told me about it yet. You see, it’s not enough to say, ‘No, I don’t like that.’ Anybody can do that. We need more right now. Look, I’m pretty tired,” he said, looking away from the camera. “Can we call it a day for now?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. President.”

“Sure.” Ryan turned away, walking south, just wandering really, toward the big parking garages. He saw a man smoking a cigarette there, a black man about forty, in defiance of the signs that prohibited the vice within sight of this shrine of medical learning. POTUS walked up to him, heedless of the three agents and two soldiers behind him.

“Got a spare?”

“Sure.” The man didn’t even look up as he sat on the edge of the brick planter, looking down at the concrete. His left hand held out the pack and a butane lighter at arm’s length. By unspoken consent they didn’t sit close together.

“Thanks.” Ryan sat down about four feet away from the man, reaching to hand the items back.

"You, too, man?"

"What do you mean?"

"My wife's in there, got the sickness. She work with a family, nanny, like. They're all sick. Now she is, too."

"My wife's a doc, she's up there with 'em."

"Ain't gonna matter, man. Ain't gonna matter at all."

"I know." Ryan took a long pull and let it out.

"Won't even let me in, say it too dangerous. Takin' *my* blood, say I gotta stay close, won't let me smoke, won't let me see her. Sweet Jesus, man, how come?"

"If it was you who was sick, and you knew that you might give it to your wife, what would you do?"

He nodded with angry resignation. "I know. The doctor said that. He's right. I know. But that don't *make* it right." He paused. "Hclps to talk."

"Yeah, I guess it does."

"The fuckers did this, like they say on TV, somebody did this. Fuckers gotta pay, man."

Ryan didn't know what to say then. Somebody else did. It was Andrea Price:

"Mr. President? I have the DCI for you."

That turned the man's head. He looked at Ryan in the yellow-orange lighting. "You're him."

"Yes, sir," Jack answered quietly.

"You say your wife is workin' up there?"

A nod. A sigh. "Yeah, she's been working here for fifteen years. I came in to see her, and see how it is, how it's going. I'm sorry ..."

"What'd'ya mean?"

"They won't let you in, but they let me in."

He grimaced. "Guess you gotta see, eh? Tough what happened with your little girl last week. She okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine. At that age, well, you know how it is."

"Good. Hey, thanks for talking with me."

"Thanks for the smoke," the President said, standing and walking to Agent Price. He took the phone. "Ed, it's Jack."

"Mr. President, we need you back. We have something you need to see," Ed Foley told him. He wondered how he would explain that the evidence was hanging on the wall of a conference room in CIA Headquarters.

"Givc me an hour, Ed."

"Yes, sir. We're getting it organized now."

Jack hit the END switch on the phone and handed it back. "Let's move."

53

SNIE

BEFORE FLYING HOME, everyone had to be decontaminated. Hopkins had set up a large room with separation of the sexes this time. The water was hot, and stank of chemicals, but the smell gave Ryan a needed sense of safety. Then he donned a new set of greens. He'd worn them before, when he'd attended the births of his children. Happy connotations. No longer, he thought, as he headed for the Suburban for the drive back to Fort McHenry and the helicopter hop back to the White House. At least the shower had enlivened him. It might even last a few hours, POTUS thought, as the VH-3 lifted off and turned southwest. If he were lucky.

IT WAS THE most lackluster performance in the history of the National Training Center. The troopers of the 11th Cav and the tankers of the Carolina Guard had blundered about for five hours, barely executing the plans that both had set up. The replay in the Star Wars Room showed cases where tanks had been less than a thousand meters apart and in plain sight, yet hadn't exchanged fire. Nothing had worked on either side, and the simulated engagement had not so much ended as stopped by apathetic consent. Just before midnight, the units formed up for the drive back to their respective laagers, and the senior commanders went to General Diggs's home on the hill.

"Hi, Nick," Colonel Hamm said.

"Hi, Al," Colonel Eddington replied, in about the same tone of voice.

"And what the hell was that all about?" Diggs demanded.

"The men are coming a little unglued, sir," the Guardsman replied first. "We're all worried about our people back home. We're safe here. They're in danger there. I can't blame them for being distracted, General. They're human."

"Best thing I can say is that our immediate families seem to be safe here, General," Hamm agreed with his older comrade in arms. "But we all got family back in the world."

"Okay, gentlemen, we've all had a chance to cry in our beer. I don't like this shit, either, y'hear? But *your* job is to lead your people, and that means *lead*, God damn it! In case you two warrior chiefs haven't noticed yet, the whole fuckin' United States Army is tied up in this epidemic—*except us!* You two colonels want to think about that? Maybe get your people thinking about it? Nobody ever told me soldiering was an easy job, and damned sure command isn't, but it is the job we do, and if you gentlemen can't get it done, well, there are others who can."

"Sir, that isn't going to work. Ain't nobody to relieve us with," Hamm pointed out wryly.

"Colonel—"

"The man's right, Diggs," Eddington said. "Some things are too much. There's an enemy out there we can't fight. Our people'll come around once they have a chance to get used to it, maybe get some good news for a change. Come on, General, you know better. You know history. Those are people out there—yes, soldiers, but people first. They're shook. So am I, Diggs."

"I also know that there are no bad regiments, only bad colonels," Diggs retorted, with one of Napoleon's best aphorisms, but he saw that neither man rose to the bait. Jesus, this really was bad.

"HOW WAS IT?" van Damm asked.

"Horrible," Ryan replied. "I saw six or seven people who're going to die. One of 'em's a kid. Cathy says there'll be more of them showing up."

"How's she doing?"

"Pretty stressed, but okay. She really let a reporter have it."

"I know, it was on TV," the chief of staff informed him.

"Already?"

"You were on live." Arnie managed a smile. "You looked great. Concerned. Sincere as hell. You said nice things about your wife. You cvcn apologized for what she said—really good, boss, especially since she looked wondcrful. Dedicated. Intense. Just like a doctor is supposed to be."

"Arnie, this isn't theater." Ryan was too tired to be angry. The reviving effects of the shower, disappointingly, had already worn off.

"No, it's leadership. Someday you're going to learn that—shit, maybe not. Just keep goin' like you're goin'," Arnie advised. "You do it without even knowing it, Jack. Don't think about it at all."

NBC SHARED THEIR tape with the whole world. As competitive as the news business was, a consciousness of public responsibility *did* pervade the profession, and the tape of the President's brief conversation went out an hour later on television sets across the globe.

She'd been right from the first instant, the Prime Minister told herself. He was far out of his depth. He couldn't even stand up straight. His words rambled. He let his wife speak for him—and she was frantic, emotional, weak. America's time as a major power was ending, because the country lacked firm leadership. She didn't *know* who had caused this plague to happen, but it was easy to guess. It had to be the UIR. Why else had he called them together in western China? With her fleet at sea guarding the approaches to the Persian Gulf, she was doing her part. She was sure she would be rewarded for it in due course.

"YOUR PRESIDENT IS distracted," Zhang said. "Understandably so."

"Such a great misfortune. You have our deepest sympathy," the Foreign Minister added. The three, plus the translator, had also just seen the tape.

Adler had been slow in getting the news of the epidemic, but he was up to speed now. He had to set it all aside, however. "Shall we proceed?"

"Does our distant province agree to our compensation demand?" the Foreign Minister asked.

"Unfortunately not. They take the position that the entire incident results from your extended maneuvers. Viewed abstractly, that point of view is not entirely without merit," the Secretary of State told them in diplo-speak.

"But the situation is not abstract. We are conducting peaceful exercises. One of their pilots saw fit to attack our aircraft, and in the process another of their foolish aviators destroyed an airliner. Who is to say if it was an accident or not?"

"Not an accident?" Adler asked. "What possible purpose could there be for such a thing?"

"Who can say with these bandits?" the Foreign Minister asked in return, stirring the pot a little more.

ED AND MARY Pat Foley came in together. Ed was carrying a large rolled poster or something, Jack saw as he sat in the Cabinet Room, still wearing greens with HOPKINS stenciled on them. Next came Murray, with Inspector O'Day in his wake. Ryan stood to go to him.

"I owe you, sorry I didn't get to see you sooner." He took the man's hand.

"That was pretty easy compared to this," Pat said. "And my little girl was there, too. But, yeah, glad I was there. I won't have any nightmares about that shoot." He turned. "Oh, hi, Andrea."

Price smiled for the first time that day. "How's your daughter, Pat?"

"Home with the sitter. They're both okay," he assured her.

"Mr. President?" It was Goodley. "This is pretty hot."

"Okay, then shall we get to work? Who starts?"

"I do," the DCI said. He slid a sheet of paper across the table. "Here."

Ryan took it and scanned it. It was some sort of official form, and the words were all in French. "What's this?"

"It's the immigration and customs clearance form for an airplane. Check the ID box, top-left corner."

"HX-NJA. Okay, so?" SWORDSMAN asked. His chief of staff sat at his side, kccping his peace. He felt the tension that the executives had brought into the room.

The blowup of Chavez's photo at Mehrabad Airport was actually larger than a poster, and had been printed up mainly as a joke. Mary Pat unrolled it, and laid it flat on the table. Two briefcases were used to keep it from rolling back up. "Check the tail," the DDO advised.

"HX-NJA. I don't have time for Agatha Christie, people," the President warned them.

"Mr. President." This was Dan Murray. "Let me walk you through this, but I'll say up front, that photo is something I could take into court and get a conviction with.

"The customs form identifies a business jet, a Gulfstream G-IV belonging to this Swiss-based corporation." A piece of paper went down on the conference table. "Flown by this flight crew." Two photos and fingerprint cards. "It left Zaire with three passengers. Two were nuns, Sister Jean Baptiste and Sister Maria Magdalena. They were both nurses at a Catholic hospital down there. Sister Jean treated Benedict Mkusa, a little boy who contracted Ebola and died of it. Somehow, Sister Jean caught it, too, and the third passenger, Dr. Mohammcd Moudi—we don't have a photo of him yet; we're working on it—decided to fly the sick one to Paris for treatment. Sister Maria tagged along, too. Dr. Moudi is an Iranian national working with the WHO. He told the boss-nun that she might have a chance there and said that he could whistle up a private jet to get her there. With me so far?"

"And this is the jet."

"Correct, Mr. President. This is the jet. Except for one thing. This jet supposedly crashed into the sea after taking off after a refueling stop in Libya. We have a ton of paperwork about that. Except for one thing." He tapped the poster again. "That photo was taken by Domingo Chavez—"

"You know him," Mary Pat put in.

"Go on. When did Ding shoot the framc?"

"Clark and Chavez accompanied Secretary Adler to Tehran, just last week."

"The aircraft was reported lost some time before that. It was even tracked by one of our destroyers when it squawked emergency. No trace was ever found, however," Murray went on. "Ed?"

"When Iraq came apart, Iran allowed the senior military leadership to skip. They all had golden parachutes. Our friend Daryaei let them jump out of the airplane. He *even* provided transport, all right? This started the day after the jet disappeared," Foley told them. "They were flown to Khartoum, in the Sudan. Our station chief there is Frank Clayton, and he drove to the airport and shot these pictures to confirm our intelligence information." The DCI slid them across.

"Looks like the same airplane, but what if somebody just played with the numbers—letters, whatever?" Ryan asked.

"Next indicator," Murray said. "There were two Ebola cases in Khartoum."

"Clark and Chavez talked to the attending physician a few hours ago," Mary Pat added.

"Both the patients flew on this airplane. We have photos of them getting off. So," the FBI Director said, "now, we have an airplane with a sick person aboard. The airplane disappears—*but* it turns up less than twenty-four hours later somewhere else, and two of the passengers come down with the same illness that the nun had. The passengers came from Iraq, via Iran, to the Sudan."

"Who owns the airplane?" Arnie asked.

"It's a corporation. We should have further details in a few hours from the Swiss. But the flight crew is Iranian. We have info on them because they learned how to fly over here," Murray explained. "And, finally, we have our friend Daryaei here on the same airplane. Looks like it's been taken out of international service. Maybe Daryaei is using it to hop around his new country now. So, Mr. President, we have the disease, the airplane, and the owner, all

tied up. Tomorrow we'll work with Gulfstream to see if the aircraft has any unique characteristics that we can identify in addition to the registration code. We'll have the Swiss pull info on the ownership and the flight logs for the rest of their fleet.

"We now know who did this, sir," Murray concluded. "This chain of evidence is hard to beat."

"There are more details to flesh out," Mary Pat said. "Background on this Dr. Moudi. Tracking down some monkey shipments—they use monkeys to study the disease. How they staged the faked airplane crash you believe it? The bastards even made an insurance claim."

"Wc're going to suspend this meeting for a moment. Andrea?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Get Secretary Bretano and Admiral Jackson in here."

"Yes, sir." She left the room.

Ed Foley waited for the door to close behind her. "Uh, Mr. President?"

"Yeah, Ed?"

"There is one other thing. I haven't even told Dan this yet. We now know that the UIR—really, our friend Mahmoud Haji Daryaei—is behind this. Chavez brought something up before we sent him and John off. The other side could well expect us to trace this back to them. Operational security for something like this is almost impossible to achieve." a So?"

"So, two things, Jack. First, whatever they're planning, they may think it's irreversible, and therefore it doesn't matter whether we figure this out or not. Second, let's remember how they knocked off Iraq. They got somebody all the way inside."

Those were two very big thoughts. Ryan started pondering the first one. Dan Murray's head turned to his roving inspector and they traded looks on the second.

"Christ, Ed," the FBI Director said a moment later.

"Think it through, Dan," the DCI said. "We have a President. We have a Senate. We have a third of the House. We do not have a Vice President yet. The presidential succession is still dicey, no really powerful figures, and the top level of the government is still gutted. Toss in this epidemic, which has the whole country tied up in knots. To almost anybody outside, we look weak and vulnerable."

Ryan looked up as Andrea came back in. "Wait a minute. They made a play for Katie. Why do that if they want me out of the way?"

"What's this?" Price asked.

"The other side has demonstrated a frightening capability. One," Foley said, "they got all the way into the Iraqi President's security detail and blew him away. Two, the operation last week was run by a sleeper agent who's been here more than a decade, and in that time did nothing at all, but when he woke up, he cared enough to assist in an attempt on a child."

Murray had to agree with that: "That's occurred to us, too. The Intelligence Division is thinking about it right now."

"Wait a minute," Andrea objected. "I know every person on the Detail. For God's sake, we lost five of them defending SANDBOX!"

"Agent Price," Mary Pat Foley said. "You know how many times CIA's been

burned by people we knew all about—people *I* knew. Hell, I lost three agents to one of those fucking moles. I *knew* them, and I *knew* the guy who shopped 'em. Don't tell me about paranoia. We are up against a very capable enemy here. And it only takes one."

Murray whistled as the argument took its full form. His mind had been racing for the past few hours in one direction. Now it had to race in another.

"Mrs. Foley, I "

"Andrea," Inspector O'Day said, "this isn't personal. Take a step back and think about it. If you had the resources of a nation-state, if you were patient, and if you had people who were really motivated, how would you do it?"

"How did they do Iraq?" Ed Foley took up the argument. "Would you have thought that was possible?"

The President looked around the room. *Fabulous, now they're telling me not to trust the Secret Service*.

"It all makes sense if you think like the other guy," Mary Pat told them. "It's part of their tradition, remember ?"

"Okay, but what do we do about it?" Andrea asked, her face openly stunned at the possibility.

"Pat, you have a new assignment," Murray told his subordinate. "With the President's permission, that is."

"Granted," POTUS breathed.

"Rules?" O'Day wanted to know.

"None, none at all," Price told him.

IT WAS APPROACHING noon over the United Islamic Republic. Maintenance was going well on the six heavy divisions based in the south-central part of the country. Nearly all the tracks on the mechanized fighting vehicles had been replaced. A healthy spirit of competition had developed between the former Iraqi divisions and those moved down from Iran. With their vehicles restored to full fighting order, the troopers drew ammunition to bring all of the T-80 tanks and BMP infantry carriers to full basic loads.

The battalion commanders looked over the results of their training exercise with satisfaction. Their newly acquired GPS locators had been like magic, and now the Iraqis understood one of the reasons why the Americans had treated them so harshly in 1991. With GPS one didn't need roads at all. The Arabic culture had long termed the desert a sea, and now they could navigate on it like sailors, moving from point to point with a confidence they had never known before.

Corps and divisional staff officers knew why this was so important. They had just been issued new maps, and with them a new mission. They also learned that their three-corps mechanized force had a name, the Army of God. By tomorrow, sub-unit commanders would be briefed in on that, and many other things.

IT TOOKAN hour for them to get in. Admiral Jackson had been sleeping in his

office, but Secretary Bretano had gone home after a marathon session of reviewing deployments within the country. The White House dress code had been relaxed, they saw. The President, also red-eyed, was wearing doctor clothes.

Dan Murray and Ed Foley repeated their brief.

Jackson took it well: "All right. Now we know what we're up against."

Bretano did not: "This is an overt act of war."

"But we're not the objective," the DCI told him. "It's Saudi Arabia, and all the other Gulf states. It's the only thing that makes sense. He figures that if he takes over those states, we *can't* nuke him—it would turn off the oil for the whole world." The DCI almost had it right, but not quite.

"And he has India and China in his pocket," Robby Jackson went on. "They're just running interference, but it's good interference. *Ike's* in the wrong place. The Indians have their carriers blocking the Straits of Hormuz. We can't get the MPS ships in without air cover. Zap, he moved those three corps down. The Saudis'll fight, but they're outmanned. It's over in a week, maybe less. Not a bad operational concept," the J-3 concluded.

"The bio-attack's pretty clever, too. I think they got more than they bargained for. Almost every base and unit we have is out of business at the moment," SecDef observed, catching up fast on the operational side.

"Mr. President, when I was a boy in Mississippi, I remember the Klukkers used to say, when you see a mad dog, don't kill the poor thing—toss it in somebody's backyard. You know, some sheet-head actually did that to us once, 'cause my pap was real big on getting people registered to vote."

"What did you do, Rob?"

"Pap blew it away with his Fox double," Admiral Jackson replied. "And continued the mission. We have to move fast if we're going to move. Problem is, what with?"

"How long before the MPS ships get to Saudi?"

"Just under three days, but there's somebody in the way. CINCLANT'S cut orders for that surface group to scoot down the Suez, and they can be at the strait in time, but we gotta get those tank-carriers past the Indians first. Those four boats are escorted by one cruiser, two 'cans, and two frigates, and if we lose them, nearest equipment re-supply's in Savannah, sir."

"What do we have in storage in Saudi?" Ben Goodley asked.

"Enough for a heavy brigade. Same in Kuwait. The third brigade-set is afloat and standing in harm's way."

"Kuwait's first in line," the President said. "What can we get there?"

"If we're balls-to-the-wall, we can fly the 10th ACR out of Israel to mate up with the POMCUS site south of Kuwait City. That we can do in twenty-four hours. The Kuwaitis'll handle transport. They have a quiet understanding with Israel on that. We helped broker it," Robby said. "The plan's called BUFFALO FORWARD."

"Anybody think that's a bad idea?" Jack asked.

"One armored cavalry regiment—I I don't think it's enough to deter them, sir," Goodley said.

"The man's right," the J-3 agreed.

Ryan looked around the table. Knowing was one thing. Being able to act

was something else. He *could* order a strategic nuclear attack on Iran. He had B-2A stealth bombers at Whitcman Air Force Base, and with the information he'd been given in the past two hours, getting CiNC-STRIKE to validate the order under the two-man rule would not be a problem. The "Spirits," as the B-2s were called, could be there in less than eighteen hours, and turn that nation into a smoking, poisoned ruin.

But he couldn't do that. Even if he had to, he probably couldn't. Though American Presidents had long been faced with the necessity of telling the world that, yes, we *will* launch our missiles and bombers if we have to, it was a duty Ryan never expected to carry out. Even this attack on his country, the use of weapons of mass destruction—to America the equivalent of nuclear arms—had been the decision of one man, and carried out by a relative handful. Could he flatten whole cities in response, kill the innocent as Daryaei had done, because the other guy had done it first? And live with himself afterward? There had to be something better, some other option. Killing Daryaei was one.

"Ed?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Where are Clark and Chavez right now?"

"Khartoum, still, awaiting instructions."

"Think they can get into Tehran again?"

"Won't be easy, sir." He turned to his wife.

"The Russians have helped us in the past. I can ask. What would their mission be?"

"Find out if they can get in first. We'll figure out the mission in a little while. Robby?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"The 10th Regiment moves to Kuwait at once."

Jackson took a deep and skeptical breath. "Aye aye, sir."

THERE WAS THE intermediary step of getting the approval of the Kuwaiti government. The Ambassador handled that. It did not prove to be hard. Major Sabah had kept his governmcnt informed of developments in their new neighbor to the north, and the satellite photos of the retracking of the UIR tanks turned the trick. With their own military fully activated, the Kuwait government telexed a formal request for America to commence an extended training exercise in the western part of their nation. This moved fast. The rulers of the small nation had fresh memories of earlier mistakes. Their only proviso was that the movement be made secretly, and America did not object. Within four hours, the plush, brand-new airliners of the national airline started lifting off, headed southwest over Saudi Arabia, and later turned north, up the Gulf of Aqaba.

The order was issued by Training and Doctrine Command, which administratively owned the 10th ACR, since it was technically a training establishment. Most other stateside units belonged to Forces Command, FORCECOM. The emergency-deployment order went by CRITIC-priority to Colonel Sean Magruder. He had roughly five thousand personnel to move, and

that would require twenty jumbo flights. The roundabout routing made for a distance of 1,300 miles and three hours in each direction, with an hour's turnaround time at both ends. But it had all been thought through, and the diminution of international air travel had made more aircraft available than the plan had anticipated for BUFFALO FORWARD. Even the Israelis cooperated. The pilots of the Kuwaiti jumbos had the singular experience of seeing F-15 fighters with blue Star of David markings flying escort as they came into the big Israeli air base in the Negev.

The first group out comprised senior officers and a security group to supplement the Kuwaiti guard force at the POMCUS site. The site was a group of warehouses containing the complete equipment set of a heavy brigade, which was exactly what the armored cavalry regiment was. The equipment was lovingly maintained by contractors, who were well paid by their Kuwaiti hosts.

The second aircraft had A-Troop, 1st of the 10th. Buses took them through the late-afternoon sun to their vehicles, which in every case started up at once, fully loaded with fuel and ammunition. A troop of the 1st "Guidon" Squadron rolled out under the watchful eyes of their squadron CO, Lieutenant Colonel Duke Mastcrman. He had family in the Philadelphia area, and he could add two and two together. Something very bad was happening in his country, and out of a clear sky BUFFALO FORWARD had been activated. That was fine with him, he decided, and his troopers.

Magruder and his staff also watched. He'd even insisted that the command group bring the regimental standard. This was the Cav.

"FOLEYLVA, IS IT that bad?" Golovko asked, meaning the epidemic. They were speaking in Russian. Though his English was nearly perfect, the CIA official spoke his native language with a poetic elegance learned from her grandfather.

"We don't know, Sergey Nikolay'ch, and I have bccn looking at other things."

"Ivan Emmetovich is bcaring up?"

"What do you think? I know you saw the TV interview a few hours ago."

"An interesting man, your President. So easy to underestimate. I did that once myself."

"And Daryaei?"

"Formidable, but an uncultured barbarian." Mary Pat could almost hear the man spit.

"Quite."

"Tell Ivan Emmetovich to think the scenario through, Foleyeva," Golovko suggested. "Yes, we will cooperate," he added, answering a question not yet asked. "Fully."

"*Spasiba*. I will be back to you." Mary Pat looked over at her husband. "You have to love the guy."

"I wish he was on our side," the DCI observed.

"He is, Ed."

THE DOG HAD stopped barking, they noted in STORM TRACK. The three corps they were trying to observe had stopped using their radios around noon. Zero. As sophisticated as their computer-aided ELINT equipment was, nothing was still nothing. It was an obvious sign, and just as often overlooked. The direct lines to Washington burned constantly now. More Saudi officers were coming in, demonstrating the increased alert state of their own military, which was quietly deploying to the field around King Khalid Military City. That was some comfort to the intelligence people in the listening post, but not much. They were far closer to the mouth of the lion. Being spooks, they thought like spooks, and by consensus they decided that the events in America had somehow started here. Elsewhere, such thoughts engendered a feeling of helplessness; here they had a different effect. The rage was real, and they had a mission to fulfill, exposed position or not.

"OKAY," JACKSON SAID on the conference line, "who *can* we deploy?"

The answer was a brief silence. The Army was half the size it had been less than a decade before. There were two heavy divisions in Europe, V Corps, but they were quarantined by the Germans. The same was true of the two armored divisions at Fort Hood, Texas, and the 1st Infantry Division (Mechanized) at Fort Riley, Kansas. Parts of the 82nd at Fort Bragg and the 101st at Fort Campbell *were* deployed to support National Guard units, but the units that had been kept back at their bases had soldiers who'd tested positive for Ebola. The same was true of the two stateside Marine divisions, based at Lejeune in North Carolina and Pendleton in California.

"Look," FORCECOM said. "We got the 11th ACR and a Guard brigade training up at the NTC. That base is totally clean, we can move them out as quick as you can whistle up the airplanes. The rest? Before we can move them, we have to sort everybody out. I don't dare move them before we've tested every soldier for this damned bug, and the kits ain't out everywhere yet."

"He's right," another voice said. Every head on the conference line nodded. The pharmaceutical companies were racing to produce them. Millions of test kits were needed, but only a few tens of thousands were available, and those were being used for targeted people, the ones who showed symptoms, relatives or close associates of known cases, truckers delivering food and medical supplies, and most of all, the medical personnel themselves, who were the most exposed to the virus. Worse still, one "clear" reading wasn't enough. Some people would have to be tested daily for three days or more, because although the test was reliable, the immune systems of potential victims were not. The antibodies could start showing up an hour after a negative test reading. Doctors and hospitals throughout the country were screaming for the kits, and in this case the Army was sucking hind tit.

The UIR is going to throw a war, J-3 thought, *and nobody's going to come.* Robby wondered if some hippie from the sixties might find that amusing.

"How long on that?"

"End of the week, at best," FORCECOM replied. "I have an officer on it."

"I got the 366th Wing at Mountain Home. They're all clean," Air Combat

Command reported. “We have the F-16 wing in Israel. My European units are being held hostage, though, all of them.”

“Airplanes are nice, Paul,” FORCECOM said. “So are ships, but we need soldiers over there in one big fucking hurry.”

“Cut warning orders to Fort Irwin,” Jackson said. “I’ll have the SecDef authorize their release within the hour.”

“Done.”

“MOSCOW?” CHAVEZ ASKED. “Jesu Cristo, we are getting around.”

“Ours is not to reason why.”

“Yeah, I know the second part, Mr. C. If we’re going to the right place, I’ll take that chancc.”

“Your carriage awaits, gents,” Clayton said. “The blue suits are turning the airplane over for you.”

“Yeah, that reminds me.” Clark pulled the uniform shirt out of the closet. In a minute, he was a colonel again. Five minutes after that, they were off for the airport, soon to leave the Sudan to the ministrations of Frank Clayton and memories of “Chinese” Gordon.

THERE WAS AN aspect of schadenfreude about it. O‘Day assembled a team of FBI agents to go over the personnel packets of every Secret Service agent who got close to the President, both the plainclothes and Uniformed Division officers. There were quite a few. Ordinarily some would have been tossed for obvious no-hit indicators—a name like O’Connor, for example—but this case was too important for that, and every file had to be examined in full before it could bc set aside. This job he left to others. Another team was examining something not widely known. There was a computerized record of every telephone call made in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Legal in a strict sense, the program, had it extended farther afield, would have excited Big Brother-ish outrage from even the most extreme law-enforcement hawk, but the President lived in Washington, and America had lost Presidents there. It was almost too much to hope for. By definition, a conspirator in the Secret Service would be an expert on security measures. Their target, if there was one, would be one of the boys. He might stand out in professional excellence —you had to, in order to make the Detail—but nothing else. He’d fit in. He’d have a good service reputation. He’d tell jokes, bct on ballgames, have a beer at the local hangout—he’d be just like all the others who would willingly guard the life of the President as courageously as Don Russell had done, O’Day knew, and part of him hated the rest of him for having to treat them like suspects in a criminal investigation. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. But then, what was?

DIGGS CALLED BOTH colonels to his office to give them the news: “We have warning orders to deploy overseas.”

"Who?" Eddington asked.

"Both of your units," the general answered.

"Where to, sir?" Hamm asked next.

"Saudi. We've both been there and done that before, Al, and here's your chance, Colonel Eddington."

"Why?" the Guardsman asked.

"They haven't said yet. I have background information coming into the fax machine now. All they told me over the phone was that the UIR is getting frisky. The 10th is mating up with their POMCUS gear right now—"

"BUFFALO FORWARD?" Hamm asked. "No warning?"

"Correct, Al."

"Is this related to the epidemic?" Eddington asked.

Diggs shook his head. "Nobody's told me anything about that."

IT HAD TO be done in Federal District Court in Baltimore. Edward J. Kealty filed a suit naming John Patrick Ryan as defendant. The substance of the complaint was that the former wanted to cross a state line, and the latter wouldn't let him. The filing asked for summary judgment, the vacating of the executive order of the President (strangely, the complaint named Ryan as President of the United States) immediately. Kealty figured that he'd win this one. The Constitution was on his side, and he'd chosen the judge with care.

THE SPECIAL NATIONAL Intelligence Estimate was now complete, and irrelevant. The intentions of the United Islamic Republic were totally clear. The trick now was to do something about them, but that was not, strictly speaking, an intelligence function.

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FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

THEY DIDN'T SEE IT coming, and it did get their attention. By dawn the next day, all three ground squadrons of the 10th Cavalry were fully deployed, while the fourth squadron, composed of attack helicopters, needed one more day to get up to speed. Kuwaiti regular officers—their standing army was still relatively small, with the ranks fleshed out by enthusiastic reservists—greeted their American counterparts with waving swords and embraces in front of the cameras, and serious, quiet conversation in the command tents. For his part, Colonel Magruder arranged for one of his squadrons to assemble in parade formation with standards flying. It was good for everyone's morale, and the fifty-two tanks massed together looked like the fist of an angry god. The UIR intelligence service expected something to happen, but not this, and not this fast.

"What is this?" Daryaei demanded, allowing his deadly rage to show for once. Ordinarily, it was enough that people knew it was hidden there, somewhere.

"It's a sham." After the initial shock, his chief of intelligence had taken the time to get a feel for the reality of the situation. "That is a *regiment*. Each of the six divisions in the Army of God has three—in two cases, four—brigades. And so, we are twenty to their one. Did you expect that the Americans would not respond at all? That is unrealistic. But here we see they have responded. With one regiment, moved in from Israel, and sent in the wrong place. With this they intend to frighten us."

"Go on." The dark eyes softened slightly, merely simmering rather than dangerously hostile.

"America cannot deploy its divisions from Europe. They are contaminated. The same is true of their heavy divisions in America. So we will face the Saudis first of all. It will be a great battle, which we shall win. The rump states will surrender to us, or be crushed—and then Kuwait will stand alone, at the top of the Gulf, with its own forces and this American regiment, and then we shall see about that. They probably expect us to invade Kuwait first. We will not repeat that error, will we?"

"And if they reinforce the Saudis?"

"Again, they have the equipment for but one brigade in the Kingdom. The second is afloat. You talked to India about that, did you not?" It was so normal that he might have predicted it, the chief UIR spook thought behind outwardly cowed eyes. They always got nervous just before things started, as though expecting everyone to follow the script they'd written. The enemy was the enemy. He didn't always cooperate. "And I doubt they have the troops to

move. Aircraft, perhaps, but there is no carrier within ten thousand kilometers, and aircraft, though they are an annoyance, can neither take nor hold ground."

"Thank you for making that clear." The old man's mood softened.

"AT LAST WE meet, Comrade Colonel," Golovko said to the CIA officer.

Clark had always wondered if he'd see the inside of KGB headquarters. He'd never quite expected to be offered drinks there in the Chairman's office. Early in the morning or not, he took a slug of the Starka-brand vodka. "Your hospitality is not what I was trained to expect, Comrade Chairman."

"We don't do that here anymore. Lefortovo Prison is more convenient." He paused, set down his glass, and switched back to tea. A drink with the man was mandatory, but it was early in the day. "I must ask. Was it you who brought Madam Gerasimov and the girl out?"

Clark nodded. There was nothing to be gained from lying to the man. "Yes, that was me."

"You are welcome to all three of them, Ivan ... your father's name?"

"Timothy. I am Ivan Timofeyevich, Sergey Nikolay'ch."

"Ah." Golovko had a good laugh. "As hard as the Cold War was, my friend, it is good now, at the end of it, to see old enemies. Fifty years from now, when all of us are dead, historians will compare CIA records with ours, and they will decide who won the intelligence war. Have you any idea what they will decide?"

"You forget, I was a foot soldier, not a commander, for most of it."

"Our Major Schcrenko was impressed with you and your young partner here. Your rescue of Koga was impressive. And now we will work together again. Have you been briefed in?"

For Chavez, who'd come to manhood watching Rambo movies, and whose early Army training had taught him to expect going head-to-head with the Soviets at any time, it was an experience which he wanted to ascribe to jet lag, though both CIA officers had noted how empty the corridors were for their passage. There was no sense letting them see faces they might remember in some other time and some other place.

"No, mainly we've been gathering information."

Golovko hit a button on his desk. "Is Bondarenko here?" A few seconds later, the door opened, revealing a senior Russian general officer.

Both Americans stood. Clark read the medals and gave the man a hard look. Bondarenko did the same. The handshakes exchanged were wary, curious, and strangely warm. They were of an age, raised in one, growing into another.

"Gennady Iosefovich is chief of operations. Ivan Timofeyevich is a CIA spy," the Chairman explained. "As is his quiet young partner. Tell me, Clark, the plague, it comes from Iran?"

"Yes, that is certain."

"Then he is a barbarian, but a clever one. General?"

"Last night you moved your cavalry regiment from Israel to Kuwait," Bondarenko said. "They are fine troops, but the correlation of forces is adverse in the extreme. Your country cannot deploy large numbers of troops for at

least two weeks. He will not give you two weeks. We estimate that the heavy divisions southeast of Baghdad will be ready to move in three days, four at the most. One day for the approach march to the border area, and then? Then we will see what their plan is."

"Any thoughts?"

"We have no more intelligence on this than you do," Golovko said. "Regrettably, most of our assets in the area have been shot, and the generals we befriended in the previous Iraqi regime have left the country."

"The high command of the army is Iranian, many were trained in Britain or America under the Shah as junior officers, and they survived the purges," Bondarenko said. "We have dossiers on many of them, and these are being transmitted to the Pentagon."

"That's very cordial of you."

"You bet," Ding observed. "If they dust us off, next they come north."

"Alliances, young man, do not occur for reasons of love, but from mutual interests," Golovko agreed.

"If you cannot deal with this maniac today, then we will have to deal with him in three years," Bondarenko said seriously. "Better today, I think, for all of us."

"We have offered our support to Foleyeva. She has accepted. When you learn your mission, let us know, and we will see what we can do."

SOME WOULD LAST longer than others. Some would last less. The first recorded death happened in Texas, a golf-equipment representative who expired due to heart complications three days after being admitted, one day after his wife entered the hospital with her own symptoms. Doctors interviewing her determined that she'd probably contracted the disease by cleaning up after her husband had vomited in the bathroom, not from any intimate contact, because he'd felt too ill even to kiss her after returning from Phoenix. Though seemingly an insignificant conclusion from obvious data, it was faxed to Atlanta, as the CDC had requested all possible information, however minor it might seem. It certainly seemed minor to the medical team in Dallas. The first death for them was both a relief and a horror. A relief because the man's condition toward the end was both hopeless and agonizing; a horror, because there would be others just as vile, only longer in coming.

The same thing happened six hours later in Baltimore. The Winnebago dealer had a preexisting GI complaint, peptic ulcer disease, which, though controlled by an over-the-counter medication, gave Ebola an easy target. His stomach lining disintegrated, and the patient rapidly bled out while unconscious with his massive dose of painkillers. This, too, came as something of a surprise to the attending physician and nurse. Soon thereafter more deaths started occurring nationwide. The media reported them, and the country's horror deepened. In the first series of cases, the husband died first, with the wife soon to follow. In many similar cases, children would be next.

It was more real for everyone now. For most, the crisis had seemed a distant event. Businesses and schools were closed, and travel was restricted, but the rest of it was a TV event, as things tended to be in Western countries. It was

something you saw on a phosphor screen, a moving image augmented by sound, something both real and not. But now the word *death* was being used with some frequency. Photos of the victims appeared on the screens, in some cases home videos, and the moving pictures of people now dead, their private pasts revealed in moments of pleasure and relaxation, followed by the somber words of reporters who were themselves becoming as familiar as family members—it all entered the public consciousness with an immediacy that was as new and different as it was horrid. It was no longer the sort of nightmare from which one awoke. It was one which went on and on, seeming to grow, like the child's dream in which a black cloud entered a room, growing and growing, approaching despite all attempts at evasion, and you knew that if it touched you, you were lost.

Grumbles about the federally imposed travel restrictions died the same day as the golfer in Texas and the recreational vehicle dealer in Maryland. Interpersonal contact, which had first been cut way back, then started to grow again, was restricted to the family-member level. People lived on telephones now. Long-distance lines were jammed with calls to ascertain the well-being of relatives and friends, to the point that AT&T, MCI, and the rest ran commercial messages requesting that such calls be kept short, and special-access lines were set aside for government and medical use. There was a true national panic now, though it was a quiet, personal one. There were no public demonstrations. Traffic on the streets was virtually nil in the major cities. People even stopped heading for supermarkets, and instead stayed at home, living out of cans or freezers for the time being.

Reporters, still moving around with their mobile cameras, reported on all that, and in doing so, they both increased the degree of tension, and contributed to its solution.

"IT'S WORKING," GENERAL Pickett said over the phone to his former subordinate in Baltimore.

"Where are you, John?" Alexandre asked.

"Dallas. It's working, Colonel. I need you to do something."

"What's that?"

"Stop playing practitioner. You have residents to do that. I have a working group at Walter Reed. Get the hell over there. You're too big an asset on the theoretical side to waste in a Racal suit doing sticks, Alex."

"John, this is my department now, and I have to lead my troops." It was a lesson well remembered from his time in green suits.

"Fine, your people know you care, Colonel. Now you can put the damned rifle down and start thinking like a goddamned *commander.* This battle's not going to be won in hospitals, is it?" Pickett asked more reasonably. "I have transport waiting for you. There should be a Hummer downstairs to bring you into Reed. Want me to reactivate you and make it an order?"

And he could do that, Alexandre knew. "Give me half an hour." The associate professor hung up the phone and looked down the corridor. Another body bag was being carried out of a room by some orderlies in plastic suits. There was a pride in being here. Even though he was losing patients and

would lose more, he was here, being a doctor, doing his best, showing his staff that, yes, he was one of them, ministering to the sick, taking his chances in accordance with the oath he'd sworn at the age of twenty-six. When this was over, the entire team would look back on this with a feeling of solidarity. As horrible as it had been, they'd done the job

"Damn," he swore. John Pickett was right. The battle was being fought here, but it wouldn't be won here. He told his chief assistant that he was heading down to the next floor, which was being run by Dean James.

There was an interesting case there. Female, thirtynine, admitted two days earlier. Her common-law significant other was dying, and she was distraught, and her blood showed Ebola antibodies, and she'd presented the classic flu symptoms, but the disease hadn't gone further. It had, in fact, seemed to stop.

"What gives with this one?" Cathy Ryan was speculating with Dean James.

"Don't knock it, Cath," he responded tiredly.

"I'm not, Dave, but I want to know why. I intcrvicwcd her myself. She slept in the same bed with him two days before she brought him in—"

"Did they have sex?" Alex asked, entering the conversation.

"No, Alex, they didn't. I asked that. He didn't feel well enough. I think this one's going to survive." And that was a first for Baltimore.

"We keep her in for at least a week, Cathy."

"I *know* that, Dave, but this is the first one," SURGEON pointed out. "Something's different here. What is it? We have to know!"

"Chart?" Cathy handed it over to Alcxandre.

He scanned it. Temperature down to 100.2, blood work

... not normal, but ... "What does she say, Cathy?" Alexandre asked, flipping back through some pages.

"How she says she feels, you mean? Panicked, frightened to death. Massive headaches, abdominal cramps—I think a lot of that is pure stress. Can't blame her, can we?"

"These values are all improving. Liver function blipped hard, but that stopped last night, and it's coming back ..."

"That's what got my attention. She's fighting it off, Alex," Dr. Ryan said. "First one, I think we're going to win with her. But *why?* What's different? What can we learn from this? What can we apply to other patients?"

That turned the trick for Dr. Alexandre. John Pickett was right. He had to get to Reed.

"Dave, they want me in Washington right now."

"Go," the dean replied at once. "We're covered here. If you can help make sense of this, get yourself down there."

"Cathy, the most likely answer to your question is the simple one. Your ability to fight this thing off is inversely proportional to the number of particles that get into your system. Everybody thinks that just one strand can kill you. That's not true. Nothing's that dangerous. Ebola kills first of all by overpowering the immune system; *then* it goes to work on the organs. If she only got a small number of the little bastards, then her immune system fought the battle and won. Talk to her some more, Cathy. Every detail of her contact with her husband-whatever in the last week. I'll call you in a couple of hours. How are you guys doing?"

"Alex, if there's some hope in this," Dr. James replied, "then I think we can hack it."

Alexandre went back upstairs for decontamination. First his suit was thoroughly sprayed. Then he disrobed and changed into greens and a mask, took the "clean" elevator down to the lobby, and out the door.

"You Colonel Alexandre?" a sergeant asked.

"Yes."

The NCO saluted. "Follow me, sir. We got a Hummer and a driver for you. You want a jacket, sir? Kinda cool out."

"Thanks." He donned the rubberized chemical-warfare parka. They were so miserable to wear that it would surely keep him warm all the way down. A female Spec-4 was at the wheel. Alexandre got into the uncomfortable seat, buckled the belt, and turned to her. "Go!" Only then did he rethink what he'd told Ryan and James upstairs. His head shook as though to repel an insect. Pickett was right. Maybe.

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"MR. PRESIDENT, PLEASE, let us reexamine the data first. I even called Dr. Alexandre down from Hopkins to work with the group I set up at Reed. It's much too soon for any conclusions. Please, let us do our work."

"Okay, General," Ryan said angrily. "I'll be here. Damn," he swore after hanging up.

"We have other things to do, sir," Goodley pointed out.

"Yeah."

IT WAS STILL dark when it started in the Pacific Time Zone. At least getting the aircraft was easy. Jumbos from most of the major airlines were heading for Barstow, California, their flight crews screened for Ebola antibodies and passed by Army doctors with test kits which were just now coming on line. There were also modifications to the aircraft ventilation systems. At the National Training Center, soldiers were boarding buscs. That was normal for the Blue Force, but not for the OpFor, whose families watched the uniformed soldiers leave their homes for the deployment. Little was known except that they were leaving. The destination was a secret for now; the soldiers would learn it only after lifting off for the sixteen-hour flights. Over ten thousand men and women meant forty flights, leaving at a rate of only four per hour from the rudimentary facilities in the high desert of California. If asked, the local public affairs officers would tell whoever called that the units at Fort Irwin were moving out to assist with the national quarantine. In Washington, a few reporters learned something else.

"THOMAS DONNER?" THE woman in the mask asked.

"That's right," the reporter answered crossly, pulled away from his breakfast

table, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt.

"FBI. Would you come with me, sir? We have to talk to you about some things."

"Am I under arrest?" the TV personality demanded.

"Only if you want to be, Mr. Donner," the agent told him. "But I need you to come with me, right now. You won't need anything special, except your wallet and ID and stuff," she added, handing over a surgical mask in a plastic container.

"Fine. Give me a minute." The door closed, allowing Donner to kiss his wife, get a jacket, and change shoes. He emerged, put the mask on, and followed the agent to her car. "So what is this all about?"

"I'm just the limo service," she said, ending the morning's conversation. If he was too dumb to remember that he was a member of the press pool pre-sclected for Pentagon operations, it wasn't her lookout.

"THE BIGGEST MISTAKE the Iraqis made in 1990 was logistics," Admiral Jackson explained, moving his pointer on the map. "Everybody thinks it's about guns and bombs. It isn't. It's about fuel and information. If you have enough fuel to keep moving, and you know what the other guy's doing, chances are you'll win." The slide changed on the screen next to the map. The pointer moved there next. "Here."

The satellite photos were clear. Every tank and BMP laager was accompanied by something else. A large collection of fuel bowsers. Artillery limbers were attached to their trucks. Blowups showed fuel drums attached to the rear decks of the T-80 tanks. Each contained fifty-five gallons of diesel. These greatly increased the tank's vulnerability to damage, but could be dropped off by flipping a switch inside the turret.

"No doubt about it. They're getting ready to move, probably within the week. We have the 10th Cavalry in place in Kuwait. We have the 11th and the First Brigade of the North Carolina National Guard moving now. That's all we can do for the moment. It won't be till Friday at the earliest that we can cut any more units loose from the quarantine."

"And that's public information," Ed Foley added.

"Essentially, we're deploying one division, a very heavy one, but only one," Jackson concluded. "The Kuwait military is fully in the field. The Saudis are spinning up, too."

"And the third brigade depends on getting the MPS ships past the Indian navy," Secretary Bretano pointed out.

"We can't do that," Admiral DeMarco informed them. "We don't have the combat power to fight our way through."

Jackson didn't reply to that. He couldn't. The acting Chief of Naval Operations was his senior, despite what he thought of him.

"Look, Brucie," Mickey Moore said, turning to look right at him, "my boys need those vehicles, or the Carolina Guard is gonna be facing an advancing enemy mechanized force with side arms. You blue-suits been telling us for years how ballsy those Aegis cruisers are. Put up or shut up, okay? By this time tomorrow, I'll have fifteen thousand soldiers at risk."

"Admiral Jackson," the President said. "You're Operations."

"Mr. President, without air cover—"

"Can we do it or can't we?" Ryan demanded.

"No," DeMarco replied. "I won't see ships wasted that way. Not without air cover."

"Robby, I want your best judgment on this," Secretary Bretano said.

"Okay." Jackson took a breath. "They have a total of about forty Harriers. Nice airplanes, but not really high-performance. The escorting force has a total of maybe thirty surface-to-surface missiles. We don't have to worry about a gunfight. *Anzio* currently carries seventy-five SAMs, fifteen Tomahawks, and eight harpoons. *Kidd* has seventy SAMs, and eight Harpoons. *O'Bannon* isn't a SAM ship. She just has point-defense weapons, but she has Harpoons, too. The two frigates that just joined up have about twenty SAMs each. Theoretically, they can fight through."

"It's too dangerous, Jackson! You don't send a surface force against a carrier group by itself, *ever!*"

"What if we shoot first?" Ryan asked. *That* caused heads to turn.

"Mr. President." It was DeMarco again. "We don't do that. We're not even sure that they are hostile."

"The ambassador thinks they are," Bretano told them.

"Admiral DeMarco, that equipment has to be dclivered," the President said, his own face coloring up.

"The Air Force is deploying to Saudi now. Two extra days and we can deal with it, but until then—"

"Admiral, call your relief." Secretary Bretano looked down at his briefing folder. "Your services are not needed here anymore. We don't have two days to bicker."

That was actually a violation of protocol. The Joint Chiefs were presidential appointments, and while they were titularly military advisers to the Secretary of Defense *and* the President, supposedly only the latter could ask one to resign. Admiral DeMarco looked to Ryan's place in the center of the conference table.

"Mr. President, I have to give you my best feel for this."

"Admiral, we have fifteen thousand men standing in harm's way. You can't tell us that the Navy will not support them. You are relieved of duty effective now," the President said. "Good day." The other uniformed Chiefs glanced at one another. This hadn't happened before. "How long before contact with the Indians?" Ryan asked, moving on.

"About twenty-four hours, sir."

"Any way we can provide additional support?"

"There's a submarine there also, loaded with torpedoes and missiles. She's about fifty miles in advance of *Anzio,*" Jackson said, as a stunned admiral and his aide left the room. "We can speed her up. That risks detection, but the Indians aren't all that swift on ASW. She would be an offensive weapon, sir. Submarines can't defend passively. They sink ships."

"I think the Indian Prime Minister and I need to have a little chat," POTUS observed. "After we get through them, then what?"

"Well, then we have to transit the strait and make it up to the unloading

ports."

"That I can help you with," the Air Force chief of staff promised. "We'll have the F-16s in-country and in range for that part of the passage. The 366th Wing won't be ready yet, but the boys from Israel will be."

"We're going to need that cover, General," Jackson emphasized.

"Well, God damn, the Navy's asking for help from us Air Scouts," the Air Force said lightly, then turned serious. "We'll kill every rag-head son of a bitch who gets in the air, Robby. Those forty-eight-16-Charlies are locked and cocked. As soon as you're within a hundred miles of the Strait, you have a friend overhead."

"Is it enough?" the President asked.

"Strictly speaking, no. The other side has four hundred top-of-the-line airplanes. When the 366th gets fully set up—in three days, minimum—we'll have eighty fighters for air-to-air, but the Saudis aren't bad. We have AWACS in place. Your tanks will fight under a neutral sky at worst, Mickey." The general checked his watch. "They should be getting off right about now."

THE FIRST FLIGHT of four F-15C fighter-interceptors rotated aloft together. Twenty minutes later, they formed up with their KC-135R tankers. There were six of them from their own wing, and others would join from the Montana and North and South Dakota Air National Guard, their home states as yet untouched by the epidemic. For most of the way to the Arabian Peninsula, they'd hold position ten miles from the lead commercial aircraft coming out of California. The flight path took them north to the Pole, then over the hump and south toward Russia, continuing over Eastern Europe. West of Cyprus, they would be joined by an Israeli escort, which would convey them as far as Jordan. From there on, the American Eagle fighters would be augmented by Saudi F-15s. They might make the first few arrivals covertly, the planning officers thought in their own commercial transports, but if the other side woke up, then there would be an air battle. The pilots in the lead Eagle flight really didn't mind that very much. There was no extraneous chatter on the radios as they saw dawn to their right. It would be a flight of two dawns. The next one would be to their left.

"OKAY, LADIES AND gentlemen," the public affairs officer told the fifteen assembled journalists. "Here's the scoop. You have been called up for a military deployment. Sergeant Astor is now handing out consent forms. You will please sign them and hand them back."

"What's this?" one of them asked.

"You maybe want to try reading it?" the Marine colonel suggested from behind his mask.

"Blood test," one muttered. "I guess so. But what about the rest?"

"Ma'am, those of you who sign the form will find out more. Those who do not will be driven home." Curiosity won in every case. They all signed.

"Thank you." The colonel examined all the forms. "Now if you will go

through the door to your left, some Navy corpsmen are waiting for you."

HE WAS PLEADING his own case. Though a member of the bar for thirty years, Ed Kealty had been in a court of law only as a spectator, though on many occasions he'd stood on the steps of a courthouse to make a speech or announcement. It was always dramatic, and so was this.

"May it please the court," the former Vice President began, "I stand here to request summary judgment. My right to cross a state line has been violated by the executive order of the President. This is contrary to explicit constitutional guarantees, and also to Supreme Court precedent, to wit, the Lemuel Penn case, in which the Court ruled unanimously . . ."

Pat Martin sat beside the Solicitor General, who would speak for the government. There was a camera from *Court TV* to send the case up and down via satellite into homes across the nation. It was a strange scene. The judge, the court reporter, the bailiff, all the attorneys, the ten reporters, and four spectators were all wearing surgical masks and rubber gloves. All had just seen Ed Kealty make the greatest political miscalculation of his career, though none had grasped it yet. Martin had come in anticipation of that very fact.

"Freedom of travel is central to all of the freedoms established and protected by the Constitution. The President has neither constitutional nor statutory authority to deny this freedom to the citizens, most particularly not by the application of armed force, which has already resulted in the death of a citizen, and the wounding of several others. This is a simple point of law," Kealty was saying, half an hour later, "and on behalf of myself and our fellow citizens, I beg the court to set this illegal order aside." With that, Edward J. Kealty took his place.

"Your Honor," the Solicitor General said, walking to the podium with the TV microphone, "as the complainant tells us, this is a most important case, but not one of great legal complexity at its foundation.

"The government cites Mr. Justice Holmes in the celebrated free speech case where he told us that the suspension of freedoms is permissible when the danger to the country as a whole is both real and present. The Constitution, Your Honor, is not a suicide pact. The crisis which the country faces today is deadly, as press reports have told us, and it is of a nature that the drafters could not have anticipated. In the late eighteenth century, I remind learned counsel, the nature of infectious disease was not yet known. But quarantining of ships at the time was both common and accepted. We have Jefferson's embargo of foreign trade as a precedent, but most of all, Your Honor, we have common sense. We cannot sacrifice our citizens on the altar of legal theory ..."

Martin listened, rubbing his nose under the mask. It smelled as though a barrel of Lysol had been spilled in the room.

IT MIGHT HAVE been comical, but was not, when each of the fifteen reporters reacted the same way to the blood test. A blink. A sigh of relief. Each one stood and walked to the far side of the room, taking the opportunity to

remove his or her mask. When the tests were complete, they were led into another briefing room.

"Okay, we have a bus outside to take you to Andrews. You will receive further information after you take off," the PAO colonel told them.

"Wait a minute!" Tom Donner objected.

"Sir, that was on your consent form, remember?"

"YOU WERE RIGHT, John," Alexandre said. Epidemiology was the medical profession's version of accounting, and as that dull profession was vital to running a business, so the study of diseases and how they spread was actually the mother of modern medicine, when in the 1830s a French physician had determined that people who became ill died or recovered at the same rate whether they were treated or not. That awkward discovery had forced the medical community to study itself, to look for things that worked and things that did not, and along the way changed medicine from a trade into a scientific art.

The devil was always in the details. In this case, it might not be a devil at all, Alex realized.

There were now 3,451 Ebola cases in the country. That included those who had started dying, those who showed frank symptoms, and those who showed antibodies. The number by itself wasn't large. Lower than AIDS deaths, lower by more than two orders of magnitude than cancer and heart disease. The statistical study, aided by FBI interviews and feedback from local physicians all over the country, had established 223 primary cases, all of them infected at trade shows, and all of whom had infected others who had in turn infected more. Though the incoming cases were still on the upslope, the rate was lower than that predicted by preexisting computer models ... and at Hopkins they'd had the first case of someone who showed antibodies, but no symptoms....

"There should have been more primary cases, Alex," Pickett said. "We started seeing that last night. The first one who died, he flew from Phoenix to Dallas. The FBI got the flight records, and University of Texas tested everybody aboard, finished this morning. Only one shows antibodies, and he isn't really symptomatic."

"Risk factors?"

"Gingivitis. Bleeding gums," General Pickett reported.

"It's trying to be an aerosol . . . but . . ."

"That's what I think, Alex. The secondary cases appear to be mostly intimate contact. Hugs, kisses, taking personal care of a loved one. If we're right, this will peak in three days, and then it'll stop. Along the way we'll start seeing survivors."

"We have one of those at Hopkins. She's got the antibodies, but it didn't get beyond the initial presentation."

"We need to get Gus working on environmental degradation. He should be already."

"Agreed. You call him. I'm doing some follow-ups down here."

THE JUDGE WAS an old friend of Kealty. Martin wasn't exactly sure how he'd fiddled with the docket in this particular district, but that didn't matter now. The two presentations had taken about thirty minutes each. It was, as Kealty had said and the Solicitor General had agreed, a fundamentally simple point of law, though the practical applications of it led into all manner of complexity. It was also a matter of great urgency, as a result of which the judge reappeared from chambers after a mere hour's contemplation. He would read his decision from his notes, and type up a full opinion later in the day.

"The Court," he began, "is cognizant of the grave danger facing the country, and must sympathize with President Ryan's sincerely felt duty to safeguard the lives of Americans in addition to their freedoms.

"However, the Court must acknowledge the fact that the Constitution is, and remains, the supreme law of the land. To violate that legal bulwark is a step that potentially sets a precedent with consequences so grave as to reach beyond the current crisis, and though the President is certainly acting under the best motives, this Court must vacate the executive order, trusting our citizens to act intelligently and prudently in the pursuit of their own safety. So ordered."

"Your Honor." The Solicitor General stood. "The government will and must appeal your ruling immediately to the Fourth Circuit in Richmond. We request a stay until the paperwork can be processed, later today."

"Request is denied. Court is adjourned." The judge stood and left the bench without a further word. The room, of course, erupted.

"What does this mean?" the *Court TV* correspondent—himself a lawyer, who knew what it probably meant—said to Ed Kealty, his microphone extended, as reporters tended to do at the moment.

"It means that so-called President Ryan cannot break the law. I think I have shown here that the rule of law still exists in our country," the politician replied. He was not being overtly smug.

"What does the government say?" the reporter asked the Solicitor General.

"Not very much. We will have papers filed with the Fourth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals before Judge Venable has his opinion drafted. The order of the court is not officially binding until it is written up, signed, and properly filed. We'll have our appeal drafted first. The Fourth Circuit will stay the order "

"And if it doesn't?"

Martin took that on. "In that case, sir, the executive order will remain in place in the interest of public safety until the case can be argued in a more structured setting. But there is every reason to believe that the Fourth Circuit will stay the order. Judges are people of reality in addition to being people of the written word. There is one other thing, however."

"Yes?" the reporter asked. Kealty was watching from ten feet away.

"The court has settled another important constitutional issue here. In referring to President Ryan by both his name and the title of his office, the court has settled the succession question raised by former Vice President Kealty. Further, the court said that that order was vacated. Had Mr. Ryan not been the President, the order would have been invalid and never legally

binding, and the court could have stated that as well. Instead, the Court acted improperly on point, I believe, but properly in a procedural sense. Thank you. The Solicitor General and I have to get some paperwork done."

It wasn't often you shut reporters up. Shutting political figures up was harder still.

"Now, wait a minute!" Kealty shouted.

"You never were a very good lawyer, Ed," Martin said on his way past.

"I THINK HE'S right," Lorenz said. "Jesus, I sure hope he is."

CDC laboratories had been frantically at work since the beginning, studying how the virus survived in the open. Environmental chambers were set up with differing values of temperature and humidity, and different lightintensity levels, and the data, incomprehensibly, kept telling them the same thing. The disease that had to be spreading by aerosol—wasn't, or at most it was barely doing so. Its survival in the open, even under benign conditions, was measured in minutes.

"I wish I understood the warfare side of this a little better," Lorenz went on after a moment's thought.

"Two-two-three primary cases. That's all. If there were more, we'd know by now. Eighteen confirmed sites, four additional trade shows that generated no hits. Why eighteen and not the other four?" Alex wondered. "What if they did hit all twenty-two, but four didn't work?"

"On the basis of our experimental data, that's a real possibility, Alex." Lorenz was pulling on his pipe. "Our models now predict a total of eight thousand cases. We're going to get survivors, and the numbers on that will alter the model somewhat. This quarantine stuff has scared the shit out of people. You know, I don't think the travel ban really matters directly, but it scared people enough that they're not interacting enough to—"

"Doctor, that's the third good piece of news today," Alexandre breathed. The first had been the woman at Hopkins. The second was Pickett's analytical data. Now the third was Gus's lab work and the logical conclusion it led to. "John always said that bio-war was more psychological than real."

"John's a smart doc, Alex. So are you, my friend."

"Three days and we'll know."

"Agreed. Rattle some beads, Alex."

"You can reach me through Reed for the time being."

"I'm sleeping in the office, too."

"See ya." Alexandre punched off the speakerphone. Around him were six Army physicians, three from Walter Reed, three from USAMRIID. "Comments?" he asked them.

"Crazy situation," a major observed with an exhausted smile. "It's a psychological weapon, all right. Scares the hell out of everybody. But that works for us, too. And somebody goofed on the other side. I wonder how . . . ?"

Alex thought about that for a moment. Then he lifted the phone and dialed Johns Hopkins. "This is Dr. Alexandre," he told the desk nurse on the medical floor. "I need to talk to Dr. Ryan, it's very important . . . okay, I'll hold." It

took a few minutes. “Cathy? Alex here. I need to talk to your husband, and it’s better if you’re there, too. ... It’s damned important,” he told her a moment later.

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COMMENCEMENT

TWO HUNDRED FILES meant two hundred birth certificates, two hundred driver's licenses, houses or apartments, sets of credit cards, and all manner of other permutations to be checked out. It was inevitable that once such an investigation started, Special Agent Aref Raman would garner special attention from the three hundred FBI agents assigned to the case. But in fact every Secret Service employee who had regular access to the White House was on the immediate checklist. All across the country (the USSS draws personnel from as wide a field as any other government agency), agents did start with birth certificates and move on, also checking high-school yearbooks for graduation pictures to be compared with ID photos of all the agents. Three agents on the Detail turned out to be immigrants, some of whose exact personal details could not be easily checked. One was French-born, having come to America in his mother's arms. Another hailed from Mexico, having actually come illegally with her parents; she'd later legitimatized her status and distinguished herself as a genius with the Technical Security Division—and a ferociously patriotic member of the team. That left "Jeff" Raman as an agent with some missing documentation, which was reasonably explained by his parents' reported refugee status.

In many ways, it was too easy. It was on his record that he'd been born in Iran and had come to America when his parents had fled the country with the fall of the Shah's regime. Every indicator since showed that he had fully adapted to his new country, even adopting a fanaticism for basketball that was a minor legend in the Service. He almost never lost a wager on a game, and it was a standing joke that professional gamblers consulted him on the line for an important game. He was always one to enjoy a beer with his colleagues. He'd developed an outstanding service reputation as a field agent. He was unmarried. That was not terribly unusual for a federal law enforcement officer. The Secret Service was especially tough on spouses who had to share their loved ones (mainly husbands) with a job far more unforgiving than the most demanding mistress which made divorce more common than marriage. He'd been seen around with female company, but didn't talk about that much. Insofar as he had a private life, it was a quiet one. It was certain that he'd had no contacts at all with other Iranian-born citizens or aliens, that he was not the least bit religious, that he'd never once brought up Islam in a conversation, except to say, as he'd told the President once, that religion had caused his family so much grief that it was a subject he was just as happy to leave alone.

Inspector O'Day, back at work because Director Murray trusted him with the sensitive cases, was not the least bit impressed with this or any other

story. He supervised the investigation. He assumed that the adversary, if he existed, would be an expert, and therefore the most plausible and consistent identity was to him only a potential cover to be examined. Better yet, there were no rules on this one. Agent Price had made that determination herself. He picked the local investigating team himself from Headquarters Division and the Washington Field Office. The best of them he assigned to Aref Raman, now, conveniently, in Pittsburgh.

His apartment in northwest D.C. was modest, but comfortable. It had a burglar alarm, but that was not a problem. The agents selected for the illegal breaking-andentering included a technical wizard who, after defeating the locks in two minutes, recognized the control panel and punched in the maker's emergency code—he had them all memorized—to deactivate the system. This procedure had once been called a "black bag job," a term which had fallen by the wayside, though the function itself had not quite done so. Now the term "special operation" was used, which could mean anything one wanted it to.

The first two agents in the door called three more into the apartment after the break-in had been effected. They photographed the apartment first of all, looking for possible telltales: seemingly innocent or random objects which, if disturbed in any way, warned the occupant that someone had been inside. These could be devilishly hard things to detect and defeat, but all five of the agents were part of the FBI's Foreign Counterintelligence Division, both trained against and trained by professional spooks. "Shaking" the apartment would take hours of exquisitely tedious effort. They knew that at least five other teams were doing the same thing to other potential subjects.

THE P-3C WAS hovering at the edge of the radar coverage for the Indian ships, keeping low and bumping through the roiled air over the warm surface of the Arabian Sea. They had tracks on thirty emitters from nineteen sources. The powerful, low-frequency search radars were the ones they worried about most, though the threat-receivers were getting traces of SAM radars as well. Supposedly, the Indians were running exercises, their fleet back at sea after a long stand-down for maintenance. The problem was that such workup exercises were quite indistinguishable from battle readiness. The data being analyzed by the on-board ELINT crew was downlinked to *Anzio* and the rest of the escorts for Task Group COMEDY, as the sailors had taken to calling the four *Bob Hopes* and their escorts.

The group commander was sitting in his cruiser's combat information center. The three large billboard displays (actually rear-projection televisions linked to the Aegis radar-computer system) showed the location of the Indian battle group with a fair degree of precision. He even knew which of the blips were probably the carriers. His task was a complex one. COMEDY was now fully formed. Under way-replenishment ships *Platte* and *Supply* were now attached to the group, along with their escorts *Hawes* and *Carr*, and over the next few hours all of the escorts would take turns alongside to top off their fuel bunkers—for a Navy captain, having too much fuel was like having too much money: impossible. After that, the UNREP ships would be ordered to take position outboard of the leading tank carriers, and the frigates outboard

of the trailers. *O'Bannon* would move forward to continue her ASW search—the Indians had two nuclear submarines, and nobody seemed to know where they were at the moment. *Kidd* and *Anzio*, both SAM ships, would back into the formation, providing close air defense. Ordinarily the Aegis cruiser would stand farther out, but not now.

The reason for that came not from his mission orders, but from TV. Every naval vessel in the group had its own satellite-TV receiver; in the modern Navy, the sailors wanted and got their own cable system, and while the crew spent most of their time watching the various movie channels—*Playboy* was always a favorite, sailors being sailors—the group commander was overdosing on CNN, because while his mission orders didn't always give him all the background information he needed for his missions, very often commercial TV did. The crews were tense. The news of events at home could not have been concealed from them in any case, and the images of sick and dying people, blocked interstates, and empty city streets had initially shaken them badly, causing officers and chiefs to sit down with the men on the mess decks to talk things through. Then had come these orders. Things were happening in the Persian Gulf, things were happening at home, and all of a sudden the MPS ships, with their brigade set of combat vehicles, were heading for the Saudi port of Dhahran . . . and the Indian navy was in the way. The crew was quiet now, Captain Greg Kemper of USS *Anzio* saw. His chiefs reported that the "troops" were not laughing and cutting up in the mess rooms, and the constant simulations on the Aegis combat system in the past few days had conveyed their own message. COMEDY was sailing in harm's way.

Each of the escorting ships had a helicopter. These coordinated with the crack ASW team on *O'Bannon*, namesake of the Navy's golden ship of World War II, a Fletcher-class destroyer which had fought in every major Pacific engagement without a casualty or a scratch; the new one had a gold A on her superstructure, the mark of a submarine-killer of note—at least in simulation. *Kidd*'s heritage was less lucky. Named for Admiral Isaac Kidd, who had died aboard USS *Arizona* on the morning of December 7, 1941, she was a member of the "dead-admiral class" of four missile destroyers originally built for the Iranian navy under the Shah, forced on a reluctant President Carter, and then perversely all named for admirals who'd died in losing battles. *Anzio*, in one of the Navy's stranger traditions, was named for a land battle, part of the Italian campaign in 1943, in which a daring invasion had developed into a desperate struggle. Ships of war were actually made for that sort of business, but it was the business of their commanders to see that the desperate part applied to the other guy.

In a real war, that would have been easy. *Anzio* had fifteen Tomahawk missiles aboard, each with a thousand-pound warhead, and nearly in range of the Indian battle group. In an ideal world he'd loose them at just over two hundred miles, based on targeting information from the Orions—his helicopters could do that, too, but the P-3Cs were far more survivable.

"Captain!" It was a petty officer on the ESM board. "We're getting airborne radars. The Orion has some company approaching, looks like two Harriers, distance unknown, constant bearing, signal strength increasing."

"Thank you. It's a free sky until somebody says different," Kemper reminded

everybody.

Maybe it was an exercise, but the Indian battle group hadn't moved forty miles in the past day, instead traveling back and forth, east and west, crossing and recrossing its own course track. Exercises were supposed to be more free-form than that. What the situation told the captain of USS *Anzio* was that they'd staked out this piece of ocean as their own. And the Indians just happened to be between where COMEDY was and where it wanted to be.

Nothing was very secret about it, either. Everyone pretended that normal peacetime conditions were in effect. *Anzio* had her SPY-1 radar operating, pumping out millions of watts. The Indians were using theirs as well. It was almost like a game of chicken.

"Captain, we have bogies, we have unknown multiple air contacts bearing zero-seven-zero, range two-one-five miles. No squawk ident, they are not commercial. Designate Raid-One." The symbols came up on the center screen.

"No emitters on that bearing," ESM reported.

"Very well." The captain crossed his legs in his command chair. In the movies this was where Gary Cooper lit up a smoke.

"Raid-One appears to be four aircraft in formation, speed four-five-zero knots, course two-four-five." Which made them inbounds, though not quite directly at COMEDY.

"Projected CPA?" the captain asked.

"They will pass within twenty miles on their current course, sir," a sailor responded crisply.

"Very well. Okay, people, listen up. I want this place cool and businesslike. You all know the job. When there's reason to be excited, I will be the one to tell you," he told the CIC crew. "Weapons tight." Meaning that peacetime rules still applied, and nothing was actually ready to fire—a situation that could be remedied by turning a few keys.

"*Anzio*, this is Gonzo-Four, over," a voice called on the air-to-surface radio.

"Gonzo-Four, *Anzio*, over."

"Anzio," the aviator reported, "we got two Harriers playing tag with us. One just zipped by at about fifty yards. He's got white ones on the rails." Real missiles hanging under the wings, not pretend ones.

"Doing anything?" the air-control officer asked.

"Negative, just like he's playing a little."

"Tell him to continue the mission," the captain said. "And pretend he doesn't care."

"Aye, sir." The message was relayed.

This sort of thing wasn't all that unusual. Fighter pilots were fighter pilots, the captain knew. They never grew up past the stage of buzzing by girls on their bikes. He directed his attention to Raid-One. Course and speed were unchanged. This wasn't a hostile act. The Indians were letting him know that they knew who was in their neighborhood. That was evident from the appearance of fighters in two places at the same time. It was definitely a game of chicken now.

What to do now? he wondered. *Play tough? Play dumb? Play apathetic?* People so often overlooked the psychological aspect of military operations. Raid-One was now 150 miles out, rapidly approaching the range of his SM-2 MR SAMs.

"What d'ya think, Weps?" he asked his weapons officer.

"I think they're just trying to piss us off."

"Agreed." The captain flipped a mental coin. "Well, they're harassing the Orion. Let 'em know we see 'em," he ordered.

Two seconds later, the SPY search radar jacked up its power to four million watts, sent all of it down one degree of bearing at the inbound fighters, and increased the "dwell" on the targets, which meant they were being hit almost continuously. It was enough to peg the threat-detection gear they had to have aboard. Inside of twenty miles, it could even start damaging such equipment, depending on how delicate it was. That was called a "zorch," and the captain still had another two million watts of power up his sleeve. The joke was that if you really pissed off an Aegis, you might start producing two-headed kids.

"*Kidd* just went to battle stations, sir," the officer of the deck reported.

"Good training time, isn't it?" Range to Raid-One was just over one hundred miles now. "Wcps, light 'em up."

With that command, the ship's four SPG-51 target-illumination radars turned, sending pencil beams of X-band energy at the inbound fighters. These radars told the missiles how to find their targets. The Indian threat gear would pick that up, too. The fighters didn't change course or speed.

"Okay, that means we're not playing rough today. If they were of a mind to do something, they'd be maneuvering now," the captain told his crew. "You know, like turning the corner when you see a cop." Or they had ice water in their veins, which didn't seem likely.

"Going to eyeball the formation?" Weps asked.

"That's what I'd do. Take some pictures, see what's here," Kemper thought.

"A lot of things happening at once, sir."

"Yep," the captain agreed, watching the display. He lifted the growler phone.

"Bridge," the OOD answered.

"Tell your lookouts I want to know what they are. Photos, if possible. How's visibility topside?"

"Surface haze, not bad aloft, sir. I've got men on the Big Eyes now."

"Very well."

"They'll go past us to the north, turn left, and come down our port side," the captain predicted.

"Sir, Gonzo-Four reports a very close pass a few seconds ago," air control said.

"Tell him to stay cool."

"Aye, Cap'n." The situation developed quickly after that. The fighters circled COMEDY twice, never closer than five nautical miles. The Indian Harriers spent another fifteen minutes around the patrolling Orion, then had to return back to their carrier to refuel, and another day at sea continued with no shots fired and no overtly hostile acts, unless you counted the fighter play, and that was pretty routine. When all was settled down, the captain of USS *Anzio* turned to his communications officer.

"I need to talk to CINCLANT. Oh, Weps?" Kemper added.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want every combat system on this ship fully checked out."

"Sir, we just ran a full check twelve hours—"

"Right now, Weps," he emphasized quietly.

"AND THAT'S GOOD news?" Cathy asked.

"Doctor, that's real simple," Alexandre said in reply. "You watched some people die this morning. You will watch more die tomorrow, and that stinks. But thousands is better than millions, isn't it? I think this epidemic is going to burn out." He didn't add that it was somewhat easier for him. Cathy was an eye cutter. She wasn't used to dealing with death. He was infectious diseases, and he was used to it. Easier? Was that the word? "We'll know in a couple of days from statistical analysis of the cases."

The President nodded silently. Van Damm spoke for him: "What's the count going to be?"

"Less than ten thousand, according to the computer models at Reed and Detrick. Sir, I am not being cavalier about this. I'm saying that ten thousand is better than ten million."

"One death is a tragedy, and a million is a statistic," Ryan said finally.

"Yes, sir. I know that one." The good news didn't make Alexandre all that happy. But how else to tell people that a disaster was better than a catastrophe?

"Iosef Vissarionovich Stalin," SWORDSMAN told them. "He did have a way with words."

"You know who did it," Alex observed.

"What makes you say that?" Jack asked.

"You didn't react normally to what I told you, Mr. President."

"Doctor, I haven't done much of anything normally over the past few months. What does this mean about the no-travel order?"

"It means we leave it in place for at least another week. Our prediction is not carved in stone. The incubation period for the disease is somewhat variable. You don't send the fire trucks home as soon as the last flame disappears. You sit there and watch for another possible flare-up. That will happen here, too. What's worked to this point is that people are frightened to death. Because of that, personal interactions are minimized, and *that*'s how you stop one of these things. We keep 'em that way. The new cases will be very circumscribed. We attack those like we did with smallpox. Identify the cases, test everyone with whom they've had contact, isolate the ones with antibodies, and see how they do. It's *working*, okay? Whoever did this miscalculated. The disease isn't anywhere near as contagious as they thought —or maybe the whole thing was just a psychological exercise. That's what bio-war is. The great plagues of the past really happened because people didn't know how diseases spread. They didn't know about microbes and fleas and contaminated water. We do. Everybody does, you learn it in health class in school. Hell, that's why we haven't had any medics infected. We've had lots of practice dealing with AIDS and hepatitis. The same precautions that work with those also work with this."

"How do we keep it from happening again?" van Damm asked.

"I told you that already. Funding. Basic research on the genetic side, and

more focused work on the diseases we know about. There's no particular reason why we can't develop safe vaccines for Ebola and a lot of others."

"AIDS?" Ryan asked.

"That's a toughie. That virus is an agile little bastard. No attempt for a vaccine has even come close yet. No, on that side, basic genetic research to determine how the biologic mechanism works, and from that to get the immune system to recognize it and kill it—some sort of vaccine; that's what a vaccine is. But how to make it work, well, we haven't figured that one yet. We'd better. In twenty years, we might have to write Africa off. Hey," the Creole said, "I got kin over there, y'know?

"That's one way to keep it from happening again. You, Mr. President, are already working on the other way. Who was it?"

He didn't have to tell anybody how secret it was: "Iran. The Ayatollah Mahmoud Haji Daryaei and his merry men."

Alexandre reverted to officer in the United States Army: "Sir, you can kill all of them you want, as far as I'm concerned."

IT WAS INTERESTING to see Mehrabad International Airport in daylight. Clark had never experienced Iran as a friendly country. Supposedly, before the fall of the Shah, the people had been friendly enough, but he hadn't made the trip soon enough for that. He'd come in covertly in 1979 and again in 1980, first to develop information for, and then to participate in, the attempt to rescue the hostages. There were no words to describe what it was like to be in a country in a revolutionary condition. His time on the ground in the Soviet Union had been far more comfortable. Enemy or not, Russia had always been a civilized country with lots of rules and citizens who broke them. But Iran had ignited like a dry forest in a lightning storm. "Death to America" had been a chant on everyone's lips, and *that*, he remembered, was about as scary as things got when you were in the middle of the mob singing *that* song. One little mistake, just contacting an agent who'd been turned, would have been his death, rather a frightening thought to a man with young children, spook or no spook. Locally they shot some criminals, but spies they mostly hanged. It seemed a gratuitously cruel way to take a man's life.

Some things had changed in the intervening years. Some had not. There was still a suspicion of foreigners here at the customs post. The clerk was backed up by armed men, and their job was to prevent the entry of people like him. For the new UIR, as for the previous country, every new face was a potential spy.

"Klerk," he said, handing over his passport, "Ivan Sergeyevich." What the hell, the Russian cover identity had worked before, and he already had it memorized. Better yet, his Russian was letter-perfect. He'd passed as a Soviet citizen before a uniformed official more than once.

"Chekov, Yevgeniy Pavlovich," Chavez told the next clerk over.

They were, again, news correspondents. Rules prohibited CIA officers from covering themselves as *American* reporters, but that didn't apply to the foreign media.

"The purpose of your visit?" the first clerk asked.

"To learn about your new country," Ivan Sergeyevich replied. "It must be very exciting for everyone." For their work in Japan, they'd brought camera gear, and a useful little gadget that looked like, and indeed was, a bright light. Not this time.

"He and I are together," Yevgeniy Pavlovich told his clerk.

The passports were brand-new, though one could not have told it from casual inspection. It was one of the few things Clark and Chavez didn't have to worry about. RVS tradecraft was every bit as good as the former KGB's had been. They made some of the best fake documents in the world. The pages were covered with stamps, many overlapping, and were creased and dog-eared from years of apparent use. An inspector grabbed their bags and opened them. He found clothing, clearly much used, two books, which he flipped through to see if they were pornographic, two cameras of medium quality, their black enamel wellchipped but the lenses new. Each had a carry-on bag with note pads and mini-tape recorders. The inspectors took their time, even after the clerks had done their work, finally passing their country's visitors through with a palpable reluctance.

"*Spasiba*," John said pleasantly, getting his bags and moving off. Over the years, he'd learned not to conceal his relief completely. Normal travelers were intimidated. He had to be, too, lest he stand apart from them. The two CIA officers went outside to catch a cab, standing together in line silently as the rank of taxis ate up the new arrivals. When they were two back, Chavez dropped his travel bag, and the contents spilled out. He and Clark let two people jump ahead of them in line while he repacked the bag. That almost certainly guaranteed a random cab, unless they were all being driven by spooks.

The trick was to look normal in all respects. Not too stupid. Never too smart. To get disoriented and ask for directions, but not too often. To stay in cheap hotels. And in their particular case, to pray that none of the people who'd seen them during their brief visit to this city crossed their path. The mission was supposed to be a simple one. That was usually the idea. You rarely sent intelligence officers out on complex missions—they'd have the good sense to refuse. The simple ones were hairy enough once you got out there.

"IT'S CALLED TASK Group COMEDY," Robby told him. "They got their doorbell rung this morning." The J-3 explained on for a few minutes.

"Playing rough?" the President asked.

"Evidently, they gave the P-3 a real air show. I've done that myself a few times, back in my young-and-foolish days. They want us to know they're there, and they're not intimidated. The group commander is Greg Kemper. I don't know him, but his rep's pretty good. CINCLANT likes him. He's asking for a ROE change."

"Not yet. Later today."

"Okay. I would not expect a night attack, but remember dawn there is midnight here, sir."

"Arnie, what's the book on the P.M.?"

“She and Ambassador Williams don’t exchange Christmas presents,” the chief of staff replied. “You met her in the East Room a while back.”

“Warning her off risks having her call Daryaei,” Ben Goodley reminded them all. “If you confront her, she’ll weasel on you.”

“And? Robby?”

“If we get past the Indians, but she warns Daryaei? They can try to block the strait. The Med force will turn the corner in a few hours and join up fifty miles off the entrance. We’ll have air cover. It could be exciting, but they should make it. Mines are the scary part. The strait there is pretty deep for them. Closer into Dhahran is another story. The longer the UIR’s in the dark, the better, but they may already know what COMEDY is made up of.”

“Or maybe not,” van Damm thought. “If she thinks she can handle it herself, she might just try to show him what kind of balls she has.”

THE TRANSFER WAS called Operation CUSTER. All forty aircraft were aloft now, each carrying roughly 250 soldiers in a sky train six thousand miles long. The lead aircraft were now six hours out from Dhahran, leaving Russian airspace and overflying Ukraine.

The F-15 pilots had traded waves with a handful of Russian fighters which had come up to say hello. They were tired now. Their rumps were like painful lead from all the time in the same seat—the airliner pilots behind them could get up and move around; they even had toilets, quite a luxury for a fighter pilot who had an appliance called a relief tube. Arms tightened up. Muscles were sore from staying in the same position. It was to the point that tanking from their KC-135s was becoming difficult, and gradually they came to the opinion that an air-to-air engagement an hour out from their destination might not be much fun at all. Most drank coffee, tried to shift hands on the stick, and stretched as much as they could.

The soldiers were mainly sleeping, still ignorant of the nature of their mission. The airlines had stocked their aircraft normally, and the troops indulged what would be their last chance to have a drink for some time to come. Those who had deployed to Saudi in 1990 and 1991 told their war stories, chief among which was the memory that the Kingdom wasn’t a place you went to for the nightlife.

NEITHER WAS INDIANA. Brown and Holbrook had found, at least not now. They had at least been smart enough to get into a motel before the general panic, and here they were trapped. This motel, like the ones they’d used in Wyoming and Nebraska, catered to truckers. It had a large restaurant, the old-fashioned sort with a counter and booths, and now with masked waitresses and customers who didn’t group closely together to socialize. Instead, they ate their meals and went back to their rooms, or to sleep in their trucks. There was a daily dance of sorts. The trucks had to be moved, lest staying in the exact same spot damage the tires. Everyone listened to the radio for hourly news broadcasts. The rooms, the restaurant, and even some of the trucks had

televisions for further information and distraction. There was boredom, the tense sort familiar to soldiers but not known to the two Mountain Men.

"Goddamned government," a furniture hauler said. He had family two states away.

"I guess they showed us who was boss, eh?" Ernie Brown said, for general consumption.

Later, data would show that not a single interstate trucker had caught the virus. Their existence was too solitary for that. But their working lives depended on movement, both because they earned their living that way and because they had chosen to do so. Sitting still was not in their nature. Being told to sit still was even less so.

"What the hell," another driver added. He couldn't think of anything else to say. "Goddamned glad I got outa Chicago when I did. That news is scary."

"You suppose this all makes sense?" someone asked.

"Since when does the government make sense?" Holbrook griped.

"I hear that," a voice chimed in, and finally the Mountain Men felt at home somewhere. Then, by unspoken consent, it was time for them to leave.

"How the hell much longer will we be stuck here, Pete?" Ernie Brown wanted to know.

"You're askin' me?"

"A WHOLE LOT of nothing," concluded the lead agent. Aref Raman was a little neat for a single man living alone, but not grossly so. One of the FBI agents had noted with surprise that even the man's socks were neatly folded, along with everything else in the bureau drawers. Then one of the group remembered a study of NFL football players. A psychologist had determined after months of study that offensive linemen, whose job was to protect the quarterback, had neat lockers, while defensive linemen, whose job it was to pound the opposing quarterbacks into the turf, were slobs in every respect. It was good for a laugh, and an explanation. Nothing else was found. There was a photo of his parents, both dead. He subscribed to two news magazines, had the full cable options for his two televisions, had no booze in the house, and ate healthy. He had a particular affinity for kosher hot dogs, judging by the freezer. There were no hidden drawers or compartments they would have found them—and nothing the least bit suspicious. That was both good news and bad.

The phone rang. Nobody answered it, because they weren't there, and they had beepers and cellular phones for their own communications needs.

"Hello, this is 536-3040," the recording of Raman's voice said, after the second ring. "Nobody's here to answer the phone right now, but if you leave a message, somebody will get back to you." Followed by a beep, and in this case, a click.

"Wrong number," one of the agents said.

"Pull the messages," the lead agent ordered the technical genius on the team.

Raman owned a digital recording system, and again there was a punch code programmed in by the manufacturer. The agent hit the six digits and another

took notes. There were three clicks and a wrong number. Somebody calling for Mr. Sloan, whoever that was.

"Rug? Mr. Alahad?"

"Sounds like the name of a rug dealer," another one said. But when they looked around, there was no such rug in the apartment, just the usual cheap wall-to-wall carpet you found in apartments of this type.

"Wrong number."

"Run the names anyway." It was more habit than anything else. You checked everything. It was like working FCI. You just never knew.

Just then the phone rang again, and all five of the agents turned to stare at the answering machine, as though it were a real witness with a real voice.

SHIT, RAMAN THOUGHT, he'd forgotten to erase the messages from before. There was nothing new. His control officer hadn't called again. It would have been a surprise if he had. With that determined, Raman, sitting in a Pittsburgh hotel room, punched the erase-all code. One nice thing about the new digitals was that, once erased, they were gone forever. That wasn't necessarily true of the ones using tape cassettes.

THE FBI AGENTS took note of that, sharing looks.

"Hey, we all do that." There was general agreement. And everybody got wrong numbers, too. And this was a brother officer. But they'd run the numbers anyway.

SURGEON, TO THE relief of her detail, was sleeping upstairs in the residence. Roy Altman and the rest assigned to guard her had been going crazy with her on the fever ward—their term for it—at Johns Hopkins, as much from the physical danger as for the fact that she had run herself right into the ground. The kids, being kids, had spent the time like most other American children, watching TV and playing under the eyes of their agents, who now worried about seeing the onset of flu symptoms, blessedly absent from the entire campus. SWORDSMAN was in the Situation Room.

"What's the time there?"

"Ten hours ahead, sir."

"Make the call," POTUS ordered.

THE FIRST 747, in United livery, crossed into Saudi airspace a few minutes earlier than expected, due to favorable arctic winds. A more circuitous routing at this point would not have helped very much. Sudan had airports and radars, too, as did Egypt and Jordan, and it was assumed that the UIR had informants somewhere in those countries. The Saudi Air Force, augmented by the F-16Cs which had sneaked in from Israel the previous day as part of BUFFALO FORWARD, stood combat air patrol along the Saudi-UIR border. Two E-3B

AWACS were up and turning their rotodomes. The sun was rising now in that part of the world—at least one could see first light from their cruising altitude, though the surface, six miles below, was still black.

"GOOD MORNING, PRIME Minister. This is Jack Ryan," the President said.

"A pleasure to hear your voice. It is late in Washington, is it not?" she asked.

"We both work irregular hours. I imagine your day is just beginning."

"So it is," the voice answered. Ryan had a conventional receiver to his ear. The conversation was on speakerphone as well, and feeding into a digital tape recorder. The CIA had even supplied a voice-stress analyzer. "Mr. President, the troubles in your country, have they improved?"

"We have some hope, but, no, not quite yet."

"Is there any way in which we might be of assistance?" Neither voice showed the least emotion beyond the false amity of people suspicious of each other, and trying to hide it.

"Well, yes, actually, there is."

"Please, then, how may we be of help?"

"Prime Minister, we have some ships heading through the Arabian Sea at the moment," Ryan told her.

"Is that so?" Total neutrality in the voice.

"Yes, ma'am, it is, and you know it is, and I want your personal assurance that your navy, which is also at sea, will not interfere with their passage."

"But why do you ask this? Why should we interfere—for that matter, what is the purpose of your ship movement?"

"Your word on the matter will suffice, Prime Minister," Ryan told her. His right hand gripped a number 2 lead pencil.

"But, Mr. President, I fail to understand the purpose of this call."

"The purpose of this call is to seek your personal assurance that the Indian navy will not interfere with the peaceful passage of United States Navy ships through the Arabian Sea."

HE WAS SO weak, she thought, repeating himself that way.

"Mr. President, I find your call unsettling. America has never spoken to us about such a matter before. You say you move warships close to my country, but not the purpose for the move. The movement of such vessels without an explanation is not the act of a friend." What if she could make him back down?

WHAT DID I TELL YOU? the note from Ben Goodley read.

"Very well, Prime Minister, for the third time, will you give me your assurance that there will be no interference in this activity?"

"But why are you invading our waters?" she asked again.

"Very well." Ryan paused, and then his voice changed. "Prime Minister, the

purpose of the movement does not directly concern your country, but I assure you, those ships will sail on to their destination. Since their mission is one of importance to us, we will not, I repeat not, brook interference of any kind, and I must warn you that should any unidentified ship or aircraft approach our formation, there might be adverse consequences. No, please excuse me, there *will* be such consequences. To avoid that, I give you notice of the passage, and I request your personal assurance to the United States of America that there will be no attack on our ships."

"And now you threaten me? Mr. President, I understand the stress which has come to you of late, but, please, you may not treat sovereign countries in this way."

"Prime Minister, then I will speak very clearly. An overt act of war has been committed against the United States of America. Any interference with, or attack on, any part of our military will be deemed a further act of war, and whatever country commits such an act will face the most serious possible consequences."

"But who has done this to you?"

"Prime Minister, that is not your concern unless you wish it to be. I think in the interests of both your country and mine, it would be well if your navy returned to port forthwith."

"And you blame us, you order us?"

"I began with a request, Prime Minister. You saw fit to evade my request three times. I regard that as an unfriendly act. And so I have a new question: Is it your desire to be at war with the United States of America?"

"Mr. President—"

"Because if those ships don't move, Prime Minister, you will be." The pencil snapped in Ryan's hand. "I think you may have associated yourself with the wrong friends, Prime Minister. I hope I am incorrect, but if my impression is correct, then your country could well pay dearly for that misjudgment. We have experienced a direct attack on our citizens. It is a particularly cruel and barbaric attack, utilizing weapons of mass destruction." He enunciated these words very clearly. "This is not yet known to our citizens. That will soon change," he told her. "When it does, Prime Minister, those guilty of launching that attack will face our justice. We will not send notes of protest. We will not call a special meeting of the UN Security Council in New York. We will make war, Prime Minister. We will make war with all the power and rage this country and her citizens can muster. Do you now understand what I am saying? Ordinary men, women, and now even children have been murdered within our borders by a foreign power. There has even been an attack upon my own child, Prime Minister. Does your country wish to be associated with those acts? If so, Prime Minister, if you wish to be part of that, then the war commences now."

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DEPLOYMENT

JESUS, JACK, YOU HAD ME convinced," Jackson breathed.

"Our friend in the clergy won't be as easy," the President said. He rubbed his two sweaty hands together. "And we still don't know if she'll keep her word. Okay, Task Group COMEDY is at DEFCON 1. If they think it's hostile, kill it. But for Christ's sake, make sure that commander knows how to use his head."

The Situation Room was quiet now, and President Ryan felt very alone, despite the people assembled around him. Secretary Bretano and the Joint Chiefs were there. Rutledge was there for State. Secretary Winston, because Ryan trusted his judgment. Goodley, because he was fully briefed in on all the intelligence information; plus his chief of staff and the usual bodyguards. They all showed their support, but it really didn't help all that much. He alone had talked to India, because despite all the help and staff and advice, Jack Ryan was now the United States of America, and the country was going to war.

THE MEDIA POOL learned that over the Atlantic Ocean. America expected an attack at any time from the United Islamic Republic into the other Gulf states. They would be there to cover the story. They also learned about the forces being deployed.

"That's all?" one of the more knowledgeable of them asked.

"That's it for the moment," the public affairs officer confirmed. "We hope that the show of force will be sufficient to deter the attack, but if not, it's going to be exciting."

"Exciting ain't the word."

Then the PAO told them why it was happening, and the windowless KC-135 that was taking them to Saudi Arabia became very quiet indeed.

KUWAIT ESSENTIALLY HAD two heavy brigades, complemented by a motorized reconnaissance brigade equipped with antitank weapons and designed to be a screening force on the border. The two heavy brigades, equipped and trained on the American model, were held back from the border in the usual way so as to be able to move to counter an incursion rather than having to meet the initial attack—possibly in the wrong place. The 10th U.S. Cavalry stood between and slightly behind those two. Overall command was somewhat equivocal. Colonel Magruder was the most senior officer in time of

service, and the most experienced tactician, but there were Kuwaitis more senior in rank—all three brigades were commanded by brigadier generals—and it *was* their country. On the other hand, the country was small enough to require only one primary command post, and Magruder was there, both to command his regiment and to advise the Kuwaiti commanders. The latter were both proud and nervous. They were understandably pleased by the strides their small country had made since 1990. No longer the comic-opera force which had disintegrated on the Iraqi invasion—though some sub-units had fought bravely—they had what looked on paper and to the eye like a very capable mechanized force. They were nervous because they were heavily outnumbered, and their mainly reservist soldiers had a long way to go before they met the American training standards to which they aspired. But the one thing they knew was gunnery. Shooting tanks is as enjoyable a pastime as it is a vital one; the empty slots in their formations were explained by the fact that twenty tanks were in the shop for replacement of their main gun tubes. That was being done by civilian contractors while the tank crews paced and waited.

The 10th Cav's helicopters were flying around the country's border, their Longbow radars looking deep into the UIR for movement, and so far seeing nothing of particular note. The Kuwaiti air force was standing a four-plane combat air patrol, with the rest of the force on high alert. Outmanned though they were, this would not be a repeat of 1990. The busiest people were the engineers, who were digging holes for all the tanks so that they could fight hull-down, with only their turrets showing. These were covered with netting to make them invisible from the air.

"And so, Colonel?" the senior Kuwaiti commander asked.

"Nothing wrong with your deployments, General," Magruder replied, scanning the map again. He didn't show everything he felt. Two or three weeks of intensive training would have been a blessing. He'd run one very simple exercise, one of his squadrons against the Kuwaiti 1st Brigade, and even then he'd gone very easy on them. It wasn't the time to break their confidence. They had enthusiasm, and their gunnery was about seventy percent of American standards, but they had a lot to learn about maneuver warfare. Well, it took time to raise an army, and more time to train field officers, and they were doing their best.

"YOUR HIGHNESS, I need to thank you for your cooperation to this point," Ryan said over the phone. The wall clock in the Sit Room said 2:10.

"Jack, with luck they will see this and not move," Prince Ali bin Sheik replied.

"I wish I could agree with that. It is time for me to tell you something you do not yet know, Ali. Our ambassador will present you with full information later in the day. For the moment, you need to know what your neighbors have been up to. It isn't just about the oil, Your Highness." He went on for five minutes.

"Are you certain of this?"

"The evidence we have will be in your hands in four hours," Ryan promised. "We haven't even told our soldiers yet."

"Might they use these weapons against us?" The natural question. Biological warfare made everyone's skin crawl.

"We don't think so, Ali. Environmental conditions militate against it." That had been checked, too. The weather forecast for the next week was hot, dry, and clear.

"Those who would use such weapons, Mr. President, this is an act of utter barbarism."

"That's why we do not expect them to back down. They can't—"

"Not 'they,' Mr. President. One man. One godless man. When will you speak to your people about this?"

"Soon," Ryan replied.

"Please, Jack, this is not our religion, this is not our faith. Please tell your people that."

"I know that, Your Highness. It isn't about God. It's about power. It always is. I'm afraid I have other things to do."

"As do I. I must see the King."

"Please give him my respects. We stand together, Ali, just like before." With that the line went dead.

"Next, where exactly is Adler right now?"

"Shuttling back to Taiwan," Rutledge answered. Those negotiations were still going on, though their purpose was now rather clear.

"Okay, he has secure comm links on the plane. You brief him in," he told the Under Secretary. "Anything else I need to do right now?"

"Sleep," Admiral Jackson told him. "Let us do the all-nighter, Jack."

"That's a plan." Ryan rose. He wobbled a bit from the stress and lack of sleep. "Wake me up if you need me."

We won't, nobody said.

"WELL," CAPTAIN KEMPER said, reading the CRITIC message from CINCLANT. "That makes things a lot simpler." Range to the Indian battle group was now two hundred miles, about eight hours of steaming—still the term they used, though all the combatant ships were now powered by jet-turbine engines. Kemper lifted the phone and flipped a switch to speak on the ship's 1-MC address system. "Now hear this. This is the captain speaking.

"Task Group COMEDY is now at DefCon 1. That means if anybody gets close, we shoot him. The mission is to deliver our tank-carriers to Saudi Arabia. Our country is flying in the soldiers to drive them in anticipation of an attack on our allies in the region by the new United Islamic Republic.

"In sixteen hours, we will link up with a surface action making a speed-run down from the Med. We will then enter the Persian Gulf to make our delivery. The group will have friendly air cover in the form of Air Force F-16C fighters, but it is to be expected that the UIR—our old Iranian friends—will not be happy with our arrival.

"USS *Anzio* is going to war, people. That is all for now." He flipped the switch back. "Okay, let's start running simulations. I want to see everything those bastards might try on us. We will have an updated intelligence estimate here in two hours. For now, let's see what we can do about aircraft and missile

attacks."

"What about the Indians?" Weps asked.

"We'll be keeping an eye on them, too." The main tactical display showed a P-3C Orion passing COMEDY to relieve the aircraft now on station. The battle group was heading east, again recrossing its wake, as it had been doing for some time now.

A KH-11 SATELLITE was just sweeping down, northwest-tosoutheast, over the Persian Gulf. Its cameras, having already looked at the three heavy corps of the Army of God, were now photographing the entire Iranian coast, looking for the launch sites of Chinese-made Silkworm missiles. The take from the electronic cameras was cross-linked to a communications satellite over the Indian Ocean, and from there to the Washington area, where technicians still wearing chemically impregnated surgical masks started looking for the airplane-shaped surface-to-surface missiles. The fixed launch sites were well known, but the weapon also could be fired off the back of a large truck, and there were plenty of coastal roads to survey.

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THE FIRST GROUP of four airliners touched down without incident outside Dhahran. There was no arrival ceremony. It was already hot. Spring had come early to the region after the surprisingly cold and wet winter season, and that meant noon temperatures close to 100 degrees, as opposed to the 120 of high summer, but night temperatures down in the forties. It was humid this close to the coast as well.

When the first airliner stopped, the truck-mounted stairs were driven up, and Brigadier General Marion Diggs was the first off. He would be the ground commander for this operation. The virus epidemic still raging in America had also compromised MacDill Air Force Base in Florida, home of Central Command, which had responsibility for this area. The briefing papers he'd seen to this point said that the commander of the 366th Air Combat Wing was also a one-star, but junior to him. It had been a long time since so vital an operation had been turned over to someone as junior as himself, Marion Diggs thought on the way down the steps.

At the bottom was a Saudi three-star. The two men exchanged salutes and entered a car for the ride to the local command post, and an intelligence update. Behind Diggs was the command group of the 11th ACR, and on the other three aircraft, a security group and most of the Second Squadron of the Black Horse. Buses waited to take them to the POMCUS site. It was all rather like the RE-FORGER exercises of the Cold War, which had anticipated a NATO-Warsaw Pact clash requiring American soldiers to get off the airplanes, board their vehicles, and march off to the front. That had never happened except in simulation, but now, again, it was happening, and this time it was for real. Two hours later, 2nd of the Blackhorse was rolling into the open.

“WHAT DO YOU mean?” Daryaei asked.

“There appears to be a major troop movement under way,” his intelligence chief told him. “Radar sites in western Iraq have detected commercial aircraft entering Saudi Arabia from Israeli airspace. We also show fighters escorting them and patrolling the border.”

“What else?”

“Nothing at the moment, but it would seem likely that America is moving another force into the Kingdom. I am not sure what it could be—certainly, it cannot be very large. Their German-based divisions are under quarantine, and all their home-quartered divisions are in the same condition. Most of their army is actually deployed for internal security.”

“We should attack them anyway,” his air force adviser urged.

“I think that would be a mistake,” Intelligence said. “It would be an invasion of Saudi airspace, alerting those goatherds too soon. The Americans can at most move one brigade-sized force. There is a second based at Diego Garcia the equipment, that is—but we have no information to suggest that it has moved, and even if it does, we expect that our Indian friends can stop it.”

“We trust pagans?” Air Force asked with contempt. That was how Muslims viewed the official religion of the Subcontinent.

“We can trust their antipathy to America. And we can ask them if their fleet has spotted anything. In any case, the Americans can deploy another brigade-sized force. That is all.”

“Kill it anyway!”

“That throws away operational security,” Intelligence pointed out.

“If they don’t know we are coming by now, then they are fools,” Air Force objected.

“The Americans have no reason to suspect that we have taken hostile actions against them. To attack their aircraft, if that’s what they are, will alert *them* unnecessarily, not just the Saudis. They are probably concerned about our troop movements in Iraq. So they fly in some small reinforcements. We can deal with them when the time comes,” Intelligence told them.

“I will call India,” Daryaei said, temporizing.

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“NAVIGATION RADARS ONLY . . . make that two air-search, probably from the carriers,” the petty officer said. “Their course track is zero-niner-zero, speed about sixteen.”

The tactical officer on the Orion, called a tacco, looked down at his chart. The Indian battle group was at the extreme eastern edge of the racetrack pattern they’d been following for the last several days. In less than twenty minutes, they should reverse course to head west. If they turned, things would become exciting. COMEDY was now 120 miles away from the other formation, and his aircraft was feeding constant information to *Anzio* and *Kidd.* Under the wings of the four-engine Lockheed turboprop were four Harpoon missiles.

White ones, war shots. The aircraft was now under the tactical command of Captain Kemper on *Anzio*, and on his order they could launch those missiles, two each at the Indian carriers, because they were the long gun of the opposing navy. A few minutes behind would be a swarm of Tomahawks and more Harpoons headed the same way.

"Are they EMCON'D?" the officer wondered.

"With nav sets emitting?" the sailor replied. "COMEDY must have 'em on their ESM gear by now. Damned sure our guys are lighting up the sky, sir." COMEDY had essentially two choices. Adopt EMCON—for emissions control—turning off their radars to make the other side expend time and fuel searching for them, or simply light everything off, creating an electronic bubble which the other side could easily see, but the penetration of which would be dangerous. *Anzio* had gone with the second option.

"Any airplane chatter?" the tacco asked another crewman.

"Negative, sir, none at all."

"Hmph." As low as the Orion was flying, its presence was probably not known to the Indians, despite their use of air-search gear. He was sorely tempted to pop up and illuminate himself with his own search radar. What were they up to? Might a few ships have broken away from the group, heading west, say, to launch an off-axis missile attack? He couldn't know what they were saying or thinking. All he had were computer-generated course tracks based on radar signals. The computer knew exactly where aircraft was at all times off the Global Positioning Satellite system. From that the bearing to the radar sources enabled calculation of their location and . . .

"Course change?"

"Negative, system shows them still leading zero-niner-zero at sixteen knots. They are passing out of the box now, sir. This is farther cast than we've seen them in three days. They are now thirty miles east of COMEDY'S course to the Strait."

"I wonder if they changed their minds about this...."

"YES, OUR FLEET is at sea," the Prime Minister told him.

"Have you seen the American ships?"

The leader of the Indian government was all alone in her office. Her Foreign Minister had been in earlier, and was on his way back at this moment. This phone call had been anticipated, but not hoped for.

The situation had changed. President Ryan, weak though she still thought him to be—who else but a weak man would have threatened a sovereign country so?—had nonetheless frightened her. What if the plague in America had been initiated by Daryaei? She had no evidence that it had, and she would never seek such information out. Her country could never be associated with such an act. Ryan had asked—what was it, four times? five?—for her word that the Indian navy would not hinder the American fleet movement. But only one time had he said *weapons of mass destruction*. That was the deadliest code phrase in international exchange. All the more so, her Foreign Minister had told her, because America only possessed one kind of such weapons, and for that reason, America regarded biological weapons and chemical weapons *to be*

nuclear weapons. That led to another calculation. Aircraft fought aircraft. Ships fought ships. Tanks fought tanks. One answered an attack with the same weapon used by one's enemy. *Full power and rage*, she remembered also. Ryan had overtly suggested that he would take action based on the nature of the supposed attack by the UIR. Nor, finally, did she discount the lunatic attack on his little daughter. She remembered that from the East Room, the reception after the funeral, how Ryan doted on his children. Weak man though he had to be, he was an *angry* weak man, armed with weapons more dangerous than any others.

Daryaei had been foolish to provoke America in that way. Better just to have launched his attack on Saudi and win with conventional arms on the field of battle, and that would have been that. But, no, he had to try to cripple America at home, to provoke them in a way that was the purest form of lunacy—and now she and her government *and her country* could be implicated, the P.M. realized.

She hadn't bargained for any of that. Deploying her fleet was chance enough—and the Chinese, what had they done? Launched an exercise, perhaps damaged that airliner—five thousand kilometers away! What risks were *they* taking? Why, none at all. Daryaei expected much of her country, and with his attack on the very citizens of America, it was too much.

"No," she told him, choosing her words carefully. "Our fleet units have seen American patrol aircraft, but no ships at all. We have heard, as you perhaps have, that an American ship group is transiting Suez, but only warships and nothing more."

"You are sure of this?" Daryaei asked.

"My friend, neither our ships nor our naval aircraft have spotted any American ships in the Arabian Sea at all." The one overflight had been by land-based MiG-23s of the Indian air force. She hadn't lied to her supposed ally. Quite. "The sea is large," she added. "But the Americans are not that clever, are they?"

"Your friendship will not be forgotten," Daryaei promised her.

The Prime Minister replaced the phone, wondering if she'd done the right thing. Well. If the American ships got to the Gulf, she could always say that they hadn't been spotted. That was the truth, wasn't it? Mistakes happened, didn't they?

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"HEADS UP. I got four aircraft lifting off from Gasr Amu," a captain said aboard the AWACS. The newly-constituted UIR air force had been working up, too, but mainly over what was the central part of the new country, and hard to spot even from the airborne radar platform.

Whoever had timed this wasn't doing all that badly. The fourth quartet of inbound airliners had just crossed into Saudi airspace, less than two hundred miles from the UIR fighters doing their climb-out. It had been quiet on the air front to this point. Two fighters had been tracked over the last few hours, but those appeared to be check-hops from the mission profiles, probably aircraft

that had been fixed for some major or minor defect, then taken up to see if the new widgets worked properly. But this was a flight of four which had taken off in two closely spaced elements. That made them fighters on a mission.

The current air cover for Operation CUSTER in this sector was a flight of four American F-16s, orbiting within twenty miles of the border.

"Kingston Lead, this is Sky-Eye Six, over."

"Sky, Lead."

"We have four bandits, zero-three-five your position, angels ten and climbing, course two-niner-zero." The four American fighters moved west to interpose themselves between the UIR fighters and the inbound airliners.

Aboard the AWACS, a Saudi officer listened in to the radio chatter between the ground radar station controlling the flight of four and the fighters. The UIR fighters, now identified as French-made F-1s, continued to close the border, then turn ten miles short of it, finally tracing only one mile inside. The F-16s did much the same, and the pilots saw each other, and examined one another's aircraft from four thousand yards apart, through the protective visors of their helmets. The air-to-air missiles were clearly visible under the wings of all the aircraft.

"Y'all want to come over and say hello?" the USAF major leading the F-16s said over guard. There was no response. The next installment of Operation CUSTER proceeded unhindered to Dhahran.

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O'DAY WAS IN early. His sitter, with no classes to worry about, rather enjoyed the thought of all the money that would come in from this, and the most important bit of news for everyone was that not a single case of the new illness had happened within ten miles of his home. Despite the inconvenience, he had slept at home every night—even though on one occasion that had been a mere four hours. He couldn't be a daddy if he didn't kiss his little girl at least once a day, even in her sleep. At least the ride into work was easy. He'd gotten a Bureau car. It was faster than his pickup, complete with a flashing light that allowed him to zip through all the checkpoints on the way.

On his desk were the case summaries from the background checks of all the Secret Service personnel. The work in nearly every case had been stultifyingly duplicative. Full background checks had been done on every USSS employee, or else they could not have held the security clearances that were an automatic part of their jobs. Birth certificates, high-school photos, and everything else matched up perfectly. But ten files showed loose ends, and all of those would be run down later in the day. O'Day went over all of them. He kept coming back to one.

Raman was of Iranian birth. But America was a nation of immigrants. The FBI had originally been constructed of Irish-Americans, preferably those educated at Jesuit institutions—Boston College and Holy Cross were the favorites, according to the legend—because J. Edgar Hoover was supposed to have believed that no Irish-American with a Jesuit education could conceivably betray his country. Doubtless, there had been some words about

that at the time, and even today, anti-Catholicism was the last of the respectable prejudices. But it was well-known that immigrants so often made the most loyal of citizens, some ferociously so. The military and other security agencies often profited from that. Well, Pat thought, it was easily settled. Just check out the rug thing and let it be. He wondered who Mr. Sloan was. A guy who wanted a rug, probably.

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THERE WAS A quiet to the streets of Tehran. Clark didn't remember them that way from 1979—80. His more recent trip had been different, more like the rest of the region, bustling but not dangerous. Being journalists, they acted like journalists. Clark reentered market areas, talking politely to people about business conditions, the availability of food, what they thought of the unification with Iraq, what their hopes for the future were, and what he got was pure vanilla. Platitudes. The political comments were especially bland, singularly lacking in the passion he remembered from the hostage crisis, when every heart and mind had been turned against the entire outside world—especially America. Death to America. Well, they'd given substance to that wish, John thought. Or someone had. He didn't sense that animus anymore among the people, remembering the strangely cordial jeweler. Probably they just wanted to live, just like everyone else. The apathy reminded him of Soviet citizens in the 1980s. They'd just wanted to get along, just wanted to live a little better, just wanted their society to respond to their needs. There was no revolutionary rage left in them. So why, then, had Daryaei taken his action? How would the people respond to that? The obvious answer was that he'd lost touch, as Great Men so often did. He'd have his coterie of true believers, and a larger number of people willing to ride the bus and enjoy the comfortable seating while everyone else walked and kept out of the way, but that was it. It was fertile ground to recruit agents, to identify those who'd had enough and were willing to talk. What a shame that there was no time to run a proper intelligence operation here. He checked his watch. Time to head back to the hotel. Their first day had been both a waste and part of their cover. Their Russian colleagues would arrive tomorrow.

THE FIRST ORDER of business was to check out the names Sloan and Alahad. That started with a check of the telephone book. Sure enough, there was a Mohammed Alahad. He had an ad in the Yellow Pages. Persian and Oriental Rugs. For some reason, people didn't connect "Persia" with "Iran," a saving grace for a lot of rug merchants. The shop was on Wisconsin Avenue, about a mile from Raman's apartment, which was not in the least way remarkable. Similarly, there was a Mr. Joseph Sloan in the crisscross, whose telephone number was 536-4040, as opposed to Raman's 536-3040. A one-digit goof, which easily explained the wrong number on the Secret Service agent's answering machine.

The next step was pure form. The computer records of telephone calls were

run by command. The massive numbers of them took almost a minute to run, even with knowledge of the probable dates ... and there it came up on the agent's screen, a call to 202-536-3040 from 202-459-6777. But that wasn't Alahad's store number, was it? A further check showed -6777 as a pay phone two blocks from the shop. Odd. If he were that close to his shop, why drop a dime—actually a quarter now—to make the call?

Why not make another check? The agent was his squad's techno-genius, with a mustache and a marginal haircut. He'd been something less than a raving success working bank robberies, but had found foreign counterintelligence to his liking. It was like the engineering classes of his college days. You just kept picking at things. He'd also found that the foreign spies he chased thought the same way he did. Toss in his technical prowess

... hmph, in the past month there had *not* been a call from the rug shop to 536-4040. He went back another month. No. How about the other direction? No, 536-4040 had *never* called 457-1100. Now, if he'd ordered a rug, and those things took time—must have, if the dealer had called to let the guy know it had finally come in ... why hadn't there been a call about it in either direction?

The agent leaned over to the next desk. "Sylvia, want to take a look at this?"

"What is it, Donny?"

THE BLACKHORSE WAS fully on the ground now. Most of them were in their vehicles or attending their aircraft. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment comprised 123 M1A2 Abrams main-battle tanks, 127 M3A4 Bradley scout vehicles, 16 M109A6 Paladin 155mm mobile guns, and 8 M270 Multiple-Launch Rocket System tracks, plus a total of 83 helicopters, 26 of which were AH-54D Apache attack choppers. Those were the shooting platforms. They were supported by hundreds of soft vehicles—mostly trucks to carry fuel, food, and ammunition—plus twenty extras locally called Water Buffaloes, a vital need in this part of the world.

The first order of business was to get everyone away from the POMCUS site. The tracked vehicles were driven onto low-boy trailers for the ride north to Abu Hadriyah, a small town with an airport and the designated assembly point for the 11th Cav. As every vehicle rolled out of its warehouse, it stopped on a pre-selected spot painted red. There the GPS navigation systems were checked against a known reference point. Two of the IVIS boxes were down. One of them announced the fact all by itself, sending a coded radio message to the regiment's support troop, demanding that it be replaced and repaired. The other was completely dead, and the crew had to figure it out for themselves. The large red square helped.

The trailer trucks were driven by Pakistanis, a few hundred of the thousands imported into the Saudi Kingdom to do menial labor. For the Abrams and Bradley crews, it would prove to be exciting, while they worked inside their tracks to make sure that everything was working. With the routine tasks done, drivers, loaders, and commanders stuck their heads out of their hatches, hoping to enjoy the view. What they saw was different from Fort Irwin but not terribly exciting. To the east was an oil pipeline. To the west was a lot of

nothing. The crews watched anyway—the view was better than they'd experienced on the flight—except for the gunners, many of whom fought motion-sickness, a common problem for people in that position. It was almost as bad for those who could see. The local truckers, it seemed, were paid by the mile and not the hour. They drove like maniacs.

The Guardsmen were beginning to arrive now. They had nothing to do at the moment except set up the tents provided for them, drink lots of water, and exercise.

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SUPERVISOR SPECIAL AGENT Hazel Loomis commanded this squad of ten agents. "Sissy" Loomis had been in FCI from the beginning of her career, virtually all of it in Washington. Approaching forty now, she still had the cheerleader look that had served her so well earlier in her time as a street agent. She also had a number of successful cases under her belt.

"This looks a little odd," Donny Selig told her, laying out his notes on her desk.

It didn't require much by way of explanation. Phone contacts between intelligence agents never included the words, "I have the microfilm." The most innocuous of messages were pre-selected to convey the proper information. Which was why they were called "code words." And it wasn't that the tradecraft was bad. It was just that if you knew what to look for, it looked like tradecraft. Loomis looked the data over, then looked up.

"Got addresses?"

"You bet, Sis," Selig told her.

"Then let's go see Mr. Sloan." The one bad part about promotion was that being a supervisor denied her the chance to hit the bricks. Not for this one, Loomis told herself.

AT LEAST THE F-15E Strike Eagle had a crew of two, allowing the pilot and weapons-systems operator to engage in conversation for the endless flight. The same was true of the six B-1B bomber crews; the Lancer even had enough area that people could lie down and sleep—not to mention a sit-down toilet. This meant that, unlike the fighter crews, they didn't have to shower immediately upon reaching Al Kharj, their final destination, south of Riyadh. The 366th Air Combat Wing had three designated "checkered flag" locations throughout the world. These were bases in anticipated trouble spots, with support equipment, fuel, and ordnance facilities maintained by small caretaker crews, who would be augmented by the 366th's own personnel, mainly flying in by chartered airliners. That ineluded additional flight crews, so that, theoretically, the crew which had flown in from Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho could indulge in crew rest, while another relief crew could, theoretically, fly the aircraft off to battle. Fortunately for all concerned, this wasn't necessary. Thoroughly exhausted airmen (and, now, -women) brought their birds in for landing, taxied off to their shelters, and dismounted, handing their charges

over to maintenance personnel. The bomb-bay fuel tanks were removed first of all, and replaced with the appliances made to hold weapons, while the crews went off for long showers and briefings from intelligence officers. Over a period of five hours, the entire 366th combat strength was in Saudi, less one F-16C, which had developed avionics trouble and diverted to Bentwaters Royal Air Force Base in England.

"YES?" THE ELDERLY woman wasn't wearing a surgical mask. Sissy Loomis handed her one. It was the new form of greeting in America.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sloan. FBI," the agent said, holding up her ID.

"Yes?" She wasn't intimidated, but she was surprised.

"Mrs. Sloan, we're conducting an investigation, and we'd like to ask you a few questions. We just need to clear something up. Could you help us, please?"

"I suppose." Mrs. Joseph Sloan was over sixty, dressed neatly, and looked pleasant enough, if somewhat surprised by all this. Inside the apartment the TV was on, tuned to a local station by the sound of it. The weather forecast was running.

"May we come in? This is Agent Don Selig," she said, nodding her head to the techno-weenie. As usual, her friendly smile won the day; Mrs. Sloan didn't even put the mask on.

"Surely." The lady of the house backed away from the door.

It took only a single glance to tell Sissy Loomis that something was not quite right here. For one thing, there was no Persian rug to be seen in the living room—in her experience people didn't just buy one of the things. For another, this apartment was just too neat.

"Excuse me, is your husband in?" The response was immediate, and pained.

"My husband passed away last September," she told the agent.

"Oh, I am sorry, Mrs. Sloan. We didn't know." And with that a fairly routine follow-up changed into something very different indeed.

"He was older than me. Joe was seventy-eight," she said, pointing to a picture on the coffee table of two people a long time ago, one about thirty and one in her late teens.

"Does the name Alahad mean anything to you, Mrs. Sloan?" Loomis asked after sitting down.

"No. Should it?"

"He deals in Persian and Oriental rugs."

"Oh, we don't have any of those. I'm allergic to wool, you see."

57

NIGHT PASSAGE

JACK?" RYAN'S EYES clicked open to see that there was bright sunlight coming through the windows. His watch said it was just after eight in the morning.

"What the hell? Why didn't anybody—"

"You even slept through the alarm," Cathy told him. "Andrea said that Arnie said to let you sleep till about now. I guess I needed it, too," SURGEON added. She'd been in bed for over ten hours before waking at seven. "Dave told me to take the day off," she added.

Jack jolted up and moved at once into the bathroom. When he came back, Cathy, in her housecoat, handed over his briefing papers. The President stood in the center of the room, reading them. Reason told him that if anything serious had happened he would have been awakened—he had slept through the clock-radio alarm before, but he'd never failed to be aroused by a phone. The papers told him that all was, if not exactly well, then relatively stable. Ten minutes after that, he was dressed. He took the time to say hello to his kids, and kiss his wife. Then he headed out.

"SWORDSMAN is moving," Andrea. said into her radio mike. "Sit Room?" she asked POTUS.

"Yeah. Whose idea was it to—"

"Mr. President, that was the chief of staff, but he was right, sir."

Ryan looked at her as she punched the elevator button for the ground floor. "I guess I'm outvoted, then."

The national-security team had clearly been up all night on his behalf. Ryan had coffee waiting at his place. They'd been living on it.

"Okay, what's happening over there?"

"COMEDY is now one hundred thirty miles beyond the Indians—would you believe they resumed their patrol station *behind* us?" Admiral Jackson told his Commander-in-Chief.

"Playing both sides of the street," Ben Goodley concluded.

"It's a good way to get hit by traffic in both directions," Arnie put in.

"Go on."

"Operation CUSTER is just about done. The 366th is also in Saudi, less one broke fighter that diverted to England. The 11th Cav is rolling out of its storage site to an assembly area. So far," the J-3 said, "so good. The other side sortied some fighters to the border, but we and the Saudis had a blocking force, and nothing happened aside from some mean looks."

"Anybody think they're going to back down?" Ryan asked.

"No." This came from Ed Foley. "They can't, not now."

THE RENDEZVOUS TOOK place fifty miles off Cape Rass al Hadd, the far southeast corner of the Arabian Peninsula. Cruisers *Normandy* and *Yorktown*, destroyer *John Paul Jones*, and frigates *Underwood, Doyle*, and *Nicholas* took a trailing position so that *Platte* and *Supply* could take them alongside after their high-speed run down from Alexandria, to top off their bunkers. Helicopters ferried the captains to *Anzio*, whose captain was senior, for an hour's worth of discussion of the mission. Their destination was Dhahran. To get there they had to drive northwest into the Strait of Hormuz. Getting there would take just over six hours, 2200 hours local time. The strait was twenty miles across and speckled with islands, plus it was one of the most heavily traveled waterways in the world—even now, despite the growing crisis. Supertankers, one of which displaced more water than all of the warships in the now-designated TF-61.1 combined, were merely the bestknown vessels transiting the area. There were also massive container ships wearing the flags of ten nations, and even a multilevel sheep carrier which looked like a big-city parking garage, which was bringing in live mutton from Australia. The smell of it was famous on all the oceans of the world. The strait was covered by radar to establish traffic control—the possibility of a ramming incident between two supertankers didn't bear thinking about—which meant that TF-61.1 would be unlikely to sneak in entirely unnoticed. But they could do a few things. At the narrowest point, the Navy ships would hold to the south, dodging between islands belonging to Oman, and hopefully somewhat obscured by the clutter. Next they'd move south of Abu Musa, past the crowd of oil platforms, again using them for radar cover, and then make a straight run for Dhahran, past the mini-states of Qatar and Bahrain. Opposition, the intelligence officers said, included ships of American, British, Chinese, Russian, and French origin, all of them armed with one sort of missile or another. The most important ships in the group, of course, were totally unarmed. Maintaining their box formation, *Anzio* would lead them, 2,000 yards in front. *Normandy* and *Yorktown* would take position 2,000 yards to starboard, with *Jones* in trail. The two under way-replenishment ships, with *O'Bannon* and all the frigates in close escort, would form a second, decoy group. Helicopters would be aloft, both to patrol and, with their radar transponders on, to simulate much larger targets. The various COs agreed on the plan and waited for their helicopters to return them to their commands. It was the first time in ages that an American naval formation had stood in harm's way without a carrier in close support. Their bunkers full of fuel, the group formed up as planned, pointed their bows northwest, and bent on twenty-six knots. At 1800 local time, a flight of four F-16 fighters blazed overhead, both to give the Aegis ships a chance to practice fire-control against live targets and also to verify the IFF codes to be used for the night's mission.

MOHAMMED ALAHAD, THEY saw, was just as ordinary as hell. He'd come to America more than fifteen years earlier. He was said to be widowed and

childless. He ran a decent and profitable business on one of Washington's nicer shopping streets. He was, in fact, in there right now. Though the CLOSED sign was on the door, they supposed he had nothing better to do but sit in his shop and go over his bills.

One of Loomis's squad went up to the shop and knocked on the door. Alahad came to open it, and a brief conversation ensued, with the expected gestures, and they could figure what was being said. *I'm sorry, but all businesses are closed because of the President's order—Yeah, sure, but I don't have anything to do, and neither do you, right?—Yes, but* it is *an order—Hey, who's gonna know, what' d' ya say?* Finally the agent went in, wearing a surgical mask. He stayed there for ten minutes before coming back out, walking around the corner, and making a radio call from his car.

"It's a rug shop," the agent told Loomis over the encrypted radio channel. "If we want to toss the place, we'll have to wait." There was already a tap on the phone line, but so far there had not been a single call in or out.

The other half of her squad was in Alahad's apartment. There they found a photo of a woman and a child, probably his son, wearing something like a uniform—about fourteen, the agent thought, photographing them with a Polaroid. But again, everything was pure vanilla. It was exactly the way a businessman would live in the Washington area, or an intelligence officer. You just couldn't tell. They had the beginning of a case, but not enough evidence to take to a judge, certainly not enough for a search warrant. Their probable-cause quotient was a little on the thin side. But this was a national-security investigation involving the personal safety of the President, and headquarters *had* told them that there were no rules. They'd already committed two technical violations of the law in invading two apartments without a warrant, and two more in tapping a couple of phone lines. With all that work accomplished, Loomis and Selig made their way into an apartment building across the street. From the manager, they learned that there was a vacant apartment facing Alahad's storefront. They got the keys to that without any difficulty and set up their surveillance of the front, while two more agents watched the back door. Sissy Loomis then used her cellular phone to call headquarters. Maybe it wasn't enough to take to a judge or a U.S. attorney, but it was enough to talk to another agent about.

ONE OTHER POTENTIAL subject wasn't completely clear yet, O'Day noted. There was Raman, and a black agent whose wife was a Muslim and who was evidently trying to convert her husband—but the agent had discussed it with his comrades, and there was a notation in his file that this agent's marriage, like others in the Service, was on shaky ground.

The phone rang.

"Inspector O'Day."

"Pat? It's Sissy."

"How's Raman looking?" He'd worked three cases with her, all involving Russian spies. The cheerleader had the jaw of a pit bull once she got onto something.

"The message on his phone, the wrong number?"

"Yeah?"

"Our rug merchant was calling a dead person whose wife is allergic to wool," Loomis told him.

Click.

"Keep going, Sis." She read off her notes and the information garnered by the people who'd entered the dealer's apartment.

"This one feels real, Pat. The tradecraft is just too good. Right out of the book. It looks so normal that you don't think about it. But why the pay phone, except that he's worried somebody might have a tap on his phone? Why call a dead man by mistake? And why did the wrong number go to somebody on the Detail?"

"Well, Raman's out of town."

"Keep him there," Loomis advised. They didn't have a case. They were still struggling for probable cause. If they arrested Alahad, he'd have the sense to ask for a lawyer—and what did they have? He'd made a phone call. He wouldn't have to defend the call. He just had to say nothing. His lawyer would say it was all some kind of mistake—Alahad might even have a plausible explanation already prepared; he'd keep that one in his pocket, of course—ask for evidence, and the FBI would have nothing to show.

"That tips our hand, too, doesn't it?"

"Better safe than sorry, Pat."

"I have to take this to Dan. When are you tossing the shop?"

"Tonight."

THE TROOPERS OF the Blackhorse were thoroughly exhausted. Fit and desert-trained soldiers that they were, they'd spent two-thirds of a day in airplanes with dry air, sitting in cramped seats, their personal weapons in the overhead bins—that always got a curious reaction from the stewardesses—and then arrived eleven time zones away in blazing heat. But they did what they had to do.

First came gunnery. The Saudis had established a large shooting range for their own use, with pop-up steel targets as close as three hundred meters and as far as five thousand. Gunners bore-sighted their weapons, then tried them out, using real ammunition instead of practice, then learned that the war shots were far more accurate, the projectiles flying "right through the dot," meaning the circular reticle in the center of their sighting systems. Once off the transport trailers, drivers exercised their mounts to make sure that everything worked properly, but the tanks and Bradleys were in the nearly mint condition promised on the flight over. Radio checks were made so that everyone could talk to everyone else. Then they verified the all-important IVIS data links. The more mundane tasks came last of all. The Saudi-deployed M1A2s did not yet have the newest modification to the vehicle series, pallet-loaded ammunition racks. Instead there was a large steel-wire bustle for personal things, especially water. One by one, the crews cycled their vehicles through the course. The Bradley crews even got to fire a single TOW missile each. Then they entered the reloading area, taking on new ammunition to replace what had been expended on the range.

It was all quiet and businesslike. The Blackhorse, because they trained other soldiers so regularly in the fine art of mechanized death, were utterly desensitized to the routine tasks of soldiering. They had to remind themselves that this was not *their* desert—deserts all look pretty much alike; this one, however, didn't have creosote bushes and coyotes. It did have camels and merchants. The Saudis honored their hospitality laws by providing food and soft drinks in abundance to the troopers, while their senior officers conferred over maps with the region's bitter coffee.

Marion Diggs was not a big man. A cavalryman all of his life, he'd always enjoyed the ability to direct sixty tons of steel with his fingertips, to reach out and touch someone else's vehicle at three miles' distance. Now he was a senior commander, effectively commanding a division, but with a third of it two hundred miles to the north, and another third aboard some ships which would be running a gauntlet later this evening.

"So what are we really up against, how ready are they?" the general asked.

Satellite photos went down, and the senior American intelligence officer, based at KKMC, went through his mission brief. It took thirty terse minutes, during which Diggs stood. He was very tired of sitting.

"STORM TRACK reports minimal radio traffic," the briefing officer, a colonel, reported. "We need to remember that they're pretty exposed where they are, by the way."

"I have a company moving to cover it," a Saudi officer reported. "They should be in position by morning."

"What's Buffalo doing?" Diggs asked. Another map went down. The Kuwaiti dispositions looked all right to his eye. At least they were not forward-deployed. Just the screening force on the berm, he saw, with the three heavy brigades in position to counter a penetration. He knew Magruder. In fact, he knew all three of the groundsquadron commanders. If the UIR hit there first, outnumbered or not, the Blue Force would give the Red one hell of a bloody nose.

"Enemy intentions?" he inquired next.

"Unknown, sir. There are elements to this we do not understand yet. Washington has told us to expect an attack, but not why."

"What the hell?"

"Tonight or tomorrow morning for that, best I can tell you, sir," the intel officer replied. "Oh, we have newsies assigned to us. They flew in a few hours ago. They're in a hotel in Riyadh."

"Marvelous."

"In the absence of knowledge of what they plan to do . . ."

"The objective is plain, is it not?" the senior Saudi commander observed. "Our Shi'ite neighbors have all the desert they need." He tapped the map. "There is our economic center of gravity."

"General?" another voice asked. Diggs turned to his left.

"Colonel Eddington?"

"Center of gravity is political, not military. We might want to keep that in mind, gentlemen," the colonel from Carolina pointed out. "If they want to go for the coastal oil fields, we'll have a lot of strategic warning."

"They do have us outnumbered, Nick. That does give them a certain degree

of strategic flexibility. Sir, I see a lot of fuel trucks in these photos," the American general noted.

"They stopped at the Kuwait border the last time because they were out of fuel," the Saudi commander reminded them.

The Saudi army—actually called their National Guard—comprised five heavy brigades, almost all of it American equipment. Three were deployed south of Kuwait, with one at Ras al Khafji, site of the only invasion of the Kingdom, but right on the water, and nobody expected an attack from the sea. It was not unusual for soldiers to prepare to fight the last war, the American remembered.

For his part, Eddington remembered a quote from Napoleon. When shown a defense plan that had troops evenly spaced on the French border, he'd asked the officer if the idea was to prevent smuggling. That defensive concept had been given the patina of legitimacy by NATO's doctrine of forward defense on the inner German border, but it had never been tested, and if there were ever a place to trade space for time, it was the Saudi desert. Eddington kept his mouth shut on that one. He was junior to Diggs, and the Saudis seemed quite possessive about their territory, as most people were. He and Diggs shared a look. As the 10th Cav was the theater reserve for the Kuwaitis, so the 11th would perform the same function for the Saudis. That might change when his Guardsmen mounted their tracks at Dhahran, but for the moment this deployment would have to do.

One big problem with the situation was the command relationship in place. Diggs was a one-star—one hell of a good one, Eddington knew, but just a brigadier. Had CENTCOM been able to fly over, he would have had the rank status to make firmer suggestions to the Saudis. Evidently, Colonel Magruder of the Buffalo Cav had done something like that, but Diggs's position was just a little ticklish.

"Well, we'll have a couple of days, anyway." The American general turned. "Get additional recon assets in place. If those six divisions fart, I want to know what they had for dinner."

"We'll have Predators going up at sunset," the intel colonel promised.

Eddington walked outside to light a cigar. He needn't have troubled himself, he realized after a few puffs. The Saudis all smoked.

"Well, Nick?" Diggs asked, joining him.

"Beer'd be nice."

"Just empty calories," the general observed.

"Four-to-one odds, and they have the initiative. That's if my people get their gear in time. This could get right interesting, Diggs." Another puff. "Their deployments suck." A phrase acquired from his students, his senior thought. "By the way, what are we calling this?"

"BUFORD, Operation BUFORD. Pick a moniker for your brigade, Nick?"

"How's WOLFPACK grab you? It's the wrong school, but TARHEEL just doesn't sound right. This damned thing's going pretty fast, General."

"One lesson the other side *must* have learned from the last one: don't give us time to build our forces up."

"True. Well, I have to see after my people."

"Use my chopper," Diggs told him. "I'll be here a while."

"Yes, sir." Eddington turned, saluted, and started walking off. Then he turned. "Diggs?"

"Yes?"

"Maybe we're not as well-trained as Hamm and his boys, but we'll get it done, y'hear?" He saluted again, tossed his cigar, and walked off to the Black Hawk.

NOTHING MOVES AS quietly as a ship. An automobile moving at this speed, a fraction below thirty miles per hour, made noise one could hear for hundreds of yards on a silent night, but for a ship it was the high-frequency *swish* of steel hull cutting through what were at the moment calm seas, and that didn't carry very far at all. Those aboard could feel the vibrations of the engine, or hear the deep sucking breath of the turbine engines, but that was all, and those sounds scarcely carried a hundred yards across the water at night. Just the swish, and behind every ship was a foaming wake, a ghostly shade of green in the water from tiny organisms upset by the pressure wave of their passage, and phosphorescing as some sort of biological protest to the disturbance. To those on the ships, it seemed hellishly bright. On every bridge, the lights were turned down, so that night vision wouldn't be compromised. Navigation lights were turned off, a rules-of-theroad violation in these confined waters. Lookouts used conventional binoculars and light-amplification gear to scan forward. The formation was just now turning the corner, in the narrowest part of the passage.

In every combat information center, people hovered over scopes and charts, talking in whispers lest they somehow be heard. Those who smoked wished they could in the antiseptic spaces, and those who'd quit now wondered why. Something about a health hazard, they remembered as they contemplated surface-to-surface missiles mounted in emplacements about fifteen thousand yards away, each of them with a ton of explosives right behind the seekerhead.

"Coming left, new course two-eight-five," the officer of the deck reported on *Anzio*.

On the main plot, there were over forty "targets," as radar contacts were called, each with a vector showing approximate course and speed. The number of inbounds and outbounds was about the same. Some of them were huge, the radar returns of supertankers being about that of a medium-sized island.

"Well, we've made it this far," Weps said to Captain Kemper. "Maybe they're asleep."

"Maybe there really is a Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown."

Only navigation radars were turning now. The Iranian /UIR-ians had to have ESM gear over there, but if they were standing a patrol in the Strait of Hormuz, they hadn't spotted it yet. There were unexplained targets. Fishing boats? Smugglers? Somebody in a pleasure craft? There was no telling. Probably the enemy was a little reticent about sending their vessels too far over the centerline of the strait. The Arabs were as territorial as everyone else, Kemper imagined.

The ships were all at battle stations. All combat systems were fully powered up, but on standby. If somebody turned toward them, they would first try to get a visual. If somebody lit them up with a targeting radar, then the ship on the clearest bearing would step up her alert level somewhat and make a few sweeps with the SPY radars to see if there might be an inbound track. But that would be tough. Those missiles all had independent seeker-heads, and the strait was crowded, and a missile just might acquire something unintended. The other side couldn't be all that trigger-happy. They might even end up slaughtering a few thousand sheep, Kemper thought with a smile. As tense as this part of the mission was, the task for the other side wasn't all *that* easy.

"Course change on track four-four, coming left," a quartermaster said.

That one was a surface contact just inside UIR-ian waters, seven miles away and passing aft. Kemper leaned forward. A computer command showed the contact's course-track for the last twenty minutes. It had been moving along at mere steerage speed, about five knots. It was now doing ten, and had turned . . . toward the trailing decoy group. That data was linked to USS *O'Bannon,* whose captain was the senior officer for the group. The range between the two ships was 16,000 yards and closing.

Things got more interesting. *Normandy*'s helicopter closed on the track from behind, keeping low. The pilots saw a green-white bloom as the unknown craft increased power, stirring the water and disturbing more of the organisms which somehow survived all the pollution here. A sudden burst of power meant . . .

"That's a gunboat," the pilot reported over the data link. "He just goosed it. Target has just increased power."

Kemper grimaced. He had a choice now. Do nothing, and maybe nothing would happen. Do nothing, and maybe give the gun/missile boat the first shot at *O'Bannon* and her group. Do something, and risk alerting the other side. But if the enemy craft shot first, the enemy would know something anyway, right? Maybe. Maybe not. It was a complex set of data for five seconds. He waited five more.

"Target is a missile boat, I see two launchers, target steadying down on course."

"He's got a direct line to *O'Bannon*, sir," Weps reported.

"Radio chatter, I have radio chatter on UHF, bearing zero-one-five."

"Take the shot," Kemper said instantly.

"Shoot!" Weps said over the voice channel to the helo.

"Roger, engaging!"

"Combat, lookout, sir, I have a flash like a missile launch on the port quarter—make that two, sir," a speaker announced.

"Give it a sweep"

"Two more launches, sir."

Shit, Kemper thought. The helo carried only two Penguin antiship missiles. The enemy had gotten the first two off. And he couldn't do anything now. The decoy group was fulfilling its function. It was getting shot at.

"Two vampires inbound—target destroyed," the pilot added, announcing the destruction of the missile boat— confirmed a moment later by the topside lookout. "Say again, two vampires inbound *O'Bannon.*"

"Silkworms are big targets," Weps said.

They watched the mini-battle imperfectly. The navigation-radar display showed *O'Bannon* changing course to port. That would be to unmask her point-defense missile system, located far aft. It would also provide a huge radar target to the inbound missiles. The destroyer did not fire off her decoys for fear that spoofing the inbounds would only divert them to the replenishment ships she was guarding. An automatic decision? Kemper wondered. A considered one? Ballsy either way. The destroyer's illumination radar came on. That meant she was firing her missiles, but the navigation radar couldn't tell. Then at least one of the frigates joined in.

"All kinda flashes aft," the topside lookout said next. "*Wow*, that was a big one! There goes another!" Then five seconds of silence.

"*O'Bannon* to group, we're okay," a voice reported.

For now, Kemper thought.

THE PREDATORS WERE up, three of them, one each for the three corps encamped southwest of Baghdad, motoring through the air at only twice the speed of a tank. None of them got as far as planned. Thirty miles short of their objectives, their look-down thermal cameras showed the glowing shapes of armored vehicles. The Army of God was moving. The feed to STORM TRACK was instantly cross-loaded to KKMC, and from there all over the world.

"Another couple of days would have been nice," Ben Goodley thought aloud.

"How ready are our people?" Ryan turned to the J-3.

"The 10th's ready to rock. The 11th needs at least a day. The other brigade doesn't even have its equipment yet," Jackson replied.

"How long before contact?" the President asked next.

"At least twelve hours, maybe eighteen. Depends on where they're going, exactly."

Jack nodded. "Arnie, has Callie been briefed in on all this?"

"No, not at all."

"Then let's get that done. I have a speech to make."

ALAHAD MUST HAVE gotten bored running a business with no customers, Loomis thought. He left early, walked to where his car was parked, and drove off. Tailing him on such empty streets would probably be fairly easy. A few minutes later, the subject was observed to park his car and enter his apartment building. Then she and Selig walked out of the unit they'd been in, crossed the street, and walked around the back. There were two locks on the door, which caused the junior agent to take ten minutes to defeat them, much to his own annoyance. Then came the alarm system, but that was more easily accomplished. It was an old one with a socket key and a very simple disarming code. Inside they found a few more photos, one, probably, of his son. They checked the Rolodex first, and there was the card for J. Sloan, with the number 536-4040, but no address.

"Tell me what you think," Loomis said.

"I think it's a new card, not dog-eared or anything like that, and I think there's a dot over the first numeral *four*. Tells him which number to change, Sis."

"This guy's a player, Donny."

"I think you're right, and that makes Aref Raman one, too."

But how to prove it?

THE COVER MIGHT or might not have been blown. There was no knowing. Kemper assessed the situation as best he could. Maybe the missile boat had gotten off a broadcast and received permission to fire . . . Maybe the young commander had decided to shoot on his own . . . probably not. Dictatorial countries didn't give much autonomy to their military commanders. If you were the dictator and you started doing that, it was a sure way to find your back to a wall sooner or later. The score to this point was USN 1 and UIR 0. Both groups were continuing, going southwest now into a widening gulf, still doing twenty-six knots, still surrounded by merchant traffic, and the electronic environment was alive with ship-to-ship chatter wondering what the hell had just happened north of Abu Musa.

Omani patrol boats were out now, and *they* were talking back and forth with somebody, perhaps the UIR, asking what was going on.

In confusion, Kemper decided, there was profit. It was dark out, and identifying ships in darkness was never an easy business.

"When's nautical twilight?"

"Five hours, sir," the quartermaster of the watch replied.

"That's a hundred fifty miles to the good. We continue as before. Let them sort things out if they can." Getting as far as Bahrain without detection would be miracle enough.

THEY LAID IT all out on Inspector O'Day's desk. "It all" amounted to three pages of notes and a couple of Polaroid photographs. The most important-looking tidbit was a printout of the phone records, duplicating Selig's scribbling. That was also the only legal piece of evidence they had.

"Not exactly the thickest pile of proof I've ever seen," Pat noted.

"Hey, Pat, you said to move fast," Loomis reminded him. "They're both dirty. I can't prove it to a jury, but that's enough to start a major investigation, assuming we have the luxury of time, which I don't think we do."

"Correct. Come on," he said, rising. "We have to see the Director."

It wasn't as though Murray weren't busy enough. The FBI wasn't exactly running the epidemiological investigation of all the Ebola cases, but the Bureau's agents were doing a lot of legwork. There was the ongoing, and practically new, case on the attack on Giant Steps, which was both criminal and FCI—and an inter-agency case to boot. And now this, the third "put everything else aside" situation in less than ten days. The inspector waved his way past the secretaries and walked into the Director's office without a knock.

“It’s a good thing I wasn’t taking a leak,” Murray observed.

“I didn’t think you’d have time for that. I don’t,” Pat told him. “There’s probably a mole in the Service after all, Dan.”

“Oh?”

“Oh, yeah, and oh, shit. I’ll let Loomis and Selig walk you through it.”

“Can I take this to Andrea Price without getting shot?” the Director asked.

“I think so.”

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THE LIGHT OF DAY

IT WASN'T SOMETHING TO celebrate, but for the second day in a row, new Ebola cases had dropped. Of the new cases identified, moreover, about a third were people who tested positive for the antibodies but were asymptomatic. CDC and USAMRIID rechecked the data twice before reporting it to the White House, also cautioning that it was too preliminary to be released to the public. The travel ban, it seemed, and the spinoff effects it was having on interpersonal contacts, was working—but the President couldn't say it was working, because then it would stop working.

The Giant Steps case was also ongoing, mainly a task of the FBI laboratory division. There, electronic microscopes were being used for something other than the identification of Ebola strands, and were narrowing in on pollen and other tiny particles. This was complicated by the fact that the Giant Steps attack had been made in the spring, when the air was full of pollens.

Mordecai Azir, it was now firmly established, was a quintessential unperson who had sprung into existence seemingly for a single purpose and, fulfilling it, had disappeared. But he had left behind photographs, and there were ways of dealing with that, Ryan learned. He wondered if there might be some good news to end the day. There wouldn't be.

"Hi, Dan." He was back in his office. The Situation Room was just one more reminder that his next major order was to send people into combat.

"Mr. President," the FBI Director said, entering with Inspector O'Day and Andrea Price.

"Why do you look so happy?"

And then they told him.

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IT WAS A BRAVE man who awoke the Ayatollah Mahmoud Haji Daryaei before dawn, and since those around him feared his wrath, it took two hours for them to summon the courage to do so. Not that it would help matters. At four in the morning in Tehran, the phone by the side of his bed rang. Ten minutes after that, he was in the sitting room of his private apartment, his dark, sunken eyes waiting to punish those responsible.

"We have a report that American ships have entered the Gulf," the intelligence chief told him.

"When and where?" the Ayatollah asked quietly.

"It was after midnight at the narrows. One of our missile-patrol boats

spotted what it reported to be an American destroyer. It was ordered in to attack by the local naval commander, but we've heard nothing more from the boat."

"That is all?" *You awakened me for* this?

"There was some radio traffic in the area, ships talking back and forth. They talked about several explosions. We have reason to believe that our missile boat was attacked and destroyed by someone, probably an aircraft—but an aircraft from where?"

"We want your permission to commence air operations to sweep the Gulf after dawn. We have never done this without your word," the air force chief pointed out.

"Permission is *given*," Daryaei told them. Well, he *was* awake now, the cleric told himself. "What else?"

"The Army of God is making its approach march to the border area. The operation is proceeding as scheduled." Surely this news would please him, the intelligence chief thought.

Mahmoud Haji nodded. He'd hoped for a decent night's sleep, in anticipation of being up long hours for the next few days, but it was his nature that, once awakened, he could not return to sleep. He looked at his desk clock—he didn't wear a watch—and decided that the day would have to begin.

"Will we surprise them?"

"Somewhat, certainly," Intelligence responded. "The army is under strict orders to maintain radio silence. The American listening posts are very sensitive, but they cannot hear nothing. When they reach Al Busayyah, we must expect detection, but then we will be ready to jump off, and it will be at night."

Daryaei shook his head. "Wait, what did our patrol boat tell us?"

"He reported an American destroyer or frigate, possibly with other ships, but that was all. We will have aircraft up to look in two hours."

"Their transport ships?"

"We don't know," Intelligence admitted. He'd hoped that they were past that.

"Find out!"

The two men took their leave with that order. Daryaei rang his servant for tea. He had another thought just then. All would be settled, or at least solved, when the Raman boy fulfilled his mission. The report was that he was in place, and had received his order. Why, then, hadn't he fulfilled it! the Ayatollah asked himself, with a building anger. He looked at the clock again. It was too early to make a call.

KEMPER HAD GIVEN his crew something akin to a stand-down. The automation of the Aegis ships made that possible, and so, starting two hours after the incident with the gunboat—missile boat, he corrected himself—crewmen were allowed to rotate off their battle stations, to relieve themselves, to get something to eat, and in many cases to pump a little iron. That had lasted an hour, with each officer and man having had fifteen minutes. They were all back now. It was two hours to nautical twilight. They were just under

a hundred miles from Qatar, now heading west-northwest, after having dodged behind every island and oil platform that might confuse an enemy radar post. COMEDY had been through the tough part. The Gulf was far wider here. There was sea room to maneuver in and to make full use of his powerful sensors. The radar picture in *Anzio*'s CIC showed a flight of four F-16s twenty miles north of his formation, their IFF codes clear on the display—his people had to be careful about that. It would have been better if there could be an AWACS aloft, but, he had just learned an hour before, all of those were deployed up north. Today, there would be a fight. It would not be the sort of thing Aegis had been designed for, or quite what he'd been trained for, but that was the Navy for you.

The decoy group he ordered south. Their job was done for now. With the sun up, there would be no disguising what COMEDY was and where they were going, he thought.

"HOW SURE OF this are you?" POTUS asked. "Christ, I've been alone with the guy a hundred times!"

"We know," Price assured him. "We know. Sir, it's hard to believe. I've known Jeff on and off—"

"He's the basketball guy. He told me who was going to win the NCAA finals. He was right. His *point spread* was right on."

"Yes, sir." Andrea had to agree with that, too. "Unfortunately, these items are a little hard to explain."

"Are you going to arrest him?"

"We can't." Murray took that one. "It's one of those situations where you know, or think you know, but can't prove anything. Pat here had an idea, though."

"Then let's hear it," Ryan ordered. His headache was back. No, that wasn't right. The intervening, brief period without a headache had ended. Bad enough that he'd been told of the vague possibility that the Secret Service was compromised, but now they thought they had proof—no, worse, he corrected himself, not good enough for proof, just more fucking suspicion!—that one of the people trusted to be around him and his family was a potential assassin. Would this never end? But he listened anyway.

"Actually, it's pretty simple," O'Day concluded.

"No!" Price said immediately. "What if—"

"We can control that. There won't be any real danger," the inspector assured everyone.

"Hold it," SWORDSMAN said. "You say you can smoke the guy out?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I actually get to *do* something instead of just sitting here like a goddamned king?"

"Yes, sir," Pat repeated.

"Where do I sign up?" Ryan asked rhetorically. "Let's do it."

"Mr. President—"

"Andrea, you'll be here, right?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Then it's approved," POTUS told her. "He doesn't get *near* my family. I mean that. If he even looks at the elevator, you take him down yourself, Andrea, got that?"

"I understand, Mr. President. West Wing only."

With that, they walked downstairs to the Situation Room, where Arnie and the rest of the national-security team were watching a map display on a large-screen TV.

"OKAY, LET'S LIGHT up the sky," Kemper told the CIC crew. On command, *Anzio* and the other four Aegis ships flipped their SPY radars from standby to full radiated power. There was no percentage in hiding anymore. They were right under a commercial air route designated W-15, and any airline pilot could look down and see the small box of ships. When one did, he'd probably talk about it. The element of surprise had its practical limits.

In a second, the three big screens showed numerous air tracks. This had to be the busiest hunk of airspace outside O'Hare, Kemper thought. The IFF scan showed a flight of four F-16 fighters deployed northwest of his formation. There were six airliners aloft, and the day had scarcely started. Missile specialists ran practice tracks just to exercise the computers, but really the Aegis system was designed to be one of those supposedly all-powerful things that could sit still one second and raise hell the next. They'd come to the right place to do that.

THE FIRST IRANIAN fighters to head into the sky that day were two aged F-14 Tomcats from Shiraz. The Shah had purchased about eighty of the fighters from Grumman in the 1970s. Ten could still fly, with parts cannibalized from all the others or procured on the world's lively black market in combat-aircraft components. These flew southeast, overland to Bandar Abbas, then they increased speed and darted south to Abu Musa, passing just north of it, with the pilots driving and the backseaters scanning the surface with binoculars. The sun was plainly visible at twenty thousand feet, but on the surface there was still the semidarkness of nautical twilight.

One doesn't see ships from aloft, a fact often lost on both sailors and airmen. In most cases, ships are too small, and the surface of the sea too vast. What one sees, whether from a satellite photo or the unaided human eye, is the wake, a disturbance in the water much like an arrow with an oversized head—the bow and stern waves generated by the ship's passage through the water—and the foaming a straight line caused by the propellers is the arrow's shaft. The eye is drawn to such shapes as naturally as to the body of a woman, and at the apex of the V-shape, there one finds the ship. Or, in this case, many ships. They spotted the decoy group first, from forty miles away. The main body of COMEDY was identified a minute later.

THE PROBLEM FOR the ships was positive identification. Kemper couldn't risk

killing an airliner, as USS *Vincennes* had once done. The four F-16s had already turned toward them when the radio call went out. He didn't have anyone aboard who spoke the language well enough to catch what they'd just said.

"Tally-ho," the F-16 flight leader called. "Looks like F-14s." And he knew the Navy didn't have any of those around.

"*Anzio* to STARFIGHTER, weapons free, splash 'em."

"Roger that."

"FLIGHT, LEAD, GO Slammer." They were too busy looking down instead of looking around. Recon flight, Starfighter Lead figured. Tough. He selected AIM-120 and fired, a fraction before the other three aircraft in his formation did the same. "Fox-One, Fox-One!" And the Battle of Qatar was under way.

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THE UIR TOMCATS were just a little too busy for their own good. Their radar-warning receivers were reporting all manner of emitters at the moment, and the air-to-air radar on the Vipers was just one of many. The leader of the two was trying to get a count of the warships below and talking on his radio at the same time, when a pair of AM-RAAM missiles exploded twenty meters in front of his aging fighter. The second pilot at least looked up in time to see death coming.

"*ANZIO*, STARFIGHTER, SPLASH two, no 'chutes, say again, splash two."

"Roger that."

"What a nice way to start the day," commented a USAF major who'd just spent sixteen months playing against the Israeli air force in the Negev. "Returning to station. Out."

"I'M NOT SURE that's a good idea," van Damm said. The radar picture from *John Paul Jones* had been uplinked from the new ship via satellite to Washington. They were seeing things less than half a second after they really happened.

"Those ships cannot be stopped, sir," Robby Jackson told the chief of staff. "We can't take chances."

"But they can say we shot first and—"

"Wrong, sir. Their missile boat shot first five hours ago," the J-3 reminded him.

"But they won't say that."

"Save it, Arnie," Ryan said. "My order, remember. The rules of engagement are in place. What now, Robby?"

"Depends on whether the Iranians got the word out. That first kill was easy. The first one usually is," Jackson said, remembering the ones he'd made in his

career, nothing at all like what he'd trained for at Top Gun, but there were no fair-play rules in real combat, were there?

The narrowest part of the passage was just over a hundred miles between Qatar and the Iranian town of Basatin. There was an air base there, and satellite coverage said there were fighters sitting on the ramp.

"III, JEFF."

"What's happening, Andrea?" Raman asked, adding, "Glad you remembered that you left me up here."

"It's pretty busy with all this fever stuff. We need you back here. Got a car?"

"I think I can steal one from the local office." In fact, he had an official car already.

"Okay," she told him, "come on down. I don't suppose we really need the advance work up there. Your ID will get you through the roadblocks on 1-70. Quick as you can. Things are happening here."

"Give me four hours."

"You have a change of clothes?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You're going to need it. We've set up decontamination procedures here. Everybody has to scrub down before getting into the West Wing. You'll see when you get here," the chief of the Detail told him.

"Fine with me."

ALAHAD WASN'T DOING anything. Bugs planted in his house had determined that he was watching TV, flipping channels from one cable station to another in search of a movie he hadn't seen before, and before going to bed he'd listened to *CNN Headline News*. After that, nothing. The lights were all out, and even the thermal-viewing cameras couldn't see through the curtained windows of his bedroom. The agents doing surveillance drank their coffee from plastic cups and looked on, at nothing, while discussing their worries about the epidemic, just like everyone else in America. The media continued to devote virtually all of its airtime to the story. There was little else. Sports had stopped. Weather continued, but few were outside to notice. Everything else rotated around the Ebola crisis. There were science segments explaining what the virus was and how it spread—actually, how it *might* be spreading, as there was still diverse opinion on that—and the agents with the headphones had listened to the latest installment over Alahad's own TV. It was all nature's revenge, one environmental advocate was preaching. Man had gone into the jungle, cut down trees, killed animals, upset the ecosystem, and now the ecosystem was getting even. Or something like that.

There was legal analysis of the court case Edward Kealty had brought, but there simply was no enthusiasm for lifting the travel ban. Stories showed airplanes at airports, buses in terminals, trains at stations, and a lot of empty roads. Stories showed people in hotels, and how they were coping. Stories showed how to reuse surgical masks, and told people that this simple safety

measure worked almost flawlessly; most people seemed to believe that. But to counter that, most of the stories showed hospitals and, now, body bags. Reports on how the bodies of the dead were being burned ran without showing the flames; that was by mutual consent. The raw data was distasteful enough without the image of its reality. Reporters and medical consultants were starting to comment on the lack of data on the number of cases—which was alarming to many—but hinting that the space in hospitals to deal with the Ebola cases had not expanded—which was comforting to some. The extreme doom-and-gloom-sayers were still distributing their cant, but others said quietly that the data didn't support that view, that the situation might be stabilizing, though in every case they added that it was much too soon to tell.

They were starting to say that people were coping, that some states were totally clean, that many regions within those states that had cases were similarly healthy. And, finally, some people were coming forward to say with some authority that the epidemic had definitely not been a natural event. There was no public opinion on the issue that the media could really measure. People didn't interact enough, share thoughts enough to make informed judgments, but with the beginnings of confidence that the world was *not* going to end came the big question: How had this begun?

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SECRETARY OF STATE Adler was back in his airplane, flying west to the People's Republic. While aloft, and in the Beijing embassy, he had access to the latest news. It had caused rage and, perversely, some degree of satisfaction. It was Zhang who was leading his government in this direction. That was fairly certain, now that they knew India had been involved—again—this time duped by Iran and China. The real question was whether or not the Prime Minister would let her partners know that she'd reneged on her part of the deal. Probably not, Adler thought. She'd outmaneuvered herself again. She seemed able to do that standing still.

But the rage kept coming back. His country had been attacked, and by someone he'd met only a few days before. Diplomacy had failed. He had failed to stop a conflict—and wasn't that his job? Worse than that, he and his country had been duped. China had maneuvered *him* and a vital naval force out of position. The PRC was now stringing out a crisis they'd made themselves, for the purpose of hurting American interests, and probably for the ultimate purpose of reshaping the world into their own design. They were being clever about it. China had not directly done anything to anyone, except a few air passengers, but had let others take the lead, and the risks that went with them. However this turned out, they would still have their trade, they would still have the respect due a superpower, and influence over American policy, and they planned to maintain all of those things until such time as they made the changes they desired. They'd killed Americans on the Airbus. Through their maneuvers they were helping to kill others, to do real and permanent harm to his country, and doing so entirely without risk, SecState thought quietly, gazing out the window as his aircraft made landfall.

But they didn't know that he knew these things, did they?

THE NEXT ATTACK would be a little more serious. The UIR had a large supply of C-802 missiles, so intelligence said. Made by China Precision Machine Import and Export Corporation, these were similar in type and capabilities to the French Exocet, with a range of about seventy miles. However, again the problem was targeting. There were just too many ships in the Gulf. To get the right destination for their missiles, the Iranians would have to get close enough for the look-down radars on their fighters to brush the edge of COMEDY'S missile envelope.

Well, Kemper decided, he'd have to see about that. *John Paul Jones* increased speed to thirty-two knots and moved north. The new destroyer was stealthy—on a radar set she looked rather like a medium-sized fishing boat—and to accentuate it she turned off all her radars. COMEDY had shown them one look. Now they would show them another. He also radioed Riyadh and screamed for AWACS support. The three cruisers, *Anzio, Normandy,* and *Yorktown,* maintained position close to the cargo ships, and it was now pretty clear to the civilian crews on the *Bob Hopes* that the warships were not there merely for missile defense. Any inbound vampire would have to go through a cruiser to get to them. But there was nothing to be done about that. The civilian seamen were all at their duty stations. Firefighting gear was deployed throughout the cargo decks. Their diesels were pounding out all the continuous power that the manuals allowed.

Aloft, the dawn patrol of F-16s was replaced by another. Weapons were free, and word was getting out now to the civilian traffic that the air over the Persian Gulf was not a good place to be. It would make everyone's task a lot easier. It was no secret that they were there. Iranian radar had to have them, but there was no helping that at the moment.

"IT APPEARS THAT there are two naval forces in the Gulf," Intelligence told him. "We are not sure of their composition, but it is possible that they are military transport ships."

"And?"

"And two of our fighters have been shot down approaching them," Air Force went on.

"The American ships—some of them are warships of a very modern type. The report from our aircraft said that there are others as well, looking like merchant ships. It is likely that these are tank transports from Diego Garcia—"

"The ones the Indians were supposed to stop!"

"That is probably correct."

What a fool I was to trust that woman! "Sink them!" he ordered, thinking that his wish could become a fact.

RAMAN LIKED TO drive fast. The nearly clear interstate, the dark night, and

the powerful Service car allowed him to indulge that pastime, as he tore down Interstate 70 toward Maryland. The number of trucks on the road surprised him. He hadn't known that there were so many vehicles dedicated to moving food and medical supplies. His rotating red light told them to keep out of his way, and also allowed his passage at speeds approaching a hundred miles per hour without interference from the Pennsylvania State Police.

It also gave him time to think. It would have been better for everyone if he'd known beforehand about all the things that were happening. Certainly it would have been better for him. The attack on SANDBOX had not pleased him. She was a child, too young, too innocent to be an enemy—he *knew* her by face and name and sound—and the shock of it had disturbed him, briefly. He didn't quite understand why it had been ordered ... unless to draw the protective circle even more tightly around POTUS, and so make his own mission easier. But that hadn't been necessary, not really. America was not Iraq, which Mahmoud Haji probably didn't fully understand.

The disease attack, that was something else. The manner of its spread was a matter of God's Will. It was distasteful, but that was life. He remembered the burning of the theater in Tehran. People had died there, too, ordinary people whose mistake had been to watch a movie instead of attending to their devotions. The world was hard, and the only thing that made its burden easier to bear was faith in something larger than oneself. Raman had that faith. The world didn't change its shape by accident. Great events had to be cruel ones, for the most part. The Faith had spread with the help of the sword, despite the Prophet's own admonition that the sword could not make one faithful . . . a dichotomy he did not fully understand, but that, too, was the nature of the world. One man could hardly comprehend it all. For so many things, one had to depend on the guidance of those wiser than oneself, to tell one what had to be done, what was acceptable to Allah, what served His purpose.

That he had not been told things that would have been useful—well, he had to admit, that was a reasonable security measure ... if one accepted the fact that one was not supposed to survive. The realization did not bring a chill along with it. He had accepted that possibility a long time before, and if his distant brother could have fulfilled his mission in Baghdad, then he could fulfill his own in Washington. But he would try to survive if the chance offered itself. There wasn't anything wrong with that, was there?

CLEARLY, THEY WERE still figuring this operation out, Kemper told himself. In 1990-91 there had been the luxury of time to decide things, to allocate assets, to set up communications links and all the rest. But not this time. When he'd called for the AWACS, some Air Force puke had replied, "What, you don't have one? Why didn't you ask?" The commanding officer of USS *Anzio* and Task Force 61.1 hadn't vented his temper at the man. It probably wasn't his fault anyway, and the good news was that they had one now. The timing was good enough, too. Four fighter aircraft, type unknown, were just rotating off the ground at Basatin, ninety miles away.

"COMEDY, this is Sky-Two, we show four inbounds." The data link came up on one of the Aegis screens. His own radar couldn't see that far, because it was

well under the horizon. The AWACS showed four blips in two pairs.

"Sky, COMEDY, they're yours. Splash 'em."

"Roger—stand by, four more coming up."

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"HERE'S WHERE IT gets interesting," Jackson told them in the Sit Room. "Kemper has a missile trap set up outboard of the main formation. If anybody gets past the -16s, we'll see if it works."

A THIRD GROUP of four lifted off a minute later. The twelve fighter aircraft climbed to ten thousand feet, then turned south at high speed.

The flight of F-16s couldn't risk straying too far from COMEDY, but moved to meet the threat in the center of the Gulf under direction from the AWACS. Both sides switched on their targeting radars, the UIR force controlled by ground-based sets, and the USAF teams guided by the E-3B circling a hundred miles behind them. It wasn't elegant. The -16s, with their longer-ranging missiles, shot first, and turned away as the southbound Iranian interceptors loosed their own and tried to evade. Then the first group of four dived down for the water. Jamming pods went on, aided by powerful shore-based interference, which the Americans hadn't expected. Three UIR fighters, still heading in, fell to the missile volley, while the Americans outran the return volley, then turned back to reengage. The American flight split into two-plane elements, racing east, then turned again to conduct an anvil attack. But the speeds involved were high, and one Iranian flight was now within fifty miles of COMEDY. That was when they appeared on *Anzio*'s radar.

"Cap'n," the chief on the ESM board said into his microphone, "I am getting acquisition radar signals, bearing three-five-five. These are detection values, sir. They may have us."

"Very well." Kemper reached to turn his key. On *York-town* and *Normandy* the same thing happened. The former was an older version of the cruiser. In her case, four white-painted SM-2 MR came out of the fore and aft magazines onto the launch rails. For *Anzio* and *Normandy* nothing changed visually. Their missiles were in vertical launch cells. The SPY radars were now pumping out six *million* watts of RF energy, and dwelling almost continuously on the inbound fighter-bombers, which were just out of range of the cruisers.

But not out of range for *John Paul Jones,* ten miles to the north of the main body. In the space of three seconds, her main radar went active, and then the first of eight missiles erupted from her launch cells, rocketing skyward on columns of smoke and flame, then changing direction in skidding turns to level out and burn north.

The fighters hadn't seen *Jones.* Her stealthy profile had not shown as a real target on their scopes, and neither had they noticed the fact that a fourth SPY radar was now tracking them. The series of white smoke trails came as an unpleasant surprise when the pilots looked up from their own radar scopes. But two of them triggered off their C-802s just in time.

Four seconds out from their targets, the SM-2 missiles received terminal guidance signals from the SPG-62 illumination radars. It was too sudden, too unexpected for them to jink clear. All four fighters were blotted out on massive clouds of yellow and black, but they'd managed to launch six antiship missiles.

"Vampire, vampire! I show inbound missile seekers, bearing three-five-zero."

"Okay, here we go." Kemper turned the key another notch, to the "special-auto" setting. Aegis would now go fully automatic. Topside, the CIWS gatling guns turned to starboard. Everywhere aboard the four warships, sailors listened and tried not to cringe. The merchant crews they guarded simply didn't know to be scared yet.

Aloft, the F-16s closed on the still-intact flight of four. These were also antiship-missile carriers, but they'd looked in the wrong place, probably for the decoy group. The first group had seen a close gaggle of ships. The second hadn't yet, and never would. They'd just turned into the signals of the Aegis radars to their west when the sky filled with down-bound smoke trails. The four scattered. Two exploded in midair. Another was damaged and tried to limp back northwest before he lost power and went in, while a fourth, missed entirely, reefed into a left turn, punched burner, and jettisoned his exterior weapons load. The four Air Force F-16s had splashed six enemy fighters in under four minutes.

Jones got one of the sea-skimmers on the way by, but none of them had locked into her radar return, and the resulting high-speed crossing targets were too difficult to engage. Three of four computer-launched attempts all failed. That left five. The destroyer's combat systems recycled and looked for additional targets.

They'd seen *Jones*'s smoke and wondered what it was, but the first real warning that something was badly wrong came when the near trio of cruisers started launching.

In *Anzio*'s CIC, Kemper decided, as *O'Bannon* had, not to launch his decoy rockets. Three of the inbounds seemed aimed at the after part of the formation, with only two at the lead. His cruiser and *Normandy* concentrated on those. You could feel the launches. The hull shivered when the first two went out. The radar display was changing every second now, showing inbound and outbound tracks. The "vampires" were eight miles away now. At ten miles per minute, that meant less than fifty seconds to engage and destroy. It would seem like a week.

The system was programmed to adopt a fire-control mode appropriate to the moment. It was now doing shootshoot-look. Fire one missile, fire another, and then look to see if the target had survived the first two, and merit a third try. His target was exploded by the first SM-2 and the second SAM self-destructed. *Normandy*'s first missile missed, but the second nicked the C-802, tumbling it into the sea with an explosion they felt through the hull a second later.

Yorktown had an advantage and a disadvantage. Her older system allowed launches directly at the inbound missiles instead of forcing the missiles to turn in flight before they could engage. But she could not launch as fast. She had three targets and fifty seconds to destroy them. The first -802 splashed five

miles out, killed by a double hit. The second was now at its terminal height of three meters, ten feet over the flat surface. The next outgoing SM-2 missed high, exploding harmless behind it. The following missile missed as well. The next ripple from the forward launchers obliterated that one three miles out, filling the air with fragments that confused the guidance of the next pair, causing both to explode in the shredded remains of a dead target. Both of the cruiser's launchers swiveled fore and aft and vertical to receive the next set of four SAMs. The last -802 passed through the spray and fragments, heading straight into the cruiser. *Yorktown* got off two more launches, but one faulty missile failed to guide at all, and the other missed. Then the CIWS systems located on the forward and after superstructure turned slightly, as the vampire entered their targeting envelope. Both opened up at eight hundred yards, missing, missing yet again, but then exploding the missile less than two hundred yards off the starboard beam. The five-hundred-pound warhead showered the cruiser with fragments, and parts of the missile body kept coming, striking the ship's foreright SPY radar panel and ripping into the superstructure, killing six sailors and wounding twenty more.

"WOW," SECRETARY BRETANO said. All the theoretical stuff he'd learned in the past weeks was suddenly real.

"Not bad. They've launched fourteen aircraft at us, and they're getting two or three back, that's all," Robby said. "That'll give them something to think about for the next time."

"What about *Yorktown*?" the President asked.

"We have to wait and see."

THEIR HOTEL WAS only half a mile from the Russian embassy, and like good parsimonious journalists, they decided to walk, and left a few minutes before eight. Clark and Chavez had gone a scarce hundred yards when they saw that something was wrong. People were moving listlessly for so early on the start of a working day. Had the war with the Saudis been announced? John took a turn onto another market street, and there he found people listening to portable radios in their stalls instead of moving their wares onto the shelves.

"Excuse me," John said in Russian-accented Farsi. "Is something the matter?"

"We are at war with America," a fruit vendor said.

"Oh, when did this happen?"

"The radio says they have attacked our airplanes," the fruit seller said next. "Who are you?" he asked.

John pulled out his passport. "We are Russian journalists. Can I ask what you think of this?"

"Haven't we fought enough?" the man asked.

"TOLD YOU. THEY'RE blaming us," Arnie said, reading over the intercept

report off Tehran radio. “What will that do to the politics in the region?”

“The sides are pretty much drawn up,” Ed Foley said. “You’re either on one side or the other. The UIR is the other. Simpler than the last time.”

The President checked his watch. It was just past midnight. “When do I go on the air?”

“Noon.”

RAMAN HAD TO stop at the Maryland-Pennsylvania line. A good twenty or so trucks were waiting for clearance from the Maryland State Police, with the National Guard in close attendance, and they lined up two by two, completely blocking the road at this point. Ten angry minutes later, he showed his ID. The cop waved him through without a word. Raman turned his light back on and sped off. He turned on the radio, caught an all-news AM station, but missed the top-of-the-hour news summary and had to suffer through all the rest, largely the same thing he’d been hearing all week, until twelve-thirty, when the network news service announced a reported air battle in the Persian Gulf. Neither the White House nor the Pentagon had commented on the alleged incident. Iran claimed to have sunk two American ships and shot down four fighters.

Patriot and zealot that he was, Raman couldn’t believe it. The problem with America, and the reason for his mission of sacrifice, was that this poorly organized, idolatrous, and misguided nation was lethally competent in the use of force. Even President Ryan, he had seen, discounted as he was by politicians, had a quiet strength to him. He didn’t shout, didn’t bluster, didn’t act like most “great” men. He wondered how many people appreciated just how dangerous SWORDSMAN was, for that very reason. Well, that was why he had to kill him, and if that had to come at the cost of his own life, so be it.

TF61.1 TURNED SOUTH behind the Qatar Peninsula without further incident. *Yorktown*’s forward superstructure was badly damaged, the electrical fire having done as much damage as the missile fragments, but with her stern turned to the enemy, that didn’t matter. Kemper maneuvered his escorting ships yet again, placing all four behind the tank carriers, but another attack was not forthcoming. The result of the first had stung the enemy too badly. Eight F-15s, four each of the Saudi Air Force and the 366th, orbited overhead. A mixture of Saudi and other escort ships turned up. Mainly mine-hunters, they pinged the bottom in front of COMEDY, looking for danger and finding none. Six huge container ships had been moved off the Dhahran quay to make room for *Bob Hope* and her sisters, and now three tugs each appeared to move them alongside. The four Aegis ships maintained station even sitting still, dropping their anchors fore and aft, mooring five hundred yards off their charges to maintain air defense coverage through the unloading process. The decoy force, having suffered not a single scratch, pulled into Bahrain to await developments.

From the wheelhouse of USS *Anzio*, Captain Gregory Kemper watched as the

first brown buses pulled up to the tank-carriers. Through his binoculars, he could see men in "chocolate-chip" fatigues trot to the edge, and watched the stern ramps come down to meet them.

"WE HAVE NO comment at this time," van Damm told the latest reporter to call in. "The President will be making a statement later today. That's all I can say right now."

"But—"

"That's all we have to say right now." The chief of staff killed the line.

PRICE HAD ASSEMBLED all of the Detail agents in the West Wing, and gone through the game plan for what was coming. The same would be repeated for the people in the White House proper, and the reaction there would be pretty much the same, she was certain: shock, disbelief, and anger bordering on rage.

"Let's all get that out of our systems, shall we? We know what we're going to be doing about it. This is a criminal case, and we'll treat it like a criminal case. Nobody loses control. Nobody gives anything away. Questions?" There were none.

DARYAEI CHECKED HIS clock again. Yes, finally, it was time. He placed a telephone call over a secure line to the UIR embassy in Paris. There, the ambassador placed a call to someone else. That person made a call to London. In all cases, the words exchanged were innocuous. The message was not.

PAST CUMBERLAND, HAGERSTOWN, Frederick, Raman turned south on 1-270 for the last hour's worth into Washington. He was tired, but his hands tingled. He'd see a dawn this morning. Perhaps his last. If so, he hoped it would be a pretty one.

THE NOISE MADE the agents jump. Both checked their watches. First of all, the number calling in came up on an LED display. It was overseas, code 44, which made it from the U.K.

"Yes?" It was the voice of the subject, Mohammed Alahad.

"Sorry to disturb you so early. I call about the threemeter Isfahan, the red one. Has it arrived yet? My customer is very anxious." The voice was accented, but not in quite the right way.

"Not yet," the groggy voice replied. "I have asked my supplier about it."

"Very well, but as I said, my customer is quite anxious."

"I will see what I can do. Good-bye." And the line went dead.

Don Selig lifted his cellular phone, dialed headquarters, and gave them the U.K. number for a quick check.

"Lights just came on," Agent Scott said. "Looks like it woke our boy up. Heads up," she said into her portable radio. "Subject is up and moving."

"Got the lights, Sylvia," another agent assured her.

Five minutes later, he emerged from the front door of the garden-style apartment building. Tracking him was not the least bit easy, but the agents had taken the trouble to locate the four closest public phones and had people close to all of them. It turned out that he picked one at a combination gas station/convenience store. The computer monitor would tell them what number he called, but through a long-lens camera he was observed to drop in a quarter. The agent on the camera saw him hit 3-6-3 in rapid succession. It was clear a few seconds later, when another tapped phone rang, and was answered by a digital answering machine.

"Mr. Sloan, this is Mr. Alahad. Your rug is in. I don't understand why you do not call me, sir." Click.

"Bingo!" another agent called over the radio net. "That's it. He called Raman's number. Mr. Sloan, we have your rug."

Yet another voice came on. "This is O'Day. Take him down right now!"

It wasn't really all *that* hard. Alahad went into the store to buy a quart of milk, and from there he walked directly back home. He had to use a key to enter his apartment house, and was surprised to find a man and a woman inside.

"FBI," the man said.

"You're under arrest, Mr. Alahad," the woman said, producing handcuffs. No guns were in evidence, but he didn't resist—they rarely did—and if he had, there were two more agents just outside now.

"But why?" he asked.

"Conspiracy to murder the President of the United States," Sylvia Scott said, pushing him against the wall.

"That's not so!"

"Mr. Alahad, you made a mistake. Joseph Sloan died last year. How do you sell a rug to a dead man?" she asked. The man jerked back as though from an electric shock, the agents saw. The clever ones always did when they found out that they had not been so clever at all. They never expected to be caught. The next trick was in exploiting the moment. That would start in a few minutes, when they told him what the penalty was for violating 18 USC § 1751.

THE INSIDE OF USNS *Bob Hope* looked like the parking garage from hell, with vehicles jammed in so closely that a rat would have had a difficult time passing between them. To board a tank, an arriving crew had to walk on the decks of the vehicles, crouching lest they smash their skulls into the overhead, and they found themselves wondering about the sanity of those who'd periodically had to check the vehicles, turning over the engines and working the guns back and forth so that rubber and plastic seals wouldn't dry out.

Assigning crews to tracks and trucks had been an administrative task of no small proportions, but the ship was loaded in such a way as to allow the most important items off first. The Guardsmen arrived as units, with computerized

printouts giving them the number and location of their assigned vehicles, and ship crewmen pointing them to the quickest way out. Less than an hour after the ship tied up, the first M1A2 main-battle tank rolled off the ramp onto the quay to board the same tank transporter used shortly before by a tank of the 11th Cav, and with the same drivers. Unloading would take more than a day, and most of another would be needed to get WOLFPACK Brigade organized.

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THE DAWN PROVED to be a pretty one, Aref Raman saw with satisfaction as he pulled into West Executive Drive. It would be a clear day for his mission. The uniformed guard at the gate waved hello as the security barrier went down. Another car came in behind him, and that one went through as well. It parked two spaces from his spot, and Raman recognized the driver as that FBI guy, O'Day, who'd been so lucky at the day-care center. There was no sense in hating the man. He'd been defending his own child, after all.

"How are you doing?" the FBI inspector asked cordially.

"Just got in from Pittsburgh," Raman replied, hefting his suitcase out of the trunk.

"What the hell were you doing up there?"

"Advance work—but that speech won't be happening, I guess. What are you in for?" Raman was grateful for the distraction. It allowed him to get his mind into the game, as it were.

"The Director and I have something to brief the Boss about. Gotta shower first, though."

"Shower?"

"Disinfec—oh, you haven't been here. A White House staff member is sick with this virus thing. *Everybody* has to shower and disinfect on the way in now. Come on," O'Day said, carrying a briefcase. Both men went through the West Entrance. Both buzzed the metal detectors, but since both were sworn federal officers, nothing was made of the fact that both were carrying side arms. The inspector pointed to the left.

"This is a treat, showing you something in the place," he joked to Raman.

"Been in a lot lately?" The Secret Service agent saw that two offices had been converted into something. One marked MEN and the other WOMEN. Andrea Price came out of one just then, her hair wet, and, he noted as she passed him, smelling of chemicals.

"Hey, Jeff, how was the drive? Pat, how's the hero?" she inquired.

"Hey, no big deal, Price. Just two rag-heads," O'Day said with a grin. He opened the MEN door and went in, and set his briefcase down.

It had clearly been a rush job, Raman saw. Some minor functionary had had the office, but all the furniture was gone and the floor covered with plastic. A hanging rack was there for clothing. O'Day stripped down and headed into the canvas-enclosed shower.

"These damn chemicals at least wake you up," the FBI inspector reported as the water started. He emerged two minutes later and started toweling off vigorously. "Your turn, Raman."

“Great,” the Service agent griped, removing his clothing and showing some of the lingering body modesty of his parent society. O‘Day didn’t look at him and didn’t look away. Didn’t do anything except dry off, until Raman was behind the canvas. The agent’s service pistol, a SigSauer, had been set atop the clothing rack. O’Day opened his briefcase first. Then he pulled Raman’s automatic, ejected the magazine, and quietly worked the action to remove the chambered round.

“How are the roads?” O’Day called.

“Clear, made great time damn, this water stinks!”

“Ain’t that the truth!” Raman kept two spare magazines for his pistol. O‘Day saw. He put all three in the lid-pocket before unwrapping the four he’d prepared. One he slid into the butt of the Sig. He worked the action one more time to load a round, then replaced it with a new, full magazine, and two more for the agent’s belt holder. Finished, he hefted the gun. Weight and balance were exactly the same as before. Everything went back in place as O’Day returned to dressing. He needn’t have rushed. Raman evidently needed a shower. Maybe he was purifying himself, the inspector thought coldly.

“Here.” O’Day tossed over a towel as he put his shirt on.

“Glad I brought a change.” Raman pulled new underwear and socks from his two-suiter.

“I guess it’s a rule you have to be all spiffy when you work in with the President, eh?” The FBI agent bent down to tie his shoes. He looked up. “Morning, Director.”

“I don’t know why I bothered at home,” Murray grumped. “Got the paperwork, Pat?”

“Yes, sir. This is something to show him.”

“Damned right it is.” And Murray doffed his jacket and tie. “White House locker room,” he noted. “Morning, Raman.”

Both agents completed dressing, made sure their personal weapons were tucked in the right place, then stepped outside.

“Murray and I are going right in,” Pat told the other in the corridor. They didn’t have to wait long for Murray, and then Price showed up again, just as the FBI Director reemerged. O’Day rubbed his nose to tell her all was done. She nodded back.

“Jeff, want to take these gentlemen into the office? I have to head to the command post. The Boss is waiting.”

“Sure, Andrea. This way,” Raman said, leading O’Day. Behind them, Price waited and did not head toward the command post.

In the next level up, Raman saw TV equipment being prepared for installation in the Oval Office. Arnie van Damm buzzed out the corridor entrance, trailed by Callie Weston. President Ryan was at his desk in the usual shirtsleeves, going through a folder. CIA Director Ed Foley was in there, too.

“Enjoy the shower, Dan?” the DCI asked.

“Oh, yeah, I’m losing the rest of my hair, Ed.”

“Hi, Jeff,” the President said, looking up.

“Good morning, Mr. President,” Raman said, taking his usual place against the wall.

“Okay, Dan, what do you guys have for me?” Ryan asked.

"We've broken an Iranian espionage ring. We think it's associated with the attempt on your daughter." While Murray talked, O'Day opened his briefcase and pulled out a folder.

"The Brits turned the connection," Foley started to say. "And the contact here is a guy named Alahad—would you believe the bastard has a business about a mile from here?"

"We have him under surveillance right now," Murray put in. "We're running his phone records."

They were all looking down at the papers on the President's desk and didn't see Raman's face freeze in place. His mind started racing, as though a drug had been injected into his bloodstream. If they were doing that right now . . . There might still be a chance, a slim one, but if not, here was the President, the directors of FBI and CIA, and he could deliver them all to Allah, and if that weren't sacrifice enough . . . Raman unbuttoned his jacket with his left hand. He eased off the spot on the wall he was leaning against and closed his eyes for a quick prayer. Then, in a rapid, smooth movement, his right hand went to his automatic.

Raman was surprised to see the President's eyes move and stare right at him. Well, that wasn't so bad, was it? Ryan should know that his death was coming, and the only shame was he'd never quite understand why.

Ryan flinched as the pistol came out. The reaction was automatic, despite the briefing on what to expect, and the sign from O'Day that it was okay. He dodged anyway, wondering if he could really trust anyone, and saw that Jeff Raman's hands tracked him and pulled back on the trigger like an automaton, no emotion in his eyes at all—

The sound made everyone jump, albeit for different reasons.

Pop.

That was all. Raman's mouth dropped open in disbelief. The weapon was loaded. He could feel the added weight of the live rounds in it, and—

"Put it down," O'Day said calmly, his Smith out and aimed now. An instant later, Murray had his service weapon out.

"We have Alahad in custody already," the Director explained.

Raman had another weapon, a telescoping billy club called an Asp, but the President was fifteen feet away and . . .

"I can put one right through your kneecap if you want," O'Day said coldly.

"You fuckin' traitor!" Andrea said, entering the room with her pistol out, too. "You fuckin' assassin! *On the floor now!"*

"Easy, Price. He's not going anywhere," Pat told her.

But it was Ryan who nearly lost control: "My little girl, my *baby*, you helped plan to murder *her?*" He started around the desk, but Foley stopped him. "No, not this time, Ed!"

"Stop!" the DCI told him. "We have him, Jack. We've got him."

"One way or another, you get on the floor," Pat said, ignoring the others and aiming at Raman's knee. "Drop the weapon and get down."

He was trembling now, fear, rage, all manner of emotions assaulted him, everything but the one he'd expected. He racked the Sig's action and pulled the trigger again. It wasn't even aimed, it was just an act of denial.

"I couldn't use blanks. They don't weigh the same," O'Day explained.

“They’re real rounds. I just tapped the bullets out and dumped the powder. The primer makes a cute little pop, doesn’t it?”

It was as though he’d forgotten to breathe for a minute or so. Raman’s body collapsed in on itself. He dropped the pistol to the rug with the Seal of the President on it and fell to his knees. Price came over and pushed him the rest of the way. Murray, for the first time in years, snapped the cuffs on.

“You want to hear about your rights?” the FBI Director asked.

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RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

DIGGS HAD NOT REceived proper mission orders yet and what was even more disturbing, his Operation BUFORD did not really have much of a plan yet, either. The Army trained its commanders to act swiftly and decisively, but as with doctors in hospitals, emergency situations were not as welcome as planned procedures. The general was in continuous contact with the commanders of his two Cavalry regiments, the senior Air Force commander, the one-star who'd brought the 366th over, the Saudis, the Kuwaitis, and various intelligence assets, just trying to get a feel for what the enemy was actually doing, and from that to determine what the enemy might be planning —from which he would try to formulate some sort of plan of his own aside from mere ad-hoc reaction.

The orders and rules of engagement arrived on his fax machine around 11:00 Washington time, 16:00 Zulu time, and 19:00 Lima, or local time. Here was the explanation he'd lacked. He relayed it at once to his principal subordinates, and assembled his staff to brief them. The troops, he told the assembled officers, would learn from their Commander-in-Chief. Their officers would have to be with their people when *that* word came down.

Things were busy enough. According to the satellites, the Army of God—as the intelligence people had determined the name to be—was within one hundred miles of the Kuwaiti border, approaching from the west in good order, and following the roads as expected. That made the Saudi deployment look pretty good, since three of their five brigades were covering the approaches to the oil fields.

They still weren't ready. The 366th Wing was in the Kingdom, but it wasn't enough to have the airplanes on the right airfields. A thousand minor details had to be sorted out, and that job wasn't even half done yet. The F-16s from Israel were pretty well spun up, all forty-eight of their single-engine fighters running, and even some kills recorded in the initial skirmishes, but the rest needed another day. Similarly, the 10th Cav was fully ready, but the 11 th was not; it was still assembling and moving to its initial deployment area. His third brigade had just started drawing equipment. An army wasn't a collection of weapons. It was a team composed of people with an idea of what they were supposed to be doing. But picking the time and place for war was usually the job of an aggressor, which was a role his country hadn't practiced very much.

He looked at the three-page fax again. It seemed quite literally explosive in his hands. His planning staff read their copies and were eerily quiet until the 11 th's S-3, the regimental operations officer, said it for all of them:

"We're gonna get some."

THREE RUSSIANS HAD recently arrived. Clark and Chavez had to remind themselves that this wasn't some sort of alcohol-induced dream. The two CIA officers were being supported by Russians under mission orders from Langley by way of Moscow. Actually, they had two missions. The Russians had drawn the hard one, and had brought the necessary equipment in the diplomatic pouch for the two Americans to have a try at the easier one. A dispatch had also come from Washington, via Moscow, that all of them read.

"Too fast, John," Ding breathed. Then his mission face came on. "But what the hell."

THE PRESS ROOM was still underpopulated. So many of the regulars were elsewhere, some caught out of town and blocked by the travel ban, others just missing, and nobody quite sure why.

"The President will be making a major speech in one hour," van Damm told them. "Unfortunately, there will be no time to give you advance copies of the speech. Please inform your networks that this is a matter of the highest importance."

"Arnie!" a reporter called, but the chief of staff had already turned his back.

THE REPORTERS IN Saudi knew more than both their friends back in Washington, and they were moving out to join their assigned units. For Tom Donner, it was B-Troop, 1st of the 11th. He was fully outfitted in a desert battle-dress uniform, or BDU, and found the twenty-nine-year-old troop commander standing by his tank.

"Howdy," the captain said, halfway looking up from his map.

"Where do you want me?" Donner asked.

The captain laughed. "Never ask a soldier where he wants a reporter, sir."

"With you, then?"

"I ride this," the officer responded, nodding at the tank. "I'll put you in one of the Brads."

"I need a camera crew."

"They're already here," the captain told him, pointing. "Over that way. Anything else?"

"Yeah, would you like to know what this is all about?" Donner asked. The journalists had been virtual prisoners in a Riyadh hotel, not even allowed to call home to tell their families where they were—all they'd known was that the reporters had been called up, and their parent corporations had signed agreements not to reveal the purpose of their absences for such deployments. In Donner's case, the network said that he was "on assignment," a difficult thing to explain with the travel ban. But they had been told the overall situation—there'd been no avoiding it—which put them one up on a lot of soldiers.

"We hear that in an hour or so, or that's what the colonel told us." But the

young officer was interested now.

"This is something you need to know now. Honest."

"Mr. Donner, I know what you pulled on the President and—"

"If you want to shoot me, do it later. Listen to me, Captain. This is important."

"Say your say, sir."

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THERE SEEMED SOMETHING perverse in being made up at a time like this. It was, as always, Mary Abbot doing the job, wearing her mask, and this time gloves as well, while both TelePrompTers ran their copy. Ryan hadn't had the time or really the inclination to rehearse. Important as the speech was, he only wished to do it once.

"THEY CAN'T DO cross-country," the Saudi general insisted. "They haven't trained for it, and they're still road-bound."

"There is information to suggest otherwise, sir," Diggs said.

"We are ready for them."

"You're never ready enough, General. Nobody is."

IT WAS TENSE but otherwise normal at PALM BOWL. Downloaded satellite photos told them that the UIR forces were still moving, and if they continued, then they would be met by two Kuwaiti brigades fighting on their own turf, and an American regiment in reserve, and the Saudis ready to provide rapid support. They didn't know how the battle would turn out—the overall numbers weren't favorable—but it wouldn't be like the last time, Major Sabah told himself. It seemed so foolish to him that the allied forces could not strike first. They *knew* what was coming.

"Getting some radio chatter," a technician reported. Outside, the sun was just starting to set. The satellite photos the intelligence officers looked at were four hours old. More would not be available for another two.

STORM TRACK WAS close to the Saudi-UIR border, too far for a mortar round, but not safe from real tube artillery. A company of fourteen Saudi tanks was now arrayed between the listening post and the berm. There also, for the first time in days, they were starting to copy radio transmissions. The signals were scrambled, more like the command sets than the regular tactical radios, which were far too numerous for easy encryption systems. Unable to read them immediately—that was the job of the computers back at KKMC—they did start trying to locate their points of origin. In twenty minutes, they had thirty pointsources. Twenty represented brigade headquarters. Six for the division command posts. Three for the corps commanders, and one for the army

command. They seemed to be testing their commo net, the ELINT people decided. They'd have to wait for the computers to unscramble what was being said. The direction-finders had them arrayed on the road to Al Busayyah, still doing their approach march to Kuwait. The radio traffic wasn't all that remarkable. Maybe, most thought, the Army of God needed more practice in march discipline ... though they hadn't done all that badly in their exercise....

With sunset the Predators were launched again, motoring north. They headed to the radio sources first of all. Their cameras turned on ten miles inside the UIR, and the first thing one of them saw was a battery of 203mm towed guns, off their trucks, their limbers spread out, and the tubes pointed south.

"Colonel!" a sergeant called urgently.

Outside, the Saudi tankers had selected hillocks to hide behind and were putting a few crewmen out to act as spotters. The first few had just started to settle into their observation points when the northern horizon flashed orange.

DIGGS WAS STILL discussing deployment patterns when the first message came in:

"Sir, STORM TRACK reports they're taking artillery fire."

"GOOD MORNING, MY fellow Americans," Ryan said to the cameras. His image was being carried worldwide. His voice would be heard even by those without TV sets at hand. In Saudi Arabia, his words went out on AM, FM, and shortwave bands so that every soldier, sailor, and airman would hear what he was about to say. "We have been through much in the past two weeks.

"The first order of business is to tell you of progress we have made with the epidemic which has been inflicted upon our country.

"It was not easy for me to order the imposition of a ban on interstate travel. There are few freedoms more precious than the right to come and go as one pleases, but based on the best medical advice, I felt it necessary to take that action. I can report to you now that it has had the desired effect. New disease cases have been trending down for four days now. Partly that's because of what your government did, but it's more because you have taken the proper measures to protect yourselves. We will give more detailed information later in the day, but for the moment I can tell you that the Ebola epidemic is going to end, probably in the next week. Many of the new cases are people who will definitely survive. America's medical professionals have performed superhuman work to help the afflicted, and to help us understand what has happened, and how best to combat it. This task is not yet complete, but our country will weather this storm, as we have weathered many others.

"A moment ago, I said that the epidemic has been inflicted upon us.

"The arrival of this disease into our country was not an accident. We have been struck with a new and barbaric form of attack. It's called biological warfare. That is something outlawed by international treaty. Biological warfare is designed to terrify and to cripple a nation, rather than to kill it.

We've all felt the disgust and horror at what's been happening in our country, the way in which the disease attacks people at random. My own wife, Cathy, has worked around the clock with Ebola victims at her hospital in Baltimore. As you know, I was only there a few days ago to see for myself. I saw the victims, talked with the doctors and nurses, and outside the hospital I sat with a man whose wife was ill.

"I could not tell him then, but I can tell you now, that from the beginning we suspected that this epidemic was a man-made act, and over the last few days, our lawenforcement and intelligence agencies have formulated the proof we needed before I could tell you what you are about to hear." On TV screens across the world appeared the faces of a young African boy, and a white-clad Belgian nun.

"This disease started some months ago in the country of Zaire," the President went on. He had to walk everyone through it, slowly and carefully, and Ryan found it hard to keep his voice even.

THE SAUDI TANKERS remounted their vehicles at once, fired up the turbine engines, and moved to new locations lest their original points had been spotted. But the fire, they saw, was aimed at STORM TRACK. That made sense, their commander thought. The listening post was a prime intelligence-gathering point. Their job was to protect it, which they could do against tanks and troops, but not against artillery fire. The Saudi captain was a handsome, almost rakish young man of twenty-five. He was also devoutly religious, and therefore mindful of the fact that the Americans were guests of his country, and thus worthy of his protection. He got on his radio to call back to his battalion headquarters, and requested armored personnel carriers—helicopters would have been suicidal—to evacuate the intelligence specialists.

"AND SO, WE HAVE the disease traveling from Africa to Iran. How do we know this?" the President asked. "We know it because the disease traveled back to Africa on this aircraft. Please note the registration code, HX-NJA. This is the same aircraft supposedly lost with Sister Jean Baptistc aboard...."

WE NEED ANOTHER day, damn it! Diggs thought. And the enemy forces were nearly two hundred miles west of where everyone planned to meet them.

"Who's closest?" he asked.

"Fourth Brigade's area," the senior Saudi replied. But that brigade was spread over a front of over a hundred miles. There were some helicopter-reconnaissance assets there, but the attack choppers were also in the wrong place, fifty miles south of Wadi al Batin. The other side wasn't cooperating very well, was it?

DARYAEI WAS SHOCKED to see his photograph on TV. Worse, at least ten

percent of the people in his country were seeing this. The American CNN was not available in the UIR, but the British Sky News service was, and nobody had thought to—

"This is the man behind the biological attack upon our country," Ryan said, with the sort of calm that seemed robotic. "He is the reason several thousand of our citizens have died. Now, I will tell you why he did this, why there was an attack on my daughter, Katie, and why there was an attempt on my own life, right in the Oval Office a few hours ago. I imagine Mr. Daryaei is watching this broadcast, too, right now. Mahmoud Haji," he said, right into the camera's eye, "your man Aref Raman is now in federal custody. Do you really think America is as foolish as that?"

LIKE EVERYONE ELSE in the Blackhorse, Tom Donner was listening—in his case with a pair of headphones off the Bradley's radio. There weren't quite enough to go around, and the crewmen had to share. He watched their faces. They, too, were as blank and expressionless as Ryan's voice had been, until his last sentence of contempt.

"Fuck," one spec-4 said. He was an 11-Delta, a Cavalry scout, and backup gunner for this track.

"My God," Donner managed to say.

Ryan went on: "UIR forces are now poised to invade our ally, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Over the past two days, we have moved forces there to stand with our friends.

"There is something very important I must say now. The attack on my daughter, the attempt on my own life, and the barbaric attack on our country was undertaken by people who call themselves Muslims. We must all understand that religion has nothing at all to do with these inhuman acts. Islam is a *religion.* America is a country in which religious liberty is the *first* freedom expressed in our Bill of Rights, even before speech and all the others. Islam is not the enemy of our country or any other. Just as my family was once attacked by people calling themselves Catholics, so these people have twisted and defiled their own religious faith in the name of worldly power, and then hidden behind it like the cowards they are. What God thinks of that, I cannot say. I know that Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, teaches us about a God of love and mercy—and justice.

"Well, there will be justice. If the UIR forces arrayed on the Saudi border move to invade, we will meet them. Our armed forces are in the field even as I speak to you, and now I will speak directly to them:

"Now you know why you have been taken away from your homes and families. Now you know why you must take up arms in the defense of your country. Now you know the nature of your enemy, and the nature of his acts.

"But America does not have a tradition of deliberate attack on the innocent. You will act in accordance with our laws at all times. I must now send you into battle. I wish this were not necessary. I have myself served as a Marine, and I know what it is like to be in a foreign place. But you stand there for your country, and here at home your country stands up for you. You will be in our prayers.

"To our allies in Kuwait, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and all the Gulf states: America stands again with you to stop aggression and restore the peace. Good luck." Ryan's voice changed then, for the first time allowing his emotions to show. "And good hunting."

The crewmen in B-Troop's command track looked at one another for several seconds before anyone spoke. They even managed to forget the presence of the reporter. The youngest of them, a PFC, looked down at shaking hands and had his say.

"Fuckers gonna pay. Motherfuckers gonna pay for this, guys."

FOUR ARMORED PERSONNEL carriers were racing across the desert at about forty miles per hour. They avoided the beaten-dirt road to STORM TRACK for fear that it would be targeted with artillery fire; that proved to be a sensible precaution. Their first view of their objective was a cloud of smoke and dust drifting away from the antenna farm as fire continued to pour into the site. One of the three buildings appeared to be standing, but on fire, and the Saudi lieutenant leading the scout platoon wondered if anyone could possibly be alive there. To the north he saw a different sort of flash—five miles away, the horizontal tongue of flame from a tank's main gun illuminated the bumps and knolls of a landscape that was not at all as level as it appeared in daylight. A minute after that, the fire on STORM TRACK diminished somewhat, shifting to where the tanks were evidently engaging enemy vehicles invading his country. He thanked Allah that his immediate job had just gotten a little easier while his radio operator called ahead on the track's tactical radio.

The four APCs picked their way through the fallen antennas on the way into the wrecked compound. Then their rear doors opened and the soldier raced out to look around. Thirty men and women worked here. They found nine unhurt people, plus five wounded. The scout platoon took about five minutes searching the wreckage, but no more living people were discovered, and there wasn't time to be fastidious about the dead. The tracks moved out, back toward the battalion CP, where helicopters waited to ferry the Americans out.

IT AMAZED THE Saudi tank commander that surprise had been achieved. He knew that most of his country's forces were two hundred miles to the east. But the enemy was *here* and coming south. They weren't going into Kuwait or after the oil fields at all. That became plain when the first UIR tanks appeared in his thermal viewer, cresting a low spot in the berm, out of gun range because he'd been ordered not to move too close. The young officer really didn't know what to do. Ordinarily, his military worked under fairly tight control, and so he radioed back for instructions. But his battalion commander was busy now, his own command of fifty-four tanks and other vehicles spread over a front of thirty kilometers, all of which was being hit with indirect artillery fire, and much of which was reporting enemy tanks crossing the border, with infantry carriers in support.

The officer decided he had to do something, so he ordered his tanks forward

to meet the attack. At three thousand meters, his men opened fire, and the first fourteen shots resulted in eight hits, not bad under the circumstances for part-time soldiers, he thought as he decided to stand and fight right there, and defend his soil against the invader. His fourteen tanks were spread over a line three kilometers long. It was a defensible deployment, but a stationary one, and in the center of his own line he was too fixed on what lay before him. The second volley got another six kills at the long range, but then one of his tanks took a direct hit from an artillery round, which destroyed its engine and started a fire that made its crew bail out, only to be shredded by more of the artillery fire before they could run five meters. He was looking that way and saw them die, four hundred meters away, and he knew that there was a hole in his line now, and he was supposed to do something about that.

His gunner, like the others, was looking for and trying to engage enemy tanks, the T-80s with their domed turrets, when the first flight of antitank missiles zoomed away from the BMP infantry carriers that lay behind them. Those started getting hits, and though they could not penetrate the frontal armor on his tanks, tracks were knocked off, more engines set afire, and fire-control systems damaged. When half his command was burning, it was time to pull back. Four started moving again turning and darting two kilometers south. The captain remained with the other three, and got another tank kill before he started to move. The air was filled with missiles now, and one of them hit the rear of his turret, igniting the ammo-storage box. The vertical flame sucked the air from the open hatch, asphyxiating his crew even as it burned him alive. Leaderless, the company fought on for thirty minutes, falling back again until the three surviving tanks ran south at fifty kilometers per hour, trying to find the battalion command post.

That was no longer there. It had been located by its radio transmissions and pounded by a full brigade of UIR artillery in its unprepared position just as the survivors from STORM TRACK arrived with the scout troop. In the first hour of the Second Persian Gulf War, a thirty-mile rent had been made in the Saudi lines, and there was a direct path to Riyadh. For that, the Army of God had lost half a brigade, a stiff price, but one which they were willing to pay.

THE INITIAL PICTURE wasn't clear. It rarely was. That was the advantage the attacker almost always had, Diggs knew, and the job of the commander was to make order from chaos and use the former to inflict the latter on his enemy. With the destruction of STORM TRACK, his Predator capability was temporarily gone and would have to be reestablished. The 366th had deployed without J-STARS airborne radar capable of tracking the movement of ground troops. Aloft were two E-3B AWACS aircraft, each with four fighters in close attendance. Twenty UIR fighters came up and started going after them. That would be exciting for the Air Force.

But Diggs had his own problems. With the loss of STORM TRACK and its Predator drones, he was largely blind and his first remedial action was to order the 10th Cav's air squadron to probe west. Eddington's words had come back hard to him. The Saudi center of gravity might not be an economic target after all.

“OUR TROOPS ARE inside the Kingdom,” Intelligence told him. “They are meeting opposition, but are breaking through. The American spy post has been destroyed.”

The news didn’t make Daryaei any happier. “How did they know—how did they know?”

The intelligence chief was afraid to ask how *they* knew *what*. So he dodged the issue: “It does not matter. We will be in Riyadh in two days, and then nothing matters.”

“What do we know about the sickness in America? Why are not more people ill? How can they have troops to send?”

“This I do not know,” Intelligence admitted.

“What *do* you know?”

“It appears that the Americans have one regiment in Kuwait, and another in the Kingdom, with a third taking equipment from the ships—the ones the Indians failed to stop in Dhahran.”

“So attack them!” Mahmoud Haji almost shouted. The arrogance of that American, calling him by name in a way that his own people might have seen and heard . . . and believed?

“Our air force is attacking in the north. That is the place of decision. Any diversion from that is a waste of time,” he replied reasonably.

“Missiles, then!”

“I will see.”

THE BRIGADIER COMMANDING the Saudi 4th Brigade had been told to expect nothing more than a diversionary attack in his area and to stand ready to launch a counterattack into the UIR right upon the commencement of their massed attack into Kuwait. Like many generals throughout history, he had made the mistake of believing his intelligence a little too much. He had three mechanized battalions, each covering a thirty-mile sector, with a five- to ten-mile gap between them. In an offensive role, it would have been a flexible deployment for harassing the enemy’s flank, but the early loss of his middle battalion had split his command in two, leaving him no easy way to command the separated parts. He next compounded the error by moving forward instead of backward. A courageous decision, it overlooked the fact that he had one hundred miles of depth behind him to King Khalid Military City, space in which he could have reorganized for a weighted counterstroke instead of a fragmented impromptu one.

The UIR attack was made on the model perfected by the Soviet army in the 1970s. The initial break-in phase had been composed on a heavy brigade surging forward behind massed artillery fire. The elimination of STORM TRACK had been intended from the beginning. It and PALM BOWL—they even knew the code names—were largely the eyes of their enemy’s command structure. Satellites they could do nothing about, but ground-based intelligence-gathering posts were fair game. As expected, the Americans had

deployed some assets, but not many, it appeared, and half of those would be day-flying aircraft. As with the Soviets, who had written the book to drive to the Bay of Biscay, the UIR would accept the cost, balancing lives against time to reach their political objective before the full weight of their potential enemies could come to bear. If the Saudis believed that Daryaei wanted their oil more than anything else, so be it, for in Riyadh was the royal family and the government. In doing so, the UIR risked its left flank, but Kuwait-based forces would have to negotiate the terrain of the Wadi al Batin, and then cross two hundred miles of desert just to get to where the Army of God had already been.

The key was speed, and the key to achieving speed was the rapid elimination of the Saudi 4th. The artillery still massed north of the berm tracked in on the urgent radio transmissions, and commenced a relentless area fire aimed at disrupting communications and cohesion in the units that they fully expected would be used to counter the initial invasion. It was a tactic almost certain to work, so long as they were willing to pay the price. One brigade each had been allocated to the three border battalions.

The 4th Brigade commander also had artillery of his own, but this, he decided, was best used on the center breakthrough, to punish the units with a clear road into the heart of his nation. The support mainly went there, to harass people just passing through rather than the brigades, which were just now making contact with his remaining mechanized forces. With their destruction, he would triple the width of the gap in the Saudi lines.

DIGGS WAS IN the main command post with all of this news coming in, and he realized what was happening to him, after a fashion. He'd done it to the Iraqis in 1991. He'd done it to the Israelis for a couple of years as CO of the Buffalo Cav. And he'd commanded the National Training Center for a time as well. Now he saw what it was like on the other side. Things were happening too fast for the Saudis. They were reacting rather than thinking, seeing the crisis in its magnitude but not its shape, semiparalyzed by the speed of events which, had they been on the other side, would have seemed merely exciting and nothing more.

"Have the 4th pull back about thirty klicks," he said quietly. "You have plenty of room to maneuver in."

"We will stop them right there!" the Saudi commander replied, too automatically.

"General, that is a mistake. You are risking that brigade when you don't have to. You can recover lost ground. You cannot recover lost time and lost men."

But he wasn't listening, and Diggs didn't have enough stars on his collar to speak more insistently. *One more day,* he thought*, one more goddamned day.*

THE HELICOPTERS TOOK their time. M-Troop, 4th of the 10th, was made of six OH-58 Kiowa scout choppers and four AH-64 Apache attack birds, all

carrying more extra fuel tanks than weapons. They had warning that enemy fighters were aloft, which prohibited flying very high. Their sensors were sniffing the air for the radar emissions of SAM radars—there had to be some around—while the pilots picked their way from hilltop to hilltop, scanning forward with low-light viewing systems and Longbow radars. Passing into UIR territory, they spotted the occasional scout vehicle, perhaps a company spread over twenty klicks within sight of the Kuwaiti border, they estimated, but that was all. The next fifty miles revealed much of the same, though the vehicles were heavier. Arriving on the outskirts of Al Busayyah, which the Army of God had been approaching according to satellite-intelligence information, all they really found were tracks in the sand and a few groups of support vehicles, mainly fuel trucks. Destroying them wasn't their mission. Their task was to locate the enemy's main body and determine its axis of advance.

That took another hour of ducking and side-slipping and darting, the helicopters leap-frogging. There were SAM vehicles around here, Russian- and French-made short-range ones that helicopters knew to avoid. One Kiowa-Apache team got close enough to see a column of tanks moving through a gap in the berm in brigade strength, and that was 150 miles from the point they'd left. With that information, the helicopters withdrew, without taking a shot at anything. The next time, they might well come in strength, and there was no sense in warning people about the gap in their air defenses before it could be properly exploited.

THE 4TH BRIGADE'S easternmost battalion stood its ground, and mainly died there. By this time, UIR attack helicopters had joined in, and while the Saudis shot well, the inability to maneuver doomed them. It cost the Army of God another brigade to accomplish this mission, but at the end of it, the gap in Saudi lines was seventy miles wide.

It was different in the west. This battalion, commanded now by a major with the death of his colonel, broke contact and headed southwest with half its strength, then tried to turn east, to get ahead of the advancing attack. Lacking the strength to stand, he stung and moved, in the process accounting for twenty tanks and a number of other vehicles, before running out of fuel, thirty kilometers north of KKMC. The 4th Brigade's support vehicles had gotten lost somewhere. The major radioed for help and wondered if any might arrive.

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IT CAME AS more of a surprise than it should have. A Defense Support System Program satellite over the Indian Ocean spotted the launch bloom. That word went to Sunnyvale, California, and from there to Dhahran. It had all happened before, but not with missiles launched from Iran. The ships were scarcely half unloaded. The war was only four hours old when the first Scud left its truck-bed launcher, heading south out of the Zagros Mountains.

"Now what?" Ryan asked.

“Now you see why the cruisers are still there,” Jackson replied.

RAID WARNING WAS scarcely needed. The three cruisers, plus *Jones,* had their radars sweeping the sky, and they all acquired the inbound ballistic track over a hundred miles out. National Guardsmen waiting their turn to fetch their tracked vehicles watched the fireballs of surface-to-air missiles lance into the sky, leaping after things that only radars could see. The initial launch of three exploded separately in the darkness, and that was that. But the soldiers were now even more motivated to collect their tanks as the triple boom came down from one hundred thousand feet.

On *Anzio,* Captain Kemper watched the track disappear from the display. This was one other thing Aegis should be good at, though sitting still under fire wasn’t exactly his idea of fun.

THE OTHER EVENT of the evening was a spirited air battle over the border. The AWACS aircraft had watched what turned out to be twenty-four fighters coming in directly for them in an attempt to deny the allies air coverage. That proved a costly exercise. No attack on the E-3B aircraft was actually accomplished. Instead, the UIR air force continued to demonstrate its ability to lose aircraft to no purpose. But would that matter? The senior American controller on one AWACS remembered an old NATO joke. One Soviet tank general ran into another in Paris and asked, “By the way, who won the air war?” The point of it was that wars were ultimately won or lost on the ground. So it would be here.

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BUFORD

IT WASN'T UNTIL SIX hours after the first artillery barrage that enemy intentions were clear. It took the reports of the helicopter reconnaissance to give an initial picture, but what finally turned the trick was satellite photography that was impossible to discount. The historical precedents flooded into Marion Diggs's mind. When the French high command had got wind of the German Schlieffen Plan prior to World War I, their reaction had been, "So much the better for us!" That assault had barely ground to a halt outside Paris. In 1940, the same high command had greeted initial news of another German attack with smiles—and *that* attack had ended at the Spanish border. The problem was that people tended to wed their ideas more faithfully than their spouses, and the tendency was universal. It was well after midnight, therefore, when the Saudis realized that the main force of their army was in the wrong place, and that their western covering force had been steamrollered by an enemy who was either too smart or too dumb to do what they'd expected him to do. To counter that, they had to fight a battle of maneuver, which they were unprepared for. The UIR sure as hell was driving first to KKMC. There would be a battle for that point on the map, after which the enemy would have the option of turning east toward the Persian Gulf—and the oil—thus trapping allied forces; or continuing south to Riyadh to deliver a political knockout and win the war. All in all, Diggs thought, it wasn't a terribly bad plan. If they could execute it. Their problem was the same as the Saudis', though. They had a plan. They thought it was pretty good, and they, too, thought that *their* enemy would connive at his own destruction. Sooner or later, everyone did, and the key to being on the winning side was knowing what you could do and what you couldn't. This enemy didn't know the *couldn't* part yet. There was no sense in teaching them that too soon.

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IN THE SITUATION Room, Ryan was on the phone with his friend in Riyadh.

"I have the picture, Ali," the President assured him.

"This is serious."

"The sun will be up soon, and you have space to trade for time. It's worked before, Your Highness."

"And what will your forces do?"

"They can't exactly drive home from there, can they?"

"You are that confident?"

"You know what those bastards did to us, Your Highness."

"Why, yes, but—"

"So do our troops, my friend." And then Ryan had a request.

"THIS WAR HAS started badly for allied forces," Tom Donner was saying live on *NBC Nightly News*. "That's what we're hearing, anyway. The combined armies of Iraq and Iran have smashed through Saudi lines west of Kuwait and are driving south. I'm here with the troopers of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, the Blackhorse. This is Sergeant Bryan Hutchinson of Syracuse, New York. Sergeant, what do you think of this?"

"I guess we're just going to have to see, sir. What I can tell you, B-Troop is ready for anything they got. I wonder if they're ready for us, sir. You come along and watch." And that was all he had to say on the subject.

"As you see, despite the bad news from the battlefield, these soldiers are ready—even eager—for contact."

THE SENIOR SAUDI commander hung up the phone, having just talked with his sovereign. Then he turned to Diggs. "What do you recommend?"

"For starters, I think we should move the 5th and 2nd Brigades southwest."

"That leaves Riyadh uncovered."

"No, sir, actually it doesn't."

"We should counterattack at once!"

"General, we don't have to yet," Diggs told him, staring down at the map. The 10th sure was in an interesting position.... He looked up. "Sir, have you ever heard the story about the old bull and the young bull?" Diggs proceeded to tell one of his favorite jokes, and one which, after a few seconds, had the senior Saudi officers nodding.

"YOU SEE, EVEN the American television says that we are succeeding," the intelligence chief told his boss.

The general commanding the UIR air force was less sanguine. In the past day, he'd lost thirty fighters, for perhaps two Saudi aircraft in return. His plan to bore in and kill the AWACS aircraft which so tilted the odds in the air had failed, and cost him a gaggle of his best-trained pilots in the process. The good news, for him, was that his enemies lacked the aircraft needed to invade his country and do serious damage. Now more ground forces were moving down from Iran to advance on Kuwait from the north, and with luck all he would have to do would be to cover the advance ground forces, which his people knew how to do, especially in daylight. They'd learn about that course in a few hours.

A TOTAL OF fifteen Scud-type ballistic missiles had been launched at Dhahran. Hitting the COMEDY ships had been a long shot at best, and all of

the inbounds had either been intercepted or, in most cases, had fallen harmlessly into the sea during a night of noise and fireworks. The last of the load—mainly trucks at this stage—were rolling off now, and Greg Kemper set his binoculars down, as he watched the line of brown-painted trucks fade into the dawn haze. Where they were heading, he didn't know. He did know that about five thousand very pissed-off National Guardsmen from North Carolina were ready to do something.

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EDDINGTON WAS ALREADY south of KKMC with his brigade staff. His WOLFPACK force would probably not get there in time to fight a battle. Instead, he had headed them to Al Artawiyah, one of those places which sometimes became important in history because roads led there. He wasn't sure if that would happen here, though he remembered that Gettysburg had been a place where Bobby Lee hoped to get some shoes for his men. While his staff did their work, the colonel lit a cigar and walked outside, to see two companies of men arriving with their vehicles. He decided to head over that way while the MPs got them scattered into hasty-defense locations. Fighters screamed overhead. American F-15Es, by the look of them. Okay, he thought, the enemy'd had a pretty good twelve hours. Let 'em think that.

"Colonel!" a staff sergeant Bradley commander saluted from his hatch. Eddington climbed up as soon as the vehicle stopped. "Good morning, sir."

"How is everybody?"

"We're just ready as hell, sir. Where are they?" the sergeant asked, taking off his dust-covered goggles.

Eddington pointed. "About a hundred miles that way, coming this way. Tell me about how the troops feel, Sergeant."

"How many can we kill before they make us stop, sir?"

"If it's a tank, kill it. If it's a BMP, kill it. If it's a truck, kill it. If it's south of the berm, and it's holding a weapon, kill it. *But* the rules are serious about killing unresisting people. We don't break those rules. That's important."

"Fair 'nuff, Colonel."

"Don't take any unnecessary chances with prisoners, either."

"No, sir," the track commander promised. "I won't."

GEOMETRY PUT THE Blackhorse first, advancing west from their assembly area toward KKMC. Colonel Hamm had his command advancing on line, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Squadrons lined up south to north, each covering a twenty-mile frontage. The 4th (Aviation) Squadron he kept in his pocket, with just a few helo scouts probing forward while the ground-support elements of their battalion moved to set up an advanced base at a point which his leading troops had not yet reached. Hamm was in his M4 command track—called, naturally enough, the Star Wars (some called it "God") Track—sitting athwartships, which made for motion-sickness, and starting to get that "take" from his advanced units.

The IVIS system was starting to go on-line now in a real tactical environment. The Inter-Vehicle Information System was a data-link network the Army had been playing with for about five years. It had never been tested in combat, and it pleased Al Hamm that he would be the first to prove its worth. His command screens in the M4 got everything. Each single vehicle was both a source and a recipient of information. It began by telling everybody where all friendly units were, which, with GPS location equipment, was accurate to the meter, and that was supposed to prevent blue-on-blue "friendly fire" losses. At the touch of a key, Hamm knew the location of every fighting vehicle he had, plotted on a map which showed all relevant terrain features. In time he would have a similarly accurate picture of enemy dispositions, and with the knowledge of everyone's location came the option to pick his spots. The Saudi 2nd and 5th Brigades were to his northwest, coming down from the Kuwaiti border area. He had about one hundred miles to move cross-country before he had to worry about making contact, and the four hours of approach march would serve to establish control of his units and make sure that everything was working. He had few doubts of that, but it was a drill he had to perform, because mistakes on the battlefield, however small, were expensive ones.

REMNANTS OF THE Saudi 4th Brigade tried to assemble north of KKMC. They amounted to perhaps two companies of tanks and infantry carriers, most having fought hit-and-run actions during the long desert night. Some had survived from pure luck, others through the brutally Darwinian process that was mobile warfare. The senior surviving officer was a major whose billet had been intelligence, and who had commandeered a tank from an angry NCO. His men had neglected practice on their IVIS gear, preferring gunnery and racing about instead of more structured battle drills. Well, they'd paid for that, the major knew. His first order of business was finding and calling in the scattered fuel trucks his brigade had kept to the rear, so that the surviving twenty-nine tanks and fifteen other tracks could fill up their tanks. Some ammunition trucks were also found, which allowed about half of his heavy vehicles to replenish their storage racks. With that done, he sent the support vehicles to the rear and selected a wadi—a dry riverbed north and west of KKMC as his next defense position. It took another half hour for him to establish reliable contact with his high command and to call for support.

His force was not coherent. The tanks and tracks came from five different battalions. Some crews knew others only casually or not at all, and he was short of officers to command what force he had. With that knowledge came the realization that his job was to command rather than to fight himself. He reluctantly returned the tank to the sergeant who "owned" it, and chose instead an infantry carrier with more radios and fewer distractions. It wasn't a warlike decision, not for a person whose cultural tradition was leading a mob of warriors on horseback with a sword waving in the air, but he'd learned a few hard lessons in the darkness south of the berm, which put him one up on a lot of men who'd died from not learning fast enough.

THE DAY'S FIGHTING began after a pause from both movement and killing that would afterward seem as stylized as the halftime of a football game. The reason the Saudi 4th's survivors had garnered the time and space to reorganize and replenish was that the Army of God had to do the same. Trailing elements refueled from the bowsers, which had followed the combat units. Then they leapfrogged forward, allowing the fuel trucks to succor the erstwhile advance units. That process took four hours. The brigade and divisional commanders were pleased to this point. They were only ten kilometers behind the plan—plans are always too optimistic—in distance, and an hour in time. The refueling took place almost on schedule as well. They'd smashed the initial opposition, taking more losses than hoped, but crushing their foe in any case. Men were tired, but soldiers were supposed to be tired, too, everyone thought, and the time for refueling allowed most to nap enough to freshen them. With the coming of dawn, the Army of God started its diesel engines and renewed its drive south.

THE FIRST BATTLES this day would be aloft. The allied air forces started taking off in numbers just after four from bases in the southern portion of the Kingdom. The first rank of aircraft were F-15 Eagles, which joined up with three circling E-3B AWACS aircraft lined up east and west of Riyadh. The UIR fighters rose as well, still in the control of ground radar stations inside the former country of Iraq. It began as a sort of dance between two chorus lines. Both sides wanted to know where the other side's SAMs were, information on which had been gathered during the dark hours. Both sides, it was gradually determined, would have a missile belt to hide behind, but in both cases the initial battles would be fought in an electronic no-man's-land. The first move was by a flight of four from the 390th Fighter Squadron, the Wild Boars. Alerted by their control aircraft that a UIR flight had turned east, the Eagles angled west, went to burner, and darted across the empty space, reversing course back toward the sea as they did so. The Americans expected to win, and they did. The UIR fighters—actually, Iranian F-4s left over from the time of the Shah—were caught looking the wrong way. Warned by their ground controllers, they turned back, but their problem was deeper than the tactical situation. They'd expected an engagement pattern in which one side would fire missiles, and the other would evade, then turn back to fire its own in a style of encounter as rigid as a medieval joust. Nobody had told them that this was not how their American enemies were trained.

The Eagles fired first, loosing one AMRAAM each. It was a fire-and-forget missile, which allowed them to retreat after shooting. But they didn't, and instead bored in behind them, following both their doctrine and inclinations after ten hours of contemplating what their President had said on the radio. It was all personal now, and the first team of Eagle drivers kept closing while their missiles tracked in on the first group of targets. Three of the four targets were destroyed, adversely surprised by the missile American pilots called the Slammer. The fourth evaded, blessed his luck, and turned back to fire off his own weapon, only to see on his radar that there was a fighter fifteen

kilometers distant, with a closure rate of nearly two thousand knots. That made him flinch and turn south, a mistake. The Eagle pilot, his wingman half a mile behind, chopped power to slow down and got in a tail-chase position. He wanted an eyeball-kill, and he got it, closing on the enemy's "six," and selecting guns. The other guy was a little slow to catch on this morning. In fifteen more seconds, the F-4 expanded to fill the gunsight . . .

"Fox-Three, Fox-Three for a kill!"

A second flight of Eagles was in the combat area now, going after their own targets. The UIR ground controllers were startled by the speed of the result, and ordered their fighters to point at the oncoming Americans and fire off their radar-guided long-range missiles but even then, the Americans did not run away to evade as expected. Instead, their tactic was to roll ninety degrees to the ground, and maintain an even distance to the launching aircraft. That denied the fighter radars a Doppler, or range-rate change, to their targets, broke radar lock, and sent the missiles into random, unguided courses. Then the Eagles turned in, selected their own missiles, and shot from under ten miles while the UIR fighters were trying to reacquire and fire another volley, again boring in behind them. Warned that more missiles were in the air, the enemy fighters tried to turn and run, but they were too far inside the Slammer envelope, and all four of them were blotted out as well.

"Hey, dude, this is Bronco," a voice taunted over the UIR guard channel. "Send us some more. We're hungry. We wanna shoot 'em *all* down and fuck their ol' ladies!" He switched channels to Sky-One. "Razorback Lead, more business, over?"

"Not in your sector, stand by."

"Roger that." The lieutenant colonel commanding the 390th rolled sideways again, looking down to see the massed tanks moving out from their assembly points, and for the first time in his life he wished that he was air-to-mud instead of air-to-air. Colonel Winters came from New York. There were sick people there, he knew, and here he was at war against those who had caused it, but he'd killed only two aircraft, and just three people so far. "Razorback, Lead, form up on me." Then he checked his fuel state. He'd have to tank soon.

Next in were the Strike Eagles of the 391st, escorted by HARM-equipped F-16s. The smaller, single-seat fighters cruised in with their threat-receivers on, sniffing for mobile SAM launchers. There turned out to be a goodly collection of low-altitude missile vehicles, French Crotales and old Russian SA-6 Gainfuls, just behind the lead echelons. The Viper drivers jinked down to draw their attention, then fired off their anti-radar missiles to cover the inbound F-15Es. Those were looking for enemy artillery first of all.

THE PREDATORS WERE working on that. Three had crashed with the loss of their ground-control at STORM TRACK, creating a gap in intelligence coverage that had taken hours to rectify. There were only ten left in theater. Four of those were up and flying at eight thousand feet, loitering almost invisibly over the advancing divisions. The UIR forces relied mostly on towed tubes. These were now setting up for the next major attack, lined up behind two mechanized brigades about to make the next leap toward KKMC. One Predator

found the six-battery group. The data went to a collection team, then up to the AWACS, and back down to the sixteen Strike Eagles of the 391st.

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THE SAUDI FORMATION waited tensely. Their forty-four fighting vehicles were spread over eight kilometers, as wide as the major commanding them dared, having to balance dispersal against firepower in what he hoped would be at least a delaying action, and maybe a stand. An approaching scream in the sky told him and his men to button up, as eight-inch shells started landing in front of his position. The initial bombardment lasted three minutes, the rounds advancing toward where his vehicles were....

"TIGERS IN HOT!" the strike commander called. The enemy had evidently expected his first attack to go after the leading tanks. That's where the SAMs were, and the Vipers were trying to deal with them. The three flights of four separated, then split into elements of two, coming down to four thousand feet, smoking in at five hundred knots. The gun batteries were lined up nice and neat, in even lines, the cannons spaced about a hundred meters apart, along with their trucks, just like their manual must have said, LTC Steve Berman thought. His weapons-system operator selected cluster munitions and started sprinkling them with bomblets.

"Lookin' good." They had dropped two canisters of BLU-97 combined-effects munitions, a total of over four hundred softball-sized mini-bombs. The first battery was wiped out when the pattern covered their position. Secondary explosions erupted from the ammo trucks. "Next." The pilot reefed his fighter into a tight right turn. His wizzo called him back around toward the next battery, then he spotted—

"Triple-A at ten." That proved to be a ZSU-23 mobile antiaircraft vehicle, whose four guns started sending tracers at their Strike Eagle. "Selecting Mav."

This death dance lasted just a few seconds. The Eagle evaded fire and got off a Maverick air-to-ground missile, which streaked down to obliterate the gun-track, and then the pilot went after the next battery of howitzers.

It was like Red Flag, the pilot thought in a blink. He'd been here in 1991 as a captain and killed targets, but mainly wasted his time in Scud-hunts. The experience of real combat had never measured up to battle practice in the Nellis Air Force Base weapons range. It did now. The mission was only planned in a general sense. He was looking for targets in real time with look-down radar and mark-one eyeball, and unlike his playtime at Nellis, these guys were shooting back with real bullets. Well, he was dropping real bombs, too. More ground fire started up as he lined his aircraft on the next collection of targets.

IT SEEMED, OF all things, like a cough in the middle of a conversation. There

was a final crash of twenty or thirty rounds on the desert a hundred meters in front of his position. Thirty seconds later, ten more fell. Thirty seconds after that, only three. On the horizon, well behind the first row of tanks just appearing, there were dust clouds. Some seconds later, they felt something through their boots, and after that a distant rumble. It became clear in a few seconds. Green-painted fighters appeared, heading due south. They were friendly, he saw from their shape. Then another appeared, trailing smoke, staggering in the sky, then tipping over, and two objects jolted out of it, turning into parachutes that drifted to the ground a kilometer behind his position, as the fighter smashed down separately, making an immense fireball. The major dispatched a vehicle to pick them up, then returned his attention to tanks still out of range—and he had no artillery to call in on them as yet.

WELL, SHIT, THE colonel thought, it was like Red Flag after all, except this night wouldn't be spent telling lies in the O club and sneaking off to Vegas for a show and some time in a casino. His third pass had run him into fire, and the Eagle was too sick to make it all the way home. He wasn't even on the ground yet when he saw a vehicle coming toward him, and he wondered whose it was. A moment later, it looked like an American-made Hummer, fifty meters away when he hit the ground, jolting hard on the packed sand. He popped the release on his chute and pulled his pistol out, but sure enough the vehicle was friendly, with two Saudi soldiers in it. One came over to him while the other took the Hummer to where the wizzo was standing, half a mile away.

"Come, come!" the Saudi private said. A minute later, the Hummer was back with the wizzo, who was holding his knee and grimacing.

"Twisted it bad, boss. Landed on a fuckin' rock," he explained, getting in one of the backseats.

Everything he'd heard about Saudi drivers was true, the colonel learned in a few seconds. It was like being inside a Burt Reynolds movie, as the Hummer bounded its way back to the safety of the wadi, but it was good to see the shapes of friendly vehicles there. The Hummer took him to what had to be the command post. There were still some shells falling forward of their position, but their aim had worsened, now dropping the shells five hundred meters short.

"Who are you?" Lieutenant Colonel Steve Berman asked.

"Major Abdullah." The man even saluted. Berman holstered his pistol and looked around.

"I guess you're the guys we came to support. We took out their artillery pretty good, but some bastard got lucky with his Shilka. Can you get us a chopper?"

"I will try. Are you injured?"

"My wizzo had a bum knee. We could use something to drink, though."

Major Abdullah handed over his canteen. "We have an attack coming in."

"Mind if I watch?" Berman asked.

ONE HUNDRED MILES to the south, Eddington's brigade was still forming. He had one battalion pretty much intact. This he moved twenty miles forward, left and right of the road to KKMC, to screen the rest of his forces as they came up the road from Dhahran. Unhappily, his artillery was the last group to have been off-loaded, and they weren't due for at least another four hours. But that couldn't be helped. As units arrived, he first of all got them to assembly areas where they could top off their fuel tanks. What with getting people off the road, directed to their intermediate destinations, and gassed up, it took about an hour per company to get things organized. His second battalion was just about ready to move. This one he would send west of the road, which would allow the first one to move laterally to the east, and double his advanced security force. It was so hard to explain to people that fighting battles was more about traffic control than killing people. That, and gathering information. A combat action was like the last act of a massive ballet—most of the time it was just getting the dancers to the right parts of the stage. The two acts—knowing where to send them and then getting them there—were interactive, and Eddington still didn't have a very clear picture. His brigade intelligence group was just setting up and starting to get hard information from Riyadh. Forward, his lead battalion had a reconnaissance screen of HMMWVs and Bradleys ten miles in advance of the main force, all of them hunkered down, their vehicles hidden as best they could be, and the troops on their bellies, scanning forward with binoculars, so far reporting nothing but the occasional wisp of dust well beyond the visible horizon and the rumbles of noise that carried amazingly far. Well, Eddington decided, so much the better. He had time to prepare, and time was the most valuable commodity a soldier could hope for.

"LOBO-SIX, this is WOLFPACK-SIX, over."

"LOBO-SIX copies."

"This is WOLFPACK-SIX-ACTUAL. WHITEFANG is moving out now. They should be on your left in an hour. You may commence your lateral movement when they arrive on line. Over."

"LOBO-SIX-ACTUAL copies, Colonel. Still nothing to see up here. We're in pretty good shape, sir."

"Very well. Keep me informed. Out." Eddington handed the radio phone back.

"Colonel!" It was the major who ran his intelligence section. "We have some information for you."

"Finally!"

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THE ARTILLERY FIRE continued, with a few rounds dropping right in the wadi. It was Colonel Berman's first experience with that, and he found that he didn't like it very much. It also explained why the tanks and tracks were spread out so much, which had struck him as very odd at first. One round went off a hundred meters to the left of the tank behind which he and Major

Abdullah were sheltering, thankfully to the far side. They both quite distinctly heard the *ping*s of fragments hitting the brown-painted armor.

"This is not fun," Berman observed, shaking his head to clear the noise of the shell-burst.

"Thank you for dealing with the rest of their guns. It was quite frightening," Abdullah said, looking through his binoculars. The advancing UIR T-80s were just over three thousand meters away, having not yet spotted his hulldown M1A2s.

"How long have you been in contact?"

"It started just after sunset yesterday. We are all that is left of the 4th Brigade." And that didn't help Berman's confidence at all. Above their heads, the tank's turret made a slight adjustment to the left. There was a short phrase over the major's radio, and he replied with a single word—shouted, however. A second after that, the tank to the left of them jerked backward a foot or so, and a blast of fire erupted from the main gun. It made the artillery round seem like a firecracker in comparison. Against all logic, Berman raised his head. In the distance he saw a column of smoke, and tumbling atop it was a tank turret.

"Jesus!"

"You have a radio I can use?"

"SKY-ONE, THIS is Tiger Lead," an AWACS officer heard on a side channel. "I am on the ground with a Saudi tank group north of KKMC." He gave the position next. "We are in heavy contact here. Got any help you can send us? Over."

"Tiger, can you authenticate?"

"No, God damn it, my fuckin' codes went down with my -15. This is Colonel Steve Berman out of Mountain Home, and I am one very pissed-off aviator right now, Sky. Forty minutes ago, we beat the snot out of some Iraqi artillery, and now we got tanks coming out the ass. You gonna believe me or not, over."

"Sounds American to me," a more senior officer thought.

"And if you look close, their tanks are round on top and pointing south and ours are flat on the top and pointing north, over." That bit of information was followed by the crash of an explosion. "This ground-pounder shit ain't no fun at all," he told them.

"Me too," the first controller decided. "Tiger, stand by. Devil-Lead, this is Sky-One, we have some business for you . . ."

It wasn't supposed to be this way at all, but it was happening even so. There were supposed to be frag—for fragmentary—orders detailing "packages" of tactical aircraft to hunting patches, but there weren't enough aircraft for that, and no time to select their patches, either. Sky-One had a flight of four F-16s waiting for some air-to-mud action, and this seemed as good a time as any.

THE ADVANCING TANKS stopped to trade fire at first, but that was a losing game against the fire-control systems on the American-made Abrams tanks,

and these Saudi crews had gotten a post-graduate course in gunnery earlier in the day. The enemy backed off and maneuvered left and right, blowing smoke from their rear decks to obscure the battlefield. More vehicles were left behind, contributing their own black columns to the morning sky as their ammunition racks cooled off. The initial part of the engagement had lasted five minutes and had cost the UIR twenty vehicles that Berman could see, with no losses for the friendlies. Maybe this wasn't so bad after all.

The Vipers came in from the west, hardly visible about four miles downrange, dropping their Mark-82 dumb bombs in the middle of the enemy formation.

"Brilliant!" the English-educated Major Abdullah said. They couldn't tell how many vehicles had died as a result, but now his men knew they were not alone in their engagement. That made a difference.

IF ANYTHING, THE streets of Tehran had become grimmer still. What struck Clark and Chavez (Klerk and Chekov, currently) was the absence of conversation. People moved along without speaking to one another. There was also a sudden shortage of men, as reserves were being called up to trek into their armories, draw weapons, and prepare to move into the war which their new country had halfheartedly announced after President Ryan's preemption.

The Russians had given them the location of Daryaei's home, and their job really was only to look at it—which was easily said, but rather a different task on the streets of the capital city of the country with which you were at war. Especially if you had been in that city shortly before, and seen by members of its security force. The complications were piling up.

The man lived modestly, they saw from two and a half blocks away. It was a three-story building on a middle-class street that displayed no trappings of power at all, except for the obvious presence of guards on the front steps, and a few cars spotted at the corners. Looking closer from two hundred meters away, they could also see that people avoided walking on that side of the street. Popular man, the Ayatollah.

"So, who else lives there?" Klerk asked the Russian *rezident.* He was covered as the embassy's second secretary, and performed many diplomatic functions to maintain his legend.

"Mainly his bodyguards, we believe." They were sitting in a cafe, drinking coffee and studiously not looking directly at the building of their interest. "To either side, we think the buildings have been vacated. He has his security concerns, this man of God. The people here are increasingly uneasy under his rule—even the enthusiasm of the Iraqi conquest fades now. You can see the mood as well as I, Klerk. These people have been under control for almost a generation. They grow tired of it. And it was clever of your President to announce hostilities before our friend did. The shock value was very effective, I think. I like your President," he added. "So does Sergey Nikolay'ch."

"This building is close enough, Ivan Sergeycvich," Chavez said quietly, calling the kaffeeklatsch back to order. "Two hundred meters, direct line of sight."

"What about collateral damage?" Clark wondered. It required some

circumlocutions to make that come out in Russian.

"You Americans are so sentimental about such things," the *rezident* observed. It amused him.

"Comrade Klerk has always had a soft heart," Chekov confirmed.

AT HOLLOMAN AIR Force Base in New Mexico, a total of eight pilots arrived at the base hospital to have their blood checked. The Ebola testing kits were finally coming out in numbers. The first major military deliveries went to the Air Force, which could deploy more power more quickly than the other branches of the service. There had been a few cases in nearby Albuquerque, all being treated at the University of New Mexico Medical Center and two on this very base, a sergeant and his wife, the former dead and the latter dying—the news of it was all over the base, further enraging warriors who already possessed a surfeit of passion. The aviators all checked out clean, and the relief they felt was not ordinary. Now, they knew, they could go out and do something. The ground crews came in next. These also tested negative. All went off to the flight line. Half of the pilots strapped into F-117 Nighthawks. The other half, with the ground crews, boarded KC-10 tanker/transport aircraft for the long flight to Saudi.

Word was coming in over the Air Force's own communications network. The 366th and the F-16s from the Israeli base were doing pretty well, but everyone wanted a piece of this one, and the men and women from Holloman would lead the second wave into the battle zone.

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"IS HE QUITE mad?" the diplomat asked an Iranian colleague. It was the RVS officers who had the dangerous—or at least most sensitive—part of the intelligence mission.

"You may not speak of our leader in that way," the foreign ministry official replied as they walked down the street.

"Very well, does your learned holy man fully understand what happens when one employs weapons of mass destruction?" the intelligence officer asked delicately. Of course he did not, they both knew. No nation-state had done such a thing in over fifty years.

"He may have miscalculated," the Iranian allowed.

"Indeed." The Russian let it go at that for the moment. He'd been working this mid-level diplomat for over a year. "The world now knows that you have this capability. So clever of him to have flown on the very aircraft that made it possible. He is quite mad. You know that. Your country will be a pariah—"

"Not if we can—"

"No, not if you can. But what if you cannot?" the Russian asked. "Then the entire world will turn against you."

“THIS IS TRUE?” the cleric asked.

“It is quite true,” the man from Moscow assured him. “President Ryan is a man of honor. He was our enemy for most of his life, and a dangerous enemy, but now, with peace between us, he turns into a friend. He is well respected by both the Israelis and the Saudis. The Prince Ali bin Sheik and he are very close. That is well known.” This meeting was in Ashkhabad, capital of Turkmenistan, disagreeably close to the Iranian border, especially with the former Premier dead in a traffic accident—probably a creative one, Moscow knew—and elections pending. “Ask yourself this: Why did President Ryan say those things about Islam? An attack on his country, an attack on his child, an attack on himself—but does he attack your religion, my friend? No, he does not. Who but an honorable man would say such things?”

The man on the other side of the table nodded. “This is possible. What do you ask of me?”

“A simple question. You are a man of God. Can you condone those acts committed by the UIR?”

Indignation: “The taking of innocent life is hateful to Allah. Everyone knows that.”

The Russian nodded. “Then you must decide for yourself which is more important to you, political power, or your faith.”

But it wasn’t quite that simple: “What do you offer us? I have people who will soon look to me for their welfare. You may not use the Faith as a weapon against the Faithful.”

“Increased autonomy, free trade of your goods to the rest of the world, direct flights to foreign lands. We and the Americans will help you to arrange lines of credit with the Islamic states of the Gulf. They do not forget acts of friendship,” he assured the next Premier of Turkmenistan.

“How can a man faithful to God do such things?”

“My friend”—he wasn’t really, but that was what one said—“how many men start to do something noble and then become corrupted? And then what do they stand for? Perhaps it is a lesson for you to remember. Power is a deadly thing, most deadly of all to those who hold it in their earthly hands. For yourself, you must decide. What sort of leader do you wish to be, and with what other leaders will you associate your country?” Golovko leaned back and sipped at his tea. How wrong his country had been not to understand religion—and yet, how right was the result. This man had clung to his Islamic faith as an anchor against the previous regime, finding in it a continuity of belief and values which the political reality of his youth had lacked. Now that his character, known to all in the land, was carrying him to political power, would he remain what he had been, or would he become something else? He had to recognize that danger now. He hadn’t thought it all the way through, Golovko saw. Political figures so rarely did. This one had to do so, and right now, and the chairman of the RVS watched him search his soul—something the Marxist doctrine of his youth had told him did not exist. It turned out to be better that it did.

“Our religion, our Faith, it is a thing of God, not of murder. The Prophet teaches Holy War, yes, but it does not teach us to become our enemies. Unless Mahmoud Haji proves these things are false, I will not stand with him, for all

his promises of money. I would like to meet this Ryan, when the time comes."

BY 13:00 LIMA TIME, the picture was firming up nicely. The numbers were still pretty unattractive, Diggs thought, with five concentrated divisions on the move facing four brigade-sized forces, which were still dispersed. But there were things that could be done about that.

The small Saudi blocking force north of KKMC had held for three spectacular hours, but was now being enveloped and had to move, despite the wishes of the Saudi general staff. Diggs didn't even know the kid's name, but hoped to meet him later. With a couple years of proper training, he might really turn into something.

At his "suggestion," King Khalid Military City was being evacuated. The one part about that which hurt was turning off the intelligence assets there. Especially the Predator teams which now had to recall their birds for their withdrawal to WOLFPACK'S line north of Al Artawiyah. Now that they'd all had time to think about it, the battle was like a huge training exercise at the NTC—three corps instead of battalions to face, but the principle was the same, wasn't it?

The lingering concern was an Iranian heavy division now known to be crossing the swamps west of Basra. The enemy's operational concept did leave one blank spot. In bypassing Kuwait, they had not had a covering force in place, perhaps because they thought it unnecessary, more likely because they didn't want to tip their hand, figuring to patch the hole as they were doing now. Well, every plan had a flaw.

So did the plan he'd put together for Operation BUFORD, probably. But he didn't see it, despite two hours of looking.

"Are we agreed, gentlemen?" he had to ask. Every Saudi officer in the room was still senior to him, but they'd come to see the logic of his proposal. They were going to fuck 'em all, not just a few. The assembled generals nodded. They didn't even complain any more about leaving KKMC to the enemy. They could always rebuild it. "Then Operation BUFORD commences at sundown."

THEY FELL BACK by echelon. A few Saudi mobile guns had appeared and they now fired smoke to obscure the battlefield. As soon as they landed, half of Major Abdullah's vehicles backed off their positions and hurried south. The flanking units were already moving, fending off encirclement attempts which the enemy had adopted, probing expensively for the extreme ends of the Saudi line.

Berman's helicopter had never arrived, and the afternoon of noisy and confusing action—you couldn't see crap down here! he had come to learn—had been instructive. Calling in four more air strikes and seeing the effects on the ground was something he would keep in mind, if the Saudis clawed their way out of the trap the other side was casting about them.

"Come with me, Colonel," Abdullah said, turning to run for his command track, ending the First Battle of KKMC.

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GRIERSON'S RIDE

THE VIEW ON THE MAP was just awful. It was easy for anyone to see, a lot of long red arrows and short blue ones. The maps on the morning TV shows were not all that different from those in the Situation Room, and commentary —especially "expert" commentary—talked about how American and Saudi forces were badly outnumbered and poorly deployed, with their backs to the sea. But then there was the direct satellite feed.

"We've heard stories of fierce air battles to the northwest," Donner told the camera from "somewhere in Saudi Arabia." "But the troopers of the Blackhorse Regiment have yet to see action. I can't say where I am right now —the fact of the matter is that I just don't know. B-Troop is stopped for refueling now, pouring hundred of gallons into those big M1 Abrams tanks. It's a real fuel-hog, the troopers tell me. But their mood remains the same. These are angry men—*and* women back in the headquarters troop," he added. "I don't know what we will find at the western horizon. I can say that these soldiers are straining at the leash despite all the bad news that has come down from the Saudi high command. The enemy is somewhere out there, driving south in great strength, and soon after sundown, we expect to make contact. This is Tom Donner in the field with the B-Troop, 1st of the Blackhorse," the report concluded.

"His poise isn't bad," Ryan noted. "When does that go on the air?"

Fortunately for all concerned, the television uplinks were over military channels, which were encrypted and controlled. It wasn't time for the UIR to learn exactly who was where. The negative commentary of the "defeat" of the Saudi army *was,* however, going out. That news, leaked in Washington, and studiously not commented on by the Pentagon, was being accepted as gospel. Jack was still worried, however amusing it might have been in the abstract that the media was doing disinformation without even being asked.

"This evening. Maybe sooner," General Mickey Moore replied. "Sunset over there is in three hours."

"Can we do it?" POTUS asked.

"Yes, sir."

WOLFPACK, FIRST BRIGADE, North Carolina National Guard, was fully formed now. Eddington took to a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter for a flyover of his forward units. LOBO, his 1st Battalion Task Force, had its left edge on the road from Al Artawiyah to KKMC. WHITEFANG, the 2nd, was arrayed to the west side of the highway. COYOTE, the 3rd, was in reserve, his maneuver

force, leaning to the west, because that's where he thought the possibilities were. His artillery battalion he split into two segments, able to cover the left or right extremes, and both able to cover the center. He lacked air assets and had been unable to get anything more than three Black Hawks for medevac. He also had an intelligence group, a combat-support battalion, medical personnel, MPs, and all the other things organic to a unit of brigade size. Forward of his two frontline battalions was a reconnaissance element whose mission was, first, to report, and second, to take out the enemy's eyes when they appeared. He'd thought of asking the 11th ACR for some of their helicopter assets, but he knew what Hamm had planned for those, and it was a waste of breath to ask. He *would* get the take from their reconnaissance efforts, and that would have to do.

Looking down, he saw that the forward line of M1A2s and Bradleys had all found comfortable spots, mainly behind berms and mini-dunes, where possible just behind high ground, so that at most the top of a turret was visible and mainly not even that. Just the track commander's head and a pair of binoculars would suffice in most cases. The tanks were spaced no less than three hundred meters apart, and mostly more than that. It made them an unattractively diluted target for artillery or air attack. He'd been told not to worry about the latter, but he worried anyway, as much as circumstance allowed. His subordinate commanders knew their jobs as well as reservists could, and the truth of the matter was that the mission was right out of the textbooks written by Guderian and practiced by Rommel and every mounted commander ever since.

THE WITHDRAWAL STARTED with a ten-mile dash at thirty-five miles per hour, enough to outrun artillery fire, and to look like the rout that Berman initially thought it to be—until he remembered that *he* made a practice of leaving enemy fire behind at least fifteen times as fast as these mechanized vehicles were doing. They were riding with top hatches open, and Berman stood to look behind, past the brown-black fountains of exploding artillery shells. He'd never known what a defensive stand was like. Mainly lonely, he thought. He'd expected bunched vehicles and men, forgetting what he himself did to such things when he spotted them from the air. He saw what had to be fifty columns of smoke, all vehicles blown apart by the Saudi National Guard. Maybe they didn't take training seriously enough—he had heard such things—but this team had stood their ground against a force at least five times as large, and held them for three hours.

Not without cost. He turned forward and counted only fifteen tanks, plus eight infantry tracks. Perhaps there were more he couldn't see in the clouds of dust, he hoped. He looked up, into what he hoped was a friendly sky.

IT WAS. THE score since dawn was forty UIR fighters down, all of them air-to-air, against six American and Saudi losses, all of them ground-to-air. The opposing air force had been unable to overcome the advantage of the allied

airborne radar coverage, and the best thing that could be said for their effort was that they had distracted efforts to attack the ground forces, which would otherwise have been totally unimpeded. The ragtag collection of American-, French-, and Russian-made fighter aircraft looked impressive on paper and on the ramp, but less so in the air. But the allied air forces were far less capable at night. Only the small collection of F-15E Strike Eagles was really all—weather capable (night is considered a weather condition). There were about twenty of those, UIR intelligence estimated, and couldn't do all that much harm. The advancing divisions halted right before KKMC, again to refuel and rearm. One more such jump, their commanders thought, and they'd be to Riyadh before the Americans were organized enough to take the field. They still had the initiative, and were halfway to their objective.

PALM BOWL KEPT track of all that, feeding what radio intercepts it was garnering from the southwest, but now facing a new threat to the north from an Iranian armored division. Perhaps the UIR had expected that, with the Kingdom out of the way or at least heavily engaged, the Kuwaitis would be intimidated into inaction. If so, it was wishful thinking. Borders could be crossed in two directions, and Kuwait's government made the correct assumption that doing nothing would only make things worse for them, not better. It turned out to be another case of one more day needed to patch things up, but this time it was the other side which needed the extra time.

The Air Cavalry Squadron, 4th of the 10th, lifted off twenty minutes after sunset, heading north. There were some light motorized units on border guard duty, soon, they thought, to be relieved by the unit now crossing the Tigris-Euphrates delta. It comprised two battalions of troops in trucks and light armored vehicles. They'd chatted quite a bit on their radios, the commanders moving units back and forth, but strangely unprepared to be invaded by a nation not a tenth the size of their own. For the next hour, all twenty-six of the Buffalo Cav's Apaches would hunt them with cannon and rocket fire, burning a path for Kuwait's own light mechanized brigade, whose reconnaissance vehicles fanned out, searching for and finding the lead elements of Iranian armor. Five kilometers back was a battalion of heavy armor guided by the reconnaissance information, and the first major surprise of the night for the UIR was the sundering of nightfall by twenty tank guns, followed two seconds later by fifteen kills. The next lesson applied was that of confidence. Their first contact with the enemy a successful one, the lead Kuwaiti elements pressed the attack with gusto. It was all coming together for them. The night-vision systems worked. The guns worked. They had an enemy with his back to unsuitable ground and noplace to go.

Listening at PALM BOWL, Major Sabah heard the radio calls, again experiencing things at second hand. It turned out that only one brigade of the Iranian 4th Armored Division, mainly a reserve formation, had gotten across, and had driven blithely and unwarned into an advancing armor force. It was, Sabah thought, just about as fair as what had happened to his country on the morning of 1 August 1990. By sunset plus three hours, the only usable access route into southern Iraq was completely blocked, and with it, easy

reinforcement of the Army of God. Throughout the night, precision-guided bombs would drop bridges to make certain of that. It was a small battle for his small nation, but a winning one to set the stage for her nation's allies.

The Buffalo Cav was already moving its ground elements due west, while the Air Cav squadron returned to refuel and rearm, leaving a buoyant Kuwaiti army holding the allied rear and spoiling for another battle.

THE UIR I CORPS had been in reserve until this point. One division was the former Iranian 1st Armored, "The Immortals," accompanied by another armored division comprised mainly of surviving Republican Guards officers, and a new class of enlisted men untouched by the 1991 war. II Corps had made the breakthrough at the border and held the lead for the advance to KKMC, though in the course of combat action losing more than a third of its strength. That task accomplished, it moved left, east, clearing the path for I Corps, as yet untouched except by a few air attacks, and III Corps, similarly untouched. II Corps would now guard the flank of the advancing force against counterstrikes fully expected from the seaward side. All units, following their doctrine, sent out reconnaissance forces as darkness fell.

The lead units, advancing by bounds, skirted around King Khalid Military City, surprised to find no opposition. Emboldened, the commander of the reconnaissance battalion sent units directly into the city, then found it virtually empty of people, most of whom had driven out during the previous day. It seemed logical when he thought about it. The Army of God was advancing, and though it had taken a few heavy blows, nothing the Saudis had could stop it. Satisfied, he pressed south, a little more cautiously now. There had to be some opposition ahead.

EDDINGTON'S MP DETACHMENT had done its job conveying people south and out of the way. He'd seen a few faces, downcast mainly, until they'd gotten a look at what was waiting between KKMC and Al Artawiyah. WOLFPACK couldn't hide everything. Saudi MP units brought up the rear, passing through the recon screen at 21:00 local time. They'd said that there was nothing behind them. They were wrong.

With his soft vehicles in the lead and his fighting tracks guarding the rear with their turrets turned aft, Major Abdullah had thought about making one more stand, but didn't have the combat power to hold much of anything against what he knew had to be behind him. His men were exhausted by twenty-four hours of continuous combat operations, and the worst off were his tank drivers. Their position in the front of their vehicles was so comfortable as to cause them to fall asleep, only to be awakened by the shouts of their tank commanders, or the lurch of heading off the road into a ditch. His additional concern was that he'd expected to make contact with friendly units—battlefields, he'd learned in the past day, were anything but friendly places.

They appeared as white blobs at first on the thermal-imaging scopes, the vehicles straggling down the highway. Eddington, in his command post, knew

that there might be some Saudi stragglers downbound, and had warned his recon screen to expect it, but it wasn't until the evening's Predators took to the sky that he was sure. Through the thermal viewers, the distinctive flat top of the M1A2 tanks was clearly visible. This information he relayed to HOOTOWL, his recon detachment, which lessened their tension as the shapeless thermal blobs on their ground-based viewing systems gradually turned into friendlier profiles. Even then, there was the chance that friendly vehicles had been captured and converted to enemy use.

Troopers cracked chemical-light wands and dropped them on the road. These were spotted and the advancing trucks stopped practically on top of them, even rolling slowly as they were, without lights. A handful of Saudi liaison officers assigned to WOLFPACK verified their identity and waved them south. Major Abdullah, arriving at the screening position ten minutes later, jumped out of his command track, along with Colonel Berman. The American Guardsmen handed over food and water, first of all, quickly followed by GI coffee out of their MRE packs, the sort with triple the normal amount of caffeine.

"They're a ways back, but they're coming," Berman said. "My friend here well, he's had a busy day."

The Saudi major was at the point of collapse, the physical and mental exertions like nothing he'd ever known. He staggered over to the HOOTOWL command post and, over a map, relayed what he knew as coherently as he could.

"We must stop them," he concluded.

"Major, why don't you head on down about ten miles, and you'll see the biggest fuckin' roadblock ever was. Nice job, son," the lawyer from Charlotte told the young man. The major walked off toward his track. "Was it that tough?" he asked Berman when the Saudi was out of earshot.

"I know they killed fifty tanks, and that's just the ones I could see," Berman said, sipping coffee from a metal cup. "A lot more coming, though."

"Really?" the lawyer/lieutenant colonel said. "That suits us just fine. No friendlies back of you?"

Berman shook his head. "No chance."

"You head on down the road now, Berman. Ten miles, and then you watch the show, y'hear?"

They looked like Americans, Berman saw, in their desert BDUs, their faces painted under the Germanshaped Fritz helmets. There were red-shielded lights to point at the maps. It was dark out here, about as dark as a clear sky could get, just the stars enabling him to tell the difference between land and sky. A sliver of moon would appear later, but that wouldn't be much. The screen commander had a command HMMWV with lots of radios. Beyond, he could see a single Bradley, a few troops, and little else. But they stood like Americans and they spoke like Americans.

"HOOT-SIX, this is Two-Niner."

"Two-Niner, Six, go," the commander took the radio.

"We have some movement, five miles north of our position. Two vehicles nosing around right on the horizon."

"Roger, Two-Niner. Keep us informed. Out." He turned to Berman. "Get

going, Colonel. We have work to do here."

THERE WAS A flanking screen. That would be the enemy II Corps, Colonel Hamm thought. His forward line of Kiowa scout helicopters was now watching it. The Kiowas—the military version of the Bell 206, the copter most often used in America for reporting on traffic congestion—specialized in hiding, most often behind hills and ridges, with just the top-mounted electronic periscope peering about the terrain while the pilot held his aircraft in hover, seeing but not seen, while the TV systems recorded the event, relaying their "take" back. Hamm had six of them up now, advance scouts for his 4th Squadron, ten miles in front of his ground elements, now lying still thirty miles southeast of KKMC.

While he watched his display in the Star Wars Track, technicians converted the information from the Kiowa scouts into data that could be displayed graphically and distributed to the fighting vehicles in his command. Next came data from the Predator drones. They were up, covering the roads and desert south of the captured city, with one drone over it. The streets, he saw, were full of fuel and supply trucks. It was a convenient place to hide them.

Most important, electronic sensors were now at work. The UIR forces were moving too fast to rely on radio silence. Commanders had to talk back and forth. Those sources were moving, but they were moving predictably now, talking almost all the time, as commanders told subunits where to go and what to do, got information and reported it up the chain. He had two brigade CPs positively identified, and probably a divisional one, too.

Hamm changed display to get the larger picture. Two divisions were moving south from KKMC now. That would be the enemy I Corps, spread on a ten-mile frontage, two divisions moving abreast in columns of brigades, a tank brigade in front, mobile artillery right behind it. II Corps was moving to their left, spread thin to provide flank guard. III Corps appeared to be in reserve. The deployment was conventional and predictable. First contact with WOLFPACK would be in about an hour, and he would hold back until then, allowing I Corps to pass north to south, right to left along his front.

There hadn't been time to prepare the battlefield properly. The Guard troops lacked a full engineer detachment and the antitank mines they might have strewn to dirty up the terrain. There hadn't been time to prepare proper obstacles and traps. They'd scarcely been in place for ten hours, and the full brigade less than that. All they really had was a fire plan. WOLFPACK could shoot short wherever it wanted, but all deep fire had to be west of the road.

"Pretty good picture here, sir," his S-2 intelligence officer said.

"Send it out." And with that, every fighting vehicle in the Blackhorse had the same digital picture of the enemy that he had. Then Hamm lifted his radio.

"WOLFPACK-SIX, this is BLACKHORSE-SlX."

"This is WOLFPACK-SIX-ACTUAL. Thanks for the data feed, Colonel," Eddington replied over the digital radio. Both units also knew where all the friendlies were. "I'd say initial contact in about an hour."

"Ready to rock, Nick?" Hamm asked.

"Al, it's all I can do to hold my boys back. We are locked and cocked," the

Guard commander assured him. “We have visual on their advance screen now.”

“You know the drill, Nick. Good luck.”

“Blackhorse,” Eddington said in parting.

Hamm changed settings on his radio, calling BUFORD-SIX.

“I have the picture, Al,” Marion Diggs assured him, a hundred miles back and not liking *that* fact one bit. He was sending men into battle by remote control, and that came hard to a new general officer.

“Okay, sir, we are fully in place. All they have to do is walk in the door.”

“Roger, BLACKHORSE. Standing by here. Out.”

The most important work was now being done by the Predators. The UAV operators, sited with Hamm’s intelligence section, circled their mini-aircraft higher to minimize the chance they might be spotted or heard. Cameras pointed down, counting and checking locations. The Immortals were on the enemy left, and the former Iraqi Guards Division on the right, west of the road. They were moving along steadily, battalions on line and tightly packed for maximum power and shock effect if they encountered opposition, ten miles behind their own reconnaissance screen. Behind the lead brigade was the divisional artillery. This force was divided in two, and as they watched in the intel track, one half halted, spread out, and set up to provide covering fire, while the other half took up and moved forward. Again, that was right out of the book. They would be in place for about ninety minutes. The Predators flew over the line of guns, marking their position from GPS signals. That data went down to the MLRS batteries. Two more Predators were sent along. These were dedicated to getting exact locations on enemy command vehicles.

“WELL, I’M NOT sure when this will go out,” Donner told the camera. “I’m here inside Bravo-Three-Two, number-two scout track in 3rd Platoon of B-Troop. We just got information on where the enemy is. He’s about twenty miles west of us right now. There are at least two divisions moving south on the road from King Khalid Military City. I know now that a brigade of the North Carolina National Guard is in a blocking position. They deployed with the 11th Cavalry Regiment because they were at the National Training Center for routine training.

“The mood here—well, how can I explain this? The troopers of the Blackhorse Regiment, they’re almost like doctors, strange as that may sound. These men are angry at what’s happened to their country, and I’ve talked to them about it, but right now, like doctors waiting for the ambulance to come into the emergency room. It’s quiet in the track. We just heard that we’ll be moving west in a few minutes to the jump-off point.

“I want to add a personal note. Not long ago, as you all know, I violated a rule of my profession. I did something wrong. I was misled, but the fault was mine. I learned earlier today that the President himself requested that I should come here—maybe to get me killed?” Donner adlibbed in an obvious joke. “No, not that. This is the sort of situation that people in the news business live for. I am here where history may soon take place, surrounded by other Americans who have an important job to do, and however this turns out, this

is where a reporter belongs. President Ryan, thank you for the chance.

"This is Tom Donner, southeast of KKMC, with B-Troop, 1st Squadron of the Blackhorse." He lowered the mike. "Got that?"

"Yes, sir," the Army spec-5 told him. The soldier said something into his own microphone. "Okay, that went up to the satellite, sir."

"Good one, Tom," the track commander said, lighting up a cigarette. "Come here. I'll show you how this IVIS thing works and—" He stopped, holding his helmet with his hand to hear what was coming over the radio. "Start'er up, Stanley," he told the driver. "It's showtime."

HE LET THEM come in. The man commanding the WOLFPACK'S reconnaissance screen was a criminal-defense attorney by profession who'd actually graduated from West Point but later decided on a civilian career. He'd never quite lost the bug, as he thought of it, though he didn't quite know why. Age forty-five now, he'd been in uniformed service of one sort or another for almost thirty years of drills and exhausting exercise and mind-numbing routine which took away from his time and his family. Now, in the front line of his recon force, he knew why.

The lead scout vehicles were two miles to his front. He estimated two platoons that he could see, a total of ten vehicles spread across three miles, moving three or four at a time in the darkness. Maybe they had low-light gear. He wasn't sure of that, but had to assume that they did. On his thermal systems he could make them out as BRDM-2 scout cars, four-wheeled, equipped with a heavy machine gun or antitank missiles. He saw both versions, but he was especially looking for the one with four radio antennas. That would be the platoon or company commander's vehicle . . .

"Antenna track direct front," a Bradley commander called from four hundred meters to the colonel's right. "Range two-kay meters, moving in now."

The lawyer-officer lifted his head above the abbreviated ridge and scanned the field with his thermal viewer. Now was as good a time as any.

"HOOTOWL, this is Six, party in ten, I say again, party in ten seconds. Four-Three, stand by."

"Four-Three is standing by, SIX." That Bradley would take the first shot in 2nd of KKMC. The gunner selected high-explosive incendiary tracer. A BRDM wasn't tough enough to need the armor-piercing rounds he had in the dual-feed magazine of his Bushmaster cannon. He centered the target in his pipper, and the on-board computer adjusted for the range.

"Eat shit and *die*, " the gunner said into the interphones.

"HOOTOWL, SIX, commence firing, commence firing."

"Fire!" the track commander told the gunner. The spec-4 on the 25mm gun depressed the triggers for a threeround burst. All three tracers made a line across the desert, and all three hit. The command BRDM erupted into a fireball as the vehicle's gas tank—strangely for a Russian-made vehicle, it was not diesel-powered-exploded. "Target!" the commander said instantly, confirming that the gunner had destroyed it. "Traverse left, target *burdum."*

"Identified!" the gunner said when he was locked on.

"Fire!" A second later: "Target! Cease fire, traverse right! Target *burdum,* two o'clock, range fifteen hundred!" The Bradley's gun turret rotated the other way as the enemy vehicles started to react.

"Identified!"

"Fire!" And the third one was dead, ten seconds after the first.

Within a minute, all the BRDMs the screen commander had seen were burning. The brilliant white light made him cringe to see. Then other flashes appeared left and right of his position. Then: "Move out, run 'em down!"

Across ten miles of desert, twenty Bradleys darted from behind their hiding places, going forward, not backward, their turrets traversing and their gunners hunting for enemy scout vehicles. A short, vicious, running gunfight began, lasting ten minutes and three klicks, with the BRDMs trying to pull back but unable to shoot back effectively. Two Sagger antitank missiles were launched, but both fell short and exploded in the sand when their launch vehicles were killed by Bushmaster fire. Their heavy machine guns weren't powerful enough to punch through the Bradleys' frontal armor. The enemy screen, comprising a total of thirty vehicles, was exterminated by the end of it, and HOOTOWL owned this part of the battlefield.

"WOLFPACK, this is HOOT-SIX-ACTUAL, I think we got'em all. Their lead screen is toast. No casualties," he added. God damn, he thought, those Bradleys can shoot.

"SOME RADIO CHATTER got out, sir," the ELINT trooper next to Eddington reported. "Getting some more now."

"He's calling for artillery fire," a Saudi intelligence officer said quickly.

"HOOT, you may expect some fire shortly," Eddington warned.

"Roger, understand. HOOT is moving forward."

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IT WAS SAFER than staying in place or falling back. On command, the Bradleys and Hummers darted two klicks to the north, looking for the enemy supplementary reconnaissance screen—there had to be some—which would move up now, probably cautiously, on direction of their brigade or divisional commanders. This, the Guard lieutenant colonel knew, would be the reconnaissance battle, the undercard for the main event, with the lightweights duking it out before the heavyweights closed. But there was a difference. He could continue to shape the battlefield for WOLIPACK. He expected to find another company of reconnaissance vehicles, closely followed by a heavy advanced guard of tanks and BMPs. The Bradley had TOW missiles to do the tanks, and the Bushmaster had been designed for the express purpose of killing the infantry carrier they called the *bimp.* Moreover, though the enemy now knew where the Blue Force recon screen was—had been—he would expect it to fall back, not advance.

That was plain two minutes later, when a planned-fire barrage dropped a klick behind the moving Bradleys. The other side was playing it by the book,

the old Soviet book. And it wasn't a bad book, but the Americans had read it, too. HOOTOWL pressed on rapidly for another klick and stopped, finding a convenient line of low ridges, with blobs on the horizon again. The lawyer/colonel lifted his radio to report that.

"BUFORD, THIS IS WOLFPACK, we are in contact, sir," Eddington relayed to Diggs from his CP. "We just clobbered their recon element. Our screening forces now have visual on the advance guard. My intentions are to engage briefly and pull them back and right, southeast. We have enemy artillery fire dropping between the screen and the main body. Over."

"Roger, WOLFPACK." On his command screen, Diggs saw the advancing Bradleys, moving in a fairly even line, but well spread. Then they started spotting movement. The things they saw started appearing as unknown-enemy symbols on the IVIS command system.

It was immensely frustrating to the general in command. He had more knowledge of a developing battle than had ever been possible in the history of warfare. He had the ability now to tell platoons what to do, where to go, whom to shoot—*but he couldn't allow himself to do that.* He'd approved the intentions of Eddington, Hamm, and Magruder, coordinating their plans in space and time, and now as their commander he had to let them do it their way, interfering only if something went wrong or some new and unexpected situation offered itself. The commander of American forces in the Kingdom, he was now a spectator. The black general shook his head in wonderment. He'd known it would be like this. He hadn't known how hard it would hit him.

IT WAS ALMOST time. Hamm had his squadrons advancing abreast, covering only ten kilometers each, but separated by intervals of ten more. In every case, the squadron commanders had opted to have their scout troops in the lead, and their tank companies in reserve. Each troop had nine tanks and thirteen Brads, plus two mortar-carrying M113 tracks. In front of them, now seven kilometers away, were the brigades of UIR II Corps, bloodied by the breakthrough battles north of KKMC, weakened, but probably alert. There was nothing like violent death to get someone's attention. His helicopters and video feed from the Predators had well defined their positions. He knew where they were. They didn't know about him yet probably, he had to admit. Certainly they were trying as hard as he would have done to make sure. His final order was for his helicopters to make one more sweep of the intervening terrain for an enemy outpost line. Everything else was pretty well locked into place, and fifty miles back, his Apaches started lifting off, along with their Kiowa scouts, for their part in the main event.

THE F-15E STRIKE Eagles were all up north. Two of their number had been lost earlier in the day, including that of the squadron commander. Now, protected by HARM-EQUIPPED F-16s, they were pounding the bridges and

causeways across the twin-rivers estuary with smart bombs. They could see tanks on the ground, burning ones west of the swamps and intact ones bunched up to the east. In an exciting hour, every route across was destroyed by repeated hits.

The F-15Cs were over the KKMC area, as always under AWACS control. One group of four stayed high, outside the envelope of the mobile SAMs with the advancing land force. Their job was to watch for UIR fighters who might get in the way of things. The rest were hunting for helicopters belonging to the armored divisions. It didn't carry the prestige of a fighter kill—but a kill was a kill, and was something they could do with near-total impunity. Better still, generals traveled in helicopters, and most of all, those would be part of the UIR reconnaissance effort, and that, the plan said, couldn't be allowed.

Below them, word must have gotten out in a hurry. Only three choppers had been killed during the daylight hours, but with the coming of darkness a number had lifted off, half of them splashed in the first ten minutes. It was so different from the last time. The hunting was pretty easy. The enemy, on the offense, had to offer battle—couldn't hide in shelters, couldn't disperse. That suited the Eagle drivers. One driver, south of KKMC, was vectored by his AWACS, located a chopper on his look-down radar, selected AIM-120, and triggered the missile off in seconds. He watched the missile all the way in, spotting the fireball that jerked left and splattered widely on the ground. Part of him thought it a needless waste of a perfectly good Slammer. But a kill was a kill. That would be the last chopper kill of the evening. The pilots heard from their E-3B Sentry control aircraft that friendly choppers were now entering the battle area, and weapons went tight on the Eagles.

LESS THAN HALF of his Bradley gunners had ever fired TOW missiles for real, though all had done so hundreds of times in simulation. HOOTOWL waited for the advance guard to get just within the margins. It was tricky. The supplementary recon screen was closer still. The Bradleys engaged them first, and this gunfight was a little more two-sided. Two BRDMs were actually behind the American scout line. Both turned at once. One nearly drove over a HMMWV, hosing it with its machine gun before a Bradley blew it apart. The armored vehicle raced to the site, finding one wounded survivor from the three-man crew on the Hummer. The infantrymen tended to him while the driver got up on a berm and the gunner elevated his TOW launcher.

The leading group of tanks was shooting now, seeking out the flashes of the Bradley guns, activating their own night-vision systems, and again there was a brief, vicious battle over the barren, unlit ground. One Bradley was hit and exploded, killing all aboard. The rest got off one or two missiles each, collecting twenty tanks in reply before their commander called them back, and just escaping the artillery barrage called in by the enemy tank commander on their positions. HOOTOWL left behind that one Bradley, and two Hummers, and the first American ground casualties of the Second Persian Gulf War. These were reported up the line.

IT WAS RIGHT after lunch in Washington. The President had eaten lightly, and the word came into the Situation Room just after he'd finished, still able to look down at the gold-trimmed plate, the crust of bread from his sandwich, and the chips he'd not eaten. The news of the deaths hit him hard, harder, somehow, than the casualties on USS *Yorktown* or the six missing aviators—*missing* didn't necessarily mean *dead*, did it? he allowed himself to think. These men certainly were. National Guardsmen, he'd learned. Citizen soldiers most often used to help people after floods or hurricanes . . .

"Mr. President, would you have gone over there for this mission?" General Moore asked, even before Robby Jackson could speak. "If you were twenty-something again, a Marine lieutenant, and they told you to go, you'd go, right?"

"I suppose—no, no, I'd go. I'd have to."

"So did they, sir," Mickey Moore told him.

"That's the job, Jack," Robby said quietly. "That's what they pay us for."

"Yeah." And he had to admit that it was what they paid him for, too.

THE FOUR F-117 Nighthawks landed at Al Kharj, rolling out and taxiing to shelters. The transports carrying the spare pilots and ground crews were right behind. Intelligence officers down from Riyadh met the latter group, taking the spare pilots aside for their first mission briefing in a war which was just now getting started in a big way.

THE MAJOR GENERAL in charge of the Immortals Division was in his command vehicle, trying to make sense of things. It had been a quite satisfactory war to this point. II Corps had done its job, blasting open the hole, allowing the main force to shoot through, and until an hour before, the picture had been both clear and pleasing. Yes, there were Saudi forces heading southwest for him, but they were the best part of a day away. By then, he'd be on the outskirts of their capital, and there were other plans for them as well. At dawn, II Corps would jump east from its covering position on his left, feinting toward the oil fields. That should give the Saudis second thoughts. Certainly it would give him another day in which, with luck, he'd get some, maybe all of the Saudi government. Maybe even the royal family—or, if they fled, as they might well do, then the Kingdom would be leaderless, and then his country would have won the war.

It had been costly to this point. II Corps had paid the price of half its combat power to deliver the Army of God this far, but victory had never been cheaply bought. Nor would it be the case here. His forward screen had disappeared right off the radio net. One call of contact with unknown forces, a request for artillery support, then nothing. He knew that a Saudi force was somewhere ahead of him. He knew it was the remains of the 4th Brigade, which II Corps had almost but not quite immolated. He knew it had fought hard north of KKMC and then pulled back ... it had probably been ordered to hold so that

the city could be evacuated . . . it was probably still strong enough to chew up his reconnaissance force. He didn't know where the American cavalry regiment was . . . probably to his cast. He knew that there might be another American brigade somewhere, probably also to his east. He wished for helicopters, but he'd just lost one to American fighters, along with his chief intelligence officer. So much for the air support he'd been promised. The only friendly fighter he'd seen all day had been a smoking hole in the ground just east of KKMC. But though Americans could annoy him, they couldn't stop him, and if he got to Riyadh on time, then he could send troops to cover most of the Saudi airfields and preempt that threat. So the key to the operation, as his Corps and Army command had told him, was to press on with all possible speed. With that decision made, he ordered his lead brigade to advance as scheduled, with his advance guard playing the reconnaissance role. They'd just reported contact and a battle, losses taken and inflicted on an enemy as yet unidentified, but who had withdrawn after a brief firefight. Probably that Saudi force, he decided, doing its best to sting and run, and he'd run it down after sunrise. He gave the orders, informed his staff of his intentions, and left the command post to drive forward, wanting to see things at the front, as a good general should, while the staff radioed orders to subordinate commanders.

THERE WERE SOME screening elements, the Kiowas reported. Not many. They'd probably been badly shot up on the drive south, Colonel Hamm thought. He directed one of his squadrons to maneuver left to avoid, and told his air commander to detail an Apache to deal with that one in a few minutes. One of the others could be bypassed easily. The third was directly in the path of 3rd Squadron, and that was just too bad. The position of the BRDMs was marked on the IVIS screens, along with most of UIR's battered II Corps.

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SO WERE THE Immortals. Eddington saw that the advance guard, with the leading elements of the main force close behind, was just entering gun range of his tanks, advancing at about twenty kilometers per hour. He called Hamm.

"Five minutes from *now.* Good luck, Al."

"You, too, Nick," Eddington heard.

IT WAS CALLED synchronicity. Thirty miles apart, several groups of Paladin mobile guns elevated their tubes and pointed them to spots picked by Predator drones and ELINT intercepts. The cannoneers of the new age punched the proper coordinates into their computers so that the widely separated weapons could fire to the same point. Eyes were on clocks now, watching the digital numbers change, one second at a time, marching toward 22:30:00 Lima time, 19:30:00 Zulu, 14:30:00 Washington.

It was much the same in the Multiple-Launch Rocket System tracks. There the troops made sure their compartments were scaled, locked their suspension to stabilize the vehicles during the launch cycle, and then closed down windshield shutters. The exhaust from their rockets could be lethal.

South of KKMC, the Carolina Guard tankers watched the advancing white blobs. Gunners thumbed their laser range-finders. The lead screening elements were now 2,500 meters distant, and the follow-on line of the main body a thousand behind them, mixed tanks and BMPs.

Southeast of KKMC, the Blackhorse was advancing at fifteen kph now, toward a line of targets on a ridge four thousand meters west.

It wasn't perfect. B-Troop, 1st of the 11th, stumbled right into an unsuspected BRDM position and opened fire on its own, starting fireballs into the air, turning eyes, and alerting people a few seconds too soon, but in the end that didn't matter, as the digital numbers kept changing at the same pace, either fast or slow, depending on the perceptions of the onlookers.

Eddington timed it to the second. Unable to smoke throughout the evening, for fear of making a glow that would show up on somebody's night viewer, he opened his Zippo and flicked it as 59 changed to 00. A little bit of light wouldn't matter . . . now.

THE ARTILLERY WENT first, already ordered to time its fire to the second. The most spectacular were the MLRS rockets, twelve from each launcher, rippling out less than two seconds apart, their flaming motors illuminating the exhaust smoke as they streaked into a sky no longer dark. By 22:30:30, nearly two hundred of the M77 free-flight rockets were in the air. By that time, the mobile guns were being reloaded, their lanyards pulled, the guns discharged, and now their breeches open for the next set of rounds.

The night was clear, and the light show could not be missed by anyone within a hundred miles. Fighter pilots aloft to the northeast saw the rockets fly, and looked closely at their course. They didn't want to be in the same sky with the things.

Iraqi officers in the advancing Guards Armored Division saw them first, coming up from the south, and next they saw that all were angling west of the north-south road from KKMC to Al Artawiyah. Many of them had seen the same sight as lieutenants and captains, and knew exactly what they meant. Steel rain was coming. Some were paralyzed by the sight. Others shouted orders for men to get cover, close their hatches, and ride it out.

That wasn't possible for the divisional artillerymen. Most of their guns were towed, and most of the gunners were in the open, ammunition trucks standing by for the fire mission that had to be coming. They saw the rocket motors burn out, noted their direction, and there was little to be done but wait. Men dived to the ground, usually scattering first, holding their helmets in place and praying that the damned things were heading somewhere else.

The rockets tipped over on apogee, heading back to the ground. At several thousand feet, a timer blew open the noses, and each projectile released 644 submunitions, each weighing half a pound, which made for 7,728 for each of the launchers employed. All were targeted at the Guards Division's artillery.

That was their longest-reaching weapon, and Eddington wanted it out of play immediately. As was the practice in the U.S. Army, MLRS was the unit commander's personal shotgun. A few of the Iraqi gunners looked up. They couldn't see or hear them coming, but come they did.

From a distance, it looked like sparklers on the ground, or maybe firecrackers at Chinese New Year, dancing and exploding in celebration. It was noisy death for those on the ground, as a total of over seventy *thousand* of the munitions exploded over an area of about two hundred acres. Trucks caught fire and exploded in flame. Propellant charges lit off in secondary explosions, but most of all the artillerymen were slaughtered, over eighty percent of them killed or wounded by the first volley. There would be two more. Back of WOLFPACK'S center, the launch vehicles scuttled back to their resupply trucks. Just before getting there, the expended "six-pack" launch cells were ejected and new ones hoisted into place with rigging equipment. It took about five minutes to accomplish the reload.

It was faster for the 155mm guns. These, too, were gunning for their enemy counterparts, and their rounds were every bit as accurate as the rockets. It was the most mechanistic of military activities. The gun did the killing and the people served the gun. They couldn't see their work, and in this case didn't even have a forward-observer to tell them how they were doing, but they'd learned that with GPS doing the aiming, it didn't matter—and if things went as planned, they would later see the results of their deadly work.

Perversely, those with direct views of the advancing enemy fired last, the tankers waiting for the word, delivered as company commanders fired first for their units.

For all its lethality, the fire-control system for the Abrams tank is one of the simplest mechanisms ever placed in the hands of soldiers, and even easier to use than the million-dollar crew-training simulators. The gunners each had assigned sectors, and the initial rounds fired by the company commanders had been HEAT—high-explosive antitank—rounds, which made a distinctive visual signature. Tanks were assigned areas left or right of those first kills. The thermal-imaging viewing systems keyed on heat, infrared radiation. Their targets were warmer than the desert landscape at night and announced their presence as clearly as lightbulbs. Each gunner was told what area to pick from, and each selected an advancing T-80. Centering the target in the sight, the laser buttons were depressed. The beam went out to the target and reflected back. The return signal told the ballistic computer the target's distance, speed, and direction of movement. Other sensors told it the outside temperature, the temperature of the ammunition, atmospheric density, wind direction and speed, the condition of the gun (hot ones droop), and how many shells had been fired through the tube to this point in its career. The computer digested this and other information, processed it, and when finished, flashed a white rectangle in the gunsight to tell the gunner the system was on target. Then it was just a matter of his closing his index fingers on the yoke's twin triggers. The tank lurched, the breech surged back, the muzzle flash blinded the sight momentarily, and the "sabot" rounds streaked downrange at more than a mile a second. The projectiles were like overly thick arrows, less than the length of a man's arm, and two inches in diameter, with stubby fins on the

tail that burned from air friction in their brief flight, and trailing tracers for the tank commander to watch the “silver bullets” all the way in.

The targets were Russian-made T-80s, old tanks with old design histories. They were much smaller than their American adversaries, mainly due to their inadequate engine power, and their diminished size had made for a number of design compromises. There was a fuel tank in the front, the line for which went along the turret ring. Gun rounds were fitted in slots that nested in the rear fuel tank, so that their ammunition was surrounded by diesel fuel. Finally, to save on turret space, the loader had been replaced by an automated loading system, which in addition to being slower than a man, also required that a live round be in the open in the turret at all times. It might not have made all that much of a difference in any case, but it did make for spectacular kills.

The second T-80 to die took a “silver bullet” at the base of the turret. The incoming round obliterated the fuel line first of all, and in the process of crashing through the armor created a lethal shower of fragments moving at over a thousand meters per second in the cramped confines, caroming off the inner surface and chopping the crewmen to bits; at the same time the ready round ignited on its tray and other rounds exploded in their racks. The crew was already dead when the ammunition exploded, also setting off the fuel and creating an explosion which blew the heavy turret fifty feet straight up in what the Army called a “catastrophic kill.” Fifteen others died the same way in the space of three seconds. The Immortals Division’s advance guard evaporated in ten more, and the only resistance they were able to offer was that the pyres of their vehicles obscured the battlefield.

Fire shifted at once to the main body, three battalions advancing on line, now just over three thousand meters away, a total of just over a hundred fifty advancing toward a battalion of fifty-four.

The commanders of the Iranian tanks were mainly still out of their turrets, the better to see, despite their having seen the rockets lifting off several miles downrange. They next saw a linear ripple of white and orange three kilometers in the distance, followed by explosions to their direct front. The quicker of the officers and conscripted tank commanders ordered their gunners to get rounds off at the muzzle flashes, and no less than ten did shoot, but they hadn’t had time to gauge the range, and all their rounds fell short. The Iranian crews were drilled in what to do, and they hadn’t as yet had time for fear to replace shock. Some started reload cycles, while others worked their range finders to get off properly aimed rounds, but then the horizon turned orange again, and what followed scarcely gave them the time to take note of the change of color in the sky.

The next volley of fifty-four main-gun rounds found forty-four marks, ten of the T-80s being double-targeted. This was less than twenty seconds into the engagement.

“Find one still moving,” one E-6 tank commander said to his gunner. The battlefield was lighting up now, and the fireballs interfered with the thermal viewers. There. The gunner got his laser range—3,650m—the box came up, and he fired. The sights blanked, then came back, and he could see the tracer of his round arcing flat across the desert, all the way in

"Target!" the commander said. "Shift fire."

"Identified—got one!"

"Fire!" the commander ordered.

"On the way!" The gunner fired his third round of the half-minute, and three seconds later, another T-80 turret became a ballistic object.

Just that fast, the tank phase of the battle was over.

The Bradleys were engaging the advancing BMPs, their Bushmaster cannons reaching out. It was slower for them, the range more difficult for their lighter guns, but the result was just as final.

THE COMMANDER OF the Immortals was just approaching the trail elements of the lead brigade when he saw the rockets fly. Telling his driver to pull over, he stood and turned in his command vehicle and saw the secondary explosions of his divisional artillery array, when, turning back forward, he saw the second volley of Eddington's tanks. Forty percent of his combat power had disappeared in less than a minute. Even before the shock hit him, he knew that he'd walked into an ambush—but of what?

THE MLRS ROCKETS which had robbed the Immortals of their artillery had come from the east, not the south. It was Hamm's gift to the National Guardsmen, who were unable to go after the Iranian guns themselves with the existing fire plan. Blackhorse's MLRS had done that, then shifted fire to make way for the regiment's Apache attack helicopters, which were striking deep, actually beyond the 11 Corps units now being engaged by the three ground squadrons.

The division of labor on this battlefield had been determined in principle the previous day, and developments had not changed anyone's thoughts. Artillery would initially target artillery. Tanks would target tanks. The helicopters were out to kill commanders. The Immortals Division CP had stopped twenty minutes earlier. Ten minutes before the first rocket launch, Apache-Kiowa teams looped around from the north, approaching from the rear and heading for the places from which the radio signals were emitting. First would come the division-level targets, followed by the brigades.

The Immortals' staff was just coming to terms with the incoming signals. Some officers requested confirmation or clarification, information needed before they could react properly to the situation. That was the problem with command posts. They were the institutional brains of the units they commanded, and the people who made up the decision process had to be together to function.

From six kilometers away, the collection of vehicles was obvious. Four SAM-shooters were oriented south, and there was a ring of AAA guns, too. Those went first. The Apaches of P-(Attack)-Troop stopped in place, picking a spot with nothing dangerous around, and hovering at about a hundred feet. Front-seated gunners, all of them young warrant officers, used optical equipment to zoom in, selected the first group of targets, and selected Hellfire laser-guided

missiles. The first launch was made by surprise, but an Iranian soldier saw the flash, and shouted to a gun crew, which slewed its guns around and started shooting before the missiles were all the way on. What followed was a madhouse. The targeted Apache dodged left, accelerating sideways at fifty knots to throw them off, but also ruining the aim of the startled gunner, who had to shoot again, as the first missile went wide. The other AH-64s were not hampered, and of their six launches, five hit. In another minute, the antiair problem was neutralized, and the attack choppers closed. They could see people running now, out and away from the command tracks. Some soldiers in the command security group started firing their rifles into the sky, and there was more structured activity from machine-gunners, but surprise was on the other side. The gunners fired 2.75-inch rockets to blanket the area, Hellfires to eliminate the few remaining armored vehicles, and then shifted to their 30mm cannon. In display of their rage, they closed in now, like the oversized insects they appeared to be, buzzing and slipping from side to side while the gunners looked for people the heavier weapons had missed. There was noplace to hide on the flat terrain, and the human bodies glowed on the dark, colder surface, and the gunners hunted them down in groups, in pairs, and finally one by one, sweeping across the site like harvesters. In their pre-mission discussion on the flight line, it had been decided that, unlike in 1991, helicopters would not accept surrender in this war, and the 30mm projectiles had explosive tips. P-Troop—they called themselves the Predators—lingered for ten minutes before they were satisfied that every single vehicle was destroyed and every moving body dead before they twisted in the sky, dipped their noses, and headed back east for their rearm points.

THE PREMATURE ATTACK on II Corps's reconnaissance element had started one part of this battle a little too early, and alerted a reasonably intact tank company sooner than intended, but the enemy tanks were still white blobs on a black background, and less than four thousand meters away.

"Battlestars engage," B-Troop's commander ordered, firing off his first round, soon to be followed by eight more. Six hit, even at this extreme range, and the attack by the Blackhorse on II Corps began even before the first MLRS volley. The next volley was delivered on the move, and five more tanks exploded, their return rounds falling short. It was a little harder to hit this way. Though the gun was stabilized, hitting a bump could throw the aim off, and misses were expected, if not exactly welcomed.

B-Troop's tanks were spaced fully half a kilometer apart, and each had a hunting zone exactly that wide, and the farther they went, the more targets appeared. The Bradley scout vehicles hung back a hundred yards or so, and their gunners looked for infantry who might wield antitank weapons. II Corps's two divisions were spread across twenty miles of linear space and about eight miles of depth, so said the IVIS gear. In ten minutes, B-Troop chopped its way through a battalion diminished by the Saudis and now erased by the Americans. The bonus came ten minutes later, when they spotted a battery of artillery setting up. The Bradleys got those, sweeping the area with their 25mm cannon and adding to the fireballs that gave the lie to the sunset

only four hours old.

"DAMN." EDDINGTON MERELY spoke the word, without any emphasis at all. He had been called forward by his battalion commanders and was now standing up in his HMMWV.

"You believe less than five minutes?" LOBO-SIX asked. He'd heard the amazement himself over his battalion net: "Is that all?" more than one sergeant had asked aloud. It was crummy radio discipline, but everyone was thinking the same thing.

But there was more to do than admire the work. Eddington lifted his radio handset and called for his brigade S-2.

"What's Predator tell us?"

"We have two more brigades still southbound, but they slowed some, sir. They're roughly nine klicks north of your line on the near one, and twelve on the far one."

"Put me through to BUFORD," WOLFPACK-SIX ordered.

THE GENERAL WAS still in the same place, with death before and behind. Scarcely ten minutes had passed. Three tanks and twelve BMPs had run backward, stopping at a depression and holding position while they waited for instructions. There were men coming back now, too, some wounded, most not. He could not scream at them. If anything, the shock of the moment was harder on him than it was on them.

He'd already tried contacting his divisional command post, but gotten only static in return, and for all his experience in uniform, his time in command, the schools he'd attended, and the exercises he'd won and lost—nothing had prepared him for this.

But he still had more than half a division to command. Two of his brigades were still fully intact, and he hadn't come here to lose. He ordered his driver to turn and head back. To the surviving elements of the lead brigade went orders to hold until further word. He had to maneuver. He'd run into a nightmare, but it couldn't be everywhere.

"WHAT DO YOU propose, Eddington?"

"General Diggs, I want to move my people north. We just ate up two tank brigades easier'n a plate full of grits. The enemy's artillery is largely destroyed, sir, and I have a clear field in front of me."

"Okay, take your time and watch your flanks. I'll notify BLACKHORSE."

"Roger that, sir. We'll be moving in twenty."

They'd thought about this possibility, of course. There was even a sketch plan on the maps. LOBO would shift and extend right. WHITEFANG would go straight north, straddling the road, and the so far unengaged Battalion Task Force COYOTE would take the left, echeloned to be able to sweep in from the rough terrain to the west. From their new positions, the brigade would grind

north to phaselines spaced ten kilometers apart. They'd have to move slowly because of the darkness, the unfamiliar ground, and the fact that it was only half a plan, but the activation code word was NATHAN, and the first phase-line was MANASSAS. Eddington hoped Diggs wouldn't mind.

"This is WOLFPACK-SIX to all sixes. Code word is NATHAN. I repeat, we are activating Plan NATHAN in two-zero minutes. Acknowledge," he ordered.

All three battalion commanders chimed in seconds later.

DIGGS HAD KEPT him in the loop, and the picture, such as it was, was up on the command screen in the M4 God Track. Colonel Magruder wasn't all that surprised at the initial results, except maybe that the Guardsmen had done so well. Rather more surprising was the progress the 10th had made. Advancing at a steady thirty kilometers per hour, he was well into the former Iraq, and ready to turn south. This he did at 0200L. His helicopter squadron left behind to cover the Kuwaitis, he felt a little naked at the moment, but it was still dark and would be for another four hours. By then he'd be back in Saudi. BUFFALO-SIX judged that he had the best cavalry mission of all. Here he was, deep into enemy territory, and deeper still in his rear. Just like what Colonel John Grierson had done to Johnny Reb, and what he and the Buffalo Soldiers had done to the Apaches. He ordered his units to spread wide. Reconnaissance said there wasn't much out here to get in the way, that the enemy's main strength was deep in the Kingdom. Well, he didn't think it would get much deeper, and all he had to do was slam the door behind.

DONNER WAS STANDING up in the top hatch of the scout track, behind the turret, with his Army cameraman next to him. It was like nothing he'd ever seen. He'd gotten the assault on the gun battery on tape, though he didn't think the tape would be all that usable, what with all the bouncing and bumping. All around him was destruction. Behind to the southeast were at least a hundred burned-out tanks, trucks, and other things he didn't recognize, and it had all happened in less than an hour. He lurched forward, striking his face on the hatch rim when the Bradley stopped.

"Get security out!" the track commander shouted. "We're gonna be here for a bit."

The Bradleys were arrayed in a circle, about a mile north of the wrecked UIR guns. There was nothing moving around them, which the gunner made sure of by traversing his turret around. The rear hatch opened, and two men jumped out, first looking and then running, rifles in hand.

"Come here," the sergeant said, holding his hand out. Donner took it and climbed to the vehicle's roof. "Want a smoke?"

Donner shook his head. "Gave it up."

"Yeah? Well, those folks'll stop smoking in a day or two," he said, gesturing to the mess a mile back. The sergeant thought that was a pretty good one. He lifted binoculars to his eyes and looked around, confirming what the gunsights said.

“What do you think of this?” the reporter asked, tapping his cameraman.

“I think this is what they pay me for, and it all works.”

“What are we stopped for?”

“We’ll get some fuel in half an hour, and we need to replenish ammo.” He put the glasses down.

“We need fuel? We haven’t been moving that much.”

“Well, the colonel thinks tomorrow might be kinda busy, too.” He turned. “What do *you* think, Tom?”

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READY AND FORWARD!

WHAT PEOPLE CALL "THE initiative," whether in war or any other field of human activity, is never anything more or less than a psychological advantage. It combines one side's feeling that they are winning with the other side's feeling that something has gone wrong—that they must now prepare for and respond to the actions of their enemy instead of preparing their own offensive action. Couched in terms of "momentum" or "ascendancy," it really always comes down to who is doing what to whom, and a sudden change in that equation will have a stronger effect than that of a gradual buildup to the same set of circumstances. The expected, when replaced by the unexpected, lingers for a time, lingers in the mind, since it is easier, for a while, to deny rather than to adapt, and that just makes things harder for those who are being done *to*. For the doers, there are other tasks.

For the American forces in contact, there came a brief, unwelcome, but necessary pause. It should have been easiest of all for Colonel Nick Eddington of WOLFPACK, but it wasn't. His force of National Guard troops had done little more than stay in place for their first battle, which had allowed the enemy to come into their kill box, an ambush fifteen miles wide by fifteen deep. Except for the brigade's reconnaissance screen, the men from Carolina had hardly moved at all. But now that had to change, and Eddington was reminded of the fact that though he was after a fashion a ballet master, the things performing the maneuvering were tanks, ponderous and clumsy, moving in the dark across unfamiliar ground.

Technology helped. He had radios to tell his people when and where to go, and the IVIS system to tell them how. Task Force LOBO started by backing off the reverseslope positions that had served them so well only forty minutes earlier, turning south and heading through preselected navigational way points to destinations less than ten kilometers south of their initial fighting positions. In the process, the augmented battalion diluted itself, spread itself more thinly than it had been, a feat made possible because the battalion staff was able to program the move electronically and transmit their intentions to sub-unit commanders, who, assigned areas of responsibility, were able to subdivide them almost automatically, until every single vehicle knew its destination to the meter. The initial delay of twenty minutes from notification that Plan NATHAN was about to be activated allowed that selection process to begin. The lateral shift required an hour, with the vehicles moving across what appeared to be vacant land at the speed of commuters in a particularly congested rush hour. Even so, it worked, and an hour from the time the movement was started, it had been completed. WOLFPACK, now covering well

over twenty miles of lateral space, wheeled, turned north, and started moving out at ten kilometers per hour, with recon teams darting forward faster still to take position five klicks in advance of the main body. That was well short of what the book said the interval should be. Eddington had to be mindful of the fact that he was maneuvering a large force of part-time soldiers whose dependence on their electronic technology was a little too great for his total comfort. He'd keep his force of three fighting battalions under tight control until contact was established and the overall picture was clear.

IT SURPRISED TOM Donner that the support vehicles, nearly all of them robust-looking trucks, were able to follow the fighting units as quickly as they did. Somehow he hadn't understood how important this was, accustomed as he was to hitting one particular gas station once or twice a week. Here the service personnel had to be as mobile as their customers, and that, he realized, was a major task. The fuel trucks set up. The Bradleys and battle tanks came to them two at a time, then went back to their perimeter posts, where ammunition was dropped off other trucks for the track crewmen to load up. Every Bradley, he learned, had a Sears socket wrench, in nearly every case bought out of the gunner's salary, to facilitate reloading of the Bushmaster magazine. It worked better than the tool designed for the purpose. That was probably worth a little story, he thought with a distant smile.

The troop commander, now in his command HMMWV instead of his M1A2, raced about from track to track to ascertain the condition of each vehicle and crew. He saved Three-Two for the last.

"Mr. Donner, you doing okay, sir?"

The reporter sipped at coffee brewed up by the Bradley's driver, and nodded. "Is it always like this?" he asked the young officer.

"First time for me, sir. Pretty much like training, though."

"What do you *think* about all this?" the journalist asked. "I mean, back there, you and your people, well, *killed* a lot of the enemy."

The captain thought about that briefly. "Sir, you ever cover tornadoes and hurricanes and stuff?"

"Yes."

"And people get their lives all messed up, and you ask them what it's like, right?"

"That's my job."

"Same with us. These guys made war on us. We're making war back. If they don't like it, well, maybe next time they'll think more about it. Sir, I got an uncle in Texas—uncle and an aunt, actually. Used to be a golf pro, he taught me how to play, then went to work for Cobra—the club company, okay? Right before we left Fort Irwin, my mom called and told me they both died of that Ebola shit, sir. You *really* want to know what we think of this?" asked an officer who'd killed five tanks this night. "Saddle up, Mr. Donner. The Blackhorse will be rolling in ten. You can expect contact right before dawn, sir." There was a dull flash on the horizon, followed a minute or so later by the rumble of distant thunder. "I guess the Apaches are starting early."

Fifteen miles to the northwest, II Corps's command post had just been

destroyed.

The plan was evolving. First Squadron would pivot and drive north through remaining II Corps units. Third Squadron would come south through lighter opposition, massing the regiment for the first attack into the enemy III Corps's left flank. Ten miles away, Hamm was moving his artillery to facilitate the destruction of the remains of II Corps, whose commanders his helicopter squadron had just eliminated.

EDDINGTON REMINDED HIMSELF again that he had to keep it simple. Despite all his years of study and the name he'd assigned to his counterstroke, he *wasn't* Nathan Bedford Forrest, and this battlefield *wasn't* small enough for him to ad-lib his maneuvers, as that racist genius had done so often in the War of the Northern Aggression.

HOOTOWL was spread especially thin now, with the brigade's front almost doubled in the last ninety minutes, and that was slowing them down. Probably not a bad thing, the colonel thought. He had to be patient. The enemy force couldn't maneuver too far east for fear of running into the left of Blackhorse—assuming they knew it was there, he thought—and the ground to the west was too choppy to allow easy movement. They'd tried the middle and gotten pounded for it. So the logical move for the enemy I Corps was to try a limited envelopment maneuver, probably weighted to the east. Incoming pictures from the Predator drones started to confirm that.

THE COMMANDER OF the Immortals no longer had a proper command post to use, and so he absorbed what was left of the command post from the vanished 1st Brigade, having also learned that he had to keep moving at all times. The first order of business for him had been to reestablish contact with I Corps command, which had proved somewhat difficult, as that CP had been on the move when he'd walked into the American—it had to be American—ambush along the road to Al Artawiyah. Now I Corps was setting up again, and probably talking a lot to Army command. He broke in, got the three-star, a fellow Iranian, and told what he could as rapidly as possible.

"There cannot be more than a single brigade," his immediate superior assured him. "What will you do?"

"I shall mass my remaining forces and strike from both flanks before dawn," the divisional commander replied. It wasn't as though he had much choice in the matter, and both senior officers knew it. I Corps couldn't retreat, because the government which had ordered it to march would not countenance that. Staying still meant waiting for the Saudi forces storming down from the Kuwaiti border. The task, then, was to regain the initiative by overpowering the American blocking force by maneuver and shock effect. That was what tanks were designed to do, and he had more than four hundred still under his command.

"Approved. I will dispatch you my corps artillery. Guards Armored on your right will do the same. Accomplish your breakthrough," his fellow Iranian told

him. “Then we will drive to Riyadh by dusk.”

Very well, the Immortals commander thought. He ordered his 2nd Brigade to slow its advance, allowing 3rd to catch up, concentrate, and maneuver east. To his west, the Iraqis would be doing much the same in mirror image. Second would advance to contact, fix the enemy flank, and 3rd would sweep around, taking them in the rear. The center he would leave empty.

“THEY’VE STOPPED. THE lead brigade has stopped. They’re eight klicks north,” the brigade S-2 said. “HOOT should have visual on them in a few minutes to confirm.” That explained what one of the enemy forces to his front was doing. The western group was somewhat farther back, not stopped, but moving slowly forward, evidently waiting for orders or some change in their dispositions. His opponent and his people were taking time to think.

Eddington couldn’t allow that.

The only real problem with MLRS was that it had a minimum range far less convenient than the maximum. For the second mission that night, the rocket vehicles, which hadn’t really moved at all, locked their suspensions in place and elevated their launcher boxes, again aimed by electronic information only. Again the night was disturbed by the streaks of rocket trails, though this time on much lower trajectories. Tube artillery did the same, with both forces dividing their attention between the advance brigades left and right of the highway.

The purpose was more psychological than real. The mini-bomblets of the MLRS rockets would not *kill* a tank. A lucky fall atop a rear deck might disable a diesel engine, and the sides of the BMP infantry carriers could sometimes be penetrated by a nearby detonation, but these were chance events. The real effect was to make the enemy button up, to limit their ability to see, and with the falling steel rain, limit their ability to think. Officers who’d leaped from their command tanks to confer had to run back, some of them killed or wounded by the sudden barrage. Sitting safely in stationary vehicles, they heard the ping sound of fragments bounding off their armor, and peered out their vision systems to see if the artillery barrage presaged a proper attack. The less numerous 155mm artillery rounds were a greater danger, all the more so since the American gun rounds were not bursting in the air, but were “common” shells that hit the ground first. The laws of probability guaranteed that some of the vehicles would be hit—and some were, erupting into fireballs as the rest of 2nd Brigade was forced to hold in place, ordered to do so while 3rd moved up to their left. Unable to move and, with the loss of their own divisional artillery, unable to respond in kind, they could do nothing but cringe and stay alert, look out of their vehicles, and watch the shells and bomblcts fall.

B-TROOP, 1ST of the 11th, moved out on schedule, spreading out and traveling due north, with the Bradley scouts in the lead and the “Battlestar” tanks half a klick behind, ready to respond to a report of contact. It provided a

strange revelation to Donner. An intelligent man, and even an outdoorsman of sorts who enjoyed backpacking with his family on the Appalachian Trail, he spent as much time as he could looking out of the Bradley, and didn't have a clue as to what was really going on. He finally overcame his embarrassment and got on the interphones to ask the track commander how *he* knew, and was called forward, where he crammed himself as a third man in a space designed for two—more like one and a half, the reporter thought.

"We're here," the staff sergeant told him, touching his finger to the IVIS screen. "We're going that way. 'Cording to this, there's nobody around to bother us, but we're looking out for that. The enemy"—he changed the display somewhat—"is here, and we're along this line."

"How far?"

"About twelve klicks and we should start to see 'cm."

"How good is this information?" Donner asked.

"It got us this far, Tom," the track commander pointed out.

The pattern of movement was annoying, and reminded the reporter of stop-and-go traffic on a Friday afternoon. The armored vehicles would dart—never faster than twenty miles per hour—from one terrain feature to another, scan ahead, then move some more. The sergeant explained that they'd move in a steadier manner on better ground, but that this part of the Saudi desert was marked by hillocks and ridges and dips that people might hide behind. The Brads were in a platoon, but actually seemed to move in pairs. Every M3 had a "wingman," a term borrowed from the Air Force.

"What if there's somebody out there?"

"Then he'll probably try to shoot at us," the staff sergeant explained. All this time, the gunner was traversing his turret left and right, searching for the glow of a warm body on the chilled ground. They could actually see better at night, Donner learned, which was why Americans had adopted the darkness as their preferred hunting time. "Stanley, come left and stop behind that bump," he ordered the driver. "If I was a grunt, I'd like that place over to the right. We'll cover Chuck as he comes around it." The turret rotated and sighted in on a larger bump, while the Bradley's wingman drove past. "Okay, Stanley, move out."

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THE ARMY OF God command section had proved devilishly hard to pin down, but now Hamm had two heloscout troops detailed to that single mission, and his electronic-intelligence section had just set up again, colocated with 2nd Squadron's headquarters troop. They'd taken to calling their target the enchilada. Locate it, and disorganize the entire enemy force. Saudi intelligence officers attached to the ELINT tracks were listening to signals. The UIR forces had encrypted radios for the senior commanders, but those were good only for talking to other people with the same equipment, and with the gradual degradation of the enemy radio network, sooner or later the enchilada would have to start talking in the clear. One Corps and two divisional command posts had been hit, two of those almost totally destroyed and the other badly

disrupted. Moreover, they knew roughly where III Corps was, and Army would have to start talking to that formation, since it was the only one so far not engaged except by a few air strikes. They didn't have to read the messages, nice though that would have been. They knew the frequency ranges for the high-command circuit, and a few minutes of traffic would enable them to localize it enough for M- and N-helicopter-scout troops to dart in and start ruining their whole morning.

It sounded like static, but digitally encrypted radios usually did. The ELINT officer, a first lieutenant, loved eavesdropping, but missed his jamming gear, which had been overlooked in the POMCUS equipment sets, probably, he thought, because that was supposed to be an Air Force mission. There was an art to this. His troopers, all military-intelligence specialists, had to tell the difference between real atmospheric static and manmade static as they swept the frequencies.

"Bingo!" One said. "Bearing three-zero-five, hissin' like a snake." It was too loud to be atmospheric noise, random though it might have sounded.

"How good?" the officer asked.

"Ninety percent, elltee." A second vehicle, slaved electronically to the first, was a klick away, providing a baseline for triangulation . . . "There." The location came up on the computer screen. The lieutenant lifted a radio for the 4th Squadron command post.

"ANGEL-SIX, this is PEEPER, we may have a posit for the enchilada...."

M-Troop's four Apaches and six Kiowas were but twenty klicks away from the position, conducting a visual search. A minute later, they turned south.

"WHAT IS HAPPENING!" Mahmoud Haji demanded. He hated using this phone-radio lash-up, and just getting in contact with his own army commander had proved difficult enough.

"We have encountered opposition south of King Khalid Military City. We are dealing with it."

"Ask him the nature of the opposition," Intelligence advised his leader.

"Perhaps your guest could tell *me* that," the general on the other side of the conversation suggested. "We're still working to find out."

"The Americans cannot have more than two brigades in theater!" the man insisted. "One more brigade-equivalent in Kuwait, but that is all!"

"Is that so? Well, I have lost more than a division in strength in the last three hours, and I still don't know what I'm facing here. Two Corps has been badly mauled. One Corps has run into something and is continuing the attack now. Three Corps is so far untouched. I can continue the attack to Riyadh, but I need more information on what I'm facing." The commanding general, a man of sixty years, was not a fool, and he still felt that he could win. He still had about four divisions' worth of combat power. It was just a matter of directing it properly. He actually felt lucky that air attacks from American and Saudi forces had been so light. He'd learned a few other lessons fast. The disappearance of three command sections had made him cautious, at least for his own safety. He was now a full kilometer from the radio transmitters attached to his armored command vehicle, a BMP-1KSh, his handset at the end

of a lengthy spool of commo wire. He himself was surrounded by a squad of soldiers, who did their best not to listen to the excitement in their commander's voice.

"DAMN, LOOK AT all those SAM tracks," a Kiowa observer said over the radio, from eight klicks north. His pilot made the call while the observer did a count.

"MARAUDER-LEAD, this is MASCOT-THREE. I think we have the enchilada."

"THREE, LEAD, go," was the terse reply.

"Six *bimps,* ten trucks, five SAM tracks, two radar tracks, and three ZSU-23s in a wadi. Recommend approach from the west, say again, approach from the west." It was far too much defensive firepower to be much of anything other than the Army of God's mobile command section. The SAM launchers were all French Crotales, and those little fuckers were scary, MASCOT-THREE knew. But they should have picked a different spot. This was one of those situations where you were better in the open, or even on high ground, so that your SAM radars could see better.

"THREE, LEAD, can you illuminate?"

"Affirmative. Tell us when. Radar tracks first."

The Apache leader, a captain, was hugging the ground to the west, creeping forward at thirty knots now, coming up on what he thought was a ridgeline that would tip over into the wadi. Slowly, slowly, letting his own mast sensor do the looking. The pilot flew the airplane like a kid learning to parallel-park, while the gunner manned the sensors.

"Hold it right there, sir," the gunner advised from his front seat.

"THREE, LEAD, start the music," the pilot called.

The Kiowa lit up its laser-illuminator, an invisible infrared beam that aimed first at the far radar track. It was actually a wheeled vehicle, but nobody was being particular. On notification that the target was lit up, the Apache tilted its nose up and loosed first one Hellfire, then another five seconds later.

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THE GENERAL HEARD the shouted warning from a thousand meters away. Only one of the radar vehicles was actually transmitting, and that intermittently as an electronic-security measure. It was radiating now, and caught the inbound missile. One of the launcher trucks rotated its four-tube mount and fired, but the Crotale lost lock when the Hellfire angled down and went harmlessly ballistic. The radar vehicle blew apart a moment later, and the second one six seconds after that. The commanding general of the Army of God stopped talking then, and ignored the incoming conversation from Tehran. There was quite literally nothing for him to do but crouch down, which his bodyguards made him do.

ALL FOUR APACHES of the troop were hovering in a semicircle now, waiting for their troop commander to ripple off his Hellfires. This he did, about five seconds apart, letting the Kiowa guide them in, switching from target to target. Next came the SAM-launcher vehicles, followed by the Russian-made gun tracks. Then there was nothing left to protect the BMP command tracks.

IT WAS UTTERLY heartless, the general saw. Men tried shooting back, but at first there was nothing to shoot at. Some people looked. Others pointed. Only a few ran. Most stayed and tried to fight. The missiles seemed to come from the west. He could see the yellow-white glow of rocket motors racing through the darkness like fireflies, but he couldn't see anything shooting them, and one after another the air defense vehicles were destroyed, then the BMPs, then the trucks. It took less than two minutes, and only then did the helicopters begin to appear. The security detachment for his mobile command post was a company of picked infantrymen. They fought back with heavy machine-gun fire and shoulder-launched rockets, but the ghostly shapes of the helicopters were too far away. The man-portable missiles couldn't seem to find them. His men tried, but then the tracers lanced out, reaching for them like beams of light into an area now bright with vehicle fires. A squad here, a section there, a pair there. The men tried to run, but the helicopters closed in, firing from only a few hundred meters away, herding them in a cruel, remorseless game. The radio handset was dead in his hand, but he still held it, watching.

"LEAD, TWO, I got a bunch to the east," a pilot told the Apache commander.

"Get 'em," the flight leader ordered, and one of the attack choppers ducked south around the remains of the command post.

NOTHING TO DO. No place to flee. Three of his men shouldered their weapons and fired. Others tried to run, but there was no running and no hiding. Whoever flew those aircraft were killing everything they saw. Americans. Had to be. Angry at what they'd been told. Might even be true, the general thought, and if—

"HOW D'YA SAY *tough shit* in rag-head?" the gunner asked, taking his time to make sure he got every one.

"I think they got the message," the pilot said, turning the chopper around and scanning for additional targets.

"ANGEL-SIX, ANGEL-SIX, this is MARAUDER-SIX-ACTUAL. This sure looked like a CP, and it's toast now," the troop commander called. "We are RTB for bullets and gas. Out."

“WELL, GET HIM back!” Daryaei shouted at the communications officer on the line. The intelligence chief in the room didn’t say anything, suspecting that they’d never talk to the army commander again in this lifetime. The worst part was not knowing why. His intelligence assessment on arriving American units had been correct. He was sure of that. How could so few do so much harm . . . ?

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“THEY HAD A pair of brigades—regiments, whatever—there, didn’t they?” Ryan asked, getting the latest upload from the battlefield onto his projection TV in the Sit Room.

“Yep.” General Moore nodded. He noted with some pleasure that even Admiral Jackson was pretty quiet. “Not anymore, Mr. President. Jesus, those Guardsmen are doing just fine.”

“Sir,” Ed Foley said, “just how far do you want to take this?”

“Do we have any doubts at all that it was Daryaei personally who made all these decisions?” It was, Ryan thought, a dumb question. Why else had he told the citizens that? But he had to ask the question, and the others in the Sit Room knew why.

“None,” the DCI replied.

“Then we take it all the way, Ed. Will the Russians play?”

“Yes, sir, I think they will.”

Jack thought of the plague now dying out in America. Thousands of the innocent had already died, with more yet to follow. He thought of the soldiers, sailors, and airmen at risk under his distant command. He found himself thinking, even, of the UIR troops who’d followed the wrong banner and wrong ideas because they hadn’t had the chance to select their country or its leader, and were now paying the price for that mistake of birthplace. If they were not completely innocent, then neither were they completely guilty, because for the most part soldiers merely did what they were told. He also found himself remembering the look in his wife’s eyes when Katie had arrived by helicopter on the South Lawn. There were times when he was allowed to be a man, just like other men, except for the power he held in his hands.

“Find out,” the President said coldly.

IT WAS A sunny morning in Beijing, and Adler knew more than the other people in the discussion. It hadn’t been much of a detailed dispatch, just the high points, which he’d shown to the Defense attaché, and the Army colonel had told him to trust every word. But the information wasn’t widely known. The TV reports had to come out over military communications nets, and because of the time of day in most of America, those hadn’t reported much beyond the commencement of combat action. If the PRC was in cahoots with the UIR, they might yet believe that their distant friends held the upper hand.

It was worth a try, SecState thought, sure that POTUS would back him up.

"Mr. Secretary, welcome again," the Foreign Minister said graciously. And again, Zhang was there, silent and enigmatic as he tried always to be.

"Thank you." Adler took his regular seat. It wasn't as comfortable as the one in Taipei.

"These new developments—can it be true?" his official host asked.

"That is the public position of my President and my country," the Secretary of State replied. Thus it had to be true.

"Do you have sufficient forces to protect your interests in that region?"

"Minister, I am not a military expert, and I cannot comment on that," Adler replied. That was entirely true, but a man in a position of strength would probably have said something else.

"It would be a great misfortune if you cannot," Zhang observed.

It might have been fun to inquire about the PRC's position on the matter, but the answer would have been neutral and meaningless. Nor would they have said anything about the presence of the *Eisenhower* battle group, now flying patrols over the "international waters" of the Formosa Strait. The trick was to make them say anything at all.

"The world situation occasionally requires reexamination of one's position on many things, and one must sometimes think carefully about one's friendships," Adler tried. It lay on the table for half a minute.

"We have been friends since your President Nixon first courageously came here," the Foreign Minister said after reflection. "And we remain so, despite the occasional misunderstanding."

"That is good to hear, Minister. We have a saying about friendship in time of need." Okay, think about that one. Maybe the news reports are true. Maybe your friend Daryaei will succeed. The bait dangled for another fifteen seconds.

"Really, our only area of permanent discord is America's position on what your President inadvertently called the 'two Chinas.' If only this could be regularized . . . ," the Minister mused.

"Well, as I told you, the President was trying to express himself to reporters in a confusing situation."

"And we are to disregard it?"

"America continues to feel that a peaceful solution to this provincial dispute serves the interests of all parties." That was status quo ante, a position established by a strong, confident America whom China would not challenge openly.

"Peace is always preferable to conflict," Zhang said. "But how long must we show such great forbearance? These recent events have only served to illustrate the central problem."

A very small push, Adler noted: "I understand your frustration, but we all know that patience is the most valuable of virtues."

"At some point, patience becomes indulgence." The Foreign Minister reached for his tea. "A helpful word from America would be most gratefully received."

"You ask that we alter our policy somewhat?" SecState wondered if Zhang would speak again after altering the course of the conversation ever so slightly.

"Merely that you see the logic of the situation. It would make the friendship of our two nations far more substantial, and it is, after all, a minor issue to countries such as ours."

"I see," Adler replied. And he did. It was certain now. He congratulated himself for making them tip their hand. The next call on this would have to be made in Washington, assuming they had the time there for something other than a shooting war.

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THE 10TH ACR crossed back into Saudi territory at 0330L. The Buffalo Cav was now spread in a line thirty miles across. In another hour, they would be astride the UIR army's supply line, having gotten here without any notice. The force was moving faster now, almost thirty miles in an hour. His lead elements had found a few patrol and internal-security units in UIR territory, mainly single vehicles which had been dispatched immediately upon sighting. There would be more now, as soon as they hit the next road. It would be MP units at first—whatever the enemy called them—used for traffic control. There had to be a lot of fuel rolling down the road to KKMC, and that was the first mission of the Buffalo Soldiers.

SECOND BRIGADE OF the Immortals had been under fire for nearly an hour, when orders came to go forward, and the armored vehicles of the former Iranian armored division moved with a will. The two-star in command was in back of the flanking 3rd Brigade now, listening rather than talking, wondering about and thankful for the absence of American air power. Corps artillery had arrived and set up without firing to reveal its presence. They might not last long, but he wanted the benefit of their presence. The opposing force could hardly be as much as a full brigade on this side of the highway, and he had double that—and even if he did face a complete brigade, then his Iraqi comrades on the far side would loop around to support him, as he would for them if he found a clear field. Over the radio, on the move in order to prevent being attacked by artillery or helicopters, he exhorted his commanders to press the attack, as he followed on in an open-topped command vehicle. Now, if his enemy would just sit still in the positions they'd held successfully for the first attack, he would see about things....

LOBO PASSED PHASE-LINE MANASSAS twenty minutes late, to the quiet anger of Colonel Eddington, who thought that he'd allowed ample time for the maneuver. But that damned criminal lawyer a redundancy, he'd joked more than once—commanding HOOTOWL was well forward again, covering the right while his battalion XO took the left, calling fire but not taking any shots of his own.

"WOLFPACK-SIX, this is HOOT-SIX, over."

"SIX-ACTUAL, HOOT," Eddington replied.

"They're coming on, sir, two brigades on line, packed in pretty close, advancing over phase-line HIGHPOINT right now."

"How close are you, Colonel?"

"Three thousand. I am pulling my people back now." They had designated safe-travel lanes for that. HOOT hoped that everybody remembered where they were. The redeployment would take them east, to screen the right edge of the flanking battalion task force.

"Okay, clear the field, counselor."

"Roger that, Professor Eddington. HOOTOWL is flying," the misplaced lawyer replied. "Out." In a minute he told his driver to see how fast he could go in the dark. It was something the NASCAR fan was just as pleased as hell to demonstrate.

The same report arrived four minutes later from the left. His one brigade was facing four. It was time to narrow those odds some. His artillery battalion shifted fire. His tank and Bradley commanders started sweeping the horizon for movement, and the three mechanized battalions started rolling forward to meet their enemy on the move. Company and platoon commanders checked their lines for proper interval. The battalion commander was in his own command tank on the left side of the line. The S-3 operations officer backed up the right. As usual, the Bradleys were slightly back on the fifty-four Abrams tanks, their mission to sweep the field for infantry and support vehicles.

The falling artillery was common shell, and now VT proximity, to make life very hard on tanks with open hatches and people dumb enough to be in the open. Nobody thought of armored knights. The battlefield was too dispersed for that. It was more like a naval battle fought on a sandy, rocky sea which was every bit as hostile to human life as the conventional kind, and about to become more so. Eddington stayed with WHITEFANG, which was essentially an advancing reserve force, as it became clear that the enemy was advancing on both flanks, and leaving the center with a screening force, if anything.

"Contact," a platoon leader called on his company net. "I have enemy armored vehicles at five thousand meters." He checked his IVIS display to confirm, again, that there were no friendlies out there. Good. HOOTOWL was clear. There was only a Red Force to his front.

THE MOON WAS up now, less than a quarter of a waning moon, but it lit up the land enough for the lead Immortals to see movement on their visible horizon. The men of 2nd Brigade, furious at the pounding they'd taken in their wait to advance, were loaded up. Some of them had laser range-finders, which showed targets at nearly double their effective range. That word, too, went up the line, and back down came orders to increase speed, the quicker to close the distance and get out of the indirect fire that had to stop soon. Gunners centered on targets that were still too far away, in anticipation of that changing in two minutes or less. They felt their mounts speed up, heard the words of their tank commanders to stand by. There were enough targets to count now, and the opposing numbers were not impressive. They had the advantage. They must have, the Immortals all thought.

But why were the Americans advancing toward them?

"COMMENCE FIRING AT four thousand meters," the company commander told his crews. The Abrams tanks were spread nearly five hundred meters apart in two staggered lines, covering a lot of ground for one mounted battalion. The TCs mainly kept their heads up and out of the vehicles for the approach phase, then ducked down to activate their own fire-control systems.

"I'm on one," one gunner told his TC. "T-80, identified, range forty-two-fifty."

"Setting?" the tank commander asked, just to make sure.

"Set on Sabot. Loader, all silver bullets till I say different."

"I hear you, gunner. Just don't miss any."

"Forty-one," the gunner breathed. He waited for another fifteen seconds and became the first in his company to fire, and to kill. The sixty-two-ton tank staggered with the shot, then kept moving.

"Target, cease fire, target tank at eleven," the TC said over the interphones.

The loader stomped his boot down on the pedal, opened the ammo doors, and yanked out another "silver bullet" round, then turned in a graceful move, first to guide, then to slam the mainly plastic round into the breech.

"Up!" he called.

"Identified!" the gunner told the TC.

"Fire!"

"On the way!" A pause. The tracer flew true. "Right through the dot!"

Commander: "Target! Cease fire! Traverse right, target tank at one."

Loader: "Up!"

Gunner: "Identified!"

Commander: "Fire!"

"On the waaaaay!" the gunner said, squeezing off his third shot in eleven seconds.

It wasn't like reality, the battalion commander saw, really too busy watching to take his own shots. It was like an advancing wave. First the lead rank of T-80s blew up, just a handful of misses that were corrected five seconds later, as the second rank of enemy vehicles started to go. They started to return fire. The flashes looked like the Hoffman simulation charges he'd so recently seen at the NTC, and turned out to be just as harmless. Enemy rounds were marked with their own tracers, and all of their first volley fell short. Some of the T-80s got off a second shot. None got off a third.

"Jesus, sir, give me a target!" his gunner called.

"Pick one."

"Bimp, " the gunner said, mainly to himself. He fired off a high-explosive round, and got a kill at just over four thousand meters, but as before, the battle was over in less than a minute. The American line advanced. Some of the BMPs launched missiles, but now they were being engaged by tanks and Bradleys. Vehicles exploded, filling the sky with fire and smoke. Now individual men were visible, mainly running, some turning to fire or trying to deploy. The tank gunners, with nothing large left to shoot, switched to the coaxial machine guns. The Bradleys pulled up level with the tanks, and they

did the serious hunting.

The lead line of tanks passed through the smoking wreckage of the Immortals division less than four minutes after the first volley. Turrets traversed left and right, looking for targets. Tank commanders had their heads back up, hands on their top-mounted heavy machine guns. Where fire originated, it was returned, and at first there was a race to see who could kill the most, because there is an excitement, a *rush* to battle unknown to those who have never felt it, the feeling of godlike power, the ability to make a life-and-death decision and then enforce it at the touch of a finger. More than that, these Guardsmen knew why they were here, knew what they had been sent to avenge. In some, that rage lasted for some minutes, as the vehicles rolled forward, grinding along at less than ten miles per hour, like farm tractors or harvesting combines, collecting life and converting it to death, looking like something from the dawn of time, utterly inhuman, utterly heartless.

But then it began to stop. It stopped being duty. It stopped being revenge. It stopped being the fun they'd expected it to be. It became murder, and one by one, the men on the weapons realized what they themselves were supposed to be and what they might become if they didn't turn away from this. It wasn't like being an aviator, hundreds of meters away, shooting at shapes that moved comically in their aiming systems and were never really human beings at all. These men were closer. They could see the faces and the wounds now, and the harmless backs of people running away. Even those fools who still shot back attracted pity from the gunners who dispatched them, but soon the futility of it was clear to everyone, and soldiers who'd arrived in the desert with rage grew sick at what the rage had become. The guns gradually fell silent, by common consent rather than order, as resistance stopped, and with it the need to kill. Battalion Task Force LOBO rolled completely through the smoking ruin of two heavy brigades, searching for targets worthy of professional attention, rather than personal, from which they had to turn away.

THERE WAS NOTHING left to be done. The general stood and walked away from his command vehicle, beckoning for the crew to do the same. On his order, they put their weapons down and stood on high ground to wait. They didn't have to wait long. The sun was rising. The first glow of orange was to the east, announcing a new day far different from the old.

THE FIRST CONVOY rolled right in front of them, thirty fuel trucks, driving at a good clip, and the drivers must have taken the south-moving vehicles for those of their own army. The Bradley gunners of I-Troop, 3rd of the 10th, took care of that with a series of shots that ignited the first five trucks. The rest of them halted, two of them turning over and exploding on their own when their drivers rolled them into ditches in their haste to escape. The Bradley crews mainly let the people get clear, plinked the trucks with high-explosive rounds, and kept moving south past the bewildered drivers, who just stood there and watched them pass.

IT WAS A Bradley that found him. The vehicle pulled to within fifty meters before stopping. The general who, twelve hours before, had commanded a virtually intact armored division didn't move or resist. He stood quite still, as four infantrymen appeared from the back of the M2A4, advancing with rifles out, while their track covered his detail with even more authority.

"On the ground!" the corporal called.

"I will tell my men. I speak English. They do not," the general said, then kept his word. His soldiers went facedown. He continued to stand, perhaps hoping that he could die.

"Get those hands up, partner." This corporal was a police officer in civilian life. The officer—he didn't know what kind yet, but the uniform was too spiffy for a grunt—complied. The corporal next handed his rifle off and drew a pistol, walked in, and held it to the man's head while he searched him expertly. "Okay, you can get down now. If you play smart, nobody gets hurt. Please tell your men that. We will kill them if we have to, but we ain't going to murder anybody, okay?"

"I will tell them."

WITH THE COMING of daylight, Eddington got back into the helicopter he'd borrowed, and flew to survey the battlefield. It was soon plain that his brigade had crushed two complete divisions. He ordered his screen forward to scout ahead for the pursuit phase that had to come next, then called Diggs for instructions on what he was supposed to do with prisoners. Before anyone figured that out, a chopper arrived from Riyadh with a television crew.

EVEN BEFORE THE pictures got out, the rumors did, as they always do in countries lacking a free press. A telephone call arrived in the home of a Russian embassy official. It came just before seven, and awakened him, but he was out of his house in minutes and driving his car through quiet streets to the rendezvous point with a man who, he thought, was finally crossing the line to become an agent of the RVS.

The Russian spent ten extra minutes checking his back, but anyone following him this morning would have to be invisible, and he imagined that a lot of the Ayatollah's security forces had been called up.

"Yes?" he said on meeting the man. There wasn't much time for formalities.

"You are right. Our army was—defeated last night. They called me in at three for an opinion of American intentions, and I heard it all. We cannot even talk with our units. The army commander simply vanished. The Foreign Ministry is in a panic."

"As well it might be," the diplomat thought. "I should tell you that the Turkoman leader has—"

"We know. He called Daryaei last night to ask if the plague story was true."

"And what did your leader say?"

"He said that it was an infidel lie—what do you expect?" The official paused. "He was not entirely persuasive. Whatever you said to the man, he is neutralized. India has betrayed us—I learned about that, too. China does not yet know."

"If you expect *them* to stand with you, you have violated your religion's laws on the consumption of alcohol. Of course, my government stands with America as well. You are quite alone," the Russian told him. "I need some information."

"What information?"

"The location of the germ factory. I need that today."

"The experimental farm north of the airport."

That easy? the Russian thought. "How can you be sure?"

"The equipment was bought from the Germans and the French. I was in the commercial section then. If you wish to confirm, it should be easy. How many farms have guards in uniform?" the man asked helplessly.

The Russian nodded. "I will see about that. There are other problems. Your country will soon be fully—by which I mean *completely*—at war with America. My country may be able to offer her good offices to negotiate a settlement of some kind. If you whisper the right word into the right ear, our ambassador is at your disposal, and then you will have done the world a service."

"That is simple. By noon we will be looking for a way out of this."

"There is no way out for your government. None," the RVS officer emphasized.

63

THE RYAN DOCTRINE

WARS USUALLY BEGIN AT exact moments in time, but most often end neither cleanly nor precisely. Daylight found the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment in command of yet another battlefield, having completed the destruction of one of UIR II Corps's divisions. The other division was now facing the Saudi 2nd Brigade, which was attacking from the rising sun while the American unit halted again to refuel and rearm in preparation for the continued attack on III Corps, still not decisively engaged.

But that was already changing. Those two divisions now had the full and undivided attention of all tactical aircraft in theater. First their air defense assets were targeted. Every radar which switched on drew the attention of **HARM H**igh-speed **A**nti-**R**adiation **M**issile—equipped F-16s, and in two hours the skies were friendly to American and Saudi pilots. UIR fighters made an effort to strike down from their home bases to defend their beleaguered ground forces, but none made it past the radarfighter screen set up well beyond the location of the forces they had been dispatched to support. They lost over sixty aircraft in the futile attempt. It was easier for them to lash out at the Kuwaiti brigades which had so impudently invaded their vastly larger and more powerful neighbor. The small air force of that country was on its own for most of the day, and the battle had little strategic relevance. The routes across the swamps were cut and would take days to repair. The resulting air battle was more a display of mutual anger than anything else, and here, too, the Kuwaiti forces held the day, not spectacularly so, but giving three kills for every one they absorbed. For a small country learning the martial arts, it was a battle that men would talk of for years, the magnitude of their deeds growing with every recounting. Yet all the deaths on this day would be useless, lives wasted in mere punctuation of a decision already reached.

Over III Corps, with the SAMs taken out, attention turned to more structured murder. There were over six hundred tanks on the ground, another eight hundred infantry carriers, more than two hundred pieces of towed and self-propelled artillery, several thousand trucks, and thirty thousand men, all of them well inside a foreign nation and trying to escape. The F-15E Strike Eagles circled at about 15,000 feet, almost loitering on low power settings, while the weapons-systems operators selected targets one by one for laser-guided bombs. The air was clear, the sun was bright, and the battlefield was flat. It was far easier than any exercise in the Nellis bombing range. Lower down in different hunting patches, F-16s joined in with Maverick and conventional bombs. Before noon, III Corps's three-star commander, correctly

thinking himself the senior ground officer, ordered a general retreat, gathered up the support trucks laagered in KKMC, and tried to get his units out in something resembling order. Bombs falling on him from above, the Saudi 5th Brigade approaching from the east, and an American force closing on his rear, he turned northwest, hoping to cross back into friendly territory at the same point he had entered. On the ground, his vehicles used smoke to obscure themselves as best they could, which somewhat frustrated the allied aviators, who did not, however, come down low to press their attacks, since the UTR forces might have shot back with some effect. That gave the commander hope that he might make it back with something like two-thirds of his strength. Fuel was not a concern. The combined fuel trucks for the entire Army of God were with his corps now.

DIGGS STOPPED OFF first to see Eddington's brigade. He'd seen the sights and smelled the smells before. Tanks could burn for a surprisingly long time, as much as two days, from all the fuel and ammunition they carried, and the stink of diesel oil and chemical propellants served to mask the revolting stench of burning human flesh. Armed enemies were always things to be killed, but dead ones soon enough became objects of pity, especially slaughtered as they had been. But only a few, in relative terms, had died by the guns of the men from Carolina. Many more had surrendered. Those had to be gathered, disarmed, counted, and set to work, mainly in disposing of the bodies of their fallen comrades. It was a fact as old as warfare, and the lesson for the defeated was always the same: *This is why you don't want to mess with us again.*

"Now what?" Eddington asked, a cigar in his teeth. The victors suffered through many mood swings on the battlefield. Arriving in confusion and haste, facing the unknown with concealed fear, entering battle with determination—and, in their case, with such wrath as they had never felt—winning with exhilaration, and then feeling horror at the carnage and pity for the vanquished. The cycle changed anew. Most of the mechanized units had reorganized over the last few hours, and were ready to move again, while their own MPs and arriving Saudi units took possession of the prisoners gathered by the line units.

"Just sit tight," Diggs replied, to Eddington's disappointment and relief. "The remains are running hard. You'd never catch them, and we don't have orders to invade."

"They just came at us in the same old way," the Guard colonel said, remembering Wellington. "And we stopped them in the same old way. What a terrible business."

"Bobby Lee, remember, Chancellorsville?"

"Oh, yeah. He was right, too. Those couple of hours, Diggs, getting things set up, maneuvering my battalions, getting the information, acting on it." He shook his head. "I never knew anything could feel like that . . . but now . . ."

" 'It is good that war is so terrible, else we should grow too fond of it.' Funny thing is, you forget sometimes. Those poor bastards," the general said, watching fifty men being herded off to trucks for the ride back to the rear. "Clean up, Colonel. Get your units put back together. There may be orders to

move, but I don't think so."

"Three Corps?"

"Ain't goin' far, Nick. We're 'keepin' up the skeer' and we're running them right into the 10th."

"So you know Bedford Forrest after all." It was one of the Confederate officer's most important aphorisms. *Keep up the skeer:* never give a fleeing enemy the chance to rest; harry him, punish him, force him into additional errors, run him into the ground. Even if it really didn't matter anymore.

"My doctoral dissertation was on Hitler as a political manipulator. I didn't much like him, either." Diggs smiled and saluted. "You and your people did just fine, Nick. Glad to have you on this trip."

"Wouldn't have missed it, sir."

THE VEHICLE HAD diplomatic tags, but the driver and passenger knew that such things had not always been respected in Tehran. Things changed in a country at war, and you could often spot previously clandestine facilities by the fact that they got more guards in time of trouble instead of remaining the same. The latter would have been far smarter, but everyone did it. The car halted. The driver lifted binoculars. The passenger lifted a camera. Sure enough, the experimental farm had armed men around the research building, and that wasn't the normal sort of thing, was it? It was just that easy. The car turned in the road and headed back to the embassy.

THEY WERE GETTING only stragglers. The Blackhorse was in full pursuit now, and this tail chase was proving to be a long one. American vehicles were better and generally faster than those they were pursuing, but it was easier to run than to chase. Pursuers had to be a little careful about possible ambushes, and the lust to kill more of the enemy was muted by the concern at dying in a war already won. Enemy disorder had allowed the 11th to pull in tight, and the right-flank units were now in radio contact with the advancing Saudis, who were just now finishing off the last few battalions of II Corps and thinking about engaging III in a final decisive battle.

"Target tank," one TC said. "Ten o'clock, forty-one hundred."

"Identified," the gunner said as the Abrams halted to make the shot easier.

"Hold fire," the TC said suddenly. "They're bailing out. Give 'em a few seconds."

"Right." The gunner could see it, too. The T-80's main gun was pointed away, in any case. They waited for the crew to make a hundred meters or so.

"Okay, take it."

"On the way." The breech recoiled, the tank jolted, and the round flew. Three seconds later, one more tank turret blew straight up. "Jack-in-the-box."

"Target. Cease fire. Driver, move out," the TC ordered. That made the twelfth kill for their tank. The crew wondered what the unit record would be, while the TC made a position notation for the three-man enemy crew on his IVIS box, which automatically told the regimental security detail where to

pick them up. The advancing cavalrymen gave them a wide berth. Unlikely though it was, one of them might shoot or do something stupid, and they had neither the time nor the inclination to waste ammunition. One more battle to fight, unless the other side got some brains and just called it a day.

"COMMENTS?" POTUS ASKED.

"Sir, it sets a precedent," Cliff Rutledge replied.

"That's the idea," Ryan said. They were getting the battlefield video first, unedited. It included the usual horrors, body parts of those ripped to shreds by high explosives, whole bodies of those whose deaths had come from some mysterious cause, a hand reaching out of a personnel carrier whose interior still smoked, some poor bastard who'd almost gotten out, but not quite. There had to be something about carrying a mini-cam that just drew people to that sort of thing. The dead were dead, and the dead were all victims in one way or another—more than one way, Ryan thought. These soldiers of two previously separate countries and one overlapping culture had died at the hands of armed Americans, but they'd been sent to death by a man whose orders they'd had to follow, who had miscalculated, and who had been willing to use their lives as tokens, gambling chips, quarters in a big slot machine whose arm he'd yanked to see what would result. It wasn't supposed to be that way. Power carried responsibility. Jack knew that he would hand-write a letter to the family of every dead American, just as George Bush had done in 1991. The letters would serve two purposes. They would, perhaps, be some measure of comfort to the families of the lost. They would, certainly, remind the man who had ordered them to the field that the dead had once been living. He wondered what their faces had been like. Probably no different from the Guardsmen who'd formed that honor guard at Indianapolis, the day of his first public appearance. They looked the same, but each human life was individual, the most valuable possession of its owner, and Ryan had played a part in stripping it away, and though he knew it had been necessary, it was also necessary for him, now and for as long as he sat in this building, to remember that they were more than just faces. And that, he told himself, is the difference. I know about my responsibility. *He* doesn't know about *his. He* still lived with the illusion that people were responsible to him, and not the reverse.

"It's political dynamite, Mr. President," van Damm said.

"So?"

"There is a legal problem," Pat Martin told them. "It violates the executive order that President Ford put in place."

"I know about that one," Ryan responded. "But who decides the executive orders?"

"The Chief Executive, sir," Martin answered.

"Draft me a new one."

"WHAT IS THAT smell?" Back at the Indiana motel, the truck drivers were out for the morning dance of moving the trucks around to protect the tires. They

were sick of this place by now, and heartily wished the travel ban would be lifted soon. One driver had just exercised his Mack, and parked it back next to the cement truck. Spring was turning warm, and the metal bodies of the trucks turned the interiors into ovens. In the case of the cement truck, it was having an effect its owners hadn't thought about. "You got a fuel leak?" he asked Holbrook, then bent down to look. "No, your tank's okay."

"Maybe somebody had a little spill over at the pumps," the Mountain Man suggested.

"Don't think so. They just hosed it down a while ago. We better find this. I seen a KW burn once 'cuz some mechanic fucked up. Killed the driver, that was on I-40 back in '85. Hell of a mess." He continued to walk around. "You got a leak somewhere, ol' buddy. Let's check your fuel pump," he said next, turning the locks on the hood panels.

"Hey, uh, wait a minute—I mean—"

"Don't sweat it, pard, I know how to fix the things. I save a good five grand a year doing my own work." The hood went up, and the trucker looked inside, reached to shake a few hoses, then felt the fuel-line connectors. "Okay, they're all right." Next he looked at the line to the injectors. One nut was a little loose, but that was just the lock, and he twisted that back in place. There wasn't anything unusual. He bent down again to look underneath. "Nothin' drippin'. Damn," he concluded, standing back up. Next he checked the wind. Maybe the smell was coming from . . . no. He could smell breakfast cooking in the restaurant, his next stop of the day. The smell was coming from right here . . . something else, too, not just diesel, now that he thought about it.

"What's the problem, Coots?" another driver asked, walking over.

"Smell that?" And both men stood there, sniffing the air like woodchucks.

"Somebody got a bad tank?"

"Not that I can see." The first one looked at Holbrook. "Look, I don't want to be unneighborly, but I'm an owner-operator, and I get nervous about my rig, y'know? Would you mind moving your truck over there? And I'd have somebody give the engine a look, okay?"

"Hey, sure, no problem, don't mind a bit." Holbrook remounted his truck, started it, and drove it slowly off, turning to park in a fairly vacant part of the lot. The other two watched him do it.

"The goddamned smell went away, didn't it, Coots?"

"That is a sick truck."

"Fuck 'im. About time for the news. Come on." The other driver waved.

"Whoa!" they heard on entering the restaurant. The TV was tuned to CNN. The scene looked like something from the special-effects department of a major studio. Nothing like that ever was real. But this was.

"Colonel, what happened last night?"

"Well, Barry, the enemy came in on us twice. The first time," Eddington explained, holding a cigar in his extended hand, "we sat on that ridge back there. The second time, we were advancing, and so were they, and we met right about here . . ." The camera turned to show two tanks heading up the road, past where the colonel was giving his lecture.

"I bet those fuckers are fun to drive," Coots said.

"I bet they're fun to shoot." The scene changed again. The reporter's

familiar, handsome face was covered with dust, with the bags of exhaustion under his eyes.

"This is Tom Donner, with the press team assigned to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. How can I describe the night we had? I've been riding with this Bradley crew, and our vehicle and the rest of B-Troop have gone through —I don't know how many of the enemy in the past twelve hours. It was *War of the Worlds* in Saudi Arabia last night, and we were the Martians.

"The UIR forces—the ones we faced were a mix of Iraqis and Iranians—fought back, or tried to, but nothing they did . . ."

"Shit, wish they'd've sent my unit," a highway patrolman said, taking his usual seat for his beginning-of-watch coffee. He'd gotten to know some of the drivers.

"Smoky, you have those in the Ohio Guard?" Coots asked.

"Yeah, my unit's armored cavalry. Those boys from Carolina had a big night. Jesus." The cop shook his head, and in the mirror noticed a man walking in from the parking lot.

"Enemy forces are in full flight now. You've just had a report from the National Guard force that defeated two complete armored divisions—"

"That many! Wow," the cop observed, sipping his coffee.

"—the Blackhorse has annihilated another. It was like watching a movie. It was like watching a football game between the NFL and the Pop Warner League."

"Welcome to the bigs, you bastards," Coots told the TV screen.

"Hey, is that your cement truck?" the cop asked, turning.

"Yes, sir," Holbrook answered, stopping on the way to join his friend for breakfast.

"Make sure it don't blow the hell up on you," Coots said, not turning his head.

"What the hell is a cement truck from Montana doing here?" the cop asked lightly. "Huh?" he added to Coots.

"He's got some kinda fuel problem. We asked him to move the rig. Thanks, by the way," he added. "Don't mean to be unneighborly, buddy."

"It's all right. I'll have it checked for sure."

"Why all the way from Montana?" the cop inquired again.

"Well, uh, we bought it there, and bringing it east for our business, y'know?"

"Hmmm." Attention returned to the TV.

"Yes, they were coming south, and we drove right into them!" a Kuwaiti officer was telling another reporter now. He patted the gun tube of his tank with the affection he might have shown a prize stallion, a little man who'd grown about a foot in the last day or so, along with his country.

"Any word on when we can get back to work, Smoky?" Coots asked the cop.

The highway patrolman shook his head. "You know as much as I do. When I leave here, I go up to the line to play roadblock some more."

"Yeah, all that good ticket money you're losin', Smoky Bear!" a driver commented with a chuckle.

"I didn't notice the tags. Why the hell drive a cement truck in from Montana?" Coots wondered. Those guys just didn't fit in.

“Maybe he got it cheap,” the cop thought, finishing his coffee. “I don’t have anything on the sheet about a hot one. Damn, I wonder if anyone ever stole one of those?”

“Not that I heard of—zap!” Coots said. The current shot was of smart bombs. “At least it can’t hurt much.”

“Y’all have a good one,” the cop said on the way out. He entered his Chevy patrol car and headed back to the highway, then decided to give the cement truck a look. Might as well run the tag, he thought. Maybe it was hot. Then he smelled it, too, and to the cop it wasn’t the diesel ... ammonia . . . ? It was a smell he’d always associated with ice cream, having once worked a summer in a plant which made it . . . and also with the smell of propellant in his National Guard cavalry unit. His curiosity aroused, he drove back to the cafe. “Excuse me, gentlemen, is that your truck parked over on the edge?” “Yeah, why?” Brown asked. “We do something wrong?”

It was his hands that betrayed him. The cop saw them twitch. Something was definitely not right. “Would you gentlemen come with me, please?”

“Wait a minute, what’s the beef here?”

“No beef. I just want to know what that smell is. Fair enough?”

“We’re going to have it looked at.”

“You’re going to have it looked at right now, gentlemen.” He gestured. “If you would, please?”

The cop followed them out, got back into his car, and drove behind them as they walked to the truck. They were talking back and forth. Something just wasn’t right. His fellow highway cops were not terribly busy at the moment, and on instinct he called another car for backup, and told his headquarters to run the truck tag. That done, he got out and looked up at the truck again.

“You want to turn it over?”

“Okay, sure.” Brown got in and cranked the engine, which was noisy enough.

“What is going on here?” the cop asked Holbrook. “Could I see some identification, please?”

“Hey, I don’t understand what the beef is.”

“No beef, sir, but I do want to see your ID.”

Pete Holbrook pulled out his wallet as another police car arrived. Brown saw it, too, looked down to see Holbrook’s wallet in his hand, and the cop’s hand on the butt of his pistol. It was just the way cops stood, but Brown didn’t think of that. Neither Mountain Man had a gun handy. They had them in their room, but hadn’t thought to carry them to breakfast. The policeman took Pete’s driver’s license, then walked back to his car, lifting the microphone—

“The tag is clean, not in the computer as hot,” the lady at the station informed him.

“Thank you.” He tossed the mike back inside and walked back to Peter Holbrook, twirling the license in his hand—

Brown saw a cop with his friend, another cop, they’d just talked on the radio—

The highway patrolman looked up in surprise as the truck jerked forward. He yelled and pointed for the man to stop. The second car moved to block him, and then the cement truck did stop. That did it. Something was just not

right.

"Out!" he shouted, his pistol in his hands now. The second officer took control of Holbrook, not having a clue what this was all about. Brown stepped down, and felt his collar grabbed and himself thrust against the body of the truck. "What is the matter with you?" the cop demanded. It would take hours to find out, and then a very interesting time at the truck stop.

THERE WAS NOTHING for him to do but scream, and that, uncharacteristically, he did. The video was undeniable. There was an instant respectability to global TV, and he couldn't stop it from going out. The affluent in his country had their own satellite dishes, and so did many others, including little neighborhood groups. What would he do now? Order them turned off?

"Why aren't they attacking?" Daryaei demanded.

"The Army commander and all corps commanders are off the air. We have some contact with two of our divisions only. One brigade reported it is heading north with enemy forces in pursuit."

"And?"

"And our forces have been defeated," Intelligence said.

"But how?"

"Does that matter?"

THEY CAME ON north. Buffalo came on south. UIR III Corps didn't know what lay ahead. The discovery took place in midafternoon. Masterman's 1st Squadron had so far eliminated a hundred or so fuel and other trucks, more than the other two battalions. The only question now was how much resistance the enemy would display. From air coverage, he knew exactly where the advancing force was, in what strength and concentration, and in what direction. It was much easier than the last time he'd seen action.

A-Troop was screening in advance, with B and C three klicks back, and the tank company in reserve. As fearful a pounding as their UIR forces were taking, he decided not to use his own artillery yet. No sense warning them that tanks were close by. With contact less than ten minutes away, he shifted A-Troop to the right. Unlike the first—and only previous—battle in his career, Duke Masterman wouldn't really see this one. Instead, he listened to it on the radio.

A-Troop engaged at extreme range with both gun tubes and TOW missiles, and crumpled the first ragged line of vehicles. The troop commander estimated at least battalion strength as he engaged them from their left-front, approaching obliquely in the planned opening maneuver. This UIR division was Iraqi in origin and recoiled the other way, without realizing that it was being herded right into two more cavalry troops.

"This is GULDON-SIX. Punch left, say again punch left," Masterman ordered from his command track. B and C turned to the east, sprinted about three kilometers, then wheeled back. At about the same time, Masterman let his

artillery fire into the enemy's second echelon. There was no surprise to lose now, and it was time to hurt the enemy in every possible way. In another few minutes, it was clear that he was engaging at least a brigade with the 1st Squadron of the Buffalo, but the numbers didn't matter any more now than they had during the night.

For one last time, there was a mechanistic horror. The gun flashes were less brilliant in the light of day, and tanks drove through the dust of their own shots as they advanced. As planned, the enemy force recoiled again from the devastating effects of B- and C-Troop, turning back, hoping to find a gap between the first attacking force and the second. What they found were fourteen M1A2s of the squadron's tank company, spaced two hundred meters apart like a breakwater. As before, first the tanks were destroyed, then the mechanized infantry carriers, as GUIDON rolled into the enemy formation. Then it stopped. Vehicles not yet engaged stopped moving. Crews hopped out and ran away from them. It was the same, Masterman heard, all the way west on the line. Surprised, running, their exit blocked, the soldiers lucky enough to see what was rolling toward them in time decided that resistance was surely fatal, and the Third (and last) Battle of KKMC stopped thirty minutes after it had begun.

It wasn't quite that easy for the invaders. Advancing Saudi forces, finally in heavy contact, fought a deliberate battle, grinding their way through another brigade, this one Iranian and therefore getting more attention than an Arab unit might have, but by sunset, all six of the UIR divisions that had entered their country were destroyed. Sub-units with some lingering fight in them were ordered to surrender by senior officers, before enemies on three sides could enforce a more final decision.

The biggest administrative headache, as before, was the prisoners, all the worse with the additional confusion of nightfall. That problem would last for at least a day, commanders reported. Fortunately, in most cases the UIR soldiers had water and rations of their own. They were moved away from their equipment and placed under guard, but this far from home, there was little danger of their striking across the desert on foot.

CLARK AND CHAVEZ left the Russian embassy an hour after nightfall. In the back of their car was a large suitcase whose contents would not appear overly dangerous to anyone, and was in fact largely in keeping with their journalistic cover. The mission, they decided, was slightly crazy, but while that troubled the senior member of the team somewhat, it had Ding rather juiced. The premise of it seemed incredible, however, and that had to be verified. The drive to the alley behind the coffee shop was uneventful. The security perimeter around Daryaei's home stopped short of their destination. The coffee shop was closed, what with the blackout conditions imposed on a city half at war and half at peace—streetlights were off, and windows draped, but cars were allowed to drive about with lights, and domestic electricity was evidently on. That worked to their benefit. The door lock was easily defeated in the unlit alley. Chavez eased the door open and looked inside. Clark followed, lugging the case, and both men went inside, closing the door behind

them. They were already on the second floor when they heard noises. A family lived here. It turned out to be a husband and wife in their fifties, proprietors of the eating place, watching television. Had the mission been properly planned, he knew, they would have established that sooner. Oh, well.

"Hello," Clark said quietly. "Please do not make any noise."

"What—"

"We will not hurt you," John said as Ding looked around for—yes, electric cords would do just fine. "Please lie down on the floor."

"Who—"

"We will let you go when we leave," Clark went on in literate Farsi. "But if you resist, we must hurt you."

They were too terrified to resist the two men who had appeared like thieves in their home. Clark used the light cords to tie their arms, then their ankles. Chavez laid them on their sides, first getting the woman some water before he gagged her.

"Make sure they can breathe," Clark said, in English this time. He checked all the knots, pleased that he remembered his basic seamanship skills from thirty years before. Satisfied, they went upstairs.

The truly crazy part was the communications lash-up. Chavez opened the case and started taking things out. The roof of the building was flat, and had a clear line of sight to another such building three blocks away. For that reason, they had to keep low. First of all, Ding set up the mini-dish. The tripod for it was heavy, with spiked feet to secure it to the roof. Next he had to turn it, to get the buzzing chirp of the carrier signal from the proper satellite. That done, he twisted the clamp to lock the dish in place. Then came the camera. This, too, had a tripod. Chavez set that up, screwed the camera in place, and aimed it, switching it on and pointing it at the center of the three buildings that held their interest. Then the cable from the camera went into the transmitter/power-supply box, which they left in the opened suitcase.

"It's running, John."

The odd part was that they had an up-link, but not a down-link. They could download signals from the satellite, but there wasn't a separate audio channel for them to use. For that they needed additional equipment, which they didn't have.

"THERE IT IS," Robby Jackson reported from the National Military Command Center.

"That's the one," Mary Pat Foley confirmed, looking at the same picture. She dialed a phone number to the American embassy in Moscow, from there to the Russian Foreign Ministry, from there to the Russian embassy in Tehran, and from there by the digital phone in John's hand. "Do you hear me, Ivan?" she asked in Russian. "It's Foleyeva." It took a very long second for the reply to come through.

• • •

“AH, MARIA, HOW good to hear your voice.” *Thank God for the phone company,* John thought to himself, letting out a long breath. *Even the one here.*

“I have your picture here on my desk,” she said next.

“I was so much younger then.”

“HE’S IN PLACE and everything’s cool,” the DDO said.

“Okay.” Jackson lifted another phone. “It’s a go. I repeat, it’s a go. Acknowledge.”

“Operation BOOTH is go,” Diggs confirmed from Riyadh.

THE IRANIAN AIR defense system was about as tense as it could be. Though no attack at all had been launched into their territory, the radar operators were keeping a close eye on things. They watched several aircraft patrolling the Saudi and Qatari coasts, mainly running parallel, not even pushing toward the center of the waterway.

BANDIT-TWO-FIVE-ONE and BANDIT-TWO-FIVE-TWO completed refueling from their tankers within seconds of each other. It wasn’t often that Stealth fighters operated in unison. They were, in fact, designed to operate entirely alone. But not this time. Both separated from the KC-10s and turned north for a flight of about one hour, albeit with a thousand feet of vertical separation. The tanker crews remained on station, and used the time to refuel the standing fighter patrol on the Saudi coast, exactly routine for night operations. Fifty miles away, an AWACS tracked everything—or almost. The E-3B couldn’t detect an F-117, either.

“WE KEEP MEETING like this,” the President said to the makeup woman, with forced good humor.

“You look very tired,” Mary Abbot told him.

“I am pretty tired,” Ryan admitted.

“Your hands are shaking.”

“Lack of sleep.” This was a lie.

CALLIE WESTON WAS typing alterations to the speech directly into the electronic memory of the TelePrompTer. Even the TV technicians were not allowed to see the content of this one, and in a way she was surprised that she herself was. She finished, scanning the whole thing for typos, which, she’d learned over the years, could be very disconcerting to Presidents on live TV.

SOME OF THEM were smoking, Clark saw, the guards outside. Poor discipline,

but maybe it did serve to keep people awake.

"John, you ever think that this job is maybe just a little too exciting?"

"Gotta take a leak?" It was the usual reaction, even for them.

"Yeah."

"Me, too." It was something that never made the James Bond movies. "Hmph. I didn't know that." Clark pressed the earpiece in, hearing a normal voice, as opposed to one of a known announcer, say that the President would be on in two minutes. Maybe some network director, he thought. With that, the last two items came out of the suitcase.

"MY FELLOW AMERICANS, I am here to give you an updated report on the situation in the Middle East," the President said without preamble.

"Approximately four hours ago, organized resistance ceased among the forces of the United Islamic Republic which invaded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Saudi, Kuwaiti, and American forces, working together, have destroyed six divisions in a battle which raged through a night and a day.

"I can now tell you that our country dispatched the 10th and 11th Cavalry regiments, plus the First Brigade of the North Carolina National Guard, and the 366th Wing from Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho. A massive battle was fought south of King Khalid Military City. You have already seen some of the details on TV. The final UIR units attempted to flee the battlefield to the north, but they were cut off, and after a brief engagement, they began to surrender. Ground combat in the area has, *for the moment,* concluded.

"I say 'for the moment,' because this war is unlike any most of us have known in the past fifty years. An attack was made directly upon our citizens, on our soil. It was an attack deliberately made upon civilians. It was an attack made using a weapon of mass destruction. The violations of international law are too numerous to list," the President went on, "but it would be wrong to say that this attack was made by the people of the United Islamic Republic upon America.

"Peoples do not make war. The decision to start a war is most often made by one man. They used to be kings, or princes, or barbarian chiefs, but throughout history it's usually one man who decides, and never is the decision to start a war of aggression the result of a democratic process.

"We Americans have no quarrel with the people of the former Iran and Iraq. Their religion may be different from ours, but we are a country which protects freedom of religion. Their languages may be different, but America has welcomed people of many languages. If America has proven anything to the world, it is that all men are the same, and given the same freedom and the same opportunity, they will all prosper to the limit only of their own abilities.

"In the last twenty-four hours, we killed at least ten thousand soldiers of the UIR. Probably many more. We do not know now and probably never will know the total number of *enemy* deaths, and we need to remind ourselves that they did not choose their fates. Those fates were chosen for them by others, and ultimately by one person." Ryan clasped his hands together theatrically. It seemed a very awkward gesture to all who watched.

• • •

"THERE IT GOES," Chavez said, his face to the camera's small eyepiece screen, which was now showing the download from the orbiting satellite. "Start the music."

Clark thumbed the laser transmitter, careful to see that it was on the invisible infra-red setting. A check through his eyepiece put the dot on the building's cornice—or parapet, he couldn't remember the difference. Whatever, there was a guard standing there, his foot on the structure.

DIGGS IN RIYADH: "Final check."

"BANDIT-TWO-FIVE-ONE," he heard in reply

"TWO-FIVE-TWO."

"THROUGHOUT HISTORY, KINGS and princes have made war at their whim, sending people off to die. To the kings, they were just peasants, and the wars were just grabs for power and riches, a kind of entertainment, and if people died, nobody much cared, and when it was all over, for the most part the kings were still kings, whether they won or lost, because they were above it all. All the way into this century, it was assumed that a chief of state had a *right* to make war. At Nuremberg, after the Second World War, we changed that rule by trying and executing some of those responsible. But getting to that point, arresting the criminals, as it were, cost the lives of twenty million Russians, six million Jews, so many lives lost that historians don't even know...." Ryan looked up to see Andrea Price wave to him. She didn't smile. It was not a smiling matter. But she gave the signal anyway.

THE GROUND-BASED laser was only insurance. They could have gone in without it, but picking out exactly the right house in the city would have been difficult, and they wanted to limit collateral damage. This way, also, the aircraft could drop their weapons from higher altitude. Simple ballistics would guarantee a drop to within a hundred yards, and the improved optics systems on the guidance packages cut that figure to one. Exactly on time, both BANDIT aircraft ("Bandit" was the semi-official call sign for the pilots of the Black Jets) opened their bomb-bay doors. Each aircraft carried a single five-hundred-pound weapon, the smallest that could take a PAVEWAY guidance package. These hung from a trapeze while the seeker heads looked for a modulated laser signal. Both acquired the laser dot, and so informed the pilots, who executed the release. Then they both did something neither had ever done before on a Stealth mission.

"BANDIT-TWO-FIVE-ONE, bomb away!"

"TWO-FIVE-TWO, bomb gone!"

“EVERY IDEA IN the history of man, good or bad, has started in a single human mind, and wars begin because one mind thinks it profitable to kill and steal. This time, it’s happened to us in a particularly cruel way. This time, we can be exactly sure who did it—and more.”

WORLDWIDE, IN EVERY country with a satellite dish and TV cable, in over a billion homes, the picture changed from the Oval Office of the White House to a three-story building on a city street. Most viewers thought it some mad error, something from a movie, a bad connection—

A HANDFUL KNEW different, even before the President went on. Daryaei, too, was watching the President’s speech, as much from pure curiosity as political advantage. What sort of man was this Ryan, really? he’d wondered so long. Too late, he found out.

“THIS IS WHERE he lives, Mahmoud Haji Daryaei, the man who attacked our country with disease, the man who attacked my child, the man who tried to attack me, the man who sent his army on a mission of conquest that turned into a mission of death. He is a man who has defiled his religion and the laws of men and nations, and now, Mr. Daryaei, here is the reply of the United States of America.”

THE PRESIDENT’S VOICE stopped, and a second or two later, so did translations all over the world, replaced only by silence, as eyes watched an ordinary black-and-white picture of a quite ordinary building—and yet everyone knew that something extraordinary was about to happen. Those looking very closely saw a light go on in a window, and the front door open, but no one would ever know the identity of the person who might have been attempting to leave, because both weapons fell true, struck the roof of the building, and went off a hundredth of a second later.

THE NOISE WAS awful. The passing pressure wave was worse. Both men watched, ignoring the danger. The echoes were punctuated by the tinkle of glass from half a mile around.

“You okay?” Ding asked.

“Yeah. Time to boogie, partner.”

“Fuckin’ A, Mr. C.”

They got down to the bedroom level as quickly as possible. Chavez cut most of the way through the cords with a pocket knife. He figured it would take them about five minutes to work themselves free. The alleys allowed them to

drive from the area, and keep out of the way of emergency vehicles, which screamed their way to the remains of the three buildings. Half an hour later, they were back in the safety of the Russian embassy. Vodka was offered. Vodka was drunk. Chavez had never experienced so bad a case of the shakes. Clark had. The vodka helped.

"TO THE PEOPLE of the United Islamic Republic, the United States of America says this:

"First, we know the exact location of the germ-warfare factory. We have asked for and received the help of the Russian Federation. They are neutrals in our dispute, but they have knowledge of this type of weapon. A team of technical experts is now on its way to Tehran. They will land, and you will take them immediately to the facility to supervise its neutralization. They will be accompanied by journalists for an independent verification of the facts. If this does not happen, then twelve hours from now we will destroy the site with a low-yield nuclear bomb to be delivered by a Stealth aircraft. Do not make the mistake of thinking that I am unwilling to give that order. The United States of America will not tolerate the existence of that facility and its inhuman weapons. The twelve-hour period starts now.

"Second, your prisoners will be treated in full accordance with international convention, and also the stern and admirable laws of hospitality which are part of your Islamic faith. Your prisoners will be returned as soon as you deliver to the United States the living bodies of every single person who had a role in preparing and delivering those weapons to our country, and those behind the attack on my daughter. On that there will be no compromise.

"Third, we will give your country a week to comply with this requirement. If you do not, then America will declare and wage unlimited war. You have seen what we can do, what we have done. I assure you that, if we have to, we can do more still. The choice is yours to make. Choose wisely.

"Finally, and I say this to all nations who may wish us ill, the United States of America will not tolerate attacks on our country, our possessions, or our citizens. From this day forward, whoever executes or orders such an attack, no matter who you are, no matter where you might hide, no matter how long it may take, we will come for you. I have sworn an oath before God to execute my duties as President. That I will do. To those who wish to be our friends, you will find no more faithful friend than we. To those who would be our enemies, remember that we can be faithful at that, too.

"My fellow Americans, it has been a hard time for us, for some of our allies, and for our enemies as well. We have defeated aggression. We have punished the person most guilty for the cruel deaths in our land, and we will have a reckoning also with those who followed his orders, but for the rest, let us now recall the words of President Abraham Lincoln:

" 'With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds . . . to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.'

"Thank you, and good day."

EPILOGUE:

PRESS ROOM

" . . . AND FINALLY, I AM SUBMITTING to the Senate the name of Dr. Pierre Alexandre to fill the post of Surgeon General. Dr. Alexandre, after a distinguished career in the United States Army Medical Corps, then joined the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine as an associate professor in the area of infectious disease. He was very helpful to me during the Ebola outbreak. Dr. Alexandre is a brilliant clinician and researcher who will initiate and oversee several new programs, including basic research in rare infectious diseases, and will also head up a new federal oversight commission to coordinate AIDS research. This will not be bureaucratic," the President said, "there's enough of that. The idea here is to set up a new system by which physicians and other research scientists can more easily exchange research data. It is my hope that the Senate will see quickly to confirmation of his appointment.

"That concludes my opening statement." Jack pointed. "Yes, Helen?"

"Mr. President, your opening remarks on China—"

"I thought I made that clear. We have had private discussions with the Republic of China and concluded that the restoration of full diplomatic relations is in the best interests of both our countries. It is not the policy of the United States to discourage countries with freely elected governments. The Republic of China is such a country, and merits our full respect and recognition."

"But what will mainland China think of this?"

"What they think is their affair. We are both sovereign nations. So is Taiwan, and it's time we stopped pretending otherwise."

"Does this have anything to do with the shoot-down of the airliner?"

"That matter is still under investigation. Next?" Ryan pointed.

"Mr. President, the new Iranian provisional government is reportedly seeking to establish full diplomatic relations with our country. Will we entertain that request?"

"Yes, we certainly will," Jack replied. "If there's a better way to turn an enemy into a friend than by open discussion and trade, I don't know what it is. They have been very cooperative, and we still have an embassy building there, but I suppose we'll have to change the lock on the front door." There was general laughter. "Yes, Tom. Nice tan, by the way. Welcome home."

"Mr. President, thank you. Regarding the destruction of the germ-warfare lab outside Tehran, the only journalists who ever got in there were those two Russians that their embassy drafted for the purpose. How can we be sure—"

"Tom, the Russian experts who supervised the neutralization of the facility were indeed experts. We have video of their procedures from the reporters,

and both I and my consultants on this matter are fully satisfied. Ed?"

"Mr. President, the prisoner exchange is now concluded. How will we respond to Iranian and Iraqi requests for credit?"

"Secretaries Adler and Winston will be flying to London next week to discuss this with representatives of both governments."

"Sir, a follow-up, will this mean preferential prices for imported oil, and if so, for how long?"

"Ed, those are subjects for negotiation, but I suppose they will offer us something in return for the credit approval they desire. The exact details will have to be worked out, and we have two very good men to handle that for us."

"What about good women?" a female reporter asked.

"We have a lot of those around, Denise, including yourself. In case you haven't heard, Special Agent Andrea Price"—POTUS gestured toward the door at his right—"has accepted a proposal of marriage. It will be a mixed marriage, however, as her fiancé, Inspector Patrick O'Day, is a special agent in the FBI. I wish them the very best, even if it means I may need a new bodyguard. Yes, Barry," he said, pointing to the senior CNN reporter.

"So the big question that nobody has asked yet today, Mr. President—"

Ryan held up his hand. "There is so much—so many things yet to be done just to get the government fully functional again after all we've been through —"

"Sir, we're not going to let you off the hook."

A smile. A sigh. A nod. A surrender. "The answer to your question, Barry, is, yes, I will."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

It is now the moment when by common consent we pause to become conscious of our national life and to rejoice in it, to recall what our country has done for each of us, and to ask ourselves what we can do for our country in return.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.

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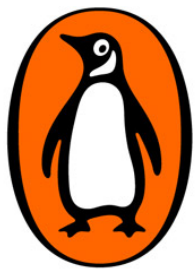

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Every Man a Tiger (written with General Charles Horner)

This is a work of fiction. The events described here are imaginary; the settings and characters are fictitious and not intended to represent specific places or living persons.

RAINBOW SIX

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FOR ALEXANDRA MARIA *lux mea mundi*

There are no compacts between lions and men, and wolves and lambs have no concord.

—HOMER

PROLOGUE

SETTING UP

John Clark had more time in airplanes than most licensed pilots, and he knew the statistics as well as any of them, but he still didn't like the idea of crossing the ocean on a twin-engine airliner. Four was the right number of engines, he thought, because losing one meant losing only 25 percent of the aircraft's available power, whereas on this United 777, it meant losing *half.* Maybe the presence of his wife, one daughter, and a son-in-law made him a little itchier than usual. No, that wasn't right. He wasn't itchy at all, not about flying anyway. It was just a lingering . . . what? he asked himself. Next to him, in the window seat Sandy was immersed in the mystery she'd started the day before, while he was trying to concentrate on the current issue of *The Economist,* and wondering what was putting the cold-air feeling on the back of his neck. He started to look around the cabin for a sign of danger but abruptly stopped himself. There wasn't anything wrong that he could see, and he didn't want to seem like a nervous flyer to the cabin crew. He sipped at his glass of white wine, shook his shoulders, and went back to the article on how peaceful the new world was.

Right. He grimaced. Well, yes, he had to admit that things were a hell of a lot better than they'd been for nearly all of his life. No more swimming out of a submarine to do a collection on a Russian beach, or flying into Tehran to do something the Iranians wouldn't like much, or swimming up a fetid river in North Vietnam to rescue a downed aviator. Someday maybe Bob Holtzman would talk him into a book on his career. Problem was, who'd believe it—and would CIA ever allow him to tell his tales except on his own deathbed? He was not in a hurry for that, not with a grandchild on the way. Damn. He grimaced, unwilling to contemplate that development. Patsy must have caught a silver bullet on their wedding night, and Ding glowed more about it than she did. John looked back to business class—the curtain wasn't in place yet—and there they were, holding hands while the stewardess did the safety lecture. *If the airplane hit the water at 400 knots, reach under your seat for the life preserver and inflate it by pulling* . . . he'd heard that one before. The bright yellow life jackets would make it somewhat easier for search aircraft to find the crash site, and that was about all they were good for.

Clark looked around the cabin again. He still felt that draft on his neck. Why? The flight attendant made the rounds, removing his wineglass as the aircraft taxied out to the end of the runway. Her last stop was by Alistair over on the left side of the first-class cabin. Clark caught his eye and got a funny look back as the Brit put his seat back in the upright position. Him, too? Wasn't that something? Neither of the two had ever been accused of

nervousness.

Alistair Stanley had been a major in the Special Air Service before being permanently seconded to the Secret Intelligence Service. His position had been much like John's—the one you called in to take care of business when the gentler people in the field division got a little too skittish. Al and John had hit it off right away on a job in Romania eight years before, and the American was pleased to be working with him again on a more regular basis, even if they were both too old now for the fun stuff. Administration wasn't exactly John's idea of what his job should be, but he had to admit he wasn't twenty anymore . . . or thirty . . . or even forty. A little old to run down alleys and jump over walls. . . . Ding had said that to him only a week before in John's office at Langley, rather more respectfully than usual, since he was trying to make a logical point to the grandfather-presumptive of his first child. What the hell, Clark told himself, it was remarkable enough that he was still alive to gripe about being old—no, not old, old*er.* Not to mention he was respectable now as Director of the new agency. Director. A polite term for a REMF. But you didn't say no to the President, especially if he happened to be your friend.

The engine sounds increased. The airliner started moving. The usual sensation came, like being pressed back into the seat of a sports car jumping off a red light, but with more authority. Sandy, who hardly traveled at all, didn't look up from the book. It must have been pretty good, though John never bothered reading mysteries. He never could figure them out, and they made him feel stupid, despite the fact that in his professional life he'd picked his way through real mysteries more than once. A little voice in his head said *rotate,* and the floor came up under his feet. The body of the aircraft followed the nose into the sky, and the flight began properly, the wheels rising up into the wells. Instantly, those around him lowered their seats to get some sleep on the way to London Heathrow. John lowered his, too, but not as far. He wanted dinner first.

"On our way, honey," Sandy said, taking a second away from the book.

"I hope you like it over there."

"I have three cookbooks for after I figure this one out."

John smiled. "Who done it?"

"Not sure yet, but probably the wife."

"Yeah, divorce lawyers are so expensive."

Sandy chuckled and went back to the story as the stews got up from their seats to resume drink service. Clark finished *The Economist* and started *Sports Illustrated.* Damn, he'd be missing the end of the football season. That was one thing he'd always tried to keep track of, even off on a mission. The Bears were coming back, and he'd grown up with Papa Bear George Halas and the Monsters of the Midway—had often wondered if he might have made it as a pro himself. He'd been a pretty good linebacker in high school, and Indiana University had shown some interest in him (also for his swimming). Then he'd decided to forgo college and join the Navy, as his father had before him, though Clark had become a SEAL, rather than a skimmer-sailor on a tin can . . .

"Mr. Clark?" The stew delivered the dinner menu. "Mrs. Clark?"

One nice thing about first class. The flight crew pretended you had a name.

John had gotten an automatic upgrade—he had frequent-flyer miles up the yingyang, and from now on he'd mainly fly British Airways, which had a very comfortable understanding with the British government.

The menu, he saw, was pretty good, as it usually was on international flights, and so was the wine list . . . but he decided to ask for bottled water instead of wine, thank you. Hmph. He grumbled to himself, settled back, and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. These damned flights always seemed overheated to him.

The captain got on next, interrupting all the personal movies on their mini-screens. They were taking a southerly routing to take advantage of the jet stream. That, Captain Will Garnet explained, would cut their time to Heathrow by forty minutes. He didn't say that it would also make for a few bumps. Airlines tried to conserve fuel, and forty-five minutes' worth would put a gold star in his copybook . . . well, maybe just a silver one . . .

The usual sensations. The aircraft tilted, more to the right than the left, as it crossed over the ocean at Sea Isle City in New Jersey for the three-thousand-mile flight to the next landfall, somewhere on the Irish coast, which they'd reach in about five and a half hours, John thought. He had to sleep for some of that time. At least the captain didn't bother them with the usual tour-director crap—*we are now at forty thousand feet, that's almost eight miles to fall ifthe wings come off and* . . . They started serving dinner. They'd be doing the same aft in tourist class, with the drink and dinner carts blocking the aisles.

It started on the left side of the aircraft. The man was dressed properly, wearing a jacket—that was what got John's attention. Most people took them off as soon as they sat down but—

—it was a Browning automatic, with a flat-black finish that said "military" to Clark, and, less than a second later, to Alistair Stanley. A moment later, two more men appeared on the right side, walking right next to Clark's seat.

"Oh, shit," he said so quietly that only Sandy heard him. She turned and looked, but before she could do or say anything, he grabbed her hand. That was enough to keep her quiet, but not quite enough to keep the lady across the aisle from screaming—well, almost screaming. The woman with her covered her mouth with a hand and stifled most of it. The stewardess looked at the two men in front of her in total disbelief. This hadn't happened in years. How could it be happening now?

Clark was asking much the same question, followed by another: Why the hell had he packed his sidearm in his carry-on and stowed it in the overhead? What was the point of having a gun on an airplane, you idiot, if you couldn't get to it? What a dumbass rookie mistake! He only had to look to his left to see the same expression on Alistair's face. Two of the most experienced pros in the business, their guns less than four feet away, but they might as well be in the luggage stored below. . . .

"John . . ."

"Just relax, Sandy," her husband replied quietly. More easily said than done, as he well knew.

John sat back, keeping his head still, but turned away from the window and toward the cabin. His eyes moved free. Three of them. One, probably the leader, was taking a stew forward, where she unlocked the door to the flight

deck. John watched the two of them go through and close the door behind them. Okay, now Captain William Garnet would find out what was going on. Hopefully he would be a pro, and he'd be trained to say *yes, sir—no, sir—threebags-full, sir* to anybody who came forward with a gun. At best he'd be Air Force–or Navy-trained, and therefore he'd know better than to do anything stupid, like trying to be a goddamned hero. His mission would be to get the airplane on the ground, somewhere, anywhere, because it was a hell of a lot harder to kill three hundred people in an airplane when it was sitting still on the ramp with the wheels chocked.

Three of them, one forward in the flight deck. He'd stay there to keep an eye on the drivers and to use the radio to tell whomever he wanted to talk to what his demands were. Two more in first class, standing there, forward, where they could see down both aisles of the aircraft.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking. I've got the seat-belt sign on. There's a little chop in the air. Please stay in your seats for the time being. I'll be back to you in a few minutes. Thank you."

Good, John thought, catching Alistair's eye. The captain sounded cool, and the bad guys weren't acting crazy— yet. The people in back probably didn't know anything was wrong—yet. Also good. People might panic . . . well, no, not necessarily, but so much the better for everyone if nobody knew there was anything to panic about.

Three of them. Only three? Might there be a backup guy, disguised as a passenger? That was the one who controlled the bomb, if there was a bomb, and a bomb was the worst thing there could be. A pistol bullet might punch a hole in the skin of the aircraft, forcing a rapid descent, and that would fill some barf bags and cause some soiled underwear, but nobody died from that. A bomb would kill everyone aboard, probably . . . better than even money, Clark judged, and he hadn't gotten old by taking that sort of chance when he didn't have to. Maybe just let the airplane go to wherever the hell these three wanted to go, and let negotiations start, by which time people would know that there were another three very special people inside. Word would be going out now. The bad guys would have gotten onto the company radio frequency and passed along the bad news of the day, and the Director of Security for United—Clark knew him, Pete Fleming, former Deputy Assistant Director of the FBI—would call his former agency and get *that* ball rolling, to include notification of CIA and State, the FBI Hostage Rescue Team in Quantico, and Little Willie Byron's Delta Force down at Fort Bragg. Pete would also pass along the passenger list, with three of them circled in red, and *that* would get Willie a little nervous, plus making the troops at Langley and Foggy Bottom wonder about a security leak—John dismissed that. This was a random event that would just make people spin wheels in the Operations Room in Langley's Old Headquarters Building. Probably.

It was time to move a little. Clark turned his head very slowly, toward Domingo Chavez, just twenty feet away. When eye contact was established, he touched the tip of his nose, as though to make an itch go away. Chavez did the same . . . and Ding was still wearing his jacket. He was more used to hot weather, John thought, and probably felt cold on the airplane. Good. He'd still have his Beretta .45 on . . . probably . . . Ding preferred the small of his back,

though, and that was awkward for a guy strapped into an airliner seat. Even so, Chavez knew what was going down, and had the good sense to do nothing about it . . . yet. How might Ding react with his pregnant wife sitting next to him? Domingo was smart and as cool under pressure as Clark could ever ask, but under that he was still Latino, a man of no small passion—even John Clark, experienced as he was, saw flaws in others that were perfectly natural to himself. He had *his* wife sitting next to him, and Sandy was frightened, and Sandy wasn't supposed to be frightened about her own safety. . . . It was her husband's self-assigned job to make certain of that. . . .

One of the bad guys was going over the passenger list. Well, that would tell John if there had been a security leak of some sort. But if there were, he couldn't do anything about it. Not yet. Not until he knew what was going on. Sometimes you just had to sit and take it and—

The guy at the head of the left-side aisle started moving, and fifteen feet later, he was looking down at the woman in the window seat next to Alistair.

"Who are you?" he demanded in Spanish.

The lady replied with a name John didn't catch—it was a Spanish name, but from twenty feet away he couldn't hear it clearly enough to identify it, mainly because her reply had been quiet, polite . . . cultured, he thought. Diplomat's wife, maybe? Alistair was leaning back in his seat, staring with wide blue eyes up at the guy with the gun and trying a little too hard not to show fear.

A scream came from the back of the aircraft. "Gun, that's a gun!" a man's voice shouted—

Shit, John thought. Now everybody would know. The right-aisle guy knocked on the cockpit door and stuck his head in to announce this good news.

"Ladies and gentlemen . . . this is Captain Garnet . . . I, uh, am instructed to tell you that we are deviating from our flight plan. . . . We, uh, have some guests aboard who have told me to fly to Lajes in the Azores. They say that they have no desire to hurt anyone, but they are armed, and First Officer Renford and I are going to do exactly what they say. Please remain calm, stay in your seats, and just try to keep things under control. I will be back to you later." Good news. He had to be military trained; his voice was as cool as the smoke off dry ice. Good.

Lajes in the Azores, Clark thought. Former U.S. Navy base . . . still active? Maybe just caretakered for long overwater flights flying there—as a stop and refueling point for somewhere else? Well, the left-side guy had spoken in Spanish, and been replied to in Spanish. Probably not Middle Eastern bad guys. Spanish speakers . . . Basques? That was still perking over in Spain. The woman, who was she? Clark looked over. Everyone was looking around now, and it was safe for him to do so. Early fifties, well turned out. The Spanish ambassador to Washington was male. Might this be his wife?

The left-side man shifted his gaze a seat. "Who are you?"

"Alistair Stanley" was the reply. There was no sense in Alistair's lying, Clark knew. They were traveling openly. Nobody knew about their agency. They hadn't even started it up yet. Shit, Clark thought. "I'm British," he added in a quaky voice. "My passport's in my bag up in the—" He reached up and had his hand slapped down by the bad guy's gun.

Nice play, John thought, even if it hadn't worked. He might have gotten the bag down, produced the passport, and then had his gun in his lap. Bad luck that the gunman had believed him. That was the problem with accents. But Alistair was up to speed. The three wolves didn't know that the sheep herd had three dogs in it. Big ones.

Willie would be on the phone now. Delta kept an advance team on round-the-clock standby, and they'd be prepping for a possible deployment now. Colonel Byron would be with them. Little Willie was that kind of soldier. He had an XO and staff to follow things up while he led from the front. A lot of wheels were spinning now. All John and his friends really had to do was sit tight . . . so long as the bad guys kept their cool.

More Spanish from the left side. "Where is your husband ?" he demanded. He was pretty mad. Made sense, John thought. Ambassadors are good targets. But so were their wives. She was too sharp-looking to be the wife of just a diplomat, and Washington had to be a premier post. Senior guy, probably aristocracy. Spain still had that. High-profile target, the better to put pressure on the Spanish government.

Blown mission was the next thought. They wanted him, not her, and they would not be happy about that. *Bad intelligence, guys,* Clark thought, looking at their faces and seeing their anger. *Even happens to me once in a while.* Yeah, he thought, like about half the fucking time in a good year. The two he could see were talking to each other . . . quietly, but the body language said it all. They were pissed. So, he had three (or more?) angry terrorists with guns on a two-engine airplane over the North Atlantic at night. Could have been worse, John told himself. Somehow. Yeah, they might have had Semtex jackets with Primacord trim.

They were late twenties, Clark thought. Old enough to be technically competent, but young enough to need adult supervision. Little operational experience, and not enough judgment. They'd think they knew it all, think they were real clever. That was the problem with death. Trained soldiers knew the reality of it better than terrorists did. These three would want to succeed, and wouldn't really consider the alternative. Maybe a rogue mission. The Basque separatists hadn't ever messed with foreign nationals, had they? Not Americans anyway, but this was an *American* airliner, and that was a big black line to step over. Rogue mission? Probably. Bad news.

You wanted a degree of predictability in situations like this. Even terrorism had rules. There was almost a liturgy to it, steps everyone had to take before something really bad happened, which gave the good guys a chance to talk to the bad guys. Get a negotiator down to establish rapport with them, negotiate the little stuff at first—*come on, let the children and their mothers off, okay? No big deal, and it looks bad for you and your group on TV, right?* Get them started giving things up. Then the old people—who wants to whack grandma and grandpa? Then the food, maybe with some Valium mixed in with it, while the response team's intel group started spiking the aircraft with microphones and miniature lenses whose fiber-optic cables fed to TV cameras.

Idiots, Clark thought. This play just didn't work. It was almost as bad as kidnapping a child for money. Cops were just too good at tracking those fools, and Little Willie was sure as hell boarding a USAF transport at Pope Air Force

Base right now. If they really landed at Lajes, the process would start real soon, and the only variable was how many good guys would bite the big one before the bad guys got to do the same. Clark had worked with Colonel Byron's boys and girls. If they came into the aircraft, at least three people would not be leaving it alive. Problem was, how much company would they have in the hereafter ? Hitting an airliner was like having a shoot-out in a grammar school, just more crowded.

They were talking more, up front, paying little attention to anything else, the rest of the aircraft. In one sense, that was logical. The front office was the most important part, but you always wanted to keep an eye on the rest. You never knew who might be aboard. Sky marshals were long in the past, but cops traveled by air, and some of them carried guns . . . well, maybe not on international flights, but you didn't get to retire from the terrorist business by being dumb. It was hard enough to survive if you were smart. Amateurs. Rogue mission. Bad intelligence. Anger and frustration. This was getting worse. One of them balled his left hand into a fist and shook it at the entire adverse world they'd found aboard.

Great, John thought. He turned in the seat, again catching Ding's eye and shaking his head side to side ever so slightly. His reply was a raised eyebrow. Domingo knew how to speak proper English when he had to.

It was as though the air changed then, and not for the better. Number 2 went forward again into the cockpit and stayed for several minutes, while John and Alistair watched the one on the left side, staring down the aisle. After two minutes of frustrated attention, he switched sides as though in a spasm, and looked aft, leaning his head forward as though to shorten the distance, peering down the aisle while his face bounced between expressions of power and impotence. Then, just as quickly, he headed back to port, pausing only to look at the cockpit door in anger.

There's only the three of them, John told himself then, just as #2 reappeared from the front office. Number 3 was too hyped. Probably just the three? he wondered. Think through it, Clark told himself. If so, that really made them amateurs. *The Gong Show* might be an amusing thought in another context, but not at 500 knots, 37,000 feet over the North Atlantic. If they could just be cool about everything, let the driver get the twin-engine beast on the ground, maybe some common sense would break out. But they wouldn't be very cool, would they?

Instead of taking his post to cover the right-side aisle, #2 went back to #3 and they spoke in raspy whispers which Clark understood in context if not content. It was when #2 pointed to the cockpit door that things became worst of all—

—*nobody's really in charge,* John decided. That was just great, three free-agents with guns in a friggin' airplane. It was time to start being afraid. Clark was not a stranger to fear. He'd been in too many tight places for that, but in every other case he'd had an element of control over the situation—or if not that, at least over his own actions, such as the ability to run away, which was a far more comforting thought now than he'd ever realized. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Number 2 headed aft to look at the woman sitting next to Alistair. He just

stood there for a few seconds, staring at her, then looking at Alistair, who looked back in a subdued way.

"Yes?" the Brit said finally, in his most cultured accent.

"Who are you?" Number 2 demanded.

"I told your friend, old man, Alistair Stanley. I have my passport in my carry-on bag if you wish to see it." The voice was just brittle enough to simulate a frightened man holding it together.

"Yes, show it to me!"

"Of course, sir." In elegantly slow movements, the former SAS major slipped out of his seat belt, stood, opened the overhead bin, and extracted his black carry-on bag. "May I?" he asked. Number 2 replied with a nod.

Alistair unzipped the side compartment and pulled the passport out, handed it over, then sat down, his trembling hands holding the bag in his lap.

Number 2 looked at the passport and tossed it back into the Brit's lap while John watched. Then he said something in Spanish to the woman in 4A. "Where is your husband?" it sounded like. The woman replied in the same cultured tones that she'd used just a few minutes earlier, and #2 stormed away to speak with #3 again. Alistair let out a long breath and looked around the cabin, as though for security, finally catching John's eye. There was no movement from his hands or face, but even so John knew what he was thinking. Al was not happy with this situation either, and more to the point, he'd seen both #2 and #3 close up, looked right in their eyes. John had to factor that into his thought processes. Alistair Stanley was worried, too. The slightly junior officer reached up as though to brush his hair back, and one finger tapped the skull above the ear twice. It might even be worse than he'd feared.

Clark reached his hand forward, enough to shield it from the two in the front of the cabin, and held up three fingers. Al nodded half an inch or so and turned away for a few seconds, allowing John to digest the message. He agreed that there were only three of them. John nodded with appreciation at the confirmation.

How much the better had they been smart terrorists, but the smart ones didn't try stuff like this anymore. The odds were just too long, as the Israelis had proven in Uganda, and the Germans in Somalia. You were safe doing this only so long as the aircraft was in the air, and they couldn't stay up forever, and when they landed the entire civilized world could come crashing in on them with the speed of a thunderbolt and the power of a Kansas tornado—and the real problem was that not all that many people truly wanted to die before turning thirty. And those who did used bombs. So, the smart ones did other things. For that reason they were more dangerous adversaries, but they were also predictable. They didn't kill people for recreation, and they didn't get frustrated early on because they planned their opening moves with skill.

These three were dumb. They had acted on bad intelligence, hadn't had an intel team in place to give them a final mission check, to tell them that their primary target hadn't made the flight, and so here they were, committed to a dumb mission that was already blown, contemplating death or life-long imprisonment . . . for nothing. The only good news, if you could call it that, was that their imprisonment would be in America.

But they didn't want to contemplate life in a steel cage any more than they wished to face death in the next few days—*but* soon they'd start to realize that there was no third alternative. And that the guns in their hands were the only power they had, and that they might as well start using them to get their way . . .

. . . and for John Clark, the choice was whether or not to wait for that to start. . . .

No. He couldn't just sit here and wait for them to start killing people.

Okay. He watched the two for another minute or so, the way they looked at each other while trying to cover both aisles, as he figured out how to do it. With both the dumb ones and the smart ones, the simple plans were usually the best.

It took five minutes more until #2 decided to talk some more with #3. When he did, John turned enough to catch Ding's eye, swiping one finger across his upper lip, as though to stroke a mustache he'd never grown. Chavez cocked his head as though to reply *you sure?* but took the sign. He loosened his seat belt and reached behind his back with his left hand, bringing his pistol out before the alarmed eyes of his six-week wife. Domingo touched her right hand with his to reassure her, covered the Beretta with a napkin in his lap, adopted a neutral expression, and waited for his senior to make the play.

"You!" Number 2 called from forward.

"Yes?" Clark replied, looking studiously forward.

"Sit still!" The man's English wasn't bad. Well, European schools had good language programs.

"Hey, look, I, uh, had a few drinks, and—well, you know, how about it? *Por favor,"* John added sheepishly.

"No, you will stay in your seat!"

"Hey, whatcha gonna do, shoot a guy who needs to take a leak? I don't know what your problem is, okay, but I gotta go, okay? Please?"

Number 2 and #3 traded an oh-shit look that just confirmed their amateur status one last time. The two stews, strapped in their seats forward, looked very worried indeed but didn't say anything. John pressed the issue by unbuckling his seat belt and starting to stand.

Number 2 raced aft then, gun in front, stopping just short of pressing it against John's chest. Sandy's eyes were wide now. She'd never seen her husband do anything the least bit dangerous, but she knew this wasn't the husband who had slept next to her for twenty-five years—and if not that one, then he had to be the other Clark, the one she knew about but had never seen.

"Look, I go there, I take a leak, and I come back, okay? Hell, you wanna watch," he said, his voice slurred now from the half glass of wine he'd drunk alongside the terminal. "That's okay, too, but please don't make me wet my pants, okay?"

What turned the trick was Clark's size. He was just under six-two, and his forearms, visible with the rolled-up sleeves, were powerful. Number 3 was smaller by four inches and thirty pounds, but he had a gun, and making bigger people do one's wishes is always a treat for bullies. So #2 gripped John by the left arm, spun him around and pushed him roughly aft toward the right-side lavatory. John cowered and went, his hands above his head.

"Hey, *gracias, amigo,* okay?" Clark opened the door. Dumb as ever, #2 actually allowed him to close it. For his part, John did what he'd asked permission to do, then washed his hands and took a brief look in the mirror.

Hey, Snake, you still got it? he asked himself, without so much as a breath.

Okay, let's find out.

John slid the locking bar loose, and pulled the folding door open with a grateful and thoroughly cowed look on his face.

"Hey, uh, thanks, y'know."

"Back to your seat."

"Wait, let me get you a cuppa coffee, okay, I—" John took a step aft, and #2 was dumb enough to follow in order to cover him, then reached for Clark's shoulder and turned him around.

"Buenas noces," Ding said quietly from less than ten feet away, his gun up and aimed at the side of #2's head. The man's eyes caught the blue steel that had to be a gun, and the distraction was just right. John's right hand came around, his forearm snapping up, and the back of his fist catching the terrorist in the right temple. The blow was enough to stun.

"How you loaded?"

"Low-velocity," Ding whispered back. "We're on an airplane, 'mano," he reminded his director.

"Stay loose," John commanded quietly, getting a nod.

"Miguel!" Number 3 called loudly.

Clark moved to the left side, pausing on the way to get a cup of coffee from the machine, complete with saucer and spoon. He then reappeared in the left-side aisle and moved forward.

"He said to bring you this. Thank you for allowing me to use the bathroom," John said, in a shaky but grateful voice. "Here is your coffee, sir."

"Miguel!" Number 3 called again.

"He went back that way. Here's your coffee. I'm supposed to sit down now, okay?" John took a few steps forward and stopped, hoping that this amateur would continue to act like one.

He did, coming toward him. John cowered a little, and allowed the cup and saucer to shake in his hand, and just as #3 reached him, looking over to the right side of the aircraft for his colleague, Clark dropped both of them on the floor and dove down to get them, about half a step behind Alistair's seat. Number 3 automatically bent down as well. It would be his last mistake for the evening.

John's hands grabbed the pistol and twisted it around and up into its owner's belly. It might have gone off, but Alistair's own Browning Hi-Power crashed down on the back of the man's neck, just below the skull, and #3 went limp as Raggedy Andy.

"You impatient bugger," Stanley rasped. "Bloody good acting, though." Then he turned, pointed to the nearest stewardess, and snapped his fingers. She came out of her seat like a shot, fairly running aft to them. "Rope, cord, anything to tie them up, quickly!"

John collected the pistol and immediately removed the magazine, then jacked the action to eject the remaining round. In two more seconds, he'd field-stripped the weapon and tossed the pieces at the feet of Alistair's

traveling companion, whose brown eyes were wide and shocked.

"Sky marshals, ma'am. Please be at ease," Clark explained.

A few seconds after that, Ding appeared, dragging #2 with him. The stewardess returned with a spool of twine.

"Ding, front office!" John ordered.

"Roge-o, Mr. C." Chavez moved forward, his Beretta in both hands, and stood by the cockpit door. On the floor, Clark did the wrapping. His hands remembered the sailor knots from thirty years earlier. Amazing, he thought, tying them off as tight as he could. If their hands turned black, too damned bad.

"One more, John," Stanley breathed.

"You want to keep an eye on our two friends."

"A pleasure. Do be careful, lots of electronics up there."

"Tell me about it."

John walked forward, still unarmed. His junior was still at the door, pistol aimed upward in both hands, eyes on the door.

"How we doing, Domingo?"

"Oh, I was thinking about the green salad and the veal, and the wine list ain't half bad. Ain't a real good place to start a gunfight, John. Let's invite him aft."

It made good tactical sense. Number 1 would be facing aft, and if his gun went off, the bullet was unlikely to damage the aircraft, though the people in Row 1 might not like it all that much. John hopped aft to retrieve the cup and saucer.

"You!" Clark gestured to the other stewardess. "Call the cockpit and tell the pilot to tell our friend that Miguel needs him. Then stand right here. When the door opens, if he asks you anything, just point over to me. Okay?"

She was cute, forty, and pretty cool. She did exactly as she was told, lifting the phone and passing along the message.

A few seconds later, the door opened, and #1 looked out. The stewardess was the only person he could see at first. She pointed to John.

"Coffee?"

It only confused him, and he took a step aft toward the large man with the cup. His pistol was aimed down at the floor.

"Hello," Ding said from his left, placing his pistol right against his head.

Another moment's confusion. He just wasn't prepared. Number 1 hesitated, and his hand didn't start to move yet.

"Drop the gun!" Chavez said.

"It is best that you do what he says," John added, in his educated Spanish. "Or my friend will kill you."

His eyes darted automatically around the cabin, looking for his colleagues, but they were nowhere to be seen. The confusion on his face only increased. John took a step toward him, reached for the gun, and took it from an unresisting hand. This he placed in his waistband, then dropped the man to the floor to frisk him while Ding's gun rested at the back of the terrorist's neck. Aft, Stanley started doing the same with his two.

"Two magazines . . . nothing else." John waved to the first stew, who came up with the twine.

"Fools," Chavez snarled in Spanish. Then he looked at his boss. "John, you think that was maybe just a little precipitous ?"

"No." Then he stood and walked into the cockpit. "Captain?"

"Who the hell are you?" The flight crew hadn't seen or heard a thing from aft.

"Where's the nearest military airfield?"

"RCAF Gander," the copilot—Renford, wasn't it?—replied immediately.

"Well, let's go there. Cap'n, the airplane is yours again. We have all three of them tied up."

"Who are you?" Will Garnet asked again rather forcefully, his own tension not yet bled off.

"Just a guy who wanted to help out," John replied, with a blank look, and the message got through. Garnet was ex-Air Force. "Can I use your radio, sir?"

The captain pointed to the fold-down jump-seat, and showed him how to use the radio.

"This is United Flight Niner-Two-Zero," Clark said. "Who am I talking to, over?"

"This is Special Agent Carney of the FBI. Who are you?"

"Carney, call the director, and tell him Rainbow Six is on the line. Situation is under control. Zero casualties. We're heading for Gander, and we need the Mounties. Over."

"Rainbow?"

"Just like it sounds, Agent Carney. I repeat, the situation is under control. The three hijackers are in custody. I'll stand by to talk to your director."

"Yes, sir," replied a very surprised voice.

Clark looked down to see his hands shaking a little now that it was over. Well, that had happened once or twice before. The aircraft banked to the left while the pilot was talking on the radio, presumably to Gander.

"Niner-Two-Zero, Niner-Two-Zero, this is Agent Carney again."

"Carney, this is Rainbow." Clark paused. "Captain, is this radio link secure?"

"It's encrypted, yes."

John almost swore at himself for violating radio discipline. "Okay, Carney, what's happening?"

"Stand by for the Director." There was a click and a brief crackle. "John?" a new voice asked.

"Yes, Dan."

"What gives?"

"Three of them, Spanish-speaking, not real smart. We took them down."

"Alive?"

"That's affirmative," Clark confirmed. "I told the pilot to head for RCAF Gander. We're due there in—"

"Niner-zero minutes," the copilot said.

"Hour and a half," John went on. "You want to have the Mounties show up to collect our bad boys, and call Andrews. We need transport on to London."

He didn't have to explain why. What ought to have been a simple commercial flight of three officers and two wives had blown their identities, and there was little damned sense in having them hang around for everyone aboard to see their faces—most would just want to buy them drinks, but that

wasn't a good idea. All the effort they'd gone to, to make Rainbow both effective and secret, had been blown by three dumbass Spaniards—or whatever they were. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police would figure that one out before handing them over to the American FBI.

"Okay, John, let me get moving on that. I'll call René and have him get things organized. Anything else you need?"

"Yeah, send me a few hours of sleep, will ya?"

"Anything you want, pal," the FBI Director replied with a chuckle, and the line went dead. Clark took the headset off and hung it on the hook.

"Who the hell are you?" the captain demanded again. The initial explanation hadn't been totally satisfactory.

"Sir, my friends and I are air marshals who just happened to be aboard. Is that clear, sir?"

"I suppose," Garnet said. "Glad you made it. The one who was up here was a little loose, if you know what I mean. We were damned worried there for a while."

Clark nodded with a knowing smile. "Yeah, so was I."

They'd been doing it for some time. The powder-blue vans—there were four of them—circulated throughout New York City, picking up homeless people and shuttling them to the dry-out centers run by the corporation. The quiet, kindly operation had made local television over a year ago, and garnered the corporation a few dozen friendly letters, then slid back down below the horizon, as such things tended to do. It was approaching midnight, and with dropping autumn temperatures, the vans were out, collecting the homeless throughout central and lower Manhattan. They didn't do it the way the police once had. The people they helped weren't compelled to get aboard. The volunteers from the corporation asked, politely, if they wanted a clean bed for the night, free of charge, and absent the religious complications typical of most "missions," as they were traditionally called. Those who declined the offer were given blankets, used ones donated by corporate employees who were home sleeping or watching TV at the moment—participation in the program was voluntary for the staff as well—but still warm, and waterproofed. Some of the homeless preferred to stay out, deeming it to be some sort of freedom. More did not. Even habitual drunkards liked beds and showers. Presently there were ten of them in the van, and that was all it could hold for this trip. They were helped aboard, sat down, and seat-belted into their places for safety purposes.

None of them knew that this was the *fifth* of the four vans operating in lower Manhattan, though they found out something was a little different as soon as it started moving. The attendant leaned back from the front seat and handed out bottles of Gallo burgundy, an inexpensive California red, but a better wine than they were used to drinking, and to which something had been added.

By the time they reached their destination, all were asleep or at least stuporous. Those who were able to move were helped from one truck into the back of another, strapped down in their litter beds, and allowed to fall asleep. The rest were carried and strapped down by two pairs of men. With that task

done, the first van was driven off to be cleaned out—they used steam to make sure that whatever residue might be left was sterilized and blasted out of the van. The second truck headed uptown on the West Side Highway, caught the curling ramp for the George Washington Bridge, and crossed the Hudson River. From there it headed north through the northeast corner of New Jersey, then back into New York State.

It turned out that Colonel William Lytle Byron was already in the air in a USAF KC-10 on a course track almost identical to, and only an hour behind, the United 777. It altered course northward for Gander as well. The former P-3 base had to wake up a few personnel to handle the inbound jumbos, but that was the least of it.

The three failed hijackers were blindfolded, hog-tied, and laid on the floor just forward of the front row of first-class seats, which John, Ding, and Alistair appropriated. Coffee was served, and the other passengers kept away from that part of the aircraft.

"I rather admire the Ethiopians' approach to situations like this," Stanley observed. He was sipping tea.

"What's that?" Chavez asked tiredly.

"Some years ago they had a hijacking attempt on their national flag carrier. There happened to be security chaps aboard, and they got control of the situation. Then they strapped their charges in first-class seats, wrapped towels around their necks to protect the upholstery, and cut their throats, right there on the aircraft. And you know—"

"Gotcha," Ding observed. *Nobody* had messed with that airline since. "Simple, but effective."

"Quite." He set his cup down. "I hope this sort of thing doesn't happen *too* often."

The three officers looked out the windows to see the runway lights just before the 777 thumped down at RCAF Gander. There was a muted series of cheers and a smattering of applause from aft. The airliner slowed and then taxied off to the military facilities, where it stopped. The front-right door was opened, and a scissors-lift truck moved to it, slowly and carefully.

John, Ding, and Alistair unsnapped their seat belts and moved toward the door, keeping an eye on the three hijackers as they did so. The first aboard the aircraft was a RCAF officer with a pistol belt and white lanyard, followed by three men in civilian clothes who had to be cops.

"You're Mr. Clark?" the officer asked.

"That's right." John pointed. "There's your three—suspects, I think the term is." He smiled tiredly at that. The cops moved to deal with them.

"Alternate transport is on the way, about an hour out," the Canadian officer told him.

"Thank you." The three moved to collect their carry-on baggage, and in two cases, their wives. Patsy was asleep and had to be awakened. Sandy had gotten back into her book. Two minutes later, all five of them were on the ground, shuffling into one of the RCAF cars. As soon as they pulled away, the aircraft started moving again, taxiing to the civilian terminal so that the passengers could get off and stretch while the 777 was serviced and refueled.

"How do we get to England?" Ding asked, after getting his wife bedded down in the unused ready room.

"Your Air Force is sending a VC-20. There will be people at Heathrow to collect your bags. There's a Colonel Byron coming for your three prisoners," the senior cop explained.

"Here are their weapons." Stanley handed over three airsick bags with the disassembled pistols inside. "Browning M-1935s, military finish. No explosives. They really were bloody amateurs. Basques, I think. They seem to have been after the Spanish ambassador to Washington. His wife was in the seat next to mine. Señora Constanza de Monterosa—the wine family. They bottle the most marvelous clarets and Madeiras. I think you will find that this was an unauthorized operation."

"And who exactly are you?" the cop asked. Clark handled it.

"We can't answer that. You're sending the hijackers right back?"

"Ottawa has instructed us to do that under the Hijacking Treaty. Look, I have to say something to the press."

"Tell them that three American law enforcement officers happened to be aboard and helped to subdue the idiots," John told him.

"Yeah, that's close enough," Chavez agreed with a grin. "First arrest I ever made, John. Damn, I forgot to give them their rights," he added. He was weary enough to think that enormously funny.

They were beyond filthy, the receiving team saw. That was no particular surprise. Neither was the fact that they smelled bad enough to gag a skunk. That would have to wait. The litters were carried off the truck into the building, ten miles west of Binghamton, New York, in the hill country of central New York State. In the clean room, all ten were sprayed in the face from a squeeze bottle much like that used to clean windows. It was done one at a time to all of them, then half were given injections into the arm. Both groups of five got steel bracelets, numbered 1 to 10. Those with even numbers got the injections. The odd-numbered control group did not. With this task done, the ten homeless were carried off to the bunk room to sleep off the wine and the drugs. The truck which had delivered them was already gone, heading west for Illinois and a return to its regular duties. The driver hadn't even known what he'd done, except to drive.

CHAPTER 1

MEMO

The VC-20B flight was somewhat lacking in amenities—the food consisted of sandwiches and an undistinguished wine—but the seats were comfortable and the ride smooth enough that everyone slept until the wheels and flaps came down at RAF Northholt, a military airfield just west of London. As the USAF G-IV taxied to the ramp, John remarked on the age of the buildings.

"Spitfire base from the Battle of Britain," Stanley explained, stretching in his seat. "We let private business jets use it as well."

"We'll be back and forth outta here a lot, then," Ding surmised at once, rubbing his eyes and wishing for coffee. "What time is it?"

"Just after eight, local—Zulu time, too, isn't it?"

"Quite," Alistair confirmed, with a sleepy grunt.

Just then the rain started, making for a proper welcome to British soil. It was a hundred-yard walk to the reception building, where a British official stamped their passports and officially welcomed them to his country before going back to his breakfast tea and newspaper.

Three cars waited outside, all of them black Daimler limousines, which headed off the base, then west, and south for Hereford. This was proof that he was a civilian bureaucrat, Clark told himself in the lead car. Otherwise they'd have used helicopters. But Britain wasn't entirely devoid of civilization. They stopped at a roadside McDonald's for Egg McMuffins and coffee. Sandy snorted at the cholesterol intake. She'd been chiding John about it for months. Then she thought about the previous night.

"John?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Who were they?"

"Who, the guys on the airplane?" He looked over and got a nod. "Not sure, probably Basque separatists. It looked like they were after the Spanish ambassador, but they screwed up big-time. He wasn't aboard, just his wife."

"They were trying to hijack the airplane?"

"Yep, they sure were."

"Isn't that scary?"

John nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, it is. Well, would have been scarier if they were competent, but they weren't." An inner smile. *Boy, did they ever pick the wrong flight!* But he couldn't laugh about it now, not with his wife sitting next to him, on the wrong side of the road—a fact that had him looking up in some irritation. It felt very wrong to be on the left side of the road, driving along at . . . eighty miles per hour? *Damn.* Didn't they have speed limits here?

"What'll happen to them?" Sandy persisted.

"There's an international treaty. The Canadians will ship them back to the States for trial—Federal Court. They'll be tried, convicted, and imprisoned for air piracy. They'll be behind bars for a long time." And they were lucky at that, Clark didn't add. Spain might well have been a little more unpleasant about it.

"First time in a long time something like that happened."

"Yep." Her husband agreed. You had to be a real dolt to hijack airplanes, but dolts, it appeared, were not yet an endangered species. That was why he was the Six of an organization called Rainbow.

There is good news and there is bad news, the memo he'd written had begun. As usual, it wasn't couched in bureaucratese; it was a language Clark had never quite learned despite his thirty years in CIA.

With the demise of the Soviet Union and other nation states with political positions adverse to American and Western interests, the likelihood of a major international confrontation is at an all-time low. This, clearly, is the best of good news.

But along with that we must face the fact that there remain many experienced and trained international terrorists still roaming the world, some with lingering contacts with national intelligence agencies—plus the fact that some nations, while not desirous of a direct confrontation with American or other Western nations, could still make use of the remaining terrorist "free agents" for more narrow political goals.

If anything, this problem is very likely to grow, since under the previous world situation, the major nation states placed firm limits on terrorist activity—these limits enforced by controlled access to weapons, funding, training, and safehavens.

It seems likely that the current world situation will invert the previous "understanding" enjoyed by the major countries. The price *of support, weapons, training, and safehavens might well become actual terrorist activity, not the ideological purity previously demanded by sponsoring nation states.*

The most obvious solution to this—probably—increasing problem will be a new multinational counterterrorist team. I propose the code name Rainbow. I further propose that the organization be based in the United Kingdom. The reasons for this are simple:

- *The U.K. currently owns and operates the Special Air Service, the world's foremost—that is, most experienced—special-operations agency.*
- *London is the world's most accessible city in terms of commercial air travel—in addition to which the SAS has a very cordial relationship with British Airways.*
- *The legal environment is particularly advantageous, due to press restrictions possible under British law but not American.*
- *The long-standing "special relationship" between American and British governmental agencies.*

For all of these reasons, the proposed special-operations team, composed of U.S., U.K., and selected NATO personnel, with full support from national-intelligence services, coordinated at site. . . .

And he'd sold it, Clark told himself with a wispy smile. It had helped that both Ed and Mary Pat Foley had backed him up in the Oval Office, along with General Mickey Moore and selected others. The new agency, Rainbow, was blacker than black, its American funding directed through the Department of the Interior by Capitol Hill, then through the Pentagon's Office of Special

Projects, with no connection whatsoever to the intelligence community. Fewer than a hundred people in Washington knew that Rainbow existed. A far smaller number would have been better, but that was about the best that could be expected.

The chain of command was a little baroque. No avoiding that. The British influence would be hard to shake—fully half of the field personnel were Brits, and nearly that many of the intel weenies, but Clark was the boss. That constituted a major concession from his hosts, John knew. Alistair Stanley would be his executive officer, and John didn't have a problem with that. Stanley was tough, and better yet, one of the smartest special-operations guys he'd ever met—he knew when to hold, when to fold, and when to play the cards. About the only bad news was that he, Clark, was now a REMF—worse, a *suit.* He'd have an office and two secretaries instead of going out to run with the big dogs. Well, he had to admit to himself, that had to come sooner or later, didn't it?

Shit. He wouldn't run with the dogs, but he would play with them. He *had* to do that, didn't he, to show the troops that he was worthy of his command. He would be a *colonel,* not a general, Clark told himself. He'd be with the troops as much as possible, running, shooting, and talking things over.

Meanwhile, *I'm a captain,* Ding was telling himself in the next car behind, while eagerly taking in the countryside. He'd only been through Britain for layovers at Heathrow or Gatwick, and never seen the land, which was as green as an Irish postcard. He'd be under John, Mr. C, leading one of the strike teams, and in effective rank, that made him a captain, which was about the best rank to have in the Army, high enough that the NCOs respected you as worthy of command, and low enough that you weren't a staff puke and you played with the troops. He saw Patsy was dozing next to him. The pregnancy was taking it out of her, and doing so in unpredictable ways. Sometimes she bubbled with activity. Other times, she just vegetated. Well, she was carrying a new little Chavez in her belly, and that made everything okay—better than okay. A miracle. Almost as great as the miracle that here he was back doing what he'd originally been trained for—to be a soldier. Better yet, something of a free agent. The bad news was that he was subject to more than one government—suits that spoke multiple languages—but that couldn't be helped, and he'd volunteered for this to stay with Mr. C. Someone had to look after the boss.

The airplane had surprised him quite a bit. Mr. C hadn't had his weapon handy—what the hell, Ding thought, you bother to get a permit that allows you to carry a weapon on a civilian airliner (about the hardest thing you can wish to have) and then you stash your weapon where you can't get at it? *Santa Maria!* even John Clark was getting old. Must have been the first operational mistake he'd made in a long time, and then he'd tried to cover it by going cowboy on the takedown. Well, it had been nicely done. Smooth and cool. But overly fast, Ding thought, overly fast. He held Patsy's hand. She was sleeping a lot now. The little guy was sapping her strength. Ding leaned over to kiss her lightly on the cheek, softly enough that she didn't stir. He caught the driver's eye in the mirror and stared back with a poker expression. Was the guy just a driver or a team member? He'd find out soon enough, Chavez decided.

Security was tougher than Ding had expected. For the moment Rainbow HQ was at Hereford, headquarters of the British Army's 22nd Special Air Service Regiment. In fact, security was even tougher than it looked, because a man holding a weapon just looked like a man holding a weapon—from a distance you couldn't tell the difference between a rent-a-cop and a trained expert. On eyeballing one close, Ding decided these guys were the latter. They just had different eyes. The man who looked into his car earned himself a thoughtful nod, which was dutifully returned as he waved the car forward. The base looked like any other—the signs were different as was some of the spelling, but the buildings had closely trimmed lawns, and things just looked neater than in civilian areas. His car ended up in officer country, by a modest but trim house, complete with a parking pad for a car Ding and Patsy didn't have yet. He noticed that John's car kept going another couple of blocks toward a larger house—well, colonels lived better than captains, and you couldn't beat the rent in any case. Ding opened the door, twisted out of the car, and headed for the trunk—excuse me, he thought, *boot*—to get their luggage moved in. Then came the first big surprise of this day.

"Major Chavez?" a voice asked.

"Uh, yeah?" Ding said, turning. *Major?* he wondered.

"I'm Corporal Weldon. I'm your batman." The corporal was much taller than Ding's five-feet-seven, and beefy-looking. The man bustled past his assigned officer and manhandled the bags out of the trunk/boot, leaving Chavez with nothing more to do or say than, "Thanks, Corporal."

"Follow me, sir." Ding and Patsy did that, too.

Three hundred meters away, it was much the same for John and Sandy, though their staff was a sergeant and a corporal, the latter female, blond, and pretty in the paleskinned English way. Sandy's first impression of the kitchen was that British refrigerators were tiny, and that cooking in here would be something of an exercise in contortion. She was a little slow to catch on—a result of the air travel—that she'd touch an implement in this room only at the sufferance of Corporal Anne Fairway. The house wasn't quite as large as their home in Virginia, but would be quite sufficient.

"Where's the local hospital?"

"About six kilometers away, mum." Fairway hadn't been briefed in on the fact that Sandy Clark was a highly trained ER nurse and would be taking a position in the hospital.

John checked out his study. The most impressive piece of furniture was the liquor cabinet—well stocked, he saw, with Scotches and gins. He'd have to figure a way to get some decent bourbons. The computer was in place, tempested, he was sure, to make sure that people couldn't park a few hundred yards away and read what he was typing. Of course, getting that close would be a feat. The perimeter guards had struck John as competent. While his batman and–woman got his clothes squared away, John hopped into the shower. This would be a day of work for him. Twenty minutes later, wearing a blue pin-stripe suit, a white shirt, and a striped tie, he appeared at the front door, where an official car waited to whisk him off to his headquarters building.

"Have fun, honey," Sandy said, with a kiss.

"You bet."

"Good morning, sir," his driver said. Clark shook his hand and learned that his name was Ivor Rogers, and that he was a sergeant. The bulge at his right hip probably made him an MP. Damn, John thought, the Brits take their security seriously. But, then, this was the home of the SAS, probably not the most favorite unit of terrorists both inside and outside the UK. And the real professionals, the truly dangerous ones, were careful, thorough people. *Just like me,* John Clark told himself.

"We have to be careful. Extremely careful every step of the way." That was no particular surprise to the others, was it? The good news was that they understood about caution. Most were scientists, and many of them routinely trafficked in dangerous substances, Level-3 and up, and so caution was part of their way of looking at the world. And that, he decided, was good. It was also good that they understood, really understood the importance of the task at hand. A holy quest, they all thought—knew—it to be. After all, they were dealing in human life, the taking thereof, and there were those who didn't understand their quest and never would. Well, that was to be expected, since it was their lives that would be forfeited. It was too bad, but it couldn't be helped.

With that, the meeting broke up, later than usual, and people left, to walk out to the parking lot, where some—fools, he thought—would ride bicycles home, catch a few hours of sleep, and then bike back to the office. At least they were True Believers, if not overly practical ones—and, hell, they rode *airplanes* on long trips, didn't they? Well, the movement had room for people of differing views. The whole point was to create a big-tent movement. He walked out to his own vehicle, a very practical Hummer, the civilian version of the military's beloved HMMWV. He flipped on the radio, heard Respighi's *The Pines of Rome,* and realized that he'd miss NPR and its devotion to classical music. Well, some things couldn't be helped.

It turned out that his office was less than two miles from his house, in a two-story brick building surrounded by workers. Another soldier was at the front door, a pistol tucked away in a white canvas holster. He snapped to and saluted when Clark got within ten feet.

"Good morning—*Sahr!"*

John was sufficiently startled that he returned the salute, as though crossing onto the quarter-deck of a ship. "Morning, soldier," John replied, almost sheepishly, and thinking he'd have to learn the kid's name. The door he managed to open for himself, to find Stanley inside, reading a document and looking up with a smile.

"The building won't be finished for another week or so, John. It was unused for some years, rather old, I'm afraid, and they've only been working on it for six weeks. Come, I'll take you to your office."

And again Clark followed, somewhat sheepishly, turning right and heading down the corridor to the end office—which was, it turned out, all finished.

"The building dates back to 1947," Alistair said, opening the door. There

John saw two secretaries, both in their late thirties, and probably cleared higher than he was. Their names were Alice Foorgate and Helen Montgomery. They stood when the Boss came in, and introduced themselves with warm and charming smiles. Stanley's XO office was adjacent to Clark's, which contained a huge desk, a comfortable chair, and the same kind of computer as in John's CIA office—tempested here, too, so that people couldn't monitor it electronically. There was even a liquor cabinet in the far right corner, doubtless a British custom.

John took a breath before trying out the swivel chair and decided to doff his jacket first. Sitting in a chair with a suit coat on was something he'd never really learned to enjoy. That was something a "suit" did, and being a "suit" wasn't John's idea of fun. He waved Alistair to the seat opposite the desk.

"Where are we?"

"Two teams fully formed. Chavez will have one. The other will be commanded by Peter Covington—just got his majority. Father was colonel of the 22nd some years ago, retired as a Brigadier. Marvelous lad. Ten men per team, as agreed. The technical staff is coming together nicely. We have an Israeli chap on that, David Peled—surprised they let us have him. He's a bloody genius with electronics and surveillance systems—"

"And he'll report back to Avi ben Jakob every day."

A smile. "Naturally." Neither office was under any illusions about the ultimate loyalty of the troops assigned to Rainbow. But, were they not capable of such loyalty, what good would they be? "David's worked with SAS on and off for a decade. He's quite amazing, contacts with every electronics corporation from San Jose to Taiwan."

"And the shooters?"

"Top drawer, John. As good as any I've ever worked with." Which was saying something.

"Intel?"

"All excellent. The chief of that section is Bill Tawney, a 'Six' man for thirty years, supported by Dr. Paul Bellow—Temple University, Philadelphia, was a professor there until your FBI seconded him. Bloody smart chap. Mind-reader, he's been all over the world. Your chaps lent him to the Italians for the Moro job, but he refused to take an assignment to Argentina the next year. Principled, also, or so it would seem. He flies in tomorrow."

Just then Mrs. Foorgate came in with a tray, tea for Stanley, coffee for Clark. "Staff meeting starts in ten minutes, sir," she told John.

"Thanks, Alice." *Sir,* he thought. Clark wasn't used to being addressed like that. Yet another sign he was a "suit." Damn. He waited until the heavy soundproofed door closed to ask his next question. "Al, what's my status here?"

"General officer—brigadier at least, maybe a two-star. I seem to be a colonel—chief of staff, you see," Stanley said, sipping his tea. "John, you know that there must be protocol," he went on reasonably.

"Al, you know what I really am—was, I mean?"

"You were a navy chief boatswain's mate, I believe, with the Navy Cross, Silver Star with a repeat cluster. Bronze star with Combat-V and three repeats, and three Purple Hearts. And all that's before the Agency took you in and gave

you no less than four Intelligence Stars." Stanley said all this from memory. "Brigadier's the least we can do, old man. Rescuing Koga and taking Daryei out were bloody brilliant jobs, in case I never told you. We do know a little bit about you, and your young Chavez—the lad has enormous potential, if he's as good as I've heard. Of course, he'll need it. His team is composed of some real stars."

"Yo, Ding!" a familiar voice called. Chavez looked to his left in genuine surprise.

"Oso! You son of a bitch! What the hell are you doing here?" Both men embraced.

"The Rangers were getting boring, so I shipped up to Bragg for a tour with Delta, and then this came up on the scope and I went after it. You're the boss for Team Two?" First Sergeant (E-8) Julio Vega asked.

"Sorta-kinda," Ding replied, shaking the hand of an old friend and comrade. "Ain't lost no weight, man, Jesu Christo, Oso, you *eat* barbells?"

"Gotta keep fit, sir," replied a man for whom a hundred morning push-ups didn't generate a drop of sweat. His uniform blouse showed a Combat Infantryman's Badge and the silver "ice-cream cone" of a master parachutist. "You're looking good, man, keeping up your running, eh?"

"Yeah, well, running away is an ability I want to keep, if you know what I mean."

"Roge-o." Vega laughed. "Come on, I'll intro you to the team. We got some good troops, Ding."

Team Two, Rainbow, had its own building—brick, single-story, and fairly large, with a desk for every man, and a secretary named Katherine Moony they'd all share, young and pretty enough, Ding noticed, to attract the interest of any unattached member of his team. Team Two was composed exclusively of NCOs, mainly senior ones, four Americans, four Brits, a German, and a Frenchman. He only needed one look to see that all were fit as hell—enough so that Ding instantly worried about his own condition. He had to lead them, and that meant being as good as or better than all of them in every single thing the team would have to do.

Sergeant Louis Loiselle was the nearest. Short and dark-haired, he was a former member of French parachute forces and had been detailed to DGSE some years before. Loiselle was vanilla, a utility infielder, good in everything but a nonspecialist specialist—like all of the men, a weapons expert, and, his file said, a brilliant marksman with pistol and rifle. He had an easy, relaxed smile with a good deal of confidence behind it.

Feldwebel Dieter Weber was next, also a paratrooper and a graduate of the German army's *Bergführer* or Mountain Leader school, one of the physically toughest schools in any army in the world. He looked it. Blondhaired and fair-skinned, he might have been on an SS recruiting poster sixty years earlier. His English, Ding learned at once, was better than his own. He could have passed for American—or English. Weber had come to Rainbow from the German GSG-9 team, which was part of the former Border Guards, the Federal Republic's counterterror team.

"Major, we have heard much about you," Weber said from his six-three

height. A little tall, Ding thought. Too large a target. He shook hands like a German. One quick grab, vertical jerk, and let go, with a nice squeeze in the middle. His blue eyes were interesting, cold as ice, interrogating Ding from the first. The eyes were usually found behind a rifle. Weber was one of the team's two long-riflemen.

SFC Homer Johnston was the other. A mountaineer from Idaho, he'd taken his first deer at the age of nine. He and Weber were friendly competitors. Average-looking in all respects, Johnston was clearly a runner rather than an iron-pumper at his six-feet-nothing, one-sixty. He'd started off in the 101st Air-Mobile at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and rapidly worked his way into the Army's black world. "Major, nice to meet you, sir." He was a former Green Beret and Delta member, like Chavez's friend, Oso Vega.

The shooters, as Ding thought of them, the guys who went into the buildings to do business, were Americans and Brits. Steve Lincoln, Paddy Connolly, Scotty McTyler, and Eddie Price were from the SAS. They'd all been there and done that in Northern Ireland and a few other places. Mike Pierce, Hank Patterson, and George Tomlinson mainly had not, because the American Delta Force didn't have the experience of the SAS. It was also true, Ding reminded himself, that Delta, SAS, GSG-9, and other crack international teams cross-trained to the point that they might as well have married one another's sisters. Every one of them was taller than "Major" Chavez. Every one was tough. Every one was smart, and with this realization came an oddly deflating feeling that, despite his own field experience, he'd have to earn the respect of his team and earn it fast.

"Who's senior?"

"That's me, sir," Eddie Price said. He was the oldest of the team, forty-one, and a former color sergeant in the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment, since spot-promoted to sergeant major. Like the rest in the bullpen, he was wearing nonuniform clothes, though they were all wearing the *same* nonuniform things, without badges of rank.

"Okay, Price, have we done our PT today?"

"No, Major, we waited for you to lead us out," Sergeant Major Price replied, with a smile that was ten percent manners and ninety percent challenge.

Chavez smiled back. "Yeah, well, I'm a little stiff from the flight, but maybe we can loosen that up for me. Where do I change?" Ding asked, hoping his last two weeks of five-mile daily runs would prove to be enough—and he *was* slightly wasted by the flight.

"Follow me, sir."

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"My name's Clark, and I suppose I'm the boss here," John said from the head of the conference table. "You all know the mission, and you've all asked to be part of Rainbow. Questions?"

That startled them, John saw. Good. Some continued to stare at him. Most looked down at the scratch pads in front of them.

"Okay, to answer some of the obvious ones, our operational doctrine ought

to be little different from the organizations you came from. We will establish that in training, which commences tomorrow. We are supposed to be operational right now," John warned them. "That means the phone could ring in a minute, and we will have to respond. Are we able to?"

"No," Alistair Stanley responded for the rest of the senior staff. "That's unrealistic, John. We need, I would estimate, three weeks."

"I understand that—but the real world is not as accommodating as we would like it to be. Things that need doing—do them, and quickly. I will start running simulations on Monday next. People, I am not a hard man to work with. I've been in the field, and I know what happens out there. I don't expect perfection, but I *do* expect that we will always work for it. If we screw a mission up, that means that people who deserve to live will not live. That is going to happen. You know it. I know it. *But* we will avoid mistakes as much as possible, and we will learn the proper lessons from every one we make. Counterterrorism is a Darwinian world. The dumb ones are already dead, and the people out there we have to worry about are those who've learned a lot of lessons. So have we, and we're probably ahead of the game, tactically speaking, but we have to run hard to stay there. We will run hard.

"Anyway," he went on, "intelligence, what's ready and what's not?"

Bill Tawney was John's age, plus one or two, John estimated, with brown, thinning hair and an unlit pipe in his mouth. A "Six" man—meaning he was a former (well, current) member of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, he was a field spook who'd come inside after ten years working the streets behind the Curtain. "Our communications links are up and running. We have liaison personnel to all friendly services either here or in the corresponding capitals."

"How good are they?"

"Fair," Tawney allowed. John wondered how much of that was Brit understatement. One of his most important but most subtle tasks would be to decode what every member of his staff said when he or she spoke, a task made all the more difficult by linguistic and cultural differences. On inspection, Tawney looked like a real pro, his brown eyes calm and businesslike. His file said that he'd worked directly with SAS for the past five years. Given SAS's record in the field, he hadn't stiffed them with bad intel very often, if at all. Good.

"David?" he asked next. David Peled, the Israeli chief of his technical branch, looked very Catholic, rather like something from an El Greco painting, a Dominican priest, perhaps, from the fifteenth century, tall, skinny, hollow of cheek and dark of hair (short), with a certain intensity of eye. Well, he'd worked a long time for Avi ben Jakob, whom Clark knew, if not well then well enough. Peled would be here for two reasons, to serve as a senior Rainbow staffer, thus winning allies and prestige for his parent intelligence service, the Israeli Mossad, and also to learn what he could and feed it back to his boss.

"I am putting together a good staff," David said, setting his tea down. "I need three to five weeks to assemble all the equipment I need."

"Faster," Clark responded at once.

David shook his head. "Not possible. Much of our electronics items can be purchased off the shelf, as it were, but some will have to be custom-made. The orders are all placed," he assured his boss, "with high-priority flags—from the

usual vendors. TRW, IDI, Marconi, you know who they are. But they can't do miracles, even for us. Three to five weeks for some crucial items."

"SAS are willing to hire anything important to us," Stanley assured Clark from his end of the table.

"For training purposes?" Clark asked, annoyed that he hadn't found out the answer to the question already.

"Perhaps."

Ding cut the run off at three miles, which they'd done in twenty minutes. Good time, he thought, somewhat winded, until he turned to see his ten men about as fresh as they'd been at the beginning, one or two with a sly smile for his neighbors at their wimpy new leader.

Damn.

The run had ended at the weapons range, where targets and arms were ready. Here Chavez had made his own change in his team's selection. A longtime Beretta aficionado, he'd decided that his men would use the recent .45 Beretta as their personal sidearms, along with the Hechler & Koch MP-10 submachine gun, the new version of the venerable MP-5, chambered instead for the 10-mm Smith & Wesson cartridge developed in the 1980s for the American FBI. Without saying anything, Ding picked up his weapon, donned his ear-protectors, and started going for the silhouette targets, set five meters away. *There,* he saw, all eight holes in the head. But Dieter Weber, next to him, had grouped his shots in one ragged hole, and Paddy Connolly had made what appeared to be one not-soragged hole less than an inch across, all between the target's eyes, without touching the eyes themselves. Like most American shooters, Chavez had believed that Europeans didn't know pistols worth a damn. Evidently, training corrected that, he saw.

Next, people picked up their H&Ks, which just about anyone could shoot well because of the superb diopter sights. Ding walked along the firing line, watching his people engage pop-up steel plates the size and shape of human heads. Driven up by compressed air, they fell back down instantly with a metallic *clang.* Ding ended up behind First Sergeant Vega, who finished his magazine and turned.

"Told you they were good, Ding."

"How long they been here?"

"Oh, 'bout a week. Used to running five miles, sir," Julio added with a smile. "Remember the summer camp we went to in Colorado?"

Most important of all, Ding thought, was the steady aim despite the run, which was supposed to get people pumped up, and simulate the stress of a real combat situation. But these bastards were as steady as fucking bronze statues. Formerly a squad leader in the Seventh Light Infantry Division, he'd once been one of the toughest, fittest, and most effective soldiers in his country's uniform, which was why John Clark had tapped him for a job in the Agency—and in *that* capacity he'd pulled off some tense and tough missions in the field. It had been a very long time indeed since Domingo Chavez had felt the least bit inadequate about anything. But now quiet voices were speaking into his ear.

"Who's the toughest?" he asked Vega.

"Weber. I heard stories about the German mountain school. Well, they be true, 'mano. Dieter isn't entirely human. Good in hand-to-hand, good pistol, damned good with a rifle, and I think he could run a deer down if he had to, then rip it apart barehanded." Chavez had to remind himself that being called "good" in a combat skill by a graduate of Ranger school *and* Fort Bragg's special-operations schools wasn't quite the same as from a guy in a corner bar. Julio was about as tough as they came.

"The smartest?"

"Connolly. All those SAS guys are tops. Us Americans have to play a little catchup ball. But we will," Vega assured him. "Don't sweat it, Ding. You'll keep up with us, after a week or so. Just like it was in Colorado."

Chavez didn't really want to be reminded of that job. Too many friends lost in the mountains of Colombia, doing a job that their country had never acknowledged. Watching his men finish off their training rounds told him much about them. If anyone had missed a single shot, he failed to notice it. Every man fired off exactly a hundred rounds, the standard daily regimen for men who fired five hundred per working week on routine training, as opposed to more carefully directed drill. That would start tomorrow.

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"Okay," John concluded, "we'll have a staff meeting every morning at eight-fifteen for routine matters, and a more formal one every Friday afternoon. My door is always open—including the one at home. People, if you need me, there's a phone next to my shower. Now, I want to get out and see the shooters. Anything else? Good. We stand adjourned." Everyone stood and shuffled out the door. Stanley remained.

"That went well," Alistair observed, pouring himself another cup of tea. "Especially for one not accustomed to bureaucratic life."

"Shows, eh?" Clark asked with a grin.

"One can learn anything, John."

"I hope so."

"When's morning PT around here?"

"Oh-six-forty-five. You plan to run and sweat with the lads?"

"I plan to try," Clark answered.

"You're too old, John. Some of those chaps run marathons for recreation, and you're closer to sixty than to fifty."

"Al, I can't command those people without trying, and you know that."

"Quite," Stanley admitted.

They awoke late, one at a time, over a period of about an hour. For the most part they just lay there in bed, some of them shuffling off to the bathroom, where they also found aspirin and Tylenol for the headaches they all had, along with showers, which half of them decided to take and the other half to forgo. In the adjoining room was a breakfast buffet that surprised them, with pans full of scrambled eggs, pancakes, sausage and bacon. Some of them even remembered how to use napkins, the people in the monitoring room saw.

They met their captor after they'd had a chance to eat breakfast. He offered all of them clean clothes, after they got cleaned up.

"What is this place?" asked the one known to the staff only as #4. It sure as hell wasn't any Bowery mission he was familiar with.

"My company is undertaking a study," the host said from behind a tightly fitting mask. "You gentlemen will be part of that study. You will be staying with us for a while. During that time, you will have clean beds, clean clothes, good food, good medical care, *and"*—he pulled a wall panel back—"whatever you want to drink." In a wall alcove which the guests remarkably had not yet discovered were three shelves of every manner of wine, beer, and spirit that could be purchased at the local liquor store, with glasses, water, mixes, and ice.

"You mean we can't leave?" Number 7 asked.

"We would prefer that you stay," the host said, somewhat evasively. He pointed to the liquor cabinet, his eyes smiling around the mask. "Anyone care for a morning eye-opener?"

It turned out that it wasn't too early in the morning for any of them, and that the expensive bourbons and ryes were the first and hardest hit. The additional drug in the alcohol was quite tasteless, and the guests all headed back to their alcove beds. Next to each was a TV set. Two more decided to make use of the showers. Three even shaved, emerging from the bathroom looking quite human. For the time being.

In the monitoring room half a building away, Dr. Archer manipulated the various TV cameras to get close-ups on every "guest."

"They're all pretty much on profile," she observed. "Their blood work ought to be a disaster."

"Oh, yeah, Barb," Dr. Killgore agreed. "Number Three looks especially unwell. You suppose we can get him slightly cleaned up before . . . ?"

"I think we should try," Barbara Archer, M.D., thought. "We can't monkey with the test criteria too much, can we?"

"Yeah, and it'd be bad for morale if we let one die too soon," Killgore went on.

" 'What a piece of work is man,' " Archer quoted, with a snort.

"Not all of us, Barb." A chuckle. "Surprised they didn't find a woman or two for the group."

"I'm not," replied the feminist Dr. Archer, to the amusement of the more cynical Killgore. But it wasn't worth getting all worked up over. He looked away from the battery of TV screens, and picked up the memo from corporate headquarters. Their guests were to be treated as guests—fed, cleaned up, and offered all the drink they could put away consistent with the continuance of their bodily functions. It was slightly worrisome to the epidemiologist that all their guest-test-subjects were seriously impaired street alcoholics. The advantage of using them, of course, was that they wouldn't be missed, even by what might have passed for friends. Few had any family members who would even know where to look for them. Fewer still would have any who would be surprised by the inability to locate them. And none, Killgore judged, had so much as one who would notify proper authorities on the inability to find them

—and even if *that* happened, would the New York City Police care? Not likely.

No, all their "guests" were people written off by their society, less aggressively but just as finally as Hitler had written off his Jews, though with somewhat more justice, Archer and Killgore both thought. What a piece of work was man? These examples of the self-designated godlike species were of less use than the laboratory animals they were now replacing. And they were also far less appealing to Archer, who had feelings for rabbits and even rats. Killgore found that amusing. He didn't much care about them either, at least not as individual animals. It was the species as a whole that mattered, wasn't it? And as far as the "guests" were concerned, well, they weren't even good examples of the substandard humans whom the species didn't need. Killgore was. So was Archer, her goofy political-sexual views notwithstanding. With that decided, Killgore returned to making a few notes and doing his paperwork. Tomorrow they'd do the physical examinations. That would be fun, he was sure.

CHAPTER 2

SADDLING UP

The first two weeks started off pleasantly enough. Chavez was now running five miles without any discomfort, doing the requisite number of push-ups with his team, and shooting better, as well as about half of them, but not as well as Connolly and the American Hank Patterson, both of whom must have been born with pistols in their cribs or something, Ding decided after firing three hundred rounds per day to try to equal them. Maybe a gunsmith could play with his weapon. The SAS based here had a regimental armorer who might have trained with Sam Colt himself, or so he'd heard. A little lighter and smoother on the trigger, perhaps. But that was mere pride talking. Pistols were secondary weapons. With their H&K MP-10s, every man could put three quick aimed rounds in a head at fifty meters about as fast as his mind could form the thought. These people were awesome, the best soldiers he'd ever met—or heard about, Ding admitted to himself, sitting at his desk and doing some hated paperwork. He grunted. Was there anyone in the world who didn't hate paperwork?

The team spent a surprising amount of time sitting at their desks and reading, mainly intelligence stuff—which terrorist was thought to be where, according to some intelligence agency or police department or money-grubbing informer. In fact the data they pored over was nearly useless, but since it was the best they had, they pored over it anyway as a way of breaking the routine. Included were photos of the world's surviving terrorists. Carlos the Jackal, now in his fifties, and now settled into a French maximum-security prison, was the one they'd all wanted. The photos of him were computer-manipulated to simulate his current-age appearance, which they then compared with real-life photos from the French. The team members spent time memorizing all of them, because some dark night in some unknown place, a flash of light might reveal one of these faces, and you'd have *that long* to decide whether or not to double-tap the head in question—and if you had the chance to bag another Carlos ll'ych Ramirez Sanchez, you wanted to take it, 'cuz then, Ding's mind went on, you'd never be able to buy a beer in a cop or special-ops bar again anywhere in the world, you'd be so famous. The real hell of it was, this pile of trash on his desk wasn't really trash after all. If they ever bagged the next Carlos, it would be because some local cop, in São Paolo, Brazil, or Bumfuck, Bosnia, or wherever, heard something from some informant or other, then went to the proper house and took a look, and then had his brain go *click* from all the flyers that filled cophouses around the world, and then it would be up to the street savvy of that cop to see if he might arrest the bastard on the spot—or, if the situation looked a little too

tense, to report back to his lieutenant, and just maybe a special team like Ding's Team-2 would deploy quietly, and take the fucker down, the easy way or the hard way, in front of whatever spouse or kids there might be, ignorant of daddy's former career . . . and then it would make CNN with quite a splash. . . .

That was the problem with working at a desk. You started daydreaming. Chavez, simulated major, checked his watch and rose, headed out into the bullpen, and handed off his pile of trash to Miss Moony. He was about to ask if everyone was ready, but they must have been, because the only other person to ask was halfway to the door. On the way, he drew his pistol and belt. The next stop was what the Brits called a robing room, except there were no robes, but instead coal-black fatigue clothes, complete with body armor.

Team-2 was all there, mostly dressed a few minutes early for the day's exercise. They were all loose, relaxed, smiling, and joking quietly. When all had their gear on, they went to the arms room to draw their SMGs. Each put the double-looped sling over his head, then checked to see that the magazine was full, sliding each into the proper port on the bottom of the weapon, and working the bolt back to the safe position, then snugging the weapon to make sure that each fitted to the differing specifications of each individual shooter.

The exercises had been endless, or as much so as two weeks could make them. There were six basic scenarios, all of which could be played out in various environments. The one they hated most was inside the body of a commercial aircraft. The only good thing about that was the confinement forced on the bad guys—they wouldn't be going anywhere. The rest was entirely bad. Lots of civilians in the fire arcs, good concealment for the bad guys—and if one of them really did have a bomb strapped to his body—they almost always claimed to—well, then all he had to have was the balls to pull the string or close the switch, and then, if the bastard was halfway competent, everyone aboard was toast. Fortunately, few people chose death in that way. But Ding and his people couldn't think like that. Much of the time terrorists seemed to fear capture more than death—so your shooting had to be fast *and* perfect, and the team had to hit the aircraft like a Kansas tornado at midnight, with your flash-bangs especially important to stun the bastards into combat-ineffectiveness so that the double-taps were aimed at nonmoving heads, and hope to God that the civilians you were trying to rescue didn't stand up and block the shooting range that the fuselage of the Boeing or Airbus had suddenly become.

"Team-2, we ready?" Chavez asked.

"Yes, sir!" came the chorused reply.

With that, Ding led them outside and ran them half a mile to the shooting house, a hard run, not the fast jog of daily exercises. Johnston and Weber were already on the scene, on opposite corners of the rectangular structure.

"Command to Rifle Two-Two," Ding said into his helmet-mounted microphone, "anything to report?"

"Negative, Two-Six. Nothing at all," Weber reported.

"Rifle Two-One?"

"Six," Johnston replied, "I saw a curtain move, but nothing else. Instruments show four to six voices inside, speaking English. Nothing else to report."

"Roger," Ding responded, the remainder of his team concealed behind a truck. He took a final look at the layout of the inside of the building. The raid had been fully briefed. The shooters knew the inside of the structure well enough to see it with their eyes closed. With that knowledge, Ding waved for the team to move.

Paddy Connolly took the lead, racing to the door. Just as he got there, he let go of his H&K and let it dangle on the sling while he pulled the Primacord from the fannypack hanging down from his body armor. He stuck the explosive to the door frame by its adhesive and pushed the blasting cap into the top-right corner. A second later, he moved right ten feet, holding the detonator control up in his left hand, while his right grabbed the pistol grip of his SMG and brought it up to point at the sky.

Okay, Ding thought. Time to move. "Let's go!" he shouted at the team.

As the first of them bolted around the truck, Connolly thumbed the switch, and the door frame disintegrated, sending the door flying inward. The first shooter, Sergeant Mike Pierce, was less than a second behind it, disappearing into the smoking hole with Chavez right behind him.

The inside was dark, the only light coming through the shattered doorway. Pierce scanned the room, found it empty, and then lodged himself by the doorway into the next room. Ding ran into that first, leading his team—

—there they were, four targets and four hostages—

Chavez brought his MP-10 up and fired two silenced rounds into the left-most target's head. He saw the rounds hit, dead-center in the head, right between the bluepainted eyes, then traversed right to see that Steve Lincoln had gotten his man just as planned. In less than a second, the overhead lights came on. It was all over, elapsed time from the Primacord explosion, seven seconds. Eight seconds had been programmed for the exercise. Ding safed his weapon.

"Goddamnit, John!" he said to the Rainbow commander.

Clark stood, smiling at the target to his left, less than two feet away, the two holes drilled well enough to ensure certain, instant death. He wasn't wearing any protective gear. Neither was Stanley, at the far end of the line, also trying to show off, though Mrs. Foorgate and Mrs. Montgomery were, in their center seats. The presence of the women surprised Chavez until he reminded himself that they were team members, too, and probably eager to show that they, too, belonged with the boys. He had to admire their spirit, if not their good sense.

"Seven seconds. That'll do, I guess. Five would be better," John observed, but the dimensions of the building pretty much determined the speed with which the team could cover the distance. He walked across, checking all the targets. McTyler's target showed one hole only, though its irregular shape proved that he'd fired both rounds as per the exercise parameters. Any one of these men would have earned a secure place in 3rd SOG, and every one was as good as he'd ever been, John Clark thought to himself. Well, training methods had improved markedly since his time in Vietnam, hadn't they? He helped Helen Montgomery to her feet. She seemed just a little shaky. Hardly a surprise. Being on the receiving end of bullets wasn't exactly what secretaries were paid for.

"You okay?" John asked.

"Oh, quite, thank you. It *was* rather exciting. My first time, you see."

"My third," Alice Foorgate said, rising herself. "It's always exciting," she added with a smile.

For me, too, Clark thought. Confident as he'd been with Ding and his men, still, looking down the barrel of a light machine gun and seeing the flashes made one's blood turn slightly cool. And the lack of body armor wasn't all that smart, though he justified it by telling himself he'd had to see better in order to watch for any mistakes. He'd seen nothing major, however. They were damned good.

"Excellent," Stanley said from his end of the dais. He pointed "You—uh—"

"Patterson, sir," the sergeant said. "I know, I kinda tripped coming through." He turned to see that a fragment of the door frame had been blasted through the entrance to the shooting room, and he'd almost stumbled on it.

"You recovered nicely, Sergeant Patterson. I see it didn't affect your aim at all."

"No, sir," Hank Patterson agreed, not quite smiling.

The team leader walked up to Clark, safing his weapon on the way.

"Mark us down fully mission-capable, Mr. C," Chavez said with a confident smile. "Tell the bad guys they better watch their asses. How'd Team-1 do?"

"Two-tenths of a second faster," John replied, glad to see the diminutive leader of–2 deflate a little. "And thanks."

"What for?"

"For not wasting your father-in-law." John clapped him on the shoulder and walked out of the room.

"Okay, people," Ding said to his team, "let's police up the brass and head back for the critique." No fewer than six TV cameras had recorded the mission. Stanley would be going over it frame by frame. That would be followed by a few pints at the 22nd's Regimental NCO club. The Brits, Ding had learned over the previous two weeks, took their beer seriously, and Scotty McTyler could throw darts about as well as Homer Johnston could shoot a rifle. It was something of a breach of protocol that Ding, a simulated major, hoisted pints with his men, all sergeants. He had explained that away by noting that he'd been a humble staff sergeant squad leader himself before disappearing into the maw of the Central Intelligence Agency, and he regaled them with stories of his former life in the Ninjas—stories that the others listened to with a mixture of respect and amusement. As good as the 7th Infantry Division had been, it wasn't *this* good. Even Domingo would admit to that after a few pints of John Courage.

"Okay, Al, what do you think?" John asked. The liquor cabinet in his office was open, a single-malt Scotch for Stanley, while Clark sipped at a Wild Turkey.

"The lads?" He shrugged. "Technically very competent. Marksmanship is just about right, physical fitness is fine. They respond well to obstacles and the unexpected, and, well, they didn't kill us with stray rounds, did they?"

"But?" Clark asked with a quizzical look.

"But one doesn't know until the real thing happens. Oh, yes, they're as good as SAS, but the best of them *are* former SAS. . . ."

Old-world pessimism, John Clark thought. That was the problem with Europeans. No optimism, too often they looked for things that would go wrong instead of right.

"Chavez?"

"Superb lad," Stanley admitted. "Almost as good as Peter Covington."

"Agreed," Clark admitted, the slight on his son-in-law notwithstanding. But Covington had been at Hereford for seven years. Another couple of months and Ding would be there. He was pretty close already. It was already down to how many hours of sleep one or the other had had the night before, and pretty soon it would be down to what one or the other had eaten for breakfast. All in all, John told himself, he had the right people, trained to the right edge. Now all he had to do was keep them there. Training. Training. Training.

Neither knew that it had already started.

"So, Dmitriy," the man said.

"Yes?" Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov replied, twirling his vodka around in the glass.

"Where and how do we begin?" the man asked.

They'd met by a fortunate accident, both thought, albeit for very different reasons. It had happened in Paris, at some sidewalk café, tables right next to each other, where one had noted that the other was Russian, and wanted to ask a few simple questions about business in Russia. Popov, a former KGB official, RIF'ed and scouting around for opportunities for entering the world of capitalism, had quickly determined that this American had a great deal of money, and was therefore worthy of stroking. He had answered the questions openly and clearly, leading the American to deduce his former occupation rapidly—the language skills (Popov was highly fluent in English, French, and Czech) had been a giveaway, as had Popov's knowledge of Washington, D.C. Popov was clearly not a diplomat, being too open and forthright in his opinions, which factor had terminated his promotion in the former Soviet KGB at the rank of Colonel—he still thought himself worthy of general's stars. As usual, one thing had led to another, first the exchange of business cards, then a trip to America, first class on Air France, as a security consultant, and a series of meetings that had moved ever so subtly in a direction that came more as a surprise to the Russian than the American. Popov had impressed the American with his knowledge of safety issues on the streets of foreign cities, then the discussion had moved into very different areas of expertise.

"How do you know all this?" the American had asked in his New York office.

The response had been a broad grin, after three double vodkas. "I know these people, of course. Come, you must know what I did before leaving the service of my country."

"You actually worked with terrorists?" he'd asked, surprised, and thinking about this bit of information, even back then.

It was necessary for Popov to explain in the proper ideological context: "You must remember that to us they were not terrorists at all. They were fellow believers in world peace and Marxism-Leninism, fellow soldiers in the struggle for human freedom—and, truth be told, useful fools, all too willing to sacrifice

their lives in return for a little support of one sort or another."

"Really?" the American asked again, in surprise. "I would have thought that they were motivated by something important—"

"Oh, they are," Popov assured him, "but idealists are foolish people, are they not?"

"Some are," his host admitted, nodding for his guest to go on.

"They believe all the rhetoric, all the promises. Don't you see? I, too, was a Party member. I said the words, filled out the bluebook answers, attended the meetings, paid my Party dues. I did all I had to do, but, really, I was KGB. I traveled abroad. I *saw* what life was like in the West. I much preferred to travel abroad on, ah, 'business' than to work at Number Two Dzerzhinsky Square. Better food, better clothes, better everything. Unlike these foolish youths, I knew what the truth was," he concluded, saluting with his half-full glass.

"So, what are they doing now?"

"Hiding," Popov answered. "For the most part, hiding. Some may have jobs of one sort or another—probably menial ones, I would imagine, despite the university education most of them have."

"I wonder . . ." A sleepy look reflected the man's own imbibing, so skillfully delivered that Popov wondered if it were genuine or not.

"Wonder what?"

"If one could still contact them . . ."

"Most certainly, if there were a reason for it. My contacts"—he tapped his temple—"well, such things do not evaporate." *Where was this going?*

"Well, Dmitriy, you know, even attack dogs have their uses, and every so often, well"—an embarrassed smile—"you know . . ."

In that moment, Popov wondered if all the movies were true. Did American business executives *really* plot murder against commercial rivals and such? It seemed quite mad . . . but maybe the movies were not entirely groundless. . . .

"Tell me," the American went on, "did you actually work with those people —you know, plan some of the jobs they did?"

"Plan? No," the Russian replied, with a shake of the head. "I provided some assistance, yes, under the direction of my government. Most often I acted as a courier of sorts." It had not been a favored assignment; essentially he'd been a mailman tasked to delivering special messages to those perverse children, but it was duty he'd drawn due to his superb field skills and his ability to reason with nearly anyone on nearly any topic, since the contacts were so difficult to handle once they'd decided to do something. Popov had been a spook, to use the Western vernacular, a really excellent field intelligence officer who'd never, to the best of his knowledge, been identified by any Western counterintelligence service. Otherwise, his entry into America at JFK International Airport would hardly have been so uneventful.

"So, you actually know how to get in touch with those people, eh?"

"Yes, I do," Popov assured his host.

"Remarkable." The American stood. "Well, how about some dinner?"

By the end of dinner, Popov was earning $100,000 per year as a special consultant, wondering where this new job would lead and not really caring. One hundred thousand dollars was a good deal of money for a man whose

tastes were actually rather sophisticated and needed proper support.

It was ten months later now, and the vodka was still good, in the glass with two ice cubes. "Where and how? . . ." Popov whispered. It amused him where he was now, and what he was doing. Life was so very strange, the paths you took, and where they led you. After all, he'd just been in Paris that afternoon, killing time and waiting for a meet with a former "colleague" in DGSE. "When is decided, then?"

"Yes, you have the date, Dmitriy."

"I know whom to see and whom to call to arrange the meeting."

"You have to do it face-to-face?" the American asked, rather stupidly, Popov thought.

A gentle laugh. "My dear friend, yes, face-to-face. One does not arrange such a thing with a fax."

"That's a risk."

"Only a small one. The meet will be in a safe place. No one will take my photograph, and they know me only by a password and codename, and, of course, the currency."

"How much?"

Popov shrugged. "Oh, shall we say five hundred thousand dollars? In cash, of course, American dollars, Deutschmarks, Swiss francs, that will depend on what our . . . our friends prefer," he added, just to make things clear.

The host scribbled a quick note and handed the paper across. "That's what you need to get the money." And with that, things began. Morals were always variable things, depending on the culture, experiences, and principles of individual men and women. In Dmitriy's case, his parent culture had few hard-and-fast rules, his experiences were to make use of that fact, and his main principle was to earn a living—

"You know that this carries a certain degree of danger for me, and, as you know, my salary—"

"Your salary just doubled, Dmitriy."

A smile. "Excellent." A good beginning. Even the Russian Mafia didn't advance people as quickly as this.

Three times a week they practiced zip-lining from a platform, sixty feet down to the ground. Once a week or so they did it for-real, out of a British Army helicopter. Chavez didn't like it much. Airborne school was one of the few things he'd avoided in his Army service—which was rather odd, he thought, looking back. He'd done Ranger school as an E-4, but for one reason or other, Fort Benning hadn't happened.

This was the next best or worst thing. His feet rested on the skids as the chopper approached the drop-site. His gloved hands held the rope, a hundred feet long in case the pilot misjudged something. Nobody trusted pilots very much, though one's life so often depended on them, and this one seemed pretty good. A little bit of a cowboy—the final part of the simulated insertion took them through a gap in some trees, and the top leaves brushed Ding's uniform, gently to be sure, but in his position, any touch was decidedly unwelcome. Then the nose came up on a powerful dynamic-braking maneuver. Chavez's legs went tight, and when the nose came back down, he

kicked himself free of the skid and dropped. The tricky part was stopping the descent just short of the ground—and getting there quickly enough so as not to present yourself as a dangling target . . . done, and his feet hit the ground. He tossed the rope free, snatched up his H&K in both hands, and headed off toward the objective, having survived his fourteenth zip-line deployment, the third from a chopper.

There was a delightfully joyous aspect to this job, he told himself as he ran along. He was being a physical soldier again, something he'd once learned to love and that his CIA duties had mainly denied him. Chavez was a man who liked to sweat, who enjoyed the physical exertion of soldiering in the field, and most of all loved being with others who shared his likes. It was hard. It was dangerous: every member of the team had suffered a minor injury or other in the past month—except Weber, who seemed to be made of steel—and sooner or later, the statistics said, someone would have a major one, most probably a broken leg from zip-lining. Delta at Fort Bragg rarely had a complete team fully mission-capable, due to training accidents and injuries. But hard training made for easy combat. So ran the motto of every competent army in the world. An exaggeration, but not a big one. Looking back from his place of cover and concealment, Chavez saw that Team-2 was all down and moving—even Vega, remarkably enough. With Oso's upper-body bulk, Chavez always worried about his ankles. Weber and Johnston were darting to their programmed perches, each carrying his custom-made scope-sighted rifle. Helmet-mounted radios were working, hissing with the digitized encryption system so that only team members could understand what was being said . . . Ding turned and saw that everyone was in his pre-briefed position, ready for his next move-command . . .

The Communications Room was on the second floor of the building whose renovations had just been completed. It had the usual number of teletype machines for the various world news services, plus TV sets for CNN, and Sky News, and a few other broadcasts. These were overseen by people the Brits called "minders," who were overseen in turn by a career intelligence officer. The one on this shift was an American from the National Security Agency, an Air Force major who usually dressed in civilian clothes that didn't disguise his nationality or the nature of his training at all.

Major Sam Bennett had acclimated himself to the environment. His wife and son weren't all that keen on the local TV, but they found the climate agreeable, and there were several decent golf courses within easy driving distance. He jogged three miles every morning to let the local collection of snake-eaters know he wasn't a total wimp, and he was looking forward to a little bird-shooting in a few weeks. Otherwise, the duty here was pretty easy. General Clark—that's how everyone seemed to think of him—seemed a decent boss. He liked it clean and fast, which was precisely how Bennett liked to deliver it. Not a screamer, either. Bennett had worked for a few of those in his twelve years of uniformed service. And Bill Tawney, the British intelligence team boss, was about the best Bennett had ever seen—quiet, thoughtful, and smart. Bennett had shared a few pints of beer with him over the past weeks, while talking shop in the Hereford Officers' Club.

But duty like this was boring most of the time. He'd worked the basement Watch Center at NSA, a large, low-ceiling room of standard office sheep-pens, with minitelevisions and computer printers that gave the room a constant low buzz of noise that could drive a man crazy on the long nights of keeping track of the whole fucking world. At least the Brits didn't believe in caging all the worker bees. It was easy for him to get up and walk around. The crew was young here. Only Tawney was over fifty, and Bennett liked that, too.

"Major!" a voice called from one of the news printers. "We have a hostage case in Switzerland."

"What service?" Bennett asked on the way over.

"Agence France-Press. It's a bank, a bloody bank," the corporal reported, as Bennett came close enough to read—but couldn't, since he didn't know French. The corporal could and translated on the fly. Bennett lifted a phone and pushed a button.

"Mr. Tawney, we have an incident in Bern, unknown number of criminals have seized the central branch of the Bern Commercial Bank. There are some civilians trapped inside."

"What else, Major?"

"Nothing at the moment. Evidently the police are there."

"Very well, thank you, Major Bennett." Tawney killed the line and pulled open a desk drawer, to find and open a very special book. Ah, yes, he knew that one. Then he dialed the British Embassy in Geneva. "Mr. Gordon, please," he told the operator.

"Gordon," a voice said a few seconds later.

"Dennis, this is Bill Tawney."

"Bill, haven't heard from you in quite a while. What can I do for you?" the voice asked pleasantly.

"Bern Commercial Bank, main branch. There seems to be a hostage situation there. I want you to evaluate the situation and report back to me."

"What's our interest, Bill?" the man asked.

"We have an . . . an understanding with the Swiss government. If their police are unable to handle it, we may have to provide some technical assistance. Who in the embassy liases with the local police?"

"Tony Armitage, used to be Scotland Yard. Good man for financial crimes and such."

"Take him with you," Tawney ordered. "Report back directly to me as soon as you have something." Tawney gave his number.

"Very well." It was a dull afternoon in Geneva anyway. "It will be a few hours."

And it will probably end up as nothing, they both knew. "I'll be here. Thank you, Dennis." With that, Tawney left his office and went upstairs to watch TV.

Behind the Rainbow Headquarters building were four large satellite dishes trained on communications satellites hovering over the equator. A simple check told them which channel of which bird carried Swiss television satellite broadcasts—as with most countries, it was easier to go up and back to a satellite than to use coaxial land-lines. Soon they were getting a direct newsfeed from the local station. Only one camera was set up at the moment. It showed the outside of an institutional building—the Swiss tended to design

banks rather like urban castles, though with a distinctly Germanic flavor to make them appear powerful and forbidding. The voice was that of a reporter talking to his station, not to the public. A linguist stood by to translate.

" 'No, I have no idea. The police haven't talked to us yet,' " the translator said in a dull monotone. Then a new voice came on the line. "Cameraman," the translator said. "Sounds like a cameraman—there's something—"

—with that the camera zoomed in, catching a shape, a human shape wearing something over his head, a mask of sorts—

"What kind of gun is that?" Bennett asked.

"Czech Model 58," Tawney said at once. "So it would seem. Bloody good man on the camera."

" 'What did he say?' That was the studio to the reporter," the translator went on, hardly looking at the picture on the TV screen. " 'Don't know, couldn't hear with all the noise out here. He shouted something, didn't hear it.' Oh, good: 'How many people?' 'Not sure, the *Wachtmeister* said over twenty inside, bank customers and employees. Just me and my cameraman here outside, and about fifteen police officers that I can see.' 'More on the way, I imagine,' reply from the station." With that the audio line went quiet. The camera switched off, and shuffling on the audio line told them that the cameraman was moving to a different location, which was confirmed when the picture came back a minute later from a very different angle.

"What gives, Bill?" Tawney and Bennett turned to see Clark standing there behind them. "I came over to talk to you, but your secretary said you had a developing situation up here."

"We may," the Intelligence section chief replied. "I have the 'Six' station in Geneva sending two men over now to evaluate it. We do have that arrangement with the Swiss government, should they decide to invoke it. Bennett, is this going out on commercial TV yet?"

Bennett shook his head. "No, sir. For the moment they're keeping it quiet."

"Good," Tawney thought. "Who's the go-team now, John?"

"Team-2, Chavez and Price. They're just finishing up a little exercise right now. How long before you think we declare an alert?"

"We could start now," Bill answered, even though it was probably nothing more than a bank robbery gone bad. They had those in Switzerland, didn't they?

Clark pulled a mini-radio from his pocket and thumbed it on. "Chavez, this is Clark. You and Price report to communications right now."

"On the way, Six" was the reply.

"I wonder what this is about," Ding observed to his command sergeant major. Eddie Price, he'd learned in the past three weeks, was as good a soldier as he was ever likely to meet: cool, smart, quiet, with plenty of field experience.

"I expect we'll find out, sir," Price responded. Officers felt the need to talk a lot, he knew. Proof of that came at once.

"How long you been in, Eddie?"

"Nearly thirty years, sir. I enlisted as a boy soldier—age fifteen, you see. Parachute Regiment," he went on, just to avoid the next question. "Came over to SAS when I was twenty-four, been here ever since."

"Well, Sar Major, I'm glad to have you with me," Chavez said, getting in the car for the drive to the Headquarters Building.

"Thank you, sir," the sergeant major replied. A decent chap, this Chavez, he thought, perhaps even a good commander, though that remained to be seen. He could have asked his own questions, but, no, that wasn't done, was it? Good as he was, Price didn't know much about the American military yet.

You oughta be an officer, Eddie, Ding didn't say. In America this guy would have been ripped from his unit, kicking and screaming or not, and shipped off to OCS, probably with a college degree purchased by the Army along the way. Different culture, different rules, Chavez told himself. Well, it gave him a damned good squad sergeant to back him up. Ten minutes later, he parked in the back lot and walked into the building, following directions up to Communications.

"Hey, Mr. C, what gives?"

"Domingo, there's a chance we may have a job for you and your team. Bern, Switzerland. Bank robbery gone bad, hostage situation. All we know now." Clark pointed both of them at the TV screens. Chavez and Price stole swivel chairs and moved them close.

If nothing else, it was good as a practice alert. The preplanned mechanisms were now moving. On the first floor, tickets had already been arranged on no fewer than four flights from Gatwick to Switzerland, and two helicopters were on the way to Hereford to ferry his men to the airport with their equipment. British Airways had been alerted to accept sealed cargo—inspecting it for the international flight would just have gotten people excited. If the alert went further, Team-2 members would change into civilian clothes, complete with ties and suit jackets. Clark thought that a little excessive. Making soldiers look like bankers was no easy task, was it?

"Not much happening now," Tawney said. "Sam, can you roll the tapes from earlier?"

"Yes, sir." Major Bennett keyed one up and hit the play button on the remote.

"Czech 58," Price said immediately. "No faces?"

"Nope, that's the only thing we have on the subjects," Bennett replied.

"Odd weapon for robbers," the sergeant major noted. Chavez turned his head. That was one of the things he had yet to learn about Europe. Okay, hoods here didn't use assault rifles.

"That's what I thought," Tawney said.

"Terrorist weapon?" Chavez asked his squad XO.

"Yes, sir. The Czechs gave away a lot of them. Quite compact, you see. Only twenty-five inches long, manufactured by the Uhersky Broad works. Seven-point-six-two /thirty-nine Soviet cartridge. Fully automatic, selector switch. Odd thing for a Swiss bandit to use," Price said once more for emphasis.

"Why?" Clark asked.

"They make far better weapons in Switzerland, sir, for their territorials—their citizen soldiers stow them in their closets, you see. Should not be all that difficult to steal several."

The building shook then with the sound of helicopters landing not too far away. Clark checked his watch and nodded approval at the timing.

"What do we know about the neighborhood?" Chavez asked.

"Working on that now, old boy," Tawney answered. "So far, just what the TV feed shows."

The TV screen showed an ordinary street, devoid of vehicular traffic at the moment because the local police had diverted cars and buses away from the bank. Otherwise, they saw ordinary masonry buildings bordering an ordinary city street. Chavez looked over at Price, whose eyes were locked on the pictures they were getting—two now, because another Swiss TV station had dispatched a camera team there, and both signals were being pirated off the satellite. The translator continued to relay the remarks of the camera crews and reporters on the scene to their respective stations. They said very little, about half of it small-talk that could have been spoken from one desk to another in an office setting. One camera or the other occasionally caught the movement of a curtain, but that was all.

"The police are probably trying to establish communications with our friends on a telephone, talk to them, reason with them, the usual drill," Price said, realizing that he had more practical experience with this sort of thing than anyone else in the room. They knew the theory, but theory wasn't always enough. "We shall know in half an hour if this is a mission for us or not."

"How good are the Swiss cops?" Chavez asked Price.

"Very good indeed, sir, but not a great deal of experience with a serious hostage event—"

"That's why we have an understanding with them," Tawney put in.

"Yes, sir." Price leaned back, reached into his pocket, and took out his pipe. "Anyone object?"

Clark shook his head. "No health Nazis here, Sergeant Major. What do you mean by a 'serious' hostage event?"

"Committed criminals, terrorists." Price shrugged. "Chaps stupid enough to put their lives behind the chips on the gaming table. The sort who kill hostages to show their resolve." *The sort we go in after and kill,* Price didn't have to add.

It was an awful lot of brain-power to be sitting around doing nothing, John Clark thought, especially Bill Tawney. But if you had no information, it was difficult to make pontifical pronouncements. All eyes were locked on the TV screens, which showed little, and Clark found himself missing the inane drivel that one expected of TV reporters, filling silence with empty words. About the only interesting thing was when they said that they were trying to talk to the local cops, but that the cops weren't saying anything, except that they were trying to establish contact with the bad guys, so far unsuccessfully. That had to be a lie, but the police were supposed to lie to the media and the public in cases like this—because any halfway competent terrorist would have a TV set with him, and would have somebody watching it. You could catch a lot by watching TV, else Clark and his senior people would not be watching it either, would they?

The protocol on this was both simple and complex. Rainbow had an understanding with the Swiss government. If the local police couldn't handle it, they'd bump it up to the canton—state—level, which would then decide whether or not to bump it one more step to the central national government,

whose ministerial-level people could then make the Rainbow call. That entire mechanism had been established months before as part of the mandate of the agency that Clark now headed. The "help" call would come through the British Foreign Office in Whitehall, on the bank of the Thames in central London. It seemed like a hell of a lot of bureaucracy to John, but there was no avoiding it, and he was grateful that there was not an additional level or two. Once the call was made, things got easier, at least in the administrative sense. But until the call was made, the Swiss would tell them nothing.

One hour into the TV vigil, Chavez left to put Team-2 on alert. The troops, he saw, took it calmly, readying gear that needed to be seen to, which was not very much. The TV feed was routed to their individual desktop sets, and the men settled back in their swivel chairs to watch quietly as their boss went back to Communications, while the helicopters sat idle on the pad outside Team-2's area. Team-1 went on standby alert as well, in case the helicopters taking–2 to Gatwick crashed. The procedures had been completely thought through—except, John thought, by the terrorists.

On the TV screen, police milled about, some at the ready, most just standing and watching. Trained police or not, they were little trained for a situation like this, and the Swiss, while they had considered such an event—everyone in the civilized world had—had taken it no more seriously than, say, the cops in Boulder, Colorado. This had never happened before in Bern, and until it did, it would not be part of the local police department's corporate culture. The facts were too stark for Clark and the rest to discount. The German police—as competent as any in the world—had thoroughly blown the hostage rescue at Fürstenfeldbrück, not because they had been bad cops, but because it had been their first time, and as a result some Israeli athletes hadn't made it home from the 1972 Munich Olympiad. The whole world had learned from that, but how much had they learned? Clark and the rest all wondered at the same time.

The TV screens showed very little for another half hour beyond an empty city street, but then a senior police officer walked into the open, holding a cellular phone. His body language was placid at first, but it started to change, and then he held the cell phone close to his ear, seeming to lean into it. His free hand came up about then, placatingly, as though in a face-to-face conversation.

"Something's wrong," Dr. Paul Bellow observed, which was hardly a surprise to the others, especially Eddie Price, who tensed in his chair, but said nothing as he puffed on his pipe. Negotiating with people like those controlling the bank was its own little art form, and it was one this police superintendent—whatever his rank was—had yet to learn. Bad news, the sergeant major thought, for one or more of the bank customers.

" 'Was that a shot?' " the translator said, relaying the words of one of the reporters on the scene.

"Oh, shit," Chavez observed quietly. The situation had just escalated.

Less than a minute later, one of the bank's glass doors opened, and a man in civilian clothes dragged a body onto the sidewalk. It seemed to be a man, but his head, as both the cameras zoomed in on the scene from different angles, was a red mass. The civilian got the body all the way outside and froze the

moment he set it down.

Move right, go to your right, Chavez thought as loudly as he could from so far away. Somehow the thought must have gotten there, for the unnamed man in his gray overcoat stood stock-still for several seconds, looking down, and then —furtively, he thought—went to the right.

" 'Somebody's shouting from inside the bank,' " the translator relayed.

But whatever the voice had shouted, it hadn't been the right thing. The civilian dove to his right, away from the double glass doors of the bank and below the level of the plate-glass bank windows. He was now on the sidewalk, with three feet of granite block over his head, invisible from the interior of the building.

"Good move, old man," Tawney observed quietly. "Now, we'll see if the police can get you into the clear."

One of the cameras shifted to the senior cop, who'd wandered into the middle of the street with his cell phone, and was now waving frantically for the civilian to get down. Brave or foolish, they couldn't tell, but the cop then walked slowly back to the line of police cars—astonishingly, without being shot for his troubles. The cameras shifted back to the escaped civilian. Police had edged to the side of the bank building, waving for the man to crawl, keep low, to where they were standing. The uniformed cops had submachine guns out. Their body language was tense and frustrated. One of the police faces looked to the body on the sidewalk, and the men in Hereford could easily translate his thoughts.

"Mr. Tawney, a call for you on Line Four," the intercom called. The intelligence chief walked to a phone and punched the proper button.

"Tawney . . . ah, yes, Dennis . . ."

"Whoever they are, they've just murdered a chap."

"We just watched it. We're pirating the TV feed." Which meant that Gordon's trip to Bern was a waste of time—but no, it wasn't, was it? "You have that Armitage chap with you?"

"Yes, Bill, he's going over to talk to their police now."

"Excellent. I will hold for him."

As though on cue, a camera showed a man in civilian clothes walking to the senior cop on the scene. He pulled out an ID folder, spoke briefly with the police commander, and walked away, disappearing around the corner.

"This is Tony Armitage, who's this?"

"Bill Tawney."

"Well, if you know Dennis, I expect you're a 'Six' chap. What can I do for you, sir?"

"What did the police tell you?" Tawney hit the speaker switch on the phone.

"He's out of his depth by several meters or so. Said he's sending it up to the canton for advice."

"Mr. C?" Chavez said from his chair.

"Tell the choppers to spool up, Ding, you're off to Gatwick. Hold there for further instructions."

"Roger that, Mr. C. Team-2 is moving."

Chavez walked down the stairs with Price behind him, then jumped into their car, which had them at Team-2's building in under three minutes.

“People, if you’re watching the *telly,* you know what’s happening. Saddle up, we’re choppering to Gatwick.” They’d just headed out the door when a brave Swiss cop managed to get the civilian to safety. The TV showed the civilian being hustled to a car, which sped off at once. Again the body language was the important thing. The assembled police, who had been standing around casually, were standing differently now, mainly crouched behind the cover of their automobiles, their hands fingering their weapons, tense but still unsure of what they ought to do.

“It’s going out live on TV now,” Bennett reported. “Sky News will have it on in a few.”

“I guess that figures,” Clark said. “Where’s Stanley?”

“He’s at Gatwick now,” Tawney said. Clark nodded. Stanley would deploy with Team-2 as field commander. Dr. Paul Bellow was gone as well. He’d chopper out with Chavez and advise him and Stanley on the psychological aspects of the tactical situation. Nothing to be done now but order coffee and solid food, which Clark did, taking a chair and sitting in front of the TVs.

CHAPTER 3

GNOMES AND GUNS

The helicopter ride was twenty-five minutes exactly, and deposited Team-2 and its attachments in the general-aviation portion of the international airport. Two vans waited, and Chavez watched his men load their gear into one of them for movement to the British Airways terminal. There, some cops, who were also waiting, supervised the van's handling into a cargo container—which would be first off the flight when the plane arrived at Bern.

But first they had to wait for the go-mission order. Chavez pulled out his cellular phone, flipped it open, and thumbed speed-dial number one.

"Clark," the voice said after the encryption software clicked through.

"Ding here, John. The call come from Whitehall yet?"

"Still waiting, Domingo. We expect it shortly. The canton bumped it upstairs. Their Justice Minister is considering it now."

"Well, tell the worthy gentleman that this flight leaves the gate in two-zero minutes, and the next one after that is ninety minutes, 'less you want us to travel Swissair. One of those in forty minutes, and another in an hour fifteen."

"I hear you, Ding. We have to hold."

Chavez swore in Spanish. He knew it. He didn't have to like it. "Roger, Six, Team-2 is holding on the ramp at Gatwick."

"Roger that, Team-2, Rainbow Six, out."

Chavez closed his phone and tucked it in his shirt pocket. "Okay, people," he said to his men over the shriek of jet engines, "we hold here for the go-ahead." The troops nodded, as eager to get it going as their boss, but just as powerless to make it happen. The British team members had been there before and took it better than the Americans and the others.

• • •

"Bill, tell Whitehall that we have twenty minutes to get them off the ground, after that over an hour delay."

Tawney nodded and went to a phone in the corner to call his contact in the Foreign Ministry. From there it went to the British Ambassador in Geneva, who'd been told that the SAS was offering special mission assistance of a technical nature. It was an odd case where the Swiss Foreign Minister knew more than the man making the offer. But, remarkably, the word came back in fifteen minutes : *"Ja."*

"We have mission approval, John," Tawney reported, much to his own surprise.

"Right." Clark flipped open his own phone and hit the speed-dial #2 button.
"Chavez," a voice said over considerable background noise.
"We have a go-mission," Clark said. "Acknowledge."
"Team-2 copies go-mission. Team-2 is moving."
"That's affirmative. Good luck, Domingo."
"Thank you, Mr. C."

Chavez turned to his people and pumped his arm up and down in the speed-it-up gesture known to armies all over the world. They got into their designated van for the drive across the Gatwick ramp. It stopped at the cargo gate for their flight, where Chavez waved a cop close, and let Eddie Price pass the word to load the special cargo onto the Boeing 757. That done, the van advanced another fifty yards to the stairs outside the end of the jetway, and Team-2 jumped out and headed up the stairs. At the top, the control-booth door was held open by another police constable, and from there they walked normally aboard the aircraft and handed over their tickets to the stewardess, who pointed them to their first-class seats.

The last man aboard was Tim Noonan, the team's technical wizard. Not a wizened techno-nerd, Noonan had played defensive back at Stanford before joining the FBI, and took weapons training with the team just to fit in. Six feet, two hundred pounds, he was larger than most of Ding's shooters but, he'd be the first to admit, was not as tough. Still, he was a better-than-fair shot with pistol and MP-10, and was learning to speak the language. Dr. Bellow settled into his window seat with a book extracted from his carry-on bag. It was a volume on sociopathy by a professor at Harvard under whom he'd trained some years before. The rest of the team members just leaned back, skimming through the onboard magazines. Chavez looked around and saw that his team didn't seem tense at all, and was both amazed at the fact, and slightly ashamed that he was so pumped up. The airline captain made his announcements, and the Boeing backed away from the gate, then taxied out to the runway. Five minutes later, the aircraft rotated off the ground, and Team-2 was on its way to its first mission.

"In the air," Tawney reported. "The airline expects a smooth flight and an on-time arrival in . . . an hour fifteen minutes."

"Great," Clark observed. The TV coverage had settled down. Both Swiss stations were broadcasting continuous coverage now, complete with thoughts from the reporters at the scene. That was about as useful as an NFL pre-game show, though police spokesmen were speaking to the press now. No, they didn't know who was inside. Yes, they'd spoken to them. Yes, negotiations were ongoing. No, they couldn't really say any more than that. Yes, they'd keep the press apprised of developments.

Like hell, John thought. The same coverage was reported on Sky News, and soon CNN and Fox networks were carrying brief stories about it, including, of course, the dumping of the first victim and the escape of the one who'd dragged the body out.

"Nasty business, John," Tawney said over his tea.

Clark nodded. "I suppose they always are, Bill."

"Quite."

Peter Covington came in then, stole a swivel chair and moved it next to the two senior men. His face was locked in neutral, though he had to be pissed, Clark thought, that his team wasn't going. But the team-availability rotation was set in stone here, as it had to be.

"Thoughts, Peter?" Clark asked.

"They're not awfully bright. They killed that poor sod very early in the affair, didn't they?"

"Keep going," John said, reminding all of them that he was new in this business.

"When you kill a hostage, you cross a large, thick line, sir. Once across it, one cannot easily go backward, can one?"

"So, you try to avoid it?"

"I would. It makes it too difficult for the other side to make concessions, and you bloody need the concessions if you want to get away—unless you know something the opposition does not. Unlikely in a situation like this."

"They'll ask for a way out . . . helicopter?"

"Probably." Covington nodded. "To an airport, commercial aircraft waiting, international crew—but to *where?* Libya, perhaps, but will Libya allow them in? Where else might they go? Russia? I think not. The Bekaa Valley in Lebanon is still possible, but commercial aircraft don't land there. About the only sensible thing they've done is to protect their identities from the police. Would you care to wager that the hostage who got out has not seen their faces?" Covington shook his head.

"They're not amateurs," Clark objected. "Their weapons point to some measure of training and professionalism."

That earned John a nod. "True, sir, but not awfully bright. I would not be overly surprised to learn that they'd actually stolen some currency, like common robbers. Trained terrorists, perhaps, but not good ones."

And what's a "good" terrorist? John wondered. Doubtless a term of art he'd have to learn.

The BA flight touched down two minutes early, then taxied to the gate. Ding had spent the flight talking to Dr. Bellow. The psychology of this business was the biggest blank spot in his copybook, and one he'd have to learn to fill in—and soon. This wasn't like being a soldier—the psychology of that job was handled at the general-officer level most of the time, the figuring out of what the other guy was going to do with his maneuver battalions. This was squad-level combat, but with all sorts of interesting new elements, Ding thought, flipping his seat belt off before the aircraft stopped moving. But it still came down to the least common denominator—steel on target.

Chavez stood and stretched, then headed aft to the doorway, his game-face now on all the way. Out the jetway, between two ordinary civilians who probably thought him a businessman, with his suit and tie. Maybe he'd buy a nicer suit in London, he thought idly, exiting the jetway, the better to fit the disguise he and his men had to adopt when traveling. There was a chauffeur sort of man standing out there holding a sign with the proper name on it. Chavez walked up to him.

"Waiting for us?"

"Yes, sir. Come with me?"

Team-2 followed him down the anonymous concourse, then turned into what seemed a conference room that had another door. In it was a uniformed police officer, a senior one, judging by the braid on his blue blouse.

"You are . . ." he said.

"Chavez." Ding stuck his hand out. "Domingo Chavez."

"Spanish?" the cop asked in considerable surprise.

"American. And you, sir?"

"Roebling, Marius," the man replied, when all the team was in the room and the door closed. "Come with me, please." Roebling opened the far door, which led outside to some stairs. A minute later, they were in a minibus heading past the park aircraft, then out onto a highway. Ding looked back to see another truck, doubtless carrying their gear.

"Okay, what can you tell me?"

"Nothing new since the first murder. We are speaking with them over the telephone. No names, no identities. They've demanded transport to this airport and a flight out of the country, no destination revealed to us as of yet."

"Okay, what did the guy who got away tell you?"

"There are four of them, they speak German, he says they sound as though it is their primary language, idiomatic, pronunciation, and so forth. They are armed with Czech weapons, and it would seem they are not reluctant to make use of them."

"Yes, sir. How long to get there, and will my men be able to change into their gear?"

Roebling nodded. "It is arranged, Major Chavez."

"Thank you, sir."

"Can I speak with the man who got out?" Dr. Bellow asked.

"My orders are to give you full cooperation—within reason, of course."

Chavez wondered what that qualification meant, but decided he'd find out in due course. He couldn't blame the man for being unhappy to have a team of foreigners come to his country to enforce the law. But these were the proverbial pros from Dover, and that was that—his own government had said so. It also occurred to Ding that the credibility of Rainbow now rested on his shoulders. It would be a hell of a thing to embarrass his father-in-law and his team and his country. He turned to look at his people. Eddie Price, perhaps reading his mind, gave a discreet thumbs-up. *Well,* Chavez thought, *at least one of us thinks we're ready.* It was different in the field, something he'd learned in the jungles and mountains of Colombia years before, and the closer you got to the firing line, the more different it got. Out here there were no laser systems to tell you who'd been killed. Real red blood would announce that. But his people were trained and experienced, especially Sergeant Major Edward Price.

All Ding had to do was lead them into battle.

There was a secondary school a block from the bank. The minibus and truck pulled up to it, and Team-2 walked into the gymnasium area, which was secured by ten or so uniformed cops. The men changed into their gear in a locker room, and walked back into the gym, to find Roebling with an

additional garment for them to wear. These were pullovers, black like their assault gear. POLIZEI was printed on them, front and back, in gold lettering rather than the usual bright yellow. A Swiss affectation? Chavez thought, without the smile that should have gone with the observation.

"Thanks," Chavez told him. It was a useful subterfuge. With that done, the men and their gear reboarded the minibus for the remainder of their drive. This put them around the corner from the bank, invisible both to the terrorists and the TV news cameras. The long-riflemen, Johnston and Weber, were walked to pre-selected perches, one overlooking the rear of the bank building, the other diagonally facing the front. Both men settled in, unfolded the bipod legs on their gunstocks, and started surveying the target building.

Their rifles were as individual as the shooters. Weber had a Walther WA2000, chambered for the .300 Winchester Magnum cartridge. Johnston's was custom made, chambered for the slightly smaller but faster 7-mm Remington Magnum. In both cases, the sharpshooters first of all determined the range to target and dialed it into their telescopic sights, then lay down on the foam mattresses they'd brought. Their immediate mission was to observe, gather information, and report.

Dr. Bellow felt very strange in his black uniform, complete with body armor and POLIZEI pullover, but it would help prevent his identification by a medical colleague who caught this event on TV. Noonan, similarly dressed, set up his computer—an Apple PowerBook—and started looking over the building blueprints so that he could input them into his system. The local cops had been efficient as hell. Over a period of thirty minutes, he had a complete electronic map of the target building. Everything but the vault combination, he thought with a smile. Then he erected a whip antenna and transmitted the imagery to the other three computers the team had brought along.

Chavez, Price, and Bellow walked to the senior Swiss policeman on the scene. Greetings were exchanged, hands shaken. Price set up his computer and put in a CD-ROM disk with photos of every known and photographed terrorist in the world.

The man who'd dragged the body out was one Hans Richter, a German national from Bonn who banked here for his Swiss-based trading business.

"Did you see their faces?" Price asked.

"Yes." A shaky nod. Herr Richter'd had a very bad day to this point. Price selected known German terrorists and started flashing photos.

"Ja, ja, that one. He is the leader."

"You are quite sure?"

"Yes, I am."

"Ernst Model, formerly of Baader-Meinhof, disappeared in 1989, whereabouts unknown." Price scrolled down. "Four suspected operations to date. Three were bloody failures. Nearly captured in Hamburg, 1987, killed two policemen to make his escape. Communist-trained, last suspected to be in Lebanon, that sighting report is thin—very thin, it would seem. Kidnapping was his specialty. Okay." Price scrolled down some more.

"That one . . . possibly."

"Erwin Guttenach, also Baader-Meinhof, last spotted 1992 in Cologne. Robbed a bank, background also kidnapping and murder—oh, yes, he's the

chappie who kidnapped and killed a board member of BMW in 1986. Kept the ransom . . . four million D-marks. Greedy bugger," Price added.

Bellow looked over his shoulder, thinking as fast as he could. "What did he say to you on the phone?"

"We have a tape," the cop replied.

"Excellent! But I require a translator."

"Doc, a profile on Ernst Model, quick as you can." Chavez turned. "Noonan, can we get some coverage on the bank?"

"No problem," the tech man replied.

"Roebling?" Chavez said next.

"Yes, Major?"

"Will the TV crews cooperate? We have to assume the subjects inside have a TV with them."

"They will cooperate," the senior Swiss cop replied with confidence.

"Okay, people, let's move," Chavez ordered. Noonan went off to his bag of tricks. Bellow headed around the corner with Herr Richter and another Swiss cop to handle the translation. That left Chavez and Price alone.

"Eddie, am I missing anything?"

"No, Major," Sergeant Major Price replied.

"Okay, number one, my name is Ding. Number two, you have more experience in this than I do. If you have something to say, I want to hear it *right now,* got it? We ain't in no fuckin' wardroom here. I need your brains, Eddie."

"Very well, sir—Ding." Price managed a smile. His commander was working out rather nicely. "So far, so good. We have the subjects contained, good perimeter. We need plans of the building and information on what's happening inside—Noonan's job, and he seems a competent chappie. And we need an idea of what the opposition is thinking—Dr. Bellow's job, and he is excellent. What's the plan if the opposition just starts shooting out of hand?"

"Tell Louis, two flash-bangs at the front door, toss four more inside, and we blow in like a tornado."

"Our body armor—"

"Won't stop a seven-six-two Russian. I know," Chavez agreed. "Nobody ever said it was safe, Eddie. When we know a little more, we can figure a real assault plan." Chavez clapped him on the shoulder. "Move, Eddie."

"Yes, sir." Price moved off to join the rest of the team.

Popov hadn't known that the Swiss police had such a well-trained counterterrorist squad. As he watched, the commander was crouching close to the front of the bank building, and another, his second-in-command, probably, was heading around the corner to the rest of the team. They were speaking with the escaped hostage—someone had walked him out of sight. Yes, these Swiss police were well trained and well-equipped. H&K weapons, it appeared. The usual for this sort of thing. For his own part, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov stood in the crowd of onlookers. His first impression of Model and his little team of three others had been correct. The German's IQ was little more than room temperature—he'd even wanted a discussion of Marxism-Leninism with his visitor! The fool. Not even a young fool. Model was into his forties now

and couldn't use youthful exuberance as an excuse for his ideological fixation. But not entirely impractical. Ernst had wanted to see the money, $600,000 in D-marks. Popov smiled, remembering where it had been stashed. It was unlikely that Ernst would ever see it again. Killing the hostage so early—foolish, but not unexpected. He was the sort who'd want to show his resolve and ideological purity, as though anyone cared about that today! Popov grunted to himself and lit a cigar, leaning back against yet another bank building to relax and observe the exercise, his hat pulled down and collar turned up, ostensibly to protect himself from the gathering evening chill, but also to obscure his face. One couldn't be too careful—a fact lost on Ernst Model and his three *Kameraden.*

Dr. Bellow finished his review of the taped phone conversations and the known facts about Ernst Johannes Model. The man was a sociopath with a distinct tendency for violence. Suspected in seven murders personally committed and a few more in the company of others. Guttenach, a less bright individual of the same ilk, and two others, unknown. Richter, the escapee, had told them, unsurprisingly, that Model had killed the first victim himself, shooting him in the back of his head from close range and ordering Richter to drag him out. So, both the shooting and the demonstration of its reality to the police had been ill-considered . . . it all fit the same worrisome profile. Bellow keyed his radio.

"Bellow for Chavez."

"Yeah, doc, this is Ding."

"I have a preliminary profile on the subjects."

"Shoot—Team, you listening?" There followed an immediate cacophony of overlapping responses. "Yeah, Ding." "Copying, leader." *"Ja."* And the rest. "Okay, doc, lay it out," Chavez ordered.

"First, this is not a well-planned operation. That fits the profile for the suspected leader, Ernst Model, German national, age forty-one, formerly of the Baader-Meinhof organization. Tends to be impetuous, very quick to use violence when cornered or frustrated. If he threatens to kill someone, we have to believe he's not kidding. His current mental state is very, repeat, *very* dangerous. He knows he has a blown operation. He knows that his likelihood of success is slim. His hostages are his only assets, and he will regard them as expendable assets. Do *not* expect Stockholm Syndrome to set in with this case, people. Model is too sociopathic for that. Neither would I expect negotiations to be very useful. I think that it is very likely that an assault resolution will be necessary tonight or tomorrow."

"Anything else?" Chavez asked.

"Not at this time," Dr. Bellow replied. "I will monitor further developments with the local cops."

Noonan had taken his time selecting the proper tools, and now he was creeping along the outside wall of the bank building, below the level of the windows. At every one of them, he raised his head slowly and carefully to see if the interior curtains allowed any view of the inside. The second one did, and there Noonan affixed a tiny viewing system. This was a lens, roughly the

shape of a cobra's head, but only a few millimeters across, which led by fiber-optic cable to a TV camera set in his black bag around the corner. He placed another at the lower corner of the bank's glass door, then worked his way back, crawling feet first, slowly and laboriously, to a place where he could stand. That done, he walked all the way around the block to repeat the procedure from the other side of the building, where he was able to make three placements, one again on the door, and two on windows whose curtains were a touch shorter than they ought to have been. He also placed microphones in order to pick up whatever sound might be available. The large plate-glass windows ought to resonate nicely, he thought, though this would apply to extraneous exterior sounds as well as to those originating inside the building.

All the while, the Swiss TV crews were speaking with the senior on-site policeman, who spent a great deal of time saying that the terrorists were serious—he'd been coached by Dr. Bellow to speak of them with respect. They were probably watching television inside, and building up their self-esteem worked for the team's purposes at the moment. In any case, it denied the terrorists knowledge of what Tim Noonan had done on the outside.

"Okay," the techie said in his place on a side street. All the video displays were up and running. They showed little. The size of the lenses didn't make for good imagery, despite the enhancement program built into his computer. "Here's one shooter . . . and another." They were within ten meters of the front of the building. The rest of the people visible were sitting on the white marble floor, in the center for easy coverage. "The guy said four, right?"

"Yeah," Chavez answered. "But not how many hostages, not exactly anyway."

"Okay, this is a bad guy, I think, behind the teller-places . . . hmph, looks like he's checking the cash drawers . . . and that's a bag of some sort. You figure they visited the vault?"

Chavez turned. "Eddie?"

"Greed," Price agreed. "Well, why not? It *is* a bank, after all."

"Okay." Noonan switched displays on the computer screen. "I got blueprints of the building, and this is the layout."

"Teller cages, vault, toilets." Price traced his finger over the screen. "Back door. Seems simple enough. Access to the upper floors?"

"Here," Noonan said. "Actually outside the bank itself, but the basement is accessible to them here, stairs down, and a separate exit to the alley in back."

"Ceiling construction?" Chavez asked.

"Rebarred concrete slab, forty centimeters thick. That's solid as hell. Same with the walls and floor. This building was made to last." So, there would be no explosives-forced entry through walls, floor, or ceiling.

"So, we can go in the front door or the back door, and that's it. And that puts number four bad guy at the back door." Chavez keyed his radio. "Chavez for Rifle Two-Two."

"Ja, Weber here."

"Any windows in the back, anything in the door, peephole, anything like that, Dieter?"

"Negative. It appears to be a heavy steel door, nothing in it that I can see,"

the sniper said, tracing his telescopic sight over the target yet again, and again finding nothing but blank painted steel.

"Okay, Eddie, we blow the rear door with Primacord, three men in that way. Second later, we blow the front glass doors, toss flash-bangs, and move in when they're looking the wrong way. Two and two through the front. You and me go left. Louis and George go right."

"Are they wearing body armor?" Price asked.

"Nothing that Herr Richter saw," Noonan responded, "and nothing visible here—but there ain't no head-protection anyway, right?" It would be nothing more than a ten-meter shot, an easy distance for the H&K shoulder weapons.

"Quite." Price nodded. "Who leads the rear-entry team?"

"Scotty, I think. Paddy does the explosives." Connolly was the best man on the team for that, and both men knew it. Chavez made an important mental note that the subteams had to be more firmly established. To this point he'd kept all his people in the same drawer. That he would have to change as soon as they got back to Hereford.

"Vega?"

"Oso backs us up, but I don't think we'll have much use for him on this trip." Julio Vega had become their heavy-machine gunner, slinging a laser-sighted M-60 7.62-mm machine gun for really serious work, but there wasn't much use for that now—and wouldn't be, unless everything went totally to hell.

"Noonan, send this picture to Scotty."

"Right." He moved the mouse-pointer and started transmitting everything to the team's various computers.

"The question now is when." Ding checked his watch. "Back to the doc."

"Yes, sir."

Bellow had spent his time with Herr Richter. Three stiff shots had calmed him down nicely. Even his English had improved markedly. Bellow was walking him through the event for the sixth time when Chavez and Price showed up again.

"His eyes, they are blue, like ice. Like ice," Richter repeated. "He is not a man like most men. He should be in a cage, with the animals at the zoo." The businessman shuddered involuntarily.

"Does he have an accent?" Price asked.

"Mixed. Something of Hamburg, but something of Bavaria, too. The others, all Bavarian accents."

"The Bundes Kriminal Amt will find that useful, Ding," Price observed. The BKA was the German counterpart to the American FBI. "Why not have the local police check the area for a car with German license plates—from Bavaria? Perhaps there's a driver about."

"Good one." Chavez left and ran over to the Swiss cops, whose chief got on his radio at once. Probably a dry hole, Chavez thought. But you didn't know until you drilled it. They had to have come here one way or another. Another mental note. Check for that on every job.

Roebling came over next, carrying his cell phone. "It is time," he said, "to speak with them again."

"Yo, Tim," Chavez said over his radio. "Come to the rally point."

Noonan was there in under a minute. Chavez pointed him to Roebling's phone. Noonan took it, popped the back off, and attached a small green circuit board with a thin wire hanging from it. Then he pulled a cell phone from a thigh pocket and handed it over to Chavez. "There. You'll hear everything they say."

"Anything happening inside?"

"They're walking around a little more, a little agitated, maybe. Two of them were talking face-to-face a few minutes ago. Didn't look real happy about things from their gestures."

"Okay. Everybody up to speed on the interior?"

"How about audio?"

The techie shook his head. "Too much background noise. The building has a noisy heating system—oil-fired hot water, sounds like—that's playing hell with the window mikes. Not getting anything useful, Ding."

"Okay, keep us posted."

"You bet." Noonan made his way back to his gear.

"Eddie?"

"Were I to make a wager, I'd say we have to storm the place before dawn. Our friend will begin losing control soon."

"Doc?" Ding asked.

"That's likely," Bellow agreed with a nod, taking note of Price's practical experience.

Chavez frowned mightily at that one. Trained as he was, he wasn't really all that eager to take this one on. He'd seen the interior pictures. There had to be twenty, perhaps thirty, people inside, with three people in their immediate vicinity holding fully automatic weapons. If one of them decided *fuck it* and went rock-and-roll on his Czech machine gun, a lot of those people wouldn't make it home to the wife and kiddies. It was called the responsibility of command, and while it wasn't the first time Chavez had experienced it, the burden never really got any lighter—because the price of failure never got any smaller.

"Chavez!" It was Dr. Bellow.

"Yeah, doc," Ding said, heading over toward him with Price in attendance.

"Model's getting aggressive. He says he'll kill a hostage in thirty minutes unless we get him a car to a helicopter pad a few blocks from here, and from there to the airport. After that, he kills a hostage every fifteen minutes. He says he has enough to last more than a few hours. He's reading off a list of the important ones now. A professor of surgery at the local medical school, an off-duty policeman, a big-time lawyer . . . well, he's not kidding, Ding. Thirty minutes from—okay, he shoots the first one at eight-thirty."

"What are the cops saying back?"

"What I told them to say, it takes time to arrange all of that, give us a hostage or two to show good faith—but that's what prompted the threat for eight-thirty. Ernst is coming a little unglued."

"Is he serious?" Chavez asked, just to make sure he understood.

"Yeah, he sounds serious as hell. He's losing control, very unhappy with how things turned out. He's barely rational now. He's not kidding about

killing somebody. Like a spoiled kid with nothing under the tree on Christmas morning, Ding. There's no stabilizing influence in there to help him out. He feels very lonely."

"Super." Ding keyed his radio. Not unexpectedly, the decision had just been made by somebody else. "Team, this is Chavez. Stand to. I say again, stand to."

He'd been trained in what to expect. One ploy was to deliver the car—it'd be too small for all the hostages, and you could take the bad guys down on the way out with aimed rifle fire. But he had only two snipers, and their rifle bullets would blast through a terrorist's head with enough leftover energy to waste two of three people beyond him. SMG or pistol fire was much the same story. Four bad guys was too many for that play. No, he had to take his team in, while the hostages were still sitting down on the floor, below the line of fire. These bastards weren't even rational enough to want food which he might drug—or maybe they were smart enough to know about the Valium-flavored pizza.

It took several minutes. Chavez and Price crawled to the door from the left. Louis Loiselle and George Tomlinson did the same from the other side. At the rear, Paddy Connolly attached a double thickness of Primacord to the door frame, inserted the detonator, and stood away, with Scotty McTyler and Hank Patterson nearby.

"Rear team in place, Leader," Scotty told them over the radio.

"Roger that. Front team is in place," Chavez replied quietly into his radio transmitter.

"Okay, Ding," Noonan's voice came over the command circuit, "TV One shows a guy brandishing a rifle, walking around the hostages on the floor. If I had to bet, I'd say it's our friend Ernst. One more behind him, and a third to the right side by the second wood desk. Hold, he's on the phone now . . . okay, he's talking to the cops, saying he's getting ready to pick a hostage to whack. He's going to give out his name first. Nice of him," Noonan concluded.

"Okay, people, it's gonna go down just like the exercises," Ding told his troops. "We are weapons-free at this time. Stand by." He looked up to see Loiselle and Tomlinson trade a look and a gesture. Louis would lead, with George behind. It would be the same for Chavez, letting Price take the lead with his commander immediately behind.

"Ding, he just grabbed a guy, standing him up—on the phone again, they're going to whack the doctor first, Professor Mario Donatello. Okay, I have it all on Camera Two, he's got the guy stood up. I think it's show time," Noonan concluded.

"Are we ready? Rear team, check in."

"Ready here," Connolly replied over the radio. Chavez could see Loiselle and Tomlinson. Both nodded curtly and adjusted their hands on their MP-10s.

"Chavez to team, we are ready to rock. Stand by. Stand by. Paddy, hit it!" Ding ordered loudly. The last thing he could do was cringe in expectation of the blast of noise sure to come.

The intervening second seemed to last for hours, and then the mass of the building was in the way. They heard it even so, a loud metallic *crash* that shook the whole world. Price and Loiselle had placed their flash-bangs at the

brass lower lining of the door, and punched the switches on them as soon as they heard the first detonation. Instantly the glass doors disintegrated into thousands of fragments, which mainly flew into the granite and marble lobby of the bank in front of a blinding white light and end-of-the-world noise. Price, already standing at the edge of the door, darted in, with Chavez right behind, and going to his left as he entered.

Ernst Model was right there, his weapon's muzzle pressed to the back of Dr. Donatello's head. He'd turned to look at the back of the room when the first explosion had happened, and, as planned, the second one, with its immense noise and blinding flash of magnesium powder, had disoriented him. The physician captive had reacted, too, dropping away from the gunman behind him with his hands over his head, and giving the intruders a blessedly clear shot. Price had his MP-10 up and aimed, and depressed the trigger for a quick and final three-round burst into the center of Ernst Model's face.

Chavez, immediately behind him, spotted another gunman, standing and shaking his head as though to clear it. He was facing away, but he still held his weapon, and the rules were the rules. Chavez double-tapped his head as well. Between the suppressors integral with the gun-barrels and the ringing from the flash-bangs, the report of the weapons was almost nil. Chavez traversed his weapon right, to see that the third terrorist was already on the floor, a pool of red streaming from what had been a head less than two seconds before.

"Clear!" Chavez shouted.

"Clear!" "Clear!" "Clear!" the others agreed. Loiselle raced to the back of the building, with Tomlinson behind him. Before they'd gotten there, the black-clad figures of McTyler and Patterson appeared, their weapons immediately pointing up at the ceiling: *"Clear!"*

Chavez moved farther left to the teller cages, leaping over the barrier to check there for additional people. None. "Clear here! Secure the area!"

One of the hostages started to rise, only to be pushed back down to the floor by George Tomlinson. One by one, they were frisked by the team members while another covered them with loaded weapons—they couldn't be sure which was a sheep and which a goat at this point. By this time, some Swiss cops were entering the bank. The frisked hostages were pushed in that direction, a shocked and stunned bunch of citizens, still disoriented by what had happened, some bleeding from the head or ears from the flash-bangs and flying glass.

Loiselle and Tomlinson picked up the weapons dropped by their victims, cleared each of them, and slung them over their shoulders. Only then, and only gradually, did they start to relax.

"What about the back door?" Ding asked Paddy Connolly.

"Come and see," the former SAS soldier suggested, leading Ding to the back room. It was a bloody mess. Perhaps the subject had been resting his head against the door frame. It seemed a logical explanation for the fact that no head was immediately visible, and only one shoulder on the corpse, which had been flung against an interior partition, the Czech M-58 rifle still grasped tightly in its remaining hand. The double thickness of Primacord had been a little too powerful . . . but Ding couldn't say that. A steel door and a stout steel

frame had demanded it.

"Okay, Paddy, nice one."

"Thank you, sir." The smile of a pro who'd gotten the job well and truly done.

There were cheers on the street outside as the hostages came out. So, Popov thought, the terrorists he'd recruited were dead fools now. No real surprise there. The Swiss counterterror team had handled the job well, as one would expect of Swiss policemen. One of them came outside and lit a pipe—how very Swiss! Popov thought. The bugger probably climbs mountains for personal entertainment, too. Perhaps he was the leader. A hostage came up to him.

"Danke schön, danke schön!" the bank director said to Eddie Price.

"Bitte sehr, Herr Direktor," the Brit answered, just about exhausting his knowledge of the German language. He pointed the man off to where the Bern police had the other hostages. They probably needed a loo more than anything else, he thought, as Chavez came out.

"How'd we do, Eddie?"

"Rather well, I should say." A puff on his pipe. "An easy job, really. They were proper wallies, picking this bank and acting as they did." He shook his head and took another puff. The IRA were far more formidable than this. Bloody Germans.

Ding didn't ask what a "wally" was, much less a proper one. With that decided, he pulled his cell phone out and hit speed-dial.

"Clark."

"Chavez.

"Did you catch it on TV, Mr. C?"

"Getting the replay now, Domingo."

"We got all four, down for the count. No hostages hurt, except for the one they whacked earlier today. No casualties on the team. So, boss, what do we do now?"

"Fly on home for the debrief, lad. Six, out."

"Bloody good," Major Peter Covington said. The TV showed the team gathering up their equipment for the next thirty or so minutes, then they disappeared around the corner. "Your Chavez does seem to know his business—and so much the better his first test was an easy one. Confidence builder."

They looked over at the computer-generated picture that Noonan had uploaded to them on his cellular phone system. Covington had predicted how the take-down would go, and made no mistakes.

"Any traditions I need to know about?" John asked, settling down, finally, and hugely relieved that there were no unnecessary casualties.

"We take them to the club for a few pints, of course." Covington was surprised that Clark didn't know about that one.

Popov was in his car, trying to navigate the streets of Bern before police vehicles blocked everything on their way back to their stations. Left there . . . two traffic lights, right, then through the square and . . . there! Excellent, even

a place for him to park. He left his rented Audi on the street right across from the half-baked safe house Model had set up. Defeating the lock was child's play. Upstairs, to the back, where the lock was just as easily dealt with.

"Wer sind sie?" a voice asked.

"Dmitriy," Popov replied honestly, one hand in his coat pocket. "Have you been watching the television?"

"Yes, what went wrong?" the voice asked in German, seriously downcast.

"It does not matter now. It is time to leave, my young friend."

"But my friends—"

"Are dead, and you cannot help them." He saw the boy in the dark, perhaps twenty years of age, and a devoted friend of the departed fool, Ernst Model. A homosexual relationship, perhaps? If so, it would make things easier for Popov, who had no love for men of that orientation. "Come, get your things. We must leave and leave quickly." There, there it was, the black-leather-clad suitcase with the D-marks inside. The lad—what was his name? Fabian something? Turned his back and went to get his parka, which the Germans called a *Joppe.* He never turned back. Popov's silenced pistol came up and fired once, then again, quite unnecessarily, from three meters away. Making sure the boy was indeed dead, he lifted the suitcase, opened it to verify the contents, and then walked out the door, crossed the street, and drove to his downtown hotel. He had a noon flight back to New York. Before that he had to open a bank account in a city well suited for the task.

The team was quiet on the trip back, having caught the last flight back to England—this one to Heathrow rather than Gatwick. Chavez availed himself of a glass of white wine, again sitting next to Dr. Bellow, who did the same.

"So, how'd we do, doc?"

"Why don't you tell me, Mr. Chavez," Bellow responded.

"For me, the stress is bleeding off. No shakes this time," Ding replied, surprised at the fact that his hand was steady.

" 'Shakes' are entirely normal—the release of stress energy. The body has trouble letting it go and returning to normal. But training attenuates that. And so does a drink," the physician observed, sipping his own glass of a nice French offering.

"Anything we might have done differently?"

"I don't think so. Perhaps if we'd gotten involved earlier, we might have prevented or at least postponed the murder of the first hostage, but that's never really under our control." Bellow shrugged. "No, what I'm curious about is the motivation of the terrorists in this case."

"How so?"

"They acted in an ideological way, but their demands were—not ideological. I understand they robbed the bank along the way."

"Correct." He and Loiselle had looked at a canvas bag on the bank's floor. It had been full of notes, perhaps twenty-five pounds of money. That seemed to Chavez an odd way to count money, but it was all he had. Followup work by the Swiss police would count it up. The after-action stuff was an intelligence function, supervised by Bill Tawney. "So . . . were they just robbers?"

"Not sure." Bellow finished off his glass, holding it up then for the

stewardess to see and refill. “It doesn’t seem to make much sense at the moment, but that’s not exactly unknown in cases like this. Model was not a very good terrorist. Too much show, and not enough go. Poorly planned, poorly executed.”

“Vicious bastard,” Chavez observed.

“Sociopathic personality—more like a criminal than a terrorist. Those—the good ones, I mean—are usually more judicious.”

“What the hell is a good terrorist?”

“He’s a businessman whose business is killing people to make a political point . . . almost like advertising. They serve a larger purpose, at least in their own minds. They believe in something, but not like kids in catechism class, more like reasoned adults in Bible study. Crummy simile, I suppose, but it’s the best I have at the moment. Long day, Mr. Chavez,” Dr. Bellow concluded, while the stew topped off his glass.

Ding checked his watch. “Sure enough, doc.” And the next part, Bellow didn’t have to tell him, was the need for some sleep. Chavez hit the button to run his seat back and was unconscious in two minutes.

CHAPTER 4

AAR

Chavez and most of the rest of Team-2 woke up when the airliner touched down at Heathrow. The taxi to the gate seemed to last forever, and then they were met by police, who escorted them to the helo-pad for the flight back to Hereford. On the way through the terminal, Chavez caught the headline on an evening tabloid saying that Swiss police had dealt with a robbery-terrorist incident in the Bern Commercial Bank. It was somewhat unsatisfying that others got the credit for his successful mission, but that was the whole point of Rainbow, he reminded himself, and they'd probably get a nice thank-you letter from the Swiss government—which would end up in the confidential file cabinet. The two military choppers landed on their pad, and vans took the troops to their building. It was after eleven at night now, and all the men were tired after a day that had started with the usual PT and ended with real mission stress.

It wasn't rest time yet, though. On entering the building, they found all the swivel chairs in the bullpen arranged in a circle, with a large-screen TV to one side. Clark, Stanley, and Covington were there. It was time for the afteraction review, or AAR.

"Okay, people," Clark said, as soon as they'd sat down. "Good job. All the bad guys are gone, and no good-guy casualties as part of the action. Okay, what did we do wrong?"

Paddy Connolly stood. "I used too much explosives on the rear door. Had there been a hostage immediately inside, he would have been killed," the sergeant said honestly. "I assumed that the door frame was stouter than it actually was." Then he shrugged. "I do not know how to correct for that."

John thought about that. Connolly was having an attack of over-scrupulous honesty, one sure mark of a good man. He nodded and let it go. "Neither do I. What else?"

It was Tomlinson who spoke next, without standing. "Sir, we need to work on a better way to get used to the flash-bangs. I was pretty wasted when I went through the door. Good thing Louis took the first shot on the inside. Not sure I could have."

"How about inside?"

"They worked pretty well on the subjects. The one I saw," Tomlinson said, "was out of it."

"Could we have taken him alive?" Clark had to ask.

"No, *mon general."* This was Sergeant Louis Loiselle, speaking emphatically. "He had his rifle in hand, and it was pointing in the direction of the hostages." There would be no talk about shooting a gun out of a terrorist's hands. The

assumption was that the terrorist had more than one weapon, and the backup was frequently a fragmentation grenade. Loiselle's three-round burst into the target's head was exactly on policy for Rainbow.

"Agreed. Louis, how did you deal with the flash-bangs? You were closer than George was."

"I have a wife," the Frenchman replied with a smile. "She screams at me all the time. Actually," he said, when the tired chuckles subsided, "I had my hand over one ear, the other pressed against my shoulder, and my eyes closed. I also controlled the detonation," he added. Unlike Tomlinson and the rest, he could anticipate the noise and the flash, which seemed a minor advantage, but a decisive one.

"Any other problems going in?" John asked.

"The usual," Price said. "Lots of glass on the floor, hinders one's footing—maybe softer soles on our boots? That would also make our steps quieter."

Clark nodded, and saw that Stanley made a note.

"Any problems shooting?"

"No." This was Chavez. "The interior was lighted, and so we didn't need our NVGs. The bad guys were standing up like good targets. The shots were easy." Price and Loiselle nodded agreement.

"Riflemen?" Clark asked.

"Couldn't see shit from my perch," Johnston said.

"Neither could I," Weber said. His English was eerily perfect.

"Ding, you sent Price in first. Why?" This was Stanley.

"Eddie's a better shot, and he has more experience. I trust him a little more than I trust myself—for now," Chavez added. "It seemed to be a simple mission all the way around. Everyone had the interior layout, and it was an easy one. I split the objective into three areas of responsibility. Two I could see. The third only had one subject in it—that was something of a guess on my part, but all of our information supported it. We had to move in fast because the principal subject, Model, was about to kill a hostage. I saw no reason to allow him to do that," Chavez concluded.

"Anyone take issue with that?" John asked the assembled group.

"There will be times when one might have to allow a terrorist to kill a hostage," Dr. Bellow said soberly. "It will not be pleasant, but it will occasionally be necessary."

"Okay, doc, any observations?"

"John, we need to follow the police investigation of these subjects. Were they terrorists or robbers? We don't know. I think we need to find out. We were not able to conduct any negotiations. In this case it probably did not matter, but in the future it will. We need more translators to work with. My language skills are not up to what we need, and I need translators who speak my language, good at nuance and stuff." Clark saw Stanley make a note of that, too. Then he checked his watch.

"Okay. We'll go over the videotapes tomorrow morning. For now, good job, people. Dismissed."

Team-2 walked outside into a night that was starting to fog up. Some looked in the direction of the NCO Club, but none headed that way. Chavez walked toward his house. On opening the door, he found Patsy sitting up in front of

the TV.

"Hi, honey," Ding told his wife.

"You okay?"

Chavez managed a smile, lifting his hands and turning around. "No holes or scratches anywhere."

"It was you on the TV—in Switzerland, I mean?"

"You know I'm not supposed to say."

"Ding, I've known what Daddy does since I was twelve," Dr. Patricia Chavez, M.D., pointed out. "You know, Secret Agent Man, just like you."

There was no sense in concealment, was there? "Well, Patsy, yeah, that was me and my team."

"Who were they—the bad guys, I mean?"

"Maybe terrorists, maybe bank robbers. Not sure," Chavez said, stripping off his shirt on the way to the bedroom.

Patsy followed him inside. "The TV said they were all killed."

"Yep." He took his slacks off and hung them in the closet. "No choice. They were about to kill a hostage when it went down. So . . . we had to go in and stop that from happening."

"I'm not sure if I like that."

He looked up at his wife. "I *am* sure. I don't like it. Remember that guy when you were in medical school, the leg that got amputated, and you assisted in the surgery? You didn't like it, did you?"

"No, not at all." It had been an auto accident, and the leg just too mangled to save.

"That's life, Patsy. You don't like all the things you have to do." With that, Chavez sat down on the bed and tossed his socks at the open-top hamper. *Secret Agent Man,* he thought. *Supposed to have a vodka martini, shaken not stirred, now, but the movies never showed the hero going to bed to get* sleep, *did they? But who wants to get laid right after killing somebody?* That was worth an ironic chuckle, and he lay back on top of the covers. *Bond. James Bond. Sure.* As soon as he closed his eyes, he saw again the sight-picture from the bank, and relived the moment, bringing his MP-10 to bear, lining up the sights on whoever the hell it was—Guttenach was his name, wasn't it? He realized he hadn't checked. Seeing the head right there in the ringed sight, and squeezing off the burst as routinely as zipping his pants after taking a leak. Puff puff puff. That fast, that quiet with the suppresser on the gun, and *zap,* whoever the hell he was, was dead as yesterday's fish. He and his three friends hadn't had much of a chance—in fact, they'd had no chance at all.

But the guy they'd murdered earlier hadn't had a chance, either, Chavez reminded himself. Some poor unlucky bastard who'd happened to be in the bank, making a deposit, or talking to a loan officer, or maybe just getting change for a haircut. *Save your sympathy for that one,* Ding told himself. And the doctor Model had been ready to kill was now in his home, probably, with his wife and family, probably half-wasted on booze, or maybe a sedative, probably going through a really bad case of the shakes, probably thinking about spending some time with a shrink friend to help get him through the delayed stress. Probably feeling pretty fucking awful. But you had to be alive to feel something, and that beat the shit out of having his wife and kids sitting

in the living room of their house outside Bern, crying their eyes out and asking why daddy wasn't around anymore.

Yeah. He'd taken a life, but he'd redeemed another. With that thought, he revisited the sight-picture, remembering now the sight of the first round hitting the asshole just forward of the ear, knowing then that he was dead, even before rounds #2 and #3 hit, in a circle of less than two inches across, blowing his brains ten feet the other way, and the body going down like a sack of beans. The way the man's gun had hit the floor, muzzle angled up, and thankfully it hadn't gone off and hurt anyone, and the head shots hadn't caused his fingers to spasm closed and pull the trigger from the grave—a real hazard, he'd learned in training. But still it was unsatisfactory. Better to get them alive and pick their brains for what they knew, and why they acted the way they did. That way you could learn stuff you could use the next time—or, just maybe—go after someone else, the bastard who gave the orders, and fill his ass with ten-millimeter hollowpoints.

The mission hadn't been perfect, Chavez had to admit to himself, but, ordered in to save a life, he'd saved that life. And that, he decided, would have to do for now. A moment later he felt the bed move as his wife lay beside him. He reached over for her hand, which she moved immediately to her belly. So, the little Chavez was doing some more laps. That, Ding decided, was worth a kiss, which he rolled over to deliver.

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Popov, too, was settled into his bed, having knocked back four stiff vodkas while watching the local television news, followed by an editorial panegyric to the efficiency of the local police. As yet they weren't giving out the identity of the robbers—that was how the crime was being reported, somewhat to Popov's disappointment, though on reflection he didn't know why. He'd established his bona fides for his employer . . . and pocketed a considerable sum of money in the bargain. A few more performances like this one and he could live like a king in Russia, or a prince in many other countries. He could know for himself the comfort he'd so often seen and envied while he was a field intelligence officer with the former KGB, wondering then how the hell his country could ever defeat nations which spent billions on amusement in addition to billions more on military hardware, all of which was better than anything his nation had produced—else why would he have so often been tasked to discovering their technical secrets? That was how he'd worked during the last few years of the Cold War, knowing even then who would win and who would lose.

But defection had never been an option. What was the point in selling out his country for a minor stipend and an ordinary job in the West? Freedom? That was the word the West still pretended to worship. What was the good of being able to wander around at liberty when you didn't have a proper automobile in which to do it? Or a good hotel in which to sleep when one got there? Or the money to buy the food and drink one needed to enjoy life properly ? No, his first trip to the West as an "illegal" field officer without a

diplomatic cover had been to London, where he'd spent much of his time counting the expensive cars, and the efficient black taxis one took when too lazy to walk—his important movement had been in the "tube," which was convenient, anonymous, and cheap. But "cheap" was a virtue for which he had little affection. No, capitalism had the singular virtue of rewarding people who had chosen the correct parents, or had been lucky in business. Rewarding them with luxury, convenience, and comfort undreamed of by the czars themselves. And *that* was what Popov had instantly craved, and wondered even then how he might get it. A nice expensive car—a Mercedes was the one he'd always desired—and a proper large flat close to good restaurants, and money to travel to places where the sand was warm and the sky blue, the better to attract women to his side, as Henry Ford must have done, he was sure. What was the point of having that sort of power without the will to use it?

Well, Popov told himself, he was closer than ever to realizing it. All he had to do was set up a few more jobs like this one in Bern. If his employer was willing to pay that much money for fools—well, a fool and his money were soon parted; a Western aphorism he found delightfully appropriate. And Dmitriy Arkadeyevich was no fool. With that satisfied thought, he lifted his remote and turned his TV off. Tomorrow, wake up, breakfast, make his bank deposit, and then take a cab to the airport for the Swissair flight to New York. First class. Of course.

"Well, Al?" Clark asked over a pint of dark British beer. They were sitting in the rear-corner booth.

"Your Chavez is all he was reported to be. Clever of him to let Price take the lead. He doesn't let ego get in the way. I like that in a young officer. His timing was right. His division of the floor plan was right, and his shots were bang on. He'll do. So will the team. So much the better that the first time out was an easy one. This Model chappie wasn't a rocket scientist, as you say."

"Vicious bastard."

Stanley nodded. "Quite. The German terrorists frequently were. We should get a nice letter from the BKA about this one, as well."

"Lessons learned?"

"Dr. Bellow's was the best. We need more and better translators if we're to get him involved in negotiations. I'll get to work on that tomorrow. Century House ought to have people we can use. Oh, yes, that Noonan lad—"

"A late addition. He was a techie with the FBI. They used him on the Hostage Rescue Team for technical backup. Sworn agent, knows how to shoot, with some investigative experience," Clark explained. "Good all-around man to have with us."

"Nice job planting his video-surveillance equipment. I've looked at the videotapes already. They're not bad. On the whole, John, full marks for Team-2." Stanley saluted with his jar of John Courage.

"Nice to see that everything works, Al."

"Until the next one."

A long breath. "Yeah." Most of the success, Clark knew, was due to the British. He'd made use of their support systems, and their men had actually

led the takedown—two-thirds of it. Louis Loiselle was every bit as good as the French had claimed. The little bastard could shoot like Davy Crockett with an attitude, and was about as excitable as a rock. Well, the French had their own terrorist experiences, and once upon a time Clark had gone out into the field with them. So, this one would go into the records as a successful mission. Rainbow was now certified. And so, Clark knew, was he.

The Society of Cincinnatus owned a large house on Massachusetts Avenue that was frequently used for the semiofficial dinners that were so vital a part of the Washington social scene, and allowed the mighty to cross paths and validate their status over drinks and small talk. The new President made that somewhat difficult, of course, with his . . . eccentric approach to government, but no person could really change that much in this city, and the new crop in Congress needed to learn how Washington Really Worked. It was no different from other places around America, of course, and to many of them the gatherings at this former dwelling of somebody rich and important was merely the new version of the country club dinners where they'd learned the rules of polite-power society.

Carol Brightling was one of the new important people. A divorcée for over ten years who'd never remarried, she had no less than three doctorates, from Harvard, Cal-Tech, and the University of Illinois, thus covering both coasts and three important states, which was an important accomplishment in this city, as that guaranteed her the instant attention, if not the automatic affection, of six senators and a larger number of representatives, all of whom had votes and committees.

"Catch the news," the junior senator from Illinois asked her over a glass of white wine.

"What do you mean?"

"Switzerland. Either a terrorist thing or a bank robbery. Nice takedown by the Swiss cops."

"Boys and their guns," Brightling observed dismissively.

"It made for good TV."

"So does football," Brightling noted, with a gentle, nasty smile.

"True. Why isn't the President supporting you on Global Warming?" the senator asked next, wondering how to crack her demeanor.

"Well, he isn't *not* supporting me. The President thinks we need some additional science on the issue."

"And you don't?"

"Honestly, no, I think we have all the science we need. The top-down and bottom-up data are pretty clear. But the President isn't convinced himself, and does not feel comfortable with taking measures that affect the economy until he is personally sure." *I have to work on him some more,* she didn't add.

"Are you happy with that?"

"I see his point," the Science Advisor replied, surprising the senator from the Land of Lincoln. So, he thought, everyone who worked in the White House toed the line with this president. Carol Brightling had been a surprise appointment to the White House staff, her politics very different from the President's, respected as she was in the scientific community for her

environmental views. It had been an adroit political move, probably engineered by Chief of Staff Arnold van Damm, arguably the most skillful political operator in this city of maneuvering, and had secured for the President the (qualified) support of the environmental movement, which had turned into a political force of no small magnitude in Washington.

"Does it bother you that the President is out in South Dakota slaughtering geese?" the senator asked with a chuckle, as a waiter replaced his drink.

"Homo sapiens is a predator," Brightling replied, scanning the room for others.

"But only the men?"

A smile. "Yes, we women are far more peaceful."

"Oh, that's your ex-husband over there in the corner, isn't it?" the senator asked, surprised at the change in her face when he said it.

"Yes." The voice neutral, showing no emotion, as she turned to face in another direction. Having spotted him, she needed to do no more. Both knew the rules. No closer than thirty feet, no lengthy eye contact, and certainly no words.

"I had the chance to put money into Horizon Corporation two years ago. I've kicked myself quite a few times since."

"Yes, John has made quite a pile for himself."

And well after their divorce, so she didn't get a nickel out of it. Probably not a good topic for conversation, the senator thought at once. He was new at the job, and not the best at politic conversation.

"Yes, he's done well, twisting science the way he has."

"You don't approve?"

"Restructuring DNA in plants and animals—no. Nature has evolved without our assistance for two billion years at least. I doubt that it needs help from us."

" 'There are some things man is not meant to know'?" the senator asked with a chuckle. His professional background was in contracting, in gouging holes in the ground and erecting something that nature didn't want there, though his sensitivity on environmental issues, Dr. Brightling thought, had itself evolved from his love of Washington and his desire to remain here in a position of power. It was called Potomac Fever, a disease easily caught and less easily cured.

"The problem, Senator Hawking, is that nature is both complex and subtle. When we change things, we cannot easily predict the ramifications of the changes. It's called the Law of Unintended Consequences, something with which the Congress is familiar, isn't it?"

"You mean—"

"I mean that the reason we have a federal law about environmental impact statements is that it's far easier to mess things up than it is to get them right. In the case of recombinant DNA, we can more easily change the genetic code than we can evaluate the effects those changes will cause a century from now. That sort of power is one that should be used with the greatest possible care. Not everyone seems to grasp that simple fact."

Which point was difficult to argue with, the senator had to concede gracefully. Brightling would be making that case before his committee in

another week. Had that been the thing that had broken up the marriage of John and Carol Brightling? How very sad. With that observation, the senator made his excuses and headed off to join his wife.

"There's nothing new in that point of view." John Brightling's doctorate in molecular biology came from the University of Virginia, along with his M.D. "It started with a guy named Ned Ludd a few centuries ago. He was afraid that the Industrial Revolution would put an end to the cottage-industry economy in England. And he was right. That economic model was wrecked. But what replaced it was better for the consumer, and that's why we call it *progress!"* Not surprisingly, John Brightling, a billionaire heading for number two, was holding court before a small crowd of admirers.

"But the complexity—" One of the audience started to object.

"Happens every day—every second, in fact. And so do the things we're trying to conquer. Cancer, for example. No, madam, are you willing to put an end to our work if it means no cure for breast cancer? That disease strikes five percent of the human population worldwide. Cancer is a *genetic* disease. The key to curing it is in the human genome. And my company is going to find that key! Aging is the same thing. Salk's team at La Jolla found the kill-me gene more than fifteen years ago. If we can find a way to turn it off, then human immortality can be real. Madam, does the idea of living forever in a body of twenty-five years' maturity appeal to you?"

"But what about overcrowding?" The congresswoman's objection was somewhat quieter than her first. It was too vast a thought, too surprisingly posed, to allow an immediate objection.

"One thing at a time. The invention of DDT killed off huge quantities of disease-bearing insects, and *that* increased populations all over the world, didn't it? Okay, we are a little more crowded now, but who wants to bring the anopheles mosquito back? Is malaria a reasonable method of population control? Nobody here wants to bring war back, right? We used to use that, too, to control populations. We got over it, didn't we? Hell, controlling populations is no big deal. It's called birth control, and the advanced countries have already learned how to do it, and the backward countries can, too, *if* they have a good reason for doing so. It might take a generation or so," John Brightling mused, "but is there anyone here who would not want to be twenty-five again—*with* all the things we've learned along the way, of course. It damned well appeals to me!" he went on with a warm smile. With sky-high salaries and promises of stock options, his company had assembled an incredible team of talent to look at that particular gene. The profits that would accrue from its control could hardly be estimated, and the U.S. patent was good for seventeen years! Human immortality, the new Holy Grail for the medical community—and for the first time, it was something for serious investigation, not a topic of pulp science-fiction stories.

"You think you can do it?" another congresswoman—this one from San Francisco—asked. Women of all sorts found themselves drawn to this man. Money, power, good looks, and good manners made it inevitable.

John Brightling smiled broadly. "Ask me in five years. We know the gene. We need to learn how to turn it off. There's a whole lot of basic science in

there we have to uncover, and along the way we hope to discover a lot of very useful things. It's like setting off with Magellan. We aren't sure what we're going to find, but we know it'll all be interesting." No one pointed out that Magellan hadn't made it home from that particular trip.

"And profitable?" a new senator from Wyoming asked.

"That's how our society works, isn't it? We pay people for doing useful work. Is this area useful enough?"

"If you bring it off, I suppose it is." This senator was himself a physician, a family practitioner who knew the basics but was well over his head on the deep-scientific side. The concept, the objective of Horizon Corporation, was well beyond breathtaking, but he would not bet against them. They'd done too well developing cancer drugs and synthetic antibiotics, and were the leading private company in the Human Genome Project, a global effort to decode the basics of human life. Himself a genius, John Brightling had found it easy to attract others like himself to his company. He had more charisma than a hundred politicians, and unlike the latter, the senator had to admit to himself, he really had something to back up the showmanship. It had once been called "the right stuff" for pilots. With his movie-star looks, ready smile, superb listening ability, and dazzlingly analytical mind, Dr. John Brightling had the knack. He could make anyone near him feel interesting—and the bastard could *teach,* could apply his lessons to everyone nearby. Simple ones for the unschooled and highly sophisticated ones for the specialists in his field, at the top of which he reigned supreme. Oh, he had a few peers. Pat Reily at Harvard-Mass General. Aaron Bernstein at Johns Hopkins. Jacques Elisé at Pasteur. Maybe Paul Ging at U.C. Berkeley. But that was it. What a fine clinician Brightling might have made, the senator-M.D. thought, but, no, he was too good to be wasted on people with the latest version of the flu.

About the only thing in which he'd failed was his marriage. Well, Carol Brightling was also pretty smart, but more political than scientific, and perhaps her ego, capacious as everyone in this city knew it to be, had quailed before the greater intellectual gifts of her husband. Only room in town for one of us, the doctor from Wyoming thought, with an inner smile. That happened often enough in real life, not just on old movies. And Brightling, John, seemed to be doing better in that respect than Brightling, Carol. At the former's elbow was a very pretty redhead drinking in his every word, while the latter had come alone, and would be leaving alone for her apartment in Georgetown. Well, the senator-M.D. thought, that's life.

Immortality. Damn, all the pronghorns he might take, the doctor from Cody thought on, heading over to his wife. Dinner was about to start. The chicken had finished the vulcanization process.

The Valium helped. It wasn't actually Valium, Killgore knew. That drug had become something of a generic name for mild sedatives, and this one had been developed by SmithKline, with a different trade name, with the added benefit that it made a good mix with alcohol. For street people who were often as contentious and territorial as junkyard dogs, this group of ten was remarkably sedate. The large quantities of good booze helped. The high-end bourbons seemed the most popular libations, drunk from cheap glasses with ice, along

with various mixers for those who didn't care to drink it neat. Most didn't, to Killgore's surprise.

The physicals had gone well. They were all healthysick people, outwardly fairly vigorous, but inwardly all with physical problems ranging from diabetes to liver failure. One was definitely suffering from prostate cancer—his PSA was off the top of the chart—but that wouldn't matter in this particular test, would it? Another was HIV+, but not yet symptomatic, and so that didn't matter either. He'd probably gotten it from drug use, but strangely, liquor seemed all he needed to keep himself regulated here. How interesting.

Killgore didn't have to be here, and it troubled his conscience to look at them so much, but they were *his* lab rats, and he was supposed to keep an eye on them, and so he did, behind the mirror, while he did his paperwork and listened to Bach on his portable CD player. Three were—claimed to be—Vietnam veterans. So they'd killed their share of Asians—"gooks" was the word they'd used in the interview—before coming apart and ending up as street drunks. Well, *homeless people* was the current term society used for them, somewhat more dignified than *bums,* the term Killgore vaguely remembered his mother using. Not the best example of humanity he'd ever seen. Yet the Project had managed to change them quite a bit. All bathed regularly now and dressed in clean clothes and watched TV. Some even read books from time to time—Killgore had thought that providing a library, while cheap, was an outrageously foolish waste of time and money. But always they drank, and the drinking relegated each of the ten to perhaps six hours of full consciousness per day. And the Valium calmed them further, limiting any altercations that his security staff would have to break up. Two of them were always on duty in the next room over, also watching the group of ten. Microphones buried in the ceiling allowed them to listen in to the disjointed conversations. One of the group was something of an authority on baseball and talked about Mantle and Maris all the time to whoever would listen. Enough of them talked about sex that Killgore wondered if he should send the snatch team back out to get some female "homeless" subjects for the experiment—he would tell Barb Archer that. After all, they needed to know if gender had an effect on the experiment. She'd *have* to buy into that one, wouldn't she? And there'd be none of the sisterly solidarity with them. There couldn't be, even from the feminazi who joined him in running this experiment. Her ideology was too pure for that. Killgore turned when there came a knock at the door.

"Hey, doc." It was Benny, one of the security guys.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Falling asleep," Benjamin Farmer replied. "The kids are playing pretty nice."

"Yeah, they sure are." It was *so* easy. Most had to be prodded a little to leave the room and go out to the courtyard for an hour of walking around every afternoon. But they had to be kept fit—which was to say, to simulate the amount of exercise they got on a normal day in Manhattan, staggering from one dreary corner to another.

"Damn, doc, I never knew *anybody* could put it away the way these guys do! I mean, I had to bring in a whole case of Grand-Dad today, and there's only

two bottles left."

"That their favorite?" Killgore asked. He hadn't paid much attention to that.

"Seems to be, sir. I'm a Jack Daniel's man myself—but with me, maybe two a night, say, for Monday Night Football, if it's a good game. I don't drink *water* the way the kids drink hard booze." A chuckle from the ex-Marine who ran the night security shift. A good man, Farmer. He did a lot of things with injured animals at the company's rural shelter. He was also the one who'd taken to calling the test subjects *the kids.* It had caught on with the security staff and from them to the others. Killgore chuckled. You had to call them something, and lab rats just wasn't respectful enough. After all, they were human beings, after a fashion, all the more valuable for their place in this test. He turned to see one of them—#6—pour himself another drink, wander back to his bed, and lie down to watch some TV before he passed out. He wondered what the poor bastard would dream about. Some did, and talked loudly in their sleep. Something to interest a psychiatrist, perhaps, or someone doing sleep studies. They *all* snored, to the point that when all were asleep it sounded like an old steam-powered railroad yard in there.

Choo-choo, Killgore thought, looking back down at his last bit of paperwork. Ten more minutes, and he could head home. Too late to put his kids to bed. Too bad. Well, in due course they would awaken to a new day and a new world, and wouldn't that be some present to give them, however heavy and nasty the price for it might be. Hmph, the physician thought, I could use a drink myself.

"The future has never been so bright as this," John Brightling told his audience, his demeanor even more charismatic after two glasses of a select California Chardonnay. "The bio-sciences are pushing back frontiers we didn't even know existed fifteen years ago. A hundred years of basic research are coming to bloom even as we speak. We're building on the work of Pasteur, Ehrlich, Salk, Sabin, and so many others. We see so far today because we stand on the shoulders of giants.

"Well," John Brightling went on, "it's been a long climb, but the top of the mountain is in sight, and we *will* get there in the next few years."

"He's smooth," Liz Murray observed to her husband.

"Very," FBI Director Dan Murray whispered back. "Smart, too. Jimmy Hicks says he's the top guy in the world."

"What's he running for?"

"God, from what he said earlier."

"Needs to grow a beard then."

Director Murray nearly choked at that, then he was saved by the vibrating of his cellular phone. He discreetly left his seat to walk into the building's large marble foyer. On flipping his phone open, it took fifteen seconds for the encryption system to synchronize with the base station calling him—which told him that it was FBI Headquarters.

"Murray."

"Director, this is Gordon Sinclair in the Watch Center. So far the Swiss have struck out on ID-ing the other two. Prints are on their way to the BKA so they can take a look." But if they hadn't been printed somewhere along the line,

that, too, would be a dry hole, and it would take a while to identify Model's two pals.

"No additional casualties on the takedown?"

"No, sir, all four bad guys down for the count. All hostages safe and evacuated. They should all be back home now. Oh, Tim Noonan deployed on this operation, electronics weenie for one of the go-teams."

"So, Rainbow works, eh?"

"It did this time, Director," Sinclair judged.

"Make sure they send us the write-up on how the operation went down."

"Yes, sir. I already e-mailed them about that." Less than thirty people in the Bureau knew about Rainbow, though quite a few would be making guesses. Especially those HRT members who'd taken note of the fact that Tim Noonan, a third-generation agent, had dropped off the face of the earth. "How's dinner going?"

"I prefer Wendy's. More of the basic food groups. Anything else?"

"The OC case in New Orleans is close to going down, Billy Betz says. Three or four more days. Aside from that, nothing important happening."

"Thanks, Gordy." Murray thumbed the END button on his phone and pocketed it, then returned to the dining room after a look and a wave at two members of his protective detail. Thirty seconds later, he slid back into his seat, with a muted thump from his holstered Smith & Wesson automatic against the wood.

"Anything important?" Liz asked.

A shake of the head. "Routine."

The affair broke up less than forty minutes after Brightling finished his speech and collected his award plaque. He held court yet again, albeit with a smaller group of fans this time, while drifting toward the door, outside of which waited his car. It was only five minutes to the Hay-Adams Hotel, across Lafayette Park from the White House. He had a corner suite on the top floor, and the hotel staff had thoughtfully left him a bottle of the house white in an ice bucket next to the bed, for his companion had come along. It was sad, Dr. John Brightling thought, removing the cork. He'd miss things like this, really miss them. But he had made the decision long before—not knowing when he'd started off that it could possibly work. Now he thought that it would, and the things he'd miss were ultimately of far less value than the things he'd get. And for the moment, he thought, looking at Jessica's pale skin and stunning figure, he'd get something else that was pretty nice.

It was different for Dr. Carol Brightling. Despite her White House job, she drove her own car without even a bodyguard to her apartment off Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown, her only companion there a calico cat named Jiggs, who, at least, came to the door to meet her, rubbing his body along her panty-hosed leg the moment the door was closed, and purring to show his pleasure at her arrival. He followed her into the bedroom, watching her change in the way of cats, interested and detached at the same time, and knowing what came next. Dressed only in a short robe, Carol Brightling walked into the kitchen, opened a cupboard, and got a treat, which she bent down to feed to Jiggs from her hand. Then she got herself a glass of ice water from the

refrigerator door, and drank it down with two aspirin. It had all been her idea. She knew that all too well. But after so many years, it was still as hard as it had been at first. She'd given up so much more. She'd gotten the job she'd craved—somewhat to her surprise, as things had turned out, but she had the office in the right building, and now played a role in making policy on the issues that were important to her. Important policy on important topics. But was it worth it?

Yes! She had to think that, and, truly, she believed it, but the price, the price of it, was often so hard to bear. She bent down to lift up Jiggs, cradling him like the child she'd never had and walking to the bedroom where, again, he'd be the only one to share it with her. Well, a cat was far more faithful than a man could ever be. She'd learned that lesson over the years. In a few seconds, the robe was on the chair next to the bed, and she under the covers, with Jiggs atop them and between her legs. She hoped sleep would come a little more quickly tonight than it usually did. But she knew it would not, for her mind would not stop thinking about what was happening in another bed less than three miles away.

CHAPTER 5

RAMIFICATIONS

Daily PT started at 0630 and concluded with the five-mile run, timed to last exactly forty minutes. This morning it ended at thirty-eight, and Chavez wondered if he and his team had an additional spring in their step from the successful mission. If so, was that good or bad? Killing fellow human beings wasn't supposed to make you feel good, was it? A deep thought for a foggy English morning.

By the end of the run, everyone had a good sweat, which the hot showers took care of. Oddly, hygiene was a little more complicated for his team than for uniformed soldiers. Nearly everyone had longer hair than their respective armies permitted, so that they could look like grown-up, if somewhat shabby, businessmen when they donned their coats and ties for their first-class flights to wherever. Ding's hair was the shortest, since at CIA he'd tried to keep it not too different from his time as staff sergeant in the Ninjas. It would have to grow for at least another month before it would be shaggy enough. He grunted at that thought, then stepped out of the shower. As Team-2 leader, he rated his own private facility, and he took the time to admire his body, always an object of pride for Domingo Chavez. Yeah, the exercise that had been so tough the first week had paid off. He hadn't been much tougher than this in Ranger School at Fort Benning—and he'd been, what? Twenty-one then, just an E-4 and one of the smallest men in the class. It was something of an annoyance to Ding that, tall and rangy like her mom, Patsy had half an inch on him. But Patsy only wore flats, which kept it respectable—and nobody messed with him. Like his boss, he had the look of a man with whom one did not trifle. Especially this morning, he thought, while toweling off. He'd zapped a guy the previous night, just as fast and automatic an action as zipping his zipper. Tough shit, Herr Guttenach.

Back home, Patsy was already dressed in her greens. She was on an OB/GYN rotation at the moment, scheduled to perform—well, to assist on—a Cesarean section this morning at the local hospital where she was completing what in America would have been her year of internship. Next would be her pediatric rotation, which struck both of them as totally appropriate. Already on the table for him was bacon and eggs—the eggs in England seemed to have brighter yolks. He wondered if they fed their chickens differently here.

"I wish you'd eat better," Patsy observed, again.

Domingo laughed, reaching for his morning paper, the *Daily Telegraph.* "Honey, my cholesterol is one-three-zero, my resting heart-rate is fifty-six. I am a lean, mean fighting machine, doctor!"

"But what about ten years from now?" Patricia Chavez, M.D., asked.

"I'll have ten complete physicals between now and then, and I will adjust my lifestyle according to how those work out," Domingo Chavez, Master of Science (International Relations), answered, buttering his toast. The bread in this country, he'd learned over the past six weeks, was just fabulous. Why did people knock English food? "Hell, Patsy, look at your dad. That old bastard is still in great shape." Though he hadn't run this morning—and at his best was hard-pressed to finish the five miles at the pace Team-2 set. Well, he was well over fifty. His shooting, however, hadn't suffered very much at all. John had worked to make that clear to the go-team members. One of the best pistoleros Chavez had ever seen, and better still with a sniper rifle. He was dead-level with Weber and Johnston out to 400 meters. Despite the suit he wore to work, Rainbow Six was on everyone's don't-fuck-with list.

The front page had a story on the previous day's events in Bern. Ding raced through it and found most of the details right. Remarkable. The *Telegraph*'s correspondent must have had good contacts with the cops . . . whom he gave credit for the takedown. Well, that was okay. Rainbow was supposed to remain black. No comment from the Ministry of Defense on whether the SAS had provided support to the Swiss police. That was a little weak. A flat "no" would have been better . . . but were that to be said, then a "no comment" spoken at some other time would be taken as a "yes." So, yeah, that probably made sense. Politics was not a skill he'd acquired yet, at least not on the instinctive level. Dealing with the media frightened him more than facing loaded weapons—he had training for the latter but not for the former. His next grimace came when he realized that while CIA had an office of public affairs, Rainbow sure as hell didn't. Well, in this business it probably didn't pay to advertise. About that time, Patsy put on her jacket and headed for the door. Ding hurried after her to deliver the goodbye kiss, watched his wife walk to the family car, and hoped she did better driving on the left side of the road than he did. It made him slightly nuts and required steady concentration. The really crazy part was that the gearshift was on the wrong side of the car, but the pedals were the same as in American autos. It made Chavez a little schizophrenic, driving left-handed and right-footed. The worst part was the traffic circles the Brits seemed to like better than real interchanges. Ding kept wanting to turn right instead of left. It would be a hell of a stupid way to get killed. Ten minutes later, dressed in his day uniform, Chavez walked over to the Team-2 building for the second AAR.

Popov tucked his passbook in his coat pocket. The Swiss banker hadn't even blinked at seeing the suitcase full of cash. A remarkable machine had counted the bills, like mechanical fingers riffling through a deck of playing cards, even checking the denominations as it did the counting. It had taken a total of forty-five minutes to get things fully arranged. The number on the account was his old KGB service number, and tucked in the passbook was the banker's business card, complete with his Internet address for making wire transfers—the proper code-phrase had been agreed upon and written into his bank file. The topic of Model's failed adventure of the previous day hadn't come up. Popov figured he'd read the press reports in the *International Herald Tribune,* which he'd get at the airport.

His passport was American. The company had arranged to get him resident-alien status, and he was on his way to citizenship, which he found amusing, as he still had his Russian Federation passport, and two others from his previous career—with different names but the same photo—which he could still use if needed. Those were stashed in his travel briefcase, in a small compartment that only a very careful customs examiner would ever find, and then only if told ahead of time that there was something strange about the incoming traveler.

Two hours before his flight was scheduled to depart, he turned in his rental car, rode the bus to the international terminal, went through the usual rigmarole of checking in, and headed off to the first-class lounge for coffee and a croissant.

Bill Henriksen was a news junkie of the first order. On waking up, early as always, he immediately flipped his TV to CNN, often flipping to Fox News with his remote while he did his morning treadmill routine, frequently with a paper on the reading board as well. The front page of the *New York Times* covered the event in Bern, as did Fox News—oddly, CNN talked about it but didn't show much. Fox did, using the feed from Swiss television, which allowed him to watch what could be seen of the takedown. Pure vanilla, Henriksen thought. Flash-bangs on the front doors—made the cameraman jump and go slightly off-target, as usual when they were that close—shooters in right behind them. No sounds of gunfire—they used suppressed weapons. In five seconds, it was all over. So, the Swiss had a properly trained SWAT team. No real surprise there, though he hadn't really known about it. A few minutes later, one guy came out and lit a pipe. Whoever that was, probably the team commander, he had a little style, Henriksen thought, checking the mileage on the treadmill. The team dressed as such people usually did, in coalgray fatigues, with Kevlar body armor. Uniformed cops went in to get the hostages out after about the right amount of time. Yeah, nicely and smoothly done—another way of saying that the criminals/terrorists—the news wasn't clear on whether they were just robbers or political types—weren't real smart. Well, whoever said they were? They'd have to choose better ones the next time if this thing were going to work. The phone would ring in a few minutes, he was sure, summoning him to do a brief TV spot. A nuisance but a necessary one.

That happened when he was in the shower. He'd long since had a phone installed just outside the door.

"Yeah."

"Mr. Henriksen?"

"Yeah, who's this?" The voice wasn't familiar.

"Bob Smith at Fox News New York. Have you seen coverage of the incident in Switzerland?"

"Yeah, matter of fact I just saw it on your network."

"Any chance you could come in and give us some commentary?"

"What time?" Henriksen asked, knowing the response, and what his answer would be.

"Just after eight, if you could."

He even checked his watch, an automatic and wasted gesture that nobody

saw. “Yeah, I can do that. How long will I be on this time?”

“Probably four minutes or so.”

“Okay, I’ll be down there in about an hour.”

“Thank you, sir. The guard will be told to expect you.”

“Okay, see you in an hour.” The kid must be new, Henriksen thought, not to know that he was a regular commentator—why else would his name have been in the Fox rolodex?—and that the security guards all knew him by sight. A quick cup of coffee and a bagel got him out the door, into his Porsche 911, and across the George Washington Bridge to Manhattan.

Dr. Carol Brightling awoke, patted Jiggs on the top of his head, and stepped into the shower. Ten minutes later, a towel wrapped around her head, she opened the door and got the morning papers. The coffee machine had already made its two cups of Mountain-Grown Folger’s, and in the refrigerator was the plastic box full of melon sections. Next she switched on the radio to catch the morning edition of *All Things Considered,* beginning her news fix, which started here and would go on through most of the day. Her job in the White House was mainly reading . . . and today she had to meet with that bozo from the Department of Energy who still thought it important to build H-bombs, which she would advise the President against, which advice he would probably decline without direct comment to her.

Why the hell had she been taken in by this administration? Carol wondered. The answer was simple and obvious : politics. This president had tried valiantly to avoid such entanglements in his year and a half of holding office. And she was female, whereas the President’s team of insiders was almost entirely male, which had caused some comment in the media and elsewhere, which had befuddled the President in his political innocence, which had amused the press even more and given them a further tool to use, which had worked, after a fashion. And so she had been offered the appointment, and taken it, with the office in the Old Executive Office Building instead of the White House itself, with a secretary and an assistant, and a parking place on West Executive Drive for her fuel-efficient six-year-old Honda—the *only* Japanese-made car on that particular block, which *nobody* had said anything about, of course, since she was female, and she’d forgotten more about Washington politics than the President would ever learn. That was astounding when she thought about it, though she warned herself that the President was a notoriously quick learner. But not a good listener, at least as far as she was concerned.

The media let him get away with it. The lesson of that was that the media was nobody’s friend. Lacking convictions of its own, it just published what people said, and so she had to speak, off the record, on deep background, or just casually, to various reporters. Some, those who covered the Environment regularly, at least understood the language, and for the most part could be trusted to write their pieces the proper way, but they always included the other side’s rubbish science—*yes, maybe your position has merit, but the science isn’t firm enough yet and the computer models are* not *accurate enough to justify this sort of action,* the other side said. As a result of which, the public’s opinion —as measured in polls—had stagnated, or even reversed a little bit. The

President was anything but an Environmental President, but the bastard was getting away with it—at the same time using Carol Brightling as political camouflage, or even political *cover!* That appalled her . . . or would have under other circumstances. But here she was, Dr. Brightling thought, zipping up her skirt before donning the suit-jacket, a senior advisor to the President of the United States. *That* meant she saw him a couple of times per week. It meant that he *read* her position papers and policy recommendations. It meant that she had *access* to the media's top-drawer people, free to pursue her own agenda . . . within reason.

But she was the one who paid the price. Always, it was she, Carol thought, reaching down to scratch Jiggs's ears as she made her way to the door. The cat would pass the day doing whatever it was that he did, mainly sleeping in the sun on the windowsill, probably waiting for his mistress to come home and feed him his Frisky treat. Not for the first time, she thought about stopping by a pet store and getting Jiggs a live mouse to play with and eat. A fascinating process to watch, predator and prey, playing their parts . . . the way the world was supposed to be; the way it had been for unnumbered centuries until the last two or so. Until Man had started changing everything, she thought, starting the car, looking at the cobblestoned street—still real cobbles for this traditional Georgetown address, with streetcar tracks still there, too—and brick buildings which had covered up what had probably been a pretty hardwood forest less than two hundred years before. It was even worse across the river, where only Theodore Roosevelt Island was still in its pristine state—and that was interfered with by the screech of jet engines. A minute later, she was on M Street, then around the circle onto Pennsylvania Avenue. She was ahead of the daily rush-hour traffic, as usual, heading the mile or so down the wide, straight street before she could turn right and find her parking place—they weren't reserved *per se,* but everyone had his or her own, and hers was forty yards from the West Entrance—and as a regular, she didn't have to submit to the dog search. The Secret Service used Belgian Malinois dogs—like brown German shepherds—keen of nose and quick of brain, to sniff at cars for explosives. Her White House pass got her into the compound, then up the steps into the OEOB, and right to her office. It was a cubbyhole, really, but larger than those of her secretary and assistant. On her desk was the *Early Bird,* with its clips of articles from various national newspapers deemed important to those who worked in this building, along with her copy of *Science Weekly, Science,* and, today, *Scientific American,* plus several medical journals. The environmental publications would arrive two days later. She hadn't yet sat down when her secretary, Margot Evans, came in with the codeword folder on nuclear-weapons policy, which she'd have to review before giving the President advice that he'd reject. The annoying part of that, of course, was that she'd have to think to produce the position paper that the President would not think about before rejecting. But she couldn't give him an excuse to accept, with great public reluctance, her resignation—rarely did anyone at this level ask to leave *per se,* though the local media had the mantras down and fully understood. Why not take it a step further than usual, and recommend the closure of the dirty reactor at Hanford, Washington? The only American reactor of the same design as Chernobyl—less a power reactor than one

designed to produce plutonium—Pu^{239}—for nuclear weapons, the worst gadget the mind of warlike *men* had ever produced. There were new problems with Hanford, new leaks from the storage tanks there, discovered before the leakage could pollute ground water, but still a threat to the environment, expensive to fix. The chemical mix in those tanks was horribly corrosive, *and* lethally toxic, *and* radioactive . . . and the President wouldn't listen to that bit of sound advice either.

The science of her objections to Hanford was real, even Red Lowell worried about it—but *he* wanted a *new* Hanford built! Even this President wouldn't countenance that!

With that reassuring thought, Dr. Brightling poured herself a cup of coffee and started reading the *Early Bird,* while her mind pondered how she'd draft her doomed recommendation to the President.

"So, Mr. Henriksen, who were they?" the morning anchor asked.

"We don't know much beyond the name of the purported leader, Ernst Model. Model was once part of the Baader-Meinhof gang, the notorious German communist terrorist group from the '70s and '80s. He dropped out of sight about ten years ago. It will be interesting to learn exactly where he's been hiding out."

"Did you have a file on him during your time with the FBI Hostage Rescue Team?"

A smile to accompany the terse reply. "Oh, yeah. I know the face, but Mr. Model will now transfer to the inactive files."

"So, was this a terrorist incident or just a bank robbery?"

"No telling as yet from press reports, but I would not entirely discount robbery as a motive. One of the things people forget about terrorists is that they have to eat, too, and you need money to do that. There is ample precedent for supposedly political criminals to break the law just to make money to support themselves. Right here in America, the CSA—the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord, as they called themselves—robbed banks to support themselves. Baader-Meinhof in Germany used kidnappings to extort money from their victims' corporate and family ties."

"So, to you they're just criminals?"

A nod, and a serious expression. "Terrorism is a crime. That's dogma at the FBI, where I came up. And these four who got killed yesterday in Switzerland were criminals. Unfortunately for them, the Swiss police have assembled and trained what appears to be an excellent, professional special-operations team."

"How would you rate the takedown?"

"Pretty good. The TV coverage shows no errors at all. All the hostages were rescued, and the criminals all were killed. That's par for the course in an incident like this. In the abstract, you would like to take the criminals down alive if possible, but it is not always possible—the lives of the hostages have absolute priority in a case like this one."

"But the terrorists, don't they have rights—"

"As a matter of principle, yes, they do have the same rights as other criminals. We teach that at the FBI, too, and the best thing you can do as a law enforcement officer in a case like this one is to arrest them, put them in

front of a judge and jury, and convict them, *but* remember that the hostages are innocent victims, and their lives are at risk *because of* the criminals' actions. Therefore, you try to give them a chance to surrender—really, you try to disarm them if you can.

"But very often you do not have that luxury," Henriksen went on. "Based on what I saw on TV from this incident, the Swiss police team acted no differently than what we were trained to do at Quantico. You only use deadly force when necessary—but when it's necessary, you do use it."

"But who decides when it's necessary?"

"The commander on the scene makes that decision, based on his training, experience, and expertise." *Then,* Henriksen didn't go on, *people like you second-guess the hell out of him for the next couple of weeks.*

"Your company trains local police forces in SWAT tactics, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does. We have numerous veterans of the FBI HRT, Delta Force, and other 'special' organizations, and we could use this Swiss operation as a textbook example of how it's done," Henriksen said—because his was an international corporation, which trained foreign police forces as well, and being nice to the Swiss wouldn't hurt his bottom line one bit.

"Well, Mr. Henriksen, thanks for joining us this morning. International terrorism expert William Henriksen, CEO of Global Security, Inc., an international consulting firm. It's twenty-four minutes after the hour." In the studio, Henriksen kept his calm, professional face on until five seconds after the light on the nearest camera went out. At his corporate headquarters, they would have already taped this interview to add to the vast library of such things. GSI was known over most of the world, and their introductory tape included snippets from many such interviews. The floor director walked him off the set to the makeup room, where the powder was removed, then let him walk himself out to where his car was parked.

That had gone well, he thought, going through the mental checklist. He'd have to find out who'd trained the Swiss. He made a mental note to have one of his contacts chase that one down. If it were a private company, that was serious competition, though it was probably the Swiss army—perhaps even a military formation disguised as policemen—maybe with some technical assistance from the German GSG-9. A couple of phone calls should run that one down.

Popov's four-engine Airbus A-340 touched down on time at JFK International. You could always trust the Swiss to do everything on time. The police team had probably even had a schedule for the previous night's activities, he thought whimsically. His first-class seat was close to the door, which allowed him to be the third passenger out, then off to claim his bags and go through the ordeal of U.S. Customs. America, he'd long since learned, was the most difficult country to enter as a foreigner—though with his minimal baggage and nothing-to-declare entry, the process was somewhat easier this time. The customs clerks were kind and waved him right through to the cabstand, where, for the usual exorbitant fee, he engaged a Pakistani driver to take him into town, making him wonder idly if the cabbies had a deal with the customs people. But he was on an expense account—meaning he had to get a receipt—

and, besides, he had ensured that day that he could afford such things without one, hadn't he? He smiled as he gazed at the passing urban sprawl. It got thicker and thicker on the way to Manhattan.

The cab dropped him off at his apartment house. The flat was paid for by his employer, which made it a tax-deductible business expense for them—Popov was learning about American tax law—and free for him. He spent a few minutes dumping his dirty laundry and hanging up his good clothes before heading downstairs and having the doorman flag a cab. From there it was another fifteen minutes to the office.

"So, how did it go?" the boss asked. There was an odd buzz in the office, designed to interfere with any listening devices that a corporate rival might place. Corporate espionage was a major factor in the life of this man's company, and the defenses against it were at least as good as those the KGB had used. And Popov had once believed that governments had the best of everything. That was certainly *not* true in America.

"It went much as I expected. They were foolish—really rather amateurish, despite all the training we gave them back in the eighties. I told them to feel free to rob the bank as cover for the real mission—"

"Which was?"

"To be killed," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich replied at once. "At least, that is what I understood your intentions to be, sir." His words occasioned a smile of a sort Popov wasn't used to. He made a note to check the stock value of the bank. Had the intention of this "mission" been to affect the standing of the bank? That didn't seem very likely, but though he didn't *need* to know why he was doing these things, his natural curiosity had been aroused. This man was treating him like a mercenary, and though Popov knew that was precisely what he'd become since leaving the service of his country, it was vaguely and distantly annoying to his sense of professionalism. "Will you require further such services?"

"What happened to the money?" the boss wanted to know.

A diffident reply: "I'm sure the Swiss will find a use for it." Certainly his banker would. "Surely you did not expect me to recover it?"

A shake of the boss's head. "No, not really, and it was a trivial sum anyway."

Popov nodded his understanding. *Trivial sum?* No Soviet-employed agent had ever gotten so much in a single payment—the KGB had always been niggardly in its payments to those whom it gave money, regardless of the importance of the information that had earned it—nor had the KGB ever been so casual in disposing of cash in any amount. Every single ruble had to be accounted for, else the bean-counters at Number 2 Dzerzhinsky Square would bring down the devil's own wrath on the field officer who'd been so lax in his operations! The next thing he wondered about was how his employer had laundered the cash. In America if you deposited or withdrew so little as ten *thousand* dollars in cash, the bank was required to make a written record of it. It was supposedly an inconvenience for drug dealers, but they managed to work with it nevertheless. Did other countries have similar rules? Popov didn't know. Switzerland did not, he was sure, but that many banknotes didn't just materialize in a bank's vaults, did they? Somehow his boss had handled that,

and done it well, Popov reminded himself. Perhaps Ernst Model had been an amateur, but this man was not. Something to keep in mind, the former spy told himself in large, red, mental letters.

There followed a few seconds of silence. Then: "Yes, I will require another operation."

"What, exactly?" Popov asked, and got the answer immediately. "Ah." A nod. He even used the correct word: *operation.* How very strange. Dmitriy wondered if he'd be well advised to check up on his employer, to find out more about him. After all, his own life was now in pawn to him—and the reverse was true as well, of course, but the other man's life was not an immediate concern to Popov. How hard would it be? To one who owned a computer and a modem, it was no longer difficult at all . . . if one had the time. For now, it was clear, he'd have but one night in his apartment before traveling overseas again. Well, it was an easy cure for jet lag.

They looked like robots, Chavez saw, peering around a computer-generated corner. The hostages, too, but in this case the hostages were computer-generated children, all girls in red-and-white striped dresses or jumpers—Ding couldn't decide which. It was clearly a psychological effect programmed into the system by whoever had set up the parameters for the program, called SWAT 6.3.2. Some California-based outfit had first produced this for Delta Force under a DOD contract overseen by RAND Corporation.

It was expensive to use, mainly because of the electronic suit he wore. It was the same weight as the usual black mission suit—lead sheets sewn into the fabric had seen to that—and everything down to the gloves was filled with copper wires and sensors that told the computer—an old Cray YMP—exactly what his body was doing, and in turn projected a computer-generated image into the goggles he wore. Dr. Bellow gave the commentary, playing the roles of bad-guy leader and good-guy advisor in this particular game. Ding turned his head and saw Eddie Price right behind him and Hank Patterson and Steve Lincoln across the way at the other simulated corner—robotic figures with numbers on them to let him know who was who.

Chavez pumped his right arm up and down three times, calling for flash-bangs, then peered around the corner one more time—

—at his chair, Clark saw the black line appear on the white corner, then hit the 7 key on his computer keyboard—

—bad-guy #4 trained his weapon on the gaggle of schoolgirls—"Steve! Now!" Chavez ordered.

Lincoln pulled the pin on the flash-bang. It was essentially a grenade simulator, heavy in explosive charge to produce noise and magnesium powder for a blinding flash—simulated for the computer program—and designed to blind and disorient through the ear-shattering blast, which was loud enough to upset the inner ear's mechanism for balance. That sound, though not quite as bad, came through their earphones as well, along with the white-out of their VR goggles. It still made them jump.

The echo hadn't even started to fade when Chavez dived into the room, weapon up and zeroing in on Terrorist #1, the supposed enemy leader. Here the computer system was faulty, Chavez thought. The European members of

his team didn't shoot the way the Americans did. They pushed their weapons forward against the double-looped sling, actually extending their H&Ks before firing them. Chavez and the Americans tended to tuck them in close against the shoulder. Ding got his first burst off before his body hit the floor, but the computer system didn't always score this as a hit—which pissed Ding off greatly. He didn't *ever* miss, as a guy named Guttenach had discovered on finding St. Peter in front of him without much in the way of warning. Hitting the floor, Chavez rolled, repeated the burst, and swung the MP-10 for another target. His earphones produced the too-loud report of the shots (the SWAT 6.3.2 program for some reason didn't allow for suppressed weapons). To his right, Steve Lincoln and Hank Patterson were in the room and shooting at the six terrorists. Their short, controlled bursts rang in his ears, and in his VR goggles, heads exploded into red clouds quite satisfactorily—

—but bad guy #5 depressed his trigger, not at the rescuers, but rather at the hostages, which started going down until at least three of the Rainbow shooters took him out at once—

—"Clear!" Chavez shouted, jumping to his feet and going to the images of the bad guys. One, the computer said, was still residually alive, albeit bleeding from the head. Ding kicked his weapon loose, but by that time #4's shade had stopped moving.

"Clear!" "Clear!" shouted his team members.

"Exercise concluded," Clark's voice told them. Ding and his men removed their Virtual Reality goggles to find a room about double the size of a basketball court, and entirely absent of objects, empty as a high-school gym at midnight. It took a little getting used to. The simulation had been of terrorists who'd taken a kids' school—evidently a girls' school, for greater psychological effect.

"How many did we lose?" Chavez asked the ceiling.

"Six killed and three wounded, the computer says." Clark entered the room.

"What went wrong?" Ding asked, suspecting he knew what the answer was.

"I spotted you looking around the corner, boy," Rainbow Six answered. "That alerted the bad guys."

"Shit," Chavez responded. "That's a program glitch. In real life I'd use the mirror rig, or take this Kevlar hat off, but the program doesn't let us. The flash-bangs would have gone in clean."

"Maybe," John Clark allowed. "But your score on this one is a B-minus."

"Gee, thanks, Mr. C," the Team-2 leader groused. "Next you gonna say our shooting was off?"

"Yours was, the machine says."

"God *damn* it, John! The program doesn't simulate marksmanship worth a damn, and I will *not* train my people to shoot in a way the machine likes instead'a doing it the way that puts steel on target!"

"Settle down, Domingo. I know your troops can shoot. Okay, follow me. Let's watch the replay."

"Chavez, why did you take this way in?" Stanley asked when everyone was seated.

"This doorway is wider, and it gives a better field of fire—"

"For *both* sides," Stanley observed.

"Battlefields are like that," Ding countered. "But when you have surprise and speed going for you, that advantage conveys also. I put my backup team on the back door, but the configuration of the building didn't allow them to participate in the takedown. Noonan had the building spiked. We had good coverage of the bad guys, and I timed the assault to catch them all in the gym —"

"With all six guns colocated with the hostages."

"Better that than to have to go looking for them. Maybe one of them could flip a grenade around a corner and kill a bunch of the Barbie dolls. No, sir, I thought about coming in from the back, or doing a two-axis assault, but the distances and timing factors didn't look good to me. Are you saying I'm wrong, sir?"

"In this case, yes."

Bullshit, Chavez thought. "Okay, show me what you think."

It was as much a matter of personal style as right and wrong, and Alistair Stanley had been there and done that as much as any man in the world, Ding knew. So he watched and listened. Clark, he saw, did much the same.

"I don't like it," Noonan said, after Stanley concluded his presentation. "It's too easy to put a noisemaker on the doorknob. The damned things only cost ten bucks or so. You can buy one in any airport gift shop—people use them on hotel doors in case somebody tries to come in uninvited. We had a case in the Bureau when a subject used one—nearly blew the whole mission on us, but the flash-bang on the outside window covered the noise pretty well."

"And what if your spikes didn't give us positions on all the subjects?"

"But they did, sir," Noonan countered. "We had time to track them." In fact the training exercise had compressed the time by a factor of ten, but that was normal for the computer simulations. "This computer stuff is great for planning the takedowns, but it falls a little flat on other stuff. I think we did it pretty well." His concluding sentence also announced the fact that Noonan wanted to be a full member of Team-2, not just their techno-weenie, Ding thought. Tim had been spending a lot of time in the shooting range, and was now the equal of any member of the team. Well, he'd worked the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team under Gus Werner. He had the credentials to join the varsity. Werner had been considered for the Six job on Rainbow. But then, so had Stanley.

"Okay," Clark said next, "let's roll the tape."

That was the nastiest surprise of all. Terrorist #2, the computer said, had taken his head shot and spun around with his finger depressed on the trigger of his AK-74, and one of his rounds had neatly transfixed Chavez's head. Ding was dead, according to the Cray computer, because the theoretical bullet had gone under the brim of his Kevlar helmet and transited right through his brain. The shock of it to Chavez had surprising magnitude. A random event generated by the computer program, it was also quite real, because real life did include such random events. They'd talked about getting Lexan visors for their helmets, which might or might not stop a bullet, but had decided against it because of the distortion it would impose on their sight, and therefore their shooting . . . maybe we need to re-think that one, Chavez told himself. The bottom line of the computer's opinion was simple: if it was possible, then it

could happen, and if it could, sooner or later, it *would,* and somebody on the team would have to drive to a house on post and tell a wife that she'd just become a widow. Because of a random event—bad luck. A hell of a thing to tell somebody who'd just lost a husband. Cause of death, bad luck. Chavez shivered a little at the thought. How would Patsy take it? Then he shook it off. It was a very low order of probability, mathematically right down there with being hit by lightning on a golf course or being wasted in a plane crash, and life *was* risk, and you avoided the risks only by being dead. Or something like that. He turned his head to look at Eddie Price.

"Unforgiving things, dice," the sergeant major observed with a wry smile. "But I got the chappie who killed you, Ding."

"Thanks, Eddie. Makes me feel a lot better. Shoot faster next time?"

"I shall make a point of it, sir," Price promised.

"Cheer up, Ding," Stanley observed, noting the exchange. "Could have been worse. I've yet to see anyone seriously harmed by an electron."

And you're supposed to learn from training exercises, Ding added for himself. But learn what from this one? Shit happens? Something to think about, he supposed, and in any case, Team-2 was now on standby, with Peter Covington's Team-1 on the ready line. Tomorrow they'd do some more shooting, aimed at getting the shots off a little faster, maybe. Problem was, there just wasn't any room for improvement—not much anyway—and pushing too hard might have the effect of dulling the sharp edge already achieved. Ding felt as though he were the head coach of a particularly good football team. The players were all excellent, and hard-working . . . just not quite perfect. But how much of that could be corrected by training, and how much merely reflected the fact that the other side played to win, too? The first job had been too easy. Model and his bunch had cried aloud to be killed. It wouldn't always be that easy.

CHAPTER 6

TRUE BELIEVERS

The problem was environmental tolerance. They knew the baseline organism was as effective as it needed to be. It was just so delicate. Exposed to air, it died far too easily. They weren't sure why, exactly. It might have been temperature or humidity, or too much oxygen—that element so essential to life was a great killer of life at the molecular level—and the uncertainty had been a great annoyance until a member of the team had come up with a solution. They'd used genetic-engineering technology to graft cancer genes into the organism. Specifically, they'd used genetic material from colon cancer, one of the more robust strains, and the results had been striking. The new organism was only a third of a micron larger and far stronger. The proof was on the electron microscope's TV screen. The tiny strands had been exposed to room air and room light for ten hours before being reintroduced into the culture dish, and already, the technician saw, the minute strands were active, using their RNA to multiply after eating, replicating themselves into millions more little strands, which had only one purpose—to eat tissue. In this case it was kidney tissue, though liver was just as vulnerable. The technician—who had a medical degree from Yale—made the proper written notations, and then, because it was her project, she got to name it. She blessed the course in comparative religion she'd taken twenty years before. You couldn't just call it anything, could you?

Shiva, she thought. Yes, the most complex and interesting of the Hindu gods, by turns the Destroyer and the Restorer, who controlled poison meant to destroy mankind, and one of whose consorts was Kali, the goddess of death herself. Shiva. *Perfect.* The tech made the proper notations, including her recommended name for the organism. There would be one more test, one more technological hurdle to hop before all was ready for execution. Execution, she thought, a proper word for the project. On rather a grand scale.

For her next task, she took a sample of Shiva, sealed in a stainless-steel container, and walked out of her lab, an eighth of a mile down the corridor, and into another.

"Hi, Maggie," the head of that lab said in greeting. "Got something for me?"

"Hey, Steve." She handed the container over. "This is the one."

"What are we calling it?" Steve took the container and set it on a countertop.

"Shiva, I think."

"Sounds ominous," Steve observed with a smile.

"Oh, it is," Maggie promised him. Steve was another M.D., Ph.D., both of his degrees from Duke University, and the company's best man on vaccines. For

this project he'd been pulled off AIDS work that had begun to show some promise.

"So, the colon cancer genes worked like you predicted?"

"Ten hours in the open, it shows good UV tolerance. Not too sure about direct sunlight, though."

"Two hours of that is all we need," Steve reminded her. And really one hour was plenty, as they both knew. "What about the atomization system?"

"Still have to try it," she admitted, "but it won't be a problem." Both knew that was the truth. The organism should easily tolerate passage through the spray nozzles for the fogging system—which would be checked in one of the big environmental chambers. Doing it outside would be better still, of course, but if Shiva was as robust as Maggie seemed to think, it was a risk better not run.

"Okay, then. Thanks, Maggie." Steve turned his back, and inserted the container into one of the glove-boxes to open it, in order to begin his work on the vaccine. Much of the work was already done. The baseline agent here was well-known, and the government had funded his company's vaccine work after the big scare the year before, and Steve was known far and wide as one of the best around for generating, capturing, and replicating antibodies to excite a person's immune system. He vaguely regretted the termination of his AIDS work. Steve thought that he might have stumbled across a method of generating broad-spectrum antibodies to combat that agile little bastard—maybe a 20 percent change, he judged, plus the added benefit of leading down a new scientific pathway, the sort of thing to make a man famous . . . maybe even good enough for a flight to Stockholm in ten years or so. But in ten years, it wouldn't matter, would it? Not hardly, the scientist told himself. He turned to look out the triple-windows of his lab. A pretty sunset. Soon the night creatures would come out. Bats would chase insects. Owls would hunt mice and voles. Cats would leave their houses to prowl on their own missions of hunger. He had a set of night-vision goggles that he often used to observe the creatures doing work not so very different from his own. But for now he turned back to his worktable, pulled out his computer keyboard, and made some notations for his new project. Many used notebooks for this, but the Project allowed only computers for record-keeping, and all the notes were electronically encrypted. If it was good enough for Bill Gates, then it was good enough for him. The simple ways were not always best. That explained why he was here, part of the newly named Shiva Project, didn't it?

They needed guys with guns, but they were hard to find—at least the right ones, with the right attitudes—and the task was made more difficult by government activities with similar, but divergent aims. It helped them keep away from the more obvious kooks, though.

"Damn, it's pretty out here," Mark observed.

His host snorted. "There's a new house right the other side of that ridge line. On a calm day, I can see the smoke from their chimney."

Mark had to laugh. "There goes the neighborhood. You and Dan'l Boone, eh?"

Foster adopted a somewhat sheepish look. "Yeah, well, it *is* a good five

miles."

"But you know, you're right. Imagine what it looked like before the white man came here. No roads 'cept for the riverbanks and deer trails, and the hunting must have been pretty spectacular."

"Good enough you didn't have to work that hard to eat, I imagine." Foster gestured at the fireplace wall of his log cabin, covered with hunting trophies, not all of them legal, but here in Montana's Bitterroot Mountains, there weren't all that many cops, and Foster kept pretty much to himself.

"It's our birthright."

"Supposed to be," Foster agreed. "Something worth fighting for."

"How hard?" Mark asked, admiring the trophies. The grizzly bear rug was especially impressive—and probably illegal as hell.

Foster poured some more bourbon for his guest. "I don't know what it's like back East, but out here, if you fight—you fight. All the way, boy. Put one right 'tween the running lights, generally calms your adversary down a mite."

"But then you have to dispose of the body," Mark said, sipping his drink. The man bought only cheap whiskey. Well, he probably couldn't afford the good stuff.

A laugh: "Ever hear of a backhoe? How 'bout a nice fire?"

It was believed by some in this part of the state that Foster had killed a fish-and-game cop. As a result, he was leery of local police—and the highway patrol people didn't like him to go a mile over the limit. But though the car had been found—burned out, forty miles away—the body of the missing officer had not, and that was that. There weren't many people around to be witnesses in this part of the state, even with a new house five miles away. Mark sipped his bourbon and leaned back in the leather chair. "Nice to be part of nature, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. It surely is. Sometimes I think I kinda understand the Indians, y'know?"

"Know any?"

"Oh, sure. Charlie Grayson, he's a Nez Percé, hunting guide, got my horse off o' him. I do that, too, to make some cash sometimes, mainly take a horse into the high country, really, meet people who get it. And the elk are pretty thick up there."

"What about bear?"

"Enough," Foster replied. "Mainly blacks, but some grizz'."

"What do you use? Bow?"

A good-natured shake of the head. "No, I admire the Indians, but I ain't one myself. Depends on what I'm hunting, and what country I'm doing it in. Bolt-action .300 Winchester Mag mainly, but in close country, a semiauto slug shotgun. Nothing like drillin' three-quarter-inch holes when you gotta, y'know?"

"Handload?"

"Of course. It's a lot more personal that way. Gotta show respect for the game, you know, keep the gods of the mountains happy."

Foster smiled at the phrase, in just the right sleepy way, Mark saw. In every civilized man was a pagan waiting to come out, who really believed in the gods of the mountains, and in appeasing the spirits of the dead game. And so

did he, really, despite his technical education.

"So, what do you do, Mark?"

"Molecular biochemistry, Ph.D., in fact."

"What's that mean?"

"Oh, figuring out how life happens. Like how does a bear smell so well," he went on, lying. "It can be interesting, but my real life is coming out to places like this, hunting, meeting people who really understand the game better than I do. Guys like you," Mark concluded, with a salute of his glass. "What about you?"

"Ah, well, retired now. I made some of my own. Would you believe geologist for an oil company?"

"Where'd you work?"

"All over the world. I had a good nose for it, and the oil companies paid me a lot for finding the right stuff, y'know? But I had to give it up. Got to the point—well, you fly a lot, right?"

"I get around," Mark confirmed with a nod.

"The brown smudge," Foster said next.

"Huh?"

"Come on, you see it all over the damned world. Up around thirty thousand feet, that brown smudge. Complex hydrocarbons, mainly from passenger jets. One day I was flying back from Paris—connecting flight from Brunei, I came the wrong way 'round 'cuz I wanted to stop off in Europe and meet a friend. Anyway, there I was, in a fuckin' 747, over the middle of the fucking Atlantic Ocean, like four hours from land, y'know? First-class window seat, sitting there drinking my drink, lookin' out the window, and there it was, the smudge—that goddamned brown shit, and I realized that I was helpin' make it happen, dirtyin' up the whole fuckin' atmosphere.

"Anyway," Foster went on, "that was the moment of my . . . conversion, I guess you'd call it. I tendered my resignation the next week, took my stock options, cashed in half a mil worth, and bought this place. So, now, I hunt and fish, do a little guide work in the fall, read a lot, wrote a little book about what oil products do to the environment, and that's about it."

It was the book that had attracted Mark's attention, of course. The brown-smudge story was in its poorly written preface. Foster was a believer, but not a screwball. His house had electricity and phone service. Mark saw his high-end Gateway computer on the floor next to his desk. Even satellite TV, plus the usual Chevy pickup truck with a gun-rack in the back window . . . and a diesel-powered backhoe. So, maybe he believed, but he wasn't too crazy about it. That was good, Mark thought. He just had to be crazy enough. Foster was. Killing the fish-and-game cop was proof of that.

Foster returned the friendly stare. He'd met guys like this during his time in Exxon. A suit, but a clever one, the kind who didn't mind getting his hands dirty. Molecular biochemistry. They hadn't had that major at the Colorado School of Mines, but Foster also subscribed to *Science News,* and knew what it was all about. A meddler with life . . . but, strangely, one who understood about the deer and elk. Well, the world was a complex place. Just then, his visitor saw the Lucite block on the coffee table. Mark picked it up.

"What's this?"

Foster grinned over his drink. “What’s it look like?”

“Well, it’s either iron pyrite or it’s—”

“Ain’t iron. I do know my rocks, sir.”

“Gold? Where from?”

“Found it in my stream, ’bout three hundred yards over yonder.” Foster pointed.

“That’s a fair-sized nugget.”

“Five and a half ounces. About two thousand dollars. You know, people—white people—been living right on this ranch on this spot for over a hundred years, but nobody ever saw that in the creek. One day I’ll have to backtrack up, see if it’s a good formation. Ought to be, that’s quartz on the bottom of the big one. Quartz-and-gold formations tend to be pretty rich, ’cuz of the way the stuff bubbled up from the earth’s core. This area’s fairly volcanic, all the hot springs and stuff,” he reminded his guest. “We even get the occasional earth tremor.”

“So, you might own your own gold mine?”

A good laugh. “Yep. Ironic, ain’t it? I paid the going rate for grazing land—not even that much ’cuz o’ the hills. The last guy to ranch around here bitched that his cattle lost every pound they gained grazin’ by climbing up to where the grass was.”

“How rich?”

A shrug. “No tellin’, but if I showed that to some guys I went to school with, well, some folks would invest ten or twenty million finding out. Like I said, it’s a quartz formation. People gamble big-time on those. Price of gold is depressed, but if it comes out of the ground pretty pure—well, it’s a shitload more valuable than coal, y’know?”

“So, why don’t you? . . .”

“ ’Cuz I don’t need it, and it’s an ugly process to watch. Worse ’n drilling oil, even. You can pretty much clean that up. But a mine—no way. Never goes away. The tailing don’t go away. The arsenic gets into the ground water and takes forever to leach out. Anyway, it’s a pretty coupla rocks in the plastic, and if I ever need the money, well, I know what to do.”

“How often you check the creek?”

“When I fish—brown trout here, see?” He pointed to a big one hanging on the log wall. “Every third or fourth time, I find another one. Actually, I figure the deposit must have been uncovered fairly recently, else folks would have spotted it a long time ago. Hell, maybe I should track it down, see where it starts, but I’d just be tempting myself. Why bother?” Foster concluded. “I might have a weak moment and go against my principles. Anyway, not like it’s gonna run away, is it?”

Mark grunted. “Guess not. Got any more of these?”

“Sure.” Foster rose and pulled open a desk drawer. He tossed a leather pouch over. Mark caught it, surprised by the weight, almost ten pounds. He pulled the drawstring and extracted a nugget. About the size of a half-dollar, half gold, half quartz, all the more beautiful for the imperfection.

“You married?” Foster asked.

“Yeah. Wife, two kids.”

“Keep it, then. Make a pendant out of it, give it to her for her birthday or

something."

"I can't do that. This is worth a couple of thousand dollars."

Foster waved his hand. "Shit, just takin' up space in my desk. Why not make somebody happy with it? 'Sides, you understand, Mark. I think you really do."

Yep, Mark thought, this was a recruit. "What if I told you there was a way to make that brown smudge go away? . . ."

A quizzical look. "You talking about some organism to eat it or something?"

Mark looked up. "No, not exactly . . ." How much could he tell him now? He'd have to be very careful. It was only their first meeting.

"Getting the aircraft is your business. Where to fly it, that we can help with," Popov assured his host.

"Where?" the host asked.

"The key is to become lost to air-traffic-control radar and also to travel far enough that fighter aircraft cannot track you, as you know. Then if you can land in a friendly place, and dispose of the flight crew upon reaching your destination, repainting the aircraft is no great task. It can be destroyed later, even dismantled for sale of the important parts, the engines and such. They can easily disappear into the international black market, with the change of a few identity plates," Popov explained. "This has happened more than once, as you know. Western intelligence and police agencies do not advertise the fact, of course."

"The world is awash with radar systems," the host objected.

"True," Popov conceded, "but air-traffic radars do not see aircraft. They see the return signals from aircraft radar transponders. Only military radars see the aircraft themselves, and what African country has a proper air-defense network? Also, with the addition of a simple jammer to the aircraft's radio systems, you can further reduce the ability of anyone to track you. Your escape is not a problem, *if* you get as far as an international airport, my friend. That," he reminded them, "is the difficult part. Once you disappear over Africa—well, that is your choice then. Your country of destination can be selected for ideological purity or for a monetary exchange. Your choice. I recommend the former, but the latter is possible," Popov concluded. Africa was not yet a hotbed of international law and integrity, but it did have hundreds of airports capable of servicing jetliners.

"A pity about Ernst," the host said quietly.

"Ernst was a fool!" his lady friend countered with an angry gesture. "He should have robbed a smaller bank. All the way in the middle of Bern. He was trying to make a statement," Petra Dortmund sneered. Popov had known her only by reputation until today. She might have been pretty, even beautiful, once, but now her once-blond hair was dyed brown, and her thin face was severe, the cheeks sunken and hollow, the eyes rimmed in dark circles. She was almost unrecognizable, which explained why European police hadn't snatched her up yet, along with her longtime lover, Hans Fürchtner.

Fürchtner had gone the other way. He was a good thirty kilos overweight, his thick dark hair had either fallen out or been shaved, and the beard was gone. He looked like a banker now, fat and happy, no longer the driven, serious, committed communist he'd been in the '70s and'80s—at least not

visibly so. They lived in a decent house in the mountains south of Munich. What neighbors they had thought them to be artists—both of them painted, a hobby unknown to their country's police. They even sold the occasional work in small galleries, which was enough to feed them, though not to maintain their lifestyle.

They must have missed the safe houses in the old DDR and Czechoslovakia, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought. Just get off the aircraft and get taken away by car to comfortable if not quite lavish quarters, leave there to shop in the "special" stores maintained for the local Party elite, get visited frequently by serious, quiet intelligence officers who would feed them information with which to plan their next operation. Fürchtner and Dortmund had accomplished several decent operations, the best being the kidnapping and interrogation of an American sergeant who serviced nuclear artillery shells—this mission had been assigned them by the Soviet GRU. Much had been learned from that, most of it still useful, as the sergeant had been an expert on the American PAL—permissible action link—safety systems. His body had later been discovered in the snowy mid-winter mountains of southern Bavaria, apparently the result of a nasty traffic accident. Or so GRU thought, based on the reports of its agents within the NATO high command.

"So, what is it that you want to learn?" she asked.

"Electronic access codes to the international trading system."

"So, you, too, are a common thief now?" Hans asked, before Petra could sneer.

"A very uncommon thief, my sponsor is. If we are to restore a socialist, *progressive* alternative to capitalism, we need both funding and to instill a certain lack of confidence in the capitalist nervous system, do we not?" Popov paused for a second. "You know who I am. You know where I worked. Do you think I have forgotten my Motherland? Do you think I have forsaken my beliefs? My father fought at Stalingrad and Kursk. He knew what it was to be pushed back, to suffer defeat—and yet not give up, ever!" Popov said heatedly. "Why do you think I risk my life here? The counterrevolutionaries in Moscow would not look kindly upon my mission . . . but they are not the only political force in Mother Russia!"

"Ahhh," Petra Dortmund observed. Her face turned serious. "So, you think all is not lost?"

"Did you ever think the forward march of humanity would be absent of setbacks? It is true we lost our way. I saw it myself in KGB, the corruption in high places. That is what defeated us—not the West! I saw it myself as a captain, Brezhnev's daughter—looting the Winter Palace for her wedding reception. As though she were the Grand Duchess Anastasia herself! It was my function in KGB to learn from the West, learn their plans and secrets, but our *Kameraden* learned only their corruption. Well, we have learned that lesson, in more ways than one, my friends. You are a communist or you are not. You believe or you do not. You act in accordance with those beliefs or you do not."

"You ask us to give up much," Hans Fürchtner pointed out.

"You will be properly provided for. My sponsor—"

"Who is that?" Petra asked.

"This you may not know," Popov replied quietly. "You suppose that *you*

take risks here? What about me? As for my sponsor, no, you may not know his identity. Operational security is paramount. You are supposed to know these things," he reminded them. They took the mild rebuke well, as he'd expected. These two fools were true believers, as Ernst Model had been, though they were somewhat brighter and far more vicious, as that luckless American sergeant had learned, probably staring with disbelief into the still-lovely blue eyes of Petra Dortmund as she'd used the hammer on his various body parts.

"So, Iosef Andreyevich," Hans said—they knew Popov by one of his many cover names, in this case I. A. Serov. "When do you wish us to act?"

"As quickly as possible. I will call you in a week, to see if you are indeed willing to take this mission and—"

"We are willing," Petra assured him. "We need to make our plans."

"Then I shall call you in a week for your schedule. I will need four days to activate my part of the operation. An additional concern, the mission depends on the placement of the American navy carrier in the Mediterranean. You may not execute the mission if it is in the western Mediterranean, because in such a case their aircraft might track your flight. We wish this mission to succeed, my friends." Then they negotiated the price. It didn't prove hard. Hans and Petra knew Popov from the old days and actually trusted him personally to make the delivery.

Ten minutes later, Popov shook hands and took his leave, this time driving a rented BMW south toward the Austrian border. The road was clear and smooth, the scenery beautiful, and Dmitriy Arkadeyevich wondered again about his hosts. The one bit of truth he'd given them was that his father was indeed a veteran of the Stalingrad and Kursk campaign, and had told his son much about his life as a tank commander in the Great Patriotic War. There was something odd about the Germans, he'd learned from his professional experience in the Committee for State Security. Give them a man on a horse, and they'd follow him to the death. It seemed that the Germans craved someone or something to follow. How very strange. But it served his purposes, and those of his sponsor, and if these Germans wanted to follow a red horse—a *dead* red horse, Popov reminded himself with a smile and a grunt—well, that was their misfortune. The only really innocent people involved were the bankers whom they would attempt to kidnap. But at least they wouldn't be subjected to torture, as that black American sergeant had been. Popov doubted that Hans and Petra would get that far, though the capabilities of the Austrian police and military were largely unknown to him. He'd find out, he was sure, one way or another.

It was odd the way it worked. Team-1 was now the Go-Team, ready to depart Hereford at a moment's notice while Chavez's Team-2 stood down, but it was the latter that was running complex exercises while the former did little but morning PT and routine marksmanship training. Technically, they were worried about a training accident that could hurt or even cripple a team member, thus breaking up a field team at a delicate moment.

Master Chief Machinist's Mate Miguel Chin belonged to Peter Covington's team. A former U.S. Navy SEAL, he'd been taken from Norfolk-based SEAL Team Six for Rainbow. The son of a Latino mother and a Chinese father, he,

like Chavez, had grown up in East L.A. Ding spotted him smoking a cigar outside the Team-1 building and walked over.

"Hey, Chief," Chavez said from ten feet away.

"Master Chief," Chin corrected. "Like being a CSM in the army, sir."

"Name's Ding, 'mano."

"Mike." Chin extended a hand. Chin's face could have passed for damned near anything. He was an iron-pumper like Oso Vega, and his rep was of a guy who'd been around the block about a hundred times. Expert with all types of weapons, his handshake announced his further ability to tear a man's head right off his shoulders.

"Those are bad for you," Chavez noted.

"So's what we do for a livin', Ding. What part of L.A.?"

Ding told him.

"No kiddin'? Hell, I grew up half a mile from there. You were *Banditos* country."

"Don't tell me—"

The master chief nodded. *"Piscadores,* till I grew out of it. A judge suggested that I might like enlisting better 'n jail, and so I tried for the Marines, but they didn't want me. Pussies," Chin commented, spitting some tobacco off his cigar. "So, went through Great Lakes, they made me a machinist . . . but then I heard about the SEALs, an', well, ain't a bad life, y'know? You're Agency, I hear."

"Started off as an Eleven-Bravo. Took a little trip to South America that went totally to shit, but I met our Six on the job and he kinda recruited me. Never looked back."

"Agency send you to school?"

"George Mason, just got my master's. International relations," Chavez replied with a nod. "You?"

"Yeah, shows, I guess. Psychology, just a bachelor's, Old Dominion University. The doc on the team, Bellow. Smart son of a bitch. Mind-reader. I got three of his books at my place."

"How's Covington to work for?"

"Good. He's been there before. Listens good. Thoughtful kinda guy. Good team here, but as usual, not a hell of a lot to do. Liked your takedown at the bank, Chavez. Fast and clean." Chin blew smoke into the sky.

"Well, thank you, Master Chief."

"Chavez!" Peter Covington came out the door just then. "Trying to steal my number-one?"

"Just found out we grew up a few blocks apart, Peter."

"Indeed? That's remarkable," the Team-1 commander said.

"Harry's aggravated his ankle some this morning. No big deal, he's chewing some aspirin," Chin told his boss. "He banged it up two weeks ago zip-lining down from the helo," he added for Ding's benefit.

Damn training accidents, the chief didn't have to add. That was the problem with this sort of work, they all knew. The Rainbow members had been selected for many reasons, not the least of which was their brutally competitive nature. Every man deemed himself to be in competition with every other, and each one of them pushed himself to the limit in everything. It made for injuries and training accidents—and the miracle was that they'd yet

to place one of the team into the base hospital. It was sure to happen soon. The Rainbow members could no more turn that aspect of their personalities off than they could stop breathing. Olympic team members hardly had a tougher outlook on what they did. Either you were the very best, or you were nothing. And so every man could run a mile within thirty or forty seconds of the world record, wearing boots instead of track shoes. It did make sense in the abstract. Half a second could easily be the difference between life and death in a combat situation—worse, not the death of one of their own, but of an innocent party, a hostage, the person whom they were sworn to protect and rescue. But the really ironic part was that the Go-Team was not allowed heavy training for fear of a training accident, and so their skills degraded slightly over time—in this case, the two weeks of being stood-to. Three more days to go for Covington's Team-1, and then, Chavez knew, it would be his turn.

"I hear you don't like the SWAT program," Chin said next.

"Not all that much. It's good for planning movement and stuff, but not so good for the takedowns."

"We've been using it for years," Covington said. "Much better than it used to be."

"I'd prefer live targets and MILES gear," Chavez persisted. He referred to the training system the U.S. military often used, in which every soldier had laser-receivers mounted on his body.

"Not as good at close range as at long," Peter informed his colleague.

"Oh, never used it that way," Ding had to admit. "But as a practical matter, once we get close, it's decided. Our people don't miss many targets."

"True," Covington conceded. Just then came the *crack* of a sniper rifle. Rainbow's long-riflemen were practicing over on the thousand-yard range, competing to see who could fire the smallest group. The current leader was Homer Johnston, Ding's Rifle Two-One, an eighth of an inch better than Sam Houston, Covington's leading longrifleman, at five hundred yards—at which range either could put ten consecutive shots inside a two-inch circle, which was considerably smaller than the human head both men practiced exploding with their hollow-point match rounds. The fact of the matter was that two misses from any of the Rainbow shooters in a given week of drills was remarkable, and usually explained by tripping on something in the shooting house. The riflemen had yet to miss *anything,* of course. The problem with their mission wasn't shooting. It was getting in close enough—more than that, making a well-timed decision to move and take down the subjects, for which they most often depended on Dr. Paul Bellow. The shooting part, which they practiced daily, was the tensest part, to be sure, but also technically and operationally the easiest. It seemed perverse in that respect, but theirs was a perverse business.

"Anything on the threat board?" Covington asked.

"I was just heading over, but I doubt it, Peter." Whatever bad guys were still thinking about making mischief somewhere in Europe had seen TV coverage of the Bern bank, and that would have calmed them down some, both team leaders thought.

"Very good, Ding. I have some paperwork to do," Covington said, heading back inside his building. On that cue, Chin tossed his cigar into the smokers'

bucket and did the same.

Chavez continued his walk to the headquarters building, returning the salute of the door guard as he went inside. The Brits sure saluted funny, he thought. Once inside, he found Major Bennett at his desk.

"Hey, Sam,"

"Good morning, Ding. Coffee?" The Air Force officer gestured to his urn.

"No, thanks. Anything happening anywhere?"

A shake of the head. "Quiet day. Not even much in the way of crime."

Bennett's primary sources for normal criminal activity were the teleprinters for the various European news services. Experience showed that the services notified those who were interested about illegal activity more quickly than the official channels, which generally sent information via secure fax from the American or British embassies across Europe. With that input source quiet, Bennett was working on his computerized list of known terrorists, shifting through the photos and written summaries of what was positively known about these people (generally not much) and what was suspected (not much more).

"What's this? Who's that?" Ding asked, pointing at the computer.

"A new toy we're using. Got it from the FBI. It ages the subject photos. This one is Petra Dortmund. We only have two photos of her, both almost fifteen years old. So, I'm aging her by fifteen years, playing with hair color, too. Nice thing about women—no beards," Bennett observed with a chuckle. "And they're usually too vain to pork up, like our pal Carlos did. This one, check out the eyes."

"Not a girl I'd try to pick up in a bar," Chavez observed.

"Probably a bad lay anyway, Domingo," Clark said from behind. "That's impressive stuff, Sam."

"Yes, sir. Just set it up this morning. Noonan got it for me from Headquarters Division Technical Services. They invented it to help ID kidnap victims years after they disappeared. It's been pretty useful for that. Then somebody figured that if it worked on children growing up, why not try it on grown-up hoods. Helped 'em find a top-ten bank robber earlier this year. Anyhow, here's what Fräulein Dortmund probably looks like now."

"What's the name of her significant other?"

"Hans Fürchtner." Bennett played with his computer mouse to bring up that photo. "Christ, this must be his high-school yearbook pictorial." Then he scanned the words accompanying the photo. "Okay, likes to drink beer . . . so, let's give him another fifteen pounds." In seconds, the photo changed. "Mustache . . . beard . . ." And then there were four photos for this one.

"These two must get along just great," Chavez noted, remembering his file on the pair. "Assuming they're still together." That started a thought moving, and Chavez walked over to Dr. Bellow's office.

"Hey, doc."

Bellow looked up from his computer. "Good morning, Ding. What can I do for you?"

"We were just looking at photos of two bad guys, Petra von Dortmund and Hans Fürchtner. I got a question for you."

"Shoot," Bellow replied.

"How likely are people like that to stay together?"

Bellow blinked a little, then leaned back in his chair. "Not a bad question at all. Those two . . . I did the evaluation for their active files. . . . They're probably still together. Their political ideology is probably a unifying factor, an important part of their commitment to each other. Their belief system is what brought them together in the first place, and in a psychological sense they took their wedding vows when they acted out on it—their terrorist jobs. As I recall, they are suspected to have kidnapped and killed a soldier, among other things, and activity like that creates a strong interpersonal bond."

"But most of the people, you say, are sociopaths," Ding objected. "And sociopaths don't—"

"Been reading my books?" Bellow asked with a smile. "Ever hear the one about how when two people marry they become as one?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So in a case like this, it's real. They *are* sociopaths, but ideology gives their deviance an ethos—and *that* makes it important. Because of that, sharing the ideology makes them one, and their sociopathic tendencies merge. For those two, I would suspect a fairly stable married relationship. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that they were formally married, in fact, but probably not in a church," he added with a smile.

"Stable marriage . . . kids?"

Bellow nodded. "Possible. Abortion is illegal in Germany—the Western part, I think, still. Would they choose to have kids? . . . That's a good question. I need to think about that."

"I need to learn more about these people. How they think, how they see the world, that sort of thing."

Bellow smiled again, rose from his chair, and walked to his bookcase. He took one of his own books and tossed it to Chavez. "Try that for starters. It's a text at the FBI academy, and it got me over here a few years ago to lecture to the SAS. I guess it got me into this business."

"Thanks, doc." Chavez hefted the book for weight and headed out the door. *The Enraged Outlook: Inside the Terrorist Mind* was the title. It wouldn't hurt to understand them a little better, though he figured the best thing about the inside of a terrorist's mind was a 185-grain 10-mm hollow-point bullet entering at high speed.

Popov could not give them a phone number to call. It would have been grossly unprofessional. Even a cellular phone whose ownership had been carefully concealed would give police agencies a paper—even deadlier today, an electronic—trail that they could run down, much to his potential embarrassment. And so he called them every few days at their number. They didn't know how that was handled, though there were ways to step a long-distance call through multiple instruments.

"I have the money. Are you prepared?"

"Hans is there now, checking things out," Petra replied. "I expect we can be ready in forty-eight hours. What of your end?"

"All is in readiness. I will call you in two days," he said, breaking the connection. He walked out of the phone booth at Charles De Gaulle

International Airport and headed toward the taxi stand, carrying his attaché case, which was largely full of hundred D-mark banknotes. He found himself impatient for the currency change in Europe. The equivalent amount of euros would be much easier to obtain than the multiple currencies of Europe.

CHAPTER 7

FINANCE

It was unusual for a European to work out of his home, but Ostermann did. It was large, a former baronial *schloss* (translated as "castle," though in this case "palace" would have been more accurate) thirty kilometers outside Vienna. Erwin Ostermann liked the *schloss;* it was totally in keeping with his stature in the financial community. It was a dwelling of six thousand square meters divided into three floors, on a thousand hectares of land, most of which was the side of a mountain steep enough to afford his own skiing slopes. In the summer, he allowed local farmers to graze their sheep and goats there . . . not unlike what the peasants once indentured to the *schloss* had done for the *Herr,* to keep the grass down to a reasonable height. Well, it was far more democratic now, wasn't it? It even gave him a break on the complex taxes put in place by the leftwing government of his country, and more to the point, it looked good.

His personal car was a Mercedes stretch—two of them, in fact—and a Porsche when he felt adventurous enough to drive himself to the nearby village for drinks and dinner in the outstanding *Gasthaus* there. He was a tall man, one meter eighty-six centimeters, with regal gray hair and a trim, fit figure that looked good on the back of one of his Arabian horses—you couldn't live in a home such as this one without horses, of course. Or when holding a business conference in a suit made in Italy or on London's Savile Row. His office, on the second floor had been the spacious library of the original owner and eight of his descendants, but it was now aglow with computer displays linked to the world's financial markets and arrayed on the credenza behind a desk.

After a light breakfast, he headed upstairs to his office, where three employees, two female and one male, kept him supplied with coffee, breakfast pastry, and information. The room was large and suitable for entertaining a group of twenty or so. The walnut-paneled walls were covered with bookshelves filled with books that had been conveyed with the *schloss,* and whose titles Ostermann had never troubled himself to examine. He read the financial papers rather than literature, and in his spare time caught movies in a private screening room in the basement—a former wine-cellar converted to the purpose. All in all, he was a man who lived a comfortable and private life in the most comfortable and private of surroundings. On his desk when he sat down was a list of people to visit him today. Three bankers and two traders like himself, the former to discuss loans for a new business he was underwriting, and the latter to seek his counsel on market trends. It fed Ostermann's already sizable ego to be consulted on such things, and he

welcomed all manner of guests.

Popov stepped off his airliner and walked onto the concourse alone, like any other businessman, carrying his attaché case with its combination lock, and not a single piece of metal inside, lest some magnetometer operator ask him to open it and so reveal the paper currency inside—terrorists had really ruined air travel for everyone, the former KGB officer thought to himself. Were someone to make the baggage-scanners more sophisticated, enough to count money inside carry-on baggage, for example, it would further put a dent in the business affairs of many people, including himself. Traveling by train was *so* boring.

Their tradecraft was good. Hans was at his designated location, sitting there, reading *Der Spiegel* and wearing the agreed-upon brown leather jacket, and he saw Dmitriy Arkadeyevich, carrying his black attaché case in his left hand, striding down the concourse with all the other business travelers. Fürchtner finished his coffee and left to follow him, trailing Popov by about twenty meters, angling off to the left so that they took different exits, crossing over to the parking garage by different walkways. Popov allowed his head to turn left and right, caught Hans on the first sweep and observed how he moved. The man had to be tense, Popov knew. Betrayal was how most of the people like Fürchtner got caught, and though Dmitriy was known and trusted by them, you could *only* be betrayed by someone whom you trusted, a fact known to every covert operator in the world. And though they knew Popov both by sight and reputation, they couldn't read minds—which, of course, worked quite well for Popov in this case. He allowed himself a quiet smile as he walked into the parking garage, turned left, stopped as though disoriented, and then looked around for any overt signs that *he* was being followed before finding his bearings and moving on his way. Fürchtner's car proved to be in a distant corner on the first level, a blue Volkswagen Golf.

"Guten Tag," he said, on sitting in the right-front seat.

"Good morning, Herr Popov," Fürchtner replied in English. It was American in character and almost without accent. He must have watched a lot of television, Dmitriy thought.

The Russian dialed the combinations into the locks of the case, opened the lid, and placed it in his host's lap. "You should find everything in order."

"Bulky," the man observed.

"It is a sizable sum," Popov agreed.

Just then suspicion appeared in Fürchtner's eyes. That surprised the Russian, until he thought about it for a moment. The KGB had never been lavish in their payments to their agents, but in this attaché case was enough cash to enable two people to live comfortably in any of several African countries for a period of some years. Hans was just realizing that, Dmitriy saw, and while part of the German was content just to take the money, the smart portion of his brain suddenly wondered where the money had come from. Better not to wait for the question, Dmitriy thought.

"Ah, yes," Popov said quietly. "As you know, many of my colleagues have outwardly turned capitalist in order to survive in my country's new political environment. But we are still the Sword and Shield of the Party, my young

friend. That has not changed. It is ironic, I grant you, that now we are better able to compensate our friends for their services. It turns out to be less expensive than maintaining the safe houses which you once enjoyed. I personally find that amusing. In any case, here is your payment, in cash, in advance, in the amount you specified."

"Danke," Hans Fürchtner observed, staring down into the attaché case's ten centimeters of depth. Then he hefted the case. "It's heavy."

"True," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich agreed. "But it could be worse. I might have paid you in gold," he joked, to lighten the moment, then decided to make his own play. "Too heavy to carry on the mission?"

"It *is* a complication, Iosef Andreyevich."

"Well, I can hold the money for you and come to you to deliver it upon the completion of your mission. That is your choice, though I do not recommend it."

"Why is that?" Hans asked.

"Honestly, it makes me nervous to travel with so much cash. The West, well, what if I am robbed? This money is *my* responsibility," he replied theatrically.

Fürchtner found that very amusing. "Here, in Österreich, robbed on the street? My friend, these capitalist sheep are very closely regulated."

"Besides, I do not even know where you will be going, and I really do not need to know—at this time, anyway."

"The Central African Republic is our ultimate destination. We have a friend there who graduated Patrice Lumumba University back in the sixties. He trades in arms to progressive elements. He will put us up for a while, until Petra and I can find suitable housing."

They were either very brave or very foolish to go to that country, Popov thought. Not so long before it had been called the Central African Empire, and had been ruled by "Emperor Bokassa I," a former colonel in the French colonial army, which had once garrisoned this small, poor nation. Bokassa had killed his way to the top, as had so many African chiefs of state, before dying, remarkably enough, of natural causes—so the papers said, anyway; you could never really be sure, could you? The country he'd left behind, a small diamond producer, was somewhat better off economically than was the norm on the dark continent, though not by much. But then, who was to say that Hans and Petra would ever get there?

"Well, my friend, it is your decision," Popov said, patting the attaché case still open in Fürchtner's lap.

The German considered that for half a minute or so. "I have seen the money," he concluded, to his guest's utter delight. Fürchtner lifted a thousand-note packet of the cash and riffled it like a deck of cards before putting it back. Next he scribbled a note and placed it inside the case. "There is the name. We will be with him starting . . . late tomorrow, I imagine. All is ready on your end?"

"The American aircraft carrier is in the eastern Mediterranean. Libya will allow your aircraft to pass without interference, but will not allow overflights of any NATO aircraft following you. Instead, their air force will provide the coverage and will lose you due to adverse weather conditions. I will advise you not to use more violence than is necessary. Press and diplomatic pressure

has more strength today than it once did."

"We have thought that one through," Hans assured his guest.

Popov wondered briefly about that. But he'd be surprised if they even boarded an aircraft, much less got it to Africa. The problem with "missions" like this one was that no matter how carefully most of its parts had been considered, this chain was decidedly no stronger than its weakest link, and the strength of *that* link was all too often determined by others, or by chance, which was even worse. Hans and Petra were believers in their political philosophy, and like earlier people who'd believed so much in their religious faith so as to take the most absurd of chances, they would pretend to plan this "mission" through with their limited resources—and when you got down to it, their only resource was their willingness to apply violence to the world; and lots of people had that—and substitute hope for expectations, belief for knowledge. They would accept random chance, one of their deadliest enemies, as a neutral element, when a true professional would have sought to eliminate it entirely.

And so their belief structure was really a blindfold, or perhaps a set of blinkers, which denied the two Germans the ability to look objectively at a world that had passed them by, and to which they were unwilling to adapt. But for Popov the real meaning of this was their willingness to let him hold the money. Dmitriy Arkadeyevich had adapted himself quite well to changing circumstances.

"Are you sure, my young friend?"

"Ja, I am sure." Fürchtner closed the case, reset the locks, and passed it over to Popov's lap. The Russian accepted the responsibility with proper gravity.

"I will guard this carefully." *All the way to my bank in Bern.* Then he extended his hand. "Good luck, and please be careful."

"Danke. We will get you the information you require."

"My employer needs that badly, Hans. We depend on you." Dmitriy left the car and walked back in the direction of the terminal, where he'd get a taxi to his hotel. He wondered when Hans and Petra would make their move. Perhaps today? Were they *that* precipitous? No, he thought, they would say that they were that *professional.* The young fools.

Sergeant First Class Homer Johnston extracted the bolt from his rifle, which he lifted to examine the bore. The ten shots had dirtied it some, but not much, and there was no erosion damage that he could see in the throat forward of the chamber. None was to be expected until he'd fired a thousand or so rounds, and he'd only put five hundred forty through it to this point. Still, in another week or so he'd have to start using a fiber-optic instrument to check, because the 7-mm Remington Magnum cartridge did develop high temperatures when fired, and the excessive heat burned up barrels a little faster than he would have preferred. In a few months, he'd have to replace the barrel, a tedious and fairly difficult exercise even for a skilled armorer, which he was. The difficulty was in matching the barrel perfectly with the receiver, which would then require fifty or so rounds on the known-distance range to make sure that it delivered its rounds as accurately as it was intended to do. But that was in the future. Johnston sprayed a moderate amount of Break-Free

onto the cleaning patch and ran it through the barrel, back to front. The patch came out dirty. He removed it from the cleaning rod, then put a new one on the tip, and repeated the motion six times until the last patch came through totally clean. A final clean patch dried the bore of the select-grade Hart barrel, though the Break-Free cleaning solvent left a thin—not much more than a molecule's thickness—coating of silicon on the steel, which protected against corrosion without altering the microscopic tolerances of the barrel. Finished and satisfied, he replaced the bolt, closing it on an empty chamber with the final act of pulling the trigger, which de-cocked the rifle as it dropped the bolt into proper position.

He loved the rifle, though somewhat surprisingly he hadn't named it. Built by the same technicians who made sniper rifles for the United States Secret Service, it was a 7-mm Remington Magnum caliber, with a Remington match-quality receiver, a select-grade Hart barrel, and Leupold ten-power Gold Ring telescopic sight, all married to an ugly Kevlar stock—wood would have been much prettier, but wood warped over time, whereas Kevlar was dead, chemically inert, unaffected by moisture or time. Johnston had just proven, again, that his rifle could fire at about one quarter of a minute of angle's accuracy, meaning that he could fire three consecutive rounds inside the diameter of a nickel at one hundred yards. Someday somebody might design a laser weapon, Johnston thought, and maybe that could improve on the accuracy of this handmade rifle. But nothing else could. At a range of one thousand yards, he could put three consecutive rounds into a circle of four inches—that required more than a rifle. That meant gauging the wind for speed and direction to compensate for drift-deflection. It also meant controlling his breathing and the way his finger touched the two-and-a-half-pound double-set trigger. His cleanup tasks done, Johnston lifted the rifle and carried it to its place in the gun vault, which was climate-controlled, and nestled it where it belonged before going back to the bullpen. The target he'd shot was on his desk.

Homer Johnston lifted it. He'd shot three rounds at 400 meters, three at 500, two at 700, and his last two at 900. All ten were inside the head-shape of the silhouette target, meaning that all ten would have been instantly fatal to a human target. He shot only cartridges that he'd loaded himself: Sierra 175-grain hollow-point boat-tailed match bullets traveling in front of 63.5 grains of IMR 4350 smokeless powder seemed to be the best combination for that particular rifle, taking 1.7 seconds to reach a target 1,000 yards downrange. That was an awfully long time, especially against a moving target, Sergeant Johnston thought, but it couldn't be helped. A hand came down on his shoulder.

"Homer," a familiar voice said.

"Yeah, Dieter," Johnston said, without looking up from the target. He was in the zone, all the way in. Shame it wasn't hunting season.

"You did better than me today. The wind was good for you." It was Weber's favorite excuse. He knew guns pretty well for a European, Homer thought, but guns were American things, and that was that.

"I keep telling you, that semiautomatic action doesn't headspace properly." Both of Weber's 900-meter rounds were marginal. They would have

incapacitated the target, but not definitely killed it, even though they scored as hits. Johnston was the best rifle in Rainbow, even better than Houston, by about half a cunt hair on a good day, Homer admitted to himself.

"I like to get my second round off more quickly than you," Weber pointed out. And that was the end of the argument. Soldiers were as loyal to their firearms as they were to their religions. The German was far better in rate of fire with his golliwog Walther sniper rifle, but that weapon didn't have the inherent accuracy of a bolt-action and also fired a less-speedy cartridge. The two riflemen had debated the point over many a beer already, and neither would ever move the other.

In any case, Weber patted his holster. "Some pistol, Homer?"

"Yeah." Johnston stood. "Why not?" Handguns were not serious weapons for serious work, but they were fun, and the rounds were free here. Weber had him faded in handguns by about one percent or so. On the way to the range, they passed Chavez, Price and the rest, coming out with their MP-10s, joking with one another as they passed. Evidently everyone had had a good morning on the range.

"Ach," Weber snorted, "anyone can shoot at five meters!"

"Morning, Robert," Homer said to the rangemaster. "Want to set up some Qs for us?"

"Quite so, Sergeant Johnston," Dave Woods replied, grabbing two of the American-style targets—called "Q targets" for the letter Q in the middle, about where the heart would be. Then he got a third for himself. A lavishly mustached color sergeant in the British Army military police regiment, he was pretty damned good with a 9-mm Browning. The targets motored down to the ten-meter line and turned sideways while the three sergeants donned their ear-protectors. Woods was, technically, a pistol instructor, but the quality of the men at Hereford made that a dull job, and as a result he himself fired close to a thousand rounds per week, perfecting his own skills. He was known to shoot with the men of Rainbow, and to challenge them to friendly competition, which, to the dismay of the shooters, was almost a break-even proposition. Woods was a traditionalist and held his pistol in one hand, as Weber did, though Johnston preferred the two-hand Weaver stance. The targets turned without warning, and three handguns came up to address them.

The home of Erwin Ostermann was magnificent, Hans Fürchtner thought for the tenth time, just the sort of thing for an arrogant class-enemy. Their research into the target hadn't revealed any aristocratic lineage for the current owner of this *schloss,* but he doubtless thought of himself in those terms. For now, Hans thought, as he turned onto the two-kilometer driveway of brown gravel and drove past the manicured gardens and bushes arranged with geometric precision by workers who were at the moment nowhere to be seen. Pulling up close to the palace, he stopped the rented Mercedes and turned right, as though looking for a parking place. Coming around the rear of the building, he saw the Sikorsky S-76B helicopter they'd be using later, sitting on the usual asphalt pad with a yellow circle painted on it. Good. Fürchtner continued the circuit around the *schloss* and parked in front, about fifty meters from the main entrance.

"Are you ready, Petra?"

"Ja" was her terse, tense reply. It had been years since either had run an operation, and the immediate reality of it was different from the planning they'd spent a week to accomplish, going over charts and diagrams. There were things they did not yet know for certain, like the exact number of servants in the building. They started walking to the front door when a delivery truck came up, arriving there just as they did. The truck doors opened, and two men got out, both carrying large boxes in their arms. One waved to Hans and Petra to go up the stone steps, which they did. Hans hit the button, and a moment later the door opened.

"Guten Tag," Hans said. "We have an appointment with Herr Ostermann."

"Your name?"

"Bauer," Fürchtner said. "Hans Bauer."

"Flower delivery," one of the other two men said.

"Please come in. I will call Herr Ostermann," the butler—whatever he was—said.

"Danke," Fürchtner replied, waving for Petra to precede him through the ornate door. The deliverymen came in behind, carrying their boxes. The butler closed the door, then turned to walk left toward a phone. He lifted it and started to punch a button. Then he stopped.

"Why don't you take us upstairs?" Petra asked. There was a pistol in her hand aimed right into his face.

"What is this?"

"This," Petra Dortmund replied with a warm smile, "is my appointment." It was a Walther P-38 automatic pistol.

The butler swallowed hard as he saw the deliverymen open their boxes and reveal light submachine guns, which they loaded in front of him. Then one of them opened the front door and waved. In seconds, two more young men entered, both similarly armed.

Fürchtner ignored the new arrivals, and took a few steps to look around. They were in the large entrance foyer, its high, four-meter walls covered with artwork. Late Renaissance, he thought, noteworthy artists, but not true masters, large paintings of domestic scenes in gilt frames, which were in their way more impressive than the paintings themselves. The floor was white marble with black-diamond inserts at the joins, the furniture also largely gilt and French-looking. More to the point, there were no other servants in view, though he could hear a distant vacuum cleaner working. Fürchtner pointed to the two most recent arrivals and pointed them west on the first floor. The kitchen was that way, and there would doubtless be people there to control.

"Where is Herr Ostermann?" Petra asked next.

"He is not here, he—"

This occasioned a movement of her pistol, right against his mouth. "His automobiles and helicopter are here. Now, tell us where he is."

"In the library, upstairs."

"Gut. Take us there," she ordered. The butler looked into her eyes for the first time and found them far more intimidating than the pistol in her hand. He nodded and turned toward the main staircase.

This, too, was gilt, with a rich red carpet held in place with brass bars,

sweeping on an elegant curve to the right as they climbed to the second floor. Ostermann was a wealthy man, a quintessential capitalist who'd made his fortune trading shares in various industrial concerns, never taking ownership in one, a string-puller, Petra Dortmund thought, a *Spinne,* a spider, and this was the center of his web, and they'd entered it of their own accord, and here the spider would learn a few things about webs and traps.

More paintings on the staircase, she saw, far larger than anything she'd ever done, paintings of men, probably the men who'd built and lived in this massive edifice, this monument to greed and exploitation . . . she already hated its owner who lived so well, so opulently, so publicly proclaiming that he was better than everyone else while he built up his wealth and exploited the ordinary workers. At the top of the staircase was a huge oil portrait of the Emperor Franz Josef himself, the last of his wretched line, who'd died just a few years before the even more hated Romanovs. The butler, this worker for the evil one, turned right, leading them down a wide hall into a doorless room. Three people were there, a man and two women, better dressed than the butler, all working away at computers.

"This is Herr Bauer," the butler said in a shaky voice. "He wishes to see Herr Ostermann."

"You have an appointment?" the senior secretary asked.

"You will take us in *now,"* Petra announced. Then the gun came into view, and the three people in the anteroom stopped what they were doing and looked at the intruders with open mouths and pale faces.

Ostermann's home was several hundred years old, but not entirely a thing of the past. The male secretary—in America he would have been called an executive assistant—was named Gerhardt Dengler. Under the edge of his desk was an alarm button. He thumbed this hard and long while he stared at the visitors. The wire led to the *schloss*'s central alarm panel, and from there to the alarm company. Twenty kilometers away, the employees at the central station responded to the buzzer and flashing light by immediately calling the office of the *Staatspolizei.* Then one of them called the *schloss* for confirmation.

"May I answer it?" Gerhardt asked Petra, who seemed to him to be in charge. He got a nod and lifted the receiver.

"Herr Ostermann's office."

"Hier ist Traudl," the alarm company's secretary said.

"Guten Tag, Traudl. Hier ist Gerhardt," the executive assistant said. "Have you called about the horse?" That was the phrase for serious trouble, called a duress code.

"Yes, when is the foal due?" she asked, carrying on to protect the man on the other end, should someone be listening in on the line.

"A few more weeks, still. We will tell you when the time comes," he told her brusquely, staring at Petra and her pistol.

"Danke, Gerhardt. *Auf Wiederhören."* With that, she hung up and waved to her watch supervisor.

"It is about the horses," he explained to Petra. "We have a mare in foal and—"

"Silence," Petra said quietly, waving for Hans to approach the double doors

into Ostermann's office. So far, she thought, so good. There was even some cause for amusement. Ostermann was right through those double doors, doing the work he did as though things were entirely normal, when they decidedly were not. Well, now it was time for him to find out. She pointed to the executive assistant. "Your name is? . . ."

"Dengler," the man replied. "Gerhardt Dengler."

"Take us in, Herr Dengler," she suggested, in a strangely childlike voice.

Gerhardt rose from his desk and walked slowly to the double doors, head down, his movements wooden, as though his knees were artificial. Guns did that to people, Dortmund and Fürchtner knew. The secretary turned the knobs and pushed, revealing Ostermann's office.

The desk was huge, gilt like everything else in the building, and sat on a huge red wool rug. Erwin Ostermann had his back to them, head down examining some computer display or other.

"Herr Ostermann?" Dengler said.

"Yes, Gerhardt?" was the reply, delivered in an even voice, and when there was no response, the man turned in his swivel chair—

—"What is this?" he asked, his blue eyes going very wide when he saw the visitors, and then wider still when he saw the guns. "Who—"

"We are commanders of the Red Workers' Faction," Fürchtner informed the trader. "And you are our prisoner."

"But—what is this?"

"You and we will be taking a trip. If you behave yourself, you will come to no harm. If you do not, you and others will be killed. Is that clear?" Petra asked. To make sure it was, she again aimed her pistol at Dengler's head.

What followed then could have been scripted in a movie. Ostermann's head snapped left and right, looking for something, probably help of some sort, which was not to be seen. Then he looked back at Hans and Petra and his face contorted itself into shock and disbelief. *This* could not be happening to *him.* Not *here,* not in *his own office.* Next came the outraged denial of the facts he could see before him . . . and then, finally, came fear. The process lasted five or six seconds. It was always the same. She'd seen it before, and realized that she'd forgotten how pleasurable it was to behold. Ostermann's hands balled into fists on the leather surface of his desk, then relaxed as his body realized how powerless it was. Trembling would start soon, depending on how much courage he might have. Petra didn't anticipate a great deal of that. He looked tall, even sitting down, thin—regal, even, in his white shirt with the starched collar and striped tie. The suit was clearly expensive, Italian silk, probably, finely tailored just for him. Under the desk would be custom-made shoes, polished by a servant. Behind him she could see lines of data marching upward on the computer screens. Here Ostermann was, in the center of his web, and scarcely a minute before he'd been totally at ease, feeling himself invincible, master of his fate, moving money around the world, adding to his fortune. Well, no more of that for a while—probably forever, though Petra had no intention of telling him that until the last possible second, the better to see the shock and terror on his regal face just before the eyes went blank and empty.

She had forgotten how it was, Petra realized, the sheer joy of the power she

held in her hands. How had she ever gone so long without exercising it?

The first police car to arrive on the scene had been only five kilometers away on getting the radio call. Reversing direction and racing to the *schloss* had only taken three minutes, and now it parked behind a tree, almost totally concealed from the house.

"I see a car and a delivery truck," the officer told his station chief, a captain. "No movement. Nothing else to be seen at the moment."

"Very well," the captain replied. "Take no action of any kind, and report any new developments to me at once. I will be there in a few minutes."

"Understood. *Ende."*

The captain replaced the microphone. He was driving to the scene himself, alone in his Audi radio car. He'd met Ostermann once, at some official function in Vienna. Just a shake of the hand and a few cursory words, but he knew what the man looked like, and knew his reputation as a wealthy, civic-minded individual who was an especially faithful supporter of the opera . . . and the children's hospital, wasn't he? . . . Yes, that had been the reason for the reception at the city hall. Ostermann was a widower, had lost his first wife to ovarian cancer five years earlier. Now, it was said, he had a new interest in his life named Ursel von Prinze, a lovely dark-haired woman from an old family. That was the odd thing about Ostermann. He lived like a member of the nobility, but he'd come from humble roots. His father had been . . . an engineer, engine-driver actually, in the state railway, wasn't it? Yes, that was right. And so some of the old noble families had looked down on him, and to take care of that he'd bought social respectability with his charity work and his attendance at the opera. Despite the grandeur of his home, he lived fairly modestly. Little in the way of lavish entertaining. A quiet, modestly dignified man, and a very intelligent one, so they said of him. But now, his alarm company said, he had intruders in the house, Captain Willi Altmark told himself, taking the last turn and seeing the *schloss.* As often as he'd noticed it in passing, he had to remind himself now of the physical circumstances. A huge structure . . . perhaps four hundred meters of clear grass lawn between it and the nearest trees. Not good. Approaching the house covertly would be extremely difficult. He pulled his Audi close to the marked police car on the scene, and got out carrying a pair of binoculars.

"Captain," the first officer said by way of greeting.

"Have you seen anything?"

"No movement of any kind. Not even a curtain."

Altmark took a minute to sweep his binoculars over the building, then lifted the radio mike to tell all units en route to come quietly and slowly so as not to alert the criminals inside. Then he got a radio call from his superior, asking for his assessment of the situation.

"This may be a job for the military," Captain Altmark responded. "We know nothing at the moment. I can see an automobile and a truck. Nothing else. No gardeners out. Nothing. But I can only see two walls, and nothing behind the main house. I will get a perimeter set up as soon as additional units arrive."

"Ja. Make certain that no one can see us," the commissioner told the captain, quite unnecessarily.

"Yes, of course."

Inside, Ostermann had yet to rise from his chair. He took a moment to close his eyes, thanking God that Ursel was in London at the moment, having flown there in the private jet to do some shopping and meet with English friends. He'd hoped to join her there the following day, and now he wondered if he'd ever see his fiancée again. Twice he'd been approached by security consultants, an Austrian and a Brit. Both had lectured him on the implicit dangers of being so publicly rich, and told him how for a modest sum, less than £500,000 per year, he could greatly improve his personal security. The Britisher had explained that his people were all veterans of the SAS; the Austrian had employed Germans formerly of GSG-9. But he hadn't seen the need for employing gun-carrying commandos who would hover over him everywhere he went as though he were a chief of state, taking up space and just sitting there like—like bodyguards, Ostermann told himself. As a trader in stocks, commodities, and international currencies he'd had his share of missed opportunities, but this one . . .

"What do you want of me?"

"We want your personal access codes to the international trading network," Fürchtner told him. Hans was surprised to see the look of puzzlement on Ostermann's face.

"What do you mean?"

"The computer-access codes which tell you what is going on."

"But those are public already. Anyone can have them," Ostermann objected.

"Yes, certainly they are. That is why everyone has a house like this one." Petra managed an amused sneer.

"Herr Ostermann," Fürchtner said patiently. "We know there is a special network for people such as you, so that you can take advantage of special market conditions and profit by them. You think us fools?"

The fear that transformed the trader's face amused his two office guests. Yes, they knew what they weren't supposed to know, and they knew they could force him to give over the information. His thoughts were plain on his face.

Oh, my God, they think I have access to something that does not exist, and I will never be able to persuade them otherwise.

"We know how people like you operate," Petra assured him, immediately confirming his fear. "How you capitalists share information and manipulate your 'free' markets for your own greedy ends. Well, you will share that with us —or you will die, along with your lackeys." She waved her pistol at the outer office.

"I see." Ostermann's face was now as pale as his white Turnbull and Asser shirt. He looked out to the anteroom. He could see Gerhardt Dengler there, his hands on the top of his desk. Wasn't there an alarm system there? Ostermann couldn't remember now, so rapidly was his mind running through the data-avalanche that had so brutally interrupted his day.

The first order of police business was to check the license-plate numbers of the vehicles parked close to the house. The automobile, they learned at once, was

a rental. The truck tags had been stolen two days before. A detective team would go to the car-rental agency immediately to see what they might learn there. The next call was made to one of Herr Ostermann's business associates. The police needed to know how many domestic and clerical employees might be in the building along with the owner. That, Captain Altmark imagined, would take about an hour. He now had three additional police cars under his command. One of these looped around the property so that the two officers could park and approach from the rear on foot. Twenty minutes after arriving on the scene, he had a perimeter forming. The first thing he learned was that Ostermann owned a helicopter, sitting there behind the house. It was an American-made Sikorsky S-76B, capable of carrying a crew of two and a maximum of thirteen passengers—that information gave him the maximum number of hostages to be moved and criminals to move them. The helicopter landing pad was two hundred meters from the house. Altmark fixed on that. The criminals would almost certainly want to use the helicopter as their getaway vehicle. Unfortunately, the landing pad was a good three hundred meters from the treeline. This meant that some really good riflemen were needed, but his preset response team had them.

Soon after getting the information on the helicopter, one of his people turned up the flight crew, one at home, one at Schwechat International Airport doing some paperwork with the manufacturer's representative for an aircraft modification. Good, Willi Altmark thought, the helicopter wasn't going anywhere just yet. But by then the fact that Erwin Ostermann's house had been attacked had perked up to the senior levels of government, and then he received a very surprising radio call from the head of the *Staatspolizei.*

They barely made the flight—more precisely, the flight hadn't been delayed on their account. Chavez tightened his seat belt as the 737 pulled back from the jetway, and went over the preliminary briefing documents with Eddie Price. They'd just rolled off the tarmac when Price mated his portable computer with the aircraft's phone system. That brought up a diagram on his screen, with the caption "Schloss Ostermann."

"So, who is this guy?" Chavez asked.

"Coming in now, sir," Price replied. "A money-lender, it would appear, rather a wealthy one, friend of the prime minister of his country. I guess that explains matters so far as we are concerned."

"Yeah," Chavez agreed. *Two in a row for Team-2* was what he thought. A little over an hour's flight time to Vienna, he thought next, checking his watch. One such incident was happenstance, Chavez told himself, but terrorist incidents weren't supposed to happen so closely together, were they? Not that there was a rulebook out there, of course, and even if there were such a thing, these people would have violated it. Still . . . but there was no time for such thoughts. Instead, Chavez examined the information coming into Price's laptop and started wondering how he'd deal with this new situation. Farther aft, his team occupied a block of economy seats and spent their time reading paperback books, hardly talking at all about the upcoming job, since they knew nothing to talk about except where they were going.

"Bloody large perimeter for us to cover," Price observed, after a few minutes.

"Any information on the opposition?" Ding asked, then wondered how it was that he was adopting Britspeak. *Opposition?* He should have said *bad guys.*

"None," Eddie replied. "No identification, no word on their numbers."

"Great," the leader of Team-2 observed, still staring sideways at the screen.

The phones were trapped. Altmark had seen to that early on. Incoming calls were given busy signals, and outgoing calls would be recorded at the central telephone exchange—but there had been none, which suggested to Captain Altmark that the criminals were all inside, since they were not seeking external help. That could have meant they were using cellular phones, of course, and he didn't have the equipment to intercept those, though he did have similar traps on Ostermann's three known cellular accounts.

The *Staatspolizei* now had thirty officers on the scene and a tight perimeter fully formed and punctuated by a four-wheel armored vehicle, hidden in the trees. They'd stopped one delivery truck from coming in with some overnight express mail, but no other vehicles had attempted to enter the property. For one so wealthy, Ostermann did indeed lead a quiet and unassuming life, the captain thought. He'd expected a constant parade of vehicles.

• • •

"Hans?"

"Yes, Petra?"

"The phones have not rung. We've been here for some time, but the phones have not rung."

"Most of my work is on computer," Ostermann said, having noted the same discrepancy himself. Had Gerhardt gotten the word out? If he had done so, was that good? He had no way of knowing. Ostermann had long joked about how cutthroat his profession was, how every step he took had danger, because others out there would try to rob him blind if they ever got the chance . . . but not one of them had ever threatened his life, nor had any ever pointed a loaded gun at him or a member of his staff. Ostermann used his remaining capacity for objectivity to realize that this was a new and dangerous aspect to the world that he'd never seriously considered, about which he knew very little, and against which he had nothing in the way of defenses. His only useful talent at the moment was his ability to read faces and the minds behind them, and though he'd never encountered anyone even vaguely close to the man and woman in his office now, he saw enough to be more afraid than he'd ever been before. The man, and even more the woman, were willing to kill him without any pangs of conscience whatsoever, no more emotion than he showed when picking up a million dollars of American T-bills. Didn't they know that his life had worth? Didn't they know that—

—no, Erwin Ostermann realized, they did not. They didn't know, and they didn't care. Worst of all, what they thought they did know wasn't true, and he

would be hard-pressed indeed to persuade them otherwise.

Then, finally, a phone rang. The woman gestured for him to answer it.

"Hier ist Ostermann," he said on picking up the receiver. His male visitor did the same on another extension.

"Herr Ostermann, I am Captain Wilhelm Altmark of the *Staatspolizei.* You have guests there, I understand."

"Yes, I do, Captain," Ostermann replied.

"Could I speak with them, please?" Ostermann merely looked at Hans Fürchtner.

"You took your time, Altmark," Hans said. "Tell me, how did you find out?"

"I will not ask you about your secrets if you do not ask me about mine," the captain replied cooly. "I would like to know who you are and what you wish."

"I am Commander Wolfgang of the Red Workers' Faction."

"And what is it you want?"

"We want the release of several of our friends from various prisons, and transport to Schwechat International. We require an airliner with a range of more than five thousand kilometers and an international flight crew for a destination which we will make known when we board the aircraft. If we do not have these things by midnight, we will begin to kill some of our . . . our guests here in *Schloss Ostermann."*

"I see. Do you have a list of the prisoners whose release you require?"

Hans put one hand over the receiver and held the other out. "Petra, the list." She walked over and handed it to him. Neither seriously expected any cooperation on this issue, but it was part of the game, and the rules had to be followed. They'd decided on the way in that they'd have to kill one hostage certainly, more probably two, before they got the ride to the airport. The man, Gerhardt Dengler, would be killed first, Hans thought, then one of the women secretaries. Neither he nor Petra really wanted to kill any of the domestic help since they were genuine workers, not capitalist lackeys like the office staff. "Yes, here is the list, Captain Altmark . . ."

"Okay," Price said, "we have a list of people we're expected to liberate for our friends." He turned the computer so that Chavez could see it.

"The usual suspects. Does this tell us anything, Eddie?"

Price shook his head. "Probably not. You can get these names from a newspaper."

"So, why do they do it?"

"Dr. Bellow will explain that they have to, to show solidarity with their compatriots, when in fact they are all sociopaths who don't care a rip for anyone but themselves." Price shrugged. "Cricket has rules. So does terrorism and—" Just then the captain of the airliner interrupted the revelation, and told everyone to put the seat backs up and tray tables away in preparation for landing.

"Showtime soon, Eddie."

"Indeed, Ding."

"So, this is just solidarity bullshit?" Ding asked, tapping the screen.

"Most likely, yes." With that, Price disconnected the phone line from his computer, saved his files, and shut the laptop down. Twelve rows aft, Tim

Noonan did the same. All the Team-2 members started putting on their game faces as the British Airways 737 flared to land in Vienna. Someone had called ahead to someone else. The airliner taxied very rapidly indeed to its assigned jetway, and out his window Chavez could see a baggage truck with cops standing next to it waiting alongside the terminal.

It was not an invisible event. A tower controller noted the arrival, having already noted a few minutes before that a Sabena flight scheduled in a slot ahead of the British aircraft had been given an unnecessary go-around order, and that a very senior police officer was in the tower, expressing interest in the British Airways flight. Then there was a second and very unnecessary baggage train with two police cars close by the A-4 jetway. What was this? he wondered. It required no great effort on his part to keep watch to learn more. He even had a pair of Zeiss binoculars.

The stewardess hadn't received instructions to get Team-2 off more quickly than anyone else, but she suspected there was something odd about them. They'd arrived without having been on her computerized manifest, and they were politer than the average business travelers. Their appearances were unremarkable, except all looked very fit, and all had arrived together in a single bunch, and headed to their seats in an unusually organized way. She had a job to do, however, as she opened the door into the jetway where, she saw, a uniformed policeman was waiting. He didn't smile or speak as she allowed the already-standing passengers to make their way off. Three from first class stopped just outside the aircraft, conferred with the policeman, then went out the door to the service stairs, which led directly to the tarmac. Being a serious fan of thriller and mystery novels, it was worth a look, she thought, to see who else went that way. The total was thirteen, and the number included all of the late-arriving passengers. She looked at their faces, most of which gave her a smile on the way out. Handsome faces, for the most part . . . more than that, manly ones, with expressions that radiated confidence, and something else, something conservative and guarded.

"Au revoir, madam," the last one said as he passed, with a very Gallic evaluative sweep of her figure and a charming smile.

"Christ, Louis," an American voice observed on the way out the side door. "You don't ever turn it off, do you?"

"Is it a crime to look at a pretty woman, George?" Loiselle asked, with a wink.

"Suppose not. Maybe we'll catch her on the flip-side," Sergeant Tomlinson conceded. She was pretty, but Tomlinson was married with four kids. Louis Loiselle never turned it off. Maybe it came along with being French, the American thought. At the bottom, the rest of the team was waiting. Noonan and Steve Lincoln were supervising the baggage transfer.

Three minutes later, Team-2 was in a pair of vans heading off the flight line with a police escort. This was noted by the tower controller, whose brother was a police reporter for a local paper. The cop who'd come to the tower departed without more than a *danke* to the controllers.

Twenty minutes later, the vans stopped outside the main entrance to *Schloss Ostermann.* Chavez walked over to the senior officer.

"Hello, I am Major Chavez. This is Dr. Bellow, and Sergeant Major Price," he said, surprised to receive a salute from—

"Captain Wilhelm Altmark," the man said.

"What do we know?"

"We know there are two criminals inside, probably more, but the number is unknown. You know what their demands are?"

"Airplane to somewhere was the last I heard. Midnight deadline?"

"Correct, no changes in the past hour."

"Anything else. How will we get them to the airport?" Ding asked.

"Herr Ostermann has a private helicopter and pad about two hundred meters behind the house."

"Flight crew?"

"We have them over there." Altmark pointed. "Our friends have not yet asked for the flight, but that seems the most likely method of making the transfer."

"Who's been speaking with them?" Dr. Bellow asked from behind the shorter Chavez.

"I have," Altmark replied.

"Okay, we need to talk, Captain."

Chevez headed over to a van where he could change along with the rest of the team. For this night's mission—the sun was just setting—they wore not black but mottled green coveralls over their body armor. Weapons were issued and loaded, then selector switches went to the SAFE position. Ten minutes later, the team was outside and at the edge of the treeline, everyone with binoculars, checking out the building.

"I guess this here's the right side of the tracks," Homer Johnston observed. "Lotsa windows, Dieter."

"Ja," the German sniper agreed.

"Where you want us, boss?" Homer asked Chavez.

"Far side, both sides, cross fire on the chopper pad. Right now, people, and when you're set up, give me radio calls to check in. You know the drill."

"Everything we see, we call to you, *Herr Major,"* Weber confirmed. Both snipers got their locked rifle cases and headed off to where the local cops had their cars.

"Do we have a layout of the house?" Chavez asked Altmark.

"Layout?" the Austrian cop asked.

"Diagram, map, blueprints," Ding explained.

"Ach, yes, here." Altmark led them to his car. Blueprints were spread on the hood. "Here, as you see, forty-six rooms, not counting the basements."

"Christ," Chavez reacted at once. "More than one basement?"

"Three. Two under the west wing—wine cellar and cold-storage. East wing basement is unused. The doors down to it may be sealed. No basement under the center portion. The *Schloss* was built in the late eighteenth century. Exterior walls and some interior ones are stone."

"Christ, it's a frickin' castle," Ding observed.

"That is what the word *Schloss* means, *Herr Major,"* Altmark informed him.

"Doc?"

Bellow came over. "From what Captain Altmark tells me, they've been pretty businesslike to this point. No hysterical threats. They gave a deadline of midnight for movement to the airport, else they say they will start killing hostages. Their language is German, with a German accent, you said, Captain?"

Altmark nodded. *"Ja,* they are German, not Austrian. We have only one name, Herr Wolfgang—that is generally a Christian name, not a surname in our language, and we have no known criminal-terrorist by that name or pseudonym. Also, he said they are of the Red Workers' Faction, but we have no word on that organization either."

Neither did Rainbow. "So, we don't know very much?" Chavez asked Bellow.

"Not much at all, Ding. Okay," the psychiatrist went on, "what does that mean? It means they are planning to survive this one. It means they're serious businessmen in this game. If they threaten to do something, they will try to do it. They haven't killed anyone yet, and that also means they're pretty smart. No other demands made to this point. They will be coming, probably soon—"

"How do you know that?" Altmark asked. The absence of demands to this point had surprised him.

"When it gets dark, they'll be talking with us more. See how they haven't turned any lights on inside the building?"

"Yes, and what does that mean?"

"It means they think the darkness is their friend, and that means they will try to make use of it. Also, the midnight deadline. When it gets dark, we'll be closer to that."

"Full moon tonight," Price observed. "And not much cloud cover."

"Yeah," Ding noted in some discomfort when he looked up at the sky. "Captain, do you have searchlights we can use?"

"The fire department will have them," Altmark said.

"Could you please order them brought here?"

"Ja . . . Herr Doktor?"

"Yes?" Bellow said.

"They said that if they do not have those things done by midnight they will begin to kill hostages. Do you—"

"Yes, Captain, we have to take that threat very seriously. As I said, these folks are acting like serious people, well-trained and well-disciplined. We can make that work for us."

"How?" Altmark asked. Ding answered.

"We give them what they want, we let them think that they are in control . . . until it is time for us to take control. We feed their pride and their egos while we have to, and then, later, we stop doing it at a time that suits us."

Ostermann's house staff was feeding the terrorists' bodies and their egos. Sandwiches had been made under the supervision of Fürchtner's team and brought around by deeply frightened staff members. Predictably, Ostermann's employees were not in a mood to eat, though their guests were.

Things had gone well to this point, Hans and Petra thought. They had their

primary hostage under tight control, and his lackeys were now in the same room, with easy access to Ostermann's personal bathroom—hostages needed such access, and there was no sense in denying it to them. Otherwise, it stripped them of their dignity and made them desperate. That was inadvisable. Desperate people did foolish things, and what Hans and Petra needed at the moment was control over their every action.

Gerhardt Dengler sat in a visitor's chair directly across the desk from his employer. He knew he'd gotten the police to respond, and, like his boss, he was now wondering if that was a good or a bad thing. In another two years, he would have been ready to strike out on his own, probably with Ostermann's blessing. He'd learned much from his boss, the way a general's aide learns at the right hand of the senior officer. Though he'd been able to pursue his own destiny much more quickly and surely than a junior officer . . . what did he owe this man? What was required by this situation? Dengler was no more suited to this than Herr Ostermann was, but Dengler was younger, fitter . . .

One of the secretaries was weeping silently, the tears trickling down her cheeks from fear and from the rage of having her comfortable life upset so cruelly. What was wrong with these two that they thought they could invade the lives of ordinary people and threaten them with death? And what could she do about it? The answer to that was . . . nothing. She was skilled at routing calls, processing voluminous paperwork, keeping track of Herr Ostermann's money so ably that she was probably the best-paid secretary in the country—because Herr Ostermann was a generous boss, always with a kind word for his staff. He'd helped her and her husband—a stonemason—with their investments, to the point that they would soon be millionaires in their own right. She'd been with him long before his first wife had died of cancer, had watched him suffer through that, unable to help him do anything to ease the horrible pain, and then she'd rejoiced at his discovery of Ursel von Prinze, who'd allowed Herr Ostermann to smile again. . . .

Who were these people who stared at them as though they were objects, with guns in their hands like something from a movie . . . except that she and Gerhardt and the others were the bit players now. They couldn't go to the kitchen to fetch beer and pretzels. They could only live the drama to its end. And so she wept quietly at her powerlessness, to the contempt of Petra Dortmund.

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Homer Johnston was in his ghillie suit, a complex overalltype garment made of rags sewn into place on a gridded matrix, whose purpose was to make him appear to be a bush or a pile of leaves or compost, anything but a person with a rifle. The rifle was set up on its bipod, the hinged flaps on the front and back lenses of his telescopic sight flipped up. He'd picked a good place to the east of the helicopter pad that would allow him to cover the entire distance between the helicopter and the house. His laser rangefinder announced that he was 216 meters from a door on the back of the house and 147 meters from the front-

left door of the helicopter. He was lying prone in a dry spot on the beautiful lawn, in the lengthening shadows close to the treeline, and the air brought to him the smell of horses, which reminded him of his childhood in the American northwest. Okay. He thumbed his radio microphone.

"Lead, Rifle Two-One."

"Rifle Two-One, Lead."

"In place and set up. I show no movement in the house at this time."

"Rifle Two-Two, in place and set up, I also see no movement," Sergeant Weber reported from his spot, two hundred fifty-six meters from Johnston. Johnston turned to see Dieter's location. His German counterpart had selected a good spot.

"Achtung," a voice called behind him. Johnston turned to see an Austrian cop approaching, not quite crawling on the grass. *"Hier,"* the man said, handing over some photos and withdrawing rapidly. Johnston looked at them. Good, shots of the hostages . . . but none of the bad guys. Well, at least he'd know whom *not* to shoot. With that, he backed off the rifle and lifted his green-coated military binoculars and began scanning the house slowly and regularly, left to right and back again. "Dieter?" he said over his direct radio link.

"Yes, Homer?"

"They get you the photos?"

"Yes, I have them."

"No lights inside . . ."

"Ja, our friends are being clever."

"I figure about half an hour until we have to go NVG."

"I agree, Homer."

Johnston grunted and turned to check the bag he'd carried in along with his rifle case and $10,000 rifle. Then he returned to scanning the building, patiently, like staking out a mountain deer trail for a big muley . . . a happy thought for the lifelong hunter . . . the taste of venison, especially cooked in the field over an open wood fire . . . some coffee from the blue, steel enamel pot . . . and the talking that came after a successful hunt . . . *Well, you can't eat what you shoot here, Homer,* the sergeant told himself, settling back into his patient routine. One hand reached into a pocket for some beef jerky to chew.

Eddie Price lit his pipe on the far side of the dwelling. Not as big as Kensington Palace, but prettier, he thought. The thought disturbed him. It was something they'd talked about during his time in the SAS. What if terrorists—usually they thought of the Irish PIRA or INLA—attacked one of the Royal residences . . . or the Palace of Westminster. The SAS had walked through all of the buildings in question at one time or another, just to get a feel for the layout, the security systems, and the problems involved—especially after that lunatic had cracked his way into Buckingham Palace in the 1980s, walking into the Queen's own bedchamber. He still had chills about that!

The brief reverie faded. He had the *Schloss Ostermann* to worry about, Price remembered, scanning over the blueprints again.

"Bloody nightmare on the inside, Ding," Price finally said.

"That's the truth. All wood floors, probably creak, lots of places for the bad

guys to hide and snipe at us. We'd need a chopper to do this right." But they didn't have a helicopter. That was something to talk with Clark about. Rainbow hadn't been fully thought through. Too fast on too many things. Not so much that they needed a helicopter as some good chopper crews trained in more than one type of aircraft, because when they deployed in the field, there was no telling what machines would be used by their host nation. Chavez turned: "Doc?"

Bellow came over. "Yes, Ding?"

"I'm starting to think about letting them out, walk to the helicopter behind the house, and taking them down that way rather than forcing our way in."

"A little early for that, isn't it?"

Chavez nodded. "Yeah, it is, but we don't want to lose a hostage, and come midnight, you said, we have to take that threat seriously."

"We can delay it some, maybe. My job to do that, over the phone."

"I understand, but if we make a move, I want it to be in the dark. That means tonight. I can't plan on having you talk them into surrender, unless you're thinking different? . . ."

"Possible, but unlikely," Bellow had to agree. He couldn't even speak confidently about delaying the threatened midnight kill.

"Next, we have to see if we can spike the building."

"I'm here," Noonan said. "Tall order, man."

"Can you do it?"

"I can probably get close unobserved, but there's over a hundred windows, and how the hell can I get to the ones on the second and third floors? Unless I do a dangle from a chopper and come down on the roof . . ." And that meant making sure that the local TV people, who'd show up as predictably as vultures over a dying cow, turned their cameras off and kept them off, which then ran the risk of alerting the terrorists when the TV reporters stopped showing the building of interest. And how could they fail to note that a helicopter had flown thirty feet over the roof of the building, and might there be a bad guy on the roof, already keeping watch?

"This is getting complicated," Chavez observed quietly.

"Dark and cold enough for the thermal viewers to start working," Noonan said helpfully.

"Yeah." Chavez picked up his radio mike. "Team, Lead, go thermal. Say again, break out the thermals." Then he turned. "What about cell phones?"

Noonan could do little more than shrug. There were now something like three hundred civilians gathered around, well back from the Ostermann property and controlled by local police, but most of them had a view of the house and the grounds, and if one of them had a cell phone and someone inside did as well, all that unknown person outside had to do was dial his buds on the inside to tell them what was going down. The miracles of modern communication worked both ways. There were over five hundred cellular frequencies, and the gear to cover them all was not part of Rainbow's regular kit. No terrorist or criminal operation had yet used that technique, to the best of their knowledge, but they couldn't all be dumb and stay dumb, could they? Chavez looked over at the *Schloss* and thought again that they'd have to get the bad guys outside for this to work properly. Problem with that, he didn't

know how many bad guys he'd have to deal with, and he had no way of finding out without spiking the building to gather additional information—which was a dubious undertaking for all the other reasons he'd just considered.

"Tim, make a note for when we get back about dealing with cellular phones and radios outside the objective. Captain Altmark!"

"Yes, Major Chavez?"

"The lights, are they here yet?"

"Just arrived, *ja,* we have three sets." Altmark pointed. Price and Chavez went over to look. They saw three trucks with attachments that looked for all the world like the lights one might see around a high-school football field. Meant to help fight a major fire, they could be erected and powered by the trucks that carried them. Chavez told Altmark where he wanted them and returned to the team's assembly point.

The thermal viewers relied on difference in temperature to make an image. The evening was cooling down rapidly, and with it the stone walls of the house. Already the windows were glowing more brightly than the walls, because the house was heated, and the old-style full-length windows in the building's many doors were poorly insulated, despite the large drapes that hung just inside each one. Dieter Weber made the first spot.

"Lead, Rifle Two-Two, I have a thermal target first floor, fourth window from the west, looking around the curtains at the outside."

"Okay! That one's in the kitchen." It was the voice of Hank Patterson, who was hovering over the blueprints. "That's number one! Can you tell me anything else, Dieter?"

"Negative, just a shape," the German sniper replied. "No, wait . . . tall, probably a man."

"This is Pierce, I have one, first floor, east side, second window from east wall."

"Captain Altmark?"

"Ja?"

"Could you call Ostermann's office, please? We want to know if he's there." Because if he were, there would be one or two bad guys in with him.

"Ostermann office," a woman's voice answered.

"This is Captain Altmark. Who is this?"

"This is Commander Gertrude of the Red Workers' Faction."

"Excuse me, I was expecting to speak to Commander Wolfgang."

"Wait," Petra's voice told him.

"Hier ist Wolfgang."

"Hier ist Altmark. We have not heard from you in a long time."

"What news do you have for us?"

"No news, but we do have a request, Herr Commander."

"Yes, what is it?"

"As a sign of good faith," Altmark said, with Dr. Bellow listening in, a translator next to him. "We request that you release two of your hostages, from the domestic staff perhaps."

"Wofür? So they can help you identify us?"

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"Lead, Lincoln here, I have a target, northwest corner window, tall, probably male."

"That's three plus two," Chavez observed, as Patterson placed a yellow circle sticker on that part of the prints.

The woman who'd answered the phone had remained on the line as well. "You have three hours until we send you a hostage, *tot,"* she emphasized. "You have any further requests? We require a pilot for Herr Ostermann's helicopter before midnight, and an airliner waiting at the airport. Otherwise, we will kill a hostage to show that we are quite serious, and then thereafter, at regular intervals. Do you understand?"

"Please, we respect your seriousness here," Altmark assured her. "We are looking for the flight crew now, and we have discussions underway with Austrian Airlines for the aircraft. These things take time, you know."

"You always say that, people like you. We have told you what *we* require. If you do not meet those requirements, then their blood is on your hands. *Ende,"* the voice said, and the line went dead.

Captain Altmark was both surprised and discomforted by the cold decisiveness on the other end of the phone and by the abrupt termination of the call. He looked up at Paul Bellow as he replaced the receiver. *"Herr Doktor?"*

"The woman is the dangerous one. They're both smart. They've definitely thought this one through, and they *will* kill a hostage to make their point, sure as hell."

"Man-and-woman team," Price was saying over the phone. "German, ages . . . late thirties, early forties as a guess. Maybe older. Bloody serious," he added for Bill Tawney.

"Thanks, Eddie, stand by," came the reply. Price could hear the fingers tapping on the keyboard.

"Okay, lad, I have three possible teams for you. Uploading them now."

"Thank you, sir." Price opened his laptop again. "Ding?"

"Yeah?"

"Intelligence coming in."

"We have at least five terrs in there, boss," Patterson said, moving his finger around the prints. "Too quick for them to move around. Here, here, here, and two upstairs here. The placement makes sense. They probably have portable radios, too. The house is too big for them to communicate by shouting around at each other."

Noonan heard that and went off to his radio-intercept equipment. If their friends were using hand-held radios, then their frequency range was well known, determined by international treaty in fact, probably not the military

sets the team used, and probably not encrypted. In seconds he had his computerized scanner set up and working off multiple antennas, which would allow him to triangulate on sources inside the house. These were coupled into his laptop computer, already overlaid with a diagram of the *Schloss.* Three spear-carriers was about right, Noonan thought. Two was too few. Three was close to the right number, though the truck in front of the building could have easily held more. Two plus three, two plus four, two plus five? But they'd all be planning to leave, and the helicopter wasn't all that big. That made the total terrorist count at five to seven. A guess, and they couldn't go with a guess—well, they'd prefer not to—but it was a starting place. So many guesses. What if they were not using portable radios? What if they used cell phones? What if a lot of things, Noonan thought. You had to start somewhere, gather all the information you could, and then act on it. The problem with people like this was that they always decided the pace of the event. For all their stupidity and their criminal intent, which Noonan regarded as a weakness, they *did* control the pace, they decided when things happened. The team could alter it a little by cajolery—that was Dr. Bellow's part—but when you got down to it, well, the bad guys were the only ones willing to do murder, and that was a card that made a noise when it came down on the table. There were ten hostages inside, Ostermann, his three business assistants, and six people who looked after the house and grounds. Every one of them had a life and a family and the expectation to keep both. Team-2's job was to make sure that happened. But the bad guys still controlled too much, and this special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation didn't like that very much. Not for the first time, he wished he was one of the shooters, able, in due course, to go in and execute the takedown. But, good as he was at weapons and the physical side, he was better trained on the technical aspects of the mission. That was his area of personal expertise, and he served the mission best by sticking with his instruments. He didn't, however, have to like it.

"So, what's the score, Ding?"

"Not all that good, Mr. C." Chavez turned to survey the building again. "Very difficult to approach the building because of the open ground, therefore difficult to spike and get tactical intelligence. We have two primary and probably three secondary subjects who seem professional and serious. I'm thinking in terms of letting them out to go to the helicopter and taking them down then. Snipers in place. But with the number of subjects, this might not be real pretty, John."

Clark looked at the display in his command center. He had continuous comm links with Team-2, including their computer displays. As before, Peter Covington was beside him to kibitz. "Might as well be a moated bloody castle," the British officer had observed earlier. He'd also noted the need for helicopter pilots as a permanent part of the team.

"One other thing," Chavez said. "Noonan says we need jamming gear for the cell phone freaks. We have a few hundred civilians around, and if one has a shoe phone, he can talk to our friends inside, tell them what we're doing. No way in hell we can prevent that without jamming gear. Write that one down, Mr. C."

"Noted, Domingo," Clark replied, looking over at David Peled, his chief technical officer.

"I can take care of that in a few days," Peled told his boss. Mossad had the right sort of equipment. Probably so did some American agencies. He'd find out in a hurry. Noonan, David told himself, was very good for a former policeman.

"Okay, Ding, you are released to execute at discretion. Good luck, my boy."

"Gee, thanks, Dad" was the ironic reply. "Team-2, out." Chavez killed the radio and tossed the microphone back at the box. "Price!" he called.

"Yes, sir." The Sergeant Major materialized at his side.

"We have discretionary release," the leader told his XO.

"Marvelous, Major Chavez. What do you propose, sir?"

The situation had to be unfavorable, Ding told himself, if Price had reverted back to sirring him.

"Well, let's see what we got in the way of assets, Eddie."

Klaus Rosenthal was Ostermann's head gardener, and at seventy-one the oldest member of the domestic staff. His wife was at home, he was sure, in her bed with a nurse in close attendance handling her medications, and worrying about him he was sure, and that worry could be dangerous to her. Hilda Rosenthal had a progressive heart condition that had invalided her over the past three years. The state medical system had provided the necessary care for her, and Herr Ostermann had assisted as well, sending a friend of his, a full professor from Vienna's Algemeine Krankenhaus, to oversee the case, and a new drug-therapy treatment had actually improved Hilda's condition somewhat, but the fear she'd be feeling for him now certainly would not help, and that thought was driving Klaus mad. He was in the kitchen along with the rest of the domestic staff. He'd been inside getting a glass of water when they'd arrived—had he been outside he might well have escaped and raised the alarm and so helped to aid his employer, who'd been so considerate to all his staff, and Hilda! But luck had been against that when these swine had stormed into the kitchen with their weapons showing. Young ones, late twenties, the close one, whose name Rosenthal didn't know, was either a Berliner or from West Prussia, judging by his accent, and he'd recently been a skinhead, or so it appeared from the uniform-length stubble on his hatless head. A product of the DDR, the now-defunct East Germany. One of the new Nazis who'd grown out of that fallen communist nation. Rosenthal had met the old ones at Belzec concentration camp as a boy, and though he'd managed to survive that experience, the return of the terror of having one's life continue only at the whim of a madman with cruel piglike eyes . . . Rosenthal closed his eyes. He still had the nightmares that went along with the five-digit number tattooed on his forearm. Once a month he still awoke on sweaty sheets after reliving the former reality of watching people march into a building from which no one ever emerged alive . . . and always in the nightmare someone with a cruel young SS face beckons to him to follow them in there, too, because he needs a shower. *Oh, no,* he protests in the dream, *Hauptsturmführer Brandt needs me in the metalworking shop. Not today, Jude,* the

young SS noncom says, with that ghastly smile, *Komm jetzt zum Brausebad.* Every time he walks as bidden, for what else could one do, right to the door—and then every time he awakes, damp with perspiration, and sure that had he not awakened, he would not have awakened at all, just like all the people he'd watched march that way . . .

There are many kinds of fear, and Klaus Rosenthal had the worst of all. His was the certainty that he would die at the hands of one of *them,* the bad Germans, the ones who simply didn't recognize or care about the humanity of others, and there was no comfort in the certainty of it.

And that kind wasn't all gone, wasn't all dead yet. One was right in his field of view, looking back at him, his machine gun in his hands, looking at Rosenthal and the others in the kitchen like *Objekte,* mere objects. The other staff members, all Christians, had never experienced this, but Klaus Rosenthal had, and he knew what to expect—and knew that it was a certainty. His nightmare was real, risen from the past to fulfill his destiny, and then also kill Hilda, for her heart would not survive—and what could he do about it? Before, the first time, he'd been an orphaned boy apprenticed to a jeweler, where he'd learned to make fine metal items, which trade had saved his life—which trade he'd never followed afterward, so horrid were the memories associated with it. Instead he found the peace of working in the soil, making living things grow pretty and healthy. He had the gift; Ostermann had recognized it and told him that he had a job for life at this *Schloss.* But that gift didn't matter to this Nazi with stubbly hair and a gun in his hands.

Ding supervised the placement of the lights. Captain Altmark walked with him to each truck, then they both told the driver exactly where to go. When the light trucks were in place, and their light masts raised, Chavez returned to his team and sketched out the plan. It was after 11 now. It was amazing how fast time went when you needed more of it.

The helicopter crew was there, mostly sitting still, drinking coffee like good aviators, and wondering what the hell came next. It turned out that the copilot had a passing resemblance to Eddie Price, which Ding decided to make use of as a final backup part of his plan.

At 11:20, he ordered the lights switched on. The front and both sides of the *schloss* were bathed in yellow-white light, but not the back, which projected a triangular shadow all the way to the helicopter and beyond into the trees.

"Oso," Chavez said, "get over to Dieter and set up close to there."

"Roger, 'mano." First Sergeant Vega hoisted his M-60 onto his shoulder and made his way through the woods.

Louis Loiselle and George Tomlinson had the hardest part. They were dressed in their night greens. The coveralls over their black "ninja suits" looked like graph paper, light green background crosshatched in darker green lines, making blocks perhaps an eighth inch square. Some of the blocks were filled with the same dark green in random, squared-off patternless patterns. The idea dated back to World War II Luftwaffe night fighters whose designers had decided that the night was dark enough, and that black-painted fighter aircraft were easier to spot because they were darker than the night itself. These coveralls worked in principle and in exercises. Now they'd see if they

worked in the real world. The blazing lights would help; aimed at and somewhat over the *Schloss,* they'd serve to create an artificial well of darkness into which the green suits should disappear. They'd drilled it at Hereford often enough, but never with real lives at risk. That fact notwithstanding, Tomlinson and Loiselle moved out from different directions, keeping inside the triangular shadow all the way in. It took them twenty minutes of crawling.

"So, Altmark," Hans Fürchtner said at 11:45, "are the arrangements set, or must we kill one of our hostages in a few minutes?"

"Please, do not do that, Herr Wolfgang. We have the helicopter crew on the way now, and we are working with the airline to get the aircraft released to us and ready for the flight. It is more difficult than you imagine to do these things."

"In fifteen minutes we shall see how difficult it is, Herr Altmark." And the line went dead.

Bellow didn't need a translator. The tone was enough. "He will do it," the psychiatrist told Altmark and Chavez. "The deadline is for real."

"Get the flight crew out," Ding ordered at once. Three minutes later, a marked police car approached the helicopter. Two men got out and entered the Sikorsky as the car drove away. Two minutes after that, the rotor started turning. Then Chavez keyed his command microphone.

"Team, this is Lead. Stand-to. I repeat, stand-to."

"Excellent," Fürchtner said. He could barely see the turning rotor, but the blinking flying lights told the tale. "So, we begin. Herr Ostermann, stand up!"

Petra Dortmund made her way downstairs ahead of the important hostages. She frowned, wondering if she should be disappointed that they'd not killed this Dengler person to show their resolve. That time could come later when they started the serious interrogation aboard the airliner—and maybe Dengler knew all that Ostermann did. If so, killing him might be a tactical mistake. She activated her radio and called the rest of her people. They were assembling in the foyer as she came down the main staircase, along with the six hostages from the kitchen. No, she decided at the door, it would be better to kill a female hostage. That would have a greater impact on the police forces outside, all the more so if she were killed by another woman. . . .

"Are you ready?" Petra asked, receiving nods from the other four of her crew. "It will go as we planned," she told them. These people were disappointing ideologically, despite their having grown up and been educated in a proper socialist country—three of them even had military training, which had included political indoctrination. But they knew their jobs, and had carried them out to this point. She could ask for little more. The house staff was coming in from the kitchen area.

One of the cooks was having trouble walking, and that annoyed the stubble-headed swine, Rosenthal saw, as he stopped by the main food-preparation table. They were taking him, he knew, taking him to die, and as in his nightmare he was doing *nothing!* The realization came to him so suddenly as to cause a crippling wave of headachelike pain. His body twisted left, and he

saw the table—and on it a small paring knife. His head snapped forward, saw the terrorists looking at Maria, the cook. In that moment, he made his decision, and snapped up the knife, tucking it up his right sleeve. Perhaps fate would give him a chance. If so, Klaus Rosenthal promised himself, this time he'd take it.

"Team-2, this is Lead," Chavez said over the radio links. "We should have them start to come out shortly. Everybody check in." He listened to two double clicks first of all, from Loiselle and Tomlinson close to the *Schloss,* then the names.

"Rifle Two-One," Homer Johnston said. His night-vision system was now attached to his telescopic sight and trained rigidly on the building's main rear doors, as the rifleman commanded his breathing into a regular pattern.

"Rifle Two-Two," Weber called in a second later.

"Oso," Vega reported. He licked his lips as he brought his weapon up to his shoulder, his face covered with camouflage paint.

"Connolly."

"Lincoln."

"McTyler."

"Patterson."

"Pierce." They all reported from their spots on the grass.

"Price," the sergeant major reported from the left-side front seat of the helicopter.

"Okay, team, we are weapons-free. Normal rules of engagement in effect. Stay sharp, people," Chavez added unnecessarily. It was hard for the commander to stop talking in such a case. His position was eighty yards away from the helicopter, marginal range for his MP-10, with his NVGs aimed at the building.

"Door opening," Weber reported a fraction before Johnston.

"I have movement," Rifle Two-One confirmed.

"Captain Altmark, this is Chavez, kill the TV feed now," Ding ordered on his secondary radio.

"Ja, I understand," the police captain replied. He turned and shouted an order at the TV director. The cameras would stay on but would not broadcast, and the tapes from this point on were considered classified information. The signal going out on the airways now merely showed talking heads.

"Door open now," Johnston said from his sniper perch. "I see one hostage, looks like a male cook, and a subject, female, dark hair, holding a pistol." Sergeant Johnston commanded himself to relax, taking his finger off the double-set triggers of his rifle. He couldn't shoot now without a direct order from Ding, and that order would not come in such a situation. "Second hostage in view, it's Little Man," he said, meaning Dengler. Ostermann was Big Man, and the female secretaries were Blondie and Brownie, so named for their hair color. They didn't have photos for the domestic staff, hence no names for them. Known bad guys were "subjects."

They hesitated at the door, Johnston saw. Had to be a scary time for them, though how scary it was they would not and could not know. Too fucking bad, he thought, centering the crosshair reticle on her face from over two hundred

yards away—which distance was the equivalent of ten feet for the rifleman. "Come on out, honey," he breathed. "We have something real special for you and your friends. Dieter?" he asked, keying his radio.

"On target, Homer," Rifle Two-Two replied. "We know this face, I think . . . I cannot recall the name. Leader, Rifle Two-Two—"

"Rifle Two, Lead."

"The female subject, we have seen her face recently. She is older now, but I know this face. Baader-Meinhof, Red Army Faction, one of those, I think, works with a man. Marxist, experienced terrorist, murderer . . . killed an American soldier, I think." None of which was particularly breaking news, but a known face was a known face.

Price broke in, thinking about the computer-morphing program they'd played with earlier in the week. "Petra Dortmund, perhaps?"

"Ja! That is the one! And her partner is Hans Fürchtner," Weber replied. *"Komm raus, Petra,"* he went on in his native language. *"Komm mir, Liebchen."*

Something was bothering her. It turned out to be difficult just to walk out of the *Schloss* onto the open rear lawn, though she could plainly see the helicopter with its blinking lights and turning rotor. She took a step or started to, her foot not wanting to make the move out and downward onto the granite steps, her blue eyes screwed up, because the trees east and west of the *Schloss* were lit so brightly by the lights on the far side of the house, with the shadow stretching out to the helicopter like a black finger, and maybe the thing that discomforted her was the deathlike image before her. Then she shook her head, disposing of the thought as some undignified superstition. She yanked at her two hostages and made her way down the six steps to the grass, then outward toward the waiting aircraft.

"You sure of the ID, Dieter?" Chavez asked.

"Ja, yes, I am, sir. Petra Dortmund."

Next to Chavez, Dr. Bellow queried the name on his laptop. "Age forty-four, ex-Baader-Meinhof, very ideological, and the word on her is that she's ruthless as hell. That's ten-year-old information. Looks like it hasn't changed very much. Partner was one Hans Fürchtner. They're supposed to be married, in love, whatever, and very compatible personalities. They're killers, Ding."

"For the moment, they are," Chavez responded, watching the three figures cross the grass.

"She has a grenade in one hand, looks like a frag," Homer Johnston said next. "Left hand, say again left."

"Confirmed," Weber chimed in. "I see the hand grenade. Pin is in. I repeat, pin is in."

"Great!" Eddie Price snarled over the radio. *Fürstenfeldbrück all bloody over again,* he thought, strapped into the helicopter, which would be holding the grenade and the fool who might pull the bloody pin. "This is Price. Just one grenade?"

"I only see the one," Johnston replied, "no bulges in her pockets or anything, Eddie. Pistol in her right hand, grenade in her left."

"I agree," Weber said.

"She's right-handed," Bellow told them over his radio circuit, after checking the known data on Petra Dortmund. "Subject Dortmund is right-handed."

Which explains why the pistol is there and the grenade in her left, Price told himself. It also meant that if she decided to throw the grenade properly, she'd have to switch hands. Some good news, he thought. Maybe it's been a long time since she played with one of the damned things. Maybe she was even afraid of things that went *bang,* his mind added hopefully. Some people just carried the damned things for visual effect. He could see her now, walking at an even pace toward the helicopter.

"Male subject in view—Fürchtner," Johnston said over the radio. "He has Big Man with him . . . and Brownie also, I think."

"Agree," Weber said, staring through his ten-power sight. "Subject Fürchtner, Big Man, and Brownie are in sight. Fürchtner appears to be armed with pistol only. Starting down the steps now. Another subject at the door, armed with submachine gun, two hostages with him."

"They're being smart," Chavez observed. "Coming in groups. Our pal started down when his babe was halfway . . . we'll see if the rest do that . . ." Okay, Ding thought. Four, maybe five, groups traversing the open ground. Clever bastards, but not clever enough . . . maybe.

As they approached the chopper, Price got out and opened both side doors for loading. He'd already stashed his pistol in the map pocket of the left-side copilot's door. He gave the pilot a look.

"Just act normally. The situation is under control."

"If you say so, Englishman," the pilot responded, with a rough, tense voice.

"The aircraft does not leave the ground under any circumstances. Do you understand?" They'd covered that before, but repetition of instructions was the way you survived in a situation like this.

"Yes. If they force me, I will roll it to your side and scream malfunction."

Bloody decent of you, Price thought. He was wearing a blue shirt with wings pinned on above the breast pocket and a name tag that announced his name as Tony. A wireless earpiece gave him the radio link to the rest of the team, along with a microphone chip inside his collar.

"Sixty meters away, not a very attractive woman, is she?" he asked his teammates.

"Brush your hair if you can hear me," Chavez told him from his position. A moment later, he saw Price's left hand go up nervously to push his hair back from his eyes. "Okay, Eddie. Stay cool, man."

"Armed subject at the door with three hostages," Weber called. "No, no, two armed subjects with three hostages. Hostage Blondie is with this one. Old man and middle-aged woman, all dressed as servants."

"At least one more bad guy," Ding breathed, and at least three more hostages to come. "Helicopter can't carry all of them . . ." What were they planning to do with the extras? he wondered. Kill them?

"I see two more armed subjects and three hostages inside the back door," Johnston reported.

"That's all the hostages," Noonan said. "Total of six subjects, then. How are they armed, Rifle One?"

"Submachine guns, look like Uzis or the Czech copy of it. They are leaning toward the door now."

"Okay, I got it," Chavez said, holding his own binoculars. "Riflemen, take aim on subject Dortmund."

"On target," Weber managed to say first. Johnston swiveled to take aim a fraction of a second later, and then he froze still.

The human eye is especially sensitive to movement at night. When Johnston moved clockwise to adjust the aim of his rifle, Petra Dortmund thought she might have seen something. It stopped her in her tracks, though she didn't know what it was that had stopped her. She stared right at Johnston, but the ghillie suit just looked like a clump of something, grass, leaves, or dirt, she couldn't tell in the semidarkness of green light reflecting off the pine trees. There was no man-shape to it, and the outline of the rifle was lost in the clutter well over a hundred meters away from her. Even so, she continued to look, without moving her gun hand, a look of curiosity on her face, not even visible alarm. Through Johnston's gunsight, the sergeant's open left eye could see the red strobe flashes from the helicopter's flying lights blinking on the ground around him while the right eye saw the crosshair reticle centered just above and between Petra Dortmund's eyes. His finger was on the trigger now, just barely enough to feel it there, about as much as one could do with so light a trigger pull. The moment lasted into several seconds, and his peripheral vision watched her gun hand most of all. If it moved too much, then . . .

But it didn't. She resumed walking to the helicopter, to Johnston's relief, not knowing that two sniper rifles followed her head every centimeter of the way. The next important part came when she got to the chopper. If she went around the right side, Johnston would lose her, leaving her to Weber's rifle alone. If she went left, then Dieter would lose her to his rifle alone. She seemed to be favoring . . . yes, Dortmund walked to the left side of the aircraft.

"Rifle Two-Two off target," Weber reported at once. "I have no shot at this time."

"On target, Rifle Two-One is on target," Johnston assured Chavez. *Hmm, let Little Man in first, honey,* he thought as loudly as he could.

Petra Dortmund did just that, pushing Dengler in the left-side door ahead of her, probably figuring to sit in the middle herself, so as to be less vulnerable to a shot from outside. A good theoretical call, Homer Johnston thought, but off the mark in this case. *Tough luck, bitch.*

The comfort of the familiar surroundings of the helicopter was lost on Gerhard Dengler at the moment. He strapped himself in under the aim of Petra's pistol, commanding himself to relax and be brave, as men did at such a time. Then he looked forward and felt hope. The pilot was the usual man, but the copilot was not. Whoever he was, he was fiddling with instruments as the flight crew did, but it wasn't him, though the shape of head and hair color were much the same, and both wore the white shirts with blue epaulets that private pilots tended to adopt as their uniforms. Their eyes met, and Dengler looked down and out of the aircraft, afraid that he'd give something away.

Good man, Eddie Price thought. His pistol was in the map pocket in the left-side door of the aircraft, well-hidden under a pile of flight charts, but easy to

reach with his left hand. He'd get it, then turn quickly, bring it up and fire if it came to that. Hidden in his left ear, the radio receiver, which looked like a hearing aid if one saw it, kept him posted, though it was a little hard to hear over the engine and rotor sounds of the Sikorsky. Now Petra's pistol was aimed at himself, or the pilot, as she moved it back and forth.

"Riflemen, do you have your targets?" Chavez asked.

"Rifle Two-One, affirmative, target in sight."

"Rifle Two-Two, negative, I have something in the way. Recommend switch to subject Fürchtner."

"Okay, Rifle Two-Two, switch to Fürchtner. Rifle Two-One, Dortmund is all yours."

"Roger that, lead," Johnston confirmed. "Rifle Two-One has subject Dortmund all dialed in." The sergeant reshot the range with his laser. One hundred forty-four meters. At this range, his bullet would drop less than an inch from the muzzle, and his "battle-sight" setting of two hundred fifty meters was a little high. He altered his crosshairs hold to just below the target's left eye. Physics would do the rest. His rifle had target-type double-set triggers. Pulling the rear trigger reduced the break-pull on the front one to a hard wish, and he was already making that wish. The helicopter would not be allowed to take off. Of more immediate concern, they couldn't allow the subjects to close the left-side door. His 7-mm match bullet would probably penetrate the polycarbonate window in the door, but the passage would deflect his round unpredictably, maybe causing a miss, perhaps causing the death or wounding of a hostage. He couldn't let that happen.

Chavez was well out of the action now, commanding instead of leading, something he'd practiced but didn't like very much. It was easier to be there with a gun in your hands than to stand back and tell people what to do by remote control. But he had no choice. Okay, he thought, we have Number One in the chopper and a gun on her. Number Two was in the open, two-thirds of the way to the chopper, and a gun on him. Two more bad guys were approaching the halfway point, with Mike Pierce and Steve Lincoln within forty meters, and the last two subjects still in the house, with Louis Loiselle and George Tomlinson in the bushes right and left of them. Unless the bad guys had set up overwatch in the house, one or more additional subjects to come out after the rest had made it to the chopper . . . very unlikely, Chavez decided, and in any case all the hostages were either in the open or soon would be—and rescuing them was the mission, not necessarily killing the bad guys, he reminded himself. It wasn't a game and it wasn't a sport, and his plan, already briefed to Team-2's members, was holding up. The key to it now was the final team of subjects.

Rosenthal saw the snipers. It was to be expected, though it had occurred to no one. He was the head gardener. The lawn was his, and the odd piles of material left and right of the helicopter were things that didn't belong, things that he would have known about. He'd seen the TV shows and movies. This was a terrorist incident, and the police would respond somehow. Men with guns would be out there, and there were two *things* on his lawn that hadn't been there in the morning. His eyes lingered on Weber's position, then fixed

on it. There was his salvation or his death. There was no telling now, and that fact caused his stomach to contract into a tight, acid-laden ball.

"Here they come," George Tomlinson announced, when he saw two legs step out of the house . . . women's legs, followed by a man's, then two more sets of women's . . . and then a man's. "One subject and two hostages out. Two more hostages to go . . ."

Fürchtner was almost there, heading to the right side of the helicopter, to the comfort of Dieter Weber. But then he stopped, seeing inside the open right-side door to where Gerhardt Dengler was sitting, and decided to go to the other side.

"Okay, Team, stand by," Chavez ordered, trying to keep all four groups juggled in the same control, sweeping his binoculars over the field. As soon as the last were in the open . . .

"You, get inside, facing back." Fürchtner pushed Brownie toward the aircraft.

"Off target, Rifle Two-Two is off the subject," Weber announced rather loudly over the radio circuit.

"Re-target on the next group," Chavez ordered.

"Done," Weber said. "I'm on the lead subject, group three."

"Rifle Two-One, report!"

"Rifle Two-One tight on Subject Dortmund," Homer Johnston replied at once.

"Ready here!" Loiselle reported next from the bushes at the back of the house. "We have the fourth group now."

Chavez took a deep breath. All the bad guys were now in the open, and now it was time:

"Okay, Lead to team, *execute, execute, execute!"*

Loiselle and Tomlinson were already tensed to stand, and both fairly leaped to their feet invisibly, seven meters behind their targets, who were looking the wrong way and never had a clue what was going on behind them. Both soldiers lined up their tritium-lit sights on their targets. Both were pushing-dragging women, and both were taller than their hostages, which made things easy. Both MP-10 submachine guns were set on three-round burst, and both sergeants fired at the same instant. There was no immediate sound. Their weapons were fully suppressed by the design in which the barrel and silencer were integrated, and the range was too close to miss. Two separate heads were blown apart by multiple impacts of large hollow-point bullets, and both bodies dropped limp to the lush green grass almost as quickly as the cartridge cases ejected by the weapons that had killed them.

"This is George. Two subjects dead!" Tomlinson called over the radio, as he started running to the hostages who were still walking toward the helicopter.

Homer Johnston was starting to cringe as a shape entered his field of view. It

seemed to be a female body from the pale silk blouse, but his sight picture was not obscured yet, and with his crosshair reticle set just below Petra Dortmund's left eye, his right index finger pushed gently back on the set-trigger. The rifle roared, sending a meter-long muzzle flash into the still night air—

—she'd just seen two pale flashes in the direction of the house, but she didn't have time to react when the bullet struck the orbit just above her left eye. The bullet drove through the thickest part of her skull. It passed a few more centimeters and then the bullet fragmented into over a hundred tiny pieces, ripping her brain tissue to mush, which then exploded out the back of her skull in an expanding red-pink cloud that splashed over Gerhardt Dengler's face—

—Johnston worked the bolt, swiveling his rifle for another target; he'd seen the bullet dispatch the first.

Eddie Price saw the flash, and his hands were already moving from the *execute* command heard half a second earlier. He pulled his pistol from the map pocket and dove out the helicopter's autolike door, aiming it one-handed at Hans Fürchtner's head, firing one round just below his left eye, which expanded and exploded out the top of his head. A second round followed, higher, and actually not a well-aimed shot, but Fürchtner was already dead, falling to the ground, his hand still holding Erwin Ostermann's upper arm, and pulling him down somewhat until the fingers came loose.

That left two. Steve Lincoln took careful aim from a kneeling position, then stopped as his target passed behind the head of an elderly man wearing a vest. "Shit," Lincoln managed to say.

Weber got the other one, whose head exploded like a melon from the impact of the rifle bullet.

Rosenthal saw the head burst apart like something in a horror movie, but the large stubbly head next to his was still there, eyes suddenly wide open, and a machine gun still in his hand—and nobody was shooting at this one, standing next to him. Then Stubble-Head's eyes met his, and there was fear/hate/shock there, and Rosenthal's stomach turned to sudden ice, all time stopped around him. The paring knife came out of his sleeve and into his hand, which he swung wildly, catching the back of Stubble-Head's left hand. Stubble-Head's eyes went wider as the elderly man jumped aside, and his one hand went slack on the forestock of his weapon.

That cleared the way for Steve Lincoln, who fired a second three-round burst, which arrived simultaneously with a second rifle bullet from Weber's semiautomatic sniper rifle, and this one's head seemed to disappear.

"Clear!" Price called. "Clear aircraft!"

"Clear house!" Tomlinson announced.

"Clear middle!" Lincoln said last of all.

At the house, Loiselle and Tomlinson raced to their set of hostages and

dragged them east, away from the house, lest there be a surviving terrorist inside to fire at them.

Mike Pierce did the same, with Steve Lincoln covering and assisting.

It was easier for Eddie Price, who first of all kicked the gun from Fürchtner's dead hand and made a quick survey of his target's wrecked head. Then he jumped into the helicopter to make sure that Johnston's first round had worked. He needed only to see the massive red splash on the rear bulkhead to know that Petra Dortmund was in whatever place terrorists went to. Then he carefully removed the hand grenade from her rigid left hand, checked to make sure the cotter pin was still in place, and pocketed it. Last of all, he took the pistol from her right hand, engaged the safety and tossed that.

"Mein Herrgott!" the pilot gasped, looking back.

Gerhardt Dengler looked dead as well, his face fairly covered on its left side with a mask of dripping red, his open eyes looking like doorknobs. The sight shook Price for a moment, until he saw the eyes blink, but the mouth was wide open, and the man seemed not to be breathing. Price reached down to flip off the belt buckle, then let Johnston pull the man clear of the aircraft. Little Man made it one step before falling to his knees. Johnston poured his canteen over the man's face to rinse off the blood. Then he unloaded his rifle and set it on the ground.

"Nice work, Eddie," he told Price.

"And that was a bloody good shot, Homer."

Sergeant Johnston shrugged. "I was afraid the gal would get in the way. Another couple of seconds and I wouldn't've had shit. Anyway, Eddie, nice work coming out of the aircraft and doing him before I could get number two off."

"You had a shot on him?" Price asked, safing and holstering his pistol.

"Waste of time. I saw his brains come out from your first."

The cops were swarming in now, plus a covey of ambulances with blinking blue lights. Captain Altmark arrived at the helicopter, with Chavez at his side. Experienced cop that he was, the mess inside the Sikorsky made him back away in silence.

"It's never pretty," Homer Johnston observed. He'd already had his look. The rifle and bullet had performed as programmed. Beyond that, it was his fourth sniper kill, and if people wanted to break the law and hurt the innocent, it was their problem, not his. One more trophy he couldn't hang on the wall with the muley and elk heads he'd collected over the years.

Price walked toward the middle group, fishing in his pocket for his curved briar pipe, which he lit with a kitchen match, his never-changing ritual for a mission completed.

Mike Pierce was assisting the hostages, all sitting for the moment while Steve Lincoln stood over them, his MP-10 out and ready for another target. But then a gaggle of Austrian police exploded out the back door, telling him that there were no terrorists left inside the building. With that, he safed his weapon and slung it over his shoulder. Lincoln came up to the elderly gent.

"Well done, sir," he told Klaus Rosenthal.

"What?"

"Using the knife on his hand. Well done."

"Oh, yeah," Pierce said, looking down at the mess on the grass. There was a deep cut on the back of its left hand. "You did that, sir?"

"Ja" was all Rosenthal was able to say, and that took three breaths.

"Well, sir, good for you." Pierce reached down to shake his hand. It hadn't really mattered very much, but resistance by a hostage was rare enough, and it had clearly been a gutsy move by the old gent.

"Amerikaner?"

"Shhh." Sergeant Pierce held a finger up to his lips. "Please don't tell anyone, sir."

Price arrived then, puffing on his pipe. Between Weber's sniper rifle and someone's MP-10 burst, this subject's head was virtually gone. "Bloody hell," the sergeant major observed.

"Steve's bird," Pierce reported. "I didn't have a clear shot this time. Good one, Steve," he added.

"Thank you, Mike," Sergeant Lincoln replied, surveying the area. "Total of six?"

"Correct," Eddie answered, heading off toward the house. "Stand by here."

"Easy shots, both of 'em," Tomlinson said in his turn, surrounded by Austrian cops.

"Too tall to hide," Loiselle confirmed. He felt like having a smoke, though he'd quit two years before. His hostages were being led off now, leaving the two terrorists on the lush green grass, which their blood, he thought, would fertilize. Blood was good fertilizer, wasn't it? Such a fine house. A pity they'd not have the chance to examine it.

Twenty minutes later, Team-2 was back at the assembly point, changing out of their tactical clothes, packing their weapons and other gear for the ride back to the airport. The TV lights and cameras were running, but rather far away. The team was relaxing now, the stress bleeding off with the successful completion of their mission. Price puffed on his pipe outside the van, then tapped it out on the heel of his boot before boarding it.

CHAPTER 8

COVERAGE

The television coverage was out before Team-2 flew into Heathrow. Fortunately, the video of the event was hampered by the *Schloss*'s great size and the fact that the *Staatspolizei* kept the cameras well away from events, and on the wrong side of the building. About the only decent shot was of a team member lighting a pipe, followed by Captain Wilhelm Altmark's summary of events for the assembled reporters. A special and heretofore secret team of his country's federal police had dealt efficiently with the incident at Schloss Ostermann, he said, rescuing all of the hostages—no, unfortunately, no criminals had been arrested. All of this was taped for later use by Bill Tawney's staff off Austrian State Television, Sky News, and every other European news service that made use of the story. Though the British Sky News service had managed to get its own camera to Vienna, the only difference between its coverage and that of the locals was the angle. Even the various learned commentaries were essentially the same: specially trained and equipped police unit; probably with members of Austria's military; decisive action to resolve the incident with no injuries to the innocent victims; score one more, they didn't quite say, for the good guys. The bad guys' identities weren't put out with the initial reports. Tracking them down would be a police function, and the results would be fed to Tawney's intelligence section, along with the debriefs of the victims.

It had been a very long day for the Team-2 members, all of whom went home to sleep on arrival back at Hereford, with notification from Chavez that they'd dispense with morning PT the next day. There wasn't even time for a congratulatory set of beers in the local NCO Club—which in any case was closed by the time they got home.

On the flight home, Chavez noted to Dr. Bellow that despite the fitness of his people the fatigue factor was pretty high—more so than on their occasional night exercises. Bellow replied that stress was the ultimate fatigue generator, and that the team members were not immune to stress, no matter what their training or fitness. That evidently included himself, since after making the pronouncement, Bellow turned and slipped off to sleep, leaving Chavez to do the same after a glass of red Spanish wine.

It was the lead news story in Austria, of course. Popov caught the first bit of it live in a *Gasthaus,* then more in his hotel room. He sipped orange schnapps while he applied his keen, professional eye to the screen. These anti-terror groups all looked pretty much the same, but that was to be expected, since they all trained to do the same thing and worked out of the same international

manual—first promulgated by the English with their Special Air Service commandos, then followed by the German GSG-9, and then the rest of Europe, followed by the Americans—down to the black clothing, which struck Popov as theatrical, but they all had to wear something, and black made more sense than white clothing, didn't it? Of more immediate interest, there in the room with him was the leather attaché case filled with D-mark banknotes, which he would take to Bern the following day for deposit in his account before flying back to New York. It was remarkable, he thought as he switched the TV off and pulled the bedclothes up, two simple jobs, and he now had just over one million American dollars in his numbered and anonymous account. Whatever his employers wanted him to accomplish for them, he was being well compensated for it, and they didn't seem overly concerned by the expense. So much the better that the money went to a good cause, the Russian thought.

"Thank God," George Winston noted. "Hell, I know that guy. Erwin's good people," the Secretary of the Treasury said on his way out of the White House, where the cabinet meeting had run very long.

"Who did the takedown?"

"Well—" That caught him short. He wasn't supposed to say, and wasn't supposed to know. "What did the news say?"

"Local cops, Vienna police SWAT team, I guess."

"Well, I suppose they learned up on how to do it," Sec-Treas opined, heading toward his car with his Secret Service detail.

"The *Austrians?* Who'd they learn it from?"

"Somebody who knows how, I guess," Winston replied, getting into the car.

"So, what's the big deal about it?" Carol Brightling asked the Secretary of the Interior. To her it looked like another case of boys and their toys.

"Nothing, really," the Secretary replied, her own protective detail guiding her to the door of her official car. "Just that what they showed on TV, it was a pretty good job of rescuing all those people. I've been to Austria a few times, and the cops didn't strike me as all that great. Maybe I'm wrong. But George acts like he knows more than he's telling."

"Oh, that's right, Jean, he's 'inner cabinet,' " Dr. Brightling observed. It was something those in the "outer cabinet" didn't like. Of course, Carol Brightling wasn't technically in the cabinet at all. She had a seat against the wall instead of around the table, there only in case the issues of the meeting required a scientific opinion, which they hadn't today. Good news and bad news. She got to listen in on everything, and she took her notes on all that happened in the ornate, stuffy room that overlooked the Rose Garden, while the President controlled the agenda and the pace—badly in today's case, she thought. Tax policy had taken over an hour, and they'd never gotten to use of national forests, which came under the Department of the Interior, which issue had been postponed to the next meeting, a week away.

She didn't have a protective detail, either, not even an office in the White House itself. Previous Presidential Science Advisors had been in the West Wing, but she'd been moved to the Old Executive Office Building. It was a larger and more comfortable office, with a window, which her basement office in the White House would not have had, but though the OEOB was considered

part of the White House for administrative and security purposes, it didn't have quite the prestige, and prestige was what it was all about if you were part of the White House staff. Even under this President, who worked pretty hard to treat everyone the same and who wasn't into the status bullshit—there was no avoiding it at this level of government. And so, Carol Brightling clung to her right to have lunch in the White House Mess with the Big Boys and Big Girls of the Administration, and grumbled that to see the President except at his request, she had to go through the Chief of Staff and the appointments secretary to get a few minutes of His Valuable Time. As though she'd ever wasted it.

A Secret Service agent opened the door for her with a respectful nod and smile, and she walked into this surpassingly ugly building, then turned right to her office, which at least overlooked the White House. She handed her notes to her (male, of course) secretary on the way in for transcription, then sat down at her desk, finding there a new pile of papers to be read and acted upon. She opened her desk drawer and got herself a starlight mint to suck on as she attacked the pile. Then on reflection she lifted her TV controller and turned her office television to CNN for a look at what was happening around the world. It was the top of the hour, and the lead story was the thing in Vienna.

God, what a house was her first thought. Like a king's palace, a huge waste of resources for one man, or even one large family, to use as a private residence. What was it Winston had said of the owner? Good people? Sure. All good people lived like wastrels, glomming up precious resources like that. Another goddamned plutocrat, stock trader, currency speculator, however he earned the money to buy a place like that—and then terrorists had invaded his privacy. Well, gee, she thought, I wonder why they picked him. No sense attacking a sheep farmer or truck driver. Terrorists went after the moneyed people, or the supposedly important ones, because going for ordinary folks had little in the way of a political point, and these were, after all, political acts. But they hadn't been as bright as they ought to have been. Whoever had picked them had . . . picked them to fail? Was *that* possible? She supposed that it was. It was a *political* act, after all, and such things could have all manner of real purposes. That brought a smile, as the reporter described the attack by the local police SWAT team—unfortunately not shown, because the local cops hadn't wanted cameras and reporters in the way—then the release of the hostages, shown in closeup to let people share the experience. They'd been so close to death, only to be released, saved by the local cops, who'd really only restored to them their programmed time of death, because everything died, sooner or later. That was Nature's plan, and you couldn't fight Nature . . . though you could help her along, couldn't you? The reporter went on to say that this had been the second terrorist incident in Europe over the last couple of months, both of them failures due to adroit police action. Carol remembered the attempted robbery in Bern, another botch . . . a creative one? She might have to find that out, though in this case a failure was as useful as —no, *more* useful than—a success, for the people who were planning things. That thought brought a smile. Yes. It was more useful than a success, wasn't it? And with that she looked down at a fax from Friends of the Earth, who had

her direct number and frequently sent her what they thought was important information.

She leaned back in her comfortable high-backed chair to read it over twice. A good bunch of people with the right ideas, though few listened to them.

"Dr. Brightling?" Her secretary stuck his head in the door.

"Yes, Roy?"

"You still want me to show you those faxes—like the one you're reading, I mean?" Roy Gibbons asked.

"Oh, yes."

"But those people are card-carrying nuts."

"Not really. I like some of the things they do," Carol replied, tossing the fax in her trash can. She'd save their idea for some future date.

"Fair enough, doc." The head disappeared back into the outer office.

The next thing in her pile was pretty important, a report of procedures for shutting down nuclear power reactors, and the subsequent safety of the shut-down reactor systems: how long before environmental factors might attack and corrode the internal items, and what environmental damage could result from it. Yes, this was very important stuff, and fortunately the index appended to it showed data on individual reactors across the country. She popped another starlight mint into her mouth and leaned forward, setting the papers flat on the desktop so that she could stare straight down at them for reading purposes.

"This seems to work," Steve said quietly.

"How many strands fit inside?" Maggie asked.

"Anywhere from three to ten."

"And how large is the overall package?"

"Six microns. Would you believe it? The packaging is white in color, so it reflects light pretty well, especially UV radiation, and in a water-spray environment, it's just about invisible." The individual capsules couldn't be seen with the naked eye, and only barely with an optical microscope. Better still, their weight was such that they'd float in air about the same as dust particles, as readily breathable as secondhand smoke in a singles bar. Once in the body, the coating would dissolve, and allow release of the Shiva strands into the lungs or the upper GI, where they could go to work.

"Water soluble?" Maggie asked.

"Slowly, but faster if there's anything biologically active in the water, like the trace hydrochloric acid in saliva, for example. Wow, we could have really made money from the Iraqis with this one, kiddo—or anybody who wants to play bio-war in the real world."

Their company had invented the technology, working on an NIH grant designed to develop an easier way than needles to deliver vaccines. Needles required semiskilled use. The new technique used electrophoresis to wrap insignificantly tiny quantities of protective gel around even smaller amounts of airborne bioactive agents. That would allow people to ingest vaccines with a simple drink rather than the more commonly used method of inoculation. If they ever fielded a working AIDS vaccine, this would be the method of choice for administering it in Africa, where countries lacked the infrastructure to do

much of anything. Steve had just proven that the same technology could be used to deliver active virus with the same degree of safety and reliability. Or almost proven it.

"How do we proof-test it?" Maggie asked.

"Monkeys. How we fixed for monkeys in the lab?"

"Lots," she assured him. This would be an important step. They'd give it to a few monkeys, then see how well it spread through the laboratory population. They'd use rhesus monkeys. Their blood was so similar to humans'.

Subject Four was the first, as expected. He was fifty-three years old and his liver function was so far off the scale as to qualify him for a high place on the transplant list at the University of Pittsburgh. His skin had a yellowish cast in the best of circumstances, but that didn't stop him from hitting the booze harder than any of their test subjects. His name, he said, was Chester something, Dr. John Killgore remembered. Chester's brain function was about the lowest in the group as well. He watched TV a lot, rarely talked to anyone, never even read comic books, which were popular with the rest, as were TV cartoons—watching the Cartoon Channel was among their most popular pastimes.

They were all in hog heaven, John Killgore had noted. All the booze and fast food and warmth that they could want, and most of them were even learning to use the showers. From time to time, a few would ask what the deal was here, but their inquiries were never pressed beyond the pro-forma answer they got from the doctors and security guards.

But with Chester, they had to take action now. Killgore entered the room and called his name. Subject Four rose from his bunk and came over, clearly feeling miserable.

"Not feeling good, Chester?" Killgore asked from behind his mask.

"Stomach, can't keep stuff down, feel crummy all over," Four replied.

"Well, come along with me and we'll see what we can do about that, okay?"

"You say so, doc," Chester replied, augmenting the agreement with a loud belch.

Outside the door, they put him in a wheelchair. It was only fifty yards to the clinical side of the installation. Two orderlies lifted Number Four into a bed, and restrained him into it with Velcro ties. Then one of them took a blood sample. Ten minutes later, Killgore tested it for Shiva antibodies, and the sample turned blue, as expected. Chester, Subject Number Four, had less than a week to live—not as much as the six to twelve months to which his alcoholism had already limited him, but not really all that much of a reduction, was it? Killgore went back inside to start an IV into his arm, and to calm Chester down, he hung a morphine drip that soon had him unconscious and even smiling slightly. Good. Number Four would soon die, but he would do so in relative peace. More than anything else, Dr. Killgore wanted to keep the process orderly.

He checked his watch when he got back to his office/ viewing room. His hours were long ones. It was almost like being a real physician again. He hadn't practiced clinical medicine since his residency, but he read all the right journals and knew the techniques, and besides, his current crop of patient/

victims wouldn't know the difference anyway. Tough luck, Chester, but it's a tough world out there, Steve thought, going back to his notes. Chester's early response to the virus had been a little unsettling—only half the time programmed—but it had been brought about by his grossly reduced liver function. It couldn't be helped. Some people would get hit sooner than others because of differing physical vulnerabilities. So the outbreak would start unevenly. It shouldn't matter in the eventual effects, though it would alert people sooner than he hoped it would. That would cause a run on the vaccines Steve Berg and his shop were developing. "A" would be widely distributed after the rush to manufacture it. "B" would be more closely held, assuming that he and his team could indeed get it ready for use. "A" would go out to everybody, while "B" would go only to those people who were supposed to survive, people who understood what it was all about, or who would accept their survival and get on with things with the rest of the crew.

Killgore shook his head. There was a lot of stuff left to be done, and as usual, not enough time to do it.

Clark and Stanley went over the takedown immediately upon their arrival in the morning, along with Peter Covington, still sweaty from his morning workout with Team-1. Chavez and his people would just be waking up after their long day on the European mainland.

"It was a bloody awful tactical situation. And Chavez is right," Major Covington went on. "We need our own helicopter crews. Yesterday's mission cried out for that, but we didn't have what we needed. That's why he had to execute a poor plan and depend on luck to accomplish it."

"He could have asked their army for help," Stanley pointed out.

"Sir, we both know that one doesn't commit to an important tactical move with a helicopter crew one doesn't know and with whom one has not worked," Covington observed, in his best Sandhurst grammar. "We need to look at this issue immediately."

"True," Stanley agreed, looking over at Clark.

"Not part of the TO and E, but I see the point," Rainbow Six conceded. How the hell had they overlooked this requirement? He asked himself. "Okay, first let's figure all the chopper types we're likely to see, and then find out if we can get some drivers who're current in most of them."

"Ideally, I'd love to have a Night Stalker—but we'd have to take it with us everywhere we go, and that means—what? A C-5 or a C-17 transport aircraft assigned to us at all times?" Stanley observed.

Clark nodded. The Night Stalker version of the McDonnell-Douglas AH-6 Loach had been invented for Task Force 160, now redesignated the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment—SOAR—based at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. They were probably the wildest and craziest bunch of aviators in the world, who worked on the sly with brother aviators from selected other countries—Britain and Israel were the two most often allowed into the 160 compound at Campbell. In a real sense, getting the choppers and flight crews assigned to Rainbow would be the easy part. The hard part would be getting the fixed-wing transport needed to move the chopper to where they needed it. It'd be about as hard to hide as an elephant in a schoolyard. With Night

Stalker they'd have all manner of surveillance gear, a special silent rotor—*and Santa on his fucking sleigh with eight tiny reindeer,* Clark's mind went on. It would never happen, despite all the drag he had in Washington and London.

"Okay, I'll call Washington for authorization to get some aviators on the team. Any problem getting some aircraft here for them to play with?"

"Shouldn't be," Stanley replied.

John checked his watch. He'd have to wait until 9:00 A.M. Washington time —2:00 P.M. in England—to make his pitch via the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, which was the routing agency for Rainbow's American funding. He wondered how Ed Foley would react—more to the point, he needed Ed to be an enthusiastic advocate. Well, that ought not to be too hard. Ed knew field operations, after a fashion, and was loyal to the people at the sharp end. Better yet, Clark was asking after they'd had a major success, and that usually worked a lot better than a plea for help after a failure.

"Okay, we'll continue this with the team debrief." Clark stood and went to his office. Helen Montgomery had the usual pile of papers on his desk, somewhat higher than usual, as this one included the expected thank-you telegrams from the Austrians. The one from the Justice Minister was particularly flowery.

"Thank you, sir," John breathed, setting that one aside.

The amazing part of this job was all the admin stuff. As the commander of Rainbow, Clark had to keep track of when and how money came in and was spent, and he had to defend such things as the number of gun rounds his people fired every week. He did his best to slough much of this off on Alistair Stanley and Mrs. Montgomery, but a lot of it still landed on his desk. He had long experience as a government employee, and at CIA he'd had to report in endless detail on every field operation he'd ever run to keep the desk weenies happy. But this was well beyond that, and it accounted for *his* time on the firing range, as he found shooting a good means of stress relief, especially if he imagined the images of his bureaucratic tormentors in the center of the Q-targets he perforated with .45-caliber bullets. Justifying a budget was something new and foreign. If it wasn't important, why fund it at all, and if it was important, why quibble over a few thousand bucks' worth of bullets? It was the bureaucratic mentality, of course, all those people who sat at their desks and felt that the world would collapse around them if they didn't have all their papers initialed, signed, stamped, and properly filed, and if that inconvenienced others, too bad. So he, John Terrence Clark, CIA field officer for more than thirty years, a quiet legend in his agency, was stuck at his expensive desk, behind a closed door, working on paperwork that any self-respecting accountant would have rejected, on top of which he had to supervise and pass judgment on real stuff, which was both more interesting and far more to the point.

And it wasn't as though his budget was all that much to worry about. Less than fifty people, total, scarcely three million dollars in payroll expense, since everyone was paid the usual military rate, plus the fact that Rainbow picked up everyone's housing expense out of its multigovernment funding. One inequity was that the American soldiers were better paid than their European counterparts. That bothered John a little, but there was nothing he could do

about it, and with housing costs picked up—the housing at Hereford wasn't lavish, but it was comfortable—nobody had any trouble living. The morale of the troops was excellent. He'd expected that. They were elite troopers, and that sort invariably had a good attitude, especially since they trained almost every day, and soldiers loved to train almost as much as they loved to do the things they trained for.

There would be a little discord. Chavez's Team-2 had drawn both field missions, as a result of which they'd swagger a little more, to the jealous annoyance of Peter Covington's Team-1, which was slightly ahead on the team/team competition of PT and shooting. Not even a cat's whisker of difference, but people like this, as competitive as any athletes could ever be, worked damned hard for that fifth of a percentage point, and it really came down to who'd had what for breakfast on the mornings of the competitive exercises, or maybe what they'd dreamed about during the night. Well, that degree of competition was healthy for the team as a whole. And decidedly unhealthy for those against whom his people deployed.

Bill Tawney was at his desk as well, going over the known information on the terrorists of the night before. The Austrians had begun their inquiries with the German Federal Police Office—the Bundes Kriminal Amt—even before the takedown. The identities of Hans Fürchtner and Petra Dortmund had been confirmed by fingerprints. The BKA investigators would jump onto the case hard that day. For starters, they'd trace the IDs of the people who'd rented the car that had been driven to the Ostermann home, and search for the house in Germany—probably Germany, Tawney reminded himself—that they'd lived in. The other four would probably be harder. Fingerprints had already been taken and were being compared on the computer scanning systems that everyone had now. Tawney agreed with the initial assessment of the Austrians that the four spear-carriers had probably been from the former East Germany, which seemed to be turning out all manner of political aberrants: converts from communism who were now discovering the joys of nazism, lingering true believers in the previous political-economic model, and just plain thugs who were a major annoyance to the regular German police forces.

But this had to be political. Fürchtner and Dortmund were—*had been,* Bill corrected himself—real, believing communists all their lives. They'd been raised in the former West Germany to middle-class families, the way a whole generation of terrorists had, striving all their active lives for socialist perfection or some such illusion. And so they had raided the home of a high-end capitalist . . . seeking what?

Tawney lifted a set of faxes from Vienna. Erwin Ostermann had told the police during his three-hour debrief that they'd sought his "special inside codes" to the international trading system. Were there such things? Probably not, Tawney judged—why not make sure? He lifted his phone and dialed the number of an old friend, Martin Cooper, a former "Six" man who now worked in Lloyd's ugly building in London's financial district.

"Cooper," a voice said.

"Martin, this is Bill Tawney. How are you this rainy morning?"

"Quite well, Bill, and you—what are you doing now?"

"Still taking the Queen's shilling, old man. New job, very hush-hush, I'm afraid."

"What can I do to help you, old man?"

"Rather a stupid question, actually. Are there any insider channels in the international trading system? Special codes and such things?"

"I bloody wish there were, Bill. Make our job here much easier," replied the former station chief for Mexico City and a few other minor posts for the British Secret Intelligence Service. "What exactly do you mean?"

"Not sure, but the subject just came up."

"Well, people at this level do have personal relationships and often trade information, but I take it you mean something rather more structured, an insider-network marketplace sort of thing?"

"Yes, that's the idea."

"If so, they've all kept it a secret from me and the people I work with, old man. International conspiracies?" Cooper snorted. "And this is a chatty mob, you know. Everyone's into everyone else's business."

"No such thing, then?"

"Not to my knowledge, Bill. It's the sort of thing the uninformed believe in, of course, but it doesn't exist, unless that's the mob who assassinated John Kennedy," Cooper added with a chuckle.

"Much what I'd thought, Martin, but I needed to tick that box. Thanks, my friend."

"Bill, you have any idea on who might have attacked that Ostermann chap in Vienna?"

"Not really. You know him?"

"My boss does. I've met him once. Seems a decent bloke, and bloody smart as well."

"Really all I know is what I saw on the telly this morning." It wasn't entirely a lie, and Martin would understand in any case, Tawney knew.

"Well, whoever did the rescue, my hat is off to them. Smells like SAS to me."

"Really? Well, that wouldn't be a surprise, would it?"

"Suppose not. Good hearing from you, Bill. How about dinner sometime?"

"Love to. I'll call you next time I'm in London."

"Excellent. Cheers."

Tawney replaced the phone. It seemed that Martin had landed on his feet after being let go from "Six," which had reduced its size with the diminution of the Cold War. Well, that was to be expected. *The sort of thing the uninformed believe in,* Tawney thought. Yes, that fit. Fürchtner and Dortmund were communists, and would not have trusted or believed in the open market. In their universe, people could only get wealthy by cheating, exploiting, and conspiring with others of the same ilk. And what did that mean? . . .

Why had they attacked the home of Erwin Ostermann? You couldn't rob such a man. He didn't keep his money in cash or gold bars. It was all electronic, theoretical money, really, that existed in computer memories and traveled across telephone wires, and that was difficult to steal, wasn't it?

No, what a man like Ostermann had was *information,* the ultimate source of power, ethereal though it was. Were Dortmund and Fürchtner willing to kill

for that? It appeared so, but were the two dead terrorists the sort of people who could make use of such information? No, they couldn't have been, because then they would have known that the thing they'd sought didn't exist.

Somebody hired them, Tawney thought. Somebody had sent them out on their mission. But who?

And to what purpose? Which was even a better question, and one from which he could perhaps learn the answer to the first.

Back up, he told himself. If someone had hired them for a job, who could it have been? Clearly someone connected to the old terror network, someone who'd know where they were and whom they'd known and trusted to some degree, enough to risk their lives. But Fürchtner and Dortmund had been ideologically pure communists. Their acquaintances would be the same, and they would certainly not have trusted or taken orders from anyone of a different political shade. And how else could this notional person have known where and how to contact them, win their confidence, and send them off on a mission of death, chasing after something that didn't really exist? . . .

A superior officer? Tawney wondered, stretching his mind for more information than he really had. Someone of the same political bent or beliefs, able to order them, or at least to motivate them to do something dangerous.

He needed more information, and he'd use his SIS and police contacts to get every scrap he could from the Austrian/German investigation. For starters, he called Whitehall to make sure he got full translations of all the hostage interviews. Tawney had been an intelligence officer for a long time, and something had gotten his nose to twitch.

"Ding, I didn't like your takedown plan," Clark said in the big conference room.

"I didn't either, Mr. C, but without a chopper, didn't have much choice, did I?" Chavez replied with an air of self-righteousness. "But that's not the thing that really scares me."

"What is?" John asked.

"Noonan brought this one up. Every time we go into a place, there are people around—the public, reporters, TV crews, all of that. What if one of them has a cell phone and calls the bad guys inside to tell them what's happening? Real simple, isn't it? We're fucked and so are some hostages."

"We should be able to deal with that," Tim Noonan told them. "It's the way a cell phone works. It broadcasts a signal to tell the local cell that it's there and it's on, so that the computer systems can route an incoming call to it. Okay, we can get instrumentation to read that, and maybe to block the signal path—maybe even clone the bad guys' phone, trap the incoming call and bag the bastards outside, maybe even flip 'em, right? But I need that software, and I need it now."

"David?" Clark turned to Dave Peled, their Israeli techno-genius.

"It can be done. I expect the technology exists already at NSA or elsewhere."

"What about Israel?" Noonan asked pointedly.

"Well . . . yes, we have such things."

"Get them," Clark ordered. "Want me to call Avi personally?"

"That would help."

"Okay, I need the name and specifications of the equipment. How hard to train the operators?"

"Not very," Peled conceded. "Tim can do it easily."

Thank you for that vote of confidence, Special Agent Noonan thought, without a smile.

"Back to the takedown," Clark commanded. "Ding, what were you thinking?"

Chavez leaned forward in his chair. He wasn't just defending himself; he was defending his team. "Mainly that I didn't want to lose a hostage, John. Doc told us we had to take those two seriously, and we had a hard deadline coming up. Okay, the mission as I understand it is *not* to lose a hostage. So, when they made it clear they wanted the chopper for transport, it was just a matter of giving it to them, with a little extra put in. Dieter and Homer did their jobs perfectly. So did Eddie and the rest of the shooters. The dangerous part was getting Louis and George up to the house so they could take down the last bunch. They did a nice ninja job getting there unseen," Chavez went on, gesturing to Loiselle and Tomlinson. "That was the most dangerous part of the mission. We had them in a light-well and the camo stuff worked. If the bad guys had been using NVGs, that would have been a problem, but the additional illumination off the trees—from the lights the cops brought in, I mean—would have interfered with that. NVGs flare a lot if you throw light their way. It was a gamble," Ding admitted, "but it was a gamble that looked better than having a hostage whacked right in front of us while we were jerking off at the assembly point. That's the mission, Mr. C, and I was the commander on the scene. I made the call." He didn't add that his call had worked.

"I see. Well, good shooting from everybody, and Loiselle and Tomlinson did very well to get close undetected," Alistair Stanley said from his place, opposite Clark's. "Even so—"

"Even so, we need helicopters for a case like this one. How the hell did we overlook that requirement?" Chavez demanded.

"My fault, Domingo," Clark admitted. "I'm going to call in on that today."

"Just so we get it fixed, man." Ding stretched in his seat. "My troops got it done, John. Crummy setup, but we got it done. Next time, be better if things went a little smoother," he conceded. "But when the doc tells me that the bad guys will really kill somebody, that tells me I have to take decisive action, doesn't it?"

"Depending on the situation, yes," Stanley answered the question.

"Al, what does *that* mean?" Chavez asked sharply. "We need better mission guidelines. I need to have it spelled out. When can I allow a hostage to get killed? Does the age or sex of the hostage enter into the equation? What if somebody takes over a kindergarten or a hospital maternity ward? You can't expect us to disregard human factors like that. Okay, I understand that you can't plan for every possibility, and as the commanders on the scene, Peter and I have to exercise judgment, but my default position is to prevent the death of a hostage if I can do it. If that means taking risks—well, it's a probability measured against a certainty, isn't it? In a case like that, you take the risk, don't you?"

“Dr. Bellow,” Clark asked, “how confident were you in your evaluation of the terrorists’ state of mind?”

“Very. They were experienced. They’d thought through a lot of the mission, and in my opinion they were dead serious about killing hostages to show us their resolve,” the psychiatrist replied.

“Then or now?”

“Both,” Bellow said confidently. “These two were political sociopaths. Human life doesn’t mean much to that sort of personality. Just poker chips to toss around the table.”

“Okay, but what if they’d spotted Loiselle and Tomlinson coming in?”

“They would probably have killed a hostage and that would have frozen the situation for a few minutes.”

“And my backup plan in that case was to rush the house from the east side and shoot our way in as quickly as possible,” Chavez went on. “The better way is to zip-line down from some choppers and hit the place like a Kansas tornado. That’s dangerous, too,” he conceded. “But the people we’re dealing with ain’t the most reasonable folks in the world, are they?”

The senior team members didn’t like this sort of discussion, since it reminded them that as good as the Rainbow troopers were, they weren’t gods or supermen. They’d now had two incidents, both of them resolved without a civilian casualty. That made for mental complacency on the command side, further exacerbated by the fact that Team-2 had done a picture-perfect takedown under adverse tactical circumstances. They trained their men to be supermen, Olympic-perfect physical specimens, supremely trained in the use of firearms and explosives, and most of all, mentally prepared for the rapid destruction of human life.

The Team-2 members sitting around the table looked at Clark with neutral expressions, taking it all in with remarkable equanimity because they’d known last night that the plan was flawed and dangerous, but they’d brought it off anyway, and they were understandably proud of themselves for having done the difficult and saved their hostages. But Clark was questioning the capabilities of their team leader, and they didn’t like that either. For the former SAS members among them, the reply to all this was simple, their old regimental motto: Who Dares, Wins. They’d dared and won. And the score for them was Christians ten, Lions nil, which wasn’t a bad score at all. About the only unhappy member of the team was First Sergeant Julio Vega. “Oso” carried the machine gun, which had yet to come into play. The long-riflemen, Vega saw, were feeling pretty good about themselves, as were the light-weapons guys. But those were the breaks. He’d been there, a few meters from Weber, ready to cover if a bad guy had gotten lucky and managed to run away, firing his weapon. He’d have cut him in half with his M-60—his pistol work in the base range was one of the best. There was killing going on, and he wasn’t getting to play. The religious part of Vega reproached the rest of him for thinking that way, which caused a few grumbles and chuckles when he was alone.

“So, where does that leave us?” Chavez asked. “What are our operational guidelines in the case where a hostage is likely to get killed by the bad guys?”

“The mission remains saving the hostages, where practicable,” Clark replied,

after a few seconds' thought.

"And the team leader on the scene decides what's practicable and what isn't?"

"Correct," Rainbow Six confirmed.

"So, we're right back where we started, John," Ding pointed out. "And that means that Peter and I get all the responsibility, and all the criticism if somebody else doesn't like what we've done." He paused. "I understand the responsibility that comes along with being in command in the field, but it would be nice to have something a little firmer to fall back on, y'know? Mistakes will happen out there sooner or later. We know it. We don't like it, but we know it. Anyway, I'm telling you here and now, John, I see the mission as the preservation of innocent life, and that's the side I'm going to come down on."

"I agree with Chavez," Peter Covington said. "That must be our default position."

"I never said it wasn't," Clark said, suddenly becoming angry. The problem was that there could well be situations in which it was not possible to save a life—but training for such a situation was somewhere between extremely difficult and damned near impossible, because all the terrorist incidents they'd have to deal with in the field would be as different as the terrorists and the sites they selected. So, he *had to* trust Chavez and Covington. Beyond that, he could set up training scenarios that forced them to think and act, in the hope that the practice would stand them in good stead in the field. It had been a lot easier as a field officer in the CIA, Clark thought. There he had always had the initiative, had almost always chosen the time and place of action to suit himself. Rainbow, however, was always *re*active, responding to the initiative of others. That simple fact was why he had to train his people so hard, so that their expertise could correct the tactical inequity. And that had worked twice. But would it continue to work?

So, for starters, John decided, from now on a more senior Rainbow member would always accompany the teams into the field to provide support, someone the team leaders could lean against. Of course, they wouldn't like the oversight right there at their shoulders, but that couldn't be helped. With that thought he dismissed the meeting, and called Al Stanley into his office, where he presented his idea.

"Fine with me, John. But who are the seniors who got out?"

"You and me, for starters."

"Very well. Makes sense—what with all the fitness and shooting training we subject ourselves to. Domingo and Peter might find it all a bit overpowering, however."

"They both know how to follow orders—and they'll come to us for advice when it's needed. Everybody does. I sure did, whenever the opportunity offered itself." Which hadn't been very damned often, though John remembered wishing for it often enough.

"I agree with your proposal, John," Stanley said. "Shall we write it up for the order book?"

Clark nodded. "Today."

CHAPTER 9

STALKERS

"I can do that, John," the Director of Central Intelligence said. "It means talking to the Pentagon, however."

"Today if possible, Ed. We really need this. I was remiss in not considering the need earlier. Seriously remiss," Clark added humbly.

"It happens," DCI Foley observed. "Okay, let me make some calls and get back to you." He broke the connection and thought for a few seconds, then flipped through his rolodex, and found the number of CINC-SNAKE, as the post was laughingly called. Commander in Chief, Special Operations Command at MacDill Air Force Base outside Tampa, Florida, was the boss of all the "snake-eaters," the special-operations people from whom Rainbow had drawn its American personnel. General Sam Wilson was the man behind the desk, not a place he was especially comfortable. He'd started off as an enlisted man who'd opted for airborne and ranger training, then moved into Special Forces, which he'd left to get his college degree in history at North Carolina State University, then returned to the Army as a second lieutenant and worked his way up the ladder rapidly. A youthful fifty-three, he had four shiny stars on his shoulders now and was in charge of a unified multiservice command that included members from each of the armed services, all of whom knew how to cook snake over an open fire.

"Hi, Ed," the general said, on getting the call over his secure phone. "What's happening at Langley?" The special-operations community was very close with CIA, and often provided intelligence to it or the muscle to run a difficult operation in the field.

"I have a request from Rainbow," the DCI told him.

"Again? They've already raided my units, you know."

"They've put 'em to good use. That was their takedown in Austria yesterday."

"Looked good on TV," Sam Wilson admitted. "Will I get additional information?" By which he meant information on who the bad guys had been.

"The whole package when it's available, Sam," Foley promised.

"Okay, what does your boy need?"

"Aviators, helicopter crews."

"You know how long it takes to train those people, Ed? Jesus, they're expensive to maintain, too."

"I know that, Sam," the voice assured him from Langley. "The Brits have to put up, too. You know Clark. He wouldn't ask 'less he needed it."

Wilson had to admit that, yes, he knew John Clark, who'd once saved a wrecked mission and, in the process, a bunch of soldiers, a long time and

several presidents ago. Ex-Navy SEAL, the Agency said of him, with a solid collection of medals and a lot of accomplishments. And this Rainbow group had two successful operations under its belt.

"Okay, Ed, how many?"

"One really good one for now."

It was the "for now" part that worried Wilson. But—"Okay, I'll be back to you later today."

"Thanks, Sam." One nice thing about Wilson, Foley knew, was that he didn't screw around on time issues. For him "right now" meant right the hell now.

Chester wasn't going to make it even as far as Killgore had thought. His liver function tests were heading downhill faster than anything he'd ever seen—or read about in the medical literature. The man's skin was yellow now, like a pale lemon, and slack over his flaccid musculature. Respiration was already a little worrisome, too, partly because of the large dose of morphine he was getting to keep him unconscious or at least stuporous. Both Killgore and Barbara Archer had wanted to treat him as aggressively as possible, to see if there were really a treatment modality that might work on Shiva, but the fact of the matter was that Chester's underlying medical conditions were so serious that no treatment regimen could overcome both those problems *and* the Shiva.

"Two days," Killgore said. "Maybe less."

"I'm afraid you're right," Dr. Archer agreed. She had all manner of ideas for handling this, from conventional—and almost certainly useless—antibiotics to Interleukin-2, which some thought might have clinical applications to such a case. Of course, modern medicine had yet to defeat any viral disease, but some thought that buttressing the body's immune system from one direction might have the effect of helping it in another, and there were a lot of powerful new synthetic antibiotics on the market now. Sooner or later, someone would find a magic bullet for viral diseases. But not yet: "Potassium?" she asked, after considering the prospects for the patient and the negligible value of treating him at all. Killgore shrugged agreement.

"I suppose. You can do it if you want." Killgore waved to the medication cabinet in the corner.

Dr. Archer walked over, tore a 40cc disposable syringe out of its paper and plastic container, then inserted the needle in a glass vial of potassium-and-water solution, and filled the needle by pulling back on the plunger. Then she returned to the bed and inserted the needle into the medication drip, pushing the plunger now to give the patient a hard bolus of the lethal chemical. It took a few seconds, longer than if she had done the injection straight into a major vein, but Archer didn't want to touch the patient any more than necessary, even with gloves. It didn't really matter that much. Chester's breathing within the clear plastic oxygen mask seemed to hesitate, then restart, then hesitate again, then become ragged and irregular for six or eight breaths. Then . . . it stopped. The chest settled into itself and didn't rise. His eyes had been semi-open, like those of a man in shallow sleep or shock, aimed in her direction but not really focused. Now they closed for the last time. Dr. Archer took her stethoscope and held it on the alcoholic's chest. There was no sound at all. Archer stood up, took off her stethoscope, and pocketed it.

So long, Chester, Killgore thought.

"Okay," she said matter-of-factly. "Any symptoms with the others?"

"None yet. Antibody tests are positive, however," Killgore replied. "Another week or so before we see frank symptoms, I expect."

"We need a set of healthy test subjects," Barbara Archer said. "These people are too—too sick to be proper benchmarks for Shiva."

"That means some risks."

"I know that," Archer assured him. "And you know we need better test subjects."

"Yes, but the risks are serious," Killgore observed.

"And I know *that,"* Archer replied.

"Okay, Barb, run it up the line. I won't object. You want to take care of Chester? I have to run over to see Steve."

"Fine." She walked to the wall, picked up the phone, and punched three digits onto the keypad to get the disposal people.

For his part, Killgore went into the changing area. He stopped in the decontamination chamber first of all, pushed the large square red button, and waited for the machinery to spray him down from all directions with the fog-solution of antiseptics that were known to be immediately and totally lethal to the Shiva virus. Then he went through the door into the changing room itself, where he removed the blue plastic suit, tossed it into the bin for further and more dramatic decontamination—it wasn't really needed, but the people in the lab felt better about it then—then dressed in surgical greens. On the way out, he put on a white lab coat. The next stop was Steve Berg's shop. Neither he nor Barb Archer had said it out loud yet, but everyone would feel better if they had a working vaccine for Shiva.

"Hey, John," Berg said, when his colleague came in.

" 'Morning, Steve," Killgore responded in greeting. "How're the vaccines coming?"

"Well, we have 'A' and 'B' working now." Berg gestured to the monkey cages on the other side of the glass. " 'A' batch has the yellow stickers. 'B' is the blue, and the control group is red."

Killgore looked. There were twenty of each, for a total of sixty rhesus monkeys. Cute little devils. "Too bad," he observed.

"I don't like it, either, but that's how it's done, my friend." Neither man owned a fur coat.

"When do you expect results?"

"Oh, five to seven days for the 'A' group. Nine to fourteen for the control group. And the 'B' group—well, we have hopes for them, of course. How's it going on your side of the house?"

"Lost one today."

"This fast?" Berg asked, finding it disturbing.

"His liver was off the chart to begin with. That's something we haven't considered fully enough. There will be people out there with an unusually high degree of vulnerability to our little friend."

"They could be canaries, man," Berg worried, thinking of the songbirds used to warn miners about bad air. "And we learned how to deal with that two years ago, remember?"

"I know." In a real sense, that was where the entire idea had come from. But they could do it better than the foreigners had. "What's the difference in time between humans and our little furry friends?"

"Well, I didn't aerosol any of these, remember. This is a vaccine test, not an infection test."

"Okay, I think you need to set up an aerosol control test. I hear you have an improved packing method."

"Maggie wants me to do that. Okay. We have plenty of monkeys. I can set it up in two days, a full-up test of the notional delivery system."

"With and without vaccines?"

"I can do that." Berg nodded. *You should have set it up already, idiot,* Killgore didn't say to his colleague. Berg was smart, but he couldn't see very far beyond the limits of his microscopes. Well, nobody was perfect, even here. "I don't go out of my way to kill things, John," Berg wanted to make clear to his physician colleague.

"I understand, Steve, but for every one we kill in proofing Shiva, we'll save a few hundred thousand in the wild, remember? And you take good care of them while they're here," he added. The test animals here lived an idyllic life, in comfortable cages, or even in large communal areas where the food was abundant and the water clear. The monkeys had a lot of room, with pseudotrees to climb, air temperature like that of their native Africa, and no predators to threaten them. As in human prisons, the condemned got hearty meals to go along with their constitutional rights. But people like Steve Berg still didn't like it, important and indispensable as it was to the overall goal. Killgore wondered if his friend wept at night for the cute little brown-eyed creatures. Certainly Berg wasn't all that concerned with Chester—except that he might represent a canary, of course. That could indeed ruin anything, but that was also why Berg was developing "A" vaccine.

"Yeah," Berg admitted. "I still feel shitty about it, though."

"You should see my side of the house," Killgore observed.

"I suppose," Steve Berg responded diffidently.

The overnight flight had come out of Raleigh-Durham International Airport in North Carolina, an hour's drive from Fort Bragg. The Boeing 757 touched down in an overcast drizzle to begin a taxi process almost as long as the flight itself, or so it often seemed to the passengers, as they finally came to the US Airways gate in Heathrow's Terminal 3.

Chavez and Clark had come up together to meet him. They were dressed in civilian clothes, and Domingo held a card with "MALLOY" printed on it. The fourth man off was dressed in Marine Class-As, complete to his Sam Browne belt, gold wings, and four and a half rows of ribbons on the olive-colored uniform blouse. His blue-gray eyes saw the card and came to it as he half-dragged his canvas bag with him.

"Nice to be met," Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Malloy observed. "Who are you guys?"

"John Clark."

"Domingo Chavez." Handshakes were exchanged. "Any more bags?" Ding asked.

"This is all I had time to pack. Lead on, people," Colonel Malloy replied.

"Need a hand with that?" Chavez asked a man about six inches taller and forty pounds heavier than himself.

"I got it," the Marine assured him. "Where we going?"

"Chopper is waiting for us. Car's this way." Clark headed through a side door, then down some steps to a waiting car. The driver took Malloy's bag and tossed it in the "boot" for the half-mile drive to a waiting British army Puma helicopter.

Malloy looked around. It was a crummy day to fly, the ceiling about fifteen hundred feet, and the drizzle getting a little harder, but he was not a white-knuckle flyer. They loaded into the back of the helicopter. He watched the flight crew run through the start-up procedure professionally, reading off their printed checklist, just as he did it. With the rotor turning, they got on the radio for clearance to lift off. That took several minutes. It was a busy time at Heathrow, with lots of international flights arriving to deliver business people to their work of the day. Finally, the Puma lifted off, climbed to altitude, and headed off in an undetermined direction to wherever the hell he was going. At that point, Malloy got on the intercom.

"Can anybody tell me what the hell this is all about?"

"What did they tell you?"

"Pack enough underwear for a week," Malloy replied, with a twinkle in his eye.

"There's a nice department store a few miles from the base."

"Hereford?"

"Good guess," Chavez responded. "Been there?"

"Lots of times. I recognized that crossroads down there from other flights. Okay, what's the story?"

"You're going to be working with us, probably," Clark told him.

"Who's 'us,' sir?"

"We're called Rainbow, and we don't exist."

"Vienna?" Malloy said through the intercom. The way they both blinked was answer enough. "Okay, that looked a little slick for cops. What's the makeup of the team?"

"NATO, mainly Americans and Brits, but others, too, plus an Israeli," John told him.

"And you set this up without any rotorheads?"

"Okay, goddamnit, I blew it, okay?" Clark observed. "I'm new at this command stuff."

"What's that on your forearm, Clark? Oh, what rank are you?"

John pulled back on his jacket, exposing the red seal tattoo. "I'm a simulated two-star. Ding here is a simulated major."

The marine examined the tattoo briefly. "I've heard of those, but never seen any. Third Special Operations Group, wasn't it? I knew a guy who worked with them."

"Who's that?"

"Dutch Voort, retired about five-six years ago as a full-bird."

"Dutch Voort! Shit, haven't heard that name in a while," Clark replied at once. "I got shot down with him once."

"You and a bunch of others. Great aviator, but his luck was kinda uneven."

"How's your luck, Colonel?" Chavez asked.

"Excellent, sonny, excellent," Malloy assured him. "And you can call me Bear."

It fit, both men decided of their visitor. He was Clark's height, six-one, and bulky, as though he pumped barbells for fun and drank his share of beer afterward. Chavez thought of his friend Julio Vega, another lover of free weights. Clark read over the medals. The DFC had two repeat clusters on it, as did the Silver Star. The shooting iron also proclaimed that Malloy was an expert marksman. Marines liked to shoot for entertainment and to prove that like all other Marines they were riflemen. In Malloy's case, a Distinguished Rifleman, which was as high as the awards went. But no Vietnam ribbons, Clark saw. Well, he would have been too young for that, which was another way for Clark to realize how old he'd grown. He also saw that Malloy was about the right age for a half-colonel, whereas someone with all those decorations should have made it younger. Had Malloy been passed over for full-bird colonel? One problem with special operations was that it often put one off the best career track. Special attention was often required to make sure such people got the promotions they merited—which wasn't a problem for enlisted men, but frequently a big one for commissioned officers.

"I started off in search-and-rescue, then I shipped over to Recon Marines, you know, get 'em in, get 'em out. You gotta have a nice touch. I guess I do."

"What are you current in?"

"H-60, Hueys, of course, and H-53s. I bet you don't have any of those, right?"

" 'Fraid not," Chavez said, immediately and obviously disappointed.

"Air Force 24th Special Operations Squadron at RAF Mildenhall has the MH-60K and MH-53. I am up to speed on both if you ever borrow them. They're part of 1st Special Operations Wing, and they're based both here and in Germany, last time I checked."

"No shit?" Clark asked.

"No shit, Simulated General, sir. I know the wing commander, Stanislas Dubrovnik, Stan the Man. Great helo driver. He's been around the block a few dozen times if you ever need a friend in a hurry."

"I'll keep that in mind. What else you know how to fly?"

"The Night Stalker, of course, but not many of them around. None based over here that I know of." The Puma turned then, circling, then flaring to settle into the Hereford pad. Malloy watched the pilot's stick work and decided he was competent, at least for straight-and-level stuff. "I'm not technically current on the MH-47 Chinook—we're only allowed to stay officially current on three types—technically I'm not current on Hueys either, but I was fucking born in a Huey, if you know what I mean, General. And I can handle the MH-47 if I have to."

"The name's John, Mr. Bear," Clark said, with a smile. He knew a pro when he saw one.

"I'm Ding. Once upon a time I was an 11-Bravo, but then the Agency kidnapped my ass. His fault," Chavez said. "John and I been working together a while."

"I suppose you can't tell me the good stuff, then. Kinda surprised I never met you guys before. I've delivered a few spooks here and there from time to time, if you know what I mean."

"Bring your package?" Clark asked, meaning his personnel file.

Malloy patted his bag. "Yes, sir, and very creative writing it is, if I do say so." The helicopter settled down. The crew chief jumped out to pull the sliding doors open. Malloy grabbed his bag, stepped down, and walked to the Rover parked just off the pad. There the driver, a corporal, took Malloy's bag and tossed it in the back. British hospitality, Malloy saw, hadn't changed very much. He returned the salute and got in the rear. The rain was picking up. English weather, the colonel thought, hadn't changed much either. Miserable place to fly helicopters, but not too bad if you wanted to get real close without being seen, and that wasn't too awful, was it? The Rover jeep took them to what looked like a headquarters building instead of his guest housing. Whoever they were, they were in a hurry.

"Nice office, John," he said, looking around on the inside. "I guess you really are a simulated two-star."

"I'm the boss," Clark admitted, "and that's enough. Sit down. Coffee?"

"Always," Malloy confirmed, taking a cup a moment later. "Thanks."

"How many hours?" Clark asked next.

"Total? Sixty-seven-forty-two last time I added it up. Thirty-one hundred of that is special operations. And, oh, about five hundred combat time."

"That much?"

"Grenada, Lebanon, Somalia, couple of other places—and the Gulf War. I fished four fast-mover drivers out and brought them back alive during that little fracas. One of them was a little exciting," Malloy allowed, "but I had some help overhead to smooth things out. You know, the job's pretty boring if you do it right."

"I'll have to buy you a pint, Bear," Clark said. "I've always been nice to the SAR guys."

"And I never turn down a free beer. The Brits in your team, ex-SAS?"

"Mainly. Worked with 'em before?"

"Exercises, here and over at Bragg. They are okay troops, right up there with Force Recon and my pals at Bragg." This was meant to be generous, Clark knew, though the local Brits might take slight umbrage at being compared to anyone. "Anyway, I suppose you need a delivery boy, right?"

"Something like that. Ding, let's run Mr. Bear through the last field operation."

"Roge-o, Mr. C." Chavez unrolled the big photo of the Schloss Ostermann on Clark's conference table and started his brief, as Stanley and Covington came in to join the conference.

"Yeah," Malloy said when the explanation ended. "You really did need somebody like me for that one, guys." He paused. "Best thing would be a long-rope deployment to put three or four on the roof . . . right about . . . here." He tapped the photo. "Nice flat roof to make it easy."

"That's about what I was thinking. Not as easy as a zip-line, but probably safer," Chavez agreed.

"Yeah, it's easy if you know what you're doing. Your boys will have to learn

to land with soft feet, of course, but nice to have three or four people inside the castle when you need 'em. From how good the takedown went, I imagine your people know how to shoot and stuff."

"Fairly well," Covington allowed, in a neutral voice.

Clark was taking a quick rifle through Malloy's personnel file, while Chavez presented his successful mission. Married to Frances née Hutchins Malloy, he saw, two daughters, ten and eight. Wife was a civilian nurse working for the Navy. Well, that was easy to fix. Sandy could set that up at her hospital pretty easy. LTC Dan Malloy, USMC, was definitely a keeper.

For his part, Malloy was intrigued. Whoever these people were, they had serious horsepower. His orders to fly to England had come directly from the office of CINC-SNAKE himself, "Big Sam" Wilson, and the people he'd met so far looked fairly serious. The small one, Chavez, he thought, was one competent little fucker, the way he'd walked him through the Vienna job, and, from examining the overhead photo, his team must have been pretty good, too, especially the two who'd crept up to the house to take the last bunch of bad guys in the back. Invisibility was a pretty cool gig if you could bring it off, but a fucking disaster if you blew it. The good news, he reflected, was that the bad guys weren't all that good at their fieldcraft. Not trained like his Marines were. That deficiency almost canceled out their viciousness—but not quite. Like most people in uniform, Malloy despised terrorists as cowardly sub-human animals who merited only violent and immediate death.

Chavez next took him to his team's own building, where Malloy met his troops, shook hands, and evaluated what he saw there. Yeah, they were serious, as were Covington's Team-1 people in the next building over. Some people just had the look, the relaxed intensity that made them evaluate everyone they met, and decide at once if the person was a threat. It wasn't that they liked killing and maiming, just that it was their job, and that job spilled over into how they viewed the world. Malloy they evaluated as a potential friend, a man worthy of their trust and respect, and that warmed the Marine aviator. He'd be the guy whom they had to trust to get them where they needed to be, quickly, stealthily, and safely—and then get them out in the same way. The remaining tour of the training base was pure vanilla to one schooled in the business. The usual buildings, simulated airplane interiors, three real railroad passenger cars, and the other things they practiced to storm; the weapons range with the pop-up targets (he'd have to play there himself to prove that he was good enough to be here, Malloy knew, since every special-ops guy was and had to be a shooter, just as every Marine was a rifleman). By noon they were back in Clark's headquarters building.

"Well, Mr. Bear, what do you think?" Rainbow Six asked.

Malloy smiled as he sat down. "I think I'm seriously jet lagged. And I think you have a nice team here. So, you want me?"

Clark nodded. "I think we do, yes."

"Start tomorrow morning?"

"Flying what?"

"I called that Air Force bunch you told us about. They're going to lend us an MH-60 for you to play with."

"Neighborly of them." That meant to Malloy that he'd have to prove that he

was a good driver. The prospect didn't trouble him greatly. "What about my family? Is this TAD or what?"

"No, it's a permanent duty station for you. They'll come over on the usual government package."

"Fair 'nuf. Will we be getting work here?"

"We've had two field operations so far, Bern and Vienna. There's no telling how busy we'll be with for-real operations, but you'll find the training regimen is pretty busy here."

"Suits me, John."

"You want to work with us?"

The question surprised Malloy. "This is a volunteer outfit?"

Clark nodded. "Every one of us."

"Well, how about that. Okay," Malloy said. "You can sign me up."

"May I ask a question?" Popov asked in New York.

"Sure," the boss said, suspecting what it would be.

"What is the purpose of all this?"

"You really do not need to know at this time" was the expected reply to the expected question.

Popov nodded his submission/agreement to the answer. "As you say, sir, but you are spending a goodly amount of money for no return that I can determine." Popov raised the money question deliberately, to see how his employer would react.

The reaction was genuine boredom: "The money is not important."

And though the response was not unexpected, it was nonetheless surprising to Popov. For all of his professional life in the Soviet KGB, he'd paid out money in niggardly amounts to people who'd risked their lives and their freedom for it, frequently expecting far more than they'd ever gotten, because often enough the material and information given *was* worth far more than they'd been paid for it. But this man had already paid out more than Popov had distributed in over fifteen years of field operations—for nothing, for two dismal failures. And yet, there was no disappointment on his face, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich saw. What the hell was this all about?

"What went wrong in this case?" the boss asked.

Popov shrugged. "They were willing, but they made the mistake of underestimating the skill of the police response. It was quite skillful indeed," he assured his employer. "More so than I expected, but not that great a surprise. Many police agencies across the world have highly trained counterterror groups."

"It was the Austrian police? . . ."

"So the news media said. I did not press my investigation further. Should I have done so?"

A shake of the head. "No, just idle curiosity on my part."

So, you don't care if these operations succeed or fail, Popov thought. *Then,* why *the hell do you fund them?* There was no logic to this. None at all. That would have been—*should* have been—troubling to Popov, yet it was not seriously so. He was becoming rich on these failures. He knew who was funding the operations, and had all the evidence—the cash—he needed to prove it. So, this

man could not turn on him. If anything, he must fear his employee, mustn't he? Popov had contacts in the terrorist community and could as easily turn them against the man who procured the cash, couldn't he? It would be a natural fear for this man to hold, Dmitriy reflected.

Or was it? What, if anything, did this man fear? He was funding murder—well, attempted murder in the last case. He was a man of immense wealth and power, and such men feared losing those things more than they feared death. It kept coming down to the same thing, the former KGB officer told himself: What the hell was this all about? Why was he plotting the deaths of people, and asking Popov to—was he doing this to kill off the world's remaining terrorists? Did *that* make sense? Using Popov as a stalking horse, an *agent provocateur,* to draw them out and be dealt with by the various countries' highly trained counterterror teams? Dmitriy decided that he'd do a little research on his employer. It ought not to be too hard, and the New York Public Library was only two kilometers distant on Fifth Avenue.

"What sort of people were they?"

"Whom do you mean?" Popov asked.

"Dortmund and Fürchtner," the boss clarified.

"Fools. They still believed in Marxism-Leninism. Clever in their way, intelligent in the technical sense, but their political judgment was faulty. They were unable to change when their world changed. That is dangerous. They failed to evolve, and for that they died." It wasn't much of an epitaph, Popov knew. They'd grown up studying the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and all the rest—the same people whose words Popov had studied through his youth, but even as a boy Popov had known better, and his world travels as a KGB officer had merely reinforced his distrust for the words of those nineteenth century academicians. His first flight on an American-made airliner, chatting in a friendly way with the people next to him, had taught him so much. But Hans and Petra—well, they'd grown up within the capitalist system, sampled all of its wares and benefits, and nevertheless decided that theirs was a system bereft of something that they needed. Perhaps in a way they'd been as he had been, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought, just dissatisfied, wanting to be part of something better—but, no, he'd always wanted something better for himself, whereas they'd always wanted to bring others to Paradise, to lead and rule as good communists. And to reach that utopian vision, they'd been willing to walk through a sea of innocent blood. Fools. His employer, he saw, accepted his more abbreviated version of their lost lives and moved on.

"Stay in the city for a few days. I will call you when I need you."

"As you say, sir." Popov stood and left the office and caught the next elevator to street level. Once there, he decided to walk south to the library with the lions in front. The exercise might clear his head, and he still had a little thinking to do. "When I need you" could mean another mission, and soon.

• • •

“Erwin? George. How are you, my friend?”

“It has been an eventful week,” Ostermann admitted. His personal physician had him on tranquilizers, which, he thought, didn’t work very well. His mind still remembered the fear. Better yet, Ursel had come home, arriving even before the rescue mission, and that night—he’d gotten to bed just after four in the morning, she’d come to bed with him, just to hold him, and in her arms he’d shaken and wept from the sheer terror that he’d been able to control right up to the moment that the man Fürchtner had died less than a meter to his left. There was blood and other tissue particles on his clothing. They’d had to be taken off for cleaning. Dengler had had the worst time of all, and wouldn’t be at work for at least a week, the doctors said. For his part, Ostermann knew that he’d be calling that Britisher who’d come to him with the security proposal, especially after hearing the voices of his rescuers.

“Well, I can’t tell you how pleased I am that you got through it okay, Erwin.”

“Thank you, George,” he said to the American Treasury Secretary. “Do you appreciate your bodyguards more today than last week?”

“You bet. I expect that business in that line of work will be picking up soon.”

“An investment opportunity?” Ostermann asked with a forlorn chuckle.

“I didn’t mean *that,”* Winston replied with an almost-laugh. It was good to laugh about it, wasn’t it?

“George?”

“Yeah?”

“They were not Austrian, not what the television and newspapers said—and they told me not to reveal this, but you can know this. They were Americans and British.”

“I know, Erwin, I know who they are, but that’s all I can say.”

“I owe them my life. How can I repay such a debt?”

“That’s what they are paid to do, my friend. It’s their job.”

“Vielleicht, but it was *my* life they saved, and those of my employees. I have a personal debt to pay them. Is there any way I might do something for them?”

“I don’t know,” George Winston admitted.

“Could you find out? If you ‘know about’ them, could you find out? They have children, do they not? I can pay for their education, set up a fund of some sort, could I not?”

“Probably not, Erwin, but I can look into it,” the Sec-Treas said, making a note on his desk. This would be a real pain in the ass for some security people, but there might well be a way, through some D.C. law firm, probably, to double-blind it. It pleased Winston that Erwin wanted to do this. *Noblesse oblige* was not entirely dead. “So, you sure you’re okay, pal?”

“Thanks to them, yes, George, I am.”

“Great. Thanks. Good to hear your voice, pal. See you next time I come over to Europe.”

“Indeed, George. Have a good day.”

“You, too. Bye.” Winston switched buttons on his phone. Might as well check into this right away. “Mary, could you get me Ed Foley over at the

CIA?”

CHAPTER 10

DIGGERS

Popov hadn't done this in ages, but he remembered how. His employer had been written about more than many politicians—which was only just, Popov thought, as this man did far more important and interesting things for his country and the world—but these articles were mainly about business, which didn't help Popov much beyond a further appreciation of the man's wealth and influence. There was little about his personal life, except that he'd been divorced. A pity of sorts. His former wife seemed both attractive and intelligent, judging by the photos and the appended information on her. Maybe two such intelligent people had difficulty staying together. If so, that was too bad for the woman, the Russian thought. Maybe few American men liked having intellectual equals under their roof. It was altogether too intimidating for the weak ones—and only a weak man would be troubled by it, the Russian thought.

But there was nothing to connect the man with terrorists or terrorism. He'd never been attacked himself, not even a simple street crime, according to the *New York Times.* Such things did not always make the news, of course. Perhaps an incident that had never seen the light of day. But if it had been so major as to change the course of his life—it would had to have become known, wouldn't it?

Probably. Almost certainly, he thought. But *almost* was a troubling qualifier for a career intelligence officer. This was a man of business. A genius both in his scientific field and in running a major corporation. There, it seemed, was where his passions went. There were many photos of the man with women, rarely the same one twice, while attending various charity or social functions —all nice women, to be sure, Popov noted, like fine trophies, to be used and mounted on the wall in the appropriate empty space, while he searched after another. So, what sort of man was he working for?

Popov had to admit that he really didn't know, which was more than troubling. His life was now in pawn to a man whose motivations he didn't understand. In not knowing, he could not evaluate the operational dangers that attached to himself as a result. Should the purpose be discerned by others, and his employer discovered and arrested, then he, Popov, was in danger of arrest on serious charges. Well, the former KGB officer thought, as he returned the last of the periodicals to the clerk, there was an easy solution to that. He'd always have a bag packed, and two false identities ready to be used. Then, at the first sign of trouble, he'd get to an international airport and be off to Europe as quickly as possible, there to disappear and make use of the cash he'd banked. He already had enough to ensure a comfortable life for a few

years, perhaps longer if he could find a really good investment counselor. Disappearing off the face of the earth wasn't all that hard for one with proper training, he told himself, walking back out on Fifth Avenue. All you needed was fifteen or twenty minutes of warning.... Now how could he be sure to get that? . . .

The German federal police were as efficient as ever, Bill Tawney saw. All six of the terrorists had been identified within forty-eight hours, and while detailed interviews of their friends, neighbors, and acquaintances were still underway, the police already knew quite a lot and had forwarded it to the Austrians, from there to the British Embassy in Vienna, and from there to Hereford. The package included a photo and blueprints of the home owned by Fürchtner and Dortmund. One of the couple, Tawney saw, had been a painter of moderate talent. The report said that they'd sold paintings at a local gallery, signed, of course, with a pseudonym. Perhaps they'd become more valuable now, the Six man thought idly, turning the page. They'd had a computer there, but the documents on it were not very useful. One of them, probably Fürchtner, the German investigators thought, had written long political diatribes, appended but not yet translated—Dr. Bellow would probably want to read them, Tawney thought. Other than that, there was little remarkable. Books, many of them political in character, most of them printed and purchased in the former DDR. A nice TV and stereo system, and plenty of records and CDs of classical music. A decent middle-class car, properly maintained, and insured through a local company, under their cover names, Siegfried and Hanna Kolb. They'd had no really close friends in their neighborhood, had kept largely to themselves, and every public aspect of their lives had been *in Ordnung,* thus arousing no comment of any kind. And yet, Tawney thought, they'd sat there like coiled springs . . . awaiting what?

What had turned them loose? The German police had no explanation for that. A neighbor reported that a car had visited their house a few weeks before—but who had come and to what purpose, no one knew. The tag number of the car had never been noted, nor the make, though the interview transcript said that it had been a German-made car, probably white or at least light in color. Tawney couldn't evaluate the importance of that. It might have been a buyer for a painting, an insurance agent—or the person who had brought them out of cover and back into their former lives as radical left-wing terrorists.

It was not the least bit unusual for this career intelligence officer to conclude that there was nothing he could conclude, on the basis of the information he had. He told his secretary to forward Fürchtner's writings to a translator for later analysis by both himself and Dr. Bellow, and that was about as far as he could go. Something had roused the two German terrorists from their professional sleep, but he didn't know what. The German federal police could conceivably stumble across the answer, but Tawney doubted it. Fürchtner and Dortmund had figured out how to live unobtrusively in a nation whose police were pretty good at finding people. Someone they'd known and trusted had come to them and persuaded them to set off on a mission. Whoever it had been had known how to contact them, which meant that there

was some sort of terror network still in existence. The Germans had figured that out, and a notation on their preliminary report recommended further investigation through paid informants—which might or might not work. Tawney had devoted a few years of his life to cracking into the Irish terrorist groups, and he'd had a few minor successes, magnified at the time by their rarity. But there had long since been a Darwinian selection process in the terrorist world. The dumb ones died, and the smart ones survived, and after nearly thirty years of being chased by increasingly clever police agencies, the surviving terrorists were themselves very clever indeed—and the best of them had been trained at Moscow Centre itself by KGB officers . . . was that an investigative option? Tawney wondered. The new Russians had cooperated somewhat . . . but not very much in the area of terrorism, perhaps because of embarrassment over their former involvement with such people . . . or maybe because the records had been destroyed, which the Russians frequently claimed, and Tawney never quite believed. People like that destroyed nothing. The Soviets had developed the world's foremost bureaucracy, and bureaucrats simply *couldn't* destroy records. In any case, seeking cooperation from the Russians on such an item as this was too far above his level of authority, though he could write up a request, and it might even percolate a level or two up the chain before being quashed by some senior civil servant in the Foreign Office. He decided that he'd try it anyway. It gave him something to do, and it would at least tell the people at Century House, a few blocks across the Thames from the Palace of Westminster, that he was still alive and working.

Tawney slid all the papers, including his notes, back into the thick manila folder before turning to work on the foredoomed request. He could only conclude now that there still was a terror network, and that someone known to its members still had the keys to that nasty little kingdom. Well, maybe the Germans would learn more, and maybe the data would find its way to his desk. If it did, Tawney wondered, would John Clark and Alistair Stanley be able to arrange a strike of their own against them? No, more likely that was a job for the police of whatever nation or city was involved, and that would probably be enough. You didn't have to be all that clever to bag one. The French had proven that with Carlos, after all.

• • •

Il'ych Ramirez Sanchez was not a happy man, but the cell in the Le Sante prison was not calculated to make him so. Once the most feared terrorist in the world, he'd killed men with his own hand, and done it as casually as zipping his fly. He'd once had every police and intelligence service in the world on his trail, and laughed at them all from the security of his safe houses in the former Eastern Europe. There, he'd read press speculation on who he really was and for whom he'd really worked, along with KGB documents on what the foreign services were doing to catch him . . . until Eastern Europe had fallen, and with it the nation-state support for his revolutionary acts. And so he'd ended up in Sudan, where he'd decided to take his situation a little more seriously. Some cosmetic surgery had been in order, and so he'd gone to

a trusted physician for the surgery, submitted to the general anesthesia—— and awakened aboard a French business jet, strapped down to a stretcher, with a Frenchman saying, *"Bonjour, Monsieur Chacal,"* with the beaming smile of a hunter who'd just captured the most dangerous of tigers with a loop of string. Tried, finally, for the murder of a cowardly informant and two French counterintelligence officers in 1975, he'd defended himself with panache, he thought, not that it mattered except to his own capacious ego. He'd proclaimed himself a "professional revolutionary" to a nation that had had its own revolution two hundred years before, and didn't feel the need for another.

But the worst part of it was being tried as a . . . criminal, as though his work hadn't had any political consequences. He'd tried hard to set that aside, but the prosecutor hadn't let go, his voice dripping with contempt in his summation—actually worse than that, because he'd been so matter-of-fact in the presentation of his evidence, saving his contempt for later. Sanchez had kept his dignity intact throughout, but inwardly he'd felt the pain of a trapped animal, and had to call on his courage to keep his mien neutral at all times. And the ultimate result had hardly been a surprise.

The prison had already been a hundred years old on the day of his birth, and was built along the lines of a medieval dungeon. His small cell had but a single window, and he was not tall enough to see out the bottom of it. The guards, however, had a camera and watched him with it twenty-four hours a day, like a very special animal in a very special cage. He was as alone as a man could be, allowed no contact with other prisoners, and allowed out of his cage only once per day for an hour of "exercise" in a bleak prison yard. He could expect little more for the remainder of his life, Carlos knew, and his courage quailed at that. The worst thing was the boredom. He had books to read, but nowhere to walk beyond the few square meters of his cage—and worst of all, the whole world knew that the Jackal was caged forever and could therefore be forgotten.

Forgotten? The entire world had once feared his name. That was the most hurtful part of all.

He made a mental note to contact his lawyer. Those conversations were still privileged and private, and his lawyer knew a few names to call.

"Starting up," Malloy said. Both turbo-shaft engines came to life, and presently the four-bladed rotor started turning.

"Crummy day," Lieutenant Harrison observed over the intercom.

"Been over here long?" Malloy asked.

"Just a few weeks, sir."

"Well, sonny, now you know why the Brits won the Battle of Britain. Nobody else can fly in this shit." The Marine looked around. Nothing else was up today. The ceiling was less than a thousand feet, and the rain was coming down pretty hard. Malloy checked the trouble-board again. All the aircraft systems were in the green.

"Roge-o, Colonel. Sir, how many hours in the Night Hawk?"

"Oh, about seven hundred. I like the Pave Low's capabilities a little better, but this one does like to fly. About time for us to see that, sonny." Malloy

pulled up on the collective, and the Night Hawk lifted off, a little unevenly in the gusting thirty-knot winds. “Y’all okay back there?”

“Got my barf bag,” Clark replied, to Ding’s amusement. “You know a guy named Paul Johns?”

“Air Force colonel, down at Eglin? He retired about five years ago.”

“That’s the man. How good is he?” Clark asked, mainly to get a feel for Malloy.

“None better in a helo, ’specially a Pave Low. He just talked to the airplane, and it listened to him real nice. You know him, Harrison?”

“Only by reputation, sir,” the copilot replied from the left seat.

“Little guy, good golfer, too. Does consulting now, and works on the side with Sikorsky. We see him up at Bragg periodically. Okay, baby, let’s see what you got.” Malloy reefed the chopper into a tight left turn. “Humph, nothing handles like a -60. Damn, I love these things. Okay, Clark, what’s the mission here?”

“The range building, simulate a zip-line deployment.”

“Covert or assault?”

“Assault,” John told him.

“That’s easy. Any particular spot?”

“Southeast corner, if you can.”

“Okay, here we go.” Malloy shoved the cyclic left and forward, dropping the helo like a fast elevator, darting for the range building like a falcon after a pheasant—and like a falcon, pulling up sharply at the right spot, transitioning into hover so quickly that the copilot in the left seat turned to look in amazement at how fast he’d brought it off. “How’s that, Clark?”

“Not too bad,” Rainbow Six allowed.

Next Malloy applied power to get the hell out of Dodge City—almost, but not quite, as though he hadn’t stopped over the building at all. “I can improve that once I get used to your people, how fast they get out and stuff, but a long-line deployment is usually better, as you know.”

“As long as you don’t blow the depth perception and run us right into the friggin’ wall,” Chavez observed. That remark earned him a turned head and a pained expression.

“My boy, we do try to avoid that. Ain’t nobody does the rocking chair maneuver better ’n me, people.”

“It’s hard to get right,” Clark observed.

“Yes, it is,” Malloy agreed, “but I know how to play the piano, too.”

The man was not lacking in confidence, they saw. Even the lieutenant in the left seat thought he was a little overpowering, but he was taking it all in anyway, especially watching how Malloy used the collective to control power as well as lift. Twenty minutes later, they were back on the ground.

“And that’s about how it’s done, people,” Malloy told them, when the rotor stopped turning. “Now, when do we start real training?”

“Tomorrow soon enough?” Clark asked.

“Works for me, General, sir. Next question, do we practice on the Night Hawk, or do I have to get used to flying something else?”

“We haven’t worked that out yet,” John admitted.

“Well, that does have a bearing on this stuff, y’know. Every chopper has a

different feel, and that matters on how I do my deliveries," Malloy pointed out. "I'm at my best on one of those. I'm nearly as good with a Huey, but that one's noisy in close and hard to be covert with. Others, well, I have to get used to them. Takes a few hours of yankin' and bankin' before I feel completely comfortable." Not to mention learning where all the controls were, Malloy didn't add, since no two aircraft in the entire world had all the dials, gauges, and controls in the same places, something aviators had bitched about since the Wright Brothers. "If we deploy, I'm risking lives, mine and others, every time I lift off. I'd prefer to keep those risks to a minimum. I'm a cautious guy, y'know?"

"I'll work on that today," Clark promised.

"You do that." Malloy nodded, and walked off to the locker/ready room.

Popov had himself a fine dinner in an Italian restaurant half a block from his apartment building, enjoyed the crisp weather in the city, and puffed on a Montecristo cigar after he got back to his flat. There was still work to do. He'd obtained videotapes of the news coverage of both of the terrorist incidents he'd instigated and wanted to study them. In both cases, the reporters spoke German—the Swiss kind, then Austrian—which he spoke like a native (of Germany). He sat in an easy chair with the remote control in his hand, occasionally rewinding to catch something odd of passing interest, studying the tapes closely, his trained mind memorizing every detail. The most interesting parts, of course, were those showing the assault teams who'd finally resolved both incidents with decisive action. The quality of the pictures was poor. Television simply didn't make for high-quality imagery, especially in bad lighting conditions and from two hundred meters away. With the first tape, that of the Bern case, there was no more than ninety seconds of pre-action pictures of the assault team—this part had not been broadcast during the attack, only afterward. The men moved professionally, in a way that somehow reminded the Russian of the ballet, so strangely delicate and stylized were the movements of the men in the black clothing, as they crept in from left and right . . . and then came the blindingly swift action punctuated by jerky camera movements when the explosives went off—that always made the cameramen jump. No sound of gunfire. So their firearms were silenced. It was done so that the victims could not learn from the sound where the shots had come from—but it had not really been a matter of importance in this case, since the terrorist/criminals had been dead before the information could have done them any good. But that was how it was done. This business was as programmed as any professional sport, with the rules of play enforced by deadly might. The mission over in seconds, the assault team came out, and the Bern city police went in to sort out the mess. The people in black acted unremarkably, he saw, like disciplined soldiers on a battlefield. No congratulatory handshakes or other demonstrations. No, they were too well-trained for that. No one even did so much as light a cigarette . . . ah, one did seem to light a pipe. What followed was the usual brainless commentary from the local news commentators, talking about this elite police unit and how it had saved all the lives of those inside, *und soweiter,* Popov thought, rising to switch tapes.

The Vienna mission, he saw, had even poorer TV coverage, due to the physical conditions of the chap's house. Quite a nice one, actually. The Romanovs might have had such a fine country house. Here the police had ruthlessly controlled the TV coverage, which was perfectly sensible, Popov thought, but not overly helpful to him. The taped coverage showed the front of the country house with boring regularity, punctuated by the monotonous words of the TV reporter repeating the same things endlessly, telling his viewers that he was unable to speak very much with the police on the scene. The tape did show the movement of vehicles, and showed the arrival of what had to be the Austrian assault team. Interestingly, they appeared to be dressed in civilian clothing upon their arrival, and changed soon thereafter into their battle dress . . . it looked green for this team . . . no, he realized, green overgarments over black regular dress. Did that mean anything? The Austrians had two men with scope-sighted rifles who rapidly disappeared into cars, which must have taken them behind the *Schloss.* The assault-team leader, not a very large man, much like the one Popov thought had headed the team in Bern, was seen from a great distance going over papers—the map/diagram/plans of the house and grounds, no doubt. Then, shortly before midnight, all of them had disappeared, leaving Popov to look at a tape of the dwelling illuminated by huge light standards, accompanied by more idiotic speculation by a singularly ill-informed TV journalist. . . . and then, just after midnight, came the distant *pop* of a rifle, followed by two more *pops,* silence, and then frantic activity by the uniformed police in the camera's field of view. Twenty of them raced into the front door carrying light machine guns. The reporter had then talked about a sudden burst of activity, which the thickest of viewers would have seen for themselves, followed by more nothing-at-all, and then the announcement that all the hostages were alive, and all the criminals dead. Another passage of time, and the green-and-black-clad assault team appeared again. As with Bern, there were no overt signs of self-congratulation. One of the assault team seemed to be puffing on a pipe, as he walked to the van that had brought them to the scene and stowed his weapons, while another of them conferred briefly with a civilian-clothed policeman, probably the Captain Altmark who'd had field command of the incident. The two must have known each other, their exchange of words was so brief before the paramilitary police team departed the scene, just as at Bern. Yes, both of the counterterror units trained from exactly the same book, Popov told himself again.

Later press coverage spoke of the skill of the special police unit. That had happened in Bern, too, but it was surprising in neither case, since reporters also spoke the same drivel, regardless of language or nationality. The words used in the statement by the police were almost identical. Well, someone had trained both teams, perhaps the same agency. Perhaps the German GSG-9 group, which, with British help, had ended the airplane incident at Mogadishu over twenty years before, had trained the forces of countries that shared their language. Certainly the thoroughness of the training and the coldness of demeanor of the assault teams struck Popov as very German. They'd acted like machines both before and after the attacks, arriving and leaving like ghosts, with nothing left behind but the bodies of the terrorists. Efficient people, the Germans, and the Germanic policemen whom they trained. Popov, a Russian

by birth and culture, had little love for the nation that had once killed so many of his countrymen, but he could respect them and their work, and the people they killed were no loss to the world. Even when he'd helped to train them as an active-duty officer of the Soviet KGB, he'd not cared much for them, nor had anyone else in his agency. They were, if not exactly the useful fools Lenin had once spoken about, then trained attack dogs to be unleashed when needed, but never really trusted by those who semicontrolled them. And they'd never really been all that efficient. About the only thing they'd really accomplished was to force airports to install metal detectors, inconveniencing travelers all over the world. Certainly they'd made life hard on the Israelis, but what, really, did that country matter on the world stage? And even then, what had happened? If you forced countries to adapt to adverse circumstances, it happened swiftly. So, now, El Al, the Israeli airline, was the safest and most secure in the world, and policemen the world over were better briefed on whom to watch and to examine closely—and if everything else failed, then the policemen had special counterterror units like those who'd settled things in Bern and Vienna. Trained by Germans to kill like Germans. Any other terrorists he sent out to do evil work would have to deal with such people. Too bad, Popov thought, turning his TV back to a cable channel while the last tape rewound. He hadn't learned much of anything from reviewing the tapes, but he was a trained intelligence officer, and therefore a thorough man. He poured himself an Absolut vodka to drink neat—he missed the superior Starka brand he would have had in Russia—and allowed his mind to churn over the information while he watched a movie on the TV screen.

"Yes, General, I know," Clark said into the phone at 1:05 the next afternoon, damning time zones as he did so.

"That comes out of *my* budget, too," General Wilson pointed out. First, CINC-SNAKE thought, they ask for a man, then they ask for hardware, and *now,* they are asking for funding, too.

"I can try to help with that through Ed Foley, sir, but the fact of the matter is that we need the asset to train with. You did send us a pretty good man," Clark added, hoping to assuage Wilson's renowned temper.

It didn't help much. "Yes, I know he's good. That's why he was working for me in the first goddamned place."

This guy's getting ecumenical in his old age, John told himself. *Now he's praising a Marine*—rather unusual for an *Army* snake-eater and former commander of XVIII Airborne Corps.

"General—sir, you know we've had a couple of jobs already, and with all due modesty, my people handled them both pretty damned well. I have to fight for my people, don't I?"

And *that* calmed Wilson down. They were both commanders, they both had jobs to do, and people to command—and defend.

"Clark, I understand your position. I really do. But I can't train my people on assets that you've taken away."

"How about we call it time-sharing?" John offered, as a further olive branch.

"It still wears out a perfectly good Night Hawk."

"It also trains up the crews for you. At the end of this, you may just have a primo helicopter crew to bring down to Bragg to work with your people—and the training expense for your operation is just about nothing, sir." And that, he thought, was a pretty good play.

At MacDill Air Force Base, Wilson told himself that this was a losing proposition. Rainbow was a bulletproof operation, and everyone knew it. This Clark guy had sold it first of all to CIA, then to the President himself—and sure enough, they'd had two deployments, and both had worked out, though the second one had been pretty dicey. But Clark, clever as he was, and good commander that he seemed to be, hadn't learned how to run a unit in the modern military world, where half the time was spent managing money like some goddamned white-socked accountant, instead of leading from the front and training with the troops. That's what really rankled Sam Wilson, young for a four-star, a professional *soldier* who wanted to *soldier,* something that high command pretty well precluded, despite his fitness and desire. Most annoying of all, this Rainbow unit promised to steal a lot of his own business. The Special Operations Command had commitments all over the world, but the international nature of Rainbow meant that there was now somebody else in the same line of work, whose politically neutral nature was supposed to make their use a lot more palatable to countries that might need special services. Clark might just put him out of business in a real sense, and Wilson didn't like that at all.

But, really, he had no choice in the matter, did he?

"Okay, Clark, you can use the aircraft *so long as* the parent unit is able to part with it, and *so long as* its use by you does not interfere with training and readiness with that parent unit. Clear?"

"Yes, sir, that is clear," John Clark acknowledged.

"I need to come over to see your little circus," Wilson said next.

"I'd like that a lot, General."

"We'll see," Wilson grumbled, breaking the connection.

"Tough son of a bitch," John breathed.

"Quite," Stanley agreed. "We are poaching on his patch, after all."

"It's our patch now, Al."

"Yes, it is, but you mustn't expect him to like that fact."

"And he's younger and tougher than me?"

"A few years younger, and I personally would not wish to cross swords with the gentleman." Stanley smiled. "The war appears to be over, John, and you appear to have won."

Clark managed a smile and a chuckle. "Yeah, Al, but it's easier to go into the field and kill people."

"Quite."

"What's Peter's team doing?"

"Long-line practice."

"Let's go and watch," John said, glad to have an excuse to leave his desk.

"I want to get out of this place," he told his attorney.

"I understand that, my friend," the lawyer replied, with a look around the room. It was the law in France, as in America, that conversations between

clients and attorneys were privileged, and could not be recorded or used in any way by the state, but neither man really trusted the French to abide by that law, especially since DGSE, the French intelligence service, had been so instrumental in bringing Il'ych to justice. The DGSE was not known for its willingness to abide by the rules of civilized international behavior, as people as diverse as international terrorists and Greenpeace had learned to their sorrow.

Well, there were other people talking in this room, and there were no obvious shotgun microphones here—and the two had not taken the seats offered by the prison guards, opting instead for one closer to the windows because, they'd said, they wanted the natural light. Of course, every booth could easily be wired.

"I must tell you that the circumstances of your conviction do not lend themselves to an easy appeal," the lawyer advised. This wasn't exactly news to his client.

"I am aware of that. I need you to make a telephone call."

"To whom?"

The Jackal gave him a name and a number. "Tell him that it is my wish to be released."

"I cannot be part of a criminal act."

"I am aware of that as well," Sanchez observed coldly. "Tell him also that the rewards will be great."

It was suspected, but not widely known for certain, that Il'ych Ramirez Sanchez had a goodly sum of money squirreled away as a result of his operations while a free man. This had come mainly as a result of his attack on the OPEC ministers in Austria almost twenty years earlier, which explained why he and his group had been so careful not to kill anyone really important, despite the political flap that would have caused—all the better for him to gain notice and acclaim at the time. Business was business, even for his sort of people. And *someone* had paid his own legal bills, the attorney thought.

"What else do you expect me to tell him?"

"That is all. If he has an immediate reply, you will convey it to me," the Jackal told him. There was still an intensity to his eyes, something cold and distant—but even so, right there looking deep into his interlocutor and telling him what must be.

For his part, the attorney asked himself again why he'd taken on this client. He had a long history of championing radical causes, from which notoriety he'd gained a wide and lucrative criminal practice. There was an attendant element of danger involved, of course. He'd recently handled three major drug cases, and lost all three, and those clients hadn't liked the idea of spending twenty or more years in prison and had expressed their displeasure to him recently. Might they arrange to have him killed? It had happened a few times in America and elsewhere. It was a more distant possibility here, the lawyer thought, though he'd made no promises to those clients except to do his best for them. It was the same with Carlos the Jackal. After his conviction, the lawyer had come into the case to look at the possibilities of an appeal, and made it, and lost—predictably. The French high courts held little clemency for a man who'd done murder on the soil of France, then essentially boasted of it.

Now the man had changed his mind and decided petulantly that he didn't enjoy prison life. The lawyer knew that he'd pass along the message, as he had to, but did that make him part of a criminal act?

No, he decided. Telling an acquaintance of his client that the latter wanted out of prison—well, who would not wish to be liberated? And the message was equivocal, it held many possible meanings. Help on another appeal, revelation of new, exculpatory evidence, anything at all. And besides, whatever Sanchez asked him to do here was privileged information, wasn't it?

"I will pass along your message," he promised his client.

"Merci."

It was a beautiful thing to watch, even in the dark. The MH-60K Night Hawk helicopter came in at about thirty miles per hour, almost two hundred feet over the ground, approaching the range building from the south, into the wind, traveling smoothly, not at all like a tactical deployment maneuver. But under the helicopter was a dark nylon rope, about one hundred fifty feet long, barely visible with the best of NVGs, and at the end of it were Peter Covington, Mike Chin, and another Team-1 member, dangling free below the black Sikorsky in their black ninja suits. The helicopter proceeded in so evenly and smoothly, as though on tracks, until the nose of the aircraft crossed the building's wall. Then the nose came up, and the aircraft flared, slowing rapidly. Below the aircraft, the people attached to the rope swept forward, as though on a child's swing, and then, at the limit of the arc, they swung backward. The backward swing froze them still in the air, their rearward velocity almost exactly matching the remaining forward motion of the helicopter, and then they were on the roof, almost as though they'd stepped off a stationary object. Instantly, Covington and his men unclipped their quick-release attachments and dropped down. The negligible speed difference between their feet and the stationary roof made for no noise at all. Scarcely had this been done when the helicopter nosed down, resuming its forward flight, and anyone on the ground would scarcely have known that the aircraft had done anything but fly at a steady pace over the building. And at night, it was nearly invisible, even with night-vision goggles.

"Bloody good," Al Stanley breathed. "Not a bloody sound."

"He is as good as he says," Clark observed.

As though hearing the remarks, Malloy brought the helicopter around, flashing a thumbs-up out the window to the men on the ground as he headed off to orbit the area for the remainder of the simulation. In a real situation, the orbit would be in case he was needed to do an emergency evacuation—and even more so, to get the people on the ground used to having a helicopter overhead, to make his presence as much a part of the landscape as the trees, so he'd disappear into the normal background of the night, no more remarkable than the song of nightingales despite the danger inherent from his presence. It surprised everyone in the business that you could get away with this, but it was just an application of human nature to the world of special operations. If a tank had driven into the parking lot, after a day or two it would be just another car. Covington's trio of shooters circulated about the roof for a few minutes, then disappeared down ladders into the interior and

emerged a few seconds later from the front door.

"Okay, Bear, this is Six, exercise concluded. Back to the bird farm, Colonel, over."

"Roger, Six, Bear is RTB. Out" was the terse reply, and the Night Hawk broke off from the orbit and headed down to the helo pad.

"What do you think?" Stanley asked Major Covington.

"Bloody good. Like stepping off the train to the platform. Malloy knows what he's about. Master Chief?"

"Put him on the payroll, sir," Master Chief Chin confirmed. "That's a guy we can work with."

• • •

"The aircraft is nicely set up," Malloy said twenty minutes later, in the club. He was wearing his green Nomex flight suit, with a yellow scarf around his neck, like a good aviator, though it struck Clark as odd.

"What's with the necktie?"

"Oh, this? It's the A-10 scarf. One of the guys I rescued in Kuwait gave it to me. I figure it's lucky, and I've always kinda liked the Warthog as an airplane. So, I wear it on missions."

"How hard is it to do that transition maneuver?" Covington asked.

"Your timing has to be pretty good, and you have to read the wind. You know what helps me prepare for it?"

"Tell me," Clark said.

"Piano playing." Malloy sipped at his pint of bitter and grinned. "Don't ask me why, but I always fly better after I've played some. Maybe something to do with getting the fingers loose. Anyway, that chopper they lent us is set up just right. Control cables have the right tension, throttles are just so. That Air Force ground crew—well, I have to meet 'em and buy 'em all a round. They really know how to prepare a chopper. Good team of mechanics."

"They are that," First Lieutenant Harrison agreed. He belonged to 1st Special Operations Wing, and technically, therefore, he was responsible for the helicopter, though now he was very pleased to have so fine a teacher as Malloy.

"That's half the battle of flying helos, getting the bird dialed in just so," Malloy went on. "That one, you can just sweet talk to her, and she listens real nice."

"Like a good rifle," Chin observed.

"Roger that, Master Chief," Malloy said, saluting with his beer. "So, what can you guys tell me about your first two missions?"

"Christians 10, Lions 1," Stanley replied.

"Who'd you lose?"

"That was the Bern job. The hostage was killed before we were on the scene."

"Eager beavers?"

"Something like that." Clark nodded. "They weren't real swift, crossing the line like that. I sorta thought they were just bank robbers, but later

investigation turned up the terrorist connection. Of course, maybe they just wanted some cash. Dr. Bellow never really decided what they were all about."

"Any way you look at it, they're just hoods, murderers, whatever you want to call 'em," Malloy said. "I helped train the FBI chopper pilots, spent a few weeks at Quantico with the Hostage Rescue Team. They kinda indoctrinated me on the psychological side. It can be pretty interesting. This Dr. Bellow, is it Paul Bellow, the guy who wrote the three books?"

"Same guy."

"He's pretty smart."

"That's the idea, Colonel Malloy," Stanley said, waving for another round.

"But the thing is, you know, there's only one thing you really need to know about them," Malloy said, reverting back to identity as a colonel of the United States Marine Corps.

"How to whack them," Master Chief Chin agreed.

The Turtle Inn Bar and Lounge was something of a fixture on Columbus Avenue, between Sixty-eighth and Sixty-ninth, well known and well patronized by locals and tourists. The music was loud, but not too loud, and the area was lighted, but not very well. The booze was a little more expensive than the norm, but the added price was for the atmosphere, which, the owner would have said, was priceless.

"So." The man sipped at his rum and coke. "You live around here?"

"Just moving in," she answered, sipping her own drink. "Looking for a job."

"What d'ya do?"

"Legal secretary."

A laugh. "Lots of room for that here. We got more lawyers 'n we got taxi drivers. Where'd you say you were from?"

"Des Moines, Iowa. Ever been there?"

"No, local boy," the man replied, lying. He'd been born in Los Angeles thirty years before. "I'm an accountant with Peat Marwick." That was a lie, too.

But a singles bar was a place for lies, as everyone knew. The woman was twenty-three or so, just out of secretarial school, brown hair and eyes, and needed to lose about fifteen pounds, though she was attractive enough if you liked them short. The three drinks she'd already consumed to show that she was a burgeoning Big Apple sophisticate had her pretty mellow.

"Been here before?" he asked.

"No, first time, what about you?"

"Last few months, nice place to meet people." Another lie, but they came easily in a place like this.

"Music's a little loud," she said.

"Well, other places it's a lot worse. You live close?"

"Three blocks north. Got a little studio apartment, subleasing it. Rent control in the building. My stuff gets here in another week."

"So, you're not really moved in yet?"

"Right."

"Well, welcome to New York . . . ?"

"Anne Pretloe."

"Kirk Maclean." They shook hands, and he held hers a little longer than

necessary so that she'd get a feel for his skin, a necessary precondition to casual affection, which he needed to generate. In another few minutes, they were dancing, which mainly meant bumping into people in the dark. He was turning on the charm, and she was smiling up at his six-foot height. Under other circumstances, this could have developed into something, Kirk thought. But not tonight.

The bar closed after two in the morning, and he walked her out. She was quite drunk now from a total of seven drinks barely diluted by bar peanuts and pretzel nuggets. He'd carefully nursed his three, and eaten a lot of peanuts. "So," he asked out on the sidewalk, "let me drive you, okay?"

"It's only three blocks."

"Annie, it's late, and this is New York; okay? You need to learn where you can go and where you can't. Come on," he concluded, pulling her hand and leading her around the corner. His BMW was parked halfway to Broadway. He gallantly held the door open, shut it behind her, then walked around to get in himself.

"You must do okay," Anne Pretloe noted, surveying the car.

"Yeah, well, lots of people like to dodge taxes, y'know?" He started the car and moved out onto the cross street, actually in the wrong direction, though she was a little too much in her cups to appreciate that. He turned left on Broadway and spotted the blue van, parked in a quiet spot. Half a block away, he flashed his lights, whereupon he slowed the car, and pushed the button to lower both the driver-side and passenger windows.

"Hey," he said, "I know this guy."

"Huh?" Pretloe replied, somewhat confused about where they were and where they were going. It was too late for her to do much in any case.

"Yo, Kirk," the man in coveralls said, leaning down to the open passenger window.

"Hey, buddy," Maclean replied, giving a thumbs-up.

The man in coveralls leaned in and produced a small aerosol can from his sleeve. Then he depressed the red plastic button and gave Anne Pretloe a blast of ether right in the face. Her eyes popped open for a second of shock and surprise. She turned to look at Kirk for a long lingering second or so, and then her body went slack.

"Be careful with the drugs, man, she's got a lot of booze in her."

"No problem." The man banged the side of the truck and another man appeared. This one looked up and down the street for a police car, then helped open the passenger door, lifted Anne Pretloe, and carried her limp form through the rear door of the van, where she joined another young woman picked up by another company employee earlier that night. With that, Maclean drove off, letting the night air blow the stink of the ether out of the car as he headed right, onto the West Side Highway and north to the George Washington Bridge. Okay, that made two he'd bagged, and the others should have gotten a total of six more by now. Another three, and they could end this most dangerous part of the operation.

CHAPTER 11

INFRASTRUCTURE

The lawyer made the call, and unsurprisingly found that it developed into a luncheon in a restaurant where a man of forty or so asked a few simple questions, then left before the dessert cart was wheeled up to the table. That ended his involvement with whatever would happen. He paid the check with cash and walked back to his office haunted by the question—what had he done, what might he have started? The answer for both, he told himself forcefully, was that he didn't know. It was the intellectual equivalent of a shower after a sweaty day's work, and though ultimately not as satisfying, he was a lawyer, and accustomed to the vicissitudes of life.

His interlocutor left the restaurant and caught the Métro, changing trains three times before settling on the one that ran near his home, close to a park known for the prostitutes who stood about, peddling their multivalued wares for passersby in automobiles. If there were anywhere an indictment of the capitalist system, it was here, he thought, though the tradition went further back than the onset of the current economic system. The women had all the gaiety of serial killers, as they stood there in their abbreviated clothing made to be removed as rapidly as possible, so as to save time. He turned away, and headed to his flat, where, with luck, others would be waiting for him. And luck, it turned out, was with him. One of his guests had even made coffee.

"This is where it has to stop," Carol Brightling said, even though she knew it wouldn't.

"Sure, doc," her guest said, sipping OEOB coffee. "But how the hell do you sell it to *him?"*

The map was spread on her coffee table: East of Alaska's Prudhoe Bay was a piece of tundra, over a thousand square miles of it, and geologists for British Petroleum and Atlantic Richfield—the two companies that had largely exploited the Alaskan North Slope, built the pipeline, and therefore helped cause the *Exxon Valdez* disaster—had made their public pronouncement. This oilfield, called AARM, was at least double the size of the North Slope. The report, still semiclassified in the industrial sense, had come to the White House a week earlier, with confirming data from the United States Geological Survey, a federal agency tasked to the same sort of work, along with the opinion of the geologists that the field extended farther east, across the Canadian border—and exactly how far it extended they could only guess, because the Canadians had not yet begun *their* survey. The conclusion of the executive summary posited the possibility that the entire field could rival the one in Saudi Arabia, although it was far harder to transport oil from it—*except for the fact,* the

report went on, that the Trans-Alaska pipeline had already been built, and the new fields would only need a few hundred miles of extension on the existing pipeline, which, the summary concluded arrogantly, had produced a negligible environmental impact.

"Except for that damned tanker incident," Dr. Brightling observed into her morning coffee. Which had killed thousands of innocent wild birds and hundreds of sea otters, and had sullied several hundred square miles of pristine seacoast.

"This will be a catastrophe if Congress lets it go forward. My God, Carol, the caribou, the birds, all the predators. There are polar bears there, and browns, and barren-ground grizzly, and this environment is as delicate as a newborn infant. We *can't* allow the oil companies to go in there!"

"I *know,* Kevin," the President's Science Advisor responded, with an emphatic nod—

"The damage might *never* be repaired. The permafrost—there's *nothing* more delicate on the face of the planet," the president of the Sierra Club said, with further, repetitive emphasis. "We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our children—we owe it to the *planet.* This bill has to be *killed!* I don't care what it takes, this bill must *die!* You *must* convince the President to withdraw any *semblance* of support for it. We cannot allow this environmental *rape* to take place."

"Kevin, we have to be smart about how we do this. The President sees this as a balance-of-payments issue. Domestic oil doesn't force us to spend our money buying oil from other countries. Worse, he believes the oil companies when they say they drill and transport the oil without doing great environmental damage, and that they can fix what damage they do *accidentally."*

"That's horseshit, and you know it, Carol." Kevin Mayflower spat out his contempt for the oil companies. Their goddamned pipeline is a bleeding scar on the face of Alaska, an ugly, jagged steel line crossing the most beautiful land on the face of the earth, an affront to Nature Herself—and what for? So that people could drive motor vehicles, which further polluted the planet merely because lazy people didn't want to walk to work or ride bicycles or horses. (Mayflower didn't reflect on the fact that he'd flown to Washington to deliver his plea instead of riding one of his Appaloosa horses across the country, and that his rented car had been parked on West Executive Drive.) Everything the oil companies touched, they ruined, he thought. They made it dirty. They sullied the very earth itself, removing what they thought of as a precious resource here, there, and everywhere, whether it was oil or coal, gashing the earth, or poking holes into it, sometimes spilling their liquid treasure because they didn't know and didn't care about the sanctity of the planet, which belonged to everyone, and which needed proper stewardship. The stewardship, of course, required proper guidance, and that was the job of the Sierra Club and similar groups, to tell the people how important the earth was, and how they *must* respect and treat it. The good news was that the President's Science Advisor *did* understand, and that she *did* work in the White House Compound, and *did* have access to the President.

"Carol, I want you to walk across the street, go into the Oval Office, and *tell*

him what has to be done."

"Kevin, it's not that easy."

"Why the hell not? He's not that much of a *dunce,* is he?"

"He occasionally has a different point of view, and the oil companies are being very clever about this. Look at their proposal," she said, tapping the report on the table. "They promise to indemnify the entire operation, to put up a *billion-dollar* bond in case something goes wrong—for God's sake, Kevin, they even offer to let the Sierra Club be on the council to oversee their environmental protection programs!"

"And be outnumbered there by their own cronies! Be damned if they'll co-opt us that way!" Mayflower snarled. "I won't let anyone from my office be a part of this rape, and *that's* final!"

"And if you say that out loud, the oil companies will call you an extremist, and marginalize the whole environmental movement—and you can't afford to let that happen, Kevin!"

"The *hell* I can't. You have to stand and fight for something, Carol. *Here* is where we stand and fight. We let those polluting bastards drill oil in Prudhoe Bay, but that's *it!"*

"What will the rest of your board say about this?" Dr. Brightling asked.

"They'll goddamned well say what I goddamned *tell* them to say!"

"No, Kevin, they won't." Carol leaned back and rubbed her eyes. She'd read the entire report the previous night, and the sad truth was that the oil companies had gotten pretty damned smart about dealing with environmental issues. It was plain business sense. The *Exxon Valdez* had cost them a *ton* of money, in addition to the bad public relations. Three pages had been devoted to the changes in tanker safety procedures. Now, ships leaving the huge oil terminal at Valdez, Alaska, were escorted by tugs all the way to the open sea. A total of twenty pollution-control vessels were on constant standby, with a further number in reserve. The navigation systems on every tanker had been upgraded to beyond what nuclear submarines carried; the navigation officers were compelled to test their skills on simulators every six months. It was all hugely expensive, but far less so than another serious spill. A series of commercials proclaimed all of these facts on television—worst of all, the high-end intellectual cable/satellite channels, History, Learning, Discovery, and A&E, for whom the oil companies were also sponsoring new shows on wildlife in the Arctic, never touched upon what the companies did, but there were plenty of pictures of caribou and other animals traversing under the elevated portions of the pipeline. They were getting their message out very skillfully indeed, even to members of the Sierra Club's board, Brightling thought.

What they didn't say, and what both she and Mayflower knew, was that once the oil was safely out of the ground, safely transported through the monster pipeline, safely conveyed over the sea by the newly double-hulled supertankers, *then* it just became more air pollution, out the tailpipes of cars and trucks and the smokestacks of electric-power stations. So it really was all a joke, and that joke included Kevin's bitching about hurting the permafrost. At most, what would be seriously damaged? Ten or twenty acres, probably, and the oil companies would make more commercials about how they cleaned *that* up, as though the polluting end-use of the oil was not an issue at all!

Because to the ignorant Joe Six-pack, sitting there in front of his TV, watching football games, it *wasn't* an issue, was it? There were a hundred or so million motor vehicles in the United States, and a larger number across the world, and they *all* polluted the air, and *that* was the real issue. How did one stop that from poisoning the planet?

Well, there were ways, weren't there? she reflected.

"Kevin, I'll do my best," she promised. "I will advise the President not to support this bill."

The bill was S-1768, submitted and sponsored by both Alaskan senators, whom the oil companies had bought long before, which would authorize the Department of the Interior to auction off the drilling rights into the AAMP area. The money involved would be huge, both for the federal government and for the state of Alaska. Even the Native American tribes up there would look the other way. The money they got from the oil would buy them lots of snowmobiles with which to chase and shoot the caribou, and motorboats to fish and kill the odd whale, which was part of their racial and cultural heritage. Snowmobiles weren't needed in the modern age of plastic-wrapped USDA Choice Iowa beef, but the Native Americans clung to the end-result of their traditions, if not the traditional methods. It was a depressing truth that even these people had set aside their history and their very gods in homage to a new age of mechanistic worship to oil and its products. Both the Alaskan senators would bring down tribal elders to testify in favor of S-1768, and they would be listened to, since who more than Native Americans knew what it was like to live in harmony with nature? Only today they did it with Ski-Do snowmobiles, Johnson outboard motors, and Winchester hunting rifles.... She sighed at the madness of it all.

"Will he listen?" Mayflower asked, getting back to business. Even environmentalists had to live in the real world of politics.

"Honest answer? Probably not," Carol Brightling admitted quietly.

"You know," Kevin observed in a low voice. "There are times when I understand John Wilkes Booth."

"Kevin, I didn't hear that, and you didn't say it. Not here. Not in this building."

"Damn it, Carol, you know how I feel. And you know I'm right. How the hell are we supposed to protect the planet if the idiots who run the world don't give a *fuck* about the world we live on?"

"What are you going to say? That *Homo sapiens* is a parasitic species that hurts the earth and the ecosystem? That we don't belong here?"

"A lot of us don't, and that's a fact."

"Maybe so, but what do you do about it?"

"I don't know," Mayflower had to admit.

Some of us know, Carol Brightling thought, looking up into his sad eyes. *But are you ready for that one, Kevin?* She thought he was, but recruitment was always a troublesome step, even for true believers like Kevin Mayflower. . . .

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Construction was about ninety percent complete. There were twenty whole sections around the site, twenty one-square-mile blocks of land, mainly flat, a slight roll to it, with a four-lane paved road leading north to Interstate 70, which was still covered with trucks heading in and out. The last two miles of the highway were set up without a median strip, the rebarred concrete paving a full thirty inches deep, as though it had been built to land airplanes on, the construction superintendent had observed, big ones, even. The road led into an equally sturdy and massively wide parking lot. He didn't care enough about it, though, to mention it at his country club in Salina.

The buildings were fairly pedestrian, except for their environmental-control systems, which were so state-of-the-art that the Navy could have used them on nuclear submarines. It was all part of the company's leading-edge posture on its systems, the chairman had told him on his last visit. They had a tradition of doing everything ahead of everyone else, and besides, the nature of their work required careful attention to every little squiggly detail. You didn't make vaccines in the open. But even the worker housing and offices had the same systems, the super thought, and that was odd, to say the least. Every building had a basement—it was a sensible thing to build here in tornado country, but few ever bothered with it, partly out of sloth, and partly from the fact that the ground was not all that easy to dig here, the famous Kansas hardpan whose top was scratched to grow wheat. That was the other interesting part. They'd continue to farm most of the area. The winter wheat was already in, and two miles away was the farm-operations center, down its own over-wide two-lane road, outfitted with the newest and best farm equipment he'd ever seen, even in an area where growing wheat was essentially an art form.

Three hundred million dollars, total, was going into this project. The buildings were huge—you could convert them to living space for five or six thousand people, the super thought. The office building had classrooms for continuing education. The site had its own power plant, along with a huge fuel-tank farm, whose tanks were semiburied in deference to local weather conditions, and connected by their own pipeline to a filling point just off I-70 at Kanopolis. Despite the local lake, there were no fewer than ten twelve-inch artesian wells drilled well down into—and *past*—the Cherokee Aquifer that local farmers used to water their fields. Hell, that was enough water to supply a small city. But the company was footing the bill, and he was getting his usual percentage of the total job cost to bring it in on time, with a substantial bonus for coming in early, which he was determined to earn. It had been twenty-five months to this point, with two more to go. And he'd make it, the super thought, and he'd get that bonus, after which he'd take the family to Disney World for two weeks of Mickey and golf on the wonderful courses there, which he needed in order to get his game back in shape after two years of seven-day weeks.

But the bonus meant he wouldn't need to work again for a couple of years. He specialized in large jobs. He'd done two skyscrapers in New York, an oil refinery in Delaware, an amusement park in Ohio, and two huge housing projects elsewhere, earning a reputation for bringing things in early and under budget—not a bad rep for someone in his business. He parked his Jeep Cherokee, and checked notes for the things remaining this afternoon. Yeah,

the window-seal tests in Building One. He used his cell phone to call ahead, and headed off, across the landing strip, as he called it, where the access roads came together. He remembered his time as an engineer in the Air Force. Two miles long, and almost a yard thick, yeah, you could land a 747 on this road if you wanted. Well, the company had a fleet of its own Gulfstream business jets, and why not land them here instead of the dinky little airfield at Ellsworth? And if they ever bought a jumbo, he chuckled, they could do that here, too. Three minutes later, he was parked just outside of One. This building *was* complete, three weeks early, and the last thing to be done was the environmental checks. Fine. He walked in through the revolving door—an unusually heavy, robust one, which was immediately locked upon his entry.

"Okay, we ready, Gil?"

"We are now, Mr. Hollister."

"Run her up, then," Charlie Hollister ordered.

Gil Trains was the supervisor of all the environmental systems at the project. Ex-Navy, and something of a control freak, he punched the wall-mounted controls himself. There was no noise associated with the pressurization—the systems were too far away for that—but the effect was almost immediate. On the walk over to Gil, Hollister felt it in his ears, like driving down a mountain road, your ears *click*ed, and you had to work your jaw around to equalize the pressure, which was announced by another *click*.

"How's it holding?"

"So far, so good," Trains replied. "Zero-point-seven-five PSI overpressure, holding steady." His eyes were on the gauges mounted in this control station. "You know what this is like, Charlie?"

"Nope," the superintendent admitted.

"Testing watertight integrity on a submarine. Same method, we overpressure a compartment."

"Really? It's all reminded me of stuff I did in Europe at fighter bases."

"What's that?" Gil asked.

"Overpressurizing pilots' quarters to keep gas out."

"Oh yeah? Well, I guess it works both ways. Pressure is holding nicely."

Damned well ought to, Hollister thought, *with all the hell we went through to make sure every fucking window was sealed with vinyl gaskets.* Not that there were all that many windows. That had struck him as pretty odd. The views here were pretty nice. Why shut them out?

The building was spec'd for a full 1.3 pounds of overpressure. They'd told him it was tornado protection, and that sorta-kinda made sense, along with the increased efficiency of the HVAC systems that came along with the seals. But it could also make for sick-building syndrome. Buildings with overly good environmental isolation kept flu germs in, and helped colds spread like a goddamned prairie fire. Well, that had to be part of the idea, too. The company worked on drugs and vaccines and stuff, and that meant that this place was like a germ-warfare factory, didn't it? So, it made sense to keep stuff in—and keep stuff out, right? Ten minutes later they were sure. Instruments all over the building confirmed that the overpressurization systems worked—on the first trial. The guys who'd done the windows and doors had earned all that extra pay for getting it right.

"Looks pretty good. Gil, I have to run over to the uplink center." The complex also had a lavish collection of satellite-communications systems.

"Use the air lock." Trains pointed.

"See you later," the super said on his way out.

"Sure thing, Charlie."

It wasn't pleasant. They now had eleven people, healthy ones, eight women and three men—segregated by gender, of course—and eleven was actually one more than they'd planned, but after kidnapping them you couldn't very well give them back. Their clothing had been taken away—in some cases it had been removed while they'd been unconscious—and replaced with tops and bottoms that were rather like prison garb, if made of somewhat better material. No undergarments were permitted—imprisoned women had actually used bras to hang themselves on occasion, and that couldn't be allowed here. Slippers for shoes, and the food was heavily laced with Valium, which helped to calm people down somewhat, but not completely. It wouldn't have been very smart to drug them that much, since the depression of all their bodily systems might skew the test, and they couldn't allow that either.

"What is all this?" the woman demanded of Dr. Archer.

"It's a medical test," Barbara replied, filling out the form. "You volunteered for it, remember? We're paying you for this, and after it's over you can go back home."

"When did I do that?"

"Last week," Dr. Archer told her.

"I don't remember."

"Well, you did. We have your signature on the consent form. And we're taking good care of you, aren't we?"

"I feel dopey all the time."

"That's normal," Dr. Archer assured her. "It's nothing to worry about."

She—Subject F4—was a legal secretary. Three of the women subjects were that, which was mildly troubling to Dr. Archer. What if the lawyers they worked for called the police? Letters of resignation had been sent, with the signatures expertly forged, and plausible explanations for the supposed event included in the text of the letters. Maybe it would hold up. In any case, the kidnappings had been expertly done, and nobody here would talk to anybody about it, would they?

Subject F4 was nude, and sitting in a comfortable cloth-covered chair. Fairly attractive, though she needed to lose about ten pounds, Archer thought. The physical examination had revealed nothing unusual. Blood pressure was normal. Blood chemistry showed slightly elevated cholesterol, but nothing to worry about. She appeared to be a normal, healthy, twenty-six-year-old female. The interview for her medical history was similarly unremarkable. She was not a virgin, of course, having had twelve lovers over the nine years of her sexual activity. One abortion carried out at age twenty by her gynecologist, after which she'd practiced safe sex. She had a current love interest, but he was out of town for a few weeks on business, and she suspected that he had another woman in his life anyway.

"Okay, that about does it, Mary." Archer stood and smiled. "Thank you for

your cooperation."

"Can I get dressed now?"

"First there's something we want you to do. Please walk through the green door. There's a fogging system in there. You'll find it feels nice and cool. Your clothes will be on the other side. You can get dressed there."

"Okay." Subject F4 rose and did as she was told. Inside the sealed room was —nothing, really. She stood there in drugged puzzlement for a few seconds, noting that it was hot in there, over ninety degrees, but then invisible spray ports in the wall sent out a mist . . . fog, something like that, which cooled her down instantly and comfortably for about ten seconds. Then the fog stopped, and the far door clicked open. As promised, there was a dressing room there, and she donned her green jamms, then walked out into the corridor, where a security guard waved her to the door at the far end—he never got closer than ten feet—back to the dormitory, where lunch was waiting. Meals were pretty good here, and after meals she always felt like a nap.

"Feeling bad, Pete?" Dr. Killgore asked in a different part of the building.

"Must be the flu or something. I feel beat-up all over, and I can't keep anything down." Even the booze, he didn't say, though that was especially disconcerting for the alcoholic. Booze was the one thing he could always keep down.

"Okay, let's give it a look, then." Killgore stood, donning a mask and putting on latex gloves for his examination. "Gotta take a blood sample, okay?"

"Sure, doc."

Killgore did that very carefully indeed, giving him the usual stick inside the elbow, and filling four five-cc test tubes. Next he checked Pete's eyes, mouth, and did the normal prodding, which drew a reaction over the subject's liver—

"Ouch! That hurts, doc."

"Oh? Doesn't feel very different from before, Pete. How's it hurt?" he asked, feeling the liver, which, as in most alcoholics, felt like a soft brick.

"Like you just stabbed me with a knife, doc. Real sore there."

"Sorry, Pete. How about here?" the physician asked, probing lower with both hands.

"Not as sharp, but it hurts a little. Somethin' I ate, maybe?"

"Could be. I wouldn't worry too much about it," Killgore replied. Okay, this one was symptomatic, a few days earlier than expected, but small irregularities were to be expected. Pete was one of the healthier subjects, but alcoholics were never really what one could call healthy. So, Pete would be Number 2. *Bad luck, Pete,* Killgore thought. "Let me give you something to take the edge off."

The doctor turned and pulled open a drawer on the wall cabinet. Five milligrams, he thought, filling the plastic syringe to the right line, then turning and sticking the vein on the back of the hand.

"Oooh!" Pete said a few seconds later. "Oooh . . . that feels okay. Lot better, doc. Thanks." The rheumy eyes went wide, then relaxed.

Heroin was a superb analgesic, and best of all, it gave its recipient a dazzling rush in the first few seconds, then reduced him to a comfortable stupor for the next few hours. So, Pete would feel just fine for a while. Killgore

helped him stand, then sent him back. Next he took the blood samples off for testing. In thirty minutes, he was sure. The antibody tests still showed positive, and microscopic examination showed what the antibodies were fighting against . . . and losing to.

Only two years earlier, people had tried to infect America with the natural version of this bug, this "shepherd's crook," some called it. It had been somewhat modified in the genetic-engineering lab with the addition of cancer DNA to make this negative-strand RNA virus more robust, but that was really like putting a raincoat on the bug. The best news of all was that the genetic engineering had more than tripled the latency period. Once thought to be four to ten days, now it was almost a month. Maggie really knew her stuff, and she'd even picked the right name for it. Shiva was one nasty little son of a bitch. It had killed Chester—well, the potassium had done that, but Chester had been doomed—and it was now starting to kill Pete. There would be no merciful help for this one. Pete would be allowed to live until the disease took his life. His physical condition was close enough to normal that they'd work to see what good supportive care could do to fight off the effects of the Ebola-Shiva. Probably nothing, but they had to establish that. Nine remaining primary test subjects, and then eleven more on the other side of the building—they would be the real test. They were all healthy, or so the company thought. They'd be testing both the method of primary transmission and the viability of Shiva as a plague agent, plus the utility of the vaccines Steve Berg had isolated the previous week.

That concluded Killgore's work for the day. He made his way outside. The evening air was chilly and clean and pure—well, as pure as it could be in this part of the world. There were a hundred million cars in the country, all spewing their complex hydrocarbons into the atmosphere. Killgore wondered if he'd be able to tell the difference in two or three years, when all that stopped. In the glow of the building lights, he saw the flapping of bats. Cool, he thought, one rarely saw bats. They must be chasing insects, and he wished his ears could hear the ultrasonic sounds they projected like radar to locate the bugs and intercept them.

There would be birds up there, too. Owls especially, magnificent raptors of the night, flying with soft, quiet feathers, finding their way into barns, where they'd catch mice, eat and digest them, and then regurgitate the bones of their prey in compact little capsules. Killgore felt far more kinship for the wild predators than he did for the prey animals. But that was to be expected, wasn't it? He *did* have kinship with the predators, those wild, magnificent things that killed without conscience, because Mother Nature had no conscience at all. It gave life with one hand, and took it back with the other. The ageless process of life, that had made the earth what it was. Men had tried so hard and so long to change it, but other men now would change it back, quickly and dramatically, and he'd be there to see it. He wouldn't see all the scars fade from the land, and that was too bad, but, he judged, he'd live long enough to see the important things change. Pollution would stop almost completely. The animals would no longer be fettered and poisoned. The sky would clear, and the land would soon be covered with life, as Nature intended, with him and his colleagues to see the magnificence of the

transformation. And if the price was high, then the prize it earned was worth it. The earth belonged to those who appreciated and understood her. He was even using one of Nature's methods to take possession—albeit with a little human help. If humans could use their science and arts to harm the world, then other humans could use them to fix it. Chester and Pete would not have understood, but then, they'd never understood much of anything, had they?

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"There will be thousands of Frenchmen there," Juan said. "And half of them will be children. If we wish to liberate our colleagues, the impact must be a strong one. This should be strong enough."

"Where will we go afterwards?" René asked.

"The Bekaa Valley is still available, and from there, wherever we wish. I have good contacts in Syria, still, and there are always options."

"It's a four-hour flight, and there is always an American aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean."

"They will not attack an aircraft filled with children," Esteban pointed out. "They might even give us an escort," he added with a smile.

"It is only twelve kilometers to the airport," Andre reminded them, "a fine multilane highway."

"So, then, we must plan the mission in every detail. Esteban, you will get yourself a job there. You, too, Andre. We must pick our places, then select the time and the day."

"We'll need more men. At least ten more."

"That is a problem. Where can we get ten reliable men?" Juan asked.

"Sicarios can be hired. We need only promise them the right amount of money," Esteban pointed out.

"They must be faithful men," René told them forcefully.

"They will be faithful enough," the Basque told them. "I know where to go for them."

They were all bearded. It was the easiest disguise to adopt, and though the national police in their countries had pictures of them, the pictures were all of young, shaven men. A passerby might have thought them to be artists, the way they looked, and the way they all leaned inward on the table to speak with intense whispers. They were all dressed moderately well, though not expensively so. Perhaps they were arguing over some political issue, the waiter thought from his station ten meters away, or some confidential business matter. He couldn't know that he was right on both counts. A few minutes later, he watched them shake hands and depart in different directions, having left cash to pay the bill, and, the waiter discovered, a niggardly tip. Artists, he thought. They were notoriously cheap bastards.

"But this is an environmental disaster waiting to happen!" Carol Brightling insisted.

"Carol," the chief of staff replied. "It's about our balance of payments. It will save America something like fifty billion dollars, and we need that. On the

environmental side, I know what your concerns are, but the president of Atlantic Richfield has promised me personally that this will be a clean operation. They've learned a lot in the past twenty years, on the engineering side and the public relations side, about cleaning up their act, haven't they?"

"Have you ever been there?" the President's science advisor asked.

"Nope." He shook his head. "I've flown over Alaska, but that's it."

"You would think differently if you'd ever seen the place, trust me."

"They strip-mine coal in Ohio. I've seen that. And I've seen them cover it back up and plant grass and trees. Hell, one of those strip mines—in two years they're going to have the PGA championship on the golf course that they built there! It's *cleaned up,* Carol. They know how now, and they know it makes good sense to do it, economically *and* politically. So, no, Carol, the President will *not* withdraw his support for this drilling project. It makes economic sense for the country." *And who really cares a rat's ass for land that only a few hundred people have ever seen?* he didn't add.

"I have to talk to him personally about it," the science advisor insisted.

"No." The chief of staff shook his head emphatically. "That's not going to happen. Not on this issue. All you'd accomplish is to undercut your position, and that isn't smart, Carol."

"But I *promised!"*

"Promised whom?"

"The Sierra Club."

"Carol, the Sierra Club isn't part of this administration. And we get their letters. I've read them. They're turning into an extremist organization on issues like this. Anybody can say 'do nothing,' and that's about all they're saying since this Mayflower guy took it over."

"Kevin is a good man and a very smart one."

"You couldn't prove that by me, Carol," the chief of staff snorted. "He's a Luddite."

"Goddamnit, Arnie, not everyone who disagrees with you is an extremist, okay?"

"That one is. The Sierra Club's going to self-destruct if they keep him on top of the masthead. Anyway." The chief of staff checked his schedule. "I have work to do. Your position on this issue, Dr. Brightling, is to support the Administration. That means *you* personally *support* the drilling bill for AAMP. There is only one position in this building, and that position is what the President says it is. That's the price you pay for working as an advisor to the President, Carol. You get to influence policy, but once that policy is promulgated, you support it, whether you believe it or not. You will say publicly that you think that drilling that oil is a good thing for America and for the environment. Do you understand that?"

"No, Arnie, I won't!" Brightling insisted.

"Carol, you will. And you will do it convincingly, in such a way as to make the more moderate environmental groups see the logic of the situation. If, that is, you like working here."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No, Carol, I am not threatening you. I am explaining to you how the rules work here. Because you have to play by the rules, just like I do, and just like

everyone else does. If you work here you must be loyal to the President. If you are not loyal, then you cannot work here. You knew those rules when you came onboard, and you knew you had to live by them. Okay, now it's time for a gut check. Carol, will you live by the rules or won't you?"

Her face was red under the makeup. She hadn't learned to conceal her anger, the chief of staff saw, and that was too bad. You couldn't afford to get angry over minor bullshit items, not at this level of government. And this was a minor bullshit item. When you found something as valuable as several billion barrels of oil in a place that belonged to you, you drilled into the ground to get it out. It was as simple as that—and it was simpler still if the oil companies promised not to hurt anything as a result. It would remain that simple as long as the voters drove automobiles. "Well, Carol?" he asked.

"Yes, Arnie, I know the rules, and I will live by the rules," she confirmed at last.

"Good. I want you to prepare a statement this afternoon for release next week. I want to see it today. The usual stuff, the science of it, the safety of the engineering measures, that sort of thing. Thanks for coming over, Carol," he said in dismissal.

Dr. Brightling stood and moved to the door. She hesitated there, wanting to turn and tell Arnie what he could do with his statement . . . but she kept moving into the corridor in the West Wing, turned north, and went down the stairs for the street level. Two Secret Service agents noted the look on her face and wondered what had rained on her parade that morning—or maybe had turned a hail-storm loose on it. She walked across the street with an unusually stiff gait, then up the steps into the OEOB. In her office, she turned on her Gateway computer and called up her word-processing program, wanting to put her fist through the glass screen rather than type on the keyboard.

To be ordered around by that *man!* Who didn't know *anything* about science, and didn't *care* about environmental policy. All Arnie cared about was politics, and politics was the most artificial damned thing in the world!

But then, finally, she calmed down, took a deep breath, and began drafting her defense of something that, after all, would never happen, would it?

No, she told herself. It would never happen.

CHAPTER 12

WILD CARDS

The theme park had learned well from its more famous model. It had taken care to hire away a dozen senior executives, their lavish salary increases paid for by the park's Persian Gulf financial backers, who had already exceeded their fiscal expectations and looked forward to recouping their total investment in less than six years instead of the programmed eight and a half.

Those investments had been considerable, since they determined not merely to emulate the American corporation, but to exceed it in every respect. The castle in *their* park was made of stone, not mere fiberglass. The main street was actually three thoroughfares, each adapted to three separate national themes. The circular railroad was of standard gauge and used two real steam locomotives, and there was talk of extending the line to the international airport, which the Spanish authorities had been so kind as to modernize in order to support the theme park—as well they might: the park provided twenty-eight thousand fulltime and ten thousand more part-time or seasonal jobs. The ride attractions were spectacular, most of them custom designed and built in Switzerland, and some of them adventurous enough to make a fighter pilot go pale. In addition, it had a Science World section, with a moonwalk attraction that had impressed NASA, an underwater walk-through mega-aquarium, and pavilions from every major industry in Europe—the one from Airbus Industrie was particularly impressive, allowing children (and adults) to pilot simulated versions of its aircraft.

There were characters in costumes—gnomes, trolls, and all manner of mythical creatures from European history, plus Roman legionnaires to fight barbarians—and the usual marketing areas where guests could buy replicas of everything the park had to offer.

One of the smartest things the investors had done was to build their theme park in Spain rather than France. The climate here, while hotter, was also sunny and dry most of the year, which made for full-year-round operations. Guests flew in from all over Europe, or took the trains, or came down on bus tours to stay at the large, comfortable hotels, which were designed for three different levels of expense and grandeur, from one that might have been decorated by César Ritz down to several with more basic amenities. Guests at all of them shared the same physical environment, warm and dry, and could take time off to bathe in the many pools surrounded by white-sand beaches, or to play on one of the two existing golf courses—three more were under construction, and one of them would soon be part of the European Professional Tour. There was also a busy casino, something no other theme park had tried. All in all, Worldpark, as it was called, had been an instant and

sensational success, and it rarely had fewer than ten thousand guests, and frequently more than fifty thousand.

A thoroughly modern facility, it was controlled by six regional and one master command center, and every attraction, ride, and food outlet was monitored by computers and TV cameras.

Mike Dennis was the operations director. He'd been hired away from Orlando, and while he missed the friendly managerial atmosphere there, the building and then running of Worldpark had been the challenge he'd waited for all his life. A man with three kids, *this* was his baby, Dennis told himself, looking out the battlements of the tower. His office and command center was in the castle keep, the tall tower in the twelfth-century fortress they'd built. Maybe the Duke of Aquitaine had enjoyed a place like this, but he'd used only swords and spears, not computers and helicopters, and as wealthy as his grace had been back in the twelfth century, he hadn't handled money in this quantity—Worldpark took in ten *million* dollars in cash alone on a good day, and far more than that from plastic. Every day a cash truck with a heavy police escort left the park for the nearest bank.

Like its model in Florida, Worldpark was a multistory structure. Under the main concourses was a subterranean city where the support services operated, and the cast members changed into costumes and ate their lunches, and where he was able to get people and things from place to place quickly and unseen by the guests in the sunlight. Running it was the equivalent of being mayor of a not-so-small city—harder, actually, since he had to make sure that everything worked all the time, and that the cost of operations was always less than the city's income. That he did his job well, actually about 2.1 percent better than his own pre-opening projections, meant that he had a sizable salary, and that he'd earned the $1,000,000 bonus that had been delivered to him only five weeks earlier. Now, if only his kids could get used to the local schools....

Even as an object of hatred, it was breathtaking. It *was* a city, Andre saw, the construction of which had cost billions. He'd lived through the indoctrination process in the local "Worldpark University," learned the absurd ethos of the place, learned to smile at everything and everybody. He'd been assigned, fortuitously, to the security department, the notional Worldpark *Policia,* which meant that he wore a light blue shirt and dark blue trousers with a vertical blue stripe, carried a whistle and a portable radio, and spent most of his time telling people where the restrooms were, because Worldpark needed a police force about as much as a ship needed wheels. He'd gotten this job because he was fluent in three languages, French, Spanish, and English, and thus could be helpful to the majority of the visitors—"guests"—to this new Spanish city, all of whom needed to urinate from time to time, and most of whom, evidently, lacked the wit to notice the hundreds of signs (graphic rather than lettered) that told them where to go when the need became overwhelming.

Esteban, Andre saw, was in his usual place, selling his helium-filled balloons. Bread and circuses, they both thought. The vast sums expended to build this place—and for what purpose? To give the children of the poor and working classes a brief few hours of laughter before they returned to their

dreary homes? To seduce their parents into spending their money for mere amusement? Really, the purpose of the place was to enrich further the Arab investors who'd been persuaded to spend so much of their oil money here, building this fantasy city. Breathtaking, perhaps, but still an object of contempt, this icon of the unreal, this opiate for the masses of workers who had not the sense to see it for what it was. Well, that was the task of the revolutionary elite.

Andre walked about, seemingly in an aimless way, but actually in accordance with plans, both his and the park's. He was being paid to look around and make arrangements while he smiled and told parents where their little darlings could relieve themselves.

"This will do it," Noonan said, walking into the morning meeting.

"What's 'this'?" Clark asked.

Noonan held up a computer floppy disk. "It's just a hundred lines of code, not counting the installation stuff. The cells—the phone cells, I mean—all use the same computer program to operate. When we get to a place, I just insert this in their drives and upload the software. Unless you dial in the right prefix to make a call—7-7-7, to be exact—the cell will respond that the number you're calling is busy. So, we can block any cellular calls into our subjects from some helpful soul outside and also prevent them from getting out."

"How many spare copies do you have?" Stanley asked.

"Thirty," Noonan answered. "We can get the local cops to install them. I have instructions printed up in six languages." *Not bad, eh?* Noonan wanted to say. He'd gone through a contact at the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Maryland, to get it. Pretty good for just over a week's effort. "It's called Cellcop, and it'll work anywhere in the world."

"Good one, Tim." Clark made a note. "Okay, how are the teams?"

"Sam Houston's down with a sprained knee," Peter Covington told Clark. "Hurt it coming down a zip-line. He can still deploy, but he won't be running for a few days."

"Team-2's fully mission-capable, John," Chavez announced. "George Tomlinson is a little slowed down with his Achilles tendon, but no big deal."

Clark grunted and nodded, making a further note. Training was so hard here that the occasional injury was inevitable—and John well remembered the aphorism that drills were supposed to be bloodless combat, and combat supposed to be bloody drills. It was fundamentally a good thing that his troops worked as hard in practice as they did in the real thing—it said a lot for their morale, and just as much for their professionalism, that they took every aspect of life in Rainbow that seriously. Since Sam Houston was a long-rifleman, he really was about seventy percent mission-capable, and George Tomlinson, strained tendon and all, was still doing his morning runs, gutting it out as an elite trooper should.

"Intel?" John turned to Bill Tawney.

"Nothing special to report," the Secret Intelligence Service officer replied. "We know that there are terrorists still alive, and the various police forces are still doing their investigations to dig them out, but it's not an easy job, and nothing promising appears to be underway, but . . ." But one couldn't predict

a break in a case. Everyone around the table knew that. This very evening someone of the class of Carlos himself could be pulled over for running a stop sign and be recognized by some rookie cop and snapped up, but you couldn't plan for random events. There were still over a hundred known terrorists living somewhere in Europe probably, just like Ernst Model and Hans Fürchtner, but they'd learned a not-very-hard lesson about keeping a low profile, adopting a simple disguise, and keeping out of trouble. They had to make some greater or lesser mistake to be noticed, and the ones who made dumb mistakes were long since dead or imprisoned.

"How about cooperation with the local police agencies?" Alistair Stanley asked.

"We keep speaking with them, and the Bern and Vienna missions have been very good press for us. Wherever something happens, we can expect to be summoned swiftly."

"Mobility?" John asked next.

"That's me, I guess," Lieutenant Colonel Malloy responded. "It's working out well with the 1st Special Operations Wing. They're letting me keep the Night Hawk for the time being, and I've got enough time on the British Puma that I'm current in it. If we have to go, I'm ready to go. I can get MC-130 tanker support if I need it for a long deployment, but as a practical matter I can be just about anywhere in Europe in eight hours in my Sikorsky, with or without tanker support. Operational side, I'm comfortable with things. The troops here are as good as any I've seen, and we work well together. The only thing that worries me is the lack of a medical team."

"We've thought about that. Dr. Bellow is our doc, and you're up to speed on trauma, right, doc?" Clark asked.

"Fairly well, but I'm not as good as a real trauma surgeon. Also, when we deploy, we can get local paramedics to help out from police and fire services on the scene."

"We did it better at Fort Bragg," Malloy observed. "I know all our shooters are trained in emergency-response care, but a properly trained medical corpsman is a nice thing to have around. Doctor Bellow's only got two hands," the pilot noted. "And he can only be in one place at a time."

"When we deploy," Stanley said, "we do a routine call-up to the nearest local casualty hospital. So far we've had good cooperation."

"Okay, guys, but I'm the one who has to transport the wounded. I've been doing it for a long time, and I think we could do it a little better. I recommend a drill for that. We should practice it regularly."

That wasn't a bad idea, Clark thought. "Duly noted, Malloy. Al, let's do that in the next few days."

"Agreed," Stanley responded with a nod.

"The hard part is simulating injuries," Dr. Bellow told them. "There's just no substitute for the real thing, but we can't put our people in the emergency room. It's too time-wasteful, and they won't see the right kind of injuries there."

"We've had this problem for years," Peter Covington said. "You can teach the procedures, but practical experience is too difficult to come by—"

"Yeah, unless we move the outfit to Detroit," Chavez quipped. "Look, guys,

we all know the right first-aid stuff, and Doctor Bellow *is* a doc. There's only so much we have time to train for, and the primary mission is paramount, isn't it? We get there and do the job, and that minimizes the number of wounds, doesn't it?" Except to the bad guys, he didn't add, and nobody really cared about them, and you couldn't treat three 10-mm bullets in the head, even at Walter Reed. "I like the idea of training to evac wounded. Fine, we can do that, and practice first-aid stuff, but can we realistically go farther than that? I don't see how."

"Comments?" Clark asked. He didn't see much past that, either.

"Chavez is correct . . . but you're never fully prepared or fully trained," Malloy pointed out. "No matter how much you work, the bad guys always find a way to dump something new on you. Anyway, in Delta we deploy with a full medical-response team, trained corpsmen—experts, used to trauma care. Maybe we can't afford to do that here, but that's how we did it at Fort Bragg."

"We'll just have to depend on local support for that," Clark said, closing the issue. "This place can't afford to grow that much. I don't have the funding."

And that's the magic word in this business, Malloy didn't have to add. The meeting broke up a few minutes later, and with it the working day ended. Dan Malloy had grown accustomed to the local tradition of closing out a day at the club, where the beer was good and the company cordial. Ten minutes later, he was hoisting ajar with Chavez. This little greaser, he thought, really had his shit together.

"That call you made in Vienna was pretty good, Ding."

"Thanks, Dan." Chavez took a sip. "Didn't have much of a choice, though. Sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do."

"Yep, that's a fact," the Marine agreed.

"You think we're thin on the medical side . . . so do I, but so far that hasn't been a problem."

"So far you've been lucky, my boy."

"Yeah, I know. We haven't been up against any crazy ones yet."

"They're out there, the real sociopathic personalities, the ones who don't care a rat's ass about anything at all. Well, truth is, I haven't seen any of them either except on TV. I keep coming back to the Ma'alot thing, in Israel twenty-plus years ago. Those fuckers wasted little kids just to show how tough they were—and remember what happened a while back with the President's little girl. She was damned lucky that FBI guy was there. I wouldn't mind buying that guy a beer."

"Good shooting," Chavez agreed. "Better yet, good timing. I read up on how he handled it—talking to them and all, being patient, waiting to make his move, then taking it when he got it."

"He lectured at Bragg, but I was traveling that day. Saw the tape. The boys said he can shoot a pistol as well as anybody on the team—but better yet, he was smart."

"Smart counts," Chavez agreed, finishing his beer. "I gotta go fix dinner."

"Say again?"

"My wife's a doc, gets home in an hour or so, and it's my turn to do dinner."

A raised eyebrow: "Nice to see you're properly trained, Chavez."

"I am secure in my masculinity," Domingo assured the aviator and headed

for the door.

Andre worked late that night. Worldpark stayed open until 2300 hours, and the shops remained open longer than that, because even so huge a place as Worldpark couldn't waste the chance to earn a few extra copper coins from the masses for the cheap, worthless souvenirs they sold, to be clutched in the greedy hands of little children, often nearly asleep in the arms of their weary parents. He watched the process impassively, the way so many people waited until the very last ride on the mechanical contrivances, and only then, with the chains in place and after the good-bye waves of the ride operators, did they finally turn and shuffle their way to the gates, taking every opportunity to stop and enter the shops, where the clerks smiled tiredly and were as helpful as they'd been taught to be at the Worldpark University. And then when, finally, all had left, the shops were closed, and the registers emptied, and under the eyes of Andre and his fellow security staff, the cash was taken off to the counting room. It wasn't, strictly speaking, part of his current job, but he tagged along anyway, following the three clerks from the Matador shop, out onto the main street, then into an alleyway, through some blank wooden doors, and down the steps to the underground, the concrete corridors that bustled with electric carts and employees during the day, now empty except for employees heading to dressing rooms to change into their street clothes. The counting room was in the very center, almost under the castle itself. There the cash was handed over, each bag labeled for its point of origin. The coins were dumped into a bin, where they were separated by nationality and denomination and counted, wrapped, and labeled for transport to the bank. The paper currency, already bundled by currency and denomination was . . . weighed. The first time he'd seen it, it had amazed him, but delicate scales actually weighed it—there, one point zero-six-one-five kilos of hundred-mark German notes. Two point six-three-seven-zero kilos of five-pound British ones. The corresponding amount was flashed on the electronic screen, and the notes were whisked off for wrapping. Here the security officers carried weapons, Astra pistols, because the total amount of the currency for the day was—the master tally display said £11,567,309.35 . . . all used cash, the very best sort, in all denominations. It all fit into six large canvas bags that were placed on a four-wheeled cart for transport out the back of the underground into an armored car with a police escort for transport to the central branch of the local bank, still open this time of day for a deposit of this magnitude. Eleven million British pounds in cash—this place took in billions per year in *cash,* Andre thought tiredly.

"Excuse me," he said to his security supervisor. "Have I broken any rules by coming here?"

A chuckle: "No, everyone comes down sooner or later to see. That's why the windows are here."

"Is it not dangerous?"

"I think not. The windows are thick, as you see, and security inside the counting room is very strict."

"Mon dieu, all that money—what if someone should try to steal it?"

"The truck is armored, and it has a police escort, two cars, four men each,

all heavily armed." And those would be only the obvious watchers, Andre thought. There would be others, not so close, and not so obvious, but equally well armed. "We were initially concerned that the Basque terrorists might try to steal the money—this much cash could finance their operations for years—but the threat has not developed, and besides, you know what becomes of all this cash?"

"Why not fly the money to the bank on a helicopter?" Andre asked.

The security supervisor yawned. "Too expensive."

"So, what becomes of the cash?"

"Much of it comes right back to us, of course."

"Oh." Andre thought for a moment. "Yes, it must, mustn't it?"

Worldpark was largely a cash business, because so many people still preferred to pay for things that way, despite the advent of credit cards, which the park was just as pleased to use, and despite the ability of guests to charge everything to their hotel-room accounts—instructions for which were printed on every plastic card-key in the language of the individual guest.

"I wager we use the same five-pound British note fifteen times before it's too worn and has to be sent to London for destruction and replacement."

"I see," Andre said with a nod. "So, we deposit, and then we withdraw from our own account just to make change for our guests. How much cash do we keep on hand, then?"

"For change purposes?" A shrug. "Oh, two or three million at minimum—British pounds, that is. To keep track of it all, we have those computers." He pointed.

"Amazing place," Andre observed, actually meaning it. He nodded at his supervisor and headed off to punch his time card and change. It had been a good day. His wanderings had confirmed his previous observations of the park. He now knew how to plan the mission, and how to accomplish it. Next he had to bring in his colleagues and show them the plan, after which came the execution. Forty minutes later, he was in his flat, drinking some Burgundy and thinking everything through. He'd been the plans and operations officer for Action Directe for over a decade—he'd planned and executed a total of eleven murders. This mission, however, would be by far the grandest of all, perhaps the culmination of his career, and he had to think it all through. Affixed to the wall of his flat was a map of Worldpark, and his eyes wandered over it, back and forth. Way-in, way-out. Possible routes of access by the police. Ways to counter them. Where to place his own security personnel. Where to take the hostages. Where to keep them. How to get everyone out. Andre kept going over it, again and again, looking for weaknesses, looking for mistakes. The Spanish national police, the Guardia Civil, would respond to this mission. They were to be taken with respect, despite their comical hats. They'd been fighting the Basques for a generation, and they'd learned. They doubtless had an arrangement with Worldpark already, because this was too obvious a target for terr—for progressive elements, Andre corrected himself. Police were not to be taken lightly. They'd almost killed or arrested him twice in France, but both of those occasions were because he'd made obvious mistakes, and he'd learned from both of them. No, not this time. He'd keep them at bay this time by his choice of hostages, and by showing his

willingness to use them to his political ends, and as tough as the Guardia Civil might be, they would quail before that demonstration of resolve, because tough as they were, they were vulnerable to bourgeois sentimentality, just as all like them were. It was the purity of his purpose that gave him the edge, and he'd hold on to that, and he *would* achieve his objective, or many would die, and neither the government of Spain nor France could stand up to that. The plan was nearly ready. He lifted his phone and made an international call.

Pete came back early in the evening. His face was pale now, and he was even more listless, but also uncomfortable, judging from the pained way in which he moved.

"How you feeling?" Dr. Killgore asked cheerily.

"Stomach is real bad, doc, right here," Pete said, pointing with his finger.

"Still bothering you, eh? Well, okay, why don't you lie down here and we'll check you out," the physician said, donning mask and gloves. The physical examination was cursory, but unnecessary for all that. Pete, like Chester before him, was dying, though he didn't know it yet. The heroin had done a good job of suppressing his discomfort, removing the pain and replacing it with chemical nirvana. Killgore carefully took another blood sample for later microscopy.

"Well, partner, I think we just have to wait this one out. But let me give you a shot to ease the pain, okay?"

"Sure thing, doc. The last one worked pretty good."

Killgore filled another plastic syringe and injected the heroin into the same vein as before. He watched Pete's brown eyes go wide with the initial rush, then droop as the pain went away, to be replaced with a lethargy so deep that he could almost have done major surgery on the spot without getting a rise from the poor bastard.

"How are the rest of the guys, Pete?"

"Okay, but Charlie is bitching about his stomach, something he ate, I guess."

"Oh, yeah? Maybe I'll see him, too," Killgore thought. *So, number three will be in here tomorrow, probably.* The timing was just about right. After Chester's earlier-than-expected symptoms, the rest of the group was right on the predicted timeline. Good.

More telephone calls were made, and by early morning, people rented cars with false IDs, drove in pairs or singly south from France to Spain, and were waved through the cursory border checkpoints, usually with a friendly smile. Various travel agents made the necessary reservations at park hotels, all mid-level, and linked to the park by monorail or train, the stations right in the shop-filled hotel lobbies, so that the guests wouldn't get lost.

The highways to the park were wide and comfortable to drive on, and the signs easy to follow even for those who didn't speak Spanish. About the only hazards were the huge tourist buses, which moved along at over 150 kilometers per hour, like land-bound ocean liners, their windows full of people, many of them children who waved down at the drivers of the passenger cars. The drivers waved back with smiles of their own, and allowed the buses to plow on, exceeding the speed limit as though it were their right to

do so, which the car drivers didn't want to risk. They had plenty of time. They'd planned their mission that way.

Tomlinson reached down to his left leg and grimaced. Chavez dropped back from the morning run to make sure he was okay.

"Still hurts?"

"Like a son of a bitch," Sergeant Tomlinson confirmed.

"So go easier on it, you dumb bastard. The Achilles is a bad thing to hurt."

"Just found that one out, Ding." Tomlinson slowed down to a walk, still favoring the left leg after running over two miles on it. His breathing was far heavier than usual, but pain was always a bad thing for the endurance.

"See Doc Bellow?"

"Yeah, but ain't nothing he can do 'cept let it heal, he says."

"So, let it heal. That's an order, George. No more running until it stops hurting so much. 'Kay?"

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Tomlinson agreed. "I can still deploy if you need me."

"I know that, George. See you in the shooting house."

"Right." Tomlinson watched his leader speed up to rejoin the rest of Team-2. It hurt his pride that he wasn't keeping up. He'd never allowed any sort of injury to slow him down—in Delta Force he'd kept up with the training despite two broken ribs, hadn't even told the medics about it for fear of being thought a pussy by the rest of his team. But while you could conceal and gut out bad ribs, a stretched tendon was something you couldn't run on—the pain was just so bad that the leg stopped working right, and it was hard to stand up straight. Damn, the soldier thought, can't let the rest of the team down. He'd never been second-best in anything in his life, back to Little League baseball, where he'd played shortstop. But today instead of running the rest of the way, he walked, trying to maintain a military one-hundred-twenty steps per minute, and even *that* hurt, but not enough to make him stop. Team-1 was out running also, and they went past him, even Sam Houston with his bad knee, limping as he ran past with a wave. The pride in this unit was really something. Tomlinson had been a special-ops trooper for six years, a former Green Beret drafted into Delta, now almost a college graduate with a major in psychology —that was the field special-ops people tended to adopt for some reason or other—and was trying to figure out how to complete his studies in England, where the universities worked differently, and where it was a little unusual for enlisted soldiers to have parchment degrees. But in Delta they often sat around and talked about the terrorists they were supposed to deal with, what made them tick, because in understanding that came the ability to predict their actions and weaknesses—the easier to kill them, which was the job, after all. Strangely, he'd never done a takedown in the field before coming here, and stranger still, the experience hadn't been at all different from training. You played as you practiced, the sergeant thought, just like they'd told him every step of the way since basic training at Fort Knox eleven years before. Damn, his lower leg was still on fire, but less so than it had been in the run. Well, the doc had told him at least a week, more likely two, before he'd be fully mission-capable again, all because he'd hit a curb the wrong way, not looking, like a damned fool. At least Houston had an excuse for his knee. Zip-lining

could be dangerous, and everybody slipped once in a while—in his case landing on a rock, which must have hurt like a bastard.... But Sam wasn't a quitter either, Tomlinson told himself, hobbling forward toward the shooting house.

"Okay, this is a live-fire exercise," Chavez told Team-2. "The scenario is five bad guys, eight hostages. The bad guys are armed with handguns and SMGs. Two of the hostages are kids, two girls, ages seven and nine. Other hostages are all females, mothers. The bad guys hit a day-care center, and it's time to do the takedown. Noonan has predicted the location of the bad guys like this." Chavez pointed to the blackboard. "Tim, how good's your data?"

"Seventy percent, no better than that. They're moving around some. But the hostages are all here in this corner." His pointer tapped the blackboard.

"Okay. Paddy, you got the explosives. Pair off as normal. Louis and George go in first, covering the left side. Eddie and I go in right behind with the center. Scotty and Oso in last, covering the right. Questions?"

There were none. The team members examined the blackboard diagram. The room was straightforward, or as much as it could be.

"Then let's do it," Ding told them. The team filed out, wearing their ninja suits.

"Your leg, George, how is it?" Loiselle asked Tomlinson.

"We'll just have to see, I guess. But my hands are okay," the sergeant said, holding his MP-10 up.

"Bien." Loiselle nodded. The two were semipermanently paired together, and worked well as a miniteam, almost to the point that one of them could read the other's mind in the field, and both had the gift for moving unseen. That was difficult to teach—instinctive hunters just knew it somehow, and the good ones practiced it incessantly.

Two minutes later, they were on the outside of the shooting house. Connolly set the Primacord around the door. This aspect of training kept the base carpenters pretty busy, Chavez thought. It took only thirty seconds before Connolly backed off, waving his hand, thumb up, to indicate he'd connected the wires to the detonator box.

"Team-2, this is Lead," they all heard over their radio earpieces. "Stand-to and stand by. Paddy, three . . . two . . . one . . . *MARK!"*

Clark, as usual, jumped when the *ka-BOOM!* sounded. A former demolitions expert himself, he knew that Connolly was his superior, with an almost magical touch for the stuff, but he knew also that no demo expert in the world ever used too little on a job. The door flew across the room and slammed into the far wall, fast enough to cause injury to anyone it hit, though probably not fatally. John covered his ears with his hands and shut his eyes because next through was a flash-bang that attacked his ears and eyes like an exploding sun. He had the timing down perfectly, as he opened back up to see the shooters come in.

Tomlinson ignored the protests from his leg, and followed Loiselle in with his weapon up. That's when the first surprise hit the shooters; this exercise was to be a tricky one. No hostages and no bad guys on the left. Both men went to the far wall, turning right to cover that side.

Chavez and Price were already in, scanning their area of responsibility, and

also seeing nothing. Then Vega and McTyler had the same experience on the right side of the room. The mission was not going as briefed, as sometimes happened.

Chavez saw there were no bad guys or hostages in view, and that there was but one door, open, into another room. “Paddy, flash-bangs, now!” he ordered over his radio, while Clark watched from the corner wearing his white observer’s shirt and body armor. Connolly had come through behind Vega and McTyler, two flash-bangs in his hands. One, then another, sailed through the door, and again the building shook. Chavez and Price took the lead this time. Alistair Stanley was in there in his white don’t-shoot-at-me garb while Clark stayed in the front room. The latter heard the suppressed chatter of the weapons, followed by shouts of “Clear!” “Clear!” “Clear!”

On entering the shooting room, John saw all the targets perforated in the heads, as before. Ding and Eddie were with the hostages, covering them with their armored bodies, weapons trained on the cardboard targets, which in real life would be on the floor and bleeding explosively from their shattered skulls.

“Excellent,” Stanley pronounced. “Good improvisation. You, Tomlinson, you were slow, but your shooting was bloody perfect. You, too, Vega.”

“Okay, people, let’s head over to the office to see the instant replay,” John told them, heading outside and still shaking his head to clear his ears from the insult of the flash-bangs. He’d have to get ear protectors and goggles if he did much more of this, lest his hearing be permanently damaged—even though he felt it his duty to experience the real thing to be able to appreciate how everything worked. He grabbed Stanley on the walk over.

“Fast enough, Al?”

“Yes.” Stanley nodded. “The flash-bangs give us, oh, three to five seconds of incapacitation, and another fifteen or so of subnormal performance. Chavez adapted well. The hostages would all have survived, probably. John, our lads are right on the crest of the wave. They cannot get any better. Tomlinson, bad leg and all, didn’t lose more than half a step, if that much, and our little Frenchman moves like a bloody mongoose. Even Vega, big as he is, isn’t the least bit oafish. John, these lads are as good as any team I’ve ever seen.”

“I agree, but—”

“But still so much is in the hands of our adversaries. Yes, I know, but God help the bastards when we come for them.”

CHAPTER 13

AMUSEMENT

Popov was still trying to learn more about his employer, but finding nothing to enlighten himself. The combination of the New York Public Library and the Internet had turned up reams of information, but nothing that gave the slightest clue as to why he'd employed the former KGB officer to dig up terrorists and turn them loose upon the world. It was as likely that a child would conspire a murder plot against a loving parent. It wasn't the morality of the event that troubled him. Morality had little place in intelligence operations. As a trainee at the KGB academy outside Moscow, the subject had never come up, except insofar as he and his classmates had always been given to understand that the State Was *Never* Wrong. "You will occasionally be ordered to do things you may find personally upsetting," Colonel Romanov had said once. "Such things will be done, because the reasons, unknown to you or not, will always be proper ones. You *do* have the right to question something for tactical reasons—as the officer in the field, *how* you do the mission will generally be your affair. But to refuse an assignment is not acceptable." And that had been that. Neither Popov nor his classmates had even made notes on the issue. It was understood that orders were orders. And so, once he accepted employment, Popov had done the jobs assigned . . . . . but as a servant of the Soviet Union he'd always known the overall mission, which was to get vital information to his country, because his country needed the information either for itself or to assist others whose actions would be of real benefit to his country. Even dealing with Il'ych Ramirez Sanchez, Popov had thought at the time, had served some special interest. He knew better now, of course. Terrorists were like wild dogs or rabid wolves that one tossed into someone's back garden just to create a stir, and, yes, perhaps that had been strategically useful—or had been thought so by his masters, in the service of a state now dead and gone. But, no, the missions had not really been useful, had they? And as good as KGB had once been—he still thought them the best espionage agency the world had ever seen—it had ultimately been a failure. The Party for which the Committee for State Security had been the Sword and Shield was no more. The Sword had not slain the Party's enemies, and the Shield had not protected against the West's various weapons. And so, had his superiors really known what they'd needed to do?

Probably not, Popov admitted to himself, and because of that, perhaps *every* mission he'd been assigned had been to some greater or lesser degree a fool's errand. The realization would have been a bitter one, except that his training and experience were paying off now with a lavish salary, not to mention the two suitcases of cash he'd managed to steal—but for doing *what?* Getting

terrorists killed off by European police forces? He could just as easily, if not so profitably, have fingered them to the police and allowed them to be arrested, tried, and imprisoned like the criminal scum they were, which would actually have been far more satisfying. A tiger in a cage, pacing back and forth behind his bars and waiting for his daily five kilos of chilled horsemeat, was far more entertaining than one stuffed in a museum, and just as helpless. He was some sort of Judas goat, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought, but if so, serving what sort of abattoir?

The money was good. Several more missions like the first two and he could take his money, his false identity papers, and vanish from the face of the earth. He could lie on some beach, drinking tasty beverages and watching pretty girls in skimpy bathing suits or—what? Popov didn't know exactly what sort of retirement he could stomach, but he was certain he could find something. Maybe use his talents to trade in stocks and bonds like a real capitalist, and thus spend his time enriching himself further. Perhaps that, he mused, sipping his morning coffee and staring out the window, looking south toward Wall Street. But he wasn't quite ready for that life yet, and until he was, the fact that he didn't know the nature of his missions' purpose was troublesome. In not knowing, he couldn't evaluate all the dangers to himself. But for all his skill, experience, and professional training, he hadn't a clue as to why his employer wanted him to let the tigers from their cages, out in the open where the hunters were waiting. What a pity, Popov thought, that he couldn't just ask. The answer might even be amusing.

Check-in at the hotel was handled with mechanical precision. The reception desk was huge, and crowded with computers that raced electronically to get the guests checked in, the quicker to get them spending money in the park itself. Juan took his card-key and nodded his thanks at the pretty female clerk, then hoisted his bags and headed off to his room, grateful that there were no metal detectors here. The walk was a short one, and the elevators unusually large, to accommodate people in wheelchairs, he imagined. Five minutes later, he was in his room, unpacking. He'd just about finished when a knock came at the door.

"Bonjour." It was René. The Frenchman came in and sat on the bed, stretching as he did so. "Are you ready, my friend?" he asked in Spanish.

"Sí," the Basque replied. He didn't look especially Spanish. His hair was on the red side of strawberry blond, his features handsome, and his beard neatly trimmed. Never arrested by the Spanish police, he was bright, careful, but thoroughly dedicated, with two car-bombings and a separate murder to his credit. This, René knew, would be Juan's boldest mission, but he looked ready enough, tense, a little edgy perhaps, but coiled like a spring and prepared to play his role. René, too, had done this sort of thing before, most often murders right on crowded streets; he'd walk right up to his target, fire a suppressed pistol, and just walk on normally, which was the best way to do it, since you were almost never identified—people never saw the pistol, and rarely noticed a person walking normally down the Champs-Élysées. And so, you just changed your clothes and switched on the television to see the press coverage of your work. Action Directe had been largely, but not quite completely,

broken up by the French police. The captured men had kept faith with their at-large comrades, hadn't fingered or betrayed them, despite all the pressure and the promises of their uniformed countrymen—and perhaps some of them would be released as a result of this mission, though the main objective was to release their comrade Carlos. It would not be easy to get him out of Le Sante, René thought, rising to look out the window at the train station used by people going to the park, but—he saw the children there, waiting for their ride in—there were some things that no government, however brutal, could overlook.

Two buildings away, Jean-Paul was looking out at the same scene and contemplating much the same thoughts. He'd never married and had rarely even enjoyed a proper love affair. He knew now, at forty-three, that this had created a hole in his life and his character, an abnormality that he'd tried to fill with political ideology, with his beliefs in principles and his vision of a radiant socialist future for his country and for Europe and ultimately for the whole world. But a niggling part of his character told him that his dreams were mere illusions, and that reality was before him, three floors down and a hundred meters west, in the distant faces of children waiting to board the steam train to the park, and—but, no, such thoughts were aberrations. Jean-Paul and his friends *knew* the rightness of their cause and their beliefs. They'd discussed them at the greatest length over the years and concluded that their path was the right one. They'd shared their frustration that so few understood—but someday they *would* understand, someday they *would* see the path of justice that socialism offered the entire world, *would* understand that the road to the radiant future had to be paved by the revolutionary elite who understood the meaning and force of history . . . and they wouldn't make the mistakes the Russians had made, those backward peasants in that over-large, foolish nation. And so he was able to look down on the assembled people, as they tightened up at the platform while the steam whistle announced the coming of the train, and see . . . things. Even the children were not people, really, but political statements to be made by others, people like himself who understood how the world actually worked, or how it should work. Would work, he promised himself. Someday.

Mike Dennis always took his lunch outside, a habit he'd formed in Florida. One thing he liked about Worldpark was that you could have a drink here, in his case a nice red Spanish wine, which he sipped from a plastic cup as he watched how people circulated, and looked for goofs of one kind or another. He found no obvious ones. The walkways had been laid out after careful and thorough planning, using computer simulations.

The rides here were the things that drew people most of all, and so the walkways had been planned to lead people to the more spectacular of them. The big expensive ones *were* pretty spectacular. His own kids loved to ride them, especially the Dive Bomber, a top-hanging coaster that looked fit to make a fighter pilot lose his lunch, next to which was the Time Machine, a virtual-reality ride that accommodated ninety-six guests per seven-minute cycle—any longer and some patrons could get violently ill, tests had shown. Out of that and it was time for some ice cream or a drink, and there were

concessions planted right there to answer the cravings. Farther away was Pepe's, an excellent sit-down restaurant specializing in Catalonian cuisine—you didn't put restaurants too close to the rides. Such attractions were not complementary, since watching the Dive Bomber didn't exactly heighten the appetite, and for adults, neither did riding it. There was a science and an art to setting up and operating theme parks like this one, and Mike Dennis was one of the handful of people in the world who knew how it was done, which explained his enormous salary and the quiet smile that went with his sips of wine, as he watched *his* guests enjoy the place. If this was work, then it was the best job in the world. Even the astronauts who rode the space shuttle didn't have this sort of satisfaction. He got to play with his toy every day. They were lucky to fly twice in a year.

His lunch completed, Dennis rose and walked back toward his office on Strada España, the Spanish Main Street, the central spoke on the partial wheel. It was another fine day at Worldpark, the weather clear, the temperature twenty-one Celsius, the air dry and pure. The rain in Spain did not, in his experience, stay mainly in the plain. The local climate was much like California's, which, he reflected, went just fine with the Spanish language of the majority of his employees. On the way, he passed one of the park security people. *Andre,* the name tag said, and the language tag on the other shirt pocket said he spoke Spanish, French, and English. Good, Dennis thought. They didn't have enough people like that.

The meeting place was prearranged. The Dive Bomber ride used as its symbol the German Ju-87 Stuka, complete to the Iron Cross insignia on the wings and fuselage, though the swastika on the tail had been thoughtfully deleted. It ought to have greatly offended Spanish sensibilities, Andre thought. Did no one remember Guernica, that first serious expression of Nazi *Grausamkeit,* when thousands of Spanish citizens had been massacred? Was historical appreciation that shallow here? Evidently it was. The children and adults in line frequently reached out to touch the half-scale model of the Nazi aircraft that had dived on both soldiers and civilians with its "Trumpet of Jericho" siren. The siren was replicated as part of the ride itself, though on the hundred-fifty-meter first hill, the screams of the riders as often as not drowned it out, followed by the compressed-air explosion and fountain of water at the bottom when the cars pulled out through simulated flak bursts for the climbing loop into the second hill after dropping a bomb on a simulated ship. Was he the only person in Europe who found the symbology here horrid and bestial?

Evidently so. People raced off the ride to rejoin the line to ride it again, except for those who bumbled off to recover their equilibrium, sometimes sweating, and twice, he'd seen, to vomit. A cleanup man with a mop and bucket stood by for that—not the choicest job in Worldpark. The medical-aid post was a few meters farther away, for those who needed it. Andre shook his head. It served the bastards right to feel ill after choosing to ride that hated symbol of fascism.

Jean-Paul, René, and Juan appeared almost together close to the entrance of the Time Machine, all sipping soft drinks. They and the five others were

marked by the hats they'd bought at the entrance kiosk. Andre nodded to them, rubbing his nose as planned. René came over to him.

"Where is the men's room?" he asked in English.

"Follow the signs," Andre pointed. "I get off at eighteen hours. Dinner as planned?"

"Yes."

"All are ready?"

"Entirely ready, my friend."

"Then I will see you at dinner." Andre nodded and walked off, continuing his patrol as he was paid to do, while his comrades walked about, some taking the time to enjoy the rides, he imagined. The park would be even busier tomorrow, he'd been told at the morning briefing session. Another nine-thousand-plus would be checking into the hotels tonight or tomorrow morning in preparation for the bank-holiday weekend in this part of Europe, for Good Friday. The park was set up for mobs of people, and his fellow security personnel had told him all manner of amusing stories about the things that happened here. Four months earlier, a woman had delivered twins in the medical post twenty minutes after riding the Dive Bomber, much to her husband's surprise and the delight of Dr. Weiler—the children had been awarded lifetime passes to Worldpark on the spot, which had made the local TV news, part of the park's genius for public relations. Maybe she'd named the boy Troll, Andre snorted, as he spotted one ahead. The Trolls were short-leg / massive-head costumes worn by petite females, he'd learned on coming to work. You could tell by the skinny legs that fit in to the huge feet-shoes they wore. There was even a water supply in the costume to make the monstrous lips drool . . . and over there was a Roman legionnaire dueling comically with a Germanic barbarian. One of them would alternately run from the other, usually to the applause of the people sitting down to watch the spectacle. He turned to walk over to the German *Strasse,* and was greeted by the oom-pah music of a marching band—why didn't they play the *Horst Wessel Lied?* Andre wondered. It would have gone well with the damned green Stuka. Why not dress the band in SS black, maybe have compulsory shower baths for some of the guests—wasn't *that* part of European history, too? *Damn this place!* Andre thought. The symbology was designed to incur the rage of anyone with the most rudimentary political awareness. But, no, the masses had no memory, no more than they had any understanding of political and economic history. He was glad they'd chosen this place to make their political statement. Maybe *this* would get the idiots to think, just a little bit, perhaps, about the shape of the world. The mis-shape, Andre corrected himself, allowing himself a very un-Worldpark frown at the sunny day and smiling crowds.

There, he told himself. *That* was the spot. The children loved it. There was a crowd of them there even now, dragging, pulling the hands of their parents, dressed in their shorts and sneakers, many wearing hats, with helium-filled balloons tied to their little wrists. And there was a special one, a little girl in a wheelchair, wearing the Special Wish button that told every ride attendant to allow her on without the need to stand in line. A sick one, Dutch from the style of her parents' dress, Andre thought, probably dying from cancer, sent here by some charity or other modeled on the American Make-A-Wish

Foundation, which paid for the parents to bring their dying whelp here for one first and last chance to see the Trolls and other cartoon characters, their rights licensed to Worldpark for sale and other exploitation. How brightly their sick little eyes shone here, Andre saw, on their quick road to the grave, and how solicitous the staff was to them, as though *that* mattered to anyone, this bourgeois sentimentality upon which the entire park was founded. Well. They'd see about all that, wouldn't they? If there were ever a place to make a political statement, to bring the attention of all Europe and all the world to what really mattered, this was it.

• • •

Ding finished his first pint of beer. He'd have only one more. It was a rule that no one had written down and that no one had actually enforced, but by common agreement nobody on the teams had more than two at a time while the teams were on-call, as they almost always were—and besides, two pints of Brit beer were quite a lot, really. Anyway, all the members of Team-2 were home having dinner with their families. Rainbow was an unusual outfit in that sense. *Every* soldier was married, with a wife and at least one kid. The marriages even appeared to be stable. John didn't know if that was a mark of special-operations troopers, but these two-legged tigers who worked for him were pussycats at home, and the dichotomy was both amazing and amusing to him.

Sandy served the main course, a fine roast beef. John rose to get the carving knife so that he could do his duty. Patsy looked at the huge hunk of dead steer and thought briefly about mad-cow disease, but decided that her mother had cooked the meat thoroughly. Besides, she liked good roast beef, cholesterol and all, and her mom was the world's champ at making gravy.

"How's it going at the hospital?" Sandy asked her physician daughter.

"OB is pretty routine. We haven't had a single hard one in the last couple of weeks. I've kinda hoped for a placenta previa, maybe even a placenta abrupta to see if we have the drill down, but—"

"Don't wish for those, Patsy. I've seen them happen in the ER. *Total* panic, and the OB better have his act together, or things can go to hell in a New York minute. Dead mother *and* a dead child."

"Ever see that happen, Mom?"

"No, but I've seen it come close to that twice in Williamsburg. Remember Dr. O'Connor?"

"Tall, skinny guy, right?"

"Yeah." Sandy nodded. "Thank God he was on duty for the second one. The resident came unglued, but Jimmy came in and took over. I was sure we'd lose that one."

"Well, if you know what you're doing—"

"If you know what you're doing, it's still tense. Routine is fine with me. I've done ER duty too long," Sandy Clark went on. "I love a quiet night when I can get caught up on my reading."

"Voice of experience," John Clark observed, serving the meat.

"Makes sense to me," Domingo Chavez agreed, stroking his wife's arm. "How's the little guy?"

"Kicking up a storm right now," Patsy replied, moving her husband's hand to her belly. It never failed, she saw. The way his eyes changed when he felt it. Always a warm, passionate boy, Ding just about melted when he felt the movement in her womb.

"Baby," he said quietly.

"Yeah." She smiled.

"Well, no nasty surprises when the time comes, okay?" Chavez said next. "I want everything to go routinely. This is exciting enough. Don't want to faint or anything."

"Right!" Patsy laughed. *"You? Faint? My commando?"*

"You never know, honey," her father observed, taking his seat. "I've seen tough guys fold before."

"Not this one, Mr. C," Domingo noted with a raised eyebrow.

"More like a fireman," Sandy said from her seat. "The way you guys just hang around 'til something happens."

"That's true," Domingo agreed. "And if the fire never starts, it's okay with us."

"You really mean that?" Patsy asked.

"Yes, honey," her husband told her. "Going out isn't fun. We've been lucky so far. We haven't lost a hostage."

"But that'll change," Rainbow Six told his subordinate.

"Not if I have anything to say about it, John."

"Ding," Patsy said, looking up from her food. "Have you—I mean ... I mean, have you actually—"

The look answered the question, though the words were "Let's not talk about that."

"We don't carve notches in our guns, Pats," John told his daughter. "Bad form, you see."

"Noonan came over today," Chavez went on. "Says he's got a new toy to look at."

"What's it cost?" John asked first of all.

"Not much, he says, not much at all. Delta just started looking at it."

"What's it do?"

"It finds people."

"Huh? Is this classified?"

"Commercial product, and, no, it's not classified at all. But it finds people."

"How?"

"Tracks the human heart up to five hundred meters away."

"What?" Patsy asked. "How's it do that?"

"Not sure, but Noonan says the guys at Fort Bragg are going nuts—I mean, *real* enthusiastic about it. It's called 'Lifeguard' or something like that. Anyway, he asked the headquarters snake people to send us a demo team."

"We'll see," John said, buttering his roll. "Great bread, Sandy."

"It's that little bakery on Millstone Road. Isn't the bread wonderful over here?"

"And everybody knocks Brit food," John agreed. "The idiots. Just what I

was raised with."

"All this red meat," Patsy worried aloud.

"My cholesterol is under one-seventy, honey," Ding reminded her. "Lower than yours. I guess it's all that good exercise."

"Wait until you get older," John groused. He was nudging two hundred for the first time in his life, exercise and all.

"No hurry here." Ding chuckled. "Sandy, you are still one of the best cooks around."

"Thanks, Ding."

"Just so our brains don't rot from eating this English cow." A Spanish grin. "Well, this is safer than zip-lining out of the Night Hawk. George and Sam are still hurtin'. Maybe we ought to try different gloves."

"Same ones the SAS uses. I checked."

"Yeah, I know. I talked it over with Eddie, day 'fore yesterday. He says we have to expect training accidents, and Homer says that Delta loses a guy a year, dead, in training accidents."

"What?" Alarm from Patsy.

"And Noonan says the FBI lost a guy once, zipping down from a Huey. Hand just slipped. Oops." Team-2 Lead shrugged.

"Only security against that is more training," John agreed.

"Well, my guys are right at the proper edge. Now I have to figure a way to keep them right there without breaking it."

"That's the hard part, Domingo."

"I s'pose." Chavez finished his plate.

"What do you mean, the edge?" Patsy asked.

"Honey, I mean Team-2 is lean and mean. We always were, but I don't see us getting any better than we are now. Same with Peter's bunch. Except for the two injuries, there isn't room for any improvement I can see—'specially with Malloy on the team now. Damn, he knows how to drive a chopper."

"Ready to kill people? . . ." Patsy asked dubiously. It was hard for her to be a physician, dedicated to saving life, and yet be married to a man whose purpose often seemed to be the taking of it—and Ding *had* killed someone, else he wouldn't have suggested that she not think about it. How could he do that, and still turn to mush when he felt the baby inside her? It was a lot for her to understand, much as she loved her diminutive husband with the olive skin and flashing white smile.

"No, honey, ready to rescue people," he corrected her. "That's the job."

"But how sure can we be that they will let them out?" Esteban asked.

"What choice will they have?" Jean-Paul replied. He poured the carafe of wine into the empty glasses.

"I agree," Andre said. "What choice will they have? We can disgrace them before the world. And they are cowards, are they not, with their bourgeois sentimentality? They have no strength, not as we do."

"Others have made the mistake of believing that," Esteban said, not so much playing devil's advocate as voicing worries that they all had to have, to one extent or another. And Esteban had always been a worrier.

"There has never been a situation like this. The Guardia Civil is effective,

but not trained for a situation like this one. Policemen," Andre snorted. "That is all. I do not think they will arrest any of us, will they?" That remark earned him a few smirks. It was true. They *were* mere policemen, accustomed to dealing with petty thieves, not dedicated political soldiers, men with the proper arms and training and dedication. "Did you change your mind?"

Esteban bristled. "Of course not, comrade. I simply counsel objectivity when we evaluate the mission. A soldier of the revolution must not allow himself to be carried away by mere enthusiasm." Which was a good cover for his fears, the others thought. They all had them, the proof of which was their denial of that fact.

"We'll get Il'ych out," René announced. "Unless Paris is willing to bury a hundred children. That they will not do. And some children will get to fly to Lebanon and back as a result. On that we are agreed, are we not?" He looked around the table and saw all nine heads nod. *"Bien.* Only the children need foul their underpants for this, my friends. Not us." That turned the nods into smiles, and two discreet laughs, as the waiters circulated around the restaurant. René waved for some more wine. The selection was good here, better than he could expect in an Islamic country for the next few years, as he dodged DGSE's field intelligence officers, hopefully with more success than Carlos had enjoyed. Well, their identities would never be known. Carlos had taught the world of terrorism an important lesson. It did *not* pay to advertise. He scratched his beard. It itched, but in that itching was his personal safety for the next few years. "So, Andre, who comes tomorrow?"

"Thompson CSF is sending six hundred employees and their families here, a company outing for one of their departments. It could not be better," the security guard told them. Thompson was a major French arms manufacturer. Some of the workers, and therefore their children, would be known and important to the French government. French, and politically important—no, it could not get much better than that. "They will be moving about as a group. I have their itinerary. They come to the castle at noon for lunch and a show. That is our moment, my friends." Plus one other little addition Andre had decided on earlier in the day. They were always around somewhere, especially at the shows.

"D'accord?" René asked the people around the table, and again he got his nods. Their eyes were stronger now. Doubts would be set aside. The mission lay before them. The decision to undertake it was far behind. The waiter arrived with two new carafes, and the wine was poured around. The ten men savored their drinks, knowing they might be the last for a very long time, and in the alcohol they found their resolve.

"Don't you just love it?" Chavez asked. "Only Hollywood. They hold their weapons like they're knives or something, and then they hit a squirrel in the left nut at twenty yards. Damn, I wish *I* could do that!"

"Practice, Domingo," John suggested with a chuckle. On the TV screen, the bad guy flew about four yards backward, as though he'd been hit with an anti-tank rocket instead of a mere 9-mm pistol round. "I wonder where you buy those."

"We can't afford them, O great accounting expert!"

John almost spilled his remaining beer at that one. The movie ended a few minutes later. The hero got the girl. The bad guys were all dead. The hero left his parent agency in disgust at their corruption and stupidity and walked off into the sunset, content at his unemployment. Yeah, Clark thought, that was Hollywood. With that comfortable thought, the evening broke up. Ding and Patsy went home to sleep, while John and Sandy did the same.

It was all a big movie set, Andre told himself, walking into the park an hour before it opened to the guests already piling up at the main gate. How very American, despite all the effort that had gone into building the place as a European park. The whole idea behind it, of course, was American, that fool Walt Disney with his talking mice and children's tales that had stolen so much money from the masses. Religion was no longer the opiate of the people. No, today it was escapism, to depart from the dull day-to-day reality they all lived and all hated, but which they couldn't see for what it was, the bourgeois fools. Who led them here? Their children with their shrill little demands to see the Trolls and the other characters from Japanese cartoons, or to ride the hated Nazi Stuka. Even Russians, those who'd gotten enough money out of their shattered economy to throw it away here, even *Russians* rode the Stuka! Andre shook his head in amazement. Perhaps the children didn't have the education or memory to appreciate the obscenity, but surely their *parents* did! But they came here anyway.

"Andre?"

The park policeman turned to see Mike Dennis, the chief executive officer of Worldpark, looking at him.

"Yes, Monsieur Dennis?"

"The name's Mike, remember?" The executive tapped his plastic name tag. And, yes, it was a park rule that everyone called everyone else by his Christian name—something else doubtless learned from the Americans.

"Yes, Mike, excuse me."

"You okay, Andre? You looked a little upset about something."

"I did? No . . . *Mike,* no, I am fine. Just a long night for me."

"Okay." Dennis patted him on the shoulder. "Busy day planned. How long you been with us?"

"Two weeks."

"Like it here?"

"It is a unique place to work."

"That's the idea, Andre. Have a good one."

"Yes, Mike." He watched the American boss walk quickly away, toward the castle and his office. *Damned Americans,* they expected everyone to be happy all the time, else something must be wrong, and if something went wrong, it had to be fixed. Well, Andre told himself, something *was* wrong, and it *would* be fixed this very day. But Mike wouldn't like that very much, would he?

One kilometer away, Jean-Paul transferred his weapons from his suitcase to his backpack. He'd ordered room service to bring breakfast in, a big American breakfast, he'd decided, since it might have to stand him in good stead for most of this day, and probably part of another. Elsewhere in this hotel and other hotels in the same complex, the others would be doing the same. His Uzi

submachine gun had a total of ten loaded magazines, with six more spares for his 9-mm pistol, and three fragmentation hand grenades in addition to his radio. It made for a heavy backpack, but he wouldn't be carrying it all day. Jean-Paul checked his watch and took one final look at his room. All the toiletries were recently bought. He'd wiped all of them with a damp cloth to make sure he left no fingerprints behind, then the table and desktops, and finally his breakfast dishes and silverware. He didn't know if the French police might have his prints on file somewhere, but if so, he didn't want to give them another set, and if not, why make it easy for them to start a file? He wore long khaki trousers and a short-sleeve shirt, plus the stupid white hat he'd bought the previous day. It would mark him as just one more guest in this absurd place, totally harmless. With all that done, he picked up his backpack and walked out the door, taking a final pause to wipe the doorknob both inside and outside before walking to the elevator bank. He pressed the DOWN button with a knuckle instead of a fingertip, and in a few seconds was on his way out the hotel door and walking casually to the train station, where his room key-card was his passport to the Worldpark Transportation System. He took off the backpack to sit down and found himself joined in the compartment by a German, also carrying a backpack, with his wife and two children. The backpack bumped loudly when the man set it on the seat next to him.

"My Minicam," the man explained, in English, oddly enough.

"I, also. Heavy things to carry about, aren't they?"

"Ah, yes, but this way we will have much to remember from our day in the park."

"Yes, you will," Jean-Paul said in reply. The whistle blew, and the train lurched forward. The Frenchman checked his pocket for his park ticket. He actually had three more days of paid entry into the theme park. Not that he'd need it. In fact, nobody in the area would.

"What the hell?" John mumbled, reading the fax on the top of his pile. "Scholarship fund?" And who had violated security? George Winston, Secretary of the Treasury? What the hell? "Alice?" he called.

"Yes, Mr. Clark," Mrs. Foorgate said on coming into his office. "I rather thought that would cause a stir. It seems that Mr. Ostermann feels it necessary to reward the team for rescuing him."

"What's the law on this?" John asked next.

"I haven't a clue, sir."

"How do we find out?"

"A solicitor, I imagine."

"Do we have a lawyer on retainer?"

"Not to my knowledge. And you will probably need one, a Briton and an American as well."

"Super," Rainbow Six observed. "Could you ask Alistair to come in?"

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER 14

SWORD OF THE LEGION

The company outing for Thompson CSF had been planned for some months. The three hundred children had been working overtime to get a week ahead in their schoolwork, and the event had business implications as well. Thompson was installing computerized control systems in the park—it was part of the company's transition from being mainly a military-products producer to a more generalized electronics-engineering firm—and here their military experience helped. The new control systems, with which Worldpark management could monitor activities throughout the establishment, were a linear development of data-transfer systems developed for NATO ground forces. They were multilingual, user-friendly gadgets that transmitted their data through ether-space rather than over copper land-lines, which saved a few million francs, and Thompson had brought the systems in on time and on budget, which was a skill that they, like many defense contractors all over the globe, were struggling to learn.

In recognition of the successful fulfillment of the contract to a high-profile commercial customer, senior Thompson management had cooperated with Worldpark to arrange this company picnic. Everyone in the group, children included, wore red T-shirts with the company logo on the front, and for the moment they were mainly together, moving toward the center of the park in a group escorted by six of the park Trolls, who were dancing their way to the castle with their absurdly large bare-feet shoes and hairy head-bodies. The group was further escorted by legionnaires, two wolfskin-wearing *signifers* bearing cohort standards, and the one lion-skinned *aquilifer,* carrying the gold eagle, the hallowed emblem of the VI *Legio Victrix,* now quartered at Worldpark, Spain, as its antecedent had been under the Emperor Tiberius in 20 A.D. The park employees tasked to be part of the resident legion had developed their own esprit, and took to their marching with a will, their Spanish-made *spatha* swords scabbarded awkwardly, but accurately, high up on their right sides, and their shields carried in their left hands. They moved in a group as proudly as their notional *Victrix* or "victorious" legion had once done twenty centuries before—their predecessors once the first and only line of defense for the Roman colony that this part of Spain had been.

About the only thing the group didn't have was a coterie of people leading them with flags, which was mainly a Japanese affectation, anyway. After the first day's ceremonies, the Thompson people would wander off on their own, and enjoy their four days here as normal tourists.

Mike Dennis watched the procession on his office TV monitors while he gathered his notes. The Roman soldiers were a signature item for his theme

park, and, for some reason or other, had proven to be wildly popular, enough so that he'd recently increased their number from fifty to over a hundred and established a trio of centurions to command them. You could spot them by the sideways plumes on their helmets instead of the fore-and-aft on the helms of the ordinary legionnaires. The guys in the outfit had taken to real sword practice, and it was rumored that some of the swords actually had edges, which Dennis hadn't bothered to verify and which he'd have to put a stop to if he did. But anything that was good for employee morale was good for the park, and it was his practice to let his people run their departments with minimal interference from his command center in the castle. He used his computer mouse to zoom in on the approaching mob. They were about twenty minutes early, and that was . . . oh, yeah, it was Francisco de la Cruz leading the parade. Francisco was a retired sergeant in the Spanish army's paratroops, and the guy just grooved to leading parades and such, didn't he? Tough-looking old bastard, over fifty, with burly arms and so heavy a beard—Worldpark allowed mustaches but not beards for its employees—that he had to shave twice a day. The little kids found him intimidating, but Francisco had a way of scooping them up like a bearish grandfather and putting them instantly at ease—the kids especially liked playing with his red horsehair plume. Dennis made a mental note to have lunch with Francisco sometime soon. He ran his little department well, and deserved some attention from topside.

Dennis pulled the manila folder from his action tray. He had to give a welcoming speech to the Thompson guests, to be followed by music from one of the park's roving bands and a parade of the Trolls, then dinner in the castle restaurant. He checked his watch and rose, heading for the corridor that led to a disguised passage with a "secret" door into the castle courtyard. The architects for this place had been handed a blank check, and they'd utilized the Gulf oil money well, though the castle wasn't totally authentic. It had fire escapes, sprinklers, and structural steel, not just blocks piled up and mortared together.

"Mike?" a voice called. The park manager turned.

"Yeah, Pete?"

"Telephone, it's the chairman calling."

The executive turned and hustled back to his office, still clutching his prepared speech.

Francisco—Pancho to his friends—de la Cruz was not a tall man, only five-seven, but wide across the chest, and his pillarlike legs made the ground shake when he marched, stiff-legged, as an historian had told him was the custom of the legions. His iron helmet was heavy, and he could feel the flopping of the plume atop it. His left arm held the large and heavy *scutum,* the shield of the legionnaire that reached almost from neck to ankles, made of glue-laminated wood, but with a heavy iron boss in the center in the image of the Medusa, and metal edges. The Romans, he'd long since learned, had been tough soldiers to march into battle with this heavy gear—almost sixty pounds of it at full load with food and mess kit, about what he'd marched with as a soldier in the field. The park had duplicated all of it, though the quality of the metal was surely better than that which had been produced in the blacksmith shops of

the Roman empire. Six young boys had formed up on him, emulating his heavy-footed march. De la Cruz liked that. His own sons were now in the Spanish army, following in their father's footsteps, just as these French boys were now doing. For de la Cruz the world was in its proper shape.

Only a few meters away, it was getting that way as well for Jean-Paul, René, and Esteban, the last of them with a cloud of balloons affixed to his wrist, selling one even now. The others were all wearing their white Worldpark hats, all getting into position around the crowd. None of the terrorists were wearing the red Thompson shirts, though doing so would not have been all that difficult. Instead, they wore black Worldpark shirts to go with the hats, and all but Esteban and Andre were also wearing backpacks, like so many other visitors to Worldpark.

The Trolls had everyone in place a few minutes early, they all saw. The adults were joking among themselves, and the children pointing and laughing, their faces illuminated with joy that would soon change to something else, some racing around the taller adults, playing games of hide-and-seek within the crowd . . . and two were in wheelchairs—no, Esteban saw, they were not part of the Thompson group. They wore their special-access buttons, but not the red shirts.

Andre saw those guests, too. One was the little dying Dutch girl from the previous day and one other . . . English by the look of his father, pushing the wheelchair up to the castle and through the crowd. Yes, they'd want both of those. So much the better that these two weren't French, wasn't it?

Dennis had sat down at his desk. The call required detailed information that he'd had to call up on his computer. Yes, quarterly park revenues were 4.1 percent over projections.... Yes, the slow season had turned out to be somewhat less slow than they'd expected. Unusually favorable weather, Dennis explained, was the explanation, and one couldn't count on that, but things were going smoothly, except for some computer problems on two of the rides. Yes, they had some software engineers in the back-lot area working on that right now.... Yes, that was warranty coverage from the manufacturer, and the manufacturer's representatives were being entirely cooperative—well, they should, as they were bidding on two more mega-rides whose designs would make the entire world take a breathless step back, Dennis told the chairman, who hadn't seen the proposals yet, and would on his next trip to Spain in three weeks. They'd be doing TV shows about conception and design on these two, Dennis promised the chairman, especially for the American cable-channel market, and wouldn't it be something if they increased their draw of American patrons—stealing guests from the Disney empire, which had invented the theme park. The Saudi chairman, who'd initially invested in Worldpark because his children loved to ride things that he had trouble even looking at, was enthusiastic about the proposed new attractions, enough so that he didn't ask about them, willing to be surprised by Dennis when the time came.

"What the hell?" Dennis said over the phone, looking up when he heard it.

Everyone jumped at the noise, the shattering staccato of Jean-Paul's submachine gun, firing a long burst up into the air. In the castle courtyard, people turned and cringed instinctively at the same time, as they first saw the

one bearded man aiming upward and swinging his weapon, which ejected a brief shower of brass cases into the air. Being untrained civilians, they did little for the first few seconds but look in shock, without even time to show real fear yet——and when they turned to see the shooter in their midst—those around him drawing instinctively away instead of trying to grab him—and the others withdrawing their weapons from their backpacks, at first just bringing them out without firing—waiting a beat or so—

Francisco de la Cruz was standing behind one of the others, and saw the weapon coming out even before the first one fired. His brain recognized the unfriendly yet familiar shape of an Israeli Uzi nine-millimeter submachine gun, and his eyes locked on it, reporting direction and distance, and that this was something that didn't belong in his park. The shock of the moment lasted only that long, and then his twenty-plus years of uniformed service flashed into his consciousness, and two meters behind that bearded criminal, he started moving.

Claude's eyes caught the movement, and he turned to see—what was this? A man wearing Roman armor and the strangest of headgear was moving toward him. He turned to face the threat and—

—Centurion de la Cruz acted on some sort of soldierly instinct that had transformed itself in time and place from the era to which his uniform belonged to where he was this noon. His right hand pulled the *spatha* from its scabbard high up on his right side, and the shield came up, its center iron boss aimed at the muzzle of the Uzi as the sword came straight in the air. He'd had this sword custom-made by a distant cousin in Toledo. It was formed of laminated carbon steel, just as the sword of El Cid had once been, and it had an edge fit to shave with, and he was suddenly a soldier again, and for the first time in his career, he had an armed enemy before him and a weapon in his hand, and the distance was less than two meters now, and gun or not, he was going to—

—Claude fired off a quick burst, just as he had learned so many times, into the center of mass of his advancing target, but that happened to be the three-centimeter-thick iron boss of the *scutum,* and the bullets deflected off it, fragmenting as they did so—

—de la Cruz felt the impact of the fragments peppering his left arm, but the stings of insects would have felt worse as he closed, and his right sword-arm came left, then right, slashing in a way the *spatha* was not designed for, but the razor's edge in the last twenty centimeters near the point did the rest, catching the *cabron*'s upper arm and laying it open just below the end of the short sleeve, and for the first time in his life, Centurion Francisco de la Cruz drew blood in anger—

—Claude felt the pain. His right arm moved, and his finger depressed the trigger, and the long burst hit the oncoming shield low and right of the boss. Three bullets hit de la Cruz's left leg, all below the knee, through the metal greaves, one of them breaking the tibia, causing the centurion to scream in pain as he went down, his second, lethal slash of the sword missing the man's throat by a whisker. His brain commanded his legs to act, but he had only one working leg at the moment, and the other failed him utterly, causing the former paratrooper to fall to the left and forward—

Mike Dennis ran to the window instead of using the TV monitors. Others were watching those, and the take from the various cameras was being recorded automatically in a bank of VCRs elsewhere in the park. His eyes saw, and though his brain didn't believe, it was there, and impossible as it was, it had to be real. A number of people with guns were surrounding the sea of red shirts, and they herded them now, like sheepdogs, inward and toward the castle courtyard. Dennis turned:

"Security lockdown, security lockdown *now!"* he called to the man on the master control board, and with a mouse click the castle's doors were all dead-bolted.

"Call the police!" Dennis ordered next. That was also pre-programmed. An alarm system fired off a signal to the nearest police barracks. It was the robbery-alert signal, but that would be sufficient for the moment. Dennis next lifted a desk phone and punched in the police number from the sticker on his phone. The one emergency contingency they'd planned for was a robbery of their cash room, and since that would necessarily be a major crime committed by a number of armed criminals, the park's internal response to the signal was also pre-programmed. All park rides would be stopped at once, all attractions closed, and shortly people would be instructed to return to their hotel rooms, or to the parking lot, because the park was closing due to an unexpected emergency . . . The noise of the machine guns would have carried a long way, Dennis thought, and the park guests would understand the urgency of the moment.

This was the amusing part, Andre thought. He donned a spare white hat from one of his comrades and took the gun that Jean-Paul had packed for him. A few meters away, Esteban cut the balloons loose from his hand, and they soared into the air as he, too, took up his weapon.

The children were not as overtly frightened as their parents were, perhaps thinking that this also was one of the magic things to be expected at the park, though the noise hurt their little ears and had made them jump. But fear is contagious, and the children quickly saw that emotion in their parents' eyes, and one by one they held tight to hands and legs, looking about at the adults who were moving quickly now, around the red-shirted crowd, holding things that looked like . . . guns, the boys recognized the shape from their own toys, which these clearly were not.

René was in command. He moved toward the castle entrance, clear of the nine others who were holding the crowd in place. Looking around, he could see others outside the perimeter of his group, looking in, many crouching down now, hiding, taking what cover there was. Many of them were taking pictures, some with television cameras, and some of those would be zooming in to catch his face, but there was nothing he could do about that.

"Two!" he called. "Select our guests!"

"Two" was Jean-Paul. He approached a knot of people roughly, and first of all grabbed the arm of a four-year-old French girl.

"No!" her mother screamed. Jean-Paul pointed his weapon at her, and she cringed but stood her ground, holding both shoulders of the child.

"Very well," "Two" told her, lowering his aim. "I will shoot her, then." In

less than a second, the muzzle of his Uzi was against the little girl's light-brown hair. That made the mother scream all the louder, but she pulled her hands back from her child.

"Walk over there," Jean-Paul told the child firmly, pointing to Juan. The little girl did so, looking back with an open mouth at her stunned mother, while the armed man selected more children.

Andre was doing the same on the other side of the crowd. He went first of all to the little Dutch child. Anna, her special-access name tag read. Without a word, he pushed Anna's father away from the wheelchair and shoved it off toward the castle.

"My child is ill," the father protested in English.

"Yes, I can see that," Andre replied in the same language, moving off to select another sick child. What fine hostages these two would make.

"You bloody swine!" this one's mother snarled at him. For her trouble she was clubbed by the extended stock of Andre's Uzi, which broke her nose and bathed her face in blood.

"Mummy!" a little boy screamed, as Andre one-handed his chair up the ramp to the castle. The child turned in his chair to see his mother collapse. A park employee, a street-sweeper, knelt down to assist her, but all she did was scream louder for her son: *"Tommy!"*

To her screams were soon added those of forty sets of parents, all of them wearing the red T-shirts of the Thompson company. The small crowd withdrew into the castle, leaving the rest to stand there, stunned, for several seconds before they moved off, slowly and jerkily, down to Strada España.

"Shit, they're coming here," Mike Dennis saw, still talking on the phone to the captain commanding the local Guardia Civil barracks.

"Get clear," the captain told him immediately. "If there is a way for you to leave the area, make use of it now! We need you and your people to assist us. Leave now!"

"But, goddamnit, these people are my responsibility."

"Yes, they are, and you can take that responsibility outside. *Now!"* the captain ordered him. *"Leave!"*

Dennis replaced the phone, turning then to look at the fifteen-person duty staff in the command center. "People, everybody, follow me. We're heading for the backup command center. Right now," he emphasized.

The castle, real as it appeared, wasn't real. It had been built with the modern conveniences of elevators and fire stairwells. The former were probably compromised, Dennis thought, but one of the latter descended straight down to the underground. He walked to that fire door and opened it, waving for his employees to head that way. This they did, most with enthusiasm for escaping this suddenly dangerous place. The last tossed him keys on the way through, and when Dennis left, he locked this door behind him, then raced down the four levels of square-spiral stairs. Another minute and he was in the underground, which was crowded with employees and guests hustled out of harm's way by Trolls, Legionnaires, and other uniformed park personnel. A gaggle of park-security people were there, but none of them were armed with anything more dangerous than a radio. There *were* guns in the counting room, but they were under lock, and only a few of the Worldpark

employees were trained and authorized to use them, and Dennis didn't want shots to be fired here. Besides, he had other things to do. The alternate Worldpark command post was actually outside the park grounds, just at the end of the underground. He ran there, following his other command personnel north toward the exit that led to the employees' parking lot. That required about five minutes, and Dennis darted in the door to see that the alternate command post was double-manned now. His own alternate desk was vacant, and the phone already linked to the Guardia Civil.

"Are you safe?" the captain asked.

"For now, I guess," Dennis responded. He keyed up his castle office on his monitor.

"This way," Andre told them. The door was locked, however. He backed off and fired his pistol at the doorknob, which bent from the impact, but remained locked, movies to the contrary. Then René tried his Uzi, which wrecked that portion of the door and allowed him to pull it open. Andre led them upstairs, then kicked in the door to the command center—empty. He swore foully at that discovery.

"I see them!" Dennis said into the phone. "One man—two—six men with guns—Jesus, they have kids with them!" One of them walked up to a surveillance camera, pointed his pistol, and the picture vanished.

"How many men with guns?" the captain asked.

"At least six, maybe ten, maybe more. They have taken children hostage. You get that? They've got kids with them."

"I understand, Señor Dennis. I must leave you now and coordinate a response. Please stand by."

"Yeah." Dennis worked other camera controls to see what was happening in his park. "Shit," he swore with a rage that was now replacing shock. Then he called his chairman to make his report, wondering what the hell he would say when the Saudi prince asked what the hell was going on—a terrorist assault on an *amusement park?*

In his office, Captain Dario Gassman called Madrid to make his first report of the incident. He had a crisis plan for his barracks, and that was being implemented now by his policemen. Ten cars and sixteen men were now racing down the divided highway from various directions and various patrol areas, merely knowing that Plan W had been implemented. Their first mission was to establish a perimeter, with orders to let no one in or out—the last part of which would soon prove to be utterly impossible. In Madrid other things were happening while Captain Gassman walked to his car for the drive to Worldpark. It was a thirty-minute drive for him, even with lights and siren, and the drive gave him the chance to think in relative peace, despite the noise from under the hood. He had sixteen men there or on the way, but if there were ten armed criminals at Worldpark, that would not be enough, not even enough to establish an inner and outer perimeter. How many more men would he need? Would he have to call up the national response team formed a few years ago by the Guardia Civil? Probably yes. What sort of criminals would hit Worldpark at this time of day? The best time for a robbery was at closing

time, even though that was what he and his men had anticipated and trained for—because *that* was the time all the money was ready, bundled and wrapped in canvas bags for transfer to the bank, and guarded by park personnel and sometimes his own . . . that was the time of highest vulnerability. But no, whoever this was, they had chosen the middle of the day, and they'd taken hostages—children, Gassman reminded himself. So, were they robbers or something else? What sort of criminals were they? What if they were terrorists . . . they had taken hostages . . . children . . . Basque terrorists? Damn, what then?

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But things were already leaving Gassman's hands. The senior Thompson executive was on his cell phone, talking with his corporate headquarters, a call quickly bucked up to his own chairman, caught in a sidewalk café having a pleasant lunch that the call aborted instantly. This executive called the Defense Minister, and that got things rolling very rapidly indeed. The report from the Thompson manager on the scene had been concise and unequivocal. The Defense Minister called him directly and had his secretary take all the notes they needed. These were typed up and faxed to both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, and the latter called his Spanish counterpart with an urgent request for confirmation. It was already a political exercise, and in the Defense Ministry another phone call was made.

"Yes, this is John Clark," Rainbow Six said into the phone. "Yes, sir. Where is that exactly . . . I see . . . how many? Okay. Please send us whatever additional information you receive.... No, sir, we cannot move until the host government makes the request. Thank you, Minister." Clark changed buttons on his phone. "Al, get in here. We have some more business coming in." Next he made the same request of Bill Tawney, Bellow, Chavez, and Covington.

The Thompson executive still in Worldpark assembled his people at a food stand and polled them. A former tank officer in the French army, he worked hard and quickly to bring order from chaos. Those employees who still had their children, he set aside. Those who did not, he counted, and determined that thirty-three children were missing, along with one or maybe two children in wheelchairs. The parents were predictably frantic, but he got and kept them under control, then called his chairman again to amplify his initial report on the situation. After that he got some paper on which to compile a list of names and ages, keeping his own emotions under control as best he could and thanking God that his own children were too old to have made this trip. With that done, he took his people away from the castle, found a park employee and asked where he might find phones and fax machines. They were all escorted through a wooden swinging door, into a well-disguised service building and down into the underground, then walked to the alternate park command post, where they met Mike Dennis, still holding the folder with his

welcoming speech for the Thompson group and trying to make some sense of things.

Gassman arrived just then, in time to see the fax machine transmitting a list of the known hostages to Paris. Not a minute later, the French Defense Minister called. It turned out that he knew the senior Thompson executive, Colonel Robert Gamelin, who'd headed the development team for the LeClerc battle tank's second-generation fire-control system a few years before.

"How many?"

"Thirty-three from our group, perhaps a few more, but the terrorists seem to have selected our children quite deliberately, Monsieur Minister. This is a job for the Legion," Colonel Gamelin said forcefully, meaning the Foreign Legion's special-operations team.

"I will see, Colonel." The connection broke.

"I am Captain Gassman," the guy in the strange hat said to Gamelin.

"Bloody hell, I took the family there last year," Peter Covington said. "You could use up a whole fucking battalion retaking the place. It's a bloody nightmare, lots of buildings, lots of space, multilevel. I think it even has an underground service area."

"Maps, diagrams?" Clark asked Mrs. Foorgate.

"I'll see," his secretary replied, leaving the conference room.

"What do we know?" Chavez asked.

"Not much, but the French are pretty worked up, and they're requesting that the Spanish let us in and—"

"This just arrived," Alice Foorgate said, handing over a fax and leaving again.

"List of hostages—Jesus, they're all kids, ages four to eleven . . . thirty-three of them . . . holy shit," Clark breathed, looking it over, then handing it to Alistair Stanley.

"Both teams, if we deploy," the Scotsman said immediately.

"Yeah." Clark nodded. "Looks that way." Then the phone beeped.

"Phone call for Mr. Tawney," a female voice announced on the speaker.

"This is Tawney," the intel chief said on picking up the receiver. "Yes, Roger . . . yes, we know, we got a call from—oh, I see. Very well. Let me get some things done here, Roger. Thank you." Tawney hung up. "The Spanish government have requested through the British embassy in Madrid that we deploy at once."

"Okay, people," John said, standing. "Saddle up. Christ, that was a fast call."

Chavez and Covington ran from the room to head for their respective team buildings. Then Clark's phone rang again. "Yeah?" He listened for several minutes. "Okay, that works for me. Thank you, sir."

"What was that, John?"

"MOD just requested an MC-130 from the First Special Ops Wing. They're chopping it to us, along with Malloy's helo. Evidently, there's a military airfield about twenty clicks from where we're going, and Whitehall is trying to get us cleared into it." And better yet, he didn't have to add, the Hercules

transport could lift them right out of Hereford. “How fast can we get moving?”

“Less than an hour,” Stanley replied after a second’s consideration.

“Good, ’cuz that Herky Bird will be here in forty minutes or less. The crew’s heading out to it right now.”

“Listen up people,” Chavez was saying half a click away as he walked into the team’s bay. “We got a job. Boots and saddles, people. Shag it.”

They started moving at once for the equipment lockers before Sergeant Patterson raised the obvious objection: “Ding, Team-1’s the go-team. What gives?”

“Looks like they need us both for this ride, Hank. Everybody goes today.”

“Fair ’nuff.” Patterson headed off to his locker.

Their gear was already packed, always set up that way as a matter of routine. The mil-spec plastic containers were wheeled to the door even before the truck arrived to load them up.

Colonel Gamelin got the word before Captain Gassman did. The French Defense Minister called him directly to announce that a special-operations team was flying down at the request of the Spanish government, and would be there in three hours or less. He relayed this information to his people, somewhat to the chagrin of the Spanish police official, who then called his own minister in Madrid to inform him of what was happening, and it turned out that the minister was just getting the word from his own Foreign Ministry. Additional police were on the way, and their orders were to take no action beyond the establishment of a perimeter. Gassman’s reaction to being whipsawed was predictable disorientation, but he had his orders. Now with thirty of his cops on the scene or on the way, he ordered a third of them to move inward, slowly and carefully, toward the castle on the surface, while two more did the same in the underground, with their weapons holstered or on safe, and with orders not to fire under any circumstances, an instruction more easily given than followed.

Things had come well to this point, René thought, and the park command center was better than anything he’d hoped for. He was learning to use the computer system to select TV cameras that seemed to cover the entire grounds, from the parking lots to the waiting areas for the various rides. The pictures were in black and white, and once a venue was selected he could zoom and pan the camera to find anything he wished. There were twenty monitors set on the walls of the office, each of them linked by a computer terminal to at least five cameras. Nobody would get close to the castle without his knowledge. Excellent.

In the secretaries’ room just through the door, Andre had the children sitting on the floor in one tight little knot, except for the two in their wheelchairs, whom he’d placed against the wall. The children were uniformly wide-eyed and frightened-looking, as well they might be, and at the moment they were quiet, which suited him. He’d slung his submachine gun over his shoulder. It wasn’t needed at the moment, was it?

“You will stay still,” he told them in French, then backed to the door into the command center. “One,” he called.

"Yes, Nine," René answered.

"Things are under control here. Time to make a call?"

"Yes," One agreed. He took his seat and picked up a phone, then examined the buttons, and finding a likely one, he pressed it.

"Yes?"

"Who is this?"

"I am Mike Dennis. I am managing director of the park."

"Bien, I am One, and I am now in command of your Worldpark."

"Okay, Mr. One. What do you want?"

"You have the police here?"

"Yes, they are here now."

"Good. I will speak with their commander then."

"Captain?" Dennis waved. Gassman took the three steps to his desk.

"I am Captain Dario Gassman of the Guardia Civil."

"I am One. I am in command. You know that I have taken over thirty hostages, yes?"

"Sí, I am aware of this," the captain replied, keeping his voice as calm as circumstances allowed. He'd read books and had training on talking with hostage-holding terrorists, and now wished that he'd had a lot more of it. "Do you have a request for me?"

"I do not make requests. I will give you orders to be carried out at once, and have you relay orders to others. Do you understand?" René asked in English.

"Sí, comprendo."

"All of our hostages are French. You will establish a line of communication with the French embassy in Madrid. My orders are for them. Please keep in mind that none of our hostages are citizens of your country. This affair is between us and the French. Do you understand that?"

"Señor One, the safety of those children is my responsibility. This is Spanish soil."

"Be that as it may," One replied, "you will open a telephone link to the French embassy at once. Let me know when it is done."

"I must first of all relay your request to my superiors. I will get back to you when I have my instructions from them."

"Quickly," René told him, before hanging up.

It was noisy in the back. The four Allison engines screamed, as they accelerated the MC-130 down the runway, then the aircraft rotated abruptly, jumping into the sky for its flight to Spain. Clark and Stanley were in the communications compartment forward, listening as best they could with their heavily insulated headphones to information coming to them, disjointed and fragmentary as usual. The voice promised maps and plans when they got there, but there was no additional information on the number or identity of the terrorists—they were working on that, the voice told them. Just then, a fax arrived from Paris via the American 1st Spec-Operations Wing headquarters, which had secure communications equipment currently linked to Hereford. It was just another list of the hostages, and this time Clark took the time to read the names, and part of his mind tried to conjure up faces to go with them, knowing he'd be wrong in every case, but doing it even so. Thirty-three

children sitting in an amusement-park castle surrounded by men with guns, number at least six, maybe ten, maybe more; they were still trying to develop that information. Shit, John thought. He knew that some things couldn't be hurried, but nothing in this business ever went fast enough, even when you were doing it all yourself.

Aft the men slipped off their seat belts and started suiting up in their black Nomex, saying little to one another while the two team leaders went forward to find out what they could. Back ten minutes later to dress themselves, Chavez and Covington tilted their heads in the typical what-the-hell expression that their troopers recognized as news that was something other than good. The team leaders told their men what little they knew, and the expressions were transferred to the shooters, along with neutral thoughts. Kids as hostages. Over thirty of them probably, and maybe more, held by an unknown number of terrorists, nationality and motivation still unknown. As a practical matter, they knew nothing about how they'd be used, except that they were going somewhere to do something, which they'd find out about once they got there. The men settled back into their seats, re-buckled their belts, and said little. Most closed their eyes and affected trying to sleep, but mainly they didn't sleep, merely sat with eyes closed, seeking and sometimes finding an hour's peace amid the screeching noise of the turboprop engines.

"I require your fax machine number," One said to the French ambassador, speaking in his native language instead of English.

"Very well" was the reply, followed by the number.

"We are sending you a list of political prisoners whose release we require. They will be released immediately and flown here on an Air France airliner. Then my people, our guests, and I will board the aircraft and fly with them to a destination that I will give to the pilot of our aircraft after we board it. I advise you to accede to our demands rapidly. We have little patience, and if our demands are not met, we will be forced to kill some of our hostages."

"I will forward your request to Paris," the ambassador said.

"Good, and be sure to tell them that we are not in a patient mood."

"Oui, I will do that as well," the diplomat promised. The line went dead and he looked at his immediate staff, the deputy chief of mission, his military attaché, and the DGSE station chief. The ambassador was a businessman who had been awarded this embassy as a political favor, since the proximity of Paris and Madrid did not require a seasoned member of the diplomatic service for the post. "Well?"

"We will look at the list," the DGSE man answered. A second later, the fax machine chirped, and a few seconds after that, the curled paper emerged. The intelligence officer took it, scanned it, and handed it over. "Not good," he announced for the others in the room.

"The Jackal?" the DCM said. "They will never—"

" 'Never' is a long time, my friend," the spook told the diplomat. "I hope these commandos know their business."

"What do you know about them?"

"Nothing, not a single thing."

“How long?” Esteban asked René.

“They will take time,” One replied. “Some will be real, and some will be creative on their part. Remember that their strategy is to lengthen the process as much as possible, to tire us, to wear us down, to weaken our resolve. Against that we have the ability to force the issue by killing a hostage. That is not a step to be taken lightly. We have selected our hostages for their psychological impact, and we will need to consider their use carefully. But above all, we must control the pace of events. For now, we will let them take their time while we consolidate our position.” René walked to the corner to see how Claude was doing. There was a nasty gash on his upper arm from that fool of a Roman soldier, the only thing that had gone wrong. He was sitting on the floor, holding a bandage over it, but the wound was still bleeding. Claude would need stitches to close it properly. It was bad luck, but not that serious, except to Claude, who was still in considerable pain from the wound.

Hector Weiler was the park physician, a general surgeon trained at the University of Barcelona who spent most of his time putting Band-Aids on skinned knees and elbows, though there was a photo on his wall of the twins he’d delivered once upon a time after a pregnant woman had been foolish enough to ride the Dive Bomber—there was now a very emphatic sign at the entrance warning against that. For all that, he was a skilled young doctor who’d done his share of work in his medical school’s emergency room, and so this wasn’t his first gunshot victim. Francisco was a lucky man. At least six shots had been fired at him, and though the first three had merely resulted in fragment-peppering on his left arm, one of the second bursts had hurt his leg badly. A broken tibia would take a long time to heal for a man of his years, but at least it was broken fairly high up. A break lower down could take six months to heal, if ever.

“I could have killed him,” the centurion groused through the anesthesia. “I could have taken his head off, but I missed!”

“Not with the first one,” Weiler observed, seeing the red crust on the sword that now lay atop his *scutum* in the corner of the treatment room.

“Tell me about him,” Captain Gassman ordered.

“Forties, early forties,” de la Cruz said. “My height plus ten or twelve centimeters, lightly built. Brown hair, brown beard, some speckles of gray in it. Dark eyes. Uzi machine gun. White hat,” the former sergeant reported, biting off his words. The anesthesia he’d been given was not enough for all the pain, but he had to tell what he knew, and accepted the discomfort as the physician worked to get the leg set. “There were others. I saw four others, maybe more.”

“We think ten or so,” Gassman said. “Did he say anything?”

De la Cruz shook his head. “Nothing I heard.”

“Who are they?” the surgeon asked, not looking up from his work.

“We think they are French, but we are not sure,” the captain of the Guardia Civil answered.

It was hardest of all for Colonel Malloy. Crossing the English Channel, he headed south-southwest at a steady cruising speed of 150 knots. He’d stop at a

French military airfield outside Bordeaux for refueling, since he lacked the external fuel tanks used for ferrying the Night Hawk long distances. Like nearly all helicopters, the Night Hawk didn't have an autopilot, forcing Malloy and Lieutenant Harrison to hand-fly the aircraft all the way. It made for stiffness since the helicopter wasn't the most comfortable aircraft in the world to sit in, but both were used to it and used to grumbling about it as they switched off the controls every twenty minutes or so. Three hours to get where they were going. In the back was their crew chief, Sergeant Jack Nance, now just sitting and looking out the plastic windows as they crossed over the French coast, cruising at two thousand feet over a fishing port filled with boats.

"This got laid on in a hurry," Harrison remarked over the intercom.

"Yeah, well, I guess Rainbow lives on a short fuse."

"You know anything about what's happening?"

"Not a clue, son." The helmeted head shook left and right briefly. "You know, I haven't been to Spain since I deployed on *Tarawa* back in . . . 1985, I think. I remember a great restaurant in Cádiz, though . . . wonder if it's still there. . . ." And with that the crew lapsed back into silence, the chopper nose down and pulling south under its four-bladed rotor while Malloy checked the digital navigation display every few seconds.

"Diminishing returns," Clark observed, checking the latest fax. There was nothing new on it, just data already sent being rearranged by some helpful intelligence officer somewhere. He left Alistair Stanley to handle that, and walked aft.

There they were, the Rainbow team, almost all of them looking as if asleep, but probably just chimped down, as he'd done with 3rd SOG more than a generation before, just pretending to sleep, eyes closed and powering their minds and bodies down, because it made no sense to think about things you didn't know jack shit about, and tension sapped the strength even when your muscles were idle. So, your defense against it was to make your body turn off. These men were smart and professional enough to know that the stress would come in its own good time, and there was no point in welcoming it too soon. In that moment John Clark, long before a Chief SEAL, U.S. Navy, was struck with the honor he held, commanding such men as these. The thought had surprising impact, just standing there and watching them do nothing, because that's what the best people did at a time like this one, because they understood what the mission was, because they knew how to handle that mission, every step of the way. Now they were heading out on a job about which they'd been told nothing, but it had to be something serious because never had teams -1 and -2 *both* gone out. And yet they treated it like another routine training mission. They didn't make men better than these, and his two leaders, Chavez and Covington, had trained them to a razor's edge of perfection.

And somewhere ahead were terrorists holding children hostage. Well, the job wouldn't be an easy one, and it was far too soon for him to speculate on how it would play out, but John knew anyway that it was better to be here on this noisy Herky Bird than it would be in that theme park still a half an hour

ahead, for soon his men would open their eyes and shuffle out, bringing their boxed combat gear with them. Looking at them, John Clark saw Death before his eyes, and Death, here and now, was his to command.

Tim Noonan was sitting in the right-side forward corner of the cargo area, playing with his computer, with David Peled at his side. Clark went over to them and asked what they were doing.

"This hasn't made the newswire services yet," Noonan told him. "I wonder why."

"That'll change in a hurry," Clark predicted.

"Ten minutes, less," the Israeli said. "Who's meeting us?"

"Spanish army and their national police, I just heard. We've been authorized to land . . . twenty-five minutes," he told them, checking his watch.

"There, Agence France-Press just started a flash," Noonan said, reading it over for possible new information. "Thirty or so French kids taken hostage by unknown terrorists—nothing else except where they are. This isn't going to be fun, John," the former FBI agent observed. "Thirty-plus hostages in a crowded environment. When I was with Hostage Rescue, we sweated this sort of scenario. Ten bad guys?" he asked.

"That's about what they think, but it isn't confirmed yet."

"Shitty chemistry on this one, boss." Noonan shook his head in worry. He was dressed like the shooters, in black Nomex and body armor, with his holstered Beretta on his right hip, because he still preferred to think of himself as a shooter rather than a tech-weenie, and his shooting, practiced at Hereford with the team members, was right on the line . . . and children were in danger, Clark reflected, and child-in-danger was perhaps the strongest of all human drives, further reinforced by Noonan's time in the Bureau, which regarded child crimes as the lowest of the low. David Peled took a more distant view, sitting there in civilian clothing and staring at the computer screen like an accountant examining a business spreadsheet.

"John!" Stanley called, heading aft with a new fax. "Here's what they're asking for."

"Anybody we know?"

"Il'ych Ramirez Sanchez is at the top of the list."

"Carlos?" Peled looked up. "Someone really wants that *schmuck?"*

"Everybody's got friends." Dr. Bellow sat down and took the fax, scanning it before handing it over to Clark.

"Okay, doc, what do we know?"

"We're dealing with ideological ones again, just like Vienna, but they have a definite fixed objective, and these 'political' prisoners . . . I know these two, from Action Directe, the rest are just names to me—"

"I got it," Noonan said, calling up his roster of known terrorists and inputting the names off the fax. "Okay, six Action Directe, eight Basques, one PFLP currently held in France. Not a long list."

"But a definite one," Bellow observed. "They know what they want, and if they have children as hostages, they really want them out. The selection of hostages is designed to put additional political pressure on the French government." That wasn't exactly a surprising opinion, and the psychiatrist knew it. "Question is, will the French government deal at all?"

"They have, in the past, bargained quietly, off the stage," Peled told them. "Our friends may know this."

"Kids," Clark breathed.

"The nightmare scenario," Noonan said with a nod. "But who has the stones to whack a kid?"

"We'll have to talk with them to see," Bellow responded. He checked his watch and grunted. "Next time, a faster airplane."

"Be cool, doc," Clark told him, knowing that Paul Bellow would have the toughest job from the moment they landed and got to the objective. He had to read their minds, evaluate the terrorists' resolve, and hardest of all, predict their actions, and he, like the rest of the Rainbow team, didn't know anything of consequence yet. Like the rest of the team, he was like a sprinter in the starting blocks, poised to go, but having to wait for the gun to fire. But unlike the others, he was not a shooter. He could not hope for the emotional release they would have if they went into action, for which he quietly envied the soldiers. *Children,* Paul Bellow thought. He had to figure a way to reason with people he didn't know, in order to protect the lives of children. How much rope would the French and Spanish governments let him have? He knew that he'd need some rope to play with, though how much depended on the mental state of the terrorists. They'd deliberately chosen children, and French children at that, to maximize the pressure on the government in Paris . . . and that had been a considered act . . . which forced him to think that they'd be willing to kill a child despite all the taboos associated with such an act in any normal human mind. Paul Bellow had written and lectured the world over on people like this, but somewhere deep inside his own mind he wondered if he truly understood the mentality of the terrorist, so divorced was it from his own supremely rational outlook on reality. He could simulate their thinking, perhaps, but did he truly understand it? That was not a question he wanted to pose to himself right now, with plugs stuffed in his ears to protect his hearing and his equilibrium from the punishing noise of the MC-130's engines. And so he, too, sat back and closed his eyes and commanded his mind into a neutral setting, seeking a respite from the stress sure to come in less than an hour.

Clark saw what Bellow did, and understood it for what it was, but that option didn't exist for Rainbow Six, for his was the ultimate responsibility of command, and what he saw before his eyes were the faces he'd made up to go with the names on the fax sheet he held in his hand. Which ones would live? Which would not? That responsibility rested on shoulders not half so strong as they appeared.

Kids.

"They have not gotten back to me yet," Captain Gassman said into the telephone, having initiated the call himself.

"I have not yet given you a deadline," One replied. "I would like to think that Paris values our goodwill. If that is not the case, then they will soon learn to respect our resolve. Make that clear to them," René concluded, setting the phone down and breaking the contact.

And so much for calling them to establish a dialogue, Gassman said to himself. That was one of the things he was supposed to do, his training classes and all

the books had told him. Establish some sort of dialogue and rapport with the criminals, even a degree of trust that he could then exploit to his benefit, get some of the hostages released in return for food or other considerations, erode their resolve, with the ultimate aim of resolving the crime without loss of innocent life—or criminal life for that matter. A real win for him meant bringing them all before the bar of justice, where a robed judge would pronounce them guilty and sentence them to a lengthy term as guests of the Spanish government, there to rot like the trash they were.... But the first step was to get them talking back and forth with him, something that this One person didn't feel the need to do. This man felt comfortably in command of the situation . . . as well he might, the police captain told himself. With children sitting in front of his guns. Then another phone rang.

"They have landed, and are unloading now."

"How long?"

"Thirty minutes."

"Half an hour," Colonel Tomas Nuncio told Clark, as the car started rolling. Nuncio had come by helicopter from Madrid. Behind him, three trucks of the Spanish army were loading up the equipment off the plane and would soon start down the same road with his people aboard.

"What do we know?"

"Thirty-five hostages. Thirty-three of them are French children—"

"I've seen the list. Who are the other two?"

Nuncio looked down in distaste. "They seem to be sick children in the park as part of a special program, the ones sent here—you started it in America, how do you say . . ."

"Make-A-Wish?" John asked.

"Yes, that is it. A girl from Holland and a boy from England, both in wheelchairs, both reportedly quite ill. Not French like the others. I find that strange. All the rest are children of workers for Thompson, the defense equipment company. The leader of that group called on his own to his corporate headquarters, and from there the news went high up in the French government, explaining the rapid response. I have orders to offer you all the assistance my people can provide."

"Thank you, Colonel Nuncio. How many people do you have on the scene now?"

"Thirty-eight, with more coming. We have an inner perimeter established and traffic control."

"Reporters, what about them?"

"We are stopping them at the main gate to the park. I will not give these swine a chance to speak to the public," Colonel Nuncio promised. He'd already lived up to what John expected of the Guardia Civil. The hat was something out of another century, but the cop's blue eyes were ready for the next one, cold and hard as he drove his radio car out onto the interstate-type highway. A sign said that Worldpark was but fifteen kilometers away, and the car was moving very fast now.

Julio Vega tossed the last Team-2 box aboard the five-ton truck and pulled

himself aboard. His teammates were all there in the back, with Ding Chavez taking the right-front seat of the truck next to the driver, as commanders tended to do. Eyes were all open now and heads perked up, checking out the surrounding terrain even though it had no relevance to the mission. Even commandos could act like tourists.

"Colonel, what sort of surveillance systems are we up against?"

"What do you mean?" Nuncio asked in reply.

"The park, does it have TV cameras spread around? If it does," Clark said, "I want us to avoid them."

"I will call ahead to see."

"Well?" Mike Dennis asked his chief technician.

"The back way in, no cameras there until they approach the employee parking lot. I can turn that one off from here."

"Do it." Dennis got on Captain Gassman's radio to give directions for the approaching vehicles. He checked his watch as he did so. The first shots had been fired three and a half hours before. It only felt like a lifetime. Giving the directions, he walked to the office coffee urn, found it empty, and cursed as a result.

Colonel Nuncio took the last exit before the one that went into the park, instead breaking off onto a two-lane blacktop road and slowing down. Presently they encountered a police car whose occupant, standing alongside it, waved them through. Two minutes more, and they were parked outside what appeared to be a tunnel with a steel door sitting partially open. Nuncio popped open his door, and Clark did the same, then walked quickly into the entrance.

"Your Spanish is very literate, Señor Clark. But I cannot place your accent."

"Indianapolis," John replied. It would probably be the last light moment of the day. "How are the bad guys talking to you?"

"What language, you mean? English so far."

And *that* was the first good break of the day. For all his expertise, Dr. Bellow's language skills were not good, and he would take point as soon as his car arrived, in about five minutes.

The park's alternate command center was a mere twenty meters inside the tunnel. The door was guarded by yet another Civil Guard, who opened it and saluted Colonel Nuncio.

"Colonel." It was another cop, John saw.

"Señor Clark, this is Captain Gassman." Handshakes were exchanged.

"Howdy. I am John Clark. My team is a few minutes out. Can you please update me on what's happening?"

Gassman waved him to the conference table in the middle of the room whose walls were lined with TV cameras and other electronic gear whose nature was not immediately apparent. A large map/diagram of the park was laid out.

"The criminals are all here," Gassman said, tapping the castle in the middle of the park. "We believe there to be ten of them, and thirty-five hostages, all

children. I have spoken with them several times. My contact is a man, probably a Frenchman, calling himself One. The conversations have come to nothing, but we have a copy of their demands—a dozen convicted terrorists, mainly in French custody, but some in Spanish prisons as well."

Clark nodded. He had all this already, but the diagram of the park was new. He was first of all examining sight-lines, what could be seen and what could not. "What about where they are, blueprints, I mean."

"Here," a park engineer said, sliding the castle blueprints on the table. "Windows here, here, here, and here. Stairs and elevators as marked." Clark referenced them against the map. "They have stair access to the roof, and that's forty meters above street level. They have good line of sight everywhere, down all the streets."

"If I want to keep an eye on things, what's the best place?"

"That's easy. The Dive Bomber ride, top of the first hill. You're damned near a hundred fifty meters high there."

"That's nearly five hundred feet," Clark said, with some measure of incredulity.

"Biggest 'coaster in the world, sir," the engineer confirmed. "People come from all over to ride this one. The ride sits in a slight depression, about ten meters, but the rest of it's pretty damned tall. If you want to perch somebody, that's the spot."

"Good. Can you get from here to there unseen?"

"The underground, but there're TV cameras in it—" He traced his hand over the map. "Here, here, here, and another one there. Better to walk on the surface, but dodging all the cameras won't be easy."

"Can you turn them off?"

"We can override the primary command center from here, yes—hell, if necessary, I can send people out to pull the wires."

"But if we do that, it might annoy our friends in the castle," John noted. "Okay, we need to think that one through before we do anything. For the moment," Clark told Nuncio and Gassman, "I want to keep them in the dark on who's here and what we're doing. We don't give them anything for free, okay?"

Both cops nodded agreement, and John saw in their eyes a desperate sort of respect. Proud and professional as they were, they had to feel some relief at having him and his team on the scene to take charge of the situation, and also to take over the responsibility for it. They could get credit for supporting a successful rescue operation, and they could also stand back and say that whatever went wrong wasn't their fault. The bureaucratic mind was part and parcel of every government employee in the known world.

"Hey, John."

Clark turned. It was Chavez, with Covington right behind him. Both team leaders strode in, wearing their black assault gear now, and looking to the others in the room like angels of death. They came to the conference table and started looking at the diagrams.

"Domingo, this is Colonel Nuncio and Captain Gassman."

"Good day," Ding said in his Los Angeles Spanish, shaking hands. Covington did the same, speaking his own language.

"Sniper perch here?" Ding asked at once, tapping the Dive Bomber. "I saw the thing from the parking lot. Some ride. Can I get Homer there unobserved?"

"We're working on that right now."

Noonan came in next, his backpack full of electronics gear. "Okay, this looks pretty good for our purposes," he observed, checking all the TV screens out.

"Our friends have a duplicate facility here."

"Oops," Noonan said. "Okay, first, I want to shut down the cell phone nodes."

"What?" Nuncio asked. "Why?"

"In case our friends have a pal outside with a cell phone to tell them what we're doing, sir," Clark answered.

"Ah. Can I help?"

Noonan handled the answer. "Have your people go to each node and have the technicians insert these disks into their computers. There are printed instructions with each."

"Filipe!" Nuncio turned and snapped his fingers. A moment later his man had the disks and orders, leaving the room with them.

"How deep underground are we?" Noonan asked next.

"No more than five meters."

"Rebarred concrete overhead?"

"Correct," the park engineer said.

"Okay, John, our portable radios should work fine." Then teams -1 and -2 entered the command center. They crowded around the conference table.

"Bad guys and hostages here," John told them.

"How many?" Eddie Price asked.

"Thirty-five hostages, all kids, two of them in wheelchairs. Those are the two who are not French."

"Who's been talking to them?" This was Dr. Bellow.

"I have," Captain Gassman answered. Bellow grabbed him and walked him to the corner for a quiet chat.

"First of all, overwatch," Chavez said. "We need to get Homer to the top of that ride . . . unseen . . . How do we do that?"

"There's people moving around on the TV screens," Johnston said, turning to look. "Who are they?"

"Park people," Mike Dennis said. "We have them moving around to make sure all our guests are out." It was the routine shutdown procedure, albeit many hours off in time.

"Get me some coveralls . . . but I still have to pack my rifle. You have mechanics here?"

"Only about a thousand," the park manager replied.

"Okay, then that's what I am, toolbox and all. You have the rides running?"

"No, they're all shut down."

"The more things moving, the more they have to watch," Sergeant Johnston told his boss.

"I like it," Chavez agreed, looking up at Clark.

"So do I. Mr. Dennis, turn them all on, if you would, please."

"They have to be started up individually. We can turn them off from here by killing the power, but we can't turn them on from this position."

"Then get your people out to do it. Sergeant Johnston will go with your man to the 'coaster. Homer, set up there. Your mission is to gather information and get it to us. Take the rifle and get zeroed."

"How high will I be?"

"About one hundred forty meters above the ground."

The sniper reached in his pocket for a calculator and switched it on to make sure it worked. "Fair enough. Where do I change?"

"This way." The engineer led him out the door and across the hall to an employee dressing room.

"A perch on the other side?" Covington asked.

"Here's a good one," Dennis answered. "The virtual reality building. Not anywhere near as high, but direct line of sight to the castle."

"I'll put Houston there," Covington said. "His leg's still bothering him."

"Okay, two sniper-observers plus the TV cameras give us pretty good visual coverage of the castle," Clark said.

"I need to take a leader's recon to figure the rest out," Chavez said. "I need a diagram with the camera positions marked on it. So does Peter."

"When's Malloy get here?" Covington asked.

"Another hour or so. He'll have to gas up when he lands. After that, endurance on the chopper is about four hours, figure thirty minutes' cycle time when he touches down."

"How far can the cameras see, Mr. Dennis?"

"They cover the parking lot this way pretty good, but not the other side. They could do better with people on top of the castle."

"What do we know about their equipment?"

"Just the guns. We have that on tape."

"I want to see those," Noonan put in. "Right now, if possible."

Things started moving then. Chavez and Covington got their park maps—they used the same ones sold to park guests, with the camera positions hand-marked with black sticky-dots stolen from a secretary. An electric cart—actually a golf cart—met them out in the corridor and whisked them outside, then back into the park on a surface road. Covington navigated from the map, avoiding camera positions as they made their way along the back-lot areas of Worldpark.

Noonan ran the three videotapes that showed the terrorists own takedown operation. "Ten of 'em, all right, all male, most of them are bearded, all wearing white hats when they executed their attack. Two look like park employees. We have any information on them?"

"Working on it," Dennis replied.

"You fingerprint them?" Noonan asked, getting a negative head-shake as an answer. "How about photographs?"

"Yes, we all have photo-ID passes to get in." Dennis held up his.

"That's something. Let's get that off to the French police PDQ."

"Mark!" Dennis waved to his personnel boss.

"We should have gotten uniforms," Covington said topside.

"Yeah, haste makes waste, doesn't it, Peter?" Chavez was peering around a corner, smelling the food from the concession stand. It made him a little hungry. "Getting in there's going to be fun, man."

"Quite," Covington agreed.

The castle certainly looked real enough, over fifty meters square and about the same in height. Mainly it was empty space, the blueprints had told them, but there were both a staircase and elevator to the flat roof, and sooner or later the bad guys would put someone there, if they had half a brain amongst them. Well, that was the job for the snipers. Homer Johnston and Sam Houston would have fairly easy direct shots, four hundred meters from one side and a mere one-sixty or so from the other.

"How big do those windows look to you?"

"Big enough, Ding."

"Yeah, I think so, too." And already a plan was coming together in the two minds. "I hope Malloy is well rested."

Sergeant Homer Johnston, now wearing park coveralls over his ninja suit, popped out of the ground fifty meters from the Dive Bomber. The ride was even more intimidating this close. He walked toward it, escorted by a park employee who was also a ride operator for this attraction.

"I can take you to the top and stop the car there."

"Great." It sure looked like a long way to climb, even though there were regular steps heading up. They walked under the canopied entrance, past the crowd-control bars, and Johnston sat in the lead seat on the right side, his gun case on the seat next to his. "Go," he told the operator. The ride up the first hill was slow—deliberately so, designed that way to scare the bejeebers out of the riders, and that gave Johnston another insight into the mind of a terrorist, he thought with a wry smile. The gang often three-seat cars stopped just at the crest. Johnston wriggled out, taking his gun case with him. This he set in an equipment bay, opening it to extract a rubber mat, and a ghillie blanket to drape over himself. Last came his rifle and binoculars. He took his time, setting the mat down—the decking here was perforated steel, and lying there would soon become uncomfortable. He deployed the blanket atop his prone frame. It was essentially a light fishing net covered with green plastic leaves, whose purpose was to break up his outline. Then he set up his rifle on its bipod, and took out his green-plastic-coated binoculars. His personal radio microphone dangled in front of his lips.

"Rifle Two-One to command."

"This is Six," Clark responded.

"Rifle Two-One in place, Six. I have a good perch here. I can see the whole roof of the castle and the doors to the elevator and stairwell. Good line of sight to the back, too. Not a bad spot, sir."

"Good. Keep us posted."

"Roger that, boss. Out." Sergeant Johnston propped himself up on his elbows and watched the area through his 7×50 binoculars. The sun was warm. He'd have to get used to that. Johnston thought for a moment and reached for his canteen. Just then the car he'd ridden up wheeled forward and then dropped from sight. He heard the steel overhead wheels roll along the metal tubing and wondered what it was like to ride the damned thing. Probably right up there with skydiving, something he knew how to do, but didn't much care for, airborne-ranger training or not. There was something nice about having your fucking feet on the fucking ground, and you couldn't

shoot a rifle while falling through the air at a hundred-thirty knots, could you? He directed his binoculars at a window . . . they were flat on the bottom but curved into a point at the top, like in a real castle, and made of clear glass segments held together with leaded strips. Maybe hard to shoot through, he thought, though getting a shot at this angle would not be easy . . . no, if he got a shot, he'd have to take it on someone outside. That would be easy. He got behind the rifle scope and punched the laser-rangefinder button, selecting the middle of the courtyard as his point of aim. Then he punched a few numbers into his calculator to allow for the vertical drop, came up with an adjusted range setting, and turned the elevation knob on the scope the right number of clicks. The direct line of sight was three hundred eighty-nine meters. Nice and close if he had to take a shot.

"Yes, Minister," Dr. Bellow said. He was sitting in a comfortable chair—Mike Dennis's—and staring at the wall. There was now a pair of photographs for him to stare at—they were unknowns, because Tim Noonan didn't have them in his computer, and neither the French nor the Spanish police had turned either into a name with a history attached. Both had apartments a few miles away, and both were being thoroughly tossed now, and phone records checked as well, to see where they'd called.

"They want this Jackal fellow out, do they?" the French Minister of Justice asked.

"Along with some others, but he would seem to be their primary objective, yes."

"My government will *not* negotiate with these creatures!" the Minister insisted.

"Yes, sir, I understand that. Giving over the prisoners is generally not an option, but every situation is different, and I need to know what leeway, if any, you will give me as a negotiating position. That could include taking this Sanchez guy out of prison and bringing him here as . . . well, as bait for the criminals we have surrounded here."

"Do you recommend that?" the Minister asked.

"I am not sure yet. I haven't spoken with them, and until I do I cannot get a feel for what they're all about. For the moment, I must assume that we are dealing with serious, dedicated people who are willing to kill hostages."

"Children?"

"Yes, Minister, we must consider that a real threat," the doctor told him. That generated a silence that lasted for a full ten seconds by the wall clock Bellow was staring at.

"I must consider this. I will call you later."

"Thank you, sir." Bellow hung up the phone and looked up at Clark.

"So?"

"So, they don't know what to do. Neither do I yet. Look, John, we're up against a number of unknowns here. We do not know much about the terrorists. No religious motivation, they're not Islamic fundamentalists. So I can't use religion or God or ethics against them. If they're ideological Marxists, they're going to be ruthless bastards. So far they haven't been really communicative. If I can't talk to them, I got bupkis."

"Okay, so, what's our play?"

"Put 'em in the dark for starters."

Clark turned: "Mr. Dennis?"

"Yes?"

"Can we cut the electricity to the castle?"

"Yes," the park engineer answered for his boss.

"Do it, doc?" John asked Bellow, getting a nod. "Okay, pull the plug now."

"Fair enough." The engineer sat at a computer terminal and worked the mouse to select the power-control program. In a few seconds, he isolated the castle and clicked the button to turn their electricity off.

"Let's see how long this takes," Bellow said quietly.

It took five seconds. Dennis's phone rang.

"Yes?" the park manager said into the speakerphone.

"Why did you do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. The lights went off."

Dr. Bellow leaned over the speaker. "I am Dr. Bellow. Who am I talking to?"

"I am One. I am in control of Worldpark. Who are you?"

"My name is Paul Bellow, and I have been asked to speak with you."

"Ah, you are the negotiator, then. Excellent. Turn the lights back on immediately."

"Before we do that," Bellow said calmly, "I would like to know who you are. You have my name. I do not have yours."

"I told you that. I am One. You will call me Mr. One," the voice replied evenly, devoid of excitement or anger.

"Okay, Mr. One, if you insist, you can call me Paul."

"Turn the electricity back on, Paul."

"In return for which you will do what, Mr. One?"

"In return for which I will abstain from killing a child—for the moment," the voice added coldly.

"You do not sound like a barbarian, Mr. One, and the taking of a child's life is a barbaric act—and also one calculated to make your position more difficult, not less so."

"Paul, I have told you what I require. Do it immediately." And then the line went dead.

"Oh, shit," Bellow breathed. "He knows the playbook."

"Bad?"

Bellow nodded. "Bad. He knows what we're going to try to do, on my side, I mean."

"Andre," René called from his desk. "Select a child."

He'd already done that, and pointed to the little Dutch girl, Anna, in her wheelchair, wearing her special-access button. René nodded his approval. So, the other side had a physician talking to him. The name Paul Bellow meant nothing to him, but the man would be a Spanish psychiatrist, probably one experienced or at least trained in negotiations. His job would be to weaken their resolve, ultimately to get them to surrender and so condemn themselves to life in prison. Well, he'd have to see about that. René checked his watch

and decided to wait ten minutes.

Malloy eased back on the cyclic control, flaring his helicopter for landing where the fuel truck was parked. There were five soldiers there, one of them waving orange-plastic wands. In another few seconds, the Night Hawk touched down. Malloy killed the engines, and watched the rotor slow as Sergeant Nance opened the side door and hopped out.

"Time for some crew rest?" Lieutenant Harrison asked over the intercom.

"Right," Malloy snorted, opening his door to climb down. He walked to what looked like an officer standing a few yards away, answering his salute when he got there to shake hands. Malloy had an urgent request to make.

"The trick will be to get close enough," Covington said.

"Yeah." Chavez nodded. They'd circulated carefully to the other side of the castle now. They could hear the Dive Bomber ride running behind them. There was a good forty meters of open ground all around the castle, doubtless planned by the main architect of the park to give the structure primacy of place. It did that, but it didn't give Ding and Peter much to work with. Both men took their time, examining everything from the little man-made streams to the bridges over them. They could see the windows into the command center where the terrorists were, and the line of sight was just too damned good, even before they considered the task of racing up the interior stairs—and those were probably covered by men with guns.

"They don't make it easy for us, do they?" Covington observed.

"Well, that's not their job, is it?"

"How's the recon going?" Clark asked over the encrypted radio circuit.

"Pretty well done, Mr. C," Chavez replied. "Malloy in yet?"

"Just landed."

"Good, 'cuz we're gonna need him if we gotta go in."

"Two groups, up and down," Covington added. "But we need something to tell us about that room."

The Spanish officer, an army major, nodded instant agreement and waved to some people in the helicopter hangar. They trotted over, got their orders, and trotted back. With that done, Malloy headed to the hangar, too. He needed a men's room. Sergeant Nance, he saw, was heading back with two thermos jugs. Good man, the Marine thought, he knew how important coffee was at a time like this.

"That camera is dead. They shot it out," Dennis said. "We have a tape of him doing it."

"Show me," Noonan commanded.

The layout of the room was not unlike this one, Tim Noonan saw in the fifty seconds of tape they had. The children had been herded to the corner opposite the camera. Maybe they'd even stay there. It was not much, but it was something. "Anything else? Audio systems in the room, a microphone or something?"

"No," Dennis replied. "We have phones for that."

"Yeah." The FBI agent nodded resignedly. "I have to figure a way to spike it, then." Just then the phone rang.

"Yes, this is Paul," Bellow said instantly.

"Hello, Paul, this is One. The lights remain out. I told you to restore power. It has not been done. I tell you again, do it immediately."

"Working on that, but the police here are fumbling around some."

"And there is no one from the park there to assist you? I am not a fool, Paul. I say it one last time, turn the electricity back on immediately."

"Mr. One, we're working on it. Please be a little patient with us, okay?" Bellow's face was sweating now. It started quite suddenly, and though he knew why, he hoped that he was wrong.

"Andre," René said, doing so mistakenly before he killed the phone line.

The former park security guard walked over to the corner. "Hello, Anna. I think it is time for you to go back to your mother."

"Oh?" the child asked. She had china-blue eyes and light brown hair, nearly blond in fact, though her skin had the pale, delicate look of parchment. It was very sad. Andre walked behind the chair, taking the handles in his hands and wheeling her to the door. "Let's go outside, *mon petit chou,"* he said as they went through the door.

The elevator outside had a default setting. Even without electricity it could go down on battery power. Andre pushed the chair inside, flipped off the red emergency-stop switch, and pressed the 1 button. The doors closed slowly, and the elevator went down. A minute later, the doors opened again. The castle had a wide walk-through corridor that allowed people to transit from one part of Worldpark to another, and a mosaic that covered the arching walls. There was also a pleasant westerly breeze, and the Frenchman wheeled Anna right into it.

"What's this?" Noonan asked, looking at one of the video monitors. "John, we got somebody coming out."

"Command, this is Rifle Two-One, I see a guy pushing a wheelchair with a kid in it, coming out the west side of the castle." Johnston set his binoculars down and got on his rifle, centering the crosshairs on the man's temple, his finger lightly trouching the set-trigger. "Rifle Two-One is on target, on the guy, on target now."

"Weapons tight" was the reply from Clark. "I repeat, weapons are tight. Acknowledge."

"Roger, Six, weapons tight." Sergeant Johnston took his finger out of the trigger guard. What was happening here?

"Bugger," Covington said. They were only forty meters away. He and Chavez had an easy direct line of sight. The little girl looked ill in addition to being scared; she was slumped to her left in the chair, trying to look up and back at the man pushing her. He was about forty, they both thought, a mustache but no beard, average-normal in height, weight, and build, with dark eyes that displayed nothing. The park was so quiet now, so empty of people, that they could hear the scrape of the rubber tires on the stone

courtyard.

"Where is Momma?" Anna asked in English she'd learned in school.

"You will see her in a moment," Nine promised. He wheeled her around the curving entrance to the castle. It circled around a statue, took a gentle upward and clockwise turn, then led down to the courtyard. He stopped the chair in the middle of the path. It was about five meters wide, and evenly paved.

Andre looked around. There had to be policemen out here, but he saw nothing moving at all, except for the cars on the Dive Bomber, which he didn't have to look at to see. The familiar noise was enough. It really was too bad. Nine reached into his belt, took out his pistol, and—

"—Gun, he's got a pistol out!" Homer Johnston reported urgently. "Oh, fuck, he's gonna—"

—The gun fired into Anna's back, driving straight through her heart. A gout of blood appeared on the flat child chest, and her head dropped forward. The man pushed the wheelchair just then, and it rolled down the curving path, caroming off the stone wall and making it all the way into the flat courtyard, where it finally stopped.

Covington drew his Beretta and started to bring it up. It would not have been an easy shot, but he had nine rounds in his pistol, and that was enough, but—

"Weapons tight!" the radio earpiece thundered. "Weapons tight! Do not fire," Clark ordered them.

"Fuck!" Chavez rasped next to Peter Covington.

"Yes," the Englishman agreed. "Quite." He holstered his pistol, watching the man turn and walk back into the shelter of the stone castle.

"I'm on target, Rifle Two-One is on target!" Johnston's voice told them all.

"Do *not* fire. This is Six, weapons are tight, goddamnit!"

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"Fuck!" Clark snarled in the command center. He slammed his fist on the table. "Fuck!" Then the phone rang.

"Yes?" Bellow said, sitting next to the Rainbow commander.

"You had your warning. Turn the electricity back on, or we will kill another," One said.

CHAPTER 15

WHITE HATS

"There was nothing we could have done, John. Not a thing," Bellow said, giving voice to words that the others didn't have the courage to say.

"Now what?" Clark asked.

"Now I guess we turn the electricity back on."

As they watched the TV monitors, three men raced to the child. Two wore the *tricornio* of the Guardia Civil. The third was Dr. Hector Weiler.

Chavez and Covington watched the same thing from a closer perspective. Weiler wore a white lab coat, the global uniform for physicians, and his race to reach the child ended abruptly as he touched the warm but still body. The slump of his shoulders told the tale, even from fifty meters away. The bullet had gone straight through her heart. The doctor said something to the cops, and one of them wheeled the chair down and out of the courtyard, turning to go past the two Rainbow members.

"Hold it, doc," Chavez called, walking over to look. In this moment Ding remembered that his own wife held a new life in her belly, even now probably moving and kicking while Patsy was sitting in their living room, watching TV or reading a book. The little girl's face was at peace now, as though asleep, and he could not hold his hand back from touching her soft hair. "What's the story, doc?"

"She was quite ill, probably terminal. I will have a file on her back at my office. When these children come here, I get a summary of their condition should an emergency arise." The physician bit his lip and looked up. "She was probably dying, but not yet dead, not yet completely without hope." Weiler was the son of a Spanish mother and a German father who'd emigrated to Spain after the Second World War. He'd studied hard to become a physician and surgeon, and this act, this murder of a child, was the negation of all that. Someone had decided to make all his training and study worthless. He'd never known rage, quiet and sad though it was, but now he did. "Will you kill them?"

Chavez looked up. There were no tears in his eyes. Perhaps they'd come later, Domingo Chavez thought, his hand still on the child's head. Her hair wasn't very long, and he didn't know that it had grown back after her last chemotherapy protocol. He did know that she was supposed to be alive, and that in watching her death, he had failed to do that which he'd dedicated his life to doing. *"Sí,"* he told the doctor. "We will kill them. Peter?" He waved at his colleague, and together they accompanied the others to the doctor's office. They walked over slowly. There was no reason to go fast now.

“That’ll do,” Malloy thought, surveying the still-wet paint on the side of the Night Hawk. POLICIA, the lettering said. “Ready, Harrison?”

“Yes, sir. Sergeant Nance, time to move.”

“Yessir.” The crew chief hopped in, buckled his safety belt, and watched the pilot go through the startup sequence. “All clear aft,” he said over the intercom, after leaning out to check. “Tail rotor is clear, Colonel.”

“Then I guess it’s time to fly.” Malloy applied power and lifted the Night Hawk into the sky. Then he keyed his tactical radio. “Rainbow, this is the Bear, over.”

“Bear, this is Rainbow Six, reading you five by five, over.”

“Bear’s in the air, sir, be there in seven minutes.”

“Roger, please orbit the area until we tell you otherwise.”

“Roger that, sir. I’ll notify when we commence the orbit. Out.” There was no particular hurry. Malloy dipped the nose and headed into the gathering darkness. The sun was almost down now, and the park lights in the distance were all coming on.

“Who is this?” Chavez asked.

“Francisco de la Cruz,” the man replied. His leg was bandaged, and he looked to be in pain.

“Ah, yes, we saw you on the videotape,” Covington said. He saw the sword and shield in the corner and turned to nod his respect at the seated man. Peter lifted the *spatha* and hefted it briefly. At close range it would be formidable as hell, not the equal of his MP-10, but probably a very satisfying weapon for all that.

“A child? They kill a child?” de la Cruz asked.

Dr. Weiler was at his file cabinet. “Anna Groot, age ten and a half,” he said, reading over the documents that had preceded the little one. “Metastatic osteosarcoma, terminally ill. . . . Six weeks left, her doctor says here. Osteo, that is a bad one.” Against the wall, the two Spanish cops lifted the body from the chair and laid it tenderly on the examining table, then covered it with a sheet. One looked close to tears, blocked only by the cold rage that made his hands tremble.

“John must feel pretty shitty about now,” Chavez said.

“He had to do it, Ding. It wasn’t the right time to take action—”

“I know that, Peter! But how the fuck do we tell *her* that?” A pause. “Doc, you have any coffee around here?”

“There.” Weiler pointed.

Chavez walked to the urn and poured some into a foam cup. “Up and down, sandwich ’em?”

Covington nodded. “Yes, I think so.”

Chavez emptied the cup and tossed it into a wastebasket. “Okay, let’s get set up.” They left the office without another word and made their way in the shadows back to the underground, thence to the alternate command center.

“Rifle Two-One, anything happening?” Clark was asking when they walked in.

“Negative, Six, nothing except shadows on the windows. They haven’t put a

guy on the roof yet. That's a little strange."

"They're pretty confident in their TV coverage," Noonan thought. He had the blueprints of the castle in front of him. "Okay, we are assuming that our friends are all in here . . . but there's a dozen other rooms on three levels."

"This is Bear," a voice said over the speaker Noonan had set up. "I am orbiting now. What do I need to know, over?"

"Bear, this is Six," Clark replied. "The subjects are all in the castle. There's a command-and-control center on the second floor. Best guess, everybody's there right now. Also, be advised the subjects have killed a hostage—a little girl," John added.

In the helicopter, Malloy's head didn't move at the news. "Roger, okay, Six, we will orbit and observe. Be advised we have all our deployment gear aboard, over."

"Roger that. Out." Clark took his hand off the transmit button.

The men were quiet, but their looks were intense, Chavez saw. Too professional for an overt display—nobody was playing with a personal weapon, or anything as Hollywood as that—yet their faces were like stone, only their eyes moving back and forth over the diagrams or flickering back and forth to the TV monitors. It must have been very hard on Homer Johnston, Ding thought. He'd been on the fucker when he shot the kid. Homer had kids, and he could have transported the subject into the next dimension as easily as blinking his eyes.... But no, that would not have been smart, and they were paid to be smart. The men hadn't been ready for even an improvised assault, and anything that smacked of improvisation would only get more children killed. And that wasn't the mission, either. Then a phone rang. Bellow got it, hitting the speaker button.

"Yes?" the doctor said.

"We regret the incident with the child, but she was soon to die anyway. Now, when will our friends be released?"

"Paris hasn't gotten back to us yet," Bellow replied.

"Then, I regret to say, there will be another incident shortly."

"Look, Mr. One, I cannot force Paris to do anything. We are talking, negotiating with government officials, and they take time to reach decisions. Governments never move fast, do they?"

"Then I will help them. Tell Paris that unless the aircraft bringing our friends is ready for us to board it in one hour, we will kill a hostage, and then another every hour until our demands are met," the voice said, entirely without emotional emphasis.

"That is unreasonable. Listen to me: even if they brought all of them out of their prisons *now,* it would take at least two hours to get them here. Your wishes cannot make an airplane fly faster, can they?"

That generated a thoughtful pause. "Yes, that is true. Very well, we will commence the shooting of hostages in three hours from now . . . no, I will start the countdown on the hour. That gives you an additional twelve minutes. I will be generous. Do you understand?"

"Yes, you say that you will kill another child at twenty-two hundred hours, and another one every hour after that."

"Correct. Make sure that Paris understands." And the line went dead.

"Well?" Clark asked.

"John, you don't need me here for this. It's pretty damned clear that they'll do it. They killed the first one to show us who's the boss. They plan to succeed, and they don't care what it takes for them to do so. The concession he just made may be the last one we're going to get."

"What is that?" Esteban asked. He walked to the window to see. "Helicopter!"

"Oh?" René went there also. The windows were so small that he had to move the Basque aside. "Yes, I see the police have them. Large one," he added with a shrug. "This is not a surprise." But—"José, get up to the roof with a radio, and keep us informed."

One of the other Basques nodded and headed for the fire stairwell. The elevator would have worked fine, but he didn't want to be inconvenienced by another power shutoff.

"Command, Rifle Two-One," Johnston called a minute later.

"Rifle Two-One, this is Six."

"I got a guy on the castle roof, one man, armed with what looks like a Uzi, and he's got a brick, too. Just one, nobody else is joining up at this time."

"Roger that, Rifle Two-One."

"This isn't the guy who whacked the kid," the sergeant added.

"Okay, good, thank you."

"Rifle Three has him, too . . . just walked over to my side. He's circulating around . . . yeah, looking over the edge, looking down."

"John?" It was Major Covington.

"Yes, Peter?"

"We're not showing them enough."

"What do you mean?"

"Give them something to look at. Policemen, an inner perimeter. If they don't see something, they're going to wonder what's going on that they cannot see."

"Good idea," Noonan said.

Clark liked it. "Colonel?"

"Yes," Nuncio replied. He leaned over the table. "I propose two men, here, two more here . . . here . . . here."

"Yes, sir, please make that happen right away."

"René," Andre called from in front of a TV screen. He pointed. "Look."

There were two Guardia cops moving slowly and trying to be covert as they approached up Strada España to a place fifty meters from the castle. René nodded and picked up his radio. "Three!"

"Yes, One."

"Police approaching the castle. Keep an eye on them."

"I will do that, One," Esteban promised.

"Okay, they're using radios," Noonan said, checking his scanner. "Citizen-band walkie-talkies, regular commercial ones, set on channel sixteen. Pure vanilla."

"No names, just numbers?" Chavez asked.

"So far. Our point of contact calls himself One, and this guy is Three. Okay, does that tell us anything?"

"Radio games," Dr. Bellow said. "Right out of the playbook. They're trying to keep their identities secret from us, but that's also in the playbook." The two photo-ID pictures had long since been sent to France for identification, but both the police and intelligence agencies had come up dry.

"Okay, will the French deal?"

A shake of the head. "I don't think so. The Minister, when I told him about the Dutch girl, he just grunted and said Carlos stays in the jug no matter what—and he expects us to resolve the situation successfully, and if we can't, his country has a team of his own to send down."

"So, we've gotta have a plan in place and ready to go—by twenty-two hundred."

"Unless you want to see them kill another hostage, yes," Bellow said. "They're denying me my ability to guide their behavior. They know how the game is played."

"Professionals?"

Bellow shrugged. "Might as well be. They know what I'm going to try, and if they know it ahead of time, then they know how to maneuver clear."

"No way to mitigate their behavior?" Clark asked, wanting it clear.

"I can try, but probably not. The ideological ones, the ones who have a clear idea of what they want—well, they're hard to reason with. They have no ethical base to play with, no morality in the usual sense, nothing I can use against them. No conscience."

"Yeah, we saw that, I guess. Okay." John stood up straight and turned to look at his two team leaders. "You got two hours to plan it, and one more to set it up. We go at twenty-two hundred hours."

"We need to know more about what's happening inside," Covington told Clark.

"Noonan, what can you do?"

The FBI agent looked down at the blueprints, then over at the TV monitors. "I need to change," he said, heading over to his equipment case and pulling out the green-on-green night gear. The best news he'd seen so far was that the castle windows made for two blind spots. Better yet, they could control the lights that bled energy into both of them. He walked over to the park engineer next. "Can you switch off these lights along here?"

"Sure. When?"

"When the guy on the roof is looking the other way. And I need somebody to back me up," Noonan added.

"I can do that," First Sergeant Vega said, stepping forward.

The children were whining. It had started two hours earlier and only gotten worse. They wanted food—something adults would probably not have asked for, since adults would be far too frightened to eat, but children were different somehow. They also needed to use the restroom quite a bit, and fortunately there were two bathrooms adjacent to the control room, and René's people didn't stop them from going—the restrooms had no windows or phones or

anything to make escape or communication possible, and it wasn't worth the aggravation to have the children soiling their pants. The children didn't talk directly to any of his people, but the whining was real and growing. Well-behaved kids, else it would be worse, René told himself, with an ironic smile. He looked at the wall clock.

"Three, this is One."

"Yes, One," came the reply.

"What do you see?"

"Eight policemen, four pairs, watching us, but doing nothing but watching."

"Good." And he set the radio down.

"Log that," Noonan said. He'd checked the wall clock. It was about fifteen minutes since the last radio conversation. He was in his night costume now, the two-shade greens they'd used in Vienna. His Beretta .45 automatic, with suppressor, was in a special, large shoulder holster over his body armor, and he had a backpack slung over one shoulder. "Vega, ready to take a little walk?"

"You betcha," Oso replied, glad at last to be doing *something* on a deployment. As much as he liked being responsible for the team's heavy machine gun, he'd never gotten to use it, and, he thought, probably never would. The biggest man on the team, his hobby was pumping iron, and he had a chest about the dimensions of a halfkeg of beer. Vega followed Noonan out the door, then outside.

"Ladder?" the first sergeant asked.

"Tool and paint shop fifty yards from where we're going. I asked. They have what we need."

"Fair 'nuff," Oso replied.

It was a fast walk, dodging through a few open areas visible to the fixed cameras, and the shop they headed for had no sign on it at all. Noonan slipped the ground-bolted door and walked in. None of the doors, remarkably enough, were locked. Vega pulled a thirty-foot extension ladder off its wall brackets. "This ought to do."

"Yeah." They went outside. Movement would now be trickier. "Noonan to command."

"Six here."

"Start doing the cameras, John."

In the command center, Clark pointed to the park engineer. There was danger here, but not much, they hoped. The castle command center, like this one, had only eight TV monitors, which were hard-wired into over forty cameras. You could have the computer simply flip through them in an automatic sequence, or select cameras for special use. With a mouse-click, one camera was disabled. If the terrorists were using the automatic sequence, as seemed likely, they probably would not notice that one camera's take was missing during the flip-through. They had to get through the visual coverage of two of them, and the park engineer was ready to flip them off and on as needed. The moment a hand appeared in camera twenty-three's field of view, the engineer flipped it off.

"Okay, twenty-three is off, Noonan."

"We're moving," Noonan said. The first walk took them twenty meters, and they stopped behind a concession stand. "Okay, we're at the popcorn building."

The engineer flipped twenty-three back on, and then turned off twenty-one.

"Twenty-one is off," Clark reported next. "Rifle Two-One, where's the guy on the roof?"

"West side, just lit up a smoke, not looking down over the edge anymore. Staying still at the moment," Sergeant Johnston reported.

"Noonan, you are clear to move."

"Moving now," the FBI agent replied. He and Vega double-timed it across the stone slabs, their rubber-soled boots keeping their steps quiet. At the side of the castle was a dirt strip about two meters wide, and some large boxwoods. Carefully, Noonan and Vega angled the ladder up, setting it behind a bush. Vega pulled the rope to extend the top portion, stopping it just under the window. Then he got between the ladder and the building, grabbed the treads and held them tight, pulling the ladder against the rough stone blocks.

"Watch your ass, Tim," Oso whispered.

"Always." Noonan went up quickly for the first ten feet, then slowed to a vertical crawl. *Patience,* Tim told himself. *Plenty of time to do this.* It was the sort of lie that men tell themselves.

"Okay," Clark heard. "He's going up the ladder now. The roof guy is still on the opposite side, fat, dumb, and happy."

"Bear, this is Six, over," John said, getting another idea.

"Bear copies, Six."

"Play around a little on the west side, just to draw some attention, over."

"Roger that."

Malloy stopped his endless circling, leveled out, and then eased toward the castle. The Night Hawk was a relatively quiet aircraft for a helicopter, but the guy on the roof turned to watch closely, the colonel saw through his night-vision goggles. He stopped his approach at about two hundred meters. He wanted to get their attention, not to spook them. The roof sentry's cigarette blazed brightly in the goggles. It moved to his lips, then away, then back, staying there.

"Say hello, sweetie," Malloy said over the intercom. "Jesus, if I was in a Night Stalker, I could spray your ass into the next time zone."

"You fly the Stalker? What's it like?"

"If she could cook, I'd fucking marry her. Sweetest chopper ever made," Malloy said, holding hover. "Six, Bear, I have the bastard's attention."

"Noonan, Six, we've frozen the roof sentry for you. He's on the opposite side from you."

Good, Noonan didn't say. He took off his Kevlar helmet and edged his face to the window. It was made of irregular segments held in place by lead strips, just like in the castles of old. The glass wasn't as good as float-plate, but it was transparent. *Okay.* He reached into his backpack and pulled a fiber-optic cable with the same cobra-head arrangement he'd used in Bern.

"Noonan to Command, you getting this?"

"That's affirmative." It was the voice of David Peled. The picture he saw was distorted, but you quickly got used to that. It showed four adults, but more important, it showed a crowd of children sitting on the floor in the corner, close to two doors with labels—the toilets, Peled realized. That worked. That worked pretty well. "Looks good, Timothy. Looks very good."

"Okay." Noonan glued the tiny instrument in place and headed down the ladder. His heart was racing faster than it ever did on the morning three-mile run. At the bottom, he and Vega both hugged the wall.

The cigarette flew off the roof, and the sentry got tired of looking at the chopper, Johnston saw.

"Our friend's moving east on the castle roof. Noonan, he's coming your way."

Malloy thought of maneuvering to draw the attention back, but that was too dangerous a play. He turned the helicopter sideways and continued his circling, but closer in, his eyes locked on the castle roof. There wasn't much else he could do except to draw his service pistol and fire, but at this range it would be hard enough to hit the castle. And killing people wasn't his job, unfortunately, Malloy told himself. There were times when he found the idea rather appealing.

"The helicopter annoys me," the voice on the phone said.

"Pity," Dr. Bellow replied, wondering what response it would get. "But police do what police do."

"News from Paris?"

"Regrettably not yet, but we hope to hear something soon. There is still time." Bellow's voice adopted a quiet intensity that he hoped would be taken for desperation.

"Time and tide wait for no man," One said, and hung up.

"What's that mean?" John asked.

"It means he's playing by the rules. He hasn't objected to the cops he can see on the TV, either. He knows the things he has to put up with." Bellow sipped his coffee. "He's very confident. He figures he's in a safe place, and he's holding the cards, and if he has to kill a few more kids, that's okay, because it'll get him what he wants."

"Killing children." Clark shook his head. "I didn't think—hell, I'm supposed to know better, right?"

"It's a very strong taboo, maybe the strongest," Dr. Bellow agreed. "The way they killed that little girl, though . . . there was no hesitation, just like shooting a paper target. Ideological," the psychiatrist went on. "They've subordinated everything to their belief system. That makes them rational, but only within that system. Our friend Mr. One has chosen his objective, and he'll stick to it."

The remote TV system, the park engineer saw, was really something. The

objective lens now affixed to the castle window was less than two millimeters across at its widest point, and even if noticed, would be mistaken for a drop of paint or some flaw in the window glass. The quality of the image wasn't very good, but it showed where people were, and the more you looked at it, the more you understood what initially appeared to be a black-and-white photograph of clutter. He could count six adults now, and with a seventh atop the castle, that left only three unaccounted for—and were all the children in view? It was harder with them. All their shirts were the same color, and the red translated into a very neutral gray on the black-and-white picture. There was the one in a wheelchair, but the rest blended together in the out-of-focus image. The commandos, he could see, were worried about that.

"He's heading back west again," Johnston reported. "Okay, he's at the west side now."

"Let's go," Noonan told Vega.

"The ladder?" They'd taken it down and laid it behind the bushes on its side.

"Leave it." Noonan ran off in a crouch, reaching the concession structure in a few seconds. "Noonan to Command, time to do the cameras again."

"It's off," the engineer told Clark.

"Camera twenty-one is down. Get moving, Tim."

Noonan popped Vega on the shoulder and ran another thirty meters. "Okay, take down twenty-three."

"Done," the park engineer said.

"Move," Clark commanded.

Fifteen seconds later, they were in a safe position. Noonan leaned against a building wall and took a long breath. "Thanks, Julio."

"Any time, man," Vega replied. "Just so the camera gadget works."

"It will," the FBI agent promised, and with that they headed back to the underground command post.

"Blow the windows? Can we do that, Paddy?" Chavez was asking when they got there.

Connolly was wishing for a cigarette. He'd quit years before—it was too hard on the daily runs to indulge—but at times like this it seemed to help the concentration. "Six windows . . . three or four minutes each . . . no, I think not, sir. I can give you two—if we have the time."

"How sturdy are the windows?" Clark asked "Dennis?"

"Metal frames set into the stone," the park manager said with a shrug.

"Wait." The engineer turned a page on the castle blueprints, then two more, and then a finger traced down the written portion on the right side. "Here's the specs . . . they're held in by grouting only. You should be able to kick them in, I think."

The "I think" part was not as reassuring as Ding would have preferred, but how strong could a window frame be with a two-hundred-pound man swinging into it with two boots leading the way?

"What about flash-bangs, Paddy?"

"We can do that," Connolly answered. "It will not do the frames any good at all, sir."

"Okay." Chavez leaned over the plans. "You'll have time to blow two windows—this one and this one." He tapped the prints. "We'll use flash-bangs on the other four and swing in a second later. Eddie here, me here, Louis here. George, how's the leg?"

"Marginal," Sergeant Tomlinson replied with painful honesty. He'd have to kick through a window, swing in, drop to a concrete floor, then come up shooting . . . and the lives of children were at stake. No, he couldn't risk it, could he? "Better somebody else, Ding."

"Oso, think you can do it?" Chavez asked.

"Oh, yeah," Vega replied, trying not to smile. "You bet, Ding."

"Okay, Scotty here, and Mike take these two. What's the exact distance from the roof?"

That was on the blueprints. "Sixteen meters exactly from the level of the roof. Add another seventy centimeters to allow for the battlements."

"The ropes can do that easily," Eddie Price decided. The plan was coming together. He and Ding would have as their primary mission getting between the kids and the bad guys, shooting as they went. Vega, Loiselle, McTyler, and Pierce would be primarily tasked to killing the subjects in the castle's command room, but that would be finally decided only when they entered the room. Covington's Team-1 would race up the stairs from the underground, to intercept any subjects who ran out, and to back up Team-2 if something went wrong on their assault.

Sergeant Major Price and Chavez looked over the blueprints again, measuring distances to be covered and the time in which to do it. It looked possible, even probable, that they could carry it off. Ding looked up at the others.

"Comments?"

Noonan turned to look at the picture from the fiber-optic gear he'd installed. "They seem to be mainly at the control panels. Two guys keeping an eye on the children, but they're not worried about them—makes sense, they're just kids, not adults able to start real resistance . . . but . . . it only takes one of these bastards to turn and hose them, man."

"Yeah." Ding nodded. There was no denying or avoiding that fact. "Well, we have to shoot fast, people. Any way to string them out?"

Bellow thought about that. "If I tell them the plane's on the way . . . that's a risk. If they think we're lying to them, well, they could start taking it out on the hostages, but the upside is, if they think it's about time to head for the airport, probably Mr. One will send a couple of his troops down to the underground—that's the most likely way for them to leave the area, I think. Then, if we can play some more with the surveillance cameras, and get a guy in close—"

"Yeah, pop them right away," Clark said. "Peter?"

"Get us within twenty meters and it's a piece of cake. Plus, we kill the lights right before we hit. Disorient the bastards," Covington added.

"There's emergency lights in the stairwells," Mike Dennis said. "They click on when the power goes down—shit, there's two in the command center, too."

"Where?" Chavez asked.

"The left—I mean the northeast corner and the southwest one. The regular

kind, two lights, like car headlights, they run off a battery."

"Okay, no NVGs when we go in, I guess, but we'll still kill the lights right before we hit, just to distract them. Anything else? Peter?" Ding asked.

Major Covington nodded. "It ought to work."

Clark observed and listened, forced to let his principal subordinates do all the planning and talking, leaving him only able to comment if they made a mistake, and they hadn't done that. Most of all, he wanted to lift an MP-10 and go in with the shooters, but he couldn't do that, and inwardly he swore at the fact. Commanding just wasn't as satisfying as leading.

"We need medics standing by in case the bad guys get lucky," John said to Colonel Nuncio.

"We have paramedics outside the park now—"

"Dr. Weiler is pretty good," Mike Dennis said. "He's had trauma training. We insisted on that in case we have something bad happen here."

"Okay, we'll have him stand-to when the time comes. Dr. Bellow, tell Mr. One that the French have caved, and their friends will be here.... What do you think?"

"Ten-twenty or so. If they agree to that, it's a concession, but the kind that will calm them down—should, anyway."

"Make the call, doc," John Clark ordered.

"Yes?" René said.

"Sanchez is being released from Le Sante prison in about twenty minutes. Six of the others, too, but there's a problem on the last three. I'm not sure what that is. They'll be taken to De Gaulle International Airport and flown here on an Air France Airbus 340. We think they'll be here by twenty-two-forty. Is that acceptable? How will we get you and the hostages to them for the flight out?" Bellow asked.

"A bus, I think. You will bring the bus right to the castle. We will take ten or so of the children with us, and leave the rest here as a show of good faith on our part. Tell the police that we know how to move the children without giving them a chance to do something foolish, and any treachery will have severe consequences."

"We do not want any more children harmed," Bellow assured him.

"If you do as you are told, that will not be necessary, but understand," René went on firmly, "if you do anything foolish, then the courtyard will run red with blood. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, One, I understand," the voice replied.

René set the phone down and stood. "My friends, Il'ych is coming. The French have granted our demands."

"He looks like a happy camper," Noonan said, eyes locked on the black-and-white picture. The one who had to be Mr. One was standing now, walking toward another of the subjects, and they appeared to shake hands on the fuzzy picture.

"They're not going to lie down and take a nap," Bellow warned. "If anything, they're going to be more alert now."

"Yeah, I know," Chavez assured him. *But if we do our job right, it doesn't*

matter how alert they are.

Malloy headed back to the airfield for refueling, which took half an hour. While there he heard what was going to happen in another hour. In the back of the Night Hawk, Sergeant Nance set up the ropes, set to fifty feet length exactly, and hooked them into eyebolts on the chopper's floor. Like the pilots, Nance, too, had a pistol holstered on his left side. He never expected to use it, and was only a mediocre shot, but it made him feel like part of the team, and that was important to him. He supervised the refueling, capped the tank, and told Colonel Malloy the bird was ready.

Malloy pulled up on the collective, brought the Night Hawk into the air, then pushed the cyclic forward to return to Worldpark. From this point on, their flight routine would be changing. On arriving over the park, the Night Hawk didn't circle. Instead it flew directly over the castle every few minutes, then drew off into the distance, his anticollision strobe lights flashing as he moved around the park grounds, seemingly at random, bored with the orbiting he'd done before.

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"Okay, people, let's move," Chavez told his team. Those directly involved in the rescue operation headed out into the underground corridor, then out to where the Spanish army truck stood. They boarded it, and it drove off, looping around into the massive parking lot.

Dieter Weber selected a sniper perch opposite Sergeant Johnston's position, on top of the flat roof of a theater building where kids viewed cartoons, only a hundred twenty meters from the castle's east side. Once there, he unrolled his foam mat, set up his rifle on the bipod, and started training his ten-power scope over the castle's windows.

"Rifle Two-Two in position," he reported to Clark.

"Very well, report as necessary, Al?" Clark said, looking up.

Stanley looked grim. "A sodding lot of guns, and a lot of children."

"Yeah, I know. Anything else we could try?"

Stanley shook his head. "It's a good plan. If we try outside, we give them too much maneuvering space, and they will feel safer in this castle building. No, Peter and Ding have a good plan, but there's no such bloody thing as a perfect one."

"Yeah," John said. "I want to be there, too. This command stuff sucks the big one."

Alistair Stanley grunted. "Quite."

The parking lot lights all went off at once. The truck, also with lights out, stopped next to a light standard. Chavez and his team jumped out. Ten seconds later, the Night Hawk came in, touching down with the rotor still turning fast. The side doors opened, and the shooters clambered aboard and sat down on the floor. Sergeant Nance closed one door, then the other.

"All aboard, Colonel."

Without a word, Malloy pulled the collective and climbed back into the sky, mindful of the light standards, which could have wrecked the whole mission. It took only four seconds to clear them, and he banked the aircraft to head back toward the park.

"A/C lights off," Malloy told Lieutenant Harrison.

"Lights off," the copilot confirmed.

"We ready?" Ding asked his men in the back.

"Goddamn right, we are," Mike Pierce said back. *Fucking murderers,* he didn't add. But every man on the bird was thinking that. Weapons were slung tight across their chests, and they had their zip-lining gloves on. Three of the men were pulling them tight on their hands, a show of some tension on their part that went along with the grim faces.

"Where is the aircraft?" One asked.

"About an hour and ten minutes out," Dr. Bellow replied. "When do you want your bus?"

"Exactly forty minutes before the aircraft lands. It will then be refueled while we board it."

"Where are you going?" Bellow asked next.

"We will tell the pilot when we get aboard."

"Okay, we have the bus coming now. It will be here in about fifteen minutes. Where do you want it to come?"

"Right to the castle, past the Dive Bomber ride."

"Okay, I will tell them to do that," Bellow promised.

"Merci." The phone went dead again.

"Smart," Noonan observed. "They'll have two surveillance cameras on the bus all the way in, so we can't use it to screen a rescue team. And they probably plan to use the mountaineer technique to get the hostages aboard." *Tough shit,* he didn't add.

"Bear, this is Six," Clark called on the radio.

"Bear copies, Six, over."

"We execute in five minutes."

"Roger that, we party in five."

Malloy turned in his seat. Chavez had heard the call and nodded, holding up one hand, fingers spread.

"Rainbow, this is Six. Stand-to, repeat stand-to. We commence the operation in five minutes."

• • •

In the underground, Peter Covington led three of his men east toward the castle stairwells, while the park engineer selectively killed off the surveillance cameras. His explosives man set a small charge on the fire door at the bottom and nodded at his boss.

"Team-1 is ready."

"Rifle Two-One is ready and on target," Johnston said.

"Rifle Two-Two is ready, but no target at this time," Weber told Clark.

"Three, this is One," the scanner crackled in the command room.

"Yes, One," the man atop the castle replied.

"Anything happening?"

"No, One, the police are staying where they are. And the helicopter is flying around somewhere, but not doing anything."

"The bus should be here in fifteen minutes. Stay alert."

"I will," Three promised.

"Okay," Noonan said. "That's a time-stamp. Mr. One calls Mr. Three about every fifteen minutes. Never more than eighteen, never less than twelve. So—"

"Yeah." Clark nodded. "Move it up?"

"Why not," Stanley said.

"Rainbow, this is Six. Move in and execute. Say again, *execute now!"*

Aboard the Night Hawk, Sergeant Nance moved left and right, sliding the side doors open. He gave a thumbs-up to the shooters that they returned, each man hooking up his zip-line rope to D-rings on their belts. All of them turned inward, getting up on the balls of their feet so that their backsides were now dangling outside the helicopter.

"Sergeant Nance, I will flash you when we're in place."

"Roger, sir," the crew chief replied, crouching in the now-empty middle of the passenger area, his arms reaching to the men on both sides.

• • •

"Andre, go down and look at the courtyard," René ordered. His man moved at once, holding his Uzi in both hands.

"Somebody just left the room," Noonan said.

"Rainbow, this is Six, one subject has left the command center."

Eight, Chavez thought. *Eight subjects to take down.* The other two would go to the long-riflemen.

The last two hundred meters were the hard ones, Malloy thought. His hands tingled on the cyclic control stick, and as many times as he'd done this, this one was not a rehearsal. *Okay* . . . He dropped his nose, heading toward the castle, and without the anticollision lights, the aircraft would only be a shadow, slightly darker than the night—better yet, the four-bladed rotor made a sound that was nondirectional. Someone could hear it, but locating the source was difficult, and he needed that to last only a few more seconds.

"Rifle Two-One, stand by."

"Rifle Two-One is on target, Six," Johnston reported. His breathing regularized, and his elbows moved slightly, so that only bone, not muscle, was in contact with the mat under him. The mere passage of blood through his

arteries could throw his aim off. His crosshairs were locked just forward of the sentry's ear. "On target," he repeated.

"Fire," the earpiece told him.

Say good night, Gracie, a small voice in his mind whispered. His finger pushed back gently on the set trigger, which snapped cleanly, and a gout of white flame exploded from the muzzle of the rifle. The flash obscured the sight picture for a brief moment, then cleared in time for him to see the bullet impact. There was a slight puff of gray-looking vapor from the far side of the head, and the body dropped straight down like a puppet with cut strings. No one inside would hear the shot, not through thick windows and stone walls from over three hundred meters away.

"Rifle Two-One. Target is down. Target is down. Center head," Johnston reported.

"That's a kill," Lieutenant Harrison breathed over the intercom. From the helicopter's perspective, the destruction of the sentry's head looked quite spectacular. It was the first death he'd ever seen, and it struck him as something in a movie, not something real. The target hadn't been a living being to him, and now it would never be.

"Yep," Malloy agreed, easing back on the cyclic. "Sergeant Nance—*now!"*

In the back, Nance pushed outward. The helicopter was still slowing, nose up now, as Malloy performed the rocking-chair maneuver to perfection.

Chavez pushed off with his feet, and went down the zip-line. It took less than two seconds of not-quite free-fall before he applied tension to the line to slow his descent, and his black, rubber-soled boots came down lightly on the flat roof. He immediately loosed his rope, and turned to watch his people do the same. Eddie Price ran over to the sentry's body, kicked the head over with his boot, and turned, making a thumbs-up for his boss.

"Six, this is Team-2 Lead. On the roof. The sentry is dead," he said into his microphone. "Proceeding now." With that, Chavez turned to his people, waving his arms to the roof's periphery. The Night Hawk was gone into the darkness, having hardly appeared to have stopped at all.

The castle roof was surrounded by the battlements associated with such places, vertical rectangles of stone behind which archers could shelter while loosing their arrows at attackers. Each man had one such shelter assigned, and they counted them off with their fingers, so that every man went to the right one. For this night, the men looped their rappelling ropes around them, then stepped into the gaps. When all of them were set up, they held up their hands. Chavez did the same, then dropped his as he kicked off the roof and slid down the rope to a point a meter to the right of a window, using his feet to stand off the wall. Paddy Connolly came down on the other side, reached to apply his Primacord around the edges, and inserted a radio-detonator on one edge. Then Paddy moved to his left, swinging on the rope as though it were a jungle vine to do the same to one other. Other team members took flash-bang grenades and held them in their hands.

"Two-Lead to Six—lights!"

In the command center, the engineer again isolated the power to the castle and shut it off.

Outside the windows, Team-2 saw the windows go dark, and then a second or two later the wall-mounted emergency lights came on, just like miniature auto headlights, not enough to light the room up properly. The TV monitors they were watching went dark as well.

"Merde," René said, sitting and reaching for a phone. If they wanted to play more games, then he could—he thought he saw some movement outside the window and looked more closely—

"Team-2, this is lead. Five seconds . . . five . . . four . . . three—" At "three," the men holding the flash-bangs pulled the pins and set them right next to the windows, then turned aside. "—. . . two . . . one . . . *fire!"*

Sergeant Connolly pressed his button, and two windows were sundered from the wall by explosives. A fraction of a second later, three more windows were blown in by a wall of noise and blazing light. They flew across the room in a shower of glass and lead fragments, missing the children in the corner by three meters.

Next to Chavez, Sergeant Major Price tossed in another flash-bang, which exploded the moment it touched the floor. Then Chavez pushed outward from the wall, swinging into the room through the window, his MP-10 up and in both hands. He hit the floor badly, falling backward, unable to control his balance, then felt Price's feet land on his left arm. Chavez rolled and jolted to his feet, then moved to the kids. They were screaming with alarm, covering their faces and ears from the abuse of the flash-bangs. But he couldn't worry about them just yet.

Price landed better, moved right as well, but turned to scan the room. There. It was a bearded one, holding an Uzi. Price extended his MP-10 to the limit of the sling and fired a three-round burst right into his face from three meters away. The force of the bullet impacts belied the suppressed noise of the shots.

Oso Vega had kicked his window loose on leg-power alone, and landed right on top of a subject, rather to the surprise of both, but Vega was ready for surprises, and the terrorist was not. Oso's left hand slammed out, seemingly of its own accord, and hit him in the face with enough force to split it open into a bloody mess that a burst of three 10-mm rounds only made worse.

René was sitting at his desk, the phone in his hand, and his pistol on the tabletop before him. He was reaching for it when Pierce fired into the side of his head from six feet away.

In the far corner, Chavez and Price skidded to a stop, their bodies between the terrorists and the hostages. Ding came to one knee, his weapon up while his eyes scanned for targets, as he listened to the suppressed chatter of his men's weapons. The semidarkness of the room was alive now with moving shadows. Loiselle found himself behind a subject, close enough to touch him with the muzzle of his submachine gun. This he did. It made the shot an easy one, but sprayed blood and brains all over the room.

One in the corner got his Uzi up, and his finger went down on the trigger, spraying in the direction of the children. Chavez and Price both engaged him, then McTyler as well, and the terrorist went down in a crumpled mass.

Another had opened a door and raced through it, splattered by bullet fragments from a shooter whose aim was off and hit the door. This one ran

down, away from the shooting, turning one corner, then another—and tried to stop when he saw a black shape on the steps.

It was Peter Covington, leading his team up. Covington had heard the noise of his steps and taken aim, then fired when the surprised-looking face entered his sights. Then he resumed his race topside, with four men behind him.

That left three in the room. Two hid behind desks, one holding his Uzi up and firing blindly. Mike Pierce jumped over the desk, twisting in midair as he did so, and shot him three times in the side and back. Then Pierce landed, turned back and fired another burst into the back of his head. The other one under a desk was shot in the back by Paddy Connolly. The one who was left stood, blazing away wildly with his weapon, only to be taken down by no fewer than four team members.

Just then the door opened, and Covington came in. Vega was circulating about, kicking the weapons away from every body, and after five seconds shouted: *"Clear!"*

"Clear!" Pierce agreed.

Andre was outside, in the open and all alone. He turned to look up at the castle.

"Dieter!" Homer Johnston called.

"Yes!"

"Can you take his weapon out?"

The German somehow read the American's mind. The answer was an exquisitely aimed shot that struck Andre's submachine gun just above the trigger guard. The impact of the .300 Winchester Magnum bullet blasted through the rough, stamped metal and broke the gun nearly in half. From his perch four hundred meters away, Johnston took careful aim, and fired his second round of the engagement. It would forever be regarded as a very bad shot. Half a second later, the 7-mm bullet struck the subject six inches below the sternum.

For Andre, it seemed like a murderously hard punch. Already the match bullet had fragmented, ripping his liver and spleen as it continued its passage, exiting his body above the left kidney. Then, following the shock of the initial impact, came a wave of pain. An instant later, his screech ripped across the 100 acres of Worldpark.

"Check this out," Chavez said in the command center. His body armor had two holes in the torso. They wouldn't have been fatal, but they would have hurt. "Thank God for DuPont, eh?"

"Miller Time!" Vega said with a broad grin.

"Command, this is Chavez. Mission accomplished. The kids—uh oh, we got one kid hurt here, looks like a scratch on the arm, the rest of 'em are all okay. Subjects all down for the count, Mr. C. You can turn the lights back on."

As Ding watched, Oso Vega leaned down and picked up a little girl. "Hello, *querida.* Let's find your *mamacita,* eh?"

"Rainbow!" Mike Pierce exulted. "Tell 'em there's a new sheriff in town, people!"

"Bloody right, Mike!" Eddie Price reached into his pocket and pulled out his

pipe and a pouch of good Cavendish tobacco.

There were things to be done. Vega, Pierce, and Loiselle collected the weapons, safed them, and stacked them on a desk. McTyler and Connolly checked out the restrooms and other adjacent doors for additional terrorists, finding none. Scotty waved to the door.

"Okay, let's get the kids out," Ding told his people. "Peter, lead us out!"

Covington had his team open the fire door and man the stairway, one man on each landing. Vega took the lead, holding the five-year-old with his left arm while his right continued to hold his MP-10. A minute later, they were outside.

Chavez stayed behind, looking at the wall with Eddie Price. There were seven holes in the corner where the kids had been, but all the rounds were high, into the drywall paneling. "Lucky," Chavez said.

"Somewhat," Sergeant Major Price agreed. "That's the one we both engaged, Ding. He was just firing, not aiming—and maybe at us, not them, I think."

"Good job, Eddie."

"Indeed," Price agreed. With that they both walked outside, leaving the bodies behind for the police to collect.

"Command, this is Bear, what's happening, over."

"Mission accomplished, no friendlies hurt. Well done, Bear," Clark told him.

"Roger and thank you, sir. Bear is RTB. Out. I need to take a piss," the Marine told his copilot, as he horsed the Night Hawk west for the airfield.

Homer Johnston fairly ran down the steps of the Dive Bomber ride, carrying his rifle and nearly tripping three times on the way down. Then he ran the few hundred meters to the castle. There was a doctor there, wearing a white coat and looking down at the man Johnston had shot.

"How is he?" the sergeant asked when he got there. It was pretty clear. The man's hands were holding his belly, and were covered with blood that looked strangely black in the courtyard lighting.

"He will not survive," Dr. Weiler said. Maybe if they were in a hospital operating room right now, he'd have a slim chance, but he was bleeding out through the lacerated spleen, and his liver was probably destroyed as well.... And so, no, absent a liver transplant, he had no chance at all, and all Weiler could do was give him morphine for the pain. He reached into his bag for a syringe.

"That's the one shot the little girl," Johnston told the doctor. "I guess my aim was a little off," he went on, looking down into the open eyes and the grimacing face that let loose another moaning scream. If he'd been a deer or an elk, Johnston would have finished him off with a pistol round in the head or neck, but you weren't supposed to do that with human targets. *Die slow, you fuck,* he didn't say aloud. It disappointed Johnston that the doctor gave him a pain injection, but physicians were sworn to their duty, as he was to his.

"Pretty low," Chavez said, coming up to the last living terrorist.

"Guess I slapped the trigger a little hard," the rifleman responded.

Chavez looked straight in his eyes. "Yeah, right. Get your gear."

"In a minute." The target's eyes went soft when the drug entered his

bloodstream, but the hands still grabbed at the wound, and there was a puddle of blood spreading from under his back. Finally, the eyes looked up at Johnston one last time.

"Good night, Gracie," the rifleman said quietly. Ten seconds later, he was able to turn away and head back to the Dive Bomber to retrieve the rest of his gear.

There were a lot of soiled underpants in the medical office, and a lot of kids still wide-eyed in shock, having lived through a nightmare that all would relive for years to come. The Rainbow troopers fussed over them. One bandaged the only wound, a scratch really, on a young boy.

Centurion de la Cruz was still there, having refused evacuation. The troops in black stripped off their body armor and set it against the wall, and he saw on their uniform jackets the jump wings of paratroopers, American, British, and German, along with the satisfied look of soldiers who'd gotten the job done.

"Who are you?" he asked in Spanish.

"I'm sorry, I can't say," Chavez replied. "But I saw what you did on the videotape. You did well, Sergeant."

"So did you, ah? . . ."

"Chavez. Domingo Chavez."

"American?"

"Sí."

"The children, were any hurt?"

"Just the one over there."

"And the—criminals?"

"They will break no more laws, *amigo.* None at all," Team-2 Lead told him quietly.

"Bueno." De la Cruz reached up to take his hand. "It was hard?"

"It is always hard, but we train for the hard things, and my men are—"

"They have the look," de la Cruz agreed.

"So do you." Chavez turned. "Hey, guys, here's the one who took 'em on with a sword."

"Oh, yeah?" Mike Pierce came over. "I finished that one off for you. Ballsy move, man." Pierce took his hand and shook it. The rest of the troopers did the same.

"I must—I must—" De la Cruz stood and hobbled out the door. He came back in five minutes later, following John Clark, and holding—

"What the hell is that?" Chavez asked.

"The eagle of the legion, VI *Legio Victrix,"* the centurion told them, holding it in one hand. "The victorious legion. *Señor* Dennis, *con permiso?"*

"Yes, Francisco," the park manager said with a serious nod.

"With the respect of my legion, *Señor* Chavez. Keep this in a place of honor."

Ding took it. The damned thing must have weighed twenty pounds, plated as it was with gold. It would be a fit trophy for the club at Hereford. "We will do that, my friend," he promised the former sergeant, with a look at John Clark.

The stress was bleeding off now, to be followed as usual by elation and fatigue. The troopers looked at the kids they'd saved, still quiet and cowed by

the night, but soon to be reunited with their parents. They heard the sound of a bus outside. Steve Lincoln opened the door, and watched the grown-ups leap out of it. He waved them through the door, and the shouts of joy filled the room.

"Time to leave," John said. He, too, walked over to shake hands with de la Cruz as the troops filed out.

Out in the open, Eddie Price had his own drill to complete. His pipe now filled, he took a kitchen match from his pocket and struck it on the stone wall of the medical office, lighting the curved briar pipe for a long, victorious puff as parents pushed in, and others pushed out, holding their children, many weeping at their deliverance.

Colonel Gamelin was standing by the bus and came over. "You are the Legion?" he asked.

Louis Loiselle handled the answer. "In a way, monsieur," he said in French. He looked up to see a surveillance camera pointed directly at the door, probably to record the event, the parents filing out with their kids, many pausing to shake hands with the Rainbow troopers. Then Clark led them off, back to the castle, and into the underground. On the way the Guardia Civil cops saluted, the gestures returned by the special-ops troopers.

CHAPTER 16

DISCOVERY

The successful conclusion of the Worldpark operation turned out to be a problem for some, and one of them was Colonel Tomas Nuncio, the senior officer of the Guardia Civil on the scene. Assumed by the local media to be the officer in command of the operation, he was immediately besieged with requests for details of the operation, along with videotapes for the TV reporters. So successful had he been in isolating the theme park from press coverage that his superiors in Madrid themselves had little idea what had taken place, and this also weighed on his decision. So the colonel decided to release Worldpark's own video coverage, deeming this to be the most innocuous footage possible, as it showed very little. The most dramatic part had been the descent of the shooting team from the helicopter to the castle roof, and then from the roof of the castle to the control-room windows, and that, Nuncio decided, was pure vanilla, lasting a mere four minutes, the time required for Paddy Connolly to place his line charges on the window frames and move aside to detonate them. Nothing of the shooting inside the room had been taped, because the terrorists had themselves wrecked the surveillance camera inside the facility. The elimination of the castle-roof sentry had been taped, but was not released due to the gruesome nature of his head wound, and the same was true of the killing of the last of them, the one named Andre who had killed the little Dutch girl—which scene had also been recorded, but was withheld for the same reason. The rest was all let go. The distance of the cameras from the actual scene of action prevented the recognition, or even the sight of the faces of the rescue team, merely their jaunty steps outside, many of them carrying the rescued children—that, he decided, could harm or offend no one, least of all the special-operations team from England, who now had one of the *tricornio* hats from his force to go along with the eagle of Worldpark's notional VI Legion as a souvenir of their successful mission.

And so, the black-and-white video was released to CNN, Sky News, and other interested news agencies for broadcast around the world, to give substance to the commentary of various reporters who'd assembled at Worldpark's main gate, there to comment at great and erroneous length about the expertise of the Guardia Civil's special-action team dispatched from Madrid to resolve this hateful episode at one of the world's great theme parks.

It was eight o'clock in the evening when Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov saw it in his New York apartment, as he smoked a cigar and sipped a vodka neat while his VCR taped it for later detailed examination. The assault phase, he saw, was both expert and expected in all details. The flashes of light from the explosives used were dramatic and singularly useless for showing him

anything, and the parade of the rescuers as predictable as the dawn, their springy steps, their slung weapons, and their arms full of small children. Well, such men would naturally feel elation at the successful conclusion of such a mission, and the trailing footage showed them walking off to a building, where there must have been a physician to take care of the one child who'd sustained a minor injury during the operation, as the reporters said. Then, later, the troops had come outside, and one of them had swiped an arm against the stone wall of the building, lighting a match, which he used . . .

. . . to light a pipe . . .

To light a pipe, Popov saw. He was surprised at his own reaction to that. He blinked hard, leaning forward in his seat. The camera didn't zoom in, but the soldier/policeman in question was clearly smoking a curved pipe, puffing the smoke out every few seconds as he spoke with his comrades . . . doing nothing dramatic, just talking unrecorded words calmly, as such men did after a successful mission, doubtless discussing who had done what, what had gone according to plan and what had not. It might as easily have been in a club or bar, for trained men always spoke the same way in those circumstances, whether they were soldiers or doctors or football players, after the stress of the job was concluded, and the lessons-learned phase began. It was the usual mark of professionals, Popov knew. Then the picture changed, back to the face of some American reporter who blathered on until the break for the next commercial, to be followed, the anchorman said, by some political development or other in Washington. With that, Popov rewound the tape, ejected it, and then reached for a different tape. He inserted it into the VCR, then fast-forwarded to the end of the incident in Bern, through the takedown phase and into the aftermath where . . . yes, a man had lit a pipe. He'd remembered that from watching from across the street, hadn't he?

Then he got the tape of the press coverage from the Vienna incident, and . . . yes, at the end a man had lit a pipe. In every case it was a man of about one hundred eighty centimeters in height, making much the same gesture with the match, holding the pipe in exactly the same way, gesturing to another with it in exactly the same manner, the way men did with pipes . . .

". . . ahh, *nichevo,"* the intelligence officer said to himself in the expensive high-rise apartment. He spent another half an hour, cueing and rerunning the tapes. The clothing was the same in every case. The man the same size, the same gestures and body language, the same weapons slung the same way, the same *everything,* the former KGB officer saw. And that meant the same man . . . in three separate countries.

But this man was not Swiss, not Austrian, and not Spanish. Next Popov backed off his deductive thoughts, searching for other facts he could discern from the visual information he had there. There were other people visible in all the tapes. The pipe smoker was often attended by another man, shorter than he, to whom the pipe smoker appeared to speak with some degree of friendly deference. There was another around, a large, muscular one who in two of the tapes carried a heavy machine gun, but in the third, carrying a child, did not. So, he had two and maybe a third man on the tapes who had appeared in Bern, Vienna, and Spain. In every case, the reporters had credited the rescue to local police, but no, that wasn't the truth, was it? So, who were

these people who arrived with the speed and decisiveness of a thunderbolt—in *three* different countries . . . twice to conclude operations that he had initiated, and once to settle one begun by others—and who they had been, he didn't know nor especially care. The reporters said that they'd demanded the release of his old friend, the Jackal. What fools. The French would as soon toss Napoleon's corpse from Les Invalides as give up that murderer. Il'ych Ramirez Sanchez, named with Lenin's own patronymic by his communist father. Popov shook that thought off. He'd just discovered something of great importance. Somewhere in Europe was a special-operations team that crossed international borders as easily as a businessman flying in an airliner, that had freedom to operate in different countries, that displaced and did the work of local police . . . and did it well, expertly . . . and this operation would not hurt them, would it? Their prestige and international acceptability would only grow from the rescue of the children at Worldpark . . .

"Nichevo," he whispered to himself again. He'd learned something of great importance this night, and to celebrate he poured himself another vodka. Now he had to follow it up. How? He'd think that one over, sleeping on the thought, trusting his trained brain to come up with something.

They were nearly home already. The MC-130 had picked them up and flown the now relaxed team back to Hereford, their weapons re-packed in the plastic carrying cases, their demeanor not the least bit tense. Some of the men were cutting up. Others were explaining what they'd done to team members who'd not had the chance to participate directly. Mike Pierce, Clark saw, was especially animated in his conversation with his neighbor. He was now the Rainbow kill-leader. Homer Johnston was chatting with Weber—they'd come to some sort of deal, something agreed between them. Weber had taken a beautiful but out-of-policy shot to disable the terrorist's Uzi, allowing Johnston to—of course, John told himself, he didn't just want to kill the bastard who'd murdered the little girl. He'd wanted to *hurt* the little prick, to send him off to hell with a special, personal message. He'd have to talk to Sergeant Johnston about that. It was outside of Rainbow policy. It was unprofessional. Just killing the bastards was enough. You could always trust God to handle the special treatment. But—well, John told himself he could understand that, couldn't he? There had once been that little bastard called Billy to whom he'd given a very special interrogation in a recompression chamber, and though he remembered it with a measure of pain and shame, at the time he'd felt it justified . . . and he'd gotten the information he'd needed at the time, hadn't he? Even so, he'd have to talk with Homer, advise him never to do such a thing again. And Homer would listen, John knew. He'd exorcised the demons once, and once, usually, was enough. It must have been hard for him to sit at his rifle, watching the murder of a child, the power to avenge her instantly right there in his skilled hands, and yet do nothing. *Could* you *have done that, John?* Clark asked himself, not really knowing what the answer was in his current, exhausted state. He felt the wheels thump down on the Hereford runway, and the props roar into reverse pitch to slow the aircraft.

Well, John thought, his idea, his concept for Rainbow was working out

rather well, wasn't it? Three deployments, three clean missions. Two hostages killed, one before his team deployed to Bern, the other just barely after their arrival in the park, neither one the result of negligence or mistake on the part of his men. Their mission performance had been as nearly perfect as anything he'd ever seen. Even his fellow animals of 3rd SOG in Vietnam hadn't been this good, and *that* was something he'd *never* expected to say or even think. The thought came suddenly, and just as unexpectedly came the near-need for tears, that he might have the honor to command such warriors as these, to send them out and bring them back as they were now, smiling as they stood, hoisting their gear on their shoulders and walking to the open rear cargo door on the Herky Bird, behind which waited their trucks. His men.

"The bar is open!" Clark called to them, when he stood.

"A little late, John," Alistair observed.

"If the door's locked, we'll have Paddy blow it," Clark insisted, with a vicious grin.

Stanley considered that and nodded. "Quite so, the lads have earned a pint or two each." Besides which, he knew how to pick locks.

They walked into the club still wearing their ninja suits, and found the barman waiting. There were a few others in the club as well, mainly SAS troopers sipping at their last-call pints. Several of them applauded when the Rainbow team came in, which warmed the room. John walked to the bar, leading his men and ordering beer for all.

"I do love this stuff," Mike Pierce said a minute later, taking his Guinness and sipping through the thin layer of foam.

"Two, Mike?" Clark asked.

"Yeah." He nodded. "The one at the desk, he was on the phone. Tap-tap," Pierce said, touching two fingers to the side of his head. "Then another one, shooting from behind a desk. I jumped over and gave him three on the fly. Landed, rolled, and three more in the back of the head. So long, Charlie. Then one more, got a piece of him, along with Ding and Eddie. Ain't supposed to like this part of the job. I know that—but, Jesus, it felt good to take those fuckers down. Killin' kids, man. Not good. Well, they ain't gonna be doing any more of that, sir. Not with the new sheriff in town."

"Well, nice going, Mr. Marshal," John replied, with a raised-glass salute. There'd be no nightmares about this one, Clark thought, sipping his own dark beer. He looked around. In the corner, Weber and Johnston were talking, the latter with his hand on the former's shoulder, doubtless thanking him for the fine shot to disable the murderer's Uzi. Clark walked over and stood next to the two sergeants.

"I know, boss," Homer said, without being told anything. "Never again, but goddamn, it felt good."

"Like you said, never again, Homer."

"Yes, sir. Slapped the trigger a little hard," Johnston said, to cover his ass in an official sense.

"Bullshit," Rainbow Six observed. "I'll accept it—just this once. And you, Dieter, nice shot, but—"

"Nie wieder. Herr General. I know, sir." The German nodded his submission to the moment. "Homer, *Junge,* the look on his face when you hit him. *Ach,*

that was something to see, my friend. Good for the one on the castle roof, too."

"Easy shot," Johnston said dismissively. "He was standing still. Zap. Easier 'n throwing darts, pal."

Clark patted both on the shoulder and wandered over to Chavez and Price.

"Did you have to land on my arm?" Ding complained lightly.

"So, next time, come through the window straight, not at an angle."

"Right." Chavez took a long sip of the Guinness.

"How'd it go?" John asked them.

"Aside from being hit twice, not bad," Chavez replied. "I have to get a new vest, though." Once hit, the vests were considered to be ruined for further use. This one would go back to the manufacturer for study to see how it had performed. "Which one was that, you think, Eddie?"

"The last one, I think, the one who just stood and sprayed at the children."

"Well, that was the plan, for us to stop those rounds, and that one went down hard. You, me, Mike, and Oso, I think, took him apart." Whatever cop had recovered that body would need a blotter and a freezer bag to collect the spilled brains.

"That we did," Price agreed as Julio came over.

"Hey, that was okay, guys!" First Sergeant Vega told them, pleased to have finally participated in a field operation.

"Since when do we punch our targets?" Chavez asked.

Vega looked a little embarrassed. "Instinct, he was so close. You know, probably could have taken him alive, but—well, nobody ever told me to do that, y'know?"

"That's cool, Oso. That wasn't part of the mission, not with a room full of kids."

Vega nodded. "What I figured, and the shot was pretty automatic, too, just playin' like we practice, man. Anyway, that one went down real good, *jefe."*

"Any problem on the window?" Price wanted to know.

Vega shook his head. "Nah, gave it a good kick, and it moved just fine. Bumped a shoulder coming through the frame, but no problems there. I was pretty pumped. But you know, you shoulda had me cover the kids. I'm bigger, I woulda stopped more bullets."

Chavez didn't say that he'd worried about Vega's agility—wrongly, as it had turned out. An important lesson learned. Bulky as Oso was, he moved lightly on his feet, far more so than Ding had expected. The bear could dance pretty well, though at 225 pounds, he was a little large for a tutu.

"Fine operation," Bill Tawney said, joining the group.

"Anything develop?"

"We have a possible identification on one of them, the chap who killed the child. The French ran the photo through some police informants, and they think it might be an Andre Herr, Parisian by birth, thought to be a stringer for Action Directe once upon a time, but nothing definite. More information is on the way, they say. The whole set of photos and fingerprints from Spain is on its way to Paris now for follow-up investigation. Not all of the photos will be very useful, I am told."

"Yeah, well, a burst of hollowpoints will rearrange a guy's face, man,"

Chavez observed with a chuckle. “Not a hell of a lot we can do about that.”

“So, who initiated the operation?” Clark asked.

Tawney shrugged. “Not a clue at this point. That’s for the French police to investigate.”

“Would be nice to know. We’ve had three incidents since we got here. Isn’t that a lot?” Chavez asked, suddenly very serious.

“It is,” the intelligence officer agreed. “It would not have been ten or fifteen years ago, but things had quieted down recently.” Another shrug. “Could be mere coincidence, or perhaps copycatting, but—”

“Copycat? I shouldn’t think so, sir,” Eddie Price observed. “We’ve given bloody little encouragement to any terr’ who has ambitions, and today’s operation ought to have a further calming effect on those people.”

“That makes sense to me,” Ding agreed. “Like Mike Pierce said, there’s a new sheriff in town, and the word on the street ought to be ‘don’t fuck with him’ even if people think we’re just local cops with an attitude. Take it a step further, Mr. C.”

“Go public?” Clark shook his head. “That’s never been part of the plan, Domingo.”

“Well, if the mission’s to take the bastards down in the field, that’s one thing. If the mission is to make these bastards think twice about raising hell—to stop terrorist incidents from happening at all—then it’s another thing entirely. The idea of a new sheriff in town might just take the starch out of their backs and put them back to washing cars, or whatever the hell they do when they’re not being bad. Deterrence, we call it, when nation-states do it. Will it work on a terrorist mentality? Something to talk with Doc Bellow about, John,” Chavez concluded.

And again Chavez had surprised him, Clark realized. Three straight successes, all of them covered on the TV news, might well have an effect on the surviving terrorists in Europe or elsewhere with lingering ambitions, mightn’t it? And that *was* something to talk to Paul Bellow about. But it was much too soon for anyone on the team to be that optimistic . . . probably, John told himself with a thoughtful sip. The party was just beginning to break up. It had been a very long day for the Rainbow troopers, and one by one they set their glasses down on the bar, which ought to have closed some time before, and headed for the door for the walk to their homes. Another day and another mission had ended. Yet another day had already begun, and in only a few hours, they’d be awakened to run and exercise and begin another day of routine training.

“Were you planning to leave us?” the jailer asked Inmate Sanchez in a voice dripping with irony.

“What do you mean?” Carlos responded.

“Some colleagues of yours misbehaved yesterday,” the prison guard responded, tossing a copy of *Le Figaro* through the door. “They will not do so again.”

The photo on the front page was taken off the Worldpark video, the quality miserably poor, but clear enough to show a soldier dressed in black carrying a child, and the first paragraph of the story told the tale. Carlos scanned it,

sitting on his prison bed to read the piece in detail, then felt a depth of black despair that he'd not thought possible. Someone had heard his plea, he realized, and it had come to nothing. Life in this stone cage beckoned as he looked up to the sun coming in the single window. Life. It would be a long one, probably a healthy one, and certainly a bleak one. His hands crumpled the paper when he'd finished the article. Damn the Spanish police. Damn the world.

"Yes, I saw it on the news last night," he said into the phone as he shaved.

"I need to see you. I have something to show you, sir," Popov's voice said, just after seven in the morning.

The man thought about that. Popov was a clever bastard who'd done his jobs without much in the way of questions . . . and there was little in the way of a paper trail, certainly nothing his lawyers couldn't handle if it came to that, and it wouldn't. There were ways of dealing with Popov, too, if it came to that.

"Okay, be there at eight-fifteen."

"Yes, sir," the Russian said, hanging up.

Pete was in real agony now, Killgore saw. It was time to move him. This he ordered at once, and two orderlies came in dressed in upgraded protective gear to load the wino onto a gurney for transport to the clinical side. Killgore followed them and his patient. The clinical side was essentially a duplication of the room in which the street bums had lounged and drunk their booze, waiting unknowingly for the onset of symptoms. He now had them all, to the point that booze and moderate doses of morphine no longer handled the pain. The orderlies loaded Pete onto a bed, next to which was an electronically operated "Christmas tree" medication dispenser. Killgore handled the stick, and got the IV plugged into Pete's major vein. Then he keyed the electronic box, and seconds later, the patient relaxed with a large bolus of medication. The eyes went sleepy and the body relaxed while the Shiva continued to eat him alive from the inside out. Another IV would be set up to feed him with nutrients to keep his body going, along with various drugs to see if any of them had an unexpectedly beneficial effect on the Shiva. They had a whole roomful of such drugs, ranging from antibiotics—which were expected to be useless against this viral infection—to Interleukin-2 and a newly developed -3a, which, some thought, might help, plus tailored Shiva antibodies taken from experimental animals. None were expected to work, but all had to be tested to make sure they didn't, lest there be a surprise out there when the epidemic spread. Vaccine-B was expected to work, and that was being tested now with the new control group of people kidnapped from Manhattan bars, along with the notional Vaccine-A, whose purpose was rather different from -B. The nanocapsules developed on the other side of the house would come in very handy indeed.

As was being demonstrated even as he had the thought, looking down at Pete's dying body. Subject F4, Mary Bannister, felt sick to her stomach, just a mild queasiness at this point, but didn't think much of it. That sort of thing

happened, and she didn't feel all that bad, some antacids would probably help, and those she got from her medicine cabinet, which was pretty well stocked with over-the-counter medications. Other than that, she felt pretty mellow, as she smiled at herself in the mirror and liked what she saw, a youngish, attractive woman wearing pink silk jammies. With that thought, she walked out of her room, her hair glossy and a spring in her step. Chip was in the sitting room, reading a magazine slowly on the couch, and she made straight for him and sat down beside him.

"Hi, Chip." She smiled.

"Hi, Mary." He smiled back, reaching to touch her hand.

"I upped the Valium in her breakfast," Barbara Archer said in the control room, zooming the camera in. "Along with the other one." The other one was an inhibition reducer.

"You look nice today," Chip told her, his words imperfectly captured by the hidden shotgun microphone.

"Thank you." Another smile.

"She looks pretty dreamy."

"She ought to be," Barbara observed coldly. "There's enough in her to make a nun shuck her habit and get it on."

"What about him?"

"Oh, yeah—didn't give him any steroids." Dr. Archer had a little chuckle at that.

In proof of which, Chip leaned over to kiss Mary on the lips. They were alone in the sitting room.

"How's her blood work look, Barb?"

"Loaded with antibodies, and starting to get some small bricks. She ought to be symptomatic in another few days."

"Eat, drink, and be merry, people, for next week, you die," the other physician told the TV screen.

"Too bad," Dr. Archer agreed. She showed the emotion one might display on seeing a dead dog at the side of the road.

"Nice figure," the man said, as the pajama tops came off. "I haven't seen an X-rated movie in a long time, Barb." A videotape was running, of course. The experimental protocol was set in stone. Everything had to be recorded so that the staff could monitor the entire test program. *Nice tits,* he thought, about the same time Chip did, right before he caressed them on the screen.

"She was fairly inhibited when she got here. The tranquilizers really work, depressing them that way." Another clinical observation. Things progressed rapidly from that point on. Both doctors sipped their coffee as they watched. Tranquilizers or not, the baser human instincts charged forward, and within five minutes Chip and Mary were humping madly away, with the usual sound effects, though the picture, blessedly, wasn't all that clear. A few minutes later, they were lying side by side on the thick shag rug, kissing tiredly and contentedly, his hand stroking her breasts, his eyes closed, his breathing deep and regular as he rolled onto his back.

"Well, Barb, if nothing else, we have a pretty good weekend getaway for couples here," the man observed with a sly grin. "How long do you figure on his blood work?"

"Three or four days until he starts showing antibodies, probably." Chip hadn't been exposed in the shower as Mary had.

"What about the vaccine testers?"

"Five with -A. We have three left as uncontaminated controls for -B testing."

"Oh? Who are we letting live?"

"M2, M3, and F9," Dr. Archer replied. "They seem to have proper attitudes. One's a member of the Sierra Club, would you believe? The others like it outdoors, and they should be okay with what we're doing."

"Political criteria for scientific tests—what *are* we coming to?" the man asked with another chuckle.

"Well, if they're going to live, they might as well be people we can get along with," Archer observed.

"True." A nod. "How confident are you with -B?"

"Very. I expect it to be about ninety-seven percent effective, perhaps a little better," she added conservatively.

"But not a hundred?"

"No, Shiva's a little too nasty for that," Archer told him. "The animal testing is a little crude, I admit, but the results follow the computer model almost exactly, well within the testing-error criteria. Steve's been pretty good on that side."

"Berg's pretty smart," the other doctor agreed. Then he shifted in his chair. "You know, Barb, what we're doing here isn't exactly—"

"I know that," she assured him. "But we all knew that coming in."

"True." He nodded submission, annoyed at himself for the second thoughts. Well, his family would survive, and they all shared his love of the world and its many sorts of inhabitants. Still, these two people on the TV, they were *humans,* just like himself, and he'd just peeped in on them like some sort of pervert. Oh, yeah, they'd only done it because both were loaded with drugs fed to them through their food or in pill form, but they were both sentenced to death and—

"Relax, will you?" Archer said, looking at his face and reading his mind. "At least they're getting a little love, aren't they? That's a hell of a lot more than the rest of the world'll get—"

"I won't have to watch *them."* Being a voyeur wasn't his idea of fun, and he'd told himself often enough that he wouldn't have to watch what he'd be helping to start.

"No, but we'll know about it. It'll be on the TV news, won't it? But then it *will* be too late, and if *they* find out, their last conscious act will be to come after us. That's the part that has me worried."

"The Project enclave in Kansas is pretty damned secure, Barb," the man assured her. "The one in Brazil's even more so." Which was where he'd be going eventually. The rain forest had always fascinated him.

"Could be better," Barbara Archer thought.

"The world isn't a laboratory, doctor, remember?" Wasn't *that* what the whole Shiva project was about, for Christ's sake? Christ? he wondered. Well, another idea that had to be set aside. He wasn't cynical enough to invoke the name of God into what they were doing. Nature, perhaps, which wasn't *quite* the same thing, he thought.

“Good morning, Dmitriy,” he said, coming into his office early.

“Good morning, sir,” the intelligence officer said, rising to his feet as his employer entered the anteroom. It was a European custom, harkening back to royalty, and one that had somehow conveyed itself to the Marxist state that had nurtured and trained the Russian now living in New York.

“What do you have for me?” the boss asked, unlocking his office door and going in.

“Something very interesting,” Popov said. “How important it is I am not certain. You can better judge that than I can.”

“Okay, let’s see it.” He sat down and turned in his swivel chair to flip on his office coffee machine.

Popov went to the far wall, and slid back the panel that covered the electronics equipment in the woodwork. He retrieved the remote control and keyed up the large-screen TV and VCR. Then he inserted a videocassette.

“This is the news coverage of Bern,” he told his employer. The tape only ran for thirty seconds before he stopped it, ejected the cassette, and inserted another. “Vienna,” he said then, hitting the PLAY button. Another segment, which ran less than a minute. This he also ejected. “Last night at the park in Spain.” This one he also played. This segment lasted just over a minute before he stopped it.

“Yes?” the man said, when it was all over.

“What did you see, sir?”

“Some guys smoking—the same guy, you’re saying?”

“Correct. In all three incidents, the same man, or so it would appear.”

“Go on,” his employer told Popov.

“The same special-operations group responded to and terminated all three incidents. That is very interesting.”

“Why?”

Popov took a patient breath. This man may have been a genius in some areas, but in others he was a babe in the woods. “Sir, the same team responded to incidents in *three* separate countries, with *three* separate national police forces, and in all *three* cases, this special team took over from those *three* separate national police agencies and dealt with the situation. In other words, there is now some special internationally credited team of special-operations troops—I would expect them to be military rather than policemen—currently operating in Europe. Such a group has never been admitted to in the open press. It is, therefore, a ‘black’ group, highly secret. I can speculate that it is a NATO team of some sort, but that is only speculation. Now,” Popov went on, “I have some questions for you.”

“Okay.” The boss nodded.

“Did you know of this team? Did you know they existed?”

A shake of the head. “No.” Then he turned to pour a cup of coffee.

“Is it possible for you to find out some things about them?”

A shrug. “Maybe. Why is it important?”

“That depends on another question—why are you paying me to incite terrorists to do things?” Popov asked.

“You do not have a need to know that, Dmitriy.”

"Yes, sir, I do have such a need. One cannot stage operations against sophisticated opposition without having some idea of the overall objective. It simply cannot be done, sir. Moreover, you have applied significant assets to these operations. There must be a point. I need to know what it is." The unspoken part, which got through the words, was that he wanted to know, and in due course, he might well figure it out, whether he was told or not.

It also occurred to his employer that his existence was somewhat in pawn to this Russian ex-spook. He could deny everything the man might say in an open public forum, and he even had the ability to make the man disappear, an option less attractive than it appeared outside of a movie script, since Popov might well have told others, or even left a written record.

The bank accounts from which Popov had drawn the funds he'd distributed were thoroughly laundered, of course, but there *was* a trail of sorts that a very clever and thorough investigator *might* be able to trace back closely enough to him to cause some minor concern. The problem with electronic banking was that there was always a trail of electrons, and bank records were both time-stamped and amount-specific, enough to make some connection appear to exist. That could be an embarrassment of large or small order. Worse, it wasn't something he could easily afford, but a hindrance to the larger mission now under way in places as diverse as New York, Kansas, and Brazil. And Australia, of course, which was the whole point of what he was doing.

"Dmitriy, will you let me think about that?"

"Yes, sir. Of course. I merely say that if you want me to do my job effectively, I need to know more. Surely you have other people in your confidence. Show these tapes to those people and see if they think the information is significant." Popov stood. "Call me when you need me, sir."

"Thanks for the information." He waited for the door to close, then dialed a number from memory. The phone rang four times before it was answered:

"Hi," a voice said in the earpiece. "You've reached the home of Bill Henriksen. Sorry, I can't make it to the phone right now. Why don't you try my office."

"Damn," the executive said. Then he had an idea, and picked up the remote for his TV. CBS, no, NBC, no . . .

"But to kill a sick child," the host said on ABC's *Good Morning, America.*

"Charlie, a long time ago, a guy named Lenin said that the purpose of terrorism was to terrorize. That's who they are, and that's what they do. It's still a dangerous world out there, maybe even more so today that there are no nation-states who, though they used to support terrorists, actually imposed some restraints on their behavior. Those restraints are gone now," Henriksen said. "This group reportedly wanted their old friend Carlos the Jackal released from prison. Well, it didn't work, but it's worth noting that they cared enough to try a classic terrorist mission, to secure the release of one of their own. Fortunately, the mission failed, thanks to the Spanish police."

"How would you evaluate the police performance?"

"Pretty good. They all train out of the same playbook, of course, and the best of them cross-train at Fort Bragg or at Hereford in England, and other places, Germany and Israel, for example."

"But one hostage was murdered."

"Charlie, you can't stop them all," the expert said sadly. "You can be ten feet away with a loaded weapon in your hands, and sometimes you can't take action, because to do so would only get more hostages killed. I'm as sickened by that murder as you are, my friend, but these people won't be doing any more of that."

"Well, thanks for coming in. Bill Henriksen, president of Global Security and a consultant to ABC on terrorism. It's forty-six minutes after the hour." Cut to commercial.

In his desk he had Bill's beeper number. This he called, keying in his private line. Four minutes later, the phone rang.

"Yeah, John, what is it?" There was street noise on the cellular phone. Henriksen must have been outside the ABC studio, just off Central Park West, probably walking to his car.

"Bill, I need to see you in my office ASAP. Can you come right down?"

"Sure. Give me twenty minutes."

Henriksen had a clicker to get into the building's garage, and access to one of the reserved spaces. He walked into the office eighteen minutes after the call.

"What gives?"

"Caught you on TV this morning."

"They always call me in on this stuff," Henriksen said. "Great job taking the bastards down, least from what the TV footage showed. I'll get the rest of it."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I have the right contacts. The video they released was edited down quite a bit. My people'll get all the tapes from the Spanish—it isn't classified in any way—for analysis."

"Watch this," John told him, flipping his office TV to the VCR and running the released tape of Worldpark. Then he had to rise and switch to the cassette of Vienna. Thirty seconds of that and then Bern. "So, what do you think?"

"The same team on all three?" Henriksen wondered aloud. "Sure does look like it—but who the hell are they?"

"You know who Popov is, right?"

Bill nodded. "Yeah, the KGB guy you found. Is he the guy who twigged to this?"

"Yep." A nod. "Less than an hour ago, he was in here to show me these tapes. It worries him. Does it worry you?"

The former FBI agent grimaced. "Not sure. I'd want to know more about them first."

"Can you find out?"

This time he shrugged. "I can talk to some contacts, rattle a few bushes. Thing is, if there is a really black specialops team out there, I should have known about it already. I mean, I've got the contacts throughout the business. What about you?"

"I can probably try a few things, quietly. Probably mask it as plain curiosity."

"Okay, I can check around. What else did Popov say to you?"

"He wants to know why I'm having him do the things."

"That's the problem with spooks. They like to know things. I mean, he's

thinking, what if he starts a mission and one of the subjects gets taken alive. Very often they sing like fucking canaries once they're in custody, John. If one fingers him, he could be in the shitter. Unlikely, I admit, but possible, and spooks are trained to be cautious."

"What if we have to take him out?"

Another grimace. "You want to be careful doing that, in case he's left a package with a friend somewhere. No telling if he has, but I'd have to assume he's done it. Like I said, they're trained to be cautious. This operation is not without its dangers, John. We knew that going in. How close are we to having the technical—"

"Very close. The test program is moving along nicely. Another month or so and we'll know all we need to know."

"Well, all I have to do is get the contract for Sydney. I'm flying down tomorrow. These incidents won't hurt."

"Who will you be working with?"

"The Aussies have their own SAS. It's supposed to be small—pretty well-trained, but short on the newest hardware. That's the hook I plan to use. I got what they need, at cost," Henriksen emphasized. "Run that tape again, the one of the Spanish job," he said.

John rose from his desk, inserted the tape, and rewound it back to the beginning of the released TV coverage. It showed the assault team zip-lining down from the helicopter.

"Shit, I missed that!" the expert admitted.

"What?"

"We need to have the tape enhanced, but that doesn't look like a police chopper. It's a Sikorsky H-60."

"So?"

"So, the -60 has never been certified for civilian use. See how it's got POLICE painted on the side? That's a civilian application. It isn't a police chopper, John. It's military . . . and if this is a refueling probe," he said, pointing, "then it's a special-ops bird. *That* means U.S. Air Force, man. That also tells us where these people are based—"

"Where?"

"England. The Air Force has a special-ops wing based in Europe, part in Germany, part in England . . . MH-60K, I think the designation of the chopper is, made for combat search-and-rescue and getting people into special places to do special things. Hey, your friend Popov is right. There *is* a special bunch of people handling these things, and they've got American support at least, maybe a lot more. Thing is, who the hell are they?"

"It's important?"

"Potentially, yes. What if the Aussies call them in to help out on the job I'm trying to get, John? That could screw up the whole thing."

"You rattle your bushes. I'll rattle mine."

"Right."

CHAPTER 17

BUSHES

Pete now had six friends in the treatment center. Only two of the subjects felt well enough now to remain in the open bay with the TV cartoons and the whiskey, and Killgore figured they'd be in here by the end of the week, so full was their blood with Shiva antibodies. It was odd how the disease attacked different people in such different ways, but everyone had a different immune system. That was why some people got cancer, and others did not despite smoking and other methods of self-abuse.

Aside from that, it was going easier than he'd expected. He supposed it was due to the high doses of morphine that had all of them pretty well zonked out. It was a relatively new discovery in medicine that there really wasn't a maximum safe dosage of painkillers. If the patient still felt pain, you could give more until it went away. Dose levels that would cause respiratory arrest in healthy people were perfectly safe for those in great pain, and that made his job far easier. Every drug-dispensing machine had a button the subjects could hit if they needed it, and so they were medicating themselves into peaceful oblivion, which also made things safer for the staffs, who didn't have to do all that many sticks. They hung nutrients on the trees, checked to make sure the IVs were secure, and avoided touching the subjects as much as possible. Later today, they'd all get injected with Vaccine-B, which was supposed to safeguard them against Shiva with a high degree of reliability—Steve Berg said 98 to 99 percent. They all knew that wasn't the same as 100 percent, though, and so the protective measures would be continued.

Agreeably, there was little sympathy for the subjects. Picking winos off the street had been a good call. The next set of test subjects would appear more sympathetic, but everyone in this side of the building had been fully briefed. Much of what they did might be distasteful, but it would still be done.

• • •

"You know, sometimes I think the Earth First people are right," Kevin Mayflower said in the Palm restaurant.

"Oh? How so?" Carol Brightling asked.

The president of the Sierra Club looked into his wine. "We destroy everything we touch. The shores, the tidal wetlands, the forests—look at what 'civilization' has done to them all. Oh, sure, we preserve some areas—and that's what? A hot three percent, maybe? Big fucking deal. We're poisoning everything, including ourselves. The ozone problem is really getting worse,

according to the new NASA study."

"Yeah, but did you hear about the proposed fix?" the President's science advisor asked.

"Fix? How?"

She grimaced. "Well, you get a bunch of jumbo jets, fill them up with ozone, fly them out of Australia, and release ozone at high altitude to patch it up. I have that proposal on my desk right now."

"And?"

"And it's like doing abortions at half-time in a football game, with instant replay and color commentary. No way it can possibly work. We have to let the planet heal herself—but we won't, of course."

"Any more good news?"

"Oh, yeah, the CO_2 issue. There's a guy up at Harvard who says if we dump iron filings into the Indian Ocean, we can encourage the growth of phytoplankton, and that will fix the CO_2 problem almost overnight. The math looks pretty good. All these geniuses who say they can fix the planet, like she needs fixing—instead of leaving her the hell alone."

"And the President says what?" Mayflower asked.

"He says for me to tell him if it'll work or not, and if it looks like it's going to work, then test it to make sure, then try it for real. He hasn't got a clue, and he doesn't listen." She didn't add that she had to follow his orders whether she liked them or not.

"Well, maybe our friends at Earth First are right, Carol. Maybe we are a parasitic species on the face of the earth, and maybe we're going to destroy the whole damned planet before we're done."

"Rachel Carson come to life, eh?" she asked.

"Look, you know the science as well as I do—maybe better. We're doing things like—like the Alvarez Event that took the dinosaurs out, except we're doing it willfully. It took how long for the planet to recover from that?"

"Alvarez? The planet *didn't* recover, Kevin," Carol Brightling pointed out. "It jump-started mammals—*us,* remember? The preexisting ecological order never returned. Something new happened, and that took a couple of million years just to stabilize." Must have been something to see, she told herself. To watch something like that in progress, what a scientific and personal blessing it must have been, but there'd probably been nobody back then to appreciate it. Unlike today.

"Well, in a few more years we'll get to see the first part of it, won't we? How many more species will we kill off this year, and if the ozone situation keeps getting worse—my God, Carol, why don't people get it? Don't they *see* what's happening? Don't they *care?"*

"Kevin, no, they don't see, and, no, they don't care. Look around." The restaurant was filled with important people wearing important-looking clothes, doubtless discussing important things over their important dinners, none of which had a thing to do with the planetary crisis that hung quite literally over all their heads. If the ozone layer really evaporated, as it might, well, they'd start using sunblock just to walk the streets, and maybe that would protect them enough . . . but what of the natural species, the birds, the lizards, all the creatures on the planet who had no such option? The studies

suggested that their eyes would be seared by the unblocked ultraviolet radiation, which would kill them off, and so the entire global ecosystem would rapidly come apart. “Do you think any of these people know about it—or give a damn if they do?”

“I suppose not.” He sipped down some more of his white wine. “Well, we keep plugging away, don’t we?”

“It’s funny,” she went on. “Not too long ago we fought wars, which kept the population down enough that we couldn’t damage the planet all that much—but now peace is breaking out all over, and we’re advancing our industrial capacity, and so, peace is destroying us a lot more efficiently than war ever did. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“And modern medicine. The anopheles mosquito was pretty good at keeping the numbers down—you know that Washington was once a malarial swamp, diplomats deemed it a hazardous-duty post! So then we invented DDT. Good for controlling mosquitoes, but tough on the peregrine falcon. We never get it right. Never,” Mayflower concluded.

“What if? . . .” she asked wistfully.

“What if what, Carol?”

“What if nature came up with something to knock the human population back?”

“The Gaea Hypothesis?” That made him smile. The idea was that the earth was itself a thinking, self-correcting organism that found ways to regulate the numerous living species that populated the planet. “Even if that’s valid—and I hope it is, really—I’m afraid that we humans move too fast for Gaea to deal with us and our work. No, Carol, we’ve created a suicide pact, and we’re going to take down everything else with us, and a hundred years from now, when the human population worldwide is down to a million or so people, they’ll know what went wrong and read the books and look at the videotapes of the paradise we once had, and they’ll curse our names—and maybe, if they’re lucky, they’ll learn from it when they crawl back up from the slime. Maybe. I doubt it. Even if they try to learn, they’ll worry more about building nuclear-power reactors so they can use their electric toothbrushes. Rachel was right. There will be a Silent Spring someday, but then it’ll be too late.” He picked at his salad, wondering what chemicals were in the lettuce and tomatoes. Some, he was sure. This time of year, the lettuce came up from Mexico, where farmers did all sorts of things to their crops, and maybe the kitchen help had washed it off, but maybe not, and so here he was, eating an expensive lunch and poisoning himself as surely as he was watching the whole planet being poisoned. His quietly despairing look told the tale.

He was ready to be recruited, Carol Brightling thought. It was time. And he’d bring some good people with him, and they’d have room for them in Kansas and Brazil. Half an hour later, she took her leave, and headed back to the White House for the weekly cabinet meeting.

“Hey, Bill,” Gus said from his office in the Hoover Building. “What’s happening?”

“Catch the TV this morning?” Henriksen asked.

“You mean the thing in Spain?” Werner asked.

"Yep."

"Sure did. I saw you on the tube, too."

"My genius act." He chuckled. "Well, it's good for business, you know?"

"Yeah, I suppose it is. Anyway, what about it?"

"That wasn't the Spanish cops, Gus. I know how they train. Not their style, man. So, who was it, Delta, SAS, HRT?"

Gus Werner's eyes narrowed. Now Assistant Director of the FBI, he'd once been the special agent in charge of the FBI's elite Hostage Rescue Team. Promoted out, he'd been Special Agent in Charge of the Atlanta field division, and now was the AD in charge of the new Terrorism Division. Bill Henriksen had once worked for him, then left the Bureau to start his own consulting company, but once FBI always FBI, and so now, Bill was fishing for information.

"I really can't talk much about that one, buddy."

"Oh?"

"Oh? Yes. Can't discuss," Werner said tersely.

"Classification issues?"

"Something like that," Werner allowed.

A chuckle: "Well, that tells me something, eh?"

"No, Bill, it doesn't tell you anything at all. Hey, man, I can't break the rules, you know."

"You always were a straight shooter," Henriksen agreed. "Well, whoever they are, glad they're on our side. The takedown looked pretty good on TV."

"That it did." Werner had the complete set of tapes, transmitted via encrypted satellite channel from the U.S. Embassy in Madrid to the National Security Agency, and from there to FBI headquarters. He'd seen the whole thing, and expected to have more data that afternoon.

"Tell them one thing, though, if you get a chance."

"What's that, Bill?" was the noncommittal response.

"If they want to look like the local cops, they ought not use a USAF helicopter. I'm not stupid, Gus. The reporters might not catch it, but it was pretty obvious to somebody with half a brain, wasn't it?"

Oops, Werner thought. He'd actually allowed that one to slip through his mental cracks, but Bill had never been a dummy, and he wondered how the news media had failed to notice it.

"Oh?"

"Don't give me that, Gus. It was a Sikorsky Model 60 chopper. We used to play with them when we went down to Fort Bragg to play, remember? We liked it better than the Hueys they issued us, but it ain't civilian-certified, and so they wouldn't let you buy one," he reminded his former boss.

"I'll pass that one along," Werner promised. "Anybody else catch on to that?"

"Not that I know of, and I didn't say anything about it on ABC this morning, did I?"

"No, you didn't. Thanks."

"So, can you tell me anything about these folks?"

"Sorry, man, but no. It's codeword stuff, and truth is," Werner lied, "I don't know all that much myself." *Bullshit,* he almost heard over the phone line. It

was weak. If there were a special counterterror group, and if America had a piece of it, sure as hell the top FBI expert in the field would have to know something about it. Henriksen would know that without being told. But, damn it, rules were rules, and there was no way a private contractor would be let into the classification compartment called Rainbow, and Bill knew what the rules were, too.

"Yeah, Gus, sure," came the mocking reply. "Anyway, they're pretty good, but Spanish isn't their primary language, and they have access to American aircraft. Tell them they ought to be a little more careful."

"I'll do that," Werner promised, making a note.

"Black project," Henriksen told himself, after hanging up. "I wonder where the funding comes from? . . ." Whoever those people were, they had FBI connections, in addition to DOD. What else could he figure? How about where they were based? . . . To do that . . . yes, it was possible, wasn't it? All he needed was a start time for the three incidents, then figure when it was the cowboys showed up, and from that he could make a pretty good guess as to their point of origin. Airliners traveled at about five hundred knots, and that made the travel distance . . .

. . . *has to be England,* Henriksen decided. It was the only location that made sense. The Brits had all the infrastructure in place, and security at Hereford was pretty good—he'd been there and trained with the SAS while part of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team, working for Gus. Okay, he'd confirm it from written records on the Bern and Vienna incidents. His staff covered all counterterror operations as a normal part of doing business . . . and he could call contacts in Switzerland and Austria to find out a few things. That ought not to be hard. He checked his watch. Better to call right away, since they were six hours ahead. He flipped through his rolodex and placed a call on his private line.

Black project, eh? he asked himself. He'd see about that.

The cabinet meeting ended early. The President's congressional agenda was moving along nicely, which made things easy for everyone. They'd taken just two votes—actually, mere polls of the cabinet members, since the President had the only real vote, as he'd made clear a few times, Carol reminded herself. The meeting broke up, and people headed out of the building.

"Hi, George," Dr. Brightling greeted the Secretary of the Treasury.

"Hey, Carol, the trees hugging back yet?" he asked with a smile.

"Always," she laughed in reply to this ignorant plutocrat. "Catch the TV this morning?"

"What about?"

"The thing in Spain—"

"Oh, yeah, Worldpark. What about it?"

"Who were those masked men?"

"Carol, if you have to ask, then you're not cleared into it."

"I don't want their phone number, George," she replied, allowing him to hold open the door for her. "And I *am* cleared for just about everything, remember?"

SecTreas had to admit that this was true. The President's Science Advisor

was cleared into all manner of classified programs, including weapons, nuclear and otherwise, and she oversaw the crown jewel secrets of communications security as a routine part of her duties. She really was entitled to know about this if she asked. He just wished she hadn't asked. Too many people knew about Rainbow as it was. He sighed.

"We set it up a few months ago. It's black, okay? Special operations group, multinational, works out of someplace in England, mainly Americans and Brits, but others, too. The idea came from an Agency guy the Boss likes—and so far they seem to be batting a thousand, don't they?"

"Well, rescuing those kids was something special. I hope they get a pat on the head for it."

A chuckle. "Depend on it. The Boss sent off his own message this morning."

"What's it called?"

"Sure you want to know?" George asked.

"What's in a name?"

"True." SecTreas nodded. "It's called Rainbow. Because of the multinational nature."

"Well, whoever they are, they scored some points last night. You know, I really ought to get briefed in on stuff like this. I *can* help, you know," she pointed out.

"So, tell the Boss you want in."

"I'm kinda on his shit list now, remember?"

"Yeah, so dial back on your environmental stuff, will you? Hell, we all like green grass and tweety birds. But we can't have Tweety Bird telling us how to run the country, can we?"

"George, these really are important scientific issues I have to deal with," Carol Brightling pointed out.

"You say so, doc. But if you dial the rhetoric back some, maybe people will listen a little better. Just a helpful hint," the Secretary of the Treasury suggested, as he opened his car door for the two-block ride back to his department.

"Thanks, George, I'll think about it," she promised. He waved at her as his driver pulled off.

"Rainbow," Brightling said to herself as she walked across West Executive Drive. Was it worth taking it a step further? The funny part about dealing with classification issues was that if you were inside, then you were inside. . . . Reaching her office, she inserted the plastic key into her STU-4 secure telephone and dialed up CIA on the Director's private line.

"Yeah?" a male voice answered.

"Ed, this is Carol Brightling."

"Hi. How'd the cabinet meeting go?"

"Smooth, like always. I have a question for you."

"What's that, Carol?" the DCI asked.

"It's about Rainbow. That was some operation they ran in Spain last night."

"Are you in on that?" Ed asked.

"How else would I know the name, Ed? I know one of your people set it up. Can't remember the name, the guy the President likes so much."

"Yeah, John Clark. He was my training officer once, long time ago. Solid

citizen. He's been there and done that even more than Mary Pat and I have. Anyway, what's your interest?"

"The new tactical-radio encryption systems NSA is playing with. Do they have it yet?"

"I don't know," the DCI admitted. "Are they ready for prime time yet?"

"Should be in another month. E-Systems will be the manufacturer, and I thought they ought to be fast-tracked into Rainbow. I mean, they're out there at the sharp end. They ought to get it first."

On the other end of the line, the Director of Central Intelligence reminded himself that he should pay more attention to the work done at the National Security Agency. He'd allowed himself to forget, moreover, that Brightling had the "black card" clearance that admitted her into that Holy of Holies at Fort Meade.

"Not a bad idea. Who do I talk to about that?"

"Admiral McConnell, I suppose. It's his agency. Anyway, just a friendly suggestion. If this Rainbow team is so hot, they ought to have the best toys."

"Okay, I'll look into it. Thanks, Carol."

"Anytime, Ed, and maybe get me fully briefed into the program someday, eh?"

"Yeah, I can do that. I can send a guy down to get you the information you need."

"Okay, whenever it's convenient. See you."

"Bye, Carol." The secure line was broken. Carol smiled at the phone. Ed would never question her about the issue, would he? She'd known the name, said nice things about the team, and offered to help, just like a loyal bureaucrat should. And she even had the name of the team leader now. John Clark. Ed's own training officer, once upon a time. It was so easy to get the information you needed if you spoke the right language. Well, that's why she'd gone after this job, frustrations and all.

One of his people did the math and estimated the travel times, and the answer came up England, just as he'd suspected. The triangle of time for both Bern and Vienna both apexed at London, or somewhere close to it. That made sense, Henriksen told himself. British Airways went everywhere, and it had always had a cordial relationship with the British government. So, whoever it was, the group had to be based . . . Hereford, almost certainly there. It was probably multinational . . . that would make it more politically acceptable to other countries. So, it would be American and British, maybe other nationalities as well, with access to American hardware like that Sikorsky helicopter. Gus Werner knew about it—might it have some FBI people in the team? Probably, Henriksen thought. The Hostage Rescue Team was essentially a police organization, but since its mission was counterterrorism, it practiced and played with other such organizations around the world, even though those were mainly military. The mission was pretty much the same, and therefore the people on the mission were fairly interchangeable—and the FBI HRT members were as good as anyone else in the world. So probably, someone from HRT, perhaps even someone he knew, was on the team. It would have been useful to find out who, but for now, that was too much of a

stretch.

The important thing at the moment was that this national counterterror outfit was a potential danger. What if they deployed to Melbourne? Would that hurt anything? It surely wouldn't help, especially if there was an FBI agent on the team. He'd spent fifteen years in the Bureau, and Henriksen was under no illusions about those men and women. They had eyes that could see and brains that could think, and they looked into everything. And so, his strategy to raise the world's consciousness of the terrorist threat, and so help himself get the Melbourne job, might have gone an unplanned step further. Damn. But the Law of Unintended Consequences could hit anyone, couldn't it? That's why he was in the loop, because it was his job to deal with the unintended things. And so here he was, still in the intelligence-gathering mode. He needed to learn more. The really bad news was that he had to fly off to Australia in less than a day, and would himself be unable to do any more gathering. Well. He'd have dinner tonight with his boss to pass along what he knew, and maybe that ex-KGB guy on the payroll could take it a little further. Damned sure he'd performed pretty well to this point. A pipe smoker. It never ceased to amaze Henriksen how such little things could break open a case. You just had to keep your head up and eyes open.

"The Interleukin isn't doing anything," John Killgore said, looking away from the monitor. The screen of the electron microscope was clear. The Shiva strands were reproducing merrily away, devouring healthy tissue in the process.

"So?" Dr. Archer asked.

"So, that's the only treatment option I was worried about: -3a is an exciting new development, but Shiva just laughs at it and moves on. This is one scary little mother of a bug, Barb."

"And the subjects?"

"I was just in there. Pete's a goner, so are the rest. The Shiva's eating them up. They all have major internal bleeds, and nothing is stopping the tissue breakdown. I've tried everything in the book. These poor bastards wouldn't be getting better treatment at Hopkins, Harvard, or the Mayo Clinic, and they're all going to die. Now," he allowed, "there will be some whose immune systems can deal with it, but that's going to be pretty damned rare."

"How rare?" she asked the epidemiologist.

"Less than one in a thousand, probably, maybe one in ten thousand. Even the pneumonic variant of plague doesn't kill everybody," he reminded her. That was about the most lethal disease on the planet, and allowed only one in ten thousand to survive. Some people, she knew, had immune systems that killed everything that didn't belong. Those were the ones who lived to a hundred years of age or so. It had nothing to do with smoking, not smoking, having a drink in the morning, or any of the other rubbish they published in the papers as the secret of living forever. It was all in the genes. Some were better than others. It was that simple.

"Well, that's not really something to worry about, is it?"

"World population is between five and six billion now. That's a little more than five times ten to the ninth people, subtract four orders from that and you

have something on the order of five times ten to the fifth survivors. Figure a few hundred thousand who might not like us very much."

"Spread all over the world," Barbara told him. "Not organized, needing leadership and scientific knowledge to help them survive. How will they even connect? The only eight hundred people surviving in New York? And what about the diseases that come with all those deaths? The best immune system in the world can't protect you against them."

"True," Killgore conceded. Then he smiled. "We're even improving the breed, aren't we?"

Dr. Archer saw the humor of that. "Yes, John, we are. So, Vaccine-B is ready?"

He nodded. "Yes, I had my injection a few hours ago. Ready for yours?"

"And -A?"

"In the freezer, ready for mass production as soon as people need it. We'll be able to turn it out in thousand-liter lots per week when we have to. Enough to cover the planet," he told her. "Steve Berg and I worked that out yesterday."

"Can anybody else—"

"No way. Not even Merck can move that fast—and even if they did, they'd have to use our formula, wouldn't they?"

That was the ultimate hook. If the plan to spread Shiva around the globe didn't work as well as hoped, then the entire world would be given Vaccine-A, which Antigen Laboratories, a division of The Horizon Corp., just happened to be working on as part of its corporate effort to help the Third World, where all the hemorrhagic fevers lived. A fortunate accident, albeit one already known in the medical literature. Both John Killgore and Steve Berg had published papers on these diseases, which had been made quite high-profile by the big scare America and the world had gone through not so long before. So, the medical world knew that Horizon/Antigen was working in this area, and wouldn't be surprised to learn that there was a vaccine in the works. They'd even test the vaccines in laboratories and find that, sure enough, the liquid had all manner of antibodies. But they'd be the wrong antibodies, and the live-virus vaccine would be a death sentence to anyone who had it enter his system. The time from injection to onset of frank symptoms was programmed at four to six weeks, and, again, the only survivors would be those lucky souls from the deepest end of the gene pool. One hundred such people out of a million would survive. Maybe less. Ebola-Shiva was one nasty little bastard of a bug, three years in the making, and how odd, Killgore thought, that it had been *that* easy to construct. Well, that was science for you. Gene manipulation was a new field, and those things were unpredictable. The sad part, maybe, was that the same people in the same lab were charging along a new and unexpected path—human longevity— and reportedly making real progress. Well, so much the better. An extended life to appreciate the new world that Shiva would bring about.

And the breakthroughs wouldn't stop. Many on the select list to receive Vaccine-B were scientists. Some of them wouldn't like the news, when they were told, but they'd have little choice, and being scientists, they'd soon get back to their work.

Not everyone in the Project approved. Some of the radical ones actually said that bringing physicians along was contrary to the nature of the mission—because medicine didn't allow nature to take her course. Sure, Killgore snorted to himself. Fine, they'd let those idiots have their babies in farm fields after a morning's plowing or hunter-gathering, and soon enough those ideologues would breed themselves out. He planned to study and enjoy nature, but he'd do so wearing shoes and a jacket to keep the chill out. He planned to remain an educated man, not revert to the naked ape. His mind wandered. . . . There'd be a division of labor, of course. Farmers to grow the food and tend the cattle they'd eat—or hunters to shoot the buffalo, whose meat was healthier, lower in cholesterol. The buffalo should come back pretty fast, he thought. Wheat would continue to grow wild in the Great Plains, and they'd grow fat and healthy, especially since their predators had been so ruthlessly hunted down that they'd be slower to catch up. Domestic cattle would thrive also, but they'd ultimately be edged out by the buffalo, a much hardier breed better suited to free life. Killgore wanted to see that, see the vast herds that had once covered the West. He wanted to see Africa, too.

That meant that the Project needed airplanes and pilots. Horizon already had its own collection of G-V business jets, capable of spanning most of the world, and so they'd also need small teams of people to manage and maintain a few airports—Zambia, for instance. He wanted to see Africa wild and free. That would take perhaps ten years to come about, Killgore estimated, and it wasn't all that big a deal. AIDS was killing off that continent at a nasty pace, and Shiva would only make it go faster, and so the Dark Continent would again be free of man, and he'd be able to go there and observe nature in all her glory . . . and maybe shoot a lion to make a rug for his home in Kansas? Some of the people in the Project would raise pure fucking hell over that, but what was one lion more or less? The Project would be saving hundreds of thousands of them, perhaps millions, free to roam and hunt in their prides. What a beautiful New World it would be, once you eliminated the parasitic species that was working so hard to destroy it.

A beeper went off. He turned to look at the control panel. "It's Ernie, M5—looks like cardiac arrest," he said.

"What are you going to do?" Barbara Archer asked.

Killgore stood. "Make sure he's dead." He bent down to select a camera for the big monitor on his desk. "Here, you can watch."

Two minutes later, he appeared on the screen. An orderly was already there, but did little more than watch. She saw Killgore check the man's pulse, then check his eyes. Despite having the -B vaccine, Killgore used gloves and a mask. Well, that made sense. Then he stood back up and switched off the monitoring equipment. The orderly detached the IV lines and covered the body with a sheet. Killgore pointed to the door, and soon the orderly wheeled the gurney out, heading off for the incinerator. Killgore took the time to look at other subjects, and even appeared to speak with one before leaving the screen for good.

"I figured that," he said, returning to the control room without his protective gear. "Ernie's heart wasn't all that good, and Shiva went right after it. Wendell's going to be next, M2. Maybe tomorrow morning. Liver function's

off the chart, and he's bleeding out big-time in the upper GI."

"What about the control group?"

"Mary, F4, two more days she's going to be in frank symptoms."

"So the delivery system works?" Archer asked.

"Like a charm." Killgore nodded, getting some coffee before he sat back down. "It's all going to work, Barb, and the computer projections look better than our requirement parameters. Six months from initiation, the world is going to be a very different place," he promised her.

"I still worry about those six months, John. If anybody figures out what's happened—their last conscious act will be to try and kill us all."

"That's why we have guns, Barb."

"It's called 'Rainbow,' " he told them, having gotten the best information of the day. "It's based in England. It was set up by a CIA guy named John Clark, and he's evidently the boss of the outfit."

"That makes sense," said Henriksen. "Multinational, right?"

"I think so," John Brightling confirmed.

"Yes," Dmitriy Popov said, picking at his Caesar salad. "That is all sensible, some sort of NATO unit, I imagine, based at Hereford?"

"Correct," said Henriksen. "By the way, nice job figuring out who they were."

Popov shrugged. "It was simple, really. I ought to have made the guess sooner. My question now, what do you want me to do about it?"

"I think we need to learn more," Henriksen said, with a glance at his boss. "A lot more."

"How do you do that?" Brightling asked.

"It is not difficult," Popov assured him. "Once you know where to look—that is most of the battle. Once you know that, you merely go there and look. And I already have one name, do I not?"

"You want to take it?" John asked the Russian.

"Certainly." *If you pay me to do so.* "There are dangers, but—"

"What kind of dangers?"

"I once worked in England. There is the possibility that they have a photograph of me, under a different name, but I do not think that likely."

"Can you fake the accent?" Henriksen asked.

"Most certainly, old boy," Popov replied with a grin. "You were FBI once?"

A nod. "Yep."

"Then you know how it is done. A week, I think."

"Okay," Brightling said. "Fly over tomorrow."

"Travel documents?" Henriksen asked.

"I have several sets, all current, and all perfect," the intelligence officer assured him.

It was nice to have a pro on the payroll, Henriksen thought to himself. "Well, I have an early flight, and I haven't packed yet, guys. See you next week when I get back."

"Easy on the jet lag, Bill," John advised.

The former FBI agent laughed. "You got a drug that works on that?"

CHAPTER 18

LOOKS

Popov boarded the morning Concorde flight. He'd never flown the Concorde before, and found the interior of the aircraft cramped, though the legroom was all right. He settled into seat 4-C. Meanwhile, at another terminal, Bill Henriksen was in a first-class seat in an American DC-10 for his trip to Los Angeles.

William Henriksen, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov thought. Formerly of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team, and an expert on counterterrorism, president of an international security-consulting company now headed off to Australia to seek a consulting contract for the next Olympics. . . . How did *that* factor into what Popov had been doing for John Brightling's Horizon Corporation? What, exactly, was he doing—more properly, what idea was he serving? What task? He was certainly being paid top dollar—he hadn't even raised the money issue over dinner, because he was sure he'd get whatever he asked for. He was thinking in terms of $250,000 for this job alone, even though it held few dangers, aside from driving an automobile in British traffic. $250,000? Maybe more, Popov told himself. After all, this mission seemed pretty important to them.

How did an expert on the mission side of terrorism and an expert on counterterrorism factor into the same plan? Why had they so rapidly seized on his discovery that there was a new international counterterror organization? It was important to them—but *why?* What the hell were they up to? He shook his head. He was so smart, yet he didn't have a clue. And he wanted to know, now more than ever.

Again, it was the not-knowing that worried him. Worried? Yes, he was worried now. The KGB had never encouraged curiosity, but even they knew that you had to tell intelligent people something, and so with mission orders had usually come some kind of explanation—and at the least he'd always known that he was serving the interests of his country. Whatever information he'd gathered, whatever foreign national he'd recruited, it had all been aimed at making his nation more secure, more knowledgeable, more strong. That the entire effort had failed was not his fault. The KGB had never failed the State. It had been the State that had failed the KGB. He'd been part of the world's finest intelligence service, and he remained proud of its abilities and his own.

But he didn't know what he was doing now. He was supposed to gather information, and it was quite easy for him, but he still didn't know why. The things he'd learned at dinner the night before had merely opened another door into another mystery. It seemed so like some Hollywood movie of conspiracy or some detective book whose ending he could not yet discern. He'd take the

money and do the job, but for the first time he was uneasy, and the feeling was not a pleasant one, as the aircraft raced down the runway and took off into the rising sun for London Heathrow.

"Any progress, Bill?"

Tawney leaned back in his chair. "Not much. The Spanish have identified two of the terrorists as Basque separatists, and the French think they have a line on another of their citizens at the park, but that's all. I suppose we could ask Carlos for some information, but it's rather doubtful that he'd cooperate—and who's to say that he even knew the buggers in the first place?"

"True." Clark took a seat. "You know, Ding's right. One of these incidents was probably to be expected, but three all in the brief time we've been here seems like a lot. Is it possible that somebody is setting them loose somehow, Bill?"

"I suppose it's possible, but who would do it—and *why* would he do it?" Tawney asked.

"Back up. Stay with the 'who' part first. Who has the ability?"

"Someone who had access to them back in the seventies and eighties—that means someone well inside the movement or someone who controlled them, 'influenced' them, from the outside. That would mean a KGB type. Notionally this chap would be known to them, would have means to contact them, and thus the ability to activate them."

"All three groups have been heavily ideological. . . ."

"That's why the contact would have to be former—or maybe active?—KGB. He'd have to be someone they trust—more than that, a person with the kind of authority they would recognize and respect." Tawney sipped at his tea. "That has to mean an intelligence officer, perhaps a fairly senior one with whom they'd worked back in the old days, someone who interfaced with them for their training and support in the old East Bloc."

"German, Czech, Russian?"

"Russian," Tawney said. "Remember that KGB let the other Bloc countries support them only under their close direction—the standoff nature of the arrangement was always paper-thin, John. It was meant more for their own comfort than for anyone else's. 'Progressive elements,' and all that rubbish. They were usually trained outside of Moscow, and then quartered in safe houses in Eastern Europe, mainly East Germany. We got a good deal of material from the old East German Stasi when the DDR collapsed. I have some colleagues at Century House going back over the information right now. That will take time. It was, unfortunately, never computerized or even properly cross-referenced. Funding problems," Tawney explained.

"Why not go straight to KGB? Hell, I've met Golovko."

Tawney didn't know that. "You're kidding."

"How do you think Ding and I got into Iran so quick with a Russian cover? You think CIA can pull off an operation that fast? I wish, Bill. No, Golovko set it up, and Ding and I were in his office before we flew down."

"Well, then, if you can, why not give it a try?"

"I'd have to get authorization from Langley."

"Will Sergey actually cooperate?"

"Not sure," John admitted. "Even money at best. But before I do such a thing, I'd need a good idea of exactly what I want. It can't be a fishing expedition. It has to be well directed."

"I can see what we might have on the name of an intelligence officer who worked with them. . . . Problem is, it won't be a real name, will it?"

Clark nodded. "Probably not. You know, we have to try harder to get one of these people alive. Kinda hard to interrogate a corpse."

"That opportunity hasn't presented itself yet," Tawney pointed out.

"Maybe," Clark thought. And even if you got one alive, who was to say that he'd know what was needed? But you had to start somewhere.

"Bern was a bank robbery. Vienna was an attempted kidnapping, and from what Herr Ostermann said, the subjects were after something that doesn't exist —private, insider computer codes into the international trading system. The most recent incident was something right out of the seventies."

"Okay, two out of three were about money," Clark agreed. "But the terrorists in both those cases were supposed to be ideological, right?"

"Correct."

"Why the interest in money? In the first one, okay, maybe it was a straight robbery. But the second one was more sophisticated—well, both sophisticated and dumb,'cuz they were after something that doesn't exist, but as ideological operators they would not have known that. Bill, *somebody* told them to go after it. They didn't start that one by themselves, did they?"

"I agree, your supposition is likely," the spook said. "Very likely, perhaps."

"So, in that case we have two ideological operators, technically fairly competent, but going after something that doesn't really exist. The combination of operational cleverness and objective stupidity just seems to cry out to us, doesn't it?"

"But what of Worldpark?"

Clark shrugged. "Maybe Carlos knows something they need. Maybe he has a stash somewhere that they want, or information, or contact numbers, maybe even cash—there's no telling, is there?"

"And I think it unlikely that he can be persuaded to cooperate with us."

Clark grunted. "Damned skippy."

"What I can do is talk with the chaps at 'Five,' too. Perhaps this Russian shadow fellow worked with the PIRA. Let me do some nosing around, John."

"Okay, Bill, and I'll talk things over with Langley." Clark stood, wandered out of the room, and headed back to his own, still groping for the idea he needed before he could do something useful.

It didn't start well, and Popov nearly laughed about it. On reaching his rental car he opened the left-side door instead of the right side. But he figured it out in as few seconds as it took him to load his luggage into the trunk—boot—and get in the driver's side. From that point he opened the map book he'd purchased in the terminal and made his way away from Heathrow's Terminal Four onto the motorway that would lead him to Hereford.

"So, how does this thing work, Tim?"

Noonan moved his hand away, but the pointer stayed right on Chavez.

“Damn, this is slick. It’s supposed to track the electromagnetic field generated by the human heart. It’s a unique low-frequency signal . . . doesn’t even get confused by gorillas and animals. . . .”

The gadget looked like a ray-gun pistol from a ’30s science-fiction movie, with a slim antenna wire out the front and a pistol grip underneath. It swung on a frictionless bearing, drawn to the signal it received. Noonan moved away from Chavez and Covington, and headed for the wall. There was a secretary sitting right . . . there. The gadget locked on her. As he walked, it stayed pointed at her, through the blank wall.

“It’s like a bloody divining rod,” Peter observed, no small amount of wonder in his voice. “Like finding water. . . .”

“Does look that way, doesn’t it? Damn, no wonder the Army wants this baby. Forget about being ambushed. This thing’s supposed to find people underground, behind trees, in the rain—whenever they’re there, this thing’ll pick them up.”

Chavez thought about that. He thought especially about his operation in Colombia so many years before, walking point in the weeds, looking and listening for people who might have worried his ten-man team. Now this thing replaced all the skills he’d learned in the 7th Light. As a defensive tool, it could put the ninjas out of business. As an offensive tool, it could tell you where the bad guys were long before you could see or hear them, and allow you to get close enough to . . .

“What’s it for—what’s the manufacturer say, I mean?”

“Search and rescue—firemen in a burning building, avalanche victims, lots of things, Ding. As a counter-intruder tool, this puppy’s going to be hard to beat. They’ve been playing with it at Fort Bragg for a couple of weeks. The Delta Guys have fallen in love with it. Still a little hard to use, and it can’t tell range yet, but all they have to do is modify the antenna for greater gain, then link two of the detectors with GPS, and triangulate. . . . The ultimate range this thing can achieve hasn’t been determined yet. They say this one can lock onto a person at five hundred meters.”

“Bloody hell,” Covington observed. But the instrument still looked like some sort of an expensive small-boy’s toy.

“What good will it be for us? It can’t tell a hostage from a terrorist,” Chavez pointed out.

“Ding, you never know, do you? Damned sure it can tell you where the bad guys are *not,”* Noonan pointed out. He’d be playing with this thing all day, getting a feel for how to use it effectively. He hadn’t felt like a kid with a new toy in quite a while, but this gadget was so new and so unexpected that it should have arrived under a decorated pine tree.

The Brown Stallion was the name of the pub right next door to his motel. It was only half a kilometer from the main gate at Hereford, and seemed like a good place to start, and better yet to have a beer. Popov ordered a pint of Guinness and sipped at it, surveying the room. A television was on, carrying a soccer match—live or taped, he couldn’t tell at the moment—between Manchester United and Rangers from up in Scotland, and that attracted the attention of the pub’s patrons, and the barman, as it turned out. Popov

watched as well, sipping at his pint and listening to the chitchat around the room. He was trained to be patient, and knew from experience that patience was usually rewarded in the business of intelligence, all the more so in this culture, where people came to their regular pub every night to chat with their friends, and Popov had unusually good hearing.

The football game ended in a 1–1 tie around the time Popov ordered a second pint.

"Tie, bloody tie," one man observed at the bar seat next to Popov's.

"That's sport for you, Tommy. At least the chaps down the road never tie, and never bloody lose."

"How are the Yanks fitting in, Frank?"

"Good bunch, that lot, very polite. I had to fix the sink for one of the houses today. The wife is very nice indeed, tried to give me a tip. Amazing people, the Americans. Think they have to give you money for everything." The plumber finished off his pint of lager and called for another.

"You work on the base?" Popov asked.

"Yes, have for twelve years, plumbing and such."

"Good lot of men, the SAS. I like how they sort the IRA buggers out," the Russian offered, in his best British blue-collar accent.

"That they do," the plumber agreed.

"So, some Americans are based there now, eh?"

"Yes, about ten of them, and their families." He laughed. "One of the wives nearly killed me in her car last week, driving on the wrong side of the bloody road. You do have to be careful around them, especially in your car."

"I may know one of them, chap name of Clark, I think," Popov offered as a somewhat dangerous ploy.

"Oh? He's the boss. Wife's a nurse in the local hospital. Haven't met him, but they say he's a very serious chappie—must be to command that lot. Scariest people I've ever met, not the sort you'd like to find in a dark alley—very polite of course, but you only have to look at them to know. Always out running and such, keeping fit, practicing with their weapons, looking dangerous as bloody lions."

"Were they involved in the show down in Spain last week?"

"Well, they don't tell us any of that, see, but"—the man smiled—"I saw a Hercules fly out of the airstrip the very day it happened, and they were back in their club late that night, Andy told me, looking very chuffed with themselves, he said. Good lads, dealing with those bastards."

"Oh, yes. What sort of swine would kill a sick child? *Bahst'ds,"* Popov went on.

"Yes, indeed. Wish I could have seen them. Carpenter I work with, George Wilton, sees them practice their shooting from time to time. George says they're like something from a film, magical stuff, he says."

"Were you a soldier?"

"Long time ago, Queen's Regiment, made corporal. That's how I got this job." He sipped at his beer while the TV screen changed over to cricket, a game for which Popov had no understanding at all. "You?"

Popov shook his head. "No, never. Thought about it, but decided not to."

"Not a bad life, really, for a few years anyway," the plumber said, reaching

for the bar peanuts.

Popov drained his glass and paid the bill. It had been a pretty good night for him, and he didn't want to press his luck. So, the wife of John Clark was a nurse at the local hospital, eh? He'd have to check that out.

"Yeah, Patsy, I did," Ding told his wife, reading the morning paper a few hours late. Press coverage on the Worldpark job was still on page one, though below the fold this time. Fortunately, nobody in the media had a clue yet about Rainbow, he saw. The reporters had bought the story about the well-trained special-action group of the Spanish Civil Guard.

"Ding, I—well, you know, I—"

"Yeah, baby, I know. You're a doc, and your job is saving lives. So's mine, remember? They had thirty-some kids in there, and they murdered one . . . I didn't tell you. I was less than a hundred feet away when they did it. I saw that little girl die, Pats. Worst damned thing I ever saw, and I couldn't do a damned thing about it," he said darkly. He'd have dreams about that for a few more weeks, Chavez knew.

"Oh?" She turned her head. "Why?"

"'Cuz we didn't—I mean we couldn't, because there was still a bunch of others inside with guns on them, and we'd just got there, and we weren't ready to hit the bastards yet, and they wanted to show us how serious and dedicated they were—and that's how people like that show their resolve, I suppose. They kill a hostage so we'll know how tough they are." Ding set his paper down, thinking about it. He'd been brought up with a particular code of honor even before the United States Army had taught him the Code of Arms: you never, *ever* hurt an innocent person. To do so forever placed you beyond the pale, irredeemably cursed among men as a murderer, unworthy to wear a uniform or accept a salute. But these terrorists seemed to revel in it. What the hell was wrong with them? He'd read all of Paul Bellow's books, but somehow the message had not gotten through. Bright as he was, his mind could not make that intellectual leap. Well, maybe all you really needed to know about these people was how to put steel on target. That always worked, didn't it?

"What's with them?"

"Hell, baby, I don't know. Dr. Bellow says they believe in their ideas so much that they can step away from their humanity, but I—I just don't get it. I can't see myself doing that. Okay, sure, I've dropped the hammer on people, but never for kicks, and never for abstract ideas. There has to be a good reason for it, something that my society says is important, or because somebody broke the law that we're all supposed to follow. It's not nice, and it's not fun, but it is important, and that's why we do it. Your father's the same way."

"You really like Daddy," Patsy Chavez, M.D., observed.

"He's a good man. He's done a lot for me, and we've had some interesting times in the field. He's smart, smarter than the people at CIA ever knew—well, maybe Mary Pat knew. She really gets it, though she's something of a cowgirl."

"Who? Mary who?"

"Mary Patricia Foley. She's DO, head of the field spooks at the Agency.

Great gal, in her mid-forties now, really knows her stuff. Good boss, looks out for us worker bees."

"Are you still in the CIA, Ding?" Patsy Clark Chavez asked.

"Technically yes." Her husband nodded. "Not sure how the administrative chain works, but as long as the checks keep coming"—he smiled—"I'm not going to worry about it. So, how's life at the hospital?"

"Well, Mom's doing fine. She's charge nurse for her shift in the ER now, and I'm rotating to ER, too, next week."

"Deliver enough babies?" Ding asked.

"Just one more this year, Domingo," Patsy replied, patting her belly. "Have to start the classes soon, assuming you're going to be there."

"Honey, I *will* be there," he assured her. "You ain't having my kid without my help."

"Daddy was never there. I don't think it was allowed back then. Prepared childbirth wasn't fashionable yet."

"Who wants to read magazines at a time like that?" Chavez shook his head. "Well, I guess times change, eh? Baby, I *will* be there, unless some terrorist jerk gets us called out of town, and then he better watch his ass, 'cuz this boy's going to be seriously pissed if that happens."

"I know I can depend on you." She sat down next to him, and as usual he took her hand and kissed it. "Boy or girl?"

"Didn't get the sonogram, remember? If it's a boy—"

"He'll be a spook, like his father and grandfather," Ding observed with a twinkle. "We'll start him on languages real early."

"What if he wants to be something else?"

"He won't," Domingo Chavez assured her. "He'll see what fine men his antecedents are, and want to emulate them. It's a Latino thing, babe"—he kissed her with a smile—"following in the honorable footsteps of your father." He couldn't say that he hadn't done so himself. His father had died at too early an age for his son to be properly imprinted. Just as well. Domingo's father, Esteban Chavez, had driven a delivery truck. Too dull, Domingo thought.

"What about the Irish? I thought it was their 'thing,' too."

"Pretty much." Chavez grinned. "That's why there are so many paddies in the FBI."

"Remember Bill Henriksen?" Augustus Werner asked Dan Murray.

"Used to work for you on HRT, bit of a nut, wasn't he?"

"Well, he was heavily into the environmental stuff, hugging trees and all that crap, but he knew the job at Quantico. He laid a good one on me for Rainbow."

"Oh?" The FBI Director looked up and instantly focused at the use of the codeword.

"In Spain they were using an Air Force chopper. The media hasn't caught on to it, but it's there on the videotapes if anyone cares to notice. Bill said it wasn't real bright. He's got a point."

"Maybe," the FBI Director allowed. "But as a practical matter—"

"I know, Dan, there are the practical considerations, but it *is* a real problem."

"Yeah, well, Clark's thinking about maybe going a little public on Rainbow. One of his people brought it up, he tells me. If you want to deter terrorism, you might want to let the word get out there's a new sheriff in town, he said. Anyway, he hasn't made any decision for an official recommendation to the Agency, but evidently he's kicking the idea around."

"Interesting," Gus Werner said. "I can see the point, especially after three successful operations. Hey, if I were one of those idiots, I'd think twice before having the Wrath of God descend on me. But they don't think like normal people, do they?"

"Not exactly, but deterrence is deterrence, and John has me thinking about it now. We could leak the data at several levels, let the word out that there's a secret multinational counterterror team now operating." Murray paused. "Not take them black to white, but maybe black to gray."

"What will the Agency say?" Werner asked.

"Probably no, with an exclamation point behind it," the Director admitted. "But like I said, John has me thinking about it a little."

"I can see his point, Dan. If the world knows about it, maybe people will think twice, but then people will start to ask questions, and reporters show up, and pretty soon you have people's faces on the front page of *USA Today,* along with articles about how they screwed up on a job, written by somebody who can't even put a clip in a gun the right way."

"They can put a D-Notice on stories in England," Murray reminded him. "At least they won't make the local papers."

"Fine, so then they come out in the *Washington Post,* and *nobody* reads that, right?" Werner snorted. And he well knew the problems that the FBI's HRT had gotten into with Waco and Ruby Ridge after his tenure as commander of the unit. The media had screwed up the reporting of events in both cases—as usual, he thought, but that was the media for you. "How many people are into Rainbow?"

"About a hundred . . . pretty big number for a black outfit. I mean, their security hasn't been broken yet that we know of, but—"

"But as Bill Henriksen said, anybody who knows the difference 'tween a Huey and a Black Hawk knows that there was something odd about the Worldpark job. Hard to keep secrets, isn't it?"

"Sure as hell, Gus. Anyway, give the idea some thought, will you?"

"Will do. Anything else?"

"Yeah, also from Clark—does anybody think three terrorist incidents since Rainbow set up is a big number? Might somebody be activating cells of bad guys and turning them loose? If so, who, and if so, what for?"

"Christ, Dan, we get our European intelligence from *them,* remember? Who's the guy they have working the spook side?"

"Bill Tawney's his chief analyst. 'Six' guy, pretty good as a matter of fact—I know him from when I was the legal attaché in London a few years ago. He doesn't know, either. They're wondering if some old KGB guy or something like that might be traveling around, telling the sleeping vampires to wake up and suck some blood."

Werner considered that for about half a second or so before speaking. "If so, he hasn't been a raving success. The operations have some of the earmarks of

professionalism, but not enough of it to matter. Hell, Dan, you know the drill. If the bad guys are in the same place for more than an hour, we descend on them and take them out the instant they screw up. Professional terrorists or not, they are *not* well-trained people, they don't have anything like our resources, and they surrender the initiative to us sooner or later. All we need to know is where they are, remember? After that, the thunderbolt is in our hands."

"Yeah, and you have zapped a few, Gus. And that's why we need better intelligence, to zap them before they show up on the radarscope of their own accord."

"Well, one thing I can't do is their intel for them. They're closer to the sources than we are," Werner said, "and I bet they don't send us everything they have anyway."

"They can't. Too much of it to fax back and forth."

"Okay, yes, three hard incidents looks like a lot, but we can't tell if it's just coincidence or part of a plan unless we have people to ask. Like a live terrorist. Clark's boys haven't taken anyone alive yet, have they?"

"Nope," Murray agreed. "That's not part of their mission statement."

"So tell them that if they want hard intel, they have to have somebody with a live brain and a mouth after the shooting stops." But Werner knew that that wasn't easy under the best of circumstances. Just as taking tigers alive was far harder than taking them dead, it was difficult to capture someone possessing a loaded submachine gun and the will to use it. Even the HRT shooters, who were trained to bring them in alive in order to toss them in front of a Federal District Court judge for proper sentencing and caging at Marion, Illinois, hadn't done well in that area. And Rainbow was made up of soldiers for whom the niceties of law were somewhat foreign. The Hague Convention established rules for war that were looser than anything found in the United States Constitution. You couldn't kill prisoners, but you had to capture them alive before they *were* prisoners, and that was something armies generally didn't emphasize.

"Does our friend Mr. Clark require any more guidance from us?" Werner asked.

"Hey, he's on our side, remember?"

"He's a good guy, yes. Hell, Dan, I met with him while they were setting Rainbow up, and I let him have one of our best troops in Timmy Noonan, *and* I'll grant you he's done a great job—three of them so far. But he's *not* one of us, Dan. He doesn't think like a cop, but if he wants better intel, that's what he has to do. Tell him that, will ya?"

"I will, Gus," Murray promised. Then they moved on to other things.

"So what are we supposed to do?" Stanley asked. "Shoot the bloody guns out of their hands? That only happens in the cinema, John."

"Weber did exactly that, remember?"

"Yes, and that was against policy, and we damned well can't encourage it," Alistair replied.

"Come on, Al, if we want better intelligence information, we have to capture some alive, don't we?"

"Fine, *if possible,* which it rarely will be, John. Bloody rarely."

"I know," Rainbow Six conceded. "But can we at least get the boys to think about it?"

"It's possible, but to make that sort of decision on the fly is difficult at best."

"We need the intel, Al," Clark persisted.

"True, but not at the cost of death or injury to one of our men."

"All things in life are a compromise of some sort," Rainbow Six observed. "Would you like to have some hard intelligence information on these people?"

"Of course, but—"

" 'But,' my ass. If we need it, let's figure a way to get it," Clark persisted.

"We're not police constables, John. That is *not* part of our mission."

"Then we're going to change the mission. If it becomes *possible* to take a subject alive, then we'll give it a try. You can always shoot 'em in the head if it's not. The guy Homer took with that gut shot. We *could* have taken him alive, Al. He wasn't a direct threat to anyone. Okay, he deserved it, and he was standing out in the open with a weapon, and our training said *kill,* and sure enough, Johnston took the shot, and decided to make a statement of his own because he wanted to—but it would have been just as easy to take out his kneecap, in which case we'd have somebody to talk to now, and maybe he would have sung like most of them do, and *then* maybe we'd know something we'd sure as hell *like* to know now, wouldn't we?"

"Quite so, John," Stanley conceded. Arguing with Clark wasn't easy. He'd come to Rainbow with the reputation of a CIA knuckle-dragger, but that's not what he was at all, the Brit reminded himself.

"We just don't know enough, and I don't like not knowing enough about the environment. I think Ding's right. Somebody's setting these bastards loose. If we can figure out a little about that, then maybe we can locate the guy and have the local cops put the bag on him wherever he is, and then maybe we can have a friendly little chat and maybe the ultimate result will be fewer incidents to go out and take risks on." The ultimate goal of Rainbow was an odd one, after all: to train for missions that rarely—if ever—came, to be the fire department in a town with no fires.

"Very well, John. We should talk with Peter and Domingo about it first of all, I think."

"Tomorrow morning, then." Clark stood from his desk. "How about a beer at the club?"

"Dmitriy Arkadeyevich, I haven't seen you in quite some time," the man said.

"Four years," Popov confirmed. They were in London, at a pub three blocks from the Russian Embassy. He'd taken the train here just on the off chance that one of his former colleagues might show up, and so one had, Ivan Petrovich Kirilenko. Ivan Petrovich had been a rising star, a few years younger than Popov, a skilled field officer who'd made full colonel at the age of thirty-eight. Now, he was probably—

"You are the *rezident* for Station London now?"

"I am not allowed to say such things, Dmitriy." Kirilenko smiled and nodded even so. He'd come very far and very fast in a downsized agency of the Russian government, and was doubtless still actively pursuing political and

other intelligence, or rather, had a goodly staff of people to do it for him. Russia was worried about NATO expansion; the alliance once so threatening to the Soviet Union was now advancing eastward toward his country's borders, and some in Moscow worried, as they were paid to worry, that this could be the precursor to an attack on the Motherland. Kirilenko knew this was rubbish, as did Popov, but even so he was paid to make sure of it, and the new *rezident* was doing his job as instructed. "So, what are *you* doing now?"

"I am not permitted to say." Which was the obvious reply. It could mean anything, but in the context of their former organization, it meant that Popov was still a player of some sort. What sort, Kirilenko didn't know, though he'd heard that Dmitriy Arkadeyevich had been RIF'd from the organization. That had been a surprise to him. Popov still enjoyed an excellent service reputation as a field spook. "I am living between worlds now, Vanya. I work for a commercial business, but I perform other duties as well," he allowed. The truth was so often a useful tool, in the service of lies.

"You did not appear here by accident," Kirilenko pointed out.

"True. I hoped to see a colleague here." The pub was too close to the Embassy on Palace Green, Kensington, for serious work, but it was a comfortable place, for casual meets, and besides, Kirilenko believed his status as *rezident* to be entirely secret. Showing up in a place like this enhanced that. No real spook, everybody knew, would take the chance. "I need some help with something."

"What might that be?" the intelligence officer asked, over a sip of bitter.

"A report on a CIA officer who is probably known to us."

"The name?"

"John Clark."

"Why?"

"He is now, I believe, the leader of a black operation based here in England. I would like to offer the information I have on the man in return for whatever information you might have. I can perhaps add a few things to that dossier. I believe my information will be of interest," Popov concluded mildly. In context, it was a large promise.

"John Clark," Kirilenko repeated. "I will see what I can do for you. You have my number?"

Popov slipped a piece of paper on the bar unseen. "Here is my number. No. Do you have a card?"

"Certainly." The Russian pocketed the scrap of paper and pulled out his wallet and handed the card over. I. P. Kirilenko, it said, Third Secretary, Russian Embassy, London. 0181-946-0001, with -9009 as the fax number. Popov pocketed the card. "Well, I must get back. Good to see you, Dmitriy." The *rezident* set his glass down and walked out onto the street.

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"Get the picture?" one "Five" man said to the other on the way out the door, about forty seconds behind their surveillance target.

"Well, not good enough for the National Portrait Gallery, but . . ." The

problem with covert cameras was that the lenses were too small to make a really good photo. They were usually good enough for identification purposes, however, and he'd gotten eleven exposures, which, combined with computer-enhancement, should be entirely adequate. Kirilenko, they knew, thought his cover to be adequate. He didn't and couldn't know that "Five," once called MI-5, and now officially called the Security Service, had its own source inside the Russian Embassy. The Great Game was still ongoing in London and elsewhere, new world order or not. They hadn't caught Kirilenko in a compromising act yet, but he was the *rezident,* after all, and therefore not given to such action. But you tracked such people anyway, because you knew who they were, and sooner or later, you got something on them, or from them. Like the chap he'd just had a beer with. Not a regular for this pub—they knew who they were. No name. Just some photos that would be compared with the library of photos at "Five's" new headquarters building, Thames House, right on the river near Lambeth Bridge.

Popov stepped outside, turned left, and walked past Kensington Palace to catch a cab to the train station. Now, if only Kirilenko could get him something of use. He should be able to. He'd offered something juicy in return.

CHAPTER 19

SEARCHING

Three of the winos died that day, all from internal bleeds in the upper GI. Killgore went down to check them. Two had died in the same hour, the third five hours later, and the morphine had helped them expire either unconscious or in a painless, merciful stupor. That left five out of the original ten, and none of them would see the end of the week. Shiva was every bit as deadly as they'd hoped, and, it would seem, just as communicable as Maggie had promised. Finally, the delivery system worked. That was proven by Mary Bannister, Subject F4, who'd just moved into the treatment center with the onset of frank symptoms. So, the Shiva Project was fully successful to this point. Everything was nominal to the test parameters and the experimental predictions.

"How bad is the pain?" he asked his doomed patient.

"Cramping, pretty bad," she replied. "Like flu, plus something else."

"Well, you do have a moderate fever. Any idea where you may have caught it? I mean, there *is* a new strain of flu out of Hong Kong, and looks like you have it."

"Maybe at work . . . before I came here. Can't remember. I'm going to be okay, right?" The concern had fought its way through the Valium-impregnated food she got every day.

"I think so." Killgore smiled around his surgical mask. "This one can be dangerous, but only to infants and the elderly, and you're not either one of those, are you?"

"I guess not." She smiled, too, at the reassurance from the physician, which was always comforting.

"Okay, what we're going to do is get an IV started to keep you properly hydrated. And we'll work on the discomfort a little with a little morphine drip, okay?"

"You're the doctor," Subject F4 replied.

"Okay, hold your arm still. I have to make a stick, and it will hurt a little bit . . . there," he said, on doing it. "How was that?"

"Not too bad."

"Okay." Killgore punched in the activation number on the Christmas tree. The morphine drip started instantly. About ten seconds later, it got into the patient's bloodstream.

"Ohhhh, oh yes," she said, eyes closed when the initial rush of the drug hit her system. Killgore had never experienced it himself, but he imagined it to be almost a sexual feeling, the way the narcotic soothed her entire body. The tension in her musculature all went away at once. You could see the body

relax. Her mouth changed most of all, from tension to the slackness of sleep. It was too bad, really. F4 wasn't exactly beautiful, but she was pretty in her way, and judging from what he'd watched on the control-room TV monitor, she was a sexual treat for her partners, even though that had been caused by the tranquilizers. But, good lay or not, she would be dead in five to seven days, despite the best efforts he and his people would render. On the tree was a small drip-bottle of Interleukin-3a, recently developed by SmithKline's excellent collection of research scientists for cancer treatment—it had also shown some promise in countering viruses, which was unique in the world of medicine. Somehow it encouraged the body's immune system, though through a mechanism that was not yet understood. It would be the most likely treatment for Shiva victims once the disease became widespread, and he had to confirm that it wouldn't work. That had been the case with the winos, but they also needed to test it in fundamentally healthy patients, male and female, just to make sure. Too bad for her, he thought, since she had a face and a name to go along with her number. It would also be too bad for millions—actually billions—of others. But it would be easier with them. He might see their faces on TV, but TV wasn't real, was it? Just dots on a phosphor screen.

The idea was simple enough. A rat was a pig was a dog, was a boy—woman in this case. All had an equal right to life. They'd done extensive testing of Shiva on monkeys, for whom it had proved universally lethal, and he'd watched all those tests, and shared the pain of the subsentient animals who felt pain as real as what F4 felt, though in the case of the monkeys morphine hadn't been possible, and he'd *hated* that—hated inflicting pain on innocent creatures with whom he could not talk and to whom he could not explain things. And though it was justifiable in the big-picture sense—they would be saving millions, billions of animals from the depredations of humans—to see an animal suffer was a lot for him and his colleagues to bear, for they all empathized with all creatures great and small, and more for the small, the innocent, and the helpless than for the larger two-legged creatures who cared not a whim about them. As F4 probably did not, though they'd never asked. Why confuse the issue, after all? He looked down again. F4 was already stuporous from the narcotic he'd administered. At least she, unlike the experimental monkeys, was not in pain. That was merciful of them, wasn't it?

"What black operation is that?" the desk officer asked over the secure phone link.

"I have no idea, but he is a serious man, remember? A colonel of the *Innostrannoye Upravleniye,* you will recall, Division Four, Directorate S."

"Ah, yes, I know him. He spent much time at Fensterwalde and Karlovy Vary. He was RIF'd along with all those people. What is he doing now?"

"I do not know, but he offers us information on this Clark in return for some of our data. I recommend that we make the trade, Vasily Borissovich."

"Clark is a name known to us. He has met personally with Sergey Nikolay'ch," the desk officer told the *rezident.* "He's a senior field officer, principally a paramilitary type, but also an instructor at the CIA Academy in Virginia. He is known to be close to Mary Patricia Foleyeva and her husband. It is also said that he has the ear of the American President. Yes, I think we

would be interested in his current activities."

The phone they spoke over was the Russian version of the American STU-3, the technology having been stolen about three years before by a team working for Directorate T of the First Chief Directorate. The internal microchips, which had been slavishly copied, scrambled the incoming and outgoing signals with a 128-bit encryption system whose key changed every hour, and changed further with the individual users whose personal codes were part of the insertable plastic keys they used. The STU system had defied the Russians' best efforts to crack it, even with exact knowledge of the internal workings of the system hardware, and they assumed that the Americans had the same problems—after all, for centuries Russia had produced the world's best mathematicians, and the best of them hadn't even come up with a theoretical model for cracking the scrambling system.

But the Americans had, with the revolutionary application of quantum theory to communications security, a decryption system so complex that only a handful of the "Directorate Z" people at the National Security Agency actually understood it. But they didn't have to. They had the world's most powerful supercomputers to do the real work. These were located in the basement of the sprawling NSA headquarters building, a dungeonlike area whose roof was held up with naked steel I-beams because it had been excavated for just this purpose. The star machine there was one made by a company gone bankrupt, the Super-Connector from Thinking Machines, Inc., of Cambridge, Massachusetts. The machine, custom-built for NSA, had sat largely unused for six years, because nobody had come up with a way to program it efficiently, but the advent of quantum theory had changed that, too, and the monster machine was now cranking merrily away while its operators wondered who they could find to make the next generation of this complex machine.

All manner of signals came into Fort Meade, from all over the world, and one such source included GCHQ, Britain's General Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham, NSA's sister service in England. The British knew what phones were whose in the Russian Embassy—they hadn't changed the numbers, even with the demise of the USSR—and this one was on the desk of the *rezident.* The sound quality wasn't good enough for a voice-print, since the Russian version of the STU system digitized signals less efficiently than the American version, but once the encryption was defeated, the words were easily recognizable. The decrypted signal was cross-loaded to yet another computer, which translated the Russian conversation to English with a fair degree of reliability. Since the signal was from the London *rezident* to Moscow, it was placed on the top of the electronic pile, and cracked, translated, and printed less than an hour after it had been made. That done, it was transmitted to Cheltenham immediately, and at Fort Meade routed to a signals officer whose job it was to send intercepts to the people interested in the content. In this case, it was routed straight to the Director of Central Intelligence and, because it evidently discussed the identity of a field spook, to the Deputy Director (Operations), since all the field spooks worked for her. The former was a busier person than the latter, but that didn't matter, since the latter was married to the former.

"Ed?" his wife's voice said.

"Yeah, honey?" Foley replied.

"Somebody's trying to ID John Clark over in U.K."

Ed Foley's eyes went fully open at that news. "Really? Who?"

"The station chief in London talked with his desk officer in Moscow, and we intercepted it. The message ought to be in your IN pile, Eddie."

"Okay." Foley lifted the pile and leafed through it. "Got it. Hmmm," he said over the phone. "The guy who wants the information, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov, former Colonel in—a terrorism guy, eh? I thought they were all RIF'd . . . Okay, they were, at least he was."

"Yeah, Eddie, a terrorism guy is interested in Rainbow Six. Isn't that interesting?"

"I'd say so. Get this out to John?"

"Bet your sweet little tushie," the DO replied at once.

"Anything on Popov?"

"I ran the name through the computer. Zip," his wife responded. "I'm starting a new file on the name. Maybe the Brits have something."

"Want me to call Basil about it?" the DCI asked.

"Let's see what we develop first. Get the fax off to John right away, though."

"It'll go out soon as I get the cover note done," Mary Pat Foley promised.

"Hockey game tonight." The Washington Capitals were closing in on the playoffs, and tonight was a grudge match with the Flyers.

"I haven't forgotten. Later, honey-bunny."

"Bill," John said over the office phone forty minutes later. "You want to come into my office?"

"On the way, John." He walked through the door in about two minutes. "What's the news?"

"Check this out, pal." Clark handed over the four pages of transcript.

"Bloody hell," the intelligence officer said, as soon as he got to page two. "Popov, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich. Doesn't ring a bell—oh, I see, they don't know the name at Langley either. Well, one cannot know them all. Call Century House about it?"

"I think we cross-index our files with yours, but it can't hurt. It would appear that Ding was right on this one. How much you want to bet that this is our guy? Who's your best friend in the Security Service?"

"Cyril Holt," Tawney said at once. "Deputy Director. I've known Cyril back to Rugby. He was a year behind me there. Outstanding chap." He didn't have to explain to Clark that old school ties were still a major part of British culture.

"Want to get him into this?"

"Bloody right, John."

"Okay, let's make the call. If we decide to go public, I want us to make the decision, not the fucking Russians."

"They know your name, then?"

"More than that. I've met Chairman Golovko. He's the guy who got Ding and me into Tehran last year. I've run a couple of cooperative operations with

'em, Bill. They know everything down to my dick size."

Tawney didn't react. He was learning how Americans talked, and it was often very entertaining. "You know, John, we ought not to get too excited about this information."

"Bill, you've been in the field as much as I have, maybe a little more. If this doesn't make your nose twitch, get something to clean your sinuses out, will you?" Clark paused for a second. "We got somebody who knows me by name, and is hinting that he can tell the Russians what I'm doing now. He's gotta know, man. He picked the London *rezident* to tell, not the one in Caracas. A terrorism guy, maybe a guy who knows names and numbers, and we've had three incidents since we got here, and we've agreed that's a lot for so short a time, and now this guy comes up on the scope, asking about me. Bill, I think it's time to get a *little* excited, okay?"

"Quite so, John. I'll get Cyril on the phone." Tawney left the room.

"Fuck," John breathed, when the door closed. That was the problem with black operations. Sooner or later, some bastard flipped the light switch, and it was generally somebody you didn't even want in the room. How the hell has this one leaked? His face darkened as he looked down at his desk, acquiring an expression that those who knew it considered very dangerous indeed.

"Shit," Director Murray said at his desk in FBI Headquarters.

"Yeah, Dan, that about covers it," Ed Foley agreed from his seventh-floor office in Langley. "How the hell did this leak?"

"Beats the hell out of me, man. You have anything on this Popov that I don't know about?"

"I can check with Intelligence and Terrorism divisions, but we cross-deck everything to you. What about the Brits?"

"If I know John, he's already on the phone to 'Five' and 'Six.' His intel guy is Bill Tawney, and Bill's top-drawer in any outfit. Know him?"

"Rings a vague bell, but I can't put a face on it. What's Basil think of him?"

"Says he's one of his best analysts, and was a primo field-spook until a few years ago. He's got a good nose," the DCI told Murray.

"How big a threat is this?"

"Can't tell yet. The Russians know John pretty well from Tokyo and Tehran. Golovko knows him personally—called me about the Tehran job to compliment him on the job he and Chavez pulled off. I gather they hit it off, but this is business, not personal, y'know?"

"I hear you, Don Corleone. Okay, what do you want me to do?"

"Well, there's a leak somewhere. I haven't got a clue yet where it might be. The only talk I've heard about Rainbow has been people with codeword clearance. They're supposed to know about keeping their mouths shut."

"Right." Murray snorted. The only people able to leak stuff like this were the people you trusted, people who'd passed a serious background check done by special agents of the FBI. Only a trusted and checked-out person could really betray his country, and unfortunately the FBI hadn't yet learned to look inside a person's brain and heart. And what if it had been an inadvertent leak? You could interview the person who'd done it, and even he or she couldn't reply that it had happened. Security and counterespionage were two of the

hardest tasks in the known universe. Thank God, he thought, for the cryppies at NSA, as always the most trusted and productive of his country's intelligence services.

"Bill, we have a two-man team on Kirilenko almost continuously. They just photographed him having a pint with a chap at his usual pub last night," Cyril Holt told his "Six" colleague.

"That may well be our man," Tawney said.

"Quite possible. I need to see your intercepts. Want me to drive out?"

"Yes, as quickly as you can."

"Fine. Give me two hours, old man. I still have a few things on my desk to attend to."

"Excellent."

The good news was that they knew this phone was secure in two different ways. The STU-4 encryption system could be beaten, but only by technology that only the Americans had—or so they thought. Better still, the phone lines used were computer-generated. One advantage to the fact that the British telephone system was essentially owned by the government was that the computers controlling the switching systems could randomize the routings and deny anyone the chance to tap into a call, unless there was a hard-wire connection at the point of origin or reception. For that bit of security, they relied on technicians who checked the lines on a monthly basis—unless one of them was working for someone else as well, Tawney reminded himself. You couldn't prevent everything, and while maintaining telephone silence could deny information to a potential enemy, it also had the effect of stopping the transfer of information within the government—thus causing that institution to grind to an immediate, smoking halt.

"Go ahead, say it," Clark told Chavez.

"Easy, Mr. C, not like I predicted the outcome of the next World Series. It was pretty obvious stuff."

"Maybe so, Domingo, but you still said it first."

Chavez nodded. "Problem is, what the hell do we do about it? John, if he knows your name, he either already knows or can easily find out your location—and that means us. Hell, all he needs is a pal in the phone company, and he starts staking us out. Probably has a photo of you, or a description. Then he gets a tag number and starts following you around."

"We should be so lucky. I know about countersurveillance, and I have a shoe-phone everywhere I go. I'd *love* for somebody to try that on me. I'd have you and some of your boys come out to the country, do a pick-and-roll, bag the fucker, and then we could have a friendly little chat with him." That generated a thin smile. John Clark knew how to extract information from people, though his techniques for doing so didn't exactly fit guidelines given to the average police departments.

"I suppose, John. But for now there's not a damned thing we can do 'cept to keep our eyes open and wait for someone else to generate some information for us."

"I've never been a target like this before. I don't like it."

"I hear you, man, but we live in an imperfect world. What's Bill Tawney say?"

"He has a 'Five' guy coming out later today."

"Well, they're the pros from Dover on this. Let 'em do their thing," Ding advised. He knew it was good advice—indeed, the only possible advice—and knew that John knew that, and he also knew that John would hate it. His boss liked doing things himself, not waiting for others to do things for him. If Mr. C had a weakness, that was it. He could be patient while working, but not while waiting for things to happen beyond his purview. Well, nobody was perfect.

"Yeah, I know" was the reply. "How are your troops?"

"Riding the crest of the wave, man, right in the curl and looking down the pipeline. I have never seen morale this good, John. The Worldpark job just lit everybody up. I think we can conquer the whole world if the bad guys line up properly."

"The eagle looks pretty good in the club, doesn't it?"

"Bet your sweet ass, Mr. C. Ain't no nightmares from this one . . . well, except for the little girl. That wasn't fun to watch, even if she was dying anyway, you know? But we got the bastards, and Mr. Carlos is still in his cage. I don't figure anybody else is going to try to spring his sorry ass."

"And he knows it, the French tell me."

Chavez stood. "Good. I gotta get back. Keep me in the loop on this, okay?"

"Sure will, Domingo," Rainbow Six promised.

"So what sort of work do you do?" the plumber asked.

"I sell plumbing supplies," Popov said. "Wrenches and so forth, wholesale to distributors and retailers."

"Indeed. Anything useful?"

"Rigid pipe wrenches, the American brand. They're the best in the world, and they have a lifetime guarantee. If one breaks, we replace it free, even twenty years from now. Various other things as well, but Rigid wrenches are my best product."

"Really? I've heard about them, but I've never used them."

"The adjustment mechanism is a little steadier than the English Stilson spanner. Other than that, the only real advantage is the replacement policy. You know, I've been selling these things for . . . what? Fourteen years, I think. I've had one break from all the thousands I've sold."

"Hmph. I broke a wrench last year," the plumber said.

"Anything unusual about work on the base?"

"Not really. Plumbing is plumbing. Some of the things I work on are rather old—the watercoolers, for example. Getting parts for the bloody things can be troublesome, and they can't make the decision to get new ones. Bloody government bureaucrats. They must spend thousands a week for bullets for their bloody machine guns, but purchase some new watercoolers that people will use every day? Not bloody likely!" The man had a good laugh and sipped at his lager.

"What sort of people are they?"

"The SAS team? Good blokes, very polite chaps. They make no trouble for me and my mates at all."

"What about the Americans?" Popov asked. "I've never really known any, but you hear stories about how they do things their own way and—"

"Not in my experience. Well, I mean, only lately have we had any at the base, but the two or three I've worked for are just like our chaps—and remember I told you, they try to tip us! Bloody Yanks! But friendly chaps. Most of them have kids, and the children are lovely. Learning to play proper football now, some of them. So, what are you doing around here?"

"Meeting with the local ironmongers, trying to get them to carry my brands of tools, and also the local distributor."

"Lee and Dopkin?" The plumber shook his head. "Both are old buggers, they won't change very much. You'll do better with the little shops than with them, I'm afraid."

"Well, how about your shop? Can I sell *you* some of my tools?"

"I don't have much of a budget—but, well, I'll look at your wrenches."

"When can I come in?"

"Security, mate, is rather tight here. I doubt they'll allow me to drive you onto the base . . . but, well, I could bring you in with me—say, tomorrow afternoon?"

"I'd like that. When?"

"Tomorrow afternoon? I could pick you up here."

"Yes," Popov said. "I'd like that."

"Excellent. We can have a ploughman's lunch here and then I'll take you in myself."

"I'll be here at noon," Popov promised. "With my tools."

Cyril Holt was over fifty, and had the tired look of a senior British civil servant. Well dressed in a finely tailored suit and an expensive tie—clothing over there, Clark knew, was excellent, but not exactly cheap—he shook hands all around and took his seat in John's office.

"So," Holt said. "I gather we have a problem here."

"You've read the intercept?"

"Yes." Holt nodded. "Good work by your NSA chaps." He didn't have to add that it was good work by his chaps as well, identifying the line used by the *rezident.*

"Tell me about Kirilenko," Clark said.

"Competent chap. He has a staff of eleven field officers, and perhaps a few other off-the-books helpers to do pickups and such. Those are all 'legals' with diplomatic cover. He has illegals as well who report to him, of course. We know two of them, both covered as businessmen who do real business in addition to espionage. We've been building up this book for some time. In any case, Vanya is a competent, capable chap. He's covered as the embassy's third secretary, does his diplomatic duties like a genuine diplomat, and is well liked by the people with whom he comes into contact. Bright, witty, good chap to have a pint with. Drinks beer more than vodka, oddly enough. He seems to like it in London. Married, two children, no bad habits that have come to our attention. His wife doesn't work at all, but we haven't seen anything covert on her part. Just a housewife, so far as we can discern. Also well liked in the diplomatic community." Holt passed across photographs of both. "Now," he

went on, “just yesterday our friend was having a friendly pint in his favorite pub. It’s a few blocks from the embassy in Kensington, close to the palace—the embassy dates back to the Czars, just like the one you have in Washington—and this pub is rather upscale. Here’s the enhanced photo of the chap he had his beer with.” Another photo was passed across.

The face, Clark and Tawney saw, was grossly ordinary. The man had brown hair and eyes, regular features, and was about as distinctive as a steel garbage can in an alley. In the photo, he was dressed in jacket and tie. The expression on his face was unremarkable. They might have been discussing football, the weather, or how to kill someone they both didn’t like—there was no telling.

“I don’t suppose he has a regular seat?” Tawney asked.

“No, usually sits at the bar, but sometimes in a booth, and rarely in the same seat twice in a row. We’ve thought about placing a bug,” Holt told them, “but it’s technically difficult, it would let the publican know we’re up to something, and it’s very doubtful that we’d get anything useful from it. His English is superb, by the way. The publican seems to think he’s a Briton from the North Country.”

“Does he know you’re following him?” Tawney asked, before Clark could.

Holt shook his head. “Hard to say, but we do not think so. The surveillance teams switch off, and they’re some of my best people. They go to this pub regularly, even when he’s not there, in case he has a chap of his own there to do countersurveillance. The buildings in the area allow us to track him fairly easily by camera. We’ve seen a few possible brush-passes, but you both know the drill on that. We all bump into people on a crowded sidewalk, don’t we? They’re not all brush-passes. That’s why we teach our field officers to do it. Especially when the streets are crowded, you can have a dozen cameras on your subject and not see it being done.”

Clark and Tawney both nodded at that. The brush-pass had probably been around as long as spies had. You walked down a street and at most you pretended to bump into someone. In the process, his hand delivered something into yours, or dropped it in your pocket, and with minimal practice it was virtually invisible even to people watching for it. To be successful, only one of the parties had to wear something distinctive, and that could be a carnation in your buttonhole, the color of a necktie or the way one carried a newspaper, or sunglasses, or any number of other markers known only to the participants in the mini-operation. It was the simplest of examples of field-craft, the easiest to use, and for that reason the curse of counterespionage agencies.

But if he did a pass to this Popov guy, they had a photograph of the bastard. Maybe had it, he reminded himself. There was no guarantee that the guy he’d drunk with yesterday was the right fellow. Maybe Kirilenko was swift enough that he’d go to a pub and strike up a conversation with some other patron just to piss the “Five” people off and give them another randomly selected person to check out. Doing that required personnel and time, neither of which the Security Service had in infinite quantities. Espionage and counterespionage remained the best damned game in town, and even the players themselves never really knew what the score was.

“So, you’ll increase your coverage of Kirilenko?” Bill Tawney asked.

“Yes.” Holt nodded. “But do remember we’re up against a highly skilled

player. There are no guarantees."

"I know that, Mr. Holt. I've been in the field, and the Second Chief Directorate never got their hands on me," Clark told the visitor from the Security Service. "So anything at all on Popov?"

He shook his head. "That name is not in our files. It's possible, I suppose, that we have him under another name. Perhaps he's been in contact with our PIRA friends—that actually seems likely, if he's a terrorism specialist. There were many such contacts. We've got informers inside the PIRA, and I'm thinking about showing the photograph to some of them. But that's something we have to do carefully. Some of our informers are doubles. Our Irish friends have their own counterespionage operations, remember?"

"I've never worked directly against them," John said next. "How good are they?"

"Bloody good," Holt assured him, catching a nod also from Bill Tawney. "They're highly dedicated, and superbly organized, but now the organization's fragmenting somewhat. Obviously, some of them do not want peace to break out. Our good friend Gerry Adams is by profession a publican, and if the Troubles come to an end, and he fails to get himself elected to high public office, as he clearly hopes, then his fallback job is rather lower in prestige than the position he now holds—but the majority of them seem willing to terminate their operations, declare victory, and give peace a chance. That has helped our informer-recruiting somewhat, but there are elements of the PIRA who are more militant today than they were ten years ago. It's a cause for concern," Holt told them.

"Same story in the Bekaa Valley," Clark agreed. What did you do when Satan came to Jesus? Some would never want to stop fighting sin, and if that meant creating some sin themselves, well, that was just the cost of doing business, wasn't it? "They just don't want to let go."

"That is a problem. And I need not tell you that one of the main targets of those chaps is right here. The SAS is not exactly beloved of the PIRA."

That wasn't news either. The British Special Air Service commandos had gone into the field often enough to "sort out" IRA members who had made the two serious mistakes of breaking the law and being known. John thought it a mistake to use soldiers to perform what was essentially a police function—but then he had to admit that Rainbow was tasked to that exact mission, in a manner of speaking. But the SAS had done things that in some contexts could be called premeditated murder. Britain, much as it resembled America in so many ways, was a different country with different laws and very different rules in some areas. So security at Hereford was tight, because someday ten or so bad guys might appear with AK-47s and an attitude, and his people, like many of the resident SAS troops, had families, and terrorists didn't always respect the rights of noncombatants, did they? Not hardly.

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The decision had come with unusual speed from Number 2 Dzerzhinsky Square, and a courier was now on his way. Kirilenko was surprised to get the

coded message. The courier was flying Aeroflot to Heathrow with a diplomatic bag, which was inviolable so long as the courier kept it in his possession—countries had been known to steal them for their contents, which were often uncoded, but couriers knew about that, and played by a strict set of rules—if they had to visit the can, so did the bag. And so with their diplomatic passports they breezed through control points and went off to the waiting cars that were always there, carrying the usually canvas bags often full of valuable secrets past the eyes of people who would trade their daughters' virtue for one look.

So it happened here. The courier arrived on the evening flight from Moscow's Sheremetyevo International, was waved through customs, and hopped into the waiting car driven by an embassy employee. From there it was a mere forty minutes through rush-hour traffic to Kensington, and from there to Kirilenko's office. The manila envelope was sealed with wax to ensure that it hadn't been tampered with. The *rezident* thanked the courier for this and two other packages and went to work. It was late enough that he'd have to pass on his usual pint of bitter tonight. It was an annoyance to him. He honestly enjoyed the atmosphere of his favorite pub. There was nothing like it in Moscow, or any of the other countries he'd served in. So now, in his hands was the complete dossier on Clark, John T., senior CIA field officer. It ran to twenty single-spaced pages, plus three photographs. He took the time to read the package over. It was impressive. According to this, in his first and only meeting with Chairman Golovko, he'd admitted to smuggling the wife and daughter of former KGB Chairman Gerasimov right out of the country . . . using a *submarine* to do it? So, the story he'd read in the Western media was true? It was like something from Hollywood. Then later he'd operated in Romania around the time of Nicolae Ceauçescu's downfall, then in cooperation with Station Tokyo he'd rescued the Japanese prime minister, and again with Russian assistance participated in the elimination of Mamoud Haji Daryaei? "Believed to have the ear of the American president," the analysis page pronounced—and well he should! Kirilenko thought. Sergey Nikolay'ch Golovko himself had added his thoughts to the file. A highly competent field officer, an independent thinker, known to take his own initiative on operations, and believed never to have put a foot wrong . . . training officer at the CIA Academy in Yorktown, Virginia, believed to have trained both Edward and Mary Patricia Foley, respectively the Director of Central Intelligence and the Deputy Director for Operations. This was one formidable officer, Kirilenko thought. He'd impressed Golovko himself, and few enough Russians accomplished that.

So, now, he was in England somewhere, doing something covert, and his parent agency wanted to know about it, because you tried very hard to keep track of such people. The *rezident* took the paper scrap from his wallet. It looked like a cellular phone number. He had several of those in his desk drawers, all cloned from existing accounts, because it kept his signals people busy, cost the embassy no money, and was very secure. Tapping into a known cellular account was difficult, but absent the electronic codes, it was just one more signal in a city awash in them.

Dmitriy Arkadeyevich had the same thing. In every city in the world were

people who cloned phones and sold them illegally on the street. London was no exception.

"Yes?" a distant voice said.

"Dmitriy, this is Vanya."

"Yes?"

"I have the package you requested. I will require payment in the terms we agreed upon."

"It will be done," Popov promised. "Where can we make the exchange?"

That was easy. Kirilenko proposed the time, place, and method.

"Agreed." And the connection broke after a mere seventy seconds. Perhaps Popov had been RIF'd, but he still knew about communications discipline.

CHAPTER 20

CONTACTS

She knew she was sick. She wasn't sure how much, but Mary Bannister knew that she didn't feel well. And through the drugs, part of her worried that it might be serious. She'd never been in a hospital, except once to the local emergency room for a sprained ankle that her father worried might be broken, but now she was in a hospital-type bed with an IV tree next to her, and a clear plastic line that ran down into the inside of her right arm, and just the sight of it frightened her, despite the drugs going into her system. She wondered what they were giving her. Dr. Killgore had said fluids to keep her hydrated and some other stuff, hadn't he? She shook her head, trying to get the cobwebs loose enough to remember. Well, why not find out? She swung her legs to the right and stood, badly and shakily, then bent down to look at the items hanging on the tree. She had trouble making her eyes focus, and bent closer, only to find that the markings on the tag-tapes were coded in a way she didn't understand. Subject F4 stood back up and tried to frown in frustration but didn't quite make it. She looked around the treatment room. Another bed was on the far side of what appeared to be a brick partition about five feet high, but it was unoccupied. There was a TV, off at the moment, hanging on the far wall. The floor was tile, and cold on her bare feet. The door was wood, and had a latch rather than a knob—it was a standard hospital door, but she didn't know that. No phone anywhere. Didn't hospitals have phones in the room? Was she *in* a hospital? It looked and seemed like one, but she knew that her brain was working more slowly than usual, though she didn't know how she knew. It was as if she'd had too much to drink. Besides feeling ill, she felt vulnerable not in total command of herself. It was time to do *something,* though exactly what she wasn't sure. She stood there for a brief time to consider it, then took the tree in her right hand and started walking for the door. Fortunately, the electronic control unit on the tree was battery-powered and not plugged into the wall. It rolled easily on the rubber wheels.

The door, it turned out, was unlocked. She pulled it open, stuck her head out, and looked around the door frame into the corridor. Empty. She walked out, still dragging the IV tree behind her. She saw no nurses' station at either end, but did not find that remarkable. Subject F4 headed to her right, pushing the IV tree ahead of her now, looking for—something, she wasn't sure what. She managed a frown and tried other doors, but while they opened, they revealed only darkened rooms, most of them smelling of disinfectant until she got to the very end. This door was labeled T-9, and behind it she found something different. No beds here, but a desk with a computer whose monitor screen was on, meaning that the computer was powered up. She walked in

and leaned over the desk. It was an IBM-compatible, and she knew how to work those. It even had a modem, she saw. Well, then, she could do—what?

It took another couple of minutes to decide. She could get a message off to her father, couldn't she?

Fifty feet and one floor away, Ben Farmer got himself a mug of coffee and sat back down into his swivel chair after a quick trip to the men's room. He picked up the copy of *Bio-Watch* he'd been reading. It was three in the morning, and all was quiet on his end of the building.

> DADDY, I'M NOT SURE WHERE I AM. THEY SAY I SIGNED A FORM ALLOW THEM TO SIGN ME IN FOR SOME MEDICAL TESTS, SOME NEW DRUG OR SOMETHING BUT I FEEL PRETTY CRUMMY NOW, AND IM NOT SUREW WHY. THEY HAVE BE HOOKEDUP TO A MEDICAION THING THATS PLUGGED INTOMY ARM, FEEL PRETTY CRUMMY AND I—

Farmer finished the article on global warming, and then checked the TV display. The computer flipped through the operating cameras, showing all the sickies in their beds—

—except one. Huh? he thought, waiting for the cameras to flip back, having missed the code number for the one with the empty bed. It took about a minute. Oh, shit, T-4 was missing. That was the girl, wasn't it? Subject F4, Mary something. Oh, shit, where had she gone to? He activated the direct controls and checked the corridor. Nobody there, either. Nobody had tried to go through the doors into the rest of the complex. They were both locked and alarmed. Where the hell were the docs? The one on duty now was a woman, Lani something, the other staff all disliked her 'cause she was an arrogant, obnoxious bitch. Evidently, Killgore didn't like her either, 'cause she always had the night duty. Palachek, that was her last name. Farmer wondered vaguely what nationality that was as he lifted the microphone for the PA system.

"Dr. Palacheck, Dr. Palachek, please call security," he said over the speaker system. It took about three minutes before his phone rang.

"This is Dr. Palachek. What is it?"

"Subject F4 has taken a walk. I can't spot her on the surveillance cameras."

"On the way. Call Dr. Killgore."

"Yes, Doctor." Farmer called that number from memory.

"Yeah?" came the familiar voice.

"Sir, it's Ben Farmer. F4 has disappeared from her room. We're looking for her now."

"Okay, call me back when you find her." And the phone went dead. Killgore wasn't all that excited. You might be able to walk around for a while, but you couldn't leave the building without someone seeing you.

It was still rush hour in London. Ivan Petrovich Kirilenko had an apartment close to the embassy, which allowed him to walk to work. The sidewalks were crowded with rapidly moving people on their way to their own jobs—the Brits are a polite people, but Londoners tend to race along—and he got to the agreed-upon corner at exactly 8:20 A.M. He carried his copy of the *Daily Telegraph,* a conservative morning newspaper, in his left hand as he stopped at the corner, waiting for the light to change.

The switch was expertly done. No words were exchanged, just a double bump on the elbow to tell him to slacken his grip, to allow one *Telegraph* to be changed for another. It was done below the waist, hidden from the casual view of those around him, and low enough to be hidden by the crowd from cameras that might be looking down from the rooftops around the busy corner. It was all the *rezident* could do not to smile. The exercise of field-craft was always a pleasure for him. Despite his currently high rank, he enjoyed the day-to-day business of espionage, just to prove to himself that he could still do it as well as the youngsters working under him. A few seconds later, the light changed, and a man in a tan coat angled away from him, walking briskly forward with his morning paper. It was two more blocks to the embassy. He walked through the iron gate, into the building, past security, and up to his second-floor office. There, his coat hung on the hook on the back of his door, he sat down and opened the paper on his desk.

So, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich had kept his word. There were two sheets of unlined white paper liberally covered with handwritten commentary. CIA Field Officer John Clark was now in Hereford, England, and was now the commander of a new multinational counterterrorist group known as "Rainbow," composed often to twenty men selected from English, American, and perhaps some other nationalities. It was a black operation, known only to a handful of highly placed people. His wife was a nurse working at the local public hospital. His team was well regarded by the local civilians who worked on the SAS base. Rainbow had been on three missions, Bern, Vienna, and Worldpark, where, in every case, it had dealt with the terrorists—Kirilenko noted that Popov had avoided use of the previous term of art, "progressive elements"—efficiently, quickly, and under the cover of local police agencies. The Rainbow team had access to American hardware, which had been used in Spain, as was clear from television coverage of the event, which he recommended that the embassy get hold of. Through the Defense Attaché would probably be best, Popov noted.

On the whole a useful, concise, and informative report, the *rezident* thought, and a fair trade for what he'd exchanged on the street corner.

"Well, see anything this morning?" Cyril Holt asked the head of the surveillance group.

"No," the other "Five" man replied. "He was carrying the usual paper in the usual hand, but the pavement was crowded. There could have been a switch, but if there was, we didn't see it. And we are dealing with a professional, sir," the chief of the surveillance section reminded the Deputy Director of the Security Service.

Popov, his brown wide-brimmed hat in his lap, was sitting in the train on the way back to Hereford, seemingly reading the newspaper, but in fact leafing through the photocopies of the single-spaced pages relayed from Moscow. Kirilenko was as good as his word, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich saw with pleasure. As a good *rezident* should be. And so, now, here he was, sitting alone in the first-class carriage of the inter-city train out of Paddington Station, learning more about this John Clark chap, and impressed with what he saw. His former

agency in Moscow had paid quite a bit of attention to him. There were three photographs, one of them quite good that appeared to have been shot in the office of the RVS chairman himself in Moscow. They'd even taken the time to learn about his family. Two daughters, one still in college in America, and one a physician now married to one Domingo Chavez—*another* CIA field officer! Popov saw, in his middle thirties. Domingo Estebanovich, who'd also met Golovko, and was evidently partnered with the older officer. Both were paramilitary officers . . . might this Chavez be in England, too? A physician, so that was easily checked. Clark and his diminutive partner were officially described as formidable and experienced field-intelligence officers, both spoke Russian in a manner described as literate and cultured—graduates of the U.S. military's language school at Monterey, California, no doubt. Chavez, the report went on, had an undergraduate and a master's degree in International Relations from George Mason University outside of Washington, doubtless paid for by CIA. So, neither he nor Clark was merely a strong back. Both were educated as well. And the younger one was married to a physician.

Their known and confirmed field operations—*nichevo!* Popov thought. Two really impressive ones done with Russian assistance, *plus* the exfiltration of Gerasimov's wife and daughter ten years before, along with several others suspected but not confirmed . . . "Formidable" was the right word for both of them. Himself a field-intelligence officer for over twenty years, he knew what to be impressed with. Clark had to be a star at Langley, and Chavez was evidently his protégé, following in the wide, deep footsteps of his . . . father-in-law . . . Wasn't *that* interesting?

They found her at three-forty, still typing away on the computer, slowly and badly. Ben Farmer opened the door and saw, first, the IV tree, then the back on the hospital gown.

"Well, hello," the security guard said, not unkindly. "Taking a little walk, eh?"

"I wanted to tell Daddy where I was," Mary Bannister replied.

"Oh, really. By e-mail?"

"That's right," she answered pleasantly.

"Well, how about we get you back to your room now, okay?"

"I guess," she agreed tiredly. Farmer helped her to her feet and walked her out into the corridor, gently, his hand around her waist. It was a short walk, and he opened the door into Treatment 4, got her in bed, and pulled the blanket up. He dimmed the lights before leaving, then found Dr. Palachek walking the halls.

"We may have a problem, Doc."

Lani Palachek didn't like being called "doc," but didn't make an issue of it now. "What's the problem?"

"I found her on the computer in T-9. She says she e-mailed her father."

"What?" That popped the doc's eyes open, Farmer saw.

"That's what she said."

Oh, shit! the doctor thought. "What does she know?"

"Probably not much. None of them know where they are." And even looking out the windows wouldn't help. The scenery showed only wooded hills, not

even a parking lot whose auto license plates might give a clue. That part of the operation had been carefully thought through.

"Any way to recover the letter she sent?"

"If we get her password and the server she logged into, maybe," Farmer replied. He was fully checked out on computers. Just about everyone in the company was. "I can try that when we wake her up—say, in about four hours?"

"Any way to un-send it?"

Farmer shook his head. "I doubt it. Not many of them work that way. We don't have AOL software on the systems, just Eudora, and if you execute the IMMEDIATE-SEND command, it's all-the-way gone, Doc. That goes right into the Net, and once it's there—oh, well."

"Killgore is going to freak."

"Yes, ma'am," the former Marine said. "Maybe we need to codeword access to the 'puters." He didn't add that he'd been off the monitors for a while, and that it was all his fault. Well, he hadn't been briefed on this contingency, and why the hell didn't they lock the rooms they wanted to keep people out of? Or just locked the subjects in their rooms? The winos from the first group of test subjects had spoiled them. None of those street bums had had the ability to use a computer, nor the desire to do much of anything, and it hadn't occurred to anyone that the current group of experimental animals might. Oops. Well, he'd seen bigger mistakes than that happen before. The good news, however, was that there was no way they could know where they were, nor anything about the name of the company that owned the facility. Without those things, what could F4 have told anyone? Nothing of value, Farmer was sure. But she was right about one thing, Farmer knew. Dr. John Killgore was going to be seriously pissed.

The English ploughman's lunch was a national institution. Bread, cheese, lettuce, baby tom*ah*toes, chutney, and some meat—turkey in this case—along with a beer, of course. Popov had found it to be agreeable on his first trip to Britain. He'd taken the time to remove his tie and change into more casual clothes, in order to appear a working-class type.

"Well, hello," the plumber said as he sat down. His name was Edward Miles. A tall, powerfully built man with tattoos on his arm—a British affectation, especially for men in uniform, Popov knew. "Started ahead of me, I see."

"How did the morning go?"

"The usual. Fixed a water-heater in one of the houses, for a French chap, in fact, part of the new team. His wife is a smasher," Miles reported. "Only saw a picture of him. A sergeant in the French army, it would seem."

"Really?" Popov took a bite of his open-face sandwich.

"Yes, have to go back this afternoon to finish up. Then I have a watercooler to fix in the headquarters building. Bloody things, must be fifty years old. I may have to make the part I need to repair the damned thing. Impossible to get them. The maker went out of business a dog's age ago." Miles started on his own lunch, expertly dividing the various ingredients and then piling them on the freshly made bread.

"Government institutions are all the same," Popov told him.

"That's a fact!" Miles agreed. "And my helper called in sick. Sick my *ahss,"* the plumber said. "No rest for the bloody wicked."

"Well, perhaps my tools can help," Popov offered. They continued talking about sports until lunch was finished, then both stood and walked to Miles's truck, a small blue van with government tags. The Russian tossed his collection of tools in the back. The plumber started it up, pulled onto the road, and headed for the main gate of the Hereford base. The security guard waved them through without a close look.

"See, you just need to know the right bloke to get in here." Miles laughed at his conquest of base security, which, the sign said, was on BLACK status, the lowest alert state. "I suppose the IRA chaps have calmed down quite a bit, and it would never have been a good idea to come here, not against these chaps, like tweaking a lion's nose—bad job, that," he went on.

"I suppose that's so. All I know about the SAS is what I see on the telly. They certainly look like a dangerous lot."

"That's the bloody truth," Miles confirmed. "All you need do is to look at them, the way they walk and such. They know they're lions. And this new lot, they're exactly the same, maybe even better, some folks say. They've had three jobs, or so I understand, and they've all been on the telly. They sorted that mob out at Worldpark for fair, didn't they?"

The base engineer's building was so typical of its type that the ones in the former Soviet Union could hardly have been different. The paint was peeling, and the parking area lumpy and fragmented. The double doors into the back had locks on them, of the type a child could have picked with a hairpin, Popov thought, but, then, the most dangerous weapon in there would have been a screwdriver. Miles parked his truck and waved for Popov to follow him. Inside was also as expected: a cheap desk for the plumber to do his paperwork on, a well-worn swivel chair whose stuffing was visible through the cracked vinyl on the seat, and a pegboard hung with tools, few of which could have been younger than five years, judging by the chipped paint on the forged steel.

"Do they let you purchase new tools?" Popov asked, just to stay in character.

"I have to make a request, with justification, to the chief of the physical-plant department. He's usually a decent bloke about it, and I don't ask for things I don't need." Miles pulled a Post-it note from his desk. "They want that watercooler fixed today. Why can't they just drink Coca-Cola?" he wondered aloud. "Well, want to come along?"

"Why not?" Popov stood and followed him out the door. Five minutes later, he regretted it. An armed soldier was outside the entrance to headquarters—and then he realized that this *was* the headquarters for Rainbow. Inside would be Clark, Ivan Timofeyevich, himself.

Miles parked the truck, got out, walked to the rear door, and opened it, pulling out his toolbox.

"I'll need a small pipe wrench," he told Popov, who opened the canvas sack he'd brought, and extracted a brand-new twelve-inch Rigid wrench.

"Will this do?"

"Perfect." Miles waved him along. "Good afternoon, Corp," he said to the soldier, who nodded politely in reply, but said nothing.

For his part, Popov was more than surprised. In Russia the security would have been much tighter. But this was England, and the plumber was doubtless known to the guard. With that, he was inside, trying not to look around too obviously, and exercising all of his self-control not to appear nervous. Miles immediately set to work, unscrewing the front, setting the cover aside, and peering back into the guts of the watercooler. He held his hand out for the small wrench, which Popov handed to him.

"Nice feel for the adjustment . . . but it's brand-new, so that's to be expected . . ." He tightened on a pipe and gave the wrench a twist. "Come on, now . . . there." He pulled the pipe out and inspected it by holding it up to a light. "Ah, well, *that* I can fix. Bloody miracle," he added. He slid back on his knees and looked in his toolbox. "The pipe is merely clogged up. Look, must be thirty years of sediment in there." He handed it over.

Popov made a show of looking through the pipe, but saw nothing at all, the metal tube was so packed with—sediment, he guessed from what Miles had said. Then the plumber took it back and inserted a small screwdriver, jammed it like the ramrod of a musket to clear it out, then switched ends to do the same from the other direction.

"So, we're going to get clean water for our coffee?" a voice asked.

"I expect so, sir," Miles replied.

Popov looked up and managed to keep his heart beating. It was Clark, Ivan Timofeyevich, as the KGB file had identified him. Tall, middle fifties, smiling down at the two workmen, dressed in suit and tie, which somehow looked uncomfortable on him. He nodded politely at the man, and looked back down to his tools while thinking as loudly as he could, *Go away!*

"There, that should do it," Miles said, reaching to put the pipe back inside, then taking the wrench from Popov to screw it into place. In another moment he stood and turned the plastic handle. The water that came out was dirty. "We just need to keep this open for five minutes or so, sir, to allow the pipe to flush itself out."

"Fair enough. Thanks," the American said, then walked off.

"A pleasure, sir," Miles said to the disappearing back. "That was the boss, Mr. Clark."

"Really? Polite enough."

"Yes, decent bloke." Miles stood and flipped the plastic lever. The water coming out of the spigot was clouded at first, but after a few minutes it appeared totally clear. "Well, that's one job done. It's a nice wrench," Miles said, handing it back. "What do they cost?"

"This one—it's yours."

"Well, thank you, my friend." Miles smiled on his way out the door and past the corporal of the British Army's military police.

Next they rode around the base. Popov asked where Clark lived, and Miles obliged by taking a left turn and heading off to the senior officers' quarters.

"Not a bad house, is it?"

"It looks comfortable enough." It was made of brown brick, with what appeared to be a slate roof, and about a hundred square meters, and a garden in the back.

"I put the plumbing in that one myself," Miles told him, "back when it was

renovated. Ah, that must be the missus."

A woman came out dressed in a nurse's uniform, walked to the car, and got in. Popov looked and recorded the image.

"They have a daughter who's a doctor at the same hospital the mum works at," Miles told him. "Bun in the oven for that one. I think she's married to one of the soldiers. Looks just like her mum, tall, blond, and pretty—smasher, really."

"Where do they live?"

"Oh, over that way, I think," Miles replied, waving vaguely to the west. "Officer housing, like this one, but smaller."

"So, what can you offer us?" the police superintendent asked.

Bill Henriksen liked the Australians. They came right to the point. They were sitting in Canberra, Australia's capital, with the country's most senior cop and some people in military uniforms.

"Well, first of all, you know my background." He'd already made sure that his FBI experience and the reputation of his company were well known. "You know that I work with the FBI, and sometimes even with Delta at Fort Bragg. Therefore I have contacts, good ones, and perhaps in some ways better than your own," he said, risking a small boast.

"Our own SAS are excellent," the chief told him.

"I know it," Bill responded, with a nod and a smile. "We worked together several times when I was in the Hostage Rescue Team, in Perth twice, Quantico and Fort Bragg once each, back when Brigadier Philip Stocker was the boss. What's he do now, by the way?"

"Retired three years ago," the chief answered.

"Well, Phil knows me. Good man, one of the best I ever met," Henriksen pronounced. "Anyway, what do I bring to the party? I work with all the hardware suppliers. I can connect you with H&K for the new MP-10 that our guys like—it was developed for an FBI requirement, because we decided the nine millimeter wasn't powerful enough. However, the new Smith & Wesson ten-millimeter cartridge is—it's a whole new world for the H&K weapon. But anyone can get guns for you. I also do business with E-Systems, Collins, Fredericks-Anders, Micro-Systems, Halliday, Inc., and all the other electronics companies. I know what's happening in communications and surveillance equipment. Your SAS is weak in that area, according to my contacts. I can help fix that, and I can get you good prices for the equipment you need. In addition, my people can help train you up on the new equipment. I have a team of former Delta and HRT people. Mostly NCOs, including the regimental sergeant major from the Special Operations Training Center at Bragg, Dick Voss. He's the best in the world, and he works for me now."

"I've met him," the Aussie SAS major noted. "Yes, he's very good indeed."

"So, what can I do for you?" Henriksen asked. "Well, you've all seen the upsurge of terrorist activity in Europe, and that's a threat you need to take seriously for the Olympics. Your SAS people don't need any advice from me or anyone else on tactics, but what my company can do is to get you state-of-the-art electronics gear for surveillance and communication. I know all the people who custom-make the gear our guys use, and that's stuff your people want to

have. I know that—they have to want it. Well, I can help you get exactly what you need, and train your troops up on it. There's no other company in the world with our expertise."

The reply was silence. Henriksen could read their minds, however. The terrorism they'd watched on TV, just like everyone else had, had perked up their ears. It must have. People in this line of work worried for a living, always searched for threats, real and imagined. The Olympic games were a catch of immense prestige for their nation, and also the most prestigious terrorist target on the planet, which the German police had learned the hard way at Munich in 1972. In many ways the Palestinian attack had been the kick-off of the world terrorist game, and as a result the Israeli team was *always* a little better looked-after than any other national collection of athletes, and invariably had some of their own military's commandos tucked in with the wrestlers, generally with the knowledge of the host nation's security people. *Nobody* wanted Munich to happen again.

The recent terrorism incidents in Europe had lit up awareness across the world, but nowhere more seriously than in Australia, a nation with great sensitivity to crime— not long ago, a madman had shot to death a number of innocent people, including children, which had resulted in the outlawing of guns throughout the country by the parliamentarians in this very city.

"What do you know about the European incidents?" the Aussie SAS officer asked.

Henriksen affected a sensitive look. "Much of what I know is, well, off-the-record, if you know what I mean."

"We all have security clearances," the cop told him.

"Okay, but you see, the problem is, I am *not* cleared into this stuff, exactly, and—oh, what the hell. The team doing the takedowns is called 'Rainbow.' It's a black operation composed mainly of Americans and Brits, but some other NATO nationalities tossed in, too. They're based in U.K., at Hereford. Their commander is an American CIA type, guy name of John Clark. He's a serious dude, guys, and so's his outfit. Their three known operations went down smooth as a baby's ass. They have access to American equipment—helicopters and such—and they evidently have diplomatic agreements in place to operate all over Europe, when the countries with problems invite them in. Has your government talked to anyone about them?"

"We're aware of it," the chief cop replied. "What you said is correct in all details. In honesty, I didn't know the name of the commander. Anything else you can tell us about him?"

"I've never met the man. Only know him by reputation. He's a very senior field officer, close to the DCI, and I gather that our president knows him personally as well. So, you would expect him to have a very good intelligence staff and, well, his operational people have shown what they can do, haven't they?"

"Bloody right," the major observed. "The Worldpark job was as good a bit of sorting out as I have ever seen, even better than the Iranian Embassy job in London, way back when."

"You could have handled it about the same way," Henriksen observed generously, and meaning it. The Australian Special Air Service was based on

the British model, and while it didn't seem to get much work, the times he'd exercised with them during his FBI career had left him in little doubt as to their abilities. "Which squadron, Major?"

"First Saber," the young officer replied.

"I remember Major Bob Fremont and—"

"He's our colonel now," the major informed him.

"Really? I have to keep better track. That's one kick-ass officer. He and Gus Werner got along very well." Henriksen paused. "Anyway, that's what I bring to the party, guys. My people and I all speak the language. We have all the contacts we need on the operational side and the industrial side. We have access to all the newest hardware. And we can be down here to assist your people in three or four days from the moment you say 'come.' "

There were no additional questions. The top cop seemed properly impressed, and the SAS major even more so.

"Thanks very much indeed for coming," the policeman said, standing. It was hard not to like the Aussies, and their country was still largely in a pristine state. A forbidding desert, most of it, into which camels had been admitted, the only place outside Arabia where they'd done well. He'd read somewhere that Jefferson Davis, of all people, had tried to get them to breed in the American Southwest, but it hadn't worked out, probably because the initial population had been too small to survive. He couldn't decide if that was bad luck or not. The animals weren't native to either country, and interfering with nature's plan was usually a bad thing to do. On the other hand, horses and burros weren't native, either, and he liked the idea of wild horses, so long as they were properly controlled by predators.

No, he reminded himself, Australia wasn't really pristine, was it? Dingoes, the wild dogs of the Outback, had also been introduced, and they'd killed off or crowded out the marsupial animals that belonged there. The thought made him vaguely sad. There were relatively few people here, but even that small number had still managed to upset the ecostructure. Maybe that was a sign that man simply couldn't be trusted anywhere, he thought, even a few of them in a whole continental landmass. And so, the Project was needed here as well.

It was a pity he didn't have more time. He wanted to see the Great Barrier Reef. An avid skin diver, he'd never made it down here with flippers and wet suit to see that most magnificent exemplar of natural beauty. Well, maybe someday, in a few years, it would be easier, Bill thought, as he looked across the table at his hosts. He couldn't think of them as fellow human beings, could he? They were competitors, rivals for the ownership of the planet, but unlike himself they were poor stewards. Not all of them, perhaps. Maybe some loved nature as much as he did, but, unfortunately, there wasn't time to identify them, and so they had to be lumped together as enemies, and for that, they'd have to pay the price. A pity.

Skip Bannister had been worried for some time. He hadn't wanted his daughter to go off to New York in the first place. It was a long way from Gary, Indiana. Sure, the papers said that crime was down in that dreadful city on the Hudson, but it was still too damned big and too damned anonymous for real people to live in—especially single girls. For him, Mary would always be his

little girl, remembered forever as a pink, wet, noisy package in his arms, delivered by a mother who'd died six years later, a daughter who'd grown up needing dollhouses to be built, a series of bicycles to be assembled, clothes to be bought, an education provided for, and then, finally, to his great discomfort, the little bird had finally grown her feathers and flown from the nest—for New York City, a hateful, crowded place full of hateful, obnoxious people. But he'd kept his peace on that, as he'd done when Mary had dated boys he hadn't been all that crazy about, because Mary had been as strong-willed as all girls her age tended to be. Off to make her fortune, meet Mr. Right, or something like that.

But then she'd disappeared, and Skip Bannister had had no idea what to do. It had started when she hadn't called for five straight days. So, he'd called her New York number and let the phone ring for several minutes. Maybe she'd been out on a date or perhaps working late. He would have tried her work number, but she'd never gotten around to giving it to him. He'd indulged her all through her life—maybe a mistake, he thought now, or maybe not—as single fathers tended to do.

But now she was gone. He'd kept calling that number at all hours of day and night, but the phone had just kept ringing, and after a week of it he'd gotten worried. Another few days and he'd gotten worried enough to call the police to make a missing-person's report. That had been a very disagreeable event. The officer he'd finally gotten had asked all manner of questions about his daughter's previous conduct, and explained patiently after twenty minutes that, you know, young women did this sort of thing all the time, and they almost always turned up safe somewhere, hey, you know, it's just part of growing up, proving to themselves that they're their own persons. And so, somewhere in New York was a paper file or a computer entry on one Bannister, Mary Eileen, female, missing, whom the NYPD didn't even regard as important enough for them to send an officer to her apartment on the Upper West Side to check things out. Skip Bannister had done that himself, driving in only to find a "super" who asked him if he was going to take his daughter's stuff out, because he hadn't seen her in weeks, and the rent would soon be due . . .

At that point Skip—James Thomas—Bannister had panicked and gone to the local police precinct station to make a report in person and demand further action, and learned that he'd come to the wrong place, but, yes, they could take down a missing-person's report there, too. And there, from a fiftyish police detective, he'd heard exactly the same thing he'd listened to over the phone. Look, it's only been a few weeks. No dead female of your daughter's description has turned up—so, she's probably alive and healthy somewhere, and ninety-nine out of a hundred of these cases turn out to be a girl who just wanted to spread her wings some and fly on her own, y'know?

Not his Mary, James T. "Skip" Bannister had replied to a calm and unlistening policeman. Sir, they all say that, and in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases—no, you know, it's actually higher than that—that's how it turns out, and I'm sorry but we don't have the manpower to investigate all of these cases. Sorry, but that's just how this sort of thing works. So, why not just go home and wait for the phone to ring?

That he'd done, and driven all the way back to Gary in a rage that grew out of his panic, arriving, finally, to find six messages on his answering machine, and he'd run through them quickly, hoping to—but not finding one from his missing daughter.

Like most Americans, James Thomas Bannister owned a personal computer, and while he'd bought it on a whim and not really used it all that much, this day, like every other, he turned it on and logged onto the Net to check his e-mail. And finally, this morning, he saw a letter in the IN box from his daughter. He moved his mouse, clicking on the letter, which sprang into life on his RGB monitor and—

—now he was truly panicked.

She didn't know where she was? Medical experiments? Most frightening of all, the letter was disjointed and poorly written. Mary had always gotten good marks in school. Her handwriting was always neat and easy to read. Her letters had been like reading stories in the morning paper, loving, of course, and clear, concise, easy to read. This could have been written by a three-year-old, Skip Bannister thought. Not even typed neatly, and his daughter knew how to type well—she'd gotten an "A" in that class.

What to do now? His little girl was missing. . . . And now his gut told him that his daughter was in danger. His stomach compressed into a knot just below his sternum. His heart speeded up. His face broke out in beads of sweat. He closed his eyes, thinking as hard as he could. Then he picked up his phone book. On the first page were the emergency numbers, from which he selected one and dialed it.

"FBI," the female voice said. "How can I help you?"

CHAPTER 21

STAGES

The last of the winos had outlasted all predictions, but it had only prolonged the inevitable. This one was named Henry, a black man of forty-six years who only appeared to be twenty years older. A veteran, he'd told everyone who'd listen, and a man with a considerable thirst, which had not, miraculously, done a great deal of liver damage. And his immune system had done a valiant job of fighting off Shiva. He was probably from the deep part of the gene pool, Dr. Killgore thought, for what little good it had done him. It would have been useful to take a history from him, to find out how long his parents had lived, but he was too far gone by the time they'd realized it. But now, the printout of his blood work said, he was surely doomed. His liver had finally succumbed to the Shiva strands, and his blood chemistry was off the chart in every category that mattered. In a way, it was too bad. The doctor still living in Killgore somehow wanted patients to survive. Maybe it was sportsmanship, he thought, heading down to the patient's room.

"How are we doing, Henry?" the doctor asked.

"Shitty, Doc, just shitty. Feels like my belly is coming apart inside out."

"You can feel it?" Killgore asked. That was a surprise. He was getting nearly twelve milligrams of morphine a day now—a lethal dose for a healthy man, but the really sick ones could somehow take a lot more of the drug.

"Some," Henry replied, grimacing.

"Well, let me fix that for you, okay?" The physician extracted a 50cc needle from his pocket, along with a vial of Dilaudid. Two to four milligrams was a strong dose for a normal person. He decided to go to forty, just to be sure. Henry had suffered enough. He filled the syringe, flicked the plastic body with a fingernail to take care of the little air bubble, then inserted it in the IV line, and pushed the plunger down quickly.

"Ah," Henry had time to say as the dazzling rush hit him. And just that fast, his face went still, eyes wide open, pupils dilated in the last pleasure he would ever know. Ten seconds later, Killgore touched the right carotid artery. There was nothing happening there, and Henry's breathing had stopped at once. Just to be completely sure, Killgore took his stethoscope from his pocket and touched it to Henry's chest. Sure enough, the heart had stopped.

"Nice fight, partner," the doctor told the body. Then he unhooked the IV line, switched off the electronic drug monitor system, and tossed the sheet over the face. So, that was the end of the winos. Most of them had checked out early, except for Henry. The bastard was a fighter to the end, defying all predictions. Killgore wondered if they might have tried one of the vaccines on him—"B" would almost certainly have saved him, but then they'd just have a

healthy wino on their hands, and the Project wasn't aimed at saving that sort of person. What use was he to anyone, really? Except maybe a liquor-store owner. Killgore left the room, waving to an orderly as he did so. In fifteen minutes, Henry would be ashes floating in the air, his chemicals useful to some grass and trees as fertilizer when they fell back to earth, which was about as much a contribution as a person like that could hope to make.

Then it was time to see Mary, F4, in her room.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Fine," she replied sleepily. Whatever discomfort she ought to be feeling was well submerged in the morphine drip.

"You took a little walk last night?" Killgore asked, checking her pulse. It was 92, strong and regular still. Well, she wasn't really into serious symptoms yet, though she'd never last as long as Henry had.

"Wanted to tell Daddy that I was okay," she explained.

"Think he's worried?"

"I haven't talked to him since I got here, and, I thought . . ." She dozed off.

"Yeah, sure, you thought," Dr. Killgore said to the unconscious form, "and we'll make sure that doesn't happen again." He changed the programming on the IV monitor, increasing the morphine drip by 50 percent. That should keep her in the bed.

Ten minutes later he was outside, walking north to where . . . there it was, and he saw Ben Farmer's pickup truck parked in the usual place. The inside of the building smelled of birds, as well it might, though it looked more like a horse barn. Every door was barred too closely for an arm to reach in—or for a bird to get out. He walked down the row of doors until he found Farmer in with one of his favorites.

"Working overtime?" Killgore asked.

"A little," the security man agreed. "Come on, Festus," he said next. The barn owl flapped its wings angrily then lifted off for the six-foot trip to Farmer's gloved arm. "I think you're all fixed, my friend."

"Doesn't look very friendly," the physician observed.

"Owls are hard to work with sometimes, and Festus has a mean side," the former Marine told him, walking the owl back to its perch and leaving him there. Then he slipped out of the door. "Not the smartest raptors, owls. Hard as hell to train. Not even going to try with him."

"Just release him?"

"Yeah. End of the week, I think." Farmer nodded. "It's been two months, but his wing's all healed now. I 'spect he's ready to go back out and find hisself a barn full o' mice to eat."

"Was that the one hit by the car?"

"No, that's Niccolo, the great horned owl. No, Festus, I think he probably flew into a power line. Wasn't looking the right way, I guess. Both his eyes seem to work just fine. But birds screw up, too, just like people. Anyway, I fixed his broke wing—did a good job of it, if I do say so myself." Farmer allowed himself a satisfied smile. "But ol' Festus ain't very grateful about it."

"Ben, you ought to be a doctor, you're so good at this. Were you a medic in the Marines?"

"Just a grunt. Marines get their medics from the Navy, Doc." Farmer took

off his thick leather gauntlet and flexed his fingers before putting it back on. "You here about Mary?"

"What happened?"

"Truth? I was off taking a leak, sat back down reading my magazine, and when I looked up, she wasn't there. I figure she was loose for, oh, ten minutes before I put the call out. I screwed up, Doc, and that's a fact," he admitted.

"No real harm done, I think."

"Yeah, well, how about me moving that computer to a room with a lock on the door, eh?" He walked to the end of the room, opened another door. "Hey, Baron," the man said next. A moment later, the Harris hawk jumped onto the offered leather arm. "Yeah, that's my buddy. You're ready to go back outside, too, ain't you? Find yourself some juicy rabbits, maybe?"

There was a real nobility to these birds, Killgore thought. Their eyes were sharp and clear, their motions powerful and redolent of purpose, and while that purpose might seem cruel to their prey, that was Nature at work, wasn't it? These raptors kept the balance in place, winnowing out the slow, the crippled, and the stupid—but more than that, the birds of prey were just plain noble in the way they soared upward and looked down on the world that lay beneath them and decided who would live and who would die. Much as he and his fellow team members were doing, Killgore thought, though human eyes lacked the hardness he saw here. He had to smile at Baron, who was soon to be released into the wild, soon to soar on the thermals above Kansas. . . .

"Will I be able to do this when we're out in the Project?" Farmer asked, setting Baron back on his wooden perch.

"What do you mean, Ben?"

"Well, Doc, some people say that I won't be able to keep birds once we're out there, 'cuz it interferes, like. Hell, I take good care of my birds—you know, captive raptors live two, three times as long as the ones in the wild, and, yeah, I know that upsets things a little bit, but, damn it—"

"Ben, it's not big enough to worry about. I understand you and the hawks, okay? I like 'em, too."

"Nature's own smart bomb, Doc. I love to watch 'em work. And when they get hurt, I know how to fix 'em."

"You're very good at that. All your birds look healthy."

"Oughta be. I feed 'em good. I live-trap mice for 'em. They like their meals warm, y'know?" He walked back to his worktable, took his gauntlet off, and hung it on the hook. "Anyway, that's my work for the morning."

"Okay, get on home, Ben. I'll see that the computer room is secured. Let's not have any more subjects taking any walks."

"Yes, sir. How's Henry doing?" Farmer asked, fishing in his pocket for his car keys.

"Henry checked out."

"I didn't figure he had much time left. So, no more of the winos, eh?" He saw the shake of Killgore's head. "Well, too bad for him. Tough bastard, wasn't he?"

"Sure was, Ben, but that's the way it goes."

"Sure 'nuff, Doc. Shame we can't just lay the body out for the buzzards. They have to eat, too, but it is kinda gross to watch how they do it." He

opened the door. “See you tonight, Doc.”

Killgore followed him out, killing the lights. No, they couldn’t deny Ben Farmer the right to keep his birds. Falconry was the real sport of kings, and from it you could learn so much about birds, how they hunted, how they lived. They’d fit into Nature’s Great Plan. The problem was that the Project had some really radical people in it, like the ones who objected to having physicians, because they interfered with Nature—curing *people* of disease was interference, allowed them to multiply too fast and upset the balance again. Yeah, sure. Maybe in a hundred years, more like two hundred, they might have Kansas fully repopulated—but not all of them would remain in Kansas, would they? No, they’d spread out to study the mountains, the wetlands, the rain forests, the African savanna, and then they’d return to Kansas to report what they’d learned, to show their videotapes of Nature in action. Killgore looked forward to that. Like most Project members he devoured the Discovery Channel on his cable system. There was so *much* to learn, so *much* to understand, because he, like many, wanted to get the whole thing, to understand Nature in Her entirety. That was a tall order, of course, maybe an unrealistic one, but if he didn’t make it, then his children would. Or their children, who’d be raised and educated to appreciate Nature in all her glory. They’d travel about, field scientists all. He wondered what the ones who went to the dead cities would think. . . . It’d probably be a good idea to make them go, so that they’d understand how many mistakes man had made and learn not to repeat them. Maybe he’d lead some of those field trips himself. New York would be the big one, the really impressive don’t-do-this lesson. It would take a thousand years, maybe more, before the buildings collapsed from rusting structural steel and lack of maintenance. . . . The stone parts would never go away, but relatively soon, maybe ten years or so, deer would return to Central Park.

The vultures would do just fine for some time. Lots of bodies to eat . . . or maybe not. At first the corpses would be buried in the normal civilized way, but in a few weeks those systems would be overwhelmed, and then people would die, probably in their own beds and then—rats, of course. The coming year would be a banner one for rats. The only thing was: Rats depended on people to thrive. They lived on garbage and the output of civilization, a fairly specialized parasite, and this coming year they’d have a gut-filling worldwide feast and then—what? What would happen to the rat population? Dogs and cats would live off them, probably, gradually reaching a balance of some sort, but without millions of people to produce garbage for the rats to eat, their numbers would decline over the next five or ten years. That would be an interesting study for one of the field teams. How quickly would the rat population trend down, and how far down might it go?

Too many of the people in the Project concerned themselves with the great animals. Everyone loved wolves and cougars, noble beautiful animals so harshly slaughtered by men because of their depredation of domestic animals. And they’d do just fine once the trapping and poisoning stopped. But what of the lesser predators? What about the rats? Nobody seemed to care about them, but they were part of the system, too. You couldn’t apply aesthetics to the study of Nature, could you? If you did, then how could you justify killing

Mary Bannister, Subject F4? She was an attractive, bright, pleasant woman, after all, not very like Chester, or Pete, or Henry, not offensive to behold as they had been . . . but like them, a person who didn't understand Nature, didn't appreciate her beauty, didn't see her place in the great system of life, and was therefore unworthy to participate. Too bad for her. Too bad for all the test subjects, but the planet was dying, and had to be saved, and there was only one way to do it, because too many others had no more understanding of the system than the lower animals who were an unknowing part of the system itself. Only man could hope to understand the great balance. Only man had the responsibility to sustain that balance, and if that meant the reduction of his own species, well, everything had its price. The greatest and finest irony of all was that it required a huge sacrifice, and that the sacrifice came from man's own scientific advances. Without the instrumentalities that threatened to kill the planet, the ability to save it would not have existed. Well, of such irony was reality made, the epidemiologist told himself.

The Project would save Nature Herself, and the Project was made of relatively few people, less than a thousand, plus those who had been selected to survive and continue the effort, the unknowing ones whose lives would not be forfeit to the crimes committed in their names. Most would never understand the cause for their survival—that they were the wife or child or close relative of a Project member, or had skills that the Project needed: airplane pilots, mechanics, farmers, communication specialists, and the like. Someday they might figure it out—that was inevitable, of course. Some people talked, and others listened. When the listeners figured it out, they would probably be horrified, but then it would be far too late for them to do anything about it. There was a wonderful inevitability to it all. Oh, there would be some things he'd miss. The theater, the good restaurants in New York, for example, but surely there would be some good cooks in the Project—certainly there would be wonderful raw materials for them to work with. The Project's installation in Kansas would grow all the grain they needed, and there would be cattle as well, until the buffalo spread out.

The Project would support itself by hunting for much of its meat. Needless to say, some members objected to that—they objected to killing anything, but cooler and wiser heads had prevailed on that issue. Man was both a predator *and* a toolmaker, and so guns were okay, too. A far more merciful way to kill game, and man had to eat, too. And so, in a few years men would saddle up their horses and ride out to shoot a few buffalo, butcher them, and bring back the healthy low-fat meat. And deer, and pronghorn antelope, and elk.

Cereals and vegetables would be grown by the farmers. They'd all eat well, and live in harmony with Nature—guns weren't all that great an advancement on bows and arrows, were they?—and they'd be able to study the natural world in relative peace.

It was a beautiful future to look forward to, though the initial four to eight months would be pretty dreadful. The stuff that'd be on TV, and the radio, and the newspapers—while they lasted—would be horrible, but again, everything had a price. Humanity as the dominant force on the planet had to die, to be replaced by Nature herself, with just enough of the right people to observe and appreciate what she was and what she did.

“Dr. Chavez, please,” Popov told the operator at the hospital.

“Wait, please,” the female voice replied. It took seventy seconds.

“Dr. Chavez,” another female voice said.

“Oh, sorry, I have the wrong number,” Popov said, and cradled the phone. Excellent, both Clark’s wife and daughter worked at the hospital, just as he’d been told. That confirmed that this Domingo Chavez was over in Hereford as well. So, he knew both the chief of this Rainbow group, and one of its senior staff members. Chavez probably was one of those. Maybe the chief of intelligence for the group? No, Popov thought, he was too junior for that. That would be a Brit, a senior man from MI-6, someone known to the continental services. Chavez was evidently a paramilitary officer, just as his mentor was. That meant that Chavez was probably a soldier type, maybe a field leader? A supposition on his part, but a likely one. A young officer, physically fit by reports. Too junior for much of anything else. Yes, that made sense.

Popov had stolen a base map from Miles, and had marked the location of Clark’s home on it. From that he could easily deduce the route his wife took to the local hospital, and figuring out her hours would not be terribly difficult. It had been a good week for the intelligence officer, and now it was time to leave. He packed his clothes and walked to his rented car, then drove to the lobby to check out. At London-Heathrow, a ticket was waiting for the 747 flight back to New York’s JFK International. He had some time, so he rested in the British Airways first-class lounge, always a comfortable place, with the wine—even champagne—bottles set out in the open. He indulged himself, then sat on one of the comfortable couches and picked up a complimentary newspaper, but instead of reading, he started going over the things he’d learned and wondering what use his employer would wish to make of it. There was no telling at the moment, but Popov’s instincts made him think about telephone numbers he had in Ireland.

“Yes, this is Henriksen,” he said into the hotel phone.

“This is Bob Aukland,” the voice said. He was the senior cop at the meeting, Bill remembered. “I have good news for you.”

“Oh? What might that be, sir?”

“The name’s Bob, old man. We spoke with the Minister, and he agrees that we should award Global Security the consulting contract for the Olympics.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“So, could you come down in the morning to work out the details with me?”

“Okay, good. When can I go out to the facility?”

“I’ll fly you down myself tomorrow afternoon.”

“Excellent, Bob. Thank you for listening to me. What about your SAS people?”

“They’ll be at the stadium as well.”

“Great. I look forward to working with them,” Henriksen told them.

“They want to see that new communications equipment you told them about.”

“E-Systems has just started manufacturing it for our Delta people. Six ounces per unit, real-time 128-bit encryption, X-band frequency, side-band, burst-

transmission. Damned near impossible to intercept, and highly reliable."

"For what do we deserve this honor, Ed?" Clark asked.

"You have a fairy godmother at the White House. The first thirty sets go to you. Ought to be there in two days," the DCI told Rainbow Six.

"Who at the White House?"

"Carol Brightling, Presidential Science Advisor. She's into the cryppie gear, and after the Worldpark job she called me to suggest you get these new radios."

"She's not cleared into us, Ed," Clark remembered. "At least, I don't remember her name on the list."

"Well, somebody must have told her something, John. When she called, she knew the codeword, and she *is* cleared into damned near everything, remember. Nuclear weapons, and all the commo stuff."

"The President doesn't like her, or so I hear. . . ."

"Yeah, she's a radical tree-hugger, I know. But she's pretty smart, too, and getting you this gear was a good call on her part. I talked to Sam Wilson down at Snake Headquarters, and his people have signed off on it with enthusiasm. Jam-proof, encrypted, digital clarity, and light as a feather." As well it ought to be, at seven thousand dollars per set, but that included the R&D costs, Foley reminded himself. He wondered if it might be something his field officers could use for covert operations.

"Okay, two days, you said?"

"Yep. Regular trash-haul out of Dover to RAF Mildenhall, and a truck from there, I guess. Oh, one other thing."

"What's that?"

"Tell Noonan that his letter about that people-finder gadget has generated results. The company's sending a new unit for him to play with—four of them, as a matter of fact. Improved antenna and GPS locator, too. What is that thing, anyway?"

"I've only seen it once. It seems to track people from their heartbeats."

"Oh, how's it do that?" Foley asked.

"Damned if I know, Ed, but I've seen it track people through blank walls. Noonan's going nuts over it. He said it needed improvements, though."

"Well, DKL—that's the company—must have listened. Four new sets are in the same shipment with a request for your evaluation of the upgrade."

"Okay, I'll pass that along to Tim."

"Any further word on the terrorists you got in Spain?"

"We're faxing it over later today. They've ID'd six of them now. Mainly suspected Basques, the Spanish figured out. The French have largely struck out, just two probables—well, one of them's fairly certain. And still no clue on who might be sending these people out of the dugout after us."

"Russian," Foley said. "A KGB RIF, I bet."

"I won't disagree with that, seeing how that guy showed up in London—we think—but the 'Five' guys haven't turned up anything else."

"Who's working the case at 'Five'?"

"Holt, Cyril Holt," Clark answered.

"Oh, okay, I know Cyril. Good man. You can believe what he tells you."

"That's nice, but right now I believe it when he says he doesn't have jackshit. I've been toying with the idea of calling Sergey Nikolay'ch myself and asking for a little help."

"I don't think so, John. That'll have to go through me, remember? I like Sergey, too, but not on this one. Too open-ended."

"That leaves us dead in the water, Ed. I do not like the fact that there's some Russkie around who knows my name and my current job."

Foley had to nod at that. No field officer liked the idea of being known to anyone at all, and Clark had ample reason to worry about it, with his family sharing his current duty station. He'd never taken Sandy into the field to use them as cover on a job, as some field officers had done in their careers. No officer had ever lost a spouse that way, but a few had been roughed up, and it was now contrary to CIA policy. More than that, John had lived his entire professional life as an unperson, a ghost seen by few, recognized by none, and known only to those on his own side. He would no more wish to change that than to change his sex, but his anonymity had been changed, and it upset him. Well, the Russians knew him and knew about him, and that had been his own doing in Japan and Iran; he must have known then that his actions would have consequences.

"John, they know you. Hell, Golovko knows you personally, and it figures they'd be interested in you, right?"

"I know, Ed, but—damn it!"

"John, I understand, but you're high-profile now, and there's no evading that fact. So, just sit tight, do your job, and let us rattle some bushes to find out what's happening, okay?"

"I guess, Ed" was the resigned reply.

"If I turn anything, I'll be on the phone to you immediately."

"Aye aye, sir," Clark replied, using the naval term that had been part of his life a long time ago. Now he reserved it for things he really didn't like.

The Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the Gary, Indiana, FBI field office was a serious black man named Chuck Ussery. Forty-four, a recent arrival in this office, he'd been in the Bureau for seventeen years, and before that a police officer in Chicago. Skip Bannister's call had rapidly been routed to his desk, and inside five minutes he'd told the man to drive to the office at once. Twenty-five minutes later, the man came in. Five-eleven, stocky, fifty-five or so, and profoundly frightened, the agent saw. First of all he got the man sat down and offered him coffee, which was refused. Then came the questions, routine at first. Then the questions got a lot more directed.

"Mr. Bannister, do you have the e-mail you told me about?"

James Bannister pulled the sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it across.

Three paragraphs, Ussery saw, disjointed and ungrammatical. Confused. His first impression was . . .

"Mr. Bannister, do you have any reason to suspect that your daughter has ever used drugs of any kind?"

"Not my Mary!" was the immediate reply. "No way. Okay, she likes to drink beer and wine, but no drugs, not my little girl, not ever!"

Ussery held up his hands. “Please, I understand how you feel. I’ve worked kidnappings before and—”

“You think she’s been kidnapped?” Skip Bannister asked, now faced with the confirmation of his greatest fear. That was far worse than the suggestion that his daughter was a doper.

“Based on this letter, yes, I think it’s a possibility, and we will treat this case as a kidnapping investigation.” Ussery lifted his phone. “Send Pat O’Connor in, will you?” he told his secretary.

Supervisory Special Agent Patrick D. O’Connor was one of the Gary office’s squad supervisors. Thirty-eight, red-haired, fair-skinned, and very fit, O’Connor headed the office kidnapping squad. “Yeah, Chuck?” he said coming in.

“This is Mr. James Bannister. He has a missing daughter, age twenty-one, disappeared in New York about a month ago. Yesterday he got this on his e-mail.” Ussery handed it over.

O’Connor scanned it and nodded. “Okay, Chuck.”

“Pat, it’s your case. Run with it.”

“You bet, Chuck. Mr. Bannister, would you come with me, please?”

“Pat runs these cases for us,” Ussery explained. “He will take charge of it, and report to me on a daily basis. Mr. Bannister, the FBI treats kidnappings as major felonies. This will be a top-priority case until we clear it. Ten men, Pat?”

“For starters, yes, more in New York. Sir,” he said to their guest, “we all have kids. We know how you feel. If there’s a way to locate your daughter for you, we’ll find it. Now I need to ask you a bunch of questions so that we can get started, okay?”

“Yeah.” The man stood and followed O’Connor out into the office bay. He’d be there for the next three hours, telling everything he knew about his daughter and her life in New York to this and other agents. First of all he handed over a recent photograph, a good one as it turned out. O’Connor looked at it. He’d keep it for the case file. O’Connor and his squad hadn’t worked a kidnapping in several years. It was a crime the FBI had essentially extinguished in the United States—kidnapping for money, in any case. There was just no percentage in it. The FBI *always* solved them, came down on the perps like the Wrath of God. Today’s kidnappings were generally of children, and, parental kidnappings aside, were almost always by sexual deviants who most often used them for personal gratification, and often as not killed them thereafter. If anything, that merely increased the FBI’s institutional rage. The Bannister Case, as it was already being called, would have the highest priority in manpower and resources in every office it might touch. Pending cases against organized crime families would be set aside for this one. That was just part of the FBI’s institutional ethos.

Four hours after Skip Bannister’s arrival in the Gary office, two agents from the New York field division in the Jacob Javits Building downtown knocked on the door of the superintendent of Mary Bannister’s dingy apartment building. The super gave them the key and told them where the apartment was. The two agents entered and commenced their search, looking first of all

for notes, photographs, correspondence, anything that might help. They'd been there an hour when a NYPD detective showed up, summoned by the FBI office to assist. There were 30,000 policemen in the city, and for a kidnapping, they could all be called upon to assist in the investigation and canvassing.

"Got a picture?" the detective asked.

"Here." The lead agent handed over the one faxed from Gary.

"You know, I got a call a few weeks ago from somebody in Des Moines, girl's name was . . . Pretloe, I think. Yeah, Anne Pretloe, mid-twenties, legal secretary. Lived a few blocks from here. Just up and disappeared. Didn't show up for work—just vanished. Roughly the same age and sex, guys," the detective pointed out. "Connection, maybe?"

"Been checking Jane Does?" the junior agent asked. He didn't have to go further. Their instant thought was the obvious one: Was there a serial killer operating in New York City? That sort of criminal nearly always went after women between eighteen and thirty years of age, as selective a predator as there was anywhere in nature.

"Yeah, but nothing that fit the Pretloe girl's description, or this one for that matter." He handed the photo back. "This case is a head-scratcher. Find anything?"

"Not yet," the senior agent replied. "Diary, but nothing useful in it. No photos of men. Just clothes, cosmetics, normal stuff for a girl this age."

"Prints?"

A nod. "That's next. We have our guy on the way now." But they all knew that this was a thin reed, after the apartment had been vacant for a month. The oils that made fingerprints evaporated over time, though there was some hope here, in a climate-controlled and sealed apartment.

"This one's not going to be easy," the NYPD detective observed next.

"They never are," the senior FBI agent replied.

"What if there's more than two?" the other FBI agent asked.

"Lots of people turn up missing in this town," the detective said. "But I'll run a computer check."

Subject F5 was a hot little number, Killgore saw. And she liked Chip, too. That wasn't very good news for Chip Smitton, who hadn't been exposed to Shiva by injection, vaccine testing, or the fogging system. No, he'd been exposed by sexual contact only, and now his blood was showing antibodies, too. So, that means of transmission worked also, and better yet, it worked female-to-male, not just male-to-female. Shiva was everything they'd hoped it would be.

It was distasteful to watch people making love. Not the least bit arousing for him, playing voyeur. Anne Pretloe, F5, was within two days of symptoms, judging by her blood work, eating, drinking, and being very merry right before his eyes on the black-and-white monitor. Well, the tranquilizers had lowered every subject's resistance to loose behavior, and there was no telling what she was like in real life, though she certainly knew the techniques well enough.

Strangely, Killgore had never paid attention to this sort of thing in animal tests. Rats, he imagined, came into season, and when they did, the boy rats and girl rats must have gotten it on, but somehow he'd never noticed. He

respected rats as a life-form, but didn't find their sexual congress the least bit interesting, whereas here, he had to admit to himself, he *did* find his eyes returning to the screen every few seconds. Well, Pretloe, Subject F5, was the cutest of the bunch, and if he'd found her in a singles bar, he might have offered her a drink and said hello and . . . let things develop. But she was doomed, too, as doomed as white, bred-for-the-purpose lab rats. Those cute little pink-eyed creatures were used all over the world because they were genetically identical, and so test results in one country would match the test results generated anywhere else in the world. They probably didn't have the wherewithal to survive in the wild, and that was too bad. But their white color would work against them—cats and dogs would spot them far more easily, and that was not a good thing in the wild, was it? And they were an artificial species anyway, not part of Nature's plan, but a work of Man, and therefore unworthy of continuance. A pity they were cute, but that was a subjective, not objective, observation, and Killgore had long since learned to differentiate between the two. After all, Pretloe, F5, was cute, too, and his pity for her was a lingering atavistic attitude on his part, unworthy of a Project member. But that got him thinking as he watched Chip Smitton screw Anne Pretloe. This was the kind of thing Hitler might have done with Jews, saved a small number of them as human lab rats, maybe as crash-test dummies for auto-safety tests. . . . So, did that make *him* a Nazi? Killgore thought. They were using F5 and M7 as such . . . but, no, they didn't discriminate on race or creed, or gender, did they? There were no politics involved, really—well, maybe, depending on how one defined the term, not in the way *he* defined the term. This was science, after all. The whole Project was *about* science and love of Nature. Project members included all races and categories of people, though not much in the way of religions, unless you considered love of Nature to be a religion . . . which in a way it was, the doctor told himself. Yes, surely it was.

What they were doing on his TV screen was natural, or nearly so—as it *had* been largely instigated by mood depressants—but the mechanics certainly were. So were their instincts, he to spread his seed as far as possible, and she to receive his seed—and *his own,* Killgore's mind went on, to be a predator, and through his depredations to decide which members of that species would live and which would not.

These two would not live, attractive as both were . . . like the lab rats with their cute white hair and cute pink eyes and twitching white whiskers. Well, none of them would be around much longer, would they? It was aesthetically troubling, but a valid choice in view of the future that they all beheld.

CHAPTER 22

COUNTERMEASURES

"So, nothing else from our Russian friend?"Bill Tawney asked.

"Nothing," Cyril Holt confirmed. "Tapes of Kirilenko show that he walks to work the same way every day and at exactly the same time, when the streets are crowded, stops in his pub for a pint four nights out of five, and bumps into all manner of people. But all it takes is a minor attempt at disguise and a little knowledge of trade-craft to outfox us, unless we really tighten our coverage, and there's too great a chance that Ivan Petrovich would notice it and simply upgrade his own efforts to remain covert. It's a chance we'd prefer not to take."

"Quite so," Tawney had to agree, despite his disappointment. "Nothing from other sources?"

"Other sources" meant whomever the Security Service might have working for them inside the Russian Embassy. There almost had to be someone there, but Holt would not discuss it over a telephone line, encrypted or not, because if there was one thing you had to protect in this business, it was the identity of your sources. Not protecting them could get them killed.

"No, Bill, nothing. Vanya hasn't spoken over his phone line to Moscow on this subject. Nor has he used his secure fax line. Whatever discussions developed from this incident, well, we do not have even a confirmed face, just that chap in the pub, and that might well have been nothing. Three months ago, I had one of my chaps strike up a conversation with him at the pub, and they talked about football—he's a serious fan, and he knows the game quite well, and never even revealed his nationality. His accent is bloody perfect. So that chap in the photo might well be nothing at all, just another coincidence. Kirilenko is a professional, Bill. He doesn't make many mistakes. Whatever information came out of this was doubtless written up and couriered off."

"So we probably have a KGB RIF prowling around London still, probably with whatever information Moscow has on our Mr. Clark, and doing what, we do not know."

"Correct, Bill," Holt agreed. "I can't say that I like it either, but there you are."

"What have you turned up on KGB-PIRA contacts?"

"We have a few things. One photo of someone else from a meeting in Dublin eight years ago, and oral reports of other contacts, with physical description. Some might be the chap in the photo, but the written descriptions fit about a third of male humanity, and we're leery of showing the photos around quite yet." Tawney didn't need to be told why. It was well within the realm of possibility that some of Holt's informants were indeed double-agents, and

showing them the photos of the man in the pub might well do nothing more than alert the target of the investigation to the fact that someone knew who he was. That would cause *him* to become more cautious, perhaps change his appearance, and the net result would be to make things worse instead of better. This *was* the most complex of games, Tawney reminded himself. And what if the whole thing was nothing more than curiosity on the part of the Russians, merely keeping track of a known intelligence officer on the other side? Hell, *everyone* did that. It was just a normal part of doing business.

The bottom line was that they knew what they didn't know—no, Tawney thought. They didn't even know that much. They knew *that* they didn't know something, but they didn't even know what it was that they wanted to find out. What was the significance of this blip of information that had appeared on the scope?

"What's this for?" Henriksen asked innocently.

"A fog-cooling system. We got it from your chaps," Aukland said.

"Huh? I don't understand," the American replied.

"One of our engineers saw it in—Arizona, I think. It sprays a very fine water mist. The tiny droplets absorb heat energy and evaporate into the atmosphere, has the same effect as air-conditioning, but with a negligible energy expenditure."

"Ahh," Bill Henriksen said, doing his best to act surprised. "How widely distributed is the system?"

"Just the tunnels and concourses. The architect wanted to put it all over the stadium, but people objected, said it would interfere with cameras and such," Aukland answered, "too much like a real fog."

"Okay, I think I need to look at that."

"Why?"

"Well, sir, it's a hell of a good way to deliver a chemical agent, isn't it?" The question took the police official seriously aback.

"Well . . . yes, I suppose it would be."

"Good. I have a guy in the company, former officer in the U.S. Army Chemical Corps, expert on this sort of thing, degree from MIT. I'll have him check it out ASAP."

"Yes, that is a good idea, Bill. Thank you," Aukland said, kicking himself for not thinking of that on his own. Well, he was hiring expertise, wasn't he? And this Yank certainly seemed to be an expert.

"Does it get that hot here?"

"Oh, yes, quite. We expect temperatures in the nineties—Fahrenheit, that is. We're supposed to think in Celsius nowadays, but I never did learn that."

"Yeah, me neither," Henriksen noted.

"Anyway, the architect said that this was an inexpensive way to cool the spectators down, and quite reasonable to install. It feeds off the fire-sprinkler system. Doesn't even use much water for what it does. It's been installed for over a year. We test it periodically. American company, can't recall the name at the moment."

Cool-Spray of Phoenix, Arizona, Henriksen thought. He had the plans for the system in the file cabinet in his office. It would play a crucial role in the

Project's plans, and had been seen as a godsend from the first moment. Here was the place. Soon would come the time.

"Heard anything more from the Brits?"

"We have an inquiry in, but no reply yet," Aukland answered. "It is a very hush-hush project, evidently."

Henriksen nodded. "Politics, always gets in the way." And with luck it would stay that way.

"Quite," Aukland agreed, with a nod.

Detective Lieutenant Mario d'Allessandro punched up his computer and accessed the NYPD central-records file. Sure enough, Mary Bannister was in there, as was Anne Pretloe. Then he set up a search routine, picking gender WOMEN, age eighteen to thirty for starters, and picking the RUN icon with his mouse. The system generated forty-six names, all of which he saved to a file he created for the purpose. The system didn't have photos built in. He'd have to access the paper files for those. He de-selected ten names from Queens and Richmond boroughs for the moment, saving for the moment only Manhattan missing girls. That came down to twenty-one. Next he de-selected African-American women, because if they were dealing with a serial killer, such criminals usually selected clones as victims—the most famous of them, Theodore Bundy, had almost exclusively picked women who parted their hair down the middle, for instance. Bannister and Pretloe were white, single, reasonably attractive, ages twenty-one and twenty-four, and dark-haired. So, eighteen to thirty should be a good straddle, he thought, and he further de-selected the names that didn't fit that model.

Next he opened the department's Jane Doe file, to look up the recovered bodies of murder victims who had not yet been identified. He already knew all of these cases from his regular work. Two fit the search parameters, but neither was Bannister or Pretloe. So this was, for the moment, a dry hole. That was both good and bad news. The two missing women were not definitely dead, and that was the good news. But their bodies could have been cleverly disposed of—the Jersey marshes were nearby, and that area had been a prime dumping site for bodies since the turn of the century.

Next he printed up his list of missing women. He'd want to examine all the paper files, including the photos, with the two FBI agents. Both Pretloe and Bannister had brown hair of roughly the same length, and maybe that was enough of a commonality for a serial killer—but, no, Bannister was still alive, or so the e-mail letter suggested . . . unless the serial killer was the kind of sick person who wanted to taunt the families of his victims. D'Allessandro had never come across one of those before, but serial killers were seriously sick bastards, and you could never really predict the things they might do for personal amusement. If one of those fucks were loose in New York, then it wasn't just the FBI who'd want his ass. Good thing the state of New York finally had a death-penalty statute . . .

"Yes, I've seen him," Popov told his boss.

"Really?" John Brightling asked. "How close?"

"About as close as we are, sir," the Russian replied. "It was not intentional,

but it happened. He's a large, powerful man. His wife is a nurse at the local community hospital, and his daughter is a medical doctor, married to one of the other team members, working at the same hospital. She is Dr. Patricia Chavez. Her husband is Domingo Chavez, also a CIA field officer, now assigned to this Rainbow group, probably as a commando leader. Both Clark and Chavez are CIA field officers. Clark was involved in the rescue of the former KGB chairman's wife and daughter from Soviet territory some years ago—you'll recall the story made the press recently. Well, Clark was the officer who got them out. He was also involved in the conflict with Japan, and the death of Mahmoud Haji Daryaei in Iran. He and Chavez are highly experienced and very capable intelligence officers. It would be very dangerous to underestimate either of them," Popov concluded.

"Okay, what does that tell us?"

"It tells us that Rainbow is what it appears to be, a multinational counterterror group whose activities spread all across Europe. Spain is a NATO member, but Austria and Switzerland are not, you will recall. Could they expand their operations to other countries? Certainly, yes. They are a very serious threat to any terrorist operation. It is not," Popov went on, "an organization I would like to have in the field against me. Their expertise in actual 'combat' operations we have seen on television. Behind that will be excellent technical and intelligence support as well. The one cannot exist without the other."

"Okay. So we know about them. Is it possible that they know about us?" Dr. Brightling asked.

"Possible, but unlikely," Popov thought. "If that were the case, then you would have agents of your FBI in here to arrest you—and me—for criminal conspiracy. I am not being tracked or followed—well, I do not think that I am. I know what to look for, and I have seen nothing of the sort, but, I must also admit, it is possible that a very careful and expert effort could probably follow me without my noticing it. That is difficult—I have been trained in countersurveillance—but theoretically possible."

That shook his employer somewhat, Popov saw. He'd just made an admission that he was not perfect. His former supervisors in KGB would have known it beforehand and accepted it as a normal risk of the intelligence trade . . . but those people never had to worry about being arrested and losing their billions of dollars of personal worth.

"What are the risks?"

"If you mean what methods can be used against you? . . ." He got a nod. "That means that your telephones could be tapped, and—"

"My phones are encrypted. The system is supposed to be break-proof. My consultants on that tell me—"

Popov cut him off with a raised hand. "Sir, do you really think that your government allows the manufacture of encryption systems that it cannot itself break?" he asked, as though explaining something to a child. "The National Security Agency at Fort Meade has some of the brightest mathematicians in the world, and the world's most powerful computers, and if you ever wonder how hard they work, you need only look at the parking lots."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"If the parking lots are filled at seven in the evening, that means they are hard at work on something. Everyone has a car in your country, and parking lots are generally too large to be enclosed and protected from even casual view. It's an easy way for an intelligence officer to see how active one of your government agencies is." And if you were *really* interested, you found out a few names and addresses, so as to know the car types and tag numbers. The KGB had tracked the head of NSA's "Z" group—the people tasked both to crack and to create encryption systems and codes—that way for over a decade, and the reborn RVS was doubtless doing the same. Popov shook his head. "No, I would not trust a commercially available encoding system. I have my doubts about the systems used by the Russian government. Your people are very clever at cracking cipher systems. They've been so for over sixty years, well before World War Two, and they are allied with the British, who also have a tradition of excellence in that area of expertise. Has no one told you this?" Popov asked in surprise.

"Well . . . no, I've been told that this system I have here could not be broken because it is a 128-bit—"

"Ah, yes, the STU-3 standard. That system has been around in your government for about twenty years. Your people have changed to STU-4. Do you think they made that change merely because they wanted to spend money, Dr. Brightling? Or might there have been another reason? When I was in the field for KGB, I only used one-time pads. That is an encryption system only used one time, composed of random transpositions. It cannot be broken, but it is tedious to use. To send a single message that way could take hours. Unfortunately, it's very difficult to use for verbal communications. Your government has a system called TAP-DANCE, which is similar in concept, but we never managed to copy it."

"So, you mean people could be listening in on every phone call I make?"

Popov nodded. "Of course. Why do you suppose all of our substantive conversations have been made face-to-face?" Now he was really shaken, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich saw. The genius *was* a babe-in-the-woods. "Now, perhaps, is the time for you to tell me why I have undertaken these missions for you?"

"Yes, Minister . . . excellent . . . thank you," Bob Aukland said into his cellular phone. He thumbed the END button and put the phone back in his pocket, then turned to Bill Henriksen. "Good news. We'll have that Rainbow group down to consult on our security as well."

"Oh?" Bill observed. "Well, I guess it can't hurt all that much."

"Nose a little out of joint?" the cop asked.

"Not really," Henriksen lied. "I probably know a few of them, and they know me."

"And your fee will remain the same, Bill," the Aussie said. They headed off to his car, and from there they'd drive to a pub for a few pints before he drove the American off to the airport.

Oh, shit, the American thought. Once more the Law of Unintended Consequences had risen up to bite him in the ass. His mind went briefly into overdrive, but then persuaded itself that it didn't really matter all that much

as long as he did his job right. It might even help, he told himself, almost believing it.

He couldn't tell Popov, Brightling knew. He trusted him in many ways—hell, what Popov knew could put him in federal prison, even on death row—but to tell him what this was really all about? No, he couldn't risk that. He didn't know Popov's views on the Environment and Nature. So he couldn't predict the Russian's reaction to the project. Popov was dangerous to him in many ways, like a falcon trained to the fist, but still a free agent, willing to kill a quail or a rabbit, perhaps, but never entirely his, always able to fly off and reclaim his previous free life . . . and if he was free to do that, he was also free to give information to others. Not for the first time, Brightling thought about having Bill Henriksen take care of this potential problem. He'd know how. Surely, the former FBI agent knew how to investigate a murder, and thus how to befuddle the investigators as well, and this little problem would go away.

Assets, Brightling thought next. What other things could he do to make his position and his Project more secure ? If this Rainbow was a problem, would it be possible to strike at it directly? To destroy it at best, or at worst, distract it, force it to focus in another direction?

"I have to think that one through first, Dmitriy," he said finally.

Popov nodded soberly, wondering what thoughts had gone through his employer's mind in the fifteen seconds he'd taken to consider the question. Now it was his turn to be concerned. He'd just informed John Brightling of the operational dangers involved in using him, Popov, to set up the terrorist incidents, and especially of the flaws in his communications security. The latter, especially, had frightened the man. Perhaps he ought to have warned him earlier, but somehow the subject had never arisen, and Dmitriy Arkadeyevich now realized that it had been a serious error on his part. Well, perhaps not that great an error. Operational security was not all that bad. Only two people knew what was happening . . . well, probably that Henriksen fellow as well. But Bill Henriksen was former FBI, and if he were an informer, then they'd all be in jail now. The FBI would have all the evidence it needed for a major felony investigation and trial, and would not allow things to proceed any further unless there were some vast criminal conspiracy yet to be uncovered—

—but how much larger would it have to be than conspiracy to commit murder? Moreover, they would have to know what the conspiracy was, else they would have no reason to hold off on their arrests. No, security here was good. And though the American government had the technical ability to decode Brightling's supposedly secure phone lines, even to tap them required a court order, and evidence was needed for that, and that evidence would itself be sufficient to put several people in death-row cages. Including me, Popov reminded himself.

What was going on here? the Russian demanded. He'd just thought it through enough to realize something. Whatever his employer was doing, it was *larger* than mass murder. What the *hell* could *that* be? Most worrisome of all, Popov had undertaken the missions in the hope—a realized hope, to be sure—of making a good deal of money off the job. He now had over a million dollars in

his Bern bank account. Enough for him to return to Mother Russia and live very well indeed . . . but not enough for what he really wanted. So strange to discover that a "million," that magic word to describe a magic number, was something that, once you had it . . . wasn't magical at all. It was just a number from which you had to subtract to buy the things you wanted. A million American dollars wasn't enough to buy the home he wanted, the car he wanted, the food he wanted, and then have enough left over to sustain the lifestyle he craved for the remainder of his life—except, probably, in Russia, where he did not, unfortunately, wish to live. To visit, yes; to stay, no. And so Dmitriy was trapped, too.

Trapped into what, he didn't know. And so here he was, sitting across the desk from someone who, like himself, was also busily trying to think things through, but neither of them knew where to go just yet. One of them knew what was happening and the other did not—but the other one knew how to *make* things happen, and his employer did not. It was an interesting and somewhat elegant impasse.

And so they just sat there for a minute or so, each regarding the other, and if not *not* knowing what to say, then unwilling to take the risk of saying what they needed to. Finally, Brightling broke the silence.

"I really need to think this situation through. Give me a day or so to do that?"

"Certainly." Popov stood, shook hands, and walked out of the office. A player for most of his adult life in that most interesting and fascinating of games, he realized now that he was in a new game, with new parameters. He'd taken possession of a vast sum of money—but an amount that his employer had regarded as trivial. He was involved in an operation whose import was larger than that of mass murder. That was not entirely new to him, Popov realized on reflection. He'd once served a nation called by its ultimately victorious enemy the Evil Empire, and *that* cold war had been greater in size than mass murder. But Brightling was not a nation-state, and however huge his resources might be, they were minuscule in comparison with those of any advanced country. The great question remained—what the hell was this man trying to achieve? And why did he need the services of Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov to achieve it?

Henriksen caught the Qantas flight for Los Angeles. He had the better part of a day ahead of him in his first-class seat, a good deal of time to consider what he knew.

The plan for the Olympics was essentially in the bag. The fogging system was in place, which was just plain perfect for the Project's purposes. He'd have one of his men check out the system, and thereby get himself in place for the delivery part on the last day. It was that simple. He had the consulting contract needed to make it all happen. But now this Rainbow bunch would be down there as well. How intrusive might they be? Damn, there was just no telling on that one. Worst case, it was possible that something small could toss a wrench into the works. It so often happened that way. He knew that from his time in the FBI. A random police patrol, a man on foot or in a radio-car could wander by and cause a well-planned robbery to stop. Or in the

investigation phase, the unexpectedly sharp memory of a random passerby, or a casual remark made by a subject to a friend, could come to the right investigator and blow a case wide open. Boom, that simple—it had happened a million times. And the breaks always went to the other side, didn't they?

And so, from his perspective, he knew he had to eliminate the chance for such random events. He'd been so close to it. The operational concept had been brilliant—it had mainly been his from the beginning; John Brightling had merely funded it. Getting the terrorists to operate in Europe had raised the international consciousness about the threat, and *that* had allowed him and his company to get the contract to oversee the security for the Olympics. But then this damned Rainbow team had appeared, and handled three major incidents—and what asshole had instigated the third one? he demanded of himself—so well that now the Australians had asked *them* to come down for a look. And if they came down, they'd stay and keep looking, and if *that* happened, they might be there for the games, and if they wondered about chemical weapons, then they might spot the perfect delivery system for them and—

A lot of ifs, Henriksen told himself. A lot of ifs. A lot of things had to go wrong for the Project to be thwarted. There was comfort in that thought. Maybe he could meet with the Rainbow people and direct them away from the threat. After all, he had a chemical weapons expert on the payroll, and they probably did not, and that gave him the edge, didn't it? With a little cleverness, his man could do his job right in front of them and not even be seen to have done it. That's what planning was for, wasn't it?

Relax, he told himself, as the stewardess came around with drinks, and he had another glass of wine. *Relax.* But, no, he couldn't do that. He had too much experience as an investigator to accept the mere chance of random interference without consideration of the possible consequences. If his man were stopped, even by accident, then it was also possible that the entire Project could be uncovered. And *that* would mean more than failure. It would mean lifelong imprisonment at best, which was not something he was prepared to accept. No, he was committed to the Project for more than one reason. It was his task to save the world first of all—and second, he wanted to be around to enjoy what he'd had a hand in saving.

And so, risks of any type and any magnitude were unacceptable. He had to come up with a way to eliminate them. The key to that was the Russian, Popov. He wondered what that spook had discovered on his trip to England. With the right information, he could devise a plan to deal with that Rainbow bunch directly. Wouldn't that be interesting? He settled back into his seat and chose a movie to semiwatch, to disguise what he was doing. Yes, he decided ten minutes later, with the right people and the right assets, it could work.

Popov was eating dinner alone in a disreputable-looking restaurant at the southern end of Manhattan. The food was reportedly good, but the place looked as though rats cleaned up the floor at night. But the vodka here was superb, and as usual, a few drinks helped him think abstractly.

What did he know about John Brightling? Well, the man was a scientific genius and also very impressive in his business skills. He'd been married some

years ago to another bright person, now the presidential science advisor, but the marriage had ended badly, and now his employer flitted from bed to bed, one of the most eligible bachelors in America—and with the financial statement to prove it—with his photo frequently in the society pages, which must have been the cause of some discomfort to his former wife.

He had good connections in the community of people admitted into classified matters. This Rainbow group was evidently "black," but he'd gotten its name and the name of its commander in a day. Just one day, Popov reminded himself. That was beyond impressive. It was startling. How the hell had he accomplished that?

And he was into an operation whose implications were more serious than mass murder. That was where his mind came to a befuddled halt once again. It was like walking down a busy street and then coming up against a blank wall. What could a businessman be doing that was more serious than *that?* More serious than the risk of losing his freedom, even the death penalty? If it were greater than mass murder, then did the plan contemplate even larger murder? But to serve *what* end? To start a war, perhaps, but he was not a chief of state, and could not, therefore, start a war. Was Brightling a spy, feeding vital national-security-class information to a foreign government—but in return for *what?* How could anyone, government or not, bribe a billionaire? No, money was out. What did that leave?

There was a classic acronym for the reasons for making treason against your native land: MICE. Money, Ideology, Conscience, and Ego. Money was out. Brightling had too much of that. Ideology was always the best motivation for a traitor/spy—people would risk their lives far more readily for their closely held beliefs than for filthy lucre—but what ideology did this man have? Popov didn't know. Next came Conscience. But Conscience against *what?* What wrong was he trying to right? There could hardly be one, could there? That left Ego. Well, Brightling had a capacious ego, but ego assumed the motive of revenge against some more powerful person or institution that had wronged him. Who could possibly have hurt billionaire John Brightling, so much that his material success was not a sufficient salve against the wound? Popov waved to the waiter for another vodka. He'd be taking a cab home tonight.

No, Money was out. So was Ego. That left Ideology and Conscience. What beliefs or what wrong could motivate a man to do murder on a large scale? In the former case, Brightling was not a religious fanatic. In the latter, he had no overt dissatisfaction with his country. And so while Money and Ego could readily be dismissed, Ideology and Conscience were almost as unlikely, and Popov did not dismiss them only because—why? he asked himself. Because he only had four possible motivations, unless Brightling was a total madman, and he wasn't that, was he?

No, Popov told himself. His employer was not mentally unbalanced. He was thoughtful in his every action, and though his perspective, especially on the issue of money, was very different from his own—well, he had so much that such a difference in outlook was understandable; it was just a matter of perspective, and to him a million dollars was like pocket change to Dmitriy Arkadeyevich. Could he then be some sort of madman who . . . like a chief of state, a new Saddam Hussein or Adolf Hitler or Josef Vissarionovich Stalin—

but, no, he was not a chief of state, had no aspirations for such a thing, and only those men could entertain that form of madness.

In his career in the KGB, Popov had dealt with all manner of curiosities. He'd played the game against world-class adversaries and never once been caught, never once failed in an assignment. As a result, he considered himself a clever sort. That made the current impasse all the more frustrating. He had over a million dollars in a Bern bank. He had the prospect of more in due course. He'd set up two terrorist missions that had accomplished their goal—had they? His employer evidently thought so, despite the abject tactical failure of both. But he knew even less now, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich told himself. The more he delved into it, the less he knew. And the less he knew, the unhappier he became. He'd asked his employer more than once the reason for his activities, but Brightling wasn't telling. It had to be something vast . . . but what the devil was it?

They practiced the breathing exercises. Ding found it amusing, but he was also persuaded that it was necessary. Tall and rangy though Patsy was, she was not the athlete he'd become to lead Team-2, and so she had to practice how to breathe to make the baby come more easily, and practice did make perfect. And so they sat on the floor of their house, both with their legs spread, huffing and puffing as though to destroy the home of a mythical pig, and it was all he could do not to laugh.

"Deep, cleansing breath," Domingo said, after timing the notional contraction. Then he reached for her hand and bent forward to kiss it. "How we doing, Pats?"

"I'm ready, Ding. I just want it to happen and be over."

"Worried?"

"Well," Patsy Clark Chavez, M.D., replied, "I know it's going to hurt some, and I'd just as soon have it behind me, y'know?"

"Yeah." Ding nodded. The anticipation of unpleasant things was usually worse than their realization, at least on the physical side. He knew that from experience, but she didn't yet. Maybe that was why second deliveries were almost always easier than the first. You knew what to expect, knew that though it was uncomfortable you'd make it through, and have a baby at the end of it. That was the key to the whole thing for Domingo. To be a *father!* To have a child, to begin the greatest of all adventures, raising a new life, doing the best you could, making some mistakes, but learning from all of them, and ultimately presenting to society a new, responsible citizen to carry on. That, he was sure, was what it meant to be a man. Oh, sure, carrying a gun and doing his job was important, too, since he was now a guardian of society, a righter of wrongs, a protector of the innocent, one of the forces of order from which came civilization itself, but this was his chance to be personally involved in what civilization really was, the raising of kids in the right way, educating and guiding them to do the Right Thing, even at three in the morning and half asleep. Maybe the kid would be a spook/soldier like him, or maybe even better, a physician like Pats, an important and good part of society, serving others. Those things could only happen if he and Pats did the job right, and that responsibility was the greatest that any person could

undertake. Domingo looked forward to it, lusted to hold his child in his arms, to kiss and cuddle, to change diapers and clean bottoms. He'd already assembled the crib, decorated the walls of the nursery with pink and blue bunnies, and bought toys to distract the little beast, and though all of these things seemed incongruous with his regular life, both he and the men of Rainbow knew different, for all of them had children as well, and for them the covenant was exactly the same. Eddie Price had a boy of fourteen years, somewhat rebellious and decidedly headstrong—probably just as his father had once been—but also bright enough to question everything to seek his own answers, which he would find in due course, just as his father had done. The kid had "soldier" written all over him, Ding thought . . . but with luck he'd go to school first and become an officer, as Price should have done, and would have done in America. Here the system was different, though, and so he'd become a superb command sergeant major, Ding's most trusted subordinate, always ready to offer his thoughts, and then execute his orders perfectly. Yes, there was much to look forward to, Ding told himself, still holding Patsy's hand in his own.

"Scared?"

"Not scared, a little nervous," Patsy admitted.

"Honey, if it were all that hard, how come there's so many people in the world?"

"Spoken like a man," Dr. Patricia Chavez noted. "It's easy for you to say. You don't have to do it."

"I'll be there to help," her husband promised.

"You better be!"

CHAPTER 23

OVERWATCH

Henriksen arrived at JFK International with his body feeling as though it had been shredded, spindled, and mutilated before being tossed into a wastepaper basket, but that was to be expected. He'd flown literally halfway around the globe in about a day, and his internal body-clock was confused and angry and punishing. For the next week or so, he'd find himself awake and asleep at random times, but that was all right. The right pills and a few drinks would help him rest when rest was needed. An employee was waiting for him at the end of the jetway, took his carry-on without a word, and led off to the baggage-claim area, where, blessedly, his two-suiter was the fifth bag on the carousel, which allowed them to scoot out of the terminal and onto the highway to New York City.

"How was the trip?"

"We got the contract," Henriksen told his man, who was not part of the Project.

"Good," the man said, not knowing how good it was, and how bad it would be for himself.

Henriksen buckled his seat belt and leaned back to catch a few winks on the way in, ending further conversation.

"So, what do we got?" the FBI agent asked.

"Nothing so far," d'Allessandro replied. "I have one other possible missing girl, same area for her apartment, similar looks, age, and so forth, disappeared around the same time as your Miss Bannister. Name is Anne Pretloe, legal secretary, just vanished off the face of the earth."

"Jane Does?" the other federal officer asked.

"Nothing that matches. Guys, we have to face the possibility that we have a serial killer loose in the area—"

"But why did this e-mail message come out?"

"How does it match with other e-mails Miss Bannister sent to her dad?" the NYPD detective asked.

"Not very well," the senior FBI agent admitted. "The one he initially brought into the Gary office looks as though—well, it smells to me like drugs, y'know?"

"Agreed," d'Allessandro said. "You have others?"

"Here." The agent handed over six printouts faxed to the New York office. The detective scanned them. They were all perfectly grammatical, and organized, with no misspelling on any of them.

"What if she didn't send it? What if somebody else did?"

"The serial killer?" the junior FBI agent asked. Then he thought about it, and his face mirrored what he thought. "He'd have to be a real sick one, Mario."

"Yeah, well, serial killers aren't Eagle Scouts, are they?"

"Tormenting the families? Have we ever had one like that?" the senior man wondered.

"Not that I know of, Tom, but, like the man said . . ."

"Shit," observed the senior agent, Tom Sullivan.

"Call Behavioral Sciences in on this one?" the junior agent, Frank Chatham, asked.

Sullivan nodded. "Yeah, let's do that. I'll call Pat O'Connor about it. Next step here, I think we get some flyers printed up with the photo of Mary Bannister and start passing them out on the West Side. Mario, can you get us some cooperation from your people?"

"No problem," d'Allessandro replied. "If this is what it looks like, I want the fuck before he starts going for some sort of record. Not in my town, guys," the detective concluded.

"Going to try the Interleukin again?" Barbara Archer asked.

"Yeah." Killgore nodded. "-3a is supposed to enhance the immune system, but they're not sure how. I'm not either, but if it has any effect, we need to know about it."

"What about lung complications?" One of the problems with Interleukin was that it attacked lung tissue, also for unknown reasons, and could be dangerous to smokers and others with respiratory problems.

Another nod. "Yeah, I know, just like -2, but F4 isn't a smoker, and I want to make sure that -3a doesn't do anything to compromise Shiva. We can't take that chance, Barb."

"Agreed," Dr. Archer observed. Like Killgore, she didn't think that this new version of Interleukin was the least bit helpful, but that had to be confirmed. "What about Interferon?"

"The French have been trying that on hemorrhagic fever for the last five years, but no results at all. We can hang that, too, but it's going to be a dry hole, Barb."

"Let's try it on F4 anyway," she suggested.

"Fair enough." Killgore made a notation on the chart and left the room. A minute later he appeared on the TV monitor.

"Hi, Mary, how are we feeling this morning? Any better?"

"No." She shook her head. "Stomach still hurts pretty bad."

"Oh, really? Let's see what we can do about that." This case was proceeding rapidly. Killgore wondered if she had a genetic abnormality in her upper GI, maybe some vulnerability to peptic ulcer disease? . . . If so, then the Shiva was going to rip her apart in a hurry. He increased the morphine dosage rate on the machine next to her bed. "Okay, now we're going to give you a couple of new medications. These ought to fix you up in two or three days, okay?"

"Are these the ones I signed up for?" F4 asked weakly.

"Yes, that's right," Killgore replied, hanging the Interferon and Interleukin-3a on the medication tree. "These ought to make you feel a lot

better," he promised with a smile. It was so odd, talking to his lab rats. Well, as he'd told himself many times, a rat was a pig was a dog was a . . . girl, in this case. There wasn't really all that much of a difference, was there? *No,* he told himself this afternoon. Her body relaxed with the increased morphine dose, and her eyes became unfocused. Well, that *was* one difference, wasn't it? They didn't give rats sedatives or narcotics to ease their pain. It wasn't that they didn't want to, just that there was no practical way to ease their discomfort. It had never pleased him to see those cute pink eyes change from bright to dull, reflecting the pain. Well, in this case, at least, the dullness mirrored a respite from the pain.

The information was very interesting, Henriksen thought, and this Russian was pretty good at developing it. He would have made a good agent for the Foreign Counterintelligence Division . . . but then, that's just what he had been, in a way, only working for the other side, of course. And with the information, he recalled his idea, from the Qantas flight.

"Dmitriy," Bill asked, "do you have contacts in Ireland?"

Popov nodded. "Yes, several of them."

Henriksen looked over at Dr. Brightling for approval and got a nod. "How would they like to get even with the SAS?"

"That has been discussed many times, but it is not practical. It is like sending a bank robber into a guarded bank—no, that is not right. It is like sending a robber into the government agency which prints the money. There are too many defensive assets to make the mission practical."

"But they actually wouldn't be going to Hereford, would they? What if we could draw them out into the open, and then stage our own little surprise for them? . . ." Henriksen explained on.

It was a very interesting idea, Popov thought. But: "It is still a very dangerous mission."

"Very well. What is the current condition of the IRA?"

Popov leaned back in his chair. "They are badly split. There are now several factions. Some want peace. Some want the disorders to continue. The reasons are both ideological and personal to the faction members. Ideological insofar as they truly believe in their political objective of overturning both the British rule in Northern Ireland and the Republican government in Dublin, and establishing a 'progressive socialist' government. As an objective, it's far too ambitious for a practical world, yet they believe in it and hold to it. They are committed Marxists—actually more Maoist than Marxist, but that is not important to us at the moment."

"And the personal side?" Brightling asked.

"When one is a revolutionary, it is not merely a matter of belief, but also a matter of perception by the public. To many people a revolutionary is a romantic character, a person who believes in a vision of the future and is willing to risk his life for it. From that comes his social status. Those who know such people often respect them. Therefore, to lose that status injures the former revolutionary. He must now work for a living, drive a truck or whatever he is capable of—"

"Like what happened to you when the KGB RIF'd you, in other words,"

Henriksen offered.

Popov had to nod at that. “In a way, yes. As a field officer of State Security, I had status and importance enjoyed by few others in the Soviet Union, and losing that was more significant to me than the loss of my modest salary. It will be the same for these Irish Marxists. And so they have two reasons for wanting the disorders to continue: their political ideological beliefs, and their need for personal recognition as something more than ordinary worker-citizens.”

“Do you know such people?” Henriksen asked pointedly.

“Yes, I can probably identify some. I met many in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, where they trained with other ‘progressive elements.’ And I have traveled to Ireland on occasion to deliver messages and money to support their activities. Those operations tied up large segments of the British Army, you see, and were, therefore, worthy of Soviet support as a distraction to a large NATO enemy.” Popov ended his discourse, looking at the other two men in the room. “What would you have them do?”

“It’s not so much a question of what as of how,” Bill told the Russian. “You know, when I was in the Bureau, we used to say that the IRA was composed of the best terrorists in the world, dedicated, smart, and utterly vicious.”

“I would agree with that assessment. They were superbly organized, ideologically sound, and willing to undertake nearly anything if it had a real political impact.”

“How would they view this mission?”

“What mission is that?” Dmitriy asked, and then Bill explained his basic mission concept. The Russian listened politely and thoughtfully before responding: “That would appeal to them, but the scope and the dangers are very large.”

“What would they require to cooperate?”

“Money and other support, weapons, explosives, the things they need to carry on their operations. The current faction-fighting has probably had the effect of disrupting their logistical organization. That’s doubtless how the peace faction is trying to control the continued-violence faction, simply by restricting their access to weapons. Without that, they cannot take physical action, and cannot therefore enhance their own prestige. So, if you offer them the wherewithal to conduct operations, they will listen seriously to your plan.”

“Money?”

“Money allows one to purchase things. The factions with which we would deal have probably been cut off from regular funding sources.”

“Which are?” Brightling asked.

“Drinking clubs, and what you call the ‘protection racket,’ yes?”

“That’s right,” Henriksen confirmed with a nod. “That’s how they get their money, and that source is probably well controlled by the peace factions.”

“So, then, how much do you think, Dmitriy?” John Brightling asked.

“Several million dollars, I should say, at the least, that is.”

“You’ll have to be very careful laundering it,” Bill warned their boss. “I can help.”

“Call it five million? . . .”

“That should be enough,” Popov said, after a moment’s reflection, “plus the

psychological attraction of bearding the lion so close to his own den. But I can offer no promises. These people make their own decisions, for their own reasons."

"How quickly could you arrange the meeting?"

"Two days, perhaps three, after I arrive in Ireland," Popov answered.

"Get your tickets," Brightling told him decisively.

"One of them did some talking before he deployed," Tawney said. "His name was René. Before he set off to Spain, he chatted with a girlfriend. She had an attack of conscience and came in on her own. The French interviewed her yesterday."

"And?" Clark asked.

"And the purpose of the mission was to free Carlos, but he said nothing to her about their being assigned the mission by anyone. In fact he said little, though the interview did develop the name of another participant in the mission, or so our French colleagues think. They're running that name down now. The woman in question—well, he and she had been friends, lovers, for some time, and evidently he confided in her. She came to the police on her own because of the dead Dutch child. The Paris papers have made a big show of that, and it evidently troubled her conscience. She told the police that she tried to talk him out of the job—not sure that I believe that—and that he told her that he'd think about it. Evidently he didn't follow through on that, but the French are now wondering if someone might have opted out. They're sweeping up the usual suspects for a chat. Perhaps they'll turn up something," Tawney concluded hopefully.

"That's all?" Clark asked.

"It's quite a lot, really," Peter Covington observed. "It's rather more than we had yesterday, and it allows our French friends to pursue additional leads."

"Maybe," Chavez allowed. "But *why* did they go out? Who's turning these bastards loose?"

"Anything from the other two incidents?" Clark asked.

"Not a bloody peep," Tawney replied. "The Germans have rattled every bush. Cars were seen going in and out of the Fürchtner/Dortmund house, but she was an artist, and they might well have been buyers of her paintings. In any case, no vehicle descriptions, much less license-plate numbers. That is dead, unless someone else walks into a police station and makes a statement."

"Known associates?" Covington asked.

"All interviewed by the BKA, with no results. Hans and Petra were never known for talking. The same was true of Model and Guttenach." Tawney waved his hands in frustration.

"It's out there, John," Chavez said. "I can feel it."

"I agree," Covington said with a nod. "But the trick's getting our hands on it."

Clark frowned mightily, but he knew the drill, too, from his time in the field. You wanted information to develop, but merely wanting it never made it happen. Things like that just came to you when they decided to come. It was that simple, and that maddening, especially when you knew it was there and you knew that you needed it. With one small bit of information, Rainbow

could turn some national police force loose and sweep up the person or persons they wanted and grill them over a slow fire until they got what they needed. The French or the Germans would be best—neither of them had the legal restrictions that the Americans and Brits had placed on their police forces. But that wasn't a good way to think, and the FBI usually got people to spill their guts, even though they treated all criminals with white kid gloves. Even terrorists, once caught, usually told what they knew—well, not the Irish, John remembered. Some of those bastards wouldn't say "boo," not even their own names. Well, there were ways of handling that level of recalcitrance. It was just a matter of speaking to them outside of police view, putting the fear of God, and of pain, into them. That usually worked—had *always* worked in John Clark's experience. But first you needed somebody to talk to. That was the hard part.

As a field officer of the CIA he'd often enough been in distant, uncomfortable places on a mission, then had the mission aborted—or just as bad, postponed—because some vital bit of information had been missing or lost. He'd seen three men and one woman die for that reason, in four different places, all of them behind the Iron Curtain. Four people, all of whose faces he'd known, lost, judicially murdered by their parent countries. Their struggle against tyranny had ultimately been successful, but they hadn't lived to see it or enjoy the fruits of their courage, and it was part of Clark's conscience that he remembered every single one of them—and because of that he'd grown to hate the people who'd had the information he'd needed but had not been able to get out in time. So it was now. Ding was right. *Somebody* was calling these animals out of their lairs, and he wanted that somebody. Finding him or her would give them all manner of names and telephone numbers and addresses for the European police agencies to sweep up into one big bag, and so end much of the terrorism that still hung over Europe like a cloud. And *that* would be a hell of a lot better than sending his troopers out into the field with loaded guns.

Popov packed his bags. He was getting quite expert at this, the Russian told himself, and had learned to pack his shirts without their coming out of the bag wrinkled, which he'd never learned as a KGB officer. Well, the shirts were more expensive now, and he'd learned to take better care of them. The suitcases, however, reflected his previous occupation, and included some special pockets and compartments in which he could keep his "alternate" travel documents. These he kept with him at all times now. Should the whole project collapse of its own weight, he wanted to be able to disappear without a trace, and his three unused sets of documents should help in that. In the final extreme, he could access his Bern bank account and disappear back into Russia, though he had other plans for his future—

—but he worried that greed might be clouding his judgment. Five million dollars. If he could bank that to himself, then he'd have the resources he needed to live in comfort forever, in virtually any place of his choosing, especially if he invested it wisely. But how could he defraud the IRA out of the money detailed to them? Well, that might easily come to him. Then his eyes closed and he asked himself about greed. Was it indeed clouding his

operational judgment? Was he taking an unnecessary chance, led along by his wish to have this huge amount of money? It was hard to be objective about one's own motivations. And it was hard to be a free man now, not just one of thousands of field officers in the Committee for State Security, having to justify every single dollar, pound, or ruble he spent to the accountants at Number 2 Dzerzhinsky Square, the most humorless people in a singularly humorless agency.

Greed, Popov thought, worrying about it. He had to set that whole issue aside. He had to go forward as the professional he'd always been, careful and circumspect at every turn, lest he be caught by enemy counterintelligence services or even by the people with whom he would be meeting. The Provisional Wing of the Irish Republican Army was as ruthless as any terrorist organization in the world. Though its members could be jolly fellows over a drink—in their drinking they so closely resembled Russians—they killed their enemies, inside and outside their organization, with as little compunction as medical testers with their laboratory rats. Yet they could also be loyal to a fault. In that they were predictable, and that was good for Popov. And he knew how to deal with them. He'd done so often enough in the past, both in Ireland and the Bekaa Valley. He just couldn't let them discern his desire to bank the money earmarked to them, could he?

The packing done, Popov took his bags to the elevator, then down to the street level, where the apartment house's doorman flagged him a cab for La Guardia, where he'd board the shuttle for Boston's Logan International, and there to catch the Aer Lingus flight to Dublin. If nothing else, his work for Brightling had gotten him a lot of frequent-flyer miles, though with too many different airlines to be of real help. But they always flew him first-class, which KGB had never done, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought with a suppressed smile in the backseat of the cab. All he had to do, he reminded himself, was deal honestly with the PIRA. If the opportunity came to steal their money, then he'd take it. But he already knew one thing: they'd jump at the proposed operation. It was too good to pass up, and if nothing else, the PIRA had *élan.*

Special Agent Patrick O'Connor looked over the information faxed from New York. The trouble with kidnapping investigations was time. No investigation ever ran quickly enough, but it was worse with kidnappings, because you knew that somewhere was a real person whose life depended upon your ability to get the information and act upon it before the kidnapper decided to end his nasty little game, kill the current hostage, and go grab another. Grab another? Yes, probably, because there had been no ransom demand, and that meant that whoever had snatched Mary Bannister off the street wasn't willing to sell her back. No, he'd be using her as a toy, almost certainly for sexual gratification, until he tired of her, and then, probably, he'd kill her. And so, O'Connor thought himself to be in a race, albeit on a track he couldn't see, and running against a stopwatch hidden in the hand of another. He had a list of Ms. Bannister's local friends and associates, and he had his men and women out talking to them, hoping to turn up a name or a phone number that would lead them on to the next step in the investigation . . . but probably not, he thought. No, this case was all happening in New York. This young woman had

gone there to seek her fortune in the bright city lights, like so many others. And many of them did find what they were seeking, which was why they went, but this one, from the outskirts of Gary, Indiana, had gone there without knowing what it was like in a big city, and lacked the self-protective skills one needed in a city of eight million . . .

. . . and she was probably already dead, O'Connor admitted quietly to himself, killed by whatever monster had snatched her off the street. There was not a damned thing he could do about it except to identify, arrest, and convict the creep, which would save others, but wouldn't be worth a damn to the victim whose name titled the case file on his desk. Well, that was one of the problems of being a cop. You couldn't save them all. But you did try to avenge them all, and that was something, the agent told himself, as he rose to get his coat for the drive home.

Chavez sipped his Guinness and looked around the club. The Eagle of the Legion had been hung on the wall opposite the bar, and people already went over to touch the wooden staff in respect. Three of his Team-2 people were at a table, drinking their brews and chatting about something or other with two of Peter Covington's troops. The TV was on—snooker championships? Chavez wondered. That was a national event? Which changed into news and weather.

More El Niño stuff, Ding saw with a snort. Once it had just been called *weather,* but then some damned oceanographer had discovered that the warm/cold water mix off the coast of South America changed every few years, and that when it happened the world's climate changed a little bit here and there, and the media had latched onto it, delighted, so it seemed, to have another label to put on things they lacked the education to understand. Now they said that the current rendition of the "El Niño Effect" was unusually hot weather in Australia.

"Mr. C, you're old enough to remember. What did they say before this crap?"

"They called it unusually hot, cold, or seasonable weather, tried to tell you if it was going to be hot, cold, sunny, or rainy the next day, and then they told you about the baseball scores." With rather less accuracy on the weather side, Clark didn't say. "How's Patsy doing?"

"Another couple of weeks, John. She's holding up pretty well, but she bitches about how big her belly's gotten to be." He checked his watch. "Ought to be home in another thirty minutes. Same shift with Sandy."

"Sleeping okay?" John went on.

"Yeah, a little restless when the little *hombre* rolls around, but she's getting all she needs. Be cool, John. I'm taking good care of her. Looking forward to being a grandpa?"

Clark sipped at his third pint of the evening. "One more milestone on the road to death, I suppose." Then he chuckled. "Yeah, Domingo, I am looking forward to it." *I'll spoil the shit out of this little bastard, and then just hand him back when he cries.* "Ready to be a pop?"

"I think I can handle it, John. How hard can it be? You did it."

Clark ignored the implicit challenge. "We're going to be sending a team down to Australia in a few weeks."

"What for?" Chavez asked.

"The Aussies are a little worried about the Olympics, and we look pretty sexy 'cause of all the missions we've had. So, they want some of us to come on down and look over things with their SAS."

"Their guys any good?"

Clark nodded. "So I am told, but never hurts to get an outside opinion, does it?"

"Who's going down?"

"I haven't decided yet. They already have a consulting company, Global Security, Ltd., run by a former FBI guy. Noonan knows him. Henriksen, something like that."

"Have they ever had a terrorist incident down there?" Domingo asked next.

"Nothing major that I can remember, but, well, you don't remember Munich in 1972, do you?"

Chavez shook his head. "Just what I've read about it. The German cops really screwed the pooch on that mission."

"Yeah, I guess. Nobody ever told them that they'd have to face people like that. Well, now we all know, right? That's how GSG-9 got started, and they're pretty good."

"Like the *Titanic,* eh? Ships have enough lifeboats because she didn't?"

John nodded agreement. "That's how it works. It takes a hard lesson to make people learn, son." John set his empty glass down.

"Okay, but how come the bad guys never learn?" Chavez asked, finishing off his second of the evening. "We've delivered some tough lessons, haven't we? But you think we can fold up the tents? Not hardly, Mr. C. They're still out there, John, and they're not retiring, are they? They ain't learned shit."

"Well, I'd sure as hell learn from it. Maybe they're just dumber than we are. Ask Bellow about it," Clark suggested.

"I think I will."

Popov was fading off to sleep. The ocean below the Aer Lingus 747 was dark now, and his mind was well forward of the aircraft, trying to remember faces and voices from the past, wondering if perhaps his contact had turned informer to the British Security Service, and would doom him to identification and possible arrest. Probably not. They'd seemed very dedicated to their cause —but you could never be sure. People turned traitor for all manner of reasons. Popov knew that well. He'd helped more than his share of people do just that, changing their loyalties, betraying their countries, often for small amounts of cash. How much the easier to turn against an atheist foreigner who'd given them equivocal support? What if his contacts had come to see the futility of their cause? Ireland would not turn into a Marxist country, for all their wishes. The list of such nations was very thin now, though across the world academics still clung to the words and ideas of Marx and Engels and even Lenin. Fools. There were even those who said that Communism had been tried in the wrong country—that Russia had been far too backward to make those wonderful ideas work.

That was enough to bring an ironic smile and a shake of the head. He'd once been part of the organization called the Sword and Shield of the Party. He'd

been through the Academy, had sat through all the political classes, learned the answers to the inevitable examination questions and been clever enough to write down exactly what his instructors wanted to hear, thus ensuring high marks and the respect of his mentors—few of whom had believed in that drivel any more than he had, but none of whom had found within themselves the courage to speak their real thoughts. It was amazing how long the lies had lasted, and truly Popov could remember his surprise when the red flag had been pulled down from its pole atop the Kremlin's Spasskaya Gate. Nothing, it seemed, lived longer than a perverse idea.

CHAPTER 24

CUSTOMS

One of the differences between Europe and America was that the former's countries truly welcomed foreigners, while America, for all her hospitality, made entering the country remarkably inconvenient. Certainly the Irish erected no barriers, Popov saw, as his passport was stamped and he collected his luggage for an "inspection" so cursory that the inspector probably hadn't noticed if the person carrying it was male or female. With that, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich walked outside and flagged a cab for his hotel. His reservation gave him a one-bedroom suite overlooking a major thoroughfare, and he immediately undressed to catch a few more hours of sleep before making his first call. His last thought before closing his eyes on this sunny morning was that he hoped the contact number hadn't been changed, or compromised. If the latter, then he'd have to do some explaining to the local police, but he had a cover story, if necessary. While it wasn't perfect, it would be good enough to protect a person who'd committed no crimes in the Republic of Ireland.

"Airborne, Airborne, have you heard?" Vega sang, as they began the final mile. "We're gonna jump from the big-ass bird!"

It surprised Chavez that as bulky as First Sergeant Julio Vega was, he never seemed to suffer from it on the runs. He was a good thirty pounds heavier than any other Team-2 member. Any bigger across the chest and he'd have to get his fatigue shirts custom-made, but despite the ample body, his legs and wind hadn't failed him yet. And so, today, he was taking his turn leading the morning run. . . . In another four minutes they could see the stop line, which they all welcomed, though none of them would admit it.

"Quick time—*march!"* Vega called, as he crossed the yellow line, and everyone slowed to the usual one-hundred-twenty steps per minute. "Left, left, your left your right your left!" Another half minute and: "Detail . . . *halt!"* And everyone stopped. There was a cough or two from those who'd had a pint or two too many the night before, but nothing more than that.

Chavez walked to the command position in front of the two lines of troopers. "Fall out," he ordered, allowing Team-2 to walk to their building for a shower, having stretched and exercised all their muscles for the day. Later today they'd have another run through the shooting house for a live-fire exercise. It would be boring in content, since they'd already tried just about every possible permutation of hostages and bad guys. Their shooting was just about perfect. Their physical condition *was* perfect, and their morale was so high that they seemed bored. They were so confident in their abilities, they'd demonstrated them so convincingly in the field, firing real bullets into real

targets. Even his time with the 7th Light Infantry Division had not given him such confidence in his people. They'd gotten to the point that the British SAS troopers, who had a long, proud history of their own, and who'd initially looked upon the Rainbow teams with a great degree of skepticism, now welcomed them into the club and even admitted they had things to learn from them. And *that* was quite a stretch, since the SAS had been the acknowledged world masters at special operations.

A few minutes later, showered and dressed, Chavez came out to the squad bay, where his people were at their individual desks, going over intelligence information from Bill Tawney and his crew, and checking out photos, many of them massaged by the computer systems to allow for the years since they'd originally been taken. The systems seemed to get better on a daily basis as the software evolved. A picture taken from an angle was now manipulated by the computer into a straight-on portrait shot, and his men studied them as they might examine photos of their own children, along with whatever information they had of who was suspected to be where, with what known or suspected associates, and so forth. It seemed a waste of time to Chavez, but you couldn't run and shoot all day, and knowing the faces wasn't a total waste of time. They *had* identified Fürchtner and Dortmund that way on their Vienna deployment, hadn't they?

Sergeant Major Price was going over budget stuff, which he'd toss onto Ding's desk for later examination, so that his boss could justify expenditures, and then maybe request some new training funds for some new idea or other. Tim Noonan was working away with his new electronic toys, and Clark was always, so it seemed, fighting money battles with CIA and other American agencies. That struck Chavez as a total waste of effort. Rainbow had been pretty bulletproof from the very beginning—Presidential sponsorship never hurt—and their missions hadn't exactly diminished the credibility from which their funding derived. In another two hours, they'd go to the range for their daily expenditure of one hundred rounds of pistol and SMG ammunition, followed by the live-five exercise . . . another routine day. For "routine," Ding often substituted "boring," but that couldn't be helped, and it was a hell of a lot less boring than it had been on field missions for CIA, most of which time had been spent sitting down waiting for a meet and/or filling out forms to describe the field operation for the Langley bureaucrats who demanded full documentation of everything that happened in the field because—because that was one of the rules. Rules at best enforced by people who'd been out there and done that a generation before and thought they still knew all about it, and at worst by people who didn't have a clue, and were all the more demanding for that very reason. But the government, which tossed away billions of dollars every day, could often be so niggardly over a thousand or so, and nothing Chavez could do would ever change that.

Colonel Malloy now had his own office in the headquarters building, since it had been decided that he was a Rainbow division commander. A staff-grade officer in the United States Marine Corps, he was accustomed to such nonsense, and he thought about hanging a dartboard on the wall for amusement when he wasn't working. Work for him was driving his chopper—

which, he reminded himself, he didn't really have, since the one assigned to him was, at the moment, down for maintenance. Some widget was being replaced with a new and improved widget that would enhance his ability to do something of which he was not yet fully informed, but which, he was sure, would be important, especially to the civilian contractor, which had conceived of, designed, and manufactured the new and improved widget.

It could have been worse. His wife and kids liked it here, and Malloy liked it, as well. His was a skill position rather than a dangerous one. There was little hazard in being a helicopter pilot in a special-operations outfit. The only thing that worried him was hitting power lines, since Rainbow mainly deployed to operations in built-up areas, and in the past twenty years more helicopters had been lost to electrical power lines than to all known antiaircraft weapons around the world. His MH-60K didn't have cable cutters, and he'd written a scathing memo on that fact to the commander of the 24th Special Operations Squadron, who had replied contritely with six photocopies of memos he'd dispatched to his parent-unit commander on the same issue. He'd explained further on that some expert in the Pentagon was considering the modification to the existing aircraft—which, Malloy thought, was the subject of a consulting contract worth probably $300,000 or so to some Beltway Bandit whose conclusion would be, *Yes, that's a good idea,* couched in about four hundred pages of stultifying bureaucratic prose, which nobody would ever read but which would be enshrined in some archive or other for all time. The modification would cost all of three thousand dollars in parts and labor—the labor part would be the time of a sergeant who worked full-time for the Air Force anyway, whether actually working or sitting in his squad bay reading *Playboy*—but the rules were, unfortunately, the rules. And who knew, maybe in a year the Night Hawks would have the cable cutters.

Malloy grimaced and wished for his darts. He didn't need to see the intelligence information. The faces of known or suspected terrorists were of no use to him. He never got close enough to see them. That was the job of the shooters, and division commander or not he was merely their chauffeur. Well, it could have been worse. At least he was able to wear his "bag," or flight suit, at his desk, almost as though this were a proper organization of aviators. He got to fly four days or so out of seven, and that wasn't bad, and after this assignment, his detailer had hinted, he might go on to command of VMH-1, and maybe fly the president around. It would be dull, but career-enhancing. It surely hadn't hurt his old friend, Colonel Hank Goodman, who had just appeared on the star list, a fairly rare achievement for a rotor-head, since naval aviation, which was mainly helicopter drivers, was run, and run ruthlessly, by fast-movers in their jet-powered fixed-wing fighter bombers. Well, they all had prettier scarves. To amuse himself before lunch, Malloy pulled out his manual for the MH-60K and started to memorize additional information on engine performance, the kind of thing usually done by an engineering officer or maybe his crew chief, Sergeant Jack Nance.

The initial meeting took place in a public park. Popov had checked the telephone book and called the number for one Patrick X. Murphy just before noon.

"Hello, this is Joseph Andrews. I'm trying to find Mr. Yates," he'd said.

That statement was followed by silence, as the man on the other end of the phone had searched his memory for the codephrase. It was an old one, but after ten seconds or so, he'd fished it out.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Andrews. We haven't heard from you in some time."

"I just arrived in Dublin this morning, and I'm looking forward to seeing him. How quickly can we get together?"

"How about one this afternoon?" And then had come the instructions.

So, here he was now, wearing his raincoat and wide-brimmed fedora hat, carrying a copy of the *Irish Times* in his right hand, and sitting on a particular bench close to an oak tree. He used the downtime to read the paper and catch up on what was happening in the world—it wasn't very different from what he'd seen on CNN the previous day in New York … international news had gotten so dull since the demise of the Soviet Union, and he wondered how the editors of major newspapers had learned to deal with it. Well, people in Rwanda and Burundi were still slaughtering one another with obscene gusto, and the Irish were wondering aloud if soldiers from their army might be sent down as peacekeepers. Wasn't that odd? Popov thought. They'd proven singularly unable to keep the peace at home, so why, then, send them elsewhere to do it?

"Joe!" a happy voice said out of his field of vision. He looked up to see a fortyish man with a beaming smile.

"Patrick!" Popov responded, standing, going over to shake hands. "It's been a long time." Very long, as he'd never met this particular chap before, though they exchanged greetings like old friends. With that, they walked off to O'Connell Street, where a car was waiting. Popov and his new friend got in the back, and the driver took off at once, not speeding, but checking his rearview mirror carefully as he took several random turns. "Patrick" in the back looked up for helicopters. Well, Dmitriy thought, these PIRA soldiers hadn't lived to their current ages by being careless. For his part, Popov just sat back and relaxed. He might have closed his eyes, but that would have been overly patronizing to his hosts. Instead, he just stared forward. It was not his first time in Dublin, but except for a few obvious landmarks, he remembered little of the city. His current companions would not have believed that, since intelligence officers were supposed to have trained, photographic memories—which was true, but only to a point. It took forty minutes of weaving through the city until they came to a commercial building and looped around into an alley. There the car stopped, and they got out to enter a door in a blank brick wall.

"Iosef Andreyevich," a voice said calmly in the darkness. Then a face appeared.

"Sean, it has been a long time." Popov stepped forward, extending his hand.

"Eleven years and six months, to be exact," Sean Grady agreed, taking the hand and shaking it warmly.

"Your trade-craft remains excellent." Popov smiled. "I have no idea where we are."

"Well, one must be careful, Iosef." Grady waved. "Come this way, if you would."

Grady directed him to a small room with a table and a few chairs. There was tea brewing. The Irish hadn't lost their sense of hospitality, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich saw, removing his coat and dumping it on an armchair. Then he sat down.

"What can we do for you?" Grady asked. He was nearing fifty, Popov saw, but the eyes retained their youth and their dedicated look, narrow, overtly without passion, but intense as ever.

"Before we get to that, how are things going for you, Sean?"

"They could be better," Grady admitted. "Some of our former colleagues in Ulster have committed themselves to surrendering to the British Crown. Unfortunately, there are many who share those leanings, but we are working to persuade others to a more realistic point of view."

"Thank you," Popov said to the one who gave him a cup of tea. He took a sip before speaking. "Sean, you know, from the first time we met in Lebanon, I have respected your commitment to your ideals. I am surprised that so many others have wavered."

"It's been a long war, Iosef, and I suppose that not everyone can maintain his dedication. And more is the pity, my friend." Again his voice was singularly devoid of emotion. His face wasn't so much cruel as blank. He would have made a superb field intelligence officer, the Russian thought. He gave away nothing, not even the satisfaction he occasionally felt when he accomplished a mission. He'd probably showed as little passion when he'd tortured and murdered two British SAS commandos who'd made the mistake of letting down their guard just once. Such things had not happened often, but Sean Grady had achieved that most difficult of goals twice—at the cost, truth be told, of a bloody vendetta between the British Army's most elite unit and Grady's own cell of the PIRA. The SAS had killed no fewer than eight of his closest associates, and on one other occasion some seven years before they'd missed Grady only because his car had broken down on the way to a meeting —a meeting crashed by the SAS, who had killed three senior PIRA officials there. Sean Grady was a marked man, and Popov was certain that the British Security Service had spent hundreds of thousands of pounds in their attempt to track him down and target him for another commando raid. This, like intelligence operations, was a very dangerous game for all the players, but most of all for the revolutionaries themselves. And now his own leadership was selling out, or so Grady must have thought. This man would never make peace with the British. He believed too firmly in his vision of the world, warped though it was. Josef Vissarionovich Stalin had possessed a face like this one, and the same single-mindedness of purpose, and the same total inability to compromise on strategic issues.

"There is a new counter-terror team operating in England now," Dmitriy told him.

"Oh?" Grady hadn't known that, and the revelation surprised him.

"Yes. It is called Rainbow. It is a joint effort of the British and Americans, and it was they who handled the jobs at Worldpark, Vienna, and Bern. They have not yet been committed to this particular mission, but that is only, I think, a matter of time."

"What do you know about this new group?"

"Quite a lot." Popov handed over his written summary.

"Hereford," Grady observed. "We've been there to look, but it is not a place one can easily attack."

"Yes, I know that, Sean, but there are additional vulnerabilities, and with proper planning, we think it possible to strike a hard blow on this Rainbow group. You see, both the wife and daughter of the group commander, this American, John Clark, work at the nearby community hospital. They would be the bait for the mission—"

"Bait?" Grady asked.

"Yes, Sean." And then Popov went on to describe the mission concept. Grady, as ever, didn't react, but two of his people did, shifting in their chairs and trading looks while waiting for their commander to speak. This he finally did, rather formally.

"Colonel Serov, you propose that we undertake a major risk."

Dmitriy nodded. "Yes, that is true, and it is for you to decide if the risk is worth the rewards." Popov didn't have to remind the IRA chieftain that he'd helped them in the past—in a minor way to be sure, but these were not people to forget assistance—but neither did he have to point out that this mission, if successful, would not only catapult Grady to the forefront of IRA commanders, but also, perhaps, poison the peace process between the British government and the "official" faction of the PIRA. To be the man who humbled the SAS and other special-operations teams on their own turf would win him such prestige as no Irish revolutionary had enjoyed since 1920. That was always the weakness of such people, Popov knew. Their dedication to ideology made them hostage to their egos, to their vision, not only of their political objectives, but of themselves.

"Iosef Andreyevich, unfortunately, we do not have the resources to consider such a mission as this."

"I understand that. What resources do you require, Sean?"

"More than you can offer." From his own experience, and from speaking with others in the community of world terrorists, Grady knew how tight the KGB was with its cash. But that only set him up for the next surprise.

"Five million American dollars, in a numbered and codeword-controlled Swiss account," Popov said evenly, and this time he saw emotion on Grady's face. The eyes blinked. The mouth opened slightly, as though to voice an objection, but then he restored his self-control.

"Six," Grady said, just to take control of the agenda.

That suited Popov just fine. "Very well, then, I suppose I can offer as much as six million. How quickly will you need it?"

"How quickly can you deliver it?"

"A week, I think. How long for you to plan the operation?"

Grady thought for a few seconds. "Two weeks." He already knew much of the area around Hereford. That he had not been able to conduct an attack in earlier days hadn't prevented him from thinking—dreaming—about it, and gathering the needed intelligence. He had also tried to gather information on SAS operations, but had found that the SAS didn't talk very much, even afterward, except within their own community. A few covert photographs had been generated, but they hadn't proven very useful in the field. No, what

they'd needed and hadn't had in previous years was a combination of people willing to undertake a huge risk and the resources to obtain the items the mission would require.

"One other thing," Grady said.

"Yes?"

"How good are your contacts with drug dealers?" Grady asked.

Popov allowed himself to be shocked, though he didn't react visibly. Grady wanted drugs to sell? That was a huge change in the PIRA's ethos. In earlier years, the Provos had made a point of killing or kneecapping drug dealers as a means of showing that they were worthy of community support. So, this had changed, too?

"I have some indirect contacts, I suppose. What would you require?"

"Cocaine, a large quantity of it, preferably pure."

"To sell here?"

"Yes. Money is money, Iosef," Grady pointed out. "And we need a continuing income to maintain operations."

"I make no promises, but I will see what I can do."

"Very well. Let me know about the money. When it is available to us, I will let you know if the mission can be carried out, and when we might be able to do it."

"Weapons?"

"That is not a concern," Grady assured him.

"I need a telephone number to call."

Grady nodded, took a pad from the table, and wrote it out for him. It was clearly a cellular phone. The Russian pocketed the note. "That should be good for another few weeks. Is that sufficient to your needs?"

"Yes, it is." Popov stood. There was nothing else to be said. Popov was led out of the building and back to the car he had arrived in. The meeting had gone well, Dmitriy told himself on the drive back to his hotel.

"Sean, this is a suicide mission!" Roddy Sands warned back in the warehouse.

"Not if we control the situation, Roddy," Grady replied. "And we can do that if we have the proper resources. We'll have to be careful, and very quick, but we can do it." *And when we do,* Grady didn't have to go on, *then the entire movement will see who really represents the people of Ireland.* "We'll need fifteen men or so. We can get the right fifteen men, Roddy." Then Grady stood and walked out the other door in the room and got his own car for the drive to his safe house. There he had work to do, the sort of work he always did alone.

Henriksen was assembling his team. He figured ten men total, all experienced, and all briefed in on the Project. Foremost among them would be Lieutenant Colonel Wilson Gearing, formerly of the United States Army Chemical Corps. A genuine expert on chemical weapons, he would be the deliveryman. The rest would consult with the local security forces, and tell them things they already knew, establishing and enforcing the international rule that an Expert Was Somebody From Out Of Town. The Australian SAS would listen politely to everything his people said, and maybe even learn a thing or two, especially when his people brought down the new radio gear from E-Systems and Dick

Voss trained the Aussies up on them. The new radios for special-operations troops and SWAT cops were a thing of beauty. After that, they'd merely strut around with special ID to get them through all the security checkpoints, and even onto the track-and-field grounds of the huge stadium. They'd be able to watch the Olympics close up, which would be an interesting fringe benny for his people, some of whom, he was sure, were real sports fans who would enjoy seeing the last Olympics.

He selected his best people, and then had the corporation's travel agent set up the flights and accommodations—the latter through the Australian police, which had reserved a block of hotel suites close to the stadium for their own use throughout the Olympic games. Henriksen wondered if there would be media attention for his company. Ordinarily, he would have insisted on it, just as advertising, but not this time, he decided. There wasn't much point in advertising his company anymore, was there?

So, this project was done. Hollister looked over the buildings, the roads, parking lots, and the ersatz airplane runway whose construction he'd supervised here in the Kansas plains. The final stuff had been the usual confusion of niggling little details, but all the subcontractors had responded well to his browbeating, especially since their contracts all had incentive clauses as well.

The company car pulled up to his four-by-four and stopped, and then Hollister was surprised. The guy who got out was the big boss, John Brightling himself. He'd never met the chairman of the corporation, though he knew the name, and had seen the face on TV once or twice. He must have flown in this very morning on one of his corporate jets, and the construction superintendent was somewhat disappointed that he hadn't used the approach road, which could have easily accommodated the Gulfstream.

"Mr. Hollister, I presume?"

"Yes, sir." He took the extended hand and shook it. "It's all done, as of today, sir."

"You beat your promise by two and a half weeks," Brightling observed.

"Well, the weather helped us out some. I can't take credit for that."

Brightling laughed. "I would."

"The toughest part was the environmental systems. That's the most demanding set of specifications I've ever seen. What's the big deal, Dr. Brightling?"

"Well, some of the things we work with demand full isolation—Level Four, we call it in the business. Hot Lab stuff, and we have to treat it very carefully, as you might imagine. Federal rules on that we have to follow."

"But the whole building?" Hollister asked. It had been like building a ship or an aircraft. Rarely was any large structure designed to be completely airtight. But this one was, which had forced them to do air-pressure tests when each module had been completed, and driven his window contractors slightly crazy.

"Well, we just wanted it done our way."

"Your building, Doc," Hollister allowed. That one specification had added five million dollars of labor costs to the project, all of it to the window

contractor, whose workers had hated the detail work, though not the extra pay to do it. The old Boeing plant down the road at Wichita had hardly been called upon to do such finely finished work. “You picked a pretty setting for it, though.”

“Didn’t we, though?” All around, the land was covered with a swaying green carpet of wheat, just about a quarter way into its growing cycle. There were some farm machines visible, fertilizing and weeding the crop. Maybe not as pretty as a golf course, but a lot more practical. The complex even had its own large institutional bakery to bake its own bread, maybe from the wheat grown right here on the campus? Hollister wondered. Why hadn’t he thought about that one before? The farms that had been bought along with the land even included a feedlot for fattening up cattle, and other land used for truck-farm vegetables. This whole complex could be self-sustaining if somebody ever wanted it to be. Well, maybe they just wanted it to fit in with the area. This part of Kansas was all farms, and though the steel-and-glass buildings of the project didn’t exactly look like barns and equipment sheds, their surroundings somehow muted their invasiveness. And besides, you could hardly see them from the interstate highway to the north, and only from a few public roads closer than that, and the gatehouses for limiting access were stout buildings, almost like pillboxes—to protect against tornadoes, the specifications had said, and sure enough no tornado could hurt them—hell, even some loony farmer with a .50-caliber machine gun couldn’t hurt those security huts.

“So, you’ve earned your bonus. The money will be in your account by the close of business tomorrow,” Dr. John Brightling promised.

“Suits me, sir.” Hollister fished in his pocket and pulled out the master key, the one that would open any door in the complex. It was a little ceremony he always performed when he finished a project. He handed it over. “Well, sir, it’s your building complex now.”

Brightling looked at the electronic key and smiled. This was the last major hurdle for the Project. This would be the home of nearly all of his people. A similar but much smaller structure in Brazil had been finished two months earlier, but that one barely accommodated a hundred people. This one could house three thousand—somewhat crowded, but comfortably even so—for some months, and that was about right. After the first couple of months, he could sustain his medical research efforts here with his best people—most of them *not* briefed in on the Project, but worthy of life even so—because that work was heading in some unexpectedly promising directions. So promising that he wondered how long he himself might live here. Fifty years? A hundred? A thousand, perhaps? Who could say now?

Olympus, he’d call it, Brightling decided on the spot. The home of the gods, for that was exactly what he expected it to be. From here they could watch the world, study it, enjoy it, *appreciate* it. He would use the call-sign OLYMPUS-1 on his portable radio. From here he’d be able to fly all over the world with picked companions, to observe and learn how the ecology was supposed to work. For twenty years or so, they’d be able to use communications satellites —no telling how long they’d last, and after that they’d be stuck with long-wire radio systems. That was an inconvenience for the future, but launching his own replacement satellites was just too difficult in terms of manpower and

resources, and besides, satellite launchers polluted like nothing else humankind had ever invented.

Brightling wondered how long his people would choose to live here. Some would scatter quickly, probably drive all over America, setting up their own enclaves, reporting back by satellite at first. Others would go to Africa—that seemed likely to be the most popular destination. Still others to Brazil and the rain forest study area. Perhaps some of the primitive tribes down there would be spared the Shiva exposure, and his people would study them as well and how Primitive Man lived in a pristine physical environment, living in full harmony with Nature. They'd study them as they were, a unique species worthy of protection—and too backward to be a danger to the environment. Might some African tribes survive as well? His people didn't think so. The African countries allowed their primitives to interface too readily with city folk, and the cities would be the focal centers of death for every nation on earth—especially when Vaccine-A was distributed. Thousands of liters of it would be produced, flown all over the world, and then distributed, ostensibly to preserve life, but really to take it … slowly, of course.

Progress was going well. Back at his corporate headquarters the fictional documentation for -A was already fully formulated. It had been supposedly tested on over a thousand monkeys who were then exposed to Shiva, and only two of them had become symptomatic, and only one of those had died over the nineteen-month trial that existed only on paper and computer memories. They hadn't yet approached the FDA for human trials, because that wasn't necessary—but when Shiva started appearing all over the world, Horizon Corporation would announce that it had been working quietly on hemorrhagic fever vaccines ever since the Iranian attack on America, and faced with a global emergency and a fully documented treatment modality, the FDA would have no choice but to approve human use, and so officially bless the Project's goal of global human extermination. Not so much the elimination, John Brightling thought more precisely, as the culling back of the most dangerous species on the planet, which would allow Nature to restore Herself, with just enough human stewards to watch and study and appreciate the process. In a thousand or so years, there might be a million or so humans, but that was a small number in the great scheme of things, and the people would be properly educated to understand and respect nature instead of destroying her. The goal of the Project wasn't to end the world. It was to build a new one, a new world in the shape that Nature Herself intended. On that he would put his own name for all eternity. John Brightling, the man who saved the planet.

Brightling looked at the key in his hand, then got back into his car. The driver took him to the main entrance, and there he used the key, surprised and miffed to see that the door was unlocked. Well, there were still people going in and out. He took the elevator to his office-apartment atop the main building. That door, he saw, *was* locked as it was supposed to be, and he opened it with a kind of one-person ceremony, and walked into the seat of Olympus's chief god. No, that wasn't right. Insofar as there was a god, it was Nature. From his office windows, he could see out over the plains of Kansas, the swaying young wheat . . . it was so beautiful. Almost enough to bring tears to his eyes. Nature. She could be cruel to individuals, but individuals didn't

matter. Despite all the warnings, humankind hadn't learned that.

Well, learn it they would, the way Nature taught all Her lessons. The hard way.

Pat O'Connor made his daily report to the ASAC in the evening. Coatless, he slid into the chair opposite Ussery's desk with his folder in hand. It was already fairly thick.

"Bannister case," Chuck Ussery said. "Anything shaking loose yet, Pat?"

"Nothing," the supervisory special agent replied. "We've interviewed fourteen friends in the Gary area. None of them had any idea what Mary was doing in New York. Only six of them even knew she was there, and she never discussed jobs or boyfriends, if any, with them. So, nothing at all has happened here."

"New York?" the ASAC asked next.

"Two agents on the case there, Tom Sullivan and Frank Chatham. They've established contact with a NYPD detective lieutenant named d'Allessandro. Forensics has been through her apartment—nothing. Latent prints are all hers, not even a maid. Neighbors in the building knew her by sight, but no real friendships established, and therefore no known associates. The New York idea is to print up some flyers and pass them out via the NYPD. The local detective is worried there might be a serial killer loose. He has another missing female, same age, roughly the same appearance and area of residence, fell off the world about the same time."

"Behavioral Sciences?" Ussery asked at once.

O'Connor nodded. "They've looked over the facts we have to date. They wonder if the e-mail was sent by the victim or maybe by a serial killer who wants to fuck over the family. Style differences on the message that Mr. Bannister brought in—well, we both saw that it appeared to have been written by a different person, or someone on drugs, but she was evidently not a drug user. And we can't trace the e-mail back anywhere. It went into an anonymous-remailer system. That sort of thing is designed to protect the originator of electronic mail, I guess so people can swap porno over the Net. I talked with Eddie Morales in Baltimore. He's the technical wizard in Innocent Images"—that was an ongoing FBI project to track down, arrest, and imprison those who swapped kiddie porn over their computers—"and Bert said they're playing with some technical fixes. They have a hacker on the payroll who thinks he can come up with a way to crack through the anonymity feature, but he's not there yet, and the local U.S. Attorney isn't sure it's legal anyway."

"Shit." Ussery thought of that legal opinion. Kiddie porn was one of the Bureau's pet hates, and Innocent Images had turned into a high-priority nationwide investigation, run from the Baltimore Field Division.

O'Connor nodded. "That's exactly what Bert said, Chuck."

"So, nothing happening yet?"

"Nothing worthwhile. We have a few more of Mary's friends to interview—five are set up for tomorrow, but if anything breaks loose, my bet's on New York. Somebody must have known her. Somebody must have dated her. But not here, Chuck. She left Gary and didn't look back."

Ussery frowned, but there was no fault to be found with O'Connor's

investigative procedures, and there was a total of twelve agents working the Bannister case. Such cases ran and broke at their own speed. If James Bannister called, as he did every day, he'd just have to tell him that the Bureau was still working on it, then ask him for any additional friends he might have forgotten to list for the Gary team of agents.

CHAPTER 25

SUNRISE

"You didn't stay very long, sir," the immigration inspector observed, looking at Popov's passport.

"A quick business meeting," the Russian said, in his best American accent. "I'll be back again soon." He smiled at the functionary.

"Well, do hurry back, sir." Another stamp on the well-worn passport, and Popov headed into the first-class lounge.

Grady would do it. He was sure of that. The challenge was too great for one of his ego to walk away, and the same was true of the reward. Six million dollars was more than the IRA had ever seen in one lump sum, even when Libya's Muammar Qaddafi had bankrolled them in the early 1980s. The funding of terrorist organizations was always a practical problem. The Russians had historically given them some arms, but more valuably to the IRA, places to train, and operational intelligence against the British security services, but never very much money. The Soviet Union had never possessed a very large quantity of foreign exchange, and mainly used it to purchase technology with military applications. Besides, it had turned out, the elderly married couple they'd used as couriers to the West, delivering cash to Soviet agents in America and Canada, had been under FBI control almost the entire time! Popov had to shake his head. Excellent as the KGB had been, the FBI was just as good. It had a long-standing institutional brilliance at false-flag operations, which, in the case of the couriers, had compromised a large number of sensitive operations run by the "Active Measures" people in KGB's Service A. The Americans had had the good sense not to burn the operations, but rather use them as expanding resources in order to gain a systematic picture of what KGB was doing—targets and objectives—and so learn what the Russians *hadn't* already penetrated.

He shook his head again, as he walked off to the gate. And he was still in the dark, wasn't he? The questions continued to swarm: Exactly *what* was he doing? *What* did Brightling want? *Why* attack this Rainbow group?

Chavez decided to set his MP-10 submachine gun aside today and concentrate instead on his Beretta .45. He hadn't missed a shot with the Heckler & Koch weapon in weeks—in this context, a "miss" meant not hitting within an inch of the ideal bullet placement, between and slightly above the eyes on the silhouette target. The H&K's diopter sights were so perfectly designed that if you could see the target through the sights, you hit the target. It was that simple.

But pistols were not that simple, and he needed the practice. He drew the

weapon from the green Gore-Tex holster and brought it up fast, his left hand joining the right on the grip as his right foot took half a step back, and he turned his body, adopting the Weaver stance that he'd been taught years before at The Farm in the Virginia Tidewater. His eyes looked down, off the target, acquiring the pistol's sights as it came up to eye level, and when it did, his right index finger pulled back evenly on the trigger—

—not quite evenly enough. The shot would have shattered the target's jaw, and maybe severed a major blood vessel, but it would not have been instantly fatal. The second shot, delivered about half a second later, would have been. Ding grunted, annoyed with himself. He dropped the hammer with the safety-decock lever and reholstered the pistol. *Again.* He looked down, away from the target, then looked up. There he was, a terrorist with his weapon to the head of a child. Like lightning, the Beretta came up again, the sights matched up and Chavez pulled back his finger. Better. That one would have gone through the bastard's left eye, and the second round, again half a second later, made the first between-the-eyes hole into a cute little figure-eight.

"Excellent double-tap, Mr. Chavez."

Ding turned to see Dave Woods, the range master.

"Yeah, my first was wide and low," Ding admitted. That it would have blown half the bastard's face right off was not good enough.

"Less wrist, more finger," Woods advised. "And let me see your grip again." Ding did that. "Ah, yes, I see." His hands adjusted Chavez's left hand somewhat. "More like that, sir."

Shit, Ding thought. Was it that simple? By moving two fingers less than a quarter of an inch, the pistol slipped into a position as though the grip had been custom-shaped for his hands. He tried it a few times, then reholstered again and executed his version of a quick-draw. This time, the first round was dead between the eyes of the target seven meters away, and the second right beside it.

"Excellent," Woods said.

"How long you been teaching, Sergeant Major?"

"Quite some time, sir. Nine years here at Hereford."

"How come you never joined up with SAS?"

"Bad knee. Hurt it back in 1986, jumping down off a Warrior. I can't run more than two miles without its stiffening up on me, you see." The red mustache was waxed into two rather magnificent points, and the gray eyes sparkled. This son of a bitch could have taught shooting to Doc Holliday, Chavez knew at that moment. "Do carry on, sir." The range master walked off.

"Well, shit," Chavez breathed to himself. He executed four more quick-draws. *More finger, less wrist, lower the left hand a skosh on the grip . . . bingo . . .* In three more minutes there was a two-inch hole right in the middle of the instant-incapacitation part of the target. He'd have to remember this little lesson, Ding told himself.

Tim Noonan was in the next lane over, using his own Beretta, shooting slower than Chavez, and not quite as tight in his groups, but *all* of his rounds would have driven through the bottom of the brain, and right into the stem, where instant kills happened, because that was where the spinal cord entered the brain. Finally, both ran out of ammunition. Chavez took off his ear-

protectors and tapped Noonan on the shoulder.

"A little slow today," the technical expert observed, with a frown.

"Yeah, well, you dropped the fucker. You were HRT, right?"

"Yeah, but not really a shooter. I did the tech side for them, too. Well, okay, I shot with them regularly, but not quite good enough for the varsity. Never got as fast as I wanted to be. Maybe I have slow nerves." Noonan grinned as he field-stripped his pistol for cleaning.

"So how's that people-finder working out?"

"The damned thing is fucking magic, Ding. Give me another week and I'll have the new one figured out. There's a parabolic attachment for the antenna, looks like something out of *Star Trek,* I guess, but goddamn, does it find people." He wiped the parts off and sprayed Break-Free on them for cleaning and lubrication. "That Woods guy's a pretty good coach, isn't he?"

"Yeah, well, he just fixed a little problem for me," Ding said, taking the spray can to start cleaning his own service automatic.

"The head guy at the FBI Academy when I was there did wonders for me, too. Just how your hands match up on the butt, I guess. And a steady finger." Noonan ran a patch through the barrel, eyeballed it, and reassembled his pistol. "You know, the best part about being over here is, we're about the only people who get to carry guns."

"I understand civilians can't own handguns over here, eh?"

"Yeah, they changed the law a few years ago. I'm sure it'll help reduce crime," Noonan observed. "They started their gun-control laws back in the '20s, to control the IRA. Worked like a charm, didn't it?" The FBI agent laughed. "Oh, well, they never wrote down a Constitution like we did."

"You carry all the time?"

"Hell, yes!" Noonan looked up. "Hey, Ding, I'm a cop, y'dig? I feel naked without a friend on my belt. Even when I was working Lab Division in Headquarters, reserved parking space and all, man, I *never* walked around D.C. without a weapon."

"Ever have to use it?"

Tim shook his head. "No, not many agents do, but it's part of the mystique, you know?" He looked back at his target. "Some skills you just like to have, man."

"Yeah, same for the rest of us." It was a fillip of British law that the Rainbow members *were* authorized to carry weapons everywhere they went, on the argument that as counterterror people they were always on duty. It was a right Chavez hadn't exercised very much, but Noonan had a point. As Chavez watched, he slapped a full magazine into the reassembled and cleaned handgun, dropped the lever to close the slide, then after safing the weapon, ejected the magazine to slide one more round into it. The gun went back into his hip holster, along with two more full magazines in covered pockets on the outside. Well, it was part of being a cop, wasn't it?

"Later, Tim."

"See you around, Ding."

Many people can't do it, but some people simply remember faces. It's a particularly useful skill for bartenders, because people will come back to

establishments where the guy at the bar remembers your favorite drink. This was true at New York's Turtle Inn Bar and Lounge, on Columbus Avenue. The foot patrolman came in just after the bar opened at noon and called, "Hey, Bob."

"Hi, Jeff, coffee?"

"Yeah," the young cop said, watching the bartender get some Starbuck's from the urn. Unusually for a bar, this place served good coffee, since that was the yuppie thing in this part of town. One sugar and some cream, and he passed the cup over.

Jeff had been on this beat for just under two years, long enough that he knew most of the business owners, and most of them knew him and his habits. He was an honest cop, but never one to turn down free food or drink, especially good donuts, the American cop's favorite food.

"So, what's shakin'?" Bob asked.

"Looking for a missin' girl," Jeff replied. "Know this face?" He handed the printed flyer over.

"Yeah, Annie something, likes Kendall Jackson Reserve Chardonnay. Used to be a regular. Haven't seen her in a while, though."

"How about this one?" The second flyer went across the bar. Bob looked at it for a second or two.

"Mary . . . Mary Bannister. I remember that, 'cuz it's like the thing on a set of steps, like you know? Haven't seen her in a while, either."

The patrolman could hardly believe his luck. "What do you know about them?"

"Wait a minute, you said they're missing, like kidnapped or something?"

"That's right, man." Jeff sipped his coffee. "FBI is on this one." He tapped the Bannister photo. "The other one we turned."

"Well, I'll be damned. Don't know much about them. Used to see 'em both here couple days a week, they dance and stuff, you know, like single girls do, trolling for guys."

"Okay, tell you what, some people will be in here to talk to you about 'em. Think about it, will ya?" The cop had to consider the possibility that Bob was the one who'd made them disappear, but there were chances you had to take in an investigation, and that likelihood was pretty damned slim. Like many New York waiters and bartenders, this guy was an aspiring actor, which probably explained his memory.

"Yeah, sure, Jeff. Damn, kidnapped, eh? Don't hear very much about that stuff anymore. Shit," he concluded.

"Eight million stories in the Naked City, man. Later," the patrolman said, heading for the door. He felt as though he'd done a major portion of his day's work, and as soon as he got outside, he used his epaulet-mounted radio microphone to call the newly developed information into his precinct house.

Grady's face was known in the U.K., but not the red beard and glasses, which, he hoped, would obscure his visage enough to reduce the chance of being spotted by an alert police constable. In any case, the police presence wasn't as heavy here as in London. The gate into the base at Hereford was just as he'd remembered it, and from there it wasn't a long drive to the community

hospital, where he examined the roads, shoulders, and parking areas and found them to his liking, as he shot six rolls of film with his Nikon. The plan that started building in his mind was simple, as all good plans were. The roads seemed to work in his favor, as did the open ground. As always, surprise would be his primary weapon. He'd need that, since the operation was so close to the U.K.'s best and most dangerous military organization, but the distances told him the time factor. Probably forty minutes on the outside, thirty on the inside to make the plan work. Fifteen men, but he could get fifteen good men. The other resources money could purchase, Grady thought, as he sat in the hospital parking lot. Yes, this could and would work. The only question was daylight or nighttime. The latter was the usual answer, but he'd learned the hard way that counter-terror teams loved the night, because their night-vision equipment made the time of day indistinguishable in a tactical sense—and people like Grady were not trained to operate as well in the dark. It had given the police an enormous advantage recently at Vienna, Bern, and Worldpark. So, why *not* try it in broad daylight? he wondered. It was something to discuss with his friends, Grady concluded, as he restarted the car and headed back toward Gatwick.

"Yeah, I've been thinking about it since Jeff showed me the pictures," the bartender said. His name was Bob Johnson. He was now dressed for the evening, in a white tuxedo shirt, black cummerbund, and bowtie.

"You know this woman?"

"Yeah." He nodded positively. "Mary Bannister. The other one is Anne Pretloe. They used to be regulars here. Seemed nice enough. They danced and flirted with the men. This place gets pretty busy at night, 'specially on weekends. They used to come in around eight or so, then leave at eleven or eleven-thirty."

"Alone?"

"When they left? Most of the time, but not always. Annie had a guy she liked. His name's Hank, don't know the last name. White, brown hair, brown eyes, about my size, growing a gut, but not really overweight. I think he's a lawyer. He'll probably be in tonight. He's pretty regular here. Then there was another guy . . . maybe the last time I saw her here . . . what the hell's his name . . . ?" Johnson looked down at the bar. "Kurt, Kirk, something like that. Now that I think of it, I saw Mary dancing with him, too, once or twice. White guy, tall, good-lookin', haven't seen him in a while, liked whiskey sours made with Jim Beam, good tipper." A bartender always remembered good and bad tippers. "He was a hunter."

"Huh?" Agent Sullivan asked.

"Huntin' for babes, man. That's why guys come to a place like this, you know?"

This guy was a godsend, Sullivan and Chatham thought. "But you haven't seen him in a while?"

"The guy Kurt? No, couple of weeks at least, maybe more."

"Any chance that you could help us put a picture together?"

"You mean the artists' sketch thing, like in the papers?" Johnson asked them.

"That's right," Chatham confirmed.

"I suppose I can try. Some of the gals who come in here might know him, too. I think Marissa knew him. She's a regular, in here nearly every night, shows up around seven, seven-thirty."

"I guess we're going to be here awhile," Sullivan thought aloud, checking his watch.

It was midnight at RAF Mildenhall. Malloy lifted the Night Hawk off the ramp and set off west for Hereford. The controls felt just as tight and crisp as ever, and the new widget worked. It turned out to be a fuel-gauge widget, digitized to tell him with numbers rather than a needle how much fuel he had. The switch also toggled back and forth between gallons (U.S., not Imperial) and pounds. Not a bad idea, he thought. The night was relatively clear, which was unusual for this part of the world, but there was no moon, and he had opted to use his night-vision goggles. These turned darkness into greenish twilight, and though they reduced his visual acuity from 20/20 down to about 20/40, that was still a major improvement on being totally blind in the dark. He kept the aircraft at three hundred feet, to avoid power lines, which scared the hell out of him, as they did all experienced helicopter pilots. There were no troops in the back, only Sergeant Nance, who still wore his pistol in order to feel more warriorlike—side arms were authorized for special-operations troops, even those who had little likelihood of ever using them. Malloy kept his Beretta M9 in his flight bag rather than a shoulder holster, which he found melodramatic, especially for a Marine.

"Chopper down there at the hospital pad," Lieutenant Harrison said, seeing it as they angled past for the base. "Turnin' and blinkin'."

"Got it," Malloy confirmed. They'd pass well clear even if the guy lifted off right now. "Nothing else at our level," he added, checking aloft for the blinking lights of airliners heading in and out of Heathrow and Luton. You never stopped scanning if you wanted to live. If he got command of VHM-1 at Anacostia Naval Air Station in D.C., the traffic at Reagan National Airport meant that he'd be flying routinely through very crowded air space, and though he respected commercial airline pilots, he trusted them less than he trusted his own abilities—which, he knew, was exactly how they viewed him and everybody in green flight suits. To be a pilot for a living, you had to think of yourself as the very best, though in Malloy's case he knew this to be true. And this kid Harrison showed some real promise, if he stayed in uniform instead of ending up a traffic reporter in West Bumfuck, Wherever. Finally, the landing pad at Hereford came into view, and Malloy headed for it. Five minutes and he'd be on the ground, cooling the turboshaft engines down, and twenty minutes after that, in his bed.

"Yes, he will do it," Popov said. They were in a corner booth, and the background music made it a secure place to talk. "He has not confirmed it, but he will."

"Who is he?" Henriksen asked.

"Sean Grady. Do you know the name?"

"PIRA . . . worked in Londonderry mainly, didn't he?"

"For the most part, yes. He captured three SAS people and . . . disposed of them. Two separate incidents. The SAS then targeted him on three separate missions. Once they came very close to getting him, and they eliminated ten or so of his closest associates. He then cleaned out some suspected informers in his unit. He's quite ruthless," Popov assured his associates.

"That's true," Henriksen assured Brightling. "I remember reading what he did to the SAS guys he caught. Wasn't very pretty. Grady's a nasty little fucker. Does he have enough people to make this attempt?"

"I think yes," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich replied. "And he held us up for money. I offered five, and he demanded six, plus drugs."

"Drugs?" Henriksen was surprised.

"Wait, I thought the IRA didn't approve of drug trafficking," Brightling objected.

"We live in a practical world. The IRA worked for years to eliminate drug dealers throughout Ireland—mainly kneecappings, to make the action very public. That was a psychological and political move on his part. Perhaps now he entertains the idea as a continuing source of income for his operations," Dmitriy explained. The morality of the issue didn't seem very important to anyone at the table.

"Yeah, well, I suppose we can entertain that request," Brightling said, with a small measure of distaste. "Kneecappings? What does that mean?"

"You take a pistol," Bill explained, "and place it behind the knee, then you fire forward. It blows the kneecap to smithereens. Painful, and permanently crippling. It's how they used to deal with informers and other people they didn't like. The Protestant terrorists preferred a Black and Decker drill for the same purpose. It puts the word out on the street that you are not to be messed with," Henriksen concluded.

"Ouch," the physician in Brightling commented.

"That's why they're called terrorists," Henriksen pointed out. "These days, they just kill them. Grady has a reputation for ruthlessness, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does," Popov confirmed. "There's no doubt that he will undertake this mission. He likes the concept and your suggestion for how it should be set up, Bill. There is also his ego, which is large." Popov took a sip of his wine. "He wants to take the lead in the IRA politically, and that will mean doing something dramatic."

"That's the Irish for you—the land of sad loves and happy wars."

"Will he succeed?" Brightling asked.

"The concept is a clever one. But remember that to him success means elimination of the primary targets, the two women, and then a few of the reaction team of soldiers. After that, he will doubtless flee the area and try to return to Ireland and safety. Just surviving an operation of this type is successful enough for his political purposes. To fight a full military action would be madness for him, and Grady is not a madman," Dmitriy told them, not really sure he believed it. Weren't all revolutionaries mad? It was difficult to understand people who let visions take control of their lives. Those who'd succeeded, Lenin, Mao, and Gandhi in this century, were the ones who'd used their visions effectively, of course—but even then, which of the three had really succeeded? The Soviet Union had fallen, the People's Republic of China

would eventually succumb to the same political-economic realities that had doomed the USSR, and India was still an economic disaster that somehow managed to hover in stagnation. By that model, Ireland was more surely doomed by the possible success of the IRA than it was by its economic marriage to Britain. At least Cuba had the tropical sun to keep it warm. To survive, with no natural resources to speak of, Ireland needed a close economic tie to someone, and the closest was the U.K. But that was off the dinner topic.

"So, you expect him to try a hit-and-run," Bill asked. Dmitriy nodded. "Nothing else makes tactical sense. He hopes to live long enough to utilize the money we've offered him. Assuming you will approve the increase he requires."

"What's another million or so?" Henriksen asked, with a suppressed grin.

So both of them regarded such a large sum as trivial, Popov saw, and again he was struck in the face with the fact that they were planning something monstrous—but what?

"How do they want it? Cash?" Brightling asked.

"No, I told them it would be deposited in a numbered Swiss account. I can arrange that."

"I have enough already laundered," Bill told his employer. "We could set that up tomorrow if you want."

"And that means I fly to Switzerland again," Dmitriy observed sourly.

"Getting tired of flying?"

"I have traveled a great deal, Dr. Brightling." Popov sighed openly. He was jet-lagged, and it showed for once.

"John."

"John." Popov nodded, seeing some actual affection in his boss for the first time, somewhat to his surprise.

"I understand, Dmitriy," Henriksen said. "The Australia trip was a pain in the ass for me."

"What was it like to grow up in Russia?" Brightling asked.

"Harder than America. There was more violence in the schools. No serious crime," Popov explained. "But lots of fights between the boys, for example. Dominance fights, as boys will. The authorities usually looked the other way."

"Where did you grow up?"

"Moscow. My father was also an officer in State Security. I was educated in Moscow State University."

"What major?"

"Language and economics." The former had proven very useful. The latter had been totally valueless, since the Marxist idea of economics had not exactly proven to be an effective one.

"Ever get out of the city? You know, like Boy Scouts do here, that sort of stuff?"

Popov smiled, wondering where this was going, and why they were asking it. But he played along. "One of my happiest memories of childhood. I was in the Young Pioneers. We traveled out to a state farm and worked there for a month, helping with the harvest, living with nature, as you Americans say." And then, at age fourteen, he'd met his first love, Yelena Ivanovna. He

wondered where she was now. He succumbed to a brief attack of nostalgia, as he remembered her feel in the darkness, his first conquest . . .

Brightling noted the distant smile and took it for what he wanted it to be. "You liked that, eh?"

Clearly they didn't want to hear that story. "Oh, yes. I have often wondered what it was like to live out there in a place like that, the sun on your back all the time, working in the soil. My father and I used to walk into the woods, hunting for mushrooms—that was a common pastime for Soviet citizens in the sixties, walking in the woods." Unlike most Russians, they'd driven there in his father's official car, but as a boy he'd liked the woods as a place of adventure and romanticism, as all boys do, and enjoyed the time with his father as well.

"Any game in the woods there?" Bill Henriksen asked.

"One would see birds, of course, many kinds, and occasionally elk—you call them moose here, I think—but rarely. State hunters were always killing them. Wolves are their main target. They hunt them from helicopters. We Russians do not like wolves as you do here in America. Too many folk tales of rabid ones killing people, you see. Mostly lies, I expect."

Brightling nodded. "Same thing here. Wolves are just big wild dogs, you can train them as pets if you want. Some people do that."

"Wolves are cool," Bill added. He'd often thought about making one a pet, but you needed a lot of land for that. Maybe when the Project was fulfilled.

What the hell was *this* all about? Dmitriy wondered, still playing along. "I always wanted to see a bear, but there are none of them left in the Moscow area. I saw them only at the zoo. I loved bears," he added, lying. They'd always frightened the hell out of him. You heard scores of bear stories as a child in Russia, few of them friendly, though not as antinature as the wolf stories. Large dogs? Wolves *killed* people in the steppes. The farmers and peasants hated the damned things and welcomed the state hunters with their helicopters and machine guns, the better to hunt them down and slaughter them.

"Well, John and I are Nature Lovers," Bill explained, waving to the waiter for another bottle of wine. "Always have been. All the way back to Boy Scouts—like your Young Pioneers, I suppose."

"The state was not kind to nature in the Soviet Union. Much worse than the problems you've had here in America. Americans have come to Russia to survey the damage and suggest ways to fix the problems of pollution and such." Especially in the Caspian Sea, where pollution had killed off most of the sturgeon, and with it the fish eggs known as caviar, which had for so long been a prime means of earning foreign currency for the USSR.

"Yes, that was criminal," Brightling agreed soberly. "But it's a global problem. People don't respect nature the way they should," Brightling went on for several minutes, delivering what had to be a brief canned lecture, to which Dmitriy listened politely.

"That is a great political movement in America, is it not?"

"Not as powerful as many would like," Bill observed. "But it's important to some of us."

"Such a movement would be useful in Russia. It is a pity that so much has been destroyed for no purpose," Popov responded, meaning some of it. The

state should conserve resources for proper exploitation, not simply destroy them because the local political hacks didn't know how to use them properly. But then the USSR had been so horridly inefficient in everything it did—well, except espionage, Popov corrected himself. America had done well, he thought. The cities were far cleaner than their Russian counterparts, even here in New York, and you only needed to drive an hour from any city to see green grass and tidy productive farms. But the greater question was: why had a conversation that had begun with the discussion of a terrorist incident drifted into this? Had he done anything to invite it? No, his employer had abruptly steered it in this direction. It had not been an accident. That meant they were sounding him out—but on what? This nature drivel? He sipped at his wine and stared at his dinner companions. "You know, I've never really had a chance to see America. I would like very much to see the national parks. What is the one with the geysers? Gold stone? Something like that?"

"Yellowstone, it's in Wyoming. Maybe the prettiest place in America," Henriksen told the Russian.

"Nope, Yosemite," Brightling countered. "In California. That's the prettiest valley in the whole world. Overrun with goddamned tourists now, of course, but that'll change."

"Same story at Yellowstone, John, and, yeah, that'll change, too. Someday," Bill Henriksen concluded.

They seemed pretty positive about the things that would change. But the American state parks were run by the federal government for all citizens, weren't they? They had to be, because they were tax-supported. No limited access for the elite here. Equality for all—something he'd been taught in Soviet schools, except here they actually lived it. One more reason, Dmitriy thought, why one country had fallen, and the other had grown stronger.

"What do you mean 'that'll change'?" Popov asked.

"Oh, the idea is to lessen the impact of people on the areas. It's a good idea, but some other things have to happen first," Brightling replied.

"Yeah, John, just one or two," Henriksen agreed, with a chuckle. Then he decided that this feeling-out process had gone far enough. "Anyway, Dmitriy, how will we know when Grady wants to go forward?"

"I will call him. He left me a mobile-phone number which I can use at certain times of the day."

"Trustful soul."

"For me, yes. We have been friends since the 1980s, back when he was in the Bekaa Valley. And besides, the phone is mobile, probably bought with a false credit card by someone else entirely. These things are very useful to intelligence officers. They are difficult to track unless you have very sophisticated equipment. America has them, and so does England, but other nations, no, not very many of them."

"Well, call him as soon as you think proper. We want this one to run, don't we, John?"

"Yes," Dr. Brightling said definitively. "Bill, set up the money for the transfer tomorrow. Dmitriy, go ahead and set up the bank account."

"Yes, John," Popov replied, as the dessert cart approached the table.

Grady, they saw, was excited about this mission. It was approaching two in the Dublin morning. The photos had been developed by a friend of the movement, and six of them blown up. The large ones were pinned to the wall. The small ones lay in appropriate places on a map unfolded on the worktable.

"They will approach from here, right up this road. Only one place for them to park their vehicles, isn't there?"

"Agreed," Rodney Sands said, checking angles.

"Okay, Roddy, then we do this . . ." Grady outlined the plan.

"How do we communicate?"

"Cellular phones. Every group will have one, and we'll select speed-dial settings so that we can trade information rapidly and efficiently."

"Weapons?" Danny McCorley asked.

"We have plenty of those, lad. They will respond with five men, perhaps as many as ten, but no more than that. They've never deployed more than ten or eleven men to a mission, even in Spain. We've counted them on the TV tapes, haven't we? Fifteen of us, ten of them, and surprise works for us in both phases."

The Barry twins, Peter and Sam, looked skeptical at first, but if the mission was run quickly . . . if it ran according to the schedule . . . yes, it was possible.

"What about the women?" Timothy O'Neil asked.

"What about them?" Grady asked. "They are our primary targets."

"A pregnant woman, Sean . . . it will not look good politically."

"They are Americans, and their husbands are our enemies, and they are bait for getting them close. We will not kill them at once, and if circumstances permit, they might well be left alive to mourn their loss, lad," Grady added, just to assuage the conscience of the younger man. Timmy wasn't a coward, but he did have some lingering bourgeois sentimentality.

O'Neil nodded submission. Grady wasn't a man to cross, and was in any case their leader. "I lead the group into the hospital, then?"

Grady nodded. "Yes. Roddy and I will remain outside with the covering group."

"Very well, Sean," Timmy agreed, committing himself to the mission now and forever.

CHAPTER 26

CONCLUSIONS

One problem with an investigation like this was that you risked alerting the subject, but that couldn't always be helped. Agents Sullivan and Chatham circulated around the bar until nearly midnight, finding two women who knew Mary Bannister, and one who knew Anne Pretloe. In the case of the former, they got the name of a man with whom Bannister had been seen dancing—a bar regular who hadn't shown up that night, but whose address they'd get rapidly enough from his telephone number, which was known, it seemed, to quite a few of the women here. By midnight they were ready to leave, somewhat annoyed to have spent so much time in a lively bar drinking nothing more potent than Coca-Cola, but with a few new leads to run down. It was so far a typical case. Special Agent Sullivan thought of it like walking through a supermarket looking for dinner, picking over the shelves randomly, selecting things to eat, never knowing how the selections would turn out in the kitchen.

" 'Morning, baby," Ding said, before he rolled out of bed, as always starting his day off with a kiss.

"Hi, Ding." Patsy tried to roll over, but it was difficult, almost as much as sleeping on her back, unable to move with her belly full of child. It couldn't come soon enough, Patricia Clark Chavez thought, despite the discomfort the delivery was sure to inflict upon her. She felt his hand slide over the stretched skin of what had once been a flat, trim abdomen.

"How's the little guy?"

"Waking up, feels like," she answered with a distant smile, wondering what he or she would look like. Ding was convinced it had to be a boy. It seemed he would accept no other possibility. Must be a Latino thing, she figured. A physician, she knew different. Whatever it was, however, it would almost certainly be healthy. The little thing inside her had been active since she'd felt the first "bloop," as she called it, at three months. "There he goes," she reported, when he/she turned over inside the sea of amniotic fluid.

Domingo Chavez felt it on the palm of his hand, smiled, and leaned down to kiss his wife again before heading to the bathroom. "Love ya, Pats," he said on the way. As usual, the world was in its proper shape. On the way to the bathroom, he sneaked a look at the nursery, with the colored critters on the wall, and the crib all ready for use. Soon, he told himself. Just about any time, the OB had said, adding that first babies were usually late, however. Fifteen minutes later, he was in his morning sweats and on his way out the door, some coffee in him but nothing else, since he didn't like to eat breakfast before

exercising. His car took the short drive to the Team-2 building, where everyone else was arriving.

"Hey, Eddie," Chavez said to Price in greeting.

"Good morning, Major," the sergeant major called in return. Five minutes later, the team was out on the grass, all dressed in their morning workout gear. This morning Sergeant Mike Pierce, still the team's kill leader, led the routine. The stretching and strength exercises took fifteen minutes, and then came the morning run.

"Airborne rangers jump from planes," Pierce called, and then the remainder of the team chorused:

"They ain't got no goddamned brains!"

The traditional chant made perfectly good sense to Chavez, who'd been through Ranger School at Fort Benning, but not Jump School. It made far better sense, he thought, to come to battle in a helicopter rather than as skeet for the bastards on the ground to shoot at, a perfect target, unable to shoot back. The very idea frightened him. But he was the only member of Team-2 who'd never jumped, and that made him a "fucking leg," or straight-legged infantryman, not one of the anointed people with the silver ice-cream cone badge. Strange that he'd never heard any of his people josh him about it, he thought, passing the first mile post on the track. Pierce was a gifted runner, and was setting a fast pace, maybe trying to get somebody to fall out. But no one would do that, and everyone knew it. At home, Ding thought, Patsy was getting herself ready for work in the hospital emergency room. She was leaning toward specialization in ER medicine at the moment, which meant getting a general surgery certification. Funny that she hadn't selected her area of medical specialty yet. She certainly had the brains to do nearly anything, and her smallish hands would be perfect for surgery. She often practiced dexterity by playing with a deck of cards, and over the past few months she'd become expert at dealing seconds. She'd showed him what she was doing and how, but even then, watching closely, he couldn't see her do it, which had amazed and annoyed her husband. Her motor-control nerves must be incredible, Domingo thought proudly, pounding into the third mile of the run. This was when you began to feel it, because in mile three your legs were thinking that they'd gone pretty far already, and maybe slowing down would be nice. At least that was true for Ding. Two members of the team ran marathons, and as far as he'd been able to tell, those two, Loiselle and Weber, respectively the smallest and largest members of the team, *never* got tired. The German especially, graduate of the Bundeswehr mountain warfare school, and holder of the Bergermeister badge, was about the toughest son of a bitch he'd ever met—and Chavez thought of himself as a tough little son of a bitch. Loiselle was just like a little damned rabbit, moving along with grace and invisible power.

Ten more minutes, Chavez thought, his legs starting to complain to him, but not allowing any of it to show, his face set in a calm, determined mien, almost bored as his feet pounded on the cinders of the track. Team-1 was running, too, opposite them on the track, and fortunately neither team raced the other. They did record their times for the run, but direct competition would have forced all of the Rainbow troopers into a destructive regimen that would only

produce injuries—and enough of those happened from routine training, though Team-2 was fully mission-capable at the moment, with all injuries healed.

"Detail . . . quick-time, march!" Pierce finally called, as they completed the morning jaunt. Another fifty meters and they halted.

"Well, people, good morning. I hope you all enjoyed waking up for another day of safeguarding the world from the bad guys," Pierce told them, sweat on his smiling face. "Major Chavez," he said next, walking back to his usual place in the ranks.

"Okay, gentlemen, that was a good workout. Thank you, Sergeant Pierce, for leading the run this morning. Showers and breakfast, troops. Fall out." With that command the two ranks of five each disintegrated, the men heading off to their building to shower off the sweat. A few of them worked legs or arms a little for some exercise-induced cricks. The endorphins had kicked in, the body's own reward for exertion, creating the "runner's high," as some called it, which would mellow in a few minutes to the wonderful sense of well-being that they'd enjoy for the rest of the morning. Already they were chatting back and forth about various things, professional and not.

An English breakfast was much the same as an American one: bacon, eggs, toast, coffee—English breakfast tea for some—fuel for the coming day. Some of the troopers ate light, and some ate heavy, in accordance with their personal metabolic rates. By this time, all were in their day uniforms, ready to head off to their desks. Tim Noonan would be giving a lecture today on communications security. The new radios from E-Systems hardly needed the introduction, but Noonan wanted them to know everything about them, including how the encryption systems worked. Now the team members could talk back and forth, and anyone trying to listen in would hear only the hiss of static. The same had been true before, but the new portable radios, with their headsets and reed-thin microphones that hung out in front of their faces, were a great technical improvement, Noonan had told Chavez. Then Bill Tawney would brief them on any new developments in the intelligence and investigations on their three field deployments. After that came the before-lunch trip to the range for marksmanship practice, but today no live-fire/ live-target exercise. Instead they'd practice long-rope deployments from Malloy's helicopter.

It promised to be a full, if routine, day for Rainbow. Chavez almost added "boring" to the description, but he knew that John worked hard to vary the routine, and, besides, you practiced the fundamentals, because they were, well, fundamental to getting the job done, the things you held on to when the tactical situation went to shit and you didn't have the time to think about what to do. By this time, every Team-2 member knew how every other member thought, and so, on exercises where the actual scenario was different from the tactical intelligence they'd been given going in, somehow the team members just adapted, sometimes without words, every trooper knowing what his partner and the others in the team would do, as if they'd communicated by telepathy. That was the reward for the intensive, intellectually boring training. Team-2, and Peter Covington's Team-1, had evolved into living, thinking organisms whose parts just acted properly—and seemed to do so

automatically. When Chavez thought about it, he found it remarkable, but on training exercises, it seemed as natural as breathing. Like Mike Pierce leaping over the desk in Worldpark. That hadn't been part of the training regimen, but he'd done it, and done it perfectly, and the only thing wrong was that his first burst hadn't taken his subject in the head, but instead had stitched down his back—causing wounds that would have been rapidly fatal—then followed it with a second burst that had blown the bastard's head apart. Boom. Zap. Splatter. And the other team members had trusted Pierce to cover his sector, and then, after cleansing it of opposition, to assist with others. Like the fingers of his hand, Chavez thought, able to form into a deadly fist, but also able to do separate tasks, because each finger had a brain. And they were all his men. That was the best part of all.

Getting the weapons was the easiest part. It struck outsiders as comical—Irishmen with guns were like squirrels with nuts, always stashing them, and sometimes forgetting where the hell they'd been stashed. For a generation, people had shipped arms to the IRA, and the IRA had cached them, mainly burying them for the coming time when the entire Irish nation would rise up under Provo leadership and engage the English invaders, driving them forever from the sacred soil of Ireland . . . or something like that, Grady thought. He'd personally buried over three thousand weapons, most of them Russian-made AKMS assault rifles, like this stash in a farm field in County Tipperary. He'd buried this shipment forty meters west of a large oak tree, over the hill from the farmhouse. They were two meters—six feet—down, deep enough that the farmer's tractor wouldn't hurt or accidentally unearth them, and shallow enough that getting them took only an hour's spadework. There were a hundred of them, delivered in 1984 by a helpful soul he'd first met in Lebanon, along with pre-loaded plastic magazines, twenty per rifle. It was all in a series of boxes, the weapons and the ammunition wrapped in greased paper, the way the Russians did it, to protect them against moisture. Most of the wrappings were still intact, Grady saw, as he selected carefully. He removed twenty weapons, tearing open each one's paper to check for rust or corrosion, working the bolts back and forth, and in every case finding that the packing grease was intact, the same as when the weapons had left the factory at Kazan. The AKMS was the updated version of the AK-47, and these were the folding-stock version, which were much easier to conceal than the full-size military shoulder weapon. More to the point, this was the weapon his people had trained on in Lebanon. It was easy to use, reliable, and concealable. Those characteristics made it perfect for the purpose intended. The fifteen he took, along with three hundred thirty-round magazines, were loaded into the back of the truck, and then it was time to refill the hole. After three hours, the truck was on its way to yet another farm, this one on the seacoast of County Cork, where there lived a farmer with whom Sean Grady had an arrangement.

Sullivan and Chatham were in the office before seven in the morning, beating the traffic and finding decent parking places for once. The first order of business was to use a computerized crisscross directory to track down the names and addresses from the phone numbers. That was quick. Next up was to

meet with the three men who were reported to have known Mary Bannister and Anne Pretloe and interview them. It was possible that one of them was a serial killer or kidnapper. If the first, he would probably be a very clever and circumspect criminal. A serial killer was a hunter of human beings. The smart ones acted strangely like soldiers, first scouting out their victims, discerning their habits and weaknesses, and then moving in to use them as entertaining toys until the fun faded, and it was time to kill them. The homicide aspects of a serial killer's activities were not, strictly speaking, in the purview of the FBI, but the kidnapping was, if the killer had moved his victims across state lines, and since there was a state line only a few hundred yards from Manhattan, that was enough to allow the agents to look into it. They'd have to ask their questions carefully, and remember that a serial killer almost always had an elegant disguise, the better to win the trust of his victims. He'd be kind, maybe handsome, friendly, and totally nonthreatening—until it was too late, and at that point his victim was doomed. He was, both agents knew, the most dangerous of criminals.

Subject F4 was progressing rapidly. Neither the Interferon nor the Interleukin-3a had touched her Shiva strands, which were replicating with gusto, and in her case attacking her liver with ferocious speed. The same was true of her pancreas, which was disintegrating, causing a serious internal bleed. Strange, Dr. Killgore thought. The Shiva had taken its time to assert itself, but then once it had started affecting the test subject's body, it had gone to town, eating away like a glutton at a feast. Mary Bannister, he decided, had about five days left.

M7, Chip Smitton, was little better off. His immune system was doing its best, but Shiva was just too malignant for him, working more slowly than in F4, but just as inexorably.

F5, Anne Pretloe, was from the deep end of the gene pool. He'd bothered to take full medical histories of all the current crop of test subjects. Bannister had a family history of cancer—breast cancer had claimed her mother and grandmother, and he saw that Shiva was working rapidly in her. Might there be a correlation between vulnerability to cancer and infectious disease? Could that indicate that cancer was fundamentally a disease of the immune system, as many physician-scientists suspected? It was the stuff of a paper for the *New England Journal of Medicine,* might get himself some additional standing in his community—but he didn't have the time, and anyway, by the time he published, there'd be few to read it. Well, it would be something to talk about in Kansas, because they'd still be practicing medicine there, and still working on the Immortality Project. Most of Horizon's best medical researchers were not really part of the Project, but they couldn't kill *them,* could they? And so, like many others, they'd find themselves beneficiaries of the Project's largesse. They would be allowing far more people than necessary to live—oh, sure, they needed the genetic diversity, and why not pick smart people who'd eventually understand why the Project had done what it had? And even if they didn't, what choice would they have but to live? All of them were earmarked for the -B vaccine Steve Berg had developed along with the lethal -A variant. In any case, his speculation had scientific value, even though it was singularly useless

for the test subjects who now filled every available room in the treatment area. Killgore gathered his notes and started rounds, beginning with F4, Mary Bannister.

Only the heavy morphine dose made life tolerable for her. The dosage might have killed a healthy person, and would have been enough to delight the most hardened IV-drug user.

"How are we feeling this morning?" the doctor asked brightly.

"Tired . . . weak . . . crummy," Mary Bannister replied.

"How's the pain, Mary?"

"It's there, but not so bad . . . mainly my stomach." Her face was deathly pale from the internal bleeding, and the petechiae were sufficiently prominent on her face that she couldn't be allowed to use a mirror, lest the sight panic her. They wanted all the subjects to die comfortably. It would be far less trouble for everyone that way—a kindness not shown to other test subjects, Killgore thought. It wasn't fair, but it was practical. The lower animals they tested didn't have the capacity to make trouble, and there were no useful data on how to medicate them against pain. Maybe he'd develop some in Kansas. That would be a worthy use of his abilities, he thought, as he made another upward adjustment in F4's morphine drip . . . just enough to . . . yes, make her stuporous. He could show her the mercy he would have liked to have shown rhesus monkeys. Would they do animal experimentation in Kansas? There would be practical difficulties. Getting the animals to the labs would be very difficult in the absence of international air-freight service, and then there was the aesthetic issue. Many of the project members would not approve, and they had a point. But, damn it, it was *hard* to develop drugs and treatment modalities without *some* animal testing. Yes, Killgore thought, leaving one treatment room for another, it was tough on the conscience, but scientific progress had a price, and they *were* saving literally millions of animals, weren't they? They'd needed thousands of animals to develop Shiva, and nobody had really objected to that. Another subject for discussion at the staff conference, he decided, entering M7's room.

"How are we feeling, Chip?" he asked.

They collectively thanked Providence for the lack of Garda in this part of County Cork. There was little crime, after all, and therefore little reason for them. The Irish national police were as efficient as their British colleagues, and their intelligence section unfortunately cooperated with the "Five" people in London, but neither service had managed to find Sean Grady—at least not after he'd identified and eliminated the informers in his cell. Both of them had vanished from the face of the earth and fed the salmon, or whatever fish liked the taste of informer flesh. Grady remembered the looks on their faces as they protested their innocence right up until the moment they'd been thrown into the sea, fifteen miles offshore, with iron weights on their legs. Protested their innocence? Then why had the SAS never troubled his cell again after three serious attempts to eliminate them all? Innocence be damned.

They had half-filled a delightful provincial pub called The Foggy Dew, named after a favored rebel song, after several hours of weapons practice on the isolated coastal farm, which was too far from civilization for people to

hear the distinctive chatter of automatic-weapons fire. It had required a few magazines each for his men to reassert their expertise with the AKMS assault rifles, but shoulder weapons were easily mastered, and that one more easily than most. Now they talked about nonbusiness matters, just a bunch of friends having a few pints. Most watched the football game on the wall-hung telly. Grady did the same, but with his brain in neutral, letting it slide over the next mission, examining and reexamining the scene in his mind, thinking about how quickly the British or this new Rainbow group might arrive. The direction of their approach was obvious. He had that all planned for, and the more he went over his operational concept, the better he seemed to like it. He might well lose some people, but that was the cost of doing business for the revolutionary, and looking around the pub at his people, he knew that they accepted the risks just as readily as he did.

He checked his watch, subtracted five hours, and reached into his pocket to turn on his cell phone. He did this three times per day, never leaving it on for more than ten minutes at a time, as a security measure. He had to be careful. Only that knowledge—and some luck, he admitted to himself—had allowed him to carry on the war this long. Two minutes later, it rang. Grady rose from his seat and walked outside to take the call.

"Hello."

"Sean, this is Joe."

"Hello, Joe," Grady said pleasantly. "How are things in Switzerland?"

"Actually, I'm in New York at the moment. I just wanted to tell you that the business thing we talked about, the financing, it's done," Popov told him.

"Excellent. What of the other matter, Joe?"

"I'll be bringing that myself. I'll be over in two days. I'm flying into Shannon on my business jet. I should get in about six-thirty in the morning."

"I shall be there to see you," Grady promised.

"Okay, my friend. I will see you then."

"Good-bye, Joe."

"Bye, Sean." And the line went dead. Grady thumbed off the power and replaced the phone in his pocket. If anyone had overheard it—not likely, since he could see all the way to the horizon, and there were no parked trucks in evidence . . . and, besides, if anyone knew where he was, they would have come after him and his men with a platoon of soldiers and/or police—all they would have heard was a business chat, brief, cryptic, and to the point. He went back inside.

"Who was it, Sean?" Roddy Sands asked.

"That was Joe," Grady replied. "He's done what we asked. So, I suppose we get to move forward as well."

"Indeed." Roddy hoisted his pint glass in salute.

The Security Service, once called MI (Military Intelligence) 5, had lived for more than a generation with two high-profile missions. One was to keep track of Soviet penetration agents within the British government—a regrettably busy mission, since the KGB and its antecedents had more than once penetrated British security. At one point, they'd almost gotten their agent-in-place Kim Philby in charge of "Five," thus nearly giving the Soviets control of

the British counterintelligence service, a miscue that still sent a collective shiver throughout “Five.” The second mission was the penetration of the Irish Republican Army and other Irish terrorist groups, the better to identify their leaders and eliminate them, for this war was fought by the old rules. Sometimes, police were called in to make arrests, and other times, SAS commandos were deployed to handle things more directly. The differences in technique had resulted from the inability of Her Majesty’s Government to decide if the “Irish Problem” was a matter of crime or national security—the result of that indecision had been the lengthening of “The Troubles” by at least a decade, in the view of the American FBI.

But the employees of “Five” didn’t have the ability to make policy. That was done by elected officials, who often as not failed to listen to the trained experts who’d spent their lives handling such matters. Without the ability to make or affect policy, they soldiered on, assembling and maintaining voluminous records of known and suspected IRA operatives for eventual action by other government agencies.

This was done mainly by recruiting informers. Informing on one’s comrades was another old Irish tradition, and one that the British had long exploited for their own ends. They speculated on its origins. Part of it, they all thought, was religion. The IRA regarded itself as the protector of *Catholic* Irishmen, and with that identification came a price: the rules and ethics of Catholicism often spilled over into the hearts and minds of people who killed in the name of their religious affiliation. One of the things that spilled over was guilt. On the one hand, guilt was an inevitable result of their revolutionary activity, and on the other hand, it was the one thing they could not afford to entertain in their own consciences.

“Five” had a thick file on Sean Grady, as they did for many others. Grady’s was special, though, since they’d once had a particularly well-placed informer in his unit who had, unfortunately, disappeared, doubtless murdered by him. They knew that Grady had given up kneecapping early on and chosen murder as a more permanent way of dealing with security leaks, and one that never left bodies about for the police to find. “Five” had twenty-three informants currently working in various PIRA units. Four were women of looser morality than was usual in Ireland. The other nineteen were men who’d been recruited one way or another—though three of them didn’t know that they were sharing secrets with British agents. The Security Service did its collective best to protect them, and more than a few had been taken to England after their usefulness had been exhausted, then flown to Canada, usually, for a new, safer life. But in the main “Five” treated them as assets to be milked for as long as possible, because the majority of them were people who’d killed or assisted others in killing, and that made them both criminals and traitors, whose consciences had been just a little too late to encourage much in the way of sympathy from the case officers who “worked” them.

Grady, the current file said, had fallen off the face of the earth. It was possible, some supposed, that he’d been killed by a rival, but probably not, as that bit of news would have percolated through the PIRA leadership. Grady was respected even by his factional enemies in the Movement as a True Believer in the Cause and an effective operator who had killed more than his

fair share of cops and soldiers in Londonderry. And the Security Service still wanted him for the three SAS troopers he'd somehow captured, tortured, and killed. Those bodies had been recovered, and the collective rage in SAS hadn't gone away, for the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment never forgave and never forgot such things. Killing, perhaps, but never torture.

Cyril Holt, Deputy Director of the Security Service, was doing his quarterly review of the major case files, and stopped when he got to Grady's. He'd disappeared from the scope entirely. If he'd died, Holt would have heard about it. It was also possible that he'd given up the fight, seen that his parent organization was finally ready to negotiate some sort of peace, and decided to play along by terminating his operations. But Holt and his people didn't believe that either. The psychological profile that had been drawn up by the chief of psychiatry at Guy's Hospital in London said that he'd be one of the last to set the gun down and look for a peaceful occupation.

The third possibility was that he was still lurking out there, maybe in Ulster, maybe in the Republic . . . more probably the latter, because "Five" had most of its informants in the North. Holt looked at the photos of Grady and his collection of twenty or so PIRA "soldiers," for whom there were also files. None of the pictures were very good despite the computer enhancement. He had to assume he was still active, leading his militant PIRA faction somehow, planning operations that might or might not come off, but meanwhile keeping a low profile with the cover identities he had to have generated. All he could do was keep a watch on them. Holt made a brief notation, closed the file, placed it on his out pile and selected another. By the following day, the notations would be placed into the "Five" computer, which was slowly supplanting the paper files, but which Holt didn't like to use. He preferred files he could hold in his hands.

"That quickly?" Popov asked.

"Why not?" Brightling responded.

"As you say, sir. And the cocaine?" he added distastefully.

"The suitcase is packed. Ten pounds in medically pure compounding condition from our own stores. The bag will be on the plane."

Popov didn't like the idea of transporting drugs at all. It wasn't a case of sudden morality, but simply concern about customs officials and luggage-sniffing dogs. Brightling saw the worry on his face, and smiled.

"Relax, Dmitriy. If there is any problem, you're transporting the stuff to our subsidiary in Dublin. You'll have documents to that effect. Just try to make sure you don't need to use them. It could be embarrassing."

"As you say." Popov allowed himself to be relieved. He'd be flying a chartered Gulfstream V private business jet this time, because bringing the drugs through a real airport on a real international flight was just a little too dangerous. European countries tended to give casual treatment to arriving Americans, whose main objective was to spend their dollars, not cause trouble, but everyone had dogs now, because every country in the world worried about narcotics.

"Tonight?"

Brightling nodded and checked his watch. "The plane'll be at Teterboro

Airport. Be there at six."

Popov left and caught a cab back to his apartment. Packing wasn't difficult but thinking was. Brightling was violating the most rudimentary security considerations here. Chartering a private business jet linked his corporation with Popov for the first time, as did the protective documentation attached to the cocaine. There was no effort to cut Popov loose from his employer. Perhaps that meant that Brightling didn't trust his employee's loyalty, didn't trust that if arrested he would keep his mouth shut . . . but, no, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought. If he wasn't trusted, then the mission would not be undertaken. Popov had always been the link between Brightling and the terrorists.

So, the Russian thought, *he* does *trust me.* But he was also violating security . . . and that could only mean that in Brightling's mind security didn't matter. Why—*how* could it not matter? Perhaps Brightling planned to have him eliminated? That was a possibility, but he didn't think so. Brightling was ruthless, but not sufficiently clever—rather, too clever. He would have to consider the possibility that Popov had left a written record somewhere, that his death would trigger the unveiling of his own part in the exploits. So he could discount that, the Russian thought.

Then what?

The former intelligence officer looked in the mirror at a face that still didn't know what it needed to know. From the beginning, he'd been seduced by money. He'd turned into a hired agent of sorts, motivated by personal gain—the "M" of MICE—but was working for someone for whom money had no importance. Even CIA, rich as it had always been, measured the money it gave out to its agents. The American intelligence service paid a hundred times better than its Russian counterpart, but even *that* had to be justified, because CIA had accountants who ruled the field officers as the Czar's courtiers and bureaucrats had once ruled over the smallest village. Popov knew from his research that Horizon Corporation had a huge amount of money, but one did not become wealthy from profligacy. In a capitalist society, one became wealthy by cleverness, perhaps ruthlessness, but not by stupidity, and throwing money about as Brightling did was stupid.

So, what is it? Dmitriy wondered, moving away from the mirror and packing his bag.

Whatever he's planning, whatever his reason for these terrorist incidents—is close at hand?

That did make a little sense. You concealed as long as you had to, but when you no longer had to, then you didn't waste the effort. It was an amateur's move, though. An amateur, even a gifted one like Brightling, didn't know, hadn't learned from bitter institutional experience that you *never* broke tradecraft, even *after* an operation had been successfully concluded, because even then your enemy might find things out that he could use against you in your next one . . .

. . . *unless there is not to be a next one?* Dmitriy thought, as he selected his underwear. *Is this the last operation to be run? No,* he corrected himself, *is this the last operation which* I *need to run?*

He ran through it again. The operations had grown in magnitude, until now

he was transporting *cocaine* to make a terrorist happy, *after* helping transfer *six million* dollars! To make the drug smuggling easier, he would have documentation to justify the drug shipment from one branch of a major corporation to another, tying himself and the drugs to Brightling's company. Perhaps his false ID would hold up if the police showed interest in him—well, they would almost certainly hold up, unless the Garda had a direct line into MI-5, which was not likely, and neither was it likely that the British Security Service had his cover name, or even a photo, good or bad—and besides, he'd changed his haircut ages ago.

No, Popov decided as he finished packing, the only thing that made sense was that this was the last operation. Brightling would be closing things down. To Popov that meant that this was his last chance to cash in. And so he found himself hoping that Grady and his band of murderers would come to as shabby an end as all the others in Bern and Vienna—and even Spain, though he'd had no part in that one. He had the number and control code for the new Swiss account, and in that was enough money to support him for the rest of his life. All he needed to happen was for the Rainbow team to kill them off, and then he could disappear forever. With that hopeful thought in his mind, Popov went outside and flagged a cab to take him to Teterboro Airport.

He'd think about it all the way across the Atlantic.

CHAPTER 27

TRANSFER AGENTS

"It really is a waste of time," Barbara Archer said at her seat in the conference room. "F4 is dead, just her heart's still beating. We've tried everything. Nothing stops Shiva. Not a damned thing."

"Except the -B vaccine antibodies," Killgore noted.

"Except them," Archer agreed. "But nothing else works, does it?"

There was agreement around the table. They had literally tried every treatment modality known to medicine, including things merely speculated upon at CDC, USAMRIID, and the Pasteur Institute in Paris. They'd even tried every antibiotic in the arsenal from penicillin to Keflex, and two new synthetics under experimentation by Merck and Horizon. The use of the antibiotics had merely been t-crossing and i-dotting, since not one of them helped viral infections, but in desperate times people tried desperate measures, and perhaps something new and unexpected might have happened —

—but not with Shiva. This new and improved version of Ebola hemorrhagic fever, genetically engineered to be hardier than the naturally produced version that still haunted the Congo River Valley, was as close to 100 percent fatal and 100 percent resistant to treatment as anything known to medical science, and absent a landmark breakthrough in infectious-disease treatment, nothing would help those exposed to it. Many would suffer exposure from the initial release, and the rest would get it from the -A vaccine Steve Berg had developed, and through both modalities, Shiva would sweep across the world like a slow-developing storm. Inside of six months, the people left alive would fall into three categories. First, those who hadn't been exposed in any way. There would be few of them, since every nation on earth would gobble up supplies of the -A vaccine and inject their citizens with it, because the first Shiva victims would horrify any human with access to a television. The second group would be those rarest of people whose immune systems were sufficient to protect them from Shiva. The lab had yet to discover any such individuals, but some would inevitably be out there—happily, most of those would probably die from the collapse of social services in the cities and towns of the world, mainly from starvation or from the panicked lawlessness sure to accompany the plague or from the ordinary bacterial diseases that accompanied large numbers of unburied dead.

The third group would be the few thousand people in Kansas. Project Lifeboat, as they thought of it. That group would be composed of active Project members—just a few hundred of them—and their families, and other selected scientists protected by Berg's -B vaccine. The Kansas facility was

large, isolated, and protected by large quantities of weapons, should any unwelcome visitors approach.

Six months, they thought. Twenty-seven weeks. That's what the computer projections told them. Some areas would go faster than others. The models suggested that Africa would go last of all, because they'd be the last to get the -A vaccine distributed, and because of the poor infrastructure for delivering vital services. Europe would go down first, with its socialized medical-care systems and pliant citizens sure to show up for their shots when summoned, then America, then, in due course, the rest of the world.

"The whole world, just like that," Killgore observed, looking out the windows at the New York/New Jersey border area, with its rolling hills and green deciduous trees. The great farms on the plains that ran from Canada to Texas would go fallow, though some would grow wild wheat for centuries to come. The bison would expand rapidly from their enclaves in Yellowstone and private game farms, and with them the wolves and barren-ground grizzly bear, and the birds, and the coyotes and the prairie dogs. Nature would restore Her balance very quickly, the computer models told them; in less than five years, the entire earth would be transformed.

"Yes, John," Barb Archer agreed. "But we're not there yet. What do we do with the test subjects?"

Killgore knew what she'd be suggesting. Archer hated clinical medicine. "F4 first?"

"It's a waste of air to keep her breathing, and we all know it. They're all in pain, and we're not learning anything except that Shiva is lethal—and we already knew that. Plus, we're going to be moving out west in a few weeks, and why keep them alive that long? We're not moving them out with us, are we?"

"Well, no," another physician admitted.

"Okay, I am tired of wasting my time as a clinician for dead people. I move that we do what we have to do, and be done with it."

"Second," agreed another scientist at the table.

"In favor?" Killgore asked, counting the hands. "Opposed." Only two of those. "The ayes have it. Okay. Barbara and I will take care of it—today, Barb?"

"Why wait, John?" Archer inquired tiredly.

"Kirk Maclean?" Agent Sullivan asked.

"That's right," the man said from behind the door.

"FBI." Sullivan held up his ID. "Can we talk to you?"

"About what?" The usual alarm, the agents saw.

"Do we have to stand in the hall to talk?" Sullivan asked reasonably.

"Oh, okay, sure, come in." Maclean stepped back and opened the door to let them in, then led them into his living room. The TV was on, some cable movie, the agents saw. Kung fu and guns mostly, it appeared.

"I'm Tom Sullivan, and this is Frank Chatham. We're looking into the disappearance of two women," the senior agent said, after sitting down. "We're hoping that you might be able to help us."

"Sure—you mean, like they were kidnapped or something?" the man asked.

"That is a possibility. Their names are Anne Pretloe and Mary Bannister. Some people have told us that you might have known one or both of them," Chatham said next.

They watched Maclean close his eyes, then look off to the window for a few seconds. "From the Turtle Inn, maybe?"

"Is that where you met them?"

"Hey, guys, I meet a lot of girls, y'know? That's a good place for it, with the music and all. Got pictures?"

"Here." Chatham handed them across.

"Okay, yeah, I remember Annie—never learned her last name," he explained. "Legal secretary, isn't she?"

"That's correct," Sullivan confirmed. "How well did you know her?"

"We danced some, talked some, had a few drinks, but I never dated her."

"Ever leave the bar with her, take a walk, anything like that?"

"I think I walked her home once. Her apartment was just a few blocks away, right? . . . Yeah," he remembered after a few seconds. "Half a block off Columbus Avenue. I walked her home—but, hey, I didn't go inside—I mean we never—I mean, I didn't, well—you know, I never did have sex with her." He appeared embarrassed.

"Do you know if she had any other friends?" Chatham asked, taking interview notes.

"Yeah, there was a guy she was tight with, Jim something. Accountant, I think. I don't know how tight they were, but when the two of them were at the bar, they'd usually have drinks together. The other one, I remember the face, but not the name. Maybe we talked some, but I don't remember much. Hey, you know, it's a singles bar, and you meet lotsa people, and sometimes you connect, but mainly you don't."

"Phone numbers?"

"Not from these two. I have two from other gals I met there. Want 'em?" Maclean asked.

"Did they know Mary Bannister or Anne Pretloe?" Sullivan asked.

"Maybe. The women connect better than the men do, y'know, little cliques, like, checking us out—like the guys do, but they're better organized, like, y'know?"

There were more questions, about half an hour's worth, some repeated a few times, which Maclean didn't seem to mind, as some did. Finally they asked if they could look around the apartment. They had no legal right to do this, but oddly, even criminals often allowed it, and more than one of them had been caught because they'd had evidence out in plain view. In this case the agents would be looking for periodicals with photographs of deviant sex practices or even personal photographs of such behavior. But when Maclean led them about, the only photos they saw were of animals and periodicals about nature and conservation—some of them from groups the FBI deemed to be extremist—and all manner of outdoors gear.

"Hiker?" Chatham asked.

"Love it in the backcountry," Maclean confirmed. "What I need is a gal who likes it, too, but you don't find many of those in this town."

"Guess not." Sullivan handed over his card. "If you think of anything, please

call me right away. My home number's on the back. Thanks for your help."

"Not sure I helped very much," the man observed.

"Every little bit, as they say. See you," Sullivan said, shaking his hand.

Maclean closed the door behind them and let out a long breath. How the *fuck* had they gotten his name and address? The questions were everything he would have expected, and he'd thought about the answers often enough—but a long time ago, he told himself. Why now? Were the cops dumb, or slow, or what?

"Whole lot of nothing," Chatham said, as they got to their car.

"Well, maybe the women he gave us can tell us something."

"I doubt it. I talked to the second one last night at the bar."

"Go back to her. Ask her what she thinks of Maclean," Sullivan suggested.

"Okay, Tom. That I can do. You get any vibes off the guy? I didn't," Chatham said.

Sullivan shook his head. "No, but I haven't learned to read minds yet."

Chatham nodded. "Right."

• • •

It was time, and there was no point in delaying it. Barbara Archer unlocked the medication cabinet with her keys and took out ten ampoules of potassium-saline solution. These went into her pockets. Outside F4's treatment room, she filled a 50cc syringe, then opened the door.

"Hello." Mainly a groan from the patient, who was lying in bed and watching the wall-mounted TV listlessly.

"Hello, Mary. How are we feeling?" Archer suddenly wondered why it was that physicians asked how *we* were feeling. An odd linguistic nuance, she told herself, learned in medical school, probably, maybe to establish solidarity with the patient—which hardly existed in this case. One of her first summer jobs in college had been working at a dog pound. The animals had been given seven days, and if nobody claimed them, they were euthanized—*murdered,* as she thought of it, mainly with heavy doses of phenobarbital. The injection always went into the left foreleg, she remembered, and the dogs just went to sleep in five seconds or so. She'd always cried afterward—it had always been done on Tuesday, right before lunch, she recalled, and she'd never eaten lunch afterward, sometimes not even supper if she'd been forced to terminate a particularly cute dog. They'd lined them up on stainless-steel treatment tables, and another employee had held them still to make the murders easier. She'd always talk soothingly to the dogs, to lessen their fear and so give them an easier death. Archer bit her lip, feeling rather like Adolf Eichmann must have —well, should have, anyway.

"Pretty rotten," Mary Bannister replied finally.

"Well, this will help," Archer promised, pulling the syringe out and thumbing off the plastic safety cover from the needle. She took the three steps to the left side of the bed, reached for F4's arm, and held it still, then pushed

the needle into the vein inside the elbow. Then she looked into F4's eyes and slid the plunger in.

Mary's eyes went wide. The potassium solution seared the veins as it moved through them. Her right hand flew to the upper left arm, and then, a second later, to her upper chest, as the burning sensation moved rapidly to her heart. The potassium stopped the heart at once. The EKG machine next to the bed had shown fairly normal sinus rhythm, but now the moving line jumped once and went totally flat, setting off the alarm beeper. Somehow Mary's eyes remained open, for the brain has enough oxygen for up to a minute's activity even after the heart stops delivering blood. There was shock there. F4 couldn't speak, couldn't object, because her breathing had stopped along with her heart, but she looked straight into Archer's eyes . . . rather as the dog had done, the doctor thought, though the dog's eyes had never seemed to accuse her as these two did. Archer returned the look, no emotion at all in her face, unlike her time at the pound. Then, in less than a minute, F4's eyes closed, and then she was dead. One down. Nine more to go, before Dr. Archer could go to her car and drive home. She hoped her VCR had worked properly. She'd wanted to tape the Discovery Channel's show on the wolves in Yellowstone, but figuring the damned machine out sometimes drove her crazy.

Thirty minutes later, the bodies were wrapped in plastic and wheeled to the incinerator. It was a special model designed for medical applications, the destruction of disposable biological material such as fetuses or amputated limbs. Fueled by natural gas, it reached an extremely high temperature, even destroying tooth fillings, and converted all to an ash so fine that prevailing winds lifted it into the stratosphere, and then carried it out to sea. The treatment rooms would be scrubbed down so that there would be no lingering Shiva presence, and for the first time in months the facility would have no virus strands actively looking for hosts to feed upon and kill. The Project members would be pleased by that, Archer thought on her drive home. Shiva was a useful tool for their objective, but sufficiently creepy that they'd all be glad when it was gone.

Popov managed five hours of sleep on the trip across and was awakened when the flight attendant shook his shoulder twenty minutes out of Shannon. The former seaplane facility where Pan American's Boeing-made clippers had landed before flying on to Southampton—and where the airline had invented Irish coffee to help the passengers wake up—was on the West Coast of Ireland, surrounded by farms and green wetlands that seemed to glisten in the light of dawn. Popov washed up in the lavatory, and retook his seat for the arrival. The touchdown was smooth, and the roll-out brief as the aircraft approached the general aviation terminal, where a few other business jets sat, similar to the G-V that Horizon Corporation had chartered for him. Barely had it stopped when a dingy official car approached the aircraft, and a man in uniform got out to jump up the stairs. The pilot waved the man to the back.

"Welcome to Shannon, sir," the immigration official said. "May I see your passport, please?"

"Here." Popov handed it across.

The bureaucrat thumbed through it. "Ah, you've been here recently. The

purpose of your trip, sir?"

"Business. Pharmaceuticals," the Russian added, in case the immigration official wanted to open his bags.

"Mm-hmm," the man responded, without a shred of interest. He stamped the passport and handed it back. "Anything to declare?"

"Not really."

"Very well. Have a pleasant time, sir." The smile was as mechanical as his movement forward, then he left to go down the steps to his car.

Popov didn't so much sigh in relief as grumble at his tension, which had clearly been wasted. Who would charter such an aircraft for $100,000 to smuggle drugs, after all? Something else to learn about capitalism, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich told himself. If you had enough money to travel like a prince, then you *couldn't* be outside the law. Amazing, he thought. He put on his overcoat and walked out of the aircraft, where a black Jaguar was waiting, his bags already loaded into the boot.

"Mr. Serov?" the driver asked, holding the door open. There was enough noise out here that he didn't have to worry about being overheard.

"That's right. Off to see Sean?"

"Yes, sir."

Popov nodded and got into the back. A minute later, they were heading off the airport grounds. The country roads were like those in England, narrower than those in America—and he was still driving on the wrong side of the road. How strange, Popov thought. If the Irish didn't like the English, then why did they emulate their driving patterns?

The ride took half an hour, and ended in a farmhouse well off the main roads. Two cars were there and a van, with one man standing outside to keep watch. Popov recognized him. It was Roddy Sands, the cautious one of this unit.

Dmitriy got out and looked at him, without shaking hands. He took the black drug-filled suitcase from the boot and walked in.

"Good morning, Iosef," Grady said in greeting. "How was your flight?"

"Comfortable." Popov handed the bag over. "This is what you requested, Sean."

The tone of voice was clear in its meaning. Grady looked his guest in the eye, a little embarrassment on his face. "I don't like it, either, but one must have money to support operations, and this is a means of getting it." The ten pounds of cocaine had a variable value. It had cost Horizon Corporation a mere $25,000, having bought it on the market that was open to drug companies. Diluted, on the street, it would be worth five hundred times that. Such was another aspect of capitalism, Popov thought, dismissing it now that the transfer had been made. Then he handed over a slip of paper.

"That is the account number and activation code for the secure account in Switzerland. You can only make withdrawals on Monday and Wednesday as an added security measure. The account has in it six million dollars of United States currency. The amount in the account can be checked at any time," Popov told him.

"A pleasure to do business with you, as always, Joe," Sean said, allowing himself a rare smile. He'd never had so much as a tenth of that much money

under his control, for all his twenty-plus years as a professional revolutionary. Well, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought, they weren't businessmen, were they?

"When will you move?"

"Very soon. We've checked out the objective, and our plan is a thing of beauty, my friend. We will sting them, Iosef Andreyevich," Grady promised. "We will hurt them badly."

"I will need to know when, exactly. There are things I must do as well," Popov told him.

That stopped him, Dmitriy saw. The issue here was operational security. An outsider wanted to know things that only insiders should have knowledge of. Two sets of eyes stared at each other for a few seconds. But the Irishman relented. Once he verified that the money was in place, then his trust in the Russian was confirmed—and delivery of the ten pounds of white powder was proof of the fact in and of itself—assuming that he wasn't arrested by the Garda later this day. But Popov wasn't that sort, was he?

"The day after tomorrow. The operation will commence at one in the afternoon, exactly."

"So soon?"

Grady was pleased that the Russian had underestimated him. "Why delay? We have everything we need, now that the money is in place."

"As you say, Sean. Do you require anything else of me?"

"No."

"Then I will be off, with your permission."

This time they shook hands. "Daniel will drive you—to Dublin?"

"Correct, the airport there."

"Tell him, and he will take you."

"Thank you, Sean—and good luck. Perhaps we will meet afterwards," Dmitriy added.

"I would like that."

Popov gave him a last look—sure that it would be the last, despite what he'd just said. Grady's eyes were animated now, thinking about a revolutionary demonstration that would be the capstone of his career. There was a cruelty there that Popov had not noted before. Like Fürchtner and Dortmund, this was a predatory animal rather than a human being, and, as much experience as he'd had with such people, Popov found himself troubled by it. He was supposed to be skilled at reading minds, but in this one he saw only emptiness, only the absence of human feelings, replaced by ideology that led him—where? Did Grady know? Probably not. He thought himself on the path to some Radiant Future—the term most favored by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—but the light that beckoned him was far more distant than he realized, and its bright glow hid the holes in the road immediately before him. And truly, Popov thought on, were he ever to achieve that which he wanted, then he'd be a disaster as a ruler of men, like those he resembled—Stalin, Mao, and the rest—so divorced from the common man's outlook as to be an alien, for whom life and death were mere tools to achieve his vision, not something of humanity at all. Of all the things Karl Marx had given the world, surely that outlook was the worst. Sean Grady had replaced his humanity and emotions with a geometrically precise model of what the world should be—

and he was too wedded to that vision to take note of the fact that it had failed wherever it had been tried. His pursuit was one after a chimera, a creature not real, never quite within reach, but drawing him onward to his own destruction—and as many others as he might kill first. And his eyes sparkled now in his enthusiasm for the chase. His ideological soundness denied him the ability to see the world as it really was—as even the Russians had come to see, finally, after seventy years of following the same chimera. Sparkling eyes serving a blind master, how strange, the Russian thought, turning to leave.

"Okay, Peter, you have the duty," Chavez told his Team-1 counterpart. As of now Team-1 was the go-team, and Team-2 was on standby/standdown, and back into the more intensive training regimen.

"As you say, Ding," Covington replied. "But nothing seems to be happening anywhere."

The intelligence that had been passed on to them from the various national agencies was actually rather encouraging. Informants who'd chatted with known or suspected terrorists—mostly the latter, since the more active ones would have been arrested—reported back that the Worldpark incident had chilled the atmosphere considerably, especially since the French had finally published the names and photos of the known terrorists who'd been killed in Spain, and one of them, it had turned out, had been a revered and respected former member of Action Directe, with six known murders to his credit and something of a reputation as an expert operator. His public destruction had rumbled through the community, along with greatly increased respect for the Spanish police, which was basking institutionally in the glow of Rainbow's deeds, to the great discomfort of Basque terrorists, who, Spanish sources reported, were also somewhat chastened by the loss of some of their most respected members.

If this was true, Bill Tawney's summary document suggested, then Rainbow was indeed having the effect that had been hoped for when it had been formed. Maybe this meant that they wouldn't have to move into the field and kill people as frequently to prove their mettle.

But there was still nothing to suggest why there had been three such incidents so close in time, or who, if anyone, might have instigated them. The British Secret Intelligence Service's analysis section called it random, pointing out that Switzerland, Germany, and Spain were different countries, and that it was unlikely that anyone had contacts in the underground groups in all three of them. Two of them, perhaps, but not all three. It also suggested that contacts be made with former East Bloc intelligence services, to check out what was happening with certain retired members. It might even be worth buying their information for the going price, which was rather high now that the former intelligence officers had to make a real living in the real world—but not as high as the cost of an incident in which people got hurt. Tawney had highlighted that when he passed it on to John Clark, and the latter had discussed it with Langley again, only to be rebuffed again, which had Rainbow Six grumbling all week about the REMFs at CIA headquarters. Tawney thought about suggesting it to the London headquarters of "Six" on his own hook, but without the positive endorsement of CIA, it would have been wasted effort.

On the other hand, Rainbow *did* seem to be working. Even Clark admitted that, unhappy though he continued to be, he was a "suit" working behind a desk and sending younger men off to do the exciting stuff. For much of his career as an intelligence officer, John had grumbled at oversight from above. Now that he was doing it, he thought that maybe he understood it a little better. Being in command might be rewarding, but it could never be much fun for someone who'd been out in the weeds, dodging the fire and involved in the things that happened out at the sharp end. The idea that he knew how it was done and could therefore tell people how to do it was as unpopular a stance for him to take as it had been . . . for him to accept, as recently as five years earlier. Life was a trap, Clark told himself, and the only way out of the trap wasn't much fun either. So, he donned his suitcoat every morning and grumbled at the effect age had on his life, just like every other man of his age did across the planet. Where had his youth gone? How had he lost it?

Popov arrived at Dublin Airport before lunch. There he purchased a ticket to Gatwick for the hour's flight back to England. He found himself missing the G-V business jet. A very convenient way to travel, liberating from the bustle of the airports. It rode every bit as well as a jumbo jet—but he'd never have enough money to permit him to indulge himself that much, and so he struck the thought from his mind. He'd have to settle for mere first-class travel, the Russian grumbled to himself, sipping some wine as the 737 climbed to cruising altitude. Now, again, he had some thinking to do, and he'd found that the solitary time in the first-class cabin of an aircraft helped.

Did he want Grady to succeed? More to the point, did his employer want Grady to succeed? It hadn't seemed so for Bern and Vienna, but was this a different matter? Maybe Henriksen thought so. He'd given Popov that impression in their discussions. Was there a difference? If so, what was it?

Henriksen was former FBI. Perhaps that explained it. Like Popov, he wouldn't court failure in anything. Or did he really want this Rainbow group damaged to the point that it couldn't—couldn't what? Interfere with some operation?

Again the brick wall, and again Popov struck his head against it. He'd started two terrorist operations, and the only purpose for them he could discern was to raise the international consciousness about terrorism. Henriksen had an international consulting company in that area, and Henriksen wanted the consciousness raised so that he could win contracts—but on the surface it seemed an expensive and inefficient way of doing it, Popov reflected. Certainly the money to be gained from the contracts won would be less than the money Popov had already expended—or pocketed. And again he reminded himself that the money had come from John Brightling and his Horizon Corporation—perhaps from Brightling himself—*not* Henriksen's Global Security, Inc. So, the two companies were related in their objectives, but not in their financial support.

Therefore, Popov thought, sipping his French Chablis, the operation is entirely Brightling's doing, with Henriksen as a support service, providing expertise and advice—

—*but,* one objective was to get Henriksen the consulting contract for the

Sydney Olympics, to start in only a few weeks. That had been very important to *both* Brightling *and* Henriksen. Therefore, Henriksen was doing something of great importance to Brightling, doubtless in support of the latter's goal, whatever the hell that was.

But what did Brightling and his company do? Horizon Corporation and all of its numerous international subsidiaries were in the business of medical research. The company manufactured medicines, and spent a huge amount of money every year to invent new ones. It was a world leader in the field of medical research. It had Nobel Prize winners working in its labs, and, his Internet research had determined, it was working in some very exciting areas of potential medical advancement. Popov shook his head again. What did genetic engineering and pharmaceutical manufacturing have to do with terrorism?

The lightbulb that went off over the Irish Sea reminded him that only a relatively few months before, America had been attacked with biological warfare. It had killed about five thousand people, and incurred the lethal wrath of the United States and her president. The dossier he'd been given said that the chief of this Rainbow group, Clark, and his son-in-law, Chavez, had played a quiet but very dramatic role in concluding that bloody little war.

Bio-war, Popov thought. It had given the entire world a reason to shudder. In the event it had proven to be an ineffective weapon of statecraft—especially since America had reacted with her customary speed and furious effectiveness on the battlefields of Saudi Arabia. As a result, no nation-state today dared even to contemplate an attack on America. Its armed forces strode the world like a frontier sheriff in a Western movie, respected and, more to the point, feared for their lethal capabilities.

Popov finished his wine, and fingered the empty glass in his hand as he looked down at the approaching green coastline of England. Bio-war. It had made the whole world shiver in fear and disgust. Horizon Corporation was deeply into cutting-edge research in medical science. So, surely, Brightling's business could well be involved with biological-warfare research—but to what possible end? Besides, it was a mere *corporation,* not a nation-state. It had no foreign policy. It had nothing to gain from warlike activities. Corporations didn't make war, except, perhaps, on other corporations. They might try to steal trade secrets, but actually shed blood? Of course not. Again, Popov told himself, he had merely found a blank hard wall to smash his head against.

"Okay," Sergeant Major Dick Voss told them. "First of all, the sound quality of these digital radios is so good that you can recognize voices just like a regular conversation in a living room. Second, the radios are coded so that if you have two different teams operating in the field, one team comes in the left ear, and the other team comes in the right ear. That's to keep the commander from getting too confused," he explained, to the amusement of the Australian NCOs. "This gives you more positive control of your operations, and it keeps everybody informed on what's going on. The more you people know, the more effective you will be in the field. You can adjust volume on this dial here—" He showed them the knob on the microphone root.

"What's the range?" a senior Aussie NCO asked.

"Up to ten miles, or fifteen thousand meters, a little longer if you have line of sight. After that, it breaks up some. The batteries are rechargeable, and every set comes with two spares. The batteries will hold their charge for about six months in the spare holders you have, but we recommend recharging them every week. No big deal, the charger comes with every set, and it has a universal plug set. It'll fit into a wall socket here, or anyplace else in the world. You just play with the little fucker until you get the right plug pattern here—" He demonstrated. Most of the people in the room looked at theirs for a few seconds. "Okay, people, let's put them on and try them out. Power on / off switch is here. . . ."

"Fifteen kilometers, eh?" Malloy asked.

"Right," Noonan said. "This way you can listen to what we're doing on the ground, instead of waiting to be told. It fits inside your aircraft headset and shouldn't interfere much with what you need to get over your intercom. This little switch can be attached, and the control button goes down your sleeve into your hand, so you can flip it on or off. It also has a listen-only mode. That's the third position here."

"Slick," Sergeant Nance observed. "Be nice to know what's happening on the ground."

"Damned right. If you ground-pounders need an evac, I'll be halfway in before you make the call. I like it," Colonel Malloy noted. "I guess we'll keep it, Tim."

"It's still experimental. E-Systems says there may be a few bugs in it, but nobody's found them yet. The encryption system is state-of-the-art 128-bit continuous, synchronized off the master set, but hierarchicalized so that if a set goes down, another automatically takes that function over. The boys and girls at Fort Meade can probably crack it, but only twelve hours after you use it."

"Any problem with being inside an aircraft—interference with any of the onboard systems?" Lieutenant Harrison asked.

"Not that we know of. It's been tested on Night Hawks and Stalkers at Fort Bragg, no problems discovered."

"Let's check that one out," Malloy said at once. He'd learned not to trust electronics—and besides, it was a perfectly good excuse to take their Night Hawk off the ground. "Sergeant Nance, head out to the bird."

"You bet, Colonel." The sergeant stood and moved toward the door.

"Tim, you stay here. We'll try it inside and outside, and get a range check, too."

Thirty minutes later, the Night Hawk was circling around Hereford.

"How's this, Noonan?"

"Loud and clear, Bear."

"Okay, good, we're about, oh, eleven clicks out, and you are coming through like Rush Limbaugh across the street. These digital radios work nice, don't they?"

"Yep." Noonan got in his car, and confirmed that the metal cage around him had no effect on performance. It turned out that the radios continued to work at over eighteen kilometers, or eleven miles, which wasn't bad, they thought,

for something with a battery the size of two quarters and an antenna half again the length of a toothpick. “This’ll make your long-rope deployments go smoother, Bear.”

“How so, Noonan?”

“Well, the guys on the end of the rope’ll be able to tell you when you’re a little high or low.”

“Noonan,” came the irate reply, “what do you think depth perception is for?”

“Roger that, Bear,” the FBI agent laughed.

CHAPTER 28

BROAD DAYLIGHT

The money made it far easier. Instead of stealing trucks, they could buy them with cashier's checks drawn from an account set up by a person with false identification papers, who'd also been wearing a disguise at the time. The trucks were large Swedish-made Volvo commercial vehicles, straight or nonarticulated trucks with canvas covers over the load area that proclaimed the names of nonexistent businesses.

The trucks came across the Irish Sea to Liverpool on commercial ferries, their interiors laden with cardboard cartons for refrigerators, and passed through British customs with no trouble, and from there it was just a matter of driving within the legal limit on the motorways. The trucks traveled in close formation through the West Country, and arrived near Hereford just before dusk. There, at a prearranged point, they all parked. The drivers dismounted at the local equivalent of a truck stop and headed for a pub.

Sean Grady and Roddy Sands had flown in the same day. They'd passed through customs/immigration control at Gatwick with false papers that had stood the test of time on numerous previous occasions, and again proved to their satisfaction that British immigration officers were blind as well as deaf and dumb. Both of them rented cars with false credit cards and drove west to Hereford, also along preplanned routes, and arrived at the same pub soon before the arriving trucks.

"Any problems?" Grady asked the Barry twins.

"None," Sam replied, accompanied by a nod from Peter. As always, the members of his unit made a show of sangfroid, despite the pre-mission jitters they all had to have. Soon everyone was there, and two groups, one of seven and one of eight, sat in booths, sipping their Guinness and chatting quietly, their presence not a matter of interest to pub regulars.

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"They work pretty good," Malloy told Noonan, over a pint in the club. "E-Systems, eh?"

"Pretty good outfit. We used a lot of their hardware at HRT."

The Marine nodded. "Yeah, same thing in Special Operations Command. But I still prefer things with control wires and cables."

"Well, yeah, Colonel, sir, but kinda hard to do two paper cups and string out of a chopper, ain't it?"

"I ain't that backward, Tim." But it was good enough for a grin. "And I ain't never needed help doing a long-wire deployment."

"You are pretty good at it." Noonan sipped at his beer. "How long you been flying choppers?"

"Twenty years—twenty-one come next October. You know, it's the last real flying left. The new fast-movers, hell, computers take a vote on whether they like what you're doing 'fore they decide to do it for you. I play with computers, games and e-mail and such, but damned if I'll *ever* let them fly for me." It was an empty boast, or nearly so, Noonan thought. Sooner or later, that form of progress would come to rotary-wing aircraft, too, and the drivers would bitch, but then they'd accept it as they had to, and move on, and probably be safer and more effective as a result. "Waiting for a letter from my detailer right now," the colonel added.

"Oh? What for?"

"I'm in the running for CO of VMH-1."

"Flying the president around?"

Malloy nodded. "Hank Goodman's got the job now, but he made star and so they're moving him up to something else. And somebody, I guess, heard that I'm pretty good with a stick."

"Not too shabby," Noonan said.

"Boring, though, straight and level all the time, no fun stuff," the Marine allowed, with a show of false distaste. Flying in VMH-1 was an honor for a captain, and command of it was the Corps' way of showing confidence in his abilities. "I ought to know in another two weeks. Be nice to see some Redskins games in person again."

"What's up for tomorrow?"

"Right before lunch, practice low-level insertion, paperwork in the afternoon. I have to do a ton of it for the Air Force. Well, they own the damned aircraft, and they are nice about maintaining it and giving me a good flight crew. I bet airliner pilots don't have to do this, though." Those lucky bastards just had to fly, though their brand of flying was about as exciting as a paint-drying race, or maybe a grass-growing marathon.

Chavez hadn't yet gotten used to British humor, and as a result the series television on the local stations mainly bored him. He did have cable service, however, and that included The History Channel, which had become his favorite, if not Patsy's.

"Just one, Ding," she told him. Now that she was close to delivery time, she wanted her husband sober at all times, and that meant only one beer per night.

"Yes, honey." It was so easy for women to push men around, Domingo thought, looking at the nearly empty glass and feeling like another. It was great to sip beer in the club and discuss business matters in a comfortable, informal setting, and generally bond with his people—but right now he was going no farther than fifty feet from his wife, except when he had to, and she had his beeper number when they were apart. The baby had dropped, whatever that meant—well, he knew it meant that delivery was imminent, but not what "dropped" signified. And now it meant that he could only have one

beer per night, though he could be stone sober with three . . . maybe even four. . . .

They sat in side-by-side easy chairs. Ding was trying both to watch TV and read intelligence documents. It was something he seemed able to do, to the amazed annoyance of his wife, who was reading a medical journal and making some marginal notes on the glossy paper.

• • •

It wasn't terribly different at the Clark home, though here a movie cassette was tucked into the VCR and was playing away.

"Anything new at the office?" Sandy asked.

At the office, John thought. She hadn't said that when he'd come back from out in the field. No, then it had been "Are you okay?" Always asked with a tinge of concern, because, though he'd never—well, almost never—told her about the things he did in the field, Sandy knew that it was a little different from sitting at a desk. So, this was just one more confirmation that he was a REMF. *Thanks, honey,* he thought. "No, not really," he said. "How about the hospital?"

"A car accident right after lunch. Nothing major."

"How's Patsy doing?"

"She'll be a pretty good doc when she learns to relax a little more. But, well, I've been doing ER for twenty-some years, right? She knows more than I do in the theoretical area, but she needs to learn the practical side a little better. But, you know, she's coming along pretty well."

"Ever think you might have been a doc?" her husband asked.

"I suppose I could have, but—wasn't the right time back then, was it?"

"How about the baby?"

That made Sandy smile. "Just like I was, impatient. You get to that point and you just want it to happen and be done with it."

"Any worries?"

"No, Dr. Reynolds is pretty good, and Patsy is doing just fine. I'm just not sure I'm ready to be a grandma yet," Sandy added with a laugh.

"I know what you mean, babe. Any time, eh?"

"The baby dropped yesterday. That means he's pretty ready."

" 'He'?" John asked.

"That's what everybody seems to think, but we'll find out when it pops out."

John grumbled. Domingo had insisted that it *had to be* a son, handsome as his father was—and bilingual, *jefe,* he'd always added with that sly Latino grin. Well, he could have gotten worse as a son-in-law. Ding was smart, about the fastest learner he'd ever stumbled across, having risen from young staff sergeant 11-Bravo light-infantryman, U.S. Army, to a respected field intelligence officer in CIA, with a master's degree from George Mason University . . . and now he occasionally mused about going another two years for his Ph.D. Maybe from Oxford, Ding had speculated earlier in the week, if he could arrange the off-time to make it possible. Wouldn't that be a kick in

the ass—an East L.A. Chicano with a hood from Oxford University! He might end up DCI someday, and *then* he would really be intolerable. John chuckled, sipped his Guinness, and returned his attention to the television.

Popov told himself that he had to watch. He was in London again, checked into a medium-class hotel made from a bunch of row houses strung together and renovated. This one he had to see. It would be a first for a terrorist operation. They had a real plan, albeit suggested by Bill Henriksen, but Grady had jumped on the idea, and it certainly seemed a tactically sound concept, as long as they knew when to end it and run away. In any case, Dmitriy wanted to see it happen, the better to know if he could then call the bank and recode the money into his own account and then . . . disappear from the face of the earth whenever he wished. It hadn't occurred to Grady that there were at least *two* people who could access the funds transferred. Perhaps Sean was a trusting soul, Popov thought, odd as that proposition sounded. He'd accepted the contact from his former KGB friend readily, and though he'd posed two major tests, the money and the cocaine, once they'd been delivered he'd stood right up to take the action promised. That was remarkable, now that Popov allowed himself to think about it. But he'd take his rented Jaguar saloon car to go and watch. It ought not to be overly hard, he thought, nor overly dangerous if he did it right. With that thought he tossed off his last Stolichnaya of the night and flipped off the light.

• • •

They woke up at the same time that morning. Domingo and Patricia in one home, and John and Sandra in another, opened their eyes at 5:30 when their alarms went off, and both couples adjusted their routine to the schedule of the day. The women had to be at the local hospital at 6:45 for the beginning of their 7:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. day shift in the emergency room, and so in both homes, the womenfolk got the bathroom first, while the men padded into the kitchen to feed the coffee machine and flip it on, then collect the morning papers from the front step, and turn the radios on to the BBC for the morning news. Twenty minutes later, the bathrooms and newspapers were exchanged, and fifteen minutes after that, the two couples sat down in the kitchen for breakfasts—though in Domingo's case, just a second cup of coffee, as he customarily breakfasted with his people after morning PT. In the Clark home, Sandy was experimenting with fried tomatoes, a local delicacy that she was trying to learn, but which her husband utterly rejected on principle as an American citizen. By 6:20, it was time for the women to dress in their respective uniforms, and for the men to do the same, and soon thereafter all left their homes to begin their different daily activities.

Clark didn't work out with the teams. He was, he'd finally admitted to himself, too old to sustain the full grind, but he showed up at roughly the same place and did roughly the same daily exercise. It wasn't very different from his time

as a SEAL, though without the lengthy swim—there was a pool here, but it wasn't large enough to suit him. Instead, he ran for three miles. The teams did five, though . . . and, he admitted shamefully to himself, at a faster pace. For a man of his years, John Clark knew himself to be in superb physical shape, but keeping himself there got harder every day, and the next major milestone on his personal road to death had the number sixty on it. It seemed so very odd that he was no longer the young pissand-vinegar guy he'd been when he'd married Sandy. It seemed as if someone had robbed him of something, but if it had happened, he'd never noticed it. It was just that one day he'd looked around and found himself different from what he'd thought himself to be. Not an agreeable surprise at all, he told himself, finishing his three miles, sweating over sore legs and needing his second shower of the day.

On the walk to headquarters, he saw Alistair Stanley setting out for his own morning exercise routine. Al was younger than he by five years and probably still had the illusion of youth. They'd become good friends. Stanley had the instincts, especially for intelligence information, and was an effective field operator in his oddly laid-back British way. Like a spiderhole, John thought, Stanley didn't appear to be much of anything until you looked at his eyes, and even then you had to know what to look for. Good-looking, rakish sort, blond hair still and a toothy smile, but like John he'd killed in the field, and like John he didn't have nightmares about it. In truth he had better instincts as a commander than Clark did, the latter admitted to himself—but only to himself. Both men were still as competitive as they'd been in their twenties, and neither gave praise away for free.

Finished with his shower, Clark walked to his office, sat down at his desk, and went over the morning paperwork, cursing it quietly for the time it required, and all the thought that had to go into such wasteful items as budgeting. Right in his desk drawer was his Beretta .45, proof that he wasn't just one more civil servant, but today he wouldn't have time to walk over to the range to practice the martial skills that had made him the commander of Rainbow—a position that ironically denied him the ability to prove he belonged. Mrs. Foorgate arrived just after eight, looked into her boss's office, and saw the frown she always saw when he was doing administrative work, as opposed to going over intelligence information or operational matters, which at least he appeared to find interesting. She came in to start his coffee machine, got the usual morning greeting-grunt, then returned to her desk, and checked the secure fax machine for anything that might have to go to the boss at once. There was nothing. Another day had started at Hereford.

• • •

Grady and his people were awake as well. They went through their breakfast routine of tea and eggs and bacon and toast, for the typical Irish breakfast was little different from the English. In fact, the countries were little different in any of their fundamental habits, a fact Grady and his people did not reflect upon. Both were polite societies, and extremely hospitable to visitors. Citizens in both countries smiled at one another, worked fairly hard at their jobs,

largely watched the same TV, read the same sports pages, and played mainly the same sports, which in both countries were true national passions—and drank similar quantities of similar beers in pubs that could have easily been in one nation as another, down to the painted signs and names that identified them.

But they attended different churches, and had different accents—seemingly so similar to outsiders—that sounded totally different to each of them. An ear for such things remained an important part of daily life, but global television was changing that slowly. A visitor from fifty years earlier would have noted the many Americanisms that had crept into the common language, but the process had been so gradual that those living through it took little note of the fact. It was a situation common to countries with revolutionary movements. The differences were small to outside observers, but all the more magnified to those who advocated change, to the point that Grady and his people saw English similarities merely as camouflage that made their operations convenient, not as commonalties that might have drawn their nations closer. People with whom they might have shared a pint and a discussion of a particularly good football match were as alien to them as men from Mars, and therefore easy to kill. They were things, not "mates," and as crazy as that might have appeared to an objective third party, it was sufficiently inculcated into them that they took no more note of it than they did of the air on this clear, blue morning, as they moved to their trucks and cars, preparing for the day's mission.

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At 10:30 A.M. Chavez and his team moved to the indoor range for marksmanship practice. Dave Woods was there, and had set the boxes of ammunition in the proper places for the Team-2 members. As before, Chavez decided to work on his pistol rather than the easier-to-use MP-10, which anyone with two functioning eyes and one working trigger finger could shoot well. As a result, he turned in the 10mm ammunition and swapped it for two boxes of .45ACP, U.S.-made Federal "Hydra-Shok" premium ammo, with a huge hollowpoint in which one could nearly mix a drink, or so it seemed when you looked into them.

Lieutenant Colonel Malloy and his flight crew, Lieutenant Harrison and Sergeant Nance, walked in just as Team-2 started. They were armed with the standard American-military-issue Beretta M9, and fired full-metal jacket 9-mm rounds as required by the Hague Convention—America had never signed the international treaty detailing what was proper and what was not on the battlefield, but America lived by the rules anyway. The special-operations people of Rainbow used different, more effective ammo, on the principle that they were not *on* a battlefield, but were, rather, engaging *criminals* who did not merit the solicitude accorded better-organized and -uniformed enemies. Anyone who thought about the issue found it slightly mad, but they knew that there was no hard-and-fast rule requiring the world to make sense, and shot

the rounds they were issued. In the case of the Rainbow troopers, it was no less than a hundred rounds per day. Malloy and his crew got to shoot perhaps fifty rounds per week, but they weren't supposed to be shooters, and their presence here was merely a matter of courtesy. As it happened, Malloy was an excellent shot, though he fired his pistol one-handed in the manner once taught by the U.S. military. Harrison and Nance used the more modern Weaver stance, both hands on the weapons. Malloy also missed the .45 of his youth, but the American armed services had gone to the smaller-diameter round to make the NATO countries happy, even though it made much smaller holes in the people whom you were supposed to shoot.

The girl was named Fiona. She was just about to turn five years old and had fallen off a swing at her day-care center. The wood chips there had scratched her skin, but it was also feared that she might have broken the radius in her left forearm. Sandy Clark held the arm while the child cried. Very slowly and carefully, she manipulated it, and the intensity of the child's tears didn't change. This wasn't broken . . . well, possibly a very minor green-stick fracture, but probably not even that.

"Let's get an X ray," Patsy said, handing over a grape sucker to the kid. It worked as well in England as it did in America. The tears stopped as she used her good right arm and teeth to rip off the plastic, then stuck the thing into her cute little mouth. Sandy used wetted gauze to clean off the arm. No need for stitches, just a few nasty scrapes that she'd paint with antiseptic and cover with two large Band-Aids.

This ER wasn't as busy as its American counterparts. For one thing, it was in the country, and there was less opportunity for a major injury—they'd had a farmer the previous week who'd come close to ripping his arm off with a farm implement, but Sandy and Patsy had been off-duty then. There were fewer severe auto accidents than in a comparable American area, because the Brits, despite their narrow roads and looser speed limits, seemed to drive more safely than Americans, a fact that had both of the American medics scratching their heads. All in all, duty here was fairly civilized. The hospital was overstaffed by American standards, and that made everyone's workload on the easy side of reasonable, somewhat to the surprise of both Americans. Ten minutes later, Patsy looked over the X ray and saw that the bones of Fiona's forearm were just fine. Thirty minutes after that, she was on her way back to day care, where it was time for lunch. Patsy sat down at her desk and went back to reading the latest issue of *The Lancet,* while her mother returned to her stand-up desk and chatted with a colleague. Both perversely wished for more work to do, though that meant pain for someone they didn't know. Sandy Clark remarked to her English friend that she hadn't seen a gunshot wound in her whole time in England. In her Williamsburg, Virginia, hospital they'd been almost a daily occurrence, a fact that somewhat horrified her colleagues but was just part of the landscape for an American ER nurse.

Hereford wasn't exactly a sleepy community, but the vehicular traffic didn't make it a bustling metropolis either. Grady was in his rented car, following the trucks to the objective, and going more slowly than usual, here in the far-

left lane, because he'd anticipated thicker traffic and therefore a longer trip in terms of time. He could have moved off at a faster clip, and therefore started the mission earlier, but he was a methodical sort, and once his plan was drafted, he tended to stick to it almost slavishly. That way, everyone knew what had to happen and when, which made operational sense. For the unexpected, every team member carried a cellular phone with speed-dial settings for every other member. Sean figured they were almost as good as the tactical radios the soldiers carried.

There was the hospital. It sat at the bottom of a shallow slope. The parking lot didn't seem to be very crowded. Maybe there weren't many patients in their beds, or maybe the visitors were off having lunch before coming back to see their loved ones.

Dmitriy pulled his rental car over to the side of the through-road and stopped. He was half a kilometer or so from the hospital, and from the top of this hill, he could see two sides, the front and the side entrance for the hospital's emergency room. He switched the motor off after lowering the power windows and waited to see what would happen next. On the backseat he had an inexpensive set of 7×35 binoculars purchased at an airport shop, and he decided to get them out. Next to him on the seat was his cellular phone, should he need it. He saw three heavy trucks pull up and stop close to the hospital in positions far nearer than his, but, like his spot, able to cover the front and the emergency side entrance.

It was then that Popov had a random thought. Why not call that Clark fellow at Hereford and warn him of what was to happen? *He,* Popov, didn't want these people to survive the afternoon, did he? If they didn't, then he'd have that five-million-plus American dollars, and *then* he could disappear from the face of the earth. The islands of the Caribbean appealed to him; he'd gone over some travel brochures. They'd have some British amenities—honest police, pubs, cordial people—plus a quiet, unhurried life, yet were close enough to America that he could travel there to manage his funds in whatever investment scheme he opted for . . .

But . . . no. There was the off chance that Grady would get away from this one, and he didn't want to risk being hunted by that intense and vicious Irishman. No, it was better that he let this play out without his interference, and so he sat in the car, binoculars in his lap, listening to classical music on one of the regular BBC radio stations.

Grady got out of his Jaguar. He opened the boot, withdrew his parcel, and pocketed the keys. Timothy O'Neil dismounted his vehicle—he'd chosen a small van—and stood still, waiting for the other five men to join him. This they did after a few minutes. Timmy lifted his cell phone and thumbed the number-one speed-dial setting. A hundred yards away, Grady's phone started chirping.

"Yes?"

"We are ready here, Sean."

"Go on, then. We're ready here as well. Good luck, lad."

"Very well, we are moving in now."

O'Neil was wearing the brown coveralls of a package deliveryman. He walked toward the hospital's side entrance carrying a large cardboard box, followed by four other men in civilian clothes carrying boxes similar in size, but not in color.

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Popov looked into his rearview mirror in annoyance. A police car was pulling over to the side of the road, and a few seconds later, a constable got out and walked to his car.

"Having a problem, sir?" the cop asked.

"Oh, no, not really—that is, I called the rental company, and they're sending someone out, you see."

"What went wrong?" the policeman asked.

"Not sure. The motor started running badly, and I thought it a good idea to pull over and shut it off. Anyway," the Russian repeated, "I called into the company, and they're sending someone to sort it out."

"Ah, very good, then." The police constable stretched, and it seemed as though he'd pulled over as much to get some fresh air as to render assistance to a stranded motorist. The timing, Popov thought, could have been better.

"Can I help you?" the desk clerk said.

"I have a delivery for Dr. Chavez, and Nurse"—he looked down at the slip of paper on the box, which seemed to him a clever bit of acting—"Clark. Are they in this afternoon?" Timmy O'Neil asked.

"I'll fetch them," the clerk said helpfully, heading back into the work area.

The IRA soldier's hand slid along the inside of the lid, ready to flip the box open. He turned and nodded to the other four, who waited politely in line behind him. O'Neil thumbed his nose, and one of them—his name was Jimmy Carr—walked back outside. There was a police car there, a Range Rover, white with an orange stripe down the side. The policeman inside was eating a sandwich, taking lunch at a convenient place, in what American cops sometimes called "cooping," just killing time when nothing was going on. He saw the man standing outside the casualty-receive entrance holding what looked like a flower box. Several others had just gone inside holding similar boxes, but this was a hospital, and people gave flowers to those inside of them . . . Even so . . . the man with the large white box was staring at his police automobile, as people often did. The cop looked back at him, mainly in curiosity, though his cop instincts were beginning to light up.

"I'm Dr. Chavez," Patsy said. She was almost as tall as he was, O'Neil saw, and very pregnant beneath her starched white lab coat. "You have something for me?"

"Yes, doctor, I do." Then another woman approached, and the resemblance was striking from the first moment he saw the two of them. They had to be mother and daughter . . . and that meant that it was time.

O'Neil flipped the top off the box and instantly extracted the AKMS rifle. He was looking down at it and missed the wide-eyed shock on the faces of the two women in front of him. His right hand withdrew one of the magazines and slapped it home into the weapon. Then he changed hands and let his right hand take hold of the pistol grip while his left slapped the bolt back into the battery position. The entire exercise hadn't lasted two seconds.

Patsy and Sandy froze, as people usually did when suddenly confronted with weapons. Their eyes were wide and faces shocked. To their left, someone screamed. Behind this deliveryman, three others now held identical weapons, and faced outward, aiming at the others in the reception area, and a routine day in the Emergency Room changed to something very different.

Outside, Carr popped open his box, smiling as he aimed it at the police car only twenty feet away.

The engine was running, and the cop's first instinct was to get clear and report in. His left hand slipped the selector into reverse, and his foot slammed down on the accelerator, causing the car to jolt backward.

Carr's response was automatic. The weapon up, bolt back, he aimed and pulled the trigger, firing fifteen rounds into the automobile's windscreen. The result was immediate. The Rover had been moving backward in a fairly straight line, but the moment the bullets started hitting, it swerved right, and ended up against the brick wall of the hospital. There it stopped, the pressure off the accelerator now. Carr sprinted over and looked inside to see that there was one less police constable in the world, and that, to him, was no great loss.

"What's that?" It was the helpful roadside cop rather than Popov who asked the rhetorical question. It was rhetorical because automatic-weapons fire is not something to be mistaken for anything else. His head turned, and he saw the police car—an identical twin to his own—scream backward, then stop, and then a man walked up to it, looked, and walked away. "Bloody hell!"

Dmitriy Arkadeyevich sat still, now watching the cop who'd come to his unneeded assistance. The man ran back to his vehicle, reached inside and pulled out a radio microphone. Popov couldn't hear what was said, but, then, he didn't need to.

"We've got them, Sean," O'Neil's voice told him. Grady acknowledged the information, thumbed the end button and speed-dialed Peter Barry's cell phone.

"Yes?"

"Timothy has them. The situation appears to be under control."

"Okay." And this call ended. Then Sean speed-dialed yet another number. "Hello, this is Patrick Casey. We have seized the Hereford community hospital. We are currently holding as hostages Dr. Chavez and Nurse Clark, plus numerous others. We will release our hostages if our demands are met. If they are not met, then it will be necessary for us to kill hostages until such time as you see the error of your ways. We require the release of all political prisoners held in Albany and Parkhurst prisons on the Isle of Wight. When they are released and seen to be released on the television, we will leave this area. Do

you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," the desk sergeant replied. He didn't, but he had a tape of this call, and he'd forward the information to someone who would understand.

Carr took the casualty-receiving entrance; the Barry twins, Peter and Sam, walked through the inside of the building to the main entrance. Here things were somewhat chaotic. Carr's initial fusillade hadn't been heard clearly here, and most of the people had turned their heads to the rough direction of the noise, and on seeing nothing, had turned back to attend to their business. The hospital's security guard, a man of fifty-five who was wearing something that looked like a police uniform, was heading for the door into the hospital proper when he saw the twins coming toward him with weapons in hand. The retired policeman managed to say, "What's all this?"—the usual words of a British constable—before a jerk of one rifle muzzle convinced him to raise his hands and shut up. Sam grabbed his collar and shoved him back into the main lobby. There, people saw the weapons. Some screamed. A few made for the doors, and all of them got outside without being fired upon, since the Barry twins had enough to do already.

The police constable's radio call from the side of the road generated a greater response than Grady's phone call, especially with the report that a constable had been shot and probably killed in his car. The first reaction of the local superintendent was to summon all of his mobile units to the general area of the hospital. Only about half of them had firearms, and those were mainly Smith & Wesson revolvers—not nearly enough to deal with the reported use of machine guns. The death of the constable was established when an officer who had been parked near the hospital failed to report in, despite numerous calls over the police radio.

Every police station in the world has preset responses for various emergencies. This one had a folder labeled "Terrorism," and the superintendent pulled it out, even though he had the contents memorized, just to make sure he didn't forget anything. The top emergency number went to a desk in the Home Office, and he reported what little he knew to the senior civil servant there, adding that he was working to get more information and would report back.

The Home Office headquarters building, close to Buckingham Palace, housed the bureaucrats who had oversight over nearly every aspect of life in the British Isles. That included law enforcement, and in that building, too, was a procedures folder, which was pulled from its slot. In this one was a new page and a new number.

"Four-two-double-three," Alice Foorgate said, on picking up the phone. This was the line used exclusively for important voice traffic.

"Mr. Clark, please."

"Yes. Wait, please."

"Mr. Clark, a call on double-three," she said into the intercom.

"This is John Clark," Rainbox Six said, lifting the receiver.

"This is Frederick Callaway at the Home Office. We have a possible emergency situation," the civil servant said.

"Okay, where is it?"

"Just up the road from you, I'm afraid, the Hereford hospital. The voice which called in identified itself as Patrick Casey. That is a codename that the PIRA use to designate their operations."

"Hereford Hospital?" John asked, his hand suddenly cold on the phone.

"That is correct."

"Hold for a second. I want to get one of my people on this line." John put his hand over the receiver. "Alice! Get Alistair on this one right now!"

"Yes, John?"

"Mr. Callaway, this is Alistair Stanley, my second-in-command. Please repeat what you just told me."

He did so, then added, "The voice identified two hostages by name, a Nurse Clark, and a Dr. Chavez."

"Oh, shit," John breathed.

"I'll get Peter's team moving, John," Stanley said.

"Right. Anything else, Mr. Callaway?"

"That is all we have now. The local police superintendent is attempting to gather more information at this time."

"Okay, thank you. You can reach me at this number if you need me." Clark replaced the receiver in its cradle. "Fuck," he said quietly.

His mind was racing. Whoever had scouted out Rainbow had done so for a reason, and those two names had not been an accident. This was a direct challenge to him and his people—and they were using his wife and daughter as a weapon. His next thought was that he would have to pass command over to Al Stanley, and the next—that his wife and daughter were in mortal danger . . . and he was helpless.

"Christ," Major Peter Covington muttered over his phone. "Yes, sir. Let me get moving here." He stood and walked into his squad bay. "Attention, we have some business. Everyone get ready to move immediately."

Team-1's members stood and headed to their lockers. It didn't seem like a drill, but they handled it as though it were. Master Chief Mike Chin was the first to be suited up. He came to see his boss, who was just putting on his body armor.

"What gives, skipper?"

"PIRA, local hospital, holding Clark's and Ding's wives as hostages."

"What's that?" Chin asked, blinking his eyes hard.

"You heard me, Mike."

"Oh, shit. Okay." Chin went back into the squad bay. "Saddle up, people, this ain't no fuckin' drill."

Malloy had just sprinted to his Night Hawk. Sergeant Nance was already there, pulling red-flagged safety pins from their plug points and holding them up for the pilot to confirm the count.

"Looking good, let's start 'er up, Lieutenant."

"Turning one," Harrison confirmed, as Sergeant Nance reboarded the aircraft and strapped on his move-around safety belt, then shifted to the left-

side door to check the tail of the Night Hawk.

"Tail rotor is clear, Colonel."

Malloy acknowledged that information as he watched his engine instruments spooling up. Then he keyed his radio again. "Command, this is Bear, we are turnin' and burnin'. What do you want us to do, over?"

"Bear, this is Five," Stanley's voice came back, to Malloy's surprise. "Lift off and orbit the local hospital. That is the site of the current incident."

"Say again, Five, over."

"Bear, we have subjects holding the local hospital. They are holding Mrs. Clark and Mrs. Chavez as hostages. They've identified both of them by name. Your orders are to lift off and orbit the hospital."

"Roger, copy that. Bear is lifting off now." His left hand pulled the collective, climbing the Sikorsky into the sky.

"Did I hear that right, Colonel?" Harrison asked.

"You must have. Fuck," the Marine observed. Somebody was grabbing the tiger by the balls, Malloy thought. He looked down to see a pair of trucks speeding off the base, heading in the same direction as he. That would be Covington and Team-1, he thought. With a little more reflection, he took the Night Hawk to four thousand feet, called the local air-traffic-control center to tell them what he was doing, and got a transponder code so that they could track him properly.

There were four police vehicles there now, blocking the access to the hospital parking lots but doing nothing else, Popov saw through his binoculars. The constables inside were just looking, all standing outside their cars, two of them holding revolvers but not pointing them at anything but the ground.

In one truck, Covington relayed the information he had. In the other, Chin did it. The troopers were as shocked as they had ever allowed themselves to be, having considered themselves and their families to be *ipso facto* immune to this sort of thing because nobody had *ever* been foolish enough to try something like this. You might walk up to a lion cage and prod him with a stick, but not when there weren't any bars between you and him. And you never ever messed with the lion's cubs, did you? Not if you wanted to be alive at sundown. This was family for all of them. Attacking the wife of the Rainbow commander was a slap in all their faces, an act of incomprehensible arrogance—and Chavez's wife was pregnant. She represented two innocent lives, both of them belonging to one of the people with whom they exercised every morning and with whom they had the occasional pint in the evening, a fellow soldier, one of their team. They all flipped on their radios and sat back, holding their individual weapons, allowing their thoughts to wander, but not very far.

"Al, I have to let you run this operation," John said, standing by his desk and preparing to leave. Dr. Bellow was in the room, along with Bill Tawney.

"I understand, John. You know how good Peter and his team are."

A long breath. "Yeah." There wasn't much of anything else to say right then.

Stanley turned to the others. "Bill?"

"They used the right codename. 'Patrick Casey' is not known to the press. It's a name they use to let us know that their operation is real—usually used with bomb threats and such. Paul?"

"Identifying your wife and daughter is a direct challenge to us. They're telling us that they know about Rainbow, that they know who we are, and, of course, who *you* are, John. They're announcing their expertise and their willingness to go all the way." The psychiatrist shook his head. "But if they're really PIRA, that means they're Catholic. I can work on that. Let's get me out there and establish contact, shall we?"

Tim Noonan was already in his personal car, his tactical gear in the back. At least this was easy for him. There were two cell-phone nodes in the Hereford area, and he'd been to both of them while experimenting with his lock-out software. He drove to the farther of the two first. It was a fairly typical setup, the usual candelabra tower standing in a fenced enclosure with a truck-type trailer—called a caravan over here, he remembered. A car was parked just outside. Noonan pulled alongside and hopped out without bothering to lock it up. Ten seconds later, he pulled open the door to the caravan.

"What's this?" the technician inside asked.

"I'm from Hereford. We're taking this cell off-line right now."

"Says who?"

"Says me!" Noonan turned so that the guy could see the holstered pistol on his hip. "Call your boss. He knows who I am and what I do." And with no further talk, Noonan walked to the master-power panel and flipped the breaker, killing transmissions from the tower. Then he sat in front of the computer control system and inserted the floppy disk he'd carried in his shirt pocket. Two mouse clicks and forty seconds later the system was modified. Only a number with a 777 prefix would be accepted now.

The technician didn't have a clue, but did have the good sense not to dispute the matter with a man carrying a gun.

"Anybody at the other one—on the other side of town?" Noonan asked.

"No, that would be me if there's a problem—but there isn't."

"Keys." Noonan held his hand out.

"I can't do that. I mean, I do not have authorization to—"

"Call your boss right now," the FBI agent suggested, handing him the land-line receiver.

Covington jumped out of the truck near where some commercial trucks were parked. The police had established a perimeter to keep the curious at bay. He trotted over to what appeared to be the senior cop at the site.

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"There they are," Sean Grady said over his phone to Timmy O'Neil. "Sure, and they responded quickly. Ever so formidable they look," he added. "How are things inside?"

"Too many people for us to control properly, Sean. I have the twins in the main lobby, Jimmy here with me, and Daniel is patrolling upstairs."

"What of your hostages?"

"The women, you mean? They're sitting on the floor. The young one is very pregnant, Sean. She could have it today, looks like."

"Try to avoid that, lad," Grady advised, with a smile. Things were going according to his plan, and the clock was running. The bloody soldiers had even parked their trucks within twenty meters of his own. It could scarcely have been better.

Houston's first name wasn't really Sam—his mother had named him Mortimer, after a favored uncle—but the current moniker had been laid on him during boot camp at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, eleven years before, and he hadn't objected. His sniper rifle was still in its boxy carrying case to safeguard it from shock, and he was looking around for a good perch. Where he was standing wasn't bad, the sergeant thought. He was ready for whatever the day offered. His rifle was a virtual twin to that used by his friend Homer Johnston, and his marksmanship was just as good, too—a little better, he'd quickly tell anyone who asked. The same was true of Rifle One-Two, Sergeant First Class Fred Franklin, formerly an instructor at the Army's marksmanship training unit at Fort Benning and a deadly shot out to a mile with his huge MacMillan .50 bolt-action rifle.

"What d'ya think, Sam?"

"I like it here, Freddy. How about you go to that knoll past the helo pad?"

"Looks good to me. Later." Franklin hoisted the case onto his shoulder and headed off that way.

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"Those people scare me," Roddy Sands admitted over the phone.

"I know, but one of them is close enough to take out at once, Roddy. You take that job, lad."

"I will, Sean," Sands agreed from inside the cargo area of the big Volvo truck.

Noonan, now with the keys to the other site, was back in his car and heading that way. The drive would take twenty minutes—no, more, he realized. Traffic was backing up on this "A"-class road, and though he had a gun on his hip, and even police identification, his car didn't have a siren and gumball machine—an oversight he himself had never considered, to his sudden and immediate rage. How the fuck had they forgotten that? He *was* a cop, wasn't he? He pulled to the shoulder, turned on his emergency flashers, and started leaning on the horn as he sped past the stopped cars.

Chavez didn't react much. Instead of looking angry or fearful, he just turned inward on himself. A small man, his body seemed to shrink even further

before Clark's eyes. "Okay," he said finally, his mouth dry. "What are we doing about it?"

"Team-1 is there now, or should be. Al is running the operation. We're spectators."

"Head over?"

Clark wavered, which was unusual for him. The best thing to do, one part of his mind told him quietly, was to sit still, stay in his office and wait, rather than drive over and torture himself with knowledge that he couldn't do anything about. His decision to let Stanley run the operation was the correct one. He couldn't allow his actions to be affected by personal emotions. There were more lives at stake than his wife's and daughter's, and Stanley was a pro who'd do the right thing without being told. On the other hand, to stay here and simply listen to a phone or radio account was far worse. So he walked back to his desk, opened a drawer, and took out his Beretta .45 automatic. This he clipped to his belt at his right hip. Chavez, he saw, had his side arm as well.

"Let's go."

"Wait." Chavez lifted Clark's desk phone and called the Team-2 building.

"Sergeant Major Price," the voice answered.

"Eddie, this is Ding. John and I are going to drive over there. You're in command of Team-2."

"Yes, sir, I understand. Major Covington and his lads are as good as we are, sir, and Team-2 is suited up and ready to deploy."

"Okay, I have my radio with me."

"Good luck, sir."

"Thanks, Eddie." Chavez hung up. "Let's get going, John."

For this ride, Clark had a driver, but he had the same problem with traffic that Noonan was having, and adopted the same solution, speeding down the hard shoulder with his horn blowing and lights blinking. What should have been a ten-minute drive turned into double that.

"Who is this?"

"This is Superintendent Fergus Macleash," the cop on the other end of the phone circuit responded. "And you are?"

"Patrick Casey will do for now," Grady answered smugly. "Have you spoken with the Home Office yet?"

"Yes, Mr. Casey, I have." Macleash looked at Stanley and Bellow, as he stood at his command post, half a mile from the hospital, and listened to the speaker phone.

"When will they release the prisoners, as we demanded?"

"Mr. Casey, most of the senior people are out of the office having lunch at the moment. Mainly, the chaps in London I spoke to are trying to track them down and get them into the office. I haven't spoken with anyone in a position of authority yet, you see."

"I suggest that you tell London to get them in quickly. I am not by nature a patient man."

"I need your assurance that no one has been hurt," Macleash tried next.

"Except for one of your constables, no, no one has been hurt—yet. That will

change if you take action against us, and it will also change if you and your friends in London make us wait too long. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I do understand what you just said."

"You have two hours until we begin eliminating hostages. We have a goodly supply, you know."

"You understand, if you injure a hostage, that will change matters greatly, Mr. Casey. My ability to negotiate on your behalf will be greatly reduced if you cross that line."

"That is your problem, not mine" was the cold reply. "I have over a hundred people here, including the wife and daughter of your chief counterterrorist official. They will be the first to suffer for your inaction. You now have one hour and fifty-eight minutes to begin the release of every political prisoner in Albany and Parkhurst prisons. I suggest you get moving on that immediately. Good-bye." And the line went dead.

"He's talking tough," Dr. Bellow observed. "Sounds like a mature voice, in his forties, and he's confirmed that he knows who Mrs. Clark and Dr. Chavez are. We're up against a professional, and one with unusually good intelligence. Where could he have gotten it?"

Bill Tawney looked down at the ground. "Unknown, Doctor. We had indications that people were looking into our existence, but this is disquieting."

"Okay, next time he calls, I talk to him," Bellow said. "I'll see if I can calm him down some."

"Peter, this is Stanley," Rainbow Five called over his tactical radio.

"Covington here."

"What have you done to this point?"

"I have both riflemen deployed for overwatch and intelligence gathering, but I'm keeping the rest close. I'm waiting now for a building diagram. We have as yet no firm estimate of the number of subjects or hostages inside." The voice hesitated before going on. "I recommend that we consider bringing Team-2 in. This is a large building to cover with only eight men, should we have to move in."

Stanley nodded. "Very well, Peter. I will make the call."

"How we looking on gas?" Malloy asked, looking down as he orbited the hospital.

"A good three and a half hours, Colonel," Lieutenant Harrison answered.

Malloy turned to look into the cargo bay area of the Night Hawk. Sergeant Nance had the zip-line ropes out and hooked into the eyebolts on the floor of the aircraft. That work done, he sat in the jump seat between and behind the pilot/copilot seats, his pistol clearly visible in his shoulder holster, listening in on the tactical radio like everyone else.

"Well, we're going to be here for a while," the Marine said.

"Sir, what do you think about—"

"I think I don't like it at all, Lieutenant. Aside from that, we're better off not thinking very much." And that was a bullshit answer, as everyone aboard the Night Hawk knew. You might as well tell the world to stop turning as to tell men in this situation to stop thinking. Malloy was looking down at the

hospital, figuring approach angles for a long-wire or zip-line deployment. It didn't appear all that difficult to accomplish, should it become necessary.

The panoramic view afforded from flying above it all was useful. Malloy could see everything. Cars were parked everywhere, and some trucks were close to the hospital. The police cars were visible from their flashing blue lights, and they had traffic pretty well stopped—and elsewhere the roads were clogged, at least those leading *to* the hospital. As usually happened, the roads leading away were wide open. A TV truck appeared, as though by magic, setting up half a mile or so from the hospital, on the hilltop where some other vehicles were stopped, probably rubbernecking, the Marine thought. It always happened, like vultures circling a carcass at Twentynine Palms. Very distasteful, and very human.

Popov turned when he heard the white TV truck stop, not ten meters from the rear bumper of his rented Jaguar. It had a satellite dish on the roof, and the vehicle had scarcely halted when men stepped out. One climbed the ladder affixed to the side and elevated the oddly angular dish. Another hoisted a Minicam, and yet another, evidently the reporter, appeared, wearing a jacket and tie. He chatted briefly with one of the others, then turned, looking down the hill. Popov ignored them.

Finally, Noonan said to himself, pulling off the road at the other cell site. He parked his car, got out, and reached for the keys the technician had given him. Three minutes later, he uploaded his spoofing software. Then he donned his tactical radio set.

"Noonan to Stanley, over."

"This is Stanley."

"Okay, Al, I just cut off the other cell. Cell phones ought to be down now for this entire area."

"Very good, Tim. Come this way now."

"Roger, on the way." The FBI agent adjusted the headset, hanging the microphone exactly in front of his mouth and pushing the earpiece all the way in as he reentered his car and started off back toward the hospital. *Okay, you bastards,* he thought, *try using your fucking phones now.*

As usual in emergency situations, Popov noted, you couldn't tell what was happening. At least fifteen police vehicles were visible along with the two army trucks from the Hereford base. His binoculars didn't allow him to recognize any faces, but he'd seen only one of them close-up, and that was the chief of the unit, and he'd be in some command post or other rather than visible in the open, assuming that he was here at all, the intelligence officer reminded himself.

Two men carrying long cases, probably riflemen, had walked away from the camouflage-painted trucks, but they were nowhere to be seen now, though . . . yes, he saw, using his binoculars again, there was one, just a jump of green that hadn't been there before. How clever. He'd be a sniper, using his telescopic sight to look into windows and gather information, which he'd then radio to his commander. There was another one of them around somewhere as

well, but Popov couldn't see him.

"Rifle One-Two to Command," Fred Franklin called in.

"One-Two, this is Command," Covington responded.

"In position, sir, looking down, but I don't see anything at all in the windows on the ground level. Some movement of the curtains on the third floor, like people peeking out, but nothing else."

"Roger, thank you, continue your surveillance."

"Roger that. Rifle One-Two, out." Several seconds later, Houston reported similar news. Both men were in perches, with their ghillie suits disguising their positions.

"Finally," Covington said. A police car had just arrived, its occupant delivering blueprints of the hospital. Peter's gratitude died in a moment, when he looked at the first two pages. There were scores of rooms, most of them on the upper levels, in any of which a man with a gun could hide and have to be winkled out—worse, all of those rooms were probably occupied with real people, sick ones, whom a flash-bang might startle enough to kill. Now that he had the knowledge, its only immediate benefit was to show him just how difficult his mission would be.

"Sean?"

Grady turned. "Yes, Roddy?"

"There they are," Sands pointed out. The black-clad soldiers were standing behind their army trucks, only a few meters from the trucks the Irishmen had driven to the site.

"I only count six, lad," Grady said. "We're hoping for ten or so."

"It is a poor time to become greedy, Sean."

Grady thought about that for a second, then checked his watch. He'd allotted forty-five to sixty minutes for this mission. Any more, he thought, would give the other side too much time to get organized. They were within ten minutes of the lower limit. So far, things had gone according to plan. Traffic would be blocked on the roads, but only into the hospital, not away from it. He had his three large trucks, the van, and two private cars, all within fifty meters of where he was standing. The crucial part of the job was yet to begin, but his people all knew what to do. Roddy was right. It was time to wrap everything up and make his dash. Grady nodded at his subordinate, pulled out his cell phone, and hit the speed-dial button for Timothy O'Neil.

But it didn't work. Lifting the phone to his ear, all he heard was the fast-busy signal that announced that the call hadn't gone through properly. Annoyed, he thumbed end and redialed . . . and got the same result.

"What's this? . . ." he said, trying a third time. "Roddy, give me your phone."

Sands offered it, and Grady took it. They were all identical in make, and all had been identically programmed. He thumbed the same speed-dial command, and again got only the fast-busy response. More confused than angry, Grady nonetheless had a sudden empty feeling in his stomach. He'd planned for many things, but not for this. For the mission to work, he had to coordinate

his three groups. They all knew what they were to do, but not when, not until he told them that it was time.

"Bloody . . ." Grady said quietly, rather to the surprise of Roddy Sands. Next Grady simply tried calling a mobile operator, but the same fast-busy signal resulted. "The bloody phones have stopped working."

"We haven't heard from him in a while," Bellow observed.

"He hasn't given us a phone number yet."

"Try this." Tawney handed over a handwritten list of numbers in the hospital. Bellow selected the main ER number and dialed it on his cell phone, making sure to start with the 777 prefix. It rang for half a minute before it was picked up.

"Yes?" It was an Irish-sounding voice, but a different one.

"I need to talk to Mr. Casey," the psychiatrist said, putting the call on speaker.

"He's not here right now" was the reply.

"Could you get him, please? I need to tell him something."

"Wait," the voice answered.

Bellow killed the microphone on the portable phone. "Different voice. Not the same guy. Where's Casey?"

"Some other place in the hospital, I imagine," Stanley offered, but the answer was dissatisfying to him when no voice came back on the phone line for several minutes.

Noonan had to explain who he was to two separate police checkpoints, but now the hospital was in sight. He called ahead on his radio, told Covington that he was five minutes away, and learned that nothing had changed.

Clark and Chavez dismounted their vehicle fifty yards from the green trucks that had brought Team-1 to the site. Team-2 was now on its way, also in another green-painted British Army truck, with a police escort to speed their way through the traffic. Chavez was holding a collection of photographs of known PIRA terrorists that he'd snatched off the intelligence desk. The hard part, Ding found, was to keep his hands from shaking—whether from fear or rage, he couldn't tell—and it required all the training he'd ever had to keep his mind on business rather than worrying about his wife and motherin-law . . . and his unborn son. Only by looking down at the photos instead of up at the country was this possible, for in his hands he had faces to seek and kill, but the green grass around the hospital was merely empty landscape where there was danger. At times like this, the manly thing was to suck it in and pretend that you had it under control, but Chavez was learning now that while being brave for yourself was easy enough, facing danger to someone you loved was a very different situation, one in which courage didn't matter a damn, and all you could do was . . . nothing. You were a spectator, and nothing more, watching a contest of sorts in which lives dear to you were at grave risk, but in which you could not participate. All he could do was watch, and trust to the professionalism of Covington's Team-1. One part of his mind told him that Peter and his boys were as good as he and his own people were, and that if a rescue could be done, they would surely do it—but that wasn't the same as

being there yourself, taking charge, and making the right things happen yourself. Sometime later today, Chavez thought, he would again hold his wife in his arms—or she and their unborn child would be taken forever from him. His hands gripped the computer-generated photographs, bending the edges, and his only comfort was in the weight of the pistol that hung in the hip-holster tucked into the waistband of his trousers. It was a familiar feeling, but one, his mind told him, which was useless at the moment, and likely to remain so.

"So, what do I call you?" Bellow asked, when the phone line became active again.

"You can call me Timothy."

"Okay," the doctor said agreeably, "I'm Paul."

"You're an American," O'Neil observed.

"That's right. And so are the hostages you're holding, Dr. Chavez and Mrs. Clark."

"So?"

"So, I thought your enemies were the Brits, not us Americans. You know that those two ladies are mother and daughter, don't you?" He had to know it, Bellow knew, and for that reason he could point it out as though giving away information.

"Yes," the voice replied.

"Did you know that they are both Catholic, just like you?"

"No."

"Well, they are," Bellow assured him. "You can ask. Mrs. Clark's maiden name is O'Toole, as a matter of fact. She is an Irish-Catholic American citizen. What makes her your enemy, Timothy?"

"She's—her husband is—I mean—"

"He's also an Irish-Catholic American, and to the best of my knowledge he has never taken action of any kind against you or the people in your organization. That's why I have trouble understanding why you are threatening their lives."

"Her husband is the head of this Rainbow mob, and they kill people for the British government."

"No, actually, they do not. Rainbow is actually a NATO establishment. The last time we went out, we had to rescue thirty children. I was there, too. The people holding them murdered one of the kids, a little Dutch girl named Anna. She was dying, Timothy. She had cancer, but those people weren't very patient about it. One of them shot her in the back and killed her. You've probably seen it on TV. Not the sort of thing a religious person would do—not the sort of thing a Catholic would do, murdering a little girl like that. And Dr. Chavez is pregnant. I'm sure you can see that. If you harm her, what about her child? Not just a murder if you do that, Timothy. You're also aborting her unborn child. I know what the Catholic Church says about that. So do you. So does the government in the Republic of Ireland. Please, Timothy, will you please think about what you've threatened to do? These are real people, not abstractions, and the baby in Dr. Chavez's womb is also a real person, too. Anyway, I have something to tell Mr. Casey. Have you found him yet?" the

psychiatrist asked.

"I—no, no, he can't come to the phone now."

"Okay, I have to go now. If I call this number again, will you be there to answer it?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll call back when I have some news for you." Bellow punched the kill switch. "Good news. Different person, younger, not as sure of himself. I have something I can use on this one. He really *is* Catholic, or at least he thinks of himself that way. That means conscience and rules. I can work on this one," he concluded soberly but with confidence.

"But where is the other one?" Stanley asked. "Unless . . ."

"Huh?" Tawney asked.

"Unless he's not in there at all."

"Huh?" the doctor asked.

"Unless he's not bloody there. He called *us* before, but he hasn't talked to us in quite a while. Shouldn't he be doing so?"

Bellow nodded. "I would have expected that, yes."

"But Noonan has chopped the cell phones," Stanley pointed out. He switched on his tactical radio. "This is Command. Look around for someone trying to use a cellular telephone. We may have two groups of subjects here. Acknowledge."

"Command, this is Covington, roger."

"Fuck!" Malloy snarled in his circling helicopter.

"Take her down some?" Harrison asked.

The Marine shook his head. "No, up here they might not even notice us. Let's stay covert for a while."

"What the hell?" Chavez observed, looking at his father-in-law.

"Inside-outside?" John speculated.

Grady was at the point of losing his temper. He'd tried a total of seven times to make a call with his cell phone, only to find the same infuriating fast-busy response. He had a virtually perfect tactical situation, but lacked the ability to coordinate his teams. There they were, those Rainbow people, standing in a bunch not a hundred meters from the two Volvo trucks. This couldn't last, though. The local police would surely start securing the area soon. There were perhaps a hundred and fifty, perhaps as many as two hundred people now, standing in little knots within three hundred meters of the hospital. The time was right. The targets were there.

Noonan crested the hill and started driving down to where the team was, wondering what the hell he'd be able to do. Bugging the building, his usual job, meant getting close. But it was broad daylight, and getting close would be a mother of a task, probably beyond the range of possibility until nightfall. Well, at least he'd taken care of his primary function. He'd denied the enemy the chance to use cell phones—if they'd tried to, which he didn't know. He

slowed the car for his approach, and saw Peter Covington in the distance conferring with his black-clad shooters.

Chavez and Clark were doing much the same thing, standing still a few yards from Clark's official car.

"The perimeter needs firming up," Ding said. Where had all these vehicles come from? Probably people who happened to be in the area when the shooting started. There was the usual goddamned TV van, its satellite dish erected, and what appeared to be a reporter speaking in front of a handheld Minicam. So, Chavez thought, now the danger to his family was a goddamned spectator sport.

Grady had to make a decision, and he had to make it now. If he wanted to achieve his goal and make his escape, it had to be now. His gun-containing parcel was sitting on the ground next to his rental car. He left it on the ground with Roddy Sands and walked to the farthest of the Volvo commercial trucks.

"Sean," a voice called from the cargo area, "the bloody phones don't work."

"I know. We begin in five minutes. Watch for the others, and then carry on as planned."

"Okay, Sean," the voice replied. To punctuate it, Grady heard the cocking of the weapons inside as he walked to the next, delivering the same message. Then the third. There were three men in each of the trucks. The canvas covers over the cargo areas had holes cut in them, like the battlements of a castle, and those inside had opened them slightly and were now looking at the soldiers less than a hundred meters away. Grady made his way back to his Jaguar. When he got there he checked his watch. He looked at Roddy Sands and nodded.

Team-2's truck was starting down the hill to the hospital. Noonan's car was directly in front of it now.

Popov was watching the whole area with his binoculars. A third military truck came into view. He looked at it and saw more men sitting in the back, probably reinforcements for the people already outside the hospital. He returned his attention to the area that already had soldiers. Closer examination showed . . . was that John Clark? he wondered. Standing away from the others. Well, if his wife were a hostage now, that made sense to let another—he had to have a second-in-command for his organization—command the operation. So, he'd just be standing there now, looking tense in his suit.

"Excuse me." Popov turned to see a reporter and a cameraman, and closed his eyes in a silent curse.

"Yes?"

"Could you give us your impressions of what is happening here? First of all, your name, and what causes you to be here."

"Well, I—my name—my name is Jack Smith," Popov said, in his best London accent. "And I was out here in the country—birding, you see. I was

out here to enjoy nature, it's a nice day, you see, and—"

"Mr. Smith, have you any idea what is happening down there?"

"No, no, not really." He didn't take his eyes away from the binoculars, not wanting to give them a look at his face. *Nichevo!* There was Sean Grady, standing with Roddy Sands. Had he believed in God, he would have invoked His name at that moment, seeing what they were doing, and knowing exactly what they were thinking in this flashpoint in time.

Grady bent down and opened his parcel, removing the AKMS assault-rifle from it. Then he slapped in the magazine, extended the folding stock, and in one smooth motion stood to straight and brought it to his shoulder. A second later he took aim and fired into the group of black-clad soldiers. A second after that, the men in the trucks did the same.

There was no warning at all. Bullets hit the side of the truck behind which they'd been sheltering, but before Team-1 had the time to react, the bullets came in on their bodies. Four men dropped in the first two seconds. By that time, the rest had jumped away and down, their eyes looking around for the source of the fire.

Noonan saw them crumple, and it took a second or so of shock for him to realize what was happening. Then he spoke into his tactical radio: "Warning, warning, Team-1 is under fire from the rear!" At the same time his eyes were searching for the source—it had to be right there, in that big truck. The FBI agent floored his accelerator and dashed that way, his right hand reaching for his pistol.

Master Chief Mike Chin was down with a bullet in each upper leg. The suddenness only made the pain worse. He'd been totally unprepared for this, and the pain paralyzed him for several seconds, until training reasserted itself, and he tried to crawl to cover. "Chin is hit, Chin is hit," he gasped over the radio, then turned to see another Team-1 member down, blood gushing from the side of his head.

Sergeant Houston's head snapped off his scope, and turned right with the sudden and unexpected noise of automatic-weapons fire. *What the hell?* He saw what appeared to be the muzzle of a rifle sticking out the side of one of the trucks, and he swung his rifle up and off the ground to the right to try to acquire a target.

Roddy Sands saw the movement. The sniper was where he remembered, but covered as he was in his camouflage blanket, it was hard to track in on him. The movement fixed that, and the shot was only about a hundred fifty meters. Holding low and left, he pulled the trigger and held it down, walking his rounds through the shape on the side of the hill, firing long, then pulling back down to hit at it again.

Houston got one round off, but it went wild as a bullet penetrated his right shoulder, blasting right through his body armor, which was sufficient to stop a pistol round but not a bullet from a rifle. Neither courage nor muscle strength could make broken bones work. The impact made his body collapse, and a second later, Houston knew that his right arm would not work at all. On instinct he rolled to his left, while his left hand tried to reach across his body for his service pistol, while he announced over the radio that he was hit as well.

It was easier for Fred Franklin. Too far away for easy fire from one of the terrorists' weapons, he was also well concealed under his blanket. It took him a few seconds to realize what was going on, but the screams and groans over his radio earpiece told him that some team members had been badly hurt. He swept his scope sight over the area, and saw one gun muzzle sticking out the side of a truck. Franklin flipped off his safety, took aim, and loosed his first .50-caliber round of the fight. The muzzle blast of his own weapon shattered the local silence. The big MacMillan sniper rifle fired the same cartridge as the .50-caliber heavy machine gun, sending a two-ounce bullet off at 2,700 feet per second, covering the distance in less than a third of a second and drilling a half-inch hole into the soft side of the truck, but there was no telling if it hit a target or not. He swept the rifle left, looking for another target. He passed over another big truck, and saw the holes in the cover, but nothing inside of them. More to the left—there, there was a guy holding a rifle and firing—off to where Sam was. Sergeant First Class Fred Franklin worked his bolt, loaded a second round, and took careful aim.

Roddy Sands was sure he'd hit his target, and was now trying to kill it. To his left, Sean was already back in his car, starting it for the getaway that had to begin in less than two minutes.

Grady heard the engine catch and turned to look back at his most trusted subordinate. He'd just gotten all the way around when the bullet hit, just at the base of Sands's skull. The huge .50 bullet exploded the head like a can of soup, and for all his experience as a terrorist, Grady had never seen anything like it. It seemed that only the jaw remained, as the body fell out of view, and Team-1 got its first kill of the day.

Noonan stopped his car inches from the third of the trucks. He dove out the right-side driver's door, and heard the distinctive chatter of Kalashnikov-type weapons. Those had to be enemies, and they had to be close. He held his Beretta pistol in both hands, looked for a second at the back of the truck and wondered how to—yes! There was a ladder-handle fixture on the rear door. He slipped a booted foot into it and climbed up, finding a canvas cover roped into place. He forced his pistol into his waistband and withdrew his K-Bar combat knife, slashing at the rope loops, getting a corner free. He lifted it with his left hand, looked inside and saw three men, facing left and doing aimed fire with their weapons. Okay. It never occurred to him to say or shout anything to them. Leaning in, his left hand holding the canvas clear, he aimed with his right hand. The first round was double-action, and his finger pulled

the trigger slowly, and the head nearest to him snapped to its right, and the body fell. The others were too distracted by the noise of their own weapons to hear the report of the pistol. Noonan instantly adjusted his grip on the pistol and fired off a second round into the next head. The third man felt the body hit his, and turned to look. The brown eyes went wide. He jerked away from the side of the truck and brought his rifle to his left, but not quickly enough. Noonan fired two rounds into the chest, then brought his pistol down from recoil and fired his third right through the man's nose. It exited through his brain stem, by which time the man was dead. Noonan looked hard at all three targets, and, sure they were dead, jumped back off the truck and headed forward to the next. He paused to slap in a fresh magazine, while a distant part of his mind remarked on the fact that Timothy Noonan was on autopilot, moving almost without conscious thought.

Grady floored his car, hitting the horn as he did so. That was the signal for the others to get clear. That included the men inside the hospital, whom he'd been unable to alert with his cell phone.

"Jesus Christ!" O'Neil announced when the first rounds were fired. "Why the bloody hell didn't he—"

"Too late to worry, Timmy," Sam Barry told him, waving to his brother and running for the door. Jimmy Carr was there, and the final member of the inside team joined up ten seconds later, emerging from the door to the fire stairs.

"Time to go, lads," O'Neil told them. He looked at the two main hostages and thought to wave to them, but the pregnant one would only slow them down, and there were thirty meters to his van. The plan had come apart, though he didn't know why, and it was time to get the hell out of here.

The third military truck stopped a few yards behind Noonan's personal car. Eddie Price jumped out first, his MP-10 up in his hands, then crouched, looking around to identify the noise. Whatever it was, it was happening too bloody fast, and there was no plan. He'd been trained for this as an ordinary infantryman, but that had been twenty years ago. Now he was a special-operations soldier, and supposed to know every step before he took it. Mike Pierce came down next to him.

"What the fuck's happening, Eddie?"

Just then, they saw Noonan jump down from the Volvo truck and swap out magazines on his pistol. The FBI agent saw them, and waved them forward.

"I suppose we follow him," Price said. Louis Loiselle appeared at Pierce's side and the two started off. Paddy Connolly caught up, reaching into his fanny pack for a flash-bang.

O'Neil and his four ran out the emergency-room entrance and made it all the way to their van without being spotted or engaged. He'd left the keys in, and had the vehicle moving before the others had a chance to close all the doors.

"Warning, warning," Franklin called over the radio. "We have bad guys in a

brown van leaving the hospital, looks like four of them." Then he swiveled his rifle and took aim just aft of the left-front tire and fired.

The heavy bullet ripped through the fender as though it were a sheet of newspaper, then slammed into the iron block of the six-cylinder engine. It penetrated one cylinder, causing the piston to jam instantly, stopping the engine just as fast. The van swerved left with the sudden loss of engine power, almost tipping over to the right, but then slamming down and righting itself.

O'Neil screamed a curse and tried to restart the engine at once, with no result at all. The starter motor couldn't turn the jammed crankshaft. O'Neil didn't know why, but this vehicle was fully dead, and he was stuck in the open.

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Franklin saw the result of his shot with some satisfaction and jacked in another round. This one was aimed at the driver's head. He centered his sight reticle and squeezed, but at the same moment the head moved, and the shot missed. That was something Fred Franklin had never done. He looked on in stunned surprise for a moment, then reloaded.

O'Neil was cut on the face by glass fragments. The bullet hadn't missed him by more than two inches, but the shock of it propelled him out of the driver's seat into the cargo area of the van. There he froze, without a clue as to what to do next.

Homer Johnston and Dieter Weber still had their rifles in the carrying cases, and since it didn't appear that either would have much chance to make use of them, right now they were moving with pistols only. In the rear of their team, they watched Eddie Price slash a hole in the rear cover of the second Volvo truck. Paddy Connolly pulled the pin on a flash-bang and tossed it inside. Two seconds later, the explosion of the pyro charge blew the canvas cover completely off the truck. Pierce and Loiselle jumped up, weapons ready in their hands, but the three men inside were stunned unconscious from the blast. Pierce jumped all the way in to disarm them, tossed their weapons clear of the truck, and kneeled over them.

In each of the three Volvo trucks, one of the armed men was also to be the driver. In the foremost of the three, this one was named Paul Murphy, and from the beginning he'd divided his time between shooting and watching Sean Grady's Jaguar. He saw that the car was moving and dropped his weapon to take the driver's seat and start the diesel engine. Looking up, he saw what had to be the body of Roddy Sands—but it appeared to be headless. What had happened? Sean's right arm came out of the window, waving in a circling motion for the truck to follow. Murphy slipped the truck into gear and pulled off to follow. He turned left to see the brown van Tim O'Neil had driven

stopped cold in the hospital parking lot. His first instinct was to go down there and pick his comrades up, but the turn would have been difficult, and Sean was still waving, and so he followed his leader. In the back, one of his shooters lifted the rear flap and looked to see the other trucks, his AKMS rifle in his hands, but neither was moving, and there were men in black clothing there—

—One of those was Sergeant Scotty McTyler, and he had his MP-10 up and aimed. He fired a three-round burst at the face in the distance, and had the satisfaction to see a puff of pink before it dropped out of sight.

"Command, McTyler, we have a truck leaving the area with subjects aboard!" McTyler loosed another few rounds, but without visible effect, and turned away, looking for something else to do.

Popov had never seen a battle before, but that was what he watched now. It seemed chaotic, with people darting around seemingly without purpose. The people in black—well, three were down at the truck from the initial gunfire, and others were moving, apparently in pursuit of the Jaguar, virtually identical with his, and the truck, now exiting the parking lot. Not three meters away, the TV reporter was speaking rapidly into his microphone, while his cameraman had his instrument locked on the events down the hill. Popov was sure it was exciting viewing for everybody in their sitting rooms. He was also sure that it was time for him to leave.

The Russian got back into his car, started the engine, and moved off, with a spray of gravel for the reporter in his wake.

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"I got 'em. Bear's got 'em," Malloy reported, lowering his collective control to drop down to a thousand feet or so, his aviator's eyes locked on the two moving vehicles. "Anybody in command of this disaster?" the Marine asked next.

"Mr. C?" Ding asked.

"Bear, this is Six. I am in command now." Clark and Chavez sprinted back to Clark's official car, where both jumped in, and the driver, unbidden, started in pursuit. He was a corporal of military police in the British Army, and had never been part of the Rainbow team, which he'd always resented somewhat. But not now.

It wasn't much of a challenge. The Volvo truck was powerful, but no competition for the V-8 Jaguar racing up behind it.

Paul Murphy checked his mirror and was instantly confused. Coming up to join him was a Jaguar visually identical to the—he looked, yes, Sean was there, up in front of him. Then who was this? He turned to yell at the people in the back, but on looking, saw that one was down and clearly dead, a pool of

blood sliding greasily across the steel floor of the truck. The other was just holding on.

"This is Price. Where is everyone? Where are the subjects?"

"Price, this is Rifle One-Two. I think we have one or more subjects in the brown van outside the hospital. I took the motor out with my rifle. They ain't going nowhere, Eddie."

"Okay." Price looked around. The local situation might even be under control or heading that way. He felt as though he'd been awakened by a tornado and was now looking at his wrecked farm and trying to make sense of what had taken place. One deep breath, and the responsibility of command asserted itself: "Connolly and Lincoln, go right. Tomlinson and Vega, down the hill to the left. Patterson, come with me. McTyler and Pierce, guard the prisoners. Weber and Johnston, get down to Team-1 and see how they are. *Move!"* he concluded.

"Price, this is Chavez," his radio announced next.

"Yes, Ding."

"What's the situation?"

"We have two or three prisoners, a van with an unknown number of subjects in it, and Christ knows what else. I am trying to find out now. Out." And that concluded the conversation.

"Game face, Domingo," Clark said, sitting in the left-front seat of the Jaguar.

"I fuckin' hear you, John!" Chavez snarled back.

"Corporal—Mole, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," the driver said, without moving his eyes a millimeter.

"Okay, Corporal, get us up on his right side. We're going to shoot out his right-front tire. Let's try not to eat the fucking truck when that happens."

"Very good, sir" was the cool reply. "Here we go."

The Jag leaped forward, and in twenty seconds was alongside the Volvo diesel truck. Clark and Chavez lowered their windows. They were doing over seventy miles per hour now, as they leaned out of their speeding automobile.

A hundred meters ahead, Sean Grady was in a state of rage and shock. What the devil had gone wrong? The first burst from his people's weapons had surely killed a number of his black-clad enemies, but after that—what? He'd formulated a good plan, and his people had executed it well at first—but the goddamned phones! What had gone wrong with those? That had ruined everything. But now things were back under some semblance of control. He was ten minutes away from the shopping area where he'd park and leave the car, disappear into the crowd of people, then walk to another parking lot, get in another rental car, and drive off to Liverpool for the ferry ride home. He would get out of this, and so would the lads in the truck behind him—he looked in the mirror. What the hell was that?

Corporal Mole had done well, first maneuvering to the truck's left, then slowing and darting to the right. That caught the driver by surprise.

In the backseat, Chavez saw the face of the man. Very fair-skinned and red-haired, a real Paddy, Domingo thought, extending his pistol and aiming at the right-front wheel.

"Now!" John called from the front seat. In that instant, their driver swerved to the left.

Paul Murphy saw the auto jump at him and instinctively swerved hard to avoid it. Then he heard gunfire.

Clark and Chavez fired several times each, and it was only a few feet of distance to the black rubber of the tire. Their bullets all hit home just outside the rim of the wheel, and the nearly-half-inch holes deflated the tire rapidly. Scarcely had the Jaguar pulled forward when the truck swerved back to the right. The driver tried to brake and slow, but that instinctive reaction only made things worse for him. The Volvo truck dipped to the right, and then the uneven braking made it worse still, and the right-side front-wheel rim dug into the pavement. This made the truck try to stop hard, and the body flipped over, landed on its right side, and slid forward at over sixty miles per hour. Strong as the body of the truck was, it hadn't been designed for this, and when the roll continued, the truck body started coming apart.

Corporal Mole cringed to see his rearview mirror filled with the sideways truck body, but it got no closer, and he swerved left to make sure it didn't overtake him. He allowed the car to slow now, watching the mirror as the Volvo truck rolled like a child's toy, shedding pieces as it did so.

"Jesuchristo!" Ding gasped, turning to watch. What could only have been a human body was tossed clear, and he saw it slide up the blacktop and pinwheel slowly as it proceeded forward at the same speed as the wrecked truck.

"Stop the car!" Clark ordered.

Mole did better than that, coming to a stop, then backing up to within a few meters of the wrecked truck. Chavez jumped out first, pistol in both hands and advancing toward the vehicle. "Bear, this is Chavez, you there?"

"Bear copies," came the reply.

"See if you can get the car, will ya? This truck's history, man."

"Roger that, Bear is in pursuit."

"Colonel?" Sergeant Nance said over the intercom.

"Yeah?"

"You see how they did that?"

"Yeah—think you can do the same?" Malloy asked.

"Got my pistol, sir."

"Well, then it's air-to-mud time, people." The Marine dropped the collective again and brought the Night Hawk to a hundred feet over the road. He was behind and down-sun from the car he was following. Unless the bastard was looking out the sunroof, he had no way of knowing the chopper was there.

"Road sign!" Harrison called, pulling back on the cyclic to dodge over the highway sign telling of the next exit on the motorway.

"Okay, Harrison, you do the road. I do the car. Yank it hard if you have to, son."

"Roger that, Colonel."

"Okay, Sergeant Nance, here we go." Malloy checked his speed indicator. He was doing eighty-five in the right outside lane. The guy in the Jag was leaning on the pedal pretty hard, but the Night Hawk had a lot more available power. It was not unlike flying formation with another aircraft, though Malloy had never done it with a car before. He closed to about a hundred feet. "Right side, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir." Nance slid the door back and knelt on the aluminum floor, his Beretta 9-mm in both hands. "Ready, Colonel. Let's do it!"

"Ready to tank," Malloy acknowledged, taking one more look at the road. Damn, it was like catching the refueling hose of a Herky Bird, but slower and a hell of a lot lower . . .

Grady bit his lip, seeing that the truck was no longer there, but behind him the road was clear, and ahead as well at the moment, and it was a mere five minutes to safety. He allowed himself a relaxing breath, flexed his fingers on the wheel, and blessed the workers who'd built this fine fast car for him. Just then his peripheral vision caught something black on his left. He turned an inch to look—what the hell—

"Got him!" Nance said, seeing the driver through the leftrear passenger-door window and bringing his pistol up. He let it wait, while Colonel Malloy edged another few feet and then—

—resting his left arm on his knee, Nance thumbed back the hammer and fired. The gun jumped in his hand. He brought it down and kept pulling the trigger. It wasn't like on the range at all. He was jerking the gun badly despite his every effort to hold it steady, but on the fourth round, he saw his target jerk to the right.

The glass was shattering all around him. Grady didn't react well. He could have slammed on the brakes, and that would have caused the helicopter to overshoot, but the situation was too far outside anything he'd ever experienced. He actually tried to speed up, but the Jaguar didn't have all that much acceleration left. Then his left shoulder exploded in fire. Grady's upper chest cringed from nerve response. His right hand moved down, causing the car to swerve in that direction, right into the steel guardrail.

Malloy pulled on the collective, having seen at least one good hit. In seconds, the Night Hawk was at three hundred feet, and the Marine turned to the right and looked down to see a wrecked and smoking car stationary in the middle of the road.

"Down to collect him?" the copilot asked.

"Bet your sweet ass, son," Malloy told Harrison. Then he looked for his own flight bag. His Beretta was in there. Harrison handled the landing, bringing the Sikorsky to a rest fifty feet from the car. Malloy turned the lock on his seat-belt buckle and turned to exit the aircraft. Nance jumped out first, ducking under the turning rotor as he ran to the car's right side. Malloy was two seconds behind him.

"Careful, Sergeant!" Malloy screamed, slowing his advance on the left side. The window was gone except for a few shards still in the frame, and he could see the man inside, still breathing but not doing much else behind the deployed air bag. The far window was gone as well. Nance reached into it, found the handle and pulled it open. It turned out that the driver hadn't been using his seat belt. The body came out easily. And there on the backseat, Malloy saw, was a Russian-made rifle. The Marine pulled it out and safed it, before walking to the other side of the car.

"Shit," Nance said in no small amazement. "He's still alive!" How had he managed not to kill the bastard from twelve feet away? the sergeant wondered.

Back at the hospital, Timothy O'Neil was still in his van wondering what to do. He thought he knew what had happened to the engine. There was a three-quarter-inch hole in the window on the left-side door, and how it had managed to miss his head was something he didn't know. He saw that one of the Volvo trucks and Sean Grady's rented Jaguar were nowhere to be seen. Had Sean abandoned him and his men? It had happened too fast and totally without warning. Why hadn't Sean called to warn him of what he did? How had the plan come apart? But the answers to those questions were of less import than the fact that he was in a van, sitting in a parking lot, with enemies around him. That he had to change.

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"Lieber Gott," Weber said to himself, seeing the wounds. One Team-1 member was surely dead, having taken a round in the side of his head. Four others right here were hit, three of them in the chest. Weber knew first aid, but he didn't need to know much medicine to know that two of them needed immediate and expert attention. One of those was Alistair Stanley.

"This is Weber. We need medical help here at once!" he called over his tactical radio. "Rainbow Five is down!"

"Oh, shit," Homer Johnston said next to him. "You're not foolin', man. Command, this is Rifle Two-One, we need medics and we need them right the fuck now!"

Price heard all that. He was now thirty yards from the van, Sergeant Hank Patterson at his side, trying to approach without being seen. To his left he could see the imposing bulk of Julio Vega, along with Tomlinson. Off to the right he could see the face of Steve Lincoln. Paddy Connolly would be right with him.

"Team-2, this is Price. We have subjects in the van. I do not know if we have any inside the building. Vega and Tomlinson, get inside and check—and be bloody careful about it!"

"Vega here. Roger that, Eddie. Moving now."

Oso reversed directions, heading for the main entrance with Tomlinson in

support, while the other four kept an eye on that damned little brown truck. The two sergeants approached the front door slowly, peering around corners to look in the windows, and seeing only a small mob of very confused people. First Sergeant Vega poked a finger into his own chest and pointed inside. Tomlinson nodded. Now Vega moved quickly, entering the main lobby and sweeping his eyes all around. Two people screamed to see another man with a gun, despite the difference in his appearance. He held up his left hand.

"Easy, folks, I'm one of the good guys. Does anybody know where the bad guys are?" The answer to this question was mainly confusion, but two people pointed to the rear of the building, in the direction of the emergency room, and that made sense. Vega advanced to the double doors leading that way and called on his radio. "Lobby is clear. Come on, George." Then: "Command, this is Vega."

"Vega, this is Price."

"Hospital lobby is clear, Eddie. Got maybe twenty civilians here to get looked after, okay?"

"I have no people to send you, Oso. We're all busy out here. Weber reports we have some serious casualties."

"This is Franklin. I copy. I can move in now if you need me."

"Franklin, Price, move in to the west. I repeat, move in from the west."

"Franklin is moving in to the west," the rifleman replied. "Moving in now."

"His pitchin' career's over," Nance said, loading the body into the Night Hawk.

"Sure as hell, if he's a lefty. Back to the hospital, I guess," Malloy strapped into the chopper and took the controls. Inside a minute, they were airborne and heading east for the hospital. In the back, Nance strapped their prisoner down tight.

It was a hell of a mess. The driver was dead, Chavez saw, crushed between the large wheel and the back of his seat from when the truck had slammed into the guardrail, his eyes and mouth open, blood coming out the latter. The body tossed out of the back was dead as well, with two bullet holes in the face. That left a guy with two broken legs, and horrible scrapes on his face, whose pain was masked by his unconsciousness.

"Bear, this is Six," Clark said.

"Bear copies."

"Can you pick us up? We have an injured subject here, and I want to get back and see what the hell's going on."

"Wait one and I'll be there. Be advised we have a wounded subject aboard, too."

"Roger that, Bear." Clark looked west. The Night Hawk was in plain view, and he saw it alter course and come straight for his position.

Chavez and Mole pulled the body onto the roadway. It seemed horrible that his legs were at such obviously wrong angles, but he was a terrorist, and got little in the way of solicitude.

“Back into the hospital?” one of the men asked O’Neil.

“But then we’re trapped!” Sam Barry objected.

“We’re bloody trapped here!” Jimmy Carr pointed out. “We need to move. Now!”

O’Neil thought that made sense. “Okay, okay. I’ll pull the door, and you lads run back to the entrance. Ready?” They nodded, cradling their weapons. “Now!” he rasped, pulling the sliding door open.

“Shit!” Price observed from a football field away. “Subjects running back into the hospital. I counted five.”

“Confirm five of them,” another voice agreed on the radio circuit.

Vega and Tomlinson were most of the way to the emergency room now, close enough to see the people there but not the double glass doors that led outside. They heard more screams. Vega took off his Kevlar helmet and peeked around the corner. Oh, shit, he thought, seeing one guy with an AKMS. That one was looking around inside the building—and behind him was half the body of someone looking outward. Oso nearly jumped out of his skin when a hand came down on his shoulder. He turned. It was Franklin, without his monster rifle, holding only his Beretta pistol.

“I just heard, five bad guys there?”

“That’s what the man said,” Vega confirmed. He waved Sergeant Tomlinson to the other side of the corridor. “You stick with me, Fred.”

“Roge-o, Oso. Wish you had your M-60 now?”

“Fuckin’ A, man.” As good as the German MP-10 was, it felt like a toy in his hands.

Vega took another look. There was Ding’s wife, standing now, looking over to where the bad guys were, pregnant as hell in her white coat. He and Chavez went back nearly ten years. He couldn’t let anything happen to her. He backed off the corner and tried waving his arm at her.

Patsy Clark Chavez, M.D., saw the motion out of the corner of her eye and turned to see a soldier dressed all in black. He was waving to her, and when she turned the waves beckoned her to him, which struck her as a good idea. Slowly, she started moving to her right.

“You, stop!” Jimmy Carr called angrily. Then he started moving toward her. Unseen to his left, Sergeant George Tomlinson edged his face and gun muzzle around the corner. Vega’s waves merely grew more frantic, and Patsy kept moving his way. Carr stepped toward her, bringing his rifle up—

—as soon as he came into view, Tomlinson took aim, and seeing the weapon aimed at Ding’s wife, he depressed the trigger gently, loosing a three-round burst.

The silence of it was somehow worse than the loudest noise. Patsy turned to look at the guy with the gun when his head exploded—but there was no noise other than the brushlike sound of a properly suppressed weapon, and the wet-mess noise of his destroyed cranium. The body—the face was sprayed away,

and the back of his head erupted in a cloud of red—then it just fell straight down, and the loudest sound was the clatter of the rifle hitting the floor, loosed from the dead hands.

"Come here!" Vega shouted, and she did what she was told, ducking and running toward him.

Oso grabbed her arm and swung her around like a doll, knocking her off her feet and sending her sliding across the tile floor. Sergeant Franklin scooped her up and ran down the corridor, carrying her like a toy. In the main lobby he found the hospital security guard, and left her with him, then ran back.

"Franklin to Command. Dr. Chavez is safe. We got her to the main lobby. Get some people there, will ya? Let's get these fucking civilians evacuated fast, okay?"

"Price to Team. Where is everyone? Where are the subjects?"

"Price, this is Vega, we are down to four subjects. George just dropped one. They are in the emergency room. Mrs. Clark is probably still there. We hear noises, there are civilians in there. We have their escape route closed. I have Tomlinson and Franklin here. Fred's only got a pistol. Unknown number of hostages, but as far as I can tell we're down to four bad guys, over."

"I've got to get down there," Dr. Bellow said. He was badly shaken. People had been shot within a few feet of him. Alistair Stanley was down with a chest wound, and at least one other Rainbow trooper was dead, along with three additional wounded, one of those serious-looking.

"That way." Price pointed to the front of the hospital. A Team-1 member appeared, and headed that way as well. It was Geoff Bates, one of Covington's shooters from the SAS, fully armed, though he hadn't taken so much as a single shot yet today. He and Bellow moved quickly.

Somehow Carr had died without notice. O'Neil turned and saw him there, his body like the stem for a huge red flower of blood on the dingy tile floor. It was only getting worse. He had four armed men, but he couldn't see around the corner twenty feet away, and surely there were armed SAS soldiers there, and he had no escape. He had eight other people nearby, and these he could use as hostages, perhaps, but the danger of that game was dramatically obvious. *No escape,* his mind told him, but his emotions said something else. He had weapons, and his enemies were nearby, and he was supposed to kill them, and if he had to die, he'd damned well die for The Cause, the idea to which he'd dedicated his life, the idea for which he'd told himself a thousand times he was willing to die. Well, here he was now, and death was close, not something to be considered in his bed, waiting for sleep to come, or drinking beer in a pub, discussing the loss of some dedicated comrades, the brave talk they all spoke when bravery wasn't needed. It all came down to this. Now danger was here, and it was time to see if his bravery was a thing of words or a thing of the belly, and his emotions wanted to show the whole bloody world that he was a man of his word and his beliefs . . . but part of him wanted to escape back to Ireland, and not die this day in an English hospital.

Sandy Clark watched him from fifteen feet away. He was a handsome man,

and probably a brave one—for a criminal, her mind added. She remembered John telling her more than once that bravery was a far more common thing than cowardice, and that the reason for it was shame. People went into danger not alone, but with their friends, and you didn't want to appear weak in front of them, and so from the fear of cowardice came the most insane of acts, the successful ones later celebrated as great heroism. It had struck her as the worst sort of cynicism on John's part . . . and yet her husband was not a cynical man. Could it therefore be the truth?

In this case, it was a man in his early thirties, holding a weapon in his hands and looking as though he didn't have a friend in the world—

—but the mother in her told Sandy that her daughter was probably safe now, along with her grandchild. The dead one had called after her, but now he was messily dead on the hospital floor, and so Patsy had probably gotten away. That was the best information of the day, and she closed her eyes to whisper a prayer of thanks.

"Hey, Doc," Vega said in greeting.

"Where are they?"

Vega pointed. "Around this corner. Four of them, we think. George dropped one for the count."

"Talk to them yet?"

Oso shook his head. "No."

"Okay." Bellow took a deep breath. "This is Paul," he called loudly. "Is Timothy there?"

"Yes," came the reply.

"Are you okay?—not wounded or anything, I mean," the psychiatrist asked.

O'Neil wiped some blood from his face—the glass fragments in the van had made some minor cuts. "We're all fine. Who are you?"

"I'm a physician. My name is Paul Bellow. What's yours?"

"Timothy will do for now."

"Okay, fine. Timothy, uh, you need to think about your situation, okay?"

"I know what that is," O'Neil responded, an edge on his voice.

Outside, things were gradually becoming organized. Ambulances were on the scene, plus medical orderlies from the British Army. The wounded were being moved now, to the base hospital at Hereford where surgeons were waiting to treat them, and coming in were SAS soldiers, thirty of them, to assist the Rainbow troopers. Colonel Malloy's helicopter set down on the pad at the base, and the two prisoners were taken to the military hospital for treatment.

"Tim, you will not be getting away from here. I think you know that," Bellow observed, in as gentle a voice as he could manage.

"I can kill hostages if you don't let me leave," O'Neil countered.

"Yes, you can do that, and then we can come in on you and try to stop that from happening, but in either case, you will not be getting away. But what do you gain by murdering people, Tim?"

"The freedom of my country!"

"That is happening already, isn't it?" Bellow asked. "There are peace

accords, Tim. And Tim, tell me, what country ever began on a foundation of the murder of innocent people? What will your countrymen think if you murder your hostages?"

"We are freedom fighters!"

"Okay, fine, you are revolutionary soldiers," the doctor agreed. "But soldiers, real soldiers, don't murder people. Okay, fine, earlier today you and your friends shot it out with soldiers, and that's not murder. But killing unarmed people *is* murder, Tim. I think you know that. Those people in there with you, are any of them armed? Do any of them wear uniforms?"

"So what? They are the enemy of my country!"

"What makes them enemies, Tim? Where they were born? Have any of them tried to hurt you? Have any of them hurt your country? Why don't you ask them?" he suggested next.

O'Neil shook his head. The purpose of this was to make him surrender. He knew that. He looked around at his comrades. It was hard for all of them to meet the eyes of the others. They were trapped, and all of them knew it. Their resistance was a thing of the mind rather than of arms, and all of their minds held doubts to which they had as yet not given voice, but the doubts were there, and they all knew it.

"We want a bus to take us away!"

"Take you away to where?" the doctor asked.

"Just get us the bloody bus!" O'Neil screamed.

"Okay, I can talk to people about that, but they have to know where the bus is going to, so that the police can clear the roads for you," Bellow observed reasonably. It was just a matter of time now. Tim—it would have been useful to know if he'd been truthful in giving out his real name, though Bellow was confident that he had indeed done that—wasn't talking about killing, hadn't actually threatened it, hadn't given a deadline or tossed out a body yet. He wasn't a killer, at least not a murderer. He thought of himself as a soldier, and that was different from a criminal, to terrorists a very important difference. He didn't fear death, though he did fear failure, and he feared almost as much being remembered as a killer of the innocent. To kill soldiers was one thing. To murder ordinary women and children was something else. It was an old story for terrorists. The most vulnerable part of any person was his self-image. Those who cared what others thought of them, those who looked in mirrors when they shaved, those people could be worked. It was just a matter of time. They were different from the real fanatics. You could wear this sort down.
"Oh, Tim?"

"Yes?"

"Could you do something for me?"

"What?"

"Could you let me make sure the hostages are okay? That's something I have to do to keep my boss happy. Can I come around to see?"

O'Neil hesitated.

"Tim, come on, okay? You have the things you have to do, and I have the things I have to do, okay? I'm a physician. I don't carry a gun or anything. You have nothing to be afraid of." Telling them that they had nothing to fear, and thus suggesting that they were unnecessarily afraid, was usually a good card

to play. There followed the usual hesitation, confirming that they were indeed afraid—and that meant Tim was rational, and that was good news for Rainbow's psychiatrist.

"No, Tim, don't!" Peter Barry urged. "Give them nothing."

"But how will we get out of here, get the bus, if we don't cooperate on something?" O'Neil looked around at the other three. Sam Barry nodded. So did Dan McCorley.

"All right," O'Neil called. "Come back to us."

"Thank you," Bellow called. He looked at Vega, the senior soldier present.

"Watch your ass, doc," the first sergeant suggested. To go unarmed into the lair of armed bad guys was, he thought, not very bright. He'd never thought that the doc had such stuff in him.

"Always," Paul Bellow assured him. Then he took a deep breath and walked the ten feet to the corner, and turned, disappearing from the view of the Rainbow troopers.

It always struck Bellow as strange, to the point of being comical, that the difference between safety and danger was a distance of a few feet and the turning of one corner. Yet he looked up with genuine interest. He'd rarely met a criminal under these circumstances. So much the better that they were armed and he was not. They would need the comfortable feelings that came with the perception of power to balance the fact that, armed or not, they were in a cage from which there was no escape.

"You're hurt," Bellow said on seeing Timothy's face.

"It's nothing, just a few scratches."

"Why not have somebody work on it for you?"

"It's nothing," Tim O'Neil said again.

"Okay, it's your face," Bellow said, looking and counting four of them, all armed with the same sort of weapon, AKMS, his memory told him. Only then did he count the hostages. He recognized Sandy Clark. There were seven others, all very frightened, by the look of them, but that was to be expected. "So, what exactly do you want?"

"We want a bus, and we want it quickly," O'Neil replied.

"Okay, I can work on that, but it'll take time to get things organized, and we'll need something in return."

"What's that?" Timothy asked.

"Some hostages to be released," the psychiatrist answered.

"No, we only have eight."

"Look, Tim, when I deal with the people I have to go to—to get the bus you want, okay?—I have to offer them something, or why else should they give me anything to give you?" Bellow asked reasonably. "It's how the game is played, Tim. The game has rules. Come on, you know that. You trade some of what you have for some of what you want."

"So?"

"So, as a sign of good faith, you give me a couple hostages—women and kids, usually, because that looks better." Bellow looked again. Four women,

four men. It would be good to get Sandy Clark out.

"And then?"

"And then I tell my superiors that you want a bus and that you've shown good faith. I have to represent you to them, right?"

"Ah, and you're on our side?" another man asked. Bellow looked and saw that he was a twin, with a brother standing only a few feet away. Twin terrorists. Wasn't that interesting?

"No, I won't say that. Look, I am not going to insult your intelligence. You people know the fix you're in. But if you want to get things, you have to deal for them. That's the rule, and it's a rule I didn't make. I have to be the go-between. That means I represent you to my bosses, and I represent my bosses to you. If you need time to think it over, fine, I won't be far away, but the faster you move on things, the faster I can move. I need you guys to think about that, okay?"

"Get the bus," Timothy said.

"In return for what?" Paul asked.

"Two women." O'Neil turned. "That one and that one."

"Can they come out with me?" Bellow saw that Timothy had actually indicated Sandy Clark. This kid, O'Neil, was overwhelmed by the circumstances, and that was probably good, too.

"Yes, but get us that bloody bus!"

"I'll do my best," Bellow promised, gesturing at the two women to follow him back around the corner.

"Welcome back, Doc," Vega said quietly. "Hey, great!" he added on seeing the two women. "Howdy, Mrs. Clark. I'm Julio Vega."

"Mom!" Patsy Chavez ran from her place of safety and embraced her mother. Then a pair of recently arrived SAS troopers took all of the women away.

"Vega to Command," Oso called.

"Price to Vega."

"Tell Six his wife and daughter are both safe."

• • •

John was back in a truck, heading to the hospital to take charge of the operation, with Domingo Chavez next to him. Both heard the radio call. In both cases, the heads dropped for a brief moment of relief. But there were six more hostages.

"Okay, this is Clark, what's happening now?"

In the hospital, Vega gave his radio set to Dr. Bellow.

"John? This is Paul."

"Yeah, Doc, what's happening now?"

"Give me a couple hours and I can give them to you, John. They know they're trapped. It's just a matter of talking them through. There's four of them now, all in their thirties, all armed. They now have six hostages. But I've

spoken with their leader, and I can work with this kid, John."

"Okay, Doc, we'll be there in ten minutes. What are they asking for?"

"The usual," Bellow answered. "They want a bus to somewhere."

John thought about that. Make them come outside, and he had riflemen to handle the problem. Four shots, child's play. "Do we deliver?"

"Not yet. We'll let this one simmer a little."

"Okay, Doc, that's your call. When I get there, you can fill me in more. See you soon. Out."

"Okay." Bellow handed the radio back to First Sergeant Vega. This soldier had a diagram of the ground floor pinned to the wall.

"The hostages are here," Bellow said. "Subjects are here and here. Two of them are twins, by the way, all male Caucs in their thirties, all carrying that folding-stock version of the AK-47."

Vega nodded. " 'Kay. If we have to move on them . . ."

"You won't, at least I don't think so. Their leader isn't a murderer, well, he doesn't want to be."

"You say so, Doc," Vega observed dubiously. But the good news was that they could flip a handful of flash-bangs around the corner and move in right behind them, bagging all four of the fuckers . . . but at the risk of losing a hostage, which was to be avoided if possible. Oso hadn't appreciated how ballsy this doctor was, walking up to four armed bad guys and talking to them —and getting Mrs. Clark released just like that. Damn. He turned to look at the six SAS guys who'd arrived, dressed in black like his people, and ready to rock if it came to that. Paddy Connolly was outside the building with his bag of tricks. The position was isolated, and the situation was pretty much under control. For the first time in an hour, First Sergeant Vega was allowing himself to relax a little.

"Well, hello, Sean," Bill Tawney said, recognizing the face at the Hereford base hospital. "Having a difficult day, are we?"

Grady's shoulder had been immobilized and would require surgery. It turned out that he'd taken a pair of 9-mm bullets in it, one of which had shattered the top of his left humerus, the long bone of the upper arm. It was a painful injury despite the medication given to him ten minutes before. His face turned to see an Englishman in a tie. Grady naturally enough took him for a policeman, and didn't say anything.

"You picked the wrong patch to play in today, my boy," Tawney said next. "For your information, you are now in the Hereford base military hospital. We will talk later, Sean." For the moment, an orthopedic surgeon had work to do, to repair the injured arm. Tawney watched an army nurse medicate him for the coming procedure. Then he went to a different room to speak to the one rescued from the wrecked truck.

This would be a merry day for all involved, the "Six" man thought. The motorway was closed with the two car smashes, and there were enough police constables about to blacken the landscape with their uniforms, plus the SAS and Rainbow people. Soon to be added were a joint mob of "Five" and "Six" people en route from London, all of whom would be claiming jurisdiction, and that would be quite a mess, since there was a written agreement between the

U.S. and U.K. governments on the status of Rainbow, which hadn't been drafted with this situation in mind, but which guaranteed that the CIA Station Chief London would soon be here as well to officiate. Tawney figured he'd be the ringmaster for this particular circus—and that maybe a whip, chair, and pistol might be needed.

Tawney tempered his good humor with the knowledge that two Rainbow troopers were dead, with four more wounded and being treated in this same hospital. People he vaguely knew, whose faces had been familiar, two of which he'd never see again, but the profit of that was Sean Grady, one of the most extreme PIRA members, now beginning what would surely be a lifetime of custody by Her Majesty's Government. He would have a wealth of good information, and his job would be to start extracting it.

"Where's the bloody bus?"

"Tim, I've talked to my superiors, and they're thinking about it."

"What's to think about?" O'Neil demanded.

"You know the answer to that, Tim. We're dealing with government bureaucrats, and they never take action without covering their own backsides first."

"Paul, I have six hostages here and I can—"

"Yes, you can, but you really can't, can you? Timothy, if you do *that,* then the soldiers outside come storming in here, and that ends the situation, and you will be remembered forever as a killer of innocent people, a murderer. You want that, Tim? Do you really want that?" Bellow paused. "What about your families? Hell, what about how your political movement is perceived? Killing these people is a hard thing to justify, isn't it? You're not Muslim extremists, are you? You're Christians, remember? Christians aren't supposed to do things like that. Anyway, that threat is useful as a threat, but it's not very useful as a tool. You can't do that, Tim. It would only result in your death and your political damnation. Oh, by the way, we have Sean Grady in custody," Bellow added, with careful timing.

"What?" That, he saw, shook Timothy.

"He was captured trying to escape. He was shot in the process, but he'll survive. They're operating on him right now."

It was like pricking a large balloon, the psychiatrist saw. He'd just let some air out of his antagonist. This was how it was done, a little at a time. Too fast and he might react violently, but wear them down bit by bit, and they were yours. Bellow had written a book on the subject. First establish physical control, which meant containment. Then establish information control. Then feed them information, bit by precious bit, in a manner as carefully orchestrated as a Broadway musical. Then you had them.

"You will release Sean to us. He goes on the bus with us!"

"Timothy, he's on an operating table right now, and he's going to be there for hours. If they even attempted to move him now, the results could be lethal—they could kill the man, Tim. So, much as you might want it, that's just not possible. It can't happen. I'm sorry about that, but nobody can change it."

His leader was a prisoner now? Tim O'Neil thought. Sean was captured? Strangely that seemed worse than his own situation. Even if he were in prison,

Sean might come up with a way of freeing him, but with Sean on the Isle of Wight . . . all was lost, wasn't it? But—

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Tim, in a situation like this, I can't lie. I'd just screw up. It's too hard to be a good liar, and if you caught me in a lie, you'd never believe me again, and that would end my usefulness to my bosses and to you, too, wouldn't it?" Again the voice of quiet reason.

"You said you're a doctor?"

"That's right." Bellow nodded.

"Where do you practice?"

"Mainly here now, but I did my residency at Harvard. I've worked at four different places, and taught some."

"So, your job is to get people like me to surrender, isn't it?" Anger, finally, at the obvious.

Bellow shook his head. "No, I think of my job as keeping people alive. I'm a physician, Tim. I am not allowed to kill people or to help others to kill people. I swore an oath on that one a long time ago. You have guns. Other people around that corner have guns. I don't want any of you to get killed. There's been enough of that today, hasn't there? Tim, do you enjoy killing people?"

"Why—no, of course not, who does?"

"Well, some do," Bellow told him, deciding to build up his ego a little. "We call them sociopathic personalities, but you're not one of them. You're a soldier. You fight for something you believe in. So do the people back there." Bellow waved to where the Rainbow people were. "They respect you, and I hope you respect them. Soldiers don't murder people. Criminals do that, and a soldier isn't a criminal." In addition to being true, this was an important thought to communicate to his interlocutor. All the more so because a terrorist was also a romantic, and to be considered a common criminal was psychologically very wounding to them. He'd just built up their self-images in order to steer them away from something he didn't want them to do. They were soldiers, not criminals, and they had to act like soldiers, not criminals.

"Dr. Bellow?" a voice called from around the corner. "Phone call, sir."

"Tim, can I go get it?" Always ask permission to do something. Give them the illusion of being in command of the situation.

"Yeah." O'Neil waved him away. Bellow walked back to where the soldiers were.

He saw John Clark standing there. Together they walked fifty feet into another part of the hospital.

"Thanks for getting my wife and little girl out, Paul."

Bellow shrugged. "It was mainly luck. He's a little overwhelmed by all this, and he's not thinking very well. They want a bus."

"You told me before," Clark reminded him. "Do we give it to 'em?"

"We won't have to do that. I'm in a poker game, John, and I'm holding a straight flush. Unless something screws up really bad, we have this one under control."

"Noonan's outside, and he has a mike on the window. I listened in on the last part. Pretty good, doctor."

"Thanks." Bellow rubbed his face. The tension was real for him, but he

could only show it here. In with Timothy he had to be cool as ice, like a friendly and respected teacher. “What’s the story on the other prisoners?”

“No change. The Grady guy is being operated on—it’ll take a few hours, they say. The other one’s unconscious still, and we don’t have a name or ID on him anyway.”

“Grady’s the leader?”

“We think so, that’s what the intel tells us.”

“So he can tell us a lot. You want me there when he comes out of the OR,” Paul told Rainbow Six.

“You need to finish up here first.”

“I know. I’m going back.” Clark patted him on the shoulder and Bellow walked back to see the terrorists.

“Well?” Timothy asked.

“Well, they haven’t decided on the bus yet. Sorry,” Bellow added in a downcast voice. “I thought I had them convinced, but they can’t get their asses in gear.”

“You tell them that if they don’t, we’ll—”

“No, you won’t, Tim. You know that. I know that. *They* know that.”

“Then why send the bus?” O’Neil asked, close to losing control now.

“Because *I* told them that you’re serious, and they have to take your threat seriously. If they don’t believe you’ll do it, they have to remember that you might, and if you do, then *they* look bad to their bosses.” Timothy shook his head at that convoluted logic, looking more puzzled than angry now. “Trust me,” Paul Bellow went on. “I’ve done this before, and I know how it works. It’s easier negotiating with soldiers like you than with those damned bureaucrats. People like you can make decisions. People like that run away from doing it. They don’t care much about getting people killed, but they do care about looking bad in the newspapers.”

Then something good happened. Tim reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. A sure sign of stress and an attempt to control it.

“Hazardous to your health, boy,” Clark observed, looking at the TV picture Noonan had established. The assault plan was completely ready. Connolly had line charges set on the windows, both to open an entry path and to distract the terrorists. Vega, Tomlinson, and Bates, from Team-1, would toss flash-bangs at the same time and dart into the room to take the bad guys down with aimed fire. The only downside to that, as always, was that one of them could turn and hose the hostages as his last conscious act, or even by accident, which was just as lethal. From the sound of it, Bellow was doing okay. If these subjects had any brains at all, they’d know it was time to call it a day, but John reminded himself that he’d never contemplated life in prison before, at least not this immediately, and he imagined it wasn’t a fun thought. He now had a surfeit of soldierly talent at his disposal. The SAS guys who’d arrived had chopped to his operational command, though their own colonel had come as well to kibitz in the hospital’s main lobby.

“Tough day for all of us, isn’t it, Tim?” the psychiatrist asked.

“Could have been a better one,” Timothy O’Neil agreed.

"You know how this one will end, don't you?" Bellow offered, like a nice fly to a brook trout, wondering if he'd rise to it.

"Yes, doctor, I do." He paused. "I haven't even fired my rifle today. I haven't killed anyone. Jimmy did," he went on, gesturing to the body on the floor, "but not any of us."

Bingo! Bellow thought. "That counts for something, Tim. As a matter of fact, it counts for a lot. You know, the war will be over soon. They're going to make peace finally, and when that happens, well, there's going to be an amnesty for most of the fighters. So you have some hope. You all do," Paul told the other three, who were watching and listening . . . and wavering, as their leader was. They had to know that all was lost. Surrounded, their leader captured, this could only end in one of two ways, with their deaths or their imprisonment. Escape was not a practical possibility, and they knew that the attempt to move their hostages to a bus would only expose them to certain death in a new and different way.

"Tim?"

"Yes?" He looked up from his smoke.

"If you set your weapons down on the floor, you have my word that you will not be hurt in any way."

"And go to prison?" Defiance and anger in the reply.

"Timothy, you can get out of prison someday. You cannot get out of *death*. Please think about that. For God's sake, I'm a physician," Bellow reminded him. "I don't like seeing people die."

Timothy O'Neil turned to look at his comrades. All eyes were downcast. Even the Barry twins showed no particular defiance.

"Guys, if you haven't hurt anyone today, then, yes, you will go to prison, but someday you'll have a good chance to get out when the amnesty is promulgated. Otherwise, you die for nothing at all. Not for your country. They don't make heroes out of people who kill civilians," he reminded them once again. Keep repeating, Bellow thought. Keep drumming it in. "Killing soldiers, yes, that's something soldiers do, but not murdering innocent people. You will die for nothing at all—or you will live, and be free again someday. It's up to you, guys. You have the guns. But there isn't going to be a bus. You will not escape, and you have six people you can kill, sure, but what does that get for you, except a trip to hell? Call it a day, Timothy," he concluded, wondering if some Catholic nun in grade school had addressed him that way.

It wasn't quite that easy for Tim O'Neil. The idea of imprisonment in a cage with common criminals, having his family come to visit him there like an animal in a zoo, gave him chills . . . but he'd known that this was a possibility for years, and though he preferred the mental image of heroic death, a blazing gun in his hand firing at the enemies of his country, this American doctor had spoken the truth. There was no glory in murdering six English civilians. No songs would be written and sung about this exploit, no pints hoisted to his name in the pubs of Ulster . . . and what was left to him was inglorious death . . . life, in prison or not, was preferable to that sort of death.

Timothy Dennis O'Neil turned to look at his fellow PIRA soldiers and saw the same expression that they saw on his face. Without a spoken agreement, they all nodded. O'Neil safed his rifle and set it on the floor. The others did

the same.

Bellow walked over to them to shake their hands.

"Six to Vega, move in now!" Clark called, seeing the picture on the small black-and-white screen.

Oso Vega moved quickly around the corner, his MP-10 up in his hands. There they were, standing with the doc. Tomlinson and Bates pushed them, not too roughly, against the wall. The former covered them while the latter patted them down. Seconds later, two uniformed policemen came in with handcuffs and, to the amazement of the soldiers, read them their legal rights. And just that easily and quietly, this day's fighting was over.

CHAPTER 29

RECOVERY

The day hadn't ended for Dr. Bellow. Without so much as a drink of water for his dry throat, he hopped into a green-painted British Army truck for the trip back to Hereford. It hadn't ended for those left behind either.

"Hey, baby," Ding said. He'd finally found his wife outside the hospital, surrounded by a ring of SAS troopers.

Patsy ran the ten steps to him and hugged her husband as tightly as her swollen abdomen allowed.

"You okay?"

She nodded, tears in her eyes. "You?"

"I'm fine. It was a little exciting there for a while—and we have some people down, but everything's under control now."

"One of them—somebody killed him, and—"

"I know. He was pointing a weapon at you, and that's why he got himself killed." Chavez reminded himself that he owed Sergeant Tomlinson a beer for that bit of shooting—in fact, he owed him a lot more than that, but in the community of warriors, this was how such debts were paid. But for now, just holding Patsy in his arms was as far as his thinking went. Tears welled up in his eyes. Ding blinked them away. That wasn't part of his *machismo* self-image. He wondered what damage this day's events might have had on his wife. She was a healer, not a killer, and yet she'd seen traumatic death so close at hand. Those IRA bastards! he thought. They'd invaded *his* life, and attacked noncombatants, and killed some of his team members. Somebody had fed them information on how to do it. Somewhere there was an information leak, a bad one, and finding it would be their first priority.

"How's the little guy?" Chavez asked his wife.

"Feels okay, Ding. Really. I'm okay," Patsy assured him.

"Okay, baby, I have to go do some things now. You're going home." He pointed to an SAS trooper and waved him over. "Take her back to the base, okay?"

"Yes, sir," the sergeant replied. Together they walked her to the parking lot. Sandy Clark was there with John, also hugging and holding hands, and the smart move seemed to be to take them both to John's quarters. An officer from the SAS volunteered, as did a sergeant to ride shotgun, which in this case was not a rhetorical phrase. As usual, once the horse had escaped from the barn, the door would be locked and guarded. But that was a universal human tendency, and in another minute both women were being driven off, a police escort with them as well.

"Where to, Mr. C?" Chavez asked.

"Our friends were taken to the base hospital. Paul is there already. He wants to interview Grady—the leader—when he comes out of surgery. I think we want to be there for that."

"Roger that, John. Let's get moving."

Popov was most of the way back to London, listening to his car radio. Whoever was briefing the media knew and talked too much. Then he heard that the leader of the IRA raiders had been captured, and Dmitriy's blood turned to ice. If they had Grady, then they had the man who knew who he was, knew his cover name, knew about the money transfer, knew too damned much. It wasn't time for panic, but it was damned sure time for action.

Popov checked his watch. The banks were still open. He lifted his cell phone and called Bern. In a minute, he had the correct bank officer on the line and gave him the account number, which the officer called up on his computer. Then Popov gave him the transaction code, and ordered the funds transferred into another account. The officer didn't even express his disappointment that so much money was being removed. Well, the bank had plenty of deposits, didn't it? The Russian was now richer by over five million dollars, but poorer in that the enemy might soon have his cover name and physical description. Popov had to get out of the country. He took the exit to Heathrow and ended up at Terminal Four. Ten minutes later, having returned his rental car, he went in and got the last first-class ticket on a British Airways flight to Chicago. He had to hurry to catch the flight, but made it aboard, where a pretty stewardess conveyed him to his seat, and soon thereafter the 747 left the gate.

"That was quite a mess," John Brightling observed, muting the TV in his office. Hereford would lead every TV newscast in the world.

"They were unlucky," Henriksen replied. "But those commandos are pretty good, and if you give them a break, they'll use it. What the hell, four or five of them went down. Nobody's ever pulled that off against a force like this one."

Brightling knew that Bill's heart was divided on the mission. He had to have at least some sympathy with the people he'd helped to attack. "Fallout?"

"Well, if they got the leader alive, they're going to sweat him, but these IRA guys don't sing. I mean, they *never* sing. The only pipeline they could possibly have to us is Dmitriy, and he's a pro. He's moving right now, probably on an airplane to somewhere if I know him. He's got all sorts of false travel documents, credit cards, IDs. So, he's probably safe. John, the KGB knew how to train its people, trust me."

"If they should get him, would he talk?" Brightling asked.

"That's a risk. Yes, he might well spill his guts," Henriksen had to admit. "If he gets back, I'll debrief him on the hazards involved. . . ."

"Would it be a good idea to . . . well . . . eliminate him?"

The question embarrassed his boss, Henriksen saw, as he prepared a careful and honest answer: "Strictly speaking, yes, but there are dangers in that, John. He's a pro. He probably has a mailbox somewhere." Seeing Brightling's confusion, he explained, "You guard against the possibility of being killed by writing everything down and putting it in a safe place. If you don't access the

box every month or so, the information inside gets distributed according to a prearranged plan. You have a lawyer do that for you. *That* is a big risk to us, okay? Dead or alive, he can burn us, and in this case, it's more dangerous if he's dead." Henriksen paused. "No, we want him alive—and under our control, John."

"Okay, you handle it, Bill." Brightling leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. They were too close now to run unnecessary risks. Okay, the Russian would be handled, put under wraps. It might even save Popov's life—hell, he thought, it *would* save his life, wouldn't it? He hoped that the Russian would be properly appreciative. Brightling had to be properly appreciative, too. This Rainbow bunch was crippled now, or at least badly hurt. It had to be. Popov had fulfilled two missions, he'd helped raise the world's consciousness about terrorism, and thus gotten Global Security its contract with the Sydney Olympics, and then he'd helped sting this new counterterror bunch, hopefully enough to take them out of play. The operation was now fully in place and awaited only the right time for activation.

So close, Brightling thought. It was probably normal to have the jitters at moments like this. Confidence was a thing of distance. The farther away you were, the easier it was to think yourself invincible, but then you got close and the dangers grew with their proximity. But that didn't change anything, did it? No, not really. The plan *was* perfect. They just had to execute it.

Sean Grady came out of surgery at just after eight in the evening, following three and a half hours on the table. The orthopod who'd worked on him was first-rate, Bellow saw. The humerus was fixed in place with a cobalt-steel pin that would be permanent and large enough that in the unlikely event that Grady ever entered an international airport in the future, he'd probably set off the metal detector while stark naked. Luckily for him the brachial plexus had not been damaged by the two bullets that had entered his body, and so he'd suffer no permanent loss of use of his arm. The secondary damage to his chest was minor. He'd recover fully, the British Army surgeon concluded, and so could enjoy full physical health during the lifelong prison term that surely awaited him.

The surgery had been performed under full general anesthesia, of course, using nitrous oxide, just as in American hospitals, coupled with the lingering effects of the barbiturates that had been used to begin his sedation. Bellow sat by the bed in the hospital's recovery room, watching the bio-monitors and waiting for him to awaken. It would not be an event so much as a process, probably a lengthy one.

There were police around now, both in uniform and out, watching with him. Clark and Chavez were there, too, standing and staring at the man who'd so brazenly attacked their men—and their women, Bellow reminded himself. Chavez especially had eyes like flint—hard, dark, and cold, though his face appeared placid enough. He thought he knew the senior Rainbow people pretty well. They were clearly professionals, and in the case of Clark and Chavez, people who'd lived in the black world and done some very black things, most of which he didn't and would never know about. But Bellow knew that both men were people of order, like police officers in many ways,

keepers of the rules. Maybe they broke them sometimes, but it was only to sustain them. They were romantics, just as the terrorists were, but the difference was in their choice of cause. Their purpose was to protect. Grady's was to upset, and in the difference of mission was the difference between the men. It was that simple to them. Now, however angry they might feel at this sleeping man, they would not cause him physical harm. They'd leave his punishment to the society that Grady had so viciously attacked and whose rules they were sworn to protect, if not always uphold.

"Any time now," Bellow said. Grady's vital signs were all coming up. The body moved a little as his brain started to come back to wakefulness, just minor flexes here and there. It would find that some parts were not responding as they should, then focus on them to see what the limitations were, looking for pain but not finding it yet. Now the head started turning, slowly, left and right, and soon . . .

The eyelids fluttered, also slowly. Bellow consulted the list of IDs that others had drawn up and hoped that the British police and the guys from "Five" had provided him with good data.

"Sean?" he said. "Sean, are you awake?"

"Who? . . ."

"It's me, it's Jimmy Carr, Sean. You back with us now, Sean?"

"Where . . . am . . . I?" the voice croaked.

"University Hospital, Dublin, Sean. Dr. McCaskey just finished fixing your shoulder up. You're in the recovery room. You're going to be okay, Sean. But, my God, getting you here was the devil's own work. Does it hurt, your shoulder, Sean?"

"No, no hurt now, Jimmy. How many? . . ."

"How many of us? Ten, ten of us got away. They're off in the safe houses now, lad."

"Good." The eyes opened, and saw someone wearing a surgical mask and cap, but he couldn't focus well, and the image was a blur. The room . . . yes, it was a hospital . . . the ceiling, rectangular tiles held in a metal rack . . . the lighting, fluorescent. His throat was dry and a little sore from the intubation, but it didn't matter. He was living inside a dream, and none of this was actually happening. He was floating on a white, awkward cloud, but at least Jimmy Carr was here.

"Roddy, where's Roddy?"

"Roddy's dead, Sean," Bellow answered. "Sorry, but he didn't make it."

"Oh, damn . . ." Grady breathed. "Not Roddy . . ."

"Sean, we need some information, we need it quickly."

"What . . . information?"

"The chap who got us the information, we need to contact him, but we don't know how to find him."

"Iosef, you mean?"

Bingo, Paul Bellow thought. "Yes, Sean, Iosef, we need to get in touch with him . . ."

"The money? I have that in my wallet, lad."

Oh, Clark thought, turning. Bill Tawney had all of Grady's personal possessions sitting on a portable table. In the wallet, he saw, were two

hundred and ten British pounds, one hundred seventy Irish pounds, and several slips of paper. On one yellow Post-it note were two numbers, six digits each, with no explanation. A Swiss or other numbered account? the spook wondered.

"How do we access it, Sean? We need to do that at once, you see, my friend."

"Swiss Commercial Bank in Bern . . . call . . . account number and control number in . . . in my wallet."

"Good, thank you, Sean . . . and Iosef, what's the rest of his name . . . how do we get in touch with him, Sean? Please, we need to do that right away, Sean." Bellow's false Irish accent wasn't good enough to pass muster with a drunk, but Grady's current condition was far beyond anything alcohol could do to the human mind.

"Don't . . . know. He contacts us, remember. Iosef Andreyevich contacts me through Robert . . . through the network . . . never gave me a way to contact him."

"His last name, Sean, what is it, you never told me."

"Serov, Iosef Andreyevich Serov . . . Russian . . . KGB chap . . . Bekaa Valley . . . years ago."

"Well, he gave us good information on this Rainbow mob, didn't he, Sean?"

"How many did we . . . how many . . . ?"

"Ten, Sean, we killed ten of them, and we got away, but you were shot on the escape in your Jaguar, remember? But we hurt them, Sean, we hurt them badly," Bellow assured him.

"Good . . . good . . . hurt them . . . kill them . . . kill them all," Grady whispered from his gurney.

"Not quite, asshole," Chavez observed quietly, from a few feet away.

"Did we get the two women? . . . Jimmy, did we get them?"

"Oh, yes, Sean, I shot them myself. Now, Sean, this Russian chap. I need to know more about him."

"Iosef? Good man, KGB, got the money and the drugs for us. Lots of money . . . six million . . . six . . . and the cocaine," Grady added for the TV Minicam that sat on a tripod next to the bed. "Got it for us, at Shannon, remember? Flew in on the little jet, the money and the drugs from America . . . well, think it was America . . . must have been . . . the way he talks now, American accent like the television, funny thing for a Russian, Jimmy . . ."

"Iosef Andreyevich Serov?"

The figure on the bed tried to nod. "That's how they do names, Jimmy. Joseph, son of Andrew."

"What does he look like, Sean?"

"Tall as me . . . brown hair, eyes . . . round face, speaks many languages . . . Bekaa Valley . . . nineteen eighty six . . . good man, helped us a lot . . ."

"How we doing, Bill?" Clark whispered to Tawney.

"Well, none of this can be used in court, but—"

"Fuck the courts, Bill! How good is this? Does it match with anything?"

"The name Serov doesn't ring a bell, but I can check with our files. We can run these numbers down, and there will be a paper trail of some sort, but"—he checked his watch—"it will have to wait until tomorrow."

Clark nodded. “Hell of an interrogation method.”

“Never seen this before. Yes, it is.”

Just then Grady’s eyes opened more. He saw the others around the bed, and his face twisted into a question. “Who are you?” he asked groggily, finding a strange face in this dream.

“My name is Clark, John Clark, Sean.”

The eyes went wide for a second. “But you’re . . .”

“That’s right, pal. That’s who I am. And thanks for spilling your guts. We got all of you, Sean. All fifteen dead or captured. I hope you like it here in England, boy. You’re going to be here a long, long time. Why don’t you go back to sleep now, lad?” he asked with grossly overdone courtesy. *I’ve killed better men than you, punk,* he thought, behind a supposedly impassive mien that in fact proclaimed his feelings.

Dr. Bellow pocketed his tape recorder and his notes. It rarely failed. The twilight state following general anesthesia made any mind vulnerable to suggestion. That was why people with high security clearances never went to the hospital without someone from their parent agencies nearby. In this case he’d had ten minutes or so to dive deep inside and come back out with information. It could never be used in a court of law, but then, Rainbow wasn’t composed of cops.

“Malloy got him, eh?” Clark asked on his way to the door.

“Actually it was Sergeant Nance,” Chavez answered.

“We have to get him something nice for this job,” Rainbox Six observed. “We owe him for this. We got a name now, Domingo. A Russian name.”

“Not a good one, it’s gotta be a cover name.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, John, don’t you recognize it? Serov, former chairman of KGB, back in the ’60s, I think, fired a long time ago because he screwed something up.”

Clark nodded. It wouldn’t be the name on the guy’s real passport, and that was too bad, but it was a name, and names could be tracked. They walked out of the hospital into the cool British evening. John’s car was waiting, with Corporal Mole looking rather pleased with himself. He’d get a nice ribbon for the day’s work and probably a very nice letter from this American pseudo-general. John and Ding got in, and the car drove to the base stockade, where the others were being kept for the time being, because the local jail wasn’t secure enough. Inside, they were guided to an interrogation room. Timothy O’Neil was waiting there, handcuffed to a chair.

“Hello,” John said. “My name is Clark. This is Domingo Chavez.”

The prisoner just stared at them.

“You were sent here to murder our wives,” John went on. That didn’t make him so much as blink either. “But you fucked it all up. There were fifteen of you. There are six now. The rest won’t be doing much of anything. You know, people like you make me ashamed to be Irish. Jesus, kid, you’re not even an *effective* criminal. By the way, Clark is just my working name. Before that, it was John Kelly, and my wife’s maiden name was O’Toole. So, now you IRA pukes are killing Irish-Catholic Americans, eh? It’s not going to look good in the papers, punk.”

“Not to mention selling coke, all that coke the Russian brought in,” Chavez

added.

"Drugs? We don't—"

"Sure you do. Sean Grady just told us everything, sang like a fucking canary. We have the number of the Swiss bank account, and this Russian guy—"

"Serov," Chavez added helpfully, "Iosef Andreyevich Serov, Sean's old pal from the Bekaa Valley."

"I have nothing to say." Which was more than O'Neil had planned to say. Sean Grady talked. Sean? That was not possible—but where else could they have gotten that information? Was the world totally mad?

" 'Mano," Ding continued, "that was *my* wife you wanted to kill, and she's got *my* baby in her belly. You think you're going to be around much longer? John, this guy ever going to get out of prison?"

"Not anytime soon, Domingo."

"Well, Timmy, let me tell you something. Where I come from, you mess with a man's lady, there's a price that has to be paid. And it ain't no little price. And where I come from, you *never, ever* mess with a man's kids. The price for that's even worse, you little fuck. Little fuck?" Chavez wondered. "No, I think we can fix that, John. I can fix him so he ain't never gonna fuck anything." From the scabbard on his belt, Ding extracted a Marine-type K-Bar fighting knife. The blade was black except for the gleaming quarter-inch edge.

"Not sure that's a good idea, Ding," Clark objected weakly.

"Why not? Feels pretty good to me right now, man." Chavez got out of his chair and walked up to O'Neil. Then he lowered his knife hand to the chair. "Ain't hard to do, man, just *flick,* and we can start your sex-change operation. I ain't a doc, you understand, but I know the first part of the procedure, y'know?" Ding bent down to press his nose against O'Neil's. "Man, you don't *ever, EVER* mess with a Latino's lady! Do you hear me?"

Timothy O'Neil had had a bad enough day to this point. He looked in the eyes of this Spanish man, heard the accent, and knew that this was not an Englishman, not even an American of the type he thought he knew.

"I've done this before, man. Mainly I kill with guns, but I've taken bastards down with a knife once or twice. It's funny how they squirm—but I ain't gonna kill you, boy. I'm just gonna make you a girl." The knife moved tight up against the crotch of the man cuffed to the chair.

"Back it off, Domingo!" Clark ordered.

"Fuck you, John! That's my *wife* he wanted to hurt, man. Well, I'm gonna fix this little fuck so he never hurts no more girls, 'mano." Chavez turned to look at the prisoner again. "I'm gonna watch your eyes when I cut it all off, Timmy. I want to see your face when you start to turn into a girl."

O'Neil blinked, as he looked deep into the dark, Spanish eyes. He saw the rage there, hot and passionate—but as bad as that was, so was the reason for it. He and his mates had planned to kidnap and maybe kill a pregnant woman, and there was shame in that, and for that reason there was justice in the fury before his face.

"It wasn't like that!" O'Neil gasped. "We didn't—we didn't—"

"Didn't have the chance to rape her, eh? Well, ain't that a big fuckin' deal?" Chavez observed.

"No, no, not rape—never, nobody in the unit ever did that, we're not—"

"You're fucking scum, Timmy—but soon you're just gonna be scum, 'cuz ain't no more fuckin' in your future." The knife moved a little. "This is gonna be fun, John. Like the guy we did in Libya two years ago, remember?"

"Jesus, Ding, I still have nightmares about that one," Clark acknowledged, looking away. "I'm telling you, Domingo, don't do it!"

"Fuck you, John." His free hand reached to loosen O'Neil's belt, then the button at the top of his slacks. Then he reached inside. "Well, shit, ain't much to cut off. Hardly any dick here at all."

"O'Neil, if you have anything to tell us, better say it now. I can't control this kid. I've seen him like this before and—"

"Too much talk, John. Shit, Grady spilled his guts anyway. What does this one know that we need? I'm gonna cut it all off and feed it to one of the guard dogs. They like fresh meat."

"Domingo, we are civilized people and we don't—"

"Civilized? My ass, John, he wanted to kill my wife and my baby!"

O'Neil's eyes popped again. "No, no, we never intended to—"

"Sure, asshole," Chavez taunted. "You had those fucking guns 'cuz you wanted to win their hearts and minds, right? Woman-killer, baby-killer." Chavez spat.

"I didn't kill anybody, didn't even fire my rifle. I—"

"Great, so you're incompetent. You think you deserve to have a dick just 'cuz you're fucking incompetent?"

"Who's this Russian guy?" Clark asked.

"Sean's friend, Serov, Iosef Serov. He got the money and the drugs—"

"Drugs? Christ, John, they're fucking druggies, too!"

"Where's the money?" John persisted.

"Swiss bank, numbered account. Iosef set it up, six million dollars—and—and, Sean asked him to bring us ten kilos of cocaine to sell for the money, we need the money to continue operations."

"Where are the drugs, Tim?" Clark demanded next.

"Farm—farmhouse." O'Neil gave them a town and road description that went into Chavez's pocketed taperecorder.

"This Serov guy, what's he look like?" And he got that, too.

Chavez backed off and let his visible temper subside. Then he smiled. "Okay, John, let's talk to the others. Thanks, Timmy. You can keep your dick, 'mano."

It was late afternoon over Canada's Quebec province. The sun reflected off the hundreds of lakes, some of them still covered with ice. Popov had been sleepless for the entire flight, the only wakeful passenger in first class. Again and again his mind went over the same data. If the British had captured Grady, then they had his primary cover name, which was in his travel documents. Well, he'd dispose of them that very day. They had a physical description, but he looked not the least bit remarkable. Grady had the number of the Swiss account that Dmitriy had set up, but he'd already transferred the funds to another account, one not traceable to him. It was theoretically possible that the opposition could pursue the information Grady was sure to give them—Popov had no illusions about that—perhaps even secure a set of

fingerprints from . . . no, that was too unlikely to be considered a danger, and no Western intelligence service would have anything to cross-match. No Western service even knew anything about him—if they had, he would have been arrested long before.

So, what did that leave? A name that would soon evaporate, a description that fitted a million other men, and a bank account number for a defunct account. In short, very little. He did need to check out, though, very quickly, the procedures by which Swiss banks transferred funds, and whether that process was protected by the anonymity laws that protected the accounts themselves. Even that—the Swiss were not paragons of integrity, were they? No, there would be an arrangement between the banks and the police. There had to be, even if the only purpose was to enable the Swiss police to lie effectively to other national police forces. But the second account was truly a shadow one. He'd set it up through an attorney who didn't have the ability to betray him, because they'd only met over the telephone. So, there was no path from the information Grady had to where he was now, and that was good. He'd have to think very carefully about *ever* accessing the 5.7 million dollars in the second account, but there might well be a way to do it. Through another attorney, perhaps, in Liechtenstein, where banking laws were even stricter than in Switzerland? He'd have to look into it. An American attorney could guide him in the necessary procedures, also under total anonymity.

You're safe, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich, Popov told himself. Safe and rich, but it was time to stop taking risks. He'd initiate no more field operations for John Brightling. Once he got into O'Hare, he'd catch the next flight to New York, get back to his apartment, report in to Brightling, and then look for an elegant escape route. Would Brightling let him go?

He'd have to, Popov told himself. He and Henriksen were the only men on the planet who could link the executive to mass murder. He might think about killing me, but Henriksen would warn him not to. Henriksen was also a professional, and he knew the rules of the game. Popov had kept a diary, which was in a safe place, the vault of a law firm in New York, with carefully written handling instructions. So, no, that was not a real danger, so long as his "friends" knew the rules—and Popov would remind them, just in case.

Why go back to New York at all? Why not simply disappear? It was tempting . . . but, no. If nothing else, he had to tell Brightling and Henriksen to leave him alone from now on and explain why it was in their interest to do so. Besides, Brightling had an unusually good source in the American government and Popov could use that person's information as additional protection. You never had too much protection.

With all that decided, Popov finally allowed himself to relax. Another ninety minutes to Chicago. Below him was a vast world, with plenty of room to disappear in, and now he had the money for it. It had all been worth it.

"Okay, what do we have?" John asked his senior executives.

"This name, Iosef Serov. It's not on our computer in London," said Cyril Holt of the Security Service. "What about CIA?"

Clark shook his head. "We have two guys named Serov on the books. One's dead. The other one's in his late sixties and retired in Moscow. What about the

description?"

"Well, it fits this chap." Holt passed a photo across the table.

"I've seen this one before."

"He's the chap who met with Ivan Kirilenko in London some weeks ago. That fits the rest of the puzzle, John. We believe he was involved in the leak of information on your organization, as you will recall. For him, then, to show up with Grady—well, it does fit, almost too well, as a matter of fact."

"Any way to press this?"

"We *can* go to the RVS—both we and CIA have relatively good relations with Sergey Golovko, and perhaps they can assist us. I will lobby very hard for that," Holt promised.

"What else?"

"These numbers," Bill Tawney put in. "One is probably a bank account identification number, and the other is probably the control-activation code number. We'll have their police look into it for us. That will tell us something, if the money hasn't been laundered, of course, and if the account is still active, which it ought to be."

"The weapons," the senior cop present told them, "judging by the serial numbers, are of Soviet origin, from the factory in Kazan. They're fairly old, at least ten years, but none of them had ever been fired before today. On the drug issue, I forwarded the information to Dennis Maguire—he's chief of the Garda. It will be on the telly in the morning. They found and seized ten pounds of pure cocaine—by 'pure' I mean medicinal quality, almost as though it had been purchased from a pharmaceutical house. The street value is enormous. Millions," the chief superintendent told them. "It was found in a semiabandoned farmhouse on the Irish West Coast."

"We have identification on three of the six prisoners. One has not yet been able to talk to us because of his injuries. Oh, they were using cellular phones to communicate, like walkie-talkies. Your Noonan chap did very well indeed to close the phone cells down. God only knows how many lives that saved," Holt told them.

At the far end of the table, Chavez nodded and shivered at the news. If they'd been able to coordinate their actions . . . Jesus. It would not have been a good day for the good guys. What they'd had was bad enough. There would be funerals. People would have to put on their Class-A uniforms and line up and fire off the guns . . . and then they'd have to replace the men who were gone. Not far away, Mike Chin was in a bed, a cast on one of his wounded legs because a bone was broken. Team-1 was out of business for at least a month, even as well as they'd fought back. Noonan had come through big-time, having killed three of them with his pistol, along with Franklin, who'd just about decapitated one with his big MacMillan .50, then used his monster rifle to kill the little brown truck and keep the five terrorists in it from getting away. Chavez was looking down at the conference table and shaking his head when his beeper went off. He lifted it and saw that it was his home number. He rose from his seat and called on the wall phone.

"Yeah, honey?"

"Ding, you want to come over here. It's started," Patsy told him calmly. Ding's response was a sudden flip of his heart.

"On the way, baby." Ding hung up. "John, I gotta get home. Patsy says it's started."

"Okay, Domingo." Clark managed a smile, finally. "Give her a kiss for me."

"Roge-o, Mr. C." And Chavez headed for the door.

"The timing on this thing is never good, is it?" Tawney observed.

"Well, at least something good is happening today." John rubbed his eyes. He even accepted the idea of becoming a grandfather. It beat the hell out of losing people, a fact that had yet to hammer all the way into his consciousness. His people. Two of them, dead. Several more wounded. His people.

"Okay," Clark went on. "What about the information leak? People, we've been set up and hit. What are we going to do about it?"

"Hello, Ed, it's Carol," the President's Science Advisor said.

"Hi, Dr. Brightling. What can I do for you?"

"What the hell happened in England today? Was it our people—our Rainbow team, I mean?"

"Yes, Carol, it was."

"How did they do? The TV wasn't very clear, and—"

"Two dead, four or so wounded," the DCI answered. "Nine terrorists dead, six captured, including their leader."

"The radios we got to them, how'd they work?"

"Not sure. I haven't seen the after-action report yet, but I know the main thing they're going to want to know."

"What's that, Ed?"

"Who spilled the beans. They knew John's name, his wife and daughter's names, identities, and place of work. They had good intel, and John isn't very happy about that."

"The family members, are they okay?"

"Yeah, no civilians hurt, thank God. Hell, Carol, I *know* Sandy and Patricia. There's going to be some serious fallout over this one."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Not sure yet, but I won't forget you asked."

"Yeah, well, I want to know if those radio gadgets worked. I told the guys at E-Systems to get them out pronto, 'cuz these guys are important. Gee, I hope they helped some."

"I'll find out, Carol," the DCI promised.

"Okay, you know where to reach me."

"Okay, thanks for the call."

CHAPTER 30

VISTAS

It was everything he'd expected—not knowing what to expect—and more, and at the end of it Domingo Chavez held his son in his hands.

"Well," he said, looking down at the new life that would be his to guard, educate, and in time present to the world. After a second that seemed to last into weeks, he handed the newborn to his wife.

Patsy's face was bathed in perspiration, and weary from the five-hour ordeal of delivery, but already, as such things went, the pain was forgotten. The goal had been achieved, and she held her child. The package was pink, hairless, and noisy, the last part assuaged by the proximity of Patsy's left breast, as John Conor Chavez got his first meal. But Patsy was exhausted, and in due course a nurse removed the child to the nursery. Then Ding kissed his wife and walked alongside her bed as she was wheeled to her room. She was already asleep when they arrived. He kissed her one last time and walked outside. His car took him back onto the Hereford base, and then to the official home of Rainbox Six.

"Yeah?" John said, opening the door.

Chavez just handed over a cigar with a blue ring. "John Conor Chavez, seven pounds eleven ounces. Patsy's doing fine, gran-pop," Ding said, with a subdued grin. After all, Patsy had done the hard part.

There are moments to make the strongest of men weep, and this was one of them. The two men embraced. "Well," John said, after a minute or so, reaching into the pocket of his bathrobe for a handkerchief with which he rubbed his eyes. "Who's he look like?"

"Winston Churchill," Domingo replied with a laugh. "Hell, John, I've never been able to figure that one out, but John Conor Chavez is a confusing enough name, isn't it? The little bastard has a lot of heritage behind him. I'll start him off on karate and guns about age five . . . maybe six," Ding mused.

"Better golf and baseball, but he's your kid, Domingo. Come on in."

"Well?" Sandy demanded, and Chavez gave the news for the second time while his boss lit up his Cuban cigar. He despised smoking, and Sandy, a nurse, hardly approved of the vice, but on this one occasion, both relented. Mrs. Clark gave Ding a hug. "John Conor?"

"You knew?" John Terrence Clark asked.

Sandy nodded. "Patsy told me last week."

"It was supposed to be a secret," the new father objected.

"I'm her *mother,* Ding!" Sandy explained. "Breakfast?"

The men checked their watches. It was just after four in the morning, close enough, they all agreed.

"You know, John, this is pretty profound," Chavez said. His father-in-law noted how Domingo switched in and out of accents depending on the nature of the conversation. The previous day, interrogating the PIRA prisoners he'd been pure Los Angeles gang kid, his speech redolent with Spanish accent and street euphemisms. But in his reflective moments, he reverted to a man with a university master's degree, with no accent at all. "I'm a papa. I've got a son." Followed by a slow, satisfied, and somewhat awestruck grin. "Wow."

"The great adventure, Domingo," John agreed, while his wife got the bacon going. He poured the coffee.

"Huh?"

"Building a complete person. That's the great adventure, sonny boy, and if you don't do it right, what the hell good are you?"

"Well, you guys've done okay."

"Thanks, Domingo," Sandy said from the stove. "We worked at it pretty hard."

"More her than me," John said. "I was away so damned much, playing field-spook. Missed three Christmases, goddamnit. You never forgive yourself for that," he explained. "That's the magic morning, and you're supposed to be there."

"Doing what?"

"Russia twice, Iran once—getting assets out every time. Two worked, but one came apart on me. Lost that one, and he didn't make it. Russians have never been real forgiving on state treason. He bit the big one four months later, poor bastard. Not a good Christmas," Clark concluded, remembering just how bleak that had been, seeing the KGB scoop the man up not fifty meters from where he'd been standing, seeing the face turned to him, the look of despair on the doomed face, having to turn away to make his own escape down the pipeline he'd set up for two, knowing there was nothing else he might have done, but feeling like shit about it anyway. Then, finally, he'd had to explain to Ed Foley what had happened—only to learn later that the agent had been burned—"shopped" was the euphemism—by a KGB mole inside CIA's own headquarters building. And *that* fuck was still alive in a federal prison, with cable TV and central heating.

"It's history, John," Chavez told him, understanding the look. They'd deployed on similar missions, but the Clark-Chavez team had never failed, though some of their missions had been on the insane side of hairy. "You know the funny part about this?"

"What's that?" John asked, wondering if it would be the same feeling he'd had.

"I know I'm gonna die now. Someday, I mean. The little guy, he's gotta outlive me. If he doesn't, then I've screwed it up. Can't let that happen, can I? JC is my responsibility. While he grows up, I grow old, and by the time he's my age, hell, I'll be in my *sixties.* Jesus, I never *planned* to be old, y'know?"

Clark chuckled. "Yeah, neither did I. Relax, kid. Now I'm a"—he almost said "fucking," but Sandy didn't like that particular epithet—"goddamned *grand*father. I never planned on that, either."

"It's not so bad, John," Sandy observed, cracking open the eggs. "We can spoil him and hand him back. And we will."

It hadn't happened that way with their kids, at least not on John's side of the family. His mother was long dead from cancer, and his father from a heart attack on the job, while rescuing some children from a dwelling fire in Indianapolis, back in the late 1960s. John wondered if they knew that their son had grown up, and then grown old, and was now a grandfather. There was no telling, was there? Mortality and its attendant issues were normal at times like this, he supposed. The great continuity of life. What would John Conor Chavez become? Rich man, poor man, beggarman, thief, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief? That was mainly Domingo and Patsy's job, and he had to trust them to do it properly, and they probably would. He knew his daughter and knew Ding almost as well. From the first time he'd seen the kid, in the mountains of Colorado, he'd known that this boy had something special in him, and the younger man had grown, blossoming like a flower in a particularly tough garden. Domingo Chavez was a younger version of himself, a man of honor and courage, Clark told himself, and therefore he'd be a worthy father, as he'd proven to be a worthy husband. The great continuity of life, John told himself again, sipping his coffee and puffing on the cigar, and if it was yet one more milestone on the road to death, then so be it. He'd had an interesting life, and a life that had mattered to others, as had Domingo, and as they all hoped would, John Conor. And what the hell, Clark thought, his life wasn't over yet, was it?

Getting a flight to New York had proven more difficult than expected. They were all fully booked, but finally Popov had managed to get himself a coach seat in the back of an old United 727. He disliked the tight fit, but the flight was short. At La Guardia, he headed for a cab, on the way out checking his inside coat pocket and finding the travel documents that had gotten him across the Atlantic. They had served him well, but they had to go. Emerging into the evening air, he surreptitiously dumped them into a trash container before walking to the cabstand. He was a weary man. His day had started just after midnight, American East Coast time, and he hadn't managed much sleep on the transatlantic flight, and his body was—how did the Americans put it?—running on empty. Maybe that explained the break with fieldcraft.

Thirty minutes later, Popov was within blocks of his downtown apartment, when the waste-disposal crew circulated past the United Airlines terminal to change the trash bags. The routine was mechanical and fairly strenuous physical labor for the mostly Puerto Rican work crew. One at a time, they lifted the metal tops off the cans and reached in to remove the heavy-gauge plastic garbage bags, then turned to dump them into wheeled containers that would later be tipped into trucks for transport to a landfill on Staten Island. The routine was good upperbody exercise, and most of the men carried portable radios to help themselves deal with the boredom of the work.

One can, fifty yards from the cabstand, didn't sit properly in its holder. When the cleanup man lifted the bag, it caught on a metallic edge and ripped, spilling its contents onto the concrete sidewalk. That generated a quiet curse from the worker, who now had to bend down and pick up a bunch of objects with his gloved hands. He was halfway through when he saw the crimson cardboard cover of what appeared to be a British passport. People didn't

throw those things away, did they? He flipped it open and saw two credit cards inside, stamped with the same name on the passport. Serov, he saw, an unusual name. He dropped the whole package into the thigh pocket of his coveralls. He'd bring it by the lost-and-found. It wasn't the first time he'd discovered valuable stuff in the trash. Once he'd even recovered a fully loaded 9-mm pistol!

By this time Popov was in his apartment, too tired even to unpack his bags. Instead he merely undressed and collapsed on the bed without even a vodka to help him off to sleep. By reflex, he turned on the TV and caught yet another story about the Hereford shoot-out. The TV was—*govno,* shit, he thought. There was the TV truck whose reporter had come close and tried to interview him. They hadn't used it, but there he was, in profile, from twenty feet away, while the reporter gave a stand-up. All the more reason to clear out now, he thought, as he drifted off. He didn't even have the energy to switch the TV off, and he slept with it on, the recurring stories entering his mind and giving him confused and unpleasant dreams throughout the night.

The passport, credit cards, and a few other items of apparent value arrived at the waste-disposal company's Staten Island office—actually a trailer that had been towed to the spot—after the close of regular business hours. The trash collector tossed it on the correct desk and punched his time card on the way out for his drive back to Queens and his usual late dinner.

Tom Sullivan had worked late, and was now in the bar the FBI agents frequented, a block from the Jacob Javits Federal Building in lower Manhattan. His partner Frank Chatham was there, too, and the two agents sat in a booth, sipping at their Sam Adams beers.

"Anything happening on your end?" Sullivan asked. He'd been in court all day, waiting to testify in a fraud case, but had never gotten to the witness stand because of procedural delays.

"I talked with two girls today. They both say they know Kirk Maclean, but neither one actually dated him," Chatham replied. "Looks like another dry hole. I mean, he *was* cooperative, wasn't he?"

"Any other names associated with the missing girls?"

Chatham shook his head. "Nope. They both said they saw him talking to the missing one and he walked one out once, like he told us, but nothing special about it. Just the usual singles bar scene. Nothing that contradicts anything he said. Neither one likes Maclean very much. They say he comes on to girls, asks some questions, and usually leaves them."

"What kind of questions?"

"The usual—name, address, work, family stuff. Same stuff we ask, Tom."

"The two girls you talked to today," Sullivan asked thoughtfully. "Where they from?"

"One's a New Yorker, one's from across the river in Jersey."

"Bannister and Pretloe are from out of town," Sullivan pointed out.

"Yeah, I know. So?"

"So, if you're a serial killer, it's easier to take down victims with no close

family members, isn't it?"

"Part of the selection process? That's a stretch, Tom."

"Maybe, but what else we got?" The answer was, not very much. The flyers handed out by the NYPD had turned up fifteen people who'd said they recognized the faces, but they were unable to provide any useful information. "I agree, Maclean was cooperative, but if he approaches girls, dumps those who grew up near here and have family here, *then* walks our victim home, hell, it's more than we have on anyone else."

"Go back to talk to him?"

Sullivan nodded. "Yeah." It was just routine procedure. Kirk Maclean hadn't struck either agent as a potential serial killer—but that was the best-disguised form of criminal, both had learned in the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia. They also knew that the dullest of routine investigative work broke far more cases than the miracles so beloved of mystery novels. Real police work was boring, mind-dulling repetition, and those who stuck with it won. Usually.

It was strange that morning at Hereford. On the one hand, Team-2 was somewhat cowed by what had happened the day before. The loss of comrades did that to any unit. But on the other hand, their boss was now a father, and that was always the best thing to happen to a man. On the way to morning PT, a somewhat strung-out Team-2 Leader, who'd had no sleep at all the night before, had his hand shaken by every member of the team, invariably with a brief word of congratulations and a knowing smile, since all of them were fathers already, even those younger than their boss. Morning PT was abbreviated, in acknowledgment of his physical condition, and after the run, Eddie Price suggested to Chavez that he might as well drive home for a few hours of sleep, since he'd be of little use to anyone in his current condition. This Chavez did, crashing and burning past noon, and wakening with a screaming headache.

As did Dmitriy Popov. It hardly seemed fair, since he'd had little to drink the day before. He supposed it was his body's revenge on him for all the travel abuse on top of a long and exciting day west of London. He awoke to CNN on his bedroom TV, and padded off to the bathroom for the usual morning routine, plus some aspirin, then to the kitchen to make coffee. In two hours, he'd showered and dressed, unpacked his bags, and hung up the clothes he'd taken to Europe. The wrinkles would stretch out in a day or two, he thought. Then it was time for him to catch a cab for midtown.

On Staten Island, the lost-and-found person was a secretary who had this as one of her additional duties, and hated it. The items dropped on her desk were always smelly, sometimes enough to make her gag. Today was no exception, and she found herself wondering why people had to place such noxious items in the trash instead of—what? she never thought to wonder. Keep them in their pockets? The crimson passport was no exception. Joseph A. Serov. The photo was of a man about fifty, she thought, and about as remarkable to look at as a McDonald's hamburger. But it *was* a passport and two credit cards and it belonged to somebody. She lifted the phone book from her desk and called

the British Consulate in Manhattan, told the operator what it was about, and got the passport control officer as a result. She didn't know that the passport control office had for generations been the semisecret cover job for field officers of the Secret Intelligence Service. After a brief conversation, a company truck that was headed for Manhattan anyway dropped off the envelope at the consulate, where the door guard called to the proper office, and a secretary came down to collect it. This she dropped on the desk of her boss, Peter Williams.

Williams really was a spook of sorts, a young man on his first field assignment outside his own country. It was typically a safe, comfortable job, in a major city of an allied country, and he did work a few agents, all of them diplomats working at the United Nations. From them, he sought and sometimes got low-level diplomatic intelligence, which was forwarded to Whitehall to be examined and considered by equally low-level bureaucrats in the Foreign Office.

This smelly passport was unusual. Though his job was supposed to handle things like this, in fact he most often arranged substitute passports for people who'd somehow lost them in New York, which was not exactly a rare occurrence, though invariably an embarrassing one for the people who needed the replacements. The procedure was for Williams to fax the identification number on the document to London to identify the owner properly, and then call him or her at home, hoping to get a family member or employee who would know where the passport holder might be.

But in this case, Williams got a telephone call from Whitehall barely thirty minutes after sending the information.

"Peter?"

"Yes, Burt?"

"This passport, Joseph Serov—rather strange thing just happened."

"What's that?"

"The address we have for the chap is a mortuary, and the telephone number is to the same place. They've never heard of Joseph Serov, alive or dead."

"Oh? A false passport?" Williams lifted it from his desk blotter. If it were a fake, it was a damned good one. So was something interesting happening for a change?

"No, the computer has the passport number and name in it, but this Serov chap doesn't live where he claims to live. I think it's a matter of false papers. The records show that he is a naturalized subject. Want us to run that down, as well?"

Williams wondered about that. He'd seen false papers before, and been trained on how to obtain them for himself at the SIS training academy. Well, why not? Maybe he'd uncover a spy or something. "Yes, Burt, could you do that for me?"

"Call you tomorrow," the Foreign Office official promised.

For his part, Peter Williams lit up his computer and sent an e-mail to London, just one more routine day for a young and very junior intelligence officer on his first posting abroad. New York was much like London, expensive, impersonal, and full of culture, but sadly lacking in the good manners of his hometown.

Serov, he thought, a Russian name, but you could find them everywhere. Quite a few in London. Even more in New York City, where so many of the cabdrivers were right off the boat or plane from Mother Russia and knew neither the English language nor where to find the landmarks of New York. Lost British passport, Russian name.

Three thousand four hundred miles away, the name "Serov" had been input onto the SIS computer system. The name had already been run for possible hits and nothing of value had been found, but the executive program had many names and phrases, and it scanned for all of them. The name "Serov" was enough—it had also been entered spelled as Seroff and Serof—and when the e-mail from New York arrived, the computer seized upon and directed the message to a desk officer. Knowing that Iosef was the Russian version of Joseph, and since the passport description gave an age in the proper range, he flagged the message and forwarded it to the computer terminal of the person who had originated the enquiry on one Serov, Iosef Andreyevich.

In due course, that message appeared as e-mail on the desktop computer of Bill Tawney. Bloody useful things, computers, Tawney thought, as he printed up the message. New York. That was interesting. He called the number of the Consulate and got Peter Williams.

"This passport from the Serov chap, anything else you can tell me?" he asked, after establishing his credentials.

"Well, yes, there are two credit cards that were inside it, a MasterCard and a Visa, both platinum." Which, he didn't have to add, meant that they had relatively large credit limits.

"Very well. I want you to send me the photo and the credit-card numbers over secure lines immediately." Tawney gave him the correct numbers to call.

"Yes, sir. I'll do that at once," Williams replied earnestly, wondering what this was all about. And who the devil was William Tawney? Whoever it was, he was working late, since England was five hours ahead of New York, and Peter Williams was already wondering what he'd have for dinner.

"John?"

"Yeah, Bill?" Clark replied tiredly, looking up from his desk and wondering if he'd get to see his grandson that day.

"Our friend Serov has turned up," the SIS man said next. That got a reaction. Clark's eyes narrowed at once.

"Oh? Where?"

"New York. A British passport was found in a dustbin at La Guardia Airport, along with two credit cards. Well," he amended his report, "the passport and credit cards were in the name of one Joseph A. Serov."

"Run the cards to see if—"

"I called the legal attaché in your embassy in London to have the accounts run, yes. Should have some information within the hour. Could be a break for us, John," Tawney added, with a hopeful voice.

"Who's handling it in the U.S.?"

"Gus Werner, assistant director, Terrorism Division. Ever met him?"

Clark shook his head. "No, but I know the name."

"I know Gus. Good chap."

The FBI has cordial relationships with all manner of businesses. Visa and MasterCard were no exceptions. An FBI agent called the headquarters of both companies from his desk in the Hoover Building, and gave the card numbers to the chiefs of security of both companies. Both were former FBI agents themselves—the FBI sends many retired agents off to such positions, which creates a large and diverse old-boy network—and both of them queried their computers and came up with account information, including name, address, credit history, and most important of all, recent charges. The British Airways flight from London Heathrow to Chicago O'Hare leaped off the screen—actually the faxed page—at the agent's desk in Washington.

"Yeah?" Gus Werner said, when the young agent came into his office.

"He caught a flight from London to Chicago late yesterday, and then a flight from Chicago to New York, about the last one, got a back-room ticket on standby. Must have dumped the ID right after he got in. Here." The agent handed over the charge records and the flight information. Werner scanned the pages.

"No shit," the former chief of the Hostage Rescue Team observed quietly. "This looks like a hit, Johnny."

"Yes, sir," replied the young agent, fresh in from the Oklahoma City field division. "But it leaves one thing out—how he got to Europe this time. Everything else is documented, and there's a flight from Dublin to London, but nothing from here to Ireland," Special Agent James Washington told his boss.

"Maybe he's got American Express. Call and find out," Werner ordered the junior man.

"Will do," Washington promised.

"Who do I call on this?" Werner asked.

"Right here, sir." Washington pointed to the number on the covering sheet.

"Oh, good, I've met him. Thanks, Jimmy." Werner lifted his phone and dialed the international number. "Mr. Tawney, please," he told the operator. "It's Gus Werner calling from FBI Headquarters in Washington."

"Hello, Gus. That was very fast of you," Tawney said, half in his overcoat and hoping to get home.

"The wonders of the computer age, Bill. I have a possible hit on this Serov guy. He flew from Heathrow to Chicago yesterday. The flight was about three hours after the fracas you had at Hereford. I have a rental car, a hotel bill, and a flight from Chicago to New York City after he got here."

"Address?"

"We're not that lucky. Post office box in lower Manhattan," the Assistant Director told his counterpart. "Bill, how hot is this?"

"Gus, it's bloody hot. Sean Grady gave us the name, and one of the other prisoners confirmed it. This Serov chap delivered a large sum of money and ten pounds of cocaine shortly before the attack. We're working with the Swiss to track the money right now. And now it appears that this chap is based in America. Very interesting."

"No shit. We're going to have to track this mutt down if we can," Werner

thought aloud. There was ample jurisdiction for the investigation he was about to open. American laws on terrorism reached across the world and had draconian penalties attached to them. And so did drug laws.

"You'll try?" Tawney asked.

"You bet your ass on that one, Bill," Werner replied positively. "I'm starting the case file myself. The hunt is on for Mr. Serov."

"Excellent. Thank you, Gus."

Werner consulted his computer for a codeword. This case would be important and classified, and the codeword on the file would read . . . no, not that one. He told the machine to pick another. Yes. PREFECT, a word he remembered from his Jesuit high school in St. Louis.

"Mr. Werner?" his secretary called. "Mr. Henriksen on line three."

"Hey, Bill," Werner said, picking up the phone.

"Cute little guy, isn't he?" Chavez asked.

John Conor Chavez was in his plastic crib-tray, sleeping peacefully at the moment. The name card in the slot on the front established his identity, helped somewhat by an armed policeman in the nursery. There would be another on the maternity floor, and an SAS team of three soldiers on the hospital grounds—they were harder to identify, as they didn't have military haircuts. It was, again, the horse-gone-lock-the-door mentality, but Chavez didn't mind that people were around to protect his wife and child.

"Most of 'em are," John Clark agreed, remembering what Patsy and Maggie had been like at that age—only yesterday, it so often seemed. Like most men, John always thought of his children as infants, never able to forget the first time he'd held them in their hospital receiving blankets. And so now, again, he basked in the warm glow, knowing exactly how Ding felt, proud and a little intimidated by the responsibility that attended fatherhood. Well, that was how it was supposed to be. *Takes after his mother,* John thought next, which meant after *his* side of the family, which, he thought, was good. But John wondered, with an ironic smile, if the little guy was dreaming in Spanish, and if he learned Spanish growing up, well, what was the harm in being bilingual? Then his beeper went off. John grumbled as he lifted it from his belt. Bill Tawney's number. He pulled his shoe-phone from his pants pocket and dialed the number. It took five seconds for the encryption systems to synchronize.

"Yeah, Bill?"

"Good news. John, your FBI are tracking down this Serov chap. I spoke with Gus Werner half an hour ago. They've established that he took a flight from Heathrow to Chicago yesterday, then on to New York. That's the address for his credit cards. The FBI are moving very quickly on this one."

The next step was checking for a driver's license, and that came up dry, which meant they were also denied a photograph of the subject. The FBI agents checking it out in Albany were disappointed, but not especially surprised. The next step, for the next day, was to interview the postal employees at the station with the P.O. box.

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"So, Dmitriy, you got back here in a hurry," Brightling observed.

"It seemed a good idea," Popov replied. "The mission was a mistake. The Rainbow soldiers are too good for such an attack on them. Sean's people did well. Their planning struck me as excellent, but the enemy was far too proficient. The skill of these people is remarkable, as we saw before."

"Well, the attack must have shaken them up," his employer observed.

"Perhaps," Popov allowed. Just then, Henriksen walked in.

"Bad news," he announced.

"What's that?"

"Dmitriy, you goofed up some, son."

"Oh? How did I do that?" the Russian asked, no small amount of irony in his voice.

"Not sure, but they know there was a Russian involved in cueing the attack on Rainbow, and the FBI is working the case now. They may know you're here."

"That is not possible," Popov objected. "Well . . . yes, they have Grady, and perhaps he talked . . . yes, he did know that I flew in from America, or he could have figured that out, and he knows the cover name I used, but that identity is gone—destroyed."

"Maybe so, but I was just on the phone with Gus Werner. I asked him about the Hereford incident, if there was anything I needed to know. He told me they've started a case looking for a Russian name, that they had reason to believe a Russian, possibly based in America, had been in contact with the PIRA. That means they know the name, Dmitriy, and that means they'll be tracking down names on airline passenger lists. Don't underestimate the FBI, pal," Henriksen warned.

"I do not," Popov replied, now slightly worried, but only slightly. It would not be all that easy to check every transatlantic flight, even in the age of computers. He also decided that his next set of false ID papers would be in the name of Jones, Smith, Brown, or Johnson, not that of a disgraced KGB chairman from the 1950s. The Serov ID name had been a joke on his part. Not a good one, he decided now. Joseph Andrew Brown, that would be the next one, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov thought, sitting there in the top-floor office.

"Is this a danger to us?" Brightling asked.

"If they find our friend here," Henriksen replied.

Brightling nodded and thought quickly. "Dmitriy, have you ever been to Kansas?"

"Hello, Mr. Maclean," Tom Sullivan said.

"Oh, hi. Want to talk to me some more?"

"Yes, if you don't mind," Frank Chatham told him.

"Okay, come on in," Maclean said, opening the door all the way, walking back to his living room, and telling himself to be cool. He sat down and muted his TV. "So, what do you want to know?"

"Anyone else you remember who might have been close to Mary

Bannister?" The two agents saw Maclean frown, then shake his head.

"Nobody I can put a name on. I mean, you know, it's a singles bar, and people bump into each other and talk, and make friends and stuff, y'know?" He thought for a second more. "Maybe one guy, but I don't know his name . . . tall guy, 'bout my age, sandy hair, big guy, like he works out and stuff . . . but I don't know his name, sorry. Mary danced with him and had drinks with him, I think, but aside from that, hey, it's too dark and crowded in there."

"And you walked her home just that one time?"

" 'Fraid so. We talked and joked some, but we never really hit it off. Just casual. I never, uh, made a move on her, if you know what I mean. Never got that far, like. Yeah, sure, I walked her home, but didn't even go in the building, didn't kiss her good night, even, just shook hands." He saw Chatham taking notes. Was this what he'd told them before? He thought so, but it was hard to remember with two federal cops in his living room. The hell of it was he *didn't* remember much about her. He'd selected her, loaded her into the truck, but that was all. He had no idea where she was now, though he imagined she was probably dead. Maclean knew what that part of the project was all about, and *that* made him a kidnapper and accessory to murder, two things he didn't exactly plan to give to these two FBI guys. New York had a death penalty statute now, and for all he knew so did the federal government. Unconsciously, he licked his lips and rubbed his hands on his slacks as he leaned back on the couch. Then he stood and faced toward the kitchen. "Can I get you guys anything?"

"No, thanks, but you go right ahead," Sullivan said. He'd just seen something he hadn't noticed in their first interview. Tension. Was it the occasional flips people got talking to FBI agents, or was this guy trying to conceal something? They watched Maclean build a drink and come back.

"How would you describe Mary Bannister?" Sullivan asked.

"Pretty, but no knockout. Nice, personable—I mean, pleasant, sense of humor, sense of fun about her. Out-oftown girl in the big city for the first time—I mean, she's just a girl, y'know?"

"But nobody really close to her, you said?"

"Not that I know of, but I didn't know her that well. What do other people say?"

"Well, people from the bar said you were pretty friendly with her . . ."

"Maybe, yeah, but not *that* friendly. I mean, it never went anywhere. I never even kissed her." He was repeating himself now, as he sipped at his bourbon and water. "Wish I did, but I didn't," he added.

"Who at the bar *are* you close to?" Chatham asked.

"Hey, that's kinda private, isn't it?" Kirk objected.

"Well, you know how it goes. We're trying to get a feel for the place, how it works, that sort of thing."

"Well, I don't kiss and tell, okay? Not my thing."

"I can't blame you for that," Sullivan observed with a smile, "but it is kinda unusual for the singles bar crowd."

"Oh, sure, there's guys there who put notches on their guns, but that's not my style."

"So, Mary Bannister disappeared, and you didn't notice?"

"Maybe, but I didn't think much about it. It's a transient community, y'know? People come in and out, and some you never see again. They just disappear, like."

"Ever call her?"

Maclean frowned. "No, I don't remember that she gave me her number. I suppose she was in the book, but, no, I never called her."

"Just walked her home only that one time?"

"Right, just that one time," Maclean confirmed, taking another pull on his drink and wishing these two inquisitors out of his home. Did they—could they know something? Why had they come back? Well, there was nothing in his apartment to confirm that he knew *any* female from the Turtle Inn. Well, just some phone numbers, but not so much as a loose sock from the women he'd occasionally brought here. "I mean, you guys looked around the first time you were here," Maclean volunteered.

"No big deal. We always ask to do that. It's just routine," Sullivan told their suspect. "Well, we have another appointment in a few minutes up the street. Thanks for letting us talk to you. You still have my card?"

"Yeah, in the kitchen, stuck on the refrigerator."

"Okay. Look, this case is kinda hard for us. Please think it over and if you come up with anything—anything at all, please call me, okay?"

"Sure will." Maclean stood and walked them to the door, then came back to his drink and took another swallow.

"He's nervous," Chatham said, out on the street.

"Sure as hell. We have enough to do a background check on him?"

"No problem," Chatham replied.

"Tomorrow morning," the senior agent said.

It was his second trip to Teterboro Airport, in New Jersey, across the river from Manhattan, but this time it was a different aircraft, with HORIZON CORP. painted on the rudder fin. Dmitriy played along, figuring that he could escape from any place in the United States, and knowing that Henriksen would warn Brightling not to try anything drastic. There was an element of anxiety to the trip, but no greater than his curiosity, and so Popov settled into his seat on the left side and waited for the aircraft to start its engines and taxi out. There was even a flight attendant, a pretty one, to give him a shot of Finlandia vodka, which he sipped as the Gulfstream V started rolling. Kansas, he thought, a state of wheat fields and tornadoes, less than three hours away.

"Mr. Henriksen?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"Kirk Maclean."

"Anything wrong?" Henriksen asked, alerted by the tone of his voice.

CHAPTER 31

MOVEMENT

The darkness hid the landscape. Popov stepped off the aircraft, and found a large military-type automobile waiting for him. Then he noticed the lines painted on the pavement and wondered if he'd landed on an airport runway or a country road of some sort. But, no, in the distance was a huge building, partially lit. More curious than ever, Dmitriy got into the vehicle and headed off toward it. His eyes gradually got accustomed to the darkness. The surrounding land seemed very flat, with only gentle rolls visible. Behind him he saw a fuel truck had pulled up to the business jet, perhaps to send it back to New Jersey. Well, they were expensive, and doubtless Brightling and his people wanted it back where he could use it. Popov didn't know that Horizon Corporation owned many of them; their number just increased by three from the factory outside Savannah, Georgia. He was still jet-lagged, he found on entering the building. A uniformed security guard walked him to the elevator and then to his fourth-floor room, which was not unlike a medium-decent hotel room, complete with cooking facilities and a refrigerator. There was a TV and VCR, and all the tapes in the adjacent storage cupboard were—nature tapes, he saw. Lions, bears, moose, spawning salmon. Not a single feature film. The magazines on the bedside table were similarly nature oriented. How odd. But there was also a complete bar, including Absolut vodka, which was almost as good as the Russian kind he preferred. He poured himself a drink and switched on the TV to CNN.

Henriksen was being overly cautious, Dmitriy thought. What could the FBI possibly have on him? A name? From that they could perhaps develop—what? Credit cards, if they were very lucky, and from that his travel records, but none of them would have evidentiary value in any court of law. No, unless Sean Grady positively identified him as a conduit of information and funds, he was totally safe, and Popov thought he could depend on Grady not to cooperate with the British. He hated them too much to be cooperative. It was just a matter of crawling back into his hole and pulling it in after himself—an Americanism he admired. The money he'd stashed in the secondary Swiss account *might* be discoverable, but there were ways to handle that—attorneys were so useful as an institution, he'd learned. Working through them was better than all the KGB fieldcraft combined.

No, if there was any danger to him, it was to be found in his employer, who might not know the rules of the game—but even if he didn't, Henriksen would help, and so Dmitriy relaxed and sipped his drink. He'd explore this place tomorrow, and from the way he was treated, he'd know—

—no, there was an even easier way. He lifted his phone, hit 9 to get an

outside line, then dialed his apartment in New York. The call went through. The phone rang four times before his answering machine clicked in. So, he had phone access to the outside. That meant he was safe, but he was no closer to understanding what was going on than he'd been during that first meeting in France, chatting with the American businessman and regaling him with tales of a former KGB field intelligence officer. Now here he was, in *Kansas,* USA, drinking vodka and watching television, with over six million American dollars in two numbered accounts in Switzerland. He'd reached one goal. Next he had to meet another. What the hell was this adventure all about? Would he find out here? He hoped so.

The airplanes were crammed with people, all of them inbound to Kingsford Smith International Airport outside Sydney. Many of them landed on the runway, which stuck out like a finger into Botany Bay, so famous as the landing point for criminals and other English rejects sent halfway round the world on wooden sailing ships to start a new country, which, to the disbelief of those who'd dispatched them, they'd done remarkably well. Many of the passengers on the inbound flights were young, fit athletes, the pride and pick of the countries that had sent them dressed in uniform clothing that proclaimed their nations of origin. Most were tourists, people with ticket-and accommodation packages expensively bought from travel agents or given as gifts from political figures in their home countries. Many carried miniature flags. The few business passengers had listened to all manner of enthusiastic predictions for national glory at the Olympic games, which would start in the next few days.

On arriving, the athletes were treated like visiting royalty and conveyed to buses that would take them up Highway 64 to the city, and thence to the Olympic Village, which had been expensively built by the Australian government to house them. They could see the magnificent stadium nearby, and the athletes looked and wondered if they'd find personal glory there.

"So, Colonel, what do you think?"

"It's one hell of a stadium, and that's a fact," Colonel Wilson Gearing, U.S. Army Chemical Corps, retired, replied. "But it sure gets hot here in the summer, pal."

"It's that El Niño business again. The ocean currents off South America have changed again, and that's associated with unusually hot temperatures here. It'll be in the mid-thirties—nineties to you, I suppose—for the whole Olympiad."

"Well, I hope this fogging system works, 'cuz if it doesn't, you'll have a lot of heat-stroke cases here, pal."

"It works," the Aussie cop told him. "It's fully tested."

"Can I take a look at it now? Bill Henriksen wants me to see if it could be used as a chemical-agent delivery system by the bad guys."

"Certainly. This way." They were there in five minutes. The water-input piping was contained in its own locked room. The cop had the key for this, and took the colonel inside.

"Oh, you chlorinate the water here?" Gearing asked in semisurprise. The

water came in from the Sydney city water system, didn't it?

"Yes, we don't want to spread any germs on our guests, do we?"

"Not exactly," Colonel Gearing agreed, looking at the plastic chlorine container that hung on the distribution piping beyond the actual pumps. Water was filtered through that before it went into the fogging nozzles that hung in all the concourses and ramps to the stadium bowl itself. The system would have to be flushed with unchlorinated water before delivery would work, but that was easily accomplished, and the false chlorine container in his hotel room was an exact twin of this one. The contents even looked like chlorine, almost, though the nano-capsules actually contained something called Shiva. Gearing thought about that behind blank brown eyes. He'd been a chemical weapons expert his whole professional life, having worked at the Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland and Dugway Proving Ground in Utah—but, well, this wasn't really chemical warfare. It was bio-war, a sister science of the one he'd studied for over twenty uniformed years. "Is the door guarded?" he asked.

"No, but it is alarmed, and it takes some minutes to play with the system, as you can see. The alarm system reports to the command post, and we have an ample reaction force there."

"How ample?" the retired colonel asked next.

"Twenty SAS members, plus twenty police constables, are there at all times, plus ten more SAS circulating in pairs around the stadium. The people at the CP are armed with automatic weapons. The ones on patrol with pistols and radios. There is also a supplementary reaction force a kilometer distant with light armored vehicles and heavy weapons, platoon strength. Beyond that, a battalion of infantry twenty kilometers away, with helicopters and other support."

"Sounds good to me," Colonel Gearing said. "Can you give me the alarm code for this facility?"

They didn't even hesitate. He was a former staff-grade army officer, after all, and a senior member of the consulting team for security at the Olympic Games. "One-One-Three-Three-Six-Six," the senior cop told him. Gearing wrote it down, then punched the numbers into the keypad, which armed and then disarmed the system. He'd be able to switch out the chlorine canister very quickly. The system was designed for rapid servicing. This would work just fine, just like the model they'd set up in Kansas, on which he and his people had practiced for several days. They'd gotten the swap-out time down to fourteen seconds. Anything under twenty meant that nobody would notice anything remiss in the fog-cooling system, because residual pressure would maintain the fogging stream.

For the first time, Gearing saw the place where he'd be doing it, and that generated a slight chill in his blood. Planning was one thing. Seeing where it would happen forreal was something else. This was the place. Here he would start a global plague that would take lives in numbers far too great to tally, and which in the end would leave alive only the elect. It would save the planet—at a ghastly price, to be sure, but he'd been committed to this mission for years. He'd seen what man could do to harm things. He'd been a young lieutenant at Dugway Proving Grounds when they'd had the well-publicized

accident with GB, a persistent nerve agent that had blown too far and slaughtered a few hundred sheep—and neurotoxins were not a pretty death, even for sheep. The news media hadn't even bothered to talk about the wild game that had died a similar, ugly death, everything from insects to antelope. It had shaken him that his own organization, the United States Army, could make so grave an error to cause such pain. The things he'd learned later had been worse. The binary agents he'd worked on for years—an effort to manufacture "safe" poisons for battlefield use . . . the crazy part was that it had all begun in Germany as insecticide research in the 1920s and 1930s. Most of the chemicals used to kill off insects were nerve agents, simple ones that attacked and destroyed the rudimentary nervous systems in ants and beetles, but those German chemists had stumbled upon some of the deadliest chemical compounds ever formulated. So much of Gearing's career had been spent with the intelligence community, evaluating information about possible chemical-warfare plants in countries not trusted to have such things.

But the problem with chemical weapons had always been their distribution—how to spread them evenly across a battlefield, thus exposing enemy soldiers efficiently. That the same chemicals would travel downrange and kill innocent civilians had been the dirty secret that the organizations and the governments that ruled them had always ignored. And they didn't even consider the wildlife that would also be exterminated in vast quantities—and worse still, the genetic damage those agents caused, because marginal doses of nerve gas, below the exposure needed to kill, invaded the very DNA of the victim, ensuring mutations that would last for generations. Gearing had spent his life knowing these things, and he supposed that it had desensitized him to the taking of life in large quantities.

This wasn't quite the same thing. He would not be spreading organophosphate chemical poisons, but rather tiny virus particles. And the people walking through the cooling fog in the concourses and ramps to the stadium bowl would breathe them in, and their body chemistry would break down the nano-capsules, allowing the Shiva strands to go to work … slowly, of course … and they'd go home to spread the Shiva farther, and in four to six weeks after the ending of the Sydney Olympics, the plague would erupt worldwide, and a global panic would ensue. Then Horizon Corporation would announce that it had an experimental "A" vaccine that had worked in animals and primates—and was safe for human usage—ready for mass production, and so it would be mass-produced and distributed worldwide, and four to six weeks after injection, those people, too, would develop the Shiva symptoms, and with luck the world would be depopulated down to a fractional percentage of the current population. Disorders would break out, killing many of the people blessed by Nature with highly effective immune systems, and in six months or so, there would be just a few left, well organized and well equipped, safe in Kansas and Brazil, and in six months more they would be the inheritors of a world returning to its natural state. This wouldn't be like Dugway, a purposeless accident. This would be a considered act by a man who'd contemplated mass murder for all of his professional life, but who'd only helped kill innocent animals … He turned to look at his hosts.

"What's the extended weather forecast?"

"Hot and dry, old boy. I hope the athletes are fit. They'll need to be."

"Well, then, this fogging system will be a lifesaver," Gearing observed. "Just so the wrong people don't fool with it. With your permission, I'll have my people keep an eye on this thing."

"Fine," the senior cop agreed. The American was really fixated on this fogging system, but he'd been a gas soldier, and maybe that explained it.

Popov hadn't closed his shades the previous evening, and so the dawn awoke him rather abruptly. He opened his eyes, then squinted them in pain as the sun rose over the Kansas plains. The medicine cabinet in the bathroom, he found, had Tylenol and aspirin, and there were coffee grounds for the machine in the kitchen area, but nothing of value in the refrigerator. So he showered and had his coffee, then went out of the room looking for food. He found a cafeteria—a huge one—almost entirely empty of patrons, though there were a few people near the food tables, and there he went, got breakfast and sat alone, as he looked at the others in the cavernous room. Mainly people in their thirties and forties, he thought, professional-looking, some wearing white laboratory coats.

"Mr. Popov?" a voice said. Dmitriy turned.

"Yes?"

"I'm David Dawson, chief of security here. I have a badge for you to wear"—he handed over a white plastic shield that pinned to his shirt—"and I'm supposed to show you around today. Welcome to Kansas."

"Thank you." Popov pinned the badge on. It even had his picture on it, the Russian saw.

"You want to wear that at all times, so that people know you belong here," Dawson explained helpfully.

"Yes, I understand." So this place was pass-controlled, and it had a director of site security. How interesting.

"How was your flight in last night?"

"Pleasant and uneventful," Popov replied, sipping his second coffee of the morning. "So, what is this place?"

"Well, Horizon set it up as a research facility. You know what the company does, right?"

"Yes." Popov nodded. "Medicines and biological research, a world leader."

"Well, this is another research-and-development facility for their work. It was just finished recently. We're bringing people in now. It will soon be the company's main facility."

"Why here in the middle of nothing?" Popov asked, looking around at the mainly empty cafeteria.

"Well, for starters, it's centrally located. You can be anywhere in the country in less than three hours. And nobody's around to bother us. It's a secure facility, too. Horizon does lots of work that requires protection, you see."

"Industrial espionage?"

Dawson nodded. "That's right. We worry about that."

"Will I be able to look around, see the grounds and such?"

"I'll drive you around myself. Mr. Henriksen told me to extend you the

hospitality of the facility. Go ahead and finish your breakfast. I have a few things I have to do. I'll be back in about fifteen minutes."

"Good, thank you," Popov said, watching him walk out of the room. This would be useful. There was a strange, institutional quality to this place, almost like a secure government facility . . . like a *Russian* facility, Popov thought. It seemed to have no soul at all, no character, no human dimension that he could identify. Even KGB would have hung a photo of Lenin on the huge, bare, white walls to give the place *some* human scale. There was a wall of tinted windows, which allowed him to see out to what appeared to be wheat fields and a road, but nothing else. It was almost like being on a ship at sea, he thought, unlike anything he'd ever experienced. The former KGB officer worked through his breakfast, all of his instincts on alert, hoping to learn more, and as quickly as he could.

"Domingo, I need you to take this one," John said.

"It's a long way to go, John, and I just became a daddy," Chavez objected.

"Sorry, pal, but Covington is down. So's Chin. I'm going to send you and four men. It's an easy job, Ding. The Aussies know their stuff, but they asked us to come down and give it a look—and the reason for that is the expert way you handled your field assignments, okay?"

"When do I leave?"

"Tonight, 747 out of Heathrow." Clark held up the ticket envelope.

"Great," Chavez grumbled.

"Hey, at least you were there for the delivery, pop."

"I suppose. What if something crops up while we're away?" Chavez tried as a weak final argument.

"We can scratch a team together, but you really think somebody's going to yank our chain anytime soon? After we bagged those IRA pukes? I don't," Clark concluded.

"What about the Russian guy, Serov?"

"The FBI's on it, trying to run him down in New York. They've assigned a bunch of agents to it."

One of them was Tom Sullivan. He was currently in the post office. Box 1453 at this station belonged to the mysterious Mr. Serov. It had some junk mail in it, and a Visa bill, but no one had opened the box in at least nine days, judging by the dates on the envelopes, and none of the clerks professed to know what the owner of Box 1453 looked like, though one thought he didn't pick up his mail very often. He'd given a street address when obtaining the box, but that address, it turned out, was to an Italian bakery several blocks away, and the phone number was a dud, evidently made up for the purpose.

"Sure as hell, this guy's a spook," Sullivan thought aloud, wondering why the Foreign Counterintelligence group hadn't picked up the case.

"Sure wiggles like one," Chatham agreed. And their assignment ended right there. They had no evidence of a crime for the subject, and not enough manpower to assign an agent to watch the P.O. box around the clock.

• • •

Security was good here, Popov thought, as he rode around in another of the military-type vehicles that Dawson called a Hummer. The first thing about security was to have defensive depth. That they had. It was ten kilometers at least before you approached a property line.

"It used to be a number of large farms, but Horizon bought them all out a few years ago and started building the research lab. It took a while, but it's finished now."

"You still grow wheat here?"

"Yeah, the facility itself doesn't use all that much of the land, and we try to keep the rest of it the way it was. Hell, we grow almost enough wheat for all the people at the lab, got our own elevators an' all over that way." He pointed to the north.

Popov looked that way and saw the massive concrete structures some distance away. It was amazing how large America was, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought, and this part seemed so flat, not unlike the Russian steppes. The land had some dips and rises, but all they seemed to do was emphasize the lack of a real hill anywhere. The Hummer went north, and eventually crossed a rail line that evidently led to the grain silos—elevators, Dawson had called them? Elevators? Why that word? Farther north and he could barely make out traffic moving on a distant highway.

"That's the northern border," Dawson explained, as they passed into nonfarm land.

"What's that?"

"Oh, that's our little herd of pronghorn antelopes." Dawson turned the wheel slightly to go closer. The Hummer bumped over the grassy land.

"They're pretty animals."

"That they are, and very fast. We call 'em the speedgoat. Not a true antelope at all, genetically closer to goats. Those babies can run at forty miles an hour, and do it for damned near an hour. They also have superb eyesight."

"Difficult to hunt, I imagine. Do you hunt?"

"They are, and I'm not. I'm a vegan."

"What?"

"Vegetarian. I don't eat meat or other animal products," Dawson said somewhat proudly. Even his belt was made of canvas rather than leather.

"Why is that, David?" Popov asked. He'd never come across anyone like him before.

"Oh, just a choice I made. I don't approve of killing animals for food or any other reason"—he turned—"not everybody agrees with me, not even here at the Project, but I'm not the only one who thinks that way. Nature is something to be respected, not exploited."

"So, you don't buy your wife a fur coat," Popov said, with a smile. He had heard about those fanatics.

"Not hardly!" Dawson laughed.

"I've never hunted," Popov said next, wondering what response he'd get. "I never saw the sense in it, and in Russia they've nearly exterminated most

game animals."

"So I understand. That's very sad, but they'll come back someday," Dawson pronounced.

"How, with all the state hunters working to kill them?" That institution hadn't ended even with the demise of Communist rule.

Dawson's face took on a curious expression, one Popov had seen many times before at KGB. The man knew something he was unwilling to say right now, though what he knew was important somehow. "Oh, there's ways, pal. There's ways."

The driving tour required an hour and a half, at the end of which Popov was mightily impressed with the size of the facility. The approach road to the building complex *was* an airport, he saw, with electronic instruments to guide airplanes in and traffic lights to warn autos off when flight operations were in progress. He asked Dawson about it.

"Yeah, it is kinda obvious, isn't it? You can get a G in and out of here pretty easy. They say you can bring in real commercial jets, too, medium-sized ones, but I've never seen that done."

"Dr. Brightling spent a lot of money to build this establishment."

"That he did," Dawson agreed. "But it's worth it, trust me." He drove up the highway/runway to the lab building and stopped. "Come with me."

Popov followed without asking why. He'd never appreciated the power of a major American corporation. This could and should have been a government facility, with all the land and the huge building complex. The hotel building in which he'd spent the night could probably hold thousands of people—and *why* build such a place here? Was Brightling going to move his entire corporation here, all his employees? So far from major cities, airports, all the things that civilization offered. Why here? Except, of course, for security. It was also far from large police agencies, from news media and reporters. For the purposes of security, this facility might as easily have been on the moon.

The lab building was also larger than it needed to be, Dmitriy thought, but unlike the others, it appeared to be functioning at the moment. Inside was a desk, and a receptionist who knew David Dawson. The two men proceeded unimpeded to the elevators, then up to the fourth floor, and right to an office.

"Hi, Doc," Dawson said. "This is Dmitriy. Dr. Brightling sent him to us last night. He's going to be here awhile," the security chief added.

"I got the fax." The physician stood and extended his hand to Popov. "Hi, I'm John Killgore. Follow me." And the two of them went through a side door into an examining room, while Dawson waited outside. Killgore told Popov to disrobe down to his underwear, and proceeded to give him a physical examination, taking blood pressure, checking eyes and ears and reflexes, prodding his belly to make sure that the liver was nonpalpable, and finally taking four test tubes of blood for further examination. Popov submitted to it all without objection, somewhat bemused by the whole thing, and slightly intimidated by the physician, as most people were. Finally, Killgore pulled a vial from the medicine cabinet and stuck a disposable syringe into it.

"What's this?" Dmitriy Arkadeyevich asked.

"Just a booster shot," Killgore explained, setting the vial down.

Popov picked it up and looked at the label, which read **"B-2100** 11-21-00"

and nothing else. Then he winced when the needle went into his upper arm. He'd never enjoyed getting shots.

"There, that's done," Killgore said. "I'll talk to you tomorrow about the blood work." With that done, he pointed his patient to the hook his clothing hung on. It was a pity, Killgore thought, that the patient couldn't be appreciative for having his life saved.

"He might as well not exist," Special Agent Sullivan told his boss. "Maybe somebody comes in to check his mail, but not in the past nine or ten days."

"What can we do about that?"

"If you want, we can put a camera and motion sensor inside the box, like the FCI guys do to cover dead-drops. We can do it, but it costs money and manpower to keep an agent or two close if the alarm goes off. Is this case that important?"

"Yes, it is now," the Assistant Special Agent in charge of the New York field division told his subordinate. "Gus Werner started this one off, and he's keeping a personal eye on the case file. So, talk to the FCI guys and get them to help you cover the P.O. box."

Sullivan nodded and concealed his surprise. "Okay, will do."

"Next, what about the Bannister case?"

"That's not going anywhere at the moment. The closest thing to a hit we've gotten to this point is the second interview with this Kirk Maclean guy. He acted a little antsy. Maybe just nerves on his part, maybe something else—we have nothing on him and the missing victim, except that they had drinks and talked together at this bar uptown. We ran a background on him. Nothing much to report. Makes a good living for Horizon Corporation—he's a biochemist by profession, graduated University of Delaware, master's degree, working toward a doctorate at Columbia. Belongs to some conservation groups, including Earth First and the Sierra Club, gets their periodicals. His main hobby is backpacking. He has twenty-two grand in the bank, and he pays his bills on time. His neighbors say he's quiet and withdrawn, doesn't make many friends in the building. No known girlfriends. He says he knew Mary Bannister casually, walked her home once, no sexual involvement, and that's it, he says."

"Anything else?" the ASAC asked.

"The flyers the NYPD handed out haven't developed into anything yet. I can't say that I'm very hopeful at this point."

"What's next, then?"

Sullivan shrugged. "In a few more days we're going back to Maclean to interview him again. Like I said, he looked a little bit hinky, but not enough to justify coverage on him."

"I talked to this Lieutenant d'Allessandro. He's thinking there might be a serial killer working that part of town."

"Maybe so. There's another girl missing, Anne Pretloe's her name, but nothing's turning on that one either. Nothing for us to work with. We'll keep scratching away at it," Sullivan promised. "If one of them's out there, sooner or later he'll make a mistake." But until he did, more young women would continue to disappear into that particular black hole, and the combined forces

of the NYPD and the FBI couldn't do much to stop it. "I've never worked a case like this before."

"I have," the ASAC said. "The Green River killer in Seattle. We put a ton of resources on that one, but we never caught the mutt, and the killings just stopped. Maybe he got picked up for burglary or robbing a liquor store, and maybe he's sitting it out in a Washington State prison, waiting to get paroled so he can take down some more hookers. We have a great profile on how his brain works, but that's it, and we don't know what brain the profile fits. These cases are real head-scratchers."

Kirk Maclean was having lunch just then, sitting in one of the hundreds of New York delicatessens, eating egg salad and drinking a cream soda.

"So?" Henriksen asked.

"So, they came back to talk to me again, asking the same fuckin' questions over and over, like they expect me to change my story."

"Did you?" the former FBI agent asked.

"No, there's only one story I'm going to tell, and that's the one I prepared in advance. How did you know that they might come to me like this?" Maclean asked.

"I used to be FBI. I've worked cases, and I know how the Bureau operates. They are very easy to underestimate, and then they appear—no, then *you* appear on the scope, and they start looking, and mainly they don't stop looking until they find something," Henriksen said, as a further warning to this kid.

"So, where are they now?" Maclean asked. "The girls, I mean."

"You don't need to know that, Kirk. Remember that. You do not need to know."

"Okay." Maclean nodded his submission. "Now what?"

"They'll come to see you again. They've probably done a background check on you and—"

"What's that mean?"

"Talk to your neighbors, coworkers, check your credit history, your car, whether you have tickets, any criminal convictions, look for anything that suggests that you could be a bad guy," Henriksen explained.

"There isn't anything like that on me," Kirk said.

"I know." Henriksen had done the same sort of check himself. There was no sense in having somebody with a criminal past out breaking the law in the name of the Project. The only black mark against him was Maclean's membership in Earth First, which was regarded by the Bureau almost as a terrorist—well, extremist—organization. But all Maclean did with that bunch was to read their monthly newsletter. They had a lot of good ideas, and there was talk in the Project about getting some of them injected with the "B" vaccine, but they had too many members whose ideas of protecting the planet were limited to driving nails into trees, so that the buzz saws would break. That sort of thing only chopped up workers in sawmills and raised the ire of the ignorant public without teaching them anything useful. That was the problem with terrorists, Henriksen had known for years. Their actions never matched their aspirations. Well, they weren't smart enough to develop the

resources they needed to be effective. You had to live in the economic eco-structure to achieve that, and they just couldn't compete on that battlefield. Ideology was never enough. You needed brains and adaptability, too. To be one of the elect, you had to be worthy. Kirk Maclean wasn't really worthy, but he was part of the team. And now he was rattled by the attention of the FBI. All he had to do was stick to his story. But he was shook up, and that meant he couldn't be trusted. So, they'd have to do something about it.

"Get your stuff packed. We'll move you out to the Project tonight." What the hell, it would be starting soon anyway. Very soon, in fact.

"Good," Maclean responded, finishing his egg salad. Henriksen was eating pastrami, he saw. Not a vegan. Well, maybe someday.

Artwork was finally going up on some of the blank walls. So, Popov thought, the facility wasn't to be entirely soulless. It was nature paintings—mountains, forests, and animals. Some of the pictures were quite good, but most of them were ordinary, the kind of thing you found on the walls of cheap motels. How strange, the Russian thought, that with all the money they'd spent to build this monstrous facility in the middle of nowhere, that the artwork was second-rate. Well, taste was taste, and Brightling was a technocrat, and doubtless uneducated in the finer aspects of life. In ancient times he would have been a druid, Dmitriy thought, a bearded man in a long white robe who worshiped trees and animals and sacrificed virgins on stone altars to his pagan beliefs. There were better things to do with virgins. There was such a strange mixture of the old and the new in this man—and his company. The director of security was a "vegan," who never ate meat? What rubbish! Horizon Corporation was a world leader in several vital new technological areas, but it was peopled by madmen of such primitive and strange beliefs. He supposed it was an American affectation. Such a huge country, the brilliant coexisting with the mad. Brightling was a genius, but he'd hired Popov to initiate terrorist incidents—

—and then he'd brought Popov here. Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought about that as he chewed his dinner. *Why here?* What was so special about this place?

Now he could understand why Brightling had shrugged off the amount he'd transferred to the terrorists. Horizon Corporation had spent more paving one of the access roads than all the money Popov had taken from the corporate coffers and translated into his own. But this place *was* important. You could see that in every detail, down to the revolving doors that kept the air inside—every doorway he'd seen was like some sort of air lock, and made him think of a spacecraft. Not a single dollar had been spared to make this facility perfect. But perfect for what?

Popov shook his head and sipped at his tea. The quality of the food was excellent. The quality of *everything* was excellent, except the absurdly pedestrian artwork. There was, therefore, not a single mistake here. Brightling was not the sort of man to compromise on anything, was he? Therefore, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich told himself, everything here *was* deliberate, and everything fit into a pattern, from which he could discern the purpose of the building and the man who'd erected it. He'd allowed himself to be beguiled this day with his tour—and his physical examination? What the *hell* was *that*

all about? The doctor had given him an injection. A “booster” he’d called it. But what for? Against what?

Outside this shrine to technology was a mere farm, and outside that, wild animals, which his driver of the day had seemed to worship.

Druids, he thought. In his time as a field officer in England he’d taken the time to read books and learn about the culture of the English, played the tourist, even traveled to Stonehenge and other places, in the hope of understanding the people better. Ultimately, though, he found that history was history, and though highly interesting, no more logical there than in the Soviet Union—where history had mainly been lies concocted to fit the ideological pattern of Marxism-Leninism.

Druids had been pagans, their culture based on the gods supposed to live in trees and rocks, and to which human lives had been sacrificed. That had doubtless been a measure exercised by the druid priesthood to maintain their control over the peasants … and the nobility, too, in fact, as all religions tended to do. In return for offering some hope and certainty for the greatest mysteries of life—what happened after death, why the rain fell when it did, how the world had come to be—they extracted their price of earthly power, which was to tell everyone how to live. It had probably been a way for people of intellectual gifts but ignoble birth to achieve the power associated with the nobility. But it had always been about power—earthly power. And like the members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the druid priesthood had probably believed that which they said and that which they enforced because—they had to believe it. It had been the source of their power, and you had to believe in that.

But these people here weren’t primitives, were they? They were mainly scientists, some of them world leaders in their fields. Horizon Corporation was a collection of geniuses, wasn’t it? How *else* had Brightling accumulated so much money?

Popov frowned as he piled his plates back on the tray, then walked off to deposit them on the collection table. This was oddly like the KGB cafeteria at Number 2 Dzerzhinsky Square. Good food and anonymity. Finished, he made his way back to his room, still in the dark as to what the hell had taken place in his life over the past months. Druids? How could people of science be like that? Vegans? How could people of good sense *not* want to eat meat? What was so special about the gray-brown antelopes that lived on the margins of the property? And that man, he was the director of security here, and therefore he was supposedly a man with the highest personal trust. A fucking vegetarian in a land that produced beef in quantities the rest of the world could only dream about.

What the hell was that shot for? Popov wondered again as he flipped on the television. “Booster”? Against what? Why had he been examined at all? The deeper he went, the more information he found, the more perplexing the puzzle became.

But whatever this was all about, it had to be commensurate in scope to the investment Brightling and his company had made—and that was vast! And whatever it was about, it didn’t shrink at causing the death of people unknown and clearly unimportant to John Brightling. But what possible pattern did all

of that fit?

Popov admitted yet again that he still didn't have a clue. Had he reported on this adventure to his KGB superiors, they would have thought him slightly mad, but they would have ordered him to pursue the case further until he had some sort of conclusion to present, and because he was KGB-trained, he could no more stop pursuing the facts to their conclusion than he could stop breathing.

At least the first-class seats were comfortable, Chavez told himself. The flight would be a long one—about as long as a flight could be, since the destination was 10,500 miles away, and the whole planet was only 24,000 miles around. British Airways Flight 9 would be leaving at 10:15 P.M., go eleven and three quarters hours to Bangkok, lay over for an hour and a half, then another eight hours and fifty minutes to Sydney, by which time, Ding thought, he'd be about ready to pull out his pistol and shoot the flight crew. All this, plus not having his wife and son handy, just because the fucking Aussies wanted him to hold their hand during the track meet. He'd arrive at 5:20 A.M. *two* days from now due to the vagaries of the equator and the International Dateline, with his body clock probably more scrambled than the eggs he had for breakfast. But there was nothing he could do about it, and at least BA had stopped smoking on their flights—those people who did smoke would probably be going totally nuts, but that wasn't his problem. He had four books and six magazines to pass the time, plus a private TV screen for movies, and decided that he had to make the best of it. The flight attendants closed the doors, the engines started, and the captain came on the intercom to welcome them aboard their home for the next day—or two days, depending on how you looked at it.

CHAPTER 32

BLOOD WORK

"Was that a good idea?" Brightling asked.

"I think so. Kirk was on the travel list anyway. We can have his coworkers tell anybody who asks that he was called out of town on company business," Henriksen said.

"What if the FBI agents go back to see him?"

"Then he's out of town, and they'll just have to wait," Henriksen answered. "Investigations like this last for months, but there won't be months, will there?"

Brightling nodded. "I suppose. How's Dmitriy doing out there?"

"Dave Dawson says he's doing okay, asking a lot of touristy questions, but that's all. He had his physical from Johnny Killgore, and he's gotten his 'B' shot."

"I hope he likes being alive. From what he said, he might turn out to be our kind of people, you know?"

"I'm not so sure about that, but he doesn't know squat, and by the time he finds out, it'll be too late anyway. Wil Gearing is in place, and he says everything's going according to plan, John. Three more weeks, and then it'll all be under way. So, it's time to start moving our people to Kansas."

"Too bad. The longevity project's really looking good at the moment."

"Oh?"

"Well, it's pretty hard to predict breakthroughs, but the research threads all look very interesting at the moment, Bill."

"So we might have lived forever? . . ." Henriksen asked, with a wry smile. For all the time he'd been associated with Brightling and Horizon Corporation, he had trouble believing such predictions. The company had caused some genuine medical miracles, but this was just too much to credit.

"I can think of worse things to happen. I'm going to make sure that whole team gets the 'B' shot," Brightling said.

"Well, take the whole team out there and put 'em to work in Kansas, for crying out loud," Bill suggested. "What about the rest of the company?"

Brightling didn't like that question, didn't like the fact that more than half of the Horizon employees would be treated like the rest of humanity—left to die at best, or to be murdered by the "A" vaccine at worst. John Brightling, M.D., Ph.D., had some lingering morality, part of which was loyalty to the people who worked for him—which was why Dmitriy Popov was in Kansas with the "B"-class antibodies in his system. So, even the Big Boss wasn't entirely comfortable with what he was doing, Henriksen saw. Well, that was conscience for you. Shakespeare had written about the phenomenon.

"That's already decided," Brightling said, after a second's discomfort. He'd be saving those who were part of the Project, and those whose scientific knowledge would be useful in the future. Accountants, lawyers, and secretaries, by and large, would not be saved. That he'd be saving about five thousand people—as many as the Kansas and Brazil facilities could hold—was quite a stretch, especially considering that only a small fraction of those people knew what the Project was all about. Had he been a Marxist, Brightling would have thought or even said aloud that the world needed an intellectual elite to make it into the New World, but he didn't really think in those terms. He truly did believe that he was saving the planet, and though the cost of doing so was murderously high, it was a goal worth pursuing, though part of him hoped that he'd be able to live through the transition period without taking his own life from the guilt factor that was sure to assault him.

It was easier for Henriksen. What people were doing to the world was a crime. Those who did it, supported it, or did nothing to stop it, were criminals. His job was to make them stop. It was the only way. And at the end of it the innocent would be safe, as would Nature. In any case, the men and the instruments of the Project were now in place. Wil Gearing was confident that he could accomplish his mission, so skillfully had Global Security insinuated itself into the security plan for the Sydney Olympics, with the help of Popov and his ginned-up operations in Europe. So, the Project would go forward, and that was that, and a year from now the planet would be transformed. Henriksen's only concern was how many people would survive the plague. The scientific members of the Project had discussed it to endless length. Most would die from starvation or other causes, and few would have the capacity to organize themselves enough to determine why the Project members had also survived and then take action against them. Most natural survivors would be invited into the protection of the elect, and the smart ones would accept that protection. The others—who cared? Henriksen had also set up the security systems at the Kansas facility. There were heavy weapons there, enough to handle rioting farmers with Shiva symptoms, he was sure.

The most likely result of the plague would be a rapid breakdown of society. Even the military would rapidly come apart, but the Kansas facility was a good distance from the nearest military base, and the soldiers based at Fort Riley would be sent to the cities first to maintain order until they, too, came down with symptoms. Then they'd be treated by the military doctors—for what little good it would do—and by the time unit cohesion broke down, it would be far too late for even the soldiers to take any organized action. So, it would be a twitchy time, but one that would pass rapidly, and so long as the Project people in Kansas kept quiet, they ought not to suffer organized attack. Hell, all they had to do was to let the world believe that people were dying there, too, maybe dig a few graves and toss bags into them for the cameras—better yet, burn them in the open—and they could frighten people away from another focal center of the plague. No, they'd considered this one for years. The Project would succeed. It had to. Who else would save the planet?

The cafeteria theme today was Italian, and Popov was pleased to see that the cooks here were not "vegans." The lasagna had meat in it. Coming out with

his tray and glass of Chianti, he spotted Dr. Killgore eating alone and decided to walk over that way.

"Ah, hello, Mr. Popov."

"Good day, Doctor. How did my blood work turn out?"

"Fine. Your cholesterol is slightly elevated, and the HDL/LDL ratio is a little off, but I wouldn't get very upset about it. A little exercise should fix it nicely. Your PSA is fine—"

"What's that?"

"Prostate-Specific Antibody, a check for prostate cancer. All men should check that out when they turn fifty or so. Yours is fine. I should have told you yesterday, but I got piled up. Sorry about that—but there was nothing important to tell you, and that's a case where no news really is good news, Mr. Popov."

"My name is Dmitriy," the Russian said, extending his hand.

"John," the doctor replied, taking it. "Ivan to you, I guess."

"And I see you are not a vegan," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich observed, gesturing to Killgore's food.

"Oh? What? Me? No, Dmitriy, I'm not one of those. *Homo sapiens* is an omnivore. Our teeth are not those of vegetarians. The enamel isn't thick enough. That's sort of a political movement, the vegans. Some of them won't even wear leather shoes because leather's an animal product." Killgore ate half a meatball to show what he thought of that. "I even like hunting."

"Oh? Where does one do that here?"

"Not on the Project grounds. We have rules about that, but in due course I'll be able to hunt deer, elk, buffalo, birds, everything I want," Killgore said, looking out the huge windows.

"Buffalo? I thought they were extinct," Popov said, remembering something he'd heard or read long before.

"Not really. They came close a hundred years ago, but enough survived to thrive at Yellowstone National Park and in private collections. Some people even breed them with domestic cattle, and the meat's pretty good. It's called beefalo. You can buy it in some stores around here."

"A buffalo can breed with a cow?" Popov asked.

"Sure. The animals are very close, genetically speaking, and cross-breeding is actually pretty easy. The hard part," Killgore explained with a grin, "is that a domestic bull is intimidated by a bison cow, and has trouble performing his duty, as it were. They fix that by raising them together from infancy, so the bull is used to them by the time he's big enough to do the deed."

"What about horses? I would have expected horses in a place like this."

"Oh, we have them, mainly quarter horses and some Appaloosas. The barn is down in the southwest part of the property. You ride, Dmitriy?"

"No, but I have seen many Western movies. When Dawson drove me around, I expected to see cowboys herding cattle carrying Colt pistols on their belts."

Killgore had a good chuckle at that. "I guess you're a city boy. Well, so was I once, but I've come to love it out here, especially on horseback. Like to go for a ride?"

"I've never sat on a horse," Popov admitted, intrigued by the invitation. This

doctor was an open man, and perhaps a trusting one. He could get information from this man, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought.

"Well, we have a nice gentle quarter horse mare—Buttermilk, would you believe?" Killgore paused. "Damn, it's nice to be out here."

"You are a recent arrival?"

"Just last week. I used to be in the Binghamton lab, northwest of New York City," he explained.

"What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm a physician—epidemiologist, as a matter of fact. I'm supposed to be an expert on how diseases riffle through populations. But I do a lot of clinical stuff, too, and so I'm one of the designated family practitioners. Like a GP in the old days. I know a little bit about everything, but I'm not really an expert in any field—except epidemiology, and that's more like being an accountant than a doc, really."

"I have a sister who is a physician," Popov tried.

"Oh? Where?"

"In Moscow. She's a pediatrician. She graduated Moscow State University in the 1970s. Her name is Maria Arkadeyevna. I am Dmitriy Arkadeyevich. Our father was Arkady, you see."

"Was he a doctor, too?" Killgore asked.

Popov shook his head. "No, he was like me, a spy—an intelligence officer for State Security." Popov dropped that in to see how Killgore would react. He figured he didn't need to keep it a secret out here—and it could be useful. You give something to get something . . .

"You were KGB? No shit?" the doctor asked, impressed.

"Yes, I was, but with the changes in my country, KGB diminished in size, and I was, how you say, laid off?"

"What did you do with KGB? Can you say?"

It was as though he'd just admitted to being a sports star, Popov saw. "I was an intelligence officer. I gathered information, and I was a conduit for people in whom KGB had interest."

"What does that mean?"

"Oh, I met with certain people and groups to discuss . . . matters of mutual interest," he replied coyly.

"Like who?"

"I am not supposed to say. Your Dr. Brightling knows. That is why he hired me, in fact."

"But you're part of the Project now, right?"

"I do not know what that means—John sent me here, but he didn't say why."

"Oh, I see. Well, you'll be here for a while, Dmitriy." That had been obvious from the fax the physician had received from New York. This Popov guy *was* now part of the Project, whether he wanted to be or not. He'd had his "B" shot, after all.

The Russian tried to recover control of the conversation: "I've heard that before, project—what project? What exactly are you doing here?"

For the first time, Killgore looked uncomfortable. "Well, John will brief you in on that when he gets out here, Dmitriy. So, how was dinner?"

"The food is good, for institutional food," Popov replied, wondering what mine he'd just stepped on. He'd been close to something important. His instincts told him that very clearly indeed. He'd asked a direct question of someone who supposed that he'd already known the answer, and his lack of specific knowledge had surprised Killgore.

"Yeah, we have some good people here in food services." Killgore finished his bread. "So, want to take a ride in the country?"

"Yes, I'd like that very much."

"Meet me here tomorrow morning, say about seven, and I'll show you around the right way." Killgore walked away, wondering what the Russian was here for. Well, if John Brightling had personally recruited him, he had to be important to the Project—but if that were true, how the hell could he not know what the Project was all about? Should he ask someone? But if so, whom?

They knocked on the door, but there was no answer. Sullivan and Chatham waited a few minutes—they might have caught the guy on the toilet or in the shower—but there was no response. They took the elevator downstairs, found the doorman, and identified themselves.

"Any idea where Mr. Maclean is?"

"He left earlier today, carrying a few bags like he was going somewhere, but I don't know where."

"Cab to the airport?" Chatham asked.

The doorman shook his head. "No, a car came for him and headed off west." He pointed that way, in case they didn't know where west was.

"Did he do anything about his mail?"

Another headshake: "No."

"Okay, thanks," Sullivan said, heading off to where their Bureau car was parked. "Business trip? Vacation?"

"We can call his office tomorrow to find out. It's not like he's a real suspect yet, is it, Tom?"

"I suppose not," Sullivan responded. "Let's head off to the bar and try the photos on some more people."

"Right," Chatham agreed reluctantly. This case was taking away his TV time at home, which was bad enough. It was also going nowhere at the moment, which was worse.

• • •

Clark awoke to the noise and had to think for a second or so to remember that Patsy had moved in with them so as not to be alone, and to have her mother's help with JC, as they were calling him. This time he decided to get up, too, despite the early hour. Sandy was already up, her maternal instincts ignited by the sound of a crying baby. John arrived in time to see his wife hand his newly re-diapered grandson to his daughter, who sat somewhat bleary-eyed in a rocking chair purchased for the purpose, her nightie open and exposing her

breast. John turned away in mild embarrassment and looked instead at his similarly nightieclad wife, who smiled benignly at the picture before her.

He was a cute little guy, Clark thought. He peeked back. JC's mouth was locked onto the offered nipple and started sucking—maybe the only instinct human children were born with, the mother-child bond that men simply could not replicate at this stage in a child's life. What a precious thing life was. Just days before, John Conor Chavez had been a fetus, a *thing* living inside his mother—and whether or not he'd been a living thing depended on what one thought of abortion, and that, to John Clark, was a matter of some controversy. He had killed in his life, not frequently, but not as seldom as he would have preferred, either. He told himself at such times that the people whose lives he took had deserved their fates, either because of actions or their associations. He'd also been largely an instrument of his country at those times, and hence able to lay off whatever guilt he might have felt on a larger identity. But now, seeing JC, he had to remind himself that every life he'd taken had started like this one had—helpless, totally dependent on the care of his mother, later growing into a manhood determined both by his own actions and the influence of others, and only then becoming a force for good or evil. How did *that* happen? What twisted a person to evil? Choice? Destiny? Luck, good or bad? What had twisted his own life to the good—and was his life a servant of the good? Just one more of the damned-fool things that entered your head at oh-darkthirty. Well, he told himself, he was sure that he'd never hurt a baby during that life, however violent parts of it had been. And he never would. No, he'd only harmed people who had harmed others first, or threatened to do so, and who had to be stopped from doing so because the others he protected, either immediately or distantly, had rights as well, and he protected them and those from harm, and that settled the thoughts for the moment.

He took a step toward the pair, reached down to touch the little feet, and got no reaction, because JC had his priorities lined up properly at the moment. Food. And the antibodies that came with breast milk to keep him healthy. In time, his eyes would recognize faces and his little face would smile, and he'd learn to sit up, then crawl, then walk, and finally speak, and so begin to join the world of men. Ding would be a good father and a good model for his grandson to emulate, Clark was sure, especially with Patsy there to be a check on his father's adverse tendencies. Clark smiled and walked back to bed, trying to remember exactly where Chavez the Elder was at the moment, and leaving the women's work to the women of the house.

It was hours later when the dawn again awoke Popov in his motel-like room. He'd fallen quickly into a routine, first turning on his coffeemaker, then going into the bathroom to shower and shave, then coming out ten minutes later to switch on CNN. The lead story was about the Olympics. The world had become so dull. He remembered his first field assignment to London, as in his hotel he'd watched CNN comment and report on East-West differences, the movement of armies and the growth of suspicion between the political groups that had defined the world of his youth. He especially remembered the strategic issues so often misreported by journalists, both print and electronic:

MIRVs and missiles, and throw weight, and ABM systems that had supposedly threatened to upset the balance of power. All things of the past now, Popov told himself. For him, it was as though a mountain range had disappeared. The shape of the world had changed virtually overnight, the things he'd believed to be immutable had indeed mutated into something he'd never believed possible. The global war he'd feared, along with his agency and his nation, was now no more likely than a life-ending meteor from the heavens.

It was time to learn more. Popov dressed and headed down to the cafeteria, where he found Dr. Killgore eating breakfast, just as promised.

"Good morning, John," the Russian said, taking his seat across the table from the epidemiologist.

"Morning, Dmitriy. Ready for your ride?"

"Yes, I think I am. You said the horse was gentle?"

"That's why they call her Buttermilk, eight-year-old quarter horse mare. She won't hurt you."

"Quarter horse? What does that mean?"

"It means they only race a quarter mile, but, you know, one of the richest horse races in the world is for that distance, down in Texas. I forget what they call it, but the purse is huge. Well, one more institution we won't be seeing much more of," Killgore went on, buttering his toast.

"Excuse me?" Popov asked.

"Hmph? Oh, nothing important, Dmitriy." And it wasn't. The horses would survive for the most part, returning to the wild to see if they could make it after centuries of being adapted to human care. He supposed their instincts, genetically encoded in their DNA, would save most of them. And someday Project members and/or their progeny would capture them, break them, and ride them on their way to enjoy Nature and Her ways. The working horses, quarters and Appaloosas, should do well. Thoroughbreds he was less sure of, super-adapted as they were to do one thing—run in a circle as fast as their physiology would allow—and little else. Well, that was their misfortune, and Darwin's laws were harsh, though also fair in their way. Killgore finished his breakfast and stood. "Ready?"

"Yes, John." Popov followed him to the doors. Outside, Killgore had his own Hummer, which he drove to the southwest in the clear, bright morning. Ten minutes later they were at the horse barns. He took a saddle from the tack room and walked down to a stall whose door had BUTTERMILK engraved on the pine. He opened it and walked in, quickly saddled the horse, and handed Popov the reins.

"Just walk her outside. She won't bite or kick or anything. She's very docile, Dmitriy."

"If you say so, John," the Russian observed dubiously. He was wearing sneakers rather than boots, and wondered if that was important or not. The horse looked at him with her huge brown eyes, revealing nothing as to what, if anything, she thought of this new human who was leading her outside. Dmitriy walked to the barn's large door, and the horse followed quietly into the clear morning air. A few minutes later, Killgore appeared, astride his horse, a gelding, so it appeared.

"You know how to get on?" the physician asked.

Popov figured he'd seen enough Western movies. He stuck his left foot into the stirrups and climbed up, swinging his right leg over and finding the opposite stirrup.

"Good. Now just hold the reins like this and click your tongue, like this." Killgore demonstrated. Popov did the same, and the horse, dumb as she appeared to be, started walking forward. Some of this must be instinctive on his part, the Russian thought. He was doing things—apparently the right things—almost without instruction. Wasn't that remarkable?

"There you go, Dmitriy," the doctor said approvingly. "This is how it's supposed to be, man. A pretty morning, a horse 'tween your legs, and lots of country to cover."

"But no pistol." Popov observed with a chuckle.

Killgore did the same. "Well, no Indians or rustlers here to kill, pal. Come on." Killgore's legs thumped in on his mount, making him move a little faster, and Buttermilk did the same. Popov got his body into a rhythm similar to that of Buttermilk's and kept pace with him.

It was magnificent, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich thought, and now he understood the ethos of all those bad movies he'd seen. There *was* something fundamental and manly about this, though he lacked a proper hat as well as a sixgun. He reached into his pocket and took out his sunglasses, looked around at the rolling land and somehow felt himself to be a part of it all.

"John, I must thank you. I have never done this before. It is wonderful," he said sincerely.

"It's Nature, man. It's the way things were always supposed to be. Come on, Mystic," he said to his mount, speeding up a little more, looking back to see that Popov could handle the increased pace.

It wasn't easy to synchronize his body movements in pace with the horse, but gradually Popov managed it, and soon pulled up alongside.

"So, this is how Americans settled the West?"

Killgore nodded. "Yep. Once this was covered with buffalo, three or four great herds, as far as the eye could see . . .

"Hunters did it, did it all in a period of about ten years, using single-shot Sharps buffalo guns mainly. They killed them for the hides to make blankets and stuff, for the meat—sometimes they killed 'em just for the tongues. Slaughtered 'em like Hitler did with the Jews." Killgore shook his head. "One of the greatest crimes America ever committed, Dmitriy, just killed 'em just 'cause they were in the way. But they'll be coming back," he added, wondering how long it would take. Fifty years—he'd have a fair chance of seeing it then. Maybe a hundred years? They'd be letting the wolves and barren-grounds grizzly come back, too, but predators would come back slower. They didn't breed as rapidly as their prey animals. He wanted to see the prairie again as it had once been. So did many other Project members, and some of them wanted to live in tepees, like the Indians had done. But that, he thought, was a little bit extreme—political ideas taking the place of common sense.

"Hey, John!" a voice called from a few hundred yards behind. Both men turned to see a figure galloping up to them. In a minute or so, he was recognizable.

"Kirk! When did you get out here?"

"Flew in last night," Maclean answered. He stopped his horse and shook hands with Killgore. "What about you?"

"Last week, with the Binghamton crew. We closed that operation down and figured it was time to pull up stakes."

"All of them?" Maclean asked in a way that got Popov's attention. All of who?

"Yep." Killgore nodded soberly.

"Schedule work out?" Maclean asked next, dismissing whatever it was that had upset him before.

"Almost perfectly on the projections. We, uh, helped the last ones along."

"Oh." Maclean looked down for a second, feeling bad, briefly, for the women he'd recruited. But only briefly. "So it's moving forward?"

"Yes, it is, Kirk. The Olympics start day after tomorrow, and then . . ."

"Yeah. Then it starts for real."

"Hello," Popov said, after a second. It was as though Killgore had forgotten he was there.

"Oh, sorry, Dmitriy. Kirk Maclean, this is Dmitriy Popov. John sent him out to us a couple days ago."

"Howdy, Dmitriy." Handshakes were exchanged. "Russian?" Maclean asked.

"Yes." A nod. "I work directly for Dr. Brightling. And you?"

"I'm a small part of the Project," Maclean admitted.

"Kirk's a biochemist and environmental engineer," Killgore explained. "Also so good-looking that we had him do another little thing for us," he teased. "But that's over now. So, what broke you loose so early, Kirk?"

"Remember Mary Bannister?"

"Yeah, what about her?"

"The FBI asked me if I knew her. I kicked it around with Henriksen, and he decided to send me out a little early. I take it she's . . ."

Killgore nodded matter-of-factly. "Yeah, last week."

"So 'A' works?"

"Yes, it does. And so does 'B.' "

"That's good. I got my 'B' shot already."

Popov thought back to his injection at Killgore's hands. There had been a capital B on the vial label, hadn't there? And what was this about the FBI? These two were talking freely, but it was like a foreign language—no, it was the speech of insiders, using internal words and phrases as engineers and physicians did, well, as intelligence officers did as well. It was part of Popov's fieldcraft to remember whatever was said in front of him, however distant from his understanding, and he took it all in, despite his befuddled expression.

Killgore led his horse off again. "First time out, Kirk?"

"First time on a horse in months. I had a deal with a guy in New York City, but I never really had time to do it enough. My legs and ass are gonna be sore tomorrow, John." The bio-engineer laughed.

"Yeah, but it's a good kind of sore." Killgore laughed as well. He'd had a horse back in Binghamton, and he hoped that the family that kept it for him would let him out when the time came, so that Stormy would be able to feed himself. . . but then Stormy was a gelding, and therefore biologically

irrelevant to the entire world except as a consumer of grass. Too bad, the physician thought. He'd been a fine riding horse.

Maclean stood in his stirrups, looking around. He could turn and look back at the Project buildings, but before him, and to left and right, little more than rolling prairie. Someday they'd have to burn down all the houses and farm buildings. They just cluttered the view.

"Look out, John," he said, seeing some danger forward and pointing at the holes.

"What is this?" Popov asked.

"Prairie dogs," Killgore said, letting his horse slow to a slow walk. "Wild rodents, they dig holes and make underground cities, called prairie-dog towns. If a horse steps into one, well, it's bad for the horse. But if they walk slow, they can avoid the holes."

"Rodents? Why don't you deal with them? Shoot them, poison them? If they can hurt a horse, then—"

"Dmitriy, they're part of Nature, okay? They *belong* here, even more than we do," Maclean explained.

"But a horse is—" *Expensive,* he thought, as the doctor cut him off.

"Not part of Nature, not really," Killgore went on. "I love 'em, too, but strictly speaking, they don't belong out here either."

"The hawks and other raptors will come back and control the prairie dogs," Maclean said. "No chicken farmers will be hurting them anymore. Man, I love watching them work."

"You bet. They're nature's own smart bomb," Killgore agreed. "That was the real sport of kings, training a hawk to hunt off your fist for you. I might do some of that myself in a few years. I always liked the gyrfalcon."

"The all-white one. Yeah, noble bird, that one," Maclean observed.

They think this area will be greatly changed in a few years, Popov thought. *But* what *could make that happen?*

"So, tell me," the Russian asked. "How will this all look in five years?"

"Much better," Killgore said. "Some buffalo will be back. We might even have to keep them away from our wheat."

"Herd 'em with the Hummers?" Maclean wondered.

"Or helicopters, maybe," the physician speculated. "We'll have a few of those to measure the populations. Mark Holtz is talking about going to Yellowstone and capturing a few, then trucking them down here to help jump-start the herd. You know Mark?"

Maclean shook his head. "No, never met him."

"He's a big-picture thinker on the ecological side, but he's not into interfering with Nature. Just helping Her along some."

"What are we going to do about the dogs?" Kirk asked, meaning domestic pets suddenly released into nature, where they'd become feral, killers of game.

"We'll just have to see," Killgore said. "Most won't be big enough to hurt mature animals, and a lot will be neutered, so they won't breed. Maybe we'll have to shoot some. Ought not to be too hard."

"Some won't like that. You know the score—we're not supposed to do anything but watch. I don't buy that. If we've screwed up the ecosystem, we ought to be able to fix the parts we broke, some of them anyway."

"I agree. We'll have to vote on that, though. Hell, I want to hunt, and they're going to have to vote on *that,* too," Killgore announced with a distasteful grimace.

"No shit? What about Jim Bridger? Except for trapping beaver, what did he do that was so damned wrong?"

"Vegans, they're extremists, Kirk. Their way or the highway, y'know?"

"Oh, fuck 'em. Tell 'em we're not designed to be herbivores, for Christ's sake. That's just pure science." The prairie-dog town was a small one, they saw, as they passed the last of the dirt bull's-eye'd holes.

"And what will your neighbors think of all this?" Popov asked, with a lighthearted smile. What the hell *were* these people talking about?

"What neighbors?" Killgore asked.

What *neighbors?* And it wasn't that which bothered Popov. It was that the reply was rhetorical in nature. But then the doctor changed the subject. "Sure is a nice morning for a ride."

What neighbors? Popov thought again. They could see the roofs of farmhouses and buildings not ten kilometers away, well lit by the morning sun. *What did they mean,* what *neighbors?* They spoke of a radiant future with wild animals everywhere, but not of people. Did they plan to purchase all the nearby farms? Even Horizon Corporation didn't have that much money, did it? This was a settled, civilized area. The farms nearby were large prosperous ones owned by people of comfortable private means. Where would they go? Why would they leave? And yet again, the question leaped into Popov's mind.

What is this all about?

CHAPTER 33

THE GAMES BEGIN

Chavez did his best not to stumble off the aircraft, somewhat amazed that the cabin crew looked so chipper. Well, they had practice, and maybe they'd adapted to jet lag better than he ever had. Like every other civilian he saw, he smacked his lips to deal with the sour taste and squinted his eyes and headed for the door with the eagerness of a man being released from a maximum-security prison. Maybe traveling great distances by ship wasn't so bad after all.

"Major Chavez?" a voice asked in an Australian accent.

"Yeah?" Chavez managed to say, looking at the guy in civilian clothes.

"G'day, I'm *Leftenant* Colonel Frank Wilkerson, Australian Special Air Service." He held out his hand.

"Howdy." Chavez managed to grab the hand and shake it. "These are my men, Sergeants Johnston, Pierce, Tomlinson, and Special Agent Tim Noonan of the FBI—he's our technical support." More handshakes were exchanged all around.

"Welcome to Australia, gentlemen. Follow me, if you please." The colonel waved for them to follow.

It took fifteen minutes to collect all the gear. That included a half dozen large mil-spec plastic containers that were loaded into a minibus. Ten minutes later, they were off the airport grounds and heading for Motorway 64 for the trip into Sydney.

"So, how was the flight?" Colonel Wilkerson asked, turning in his front seat to look at them.

"Long," Chavez said, looking around. The sun was rising—it was just short of 6:00 A.M.—while the arriving Rainbow troopers were all wondering if it was actually supposed to be setting according to their body clocks. They all hoped a shower and some coffee would help.

"Pig of a flight, all the way out from London," the colonel sympathized.

"That it is," Chavez agreed for his men.

"When do the games start?" Mike Pierce asked.

"Tomorrow," Wilkerson replied. "We've got most of the athletes settled into their quarters, and our security teams are fully manned and trained up. We expect no difficulties at all. The intelligence threat board is quite blank. The people we have watching the airport report nothing, and we have photos and descriptions of all known international terrorists. Not as many as there used to be, largely thanks to your group," the SAS colonel added, with a friendly, professional smile.

"Yeah, well, we try to do our part, Colonel," George Tomlinson observed, while rubbing his face.

"The chaps who attacked you directly, they were IRA, as the media said?"

"Yeah," Chavez answered. "Splinter group. But they were well briefed. Somebody gave them primo intelligence information. They had their civilian targets identified by name and occupation—that included my wife and motherin-law, and—"

"I hadn't heard *that,"* the Aussie said, with wide-open eyes.

"Well, it wasn't fun. And we lost two people killed, and four wounded, including Peter Covington. He's my counterpart, commanding Team-1," Ding explained. "Like I said, wasn't fun. Tim here turned out to have saved the day," he went on, pointing at Noonan.

"How so?" Wilkerson asked the FBI agent, who looked slightly embarrassed.

"I have a system for shutting down cellular phone communications. Turns out the bad guys were using them to coordinate their movements," the FBI agent explained. "We denied them that ability, and it interfered with their plans. Then Ding and the rest of the guys came in and messed them up some more. We were very, very lucky, Colonel."

"So, you're FBI. You know Gus Werner, I expect?"

"Oh, yeah. Gus and I go back a ways. He's the new AD for terrorism—new division the Bureau's set up. You've been to Quantico, I suppose."

"Just a few months ago, in fact, exercising with your Hostage Rescue Team and Colonel Byron's Delta group. Good lads, all of them." The driver turned off the interstate-type highway, taking an exit that seemed to head into downtown Sydney. Traffic was light. It was still too early for people to be very active, aside from milkmen and paperboys. The minibus pulled up to an upscale hotel, whose bell staff was awake, even at this ungodly hour.

"We have an arrangement with this one," Wilkerson explained. "The Global Security people are here, too."

"Who?" Ding asked.

"Global Security, they have the consulting contract. Mr. Noonan, you probably know their chief, Bill Henriksen."

"Bill the tree-hugger?" Noonan managed a strangled laugh. "Oh, yeah, I know him."

"Tree-hugger?"

"Colonel, Bill was a senior guy in Hostage Rescue a few years ago. Competent guy, but he's one of those nutty environmentalist types. Hugs trees and bunny rabbits. Worries about the ozone layer, all that crap," Noonan explained.

"I didn't know that about him. We do worry about the ozone down here, you know. One must use sunblock on the beaches and such. Might be serious in a few years, so they say."

"Maybe so," Tim allowed with a yawn. "I'm not a surfer."

The door was pulled open by a hotel employee and the men stumbled out. Colonel Wilkerson must have called ahead, Ding thought a minute later, as they were fast tracked to their rooms—nice ones—for wake-up showers, followed by big breakfasts with *lots* of coffee. As dreadful as the jet lag was, the best way for them to handle it was to gut their way through the first day, try to get a decent night's sleep, and so synchronize themselves in a single day. At least that was the theory, Ding thought, toweling off in front of the

bathroom mirror and seeing that he looked almost as messed up as he felt. Soon after that, wearing casual clothes, he showed up in the hotel coffee shop.

"You know, Colonel, if somebody made a narcotic that worked on jet lag, he'd die richer 'n hell."

"Quite. I've been through it as well, Major."

"Call me Ding. My given name's Domingo, but I go by Ding."

"What's your background?" Wilkerson asked.

"Started off as an infantryman, but then into CIA, and now this. I don't know about this simulated-major stuff. I'm Team-2 commander for Rainbow, and I guess that'll have to do."

"You Rainbow chaps have been busy."

"That's a fact, Colonel," Ding agreed, shaking his head as the waiter came with a pot of coffee. Ding wondered if anyone had the Army type of coffee, the sort with triple the usual amount of caffeine. It would have come in handy right now. That and a nice morning workout might have helped a lot. In addition to the fatigue, his body was rebelling against the full day of confinement on the 747. The damned airplane was big enough for a few laps, but somehow the designers had left out the running track. Then came the slightly guilty feeling for the poor bastards who'd made the hop in tourist. They must really be suffering, Ding was sure. Well, at least it had been quick. A ship would have taken a whole month—of palatial comfort, lots of exercise opportunities, and good food. Life was full of trade-offs, wasn't it?

"You were in on the Worldpark job?"

"Yeah." Ding nodded. "My team did the assault on the castle. I was a hot hundred feet away when that bastard killed the little girl. That really wasn't fun, Colonel."

"Frank."

"Thanks. Yeah, Frank, that was pretty damned bad. But we got that bastard —which is to say, Homer Johnston did. He's one of my long rifles."

"From the TV coverage we saw, that wasn't a particularly good shot."

"Homer wanted to make a little statement," Chavez explained, with a raised eyebrow. "He won't be doing it again."

Wilkerson figured that one out instantly. "Oh, yes, quite. Any children, Ding?"

"Just became a father a few days ago. A son."

"Congratulations. We'll have to have a beer for that, later today perhaps."

"Frank, one beer and you might just have to carry my ass back here." Ding yawned, and felt embarrassment at the state of his body right then and there. "Anyway, why did you want us down here? Everybody says you guys are pretty good."

"Never hurts to get a second opinion, Ding. My lads *are* well trained, but we haven't had all that much practical experience. And we need some new hardware. Those new radios that E-Systems make, and that Global Security got for us, they're bloody marvelous. What other magic tools might you have?"

"Noonan's got something that'll knock your eyes out, Frank. I hardly believe it myself, but I don't think it'll be worth a damn down here. Too many people around. But you'll find it interesting. I promise you that."

"What's that?"

"Tim calls it the 'Tricorder'—you know the gadget Mr. Spock used all the time in *Star Trek*. It finds people like radar finds airplanes."

"How's it do that?"

"He'll tell you. Something about the electrical field around a human heart."

"I've never heard of that."

"It's new," Chavez explained. "Little company in the States called DKL, I think. That little fucker is magic, the way it works. Little Willie at Fort Bragg's in love with it."

"Colonel Byron?"

"He's the man. You said you've worked with him recently?"

"Oh, yes, splendid chap."

Chavez had a chuckle at that one. "He doesn't like Rainbow all that much. We stole some of his best people, you see."

"And gave them practical work to do."

"True," Chavez agreed, sipping his coffee. The rest of the team appeared then, dressed as their commander was, in semimilitary casual clothes. Sauntering into the coffee shop, they spotted their boss and came over.

It was about four in the afternoon in Kansas. The morning ride had left Popov sore in unusual places. His hips especially protested the way they'd been used earlier in the day, his upper legs held out at an unusual angle. But it was a pleasant memory for all that.

There was nothing for Popov to do here. He had no assigned work, and by lunch he'd run out of things he could conveniently explore. That left television as a diversion, but TV was not one of his favorite things. A bright man, he was easily bored, and he hated boredom. CNN kept repeating the same stories on the Olympics, and while he'd always enjoyed watching that international competition, it hadn't started yet. So, he wandered the corridors of the hotel, and looked out the huge window-wall at the surrounding countryside. Another ride tomorrow morning, he thought, at least it got him outside into pleasant surroundings. After over an hour's wandering, he headed down to the cafeteria.

"Oh, hello, Dmitriy," Kirk Maclean said, just ahead of him in the line. Maclean wasn't a vegan either, the Russian saw. His plate had a large slice of ham on it. Popov remarked on that.

"Like I said this morning, we're not designed to be vegetarians," Maclean pointed out with a grin.

"How do you know that is true?"

"Teeth mainly," Maclean replied. "Herbivores chew grass and stuff, and there's a lot of dirt and grit in that kind of food, and that wears the teeth down like sandpaper. So they need teeth with very thick enamel so they won't wear out in a few years. The enamel on human teeth is a lot thinner than what you find on a cow. So either we're adapted to washing the dirt off our food first, or we're designed to eat meat for most of our protein intake. I don't think we adapted that fast to running water in the kitchen, y'know?" Kirk asked with a grin. The two men headed off to the same table. "What do you do for John?" he asked after they'd sat down.

"Dr. Brightling, you mean?"

"Yeah, you said you work directly for him."

"I used to be KGB." Might as well try it on him, too.

"Oh, you spy for us, then?" Maclean asked, cutting up his ham slice.

Popov shook his head. "Not exactly. I established contact with people in whom Dr. Brightling had interest and asked them to perform certain functions which he wished them to do."

"Oh? For what?" Maclean asked.

"I am not sure that I am allowed to say."

"Secret stuff, eh? Well, there's a lot of that here, man. Have you been briefed in on the Project?"

"Not exactly. Perhaps I am part of it, but I haven't been told exactly what the purpose of all this is. Do you know?"

"Oh, sure. I've been in it almost from the beginning. It's really something, man. It's got some real nasty parts, but," he added with a cold look in his eyes, "you don't make an omelet without breaking some eggs, right?"

Lenin said that, Popov remembered. In the 1920s, when asked about the destructive violence being done in the name of Soviet Revolution. The observation had become famous, especially in KGB, when occasionally someone objected to particularly cruel field operations—like what Popov had done, interfacing with terrorists, who typically acted in the most grossly inhuman manner and . . . recently, under his guidance. But what sort of omelet was this man helping to make?

"We're gonna change the world, Dmitriy," Maclean said.

"How so, Kirk?"

"Wait and see, man. Remember how it was this morning out riding?"

"Yes, it was very pleasant."

"Imagine the whole world like that" was as far as Maclean was willing to go.

"But how would you make that happen . . . where would all the farmers go?" Popov asked, truly puzzled.

"Just think of 'em as eggs, man," Maclean answered, with a smile, and Dmitriy's blood suddenly turned cold, though he didn't understand why. His mind couldn't make the jump, much as he wanted it to do so. It was like being a field officer again, trying to discern enemy intentions on an important field assignment, and knowing some, perhaps much, of the necessary information, but not enough to paint the entire picture in his own mind. But the frightening part was that these Project people spoke of human life as the German fascists had once done. *But they're only Jews.* He looked up at the noise and saw another aircraft landing on the approach road. Behind it in the distance, a number of automobiles were halted off the road/runway, waiting to drive to the building. There were more people in the cafeteria now, he saw, nearly double the number from the previous day. So, Horizon Corporation was bringing its people here. Why? Was this part of the Project? Was it merely the activation of this expensive research facility? The pieces of the puzzle were all before him, Popov knew, but the manner in which they fit was as mysterious as ever.

"Hey, Dmitriy!" Killgore said, as he joined them. "A little sore, maybe?"

"Somewhat," Popov admitted, "but I do not regret it. Could we do it again?"

"Sure. It's part of my morning routine here. Want to join me that way?"

"Yes, thank you, that is very kind."

"Seven A.M., right here, pal," Killgore responded with a smile. "You, too, Kirk?"

"You bet. Tomorrow I have to drive out and get some new boots. Is there a good store around here for outdoors stuff?"

"Half an hour away, U.S. Cavalry outlet. You go east two exits on the interstate," Dr. Killgore advised.

"Great. I want to get 'em before all the new arrivals strip the stores of the good outdoors stuff."

"Makes sense," Killgore thought, then turned. "So, Dmitriy, what's it like being a spy?"

"It is often very frustrating work," Popov replied truthfully.

"Wow, this is some facility," Ding observed. The stadium was huge, easily large enough to seat a hundred thousand people. But it would be hot here, damned hot, like being inside a huge concrete wok. Well, there were plenty of concessions in the concourses, and surely there'd be people circulating with Cokes and other cold drinks. And just off the stadium grounds were all manner of pubs for those who preferred beer. The lush grass floor of the stadium bowl was nearly empty at the moment, with just a few groundskeepers manicuring a few parts. Most of the track and-field events would be here. The oval Tartan track was marked for the various distance and hurdle races, and there were the pits for the jumping events. A monster scoreboard and Jumbotron sat on the far end so that people could see instant replays of the important events, and Ding felt himself getting a little excited. He'd never been present for an Olympic competition, and he was himself enough of an athlete to appreciate the degree of dedication and skill that went into this sort of thing. The crazy part was that as good as his own people were, they were not the equal of the athletes—most of them little kids, to Ding's way of thinking—who'd be marching in here tomorrow. Even his shooters probably wouldn't win the pistol or rifle events. His men were generalists, trained to do many things, and the Olympic athletes were the ultimate specialists, trained to do a single thing supremely well. It had about as much relevance to life in the real world as a professional baseball game, but it would be a beautiful thing to watch for all that.

"Yes, we've spent a good deal of money to make it so," Frank Wilkerson agreed.

"Where do you keep your reaction force?" Chavez asked. His host gestured and turned.

"This way."

"Hey, that feels good," Chavez said, entering the fine water fog.

"Yes, it does. It reduces the apparent temperature about fifteen degrees. I expect a lot of people will be coming here during the competition to cool down, and as you see, we have televisions to allow them to keep current on the goings-on."

"That'll come in handy, Frank. What about the athletes?"

"We have a similar arrangement in their access tunnels, and also the main

tunnel they will use to march in, but out on the field, they'll just have to sweat."

"God help the marathon runners," Chavez said.

"Quite," Wilkerson agreed. "We will have medical people out there at various points. The extended weather forecast is for clear and hot weather, I'm afraid. But we have ample first-aid kiosks spotted about the various stadia. The velodrome will be another place where it's sorely needed."

"Gatorade," Chavez observed after a second.

"What?"

"It's a sports drink, water and lots of electrolytes to keep you from getting heatstroke."

"Ah, yes, we have something similar here. Salt tablets as well. Buckets of the things."

A few minutes later, they were in the security area. Chavez saw the Australian SAS troops lounging in air conditioned comfort, their own TVs handy so that they could watch the games—and other sets to keep an eye on choke points. Wilkerson handled the introductions, after which most of the troops came over for a handshake and a "G'day," all delivered with the open friendliness that all Aussies seemed to have. His sergeants started chatting with the Aussie ones, and respect was soon flowing back and forth. The trained men saw themselves in the others, and their international fraternity was an elite one.

The facility was filling rapidly. He'd been alone on the fourth floor the first day, Popov reflected, but not now. At least six of the nearby rooms were occupied, and looking outside he could see that the parking lot was filling up with private cars that had been driven in that day. He figured it was a two- or three-day drive from New York, and so the order to bring people out had been given recently—but where were the moving vans? Did the people intend to live here indefinitely? The hotel building was comfortable—for a hotel, but that was not the same as comfort in a place of permanent residence. Those people with small children might quickly go mad with their little ones in such close proximity all the time. He saw a young couple talking with another, and caught part of the conversation as he walked past. They were evidently excited about the wild game they'd seen driving in. Yes, deer and such animals were pretty, Popov thought in mute agreement, but hardly worth so animated a conversation on the subject. Weren't these trained scientists who worked for Horizon Corporation? They spoke like Young Pioneers out of Moscow for the first time, goggling at the wonders of a state farm. Better to see the grand opera house in Vienna or Paris, the former KGB officer thought, as he entered his room. But then he had another thought. These people were all lovers of nature. Perhaps he would examine their interests himself. Weren't there videotapes in his room? . . . Yes, he found them and slipped one into his VCR, hitting the PLAY button and switching on his TV.

Ah, he saw, the ozone layer, something people in the West seemed remarkably exercised about. Popov thought he would begin to show concern when the Antarctic penguins who lived under the ozone hole started dying of sunburn. But he watched and listened anyway. It turned out that the tape had

been produced by some group called Earth First, and the content, he soon saw, was as polemic in content as anything ever produced by the USSR's staterun film companies. These people were indeed very exercised about the subject, calling for the end of various industrial chemicals—and how would air-conditioning work without them? Give up air-conditioning to save penguins from too much ultraviolet radiation? What was this rubbish?

That tape lasted fifty-two minutes by his watch. The next one he selected, produced by the same group, was concerned with dams. It started off by castigating the "environmental criminals" who'd commissioned and built Hoover Dam on the Colorado River. But that was a *power* dam, wasn't it? Didn't people need electricity? Wasn't the electricity generated by power dams the cleanest there was? Wasn't this very videotape produced in Hollywood using the very electricity that this dam produced? Who were these people—

—and why were their tapes here in his hotel room? Popov wondered. Druids? The word came to him again. Sacrificers of virgins, worshipers of trees—if that, then they'd come to a strange place. There were precious few trees to be seen on the wheat-covered plains of western Kansas.

Druids? Worshipers of nature? He let the tape rewind and checked out some of the periodicals and found one published by this Earth First group.

What sort of name was that? Earth First—ahead of what? Its articles screamed in outrage over various insults to the planet. Well, strip mining was an ugly thing, he had to admit. The planet was supposed to be beautiful and appreciated. He enjoyed the sight of a green forest as much as the next man, and the same was true of the purple rock of treeless mountains. If there were a God, then He was a fine artist, but . . . what was this?

Humankind, the second article said, was a parasitic species on the surface of the planet, destroying rather than nurturing. People had killed off numerous species of animals and plants, and in doing so, people had forfeited their right to be here . . . he read on into the polemic.

This was errant rubbish, Popov thought. Did a gazelle faced with an attacking lion call for the police or a lawyer to plead his right to be alive? Did a salmon swimming upstream to spawn protest against the jaws of the bear that plucked it from the water and then stripped it apart to feed its own needs? Was a cow the equal of a man? In whose eyes?

It had been a matter of almost religious faith in the Soviet Union that as formidable and as rich as Americans were, they were mad, cultureless, unpredictable people. They were greedy, they stole wealth from others, and they exploited such people for their own selfish gain. He'd learned the falsehood of that propaganda on his first field assignment abroad, but he'd also learned that the Western Europeans, as well, thought Americans to be slightly mad—and if this Earth First group were representative of America, then surely they were right. But Britain had people who spray-painted those who wore fur coats. Mink had a right to live, they said. A mink? It was a wellinsulated rodent, a tubular rat with a fine coat of fur. This *rodent* had a right to be alive? Under whose law?

That very morning they'd objected to his suggestion to kill the—what was it? Prairie dogs, yet another tubular rat, and one whose holes could break the legs of the horses they rode—but what was it they'd said? They *belonged* there,

and the horses and people did not? Why such solicitude for a *rat?* The noble animals, the hawks and bears, the deer, and those strange-looking antelope, they were pretty, but *rats?* He'd had similar talks with Brightling and Henriksen, who also seemed unusually loving of the things that lived and crawled outside. He wondered how they felt about mosquitoes and fire ants.

Was this druidic rubbish the key to his large question? Popov thought about it, and decided that he needed an education, if only to assure himself that he hadn't entered the employ of a madman . . . not a madman, only a mass murderer? . . . That was not a comforting thought at the moment.

"So how was the flight?"

"About what you'd expect, a whole fucking day trapped in a 747," Ding groused over the phone.

"Well, at least it was first class," Clark observed.

"Great, next time you can have the pleasure, John. How're Patsy and JC?" Chavez asked, getting on to the important stuff.

"They're just fine. The grandpa stuff isn't all that bad." Clark could have said that he hadn't changed a single diaper yet. Sandy had seized on the ancillary baby-in-the house duties with utter ruthlessness, allowing her husband to only hold the little guy. He supposed that such instincts were strong in women, and didn't want to interfere with her self-assumed rice bowl. "He's a cute little guy, Domingo. You done good, kid."

"Gee, thanks, Dad" was the ironic reply from ten thousand miles away. "Patsy?"

"She's doing fine, but not getting a hell of a lot of sleep. JC only sleeps about three hours at a stretch at the moment. But that'll change by the time you get back. Want to talk to her?" John asked next.

"What do you think, Mr. C?"

"Okay, hold on. Patsy!" he called. "It's Domingo."

"Hey, baby," Chavez said in his hotel room.

"How are you, Ding? How was the flight out?"

"Long, but no big deal," he lied. One doesn't show weakness before one's own wife. "They're treating us pretty nice, but it's hot here. I forgot what hot weather is like."

"Will you be there for the opening?"

"Oh, yeah, Pats, we all have security passes, courtesy of the Aussies. How's JC?"

"Wonderful" was the inevitable reply. "He's so beautiful. He doesn't cry much. It's pretty wonderful to have him, y'know?"

"How are you sleeping, baby?"

"Well, I get a few hours here and there. No big deal. Internship was a lot worse."

"Well, let your mom help you out, okay?"

"She does," Patsy assured her husband.

"Okay, I need to talk to your dad again—business stuff. Love ya, baby."

"Love you, too, Ding."

"Domingo, I think you're going to be okay as a son-in-law," the male voice

said three seconds later. “I’ve never seen Patricia smile so much, and I guess that’s your doing.”

“Gee, thanks, Pop,” Chavez replied, checking his U.K. watch. It was just after seven in the morning there, whereas in Sydney it was four in the hot afternoon.

“Okay, how are things there?” Clark asked.

“Good,” Chavez told Rainbow Six. “Our point of contact is a short colonel named Frank Wilkerson. Solid troop. His people are pretty good, well trained, confident, nice and loose. Their relationship with the police is excellent. Their reaction plans look good to me—short version, John, they don’t need us here any more than they need a few more kangaroos in the outback I flew over this morning.”

“So, what the hell, enjoy the games.” Bitch as he might, Chavez and his people were getting about ten grand worth of free holiday, Clark thought, and that wasn’t exactly a prison sentence.

“It’s a waste of our time, John,” Chavez told his boss.

“Yeah, well, you never know, do you, Domingo?”

“I suppose,” Chavez had to agree. They’d just spent several months proving that you never really knew.

“Your people okay?”

“Yeah, they’re treating us pretty nice. Good hotel rooms, close enough to walk to the stadium, but we have official cars for that. So, I guess we’re just paid tourists, eh?”

“Yep, like I said, Ding, enjoy the games.”

“How’s Peter doing?”

“Bouncing back okay, but he’ll be out of business for at least a month, more like six weeks. The docs here are okay. Chin’s legs are going to be a pain in the ass. Figure two and a half months for him to get back in harness.”

“He must be pissed.”

“Oh, he is.”

“What about our prisoners?”

“Police are interrogating them now,” Clark answered. “We’re hearing more about this Russian guy, but nothing we can really use yet. The Irish cops are trying to ID the cocaine by manufacturer—it’s medical quality, from a real drug company. Ten pounds of pure coke. Street value would buy a friggin’ airliner. The Garda is worried that it might be the start of a trend, the IRA splinter groups getting into drugs big-time, but that’s not our problem.”

“This Russian guy—Serov, right?—he’s the guy who gave them the intel on us?”

“That’s affirmative, Domingo, but where he got it we don’t know, and our Irish guests aren’t giving us anything more than what we already have—probably all they know. Grady isn’t talking at all. And his lawyer’s bitching about how we interrogated him in the recovery room.”

“Well, isn’t that just a case of tough shit?”

“I hear you, Ding,” Clark chuckled. It wasn’t as though they’d be using the information in a trial. There was even a videotape of Grady’s leaving the scene from the BBC news crew that had turned up at Hereford. Sean Grady would be imprisoned for a term defined by “the Queen’s pleasure,” which meant life

plus forever, unless the European Union treaty interfered with it. Timothy O'Neil and the people who'd surrendered with him *might* get out around the time they turned sixty, Bill Tawney had told him the previous day. "Anything else?"

"Nope, everything's looking good here, John. I'll report in the same time tomorrow."

"Roger that, Domingo."

"Kiss Patsy for me."

"I'll even manage a hug if you want."

"Yeah, thanks, Grandpa," Ding agreed with a smile.

"Bye," he heard, and the line went dead.

"Not a bad time to be away from home, boss," Mike Pierce observed from a few feet away. "The first two weeks can be a real pain in the ass. This way, by the time you get back home, the little guy'll be sleeping four, five hours. Maybe more if you're really lucky," predicted the father of three sons.

"Mike, you see any problems here?"

"Like you told Six, the Aussies have it under control. They look like good people, man. Us bein' here's a waste of time, but what the hell, we get to see the Olympics."

"I suppose so. Any questions?"

"Do we carry?" Pierce asked.

"Pistols only, and casual clothes. Your security pass will take care of that. We pair off, you with me, and George with Homer. We take our tactical radios, too, but that's all."

"Yes, sir. Works for me. How's the jet lag?"

"How's it with you, Mike?"

"Like I been put in a bag and beat with a baseball bat." Pierce grinned. "But it'll be better tomorrow. Shit, I'd hate to think that gutting it through today won't help some tomorrow. Hey, tomorrow morning, we can work out with the Aussies, do our running on the Olympic track. Pretty cool, eh?"

"I like it."

"Yeah, it would be nice to meet up with some of those pussy athletes, see how fast they can run with weapons and body armor." At his best and fully outfitted, Pierce could run a mile in thirty seconds over four minutes, but he'd never broken the four-minute mark, even in running shoes and shorts. Louis Loiselle claimed to have done it once, and Chavez believed him. The diminutive Frenchman was the right size for a distance runner. Pierce was too big in height and across the shoulders. A Great Dane rather than a greyhound.

"Be cool, Mike. We have to protect them from the bad guys. That tells us who the best men are," Chavez observed through the jet lag.

"Roge-o, sir." Pierce would remember that one.

Popov awoke for no particular reason he could see, except that—yes, another Gulfstream jet had just landed. He imagined that these were the really important ones for this project thing. The junior ones, or those with families, either drove out or flew commercial. The business jet sat there in the lights, the stairs deployed from their bay in the aircraft, and people walked out to the waiting cars that swiftly drove away from the aircraft and toward the hotel

building. Popov wondered who it was, but he was too far away to recognize faces. He'd probably see them in the cafeteria in the morning. Dmitriy Arkadeyevich got a drink of water from the bathroom and returned to his bed. This facility was filling up rapidly, though he still didn't know why.

Colonel Wilson Gearing was in his hotel room only a few floors above the Rainbow troops. His large bags were in the closet, and his clothing hung. The maids and other staff who serviced his room hadn't touched anything, merely checked the closet and proceeded to make up the beds and scrub the bathroom. They hadn't checked inside the bags—Gearing had telltales on them to make sure of that—inside one of which was a plastic canister with "Chlorine" painted on it. It was outwardly identical with the one on the fogging system at the Olympic stadium—it had, in fact, been purchased from the same company that had installed the fogging system, cleaned out and refilled with the nano-capsules. He also had the tools he needed to swap one out, and had practiced the skill in Kansas, where an identical installation was to be found. He could close his eyes and see himself doing it, time and again, to keep the downtime for the fogging system to a minimum. He thought about the contents of the container. Never had so much potential death been so tightly contained. Far more so than in a nuclear device, because unlike one of those, the danger here could replicate itself many times instead of merely detonating once. The way the fogging system worked, it would take about thirty minutes for the nano-capsules to get into the entire fogging system. Both computer models and actual mechanical tests proved that the capsules would get everywhere in the pipes, and spray out the fogging nozzles, invisible in the gentle, cooling mist. People walking through the tunnels leading to the stadium proper and in the concourses would breathe it in, an average of two hundred or so nano-capsules in four minutes of breathing, and that was well above the calculated mean lethal dose. The capsules would enter through the lungs, be transported into the blood, and there the capsules would dissolve, releasing the Shiva. The engineered virus strands would travel in the bloodstreams of the spectators and the athletes, soon find the liver and kidneys, the organs for which they had the greatest affinity, and begin the slow process of multiplication. All this had been established at Binghamton Lab on the "normal" test subjects. Then it was just a matter of weeks until the Shiva had multiplied enough to do its work. Along the way, people would pass on the Shiva through kisses and sexual contact, through coughs and sneezes. This, too, had been proven at the Binghamton Lab. Starting in about four weeks, people would think themselves mildly ill. Some would see their personal physicians, and be diagnosed as flu victims, told to take aspirin, drink fluids, and rest in front of the TV. They would do this, and feel better—because seeing a doctor usually did that for people—for a day or so. But they would not be getting better. Sooner or later, they'd develop the internal bleeds that Shiva ultimately caused, and then, about five weeks after the initial release of the nano-capsules, some doctor would run an antibody test and be aghast to learn that something like the famous and feared Ebola fever was back. A good epidemiology program might identify the Sydney Olympics as the focal center, but tens of thousands of people would have come and gone.

This was a perfect venue for distributing Shiva, something the Project's senior members had determined years before—even before the attempted plague launched by Iran against America, which had predictably failed because the virus hadn't been the right one, and the method of delivery too haphazard. No, this plan was perfection itself. Every nation on earth sent athletes and judges to the Olympic games, and all of them would walk through the cooling fog in this hot stadium, lingering there to shed excess body heat, breathe deeply, and relax in this cool place. Then they'd all return to their homes, from America to Argentina, from Russia to Rwanda, there to spread the Shiva and start the initial panic.

Then came Phase Two. Horizon Corporation would manufacture and distribute the "A" vaccine, turn it out in thousand-liter lots, and send it all over the world by express flights to nations whose public-health-service physicians and nurses would be sure to inject every citizen they could find. Phase Two would finish the job begun with the global panic that was sure to result from Phase One. Four to six weeks after being injected, the "A" recipients would start to become ill. So, three weeks from today, Gearing thought, plus six weeks or so, plus two weeks, plus another six, plus a final two. A total of nineteen weeks, not even half a year, not even a full baseball season, and well over ninety-nine percent of the people on the earth would be dead. And the planet would be saved. No more slaughtering of sheep from a chemical-weapons release. No more extinction of species by thoughtless man. The ozone hole would soon heal itself. Nature would flourish once more. And he'd be there to see it, to enjoy and appreciate it all, along with his friends and colleagues in the Project. They'd save the planet and raise their children to respect it, love it, cherish it. The world would again be green and beautiful.

His feelings were not completely unambiguous. He could look out the windows and see people walking on the streets of Sydney, and it caused him pain to think of what would be happening to all of them. But he'd seen much pain. The sheep at Dugway. The monkeys and pigs and other test animals at Edgewood Arsenal. They, too, felt great pain. They, too, had a right to live, and people had disregarded both self-evident facts. The people down there didn't use shampoo unless it had been tested on the eyes of laboratory rabbits, held stock-still in cruel little cages, there to suffer without words, without expression at all to most people, who didn't understand animals, and cared less about them than they cared for how their burgers were cooked at the local McDonald's. They were helping to destroy the earth because they didn't care. Because they didn't care, they didn't even try to see what was important, and because they didn't appreciate what was important . . . they would die. They were a species that had endangered itself, and so would reap the whirlwind of its own ignorance. They were not like himself, Gearing thought. They didn't see. And under the cruel but fair laws of Charles Darwin, that left them at a comparative disadvantage. And so, as one animal replaced another, so he and his kind would replace them and theirs. He was only the instrument of natural selection, after all.

The jet lag was mainly gone, Chavez thought. The morning workout had been delicious in its sweat and endorphin-reduced pain, especially the run on the

Olympic track. He and Mike Pierce had pushed hard on that, not timing it, but going as hard as they could, and on the run both had looked up at the empty stands and imagined the cheers they'd get had they been trained athletes. Then had come the showers and the grins, one soldier to another, at what they'd done, then dressing into their casual clothing, their pistols hidden under their shirts, their tactical radios jammed into pockets, and their security passes looped around their necks.

Later, the trumpets had blared, and the team of the first nation in the parade, Greece, marched out the tunnel at the far end, to the thundering cheers of the spectators in their seats, and the Sydney Olympiad had begun. Chavez told himself that as a security officer he was supposed to watch the crowd, but he found that he couldn't, without some specific danger to look at. The proud young athletes marched almost as well as soldiers, as they followed their flags and their judges on the oval track. It must have been a proud moment for them, Ding thought, to represent your homeland before all the other nations of the world. Each of them would have trained for months and years to earn this honor, to accept the cheers and hope himself to be worthy of the moment. Well, it wasn't the sort of thing you got to do as a field officer of the Central Intelligence Agency, nor a Team-2 commander of Rainbow. This was pure sport, pure competition, and if it didn't really apply to the real world, then what did that hurt? Every event would be a form of activity taken down to its essence—and most of them were really military in nature. Running—the most important martial skill was the ability to run toward battle or away from it. The javelin—a lance to throw at one's enemies. The shot put and discus—other missile weapons. The pole vault—to get one over a wall and into the enemy camp. The long jump—to get over a hole that the enemy had dug in the battlefield. These were all soldierly skills from antiquity, and the modern Games had gun sports, pistol and rifle, as well. The modern pentathlon was based on the skills needed by a military courier in the late nineteenth century—riding, running, and shooting his way to his destination, to tell his commander what he needed to know in order to command his troops effectively.

These men and women were warriors of a sort, here to win glory for themselves and their flags, to vanquish foes without bloodshed, to win a pure victory on the purest field of honor. That, Chavez thought, was a worthy goal for anyone, but he was too old and unfit to compete here. Unfit? he wondered. Well, not for one his age, and he was probably fitter than some of these people walking on the oval track, but not enough to win a single event. He felt his Beretta pistol under his shirt. That, and his ability to use it, made him fit to defend these kids against any who might wish to harm them, and that, Domingo Chavez decided, would have to do.

"Pretty cool, boss," Pierce observed, watching the Greeks pass where they were standing.

"Yeah, Mike, it sure as hell is."

CHAPTER 34

THE GAMES CONTINUE

As happens in all aspects of life, things settled into a routine. Chavez and his people spent most of their time with Colonel Wilkerson's people, mainly sitting in the reactionforce center and watching the games on television, but also wandering to the various venues, supposedly to eyeball security matters up close, but in reality to see the various competitive events even closer. Sometimes they even wandered onto the event field by virtue of their goanywhere passes. The Aussies, Ding learned, were ferociously dedicated sports fans, and wonderfully hospitable. In his off-duty time, he picked a neighborhood pub to hang out in, where the beer was good and the atmosphere friendly. On learning that he was an American, his "mates" would often as not buy a beer for him and ask questions while watching sports events on the wall-hung televisions. About the only thing he didn't like was the cigarette smoke, for the Australian culture had not yet totally condemned the vice, but no place was perfect.

Each morning he and his people worked out with Colonel Wilkerson and his men, and they found that in *this* Olympic competition there was little difference between Australian and American special-operations troopers. One morning they went off to the Olympic pistol range, borrowing Olympic-style handguns—.22 automatics that seemed like toys compared to the .45s the Rainbow soldiers ordinarily packed—then saw that the target and scoring systems were very difficult indeed, if not especially related to combat shooting in the real world. For all his practice and expertise, Chavez decided that with luck he could have made the team from Mali. Certainly not the American or Russian teams, whose shooters were utterly inhuman in their ability to punch holes in the skinny silhouette targets that flipped full-face and sideways on computer-controlled hangers. But these paper targets didn't shoot back, he told himself, and that *did* make something of a difference. Besides, success in his form of shooting was to make a real person dead, not to hit a quarter-sized target on a black paper target card. That made a difference, too, Ding and Mike Pierce thought aloud with their Aussie counterparts. What they did could never be an Olympic sport, unless somebody brought back the gladiatorial games of Rome, and that wouldn't be happening. Besides, what they did for their living wasn't a sport at all, was it? Neither was it a form of mass entertainment in the kinder and gentler modern world. Part of Chavez admitted that he wondered what the games in classical Rome's Flavian Amphitheater had been like to watch, but it wasn't something he could say aloud, lest people take him for an utter barbarian. *Hail, Caesar! We who are about to die salute you!* It wasn't exactly the Super Bowl, was it? And so,

“Major” Domingo Chavez, along with sergeants Mike Pierce, Homer Johnston, and George Tomlinson, and Special Agent Tim Noonan, got to watch the games for free, sometimes with “official” jackets to give them the cover of anonymity.

The same was true, rather more distantly, of Dmitriy Popov, who stayed in his room to watch the Olympics on TV. He found the games a distraction from the questions that were running their own laps inside his brain. The Russian national team, naturally enough his favorite, was doing well, though the Australians were making a fine showing as hosts, especially in swimming, which seemed to be their national passion. The problem was in the vastly different time zones. When Popov was watching events live, it was necessarily an ungodly hour in Kansas, which made him somewhat bleary-eyed for his morning horseback rides with Maclean and Killgore—those had become a very pleasant morning diversion.

This morning was like the previous ten, with a cool westerly breeze, the rising orange sun casting strange but lovely light on the waving fields of grass and wheat. Buttermilk now recognized him, and awarded the Russian with oddly endearing signs of affection, which he in turn rewarded with sugar cubes or, as today, an apple taken from the morning breakfast buffet, which the mare crunched down rapidly from his hand. He had learned to saddle his own horse, which he now did quickly, leading Buttermilk outside to join the others and mounting up in the corral.

“Morning, Dmitriy,” Maclean said.

“Good morning, Kirk,” Popov replied pleasantly. In another few minutes, they were riding off, to the south this time, toward one of the wheat fields, at a rather more rapid pace than his first such ride.

“So, what’s it like to be an intelligence agent?” Killgore asked, half a mile from the barn.

“We are called intelligence officers, actually,” Popov said to correct the first Hollywood-generated misimpression. “Truthfully, it is mainly boring work. You spend much of your time waiting for a meeting, or filling out forms for submission to your headquarters, or the *rezidentura.* There is some danger—but only of being arrested, not shot. It has become a civilized business. Captured intelligence officers are exchanged, usually after a brief period of imprisonment. That never happened to me, of course. I was well trained.” And lucky, he didn’t add.

“So, no James Bond stuff, you never killed anybody, nothing like that?” Kirk Maclean asked.

“Good heavens, no,” Popov replied, with a laugh. “You have others do that sort of thing for you, surrogates, when you need it done. And that is quite rare.”

“How rare?”

“Today? Almost never I should think. At KGB, our job was to get information and pass it upwards to our government—more like reporters, like your Associated Press, than anything else. And much of the information we gathered was from open sources, newspapers, magazines, television. Your CNN is perhaps the best, most used source of information in the world.”

"But what sort of information *did* you gather?"

"Mainly diplomatic or political intelligence, trying to discern intentions. Others went after technical intelligence—how fast an airplane flies or how far a cannon shoots—but that was never my specialty area, you see. I was what you call here a people person. I met with various people and delivered messages and such, then brought the answers back to my station."

"What kind of people?"

Popov wondered about how he should answer, and decided on the truth: "Terrorists, that was what you would call them."

"Oh? Like which ones?"

"Mainly European, but some in the Middle East as well. I have language skills, and I can speak easily with people from various lands."

"Was it hard?" Dr. Killgore asked.

"Not really. We had similar political beliefs, and my country provided them with weapons, training, access to some facilities in the Eastern Bloc. I was as much a travel agent as anything else, and occasionally I would suggest targets for them to attack—as payment for our assistance, you see."

"Did you give them money?" Maclean this time.

"Yes, but not much money. The Soviet Union had only limited hard-currency reserves, and we never paid our agents very much. At least I did not," Popov said.

"So, you sent terrorists out on missions to kill people?" This was from Killgore.

Popov nodded. "Yes. That was often my job. That was," he added, "why Dr. Brightling hired me."

"Oh?" Maclean asked.

Dmitriy wondered how far he could take this one. "Yes, he asked me to do similar things for Horizon Corporation."

"You're the guy who ramrodded the stuff in Europe?"

"I contacted various people and made suggestions which they carried out, yes, and so, yes, I do have some blood on my second hands, I suppose, but one cannot take such matters too seriously, can one? It is business, and it has been *my* business for some time."

"Well, that's a good thing for you, Dmitriy. That's why you're here," Maclean told him. "John is pretty loyal to his people. You must have done okay."

Popov shrugged. "Perhaps so. He never told me why he wanted these things done, but I gather it was to help his friend Henriksen get the consulting contract for the Sydney Olympics that I've been watching on TV."

"That's right," Killgore confirmed. "That was very important to us." *Might as well watch,* the epidemiologist thought, *they'll be the last ones.*

"But why?"

They hesitated at the direct question. The physician and the engineer looked at each other. Then Killgore spoke.

"Dmitriy, what do you think of the environment?"

"What do you mean? Out here? It is beautiful. You've taught me much with these morning rides, my friends," the Russian answered, choosing his words carefully. "The sky and the air, and the beautiful fields of grass and wheat. I

have never appreciated how beautiful the world can be. I suppose that's because I grew up in Moscow." Which had been a hideously filthy city, but they didn't know that.

"Yeah, well, it's not all this way."

"I know that, John. In Russia—well, the State didn't care as you Americans do. They nearly killed all life in the Caspian Sea—where caviar comes from—from chemical poisoning. And there is a place just east of the Urals where our original atomic-bomb research created a wasteland. I haven't seen it, but I have heard of it. The highway signs there tell you to drive very fast to be through the zone of dangerous radiation as quickly as possible."

"Yeah, well, if we're not careful, we might just kill the whole planet," Maclean observed next.

"That would be a crime, like the Hitlerites," Popov said next. "It is *nekulturny,* the work of uncivilized barbarians. In my room, the tapes and the magazines make this clear."

"What do you think of killing people, Dmitriy?" Killgore asked then.

"That depends on who they are. There are many people who deserve to die for one reason or another. But Western culture has this strange notion that taking life is almost always wrong—you Americans cannot even kill your criminals, murderers and such, without jumping through hoops, as you say here. I find that very curious."

"What about crimes against Nature?" Killgore said, staring off into the distance.

"I do not understand."

"Well, things that hurt the whole planet, killing off whole living species, polluting the land and the sea. What about that?"

"Kirk, that is also a barbaric act, and it should be punished severely. But how do you identify the criminals? Is it the industrialist who gives the order and makes the profit from it? Or is it the worker who takes his wages and does what he is told?"

"What did they say at Nuremberg?" Killgore said next.

"The war-crimes trial, you mean? It was decided that following orders is not a defense." Not a concept he'd been taught to consider in the KGB Academy, where he'd learned that the State Was Always Right.

"Right," the epidemiologist agreed. "But you know, nobody ever went after Harry Truman for bombing Hiroshima."

Because he won, *you fool,* Popov didn't reply. "Do you ask if this was a crime? No, it was not, because he ended a greater evil, and the sacrifice of those people was necessary to restore the peace."

"What about saving the planet?"

"I do not understand."

"If the planet was dying, what would one have to do—what would be *right* to do, to save it?"

This discussion had all the ideological and philosophical purity of a classroom discussion of the Marxist dialectic at Moscow State University—and about as much relevance to the real world. Kill the whole planet? That was not possible. A full-blown nuclear war, yes, maybe *that* could have such an effect, but *that* was no longer possible. The world had changed, and America

was the nation that had made it happen. Didn't these two druids see the wonder of that? More than once, the world had been *close* to loosing nuclear weapons, but today that was a thing of the past.

"I have never considered that question, my friends."

"We have," Maclean responded. "Dmitriy, there are people and forces at work today that could easily kill off everything here. Somebody has to stop that from happening, but how do you do it?"

"You do not mean simply political action, do you?" the former KGB spook observed.

"No, it's too late for that, and not enough people would listen anyway." Killgore turned his horse to the right and the others followed. "I'm afraid you have to take more drastic measures."

"What's that? Kill the whole world population?" Dmitriy Arkadeyevich asked, with hidden humor. But the reply to the rhetorical question was the same look in two sets of eyes. The look didn't make his blood go cold, but it did get his brain moving off in a new and unexpected direction. These were *fascisti.* Worse than that, *fascisti* with an ethos in which they believed. But were they willing to take action on their beliefs? Could anyone take action like that? Even the worst of the Stalinists—no, they'd never been madmen, just political romantics.

Just then an aircraft's noise disturbed the morning. It was one of Horizon's fleet of G's, lifting off from the complex's runway, climbing up and turning right, looping around to the east—for New York, probably, to bring more of the "project" people in? Probably. The complex was about 80 percent full now, Popov reflected. The rate of arrivals had slowed, but people were still coming, most by private car. The cafeteria was almost full at lunch- and dinnertime, and the lights burned late in the laboratory and other work buildings. But what were those people doing?

Horizon Corporation, Popov reminded himself, was a biotech company, specializing in medicines and medical treatments, Killgore was a physician, and Maclean an engineer specializing in environmental matters. Both were druids, both nature-worshipers, the new kind of paganism spawned in the West. John Brightling seemed to be one as well, judging by that conversation they'd had in New York. That, then, was the ethos of these people *and* their company. Dmitriy thought about the printed matter in his room. Humans were a *parasitic* species doing more harm than good to the earth, and these two had just talked about sentencing the harmful people to death—then made it clear that they thought of *everyone* as harmful. What were they going to do, kill everyone? What rubbish. The door leading to the answer had opened further. His brain was moving far more quickly than Buttermilk was, but still not fast enough.

They rode in silence for a few minutes. Then a shadow crossed the ground, and Popov looked up.

"What is that?"

"Red-tail hawk," Maclean answered, after a look. "Cruising for some breakfast."

As they watched, the raptor climbed to five hundred feet or so, then spread his wings to ride the thermal air currents, his head down, examining the

surface of the land for an unwary rodent through his impossibly sharp eyes. By unspoken consent the three men stopped their horses to watch. It took several minutes and then it was both beautiful and terrible to behold. The hawk folded its wings back and dropped rapidly, then flapped to accelerate like a feathered bullet, then spread its wings wide, nosing up, its yellow talons leading the descent now—

"Yes!" Maclean hooted.

Like a child stomping on an anthill, the hawk used its talons to kill its prey, twisting and crushing, then, holding the limp tubular body in them, flapped laboriously into the sky, heading off to the north to its nest or home, or whatever you called it, Popov thought. The prairie dog it killed had enjoyed no chance, Dmitriy thought, but nature was like that, as were people. No soldier willingly gave his foe a fair chance on any battlefield. It was neither safe nor intelligent to do so. You struck with total fury and as little warning as possible, the better to take his life quickly and easily—and safely—and if he lacked the wit to protect himself properly, well, that was his problem, not yours. In the case of the hawk, it had swooped down from above and down-sun, not even its shadow warning the prairie dog sitting at the entrance to its home, and killed without pity. The hawk had to eat, he supposed. Perhaps it had young to feed, or maybe it was just hunting for its own needs. In either case, the prairie dog hung limp in its claws, like an empty brown sock, soon to be ripped apart and eaten by its killer.

"Damn, I love watching that," Maclean said.

"It is cruel, but beautiful," Popov said.

"Mother Nature is like that, pal. Cruel but beautiful." Killgore watched the hawk vanish in the distance. "That was something to see."

"I have to capture one and train it," Maclean announced. "Train it to kill off my fist."

"Are the prairie dogs endangered?"

"No, no way," Killgore answered. "Predators can control their numbers, but never entirely eliminate them. Nature maintains a balance."

"How do men fit into that balance?" Popov asked.

"They don't," Kirk Maclean answered. "People just screw it up, 'cuz they're too dumb to see what works and what doesn't. And they don't care about the harm they do. That's the problem."

"And what is the solution?" Dmitriy asked. Killgore turned to look him right in the eyes.

"Why, we are."

"Ed, the cover name must be one he's used for a long time," Clark argued. "The IRA guys hadn't seen him in years, but that's the name they knew him by."

"Makes sense," Ed Foley had to admit over the phone. "So, you really want to talk to him, eh?"

"Well, it's no big thing, Ed. He just turned people loose to kill my wife, daughter, and grandson, you know? And they *did* kill two of *my* men. Now, do I have permission to contact him or not?" Rainbow Six demanded from his desk.

In his seventh-floor office atop CIA Headquarters, Director of Central Intelligence Edward Foley uncharacteristically wavered. If he let Clark do it, and Clark got what he wanted, reciprocity rules would then apply. Sergey Nikolay'ch would someday call CIA and request information of a delicate nature, and he, Foley, would have to provide it, else the veneer of amity within the international intelligence community would crumble away. But Foley could not predict what the Russians would ask about, and both sides were still spying on each other, and so the friendly rules of modern life in the spook business both did and did not apply. You pretended that they did, but you remembered and acted as though they did not. Such contacts were rare, and Golovko had been very helpful twice in real-world operations. And he'd never requested a return favor, perhaps because the operations had been of direct or indirect benefit to his own country. But Sergey wasn't one to forget a debt and—

"I know what you're thinking, Ed, but I've lost people because of this guy, and I want his ass, and Sergey can help us identify the fuck."

"What if he's still inside?" Foley temporized.

"Do you believe that?" Clark snorted.

"Well, no, I think we're past that."

"So do I, Ed. So, if he's a friend, let's ask him a friendly question. Maybe we'll get a friendly answer. The *quid pro quo* on this could be to let Russian special-operations people train a few weeks with us. That's a price I'm willing to pay."

It was ultimately a futile exercise to argue with John, who'd been the training officer to him and his wife, Mary Pat, now Deputy Director (Operations). "Okay, John, it's approved. Who handles the contact?"

"I have his number," Clark assured the DCI.

"Then call it, John. Approved," the DCI concluded, not without reluctance. "Anything else?"

"No, sir, and thank you. How are Mary Pat and the kids?"

"They're fine. How's your grandson?"

"Not too bad at all. Patsy is doing fine, and Sandy's taken over the job with JC."

"JC?"

"John Conor Chavez," Clark clarified.

That was a complex name, Foley thought, without saying so. "Well, okay. Go ahead, John. See ya."

"Thanks, Ed. Bye." Clark switched buttons on his phone. "Bill, we got approval."

"Excellent," Tawney replied. "When will you call?"

"How's right now grab you?"

"Set things up properly," Tawney warned.

"Fear not." Clark killed that line and punched another button. That one activated a cassette-tape recorder before he punched yet another and dialed Moscow.

"Six-Six-Zero," a female voice answered in Russian.

"I need to speak personally with Sergey Nikolayevich. Please tell him that this is Ivan Timofeyevich calling," Clark said in his most literate Russian.

"Da," the secretary replied, wondering how this person had gotten the Chairman's direct line.

"Clark!" a man's voice boomed onto the line. "You are well there in England?" And already it started. The Chairman of the reconfigured Russian foreign-intelligence service wanted him to know that he knew where he was and what he was doing, and it wouldn't do to ask how he'd found out.

"I find the climate agreeable, Chairman Golovko."

"This new unit you head has been rather busy. The attack on your wife and daughter—they are well?"

"It was rather unpleasant, but yes, thank you, they are quite well." The conversation was in Russian, a language Clark spoke like a native of Leningrad—St. Petersburg, John corrected himself. That was another old habit that died hard. "And I am now a grandfather."

"Indeed, Vanya? Congratulations! That is splendid news. I was not pleased to learn of the attack on you," Golovko went on sincerely. Russians have always been very sentimental people, especially where small children are concerned.

"Neither was I," Clark said next. "But it worked out, as we say. I captured one of the bastards myself."

"That I did not know, Vanya," the Chairman went on—lying or not, John couldn't tell. "So, what is the purpose of your call?"

"I need your assistance with a name."

"What name is that?"

"It is a cover identity: Serov, Iosef Andreyevich. The officer in question—former officer, I should think—works with progressive elements in the West. We have reason to believe he has instigated operations in which people were killed, including the attack on my people here in Hereford."

"We had nothing at all to do with that, Vanya," Golovko said at once, in a very serious voice.

"I have no reason to think that you did, Sergey, but a man with this name, and identified as a Russian national, handed over money and drugs to the Irish terrorists. He was known to the Irishmen from years of experience, including in the Bekaa Valley. So, I think he was KGB at one time. I also have a physical description," Clark said, and gave it.

" 'Serov,' you said. That's an odd—"

"Da, I know that."

"This is important to you?"

"Sergey, in addition to killing two of my people, this operation threatened my wife and daughter directly. Yes, my friend, this is very important to me."

In Moscow, Golovko wondered about that. He knew Clark, having met him eighteen months before. A field officer of unusual talent and amazing luck, John Clark had been a dangerous enemy, a quintessential professional intelligence officer, along with his younger colleague, Domingo Estebanovich Chavez, if he remembered right. And Golovko knew that his daughter was married to this Chavez boy—he'd just found that out, in fact. Someone had given that information to Kirilenko in London, though he couldn't remember who.

But if it were a Russian, a former *chekist* no less, who was stirring up the

terrorist pot, well, that was not good news for his country. Should he cooperate? the Chairman asked himself. What was the upside and what might be the downside? If he agreed now, he'd have to follow through on it, else CIA and other Western services might not cooperate with him. Was it in his country's interest? Was it in his institution's interest?

"I will see what I can do, Vanya, but I can make no promises," Clark heard. Okay, that meant he was thinking about it at least.

"I would deem it a personal favor, Sergey Nikolay'ch."

"I understand. Allow me to see what information I can find."

"Very well. Good day, my friend."

"Dosvidaniya."

Clark punched out the tape and put it in his desk drawer. "Okay, pal, let's see if you can deliver."

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The computer system in the Russian intelligence service was not as advanced as its Western counterparts, but the technical differences were mainly lost on human users, whose brains moved at slower speed than even the most backward computer. Golovko had learned to make use of it because he didn't always like to have people doing things for him, and in a minute he had a screenful of data tracked down by the cover name.

POPOV, DMITRIY ARKADEYEVICH, the screen read, giving service number, date of birth, and time of employment. He'd retired as a colonel near the end of the first big RIF that had cut the former KGB by nearly a third. Good evaluations by his superiors, Golovko saw, but he'd specialized in a field in which the agency no longer had great interest. Virtually everyone in that sub-department had been terminated, pensioned off in a land where pensions could feed one for perhaps as much as five days out of a month. Well, there wasn't much he could do about that, Golovko told himself. It was hard enough to get enough funding out of the Duma to keep his downsized agency operating, despite the fact that the downsized nation needed it more than ever before . . . and this Clark had performed two services that had benefited his nation, Golovko reminded himself—in addition, of course, to previous actions that had caused the Soviet Union no small harm . . . but again, those acts had helped elevate himself to the chairmanship of his agency.

Yes, he had to help. It would be a good bargaining chip to acquire for later requests to be made of the Americans. Moreover, Clark had dealt honorably with him, Sergey reminded himself, and it was distantly troubling to him that a former KGB officer had helped attack the man's family—attacks on non-combatants were forbidden in the intelligence business. Oh, occasionally the wife of a CIA officer might have been slightly roughed up in the old days of the East-West Cold War, but serious harm? Never. In addition to being *nekulturny,* it would only have started vendettas that would only have interfered with the conduct of real business, the gathering of information. From the 1950s on, the business of intelligence had become a civilized,

predictable one. Predictability was always the one thing the Russians had wanted from the West, and that had to go both ways. Clark was predictable.

With that decision made, Golovko printed up the information on his screen.

"So?" Clark asked Bill Tawney.

"The Swiss were a little slow. It turns out that the account number Grady gave us was real enough—"

"Was?" John said, thinking that he could hear the bad news "but" coming.

"Well, actually it's still an active account. It began with about six million U.S. dollars deposited, then several hundred thousand withdrawn—and then, the very day of the attack at the hospital, all but a hundred thousand was withdrawn and redeposited elsewhere, another account in yet another bank."

"Where?"

"They say they cannot tell us."

"Oh, well, you tell their fucking Justice Minister that the next time he needs our help, we'll fuckin' let the terrorists kill off their citizens!" Clark snarled.

"They do have laws, John," Tawney pointed out. "What if this chap had an attorney do the transfer? The attorney-client privilege applies, and no country can break that barrier. The Swiss *do* have laws that govern funds thought to have been generated by criminal means, but we have no proof of that, do we? I suppose we could gin something up to get around the law, but that will take time, old man."

"Shit," Clark observed. Then he thought for a second. "The Russian?"

Tawney nodded sagely. "Yes, that makes sense, doesn't it? He set them up a numbered account, and when they were taken out, he still had the necessary numbers, didn't he?"

"Fuck, so he sets them up and rips them off."

"Quite," Tawney observed. "Grady said six million dollars in the hospital, and the Swiss confirm that number. He needs a few hundred thousand to purchase the trucks and other vehicles they used—we have records on that from the police investigation—and left the rest in place, and then this Russian chap decided they have no further use of the funds. Well, why not?" the intelligence officer asked. "Russians *are* notoriously greedy people, you know."

"The Russian giveth, and the Russian taketh away. He gave them the intel on us, too."

"I would not wager against that, John," Tawney agreed.

"Okay, let's back up some," John proposed, putting his temper back in its box. "This Russian appears, gives them intelligence information on us, funds the operation from somewhere—sure as hell not Russia, because, A, they have no reason to undertake such an operation and, B, they don't have that much money to toss around. First question: where did the money—"

"And the drugs, John. Don't forget that."

"Okay, and the drugs—come *from?"*

"Easier to track the drugs, perhaps. The Garda say that the cocaine was medical quality, which means that it came *from* a drug company. Cocaine is closely controlled in every nation in the world. Ten pounds is a large quantity, enough to fill a fairly large suitcase—cocaine is about as dense as tobacco. So the bulk of the shipment would be the equivalent of ten pounds of cigarettes.

Say the size of a large suitcase. That's a bloody large quantity of drugs, John, and it would leave a gap in someone's controlled and guarded warehouse, wherever it might be."

"You're thinking it all originated in America?" Clark asked.

"For a starting point, yes. The world's largest pharmaceutical houses are there and here in Britain. I can get our chaps started checking out Distillers, Limited, and the others for missing cocaine. I expect your American DEA can attempt to do the same."

"I'll call the FBI about that," Clark said at once. "So, Bill, what *do* we know?"

"We will assume that Grady and O'Neil were telling us the truth about this Serov chap. We have a former—presumably former—KGB officer who instigated the Hereford attack. Essentially he hired them to do it, like mercenaries, with a payment of cash and drugs. When the attack failed, he simply confiscated the money for his own ends, and on that I still presume that he kept it for himself. The Russian will not have such private means—well, I suppose it could be the Russian Mafia, all those former KGB chaps who are now discovering free enterprise, but I see no reason why they should target us. We here at Rainbow are not a threat to them in any way, are we?"

"No," Clark agreed.

"So, we have a large quantity of drugs and six million American dollars, delivered by a Russian. I am assuming for the moment that the operation originated in America, because of the drugs and the quantity of the money."

"Why?"

"I cannot justify that, John. Perhaps it's my nose telling me that."

"How did he get to Ireland?" John asked, agreeing to trust Tawney's nose.

"We don't know that. He must have flown into Dublin—yes, I know, with such a large quantity of drugs, that is not a prudent thing to do. We need to ask our friends about that."

"Tell the cops that's important. We can get a flight number and point of origin from that."

"Quite." Tawney made a note.

"What else are we missing?"

"I'm going to have my chaps at 'Six' check for the names of KGB officers who are known to have worked with terrorist groups. We have a rough physical description which may be of some use for the purposes of elimination. But I think our best hope is the ten pounds of drugs."

Clark nodded. "Okay, I'll call the Bureau on that one."

"*Ten pounds,* eh?"

"That's right, Dan, and doctor-quality pure. That's a real shitload of coke, man, and there ought to be a blank spot in somebody's warehouse."

"I'll call DEA and have them take a quick look," the FBI Director promised. "Anything shaking on your end?"

"We're giving the tree a kick, Dan," John told him. "For the moment we're proceeding on the assumption that the operation initiated in America." He explained on to tell Murray why this was so.

"This Russian guy, Serov, you said, former KGB, formerly a go-between for

terrorists. There weren't all that many of those, and we have some information on the specialty."

"Bill's having 'Six' look at it, too, and I've already kicked it around with Ed Foley. I talked to Sergey Golovko about it as well."

"You really think he'll help?" Director Murray asked.

"The worst thing he can say is no, Dan, and that's where we are already," Rainbow Six pointed out.

"True," Dan conceded. "Anything else we can do on this end?"

"If I come up with anything I'll let you know, pal."

"Okay, John. Been watching the Olympics?"

"Yeah, I actually have a team there."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, Ding Chavez and some men. The Aussies wanted us down to observe their security operations. He says they're pretty good."

"Free trip to the Olympics, not a bad gig," the FBI director observed.

"I guess so, Dan. Anyway, let us know if you turn anything, will ya?"

"You bet, John. See you later, pal."

"Yeah. Bye, Dan."

Clark replaced the secure phone and leaned back in his chair, wondering what he might be missing. He was checking everything he had thought of, every loose end, hoping that somewhere someone might come up with another seemingly innocent factoid that might lead to another. He'd never quite appreciated how hard it was to be a cop investigating a major crime. The color of the damned car the bad guys drove was or could be important, and you had to remember to ask that question, too. But it was something for which he was not trained, and he had to trust the cops to do their jobs.

They were doing that. In London, the police sat Timothy O'Neil down in the usual interrogation room. Tea was offered and accepted.

It wasn't easy for O'Neil. He wanted to say nothing at all, but with the shock of the information given him by the police that could only have originated with Sean Grady, his faith and his resolve had been shaken, and as a result he *had* said a few things, and that was a process that once begun could not be taken back.

"This Russian chap, Serov, you told us his name was," the detective inspector began. "He flew into Ireland?"

"It's a long swim, mate," O'Neil replied as a joke.

"Yes, and a difficult drive," the police inspector agreed. "How did he fly in?"

The answer to that was silence. That was disappointing, but not unexpected.

"I can tell you something you don't know, Tim," the inspector offered, to jump-start the conversation.

"What might that be?"

"This Serov bloke set you up a numbered Swiss account for all the money he brought in. Well, we just learned from the Swiss that he cleaned it out."

"What?"

"The day of your operation, someone called the bank and transferred nearly all the money out. So, your Russian friend gave with one hand, and took away

with the other. Here"—the inspector handed a sheet of paper across—"this is the account number, and this is the activation number to do transfers. Six million dollars, less what you chaps spent to buy the trucks and such. He transferred it out, to his own personal account, I'll wager. You chaps picked the wrong friend, Tim."

"That bloody fucking thief!" O'Neil was outraged.

"Yes, Tim, I know. You've never been one of those. But this Serov chappie is, and that's a fact, my boy."

O'Neil swore something at odds with his Catholicism. He recognized the account number, knew that Sean had written it down, and was reasonably certain that this cop wasn't lying to him about what had happened with it.

"He flew into Shannon on a private business jet. I do not know where from."

"Really?"

"Probably because of the drugs he brought in with him. They don't search plutocrats, do they? Bloody nobility, they act like."

"What kind of aircraft, do you know?"

O'Neil shook his head. "It had two engines and the tail was shaped like a T, but no, I do not know the name of the bloody thing."

"And how did he get to the meeting?"

"We had a car meet him."

"Who drove the car?" the inspector asked next.

"I will not give you names. I've told you that."

"Forgive me, Tim, but I must ask. You know that," the cop apologized. He'd worked hard winning this terrorist's confidence. "Sean trusted this Serov chap. That was evidently a mistake. The funds were transferred out two hours after your operation began. We rather suspect he was somewhere close, to watch, and when he saw how things were going, he simply robbed you. Russians are greedy buggers," the cop sympathized. His eyes didn't show his pleasure at the new information developed. The room was bugged, of course, and already the Police of the Metropolis were on the phone to Ireland.

The Irish national police force, called the Garda, had almost always cooperated with their British counterparts, and this time was no exception. The senior local Gardai drove at once to Shannon to check for flight records—as far as he was concerned, all he wanted to know was how ten pounds of illegal drugs had entered his country. That tactical mistake by the IRA had only enraged the local cops, some of whom did have their tribal sympathies with the revolutionary movement to the north. But those sympathies stopped well short of drug-trafficking, which they, like most cops in the world, regarded as the dirtiest of crimes.

The flight-operations office at Shannon had paper records of every flight that arrived or departed from the complex, and with the date, the assistant operations manager found the right sheet in under three minutes. Yes, a Gulfstream business jet had arrived early in the morning, refueled, and departed soon after. The documents showed the tail number and the names of the flight crew. More to the point, it showed that the aircraft was registered in the United States to a large charter company. From this office, the Irish police officer went to immigration/customs control, where he found that one Joseph

Serov had indeed cleared customs on the morning indicated. The Gardai took a photocopy of all relevant documents back to his station, where they were faxed immediately to Garda headquarters in Dublin, and then on to London, and from there to Washington, D.C.

"Damn," Dan Murray said at his desk. "It *did* start here, eh?"

"Looks that way," said Chuck Baker, the assistant director in charge of the criminal division.

"Run this one down, Chuck."

"You bet, Dan. This one's getting pretty deep."

Thirty minutes later, a pair of FBI agents arrived at the office of the charter company at the Teterboro, New Jersey, airport. There they soon ascertained that the aircraft had been chartered by one Joseph Serov, who'd paid for the charter with a certified check drawn on an account at Citibank that was in his name. No, they didn't have a photo of the client. The flight crew was elsewhere on another flight, but as soon as they came back they would cooperate with the FBI, of course.

From there the agents, plus some photocopied documents, went to the bank branch where Serov kept his account, and there learned that nobody at the branch had ever met the man. His address, they found, was the same damned post-office box that had dead-ended the search for his credit card records.

By this time, the FBI had a copy of Serov's passport photo—but those were often valueless for the purposes of identification, intended more, Director Murray thought, to identify the body of a plane-crash victim than to facilitate the search for a living human being.

But the case file was growing, and for the first time Murray felt optimistic. They were gradually turning up data on this subject, and sooner or later they'd find where he'd slipped up—trained KGB officer or not—because everyone did, and once you appeared on the FBI's collective radarscope, nine thousand skilled investigators started looking, and they wouldn't stop looking until told to stop. Photo, bank account, credit card records . . . the next step would be to find out how the money had gotten into his account. He had to have an employer and/or sponsor, and that person or entity could be squeezed for additional information. It was now just a matter of time, and Murray thought they had all the time they needed to run this mutt down. It wasn't often that they bagged a trained spook. They were the most elusive of game, and for that reason all the more pleasing when you could hang the head of one over the mantelpiece. Terrorism and drug-trafficking. This would be a juicy case to give to a United States Attorney.

"Hello," Popov said.

"Howdy," the man replied. "You're not from here."

"Dmitriy Popov," the Russian said, extending his hand.

"Foster Hunnicutt," the American said, taking it. "What do you do here?"

Popov smiled. "Here, I do nothing at all, though I am learning to ride a horse. I work directly for Dr. Brightling."

"Who—oh, the big boss of this place?"

"Yes, that is correct. And you?"

"I'm a hunter and guide," the man from Montana replied.

"Good, and you are not a vegan?"

Hunnicutt thought that was pretty good. "Not exactly. I like red meat as much as the next man. But I prefer elk to this mystery meat," he went on, looking down with some distaste for what was on his plate.

"Elk?"

"Wapiti, biggest damned deer you're ever gonna see. A good one's got maybe four, five hundred pounds of good meat in him. Nice rack, too."

"Rack?"

"The antlers, horns on the head. I'm partial to bear meat, too."

"That'll piss off a lot of the folks here," Dr. Killgore observed, working into his pasta salad.

"Look, man, hunting is the first form of conservation. If somebody don't take care of the critters, there ain't nothing to hunt. You know, like Teddy Roosevelt and Yellowstone National Park. If you want to understand game, I mean *really* understand them, you better be a hunter."

"No arguments here," the epidemiologist said.

"Maybe I'm not a bunny-hugger. Maybe I kill game, but, goddamnit, I eat what I kill. I don't kill things just to watch 'em die—well," he added, "not game animals anyway. But there's a lot of ignorant-ass people I wouldn't mind popping."

"That's why we're here, isn't it?" Maclean asked with a smile.

"You bet. Too many people fucking up the place with electric toothbrushes and cars and ugly-ass houses."

"I brought Foster into the Project," Mark Waterhouse replied. He'd known Maclean for years.

"All briefed in?" Killgore asked.

"Yes, sir, and it's all fine with me. You know, I always wondered what it was like to be Jim Bridger or Jedediah Smith. Maybe now I can find out, give it a few years."

"About five," Maclean said, "according to our computer projections."

"Bridger? Smith?" Popov asked.

"They were Mountain Men," Hunnicutt told the Russian. "They were the first white men to see the West, and they were legends, explorers, hunters, Indian fighters."

"Yeah, it's a shame about the Indians."

"Maybe so," Hunnicutt allowed.

"When did you get in?" Maclean asked Waterhouse.

"We drove in today," Mark replied. "The place is about full up now, isn't it?" He didn't like the crowding.

"That it is," Killgore confirmed. He didn't, either. "But it's still nice outside. You ride, Mr. Hunnicutt?"

"How else does a man hunt in the West? I don't use no SUV, man."

"So, you're a hunting guide?"

"Yeah." Hunnicutt nodded. "I used to be a geologist for the oil companies, but I kissed that off a long time ago. I got tired of helping to kill the planet, y'know?"

Another tree-worshiping druid, Popov thought. It wasn't especially surprising, though this one struck him as verbose and a little bombastic.

"But then," the hunter went on, "well, I figured out what was important." He explained for a few minutes about the Brown Smudge. "And I took my money and hung it up, like. Always liked hunting and stuff, and so I built me a cabin in the mountains—bought an old cattle ranch—and took to hunting full-time."

"Oh, you can do that? Hunt full-time, I mean?" Killgore asked.

"That depends. A fish-and-game cop hassled me about it . . . but, well, he stopped hassling me."

Popov caught a wink from Waterhouse to Killgore when this primitive said that, and in a second he knew that this Hunnicutt person had killed a police officer and gotten away with it. What sort of people did this "project" recruit?

"Anyway, we all ride in the morning. Want to join us?"

"You bet! I never turn that down."

"I have learned to enjoy it myself," Popov put in.

"Dmitriy, you must have some Cossack in you." Killgore laughed. "Anyway, Foster, show up here for breakfast a little before seven, and we can go out together."

"Deal," Hunnicutt confirmed.

Popov stood. "With your permission, the Olympic equestrian events start in ten minutes."

"Dmitriy, don't start thinking about jumping fences. You're not *that* good yet!" Maclean told him.

"I can watch it done, can I not?" the Russian said, walking away.

"So, what's he do here?" Hunnicutt asked, when Popov was gone.

"Like he said, nothing here, exactly, but he helped get the Project going in one important way."

"Oh?" the hunter asked. "How's that?"

"All those terrorist incidents in Europe, remember them?"

"Yeah, the counterterror groups really worked good to shut those bastards down. Damned nice shooting, some of it. Dmitriy was part of that?"

"He got the missions started, all of 'em," Maclean said.

"Damn," Mark Waterhouse observed. "So, he helped Bill get the contract for the Olympics?"

"Yep, and without that, how the hell would we get the Shiva delivered?"

"Good man," Waterhouse decided, sipping his California Chardonnay. He'd miss it, he thought, after the Project activated. Well, there were plenty of liquor warehouses around the country. He would not outlive their stocks, he was sure.

CHAPTER 35

MARATHON

It had become so enjoyable that Popov was waking up early, in order to relish it more. This day he woke up just after first light, and admired the orange-rose glow on the eastern horizon that presaged the actual dawn. He'd never ridden a horse before coming to the Kansas facility, and he'd found that there was something fundamentally pleasing and manly about it, to have a large, powerful animal between one's legs, and to command it with nothing more than a gentle tug on the leather reins, or even the clucking sound one made with one's tongue. It offered a much better perspective than walking, and was just . . . pleasing to him at a sub-intellectual level.

And so he was in the cafeteria early, picking his breakfast food—plus a fresh red apple for Buttermilk—just as the kitchen staff set it out. The day promised to be fine and clear again. The wheat farmers were probably as pleased as he was with the weather, the intelligence officer thought. There had been enough rain to water the crops, and plenty of sun to ripen them. The American wheat farmers had to be the most productive in all the world, Popov reflected. With this fine land and their incredible mobile equipment, that was little surprise, he thought, lifting his tray and walking to the accustomed table. He was halfway through his scrambled eggs when Killgore and the new one, Hunnicutt, approached.

"Morning, Dmitriy," the tall hunter said in greeting.

Popov had to swallow before replying. "Good morning, Foster."

"What did you think of the riding last night?"

"The Englishman who won the gold medal was marvelous, but so was his horse."

"They pick good ones," Hunnicutt observed, heading off to get his breakfast and returning in a few minutes. "So, you were a spy, eh?"

"Intelligence officer. Yes, that was my job for the Soviet Union."

"Working with terrorists, John tells me."

"That is also true. I had my assignments, and of course I had to carry them out."

"No problem with me on that, Dmitriy. Ain't none of those folks ever bothered me or anybody I know. Hell, I worked in Libya once for Royal Dutch Shell. Found 'em a nice little field, too, and the Libyans I worked with were okay people." Like Popov, Hunnicutt had piled up eggs and bacon. He needed a lot of food to support his frame, Dmitriy imagined. "So what do you think of Kansas?"

"Like Russia in many ways, the broad horizons, and vast farms—though yours are far more efficient. So few people growing so much grain."

"Yeah, we're counting on that to keep us in bread," Hunnicutt agreed, stuffing his face. "We have enough land here to grow plenty, and all the equipment we need. I may be into that myself."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, well, everybody's going to be assigned Project work to do. Makes sense, we all gotta pull together in the beginning anyway, but I'm really looking forward to getting me some buffalo. I even bought myself a real buffalo gun."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a company in Montana, Shiloh Arms, that makes replicas of the real buffalo rifles. Bought me one a month ago—Sharps .40-90—and it shoots like a son of a bitch," the hunter reported.

"Some of the people here will not approve," Popov said, thinking of the vegans, clearly the most extreme of the druidic elements.

"Yeah, well, those people, if they think they can live in harmony with nature without guns, they better read up on Lewis and Clark. A grizzly bear don't know about this friend-of-nature stuff. He just knows what he can kill and eat, and what he can't. Sometimes you just gotta remind him what he can't. Same thing with wolves."

"Oh, come on, Foster," Killgore said, sitting to join his friends. "There has *never* been a confirmed case of wolves killing people in America."

Hunnicutt thought that was especially dumb. "Oh? Well, it's kinda hard to bitch about something if a wolf shits you out his ass. Dead men tell no tales, Doc. What about Russia, Dmitriy? What about wolves there?"

"The farmers hate them, have always hated them, but the state hunters pursue them with helicopters and machine guns. That is not sporting, as you say, is it?"

"Not hardly," Hunnicutt agreed. "You treat game with respect. It's *their* land, not yours, and you have to play by the rules. That's how you learn about them, how they live, how they think. That's why we have the Boone and Crockett rules for big-game hunting. That's why I go in on horseback, and I pack 'em out on horseback. You have to play fair with game. But not with people, of course," he added with a wink.

"Our vegan friends don't understand about hunting," Killgore told them sadly. "I suppose they think they can eat grass and just take pictures of the life-forms."

"That's bullshit," Hunnicutt told them. "Death is part of the process of life, and we're the top predator, and the critters out there know it. Besides, ain't nothing tastes better than elk over an open fire, guys. That's one taste I'll never lose, and be damned if I'll ever give it up. If those extremists want to eat rabbit food, fine, but anybody tells me I can't eat meat, well, there used to be a fish-and-game cop who tried to tell me when I could hunt and when I couldn't." Hunnicutt smiled cruelly. "Well, he don't bother anybody no more. Goddamnit, *I* know the way the world's supposed to work."

You killed a policeman over this business? Popov couldn't ask. *Nekulturny barbarian.* He could just as easily have bought his meat in a supermarket. A druid with a gun, surely that was an unusually dangerous sort. He finished his breakfast and walked outside. Soon the others followed, and Hunnicutt pulled

a cigar from the saddlebags he was carrying and lit it as they walked to Killgore's Hummer.

"You have to smoke in the car?" the doctor complained, as soon as he saw the thing.

"I'll hold it out the fuckin' window, John. Christ, you a secondhand-smoke Nazi, too?" the hunter demanded. Then he bent to the logic of the moment and lowered the window, holding the cigar outside for the ride to the horse barn. It didn't take long. Popov saddled the affable Buttermilk, fed her the apple from the cafeteria food line and took her outside, mounted the mare and looked around the green-amber sea that surrounded the facility. Hunni-cutt came out on a horse Dmitriy had never seen, a blanket Appaloosa stallion that he took to be the hunter's own. On a closer look—

"Is that a pistol?" Popov asked.

"It's an M-1873 Colt's Single-Action Army Revolver," Foster replied, lifting it from the equally authentic Three-persons holster. "The gun that won the West. Dmitriy, I never go riding without a friend," he said with a self-satisfied smile.

"Forty-five?" the Russian asked. He'd seen them in movies, but never in real life.

"No, it's a .44-40. Caliber forty-four, with forty grains of black powder. Back a hundred years ago, you used the same cartridge in your handgun and your rifle. Cheaper that way," he explained. "And the bullet'll kill just about anything you want. Maybe not a buffalo," he allowed, "but damned sure a deer—"

"Or a man?"

"You bet. This is just about the deadliest cartridge ever made, Dmitriy." Hunnicutt replaced the revolver in the leather holster. "Now, this holster isn't authentic, really. It's called a Threepersons, named for Billy Threepersons, I think. He was a U.S. Marshal back in the old days—he was a Native American, too, and quite a lawman, so the story goes. Anyway, he invented the holster late in the nineteenth century. Easier to quick-draw out of this one, see?" Foster demonstrated. It impressed Popov to see it in real life after so many movies. The American hunter even wore a wide-brim Western hat. Popov found himself liking the man despite his bombast.

"Come on, Jeremiah," Hunnicutt said, as the other two entered the corral, and with that he led them off.

"Your horse?" Popov asked.

"Oh, yeah, bought him off a Nez Percé Indian pal. Eight years old, just about right for me." Foster smiled as they walked out the gate, a man fully in his element, Popov thought.

The rides had become somewhat repetitive. Even here there was only so much land to walk and examine, but the simple pleasure of it hadn't changed. The four men went north this morning, slowly through the prairie-dog town, then close to the interstate highway with its heavy truck traffic.

"Where is the nearest town?" Popov asked.

"That way"—Killgore pointed—"about five miles. Not much of a town."

"Does it have an airport?"

"Little one for private planes only," the doctor replied. "You go east about

twenty miles, there's another town with a regional airport for puddle-jumpers, so you can get to Kansas City, from there you can fly anywhere."

"But we'll be using our own runways for the Gs, right?"

"Yep," Killgore confirmed. "The new ones can hop all the way to Johannesburg from right here."

"No shit?" Hunnicutt asked. "You mean, like, we could go hunting in Africa if we want?"

"Yeah, Foster, but packing back the elephant on a horse might be a little tough." The epidemiologist laughed.

"Well, maybe just the ivory," the hunter replied, doing the same. "I was thinking lion and leopard, John."

"Africans like to eat the lion's gonads. You see, the lion is the most virile of all the animals," Killgore told them.

"How's that?"

"Once upon a time, a nature-film crew watched two males servicing a female who was in season. They *averaged* once every ten minutes for a day and a half between 'em. So, the individual males were going three times an hour for thirty-six hours. Better than *I* ever did." There was another laugh that the men all shared. "Anyway, some African tribes still believe that when you eat a body part off something you killed, you inherit the attribute of that part. So, they like to eat lion balls."

"Does it work?" Maclean asked.

Killgore liked that. "If it did, wouldn't be many male lions left in the world, Kirk."

"You got that one right, John!" And there was more general laughter that dawn.

Popov wasn't as amused by this discussion as his companions. He looked off at the highway, and saw a Greyhound bus pass by at about seventy miles per hour—but then it slowed and stopped at an odd little square building. "What's that?" he asked.

"Bus stop for the intercity buses," Mark Waterhouse replied. "They have them out here in the boonies. You sit there and wait, then you wave for the bus to stop, like the old flag stops for trains."

"Ah." Dmitriy filed that one away as he turned his horse to the east. The hawk, he saw, the one that lived around here, was up and flying again, looking down for one of those tubular rodents to eat for its own breakfast. He watched, but evidently the hawk didn't see one. They rode for another hour, then headed back. Popov ended up next to Hunnicutt.

"You been riding how long?"

"Hardly more than a week," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich answered.

"You're doing okay for a tenderfoot," Foster told him in a friendly voice.

"I want to do it more, so that I can ride better at a faster pace."

"Well, how about tonight, just 'fore sundown, say?"

"Thank you, Foster, yes, I would like that. Just after dinner, shall we say?"

"Sure. Meet me around six-thirty at the corral."

"Thank you. I will do that," Popov promised. A night ride, under the stars, yes, that should be very pleasant.

“I got an idea,” Chatham said when he got to work in the Javits Building.

“What’s that?”

“This Russian guy, Serov. We got a passport photo, right?”

“Yeah,” Sullivan agreed.

“Let’s try the flyers again. His bank, it’s probably within walking distance of his apartment, right?”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? I like it,” Special Agent Tom Sullivan said with some enthusiasm. “Let’s see how fast we can get that done.”

“Hey, Chuck,” the voice said over the phone.

“Good morning—afternoon for you, I suppose, John.”

“Yeah, just finished lunch,” Clark said. “Any luck with this Serov investigation?”

“Nothing yet,” the assistant director for the criminal division answered. “These things don’t happen overnight, but they do happen. I have the New York field division looking for this mutt. If he’s in town, we’ll find him,” Baker promised. “It might take a while, but we will.”

“Sooner is better than later,” Rainbow Six pointed out.

“I know. It always is, but stuff like this doesn’t happen overnight.” Baker knew that he was being kicked in the ass, lest he allow this hunt to become a low-priority item. That would not happen, but this Clark guy was CIA, and he didn’t know what it was like to be a cop. “We’ll find the guy for you, John. If he’s over here, that is. You have the British cops looking, too?”

“Oh, yeah. Thing is, we don’t know how many identities he might have.”

“In his place, how many would you have?”

“Three or four, probably, and they’d be similar so they’re easy for me to remember. This guy’s a trained spook. So, he probably has a number of ‘legends’ that he can change into about as easy as he changes shirts.”

“I know, John. I’ve worked Foreign Counterintelligence before. They are elusive game, but we know how to hunt ’em. Are you sweating any more stuff out of your terrorists?”

“They don’t talk all that much,” the voice replied. “The cops here can’t interrogate very effectively.”

So, are we supposed to roast them over a slow fire? Baker didn’t ask. The FBI operated under the rules established by the U.S. Constitution. He figured that CIA most often did not, and like most FBI types he found that somewhat distasteful. He’d never met Clark, and knew him only by reputation. Director Murray respected him, but had his reservations. Clark had once tortured subjects, Murray had hinted once, and that, for the FBI, was beyond the pale, however effective it might be. The Constitution said “no” on that issue, and that was that, even for kidnappers, even though that was one class of criminal that deserved it in the eyes of every special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

“Trust the Brit cops. They’re damned good, John, and they have a lot of experience with IRA types. They know how to talk to them.”

“You say so, Chuck,” the voice responded somewhat dubiously. “Okay, anything else we get comes right to your desk.”

“Good. Talk to you later if we get anything here, John.”

"Right, see ya."

Baker wondered if he should visit the bathroom to wash his hands after that conversation. He'd been briefed into Rainbow and its recent activities, and while he admired the military way of doing things—like many FBI agents, he'd been a Marine officer, recruited right out of the Quantico Marine Base into the Bureau—it differed in several important areas from the Bureau's way of doing things. . . like not violating the law. This John Clark was a hardcase son of a bitch, a former Agency guy who'd done some spooky things, Dan Murray had told him, with a mixture of admiration and disapproval. But, what the hell, they were on the same side, sort of, and this Russian subject had probably initiated an operation that had gone after Clark's own family. That added a personal element to the case, and Baker had to respect that.

Chavez turned in after another long day of watching athletes run and sweat. It had been an interesting couple of weeks, and though he sorely missed Patsy and JC, whom he'd hardly had a chance to meet, he couldn't deny that he was enjoying himself. But soon it would be over. Sports reporters were tallying up the medals—America had done quite well, and the Aussies had done spectacularly well, especially in swimming events—in anticipation of announcing which nation had "won" the games. Three more days and they'd run the Marathon, traditionally the last Olympic event, followed soon thereafter by the closing ceremonies and the dousing of the flame. Already the runners were walking and/or driving along the course, to learn the hills and turns. They didn't want to get lost, though that would hardly be possible, as the route would be lined with screaming fans every step of the way. And they were working out, running in the training/practice area of the Olympic Village, not so much so as to tire themselves out, but just enough to keep their muscles and lungs ready for the murderous exertion of this longest of footraces. Chavez considered himself to be in shape, but he'd never run a twenty-plus-mile course. Soldiers had to know how to run, but not *that* far, and running that distance on paved roads had to be pure murder on the feet and ankles, despite the cushioned soles of modern running shoes. Yeah, those bastards had to be in real shape, Ding thought, lying down in his bed.

From the opening-day ceremonies, when the Olympic flame had been lit, through today, the games had been wonderfully managed and run, as if the entire national soul and strength of Australia had been devoted to one task—as America had once decided to go to the moon. Everything was superbly organized, and that was further proof that his presence here was a total waste of time. Security hadn't had even a hint of a problem. The Aussie cops were friendly, competent, and numerous, and the Australian SAS backing them up were nearly as good as his own troopers, well supported and advised by the Global Security people who'd gotten them the same tactical radios that Rainbow used. That company looked like a good vendor to use, and he thought he might recommend that John talk to them along those lines. It never hurt to have an outside opinion.

About the only bad news was the weather, which had been sultry-hot for the entire Olympiad. That had kept the medics busy at their heatstroke kiosks. Nobody had died yet, but about a hundred people had been hospitalized, and

thirty times that many treated and released by the firemen paramedics and Australian army medical orderlies. That didn't count the people who just sat down on the curb and tried to cool off without getting any proper medical assistance. He didn't mind the heat all that much—Chavez had never been afraid of sweat—but he also paced himself, and, like everyone else in the Olympic stadium, was grateful for that fogging system. The TV guys had even done a story about it, which was good news for the American company that had designed and installed it. They were even talking about a version for golf courses in Texas and elsewhere, where it got about this hot. Traveling from ninety-five degrees to an apparent temperature of eighty or so was a pleasant sensation indeed, not unlike a shower, and the concourses were often crowded with people in the afternoons, escaping from the blazing sunshine.

Chavez's last thought of the night was that he would not have minded having the sunblock concession. There were signs everywhere telling people to be mindful of the hole in the ozone layer, and he knew that sun-caused skin cancer wasn't a pleasant death. So, Chavez and his men liberally slathered the stuff on every morning just like everyone else. Well, a few more days and they'd go back to Britain, where their tans would be noted by the pastypale Englishmen, and the weather would be a good twenty degrees cooler on what the Brits called a "hot" day. Anything over seventy-five over there and people started dropping dead in the street—which made Ding wonder about the old song that claimed only "mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun." They must have been a lot tougher back then, Chavez thought, falling off to sleep.

Popov saddled Buttermilk at about six that evening. The sun wasn't setting yet, but that was less than an hour away, and his horse, having rested and eaten all day, was not the least bit averse to his attention—besides, he'd given Buttermilk another apple, and the mare seemed to relish them as a man might enjoy his first glass of beer after a long working day.

Jeremiah, Hunnicutt's horse, was smaller than Buttermilk, but appeared more powerful. An odd-looking animal, his light gray coat was covered from hindquarters to neck with an almost perfectly square matlike mark of deep charcoal, hence the name "blanket Appaloosa," the Russian imagined. Foster Hunnicutt showed up, hoisting his large Western-style saddle on his shoulder, and tossing it atop the blanket, then reaching under to cinch the straps in. His last act, Popov saw, was to strap on his Colt pistol. Then he slid his left foot into the left-side stirrup and climbed aboard. Jeremiah, the stallion, must have liked to be ridden. It was as though the animal transformed himself with this new weight on his back. The head came up proudly, and the ears swiveled around, waiting for the command of its rider. That was a clucking sound, and the stallion moved out into the corral alongside Popov and Buttermilk.

"He is a fine horse, Foster."

"Best I've ever had," the hunter agreed. "The App's a great all-around critter. They come from the Nez Percé Indian tribe. The Nez Percé captured the original Western horses—they were the ones who escaped from the Spanish conquistadors, and bred out in the wild. Well, the Nez Percé learned how to breed them back to the Arabian roots of the Spanish breed, and came

out with these." Hunnicutt reached down to pat his horse's neck with rough affection, which the animal seemed to like. "The Appaloosa's the best horse there is, if you ask me. Smart, steady, healthy breed, not dizzy like the Arabians are, and damned pretty, I think. They aren't the best at any one thing, but they're damned good in all things. Great all-around mount. Jeremiah here's a great hunting and tracking horse. We've spent a lot of time in the high country after elk. He even found my gold for me."

"Excuse me? Gold?"

Hunnicutt laughed. "My spread up in Montana. It used to be part of a cattle ranch, but the mountains are too steep for the cows. Anyway, there's a stream coming down from the mountain. I was letting Jeremiah drink one afternoon, and I saw something shiny, okay?" Hunnicutt stretched. "It was gold, a big hunk of gold and quartz—that's the best geological formation for gold, Dmitriy. Anyway, I figure I got a fair-sized deposit on my land. How big? There's no tellin', and it doesn't matter much anyway."

"Not matter?" Popov turned in the saddle to look at his companion. "Foster, for the last ten thousand years men have killed one another over gold."

"Not anymore, Dmitriy. That's going to end—forever, probably."

"But how? Why?" Popov demanded.

"Don't you know about the Project?"

"A little, but not enough to understand what you just said."

What the hell, the hunter thought. "Dmitriy, human life on the planet is going to come to a screeching halt, boy."

"But—"

"They didn't tell you?"

"No, Foster, not that part. Can you tell me?"

What the hell, Hunnicutt thought again. The Olympics were almost over. Why not? This Russkie understood about Nature, knew about riding, and he damned sure worked for John Brightling in a very sensitive capacity.

"It's called Shiva," he began, and went on for several minutes.

For Popov it was a time to put his professional face back on. His emotions were neutralized while he listened. He even managed a smile which masked his inner horror.

"But how do you distribute it?"

"Well, you see, John has a company that also works for him. Global Security—the boss man's a guy named Henriksen."

"Ah, yes, I know him. He was in your FBI."

"Oh? I knew he was a cop, but not a fed. Anyway, they got the consulting contract with the Aussies for the Olympics, and one of Bill's people will be spreading the Shiva. Something to do with the air-conditioning system at the stadium, they tell me. They're going to spread it on the last day, see, and the closing ceremonies. The next day everyone flies home, and then, like, thousands of people all take the bug home with them."

"But what protects us?"

"You got a shot when you came here, right?"

"Yes, Killgore said it was a booster for something."

"Oh, it was, Dmitriy. It's a booster, all right. It's the vaccine that protects you against Shiva. I got it, too. That's the 'B' vaccine, pal. There's another one,

they tell me, the 'A' vaccine, but that one's not the one you want to get." Hunnicutt explained on.

"How do you know all this?" Popov asked.

"Well, you see, in case people figure this out, I'm one of the guys who helped set up the perimeter security system here. So, they told me why the Project *needs* perimeter security. It's pretty serious shit, man. If anyone were to find out about what was done, hell, they might even nuke us, y'know?" Foster pointed out with a grin. "Not many people really understand about saving the planet. I mean, we do this now, or in about twenty years, hell, *everything* and *everybody* dies. Not just the people. The animals, too. We can't let that happen, can we?"

"I see your point. Yes, that does make sense," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich agreed, without choking on his words.

Hunnicutt nodded with some satisfaction. "I figured you'd get it, man. So, those terrorist things you got started, well, they were very pretty important. Without getting everybody all hot and bothered about international terrorism, Bill Hendriksen might not have got his people in place to do their little job. So," Hunnicutt said as he fished a cigar out of his pocket, "thanks, Dmitriy. You were really an important part for this here Project."

"Thank you, Foster," Popov responded. *Is this possible?* he wondered. "How certain are you that this will work?"

"It oughta work. I asked that question, too. They let me in on some of the planning, 'cuz I'm a scientist—I was a pretty good geologist once, trust me. I know a lot of stuff. The disease is a real mother. The real key to that was the genetic engineering done on the original Ebola. Hell, you remember how scary that was a year and a half ago, right?"

Popov nodded. "Oh, yes. I was in Russia then, and it was very frightening indeed." Even more frightening had been the response of the American president, he reminded himself.

"Well, they—the real Project scientists—learned a lot from that. The key to this is the 'A' vaccine. The original outbreak may kill a few million people, but that's mainly psychological. The vaccine that Horizon's going to market is a live-virus vaccine, like the Sabin polio vaccine. But they've tuned it, like. It doesn't stop Shiva, man. It *spreads* Shiva. Takes a month to six weeks for the symptoms to show. They proved that in the lab."

"How?"

"Well, Kirk was part of that. He kidnapped some folks off the street, and they tested the Shiva and the vaccines on them. Everything worked, even the first-phase delivery system that's set up to use in Sydney."

"It is a big thing, to change the face of the world," Popov thought aloud, looking north to where the interstate highway was.

"Gotta be done, man. If we don't—well, you can kiss all this good-bye, Dmitriy. I can't let that happen."

"It's a terrible thing to do, but I see the logic of your position. Brightling is a genius, to see this, to find a way of solving the problem, and then to have the courage to act." Popov hoped his voice wasn't too patronizing, but this man Hunnicutt was a technocrat, not one who understood people.

"Yep," Hunnicutt said around the cigar, as he lit it with a kitchen match. He

blew the match out, then held it until it was cold before letting it fall to the ground, lest it start a prairie fire. “Brilliant scientist, and he *gets it,* you know? Thank God, he has the resources to make all this happen. Setting all this up must have cost near onto a billion dollars—hell, just this place, not counting the one in Brazil.”

“Brazil?”

“There’s a smaller version of the complex down there, somewhere west of Manaus, I think. I never been there. The rain forest doesn’t interest me that much. I’m an open-country sort of guy,” Hunnicutt explained. “Now, the African veldt, the plains there, that’s something else. Well, I guess I’ll get to see it, and hunt it.”

“Yes, I would like to see that, to see the wildlife, how it lives and thrives in the sun,” Popov agreed, coming to his own decision.

“Yep. Gonna get me a lion or two there with my H&H .375.” Hunnicutt clucked and got Jeremiah to go faster, an easy canter that Popov tried to duplicate. He’d done this pace before, but now he found that he had trouble synchronizing with Buttermilk’s rather easy motions. He had to switch his mind back into his body to make that happen, but he managed it, catching up with the hunter.

“So, you will transform this country to the Old West, eh?” The interstate was about two miles off. The trucks were passing by swiftly, their trailers lit in amber lights. There would be intercity buses, too, similarly lit, he hoped.

“That’s one of the things we’re going to do.”

“And you’ll carry your pistol everywhere?”

“Revolver, Dmitriy,” Foster corrected. “But, yeah. I’ll be like the guys I’ve read about, living out here in harmony with nature. Maybe find me a woman who thinks like I do, maybe build me a nice cabin in the mountains, like Jeremiah Johnson did—but no Crow Indians to worry me there,” he added with a chuckle.

“Foster?”

He turned. “Yeah?”

“Your pistol, may I hold it?” the Russian asked, praying for the correct response.

He got it. “Sure.” He drew it and passed it across, muzzle up for safety.

Popov felt the weight and the balance. “It is loaded?”

“Nothing much more useless than a handgun that ain’t loaded. Hell, you want to shoot it? Just cock the hammer back and let go, but you want to make sure your horse is reined in tight, okay? Jeremiah here’s used to the noise. That mare might not be.”

“I see.” Popov took the reins in his left hand to keep Buttermilk in check. Next he extended his right hand and cocked the hammer on the Colt, heard the distinctive triple click of this particular type of revolver, and took aim at a wooden surveyor’s stake and pulled the trigger. It broke cleanly at about five pounds.

Buttermilk jumped slightly with the noise, so close to her sensitive ears, but the horse didn’t react all that badly. And the bullet, Popov saw, grazed the two-inch stake, six meters or so away. So, he still knew how to shoot.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Hunnicutt asked. “If you ask me, the Single-Action Army’s

got the best balance of any handgun ever made."

"Yes," Popov agreed, "it is very nice." Then he turned. Foster Hunnicutt was seated on his stallion, Jeremiah, not three meters away. That made it easy. The former KGB officer cocked the hammer again, turned and aimed right at the center of his chest, and pulled the trigger before the hunter could even be surprised by the action. His target's eyes widened, either from his unbelieving recognition of the impossible thing that was happening or from the impact of the heavy bullet, but what it was didn't matter. The bullet went straight through his heart. The body of the hunter stayed erect in the saddle for a few seconds, the eyes still wide with shock, then it fell lifelessly backward away from Popov and onto the grassland.

Dmitriy dismounted and took the three steps to the body to make sure that Hunnicutt was dead. Then he unsaddled Jeremiah, who took the death of his owner phlegmatically, and removed the bridle, too, surprised that the animal didn't bite him for what he'd just done, but a horse wasn't a dog. With that done, he smacked the stallion heavily on the rump, and it trotted off for fifty meters or so, then stopped and started grazing.

Popov remounted Buttermilk and clucked her to a northerly direction. He looked back, saw the lit windows of the Project building complex, and wondered if he or Hunnicutt would be missed. Probably not, he judged, as the interstate highway grew closer. There was supposed to be that little village to the west, but he decided that his best chance was the bus stop hut, or perhaps thumbing a ride on a car or truck. What he'd do after that, he wasn't sure, but he knew he had to get the hell away from this place, just as fast and as far as he could manage. Popov was not a man who believed in God. His education and his upbringing had not aimed him in that direction, and so for him "god" was only the first part of "goddamned." But he'd learned something important today. He might never know if there was a God, but there were surely devils—and he had worked for them, and the horror of that was like nothing he'd ever known as a young colonel of the KGB.

CHAPTER 36

FLIGHTS OF NECESSITY

The fear was as bad as the horror. Popov had never experienced a really frightening time as a field-intelligence officer. There had always been tension, especially at the beginning of his career, but he'd quickly grown confident in his fieldcraft, and the skills had become for him a kind of security blanket, whose warm folds had always made his soul comfortable. But not today.

Now he was in a foreign place. Not merely a foreign land, for he was a man of cities. In any such place he knew how to disappear in minutes, to vanish so completely that scarcely any police force in the world could find him. But this wasn't a city. He dismounted Buttermilk a hundred meters from the bus hut, and again he took the time to remove the saddle and bridle, because a saddled, riderless horse was sure to attract notice, but a horse merely walking about on its own probably would not, not here, where many people kept such animals for their pleasure. Then it was just a matter of easing his way through the barbed-wire fence and walking to the bus hut, which, he found, was empty. There was no schedule on the blank, white-painted walls. It was the simplest of structures, seemingly made of poured concrete, with a thick roof to stand up against the heavy winter snows, and perhaps survive the tornadoes that he'd heard about but never experienced. The bench was also made of concrete, and he sat on it briefly to work on making his shakes go away. He'd never felt like this in his life. The fear—if these people were willing to kill millions—billions—of people, surely they would not hesitate as long as a blink to end his solitary life. He had to get away.

Ten minutes after arriving at the hut, he checked his watch and wondered if there were any buses at this hour. If not, well, there were cars and trucks, and perhaps—

He walked to the shoulder and held up his hand. Cars were passing by at over a hundred thirty kilometers per hour, which left them little time to see him in the darkness, much less brake to stop. But after fifteen minutes, a cream-colored Ford pickup truck eased over to the side of the road.

"Where you headin', buddy?" the driver asked. He looked to be a farmer, perhaps sixty years of age, his face and neck scored by lines from too many afternoon suns.

"The airport in the next town. Can you take me there?" Dmitriy said, getting in. The driver wasn't wearing a seat belt, which was probably against the law, but, then, so was cold-blooded murder, and for that reason alone he had to get the hell away from this place.

"Sure, I have to get off at that exit anyway. What's your name?"

"Joe—Joseph," Popov said.

"Well, I'm Pete. You're not from around here, are you?"

"Not originally. England, actually," Dmitriy went on, trying that accent on for size.

"Oh, yeah? What brings you here?"

"Business."

"What kind?" Pete asked.

"I am a consultant, kind of a go-between."

"So, how'd you get stuck out here, Joe?" the driver asked.

What was the matter with this man? Was he a police officer? He asked questions like someone from the Second Chief Directorate. "My, uh, friend, had a family emergency, and he had to drop me off there to wait for a bus."

"Oh." And that shut him up, Popov saw, blessing his most recent lie. *You see, I just shot and killed someone who wanted to kill you and everyone you know . . .* It was one of those times when the truth simply didn't work for him or for anyone else. His mind was going at a very rapid speed, faster by a considerable margin than this damned pickup truck, whose driver seemed unwilling to push the pedal much harder, every other vehicle on the road whizzing past. The farmer was an elderly man and evidently a patient one. Had Popov been driving, he'd soon establish how fast this damned truck could go. But for all that, it was only ten minutes to the green exit sign with the silhouette of an airplane tacked onto one side. He tried not to pound his fist on the armrest as the driver slowly took the exit, then a right turn to what looked like a small regional airport. In another minute, Pete took him to the US Air Express door.

"Thank you, sir," Popov said, as he left.

"Have a good trip, Joe," the driver said, with a friendly Kansas smile.

Popov walked rapidly into the diminutive terminal, and then to the desk, only twenty meters inside.

"I need to get to New York," Popov told the clerk. "First class, if possible."

"Well, we have a flight leaving in fifteen minutes for Kansas City, and from there you can connect to a US Airways flight to La Guardia, Mr.? . . . "

"Demetrius," Popov replied, remembering the name on his single remaining credit card. "Joseph Demetrius," he said, taking out his wallet and handing the card over. He had a passport in that name in a safe-deposit box in New York, and the credit card was good, with a high limit and nothing charged on it in the past three months. The desk clerk probably thought he was working quickly, but Popov also needed to visit a men's room and did his best not to show that urgent requirement. It was at that moment he realized he had a loaded revolver in the saddlebags he was carrying, and he had to get rid of *that* at once.

"Okay, Mr. Demetrius, here's your ticket for now, Gate 1, and here's the one for the Kansas City flight. It will be leaving from Gate A-34, and it's a first-class aisle seat, 2C. Any questions, sir?"

"No, no, thank you." Popov took the tickets and tucked them in his pocket. Then he looked for the entrance to the departure concourse, and headed that way, stopped by a waste bin and, after quickly looking around, very carefully took the monster handgun out of the bags, wiped it, and dumped it into the trash. He checked the terminal again. No, no one had noticed. He checked the

saddlebags for anything else they might contain, but they were completely empty now. Satisfied, he headed through the security checkpoint, whose magnetometer blessedly didn't beep at his passage. Collecting the leather saddlebags off the conveyor system, he looked for and found a men's room, to which he headed directly, emerging in another minute feeling far better.

This regional airport, he saw, had but two gates, but it *did* have a bar, to which Popov went next. He had fifty dollars of cash in his wallet, and five of those paid for a double vodka, which he gulped down before taking the next hundred steps to the gate. Handing the ticket to the next clerk, he was directed out the door. The aircraft had propellers, and he hadn't traveled on one of those for years. But for this flight he would have settled for rubber bands, and Popov clambered aboard the Saab 340B short-haul airliner. Five minutes later, the propellers started turning, and Popov started to relax. Thirty-five minutes to Kansas City, a forty-five-minute layover, and then off to New York on a 737, in first class, where the alcohol was free. Best of all, he sat alone on the left side of the aircraft, with nobody to engage him in conversation. Popov needed to think, very carefully, and though quickly, not too quickly.

He closed his eyes as the aircraft started its takeoff roll, the noise of the engines blotting out all extraneous noise. *Okay,* he thought, *what have you learned, and what should you do with that knowledge?* Two simple questions, perhaps, but he had to organize the answer to the first before he knew how to answer the second. He almost started praying to a God in whose existence he did not believe, but instead he stared out the window at the mainly dark ground while his mind churned away in a darkness of its own.

Clark awoke with a start. It was three in the morning at Hereford, and he'd had a dream whose substance retreated away from his consciousness like a cloud of smoke, shapeless and impossible to grab. He knew it had been an unpleasant dream, and he could only estimate the degree of unpleasantness by the fact that it had awakened him, a rare occurrence even when on a dangerous field assignment. He realized that his hands were shaking—and he didn't know why. He dismissed it, rolled back over, and closed his eyes for more sleep. He had a budgeting meeting today, the bane of his existence as commander of Rainbow group, playing goddamned accountant. Maybe that had been the substance of his dream, he thought with his head on the pillow. Trapped forever with accountants in discussions of where the money came from and how it would be spent . . .

The landing at Kansas City was a smooth one, and the Saab airliner pulled up to the terminal, where, presently, the propellers stopped. A ground-crewman came up and attached a rope to the propeller tip to keep it from turning while the passengers debarked. Popov checked his watch. They were a few minutes early as he walked out the door into the clean air, then into the terminal. There, three gates away from his flight at A-34—he checked to make sure it was the correct flight—he found a bar again. They even allowed smoking in here, which was unusual for an American airport, and he sniffed in the secondhand fumes, remembering the youth in which he'd smoked *Trud*

cigarettes, and almost asked one of these Americans for a smoke. But he stopped short of it and merely drank his next double vodka in a corner booth, facing the wall, wanting no one to have a reason to remember him here. After thirty minutes, his flight was called. He left ten dollars on the table and walked off, carrying the empty saddlebags, then asked himself why he was bothering. But it would appear unusual for a person to board a flight carrying nothing, and so he retained them, and tucked them into the overhead bin. The best news of this flight was that 2-D was not occupied, and he took that, facing the window to make it harder for the stewardess to see his face. Then the Boeing 737 backed away from the gate and took off into the darkness. Popov declined the drink offered to him. He'd had enough for the moment, and though some alcohol helped him to organize his thoughts, too much of it muddled them. He had enough in his system to relax, and that was all he wanted.

What exactly had he learned this day? How did it fit in with all the other things he'd learned at the building complex in western Kansas? The answer to the second question was easier than the first: whatever hard data he'd learned today contradicted *nothing* about the project's nature, location, or even its decor. It hadn't contradicted the magazines by his bedside, nor the videotapes next to the TV, nor the conversations he'd overheard in the corridors or in the building's cafeteria. Those maniacs were planning to end the world in the name of their pagan beliefs—but *how the hell* could he persuade anyone that this was so? And exactly what hard data did he have to give to someone else—and to *which* someone else? It had to be someone who would both believe him and be able to take action. But who? There was the additional problem that he'd murdered Foster Hunnicutt—he'd had no choice in the matter; he'd had to get away from the Project, and that had been his only chance to do so covertly. But now they could accuse him rightfully of murder, which meant that some police force might try to arrest him, and then how could he get the word out to stop those fucking druids from doing what they said they'd do? No policeman in the known world would believe his tale. It was far too grotesque to be absorbed by a normal mind—and surely those people in the Project had a cover story or legend which had been carefully constructed to shunt aside any sort of official inquiry. That was the most rudimentary security concern, and that Henriksen fellow would have worked on that himself.

Carol Brightling stood in her office. She'd just printed up a letter to the chief of staff saying that she'd be taking a leave of absence to work on a special scientific project. She'd discussed this matter with Arnie van Damm earlier in the day and gotten no serious objection to her departure. She would not be missed, his body language had told her quite clearly. *Well,* she thought with a cold look at the computer screen, *neither would he,* when it came to that.

Dr. Brightling tucked the letter in an envelope, sealed it, and left it on her assistant's desk for transfer into the White House proper the next day. She'd done her job for the Project and for the planet, and it was now time for her to leave. It had been so long, so very long, since she'd felt John's arms around her. The divorce had been well publicized. It had had to be. She would never

have gotten the White House job if she'd been married to one of the country's richest men. And so, she'd forsworn him, and he'd publicly forsworn the movement, the beliefs they'd both held ten years before when they'd formulated the idea for the Project, but he'd never stopped believing, any more than she had. And so she'd gotten all the way inside the government, and gotten a security clearance that gave her access to literally everything, even operational intelligence, which she then forwarded to John when he needed it. Most especially, she'd gotten access to biological-warfare information, so that they knew what USAMRIID and others had done to protect America, and so knew how to engineer Shiva in such a way as to defeat *any* proposed vaccine except those which Horizon Corporation had formulated.

But it had had its own price. John had been seen in public with all manner of young women, and had doubtless dallied with many of them, for he'd always been a passionate man. It was something they hadn't discussed before their public divorce, and for that reason it had come to her as an unpleasant surprise to see him at those occasional social functions they both had to attend, always with a pretty young thing on his arm—always a different one, since he'd never formed a real relationship with anyone but her. Carol Brightling told herself that this was good, since it meant that *she* was the only woman really a part of John's life, and thus those annoying young women were merely a way for him to dissipate his male hormones. . . . But it hadn't been easy to see, and harder still to think about, alone in her home, with only Jiggs for company, and often as not weeping in her loneliness.

But set against that small personal consideration was the Project. The White House job had merely fortified her beliefs. She'd seen it all here, Carol Brightling reminded herself, from the specifications for new nuclear weapons to bio-war reports. The Iranian attempt at a national plague, which had predated her government job, had both frightened and encouraged her. Frightened, because it had been a real threat to the country, and one that could have begun a massive effort to counter a future attack. Encouraged, because she'd learned in short order that a really effective defense was difficult at best, because vaccines had to be tailored for specific bugs. And, when one got down to it, the Iranian plague had merely heightened the public's appreciation of the threat, and *that* would make distribution of the "A" vaccine the easier to sell to the public . . . and to the government bureaucrats here and around the world who would leap at the offered cure. She would even return to her OEOB office at the proper time to urge approval for this essential public health measure, and on this issue she would be trusted.

Dr. Carol Brightling walked out of her office, turned left down the wide corridor, then left again and down the steps to her parked car. Twenty minutes later, she locked the car and walked up the steps of her apartment building, there to be greeted by the faithful Jiggs, who jumped into her arms and rubbed his furry head against her breast, as he always did. Her ten years of misery were over, and though the sacrifice had been hard to endure, the reward for it would be a planet turning back to green, and a Nature restored to Her deserved Glory.

It was somehow good to be back in New York. Though he didn't dare to return to his apartment, this was at least a city, and here he could disappear as easily as a rat in a junkyard. He told the taxi driver to take him to Essex House, an upscale hotel on Central Park South, and there he checked in under the name of Joseph Demetrius. Agreeably, there was a minibar in his room, and he mixed a drink with two miniatures of an American brand of vodka, whose inferior taste he was too anxious to be concerned about. Then, having come to his decision, he called the airline to confirm flight information, checked his watch, then called the front desk and instructed the clerk there to give him a wake-up call at the hellish hour of 3:30 A.M. The Russian collapsed into the bed without undressing. He'd have to do some quick shopping in the morning, and also visit his bank to pull his Demetrius passport out of the safe-deposit box. Then he'd get five hundred dollars out of an ATM cash machine, courtesy of his Demetrius Mas-terCard, and he'd be safe . . . well, if not truly safe, then safer than he was now, enough to be somewhat confident in himself and his future, such as it was, if the Project could be stopped. And if not, he told himself behind closed and somewhat drunken eyes, then at least he'd know what to avoid in order to keep himself alive. Probably.

Clark awoke at his accustomed hour. JC was sleeping better now, after two weeks of life, and this morning he'd at least synchronized himself with the master of the house, John found, as he emerged from his morning shave to hear his grandson's first wake-up chirps in the bedroom where he and Patsy were currently quartered. Sandy was awakened by the sounds, though she'd managed to ignore the alarm on John's side of the bed, her maternal or grand-maternal instincts obviously having their own selective power. Clark headed down to the kitchen to flip on the coffee machine, then opened the front door to collect his morning copies of the *Times,* the *Daily Telegraph,* and the *Manchester Guardian* for his morning news brief. One thing about Brit papers, he'd learned, the quality of the writing was better than in most American newspapers, and the articles were rather more concise.

The little guy was growing, John told himself when Patsy came into the kitchen with JC affixed to her left breast and Sandy in tow behind. But his daughter wasn't drinking coffee, evidently fearful that the caffeine might find its way into her breast milk. Instead she drank milk herself, while Sandy got breakfast going. John Conor Chavez was fully engaged with his breakfast, and in ten minutes, his grandfather was similarly engaged with his own, the radio now on a BBC channel to catch the morning news to supplement the print in front of him. Both modalities confirmed that the world was essentially at peace. The lead story was the Olympic Games, which Ding had reported on every night for them—the morning for him, all those time zones away—the reports usually ending with the phone held to JC's little face so that his proud father might hear the mewings he occasionally made, though rarely on cue.

By 6:30, John was dressed and heading out the door, and this morning, unlike a few others, he drove to the athletic field for his morning exercises. The men of Team-1 were there, their numbers still short because of the losses at the hospital shoot-out, but proud and tough as ever. Sergeant First Class

Fred Franklin led the team this morning, and Clark followed his instructions, not as ably as the younger men, but trying still to keep up, and so earn their respect if also a few disparaging looks at the old fart who thought he was something else. The also short-numbered Team-2 was at the other side of the field, led by Sergeant Major Eddie Price, John saw. Half an hour later, he showered again—doing so twice in ninety minutes almost every day had often struck him as strange, but the wake-up shower was so firm a part of his life that he couldn't dispense with it, and after working up a sweat with the troops, he always needed another. After that, dressed in his "boss's" suit, he entered the headquarters building, checked the fax machine first, as always, and found a message from FBI headquarters that told him that nothing new had developed on the Serov case. A second fax told him that a package would be couriered to him early that morning from Whitehall, without saying exactly what it was. Well, John thought, flipping on the office coffee-drip machine, he'd find out in due course.

Al Stanley came in just before eight, still showing the effects of his wounds, but bouncing back well for a man of his age. Bill Tawney was in just two minutes later, and the senior leadership of Rainbow was in place for another working day.

The phone woke him up with a jolt. Popov reached for it in the darkness, missed, then reached again. "Yes."

"It's three-thirty, Mr. Demetrius," the operator said.

"Yes, thank you," Dmitriy Arkadeyevich replied, switching on the light and swiveling to get his feet on the carpeted floor. The note next to his phone told him how to dial the number he wanted: nine . . . zero-one-one-four four...

Alice Foorgate came in a few minutes early. She put her purse in a desk drawer and sat down, and began reviewing her notes on the things that were supposed to happen today. Oh, she saw, a budget meeting. Mr. Clark would be in a foul mood until after lunch. Then her phone rang.

"I need to speak to Mr. John Clark," the voice said.

"May I tell him who's calling?"

"No," the voice said. "You may not."

That made the secretary blink with puzzlement. She almost said that she could hardly forward a call under such circumstances, but didn't. It was too early in the morning for unpleasantness. She placed the incoming call on hold and punched another button.

"A call for you on line one, sir."

"Who is it?" Clark asked.

"He didn't say, sir."

"Okay," John grumbled. He switched buttons and said, "This is John Clark."

"Good morning, Mr. Clark," the anonymous voice said in greeting.

"Who is this?" John asked.

"We have a mutual acquaintance. His name is Sean Grady."

"Yes?" Clark's hand tightened on the instrument, and he punched the RECORD button for the attached taping system.

"You may know my name, therefore, as Iosef An-dreyevich Serov. We

should meet, Mr. Clark."

"Yes," John replied evenly, "I'd like that. How do we do it?"

"Today, I think, in New York. Take the British Airways Concorde Flight 1 into JFK, and I will meet you at one in the afternoon at the entrance to the Central Park Zoo. The redbrick building that looks like a castle. I shall be there at eleven o'clock exactly. Any questions?"

"I suppose not. Okay, eleven A.M. in New York."

"Thank you. Good-bye." The line went dead, and Clark switched buttons again.

"Alice, could you have Bill and Alistair join me, please?"

They came in less than three minutes later. "Listen to this one, guys," John said, hitting the PLAY button on the tape machine.

"Bloody hell," Bill Tawney observed, a second before Al Stanley could do the same. "He wants to meet you? I wonder why."

"Only one way to find out. I have to catch the Con-corde for New York. Al, could you get Malloy awake so he can chopper me to Heathrow?"

"You're going?" Stanley asked. The answer was obvious.

"Why not? Hell"—John grinned—"it gets me out of the fucking budget meeting."

"Quite so. There could be dangers involved."

"I'll have the FBI send some people to look after me, and I'll have a friend with me," Clark pointed out, meaning his .45 Beretta. "We're dealing with a professional spook here. There's more danger to him than there is to me, unless he's got a very elaborate operation set up at the other end, and we should be able to spot that. He wants to meet with me. He's a pro, and that means he wants to tell me something—or maybe ask me something, but I'd lean the other way, right?"

"I'd have to agree with that," Tawney said.

"Objections?" Clark asked his principal subordinates. There were none. They were just as curious as he was, though they'd want good security in New York for the meeting. But that would not be a problem.

Clark checked his watch. "It's short of four in the morning there—and he wants the meet to be today. Pretty fast for this sort of thing. Why the hurry? Any ideas?"

"He could want to tell you that he had no connection with the hospital incident. Aside from that? . . ." Tawney just shook his head.

"Timing's a problem. That's a ten-thirty flight, John," Stanley pointed out. "It's now three-thirty on your East Coast. No one important will be at work yet."

"We'll just have to wake them up." Clark looked at his phone and hit the speed-dial button for FBI headquarters.

"FBI," another anonymous voice said.

"I need to talk to Assistant Director Chuck Baker."

"I don't think Mr. Baker will be in now."

"I know. Call him at home. Tell him that John Clark is calling." He could almost hear the *oh, shit* at the other end of the call, but an order had been given by a voice that sounded serious, and it would have to be followed.

"Hello," another voice said somewhat groggily a minute later.

"Chuck, this is John Clark. Something's turned on the Serov case."

"What's that?" *And why the hell can't it wait four hours?* the voice didn't go on.

John explained. He could hear the man waking up at the other end.

"Okay," Baker said. "I'll have some guys from New York meet you at the terminal, John."

"Thanks, Chuck. Sorry to shake you loose at this hour."

"Yeah, John. Bye."

The rest was easy. Malloy came into his office after his own morning workout, and called to get his helicopter readied for a hop. It didn't take long. The only headache was having to filter through the in- and outbound airliner traffic, but the chopper landed at the general-aviation terminal, and an airport security car took John to the proper terminal, where Clark was able to walk into the Speedway Lounge twenty minutes before the flight to collect his ticket. This way, he also bypassed security, and was thus spared the embarrassment of having to explain that he carried a pistol, which in the United Kingdom was the equivalent of announcing that he had a case of highly infectious leprosy. The service was British-lavish, and he had to decline the offer of champagne before boarding the aircraft. Then the flight was called, and Clark walked down the jet-way and into the world's fastest airliner for Flight 1 to New York's JFK International. The pilot gave the usual preflight brief, and a tractor pushed the oversized fighter aircraft away from its gate. In less than four hours, John thought, he'd be back in the States. Wasn't air travel wonderful? But better yet, he had in his lap the package that had just been couriered in. It was the personnel package for one Popov, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich. It had been heavily edited, he was sure, but even so it made for interesting reading, as the Concorde leaped into the air and turned west for America. *Thank you, Sergey Nikolayevich,* John thought, flipping through the pages. It had to be the real KGB file, John saw. Some of the photocopied pages showed pinholes in the upper-left corners, which meant that they dated back to when KGB had used pins to keep pages together instead of staples, that having been copied from the British MI-6 back in the 1920s. It was a piece of trivia that only insiders really knew.

Clark was about halfway across the North Atlantic when Popov awoke on his own again at seven-fifteen. He ordered breakfast sent up and got himself clean in preparation for a busy day. By eight-fifteen, he was walking out the front door, and looked first of all for a men's store that was open for business. That proved to be frustrating, until finally he found one whose doors opened promptly at nine. Thirty minutes later, he had an expensive but somewhat ill-fitting gray suit, plus shirts and ties that he took back to his hotel room and into which he changed at once. Then it was time for him to walk to Central Park.

The building that guarded the Central Park Zoo was strange to behold. It was made of brick, and had battlements on the roof as though to defend the area against armed attack, but the same walls were dotted with windows, and the entire building sat in a depression rather than atop a hill, as a proper castle did. Well, American architects had their own ideas, Popov decided. He

circulated about the area, looking for the FBI agents (or perhaps CIA field officers? he wondered) who were certain to be there to cover this meeting—and possibly to arrest him? Well, there was nothing to be done about that. He would now learn if this John Clark were truly an intelligence officer. That business had rules, and Clark should follow them as a matter of professional courtesy. The gamble was a huge one on his part, and Clark had to respect it for that very reason, but he couldn't be sure. Well, one couldn't be sure of much in this world.

Dr. Killgore came to the cafeteria at his accustomed hour, but surprisingly didn't find his Russian friend, or Foster Hunnicutt, there. Well, maybe they'd both slept late. He lingered over breakfast twenty minutes more than usual before deciding, the hell with it, and drove to the horse barn. There he found another surprise. Both Buttermilk and Jeremiah were in the corral, neither of them saddled or bridled. There was no way for him to know that both horses had walked back to their home on their own last night. Curious, he walked both back to their stalls before saddling up his own usual mount. He waited outside in the corral for another fifteen minutes, wondering if his friends would show up, but they didn't, and he and Kirk Maclean rode off west for their morning tour of the countryside.

The covert side of the business could be fun, Sullivan thought. Here he was driving what appeared to be a Consolidated Edison van, and wearing the blue coveralls that announced the same employment. The clothing was baggy enough to allow him to carry a dozen weapons inside the ugly garment, but better yet it made him effectively invisible. There were enough of these uniforms on the streets of New York that no one ever noticed them. This discreet surveillance mission had been laid on in one big hurry, with no fewer than eight agents already at the rendezvous site, all carrying the passport photo of this Serov subject, for what good it was. They lacked height and weight estimates, and that meant they were looking for an OWG, an ordinary white guy, of which New York City had at least three million.

Inside the terminal, his partner, Frank Chatham, was waiting at the exit ramp off British Airways Flight 1, in a suit and tie. His coverall outfit was inside the Con Ed van that Sullivan had parked outside the terminal. They didn't even know who this Clark guy was whom they were meeting, just that Assistant Director Baker thought he was pretty fucking important.

The aircraft got in exactly on time. Clark, in seat 1-C, stood and was the first off the aircraft. The FBI escort at the jetway exit was easy to spot.

"Looking for me?"

"Your name, sir?"

"John Clark. Chuck Baker should have—"

"He did. Follow me, sir." Chatham led him out the fast way, bypassing immigration and customs, and it was just one more time that John's passport wouldn't be stamped to celebrate his entry into a sovereign country. The Con Ed van was easily spotted. Clark went for it without being told to and hopped in.

"Hi, I'm John Clark," he told the driver.

"Tom Sullivan. You've met Frank."

"Let's move, Mr. Sullivan," John told him.

"Yes, sir." The van took off at once. In the back, Chatham sat and struggled into his blue coveralls.

"Okay, sir, what exactly is happening here?"

"I'm meeting a guy."

"Serov?" Sullivan asked, as he negotiated his way onto the highway.

"Yeah, but his real name is Popov. Dmitriy Arkadeye-vich Popov. He used to be a colonel in the old KGB. I have his personnel package, read it coming across. He's a specialist in dealing with terrorists, probably has more connections than the phone company."

"This guy set up the operation that—"

"Yeah." John nodded in the front-right passenger seat. "The operation that went after my wife and my daughter. They were the primary targets."

"Shit!" Chatham observed, as he zipped his outfit up. They hadn't known *that*. "And you want to meet with this mutt?"

"Business is business, guys," John pointed out, wondering if he really believed that or not.

"So, who are you?"

"Agency, used to be, anyway."

"How do you know Mr. Baker?"

"I have a slightly different job now, and we have to interface with the Bureau. Mainly with Gus Werner, but lately I've been talking with Baker, too."

"You part of the team that took down the bad guys at the hospital over in England?"

"I'm the boss of it," Clark told them. "But don't go spreading that around, okay?"

"No problem," Sullivan replied.

"You're working the case on Mr. Serov?"

"That's one of them we've got on the desk, yes."

"What do you got on it?" John asked.

"Passport photo—I guess you have that."

"Better, I have his official KGB photo. Better than the passport one, it's like a mug shot full face and profile, but it's ten years old. What else you have?"

"Bank accounts, credit-card records, post-office box, but no address yet. We're still working on that."

"What's he wanted for?" John asked next.

"Conspiracy mainly," Sullivan answered. "Conspiracy to incite terrorism, conspiracy to traffic in illegal drugs. Those statutes are pretty broad, so that's what we use in cases where we don't have much of a clue as to what's really happening."

"Can you arrest him?"

"You bet. On sight," Chatham said in the back. "Do you want us to do that?"

"I'm not sure." Clark settled into the uncomfortable seat, and watched the approach of the New York skyline, still wondering what the hell this was all about. He'd find out soon enough, John told himself, thinking that it couldn't be soon enough to meet the fucker who'd sent armed men out after his wife and daughter. He managed a scowl at the approaching city that the FBI agents

didn't notice.

Popov thought that he had two FBI types spotted, not to mention a pair of uniformed police officers who might or might not be part of the surveillance that had to be assembling here. There was nothing for it, however. He had to meet with this Clark fellow, and that meant that the meet had to be in a public place, else he'd have to walk right into the lion's den, something he could not bring himself to do. Here he'd have some chance, just a matter, really, of walking south toward the subway station and racing down to catch a train. That would shake a lot of them off, and give him options. Dump his suit coat and change his appearance, put on the hat he had tucked into a pants pocket. He figured he had about an even chance of evading contact if he had to, and there was little danger that anyone would shoot him, not in the heart of America's largest city. But his best chance was to communicate with Clark. If he were the professional Popov believed him to be, then they could do business. They had to. There was no choice for either of them, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich told himself.

The van crossed the East River and proceeded west through crowded streets. John checked his watch.

"No problem, sir. We'll be about ten minutes early," Sullivan told him.

"Good," John replied tensely. It was coming soon now, and he had to get his emotions totally under control. A passionate man, John Terence Clark had more than once let them loose on a job, but he couldn't allow this now. Whoever this Russian was, he had invited him to the meeting, and that meant something—what, he could not yet know, but it had to mean that *something* unusual was afoot. And so he had to set aside all thoughts of past dangers to his immediate family. He had to be stone cold at this meeting, and so, sitting there in the front seat of the Con Ed truck, Clark told himself to breathe deeply and relax, and slowly he managed to accomplish that. Then his curiosity took over. This Russian had to know that Clark knew what he'd done, and *still* he'd asked for this meeting, and insisted on having it done speedily. That had to mean something, John told himself, as they broke through traffic and turned left onto Fifth Avenue. He checked his watch again. They were fourteen minutes early. The van eased over to the right and stopped. Clark stepped out and headed south on the crowded sidewalk, past people selling used books and other gimcracks from what appeared to be portable wooden closets. Behind him the FBI agents moved the van forward, stopped it close to the meet-building and got out, carrying papers and looking around rather too obviously like Con Ed employees, John thought. Then he turned right and walked down the stairs and looked up at the redbrick building that had been someone's idea of a castle a hundred years or so before. It didn't take long.

"Good morning, John Clark," a man's voice said behind him.

"Good morning, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich," John replied, without turning at first.

"Very good," the voice said approvingly. "I congratulate you on learning one of my names."

"We have good intelligence support," John went on, without turning.

"You had a pleasant flight?"

"A fast one. I've never done the Concorde before. It was not unpleasant. So, Dmitriy, what can I do for you?"

"I must first of all apologize to you for my contacts with Grady and his people."

"What about the other operations?" Clark asked as a dangle, something of a gamble, but he was in a gambling mood.

"Those did not concern you directly, and only one person was killed."

"But that one was a sick little girl," John observed too quickly.

"No, I had nothing to do with Worldpark. The bank in Bern, and the stock-trader outside Vienna, yes, those were my missions, but not the amusement park."

"So, you have implicated yourself in three terrorist operations. That is against the law, you know."

"Yes, I am aware of that," the Russian replied dryly.

"So, what can I do for you?" John asked again.

"It is more what I can do for you, Mr. Clark."

"And that is?" Still he didn't turn. But there had to be half a dozen FBI agents watching, maybe one with a shotgun microphone to record the exchange. In his haste to come over, Clark hadn't been able to get a proper recording system for his suit.

"Clark, I can give you the reason for the missions, and the name of the man who instigated it all—it is quite monstrous. I only discovered yesterday, not even twenty-four hours ago, what the purpose for all of this is."

"So, what is the objective?" John asked.

"To kill almost every human being on the planet," Popov replied.

That made Clark stop walking and turn to look at the man. The KGB file mug shot was pretty good, he saw. "Is this some sort of movie script?" he asked coldly.

"Clark, yesterday I was in Kansas. There I learned the plan for this 'project.' I shot and killed the person who told me so that I could escape. The man I killed was Foster Hunnicutt, a hunter-guide from Montana. I shot him in the chest with his own Colt forty-four pistol. From there I went to the nearest highway and managed to beg a ride to the nearest regional airport, from there to Kansas City, and from there to New York. I called you from my hotel room less than eight hours ago. Yes, Clark, I know you have the power to arrest me. You must have security watching us right now, presumably from your FBI," he said as they walked into the area with the animal cages. "And so you need only wave your hand and I will be arrested, and I have just told you the name of the man I shot, and the location where it was done. Plus you have me for inciting terrorist incidents, and I presume for drug-trafficking as well. I know this, yet I have asked for this meeting. Do you suppose that I am joking with you, John Clark?"

"Perhaps not," Rainbow Six answered, looking closely at the man.

"Very well, and in that case I propose that you have us taken to the local FBI office or some other secure place, so that I can give you the information you need under controlled circumstances. I require only your word that I will

not be detained or arrested."

"You would believe me if I were to say that?"

"Yes. You are CIA, and you know the rules of the game, do you not?"

Clark nodded. "Okay, you have my word—if you're telling me the truth."

"John Clark, I wish I were not," Popov said. "Truly I wish I were not, *tovarich.*"

John looked hard into his eyes, and in them he saw fear . . . no, something deeper than fear. This guy had just called him *comrade.* That meant something, particularly under these circumstances.

"Come on," John told him, turning around and heading for Fifth Avenue.

"That's our subject, guys," a female agent said over the radio circuit. "That is subject Serov all gift-wrapped like a toy from F.A.O. Schwarz. Wait. They're turning around, heading east to Fifth."

"No shit?" Frank Chatham asked. Then he saw them walking very quickly to where the van was parked.

"You got a safe house around here?" Clark asked.

"Well, yeah, we do, but—"

"Get us there, right now!" Clark ordered. "You can terminate your cover operation at once, too. Get in, Dmitriy," he said, opening the sliding door.

The safe house was only ten blocks away. Sullivan parked the van, and all four men went inside.

CHAPTER 37

DYING FLAME

The safe house was a four-story brownstone that had been given to the federal government decades before by a grateful businessman whose kidnapped son had been recovered alive by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It was used mainly for interviewing UN diplomats who worked in one way or another for the U.S. government, and had been one of the places used by Arkady Schevchenko, still the highest-ranking Soviet defector of all time. Outwardly unremarkable, inside it had an elaborate security system and three rooms outfitted with recording systems and two-way mirrors, plus the usual tables, and more comfortable chairs than normal. It was manned around the clock, usually by a rookie agent in the New York field division whose purpose was merely that of doorman.

Chatham took them to the top-floor interview room and sat Clark and Popov down in the windowless cubicle. The microphone was set up, and the reel-to-reel tape recorder set to turning. Behind one of the mirrors, a TV camera and attendant VCR was set up as well.

"Okay," Clark said, announcing the date, time, and place. "With me is Colonel Dmitriy Arkadeyevich Popov, retired, of the former Soviet KGB. The subject of this interview is international terrorist activity. My name is John Clark, and I am a field officer of the Central Intelligence Agency. Also here are —"

"Special Agent Tom Sullivan—"

"And—"

"Special Agent Frank Chatham—"

"Of the FBI's New York office. Dmitriy, would you please begin?" John said.

It was intimidating as hell for Popov to do this, and it showed in the first few minutes of his narrative. The two FBI agents showed total incredulity on their faces for the first half hour, until he got to the part about his morning rides in Kansas.

"Maclean? What was his first name?" Sullivan asked.

"Kirk, I think, perhaps Kurt, but I think it ended with a K," Popov replied. "Hunnicutt told me that he'd kidnapped people here in New York to be used as guinea pigs for this Shiva sickness."

"Fuck," Chatham breathed. "What does this guy look like?"

Popov told them in very accurate terms, down to hair length and eye color.

"Mr. Clark, we know this guy. We've interviewed him in the disappearance of a young woman, Mary Bannister. And another woman, Anne Pretloe, disappeared under very similar circumstances. Holy shit, you say they were murdered?"

"No, I said they were killed as test subjects for this Shiva disease that they plan to spread at Sydney."

"Horizon Corporation. That's where this Maclean guy works. He's out of town now, his coworkers told us."

"Yes, you will find him in Kansas," Popov told them, with a nod.

"You know how *big* Horizon Corporation is?" Sullivan asked.

"Big enough. Okay, Dmitriy," Clark said, turning back, "exactly how do you think they will spread this virus?"

"Foster told me it was part of the air-cooling system at the stadium. That is all I know."

John thought about the Olympics. They were running the marathon today, and that was the last event, to be followed by the closing ceremonies that evening. There wasn't time to think very much further than that. He turned, lifted the telephone, and dialed England. "Give me Stanley," he told Mrs. Foorgate.

"Alistair Stanley," the voice said next.

"Al, this is John. Get hold of Ding and have him call me here." John read the number off the phone. "Right now—immediately, Al. I mean right the hell now."

"Understood, John."

Clark waited four and a half minutes by his watch before the phone rang.

"You're lucky he got me, John. I was just getting dressed to leave and watch the mara—"

"Shut the hell up and listen to me, Domingo," Clark said harshly.

"Yeah, John, go ahead," Chavez answered, getting out a pad to take some notes. "Is this for real?" he asked after a few seconds.

"We believe it to be, Ding."

"It's like something from a bad movie." Was this something concocted by SPECTRE? Chavez wondered. What was the potential profit in it for anybody?

"Ding, the guy giving this to me is named Serov, Iosef Andreyevich. He's here with me now."

"Okay, I hear you, Mr. C. When is this operation supposed to take place?"

"Around the time of the closing ceremonies, supposedly. Is there anything else today besides the marathon?"

"No, that's the last major event, and we ought not to be too busy 'til the race ends. We expect the stadium to start filling up around five this afternoon, and then they have the closing ceremonies, and everybody goes home." *Including me,* he didn't have to add.

"Well, that's their plan, Ding."

"And you want us to stop it."

"Correct. Get moving. Keep this number. I'll be here all day on the STU-4. From now on, all transmissions will be secure. Okay?"

"You got it. Let me get moving, John."

"Move," the voice told him. "Bye."

Chavez hung up, wondering how the hell he'd do this. First he had to assemble his team. They were all on the same floor, and he went into the corridor, knocked on each door, and told the NCOs to come to his suite.

"Okay, people, we got a job to handle today. Here's the deal," he began, then spun the tale for about five minutes.

"Christ," Tomlinson managed to say for all of them. The story was quite incredible, but they were accustomed to hearing and acting upon strange information.

"We have to find the control room for the fogging system. Once we do that, we'll put people in there. We'll rotate the duty. George and Homer, you start, then Mike and I will relieve you. Call it two-hour rotation inside and outside. Radios will be on at all times. Deadly force is authorized, people."

Noonan had heard the briefing, too. "Ding, this whole thing sounds kinda unlikely."

"I know, Tim, but we act on it anyway."

"You say so, man."

"Let's move, people," Ding told them, standing.

"This is the day, Carol," John Brightling told his ex-wife. "Less than ten hours from now, the Project starts."

She dropped Jiggs on the floor and came to embrace him. "Oh, John!"

"I know," he told her. "It's been a long time. Couldn't have done it without you."

Henriksen was there, too. "Okay, I talked with Wil Gearing twenty minutes ago. He'll be hooking up the Shiva dispenser right before they start the closing ceremonies. The weather is working for us, too. It's going to be another hot one in Sydney, temperature's supposed to hit ninety-seven degrees. So, people'll be camping out under the foggers."

"And breathing heavily," Dr. John Brightling confirmed. That was another of the body's methods for shedding excess heat.

Chavez was in the stadium now, already sweating from the building heat and wondering if any of the marathon runners would fall over dead from this day's race. So Global Security, with whose personnel he'd interfaced briefly, was part of the mission. He wondered if he could remember all the faces he'd seen in the two brief conferences he'd had, but for now he had to find Colonel Wilkerson. Five minutes later, in the security-reaction hut, he found the man.

"G'day, Major Chavez."

"Hey, Frank. I got a question for you."

"What's that, Ding?"

"The fogging system. Where's it come from?"

"The pumping room's by Section Five, just left of the ramp."

"How do I get in there?"

"You get a key to the door and the alarm code from me. Why, old boy?"

"Oh, well, I just want to see it."

"Is there a problem, Ding?" Wilkerson asked.

"Maybe. I got to thinking," Chavez went on, trying to formulate a persuasive lie for the moment. "What if somebody wanted to use it to dispense a chemical agent, like? And I thought I might—"

"Check it out? One of the Global people beat you to that one, lad. Colonel Gearing. He checked out the entire installation. Same concern as you, but a bit

earlier."

"Well, can I do it, too?"

"Why?"

"Call it paranoia," Chavez replied.

"I suppose." Wilkerson rose from his chair and pulled the proper key off the wall. "The alarm code is one-one-three-three-six-six."

Eleven thirty-three sixty-six, Ding memorized.

"Good. Thanks, Colonel."

"My pleasure, Major," the SAS lieutenant colonel replied.

Chavez left the room, rejoined his people outside, and headed rapidly back to the stadium.

"Did you tell 'em about the problem?" Noonan asked.

Chavez shook his head. "I wasn't authorized to do that. John expects us to handle it."

"What if our friends are armed?"

"Well, Tim, we *are* authorized to use necessary force, aren't we?"

"Could be messy," the FBI agent warned, worried about local laws and jurisdictions.

"Yeah, I suppose so. We use our heads, okay? We know how to do that, too."

Kirk Maclean's job at the Project was to keep an eye on the environmental support systems, mainly the air-conditioning and the over-pressurization system, whose installation he didn't really understand. After all, everyone inside the buildings would have the "B" vaccine shot, and even if Shiva got in, there wasn't supposed to be any danger. But he supposed that John Brightling was merely being redundant in his protective-systems thinking, and that was okay with him. His daily work was easily dealt with—it mainly involved checking dials and recording systems, all of which were stuck in the very center of normal operating ranges—and then he felt like a ride. He walked into the transport office and took a set of keys for a Project Hummer, then headed out to the barn to get his horse. Another twenty minutes, and he'd saddled his quarter horse and headed north, cantering across the grassland, through the lanes in the wheat fields where the farm machines turned around, taking his time through one of the prairie-dog towns, and heading generally toward the interstate highway that formed the northern edge of the Project's real estate. About forty minutes into the ride, he saw something unusual.

Like every rural plot of land in the American West, this one had a resident buzzard population. Here, as in most such places, they were locally called turkey buzzards, regardless of the actual breed, large raptors that ate carrion and were distinctive for their size and their ugliness—black feathers and naked red-skinned heads that carried large powerful beaks designed for ripping flesh off the carcasses of dead animals. They were Nature's garbage collectors—or Nature's own morticians, as some put it—important parts of the ecosystem, though distasteful to some. He saw about six of them circling something in the tall grass to the northeast. Six was a lot—then he realized that there were more still, as he spotted the black angular shapes in the grass from two miles away. Something large had evidently died, and they had

assembled to clean—eat—it up. They were careful, conservative birds. Their circling and examination was to ensure that whatever they saw and smelled wasn't still alive, and hence able to jump up and injure them when they came down to feed. Birds were the most delicate of creatures, made mostly for air, and needing to be in perfect condition to fly and survive.

What are they eating? Maclean wondered, heading his horse over that way at a walk, not wanting to spook the birds any more than necessary, and wondering if they were afraid of a horse and rider. Probably not, he thought, but he'd find out about this little bit of Nature's trivia.

Whatever it was, he thought five minutes later, the birds liked it. It was an ugly process, Maclean thought, but no more so than when he ate a burger, at least as far as the cow was concerned. It was Nature's way. The buzzards ate the dead and processed the protein, then excreted it out, returning the nutrients back to the soil so that the chain of life could proceed again in its timeless cycle of life-death-life. Even from a hundred yards away, there were too many birds for him to determine what they were feasting on. Probably a deer or pronghorn antelope, he thought, from the number of birds and the way they bobbed their heads up and down, consuming the creature that Nature had reclaimed for Herself. What did pronghorns die of? Kirk wondered. Heart attacks? Strokes? Cancer? It might be interesting to find out in a few years, maybe have one of the Project physicians do a postmortem on one—if they got there ahead of the buzzards, which, he thought with a smile, ate up the evidence. But at fifty yards, he stopped his horse. Whatever they were eating seemed to be wearing a plaid shirt. With that he urged his horse closer, and at ten yards the buzzards took notice, first swiveling their odious red heads and cruel black eyes, then hopping away a few feet, then, finally, flapping back into the air.

"Oh, fuck," Maclean said quietly, when he got closer. The neck had been ripped away, leaving the spine partly exposed, and in some places the shirt had been shredded, too, by the powerful beaks. The face had also been destroyed, the eyes gone and most of the skin and flesh, but the hair was fairly intact, and—

"Jesus. . . Foster? What happened to you, man?" It required a few more feet of approach to see the small red circle in the center of the dark shirt. Maclean didn't dismount his horse. A man was dead, and, it appeared, had been shot dead. Kirk looked around and saw the hoofprints of one or two horses right here . . . probably two, he decided. Backing away, he decided to get back to the Project as quickly as his horse could manage. It took fifteen minutes, which left his quarter horse winded and the rider shaken. He jumped off, got into his Hummer and raced back to the Project and found John Killgore.

The room was grossly nondescript, Chavez saw. Just pipes, steel and plastic, and a pump, which was running, as the fogging-cooling system had started off from its timer a few minutes before, and Chavez's first thought was, *what if the bug's already in the system—I just walked through it, and what if I breathed the fucking thing in?*

But here he was, and if that were the case . . . but, no, John had told him that the poisoning was to start much later in the day, and that the Russian was

supposed to know what was going on. You had to trust your intelligence sources. You just had to. The information they gave you was the currency of life and death in this business.

Noonan bent down to look at the chlorine canister that hung on the piping. "It looks like a factory product, Ding," the FBI agent said, for what that was worth. "I can see how you switch them out. Flip off the motor here"—he pointed—"close this valve, twist this off with a wrench like the one on the wall there, swap on the new one, reopen the valve and hit the pump motor. Looks like a thirty-second job, maybe less. Boom-boom-boom, and you're done."

"And if it's already been done?" Chavez asked.

"Then we're fucked," Noonan replied. "I hope your intel's good on this, partner."

The fog outside had the slight smell of chlorine, Chavez told himself hopefully, like American city water, and chlorine was used because it killed germs. It was the only element besides oxygen that supported combustion, wasn't it? He'd read that somewhere, Domingo thought.

"What do you think, Tim?"

"I think the idea makes sense, but it's one *hell* of a big operation for somebody to undertake, and it's—Ding, who the hell would do something like this? And *why,* for Christ's sake?"

"I guess we have to figure that one out. But for now, we watch this thing like it's the most valuable gadget in the whole fucking world. Okay." Ding turned to look at his men. "George and Homer, you guys stay here. If you gotta take a piss, do it on the floor." There was a drainage pit there, they all saw. "Mike and I will handle things outside. Tim, you stay close, too. We got our radios, and that's how we communicate. Two hours on, two hours off, but never more than fifty yards from this place. Questions?"

"Nope," Sergeant Tomlinson said for the rest. "If somebody comes in and tries to fool with this? . . ."

"You stop him, any way you have to. And you call for help on your radios."

"Roge-o, boss," George said. Homer Johnston nodded agreement.

Chavez and the other two went back outside. The stadium had filled up, people wanting to see the start of the marathon . . . and then what? Ding wondered. Just sit here and wait for three hours? No, about two and a half. That was about the usual championship time, wasn't it? Twenty-six miles. Forty-two kilometers or so. One hell of a long way for a man—or woman—to run, a daunting distance even for him, Chavez admitted to himself, a distance better suited to a helicopter lift or a ride in a truck. He, Pierce, and Noonan walked to one of the ramps and watched the TVs hanging there.

By this time the runners were assembling for the crowded start. The favorites were identified, some of them given up-close-and-personal TV biographies. The local Australian commentary discussed the betting on the event, who the favorites were, and what the odds were. Smart money seemed to be on a Kenyan, though there was an American who'd blown away the record for the Boston Marathon the previous year by almost half a minute—evidently a large margin for such a race—and a thirty-year-old Dutchman who was the dark horse among the favorites. Thirty, and a competitor in an

Olympic competition, Chavez thought. Good for him.

"Command to Tomlinson," Chavez said over his radio.

"I'm here, Command. Nothing much happening 'cept this damned pump noise. I'll call you if anything happens, over."

"Okay, Command out."

"So, what do we do now?" Mike Pierce asked.

"Wait. Stand around and wait."

"You say so, boss," Pierce responded. They all knew how to wait, though none of them especially liked it.

"Christ," Killgore observed. "You sure?"

"You want to drive out and see?" Maclean asked heatedly. Then he realized that they'd have to do that anyway, to collect the body for proper burial. Now Maclean understood Western funeral customs. It was bad enough to see vultures pick a deer's body apart. To see the same thing happening to a human being whom you knew was intolerable, love for Nature or not.

"You say he was shot?"

"Sure looked like it."

"Great." Killgore lifted his phone. "Bill, it's John Kill-gore. Meet me in the main lobby right away. We have a problem. Okay? Good." The physician replaced the phone and rose. "Come on," he said to Maclean.

Henriksen arrived in the lobby of the residential building two minutes after they did, and together they drove in a Hummer north to where the body was. Again the buzzards had to be chased off, and Henriksen, the former FBI agent, walked up to take a look. It was as distasteful as anything he'd seen in his law-enforcement career.

"He's been shot, all right," he said first of all. "Big bullet, right through the X-ring." The wound had been a surprise for Hunnicutt, he thought, though there wasn't enough of the man's face left to tell, really. There were ants on the body as well, he saw. Damn, Henriksen thought, he'd been depending on this guy to help with perimeter security once the Project went fully active. Somebody had murdered an important Project asset. But who?

"Who else hung out with Foster?" Bill asked.

"The Russian guy, Popov. We all rode together," Maclean answered.

"Hey," Killgore said. "Their horses were out this morning, Jeremiah and Buttermilk were both in the corral. Both unsaddled and—"

"Here's the saddle and bridle," Henriksen said, fifteen feet away. "Okay, somebody shot Hunnicutt and then stripped the tack gear off his horse . . . okay, so nobody would see a riderless horse with a saddle on it. We have a murder here, people. Let's find Popov right now. I think I need to talk to him. Anybody see him lately?"

"He didn't show up for breakfast this morning like he usually does," Killgore revealed. "We've been eating together for a week or so, then taking a morning ride. He liked it."

"Yeah," Maclean confirmed. "We all did. You think he—"

"I don't think anything yet. Okay, let's get the body into the Hummer and head back. John, can you do a post on this?"

This seemed a cold appellation for a dead colleague, Killgore thought, but he

nodded. “Yeah, doesn’t look like it’ll be too hard.”

“Okay, you get the feet,” Bill said next, bending down and trying to avoid touching the parts the buzzards had feasted on. Twenty minutes later, they were back in the Project. Henriksen went up to Popov’s fourth-floor room and used his passkey to get in. Nothing, he saw. The bed hadn’t been slept in. He had a suspect. Popov had killed Hunnicutt, probably. But why? And where the hell was that Russian bastard now?

It took half an hour to check around the Project complex. The Russian was nowhere to be found. That made sense, since his horse had been found loose that morning by Dr. Killgore. Okay, the former FBI agent thought. Popov had killed Hunnicutt and then skipped. But skipped where? He’d probably ridden to the interstate highway and thumbed a ride, or maybe walked to a bus stop or something. It was a mere twenty-five miles to the regional airport, and from there the bastard could be in Australia by now, Henriksen had to admit to himself. But why would he have done any of that?

“John?” he asked Killgore. “What did Popov know?” “What do you mean?”

“What did he know about the Project?”

“Not much. Brightling didn’t really brief him in, did he?”

“No. Okay, what did Hunnicutt know?”

“Shit, Bill, Foster knew everything.”

“Okay, then we think Popov and Hunnicutt went riding last night. Hunnicutt turns up dead, and Popov isn’t anywhere to be found. So, could Hunnicutt have told Popov what the Project is doing?”

“I suppose, yes,” Killgore confirmed with a nod.

“So, Popov finds out, gets Foster’s revolver, shoots him, and bugs the hell out.”

“Christ! You think he might—”

“Yes, he might. Shit, man, anybody *might.”*

“But we’d got the ‘B’ vaccine in him. I gave him the shot myself!”

“Oh, well,” Bill Henriksen observed. *Oh, shit,* his brain went on. *Wil Gearing’s going to initiate Phase One* today*!* As if he could have forgotten. He had to talk to Brightling right away.

Both Doctors Brightling were in the penthouse accommodations atop the residence building, overlooking the runway, which now had four Gulfstream V business jets on it. The news Henriksen delivered wasn’t pleasing to either of them.

“How bad is this?” John asked.

“Potentially it’s pretty bad,” Bill had to admit.

“How close are we to—”

“Four hours or less,” Henriksen replied.

“Does he know that?”

“It’s possible, but we can’t know for sure.”

“Where would he have gone?” Carol Brightling asked.

“Shit, I don’t know—CIA, FBI, maybe. Popov’s a trained spook. In his position I’d go to the Russian embassy in D.C., and tell the *rezident.* He’ll have credibility there, but the time zones and bureaucracy work for us. KGB can’t do *anything* fast, Carol. They’ll spend hours trying to swallow whatever he tells them.”

"Okay. So, we proceed?" John Brightling asked.

A nod. "Yeah, I think so. I'll call Wil Gearing to give him a heads-up, maybe?"

"Can we trust *him?"* John inquired next.

"I think so, yes—I mean, hell, yes. He's been with us for years, guys. He's *part* of the Project. If we couldn't trust him, we'd all be fucking in jail now. He knows about the test protocols in Binghamton, and nobody interfered with that, did they?"

John Brightling leaned back in his chair. "You're saying we can relax?"

"Yeah," Henriksen decided. "Look, even if the whole thing comes apart, we're covered, aren't we? We turn out the 'B' vaccine instead of the 'A' one, and we're heroes for the whole world. Nobody can trace the missing people back to us unless someone cracks and talks, and there're ways to handle that. There's no physical evidence that we've done anything wrong—at least none that we can't destroy in a matter of minutes, right?"

That part had been carefully thought through. All of the Shiva virus containers were a two-minute walk from the incinerators both here and at Binghamton. The bodies of the test subjects were ashes. There *were* people with personal knowledge of what had happened, but for any of them to talk to the authorities meant implicating themselves in mass murder, and they'd all have attorneys present to shield them through the interrogation process. It would be a twitchy time for all involved, but nothing that they couldn't beat.

"Okay." John Brightling looked at his wife. They'd worked too hard and too long to turn back. They'd both endured separation from their loves to serve their greater love for Nature, invested time and vast funds to do this. No, they couldn't turn back. And if this Russian talked—to whom, they couldn't speculate—even then, could those he talked to stop the Project in time? That was scarcely possible. Husband-physician-scientist traded a look with wife-scientist, and then both looked at their Director of Security.

"Tell Gearing to proceed, Bill."

"Okay, John." Henriksen stood and headed back to his office.

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"Yes, Bill," Colonel Gearing said.

"No big deal. Proceed as planned, and call me to confirm the package is delivered properly."

"Okay," Wil Gearing replied. "Anything else I have to do? I have plans of my own, you know."

"Like what?" Henriksen asked.

"I'm flying up north tomorrow, going to take a few days to dive the Great Barrier Reef."

"Oh, yeah? Well, don't let any sharks eat you."

"Right!" was the laughing reply, and the line cut off.

Okay, Bill Henriksen thought. *That's decided.* He could depend on Gearing. He knew that. He'd come to the Project after a life of poisoning things, and he, too, knew the rest of the Project's activities. If he'd ratted to anybody, they

would not have gotten this far. But it'd have been so much better if that Russian cocksucker hadn't skipped. What could he do about that? Report Hunnicutt's murder to the local cops, and finger Popov/Serov as the likely killer? Was that worth doing? What were the possible complications? Well, Popov could spill what he knew—however much or little that might be—but then they could say that he was a former KGB spy who'd acted strangely, who'd done some consulting to Horizon Corporation—but, Jesus, started terrorist incidents in Europe? Be serious! This guy's a murderer with imagination, trying to fabricate a story to get himself off a cold-blooded killing right here in Middle America . . . Would that work? It might, Henriksen decided. It just might work, and take that bastard right the hell out of play. He could say anything he wanted, but what physical evidence did he have? Not a fucking thing.

Popov poured a drink from a bottle of Stolichnaya that the FBI had been kind enough to purchase from a corner liquor store. He had four previous drinks in his system. That helped to mellow his outlook somewhat.

"So, John Clark. We wait."

"Yeah, we wait," Rainbow Six agreed.

"You have a question for me?"

"Why did you call me?"

"We've met before."

"Where?"

"In your building in Hereford. I was there with your plumber under one of my legends."

"I wondered how you knew me by sight," Clark admitted, sipping a beer. "Not many people from your side of the Curtain do."

"You do not wish to kill me now?"

"The thought's occurred to me," Clark replied, looking in Popov's eyes. "But I guess you have some scruples after all, and if you're lying to me, you'll soon wish you were dead."

"Your wife and daughter are well?"

"Yes, and so is my grandson."

"That is good," Popov announced. "That mission was a distasteful one. You have done distasteful missions in your career, John Clark?"

He nodded. "Yeah, a few."

"So, then, you understand?"

Not the way you mean, sport, Rainbow Six thought, before responding. "Yeah, I suppose I do, Dmitriy Arkadeyevich."

"How did you find my name? Who told you?"

The answer surprised him. "Sergey Nikolay'ch and I are old friends."

"Ah," Popov managed to observe, without fainting. His own agency had betrayed him? Was that possible? Then it was as if Clark had read his mind.

"Here," John said, handing over the sheaf of photocopies. "Your evaluations are pretty good."

"Not good enough," Popov replied, failing to recover from the shock of viewing items from a file that he had never seen before.

"Well, the world changed, didn't it?"

"Not as completely as I had hoped."

"I do have a question for you."

"Yes?"

"The money you gave to Grady, where is it?"

"In a safe place, John Clark. The terrorists I know have all become capitalists with regard to cash money, but thanks to your people, those I contacted have no further need of money, do they?" the Russian asked rhetorically.

"You greedy bastard," Clark observed, with half a smile.

The race started on time. The fans cheered the marathon runners as they took their first lap around the stadium, then disappeared out the tunnel onto the streets of Sydney, to return in two and a half hours or so. In the meantime, their progress would be followed on the Jumbotron for those who sat in the stadium seats, or on the numerous televisions that hung in the ramp and concourse areas. Trucks with remote TV transmitters rolled in front of the lead runners, and the Kenyan, Jomo Nyreiry, held the lead, closely followed by Edward Fulmer, the American, and Willem terHoost, the Dutchman, the leading trio not two steps apart, and a good ten meters ahead of the next group of runners as they passed the first milepost.

Like most people, Wil Gearing saw this on his hotel room TV as he packed. He'd be renting diving gear tomorrow, the former Army colonel told himself, and he'd treat himself to the best diving area in the world, in the knowledge that the oceanic pollution that was harming that most lovely of environments would soon be ending. He got all of his clothing organized in a pair of Tumi wheeled suitcases and set them by the door of the room. He'd be diving while all the ignorant plague victims flew off to their homes across the world, not knowing what they had and what they'd be spreading. He wondered how many would be lost to Phase One of the Project. Computer projections predicted anywhere from six to thirty million, but Gearing thought those numbers conservative. The higher the better, obviously, because the "A" vaccine had to be something that people all over the globe would cry out for, thus hastening their own deaths. The real cleverness of it was that if medical tests on the vaccine recipients showed Shiva antibodies, they'd be explained away by the vaccine—"A" was a live-virus vaccine, as everyone would know. Just a little more live than anyone would realize until it was a little too late.

It was ten hours later in New York, and there in the safe house Clark, Popov, Sullivan, and Chatham sat, watching network coverage of the Olympic games, like millions of other Americans. There was nothing else for them to do. It was boring for them all, as none were marathoners, and the steps of the leading runners were endlessly the same.

"The heat must be terrible to run in," Sullivan observed.

"It's not fun," Clark agreed.

"Ever run in a race like this?"

"No." John shook his head. "But I've had to run away from things in my time, mainly Vietnam. It was pretty hot there, too."

"You were there?" Popov asked.

"A year and a half's worth. Third SOG—Special Operations Group."

"Doing what?"

"Mainly looking and reporting. Some real operations, raids, assassinations, that sort of thing, taking out people we really didn't like." Thirty years ago, John thought. Thirty years. He'd given his youth to one conflict, and his manhood to another, and now, in his approaching golden years, what would he be doing? Was it really possible, what Popov had told him? It seemed so unreal, but the Ebola scare had been real as hell. He remembered flying all over the world about that one, and he remembered the news coverage that had shaken his country to its very foundations—and he remembered the terrible revenge that America had taken as a result. Most of all, he remembered lying with Ding Chavez on the flat roof of a Tehran dwelling and guiding two smart-bombs in to take the life of the man responsible for it all, in the first application of the president's new doctrine. But if this were real, if this "project" that Popov had told them about were what he said it was, then what would his country do? Was it a matter for law enforcement or something else? Would you put people like this on trial? If not, then—what? Laws hadn't been written for crimes of this magnitude, and the trial would be a horrid circus, spreading news that would shake the foundations of the entire world. That one corporation could have the power to do such a thing as this . . .

Clark had to admit to himself that his mind hadn't expanded enough to enclose the entire thought. He'd acted upon it, but not really accepted it. It was too big a concept for that.

"Dmitriy, why did you say they are doing this?"

"John Clark, they are druids, they are people who worship nature as though it were a god. They say that the animals belong in places, but people do not. They say they want to restore nature—and to do that they are willing to kill all of mankind. This is madness, I know, but it is what they told me. In my room in Kansas, they have videotapes and magazines that proclaim these beliefs. I never knew such people existed. They say that nature hates us, that the planet hates us for what we—all men—have done. But the planet has no mind, and nature has no voice with which to speak. Yet they believe that they do have these things. It's amazing," the Russian concluded. "It is as if I have found a new, mad religious movement whose god requires our deaths, human sacrifice, whatever you wish to call it." He waved his hands in frustration at his inability to understand it.

"Do we know what this guy Gearing looks like?" Noonan asked.

"No," Chavez said. "Nobody told me. I suppose Colonel Wilkerson knows, but I didn't want to ask him."

"Christ, Ding, is this whole thing *possible?"* the FBI agent asked next.

"I guess we'll know in a few hours, man. I know something like this happened once before, and I know John and I helped take out the bastard who did it to us. On the technical side, I'd have to ask Patsy about it. I don't know biology. She does."

"Jesus," Noonan concluded, looking over at the entrance to the pump room. The three of them headed over to a concession area and got half-liter cups of Coca-Cola, then sat down to watch the blue-painted door. People walked past

it, but nobody actually approached it.

"Tim?"

"Yeah, Ding?"

"Do you have arrest powers for this?"

The FBI agent nodded. "I think so, conspiracy to commit murder, the crime originated in America, and the subject is an American citizen, so, yes, that should hold up. I can take it a step further. If we kidnap his ass and bring him to America, the courts don't care how somebody got there. Once he's in front of a United States District Court judge, how he came to be there doesn't interest the court at all."

"How the hell do we get him out of the country?" Chavez wondered next. He activated his cell phone.

Clark picked up the STU-4's receiver. It took five seconds for Ding's encryption system to handshake with his. A computerized voice finally said *Line is secure,* followed by two beeps. "Yeah?"

"John, it's Ding. I got a question."

"Shoot."

"If we bag this Gearing guy, then what? How the hell do we get him back to America?"

"Good question. Let me work on that."

"Right." And the line went dead. The logical place to call was Langley, but, as it turned out, the DCI was not in his office. The call was routed to his home.

"John, what the hell is going on down there, anyway?" Ed Foley asked from his bed.

Clark told the DCI what he knew. That took about five minutes. "I have Ding staking out the only place this can be done, and—"

"Jesus Christ, John, is this for real?" Ed Foley asked, somewhat breathlessly.

"We'll know if this Gearing guy shows up with a package containing the bug, I suppose," Clark replied. "If he does, how do we get Ding, his people, and this Gearing guy back to the States?"

"Let me work on that. What's your number?" John gave it to him and Ed Foley wrote it down on a pad. "How long have you known about this?"

"Less than two hours. The Russian guy is right here with me. We're in an FBI safe house in New York City."

"Is Carol Brightling implicated in this?"

"I'm not sure. Her ex-husband sure as hell is," Clark answered.

Foley closed his eyes and thought. "You know, she called me about you guys a while back, asked a couple of questions. She's the one who shook the new radios loose from E-Systems. She talked to me as though she was briefed in on Rainbow."

"She's not on my list, Ed," John pointed out. He'd personally approved all of the people cleared into the Rainbow compartment.

"Yeah, I'll look at that, too. Okay, let me check around and get back to you."

"Right." Clark replaced the receiver. "We have an FBI guy with the Sydney team," he told the others.

"Who?" Sullivan asked.

"Tim Noonan. Know him?"

"Used to be tech support with HRT?"

Clark nodded. "That's the guy."

"I've heard about him. Supposed to be pretty smart."

"He is. He saved our ass in Hereford, probably my wife and daughter, too."

"So, he can arrest this Gearing mutt, nice and legal."

"You know, I've never worried all that much about enforcing the law—mainly I enforce policy, but not law."

"I suppose things are a little different with the Agency, eh?" Sullivan asked, with a smile. The James Bond factor never really goes away, even with people who are supposed to know better.

"Yeah, some."

Gearing left his hotel, carrying a backpack like many of the other people on the street, and flagged a cab just outside. The marathon was about half an hour from its conclusion. He found himself looking around at the crowded sidewalks and all the people on them. The Australians seemed a friendly people, and what he'd seen of their country was pleasant enough. He wondered about the aborigines, and what might happen to them, and the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, and other such tribal groupings around the world, so removed from normal life that they wouldn't be exposed to Shiva in any way. If fate smiled upon them, well, he decided, that was okay with him. These kinds of people didn't harm Nature in any way, and they were insufficiently numerous to do harm even if they wanted to, which they didn't, worshipping the trees and the thunder as the Project members did. Were there enough of them to be a problem? Probably not. The Bushmen might spread out, but their folkways wouldn't allow them to change their tribal character very much, and though they'd increase somewhat in number, they'd probably not even do much of that. The same with the "abos" of Australia. There hadn't been many of them before the Europeans had arrived, after all, and they'd had millennia to sweep over the continent. So the Project would spare many people, wouldn't it? It was vaguely comforting to the retired colonel that Shiva would kill only those whose lifestyles made them the enemies of Nature. That this criterion included everyone he could see out the cab windows troubled him little.

The taxi stopped at the regular drop-off point by the stadium. He paid his fare plus a generous tip, got out, walked toward the massive concrete bowl. At the entrance, he showed his security pass and was waved through. There came the expected creepy feeling. He'd be testing his "B" vaccine in a very immediate way, first admitting the Shiva virus into the fogging system, and then walking through it, breathing in the same nano-capsules as all the other hundred-thousand-plus tourists, and if the "B" shot didn't work, he'd be condemning himself to a gruesome death—but he'd been briefed in on that issue a long time ago.

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“That Dutchman looks pretty tough,” Noonan said. Willem terHoost was currently in the lead, and had picked up the pace, heading for a record despite the weather conditions. The heat had taken its toll of many runners. A lot of them slowed their pace to get cold drinks, and some ran through pre-spotted water showers to cool off, though the TV commentators said that these had the effect of tightening up the leg muscles and were therefore not really a good thing for marathoners to do. But they took the relief anyway, most of them, or grabbed the offered ice-water drinks and poured them over their faces.

“Self-abuse,” Chavez said, checking his watch and reaching for his radio microphone. “Command to Tomlinson.”

“I’m here, boss,” Chavez heard in his earpiece.

“Coming in to relieve you.”

“Roger that, fine with us, boss,” the sergeant replied from inside the locked room.

“Come on.” Ding stood, waving for Pierce and Noo-nan to follow. It was just a hundred feet to the blue door. Ding twisted the knob and went inside.

Tomlinson and Johnston had hidden in the shadows in the corner opposite the door. They came out when they recognized their fellow team members.

“Okay, stay close and stay alert,” Chavez told the two sergeants.

“Roge-o,” Homer Johnston said on his way out. He was thirsty and planned to get himself something to drink, and on the way out he placed his hands over his ears, popping them open to rid himself of the pump noise.

The sound was annoying, Chavez realized in the first few minutes. Not overly loud, but constant, a powerful deep whirring, like a well-insulated automobile engine. It hovered at the edge of your consciousness and didn’t go away, and on further reflection made him think of a beehive. Maybe that was the annoying part of it.

“Why are we leaving the lights on?” Noonan asked.

“Good question.” Chavez walked over and flipped the switch. The room went almost totally dark, with just a crack of light coming in from under the steel fire door. Chavez felt his way to the opposite wall, managed to get there without bumping his head, and leaned against the concrete wall, allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Gearing was dressed in shorts and low-cut hiking boots, with short socks as well. It seemed the form of dress the locals had adopted for dealing with the heat, and it was comfortable enough, as was his backpack and floppy hat. The stadium concourses were crowded with fans coming in early for the closing ceremonies, and he saw that many of them were standing in the fog to relieve themselves from the oppressive heat of the day. The local weather forecasters had explained ad nauseam about how this version of the El Niño phenomenon had affected the global climate and inflicted unseasonably hot weather on their country, for which they all felt the need to apologize. He found it all rather amusing. Apologize for a natural phenomenon? How ridiculous. With that thought he headed to his objective. In doing so, he walked right past Homer Johnston, who was standing, sipping his Coke.

“Any other places the guy might use?” Chavez worried suddenly in the darkness.

“No,” Noonan replied. “I checked the panel on the way in. The whole stadium fogging system comes from this one room. If it’s going to happen, it will happen here.”

“If it’s gonna happen,” Chavez said back, actually hoping that it would not. If that happened, they’d go back to Lieutenant Colonel Wilkerson and find out where this Gearing guy was staying, and then pay a call on him and have a friendly little chat.

Gearing spotted the blue door and looked around for security people. The Aussie SAS troops were easily spotted, once you knew how they dressed. But though he saw two Sydney policemen walking down the concourse, there were no army personnel. Gearing paused fifty feet or so from the door. The usual mission jitters, he told himself. He was about to do something from which there was no turning back. He asked himself for the thousandth time if he really wanted to do this. There were fellow human beings all around him, people seemingly just like himself with hopes and dreams and aspirations—but, no, those things they held in their minds weren’t like the things he held in his own, were they? They didn’t get it, didn’t understand what was important and what was not. They didn’t see Nature for what She was, and as a result they lived lives that were aimed only at hurting or even destroying Her, driving cars that injected hydrocarbons into the atmosphere, using chemicals that found their way into the water, pesticides that killed birds or kept them from reproducing, aiming spray cans at their hair whose propellants destroyed the ozone layer. They were *killing* Nature with nearly every act they took. They didn’t care. They didn’t even try to understand the consequences of what they were doing, and so, no, they didn’t have a right to live. It was his job to protect Nature, to remove the blight upon the planet, to restore and save, and that was a job he must do. With that decided, Wil Gearing resumed his walk to the blue door, fished in his pocket for the key and inserted it into the knob.

“Command, this is Johnston, you got company coming in! White guy, khaki shorts, red polo shirt, and backpack,” Homer announced loudly into everyone’s ear. Beside him, Sergeant Tomlinson started walking in that direction, too.

“Heads up,” Chavez said in the darkness. There were two shadows in the crack of light under the door, and then the sound of a key in the lock, and then there was another crack of light, a vertical one as the door opened, and a silhouette, a human shape—and just that fast, Chavez knew that it *was* all real after all. Would the lights reveal an inhuman monster, something from another planet, or . . .

. . . just a man, he saw, as the lights flipped on. About fifty, with closely cropped salt-and-pepper hair. A man who knew what he was about. He reached for the wrench hanging on the wall-mounted pegboard, then shrugged out of his backpack, and loosened the two straps that held the flap in place. It seemed to Chavez that he was watching a movie, something separated from reality, as the man flipped off the motor switch, ending the whirring. Then he

closed the valve and lifted the wrench to—

"Hold it right there, pal," Chavez said, emerging from the shadows.

"Who are you?" the man asked in surprise. Then his face told the tale. He was doing something he shouldn't. He knew it, and suddenly someone else did, too.

"I could ask you the same thing, except I know who you are. Your name is Wil Gearing. What are you planning to do, Mr. Gearing?"

"I'm just here to swap out the chlorine canister on the fogging system," Gearing replied, shaken all the more that this Latino seemed to know his name. How had that happened ? Was he part of the Project—and if not, then what? It was as if someone had punched him in the stomach, and now his entire body cringed from the blow.

"Oh? Let's see about that, Mr. Gearing. Tim?" Chavez gestured for Noonan to get the backpack. Sergeant Pierce stayed back, his hand on his pistol and his eyes locked on their visitor.

"Sure looks like a normal one," Noonan said. If this was a counterfeit, it was a beaut. He was tempted to open the screw top, but he had good reason not to. Next to the pump motor, Chavez took the wrench and removed the existing canister.

"Looks about half full to me, pal. Not time to replace it yet, at least not with something called Shiva. Tim, let's be careful with that one."

"You bet." Noonan tucked it back into Gearing's pack and strapped the cover down. "We'll have this checked out. Mr. Gearing, you are under arrest," the FBI agent told him. "You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, we will provide you with one. Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law. Do you understand these rights, sir?"

Gearing was shaking now, and turned to look at the door, wondering if he could—

—he couldn't. Tomlinson and Johnston chose that moment to come in. "Got him?" Homer asked.

"Yep," Ding replied. He pulled his cell phone out and called America. Again the encryption systems went through the synchronization process.

"We got him," Chavez told Rainbow Six. "And we got the canister thing, whatever you call it. How the hell do we get everybody home?"

"There's an Air Force C-17 at Alice Springs, if you can get there. It'll wait for you."

"Okay, I'll see if we can fly there. Later, John." Chavez thumbed the END button and turned to his prisoner. "Okay, pal, you're coming with us. If you try anything stupid, Sergeant Pierce here will shoot you right in the head. Right, Mike?"

"Yes, sir, I sure as hell will," Pierce responded in a voice from the grave.

Noonan reopened the valve and turned the pump motor back on. Then they went back out into the stadium concourse and walked to the cabstand. They ended up needing two taxis, both of which headed to the airport. There they had to wait an hour and a half for a 737 for the desert airport, a flight of nearly two hours.

Alice Springs is in the very center of the continental island called Australia, near the Macdonnell mountain range, and a strange place indeed to find the highest of high-tech equipment, but here were the huge antenna dishes that downloaded information from America's reconnaissance, electronic intelligence, and military communications satellites. The facility there is operated by the National Security Agency, NSA, whose main site is at Fort Meade, Maryland, between Baltimore and Washington.

The Qantas flight was largely empty, and on arrival, an airport van took them to the USAF terminal, which was surprisingly comfortable, though here the temperature was blisteringly hot, heading down from an afternoon temperature of 120.

"You're Chavez?" the sergeant in the Distinguished Visitors area asked.

"That's right. When's the plane leave?"

"They're waiting for you now, sir. Come this way." And with that they entered another van, which rolled them right to the front-left-side door, where a sergeant in a flight suit gestured them aboard.

"Where we going, Sarge?" Chavez asked on his way past.

"Hickam in Hawaii first, sir, then on to Travis in California."

"Fair enough. Tell the driver he can leave."

"Yes, sir." The crew chief laughed, as he closed the door and walked forward.

It was a mobile cavern, this monster transport aircraft, and there seemed to be no other passengers aboard. Gearing hadn't been handcuffed, somewhat to Ding's disappointment, and he behaved docilely, with Noonan at his side.

"So, you want to talk to us about it, Mr. Gearing?" the FBI agent asked.

"What's in it for me?"

He'd had to ask that question, Noonan supposed, but it was a sign of weakness, just what the FBI agent had hoped for. The question made the answer easy:

"Your life, if you're lucky."

CHAPTER 38

NATURE RESORT

It was just too much for Wil Gearing. Nobody had told him what to do in a case like this. It had never occurred to him that security would be broken on the Project. His life was forfeit now—how could that have happened? He could cooperate or not. The contents of the canister would be examined anyway, probably at USAMRIID at Fort Detrick, Maryland, and it would require only a few seconds for the medical experts there to see what he'd carried into the Olympic stadium, and there was no explaining that away, was there? His life, his plans for the future, had been taken away from him, and his only choice was to cooperate and hope for the best.

And so, as the C-17A Globemaster III transport climbed to its cruising altitude, he started talking. Noonan held a tape recorder in his hand, and hoped that the engine noise that permeated the cargo area wouldn't wash it all away. It turned out that the hardest part for him was to keep a straight face. He'd heard about extreme environmental groups, the people who thought killing baby seals in Canada was right up there with Treblinka and Auschwitz, and he knew that the Bureau had looked at some for offenses like releasing laboratory animals from medical institutions, or spiking trees with nails so that no lumber company would dare to run trees from those areas through their sawmills, but he'd never heard of those groups doing anything more offensive than that. This, however, was such a crime as to redefine "monstrous." And the religious fervor that went along with it was entirely alien to him, and therefore hard to credit. He wanted to believe that the contents of the chlorine canister really was just chlorine, but he knew that it was not. That and the backpack were now sealed in a mil-spec plastic container strapped down in a seat next to Sergeant Mike Pierce.

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"He hasn't called yet," John Brightling observed, checking his watch. The closing ceremonies were under way. The head of the International Olympic Committee was about to give his speech, summoning the Youth of the World to the next set of games. Then the assembled orchestra would play, and the Olympic Flame would be extinguished . . . just as most of humanity would be extinguished. There was the same sort of sadness to it, but also the same inevitability. There would be no next Olympiad, and the Youth of the World would not be alive to hear the summons? . . .

"John, he's probably watching this the same as we are. Give him some

time," Bill Henriksen advised.

"You say so." Brightling put his arm around his wife's shoulders and tried to relax. Even now, the people walking in the stadium were being sprinkled with the nano-capsules bearing Shiva. Bill was right. Nothing could have gone wrong. He could see it in his mind. The streets and highways empty, farms idle, airports shut down. The trees would thrive without lumberjacks to chop them down. The animals would nose about, wondering perhaps where all the noises and the two-legged creatures were. Rats and other carrion eaters would feast. Dogs and cats would return to their primal instincts and survive or not, as circumstances allowed. Herbivores and predators would be relieved of hunting pressure. Poison traps set out in the wild would continue to kill, but eventually these would run out of their poisons and stop killing game that farmers and others disliked. This year there would be no mass murder of baby harp seals for their lovely white coats. This year the world would be reborn … and even if that required an act of violence, it was worth the price for those who had the brains and aesthetic to appreciate it all. It was like a religion for Brightling and his people. Surely it had all the aspects of a religion. They worshiped the great collective life system called Nature. They were fighting for Her because they knew that She loved and nurtured them back. It was that simple. Nature was to them if not a person, then a huge enveloping idea that made and supported the things they loved. They were hardly the first people to dedicate their lives to an idea, were they?

"How long to Hickam?"

"Another ten hours, the crew chief told me," Pierce said, checking his watch. "This is like being back in the Eight-Deuce. All I need's my chute, Tim," he told Noonan.

"Huh?"

"Eighty-Second Airborne, Fort Bragg, my first outfit. All the way, baby," Pierce explained for the benefit of this FBI puke. He missed jumping, but that was something special-ops people didn't do. Going in by helicopter was better organized and definitely safer, but it didn't have the *rush* you got from leaping out of a transport aircraft along with your squadmates. "What do you think of what this guy was trying to do?" Pierce asked, pointing at Gearing.

"Hard to believe it's real."

"Yeah, I know," Pierce agreed. "I'd like to think nobody's that crazy. It's too big a thought for my brain, man."

"Yeah," Noonan replied. "Mine, too." He felt the mini tape recorder in his shirt pocket and wondered about the information it contained. Had he taken the confession legally? He'd given the mutt his rights, and Gearing said that he understood them, but any halfway competent attorney would try hard to have it all tossed, claiming that since they were aboard a military aircraft surrounded by armed men, the circumstances had been coercive—and maybe the judge would agree. He might also agree that the arrest had been illegal. But, Noonan thought, all of that was less important than the result. If Gearing had spoken the truth, this arrest might have saved millions of lives.... He went forward to the aircraft's radio compartment, got on the secure system, and called New York.

Clark was asleep when his phone rang. He grabbed the receiver and grunted, “Yeah?” only to find that the security system was still handshaking. Then it announced that the line was secure. “What is it, Ding?”

“It’s Tim Noonan, John. I have a question.”

“What’s that?”

“What are you going to do when we get there? I have Gearing’s confession on tape, the whole thing, just like what you told Ding a few hours ago. Word for fucking word, John. What do we do now?”

“I don’t know yet. We probably have to talk to Director Murray, and also with Ed Foley at CIA. I’m not sure the law anticipates anything this big, and I’m not sure this is something we ever want to put in a public courtroom, y’know?”

“Well, yeah,” Noonan’s voice agreed from half a world away. “Okay, just so somebody’s thinking about it.”

“Okay, yeah, we’re thinking about it. Anything else?”

“I guess not.”

“Good. I’m going back to sleep.” And the line went dead, and Noonan walked back to the cargo compartment. Chavez and Tomlinson were keeping an eye on Gearing, while the rest of the people tried to get some sleep in the crummy USAF seats and thus pass the time on this most boring of flights. Except for the dreams, Noonan discovered in an hour. They weren’t boring at all.

“He still hasn’t called,” Brightling said, as the network coverage went through Olympic highlights.

“I know,” Henriksen conceded. “Okay, let me make a call.” He rose from his seat, pulled a card from his wallet, and dialed a number on the back of it to a cellular phone owned by a senior Global Security employee down in Sydney.

“Tony? This is Bill Henriksen. I need you to do something for me right now, okay? . . . Good. Find Wil Gearing and tell him to call me immediately. He has the number . . . Yes, that’s the one. Right now, Tony . . . Yeah. Thanks.” And Henriksen hung up. “That shouldn’t take long. Not too many places he can be except maybe on the way to the airport for his flight up the coast. Relax, John,” the security chief advised, still not feeling any chill on his skin. Gearing’s cell phone could have a dead battery, he could be caught up in the crowds and unable to get a cab back to his hotel, maybe there weren’t any cabs—any one of a number of innocent explanations.

Down in Sydney, Tony Johnson walked across the street to Wil Gearing’s hotel. He knew the room already, since they’d met there, and took the elevator to the right room. Defeating the lock was child’s play, just a matter of working a credit card into the doorjamb and flipping the angled latch, and then he was inside—

—and so were Gearing’s bags, sitting there by the sliding mirror-doors of the closet, and there on the desk-table was the folder with his flight tickets to the Northeast Coast of Australia, plus a map and some brochures about the Great Barrier Reef. This was odd. Wil’s flight—he checked the ticket folder—was due to go off in twenty minutes, and he ought to be all checked in and

boarding the aircraft by now, but he hadn't left the hotel. This was very odd. *Where are you, Wil?* Johnson wondered. Then he remembered why he was here, and lifted the phone.

"Yeah, Tony. So, where's our boy?" Henriksen asked confidently. Then his face changed. "What do you mean? What else do you know? Okay, if you find out anything else, call me here. Bye." Henriksen set the phone down and turned to look at the other two. "Wil Gearing's disappeared. Not in his room, but his luggage and tickets are. Like he just fell off the planet."

"What's that mean?" Carol Brightling asked.

"I'm not sure. Hell, maybe he got hit by a car in the street—"

"—Or maybe Popov spilled his guts to the wrong people and they bagged him," John Brightling suggested nervously.

"Popov didn't even know his name—Hunnicutt couldn't have told him, he didn't know Gearing's name either." But then Henriksen thought, *Oh, shit. Foster* did *know how the Shiva was supposed to be delivered, didn't he? Oh, shit.*

"What's the matter, Bill?" John asked, seeing the man's face and knowing that something was wrong.

"John, we may have a problem," the former FBI agent announced.

"What problem?" Carol asked. Henriksen explained, and the mood in the room changed abruptly. "You mean, they might know? . . ."

Henriksen nodded. "That is possible, yes."

"My God," the Presidential Science Advisor exclaimed. "If they know that, then—then—then—"

"Yeah." Bill nodded. "Then we're fucked."

"What can we do about this?"

"For starters, we destroy all the evidence. All the Shiva, all the vaccines, all the records. It's all on computer, so we just erase it. There shouldn't be much in the way of a paper trail, because we told people not to print anything up, and to destroy any paper notes they might make. We can do that from here. I can access all the company computers from my office and kill off all the records—"

"They're encrypted, all of them," John Brightling pointed out.

"You want to bet against the code-breakers at Fort Meade? I don't," Henriksen told them. "No, those files all have to go, John. Look, you beat a criminal prosecution by denying evidence to the prosecutors. Without physical evidence, they can't hurt you."

"What about witnesses?"

"The most overrated thing in the world is an eyewitness. Any lawyer with half a brain can make fools out of them. No, when I was working cases for the Bureau, I wanted something I could hold in my hand, something you could pass over to the jury so they could see it and feel it. Eyewitness testimony is pretty useless in court, despite what you see on TV. Okay, I'm going to my office to get rid of the computer stuff." Henriksen left at once, leaving the two Brightlings behind him.

"My God, John," Carol said in quiet alarm, "what if people find out, nobody'll understand . . ."

"Understand that we were going to kill them and their families? No," her

husband agreed dryly, “I don’t think Joe Sixpack and Archie Bunker will understand that very well.”

“So, what do we do?”

“We get the hell out of the country. We fly down to Brazil with everyone who knows what the Project is all about. We still have access to money—I have dozens of covert accounts we can access electronically—and they probably can’t make a criminal case against us if Bill can trash all the computer files. Okay, they may have Wil Gearing under arrest, but he’s just one voice, and I’m not sure they can come after us legally, in a foreign country, on the word of one person. There are only fifty or so people who really know what’s happening—all of it, I mean—and we have enough airplanes to get us all to Manaus.”

In his office, Henriksen lit up his personal computer and pulled open an encrypted file. It had telephone numbers and access codes to every computer in Horizon Corporation, plus the names of the files relating to the Project. He accessed them via modem, looked for the files that had to go, and moved them with mouse-clicks into trash cans that shredded the files completely instead of merely removing their electronic address codes. He found that he was sweating as he did so, and it took him thirty-nine minutes, but after that time was concluded, he was certain that he’d completely destroyed them all. He checked his list and his memory for the file names and conducted another global search, but no, those files were completely gone now. Good.

Okay, he asked himself, what else might they have? They might have Gearing’s Shiva-delivery canister. That would be hard to argue with, but what, really, did it mean? It would mean, if the right people looked at it, that Gearing had been carrying a potential bio-war weapon. Gearing could tell a U.S. attorney that it had come from Horizon Corporation, but no one working on that segment of the Project would ever admit to having done it, and so, *no,* there would be no corroborating evidence to back up the assertion.

Okay, there were by his count fifty-three Horizon and Global Security employees who knew the Project from beginning to end. Work on the “A” and “B” vaccines could be explained away as medical research. The Shiva virus and the vaccine supplies would be burned in a matter of hours, leaving no physical evidence at all.

This was enough—well, it was almost enough. They still had Gearing, and Gearing, if he talked—and he *would* talk, Henriksen was sure, because the Bureau had ways of choking information out of people—could make life very uncomfortable for Brightling and a lot of other people, including himself. They would probably avoid conviction, but the embarrassment of a trial—and the things that the revelations might generate, casual comments made by Project members to others, would be woven together . . . and there was Popov, who could link John Brightling and himself to terrorist acts. But they could finger Popov for murdering Foster Hunnicutt, and that would pollute whatever case he might try to make . . . the best thing would be to be beyond their reach when they tried to assemble a case. That meant Brazil, and Project Alternate in the jungles west of Manaus. They could head down there, sheltered by Brazil’s wonderfully protective extradition laws, and study the rain forest . . .

yes, that made sense. Okay, he thought, he had a list of the full-Project members, those who knew everything, those who, if the FBI got them and interrogated them, could hang them all. He printed this list of the True Believers and tucked the pages in his shirt pocket. With the work done and the alternatives analyzed, Henriksen went back to Brightling's penthouse office.

"I've told the flight crews to get the birds warmed up," Brightling told him when he came in.

"Good." Henriksen nodded. "I think Brazil looks pretty good right now. If nothing else, we can get all of our critical personnel fully briefed on how to handle this, how to act if anyone asks them some questions. We can beat this one, John, but we have to be smart about it."

"What about the planet?" Carol Brightling asked sadly.

"Carol," Bill replied, "you take care of your own ass first. You can't save Nature from inside Marion Federal Penitentiary, but if we play it smart, we can deny evidence to anyone who investigates us, and without that we're safe, guys. Now"—he pulled the list from his pocket—"these are the only people we have to protect. There's fifty-three of them, and you have four Gulfstreams sitting out there. We can fly us all down to Project Alternate. Any disagreement on that?"

John Brightling shook his head. "No, I'm with you. Can this keep us in the clear legally?"

Henriksen nodded emphatically. "I think so. Popov will be a problem, but he's a murderer. I'm going to report the Hunnicutt killing to the local cops before we fly off. That will compromise his value as a witness—make it look like he's just telling a tale to save his own ass from the gallows, whatever they use to execute murderers here in Kansas. I'll have Maclean and Killgore tape statements we can hand over to the local police. It may not be enough to convict him, but it will make him pretty uncomfortable. That's how you do this, break up the other guy's chain of evidence and the credibility of his witnesses. In a year, maybe eighteen months, we have our lawyers sit down and chat with the local U.S. attorney, and then we come home. Until then we camp out in Brazil, and you can run the company from there via the Internet, can't you?"

"Well, it's not as good as what we planned, but . . ."

"Yes," Carol agreed. "But it beats the hell out of life in a federal prison."

"Get everything moving, Bill," John ordered.

"So, what do we do with this?" Clark asked, on waking up.

"Well," Tom Sullivan answered, "first we go to the Assistant Director in Charge of the New York office, and then we talk to a United States attorney about building a criminal case."

"I don't think so," Clark responded, rubbing his eyes and reaching for the coffee.

"We can't just put the arm on them and whack'em, you know. We're cops. We can't break the law," Chatham pointed out.

"This can never see the light of day in a court. Besides, who's to say that you'll win the case? How hard will this be to cover up?"

"I can't evaluate that. We have two missing girls they probably murdered—

more, if our friend Popov is right—and that's a crime, both federal and state, and, Jesus, this other conspiracy . . . that's why we have laws, Mr. Clark."

"Maybe so, but how fast do you see yourself driving out to this place in Kansas, whose location we don't know yet, with warrants to arrest one of the richest men in America?"

"It will take a little time," Sullivan admitted.

"A couple of weeks at least, just to assemble the case information," Special Agent Chatham said. "We'll need to talk with experts, to have that chlorine jar examined by the right people—and all the while the subjects will be working to destroy every bit of physical evidence. It won't be easy, but that's what we do in the Bureau, y'know?"

"I suppose," Clark said dubiously. "But there won't be much element of surprise here. They probably know we have this Gearing guy. From that they know what he can tell us."

"True," Sullivan conceded.

"We might have to try something else."

"What might that be?"

"I'm not sure," Clark admitted.

The videotaping was done in the Project's media center, where they'd hoped to produce nature tapes for those who survived the plague. The end of the Project as an operational entity hit its members hard. Kirk Maclean was especially downcast, but he acted his role well in explaining the morning rides that he, Serov, Hunnicutt, and Killgore had enjoyed. Then Dr. John Killgore told of how he'd found the horses, and then came Maclean's explanation of how the body was found, and the autopsy Killgore had personally performed, which had found the .44 bullet that had ended Foster Hunnicutt's life. With that done, the men joined the others in the lobby of the residence building, and a minibus ferried them to the waiting aircraft.

It would be a 3,500-mile flight to Manaus, they were told on boarding, about eight hours, an easy hop for the Gulfstream V. The lead aircraft was nearly empty, just the doctors Brightling, Bill Henriksen, and Steve Berg, lead scientist for the Shiva part of the Project. The aircraft lifted off at nine in the morning local time. Next stop, the Amazon Valley of central Brazil.

It turned out that the FBI *did* know where the Kansas site was. A car and two agents from the local resident agency drove out in time to see the jets lift off, which they duly reported to their base station, and from there to Washington. Then they just parked at the side of the road, sipped at their drinks, ate their McDonald's burgers and watched nothing happening at all at the misplaced buildings in the middle of wheat country.

The C-17 switched crews at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii, then refueled and lifted off for Travis in northern California. Chavez and his party never even departed the aircraft, but watched the new crew arrive with box lunches and drinks, and then settled in for the next six hours of air travel. Wilson Gearing was trying to explain himself now, talking about trees and birds and fish and stuff, Ding overheard. It was not an argument calculated to persuade

the father of a newborn, and the husband of a physician, but the man rambled on. Noonan listened politely and recorded this conversation, too.

The flight south was quiet on all the aircraft. Those who hadn't heard about the developments in Sydney guessed that something was wrong, but they couldn't communicate with the lead aircraft without going through the flight crews, and they had not been briefed in on the Project's objectives—like so many of the employees of Horizon Corporation, they had simply been paid to do the jobs for which they were trained. They flew now on a southerly course to a destination just below the equator. It was a trip they'd made before, when Project Alternate had been built the previous year. It, too, had its own runway sufficient for the business jets, but only VFR daylight capable, since it lacked the navigation aids in Kansas. If anything went wrong, they would bingo to the Manaus city airport, ninety-eight miles to the east of their destination, which had full services, including repairs. Project Alternate had spare parts, and every aircraft had a trained mechanic aboard, but they preferred to leave major repairs to others. In an hour, they were "feet-wet" over the Gulf of Mexico, then turned east to fly through the international travel corridor over Cuba. The weather forecast was good all the way down to Venezuela, where they might have to dodge a few thunderheads, but nothing serious. The senior passengers in the lead aircraft figured that they were leaving the country about as fast as it could be done, disappearing off the face of the planet they'd hoped to save.

"What's that?" Sullivan asked. Then he turned. "Four jets just left the Kansas location, and they headed off to the south."

"Is there any way to track them?"

Sullivan shrugged. "The Air Force maybe."

"How the hell do we do that?" Clark wondered aloud. Then he called Langley.

"I can try, John, but getting the Air Force hopping this quick won't be easy."

"Try, will you, Ed? Four Gulfstream-type business jets heading south from central Kansas, destination unknown."

"Okay, I'll call the NMCC."

That was not a difficult thing for the Director of Central Intelligence to do. The senior duty officer in the National Military Command Center was an Air Force two-star recently rotated into a desk job after commanding the remaining USAF fighter force in NATO.

"So, what are we supposed to do, sir?" the general asked.

"Four Gulfstream-type business jets took off from central Kansas about half an hour ago. We want them tracked."

"With what? All our air-defense fighters are on the Canadian border. Calling them down wouldn't work, they'd never catch up."

"How about an AWACS?" Foley asked.

"They belong to Air Combat Command at Langley—ours, not yours—and well, maybe one's up for counter-drug surveillance or maybe training. I can check."

"Do that," Ed Foley said. "I'll hold."

The two-star in blue went one better than that, calling the North American Aerospace Defense Command in Cheyenne Mountain, which had radar coverage over the entire country, and ordering them to identify the four Gs. That took less than a minute, and a computer command was sent to the Federal Aviation Administration to check the flight plans that had to be filed for international flights. NORAD also told the general that there were *two* E-3B AWACS aircraft aloft at the moment, one 300 miles south of New Orleans doing counter-drug operations, and the other just south of Eglin Air Force Base, conducting routine training with some fighters based there in an exercise against a Navy flight out of Pensacola Naval Air Station. With that information, he called Langley Air Force Base in the Virginia Tidewater, got Operations, and told them about the DCI's request.

"What's this for, sir?" the general asked Foley, once the phone lines were properly lashed up.

"I can't tell you that, but it's important as hell."

The general relayed that to Langley Operations, but did not relay the snarled response back to CIA. This one had to be kicked to the four-star who ran Air Combat Command, who, conveniently, was in his office rather than the F-16 that came with the job. The four-star grunted approval, figuring CIA wouldn't ask without good reason.

"You can have it if you need it. How far will it be going?"

"I don't know. How far can one of those Gulfstream jets go?"

"Hell, sir, the new one, the G-V, can fly all the way to friggin' Japan. I may have to set up some tanker support."

"Okay, please do what you have to do. Who do I call to keep track of the shadowing operation?"

"NORAD." He gave the DCI the number to call.

"Okay, thank you, General. The Agency owes you one."

"I will remember that, Director Foley," the USAF major general promised.

"We're in luck," Clark heard. "The Air Force is chopping an AWACS to us. We can follow them all the way to where they're going," Ed Foley said, exaggerating somewhat, since he didn't understand the AWACS would have to refuel on the way.

The aircraft in question, a ten-year-old E-3B Sentry, got the word fifteen minutes later. The pilot relayed the information to the senior control officer aboard, a major, who in turn called NORAD for further information and got it ten minutes after the leading G departed U.S. airspace. The steer from Cheyenne Mountain made the tracking exercise about as difficult as the drive to the local 7-Eleven. A tanker would meet them over the Caribbean, after lifting off from Panama, and what had been an interesting air-defense exercise reverted to total boredom. The E-3B Sentry, based on the venerable Boeing 707-320B, flew at the identical speed as the business jets made in Savannah, and kept station from fifty miles behind. Only the aerial tanking would interfere with matters, and that not very much. The radar aircraft's call-sign was Eagle Two-Niner, and it had satellite radio capability to relay everything,

including its radar picture, to NORAD in Colorado. Most of Eagle Two-Niner's crewmen rested in their comfortable seats, many of them dozing off while three controllers worked the four Gulfstreams they were supposed to track. It was soon evident that they were heading somewhere pretty straight, five minutes or about forty-one miles apart, attempting no deception at all, not even wavetop flying. But that, they knew, would only abuse the airframes and use up gas unnecessarily. It didn't matter to the surveillance aircraft, which could spot a trash bag floating in the water—something they regularly did in counter-drug operations, since that was one of the methods used by smugglers to transfer their cocaine—or even enforce the speed limit on interstate highways, since anything going faster than eighty miles per hour was automatically tracked by the radar-computer system, until the operator told the computer to ignore it. But now all they had to look at were commercial airliners going and coming in routine daily traffic, plus the four Gulfstreams, who were traveling so normal, straight, and dumb that, as one controller observed, even a Marine could have taken them out without much in the way of guidance.

By this time, Clark was on a shuttle flight to Reagan National Airport across the river from Washington. It landed on time, and Clark was met by a CIA employee whose "company" car was parked outside for the twenty-minute ride to Langley and the seventh floor of the Old Headquarters Building. Dmitriy Popov had never expected to be inside this particular edifice, even wearing a VISITOR—ESCORT REQUIRED badge. John handled the introductions.

"Welcome," Foley said in his best Russian. "I imagine you've never been here before."

"As you have never been to Number 2 Dzerzhinsky Square."

"Ah, but I have," Clark responded. "Right into Sergey Nikolay'ch's office, in fact."

"Amazing," Popov responded, sitting down as guided.

"Okay, Ed, where the hell are they now?"

"Over northern Venezuela, heading south, probably for central Brazil. The FAA tells us that they filed a flight plan—it's required by law—for Manaus. Rubber-tree country, I think. A couple of rivers come together there."

"They told me that there is a facility there, like the one in Kansas, but smaller," Popov informed his hosts.

"Task a satellite to it?" Clark asked the DCI.

"Once we know where it is, sure. The AWACS lost a little ground when it refueled, but it's only a hundred fifty miles back now, and that's not a problem. They say the four business jets are just flying normally, cruising right along."

"Once we know where they're going . . . then what?"

"Not sure," Foley admitted. "I haven't thought it through that far."

"There might not be a good criminal case on this one, Ed."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Clark confirmed with a nod. "If they're smart, and we have to assume they are, they can destroy all the physical evidence of the crime pretty

easily. That leaves witnesses, but who, you suppose, is aboard those four Gs heading into Brazil?"

"All the people who know what's been happening. You'd want to keep that number low for security reasons, wouldn't you—so, you think they're going down there for choir practice?"

"What?" Popov asked.

"They need to find and learn a single story to tell the FBI when the interrogations begin," Foley explained. "So, they all need to learn the same hymn, and learn to sing it the same way every time."

"What would you do in their place, Ed?" Rainbow Six asked reasonably.

Foley nodded. "Yeah, that's about it. Okay, what should we do?"

Clark looked the DCI straight in the eye. "Pay them a little visit, maybe?"

"Who authorizes that?" the Director of Central Intelligence asked.

"I still draw my paychecks from this agency. I report to you, Ed, remember?"

"Christ, John."

"Do I have your permission to get my people together at a suitable staging point?"

"Where?"

"Fort Bragg, I suppose," Clark proposed. Foley had to yield to the logic of the moment.

"Permission granted." And with that Clark walked down the narrow office to a table with a secure phone to call Hereford.

• • •

Alistair Stanley had bounced back well from his wounds, enough so that he could just about manage a full day in his office without collapsing with exhaustion. Clark's trip to the States had left him in charge of a crippled Rainbow force, and he was facing problems now that Clark had not yet addressed, like replacements for the two dead troopers. Morale was brittle at the moment. There were still two missing people with whom the survivors had worked intimately, and that was never an easy thing for men to bear, though every morning they were out on the athletic field doing their daily routine, and every afternoon they fired their weapons to stay current and ready for a possible call-up. This was regarded as unlikely, but, then, none of the missions that Rainbow had carried out had been, in retrospect, very likely. His secure phone started chirping, and Stanley reached to answer it.

"Yes, this is Alistair Stanley."

"Hi, Al, this is John. I'm in Langley now."

"What the bloody hell's been happening, John? Chavez and his people have fallen off the earth, and—"

"Ding and his people are halfway between Hawaii and California now, Al. They arrested a major conspirator in Sydney."

"Very well, what the devil's been going on?"

"You sitting down, Al?"

"Yes, John, of course I am, and—"

"Listen up. I'll give you the short version," Clark commanded, and proceeded to do that for the next ten minutes.

"Bloody hell," Stanley said when his boss stopped talking. "You're sure of this?"

"Damned sure, Al. We are now tracking the conspirators in four aircraft. They seem to be heading for central Brazil. Okay, I need you to get all the people together and fly them to Fort Bragg—Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina—with all their gear. Everything, Al. We may be taking a trip down to the jungle to . . . to, uh, deal decisively with these people."

"Understood. I'll try to get things organized here. Maximum speed?"

"That is correct. Tell British Airways we need an airplane," Clark went on.

"Very well, John. Let me get moving here."

In Langley, Clark wondered what would happen next, but before he could decide that he needed to get all of his assets in place. Okay, Alistair would try to get British Airways to release a spare, reserve aircraft to his people for a direct flight to Pope, and from there—from there he'd have to think some more. And he'd have to get there, too, to Special Operations Command with Colonel Little Willie Byron.

"Target One is descending," a control officer reported over the aircraft's intercom. The senior controller looked up from the book he was reading, activated his scope, and confirmed the information. He was breaking international law at the moment. Eagle Two-Niner hadn't gotten permission to overfly Brazil, but the air-traffic-control radar systems down there read his transponder signal as a civilian air-cargo flight—the usual ruse—and nobody had challenged them yet. Confirming that information, he got on his satellite radio to report this information to NORAD and, though he didn't know it, on to CIA. Five minutes later, Target Two started doing the same. Also both aircraft were slowing, allowing Eagle Two-Niner to catch up somewhat. The senior controller told the flight crew to continue on this heading and speed, inquired about fuel state, and learned that they had another eight hours of flight time, more than enough to return to their home at Tinker Air Force Base outside Oklahoma City.

In England, the British Airways card was played, and the airline, after ten minutes of checking, assigned Rainbow a 737-700 airliner, which would await their pleasure at Luton, a small commercial airport north of London. They'd have to go there by truck, and those were whistled up from the British army's transport company at Hereford.

• • •

It looked like a green sea, John Brightling thought, the top layer of the triple-canopy jungle. In the setting sun, he could see the silvery paths of rivers, but almost nothing of the ground itself. This was the richest ecosystem on the

planet, and one that he'd never studied in detail—well, Brightling thought, now he'd be able to, for the next year or so. Project Alternate was a robust and comfortable facility with a maintenance staff of six people, its own power supply, satellite communications, and ample food. He wondered which of the people on the four aircraft might be good cooks. There would be a division of labor here, as at every other Project activity, with himself, of course, as the leader.

At Binghamton, New York, the maintenance staff was loading a bunch of biohazard-marked containers into the incinerator. It was sure a big furnace, one of the men thought—big enough to cremate a couple of bodies at the same time—and, judging by the thickness of the insulation, a damned hot one. He pulled down the three-inch-thick door, locked it in place, and punched the ignition button. He could hear the gas jetting it and lighting off from the sparkler-things inside, followed by the usual *voosh.* There was nothing unusual about this. Horizon Corporation was always disposing of biological material of one sort or another. Maybe it was live AIDS virus, he thought. The company did a lot of work in that area, he'd read. But for the moment he looked at the papers on his clipboard. Three sheets of paper from the special order that had been faxed in from Kansas, and every line was checked off. All the containers specified were now ashes. Hell, this incinerator even destroyed the metal lids. And up into the sky went the only physical evidence of the Project. The maintenance worker didn't know that. To him container G7-89-98-00A was just a plastic container. He didn't even know that there was a word such as Shiva. As required, he went to his desktop computer—everyone here had one—and typed in that he'd eliminated the items on the work order. This information went into Horizon Corporation's internal network, and, though he didn't know it, popped onto a screen in Kansas. There were special instructions with that, and the technician lifted his phone to relay the information to another worker, who relayed it in turn to the phone number identified on the electronically posted notice.

"Okay, thank you," Bill Henriksen replied upon hearing the information. He replaced the cabin phone and made his way forward to the Brightlings.

"Okay, guys, that was Binghamton. All the Shiva stuff, all the vaccines, everything's been burned up. There is now no real physical evidence that the Project ever existed."

"We're supposed to be happy about that?" Carol demanded crossly, looking out her window at the approaching ground.

"No, but I hope you'll be happier than you'd be if you were facing an indictment for conspiracy to commit murder, Doctor."

"He's right, Carol," John said, sadness in his voice. So close. So damned close. Well, he consoled himself, he still had resources, and he still had a core of good people, and this setback didn't mean that he'd have to give up his ideals, did it? Not hardly, the chairman of Horizon told himself. Below, under the green sea into which they were descending, was a great diversity of life—he'd justified building Project Alternate to his board for that very reason, to find new chemical compounds in the trees and plants that grew only here—

maybe a cure for cancer, who could say? He heard the flaps lower, and soon thereafter, the landing gear went down. Another three minutes, and they thumped down on the road-runway constructed along with the lab and residential buildings. The aircraft's thrust-reversers engaged, and it slowed to a gradual stop.

"Okay, Target One is down on the ground." The controller read off the exact position, then adjusted his screen's picture. There were buildings there, too? Well, okay, and he told the computer to calculate their exact position, which information was immediately relayed to Cheyenne Mountain.

"Thank you." Foley wrote the information down on a pad. "John, I have exact lat and longe for where they are. I'll task a satellite to get pictures for us. Should have that in, oh, two or three hours, depending on weather there."

"So fast?" Popov asked, looking out the seventh-floor windows at the VIP parking lot.

"It's just a computer command," Clark explained. "And the satellites are always up there." Actually, three hours struck him as a long time to wait. The birds must have been in the wrong places for convenience.

Rainbow lifted off the runway at Luton well after midnight, British time, looping around to the right over the automobile-assembly plant located just off the airport grounds and heading west for America. British Airways had assigned three flight attendants to the flight, and they kept the troopers fed and supplied with drink, which all the soldiers accepted before they settled down as best they could to sleep most of the way across. They had no idea why they were going to America. Stanley hadn't briefed them in on anything yet, though they wondered why they were packing *all* of their tactical gear.

Skies were blessedly clear over the jungles of central Brazil. The first KH-11D went over at nine-thirty in the night, local time. Its infrared cameras took a total of three hundred twenty frames, plus ninety-seven more in the visible spectrum. These images were immediately cross-loaded to a communications satellite, and from there beamed down to the antenna farm at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, near Washington. From there they went by landline to the National Reconnaissance Office building near Dulles Airport, and from there via another fiber-optic line to CIA headquarters.

"This looks pretty vanilla," the senior duty photoanalyst told them in Foley's office. "Buildings here, here, here, and this one here. Four airplanes on the ground, look like Gulfstream Vs—that one's got a longer wing. Private airfield, it's got lights but no ILS gear. I expect the fuel tanks are here. Power plant here. Probably a diesel generator system, by the look of this exhaust plume. This building looks residential from the window-light pattern. Somebody build a nature resort we're interested in?" the analyst asked.

"Something like that," Clark confirmed. "What else?"

"Nothing much for a ninety-mile radius. This here used to be a rubber-tree plantation, I'd say, but the buildings are not warmed up, and so I'd have to say

it's inactive. Not much in the way of civilization. Fires down this way"—he pointed—"campfires, maybe from indigenous people, Indian tribes or such-like. That's one lonely place, sir. Must have been a real pain in the ass to build this place, isolated as it is."

"Okay, send us the Lacrosse images, too, and when we get good visual-light images, I want to see those, too," Foley said.

"We'll have a direct-overhead pass on another bird at about zero-seven-twenty Lima," he said, meaning local time. "Weather forecast looks okay. Ought to get good frames from that pass."

"How wide is this runway?" Clark asked.

"Oh, looks like seven thousand feet long by three hundred or so wide, standard width, and they've cut the trees down another hundred yards—meters, probably, on both sides. So, you could get a fair-sized airplane in there if the concrete's thick enough. There's a dock here on the river, it's the Río Negro, actually, not the Amazon itself, but no boats. I guess that's left over from the construction process."

"I don't see any telephone or power lines," Clark said next, looking closely at the photo.

"No, sir, there ain't none. I guess they depend on satellite and radio comms from this antenna farm." He paused. "Anything else you need?"

"No, and thanks," Clark told the technician.

"Yes, sir, you bet." The analyst walked out to take the elevator for his basement office.

"Learn anything?" Foley asked. He himself knew nothing about running around in jungles, but he knew that Clark did.

"Well, we know where they are, and we know about how many of 'em there are."

"What are you planning, John?"

"I'm not sure yet, Ed" was the honest reply. Clark wasn't planning much, but he was starting to think.

The C-17 thumped down rather hard at Travis Air Force Base in California. Chavez and his companions were rather seriously disoriented by all the travel, but the walk outside the aircraft was, at least, in pleasantly cool air. Chavez pulled out his cell phone and speed-dialed Hereford, then learned that John was in Langley. He had to dredge that number up from his memory, but remembered it after twenty seconds or so, and dialed.

"Director's office."

"This is Domingo Chavez calling for John Clark."

"Hold, please," Foley's receptionist replied.

"Where are you now, Ding?" John asked, when he got on the line.

"Travis Air Force base, north of 'Frisco. Now where the hell are we supposed to go?"

"There should be an Air Force VC-20 waiting for you at the DV terminal."

"Okay, I'll get over that way. We don't have any of our gear with us, John. We left Australia in a hurry."

"I'll have somebody take care of that. You get the hell back to D.C., okay?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. C," Ding acknowledged.

"Your guest, what's his name—Gearing?"

"That's right. Noonan sat with him most of the way. He sang like a fuckin' canary, John. This thing they planned to do, I mean if it's real—*Jesuchristo, jefe."*

"I know, Ding. They've bugged out, by the way."

"Where to, do we know?"

"Brazil. We know exactly where they are. I have Al bringing the team across to Fort Bragg. You get to An-drews, and we'll get organized."

"Roge-o, John. Let me go find my airplane. Out." Chavez killed the phone and waved for a blue USAF van that took them to the Distinguished Visitors' lounge, where they found yet another flight crew waiting for them. Soon thereafter, they boarded the VC-20, the Air Force version of the Gulfstream business jet, and aboard they found out what time it was from the food that the sergeant served them. Breakfast. It had to be early morning, Chavez decided. Then he asked the sergeant for the correct time and reset his watch.

CHAPTER 39

HARMONY

It struck Noonan as terribly odd that he was traveling with a confessed attempted-mass-murderer in an aircraft without the man's being in handcuffs or a straitjacket or some sort of restraint. But, as a practical matter, what was he going to do, and where was he going to go? It might be possible to open the door and jump out, but Gearing didn't strike the FBI agent as a suicide risk, and Noonan was damned sure he wasn't going to hijack this aircraft to Cuba. And so Tim Noonan just kept an eye on the prisoner, while considering that he'd arrested the mutt on another continent, in a different time zone and hemisphere, and on the far side of the International Dateline. He'd been in on the Fuad Yunis takedown in the Eastern Mediterranean ten or eleven years before, but he figured this might be the FBI's all-time distance record for arresting a subject and bringing the mutt home. Close enough to twelve thousand miles. Damn. The price had been the air travel, which had his body thoroughly wrecked and crying out for exercise. He changed the time setting on his watch, then wondered if the day was the same—but, he decided, while you could ask the USAF sergeant flight attendant for the time, you'd look like a total fucking idiot to have to ask the date. Maybe he'd get it from a copy of *USA Today* back in the States, Noonan thought, pushing his seat back and locking his eyes on the back of Wil Gearing's head. Then he realized: He'd have to turn his prisoner in when they got to Washington, but to whom, and on what charge?

"Okay," Clark said. "They get into Andrews in two hours, and then we'll take a puddle-jumper to Pope and figure out what to do."

"You've got a plan already, John," Foley observed. He'd known Clark long enough to recognize that look in his eyes.

"Ed, is this my case to run or isn't it?" he asked the DCI.

"Within reason, John. Let's try not to start a nuclear war or anything, shall we?"

"Ed, can this ever come to trial? What if Brightling ordered the destruction of all the evidence? It's not hard to do, is it? Hell, what are we talking about? A few buckets of bio-gunk and some computer records. There're commercial programs that destroy files thoroughly enough that you can't recover them ever, right?"

"True, but somebody might have printed stuff up, and a good search—"

"And then what do we have? A global panic when people realize what a bio-tech company can do if it wants. What good will that do?"

"Toss in a senior presidential advisor who violated security. Jesus, that

would not be very helpful for Jack, would it?" Foley paused. "But we can't *murder* these people, John! They're U.S. citizens with *rights,* remember?"

"I know, Ed. But we can't let them go, and we probably can't prosecute them, can we? What's that leave?" Clark paused. "I'll try something creative."

"What?"

John Clark explained his idea. "If they fight back, well, then, it makes things easier for us, doesn't it?"

"Twenty men against maybe fifty?"

"My twenty—actually, more like fifteen—against those feather merchants? Give me a break, Ed. It may be the moral equivalent of murder, but *not* the legal equivalent."

Foley frowned mightily, worried about what would happen if this ever made the media, but there was no particular reason that it should. The special-operations community kept all manner of secrets, many of which would look bad in the public media. "John," he said finally.

"Yeah, Ed?"

"Make sure you don't get caught."

"Never happened yet, Ed," Rainbow Six reminded him.

"Approved," said the Director of Central Intelligence, wondering how the hell he'd ever explain this one to the president of the United States.

"Okay, can I use my old office?" Clark had some phone calls to make.

"Sure."

"Is that *all* you need?" General Sam Wilson asked.

"Yes, General, that should do it."

"Can I ask what it's for?"

"Something covert," he heard Clark reply.

"That's all you're willing to say?"

"Sorry, Sam. You can check this out with Ed Foley if you want."

"I guess I will," the general's voice rumbled.

"Fine with me, sir." Clark hoped the "sir" part would assuage his hurt feelings.

It didn't, but Wilson was a pro, and knew the rules. "Okay, let me make some phone calls."

The first of them went to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, home of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, whose commanding officer, a colonel, made the expected objection, which was expectedly overridden. That colonel then lifted a phone of his own and ordered an MH-60K Night Hawk special-operations helicopter ferried to Pope Air Force Base, along with a maintenance crew for some TDY to a place he didn't know about. The next phone call went to an Air Force officer who took his notes and said, "Yes, sir," like the good airman he was. Getting the pieces in place was mainly an exercise in electronics, lifting encrypted phones and giving spooky orders to people who, fortunately, were accustomed to such things.

Chavez reflected that he'd come three quarters of the way around the world, most of it in the last twenty-two hours, and was landing at an airfield he'd used only once before. There was Air Force One, the VC-25A version of the

747 painted in a scheme known all over the world, and with him was someone who'd planned to kill all the people who'd known it. He'd learned years before not to reflect too much on the things that he did for his country and the $82,450 per year that he now earned as a mid-level CIA employee. He had a master's degree in international relations, which he jokingly defined as one country fucking another—but now, it wasn't a country, it was a *corporation*. Since when did *they* start to think they could play games at this level? he wondered. Maybe it was the New World Order that President Bush had once talked about. If that's what it was, it didn't make sense to the commander of Team-2. Governments were selected, by and large, by the citizens, and answered to them. Corporations answered—if they did so at all—to their shareholders. And that wasn't quite the same thing. Corporations were supposed to be overseen by the governments of the countries in which they were domiciled, but everything was changing now. It was private corporations that developed and defined the tools that people across the world were using. The changing technological world had given immense power to relatively small organizations, and now he was wondering if that was a good thing or not. Well, if people depended on governments for progress, then they'd still be riding horses and steamships around the world. But in this New World Order things had little in the way of controls at all, and that was something somebody should think about, Chavez decided, as the aircraft came to a halt on the Andrews ramp. Yet another anonymous blue USAF van appeared at the stairs even before they were fully deployed.

"Building up those frequent-flyer miles, Domingo?" John asked from the concrete.

"I suppose. Am I sprouting feathers yet?" Chavez asked tiredly.

"Only one more hop for now."

"Where to?"

"Bragg."

"Then let's do it. I don't want to get too used to standing still if it's just temporary." He needed a shave and a shower, but that, too, would have to wait until Fort Bragg. Soon they were in yet another Air Force short-haul aircraft, lifting off and heading southwest. This hop was blessedly short, and ended at Pope Air Force Base, which adjoins the home of the 82nd Airborne Infantry Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, also home of Delta Force and other special-operations units.

For the first time, someone had thought what to do with Wil Gearing, Noonan saw. Three military policemen carted him off to the base stockade. The rest of the people on the trip ended up in Bachelor Officers' Quarters, more colloquially known as "the Q."

Chavez wondered if the clothing he stripped off would ever be clean enough to wear again. But then he showered, and set on the sink in the bathroom was a razor that allowed him to scrape off a full day's accumulation of black blur on his—he thought—manly face. He emerged to find clothing laid out.

"I had the base people run this over."

"Thanks, John." Chavez struggled into the white boxers and T-shirt, then selected the forest-pattern Battle Dress Uniform—BDU—items laid on the bed,

complete to socks and boots.

"Long day?"

"Shit, John, it's been a long *month* coming back from Australia." He sat down on the bed, then on reflection lay down on the bedspread. "Now what?"

"Brazil."

"How come?"

"That's where they all went. We tracked them down, and I have overheads of the place where they're camped out."

"So, we're going to see them?"

"Yes."

"To do *what,* John?"

"To settle this thing out once and for all, Domingo."

"Suits me, but is it legal?"

"When did you start worrying about that?"

"I'm a married man, John, and a father, remember? I have to be responsible now, man."

"It's legal enough, Ding," his father-in-law told the younger man.

"Okay, you say so. What happens now?"

"You get a nap. The rest of the team arrives in about half an hour."

"The rest of what team?"

"Everybody who can move and shoot, son."

"Muy bien, jefe," Chavez said, closing his eyes.

The British Airways 737-700 was on the ground for as little time as possible, refueled from an Air Force fuel bowser and then lifted off for Dulles International Airport outside Washington, where its presence would not cause much in the way of comment. The Rainbow troopers were bused off to a secure location and allowed to continue their rest. That worried some of them slightly. Being allowed to rest implied that rest was something they'd need soon.

Clark and Alistair Stanley conferred in a room at Joint Special Operations Command Headquarters, a nondescript building facing a small parking lot.

"So, what gives here?" asked Colonel William Byron. Called "Little Willie" by his uniformed colleagues, Colonel Byron had the most unlikely sobriquet in the United States Army. Fully six-four and two hundred thirty pounds of lean, hard meat, Byron was the largest man in JSOC. The name dated back to West Point, where he'd grown six inches and thirty pounds over four years of exercise and wholesome food, and ended up a linebacker on the Army football team that had murdered Navy 35–10 in the autumn classic at Philadelphia's Veterans Stadium. His accent was still south Georgia despite his master's degree in management from Harvard Business School, which was becoming favored in the American military.

"We're taking a trip here," Clark told him, passing the overheads across the table. "We need a helo and not much else."

"Where the hell is this shithole?"

"Brazil, west of Manaus, on the Río Negro."

"Some facility," Byron observed, putting on the reading glasses that he hated. "Who built it, and who's there now?"

"The people who wanted to kill the whole fucking world," Clark responded, reaching for his cell phone when it started chirping. Again he had to wait for the encryption system to handshake with the other end. "This is Clark," he said finally.

"Ed Foley here, John. The sample was examined by the troops up at Fort Detrick."

"And?"

"And it's a version of the Ebola virus, they say, modified—'engineered' is the term they used, as a matter of fact—by the addition of what appears to be cancer genes. They say that makes the little bastard more robust. Moreover, the virus strands were encased in some sort of mini-capsules to help it survive in the open. In other words, John, what your Russian friend told you—it looks like it's fully confirmed."

"What did you do with Dmitriy?" Rainbow Six asked.

"A safe house out in Winchester," the DCI replied. It was the usual place to quarter a foreign national the CIA wanted to protect. "Oh, the FBI tells me that the Kansas State Police are looking for him on a murder charge. Supposedly he killed one Foster Hunnicutt from the state of Montana, or so he has been accused."

"Why don't you have the Bureau tell Kansas that he didn't kill anybody. He was with me the whole time," Clark suggested. They had to take care of this man, didn't they? John had already made the conceptual leap of forgetting that Popov had instigated an attack on his wife and daughter. Business, in this case, was business, and it wasn't the first time a KGB enemy had turned into a valuable friend.

"Okay, yes, I can do that." It was a little white lie, Foley agreed, set against a big black truth. In his Lan-gley, Virginia, office, Foley wondered why his hands weren't shaking. These lunatics had not only *wanted* to kill the whole world, but they'd also had the *ability* to do so. This was a new development the CIA would have to study in detail, a whole new type of threat, and investigating it would be neither easy nor fun.

"Okay, thanks, Ed." Clark killed the phone and looked at the others in the room. "We just confirmed the contents of the chlorine canister. They created a modified form of Ebola for distribution."

"What?" Colonel Byron asked. Clark gave him a ten-minute explanation. "You're serious, eh?" he asked finally.

"As a heart attack," Clark replied. "They hired Dmitriy Popov to interface with terrorists to set up incidents throughout Europe. That was to increase the fear of terrorism, to get Global Security the consulting contract for the Australians, and—"

"Bill Henriksen?" Colonel Byron asked. "Hell, I *know* that guy!"

"Yeah? Well, his people were supposed to deliver the bug through the fogging-cooling system at the Olympic stadium in Sydney, Willie. Chavez was there in the control room when this Wil Gearing guy showed up with the container, and the contents were checked out by the USAMRIID guys at Fort Detrick. You know, the FBI could almost make a criminal case out of this. But not quite," Clark added.

"So, you're heading down there to . . ."

"To talk to them, Willie," Clark finished the statement for him. "They have the aircraft scrubbed yet?"

Byron checked his watch. "Ought to."

"Then it's time for us to get moving."

"Okay. I have BDUs for all your people, John. Sure you don't need a little help?"

"No, Willie. I appreciate the offer, but we want to keep this one tight, don't we?"

"I suppose, John." Byron stood. "Follow me, guys. Those folks you're going to see in Brazil?"

"Yeah?" Clark said.

"Give them a special hello for JSOC, will ya?"

"Yes, sir," John promised. "We'll do that."

The major aircraft sitting on the Pope Air Force Base ramp was an Air Force C-5B Galaxy transport, which the local ground crew had been working on for several hours. All official markings had been painted over, with HORIZON CORPORATION painted in the place of the USAF roundels. Even the tail number was gone. The clamshell cargo doors in the rear were being sealed now. Clark and Stanley got there first. The rest of the troops arrived by bus, carrying their personal gear, and they climbed into the passenger compartment aft of the wing box. From that point on, it was just a matter of having the flight crew—dressed in civilian clothing—climb up to the flight deck and commence start-up procedures as though they were a commercial flight. A KC-10 tanker would meet up with them south of Jamaica to top off their fuel tanks.

"Okay, so that's what seems to have happened," John Brightling told the people assembled in the auditorium. He saw disappointment on the faces of the other fifty-two people here, but some relief was evident as well. Well, even true believers had consciences, he imagined. Too bad.

"What do we do here, John?" Steve Berg asked. He'd been one of the senior scientists on the Project, developer of the "A" and "B" vaccines, who'd also helped to design Shiva. Berg was one of the best people Horizon Corporation had ever hired.

"We study the rain forest. We have destroyed everything of evidentiary value. The Shiva supply is gone. So are the vaccines. So are all the computer records of our laboratory notes, and so forth. The only records of the Project are what you people have in your heads. In other words, if anybody tries to make a criminal case against us, you just have to keep your mouths shut, and there will be no case. Bill?" John Brightling gestured to Henriksen, who walked to the podium.

"Okay, you know that I used to be in the FBI. I know how they make their criminal cases. Making one against us will not be easy under the best of circumstances. The FBI has to play by the rules, and they're strict rules. They *must* read you your rights, one of which is to have a lawyer present during questioning. All you have to say is, 'Yes, I want my lawyer here.' If you say *that,* then they can't even ask you what the time is. Then you call us, and we

get a lawyer to you, and the lawyer will tell you, right in front of the case agents, that you will not talk at all, and he'll tell the agents that you will not talk, and that if they try to make you talk then they've violated all sorts of statutes and Supreme Court decisions. That means that *they* can get into trouble, and anything you might say cannot be used anywhere. Those are your civil protections.

"Next," Bill Henriksen went on, "we will spend our time here looking at the rich ecosystem around us, and formulating a cover story. That will take us some time and—"

"Wait, if we can avoid answering their questions, then—"

"Why concoct a cover story? That's easy. Our lawyers will have to talk some with the United States attorneys. If we generate a plausible cover story, then we can make them go away. If the cops know they can't win, they won't fight. A good cover story will help with that. Okay, we can say that, yes, we were looking at the Ebola virus, because it's a nasty little fucker, and the world needs a cure. Then, maybe, some loony employee decided to kill the world—but *we* had nothing to do with that. Why are we here? We're here to do primary medical research into chemical compounds in the flora and fauna here in the tropical rain forest. That's legitimate, isn't it?" Heads nodded.

"Okay, we'll take our time to construct an ironclad cover story. Then we'll all memorize it. That way, when our lawyers let us talk to the FBI so that we can be cooperative, we give them only information which cannot hurt us, and will, in fact, help us evade the charges that they might hit us with. People, if we stand together and stick to our scripts, we can't lose. Please believe me on that. We *can't lose* if we use our heads. Okay?"

"And we can also work on Project 2," Brightling said, resuming the podium. "You are some of the smartest people in the world, and our commitment to our ultimate goal has *not* changed. We'll be here for a year or so. It's a chance for us to study nature, and learn things we need to learn. It will also be a year of working to find a new way to achieve that to which we have dedicated our lives," he went on, seeing nods. There were already alternate ideas he could investigate, probably. He was still the chairman of the world's foremost biotech company. He still had the best and brightest people in the world working for him. He and they still cared about saving the planet. They'd just have to find something else, and they had the resources and the time to do so.

"Okay," Brightling told them, with a beaming smile. "It's been a long day. Let's all bed down and get some rest. Tomorrow morning, I'm going out in the forest to see an ecosystem that we all want to learn about."

The applause moved him. Yes, all of these people cared as much as he did, shared his dedication—and, who knew, maybe there was a way for Project 2 to happen.

Bill Henriksen came up to John and Carol during the walk to their rooms. "There is one other potential problem."

"What's that?"

"What if they send a paramilitary team here?"

"You mean like the Army?" Carol Brightling asked.

"That's right."

"We fight them," John responded. "We have guns here, don't we?"

And that they did. The Project Alternate armory had no fewer than a hundred German-made G-3 military assault rifles, the real sort, able to go full-automatic, and quite a few of the people here knew how to shoot.

"Yes. Okay, the problem with this is, they can't really arrest us legally, but if they do manage to apprehend us and get us back to America, then the courts won't care that the arrests were illegal. That's a point of American law—once you're in front of the judge, that's all the judge cares about. So, if people show up, we just have to discourage them. I think—"

"I think our people won't need much in the way of encouragement to fight back after what those bastards did to the Project!"

"I agree, but we'll just have to see what happens. Damn, I wish we'd gotten some radar installed here."

"Huh?" John asked.

"They will come, if they come, by helicopter. Too far to walk through the jungle, and boats are too slow, and our people think in terms of helicopters. That's just how they do things."

"How do they even know where we are, Bill? Hell, we skipped the country pretty fast and—"

"And they can ask the flight crews where they delivered us. They had to file flight plans to Manaus, and that narrows it down some, doesn't it?"

"They won't talk. They're well paid," John objected. "How long before they can figure all that out?"

"Oh, a couple of days at worst. Two weeks at best. I think we ought to get our people trained in defense. We can start that tomorrow," Henriksen proposed.

"Do it," John Brightling agreed. "And let me call home and see if anybody's talked to our pilots."

The master suite had its own communications room. Project Alternate was state-of-the-art in many ways, from the medical labs to communications. In the latter case the antenna farm next to the power-generating facility had its own satellite-phone system that also allowed e-mail and electronic access to Horizon Corp.'s massive internal computer network. Immediately upon arriving in his suite, Brightling flipped on the phone system and called Kansas. He left instructions for the flight crews, now most on the way back home, to inform Alternate if anyone tried to interrogate them regarding their most recent overseas trip. That done, there was little else left to do. Brightling showered and walked into the bedroom and found his wife there.

"It's so sad," Carol observed in the darkness.

"It's goddamned infuriating," John agreed. "We were so fucking close!"

"What went wrong?"

"I'm not sure, but I think our friend Popov found out what we were doing, then he killed the guy who told him about it and skipped. Somehow he told them enough to capture Wil Gearing down in Sydney. Damn, we were within *hours* of initiating Phase One!" he growled.

"Well, next time we'll be more careful," Carol soothed, reaching to stroke his arm. Failure or not, it was good to lie in bed with him again. "What about Wil?"

"He's going to have to take his chances. I'll get the best lawyers I can find

for him," John promised. "And get him the word to keep his mouth shut."

Gearing had stopped talking. Somehow arriving back in America had awakened in him the idea of civil rights and criminal proceedings, and now he wasn't saying anything to anybody. He sat in his aft-facing seat in the C-5, looking backward at the circular seal that led into the immense void area there in the tail, while these soldiers mainly dozed. Two of them were wide awake, however, and looking right at him all the way while they chatted about something or other. They were loaded for bear, Gearing saw, lots of personal weapons evident here and others loaded into the cargo area below. Where were they going? Nobody had told him that.

Clark, Chavez, and Stanley were in the compartment aft of the flight deck on the massive air-lifter. The flight crew was regular Air Force—most such transports are actually flown by reservists, mainly airline pilots in civilian life—and they kept their distance. They'd been warned by their superiors, the warnings further reinforced by the alteration in the aircraft's exterior paint job. They were civilians now? They were dressed in civilian clothes so as to make the deception plausible to someone. But who would believe that a Lockheed Galaxy was civilian owned?

"It looks pretty straightforward," Chavez observed. It was interesting to be an infantryman again, again a Ninja, Ding mused, again to own the night—except they were planning to go in the daylight. "Question is, will they resist?"

"If we're lucky," Clark responded.

"How many of them?"

"They went down in four Gulfstreams, figure a max of sixteen people each. That's sixty-four, Domingo."

"Weapons?"

"Would you live in the jungle without them?" Clark asked. The answer he anticipated was, not very likely.

"But are they trained?" Team-2's commander persisted.

"Most unlikely. These people will be scientist-types, but some will know the woods, maybe some are hunters. I suppose we'll see if Noonan's new toys work as well as he's been telling us."

"I expect so," Chavez agreed. The good news was that his people were highly trained and well equipped. Daylight or not, it would be a Ninja job. "I guess you're in overall command?"

"You bet your sweet ass, Domingo," Rainbow Six replied. They stopped talking as the aircraft jolted somewhat, as they flew into the wake-turbulence of the KC-10 for aerial refueling. Clark didn't want to watch the procedure. It had to be the most unnatural act in the world, two massive aircraft mating in midair.

Malloy was a few seats farther aft, looking at the satellite overheads as well, along with Lieutenant Harrison.

"Looks easy," the junior officer opined.

"Yeah, pure vanilla, unless they shoot at us. Then it gets a little exciting," he promised his copilot.

"We're going to be close to overloading the aircraft," Harrison warned.

"That's why it's got two engines, son," the Marine pointed out.

It was dark outside. The C-5's flight crew looked down at a surface with few lights after they'd topped off their tanks from the KC-10, but for them it was essentially an airliner flight. The autopilot knew where it was, and where it was going, with waypoints programmed in, and a thousand miles ahead the airport at Manaus, Brazil, knew they were coming, a special air-cargo flight from America which would need ramp space for a day or so, and refueling services—this information had already been faxed ahead.

It wasn't yet dawn when they spotted the runway lights. The pilot, a young major, squirmed erect in his front-left seat and slowed the aircraft, making an easy visual approach while the first-lieutenant copilot to his right watched the instruments and called off altitude and speed numbers. Presently, he rotated the nose up and allowed the C-5B to settle onto the runway, with only a minor jolt to tell those aboard that the aircraft wasn't flying anymore. He had a diagram of the airport, and taxied off to the far corner of the ramp, then stopped the aircraft and told the loadmaster that it was his turn to go to work.

It took a few minutes to get things organized, but then the huge rear doors opened. Then the MH-60K Night Hawk was dragged out into the predawn darkness. Sergeant Nance supervised three other enlisted men from the 160th SOAR as they extended the rotor blades from their stowed position, and climbed atop the fuselage to make sure that they were safely locked in place for flight operations. The Night Hawk was fully fueled. Nance installed the M-60 machine gun in its place on the right side and told Colonel Malloy that the aircraft was ready. Malloy and Harrison preflighted the helicopter and decided that it was ready to go, then radioed this information to Clark.

The last people off the C-5B were the Rainbow troopers, now dressed in multicolor BDU fatigues, their faces painted in green and brown camouflage makeup. Gearing came down last of all, a bag over his head so that he couldn't see anything.

It turned out that they couldn't get everyone aboard. Vega and four others were left behind to watch the helicopter lift off just at first light. The blinking strobes climbed into the air and headed northwest, while the soldiers groused at having to stand in the warm, humid air close to the transport. About that time, an automobile arrived at the aircraft with some forms for the flight crew to fill out. To the surprise of everyone present, no special note was made of the aircraft type. The paint job announced that it was a large, privately owned transport, and the airport personnel accepted this, since all the paperwork seemed to be properly filled out, and therefore had to be true and correct.

It was so much like Vietnam, Clark thought, riding in a helicopter over solid treetops of green. But he was not in a Huey this time, and it was nearly thirty years since his first exposure to combat operations. He couldn't remember being very afraid—tense, yes, but not really afraid—and that struck him as remarkable, looking back now. He was holding one of the suppressed MP-10s, and now, riding in this chopper to battle, it was as though his youth had returned—until he turned to see the other troops aboard and remarked on how young they all looked, then reminded himself that they were, in the main, over thirty years of age, and that for them to look young meant that he

had to be old. He put that unhappy thought aside and looked out the door past Sergeant Nance and his machine gun. The sky was lightening up now, too much light for them to use their night-vision goggles, but not enough to see very well. He wondered what the weather would be like here. They were right on the equator, and that was jungle down there, and it would be hot and damp, and down there under the trees would be snakes, insects, and the other creatures for whom this most inhospitable of places was indeed home—and they were welcome to it, John told them without words, out the door of the Night Hawk.

"How we doing, Malloy?" John asked over the intercom.

"Should have it in sight any second—there, see the lights dead ahead!"

"Got it." Clark waved for the troops in the back to get ready. "Proceed as planned, Colonel Malloy."

"Roger that, Six." He held course and speed, on a heading of two-nine-six, seven hundred feet AGL—above ground level—and a speed of a hundred twenty knots. The lights in the distance seemed hugely out of place, but lights they were, just where the navigation system and the satellite photos said they would be. Soon the point source broke up into separate distinct sources.

"Okay, Gearing," Clark was saying in the back. "We're letting you go back to talk to your boss."

"Oh?" the prisoner asked through the black cloth bag over his head.

"Yes," John confirmed. "You're delivering a message. If he surrenders to us, nobody gets hurt. If he doesn't, things'll get nasty. His only option is unconditional surrender. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah." The head nodded inside the black bag.

The Night Hawk's nose came up just as it approached the west end of the runway that some construction crew had carved into the jungle. Malloy made a fast landing, without allowing his wheels to touch the ground—standard procedure, lest there be mines there. Gearing was pushed out the door, and immediately the helicopter lifted back off, reversing course to the runway's east end.

Gearing pulled the bag from his head and oriented himself, spotted the lights for Project Alternate, a facility he knew about but had never visited, and headed there without looking back.

At the east end, the Night Hawk again came in to hover a foot or so off the ground. The Rainbow troops leaped out, and the helicopter immediately climbed up for the return trip to Manaus, which would be made into the rising sun. Malloy and Harrison put on their sunglasses and held course, keeping a close watch on their fuel state. The 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment maintained its helos pretty well, the Marine thought, flexing his gloved hands on the controls. Just like the Air Force pukes in England.

Noonan was the first to get set up. All the troops ran immediately into the thick cover a scant hundred yards from the thick concrete pavement of the runway and headed west, wondering if Gearing had noted their separate arrival here. It took fully half an hour for them to make their way over a distance that, had they run it, would have taken scarcely ten minutes. For all

that, Clark thought it was good time—and now he remembered the creepy feeling that came from being in the jungle, where the very air seemed alive with things hoping to suck one's blood and give you whatever diseases would take your life as slowly and painfully as possible. How the hell had he endured the nineteen months he'd spent in Vietnam? Ten minutes here and he was ready to leave. Around him, massive hardwood trees reached two or three hundred feet to the sky to form the top canopy of this fetid place, with secondary trees reaching about a third that height, and yet another that stopped at fifty or so, with bushes and other plants at his feet. He could hear the sound of movement— whether his own people or animals he couldn't be sure, though he knew that this environment supported all manner of life, most of it unfriendly to humans. His people spread out to the north, most of them plucking branches to tuck under the elastic bands that ran around their Kevlar helmets, the better to break up the outline of their unnatural shapes and improve their concealment.

The front door of the building was unlocked, Gearing found, amazed that this should be so. He walked into what appeared to be a residential building, entered an elevator, punched the topmost button and arrived on the fourth floor. Once there, it was just a matter of opening one of the double doors on the corridor and flipping on a light in what had to be the master suite. The bedroom doors were open, and he walked that way.

John Brightling's eyes reported the sudden blaze of light from the sitting room. He opened them and saw—

"What the hell are you doing here, Wil?"

"They brought me down, John."

"*Who* brought you down?"

"The people who captured me in Sydney," Gearing explained.

"What?" It was a little much for so early in the morning. Brightling stood and put on the robe next to the bed.

"John, what is it?" Carol asked from her side of the bed.

"Nothing, honey, just relax." John went to the sitting room, pulling the doors closed as he did so.

"What the fuck is going on, Wil?"

"They're here, John."

"*Who*'s here?"

"The counterterror people, the ones who went to Australia, the ones who arrested me. They're *here,* John!" Gearing told him, looking around the room, thoroughly disoriented by all the traveling he'd done and not sure of much of anything at the moment.

"Here? Where? In the building?"

"No." Gearing shook his head. "They dropped me off by helicopter. Their boss is a guy named Clark. He said to tell you that you have to surrender—unconditional surrender, John."

"Or else what?" Brightling demanded.

"Or else they're going to come in and get us!"

"Really?" This was no way to be awakened. Brightling had spent two hundred million dollars to build this place—labor costs were low in Brazil—

and he considered Project Alternate a fortress, and more than that, a fortress that would have taken months to locate. Armed men—here, right now—demanding his surrender? What was this?

Okay, he thought. First he called Bill Henriksen's room and told him to come upstairs. Next he lit up his computer. There was no e-mail telling him that anyone had spoken with his flight crews. So, nobody had told anyone where they were. So, how the hell had anyone found out? And who the hell was here? And what the hell did they want? Sending someone he knew in to demand their surrender seemed like something from a movie.

"What is it, John?" Henriksen asked. Then he looked at the other man in the room: "Wil, how did you get here?"

Brightling held up his hand for silence, trying to think while Gearing and Henriksen exchanged information. He switched off the room lights, looked out the large windows for signs of activity, and saw nothing at all.

"How many?" Bill was asking.

"Ten or fifteen soldiers," Gearing replied. "Are you going to do what they—are you going to surrender to them?" the former colonel asked.

"Hell, no!" John Brightling snarled. "Bill, what they're doing, is it legal?"

"No, not really. I don't think it is, anyway."

"Okay, let's get our people up and armed."

"Right," the security chief said dubiously. He left the room for the main lobby, whose desk controlled the public-address system in the complex.

"Oh, baby, talk to me," Noonan said. The newest version of the DKL people-finding system was up and running now. He'd spotted two of the receiver units about three hundred yards apart. Each had a transmitter that reported to a receiving unit that was in turn wired to his laptop computer.

The DKL system tracked the electromagnetic field generated by the beating of the human heart. This was, it had been discovered, a unique signal. The initial items sold by the company had merely indicated the direction of the signals they received, but the new ones had been improved with parabolic antennas to increase their effective range now to fifteen hundred meters, and, by triangulation, to give fairly exact positions—accurate to from two to four meters. Clark was looking down at the computer screen. It showed blips indicating people evenly spaced in their rooms in the headquarters/residential building.

"Boy, this would have been useful in Eye-Corps back when I was a kid," John breathed. Each of the Rainbow troopers had a GPS locator built into his personal radio transceiver, and these, also, reported to the computer, giving Noonan and Clark exact locations for their own people, and locations also on those in the building to their left.

"Yeah, that's why I got excited about this puppy," the FBI agent noted. "I can't tell you what floor they're on, but look, they've all started moving. I guess somebody woke them up."

"Command, this is Bear," Clark's radio crackled.

"Bear, Command. Where are you?"

"Five minutes out. Where do you want me to make my delivery?"

"Same place as before. Let's keep you out of the line of fire. Tell Vega and

the rest that we are on the north side of the runway. My command post is a hundred meters north of the treeline. We'll talk them in from there."

"Roger that, Command. Bear out."

"This must be an elevator," Noonan said, pointing at the screen. Six blips converged on a single point, stayed together for half a minute or so, then diverged. A number of blips were gathering in one place, probably a lobby of some sort. Then they started moving north and converged again.

• • •

"I like this one," Dave Dawson said, hefting his G3 rifle. The black German-made weapon had fine balance and excellent sights. He'd been the site-security chief in Kansas, another true believer who didn't relish the idea of flying back to America in federal custody and spending the rest of his life at Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary—a part of Kansas for which he had little love. "What do we do now, Bill?"

"Okay, we split into pairs. Everybody gets one of these." Henriksen started passing over handheld radios. "Think. Don't shoot until we tell you to. Use your heads."

"Okay, Bill. I'll show these bastards what a hunter can do," Killgore observed, liking the feel of his rifle as well and pairing off with Kirk Maclean.

"These, too." Henriksen opened another door, revealing camouflage jackets and pants for them to wear.

"What can we do to protect ourselves, Bill?" Steve Berg asked.

"We can kill the fuckers!" Killgore replied. "They're not cops, they're not here to arrest us, are they, Bill?"

"Well, no, and they haven't identified themselves, and so the law is—the law is unclear on this one, guys."

"And we're in a foreign country anyway. So those guys are probably breaking the fucking law to be here, and if people want to attack us with guns we can defend ourselves, right?" Ben Farmer asked.

"You know what you're doing?" Berg asked Farmer.

"Ex-Marine, baby. Light weapons, line-grunt, yeah, I know what's happening out there." Farmer looked confident, and was as angry as the rest of them at the upset of their plans.

"Okay, people, *I* am in command, okay?" Henriksen said to them. He had thirty armed men now. That would have to be enough. "We make them come to us. If you see somebody advancing toward you with a weapon, you take the bastard out. But be *patient!* Let them in close. Don't waste ammo. Let's see if we can discourage them. They can't stay here long without supplies, and they only have one helicopter to—"

"Look!" Maclean said. A mile and a half away, the black helo landed at the far end of the runway. Three or four people ran from it into the woods.

"Okay, be careful, people, and *think* before you act."

"Let's do it," Killgore said aggressively, waving to Maclean to follow him out the door.

“They’re leaving the building,” Noonan said. “Looks like thirty or so.” He looked up to orient himself on the terrain. “They’re heading into the woods—figuring to ambush us, maybe?”

“We’ll see about that. Team-2, this is Command,” Clark said into his tactical radio.

“-2 Lead here, Command,” Chavez replied. “I can see people running out of the building. They appear to be armed with shoulder weapons.”

“Roger that. Okay, Ding, we will proceed as briefed.”

“Understood, Command. Let me get organized here.” Team-2 was intact, except for the absence of Julio Vega, who’d just arrived on the second helicopter delivery. Chavez got onto his radio and paired his people off with their normal partners, extending his line northward into the forest, and keeping himself at the hinge point on the southern end of the line. The Team-1 people would be the operational reserve, assigned directly to John Clark at the command post.

Noonan watched the Team-2 shooters move. Each friendly blip was identified by a letter so that he’d know them by name. “John,” he asked, “when do we go weapons-free?”

“Patience, Tim,” Six replied.

Noonan was kneeling on the damp ground, with his laptop computer sitting on a fallen tree. The battery was supposed to be good for five hours, and he had two spares in his pack.

Pierce and Loiselle took the lead, heading half a kilometer into the jungle. It wasn’t a first for either of them. Mike Pierce had worked in Peru twice, and Loiselle had been to Africa three separate times. The familiarity with the environmental conditions was not the same thing as comfort. Both worried about snakes as much as the armed people heading their way, sure that this forest was replete with them, either poisonous or willing to eat them whole. The temperature was rising, and both soldiers were sweating under their camo makeup. After ten minutes, they found a nice spot, with a standing tree and a fallen one next to it, with a decent field of fire.

“They’ve got radios,” Noonan reported. “Want me to take them away?” He had his jammer set up already.

Clark shook his head. “Not yet. Let’s listen in to them for a while.”

“Fair enough.” The FBI agent flipped the radio scanner to the speaker setting.

“This is some place,” one voice said. “Look at these trees, man.”

“Yeah, big, ain’t they?”

“What kind of trees?” a third asked.

“The kind somebody can hide behind and shoot your ass from!” a more serious voice pointed out. “Killgore and Maclean, keep moving north about half a mile, find a place, and sit still there!”

“Yeah, yeah, okay, Bill,” the third voice agreed.

“Listen up everybody,” “Bill’s” voice told them. “Don’t clutter up these radios, okay? Report in when I call you or when you see something important. Otherwise keep them clear!”

“Yeah.”

"Okay."

"You say so, Bill."

"Roger."

"I can't see shit," a fifth responded.

"Then find a place where you can!" another helpful voice suggested.

"They're in pairs, moving close together, most of'em," Noonan said, staring down at his screen. "This pair is heading right for Mike and Louis."

Clark looked down at the screen. "Pierce and Loiselle, this is Command. You have two targets approaching you from the south, distance about two-fifty meters."

"Roger, Command. Pierce copies."

Sergeant Pierce settled into his spot, looking south, letting his eyes sweep back and forth through a ninety-degree arc. Six feet away, Loiselle did the same, starting to relax as far as the environment was concerned, and tensing with the approach of enemies.

Dr. John Killgore knew the woods and knew hunting. He moved slowly and carefully now, with every step looking down to assure quiet footing, then up and around to examine the landscape for a human shape. They'd be coming in to get us, he thought, and so he and Maclean would find good spots to shoot them from, just like hunting deer, picking a place in the shadows where you could belly up and wait for the game to come. Another couple of hundred yards, he thought, would be about right.

Three hundred meters away, Clark used the computer screen and the radios to get his people moving to good spots. This new capability was incredible. Like radar, he could spot people long before he or anyone else could see or hear them. This new electronic toy would be an astounding blessing to every soldier who ever made use of it . . .

"Here we go," Noonan said quietly, like a commentator at a golf tournament, tapping the screen.

"Pierce and Loiselle, this is Command, you have two approaching targets just east of south, approaching at about two hundred meters."

"Roger, Command. Can we engage?" Pierce asked. At his perch, Loiselle was looking at him instead of his direct front.

"Affirmative," Clark replied. Then: "Rainbow, this is Six. Weapons-free. I repeat, we are weapons-free at this time."

"Roger that, I copy weapons-free." Pierce acknowledged.

"Let's wait till we can get both of 'em, Louis," Pierce whispered.

"D'accord," Sergeant Loiselle agreed. Both men looked to their south, eyes sharp and ears listening for the first snapped twig.

This wasn't so bad, Killgore thought. He'd hunted in worse country, far noisier country. There were no pine needles here to make that annoying swishing sound that deer could hear from half a time zone away. Plenty of shadows,

little in the way of direct sunlight. Except for the bugs, he might have even been comfortable here. But the bugs were murder. The next time he came out, he'd try to spray some repellent, the physician thought, as he moved forward slowly. The branch of a bush was in his way. He used his left hand to move it, lest he make noise by walking through it.

There, Pierce saw. A bush branch had just moved, and there wasn't a breath of wind down there to make that happen.

"Louis," he whispered. When the Frenchman turned, Pierce held up one finger and pointed. Loiselle nodded and returned to looking forward.

"I have a visual target," Pierce reported over his radio. "One target, a hundred fifty meters to my south."

Maclean was less comfortable on his feet than he would have been on horseback. He did his best to mimic the way John Killgore was moving, however, though both keeping quiet and keeping up were proving to be incompatible. He tripped over an exposed root and fell, making noise, then swearing quietly before he stood.

• • •

"Bonjour," Loiselle whispered to himself. It was as though the noise had switched on a light of sorts. In any case, Sergeant Loiselle now saw a man-shape moving in the shadows, about one hundred fifty meters away. "Mike?" he whispered, pointing to where his target was.

"Okay, Louis," Pierce responded. "Let them get closer, man."

"Yes."

Both men shouldered their MP-10s, though the range was a little too far as yet.

If there was anything larger than an insect moving, Killgore thought, he couldn't hear it. There were supposed to be jaguars in this jungle, leopard-size hunting cats whose pelts would make a nice throw rug, he thought, and the 7.62mm NATO round this rifle fired should be more than adequate for that purpose. Probably night hunters, though, and hard to stalk. But what about the capybaras, the largest rat in the world, supposed to be good to eat despite its biological family—they were supposed to feed during the day, weren't they? There was so much for his eyes to see here, so much visual clutter, and his eyes weren't used to it yet. Okay, he'd find a place to sit still, so that his eyes could learn a pattern of light and darkness and then note the change in it that denoted something that didn't belong. *There's a good spot,* he thought, a fallen tree and a standing one . . .

"Come on in, sweetheart," Pierce whispered to himself. At one hundred yards, he thought, that would be close enough. He'd have to hold a little high, like for the target's chin, and the natural drop of the bullet would place the rounds

in the upper chest. A head shot would be nicer, but the distance was a little too far for that, and he wanted to be careful.

• • •

Killgore whistled and waved to Maclean, pointing forward. Kirk nodded agreement. His initial enthusiasm for this job was fading rapidly. The jungle wasn't quite what he expected, and being out here with people trying to attack him didn't make the surroundings any more attractive. He found himself, strangely, thinking of that singles bar in New York, the darkened room and loud dance music, such a strange environment . . . and the women he'd found there. It was too bad, really, what had happened to them. They were—had been—people after all. But worst of all, their deaths had not had any meaning. At least, had the Project moved forward, their sacrifice would have counted for something, but now . . . but now it was just a failure, and here he was in the fucking jungle holding a loaded rifle, looking for people who wanted to do to him what he'd done....

"Louis, you got your target?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, let's do it," Pierce called in a raspy voice, and with that he tightened his grip on the MP-10, centered the target on the sights, and squeezed the trigger gently. The immediate result was the gentle *puff-puff-puff* sound of the three shots, the somewhat louder metallic sound of the cycling of the submachine gun's action, and then the impact of all three rounds on the target. He saw the man's mouth spring open, and then the figure fell. His ears reported similar sounds from his left. Pierce left his spot and ran forward, his weapon up, with Loiselle in close support.

Killgore's mind didn't have time to analyze what had happened to him, just the impacts to his chest, and now he was looking straight up into the treetops, where there were small cracks of blue and white from the distant sky. He tried to say something, but he wasn't breathing very well at the moment, and when he turned his head a few inches, there was no one there to see. Where was Kirk? he wondered, but found himself unable to move his body to—he'd been shot? The pain was real but strangely distant, and he lowered his head to see blood on his chest and—

—who was that in camouflage clothing, his face painted green and brown?

And who are you? Sergeant Pierce wondered. His three rounds had sprinkled across the chest, missing the heart but ripping into the upper lungs and major blood vessels. The eyes were still looking, focused on him.

"Wrong playground, partner," he said softly, and then life left the eyes, and he bent down to collect the man's rifle. It was a nice one, Pierce saw, slinging it across his back. Then he looked left to see Loiselle holding an identical rifle in one hand and waving his hand across his throat. His target was bloodily dead, too.

“Hey, you can even tell when they get killed,” Noonan said. When the hearts stopped, so did the signals the DKL gadget tracked. Cool, Timothy thought.

“Pierce and Loiselle, this is command. We copy you took down two targets.”

“That’s affirmative,” Pierce answered. “Anything else close to us?”

“Pierce,” Noonan replied, “two more about two hundred meters south of your current position. This pair is still moving eastward slowly, they’re heading toward McTyler and Patterson.”

“Pierce, this is Command. Sit tight,” Clark ordered.

“Roger, Command.” Next Pierce picked up the radio his target had been carrying, leaving it on. With nothing else to do, he fished into the man’s pants. So, he saw a minute later, he had just killed John Killgore, M.D., of Binghamton, New York. *Who were you?* he wanted to ask the body, but this Killgore fellow would answer no more questions, and who was to say that the answers would have made any sense?

“Okay, people, everybody check in,” the citizens band walkie-talkie said over Noonan’s scanner unit.

• • •

Henriksen was just inside the treeline, hoping that his people had the brains to sit still once they found good spots. He worried about the incoming soldiers, if that’s what they were. The Project people were a little too eager and a little too dumb. His radio crackled with voices acknowledging his order, except for two.

“Killgore and Maclean, report in.” Nothing. “John, Kirk, where the hell are you?”

“That’s the pair we took out,” Pierce called into Command. “Want me to let him know?”

“Negative, Pierce, you know better than that!” Clark replied angrily.

“No sense of humor, our chief,” Loiselle observed to his partner, with a Gallic shrug.

“Who’s closest to them?” the voice on the radio asked next.

“Me and Dawson,” another voice answered.

“Okay, Berg and Dawson, move north, take your time, and see what you can see, okay?”

“Okay, Bill,” yet another voice said.

“More business coming our way, Louis,” Pierce said.

“Oui,” Loiselle agreed. He pointed. “That tree, Mike.” It had to be three meters across at the base, Pierce saw. You could build a house from the lumber from just that one. A big house, too.

“Pierce and Loiselle, Command, two targets just started moving toward you, almost due south, they’re close together.”

Dave Dawson was a man trained in the United States Army fifteen years before, and he knew enough to be worried. He told Berg to stay close behind him, and the scientist did, as Dawson led the way.

• • •

"Command, Patterson, I have movement to my direct front, about two hundred meters out."

"That's about right," Noonan said. "They're heading straight for Mike and Louis."

"Patterson, Command, let 'em go."

"Roger," Hank Patterson acknowledged.

"This isn't very fair," Noonan observed, looking up from his tactical picture.

"Timothy, 'fair' means I bring all my people home alive. Fuck the others," Clark responded.

"You say so, boss," the FBI agent agreed. Together, he and Clark watched the blips move toward the ones labeled Land P. Five minutes after that, both of the unidentified blips dropped off the screen and did not return.

"That's two more kills for the our guys, John."

"Jesus, this thing's magic," Clark said after Pierce and Loiselle called in to confirm what the instrument had already told them.

"Chavez to Command."

"Okay, Ding, go," Clark responded.

"Can we use that instrument to move in on them?"

"I think so. Tim, can we steer our guys in behind them, like?"

"Sure. I can see where everybody is, just a question of keeping them well clear until we bend 'em around and bring them in close."

"Domingo, Noonan says he can do this, but it'll take time to do it right, and you guys'll have to use your heads."

"I'll do the best I can, *jefe,"* Chavez called back.

It was twenty minutes before Henriksen tried to raise Dawson and Berg, only to find that they were not answering. There was something bad happening out there, but he didn't have a clue. Dawson was a former soldier, and Killgore an experienced and skilled hunter—and yet they'd fallen off the earth without a trace? What was happening here? There were soldiers out there, yes, but *nobody* was that good. He had little choice but to leave his people out there.

Patterson moved first, along with Scotty McTyler, heading west-northwest for three hundred meters, then turning south, moving slowly and silently, blessing the surprisingly bare ground in the forest—the ground got little sunlight to allow grass to grow here. Steve Lincoln and George Tomlinson also moved as a team, steering around two bad-guy blips to their north, and maneuvering right behind them.

"We have our targets," McTyler reported in his Scottish burr. On Noonan's screen they appeared to be less than a hundred meters away, directly behind them.

“Take ’em down,” Clark ordered.

Both men were facing east, away from the Rainbow troopers, one sheltering behind a tree and the other lying on the ground.

The standing one was Mark Waterhouse. Patterson took careful aim and loosed his three-round burst. The impacts pushed him against the tree, and he dropped his rifle, which clattered to the ground. That caused the lying one to turn, and grip his own rifle tighter when he was hit, and the reflexive action of his hand held the trigger down, resulting in ten rounds fired on full-automatic into the forest.

“Oh, shit,” Patterson said over the radio. “That was mine. His rifle must’ve been set on rock-and-roll, Command.”

“What was that, what was that—who fired?” Henriksen called over the radio.

It only made things easier for Tomlinson and Lincoln. Both of their targets jumped up and looked to their left, bringing both into plain view. Both went down an instant later, and a few minutes after that the command voice on the enemy radio circuit called for another status check. It now came up eight names short.

By this time, Rainbow was more behind than in front of Henriksen’s people, steered into place by Noonan’s computer-tricorder rig.

“Can you get me on their radio?” Clark asked the FBI agent.

“Easy,” Noonan replied, flipping a switch and plugging a microphone in. “Here.”

“Hi, there,” Clark said over the CB frequency. “That’s eight of your people down.”

“Who is this?”

“Is your name Henriksen?” John asked next.

“Who the hell is this?” the voice demanded.

“I’m the guy who’s killing your people. We’ve taken eight of them down. Looks like you have twenty-two more out here. Want I should kill some more?”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“The name’s Clark, John Clark. Who are you?”

“William Henriksen!” the voice shouted back.

“Oh, okay, you’re the former Bureau guy. I suppose you saw Wil Gearing this morning. Anyway.” Clark paused. “I’m only going to say this once: Put your weapons down, walk into the open, and surrender, and we won’t shoot any more of you. Otherwise, we’ll take down every single one, Bill.”

There was a long silence. Clark wondered what the voice on the other end would do, but after a minute he did what John expected.

“Listen up, everybody, listen up. Pull back to the building right now! Everybody move back right now!”

“Rainbow, this is Six, expect movement back to the building complex right now. Weapons are free,” he added over the encrypted tactical radios.

The panic in Henriksen's radio call turned out to be contagious. Immediately they heard the thrashing sound of people running in the woods, through bushes, taking direct if not quiet paths back toward the open to which many ran without thinking.

That made an easy shot for Homer Johnston. One green-clad man broke from the trees and ran down the grassy part next to the runway. The weapon he carried made him an enemy, and Johnston dispatched a single round that went between his shoulder blades. The man took one more stumbling step and went down. "Rifle Two-One, I got one north of the runway!" the sniper called in.

It was more direct for Chavez. Ding was sheltering behind a hardwood tree when he heard the noises coming his way from two people he'd been stalking alone. When he figured they were about fifty meters away, he stepped around the tree trunk, to see that they were heading the other way. Chavez sidestepped left and spotted one, and brought his MP-10 to his shoulder. The running man saw him and tried to bring up his rifle. He even managed to fire, but right into the ground, before taking a burst in the face and falling like a sack of beans. The man behind him skidded to a stop and looked at where Chavez was standing.

"Drop the fucking rifle!" Ding screamed at him, but the man either didn't hear or didn't listen. His rifle started coming up, too, but as with his companion, he never made it. "Chavez here, I just dropped two." The excitement of the moment masked the shame of how easy it had been. This was pure murder.

It was like keeping score for Clark, like some sort of horrid gladiatorial game. The unknown blips on the screen of Noonan's computer started disappearing as their hearts stopped and with them the electronic signals they generated. In another few minutes, he counted four of the thirty signals they'd originally tracked, and those were running back to the building.

"Christ, Bill, what happened out there?" Brightling demanded at the main entrance.

"They slaughtered us like fucking sheep, man. I don't know. I don't know."

"This is John Clark calling for William Henriksen," the radio crackled.

"Yeah?"

"Okay, one last time, surrender right now, or else we come in after you."

"Come and fucking get us!" Henriksen screamed in reply.

"Vega, start doing some windows," Clark ordered in a calm voice.

"Roger that, Command," Oso replied. He lifted the shoulder stock of his M-60 machine gun and started on the second floor. The weapon traced right to left, shattering glass as the line of tracers darted across the intervening distance into the building.

"Pierce and Loiselle, you and Connolly head northwest into the other buildings. Start taking stuff down."

"Roger, Command," Pierce replied.

The survivors from the forest party were trying to shoot back, mainly at empty air, but making noise in the lobby of the headquarters building. Carol Brightling was screaming now. The glass from the upstairs windows cascaded like a waterfall in front of their faces.

"Make them stop!" Carol cried loudly.

"Give me the radio," Brightling said. Henriksen handed it to him.

"Cease firing. This is John Brightling, cease firing, everybody. That means you, too, Clark, okay?"

In a few seconds, it stopped, which proved harder for the Project people, since Rainbow had only one weapon firing, and Oso stopped immediately on being ordered to.

"Brightling, this is Clark, can you hear me?" the radio in John's hand crackled next.

"Yes, Clark, I hear you."

"Bring all of your people into the open right now and unarmed," the strange voice commanded. "And nobody will get shot. Bring all of your people out now, or we start playing really rough."

"Don't do it," Bill Henriksen urged, seeing the futility of resistance, but fearing surrender more and preferring to die with a weapon in his hands.

"So they can kill us all right here and right now?" Carol asked. "What choice do we have?"

"Not much of one," her husband observed. He walked to the reception desk and made a call over the building's intercom system, calling everyone to the lobby. Then he lifted the portable radio. "Okay, okay, we'll be coming out in a second. Give us a chance to get organized."

"Okay, we'll wait a little while," Clark responded.

"This is a mistake, John," Henriksen told his employer.

"This whole fucking thing's been a mistake, Bill," John observed, wondering where he'd gone wrong. As he watched, the black helicopter reappeared and landed about halfway down the runway, as close as the pilot was willing to come to hostile weapons.

Paddy Connolly was at the fuel dump. There was a huge above-ground fuel tank, labeled #2 Diesel, probably for the generator plant. There was nothing easier or more fun to blow up than a fuel tank, and with Pierce and Loiselle watching, the explosives expert set ten pounds of charges on the opposite side of the tank from the generator plant that it served. A good eighty thousand gallons, he thought, enough to keep those generators going for a very long time.

"Command, Connolly."

"Connolly, Command," Clark answered.

"I'm going to need more, everything I brought down," he reported.

"It's on the chopper, Paddy. Stand by."

"Roger."

John had advanced to the edge of the treeline, a scant three hundred yards from the building. Just beyond him, Vega was still on his heavy machine gun,

and the rest of his troops were close by, except for Connolly and the two shooters with him. The elation was already gone. It had been a grim day. Success or not, there is little joy in the taking of life, and this day's work had been as close to pure murder as anything the men had ever experienced.

"Coming out," Chavez said, his binoculars to his eyes. He did a fast count. "I see twenty-six of 'em."

"About right," Clark said. "Gimme," he said next, taking the glasses from Domingo to see if he could recognize any faces. Surprisingly, the first face he could put a name on was the only woman he saw, Carol Brightling, presidential science advisor. The man next to her would be her former husband, John Brightling, Clark surmised. They walked out, away from the building onto the ramp that aircraft used to turn around on. "Keep coming straight out away from the building," he told them over the radio. And they did what he told them, John saw, somewhat to his surprise.

"Okay, Ding, take a team and check the building out. Move, boy, but be careful."

"You bet, Mr. C." Chavez waved for his people to follow him at a run for the building."

Using the binoculars again, Clark could see no one carrying weapons, and decided that it was safe for him to walk out with five Team-1 troops as an escort. The walk took five minutes or so, and then he saw John Brightling face-to-face.

"I guess this is your place, eh?"

"Until you destroyed it."

"The guys at Fort Detrick checked out the canister that Mr. Gearing there tried to use in Sydney, Dr. Brightling. If you're looking for sympathy from me, pal, you've called the wrong number."

"So, what are you going to do?" Just as he finished the question, the helicopter lifted off and headed for the power-plant building, delivering the rest of Connolly's explosives, Clark figured.

"I've thought about that."

"You killed our people!" Carol Brightling snarled, as though it meant something.

"The ones who were carrying weapons in a combat zone, yeah, and I imagine they would have shot at my people if they'd had a chance—but we don't give freebies."

"Those were good people, people—"

"People who were willing to kill their fellow man—and for what?" John asked.

"To save the world!" Carol Brightling snapped back.

"You say so, ma'am, but you came up with a horrible way to do it, don't you think?" he asked politely. It didn't hurt to be polite, John thought. Maybe it would get them to talk, and maybe then he could figure them out.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"I guess I'm not smart enough to get it, eh?"

"No," she said. "You're not."

"Okay, but let me get this right. You were willing to kill nearly every person on earth, to use germ warfare to do it, so that you could hug some trees?"

“So that we could save the world!” John Brightling repeated for them all.

“Okay.” Clark shrugged. “I suppose Hitler thought killing all the Jews made sense. You people, sit down and keep still.” He walked away and got onto his radio. There was no understanding them, was there?

Connolly was fast, but not a miracle worker. The generator room he left alone. As it turned out, the hardest thing to take care of was the freezer in the main building. For this he borrowed a Hummer—there were a bunch of them here—and used it to ferry two oil drums into the building. There being no time for niceties, Connolly simply drove the vehicle through the glass walls. Meanwhile, Malloy and his helicopter ferried half the team back to Manaus and refueled before returning. All in all, it took nearly three hours, during which time the prisoners said virtually nothing, didn’t even ask for water, hot and uncomfortable as it was on the frying-pan surface of the runway. Clark didn’t mind—it was all the better if he didn’t have to acknowledge their humanity. Strangest of all to him, these were educated people, people whom he could easily have respected, except for that one little thing. Finally, Connolly came striding over to where he was standing, holding an electronic box in his hand. Clark nodded and cued his tactical radio.

“Bear, Command.”

“Bear copies.”

“Let’s get wound up, Colonel.”

“Roger that. Bear’s on the way.” In the distance, the Night Hawk’s rotor started turning and Clark walked back to where the prisoners were sitting.

“We are not going to kill you, and we are not going to take you back to America,” he told them. The surprise in their faces was stunning.

“What, then?”

“You think we should all live in harmony with nature, right?”

“If you want the planet to survive, yes,” John Brightling said. His wife’s eyes were filled with hatred and defiance, but also curiosity now.

“Fine.” Clark nodded. “Stand up and get undressed, all of you. Dump your clothes right here.” He pointed at a corner joint in the runway.

“But—”

“Do it!” Clark shouted at them. “Or I will have you shot right here and right now.”

And slowly they did. Some disrobed quickly, some slowly and uncomfortably, but one by one they piled their clothing up in the middle of the runway. Carol Brightling, oddly, wasn’t the least bit modest about the moment.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Okay, here’s the score. You want to live in harmony with nature, then go do it. If you can’t hack it, the nearest city is Manaus, about ninety-eight miles that way—” He pointed, then turned. “Paddy, fire in the hole.”

Without a word, Connolly started flipping switches on his box. The first thing to go was the fuel tank. The twin charges blew a pair of holes in the side of the tank. That ignited the diesel fuel, which blew out of the tank like the exhaust from a rocket, and propelled the tank straight into the power house, less than fifty meters away. There the tank stopped and ruptured, pouring burning #2 diesel fuel over the area.

They couldn't see the freezer area in the main building go, but here as well, the diesel fuel ignited, ripping out the wall of the freezer unit and then dropping part of the building on the burning wreckage. The other buildings went in turn, along with the satellite dishes. The headquarters-residence building went last, its poured concrete core resisting the damage done by the cratering charges, but after a few seconds of indecision, the core snapped at the ground-floor level and collapsed, bringing the rest of the building down with it. Over a period of less than a minute, everything useful to life here had been destroyed.

"You're sending us out into the jungle without even a knife?" Hendriksen demanded.

"Find some flint rocks and make one," Clark suggested, as the Night Hawk landed. "We humans learned how to do that about half a million years ago. You want to be in harmony with nature. Go harmonize," he told them, as he turned to get aboard. Seconds later, he was strapped into the jump seat behind the pilots, and Colonel Malloy lifted off without circling.

You could always tell, Clark remembered from his time in 3rd SOG. There were those who got out of the Huey and ran into the bush, and there were those who lingered to watch the chopper leave. He'd always been one of the former, because he knew where the job was. Others only worried about getting back, and didn't want the chopper to leave them behind. Looking down one last time, he saw that all the eyes down there were following the Night Hawk as it headed east.

"Maybe a week, Mr. C?" Ding asked, reading his face. A graduate of the U.S. Army's Ranger School, he didn't think that *he* could survive very long in this place.

"If they're lucky," Rainbow Six replied.

EPILOGUE

NEWS

The *International Trib* landed on Chavez's desk after the usual morning exercise routine, and he leaned back comfortably to read it. Life had become boring at Hereford. They still trained and practiced all their skills, but they hadn't been called away from the base since returning from South America six months earlier.

Gold Mine in the Rockies, a front-page story started. A place in Montana, the article read, owned by a Russian national, had been found to contain a sizable gold deposit. The place had been bought as a ranch by Dmitriy A. Popov, a Russian entrepreneur, as an investment and vacation site and then he'd made the accidental discovery, the story read. Mining operations would begin in the coming months. Local environmentalists had objected and tried to block the development in court, but the federal district court judge had decided in summary judgment that laws from the 1800s governing mineral exploration and exploitation were the governing legal authority, and tossed the objections out of court.

"You see this?" Ding asked Clark.

"Greedy bastard," John replied, checking out the latest pictures of his grandson on Chavez's desk. "Yeah, I read it. He spent half a million to buy the place from the estate of Foster Hunnicutt. I guess the bastard told him more than just what Brightling was planning, eh?"

"I suppose." Chavez read on. In the business section he learned that Horizon Corporation stock was heading back up with the release of a new drug for heart disease, recovering from the loss in value that had resulted from the disappearance of its chairman, Dr. John Brightling, several months earlier, a mystery that remained to be solved, the business reporter added. The new drug, Kardiklear, had proven to reduce second heart attacks by fully 56 percent in FDA studies. Horizon was also working on human longevity and cancer medications, the article concluded.

"John, has anybody gone back to Brazil to—"

"Not that I know of. Satellite overheads show that nobody's cutting the grass next to their airport."

"So, you figure the jungle killed them?"

"Nature isn't real sentimental, Domingo. She doesn't distinguish between friends and enemies."

"I suppose not, Mr. C." Even terrorists could do that, Chavez thought, but not the jungle. So, who was the real enemy of mankind? Himself, mostly, Ding decided, setting the newspaper down and looking again at the photo of John Conor Chavez, who'd just learned to sit up and smile. His son would grow into the Brave New World, and his father would be one of those who tried to

ensure that it would be a safe one—for him and all the other kids whose main tasks were learning to walk and talk.

• • •

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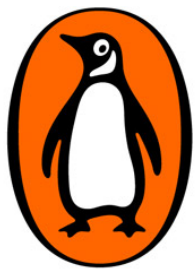

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Tom Clancy

THE BEAR AND THE DRAGON

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for some unexpected information,

John G., my gateway into
the world of technology,

And Charles, a fine teacher from long ago,
and probably a pretty good soldier, too.

History admires the wise, but it elevates the brave.

—EDMUND MORRIS

PROLOGUE

The White Mercedes

Going to work was the same everywhere, and the changeover from Marxism-Leninism to Chaos-Capitalism hadn't changed matters much—well, maybe things were now a little worse. Moscow, a city of wide streets, was harder to drive in now that nearly anyone could have a car, and the center lane down the wide boulevards was no longer tended by militiamen for the Politburo and used by Central Committee men who considered it a personal right-of-way, like Czarist princes in their troika sleds. Now it was a left-turn lane for anyone with a Zil or other private car. In the case of Sergey Nikolay'ch Golovko, the car was a white Mercedes 600, the big one with the S-class body and twelve cylinders of German power under the hood. There weren't many of them in Moscow, and truly his was an extravagance that ought to have embarrassed him ... but didn't. Maybe there were no more *nomenklatura* in this city, but rank *did* have its privileges, and he was chairman of the SVR. His apartment was also large, on the top floor of a high-rise building on Kutusovskiy Prospekt, a structure relatively new and well-made, down to the German appliances which were a long-standing luxury accorded senior government officials.

He didn't drive himself. He had Anatoliy for that, a burly former Spetsnaz special-operations soldier who carried a pistol under his coat and who drove the car with ferocious aggression, while tending it with loving care. The windows were coated with dark plastic, which denied the casual onlooker the sight of the people inside, and the windows were thick, made of polycarbonate and specced to stop anything up to a 12.7-mm bullet, or so the company had told Golovko's purchasing agents sixteen months before. The armor made it nearly a ton heavier than was the norm for an S600 Benz, but the power and the ride didn't seem to suffer from that. It was the uneven streets that would ultimately destroy the car. Road-paving was a skill that his country had not yet mastered, Golovko thought as he turned the page in his morning paper. It was the American *International Herald Tribune,* always a good source of news since it was a joint venture of *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times,* which were together two of the most skilled intelligence services in the world, if a little too arrogant to be the true professionals Sergey Nikolay'ch and his people were.

He'd joined the intelligence business when the agency had been known as the KGB, the Committee for State Security, still, he thought, the best such government department the world had ever known, even if it had ultimately failed. Golovko sighed. Had the USSR not fallen in the early 1990s, then his

place as Chairman would have put him as a full voting member of the Politburo, a man of genuine power in one of the world's two superpowers, a man whose mere gaze could make strong men tremble ... but ... no, what was the use of that? he asked himself. It was all an illusion, an odd thing for a man of supposed regard for objective truth to value. That had always been the cruel dichotomy. KGB had always been on the lookout for hard facts, but then reported those facts to people besotted with a dream, who then bent the truth in the service of that dream. When the truth had finally broken through, the dream had suddenly evaporated like a cloud of steam in a high wind, and reality had poured in like the flood following the breakup of an icebound river in springtime. And then the Politburo, those brilliant men who'd wagered their lives on the dream, had found that their theories had been only the thinnest of reeds, and reality was the swinging scythe, and the eminence bearing *that* tool didn't deal in salvation.

But it was not so for Golovko. A dealer in facts, he'd been able to continue his profession, for his government still needed them. In fact, his authority was broader now than it would have been, because as a man who well knew the surrounding world and some of its more important personalities intimately, he was uniquely suited to advising his president, and so he had a voice in foreign policy, defense, and domestic matters. Of them, the third was the trickiest lately, which had rarely been the case before. It was now also the most dangerous. It was an odd thing. Previously, the mere spoken (more often, shouted) phrase "State Security!" would freeze Soviet citizens in their stride, for KGB had been the most feared organ of the previous government, with power such as Reinhart Heydrich's *Sicherheitsdienst* had only dreamed about, the power to arrest, imprison, interrogate, and to kill any citizen it wished, with no recourse at all. But that, too, was a thing of the past. Now KGB was split, and the domestic-security branch was a shadow of its former self, while the SVR—formerly the First Chief Directorate—still gathered information, but lacked the immediate strength that had come with being able to enforce the *will,* if not quite the *law,* of the communist government. But his current duties were still vast, Golovko told himself, folding the paper.

He was only a kilometer away from Dzerzhinskiy Square. That, too, was no longer the same. The statue of Iron Feliks was gone. It had always been a chilling sight to those who'd known who the man was whose bronze image had stood alone in the square, but now it, too, was a distant memory. The building behind it was the same, however. Once the stately home office of the Rossiya Insurance Company, it had later been known as the Lubyanka, a fearsome word even in the fearsome land ruled by Iosef Vissarionovich Stalin, with its basement full of cells and interrogation rooms. Most of those functions had been transferred over the years to Lefortovo Prison to the east, as the KGB bureaucracy had grown, as all such bureaucracies grow, filling the vast building like an expanding balloon, as it claimed every room and corner until secretaries and file clerks occupied the (remodeled) spaces where Kamenev and Ordzhonikidze had been tortured under the eyes of Yagoda and Beriya. Golovko supposed that there hadn't been too many ghosts.

Well, a new working day beckoned. A staff meeting at 8:45, then the normal

routine of briefings and discussions, lunch at 12:15, and with luck he'd be back in the car and on his way back home soon after six, before he had to change for the reception at the French Embassy. He looked forward to the food and wine, if not the conversation.

Another car caught his eye. It was a twin to his own, another large Mercedes S-class, iceberg white just like his own, complete down to the American-made dark plastic on the windows. It was driving purposefully in the bright morning, as Anatoliy slowed and pulled behind a dump truck, one of the thousand such large ugly vehicles that covered the streets of Moscow like a dominant life-form, this one's load area cluttered with hand tools rather than filled with earth. There was yet another truck a hundred meters beyond, driving slowly as though its driver was unsure of his route. Golovko stretched in his seat, barely able to see around the truck in front of his Benz, wishing for the first cup of Sri Lankan tea at his desk, in the same room that Beriya had once ...

... the distant dump truck. A man had been lying in the back. Now he rose, and he was holding ...

"Anatoliy!" Golovko said sharply, but his driver couldn't see around the truck to his immediate front.

... it was an RPG, a slender pipe with a bulbous end. The sighting bar was up, and as the distant truck was now stopped, the man came up to one knee and turned, aiming his weapon at the other white Benz—

—the other driver saw it and tried to swerve, but found his way blocked by the morning traffic and—

—not much in the way of a visual signature, just a thin puff of smoke from the rear of the launcher-tube, but the bulbous part leapt off and streaked into the hood of the other white Mercedes, and there it exploded.

It hit just short of the windshield. The explosion wasn't the fireball so beloved of Western movies, just a muted flash and gray smoke, but the sound roared across the square, and a wide, flat, jagged hole blew out of the trunk of the car, and that meant that anyone inside the vehicle would now be dead, Golovko knew without pausing to think on it. Then the gasoline ignited, and the car burned, along with a few square meters of asphalt. The Mercedes stopped almost at once, its left-side tires shredded and flattened by the explosion. The dump truck in front of Golovko's car panic-stopped, and Anatoliy swerved right, his eyes narrowed by the noise, but not yet—

"Govno!" Now Anatoliy saw what had happened and took action. He kept moving right, accelerating hard and swerving back and forth as his eyes picked holes in the traffic. The majority of the vehicles in sight had stopped, and Golovko's driver sought out the holes and darted through them, arriving at the vehicle entrance to Moscow Center in less than a minute. The armed guards there were already moving out into the square, along with the supplementary response force from its shack just inside and out of sight. The commander of the group, a senior lieutenant, saw Golovko's car and recognized it, waved him inside and motioned to two of his men to

accompany it to the drop-off point. The arrival time was now the only normal aspect of the young day. Golovko stepped out, and two young soldiers formed up in physical contact with his heavy topcoat. Anatoliy stepped out, too, his pistol in his hand and his coat open, looking back through the gate with suddenly anxious eyes. His head turned quickly.

"Get him inside!" And with that order, the two privates strong-armed Golovko through the double bronze doors, where more security troops were arriving.

"This way, Comrade Chairman," a uniformed captain said, taking Sergey Nikolay'ch's arm and heading off to the executive elevator. A minute later, he stumbled into his office, his brain only now catching up with what it had seen just three minutes before. Of course, he walked to the window to look down.

Moscow police—called militiamen—were racing to the scene, three of them on foot. Then a police car appeared, cutting through the stopped traffic. Three motorists had left their vehicles and approached the burning car, perhaps hoping to render assistance. Brave of them, Golovko thought, but an entirely useless effort. He could see better now, even at a distance of three hundred meters. The top had bulged up. The windshield was gone, and he looked into a smoking hole, which had minutes before been a hugely expensive vehicle, and which had been destroyed by one of the cheapest weapons the Red Army had ever mass-produced. Whoever had been inside had been shredded instantly by metal fragments traveling at nearly ten thousand meters per second. Had they even known what had happened? Probably not. Perhaps the driver had had time to look and wonder, but the owner of the car in the back had probably been reading his morning paper, before his life had ended without warning.

That was when Golovko's knees went weak. That could have been him ... suddenly learning if there were an afterlife after all, one of the great mysteries of life, but not one which had occupied his thoughts very often ...

But whoever had done the killing, who had been his target? As Chairman of the SVR, Golovko was not a man to believe in coincidences, and there were not all that many white Benz S600s in Moscow, were there?

"Comrade Chairman?" It was Anatoliy at the office door.

"Yes, Anatoliy Ivan'ch?"

"Are you well?"

"Better than he," Golovko replied, stepping away from the window. He needed to sit now. He tried to move to his swivel chair without staggering, for his legs were suddenly weak indeed. He sat and found the surface of his desk with both his hands, and looked down at the oaken surface with its piles of papers to be read—the routine sight of a day which was not now routine at all. He looked up.

Anatoliy Ivan'ch Shelepin was not a man to show fear. He'd served in Spetsnaz through his captaincy, before being spotted by a KGB talent scout for a place in the 8th "Guards" Directorate, which he'd accepted just in time for KGB to be broken apart. But Anatoliy had been Golovko's driver and

bodyguard for years now, part of his official family, like an elder son, and Shelepin was devoted to his boss. He was a tall, bright man of thirty-three years, with blond hair and blue eyes that were now far larger than usual, because though Anatoliy had trained for much of his life to deal with and in violence, this was the first time he'd actually been there to see it when it happened. Anatoliy had often wondered what it might be like to take a life, but never once in his career had he contemplated losing his own, certainly not to an ambush, and most certainly not to an ambush within shouting distance of his place of work. At his desk outside Golovko's office, he acted like a personal secretary more than anything else. Like all such men, he'd grown casual in the routine of protecting someone whom no one would dare attack, but now his comfortable world had been sundered as completely and surely as that of his boss.

Oddly, but predictably, it was Golovko's brain that made it back to reality first.

"Anatoliy?"

"Yes, Chairman?"

"We need to find out who died out there, and then find out if it was supposed to be us instead. Call militia headquarters, and see what they are doing."

"At once." The handsome young face disappeared from the doorway.

Golovko took a deep breath and rose, taking another look out the window as he did so. There was a fire engine there now, and firefighters were spraying the wrecked car to extinguish the lingering flames. An ambulance was standing by as well, but that was a waste of manpower and equipment, Sergey Nikolay'ch knew. The first order of business was to get the license-plate number from the car and identify its owner, and from that knowledge determine if the unfortunate had died in Golovko's place, or perhaps had possessed enemies of his own. Rage had not yet supplanted the shock of the event. Perhaps that would come later, Golovko thought, as he took a step toward his private washroom, for suddenly his bladder was weak. It seemed a horrid display of frailty, but Golovko had never known immediate fear in his life, and, like many, thought in terms of the movies. The actors there were bold and resolute, never mind that their words were scripted and their reactions rehearsed, and none of it was anything like what happened when explosives arrived in the air without warning.

Who wants me dead? he wondered, after flushing the toilet.

The American Embassy a few miles away had a flat roof on which stood all manner of radio antennas, most of them leading to radio receivers of varying levels of sophistication, which were in turn attached to tape recorders that turned slowly in order to more efficiently use their tapes. In the room with the recorders were a dozen people, both civilian and military, all Russian linguists

who reported to the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Maryland, between Baltimore and Washington. It was early in the day, and these people were generally at work before the Russian officials whose communications they worked to monitor. One of the many radios in the room was a scanning monitor of the sort once used by American citizens to listen in on police calls. The local cops used the same bands and the exact same type of radios that their American counterparts had used in the 1970s, and monitoring them was child's play—they were not encrypted yet. They listened in on them for the occasional traffic accident, perhaps involving a big shot, and mainly to keep a finger on the pulse of Moscow, whose crime situation was bad and getting worse. It was useful for embassy personnel to know what parts of town to avoid, and to be able to keep track of a crime to one of the thousands of American citizens.

"Explosion?" an Army sergeant asked the radio. His head turned. "Lieutenant Wilson, police report an explosion right in front of Moscow Center."

"What kind?"

"Sounds like a car blew up. Fire department is on the scene now, ambulance ..." He plugged in headphones to get a better cut on the voice traffic. "Okay, white Mercedes-Benz, tag number—" He pulled out a pad and wrote it down. "Three people dead, driver and two passengers and ... oh, shit!"

"What is it, Reins?"

"Sergey Golovko ..." Sergeant Reins's eyes were shut, and he had one hand pressing the headphones to his ears. "Doesn't he drive a white Benz?"

"Oh, shit!" Lieutenant Wilson observed for herself. Golovko was one of the people whom *her* people routinely tracked. "Is he one of the deaders?"

"Can't tell yet, ell-tee. New voice ... the captain at the station, just said he's coming down. Looks like they're excited about this one, ma'am. Lotsa chatter coming up."

Lieutenant Susan Wilson rocked back and forth in her swivel chair. Make a call on this one or not? They couldn't shoot you for notifying your superiors of something, could they ...? "Where's the station chief?"

"On his way to the airport, ell-tee, he's flying off to St. Petersburg today, remember?"

"Okay." She turned back to her panel and lifted the secure phone, a STU-6 (for "secure telephone unit"), to Fort Meade. Her plastic encryption key was in its proper slot, and the phone was already linked and synchronized with another such phone at NSA headquarters. She punched the # key to get a response.

"Watch Room," a voice said half a world away.

"This is Station Moscow. We have an indication that Sergey Golovko may just have been assassinated."

"The SVR chairman?"

“Affirmative. A car similar to his has exploded in Dzerzhinskiy Square, and this is the time he usually goes to work.”

“Confidence?” the disembodied male voice asked. It would be a middle-grade officer, probably military, holding down the eleven-to-seven watch. Probably Air Force. “Confidence” was one of their institutional buzzwords.

“We’re taking this off police radios—the Moscow Militia, that is. We have lots of voice traffic, and it sounds excited, my operator tells me.”

“Okay, can you upload it to us?”

“Affirmative,” Lieutenant Wilson replied.

“Okay, let’s do that. Thanks for the heads-up, we’ll take it from here.”

Okay, Station Moscow out,” heard Major Bob Teeters. He was new in his job at NSA. Formerly a rated pilot who had twenty-one hundred hours in command of C-5s and C-17s, he’d injured his left elbow in a motorcycle accident eight months before, and the loss of mobility there had ended his flying career, much to his disgust. Now he was reborn as a spook, which was somewhat more interesting in an intellectual sense, but not exactly a happy exchange for an aviator. He waved to an enlisted man, a Navy petty officer first-class, to pick up on the active line from Moscow. This the sailor did, donning headphones and lighting up the word-processing program on his desktop computer. This sailor was a Russian linguist in addition to being a yeoman, and thus competent to drive the computer. He typed, translating as he listened in to the pirated Russian police radios, and his script came up on Major Teeters’s computer screen.

I HAVE THE LICENSE NUMBER, CHECKING NOW, the first line read.

GOOD, QUICK AS YOU CAN.

WORKING ON IT, COMRADE. (TAPPING IN THE BACKGROUND, DO THE RUSSKIES HAVE COMPUTERS FOR THIS STUFF NOW?)

I HAVE IT, WHITE MERCEDES BENZ, REGISTERED TO G. F. AVSYENKO (NOT SURE OF SPELLING), 677 PROTOPOPOV PROSPEKT, FLAT 18A.

HIM? I KNOW THAT NAME!

Which was good for somebody, Major Teeters thought, but not all that great for Avsyenko. Okay, what next? The senior watch officer was another squid, Rear Admiral Tom Porter, probably drinking coffee in his office over in the main building and watching TV, maybe. Time to change that. He called the proper number.

“Admiral Porter.”

“Sir, this is Major Teeters down in the watch center. We have some breaking news in Moscow.”

“What’s that, Major?” a tired voice asked.

“Station Moscow initially thought that somebody might have killed Chairman Golovko of the KG—the SVR, I mean.”

“What was that, Major?” a somewhat more alert voice inquired.

“Turns out it probably wasn’t him, sir. Somebody named Avsyenko—” Teeters spelled it out. “We’re getting the intercepts off their police radio bands. I haven’t run the name yet.”

“What else?”

“Sir, that’s all I have right now.”

By this time, a CIA field officer named Tom Barlow was in the loop at the embassy. The third-ranking spook in the current scheme of things, he didn’t want to drive over to Dzerzhinskiy Square himself, but he did the next best thing. Barlow called the CNN office, the direct line to a friend.

“Mike Evans.”

“Mike, this is Jimmy,” Tom Barlow said, initiating a prearranged and much-used lie. “Dzerzhinskiy Square, the murder of somebody in a Mercedes. Sounds messy and kinda spectacular.”

“Okay,” the reporter said, making a brief note. “We’re on it.”

At his desk, Barlow checked his watch: 8:52 local time. Evans was a hustling reporter for a hustling news service. Barlow figured there’d be a mini-cam there in twenty minutes. The truck would have its own Ku-band uplink to a satellite, down from there to CNN headquarters in Atlanta, and the same signal would be pirated by the DoD downlink at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and spread around from there on government-owned satellites to interested parties. An attempt on the life of Chairman Golovko made it interesting as hell to a lot of people. Next he lit up his desktop Compaq computer and opened the file for Russian names that were known to CIA.

Aduplicate of that file resided in any number of CIA computers at Langley, Virginia, and on one of those in the CIA Operations Room on the 7th floor of the Old Headquarters Building, a set of fingers typed A-V S-Y E-N-K-O ... and came up with nothing other than:

ENTIRE FILE SEARCHED. THE SEARCH ITEM WAS NOT FOUND.

That evoked a grumble from the person on the computer. So, it wasn’t spelled properly.

“Why does this name sound familiar?” he asked. “But the machine says no-hit.”

“Let’s see...” a co-worker said, leaning over and respelling the name. “Try this ...” Again a no-hit. A third variation was tried.

“Bingo! Thanks, Beverly,” the watch officer said. “Oh, yeah, we know who this guy is. Rasputin. Low-life bastard—sure as hell, look what happened when

he went straight," the officer chuckled.

Rasputin?" Golovko asked. *"Nekulturniy* swine, eh?" He allowed himself a brief smile. "But who would wish *him* dead?" he asked his security chief, who, if anything, was taking the matter even more seriously than the Chairman. His job had just become far more complicated. For starters, he had to tell Sergey Nikolay'ch that the white Mercedes was no longer his personal conveyance. Too ostentatious. His next task of the day was to ask the armed sentries who posted the corners of the building's roof why they hadn't spotted a man in the load area of a dump truck with an RPG—*within three hundred meters of the building they were supposed to guard!* And not so much as a warning over their portable radios until the Mercedes of Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko had been blown to bits. He'd sworn many oaths already on this day, and there would be more to come.

"How long has he been out of the service?" Golovko asked next.

"Since '93, Comrade Chairman," Major Anatoliy Ivan'ch Shelepin said, having just asked the same question and received the answer seconds earlier.

The first big reduction-in-force, Golovko thought, but it would seem that the pimp had made the transition to private enterprise well. Well enough to own a Mercedes Benz S- 600 ... and well enough to be killed by enemies he'd made along the way ... unless he'd unknowingly sacrificed his own life for that of another. That question still needed answering. The Chairman had recovered his self-control by this point, enough at any rate for his mind to begin functioning. Golovko was too bright a man to ask *Why would anyone wish to end my life?* He knew better than that. Men in positions like his made enemies, some of them deadly ones ... but most of them were too smart to make such an attempt. Vendettas were dangerous things to begin at his level, and for that reason, they *never* happened. The business of international intelligence was remarkably sedate and civilized. People still died. Anyone caught spying for a foreign government against Mother Russia was in the deepest of trouble, new regime or not—state treason was still state treason—but those killings followed ... what did the Americans call it? *Due process of law.* Yes, that was it. The Americans and their lawyers. If their lawyers approved of something, then it was civilized.

"Who else was in the car?" Golovko asked.

"His driver. We have the name, a former militiaman. And one of his women, it would seem, no name for her yet."

"What do we know of Gregoriy's routine? Why was he there this morning?"

"Not known at this time, Comrade," Major Shelepin replied. "The militia are working on it."

"Who is running the case?"

"Lieutenant Colonel Shablikov, Comrade Chairman."

"Yefim Konstantinovich—yes, I know him. Good man," Golovko allowed. "I

suppose he'll need his time, eh?"

"It does require time," Shelepin agreed.

More than it took for Rasputin to meet his end, Golovko thought. Life was such a strange thing, so permanent when one had it, so fleeting when it was lost—and those who lost it could never tell you what it was like, could they? Not unless you believed in ghosts or God or an afterlife, things which had somehow been overlooked in Golovko's childhood. So, yet another great mystery, the spymaster told himself. It had come so close, for the first time in his life. It was disquieting, but on reflection, not so frightening as he would have imagined. The Chairman wondered if this was something he might call courage. He'd never thought of himself as a brave man, for the simple reason that he'd never faced immediate physical danger. It was not that he had avoided it, only that it had never come close until today, and after the outrage had passed, he found himself not so much bemused as curious. *Why* had this happened? *Who* had done it? Those were the questions he had to answer, lest it happen again. To be courageous once was enough, Golovko thought.

Dr. Benjamin Goodley arrived at Langley at 5:40, five minutes earlier than his customary time. His job largely denied him much of a social life, which hardly seemed fair to the National Intelligence Officer. Was he not of marriageable age, possessed of good looks, a man with good prospects both in the professional and business sense? Perhaps not the latter, Goodley thought, parking his car in a VIP slot by the cement canopy of the Old Headquarters Building. He drove a Ford Explorer because it was a nice car for driving in the snow, and there would be snow soon. At least winter was coming, and winter in the D.C. area was wholly unpredictable, especially now that some of the econuts were saying that global warming would cause an unusually *cold* winter this year. The logic of that escaped him. Maybe he'd have a chat with the President's Science Adviser to see if that made any sense talking with someone who could explain things. The new one was pretty good, and knew how to use single-syllable words.

Goodley made his way through the pass-gate and into the elevator. He walked into the Operations Room at 5:50 A.M.

"Hey, Ben," one said.

"Morning, Charlie. Anything interesting happening?"

"You're gonna love this one, Ben," Charlie Roberts promised. "A big day in Mother Russia."

"Oh?" Narrowed eyes. Goodley had his worries about Russia, and so did his boss. "What's that?"

"No big deal. Just somebody tried to whack Sergey Nikolay'ch."

His head snapped around like an owl's. *"What?"*

"You heard me, Ben, but they hit the wrong car with the RPG and took out somebody else we know—well, used to know," Roberts corrected himself.

“Start from the beginning.”

“Peggy, roll the videotape,” Roberts commanded his watch officer with a theatrical wave of the arm.

“Whoa!” Goodley said after the first five seconds. “So, who was it really?”

“Would you believe Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko?”

“I don’t know that name,” Goodley admitted.

“Here.” The watch officer handed over a manila folder. “What we had on the guy when he was KGB. A real sweet-heart,” she observed, in the woman’s neutral voice of distaste.

“Rasputin?” Goodley said, scanning the first page. “Oh, okay, I have heard something about this one.”

“So has the Boss, I bet.”

“I’ll know in two hours,” Goodley imagined aloud. “What’s Station Moscow saying?”

“The station chief is in St. Pete’s for a trade conference, part of his cover duties. What we have is from his XO. The best bet to this point is that either Avseyenko made a big enemy in the Russian Mafia, or maybe Golovko was the real target, and they hit the wrong car. No telling which at this point.” Followed by the usual NIO damned-if-I-know shrug.

“Who would want to take Golovko out?”

“Their Mafia? Somebody got himself an RPG, and they don’t sell them in hardware stores, do they? So, that means somebody deeply into their criminal empire, probably, made the hit—but who was the real target? Avseyenko must have had some serious enemies along the way, but Golovko must have enemies or rivals, too.” She shrugged again. “You pays your money and you takes your choice.”

“The Boss likes to have better information,” Goodley warned.

“So do I, Ben,” Peggy Hunter replied. “But that’s all I got, and even the fuckin’ Russians don’t have better at this point.”

“Any way we can look into their investigation?”

“The Legal Attaché, Mike Reilly, is supposed to be pretty tight with their cops. He got a bunch of them admitted to the FBI’s National Academy post-grad cop courses down at Quantico.”

“Maybe have the FBI tell him to nose around?”

Mrs. Hunter shrugged again. “Can’t hurt. Worst thing anybody can say is no, and we’re already there, right?”

Goodley nodded. “Okay, I’ll recommend that.” He got up. “Well,” he observed on his way out the door, “the Boss won’t bitch about how boring the world is today.” He took the CNN tape with him and headed back to his SUV.

The sun was struggling to rise now. Traffic on the George Washington

Parkway was picking up with eager-beaver types heading into their desks early, probably Pentagon people, most of them, Goodley thought, as he crossed over the Key Bridge, past Teddy Roosevelt Island. The Potomac was calm and flat, almost oily, like the pond behind a mill dam. The outside temperature, his dashboard said, was forty-four, and the forecast for the day was a high in the upper fifties, a few clouds, and calm winds. An altogether pleasant day for late fall, though he'd be stuck in his office for all of it, pleasant or not.

Things were starting early at The House, he saw on pulling in. The Blackhawk helicopter was just lifting off as he pulled into his reserved parking place, and the motorcade had already formed up at the West Entrance. It was enough to make him check his watch. No, he wasn't late. He hustled out of his car, bundling the papers and cassette into his arms as he hurried inside.

"Morning, Dr. Goodley," a uniformed guard said in greeting.

"Hi, Chuck." Regular or not, he had to pass through the metal detector. The papers and cassette were inspected by hand—as though he'd try to bring a gun in, Ben thought in passing irritation. Well, there had been a few scares, hadn't there? And these people were trained not to trust anybody.

Having passed the daily security test, he turned left, sprinted up the stairs, then left again to his office, where some helpful soul—he didn't know if it was one of the clerical staff or maybe one of the Service people—had his office coffee machine turning out some Gloria Jean's French Hazelnut. He poured himself a cup and sat down at his desk to organize his papers and his thoughts. He managed to down half of the cup before bundling it all up again for the ninety-foot walk. The Boss was already there.

"Morning, Ben."

"Good morning, Mr. President," replied the National Security Adviser.

"Okay, what's new in the world?" POTUS asked.

"It looks as though somebody might have tried to assassinate Sergey Golovko this morning."

"Oh?" President Ryan asked, looking up from his coffee. Goodley filled him in, then inserted the cassette in the Oval Office VCR and punched PLAY.

"Jeez," Ryan observed. What had been an expensive car was now fit only for the crushing machine. "Who'd they get instead?"

"One Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko, age fifty-two—"

"I know that name. Where from?"

"He's more widely known as Rasputin. He used to run the KGB Sparrow School."

Ryan's eyes went a little wider. "That cocksucker! Okay, what's the story on him?"

"He got RIF'd back in '93 or so, and evidently set himself up in the same business, and it would seem he's made some money at it, judging by his car,

anyway. There was evidently a young woman in with him when he was killed, plus a driver. They were all killed."

Ryan nodded. The Sparrow School had been where for years the Soviets had trained attractive young women to be prostitutes in the service of their country both at home and abroad, because, since time immemorial, men with a certain weakness for women had often found their tongues loosened by the right sort of lubrication. Not a few secrets had been conveyed to the KGB by this method, and the women had also been useful in recruiting various foreign nationals for the KGB officers to exploit. So, on having his official office shut down, Rasputin—so called by the Soviets for his ability to get women to bend to his will—had simply plied his trade in the new free-enterprise environment.

"So, Avseyenko might have had 'business' enemies angry enough to take him out, and Golovko might not have been the target at all?"

"Correct, Mr. President. The possibility exists, but we don't have any supporting data one way or the other."

"How do we get it?"

"The Legal Attaché at the embassy is well connected with the Russian police," the National Security Adviser offered.

"Okay, call Dan Murray at FBI and have his man nose around," Ryan said. He'd already considered calling Golovko directly—they'd known each other for more than ten years, though one of their initial contacts had involved Golovko's pistol right in Jack's face on one of the runways of Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport—and decided against it. He couldn't show that much immediate interest, though later, if they had a private moment together, he'd be able to ask a casual question about the incident. "Same for Ed and MP at CIA."

"Right." Goodley made a note.

"Next?"

Goodley turned the page. "Indonesia is doing some naval exercises that have the Aussies a little interested...." Ben went on with the morning briefing for twenty more minutes, mainly covering political rather than military matters, because that's what national security had become in recent years. Even the international arms trade had diminished to the point that quite a few countries were treating their national military establishments as boutiques rather than serious instruments of statecraft.

"So, the world's in good shape today?" the President summarized.

"Except for the pothole in Moscow, it would seem so, sir."

The National Security Adviser departed, and Ryan looked at his schedule for the day. As usual, he had very little in the way of free time. About the only moments on his plan-of-the-day without someone in the office with him were those in which he'd have to read over briefing documents for the next meeting, many of which were planned literally weeks in advance. He took off his reading glasses—he hated them—and rubbed his eyes, already anticipating

the morning headache that would come in about thirty minutes. A quick re-scan of the page showed no light moments today. No troop of Eagle Scouts from Wyoming, nor current World Series champs, nor Miss Plum Tomato from California's Imperial Valley to give him something to smile about. No. Today would be all work.

Shit, he thought.

The nature of the Presidency was a series of interlocking contradictions. The Most Powerful Man in the World was quite unable to use his power except under the most adverse circumstances, which he was supposed to avoid rather than to engage. In reality, the Presidency was about negotiations, more with the Congress than anyone else; it was a process for which Ryan had been unsuited until given a crash course by his chief of staff, Arnold van Damm. Fortunately, Arnie did a lot of the negotiations himself, then came into the Oval Office to tell the President what *his* (Ryan's) decision and/or position was on an issue, so that *he* (van Damm) could then do a press release or a statement in the Press Room. Ryan supposed that a lawyer treated his client that way much of the time, looking after his interests as best he could while *not* telling him what those interests were until they were already decided. The President, Arnie told everyone, had to be protected from direct negotiations with everyone—especially Congress. And, Jack reminded himself, he had a fairly tame Congress. What had it been like for presidents dealing with contentious ones?

And what the hell, he wondered, not for the first time, was he doing here?

The election process had been the purest form of hell—despite the fact that he'd had what Arnie invariably had called a cakewalk. Never less than five speeches per day, more often as many as nine, in as many different places before as many diverse groups—but always the same speech, delivered off file cards he kept in his pocket, changed only in minor local details by a frantic staff on the Presidential aircraft, trying to keep track of the flight plan. The amazing thing was that they'd never made a mistake that he'd caught. For variety, the President would alter the order of the cards. But the utility of that had faded in about three days.

Yes, if there were a hell in creation, a political campaign was its most tangible form, listening to yourself saying the same things over and over until your brain started rebelling and you started *wanting* to make random, crazy changes, which might amuse yourself, but it would make you appear crazy to the audience, and you couldn't do that, because a presidential candidate was expected to be a perfect automaton rather than a fallible man.

There had been an upside to it. Ryan had bathed in a sea of love for the ten weeks of the endurance race. The deafening cheers of the crowds, whether in a parking lot outside a Xenia, Ohio, shopping mall, or in Madison Square Garden in New York City, or Honolulu, or Fargo, or Los Angeles—it had all been the same. Huge crowds of ordinary citizens who both denied and

celebrated the fact that John Patrick Ryan was one of them ... kind of, sort of, something like that—but something else, too. From his first formal speech in Indianapolis, soon after his traumatic accession to the Presidency, he'd realized just how strong a narcotic that sort of adulation was, and sure enough, his continued exposure to it had given him the same sort of rush that a controlled substance might. With it came a desire to be perfect for them, to deliver his lines properly, to seem sincere—as indeed he was, but it would have been far easier doing it once or twice instead of three hundred and eleven times, as the final count had been reckoned.

The news media in every place asked the same questions, written down or taped the same answers, and printed them as new news in every local paper. In every city and town, the editorials had praised Ryan, and worried loudly that this election wasn't really an election at all, except on the congressional level, and there Ryan had stirred the pot by giving his blessing to people of both major parties, the better to retain his independent status, and therefore to risk offending everyone.

The love hadn't quite been universal, of course. There were those who'd protested, who got their heads on the nightly commentary shows, citing his professional background, criticizing his drastic actions to stop the terrorist-caused Ebola plague that had threatened the nation so desperately in those dark days—"Yes, it worked in this particular case, *but ... !"*—and especially to criticize his politics, which, Jack said in his speeches, weren't politics at all, but plain common sense.

During all of this, Arnie had been a godsend, preselecting a response to every single objection. Ryan was wealthy, some said. "My father was a police officer" had been the answer. "I've *earned* every penny I have—and besides [going on with an engaging smile], now my wife makes a lot more money than I do."

Ryan knew nothing about politics: "Politics is one of those fields in which everybody knows what it is, but nobody can make it work. Well, maybe *I* don't know what it is, but I am *going* to make it work!"

Ryan had packed the Supreme Court: "I'm not a lawyer, either, sorry," he'd said to the annual meeting of the American Bar Association. "But I know the difference between right and wrong, and so do the justices."

Between the strategic advice of Arnie and the preplanned words of Callie Weston, he'd managed to parry every serious blow, and strike back with what was usually a soft and humorous reply of his own—leavened with strong words delivered with the fierce but quiet conviction of someone who had little left to prove. Mainly, with proper coaching and endless hours of preparation, he'd managed to present himself as Jack Ryan, regular guy.

Remarkably, his most politically astute move had been made entirely without outside expertise.

Morning, Jack," the Vice President said, opening the door unannounced.

"Hey, Robby." Ryan looked up from his desk with a smile. He still looked a little awkward in suits, Jack saw. Some people were born to wear uniforms, and Robert Jefferson Jackson was one of them, though the lapel of every suit jacket he owned sported a miniature of his Navy Wings of Gold.

"There's some trouble in Moscow," Ryan said, explaining on for a few seconds.

"That's a little worrisome," Robby observed.

"Get Ben to give you a complete brief-in on this. What's your day look like?" the President asked.

"Sierra-square, Delta-square." It was their personal code: SSDD—*same shit, different day*. "I have a meeting of the Space Council across the street in twenty minutes. Then tonight I have to fly down to Mississippi for a speech tomorrow morning at Ole Miss."

"You taking the wheel?" Ryan asked.

"Hey, Jack, the *one* good thing about this damned job is that I get to fly again." Jackson had insisted on getting rated on the VC-20B that he most often flew around the country on official trips under the code name "Air Force Two." It looked very good in the media, and it was also the best possible therapy for a fighter pilot who missed being in control of his aircraft, though it must have annoyed the Air Force flight crew. "But it's always to shit details you don't want," he added with a wink.

"It's the only way I could get you a pay raise, Robby. And nice quarters, too," he reminded his friend.

"You left out the flight pay," responded Vice Admiral R. J. Jackson, USN, retired. He paused at the door and turned. "What does that attack say about the situation over there in Russia?"

Jack shrugged. "Nothing good. They just can't seem to get ahead of things, can they?"

"I guess," the Vice President agreed. "Problem is, how the hell do we help them?"

"I haven't figured that one out yet," Jack admitted. "And we have enough potential economic problems on our horizon, with Asia sliding down the tubes."

"That's something I have to learn, this economic shit," Robby admitted.

"Spend some time with George Winston," Ryan suggested. "It's not all that hard, but you have to learn a new language to speak. Basis points, derivatives, all that stuff. George knows it pretty good."

Jackson nodded. "Duly noted, sir."

" 'Sir'? Where the hell did that come from, Rob?"

"You still be the National Command Authority, oh great man," Robby told

him with a grin and a lower-Mississippi accent. “I just be da XO, which means Ah gits all the shit details.”

“So, think of this as PCO School, Rob, and thank God you have a chance to learn the easy way. It wasn’t like that for me—”

“I remember, Jack. I was here as J-3, remember? And you did okay. Why do you think I allowed you to kill my career for me?”

“You mean it wasn’t the nice house and the drivers?”

The Vice President shook his head. “And it wasn’t to be a first-black, either. I couldn’t say ‘no’ when my President asks, even if it’s a turkey like you. Later, man.”

“See ya at lunch, Robby,” Jack said as the door closed.

“Mr. President, Director Foley on three,” the speakerphone announced.

Jack lifted the secure phone and punched the proper button. “Morning, Ed.”

“Hi, Jack, we have some more on Moscow.”

“How’d we get it?” Ryan asked first, just to have a way of evaluating the information he was about to receive.

“Intercepts,” the Director of Central Intelligence answered, meaning that the information would be fairly reliable. Communications intelligence was the most trusted of all, because people rarely lied to one another over the radio or telephone. “It seems this case has a very high priority over there, and the militiamen are talking very freely over their radios.”

“Okay, what do you got?”

“Initial thinking over there is that Rasputin was the main target. He was pretty big, making a ton of money with his female ... employees,” Ed Foley said delicately, “and trying to branch out into other areas. Maybe he got a little pushy with someone who didn’t like being pushed.”

You think so?“ Mike Reilly asked.

“Mikhail Ivan”ch, I am not sure what I think. Like you, I am not trained to believe in coincidences,” replied Lieutenant Oleg Provalov of the Moscow Militia. They were in a bar which catered to foreigners, which was obvious from the quality of the vodka being served.

Reilly wasn’t exactly new to Moscow. He’d been there fourteen months, and before that had been the Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the New York office of the FBI—but not for Foreign Counter-Intelligence. Reilly was an OC—Organized Crime—expert who’d spent fifteen busy years attacking the Five Families of the New York Mafia, more often called LCN by the FBI, for La Cosa Nostra. The Russians knew this, and he’d established good relations with the local cops, especially since he’d arranged for some senior militia officers to fly to America to participate in the FBI’s National Academy Program, essentially a

Ph.D. course for senior cops, and a degree highly prized in American police departments.

"You ever have a killing like this in America?"

Reilly shook his head. "No, you can get regular guns pretty easy at home, but not anti-tank weapons. Besides, using them makes it an instant Federal case, and they've learned to keep away from us as much as they can. Oh, the wiseguys have used car bombs," he allowed, "but just to kill the people in the car. A hit like this is a little too spectacular for their tastes. So, what sort of guy was Avseyenko?"

A snort, and then Provalov almost spat the words out: "He was a pimp. He preyed on women, had them spread their legs, and then took their money. I will not mourn his passing, Mishka. Few will, but I suppose it leaves a vacuum that will be filled in the next few days."

"But you think he was the target, and not Sergey Golovko?"

"Golovko? To attack him would be madness. The chief of such an important state organ? I don't think any of our criminals have the balls for that."

Maybe, Reilly thought, *but you don't start off a major investigation by making assumptions of any kind, Oleg Gregoriyevich.* Unfortunately, he couldn't really say that. They were friends, but Provalov was thin-skinned, knowing that his police department did not measure up well against the American FBI. He'd learned that at Quantico. He was doing the usual right now, rattling bushes, having his investigators talk to Avseyenko's known associates to see if he'd spoken about enemies, disputes, or fights of one sort or another, checking with informants to see if anyone in the Moscow underworld had been talking about such things.

The Russians needed help on the forensic side, Reilly knew. At the moment they didn't even have the dump truck. Well, there were a few thousand of them, and that one might have been stolen without its owner/operator even knowing that it had been missing. Since the shot had been angled down, according to eyewitnesses, there would be little if any launch signature in the load area to help ID the truck, and they needed the right truck in order to recover hair and fibers. Of course, no one had gotten the tag number, nor had anyone been around with a camera during rush hour—well, so far. Sometimes a guy would show up a day or two later, and in major investigations you played for breaks—and usually the break was somebody who couldn't keep his mouth shut. Investigating people who knew how to stay silent was a tough way to earn a living. Fortunately, the criminal mind wasn't so circumspect—except for the smart ones, and Moscow, Reilly had learned, had more than a few of them.

There were two kinds of smart ones. The first was composed of KGB officers cut loose in the series of major reductions-in-force—known to Americans as RIFs—similar to what had happened in the American military. These potential criminals were frightening, people with real professional training and experience in black operations, who knew how to recruit and exploit others, and how to function invisibly—people, as Reilly thought of it, who'd played a

winning game against the FBI despite the best efforts of the Bureau's Foreign Counter-Intelligence Division.

The other was a lingering echo of the defunct communist regime. They were called *tolkachi*—the word meant "pushers"—and under the previous economic system they'd been the grease that allowed things to move. They were facilitators whose relationships with everyone got things done, rather like guerrilla warriors who used unknown paths in the wilderness to move products from one place to another. With the fall of communism their skills had become genuinely lucrative because it was still the case that virtually no one understood capitalism, and the ability to get things done was more valuable than ever—and now it paid a lot better. Talent, as it always did, went where the money was, and in a country still learning what the rule of law meant, it was natural for men with this skill to break what laws there were, first in the service of whoever needed them, and then, almost instantly afterward, in the service of themselves. The former *tolkachi* were the most wealthy men in their country. With that wealth had come power. With power had come corruption, and with corruption had come crime, to the point that the FBI was nearly as active in Moscow as CIA had ever been. And with reason.

The union between the former KGB and the former *tolkachi* was creating the most powerful and sophisticated criminal empire in human history.

And so, Reilly had to agree, this Rasputin—the name meant literally "the debauched one"—might well have been part of that empire, and his death might well have been something related to that. Or something else entirely. This would be a very interesting investigation.

"Well, Oleg Gregoriyevich, if you need any help, I will do my best to provide it for you," the FBI agent promised.

"Thank you, Mishka."

And they parted ways, each with his own separate thoughts.

CHAPTER 1

Echoes of the Boom

So, who were his enemies?" Lieutenant Colonel Shablikov asked.

"Gregoriy Filipovich had many. He was overly free with his words. He insulted too many people and—"

"What else?" Shablikov demanded. "He was not blown up in the middle of the street for abusing some criminal's feelings!"

"He was beginning to think about importing narcotics," the informant said next.

"Oh? Tell us more."

"Grisha had contacts with Colombians. He met them in Switzerland three months ago, and he was working to get them to ship him cocaine through the port of Odessa. I heard whispers that he was setting up a pipeline to transport the drugs from there to Moscow."

"And how was he going to pay them for it?" the militia colonel asked. Russian currency was, after all, essentially valueless.

"Hard currency. Grisha made a lot of that from Western clients, and certain of his Russian clients. He knew how to make such people happy, for a price."

Rasputin, the colonel thought. And surely he'd been the debauched one. Selling the bodies of Russian girls—and some boys, Shablikov knew—for enough hard currency to purchase a large German car (for cash; his people had checked on the transaction already) and then planning to import drugs. That had to be for cash "up front," too, as the Americans put it, which meant that he planned to sell the drugs for hard currency, too, since the Colombians probably had little interest in rubles. Avseyenko was no loss to his country. Whoever had killed him ought to get some reward ... except someone new would certainly move into the vacuum and take control of the pimp's organization ... and the new one might be smarter. That was the problem with criminals. There was a Darwinian process at work. The police caught some—even many—but they only caught the dumb ones, while the smart ones just kept getting smarter, and it seemed that the police were always trying to catch up, because those who broke the law always had the initiative.

"Ah, yes, and so, who else imports drugs?"

"I do not know who it is. There are rumors, of course, and I know some of the street vendors, but who actually organizes it, that I do not know."

“Find out,” Shablikov ordered coldly. “It ought not to tax your abilities.”

“I will do what I can,” the informant promised.

“And you will do it quickly, Pavel Petrovich. You will also find out for me who takes over Rasputin’s empire.”

“Yes, Comrade Polkovnik Leytnant.” The usual nod of submission.

There was power in being a senior policeman, Shablikov thought. Real human power, which you could impose on other men, and that made it pleasurable. In this case, he’d told a mid-level criminal what he had to do, and it would be done, lest his informant be arrested and find his source of income interrupted. The other side of the coin was protection of a sort. So long as this criminal didn’t stray too far from what the senior cop found to be acceptable violations, he was safe from the law. It was the same over most of the world, Lieutenant Colonel Yefim Konstantinovich Shablikov of the Moscow Militia was sure. How else could the police collect the information they needed on people who did stray too far? No police agency in the world had the time to investigate everything, and thus using criminals against criminals was the easiest and least expensive method of intelligence-gathering.

The one thing to remember was that the informants were criminals, and hence unreliable in many things, too given to lying, exaggeration, to making up what they thought their master wanted to hear. And so Shablikov had to be careful believing anything this criminal said.

For his part, Pavel Petrovich Klusov had his own doubts, dealing as he did with this corrupted police colonel. Shablikov was not a former KGB officer, but rather a career policeman, and therefore not as smart as he believed himself to be, but more accustomed to bribes and informal arrangements with those he pursued. That was probably how he had achieved his fairly high rank. He knew how to get information by making deals with people like himself, Klusov thought. The informant wondered if the colonel had a hard-currency account somewhere. It would be interesting to find out where he lived, what sort of private car he or his wife drove. But he’d do what he was told, because his own “commercial” activities thrived under Shablikov’s protection, and later that night he’d go out drinking with Irina Aganovna, maybe take her to bed later, and along the way find out how deeply mourned Avseyenko was by his ... former ... employees.

“Yes, Comrade Polkovnik Leytnant,” Klusov agreed. “It will be as you say. I will try to be back with you tomorrow.”

“You will not try. You will do it, Pasha,” Shablikov told him, like a schoolmaster demanding homework from an underachieving child.

It is already under way,” Zhang told his Premier.

“I trust this one will go more smoothly than its two predecessors,” the Premier replied dryly. The risks attached to this operation were incomparably

greater. Both previous times, with Japan's attempt to drastically alter the Pacific Rim equation, and Iran's effort to create a new nation from the ashes of the Soviet Union, the People's Republic had not *done* anything, just ... encouraged, behind the scenes. This venture, though, was different. Well, one could not really expect great things to happen on the cheap, could one?

"I—we have been unlucky."

"Perhaps so." A casual nod as he switched papers on his desk.

Zhang Han San's blood went a little cold at that. The Premier of the People's Republic was a man known for his detachment, but he'd always regarded his Minister Without Portfolio with a certain degree of warmth. Zhang was one of the few whose advice the Premier usually heeded. As indeed today the advice would be heeded, but without any feeling on the part of the senior official.

"We have exposed nothing and we have lost nothing," Zhang went on.

The head didn't come up. "Except that there is now an American ambassador in Taipei." And now there was talk of a mutual-defense treaty whose only purpose was to place the American navy between the two countries, regular port visits, perhaps even a permanent base (to be built entirely, most certainly, from Taiwanese money) whose only purpose, the Americans would innocently say, was merely to be a replacement for Subic Bay in the Philippines. The economy on Taiwan had exploded after the renewal of full U.S. diplomatic recognition, with an influx of massive new capital investments from all over the world. Much of that money would—and *should*—have come to the PRC, except for the change in America's outlook.

But the American President Ryan had taken his action entirely on his own, so the intelligence services claimed, contrary to political and diplomatic advice in Washington—though the American Secretary of State, that Adler man, had reportedly supported Ryan's foolish decision.

Zhang's blood temperature dropped another degree or so. Both of his plans had gone almost as he'd calculated they should, hadn't they? In neither case had his country risked anything of consequence—oh, yes, they'd lost a few fighter aircraft the last time around, but those things and their pilots regularly crashed to no purpose anyway. Especially in the case of Taiwan, the People's Republic had acted responsibly, allowing Secretary Adler to shuttle directly back and forth between Beijing and its wayward province across the Formosa Strait, as though *giving* them legitimacy—something obviously *not* intended by the PRC, but rather as a convenience to aid the American in his peacemaking task, so as to appear more reasonable to the Americans ... and so, why had Ryan done it? Had he guessed Zhang's play? That was possible, but it was more likely that there was a leak, an informer, a *spy* this close to the summit of political power in the People's Republic. The counterintelligence agencies were examining the possibility. There were few who knew what emerged from his mind and his office, and all of them would be questioned, while technical people checked his telephone lines and the very walls of his office. Had he, Zhang, been in error? Certainly not! Even if his Premier felt that way ... Zhang next considered his standing with the Politburo. That could have been better.

Too many of them regarded him as an adventurer with too great an access to the wrong ear. It was an easy thing to whisper, since they'd be delighted to reap the profits from his policy successes, and only slightly less delighted to pull away from him if things went awry. Well, such were the hazards of having reached the summit of policy-making in a country such as his.

"Even if we wished to crush Taiwan, unless we opted for nuclear weapons, it would require years and vast amounts of treasure to construct the means to make it possible, and then it would be a vast risk to little profit. Better that the People's Republic should grow so successful economically that they come begging to us to be let back into the family home. They are not powerful enemies, after all. They are scarcely even a nuisance on the world stage." But for some reason, they were a specific nuisance to his Premier, Zhang reminded himself, like some sort of personal allergy that marked and itched his sensitive skin.

"We have lost face, Zhang. That is enough for the moment."

"Face is not blood, Xu, nor is it treasure."

"They have ample treasure," the Premier pointed out, still not looking at his guest. And that was true. The small island of Taiwan was immensely rich from the industrious effort of its mainly ethnic-Chinese inhabitants, who traded nearly everything to nearly everywhere, and the restoration of American diplomatic recognition had increased both their commercial prosperity and their standing on the world stage. Try as he might, wish as he might, Zhang could not discount either of those things.

What had gone wrong? he asked himself again. Were not his plays brilliantly subtle ones? Had his country ever overtly threatened Siberia? No. Did even the People's Liberation Army's leadership know what the plans were? Well, yes, he had to admit to himself, some did, but only the most trusted people in the operations directorate, and a handful of senior field commanders—the ones who would have to execute the plans if the time ever came. But such people knew how to keep secrets, and if they talked to anyone ... but they wouldn't, because they knew what happened to people who spoke of things best left unspoken in a society such as theirs, and they knew that the very air had ears at their level of "trust." They hadn't even commented on the draft plans to anyone, just made the usual adjustments in the technical arrangements, as senior officers always tended to do. And so, perhaps some file clerks had the ability to examine the plans, but that was exceedingly unlikely as well. Security in the PLA was excellent. The soldiers, from private to the lower general ranks, had no more freedom than a machine bolted to the factory floor, and by the time they reached senior rank they'd mainly forgotten how to think independently, except perhaps in some technical matters, like which sort of bridge to build over a particular river. No, to Zhang they might as well have been machines, and were just as trustworthy.

Back to the original question: *Why* had that Ryan fellow reestablished relations with the "Republic of China"? Had he guessed anything about the Japan and Iran initiatives? The incident with the airliner had certainly looked like the accident it was supposed to simulate, and afterward the PRC had

invited the American navy to come to the area and “keep the peace,” as they liked to put it, as though peace were something you could place in a metal box and guard. In reality it was the other way ’round. War was the animal you kept in a cage, and then released when the time suited.

Had this President Ryan guessed the PRC’s intentions to begin the dismemberment of the former Soviet Union, and then decided to punish the People’s Republic with his recognition of the renegades on Taiwan? It was possible. There were those who found Ryan to be unusually perceptive for an American political figure ... he was a former intelligence officer, after all, and had probably been a good one, Zhang reminded himself. It was always a serious mistake to underrate an adversary, as the Japanese and the Iranians had learned to their considerable sorrow. This Ryan fellow had responded skillfully to both of Zhang’s plans, and yet he hadn’t so much as whispered his displeasure to the PRC. There had been no American military exercises aimed even indirectly at the People’s Republic, no “leaks” to the American media, and nothing that his country’s own intelligence officers operating out of the embassy in Washington had discovered. And so, he was again back to the original question: Why had Ryan taken that action? He just didn’t know. Not knowing was a great annoyance to a man at his level of government. Soon his Premier might ask a question for which he needed to have the answer. But for now the leader of his government was flipping papers on his desk, ostensibly to tell him, Zhang, that he, the Premier, was displeased, but not at this moment doing anything about his emotions.

Ten meters away through a solid-core wood door, Lian Ming had her own emotions. The secretarial chair she sat in was an expensive one, purchased from Japan, the price of it equal to the wages of a skilled worker for, what? Four months? Five? Certainly more than the price of the new bicycle she could have used.

A university graduate in modern languages, she spoke English and French well enough to make herself understood in any city in the world, and as a result she found herself going over all manner of diplomatic and intelligence documents for her boss, whose language skills were considerably less than her own. The comfortable chair represented her boss’s solicitude for the way in which she organized his work and his day. And a little more.

CHAPTER 2

The Dead Goddess

This was where it had all happened, Chester Nomuri told himself. The vast expanse of Tiananmen Square, the "Square of Heavenly Peace," with the massive walls to his right, was like ... what? On reflection he realized that he had nothing with which to compare it. If there were another place in all the world like this place, he had neither visited nor even heard of it.

And yet the very paving stones seemed to drip with blood. It was almost as if he could smell it here, though that was more than ten years in the past, the massed students, not much younger than he had been at the time in California, rallying here to protest their government. They hadn't protested the form of their country's government so much as the corruption of those at its highest levels, and, predictably, such actions had been hugely offensive to the corrupted. Well, that's how it usually went. Only with discretion did one point out the nature of a powerful man to himself, Eastern or Western, but this was the most dangerous place of all, because of its long history of gross brutality. Here there was an *expectation* of it ...

... but the first time it had been tried right here, the soldiers ordered to clear things up had balked. And *that* must have frightened the leadership in their plush and comfortable offices, because when the organs of the state refused to do the bidding of the state, *that* was when something called "Revolution" started (and in a place where there had already been a Revolution, enshrined on this very spot). And so, the initial troop formations had been pulled back and replaced with others, drawn from farther away, young soldiers (all soldiers were young, Nomuri reminded himself). They had not yet been contaminated by the words and thoughts of their contemporaries demonstrating in the Square, not yet sympathetic with them, not yet willing to ask themselves *why* the government which gave them their weapons and uniforms wished for them to hurt these people instead of listening to what they had to say ... and so, they'd acted like the mindless automatons they'd been trained to be.

There, just a few yards away, were some soldiers of the People's Liberation Army on parade, wearing the strange wax-doll look they tended to have, looking not quite human in their green wool uniforms, almost as though they used makeup, Chet thought, wanting to look more closely at their faces to see if maybe they really did. He turned away with a shake of his head. He hadn't flown JAL to China for that. Wangling this assignment for Nippon Electric Company had been difficult enough. It was a major drag working two jobs, as an upper-middle account executive for NEC *and* a field intelligence officer for

CIA. To succeed in the second, he had also to succeed in the first, and to succeed in the first he had to simulate a true Japanese salaryman, one who subordinated everything short of his breathing to the good of the company. Well, at least he got to keep *both* of his salaries, and the Japanese one wasn't all that bad, was it? Not at the current exchange rate, anyway.

Nomuri supposed that this whole deal was a great sign of confidence in his abilities—he'd established a modestly productive network of agents in Japan who would now report to other CIA case officers—and also of desperation. The Agency had been singularly unsuccessful in getting a spy network operating over here in the PRC. Langley hadn't recruited many Chinese Americans into the fold ... and one of those it had gotten was now in Federal prison after having developed a serious case of divided loyalties. It was a fact that certain federal agencies were allowed to be racist, and today Chinese ethnicity was strongly suspect at CIA headquarters. Well, there wasn't anything he could do about that—nor could he pretend to be Chinese himself, Nomuri knew. To some half-blind racist European types, everyone with crooked eyes looked the same, but here in Beijing, Nomuri, whose ancestry was a hundred percent Japanese (albeit entirely of the southern California variety), figured he stood out about as much as Michael Jordan would. It wasn't something to make an intelligence officer without diplomatic cover feel comfortable, especially since the Chinese Ministry of State Security was as active and well-supported as it was. MSS was every bit as powerful in this city as the Soviet KGB had ever been in Moscow, and was probably just as ruthless. China, Nomuri reminded himself, had been in the business of torturing criminals and other unloved ones for thousands of years ... and *his* ethnicity would not be overly helpful. The Chinese did business with the Japanese because it was convenient—necessary was a more accurate term—but there was precisely zero love lost between the countries. Japan had killed far more Chinese in World War II than Hitler had killed Jews, a fact little appreciated anywhere in the world, except, of course, in China, and that set of facts only added to a racial/ethnic antipathy that went back at least as far as Kublai Khan.

He'd gotten too used to fitting in. Nomuri had joined CIA to serve his country, and to have a little fun, he'd thought at the time. Then he'd learned what a deadly serious business field-intelligence was, followed by the challenge of slipping into places he wasn't supposed to be, of obtaining information he wasn't supposed to get, and then giving it to people who weren't supposed to know it. It wasn't just serving his country that kept Nomuri in the business. There was also the thrill, the rush of knowing what others didn't know, of beating people at their own game, on their own turf.

But in Japan he looked like everyone else. Not here in Beijing. He was also a few inches taller than the average Chinese—that came from his childhood diet and American furniture—and better dressed in Western-style clothes. The clothes he could fix. His face he could not. For starters, he'd have to change his haircut, Chet thought. At least that way he could disappear from behind, and perhaps shake an MSS tail that way. He had a car to drive around, paid for by NEC, but he'd get a bicycle, too, a Chinese make rather than an

expensive European one. If asked about it, he'd say it was good exercise—and besides, wasn't it a perfectly fine socialist bicycle? But such questions would be asked, and notice of his presence would be taken, and in Japan, Nomuri realized, he'd gotten slack and comfortable running his agents. He'd known that he could disappear in a place as intimate as a steaming bathhouse, and there talk about women and sports and many other things, but rarely business. In Japan every business operation was secret at some level or other, and even with the intimate friends with whom he discussed their wives' shortcomings, a Japanese salaryman would not discuss goings-on in the office until after they were overt and public. And that was good for operational security, wasn't it?

Looking around like any other tourist, he wondered how he would handle such things here. But most of all he noticed that eyes lingered on him as he walked from one side of this immense square to the other. How had this place sounded when the tanks were here? He stood still for a moment, remembering ... it was right there, wasn't it? ... the guy with the briefcase and shopping bag who'd held up a company of tanks, just by standing there ... because even the private in the driver's seat of a Type 80 PRC tank didn't have the stones to run over the guy, despite whatever his captain might have been screaming at him over the inter-phones from his place on top of the turret. Yeah, it was right about here that had happened. Later on, of course, in about a week, the guy with the briefcase had been arrested by MSS, so said CIA's sources, and he'd been taken away and interrogated to see what had persuaded him to take so public and so foolish a political stand against both the government and the armed forces of his country. That had probably lasted a while, the CIA officer thought, standing here and looking around from the spot where one brave man had taken his stand ... because the MSS interrogators just wouldn't have believed that it had been one man acting on his own ... the concept of acting on one's own was not something encouraged in a communist regime, and was therefore entirely alien to those who enforced the will of the State on those who broke the State's rules. Whoever he'd been, the guy with the briefcase was dead now—the sources were pretty clear on that. An MSS official had commented on the matter with satisfaction later on, before someone whose ears were distantly connected to America. He'd taken the bullet in the back of the head, and his family—a wife and an infant son, the source believed—had been billed for the pistol round needed to execute the husband/ father/ counterrevolutionary/enemy-of-the-state in question. Such was justice in the People's Republic of China.

And what was it they called foreigners here? Barbarians. *Yeah,* Nomuri thought, *sure, Wilbur.* The myth of central position was as alive here as it had been on the Ku-Damm of Adolf Hitler's Berlin. Racism was the same all over the world. Dumb. That was one lesson his country had taught the world, Chester Nomuri thought, though America still had to absorb the lesson herself.

She was a whore, and a very expensive one, Mike Reilly thought from his seat behind the glass. Her hair had been unnaturally blonded by some expensive

shop in Moscow—she needed another treatment, since there was a hint of dark brown at the roots—but it went well with her cheekbones and eyes, which were not quite any shade of blue he'd ever seen in a woman's eyes. That was probably a hook for her repeat customers, the color, he thought, but not the expression. Her body could have been sculpted by Phidias of Athens to be a goddess fit for public worship, ample curves everywhere, the legs thinner than normal for Russian tastes, but ones that would have gotten along well at the comer of Hollywood and Vine, if that were still a nice neighborhood in which to be spotted ...

... but the *expression* in her lovely eyes could have stopped the heart of a marathon runner. What was it about prostitution that did this to women? Reilly shook his head. He hadn't worked that particular class of crime very often—it was mainly a violation for local cops—and not enough, he supposed, to understand its practitioners. The look in her eyes was frightening. Only men were supposed to be predators, so he and most men thought. But this woman belied that belief to a fare-thee-well.

Her name was Tanya Bogdanova. She was, she said, twenty-three years of age. She had the face of an angel, and the body of a movie star. It was her heart and soul the FBI agent was unsure of. Maybe she was just wired differently from normal people, as so many career criminals seemed to be. Maybe she'd been sexually abused in her youth. But even at twenty-three, her youth was a very distant thing, judging from the way her eyes looked at her interrogator. Reilly looked down at her dossier-folder from Militia headquarters. There was only one shot of her in it, a distant black-and-white of her with a john—well, probably an ivan, Reilly thought with a grunt—and in this photo her face was animated, youthful, and as alluring as the young Ingrid Bergman had been to Bogie in *Casablanca.* Tanya could act, Reilly thought. If this were the real Tanya in front of him, as it probably was, then the one in the photo was a construct, a role to be played, an illusion—a wonderful one, to be sure, but potentially a highly dangerous lie to anyone taken in by it. The girl on the other side of the one-way mirror could have dug a man's eyeballs out with her nail file, and then eaten them raw before going to her next appointment at the new Moscow Four Seasons Hotel and Convention Center.

"Who were his enemies, Tanya?" the militiaman asked in the interrogation room.

"Who were his friends?" she asked in bored reply. "He had none. Of enemies he had many." Her spoken language was literate and almost refined. Her English was supposed to be excellent as well. Well, she doubtless needed that for her customers ... it was probably worth a few extra bucks, D-marks, pounds, or euros, a nice hard currency for whose printed notes she'd give a discount, doubtless smiling in a coquettish way when she told her john, jean, johannes, or ivan about it. Before or after? Reilly wondered. He'd never paid for it, though looking at Tanya, he understood why some men might ...

"What's she charge?" he whispered to Provalov.

"More than I can afford," the detective lieutenant grunted. "Something like

six hundred euros, perhaps more for an entire evening. She is medically clean, remarkably enough. A goodly collection of condoms in her purse, American, French, and Japanese brands."

"What's her background? Ballet, something like that?" the FBI agent asked, commenting implicitly on her grace.

Provalov grunted in amusement. "No, her tits are too big for that, and she's too tall. She weighs about, oh, fifty-five kilos or so, I would imagine. Too much for one of those little fairies in the Bolshoi to pick up and throw about. She could become a model for our growing fashion industry, but, no, on what you ask, her background is quite ordinary. Her father, deceased, was a factory worker, and her mother, also deceased, worked in a consumer-goods store. They both died of conditions consistent with alcohol abuse. Our Tanya drinks only in moderation. State education, undistinguished grades in that. No siblings, our Tanya is quite alone in the world—and has been so for some time. She's been working for Rasputin for almost four years. I doubt the Sparrow School ever turned out so polished a whore as this one. Gregoriy Filipovich himself used her many times, whether for sex or just for his public escort, we're not sure, and she is a fine adornment, is she not? But whatever affection he may have had for her, as you see, was not reciprocated."

"Anyone close to her?"

Provalov shook his head. "None known to us, not even a woman friend of note."

The interview was pure vanilla, Reilly saw, like fishing for bass in a well-stocked lake, one of twenty-seven interrogations to this point concerning the death of G. F. Avseyenko—everyone seemed to forget the fact that there had been two additional human beings in the car, but they probably hadn't been the targets. It wasn't getting any easier. What they really needed was the truck, something with physical evidence. Like most FBI agents, Reilly believed in tangibles, something you could hold in your hand, then pass off to a judge or jury, and have them *know* it was both evidence of a crime and proof of who had done it. Eyewitnesses, on the other hand, were often liars; at best they were easy for defense lawyers to confuse, and therefore they were rarely trusted by cops or juries. The truck might have blast residue from the RPG launch, maybe fingerprints on the greasy wrapping paper the Russians used for their weapons, maybe anything—best of all would be a cigarette smoked by the driver or the shooter, since the FBI could DNA-match the residual saliva on that to anyone, which was one of the Bureau's best new tricks (six-hundred-million-to-one odds were hard for people to argue with, even highly paid defense attorneys). One of Reilly's pet projects was to bring over the DNA technology for the Russian police to use, but for that the Russians would have to front the cash for the lab gear, which would be a problem—the Russians didn't seem to have the cash for anything important. All they had now was the remainder of the RPG warhead—it was amazing how much of the things actually did survive launch and detonation—which had a serial number that was being run down, though it was doubtful that this bit of information would lead anywhere. But you ran them all down because you never knew what was

valuable and what was not until you got to the finish line, which was usually in front of a judge's bench with twelve people in a box off to your right. Things were a little different here in Russia, procedurally speaking, but the one thing he was trying to get through to the Russian cops he counseled was that the aim of every investigation was a conviction. They were getting it, slowly for most, quickly for a few, and also getting the fact that kicking a suspect's balls into his throat was not an effective interrogation technique. They had a constitution in Russia, but public respect for it still needed growing, and it would take time. The idea of the rule of law in this country was as foreign as a man from Mars.

The problem, Reilly thought, *was that neither he nor anyone else knew how much time there was for Russians to catch up with the rest of the world.* There was much here to admire, especially in the arts. Because of his diplomatic status, Reilly and his wife often got complimentary tickets to concerts (which he liked) and the ballet (which his wife loved), and that was still the class of the world ... but the rest of the country had never kept up. Some at the embassy, some of the older CIA people who'd been here before the fall of the USSR, said that the improvements were incredible. But if that were true, Reilly told himself, then what had been here before must have been truly dreadful to behold, though the Bolshoi had probably still been the Bolshoi, even then.

"That is all?" Tanya Bogdanova asked in the interrogation room.

"Yes, thank you for coming in. We may call you again."

"Use this number," she said, handing over her business card. "It's for my cellular phone." That was one more Western convenience in Moscow for those with the hard currency, and Tanya obviously did.

The interrogator was a young militia sergeant. He stood politely and moved to get the door for her, showing Bogdanova the courtesy she'd come to expect from men. In the case of Westerners, it was for her physical attributes. In the case of her countrymen, it was her clothing that told them of her newfound worth. Reilly watched her eyes as she left the room. The expression was like that of a child who'd expected to be caught doing something naughty, but hadn't. *How stupid father was,* that sort of smile proclaimed. It seemed so misplaced on the angel-face, but there it was, on the other side of the mirror.

"Oleg?"

"Yes, Mishka?" Provalov turned.

"She's dirty, man. She's a player," Reilly said in English. Provalov knew the cop-Americanisms.

"I agree, Mishka, but I have nothing to hold her on, do I?"

"I suppose not. Might be interesting to keep an eye on her, though."

"If I could afford her, I would keep more than my eye on her, Mikhail Ivan'ch."

Reilly grunted amusement. "Yeah, I hear that."

"But she has a heart of ice."

"That's a fact," the FBI agent agreed. And the game in which she was a player was at best nasty, and at its worst, lethal.

So, what do we have?" Ed Foley asked, some hours later across the river from Washington.

"Gornischt so far," Mary Pat replied to her husband's question.

"Jack wants to be kept up to speed on this one."

"Well, tell the President that we're running as fast as we can, and all we have so far is from the Legal Attaché. He's in tight with the local cops, but they don't seem to know shit either. Maybe somebody tried to kill Sergey Nikolay'ch, but the Legat says he thinks Rasputin was the real target."

"I suppose he had his share of enemies," the Director of Central Intelligence conceded.

Thank you," the Vice President concluded to the packed house at the Ole Miss field house. The purpose of the speech was to announce that eight new destroyers would be built in the big Litton shipyard on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, which meant jobs and money for the state, always items of concern for the governor, who was now standing and applauding as though the Ole Miss football team had just knocked off Texas at the Cotton Bowl. They took their sports seriously down here. And their politics, Robby reminded himself, stifling a curse for this tawdry profession that was so much like medieval bargaining in a village square, three good pigs for a cow or something, toss in a mug of bitter ale. Was *this* how one governed a country? He grinned as he shook his head. Well, there had been politics in the Navy, too, and he'd scaled those heights, but he'd done it by being one hell of a good naval officer and the best fucking fighter pilot ever to catapult off a flattop. On the last score, of course he knew that *every* fighter pilot sitting and waiting for the cat shot felt exactly the same way ... it was just that he was totally correct in his self-assessment.

There were the usual hands to shake coming off the platform, guided by his Secret Service detail in their dark, forbidding shades, then down the steps and out the back door to his car, where another squad of armed men waited, their vigilant eyes looking ever outward, like the gunners on a B- 17 over Schweinfurt must have done, the Vice President thought. One of them held open the car door, and Robby slid in.

"TOMCAT is rolling," the chief of the VP detail told his microphone as the car headed off.

Robby picked up his briefing folder as the car got onto the highway for the airport. "Anything important happening in D.C.?"

"Not that they've told me about," the Secret Service agent answered.

Jackson nodded. These were good people looking after him. The detail chief, he figured, was a medium-to-senior captain, and the rest of his troops

j.g.'s to lieutenant commanders, which was how Robby treated them. They were underlings, but good ones, well-trained pros who merited the smile and the nod when they did things right, which they nearly always did. They would have made good aviators, most of them—and the rest probably good Marines. The car finally pulled up to the VC-20B jet in an isolated corner of the general-aviation part of the airport, surrounded by yet more security troops. The driver stopped the car just twenty feet from the foot of the self-extending stairs.

"You going to drive us home, sir?" the detail chief asked, suspecting the answer.

"Bet your ass, Sam" was the smiling reply.

That didn't please the USAF captain detailed to be co-pilot on the aircraft, and it wasn't all that great for the lieutenant colonel supposed to be the pilot-in-command of the modified Gulfstream III. The Vice President liked to have the stick—in his case the yoke—in his hands at all times, while the colonel worked the radio and monitored the instruments. The aircraft spent most of its time on autopilot, of course, but Jackson, right seat or not, was determined to be the command pilot on the flight, and you couldn't very well say no to him. As a result, the captain would sit in the back and the colonel would be in the left seat, but jerking off. What the hell, the latter thought, the Vice President told good stories, and was a fairly competent stick for a Navy puke.

"Clear right," Jackson said, a few minutes later.

"Clear left," the pilot replied, confirming the fact from the plane-walker in front of the Gulfstream.

"Starting One," Jackson said next, followed thirty seconds later by "Starting Two."

The ribbon gauges came up nicely. "Looking good, sir," the USAF lieutenant colonel reported. The G had Rolls-Royce Spey engines, the same that had once been used on the U.K. versions of the F-4 Phantom fighter, but somewhat more reliable.

"Tower, this is Air Force Two, ready to taxi."

"Air Force Two, Tower, cleared to taxiway three."

"Roger, Tower AF-Two taxiing via three." Jackson slipped the brakes and let the aircraft move, its fighter engines barely above idle, but guzzling a huge quantity of fuel for all that. On a carrier, Jackson thought, you had plane handlers in yellow shirts to point you around. Here you had to go according to the map/diagram—clipped to the center of the yoke—to the proper place, all the while looking around to make sure some idiot in a Cessna 172 didn't stray into your path like a stray car in the supermarket parking lot. Finally, they reached the end of the runway, and turned to face down it.

"Tower, this is Spade requesting permission to take off." It just sort of came out on its own.

A laughing reply: "This ain't the *Enterprise,* Air Force Two, and we don't

have cat shots here, but you are cleared to depart, sir."

You could hear the grin in the reply: "Roger, Tower, AF-TWO is rolling."

"Your call sign was really 'Spade'?" the assigned command pilot asked as the VC-20B started rolling.

"Got hung on by my first CO, back when I was a new nugget. And it kinda stuck." The Vice President shook his head. "Jesus, that seems like a long time ago."

"V-One, sir," the Air Force officer said next, followed by "V-R."

At velocity-rotation, Jackson eased back on the yoke, bringing the aircraft off the ground and into the air. The colonel retracted the landing gear on command, while Jackson flipped the wheel half an inch left and right, rocking the wings a little as he always did to make sure the aircraft was willing to do what he told it. It was, and inside of three minutes, the G was on autopilot, programmed to turn, climb, and level out at thirty-nine thousand feet.

"Boring, isn't it?"

"Just another word for safe, sir," the USAF officer replied.

Fucking trash-hauler, Jackson thought. No fighter pilot would say something like that out loud. Since when was flying supposed to be ... well, Robby had to admit to himself, he always buckled his seat belt before starting his car, and never did anything reckless, even with a fighter plane. But it offended him that this aircraft, like almost all of the new ones, did so much of the work that he'd been trained to do himself. It would even land itself ... well, the Navy had such systems aboard its carrier aircraft, but *no* proper naval aviator ever used it unless ordered to, something Robert Jefferson Jackson had always managed to avoid. This trip would go into his logbook as time in command, but it really wasn't. Instead it was a microchip in command, and his real function was to be there to take proper action in case something broke. But nothing ever did. Even the damned engines. Once turbojets had lasted a mere nine or ten hours before having to be replaced. Now there were Spey engines on the G fleet that had twelve *thousand* hours. There was one out there with over *thirty* thousand that Rolls-Royce wanted back, offering a free brand-new replacement because its engineers wanted to tear that one apart to learn what they'd done so right, but the owner, perversely and predictably, refused to part with it. The rest of the Gulfstream airframe was about that reliable, and the electronics were utterly state-of-the-art, Jackson knew, looking down at the color display from the weather-radar. It was a clear and friendly black at the moment, showing what was probably smooth air all the way to Andrews. There was as yet no instrument that detected turbulence, but up here at flight level three-niner-zero, that was a pretty rare occurrence, and Jackson wasn't often susceptible to airsickness, and his hand was inches from the yoke in case something unexpected happened. Jackson occasionally hoped that something *would* happen, since it would allow him to show just how good an aviator he was ... but it never did. Flying had become too routine since his childhood in the F-4N Phantom and his emerging manhood in the F-14A Tomcat. And maybe it was better that way. Yeah, he thought, sure.

“Mr. Vice President?” It was the voice of the USAF communications sergeant aboard the VC-20. Robby turned to see her with a sheaf of papers.

“Yeah, Sarge?”

“Flash traffic just came in on the printer.” She extended her hand, and Robby took the paper.

“Colonel, your airplane for a while,” the VP told the lieutenant colonel in the left seat.

“Pilot’s airplane,” the colonel agreed, while Robby started reading.

It was always the same, even though it was also always different. The cover sheet had the usual classification formatting. It had once impressed Jackson that the act of showing a sheet of paper to the wrong person could land him in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary—at the time, actually, the since-closed Portsmouth Naval Prison in New Hampshire—but now as a senior government official in Washington, D.C., he knew he could show damned near anything to a reporter from *The Washington Post* and not be touched for it. It wasn’t so much that he was above the law as he was one of the people who decided what the law meant. What was so damned secret and sensitive in this case was that CIA didn’t know shit about the possible attempt on the life of Russia’s chief spymaster ... which meant nobody else in Washington did, either....

CHAPTER 3

The Problems with Riches

The issue was trade, not exactly the President's favorite, but then, at this level, every issue took on sufficient twists that even the ones you thought you knew about became strange at best, unknown and alien at worst.

"George?" Ryan said to his Secretary of the Treasury, George Winston.

"Mr. Pres—"

"Goddammit, George!" The President nearly spilled his coffee with the outburst.

"Okay." SecTreas nodded submission. "It's hard to make the adjustment ... *Jack."* Ryan was getting tired of the Presidential trappings, and his rule was that here, in the Oval Office, his name was Jack, at least for his inner circle, of which Winston was one. After all, Ryan had joked a few times, after leaving this marble prison, he might be working *for* TRADER, as the Secret Service knew him, back in New York on The Street, instead of the other way 'round. After leaving the Presidency, something for which Jack prostrated himself before God every night—or so the stories went—he'd have to find gainful employment somewhere, and the trading business beckoned. Ryan had shown a rare gift for it, Winston reminded himself. His last such effort had been a California company called Silicon Alchemy, just one of many computer outfits, but the only one in which Ryan had taken an interest. So skillfully had he brought that firm to IPO that his own stock holdings in SALC—its symbol on the big board—were now valued at just over eighty million dollars, making Ryan by far the wealthiest American President in history. It was something his politically astute Chief of Staff, Arnold van Damm, did not advertise to the news media, who typically regarded every wealthy man as a robber baron, excepting, of course, the owners of the papers and TV stations themselves, who were, of course, the best of public-spirited citizens. None of this was widely known, even in the tight community of Wall Street big-hitters, which was remarkable enough. Should he ever return to The Street, Ryan's prestige would be sufficient to earn money while he slept in his bed at home. And that, Winston freely admitted, was something well and truly earned, and be damned to whatever the media hounds thought of it.

"It's China?" Jack asked.

"That's right, Boss," Winston confirmed with a nod. "Boss" was a term Ryan could stomach, as it was also the in-house term the Secret Service—which was part of Winston's Department of the Treasury—used to identify the man they

were sworn to protect. “They’re having a little cash-shortfall problem, and they’re looking to make it up with us.”

“How little?” POTUS asked.

“It looks as though it will annualize out to, oh, seventy billion or so.”

“That is, as we say, real money.”

George Winston nodded. “Anything that starts with a ‘B’ is real enough, and this is a little better than six ‘Bs’ a month.”

“Spending it for what?”

“Not entirely sure, but a lot of it has to be military-related. The French arms industries are tight with them now, since the Brits kiboshed the jet-engine deal from Rolls-Royce.”

The President nodded, looking down at the briefing papers. “Yeah, Basil talked the PM out of it.” That was Sir Basil Charleston, chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service, sometimes called (erroneously) MI6. Basil was an old friend of Ryan’s, going back to his CIA days. “It was a remarkably stand-up thing to do.”

“Well, our friends in Paris don’t seem to think the same way.”

“They usually don’t,” Ryan agreed. The odd thing was the dichotomy inherent in dealing with the French. In some things, they weren’t so much allies as blood brothers, but in others they were less than mere associates, and Ryan had trouble figuring out the logic by which the French changed their minds. Well, the President thought, that’s what I have a State Department for.... “So, you think the PRC is building up its military again?”

“Big time, but not so much their navy, which makes our friends in Taiwan feel a little better.”

That had been one of President Ryan’s foreign-policy initiatives after concluding hostilities with the defunct United Islamic Republic, now restored to the separate nations of Iran and Iraq, which were at least at peace with each other. The real reasons for the recognition of Taiwan had never been made known to the public. It looked pretty clear to Ryan and his Secretary of State, Scott Adler, that the People’s Republic of China had played a role in the Second Persian Gulf War, and probably in the preceding conflict with Japan, as well. Exactly why? Well, some in CIA thought that China lusted after the mineral riches in eastern Siberia—this was suggested by intercepts and other access to the electronic mail of the Japanese industrialists who’d twisted their nation’s path into a not-quite-open clash with America. They’d referred to Siberia as the “Northern Resource Area,” harkening back to when an earlier generation of Japanese strategists had called South Asia the “Southern Resource Area.” That had been part of another conflict, one known to history as the Second World War. In any case, the complicity of the PRC with America’s enemies had merited a countermove, Ryan and Adler had agreed, and besides, the Republic of China on Taiwan was a democracy, with government officials elected by the people of that nation island—and *that* was something America was supposed to respect.

"You know, it would be better if they started working their navy and threatening Taiwan. We are in a better position to forestall that than—"

"You really think so?" SecTreas asked, cutting his President off.

"The Russians do," Jack confirmed.

"Then why are the Russians selling the Chinese so much hardware?" Winston demanded. "That doesn't make sense!"

"George, there is no rule demanding that the world has to make sense." That was one of Ryan's favorite aphorisms. "That's one of the things you learn in the intelligence business. In 1938, guess who was Germany's number one trading partner?"

SecTreas saw that sandbag coming before it struck. "France?"

"You got it." Ryan nodded. "Then, in '40 and '41, they did a lot of trade with the Russians. That didn't work out so well either, did it?"

"And everyone always told me that trade was a moderating influence," the Secretary observed.

"Maybe it is among people, but remember that governments don't have principles so much as interests—at least the primitive ones, the ones who haven't figured it all out yet..."

"Like the PRC?"

It was Ryan's turn to nod. "Yeah, George, like those little bastards in Beijing. They rule a nation of a billion people, but they do it as though they were the new coming of Caligula. Nobody ever told them that they have a positive duty to look after the interests of the people they rule—well, maybe that's not true," Ryan allowed, feeling a little generous. "They have this big, perfect theoretical model, promulgated by Karl Marx, refined by Lenin, then applied in their country by a pudgy sexual pervert named Mao."

"Oh? Pervert?"

"Yeah." Ryan looked up. "We had the data over at Langley. Mao liked virgins, the younger the better. Maybe he liked to see the fear in their cute little virginal eyes—that's what one of our pshrink consultants thought, kinda like rape, not so much sex as power. Well, I guess it could have been worse—at least they were girls," Jack observed rather dryly, "and their culture is historically a little more liberal than ours on that sort of thing." A shake of the head. "You should see the briefs I get whenever a major foreign dignitary comes over, the stuff we know about their personal habits."

A chuckle: "Do I really want to know?"

A grimace: "Probably not. Sometimes I wish they didn't give me the stuff. You sit them down right here in the office, and they're charming and businesslike, and you can spend the whole fucking meeting looking for horns and hooves." That could be a distraction, of course, but it was more generally thought that as in playing poker for high stakes, the more you knew about the guy on the other side of the table, the better, even if it might make you want

to throw up during the welcoming ceremony on the White House South Lawn. But that was the business of being President, Ryan reminded himself. *And people actually fought like tigers to get there.* And would again, when he left, POTUS reminded himself. *And so, Jack, is it your job to protect your country from the kind of rat who lusts to be where all the really good cheese is stored?* Ryan shook his head again. So many doubts. It wasn't so much that they never went away. They just kept getting bigger all the time. How strange that he understood and could recount every small step that had led him to this office, and yet he still asked himself several times every hour how the *hell* he'd come to be in this place ... and how the hell he'd ever get out. Well, he had no excuses at all this time. He'd actually run for election to the Presidency. If you could call it that—Arnie van Damm didn't, as a matter of fact—which you could, since he'd fulfilled the constitutional requirements, a fact on which just about every legal scholar in the nation had agreed, *and* talked about on every major news network *ad nauseam.* Well, Jack reminded himself, *I wasn't watching much TV back then, was I?* But it all really came down to one thing: The people you dealt with as President were very often people whom you would never willingly invite into your home, and it had nothing to do with any lack of manners or personal charm, which, perversely, they usually displayed in abundance. One of the things Arnie had told Jack early on was that the main requirement to enter the political profession was nothing more nor less than the ability to be pleasant to people whom you despised, and then to do business with them as if they were bosom friends.

"So, what do we know about our heathen Chinese friends?" Winston asked. "The current ones, that is."

"Not much. We're working on that. The Agency has a long way to go, though we are started on the road. We still get intercepts. Their phone system is leaky, and they use their cell phones too much without encrypting them. Some of them are men of commendable vigor, George, but nothing too terribly scandalous that we know about. Quite a few of them have secretaries who are very close to their bosses."

The Secretary of the Treasury managed a chuckle. "Well, a lot of that going around, and not just in Beijing."

"Even on Wall Street?" Jack inquired, with a theatrically raised eyebrow.

"I can't say for sure, sir, but I have heard the occasional rumor." Winston grinned at the diversion.

And even right here in this room, Ryan reminded himself. They'd changed the rug long since, of course, and all the furniture, except for the Presidential desk. One of the problems associated with holding this job was the baggage piled on your back by previous officeholders. They said the public had a short memory, but that wasn't true, was it? Not when you heard the whispers, followed by chuckles, and accompanied by knowing looks and the occasional gesture that made you feel dirty to be the subject of the chuckles. And all you could do about it was to live your life as best you could, but even then the best you could hope for was for people to think you were smart enough not to get caught, *because they* all *did it, right?* One of the problems with living in a

free country was that anyone outside this palace/prison could think and say whatever he wished. And Ryan didn't even have the right that any other citizen might have to punch out whatever twit said something about his character that the twit was unwilling to back up. It hardly seemed fair, but as a practical matter, it would force Ryan to visit a lot of corner bars, and break a lot of knuckles, to little gain. And sending sworn cops or armed Marines out to handle matters wasn't exactly a proper use of Presidential power, was it?

Jack knew that he was far too thin-skinned to hold this job. Professional politicians typically had hides that made a rhinoceros's look like rose petals, because they expected to have things hurled at them, some true, some not. By cultivating that thick covering, they attenuated the pain somehow, until eventually people stopped hurling things at them, or such was the theory. Maybe it actually worked for some. Or maybe the bastards just didn't have consciences. You paid your money and you took your choice.

But Ryan did have a conscience. That was a choice he'd made long before. You still had to look in the mirror once a day, usually at shaving time, and there was no easy fix for not being able to like the face you saw there.

"Okay, back to the PRC's problems, George," the President commanded.

"They're going to juice up their trade—one way, that is. They're discouraging their own citizens from buying American, but all they can sell, they sell. Including some of Mao's young virgins, probably."

"What do we have to prove that?"

"Jack, I pay close attention to results, and I have friends in various businesses who shake the bushes and talk to people over drinks. What they learn frequently gets back to me. You know, a lot of ethnic Chinese have some weird medical condition. You get one drink into them, it's like four or five for us—and the second drink is like chugging a whole bottle of Jack Daniel's, but some of the dummies try to keep up anyway, some hospitality thing, maybe. Anyway, when that happens, well, the talk becomes freer, y'know? It's been going on quite a while, but lately Mark Gant set up a little program. Senior executives who go to certain special places, well, I *do* own the Secret Service now, and the Secret Service *does* specialize in economic crimes, right? And a lot of my old friends know who I am and what I do now, and they cooperate pretty nice, and so I get a lot of good stuff to write up. It mainly goes to my senior people across the street."

"I'm impressed, George. You cross-deck it to CIA?"

"I suppose I could, but I was afraid they'd get all pissy over turf rights and stuff."

Ryan rolled his eyes at that bit of information. "Not Ed Foley. He's a real pro from way back, and the bureaucracy over at Langley hasn't captured him yet. Have him over to your office for lunch. He won't mind what you're doing. Same thing with Mary Pat. She runs the Directorate of Operations. MP's a real cowgirl, and she wants results, too."

"Duly noted. You know, Jack, it's amazing how much people talk, and the

things they talk about under the proper circumstances."

"How'd you make all that money on The Street, George?" Ryan asked.

"Mainly by knowing a little more than the guy across the street," Winston replied.

"Works the same way for me here. Okay, if our little friends go forward with this, what should we do?"

"Jack—no, now it's *Mr. President*—we've been financing Chinese industrial expansion for quite a few years now. They sell things to us, we pay cash for them, and then they either keep the money for their own purposes on the international money markets, or they purchase things they want from other countries, often things they could as easily buy from us, but maybe half a percent more expensive from an American manufacturer. The reason it's called 'trade' is that you theoretically exchange something of yours for something of the other guy's—just like kids with baseball cards, okay?—but they're not playing the game that way. They're also dumping some products just to get dollars, selling items here for less than what they sell them to their own citizens. Now, that is technically in violation of a couple federal statues. Okay," Winston shrugged, "it's a statute we enforce somewhat selectively, but it is on the books, and it *is* the law. Toss in the Trade Reform Act that we passed a few years ago because of the games the Japs were playing—"

"I remember, George. It kinda started a little shooting war in which some people got killed," POTUS observed dryly. Worst of all, perhaps, it had begun the process that had ended up with Ryan in this very room.

SecTreas nodded. "True, but it's still the law, and it was not a bill of attainder meant only to apply to Japan. Jack, if we apply the same trade laws to China that the Chinese apply to us, well, it'll put a major crimp in their foreign-exchange accounts. Is that a bad thing? No, not with the trade imbalance we have with them now. You know, Jack, if they start building automobiles and play the same game they're playing on everything else, our trade deficit could get real ugly real fast, and frankly I'm tired of having us finance their economic development, which they then execute with heavy equipment bought in Japan and Europe. If they want trade with the United States of America, fine, but let it be *trade.* We can hold our own in any truly fair trade war with any country, because American workers can produce as well as anybody in the world and better than most. But if we let them cheat us, we're being cheated, Jack, and I don't like that here any more than I do around a card table. And here, buddy, the stakes are a hell of a lot higher."

"I hear you, George. But we don't want to put a gun to their head, do we? You don't do that to a nation-state, especially a *big* nation-state, unless you have a solid reason for doing so. Our economy is chugging along rather nicely now, isn't it? We can afford to be a little magnanimous."

"Maybe, Jack. What I was thinking was a little friendly encouragement on our part, not a pointed gun exactly. The gun is always there in the holster—the big gun is most-favored-nation status, and they know it, and we know they know it. TRA is something we can apply to any country, and I happen to think

the idea behind the law is fundamentally sound. It's been fairly useful as a club to show to a lot of countries, but we've never tried it on the PRC. How come?"

POTUS shrugged, with no small degree of embarrassment. "Because I haven't had the chance to yet, and before me too many people in this town just wanted to kiss their collective ass."

"Leaves a bad taste in your mouth when you do that, Mr. President, doesn't it?"

"It can," Jack agreed. "Okay, you want to talk this over with Scott Adler. The ambassadors all work for him."

"Who do we have in Beijing?"

"Carl Hitch. Career FSO, late fifties, supposed to be very good, and this is his sunset assignment."

"Payoff for all those years of holding coats?"

Ryan nodded. "Something like that, I suppose. I'm not entirely sure. State wasn't my bureaucracy." CIA, he didn't add, was bad enough.

It was a much nicer office, Bart Mancuso thought. And the shoulderboards on his undress whites were a little heavier now, with the four stars instead of the two he'd worn as COMSUBPAC. But no more. His former boss, Admiral Dave Seaton, had fleeted up to Chief of Naval Operations, and then the President (or someone close to him) had decided that Mancuso was the guy to be the next Commander in Chief, Pacific. And so he now worked in the same office once occupied by Chester Nimitz, and other fine—and some brilliant—naval officers since. It was quite a stretch since Plebe Summer at Annapolis, lo those many years before, especially since he'd had only a single command at sea, USS *Dallas,* though that command tour had been a noteworthy one, complete with two missions he could *still* tell no one about. And having been shipmates once and briefly with the sitting President probably hadn't hurt his career very much.

The new job came with a plush official house, a sizable team of sailors and chiefs to look after him and his wife—the boys were all away at college now—the usual drivers, official cars, and, now, armed bodyguards, because, remarkably enough, there were people about who didn't much care for admirals. As a theater commander Mancuso now reported directly to the Secretary of Defense, Anthony Bretano, who in turn reported directly to President Ryan. In return, Mancuso got a lot of new perks. Now he had direct access to all manner of intelligence information, including the holy of holies, sources and methods—where the information came from, and how we'd gotten it out—because as America's principal executor for a quarter of the globe's surface, he had to know it all, so that he'd know what to advise the SecDef, who would, in turn, advise the President of CINCPAC's views, intentions, and desires.

The Pacific, Mancuso thought, having just completed his first morning intel brief, looked okay. It hadn't always been like that, of course, including recently, when he'd fought a fairly major conflict—"war" was a word that had fallen very much out of favor in civilized discourse—with the Japanese, and that had included the loss of two of his nuclear submarines, killed with treachery and deceit, as Mancuso thought of it, though a more objective observer might have called the tactics employed by the enemy clever and effective.

Heretofore he'd been notified of the locations and activities of his various submarines, but now he also got told about his carriers, tin cans, cruisers, and replenishment ships, plus Marines, and even Army and Air Force assets, which were technically his as a theater commander-in-chief. All that meant that the morning intel brief lasted into a third cup of coffee, by the end of which he looked longingly to the executive head, just a few feet away from his desk. Hell, his intelligence coordinator, called a J-2, was, in fact, an Army one-star doing his "joint" tour, and, in fairness, doing it pretty well. This brigadier, named Mike Lahr, had taught political science at West Point, in addition to other assignments. Having to consider political factors was a new development in Mancuso's career, but it came with the increased command territory. CINCPAC had done his "joint" tour along the way, of course, and was theoretically conversant with the abilities and orientation of his brother armed services, but whatever confidence he'd had along those lines diminished in the face of having the command responsibility to utilize such forces in a professional way. Well, he had subordinate commanders in those other services to advise him, but it was his job to know more than just how to ask questions, and for Mancuso that meant he'd have to go out and get his clothes dirty seeing the practical side, because that was where the kids assigned to his theater would shed blood if he didn't do his job right.

The team was a joint venture of the Atlantic Richfield Company, British Petroleum, and the largest Russian oil exploration company. The last of the three had the most experience but the least expertise, and the most primitive methods. This was not to say that the Russian prospectors were stupid. Far from it. Two of them were gifted geologists, with theoretical insights that impressed their American and British colleagues. Better still, they'd grasped the advantages of the newest exploration equipment about as quickly as the engineers who'd designed it.

It had been known for many years that this part of eastern Siberia was a geological twin to the North Slope region of Alaska and Northern Canada, which had turned into vast oil fields for their parent countries to exploit. The hard part had been getting the proper equipment there to see if the similarity was more than just cosmetic.

Getting the gear into the right places had been a minor nightmare. Brought by train into southeastern Siberia from the port of Vladivostok, the "thumper trucks"—they were far too heavy to airlift—had then spent a month going

cross-country, north from Magdagachi, through Aim and Ust Maya, finally getting to work east of Kazachye.

But what they had found had staggered them. From Kazachye on the River Yana all the way to Kolymskaya on the Kolyma was an oil field to rival the Persian Gulf. The thumper trucks and portable computer—carrying seismic-survey vehicles—had shown a progression of perfect underground dome formations in stunning abundance, some of them barely two thousand feet down, mere tens of vertical yards from the permafrost, and drilling through that would be about as hard as slicing a wedding cake with a cavalryman's saber. The scope of the field could not be ascertained without drilling test wells—over a hundred such wells, the chief American engineer thought, just from the sheer scope of the field—but no one had ever seen as promising or as vast a natural deposit of petroleum during his professional lifetime. The issues of exploitation would not be small ones, of course. Except for Antarctica itself, there was no place on the planet with a less attractive climate. Getting the production gear in here would take years of multistage investment, building airfields, probably building ports for the cargo ships that could alone deliver the heavy equipment—and then only in the brief summer months—needed to construct the pipeline which would be needed to get the oil out to market. Probably through Vladivostok, the Americans thought. The Russians could sell it from there, and supertankers, more precisely called VLCCs or ULCCs—for Very Large to Ultra-Large Crude Carriers—would move it out across the Pacific, maybe to Japan, maybe to America or elsewhere, wherever oil was needed, which was just about everywhere. From those users would come hard currency. It would take many more years until Russia could build the wherewithal needed for its own industries and consumers to use the oil, but, as such things happened, the cash generated from selling the Siberian crude could then be flipped and used to purchase oil from other sources, which would be much more easily transported to Russian ports and thence into existing Russian pipelines. The cash difference of selling and buying, as opposed to building a monstrous and monstrously expensive pipeline, was negligible in any case, and such decisions were usually made for political rather than economic reasons.

At precisely the same time, and only six hundred miles, or nine hundred sixty or so kilometers, away, another geology team was in the eastern extreme of the Sayan mountain range. Some of the semi-nomadic tribes in the area, who had made their living for centuries by herding reindeer, had brought into a government office some shiny yellow rocks. Few people in the world have been unaware of what such rocks mean, at least for the preceding thirty centuries, and a survey team had been dispatched from Moscow State University, still the nation's most prestigious school. They had been able to fly in, since their equipment was far lighter, and the last few hundred kilometers had been done on horseback, a wonderful anachronism for the survey team of academics, who were far more used to riding Moscow's fine subway system.

The first thing they'd found was an eighty-ish man living alone with his herd and a rifle to fend off wolves. This citizen had lived alone since the death of his wife, twenty years before, quite forgotten by the changing governments

of his country, known to exist only by a few shopkeepers in a dreary village thirty kilometers to the south, and his mental state reflected his long-term isolation. He managed to shoot three or four wolves every year, and he kept the pelts as any hunter/herdsman might, but with a difference. First he took the pelts and, weighting them down with stones, set them in the small river that ran near his hut.

In Western literature there is the well-known story of Jason and the Argonauts, and their heroic quest for the Golden Fleece. It was not known until recently that the legend of the artifact sought was quite real: The tribesmen of Asia Minor had set the skins of sheep in their streams to catch the gold dust being washed down from deposits higher up, changing the pale wool fibers into something almost magical in appearance.

It was no different here. The wolf pelts the geologists found hanging inside the old soldier's hut looked on first inspection to be sculptures by Renaissance masters, or even artisans of the Pharaohs of dynastic Egypt, they were so evenly coated, and then the explorers found that each pelt weighed a good sixty kilograms, and there were thirty-four of them! Sitting down with him over the necessary bottle of fine vodka, they learned that his name was Pavel Petrovich Gogol, that he'd fought against the Fascisti in the Great Patriotic War as a sniper, and, remarkably, was twice a Hero of the Soviet Union for his marksmanship, mainly in the battles around Kiev and Warsaw. A somewhat grateful nation had allowed him to return to his ancestral lands—he was, it turned out, descended from the entrepreneurial Russians who'd come to Siberia in the early nineteenth century—where he'd been forgotten by the bureaucrats who never really wondered much where the reindeer meat eaten by the locals came from, or who might be cashing his pension checks to buy ammunition for his old bolt-action rifle. Pavel Petrovich knew the value of the gold he found, but he'd never spent any of it, as he found his solitary life quite satisfactory. The gold deposit a few kilometers upstream from the place where the wolves went for their last swim—as Pavel Petrovich described it with a twinkle in the eye and a snort of vodka—turned out to be noteworthy, perhaps as much as the South African strike of the mid-nineteenth century, and that had turned into the richest gold mine in the history of the world. The local gold had not been discovered for several reasons, mainly relating to the dreadful Siberian climate, which had, first, prevented a detailed exploratory survey, and, second, covered the local streams with ice so much of the time that the gold dust in the streambeds had never been noticed.

Both the oil and rock survey teams had traveled into the field with satellite phones, the more quickly to report what they found. This both teams did, coincidentally on the same day.

The Iridium satellite-communications system they used was a huge breakthrough in global communications. With an easily portable instrument, one could communicate with the low-altitude constellation of dedicated communications satellites which cross-linked their signals at the speed of light (which was almost instantaneous, but not quite) to conventional communications birds, and from there to the ground, which was where most people were most of the time.

The Iridium system was designed to speed communications worldwide. It was not, however, designed to be a secure system. There were ways to do that, but they all required the individual users to make their security arrangements. It was now theoretically possible to get commercially available 128-bit encryption systems, and these were extremely difficult to break even by the most sophisticated of nation-states and their black services ... or so the salesmen said. But the remarkable thing was that few people bothered. Their laziness made life a lot easier for the National Security Agency, located between Baltimore and Washington at Fort Meade, Maryland. There, a computer system called ECHELON was programmed to listen in on every conversation that crossed the ether, and to lock in on certain codewords. Most of those words were nouns with national-security implications, but since the end of the Cold War, NSA and other agencies had paid more attention to economic matters, and so some of the new words were "oil," "deposit," "crude," "mine," "gold," and others, all in thirty-eight languages. When such a word crossed ECHELON'S electronic ear, the continuing conversation was recorded onto electronic media and transcribed and, where necessary, translated—all by computer. It was by no means a perfect system, and the nuances of language were still difficult for a computer program to unravel—not to mention the tendency of many people to mutter into the phone—but where a goof occurred, the original conversation would be reviewed by a linguist, of which the National Security Agency employed quite a few.

The parallel reports of the oil and gold strikes came in only five hours apart, and made their way swiftly up the chain of command, ending in a "flash" priority Special National Intelligence Estimate (called a SNIE, and pronounced "snee") destined for the President's desk right after his next breakfast, to be delivered by his National Security Adviser, Dr. Benjamin Goodley. Before that, the data would be examined by a team from the Central Intelligence Agency's Directorate of Science and Technology, with a big assist from experts on the payroll of the Petroleum Institute in Washington, some of whose members had long enjoyed a cordial relationship with various government agencies. The preliminary evaluation—carefully announced and presented as such, *preliminary,* lest someone be charged for being wrong if the estimate proved to be incorrect someday—used a few carefully chosen superlatives.

Damn," the President observed at 8:10 EST. "Okay, Ben, how big are they really?"

"You don't trust our technical weenies?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"Ben, as long as I worked on the other side of the river, I never once caught them wrong on something like this, but damned if I didn't catch them u*nder*estimating stuff." Ryan paused for a moment. "But, Jesus, if these are lowball numbers, the implications are pretty big."

"Mr. President"—Goodley was not part of Ryan's inner circle—"we're

talking billions, exactly how many nobody knows, but call it two hundred billion dollars in hard currency earnings over the next five to seven years at minimum. That's money they can use."

"And at maximum?"

Goodley leaned back for a second and took a breath. "I had to check. A trillion is a *thousand* billion. On the sunny side of that number. This is pure speculation, but the guys at the Petroleum Institute that CIA uses, the guys across the river tell me, spent most of their time saying 'Holy shit!' "

"Good news for the Russians," Jack said, flipping through the printed SNIE.

"Indeed it is, sir."

"About time they got lucky," POTUS thought aloud. "Okay, get a copy of this to George Winston. We want his evaluation of what this will mean to our friends in Moscow."

"I was planning to call some people at Atlantic Richfield. They were in on the exploration. I imagine they'll share in the proceeds. Their president is a guy named Sam Sherman. Know him?"

Ryan shook his head. "I know the name, but we've never met. Think I ought to change that?"

"If you want hard information, it can't hurt."

Ryan nodded. "Okay, maybe I'll have Ellen track him down." Ellen Sumter, his personal secretary, was located fifteen feet away through the sculpted door to his right. "What else?"

"They're still beating bushes for the people who blew up the pimp in Moscow. Nothing new to report on that, though."

"Would be nice to know what's going on in the world, wouldn't it?"

"Could be worse, sir," Goodley told his boss.

"Right." Ryan tossed the paper copy of the morning brief on his desk. "What else?"

Goodley shook his head. *"And that's the way it is* this morning, Mr. President." Goodley got a smile for that.

CHAPTER 4

Knob Rattling

It didn't matter what city or country you were in, Mike Reilly told himself. Police work was all the same. You talked to possible witnesses, you talked to the people involved, you talked to the victim.

But not the victim this time. Grisha Avseyenko would never speak again. The pathologist assigned to the case commented that he hadn't seen such a mess since his uniformed service in Afghanistan. But that was to be expected. The RPG was designed to punch holes in armored vehicles and concrete bunkers, which was a more difficult task than destroying a private-passenger automobile, even one so expensive as that stopped in Dzerzhinskiy Square. That meant that the body parts were very difficult to identify. It turned out that half the jaw had enough repaired teeth to say with great certainty that the decedent had indeed been Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko, and DNA samples would ultimately confirm this (the blood type also matched). There hadn't been enough of his body to identify—the face, for example, had been totally removed, and so had the left forearm, which had once borne a tattoo. The decedent's death had come instantaneously, the pathologist reported, after the processed remains had been packed into a plastic container, which in turn found its way into an oaken box for later cremation, probably—the Moscow Militia had to ascertain whether any family members existed, and what disposition for the body they might wish. Lieutenant Provalov assumed that cremation would be the disposal method of choice. It was, in its way, quick and clean, and it was easier and less expensive to find a resting place for a small box or urn than for a full-sized coffin with a cadaver in it.

Provalov took the pathology report back from his American colleague. He hadn't expected it to reveal anything of interest, but one of the things he'd learned from his association with the American FBI was that you checked everything thoroughly, since predicting how a criminal case would break was like trying to pick a ten-play football pool two weeks before the games were played. The human minds who committed crimes were simply too random in their operation for any sort of prediction.

And that had been the easy part. The pathology report on the driver had essentially been useless. The only data in it of any use at all had been blood and tissue types (which could be checked with his military-service records, if they could be located), since the body had been so thoroughly shredded as to leave not a single identifying mark or characteristic, though, perversely, his identity papers had survived in his wallet, and so, they probably knew who he had been. The same was true of the woman in the car, whose purse had

survived virtually intact on the seat to the right of her, along with her ID papers ... which was a lot more than could be said for her face and upper torso. Reilly looked at the photos of the other victims—well, one presumed they matched up, he told himself. The driver was grossly ordinary, perhaps a little fitter than was the average here. The woman, yet another of the pimp's high-priced hookers with a photo in her police file, had been a dish, worthy of a Hollywood screen test, and certainly pretty enough for a *Playboy* centerfold. Well, no more.

"So, Mishka, have you handled enough of these crimes that it no longer touches you?" Provalov asked.

"Honest answer?" Reilly asked, then shook his head. "Not really. We don't handle that many homicides, except the ones that happen on Federal property —Indian reservations or military bases. I have handled some kidnappings, though, and those you never get used to." Especially, Reilly didn't add, since kidnapping for money was a dead crime in America. Now children were kidnapped for their sexual utility, and most often killed in five hours, often before the FBI could even respond to the initial request for assistance from the local police department. Of all the crimes which Mike Reilly had worked, those were by far the worst, the sort after which you retired to the local FBI bar—every field division had one—and had a few too many as you sat quietly with equally morose and quiet colleagues, with the occasional oaths that you were going to get this mutt no matter what it took. And, mostly, the mutts were apprehended, indicted, and then convicted, and the lucky ones went to death row. Those convicted in states without a death penalty went into the general prison population, where they discovered what armed robbers thought of the abusers of children. "But I see what you mean, Oleg Gregoriyevich. It's the one thing you have trouble explaining to an ordinary citizen." It was that the worst thing about a crime scene or autopsy photo was the *sadness* of it, how the victim was stripped not merely of life, but of all dignity. And these photos were particularly grisly. Whatever beauty this Maria Ivanovna Sablin had once had was only a memory now, and then mainly memories held by men who'd rented access to her body. *Who mourned for a dead whore?* Reilly asked himself. Not the johns, who'd move on to a new one with scarcely a thought. Probably not even her own colleagues in the trade of flesh and desire, and whatever family she'd left behind would probably remember her not as the child who'd grown up to follow a bad path, but as a lovely person who'd defiled herself, pretending passion, but feeling no more than the trained physician who'd picked her organs apart on the dented steel table of the city morgue. Is that what prostitutes were, Reilly wondered, pathologists of sex? A victimless crime, some said. Reilly wished that such people could look at these photos and see just how "victimless" it was when women sold their bodies.

"Anything else, Oleg?" Reilly asked.

"We continue to interview people with knowledge of the deceased." Followed by a shrug.

He offended the wrong people," an informant said, with a shrug of his own that showed how absurdly obvious the answer to the preceding question was. How else could a person of Avseyenko's stature turn up dead in so spectacular a way?

"And what people are they?" the militiaman asked, not expecting a meaningful answer, but you asked the question anyway because you didn't know what the answer was until you did.

"His colleagues from State Security," the informant suggested.

"Oh?"

"Who else could have killed him in that way? One of his girls would have used a knife. A business rival from the street would have used a pistol or a larger knife, but an RPG ... be serious, where does one get one of those?"

He wasn't the first to voice that thought, of course, though the local police did have to allow for the fact that all manner of weapons, heavy and light, had escaped one way or another from the coffers of what had once been called the Red Army into the active marketplace of criminal weapons.

"So, do you have any names for us?" the militia sergeant asked.

"Not a name, but I know the face. He's tall and powerfully built, like a soldier, reddish hair, fair skin, some freckles left over from his youth, green eyes." The informant paused. "His friends call him 'the boy,' because his appearance is so youthful. He was State Security once, but not a spy and not a catcher of spies. He was something else there, but I am not sure what."

The militia sergeant started taking more precise notes at this point, his pencil marks far more legible and much darker on the yellow page.

"And this man was displeased with Avseyenko?"

"So I have heard."

"And the reason for his displeasure?"

"That I do not know, but Gregoriy Filipovich had a way of offending men. He was very skilled at handling women, of course. For that he had a true gift, but the gift did not translate into his dealings with men. Many thought him a *zhopnik,* but he was not one of those, of course. He had a different woman on his arm every night, and none of them were ugly, but for some reason he didn't get along well with men, even those from State Security, where, he said, he was once a great national asset."

"Is that a fact," the militia sergeant observed, bored again. If there was anything criminals liked to do, it was boast. He'd heard it all a thousand times or more.

"Oh, yes. Gregoriy Filipovich claims to have supplied mistresses for all manner of foreigners, including some of ministerial rank, and says that they continue to supply valuable information to Mother Russia. I believe it," the informer added, editorializing again. "For a week with one of those angels, I would speak much."

And who wouldn't? the militiaman wondered with a yawn. "So, how did Avseyenko offend such powerful men?" the cop asked again.

"I have told you I do not know. Talk to 'the boy,' perhaps he will know."

"It is said that Gregoriy was beginning to import drugs," the cop said next, casting his hook into a different hole, and wondering what fish might lurk in the still waters.

The informant nodded. "That is true. It was said. But I never saw any evidence of it."

"Who would have seen evidence of it?"

Another shrug. "This I do not know. One of his girls, perhaps. I never understood how he planned to distribute what he thought about importing. To use the girls was logical, of course, but dangerous for them—and for him, because his whores would not have been loyal to him in the face of a trip to the camps. So, then, what does that leave?" the informant asked rhetorically. "He would have to set up an entirely new organization, and there were also dangers in doing that, were there not? So, yes, I believe he was thinking about importing drugs for sale, and making vast sums of money from it, but Gregoriy was not a man who wished to go to a prison, and I think he was merely thinking about it, perhaps talking a little, but not much. I do not think he had made his final decision. I do not think he actually imported anything before he met his end."

"Rivals with the same ideas?" the cop asked next.

"There are people who can find cocaine and other drugs for you, as you well know."

The cop looked up. In fact, the militia sergeant *didn't* know that for certain. He'd heard rumbles and rumors, but not statements of fact from informants he trusted (insofar as any cop in any city truly trusted *any* informant). As with many things, there was a buzz on the streets of Moscow, but like most Moscow cops he expected it to show up first in the Black Sea port of Odessa, a city whose criminal activity went back to the czars and which today, with the restoration of free trade with the rest of the world, tended to lead Russia in—well, led Russia to all forms of illicit activity. If there was an active drug trade in Moscow, it was so new and so small that he hadn't stumbled across it yet. He made a mental note to check with Odessa, to see what if anything was happening down there along those lines.

"And what people might they be?" the sergeant asked. If there was a growing distribution network in Moscow, he might as well learn about it.

Nomuri's job for Nippon Electric Company involved selling high-end desktop computers and peripherals. For him that meant the PRC government, whose senior bureaucrats had to have the newest and best of everything, from cars to mistresses, paid for in all cases by the government, which in turn took its

money from the people, whom the bureaucrats represented and protected to the best of their abilities. As in many things, the PRC could have bought American brands, but in this case it chose to purchase the slightly less expensive (and less capable) computers from Japan, in the same way that it preferred to buy Airbus airlines from the European maker rather than Boeings from America—that had been a card played a few years before to teach the Americans a lesson. America had briefly resented it, then had quickly forgotten about it, in the way America seemed to handle all such slights, which was quite a contrast to the Chinese, who never forgot anything.

When President Ryan had announced the reestablishment of their official recognition of the Republic of China government on Taiwan, the repercussions had thundered through the corridors of power in Beijing like the main shocks of a major earthquake. Nomuri hadn't been here long enough yet to see the cold fury the move had generated, but the aftershocks were significant enough, and he'd heard echoes of it since his arrival in Beijing. The questions directed at himself were sometimes so direct and so demanding of an explanation that he'd momentarily wondered if his cover might have been blown, and his interlocutors had known that he was a CIA "illegal" field officer in the capital of the People's Republic of China, entirely without a diplomatic cover. But it hadn't been that. It was just a continuing echo of pure political rage. Paradoxically, the Chinese government was itself trying to shove that rage aside because they, too, had to do business with the United States of America, now their number one trading partner, and the source of vast amounts of surplus cash, which their government needed to do the things which Nomuri was tasked to find out about. And so, here he was, in the outer office of one of the nation's senior officials.

"Good day," he said, with a bow and a smile to the secretary. She worked for a senior minister named Fang Gan, he knew, whose office was close by. She was surprisingly well dressed for a semi-ordinary worker, in a nation where fashion statements were limited to the color of the buttons one wore on the Mao jacket that was as much a part of the uniform of civilian government workers as was the gray-green wool of the soldiers of the People's Liberation Army.

"Good day," the young lady said in reply. "Are you Nomuri?"

"Yes, and you are ... ?"

"Lian Ming," the secretary replied.

An interesting name, Chester thought. "Lian" in Mandarin meant "graceful willow." She was short, like most Chinese women, with a square-ish face and dark eyes. Her least attractive feature was her hair, short and cut in a manner that harkened back to the worst of the 1950s in America, and then only for children in Appalachian trailer parks. For all that, it was a classically Chinese face in its ethnicity, and one much favored in this tradition-bound nation. The look in her eyes, at least, suggested intelligence and education.

"You are here to discuss computers and printers," she said neutrally, having absorbed some of her boss's sense of importance and centrality of place in the

universe.

“Yes, I am. I think you will find our new pin-matrix printer particularly appealing.”

“And why is that?” Ming asked.

“Do you speak English?” Nomuri asked in that language.

“Certainly,” Ming replied, in the same.

“Then it becomes simple to explain. If you transliterate Mandarin into English, the spelling, I mean, then the printer transposes into Mandarin ideographs automatically, like this,” he explained, pulling a sheet of paper from his plastic folder and handing it to the secretary. “We are also working on a laser-printer system which will be even smoother in its appearance.”

“Ah,” the secretary observed. The quality of the characters was superb, easily the equal of the monstrous typewriting machine that secretaries had to use for official documents—or else have them hand-printed and then further processed on copying machines, mainly Canons, also of Japanese manufacture. The process was time-consuming, tedious, and much hated by the secretarial staff. “And what of inflection variations?”

Not a bad question, Nomuri noted. The Chinese language was highly dependent on inflection. The tone with which a word was delivered determined its actual meaning from as many as four distinct options, and it was also a determining factor in which ideograph it designated in turn.

“Do the characters appear on the computer screen in that way as well?” the secretary asked.

“They can, with just a click of the mouse,” Nomuri assured her. “There may be a ‘software’ problem, insofar as you have to think simultaneously in two languages,” he warned her with a smile.

Ming laughed. “Oh, we always do that here.”

Her teeth would have benefited from a good orthodontist, Nomuri thought, but there weren’t many of them in Beijing, along with the other bourgeois medical specialties, like reconstructive surgery. For all that, he’d gotten her to laugh, and that was something.

“Would you like to see me demonstrate our new capabilities?” the CIA field officer asked.

“Sure, why not?” She appeared a little disappointed that he wasn’t able to do so right here and now.

“Excellent, but I will need you to authorize my bringing the hardware into the building. Your security people, you see.”

How did I forget that? he saw her ask herself, blinking rather hard in a mild self-rebuke. Better to set the hook all the way.

“Do you have the authority for that, or must you consult someone more senior?” The most vulnerable point in any communist bureaucrat was their sense of importance-of-place.

A knowing smile: “Oh, yes, I can authorize that on my own authority.”

A smile of his own: “Excellent. I can be here with my equipment at, say, ten in the morning.”

“Good, the main entrance. They will be awaiting you.”

“Thank you, Comrade Ming,” Nomuri said with his best officious (short) bow to the young secretary—and, probably, mistress to her minister, the field officer thought. This one had possibilities, but he’d have to be careful with her both for himself and for her, he thought to himself while waiting for the elevator. That’s why Langley paid him so much, not counting the princely salary from Nippon Electric Company that was his to keep. He needed it to survive here. The price of living was bad enough for a Chinese. For a foreigner, it was worse, because for foreigners everything was—had to be—special. The apartments were special—and almost certainly bugged. The food he bought in a special shop was more expensive—and Nomuri didn’t object to that, since it was also almost certainly healthier.

China was what Nomuri called a thirty-foot country. Everything looked okay, even impressive, until you got within thirty feet of it. Then you saw that the parts didn’t fit terribly well. He’d found it could be especially troublesome getting into an elevator, of all things. Dressed as he was in Western-made clothing (the Chinese thought of Japan as a Western country, which would have amused a lot of people, both in Japan and the West), he was immediately spotted as a *qwai*—a foreign devil—even before people saw his face. When that happened, the looks changed, sometimes to mere curiosity, sometimes to outright hostility, because the Chinese weren’t like the Japanese; they weren’t trained as thoroughly to conceal their feelings, or maybe they just didn’t give a damn, the CIA officer thought behind his own blanked-out poker face. He’d learned the practice from his time in Tokyo, and learned it well, which explained both why he had a good job with NEC and why he’d never been burned in the field.

The elevator ran smoothly enough, but somehow it just didn’t feel right. Maybe it was, again, because the pieces didn’t quite seem to fit together. Nomuri hadn’t had that feeling in Japan. For all their faults, the Japanese were competent engineers. The same was doubtless true of Taiwan, but Taiwan, like Japan, had a capitalist system which rewarded performance by giving it business and profits and comfortable salaries for the workers who turned out good work. The PRC was still learning how to do that. They exported a lot, but to this point the things exported were either fairly simple in design (like tennis shoes), or were manufactured mostly in strict accordance to standards established elsewhere and then slavishly copied here in China (like electronic gadgets). This was already changing, of course. The Chinese people were as clever as any, and even communism could keep them down only so long. Yet the industrialists who were beginning to innovate and offer the world genuinely new products were treated by their government masters as ... well, as unusually productive peasants at best. That was not a happy thought for the useful men who occasionally wondered over drinks why it was that they, the ones who brought wealth into their nation, were treated as ...

unusually productive peasants, by the ones who deemed themselves the masters of their country and their culture. Nomuri walked outside, toward his parked automobile, wondering how long *that* could last.

This whole political and economic policy was schizophrenic, Nomuri knew. Sooner or later, the industrialists would rise up and demand that they be given a voice in the political operation of their country. Perhaps—doubtless—such whispers had happened already. If so, word had gotten back to the whisperers that the tallest tree is quickly cut for lumber, and the well with the sweetest water is first to be drunk dry, and he who shouts too loudly is first to be silenced. So, maybe the Chinese industrial leaders were just biding their time and looking around the rooms where they gathered, wondering which of their number would be the first to take the risk, and maybe he would be rewarded with fame and honor and later memories of heroism—or maybe, more likely, his family would be billed for the 7.62x39 cartridge needed to send him into the next life, which Buddha had promised but which the government contemptuously denied.

So, they haven't made it public yet. That's a little odd," Ryan thought aloud.

"It is," Ben Goodley agreed with a nod.

"Any idea why they're sitting on the news?"

"No, sir ... unless somebody is hoping to cash in on it somehow, but exactly how ..." CARDSHARP shrugged.

"Buy stock in Atlantic Richfield? Some mine-machine builder—"

"Or just buy options in some land in eastern Siberia," George Winston suggested. "Not that such a thing is ever done by the honorable servants of the people." The President laughed hard enough that he had to set his coffee down.

"Certainly not in this administration," POTUS pointed out. One of the benefits the media had with Ryan's team was that so many of them were plutocrats of one magnitude or another, not "working" men. It was as if the media thought that money just appeared in the hands of some fortunate souls by way of miracle ... or some unspoken and undiscovered criminal activity. But never by work. It was the oddest of political prejudices that wealth didn't come from work, but rather from something else, a something never really described, but always implied to be suspect.

"Yeah, Jack," Winston said, with a laugh of his own. "We've got enough that we can afford to be honest. Besides, who the hell needs an oil field or gold mine?"

"Further developments on the size of either?"

Goodley shook his head. "No, sir. The initial information is firming up nicely. Both discoveries are big. The oil especially, but the gold as well."

“The gold thing will distort the market somewhat,” SecTreas opined. “Depending on how fast it comes on stream. It might also cause a shutdown of the mine we have operating in the Dakotas.”

“Why?” Goodley asked.

“If the Russian strike is as good as the data suggests, they’ll be producing gold for about twenty-five percent less than what it costs there, despite environmental conditions. The attendant reduction of the world price of gold will then make Dakota unprofitable to operate.” Winston shrugged. “So, they’ll mothball the site and sit until the price goes back up. Probably after the initial flurry of production, our Russian friends will scale things back so that they can cash in in a more, uh, orderly way. What’ll happen is that the other producers, mainly South Africans, will meet with them and offer advice on how to exploit that find more efficiently. Usually the new kids listen to advice from the old guys. The Russians have coordinated diamond production with the De Beers people for a long time, back to when the country was called the Soviet Union. Business is business, even for commies. So, you going to offer our help to our friends in Moscow?” TRADER asked SWORDSMAN.

Ryan shook his head. “I can’t yet. I can’t let them know that we know. Sergey Nikolay’ch would start wondering how, and he’d probably come up with SIGINT, and that’s a method of gathering information that we try to keep covert.” Probably a waste of time, Ryan knew, but the game had rules, and everyone played by those rules. Golovko could guess at signals intelligence, but he’d never quite know. I’ll probably never stop being a spook, the President admitted to himself. Keeping and guarding secrets was one of the things that came so easily to him—a little too easily, Arnie van Damm often warned. A modern democratic government was supposed to be more open, like a torn curtain on the bedroom window that allowed people to look in whenever they wished. That was an idea Ryan had never grown to appreciate. He was the one who decided what people were allowed to know and when they’d know it. It was a point of view he followed even when he knew it to be wrong, for no other reason than it was how he’d learned government service at the knee of an admiral named James Greer. Old habits were hard to break.

“I’ll call Sam Sherman at Atlantic Richfield,” Winston suggested. “If he breaks it to me, then it’s in the open, or at least open enough.”

“Can we trust him?”

Winston nodded. “Sam plays by the rules. We can’t ask him to screw over his own board, but he knows what flag to salute, Jack.”

“Okay, George, a discreet inquiry.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. President, sir.”

“God damn it, George!”

“Jack, when the hell are you going to learn to relax in this fucking job?” SecTreas asked POTUS.

“The day I move out of this goddamned museum and become a free man again,” Ryan replied with a submissive nod. Winston was right. He had to

learn to stay on a more even keel in the office of President. In addition to not being helpful to himself, it wasn't especially helpful to the country for him to be jumpy with the folderol of office-holding. That also made it easy for people like the Secretary of the Treasury to twist his tail, and George Winston was one of the people who enjoyed doing that ... maybe because it ultimately helped him relax, Ryan thought. Backwards English on the ball or something. "George, why do you think I *should* relax in this job?"

"Jack, because you're here to be effective, and being tight all the time does not make you more effective. Kick back, guy, maybe even learn to like some aspect of it."

"Like what?"

"Hell." Winston shrugged, and then nodded to the secretaries' office. "Lots of cute young interns out there."

"There's been enough of that," Ryan said crossly. Then he did manage to relax and smile a little. "Besides, I'm married to a surgeon. Make that little mistake and I could wake up without something important."

"Yeah, I suppose it's bad for the country to have the President's dick cut off, eh? People might not respect us anymore." Winston stood. "Gotta go back across the street and look at some economic models."

"Economy looking good?" POTUS asked.

"No complaints from me or Mark Gant. Just so the Fed Chairman leaves the discount rate alone, but I expect he will. Inflation is pretty flat, and there's no upward pressure anywhere that I see happening."

"Ben?"

Goodley looked through his notes, as though he'd forgotten something. "Oh, yeah. Would you believe, the Vatican is appointing a Papal Nuncio to the PRC?"

"Oh? What's that mean, exactly?" Winston asked, stopping halfway to the door.

"The Nuncio is essentially an ambassador. People forget that the Vatican is a nation-state in its own right and has the usual trappings of statehood. That includes diplomatic representation. A nuncio is just that, an ambassador—and a spook," Ryan added.

"Really?" Winston asked.

"George, the Vatican has the world's oldest intelligence service. Goes back centuries. And, yeah, the Nuncio gathers information and forwards it to the home office, because people talk to him—who better to talk to than a priest, right? They're good enough at gathering information that we've made the occasional effort to crack their communications. Back in the thirties, a senior cryppie at the State Department resigned over it," Ryan informed his SecTreas, reverting back to history teacher.

"We still do that?" Winston directed this question at Goodley, the

President's National Security Adviser. Goodley looked first to Ryan, and got a nod. "Yes, sir. Fort Meade still takes a look at their messages. Their ciphers are a little old-fashioned, and we can brute-force them."

"And ours?"

"The current standard is called TAPDANCE. It's totally random, and therefore it's theoretically unbreakable—unless somebody screws up and reuses a segment of it, but with approximately six hundred forty-seven million trans-positions on every daily CD-ROM diskette, that's not very likely."

"What about the phone systems?"

"The STU?" Goodley asked, getting a nod. "That's computer-based, with a two-fifty-six-kay computer-generated encryption key. It can be broken, but you need a computer, the right algorithm, and a couple of weeks at least, and the shorter the message the harder it is to crack it, instead of the other way around. The guys at Fort Meade are playing with using quantum-physics equations to crack ciphers, and evidently they're having some success, but if you want an explanation, you're going to have to ask somebody else. I didn't even pretend to listen," Goodley admitted. "It's so far over my head I can't even see the bottom of it."

"Yeah, get your friend Gant involved," Ryan suggested. "He seems to know 'puters pretty well. As a matter of fact, you might want to get him briefed in on these developments in Russia. Maybe he can model the effects they'll have on the Russian economy."

"Only if everyone plays by the rules," Winston said in warning. "If they follow the corruption that's been gutting their economy the last few years, you just can't predict anything, Jack."

We cannot let it happen again, Comrade President," Sergey Nikolay'ch said over a half-empty glass of vodka. This was still the best in the world, if the only such Russian product of which he could make that boast. *That* thought generated an angry frown at what his nation had become.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, what do you propose?"

"Comrade President, these two discoveries are a gift from Heaven itself. If we utilize them properly, we can transform our country—or at least make a proper beginning at doing that. The earnings in hard currencies will be colossal, and we can use that money to rebuild so much of our infrastructure that we *can* transform our economy. *If,* that is"—he held up a cautionary finger—"if we don't allow a thieving few to take the money and bank it in Geneva or Liechtenstein. It does us no good there, Comrade President."

Golovko didn't add that a few people, a few well-placed individuals, would profit substantially from this. He didn't even add that he himself would be one of them, and so would his president. It was just too much to ask any man to walk away from such an opportunity. Integrity was a virtue best found among

those able to afford it, and the press be damned, the career intelligence officer thought. What had they ever done for his country or any other? All they did was expose the honest work of some and the dishonest work of others, doing little actual work themselves—and besides, they were as easily bribed as anyone else, weren't they?

"And so, who gets the concession to exploit these resources?" the Russian president asked.

"In the case of the oil, our own exploration company, plus the American company, Atlantic Richfield. They have the most experience in producing oil in those environmental conditions anyway, and our people have much to learn from them. I would propose a fee-for-service arrangement, a generous one, but *not* an ownership percentage in the oil field itself. The exploration contract was along those lines, generous in absolute terms, but no share at all in the fields discovered."

"And the gold strike?"

"Easier still. No foreigners were involved in that discovery at all. Comrade Gogol will have an interest in the discovery, of course, but he is an old man with no heirs, and, it would seem, a man of the simplest tastes. A properly heated hut and a new hunting rifle will probably make him very happy, from what these reports tell us."

"And the value of this venture?"

"Upwards of seventy billions. And all we need do is purchase some special equipment, the best of which comes from the American company Caterpillar."

"Is that necessary, Sergey?"

"Comrade President, the Americans are our friends, after a fashion, and it will not hurt us to remain on good terms with their President. And besides, their heavy equipment is the world's finest."

"Better than the Japanese?"

"For these purposes, yes, but slightly more expensive," Golovko answered, thinking that people really were all the same, and despite the education of his youth, in every man there seemed to be a capitalist, looking for ways to cut costs and increase his profits, often to the point of forgetting the larger issues. Well, that was why Golovko was here, wasn't it?

"And who will want the money?"

A rare chuckle in this office: "Comrade President, *everyone* wants to have money. In realistic terms, our military will be at the front of the line."

"Of course," the Russian president agreed, with a resigned sigh. "They usually are. Oh, any progress in the attack on your car?" he asked, looking up from his briefing papers.

Golovko shook his head. "No notable progress, no. The current thinking is that this Avseyenko fellow was the actual target, and the automobile was just a coincidence. The militia continues to investigate."

“Keep me posted, will you?”

“Of course, Comrade President.”

CHAPTER 5

Headlines

Sam Sherman was one of those whom age hadn't treated kindly, though he himself hadn't helped. An avid golfer, he moved from lie to lie via cart. He was much too overweight to walk more than a few hundred yards in a day. It was rather sad for one who'd been a first-string guard for the Princeton Tigers, once upon a time. Well, Winston thought, muscle just turned to blubber if you didn't use it properly. But the overweight body didn't detract from the sharpness of his brain. Sherman had graduated about fifth in a class not replete with dummies, double-majoring in geology and business. He'd followed up the first sheet of parchment with a Harvard MBA, and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas, this one in geology as well, and so Samuel Price Sherman could not only talk rocks with the explorers but finance with his board members, and that was one of the reasons why Atlantic Richfield stock was as healthy as any oil issue in the known world. His face was lined by a lot of low sun and field grit, and his belly swollen by a lot of beers with the roughnecks out in many godforsaken places, plus hot dogs and other junk food preferred by the men who drifted into such employment. Winston was surprised that Sam didn't smoke, too. Then he spotted the box on the man's desk. Cigars. Probably good ones. Sherman could afford the best, but he still had the Ivy League manners not to light up in front of a guest who might be offended by the blue cloud they generated.

Atlantic Richfield's home office was elsewhere, but as with most major corporations, it didn't hurt to have a set of offices in Washington, the better to influence members of Congress with the occasional lavish party. Sherman's personal office was in a corner on the top floor, and plush enough, with a thick beige carpet. The desk was either mahogany or well-seasoned oak, polished like glass, and probably cost more than his secretary made in a year or two.

"So, how do you like working for the government, George?"

"It's really a fun change of pace. Now I can play with all the things I used to bitch about—so, I guess I've kinda given up my right to bitch."

"That is a major sacrifice, buddy," Sherman replied with a laugh. "It's kinda like going over to the enemy, isn't it?"

"Well, sometimes you gotta pay back, Sam, and making policy the right way can be diverting."

"Well, I have no complaints with what you guys are doing. The economy

seems to like it. Anyway," Sherman sat up in his comfortable chair. It was time to change subjects. Sam's time was valuable, too, as he wanted his guest to appreciate. "You didn't come here for small talk. What can I do for you, Mr. Secretary?"

"Russia."

Sherman's eyes changed a little, as they might when the last card was laid in a high-stakes game of stud. "What about it?"

"You have a high-powered exploration team working with the Russians ... they find anything nice?"

"George, that's sensitive stuff you're asking. If you were still running Columbus, this would constitute insider-trading information stuff. Hell, *I* can't buy any more of our stock now, based on this stuff."

"Does that mean you'd like to?" TRADER asked with a smile.

"Well, it'll be public soon enough anyway. Yeah, George. Looks like we've found the biggest goddamned oil field ever, bigger 'n the Persian Gulf, bigger 'n Mexico, damned sight bigger than Prudhoe Bay and Western Canada combined. I'm talking big, *billions and billions* of barrels of what looks like the very best light-sweet crude, just sitting there and waiting for us to pump it out of the tundra. It's a field we'll measure in years of production, not just barrels."

"Bigger than the P.G.?"

Sherman nodded. "By a factor of forty percent, and that's a very conservative number. The only beef is where it is. Getting that crude out is going to be a mother-humper—to get started, anyway. We're talking twenty billion dollars just for the pipeline. It'll make Alaska look like a kindergarten project, but it'll be worth it."

"And your end of it?" the Secretary of the Treasury asked.

That question generated a frown. "We're negotiating that now. The Russians seem to want to pay us a flat consulting fee, like a billion dollars a year—they're talking a lot less than that now, but you know how the hog-tradin' works at this stage, right? They say a couple of hundred million, but they mean a billion a year, for seven to ten years, I'd imagine. And that isn't bad for what we'd have to do for the money, but I want a minimum of five percent of the find, and that's not at all an unreasonable request on our part. They have some good people in the geology business, but nobody in the world can sniff out oil in ice like my people can, and they've got a lot to learn about how to exploit something like this. We've been there and done that in these environmental conditions. Ain't nobody knows this like we do, even the guys at BP, and they're pretty good—but we're the best in the world, George. That's the barrel we have them over. They can do it without us, but with us helping, they'll make a ton more cash, and a hell of a lot faster, and they know that, and we know they know that. So, I got my lawyers talking to their lawyers—actually, they have diplomats doing the negotiating." Sherman managed a grin. "They're dumber than my lawyers."

Winston nodded. Texas turned out more good private-practice attorneys than most parts of America, and the excuse was that in Texas there were more men needin' killin' than horses needin' stealin'. And the oil business paid the best, and in Texas, like everyplace else, talent went where the money was.

"When will this go public?"

"The Russians are trying to keep a cork in it. One of the things we're getting from our lawyers is that they're worried about how to exploit this one—really who to keep out of it, you know, their Mafia and stuff. They do have some serious corruption problems over there, and I can sympathize—"

Winston knew he could ignore the next part. The oil industry did business all over the world. Dealing with corruption on the small scale (ten million dollars or less), or even the monstrous scale (ten *billion* dollars or more), was just part of the territory for such companies as Sam Sherman ran, and the United States government had never probed too deeply into that. Though there were federal statutes governing how American companies handled themselves abroad, many of those laws were selectively enforced, and this was merely one such example. Even in Washington, business was business.

"—and so they're trying to keep it quiet until they can make the proper arrangements," Sherman concluded.

"You hearing anything else?"

"What do you mean?" Sherman asked in reply.

"Any other geological windfalls," Winston clarified.

"No, I'm not that greedy in what I pray for. George, I haven't made it clear enough, just how huge this oil field is. It's—"

"Relax, Sam, I can add and subtract with the best of 'em," SecTreas assured his host.

"Something I need to know about?" Sherman only saw hesitation. "Give and take, George. I played fair with you, remember?"

"Gold," Winston clarified.

"How much?"

"They're not sure. South Africa at least. Maybe more."

"Really? Well, that's not my area of expertise, but sounds like our Russian friends are having a good year for a change. Good for them," Sherman thought.

"You like them?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact. They're a lot like Texans. They make good friends and fearsome enemies. They know how to entertain, and Jesus, do they know how to drink. About time they got some good luck. Christ knows they've had a lot of the other kind. This is going to mean a lot for their economy, and damned near all of it's going to be good news, 'specially if they can handle the corruption stuff and keep the money inside their borders where it'll do them some good, instead of finding its way onto some Swiss bank's computer. That

new Mafia they have over there is smart and tough ... and a little scary. They just got somebody I knew over there."

"Really? Who was that, Sam?"

"We called him Grisha. He took care of some high rollers in Moscow. Knew how to do it right. He was a good name to know if you had some special requirements," Sherman allowed. Winston recorded the information in his mind for later investigation.

"Killed him?"

Sherman nodded. "Yup, blew him away with a bazooka right there on the street—it made CNN, remember?" The TV news network had covered it as a crime story with no further significance except for its dramatic brutality, a story gone and forgotten in a single day.

George Winston vaguely remembered it, and set it aside. "How often you go over there?"

"Not too often, twice this year. Usually hop my G-V over direct out of Reagan or Dallas/Fort Worth. Long flight, but it's a one-hop. No, I haven't seen the new oil field yet. Expect I'll have to in a few months, but I'll try for decent weather. Boy, you don't know what cold means 'til you go that far north in the winter. Thing is, it's dark then, so you're better off waiting 'til summer anyway. But at best you can leave the sticks at home. Ain't no golf a' tall in that part of the world, George."

"So take a rifle and bag yourself a bear, make a nice rug," Winston offered.

"Gave that up. Besides, I got three polar bears. That one is number eight in the Boone and Crockett all-time book," Sherman said, pointing to a photo on the far wall. Sure enough, it showed a hell of a big polar bear. "I've made two kids on that rug," the president of Atlantic Richfield observed, with a sly smile. The pelt in question lay before his bedroom fireplace in Aspen, Colorado, where his wife liked to ski in the winter.

"Why'd you give it up?"

"My kids think there aren't enough polar bears anymore. All that ecology shit they learn in school now."

"Yeah," SecTreas said sympathetically, "and they do make such great rugs."

"Right, well, *that* rug was threatening some of our workers up at Prudhoe Bay back in ... '75, as I recall, and I took him at sixty yards with my .338 Winchester. One shot," the Texan assured his guest. "I suppose nowadays you have to let the bear kill a human bein', and then all you're supposed to do is just cage him and transport him to another location so the bear doesn't get too traumatized, right?"

"Sam, I'm Secretary of the Treasury. I leave the birds and bees to EPA. I don't hug trees, not until they turn the wood chips into T-Bills, anyway."

A chuckle: "Sorry, George. I'm always hearing that stuff at home. Maybe it's Disney. All wild animals wear white gloves and talk to each other in good

Midwestern Iowa English."

"Cheer up, Sam. At least they're laying off the supertankers out of Valdez now. How much of the eastern Alaska/Western Canada strike is yours?"

"Not quite half, but that'll keep my stockholders in milk and cookies for a long time."

"So, between that one and Siberia, how many options will they give you to exercise?" Sam Sherman got a nice salary, but at his level the way you earned your keep was measured in the number of options in the stock whose value your work had increased, invariably offered you by the board of directors, whose own holdings you inflated in value through your efforts.

A knowing smile, and a raised eyebrow: "A lot, George. Quite a lot."

Married life agrees with you, Andrea," President Ryan observed with a smile at his Principal Agent. She was dressing better, and there was a definite spring in her step now. He wasn't sure if her skin had a new glow, or maybe her makeup was just different. Jack had learned never to comment on a woman's makeup. He always got it wrong.

"You're not the only one to say that, sir."

"One hesitates to say such things to a grown adult female, especially if you're fashion-bereft, as I am," Jack said, his smile broadening somewhat. His wife, Cathy, still said she had to dress him because his taste was entirely, she said, in his mouth. "But the change is sufficiently marked that even a man such as myself can see it."

"Thank you, Mr. President. Pat is a very good man, even for a Bureau puke."

"What's he doing now?"

"He's up in Philadelphia right now. Director Murray sent him off on a bank robbery, two local cops got killed in that one."

"Caught that one on TV last week. Bad."

The Secret Service agent nodded. "The way the subjects killed the cops, both in the back of the head, that was pretty ruthless, but there's people out there like that. Anyway, Director Murray decided to handle that one with a Roving Inspector out of Headquarters Division, and that usually means Pat gets to go do it."

"Tell him to be careful," Ryan said. Inspector Pat O"Day had saved his daughter's life less than a year before, and that act had earned him undying Presidential solicitude.

"Every day, sir," Special Agent Price-O'Day made clear.

"Okay, what's the schedule look like?" His "business" appointments were on his desk already. Andrea Price-O' Day filled him in every morning, after his national-security briefing from Ben Goodley.

"Nothing unusual until after lunch. National Chamber of Commerce

delegation at one-thirty, and then at three the Detroit Red Wings, they won the Stanley Cup this year. Photo op, TV pukes and stuff, take about twenty minutes or so."

"I ought to let Ed Foley do that one. He's the hockey fanatic—"

"He's a Caps fan, sir, and the Red Wings swept the Caps four straight in the finals. Director Foley might take it personally," Price-O'Day observed with half a smile.

"True. Well, last year we got the jerseys and stuff for his son, didn't we?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good game, hockey. Maybe I ought to catch a game or two. Trouble to arrange that?"

"No, sir. We have standing agreements with all the local sports facilities. Camden Yards even has that special box for us—they let us help design it, the protective stuff, that is."

Ryan grunted. "Yeah, I have to remember all the people who'd like to see me dead."

"My job to think about that, sir, not yours," Price-O'Day told him.

"Except when you won't let me go shopping or to a movie." Neither Ryan nor his family was entirely used to the restrictions imposed on the life of the President of the United States or his immediate family members. It was getting especially tough on Sally, who'd started dating (which was hard on her father), and dating was difficult with a lead car and a chase car (when the young gentleman drove himself) or an official car with a driver and a second armed agent up front (when he did not), and guns all over the place. It tended to restrain the young gentlemen in question—and Ryan hadn't told his daughter that this was just fine with him, lest she stop speaking to him for a week or so. Sally's Principal Agent, Wendy Merritt, had proven to be both a good Secret Service agent and a superb big sister of sorts. They spent at least two Saturdays per month shopping with a reduced detail—actually it wasn't reduced at all, but it appeared so to Sally Ryan when they went out to Tyson's Corner or the Annapolis Mall for the purpose of spending money, something for which all women seemed to have a genetic predisposition. That these shopping expeditions had been planned days in advance, with every site scouted by the Secret Service, and a supplementary detail of young agents selected for their relative invisibility who showed up there an hour before SHADOW'S arrival, had never occurred to Sally Ryan. That was just as well, as the dating problems grated on her badly enough, along with being followed around St. Mary's School in Annapolis by the rifle squad, as she sometimes termed it. Little Jack, on the other hand, thought it was pretty neat, and had recently learned to shoot at the Secret Service Academy in Beltsville, Maryland, with his father's permission (and something he'd not allowed the press to learn, lest he get hammered on the front page of the *New York Times* for the social indiscretion of *encouraging* his own son to touch, much less actually to fire, something so inherently evil as a pistol!). Little Jack's

Principal Agent was a kid named Mike Brennan, a South Boston Irishman, a third-generation Secret Service agent with fiery red hair and a ready laugh, who'd played baseball at Holy Cross and frequently played catch and pepper with the President's son on the South Lawn of the White House.

"Sir, we never don't let you do anything," Price said.

"No, you're pretty subtle about it," Ryan allowed. "You know that I'm too considerate of other people, and when you tell me about all the crap you people have to go through so that I can buy a burger at Wendy's, I usually back off ... like a damned wimp." The President shook his head. Nothing frightened him more than the prospect that he'd somehow get used to all this panoply of "specialness," as he thought of it. As though he'd only recently discovered royal parentage, and was now to be treated like a king, hardly allowed to wipe his own ass after taking a dump. Doubtless some people who'd lived in this house *had* gotten used to it, but that was something John Patrick Ryan, Sr., wanted to avoid. He knew that *he* was *not* all that special, and not deserving of all this folderol ... and besides, like every other man in the world, when he woke up in the morning the first thing he did was head to the bathroom. Chief Executive he might be, but he still had a working-class bladder. *And thank God for that,* the President of the United States reflected.

"Where's Robby today?"

"Sir, the Vice President is in California today, the Navy base at Long Beach, giving a speech at the shipyard."

Ryan grinned a little sideways. "I work him pretty hard, don't I?"

"That's the Vice President's job," Arnie van Damm said from the door. "And Robby's a big boy about it," added the President's Chief of Staff.

"Your vacation was good for you," Ryan observed. He had a very nice tan. "What did you do?"

"Mainly I laid on the beach and read all the books I haven't had time for. Thought I'd die of boredom," van Damm added.

"You actually thrive on this crap, don't you?" Jack asked, a little incredulous at the thought.

"It's what I do, Mr. President. Hey, Andrea," he added with a slight turn of the head.

"Good morning, Mr. van Damm." She turned to Jack. "That's all I have for you this morning. If you need me, I'll be in the usual place." Her office was in the Old Executive Office Building, just across the street, and upstairs from the new Secret Service command post, called JOC, for Joint Operations Center.

"Okay, Andrea, thanks." Ryan nodded, as she withdrew into the secretaries' room, from which she'd head down to the Secret Service Command Post. "Arnie, get some coffee?"

"Not a bad idea, boss." The Chief of Staff took his usual seat and poured a cup. The coffee in the White House was especially good, a rich blend, about half Colombian and half Jamaica Blue Mountain, the sort of thing that Ryan

could get used to as President. There had to be some place he could buy this after escaping from his current job, he hoped.

"Okay, I've had my national security brief and my Secret Service brief. Now tell me about politics for the day."

"Hell, Jack, I've been trying to do that for over a year now, and you still aren't getting it very well."

Ryan allowed his eyes to flare at the simulated insult. "That's a cheap shot, Arnie. I've been studying this crap pretty hard, and even the damned newspapers say I'm doing fairly well."

"The Federal Reserve is doing a brilliant job of handling the economy, Mr. President, and that has damned little to do with you. But since you *are* the President, you get credit for all the good things that happen, and that's nice, but do remember, you will also get the blame for all the *bad* things that are going to happen—and some will, remember that—because you just happen to be here, and the citizens out there think you can make the rain fall on their flowers and the sun come out for their picnics just by wishing it so.

"You know, Jack," the Chief of Staff said after sipping his coffee. "We really haven't got past the idea of kings and queens. A lot of people really do think you have that sort of personal power—"

"But I don't, Arnie, how can that be?"

"It just is the truth, Jack. It doesn't have to make sense. It just is. Deal with it."

I do so love these lessons, Ryan thought to himself. "Okay, today is ... ?"

"Social Security."

Ryan's eyes relaxed. "I've been reading up on that. The third rail of American political life. Touch it and die."

For the next half hour, they discussed what was wrong and why, and the irresponsibility of the Congress, until Jack sat back with a sigh.

"Why don't they learn, Arnie?"

"What do they need to learn?" Arnie asked, with the grin of a Washington insider, one of the anointed of God. "They've been *elected.* They must know it all already! How else do you think they got here?"

"Why the hell did I allow myself to stay in this damned place?" the President asked rhetorically.

"Because you had a conscience attack and decided to do the right thing for your country, you dumbass, that's why."

"Why is it you're the only person who can talk to me like that?"

"Besides the Vice President? Because I'm your teacher. Back to today's lesson. We *could* leave Social Security alone this year. It's in decent enough fiscal shape to last another seven to nine years without intervention, and that means you could leave it to your successor to handle—"

"That's not ethical, Arnie," Ryan snapped.

"True," the Chief of Staff agreed, "but it's good politics, and fairly Presidential. It's called letting sleeping dogs lie."

"You don't do that in the knowledge that as soon as it wakes up, it's going to rip the baby's throat out."

"Jack, you really ought to be a king. You'd be a good one," van Damm said, with what appeared to be genuine admiration.

"Nobody can handle that kind of power."

"I know: 'Power corrupts, and absolute power is actually pretty neat.' So said a staffer for one of your predecessors."

"And the bastard wasn't hanged for saying it?"

"We need to work on that sense of humor, Mr. President. That was meant as a joke."

"The scariest part of this job is that I do see the humor of it. Anyway, I told George Winston to start a quiet project to see what we can do with Social Security. Quiet project, I mean classified—black, this project doesn't exist."

"Jack, if you have one weakness as President, that's it. You're into this secrecy thing too much."

"But if you do something like this in the open, you get clobbered by ill-informed criticism before you manage to produce anything, and the press crawls up your ass demanding information you don't have yet, and so then they go make up stuff on their own, or they go to some yahoo who just makes up bullshit, and then *we* have to answer it."

"You are learning," Arnie judged. "That's exactly how it works in this town."

"That does not constitute 'working' by any definition I know of."

"This is Washington, a government town. Nothing is really supposed to function efficiently here. It would scare the hell out of the average citizen if the government started to function properly."

"How about I just fucking resign?" Jack asked the ceiling. "If I can't get this damned mess to start working, then why the hell am I here?"

"You're here because some Japanese 747 pilot decided to crash the party at the House Chamber fifteen months ago."

"I suppose, Arnie, but I still feel like a damned fraud."

"Well, by my old standards, you are a fraud, Jack."

Ryan looked up. "Old standards?"

"Even when Bob Fowler took over the statehouse in Ohio, Jack, even he didn't try as hard as you to play a fair game, and Bob got captured by the system, too. You haven't yet, and that's what I like about you. More to the point, that's what Joe Citizen likes about you. They may not like your

positions, but everybody knows you try damned hard, and they're sure you're not corrupt. And you're not. Now: Back to Social Security."

"I told George to get a small group together, swear them to secrecy, and make recommendations—more than one—and at least one of them has to be completely outside the box."

"Who's running this?"

"Mark Gant, George's technical guy."

The Chief of Staff thought that one over for a moment. "Just as well you keep it quiet. The Hill doesn't like him. Too much of a smart-ass."

"And they're not?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"You were naive with that, Jack. The people you tried to get elected, non-politicians, well, you semi-succeeded. A lot of them *were* regular people, but what you didn't allow for was the seductive nature of life in elected government service. The money isn't all that great, but the perks are, and a lot of people *like* being treated like a medieval prince. A lot of people *like* being able to enforce their will on the world. The people who used to be there, the ones that pilot fried in their seats, they started off as pretty good people, too, but the nature of the job is to seduce and capture. Actually, the mistake you made was to allow them to keep their staffs. Honestly, I think the problem down there is in the staffers, not the bosses. You have ten or more people around you all the time telling you how great you are, sooner or later you start believing that crap."

"Just so you don't do that to me."

"Not in this lifetime," Arnie assured him, as he stood to leave. "Make sure Secretary Winston keeps me in the loop on the Social Security project."

"No leaks," Ryan told his Chief of Staff forcefully.

"Me? Leak something? Me?" van Damm replied with open hands and an innocent face.

"Yeah, Arnie, you." As the door closed, the President wondered how fine a spook Arnie might have made. He lied with the plausibility one might associate with a trusted member of the clergy, and he could hold all manner of contradictory thoughts in his head at the same time, like the best of circus jugglers ... and somehow they never quite crashed to earth. Ryan was the current president, but the one member of the administration who could not be replaced was the chief of staff he'd inherited from Bob Fowler, by way of Roger Durling ...

And yet, Jack wondered, how much was he being manipulated by this staff employee? The truthful answer was that he couldn't tell, and that was somewhat troubling. He trusted Arnie, but he trusted Arnie because he had to trust him. Jack would not know what to do without him ... but was that a good thing?

Probably not, Ryan admitted to himself, checking over his appointment list, but neither was being here in the Oval Office, and Arnie was at worst one

more thing not to like about this job, and at best, he was a scrupulously honest, extremely hardworking, and utterly dedicated public servant ...

... *just like everyone else in Washington, D.C.,* Ryan's cynicism added.

CHAPTER 6

Expansion

Moscow is eight hours ahead of Washington, a source of annoyance to diplomats who are either a day behind the times or too far out of synch with their body clocks to conduct business properly. This was more a problem for the Russians, as by five or six in the evening, most of them had had a few stiff drinks, and given the relative speed of all diplomatic exchange, it was well into the falling night in Moscow before American diplomats emerged from their "working lunches" to issue a démarche or communiqué, or a simple letter of reply to whatever the Russians had issued the previous working day. In both capitals, of course, there was always a night crew to read and evaluate things on a more timely basis, but these were underlings, or at best people on their way up but not quite there yet, who always had to judge which possibility was worse: waking up a boss with something unworthy of the nighttime phone call, or delaying until the post-breakfast morning something that the minister or secretary ought to have been informed of *right now!* And more than one career had been made or broken on such seeming trivialities.

In this particular case, it would not be a diplomat's hide at risk. It was six-fifteen on the Russian spring evening, the sun high in the sky still, in anticipation of the "White Nights" for which the Russian summer is justly famous.

"Yes, Pasha?" Lieutenant Provalov said. He'd taken over Klusov from Shablikov. This case was too important to leave in anyone else's hands—and besides, he'd never really trusted Shablikov: There was something a little too corrupt about him.

Pavel Petrovich Klusov was not exactly an advertisement for the quality of life in the new Russia. Hardly one hundred sixty-five centimeters or so in height, but close to ninety kilos, he was a man the bulk of whose calories came in liquid form, who shaved poorly when he bothered at all, and whose association with soap was less intimate than it ought to have been. His teeth were crooked and yellow from the lack of brushing and a surfeit of smoking cheap, unfiltered domestic cigarettes. He was thirty-five or so, and had perhaps a fifty-fifty chance of making forty-five, Provalov estimated. It was not as though he'd be much of a loss to society, of course. Klusov was a petty thief, lacking even the talent—or courage—to be a major violator of the law. But he knew those who were, and evidently scampered around them like a small dog, performing minor services, like fetching a bottle of vodka, the Militia lieutenant thought. But Klusov did have ears, which many people, especially criminals, had an odd inability to consider.

“Avseyenko was killed by two men from St. Petersburg. I do not know their names, but I think they were hired by Klementi Ivan’ch Suvorov. The killers are former Spetsnaz soldiers with experience in Afghanistan, in their late thirties, I think. One is blond, the other red-haired. After killing Grisha, they flew back north before noon on an Aeroflot flight.”

“That is good, Pasha. Have you seen their faces?”

A shake of the head: “No, Comrade Lieutenant. I learned this from ... someone I know, in a drinking place.” Klusov lit a new cigarette with the end of its predecessor.

“Did your acquaintance say why our friend Suvorov had Avseyenko killed?” *And who the hell is Klementi Ivan’ch Suvorov?* the policeman wondered. He hadn’t heard that name before, but didn’t want Klusov to know that quite yet. Better to appear omniscient.

The informant shrugged. “Both were KGB, maybe there was bad blood between them.”

“What exactly is Suvorov doing now?”

Another shrug: “I don’t know. Nobody does. I am told he lives well, but the source of his income, no one knows.”

“Cocaine?” the cop asked.

“It is possible, but I do not know.” The one good thing about Klusov was that he didn’t invent things. He told the (relatively) unvarnished truth ... most of the time, the militia lieutenant told himself.

Provalov’s mind was already spinning. Okay, a former KGB officer had hired two former Spetsnaz soldiers to eliminate another former KGB officer who’d specialized in running girls. Had this Suvorov chap approached Avseyenko for cooperation in a drug venture? Like most Moscow cops, he’d never grown to like the KGB. They’d been arrogant bullies most of the time, too besotted with their power to perform proper investigations, except against foreigners, for whom the niceties of civilized behavior were necessary, lest foreign nations treat Soviet citizens—worse, Soviet diplomats—the same way.

But so many KGB officers had been let go by their parent service, and few of them had drifted into menial labor. No, they had training in conspiracy, and many had done foreign travel, and there met all manner of people, most of whom, Provalov was sure, could be persuaded to undertake illegal operations for the right inducement, which invariably meant money. For money, people would do anything, a fact known by every police officer in every country in the world.

Suvorov. Must track that name down, the militia lieutenant told himself as he took a casual sip of his vodka. *Examine his background, determine his expertise, and get a photo.* Suvorov, Klementi Ivanovich.

“Anything else?” the lieutenant asked.

Klusov shook his head. “That is all I have uncovered.”

“Well, not too bad. Get back to work, and call me when you discover more.”

“Yes, Comrade Lieutenant.” The informant stood up to leave. He left the bill with the cop, who’d pay it without much in the way of annoyance. Oleg Gregoriyevich Provalov had spent enough time in police work to understand that he might just have discovered something important. Of course, you couldn’t tell at this stage, not until you ran it down, every single option and blind alley, which could take rather some time ... but if it turned out to be something important, then it was worth it. And if not, it was just another blind alley, of which there were many in police work.

Provalov reflected on the fact that he hadn’t asked his informant exactly who had given him this new flood of information. He hadn’t forgotten, but perhaps had allowed himself to be a little gulled by the descriptions of the alleged former Spetsnaz soldiers who’d made the murder. He had their descriptions in his mind, and then removed his pad to write them down. Blond and red-haired, experience in Afghanistan, both living in St. Petersburg, flew back just before noon on the day Avseyenko was murdered. So, he would check for the flight number and run the names on the manifest through the new computers Aeroflot used to tie into the global ticketing system, then cross-check it against his own computer with its index of known and suspected criminals, and also with the army’s records. If he got a hit, he’d have a man talk to the cabin crew of that Moscow—St. Petersburg flight to see if anyone remembered one or both of them. Then he’d have the St. Petersburg militia do a discreet check of these people, their addresses, criminal records if any, a normal and thorough background check, leading, possibly, to an interview. He might not conduct it himself, but he’d be there to observe, to get a feel for the suspects, because there was no substitute for that, for looking in their eyes, seeing how they talked, how they sat, if they fidgeted or not, if the eyes held those of the questioner, or traveled about the room. Did they smoke then, and if so, rapidly and nervously or slowly and contemptuously ... or just curiously, as would be the case if they were innocent of this charge, if not, perhaps, of another.

The militia lieutenant paid the bar bill and headed outside.

“You need to pick a better place for your meets, Oleg,” a familiar voice suggested from behind. Provalov turned to see the face.

“It is a big city, Mishka, with many drinking places, and most of them are poorly lit.”

“And I found yours, Oleg Gregoriyevich,” Reilly reminded him. “So, what have you learned?”

Provalov summarized what he’d found out this evening.

“Two shooters from Spetsnaz? I suppose that makes some sense. What would that cost?”

“It would not be inexpensive. As a guess ... oh, five thousand euros or so,” the lieutenant speculated as they walked up the street.

“And who would have that much money to throw around?”

“A Muscovite criminal ... Mishka, as you well know, there are hundreds who could afford it, and Rasputin wasn’t the most popular of men ... and I have a new name, Suvorov, Klementi Ivan’ch.”

“Who is he?”

“I do not know. It is a new name for me, but Klusov acted as though I ought to have known it well. Strange that I do not,” Provalov thought aloud.

“It happens. I’ve had wise guys turn up from nowhere, too. So, check him out?”

“Yes, I will run the name. Evidently he, too, is former KGB.”

“There are a lot of them around,” Reilly agreed, steering his friend into a new hotel’s bar.

“What will you do when CIA is broken up?” Provalov asked.

“Laugh,” the FBI agent promised.

The city of St. Petersburg was known to some as the Venice of the North for the rivers and canals that cut through it, though the climate, especially in winter, could hardly have been more different. And it was in one of those rivers that the next clue appeared.

A citizen had spotted it on his way to work in the morning, and, seeing a militiaman at the next corner, he’d walked that way and pointed, and the policeman had walked back, and looked over the iron railing at the space designated by the passing citizen.

It wasn’t much to see, but it only took a second for the cop to know what it was and what it would mean. Not garbage, not a dead animal, but the top of a human head, with blond or light brown hair. A suicide or a murder, something for the local cops to investigate. The militiaman walked to the nearest phone to make his call to headquarters, and in thirty minutes a car showed up, followed in short order by a black van. By this time, the militiaman on his beat had smoked two cigarettes in the crisp morning air, occasionally looking down into the water to make sure that the object was still there. The arriving men were detectives from the city’s homicide bureau. The van that had followed them had a pair of people called technicians, though they had really been trained in the city’s public-works department, which meant water-and-sewer workers, though they were paid by the local militia. These two men took a look over the rail, which was enough to tell them that recovering the body would be physically difficult but routine. A ladder was set up, and the junior man, dressed in waterproof coveralls and heavy rubber gauntlets, climbed down and grabbed the submerged collar, while his partner observed and shot a few frames from his cheap camera and the three policemen on the scene observed and smoked from a few feet away. That’s when the first surprise happened.

The routine was to put a flexible collar on the body under the arms, like

that used by a rescue helicopter, so that the body could be winched up. But when he worked to get the collar under the body, one of the arms wouldn't move at all, and the worker struggled for several unpleasant minutes, working to get the stiff dead arm upward ... and eventually found that it was handcuffed to another arm.

That revelation caused both detectives to toss their cigarettes into the water. It was probably not a suicide, since that form of death was generally not a team sport. The sewer rat—that was how they thought of their almost-police comrades—took another ten minutes before getting the hoist collar in place, then came up the ladder and started cranking the winch.

It was clear in a moment. Two men, not old ones, not badly dressed. They'd been dead for several days, judging by the distortion and disfigurement of their faces. The water had been cold, and that had slowed the growth and hunger of the bacteria that devoured most bodies, but water itself did things to bodies that were hard on the full stomach to gaze upon, and these two faces looked like ... like Pokémon toys, one of the detectives thought, just like perverse and horrible Pokémon toys, like those that one of his kids lusted after. The two sewer rats loaded the bodies into body bags for transport to the morgue, where the examinations would take place. As yet, they knew nothing except that the bodies were indeed dead. There were no obviously missing body parts, and the general dishevelment of the bodies prevented their seeing anything like a bullet or knife wound. For the moment, they had what Americans would call two John Does, one with blond or light brown hair, the other with what appeared to be reddish hair. From appearances, they'd been in the water for three or four days. And they'd probably died together, handcuffed as they were, unless one had murdered the other and then jumped to his own death, in which case one or both might have been homosexual, the more cynical of the two detectives thought. The beat cop was told to write up the proper reporting forms at his station, which, the militiaman thought, would be nice and warm. There was nothing like finding a corpse or two to make a cold day colder still.

The body-recovery team loaded the bags into their van for the drive to the morgue. The bags were not properly sealed because of the handcuffs, and they sat side by side on the floor of the van, perversely like the hands of lovers reaching out to each other in death ... as they had in life? one of the detectives wondered aloud back in their car. His partner just growled at that one and continued his drive.

It was, agreeably, a slow day in the St. Petersburg morgue. The senior pathologist on duty, Dr. Aleksander Koniev, had been in his office reading a medical journal and well bored by the inactivity of the morning, when the call came in, a possible double homicide. Those were always interesting, and Koniev was a devotee of murder mysteries, most of them imported from Britain and America, which also made them a good way to polish up his language skills. He was waiting in the autopsy room when the bodies arrived, were transferred to gurneys at the loading ramp and rolled together into his room. It took a moment to see why the two gurneys were wheeled side by side.

"So," the pathologist asked with a sardonic grin, "were they killed by the militia?"

"Not officially," the senior detective replied, in the same emotional mode. He knew Koniev.

"Very well." The physician switched on the tape recorder. "We have two male cadavers, still fully dressed. It is apparent that both have been immersed in water—where were they recovered?" he asked, looking up at the cops. They answered. "Immersed in *fresh* water in the Neva. On initial visual inspection, I would estimate three to four days' immersion after death." His gloved hands felt around one head, and the other. "Ah," his voice said. "Both victims seem to have been shot. Both have what appear to be bullet holes in the center of the occipital region of both bodies. Initial impression is a small-caliber bullet hole in both victims. We'll check that later. Yevgeniy," he said, looking up again, this time at his own technician. "Remove the clothing and bag it for later inspection."

"Yes, Comrade Doctor." The technician put out his cigarette and came forward with cutting tools.

"Both shot?" the junior detective asked.

"In the same place in both heads," Koniev confirmed. "Oh, they were handcuffed after death, strangely enough. No immediately visible bruising on either wrist. Why do it afterwards?" the pathologist wondered.

"Keeps the bodies together," the senior detective thought aloud—*but why might that be important?* he wondered to himself. The killer or killers had an overly developed sense of neatness? But he'd been investigating homicides long enough to know that you couldn't fully explain all the crimes you solved, much less the ones you'd newly encountered.

"Well, they were both fit," Koniev said next, as his technician got the last of their clothes off. "Hmm, what's that?" He walked over and saw a tattoo on the left biceps of the blond one, then turned to see—"They both have the same tattoo."

The senior detective came over to see, first thinking that maybe his partner had been right and there was a sexual element to this case, but—

"Spetsnaz, the red star and thunderbolt, these two were in Afghanistan. Anatoliy, while the doctor conducts his examination, let's go through their clothing."

This they did, and in half an hour determined that both had been well dressed in fairly expensive clothing, but in both cases entirely devoid of identification of any kind. That was hardly unusual in a situation like this, but cops, like everyone else, prefer the easy to the hard. No wallet, no identity papers, not a banknote, key chain, or tie tack. Well, they could trace them through the labels on the clothes, and nobody had cut their fingertips off, and so they could also use fingerprints to identify them. Whoever had done the double murder had been clever enough to deny the police some knowledge, but not clever enough to deny them everything.

What did that mean? the senior detective wondered. The best way to prevent a murder investigation was to make the bodies disappear. Without a body there was no proof of death, and therefore, no murder investigation, just a missing person who could have run off with another woman or man, or just decided to go someplace to start life anew. And disposing of a body was not all *that* difficult, if you thought about it a little. Fortunately, most killings were, if not exactly impulse crimes, then something close to it, and most killers were fools who would later seal their own fates by talking too much.

But not this time. Had this been a sexual killing, he probably would have heard about it by now. Such crimes were virtually advertised by their perpetrators in some perverse desire to assure their own arrest and conviction, because no one who committed that kind of crime seemed able to keep his mouth shut about anything.

No, this double killing had every hallmark of professionalism. Both bodies killed in the same way, and only *then* handcuffed together ... probably for better and/or lengthier concealment. No sign of a struggle on either body, and both were manifestly fit, trained, dangerous men. They'd been taken unawares, and that usually meant someone they both knew and trusted. Why criminals trusted anyone in their community was something neither detective quite understood. "Loyalty" was a word they could scarcely spell, much less a principle to which any of them adhered ... and yet criminals gave strange lip-service to it.

As the detectives watched, the pathologist drew blood from both bodies for later toxicology tests. Perhaps both had been drugged as a precursor to the head shots, not likely, but possible, and something to be checked. Scrapings were taken from all twenty fingernails, and those, too, would probably be valueless. Finally, fingerprints were taken so that proper identification could be made. This would not be very fast. The central records bureau in Moscow was notoriously inefficient, and the detectives would beat their own local bushes in the hope of finding out who these two cadavers had once been.

"Yevgeniy, these are not men of whom I would have made enemies lightly."

"I agree, Anatoliy," the elder of the two said. "But someone either did not fear them at all ... or feared them sufficiently to take very drastic action." The truth of the matter was that both men were accustomed to solving easy murders where the killer confessed almost at once, or had committed his crime in front of numerous witnesses. This one would challenge their abilities, and they would report that to their lieutenant, in the hope of getting additional assets assigned to the case.

As they watched, photos were taken of the faces, but those faces were so distorted as to be virtually unrecognizable, and the photos would then be essentially useless for purposes of identification. But taking them prior to opening the skull was procedure, and Dr. Koniev did everything by the book. The detectives stepped outside to make a few phone calls and smoke in a place with a somewhat more palatable ambience. By the time they came back, both bullets were in plastic containers, and Koniev told them that the presumptive cause of both deaths was a single bullet in each brain, with powder tattooing

evident on both scalps. They'd both been killed at short range, less than half a meter, the pathologist told them, with what appeared to be a standard, light 2.6-gram bullet fired from a 5.45-mm PSM police pistol. That might have generated a snort, since this was the standard-issue police side arm, but quite a few had found their way into the Russian underworld.

"The Americans call this a professional job," Yevgeniy observed.

"Certainly it was accomplished with skill," Anatoliy agreed. "And now, first ..."

"First we find out who these unlucky bastards were. Then, who the hell were their enemies."

The Chinese food in China wasn't nearly as good as that to be found in LA, Nomuri thought. Probably the ingredients, was his immediate analysis. If the People's Republic had a Food and Drug Administration, it had been left out of his premission briefing, and his first thought on entering this restaurant was that he didn't want to check the kitchen out. Like most Beijing restaurants, this one was a small mom-and-pop operation operating out of the first floor of what was in essence a private home, and serving twenty people out of a standard Chinese communist home kitchen, which must have involved considerable acrobatics. The table was circular, small, and eminently cheap, and the chair was uncomfortable, but for all that, the mere fact that such a place existed was testimony to fundamental changes in the political leadership of this country.

But the mission of the evening sat across from him. Lian Ming. She wore the standard off-blue boiler suit that was virtually the uniform of low- to mid-level bureaucrats in the various government ministries. Her hair was cut short, almost like a helmet. The fashion industry in this city must have been established by some racist son of a bitch who loathed the Chinese and tried his level best to make them as unattractive as he could. He'd yet to see a single local female citizen who dressed in a manner that anyone could call attractive —except, maybe, for some imports from Hong Kong. Uniformity was a problem with the Orient, the utter lack of variety, unless you counted the foreigners who were showing up in ever-increasing numbers, but they stuck out like roses in a junkyard, and that merely emphasized the plethora of junk. Back home, at USC, one could have—well, one could look at, the CIA officer corrected himself—any sort of female to be had on the planet. White, black, Jewish, gentile, yellow in various varieties, Latina, some real Africans, plenty of real Europeans—and there you had ample variety, too: the dark-haired, earthy Italians, the haughty French, the proper Brits, and the stiff Germans. Toss in some Canadians, and the Spanish (who went out of their way to be separated from the local Spanish speakers) and lots of ethnic Japanese (who were also separated from the local Japanese, though in this case at the will of the latter rather than the former), and you had a virtual deli of people. The only sameness there came from the Californian atmosphere, which commanded that every individual had to work hard to be presentable and attractive, for that was the One Great Commandment of life in California,

home of Rollerblading and surfing, and the tight figures that went along with both pastimes.

Not here. Here everyone dressed the same, looked the same, talked the same, and largely acted the same way ... ... except this one. There was something else to be had here, Nomuri thought, and that's why he'd asked her to dinner.

It was called seduction, which had been part of the spy's playbook since time immemorial, though it would be a first for Nomuri. He hadn't been quite celibate in Japan, where mores had changed in the past generation, allowing young men and young women to meet and ... communicate on the most basic of levels—but there, in a savage, and for Chester Nomuri a rather cruel, irony, the more available Japanese girls had a yen for Americans. Some said it was because Americans had a reputation for being better equipped for lovemaking than the average Japanese male, a subject of much giggling for Japanese girls who have recently become sexually active. Part of it was also that American men were reputed to treat their women better than the Japanese variety, and since Japanese women were far more obsequious than their Western counterparts, it probably worked out as a good deal for both sides of the partnerships that developed. But Chet Nomuri was a spook covered as a Japanese salaryman, and had learned to fit in so well that the local women regarded him as just another Japanese male, and so his sex life had been hindered by his professional skills, which hardly seemed fair to the field officer, brought up, like so many American men, on the movies of 007 and his numerous conquests: Mr. Kiss-Kiss Bang-Bang, as he was known in the West Indies. Well, Nomuri hadn't handled a pistol either, not since his time at The Farm—the CIA's training school off Interstate 64 near Yorktown, Virginia—and hadn't exactly broken any records there in the first place.

But this one had possibilities, the field officer thought, behind his normal, neutral expression, and there was nothing in the manual against getting laid on the job—what a crimp on Agency morale *that* would have been, he considered. Such stories of conquest were a frequent topic of conversation at the rare but real field-officer get-togethers that the Agency occasionally held, usually at The Farm, for the field spooks to compare notes on techniques—the after-hour beer sessions often drifted in this direction. For Chet Nomuri since getting to Beijing, his sex life had consisted of prowling Internet pornography sites. For one reason or another, the Asian culture made for an ample collection of such things, and while Nomuri wasn't exactly proud of this addiction, his sexual drive needed *some* outlet.

With a little work, Ming might have been pretty, Nomuri thought. First of all she needed long hair. Then, perhaps, better frames on her eyeglasses. Those she wore had all the attraction of recycled barbed wire. Then some makeup. Exactly what sort Nomuri wasn't sure—he was no expert on such things, but her skin had an ivory-like quality to it that a little chemical enhancement might turn into something attractive. But in this culture, except for people on the stage (whose makeup was about as subtle as a Las Vegas neon sign), makeup meant washing your face in the morning, if that. It was her eyes, he decided. They were lively and ... cute. There was life in them, or

behind them, however that worked. She might even have had a decent figure, but it was hard to tell in that clothing.

"So, the new computer system works well?" he asked, after the lingering sip of green tea.

"It is magical," she replied, almost gushing. "The characters come out beautifully, and they print up perfectly on the laser printer, as though from a scribe."

"What does your minister think?"

"Oh, he is very pleased. I work faster now, and he is very pleased by that!" she assured him.

"Pleased enough to place an order?" Nomuri asked, reverting back to his salaryman cover.

"This I must ask the chief of administration, but I think you will be satisfied by the response."

That will make NEC happy, the CIA officer thought, again wondering briefly how much money he'd made for his cover firm. His boss in Tokyo would have gagged on his sake to know whom Nomuri really worked for, but the spook had won all of his promotions at NEC on merit, while moonlighting for his true country. It was a fortunate accident, Chet thought, that his real job and his cover one blended so seamlessly. That and the fact that he'd been raised in a very traditional home, speaking two native tongues ... and more than that, the sense of *on,* the duty owed to his native land, far over and above that he pretended to owe to his parent culture. He'd probably gotten that from seeing his grandfather's framed plaque, the Combat Infantryman's Badge in the center on the blue velvet, surrounded by the ribbons and medallions that designated awards for bravery, the Bronze Star with combat "V," the Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation, and the campaign ribbons won as a grunt with the 442nd Regimental Combat team in Italy and Southern France. Fucked over by America, his grandfather had earned his citizenship rights in the ultimate and best possible way before returning home to the landscaping business that had educated his sons and grandsons, and taught one of them the duty he owed his country. And besides, this could be fun.

It was now, Nomuri thought, looking deeply into Ming's dark eyes, wondering what the brain behind them was thinking. She had two cute dimples at the sides of her mouth, and, he thought, a very sweet smile on an otherwise unremarkable face.

"This is such a fascinating country," he said. "By the way, your English is very good." And good that it was. His Mandarin needed a lot of help, and one doesn't seduce women with sign language.

A pleased smile. "Thank you. I do study very hard."

"What books do you read?" he asked with an engaging smile of his own.

"Romances, Danielle Steel, Judith Krantz. America offers women so many more opportunities than what we are used to here."

“America is an interesting country, but chaotic,” Nomuri told her. “At least in this society one can know his place.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “There is security in that, but sometimes too much. Even a caged bird wishes to spread its wings.”

“I will tell you one thing I find bad here.”

“What is that?” Ming asked, not offended, which, Nomuri thought, was very good indeed. Maybe he’d get a Steele novel and read up on what she liked.

“You should dress differently. Your clothing is not flattering. Women should dress more attractively. In Japan there is much variety in clothing, and you can dress Eastern or Western as the spirit moves you.”

She giggled. “I would settle for the underthings. They must feel so nice on the skin. That is not a very socialist thought,” she told him, setting down her cup. The waiter came over, and with Nomuri’s assent she ordered mao-tai, a fiery local liqueur. The waiter returned rapidly with two small porcelain cups and a flask, from which he poured daintily. The CIA officer nearly gasped with his first sip, and it went down hot, but it certainly warmed the stomach. Ming’s skin, he saw, flushed from it, and there came the fleeting impression that a gate had just been opened and passed ... and that it probably led in the right direction.

“Not everything can be socialist,” Nomuri judged, with another tiny sip. “This restaurant is a private concern, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes. And the food is better than what I cook. That is a skill I do not have.”

“Truly? Then perhaps you will allow me to cook for you sometime,” Chet suggested.

“Oh?”

“Certainly.” He smiled. “I can cook American style, and I am able to shop at a closed store to get the correct ingredients.” Not that the ingredients would be worth a damn, shipped in as they were, but a damned sight better than the garbage you got here in the public markets, and a steak dinner was probably something she’d never had. Could he justify getting CIA to put a few Kobe beef steaks on his expense account? Nomuri wondered. Probably. The bean-counters at Langley didn’t bother the field spooks all that much.

“Really?”

“Of course. There are some advantages to being a foreign barbarian,” he told her with a sly smile. The giggling response was just right, he thought. Yeah. Nomuri took another careful sip of this rocket fuel. She’d just told him what she wanted to wear. Sensible, too, for this culture. However comfy it might be, it would also be quite discreet.

“So, what else can you tell me about yourself?” he asked next.

“There is little to tell. My job is beneath my education, but it carries prestige for ... well, for political reasons. I am a highly educated secretary. My

employer—well, technically I work for the state, as do most of us, but in fact I work for my minister as if he were in the capitalist sector and paid me from his own pocket." She shrugged. "I suppose it has always been so. I see and hear interesting things."

Don't want to ask about them now, Nomuri knew. Later, sure, but not now.

"It is the same with me, industrial secrets and such. Ahh," he snorted. "Better to leave such things at my official desk. No, Ming, tell me about you."

"Again, there is little to tell. I am twenty-four. I am educated. I suppose I am lucky to be alive. You know what happens to many girl babies here ..."

Nomuri nodded. "I have heard the stories. They are distasteful," he agreed with her. It was more than that. It was not unknown for the father of a female toddler to drop her down a well in the hope that his wife would bear him a son on the next try. One-baby-per-family was almost a law in the PRC, and like most laws in a communist state, that one was ruthlessly enforced. An unauthorized baby was often allowed to come to term, but then as birth took place, when the baby "crowned," the top of the head appearing, the very moment of birth, the attending physician or nurse would take a syringe loaded with formaldehyde, and stab it into the soft spot at the crown of the almost-newborn's head, push the plunger, and extinguish its life at the moment of its beginning. It wasn't something the government of the PRC advertised as government policy, but government policy it was. Nomuri's one sister, Alice, was a physician, an obstetrician /gynecologist trained at UCLA, and he knew that his sister would take poison herself before performing such a barbarous act, or take a pistol to use on whoever demanded that she do it. Even so, some surplus girl babies somehow managed to be born, and these were often abandoned, and then given up for adoption, mainly to Westerners, because the Chinese themselves had no use for them at all. Had it been done to Jews, it would have been called genocide, but there were a lot of Chinese to go around. Carried to extremes, it could lead to racial extinction, but here it was just called population control. "In due course Chinese culture will again recognize the value of women, Ming. That is certain."

"I suppose it is," she allowed. "How are women treated in Japan?"

Nomuri allowed himself a laugh. "The real question is how well they treat us, and how well they *permit* us to treat them!"

"Truly?"

"Oh, yes. My mother ruled the house until she died."

"Interesting. Are you religious?"

Why that question? Chet wondered.

"I have never decided between Shinto and Zen Buddhism," he replied, truthfully. He'd been baptized a Methodist, but fallen away from his church many years before. In Japan he'd examined the local religions just to understand them, the better to fit in, and though he'd learned much about both, neither had appealed to his American upbringing. "And you?"

“I once looked into Falun Gong, but not seriously. I had a friend who got very involved. He’s in prison now.”

“Ah, a pity.” Nomuri nodded sympathetically, wondering how close the friend had been. Communism remained a jealous system of belief, intolerant of competition of any sort. Baptists were the new religious fad, springing up as if from the very ground itself, started off, he thought, from the Internet, a medium into which American Christians, especially Baptists and Mormons, had pumped a lot of resources of late. And so Jerry Falwell was getting some sort of religious/ideological foothold here? How remarkable—or not. The problem with Marxism-Leninism, and also with Mao it would seem, was that as fine as the theoretical model was, it lacked something the human soul craved. But the communist chieftains didn’t and couldn’t like that very much. The Falun Gong group hadn’t even been a religion at all, not to Nomuri’s way of thinking, but for some reason he didn’t fully understand, it had frightened the powers that be in the PRC enough to crack down on it as if it had been a genuinely counterrevolutionary political movement. He heard that the convicted leaders of the group were doing seriously hard time in the local prisons. The thought of what constituted especially hard time in this country didn’t bear much contemplation. Some of the world’s most vicious tortures had been invented in this country, where the value of human life was a far less important thing than in the nation of his origin, Chet reminded himself. China was an ancient land with an ancient culture, but in many ways these people might as well have been Klingons as fellow human beings, so detached were their societal values from what Chester Nomuri had grown up with. “Well, I really don’t have much in the way of religious convictions.”

“Convictions?” Ming asked.

“Beliefs,” the CIA officer corrected. “So, are there any men in your life? A fiance, perhaps?”

She sighed. “No, not in some time.”

“Indeed? I find that surprising,” Nomuri observed with studied gallantry.

“I suppose we are different from Japan,” Ming admitted, with just a hint of sadness in her voice.

Nomuri lifted the flask and poured some more mao-tai for both. “In that case,” he said, with a smile and a raised eyebrow, “I offer you a friendly drink.”

“Thank you, Nomuri-san.”

“My pleasure, Comrade Ming.” He wondered how long it would take. Perhaps not too long at all. Then the real work would begin.

CHAPTER 7

Developing Leads

It was the sort of coincidence for which police work is known worldwide. Provalov called militia headquarters, and since he was investigating a homicide, he got to speak with the St. Petersburg murder squad leader, a captain. When he said he was looking for some former Spetsnaz soldiers, the captain remembered his morning meeting in which two of his men had reported finding two bodies bearing possible Spetsnaz tattoos, and that was enough to make him forward the call.

"Really, the RPG event in Moscow?" Yevgeniy Petrovich Ustinov asked. "Who exactly was killed?"

"The main target appears to have been Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko. He was a pimp," Provalov told his colleague to the north. "Also his driver and one of his girls, but they appear to have been inconsequential." He didn't have to elaborate. You didn't use an anti-tank rocket to kill a chauffeur and a whore.

"And your sources tell you that two Spetsnaz veterans did the shooting?"

"Correct, and they flew back to St. Petersburg soon thereafter."

"I see. Well, we fished two such people from the River Neva yesterday, both in their late thirties or so, and both shot in the back of the head."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. We have fingerprints from both bodies. We're waiting for Central Army Records to match them up. But that will not be very fast."

"Let me see what I can do about that, Yevgeniy Petrovich. You see, also present at the murder was Sergey Nikolay'ch Golovko, and we have concerns that he might have been the true target of the killing."

"That would be ambitious," Ustinov observed coolly. "Perhaps your friends at Dzerzhinskiy Square can get the records morons moving?"

"I will call them and see," Provalov promised.

"Good, anything else?"

"Another name, Suvorov, Klementi Ivan'ch, reportedly a former KGB officer, but that is all I have at the moment. Does the name mean anything to you?" You could hear the man shaking his head over the phone, Provalov noted.

"Nyet, never heard that one," the senior detective replied as he wrote it down. "Connection?"

“My informant thinks he’s the man who arranged the killing.”

“I’ll check our records here to see if we have anything on him. Another former ’Sword and Shield’ man, eh? How many of those guardians of the state have gone bad?” the St. Petersburg cop asked rhetorically.

“Enough,” his colleague in Moscow agreed, with an unseen grimace.

“This Avseyenko fellow, also KGB?”

“Yes, he reportedly ran the Sparrow School.”

Ustinov chuckled at that one. “Oh, a state-trained pimp. Marvelous. Good girls?”

“Lovely,” Provalov confirmed. “More than we can afford.”

“A real man doesn’t have to pay for it, Oleg Gregoriyevich,” the St. Petersburg cop assured his Moscow colleague.

“That is true, my friend. At least not until long afterwards,” Provalov added.

“That is the truth!” A laugh. “Let me know what you find out?”

“Yes, I will fax you my notes.”

“Excellent. I will share my information with you as well,” Ustinov promised. There is a bond among homicide investigators across the world. No country sanctions the private taking of human life. Nation-states reserve such power for themselves alone.

In his dreary Moscow office, Lieutenant Provalov made his notes for several minutes. It was too late to call the RVS about rattling the Central Army Records cage. First thing in the morning, he promised himself. Then it was time to leave. He picked his coat off the tree next to his desk and headed out to where his official car was parked. This he drove to a corner close to the American Embassy, and a place called Boris Godunov’s, a friendly and warm bar. He’d only been there for five minutes when a familiar hand touched his shoulder.

“Hello, Mishka,” Provalov said, without turning.

“You know, Oleg, it’s good to see that Russian cops are like American cops.”

“It is the same in New York?”

“You bet,” Reilly confirmed. “After a long day of chasing bad guys, what’s better than a few drinks with your pals?” The FBI agent waved to the bartender for his usual, a vodka and soda. “Besides, you get some real work done in a place like this. So, anything happening on the Pimp Case?”

“Yes, the two who did the killing may have shown up dead in St. Petersburg.” Provalov tossed down the last of his straight vodka and filled the American in on the details, concluding, “What do you make of that?”

“Either it’s revenge or insurance, pal. I’ve seen it happen at home.”

“Insurance?”

“Yeah, had it happen in New York. The Mafia took Joey Gallo out, did it in

public, and they wanted it to be a signature event, so they got a black hood to do the hit—but then the poor bastard gets shot himself about fifteen feet away. Insurance, Oleg. That way the subject can't tell anybody who asked him to take the job. The second shooter just walked away, never did get a line on him. Or it could have been a revenge hit: whoever paid them to do the job whacked them for hitting the wrong target. You pays your money and you takes your choice, pal."

"How do you say, wheels within wheels?"

Reilly nodded. "That's how we say it. Well, at least it gives you some more leads to run down. Maybe your two shooters talked to somebody. Hell, maybe they even kept a diary." It was like tossing a rock into a pond, Reilly thought. The ripples just kept expanding in a case like this. Unlike a nice domestic murder, where a guy whacked his wife for fucking around, or serving dinner late, and then confessed while crying his eyes out at what he'd done. But by the same token, it was an awfully loud crime, and those, more often than not, were the ones you broke because people commented on the noise, and some of those people knew things that you could use. It was just a matter of getting people out on the street, rattling doorknobs and wearing out shoes, until you got what you needed. These Russian cops weren't dumb. They lacked some of the training that Reilly took for granted, but for all that, they had the proper cop instincts, and the fact of the matter was that if you followed the proper procedures, you'd break your cases, because the other side wasn't all that smart. The smart ones didn't break the law in so egregious a way. No, the perfect crime was the one you never discovered, the murder victim you never found, the stolen funds missed by bad accounting procedures, the espionage never discovered. Once you knew a crime had been committed, you had a starting place, and it was like unraveling a sweater. There wasn't all that much holding the wool together if you just kept picking at it.

"Tell me, Mishka, how worthy were your Mafia adversaries in New York?" Provalov asked after sipping his second drink.

Reilly did the same. "It's not like the movies, Oleg. Except maybe *Goodfellas.* They're cheap hoods. They're not educated. Some of them are pretty damned dumb. Their cachet was that once upon a time they didn't talk, *omertà* they used to call it, the Law of Silence. I mean, they'd take the fall and never cooperate. But that changed over time. The people from the Old Country died out and the new generation was softer—and we got tougher. It's a lot easier to laugh your way through three years than it is to handle ten, and on top of that the organization broke down. They stopped taking care of the families while the dad was in the slammer, and that was real bad for morale. So, they started talking to us. And we got smarter, too, with electronic surveillance—now it's called 'special operations'; back then it was a 'black bag job'—and we weren't always very careful about getting a warrant. I mean, back in the '60s, a Mafia don couldn't take a leak without us knowing what color it was."

"And they never fought back?"

"You mean fuck with us? Mess with an FBI agent?" Reilly grinned at the very thought. "Oleg, *nobody ever* messes with the FBI. Back then, and still

somewhat to this day, we are the Right Hand of God Himself, and if you mess with us, some really bad things are going to happen. The truth of the matter is that nothing like that has ever happened, but the bad guys worry that it might. The rules get bent some, but, no, we never really break them—at least not that I know about. But if you threaten a hood with serious consequences for stepping over the line, chances are he'll take you seriously."

"Not here. They do not respect us that much yet."

"Well, then you have to generate that respect, Oleg." And it really was about that simple in concept, though bringing it about, Reilly knew, would not be all that easy. Would it take having the local cops go off the reservation once in a while, to show the hoods the price of lèse-majesté? That was part of American history, Reilly thought. Town sheriffs like Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, and Wild Bill Hickok, Lone Wolf Gonzales of the Texas Rangers, Bill Tilghman and Billy Threepersons of the U.S. Marshal Service, the cops of their time who didn't so much enforce the law as embody it in the way they walked down the street. There was no corresponding Russian lawman of legend. Maybe they needed one. It was part of the heritage of every American cop, and from watching movies and TV westerns, American citizens grew up with the expectation that breaking the law would bring such a man into your life, and not to your personal profit. The FBI had grown up in an era of increased crime during the Great Depression, and had exploited the existing Western tradition with modern technology and procedures to create its own institutional mystique. To do that had meant convicting a lot of criminals, and killing a few on the street as well. In America there was the expectation that cops were heroic figures who didn't merely enforce the law, but who protected the innocent as well. There was no such tradition here. Growing it would solve many of the problems in the former Soviet Union, where the lingering tradition was of oppression rather than protection. No John Wayne, no Melvin Purvis in Russian movies, and this nation was the poorer for it. As much as Reilly liked working here, and as much as he'd come to like and respect his Russian counterparts, it was much like being dumped into a trash heap with instructions to make it as orderly as Bergdorf-Goodman's in New York. All the proper things were there, but organizing them made Hercules' task in the Augean stables seem trivial in comparison. Oleg had the right motivation, and the right set of skills, but it was some job he had ahead of him. Reilly didn't envy him the task, but he had to help as best he could.

"I do not envy you very much, Mishka, but your organization's status in your country is something I would like to have."

"It didn't just happen, Oleg. It's the product of many years and a lot of good men. Maybe I should show you a Clint Eastwood movie."

"Dirty Harry? I have seen it." *Entertaining,* the Russian thought, *but not overly realistic.*

"No, *Hang 'Em High,* about the Marshal Service, back in the Old West, when men were men and women were grateful. Actually it's not true in the usual sense. There wasn't much crime in the Old West."

That made the Russian look up from his drink in surprise. “Then why do all the movies say otherwise?”

“Oleg, movies have to be exciting, and there isn’t much exciting about raising wheat or punching cattle. The American West was mainly settled by veterans of our Civil War. That was a hard and cruel conflict, but no man who’d survived the Battle of Shiloh was likely to be intimidated by some bozo on a horse, gun or not. A professor at Oklahoma State University did a book on this subject twenty or so years ago. He checked court records and such, and found out that except for saloon shootings—guns and whiskey make a crummy mix, right?—there wasn’t a hell of a lot of crime in the West. The citizens could look after themselves, and the laws they had were pretty tough—not a hell of a lot of repeat offenders—but what it really came down to was that the citizens all had guns and all pretty much knew how to use them, and that is a big deterrent for the bad guys. A cop’s less likely to shoot you than an aroused citizen, when you get down to it. He doesn’t want to do all the paperwork if he can avoid it, right?” A sip and a chuckle from the American.

“In that we are the same, Mishka,” Provalov agreed.

“And, by the way, all this quick-draw stuff in the movies. If it ever happened for real, I’ve never heard of such a case. No, that’s all Hollywood bullshit. You can’t draw and fire accurately that way. If you could, they would have trained us to do it that way at Quantico. But except for people who practice for special performances and tournaments and stuff, and that’s always at the same angle and the same distance, it just can’t be done.”

“You’re sure of that?” Legends die hard, especially for an otherwise pretty smart cop who had, however, seen his share of Westerns.

“I was a Principal Instructor in my Field Division, and damned if *I* can do it.”

“You are good shot, eh?”

Reilly nodded with uncharacteristic modesty on this particular issue. “Fair,” he allowed. “Pretty fair.” There were less than three hundred names on the FBI Academy’s “Possible Board,” identifying those who’d fired a perfect qualifying course on graduating. Mike Reilly was one of them. He’d also been assistant head of the SWAT team in his first field division in Kansas City before moving over to the chess players in the OC—Organized Crime—depart—ment. It made him feel a little naked to walk around without his trusty S&W 1076 automatic, but that was life in the FBI’s diplomatic service, the agent told himself. What the hell, the vodka was good here, and he was developing a taste for it. For that his diplomatic license plates helped. The local cops were pretty serious about giving tickets out. It was a pity they still had so much to learn about major criminal investigations.

“So, our pimp friend was probably the primary target, Oleg?”

“Yes, I think that is likely, but not entirely certain yet.” He shrugged. “But we’ll keep the Golovko angle open. After all,” Provalov added, after a long sip of his glass, “it will get us lots of powerful cooperation from other agencies.”

Reilly had to laugh at that. “Oleg Gregoriyevich, you know how to handle the bureaucratic part of the job. I couldn’t do that better myself!” Then he waved to the bartender. He’d spring for the next round.

The Internet had to be the best espionage invention ever made, Mary Patricia Foley thought. She also blessed the day that she’d personally recommended Chester Nomuri to the Directorate of Operations. That little Nisei had some beautiful moves for an officer still on the short side of thirty. He’d done superb work in Japan, and had volunteered in a heartbeat for Operation GENGHIS in Beijing. His cover job at Nippon Electric Company could hardly have been better suited to the mission requirements, and it seemed that he’d waltzed into his niche like Fred Astaire on a particularly good day. The easiest part of all, it seemed, was getting the data out.

Six years before, CIA had gone to Silicon Valley—undercover, of course—and commissioned a modern manufacturer to set up a brief production run of a very special modem. In fact, it seemed to many to be a sloppy one, since the linkup time it used was four or five seconds longer than was the usual. What you couldn’t tell was that the last four seconds weren’t random electronic noise at all, but rather the mating of a special encryption system, which when caught on a phone tap sounded just like random noise anyway. So, all Chester had to do was set up his message for transmission and punch it through. To be on the safe side, the messages were super-encrypted with a 256-bit system specially made at the National Security Agency, and the double-encipherment was so complex that even NSA’s own bank of supercomputers could only crack it with difficulty and after a lot of expensive time. After that, it was just a matter of setting up a www-dot-something domain through an easily available public vendor and a local ISP—Internet Service Provider—with which the world abounded. It could even be used on a direct call from one computer to another—in fact, that was the original application, and even if the opposition had a hardwire phone tap, it would take a mathematical genius *plus* the biggest and baddest supercomputer that Sun Microsystems made even to begin cracking into the message.

Lian Ming, Mary Pat read, secretary to ... to him, eh? Not a bad potential source. The most charming part of all was that Nomuri included the sexual possibilities implicit in the recruitment. The kid was still something of an innocent; he’d probably blushed writing this, the Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency thought to herself, but he’d included it because he was so damned honest in everything he did. It was time to get Nomuri a promotion and a raise. Mrs. Foley made the appropriate note on a Post-it for attachment to his file. James Bond-san, she thought with an internal chuckle. The easiest part was the reply: *Approved, proceed.* She didn’t even have to add the “with caution” part. Nomuri knew how to handle himself in the field, which was not always the rule for young field officers. Then she picked up the phone and called her husband on the direct line.

“Yeah, honey?” the Director of Central Intelligence said.

"Busy?"

Ed Foley knew that wasn't a question his wife asked lightly. "Not too busy for you, baby. Come on down." And hung up.

The CIA Director's office is relatively long and narrow, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the woods and the special-visitors' parking lot. Beyond that are the trees overlooking the Potomac Valley and the George Washington Parkway, and little else. The idea of anyone having a direct line of sight into any part of this building, much less the Office of the Director, would have been the cause of serious heartburn for the security pukes. Ed looked up from his paperwork when his wife came in and took the leather chair across from his desk.

"Something good?"

"Even better than Eddie's marks at school," she replied with a soft, sexy smile she reserved for her husband alone. And that had to be pretty good. Edward Foley, Jr., was kicking ass up at Rensselaer Polytechnic in New York, and a starter on their hockey team, which damned near always kicked ass itself in the NCAA. Little Ed might earn a place on the Olympic team, though pro hockey was out. He'd make too much money as a computer engineer to waste his time in so pedestrian a pursuit. "I think we may have something here."

"Like what, honey?"

"Like the executive secretary to Fang Gan," she replied. "Nomuri's trying to recruit her, and he says the prospects are good."

"GENGHIS," Ed observed. They ought to have picked a different name, but unlike most CIA operations, the name for this one hadn't been generated by a computer in the basement. The fact of the matter was that this security measure hadn't been applied for the simple reason that nobody had ever expected anything to come of it. CIA had never gotten any kind of agent into the PRC government. At least not above the rank of captain in the People's Liberation Army. The problems were the usual ones. First, they had to recruit an ethnic Chinese, and CIA hadn't had much success at that; next, the officer in question had to have perfect language skills, and the ability to disappear into the culture. For a variety of reasons, none of that had ever happened. Then Mary Pat had suggested trying Nomuri. His corporation did a lot of business in China, after all, and the kid did have good instincts. And so, Ed Foley had signed off on it, not really expecting much to result. But again his wife's field instincts had proven superior to his. It was widely believed that Mary Pat Foley was the best field officer the Agency had had in twenty years, and it looked as if she was determined to prove that. "How exposed is Chet?"

His wife had to nod her concern at that one. "He's hanging out there, but he knows how to be careful, and his communications gear is the best we have. Unless they brute-force him, you know, just pick him up because they don't like his haircut, he ought to be pretty safe. Anyway—" She handed over the communication from Beijing.

The DCI read it three times before handing it back. “Well, if he wants to get laid—it’s not good fieldcraft, honey. Not good to get that involved with your agent—”

“I *know* that, Ed, but you play the cards you’re dealt, remember? And if we get her a computer like the one Chet’s using, her security won’t be all that bad either, will it?”

“Unless they have somebody pick it apart,” Ed Foley thought aloud.

“Oh, Jesus, Ed, our best people would have a cast-iron motherfucker of a time figuring it all out. I ran that project myself, remember? It’s *safe!”*

“Easy, honey.” The DCI held up his hand. When Mary used that sort of language, she was really into the matter at hand. “Yeah, I know, it’s secure, but I’m the worrier and you’re the cowgirl, remember?”

“Okay, honey-bunny.” The usual sweet smile that went with seduction and getting her way.

“You’ve already told him to proceed?”

“He’s my officer, Eddie.”

A resigned nod. It wasn’t fair that he had to work with his wife here. He rarely won any arguments at the office, either. “Okay, baby. It’s your operation, run with it, but—”

“But what?”

“But we change GENGHIS to something else. If this one pans out, then we go to a monthly name cycle. This one has some serious implications, and we’ve got to go max-security on it.”

She had to agree with that. As case officers, the two of them had run an agent known in CIA legend as CARDINAL, Colonel Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov, who’d worked inside the Kremlin for more than thirty years, feeding gold-plated information on every aspect of the Soviet military, plus some hugely valuable political intelligence. For bureaucratic reasons lost in the mists of time, CARDINAL had not been handled as a regular agent-in-place, and that had saved him from Aldrich Ames and his treacherous betrayal of a dozen Soviet citizens who’d worked for America. For Ames it had worked out to roughly $100,000 per life given away. Both of the Foleys regretted the fact that Ames was allowed to live, but they weren’t in the law-enforcement business.

“Okay, Eddie, monthly change-cycle. You’re always so careful, honey. You call or me?”

“We’ll wait until she gives us something useful before going to all the trouble, but let’s change GENGHIS to something else. It’s too obviously a reference to China.”

“Okay.” An impish smile. “How about SORGE for the moment?” she suggested. The name was that of Richard Sorge, one of the greatest spies who’d ever lived, a German national who’d worked for the Soviets, and just

possibly the man who'd kept Hitler from winning his Eastern Front war with Stalin. The Soviet dictator, knowing this, hadn't lifted a hand to save him from execution. "Gratitude," Iosif Vissarionovich had once said, "is a disease of dogs."

The DCI nodded. His wife had a lively sense of humor, especially as applied to business matters. "When do you suppose we'll know if she'll play ball with us?"

"About as soon as Chet gets his rocks off, I suppose."

"Mary, did you ever ... ?"

"In the field? Ed, that's a guy thing, not a girl thing," she told her husband with a sparkling grin as she lifted her papers and headed back out. "Except with you, honey-bunny."

The Alitalia DC-10 touched down about fifteen minutes early due to the favorable winds. Renato Cardinal DiMilo was pleased enough to think through an appropriate prayer of thanksgiving. A longtime member of the Vatican's diplomatic service, he was accustomed to long flights, but that wasn't quite the same as enjoying them. He wore his red—"cardinal"—and black suit that was actually more akin to an official uniform, and not a conspicuously comfortable one at that, despite the custom tailoring that came from one of Rome's better shops. One of the drawbacks to his clerical and diplomatic status was that he'd been unable to shed his suit coat for the flight, but he'd been able to kick off his shoes, only to find that his feet had swollen on the flight, and getting them back on was more difficult than usual. That evoked a sigh rather than a curse, as the plane taxied to the terminal. The senior flight attendant ushered him to the forward door and allowed him to leave the aircraft first. One advantage to his diplomatic status was that all he ever had to do was wave his diplomatic passport at the control officers, and in this case a senior PRC government official was there to greet him at the end of the jetway.

"Welcome to our country," the official said, extending his hand.

"It is my pleasure to be here," the cardinal replied, noting that this communist atheist didn't kiss his ring, as was the usual protocol. Well, Catholicism in particular and Christianity in general were not exactly welcome in the People's Republic of China, were they? But if the PRC expected to live in the civilized world, then they'd have to accept representation with the Holy See, and that was that. And besides, he'd go to work on these people, and, who knew, maybe he could convert one or two. Stranger things had happened, and the Roman Catholic Church had handled more formidable enemies than this one.

With a wave and a small escort group, the demi-minister conducted his distinguished visitor through the concourse toward the place where the official car and escort waited.

“How was your flight?” the underling asked.

“Lengthy but not unpleasant” was the expected reply. Diplomats had to act as though they loved flying, though even the flight crews found journeys of this length tiresome. It was his job to observe the new ambassador of the Vatican, to see how he acted, how he looked out the car’s windows, even, which, in this case, was not unlike all the other first-time diplomats who came to Beijing. They looked out at the differences. The shapes of the buildings were new and different to them, the color of the bricks, and how the brickwork looked close up and at a distance, the way in which things that were essentially the same became fascinating because of differences that were actually microscopic when viewed objectively.

It took a total of twenty-eight minutes to arrive at the residence/embassy. It was an old building, dating back to the turn of the previous century, and had been the largish home of an American Methodist missionary—evidently one who liked his American comforts, the official thought—and had passed through several incarnations, including, he’d learned the previous day, that of a bordello in the diplomatic quarter in the 1920s and ’30s, because diplomats liked their comforts as well. Ethnic Chinese, he wondered, or Russian women who’d always claimed to be of the Czarist nobility, or so he’d heard. After all, Westerners enjoyed fucking noblewomen for some reason or other, as if their body parts were different somehow. He’d heard that one, too, at the office, from one of the archivists who kept track of such things at the Ministry. Chairman Mao’s personal habits were not recorded, but his lifelong love for deflowering twelve-year-olds was well known in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Every national leader had something odd and distasteful about him, the young official knew. Great men had great aberrations.

The car pulled up to the old wooden frame house, where a uniformed policeman opened the door for the visiting Italian, and even saluted, earning himself a nod from the man wearing the ruby-red skullcap.

Waiting on the porch was yet another foreigner, Monsignor Franz Schepke, whose diplomatic status was that of DCM, or deputy chief of mission, which usually meant the person who was really in charge of things while the ambassador—mainly a man chosen for political reasons—reigned in the main office. They didn’t know if that were the case here yet.

Schepke looked as German as his ancestry was, tall and spare with gray-blue eyes that revealed nothing at all, and a wonderful language gift that had mastered not only the complex Chinese language, but also the local dialect and accent as well. Over the phone this foreigner could pass for a party member, much to the surprise of local officials who were not in the least accustomed to foreigners who could even speak the language properly, much less master it.

The German national, the Chinese official saw, kissed his superior’s ring. Then the Italian shook his hand and embraced the younger churchman. They probably knew each other. Cardinal DiMilo then led Schepke to the escort and introduced them—they’d met many times before, of course, and that made the senior churchman appear just a little backward to the local official. In due

course, the luggage was loaded into the residence/embassy building, and the Chinese official got back in the official car for the ride to the Foreign Ministry, where he'd make his contact report. The Papal Nuncio was past his prime, he'd write, a pleasant enough old chap, perhaps, but no great intellect. A fairly typical Western ambassador, in other words.

No sooner had they gotten inside than Schepke tapped his right ear and gestured around the building.

"Everywhere?" the cardinal asked.

"Ja, doch," Monsignor Schepke replied in his native German, then shifted to Greek. Not modern, but Attic Greek, that spoken by Aristotle, similar to but different from the modern version of that language, a language perpetuated only by a handful of scholars at Oxford and a few more Western universities. "Welcome, Eminence."

"Even airplanes can take too long. Why can we not travel by ship? It would be a much gentler way to getting from point to point."

"The curse of progress," the German priest offered weakly. The Rome-Beijing flight was only forty minutes longer than the one between Rome and New York, after all, but Renato was a man from a different and more patient age.

"My escort. What can you tell me of him?"

"His name is Qian. He's forty, married, one son. He will be our point of contact with the Foreign Ministry. Bright, well educated, but a dedicated communist, son of another such man," Schepke said, speaking rapidly in the language learned long before in seminary. He and his boss knew that this exchange would probably be recorded, and would then drive linguists in the Foreign Ministry to madness. Well, it was not their fault that such people were illiterate, was it?

"And the building is fully wired, then?" DiMilo asked, heading over to a tray with a bottle of red wine on it.

"We must assume so," Schepke confirmed with a nod, while the cardinal poured a glass. "I could have the building swept, but finding reliable people here is not easy, and ..." And those able to do a proper sweep would then use the opportunity to plant their own bugs for whatever country they worked for —America, Britain, France, Israel, all were interested in what the Vatican knew.

The Vatican, located in central Rome, is technically an independent country, hence Cardinal DiMilo's diplomatic status even in a country where religious convictions were frowned upon at best, and stamped into the earth at worst. Renato Cardinal DiMilo had been a priest for just over forty years, most of which time had been spent in the Vatican's foreign service. His language skills were not unknown within the confines of his own service, but rare even there, and damned rare in the outside world, where men and women took a great deal of time to learn languages. But DiMilo picked them up easily—so much so that it surprised him that others were unable to do so as well. In addition to

being a priest, in addition to being a diplomat, DiMilo was also an intelligence officer—all ambassadors are supposed to be, but he was much more so than most. One of his jobs was to keep the Vatican—therefore the Pope—informed of what was happening in the world, so that the Vatican—therefore the Pope—could take action, or at least use influence in the proper direction.

DiMilo knew the current Pope quite well. They'd been friends for years before his election to the chair of the Pontifex Maximus ("maximus" in this context meaning "chief," and "pontifex" meaning "bridge-builder," as a cleric was supposed to be the bridge between men and their God). DiMilo had served the Vatican in this capacity in seven countries. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, he'd specialized in Eastern European countries, where he'd learned to debate the merits of communism with its strongest adherents, mostly to their discomfort and his own amusement. Here would be different, the cardinal thought. It wasn't just the Marxist beliefs. This was a very different culture. Confucius had defined the place of a Chinese citizen two millennia before, and that place was different from what Western culture taught. There was a place for the teachings of Christ here, of course, as there was everywhere. But the local soil was not as fertile for Christianity as it was elsewhere. Local citizens who sought out Christian missionaries would do so out of curiosity, and once exposed to the gospel would find Christian beliefs more curious still, since they were so different from the nation's more ancient teachings. Even the more "normal" beliefs that were in keeping, more or less, with Chinese traditions, like the Eastern Spiritualist movement known as Falun Gong, had been ruthlessly, if not viciously, repressed. Cardinal DiMilo told himself that he'd come to one of the few remaining pagan nations, and one in which martyrdom was still a possibility for the lucky or luckless, depending on one's point of view. He sipped his wine, trying to decide what time his body thought it was, as opposed to what time it was by his watch. In either case, the wine tasted good, reminding him as it did of his home, a place which he'd never truly left, even in Moscow or Prague. Beijing, though—Beijing might be a challenge.

CHAPTER 8

Underlings and Underthings

It wasn't the first time he'd done this. It was exciting in its way, and arousing, and marginally dangerous because of the time and place. Mainly it was an exercise in effective memory and the discerning eye. The hardest part was converting the English units to metric. The perfect female form was supposed to be 36-24-36, not 91.44-60.96- 91.44.

The last time he'd been in a place like this had been in the Beverly Center Mall in Los Angeles, buying for Maria Castillo, a voluptuous Latina who'd been delighted at his error, taking her waist for twenty-four rather than its true twenty-seven. You wanted to err on the low side in numbers, but probably the big side in letters. If you took a 36B chest to be a 34C, she wouldn't be mad, but if you took a twenty-four-inch waist for a twenty-eight-inch, she'd probably be pissed. Stress, Nomuri told himself with a shake of the head, came in many shapes and sizes. He wanted to get this right because he wanted Ming as a source, but he wanted her as a mistress, too, and that was one more reason not to make a mistake.

The color was the easy part. Red. Of course, red. This was still a country in which red was the "good" color, which was convenient because red had always been the lively choice in women's underthings, the color of adventure and giggles and ... looseness. And looseness served both his biological and professional purposes. He had other things to figure out, too. Ming was not tall, scarcely five feet—151 centimeters or so, Nomuri thought, doing the conversion in his head. She was short but not really petite. There was no real obesity in China. People didn't overeat here, probably because of the lingering memory of times when food had not been in abundance and overeating was simply not possible. Ming would have been considered overweight in California, Chester thought, but that was just her body type. She was squat because she was short, and no amount of dieting or working out or makeup could change it. Her waist wouldn't be much less than twenty-seven inches. For her chest, 34B was about the best he could hope for ... well, maybe 34C—no, he decided, B+ at most. So, a 34B bra, and medium shorts—panties—red silk, something feminine ... something on the wild, whorish side of feminine, something that she could look into the mirror alone with and giggle ... and maybe sigh at how different she looked wearing such things, and maybe smile, that special inward smile women had for such moments. The moment when you knew you had them—and the rest was just dessert.

The best part of Victoria's Secret was the catalog, designed for men who really, and sensibly, wanted to buy the models themselves, despite the facial

attitudes that sometimes made them look like lesbians on quaaludes—but with such bodies, a man couldn't have everything, could he? Fantasies, things of the mind. Nomuri wondered if the models really existed or were the products of computers. They could do anything with computers these days—make Rosie O'Donnell into Twiggy, or Cindy Crawford obsolete.

Back to work, he told himself. This might be a place for fantasies, but not that one, not yet. Okay, it had to be sexy. It had to be something that would both amuse and excite Ming, and himself, too: That was all part of it. Nomuri took the catalog off the pile because it was a lot easier for him to see what he wanted in a filled rather than an unfilled condition. He turned pages and stopped dead on page 26. There was a black girl modeling it, and whatever genetic stew she'd come from must have had some fine ingredients, as her face would have appealed to a member of Hitler's SS just as much as Idi Amin. It was that sort of face. Better yet, she wore something called a Racerback bra with matching string bikini panties, and the color was just perfect, a red-purple that the Romans had once called Tyrrian Scarlet, the color on the toga stripe of members of the senatorial order, reserved by price and custom to the richest of the Roman nobility, not quite red, not quite purple. The bra material was satin and Lycra, and it closed in front, the easier for a girl to put it on, and the more interesting for a guy to take it off, his mind thought, as he headed over to the proper rack of clothing. Thirty-four-B, he thought. If too small, it would be all the more flattering ... small or medium on the string bikini? Shit, he decided, get one of each. Just to be sure, he also got a no-wire triangle-pattern bra and thong panties in an orange-red color that the Catholic Church would call a mortal sin just for looking at. On impulse he got several additional panties on the assumption that they soiled more quickly than bras did, something he wasn't sure of despite being a field intelligence officer of the Central Intelligence Agency. They didn't tell you about such things at The Farm. He'd have to do a memo on that. It might give MP a chuckle in her seventh-floor office at Langley.

One other thing, he thought. Perfume. Women liked perfume. You'd expect them to like it, especially here. The entire city of Beijing smelled like a steel mill, lots of coal dust and other pollutants in the air—as Pittsburgh had probably been at the turn of the last century—and the sad truth was that the Chinese didn't bathe as diligently as Californians did, and nowhere nearly as regularly as the Japanese. So, something that smelled nice ...

"Dream Angels," the brand was called. It came in a perfume spray, lotion, and other applications that he didn't understand, but he was sure Ming would, since she was a girl, and this was a quintessential girl thing. So, he bought some of that, too, using his NEC credit card to pay for it—his Japanese bosses would understand. There were skillfully arranged and choreographed sex tours that took Japanese salarymen to various places in Asia that catered to the sex trade. That was probably how AIDS had gotten to Japan, and why Nomuri used a condom for everything there except urinating. The total came to about 300 euros. The salesclerk wrapped everything and commented that the lady in his life was very lucky.

She will be, Nomuri promised himself. The underthings he'd just bought her,

well, the fabrics felt as smooth as flexible glass, and the colors would arouse a blind man. The only question was how they would affect a dumpy Chinese female secretary to a government minister. It wasn't as though he was trying to seduce Suzie Wong. Lian Ming was pretty ordinary rather than ordinarily pretty, but you never knew. Amy Irvin, his first conquest at the ripe old age of seventeen years and three months, had been pretty enough to inspire him—which meant, for a boy of that age, she had the requisite body parts, no beard like a Civil War general, and had showered in the previous month. At least Ming wouldn't be like so many American women now who'd visited the plastic surgeon to have their tummies tucked, tits augmented to look like cereal bowls, and lips pumped full of chemicals until they looked like some strange kind of two-part fruit. What women did to attract men ... and what men did in the hope of seducing them. What a potential energy source, Nomuri thought, as he turned the key in his company Nissan.

What is it today, Ben?" Ryan asked his National Security Adviser.

"CIA is trying to get a new operation under way in Beijing. For the moment it's called SORGE."

"As in Richard Sorge?"

"Correct."

"Somebody must be ambitious. Okay, tell me about it."

"There's an officer named Chester Nomuri, an illegal, he's in Beijing covered as a computer salesman for NEC. He's trying to make a move on a secretary, female, for a senior PRC minister, a guy named Fang Gan—"

"Who is?" Ryan asked over his coffee mug.

"Sort of a minister without portfolio, works with the Premier and the Foreign Minister."

"Like that Zhang Han San guy?"

"Not as senior, but yes. Looks like a very high-level gofer type. Has contacts in their military and foreign ministries, good ideological credentials, sounding board for others in their Politburo. Anyway, Nomuri is trying to make a move on the girl."

"Bond," Ryan observed in a studiously neutral voice, "James Bond. I know Nomuri's name. He did some good work for us in Japan when I had your job. This is for information only, not my approval?"

"Correct, Mr. President. Mrs. Foley is running this one, and wanted to give you a heads-up."

"Okay, tell MP that I'm interested in whatever take comes out of this." Ryan fought off the grimace that came from learning of another person's private—well, if not private, then his sex—life.

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER 9

Initial Results

Chester Nomuri had learned many things in his life, from his parents and his teachers and his instructors at The Farm, but one lesson he'd yet to learn was the value of patience, at least as it applied to his personal life. That didn't keep him from being cautious, however. That was why he'd sent his plans to Langley. It was embarrassing to have to inform a woman of his proposed sex life—MP was a brilliant field spook, but she still took her leaks sitting down, Nomuri reminded himself—but he didn't want the Agency to think that he was an alley cat on the government payroll, because the truth was, he liked his job. The excitement was at least as addictive as the cocaine that some of his college chums had played with.

Maybe that's why Mrs. Foley liked him, Nomuri speculated. They were of a kind. Mary Pat, they said in the Directorate of Operations, was The Cowgirl. She'd swaggered through the streets of Moscow during the last days of the Cold War like Annie Fucking Oakley packing heat, and though she'd been burned by KGB's Second Chief Directorate, she hadn't given the fuckers anything, and whatever operation she'd run—this was still very, very secret—it must have been a son of a bitch, because she'd never gone back in the field but had scampered up the CIA career ladder like a hungry squirrel up an oak tree. The President thought she was smart, and if you wanted a friend in this business, the President of the United States was right up there, because he knew the spook business. Then came the stories about what President Ryan had once done. Bringing out the chairman of the fucking KGB? MP must have been part of that, the boys and girls of the DO all thought. All they knew even within the confines of CIA—except, of course, for those who needed to know (both of them, the saying went)—was what had been published in the press, and while the media generally knew jack shit about black operations, a CNN TV crew had put a camera in the face of a former KGB chairman now living in Winchester, Virginia. While he hadn't spilled many beans, the face of a man the Soviet government had declared dead in a plane crash was bean enough to make a very rich soup indeed. Nomuri figured he was working for a couple of real pros, and so he let them know what he was up to, even if that meant causing a possible blush for Mary Patricia Foley, Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency.

He'd picked a Western-style restaurant. There were more than a few of them in Beijing now, catering both to the locals and to tourists who felt nostalgic for the taste of home (or who worried about their GI systems over here—not unreasonably, Nomuri thought). The quality wasn't anything close to a real

American restaurant, but it was considerably more appealing than the deep-fried rat he suspected was on the menu of many Beijing eateries.

He'd arrived first, and was relaxing with a cheap American bourbon when Ming came through the door. Nomuri waved in what he hoped was not an overly boyish way. She saw him do so, and her resulting smile was just about right, he thought. Ming was glad to see him, and that was step one in the plan for the evening. She made her way to his corner table in the back. He stood, showing a degree of gentlemanliness unusual in China, where women were nowhere near as valued as they were back home. Nomuri wondered if that would change, if all the killing of female babies could suddenly make Ming a valuable commodity, despite her plainness. He still couldn't get over the casual killing of children; he kept it in the front of his mind, just to keep clear who the good guys were in the world, and who the bad guys were.

"It's so good to see you," he said with an engaging smile. "I was worried you might not meet me here."

"Oh, really? Why?"

"Well, your superior at work ... I'm sure that he ... well ... needs you, I suppose is the polite way to put it," Nomuri said with a hesitant voice, delivering his rehearsed line pretty well, he thought. He had. The girl giggled a little.

"Comrade Fang is over sixty-five," she said. "He is a good man, a good superior, and a fine minister, but he works long hours, and he is no longer a young man."

Okay, so he *fucks you, but not all that much,* Nomuri interpreted that to mean. *And maybe you'd like a little more, from somebody closer to your age, eh?* Of course, if Fang was over sixty-five and still getting it on, then maybe he is worthy of some respect, Nomuri added to himself, then tossed the thought aside.

"Have you eaten here before?" The place was called Vincenzo's, and pretended to be Italian. In fact the owner/operator was a half-breed Italian-Chinese from Vancouver, whose spoken Italian would have gotten him hit by the Mafia had he tried it in Palermo, or even Mulberry Street in Manhattan, but here in Beijing it seemed genuinely ethnic enough.

"No," Ming replied, looking around at, to her, this most exotic of locations. Every table had an old wine bottle, its bottom wrapped in twine, and an old drippy red candle at the top. The tablecloth was checked white and red. Whoever had decorated this place had evidently seen too many old movies. That said, it didn't look anything like a local restaurant, even with the Chinese servers. Dark wood paneling, hooks near the door for hanging coats. It could have been in any East Coast city in America, where it would have been recognized as one of those old family Italian places, a mom-and-pop joint with good food and little flash. "What is Italian food like?"

"At its best, Italian cooking is among the very finest in the world," Nomuri answered. "You've never had Italian food? Never at all? Then may I select for

you?"

Her response was girlish in its charm. Women were all the same. Treat them in the right way, and they turn into wax in your hand, to be kneaded and shaped to your will. Nomuri was starting to like this part of the job, and someday it might be useful in his *personal* personal life, too. He waved to the waiter, who came over with a subservient smile. Nomuri first of all ordered a genuine Italian white wine—strangely, the wine list here was actually first rate, and quite pricey to boot, of course—and, with a deep breath, fettuccine Alfredo, quintessential Italian heart-attack food. From looking at Ming, he figured that she'd not refuse rich food.

"So, the new computer and printer systems continue to work out?"

"Yes, and Minister Fang has praised me before the rest of the staff for choosing it. You have made me something of a hero, Comrade Nomuri."

"I am pleased to hear that," the CIA officer replied, wondering if being called "comrade" was a good thing for the current mission or a bad one. "We are bringing out a new portable computer now, one you could take home with you, but which has the same power as your office mainframe, with all the same features and software, of course, even a modem for accessing the Internet."

"Really? I get to do that so seldom. At work, you see, it is not encouraged for us to surf the 'Net, except when the Minister wants something specific."

"Is that so? What 'Net interests does Minister Fang have?"

"Mainly political commentary, and mainly in America and Europe. Every morning I print up various pieces from the newspapers, the *Times of London, New York Times, Washington Post,* and so on. The Minister especially likes to see what the Americans are thinking."

"Not very much," Nomuri observed, as the wine arrived.

"Excuse me?" Ming asked, getting him to turn back.

"Hmph, oh, the Americans, they don't think very much. The shallowest people I have ever encountered. Loud, poorly educated, and their women ..." Chet let his voice trail off.

"What of their women, Comrade Nomuri?" Ming asked, virtually on command.

"Ahh." He took a sip of the wine and nodded for the waiter to serve it properly. It was a pretty good one from Tuscany. "Have you ever seen the American toy, the Barbie doll?"

"Yes, they are made here in China, aren't they?"

"That is what every American woman wishes to be, hugely tall, with massive bosoms, a waist you can put your hands around. That is not a woman. It's a toy, a mannequin for children to play with. And about as intelligent as your average American woman. Do you think they have language skills, as you do? Consider: We now converse in English, a language native to neither of

us, but we converse well, do we not?"

"Yes," Ming agreed.

"How many Americans speak Mandarin, do you suppose? Or Japanese? No, Americans have no education, no sophistication. They are a backward nation, and their women are very backward. They even go to surgeons to have their bosoms made bigger, like that stupid child's doll. It's comical to see them, especially to see them nude," he concluded with a dangle.

"You have?" she asked, on cue.

"Have what—you mean seen American women nude?" He got a welcome nod for his question. This was going well. *Yes, Ming, I* am *a man of the world.* "Yes, I have. I lived there for some months, and it was interesting in a grotesque sort of way. Some of them can be very sweet, but not like a decent Asian woman with proper proportions, and womanly hair that doesn't come from some cosmetics bottle. And manners. Americans lack the manners of an Asian."

"But there are many of our people over there. Didn't you ... ?"

"Meet one? No, the round-eyes keep them for themselves. I suppose their men appreciate real women, even while their own women turn into something else." He reached to pour some more wine into Ming's glass. "But in fairness, there are some things Americans are good at."

"Such as?" she asked. The wine was already loosening her tongue.

"I will show you later. Perhaps I owe you an apology, but I have taken the liberty of buying you some American things."

"Really?" Excitement in her eyes. This was *really* going well, Nomuri told himself. He'd have to go easier on the wine. Well, half a bottle, two of these glasses, wouldn't hurt him in any way. How did that song go ... *It's okay to do it on the first date...* Well, he didn't have to worry about much in the way of religious convictions or inhibitions here, did he? That was one advantage to communism, wasn't it?

The fettuccine arrived right on time, and surprisingly it was pretty good. He watched her eyes as she took her first forkful. (Vincenzo's used silverware instead of chopsticks, which was a better idea for fettuccine Alfredo anyway.) Her dark eyes were wide as the noodles entered her mouth.

"This is fine ... lots of eggs have gone into it. I love eggs," she confided.

They're your arteries, honey, the case officer thought. He watched her inhale the first bit of the fettuccine. Nomuri reached across the table to top off her wineglass once more. She scarcely noticed, she attacked her pasta so furiously.

Halfway through the plate of pasta, she looked up. "I have never had so fine a dinner," Ming told him.

Nomuri responded with a warm grin. "I am so pleased that you are enjoying yourself." *Wait'll you see the drawers I just got you, honey.*

Attention to orders!"

Major General Marion Diggs wondered what his new command would bring him. The second star on his shoulder ... well, he told himself that he could feel the additional weight, but the truth was that he couldn't, not really. His last five years in the uniform of his country had been interesting. The first commander of the reconstituted 10th Armored Cavalry Regiment—the Buffalo Soldiers—he'd made that ancient and honored regiment into the drill masters of the Israeli army, turning the Negev Desert into another National Training Center, and in two years he'd hammered every Israeli brigade commander into the ground, then built them up again, tripling their combat effectiveness by every quantifiable measure, so that now the Israeli troopers' swagger was actually justified by their skills. Then he'd gone off to the real NTC in the high California desert, where he'd done the same thing for his own United States Army. He'd been there when the Bio War had begun, with his own 11th ACR, the famous Blackhorse Cavalry, and a brigade of National Guardsmen, whose unexpected use of advanced battlefield-control equipment had surprised the hell out of the Blackhorse and their proud commander, Colonel Al Hamm. The whole bunch had deployed to Saudi, along with the 10th from Israel, and together they'd given a world-class bloody nose to the army of the short-lived United Islamic Republic. After acing his colonel-command, he'd really distinguished himself as a one-star, and that was the gateway to the second sparkling silver device on his shoulder, and also the gateway to his new command, known variously as "First Tanks," "Old Ironsides," or "America's Armored Division." It was the 1st Armored Division, based in Bad Kreuznach, Germany, one of the few remaining heavy divisions under the American flag.

Once there had been a lot of them. Two full corps of them right here in Germany, 1st and 3rd Armored, 3rd and 8th Infantry, plus a pair of Armored Cavalry Regiments, 2nd and 11th, and the POMCUS sites—monster equipment warehouses—for stateside units like the 2nd Armored, and the 1 st Infantry, the Big Red One out of Fort Riley, Kansas, which could redeploy to Europe just as fast as the airlines could deliver them, there to load up their equipment and move out. All that force—and it was a whole shitload of force, Diggs reflected—had been part of NATO's commitment to defend Western Europe from a country called the Soviet Union and its mirror-image Warsaw Pact, huge formations whose objective was the Bay of Biscay, or so the operations and intelligence officers in Mons, Belgium, had always thought. And quite a clash it would have been. Who would have won? Probably NATO, Diggs thought, depending on political interference, and command skills on both sides of the equation.

But, now, the Soviet Union was no more. And with it was also gone the need for the presence of V and VII Corps in Western Germany, and so, 1st Armored was about the only vestige left of what had once been a vast and powerful force. Even the cavalry regiments were gone, the 11th to be the OpFor—"opposing force," or Bad Guys—at the National Training Center and the 2nd "Dragoon" Regiment essentially disarmed at Fort Polk, Louisiana, trying to make up new doctrine for weaponless troopers. That left Old Ironsides, somewhat reduced in size from its halcyon days, but still a

formidable force. Exactly whom Diggs might fight in the event hostilities sprang unexpectedly from the ground, he had no idea at the moment.

That, of course, was the job of his G-2 Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Tom Richmond, and training for it was the problem assigned to his G-3 Operations Officer, Colonel Duke Masterman, whom Diggs had dragged kicking and screaming from the Pentagon. It was not exactly unknown in the United States Army for a senior officer to collect about him younger men whom he'd gotten to know on the way up. It was his job to look after their careers, and their jobs to take care of their mentor—called a "rabbi" in the NYPD or a "Sea Daddy" in the United States Navy—in a relationship that was more father/son than anything else. Neither Diggs nor Richmond nor Masterman expected much more than interesting professional time in the 1 st Armored Division, and that was more than enough. They'd seen the elephant —a phrase that went back in the United States Army to the Civil War to denote active participation in combat operations—and killing people with modern weapons wasn't exactly a trip to Disney World. A quiet term of training and sand-table exercises would be plenty, they all thought. Besides, the beer was pretty good in Germany.

"Well, Mary, it's all yours," outgoing Major General (promotable) Sam Goodnight said after his formal salute. "Mary" was a nickname for Diggs that went back to West Point, and he was long since past getting mad about it. But only officers senior to him could use that moniker, and there weren't all that many of them anymore, were there?

"Sam, looks like you have the kids trained up pretty well," Diggs told the man he'd just relieved.

"I'm especially pleased with my helicopter troops. After the hoo-rah with the Apaches down in Yugoslavia, we decided to get those people up to speed. It took three months, but they're ready to eat raw lion now—after they kill the fuckers with their pocketknives."

"Who's the boss rotor-head?"

"Colonel Dick Boyle. You'll meet him in a few minutes. He's been there and done that, and he knows how to run his command."

"Nice to know," Diggs allowed, as they boarded the World War II command car to troop the line, a goodbye ride for Sam Goodnight and welcome for Mary Diggs, whose service reputation was as one tough little black son of a bitch. His doctorate in management from the University of Minnesota didn't seem to count, except to promotion boards, and whatever private company might want to hire him after retirement, a possibility he had to consider from time to time now, though he figured two stars were only about half of what he had coming. Diggs had fought in two wars and comported himself well in both cases. There were many ways to make a career in the armed services, but none so effective as successful command on the field of battle, because when you got down to it, the Army was about killing people and breaking things as efficiently as possible. It wasn't fun, but it was occasionally necessary. You couldn't allow yourself to lose sight of that. You trained your soldiers so that if they woke up

the next morning in a war, they'd know what to do and how to go about it, whether their officers were around to tell them or not.

"How about artillery?" Diggs asked, as they drove past the assembled self-propelled 155-mm howitzers.

"Not a problem there, Mary. In fact, no problems anywhere. Your brigade commanders all were there in 1991, mainly as company commanders or battalion S-3s. Your battalion commanders were almost all platoon leaders or company XOs. They're pretty well trained up. You'll see," Goodnight promised.

Diggs knew it would all be true. Sam Goodnight was a Major General (promotable), which meant he was going to get star number three as soon as the United States Senate got around to approving the next bill with all the flag officers on it, and that couldn't be rushed. Even the President couldn't do that. Diggs had screened for his second star six months earlier, just before leaving Fort Irwin, to spend a few months parked in the Pentagon—an abbreviated "joint-ness" tour, as it was called—before moving back to Germany. The division was slated to run a major exercise against the Bundeswehr in three weeks. First AD vs. four German brigades, two tanks, two mechanized infantry, and that promised to be a major test of the division. Well, that was something for Colonel Masterman to worry about. It was his neck on the line. Duke had come to Germany a week early to meet with his also-outgoing predecessor as divisional operations officer and go over the exercise's rules and assumptions. The German commander in the exercise was Generalmajor Siegfried Model. Siggy, as he was known to his colleagues, was descended from a pretty good Wehrmacht commander from the old-old days, and it was also said of him that he regretted the fall of the USSR, because part of him wanted to take the Russian Army on and rape it. Well, such things had been said about a lot of German, and a few American senior officers as well, and in nearly every case it was just that—talk, because nobody who'd seen one battlefield ever yearned to see another.

Of course, Diggs thought, there weren't many Germans left who had ever seen a battlefield.

"They look good, Sam," Diggs said, as they passed the last static display.

"It's a hell of a tough job to leave, Marion. Damn." The man was starting to fight back tears, which was one way of telling who the really tough ones were in this line of work, Diggs knew. Walking away from the command of soldiers was like leaving your kid in the hospital, or maybe even harder. They'd all been Sam's kids, and now they would be his kids, Diggs thought. On first inspection, they looked healthy and smart enough.

Yeah, Arnie," President Ryan said. His voice betrayed his emotions more than a growl or a shout could have.

"Nobody ever said the job was fun, Jack. Hell, I don't know why you're complaining. You don't have to schmooze people to raise money for your

reelection campaign, do you? You don't have to kiss ass. All you have to do is your work, and that saves you a good hour—maybe an hour and a half—per day to watch TV and play with your kids." If there was anything Arnie loved, Ryan thought, it was telling him (Ryan) how easy he had it in this fucking job.

"But I still spend half my day doing unproductive shit instead of doing what I'm paid to do."

"Only half, and still he complains," Arnie told the ceiling. "Jack, you'd better start liking this stuff, or it'll eat you up. This is the *fun* part of being President. And, hell, man, you were a government employee for fifteen years before you came here. You should *love* being unproductive!"

Ryan nearly laughed, but managed to contain himself. If there was anything Arnie knew how to do, it was to soften his lessons with humor. That could be annoying as hell.

"Fine, but exactly what do I promise them?"

"You promise that you'll support this dam and barge-canal scheme."

"But it's probably a waste of money."

"No, it is *not* a waste of money. It provides employment in this two-state area, which is of interest to not one, not two, but *three* United States Senators, all of whom support you steadfastly on the Hill, and whom you, therefore, must support in turn. You reward them for helping you by helping them get reelected. And you help them get reelected by allowing them to generate about fifteen thousand construction jobs in the two states."

"And screw with a perfectly good river for"—Ryan checked the briefing folder on his desk—"three and a quarter *billion* dollars ... Jesus H. Christ," he finished with a long breath.

"Since when have you been a tree-hugger? Cutthroat trout don't vote, Jack. And even if the barge traffic up the river doesn't develop, you'll still have one hell of a recreation area for people to water-ski and fish, toss in a few new motels, maybe a golf course or two, fast-food places ..."

"I don't like saying things and doing things I don't believe in," the President tried next.

"For a politician, that is like color blindness or a broken leg: a serious handicap," van Damm noted. "That's part of the job, too. Nikita Khrushchev said it: 'Politicians are the same all over the world, we build bridges where there aren't any rivers.' "

"So wasting money is something we're *supposed* to do? Arnie, it isn't *our* money! It's the *people's* money. It belongs to them, and we don't have the right to piss it away!"

"Right? Who ever said this is about what's right?" Arnie asked patiently. "Those three senators who're"—he checked his watch—"on their way down here right now got you your defense appropriations bill a month ago, in case you didn't remember, and you may need their votes again. Now, that appropriations bill was important, wasn't it?"

"Yes, of course it was," President Ryan responded with guarded eyes.

"And getting that bill through was the right thing for the country, wasn't it?" van Damm asked next.

A long sigh. He could see where this was going. "Yes, Arnie, it was."

"And so, doing this little thing *does* help you to do the right thing for the country, doesn't it?"

"I suppose." Ryan hated conceding such things, but arguing with Arnie was like arguing with a Jesuit. You were almost always outgunned.

"Jack, we live in an imperfect world. You can't expect to be doing the *right thing* all the time. The best you can expect to do is to make the right thing happen most of the time—actually, you will do well to have the right things outbalance the not-so-right things over the long term. Politics is the art of compromise, the art of getting the important things you want, while giving to others the less important things they want, and doing so in such a way that you're the one doing the giving, not them doing the taking—because that's what makes you the boss. You must understand that." Arnie paused and took a sip of coffee. "Jack, you try hard, and you're learning pretty well—for a fourth-grader in graduate school—but you have to learn this stuff to the point that you don't even think about it. It has to become as natural as zipping your pants after you take a piss. You still have no idea how well you're doing." *And maybe that's a good thing,* Arnie added to himself alone.

"Forty percent of the people don't think I'm doing a good job."

"Fifty-nine percent do, and some of those forty percent voted for you anyway!"

The election had been a remarkable session for write-in candidates, and Mickey Mouse had done especially well, Ryan reminded himself.

"What am I doing to offend those others?" Ryan demanded.

"Jack, if the Gallup Poll had been around in ancient Israel, Jesus would probably have gotten discouraged and gone back to carpentry."

Ryan punched a button on his desk phone. "Ellen, I need you."

"Yes, Mr. President," Mrs. Sumter replied to their not-so-secret code. Thirty seconds later, she appeared through the door with her hand at her side. Approaching the President's desk, she extended her hand with a cigarette in it. Jack took it and lit it with a butane lighter, removing a glass ashtray from a desk drawer.

"Thanks, Ellen."

"Surely." She withdrew. Every other day Ryan would slip her a dollar bill to pay off his cigarette debt. He was getting better at this, mooching usually no more than three smokes on a stressful day.

"Just don't let the media catch you doing that," Arnie advised.

"Yeah, I know. I can get it on with a secretary right here in the Oval Office, but if I get caught smoking, that's like goddamned child abuse." Ryan took a

long hit on the Virginia Slim, also knowing what his wife would say if she caught him doing this. “If I were king, then I’d make the goddamned rules!”

“But you’re not, and you don’t,” Arnie pointed out.

“My job is to preserve, protect, and defend the country—”

“No, your job is to preserve, protect, and defend the *Constitution,* which is a whole lot more complicated. Remember, to the average citizen ’preserve, protect, and defend’ means that they get paid every week, and they feed their families, get a week at the beach every year, or maybe Disney World, and football every Sunday afternoon in the fall. Your job is to keep them content and secure, not just from foreign armies, but from the general vicissitudes of life. The good news is that if you do that, you can be in this job another seven-plus years and retire with their love.”

“You left out the legacy part.”

That made Arnie’s eyes flare a bit. “Legacy? Any president who worries too much about that is offending God, and that’s almost as dumb as offending the Supreme Court.”

“Yeah, and when the Pennsylvania case gets there—”

Arnie held up his hands as though protecting against a punch. “Jack, I’ll worry about that when the time comes. You didn’t take my advice on the Supreme Court, and so far you’ve been lucky, but if—no, *when* that blows up in your face, it won’t be pretty.” Van Damm was already planning the defense strategy for that.

“Maybe, but 1 won’t worry about it. Sometimes you just let the chips fall where they may.”

“And sometimes you look out to make sure the goddamned tree doesn’t land on you.”

Jack’s intercom buzzed just as he put out the cigarette. It was Mrs. Sumter’s voice. “The senators just came through the West Entrance.”

“I’m out of here,” Arnie said. “Just remember, you will support the dam and canal on that damned river, and you value their support. They’ll be there when you need them, Jack. Remember that. And you *do* need them. Remember that, too.”

“Yes, Dad,” Ryan said.

You walked here?” Nomuri asked, with some surprise.

“It is only two kilometers,” Ming replied airily. Then she giggled. “It was good for my appetite.”

Well, you went through that fettuccine like a shark through a surfer, Nomuri thought. *I suppose your appetite wasn’t hurt very much.* But that was unfair. He’d thought this evening through very carefully, and if she’d fallen into his trap, it

was his fault more than hers, wasn't it? And she did have a certain charm, he decided as she got into his company car. They'd already agreed that they'd come to his apartment so that he could give her the present he'd already advertised. Now Nomuri was getting a little excited. He'd planned this for more than a week, and the thrill of the chase was the thrill of the chase, and that hadn't changed in tens of thousands of years of male humanity ... and now he wondered what was going on in her head. She'd had two stiff glasses of wine with the meal—and she'd passed on dessert. She'd jumped right to her feet when he'd suggested going to his place. Either his trap had been superbly laid, or she was more than ready herself.... The drive was short, and it passed without words. He pulled into his numbered parking place, wondering if anyone would take note of the fact that he had company today. He had to assume that he was watched here. The Chinese Ministry of State Security probably had an interest in all foreigners who lived in Beijing, since all were potential spies. Strangely, his apartment was not in the same part of the building as the Americans and other Westerners. It wasn't overt segregation or categorization, but it had worked out that way, the Americans largely in one section, along with most of the Europeans ... and the Taiwanese, too, Nomuri realized. And so, whatever surveillance existed was probably over on that end of the complex. A good thing now for Ming, and later, perhaps, a good thing for himself.

His place was a corner second-story walk-up in a Chinese interpretation of an American garden-apartment complex. The apartment was spacious enough, about a hundred square meters, and was probably not bugged. At least he'd found no microphones when he'd moved in and hung his pictures, and his sweep gear had discovered no anomalous signals—his phone had to be bugged, of course, but just because it was bugged didn't mean that there was somebody going over the tapes every day or even every week. MSS was just one more government agency, and in China they were probably little different from those in America, or France for that matter, lazy, underpaid people who worked as little as possible and served a bureaucracy that didn't encourage singular effort. They probably spent most of their time smoking the wretched local cigarettes and jerking off.

He had an American Yale lock on the door, with a pick-resistant tumbler and a sturdy locking mechanism. If asked about this, he'd explain that when living in California for NEC, he'd been burglarized—the Americans were such lawless and uncivilized people—and he didn't want that to happen again.

"So, this is the home of a capitalist," Ming observed, looking around. The walls were covered with prints, mainly movie posters.

"Yes, well, it's the home of a salaryman. I don't really know if I'm a capitalist or not, Comrade Ming," he added, with a smile and arched eyebrow. He pointed to his couch. "Please have a seat. Can I get you anything?"

"Another glass of wine, perhaps?" she suggested, spotting and then looking at the wrapped box on the chair opposite the couch.

Nomuri smiled. "That I can do." He headed off into the kitchen, where he had a bottle of California Chardonnay chilling in the fridge. Popping the cork

was easy enough, and he headed back to the living room with two glasses, one of which he handed to his guest. “Oh,” he said then. “Yes, this is for you, Ming.” With that he handed over the box, wrapped fairly neatly in red—of course—gift paper.

“May I open it now?”

“Certainly.” Nomuri smiled, in as gentlemanly a lustful way as he could manage. “Perhaps you would want to unwrap it, well ...”

“Are you saying in your bedroom?”

“Excuse me. Just that you might wish some privacy when you open it. Please pardon me if I am too forward.”

The mirth in her eyes said it all. Ming took a deep sip of her white wine and walked off into that room and closed the door. Nomuri took a small sip of his own and sat down on the couch to await developments. If he’d chosen unwisely, she might throw the box at him and storm out ... not much chance of that, he thought. More likely, even if she found him too forward, she’d keep the present and the box, finish her wine, make small talk, and then take her leave in thirty minutes or so, just to show good manners—effectively the same result without the overt insult—and Nomuri would have to search for another recruitment prospect. No, the best outcome would be ...

... the door opened, and there she stood with a small, impish smile. The boiler suit was gone. Instead she wore the red-orange bra and panties set, the one with the front closure. She stood there holding her wineglass in salute, and it looked as if she’d taken another sip of her drink, maybe to work up her courage ... or to loosen her inhibitions.

Nomuri found himself suddenly apprehensive. He took another drink himself before standing, and he walked slowly, and a little uneasily, to the bedroom doorway.

Her eyes, he saw, were a little uneasy themselves, a little frightened, and with luck maybe his were, too, because women everywhere liked their men to be just a little vulnerable. Maybe John Wayne hadn’t gotten all the action he wanted, Nomuri thought quickly. Then he smiled.

“I guessed right on the size.”

“Yes, and it feels wonderful, like a second skin, smooth and silky.” Every woman has it, Nomuri realized: the ability to smile and, regardless of the exterior, show the woman within, often a perfect woman, full of tenderness and desire, demureness and coquetry, and all you had to do ...

... his hand came out and touched her face as gently as his slight shaking allowed. What the hell was this? he demanded of himself. *Shaking?* James Bond’s hands never shook. This was the time when he was supposed to scoop her up in his arms and stride in a masterful way off to the bed, there to possess her like Vince Lombardi taking over a football team, like George Patton leading an attack. But for all his triumphal anticipation of this moment, things were different from what he’d expected. Whoever or whatever Ming was, she was giving herself to him. There was no more in her than that—that

was all she had. And she was giving it to him.

He bent his head down to kiss her, and there he caught the scent of the Dream Angel perfume, and somehow it suited the moment perfectly. Her arms came around him sooner than he'd expected. His hands replicated her gesture, and he found that her skin was smooth, like oiled silk, and his hands rubbed up and down of their own accord. He felt something strange on his chest and looked down to see her small hands undoing his buttons, and then her eyes looked into his, and her face was no longer plain. He unbuttoned his own cuffs, and she forced his shirt off, down his back, then lifted his T-shirt over his head—or tried to, for her arms were too short to make it quite all the way—and then he hugged her tighter, feeling the silklike artificial fibers of her new bra rub on his hairless chest. It was then that his hug became harder, more insistent, and his kiss harder on her mouth, and he took her face in his hands and looked hard into her dark, suddenly deep eyes, and what he saw was woman.

Her hands moved and unfastened his belt and slacks, which fell to his ankles. He nearly fell himself when he moved one leg, but Ming caught him and both laughed a little as he lifted his feet clear of his loafers and the slacks, and with that they both took a step toward the bed. Ming took another and turned, displaying herself for him. He'd underestimated the girl. Her waist was a full four inches slimmer than he'd thought—must be the damned boiler suit she wore to work, Nomuri thought at once—and her breasts filled the bra to perfection. Even the awful haircut seemed right just now, somehow fitting the amber skin and slanted eyes.

What came next was both easy and very, very hard. Nomuri reached out to her side, pulling her close, but not too close. Then he let his hand wander across her chest, for the first time feeling her breast through the gossamer fabric of the bra, at the same time watching her eyes closely for a reaction. There was little of that, though her eyes did seem to relax, perhaps even smile just a little at his touch, and then came the obligatory next step. With both hands, he unfastened the front closure of the bra. Instantly Ming's hands dropped to cover herself. *What did that mean?* the CIA officer wondered, but then her hands dropped and she pulled him to her, and their bodies met and his head came down to kiss her again, and his hands slid the bra straps off her arms and onto the floor. There was little left to be done, and both, so it seemed, advanced with a combination of lust and fear. Her hands went down and loosened the elastic band of his briefs, with her eyes now locked on his, and this time she smiled, a for-real smile that made him blush, because he was as ready as he needed to be, and then her hands pushed down on the briefs, and all that left was his socks, and then it was his turn to kneel and pull down on the red silklike panties. She kicked them loose and each stood apart to inspect the other. Her breasts were about a large B, Nomuri thought, the nipples brown as potting soil. Her waist was not nearly model-thin, but a womanly contrast with both the hips and upper body. Nomuri took a step and then took her hand and walked her to the bed, laying her down with a gentle kiss, and for this moment he was not an intelligence officer for his country.

CHAPTER 10

Lessons of the Trade

The pathway started in Nomuri's apartment, and from there went to a Web site established in Beijing, notionally for Nippon Electric Company, but the site had been designed for NEC by an American citizen who worked for more than one boss, one of whom was a front operated by and for the Central Intelligence Agency. The precise address point for Nomuri's e-mail was then accessible to the CIA's Beijing station chief, who, as a matter of fact, didn't know anything about Nomuri. That was a security measure to which he would probably have objected, but which he would have understood as a characteristic of Mary Patricia Foley's way of running the Directorate of Operations—and besides which, Station Beijing hadn't exactly covered itself with glory in recruiting senior PRC officials to be American agents-in-place.

The message the station chief downloaded was just gibberish to him, scrambled letters that might as easily have been typed by a chimpanzee in return for a bunch of bananas at some research university, and he took no note of it, just super-encrypting on his own in-house system called TAPDANCE and cross-loading it to an official government communications network that went to a communications satellite, to be downloaded at Sunnyvale, California, then uploaded yet again, and downloaded at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. From there the message went by secure fiber-optic landline to CIA headquarters at Langley, and then first of all into Mercury, the Agency's communications center, where the Station Beijing super-encryption was stripped away, revealing the original gibberish, and then cross-loaded one last time to Mrs. Foley's personal computer terminal, which was the only one with the encryption system and daily key-selection algorithm for the counterpart system on Chet Nomuri's laptop, which was called INTERCRYPT. MP was doing other things at the time, and took twenty minutes to log into her own system and note the arrival of a SORGE message. That piqued her interest at once. She executed the command to decrypt the message, and got gibberish, then realized (not for the first time) that Nomuri was on the other side of the date line, and had therefore used a different key sequence. *So, adjust the date for tomorrow...* and, yes! She printed a hard copy of the message for her husband, and then saved the message to her personal hard drive, automatically encrypting it along the way. From there, it was a short walk to Ed's office.

"Hey, baby," the DCI said, without looking up. Not too many people walked into his office without announcement. The news had to be good. MP had a beaming smile as she handed the paper over.

“Chet got laid last night!” the DDO told the DCI.

“Am I supposed to break out a cigar?” the Director of Central Intelligence asked. His eyes scanned the message.

“Well, it’s a step forward.”

“For him, maybe,” Ed Foley responded with a twinkling eye. “I suppose you can get pretty horny on that sort of assignment, though I never had that problem myself.” The Foleys had always worked the field as a married couple, and had gone through The Farm together. It had saved the senior Foley from all the complications that James Bond must have encountered.

“Eddie, you can be such a mudge!”

That made the DCI look up. “Such a what?”

“Curmudgeon!” she growled. “This could be a real breakthrough. This little chippy is personal secretary to Fang Gan. She knows all sorts of stuff we want to know.”

“And Chet got to try her out last night. Honey, that’s not the same thing as recruitment. We don’t have an agent-in-place quite yet,” he reminded his wife.

“I know, I know, but I have a feeling about this.”

“Woman’s intuition?” Ed asked, scanning the message again for any sordid details, but finding only cold facts, as though *The Wall Street Journal* had covered the seduction. Well, at least Nomuri had a little discretion. No rigid quivering rod plunging into her warm moist sheath—though Nomuri was twenty-nine, and at that age the rod tended to be pretty rigid. *Chet was from California, wasn’t he?* the DCI wondered. So, probably not a virgin, maybe even a competent lover, though on the first time with anybody you mainly wanted to see if the pieces fit together properly—they always did, at least in Ed Foley’s experience, but you still wanted to check and see. He remembered Robin Williams’s takeoff on Adam and Eve, “Better stand back, honey. I don’t know how big this thing gets!” The combination of careful conservatism and out-of-control wishful thinking common to the male of the species. “Okay, so, what are you going to reply? ‘How many orgasms did the two of you have’?”

“God damn it, Ed!” The pin in the balloon worked, the DCI saw. He could almost see steam coming out of his wife’s pretty ears. “You know damned well what I’m going to suggest. Let the relationship blossom and ease her into talking about her job. It’ll take a while, but if it works it’ll be worth the wait.”

And if it doesn’t work, it’s not a bad deal for Chester, Ed Foley thought. There weren’t many professions in the world in which getting sex was part of the job that earned you promotions, were there?

“Mary?”

“Yes, Ed?”

“Does it strike you as a little odd that the kid’s reporting his sex life to us? Does it make you blush a little?”

“It would if he were telling me face-to-face. The e-mail method is best for

this, I think. Less human content."

"You're happy with the security of the information transfer?"

"Yeah, we've been through this. The message could just be sensitive business information, and the encryption system is very robust. The boys and girls at Fort Meade can break it, but it's brute force every time, and it takes up to a week, even after they make the right guesses on how the encryption system works. The PRC guys would have to go from scratch. The trapdoor in the ISP was very cleverly designed, and the way we tap into it should also be secure—and even then, just because an embassy phone taps into an ISP doesn't mean anything. We have a consular official downloading pornography from a local Web site through that ISP as another cover, in case anybody over there gets real clever." That had been carefully thought through. It would be something that one would wish to be covert, something the counterintelligence agency in Beijing would find both understandable and entertaining in its own right, if and when they cracked into it.

"Anything good?" Ed Foley asked, again, just to bedevil his wife.

"Not unless you're into child abuse. Some of the subjects for this site are too young to vote. If you downloaded it over here, the FBI might come knocking on your door."

"Capitalism really has broken out over there, eh?"

"Some of the senior Party officials seem to like this sort of thing. I guess when you're pushing eighty, you need something special to help jump-start the motor." Mary Pat had seen some of the photographs, and once had been plenty. She was a mother, and all of those photographic subjects had been infants once, strange though that might seem to a subscriber to that Web site. The abusers of girls must have thought that they all sprang into life with their legs spread and a welcoming look in their doll-child faces. Not quite, the DDO thought, but her job wasn't to be a clergyman. Sometimes you had to do business with such perverts, because they had information which her country needed. If you were lucky, and the information was really useful, then you often arranged for them to defect, to live in the United States, where they could live and enjoy their perversions to some greater or lesser degree, after being briefed on the law, and the consequences of breaking it. Afterward there was always a bathroom and soap to wash your hands. It was a need of which she'd availed herself more than once. One of the problems with espionage was that you didn't always do business with the sort of people whom you'd willingly invite into your home. But it wasn't about Miss Manners. It was about getting information that your country needed to guard its strategic interests, and even to prevail in war, if it came to that. Lives were often at stake, either directly or indirectly. And so, you did business with anyone who had such information, even if he or she wasn't exactly a member of the clergy.

"Okay, babe. Keep me posted," Foley told his wife.

"Will do, honey-bunny." The DDO headed back to her own office. There she drew up her reply to Nomuri: MESSAGE RECEIVED. KEEP US POSTED ON YOUR PROGRESS. MP. ENDS.

The reply came as a relief to Nomuri when he woke and checked his e-mail. It was a disappointment that he didn't wake up with company, but to expect that would have been unrealistic. Ming would have been ill-advised to spend the night anywhere but in her own bed. Nomuri couldn't even drive her back. She'd just left, carrying her presents—well, wearing some of them—for the walk back to her own shared flat where, Nomuri fervently hoped, she wouldn't discuss her evening's adventures with her room-mates. You never knew about women and how they talked. It wasn't all that dissimilar with some men, Nomuri remembered from college, where some of his chums had talked at length about their conquests, as though they'd slain a dragon with a Popsicle stick. Nomuri had never indulged in this aural spectator sport. Either he'd had a spy's mentality even then, or he'd been somehow imbued with the dictum that a gentleman didn't kiss and tell. But did women? That was a mystery to him, like why it was that women seemed to go to the bathroom in pairs—he'd occasionally joked that that was when they'd held their "union meetings." Anyway, women talked more than men did. He was sure of that. And while they kept many secrets from men, how many did they keep from other women? Jesus, all that had to happen was for her to tell a roomie that she'd had her brains fucked out by a Japanese salaryman, and if that roomie was an informant to the MSS, Ming would get a visit from a security officer, who at the very least would counsel her never to see Nomuri again. More likely, the counseling would involve a demand to send that degenerate American bourgeois trash (the Victoria's Secret underthings) back to him, plus a threat to lose her ministry job if she ever appeared on the same street with him again. And that also meant that he'd be tailed and observed and investigated by the MSS, and that was something he had to take seriously. They didn't have to catch him committing espionage. This was a communist country, where due process of law was a bourgeois concept unworthy of serious consideration, and civil rights were limited to doing what one was told. As a foreigner doing business in the PRC, he might get some easiness of treatment, but not all that much.

So, he hadn't just gotten his rocks off, Nomuri told himself, past the delightful memories of a passionate evening. He'd crossed a wide red line in the street, and his safety depended entirely upon on how discreet Ming was. He hadn't—could not have—warned her to keep her mouth shut about their time together. Such things weren't said, because they added a level of gravity to what was supposed to have been a time of joy and friendship ... or even something potentially bigger than friendship. Women thought in such terms, Chester reminded himself, and for that reason he might see a pointed nose and whiskers the next time he looked in the mirror, but this was *business,* not *personal,* he told himself as he shut down his computer.

Except for one small thing. He'd had sexual relations with an intelligent and not entirely unattractive young female human being, and the problem was that when you gave a little bit of your heart away, you never really got it back. And his heart, Nomuri belatedly realized, was distantly connected to his

dick. He wasn't James Bond. He could not embrace a woman as a paid whore embraced a man. It just wasn't in him to be that sort of heartless swine. The good news was that for this reason he could stand to look in a mirror for the time being. The bad news was that this ability might be short-lived, if he treated Ming as a thing and not a person.

Nomuri needed advice on how to feel about this operation, and he didn't have a place to get it. It wasn't the sort of thing to e-mail to Mary Pat or to one of the pshrinks the Agency employed for counseling DO people who needed a little guidance with their work. This sort of thing had to be handled face-to-face with a real person, whose body language you could read and whose tone of voice would deliver its own content. No, e-mail wasn't the medium he needed right now. He needed to fly to Tokyo and meet a senior officer of the Directorate of Operations who could counsel him on how to handle things. But if the guy told him to cut himself off from intimate contact with Ming, then what would he do? Nomuri asked himself. It wasn't as though he had a girlfriend of any kind, and he had his needs for intimacy, too—and besides, if he cut her off, what effect would that have on his potential, prospective agent? You didn't check your humanity by the door when you joined up with the Agency, despite what all the books said and the public expectations were. All the chuckles over beer during the nights after training sessions seemed a distant thing now, and all the expectations he and his colleagues had had back then. They'd been so far off the mark, in spite of what their training officers had told them. He'd been a child then, and to some extent even in Japan, but suddenly he was a man, alone in a country that was at best suspicious, and at worst hostile to him and his country. Well, it was in her hands now, and that was something he couldn't change.

Her co-workers noted a slight difference in their colleague. She smiled a little more, and in a somewhat different way. Something good must have happened to her, some of them thought, and for this they rejoiced, albeit in a reserved and private way. If Ming wished to share the experience with them, all well and good, and if not, that, too, was okay with them, because some things were private, even among a group of women who shared virtually everything, including stories of their minister and his fumbling, lengthy, and occasionally futile efforts at lovemaking. He was a wise man, and usually a gentle one, though as a boss he had his bad points. But Ming would notice none of those today. Her smile was sweeter than ever, and her eyes twinkled like little diamonds, the rest of the admin/secretarial staff all thought. They'd all seen it before, though not with Ming, whose love life had been an abbreviated one, and whom the minister liked a little too much, but whom he serviced imperfectly and too seldom. She sat at her computer to do her correspondence and translations of Western news articles that might be of interest to the Minister. Ming had the best English skills of anyone in this corner of the building, and the new computer system worked superbly. The next step, so the story went, was a computer into which you'd just speak, making the characters appear by voice command, sure to become the curse of every executive secretary in the world, because it would largely make them obsolete.

Or maybe not. The boss couldn't fuck a computer, could he? Not that Minister Fang was all *that* intrusive in his demands. And the perks he delivered in return weren't bad at all.

Her first morning assignment took the customary ninety minutes, after which she printed up the resulting copy and stapled the pages together by article. This morning she'd translated pieces by the *Times of London,* and the *New York Times,* plus *The Washington Post,* so that her Minister would know what the barbarians around the world thought of the enlightened policy of the People's Republic.

In his private office, Minister Fang was going over other things. The MSS had a double report on the Russians: both oil and gold, the reports said. So, he thought, Zhang had been right all along, even more right than he knew. Eastern Siberia was indeed a treasure-house, full of things everyone needed. Oil, because petroleum was the very blood of modern society, and gold, because in addition to its negotiable value as an old but still very real medium of exchange, it still had industrial and scientific uses as well. And each had a cache of its own. What a pity that such riches should fall to a people without the wit to make proper use of them. It was so strange, the Russians who had given the world the gift of Marxism but then failed to exploit it properly, and then abandoned it, only to fail also in their transition to a bourgeois capitalist society. Fang lit a cigarette, his fifth of the day (he was trying to cut back as his seventieth birthday approached), and set the MSS report down on his desk before leaning back in his chair to puff on his unfiltered smoke and consider the information this morning had brought. Siberia, as Zhang had been saying for some years now, had so much that the PRC needed, timber, minerals in abundance—even greater abundance, so these intelligence documents said—and *space,* which China needed above all things.

There were simply too many people in China, and that despite population-control measures that could only be called draconian both in their content, and in their ruthless application. Those measures were an affront to Chinese culture, which had always viewed children as a blessing, and now the social engineering was having an unexpected result. Allowed only one child per married couple, the people often chose to have boys instead of girls. It was not unknown for a peasant to take a female toddler of two years and drop her down a well—the merciful ones broke their necks first—to dispose of the embarrassing encumbrance. Fang understood the reasons for this. A girl child grew up to marry, to join her life to a man, while a boy child could always be depended upon to support and honor his parents, and provide security. But a girl child would merely spread her legs for some other couple's boy child, and where was the security for her parents in that?

It had been true in Fang's case. As he'd grown to a senior party official, he'd made sure that his own mother and father had found a comfortable place to live out their lives, for such were the duties of a child for those who had given him life. Along the way, he'd married, of course—his wife was long dead of cardiovascular disease—and he'd given some lip service to his wife's parents

... but not as much as he'd done for his own. Even his wife had understood that, and used her shadow-influence as the wife of a party official to make her own special but lesser arrangements. Her brother had died young, at the hands of the American army in Korea, and was therefore just a memory without practical value.

But the problem for China that no one really talked about, even at Politburo level, was that their population policy was affecting the demographics of their country. In elevating the value of boy children over girls, the PRC was causing an imbalance that was becoming statistically significant. In fifteen years or so, there would be a shortage of women—some said that this was a good thing, because they would achieve the overarching national objective of population stability faster but it also meant that for a generation, millions of Chinese men would have no women to marry and mate with. Would this turn into a flood of homosexuality? PRC policy still frowned upon that as a bourgeois degeneracy, though sodomy had been decriminalized in 1998. But if there were no women to be had, what was a man to do? And in addition to killing off surplus girl babies, those abandoned by their parents were often given away, to American and European couples unable to have children of their own. This happened by the hundreds of thousands, with the children disposed of as readily and casually as Americans sold puppies in shopping malls. Something in Fang's soul bridled at that, but his feelings were mere bourgeois sentimentality, weren't they? National policy dictated what must be, and policy was the means to achieving the necessary goal.

His was a life as comfortable as privilege could make it. In addition to a plush office as pleasant as any capitalist's, he had an official car and driver to take him to his residence, an ornate apartment with servants to look after his needs, the best food that his country could provide, good beverages, a television connected to a satellite service so that he could receive all manner of entertainment, even including Japanese pornographic channels, for his manly drives had not yet deserted him. (He didn't speak Japanese, but you didn't need to understand the dialogue in such movies, did you?)

Fang still worked long hours, rising at six-thirty, and was at his desk before eight every morning. His staff of secretaries and assistants took proper care of him, and some of the female ones were agreeably compliant, once, occasionally twice per week. Few men of his years had his vigor, Fang was sure, and unlike Chairman Mao, he didn't abuse children, which he'd known of at the time and found somewhat distasteful. But great men had their flaws, and you overlooked them because of the greatness that made them who they were. As for himself and people like him, they were entitled to the proper environments in which to rest, good nourishment to sustain their bodies through their long and grueling workdays, and the opportunities for relaxation and recreation that men of vigor and intelligence needed. It was *necessary* that they live better than most other citizens of their country, and it was also *earned.* Giving direction to the world's most populous country was no easy task. It demanded their every intellectual energy, and such energy needed to be conserved and restored. Fang looked up as Ming entered with her folder of news articles.

"Good morning, Minister," she said with proper deference.

"Good morning, child." Fang nodded with affection. This one shared his bed fairly well, and for that reason merited more than a grunt. Well, he'd gotten her a very comfortable office chair, hadn't he? She withdrew, bowing proper respect for her father figure, as she always did. Fang noticed nothing particularly different about her demeanor, as he lifted the folder and took out the news articles, along with a pencil for making notations. He'd compare these with MSS estimates of the mood of other countries and their governments. It was Fang's way of letting the Ministry of State Security know that the Politburo members still had minds of their own with which to think. The MSS had signally failed to predict America's diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, though in fairness, the American news media didn't seem to predict the actions of this President Ryan all that well, either. What an odd man he was, and certainly no friend of the People's Republic. A peasant, the MSS analysts called him, and in many ways that seemed both accurate and appropriate. He was strangely unsophisticated in his outlook, something the *New York Times* commented upon rather frequently. Why did they dislike him? Was he not capitalist enough, or was he too capitalist? Understanding the American news media was beyond Fang's powers of analysis, but he could at least digest the things they said, and that was something the intelligence "experts" at the MSS Institute for American Studies were not always able to do. With that thought, Fang lit another cigarette and settled back in his chair.

It was a miracle, Provalov thought. Central Army Records had gotten the files, fingerprints, and photographs of the two bodies recovered in St. Petersburg—but perversely sent the records to him rather than to Abramov and Ustinov, doubtless because he was the one who had invoked the name of Sergey Golovko. Dzerzhinskiy Square still inspired people to do their jobs in a timely fashion. The names and vital statistics would be faxed at once to St. Petersburg so that his northern colleagues might see what information could be developed. The names and photographs were only a start—documents nearly twenty years old showing youthful, emotionless faces. The service records were fairly impressive, though. Once upon a time, Pyotr Alekseyevich Amalrik and Pavel Borissovich Zimyanin had been considered superior soldiers, smart, fit ... and highly reliable, politically speaking, which was why they'd gone to Spetsnaz school and sergeant school. Both had fought in Afghanistan, and done fairly well—they'd survived Afghanistan, which was not the usual thing for Spetsnaz troops, who'd drawn all of the dirtiest duty in an especially dirty war. They'd not reenlisted, which was not unusual. Hardly anyone in the Soviet Army had ever reenlisted voluntarily. They'd returned to civilian life, both working in the same factory outside Leningrad, as it had been called then. But Amalrik and Zimyanin had both found ordinary civilian life boring, and both, he gathered, had drifted into something else. He'd have to let the investigators in St. Petersburg find out more. He pulled a routing slip from his drawer and rubber-banded it to the records package. It would be couriered to St. Petersburg, where Abramov and Ustinov would play with the

A Mr. Sherman, Mr. Secretary," Winston's secretary told him over the intercom. "Line three."

"Hey, Sam," SecTreas said, as he picked up the phone. "What's new?"

"Our oil field up north," the president of Atlantic Richfield replied.

"Good news?"

"You might say that. Our field people say the find is about fifty percent bigger than our initial estimates."

"How solid is that information?"

"About as reliable as one of your T-bills, George. My head field guy is Ernie Beach. He's as good at finding oil as you used to be playing up on The Street." *Maybe even better* , Sam Sherman didn't add. Winston was known to have something of an ego on the subject of his own worth. The addendum got through anyway.

"So, summarize that for me," the Secretary of the Treasury commanded.

"So, when this field comes on line, the Russians will be in a position to purchase Saudi Arabia outright, plus Kuwait and maybe half of Iran. It makes east Texas look like a fart in a tornado. It's *huge,* George."

"Hard to get out?"

"It won't be easy, and it won't be inexpensive, but from an engineering point of view it's pretty straightforward. If you want to buy a hot stock, pick a Russian company that makes cold-weather gear. They're going to be real busy for the next ten years or so," Sherman advised.

"Okay, and what can you tell me of the implications for Russia in economic terms?"

"Hard to say. It will take eight to twelve years to bring this field fully on line, and the amount of crude this will dump on the market will distort market conditions quite a bit. We haven't modeled all that out—but it's going to be *huge,* like in the neighborhood of one hundred billion dollars per year, current-year dollars, that is."

"For how long?" Winston could almost hear the shrug that followed.

"Twenty years, maybe more. Our friends in Moscow still want us to sit on this, but word's perking out in our company, like trying to hide a sunrise, y'know? I give it a month before it breaks out into the news media. Maybe a little longer'n that, but not much."

"What about the gold strike?"

"Hell, George, they're not telling *me* anything about that, but my guy in Moscow says the cat's gobbled down some kind of canary, or that's how it appears to him. That will probably depress the world price of gold about five, maybe ten percent, but our models say it'll rebound before Ivan starts selling

the stuff he pulls out of the ground. Our Russian friends—well, their rich uncle just bit the big one and left them the whole estate, y'know?"

"And no adverse effects on us," Winston thought aloud.

"Hell, no. They'll have to buy all sorts of hardware from our people, and they'll need a lot of expertise that only we have, and after that's over, the world price of oil goes down, and that won't hurt us either. You know, George, I like the Russians. They've been unlucky sonsabitches for a long time, but maybe this'll change that for'em."

"No objections here or next door, Sam," TRADER assured his friend. "Thanks for the information."

"Well, you guys still collect my taxes." *You bastards*, he didn't add, but Winston heard it anyway, including the chuckle. "See you around, George."

"Right, have a good one, Sam, and thanks." Winston killed one button on his phone, selected another line, and hit his number nine speed-dial line.

"Yeah?" a familiar voice responded. Only ten people had access to this number.

"Jack, it's George, just had a call from Sam Sherman, Atlantic Richfield."

"Russia?"

"Yeah. The field is fifty percent bigger than they initially thought. That makes it pretty damned big, biggest oil strike ever, as a matter of fact, bigger than the whole Persian Gulf combined. Getting the oil out will be a little expensive, but Sam says it's all cookbook stuff—hard, but they know how it's done, no new technology to invent, just a matter of spending the money—and not even all that much, 'cause labor is a lot cheaper there than it is here. The Russians are going to get rich."

"How rich?" the President asked.

"On the order of a hundred billion dollars per year once the field is fully on line, and that's good for twenty years, maybe more."

Jack had to whistle at that. "Two *trillion* dollars. That's real money, George."

"That's what we call it on The Street, Mr. President," Winston agreed. "Sure as hell, that's real money."

"And what effect will it have on the Russian economy?"

"It won't hurt them very much," SecTreas assured him. "It gets them a ton of hard currency. With that money they can buy the things they'd like to have, and buy the tools to build the things they can make on their own. This will re-industrialize their country, Jack, jump-start them into the new century, assuming they have the brains to make proper use of it and not let it all bug out to Switzerland and Liechtenstein."

"How can we help them?" POTUS asked.

"Best answer to that, you and I and two or three others sit down with our Russian counterparts and ask them what they need. If we can get a few of our

industrialists to build some plants over there, it won't hurt, and it'll damned sure look good on TV."

"Noted, George. Get me a paper on that by the beginning of next week, and then we'll see if we can figure out a way to let the Russians know what we know."

It was the end of another overlong day for Sergey Golovko. Running the SVR was job enough for any man, but he also had to back up Eduard Petrovich Grushavoy, President of the Russian Republic. President Grushavoy had his own collection of ministers, some of them competent, the others selected for their political capital, or merely to deny them to the political opposition. They could still do damage on the inside of Grushavoy's administration, but less than on the outside. On the inside they had to use small-caliber weapons, lest they be killed by their own shots.

The good news was that the Economics Minister, Vasily Konstantinovich Solomentsev, was intelligent and seemingly honest as well, as rare a combination in the Russian political spectrum as anywhere else in the known world. He had his ambitions—it was a rare minister who did not—but mainly, it seemed, he wanted his nation to prosper, and didn't want to profit himself all that much. A little self-enrichment was all right with Golovko, just so that a man wasn't a pig about it. The line, for Sergey Nikolay'ch, was about twenty million euros. More than that was hoggish, but less was understandable. After all, if a minister was successful at helping his country, he or she was entitled to get a proper reward for doing so. The ordinary working people out there wouldn't mind, if the result was a better life for them, would they? Probably not, the spymaster thought. This wasn't America, overrun with pointless and counterproductive "ethics" laws. The American President, whom Golovko knew well, had an aphorism that the Russian admired : *If you have to write your ethics rules down, you've* already lost. No fool, that Ryan, once a deadly enemy, and now a good friend, or seemingly so. Golovko had cultivated that friendship by providing help to America in two serious international crises. He'd done it because it had, first of all, been in his nation's interest, and secondly, because Ryan was a man of honor, and unlikely to forget such favors. It had also amused Golovko, who'd spent most of his adult-hood in an agency devoted to the destruction of the West.

But what about himself? Was someone intent on his own destruction? Had someone desired to end his life in a loud and spectacular manner on the paving stones of Dzerzhinskiy Square? The more his mind dwelt on that question, the more frightening it became. Few healthy men could contemplate the end of their lives with equanimity, and Golovko wasn't one of them. His hands never shook, but he didn't argue at all with Major Shelepin's increasingly invasive measures to keep him alive. The car changed every day in color, and sometimes in make, and the routes to his office shared only the starting place—the SVR building was sufficiently large that the daily journey to work had a total of five possible end points. The clever part, which Golovko

admired, was that he himself occasionally rode in the front seat of the lead vehicle, while some functionary sat in the back seat of the putative guarded car. Anatoliy was no fool, and even showed the occasional spark of creativity.

But none of that now. Golovko shook his head and opened his last folder of the day, scanning first of all the executive summary—and his mind skidded to an almost instant halt, his hand reaching for a phone and dialing a number.

"This is Golovko," he told the male voice who answered. He didn't have to say anything else.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch," the minister's voice greeted him pleasantly five seconds later. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, Vasily Konstantinovich, you can confirm these numbers to me. Are they possible?"

"They are more than possible, Sergey. They are as real as the sunset," Solomentsev told the intelligence chief *cum* chief minister and advisor to President Grushavoy.

"Solkin syn," the intelligence chief muttered. *Son of a bitch!* "And this wealth has been there for how long?" he asked incredulously.

"The oil, perhaps five hundred thousand years; the gold, rather longer, Sergey."

"And we never knew," Golovko breathed.

"No one really looked, Comrade Minister. Actually, I find the gold report the more interesting. I must see one of these gold-encrusted wolf pelts. Something for Prokofiev, eh? Peter and the *Golden* Wolf."

"An entertaining thought," Golovko said, dismissing it immediately. "What will it mean to our country?"

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, I would have to be a fortune-teller to answer that substantively, but it could be the salvation of our country in the long term. Now we have something that all nations want—two somethings, as a matter of fact—and it belongs to us, and for it those foreigners will pay vast sums of money, and do so with a smile. Japan, for example. We will answer their energy needs for the next fifty years, and along the way we will save them vast sums in transportation costs—ship the oil a few hundred kilometers instead of ten *thousand.* And perhaps America, too, though they've made their own big strike on the Alaskan-Canadian border. The question becomes how we move the oil to market. We'll build a pipeline from the field to Vladivostok, of course, but maybe another one to St. Petersburg so that we can sell oil more easily to Europe as well. In fact, we can probably have the Europeans, especially the Germans, build the pipeline for us, just to get a discount on the oil. Serge, if we'd found this oil twenty years ago, we—"

"Perhaps." It wasn't hard to imagine what would come next: The Soviet Union would not have fallen but grown strong instead. Golovko had no such illusions. The Soviet government would have managed to fuck up these new treasures as it had fucked up everything else. The Soviet government had

owned Siberia for seventy years but had never even gone looking for what might have been there. The country had lacked the proper experts to do the looking, but was too proud to let anyone else do it, lest they think less of the Motherland. If any one thing had killed the USSR, it wasn't communism, or even totalitarianism. It was that perverse *amour propre* that was the most dangerous and destructive aspect of the Russian character, created by a sense of inferiority that went back to the House of Romanov and beyond. The Soviet Union's death had been as self-inflicted as any suicide's, just slower and therefore far deadlier in coming. Golovko endured the next ninety seconds of historical speculation from a man who had little sense of history, then spoke: "All this is good, Vasily Konstantinovich, but what of the future? That is the time in which we will all live, after all."

"It will do us little harm. Sergey, this is the salvation of our country. It will take ten years to get the full benefit from the outfields, but then we shall have a steady and regular income for at least one whole generation, and perhaps more besides."

"What help will we need?"

"The Americans and the British have expertise which we need, from their own exploitation of the Alaskan fields. They have knowledge. We shall learn it and make use of it. We are in negotiations now with Atlantic Richfield, the American oil company, for technical support. They are being greedy, but that's to be expected. They know that only they have what we need, and paying them for it is cheaper than having to replicate it ourselves. So, they will get most of what they now demand. Perhaps we will pay them in gold bricks," Solomentsev suggested lightly.

Golovko had to resist the temptation to inquire too deeply into the gold strike. The oil field was far more lucrative, but gold was prettier. He, too, wanted to see one of those pelts that this Gogol fellow had used to collect the dust. And this lonely forest-dweller would have to be properly taken care of—no major problem, as he lived alone and was childless. Whatever he got, the state would soon get back, old as he was. And there'd be a TV show, maybe even a feature film, about this hunter. He'd once hunted Germans, after all, and the Russians still made heroes of such men. That would make Pavel Petrovich Gogol happy enough, wouldn't it?

"What does Eduard Petrovich know?"

"I've been saving the information until I had a full and reliable reading on it. I have that now. I think he will be pleased at the next cabinet meeting, Sergey Nikolay'ch."

As well he should, Golovko thought. President Grushavoy had been as busy as a one-armed, one-legged paperhanger for three years. No, more like a stage magician or conjurer, forced to produce real things from nothing, and his success in keeping the nation moving often seemed nothing short of miraculous. Perhaps this was God's own way of rewarding the man for his efforts, though it would not be an entirely unmixed blessing. Every government agency would want its piece of the gold-and-oil pie, each with its

needs, all of them presented by its own minister as vital to the security of the state, in white papers of brilliant logic and compelling reasoning. Who knew, maybe some of them would even be telling the truth, though truth was so often a rare commodity in the cabinet room. Each minister had an empire to build, and the better he built it, the closer he would come to the seat at the head of the table that was occupied, for now, by Eduard Petrovich Grushavoy. Golovko wondered if it had been this way under the czars. Probably, he decided at once. Human nature didn't change very much. The way people had acted in Babylon or Byzantium was probably little different from the way they'd act at the next cabinet meeting, three days hence. He wondered how President Grushavoy would handle the news.

"How much has leaked out?" the spymaster asked.

"There are doubtless some rumors," Minister Solomentsev answered, "but the current estimates are less than twenty-four hours old, and it usually takes longer than that to leak. I will have these documents messengered to you—tomorrow morning?"

"That will be fine, Vasily. I'll have some of my own analysts go over the data, so that I can present my own independent estimate of the situation."

"I have no objection to that," the economics minister responded, surprising Golovko more than a little. But then this wasn't the USSR anymore. The current cabinet might be the modern counterpart to the old Politburo, but nobody there told lies ... well, at least not big lies. And that was a measure of progress for his country, wasn't it?

CHAPTER 11

Faith of the Fathers

His name was Yu Fa An, and he said he was a Christian. That was rare enough that Monsignor Schepke invited him in at once. What he saw was a Chinese national of fifty-plus years and stooped frame, with hair a curious mix of black and gray that one saw only rarely in this part of the world.

"Welcome to our embassy. I am Monsignor Schepke." He bowed quickly and then shook the man's hand.

"Thank you. I am the Reverend Yu Fa An," the man replied with the dignity of truth, one cleric to another.

"Indeed. Of what denomination?"

"I am a Baptist."

"Ordained? Is that possible?" Schepke motioned the visitor to follow him, and in a moment they stood before the Nuncio. "Eminence, this is the Reverend Yu Fa An—of Beijing?" Schepke asked belatedly.

"Yes, that is so. My congregation is mainly northwest of here."

"Welcome." Cardinal DiMilo rose from his chair for a warm handshake, and guided the man to the comfortable visitor's chair. Monsignor Schepke went to fetch tea. "It is a pleasure to meet a fellow Christian in this city."

"There are not enough of us, and that is a fact, Eminence," Yu confirmed.

Monsignor Schepke swiftly arrived with a tray of tea things, which he set on the low coffee table.

"Thank you, Franz."

"I thought that some local citizens should welcome you. I expect you've had the formal welcome from the Foreign Ministry, and that it was correct ... and rather cold?" Yu asked.

The Cardinal smiled as he handed a cup to his guest. "It was correct, as you say, but it could have been warmer."

"You will find that the government here has ample manners and good attention to protocol, but little in the way of sincerity," Yu said, in English, with a very strange accent.

"You are originally from ... ?"

"I was born in Taipei. As a youth, I traveled to America for my education. I first attended the University of Oklahoma, but the call came, and I transferred

to Oral Roberts University in the same state. There I got my first degree—in electrical engineering—and went on for my doctor of divinity and my ordination," he explained.

"Indeed, and how did you come to be in the People's Republic?"

"Back in the 1970s, the government of Chairman Mao was ever so pleased to have Taiwanese come here to live—rejecting capitalism and coming to Marxism, you see," he added with a twinkling eye. "It was hard on my parents, but they came to understand. I started my congregation soon after I arrived. That was troublesome for the Ministry of State Security, but I also worked as an engineer, and at the time the state needed that particular skill. It is remarkable what the State will accept if you have something it needs, and back then their need for people with my degree was quite desperate. But now I am a minister on a full-time basis." With the announcement of his triumph, Yu lifted his own teacup for a sip.

"So, what can you tell us about the local environment?" Renato asked.

"The government is truly communist. It trusts and tolerates no loyalty to anything except itself. Even the Falun Gong, which was not truly a religion—that is, not really a belief system as you or I would understand the term—has been brutally suppressed, and my own congregation has been persecuted. It is a rare Sunday on which more than a quarter of my congregation comes to attend services. I must spend much of my time traveling from home to home to bring the gospel to my flock."

"How do you support yourself?" the Cardinal asked.

Yu smiled serenely. "That is the least of my problems. American Baptists support me most generously. There is a group of churches in Mississippi that is particularly generous—many are black churches, as it turns out. I just received some letters from them yesterday. One of my classmates at Oral Roberts University has a large congregation near Jackson, Mississippi. His name is Gerry Patterson. We were good friends then, and he remains a friend in Christ. His congregation is large and prosperous, and he still looks after me." Yu almost added that he had far more money than he knew how to spend. In America, such prosperity would have translated into a Cadillac and a fine parsonage. In Beijing, it meant a nice bicycle and gifts to the needy of his flock.

"Where do you live, my friend?" the Cardinal asked.

The Reverend Yu fished in his pocket for a business card and handed it over. Like many such Chinese cards, it had a sketch-map on the back. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to join my wife and myself for dinner. Both of you, of course," he added.

"We should be delighted. Do you have children?"

"Two," Yu replied. "Both born in America, and so exempt from the bestial laws the communists have in place here."

"I know of these laws," DiMilo assured his visitor. "Before we can make them change, we need more Christians here. I pray on this subject daily."

“As do I, Eminence. As do I. I presume you know that your dwelling here is, well ...”

Schepke tapped his ear and pointed his finger around the room. “Yes, we know.”

“You have a driver assigned to you?”

“Yes, that was very kind of the ministry,” Schepke noted. “He’s a Catholic. Isn’t that remarkable?”

“Is that a fact?” Yu asked rhetorically, while his head shook emphatically from side to side. “Well, I am sure he’s loyal to his country as well.”

“But of course,” DiMilo observed. It wasn’t much of a surprise. The Cardinal had been in the Vatican’s diplomatic service a long time, and he’d seen most of the tricks at least once. Clever though the Chinese communists were, the Catholic Church had been around a lot longer, loath though the local government might be to admit that fact.

The chitchat went on for another thirty minutes before the Reverend Yu took his leave, with another warm handshake to send him on his way.

“So, Franz?” DiMilo asked outside, where a blowing breeze would impede any microphones installed outside the dwelling itself.

“First time I’ve seen the man. I’ve heard his name since I arrived here. The PRC government has indeed given him a bad time, and more than once, but he is a man of strong faith and no small courage. I hadn’t known of his educational background. We could check on this.”

“Not a bad idea,” the Papal Nuncio said. It wasn’t that he distrusted or disbelieved Yu, just that it was good to be sure of things. Even the name of a classmate, now an ordained minister, Gerry Patterson. Somewhere in Mississippi, USA. That would make it easy. The message to Rome went out an hour later, over the Internet, a method of communication that lent itself so readily to intelligence operations.

In this case, the time differences worked for them, as sometimes happened when the inquiries went west instead of east. In a few hours, the dispatch was received, decrypted, and forwarded to the proper desk. From there, a new dispatch, also encrypted, made its way to New York, where Timothy Cardinal McCarthy, Archbishop of New York and the chief of the Vatican’s intelligence operations in the United States of America, received his copy immediately after breakfast. From there, it was even easier. The FBI remained a bastion of Irish-Catholic America, though not so much as in the 1930s, with a few Italians and Poles tossed in. The world was an imperfect place, but when the Church needed information, and as long as the information was not compromising to American national security, it was gotten, usually very quickly.

In this case, particularly so. Oral Roberts University was a very conservative institution, and therefore ready to cooperate with the FBI’s inquiries, official or not. A clerk there didn’t even consult her supervisor, so innocuous was the phoned inquiry from Assistant Special Agent in Charge Jim Brennan of the

FBI's Oklahoma City office. It was quickly established via computer records that one Yu Fa An had graduated the university, first with a bachelor of science degree in electrical engineering, and then spent an additional three years in the university for his doctor of divinity, both degrees attained "with distinction," the clerk told Brennan, meaning nothing lower than a B+. The alumni office added that the Reverend Yu's current address was in Beijing, China, where he evidently preached the gospel courageously in the land of the pagans. Brennan thanked the clerk, made his notes, and replied to the e-mail inquiry from New York, then went off to his morning meeting with the SAC to review the Field Division's activities in enforcing federal law in the Sooner State.

It was a little different in Jackson, Mississippi. There it was the SAC—Special Agent in Charge—himself who made the call on Reverend Gerry Patterson's First Baptist Church, located in an upscale suburb of the Mississippi state capital. The church was three-quarters of the way into its second century, and among the most prosperous of such congregations in the region. The Reverend Patterson could scarcely have been more impressive, impeccably turned out in a white button-down shirt and a striped blue tie. His dark suit coat was hung in a corner in deference to the local temperature. He greeted the visiting FBI official with regal manners, conducted him to his plush office, and asked how he could be of service. On hearing the first question, he replied, "Yu! Yes, a fine man, and a good friend from school. We used to call him Skip—Fa sounded too much like something from *The Sound of Music,* you know? A good guy, and *a fine* minister of the gospel. He could give lessons in faith to Jerry Falwell. Correspond with him? You bet I do! We send him something like twenty-five thousand dollars a year. Want to see a picture? We have it in the church itself. We were both a lot younger then," Patterson added with a smile. "Skip's got real guts. It can't be much fun to be a Christian minister in China, you know? But he never complains. His letters are always upbeat. We could use a thousand more men like him in the clergy."

"So, you are that impressed with him?" SAC Mike Leary asked.

"He was a good kid in college, and he's a good man today, and a fine minister of the gospel who does his work in a very adverse environment. Skip is a hero to me, Mr. Leary." Which was very powerful testimony indeed from so important a member of the community. First Baptist Church hadn't had a mortgage in living memory, despite its impressive physical plant and amply cushioned pews.

The FBI agent stood. "That's about all I need. Thank you, sir."

"Can I ask why you came here to ask about my friend?"

Leary had expected that question, and so had preframed his answer. "Just a routine inquiry, sir. Your friend isn't in any trouble at all—at least not with the United States government."

"Good to know," the Reverend Patterson responded, with a smile and a handshake. "You know, we're not the only congregation that looks after Skip."

Leary turned. "Really?"

"Of course. You know Hosiah Jackson?"

"Reverend Jackson, the Vice President's dad? Never met him, but I know who he is."

Patterson nodded. "Yep. Hosiah's as good as they come." Neither man commented on how unusual it would have been a mere forty years earlier for a white minister to comment so favorably on a black one, but Mississippi had changed over time, in some ways even faster than the rest of America. "I was over at his place a few years ago and we got talking about things, and this subject came up. Hosiah's congregation sends Skip five or ten thousand dollars a year also, and he organized some of the other black congregations to help us look after Skip as well."

Mississippi whites and blacks looking after a Chinese preacher, Leary thought. *What was the world coming to?* He supposed that Christianity might really mean something after all, and headed back to his office in his official car, content at having done some actual investigative work for a change, if not exactly for the FBI.

Cardinal McCarthy learned from his secretary that his two requests for information had been answered before lunch, which was impressive even by the standards of the FBI-Catholic Church alliance. Soon after his midday meal, Cardinal McCarthy personally encrypted both of the replies and forwarded them back to Rome. He didn't know why the inquiry had come, but figured that he'd find out in due course if it were important, and if not, then not. It amused the churchman to be the Vatican's master spy in America.

It would have amused him less to know that the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Maryland, was interested in this sideshow activity also, and that their monster Thinking Machines, Inc., supercomputer in the cavernous basement under the main building in the sprawling complex was on the case. This machine, whose manufacturer had gone bankrupt some years before, had been both the pride and joy and the greatest disappointment in the huge collection of computers at NSA, until quite recently, when one of the agency's mathematicians had finally figured out a way to make use of it. It was a massive parallel-processing machine and supposedly operated much as the human brain did, theoretically able to attack a problem from more than one side simultaneously, just as the human brain was thought to do. The problem was that no one actually knew how the human brain worked, and as a result drafting the software to make full use of the hugely powerful computer had been impossible for some years. This had relegated the impressive and expensive artifact to no more practical utility than an ordinary workstation. But then someone had recognized the fact that quantum mechanics had become useful in the cracking of foreign ciphers, wondered *why* this should be the case, and started looking at the problems from the programming unit. Seven months later, that intellectual sojourn had resulted in the first of three new operating systems for the Thinking Machines Super-Cruncher, and the

rest was highly classified history. NSA was now able to crack any book or machine cipher in the world, and its analysts, newly rich with information, had pitched in to have a woodworker construct a sort of pagan altar to put before the Cruncher for the notional sacrifice of goats before their new god. (To suggest the sacrifice of virgins would have offended the womenfolk at the agency.) NSA had long been known for its eccentric institutional sense of humor. The only real fear was that the world would learn about the TAPDANCE system NSA had come up with, which was totally random, and therefore totally unbreakable, plus easy to manufacture—but it was also an administrative nightmare, and that would prevent most foreign governments from using it.

The Cardinal's Internet dispatches were copied, illegally but routinely, by NSA and fed into the Cruncher, which spat out the clear text, which found its way quickly to the desk of an NSA analyst, who, it had been carefully determined beforehand, wasn't Catholic.

That's interesting, the analyst thought. Why is the Vatican interested in some Chink minister? And why the hell did they go to New York to find out about him? Oh, okay, educated over here, and friends in Mississippi ... what the hell is this all about? He was supposed to know about such things, but that was merely the theory under which he operated. He frequently didn't know beans about the information he looked at, but was honest enough to tell his superiors that. And so, his daily report was forwarded electronically to his supervisor, who looked it over, coded it, and then forwarded it to CIA, where three more analysts looked it over, decided that they didn't know what to make of it either, and then filed it away, electronically. In this case, the data went onto VHS-sized tape cassettes, one of which went into storage container Doc, and the other into Grumpy—there are seven such storage units in the CIA computer room, each named after one of Disney's Seven Dwarfs—while the reference names went into the mainframe so that the computer would know where to look for the data for which the United States government as yet had no understanding. That situation was hardly unknown, of course, and for that reason CIA had every bit of information it generated in a computerized and thoroughly cross-referenced index, instantly accessible, depending on classification, to anyone in either the New or Old Headquarters Buildings located one ridgeline away from the Potomac River. Most of the data in the Seven Dwarfs just sat there, forevermore to be untouched, footnotes to footnotes, never to be of interest even to the driest of academics.

And so?" Zhang Han San asked.

"And so, our Russian neighbors have the luck of the devil," Fang Gan replied, handing the folder over to the senior Minister Without Portfolio. Zhang was seven years older than Fang, closer to his country's Premier. But not that much, and there was little competition between the two ministers. "What we could do with such blessings ..." His voice trailed off.

“Indeed.” That any country could have made constructive use of oil and gold was an obvious truth left unsaid. What mattered here and now was that China would not, and Russia would.

“I had planned for this, you know.”

“Your plans were masterful, my friend,” Fang said from his seat, reaching inside his jacket for a pack of cigarettes. He held it up to seek approval from his host, who’d quit the habit five years before. The response was a dismissive wave of the hand, and Fang tapped one out and lit it from a butane lighter. “But anyone can have bad luck.”

“First the Japanese failed us, and then that religious fool in Tehran,” Zhang groused. “Had either of our supposed allies performed as promised, the gold and the oil would now be ours ...”

“Useful, certainly, for our own purposes, but I am somewhat doubtful on the subject of world acceptance of our notionally prosperous status,” Fang said, with a lengthy puff.

The response was yet another wave of the hand. “You think the capitalists are governed by principle? They need oil and gold, and whoever can provide it cheaply gets to sell the most of it. Look whom they buy from, my old friend, anyone who happens to have it. With all the oil in Mexico, the Americans can’t even work up the courage to seize it. How cowardly of them! In our case, the Japanese, as we have learned to our sorrow, have no principles at all. If they could buy oil from the company which made the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they would. They call it realism,” Zhang concluded scornfully. The real cite came from Vladimir Il’ych Ulyanov, Lenin himself, who’d predicted, not unreasonably, that capitalist nations would compete among themselves to sell the Soviet Union the rope with which the Russians would later hang them all. But Lenin had never planned for Marxism to fail, had he? Just as Mao hadn’t planned for his perfect political/economic vision to fail in the People’s Republic, as evidenced by such slogans as “The Great Leap Forward,” which, among other things, had encouraged ordinary peasants to smelt iron in their backyards. That the resulting slag hadn’t been useful even to make andirons with was a fact not widely advertised in the East or West.

“Alas, fortune did not smile upon us, and so, the oil and gold are not ours.”

“For the moment,” Zhang murmured.

“What was that?” Fang asked, not having quite caught the comment.

Zhang looked up, almost startled from his internal reverie. “Hmph? Oh, nothing, my friend.” And with that the discussion turned to domestic matters. It lasted a total of seventy-five minutes before Fang went back to his office. There began another routine. “Ming,” Fang called, gesturing on the way to his inner office.

The secretary stood and scampered after him, closing the door behind before finding her seat.

“New entry,” Fang said tiredly, for it had been a lengthy day. “Regular

afternoon meeting with Zhang Han San, and we discussed ...” His voice went on, relating the substance and contents of the meeting. Ming duly took her notes for her minister’s official diary. The Chinese were inveterate diarists, and besides that, members of the Politburo felt both an obligation (for scholarly history) and a personal need (for personal survival) to document their every conversation on matters political and concerning national policy, the better to document their views and careful judgment should one of their number make an error of judgment. That this meant his personal secretary, as, indeed, all of the Politburo members’ personal secretaries, had access to the most sensitive secrets of the land was not a matter of importance, since these girls were mere robots, recording and transcription machines, little more than that—well, a little more, Fang and a few of his colleagues thought with the accompanying smile. You couldn’t have a tape machine suck on your penis, could you? And Ming was especially good at it. Fang was a communist, and had been for all of his adult life, but he was not a man entirely devoid of heart, and he had the affection for Ming that another man, or even himself, might have had for a favored daughter ... except that you usually didn’t fuck your own daughter.... His diary entry droned on for twenty minutes, his trained memory recounting every substantive part of his exchange with Zhang, who was doubtless doing the same with his own private secretary right at this moment—unless Zhang had succumbed to the Western practice of using a tape machine, which would not have surprised Fang. For all of Zhang’s pretended contempt for Westerners, he emulated them in so many ways.

They’d also tracked down the name of Klementi Ivan’ch Suvorov. He was yet another former KGB officer, part then of the Third Chief Directorate, which had been a hybrid department of the former spy agency, tasked to overseeing the former Soviet military, and also to overseeing certain special operations of the latter force, like the Spetsnaz, Oleg Provalov knew. He turned a few more pages in Suvorov’s package, found a photograph and fingerprints, and also discovered that his first assignment had been in the First Chief Directorate, known as the Foreign Directorate because of its work in gathering intelligence from other nations. Why the change? he wondered. Usually in KGB, you stayed where you were initially put. But a senior officer in the Third had drafted him by name from the First ... why? Suvorov, K. I., asked for by name by General Major Pavel Konstantinovich Kabinet. The name made Provalov pause. He’d heard it somewhere, but exactly where, he couldn’t recall, an unusual state of affairs for a long-term investigator. Provalov made a note and set it aside.

So, they had a name and a photo for this Suvorov fellow. Had he known Amalrik and Zimyanin, the supposed—and deceased—killers of Avseyenko the pimp? It seemed possible. In the Third Directorate he would have had possible access to the Spetsnaz, but that could have been a mere coincidence. The KGB’s Third Directorate had been mainly concerned with political control of the Soviet military, but that was no longer something the State needed, was it? The entire panoply of political officers, the *zampoliti* who had so long been the

bane of the Soviet military, was now essentially gone.

Where are you now? Provalov asked the file folder. Unlike Central Army Records, KGB records were usually pretty good at showing where former intelligence officers lived, and what they were doing. It was a carryover from the previous regime that worked for the police agencies, but not in this case. *Where are you? What are you doing to support yourself? Are you a criminal? Are you a murderer?* Homicide investigations by their nature created more questions than answers, and frequently ended with many such questions forever unanswered because you could never look inside the mind of a killer, and even if you could, what you might find there didn't have to make any sort of sense.

This murder case had begun as a complex one, and was only becoming more so. All he knew for certain was that Avseyenko was dead, along with his driver and a whore. And now, maybe, he knew even less. He'd assumed almost from the beginning that the pimp had been the real target, but if this Suvorov fellow had hired Amalrik and Zimyanin to do the killing, why would a former —he checked—lieutenant colonel in the Third Chief Directorate of the KGB go out of his way to kill a pimp? Was not Sergey Golovko an equally likely target for the killing, and would that not also explain the murder of the two supposed killers, for eliminating the wrong target? The detective lieutenant opened a desk drawer for a bottle of aspirin. It wasn't the first headache this case had developed, and it didn't seem likely that this would be the last. Whoever Suvorov was, if Golovko had been the target, he had not made the decision to kill the man himself. He'd been a contract killer, and therefore someone else had made the decision to do the killing.

But who?

And why?

Cui bonuo was the ancient question—old enough that the adage was in a dead language. *To whom the good?* Who profited from the deed?

He called Abramov and Ustinov. Maybe they could run Suvorov down, and then he'd fly north to interview the man. Provalov drafted the fax and fired it off to St. Petersburg, then left his desk for the drive home. He checked his watch. Only two hours late. Not bad for this case.

General Lieutenant Gennady Iosifovich Bondarenko looked around his office. He'd had his three stars for a while, and sometimes he wondered if he'd get any further. He'd been a professional soldier for thirty-one years, and the job to which he'd always aspired was Commanding General of the Russian Army. Many good men, and some bad ones, had been there. Gregoriy Zhukov, for one, the man who'd saved his country from the Germans. There were many statues to Zhukov, whom Bondarenko had heard lecture when he was a wet-nosed cadet all those years before, seeing the blunt, bulldog face and ice-blue determined eyes of a killer, a true Russian hero whom politics could not

demean, and whose name the Germans had come to fear.

That Bondarenko had come this far was no small surprise even to himself. He'd begun as a signals officer, seconded briefly to Spetsnaz in Afghanistan, where he'd cheated death twice, both times taking command of a panic-worthy situation and surviving with no small distinction. He'd taken wounds, and killed with his own hands, something few colonels do, and few colonels relished, except at a good officers' club bar after a few stiff ones with their comrades.

Like many generals before him, Bondarenko was something of a "political" general. He'd hitched his career-star to the coattails of a quasi-minister, Sergey Golovko, but in truth he'd never have gone to general-lieutenant's stars without real merit, and courage on the battlefield went as far in the Russian army as it did in any other. Intelligence went further still, and above all came accomplishment. His job was what the Americans called J-3, Chief of Operations, which meant killing people in war and training them in peace. Bondarenko had traveled the globe, learning how other armies trained their men, sifted through the lessons, and applied them to his own soldiers. The only difference between a soldier and a civilian was training, after all, and Bondarenko wanted no less than to bring the Russian army to the same razor-sharp and granite-hard condition with which it had kicked in the gates of Berlin under Zhukov and Koniev. That goal was still off in the future, but the general told himself that he'd laid the proper foundation. In ten years, perhaps, his army would be at that goal, and he'd be around to see it, retired by then, of course, honorably so, with his decorations framed and hanging on the wall, and grandchildren to bounce on his knee ... and occasionally coming in to consult, to look things over and offer his opinion, as retired general officers often did.

For the moment, he had no further work to do, but no particular desire to head home, where his wife was hosting the wives of other senior officers. Bondarenko had always found such affairs tedious. The military attaché in Washington had sent him a book, *Swift Sword,* by a Colonel Nicholas Eddington of the American Army National Guard. Eddington, yes, he was the colonel who'd been training with his brigade in the desert of California when the decision had come to deploy to the Persian Gulf, and his troops—civilians in uniform, really—had performed well: Better than well, the Russian general told himself. They'd exercised the Medusa Touch, destroying everything they'd touched, along with the regular American formations, the 10th and 11th cavalry regiments. Together that one division-sized collection of forces had smashed a full four corps of mechanized troops like so many sheep in the slaughter pen. Even Eddington's guardsmen had performed magnificently. Part of that, Gennady Iosifovich knew, was their motivation. The biological attack on their homeland had understandably enraged the soldiers, and such rage could make a poor soldier into an heroic one as easily as flipping a light switch. "Will to combat" was the technical term. In more pedestrian language, it was the reason a man put his life at risk, and so it was a matter of no small importance to the senior officers whose job it was to lead those men into danger.

Paging through the book, he saw that this Eddington—also a professor of history, the flap said; wasn't that interesting? —paid no small attention to that factor. Well, maybe he was smart in addition to being lucky. He'd had the good fortune to command reserve soldiers with many years of service, and while they'd only had part-time practice for their training, they'd been in highly stable units, where every soldier knew every other, and that was a virtually unknown luxury for regular soldiers. And they'd also had the revolutionary new American IVIS gear, which let all the men and vehicles in the field know exactly what their commander knew, often in great detail ... and in turn told their commander exactly what his men saw. Eddington said that had made his job a lot easier than any mechanized-force commander had ever had it.

The American officer also talked about knowing not only what his subordinate commanders were saying, but also the importance of knowing what they were *thinking,* the things they didn't have the time to say. The implicit emphasis was on the importance of continuity within the officer corps, and *that,* Bondarenko thought as he made a marginal note, was a most important lesson. He'd have to read this book in detail, and maybe have Washington purchase a hundred or so for his brother officers to read ... even get reprint rights in Russia for it? It was something the Russians had done more than once.

CHAPTER 12

Conflicts of the Pocket

Okay, George, let's have it," Ryan said, sipping his coffee. The White House had many routines, and one that had evolved over the past year was that, after the daily intelligence briefing, the Secretary of the Treasury was Ryan's first appointment two or three days of the week. Winston most often walked across—actually under—15th Street via a tunnel between the White House and Treasury Building that dated back to the time of FDR. The other part of the routine was that the President's Navy messmen laid out coffee and croissants (with butter) in which both men indulged to the detriment of their cholesterol numbers.

"The PRC. The trade negotiations have hit the wall pretty hard. They just don't want to play ball."

"What are the issues?"

"Hell, Jack, what *aren't* the friggin' issues?" TRADER took a bite of croissant and grape jelly. "That new computer company their government started up is ripping off a proprietary hardware gadget that Dell has patented—that's the new doohickey that kicked their stock up twenty percent, y'know? They're just dropping the things into the boxes they make for their own market *and* the ones they just started selling in Europe. That's a goddamned violation of all sorts of trade *and* patent treaties, but when we point that out to them over the negotiating table, they just change the subject and ignore it. That could cost Dell something like four hundred million dollars, and that's real money for one company to lose, y"know? If I was their corporate counsel, I'd be flipping through the Yellow Pages for Assassins 'R Us. Okay, that's one. Next, they've told us that if we make too big a deal of these 'minor' disagreements, Boeing can forget the 777 order—twenty-eight aircraft they've optioned—in favor of Airbus."

Ryan nodded. "George, what's the trade balance with the PRC now?"

"Seventy-eight billion, and it's their way, not ours, as you know."

"Scott's running this over at Foggy Bottom?"

SecTreas nodded. "He's got a pretty fair team in place, but they need a little more in the way of executive direction."

"And what's this doing to us?"

"Well, it gets our consumers a lot of low-cost goods, about seventy percent of which is in low-tech stuff, lots of toys, stuffed animals, like that. But, Jack,

thirty percent is upscale stuff. That amount's almost doubled in two and a half years. Pretty soon that's going to start costing us jobs, both in terms of production for domestic consumption and lost exports. They're selling a lot of laptops domestically—in their country, I mean—but they don't let us into the market, even though we've got 'em beat in terms of performance and price. We know for sure they're taking part of their trading surplus with us and using it to subsidize their computer industries. They want to build that up for strategic reasons, I suppose."

"Plus selling weapons to people we'd prefer not to have them," POTUS added. *Which they also do for strategic reasons.* "Well, doesn't everybody need an AK-47 to take care of his gophers?" A shipment of fourteen hundred true—that is, fully automatic—assault rifles had been seized in the Port of Los Angeles two weeks before, but the PRC had denied responsibility, despite the fact that U.S. intelligence services had tracked the transaction order back to a particular Beijing telephone number. That was something Ryan knew, but it had not been allowed to leak, lest it expose methods of intelligence collection—in this case to the National Security Agency at Fort Meade. The new Beijing telephone system hadn't been built by an American firm, but much of the design work had been contracted to a company that had made a profitable arrangement with an agency of the United States government. It wasn't strictly legal, but different rules were attached to national security matters.

"They just don't play by the rules, do they?"

Winston grunted. "Not hardly."

"Suggestions?" President Ryan asked.

"Remind the little slant-eyed fucks that they need us a shitload more than we need them."

"You have to be careful talking like that to nation-states, especially ones with nuclear weapons," Ryan reminded his Treasury Secretary. "Plus the racial slur."

"Jack, either it's a level playing field or it isn't. Either you play fair or you don't. If they keep that much more of our money than we do of theirs, then it means they've got to start playing fair with us. Okay, I know"—he held his hands up defensively—"their noses are a little out of joint over Taiwan, but that was a good call, Jack. You did the right thing, punishing them. Those little fucks killed people, and they probably had complicity in our last adventure in the Persian Gulf—*and* the Ebola attack on us—and so they had it coming. But *nooooo,* we can't punish them for murder and complicity in an act of war on the United States, can we? We have to be too big and strong to be so petty. Petty, my ass, Jack! Directly or indirectly, those little bastards helped that Daryaei guy kill seven thousand of our citizens, and establishing diplomatic relations with Taiwan was the price they paid for it—and a damned small price that was, if you ask me. They ought to understand that. They've got to learn that the world has rules. So, what we have to do is show them that there's pain when you break the rules, and we have to make the pain stick. Until they understand that, there's just going to be more trouble.

Sooner or later, they have to learn. I think it's been long enough to wait."

"Okay, but remember their point of view: Who are we to tell them the rules?"

"Horseshit, Jack!" Winston was one of the very few people who had the ability—if not exactly the right—to talk that way in the Oval Office. Part of it came from his own success, part of it from the fact that Ryan respected straight talk, even if the language was occasionally off-color. "Remember, they're the ones sticking it to us. We *are* playing fair. The world *does* have rules, and those rules are honored by the community of nations, and if Beijing wants to be part of that community, well, then they have to abide by the same rules that everyone else does. If you want to join the club, you have to pay the cost of admittance, *and* even then you still can't drive your golf cart on the greens. You can't have it both ways."

The problem, Ryan reflected, was that the people who ran entire nations—especially large, powerful, important nations—were not the sort to be told how or why to do anything at all. This was all the more true of despotic countries. In a liberal democracy the idea of the rule of law applied to just about everyone. Ryan was President, but he couldn't rob a bank just because he needed pocket change.

"George, okay. Sit down with Scott and work something out that I can agree to, and we'll have State explain the rules to our friends in Beijing." *And who knows, maybe it might even work this time.* Not that Ryan would bet money on it.

This would be the important evening, Nomuri thought. Yeah, sure, he'd banged Ming the night before, and she seemed to have liked it, but now that she'd had time to think it over, would her reaction be the same? Or would she reflect that he'd plied her with liquor and taken advantage of her? Nomuri had dated and bedded his share of women, but he didn't confuse amorous successes with any sort of understanding of the female psyche.

He sat at the bar of the medium-sized restaurant—different from the last one—smoking a cigarette, which was new for the CIA officer. He wasn't coughing, though his first two had made the room seem to spin around some. Carbon monoxide poisoning, he thought. Smoking reduced the oxygen supply to your brain, and was bad for you in so many ways. But it also made waiting a lot easier. He'd bought a Bic lighter, blue, with a facsimile of the PRC flag on it, so that it appeared like their banner was waving in a clear sky. Yeah, he thought, *sure, and here I am wondering if my girl will show up, and she's already* —he checked his watch—*nine minutes late.* Nomuri waved to the bartender and ordered another Scotch. It was a Japanese brand, drinkable, not overly expensive, and when you got down to it, booze was booze, wasn't it?

Are you coming, Ming? the case officer's mind asked the air around him. Like most bars around the world, this one had a mirror behind the glasses and

bottles, and the California native examined his face quizzically, pretending it was someone else's, wondering what someone else might see in it. Nervousness? Suspicion? Fear? Loneliness? Lust? There could be someone making that evaluation right now, some MSS counterintelligence officer doing his stakeout, careful not to look toward Nomuri too much of the time. Maybe using the mirror as an indirect surveillance tool. More likely sitting at an angle so that his posture naturally pointed his eyes to the American, whereas Nomuri would have to turn his head to see him, giving the surveillance agent a chance to avert his glance, probably toward his partner—you tended to do this with teams rather than an individual—whose head would be on the same line of sight, so that he could survey his target without seeming to do so directly. Every nation in the world had police or security forces trained in this, and the methods were the same everywhere because human nature was the same everywhere, whether your target was a drug dealer or a spook. That's just the way it was, Nomuri said to himself, checking his watch again. Eleven minutes late. *It's cool, buddy, women are* always *late. They do it because they can't tell time, or it takes them fucking forever to get dressed and do their makeup, or because they don't remember to wear a watch ... or most likely of all, because it gives them an advantage.* Such behavior, perhaps, made women appear more valuable to men—after all, men waited for *them,* right? Not the other way around. It put a premium on their affection, which if *not* waited for, might *not* appear one day, and that gave men something to fear.

Chester Nomuri, behavioral anthropologist, he snorted to himself, looking back up in the mirror.

For Christ's sake, dude, maybe she's working late, or the traffic is heavy, or some friend at the office needed her to come over and help her move the goddamned furniture. Seventeen minutes. He fished out another Kool and lit it from his ChiComm lighter. *The East is* Red, he thought. And maybe this was the last country in the world that really was red ... wouldn't Mao be proud ... ?

Where are you?

Well, whoever from the MSS might be watching, if he had any doubts about what Nomuri was doing, they'd damned sure know he was waiting for a woman, and if anything his stress would look like that of a guy bewitched by the woman in question. And spooks weren't supposed to be bewitched, were they?

What are you worrying about that *for, asshole, just because you might not get laid tonight?*

Twenty-three minutes late. He stubbed out one cigarette and lit another. If this was a mechanism women used to control men, then it was an effective one.

James Bond never had these problems, the intelligence officer thought. Mr. Kiss-Kiss Bang-Bang was always master of his women—and *if anyone needed proof that Bond was a character of fiction, that was sure as hell it!*

As it turned out, Nomuri was so entranced with his thoughts that he didn't see Ming come in. He felt a gentle tap on his back, and turned rapidly to see—

—she wore the radiant smile, pleased with herself at having surprised him, the beaming dark eyes that crinkled at the corners with the pleasure of the moment.

"I am so sorry to be late," she said rapidly. "Fang needed me to transcribe some things, and he kept me in the office late."

"I must talk to this old man," Nomuri said archly, hauling himself erect on the bar stool.

"He is, as you say, an old man, and he does not listen very well. Perhaps age has impeded his hearing."

No, the old fucker probably doesn't want to listen, Nomuri didn't say. Fang was probably like bosses everywhere, well past the age when he looked for the ideas of others.

"So, what do you want for dinner?" Nomuri asked, and got the best possible answer.

"I'm not hungry." With sparkles in the dark eyes to affirm what she did want. Nomuri tossed off the last of his drink, stubbed out his cigarette, and walked out with her.

So?" Ryan asked.

"So, this is not good news," Arnie van Damm replied.

"I suppose that depends on your point of view. When will they hear arguments?"

"Less than two months, and that's a message, too, Jack. Those good 'strict-constructionist' justices you appointed are going to hear this case, and if I had to bet, I"d wager they're hot to overturn *Roe."*

Jack settled back in his chair and smiled up at his Chief of Staff. "Why is that bad, Arnie?"

"Jack, it's bad because a lot of the citizens out there like to have the option to choose between abortion or not. That's why. 'Pro choice' is what they call it, and so far it's the law."

"Maybe that'll change," the President said hopefully, looking back down at his schedule. The Secretary of the Interior was coming in to talk about the national parks.

"That is *not* something to look forward to, damn it! And it'll be blamed on you!"

"Okay, if and when that happens, I will point out that *I* am not a justice of the United States Supreme Court, and stay away from it entirely. If they decide the way I—and I guess you—think they will, abortion becomes a legislative matter, and the legislature of the 'several states,' as the Constitution terms them, will meet and decide for themselves if the voters want to be able

to kill their unborn babies or not—but, Arnie, I've got four kids, remember. I was there to see them all born, and be damned if you are going to tell me that abortion is okay!" The fourth little Ryan, Kyle Daniel, had been born during Ryan's Presidency, and the cameras had been there to record his face coming out of the delivery room, allowing the entire nation—and the world, for that matter—to share the experience. It had bumped Ryan's approval rating a full fifteen points, pleasing Arnie very greatly at the time.

"God damn it, Jack, I never said that, did I?" van Damm demanded. "But you and I do objectionable things every so often, don't we? And we don't deny other people the right to do such things, too, do we? Smoke, for example?" he added, just to twist Ryan's tail a little.

"Arnie, you use words as cleverly as any man I know, and that was a good play. I'll give you that. But there's a qualitative difference between lighting up a goddamned cigarette and killing a living human being."

"True, if a fetus is a living human being, which is something for theologians, not politicians."

"Arnie, it's like this. The pro-abortion crowd says that whether or not a fetus is human is beside the point because it's inside a woman's body, and therefore her property to do with as she pleases. Fine. It was the law in the Roman Republic and Empire that a wife and children were property of the *paterfamilias,* the head of the family, and he could kill them anytime he pleased. You think we should go back to that?"

"Obviously not, since it empowers men and disempowers women, and we don't do things like that anymore."

"So, you've taken a moral issue and degraded it to what's good politically and what's bad politically. Well, Arnie, I am not here to do that. Even the President is allowed to have some moral principles, or am I supposed to check my ideas of right and wrong outside the door when I show up for work in the morning?"

"But he's not allowed to impose it on others. Moral principles are things you keep on the inside, for yourself."

"What we call law is nothing more or less than the public's collective belief, their conviction of what right and wrong is. Whether it's about murder, kidnapping, or running a red light, society decides what the rules are. In a democratic republic, we do that through the legislature by electing people who share our views. That's how laws happen. We also set up a constitution, the supreme law of the land, which is very carefully considered because it decides what the other laws may and may not do, and therefore it protects us against our transitory passions. The job of the judiciary is to interpret the laws, or in this case the constitutional principles embodied in those laws, as they apply to reality. In *Roe versus Wade,* the Supreme Court went too far. It legislated; it changed the law in a way not anticipated by the drafters, and that was an error. All a reversal of *Roe* will do is return the abortion issue to the state legislatures, where it belongs."

“How long have you been thinking about that speech?” Arnie asked. Ryan’s turn of phrase was too polished for extemporaneous speech.

“A little while,” the President admitted.

“Well, when that decision comes through, be ready for a firestorm,” his Chief of Staff warned. “I’m talking demonstrations, TV coverage, and enough newspaper editorials to paper the walls of the Pentagon, and your Secret Service people will worry about the additional danger to your life, and your wife’s life, and your kids. If you think I’m kidding, ask them.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“There’s no law, federal, state, or local, which compels the world to be logical, Jack. The people out there depend on you to keep the fucking weather pleasant, and they blame you when you don’t. Deal with it.” With that, an annoyed Chief of Staff headed out and west toward his corner office.

“Crap,” Ryan breathed, as he flipped to the briefing papers for the Secretary of the Interior. Smokey Bear’s owner. Also custodian of the national parks, which the President only got to see on the Discovery Channel, on such nights as he had free time to switch the TV on.

There wasn’t much to be said for the clothing people wore in this place, Nomuri thought again, except for one thing. When you undid the buttons and found the Victoria’s Secret stuff underneath, well, it was like having a movie switch from black-and-white to Technicolor. This time Ming allowed him to do her buttons, then slide the jacket down her arms, and then get her trousers off. The panties looked particularly inviting, but then, so did her entire body. Nomuri scooped her up in his arms and kissed her passionately before dropping her on the bed. A minute later, he was beside her.

“So, why were you late?”

She made a face. “Every week Minister Fang meets with other ministers, and when he comes back, he has me transcribe the notes of the meetings so that he has a record of everything that was said.”

“Oh, do you use my new computer for that?” The question concealed the quivering *Jesus!* he felt throughout his body on hearing Ming’s words. This girl could be one hell of a source! Nomuri took a deep breath and resumed his poker face of polite disinterest.

“Of course.”

“Excellent. It’s equipped with a modem, yes?”

“Of course, I use it every day to retrieve Western news reports and such from their media Web sites.”

“Ah, that is good.” So, he’d taken care of business for the day, and with that job done, Nomuri leaned over for a kiss.

“Before I came into the restaurant, I put the lipstick on,” Ming explained. “I don’t wear it at work.”

“So I see,” the CIA officer replied, repeating the initial kiss, and extending it in time. Her arms found their way around his neck. The reason for her lateness had nothing to do with a lack of affection. That was obvious now, as his hands started to wander also. The front-closure on the bra was the smartest thing he’d done. Just a flick of thumb and forefinger and it sprang open, revealing both of her rather cute breasts, two more places for his hand to explore. The skin there was particularly silky ... and, he decided a few seconds later, tasty as well.

This resulted in an agreeable moan and squirm of pleasure from his ... what? Friend? Well, okay, but not enough. Agent? Not yet. Lover would do for the moment. They’d never talked at The Farm about this sort of thing, except the usual warnings not to get too close to your agent, lest you lose your objectivity. But if you didn’t get a little bit close, you’d never recruit the agent, would you? Of course, Chester knew that he was far more than a *little bit* close at the moment.

Whatever her looks, she had delightful skin, and his fingertips examined it in great detail as his eyes smiled into hers, with the occasional kiss. And her body wasn’t bad at all. A nice shape even when she stood. A little too much waist, maybe, but this wasn’t Venice Beach, and the hourglass figure, however nice it might look in pictures, was just that, a picture look. Her waist was smaller than her hips, and that was enough for the moment. It wasn’t as though she’d be walking down the ramp at some New York fashion show, where the models looked like boys anyway. *So, Ming is not now and would never be a supermodel—deal with it,* Chet, the officer told himself. Then it was time to put all the CIA stuff aside. He was a man, dressed only in boxer shorts, next to a woman, dressed only in panties. Panties large enough maybe to make a handkerchief, though orange-red wouldn’t be a good color for a man to pull from his back pocket, especially, he added to himself with a smile, in some artificial silk fabric.

“Why do you smile?” Ming asked.

“Because you are pretty,” Nomuri replied. And so she was, now, with that particular smile on her face. No, she’d never be a model, but inside every woman was the look of beauty, if only they would let it out. And her skin was first-class, especially her lips, coated with after-work lipstick, smooth and greasy, yet making his lips linger even so. Soon their bodies touched almost all over, and a warm, comfortable feeling it was, so nicely she fit under one arm, while his left hand played and wandered. Ming’s hair didn’t tangle much. She could evidently brush it out very easily, it was so short. Her underarms, too, were hairy, like many Chinese women’s, but that only gave Nomuri something else to play with, teasing and pulling a little. That evidently tickled her. Ming giggled playfully and hugged him tighter, then relaxed to allow his hand to wander more. As it passed her navel, she lay suddenly still, relaxing herself in some kind of invitation. Time for another kiss as his fingertips wandered farther, and there was humor in her eyes now. What game could this be ... ?

As soon as his hands found her panties, her bottom lifted off the mattress. He sat up halfway and pulled them down, allowing her left foot to kick them into the air, where the red-orange pants flew like a mono-colored rainbow, and then—

"Ming!" he said in humorous accusation.

"I've heard that men like this," she said with a sparkle and a giggle.

"Well, it is different," Nomuri replied, as his hands traced over skin even smoother than the rest of her body. "Did you do this at work?"

A riotous laugh now: "No, fool! This morning at my apartment! In my own bathroom, with my own razor."

"Just wanted to make sure," the CIA officer assured her. *Damn, isn't* this *something!* Then her hand moved to do to him much the same as he was doing to her.

"You are different from Fang," her voice told him in a playful whisper.

"Oh? How so?"

"I think the worst thing a woman can say to a man is 'Are you in yet?' One of the other secretaries said that to Fang once. He beat her. She came into work the next day with black eyes—he made her come in—and then the next night... well, he had me to bed," she admitted, not so much with shame as embarrassment. "To show what a man he still is. But I knew better than to say *that* to him. We all do, now."

"Will you say that to me?" Nomuri asked with a smile and another kiss.

"Oh, no! You are a sausage, not a string bean!" Ming told him enthusiastically.

It wasn't the most elegant compliment he'd ever had, but it sufficed for the moment, Nomuri thought.

"Do you think it's time for the sausage to find a home?"

"Oh, yes!"

As he rolled on top, Nomuri saw two things under him. One was a girl, a young woman with the usual female drives, which he was about to answer. The other was a potential agent, with access to political intelligence such as an experienced case officer only dreamed about. But Nomuri wasn't an experienced case officer. He was still a little wet behind the ears, and so he didn't know what was impossible. He'd have to worry about his potential agent, because if he ever recruited her successfully, her life would be in the gravest danger... he thought about what would happen, how her face would change as the bullet entered her brain... but, no, it was too ugly. With an effort, Nomuri forced the thought aside as he slipped into her. If he were to recruit her at all, he had to perform this function well. And if it made him happy, too, well, that was just a bonus.

I'll think about it," POTUS promised the Secretary of the Interior, walking him to the door that led to the corridor, to the left of the fireplace. *Sorry, buddy, but the money isn't there to do all that.* His SecInterior was by no means a bad man, but it seemed he'd been captured by his departmental bureaucracy, which was perhaps the worst danger of working in Washington. He sat back down to read the papers the Secretary had handed over. Of course he wouldn't have time to read it all over himself. On a good day, he'd be able to skim through the Executive Summary of the documents, while the rest went to a staffer who'd go through it all and draft a report to the President—in effect, *another* Executive Summary of sorts, and from that document, typed up by a White House staff member of maybe twenty-eight years, policy would actually be made.

And that was crazy! Ryan thought angrily. *He* was supposed to be the chief executive of the country. *He* was the only one who was supposed to make policy. But the President's time was valuable. So valuable, in fact, that others guarded it for him—and really those others guarded his time from himself, because ultimately it was they who decided what Ryan saw and didn't see. Thus, while Ryan *was* the Chief Executive, and *did* alone make executive policy, he made that policy often based solely on the information presented to him by others. And sometimes it worried him that he was controlled by the information that made it to his desk, rather as the press decided what the public saw, and thus had a hand in deciding what the public thought about the various issues of the day.

So, Jack, have you been captured by your *bureaucracy, too?* It was hard to know, hard to tell, and hard to decide how to change the situation, if the situation existed in the first place.

Maybe that's why Arnie likes me to get out of this building to where the real people are, Jack realized.

The more difficult problem was that Ryan was a foreign-policy and national-security expert. In those areas he felt the most competent. It was on domestic stuff that he felt disconnected and dumb. Part of that came from his personal wealth. He'd never worried about the cost of a loaf of bread or a quart of milk —all the more so in the White House, where you never saw milk in a quart container anyway, but only in a chilled glass on a silver tray, carried by a Navy steward's mate right to your hands while you sat in your easy chair. There were people out there who did worry about such things, or at least worried about the cost of putting little Jimmy through college, and Ryan, as President, had to concern himself with their worries. He had to try to keep the economy in balance so that they could earn their decent livings, could go to Disney World in the summer, and the football games in the fall, and splurge to make sure there were plenty of presents under the Christmas tree every year.

But *how* the hell was he supposed to do that? Ryan remembered a lament attributed to the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. On learning that he'd been declared a god, and that temples had been erected to him, and that people sacrificed to the statues of himself in those temples, Augustus angrily inquired: *When someone prays to me to cure his gout, what am I supposed to* do? The

fundamental issue was how much government policy really had to do with reality. That was a question seldom posed in Washington even by conservatives who ideologically despised the government and everything it did in domestic terms, though they were often in favor of showing the flag and rattling the national saber overseas—exactly why they enjoyed this Ryan had never thought about. Perhaps just to be different from liberals who flinched from the exercise of force like a vampire from the cross, but who, like vampires, liked to extend government as far as they could get away with into the lives of everyone, and so suck their blood—in reality, use the instrument of taxation to take more and more to pay for the more and more they would have the government do.

And yet the economy seemed to move on, regardless of what government did. People found their jobs, most of them in the private sector, providing goods and services for which people paid voluntarily with their after-tax money. And yet "public service" was a phrase used almost exclusively by and about political figures, almost always the elected sort. Didn't everyone out there serve the public in one way or another? Physicians, teachers, firefighters, pharmacists. Why did the media say it was just Ryan and Robby Jackson, and the 535 elected members of the Congress? He shook his head.

Damn. Okay, I know how I got here, but why the hell did I allow myself to run for election? Jack asked himself. It had made Arnie happy. It had even made the media happy—*perhaps because they loved him as a target?* the President asked himself—and Cathy had not been cross with him about it. But *why* the hell had he ever allowed himself to be stampeded into this? He fundamentally didn't know what he was supposed to do as President. He had no real agenda, and sort of bumped along from day to day. Making tactical decisions (for which he was singularly unqualified) instead of large strategic ones. There was nothing important he really wanted to change about his country. Oh, sure, there were a few problems to be fixed. Tax policy needed rewriting, and he was letting George Winston ramrod that. And Defense needed firming up, and he had Tony Bretano working on that. He had a Presidential Commission looking at health-care policy, which his wife, actually, was overseeing in a distant way, along with some of her Hopkins colleagues, and all of that was kept quiet. And there was that very black look at Social Security, being guided by Winston and Mark Gant.

The "third rail of American politics," he thought again. Step on it and die. But Social Security was something the American people really cared about, not for what it was, but for what they wrongly thought it to be—and, actually, they knew that their thoughts were wrong, judging by the polling data. As thoroughly mismanaged as any financial institution could possibly be, it was still part of a government promise made by the representatives *of* the people *to* the people. And somehow, despite all the cynicism out there—which was considerable—the average Joe Citizen really did trust his government to keep its word. The problem was that union chiefs and industrialists who'd dipped into pension funds and gone to federal prison for it had done nothing compared to what succeeding Congresses had done to Social Security—but the advantage of a crook in Congress was that he or she was not a crook, not

legally. After all, Congress made the *law*. Congress made *government policy,* and those things couldn't be *wrong,* could they? Yet another proof that the drafters of the Constitution had made one simple but far-reaching error. They'd assumed that the people selected by The People to manage the nation would be as honest and honorable as they'd been. One could almost hear the "Oops!" emanating from all those old graves. The people who'd drafted the Constitution had sat in a room dominated by George Washington himself, and whatever honor they'd lacked he'd probably provided from his own abundant supply, just by sitting there and looking at them. *The current Congress had no such mentor/living god to take George's place, and more was the pity,* Ryan thought. The mere fact that Social Security had shown a profit up through the 1960s had meant that—well, Congress couldn't let a *profit* happen, could it? *Profits* were what made rich people (who had to be bad people, because no one grew rich without having exploited someone or other, right?, which never stopped members of the Congress from going to those people for campaign contributions, of course) rich, and so profits had to be spent, and so Social Security taxes (properly called premiums, because Social Security was actually called OASDI, for Old Age, Survivors, and Disability *Insurance)* were transformed into general funds, to be spent along with everything else. One of Ryan's students from his days of teaching history at the Naval Academy had sent him a small plaque to keep on his White House desk. It read: *THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC WILL ENDURE UNTIL THE DAY CONGRESS DISCOVERS THAT IT CAN BRIBE THE PUBLIC WITH THE PUBLIC'S MONEY—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE.* Ryan paid heed to it. There were times when he wanted to grab Congress by its collective neck and throttle it, but there was no single such neck, and Arnie never tired of telling him how tame a Congress he had, the House of Representatives especially, which was the reverse of how things usually went.

The President grumbled and checked his daily schedule for his next appointment. As with everything else, the President of the United States lived a schedule determined by others, his appointments made weeks in advance, the daily briefing pages prepared the day before so that he'd know who the hell was coming in, and what the hell he, she, or they wanted to talk about, and also what his considered position (mainly drafted by others) was. The President's position was usually a friendly one so that the visitor(s) could leave the Oval Office feeling good about the experience, and the rules were that you couldn't change the agenda, lest the Chief Executive say, "What the hell are you asking me for now!" This would alarm both the guest and the Secret Service agents standing right behind them, hands close to their pistols —just standing there like robots, faces blank but scanning, ears taking everything in. After their shift ended, they probably headed off to whatever cop bar they frequented to chuckle over what the City Council President of Podunk had said in the Oval Office that day—"Jesus, did you see the Boss's eyes when that dumb bastard ... ?"—because they were bright, savvy people who in many ways understood his job better than he did, Ryan reflected. Well they should. They had the double advantage of having seen it all, and not being responsible for any of it. *Lucky bastards,* Jack thought, standing for his next appointment.

If cigarettes were good for anything, it was for this, Nomuri thought. His left arm was curled around Ming, his body snuggled up against her, staring at the ceiling in the lovely, relaxed, deflationary moment, and puffing gently on his Kool as an accent to the moment, feeling Ming's breathing, and feeling very much like a man. The sky outside the windows was dark. The sun had set.

Nomuri stood, stopping first in the bathroom and then heading to the kitchenette. He returned with two wine-glasses. Ming sat up in bed and took a sip from hers. For his part, Nomuri couldn't resist reaching over to touch her. Her skin was just so smooth and inviting.

"My brain is still not working," she said, after her third sip.

"Darling, there are times when men and women don't need their brains."

"Well, your sausage doesn't need one," she responded, reaching down to fondle it.

"Gently, girl! He's run a long hard race!" the CIA officer warned her with an inner smile.

"Oh, so he has." Ming bent down to deliver a gentle kiss. "And he won the race."

"No, but he did manage to catch up with you." Nomuri lit another cigarette. Then he was surprised to see Ming reach into her purse and pull out one of her own. She lit it with grace and took a long puff, finally letting the smoke out her nose.

"Dragon girl!" Nomuri announced with a laugh. "Do flames come next? I didn't know you smoked."

"At the office, everyone does."

"Even the minister?"

Another laugh: *"Especially* the minister."

"Someone should tell him that smoking is dangerous to the health, and not good for the yang."

"A smoked sausage is not a firm sausage," Ming said, with a laugh. "Maybe that's his problem, then."

"You do not like your minister?"

"He is an old man with what he thinks is a young penis. He uses the office staff as his personal bordello. Well, it could be worse," Ming admitted. "It's been a long time since I was his favorite. Lately he's fixed on Chai, and she is engaged, and Fang knows it. That is not a civilized act on the part of a senior minister."

"The laws do not apply to him?"

She snorted with borderline disgust. "The laws apply to none of them.

Nomuri-san, these are government *ministers.* They *are* the law in this country, and they care little for what others think of them or their habits—few enough find out in any case. They are corrupt on a scale that shames the emperors of old, and they say they are the guardians of the common people, the peasants and workers they claim to love as their own children. Well, I suppose sometimes I am one of those peasants, eh?"

"And I thought you liked your minister," Nomuri responded, goading her on. "So, what does he talk about?"

"What do you mean?"

"The late work that kept you away from here," he answered, waving at the bedclothes with a smile.

"Oh, talk between the ministers. He keeps an extensive personal political diary—in case the president might want to oust him, that is his defense, you see, something he could present to his peers. Fang doesn't want to lose his official residence and all the privileges that come along with it. So, he keeps records of all he does, and I am his secretary, and I transcribe all his notes. Sometimes it can take forever."

"On your computer, of course."

"Yes, the new one, in perfect Mandarin ideographs now that you've given us the new software."

"You keep it on your computer?"

"On the hard drive, yes. Oh, it's encrypted," she assured him. "We learned that from the Americans, when we broke into their weapons records. It's called a robust encryption system, whatever that means. I select the file I wish to open and type in the decryption key, and the file opens. Do you want to know what key I use?" She giggled. "YELLOW SUBMARINE. In English because of the keyboard—it was before your new software—and it's from a Beatles song I heard on the radio once. 'We all live in a yellow submarine,' something like that. I listened to the radio a lot back then, when I was first studying English. I spent half an hour looking up submarines in the dictionary and then the encyclopedia, trying to find out why a ship was painted yellow. Ahh!" Her hands flew up in the air.

The encryption key! Nomuri tried to hide his excitement. "Well, it must be a lot of folders. You've been his secretary for a lot of time," he said casually.

"Over four hundred documents. I keep them by number instead of making up new names for them. Today was number four hundred eighty-seven, as a matter of fact."

Holy shit, Nomuri thought, *four hundred eighty-seven computer documents of inside-the-Politburo conversations. This makes a gold mine look like a toxic waste dump.*

"What exactly do they talk about? I've never met a senior government functionary," Nomuri explained.

"Everything!" she answered, finishing her own cigarette. "Who's got ideas in

the Politburo, who wants to be nice to America, who wants to hurt them—everything you can imagine. Defense policy. Economic policy. The big one lately is how to deal with Hong Kong. 'One Country, Two Systems' has developed problems with some industrialists around Beijing and Shanghai. They feel they are treated with less respect than they deserve—less than they get in Hong Kong, that is—and they are unhappy about it. Fang's one of the people trying to find a compromise to make them happy. He might. He's very clever at such things."

"It must be fascinating to see such information—to really know what's going on in your country!" Nomuri gushed. "In Japan, we never know what the *zaibatsu* and the MITI people are doing—ruining the economy, for the most part, the fools. But because nobody knows, no action is ever taken to fix things. Is it the same here?"

"Of course!" She lit another smoke, getting into the conversation, and hardly noticing that it wasn't about love anymore. "Once I studied my Marx and my Mao. Once I believed in it all. Once I even trusted the senior ministers to be men of honor and integrity, and totally believed the things they taught me in school. But then I saw how the army has its own industrial empire, and that empire keeps the generals rich and fat and happy. And I saw how the ministers use women, and how they furnish their apartments. They've become the new emperors. They have too much power. Perhaps a woman could use such power without being corrupted, but not a man."

Feminism's made it over here, too? Nomuri reflected. Maybe she was too young to remember Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, who could have given corruption lessons to the court of Byzantium.

"Well, that is not a problem for people like us. And at least you get to see such things, and at least *you* get to know it. That makes you even more unique, Ming-chan," Nomuri suggested, tracing the palm of his hand over her left nipple. She shivered right on command.

"You think so?"

"Of course." A kiss this time, a nice lingering one, while his hand stroked her body. He was so close. She had told him of all the information she had—she'd even given him the fucking encryption key! So her 'puter was wired into the phone system—that meant he could call in to it, and with the right software he could go snooping around her hard drive, and with the encryption key he could lift things right off, and cross-load them right to Mary Pat's desk. *Damn, first I get to fuck a Chinese citizen, and then I can fuck their whole country.* It didn't get much better than this, the field spook decided, with a smile at the ceiling.

CHAPTER 13

Penetration Agent

Well, he left the prurient parts out this time, Mary Pat saw when she lit up her computer in the morning. Operation SORGE was moving right along. Whoever this Ming girl was, she talked a little too much. Odd. Hadn't the MSS briefed all the executive secretaries about this sort of thing? Probably—it would have been a remarkable oversight if they hadn't—but it also seemed likely that of the well-known reasons for committing treason and espionage (known as MICE: Money, Ideology, Conscience, and Ego), this one was Ego. Young Miss Ming was being used sexually by her Minister Fang, and she didn't much like it, and that made perfect sense to Mary Patricia Foley. A woman only had so much to give, and to have it taken coercively by a man of power wasn't something calculated to make a woman happy—though ironically the powerful man in question probably thought he was honoring her with his biological attention. After all, was he not a great man, and was she not a peasant? The thought was good for a snort as she took a sip of morning seventh-floor coffee. It didn't matter what culture or race, men were all the same, weren't they? So many of them thought from the dick instead of the brain. Well, it was going to cost this one dearly, the Deputy Director (Operations) concluded.

Ryan saw and heard the PDB, the President's Daily Brief, every day. It covered intelligence information developed by CIA, was prepared late every night and printed early every morning, and there were less than a hundred copies, almost all of which were shredded and burned later in the day of delivery. A few copies, maybe three or four, were kept as archives, in case the electronic files somehow got corrupted, but even President Ryan didn't know where the secure-storage site was. He hoped it was carefully guarded, preferably by Marines.

The PDB didn't contain everything, of course. Some things were so secret that even the President couldn't be trusted. That was something Ryan accepted with remarkable equanimity. Sources' names had to remain secret, even from him, and methods were often so narrowly technical that he'd have trouble understanding the technology used anyway. But even some of the "take," the information obtained by the CIA through nameless sources and overly intricate methods, was occasionally hidden from the Chief Executive, because some information *had* to come from a certain limited number of sources. The

intelligence business was one in which the slightest mistake could end the life of a priceless asset, and while such things had happened, nobody had ever felt good about it—though to some politicians, it had been a matter of infuriating indifference. A good field spook viewed his agents as his own children, whose lives were to be protected against all hazards. Such a point of view was necessary. If you didn't care that much, then people died—and with their lost lives went lost information, which was the whole point of having a clandestine service in the first place.

"Okay, Ben," Ryan said, leaning back in his chair and flipping through the PDB pages. "What's interesting?"

"Mary Pat has something happening in China. Not sure what it is, though. She's keeping these cards pretty close. The rest of today's document you can get on CNN."

Which was, depressingly, not infrequently the case. On the other hand, the world was fairly sedate, and penetrating information wasn't all that necessary ... or apparently so, Ryan corrected himself. You could never tell. He'd learned that one at Langley, too.

"Maybe I'll call her about it," POTUS said, flipping the page. "Whoa!"

"The Russian oil and gold?"

"Are these numbers for real?"

"It appears so. They track with what TRADER'S been feeding us from his sources, step for step."

"Ummhmm," Ryan breathed, looking over the resulting forecasts for the Russian economy. Then he frowned with some disappointment. "George's people did a better evaluation of results."

"Think so? CIA's economics troops have a pretty decent track record."

"George lives in that business. That's better than being an academic observer of events, Ben. Academia is fine, but the real world is the *real* world, remember."

Goodley nodded. "Duly noted, sir."

"Throughout the '80s, CIA overestimated the Soviet economy. Know why?"

"No, I don't. What went wrong?"

Jack smiled wryly. "It wasn't what was wrong. It was what was *right.* We had an agent back then who fed us the same information the Soviet Politburo got. It just never occurred to us that the system was lying to itself. The Politburo based its decisions on a chimera. Their numbers were almost never right because the underlings were covering their own asses. Oops."

"Same thing in China, you suppose?" Goodley asked. "They're the last really Marxist country, after all."

"Good question. Call Langley and ask. You'll get an answer from the same sort of bureaucrat the Chinese have in Beijing, but to the best of my knowledge we don't have a penetration agent in Beijing who can give us the

numbers we want." Ryan paused and looked at the fireplace opposite his desk. He'd have to have the Secret Service put a real fire in it someday ... "No, I expect the Chinese have better numbers. They can afford to. Their economy is working, after a fashion. They probably deceive themselves in other ways. But they *do* deceive themselves. It's a universal human characteristic, and Marxism doesn't ameliorate it very much." Even in America, with its free press and other safeguards, reality often slapped political figures in the face hard enough to loosen some teeth. Everywhere, people had theoretical models based on ideology rather than facts, and those people usually found their way into academia or politics, because real-world professions punished that sort of dreamer more than politics ever did.

"Morning, Jack," a voice said from the corridor door.

"Hey, Robby." POTUS pointed to the coffee tray. Vice President Jackson got himself a cup, but passed on the croissants. His waistline looked a little tight. Well, Robby had never looked like a marathoner. So many fighter pilots tended to have thick waists. Maybe it was good for fighting g-forces, Jack speculated.

"Read the PDB this morning. Jack, this Russian oil and gold thing. Is it really that big?"

"George says it's even bigger. You ever sit down with him to learn economics?"

"End of the week, we're going to play a round at Burning Tree, and I'm reading Milton Friedman and two other books to bone up for it. You know, George comes across as pretty smart."

"Smart enough to make a ton of money on The Street—and I mean if you put his money in hundred-dollar bills and weigh them, it *is* a fucking ton of money."

"Must be nice," breathed a man who'd never made more than $130,000 in a year before taking on his current job.

"Has its moments, but the coffee here's still pretty good."

"It was better on *Big John,* once upon a time."

"Where?"

"John F. Kennedy, back when I was an O-3, and doing fun work, like driving Tomcats off the boat."

"Robby, hate to tell you, my friend, but you're not twenty-six anymore."

"Jack, you have such a way of brightening up my days for me. I've walked past death's door before, but it's safer and a hell of a lot more fun to do it with a fighter plane strapped to your back."

"What's your day look like?"

"Believe it or not, I have to drive down to the Hill and preside at the Senate for a few hours, just to show I know what the Constitution says I'm supposed to do. Then a dinner speech in Baltimore about who makes the best

brassieres," he added with a smile.

"What?" Jack asked, looking up from the PDB. The thing about Robby's sense of humor was that you never really knew when he was kidding.

"National meeting of artificial fiber manufacturers. They also make bulletproof vests, but bras get most of their fibers, or so my research staff tells me. They're trying to make a few jokes for the speech."

"Work on your delivery," the President advised the Vice President.

"You thought I was funny enough way back when," Jackson reminded his old friend.

"Rob, I thought *I* was funny enough way back when, but Arnie tells me I'm not sensitive enough."

"I know, no Polish jokes. Some Polacks learned to turn on their TVs last year, and there's six or seven who know how to read. That doesn't count the Polish gal who doesn't use a vibrator because it chips her teeth."

"Jesus, Robby!" Ryan almost spilled his coffee laughing. "We're not even allowed to *think* things like that anymore."

"Jack, I'm not a politician. I'm a fighter jock. I got the flight suit, the hackwatch, and the dick to go along with the job title, y'dig?" the Vice President asked with a grin. "And I am allowed to tell a joke once in a while."

"Fine, just remember this isn't the ready room on the *Kennedy*. The media lacks the sense of humor enjoyed by naval aviators."

"Yeah, unless they catch us in something. Then it's funnier 'n hell," the retired Vice Admiral observed.

"Rob, you're finally catching on. Glad to see it." Ryan's last sight of the departing subordinate was the back of a nicely tailored suit, accompanied by a muttered vulgarity.

So, Mishka, any thoughts? "Provalov asked.

Reilly took a sip of his vodka. It was awfully smooth here. "Oleg, you just have to shake the tree and see what falls out. It could be damned near anything, but 'don't know' means 'don't know'. And at the moment, we don't know." Another sip. "Does it strike you that two former Spetsnaz guys are a lot of firepower to go after a pimp?"

The Russian nodded. "Yes, of course, I've thought of that, but he was a very prosperous pimp, wasn't he, Mishka? He had a great deal of money, and very many contacts inside the criminal establishment. He had power of his own. Perhaps he'd had people killed as well. We never had his name come up in a serious way in any murder investigations, but that doesn't mean that Avseyenko was not a dangerous man in his own right, and therefore worthy of such high-level attention."

“Any luck with this Suvorov guy?”

Provalov shook his head. “No. We have a KGB file for him and a photograph, but even if that is for the right person, we haven’t found him yet.”

“Well, Oleg Gregoriyevich, it looks as though you have a real head-scratcher on your hands.” Reilly lifted his hand to order another round.

“You are supposed to be the expert on organized crime,” the Russian lieutenant reminded his FBI guest.

“That’s true, Oleg, but I ain’t no gypsy fortune-teller, and I ain’t the Oracle of Delphi either. You don’t know who the real target was yet, and until you learn that, you don’t know jack shit. Problem is, to find out who the target was, you have to find somebody who knows something about the crime. The two things are wrapped up together, bro. Get one, get both. Get neither, get nothing.” The drinks arrived. Reilly paid and took another hit.

“My captain is not pleased.”

The FBI agent nodded. “Yeah, bosses are like that in the Bureau, too, but he’s supposed to know what the problems are, right? If he does, he knows he has to give you the time and the resources to play it out. How many men you have on it now?”

“Six here, and three more in St. Petersburg.”

“May want to get some more, bro.” In the FBI’s New York OC office, a case like this could have as many as twenty agents working it, half of them on a full-time basis. But the Moscow Militia was stretched notoriously thin. For as much crime as there was now in Moscow, the local cops were still sucking hind tit when it came to government support. But it could have been worse. Unlike much of Russian society, the militiamen were getting paid.

You tire me out, ”Nomuri protested.

“There is always Minister Fang,” Ming replied with a playful look.

“*Ah!*” was the enraged reply. “You compare me with an old man?”

“Well, both of you are men, but better a sausage than a string bean,” she answered, grasping the former in her soft left hand.

“Patience, girl, allow me to recover from the first race.” With that he lifted her body over his and let it down. *She must really like me,* Nomuri reflected. *Three nights in a row. I suppose Fang isn’t the man he thinks he is. Well, can’t win ’em all, Charlie.* Plus the advantage of being forty years younger. There was probably something to that, the CIA officer admitted to himself.

“But you run so fast!” Ming protested, rubbing her body on his.

“There is something I want you to do.”

A very playful smile. “What might that be?” she asked while her hand

wandered a little.

“Not that!”

“Oh ...” The disappointment in her voice was noteworthy.

“Something for work,” Nomuri explained on. Just as well she couldn’t feel the shaking inside his body, which, remarkably enough, didn’t show.

“For work? I can’t bring you into the office for this!” she said with a laugh, followed by a warm, affectionate kiss.

“Yes, something to upload onto your computer.” Nomuri reached into the night-table drawer and pulled out a CD-ROM. “Here, you just load this into your machine, click INSTALL, and then dispose of it when you’re done.”

“And what will it do?” she asked.

“Do you care?”

“Well ...” Hesitation. She didn’t understand. “I must care.”

“It will allow me to look at your computer from time to time.”

“But why?”

“Because of Nippon Electric—we make your computer, don’t you see?” He allowed his body to relax. “It is useful for my company to know how economic decisions are made in the People’s Republic,” Nomuri explained, with a well-rehearsed lie. “This will allow us to understand that process a little better, so that we can do business more effectively. And the better I do for them, the more they will pay me—and the more I can spend on my darling Ming.”

“I see,” she thought, wrongly.

He bent down to kiss a particularly nice spot. Her body shuddered in just the right way. Good, she wasn’t resisting the idea, or at least wasn’t letting it get in the way of this activity, which was good for Nomuri in more than one way. The intelligence officer wondered if someday his conscience would attack him for using this girl in such a way. But business, he told himself, was business.

“No one will know?”

“No, that is not possible.”

“And it will not get me into trouble?”

With that question he rolled over, finding himself on top. He held her face in both hands. “Would I ever do something to get Ming-chan in trouble? Never!” he announced, with a deep and passionate kiss.

Afterward there was no talk about the CD-ROM, which she tucked into her purse before leaving. It was a nice-looking purse, a knockoff of something Italian that you could buy on the street here, rather like the genuine ones in New York that “fell off the back of the truck,” as the euphemism went.

Every time they parted, it was a little hard. She didn’t want to leave, and truly he didn’t want her to depart, but it was necessary. For them to share an

apartment would be commented upon. Even in her dreams, Ming couldn't think of that, actually sleeping at the apartment of a foreigner, because she *did* have a security clearance, and she *had* been given her security brief by a bored MSS officer, along with all the other senior secretaries, and she *hadn't* reported this contact to her superiors or the office security chief as she ought to have done—why? Partly because she'd forgotten the rules, because she'd never broken them or known someone who had done so, and partly because like many people she drew a line between her private life and her professional one. That the two were not allowed to be separate in her case was something that the MSS briefing had covered, but in so clumsy a way as to have been disregarded even upon its delivery. And so here she was, not even knowing where and what *here* was. With luck, she'd never have to find out, Nomuri thought, watching her turn the corner and disappear from view. Luck would help. What the MSS interrogators did to young women in the Beijing version of the Lubyanka didn't really bear much contemplation, certainly not when one had just made love to her twice in two hours.

"Good luck, honey," Nomuri whispered, as he closed the door and headed to the bathroom for a shower.

CHAPTER 14

(dot)com

It was a sleepless night for Nomuri. Would she do it? Would she do what she was told? Would she tell a security officer about it, and then about him? Might she be caught with the CD-ROM going into work and questioned about it? If so, a casual inspection would show it to be a music CD, Bill Conti's musical score for *Rocky*—a poorly marked knockoff of an American intellectual property that was quite common in the PRC. But a more careful examination would have revealed that the first—outermost—data line on the metallic surface told the computer CD-ROM reader to skip to a certain place where the content was not music, but binary code, and very efficient binary code at that.

The CD-ROM didn't contain a virus per se, because a virus circulates mainly across computer networks, entering a computer surreptitiously the way a disease organism enters a living host (hence the term virus). But this one came in the front door, and on being read by the CD-ROM reader, a single prompt came up on the screen, and Ming, after a quick look-around in her office, moved her mouse to put the pointer on the prompt, clicked the INSTALL command, and everything immediately disappeared. The program thus implanted searched her hard drive at nearly the speed of light, categorizing every file and setting up its own index, then compressing it into a small file that hid in plain sight, as it were, identified by any disk-sorting program with a wholly innocent name that referred to a function carried out by another program entirely. Thus only a very careful and directed search by a skilled computer operator could even detect that something was even there. Exactly what the program did could only be determined by a one-by-zero reading of the program itself, something difficult to accomplish at best. It would be like trying to find what was wrong with a single leaf on a single tree in a vast forest where all the trees and all the leaves looked pretty much alike, except that this one leaf was smaller and humbler than most. CIA and NSA could no longer attract the best programmers in America. There was just too much money in the consumer electronics industry for government to compete effectively in that marketplace. But you could still hire them, and the work that came out was just as good. And if you paid them enough—strangely, you could pay lots more to a contractor than to an employee—they wouldn't talk to anyone about it. And besides, they never really knew what it was all about anyway, did they?

In this case, there was an additional level of complexity that went back over sixty years. When the Germans had overrun the Netherlands in 1940, they'd

created a strange situation. In Holland the Germans had found both the most cooperative of their conquered nations and the most fiercely resistant. More Dutchmen per capita had joined the Germans than any other nationality—enough to form their own SS division, SS Nordland. At the same time, the Dutch resistance became the most effective in Europe, and one of their number was a brilliant mathematician/engineer working for the national telephone company. In the second decade of the twentieth century, the telephone had reached a developmental roadblock. When you lifted a phone, you were immediately connected with an operator to whom you gave the destination you were trying to call, and she then physically moved a plug into the proper hole. This system had been workable when only a few telephones were in use, but the appliance had rapidly proved too useful for limited applications. The solution to the problem, remarkably enough, had come from a mortician in the American South. Vexed by the fact that the local operator in his town referred the bereaved to a competing undertaker, he had invented the stepping switch, which enabled people to reach their own phone destinations merely by turning a rotary dial. That system served the world well, but also required the development of a whole body of new mathematical knowledge called "complexity theory," which was systematized by the American company AT&T in the 1930s.

Ten years later, merely by adding additional digits to be dialed, the Dutch engineer in the resistance had applied complexity theory to covert operations by creating theoretical pathways through the switching gear, thus enabling resistance fighters to call others without knowing whom they called, or even the actual telephone numbers they were calling.

This bit of electronic skullduggery had first been noticed by an officer for the British Special Operations Executive, the SOE, and, finding it very clever indeed, he'd discussed it over a beer with an American colleague in a London pub. The American OSS officer, like most of the men Wild Bill Donovan had chosen, was an attorney by profession, and in his case, a very thorough one, who wrote everything down and forwarded it up the line. The report on the Dutch engineer had made its way to the office of Colonel William Friedman, then America's foremost code-breaker. Though not himself a hardware expert, Friedman had known something useful when he saw it, and he knew there would be an after-the-war, during which his agency—later reborn as the National Security Agency—would still be busy cracking other countries' codes and ciphers and producing codes and ciphers itself. The ability to develop covert communications links through a relatively simple mathematical trick had seemed a gift from God's own hand.

In the 1940s and '50s, NSA *had* been able to hire American's finest mathematicians, and one of the tasks assigned them had been to work with AT&T to create a universal telephone operating system that could be used covertly by American intelligence officers. Back then, AT&T was the only real rival NSA had had in the hiring of skilled mathematicians, and beyond that, AT&T had always been a prime contractor for just about every executive agency of the government. By 1955, it was done, and for a surprisingly modest fee AT&T provided the entire world with a model for telephone systems that

most of the world adopted—the modest cost was explained by the desire of AT&T to make its systems compatible with every other country's to ease international communications. With the 1970s had come push-button phones, which directed calls electronically by frequency-controlled codes even easier for electronic systems to use, and infinitely easier to maintain than the former electro-mechanical stepping switches that had made the mortician hugely rich. They also proved even easier for AT&T to rig for NSA. The operating systems first given the world's telephone companies by AT&T's Parsippany, New Jersey, research laboratory had been upgraded yearly at least, giving further improvements to the efficiency of the world's phone systems—so much so that scarcely any telephone system in the world didn't use it. And tucked into that operating system were six lines of binary code whose operational concept traced back to the Nazi occupation of Holland.

Ming finished the installation and ejected the disk, discarding it into her waste can. The easy way to dispose of secret material was to have your adversary do it, through the front door, not the back one.

Nothing really happened for some hours, while Ming did her usual office tasks and Nomuri visited three commercial businesses to sell his high-powered desktop computers. All that changed at 7:45 P.M.

By this time, Ming was at her own home. Nomuri would get a night off; Ming had to do some things with her room-mate to avoid too much suspicion —watching local television, chatting with her friend, and thinking about her lover, while the whole reason for the wispy smiles on her face played out entirely outside her consciousness. Strangely, it never occurred to her that her roomie had it all figured out in an instant, and was merely polite enough not to broach the subject.

Her NEC desktop computer had long since gone into auto-sleep mode, leaving the monitor screen dark and blank, and the indicator light in the lower right position of the plastic frame amber instead of the green that went with real activity. The software she'd installed earlier in the day had been custom-designed for the NEC machines, which like all such machines had proprietary source-code unique to the brand. The source-code, however, was known to the National Security Agency.

Immediately upon installation, the Ghost program—as it had been christened at Fort Meade, Maryland—had buried itself in a special niche in the NEC's operating system, the newest version of Microsoft Windows. The niche had been created by a Microsoft employee whose favorite uncle had died over North Vietnam while flying an F-105 fighter-bomber, and who did his patriotic work entirely without the knowledge of his parent company. It also dovetailed exactly with the NEC code, with the effect of making it virtually invisible even to a line-by-line inspection of all the code within the machine by an expert software engineer.

The Ghost had gone immediately to work, creating a directory that sorted the documents on Ming's computer first by date of creation/modification, and then by file type. Some files, like the operating system, it ignored. It similarly ignored the NEC-created transcription program that converted Roman

characters, actually the English phonemes of the spoken Mandarin language, into the corresponding ideographs, but the Ghost did not ignore the graphic-text files that resulted from that program. Those it copied, along with telephone indexes and every other text file on the five-gigabyte hard drive. This entire procedure took the machine, guided by the Ghost, seventeen-point-one-four seconds, leaving a large file that sat by itself.

The machine did nothing for a second and a half, then new activity started. The NEC desktop machines had built-in high-speed modems. The Ghost activated these, but also turned off their internal mini-speakers so that no evidence of the transmission would be heard by anyone. (Leaving the speakers on was a primary security measure. The flashing lights that told of their activity were hidden because the modem was inside the box for this model.) The computer then dialed (this term had somehow survived the demise of rotary dials on telephones) a twelve-digit number rather than the usual seven used by the Beijing telephone system. The additional five digits sent the seeker-signal on a round-robin adventure through the hardware of the central switching computer, and it came out in the place designated two weeks before by the engineers at Fort Meade, who, of course, never had an idea what this was all for, or where it would happen, or who might be involved. The number that rang—actually there wasn't a mechanical or electronic ringer of any sort—was the dedicated modem line that exited the wall by Chester Nomuri's desk and ended in the back of his very high-end laptop—which was not an NEC, because here, as with most computer applications, the best was still American.

Nomuri was also watching TV at the moment, though in his case it was the CNN international news, so that he could know what was going on at home. After that he'd switch to a Japanese satellite channel, because it was part of his cover. A samurai show he liked was on tonight, in theme and simplicity rather like the Westerns that had polluted American TV in the 1950s. Though an educated man and a professional intelligence officer, Nomuri liked mindless entertainment as much as anyone else. The beep made him turn his head. Though his computer had software similar to that running in Ming's office, he'd allowed the aural prompt to tell him that something was coming in, and a three-key code lit up his screen to show exactly what it was and where it was coming from.

Yes! the CIA officer exulted, his right fist slamming into his open left hand hard enough to sting. Yes. He had his agent in fucking place, and here was the take from Operation SORGE. A bar at the top of the screen showed that the data was coming it at a rate of 57,000 bits per second. That was pretty fast. Now, just hope that the local commie phone system didn't develop a bad connection somewhere between Ming's office and the switching center, and from the switching center to his flat, Chester thought. Shouldn't be much of a problem. The outbound leg from Ming's office would be first-rate, tasked as it was to the service of the Party nobility. And from the switching center to his place would be okay, because he'd gotten numerous messages that way, most of them from NEC in Tokyo to congratulate him on exceeding his sales quota already.

Yeah, well, Chet, you are pretty good at making a sale, aren't you? he asked

himself on the way to the kitchen. He figured he owed himself a drink for this bit of performance. On returning, he saw that the download wasn't finished yet.

Damn. How much shit is she sending me? Then he realized that the text files he was getting were actually graphics files, because Ming's computer didn't store ideographs as letters, but rather as the pictures that they actually were. That made the files memory-intensive. Exactly how memory-intensive they were, he saw forty minutes later when the download ended.

At the far end of the electronic chain, the Ghost program appeared to shut itself down, but in fact it slept rather as a dog did, one ear always cocked up, and always aware of the time of day. On finishing the transmission, the Ghost made a notation on its inside index of the files. It had sent everything up until this day. From now on, it would only send new ones—which would make for much shorter and faster transmissions—but only in the evening, and only after ninety-five minutes of total inactivity on the computer, and only when it was outwardly in auto-sleep mode. Tradecraft and caution had been programmed in.

"Fuck," Nomuri breathed on seeing the size of the download. In pictures this could be the porno shots of damned near every hooker in Hong Kong. But his job was only half done. He lit up a program of his own and selected the "Preferences" folder that controlled it. Already checked was the box for autoencryption. Virtually everything on his computer was encrypted anyway, which was easily explainable as trade and business secrets—Japanese companies are renowned for the secrecy of their operations—but with some files more encrypted than others. The ones that arrived from the Ghost got the most robust scrambling, from a mathematically derived transcription system, fully 512 bits in the key, plus an additional random element which Nomuri could not duplicate. That was in addition to his numeric password, 51240, the street number of his first "score" in East LA. Then it was time to transmit his take.

This program was a close cousin to the Ghost he'd given Ming. But this one dialed the local Internet Service Provider, or ISP, and sent off a lengthy e-mail to a destination called patsbakery@brownienet.com. The "brownienet" was putatively a network established for bakeries and bakers, professional and amateur, who liked to swap recipes, often posting photos of their creations for people to download, which explained the occasional large file transferred. Photographs are notoriously rapacious in their demands for bytes and disk space.

In fact, Mary Patricia Foley had posted her own highly satisfactory recipe for French apple pie, along with a photo her elder son had taken with his Apple electronic camera. Doing so hadn't been so much a case of establishing a good cover as womanly pride in her own abilities as a cook, after spending an hour one night looking over the recipes others had put on this bulletin board. She'd tried one from a woman in Michigan a few weeks previously and found it okay, but not great. In coming weeks she wanted to try some of the bread recipes, which did look promising.

It was morning when Nomuri uploaded his e-mail to Pat's Bakery, an entirely real and legitimate business three blocks from the statehouse in Madison, Wisconsin, as a matter of fact, owned by a former CIA officer in the Science and Technology Directorate, now retired and a grandmother who was, however, too young for knitting. She'd created this Internet domain, paying the nominal fee and then forgetting about it, just as she'd forgotten nearly everything she'd ever done at Langley.

"You've got mail," the computer said when MP switched on her Internet mail service, which used the new Pony Express e-mail program. She keyed the download command and saw the originator was cgoodjadecastle.com. The username was from *Gunsmoke*. Marshal Dillon's crippled sidekick had been named Chester Good.

DOWNLOADING, the prompt-box on the screen said. It also gave an estimate for how long the download would take. 47 MINUTES ... !

"Son of a bitch," the DDO breathed, and lifted her phone. She pressed a button, waiting a second for the right voice to answer. "Ed, better come see this ..."

"Okay, honey, give me a minute."

The Director of Central Intelligence came in, holding his morning mug of coffee, to see his wife of twenty-three years leaning back, away from her computer screen. Rarely in that time had Mary Pat ever backed away from anything. It just wasn't her nature.

"From our Japanese friend?" Ed asked his wife.

"So it would seem," MP replied.

"How much stuff is this?"

"Looks like a lot. I suppose Chester is pretty good in the sack."

"Who trained him?"

"Whoever it was, we need to get his ass down to The Farm and pass all that knowledge along. For that matter," she added, with a changed voice and an upward look to catch her husband's eye, "maybe you could audit the course, honey-bunny."

"Is that a complaint?"

"There's always room for improvement—and, okay, yes, I need to drop fifteen pounds, too," she added, to cut the DCI off before he could reply in kind. He hated when she did that. But not now. Now his hand touched her face quite tenderly, as the prompt screen said another thirty-four minutes to complete the download.

"Who's the guy at Fort Meade who put the Ghost programs together?"

"They contracted a game place—a guy at a game company, I guess," Mrs. Foley corrected herself. "They paid him four hundred fifty big ones for the job." Which was more than the Director of Central Intelligence and the Deputy Director (Operations) made together, what with the federal pay caps, which

didn't allow any federal employee to make more than a member of Congress—and they feared raising their own salaries, lest they offend the voters.

"Call me when you have it downloaded, baby."

"Who's the best guy we have for China?"

"Joshua Sears, Ph.D., from U-Cal Berkley, runs the China desk in the DI. But the guy at NSA is better for linguistic nuances, they say. His name's Victor Wang," the DCI said.

"Can we trust him?" MP asked. Distrust of ethnic Chinese in the American national-security apparatus had reached a considerable level.

"Shit, I don't know. You know, we have to trust somebody, and Wang's been on the box twice a year for the last eight years. The ChiComms can't compromise every Chinese-American we have, you know. This Wang guy's third-generation American, was an officer in the Air Force—ELINT guy, evidently worked out of Wright-Patterson—and just made super-grade at NSA. Tom Porter says he's very good."

"Okay, well, let me see what all this is, then we'll have Sears check it out, and then, maybe, if we have to, we'll talk to this Wang guy. Remember, Eddie, at the end of this is an officer named Nomuri and a foreign national who has two eyes—"

Her husband cut her off with a wave. "And two ears. Yeah, baby, I know. We've been there. We've done that. And we both have the T-shirts to prove it." And he was about as likely to forget that as his wife was. Keeping your agents alive was as important to an intelligence agency as capital preservation was to an investor.

Mary Pat ignored her computer for twenty minutes, and instead went over routine message traffic hand-carried up from MERCURY down in the basement of the Old Headquarters Building. That was not especially easy, but necessary nonetheless, because CIA's Clandestine Service was running agents and operations all over the world—or trying to, Mary Pat corrected herself. It was her job to rebuild the Directorate of Operations, to restore the human-intelligence—HUMINT—capability largely destroyed in the late 1970s, and only slowly being rebuilt. That was no small task, even for an expert in the field. But Chester Nomuri was one of her pets. She'd spotted him at The Farm some years before and seen in him the talent, the gift, and the motivation. For him espionage was as much a vocation as the priesthood, something important to his country, and *fun*, as much fun as dropping a fifty-footer at Augusta was for Jack Nicklaus. Toss in his brains and street sense, and, Mary Pat had thought at the time, she had a winner there. Now Nomuri was evidently living up to her expectations. Big time. For the first time, CIA had an agent-in-place inside the ChiComm Politburo, and that was about as good as it got. Perhaps even the Russians didn't have one of those, though you could never be sure, and you could lose a lot of money betting against the Russian intelligence services.

"File's done," the computer's electronic voice finally said. That occasioned a

turn in her swivel chair. The DDO first of all backed up her newly downloaded file to a second hard drive, and then to a "toaster" disk, so called because the disk went in and out of the drive box like a slice of bread. With that done, she typed in her decryption code, 51240. She had no idea why Nomuri had specified that number, but knowing was not necessary, just so long as nobody else knew either. After typing in the five digits and hitting RETURN, the file icons changed. They were already aligned in list form, and MP selected the oldest. A page full of Chinese ideographs came up. With that bit of information, MP lifted her office phone and punched the button for her secretary. "Dr. Joshua Sears, DI, Chinese Section. Please ask him to come see me right away."

That took six endless minutes. It took rather a lot to make Mary Patricia Kaminsky Foley shiver, but this was one such occasion. The image on her screen looked like something one might get from inking the feet of several drunken roosters, then making them loiter on a piece of white paper, but within the imagery were words and thoughts. Secret words and hidden thoughts. On her screen was the ability to read the minds of adversaries. It was the sort of thing that could win the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas, but infinitely more important. It was the sort of thing that had won wars and altered history from the expected path determined by the most important of players, and in that was the value of espionage, the whole point of having an intelligence community, because the fates of nations really did ride on such things—

—and therefore, the fates of nations rode on Chet Nomuri's schwantz and how well he used it, Mrs. Foley reflected. What a crazy fucking world it was. How the hell could an historian ever get that right? How did you communicate the importance of seducing some nameless secretary, an underling, a modern-day peasant who merely transcribed the thoughts of the important, but in being compromised made those thoughts available to others, and in doing so, altered the course of history as surely as turning the rudder changed the course of a mighty ship. For Mary Pat, Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency, it was a moment of fulfillment to place alongside the birth of her children. Her entire raison d'être lay in black-and-white ideographs on her computer monitor—and she couldn't read the fucking things. She had the language skills to teach Russian literature at Moscow State University, but all she knew of Chinese was chop suey and moo goo gai pan.

"Mrs. Foley?" A head appeared at her door. "I'm Josh Sears." He was fifty, tall, losing his hair, most of it gray. Brown eyes. He hit the cafeteria line downstairs a little too hard, the DDO thought.

"Please come in, Dr. Sears. I need you to translate some things for me."

"Sure," he replied, picking a seat and relaxing into it. He watched the DDO take some pages off her laser printer and hand them across.

"Okay, it says the date is last March twenty-first, and the place is Beijing—hmph, the Council of Ministers Building, eh? Minister Fang is talking to Minister Zhang." Sears ran his eyes down the page. "Mrs. Foley, this is hot

stuff. They're talking about the possibilities of Iran—no, the old UIR—taking over the entire Persian Gulf oil fields, and what effect it would have on China. Zhang appears to be optimistic, but guarded. Fang is skeptical ... oh, this is an *aide-memoir,* isn't it? It's Fang's notes from a private conversation with Zhang."

"The names mean anything to you?"

"Both are Ministers Without Portfolio. They're both full Politburo members without direct ministerial duties. That means they're both trusted by the chairman, the PRC premier, Xu Kun Piao. They go back thirty years plus, well into the time of Mao and Chou. As you know, the Chinese are really into lengthy relationships. They develop—well, not friendships as we understand them, but associations. It's a comfort-level thing, really. Like at a card table. You know what the other guy's mannerisms and capabilities are, and that makes for a long, comfortable game. Maybe you won't win big, but you won't lose your shirt either."

"No, they don't gamble, do they?"

"This document demonstrates that. As we suspected, the PRC backed the Ayatollah Daryaei in his play, but they never allowed their support to be public. From skimming this, it appears that this Zhang guy is the one who ramrodded this—and the play the Japanese made. We've been trying to build a book on this Zhang guy—and Fang as well—without a whole lot of success. What do I need to know about this?" he asked, holding the page up.

"It's code word," MP replied. By federal statute, "top secret" was as high as it went, but in reality there were more secret things than that, called "special-access programs," which were designated by their controlling code words. "This one's called SORGE." She didn't have to say that he could not discuss this information with anyone, and that even dreaming in bed about it was forbidden. Nor did she have to say that in SORGE was Sears's path to a raise and much greater personal importance within the CIA's pantheon of bureaucrats.

"Okay." Sears nodded. "What can you tell me?"

"What we have here is a digest of conversations between Fang and Zhang, and probably other ministers as well. We've found a way to crash into their documents storage. We believe the documents are genuine," MP concluded. Sears would know that he was being misled on sources and methods, but that was to be expected. As a senior member of the DI—the Directorate of Intelligence—it was his job to evaluate information provided to him by various sources, in this case the DO. If he got bad information, his evaluation would be bad as well, but what Mrs. Foley had just told him was that he would not be held at fault for bad information. But he'd also question the authenticity of the documents in an internal memo or two, just to cover his own ass, of course.

"Okay, ma'am. In that case, what we have here is pure nitroglycerine. We've suspected this, but here's confirmation. It means that President Ryan did the

right thing when he granted diplomatic recognition to Taiwan. The PRC had it coming. They conspired to wage aggressive war, and since we got involved, you can say that they conspired against us. Twice, I bet. We'll see if another of these documents refers to the Japanese adventure. You'll recall that the Japanese industrialists implicated this Zhang guy by name. That's not a hundred percent, but if it's confirmed by this, then it's almost something you could take before a judge. Mrs. Foley, this is some source we have here."

"Evaluation?"

"It feels right," the analyst said, reading over the page again. "It sounds like conversation. I mean, it's unguarded, not official diplomatic-speak or even inside-minister-speak. So, it sounds like what it purports to be, the notes of a private, informal policy discussion between two senior colleagues."

"Any way to cross-check it?" MP asked next.

An immediate shake of the head. "No. We don't know much about either one of these guys. Zhang, well, we have the evaluation from Secretary Adier—you know, from the shuttle diplomacy after the Airbus shoot-down, which pretty well confirms what that Yamata guy told the Japanese police and our FBI guys about how the Chinese nudged them into the conflict with us, and what for. The PRC looks on eastern Siberia with covetous eyes," Sears reminded her, showing his knowledge of the PRC policies and objectives. "For Fang Gan, we have photos of him sipping mao-tai at receptions in his Mao jacket and smiling benignly, like they all do. We know he's tight with Xu, there are stories that he likes to play with the office help—but a lot of them do that—and that's about it."

It was good of Sears not to remind her that playing with the office help wasn't a character defect limited to China.

"So, what do we think about them?"

"Fang and Zhang? Well, both are Ministers Without Portfolio. So, they're utility infielders, maybe even assistant coaches. Premier Xu trusts their judgment. They get to sit in at the Politburo as full voting members. They get to hear everything and cast votes on everything. They influence policy not so much by making it as shaping it. Every minister knows them. These two know all the others. They've both been around a long time. Both are well into their sixties or seventies, but people over there don't mellow with age like they do in America. Both will be ideologically sound, meaning they're both probably solid communists. That implies a certain ruthlessness, and you can add to that their age. At seventy-five, death starts being a very real thing. You don't know how much time you have left, and these guys don't believe in an afterlife. So, whatever goals they have, they have to address pretty quick at that age, don't they?"

"Marxism doesn't mix well with humanity, does it?"

Sears shook his head. "Not hardly, and toss in a culture that places a much lower value on human life than ours does."

"Okay. Good brief. Here," she said, handing over ten printed pages. "I want

a written evaluation after lunch. Whatever you might be working on now, SORGE is more important."

That meant a "seventh-floor tasking" to Dr. Sears. He'd be working directly for the Directors. Well, he had a private office already, and a computer that wasn't hooked into any telephone lines, even a local area network, as many of the CIA's 'puters were. Sears tucked the papers into a coat pocket and departed, leaving Mary Pat to look out her floor-to-ceiling windows and contemplate her next move. Really it was Ed's call, but things like this were decided collegially, especially when the DCI was your husband. This time she'd wander over to see him.

The DCI's office is long and relatively narrow, with the director's office near the door, well away from the sitting area. Mary Pat took the easy chair across from the desk.

"How good is it?" Ed asked, knowing the reason for her visit.

"Calling this SORGE was unusually prescient for us. It's at least that good."

Since Richard Sorge dispatches from Tokyo to Moscow might have saved the Soviet Union in 1941, that got Ed Foley's eyes to widen some. "Who looked at it?"

"Sears. He seems pretty smart, by the way. I've never really talked to him before."

"Harry likes him," Ed noted, referring to Harry Hall, the current Deputy Director (Intelligence), who was in Europe at the moment. "Okay, so he says it looks pretty good, eh?"

A serious nod. "Oh, yeah, Eddie."

"Take it to see Jack?" They could not *not* take this to the President, could they?

"Tomorrow, maybe?"

"Works for me." Just about any government employee can find space in his or her day for a drive to the White House. "Eddie, how far can this one spread?"

"Good question. Jack, of course. *Maybe* the Vice President. I like the guy," the DCI said, "but usually the veep doesn't get into stuff like this. SecState, SecDef, both are maybes. Ben Goodley, again a maybe. Mary, you know the problem with this."

It was the oldest and most frequent problem with really valuable high-level intelligence information. If you spread it too far, you ran the risk of compromising the information—which also meant getting the source killed—and that killed the goose laying the golden eggs. On the other hand, if you didn't make *some* use of the information, then you might as well not have the eggs anyway. Drawing the line was the most delicate operation in the field of intelligence, and you never knew where the right place was to draw it. You also had to worry about methods of spreading it around. If you sent it encrypted from one place to another, what if the bad guys had cracked your

encryption system? NSA swore that its systems, especially TAPDANCE, could not be broken, but the Germans had thought ENIGMA crack-proof, too.

Almost as dangerous was giving the information, even by hand, to a senior government official. The bastards talked too much. They lived by talking. They lived by leaking. They lived by showing people how important they were, and importance in D.C. meant knowing what other people didn't know. Information was the coin of the realm in this part of America. The good news here was that President Ryan understood about that. He'd been CIA, as high as Deputy Director, and so he knew about the value of security. The same was probably true of Vice President Jackson, former naval aviator. He'd probably seen lives lost because of bad intelligence. Scott Adler was a diplomat, and he probably knew as well. Tony Bretano, the well-regarded SecDef, worked closely with CIA, as all Secretaries of Defense had to do, and he could probably be trusted as well. Ben Goodley was the President's National Security Advisor, and thus couldn't easily be excluded. So, what did that total up to? Two in Beijing. At Langley, the DCI, DDCI, DDI, and DDO, plus Sears from inside the DI. That made seven. Then the President, Vice President, SecState, SecDef, and Ben Goodley. That made twelve. And twelve was plenty for the moment, especially in a town where the saying went, *If two people know it, it's not a secret.* But the entire reason for having CIA was this sort of information.

"Pick a name for the source," Foley instructed his wife.

"SONGBIRD will do for now." It was a sentimental thing for MP, naming agents for birds. It dated back to CARDINAL.

"Fair enough. Let me see the translations you get, okay?"

"You bet, honey-bunny." Mary Pat leaned over her husband's desk to deliver a kiss, before heading back to her own office.

On arriving there, MP checked her computer for the SORGE file. She'd have to change that, MP realized. Even the name of this special-access compartment would be classified top secret or higher. Then she did a page count, making a note on a paper pad next to the screen.

ALL 1,349 PAGES OF RECIPES RECEIVED, she wrote as a reply to cgood@jadecastle.com. WILL LOOK THE RECIPES OVER. THANKS A BUNCH. MARY. She hit the RETURN key, and off the letter went, through the electronic maze called the Internet. *One thousand, three hundred and forty-nine pages,* the DDO thought. It would keep the analysts busy for quite a while. Inside the Old Headquarters Building, analysts would see bits and pieces of SORGE material, covered under other transitory code names randomly chosen by a computer in the basement, but only Sears would know the whole story—and, in fact, he didn't even know that, did he? What he knew might—probably would—be enough to get this Ming woman killed, once the MSS realized who'd had access to the information. They could do some things in Washington to protect her, but not much.

Nomuri rose early in his Beijing apartment, and the second thing he did was to

log on to check his e-mail. There it was, number seven in the list, one from patsbakery@brownienet.com. He selected the decryption system and typed in the key ... so, the pages had all been received. That was good. Nomuri dragged the message he'd dispatched to the "wipe-info" bin, where Norton Utilities not only deleted the file, but also five times electronically scrubbed the disk segments where they'd briefly resided, so that the files could never be recovered by any attempt, no matter how skilled. Next he eliminated the record of having sent any e-mail to brownienet. Now there was no record whatever of his having done anything, unless his telephone line was tapped, which he didn't really suspect. And even then the data was scrambled, fully encrypted, and thus not recoverable. No, the only dangers in the operation now attached to Ming. His part of it, being the spymaster, was protected by the method in which her desktop computer called him, and from now on those messages would be sent out to brownienet automatically, and erased the same way, in a matter of seconds. It would take a very clever counterintelligence operation to hurt Nomuri now.

CHAPTER 15

Exploitation

What's this mean, Ben?" Ryan asked, seeing a change in his morning schedule.

"Ed and Mary Pat want to talk something over with you. They didn't say what it was," Goodley replied. "The Vice President can be here, too, and me, but that's it, they requested."

"Some new kind of toilet paper in the Kremlin, I suppose," POTUS said. It was a long-standing CIA joke from Ryan's time in the Bad Old Days of the Cold War. He stirred his coffee and leaned back in his comfortable chair. "Okay, what else is happening in the world, Ben?"

So, this is mao-tai?" Cardinal DiMilo asked. He didn't add that he'd been given to understand that Baptists didn't drink alcoholic beverages. Odd, considering that Jesus' first public miracle had been to change water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana. But Christianity had many faces. In any case, the mao-tai was vile, worse than the cheapest grappa. With advancing years, the Cardinal preferred gentler drinks. It was much easier on the stomach.

"I should not drink this," Yu admitted, "but it is part of my heritage."

"I know of no passage in Holy Scripture that prohibits this particular human weakness," the Catholic said. And besides, wine was part of the Catholic liturgy. He saw that his Chinese host barely sipped at his tiny cup. Probably better for his stomach, too, the Italian reasoned.

He'd have to get used to the food, too. A gourmet like many Italians, Renato Cardinal DiMilo found that the food in Beijing was not as good as he'd experienced in Rome's numerous Chinese restaurants. The problem, he thought, was the quality of the ingredients rather than the cook. In this case, the Reverand Yu's wife was away in Taiwan to see her sick mother, he'd said, apologizing on the Catholic's arrival. Monsignor Schepke had taken over the serving, rather like a young lieutenant-aide serving the needs of his general, Yu had thought, watching the drama play out with some amusement. The Catholics certainly had their bureaucratic ways. But this Renato fellow was a decent sort, clearly an educated man, and a trained diplomat from whom Yu realized he might learn much.

"So, you cook for yourself. How did you learn?"

"Most Chinese men know how. We learn from our parents as children."

DiMilo smiled. "I, as well, but I have not cooked for myself in years. The

older I get the less they allow me to do for myself, eh, Franz?"

"I have my duties also, Eminence," the German answered. He was drinking the mao-tai with a little more gusto. Must be nice to have a young stomach lining, both the older men thought.

"So, how do you find Beijing?" Yu asked.

"Truly fascinating. We Romans think that our city is ancient and redolent with history, but Chinese culture was old before the Romans set one stone upon another. And the art we saw yesterday..."

"The jade mountain," Schepke explained. "I spoke with the guide, but she didn't know about the artists involved, or the time required to carve it."

"The names of artisans and the time they needed—these were not matters of importance to the emperors of old. There was much beauty then, yes, but much cruelty as well."

"And today?" Renato asked.

"Today as well, as you know, Eminence," Yu confirmed with a long sigh. They spoke in English, and Yu's Oklahoma accent fascinated his visitors. "The government lacks the respect for human life, which you and I would prefer."

"Changing that will not be simple," Monsignor Schepke added. The problem wasn't limited to the communist PRC government. Cruelty had long been part of Chinese culture, to the point that someone had once said that China was too vast to be governed with kindness, an aphorism picked up with indecent haste by the left wings of the world, ignoring the explicit racism in such a statement. Perhaps the problem was that China had always been crowded, and in crowds came anger, and in anger came a callous disregard for others. Nor had religion helped. Confucius, the closest thing China had developed to a great religious leader, preached conformity as a person's best action. While the Judeo-Christian tradition talked of transcendent values of right and wrong, and the human rights that devolved from them, China saw authority as Society, not God. For that reason, Cardinal DiMilo thought, communism had taken root here. Both societal models were alike in their absence of an absolute rule of right and wrong. And that was dangerous. In relativism lay man's downfall, because, ultimately, if there were no absolute values, what difference was there between a man and a dog? And if there were no such difference, where was man's fundamental dignity? Even a thinking atheist could mark religion's greatest gift to human society: human dignity, the value placed on a single human life, the simple idea that man was more than an animal. That was the foundation of all human progress, because without it, human life was doomed to Thomas Hobbes's model, "nasty, brutish, and short."

Christianity—and Judaism, and Islam, which were also religions of The Book—required merely that man believe in that which was self-evident: There was order in the universe, and that order came from a source, and that source was called God. Christianity didn't even require that a man believe in that idea—not anymore, anyway—just that he accept the sense of it, and the result

of it, which was human dignity and human progress. Was that so hard?

It was for some. Marxism, in condemning religion as "the opiate of the people," merely prescribed another, less effective drug—"the radiant future," the Russians had called it, but it was a future they'd never been able to deliver. In China, the Marxists had shown the good sense to adopt some of the forms of capitalism to save their country's economy, but not to adopt the principle of human freedom that usually came along with it. That had worked to this point, DiMilo thought, only because Chinese culture had a preexisting model of conformity and acceptance of authority from above. But how long would that last? And how long could China prosper without some idea of the difference between what was *right* and what was *wrong?* Without that information, China and the Chinese were doomed to perdition. Someone had to bring the Good News of Jesus to the Chinese, because with that came not only eternal salvation, but temporal happiness as well. Such a fine bargain, and yet there were those too stupid and too blind to accept it. Mao had been one. He'd rejected all forms of religion, even Confucius and the Lord Buddha. But when he'd lain dying in his bed, what had Chairman Mao thought? To what Radiant Future had he looked forward then? What did a communist think on his deathbed? The answer to that question was something none of the three clergymen wanted to know, or to face.

"I was disappointed to see the small number of Catholics here—not counting foreigners and diplomats, of course. How bad is the persecution?"

Yu shrugged. "It depends on where you are, and the political climate, and the personality of the local party leadership. Sometimes they leave us alone—especially when foreigners are here, with their TV cameras. Sometimes they can become very strict, and sometimes they can harass us directly. I have been questioned many times, and been subjected to political counseling." He looked up and smiled. "It's like having a dog bark at you, Eminence. You need not answer back. Of course, you will be spared any of that," the Baptist pointed out, noting DiMilo's diplomatic status, and his resulting personal inviolability.

The cardinal caught that reference, somewhat to his discomfort. He didn't see his life as any more valuable than anyone else's. Nor did he wish his faith to appear less sincere than this Chinese Protestant's, who'd been educated at some pretentious pseudo-university in the American prairie, whereas he had acquired his knowledge in some of the most ancient and honored institutions of higher learning on the planet, whose antecedents went back to the Roman empire, and beyond that, to the chambers of Aristotle himself. If there was one vanity Renato Cardinal DiMilo possessed, it was in his education. He'd been superbly educated, and he knew it. He could discuss Plato's *Republic* in Attic Greek, or the law cases of Marcus Tullius Cicero in Imperial Latin. He could debate a committed Marxist on the attributes of that political philosophy in the same language the German Marx himself had spoken—and win, because Marx had left a lot of unfilled holes in the walls of his political theories. He'd forgotten more about human nature than some psychologists knew. He was in the Vatican's diplomatic service because he could read minds—better than that, he could read the minds of politicians and diplomats highly skilled in concealing their thoughts. He could have been a gambler of talent and riches

with these skills, but instead he applied them for the Greater Glory of God.

His only failing was that, like all men, he could not predict the future, and thus could not see the world war that this meeting would ultimately bring about.

"So, does the government harass you?" the Cardinal asked his host.

A shrug. "Occasionally. I propose to hold a prayer service in public to test their willingness to interfere with my human rights. There is some danger involved, of course."

It was a challenge skillfully delivered, and the elderly Catholic cleric rose to it: "Keep Franz and me informed, if you would."

SONGBIRD? " Ryan asked. "What can you tell me about him? "

"Do you really want to know, Jack?" Ed Foley asked, somewhat pointedly.

"You telling me I ought not to know?" Ryan responded. Then he realized that Robby Jackson and Ben Goodley were here as well, and he could know things that they could not. Even at this level, there were rules of classification. The President nodded. "Okay, we'll let that one go for now."

"The overall operation is called SORGE. That'll change periodically," Mary Pat told the assembled audience. Unusually, the Secret Service had been hustled out of the Oval Office for this briefing—which told the USSS a lot more than CIA would have liked—and also a special jamming system had been switched on. It would interfere with any electronic device in the room. You could see that from the TV set to the left of the President's desk, tuned to CNN. The screen was now full of snow, but with the sound turned all the way down, there was no annoying noise to disturb the meeting. The possibility of a bug in this most secure of rooms was slight, but so great was the value of SORGE that this card was being played as well. The briefing folders had already been passed out. Robby looked up from his.

"Notes from the Chinese Politburo? Lordy," Vice President Jackson breathed. "Okay, no sources and methods. That's cool with me, guys. Now, how reliable is it?"

"For the moment, reliability is graded 'B+' " Mary Pat answered. "We expect to upgrade that later on. The problem is that we don't grade 'A' or higher without outside confirmation, and this stuff is so deep inside that we have no other asset to verify what we have here."

"Oops," Jackson observed. "So it could all be a false flag. Pretty one, I admit, but false even so."

"Perhaps, but unlikely. There's stuff here that is awfully sensitive to let out voluntarily, even for a major sting operation."

"So I see," Ryan partially agreed. "But I remember what Jim Greer used to say: Ain't nothing too crazy to be true. Our fundamental problem with these guys is that their culture is so different in so many ways that they might as

well be Klingons."

"Well, they don't display much love for us in this," Ben Goodley observed, flipping halfway through the briefing folder. "Jesus, this is interesting material. We going to show it to Scott Adler?"

"That's our recommendation," the DCI agreed. "Adler is pretty good at figuring people out, and his take on some of this—especially page five—will be very interesting. Tony Bretano, too."

"Okay, that's EAGLE and THUNDER. Who else?" Ryan asked.

"That's all for now," Ed Foley said, with a nod from his wife. "Mr. Pres—"

Ryan's eyes flared a little. "My name is ..."

The DCI held up his hand. "Okay. *Jack,* let's keep this one real close for a while. We'll figure a way to launder the information so that some others can know what we've learned. But *not* how. Not ever that. SONGBIRD'S too precious an asset to lose."

"This is potentially right up there with CARDINAL, isn't it?"

"Maybe even better, Jack," Mary Pat said. "This is like having a bug in the boardroom, and we've streamlined our methods on this one. We're being very, very careful with this source."

"Okay, what about analysts?" Ben Goodley asked. "Our best guy with the PRC is Professor Weaver up at Brown University. You know him, Ed."

Foley nodded. "Yeah, I know him, but let's hold off for a while. We have a pretty good guy in-house. Let me see what he can develop for us before we start farming things out. By the way, we're looking at something like a total of fifteen hundred printed pages from this source, plus daily information from now on."

Ryan looked up at that one. Daily information. How the hell had they arranged that? *Back to business,* he told himself. "Okay, for one thing, I want an evaluation of the Zhang Han San character," Ryan said. "I've seen this bastard's name before. He started two wars we got pulled into. What the hell is he all about?"

"We have a psychiatrist on staff to work on that," Mary Foley replied. *After,* she didn't say, *we scrub this information clean of source-related material.* "He does our profiling."

"Okay, yeah, I remember him." Ryan nodded agreement on this point. "Anything else?"

"Just the usual," Ed Foley said as he stood. "Don't leave these documents on your desk, okay?"

They all nodded agreement. They all had personal safes for that purpose, and every one was wired into the Secret Service command center, and was on round-the-clock TV surveillance. The White House was a good place to store documents, and besides, the secretaries were cleared higher than God. Mary Pat left the office with a special spring in her step. Ryan waved for his Vice

President to stay as the rest walked toward the West Entrance.

"What do you think?" SWORDSMAN asked TOMCAT.

"This looks pretty damned hot, Jack. Jesus, boy, how the *hell* do they get stuff like this?"

"If they ever get around to telling me, I can't tell you, Rob, and I'm not sure I want to know. It isn't always pretty."

The retired fighter pilot agreed. "I believe it. Not quite the same as catapulting off the boat and shooting the bastard in the lips, is it?"

"But just as important."

"Hey, Jack, I know. Battle of Midway, like. Joe Rochefort and his band of merry men at FRUPAC back in '42 saved our country a lot of hassles with our little yellow friends in WestPac when they told Nimitz what was coming."

"Yeah, Robby, well, looks like we have more of the same sort of friends. If there's operational stuff in here, I want your opinion of it."

"I can do that already. Their army and what passes for a navy are talking in the open about how they take us on, how to counter carriers and stuff like that. It's mostly pipe dreams and self-delusion, but my question is, why the hell are they putting this in the open? Maybe to impress the unwashed of the world—reporters and the other idiots who don't know shit about war at sea—and maybe to impress their own people with how smart and how tough they are. Maybe to put more heat on the ROC government on Taiwan, but if they want to invade, they have something to do first, like building a real navy with real amphibious capability. But that would take ten years, and we'd probably notice all the big gray canoes in the water. They've got some submarines, and the Russians, of all people, are selling them hardware—just forked over a Sovremenny-class DDG, complete with Sunburn missiles, supposedly. Exactly what they want to do with them, I have no idea. It's not the way I'd build up a navy, but they didn't ask me for advice. What freaks me is, the Russians sold them the hardware, and they're selling some other stuff, too. Crazy," the Vice President concluded.

"Tell me why," POTUS commanded.

"Because once upon a time a guy named Genghis Khan rode all the way to the Baltic Sea—like, all the way across Russia. The Russkies have a good sense of history, Jack. They ain't forgot that. If I'm a Russian, what enemies do I have to worry about? NATO? The Poles? Romania? I don't think so. But off to my southeast is a great big country with a shitload of people, a nice large collection of weapons, and a long history of killing Russians. But I was just an operations guy, and sometimes I get a little paranoid about what my counterparts in other countries might be thinking." Robby didn't have to add that the Russians had invented paranoia once upon a time.

This is *madness!"* Bondarenko swore. "There are many ways to prove Lenin was right, but *this* is not the one I would choose!" Vladimir Il'ych Ulyanov had

once said that the time would come when the capitalist countries would bid among themselves to sell to the Soviet Union the rope with which the Soviet Union would later hang them. He hadn't anticipated the death of the country he'd founded, and certainly not that the next Russia might be the one doing what he had predicted.

Golovko could not disagree with his guest. He'd made a similar argument, though with fewer decibels, in the office of President Grushavoy. "Our country needs the hard currency, Gennady Iosifovich."

"Indeed. And perhaps someday we will also need the oil fields and the gold mines of Siberia. What will we do when the Chinks take those away from us?" Bondarenko demanded.

"The Foreign Ministry discounts that possibility," Sergey Nikolay'ch replied.

"Fine. Will those foreign-service pansies take up arms if they are proven wrong, or will they wring their hands and say it isn't their fault? I am spread too thin for this. I cannot stop a Chinese attack, and so now we sell them the T-99 tank design ..."

"It will take them five years to bring about series production, and by that time we will have the T-10 in production at Chelyabinsk, will we not?"

That the People's Liberation Army had four thousand of the Russian-designed T-80/90 tanks was not discussed. That had happened years earlier. But the Chinese had not used the Russian-designed 115-mm gun, opting instead for the 105-mm rifled gun sold to them by Israel Defense Industries, known to America as the M-68. They came complete with three million rounds of ammunition made to American specifications, down to the depleted uranium projectiles, probably made with uranium depleted by the same reactors that made plutonium for their nuclear devices. What was it about politicians? Bondarenko wondered. You could talk and talk and talk to them, but they *never listened!* It had to be a *Russian* phenomenon, the general thought, rather than a political one. Stalin had executed the intelligence officer who'd predicted—correctly, as it turned out—the German attack of June 1941 on the Soviet Union. And *that* one had come within sight of Moscow. Executed him, why? Because his prediction was less pleasing than that of Levrenti Beriya, who'd had the good sense to say what Stalin had wanted to hear. And Beriya had survived being completely wrong. So much for the rewards of patriotism.

"If we have the money for it, and if Chelyabinsk hasn't been retooled to make fucking washing machines!" Russia had cannibalized its defense infrastructure even more quickly than America had. Now there was talk of converting the MiG airplane plants to automobile production. Would this never stop? Bondarenko thought. He had a potentially hostile nation next door, and he was years away from rebuilding the Russian Army into the shape he wished. But to do that meant asking President Grushavoy for something that he knew he couldn't have. To build a proper army, he had to pay the soldiers a living wage, enough to attract the patriotic and adventurous boys who wanted to wear their country's uniform for a few years, and most

particularly those who found that they enjoyed uniformed life enough to make a career of it, to become sergeants, the middle-level professional soldiers without whom an army simply could not function, the sinews that held the muscles to the bone. To make that happen, a good platoon sergeant had to make almost as much money as a skilled factory worker, which was only fair, since the demands of such a man were on the same intellectual level. The rewards of a uniformed career could not be duplicated in a television plant. The comradeship, and the sheer joy of soldiering, was something to which a special sort of man responded. The Americans had such men, as did the British and the Germans, but these priceless professionals had been denied the Russian Army since the time of Lenin, the first of many Soviet leaders who'd sacrificed military efficiency in favor of the political purity the Soviet Union had insisted upon. Or something like that, Bondarenko thought. It all seemed so distant now, even to one who'd grown up within the misbegotten system.

"General, please remember that I am your friend in the government," Golovko reminded him. Which was just as well. The Defense Minister was—well, he spoke the right words, but he wasn't really able to think the right thoughts. He could repeat what others told him, and that was about it. In that sense, he was the perfect politician.

"Thank you, Sergey Nikolay'ch." The general inclined his head with the proper respect. "Does that mean that I can count upon some of these riches that Fate has dropped into our lap?"

"At the proper time I will make the proper recommendation to the president."

By that time, I will be retired, writing my memoirs, or whatever the hell a Russian general is supposed to do, Bondarenko told himself. *But at least I can try to get the necessary programs drafted for my successors, and perhaps help choose the right man to follow me into the operations directorate.* He didn't expect to go any further than he already had. He was chief of operations (which included training) for his army, and that was as fine a goal as any man could ask for his career.

"Thank you, Comrade Minister. I know your job is also difficult. So, is there anything I need to know about the Chinese?"

Minister Golovko wished he could tell this general that SVR didn't have a decent pipeline into the PRC anymore. Their man, a second-deputy minister, long in the employ of the KGB, had retired on grounds of ill health.

But he could not make the admission that the last Russian source inside the Forbidden City was no longer operational, and with him had gone all the insights they needed to evaluate the PRC's long-term plans and intentions. Well, there was still the Russian ambassador in Beijing, and he was no one's fool, but a diplomat saw mainly what the host government wanted him to see. The same was true of the military, naval, and air attaches, trained intelligence officers all, but also limited to what the Chinese military wished them to see, and even that had to be reciprocated every step of the way in Moscow, as though in some elegant international waltz. No, there was no substitute for a

trained intelligence officer running agents who looked inside the other government, so that he, Golovko, could know exactly what was going on and report on it to his president. It wasn't often that Golovko had to report that he did not know enough, but it had happened in this case, and he would not confess his shortcomings to this soldier, senior one or not.

"No, Gennady Iosifovich, I have nothing to indicate that the Chinese seek to threaten us."

"Comrade Minister, the discoveries in Siberia are too vast for them not to consider the advantage to be had from seizing them. In their place, *I* would draw up the necessary plans. They import oil, and these new fields would obviate that necessity, and make them rich in the foreign exchange they seek. And the gold, Comrade, speaks for itself, does it not?"

"Perhaps." Golovko nodded. "But their economy seems healthy at the moment, and wars are not begun by those already rich."

"Hitler was prosperous enough in 1941. That did not prevent him from driving his army to within sight of this building," the chief of operations for the Russian army pointed out. "If your neighbor has an apple tree, sometimes you will pick an apple even if your belly is full. Just for the taste, perhaps," Bondarenko suggested.

Golovko couldn't deny the logic of that. "Gennady Iosifovich, we are of a kind. We both look out for dangers even when they are not obvious. You would have made a fine intelligence officer."

"Thank you, Comrade Minister." The three-star toasted his host with his almost empty vodka glass. "Before I leave my office, it is my hope to lay before my successor a plan, the accomplishment of which will make our country invulnerable to attack from any country. I know I will not be able myself to make that happen, but I will be grateful for the ability to set a firm plan in place, if our political leadership can see the merit of our ideas." And that was the real problem, wasn't it? The Russian army might be able to deal with external enemies. It was the internal ones which formed the really intractable problem. You usually knew where your enemy stood, because you faced them. Where your friends stood was more difficult, because they were usually behind you.

"I will make sure you present the case yourself to the cabinet. But"—Golovko held up his hand—"you must wait for the right moment."

"I understand, and let us hope the Chinese allow us the time for that moment." Golovko tossed off the last of his drink and rose. "Thanks for letting me come in to bare my heart to you, Comrade Chairman."

So, where is he?" Provalov demanded.

"I do not know," Abramov replied tiredly. "We've identified one person who claims to know him, but our informant has no idea where he lives."

"Very well. What *do* you know?" Moscow asked St. Petersburg.

"Our informant says that Suvorov is former KGB, RIF'd in 1996 or so, that

he lives, probably, in St. Petersburg—but if that is true, he does so under an assumed name and false documents, or 'Suvorov' is itself a false name. I have a description. Male, fifty or so, average height and build. Thinning blond hair. Regular features. Blue eyes. Physically fit. Unmarried. Thought to frequent prostitutes. I have some people asking around those women for more information. Nothing yet," the St. Petersburg investigator replied.

This is amazing, Lieutenant Provalov thought. *All the resources we have, and we can't develop a single reliable piece of information.* Was he chasing ghosts? Well, he had five of those already. Avseyenko, Maria Ivanovna Sablin, a driver whose name he couldn't remember at the moment, and the two putative Spetsnaz killers, Pyotr Alekseyevich Amalrik and Pavel Borissovich Zimyanin. Three blown up spectacularly during a morning rush hour, and two murdered in St. Petersburg after having done the job—but killed for succeeding or failing?

"Well, let me know when you develop anything."

"I will do that, Oleg Gregoriyevich," Abramov promised.

The militia lieutenant hung up his phone and cleared his desk, putting all his "hot" files into the locked drawer, then he walked downstairs to his official car and drove to his favorite bar. Reilly was inside, and waved when he came through the door. Provalov hung up his coat on a hook and walked over to shake hands. He saw that a drink was waiting for him.

"You are a true comrade, Mishka," the Russian said to his American friend as he took his first slug.

"Hey, I know the problem, pal," the FBI agent said sympathetically.

"It is this way for you as well."

"Hell, when I was a brand-new brick agent, I started working the Gotti case. We busted our asses bagging that lowlife. Took three juries to put him in Marion. He's never coming back. Marion is a particularly nasty prison." Though "nasty" in American terms was different from the Russian. Russian prisons didn't really bear thinking about, though Reilly didn't worry much about that. People who broke the law in any society knew about the possible consequences going in, and what happened when they got caught was their problem, not his. "So, what's the story?"

"This Suvorov. We can't find him. Mishka, it is as if he doesn't exist."

"Really?" It both was and was not a surprise to Reilly. The former, because Russia, like many European societies, kept track of people in ways that would have started a Second American Revolution. The cops here were supposed to know where everybody lived, a carryover from the Bad Old Days when KGB had kept a third of the population as informers on the other two-thirds. It was an uncommon situation for the local cops not to be able to find someone.

The situation was not surprising, however, because if this Suvorov mutt really was a former KGB officer, then he'd been expertly trained to disappear, and that sort of adversary didn't just die of the dumbs, like most American and Russian hoods did. Nor would he die from talking too much. Your average

criminals acted—well, like criminals. They bragged too much, and to the wrong people, other criminals for the most part, who had the loyalty of rattlesnakes and would sell out a "friend" as readily as taking a piss. No, this Suvorov guy, if he was who and what the informants said he was, was a pro, and they made interesting game for interesting hunts, and usually long hunts at that. But you always got them in the end, because the cops never stopped looking, and sooner or later, he'd make a mistake, maybe not a big one, but big enough. He wouldn't be hanging with his former buds in KGB, people who would help keep him hidden, and would only talk among themselves and then not much. No, he was in a different milieu now, not a friendly one, not a safe one, and that was just too damned bad. Reilly had occasionally felt a certain sympathy for a criminal, but never for a killer. There were some lines you just couldn't cross.

"He has dived into a hole and then covered it up from inside," the Russian said, with some frustration.

"Okay, what do we know about him?"

Provalov related what he'd just learned. "They say they will be asking whores if they might know him."

"Good call." Reilly nodded. "I bet he likes the high-end ones. Like our Miss Tanya, maybe. You know, Oleg, maybe he knew Avseyenko. Maybe he knows some of his girls."

"That is possible. I can have my men check them out as well."

"Can't hurt," the FBI agent agreed, waving to the bartender for a couple of refills. "You know, buddy, you've got yourself a real investigation happening here. I kinda wish I was on your force to help out."

"You enjoy this?"

"Bet your ass, Oleg. The harder the case, the more thrilling the chase. And it feels real good at the end when you bag the bastards. When we convicted Gotti, damn if we didn't have one big party in Manhattan. The Teflon Don," Reilly said, hoisting his glass, and telling the air, "Hope you like it in Marion, boy."

"This Gotti, he killed people, yes?" Provalov asked.

"Oh, yeah, some himself, and others he gave the orders. His number one boy, Salvatore Gravano—Sammy the Bull, they called him—turned government witness and helped make the case for us. So then we put Sammy in the witness-protection program, and the mutt starts dealing drugs again down in Arizona. So, Sammy's back inside. The dummy."

"They all are, as you say, criminals," Provalov pointed out.

"Yeah, Oleg, they are. They're too stupid to go straight. They think they can outsmart us. And y'know, for a while they do. But sooner or later..." Reilly took a sip and shook his head.

"Even this Suvorov, you think?"

Reilly smiled for his new friend. “Oleg, do you ever make a mistake?”

The Russian grunted. “At least once a day.”

“So, why do you think they’re any smarter than you are?” the FBI agent asked. “Everybody makes mistakes. I don’t care if he’s driving a garbage truck or President of the fucking United States. We all fuck up every so often. It’s just part of being human. Thing is, if you recognize that fact, you can make it a lot further. Maybe this guy’s been well trained, but we all have weaknesses, and we’re not all smart enough to acknowledge them, and the smarter we are, the less likely we are to acknowledge them.”

“You are a philosopher,” Provalov said with a grin. He liked this American. They were of a kind, as though the gypsies had switched babies at birth or something.

“Maybe, but you know the difference between a wise man and a fool?”

“I am sure you will tell me.” Provalov knew how to spot pontification half a block away, and the one approaching had flashing red lights on the roof.

“The difference between a wise man and a fool is the magnitude of his mistakes. You don’t trust a fool with anything important.” *The vodka was making him wax rhapsodic,* Reilly thought. “But a wise man you do, and so the fool doesn’t have the chance to make a big screwup, while a wise man does. Oleg, a private can’t lose a battle, but a general can. Generals are smart, right? You have to be real smart to be a doc, but docs kill people by accident all the time. It is the nature of man to make mistakes, and brains and training don’t matter a rat-fuck. I make ‘em. You make ’em.” Reilly hoisted his glass again. “And so does Comrade Suvorov.” *It’ll be his dick,* Reilly thought. *If he likes to play with hookers, it’ll be his dick that does him in. Tough luck, bro.* But he wouldn’t be the first to follow his dick into trouble, Reilly knew. He probably wouldn’t be the last, either.

So, did it all work?" Ming asked.

“Hmph?” Nomuri responded. This was strange. She was supposed to be in the afterglow period, his arm still around her, while they both smoked the usual after-sex cigarette.

“I did what you wished with my computer. Did it work?”

“I’m not sure,” Nomuri tried as a reply. “I haven’t checked.”

“I do not believe that!” Ming responded, laughing. “I have thought about this. You have made me a spy!” she said, followed by a giggle.

“I did *what?”*

“You want me to make my computer accessible to you, so you can read all my notes, yes?”

“Do you care?” He’d asked her that once before, and gotten the right answer. Would it be true now? She’d sure as hell seen through his cover story. Well, that was no particular surprise, was it? If she weren’t smart, she’d be useless as a penetration agent. But knowing what she was ... how patriotic was she? Had he read her character right? He didn’t let his body tense next to hers, remarkably enough. Nomuri congratulated himself for mastering another lesson in the duplicity business.

A moment’s contemplation, then: “No.”

Nomuri tried not to let his breath out in too obvious an expression of relief.

“Well, then you need not concern yourself. From now on, you will do nothing at all.”

“Except this?” she asked with yet another giggle.

“As long as I continue to please you, I suppose!”

“Master Sausage!”

“Huh?”

“Your sausage pleases me greatly,” Ming explained, resting her head on his chest.

And that, Chester Nomuri thought, was sufficient to the moment.

CHAPTER 16

The Smelting of Gold

Pavel Petrovich Gogol could believe his eyes, but only because he'd seen the whole Red Army armored corps on the move in the Western Ukraine and Poland, when he was a younger man. The tracked vehicles he saw now were even bigger and knocked down most of the trees, those that weren't blown down by engineers with explosives. The short season didn't allow the niceties of tree-felling and road-laying they used in the effete West. The survey team had found the source of the gold dust with surprising ease, and now a team of civil and military engineers was pushing a road to the site, slashing a path across the tundra and through the trees, dropping tons of gravel on the path which might someday be properly paved, though such roads were a problem in these weather conditions. Over the roads would come heavy mining equipment, and building materials for the workers who would soon make their homes in what had been "his" woods. They told him that the mine would be named in his honor. That hadn't been worth much more than a spit. And they'd taken most of his golden wolf pelts—after paying for them and probably paying most generously, he allowed. The one thing they'd given him that he liked was a new rifle, an Austrian Steyr with a Zeiss scope in the American .338 Winchester Magnum caliber, more than ample for local game. The rifle was brand-new—he'd fired only fifteen rounds through it to make sure it was properly sighted in. The blued steel was immaculate, and the walnut stock was positively sensuous in its honeyed purity. *How many Germans might he have killed with this!* Gogol thought. And how many wolves and bear might he take now.

They wanted him to leave his river and his woods. They promised him weeks on the beaches at Sochi, comfortable apartments anywhere in the country. Gogol snorted. Was he some city pansy? No, he was a *man* of the woods, a man of the mountains, a man feared by the wolves and the bear, and even the tigers to the south had probably heard of him. This land was *his* land. And truth be told, he knew no other way to live, and was too old to learn one in any case. What other men called comforts he would call annoyances, and when his time came to die, he would be content to die in the woods and let a wolf or a bear pick over his corpse. It was only fair. He'd killed and skinned enough of them, after all, and good sport was good sport.

Well, the food they'd brought in—flown in, they'd told him—was pretty good, especially the beef, which was richer than his usual reindeer, and he had fresh tobacco for his pipe. The television reporters loved the pipe, and encouraged him to tell his story of life in the Siberian forests, and his best bear

and wolf stories. But he'd never see the TV story they were doing on him; he was too far away from what they occasionally called "civilization" to have his own TV set. Still, he was careful to tell his stories carefully and clearly, so that the children and grandchildren he'd never had would see what a great man he'd been. Like all men, Gogol had a proper sense of self-worth, and he would have made a fine storyteller for any children's school, which hadn't occurred to any of the bureaucrats and functionaries who'd come to disturb his existence. Rather, they saw him as a TV personality, and an example of the rugged individualist whom the Russians had always worshipped on the one hand and brutally suppressed on the other.

But the real subject of the forty-minute story that was being put together by Russian national television wasn't really here. It was seventeen kilometers away, where a geologist tossed a gold nugget the size of his fist up and down like a baseball, though it weighed far more than the equivalent volume of iron. That was merely the biggest nugget they'd found. This deposit, the geology team explained to the cameras, was worthy of a tale from mythology, the garden, perhaps, of Midas himself. Exactly how rich it was they'd learn only from tunneling into the ground, but the chief of the geology team was willing to wager his professional reputation that it would beggar the South African mine, by far the richest found to date on the planet. Every day the tapes the cameras made were uploaded to the Russian communications satellite that spent most of its time hanging over the North Pole—much of the country is too far north to make proper use of the geosynchronous birds used by the rest of the world.

This was not a problem for the National Security Agency. NSA has stations worldwide, and the one located at Chicksands in England took the feed of the Russian satellite and instantly cross-loaded it to an American military-communications satellite, which dispatched the signal to Fort Meade, Maryland. Agreeably, the signal was not encrypted and so could be immediately forwarded to Russian linguists for translation, and then off it went to CIA and other national assets for evaluation. As it played out, the President of the United States would see the footage a week before the average Russian citizen.

"Damn, who is that guy, Jim Bridger?" Jack asked.

"His name is Pavel Petrovich Gogol. He's the guy credited with discovering the gold deposit. See," Ben Goodley said. The camera took in the row of gilded wolf pelts.

"Damn, those could be hung in the Smithsonian ... like something out of a George Lucas movie ..." SWORDSMAN observed.

"Or you could buy one for your wife," Goodley suggested.

POTUS shook his head. "Nah ... but ... maybe if it was a gilded sable coat ... you think the voters could handle it?"

"I think I defer on such questions to Mr. van Damm," the National Security Adviser said after a moment's consideration.

“Yeah, might be fun to see him have a cow right here in the Oval Office. This tape isn’t classified, is it?”

“Yes, it is, but only ‘confidential.’ ”

“Okay, I want to show this one to Cathy tonight.” That level of classification wouldn’t faze anybody, not even a major city newspaper.

“You want one with subtitles or a voice-over translation?”

“We both *hate* subtitles,” Jack informed his aide, with a look.

“I’ll have Langley get it done for you, then,” Goodley promised.

“She’ll flip out when she sees that pelt.” With the money from his investment portfolio, Ryan had become a connoisseur of fine jewelry and furs. For the former, he had an arrangement with Blickman‘s, a very special firm in Rockefeller Center. Two weeks before the previous Christmas, one of their salespeople had come by train to Washington, accompanied by two armed guards, who hadn’t been allowed into the White House proper—the outside guards had gone slightly nuts on learning that armed men were on campus, but Andrea Price-O’Day had smoothed that over—and shown the President about five million dollars’ worth of estate jewelry, and some pieces newly made just across the street from their office, some of which Ryan had purchased. His reward had been to see Cathy’s eyes pop nearly out of her head under the Christmas tree, and lament the fact that all she’d gotten him was a nice set of Taylor golf clubs. But that was fine with SWORDSMAN. To see his wife smile on Christmas morning was as fine a prize as he expected in life. Besides, it was proof that he had taste in jewelry, one of the better things for a man to have—at least in his woman’s eyes. But damn, if he could have gotten her one of those wolf-fur coats ... could he cut a deal with Sergey Golovko? Jack wondered briefly. But where the hell could you wear such a thing? He had to be practical.

“Would look nice in the closet,” Goodley agreed, seeing the distant look in his boss’s eyes.

Color would go so nice with her butter-blond hair. Ryan mused on for a few more seconds, then shook his head to dismiss the thought.

“What else today?”

“SORGE has developed new information. It’s being couriered down even as we speak.”

“Important?”

“Mrs. Foley didn’t say so, but you know how it works.”

“Oh, yeah, even the minor stuff fits together into a real pretty picture when you need it.” The major download still sat in his private safe. The sad truth was that while he did, technically, have the time to read it, that would have entailed taking time away from his family, and it would have had to have been *really* important for the President to do that.

So, what will the Americans do?" Fang asked Zhang.

“On the trade issue? They will, finally, bow to the inevitable, and grant us most-favored-nation status *and* remove their objection to our full entry into the World Trade Organization,” the minister replied.

“None too soon,” Fang Gan observed.

“That is true,” Zhang Han San agreed. The financial conditions in the PRC had been well concealed to this point, which was one advantage of the communist form of government, both ministers would have agreed, if they had ever considered another form of government. The cold truth of the matter was that the PRC was nearly out of foreign exchange, having spent it mainly on armaments and arms-related technology all over the world. Only incidental goods had come from America—mainly computer chips, which could be used in nearly any sort of mechanical contrivance. The overtly military material they’d purchased came most often from Western Europe, and sometimes from Israel. America sold what arms it released to this part of the world to the renegades on Taiwan, who paid cash, of course. That was like a mosquito bite to the mainland regime, not large, not life-threatening, but an annoyance that they continuously scratched at, in the process making it worse instead of better. There were over a billion—a *thou*sand million—people in mainland China, and less than thirty million on the island across the strait. The misnamed Republic of China used its people well, producing more than a quarter of the goods and services the PRC turned out in a given year with forty times as many workers and peasants. However, while the mainland coveted the goods and services and the riches that resulted, they did not covet the political and economic system that made it possible. Their system was far superior, of course, because theirs was the better ideology. Mao himself had said so.

Neither of these two Politburo members, nor any of the others, reflected much on the objective realities at hand. They were as certain in their beliefs as any Western clergyman was in his. They even ignored the self-evident fact that what prosperity the People’s Republic possessed came from capitalist enterprise allowed by previous rulers, often over the screams and howls of other ministerial-rank politicians. The latter contented themselves by denying political influence to the people who were enriching their country, confident that this situation would go on forever, and that those businessmen and industrialists would be satisfied to make their money and live in relative luxury while they, the political theorists, continued to manage the nation’s affairs. After all, the weapons and the soldiers belonged to *them,* didn’t they? And power still grew out of the barrel of a gun.

“You are certain of this?” Fang Gan asked.

“Yes, Comrade, I am quite certain. We have been ‘good’ for the Yankees, haven’t we? We have not rattled our saber at the Taiwanese bandits lately, have we?”

“What of American trade complaints?”

“Do they not understand business?” Zhang asked grandly. “We sell goods to them because of their quality and price. We shop the same way. Yes, I admit, their Boeing airplane company makes fine airplanes, but so does Airbus in Europe, and the Europeans have been more ... accommodating to us politically. America rants on about opening our markets to their goods, and we do this—slowly, of course. We need to keep the surplus they so kindly give us, and spend it on items of importance to us. Next, we will expand our automobile production and enter their auto market, as the Japanese once did. In five years, Fang, we will be taking another ten billion dollars from America annually—and that, my friend, is a very conservative estimate.”

“You think so?”

An emphatic nod. “Yes! We will not make the mistake the Japanese made early on, selling ugly little cars. We are already looking for American styling engineers who will help us design automobiles which are aesthetically pleasing to the white devils.”

“If you say so.”

“When we have the money we need to build up our military, we will be the world’s leading power in every respect. Industrially, we will lead the world. Militarily, we are at the center of the world.”

“I fear these plans are too ambitious,” Fang said cautiously. “They will take more years than we have to implement in any case, *but* what legacy will we leave to our country if we point her on a erroneous path?”

“What error is this, Fang?” Zhang asked. “Do you doubt our ideas?”

Always that question, Fang thought with an inward sigh. “I remember when Deng said, ‘It doesn’t matter if the cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice.’ To which Mao responded with a livid snarl: ‘What *emperor* said that?’ ”

“But it *does* matter, my old friend, and well you know it.”

“That is true,” Fang agreed with a submissive nod, not wanting a confrontation this late in the day, not when he had a headache. Age had made Zhang even more ideologically pure than he’d been in his youth, and it hadn’t tempered his imperial ambition. Fang sighed once more. He was of a mind to set the issue aside. It wasn’t worth the trouble. Though he’d mention it just once more, to cover his political backside.

“What if they don’t?” Fang asked finally.

“What?”

“What if they don’t go along? What if the Americans are troublesome on the trade issue?”

“They will not be,” Zhang assured his old friend.

“But if they are, Comrade, what then will we do? What are our options?”

“Oh, I suppose we could punish with one hand and encourage with the other, cancel some purchases from America and then inquire about making

some other ones. It's worked before many times," Zhang assured his guest. "This President Ryan is predictable. We need merely control the news. We will give him nothing to use against us."

Fang and Zhang continued their discussion into other issues, until the latter returned to his office, where, again, he dictated his notes of the discussion to Ming, who then typed them into her computer. The minister considered inviting her to his apartment, but decided against it. Though she'd become somewhat more attractive in the preceding weeks, catching his eye with her gentle smiles in the outer office, it had been a long day for him, and he was too tired for it, enjoyable though it often was with Ming. Minister Fang had no idea that his dictation would be in Washington, D.C., in less than three hours.

What do you think, George?"

"Jack," TRADER began, "what the hell is this, and how the hell did we get it?"

"George, this is an internal memorandum—well, of sorts—from the government of the People's Republic of China. How we got it, you do not, repeat, *not* need to know."

The document had been laundered—scrubbed—better than Mafia income. All the surnames had been changed, as had the syntax and adjectives, to disguise patterns of speech. It was thought—hoped would be a better term—that even those whose discourse was being reported would not have recognized their own words. But the content had been protected—even improved, in fact, since the nuances of Mandarin had been fully translated into American English idiom. That had been the hardest part. Languages do not really translate into one another easily or well. The denotations of words were one thing. The connotations were another, and these never really paralleled from one tongue to another. The linguists employed by the intelligence services were among the best in the country, people who regularly read poetry, and sometimes published journal pieces, under their own names, so that they could communicate their expertise in—and indeed, love of—their chosen foreign language with others of a similar mind. *What resulted were pretty good translations,* Ryan thought, but he was always a little wary of them.

"These cocksuckers! They're talking about how they plan to fuck us over." For all his money, George Winston retained the patois of his working-class origins.

"George, it's business, not personal," the President tried as a tension-release gambit.

The Secretary of the Treasury looked up from the briefing document. "Jack, when I ran Columbus Group, I had to regard all of my investors as my family, okay? *Their* money had to be as important to me as *my* money. That was my professional obligation as an investment counselor."

Jack nodded. "Okay, George. That's why I asked you into the cabinet.

You're honest."

"Okay, but now, I'm Sec-fucking-Treas, okay? *That* means that every citizen in our country is part of my family, and these Chink bastards are planning to fuck with my country—all those people out there"—Secretary Winston waved toward the thick windows of the Oval Office—"the ones who trust *us* to keep the economy leveled out. So, they want MFN, do they? They want into the WTO, do they? Well, *fuck* them!"

President Ryan allowed himself an early-morning laugh, wondering if the Secret Service detail had heard George's voice, and might now be looking through the spy holes in the door to see what the commotion was. "Coffee and croissants, George. The grape jelly is Smuckers, even."

TRADER stood and walked around the couch, tossing his head forcefully like a stallion circling a mare in heat. "Okay, Jack, I'll cool down, but you're used to this shit, and I'm not." He paused and sat back down. "Oh, okay, up on The Street we trade jokes and stories, and we even plot a little bit, but deliberately fucking people over—no! I've *never* done that! And you know what's worst?"

"What's that, George?"

"They're stupid, Jack. They think they can mess with the marketplace according to their little political theories, and it'll fall into line like a bunch of soldiers right out of boot camp. These little bastards couldn't run a Kmart and show a profit, but they let them dick around with a whole national economy—and then they want to dick with ours, too."

"Got it all out of your system?"

"Think this is funny?" Winston asked crossly.

"George, I've never seen you get this worked up. I'm surprised by your passion."

"Who do you think I am, Jay Gould?"

"No," Ryan said judiciously. "I was thinking more of J. P. Morgan." The remark had the desired effect. SecTreas laughed.

"Okay, you got me there. Morgan was the first actual Chairman of the Fed, and he did it as a private citizen, and did it pretty well, but that's probably an institutional function, 'cuz there ain't that many J. P. Morgans waiting around on deck. Okay, Mr. President, sir, I am calmed down. Yes, this is business, not personal. And our reply to this miserable *business* attitude will be *business,* too. The PRC will *not* get MFN. They will not get into the WTO—as a practical matter, they don't deserve it yet anyway, based on the size of their economy. And, I think we rattle the Trade Reform Act at them nice and hard. Oh, there's one other thing, and I'm surprised it's not in here," Winston said, pointing down at the briefing sheet.

"What's that?"

"We can get 'em by the short hairs pretty easy, I think. CIA doesn't agree, but Mark Gant thinks their foreign-exchange account's a little thin."

“Oh?” the President asked, stirring his coffee.

Winston nodded emphatically. “Mark’s my tech-weenie, remember. He’s very good at modeling stuff on the computers. I’ve set him up with his own little section to keep an eye on various things. Pulled the professor of economics out of Boston University to work there, Morton Silber, another good man with the microchips. Anyway, Mark’s been looking at the PRC, and he thinks they’re driving off the edge of the Grand Canyon because they’ve been pissing away their money, mainly on military hardware and heavy-manufacturing equipment, like to make tanks and things. It’s a repeat of the old communist stuff, they have a fixation on heavy industry. They are really missing the boat on electronics. They have little companies manufacturing computer games and stuff, but they’re not applying it at home, except for that new computer factory they set up that’s ripping off Dell.”

“So you think we ought to shove that up their ass at the trade negotiations?”

“I’m going to recommend it to Scott Adler at lunch this afternoon, as a matter of fact,” SecTreas agreed. “They’ve been warned, but this time we’re going to press it hard.”

“Back to their foreign exchange account. How bad is it?”

“Mark thinks they’re down to negative reserves.”

“In the hole? For how much?” POTUS asked.

“He says at least fifteen billion, floated with paper out of German banks for the most part, but the Germans have kept it quiet—and we’re not sure why. It could be a normal transaction, but either the Germans or the PRC wants to keep it under wraps.”

“Wouldn’t be the Germans, would it?” Ryan asked next.

“Probably not. It makes their banks look good. And, yeah, that leaves the Chinese covering it up.”

“Any way to confirm that?”

“I have some friends in Germany. I can ask around, or have a friend do it for me. Better that way, I guess. Everybody knows I’m a government employee now, and that makes me sinister,” Winston observed with a sly grin. “Anyway, I am having lunch with Scott today. What do I tell him about the trade negotiations?’

Ryan thought about that for several seconds. This was one of those moments —the frightening ones, as he thought of them—when his words would shape the policy of his own country, and, possibly, others as well. It was easy to be glib or flip, to say the first thing that popped into his mind, but, no, he couldn’t do that. Moments like this were too important, too vast in their potential consequences, and he couldn’t allow himself to make government policy on a whim, could he? He had to think the matter through, quickly perhaps, but through.

“We need China to know that we want the same access to their markets that we’ve given them to ours, and that we won’t tolerate their stealing products

from American companies without proper compensation. George, I want the playing field level and fair for everyone. If they don't want to play that way, we start hurting them."

"Fair enough, Mr. President. I will pass that message along to your Secretary of State. Want I should deliver this, too?" Winston asked, holding up his SORGE briefing sheet.

"No, Scott gets his own version of it. And, George, be very, very careful with that. If the information leaks, a human being will lose his life," SWORDSMAN told TRADER, deliberately disguising the source as a man, and therefore deliberately misleading his Secretary of the Treasury. But that, too, was business, and not personal.

"It goes into my confidential files." Which was a pretty secure place, they both knew. "Nice reading the other guy's mail, isn't it?"

"Just about the best intelligence there is," Ryan agreed.

"The guys at Fort Meade, eh? Tapping into somebody's cell phone via satellite?"

"Sources and methods—you really don't want to know that, George. There's always the chance that you'll spill it to the wrong person by mistake, and then you have some guy's life on your conscience. Something to be avoided, trust me."

"I hear you, Jack. Well, I have a day to start. Thanks for the coffee and the pastry, Boss."

"Any time, George. Later." Ryan turned to his appointment calendar as the Secretary walked out the corridor door, from which he'd go downstairs, cross outside because the West Wing wasn't directly connected to the White House proper, dart back inside, and head off into the tunnel leading to Treasury.

Outside Ryan's office, the Secret Service detail went over the appointment list also, but their copy also included the results of a National Crime Information Computer check, to make sure that no convicted murderer was being admitted into the Sanctum Sanctorum of the United States of America.

CHAPTER 17

The Coinage of Gold

Scott Adler was regarded as too young and inexperienced for the job, but that judgment came from would-be political appointees who'd schemed their way to near-the-top, whereas Adler had been a career foreign-service officer since his graduation from Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy twenty-six years earlier. Those who'd seen him work regarded him as a very astute diplomatic technician. Those who played cards with him—Adler liked to play poker before a major meeting or negotiation—thought he was one very lucky son of a bitch.

His seventh-floor office at the State Department building was capacious and comfortable. Behind his desk was a credenza covered with the usual framed photographs of spouse, children, and parents. He didn't like wearing his suit jacket at his desk, as he found it too confining for comfort. In this he'd outraged some of the senior State Department bureaucrats, who thought this an entirely inappropriate informality. He did, of course, don the jacket for important meetings with foreign dignitaries, but he didn't think internal meetings were important enough to be uncomfortable for.

That suited George Winston, who tossed his coat over a chair when he came in. Like himself, Scott Adler was a working guy, and those were the people with whom Winston was most comfortable. He might be a career government puke, but the son of a bitch had a work ethic, which was more than he could say for too many of the people in his own department. He was doing his best to weed the drones out, but it was no easy task, and civil-service rules made firing unproductive people a non-trivial exercise.

"Have you read the Chinese stuff?" Adler asked, as soon as the lunch tray was on the table.

"Yeah, Scott. I mean, holy shit, fella," TRADER observed to EAGLE.

"Welcome to the club. The intelligence stuff we get can be very interesting." The State Department had its own spook service, called Intelligence and Research, or I&R, which, while it didn't exactly compete with CIA and the other services, occasionally turned up its own rough little diamonds from the thick diplomatic mud. "So, what do you think of our little yellow brothers?"

Winston managed not to growl. "Buddy, I might not even eat their goddamned food anymore."

"They make our worst robber barons look like Mother Teresa. They're conscienceless motherfuckers, George, and that's a fact." Winston immediately

started liking Adler more. A guy who talked like this had real possibilities. Now it was his turn to be coldly professional to counterpoint Adler's working-class patois.

"They're ideologically driven, then?"

"Totally—well, maybe with a little corruption thrown in, but remember, they figure that their political astuteness entitles them to live high on the hog, and so to them it's not corruption at all. They just collect tribute from the peasants, and 'peasant' is a word they still use over there."

"In other words, we're dealing with dukes and earls?"

The Secretary of State nodded. "Essentially, yes. They have an enormous sense of personal entitlement. They are not used to hearing the word 'no' in any form, and as a result they don't always know what to do when they do hear it from people like me. That's why they're often at a disadvantage in negotiations—at least, when we play hardball with them. We haven't done much of that, but last year, after the Airbus shoot-down I came on a little strong, and then we followed up with official diplomatic recognition of the ROC government on Taiwan. That really put the PRC noses seriously out of joint, even though the ROC government hasn't officially declared its independence."

"What?" Somehow SecTreas had missed that.

"Yeah, the people on Taiwan play a pretty steady and reasonable game. They've never really gone out of their way to offend the mainland. Even though they have embassies all over the world, they've never actually proclaimed the fact that they're an independent nation. That would flip the Beijing Chinese out. Maybe the guys in Taipei think it would be bad manners or something. At the same time, we have an understanding that Beijing knows about. If somebody messes with Taiwan, Seventh Fleet comes over to keep an eye on things, and we will not permit a direct military threat to the Republic of China government. The PRC doesn't have enough of a navy to worry our guys that much, and so all that flies back and forth, really, is words." Adler looked up from his sandwich. "Sticks and stones, y'know?"

"Well, I had breakfast with Jack this morning, and we talked about the trade talks."

"And Jack wants to play a little rougher?" SecState asked. It wasn't much of a surprise. Ryan had always preferred fair play, and that was often a rare commodity in the intercourse among nation-states.

"You got it," Winston confirmed around a bite of his sandwich. One thing about working-class people like Adler, the SecTreas thought, they knew what a proper lunch was. He was so tired of fairyfied French food for lunch. Lunch was supposed to be a piece of meat with bread wrapped around it. French cuisine was just fine, but for dinner, not for lunch.

"How rough?"

"We get what we want. We need them to get accustomed to the idea that they need us a hell of a lot more than we need them."

“That’s a tall order, George. If they don’t want to listen?”

“Knock louder on the door, or on their heads. Scott, you read the same document this morning I did, right?”

“Yeah,” SecState confirmed.

“The people they’re cheating out of their jobs are American citizens.”

“I know that. But what you have to remember is that we can’t dictate to a sovereign country. The world doesn’t work that way.”

“Okay, fine, but we can tell them that they can’t dictate trade practices to us, either.”

“George, for a long time America has taken a very soft line on these issues.”

“Maybe, but the Trade Reform Act is now law—”

“Yeah, I remember. I also remember how it got us into a shooting war,” Adler reminded his guest.

“We won. I remember that, too. Maybe other people will as well. Scott, we’re running a huge trade deficit with the Chinese. The President says that has to stop. I happen to agree. If we can buy from them, then they damned well have to buy from us, or we buy our chopsticks and teddy bears elsewhere.”

“There are jobs involved,” Adler warned. “They know how to play that card. They cancel contracts and stop buying our finished goods, and then some of our people lose their jobs, too.”

“Or, if we succeed, then we sell more finished goods to them, and our factories have to hire people to make them. Play to win, Scott,” Winston advised.

“I always do, but this isn’t a baseball game with rules and fences. It’s like racing a sailboat in the fog. You can’t always see your adversary, and you can damned near never see the finish line.”

“I can buy you some radar, then. How about I give you one of my people to help out?”

“Who?”

“Mark Gant. He’s my computer whiz. He really knows the issues from a technical, monetary point of view.”

Adler thought about that. State Department had always been weak in that area. Not too many business-savvy people ended up in the Foreign Service, and learning it from books wasn’t the same as living it out in the real world, a fact that too many State Department “professionals” didn’t always appreciate as fully as they should.

“Okay, send him over. Now, just how rough are we supposed to play this?”

“Well, I guess you’ll need to talk that one over with Jack, but from what he told me this morning, we want the playing field leveled out.”

An easy thing to say, Adler thought, but less easy to accomplish. He liked and admired President Ryan, but he wasn't blind to the fact that SWORDSMAN was not the most patient guy in the world, and in diplomacy, patience was everything—hell, patience was just about the only thing. "Okay," he said, after a moment's reflection. "I'll talk it over with him before I tell my people what to say. This could get nasty. The Chinese play rough."

"Life's a bitch, Scott," Winston advised.

SecState smiled. "Okay, duly noted. Let me see what Jack says. So, how's the market doing?"

"Still pretty healthy. Price/earnings ratios are still a little outrageous, but profits are generally up, inflation is under control, and the investment community is nice and comfy. The Fed Chairman is keeping a nice, even strain on monetary policy. We're going to get the changes we want in the tax code. So, things look pretty good. It's always easier to steer the ship in calm seas, y'know?"

Adler grimaced. "Yeah, I'll have to try that sometime." But he had marching orders to lay on a typhoon. This would get interesting.

So, how's readiness?" General Diggs asked his assembled officers.

"Could be better," the colonel commanding 1st Brigade admitted. "We've been short lately on funds for training. We have the hardware, and we have the soldiers, and we spend a lot of time in the simulators, but that's not the same as going out in the dirt with our tracks." There was general nodding on that point.

"It's a problem for me, sir," said Lieutenant Colonel Angelo Giusti, who commanded 1st Squadron, 4th Armored Cavalry Regiment. Known within the Army as the Quarter Horse for the 1st/4th unit designator, it was the division reconnaissance screen, and its commander reported directly to the commanding general of First Tanks instead of through a brigade commander. "I can't get my people out, and it's hard to train for reconnaissance in the *kazerne.* The local farmers get kinda irate when we crunch through their fields, and so we have to pretend we can do recon from hard-surface roads. Well, sir, we can't, and that bothers me some."

There was no denying the fact that driving armored vehicles across a cornfield was tough on the corn, and while the U.S. Army trailed every tactical formation with a Hummer whose passengers came with a big checkbook to pay for the damage, the Germans were a tidy people, and Yankee dollars didn't always compensate for the suddenly untidy fields. It had been easier when the Red Army had been right on the other side of the fence, threatening death and destruction on West Germany, but Germany was now one sovereign country, and the Russians were now on the far side of Poland, and a lot less threatening than they'd once been. There were a few places where large formations could exercise, but those were as fully booked as the prettiest debutante's dance card at the cotillion, and so the Quarter Horse spent too

much time in simulators, too.

“Okay,” Diggs said. “The good news is that we’re going to profit from the new federal budget. We have lots more funds to train with, and we can start using them in twelve days. Colonel Masterman, do you have some ways for us to spend it?”

“Well, General, I think I might come up with something. Can we pretend that it’s nineteen-eighty-three again?” At the height of the Cold War, Seventh Army had trained to as fine an edge as any army in history, a fact ultimately demonstrated in Iraq rather than in Germany, but with spectacular effect. Nineteen eighty-three had been the year the increased funding had first taken real effect, a fact noted fully by the KGB and GRU intelligence officers, who’d thought until that time that the Red Army might have had a chance to defeat NATO. By 1984, even the most optimistic Russian officers fell off that bandwagon for all time. If they could reestablish that training regimen, the assembled officers all knew they’d have a bunch of happy soldiers, because, though training is hard work, it is what the troops had signed up for. A soldier in the field is most often a happy soldier.

“Colonel Masterman, the answer to your question is, Yes. Back to my original question. How’s readiness?”

“We’re at about eighty-five percent,” 2nd Brigade estimated. “Probably ninety or so for the artillery—”

“Thank you, Colonel, and I agree,” the colonel commanding divisional artillery interjected.

“But we all know how easy life is for the cannon-cockers,” 2nd Brigade added as a barb.

“Aviation?” Diggs asked next.

“Sir, my people are within three weeks of being at a hundred percent. Fortunately, we don’t squash anybody’s corn when we’re up practicing. My only complaint is that it’s too easy for my people to track tanks on the ground if they’re road-bound, and a little more realistic practice wouldn’t hurt, but, sir, I’ll put my aviators up against anyone in this man’s army, especially my Apache drivers.” The “snake” drivers enjoyed a diet of raw meat and human babies. The problems they’d had in Yugoslavia a few years earlier had alarmed a lot of people, and the aviation community had cleaned up its act with alacrity.

“Okay, so you’re all in pretty good shape, but you won’t mind sharpening the edge up a little, eh?” Diggs asked, and got the nods he expected. He’d read up on all his senior officers on the flight across the pond. There was little in the way of dead wood here. The Army had less trouble than the other services in holding on to good people. The airlines didn’t try to hire tank commanders away from 1st Armored, though they were always trying to steal fighter and other pilots from the Air Force, and while police forces loved to hire experienced infantrymen, his division had only about fifteen hundred of them, which was the one structural weakness in an armored division: not enough

people with rifles and bayonets. An American tank division was superbly organized to take ground—to immolate everyone who happened to be on real estate they wanted—but not so well equipped to hold the ground they overran. The United States Army had never been an army of conquest. Indeed, its ethos has always been liberation, and part and parcel of that was the expectation that the people who lived there would be of assistance, or at least show gratitude for their deliverance, rather than hostility. It was so much a part of the American military's history that its senior members rarely, if ever, thought about other possibilities. Vietnam was too far in the past now. Even Diggs had been too young for that conflict, and though he'd been told how lucky he was to have missed it, it was something he almost never thought about. Vietnam had not been his war, and he didn't really want to know about light infantry in the jungle. He was a cavalryman, and his idea of combat was tanks and Bradleys on open ground.

"Okay, gentlemen. I'll want to meet with all of you individually in the next few days. Then I need to come out and see your outfits. You will find that I'm a fairly easy guy to work for"—by which he meant that he wasn't a screamer, as some general officers were; he demanded excellence as much as anyone else, but he didn't think ripping a man's head off in public was a good way to achieve it—"and I know you're all pretty good. In six months or less, I want this division ready to deal with anything that might come down the road. I mean anything at all."

Who might that be, Colonel Masterman mused to himself, *the Germans?* It might be a little harder to motivate the troops, given the total absence of a credible threat, but the sheer joy of soldiering was not all that much different from the kick associated with football. For the right guy, it was just plain fun to play in the mud with the big toys, and after a while, they started wondering what the real thing might be like. There was a leavening of troops in First Tanks from the 10th and 11th Cavalry Regiments who'd fought the previous year in Saudi Arabia, and like all soldiers, they told their stories. But few of the stories were unhappy ones. Mainly they expounded on how much like training it had been, and referred to their then-enemies as "poor, dumb raghead sunsabitches" who'd been, in the final analysis, unworthy of their steel. But that just made them swagger a little more. A winning war leaves only good memories for the most part, especially a short winning war. Drinks would be hoisted, and the names of the lost would be invoked with sadness and respect, but the overall experience had not been a bad one for the soldiers involved.

It wasn't so much that soldiers lusted for combat, just that they often felt like football players who practiced hard but never actually got to play for points. Intellectually, they knew that combat was the game of death, not football, but that was too theoretical for most of them. The tankers fired their practice rounds, and if the pop-up targets were steel, there was the satisfaction of seeing sparks from the impact, but it wasn't quite the same as seeing the turret pop off the target atop a column of flame and smoke ... and knowing that the lives of three or four people had been extinguished like a birthday-cake candle in front of a five-year-old. The veterans of the Second Persian Gulf

War did occasionally talk about what it was like to see the results of their handiwork, usually with a “Jesus, it was really something awful to see, bro,” but that was as far as it went. For soldiers, killing wasn’t really murder once you stepped back from it; they’d been the enemy, and both had played the game of death on the same playing field, and one side had won, and the other side had lost, and if you weren’t willing to run that risk, well, don’t put the uniform on, y‘know? Or, “Train better, asshole, cuz we be serious out here.” And that was the other reason soldiers liked to train. It wasn’t just interesting and fairly enjoyable hard work. It was life insurance if the game ever started for real, and soldiers, like gamblers, like to hold good cards.

Diggs adjourned the meeting, waving for Colonel Masterman to stay behind.

“Well, Duke?”

“I’ve been nosing around. What I’ve seen is pretty good, sir. Giusti is especially good, and he’s always bitching about training time. I like that.”

“So do I,” Diggs agreed at once. “What else?”

“Like the man said, artillery is in very good shape, and your maneuver brigades are doing okay, considering the lack of field time. They might not like using the sims all that much, but they are making good use of them. They’re about twenty percent off where we were in the Tenth Cav down in the Negev playing with the Israelis, and that isn’t bad at all. Sir, you give me three or four months in the field, and they’ll be ready to take on the world.”

“Well, Duke, I’ll write you the check next week. Got your plans ready?”

“Day after tomorrow. I’m taking some helicopter rides to scout out the ground we can use and what we can’t. There’s a German brigade says they’re eager to play aggressor for us.”

“They any good?”

“They claim to be. I guess we’ll just have to see. I recommend we send Second Brigade out first. They’re a little sharper than the other two. Colonel Lisle is our kind of colonel.”

“His package looks pretty good. He’ll get his star next go-round.”

“About right,” Masterman agreed. *And what about my star?* he couldn’t ask. He figured himself a pretty good bet, but you never really knew. Oh, well, at least he was working for a fellow cavalryman.

“Okay, show me your plans for Second Brigade’s next adventure in the farmland ... tomorrow?”

“The broad strokes, yes, sir.” Masterman bobbed his head and walked off toward his office.

How rough?" Cliff Rutledge asked.

“Well,” Adler replied, “I just got off the phone with the President, and he

says he wants what he wants and it's our job to get it for him."

"That's a mistake, Scott," the Assistant Secretary of State warned.

"Mistake or not, we work for the President."

"I suppose so, but Beijing's been pretty good about not tearing us a new asshole over Taiwan. This might not be the right time for us to press on them so hard."

"Even as we speak, American jobs are being lost because of their trade policy," Adler pointed out. "When does enough become too much?"

"I guess Ryan decides that, eh?"

"That's what the Constitution says."

"And you want me to meet with them, then?"

SecState nodded. "Correct. Four days from now. Put your position paper together and run it past me before we deliver it, but I want them to know we're not kidding. The trade deficit has to come down, and it has to come down soon. They can't make that much money off us and spend it somewhere else."

"But they can't buy military hardware from us," Rutledge observed.

"What do they need all that hardware for?" Scott Adler asked rhetorically. "What external enemies do they have?"

"They'll say that their national security is their affair."

"And we reply that our economic security is our affair, and they're not helping." That meant observing to the PRC that it looked as though they were preparing to fight a war—but against whom, and was that a good thing for the world? Rutledge would ask with studied sangfroid.

Rutledge stood. "Okay, I can present our case. I'm not fully comfortable with it, but, well, I suppose I don't have to be, do I?"

"Also correct." Adler didn't really like Rutledge all that much. His background and advancement had been more political than properly earned. He'd been very tight with former Vice President Kealty, for example, but after that incident had settled out, Cliff had dusted off his coattails with admirable speed. He would probably not get another promotion. He'd gone as far as one could go without really serious political ties—say a teaching position at the Kennedy School at Harvard, where one taught and became a talking head on the PBS evening news hour and waited to be noticed by the right political hopeful. But that was pure luck. Rutledge had come further than actual merit could justify, but with it came a comfortable salary and a lot of prestige on the Washington cocktail-party circuit, where he was on most of the A lists. And that meant that when he left government service, he'd increase his income by an order of magnitude or so with some consulting firm or other. Adler knew he could do the same, but probably wouldn't. He'd probably take over the Fletcher School at Tufts and try to pass along what he'd learned to a new generation of would-be diplomats. He was too young for real retirement,

though there was little in the way of a government afterlife from being Secretary of State, and academia wouldn't be too bad. Besides, he'd get to do the odd consulting job, and do op-ed pieces for the newspapers, where he would assume the role of elder-statesman sage.

"Okay, let me get to work." Rutledge walked out and turned left to head to his seventh-floor office.

Well, this was a plum, the Assistant Secretary thought, even if it was the wrong plum. The Ryan guy was not what he thought a president should be. He thought international discourse was about pointing guns at people's heads and making demands, instead of reasoning with them. Rutledge's way took longer, but was a lot safer. You had to give something to get something. Well, sure, there wasn't much left to give the PRC, except maybe renouncing America's diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. It wasn't hard to understand the reason they'd done it, but it had still been a mistake. It made the PRC unhappy, and you couldn't let some damned-fool "principle" get in the way of international reality. Diplomacy, like politics—another area in which Ryan was sadly lacking—was a practical business. There were a *billion* people in the People's Republic, and you had to respect that. Sure, Taiwan had a democratically elected government and all that, but it was *still* a breakaway province of China, and that made it an internal matter. Their civil war was a fifty-plus-year affair, but Asia was a place where people took the long-term view.

Hmm, he thought, sitting down at his desk. *We want what we want, and we're going to get what we want* ... Rutledge took out a legal pad and leaned back in his chair to make some notes. It might be the wrong policy. It might be dumb policy. It might be policy he disagreed with. But it *was* policy, and if he ever wanted to be kicked upstairs—actually to a different office on the same floor—to Undersecretary of State, he had to present the policy as though it were his own personal passion. It was like being a lawyer, Rutledge thought. They had to argue dumb cases all the time, didn't they? That didn't make them mercenaries. It made them professionals, and he was a professional.

And besides, he'd never been caught. One thing about Ed Kealty, he'd never told anybody how Rutledge had tried to help him be President. Duplicitous he might have been toward the President, but he'd been loyal to his own people about it, as a politician was supposed to be. And that Ryan guy, smart as he might have been, he'd never caught on. *So there, Mr. President,* Rutledge thought. *You may be smart, you think, but you need* me *to formulate your policy for you.* Ha!

This is a pleasant change, Comrade Minister," Bondarenko observed on coming in. Golovko waved him to a chair, and poured him a small glass of vodka, the fuel of a Russian business meeting. The visiting general-lieutenant took the obligatory sip and expressed his thanks for the formal hospitality. He most often came here after normal working hours, but this time he'd been summoned officially, and right after lunch. It would have made him uneasy—once upon a time, such an invitation to KGB headquarters would involve a quick trip to the men's room—except for his cordial relationship with Russia's

chief spy.

"Well, Gennady Iosifovich, I've talked you and your ideas over with President Grushavoy, and you've had three stars for a long time. It is time, the president and I agreed, for you to have another, and a new assignment."

"Indeed?" Bondarenko wasn't taken aback, but he became instantly wary. It wasn't always pleasant to have one's career in others' hands, even others one liked.

"Yes. As of Monday next, you will be General-Colonel Bondarenko, and soon after that you will travel to become commander-in-chief of the Far East Military District."

That got his eyebrows jolting upward. This was the award of a dream he'd held in his own mind for some time. "Oh. May I ask, why there?"

"I happen to agree with your concerns regarding our yellow neighbors. I've seen some reports from the GRU about the Chinese army's continuing field exercises, and to be truthful, our intelligence information from Beijing is not all we would wish. Therefore, Eduard Petrovich and I feel that our eastern defenses might need some firming up. That becomes your job, Gennady. Do it well, and some additional good things might happen for you."

And that could only mean one thing, Bondarenko thought, behind an admirable poker face. Beyond the four stars of a general-colonel lay only the single large star of a marshal, and that was as high as any Russian soldier could go. After that, one could be commander-in-chief of the entire army, or defense minister, or one could retire to write memoirs.

"There are some people I'd like to take out to Chabarsovil with me, some colonels from my operations office," the general said contemplatively.

"That is your prerogative, of course. Tell me, what will you wish to do out there?"

"Do you really want to know?" the newly frocked four-star asked.

Golovko smiled broadly at that. "I see. Gennady, you wish to remake the Russian army in your image?"

"Not my image, Comrade Minister. A winning image, such as we had in 1945. There are images one wishes to deface, and there are images one dares not touch. Which, do you think, ought we to have?"

"What will the costs be?"

"Sergey Nikolay'ch, I am not an economist, nor am I an accountant, but I can tell you that the cost of doing this will be far less than the cost of not doing it." And now, Bondarenko thought, he'd get wider access to whatever intelligence his country possessed. It'd have been better if Russia had spent the same resources on what the Americans delicately called National Technical Means—strategic reconnaissance satellites—that the Soviet Union had once done. But he'd get such as there was, and maybe he could talk the air force into making a few special flights ...

“I will tell that to President Grushavoy.” Not that it would do all that much good. The cupboard was still bare of funding, though that could change in a few years.

“Will these new mineral discoveries in Siberia give us a little more money to spend?”

Golovko nodded. “Yes, but not for some years. Patience, Gennady.”

The general took a final shot of the vodka. “I can be patient, but will the Chinese?”

Golovko had to grant his visitor’s concern. “Yes, they are exercising their military forces more than they used to.” What had once been a cause for concern had become, with its continuance, a matter of routine, and Golovko, like many, tended to lose such information in the seemingly random noise of daily life. “But there are no diplomatic reasons for concern. Relations between our countries are cordial.”

“Comrade Minister, I am not a diplomat, nor am 1 an intelligence officer, but I do study history. I recall that the Soviet Union’s relations with Hitler’s Germany were cordial right up until June 23, 1941. The leading German elements passed Soviet trains running westbound with oil and grain to the *fascisti.* I conclude from this that diplomatic discourse is not always an indicator of a nation’s intentions.”

“That is true, and that is why we have an intelligence service.”

“And then you will also recall that the People’s Republic has in the past looked with envy on the mineral riches of Siberia. That envy has probably grown with the discoveries we have made. We have not publicized them, but we may assume that the Chinese have intelligence sources right here in Moscow, yes?”

“It is a possibility not to be discounted,” Golovko admitted. He didn’t add that those sources would most probably be true-believing communists from Russia’s past, people who lamented the fall of their nation’s previous political system, and saw in China the means, perhaps, to restore Russia to the true faith of Marxism-Leninism, albeit with a little Mao tossed in. Both men had been Communist Party members in their day: Bondarenko because advancement in the Soviet Army had absolutely demanded it, and Golovko because he would never have been entrusted with a post in KGB without it. Both had mouthed the words, and kept their eyes mostly open during party meetings, in both cases while checking out the women in the meetings or just day-dreaming about things of more immediate interest. But there were those who had listened and thought about it, who had actually believed all that political rubbish. Both Bondarenko and Golovko were pragmatists, interested mainly in a reality they could touch and feel rather than some model of words that might or might not come to pass someday. Fortunately for both, they’d found their way into professions more concerned with reality than theory, where their intellectual explorations were more easily tolerated, because men of vision were always needed, even in a nation where vision was supposed to be controlled. “But you will have ample assets to act upon your concerns.”

Not really, the general thought. He'd have—what? Six motor-rifle divisions, a tank division, and a divisional formation of artillery, all regular-army formations at about seventy percent nominal strength and dubious training—that would be his first task, and not a minor one, to crack those uniformed boys into Red Army soldiers of the sort who had crushed the Germans at Kursk, and moved on to capture Berlin. *That would be a major feat to accomplish, but who was better suited to this task?* Bondarenko asked himself. There were some promising young generals he knew of, and maybe he'd steal one, but for his own age group Gennady Iosifovich Bondarenko felt himself to be the best brain in his nation's armed forces. Well, then, he'd have an active command and a chance to prove it. The chance of failure was always there, but men such as he are the kind who see opportunities where others see dangers.

"I presume I will have a free hand?" he asked, after some final contemplation.

"Within reason." Golovko nodded. "We'd prefer that you did not start a war out there."

"I have no desire to drive to Beijing. I have never enjoyed their cooking," Bondarenko replied lightly. And Russians should be better soldiers. The fighting ability of the Russian male had never been an issue for doubt. He just needed good training, good equipment, and proper leadership. Bondarenko thought he could supply two of those needs, and that would have to do. Already, his mind was racing east, thinking about his headquarters, what sort of staff officer he would find, whom he'd have to replace, and where the replacements would come from. There'd be drones out there, careerist officers just serving their time and filling out their forms, as if that were what it meant to be a field-grade officer. Those men would see their careers aborted—well, he'd give everyone thirty days to straighten up, and if he knew himself, he'd inspire some to rediscover their vocations. His best hope was in the individual soldiers, the young boys wearing their country's uniform indifferently because no one had told them exactly what they were and how important that thing was. But he'd fix *that.* They were *soldiers,* those boys. Guardians of their country, and they deserved to be proud guardians. With proper training, in nine months they'd wear the uniforms better, stand straighter, and swagger a bit on leave, as soldiers were supposed to do. He'd show them how to do it, and he'd become their surrogate father, pushing and cajoling his new crop of sons toward manhood. It was as worthy a goal as any man could wish, and as Commander-in-Chief Far East, he just might set a standard for his country's armed forces to emulate.

"So, Gennady Iosifovich, what do I tell Eduard Petrovich?" Golovko asked, as he leaned across the desk to give his guest a little more of the fine Starka vodka.

Bondarenko lifted the glass to salute his host. "Comrade Minister, you will please tell our president that he has a new CINC-Far East."

CHAPTER 18

Evolutions

The interesting part for Mancuso in his new job was that he now commanded aircraft, which he could fairly well understand, but also ground troops, which he hardly understood at all. This latter contingent included the 3rd Marine Division based on Okinawa, and the Army's 25th Light Infantry Division at Schofield Barracks on Oahu. Mancuso had never directly commanded more than one hundred fifty or so men, all of whom had been aboard his first and last real—as he thought of it—command, USS *Dallas.* That was a good number, large enough that it felt larger than even an extended family, and small enough that you knew every face and name. Pacific Command wasn't anything like that. The *square* of *Dallas's* crew didn't begin to comprise the manpower which he could direct from his desk.

He'd been through the Capstone course. That was a program designed to introduce new flag officers to the other branches of the service. He'd walked in the woods with Army soldiers, crawled in the mud with Marines, even watched an aerial refueling from the jump seat of a C-5B transport (the most unnatural act he ever expected to see, two airplanes mating in midair at three hundred knots), and played with the Army's heavy troops at Fort Irwin, California, where he'd tried his hand at driving and shooting tanks and Bradleys. But seeing it all and playing with the kids, and getting mud on his clothing, wasn't really the same as knowing it. He had some very rough ideas of what it looked and sounded and smelled like. He'd seen the confident look on the faces of men who wore uniforms of different color, and told himself about a hundred times that they were, really, all the same. The sergeant commanding an Abrams tank was little different in spirit from a leading torpedoman on a fast-attack boat, just not recently showered, and a Green Beret was little different from a fighter pilot in his godlike self-confidence. But to command such people effectively, he ought to know more, CINCPAC told himself. He ought to have had more "joint" training. But then he told himself that he could take the best fighter jock in the Air Force or the Navy, and even then it would take months for them to understand what he'd done on *Dallas.* Hell, just getting them to understand the importance of reactor safety would take a year—about what it had taken him to learn all those things once upon a time, and Mancuso wasn't a "nuc" by training. He'd always been a front-end guy. The services were all different in their *feel* for the mission, and that was because the missions were all as different in nature as a sheepdog was from a pit bull.

But he had to command them all, and do so effectively, lest he make a

mistake that resulted in a telegram coming to Mrs. Smith's home to announce the untimely death of her son or husband because some senior officer had fucked up. Well, Admiral Bart Mancuso told himself, that was why he had such a wide collection of staff officers, including a surface guy to explain what that sort of target did (to Mancuso any sort of surface ship was a target), an Airedale to explain what naval aircraft did, a Marine and some soldiers to explain life in the mud, and some Air Force wing-wipers to tell him what their birds were capable of. All of them offered advice, which, as soon as he took it, became his idea alone, because he was in command, and command meant being responsible for everything that happened in or near the Pacific Ocean, including when some newly promoted E- 4 petty officer commented lustily on the tits of another E-4 who happened to have them—a recent development in the Navy, and one which Mancuso would just as soon have put off for another decade. They were even letting women on submarines now, and the admiral didn't regret having missed that one little bit. What the hell would Mush Morton and his crop of WWII submarines have made of *that?*

He figured he knew how to set up a naval exercise, one of those grand training evolutions in which half of 7th Fleet would administratively attack and destroy the other half, followed by the simulated forced-entry landing of a Marine battalion. Navy fighters would tangle with Air Force ones, and after it was all over, computer records would show who'd won and who'd lost, and bets of various sorts would be paid off in various bars—and there'd be some hard feelings, because fitness reports (and with them, careers) could ride on outcomes of simulated engagements.

Of all his services, Mancuso figured his submarine force was in the best shape, which made sense, since his previous job had been COMSUBPAC, and he'd ruthlessly whipped his boats into shape. And, besides, the little shooting war they'd engaged in two years before had given everyone the proper sense of mission, to the point that the crews of the boomers who'd laid on a submarine ambush worthy of Charlie Lockwood's best day still swaggered around when on the beach. The boomers remained in service as auxiliary fast-attacks because Mancuso had made his case to the CNO, who was his friend, Dave Seaton, and Seaton had made his case to Congress to get some additional funding, and Congress was nice and tame, what with two recent conflicts to show them that people in uniform did have more purposes than opening and closing doors for the people's elected representatives. Besides, the Ohio-class boats were just too expensive to throw away, and they were mainly off doing valuable oceanographic missions in the North Pacific, which appealed to the tree- (actually fish- and dolphin- in this case) huggers, who had far too much political power in the eyes of this white-suited warrior.

With every new day came his official morning briefing, usually run by Brigadier General Mike Lahr, his J-2 Intelligence Officer. This was particularly good news. On the morning of 7 December, 1941, the United States had learned the advantage of providing senior area commanders with the intelligence they might need, and so this CINCPAC, unlike Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, got to hear a lot.

"Morning, Mike," Mancuso said in greeting, while a chief steward's mate set

up morning coffee.

"Good morning, sir," the one-star replied.

"What's new in the Pacific?"

"Well, top of the news this morning, the Russians have appointed a new guy to head their Far Eastern Military District. His name is Gennady Bondarenko. His last job was J-3 operations officer for the Russian army. His background's pretty interesting. He started off in signals, not a combat arm, but he distinguished himself in Afghanistan toward the end of that adventure on their part. He's got the Order of the Red Banner and he's a Hero of the Soviet Union—got both of those as a colonel. He moved rapidly up from there. Good political connections. He's worked closely with a guy named Golovko—he's a former KGB officer who's still in the spook business and is personally known to the President—ours, that is. Golovko is essentially the operational XO for the Russian President Grushavoy—like a chief minister or something. Grushavoy listens to him on a lot of issues, and he's a pipeline into the White House on matters 'of mutual interest.' "

"Great. So the Russians have Jack Ryan's ear via this guy. What sort of mensch is he?" CINCPAC asked.

"Very smart and very capable, our friends at Langley say. Anyway, back to Bondarenko. The book on the guy says he's also very smart and also very capable, a contender for further advancement. Brains and personal bravery can be career-enhancing in their military, just like ours."

"What sort of shape is his new command in?"

"Not very good at all, sir. We see eight division-sized formations, six motor-rifle divisions, one tank, and one artillery division. All appear to be under strength on our overheads, and they don't spend much time in the field. Bondarenko will change that, if he goes according to the form card."

"Think so?"

"As their J-3, he agitated for higher training standards—and he's a bit of an intellectual. He published a lengthy essay last year on the Roman legions. It was called 'Soldiers of the Caesars.' It had that great quote from Josephus, 'Their drills are bloodless battles and their battles are bloody drills.' Anyway, it was a straight historical piece, sources like Josephus and Vegetius, but the implication was clear. He was crying out for better training in the Russian army, and also for career NCOs. He spent a lot of time with Vegetius's discussion of how you build centurions. The Soviet army didn't really have sergeants as we understand the term, and Bondarenko is one of the new crop of senior officers who's saying that the new *Russian* army should reintroduce that institution. Which makes good sense," Lahr thought.

"So, you think he's going to whip his people into shape. What about the Russian navy?"

"They don't belong to him. He's got Frontal Aviation tactical aircraft and ground troops, but that's all."

“Well, their navy’s so far down the shitter they can’t see where the paper roll is,” Mancuso observed. “What else?”

“A bunch of political stuff you can read up on at your leisure. The Chinese are still active in the field. They’re running a four-division exercise now south of the Amur River.”

“That big?”

“Admiral, they’ve been on an increased training regimen for almost three years now. Nothing frantic or anything, but they’ve been spending money to get the PLA up to speed. This one’s heavy with tanks and APCs. Lots of artillery live-fire exercises. That’s a good training area for them, not much in the way of civilians, kinda like Nevada but not as flat. At first when they started this we kept a close eye on it, but it’s fairly routine now.”

“Oh, yeah? What do the Russians think about it?”

Lahr stretched in his chair. “Sir, that’s probably why Bondarenko drew this assignment. This is backward from how the Russians trained to fight. The Chinese have them heavily outnumbered in theater, but nobody sees hostilities happening. The politics are pretty smooth at the moment.”

“Uh-huh,” CINCPAC grunted behind his desk. “And Taiwan?”

“Some increased training near the strait, but those are mainly infantry formations, and nothing even vaguely like amphibious exercises. We keep a close eye on that, with help from our ROC friends.”

Mancuso nodded. He had a filing cabinet full of plans to send 7th Fleet west, and there was almost always one of his surface ships making a “courtesy call” to that island. For his sailors, the Republic of China was one hell of a good liberty port, with lots of women whose services were subject to commercial negotiations. And having a gray U.S. Navy warship tied alongside pretty well put that city off-limits for a missile attack. Even scratching an American warship was classified delicately as a *casus belli,* a reason for war. And nobody thought the ChiComms were ready for that sort of thing yet. To keep things that way, Mancuso had his carriers doing constant workups, exercising their interceptor and strike-fighter forces in the manner of the 1980s. He always had at least one fast-attack or boomer slow-attack submarine in the Formosa Strait, too, something that was advertised only by casual references allowed to leak to the media from time to time. Only very rarely would a submarine make a local port call, however. They were more effective when not seen. But in another filing cabinet he had lots of periscope photos of Chinese warships, and some “hull shots,” photos made from directly underneath, which was mainly good for testing the nerve of his submarine drivers.

He also occasionally had his people track ChiComm submarines, much as he’d done in Dallas against the former Soviet navy. But this was much easier. The Chinese nuclear-power plants were so noisy that fish avoided them to prevent damage to their ears, or so his sonarmen joked. As much as the PRC had rattled its saber at Taiwan, an actual attack, if opposed by his 7th Fleet,

would rapidly turn into a bloody shambles, and he hoped Beijing knew that. If they didn't, finding out would be a messy and expensive exercise. But the ChiComms didn't have much in the way of amphibious capability yet, and showed no signs of building it.

"So, looks like a routine day in theater?" Mancuso asked, as the briefing wound down.

"Pretty much," General Lahr confirmed.

"What sort of assets do we have tasked to keep an eye on our Chinese friends?"

"Mainly overheads," the J-2 replied. "We've never had much in the way of human intelligence in the PRC—at least not that I ever heard about."

"Why is that?"

"Well, in simplest terms it would be kind of hard for you or me to disappear into their society, and most of our Asian citizens work for computer-software companies, last time I checked."

"Not many of them in the Navy. How about the Army?"

"Not many, sir. They're pretty underrepresented."

"I wonder why."

"Sir, I'm an intelligence officer, not a demographer," Lahr pointed out.

"I guess that job is hard enough, Mike. Okay, if anything interesting happens, let me know."

"You bet, sir." Lahr headed out the door, to be replaced by Mancuso's J-3 operations officer, who would tell him what all his theater assets were up to this fine day, plus which ships and airplanes were broken and needed fixing.

She hadn't gotten any less attractive, though getting her here had proven difficult. Tanya Bogdanova hadn't avoided anything, but she'd been unreachable for several days.

"You've been busy?" Provalov asked.

"Da, a special client," she said with a nod. "We spent time together in St. Petersburg. I didn't bring my beeper. He dislikes interruptions," she explained, without showing much in the way of remorse.

Provalov could have asked the cost of several days in this woman's company, and she would probably have told him, but he decided that he didn't need to know all that badly. She remained a vision, lacking only the white feathery wings to be an angel. Except for the eyes and the heart, of course. The former cold, and the latter nonexistent.

"I have a question," the police lieutenant told her.

"Yes?"

"A name. Do you know it? Klementi Ivan'ch Suvorov."

Her eyes showed some amusement. “Oh, yes. I know him well.” She didn’t have to elaborate on what “well” meant.

“What can you tell me about him?”

“What do you wish to know?”

“His address, for starters.”

“He lives outside Moscow.”

“Under what name?”

“He does not know that I know, but I saw his papers once. Ivan Yurievich Koniev.”

“How do you know this?” Provalov asked.

“He was asleep, of course, and I went through his clothes,” she replied, as matter-of-factly as if she’d told the militia lieutenant where she shopped for bread.

So, he fucked you, and you, in turn, fucked him, Provalov didn’t say. “Do you remember his address?”

She shook her head. “No, but it’s one of the new communities off the outer ring road.”

“When did you last see him?”

“It was a week before Gregoriy Filipovich died,” she answered at once.

It was then that Provalov had a flash: “Tanya, the night before Gregoriy died, whom did you see?”

“He was a former soldier or something, let me think ... Pyotr Alekseyevich ... something ...”

“Amalrik?” Provalov asked, almost coming off his seat.

“Yes, something like that. He had a tattoo on his arm, the Spetsnaz tattoo a lot of them got in Afghanistan. He thought very highly of himself, but he wasn’t a very good lover,” Tanya added dismissively.

And he never will be, Provalov could have said then, but didn’t. “Who set up that, ah, appointment?”

“Oh, that was Klementi Ivan’ch. He had an arrangement with Gregoriy. They knew each other, evidently for a long time. Gregoriy often made special appointments for Klementi’s friends.”

Suvorov had one or both of his killers fuck the whores belonging to the man they would kill the next day ... ? Whoever Suvorov was, he had an active sense of humor ... or the real target actually had been Sergey Nikolay’ch. Provalov had just turned up an important piece of information, but it didn’t seem to illuminate his criminal case at all. Another fact which only made his job harder, not easier. He was back to the same two possibilities: This Suvorov had contracted the two Spetsnaz soldiers to kill Rasputin, and then had them

killed as “insurance” to avoid repercussions. Or he’d contracted them to eliminate Golovko, and then killed them for making a serious error. Which? He’d have to find this Suvorov to find out. But now he had a name and a probable location. And that was something he could work on.

CHAPTER 19

Manhunting

Things had quieted down at Rainbow headquarters in Hereford, England, to the point that both John Clark and Ding Chavez were starting to show the symptoms of restlessness. The training regimen was as demanding as ever, but nobody had ever drowned in sweat, and the targets, paper and electronic were —well, if not as *satisfying* as a real human miscreant wasn't the best way to put it, then maybe not as *exciting* was the right phrase. But the Rainbow team members didn't say that, even among themselves, for fear of appearing bloodthirsty and unprofessional. To them the studied mental posture was that it was all the same. Practice *was* bloodless battle, and battle *was* bloody drill. And certainly by taking their training so seriously, they were still holding a very fine edge. Fine enough to shave the fuzz off a baby's face.

The team had never gone public, at least not per se. But the word had leaked out somehow. Not in Washington, and not in London, but somewhere on the continent, the word had gotten out that NATO now had a very special and very capable counterterrorist team that had raped and pillaged its way through several high-profile missions, and only once taken any lumps, at the hands of Irish terrorists who had, however, paid a bitter price for their misjudgment. The European papers called them the "Men of Black" for their assault uniforms, and in their relative ignorance the European newsies had somehow made Rainbow even more fierce than reality justified. Enough so that the team had deployed to the Netherlands for a mission seven months before, a few weeks after the first news coverage had broken, and when the bad guys at the grammar school had found there were new folks in the neighborhood, they'd stumbled through a negotiating session with Dr. Paul Bellow and cut a deal before hostilities had to be initiated, which was pleasing for everyone. The idea of a shoot-out in a school full of kids hadn't even appealed to the Men of Black.

Over the last several months, some members had been hurt or rotated back to their parent services, and new members had replaced them. One of these was Ettore Falcone, a former member of the Carabinieri sent to Hereford as much for his own protection as to assist the NATO team. Falcone had been walking the streets of Palermo in Sicily with his wife and infant son one pleasant spring evening when a shoot-out had erupted right before his eyes. Three criminals were hosing a pedestrian, his wife, and their police bodyguard with submachine guns, and in an instant Falcone had pulled out his Beretta and dropped all three with head shots from ten meters away. His action had been too late to save the victims, but not too late to incur the wrath of a *capo*

mafioso, two of whose sons had been involved in the hit. Falcone had publicly spat upon the threat, but cooler heads had prevailed in Rome—the Italian government did not want a blood feud to erupt between the Mafia and its own federal police agency—and Falcone had been dispatched to Hereford to be the first Italian member of Rainbow. He had quickly proven himself to be the best pistol shot anyone had ever seen.

"*Damn*," John Clark breathed, after finishing his fifth string of ten shots. This guy had beaten him again! They called him Big Bird. Ettore—Hector—was about six-three and lean like a basketball player, the wrong size and shape for a counterterror trooper, but, Jesus, could this son of a bitch shoot!

"*Grazie*, General," the Italian said, collecting the five-pound note that had accompanied *this* blood feud.

And John couldn't even bitch that he'd done it for real, whereas Big Bird had only done it with paper. This spaghetti-eater had dropped three guys armed with SMGs, and done it with his wife and kid next to him. Not just a talented shooter, this guy had two big brass ones dangling between his legs. And his wife, Anna-Maria, was reputed to be a dazzling cook. In any case, Falcone had bested him by one point in a fifty-round shootoff. And John had practiced for a week before this grudge match.

"Ettore, where the hell did you learn to shoot?" RAINBOW Six demanded.

"At the police academy, General Clark. I never fired a gun before that, but I had a good instructor, and I learned well," the sergeant said, with a friendly smile. He wasn't the least bit arrogant about his talent, and somehow that just made it worse.

"Yeah, I suppose." Clark zippered his pistol into the carrying case and walked away from the firing line.

"You, too, sir?" Dave Woods, the rangemaster, said, as Clark made for the door.

"So I'm not the only one?" RAINBOW Six asked.

Woods looked up from his sandwich. "Bloody hell, that lad's got a fookin' letter of credit at the Green Dragon from besting me!" he announced. And Sergeant-Major Woods really *had* taught Wyatt Earp everything he knew. And at the SAS/Rainbow pub he'd probably taught the new boy how to drink English bitter. Beating Falcone would not be easy. There just wasn't much room to take a guy who often as not shot a "possible," or perfect score.

"Well, Sergeant-Major, then I guess I'm in good company." Clark punched him on the shoulder as he headed out the door, shaking his head. Behind him, Falcone was firing another string. He evidently liked being Number One, and practiced hard to stay there. It had been a long time since anyone had bested him on a shooting range. John didn't like it, but fair was fair, and Falcone had won within the rules.

Was it just one more sign that he was slowing down? He wasn't running as

fast as the younger troops at Rainbow, of course, and that bothered him, too. John Clark wasn't ready to be old yet. He wasn't ready to be a grandfather either, but he had little choice in that. His daughter and Ding had presented him with a grandson, and he couldn't exactly ask that they take him back. He was keeping his weight down, though that often required, as it had today, skipping lunch in favor of losing five paper-pounds at the pistol range.

"Well, how did it go, John?" Alistair Stanley asked, as Clark entered the office building.

"The kid's real good, Al," John replied, as he put his pistol in the desk drawer.

"Indeed. He won five pounds off me last week."

A grunt. "I guess that makes it unanimous." John settled in his swivel chair, like the "suit" he'd become. "Okay, anything come in while I was off losing money?"

"Just this from Moscow. Ought not to have come here anyway," Stanley told his boss, as he handed over the fax.

They want what?" Ed Foley asked in his seventh-floor office.

"They want us to help train some of their people," Mary Pat repeated for her husband. The original message had been crazy enough to require repetition.

"Jesus, girl, how ecumenical are we supposed to get?" the DCI demanded.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch thinks we owe him one. And you know ..."

He had to nod at that. "Yeah, well, maybe we do, I guess. This has to go up the line, though."

"It ought to give Jack a chuckle," the Deputy Director (Operations) thought.

Shit," Ryan said in the Oval Office, when Ellen Sumter handed him the fax from Langley. Then he looked up. "Oh, excuse me, Ellen."

She smiled like a mother to a precocious son. "Yes, Mr. President."

"Got one I can ... ?"

Mrs. Sumter had taken to wearing dresses with large slash pockets. From the left one, she fished out a flip-top box of Virginia Slims and offered it to her President, who took one out and lit it from the butane lighter also tucked in the box.

"Well, ain't this something?"

"You know this man, don't you?" Mrs. Sumter asked.

"Golovko? Yeah." Ryan smiled crookedly, again remembering the pistol in his face as the VC-137 thundered down the runway at Moscow's Sheremetyevo

airport all those years before. He could smile now. At the time, it hadn't seemed all that funny. "Oh, yeah, Sergey and I are old friends."

As a Presidential secretary, Ellen Sumter was cleared for just about everything, even the fact that President Ryan bummed the occasional smoke, but there were some things she didn't and would never know. She was smart enough to have curiosity, but also smart enough not to ask.

"If you say so, Mr. President."

"Thanks, Ellen." Ryan sat back down in his chair and took a long puff on the slender cigarette. Why was it that stress of any sort made him gravitate back to these damned things that made him cough? The good news was that they also made him dizzy. So, *that meant he wasn't a smoker, not really*, POTUS told himself. He read over the fax again. It had two pages. One was the original fax from Sergey Nikolay'ch to Langley—unsurprisingly, he had Mary Pat's direct fax line, and wanted to show off that fact—and the second was the recommendation from Edward Foley, his CIA director.

For all the official baggage, it was pretty simple stuff. Golovko didn't even have to explain *why* America had to accede to his request. The Foleys and Jack Ryan would know that KGB had assisted the CIA and the American government in two very sensitive and important missions, and the fact that both of them had also served Russian interests was beside the point. Thus Ryan had no alternative. He lifted the phone and punched a speed-dial button.

"Foley," the male voice at the other end said.

"Ryan," Jack said in turn. He then heard the guy at the other end sit up straighter in his chair. "Got the fax."

"And?" the DCI asked.

"And what the hell else can we do?"

"I agree." Foley could have said that he personally liked Sergey Golovko. Ryan did, too, as he knew. But this wasn't about like or don't-like. They were making government policy here, and that was bigger than personal factors. Russia had helped the United States of America, and now Russia was asking the United States of America for help in return. In the regular intercourse among nations, such requests, if they had precedents, had to be granted. The principle was the same as lending your neighbor a rake after he had lent you a hose the previous day, just that at this level, people occasionally got killed from such favors. "You handle it or do I?"

"The request came to Langley. You do the reply. Find out what the parameters are. We don't want to compromise Rainbow, do we?"

"No, Jack, but there's not much chance of that. Europe's quieted down quite a bit. The Rainbow troopers are mainly exercising and punching holes in paper. That news story that ran—well, we might actually want to thank the putz who broke it." The DCI rarely said anything favorable about the press. And in this case some government puke had talked far too much about something he knew, but the net effect of the story had had the desired effect, even though the press account had been replete with errors, which was hardly

surprising. But some of the errors had made Rainbow appear quite superhuman, which appealed to their egos and gave their potential enemies pause. And so, terrorism in Europe had slowed down to a crawl after its brief (and somewhat artificial, they knew now) rebirth. The Men of Black were just too scary to mess with. Muggers, after all, went after the little old ladies who'd just cashed their Social Security checks, not the armed cop on the corner. In this, criminals were just being rational. A little old lady can't resist a mugger very effectively, but a cop carries a gun.

"I expect our Russian friends will keep a lid on it."

"I think we can depend on that, Jack," Ed Foley agreed.

"Any reason not to do it?"

Ryan could hear the DCI shift in his seat. "I never have been keen on giving 'methods' away to anybody, but this isn't an intelligence operation per se, and most of it they could get from reading the right books. So, I guess we can allow it."

"Approved," the President said.

Ryan imagined he could see the nod at the other end. "Okay, the reply will go out today."

With a copy to Hereford, of course. It arrived on John's desk before closing time. He summoned Al Stanley and handed it to him.

"I suppose we're becoming famous, John."

"Makes you feel good, doesn't it?" Clark asked distastefully. Both were former clandestine operators, and if there had been a way to keep their own supervisors from knowing their names and activities, they would have found it long before.

"I presume you will go yourself. Whom will you take to Moscow with you?"

"Ding and Team-2. Ding and I have been there before. We've both met Sergey Nikolay'ch. At least this way he doesn't see all that many new faces."

"Yes, and your Russian, as I recall, is first-rate."

"The language school at Monterey is pretty good," John said, with a nod.

"How long do you expect to be gone?"

Clark looked back down at the fax and thought it over for a few seconds. "Oh, not more than ... three weeks," he said aloud. "Their Spetsnaz people aren't bad. We'll set up a training group for them, and after a while, we can probably invite them here, can't we?"

Stanley didn't have to point out that the SAS in particular, and the British Ministry of Defense in general, would have a conniption fit over that one, but in the end they'd have to go along with it. It was called diplomacy, and its principles set policy for most of the governments in the world, whether they

liked it or not.

"I suppose we'll have to, John," Stanley said, already hearing the screams, shouts, and moans from the rest of the camp, and Whitehall.

Clark lifted his phone and hit the button for his secretary, Helen Montgomery. "Helen, could you please call Ding and ask him to come over? Thank you."

"His Russian is also good, as I recall."

"We had some good teachers. But his accent is a little southern."

"And yours?"

"Leningrad—well, St. Petersburg now, I guess. Al, do you believe all the changes?"

Stanley took a seat. "John, it is all rather mad, even today, and it's been well over ten years since they took down the red flag over the Spaskiy gate."

Clark nodded. "I remember when I saw it on TV, man. Flipped me out."

"Hey, John," a familiar voice called from the door. "Hi, Al."

"Come in and take a seat, my boy."

Chavez, simulated major in the SAS, hesitated at the "my boy" part. Whenever John talked that way, something unusual was about to happen. But it could have been worse. "Kid" was usually the precursor to danger, and now that he was a husband and a father, Domingo no longer went too far out of his way to look for trouble. He walked to Clark's desk and took the offered sheets of paper.

"Moscow?" he asked.

"Looks like our Commander-in-Chief has approved it."

"Super," Chavez observed. "Well, it's been a while since we met Mr. Golovko. I suppose the vodka's still good."

"It's one of the things they do well," John agreed.

"And they want us to teach them to do some other things?"

"Looks that way."

"Take the wives with us?"

"No." Clark shook his head. "This one's all business."

"When?"

"Have to work that out. Probably a week or so."

"Fair enough."

"How's the little guy?"

A grin. "Still crawling. Last night he started pulling himself up, standing, like. Imagine he'll start walking in a few days."

"Domingo, you spend the first year getting them to walk and talk. The next

twenty years you spend getting them to sit down and shut up," Clark warned.

"Hey, Pop, the little guy sleeps all the way through the night, and he wakes up with a smile. Damned sight better than I can say for myself, y'know?" Which made sense. When Domingo woke up, all he had to look forward to was the usual exercises and a five-mile run, which was both strenuous and, after a while, boring.

Clark had to nod at that. It was one of the great mysteries of life, how infants always woke up in a good mood. He wondered where, in the course of years, one lost that.

"The whole team?" Chavez asked.

"Yeah, probably. Including BIG BIRD," RAINBOW SIX added.

"Did he clean your clock today, too?" Ding asked.

"Next time I shoot against that son of a bitch, I want it right after the morning run, when he's a little shaky," Clark said crossly. He just didn't like to lose at much of anything, and certainly not something so much a part of his identity as shooting a handgun.

"Mr. C, Ettore just isn't human. With the MP, he's good, but not spectacular, but with that Beretta, he's like Tiger Woods with a pitching wedge. He just lays 'em dead."

"I didn't believe it until today. I think maybe I ought to have eaten lunch over at the Green Dragon."

"I hear you, John," Chavez agreed, deciding not to comment on his father-in-law's waist. "Hey, I'm pretty good with a pistol, too, remember. Ettore blew my ass away by three whole points."

"The bastard took me by one," John told his Team-2 commander. "First man-on-man match I've lost since Third SOG." And that was thirty years in the past, against his command-master-chief, for beers. He'd lost by two points, but beat the master-chief three straight after that, Clark remembered with pride.

Is that him?" Provalov asked.

"We don't have a photograph," his sergeant reminded him. "But he fits the general description." And he was walking to the right car. Several cameras would be snapping now to provide the photos.

They were both in a van parked half a block from the apartment building they were surveilling. Both men were using binoculars, green, rubber-coated military-issue.

The guy looked about right. He'd come off the building's elevator, and had left the right floor. It had been established earlier in the evening that one Ivan Yurievich Koniev lived on the eighth floor of this upscale apartment building. There had not been time to question his neighbors, which had to be done carefully, in any case. There was more than the off-chance that this Koniev/

Suvorov's neighbors were, as he was reputed to be, former KGB, and thus asking them questions could mean alerting the subject of their investigation. This was not an ordinary subject, Provalov kept reminding himself.

The car the man got into was a rental. There was a private automobile registered to one Koniev, Ian Yurievich, at this address, a Mercedes C-class, and who was to say what other cars he might own under another identity? Provalov was sure he'd have more of those, and they'd all be very carefully crafted. The Koniev ID certainly was. KGB had trained its people thoroughly.

The sergeant in the driver's seat started up the van's motor and got on the radio. Two other police cars were in the immediate vicinity, both manned by pairs of experienced investigators.

"Our friend is moving. The blue rental car," Provalov said over the radio. Both of his cars radioed acknowledgments.

The rental car was a Fiat—a real one made in Turin rather than the Russian copy made at Togliattistad, one of the few special economic projects of the Soviet Union that had actually worked, after a fashion. Had it been selected for its agility, Provalov wondered, or just because it was a cheap car to rent? There was no knowing that right now. Koniev/Suvorov pulled out, and the first tail car formed up with him, half a block behind, while the second was half a block in front, because even a KGB-trained intelligence officer rarely looked for a tail *infront of* himself. A little more time and they might have placed a tracking device on the Fiat, but they hadn't had it, nor the darkness required. If he returned to his apartment, they'd do it late tonight, say about four in the morning. A radio beeper with a magnet to hold it onto the inside of the rear bumper; its antenna would hang down like a mouse's tail, virtually invisible. Some of the available technology Provalov was using had originally been used to track suspected foreign spies around Moscow, and that meant it was pretty good, at least by Russian standards.

Following the car was easier than he'd expected. Three trail cars helped. Spotting a single-car tail was not overly demanding. Two could also be identified, since the same two would switch off every few minutes. But three shadow cars broke up the pattern nicely, and, KGB-trained or not, Koniev/Suvorov was not superhuman. His real defense lay in concealing his identity, and cracking that had been a combination of good investigation and luck—but cops knew about luck. KGB, on the other hand, didn't. In their mania for organization, their training program had left it out, perhaps because trusting to luck was a weakness that could lead to disaster in the field. That told Provalov that Koniev/Suvorov hadn't spent that much time in field operations. In the real world of working the street, you learned such things in a hurry.

The tailing was conducted at extreme range, over a block, and the city blocks were large ones here. The van had been specially equipped for it. The license-plate holders were triangular in cross-section, and at the flip of a switch one could switch from among three separate pairs of tags. The lights on the front of the vehicle were paired as well, and so one could change the light pattern, which was what a skilled adversary would look for at night. Switch them once or twice when out of sight of his rearview mirror, and he'd have to

be a genius to catch on. The most difficult job went with the car doing the front-tail, since it was hard to read Koniev/Suvorov's mind, and when he made an unexpected turn, the lead car then had to scurry about under the guidance of the trailing shadow cars to regain its leading position. All of the militiamen on this detail, however, were experienced homicide investigators who'd learned how to track the most dangerous game on the planet: human beings who'd displayed the willingness to take another life. Even the stupid murderers could have animal cunning, and they learned a lot about police operations just from watching television. That made some of his investigations more difficult than they ought to have been, but in a case like this, the additional difficulty had served to train his men more thoroughly than any academy training would have done.

"Turning right," his driver said into his radio. "Van takes the lead." The leading trail car would proceed to the next right turn, make it, and then race to resume its leading position. The trailing car would drop behind the van, falling off the table for a few minutes before resuming its position. The trail car was a Fiat-clone from Togliattistad, by far the most common private-passenger auto in Russia, and therefore fairly anonymous, with its dirty off-white paint job.

"If that's his only attempt at throwing us off, he's very confident of himself."

"True," Provalov agreed. "Let's see what else he does."

The "what else" took place four minutes later. The Fiat took another right turn, this one not onto a cross-street, but into the underpass of another apartment building, one that straddled an entire block. Fortunately, the lead trail car was already on the far side of the building, trying to catch up with the Fiat, and had the good fortune to see Koniev/Suvorov appear thirty meters in front.

"We have him," the radio crackled. "We'll back off somewhat."

"Go!" Provalov told his driver, who accelerated the van to the next corner. Along the way, he toggled the switch to flip the license plates and change the headlight pattern, converting the van into what at night would seem a new vehicle entirely.

"He is confident," Provalov observed five minutes later. The van was now in close-trail, with the lead trail car behind the van, and the other surveillance vehicle close behind that one. Wherever he was going, they were on him. He'd run his evasion maneuver, and a clever one it had been, but only one. Perhaps he thought that one such SDR—surveillance-detection run—was enough, that if he were being trailed it would only be a single vehicle, and so he'd run that underpass, eyes on the rearview mirror, and spotted nothing. Very good, the militia lieutenant thought. It was a pity he didn't have his American FBI friend along. The FBI could scarcely have done this better, even with its vast resources. It didn't hurt that his men knew the streets of Moscow and its suburbs as well as any taxi driver.

"He's getting dinner and a drink somewhere," Provalov's driver observed. "He'll pull over in the next kilometer."

“We shall see,” the lieutenant said, thinking his driver right. This area had ten or eleven upscale eateries. Which would his quarry choose ... ?

It turned out to be the Prince Michael of Kiev, a Ukrainian establishment specializing in chicken and fish, known also for its fine bar. Koniev/Suvorov pulled over and allowed the restaurant’s valet to park his vehicle, then walked in.

“Who’s the best dressed among us?” Provalov asked over the radio.

“You are, Comrade Lieutenant.” His other two teams were attired as working-class people, and that wouldn’t fly here. Half of the Prince Michael of Kiev’s clientele were foreigners, and you had to dress well around such people —the restaurant saw to that. Provalov jumped out half a block away and walked briskly to the canopied entrance. The doorman admitted him after a look—in the new Russia, clothing made the man more than in most European nations. He could have flashed his police ID, but that might not be a good move. Koniev/Suvorov might well have some of the restaurant staff reporting to him. That was when he had a flash of imagination. Provalov immediately entered the men’s lavatory and pulled out his cellular phone.

“Hello?” a familiar voice said on picking up the receiver.

“Mishka?”

“Oleg?” Reilly asked. “What can I do for you?”

“Do you know a restaurant called the Prince Michael of Kiev?”

“Yeah, sure. Why?”

“I need your help. How quickly can you get here?” Provalov asked, knowing that Reilly lived only two kilometers away.

“Ten or fifteen minutes.”

“Quickly, then. I’ll be at the bar. Dress presentably,” the militiaman added.

“Right,” Reilly agreed, wondering how he’d explain it to his wife, and wondering why he’d had his quiet evening in front of the TV interrupted.

Provalov headed back to the bar, ordered a pepper vodka, and lit a cigarette. His quarry was seven seats away, also having a solitary drink, perhaps waiting for his table to become available. The restaurant was full. A string quartet was playing some Rimsky-Korsakov on the far side of the dining room. The restaurant was far above anything Provalov could afford as a regular part of his life. So, Koniev/Suvorov was well set financially. That was no particular surprise. A lot of ex-KGB officers were doing very well indeed in the economic system of the new Russia. They had worldly ways and knowledge that few of their fellow citizens could match. In a society known for its burgeoning corruption, they had a corner on the market, and a network of fellow-travelers to call upon, with whom they could, for various considerations, share their gains, ill-gotten or not.

Provalov had finished his first drink, and had motioned to the bartender for another when Reilly appeared.

“Oleg Gregoriyevich,” the American said in greeting. He was no fool, the Russian militia lieutenant realized. The American’s Russian was manifestly American and over-loud, a fine backward stealth for this environment. He was well dressed also, proclaiming his foreign origin to all who saw him.

“Mishka!” Provalov said in response, taking the American’s hand warmly and waving to the bartender.

“Okay, who we looking for?” the FBI agent asked more quietly.

“The gray suit, seven seats to my left.”

“Got him,” Reilly said at once. “Who is he?”

“He is currently under the name Koniev, Ivan Yurievich. In fact we believe him to be Suvorov, Klementi Ivan’ch.”

“Aha,” Reilly observed. “What else can you tell me?”

“We trailed him here. He used a simple but effective evasion method, but we have three cars tracking him, and we picked him right back up.”

“Good one, Oleg,” the FBI agent said. Inadequately trained and poorly equipped or not, Provalov was a no-shit copper. In the Bureau, he’d be at least a supervisory special agent. Oleg had fine cop instincts. Tracking a KGB type around Moscow was no trivial exercise, like following a paranoid button-man in Queens. Reilly sipped his pepper vodka and turned sideways in his seat. On the far side of the subject was a dark-haired beauty wearing a slinky black dress. She looked like another of those expensive hookers to Reilly, and her shingle was out. Her dark eyes were surveying the room as thoroughly as his. The difference was that Reilly was a guy, and looking at a pretty girl—or seeming to—was not the least bit unusual. In fact, his eyes were locked not on the woman, but the man. Fifty-ish, well turned out, nondescript in overall appearance, just as a spy was supposed to be, looked to be waiting for a table, nursing his drink and looking studiously in the bar’s mirror, which was a fine way to see if he were being watched. The American and his Russian friend he dismissed, of course. What interest could an American businessman have in him, after all? And besides, the American was eyeing the whore to his left. For that reason, the subject’s eyes did not linger on the men to his right, either directly or in the mirror. Oleg *was* smart, Reilly thought, using *him* as camouflage for his discreet surveillance.

“Anything else turn lately?” the FBI agent asked. Provalov filled in what he’d learned about the hooker and what had happened the night before the murders. “Damn, that is swashbuckling. But you still don’t know who the target was, do you?”

“No,” Provalov admitted, with a sip of his second drink. He’d have to go easy on the alcohol, he knew, lest he make a mistake. His quarry was too slick and dangerous to take any sort of risk at all. He could always bring the guy in for questioning, but he knew that would be a fruitless exercise. Criminals like this one had to be handled as gently as a cabinet minister. Provalov allowed his eyes to look into the mirror, where he got a good look at the profile of a probable multiple murderer. Why was it that there was no black halo around

such people? Why did they look normal?

"Anything else we know about the mutt?"

The Russian had come to like that American term. He shook his head. "No, Mishka. We haven't checked with SVR yet."

"Worried that he might have a source inside the building?" the American asked. Oleg nodded.

"That is a consideration." And an obvious one. The fraternity of former KGB officers was probably a tight one. There might well be someone inside the old headquarters building, say someone in personnel records, who'd let people know if the police showed interest in any particular file.

"Damn," the American noted, thinking, *You son of a bitch, fucking the guy's hookers before you waste him.* There was a disagreeable coldness to it, like something from a Mafia movie. But in real life, La Cosa Nostra members didn't have the stones for such a thing. Formidable as they might be, Mafia button-men didn't have the training of a professional intelligence officer, and were tabby cats next to panthers in this particular jungle. Further scrutiny of the subject. The girl beyond him was a distraction, but not that much.

"Oleg?"

"Yes, Mikhail?"

"He's looking at somebody over by the musicians. His eyes keep coming back to the same spot. He isn't scanning the room like he was at first." The subject did check out everyone who came into the restaurant, but his eyes kept coming back to one part of the mirror, and he'd probably determined that nobody in the place was a danger to him. Oops. Well, Reilly thought, even training has its limitations, and sooner or later your own expertise could work against you. You fell into patterns, and you made assumptions that could get you caught. In this case, Suvorov assumed that no American could be watching him. After all, he'd done nothing to any Americans in Moscow, and maybe not in his entire career, and he was on friendly, not foreign ground, and he'd dusted off his tail on the way over in the way he always did, looking for a single tail car. Well, the smart ones knew their limitations. How did it go? The difference between genius and stupidity was that genius knew that it had limits. This Suvorov guy thought himself a genius ... but whom was he looking at? Reilly turned a little more on his bar stool and scanned that part of the room.

"What do you see, Mishka?"

"A lot of people, Oleg Gregoriyevich, mainly Russians, some foreigners, all well-dressed. Some Chinese, look like two diplomats dining with two Russians —they look like official types. Looks cordial enough," Reilly thought. He'd eaten here with his wife three or four times. The food was pretty good, especially the fish. And they had a good source of caviar at the Prince Michael of Kiev, which was one of the best things you could get over here. His wife loved it, and would have to learn that getting it at home would be a lot more expensive than it was here.... Reilly'd done discreet surveillance for so many

years that he had trained himself to be invisible. He could fit in just about anyplace but Harlem, and the Bureau had black agents to handle that.

Sure as hell, that Suvorov guy was looking in the same place. Casually, perhaps, and using the bar's mirror to do it. He even sat so that his eyes naturally looked at the same place as he sat on his bar stool. But people like this subject didn't do anything by accident or coincidence. They were trained to think through everything, even taking a leak ... it was remarkable, then, that he'd been turned so stupidly. By a hooker who'd gone through his things while he was sleeping off an orgasm. Well, some men, no matter how smart, thought with their dicks.... Reilly turned again.... one of the Chinese men at the distant table excused himself and stood, heading for the men's room. Reilly thought to do the same at once, but ... no. If it were prearranged, such a thing could spook it ... *Patience, Mishka,* he told himself, turning back to look at the principal subject. Koniev/Suvorov set down his drink and stood.

"Oleg. I want you to point me toward the men's room," the FBI agent said. "In fifteen seconds."

Provalov counted out the time, then extended his arm toward the main entrance. Reilly patted him on the shoulder and headed that way.

The Prince Michael of Kiev restaurant was nice, but it didn't have a bathroom attendant, as many European places did, perhaps because Americans were uneasy with the custom, or maybe because the management thought it an unnecessary expense. Reilly entered and saw three urinals, two of them being used. He unzipped and urinated, then rezipped and turned to wash his hands, looking down as he did so ... and just out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other two men share a sideways look. The Russian was taller. The men's room had the sort of pull-down roller towel that America had largely done away with. Reilly pulled it down and dried his hands, unable to wait too much longer. Heading toward the door, he reached in his pocket and pulled his car keys part of the way out. These he dropped just as he pulled the door open, with a muttered, "Damn," as he bent down to pick them up, shielded from their view by the steel divider. Reilly picked them off the tile floor and stood back up.

Then he saw it. It was well done. They could have been more patient, but they probably both discounted the importance of the American, and both were trained professionals. They scarcely touched each other, and what touching and bumping there was happened below the waist and out of sight to the casual observer. Reilly wasn't a casual observer, however, and even out of the corner of his eyes, it was obvious to the initiated. It was a classic brush-pass, so well done that even Reilly's experience couldn't determine who had passed what to whom. The FBI agent continued out, heading back to his seat at the bar, where he waved to the bar-keep for the drink he figured he'd just earned.

"Yes?"

"You want to identify that Chinaman. He and our friend traded something in the shitter. Brush-pass, and nicely done," Reilly said, with a smile and a gesture at the brunette down the bar. Good enough, in fact, that had Reilly

been forced to sit in a witness stand and describe it to a jury, a week-old law-school graduate could make him admit that he hadn't actually seen anything at all. But that told him much. That degree of skill was either the result of a totally chance encounter between two entirely innocent people—the purest of coincidences—or it had been the effort of two trained intelligence officers applying their craft at a perfect place in a perfect way. Provalov was turned the right way to see the two individuals leave the men's room. They didn't even notice each other, or didn't appear to acknowledge the presence of the other any more than they would have greeted a stray dog—exactly as two unrelated people would act after a happenstance encounter with a total stranger in any men's room anywhere. But this time as Koniev/Suvorov resumed his seat at the bar, he tended to his drink and didn't have his eyes interrogate the mirror regularly. In fact, he turned and greeted the girl to his left, then waved for the bartender to get her another drink, which she accepted with a warm, commercial smile. Her face proclaimed the fact that she'd found her trick for the night. The girl could act, Reilly thought.

"Well, our friend's going to get laid tonight," he told his Russian colleague.

"She is pretty," Provalov agreed. "Twenty-three, you think?"

"Thereabouts, maybe a little younger. Nice hooters."

"Hooters?" the Russian asked.

"Tits, Oleg, tits," the FBI agent clarified. "That Chinaman's a spook. See any coverage on him around?"

"No one I know," the lieutenant replied. "Perhaps he is not known to be an intelligence officer."

"Yeah, sure, your counterintelligence people have all retired to Sochi, right? Hell, guy, they trail me every so often."

"That means I am one of your agents, then?" Provalov asked.

A chuckle. "Let me know if you want to defect, Oleg Gregoriyevich."

"The Chinese in the light blue suit?"

"That's the one. Short, about five-four, one fifty-five, pudgy, short hair, about forty-five or so."

Provalov translated that to about 163 centimeters and seventy kilos, and made a mental note as he turned to look at the face, about thirty meters away. He looked entirely ordinary, as most spies did. With that done, he headed back to the men's room to make a phone call to his agents outside.

And that pretty much ended the evening. Koniev/Suvorov left the restaurant about twenty minutes later with the girl on his arm, and drove straight back to his apartment. One of the men who'd stayed behind walked with the Chinese to his car, which had diplomatic plates. Notes were written down, and the cops all headed home after an overtime day, wondering what they'd turned up and how important it might be.

CHAPTER 20

Diplomacy

Well?" Rutledge took his notes back from Secretary Adler.

"It looks okay, Cliff, assuming that you can deliver the message in an appropriate way," SecState told his subordinate.

"Process is something I understand." Then he paused. "The President wants this message delivered in unequivocal terms, correct?"

Secretary Adler nodded. "Yep."

"You know, Scott, I've never really landed on people this hard before."

"Ever want to?"

"The Israelis a few times. South Africa," he added thoughtfully.

"But never the Chinese or Japanese?"

"Scott, I've never been a trade guy before, remember?" But he was this time, because the mission to Beijing was supposed to be high-profile, requiring a higher-level diplomat instead of someone of mere ambassadorial rank. The Chinese knew this already. In their case negotiations would be handled publicly by their Foreign Minister, though they would actually be run by a lesser-ranked diplomat who was a foreign-trade specialist, and who had experienced a good run of luck dealing with America. Secretary Adler, with President Ryan's permission, was slowly leaking to the press that the times and the rules might have changed a little bit. He worried that Cliff Rutledge wasn't exactly the right guy to deliver the message, but Cliff was the on-deck batter.

"How are you working out with this Gant guy from Treasury?"

"If he were a diplomat, we'd be at war with the whole damned world, but I suppose he does know numbers and computers, probably," Rutledge allowed, not troubling to hide his distaste for the Chicago-born Jew with his nouveau-riche ways. That Rutledge had been of modest origins himself was long forgotten. A Harvard education and a diplomatic passport help one forget such distasteful things as having grown up in a row house, eating leftovers.

"Remember that Winston likes him, and Ryan likes Winston, okay?" Adler warned his subordinate gently. He decided not to concern himself with Cliff's WASP-ish anti-Semitism. Life was too short for trivialities, and Rutledge knew that his career rested in Scott Adler's hands. He might make more money as a consultant after leaving the State Department, but being fired out of Foggy

Bottom would not enhance his value on the free-agent market.

"Okay, Scott, and, yeah, I need backup on the monetary aspects of this trade stuff." The accompanying nod was almost respectful. Good. He did know how to grovel when required. Adler didn't even consider telling Rutledge about the intelligence source in his pocket, courtesy of POTUS. There was something about the career diplomat that failed to inspire trust in his superior.

"What about communications?"

"The Embassy in Beijing has TAPDANCE capability. Even the new phone kind, same as the airplane." But there were problems with it, recently fielded by Fort Meade. The instruments had trouble linking up with each other, and using a satellite lash-up didn't help at all. Like most diplomats, Rutledge rarely troubled himself with such trivialities. He often expected the intelligence to appear as if by magic, rarely wondering how it had been obtained, but always questioning the motives of the source, whoever that might be. All in all, Clifford Rutledge II was the perfect diplomat. He believed in little beyond his own career, some vague notions of international amity, and his personal ability to make it come about and to avoid war through the sheer force of his brilliance.

But on the plus side, Adler admitted to himself, Rutledge was a competent diplomatic technician who knew how the banter worked, and how to present a position in the gentlest possible but still firm terms. The State Department never had enough of those. As someone had once remarked of Theodore Roosevelt, "The nicest gentleman who ever slit a throat." But Cliff would never do that, even to advance his own career. He probably shaved with an electric razor, not for fear of cutting himself so much as fear of actually seeing blood.

"When's your plane leave?" EAGLE asked his subordinate.

Barry Wise was already packed. He was an expert at it, as well he might be, because he traveled about as much as an international airline pilot. At fifty-four, the black ex-Marine had worked for CNN since its beginnings more than twenty years before, and he'd seen it all. He'd covered the contras in Nicaragua, and the first bombing missions in Baghdad. He'd been there when mass graves were excavated in Yugoslavia, and done live commentary over Rwanda's roads of death, simultaneously wishing that he could and thanking God that he could not broadcast the ghastly smells that still haunted his dreams. A news professional, Wise regarded his mission in life to be this: to transmit the truth from where it happened to where people were interested in it—and helping them to become interested if they were not. He didn't have much of a personal ideology, though he was a great believer in justice, and one of the ways to make justice happen was to give the correct information to the jury—in his case, the television-watching public. He and people like him had changed South Africa from a racist state into a functioning democracy,

and he'd also played a role in destroying world communism. The truth, he figured, was about the most powerful weapon in the world, if you had a way of getting it to the average Joe. Unlike most members of his business, Wise respected Joe Citizen, at least the ones who were smart enough to watch him. They wanted the truth, and it was his job to deliver it to them to the best of his abilities, which he often doubted, as he constantly asked himself how well he was doing.

He kissed his wife on the way out the door, promising to bring back things for the kids, as he always did, and lugging his travel bag out to his one personal indulgence, a red Mercedes two-seater, which he then drove south to the D.C. Beltway and south again toward Andrews Air Force Base. He had to arrive early, because the Air Force had gotten overly security-conscious. Maybe it was from that dumbass movie that had had terrorists getting past all the armed guards—even though they were merely Air Force, not Marines, they did carry rifles, and they did at least appear to be competent—and aboard one of the 89th Military Airlift Wing's aircraft, which, Wise figured, was about as likely as having a pickpocket walk into the Oval Office and lift the President's wallet. But the military followed its own rules, senseless though they might be—that was something he remembered well from his time in the Corps. So, he'd drive down, pass through all the checkpoints, whose guards knew him better than they knew their own CO, and wait in the plush Distinguished Visitors' lounge at the end of Andrews' Runway Zero-One Left for the official party to arrive. Then they'd board the venerable VC-137 for the endless flight to Beijing. The seats were as comfortable as they could be on an airplane, and the service was as good as any airline's first class, but flights this long were never fun.

Never been there before," Mark Gant said, answering George Winston's question. "So—what's the score on this Rutledge guy?"

The SecTreas shrugged. "Career State Department puke, worked his way pretty far up the ladder. Used to have good political connections—he was tight with Ed Kealty once upon a time."

The former stock trader looked up. "Oh? Why hasn't Ryan fired his ass?"

"Jack doesn't play that sort of game," Winston replied, wondering if in this case principle was getting in the way of common sense.

"George, he's still pretty naive, isn't he?"

"Maybe so, but he's a straight shooter, and I can live with that. He sure as hell backed us up on tax policy, and that's going to pass through Congress in another few weeks."

Gant wouldn't believe that until he saw it. "Assuming every lobbyist in town doesn't jump in front of the train."

That engendered an amused grunt. "So, the wheels get greased a little better. You know, wouldn't it be nice to close all those bastards down ... ?"

George, Gant couldn't say in this office, *if you believe that, you've been hanging out with the President too long.* But idealism wasn't all that bad a thing, was it?

"I'll settle for squeezing those Chinese bastards on the trade balance. Ryan's going to back us up?"

"All the way, he says. And I believe him, Mark."

"I guess we'll see. I hope this Rutledge guy can read numbers."

"He went to Harvard," Secretary Winston observed.

"I know," Gant said back. He had his own academic prejudice, having graduated from the University of Chicago twenty years earlier. What the hell was Harvard except a name and an endowment?

Winston chuckled. "They're not all dumb."

"I suppose we'll see, boss. Anyway"—he lifted his suitcase up on its rollers; his computer bag went over his shoulder—" my car's waiting downstairs."

"Good trip, Mark."

Her name was Yang Lien-Hua. She was thirty-four, nine months pregnant, and very frightened. It was her second pregnancy. Her first had been a son whom they had named Ju-Long, a particularly auspicious given name, which translated roughly as Large Dragon. But the youngster had died at the age of four, bumped by a bicycle off the sidewalk into the path of a passenger bus. His death had devastated his parents, and even saddened the local Communist Party officials who'd officiated at the inquest, which had absolved the bus driver of guilt and never identified the careless bicyclist. The loss has been sufficiently hard on Mrs. Yang that she'd sought comfort in a way that this country's government did not especially approve.

That way was Christianity, the foreign religion despised in fact if not exactly in law. In another age she might have found solace in the teachings of Buddha or Confucius, but these, too, had been largely erased from the public consciousness by the Marxist government, which still regarded all religion as a public narcotic. A co-worker had quietly suggested that she meet a "friend" of hers, a man named Yu Fa An. Mrs. Yang had sought him out, and so had begun her first adventure in treason.

Reverend Yu, she found, was a well-educated and -traveled man, which added to his stature in her eyes. He was also a fine listener, who attended to her every word, occasionally pouring her some sympathetic tea, and gently touching her hand when tears streamed down her face. Only when she had finished her tale of woe had he begun his own lessons.

Ju-Long, he told her, was with God, because God was especially solicitous to the needs of innocent children. While she could not see her son at this moment, her son could see her, looking down from Heaven, and while her sorrow was completely understandable, she should believe that the God of the

Earth was a God of Mercy and Love who had sent his Only Begotten Son to earth to show mankind the right path, and to give His own life for the sins of humanity. He handed her a Bible printed in the *Gouyu,* the national language of the PRC (also called Mandarin), and helped her find appropriate passages.

It had not been easy for Mrs. Yang, but so deep was her grief that she kept returning for private counseling, finally bringing along her husband, Quon. Mr. Yang proved a harder sell on any religion. He'd served his time in the People's Liberation Army, where he'd been thoroughly indoctrinated in the politics of his nation, and done sufficiently well in his test answers to be sent off to sergeant school, for which political reliability was required. But Quon had been a good father to his little Large Dragon, and he, too, found the void in his belief system too large to bridge easily. This bridge the Reverend Yu provided, and soon both of the Yangs came to his discreet church services, and gradually they'd come to accept their loss with confidence in the continued life of Ju-Long, and the belief that they would someday see him again in the presence of an Almighty God, whose existence became increasingly real to both of them.

Until then, life had to go on. Both worked at their jobs, as factory workers in the same factory, with a working-class apartment in the Di'Anmen district of Beijing near Jingshan—Coal Hill—Park. They labored at their factory during the day, watched state-run television at night, and in due course, Lien-Hua became pregnant again.

And ran afoul of the government's population-control policy that was well to the left of draconian. It had long since been decreed that any married couple could have but one child. A second pregnancy required official government permission. Though this was not generally denied to those whose first child had died, pro forma permission had to be obtained, and in the case of politically unacceptable parents, this permission was generally withheld as a method of controlling the living population, as well. *That* meant that an unauthorized pregnancy had to be terminated. Safely, and at state expense in a state hospital—but terminated.

Christianity translated exactly into political unreliability for the communist government, and unsurprisingly the Ministry of State Security had inserted intelligence officers into Reverend Yu's congregation. This individual—actually there were three, lest one be corrupted by religion and become unreliable himself—had entered the names of the Yangs on a master list of political unreliables. For that reason, when Mrs. Yang Lien-Hua had duly registered her pregnancy, an official letter had appeared in her box, instructing her to go to the Longfu Hospital located on Meishuguan Street for a therapeutic abortion.

This Lien-Hua was unwilling to do. Her given name translated as "Lotus Flower," but inside she was made of much sterner stuff. She wrote a week later to the appropriate government agency, telling them that her pregnancy had miscarried. Given the nature of bureaucracies, her lie was never checked out.

That lie had merely won Lotus Flower six months of ever-increasing stress.

She never saw a physician, not even one of the “barefoot medics” that the PRC had invented a generation earlier, much to the admiration of political leftists all over the world. Lien-Hua was healthy and strong, and the human body had been designed by Nature to produce healthy offspring long before the advent of obstetricians. Her swelling belly she was able to hide, mostly, in her ill-fitting clothing. What she could not hide—at least from herself—was her inward fear. She carried a new baby in her belly. She wanted it. She wanted to have another chance at motherhood. She wanted to feel her child suckling at her breast. She wanted to love it and pamper it, watch it learn to crawl and stand and walk and talk, to see it grow beyond four years, enter school, learn and grow into a good adult of whom she could be proud.

The problem was politics. The state enforced its will with ruthlessness. She knew what could happen, the syringe filled with formaldehyde stabbed into the baby’s head at the very moment of birth. In China, it was state policy. For the Yangs, it was premeditated, cold-blooded murder, and they were determined not to lose a second child, who, the Reverend Yu had told them, was a gift from God Himself.

And there was a way. If you delivered the baby at home without medical assistance, and if the baby took its first breath, then the state would not kill it. There were some things even the government of the People’s Republic quailed at, and the killing of a living, breathing human infant was one of them. But until it took that breath, it was of no more consequence than a piece of meat in a market. There were even rumors that the Chinese government was selling organs from the aborted newborns on the world’s tissue market, to be used for medical purposes, and that was something the Yangs were able to believe.

So, their plan was for Lien-Hua to deliver the child at home, after which they would present their state with a *fait accompli*—and eventually have it baptized by Reverend Yu. To this end, Mrs. Yang had kept herself in good physical shape, walking two kilometers every day, eating sensibly, and generally doing all the things the government-published booklets told expectant mothers to do. And if anything went badly wrong, they’d go to Reverend Yu for counsel and advice. The plan enabled Lien-Hua to deal with the stress—in fact it was a heart-rending terror—of her unauthorized condition.

Well?" Ryan asked.

“Rutledge has all the right talents, and we’ve given him the instructions he needs. He ought to carry them out properly. Question is, will the Chinese play ball.”

“If they don’t, things become harder for them,” the President said, if not coldly, then with some degree of determination. “If they think they can bully us, Scott, it’s time they found out who the big kid in the playground is.”

“They’ll fight back. They’ve taken out options on fourteen Boeing 777s—just did that four days ago, remember? That’s the first thing they’ll chop if they don’t like us. That’s a lot of money and a lot of jobs for Boeing in Seattle,” SecState warned.

“I never have been real big on blackmail, Scott. Besides, that’s a classic case of penny-wise, pound-foolish. If we cave because of that, then we lose ten times the money and ten times the jobs elsewhere—okay, they won’t be all in one place, and so the TV news guys won’t be able to point their cameras, and so they won’t do the real story, just the one that can fit on half-inch tape. But I’m not in here to keep the goddamned media happy. I’m here to serve the people to the best of my ability, Scott. And that’s by-God going to happen,” POTUS promised his guest.

“I don’t doubt it, Jack,” Adler responded. “Just remember that it won’t play out quite the way you want it to.”

“It never does, but if they play rough, it’s going to cost them seventy billion dollars a year. We can afford to do without their products. Can they afford to do without our money?” Ryan asked.

Secretary Adler was not totally comfortable with the way the question was posed. “I suppose we’ll have to wait and see.”

CHAPTER 21

Simmering

So, what did you develop last night?" Reilly asked. He'd be late to his embassy office, but his gut told him that things were breaking loose in the RPG Case—that was how he thought of it—and Director Murray had a personal interest in the case, because the President did, and *that* made it more important than the routine bullshit on Reilly's desk.

"Our Chinese friend—the one in the men's room, that is—is the Third Secretary at their mission. Our friends across town at SVR have suspected that he is a member of their Ministry for State Security. He's not regarded as a particularly bright diplomat by the Foreign Ministry—ours, that is."

"That's how you cover a spook," Reilly agreed. "A dumb cookie-pusher. Okay, so he's a player."

"I agree, Mishka," Provalov said. "Now, it would be nice to know who passed what to whom."

"Oleg Gregoriyevich"—Reilly liked the semiformal Russian form of address—"if I'd been standing right there and staring, I might not have been able to tell." That was the problem dealing with real professionals. They were as good at that maneuver as a Vegas dealer was with a deck of Bicycles. You needed a good lens and a slow-motion camera to be sure, and that was a little bulky for work in the field. But they'd just proved, to their satisfaction at least, that both men were active in the spook business, and that was a break in the case any way you sliced it. "ID the girl?"

"Yelena Ivanova Dimitrova." Provalov handed the folder across. "Just a whore, but, of course, a very expensive one."

Reilly flipped it open and scanned the notes. Known prostitute specializing in foreigners. The photo of her was unusually flattering.

"You came in early this morning?" Reilly asked. He must have, to have all this work done already.

"Before six," Oleg confirmed. The case was becoming more exciting for him as well. "In any case, Klementi Ivan'ch kept her all night. She left his apartment and caught a taxi home at seven-forty this morning. She looked happy and satisfied, according to my people."

That was good for a chuckle. She didn't leave her trick until after Oleg hit the office? *That* must have affected his attitude somewhat, Reilly thought, with an inward grin. It sure as hell would have affected his. "Well, good for

our subject. I expect he won't be getting too much of that in a few months," the FBI agent thought aloud, hoping it would make his Russian colleague a little happier about life.

"One can hope," Provalov agreed coldly. "I have four men watching his apartment. If he leaves and appears to be heading away for a while, I will try to get a team into his apartment to plant some electronic surveillance."

"They know how to be careful?" Reilly asked. If this Suvorov mutt was as trained as they thought, he'd leave telltales in his apartment that could make breaking in dicey.

"They are KGB-trained also. One of them helped catch a French intelligence officer back in the old times. Now, I have a question for you," the Russian cop said.

"Shoot."

"What do you know of a special counterterrorist group based in England?"

"The 'Men of Black,' you mean?"

Provalov nodded. "Yes. Do you know anything about them?"

Reilly knew he had to watch his words, even though he knew damned little. "Really, I don't know anything more than what I've seen in the papers. It's some sort of multinational NATO group, part military and part police, I think. They had a good run of luck last year. Why do you ask?"

"A request from on high, because I know you. I've been told that they are coming to Moscow to assist in training our people—Spetsnaz groups with similar tasks," Oleg explained.

"Really? Well, I've never been in the muscle end of the Bureau, just in a local SWAT team once. Gus Werner probably knows a lot about them. Gus runs the new Counter-Terrorism Division at Headquarters. Before that, Gus ran HRT and had a field command—a field division, that is, a big-city field office. I've met him once, just to say hello. Gus has a very good service rep."

"Rep?"

"Reputation, Oleg. He's well regarded by the field agents. But like I said, that's the muscle end of the Bureau. I've always been with the chess players."

"Investigations, you mean."

Reilly nodded. "That's right. It's what the FBI is supposed to be all about, but the outfit's mutated a bit over the years." The American paused. "So, you're covering this Suvorov/Koniev guy real tight?" Reilly asked, to recenter the discussion.

"My men have orders to be discreet, but yes, we will keep a close eye on him, as you say."

"You know, if he really is working with the Chinese spooks ... do you think they might want to kill that Golovko guy?"

"I do not know, but we must regard that as a real possibility."

Reilly nodded, thinking this would make an interesting report to send to Washington, and maybe discuss with the CIA station chief as well.

I want the files for everyone who ever worked with him,“" Sergey Nikolay‘ch ordered. ”And I want *you* to get me his personal file."

“Yes, Comrade Chairman,” Major Shelepin replied, with a bob of the head.

The morning briefing, delivered by a colonel of the militia, had pleased neither the SVR Chairman nor his principal bodyguard. In this case, for a change, the legendarily slow Russian bureaucracy had been circumvented, and the information fast-tracked to those interested in it. That included the man whose life might have been spared accidentally after all.

“And we will set up a special-action group to work with this Provalov child.”

“Of course, Comrade Chairman.”

It was strange, Sergey Nikolay’ch thought, how rapidly the world could change. He vividly remembered the morning of the murder—it was not the sort of thing a man could forget. But after the first few days of shock and attendant fear, he’d allowed himself to relax, to believe that this Avseyenko had been the real target of an underworld rub out—an archaic American term he liked—and that his own life had never been directly threatened. With the acceptance of that belief, the entire thing had become like driving past an ordinary traffic accident. Even if some unfortunate motorist had been killed there at the side of the road, you just dismissed it as an irrelevance, because that sort of thing couldn’t happen to you in your own expensive official car, not with Anatoliy driving. But now he’d begun to wonder if perhaps his life had been *spared* by accident. Such things were not supposed to occur—there shouldn’t have been any need for them.

Now he was more frightened than he’d been that bright Moscow morning, looking down from his window at the smoking wreck on the pavement. It meant that he might be in danger still, and he dreaded that prospect as much as the next man.

Worse still, his hunter might well be one of his own, a former KGB officer with connections to Spetsnaz, and if he were in contact with the Chinese ...

... But why would the Chinese wish to end his life? For that matter, why would the Chinese wish to perform any such crime in a foreign land? It was beyond imprudent.

None of this made any sense, but as a career intelligence officer, Golovko had long since shed the illusion that the world was supposed to make sense. What he did know was that he needed more information, and at least he was in a very good place to seek it out. If he wasn’t as powerful as he might once have been, he was still powerful enough for his own purposes, Golovko told

himself.

Probably.

He didn't try to come to the ministry very often. It was just a routine security measure, but a sensible one. Once you recruited an agent, you didn't want to hang out with him or her for fear of compromise. That was one of the things they taught you at The Farm. If you compromised one of your agents, you might have trouble sleeping at night, because CIA was usually active in countries where the Miranda warning was delivered by a gun or knife or fist, or something just as bad—as unpleasant as a police state could make it, and that, the instructors had told his class, could be pretty fuckin' unpleasant. Especially in a case like this, he was intimate with this agent, and breaking away from her could cause her to stop her cooperation, which, Langley had told him, was pretty damned good, and they wanted more of it. Erasing the program he'd had her input on her machine would be difficult for a CalTech-trained genius, but you could accomplish the same thing by clobbering the whole hard drive and reinstalling new files over the old ones, because the valuable little gopher file was hidden in the system software, and a write-over would destroy it as surely as the San Francisco Earthquake.

So, he didn't want to be here, exactly, but he was a businessman, in addition to being a spook, and the client had called him in. The girl two desks away from Ming had a computer problem, and he was the NEC rep for the ministry offices.

It turned out to be a minor problem—you just couldn't turn some women loose on computers. It was like loosing a four-year-old in a gun shop, he thought, but didn't dare say such things aloud in these liberated times, even here. Happily, Ming hadn't been in sight when he'd come in. He'd walked over to the desk with the problem and fixed it in about three minutes, explaining the error to the secretary in simple terms she was sure to understand, and which would now make her the office expert for an easily replicated problem. With a smile and a polite Japanese bow, he'd made his way to the door, when the door to the inner office opened, and Ming came out with her Minister Fang behind her, looking down at some papers.

"Oh, hello, Nomuri-san," Ming said in surprise, as Fang called the name "Chai," and waved to another of the girls to follow him in. If Fang saw Nomuri there, he didn't acknowledge it, simply disappeared back into his private office.

"Hello, Comrade Ming," the American said, speaking in English. "Your computer operates properly?" he asked formally.

"Yes, it does, thank you."

"Good. Well, if you experience a problem, you have my card."

"Oh, yes. You are well settled in to Beijing now?" she asked politely.

"Yes, thank you, I am."

"You should try Chinese food instead of sticking to the food of your homeland, though, I admit, I have developed a taste lately for Japanese sausage," she told him, and everyone else in the room, with a face that would have done Amarillo Slim proud.

For his part, Chester Nomuri felt his heart not so much skip a beat as stop entirely for about ten seconds, or so it seemed. "Ah, yes," he had to say in reply, as soon as he got breath back in his lungs. "It can be very tasty."

Ming just nodded and went to her desk and back to work. Nomuri nodded and bowed politely to the office and made his departure as well, then headed down the corridor immediately for a men's room, the need to urinate urgent. Sweet Jesus. But that was one of the problems with agents. They sometimes got off on their work the way a drug addict got off on the immediate rush when the chemical hit his system, and they'd tickle the dragon with their new and playful enthusiasm just to experience a little more of the rush, forgetting that the dragon's tail was a lot closer to its mouth than it appeared. It was foolish to enjoy danger. Zipping himself back up, he told himself that he hadn't broken training, hadn't stumbled on his reply to her playful observation. But he had to warn her about dancing in a minefield. You never really knew where to put your feet, and discovering the wrong places was usually painful.

That's when he realized why it had happened, and the thought stopped him dead in his tracks. Ming loved him. She was playful because ... well, why else would she have said that? As a game? Did she regard the whole thing as a game? No, she wasn't the right personality type to be a hooker. The sex had been good, maybe too good—if such a thing were possible, Nomuri thought as he resumed walking toward the elevator. She'd surely be over tonight after saying that. He'd have to stop by the liquor store on the way home and get some more of that awful Japanese scotch for thirty bucks a liter. A working man couldn't afford to get drunk here unless he drank the local stuff, and that was too vile to contemplate.

But Ming had just consecrated their relationship by risking her life in front of her minister and her co-workers, and that was far more frightening to Nomuri than her ill-considered remark about his dick and her fondness for it. *Jesus,* he thought, *this is getting too serious.* But what could he do now? He'd seduced her and made a spy of her, and she'd fallen for him for no better reason, probably, than that he was younger than the old fucker she worked for, and was far nicer to her. Okay, so he was pretty good in the sack, and that was excellent for his male ego, and he was a stranger in a strange land and he had to get his rocks off, too, and doing it with her was probably safer to his cover than picking up some hooker in a bar—and he didn't even want to consider getting seriously involved with a real girl in his real life—

—but how was *this* so different from *that?* he asked himself. Aside from the fact that while she was loving him, her computer was sending her transcribed notes off into the etherworld....

It was doing it again soon after the close of regular business hours, and the eleven-hour differential pretty much guaranteed that it arrived on the desks of American officials soon after their breakfasts. In the case of Mary Patricia Foley, mornings were far less hectic than they'd once been. Her youngest was not yet in college, but preferred to fix her own oatmeal from the Quaker envelopes, and now drove herself to school, which allowed her mother an extra twenty-five minutes or so of additional sleep every morning. Twenty years of being a field spook and mother should have been enough to drive her to distracted insanity, but it was, actually, a life she'd enjoyed, especially her years in Moscow, doing her business right there in the belly of the beast, and giving the bastard quite an ulcer at the time, she remembered with a smile.

Her husband could say much the same. The first husband-wife team to rise so high at Langley, they drove together to work every morning—in their own car rather than the "company" one to which they were entitled, but with lead and chase cars full of people with guns, because any terrorist with half a brain would regard them as targets more valuable than rubies. This way they could talk on the way in—and the car was swept for bugs on a weekly basis.

They took their usual reserved and oversized place in the basement of the Old Headquarters Building, then rode up in the executive elevator, which somehow was always waiting for them, to their seventh-floor offices.

Mrs. Foley's desk was always arrayed just so. The overnight crew had all her important papers arranged just so, also. But today, as she had for the last week, instead of looking over the striped-border folders full of TOP SECRET CODEWORDED material, she first of all flipped on her desktop computer and checked her special e-mail. This morning was no disappointment. She copied the file electronically to her hard drive, printed up a hard copy, and when that was off her printer, deleted the e-mail from her system, effectively erasing it from electronic existence. Then she reread the paper copy and lifted the phone for her husband's office.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Some egg-drop soup," she told the Director of Central Intelligence. It was a Chinese dish he found especially vile, and she enjoyed teasing her husband.

"Okay, honey. Come on in." It had to be pretty good if she was trying to turn his stomach over this early in the friggin' morning, the DCI knew.

More SORGE?" the President asked, seventy-five minutes later.

"Yes, sir," Ben Goodley replied, handing the sheet over. It wasn't long, but it was interesting.

Ryan skimmed through it. "Analysis?"

“Mrs. Foley wants to go over it with you this afternoon. You have a slot at two-fifteen.”

“Okay. Who else?”

“The Vice President, since he’s around.” Goodley knew that Ryan liked to have Robby Jackson in for strategically interesting material. “He’s fairly free this afternoon as well.”

“Good. Set it up,” POTUS ordered.

Six blocks away, Dan Murray was just arriving at his capacious office (considerably larger than the President’s, as a matter of fact) with his own security detail, because he, as the country’s principal counterintelligence and counterterrorist officer, had ail manner of information that others were interested in. This morning only brought in some more.

“Morning, Director,” one of the staff said—she was a sworn agent carrying a side arm, not just a secretary.

“Hey, Toni,” Murray responded. This agent had very nice wheels, but the FBI Director realized that he’d just proven to himself that his wife, Liz, was right: He was turning into a dirty old man.

The piles on the desk were arranged by the overnight staff, and there was a routine for this. The rightward-most pile was for intelligence-related material, the leftward-most for counterintelligence operations, and the big one in the middle was for ongoing criminal investigations requiring his personal attention or notification. That tradition went back to “Mr. Hoover,” as he was remembered at the FBI, who seemingly went over every field case bigger than the theft of used cars off the government parking lot.

But Murray had long worked the “black” side of the Bureau, and that meant he attacked the rightward pile first. There wasn’t much there. The FBI was running some of its own pure intelligence operations at the moment, somewhat to the discomfort of CIA—but those two government agencies had never gotten along terribly well, even though Murray rather liked the Foleys. What the hell, he thought, a little competition was good for everybody, so long as CIA didn’t mess with a criminal investigation, which would be a very different kettle of fish. The top report was from Mike Reilly in Moscow....

“Damn ...” Murray breathed. Then an inward smile. Murray had personally selected Reilly for the Moscow slot, over the objections of some of his senior people, who had all wanted Paul Landau out of the Intelligence Division. But no, Murray had decided, Moscow needed help with cop work, not spy-chasing, at which they had lots of good experience, and so he’d sent Mike, a second-generation agent who, like his father, Pat Reilly, had given the Mafia in New York City a serious case of indigestion. Landau was now in Berlin, playing with the German Bundeskriminalamt, the BKA, doing regular crime liaison stuff, and doing it pretty well. But Reilly was a potential star. His dad had

retired an ASAC. Mike would do better than that.

And the way he'd bonded with this Russian detective, Provalov, wouldn't hurt his career one bit. So. They'd uncovered a link between a former KGB officer and the Chinese MSS, eh? And this was part of the investigation into the big ka-boom in Moscow ... ? Jesus, could the Chinese have had a part in that? If so, what the hell did *that* mean? Now, *this* was something the Foleys had to see. To that end, Director Murray lifted his phone. Ten minutes later, the Moscow document slid into his secure fax machine to Langley—and just to make sure that CIA didn't take credit for an FBI job, a hard copy was hand-carried to the White House, where it was handed to Dr. Benjamin Goodley, who'd surely show it to the President before lunch.

It had gotten to the point that he recognized her knock at the door. Nomuri set his drink down and jumped to answer, pulling it open less than five seconds after the first sexy *tap tap*.

"Ming," Chet said.

"Nomuri-san," she greeted in turn.

He pulled her in the door, closed, and locked it. Then he lifted her off the floor with a passionate hug that was less than three percent feigned.

"So, you have a taste for Japanese sausage, eh?" he demanded, with a smile and a kiss.

"You didn't even smile when I said it. Wasn't it funny?" she asked, as he undid a few of her buttons.

"Ming—" Then he hesitated and tried something he'd learned earlier in the day. "*Bau-bei*," he said instead. It translated to "beloved one."

Ming smiled at the words and made her own reply: *"Shing-gan,"* which literally meant "heart and liver," but in context meant "heart and soul."

"Beloved one," Nomuri said, after a kiss, "do you advertise our relationship at your office?"

"No, Minister Fang might not approve, but the other girls in the office probably would not object if they found out," she explained, with a coquettish smile. "But you never know."

"Then why risk exposing yourself by making such a joke, unless you wish *me* to betray you?"

"You have no sense of humor," Ming observed. But then she ran her hands under his shirt and up his chest. "But that is all right. You have the other things I need."

Afterward, it was time to do business.

"*Bau-bei*?"

"Yes?"

“Your computer still works properly?”

“Oh, yes,” she assured him in a sleepy voice.

His left hand stroked her body gently. “Do any of the other girls in the office use their computers to surf the ’Net?”

“Only Chai. Fang uses her as he uses me. In fact, he likes her better. He thinks she has a better mouth.”

“Oh?” Nomuri asked, softening the question with a smile.

“I told you, Minister Fang is an old man. Sometimes he needs special encouragement, and Chai doesn’t mind so much. Fang reminds her of her grandfather, she says,” Ming told him.

Which was good in the American’s mind for a *Yuck!* and little else. “So, all the girls in the office trade notes on your minister?”

Ming laughed. It was pretty funny. “Of course. We all do.”

Damn, Nomuri thought. He’d always thought that women would be more ... discreet, that it was just the men who bragged in the locker room over their sweat socks.

“The first time he did me,” she went on, “I didn’t know what to do, so I talked with Chai for advice. She’s been there the longest, you see. She just said to enjoy it, and try to make him happy, and I might get a nice office chair out of it, like she did. Chai must be very good to him. She got a new bicycle last November. Me, well, I think he only likes me because I’m a little different to look at. Chai has bigger breasts than I do, and I think I’m prettier, but she has a sweet disposition, and she likes the old man. More than I do, anyway.” She paused. “I don’t want a new bicycle enough for that.”

What does this mean?" Robby Jackson asked.

“Well, we’re not sure,” the DCI admitted. “This Fang guy had a long talk with our old friend Zhang Han San. They’re talking about the meeting with our trade team that starts tomorrow. Hell”—Ed Foley looked at his watch —“call that fourteen hours from now. And it looks as though they want concessions from us instead of offering any to us. They’re even angrier over our recognition of Taiwan than we’d anticipated.”

“Tough shit,” Ryan observed.

“Jack, I agree with your sentiment, but let’s try not to be over-cavalier about their opinions, shall we?” Foley suggested.

“You’re starting to sound like Scott,” the President said.

“So? You want a yes-man handling Langley, you got the wrong guy,” the DCI countered.

“Fair enough, Ed,” Jack conceded. “Go on.”

“Jack, we need to warn Rutledge that the PRC isn’t going to like what he has to say. They may not be in a mood to make many trade concessions.”

“Well, neither is the United States of America,” Ryan told his Director of Central Intelligence. “And we come back to the fact that they need our money more than we need their trade goods.”

“What’s the chance that this is a setup, this information I mean?” Vice President Jackson asked.

“You mean that they’re using this source as a conduit to get back-channel information to us?” Mary Patricia Foley asked. “I evaluate that chance as practically zero. As close to zero as something in the real world can be.”

“MP, how can you be that confident?” President Ryan asked.

“Not here, Jack, but I *am* that confident,” Mary Pat said, somewhat to the discomfort of her husband, Ryan saw. It was rare in the intelligence community for anyone to feel that confident about anything, but Ed had always been the careful one, and Mary Pat had always been the cowgirl. She was as loyal to her people as a mother was to her infant, and Ryan admired that, even though he also had to remind himself that it wasn’t always realistic.

“Ed?” Ryan asked, just to see.

“I back Mary up on this one. This source appears to be gold-plated and copper-bottomed.”

“So, this document represents the view of their government?” TOMCAT asked.

Foley surprised the Vice President by shaking his head. “No, it represents the view of this Zhang Han San guy. He’s a powerful and influential minister, but he doesn’t speak for their government per se. Note that the text here doesn’t say what their official position is. Zhang probably does represent a view, and a powerful view, inside their Politburo. There are also moderates whose position this document does not address.”

“Okay, great,” Robby said, shifting in his seat, “so why are you taking up our time with this stuff, then?”

“This Zhang guy is tight with their Defense Minister—in fact he has a major voice in their entire national-security establishment. If he’s expanding his influence into trade policy, we have a problem, and our trade negotiations team needs to know that up front,” the DCI informed them.

So?" Ming asked tiredly. She hated getting dressed and leaving, and it meant a night of not-enough sleep.

“So, you should get in early and upload this on Chai’s computer. It’s just a new system file, the new one, six-point-eight-point-one, like the one I uploaded on your computer.” In fact, the newest real system file was 6.3.2, and so there was at least a year until a write-over would actually be necessary.

“Why do you have me do this?”

“Does it matter, *Bau-bei?”* he asked.

She actually hesitated, thinking it over a bit, and the second or so of uncertainty chilled the American spy. “No, I suppose not.”

“I need to get you some new things,” Nomuri whispered, taking her in his arms.

“Like what?” she asked. All his previous gifts had been noteworthy.

“It will be a surprise, and a good one,” he promised.

Her dark eyes sparkled with anticipation. Nomuri helped her on with her dreadful jacket. Dressing her back up was not nearly as fun as undressing her, but that was to be expected. A moment later, he gave her the final goodbye kiss at the door, and watched her depart, then went back to his computer to tell patsbakery@brownienet.com that he’d arranged for a second recipe that he hoped she might find tasty.

CHAPTER 22

The Table and the Recipe

Minister, this is a pleasure," Cliff Rutledge said in his friendliest diplomatic voice, shaking hands. Rutledge was glad the PRC had adopted the Western custom—he'd never learned the exact protocol of bowing.

Carl Hitch, the U.S. Ambassador to the People's Republic, was there for the opening ceremony. He was a career foreign service officer who'd always preferred working abroad to working at Foggy Bottom. Running day-to-day diplomatic relations wasn't especially exciting, but in a place like this, it did require a steady hand. Hitch had that, and he was apparently well liked by the rest of the diplomatic community, which didn't hurt.

It was all new for Mark Gant, however. The room was impressive, like the boardroom of a major corporation—designed to keep the board members happy, like noblemen from medieval Italy. It had high ceilings and fabric-covered walls—Chinese silk, in this case, red, of course, so that the effect was rather like crawling inside the heart of a whale, complete with chandeliers, cut crystal, and polished brass. Everyone had a tiny glass of mao-tai, which really was like drinking flavored lighter fluid, as he'd been warned.

"It is your first time in Beijing?" some minor official asked him.

Gant turned to look down at the little guy. "Yes, it is."

"Too soon for first impressions, then?"

"Yes, but this room is quite stunning ... but then silk is something with which your people have a long and fruitful history," he went on, wondering if he sounded diplomatic or merely awkward.

"This is so, yes," the official agreed with a toothy grin and a nod, neither of which told the visiting American much of anything, except that he didn't waste much money on toothbrushes.

"I have heard much of the imperial art collection."

"You will see it," the official promised. "It is part of the official program."

"Excellent. In addition to my duties, I would like to play tourist."

"I hope you will find us acceptable hosts," the little guy said. For his part, Gant was wondering if this smiling, bowing dwarf would hit his knees and offer a blow job, but diplomacy was an entirely new area for him. These were not investment bankers, who were generally polite sharks, giving you good food and drink before sitting you down and trying to bite your dick off. But

they never concealed the fact that they were sharks. These people—he just wasn't sure. This degree of politeness and solicitude was a new experience for Gant, but given his pre-mission brief, he wondered if the hospitality only presaged an unusually hostile meeting when they got to business. If the two things had to balance out, then the downside of this seesaw was going to be a son of a bitch, he was sure.

"So, you are not from the American State Department?" the Chinese man asked.

"No. I'm in the Department of the Treasury. I work directly for Secretary Winston."

"Ah, then you are from the trading business?"

So, the little bastard's been briefed... But that was to be expected. At this level of government you didn't freelance things. Everyone would be thoroughly briefed. Everyone would have read the book on the Americans. The State Department members of the American crew had done the same. Gant, however, had not, since he wasn't really a player per se, and had only been told what he needed to know. That gave him an advantage over the Chinese assigned to look after him. He was not State Department, hence should not have been regarded as important—but he was the personal representative of a very senior American official, known to be part of that man's inner circle, and that made him very important indeed. Perhaps he was even a principal adviser to the Rutledge man—and in a Chinese context, that might even mean that he, Gant, was the man actually running the negotiations rather than the titular chief diplomat, because the Chinese often ran things that way. It occurred to Gant that maybe he could fuck with their minds a little bit ... but how to go about it?

"Oh, yes, I've been a capitalist all my life," Gant said, deciding to play it cool and just talk to the guy as though he were a human being and not a fucking communist diplomat. "So has Secretary Winston, and so has our President, you know."

"But he was mainly an intelligence officer, or so I have been told."

Time to stick the needle: "I suppose that's partly true, but his heart is in business, I think. After he leaves government service, he and George will probably go into business together and really take the world over." Which was almost true, Gant thought, remembering that the best lies usually were.

"And you have worked some years with Secretary Winston." A statement rather than a question, Gant noted. How to answer it? How much did they really know about him ... or was he a man of mystery to the ChiComms? If so, could he make that work for him ... ?

A gentle, knowing smile. "Well, yeah, George and I made a little money together. When Jack brought him into the cabinet, George decided that he wanted me to come down with him and help make a little government policy. Especially tax policy. That's been a real mess, and George turned me loose on

it. And you know? We just might get all of that changed. It looks as though Congress is going to do what we told them to do, and that's not bad, making those idiots do what we want them to do," Gant observed, looking rather deliberately at the carved ivory fixture on the wooden display cabinet. Some craftsman with a sharp knife had spent a lot of time to get that thing just right ... *So, Mr. Chinaman, do I look important now?* One thing about this guy. He would have been a pretty good poker player. His eyes told you nothing at all. Not a fucking thing. Gant looked down at the guy again. "Excuse me. I talk too much."

The official smiled. "There is much of that at times like this. Why do you suppose everyone gets something to drink?" Amusement in his voice, letting Gant know, perhaps, who was really running this affair ... ?

"I suppose," Gant observed diffidently and wandered off with the junior—or was he?—official in tow.

For his part, Rutledge was trying to decide if the opposition knew what his instructions were. There had been a few leaked hints in the media, but Adler had arranged the leaks with skill, so that even a careful observer—and the PRC ambassador in Washington was one of those—might have trouble deciding who was leaking what, and to what purpose. The Ryan administration had utilized the press with a fair degree of skill, probably, Rutledge thought, because the cabinet officers mainly took their lead from Ryan's chief of staff, Arnie van Damm, who was a very skillful political operator. The new cabinet didn't have the usual collection of in-and-out political figures who needed to stroke the press to further their own agendas. Ryan had chiefly selected people with no real agenda at all, which was no small feat—especially since most of them seemed to be competent technicians who, like Ryan, only seemed to want to escape Washington with their virtue intact and return to their real lives as soon as they finished serving their country for a short period of time. The career diplomat had not thought it possible that his country's government could be so transformed. He assigned credit for all this to that madman Japanese pilot who'd killed so much of official Washington in that one lunatic gesture.

It was then that Xu Kun Piao showed up, sweeping in to the greeting room with his official entourage. Xu was General Secretary of the Communist Party of the People's Republic of China, and Chairman of the Chinese Politburo, though referred to in the media as the country's "Premier," which was something of a misnomer, but one adopted even in the diplomatic community. He was a man of seventy-one years, one of the second generation of Chinese leaders. The Long March survivors had long since died out—there were some senior officials who claimed to have been there, but a check of the numbers showed that if they had, they'd been sucking their mothers' nipples at the time, and those men were not taken seriously. No, the current crop of Chinese political leaders were mainly the sons or nephews of the original set, raised in privilege and relative comfort, but always mindful of the fact that their place in life was a precarious one. On one side were the other political children who craved advancement beyond their parents' places, and to achieve that they'd been more Catholic than the local communist pope. They'd carried their *Little*

Red Books high as adults during the Cultural Revolution, and before that they'd kept their mouths shut and ears open during the abortive and predatory "Hundred Flowers" campaign of the late '50s, which had trapped a lot of intellectuals who'd thought to keep hidden for the first decade of Maoist rule. They'd been enticed into the open by Mao's own solicitation for their ideas, which they'd foolishly given out, and in the process only extended their necks over the broad block for the axe that fell a few years later in the brutal, cannibalistic Cultural Revolution.

The current Politburo members had survived in two ways. First, they'd been secured by their fathers and the rank that attached to such lofty parentage. Second, they'd been carefully warned about what they could say and what they could not say, and so all along they'd observed cautiously, always saying out loud that Chairman Mao's ideas were those which China really needed, and that the others, while interesting, perhaps, in a narrow intellectual sense, were dangerous insofar as they distracted the workers and peasants from The True Way of Mao. And so when the axe had fallen, borne as it had been by the *Little Red Book,* they'd been among the first to carry and show that book to others, and so escaped the destruction for the most part—a few of their number had been sacrificed, of course, but none of the really smart ones who now shared the seats on the Politburo. It had been a brutal Darwinian process that they had all gotten through by being a little smarter than those around them, and now, at the peak of the power won for them by brains and caution, it was time for them to enjoy that which they'd earned.

The new crop of leaders accepted communism as truly as other men believed in God, because they'd learned nothing else, and had not exercised their intellectual agility to seek another faith, or even to seek solutions to the questions that Marxism could not answer. Theirs was a faith of resignation rather than enthusiasm. Raised within a circumscribed intellectual box, they never ventured out of it, for they feared what they might find out there. In the past twenty years, they'd been forced to allow capitalism to blossom within the borders of their country, because that country needed money to grow into something more powerful than the failed experiment in the Democratic Republic of Korea. China had experienced its own killer famine around 1960, and slowly learned from it and the Chinese also used it as a launching point for the Cultural Revolution, thus gaining political capital from a self-imposed disaster.

They wanted their nation to be great. In fact, they already regarded it as such, but recognized the fact that other nations lacked this appreciation, and so they had to seek out the means to correct the misimpression foolishly held by the rest of the world. That had meant money, and money had meant industry, and industry required capitalists. It was something they had figured out before the foolish Soviets to their north and west. And so the Soviet Union had fallen, but the People's Republic of China remained.

Or so they all believed. They looked out, when they bothered themselves to do so, at a world that they pretended to understand and to which they felt superior for no better reason than their skin and their language—ideology came second in their self-reckoning; *amour propre* starts from within. They

expected people to defer to them, and the previous years of interactive diplomacy with the surrounding world had not altered their outlook very much.

But in this, they suffered from their own illusions. Henry Kissinger had come to China in 1971 at the behest of President Richard Nixon not so much from his perceived need to establish normal relations with the world's most populous nation as to use the PRC as a stick with which to beat the Soviet Union into submission. In fact Nixon had begun a process so lengthy as to be considered beyond Western capabilities—it was more the sort of thing that Westerners thought the Chinese themselves capable of conceiving. With such ideas, people merely show ethnic prejudices of one sort or another. The typical chief of a totalitarian government is far too self-centered to think much beyond his own lifetime, and men all over the world live roughly the same number of years. For that simple reason, they all think in terms of programs that can be completed in their own living sight, and little beyond, because they were all men who'd torn down the statues of others, and such men had few illusions over the fate of their own monuments. It was only as they faced death that they considered what they had done, and Mao had conceded bleakly to Henry Kissinger that all he'd accomplished had been to change the lives of peasants within a few miles of Beijing.

But the men in this ceremonial room were not yet close enough to death to think in such terms. They were the magisters of their land. They made the rules that others followed. Their words were law. Their whims were granted with alacrity. People looked upon them as they once looked upon the emperors and princes of old. All a man could wish to have, they had. Most of all, they had the power. It was their wishes that ruled their vast and ancient land. Their communist ideology was merely the magic that defined the form their wishes took, the rules of the game they had all agreed to play all those years before. The power was the thing. They could grant life or take it with the stroke of a pen—or more realistically, a dictated word, taken down by a personal secretary, for transmission to the underling who squeezed the trigger.

Xu was a man of average everything—height, weight, eyes, and face ... and intellect, some said. Rutledge had read all this in his briefing documents. The real power was elsewhere. Xu was a figurehead of sorts, chosen for his looks, partially; his ability to give a speech, certainly; and his ability to front the occasional idea of others on the Politburo, to simulate conviction. Like a Hollywood actor, he didn't so much have to be smart as to play smart.

"Comrade Premier," Rutledge said in greeting, holding out his hand, which the Chinese man took.

"Mr. Rutledge," Xu replied in passable English. There was an interpreter there, too, for the more complex thoughts. "Welcome to Beijing."

"It is my pleasure, and my honor, to visit your ancient country again," the American diplomat said, showing proper respect and subservience, the Chinese leader thought.

"It is always a pleasure to welcome a friend," Xu went on, as he'd been

briefed to do. Rutledge had been to China before in his official capacity, but never before as a delegation leader. He was known to the Chinese Foreign Ministry as a diplomat who'd climbed his way up the ladder of his bureaucracy, much as they did in their own—a mere technician, but a high-ranking one. The Politburo chief raised his glass. "I drink to successful and cordial negotiations."

Rutledge smiled and hoisted his glass as well. "As do I, sir."

The cameras got it. The news media people were circulating around, too. The cameramen were doing mainly what they called "locator" shots, like any amateur would do with his less expensive mini-cam. They showed the room at an artificial distance, so that the viewers could see the colors, with a few close-ups of the furniture on which no one was supposed to sit, with somewhat closer shots of the major participants drinking their drinks and looking pleasant to one another—this was called "B-roll," intended to show viewers what it was like to be at a large, formal, and not overly pleasant cocktail party. The real news coverage for the event would be by people like Barry Wise and the other talking heads, who would tell the viewer what the visuals could not.

Then the coverage would shift back to CNN's Washington studio, down the hill from Union Station, where other talking heads would discuss what had been leaked or not leaked to them, then discuss what they in their personal sagacious wisdom thought the proper course for the United States of America ought to be. President Ryan would see all this over breakfast, as he read the papers and the government-produced *Early Bird* clipping service. Over breakfast, Jack Ryan would make his own terse comments to be noted by his wife, who might discuss it over lunch with her colleagues at Johns Hopkins, who might discuss it with their spouses, from whom it would go no further. In this way, the President's thoughts often remained a mystery.

The party broke up at the predetermined hour, and the Americans headed back to the embassy in their official cars.

"So, what can you tell us off the record?" Barry asked Rutledge, in the sanctity of the stretch Lincoln's backseat.

"Not much, really," the Assistant Secretary of State for Policy replied. "We'll listen to what they have to say, and they'll listen to what we have to say, and it'll go from there."

"They want MFN. Will they get it?"

"That's not for me to decide, Barry, and you know that." Rutledge was too tired and jet-lagged for intelligent conversation at the moment. He didn't trust himself to speak under these circumstances, and figured Wise knew that. The reporter was leaning on him for just that reason.

"So, what are you going to talk about?"

"Obviously, we'd like the Chinese to open their markets more, and also to take a closer look at some issues we have, like patent and copyright violations that American business has complained about."

"The Dell Computer issue?"

Rutledge nodded. "Yes, that's one." Then he yawned. "Excuse me. The long flight ... you know how it is."

"I was on the same airplane," Barry Wise pointed out.

"Well, maybe you're just better at this than I am," Rutledge offered. "Can we postpone this discussion a day or so?"

"If you say so," the CNN reporter agreed. He didn't much like this preppy asshole, but he was a source of information, and Wise was in the information business. The ride was a brief one in any case. The official delegation hopped out at the embassy, and the embassy cars took the newsies back to their hotels.

The embassy had sleeping accommodations for the entire official party, mainly to ensure that anything they said wouldn't be recorded by the MSS bugs in every hotel room in the city. This was not to say that the accommodations were palatial, though Rutledge had a comfortable room. Here protocol failed Mark Gant, but he did have a comfortable single bed in his small private room and a shared bathroom with a shower. He opted instead for a hot bath and one of the sleeping pills the physician who accompanied the official party had issued him. It was supposed to give him a solid eight hours or so, which would just about synchronize him with local time by the morning. There would then be a big working breakfast, much like the astronauts got before a shuttle launch, and as much of an American tradition as the Stars and Stripes over Fort McHenry.

Nomuri caught the arrival of the trade delegation on Chinese TV, which he watched mainly to hone his language skills. These were improving, though the tonal nature of Mandarin drove him slightly nuts. He'd once thought Japanese was hard, but it was a walk in the park compared to Guoyu. He looked at the faces, wondering who they were. The Chinese narrator helped, stumbling badly over "Rutledge," however. Well, Americans murdered Chinese names, too, except for simple ones like Ming and Wang, and listening to an American businessman try to make himself understood to a local was enough to make Nomuri gag. The commentator went on to talk about the Chinese position on the trade talks, how America owed the PRC all manner of concessions—after all, was not China generous in allowing Americans to spend their worthless dollars for the valuable products of the People's Republic? In this, China sounded a lot like Japan had once done, but the new Japanese government had opened up their markets. While there was still a trade deficit in Japan's favor, fair competition on the playing field had muted American criticism, though Japanese cars were still less welcome in America than they had been. But that would pass, Nomuri was sure. If America had a weakness it was in forgiving and forgetting too rapidly. In this, he greatly admired the Jews. They still hadn't forgotten Germany and Hitler. As well they shouldn't, he thought. His last thought before retiring was to wonder how the new software was

working on Chai's computer, and if Ming had actually installed it or not. Then he decided to check.

Rising from bed, he switched his laptop on and ... yes! Chai's system lacked Ming's transcription software, but it was transmitting what it had. Okay, fine, they had linguists at Langley to fiddle with that. He didn't have the desire to do so, and just uploaded it and headed back to bed.

Damn!" Mary Pat observed. Nearly all of it was unreadable, but this was a second SORGE source. That was evident from the pathway it had taken through the 'Net. She wondered if Nomuri was showing off, or had somehow managed to get in the pants of a second high-ranking Chinese government secretary. It wouldn't exactly be a first for a field officer to have that active a sex life, but it wasn't all that common, either. She printed it up, saved it to disk, and called for a linguist to come up and translate. Then she downloaded SONGBIRD'S current take. It was becoming as regular as *The Washington Post,* and a lot more interesting. She settled back in her chair and started reading the translation of Ming's latest notes from Minister Fang Gan. He'd be talking about the trade negotiations, she hoped, then to see that, sure enough, he was ... This would be important, the DDO thought. She'd soon be surprised to find out how wrong that impression was.

CHAPTER 23

Down to Business

Bacon and eggs, toast and hash-brown potatoes, plus some Colombian-bean coffee. Gant was Jewish but not observant, and he loved his bacon. Everyone was up and looking pretty good, he thought. The government-issued black capsule (they all called it that, evidently some sort of tradition that he didn't know about) had worked for all of them, and the cookie-pushers were all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Most of the talk, he noted, was about the NBA. The Lakers were looking tough again. Rutledge, Gant saw, was at the head of the table chatting amiably with Ambassador Hitch, who seemed a solid citizen. Then a more ruffled employee of the embassy came in with a manila folder whose borders were lined with striped red-and-white tape. This he handed to Ambassador Hitch, who opened it at once.

Gant realized at once that it was classified material. There wasn't much of that to be seen at Treasury, but there was some, and he'd been screened for a Top Secret/Special Access clearance as part of his employment on Secretary Winston's personal staff. So, there was intel coming in from Washington for the negotiations. Exactly what it was about, he couldn't see, and didn't know if he would see it. He wondered if he could flex his institutional muscles on this one, but Rutledge would be the one who decided if he got to see it or not, and he didn't want to give the State Department puke the excuse to show who was the he-bull in this herd. Patience was a virtue he'd long had, and this was just one more chance to exercise it. He returned to his breakfast, then decided to stand and get more off the buffet. Lunch in Beijing probably wouldn't be very appealing, even at their Foreign Ministry Building, where they would feel constrained to show off their most exotic national dishes, and Fried Panda Penis with candied bamboo roots wasn't exactly to his taste. At least the tea they served was acceptable, but even at its best, tea wasn't coffee.

"Mark?" Rutledge looked up from his seat and waved the Treasury guy over. Gant walked over with his refilled plate of eggs and bacon.

"Yeah, Cliff?"

Ambassador Hitch made room for Gant to sit down, and a steward arrived with fresh silverware. The government could make one comfortable when it wanted. He asked the guy for more hash browns and toast. Fresh coffee arrived seemingly of its own volition.

"Mark, this just came in from Washington. This is codeword material—"

"Yeah, I know. I can't even see it now, and I am not allowed to have any

memory of it. So, can I see it now?"

Rutledge nodded and slipped the papers across. "What do you make of these foreign-exchange figures?"

Gant took a bite of bacon and stopped chewing almost at once. "Damn, they're *that* low? What have they been pissing their money away on?"

"What does this mean?"

"Cliff, once upon a time, Dr. Samuel Johnson put it this way: 'Whatever you have, spend less.' Well, the Chinese didn't listen to that advice." Gant flipped the pages. "It doesn't say what they've been spending it on."

"Mainly military stuff, so I am told," Ambassador Hitch replied. "Or things that can be applied to military applications, especially electronics. Both finished goods and the machinery with which to make electronic stuff. I gather it's expensive to invest in such things."

"It can be," Gant agreed. He turned the pages back to start from the beginning. He saw it was transmitted with the TAPDANCE encryption system. That made it hot. TAPDANCE was only used for the most sensitive material because of some technical inconveniences in its use ... so this was some really hot intelligence, TELESCOPE thought. Then he saw why. Somebody must have bugged the offices of some *very* senior Chinese officials to get *this* stuff ... "Jesus."

"What does this mean, Mark?"

"It means they've been spending money faster than it's coming in, and investing it in noncommercial areas for the most part. Hell, it means they're acting like some of the idiots we have in our government. They think money is just something that appears when you snap your fingers, and then you can spend it as fast as you want and just snap your fingers to get some more ... These people don't live in the real world, Cliff. They have no idea how and why the money appears." He paused. He'd gone too far. A Wall Street person would understand his language, but this Rutledge guy probably didn't. "Let me rephrase. They know that the money comes from their trade imbalance with the United States, and it appears that they believe the imbalance to be a natural phenomenon, something they can essentially dictate because of who they are. They think the rest of the world owes it to them. In other words, if they believe that, negotiating with them is going to be hard."

"Why?" Rutledge asked. Ambassador Hitch, he saw, was already nodding. He must have understood these Chinese barbarians better.

"People who think this way do not understand that negotiations mean give and take. Whoever's talking here thinks that he just gets whatever the hell he wants because everybody owes it to him. It's like what Hitler must have thought at Munich. I want, you give, and then I am happy. We're not going to cave for these bastards, are we?"

"Those are not my instructions," Rutledge replied.

"Well, guess what? Those are the instructions your Chinese counterpart has.

Moreover, their economic position is evidently a lot more precarious than what we've been given to expect. Tell CIA they need better people in their financial-intelligence department," Gant observed. Then Hitch shifted his glance across the table to the guy who must have run the local CIA office.

"Do they appreciate how serious their position is?" Rutledge asked.

"Yes and no. Yes, they know they need the hard currency to do the business they want to do. No, they think they can continue this way indefinitely, that an imbalance is natural in their case because—because why? Because they think they're the fucking master race?" Gant asked.

Again it was Ambassador Hitch who nodded. "It's called the Middle Kingdom Complex. Yes, Mr. Gant, they really do think of themselves in those terms, and they expect people to come to them and give, not for themselves to go to other people as supplicants. Someday that will be their downfall. There's an institutional ... maybe a racial arrogance here that's hard to describe and harder to quantify." Then Hitch looked over to Rutledge. "Cliff, you're going to have an interesting day."

Gant realized at once that this was not a blessing for the Assistant Secretary of State for Policy.

They should be eating breakfast right about now," Secretary Adler said over his Hennessey in the East Room.

The reception had gone well—actually Jack and Cathy Ryan found these things about as boring as reruns of *Gilligan's Island,* but they were as much a part of the Presidency as the State of the Union speech. At least the dinner had been good—one thing you could depend on at the White House was the quality of the food—but the people had been Washington people. Even that, Ryan did not appreciate, had been greatly improved from previous years. Once Congress had largely been populated with people whose life's ambition was "public service," a phrase whose noble intent had been usurped by those who viewed $130,000 per year as a princely salary (it was far less than a college dropout could earn doing software for a computer-game company, and a hell of a lot less than one could make working on Wall Street), and whose real ambition was to apply their will to the laws of their nation. Many of them now, mainly because of speeches the President had made all over the country, were people who actually had *served* the public by doing useful work until, fed up with the machinations of government, they had decided to take a few years off to repair the train wreck Washington had become, before escaping back to the real world of productive work. The First Lady had spent much of the evening talking with the junior senator from Indiana, who in real life was a pediatric surgeon of good reputation and whose current efforts were centered on straightening out government health-care programs before they killed too many of the citizens they supposedly wanted to assist. His greatest task was to persuade the media that a physician might know as much about making sick people well as Washington lobbyists did, something he'd been bending

SURGEON'S ear about most of the night.

"That stuff we got from Mary Pat ought to help Rutledge."

"I'm glad that Gant guy is there to translate it for him. Cliff is going to have a lively day while we sleep off the food and the booze, Jack."

"Is he good enough for the job? I know he was tight with Ed Kealty. That does not speak well for the guy's character."

"Cliff's a fine technician," Adler said, after another sip of brandy. "And he has clear instructions to carry out, and some awfully good intelligence to help him along. This is like the stuff Jonathan Yardley gave our guys during the Washington Naval Treaty negotiations. We're not exactly reading their cards, but we are seeing how they think, and that's damned near as good. So, yes, I think he's good enough for this job, or I wouldn't have sent him out."

"How's the ambassador we have there?" POTUS asked.

"Carl Hitch? Super guy. Career pro, Jack, ready to retire soon, but he's like a good cabinetmaker. Maybe he can't design the house for you, but the kitchen will be just fine when he's done—and you know, I'll settle for that in a diplomat. Besides, designing the house is your job, Mr. President."

"Yeah," Ryan observed. He waved to an usher, who brought over some ice water. He'd pushed the booze enough for one night, and Cathy was starting to razz him about it again. *Damn, being married to a doctor,* Jack thought. "Yeah, Scott, but who the hell do I go to for advice when I don't know what the hell I'm doing?"

"Hell, I don't know," EAGLE replied. Maybe some humor, he thought: "Try doing a séance and call up Tom Jefferson and George Washington." He turned with a chuckle and finished his Hennessey. "Jack, just take it easy on yourself and do the fuckin' job. You're doing just fine. Trust me."

"I hate this job," SWORDSMAN observed with a friendly smile at his Secretary of State.

"I know. That's probably why you're doing it pretty well. God protect us all from somebody who *wants* to hold high public office. Hell, look at me. Think I ever wanted to be SecState? It was a lot more fun to eat lunch in the cafeteria with my pals and bitch about the dumb son of a bitch who was. But now—shit, they're down there saying that about *me!* It ain't fair, Jack. I'm a working guy."

"Tell me about it."

"Well, look at it this way: When you do your memoirs, you'll get a great advance from your publisher. *The Accidental President*?" Adler speculated for the title.

"Scott, you get funny when you're drunk. I'll settle for working on my golf game."

"Who spoke the magic word?" Vice President Jackson asked as he joined the conversation.

“This guy whips my ass so bad out there,” Ryan complained to Secretary Adler, “that sometimes I wish I had a sword to fall on. What’s your handicap now?”

“Not playing much, Jack, it’s slipped to six, maybe seven.”

“He’s going to turn pro—Senior Tour,” Jack advised.

“Anyway, Jack, this is my father. His plane was late and he missed the receiving line,” Robby explained.

“Reverend Jackson, we finally meet.” Jack took the hand of the elderly black minister. For the inauguration he’d been in the hospital with kidney stones, which probably had been even less fun than the inauguration.

“Robby’s told me a lot of good things about you.”

“Your son is a fighter pilot, sir, and they exaggerate a lot.”

The minister had a good laugh at that. “Oh, that I know, Mr. President. That I know.”

“How was the food?” Ryan asked. Hosiah Jackson was a man on the far side of seventy, short like his son, and rotund with increasing years, but he was a man possessed of the immense dignity that somehow attached to black men of the cloth.

“Much too rich for an old man, Mr. President, but I ate it anyway.”

“Don’t worry, Jack. Pap doesn’t drink,” TOMCAT advised. On the lapel of his tuxedo jacket was a miniature of his Navy Wings of Gold. Robby would never stop being a fighter pilot.

“And you shouldn’t either, boy! That Navy taught you lots of bad habits, like braggin’ on yourself too much.”

Jack had to jump to his friend’s defense. “Sir, a fighter pilot who doesn’t brag isn’t allowed to fly. And besides, Dizzy Dean said it best—if you can do it, it isn’t bragging. Robby can do it ... or so he claims.”

“They started talking over in Beijing yet?” Robby asked, checking his watch.

“Another half hour or so,” Adler replied. “It’s going to be interesting,” he added, referring to the SORGE material.

“I believe it,” Vice President Jackson agreed, catching the message. “You know, it’s hard to love those people.”

“Robby, you are not allowed to say such things,” his father retorted. “I have a friend in Beijing.”

“Oh?” His son didn’t know about that. The answer came rather as a papal pronouncement.

“Yes, Reverend Yu Fa An, a fine Baptist preacher, educated at Oral Roberts University. My friend Gerry Patterson went to school with him.”

“Tough place to be a priest—or minister, I guess,” Ryan observed.

It was as though Jack had turned the key in the minister’s dignity switch.

“Mr. President, I envy him. To preach the Gospel of the Lord anywhere is a privilege, but to preach it in the land of the heathen is a rare blessing.”

“Coffee?” a passing usher asked. Hosiah took a cup and added cream and sugar.

“This is fine,” he observed at once.

“One of the fringe bennies here, Pap,” Jackson told his dad with considerable affection. “This is even better than Navy coffee—well, we have navy stewards serving it. Jamaica Blue Mountain, costs like forty bucks a pound,” he explained.

“Jesus, Robby, don’t say that too loud. The media hasn’t figured that one out yet!” POTUS warned. “Besides, I asked. We get it wholesale, thirty-two bucks a pound if you buy it by the barrel.”

“Gee, that’s a real bargoon,” the VP agreed with a chuckle.

With the welcoming ceremony done, the plenary session began without much in the way of fanfare. Assistant Secretary Rutledge took his seat, greeted the Chinese diplomats across the table, and began. His statement started off with the usual pleasantries that were about as predictable as the lead credits for a feature film.

“The United States,” he went on, getting to the meat of the issue, “has concerns about several disturbing aspects of our mutual trading relationship. The first is the seeming inability of the People’s Republic to abide by previous agreements to recognize international treaties and conventions on trademarks, copyrights, and patents. All of these items have been discussed and negotiated at length in previous meetings like this one, and we had thought that the areas of disagreement were successfully resolved. Unfortunately, this seems not to be the case.” He went on to cite several specific items, which he described as being illustrative but in no way a comprehensive listing of his areas of “concern.”

“Similarly,” Rutledge continued, “commitments to open the Chinese market to American goods have not been honored. This has resulted in an imbalance in the mercantile exchange which ill serves our overall relationship. The current imbalance is approaching seventy *billion* U.S. dollars, and that is something the United States of America is not prepared to accept.

“To summarize, the People’s Republic’s commitment to honor international treaty obligations and private agreements with the United States has not been carried out. It is a fact of American law that our country has the right to adopt the trade practices of other nations in its own law. This is the well-known Trade Reform Act, enacted by the American government several years ago. It is my unpleasant obligation, therefore, to inform the government of the People’s Republic that America will enforce this law with respect to trade with the People’s Republic forthwith, unless these previously agreed-upon commitments are met immediately,” Rutledge concluded. *Immediately* is a

word not often used in international discourse. “That concludes my opening statement.”

For his part, Mark Gant halfway wondered if the other side might leap across the polished oak table with swords and daggers at the end of Rutledge’s opening speech. The gauntlet had been cast down in forceful terms not calculated to make the Chinese happy. But the diplomat handling the other side of the table—it was Foreign Minister Shen Tang—reacted no more than he might on getting the check in a restaurant and finding that he’d been overcharged about five bucks’ worth. Not even a look up. Instead the Chinese minister continued to look down at his own notes, before finally lifting his eyes as he felt the end of Rutledge’s opening imminent, with no more feeling or emotion than that of a man in an art gallery looking over some painting or other that his wife wanted him to purchase to cover a crack in the dining room wall.

“Secretary Rutledge, thank you for your statement,” he began in his turn.

“The People’s Republic first of all welcomes you to our country and wishes to state for the record its desire for a continued friendly relationship with America and the American people.

“We cannot, however, reconcile America’s stated desire for friendly relations with her action to recognize the breakaway province on the island of Taiwan as the independent nation it is not. Such action was calculated to inflame our relationship—to fan the flames instead of helping to extinguish them. The people of our country will not accept this unconscionable interference with Chinese internal affairs and—” The diplomat looked up in surprise to see Rutledge’s hand raised in interruption. He was sufficiently shocked by this early breach of protocol that he actually stopped talking.

“Minister,” Rutledge intoned, “the purpose of this meeting is to discuss trade. The issue of America’s diplomatic recognition of the Republic of China is one best left to another venue. The American delegation has no desire to detour into that area today.” Which was diplo-speak for “Take that issue and shove it.”

“Mr. Rutledge, you cannot dictate to the People’s Republic what our concerns and issues are,” Minister Shen observed, in a voice as even as one discussing the price of lettuce in the street market. The rules of a meeting like this were simple: The first side to show anger lost.

“Do go on, then, if you must,” Rutledge responded tiredly. *You’re wasting my time, but I get paid whether I work or not,* his demeanor proclaimed.

Gant saw that the dynamic for the opening was that both countries had their agendas, and each was trying to ignore that of the other in order to take control of the session. This was so unlike a proper business meeting as to be unrecognizable as a form of verbal intercourse—and in terms of other intercourse, it was like two naked people in bed, purportedly for the purpose of sex, starting off their foreplay by fighting over the TV remote. Gant had seen all manner of negotiations before, or so he thought. This was something entirely new and, to him, utterly bizarre.

“The renegade bandits on Taiwan are part of China in their history and heritage, and the People’s Republic cannot ignore this deliberate insult to our nationhood by the Ryan Regime.”

“Minister Shen, the government of the United States of America has a long history of supporting democratically elected governments throughout the world. That has been part of our nation’s ethos for over two hundred years. I would remind the People’s Republic that the United States of America has the longest-lived government in the world. We have lived under our constitutional form of government for well over two hundred years. That is a small number in terms of Chinese history, but I would remind you further that when America elected her first President and first Congress, China was ruled by a hereditary monarch. The government of your country has changed many times since then, but the government of the United States of America has not. Thus it is well within our power both as an independent nation under recognized international law, and also as a *moral* right as a long-lived and therefore legitimate form of government, both to act as we choose and to foster governments like our own. The government of the Republic of China is democratically elected, and therefore it commands the respect of similarly chosen governments of the people, like our own. In any case, Minister, the purpose of this meeting is to discuss trade. Shall we do that, or shall we fritter away our time discussing irrelevancies?”

“Nothing could be more relevant to this discussion than the fundamental lack of respect shown by your government—by the Ryan Regime, shall I say?—for the government of our country. The Taiwan issue is one of fundamental importance to ...” He droned on for another four minutes.

“Minister Shen, the United States of America is not a ’regime’ of any sort. It is an independent nation with a freely elected government chosen by its people. That experiment in government which we undertook when your country was ruled by the Manchu Dynasty is one which you might consider imitating at some future date, for the benefit of your own people. Now, shall we return to the issue at hand, or do you wish to continue wasting your own time and mine by discussing a topic for which I have neither instructions nor much in the way of interest?”

“We will not be brushed aside so cavalierly as that,” Shen responded, earning Rutledge’s brief and irrelevant respect for his unexpected command of the English language.

The American chief diplomat settled back in his chair and looked politely across the table while he thought over his wife’s plans for redecorating the kitchen of their Georgetown town house. Was green and blue the right color scheme? He preferred earth tones, but he was far more likely to win this argument in Beijing than that one in Georgetown. A lifetime spent in diplomacy didn’t enable him to win arguments with Mrs. Rutledge over items like decorating ...

So it went for the first ninety minutes, when there came time for the first break. Tea and finger food was served and people wandered out the French doors—a strange place to find *those,* Gant thought—into the garden. It was

Gant's first adventure in diplomacy, and he was about to learn how these things really worked. People paired off, American and Chinese. You could tell who was who from a distance. Every single one of the Chinese smoked, a vice shared by only two of the American delegation, both of whom looked grateful for the chance to enjoy their habit *indoors* in this country. They might be trade nazis, the Treasury Department official reflected, but they weren't health nazis.

"What do you think?" a voice asked. Gant turned to see the same little guy who'd bugged him at the reception. His name was Xue Ma, Gant remembered, all of five-foot-nothing, with poker-player's eyes and some acting ability. Smarter than he appeared to be, the American reminded himself. So, how was he supposed to handle this? When in doubt, Gant decided, fall back on the truth.

"It's my first time observing diplomatic negotiations. It's intensely boring," Gant replied, sipping his (dreadful) coffee.

"Well, this is normal," Xue answered.

"Really? It's not that way in business. How do you get anything done?"

"Every endeavor has its process," the Chinese man told him.

"I suppose. Can you tell me something?" TELESCOPE asked.

"I can try."

"What's the big deal about Taiwan?"

"What was the big deal when your Civil War began?" Xue replied, with a clever question of his own.

"Well, okay, but after fifty years, why not call it even and start over?"

"We do not think in such short terms," Xue answered with a superior smile.

"Okay, but in America we call that living in the past." *Take* that, *you little Chink!*

"They are our countrymen," Xue persisted.

"But they have chosen not to be. If you want them back, then make it advantageous for them. You know, by achieving the same prosperity here that they've achieved there." *You backward commie.*

"If one of your children ran away from home, would you not work for his return?"

"Probably, but I would entice him, not threaten him, especially if I didn't have the ability to threaten him effectively." *And your military is for shit, too.* So the briefings had told them before flying over.

"But when others encourage our child to abscond and defy their father, are we not to object?"

"Look, pal," Gant responded, not quite showing the inward heat he felt—or so he thought. "If you want to do business, then do business. If you want to chat, we can chat. But my time is valuable, and so is the time of our country,

and we can save the chat for another time." And then Gant realized that, no, he wasn't a diplomat, and this was not a game he could play and win. "As you see, I am not gifted at this sort of exchange. We have people who are, but I am not one of them. I am the kind of American who does real work and earns real money. If you enjoy this game, that's fine, but it's not my game. Patience is a good thing, I suppose, but not when it impedes the objective, and I think your minister is missing something."

"What is that, Mr. Gant?"

"It is we who will have what we wish to have out of these meetings," Gant told the little Chinese man, and realized instantly that he'd stuck his own foot into his mouth about to the knee. He finished his coffee and excused himself, then headed unnecessarily for the bathroom, where he washed his hands before heading back outside. He found Rutledge standing alone, examining some spring flowers.

"Cliff, I think I fucked something up," Gant confessed quietly.

"What's that?" the Assistant Secretary asked, then listened to the confession. "Don't sweat it. You didn't tell them anything I haven't already told them. You just don't understand the language."

"But they'll think we're impatient, and that makes us vulnerable, doesn't it?"

"Not with me doing the talking inside," Rutledge answered, with a gentle smile. "Here I am Jimmy Connors at the U.S. Open, Mark. This is what I do."

"The other side thinks so, too."

"True, but we have the advantage. They need us more than we need them."

"I thought you didn't like taking this sort of line with people," Gant observed, puzzled by Rutledge's attitude.

"I don't have to like it. I just have to do it, and winning is always fun." He didn't add that he'd never met Minister Shen before, and therefore had no personal baggage to trip over, as often happened with diplomats who had been known to put personal friendship before the interest of their countries. They usually justified it by telling themselves that the bastard would owe them one next time, which would serve their country's interest. Diplomacy had always been a personal business, a fact often lost on observers, who thought of these verbose technicians as robots.

Gant found all of this puzzling, but he would play along with Rutledge because he had to, and because the guy at least acted as though he knew what the hell he was doing. Whether he did or not ... Gant wondered how he'd be able to tell. Then it was time to go back indoors.

The ashtrays had been cleaned and the water bottles replenished by the domestic help, who were probably all politically reliable functionaries of one sort or another, or more likely professional intelligence officers, who were here because their government took no chances with anything, or at least tried not to. It was, in fact, a waste of trained personnel, but communists had never

been overly concerned with utilizing manpower in an efficient way.

Minister Shen lit a smoke and motioned for Rutledge to lead off. For his part, the American remembered that Bismarck had counseled the use of a cigar in negotiations, because some found the thick tobacco smoke irritating and that gave the smoker the advantage.

“Minister, the trade policies of the People’s Republic are set in place by a small number of people, and those policies are set in place for political reasons. We in America understand that. What you fail to understand is that ours truly is a government of the people, and our people demand that we address the trade imbalance. The People’s Republic’s inability to open markets to American goods costs the jobs of American citizens. Now, in our country it is the business of the government to serve the people, not to rule them, and for that reason, we must address the trade imbalance in an effective way.”

“I fully agree that it is the business of government to serve the interests of the people, and for that reason, we must consider also the agony that the Taiwan issue imposes on the citizens of my country. Those who should be our countrymen have been separated from us, and the United States has assisted in the estrangement of our kinsmen ...” The remarkable thing, Rutledge thought, was that this droning old fart hadn’t died from smoking those damned things. They looked and smelled like the Lucky Strikes his grandfather had died of, at age eighty. It had not been a death to please a physician, however. Grandpa Owens had been driving his great-grandson to South Station in Boston when, lighting one, he’d dropped it into his lap and, in retrieving it, strayed onto the wrong side of the road. Grandpa hadn’t believed in seat belts, either ... the bastard actually chain-smoked, lighting a new one with the butt of the previous one, like Bogie in a ’30s movie. Well, maybe it was a way for the Chinese to pursue their population-control policy ... but in rather an ugly way ...

“Mr. Foreign Minister,” Rutledge started off, when it was next his turn, “the government of the Republic of China is one elected in free and fair elections by the people who live in that country. In America’s eyes, that makes the government of the Republic of China legitimate”—he didn’t say that the government of the People’s Republic was, therefore, illegitimate, but the thought hung in the room like a dark cloud—“and that makes the government in question worthy of international recognition, as you may have noticed has been the case in the last year.

“It is the policy of our government to recognize such governments. We will not change policies based upon firm principles to suit the wishes of other countries which do not share those principles. We can talk until you run out of cigarettes, but my government’s position in this case is set in stone. So, you can recognize this fact and allow the meeting to move on to productive areas, or you can beat this dead horse until nothing is left of it. The choice is yours, of course, but is it not better to be productive than not?”

“America cannot dictate to the People’s Republic that which concerns us. You claim to have your principles, and surely we have our own, and one of ours is the importance of our country’s territorial integrity.”

For Mark Gant, the hard part was keeping an impassive face. He had to pretend that this all made sense and was important, when he'd much prefer to set up his computer to review stock prices, or for that matter read a paperback book under the rim of the table. But he couldn't do that. He had to pretend that this was all interesting, which, if successfully done, could get him nominated for the next Academy Award ceremonies for Best Actor in a Supporting Role: "For keeping awake during the most boring contest since the Iowa grass-growing championships, the winner is ..." He concentrated on not shifting in his seat, but that just made his ass tired, and these seats hadn't been designed to fit his ass. Maybe one of those skinny Chinese ones, but not that of a Chicago-raised professional who liked having a beer and a corned-beef sandwich for lunch at least once a week and didn't work out enough. His ass required a broader and softer seat for comfort, but he didn't have one. He tried to find something interesting. He decided that Foreign Minister Shen had terrible skin, as though his face had once been on fire and a friend had tried to extinguish the flames with an ice pick. Gant tried to conjure up the image of that supposed event without smiling. Then came the fact that Shen was smoking so much, lighting his smokes from cheap paper matches instead of a proper lighter. Perhaps he was one of those people who set things down and forgot where they were, which would also explain why he used cheap throwaway pens instead of something in keeping with his rank and status. So, this important son of a bitch had suffered from terminal acne as a kid and was a butterfingers... ? It was something worthy of an inward smile as the minister droned on in passable English. That engendered a new thought. He had access to an earphone for simultaneous translation ... could he get one tuned to a local station? They had to have a radio station in Beijing that played music of some sort or other, didn't they?

When Rutledge's turn came, it was almost as bad. The stated American position was as repetitive as the Chinese one, perhaps more reasonable but no less boring. Gant imagined that lawyers talking over a divorce settlement probably went through bullshit like this. Like diplomats, they were paid by the hour and not by the product. Diplomats and lawyers. What a pair, Gant thought. He was unable even to look at his watch. The American delegation had to present a united front of solid stone, Gant thought, to show the Heathen Chinese that the Forces of Truth and Beauty were firm in their resolve. Or something like that. He wondered if it would feel different negotiating with the British, for example, everyone speaking much the same language, but those negotiations were probably handled with phone calls or e-mails rather than this formalistic crap....

Lunch came at the expected hour, about ten minutes late because the Shen guy ran over, which was hardly unexpected. The American team all headed to the men's room, where no talking was done for fear of bugs. Then they went back outside, and Gant went to Rutledge.

"This is how you earn your living?" the stock trader asked with no small degree of incredulity.

"I try to. These talks are going pretty well," the Assistant Secretary of State observed.

"What?" Gant inquired with total amazement.

"Yeah, well, their Foreign Minister is doing the negotiating, so we're playing with their varsity," Rutledge explained. "That means that we'll be able to reach a real agreement instead of a lot of back-and-forth between lower-level people and the Politburo—the additional layer of people can really mess things up. There'll be some of that, of course. Shen will have to talk over his positions with them every evening, maybe even right now—he's nowhere to be seen. I wonder who he reports to, exactly. We don't think he really has plenipotentiary powers, that the rest of the big boys second-guess him a lot. Like the Russians used to be. That's the problem with their system. Nobody really trusts anybody else."

"You serious?" TELESCOPE asked.

"Oh, yeah, it's how their system works."

"That's a clusterfuck," Gant observed.

"Why do you think the Soviet Union went belly-up?" Rutledge asked with amusement. "They never had their act together on any level because they fundamentally didn't know how properly to exercise the power they had. It was rather sad, really. But they're doing a lot better now."

"But how are the talks going, well?"

"If all they have to throw at us is Taiwan, their counter-arguments on trade won't be all that impressive. Taiwan's a settled issue, and they know it. We may have a mutual-defense treaty with them in ten or eleven months, and they probably know that. They have good intelligence sources in Taipei."

"How do we know *that?"* Gant demanded.

"Because our friends in Taipei make sure they do. You want your adversaries to know a lot of things. It makes for better understandings, cuts down on mistakes and stuff." Rutledge paused. "I wonder what's for lunch ... ?"

Jesus, Gant thought. Then he thanked God that he was just here to offer economic backup for this diplomat. They were playing a game so different from anything he'd ever encountered before that he felt like a truck driver doing some day-trading on his laptop at a highway phone booth.

The newsies showed up for lunch so that they could get more B-roll tape of diplomats chatting amiably about such things as the weather and the food—the viewers would think they were handling matters of state, of course, when in fact at least half of the talks between diplomats at such affairs were limited to the problems of raising children or killing the crabgrass in your lawn. It was all, in fact, a kind of gamesmanship with few parallels in other forms of endeavor, Gant was only beginning to understand. He saw Barry Wise approach Rutledge without a microphone or camera in attendance.

“So, how’s it going, Mr. Secretary?” the reporter asked.

“Pretty well. In fact, we had a fine opening session,” Rutledge replied in Gant’s earshot. It was a shame, TELESCOPE decided, that the people couldn’t see what really happened. It would be the funniest thing this side of Chris Rock. It made *Laverne* & *Shirley* look like *King Lear* in its lunacy, and the world chess championship look like a heavyweight-championship fight in its torpor. But every field of human endeavor had its rules, and these were just different ones.

There’s our friend," the cop observed, as the car pulled out. It was Suvorov/Koniev in his Mercedes C-class. The license tag number checked, as did the face in the binoculars.

Provalov had gotten the local varsity to handle this case, with even some help now from the Federal Security Service, formerly the Second Chief Directorate of the former KGB, the professional spy-chasers who’d made life in Moscow difficult for foreign intelligence operations. They remained superbly equipped, and though not so well funded as in the past, there was little to criticize in their training.

The problem, of course, was that they knew all that themselves, and took on a degree of institutional arrogance that had gotten the noses of his homicide investigators severely out of joint. Despite all that, they were useful allies. There were a total of seven vehicles to handle the surveillance. In America, the FBI would have arranged a helicopter as well, but Michael Reilly wasn’t here to make that condescending observation, somewhat to Provalov’s relief. The man had become a friend, and a gifted mentor in the business of investigation, but enough was sometimes enough. There were trucks containing TV cameras to tape the business of the morning, and every automobile had two people in it so that driving wouldn’t interfere with watching. They followed Suvorov/Koniev into central Moscow.

Back at his apartment, another team had already defeated his lock and was inside his flat. What happened there was as graceful as any performance by the Bolshoi Ballet. Once inside, the investigative team stood still at first, scanning for telltales, left-behind items as innocuous as a human hair stuck in place across a closet door to show if someone had opened it. Suvorov’s KGB file was finally in Provalov’s possession now, and he knew all the things the man had been trained in—it turned out that his training had been quite thorough, and Suvorov’s grades had been, well, “C” class most of the time: not outstanding enough to earn him the chance to operate in the field as an “illegal” officer on the home ground of the “Main Enemy,” meaning the United States, but good enough that he’d become a diplomatic-intelligence specialist, mainly going over information brought in by others, but spending some time in the field, trying to recruit and “run” agents. Along the way, he’d established

contact with various foreign diplomats, including three from China—those three he'd used to gather low-level diplomatic information, mainly chitchat-level stuff, but it was all regarded as useful. Suvorov's last field assignment had been from 1989 to '91 in the Soviet Embassy in Beijing, where he'd again tried to gather diplomatic intelligence, and, they saw, with some success this time. The accomplishments had not been questioned at the time, Provalov saw, probably because he'd had some minor victories against the same country's diplomatic service while in Moscow. His file said that he could both speak and write Chinese, skills learned at the KGB Academy that had militated in favor of making him a China specialist.

One of the problems with intelligence operations was that what looked suspicious was often innocuous, and what looked innocuous could well be suspicious. An intelligence officer was *supposed* to establish contact with foreign nationals, often foreign intelligence officers, and then the foreign spy could execute a maneuver that the Americans called a "flip," turning an enemy into an asset. The KGB had done the same thing many times, and part of the price of doing such business was that it could happen to your own people, not so much while you were not looking as when you *were.* Nineteen eighty-nine to '91 had been the time of *glasnost,* the "openness" that had destroyed the Soviet Union as surely as smallpox had annihilated primitive tribesmen. *At that time, KGB was having problems of its own,* Provalov reminded himself, *and what if the Chinese had recruited Suvorov?* The Chinese economy had just been starting to grow back then, and so they'd had the money to toss around, not as much as the Americans always seemed to have, but enough to entice a Soviet civil servant looking at the prospect of losing his job soon.

But what had Suvorov been doing since then? He was now driving a Mercedes-Benz automobile, and those didn't appear in your mailbox. The truth was that they didn't know, and finding out would not be very easy. They knew that neither Klementi Ivan'ch Suvorov nor Ivan Yurievich Koniev had paid his income taxes, but that merely put him at the same level as most Russian citizens, who didn't want to be bothered with such irrelevancies. And, again, they hadn't wanted to question his neighbors. Those names were now being checked to see if any were former KGB, and perhaps, therefore, allies of their suspect. No, they didn't want to alert him in any way.

The apartment looked "clean" in the police sense. With that, they began looking around. The bed was mussed up. Suvorov/Koniev was a man and therefore not terribly neat. The contents of the apartment were, however, expensive, much of them of foreign manufacture. West German appliances, a common affectation of the Russian well-to-do. The searchers wore latex surgical gloves as they opened the refrigerator door (refrigerator-freezers are well-regarded hiding places) for a visual examination. Nothing obvious. Then dresser drawers. The problem was that their time was limited and any residence just had too many places to hide things, whether rolled up in a pair of socks or inside the toilet-paper tube. They didn't really expect to find much, but making the effort was de *rigueur*—it was too hard to explain to one's superiors why one didn't do it than it was to send the search team in to waste their expensively trained time. Elsewhere, people were tapping the

apartment's phone. They'd thought about installing some pinhole-lens cameras. These were so easy to hide that only a paranoid genius was likely to find them, but putting them in took time—the hard part was running the wires to the central monitoring station—and time was an asset they didn't have. As it was, their leader had a cell phone in his shirt pocket, waiting for it to vibrate with the word that their quarry was driving back home, in which case they'd tidy up and leave in a hurry.

He was twelve kilometers away. Behind him, the trail cars were switching in and out of visual coverage as deftly as the Russian national football team advancing the soccer ball into tied-game opposition. Provalov was in the command vehicle, watching and listening as the KGB/FSS team leader used a radio and a map to guide his people in and out. The vehicles were all dirty, middle-aged, nondescript types that could be owned by the Moscow city government or gypsy-cab operators, expected to dart around, concealing themselves among the numerous twins they all had. In most cases, the second vehicle occupant was in the back seat, not the front, to simulate a taxi's passenger, and they even had cell phones to complete the disguise, which allowed them to communicate with their base station without looking suspicious. That, the FSS leader remarked to the cop, was one advantage of new technology.

Then came the call that the subject had pulled over, stopped, and parked his car. The two surveillance vehicles in visual contact continued past, allowing new ones to close in and stop.

"He's getting out," a Federal Security Service major reported. "I'm getting out to follow on foot." The major was young for his rank, usually a sign of a precocious and promising young officer on the way up, and so it was in this case. He was also handsome with his twenty-eight years, and dressed in expensive clothing like one of the new crop of Moscovite business entrepreneurs. He was talking into his phone in a highly animated fashion, the very opposite of what someone conducting a surveillance would do. That enabled him to get within thirty meters of the subject, and to watch his every move with hawk's eyes. Those eyes were needed to catch the most elegant of maneuvers. Suvorov/Koniev sat on a bench, his right hand already in his overcoat pocket while his left fiddled with the morning paper he'd brought out from the car—and that is what tipped the FSS major that he was up to no good. A newspaper was the main disguise used by a spy, something to cover the actions of the working hand, just as a stage magician kept one hand ostentatiously busy while the other performed the actual illusion. And so it was here, so beautifully done that had he been an untrained man, he would never have caught it. The major took a seat on another bench and dialed up another false number on his cell phone and started talking to a fictitious business associate, then watched his surveillance subject stand and walk with studied casualness back to his parked Mercedes.

Major Yefremov called a real number when his subject was a hundred

meters away. “This is Pavel Georgiyevich. I am staying here to see what he left behind,” he told his base station. He crossed his legs and lit a cigarette, watching the figure get back into his car and drive off. When he was well out of sight, Yefremov walked over to the other bench and reached under. Oh, yes. A magnetic holder. Suvorov had been using this one for some time. He’d glued a metal plate to the bottom of the green-painted wood, and to this he could affix a magnetic holder ... about a centimeter in thickness, his hand told him. Their subject was a “player” after all. He’d just executed a dead-drop.

On hearing it, Provalov experienced the thrill of seeing a crime committed before his very eyes. Now they had their man committing a crime against the state. Now he was theirs. Now they could arrest him at any time. But they wouldn’t, of course. The operation’s commander next to him ordered Yefremov to retrieve the container for examination. That would be done very speedily, because the container would have to be returned. They only had half of the spy team. The other half would come to pick it up.

It was the computer. It had to be. On turning it on, they found a maze of folders, but one of them, they quickly saw, had encrypted contents. The encryption program was one they hadn’t come across before. It was American, and its name was written down. They could do no more now. They lacked the proper disks to copy the covert file. That they could fix, and they could also copy the encryption program. Next, they’d have to plant a bugging device on the keyboard. In that way, they could use Sovorov’s own password code to crack the encrypted file. With that decision made, the burglary team left the premises.

The next part was virtually preordained. They followed the Mercedes using the same multi-car drill, but the break came when a dump truck—still the dominant form of life on the Moscow streets—was closest. The subject parked the German sedan and jumped out, took just enough time to affix a strip of paper tape to a lamppost, and hopped back into his car. He didn’t even bother to look around, as though he’d only done something routine.

But he hadn’t. He’d just posted a flag, a notice to someone unknown that the dead-drop had something in it. That someone would walk or drive past and see the tape and know where to go. So, they had to examine the capsule quickly and replace it, lest they warn the enemy spy that their little operation had been compromised. No, you didn’t do that until you had to, because things like this were like an unraveling sweater on a pretty woman. You didn’t stop pulling the yarn until the tits were exposed, the FSS commander told Provalov.

CHAPTER 24

Infanticide

What's this?" the President asked at his morning intelligence briefing.

"A new SORGE source, this one's called WARBLER. I'm afraid it's not as good from an intelligence point of view, though it does tell us things about their ministers," Dr. Goodley added with some feigned delicacy.

Whoever WARBLER was, Ryan saw, she—it was definitely a she—kept a very intimate diary. She, too, worked with this Minister Fang Gan, and, it appeared, he was enamored of her, and she, if not exactly enamored of him, certainly kept records of his activities. All of them, Ryan saw. It was enough to make his eyes go a little wide this early in the morning.

"Tell Mary Pat that she can sell this stuff to *Hustler* if she wants, but I really don't need it at eight in the goddamned morning."

"She included it to give you a feel for the source," Ben explained. "The material isn't as narrowly political as we're getting from SONGBIRD, but MP thinks it tells us a lot about the guy's character, which is useful, and also there's some political content to go along with the information on Fang's sex life. It would appear he's a man of, uh ... well, commendable vigor, I guess, though the girl in question would clearly prefer a younger lover. It appears that she had one, but this Fang guy scared him off."

"Possessive bastard," Ryan saw, skimming that section. "Well, I guess at that age you hold on to what you need. Does this tell us anything?"

"Sir, it tells us something about the kind of people who make decisions over there. Here we call them sexual predators."

"Of which we have a few in government service ourselves," Ryan observed. The papers had just broken a story on a member of the Senate.

"At least not in this office," Goodley told his President. He didn't add *anymore.*

"Well, this President is married to a surgeon. She knows how to use sharp instruments," Ryan said, with a wry grin. "So, the Taiwan stuff yesterday was just a ploy because they haven't figured out how to address the trade issues yet?"

"So it would appear, and yes, that does seem a little odd. Also, MP thinks that they might have a low-level source in State. They know a little more than they could have gotten from the press, she thinks."

“Oh, great,” Jack noted. “So what happened? The Japanese corporations sold their old sources to the Chinese?”

Goodley shrugged. “No telling at this time.”

“Have Mary Pat call Dan Murray about this. Counterespionage is the FBI’s department. Is this something we want to move on at once, or will this compromise SONGBIRD?”

“That’s for somebody else to judge, sir,” Goodley said, reminding the President that he was good, but not quite *that* good at this business.

“Yeah, somebody other than me, too. What else?”

“The Senate Select Intelligence Committee wants to look into the Russian situation.”

“That’s nice. What’s the beef?”

“They seem to have their doubts about how trustworthy our friends in Moscow are. They’re worried that they’re going to use the oil and gold money to become the USSR again, and maybe threaten NATO.”

“NATO’s moved a few hundred miles east, last time I looked. The buffer zone will not hurt our interests.”

“Except that we *are* obligated to defend Poland now,” Goodley reminded his boss.

“I remember. So, tell the Senate to authorize funds to move a tank brigade east of Warsaw. We can take over one of the old Soviet laagers, can’t we?”

“If the Poles want us to. They don’t seem overly concerned, sir.”

“Probably more worried by the Germans, right?”

“Correct, and there is a precedent for that concern.”

“When will Europe get the word that peace has finally broken out for good and all?” Ryan asked the ceiling.

“There’s a lot of history, some of it pretty recent, for them to remember, Mr. President. And much of it militates in the other direction.”

“I’ve got a trip to Poland scheduled, don’t I?”

“Yes, not too far off, and they’re working out the itinerary right now.”

“Okay, I’ll tell the Polish president personally that he can depend on us to keep the Germans under control. If they step out of line—well, we’ll take Chrysler back.” Jack sipped his coffee and checked his watch. “Anything else?”

“That should do it for today.”

The President looked up slyly. “Tell Mary Pat if she sends me more of this WARBLER stuff, I want the pictures to go with it.”

“Will do, sir.” Goodley had himself a good hoot at that.

Ryan picked up the briefing papers again and read through them more

slowly this time, between sips of coffee and snorts, with a few grumbles thrown in. Life had been much easier when he was the guy who prepared these briefing papers than it was now that he was the guy who had to read them. Why was that? Shouldn't it have been the other way around? Before, he'd been the one to find the answers and anticipate the questions, but now that other people had done all that stuff for him ... it was harder. That didn't make any sense at all, damn it. Maybe, he decided, it was because, after him, the information stopped. He had to make the decisions, and so whatever other decisions and analyses had been made at lower levels, the process came to one place and stopped cold. It was like driving a car: Someone else could tell him to turn right at the corner, but he was the guy at the wheel who had to execute the turn, and if somebody clobbered the car, he was the guy who'd get the blame. For a moment, Jack wondered if he was better suited to being a step or two down in the process, able to do the analysis work and make his recommendations with confidence ... but always knowing that someone else would always get the credit for making the right move, or the blame for making the wrong one. In that insulation from consequence, there was safety and security. But that was cowardice talking, Ryan reminded himself. If there were anyone in Washington better suited for making decisions, he hadn't met the guy yet, and if that was arrogance talking, then so be it.

But there ought to be someone better, Jack thought, as the clock wound to his first appointment of the day, and it wasn't his fault that there wasn't. He checked his appointment sheet. The whole day was political bullshit ... except it wasn't bullshit. Everything he did in this office affected the lives of American citizens in one way or another, and that made it important, to them and to him. But who had decided to make him the national *daddy?* What the hell made *him* so damned smart? The people behind his back, as he thought of it, outside the overly thick windows of the Oval Office, all expected him to know how to do the right thing, and over the dinner table or a low-stakes card game, they'd bitch and moan and complain about the decisions he'd made that they didn't like, as though they knew better—which was easy to say out there. In here it was different. And so, Ryan had to apply himself to every little decision, even menus for school lunches—that one was a real son of a bitch. If you gave kids what they liked to eat, nutritionists would complain that they really ought to eat healthy twigs and berries, but for the most part, parents would probably opt for burgers and fries, because that's what the kids *would* eat, and even healthy food, uneaten, did them little good. He'd talked that one over with Cathy once or twice, but he really didn't need to. She let their own kids eat pizza whenever they wished, claiming that pizza was high in protein, and that a kid's metabolism could eat almost anything without ill effect, but when cornered, she'd admit that put her at odds with some of her fellow professors at Johns Hopkins. And so what was Jack Ryan, President of the United States, Doctor of Philosophy in History, Bachelor of Arts in Economics, *and* a Certified Public Accountant (Ryan couldn't even remember why he had bothered taking that exam), supposed to think, when experts—including the one he was married to—disagreed? That was worth another snort, when his desk buzzer went off and Mrs. Sumter announced that his first appointment of the day was here. Already Jack was wishing for a bummed cigarette, but he

couldn't do that until he had a break in his schedule, because only Mrs. Sumter and a few of his Secret Service detail were allowed to know that the President of the United States suffered, intermittently, from *that* vice.

Jesus, he thought, as he did so often when the workday began, *how did I ever get stuck in here?* Then he stood and faced the door, conjuring up his welcoming Presidential smile as he tried to remember who the hell was coming in first to discuss farm subsidies in South Dakota.

The flight, as usual, was out of Heathrow, this one in a Boeing 737, because it wasn't all that long a hop to Moscow. The Rainbow troopers filled the entire first-class section, which would please the cabin staff, though they didn't know it yet, because the passengers would be unusually polite and undemanding. Chavez sat with his father-in-law, politely watching the safety-briefing video, though both knew that if the airplane hit the ground at four hundred knots, it really wouldn't help all that much to know where the nearest emergency exit was. But such things were rare enough to be ignored. Ding grabbed the magazine from the pocket in front and flipped through it in the hope of finding something interesting. He'd already bought all the useful items from the "flying mall" magazine, some to his wife's pitying amusement.

"So, the little guy's walking better?" Clark asked.

"You know, the enthusiasm he has for it is kinda funny, the big grin every time he makes it from the TV to the coffee table, like he's won the marathon, got a big gold medal, and a kiss from Miss America on his way to Disney World."

"The big things are made up of a lot of little things, Domingo," Clark observed, as the aircraft started its takeoff run. "And the horizon's a lot closer when you're that short."

"I suppose, Mr. C. Does seem kinda amusing, though ... and kinda cute," he allowed.

"Not bad duty being the father of a little guy, is it?"

"I got no complaints," Chavez agreed, leaning his seat back now that the gear was up.

"How's Ettore working out?" Back to business, Clark decided. This grandpa stuff had its limitations.

"He's in better shape now. Needed about a month to get caught up. He took some razzing, but he handled it just fine. You know, he's smart. Good tactical instincts, considering he's a cop and not a soldier."

"Being a cop in Sicily isn't like walking a beat on Oxford Street in London, you know?"

"Yeah, guess so," Chavez agreed. "But on the simulator he hasn't made a single shoot/no-shoot mistake yet, and that's not bad. The only other guy who

hasn't blown one is Eddie Price." The computerized training simulator back at Hereford was particularly ruthless in its presentation of possible tactical scenarios, to the point that in one a twelve-year-old picked up an AK-74 and hosed you if you didn't pay close enough attention. The other nasty one was the woman holding the baby who'd just happened to pick up a pistol from a dead terrorist and turn innocently to face the incoming Men of Black. Ding had taken her down once, to find a Cabbage Patch doll on his desk the next morning with a packet of McDonald's ketchup spread across the face. The RAINBOW troopers had a lively, if somewhat perverse, institutional sense of humor.

"So, what exactly are we supposed to be doing?"

"The old Eighth Chief Directorate of the KGB, their executive protective service," John explained. "They've got worries about domestic terrorists—from the Chechens, I guess, and other internal nationalities who want out of the country. They want us to help train up their boys to deal with them."

"How good are they?" Ding asked.

RAINBOW SIX shrugged. "Good question. The personnel are former KGB types, but with Spetsnaz training, so, probably career people as opposed to two-year in-and-outs in the Red Army. All probably titular commissioned officers, but with sergeants' duties. I expect they'll be smart, properly motivated, probably in decent physical shape, and they'll understand the mission. Will they be as good as they need to be? Probably not," John thought. "But in a few weeks we ought to be able to point them in the right direction."

"So mainly we're going to be training up their instructors?"

Clark nodded. "That's how I read it, yeah."

"Fair enough," Chavez agreed, as the lunch menu appeared. Why was it, he wondered, that airline food never seemed to have what you wanted? This was dinner food, not lunch food. What the hell was wrong with a cheeseburger and fries? Oh, well, at least he could have a decent beer. The one thing he'd come to love about life in the UK was the beer. There wouldn't be anything like it in Russia, he was sure.

Sunrise in Beijing was as drab as the polluted air could make it, Mark Gant thought. For some reason he'd slipped out of synch with the local time, despite the black capsule and planned sleep. He'd found himself awake just at first light, which fought through air that was as bad as Los Angeles on its worst-ever day. Certainly there was no EPA in the PRC, and this place didn't even have much in the way of automobiles yet. If that ever happened, China might solve its local population problem with mass gassing. He hadn't been around enough to recognize this as a problem of Marxist nations—but there weren't many of them left to be examples, were there? Gant had never smoked—it was

a vice largely removed from the stock-trading community, where the normal working stress was enough of a killer that they needed few others—and this degree of air pollution made his eyes water.

He had nothing to do and lots of time in which to do it—once awake he was never able to escape back into sleep—so he decided to flip on his reading light and go over some documents, most of which he'd been given without any particular expectation that he would read them. The purpose of diplomacy, Commander Spock had once said on *Star Trek,* was to *prolong* a crisis. Certainly the discourse meandered enough to make the Mississippi River look like a laser beam, but like the Father of Waters, it eventually had to get downstream, or downhill, or wherever the hell it was that rivers went. But this morning—what had awakened him? He looked out the window, seeing the orange-pink smudge beginning to form at the horizon, backlighting the buildings. Gant found them ugly, but he knew he just wasn't used to them. The tenements of Chicago weren't exactly the Taj Mahal, and the wood-frame house of his youth wasn't Buckingham Palace. Still, the sense of different-ness here was overpowering. Everywhere you looked, things seemed alien, and he wasn't cosmopolitan enough to overcome that feeling. It was like a background buzz in the Muzak, never quite there, but never gone away either. It was almost a sense of foreboding, but he shook it off. There was no reason to feel anything like that. He didn't know that he would be proven wrong very soon.

Barry Wise was already up in his hotel room, with breakfast coming—the hotel was one of an American chain, and the breakfast menu approximately American as well. The local bacon would be different, but even Chinese chickens laid real eggs, he was sure. His previous day's experiment with waffles hadn't worked out very well, and Wise was a man who needed a proper breakfast to function throughout the day.

Unlike most American TV correspondent/reporters, Wise looked for his own stories. His producer was a partner, not a boss-handler. He credited that fact for his collection of Emmy awards, though his wife just grumbled about dusting the damned things behind the basement bar.

He needed a fresh new story for today. His American audience would be bored with another talking-head-plus-B-roll piece on the trade negotiations. He needed some local color, he thought, something to make the American people feel as one with the Chinese people. It wasn't easy, and there'd been enough stories on Chinese restaurants, which was the only Chinese thing with which most Americans were familiar. What, then? What did Americans have in common with the citizens of the People's Republic of China? *Not a hell of a lot,* Wise told himself, but there had to be *something* he could use. He stood when breakfast arrived, looking out the picture windows as the waiter wheeled the cart close to the bed. It turned out that they'd goofed on his order, ham instead of bacon, but the ham looked okay and he went with it, tipping the waiter and sitting back down.

Something, he thought, pouring his coffee, *but what?* He'd been through this process often enough. The writers of fiction often chided reporters for their own sort of "creativity," but the process was real. Finding stuff of interest was doubly hard for reporters, because, unlike novelists, they couldn't make things up. They had to use reality, and reality could be a son of a bitch, Barry Wise thought. He reached for his reading glasses in the drawer of the night table and was surprised to see ...

Well, it wasn't all *that* surprising. It was a matter of routine in any American hotel, a Bible left there by the Gideon Society. It was only here, probably, because the hotel was American-owned and -operated, and they had a deal with the Gideon people ... but what a strange place to find a Bible. The People's Republic wasn't exactly overrun with churches. Were there Christians here? Hmph. Why not find out? Maybe there was a story in that.... Better than nothing, anyway. With that semi-decided, he went back to breakfast. His crew would be waking up about now. He'd have his producer look around for a Christian minister, maybe even a Catholic priest. A rabbi was too much to hope for. That would mean the Israeli embassy, and that was cheating, wasn't it?

How was your day, Jack?" Cathy asked.

The night was an accident. They had nothing to do, no political dinner, no speech, no reception, no play or concert at the Kennedy Center, not even an intimate party of twenty or thirty on the bedroom level of the residence portion of the White House, which Jack hated and Cathy enjoyed, because they could invite people they actually knew and liked to those, or at least people whom they wanted to meet. Jack didn't mind the parties as such, but he felt that the bedroom level of The House (as the Secret Service called it, as opposed to the other *House,* sixteen blocks down the street) was the only private space he had left—even the place they owned at Peregrine Cliff on Chesapeake Bay had been redone by the Service. Now it had fire-protection sprinklers, about seventy phone lines, an alarm system like they used to protect nuclear-weapon storage sites, and a new building to house the protective detail who deployed there on the weekends when the Ryans decided to see if they still had a house to retreat to when this official museum got to be too much.

But tonight there was none of that. Tonight they were almost real people again. The difference was that if Jack wanted a beer or drink, he couldn't just walk to the kitchen and get it. That wasn't allowed. No, he had to order it through one of the White House ushers, who'd either take the elevator down to the basement-level kitchen, or to the upstairs bar. He could, of course, have insisted and walked off to make his own, but that would have meant insulting one of the ushers, and while these men, mainly black (some said they traced their lineage back to Andrew Jackson's personal slaves), didn't mind, it seemed unnecessarily insulting to them. Ryan had never been one to have others do his work, however. Oh, sure, it was nice to have his shoes shined

every night by some guy who didn't have anything else to do, and who drew a comfortable government salary to do it, but it just seemed unmanly to be fussed over as if he were some sort of nobleman, when in fact his father had been a hardworking homicide detective on the Baltimore city police force, and he'd needed a government scholarship (courtesy of the United States Marine Corps) to get through Boston College without having his mom take a job. Was it his working-class roots and upbringing? Probably, Ryan thought. Those roots also explained what he was doing now, sitting in an easy chair with a drink in his hand, watching TV, as though he were a normal person for a change.

Cathy's life was actually the least changed in the family, except that every morning she flew to work on a Marine Corps VH-60 Blackhawk helicopter, to which the taxpayers and the media didn't object—not after SANDBOX, also known as Katie Ryan, had been attacked in her daycare center by some terrorists. The kids were off watching televisions of their own, and Kyle Daniel, known to the Secret Service as SPRITE, was asleep in his crib. And so, *that* Dr. Ryan—code name SURGEON—was sitting in her own chair in front of the TV, going over her patient notes and checking a medical journal as part of her never-ending professional education.

"How are things at work, honey?" SWORDSMAN asked SURGEON.

"Pretty good, Jack. Bernie Katz has a new granddaughter. He's all bubbly about it."

"Which kid?"

"His son Mark—got married two years ago. We went, remember?"

"That's the lawyer?" Jack asked, remembering the ceremony, in the good old days, before he'd been cursed into the Presidency.

"Yeah, his other son, David, is the doctor—up at Yale, on the faculty, thoracic surgeon."

"Have I met that one?" Jack couldn't remember.

"No. He went to school out west, UCLA." She turned the page in the current *New England Journal of Medicine,* then decided to dog-ear it. It was an interesting piece on a new discovery in anesthesia, something worth remembering. She'd talk about it at lunch with one of the professors. It was her custom to lunch with her colleagues in different fields, to keep current on what was going on in medicine. The next big breakthrough, she thought, would be in neurology. One of her Hopkins colleagues had discovered a drug that seemed to make damaged nerve cells regrow. If it panned out, that was a Nobel Prize. It would be the ninth hanging on the trophy wall of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Her work with surgical lasers had won her a Lasker Public Service Award—the highest such award in American medicine—but it hadn't been fundamental enough for a trip to Stockholm. That was fine with her. Ophthalmology wasn't that sort of field, but fixing people's sight was pretty damned rewarding. Maybe the one good thing about Jack's elevation and her attendant status as First Lady was that she'd have a

real shot at the Directorship of the Wilmer Institute if and when Bernie Katz ever decided to hang it up. She'd still be able to practice medicine—that was something she never wanted to give up—and also be able to oversee research in her field, decide who got the grants, where the really important exploratory work was, and that, she thought, was something she might be good at. So, maybe this President stuff wasn't a total loss.

Her only real beef was that people expected her to dress like a supermodel, and while she had always dressed well, being a clotheshorse had never appealed to her. It was enough, she figured, to wear nice formal gowns at all the damned formal affairs she had to attend (and not get charged for it, since the gowns were all donated by the makers). As it was, *Women's Wear Daily* didn't like her normal choice of clothing, as though her white lab coat was a fashion statement—no, it was her uniform, like the Marines who stood at the doors to the White House, and one she wore with considerable pride. Not many women, or men, could claim to be at the very pinnacle of their profession. But she could. As it was, this had turned into a nice evening. She didn't even mind Jack's addiction to The History Channel, even when he grumbled at some minor mistake in one of their shows. Assuming, she chuckled to herself, that he was right, and the show was wrong.... Her wineglass was empty, and since she didn't have any procedures scheduled for the next day, she waved to the usher for a refill. Life could have been worse. Besides, they'd had their big scare with those damned terrorists, and with good luck and that wonderful FBI agent Andrea Price had married, they'd survived, and she didn't expect anything like that to happen again. Her own Secret Service detail was her defense against that. Her own Principal Agent, Roy Altman, inspired the same sort of confidence at his job that she did at hers, Cathy judged.

"Here you go, Dr. Ryan," the usher said, delivering the refilled glass.

"Thank you, George. How are the kids?"

"My oldest just got accepted to Notre Dame," he answered proudly.

"That's wonderful. What's she going to major in?"

"Premed."

Cathy looked up from her journal. "Great. If there's any way I can help her, you let me know, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am, I sure will." And the nice thing, George thought, was that she wasn't kidding. The Ryans were very popular with the staff, despite their awkwardness with all the fussing. There was one other family the Ryans looked after, the widow and kids of some Air Force sergeant whose connection with the Ryans nobody seemed to understand. And Cathy had personally taken care of two kids of staff members who'd had eye problems.

"What's tomorrow look like, Jack?"

"Speech to the VFW convention in Atlantic City. I chopper there and back after lunch. Not a bad speech Callie wrote for me."

"She's a little weird."

“She’s different,” the President agreed, “but she’s good at what she does.”

Thank God, Cathy didn’t say aloud, *that I don’t have to do much of that!* For her, a speech was telling a patient how she was going to fix his or her eyes.

There’s a new Papal Nuncio in Beijing," the producer said. ”That’s an ambassador, like, isn’t it?"

The producer nodded. “Pretty much. Italian guy, Cardinal Renato DiMilo. Old guy, don’t know anything about him.”

“Well, maybe we can drive over and meet the guy,” Barry thought as he knotted his tie. “Got an address and phone number?”

“No, but our contact at the American Embassy can get ’em quick enough.”

“Give the guy a call,” Wise ordered gently. He and the producer had been together for eleven years, and together they’d dodged bullets and won those Emmys, which wasn’t bad for a couple of ex-Marine sergeants.

“Right.”

Wise checked his watch. The timing worked just fine. He could get a report at his leisure, upload it on the satellite, and Atlanta could edit it and show it to people for breakfast in America. That would pretty much take care of his day in this heathen country. Damn, why couldn’t they do trade conferences in Italy? He remembered Italian food fondly from his time in the Mediterranean Fleet Marine Force. And the Italian women. They’d like the United States Marine uniform. Well, lots of women did.

One thing neither Cardinal DiMilo nor Monsignor Schepke had learned to like was Chinese breakfast food, which was totally alien from anything Europeans had ever served for the early-morning meal. And so Schepke fixed breakfast every morning before their Chinese staff came in—they’d do the dishes, which was enough for both churchmen. Both had already said their morning mass, which necessitated their rising before six every morning, rather like soldiers did, the elderly Italian had often remarked to himself.

The morning paper was the *International Herald Tribune,* which was too American-oriented, but the world was an imperfect place. At least the paper showed the football scores, and European football was a sport of interest to both of them, and one which Schepke could still go out and play when the opportunity arose. DiMilo, who’d been a pretty good midfielder in his day, had to content himself with watching and kibitzing now.

The CNN crew had their own van, an American make that had been shipped into the PRC ages ago. It had its own miniature satellite transceiver rig, a small technical miracle of sorts that enabled instant contact with any place in the world via orbiting communications satellites. It could do anything but

operate when the vehicle was moving, and someone was working on that feature, which would be the next major breakthrough, because then the mobile crews could work with little threat of interference from the gomers in whatever country they happened to be operating.

They also had a satellite-navigation system, which was a genuine miracle that allowed them to navigate anywhere, in any city for which they had a CD-ROM map. With it, they could find any address faster than a local taxi driver. And with a cell phone, they could get the address itself, in this case from the U.S. embassy, which had the street addresses for all foreign legations, of which the Papal Nuncio's house was just one more. The cell phone also allowed them to call ahead. The call was answered by a Chinese voice at first, then one that sounded German, of all things, but which said, sure, come on over.

Barry Wise was dressed in his usual coat and tie—his neatness was another leftover from the Marines—and he knocked on the door, finding the expected local—he was tempted to call them "natives," but that was too English, and distantly racist—at the door to conduct them in. The first Westerner they met was clearly not a Cardinal. Too young, too tall, and far too German.

"Hello, I am Monsignor Schepke," the man greeted him.

"Good day, I am Barry Wise of CNN."

"Yes," Schepke acknowledged with a smile. "I have seen you many times on the television. What brings you here?"

"We're here to cover the trade meeting between America and China, but we decided to look for other items of interest. We were surprised to see that the Vatican has a diplomatic mission here."

Schepke ushered Wise into his office and motioned him to a comfortable chair. "I've been here for several months, but the Cardinal just arrived recently."

"Can I meet him?"

"Certainly, but His Eminence is on the phone to Rome at the moment. Do you mind waiting a few minutes?"

"No problem," Wise assured him. He looked the monsignor over. He looked athletic, tall, and very German. Wise had visited that country many times, and always felt somewhat uneasy there, as if the racism that had occasioned the Holocaust was still there somewhere, hiding close by but out of sight. In other clothing, he would have taken Schepke for a soldier, even a Marine. He looked physically fit and very smart, clearly a keen observer.

"What order are you in, if I may ask?" Wise said.

"The Society of Jesus," Schepke replied.

A *Jesuit,* Wise thought at once. That explained it. "From Germany?"

"Correct, but I'm based in Rome now at Robert Bellarmine University, and I was asked to accompany His Eminence here because of my language skills."

His English was about halfway between English and American, but not Canadian, grammatically perfect and remarkably precise in his pronunciations.

And because you're smart, Wise added to himself. He knew that the Vatican had a respected intelligence-gathering service, probably the oldest in the world. So, this Monsignor was a combination diplomat and spook, Wise decided.

"I won't ask how many languages you speak. I'm sure you have me beat," Wise observed. He'd never met or even heard of a dumb Jesuit.

Schepke offered a friendly smile. "It is my function." Then he looked at his desk phone. The light had gone out. Schepke excused himself and headed to the inner office, then returned. "His Eminence will see you now."

Wise rose and followed the German priest in. The man he saw was corpulent and clearly Italian, dressed not in priestly robes, but rather a coat and trousers, with a red shirt (or was it a vest?) underneath his Roman collar. The CNN correspondent didn't remember if the protocol was for him to kiss the man's ring, but hand-kissing wasn't his thing anyway, and so he just shook hands in the American custom.

"Welcome to our legation," Cardinal DiMilo said. "You are our first American reporter. Please—" The Cardinal gestured him to a chair.

"Thank you, Your Eminence." Wise did remember that part of the protocol.

"How may we serve you this day?"

"Well, we're in town to cover the trade talks—America and China—and we're just looking for a story about life in Beijing. We just learned last night that the Vatican has an embassy here, and we thought we might come over to talk to you, sir."

"Marvelous," DiMilo observed with a gracious priestly smile. "There are a few Christians in Beijing, though this is not exactly Rome."

Wise felt a lightbulb go off. "What about Chinese Christians?"

"We've only met a few. We're going over to see one this afternoon, as a matter of fact, a Baptist minister named Yu."

"Really?" That was a surprise. A *local* Baptist?

"Yes," Schepke confirmed. "Good chap, he was even educated in America, at Oral Roberts University."

"A Chinese citizen from Oral Roberts?" Wise asked somewhat incredulously, as the STORY! light flashed in his head.

"Yes, it is somewhat unusual, isn't it?" DiMilo observed.

It was unusual enough that a Baptist and a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church were on speaking terms, Wise thought, but to have it happen here seemed about as likely as a live dinosaur strolling up the Mall in Washington. Atlanta would sure as hell like this one.

“Could we go over with you?” the CNN correspondent asked.

The terror began soon after she arrived at her workplace. For all the waiting and all the anticipation, it still came as a surprise, and an unwelcome one, the first twinge in her lower abdomen. The last time, now nearly six years before, it had presaged the birth of Ju-Long, and been a surprise as well, but that pregnancy had been authorized, and this one was not. She’d hoped that it would begin in the morning, but on a weekend, in their apartment, where she and Quon could handle things without external complications, but babies came at their own time in China, as they did elsewhere in the world, and this one would be no exception. The question was whether or not the State would allow it to take his first breath, and so the first muscle twinge, the first harbinger of the contractions of frank labor, brought with it the fear that murder would be committed, that her own body would be the scene of the crime, that she would be there to see it, to feel the baby stop moving, to feel death. The fear was the culmination of all the sleepless nights and the nightmares which had caused her to sweat in her bed for weeks. Her co-workers saw her face and wondered. A few of the women on the shop floor had guessed her secret, though they’d never discussed it with her. The miracle was that no one had informed on her, and that had been Lien-Hua’s greatest fear of all—but that just wasn’t the sort of thing one woman could do to another. Some of them, too, had given birth to daughters who had “accidentally” died a year or two later to satisfy their husbands’ desire for a male heir. That was one more aspect of life in the People’s Republic that was rarely the subject of conversation, even among women in private.

And so Yang Lien-Hua looked around the factory floor, feeling her muscles announce what was to come, and all she could hope was that it would stop, or delay itself. Another five hours, and she could pedal her bicycle home and deliver the baby there, and maybe that wasn’t as good as on a weekend, but it was better than having an emergency here. “Lotus Flower” told herself that she had to be strong and resolute. She closed her eyes, and bit her lip, and tried to concentrate on her job, but the twinges soon grew into discomfort. Then would come mild pain, followed by the real contractions that would deny her the ability to stand, and then ... what? It was her inability to see just a few hours beyond where she stood that contorted her face worse than pain ever could. She feared death, and while that fear is known to all humans, hers was for a life still part of herself, but not really her own. She feared seeing it die, feeling it die, feeling an unborn soul depart, and while it would surely go back to God, that was not God’s intention. She needed her spiritual counselor now. She needed her husband, Quon. She needed Reverend Yu even more. But how would she make that happen?

The camera setup went quickly. Both of the churchmen watched with interest,

since neither had seen this happen before. Ten minutes later, both were disappointed with the questions. Both had seen Wise on television, and both had expected better of him. They didn't realize that the story he really wanted was a few miles and an hour or so away.

"Good," Wise said, when the vanilla questions were asked and answered. "Can we follow you over to your friend's place?"

"Certainly," His Eminence replied, standing. He excused himself, because even Cardinals have to visit the bathroom before motoring off—at least they did at DiMilo's age. But he reappeared and joined Franz for the walk to the car, which the Monsignor would drive, to the continuing disappointment of their own servant/driver who was, as they suspected, a stringer for the Ministry of State Security. The CNN van followed, twisting through the streets until they arrived at the modest house of the Reverend Yu Fa An. Parking was easy enough. The two Catholic churchmen walked to Yu's door, carrying a large package, Wise noted.

"Ah!" Yu observed with a surprised smile, on opening the door. "What brings you over?"

"My friend, we have a gift for you," His Eminence replied, holding up the package. It was clearly a large Bible, but no less pleasing for the obvious nature of the gift. Yu waved them in, then saw the Americans.

"They asked if they could join us," Monsignor Schepke explained.

"Certainly," Yu said at once, wondering if maybe Gerry Patterson might see the story, and even his distant friend Hosiah Jackson. But they didn't get the cameras set up before he unwrapped the package.

Yu did this at his desk, and on seeing it, he looked up in considerable surprise. He'd expected a Bible, but this one must have cost hundreds of American dollars ... It was an edition of the King James version in beautifully literate Mandarin ... and magnificently illustrated. Yu stood and walked around the desk to embrace his Italian colleague.

"May the Lord Jesus bless you for this, Renato," Yu said, with no small emotion.

"We both serve Him as best we can. I thought of it, and it seemed something you might wish to have," DiMilo replied, as he might to a good parish priest in Rome, for that was what Yu was, wasn't it? Close enough, certainly.

For his part, Barry Wise cursed that he hadn't quite gotten his camera running for that moment. "We don't often see Catholics and Baptists this friendly," the reporter observed.

Yu handled the answer, and this time the camera was rolling. "We are allowed to be friends. We work for the same boss, as you say in America." He took DiMilo's hand again and shook it warmly. He rarely received so sincere a gift, and it was so strange to get it here in Beijing from what some of his American colleagues called papists, and an Italian one at that. Life really did have purpose after all. Reverend Yu had sufficient faith that he rarely doubted that, but to have it confirmed from time to time was a blessing.

The contractions came too fast, and too hard. Lien-Hua withstood it as long as she could, but after an hour, it felt as though someone had fired a rifle into her belly. Her knees buckled. She did her best to control it, to remain standing, but it was just too much. Her face turned pasty-white, and she collapsed to the cement floor. A co-worker was there at once. A mother herself, she knew what she beheld.

"It is your time?" she asked.

"Yes." Delivered with a gasp and a painful nod.

"Let me run and get Quon." And she was off at once. That bit of help was when things went bad for Lotus Flower.

Her supervisor noted one running employee, and then turned his head to see another prostrate one. He walked over, as one might to see what had happened after an automobile accident, more with curiosity than any particular desire to intervene. He'd rarely taken note of Yang Lien-Hua. She performed her function reliably, with little need for chiding or shouting, and was popular with her co-workers, and that was all he knew about her, really, and all that he figured he needed to know. There was no blood about. She hadn't fallen from some sort of accident or mechanical malfunction. How strange. He stood over her for a few seconds, seeing that she was in some discomfort and wondering what the problem was, but he wasn't a doctor or a medic, and didn't want to interfere. Oh, if she'd been bleeding he might have tried to slap a bandage over the wound or something, but this wasn't such a situation and so he just stood there, as he figured a manager should, showing that he was there, but not making things worse. There was a medical orderly in the first-aid room two hundred meters away. The other girl had probably run that way to fetch her, he thought.

Lien-Hua's face contorted after a few minutes' relative peace, as another contraction began. He saw her eyes screw closed and her face go pale, and her breathing change to a rapid pant. *Oh,* he realized, *that's it.* How odd. He was supposed to know about such things, so that he could schedule substitutions on the line. Then he realized something else. This was not an authorized pregnancy. Lien-Hua had broken the rules, and that wasn't supposed to happen, and it could reflect badly on his department, and on *him* as a supervisor ... and he wanted to own an automobile someday.

"What is happening here?" he asked her.

But Yang Lien-Hua was in no shape to reply at the moment. The contractions were accelerating much faster than they'd done with Ju-Long. *Why couldn't this have waited until Saturday?* she demanded of Destiny. *Why does God wish my child to die aborning?* She did her best to pray through the pain, doing her utmost to concentrate, to entreat God for mercy and help in this time of pain and trial and terror, but all she saw around her was more cause for fear. There was no help in the face of her shop supervisor. Then she heard running feet again and looked to see Quon approaching, but before he got to her, the supervisor intercepted him.

“What goes on here?” the man demanded, with all the harshness of petty authority. “Your woman makes a baby here? An unauthorized baby?” the most minor of officials asked and accused in the same breath. “*Ju hai,”* he added: *Bitch!*

For his part, Quon wanted this baby as well. He hadn’t told his wife of the fears that he’d shared with her, because he felt that it would have been unmanly, but that last statement from the shop supervisor was a little much for a man under two kinds of simultaneous stress. Recalling his army training, Quon struck out with his fist, following his hand with an imprecation of his own:

“Pok gai,” literally, fall down in the street, but in context, *Get the fuck out of my way!* The shop supervisor gashed his head when he went down, giving Quon the satisfaction of seeing an injury to avenge the insult to his wife. But he had other things to do.

With the words said, and the blow struck, he lifted Lien-Hua to her feet and supported her as best he could on the way to where their bicycles were parked. But, now what to do? Like his wife, Quon had wanted this all to happen at home, where at the worst she could call in sick. But he had no more power to stop this process than he did to stop the world from turning on its axis. He didn’t even have time or energy to curse fate. He had to deal with reality as it came, one shaky second at a time, and help his beloved wife as best he could.

You were educated in America?" Wise asked, in front of the rolling camera.

“Yes,” Yu replied over tea. “At Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma. My first degree was in electrical engineering, then my divinity degree and my ordination came later.”

“I see you are married,” the reporter observed, pointing to a picture on the wall.

“My wife is away in Taiwan, looking after her mother, who is sick at the moment,” he explained.

“So, how did you two meet?” Wise asked, meaning Yu and the Cardinal.

“That was Fa An’s doing,” the Cardinal explained. “It was he who came to us to extend a greeting to a newcomer in the same—same line of work, one could say.” DiMilo was tempted to say that they enjoyed drinks together, but refrained for fear of demeaning the man before his fellow Baptists, some of whom objected to alcohol in any form. “As you might imagine, there are not so many Christians in this city, and what few there are need to stick together.”

“Do you find it odd, a Catholic and a Baptist to be so friendly?”

“Not at all,” Yu replied at once. “Why should it be odd? Are we not united by faith?” DiMilo nodded agreement at this perfect, if unanticipated, statement of belief.

“And what of your congregation?” Wise asked the Chinese minister next.

The bicycle lot outside was a confused mass of metal and rubber, for few of the Chinese workers owned automobiles, but as Quon helped Lien-Hua to the far corner, the two of them were spotted by someone who did have access to one. He was a factory security guard who drove about the perimeter of the plant very importantly in his three-wheel motorized cart, an accessory more important to his sense of status than his uniform and badge. Like Quon, a former sergeant in the People’s Liberation Army, he’d never lost his feeling of personal authority, and this communicated itself in the way he spoke to people.

“Stop!” he called from the driver’s seat in his cart. “What goes on here?”

Quon turned. Lien-Hua had just been hit with another contraction, with buckled knees and gasping breath, and he was almost dragging her to their bikes. Suddenly, he knew that this wasn’t going to work. There was just no way that she could pedal her own bike. It was eleven blocks to their apartment. He could probably drag her up the three flights of steps, but how the hell was he going to get her to the front door?

“My wife is ... she’s hurt,” Quon said, unwilling—afraid—to explain what the problem really was. He knew this guard—his name was Zhou Jingjin—and he seemed a decent enough chap. “I’m trying to get her home.”

“Where do you live, Comrade?” Zhou asked.

“Great Long March Apartments, number seventy-four,” Quon replied. “Can you help us?”

Zhou looked them over. The woman seemed to be in some distress. His was not a country which placed great value on personal initiative, but she was a comrade in difficulty, and there was supposed to be solidarity among the people, and their apartment was only ten or eleven blocks, hardly fifteen minutes even in this slow and awkward cart. He made his decision, based on socialist worker solidarity.

“Load her on the back, Comrade.”

“Thank you, Comrade.” And Quon got his wife there, lifted her bottom up, and set her on the rusted steel deck behind the driver’s compartment. With a wave, he signaled Zhou to head west. This contraction proved a difficult one. Lien-Hua gasped and then cried out, to the distress of her husband, and worse, the distress of the driver, who turned and saw what ought to have been a healthy woman grasping her abdomen in great pain. It was not a pretty thing to see by any stretch of the imagination, and Zhou, having taken one leap of initiative, decided that maybe he ought to take another. The path to Great Long March Apartments led down Meishuguan Street, past the Longfu Hospital, and like most Beijing teaching hospitals, this one had a proper

emergency-receiving room. This woman was in distress, and she was a comrade, like himself a member of the working class, and she deserved his help. He looked back. Quon was doing his best to comfort his woman as a man should, far too busy to do much of anything as the security cart bumped along the uneven streets at twenty kilometers per hour.

Yes, Zhou decided, he had to do it. He turned the steering tiller gently, pulled up to the loading dock designed more for delivery trucks than ambulances, and stopped.

It took Quon a few seconds to realize that they'd stopped. He looked around, ready to help his wife off the cart, until he saw that they weren't at the apartment complex. Disoriented by the previous thirty minutes of unexpected emergency and chaos, he didn't understand, didn't grasp where they were, until he saw someone in a uniform emerge from the door. She wore a white bandanna-hat on her head—a nurse? Were they at the hospital? No, he couldn't allow that.

Yang Quon stood off the cart and turned to Zhou. He started to object that they'd come to the wrong place, that he didn't want to be here, but the hospital workers had an unaccustomed sense of industry at the moment—the emergency room was perversely idle at the moment—and a wheeled gurney emerged from the door with two men in attendance. Yang Quon tried to object, but he was merely pushed aside by the burly attendants as Lien-Hua was loaded on the gurney and wheeled inside before he could do much more than flap his mouth open and closed. He took a breath and rushed in, only to be intercepted by a pair of clerks asking for the information they needed to fill out their admitting forms, stopping him dead in his tracks as surely as a man with a loaded rifle, but far more ignominiously.

In the emergency room itself, a physician and a nurse watched as the orderlies loaded Lien-Hua onto an examining table. It didn't take more than a few seconds for their trained eyes to make the first guess, which they shared with a look. Only a few seconds more and her work clothes had been removed, and the pregnant belly was as obvious as a sunrise. It was similarly obvious that Yang Lien-Hua was in frank labor, and that this was no emergency. She could be wheeled to the elevator and taken to the second floor, where there was a sizable obstetrics staff. The physician, a woman, beckoned to the orderlies and told them where to move the patient. Then she walked to the phone to call upstairs and tell them that a delivery was on the way up. With that "work" done, the doctor went back to the physicians' lounge for a smoke and a magazine.

ComradeYang?" another clerk, a more senior one, said. "Yes?" the worried husband replied, still stuck in the waiting room, held prisoner by clerks.

"Your wife is being taken upstairs to obstetrics. But," the clerk added,

“there’s one problem.”

“What is that?” Quon asked, knowing the answer, but hoping for a miracle, and utterly trapped by the bureaucratic necessities of the moment.

“We have no record of your wife’s pregnancy in our files. You are in our health district—we show you at Number Seventy-two Great Long March Flats. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s where we live,” Quon sputtered out, trying to find a way out of this trap, but not seeing one anywhere.

“Ah.” The clerk nodded. “I see. Thank you. I must now make a telephone call.”

It was the way the last statement was delivered that frightened Quon: Ah, yes, I have to see that the trash is removed properly. Ah, yes, the glass is broken, and I’ll try to find a repairman. Ah, yes, an unauthorized pregnancy, I’ll call upstairs so that they’ll know to kill the baby when it crowns.

Upstairs, Lien-Hua could see the difference in their eyes. When Ju-Long had been on his way, there’d been joy and anticipation in the eyes of the nurses who oversaw her labor. You could see their eyes crinkle with smiles at the corners of their masks ... but not this time. Someone had come over to where she was in labor room #3 and said something to the nurse, and her head had turned rapidly to where Lien-Hua lay, and her eyes had turned from compassionate to ... something else, and while Mrs. Yang didn’t know what other thing it was, she knew the import. It might not be something the nurse particularly liked, but it was something she would assist in doing, because she had to. China was a place where people did the things they had to do, whether they approved it or liked it or not. Lien-Hua felt the next contraction. The baby in her uterus was trying to be born, not knowing that it was racing to its own destruction at the hands of the State. But the hospital staffers knew. Before, with Ju-Long, they’d been close by, not quite hovering, but close enough to watch and see that things were going well. Not now. Now they withdrew, desiring not to hear the sounds of a mother struggling to bring forth death in a small package.

On the first floor, it was equally plain to Yang Quon. What came back to him now was his firstborn son, Ju-Long, the feel of his small body in his arms, the little noises he made, the first smile, sitting up, crawling, the first step in their small apartment, the first words he’d spoken ... but their little Large Dragon was dead now, never to be seen again, crushed by the wheel of a passenger bus. An uncaring fate had ripped that child from his arms and cast him aside like a piece of blowing trash on the street—and now the State was going to slay his second child. And it would all happen upstairs, less than ten meters away, and he couldn’t do a thing about it.... It was a feeling not unknown to

citizens of the People's Republic, where rule from above was the rule, but opposed to it now was the most fundamental of human drives. The two forces battled within the mind of factory worker Yang Quon. His hands shook at his sides as his mind struggled with the dilemma. His eyes strained, staring at nothing closer than the room's wall, but straining even so ... something, there had to be *something* ...

There *was* a pay telephone, and he *did* have the proper coins, and he *did* remember the number, and so Yang Quon lifted the receiver and dialed the number, unable to find the ability within himself to change fate, but hoping to find that ability in another.

I'll get it," Reverend Yu said in English, rising and walking to where it was ringing.

"A remarkable guy, isn't he?" Wise asked the two Catholics.

"A fine man," Cardinal DiMilo agreed. "A good shepherd for his flock, and that is all a man can hope to be."

Monsignor's Schepke's head turned when he caught the tone of Yu's voice. Something was wrong here, and by the sound, something serious. When the minister returned to the sitting room, his face told the tale.

"What is amiss?" Schepke asked in his perfect Mandarin. Perhaps this was not something for the American reporters.

"One of my congregation," Yu replied, as he reached for his jacket. "She is pregnant, in labor even now—but her pregnancy is unauthorized, and her husband fears the hospital will try to kill it. I must go to help."

"Franz, *was gibt's hier?"* DiMilo asked in German. The Jesuit then replied in Attic Greek to make damned sure the Americans wouldn't get it.

"You've been told about this, Eminence," Monsignor Schepke explained in the language of Aristotle. "The abortionists here commit what is virtually murder in any civilized country in the world, and the decision to do so, in this case, is purely political and ideological. Yu wishes to go and help the parents prevent this vile act."

DiMilo needed less than a second. He stood, and turned his head. "Fa An?"

"Yes, Renato?"

"May we come with you and assist? Perhaps our diplomatic status will have practical value," His Eminence said, in badly accented but comprehensible Mandarin.

It didn't take long for Reverend Yu either: "Yes, a fine idea! Renato, I cannot allow this child to die!"

If the desire to procreate is the most fundamental known to mankind, then there are few more powerful calls to action for an adult than *child-in-danger*. For this, men race into burning buildings and jump into rivers. For this now,

three clergymen would go to a community hospital to challenge the power of the world's most populous nation.

"What's happening?" Wise asked, surprised by the sudden shifts in language and the way the three churchmen had leapt to their feet.

"A pastoral emergency. A member of Yu's congregation is in the hospital. She needs him, and we will go with our friend to assist in his pastoral duties," DiMilo said. The cameras were still running, but this was the sort of thing that got edited out. *But what the hell,* Wise thought.

"Is it far? Can we help? Want us to run you over?"

Yu thought it over and quickly decided that he couldn't make his bike go as fast as the American news van. "That is very kind. Yes."

"Well, let's go, then." Wise stood and motioned to the door. His crew broke down their gear in a matter of seconds and beat them all out the door.

Longfu Hospital turned out to be less than two miles away, facing a north-south street. It was, Wise thought, a place designed by a blind architect, so lacking in aesthetic as to be a definite government-owned building even in this country. The communists had probably killed off anyone with a sense of style back in 1950 or so, and no one had attempted to take his place. Like most reporters, the CNN team came in the front door in the manner of a police SWAT team. The cameraman's tool was up on his shoulder, with the soundman beside him, Barry Wise and the producer trailing while they looked for good establishing shots. To call the lobby dreary was generous. A Mississippi state prison had a better atmosphere than this, to which was added the disinfectant smell that makes dogs cringe in the vet's office and made kids hug your neck harder for fear of the coming needle.

For his part, Barry Wise was unnaturally alert. He called it his Marine training, though he'd never seen combat operations. But one January night in Baghdad, he'd started looking out the windows forty minutes before the first bombs had fallen from the Stealth fighters, and kept looking until what U.S. Air Force planners had called the AT&T Building took the first spectacular hit. He took the producer's arm and told him to keep his head up. The other ex-Marine nodded agreement. For him it was the suddenly grim looks on the faces of the three clergymen, who'd been so genial until the phone had rung. For that old Italian guy to look this way—it had to be something, they both were sure, and whatever it was, it wouldn't be pleasant, and that often made for a good news story, and they were only seconds from their satellite uplink. Like hunters hearing the first rustle of leaves in the forest, the four CNN men looked alertly for the game and the shot.

"Reverend Yu!" Yang Quon called, walking—almost running—to where they were.

"Eminence, this is my parishioner, Mr. Yang."

"Buon giorno," DiMilo said in polite greeting. He looked over to see the newsies taking their pictures and keeping out of the way, more politely than he'd expected them to do. While Yu spoke with Yang, he walked over to Barry

Wise to explain the situation.

"You are right to observe that relations between the Catholics and the Baptists are not always as friendly as they ought to be, but on this issue we stand as one. Upstairs, the officials of this government wish to kill a human baby. Yu wants to save that child. Franz and I will try to help."

"This could get messy, sir," Wise warned. "The security personnel in this country can play rough. I've seen it before."

DiMilo was not an imposing man in physical terms. He was short and a good thirty pounds overweight, the American figured. His hair was thinning. His skin was sagging with age. He probably went out of breath going up two flights of stairs. But for all that, the Cardinal summoned what manhood he had and transformed himself before the American's eyes. The genial smile and gentle disposition evaporated like steam in cold air. Now he looked more like a general on a battlefield.

"The life of an innocent child is at risk, Signore Wise," was all DiMilo said, and it was all he had to say. The Cardinal walked back to his Chinese colleague.

"Get that?" Wise asked his cameraman, Pete Nichols.

"Fuckin' A, Barry!" the guy said behind his eyepiece.

Yang pointed. Yu headed that way. DiMilo and Schepke followed. At the reception desk, the head clerk lifted a phone and made a call. The CNN crew followed the others into the stairwell and headed up to the second floor.

If anything, the obstetrics and gynecology floor was even more drab than the first. They heard the shouts, cries, and moans of women in labor, because in China, the public-health system did not waste drugs on women giving birth. Wise caught up to see that Yang guy, the father of the baby, standing still in the corridor, trying to identify the cries of his own wife from all the others. Evidently, he failed. Then he walked to the nurse's desk.

Wise didn't need to understand Chinese to get what the exchange was all about. Yang was supported by Reverend Yu and demanded to know where his wife was. The head nurse asked what the hell they were doing here, and told them all that they had to leave at once! Yang, his back straight with dignity and fear, refused and repeated his question. Again the head nurse told him to get lost. Then Yang seriously broke the rules by reaching across the high countertop and grabbing the nurse. You could see it in her eyes. It shocked her at a very fundamental level that anyone could defy her state-issued authority so blatantly. She tried to back away, but his grip was too strong, and for the first time she saw that his eyes were no longer a display of fear. Now they showed pure killing rage, because for Yang human instincts had cast aside all the societal conditioning he'd absorbed in his thirty-six years. His wife and child were in danger, and for them, right here and right now, he'd face a fire-breathing dragon barehanded and be damned to the consequences! The nurse took the easy way out and pointed to the left. Yang headed that way, Yu and the other two clergy with him, and the CNN crew trailing. The nurse felt her

neck and coughed to get her breath back, still too surprised to be fearful, trying to understand how and why her orders had been disregarded.

Yang Lien-Hua was in Labor Room #3. The walls were of yellow glazed brick, the floor tile of some color that had been overcome by years of use, and was now a brown-gray.

For "Lotus Flower," it had been a nightmare without end. Alone, all alone in this institution of life and death, she'd felt the contractions strengthen and merge into one continuous strain of her abdominal muscles, forcing her unborn child down the birth canal, toward a world that didn't want it. She'd seen that in the nurses' faces, the sorrow and resignation, what they must have seen and felt elsewhere in the hospital when death came to take a patient. They'd all learned to accept it as inevitable, and they tried to step away from it, because what had to be done was so contrary to all human instincts that the only way they could be there and see it happen was to—to be somewhere else. Even that didn't work, and though they scarcely admitted it even to one another, they'd go home from work and lie in their beds and weep bitterly at what they as women had to do to newborns. Some would cradle the dead children who never were, who never got to take that first life-affirming breath, trying to show womanly gentleness to someone who would never know about it, except perhaps the spirits of the murdered babies who might have lingered close by. Others went the other way, tossing them into bins like the trash the state said they were. But even they never joked about it—in fact, never talked about it, except perhaps to note it had been done, or, maybe, "There's a woman in Number Four who needs *the shot."*

Lien-Hua felt the sensations, but worse, knew the thoughts, and her mind cried out to God for mercy. Was it so wrong to be a mother, even if she attended a Christian church? Was it so wrong to have a second child to replace the first that Fate had ripped from her arms? Why did the State deny to her the blessing of motherhood? Was there no way out? She hadn't killed the first child, as many Chinese families did. She hadn't murdered her little Large Dragon, with his sparkling black eyes and comical laugh and grasping little hands. Some other force had taken that away from her, and she *wanted,* she *needed* another. Just one other. She wasn't being greedy. She didn't want to raise two more children. Only one. Only one to suckle at her breasts and smile at her in the mornings. She *needed* that. She worked hard for the State, asked little in return, but she did ask for *this!* It was her *right* as a human being, wasn't it?

But now she knew only despair. She tried to reverse the contractions, to stop the delivery from happening, but she might as well have tried to stop the tide with a shovel. Her little one was coming out. She could feel it. She could see the knowledge of it in the face of the delivery nurse. She checked her watch and leaned out of the room, waving her arm just as Lien-Hua fought the urge to push and complete the process, and so offer up her child to Death. She fought, controlled her breathing, struggled with her muscles, panted instead of

breathing deeply, fought and fought and fought, but it was all for nothing. She knew that now. Her husband was nowhere near to protect her. He'd been man enough to put her here, but not enough to protect her and his own child from what was happening now. With despair came relaxation. It was time. She recognized the feeling from before. She could not fight anymore. It was time to surrender.

The doctor saw the nurse wave. This one was a man. It was easier on the men, and so they gave most of the "shots" in this hospital. He took the 50-cc syringe from stores and then went to the medication closet, unlocking it and withdrawing the big bottle of formaldehyde. He filled the syringe, not bothering to tap out the bubbles, because the purpose of this injection was to kill, and any special care was superfluous. He walked down the corridor toward Labor #3. He'd been on duty for nine hours that day. He'd performed a difficult and successful Caesarian section a few hours before, and now he'd end his working day with this. He didn't like it. He did it because it was his job, part of the State's policy. The foolish woman, having a baby without permission. It really was *her* fault, wasn't it? She knew what the rules were. Everyone did. It was impossible *not* to know. But she'd broken the rules. And she wouldn't be punished for it. Not really *her*. She wouldn't go to prison or lose her job or suffer a monetary fine. She'd just get to go home with her uterus the way it had been nine months before—empty. She'd be a little older, and a little wiser, and know that if this happened again, it was a lot better to have the abortion done in the second or third month, before you got too attached to the damned thing. Damned sure it was a lot more comfortable than going through a whole labor for nothing. That was sad, but there was much sadness in life, and for this part of it they'd all volunteered. The doctor had chosen to become a doctor, and the woman in #3 had chosen to become pregnant.

He came into #3, wearing his mask, because he didn't want to give the woman any infection. That was why he used a clean syringe, in case he should slip and stick her by mistake.

So.

He sat on the usual stool that obstetricians used both for delivering babies and for aborting the late-term ones. The procedure they used in America was a little more pleasant. Just poke into the baby's skull, suck the brains out, crush the skull and deliver the package with a lot less trouble than a full-term fetus, and a lot easier on the woman. He wondered what the story was on this one, but there was no sense in knowing, was there? No sense knowing that which you can't change.

So.

He looked. She was fully dilated and effaced, and, yes, there was the head. Hairy little thing. Better give her another minute or two, so that after he did his duty she could expel the fetus in one push and be done with it. Then she could go off and cry for a while and start getting over it. He was concentrating a little too much to note the commotion in the corridor outside the labor room.

Yang pushed the door open himself. And there it all was, for all of them to see. Lien-Hua was on the delivery table. Quon had never seen one of them before, and the way it held a woman's legs up and apart, it looked for all the world like a device to make women easier to rape. His wife's head was back and down, not up and looking to see her child born, and then he saw why.

There was the ... doctor, was he? And in his hand a large needle full of—

—they were in time! Yang Quon pushed the doctor aside, off his stool. He darted right to his wife's face.

"I am here! Reverend Yu came with me, Lien." It was like a light coming on in a darkened room.

"Quon!" Lien-Hua cried out, feeling her need to push, and finally wanting to.

But then things became more complicated still. The hospital had its own security personnel, but on being alerted by the clerk in the main lobby, one of them called for the police, who, unlike the hospital's own personnel, were armed. Two of them appeared in the corridor, surprised first of all to see foreigners with TV equipment right there in front of them. Ignoring them, they pushed into the delivery room to find a pregnant woman about to deliver, a doctor on the floor, and four men, two of *them* foreigners as well!

"What goes on here!" the senior one bellowed, since intimidation was a major tool for controlling people in the PRC.

"These people are interfering with my duties!" the doctor answered, with a shout of his own. If he didn't act fast, the damned baby would be born and breathe, and then he couldn't ...

"What?" the cop demanded of him.

"This woman has an unauthorized pregnancy, and it is my duty to terminate the fetus now. These people are in my way. Please remove them from the room."

That was enough for the cops. They turned to the obviously unauthorized visitors. "You will leave now!" the senior one ordered, while the junior one kept his hand on his service pistol.

"No!" was the immediate reply, both from Yang Quon and Yu Fa An.

"The doctor has given his order, you must leave," the cop insisted. He was unaccustomed to having ordinary people resist his orders. "You will go now!"

The doctor figured this was the cue for him to complete his distasteful duty, so that he could go home for the day. He set the stool back up and slid it to where he needed to be.

"You will not do this!" This time it was Yu, speaking with all the moral authority his education and status could provide.

“Will you get him out of here?” the doctor growled at the cops, as he slid the stool back in place.

Quon was ill-positioned to do anything, standing as he was by his wife’s head. To his horror, he saw the doctor lift the syringe and adjust his glasses. Just then his wife, who might as well have been in another city for the past two minutes, took a deep breath and pushed.

“Ah,” the doctor said. The fetus was fully crowned now, and all he had to do was—

Reverend Yu had seen as much evil in his life as most clergymen, and they see as much as any seasoned police officer, but to see a human baby murdered before his eyes was just too much. He roughly shoved the junior of the two policemen aside and struck the doctor’s head from behind, flinging him to the right and jumping on top of him.

“Getting this?” Barry Wise asked in the corridor.

“Yep,” Nichols confirmed.

What offended the junior policeman was not the attack on the doctor, but rather the fact that this—this citizen had laid hands on a uniformed member of the Armed People’s Police. Outraged, he drew his pistol from its holster, and what had been a confused situation became a deadly one.

“No!” shouted Cardinal DiMilo, moving toward the young cop. He turned to see the source of the noise and saw an elderly *gwai,* or foreigner in very strange clothes, moving toward him with a hostile expression. The cop’s first response was a blow to the foreigner’s face, delivered with his empty left hand.

Renato Cardinal DiMilo hadn’t been physically struck since his childhood, and the affront to his personhood was all the more offensive for his religious and diplomatic status, and to be struck by this child! He turned back from the force of the blow and pushed the man aside, wanting to go to Yu’s aid, and to help him keep this murderous doctor away from the baby about to be born. The doctor was wavering on one foot, holding the syringe up in the air. This the Cardinal seized in his hand and hurled against the wall, where it didn’t break, because it was plastic, but the metal needle bent.

Had the police better understood what was happening, or had they merely been better trained, it would have stopped there. But they hadn’t, and it didn’t. Now the senior cop had his Type 77 pistol out. This he used to club the Italian on the back of the head, but his blow was poorly delivered, and all it managed to do was knock him off balance and split his skin.

Now it was Monsignor Schepke’s turn. His Cardinal, the man whom it was his duty to serve and protect, had been attacked. He was a priest. He couldn’t use deadly force. He couldn’t attack. But he could defend. That he did, grasping the older officer’s gun hand and twisting it up, in a safe direction, away from the others in the room. But there it went off, and though the bullet merely flattened out in the concrete ceiling, the noise inside the small room was deafening.

The younger policeman suddenly thought that his comrade was under attack. He wheeled and fired, but missed Schepke, and struck Cardinal DiMilo in the back. The .30 caliber bullet transited the body back to front, damaging the churchman's spleen. The pain surprised DiMilo, but his eyes were focused on the emerging baby.

The crash of the shot had startled Lien-Hua, and the push that followed was pure reflex. The baby emerged, and would have fallen headfirst to the hard floor but for the extended hands of Reverend Yu, who stopped the fall and probably saved the newborn's life. He was lying on his side, and then he saw that the second shot had gravely wounded his Catholic friend. Holding the baby, he struggled to his feet and looked vengefully at the youthful policeman.

"Huai dan! he shouted: *Villain!* Oblivious of the infant in his arms, he lurched forward toward the confused and frightened policeman.

As automatically as a robot, the younger cop merely extended his arm and shot the Baptist preacher right in the forehead.

Yu twisted and fell, bumping into Cardinal DiMilo's supine form and landing on his back, so that his chest cushioned the newborn's fall.

"Put that away!" the older cop screamed at his young partner. But the damage had been done. The Chinese Reverend Yu was dead, the back of his head leaking brain matter and venting blood at an explosive rate onto the dirty tile floor.

The doctor was the first to take any intelligent action. The baby was out now, and he couldn't kill it. He took it from Yu's dead arms, and held it up by the feet, planning to smack it on the rump, but it cried out on its own. *So,* the doctor thought as automatically as the second policeman's shot, *this lunacy has one good result.* That he'd been willing to kill it sixty seconds before was another issue entirely. Then, it had been unauthorized tissue. Now, it was a breathing citizen of the People's Republic, and his duty as a physician was to protect it. The dichotomy did not trouble him because it never even occurred to him.

There followed a few seconds in which people tried to come to terms with what had happened. Monsignor Schepke saw that Yu was dead. He couldn't be alive with that head wound. His remaining duty was to his Cardinal.

"Eminence," he said, kneeling down to lift him off the bloody floor.

Renato Cardinal DiMilo thought it strange that there was so little pain, for he knew that his death was imminent. Inside, his spleen was lacerated, and he was bleeding out internally at a lethal rate. He had not the time to reflect on his life or what lay in his immediate future, but despite that, his life of service and faith reasserted itself one more time.

"The child, Franz, the child?" he asked in a gasping voice.

"The baby lives," Monsignor Schepke told the dying man.

A gentle smile: *"Bene,"* Renato said, before closing his eyes for the last time.

The last shot taken by the CNN crew was of the baby lying on her mother's

chest. They didn't know her name, and the woman's face was one of utter confusion, but then she felt her daughter, and the face was transformed as womanly instincts took over completely.

"We better get the fuck out of here, Barry," the cameraman advised, with a hiss.

"I think you're right, Pete." Wise stepped back and started to his left to get down the corridor to the stairs. He had a potential Emmy-class story in his hands now. He'd seen a human drama with few equals, and it had to go out, and it had to go out fast.

Inside the delivery room, the senior cop was shaking his head, his ears still ringing, trying to figure out what the hell had happened here, when he realized that the light level was lower—the TV camera was gone! He had to do something. Standing erect, he darted from the room and looked right, and saw the last American disappear into the stairwell. He left his junior in the delivery room and ran that way, turned into the fire stairs and ran downstairs as fast as gravity could propel him.

Wise led his people into the main lobby and right toward the main door, where their satellite van was. They'd almost made it, when a shout made them turn. It was the cop, the older one, about forty, they thought, and his pistol was out again, to the surprise and alarm of the civilians in the lobby.

"Keep going," Wise told his crew, and they pushed through the doors into the open air. The van was in view, with the mini-satellite dish lying flat on the roof, and that was the key to getting this story out.

"Stop!" the cop called. He knew some English, so it would seem.

"Okay, guys, let's play it real cool," Wise told the other three.

"Under control," Pete the cameraman advised. The camera was off his shoulder now, and his hands were out of casual view.

The cop bolstered his pistol and came close, with his right hand up and out flat. "Give me tape," he said. "Give me tape." His accent was crummy, but his English was understandable enough.

"That tape is my property!" Wise protested. "It belongs to me and my company."

The cop's English wasn't that good. He just repeated his demand: "Give me tape!"

"Okay, Barry," Pete said. "I got it."

The cameraman—his name was Peter Nichols—lifted the camera up and hit the EJECT button, punching the Beta-format tape out of the Sony camera. This he gave to the police officer with a downcast and angry expression. The cop took it with his own expression of satisfaction and turned on his heel to go back into the hospital.

There was no way he could have known that, like any news cameraman, Pete Nichols could deal seconds as skillfully as any Las Vegas poker dealer. He

winked at Barry Wise, and the four headed off to the van.

"Send it up now?" the producer asked.

"Let's not be too obvious about it," Wise thought. "Let's move a few blocks."

This they did, heading west toward Tiananmen Square, where a news van doing a satellite transmission wasn't out of the ordinary. Wise was already on his satellite phone to Atlanta.

"This is Wise Mobile in Beijing with an upload," the correspondent said into the phone.

"Hey, Barry," a familiar voice said in reply. "This is Ben Golden. What you got for us?"

"It's hot," Wise told his controller half a world away. "A double murder and a childbirth. One guy who got whacked is a Catholic cardinal, the Vatican ambassador to Beijing. The other one's a Chinese Baptist minister. They were both shot on camera. You might want to call Legal about it."

"Fuck!" Atlanta observed.

"We're uploading the rough-cut now, just so you get it. I'll stand by to do the talking. But let's get the video uploaded first."

"Roger that. We're standing by on Channel Zero Six."

"Zero Six, Pete," Wise told his cameraman, who also ran the uplink.

Nichols was kneeling by the control panels. "Standing by ... tape's in ... setting up for Six ... transmitting ... now!" And with that, the Ku-band signal went racing upward through the atmosphere to the satellite hovering 22,800 miles directly over the Admiralty Islands in the Bismarck Sea.

CNN doesn't bother encrypting its video signals. To do so is technically inconvenient, and few people bother pirating signals they could just as easily get off their cable systems for free in a few minutes, or even get live just four seconds later.

But this one was coming in at an awkward hour, which was, however, good for CNN Atlanta, because some headquarters people would want to go over it. A shooting death was not what the average American wanted with his Rice Krispies in the morning.

It was also downloaded by the American intelligence community, which holds CNN in very high regard, and doesn't distribute its news coverage very far in any case. But this one did go to the White House Office of Signals, a largely military operation located in the basement of the West Wing. There a watch officer had to decide how important it was. If it ranked as a CRITIC priority, the President had to know about it in fifteen minutes, which meant waking him up *right now,* which was not something to be done casually to the Commander-in-Chief. A mere FLASH could wait a little longer, like—the watch officer checked the wall clock—yeah, like until breakfast. So, instead,

they called the President's National Security Adviser, Dr. Benjamin Goodley. They'd let him make the call. He was a carded National Intelligence Officer.

"Yeah?" Goodley snarled into the phone while he checked the clock radio next to his bed.

"Dr. Goodley, this is Signals. We just copied something off CNN from Beijing that the Boss is going to be interested in."

"What is it?" CARDSHARP asked. Then he heard the reply. "How certain are you of this?"

"The Italian guy looks like he might possibly have survived, from the video —I mean if there was a good surgeon close—but the Chinese minister had his brains blowed right out. No chance for him at all, sir."

"What was it all about?"

"We're not sure of that. NSA might have the phone conversation between this Wise guy and Atlanta, but we haven't seen anything about it yet."

"Okay, tell me what you got again," Goodley ordered, now that he was approximately awake.

"Sir, we have a visual of two guys getting shot and a baby being born in Beijing. The video comes from Barry Wise of CNN. The video shows three gunshots. One is upwards into the ceiling of what appears to be a hospital delivery room. The second shot catches a guy in the back. That guy is identified as the Papal Nuncio to Beijing. The third shot goes right into the head of a guy identified as a Baptist minister in Beijing. That one appears to be a Chinese national. In between, we have a baby being born. Now we—stand by a minute, Dr. Goodley, okay, I have FLASH traffic from Fort Meade. Okay, they got it, too, and they got a voice transmission via their ECHELON system, reading it now. Okay, the Catholic cardinal is dead, according to this, says Cardinal Renato DiMilo—can't check the spelling, maybe State Department for that—and the Chinese minister is a guy named Yu Fa An, again no spelling check. They were there to, oh, okay, they were there to prevent a late-term abortion, and looks like they succeeded, but these two clergy got their asses killed doing it. Third one, a monsignor named Franz Schepke—that sounds pretty German to me—was there, too, and looks like he survived—oh, okay, he must be the tall one you see on the tape. You gotta see the tape. It's a hell of a confused mess, sir, and when this Yu guy gets it, well, it's like that video from Saigon during the Tet Offensive. You know, where the South Vietnamese police colonel shot the North Vietnamese spy in the side of the head with a Smith Chief's Special, you know, like a fountain of blood coming out the head. Ain't something to watch with your Egg McMuffin, y'know?" the watch officer observed. The reference came across clearly enough. The news media had celebrated the incident as an example of the South Vietnamese government's bloodthirstiness. They had never explained—probably never even knew—that the man shot had been an officer of the North Vietnamese army captured in a battle zone wearing civilian clothing, therefore, under the Geneva Protocols was a spy liable to summary execution, which was exactly what he'd received.

“Okay, what else?”

“Do we wake the Boss up for this? I mean, we got a diplomatic team over there, and this has some serious implications.”

Goodley thought about that for a second or two. “No. I’ll brief him in in a few hours.”

“Sir, it’s sure as hell going to be on CNN’s seven o’clock morning report,” the watch officer warned.

“Well, let me brief him when he has more than just pictures.”

“Your call, Dr. Goodley.”

“Thanks. Now, I think I’ll try to get one more hour before I drive over to Langley.” The phone went down before Goodley heard a reaction. His job carried a lot of prestige, but it denied him sleep and much of a social or sex life, and at moments like this he wondered what the hell was so goddamned prestigious about it.

CHAPTER 25

Fence Rending

The speed of modem communications makes for curious disconnects. In this case, the American government knew what had happened in Beijing long before the government of the People's Republic did. What appeared in the White House Office of Signals appeared also in the State Department's Operations Center, and there the senior officer present had decided, naturally enough, to get the information immediately to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. There Ambassador Carl Hitch took the call at his desk on the encrypted line. He forced the caller from Foggy Bottom to confirm the news twice before making his first reaction, a whistle. It wasn't often that an accredited ambassador of any sort got killed in a host country, much less by a host country. What the hell, he wondered, was Washington going to do about this?

"Damn," Hitch whispered. He hadn't even met Cardinal DiMilo yet. The official reception had been planned for two weeks from now in a future that would never come. What was *he* supposed to do? First, he figured, get off a message of condolence to the Vatican mission. (Foggy Bottom would so notify the Vatican through the Nuncio in Washington, probably. Maybe even Secretary Adler would drive over himself to offer official condolences. Hell, President Ryan was Catholic, and maybe *he* would go himself, Hitch speculated.) Okay, Hitch told himself, things to do here. He had his secretary call the Nuncio's residence, but all he got there was a Chinese national answering the phone, and that wasn't worth a damn. That would have to go on the back burner ... what about the Italian Embassy? he thought next. The Nuncio was an Italian citizen, wasn't he? Probably. Okay. He checked his card file and dialed up the Italian ambassador's private line.

"Paulo? This is Carl Hitch. Thanks, and you? I have some bad news, I'm afraid ... the Papal Nuncio, Cardinal DiMilo, he's been shot and killed in some Beijing hospital by a Chinese policeman ... it's going to be on CNN soon, not sure how soon ... we're pretty certain of it, I'm afraid ... I'm not entirely sure, but what I've been told is that he was there trying to prevent the death of a child, or one of those late-term abortions they do here ... yeah ... say, doesn't he come from a prominent family?" Then Hitch started taking notes. "Vincenzo, you said? I see ... Minister of Justice two years ago? I tried to call over there, but all I got was some local answering the phone. German? Schepke?" More notes. "I see. Thank you, Paulo. Hey, if there's anything we can help you with over here ... right. Okay. Bye." He hung up. "Damn. Now what?" he asked the desk. He could spread the bad news to the German Embassy, but, no, he'd let someone else do that. For now ... he checked his

watch. It was still short of sunrise in Washington, and the people there would wake up to find a firestorm. His job, he figured, was to verify what had happened so that he could make sure Washington had good information. But how the hell to do that? His best potential source of information was this Monsignor Schepke, but the only way to get him was to stake out the Vatican Embassy and wait for him to come home. Hmm, would the Chinese be holding him somewhere? No, probably not. Once their Foreign Ministry found out about this, they'd probably fall all over themselves trying to apologize. So, they'd put extra security on the Nuncio's place, and that would keep newsies away, but they're not going to mess with accredited diplomats, not after killing one. This was just so bizarre. Carl Hitch had been a foreign-service officer since his early twenties. He'd never come across anything like this before, at least not since Spike Dobbs had been held hostage in Afghanistan by guerrillas, and the Russians had screwed up the rescue mission and gotten him killed. Some said that had been deliberate, but even the Soviets weren't that dumb, Hitch thought. Similarly, this hadn't been a deliberate act either. The Chinese were communists, and communists didn't gamble that way. It just wasn't part of their nature or their training.

So, how had this happened? And what, exactly, *had* happened ?

And when would he tell Cliff Rutledge about it? And what effect might this have on the trade talks? Carl Hitch figured he'd have a full evening.

The People's Republic will not be dictated to," Foreign Minister Shen Tang concluded.

"Minister," Rutledge replied, "it is not the intention of the United States to dictate to anyone. You make your national policy to suit your nation's needs. We understand and respect that. We require, however, that you understand and respect our right to make *our* national policy as well, to suit *our* country's needs. In this case, that means invoking the provisions of the Trade Reform Act."

That was a big, sharp sword to wave, and everyone in the room knew it, Mark Gant thought. The TRA enabled the Executive Branch to replicate any nation's trade laws as applied to American goods, and mirror-image them against that nation's own goods. It was international proof of the adage that the shoe could sure pinch if it was on the other foot. In this case, everything China did to exclude American manufactured goods from the Chinese marketplace would simply be invoked in order to do the same to Chinese goods, and with a trade surplus of seventy billion dollars per year, that could well mean seventy billion dollars—all of it hard currency. The money to buy the things the PRC government wanted from America or elsewhere wouldn't be there anymore. Trade would become *trade,* one of mine for one of yours, which was the theory that somehow never became reality.

"If America embargoes Chinese trade, China can and will do the same to America," Shen shot back.

"Which serves neither your purposes nor our own," Rutledge responded. *And that dog ain't gonna hunt,* he didn't have to say. The Chinese knew that well enough without being told.

"And what of most-favored-nation status for our country? What of entry into the World Trade Organization?" the Chinese foreign minister demanded.

"Mr. Minister, America cannot look favorably upon either so long as your country expects open export markets while closing your import markets. Trade, sir, means trade, the even exchange of your goods for ours," Rutledge pointed out again—about the twelfth time since lunch, he reckoned. Maybe the guy would get it this time. But that was unfair. He already got it. He just wasn't acknowledging the fact. It was just domestic Chinese politics projected into the international arena.

"And again you dictate to the People's Republic!" Shen replied, with enough anger, real or feigned, to suggest that Rutledge had usurped his parking place.

"No, Minister, we do no such thing. It is you, sir, who tried to dictate to the United States of America. You say that we must accept your trade terms. In that, sir, you are mistaken. We see no more need to buy your goods than you do to buy ours." *Just that you need our hard cash a damned sight more than we need your chew toys for our fucking dogs!*

"We can buy our airliners from Airbus just as easily as from Boeing."

This really was getting tiresome. Rutledge wanted to respond: *But without our dollars, what will you pay for them with, Charlie?* But Airbus had excellent credit terms for its customers, one more way in which a European government-subsidized enterprise played "fair" in the marketplace with a private American corporation. So, instead he said:

"Yes, Mr. Minister, you can do that, and we can buy trade goods from Taiwan, or Korea, or Thailand, or Singapore, just as easily as we can buy them here." *And they'll fucking well buy their airplanes from Boeing!* "But that does not serve the needs of your people, or of ours," he concluded reasonably.

"We are a sovereign nation and a sovereign people," Shen retorted, continuing on as he had before, and Rutledge figured that the rhetoric was all about taking command of the verbiage. It was a strategy that had worked many times before, but Rutledge had instructions to disregard all the diplomatic theatrics, and the Chinese just hadn't caught on yet. Maybe in a few more days, he thought.

"As are we, Minister," Rutledge said, when Shen concluded. Then he ostentatiously checked his watch, and here Shen took the cue.

"1 suggest we adjourn until tomorrow," the PRC foreign minister said.

"Good. I look forward to seeing you in the morning, Minister," Rutledge responded, rising and leaning across the table to shake hands. The rest of the party did the same, though Mark Gant didn't have a counterpart to be nice to at the moment. The American party shuffled out, downstairs toward their waiting cars.

“Well, that was lively,” Gant observed, as soon as they were outside.

Rutledge actually had himself a nice grin. “Yeah, it was kind of diverting, wasn’t it?” A pause. “I think they’re exploring how far bluster can take them. Shen is actually rather a sedate kind of guy. He likes it nice and gentle most of the time.”

“So, he has his instructions, too?” Gant wondered.

“Of course, but he reports to a committee, their Politburo, whereas we report to Scott Adler, and he reports to President Ryan. You know, I was a little mad about the instructions I had coming over here, but this is actually turning into fun. We don’t get to snarl back at people very often. We’re the U.S. of A., and we’re supposed to be nice and calm and accommodating to everybody. That’s what I’m used to doing. But this—this feels good.” That didn’t mean that he approved of President Ryan, of course, but switching over from canasta to poker made an interesting change. Scott Adler liked poker, didn’t he? Maybe that explained why he got along so well with that yahoo in the White House.

It was a short drive back to the embassy. The Americans in the delegation rode mainly in silence, blessing the few minutes of quiet. The hours of precise diplomatic exchange had had to be attended to in the same way a lawyer read a contract, word by goddamned word, seeking meaning and nuance, like searching for a lost diamond in a cesspool. Now they sat back in their seats and closed their eyes or looked mutely at the passing drab scenery with no more than an unstifled yawn, until they pulled through the embassy gate.

About the only thing to complain about was the fact that the limousines here, like those everywhere, were hard to get in and out of, unless you were six years old. But as soon as they alighted from their official transport, they could see that something was wrong. Ambassador Hitch was right there, and he hadn’t bothered with that before. Ambassadors have high diplomatic rank and importance. They do not usually act as doormen for their own countrymen.

“What’s the matter, Carl?” Rutledge asked.

“A major bump in the road,” Hitch answered.

“Somebody die?” the Deputy Secretary of State asked lightly.

“Yeah,” was the unexpected answer. Then the ambassador waved them inside. “Come on.”

The senior delegation members followed Rutledge into the ambassador’s conference room. Already there, they saw, were the DCM—the Deputy Chief of Mission, the ambassador’s XO, who in many embassies was the real boss—and the rest of the senior staff, including the guy Gant had figured was the CIA station chief. *What the hell?* TELESCOPE thought. They all took their seats, and then Hitch broke the news.

“Oh, shit,” Rutledge said for them all. “Why did this happen?”

“We’re not sure. We have our press attaché trying to track this Wise guy down, but until we get more information, we really don’t know the cause of the incident.” Hitch shrugged.

“Does the PRC know?” Rutledge asked next.

“Probably they’re just finding out,” the putative CIA officer opined. “You have to assume the news took a while to percolate through their bureaucracy.”

“How do we expect them to react?” one of Rutledge’s underlings asked, sparing his boss the necessity of asking the obvious and fairly dumb question.

The answer was just as dumb: “Your guess is as good as mine,” Hitch said.

“So, this could be a minor embarrassment or a major whoopsie,” Rutledge observed. “Whoopsie” is a term of art in the United States Department of State, usually meaning a massive fuckup.

“I’d lean more toward the latter,” Ambassador Hitch thought. He couldn’t come up with a rational explanation for why this was so, but his instincts were flashing a lot of bright red lights, and Carl Hitch was a man who trusted his instincts.

“Any guidance from Washington?” Cliff asked.

“They haven’t woken up yet, have they?” And as one, every member of the delegation checked his watch. The embassy people already had, of course. The sun had not yet risen on their national capital. What decisions would be made would happen in the next four hours. Nobody here would be getting much sleep for a while, because once the decisions were made, then they’d have to decide how to implement them, how to present the position of their country to the People’s Republic.

“Ideas?” Rutledge asked.

“The President won’t like this very much,” Gant observed, figuring he knew about as much as anyone else in the room. “His initial reaction will be one of disgust. Question is, will that spill over into what we’re here for? I think it might, depending on how our Chinese friends react to the news.”

“How will the Chinese react?” Rutledge asked Hitch.

“Not sure, Cliff, but I doubt we’ll like it. They will regard the entire incident as an intrusion—an interference with their internal affairs—and their reaction will be somewhat crass, I think. Essentially they’re going to say, ‘Too damned bad.’ If they do, there’s going to be a visceral reaction in America and in Washington. They don’t understand us as well as they’d like to think they do. They misread our public opinion at every turn, and they haven’t shown me much sign of learning. I’m worried,” Hitch concluded.

“Well, then it’s our job to walk them through this. You know,” Rutledge thought aloud, “this could work in favor of our overall mission here.”

Hitch bristled at that. “Cliff, it would be a serious mistake to try to play this one that way. Better to let them think it through for themselves. The death of

an ambassador is a big deal," the American ambassador told the people in the room, in case they didn't know. "All the more so if the guy was killed by an agent of their government. But, Cliff, if you try to shove this down their throats, they're going to choke, and I don't think we want that to happen either. I think our best play is to ask for a break of a day or two in the talks, to let them get their act together."

"That's a sign of weakness for our side, Carl," Rutledge replied, with a shake of the head. "I think you're wrong on that. I think we press forward and let them know that the civilized world has rules, and we expect them to abide by them."

What lunacy is this?" Fang Gan asked the ceiling. "We're not sure," Zhang Han San replied. "Some troublesome churchman, it sounds like."

"And some foolish policeman with more gun than brains. He'll be punished, of course," Fang suggested.

"Punished? For what? For enforcing our population-control laws, for protecting a doctor against an attack by some *gwai?"* Zhang shook his head. "Do we allow foreigners to spit upon our laws in this way? No, Fang, we do not. I will not see us lose face in such a way."

"Zhang, what is the life of one insignificant police officer next to our country's place in the world?" Fang demanded. "The man he killed was an *ambassador,* Zhang, a foreigner accredited to our country by another—"

"Country?" Zhang spat. "A *city,* my friend, no, not even that—a *district* in Rome, smaller than Qiong Dao!" He referred to Jade Island, home of one of the many temples built by the emperors, and not much larger than the building itself. Then he remembered a quote from Iosef Stalin. "How big an army does that Pope have, anyway? Ahh!" A dismissive wave of the hand.

"He *does* have a country, whose ambassador *we* accredited, in the hope of improving *our* position in the diplomatic world," Fang reminded his friend. "His death is to be regretted, at the least. Perhaps he was merely one more troublesome foreign devil, Zhang, but for the purposes of diplomacy we must *appear* to regret his passing." And if that meant executing some nameless policeman, they had plenty of policemen, Fang didn't add.

"For what? For interfering with our laws? An *ambassador* may not do such a thing. *That* violates diplomatic protocol, does it not? Fang, you have become overly solicitous to the foreign devils," Zhang concluded, using the term from history to identify the lesser people from those lesser lands.

"If we want their goods in trade, and we want them to pay for our goods so that we might have their hard currency, then we must treat them like guests in our home."

"A guest in your home does not spit on the floor, Fang."

"And if the Americans do not react kindly to this incident?"

"Then Shen will tell them to mind their own affairs," Zhang replied, with the finality of one who had long since made up his mind.

"When does the Politburo meet?"

"To discuss this?" Zhang asked in surprise. "Why? The death of some foreign troublemaker and a Chinese ... churchman? Fang, you are too cautious. I have already discussed the incident with Shen. There will be no full meeting of the Politburo for this trivial incident. We will meet the day after tomorrow, as usual."

"As you say," Fang responded, with a nod of submission. Zhang had him ranked on the Politburo. He had much influence with the foreign and defense ministries, and the ear of Xu Kun Piao. Fang had his own political capital—mainly for internal matters—but less such capital than Zhang, and so he had to spend it carefully, when it could profit himself. This was not such a case, he thought. With that, he went back to his office and called Ming to transcribe his notes. Then, later, he thought, he'd have Chai come in. She was so useful in easing the tension of his day.

He felt better on waking this morning than was usually the case, probably because he'd gotten to sleep at a decent hour, Jack told himself, on the way to the bathroom for the usual morning routine. You never got a day off here, at least not in the sense that most people understood the term. You never really got to sleep late—8:25 was the current record dating all the way back to that terrible winter day when this had begun—and every day you had to have the same routine, including the dreaded national security briefing, which told you that some people really did believe that the world couldn't get on without you. The usual look in the mirror. He needed a haircut, Jack saw, but for that the barber came here, which wasn't a bad deal, really, except that you lost the fellowship of sitting in a male place and discussing male things. Being the most powerful man in the world insulated you from so many of the things that mattered. The food was good, and the booze was just fine, and if you didn't like the sheets they were changed at the speed of light, and people jumped to the sound of your voice. Henry VIII never had it so good ... but Jack Ryan had never thought to become a crowned monarch. That whole idea of kingship had died across the world except in a few distant places, and Ryan didn't live in one of them. But the entire routine at the White House seemed designed to make him feel like a king, and that was disturbing on a level that was like grasping a cloud of cigarette smoke. It was there, but every time you tried to hold it, the damned stuff just vanished. The staff was just so eager to serve, grimly—but pleasantly—determined to make everything easy for them. The real worry was the effect this might have on his kids. If they started thinking they were princes and princesses, sooner or later their lives would go to hell in one big hurry. But that was his problem to worry about, Jack thought as he shaved. His and Cathy's. Nobody else could raise their kids for them. That was their job. Just that all of this White House crap got in the way practically all the time.

The worst part of all, however, was that he had to be dressed all the time.

Except in bed or in the bathroom, the President had to be properly dressed—*or what would the staff think?* So, Ryan couldn't walk out into the corridor without pants and at least some kind of shirt. At home, a normal person would have padded around barefoot in his shorts, but while a truck driver might have that freedom in his own home, the President of the United States did not have that freedom in *his.*

Then he had to smile wryly at the mirror. He bitched to himself about the same things every morning, and if he *really* wanted to change them, he could. But he was afraid to, afraid to take action that would cause people to lose their jobs. Aside from the fact that it would really look shitty in the papers—and practically everything he did made it into the news—it would feel bad to him, here, shaving every morning. And he didn't really need to walk out to the box and get the paper in the morning, did he?

And if you factored out the dress code, it wasn't all that bad. The breakfast buffet was actually quite nice, though it wasted at least five times the food it actually served. His cholesterol was still in the normal range, and so Ryan enjoyed eggs for his morning meal two or even three times a week, somewhat to his wife's distaste. The kids opted mainly for cereal or muffins. These were still warm from the downstairs kitchen and came in all sorts of healthy—and tasty—varieties.

The *Early Bird* was the clipping service the government provided for senior officials, but for breakfast SWORDSMAN preferred the real paper, complete with cartoons. Like many, Ryan lamented the retirement of Gary Larson and the attendant loss of the morning *Far Side,* but Jack understood the pressure of enforced daily output. There was also a sports page to be read, something the *Early Bird* left out completely. And there was CNN, which started in the White House breakfast room promptly at seven.

Ryan looked up when he heard the warning that kids should not see what they were about to show. His kids, like all other kids, stopped what they were doing to look.

"Eww, gross!" Sally Ryan observed, when some Chinese guy got shot in the head.

"Head wounds do that," her mother told her, wincing even so. Cathy did surgery, but not that sort. "Jack, what's this all about?"

"You know as much as I do, honey," the President told the First Lady.

Then the screen changed to some file tape showing a Catholic Cardinal. Then Jack caught "Papal Nuncio" off the audio, leaning to reach for the controller to turn the sound up.

"Chuck?" Ryan said, to the nearest Secret Service agent. "Get me Ben Goodley on the phone, if you could."

"Yes, Mr. President." It took about thirty seconds, then Ryan was handed the portable phone. "Ben, what the hell's this thing out of Beijing?"

In Jackson, Mississippi, Reverend Gerry Patterson was accustomed to rising early in preparation for his morning jog around the neighborhood, and he turned on the bedroom TV while his wife went to fix his hot chocolate (Patterson didn't approve of coffee any more than he did of alcohol). His head turned at the words "Reverend Yu," then his skin went cold when he heard, "a Baptist minister here in Beijing ..." He came back into the bedroom just in time to see a Chinese face go down, and shoot out blood as from a garden hose. The tape didn't allow him to recognize a face.

"My God ... Skip ... God, no ..." the minister breathed, his morning suddenly and utterly disrupted. Ministers deal with death on a daily basis, burying parishioners, consoling the bereaved, entreating God to look after the needs of both. But it was no easier for Gerry Patterson than it would have been for anyone else this day, because there had been no warning, no "long illness" to prepare the mind for the possibility, not even the fact of age to reduce the surprise factor. Skip was—what? Fifty-five? No more than that. Still a young man, Patterson thought, young and vigorous to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to his flock. Dead? Killed, was it? Murdered? By whom? Murdered by that *communist* government? A Man of God, *murdered* by the godless heathen?

Oh, shit," the President said over his eggs. "What else do we know, Ben? Anything from SORGE?" Then Ryan looked around the room, realizing he'd spoken a word that was itself classified. The kids weren't looking his way, but Cathy was..."Okay, we'll talk about it when you get in." Jack hit the kill button on the phone and set it down.

"What's the story?"

"It's a real mess, babe," SWORDSMAN told SURGEON. He explained what he knew for a minute or so. "The ambassador hasn't gotten to us with anything CNN didn't just show."

"You mean with all the money we spend on CIA and stuff, CNN is the best source of information we have?" Cathy Ryan asked, somewhat incredulously.

"You got it, honey," her husband admitted.

"Well, that doesn't make any sense!"

Jack tried to explain: "CIA can't be everywhere, and it would look a little funny if all our field spooks carried video-cams everywhere they went, you know?"

Cathy made a face at being shut down so cavalierly. "But—"

"But it's not that easy, Cathy, and the news people are in the same business, gathering information, and occasionally they get there first."

"But you have other ways of finding things out, don't you?"

"Cathy, you don't need to know about things like that," POTUS told FLOTUS.

That was a phrase she'd heard before, but not one she'd ever learned to love. Cathy went back to her morning paper while her husband graduated to the *Early Bird.* The Beijing story, Jack saw, had happened too late for the morning editions, one more thing to chuff up the TV newsies and annoy the print ones. Somehow the debate over the federal education budget didn't seem all that important this morning, but he'd learned to scan the editorials, because they tended to reflect the questions the reporters would ask at the press conferences, and that was one way for him to defend himself.

By 7:45, the kids were about ready for their drive to school, and Cathy was ready for her flight to Hopkins. Kyle Daniel went with her, with his own Secret Service detail, composed exclusively of women who would look after him at the Hopkins daycare center rather like a pack of she-wolves. Katie would head back to her daycare center, the rebuilt Giant Steps north of Annapolis. There were fewer kids there now, but a larger protective detail. The big kids went to St. Mary's. On cue, the Marine VH-60 Blackhawk helicopter eased down on the South Lawn helipad. The day was about to start for real. The entire Ryan family took the elevator downstairs. First Mom and Dad walked the kids to the west entrance of the West Wing, where, after hugs and kisses, three of the kids got into their cars to drive off. Then Jack walked Cathy to the helicopter for the kiss goodbye, and the big Sikorsky lifted off under the control of Colonel Dan Malloy for the hop to Johns Hopkins. With that done, Ryan walked back to the West Wing, and inside to the Oval Office. Ben Goodley was waiting for him.

"How bad?" Jack asked his national security adviser.

"Bad," Goodley replied at once.

"What was it all about?"

"They were trying to stop an abortion. The Chinese do them late-term if the pregnancy is not government-approved. They wait until just before the baby pops out and zap it in the top of the head with a needle before it gets to take a breath. Evidently, the woman on the tape was having an unauthorized baby, and her minister—that's the Chinese guy who gets it in the head, a Baptist preacher educated, evidently, at Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma, would you believe? Anyway, he came to the hospital to help. The Papal Nuncio, Renato Cardinal DiMilo, evidently knew the Baptist preacher pretty well and came to offer assistance. It's hard to tell exactly what went wrong, but it blew up real bad, as the tape shows."

"Any statements?"

"The Vatican deplores the incident and has requested an explanation. But it gets worse. Cardinal DiMilo is from the DiMilo family. He has a brother, Vincenzo DiMilo, who's in the Italian parliament—he was a cabinet minister a while back—and so the Italian government has issued its own protest. Ditto the German government, because the Cardinal's aide is a German monsignor named Schepke, who's a Jesuit, and he got a little roughed up, and the Germans aren't very happy either. This Monsignor Schepke was arrested briefly, but he was released after a few hours when the Chinese remembered

he had diplomatic status. The thinking at State is that the PRC might PNG the guy, just to get him the hell out of the country and make the whole thing all go away."

"What time is it in Beijing?"

"Us minus eleven, so it's nine at night there," CARDSHARP answered.

"The trade delegation will need instructions of some sort about this. I need to talk to Scott Adler as soon as he gets in this morning."

"You need more than that, Jack." It was the voice of Arnold van Damm, at the door to the office.

"What else?"

"The Chinese Baptist who got killed, I just heard he has friends over here."

"Oral Roberts University," Ryan said. "Ben told me."

"The churchgoers are not going to like this one, Jack," Arnie warned.

"Hey, guy, *I* don't goddamn like it," the President pointed out. "Hell, *I* don't like abortion under the best of circumstances, remember?"

"I remember," van Damm said, recalling all the trouble Ryan had gotten into with his first Presidential statement on the issue.

"And this kind of abortion is especially barbaric, and so, two guys go to the fucking hospital and try to save the baby's life, and they get *killed* for it! Jesus," Ryan concluded, "and we have to do business with people like this."

Then another face showed up at the door. "You've heard, I suppose," Robby Jackson observed.

"Oh, yeah. Hell of a thing to see over breakfast."

"My pap knows the guy."

"What?" Ryan asked.

"Remember at the reception last week? He told you about it. Pap and Gerry Patterson both support his congregation out of Mississippi—some other congregations, too. It's a Baptist thing, Jack. Well-off churches look after ones that need help, and this Yu guy sure as hell needed help, looks like. I haven't talked to him yet, but Pap is going to raise pure fucking hell about this one, and you can bet on it," the Vice President informed his boss.

"Who's Patterson?" van Damm asked.

"White preacher, got a big air-conditioned church in the suburbs of Jackson. Pretty good guy, actually. He and Pap have known each other forever. Patterson went through school with this Yu guy, I think."

"This is going to get ugly," the Chief of Staff observed.

"Arnie, baby, it's *already* ugly," Jackson pointed out. The CNN cameraman had been a little too good, or had just been standing in a good place, and had caught both shots in all their graphic majesty.

"What's your dad going to say?" Ryan asked.

TOMCAT made them wait for it. "He's going to call down the Wrath of Almighty God on those murdering cocksuckers. He's going to call Reverend Yu a martyr to the Christian faith, right up there with the Maccabees of the Old Testament, and those courageous bastards the Romans fed to the lions. Arnie, have you ever seen a Baptist preacher calling down the Vengeance of the Lord? It beats the hell out of the Super Bowl, boy," Robby promised. "Reverend Yu is standing upright and proud before the Lord Jesus right now, and the guys who killed him have their rooms reserved in the Everlasting Fires of Hell. Wait till you hear him go at it. It's impressive, guys. I've seen him do it. And Gerry Patterson won't be far behind."

"And the hell of it is, I can't disagree with any of it. Jesus," Ryan breathed. "Those two men died to save the life of a baby. If you gotta die, that's not a bad reason for it."

They both died like men, Mr. C," Chavez was saying in Moscow. "I wish I was there with a gun." It had hit Ding especially hard. Fatherhood had changed his perspective on a lot of things, and this was just one of them. The life of a child was sacrosanct, and a threat against a child was an invitation to immediate death in his ethical universe. And in the real universe, he was known to have a gun a lot of the time, and the training to use it efficiently.

"Different people have different ways of looking at things," Clark told his subordinate. But if he'd been there, he would have disarmed both of the Chinese cops. On the videotape, they hadn't looked all that formidable. And you didn't kill people to make a fashion statement. Domingo still had the Latin temperament, John reminded himself. And that wasn't so bad a thing, was it?

"What are you saying, John?" Ding asked in surprise.

"I'm saying two good men died yesterday, and I imagine God'll look after both of them."

"Ever been to China?"

He shook his head. "Taiwan once, for R and R, long time ago. That was okay, but aside from that, no closer than North Vietnam. I don't speak the language and I can't blend in." Both factors were distantly frightening to Clark. The ability to disappear into the surroundings was the *sine qua non* of being a field-intelligence officer.

They were in a hotel bar in Moscow after their first day of lecturing their Russian students. The beer on tap was acceptable. Neither of them was in a mood for vodka. Life in Britain had spoiled them. This bar, which catered to Americans, had CNN on a large-screen TV next to the bar, and this was CNN's lead story around the globe. The American government, the report concluded, hadn't reacted to the incident yet.

"So, what's Jack going to do?" Chavez wondered.

"I don't know. We have that negotiations team in Beijing right now for trade talks," Clark reminded him.

"The diplomatic chatter might get a little sharp," Domingo thought.

Scott, we can't let this one slide," Jack said. A call from the White House had brought Adler's official car here instead of Foggy Bottom.

"It is not, strictly speaking, pertinent to trade talks," the Secretary of State pointed out.

"Maybe you want to do business with people like that," Vice President Jackson responded, "but the people outside the Beltway might not."

"We have to consider public opinion on this, Scott," Ryan said. "And, you know, we have to damn well consider *my* opinion. The murder of a diplomat is not something we can ignore. Italy is a NATO member. So is Germany. And we have diplomatic relations with the Vatican and about seventy million Catholics in the country, plus millions more Baptists."

"Okay, Jack," EAGLE said, with raised, defensive hands. "I am not defending them, okay? I'm talking about the foreign policy of the United States of America here, and we're not supposed to manage that on the basis of emotions. The people out there pay us to use our heads, not our dicks."

Ryan let out a long breath. "Okay, maybe I had that coming. Go on."

"We issue a statement deploring this sorry incident in strong language. We have Ambassador Hitch make a call on their foreign ministry and say the same thing, maybe even stronger, but in more informal language. We give them a chance to think this mess through before they become an international pariah, maybe discipline those trigger-happy cops—hell, maybe shoot them, given how the law works over there. We let common sense break out, okay?"

"And what do I say?"

Adler thought that one over for a few seconds. "Say whatever you want. We can always explain to them that we have a lot of churchgoers here and you have to assuage their sensibilities, that they have inflamed American public opinion, and in our country, public opinion counts for something. They know that on an intellectual level, but deep down in the gut they don't get it. That's okay," SecState went on. "Just so they get it in the brain, because the brain talks to the gut occasionally. They have to understand that the world doesn't like this sort of thing."

"And if they don't?" the Vice President asked.

"Well, then we have a trade delegation to show them the consequences of uncivilized behavior." Adler looked around the room. "Are we okay on that?"

Ryan looked down at the coffee table. There were times when he wished he were a truck driver, able to scream out bloody murder when certain things happened, but that was just one more freedom the President of the United States didn't have. *Okay, Jack, you have to be sensible and rational about all this.*

He looked up. “Yes, Scott, we’re sort of okay on that.”

“Anything from our, uh, new source on this issue?”

Ryan shook his head. “No, MP hasn’t sent anything over yet.”

“If she does ...”

“You’ll get a copy real fast,” the President promised. “Get me some talking points. I’ll have to make a statement—when, Arnie?”

“Eleven-ish ought to be okay,” van Damm decided. “I’ll talk to some media guys about this.”

“Okay, if anybody has ideas later today, I want to hear them,” Ryan said, standing, and adjourning the meeting.

CHAPTER 26

Glass Houses and Rocks

Fang Gan had worked late that day because of the incident that had Washington working early. As a result, Ming hadn't transcribed his discussion notes and her computer hadn't gotten them out on the 'Net as early as usual, but Mary Pat got her e-mail about 9:45. This she read over, copied to her husband, Ed, and then shot via secure fax line to the White House, where Ben Goodley walked it to the Oval Office. The cover letter didn't contain Mary Pat's initial comment on reading the transmission: "Oh, shit..."

"Those *cocksuckers!"* Ryan snarled, to the surprise of Andrea Price, who happened to be in the room just then.

"Anything I need to know about, sir?" she asked, his voice had been so furious.

"No, Andrea, just that thing on CNN this morning." Ryan paused, blushing that she'd heard his temper let go again—and in that way. "By the way, how's your husband doing?"

"Well, he bagged those three bank robbers up in Philadelphia, and they did it without firing a shot. I was a little worried about that."

Ryan allowed himself a smile. "That's one guy I wouldn't want to have a shoot-out with. Tell me, you saw CNN this morning, right?"

"Yes, sir, and we replayed it at the command post."

"Opinion?"

"If I'd've been there, my weapon would have come out. That was cold-blooded murder. Looks bad on TV when you do dumb stuff like that, sir."

"Sure as hell does," the President agreed. He nearly asked her opinion on what he ought to do about it. Ryan respected Mrs. O'Day's (she still went by Price on the job) judgment, but it wouldn't have been fair to ask her to delve into foreign affairs, and, besides, he already had his mind pretty well made up. But then he speed-dialed Adler's direct line on his phone.

"Yes, Jack?" Only one person had *that* direct line.

"What do you make of the SORGE stuff?"

"It's not surprising, unfortunately. You have to expect them to circle wagons."

"What do we do about it?" SWORDSMAN demanded.

"We say what we think, *but* we try not to make it worse than it already is," SecState replied, cautious as ever.

"Right," Ryan growled, even though it was exactly the good advice he'd expected from his SecState. Then he hung up. He reminded himself that Arnie had told him a long time ago that a president wasn't allowed to have a temper, but that was asking a hell of a lot, and at what point was he allowed to react the way a man needed to react? When was he supposed to stop acting like a goddamned robot?

"You want Callie to work up something for you in a hurry?" Arnie asked over the phone.

"No," Ryan replied, with a shake of the head. "I'll just wing it."

"That's a mistake," the Chief of Staff warned.

"Arnie, just let me be me once in a while, okay?"

"Okay, Jack," van Damm replied, and it was just as well the President didn't see his expression.

Don't make things worse than they already are, Ryan told himself at his desk. Yeah, sure, like that's possible ...

Hi, Pap," Robby Jackson was saying in his office at the northwest comer of the West Wing.

"Robert, have you seen—"

"Yes, we've all seen it," the Vice President assured his father.

"And what are y'all going to do about it?"

"Pap, we haven't figured that out yet. Remember that we have to do business with these people. The jobs of a lot of Americans depend on trade with China and—"

"Robert"—the Reverend Hosiah Jackson used Robby's proper name mainly when he was feeling rather stern—"those people *murdered* a man of God—no, excuse me, they murdered two men of God, doing their duty, trying to save the life of an innocent child, and one does not do business with murderers."

"I know that, and I don't like it any more than you do, and, trust me, Jack Ryan doesn't like it any more than you do, either. But when we make foreign policy for our country, we have to think things through, because if we screw it up, people can lose their lives."

"Lives have already been lost, Robert," Reverend Jackson pointed out.

"I know that. Look, Pap, I know more about this than you do, okay? I mean, we have ways of finding out stuff that doesn't make it on CNN," the Vice President told his father, with the latest SORGE report right in his hand. Part of him wished that he could show it to his father, because his father was easily smart enough to grasp the importance of the secret things that he and Ryan

knew. But there was no way he could even approach discussing that sort of thing with anyone without a TS/SAR clearance, and that included his wife, just as it included Cathy Ryan. Hmm, Jackson thought—maybe that was something he should discuss with Jack. You had to be able to talk this stuff over with someone you trusted, just as a reality check on what was right and wrong. Their wives weren't security risks, were they?

"Like what?" his father asked, only halfway expecting an answer.

"Like I can't discuss some things with you, Pap, and you know that. I'm sorry. The rules apply to me just like they do to everybody else."

"So, what are we going to do about this?"

"We're going to let the Chinese know that we are pretty damned angry, and we expect them to clean their act up, and apologize, and—"

"Apologize!" Reverend Jackson shot back. "Robert, they *murdered* two people!"

"I know that, Pap, but we can't send the FBI over to arrest their government for this, can we? We're very powerful here, but we are not God, and as much as I'd like to hurl a thunderbolt at them, I can't."

"So, we're going to do *what?"*

"We haven't decided yet. I'll let you know when we figure it out," TOMCAT promised his father.

"Do that," Hosiah said, hanging up far more abruptly than usual.

"Christ, Pap," Robby breathed into the phone. Then he wondered how representative of the religious community his father was. The hardest thing to figure was public reaction. People reacted on a subintellectual level to what they saw on TV. If you showed some chief of state tossing a puppy dog out the window of his car, the ASPCA might demand a break in diplomatic relations, and enough people might agree to send a million telegrams or e-mails to the White House. Jackson remembered a case in California where the killing of a *dog* had caused more public outrage than the kidnap-murder of a little girl. But at least the bastard who'd killed the girl had been caught, tried, and sentenced to death, whereas the asshole who'd tossed the little dog into traffic had never been identified, despite the ton of reward money that had been raised. Well, it had all happened in the San Francisco area. Maybe that explained it. America wasn't supposed to make policy on the basis of emotion, but America was a democracy, and therefore her elected officials had to pay attention to what the *people* thought—and it wasn't easy, especially for rational folk, to predict the emotions of the public at large. Could the television image they'd just seen, theoretically upset international trade? Without a doubt, and *that* was a very big deal.

Jackson got up from his desk and walked to Arnie's office. "Got a question," he said, going in.

"Shoot," the President's Chief of Staff replied.

"How's the public going to react to this mess in Beijing?"

"Not sure yet," van Damm answered.

"How do we find out?"

"Usually you just wait and see. I'm not into this focus-group stuff. I prefer to gauge public opinion the regular way: newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, and the mail we get here. You're worried about this?"

"Yep." Robby nodded.

"Yeah, so am I. The Right-to-Lifers are going to be on this like a lion on a crippled gazelle, and so are the people who don't like the PRC. Lots of them in Congress. If the Chinese think they're going to get MFN this year, they're on drugs. It's a public relations nightmare for the PRC, but I don't think they're capable of understanding what they started. And I don't see them apologizing to anybody."

"Yeah, well, my father just tore me a new asshole over this one," Vice President Jackson said. "If the rest of the clergy picks this one up, there's going to be a firestorm. The Chinese have to apologize loud and fast if they want to cut their losses."

Van Damm nodded agreement. "Yeah, but they won't. They're too damned proud."

"Pride goeth before the fall," TOMCAT observed.

"Only *after* you feel the pain from the broken assbone, Admiral," van Damm corrected the Vice President.

Ryan entered the White House press room feeling tense. The usual cameras were there. CNN and Fox would probably be running this news conference live, and maybe C-SPAN as well. The other networks would just tape it, probably, for use in their news feeds to the local stations and their own flagship evening news shows. He came to the lectern and took a sip of water before staring into the faces of the assembled thirty or so reporters.

"Good morning," Jack began, grasping the lectern tightly, as he tended to do when angry. He didn't know that reporters knew about it, too, and could see it from where they sat.

"We all saw those horrible pictures on the television this morning, the deaths of Renato Cardinal DiMilo, the Papal Nuncio to the People's Republic of China, and the Reverend Yu Fa An, who, we believe, was a native of the Republic of China and educated at Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma. First of all, the United States of America extends our condolences to the families of both men. Second, we call upon the government of the People's Republic to launch an immediate and full investigation of this horrible tragedy, to determine who, if anyone, was at fault, and if someone was at fault, for such person or persons to be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

"The death of a diplomat at the hands of an agent of a government is a gross violation of international treaty and convention. It is a quintessentially uncivilized act that must be set right as quickly and definitively as possible. Peaceful relations between nations cannot exist without diplomacy, and diplomacy cannot be carried out except through men and women whose personal safety is sacrosanct. That has been the case for literally thousands of years. Even in time of war, the lives of diplomats have always been protected by all sides for this very reason. We require that the government of the PRC explain this tragic event and take proper action to see to it that nothing of this sort will *ever* happen again. That concludes my statement. Questions?" Ryan looked up, trying not to brace too obviously for the storm that was about to break.

"Mr. President," the Associated Press said, "the two clergymen who died were there to prevent an abortion. Does that affect your reaction to this incident?"

Ryan allowed himself to show surprise at the stupid question: "My views on abortion are on the public record, but I think everyone, even the pro-choice community, would respond negatively to what happened here. The woman in question did *not* choose to have an abortion, but the Chinese government tried to impose its will on her by killing a full-term fetus about to be born. If anyone did that in the United States, that person would be guilty of a felony—probably more than one—yet that is government policy in the People's Republic. As you know, I personally object to abortion on moral grounds, but what we saw attempted on TV this morning is worse even than that. It's an act of incomprehensible barbarism. Those two courageous men tried to stop it, and they were killed for their efforts, but, thank God, the baby appears to have survived. Next question?" Ryan pointed next to a known troublemaker.

"Mr. President," the *Boston Globe* said, "the government's action grew out of the People's Republic's population-control policy. Is it our place to criticize a country's internal policy?"

Christ, Ryan thought, *another one?* "You know, once upon a time, a fellow named Hitler tried to manage the population of his country—in fact, of a lot of Europe—by killing the mentally infirm, the socially undesirable, and those whose religions he didn't like. Now, yes, Germany was a nation-state, and we even had diplomatic relations with Hitler until December 1941. But are you saying that America does not have the right to object to a policy we consider barbaric just because it is the official policy of a nation-state? Hermann Goring tried that defense at the Nürnberg Trials. Do you want the United States of America to recognize it?" Jack demanded.

The reporter wasn't as used to answering questions as to asking them. Then she saw that the cameras were pointed her way, and she was having a bad-hair day. Her response, therefore, could have been a little better: "Mr. President, is it possible that your views of abortion have affected your reaction to this event?"

"No, ma'am. I've disapproved of murder even longer than I've objected to abortion," Ryan replied coldly.

“But you’ve just compared the People’s Republic of China to Hitler’s Germany,” the *Globe* reporter pointed out. *You can’t say* that *about* them!

“Both countries shared a view of population control that is antithetical to American traditions. Or do you approve of imposing late-term abortions on women who choose *not* to have one?”

“Sir, I’m not the President,” the Globe replied, as she sat down, avoiding the question, but not the embarrassed blush.

“Mr. President,” began the *San Francisco Examiner,* “whether we like it or not, China has decided for itself what sort of laws it wants to have, and the two men who died this morning were interfering with those laws, weren’t they?”

“The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King interfered with the laws of Mississippi and Alabama back when I was in high school. Did the *Examiner* object to his actions then?”

“Well, no, but—”

“But we regard the personal human conscience as a sovereign force, don’t we?” Jack shot back. “The principle goes back to St. Augustine, when he said that an unjust law is *no* law. Now, you guys in the media agree with that principle. Is it only when you happen to agree with the person operating on that principle? Isn’t that intellectually dishonest? I do not personally approve of abortion. You all know that. I’ve taken a considerable amount of heat for that personal belief, some of which has been laid on me by you good people. Fine. The Constitution allows us all to feel the way we choose. But the Constitution does not allow me *not* to enforce the law against people who blow up abortion clinics. I can sympathize with their overall point of view, but I cannot agree or sympathize with the use of violence to pursue a political position. We call that terrorism, and it’s against the law, and I have sworn an oath to enforce the law fully and fairly in all cases, regardless of how I may or may not feel on a particular issue.

“Therefore, if *you* do not apply it evenhandedly, ladies and gentlemen, it is not a principle at all, but ideology, and it is not very helpful to the way we govern our lives and our country.

“Now, on the broader question, you said that China has chosen its laws. Has it? Has it really? The People’s Republic is not, unfortunately, a democratic country. It is a place where the laws are imposed by an elite few. Two courageous men died yesterday objecting to those laws, and in the successful attempt to save the life of an unborn child. Throughout history, men have given up their lives for worse causes than that. Those men are heroes by any definition, but I do not think anyone in this room, or for that matter anyone in our country, believes that they deserved to die, heroically or not. The penalty for civil disobedience is not supposed to be death. Even in the darkest days of the 1960s, when black Americans were working to secure their civil rights, the police in the southern states did not commit wholesale murder. And those local cops and members of the Ku Klux Klan who *did* step over that line were arrested and convicted by the FBI and the Justice Department.

"In short, there are fundamental differences between the People's Republic of China and America, and of the two systems, I much prefer ours."

Ryan escaped the press room ten minutes later, to find Arnie standing at the top of the ramp.

"Very good, Jack."

"Oh?" The President had learned to fear that tone of voice.

"Yeah, you just compared the People's Republic of China to Nazi Germany and the Ku Klux Klan."

"Arnie, why is it that the media feel such great solicitude for communist countries?"

"They *don't,* and—"

"The *hell* they don't! I just compared the PRC to Nazi Germany and they damned near wet their pants. Well, guess what? Mao murdered more people than Hitler did. That's public knowledge—I remember when CIA released the study that documented it—but they ignore it. Is some Chinese citizen killed by Mao less dead than some poor Polish bastard killed by Hitler?"

"Jack, they have their sensibilities," van Damm told his President.

"Yeah? Well, just once in a while, I wish they'd display something I can recognize as a principle." With that, Ryan strode back to his office, practically trailing smoke from his ears.

"Temper, Jack, temper," Arnie said to no one in particular. The President still had to learn the first principle of political life, the ability to treat a son of a bitch like your best friend, because the needs of your nation depended on it. The world would be a better place if it were as simple as Ryan wished, the Chief of Staff thought. But it wasn't, and it showed no prospect of becoming so.

A few blocks away at Foggy Bottom, Scott Adler had finished cringing and was making notes on how to mend the fences that his President had just kicked over. He'd have to sit down with Jack and go over a few things, like the principles he held so dear.

What did you think of that, Gerry?"

"Hosiah, I think we have a real President here. What does your son think of him?"

"Gerry, they've been friends for twenty years, back to when they both taught at the Naval Academy. I've met the man. He's a Catholic, but I think we

can overlook that."

"We have to." Patterson almost laughed. "So was one of the guys who got shot yesterday, remember?"

"Italian, too, probably drank a lot of wine."

"Well, Skip was known to have the occasional drink," Patterson told his black colleague.

"I didn't know," Reverend Jackson replied, disturbed at the thought.

"Hosiah, it is an imperfect world we live in."

"Just so he wasn't a dancer." That was almost a joke, but not quite.

"Skip? No, I've never known him to dance," Reverend Patterson assured his friend. "By the way, I have an idea."

"What's that, Gerry?"

"How about this Sunday you preach at my church, and I preach at yours? I'm sure we're both going to speak on the life and martyrdom of a Chinese man."

"And what passage will you base your sermon on?" Hosiah asked, surprised and interested by the suggestion.

"Acts," Patterson replied at once.

Reverend Jackson considered that. It wasn't hard to guess the exact passage. Gerry was a fine biblical scholar. "I admire your choice, sir."

"Thank you, Pastor Jackson. What do you think of my other suggestion?"

Reverend Jackson hesitated only a few seconds. "Reverend Patterson, I would be honored to preach at your church, and I gladly extend to you the invitation to preach at my own."

Forty years earlier, when Gerry Patterson had been playing baseball in the church-sponsored Little League, Hosiah Jackson had been a young Baptist preacher, and the mere idea of preaching in Patterson's church could have incited a lynching. But, by the Good Lord, they *were* men of God, and they *were* mourning the death—the *martyrdom*—of another man of God of yet another color. Before God, all men were equal, and that was the whole point of the Faith they shared. Both men were thinking quickly of how they might have to alter their styles, because though both were Baptists, and though both preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Baptist congregations, their communities were a little bit different and required slightly different approaches. But it was an accommodation both men could easily make.

"Thank you, Hosiah. You know, sometimes we have to acknowledge that our faith is bigger than we are."

For his part, Reverend Jackson was impressed. He never doubted the sincerity of his white colleague, and they'd chatted often on matters of religion and scripture. Hosiah would even admit, quietly, to himself, that Patterson was his superior as a scholar of the Holy Word, due to his somewhat

lengthier formal education, but of the two, Hosiah Jackson was marginally the better speaker, and so their relative talents played well off each other.

"How about we get together for lunch to work out the details?" Jackson asked.

"Today? I'm free."

"Sure. Where?"

"The country club? You're not a golfer, are you?" Patterson asked hopefully. He felt like a round, and his afternoon was free today for a change.

"Never touched a golf club in my life, Gerry." Hosiah had a good laugh at that. "Robert is, learned at Annapolis and been playing ever since. Says he kicks the President's backside every time they go out." He'd never been to the Willow Glen Country Club either, and wondered if the club had any black members. Probably not. Mississippi hadn't changed quite *that* much yet, though Tiger Woods had played at a PGA tournament there, and so *that* color line had been breached, at least.

"Well, he'd probably whip me, too. Next time he comes down, maybe we can play a round." Patterson's membership at Willow Glen was complimentary, another advantage to being pastor of a well-to-do congregation.

And the truth of the matter was that, white or not, Gerry Patterson was not the least bit bigoted, Reverend Jackson knew. He preached the Gospel with a pure heart. Hosiah was old enough to remember when that had not been so, but that, too, had changed once and for all. Praise God.

For Admiral Mancuso, the issues were the same, and a little different. An early riser, he'd caught CNN the same as everyone else. So had Brigadier General Mike Lahr.

"Okay, Mike, what the hell is this all about?" CINCPAC asked when his J-2 arrived for his morning intel brief.

"Admiral, it looks like a monumental cluster-fuck. Those clergy stuck their noses in a tight crack and paid the price for it. More to the point, NCA is seriously pissed." NCA was the code-acronym for National Command Authority, President Jack Ryan.

"What do I need to know about this?"

"Well, things are likely to heat up between America and China, for starters. The trade delegation we have in Beijing is probably going to catch some heat. If they catch too much, well . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Give me worst case," CINCPAC ordered.

"Worst case, the PRC gets its collective back up, and we recall the trade delegation *and* the ambassador, and things get real chilly for a while."

"Then what?"

"Then—that's more of a political question, but it wouldn't hurt for us to take it a little seriously, sir," Lahr told his boss, who took just about everything seriously.

Mancuso looked at his wall map of the Pacific. Enterprise was back at sea doing exercises between Marcus Island and the Marianas. *John Stennis* was alongside in Pearl Harbor. *Harry Truman* was en route to Pearl Harbor after taking the long way around Cape Horn—modern aircraft carriers are far too beamy for the Panama Canal. *Lincoln* was finishing up a bobtail refit in San Diego and about to go back to sea. *Kitty Hawk* and *Independence,* his two old, oil-fired carriers, were both in the Indian Ocean. At that, he was lucky. First and Seventh Fleets had six carriers fully operational for the first time in years. So, if he needed to project power, he had the assets to give people something to think about. He also had a lot of Air Force aircraft at his disposal. The 3rd Marine Division and the Army's 25th Light based right there in Hawaii wouldn't play in this picture. The Navy might bump heads with the ChiComms, and the Air Force, but he lacked the amphibious assets to invade China, and besides, he wasn't insane enough to think that was a rational course of action under any circumstances.

"What do we have in Taiwan right now?"

"Mobile Bay, Milius, Chandler, and Fletcher are showing the flag. Frigates *Curtis* and *Reid* are doing operations with the ROC navy. The submarines *La Jolla, Helena,* and *Tennessee* are trolling in the Formosa Strait or along the Chinese coast looking at their fleet units."

Mancuso nodded. He usually kept some high-end SAM ships close to Taiwan. *Milius* was a Burke-class destroyer, and *Mobile Bay* was a cruiser, both of them with the Aegis system aboard to make the ROC feel a little better about the putative missile threat to their island. Mancuso didn't think the Chinese were foolish enough to launch an attack against a city with some U.S. Navy ships tied alongside, and the Aegis ships had a fair chance of stopping anything that flew their way. But you never knew, and if this Beijing incident blew up any more . . . He lifted the phone for SURFPAC, the three-star who administratively owned Pacific Fleet's surface ships.

"Yeah," answered Vice Admiral Ed Goldsmith.

"Ed, Bart. What material shape are those ships we have in Taipei harbor in?"

"You're calling about the thing on CNN, right?"

"Correct," CINCPAC confirmed.

"Pretty good. No material deficiencies I know about. They're doing the usual port-visit routine, letting people aboard and all. Crews are spending a lot of time on the beach."

Mancuso didn't have to ask what they were doing on the beach. He'd been a

young sailor once, though never on Taiwan.

"Might not hurt for them to keep their ears perked up some."

"Noted," SURFPAC acknowledged. Mancuso didn't have to say more. The ships would now stand alternating Condition-Three on their combat systems. The SPY radars would be turned on aboard one of the Aegis ships at all times. One nice thing about Aegis ships was that they could go from half-asleep to fully operational in about sixty seconds; it was just a matter of turning some keys. They'd have to be a little careful. The SPY radar put out enough power to fry electronic components for miles around, but it was just a matter of how you steered the electronic beams, and that was computer-controlled. "Okay, sir, I'll get the word out right now."

"Thanks, Ed. I'll get you fully briefed in later today."

"Aye, aye," SURFPAC replied. He'd put a call to his squadron commanders immediately.

"What else?" Mancuso wondered.

"We haven't heard anything directly from Washington, Admiral," BG Lahr told his boss.

"Nice thing about being a CINC, Mike. You're allowed to think on your own a little."

What a fucking mess," General-Colonel Bondarenko observed to his drink. He wasn't talking about the news of the day, but about his command, even though the officers' club in Chabarsovil was comfortable. Russian general officers have always liked their comforts, and the building dated back to the czars. It had been built during the Russo-Japanese war at the beginning of the previous century and expanded several times. You could see the border between pre-revolution and post-revolution workmanship. Evidently, German POWs hadn't been trained this far east—they'd built most of the dachas for the party elite of the old days. But the vodka was fine, and the fellowship wasn't too bad, either.

"Things could be better, Comrade General," Bondarenko's operations officer agreed. "But there is much that can be done the right way, and little bad to undo."

That was a gentle way of saying that the Far East Military District was less of a military command than it was a theoretical exercise. Of the five motor-rifle divisions nominally under his command, only one, the 265th, was at eighty-percent strength. The rest were at best regimental-size formations, or mere cadres. He also had theoretical command of a tank division—about a regiment and a half—plus thirteen reserve divisions that existed not so much on paper as in some staff officer's dreams. The one thing he did have was huge equipment stores, but a lot of that equipment dated back to the 1960s, or even earlier. The best troops in his area of command responsibility were not

actually his to command. These were the Border Guards, battalion-sized formations once part of the KGB, now a semi-independent armed service under the command of the Russian president.

There was also a defense line of sorts, which dated back to the 1930s and showed it. For this line, numerous tanks—some of them actually *German* in origin—were buried as bunkers. In fact, more than anything else the line was reminiscent of the French Maginot Line, also a thing of the 1930s. It had been built to protect the Soviet Union against an attack by the Japanese, and then upgraded halfheartedly over the years to protect against the People's Republic of China—a defense never forgotten, but never fully remembered either. Bondarenko had toured parts of it the previous day. As far back as the czars, the engineering officers of the Russian Army had never been fools. Some of the bunkers were sited with shrewd, even brilliant appreciation for the land, but the problem with bunkers was explained by a recent American aphorism: *If you can see it, you can hit it, and if you can hit it, you can kill it.* The line had been conceived and built when artillery fire had been a chancy thing, and an aircraft bomb was fortunate to hit the right county. Now you could use a fifteen-centimeter gun as accurately as a sniper rifle, and an aircraft could select which window-pane to put the bomb through on a specific building.

"Andrey Petrovich, I am pleased to hear your optimism. What is your first recommendation?"

"It will be simple to improve the camouflage on the border bunkers. That's been badly neglected over the years," Colonel Aliyev told his commander-in-chief. "That will reduce their vulnerability considerably."

"Allowing them to survive a serious attack for ... sixty minutes, Andrushka?"

"Maybe even ninety, Comrade General. It's better than five minutes, is it not?" He paused for a sip of vodka. Both had been drinking for half an hour. "For the 265th, we must begin a serious training program at once. Honestly, the division commander did not impress me greatly, but I suppose we must give him a chance."

Bondarenko: "He's been out here so long, maybe he likes the idea of Chinese food."

"General, I was out here as a lieutenant," Aliyev said. "I remember the political officers telling us that the Chinese had increased the length of the bayonets on their AK-47s to get through the extra fat layer we'd grown after discarding true Marxism-Leninism and eating too much."

"Really?" Bondarenko asked.

"That is the truth, Gennady Iosifovich."

"So, what do we know of the PLA?"

"There are a lot of them, and they've been training seriously for about four years now, much harder than we've been doing."

"They can afford to," Bondarenko observed sourly. The other thing he'd learned on arriving was how thin the cupboard was for funds and training

equipment. But it wasn't totally bleak. He had stores of consumable supplies that had been stocked and piled for three generations. There was a virtual mountain of shells for the 100-mm guns on his many—and long-since obsolete—T-54⁄55 tanks, for example, and a sea of diesel fuel hidden away in underground tanks too numerous to count. The one thing he had in the Far East Military District was infrastructure, built up by the Soviet Union over generations of institutional paranoia. But that wasn't the same as an army to command.

"What about aviation?"

"Mainly grounded," Aliyev answered glumly. "Parts problems. We used up so much in Chechnya that there isn't enough to go around, and the Western District still has first call."

"Oh? Our political leadership expects the Poles to invade us?"

"That's the direction Germany is in," the G-3 pointed out.

"I've been fighting that out with the High Command for three years," Bondarenko growled, thinking of his time as chief of operations for the entire Russian army. "People would rather listen to themselves than to others with the voice of reason." He looked up at Aliyev. "And if the Chinese come?"

The theater operations officer shrugged. "Then we have a problem."

Bondarenko remembered the maps. It wasn't all that far to the new gold strike . . . and the ever-industrious army engineers were building the damned roads to it . . .

"Tomorrow, Andrey Petrovich. Tomorrow we start drawing up a training regimen for the whole command," CINC—FAR EAST told his own G-3.

CHAPTER 27

Transportation

Diggs didn't entirely like what he saw, but it wasn't all that unexpected. A battalion of Colonel Lisle's 2nd Brigade was out there, maneuvering through the exercise area—clumsily, Diggs thought. He had to amend his thoughts, of course. This wasn't the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, and Lisle's 2nd Brigade wasn't the 11th ACR, whose troopers were out there training practically every day, and as a result knew soldiering about as well as a surgeon knew cutting. No, 1st Armored Division had turned into a garrison force since the demise of the Soviet Union, and all that wasted time in what was left of Yugoslavia, trying to be "peacekeepers," hadn't sharpened their war-fighting skills. That was a term Diggs hated. Peacekeepers be damned, the general thought, they were supposed to be *soldiers,* not policemen in battle dress uniform. The opposing force here was a German brigade, and by the looks of it, a pretty good one, with their Leopard-II tanks. Well, the Germans had soldiering in their genetic code somewhere, but they weren't any better trained than Americans, and *training* was the difference between some ignorant damned civilian and a soldier. Training meant knowing where to look and what to do when you saw something there. Training meant knowing what the tank to your left was going to do without having to look. Training meant knowing how to fix your tank or Bradley when something broke. Training eventually meant pride, because with training came confidence, the sure knowledge that you were the baddest motherfucker in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and you didn't have to fear no evil at all.

Colonel Boyle was flying the UH-60A in which Diggs was riding. Diggs was in the jump seat immediately aft and between the pilots' seats. They were cruising about five hundred feet over the ground.

"Oops, that platoon down there just walked into something," Boyle reported, pointing. Sure enough the lead tank's blinking yellow light started flashing the *I'm dead* signal.

"Let's see how the platoon sergeant recovers," General Diggs said.

They watched, and sure enough, the sergeant pulled the remaining three tanks back while the crew bailed out of the platoon leader's M1A2 main battle tank. As a practical matter, both it and its crew would probably have survived whatever administrative "hit" it had taken from the Germans. Nobody had yet come up with a weapon to punch reliably through the Chobham armor, but someone might someday, and so the tank crews were not encouraged to think themselves immortal and their tanks invulnerable.

“Okay, that sergeant knows his job,” Diggs observed, as the helicopter moved to another venue. The general saw that Colonel Masterman was making notes aplenty on his pad. “What do you think, Duke?”

“I think they’re at about seventy-five percent efficiency, sir,” the G-3 operations officer replied. “Maybe a little better. We need to put everybody on the SimNet, to shake ’em all up a little.” That was one of the Army’s better investments. SIMNET, the simulator network, comprised a warehouse full of M1 and Bradley simulators, linked by supercomputer and satellite with two additional such warehouses, so that highly complex and realistic battles could be fought out electronically. It had been hugely expensive, and while it could never fully simulate training in the field, it was nevertheless a training aid without parallel.

“General, all that time in Yugoslavia didn’t help Lisle’s boys,” Boyle said from the chopper’s right seat.

“I know that,” Diggs agreed. “I’m not going to kill anybody’s career just yet,” he promised.

Boyle’s head turned to grin. “Good, sir. I’ll spread that word around.”

“What do you think of the Germans?”

“I know their boss, General Major Siegfried Model. He’s damned smart. Plays a hell of a game of cards. Be warned, General.”

“Is that a fact?” Diggs had commanded the NTC until quite recently, and had occasionally tried his luck at Las Vegas, a mere two hours up I-15 from the post.

“Sir, I know what you’re thinking. Think again,” Boyle cautioned his boss.

“Your helicopters seem to be doing well.”

“Yep, Yugoslavia was fairly decent training for us, and long as we have gas, I can train my people.”

“What about live-fire?” the commanding general of First Tanks asked.

“We haven’t done that in a while, sir, but again, the simulators are almost as good as the real thing,” Boyle replied over the intercom. “But I think you’ll want your track toads to get some in, General.” And Boyle was right on that one. Nothing substituted for live-fire in an Abrams or a Bradley.

The stakeout on the park bench turned out to be lengthy and boring. First of all, of course, they’d pulled the container, opened it, and discovered that the contents were two sheets of paper, closely printed with Cyrillic characters, but encrypted. So the sheet had been photographed and sent off to the cryppies for decryption. This had not proven to be easy. In fact, it had thus far proven to be impossible, leading the officers from the Federal Security Service to conclude that the Chinese (if that was who it was) had adopted the old KGB practice of using one-time pads. These were unbreakable in theoretical terms

because there was no pattern, formula, or algorithm to crack.

The rest of the time was just a matter of waiting to see who came to pick up the package.

It ended up taking days. The FSS put three cars on the case. Two of them were vans with long-lens cameras on the target. In the meanwhile, Suvorov/Koniev's apartment was as closely watched as the Moscow Stock Exchange ticker. The subject himself had a permanent shadow of up to ten trained officers, mainly KGB-trained spy-chasers instead of Provalov's homicide investigators, but with a leavening of the latter because it was technically still their case. It would remain a homicide case until some foreign national—they hoped—picked up the package under the bench.

Since it was a park bench, people sat on it regularly. Adults reading papers, children reading comic books, teenagers holding hands, people chatting amiably, even two elderly men who met every afternoon for a game of chess played on a small magnetic board. After every such visit, the stash was checked for movement or disturbance, always without result. By the fourth day, people speculated aloud that it was all some sort of trick. This was Suvorov/Koniev's way of seeing if he were being trailed or not. If so, he was a clever son of a bitch, the surveillance people all agreed. But they already knew that.

The break came in the late afternoon of day five, and it was the man they wanted it to be. His name was Kong Deshi, and he was a minor diplomat on the official list, age forty-six, a man of modest dimensions, and, the form card at the Foreign Ministry said, modest intellectual gifts—that was a polite way of saying he was considered a dunce. But as others had noted, that was the perfect cover for a spy, and one which wasted a lot of time for counterintelligence people, making them trail dumb diplomats all over the world who turned out to be nothing more than just that—dumb diplomats—of which the global supply was ample. The man was walking casually with another Chinese national, who was a businessman of some sort, or so they'd thought. Sitting, they'd continued to chat, gesturing around until the second man had turned to look at something Kong had pointed at. Then Kong's right hand had slipped rapidly and almost invisibly under the bench and retrieved the stash, possibly replacing it with another before his hand went back in his lap. Five minutes later, after a smoke, they'd both walked off, back in the direction of the nearest Metro station.

"Patience," the head FSS officer had told his people over the radio circuit, and so they'd waited over an hour, until they were certain that there were no parked cars about keeping an eye on the dead-drop. Only then had an FSS man walked to the bench, sat down with his afternoon paper, and pulled the package. The way he flicked his cigarette away told the rest of the team that there had been a substitution.

In the laboratory, it was immediately discovered that the package had a key lock, and that got everyone's attention. The package was x-rayed immediately and found to contain a battery and some wires, plus a semi-opaque rectangle that collectively represented a pyrotechnic device. Whatever was inside the

package was therefore valuable. A skilled locksmith took twenty minutes picking the lock, and then the holder was opened to reveal a few sheets of flash paper. These were removed and photographed, to show a solid collection of Cyrillic letters—and they were all random. It was a one-time-pad key sheet, the best thing they could have hoped to find. The sheets were refolded exactly as they had been replaced in the holder, and then the thin metal container—it looked like a cheap cigarette case—was returned to the bench.

"So?" Provalov asked the Federal Security Service officer on the case.

"So, the next time our subject sends a message, we'll be able to read it."

"And then we'll know," Provalov went on.

"Perhaps. We'll know something more than we know now. We'll have proof that this Suvorov fellow is a spy. That I can promise you," the counterintelligence officer pronounced.

Provalov had to admit to himself that they were no closer to solving his murder case than they'd been two weeks before, but at least things were moving, even if the path merely led them deeper into the fog.

So, Mike?" Dan Murray asked, eight time zones away. "No nibbles yet, Director, but now it looks like we're chasing a spook. The subject's name is Klementi Ivan'ch Suvorov, currently living as Ivan Yurievich Koniev." Reilly read off the address. "The trail leads to him, or at least it seems to, and we spotted him making probable contact with a Chinese diplomat."

"And what the hell does all this mean?" FBI Director Murray wondered aloud into the secure phone.

"You got me there, Director, but it sure has turned into an interesting case."

"You must be pretty tight with this Provalov guy."

"He's a good cop, and yes, sir, we get along just fine."

That was more than Cliff Rutledge could say about his relationship with Shen Tang.

"Your news coverage of this incident was bad enough, but your President's remarks on our domestic policy is a violation of Chinese sovereignty!" the Chinese foreign minister said almost in a shout, for the seventh time since lunch.

"Minister," Cliff Rutledge replied. "None of this would have happened but for your policeman shooting an accredited diplomat, and that is not, strictly speaking, an entirely civilized act."

"Our internal affairs are our internal affairs," Shen retorted at once.

"That is so, Minister, but America has her own beliefs, and if you ask us to honor yours, then we may request that you show some respect for ours."

"We grow weary of America's interference with Chinese internal affairs. First you recognize our rebellious province on Taiwan. Then you encourage foreigners to interfere with our internal policies. Then you send a spy under the cover of religious beliefs to violate our laws with a diplomat from yet another country, then you photograph a Chinese policeman doing his duty, and then your President condemns us for your interference with our internal affairs. The People's Republic will not tolerate this uncivilized activity!"

And now you're going to demand most-favored-nation trade status, eh? Mark Gant thought in his chair. Damn, this was like a meeting with investment bankers—the pirate kind—on Wall Street.

"Minister, you call us uncivilized," Rutledge replied. "But there is no blood on our hands. Now, we are here, as I recall, to discuss trade issues. Can we return to that agenda?"

"Mr. Rutledge, America does not have the right to dictate to the People's Republic on one hand and to deny us our rights on the other," Shen retorted.

"Minister, America has made no such intrusion on China's internal affairs. If you kill a diplomat, you must expect a reaction. On the question of the Republic of China—"

"There is no Republic of China!" the PRC's Foreign Minister nearly screamed. "They are a renegade province, and *you* have violated our sovereignty by recognizing them!"

"Minister, the Republic of China is an independent nation with a freely elected government, and we are not the only country to recognize this fact. It is the policy of the United States of America to encourage the self-determination of peoples. At such time as the people in the ROC elect to become part of the mainland, that is their choice. But since they have freely chosen to be what they are, America chooses to recognize them. As we expect others to recognize America as a legitimate government because it represents the will of her people, so it is incumbent upon America to recognize the will of other peoples." Rutledge sat back in his chair, evidently bored with the course the afternoon had taken. The morning he'd expected. The PRC had to blow off some steam, but one morning was enough for that. This was getting tiresome.

"And if another of our provinces rebels, will you recognize that?"

"Is the Minister telling me of further political unrest in the People's Republic?" Rutledge inquired at once, a little too fast and too glibly, he told himself a moment later. "In any case, I have no instructions for that eventuality." It was supposed to have been a (semi) humorous response to rather a dumb question, but Minister Shen evidently didn't have his sense of humor turned on today. His hand came up, finger extended, and now he shook it at Cliff Rutledge and the United States.

"You cheat us. You interfere with us. You insult us. You blame us for the inefficiency of your economy. You deny us fair access to your markets. And

you sit there as though you are the seat of the world's virtue. We will have none of this!"

"Minister, we have opened our doors to trade with your country, and you have closed your door in our face. It is your door to open or close," he conceded, "but we have our doors to close as well if you so force us. We have no wish to do this. We wish for fair and free trade between the great Chinese people and the American people, but the impediments to that trade are not to be found in America."

"You insult us, and then you expect us to invite you into our home?"

"Minister, America insults no one. A tragedy happened in the People's Republic yesterday. It was probably something you would have preferred to avoid, but even so, it happened. The President of the United States has asked for you to investigate the incident. That is not an unreasonable request. What do you condemn us for? A journalist reported the facts. Does China deny the facts we saw on television? Do you claim that a private American company fabricated this event? I think not. Do you say that those two men are not dead? Regrettably, this is not the case. Do you say that your policeman was justified in killing an accredited diplomat and a clergyman holding a newborn child?" Rutledge asked in his most reasonable voice. "Minister, all you have said for the past three and a half hours is that America is wrong for objecting to what appears to be cold-blooded murder. And our objection was merely a request for your government to investigate the incident. Minister, America has neither done nor said anything unreasonable, and we grow weary of the accusation. My delegation and I came here to discuss trade. We would like the People's Republic to open up its markets more so that trade can become trade, the free exchange of goods across international borders. You request a most-favored-nation trading relationship with the United States. That will not happen until such time as your markets are as open to America as America's are open to China, but it *can* happen at such time as you make the changes we require."

"The People's Republic is finished with acceding to America's insulting demands. We are finished with tolerating your insults to our sovereignty. We are finished with your interference in our internal affairs. It is time for America to consider our reasonable requests. China desires to have a fair trading relationship with the United States. We ask no more than what you give other nations: most favored nation."

"Minister, that will not happen until such time as you open your markets to our goods. Trade is not free if it is not fair. We object also to the PRC's violation of copyright and trademark treaties and agreements. We object to having industries fully owned by agencies of the government of the People's Republic to violate patent treaties, even to the point of manufacturing proprietary American products without permission or compensation and—"

"So now you call us thieves?" Shen demanded.

"Minister, I point out that such words have not escaped my lips. It is a fact, however, that we have examples of products made in China by factories

owned by agencies of your government, which products appear to contain American inventions for which the inventors have not been compensated, and from whom permission to manufacture the copies has not been obtained. I can show you examples of those products if you wish." Shen's reaction was an angry wave of the hand, which Rutledge took to mean *No, thank you.* Or something like that.

"I have no interest in seeing physical evidence of American lies and distortions."

Gant just sat back in his chair while Rutledge made his injured reply, like a spectator at a prizefight, wondering if anyone would land the knockdown punch. Probably not, he thought. Neither had a glass chin, and both were too light on their feet. What resulted was a lot of flailing about, but no serious result. It was just a new kind of boring for him, exciting in its form, but dull in its result. He made some notes, but those were merely memory aids to help him remember how this had gone. It might make a fun chapter in his autobiography. What title, he wondered. *Trader and Diplomat,* maybe?

Forty-five minutes later, it broke up, with the usual handshakes, as cordial as the meeting had been contentious, which rather amazed Mark Gant.

"It's all business, not personal," Rutledge explained. "I'm surprised they're dwelling on this so much. It's not as though we've actually accused them of anything. Hell, even the President just asked for an investigation. Why are they so touchy?" he wondered aloud.

"Maybe they're worried they won't get what they want out of the talks," Gant speculated.

"But why are they *that* worried?" Rutledge asked.

"Maybe their foreign-exchange reserves are even lower than my computer model suggests." Gant shrugged.

"But even if they are, they're not exactly following a course that would ameliorate it." Rutledge slammed his hands together in frustration. "They're not behaving logically. Okay, sure, they're allowed to have a conniption fit over this shooting thing, and, yeah, maybe President Ryan pushed it a little too far saying some of the things he said—and Christ knows he's a real Neanderthal on the abortion issue. But all of that does not justify the time and the passion in their position."

"Fear?" Gant wondered.

"Fear of what?"

"If their cash reserves are that low, or maybe even lower, then they could be in a tight crack, Cliff. Tighter than we appreciate."

"Assume that they are, Mark. What makes it something to be fearful about?"

"A couple of things," Gant said, leaning forward in his limo seat. "It means they don't have the cash to buy things, or to meet the payments on the things they've already bought. It's an embarrassment, and like you said, these are proud people. I don't see them admitting they're wrong, or wanting to show

weakness."

"That's a fact," Rutledge agreed.

"Pride can get people into a lot of trouble, Cliff," Gant thought aloud. He remembered a fund on Wall Street that had taken a hundred-million-dollar hit because its managing director wouldn't back off a position that he'd thought was correct a few days earlier, but then stayed with after it was manifestly clear that he was wrong. Why? Because he hadn't wanted to look like a pussy on The Street. And so instead of appearing to be a pussy, he'd proclaimed to the whole world that he was an ass. But how did one translate that into foreign affairs? A chief of state was smarter than that, wasn't he?

It's not going well, my friend," Zhang told Fang.

"That foolish policeman is to blame. Yes, the Americans were wrong to react so strongly, but that would not have taken place at all if not for the overzealous police officer."

"President Ryan—why does he hate us so?"

"Zhang, twice you have plotted against the Russians, and twice you've played your intrigue against America. Is it not possible that the Americans know of this? Is it not possible that they guessed it was the case? Has it not occurred to you that this is why they recognized the Taiwan regime?"

Zhang Han San shook his head. "This is not possible. Nothing was ever written down." *And our security was perfect in both cases,* he didn't trouble himself to add.

"When things are said around people with ears, Zhang, they remember them. There are few secrets in the world. You can no more keep the affairs of state secret than you can conceal the sunrise," Fang went on, thinking that he'd make sure that this phrase went into the record of the talk that Ming would write up for him. "They spread too far. They reach too many people, and each of them has a mouth."

"Then what would you have us do?"

"The American has requested an investigation, so, we give him one. The facts we discover will be whatever facts we wish them to be. If a policeman must die, there are many others to take his place. Our trading relationship with America is more important than this trivial matter, Zhang."

"We cannot afford to abase ourselves before the barbarian."

"We cannot not afford *not* to in this case. We cannot allow false pride to put the country at risk." Fang sighed. His friend Zhang had always been a proud one. A man able to see far, certainly, but too aware of himself and the place he wanted. Yet the one he'd chosen was difficult. He'd never wanted the *first* place for himself, but instead to be the man who influenced the man at the top, to be like the court eunuchs who had directed the various emperors for

over a thousand years. Fang almost smiled, thinking that no amount of power was worth becoming a eunuch, at the royal court or not, and that Zhang probably didn't wish to go that far, either. But to be the man of power behind the curtain was probably more difficult than to be the man in the first chair ... and yet, Fang remembered, Zhang had been the prime mover behind Xu's selection to general secretary. Xu was an intellectual nonentity, a pleasant enough man with regal looks, able to speak in public well, but not himself a man of great ideas ...

... and that explained things, didn't it? Zhang had helped make Xu the chief of the Politburo precisely *because* he was an empty vessel, and Zhang was the one to fill the void of ideas with his own thoughts. Of course. He ought to have seen it sooner. Elsewhere, it was believed that Xu had been chosen for his middle-of-the-road stance on everything—a conciliator, a consensus-maker, they called him outside the PRC. In fact, he was a man of few convictions, able to adopt those of anyone else, if that someone—Zhang—looked about first and decided where the Politburo should go.

Xu was not a complete puppet, of course. That was the problem with people. However useful they might be on some issues, on others they held to the illusion that they thought for themselves, and the most foolish of them *did* have ideas, and those ideas were rarely logical and almost never helpful. Xu had embarrassed Zhang on more than one occasion, and since he was chairman of the Politburo, Xu *did* have real personal power, just not the wit to make proper use of it. But—what? Sixty percent of the time, maybe a little more?—he was merely Zhang's mouthpiece. And Zhang, for his part, was largely free to exert his own influence, and to make his own national policy. He did so mostly unseen and unknown outside the Politburo itself, and not entirely known inside, either, since so many of his meetings with Xu were private, and most of the time Zhang never spoke of them, even to Fang.

His old friend was a chameleon, Fang thought, hardly for the first time. But if he showed humility in not seeking prominence to match his influence, then he balanced that with the fault of pride, and, worse, he didn't seem to know what weakness he displayed. He thought either that it wasn't a fault at all, or that only he knew of it. All men had their weaknesses, and the greatest of these were invariably those unknown to their practitioners. Fang checked his watch and took his leave. With luck, he'd be home at a decent hour, after he transcribed his notes through Ming. What a novelty, getting home on time.

CHAPTER 28

Collision Courses

Those sonsabitches," Vice President Jackson observed with his coffee.

"Welcome to the wonderful world of statecraft, Robby," Ryan told his friend. It was 7:45 A.M. in the Oval Office. Cathy and the kids had gotten off early, and the day was starting fast. "We've had our suspicions, but here's the proof, if you want to call it that. The war with Japan and that little problem we had with Iran started in Beijing—well, not exactly, but this Zhang guy, acting for Xu, it would seem, aided and abetted both."

"Well, he may be a nasty son of a bitch, but I wouldn't give him points for brains," Robby said, after a moment's reflection. Then he thought some more. "But maybe that's not fair. From his point of view, the plans were pretty clever, using others to be his stalking horse. He risked nothing himself, then he figured to move in and profit on the risks of others. It certainly looked efficient, I suppose."

"Question is, what's his next move?"

"Between this and what Rutledge reports from Beijing, I'd say we have to take these people a little seriously," Robby reflected. Then his head perked up some more. "Jack, we have to get more people in on this."

"Mary Pat will flip out if we even suggest it," Ryan told him.

"Too damned bad. Jack, it's the old problem with intelligence information. If you spread it out too much, you risk compromising it, and then you lose it—*but* if you don't use it at all, you might as well not even have it. Where do you draw the line?" It was a rhetorical question. "If you err, you err on the side of safety—but the safety of the country, not the source."

"There's a real, live person on the other end of this sheet of paper, Rob," Jack pointed out.

"I'm sure there is. But there are two hundred fifty million people outside this room, Jack, and the oath we both swore was to them, not some Chinese puke in Beijing. What this tells us is that the guy making policy in China is willing to start wars, and twice now we've sent our people to fight wars he's had a part in starting. Jesus, man, war is supposed to be a thing of the past, but this Zhang guy hasn't figured that one out yet. What's he doing that we don't know about?"

"That's what SORGE's all about, Rob. The idea is that we find out beforehand and have a chance to forestall it."

Jackson nodded. “Maybe so, but once upon a time, there was a source called MAGIC that told us a lot about an enemy’s intentions, but when that enemy launched the first attack, we were asleep—because MAGIC was so important we never told CINCPAC about it, and he ended up not preparing for Pearl Harbor. I know intel’s important, but it has its operational limitations. All this really tells us is that we have a potential adversary with little in the way of inhibitions. We know his mind-set, but not his intentions or current operations. Moreover, SORGE’S giving us recollections of private conversations between one guy who makes policy and another guy who tries to influence policy. A lot of stuff is being left out. This looks like a cover-your-ass diary, doesn’t it?”

Ryan told himself that this was a particularly smart critique. Like the people at Langley, he’d allowed himself to wax a little too euphoric about a source they’d never even approached before. SONGBIRD was good, but not without limitations. Big ones.

“Yeah, Rob, that’s probably just what it is. This Fang guy probably keeps the diary just to have something to pull out of the drawer if one of his colleagues on the Chinese Politburo tries to butt-fuck him.”

“So, it isn’t Sir Thomas More whose words we’re reading,” TOMCAT observed.

“Not hardly,” Ryan conceded. “But it’s a good source. All the people who’ve looked at this for us say it feels very real.”

“I’m not saying it isn’t *true,* Jack, I’m saying it isn’t *all,”* the Vice President persisted.

“Message received, Admiral.” Ryan held up his hands in surrender. “What do you recommend?”

“SecDef for starters, and the Chiefs, and J-3 and J-5, and probably CINCPAC, your boy Bart Mancuso,” Jackson added, with a hint of distaste.

“Why don’t you like the guy?” SWORDSMAN asked.

“He’s a bubblehead,” the career fighter pilot answered. “Submariners don’t get around all that much . . . but I grant you he’s a pretty good operator.” *The submarine operation he’d run on the Japs using old boomers had been pretty swift,* Jackson admitted to himself.

“Specific recommendations?”

“Rutledge tells us that the ChiComms are talking like they’re real torqued over the Taiwan thing. What if they act on that? Like a missile strike into the island. Christ knows they have enough missiles to toss, and we have ships in harbor there all the time.”

“You really think they’d be dumb enough to launch an attack on a city with one of our ships tied alongside?” Ryan asked. Nasty or not, this Zhang guy wasn’t going to risk war with America quite that foolishly, was he?

“What if they don’t know the ship’s there? What if they get bad intel? Jack, the shooters don’t always get good data from the guys in the back room. Trust

me. Been there, done that, got the fucking scars, y'know?"

"The ships can take care of themselves, can't they?"

"Not if they don't have all their systems turned on, and can a Navy SAM stop a ballistic inbound?" Robby wondered aloud. "I don't know. How about we have Tony Bretano check it out for us?"

"Okay, give him a call." Ryan paused. "Robby, I have somebody coming in in a few minutes. We need to talk some more about this. With Adler and Bretano," the President added.

"Tony's very good on hardware and management stuff, but he needs a little educating on operations."

"So, educate him," Ryan told Jackson.

"Aye, aye, sir." The Vice President headed out the door.

They got the container back to its magnetic home less than two hours after removing it, thanking God—Russians were allowed to do that now—that the lock mechanism wasn't one of the new electronic ones. Those could be very difficult to break. But the problem with all such security measures was that they all too often ran the chance of going wrong and destroying that which they were supposed to protect, which only added complexity to a job with too much complexity already. The world of espionage was one in which everything that could go wrong invariably did, and so over the years, every way of simplifying operations had been adopted by all the players. The result was that since what worked for one man worked for all, when you saw someone following the same procedures as your own intelligence officers and agents, you knew you had a player in your sights.

And so the stakeout on the bench was renewed—of course it had never been withdrawn, in case Suvorov/ Koniev should appear unexpectedly while the transfer case was gone off to the lab—with an ever-changing set of cars and trucks, plus coverage in a building with a line-of-sight to the bench. The Chinese subject was being watched, but no one saw him set a telltale for the dead-drop. But that could be as simple as calling a number for Suvorov/ Koniev's beeper . . . but probably no, since they'd assume that every phone line out of the Chinese embassy was bugged, and the number would be captured and perhaps traced to its owner. Spies had to be careful, because those who chased after them were both resourceful and unrelenting. That fact made them the most conservative of people. But difficult to spot though they might be, once spotted they were usually doomed. And that, the FSS men all hoped, would be the case with Suvorov/Koniev.

In this case, it took until after nightfall. The subject left his apartment building and drove around for forty minutes, following a path identical to one driven two days before—probably checking to see if he had a shadow, and also to check for some telltale alert the FSS people hadn't spotted yet. But this time, instead of driving back to his flat, he came by the park, parked his car

two blocks from the bench, and walked there by an indirect route, pausing on the way twice to light a cigarette, which gave him ample opportunity to turn and check his back. Everything was right out of the playbook. He saw nothing, though three men and a woman were following him on foot. The woman was pushing a baby carriage, which gave her the excuse to stop every so often to adjust the infant's blanket. The men just walked, not looking at the subject or, so it seemed, anything else.

"There!" one of the FSS people said. Suvorov/Koniev didn't sit on the bench this time. Instead he rested his left foot on it, tied his shoelace, and adjusted his pants cuff. The pickup of the holder was accomplished so skillfully that no one actually saw it, but it seemed rather a far-fetched coincidence that he would pick that particular spot to tie his shoes—and besides, one of the FSS men would soon be there to see if he'd replaced one holder with another. With that done, the subject walked back to his car, taking a different circuitous route and lighting two more American Marlboros on the way.

The amusing part, Lieutenant Provalov thought, was how obvious it was once you knew whom to look at. What had once been anonymous was now as plain as an advertising billboard.

"So, now what do we do?" the militia lieutenant asked his FSS counterpart.

"Not a thing," the FSS supervisor replied. "We wait until he places another message under the bench, and then we get it, decode it, and find out what exactly he's up to. Then we make a further decision."

"What about my murder case?" Provalov demanded.

"What about it? This is an espionage case now, Comrade Lieutenant, and that takes precedence."

Which was true, Oleg Gregoriyevich had to admit to himself. The murder of a pimp, a whore, and a driver was a small thing compared to state treason.

His naval career might never end, Admiral Joshua Painter, USN (Ret.), thought to himself. And that wasn't so bad a thing, was it? A farm boy from Vermont, he'd graduated the Naval Academy almost forty years earlier, made it through Pensacola, then gotten his life's ambition, flying jets off aircraft carriers. He'd done it for the next twenty years, plus a stint as a test pilot, commanded a carrier air wing, then a carrier, then a group, and finally topped out as SACLANT/CINCLANT/CINCLANTFLT, three very weighty hats that he'd worn comfortably enough for just over three years before removing the uniform forever. Retirement had meant a civilian job paying about four times what the government had, mainly consulting with admirals he'd watched on the way up and telling them how he would have done it. In fact, it was something he would have done for free in any officers' club on any Navy base in America, maybe for the cost of dinner and a few beers and a chance to smell the salt air.

But now he was in the Pentagon, back on the government payroll, this time

as a civilian supergrade and special assistant to the Secretary of Defense. Tony Bretano, Josh Painter thought, was smart enough, a downright brilliant engineer and manager of engineers. He was prone to look for mathematical solutions to problems rather than human ones, and he tended to drive people a little hard. All in all, Bretano might have made a decent naval officer, Painter thought, especially a nuc.

His Pentagon office was smaller than the one he'd occupied as OP-05—Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Air—ten years earlier, a job since de-established. He had his own secretary and a smart young commander to look after him. He was an entry-port to the SecDef's office for a lot of people, one of whom, oddly enough, was the Vice President.

"Hold for the Vice President," a White House operator told him on his private line.

"You bet," Painter replied.

"Josh, Robby."

"Good morning, sir," Painter replied. This annoyed Jackson, who'd served under Painter more than once, but Josh Painter wasn't a man able to call an elected official by his Christian name. "What can I do for you?"

"Got a question. The President and I were going over something this morning, and I didn't have the answer to his question. Can an Aegis intercept and kill a ballistic inbound?"

"I don't know, but I don't think so. We looked at that during the Gulf War and—oh, okay, yeah, I remember now. We decided they could probably stop one of those Scuds because of its relatively slow speed, but that's the top end of their ability. It's a software problem, software on the SAM itself." Which was the same story for the Patriot missiles as well, both men then remembered. "Why did that one come up?"

"The President's worried that if the Chinese toss one at Taiwan and we have a ship alongside, well, he'd prefer that the ship could look after herself, y'know?"

"I can look into that," Painter promised. "Want me to bring it up with Tony today?"

"That's affirmative," TOMCAT confirmed.

"Roger that, sir. I'll get back to you later today."

"Thanks, Josh," Jackson replied, hanging up.

Painter checked his watch. It was about time for him to head in anyway. The walk took him out into the busy E-Ring corridor, then right again into the SecDef's office, past the security people and the various private secretaries and aides. He was right on time, and the door to the inner office was open.

"Morning, Josh," Bretano greeted.

"Good morning, Mr. Secretary."

"Okay, what's new and interesting in the world today?"

“Well, sir, we have an inquiry from the White House that just came in.”

“And what might that be?” THUNDER asked. Painter explained. “Good question. Why is the answer so hard to figure out?”

“It’s something we’ve looked at on and off, but really Aegis was set up to deal with cruise-missile threats, and they top out at about Mach Three or so.”

“But the Aegis radar is practically ideal for that sort of threat, isn’t it?” The Secretary of Defense was fully briefed in on how the radar-computer system worked.

“It’s a hell of a radar system, sir, yes,” Painter agreed.

“And making it capable for this mission is just a question of software?”

“Essentially yes. Certainly it involves software in the missile’s seekerhead, maybe also for the SPY and SPG radars as well. That’s not exactly my field, sir.”

“Software isn’t all that difficult to write, and it isn’t that expensive either. Hell, I had a world-class guy at TRW who’s an expert on this stuff, used to work in SDIO downstairs. Alan Gregory, retired from the Army as a half-colonel, Ph.D. from Stony Brook, I think. Why not have him come in to check it out?”

It amazed Painter that Bretano, who’d run one major corporation and had almost been headhunted away to head Lockheed-Martin before President Ryan had intercepted him, had so little appreciation for procedure.

“Mr. Secretary, to do that, we have to—”

“My ass,” THUNDER interrupted. “I have discretionary authority over small amounts of money, don’t I?”

“Yes, Mr. Secretary,” Painter confirmed.

“And I’ve sold all my stock in TRW, remember?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So, I am not in violation of any of those fucking ethics laws, am I?”

“No, sir,” Painter had to agree.

“Good, so call TRW in Sunnyvale, get Alan Gregory, I think he’s a junior vice president now, and tell him we need him to fly here right away and look into this, to see how easy it would be to upgrade Aegis to providing a limited ballistic-missile-defense capability.”

“Sir, it won’t make some of the other contractors happy.” *Including,* Painter did not add, *TRW.*

“I’m not here to make them happy, Admiral. Somebody told me I was here to defend the country efficiently.”

“Yes, sir.” It was hard not to like the guy, even if he did have the bureaucratic sensibilities of a pissed-off rhinoceros.

"So let's find out if Aegis has the technical capabilities to do this particular job."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"What time do I have to drive up to the Hill?" the SecDef asked next.

"About thirty minutes, sir."

Bretano grumbled. Half his working time seemed to be spent explaining things to Congress, talking to people who'd already made up their minds and who only asked questions to look good on C-SPAN. For Tony Bretano, an engineer's engineer, it seemed like a hellishly unproductive way to spend his time. But they called it public service, didn't they? In a slightly different context, it was called slavery, but Ryan was even more trapped than he was, leaving THUNDER with little room to complain. And besides, he'd volunteered, too.

They were eager enough, these Spetsnaz junior officers, and Clark remembered that what makes elite troops is often the simple act of telling them that they are elite—then waiting for them to live up to their own self-image. There was a little more to it, of course. The Spetsnaz were special in terms of their mission. Essentially they'd been copies of the British Special Air Service. As so often happened in military life, what one country invented, other countries tended to copy, and so the Soviet Army had selected troops for unusually good fitness tests and a high degree of political reliability—Clark never learned exactly how one tested for that characteristic—and then assigned them a different training regimen, turning them into commandos. The initial concept had failed for a reason predictable to anyone but the political leadership of the Soviet Union: The great majority of Soviet soldiers were drafted, served two years, then went back home. The average member of the British SAS wasn't even considered for membership until he'd served four years and had corporal's stripes, for the simple reason that it takes more than two years to learn to be a competent soldier in ordinary duties, much less the sort that required thinking under fire—yet another problem for the Soviets, who didn't encourage independent thought for any of those in uniform, much less conscripted non-officers. To compensate for this, some clever weapons had been thought up. The spring-loaded knife was one with which Chavez had played earlier in the day. At the push of a button, it shot off the blade of a serious combat knife with a fair degree of accuracy over a range of five or six meters. But the Soviet engineer who'd come up with this idea must have been a movie watcher, because only in the movies do men fall silently and instantly dead from a knife in the chest. Most people find this experience painful, and most people respond to pain by making noise. As an instructor at The Farm, Clark had always warned, "Never cut a man's throat with a knife. They flop around and make noise when you do that."

By contrast, after all the thought and good engineering that had gone into the spring-knife, their pistol silencers were garbage, cans loaded with steel

wool that self-destructed after less than ten shots, when manufacturing a decent suppressor required only about fifteen minutes of work from a semi-skilled machinist. John sighed to himself. There was no understanding these people.

But the individual troopers were just fine. He'd watched them run with Ding's Team-2, and not one of the Russians fell out of the formation. Part of that had been pride, of course, but most of it had been ability. The shoot-house experience had been less impressive. They weren't as carefully trained as the boys from Hereford, and not nearly so well equipped. Their supposedly suppressed weapons were sufficiently noisy to make John and Ding both jump ... but for all that, the eagerness of these kids was impressive. Every one of the Russians was a senior lieutenant in rank, and each was airborne-qualified. They all were pretty good with light weapons—and the Russian snipers *were* as good as Homer Johnston and Dieter Weber, much to the surprise of the latter. The Russian sniper rifles looked a little clunky, but they shot pretty well —at least out to eight hundred meters.

"Mr. C, they have a ways to go, but they got spirit. Two weeks, and they'll be right on line," Chavez pronounced, looking skeptically at the vodka. They were in a Russian officers' club, and there was plenty of the stuff about.

"Only two?" John asked.

"In two weeks, they'll have all their skills down pat, and they'll master the new weapons." RAINBOW was transferring five complete team-sets of weapons to the Russian Spetsnaz team: MP-10 submachine guns, Beretta .45 pistols, and most important, the radio gear that allowed the team to communicate even when under fire. The Russians were keeping their own Dragunov long-rifles, which was partly pride, but the things could shoot, and that was sufficient to the mission. "The rest is just experience, John, and we can't really give 'em that. All we can really do is set up a good training system for 'em, and the rest they'll do for themselves."

"Well, nobody ever said Ivan couldn't fight." Clark downed a shot. The working day was over, and everybody else was doing it.

"Shame their country's in such a mess," Chavez observed.

"It's their mess to clean up, Domingo. They'll do it if we keep out of their way." *Probably,* John didn't add. The hard part for him was thinking of them as something other than the enemy. He'd been here in the Bad Old Days, operating briefly on several occasions in Moscow as an "illegal" field officer, which in retrospect seemed like parading around Fifth Avenue in New York stark naked holding up a sign saying he hated Jews, blacks, and NYPD cops. At the time, it had just seemed like part of the job, John remembered. But now he was older, a grandfather, and evidently a lot more chicken than he'd been back in the '70s and '80s. Jesus, the chances he'd taken back then! More recently, he'd been in KGB—to him it would *always* be KGB—headquarters at *#2* Dzerzhinskiy Square as a guest of the Chairman. Sure, Wilbur, and soon he'd hop in the alien spacecraft that landed every month in his backyard and

accept their invitation for a luncheon flight to Mars. It felt about that crazy, John thought.

"Ivan Sergeyevich!" a voice called. It was Lieutenant General Yuriy Kirillin, the newly selected chief of Russian special forces—a man defining his own job as he went along, which was not the usual thing in this part of the world.

"Yuriy Andreyevich," Clark responded. He'd kept his given name and patronymic from his CIA cover as a convenience that, he was sure, the Russians knew all about anyway. So, no harm was done. He lifted a vodka bottle. It was apple vodka, flavored by some apple skins at the bottom of the bottle, and not bad to the taste. In any case, vodka was the fuel for any sort of business meeting in Russia, and since he was in Rome it was time to act Italian.

Kirillin gunned down his first shot as though he'd been waiting all week for it. He refilled and toasted John's companion: "Domingo Stepanovich," which was close enough. Chavez reciprocated the gesture. "Your men are excellent, comrades. We will learn much from them."

Comrades, John thought. *Son* of *a* bitch*!* "Your boys are eager, Yuriy, and hard workers."

"How long?" Kirillin asked. His eyes didn't show the vodka one little bit. *Perhaps they were immune,* Ding thought. He had to go easy on the stuff, lest John have to guide him home.

"Two weeks," Clark answered. "That's what Domingo tells me."

"That fast?" Kirillin asked, not displeased by the estimate.

"They're good troops, General," Ding said. "Their basic skills are there. They're in superb physical condition, and they're smart. All they need is familiarization with their new weapons, and some more directed training that we'll set up for them. And after that, they'll be training the rest of your forces, right?"

"Correct, Major. We will be establishing regional special-operations and counterterror forces throughout the country. The men you train this week will be training others in a few months. The problem with the Chechens came as a surprise to us, and we need to pay serious attention to terrorism as a security threat."

Clark didn't envy Kirillin the mission. Russia was a big country containing too many leftover nationalities from the Soviet Union—and for that matter from the time of the czars—many of whom had never particularly liked the idea of being part of Russia. America had had the problem once, but never to the extent that the Russians did, and here it wouldn't be getting better anytime soon. Economic prosperity was the only sure cure—prosperous people don't squabble; it's too rough on the china and the silverware—but prosperity was a way off in the future yet.

"Well, sir," Chavez went on, "in a year you'll have a serious and credible force, assuming you have the funding support you're going to need."

Kirillin grunted. “That is the question here, and probably in your country as well, yes?”

“Yeah.” Clark had himself a laugh. “It helps if Congress loves you.”

“You have many nationalities on your team,” the Russian general observed.

“Yeah, well, we’re mainly a NATO service, but we’re used to working together. Our best shooter now is Italian.”

“Really? I saw him, but—”

Chavez cut him off. “General, in a previous life, Ettore was James Butler Hickok. Excuse me, Wild Bill Hickok to you. That son of a bitch can sign his name with a handgun.”

Clark refilled the vodka glasses. “Yuriy, he’s won money off all of us at the pistol range. Even me.”

“Is that a fact?” Kirillin mused, with the same look in his eyes that Clark had had a few weeks earlier. John punched him on the arm.

“I know what you’re thinking. Bring money when you have your match with him, Comrade General,” John advised. “You’ll need it to pay off his winnings.”

“This I must see,” the Russian announced.

“Hey, Eddie!” Chavez waved his number-two over.

“Yes, sir?”

“Tell the general here how good Ettore is with a pistol.”

“That fucking Eyetalian!” Sergeant Major Price swore. “He’s even taken twenty pounds off Dave Woods.”

“Dave’s the range-master at Hereford, and he’s pretty good, too,” Ding explained. “Ettore really ought to be in the Olympics or something—maybe Camp Perry, John?”

“I thought of that, maybe enter him in the President’s Cup match next year . . .” Clark mused. Then he turned. “Go ahead, Yuriy. Take him on. Maybe you will succeed where all of us failed.”

“All of you, eh?”

“Every bloody one of us,” Eddie Price confirmed. “I wonder why the Italian government gave him to us. If the Mafia want to go after him, I wish the bastards luck.”

“This I must see,” Kirillin persisted, leading his visitors to wonder how smart he was.

“Then you will see it, *Tovarisch General,”* Clark promised.

Kirillin, who’d been on the Red Army pistol team as a lieutenant and a captain, couldn’t conceive of being beaten in a pistol match. He figured these NATO people were just having fun with him, as he might do if the situation were reversed. He waved to the bartender and ordered pepper vodka for his own next round. But all that said, he liked these NATO visitors, and their

reputation spoke forcefully for itself. This Chavez, a major—he was really CIA, Kirillin knew, and evidently a good spy at that, according to his briefing from the SVR—had the look of a good soldier, with confidence won in the field, the way a soldier ought to win his confidence. Clark was much the same—and also very capable, so the book on him read—with his own ample experience both as a soldier and a spy. And his spoken Russian was superb and very literate, his accent of St. Petersburg, where he probably could—and probably once or twice *had,* Kirillin reflected—pass for a native. It was so strange that such men as these had once been his sworn enemies. Had battle happened, it would have been bloody, and its outcome very sad. Kirillin had spent three years in Afghanistan, and had learned firsthand just how horrid a thing combat was. He'd heard the stories from his father, a much-decorated infantry general, but hearing them wasn't the same as seeing, and besides, you never told the really awful parts because you tended to edit them out of your memory. One did not discuss seeing a friend's face turn to liquid from a rifle bullet over a few drinks in a bar, because it was just not the sort of thing you could describe to one who didn't understand, and you didn't need to describe it to one who did. You just lifted your glass to toast the memory of Grisha or Mirka, or one of the others, and in the community of arms, that was enough. Did these men do it? Probably. They'd lost men once, when Irish terrorists had attacked their own home station, to their ultimate cost, but not without inflicting their own harm on highly trained men.

And that was the essence of the profession of arms right there. You trained to skew the odds your way, but you could never quite turn them all the way in the direction you wished.

Yu Chun had experienced a thoroughly vile day. In the city of Taipei to look after her aged and seriously ill mother, she'd had a neighbor call urgently, telling her to switch on her TV, then seen her husband shot dead before her blinking eyes. And that had just been the first hammer blow of the day.

The next one involved getting to Beijing. The first two flights to Hong Kong were fully booked, and that cost her fourteen lonely and miserable hours sitting in the terminal as an anonymous face in a sea of such faces, alone with her horror and additional loneliness, until she finally boarded a flight to the PRC capital. That flight had been bumpy, and she had cowered in her last-row window seat, hoping that no one could see the anguish on her face, but hiding it as well as she might conceal an earthquake. In due course, that trial had ended, and she managed to leave the aircraft, and actually made it through immigration and customs fairly easily because she carried virtually nothing that could conceal contraband. Then it started all over again with the taxi to her home.

Her home was hidden behind a wall of policemen. She tried to pass through their line as one might wiggle through a market checkout, but the police had

orders to admit no one into the house, and those orders did not include an exception for anyone who might actually live there. That took twenty minutes and three policemen of gradually increasing rank to determine. By this time, she'd been awake for twenty-six hours and traveling for twenty-two of them. Tears did not avail her in the situation, and she staggered her way to the nearby home of a member of her husband's congregation, Wen Zhong, a man who operated a small restaurant right in his home, a tall and rotund man, ordinarily jolly, liked by all who met him. Seeing Chun, he embraced her and took her into his home, at once giving her a room in which to sleep and a few drinks to help her relax. Yu Chin was asleep in minutes, and would remain that way for some hours, while Wen figured he had his own things to do. About the only thing Chun had managed to say before collapsing from exhaustion was that she wanted to bring Fa An's body home for proper burial. That Wen couldn't do all by himself, but he called a number of his fellow parishioners to let them know that their pastor's widow was in town. He understood that the burial would be on the island of Taiwan, which was where Yu had been born, but his congregation could hardly bid their beloved spiritual leader farewell without a ceremony of its own, and so he called around to arrange a memorial service at their small place of worship. He had no way of knowing that one of the parishioners he called reported directly to the Ministry of State Security.

Barry Wise was feeling pretty good about himself. While he didn't make as much money as his colleagues at the other so-called "major" networks—CNN didn't have an entertainment division to dump money into news—he figured that he was every bit as well known as their (white) talking heads, and he stood out from them by being a serious newsie who went into the field, found his own stories, and wrote his own copy. Barry Wise did the news, and that was all. He had a pass to the White House press room, and was considered in just about every capital city in the world not only as a reporter with whom you didn't trifle, but also as an honest conveyor of information. He was by turns respected and hated, depending on the government and the culture. *This* government, he figured, had little reason to love him. To Barry Wise, they were fucking barbarians. The police here had delusions of godhood that evidently devolved from the big shots downtown who must have thought their dicks were pretty big because they could make so many people dance to their tune. To Wise, that was the sign of a little one, instead, but you didn't tell them that out loud, because, small or not, they had cops with guns, and the guns were certainly big enough.

But these people had huge weaknesses, Wise also knew. They saw the world in a distorted way, like people with astigmatism, and assumed that was its real shape. They were like scientists in a lab who couldn't see past their own theories and kept trying to twist the experimental data into the proper result—or ended up ignoring the data which their theory couldn't explain.

But that was going to change. Information was getting in. In allowing free-

market commerce, the government of the PRC had also allowed the installation of a forest of telephone lines. Many of them were connected to fax machines, and even more were connected to computers, and so lots of information was circulating around the country now. Wise wondered if the government appreciated the implications of *that.* Probably not. Neither Marx nor Mao had really understood how powerful a thing information was, because it was the place where one found the Truth, once you rooted through it a little, and Truth wasn't Theory. Truth was the way things really *were,* and that's what made it a son of a bitch. You could deny it, but only at your peril, because sooner or later the son of a bitch would bite you on the ass. Denying it just made the inevitable bite worse, because the longer you put it off, the wider its jaws got. The world had changed quite a bit since CNN had started up. As late as 1980, a country *could* deny anything, but CNN's signals, the voice *and* the pictures, came straight down from the satellite. You couldn't deny pictures worth a damn.

And that made Barry Wise the croupier in the casino of Information and Truth. He was an honest dealer—he had to be in order to survive in the casino, because the customers demanded it. In the free marketplace of ideas, Truth always won in the end, because it didn't need anything else to prop it up. Truth stood by itself, and sooner or later the wind would blow the props away from all the bullshit.

It was a noble enough profession, Wise thought. His mission in life was reporting history, and along the way, he got to make a little of it himself—or at least to help—and for that reason he was feared by those who thought that defining history was their exclusive domain. The thought often made him smile to himself. He'd helped a little the other day, Wise thought, with those two churchmen. He didn't know where it would lead. That was the work of others.

He still had more work of his own to do in China.

CHAPTER 29

Billy Budd

So, what else is going to go wrong over there?" Ryan asked.

"Things will quiet down if the other side has half a brain," Adler said hopefully.

"Do they?" Robby Jackson asked, just before Arnie van Damm could.

"Sir, that's not a question with an easy answer. Are they stupid? No, they are not. But do they see things in the same way that we do? No, they do not. That's the fundamental problem dealing with them—"

"Yeah, Klingons," Ryan observed tersely. "Aliens from outer space. Jesus, Scott, how do we predict what they're going to do?"

"We don't, really," SecState answered. "We have a bunch of good people, but the problem is in getting them all to agree on something when we need an important call. They *never* do," Adler concluded. He frowned before going on. "Look, these guys are kings from a different culture. It was already very different from ours long before Marxism arrived, and the thoughts of our old friend Karl only made things worse. They're kings because they have absolute power. There *are* some limitations on that power, but we don't fully understand what they are, and therefore it's hard for us to enforce or to exploit them. They are Klingons. So, what we need is a Mr. Spock. Got one handy, anyone?"

Around the coffee table, there were the usual half-humorous snorts that accompany an observation that is neither especially funny nor readily escapable.

"Nothing new from SORGE today?" van Damm asked.

Ryan shook his head. "No, the source doesn't produce something every day."

"Pity," Adler said. "I've discussed the take from SORGE with some of my I and R people—always as my own theoretical musings . . ."

"And?" Jackson asked.

"And they think it's decent speculation, but not something to bet the ranch on."

There *was* amusement around the coffee table at that one.

"That's the problem with good intelligence information. It doesn't agree with what your own people think—assuming they really think at all," the Vice President observed.

"Not fair, Robby," Ryan told his VP.

"I know, I know." Jackson held up surrendering hands. "I just can't forget the motto of the whole intelligence community: 'We bet *your* life.' It's lonely out there with a fighter plane strapped to your back, risking your life on the basis of a piece of paper with somebody's opinion typed on it, when you never know the guy it's from or the data it's based on." He paused to stir his coffee. "You know, out in the fleet we used to think—well, we used to *hope*—that decisions made in this room here were based on solid data. It's quite a disappointment to learn what things are really like."

"Robby, back when I was in high school, I remember the Cuban Missile Crisis. I remember wondering if the world was going to blow up. But I still had to translate half a page of Caesar's goddamned Gallic Wars, and I saw the President on TV, and I figured things were okay, because he was the President of the United Goddamned States, and he had to know what was really going on. So, I translated the battle with the Helvetii and slept that night. The President knows, because he's the President, right? Then I become President, and I don't know a damned thing more than I knew the month before, but everybody out there"—Ryan waved his arm at the window—"thinks I'm fucking omniscient.... *Ellen!"* he called loudly enough to get through the door.

The door opened seven seconds later. "Yes, Mr. President?"

"I think you know, Ellen," Jack told her.

"Yes, sir." She fished in her pocket and pulled out a flip-top box of Virginia Slims. Ryan took one out, along with the pink butane lighter stashed inside. He lit the smoke and took a long hit. "Thanks, Ellen."

Her smile was downright motherly. "Surely, Mr. President." And she headed back to the secretaries' room, closing the curved door behind her.

"Jack?"

"Yeah, Rob?" Ryan responded, turning.

"That's disgusting."

"Okay, I am not omniscient, and I'm not perfect," POTUS admitted crossly after the second puff. "Now, back to China."

"They can forget MFN," van Damm said. "Congress would impeach you if you asked for it, Jack. And you can figure that the Hill will offer Taiwan any weapons system they want to buy next go-round."

"I have no problems with that. And there's no way I was going to offer them MFN anyway, unless they decide to break down and start acting like civilized people."

"And that's the problem," Adler reminded them all. "They think we're the uncivilized ones."

“I see trouble,” Jackson said, before anyone else could. Ryan figured it was his background as a fighter pilot to be first in things. “They’re just out of touch with the rest of the world. The only way to get them back in touch will involve some pain. Not to their people, especially, but sure as hell to the guys who make the decisions.”

“And they’re the ones who control the guns,” van Damm noted.

“Roger that, Arnie,” Jackson confirmed.

“So, how can we ease them the right way?” Ryan asked, to center the conversation once more.

“We stick to it. We tell them we want reciprocal trade access, or they will face reciprocal trade barriers. We tell them that this little flare-up with the Nuncio makes any concessions on our part impossible, and that’s just how things are. If they want to trade with us, they have to back off,” Adler spelled out. “They don’t like being told such things, but it’s the real world, and they have to acknowledge objective reality. They do understand that, for the most part,” SecState concluded.

Ryan looked around the room and got nods. “Okay, make sure Rutledge understands what the message is,” he told EAGLE.

“Yes, sir,” SecState agreed, with a nod. People stood and started filing out. Vice President Jackson allowed himself to be the last in the line of departure.

“Hey, Rob,” Ryan said to his old friend.

“Funny thing, watched some TV last night for a change, caught an old movie I hadn’t seen since I was a kid.”

“Which one?”

“Billy Budd, Melville’s story about the poor dumb sailor who gets himself hanged. I’d forgot the name of Billy’s ship.”

“Yeah?” So had Ryan.

“It was *The Rights of Man.* Kind of a noble name for a ship. I imagine Melville made that up with malice aforethought, like writers do, but that’s what we fight for, isn’t it? Even the Royal Navy, they just didn’t fight as well as we did back then. *The Rights of Man,”* Jackson repeated. “It is a noble sentiment.”

“How does it apply to the current problem, Rob?”

“Jack, the first rule of war is the mission: First, why the hell are you out there, and then what are you proposing to do about it. The Rights of Man makes a pretty good starting point, doesn’t it? By the way, CNN’s going to be at Pap’s church tomorrow and at Gerry Patterson’s. They’re switching off, preaching in each other’s pulpit for the memorial ceremonies, and CNN decided to cover it as a news event in and of itself. Good call, I think,” Jackson editorialized. “Wasn’t like that in Mississippi back when I was a boy.”

“It’s going to be like you said?”

“I’m only guessing,” Robby admitted, “but I don’t see either one of them

playing it cool. It's too good an opportunity to teach a good lesson about how the Lord doesn't care a rat's ass what color we are, and how all men of faith should stand together. They'll both probably fold in the abortion thing—Pap ain't real keen on abortion rights, and neither's Patterson—but mainly it'll be about justice and equality and how two good men went to see God after doing the right thing."

"Your dad's pretty good with a sermon, eh?"

"If they gave out Pulitzers for preaching, he'd have a wall covered in the things, Jack, and Gerry Patterson ain't too bad for a white boy either."

Ah," Yefremov observed. He was in the building perch instead of one of the vehicles. It was more comfortable, and he was senior enough to deserve and appreciate the comforts. There was Suvorov/Koniev, sitting back on the bench, an afternoon newspaper in his hands. They didn't have to watch, but watch they did, just to be sure. Of course, there were thousands of park benches in Moscow, and the probability that their subject would sit in the same one this many times was genuinely astronomical. That's what they would argue to the judge when the time came for the trial ... depending on what was in the subject's right hand. (His KGB file said that he was right-handed, and it seemed to be the case.) He was so skillful that you could hardly see what he did, but it was done, and it was seen. His right hand left the paper, reached inside his jacket, and pulled out something metallic. Then the hand paused briefly, and as he turned pages in the paper—the fluttering of the paper was a fine distraction to anyone who might be watching, since the human eye is always drawn to movement—the right hand slid down and affixed the metal transfer case to the magnetic holder, then returned for the paper, all in one smooth motion, done so quickly as to be invisible. Well, almost, Yefremov thought. He'd caught spies before—four of them, in fact, which explained his promotion to a supervisory position—and every one had a thrill attached to it, because he was chasing and catching the most elusive of game. And this one was Russian-trained, the most elusive of all. He'd never bagged one of them before, and there was the extra thrill of catching not just a spy but a traitor as well ... and perhaps a traitor guilty of murder? he wondered. That was another first. Never in his experience had espionage involved the violation of that law. No, an intelligence operation was about the transfer of information, which was dangerous enough. The inclusion of murder was an additional hazard that was not calculated to please a trained spy. It made noise, as they said, and noise was something a spy avoided as much as a cat burglar, and for much the same reason.

"Call Provalov," Yefremov told his subordinate. Two reasons for that. First, he rather owed it to the militia lieutenant, who'd presented him with both the case and the subject. Second, the civilian cop might know something useful to his part of this case. They continued to watch Suvorov/Koniev for another ten

minutes. Finally, he stood and walked back to his car for the drive back to his apartment, during which he was duly followed by the ever-changing surveillance team. After the requisite fifteen minutes, one of Yefremov's people crossed the street and retrieved the case from the bench. It was the locked one again, which told them that the item inside was perhaps more important. You had to get past the anti-tamper device to keep the contents from being destroyed, but the FSS had people well skilled in that, and the key for this transfer case had already been struck. That was confirmed twenty minutes later, when the case was opened and the contents extracted, unfolded, photographed, refolded, reinserted, and, finally, relocked in the container, which was immediately driven back to the bench.

Back at FSS headquarters, the decryption team typed the message into a computer into which the one-time-pad had already been inputted. After that, it was a matter of mere seconds before the computer performed a function not unlike sliding a document over a printed template. The clear-text message was, agreeably, in Russian. The content of the message was something else.

"Yob tvoyu maht!" the technician breathed, in one of his language's more repulsive imprecations: *Fuck your mother.* Then he handed the page to one of the supervising inspectors, whose reaction was little different. Then he walked to the phone and dialed Yefremov's number.

"Pavel Georgeyevich, you need to see this."

Provalov was there when the chief of the decryption section walked in. The printout was in a manila folder, which the head cryppie handed over without a word.

"Well, Pasha?" the homicide investigator asked.

"Well, we have answered our first question."

The motorcar was even purchased at the same dealership in central Moscow, the sheet read. There is no fault to be found here. The men who performed the mission are both dead in St. P. Before I can make another attempt, I need an indication from you on the time line, and also on the payment to my contractors.

"Golovko was the target, then," Provalov observed. *And the head of our country's intelligence service owes his life to a pimp.*

"So it would appear," Yefremov agreed. "Note that he doesn't ask payment for himself. I would imagine he's somewhat embarrassed at having missed his target on the first attempt."

"But he's working for the Chinese?"

"So that would appear as well," the FSS man observed, with an inward chill. *Why,* he asked himself, *would the Chinese wish to do such a thing? Isn't that nearly an act of war?* He sat back in his chair and lit up a smoke, looking into the eyes of his police colleague. Neither man knew what to say at the moment, and both kept silent. It would all soon be out of and far beyond their hands. With that decided, both men headed home for dinner.

The morning broke more brightly than usual in Beijing. Mrs. Yu had slept deeply and well, and though she awoke with a slight headache, she was grateful for Wen's insistence on a couple of drinks before retiring. Then she remembered why she was in Beijing, and any good feelings departed from her mind. Breakfast was mainly green tea and was spent looking down, remembering the sound of her husband's voice in the bleak acceptance of the fact that she'd never hear it again. He'd always been in a good mood over breakfast, never forgetting, as she had just done, to say grace over the morning meal and thank God for another day in which to serve Him. No more. *No more would he do that,* she reminded herself. But she had duties of her own to perform.

"What can we do, Zhong?" she asked, when her host appeared.

"I will go with you to the police post and we will ask for Fa An's body, and then I will help you fly our friend home, and we will have a memorial prayer service at the—"

"No, you can't, Zhong. There are police there to keep everyone out. They wouldn't even let me in, even though I had my papers in order."

"Then we will have it outside, and they will watch us pray for our friend," the restaurateur told his guest with gentle resolve.

Ten minutes later, she'd cleaned up and was ready to leave. The police station was only four blocks away, a simple building, ordinary in all respects except for the sign over the door.

"Yes?" the desk officer said when his peripheral vision noted the presence of people by his desk. He looked up from the paper forms that had occupied his attention for the past few minutes to see a woman and a man of about the same age.

"I am Yu Chun," Mrs. Yu answered, seeing some recognition in the desk officer's eyes result from her words.

"You are the wife of Yu Fa An?" he asked.

"That is correct."

"Your husband was an enemy of the people," the cop said next, sure of that but not sure of much else in this awkward case.

"I believe he was not, but all I ask is for his body, so that I might fly it home for burial with his family."

"I do not know where his body is," the cop said.

"But he was shot by a policeman," Wen put in, "and the disposal of his body is therefore a police matter. So, might you be so kind, comrade, as to call the proper number so that we can remove our friend's body?" His manners did not allow anger on the part of the desk officer.

But the desk cop really didn't know what number to call, and so he called someone inside the building, in the large administration division. He found this embarrassing to do with two citizens standing by his desk, but there was

no avoiding that.

"Yes?" a voice answered on his third internal call.

"This is Sergeant Jiang at the desk in the public lobby. I have Yu Chun here, seeking the body of her husband, Yu Fa An. I need to tell her where to go."

The reply took a few seconds for the man on the other end of the phone, who had to remember.... "Ah, yes, tell her she can go to the Da Yunhe River. His body was cremated and the ashes dumped in the water last evening."

And, enemy of the people or not, it would not be a pleasant thing to tell his widow, who'd probably had feelings for him. Sergeant Jiang set the phone down and decided to give her the news.

"The body of Yu Fa An was cremated and the ashes scattered in the river, comrade."

"That is cruel!" Wen said at once. Chun was too stunned to say anything at the moment.

"I cannot help you more than that," Jiang told his visitors and looked back down at his paperwork to dismiss them.

"Where is my husband?" Yu Chun managed to blurt, after thirty seconds or so of silence.

"Your husband's body was cremated and the ashes scattered," Jiang said, without looking up, because he really didn't wish to see her eyes under these circumstances. "I cannot help you further. You may leave now."

"I want my husband back!" she insisted.

"Your husband is dead and his body has been cremated. Be gone now!" Sergeant Jiang insisted in return, wishing she'd just go away and allow him to get back to his paperwork.

"I want my husband," she said louder now, causing a few eyes to turn her way in the lobby.

"He is gone, Chun," Wen Zhong told her, taking her arm and steering her to the door. "Come, we will pray for him outside."

"But why did they—I mean, why is he—and why did they—" It had just been too much for one twenty-four-hour period. Despite the night's sleep, Yu Chun was still too disoriented. Her husband of over twenty years had vanished, and now she could not even see the urn containing his ashes? It was a lot to absorb for a woman who'd never so much as bumped into a policeman on the street, who'd never done a single thing to offend the state—except, perhaps, to marry a Christian—but what did *that* hurt, anyway? Had either of them, had any of their congregation ever plotted treason against the state? No. Had any of them so much as violated the criminal or civil law? No. And so why had this misfortune fallen upon her? She felt as though she'd been struck by an invisible truck while crossing the street, then had it decided that her injuries were all her fault. Behind one invisible truck was just another, and all the more merciless at that.

There was nothing left for her to do, no recourse, legal or otherwise. They couldn't even go into her home, whose living room had so often served as their church, there to pray for Yu's soul and entreat God for mercy and help. Instead they'd pray ... where? she wondered. One thing at a time. She and Wen walked outside, escaping the eyes of the lobby, which had zoomed in on them with almost physical impact. The eyes and the weight they'd carried were soon left behind, but the sun outside was just one more thing that intruded on what ought to have been, and what needed to be, a day of peace and lonely prayer to a God whose mercy was not very evident at the moment. Instead, the brightness of the sun defeated her eyelids, bringing unwanted brilliance into the darkness that might have simulated, if not exactly granted, peace. She had a flight booked back to Hong Kong, and from there back to Taipei, where she could at least weep in the presence of her mother, who was awaiting her death as well, for the woman was over ninety and frail.

For Barry Wise, the day had long since begun. His colleagues in Atlanta had praised him to the heavens in an e-mail about his earlier story. Maybe another Emmy, they said. Wise liked getting the awards, but they weren't the reason for his work. It was just what he did. He wouldn't even say he enjoyed it, because the news he reported was rarely pretty or pleasant. It was just his job, the work he'd chosen to do. If there was an aspect of it that he actually liked, it was the newness of it. Just as people awoke wondering what they'd see on CNN every day, from baseball scores to executions, so he awoke every day wondering what he'd report. He often had some idea of where the story would be and roughly what it would contain, but you were never really sure, and in the newness was the adventure of his job. He'd learned to trust his instincts, though he never really understood where they came from or how they seemed to know what they did, and today his instincts reminded him that one of the people he'd seen shot the other day had said he was married, and that his wife was on Taiwan. Maybe she'd be back now? It was worth trying out. He'd tried to get Atlanta to check with the Vatican, but that story would be handled by the Rome bureau. The aircraft containing Cardinal DiMilo's body was on its way back to Italy, where somebody would be making a big deal about it for CNN to cover live and on tape to show to the entire world ten times at least.

The hotel room had a coffeemaker, and he brewed his own from beans stolen from the CNN Beijing bureau office. Sipping coffee, for him as for so many others, helped him think.

Okay, he thought, the Italian guy, the Cardinal, his body was gone, boxed and shipped out on an Alitalia 747, probably somewhere over Afghanistan right now. But what about the Chinese guy, the Baptist minister who took the round in the head? He had to have left a body behind, too, and he had a congregation and—he said he was married, didn't he? Okay, if so, he had a wife somewhere, and she'd want the body back to bury. So, at the least he could try to interview her ... it would be a good follow-up, and would allow Atlanta to play the tape of the killings again. He was sure the Beijing

government had written him onto their official shitlist, but fuck 'em, Wise thought with a sip of the Starbucks, it was hardly a disgrace to be there, was it? These people were racist as hell. Even folks on the street cringed to see him pass, with his dark skin. Even Birmingham under Bull Connor hadn't treated black Americans like aliens from another goddamned planet. Here, everyone looked the same, dressed the same, talked the same. Hell, they *needed* some black people just to liven up the mix some. Toss in a few blond Swedes and maybe a few Italians to set up a decent restaurant....

But it wasn't his job to civilize the world, just to tell people what was going on in it. The trade talks were not where it was happening, not today, Wise thought. Today he and his satellite truck would head back to the home of Reverend Yu Fa An. Wise was playing a hunch. No more than that. But they'd rarely failed him before.

Ryan was enjoying another night off. The following night would be different. He had to give another goddamned speech on foreign policy. Why he couldn't simply announce policy in the press room and be done with it, nobody had yet told him—and he hadn't asked, for fear of looking the fool (again) before Arnie. This was just how it was done. The speech and the subject had nothing to do with the identity of the group he was addressing. Surely there had to be an easier way to tell the world what he thought. This way, too, Cathy had to come with him, and she hated these things even more than he did, because it took her away from her patient notes, which she guarded about as forcefully as a lion over the wildebeests he'd just killed for lunch. Cathy often complained that this First Lady stuff was hurting her performance as a surgeon. Jack didn't believe that. It was more likely that like most women, Cathy needed something to bitch about, and this subject was worthier than her more pedestrian complaints, like being unable to cook dinner once in a while, which she missed a lot more than the women's lib people would have cared to learn. Cathy had spent over twenty years learning to be a gourmet cook, and when time allowed (rarely) she'd sneak down to the capacious White House kitchen to trade ideas and recipes with the head chef. For the moment, however, she was curled up in a comfortable chair making notes on her patient files and sipping at her wineglass, while Jack watched TV, for a change *not* under the eyes of the Secret Service detail and the domestic staff.

But the President wasn't really watching TV. His eyes were pointed in that direction, but his mind was looking at something else. It was a look his wife had learned to understand in the past year, almost like open-eyed sleep while his brain churned over a problem. In fact, it was something she did herself often enough, thinking about the best way to treat a patient's problem while eating lunch at the Hopkins doctors' cafeteria, her brain creating a picture as though in a Disney cartoon, simulating the problem and then trying out theoretical fixes. It didn't happen all that much anymore. The laser applications she'd helped to develop were approaching the point that an auto mechanic could perform them—which was not something she or her

colleagues advertised, of course. There had to be a mystique with medicine, or else you lost your power to tell your patients what to do in a way that ensured that they might actually do it.

For some reason, that didn't translate to the Presidency, Cathy thought. With Congress, well, most of the time they went along with him—as well they ought, since Jack's requests were usually as reasonable as they could be—but not always, and often for the dumbest reasons. "It may be good for the country, but it's not so good for my district, and ..." And they all forgot the fact that when they had arrived in Washington, they'd sworn an oath to the country, not to their stupid little districts. When she'd said that to Arnie, he'd had a good laugh and lectured her on how the real world worked—*as though a* physician *didn't know that!* she fumed. And so Jack had to balance what was real with what wasn't but ought to be—as opposed to what wasn't and never would be. Like foreign affairs. It made a lot more sense for a married man to have an affair with some floozy than it did to try to reason with some foreign countries. At least you could tell the floozy that it was all over after three or four times, but these damned foreign chiefs of state would stay around forever with their stupidity.

That was one nice thing about medicine, Professor Ryan thought. Doctors all over the world treated patients pretty much the same way because the human body was the same everywhere, and a treatment regimen that worked at Johns Hopkins in east Baltimore worked just as well in Berlin or Moscow or Tokyo, even if the people looked and talked different—and if that was true, why couldn't people all over the world think the same way? Their damned brains were the same, weren't they? Now it was her turn to grumble, as her husband did often enough.

"Jack?" she said, as she put her notebook down.

"Yeah, Cathy?"

"What are you thinking about now?"

Mainly how I wish Ellen Sumter was here with a cigarette, he couldn't say. If Cathy knew he was sneaking smokes in the Oval Office, she didn't let on, which was probably the case, since she didn't go around looking for things to fight over, and he never ever smoked in front of her or the kids anymore. Cathy allowed him to indulge his weaknesses, as long as he did so in the utmost moderation. But her question was about the cause for his yearning for some nicotine.

"China, babe. They really stepped on the old crank with the golf shoes this time, but they don't seem to know how bad it looked."

"Killing those two people—how could it *not* look bad?" SURGEON asked.

"Not everybody values human life in the same way that we do, Cath."

"The Chinese doctors I've met are—well, they're doctors, and we talk to each other like doctors."

"I suppose." Ryan saw a commercial start on the TV show he was pretending to watch, and stood to walk off to the upstairs kitchen for another

whiskey. “Refill, babe?”

“Yes, thank you.” With her Christmas-tree smile.

Jack lifted his wife’s wineglass. So, she had no procedures scheduled for the next day. She’d come to love the Chateau Ste. Michelle Chardonnay they’d first sampled at Camp David. For him tonight, it was Wild Turkey bourbon over ice. He loved the pungent smell of the corn and rye grains, and tonight he’d dismissed the upstairs staff and could enjoy the relative luxury of fixing his own—he could even have made a peanut butter sandwich, had he been of such a mind. He walked the drinks back, touching his wife’s neck on the way, and getting the cute little shiver she always made when he did so.

“So, what’s going to happen in China?”

“We’ll find out the same way as everybody else, watching CNN. They’re a lot faster than our intelligence people on some things. And our spooks can’t predict the future any better than the traders on Wall Street.” *You’d be able to identify such a man at Merrill Lynch easily if he existed,* Jack didn’t bother saying aloud. *He’d be the guy with all the millionaires lined up outside his office.*

“So, what do you think?”

“I’m worried, Cath,” Ryan admitted, sitting back down.

“About what?”

“About what we’ll have to do if they screw things up again. But we can’t warn them. That only makes it certain that bad things are going to happen, because then they’ll do something really dumb just to show us how powerful they are. That’s how nation-states are. You can’t talk to them like real people. The people who make the decisions over there think with their …”

“… dicks?” Cathy offered with a half giggle.

“Yep,” Jack confirmed with a nod. “A lot of them follow their dicks everywhere they go, too. We know about some foreign leaders who have habits that would get them tossed out of any decent whorehouse in the world. They just love to show everybody how tough and manly they are, and to do that, they act like animals in a goddamned barnyard.”

“Secretaries?”

“A lot of that.” Ryan nodded. “Hell, Chairman Mao liked doing twelve-year-old virgins, like changing shirts. I guess old as he was, it was the best he could do—”

“No Viagra back then, Jack,” Cathy pointed out.

“Well, you suppose that drug will help civilize the world?” he asked, turning to grin at his physician wife. It didn’t seem a likely prospect.

“Well, maybe it’ll protect a lot of twelve-year-olds.”

Jack checked his watch. Another half hour and he’d be turning in. Until then, maybe he could actually watch the TV for a little while.

Rutledge was just waking up. Under his door was an envelope, which he picked up and opened, to find an official communique from Foggy Bottom, his instructions for the day, which weren't terribly different from those of the previous day. Nothing in the way of concessions to offer, which were the grease of dealing with the PRC. You had to give them something if you wanted to get anything, and the Chinese never seemed to realize that such a procedure could and occasionally *should* work the other way as well. Rutledge headed to his private bathroom and wondered if it had been like this chatting with German diplomats in May 1939. Could anyone have prevented *that* war from breaking out? he wondered. Probably not, in retrospect. Some chiefs of state were just too damned stupid to grasp what their diplomats told them, or maybe the idea of war just appealed to one sort of mind. Well, even diplomacy had its limitations, didn't it?

Breakfast was served half an hour later, by which time Rutledge was showered and shaved pink. His staff were all there in the dining room, looking over the papers for the most part, learning what was going on back home. They already knew, or thought they knew, what was going to happen here. A whole lot of nothing. Rutledge agreed with that assessment. He was wrong, too.

CHAPTER 30

And the Rights of Men

Got the address?" Wise asked his driver. He was also the team's cameraman, and drew the driving duty because of his steady hands and genius for anticipating traffic clogs.

"Got it, Barry," the man assured him. Better yet, it had been inputted into the satellite-navigation system, and the computer would tell them how to get there. *Hertz was going to conquer the world someday,* Wise reflected with a chuckle. Just so they didn't bring back the O.J. commercials.

"Going to rain, looks like," Barry Wise thought aloud.

"Could be," his producer agreed.

"What do you suppose happened to the gal who had the baby?" the cameraman asked from the driver's seat.

"Probably home with her kid now. I bet they don't keep mothers in the hospital very long here," Wise speculated. "Trouble is, we don't know her address. No way to do a follow-up on her and the kid." And that was too bad, Wise could have added. They had the surname, Yang, on their original tape, but the given names of the husband and wife were both garbled.

"Yeah, I bet there's a lot of Yangs in the phone book here."

"Probably," Wise agreed. He didn't even know if there was such a thing as a Beijing phone book—or if the Yang family had a phone—and none of his crew could read the ideographic characters that constituted the Chinese written language. All of those factors combined to make a stone wall.

"Two blocks," the cameraman reported from the front seat. "Just have to turn left ... here..."

The first thing they saw was a crowd of khaki uniforms, the local police, standing there like soldiers on guard duty, which was essentially what they were, of course. They parked the van and hopped out, and were immediately scrutinized as though they were alighting from an alien spacecraft. Pete Nichols had his camera out and up on his shoulder, and that didn't make the local cops any happier, because they'd all been briefed on this CNN crew at the Longfu hospital and what they'd done to damage the People's Republic. So the looks they gave the TV crew were poisonous—Wise and his crew could not have asked for anything better for their purposes.

Wise just walked up to the cop with the most rank-stuff on his uniform.

“Good day,” Barry said pleasantly.

The sergeant in command of the group just nodded. His face was entirely neutral, as though he were playing cards for modest stakes.

“Could you help us?” Wise asked.

“Help you do what?” the cop asked in his broken English, suddenly angry at himself for admitting he could speak the language. Better if he’d played dumb, he realized a few seconds too late.

“We are looking for Mrs. Yu, the wife of the Reverend Yu, who used to live here.”

“No here,” the police sergeant replied with a wave of the hands. “No here.”

“Then we will wait,” Wise told him.

Minister,” Cliff Rutledge said in greeting.

Shen was late, which was a surprise to the American delegation. It could have meant that he was delivering a message to his guests, telling them that they were not terribly important in the great scheme of things; or he might have been delayed by new instructions from the Politburo; or maybe his car hadn’t wanted to start this morning. Personally, Rutledge leaned toward option number two. The Politburo would want to have input into these talks. Shen Tang had probably been a moderating influence, explaining to his colleagues that the American position, however unjust, would be difficult to shake in this series of talks, and so the smart long-term move would be to accommodate the American position for now, and make up for the losses in the next go-around the following year—the American sense of fair play, he would have told them, had cost them more negotiations than any other single factor in history, after all.

That’s what Rutledge would have done in his place, and he knew Shen was no fool. In fact, he was a competent diplomatic technician, and pretty good at reading the situation quickly. He had to know—no, Rutledge corrected himself, he *should know or ought to know*—that the American position was being driven by public opinion at home, and that that public opinion was against the interests of the PRC, because the PRC had fucked up in public. So, if he’d been able to sell his position to the rest of the Politburo, he’d start off with a small concession, one which would show the course the day would take, allowing Rutledge to beat him back a few steps by the close of the afternoon session. Rutledge hoped for that, because it would get him what his country wanted with little further fuss, and would, by the way, make him look pretty good at Foggy Bottom. So he took a final sip of the welcoming tea and settled back in his chair, motioning for Shen to begin the morning’s talks.

“We find it difficult to understand America’s position in this and other matters—”

Uh-oh ...

“America has chosen to affront our sovereignty in many ways. First, the Taiwan issue ...”

Rutledge listened to the earphone which gave him the simultaneous translation. So, Shen hadn’t been able to persuade the Politburo to take a reasonable tack. That meant another unproductive day at these talks, and maybe—possible but not likely as yet—failed talks entirely. If America was unable to get concessions from China, and was therefore forced to impose sanctions, it would be ruinous to both sides, and not calculated to make the world a safer or better place. The tirade lasted twenty-seven minutes by his watch.

“Minister,” Rutledge began when it was his turn, “I find it difficult as well to understand your intransigence—” He went on along his own well-grooved path, varying only slightly when he said, “We put you *on notice* that unless the PRC allows its markets to be opened to American trade goods, the government of the United States will enact the provisions of the Trade Reform Act—”

Rutledge saw Shen’s face coloring up some. Why? He had to know the rules of the new game. Rutledge had said this half a hundred times in the previous few days. Okay, fine, he’d never said “put on notice,” which was diplo-speak for *no shit, Charlie, we’re not fuckin’ kidding anymore,* but the import of his earlier statements had been straightforward enough, and Shen was no fool ... was he? Or had Cliff Rutledge misread this whole session?

Hello,” a female voice said.

Wise’s head turned sharply. “Hi. Have we met?”

“You met my husband briefly. I am Yu Chun,” the woman said, as Barry Wise came to his feet. Her English was pretty good, probably from watching a lot of TV, which was teaching English (the American version, anyway) to the entire world.

“Oh.” Wise blinked a few times. “Mrs. Yu, please accept our condolences for the loss of your husband. He was a very courageous man.”

Her head nodded at the good wishes, but they made her choke up a little, remembering what sort of man Fa An had been. “Thank you,” she managed to say, struggling not to show the emotions that welled up within her, held back, however, as though by a sturdy dam.

“Is there going to be a memorial service for your husband? If so, ma‘am, we would ask your permission to make a record of it.” Wise had never grown to like the oh-your-loved-one-is-dead, what’s-it-feel-like? school of journalism. He’d seen far more death as a reporter than as a Marine, and it was all the same all over the world. The guy on the pale horse came to visit, always taking away something precious to somebody, most of the time more than one somebody, and the vacuum of feelings it left behind could only be filled by tears, and that language was universal. The good news was that people all over the world understood. The bad news was that getting it out did further

harm to the living victims, and Wise had trouble stomaching his occasional obligation to do that, however relevant it was to the all-important story.

“I do not know. We used to worship there in our house, but the police will not let me inside,” she told him.

“Can I help?” Wise offered, truly meaning it. “Sometimes the police will listen to people like us.” He gestured to them, all of twenty meters away. Quietly, to Pete Nichols: “Saddle up.”

How it looked to the cops was hard for the Americans to imagine, but the widow Yu walked toward them with this American black man in attendance and the white one with the camera close behind.

She started talking to the senior cop, with Wise’s microphone between the two of them, speaking calmly and politely, asking permission to enter her home.

The police sergeant shook his head in the universal *No, you cannot* gesture that needed no translation.

“Wait a minute. Mrs. Yu, could you please translate for me?” She nodded. “Sergeant, you know who I am and you know what I do, correct?” This generated a curt and none too friendly nod. “What is the reason for not allowing this lady to enter her own home?”

“ ‘I have my orders,’ ” Chun translated the reply.

“I see,” Wise responded. “Do you know that this will look bad for your country? People around the world will see this and feel it is improper.” Yu Chun duly translated this for the sergeant.

“ ‘I have my orders,’ ” he said again, through her, and it was plain that further discussion with a statue would have been equally productive.

“Perhaps if you called your superior,” Wise suggested, and to his surprise the Chinese cop leaped on it, lifting his portable radio and calling his station.

“ ‘My lieutenant come,’ ” Yu Chun translated. The sergeant was clearly relieved, now able to dump the situation on someone else, who answered directly to the captain at the station.

“Good, let’s go back to the truck and wait for him,” Wise suggested. Once there, Mrs. Yu lit up an unfiltered Chinese cigarette and tried to retain her composure. Nichols let the camera down, and everyone relaxed for a few minutes.

“How long were you married, ma’am?” Wise asked, with the camera shut off.

“Twenty-four years,” she answered.

“Children?”

“One son. He is away at school in America, University of Oklahoma. He study engineering,” Chun told the American crew.

“Pete,” Wise said quietly, “get the dish up and operating.”

“Right.” The cameraman ducked his head to go inside the van. There he switched on the uplink systems. Atop the van, the mini-dish turned fifty degrees in the horizontal and sixty degrees in the vertical, and saw the communications satellite they usually used in Beijing. When he had the signal on his indicator, he selected Channel Six again and used it to inform Atlanta that he was initiating a live feed from Beijing. With that, a home-office producer started monitoring the feed, and saw nothing. He might have succumbed to immediate boredom, but he knew Barry Wise was usually good for something, and didn’t go live unless there was a good reason for it. So, he leaned back in his comfortable swivel chair and sipped at his coffee, then notified the duty director in Master Control that there was a live signal inbound from Beijing, type and scope of story unknown. But the director, too, knew that Wise and his crew had sent in a possible Emmy-class story just two days earlier, and to the best of anyone’s knowledge, none of the majors was doing anything at all in Beijing at the moment—CNN tracked the communications-satellite traffic as assiduously as the National Security Agency, to see what the competition was doing.

More people started showing up at the Wen house/church. Some were startled to see the CNN truck, but when they saw Yu Chun there, they relaxed somewhat, trusting her to know what was happening. Showing up in ones and twos for the most part, there were soon thirty or so people, most of them holding what had to be Bibles, Wise thought, getting Nichols up and operating again, but this time with a live signal going up and down to Atlanta.

“This is Barry Wise in Beijing. We are outside the home of the Reverend Yu Fa An, the Baptist minister who died just two days ago along with Renato Cardinal DiMilo, the Papal Nuncio, or Vatican Ambassador to the People’s Republic. With me now is his widow, Yu Chun. She and the reverend were married for twenty-four years, and they have a son now studying at the University of Oklahoma at Norman. As you can imagine, this is not a pleasant time for Mrs. Yu, but it is all the more unpleasant since the local police will not allow her to enter her own home. The house also served as the church for their small congregation, and as you can see, the congregation has come together to pray for their departed spiritual leader, the Reverend Yu Fa An.

“But it does not appear that the local government is going to allow them to do so in their accustomed place of worship. I’ve spoken personally with the senior police official here. He has orders, he says, not to admit anyone into the house, not even Mrs. Yu, and it appears that he intends to follow those orders.” Wise walked to where the widow was.

“Mrs. Yu, will you be taking your husband’s body back to Taiwan for burial?” It wasn’t often that Wise allowed his face to show emotion, but the answer to this question grabbed him in a tender place.

“There will be no body. My husband—they take his body and burn it, and scatter the ashes in river,” Chun told the reporter, and saying it cracked both her composure and her voice.

“What?” Wise blurted. He hadn’t expected that any more than she had, and it showed on his face. “They cremated his body without your permission?”

"Yes," Chun gasped.

"And they're not even giving you the ashes to take home with you?"

"No, they scatter ashes in river, they tell me."

"Well" was all Wise could manage. He wanted to say something stronger, but as a reporter he was supposed to maintain some degree of objectivity, and so he couldn't say what he might have preferred to say. *Those barbarian cocksuckers.* Even the differences in culture didn't explain this one away.

It was then that the police lieutenant arrived on his bicycle. He walked at once to the sergeant, spoke to him briefly, then walked to where Yu Chun was.

"What is this?" he asked in Mandarin. He recoiled when the TV camera and microphone entered the conversation. *What is THIS?* his face demanded of the Americans.

"I wish to enter my house, but he won't let me," Yu Chun answered, pointing at the sergeant. "Why can't I go in my house?"

"Excuse me," Wise put in. "I am Barry Wise. I work for CNN. Do you speak English, sir?" he asked the cop.

"Yes, I do."

"And you are?"

"I am Lieutenant Rong."

He could hardly have picked a better name for the moment, Wise thought, not knowing that the literal meaning of this particular surname actually was *weapon.*

"Lieutenant Rong, I am Barry Wise of CNN. Do you know the reason for your orders?"

"This house is a place of political activity which is ordered closed by the city government."

"Political activity? But it's a private residence—a house, is it not?"

"It is a place of political activity," Rong persisted. "Unauthorized political activity," he added.

"I see. Thank you, Lieutenant." Wise backed off and started talking directly to the camera while Mrs. Yu went to her fellow church members. The camera traced her to one particular member, a heavyset person whose face proclaimed resolve of some sort. This one turned to the other parishioners and said something loud. Immediately, they all opened their Bibles. The overweight one flipped his open as well and started reading a passage. He did so loudly, and the other members of the congregation looked intently into their testaments, allowing the first man to take the lead.

Wise counted thirty-four people, about evenly divided between men and women. All had their heads down into their own Bibles, or those next to them. That's when he turned to see Lieutenant Rong's face. It twisted into a sort of curiosity at first, then came comprehension and outrage. Clearly, the

“political” activity for which the home had been declared off-limits was religious worship, and that the local government called it “political” activity was a further affront to Barry Wise’s sense of right and wrong. He reflected briefly that the news media had largely forgotten what communism really had been, but now it lay right here in front of him. The face of oppression had never been a pretty one. It would soon get uglier.

Wen Zhong, the restaurateur, was leading the ad-hoc service, going through the Bible but doing so in Mandarin, a language which the CNN crew barely comprehended. The thirty or so others flipped the pages in their Bibles when he did, following his scriptural readings very carefully, in the way of Baptist, and Wise started wondering if this corpulent chap might be taking over the congregation right before his eyes. If so, the guy seemed sincere enough, and that above all was the quality a clergyman needed. Yu Chun headed over to him, and he reached out to put his arm around her shoulder in a gesture that didn’t seem Chinese at all. That was when she lost it and started weeping, which hardly seemed shameful. Here was a woman married over twenty years who’d lost her husband in a particularly cruel way, then doubly insulted by a government which had gone so far as to destroy his body, thus denying her even the chance to look upon her beloved’s face one last time, or the chance to have a small plot of ground to visit.

These people are barbarians, Wise thought, knowing he couldn’t say such a thing in front of the camera, and angry for that reason, but his profession had rules and he didn’t break them. But he did have a camera, and the camera showed things that mere words could not convey.

Unknown to the news crew, Atlanta had put their feed on live, with voice-over commentary from CNN headquarters because they hadn’t managed to get Barry Wise’s attention on the side-band audio circuit. The signal went up to the satellite, then down to Atlanta, and back up to a total of four orbiting birds, then it came down all over the world, and one of the places it came to was Beijing.

The members of the Chinese Politburo all had televisions in their offices, and all of them had access to the American CNN, which was for them a prime source of political intelligence. It came down also to the various hotels in the city, crowded as they were with businessmen and other visitors, and even some Chinese citizens had access to it, especially businesspeople who conducted their affairs both within and without the People’s Republic and needed to know what was happening in the outside world.

In his office, Fang Gan looked up from his desk to the TV that was always kept on while he was there. He lifted the controller to get the sound, and heard English, with some Chinese language in the background that he could not quite understand. His English wasn’t very good, and he called Ming into his office to translate.

“Minister, this is coverage of something right here in Beijing,” she told him first of all.

“I can see that, girl!” he snapped back at her. “What is being said?”

“Ah, yes. It is associates of the man Yu who was shot by the police two days ago ... also his widow ... this is evidently a funeral ceremony of some sort—oh, they say that Yu’s body was cremated and scattered, and so his widow has nothing to bury, and that explains her added grief, they say.”

“What lunatic did that?” Fang wondered aloud. He was not by nature a very compassionate man, but a wise man did not go out of his way to be cruel, either. “Go on, girl!”

“They are reading from the Christian Bible, I can’t make out the words, the English speaker is blanking them out ... the narrator is mainly repeating himself, saying ... ah, yes, saying they are trying to establish contact with their reporter Wise here in Beijing but they are having technical difficulties ... just repeating what he has already said, a memorial ceremony for the man Yu, friends ... no, members of his worship group, and that is all, really. They are now repeating what happened before at the Longfu hospital, commenting also on the Italian churchman whose body will soon arrive back in Italy.”

Fang grumbled and lifted his phone, calling for the Interior Minister.

“Turn on your TV!” he told his Politburo colleague at once. “You need to get control of this situation, but do so intelligently! This could be ruinous for us, the worst since those foolish students at Tiananmen Square.”

Ming saw her boss grimace before setting the phone down and mutter, *“Fool!”* after he did so, then shake his head with a mixture of anger and sorrow.

“That will be all, Ming,” he told her, after another minute.

His secretary went back to her desk and computer, wondering what was happening with the aftermath of the man Yu’s death. Certainly it had seemed sad at the time, a singularly pointless pair of deaths which had upset and offended her minister for their stupidity. He’d even advocated punishing the trigger-happy policemen, but that suggestion had come to nothing, for fear of losing face for their country. With that thought, she shrugged and went back to her daily work.

The word from the Interior Minister went out fast, but Barry Wise couldn’t see that. It took another minute for him to hear the voices from Atlanta on his IFB earphone. Immediately thereafter, he went live on audio and started again to do his own on-the-scene commentary for a global audience. He kept turning his head while Pete Nichols centered the video on this rump religious meeting in a narrow, dirty street. Wise saw the police lieutenant talk into his portable radio—it looked like a Motorola, just like American cops used. He talked, listened, talked again, then got something confirmed. With that, he holstered the radio and came walking directly to the CNN reporter. There was

determination on his face, a look Wise didn't welcome, all the more so that on the way over, this Lieutenant Rong spoke discreetly with his men, who turned in the same direction, staying still but with a similar look of determination on their faces as they flexed their muscles in preparation for something.

"You must turn camera off," Rong told Wise.

"Excuse me?"

"Camera, turn off," the police lieutenant repeated.

"Why?" Wise asked, his mind going immediately into race mode.

"Orders," Rong explained tersely.

"What orders?"

"Orders from police headquarter," Rong said further.

"Oh, okay," Wise replied. Then he held out his hand.

"Turn off camera now!" Lieutenant Rong insisted, wondering what the extended hand was all about.

"Where is the order?"

"What?"

"I cannot turn my camera off without a written order. It is a rule for my company. Do you have a written order?"

"No," Rong said, suddenly nonplussed.

"And the order must be signed by a captain. A major would be better, but it must be a captain at least to sign the order," Wise went on. "It is a rule of my company."

"Ah," Rong managed to say next. It was as if he'd walked headfirst into an invisible wall. He shook his head, as though to shake off the force of a physical impact, and walked five meters away, pulling out his radio again to report to someone elsewhere. The exchange took about a minute, then Rong came back. "Order come soon," the lieutenant informed the American.

"Thank you," Wise responded, with a polite smile and half bow. Lieutenant Rong went off again, looking somewhat confused until he grouped his men together. He had instructions to carry out now, and they were instructions he and they understood, which was usually a good feeling for citizens of the PRC, especially those in uniform.

"Trouble, Barry," Nichols said, turning the camera toward the cops. He'd caught the discussion of the written order, and managed to keep his face straight only by biting his tongue hard. Barry had a way of confounding people. He'd even done it to presidents more than once.

"I see it. Keep rolling," Wise replied off-mike. Then to Atlanta: "Something's going to happen here, and I don't like the looks of it. The police appear to have gotten an order from someone. As you just heard, they asked us to turn our camera off and we managed to refuse the request until we get a written order from a superior police official, in keeping with CNN policy," Wise went

on, knowing that someone in Beijing was watching this. The thing about communists, he knew, was that they were maniacally organized, and found a request in writing to be completely reasonable, however crazy it might appear to an outsider. The only question now, he knew, was whether they'd follow their verbal radioed order before the draft for the CNN crew came. Which priority came first ... ?

The immediate priority, of course, was maintaining order in their own city. The cops took out their batons and started heading toward the Baptists.

"Where do I stand, Barry?" Pete Nichols asked.

"Not too close. Make sure you can sweep the whole playing field," Wise ordered.

"Gotcha," the cameraman responded.

They tracked Lieutenant Rong right up to Wen Zhong, where a verbal order was given, and just as quickly rejected. The order was given again. The shotgun mike on the camera just barely caught the reply for the third iteration:

"Diao ren, chou ni ma di be!" the overweight Chinese shouted into the face of the police official. Whatever the imprecation meant, it made a few eyes go wide among the worshippers. It also earned Wen a smashed cheekbone from Rong's personal baton. He fell to his knees, blood already streaming from the ripped skin, but then Wen struggled back to his feet, turned his back on the cop, and turned to yet another page in his Bible. Nichols changed position so that he could zoom in on the testament, and the blood dripping onto the pages.

Having the man turn his back to him only enraged Lieutenant Rong more. His next swing came down on the back of Wen's head. That one buckled his knees, but amazingly failed to drop him. This time, Rong grabbed his shoulder with his left hand and spun him about, and the third blow from the baton rammed directly into the man's solar plexus. That sort of blow will fell a professional boxer, and it did so to this restaurateur. A blink later, he was on his knees, one hand holding his Bible, the other grasping at his upper abdomen.

By this time, the other cops were moving in on the remainder of the crowd, swinging their own nightsticks at people who cringed but didn't run. Yu Chun was the first of them. Not a tall woman even by Chinese standards, she took the full force of a blow squarely in the face, which broke her nose and shot blood out as though from a garden sprinkler.

It didn't take long. There were thirty-four parishioners and twelve cops, and the Christians didn't resist effectively, not so much because of their religious beliefs as because of their societal conditioning not to resist the forces of order in their culture. And so, uniformly they stood, and uniformly they took the blows with no more defense than a cringe, and uniformly they collapsed to the street with bleeding faces. The policemen withdrew almost immediately, as though to display their work to the CNN camera, which duly took the shots

and transmitted them around the world in a matter of seconds.

"You getting this?" Wise asked Atlanta.

"Blood and all, Barry," the director replied, from his swivel chair at CNN headquarters. "Tell Nichols I owe him a beer."

"Roger that."

"It seems that the local police had orders to break up this religious meeting, which they regard as something of a political nature, and politically threatening to their government. As you can see, none of these people are armed, and none resisted the attack by the police in any way. Now—" He paused on seeing another bicycle speed its way up the street to where they were. A uniformed cop jumped off and handed something to Lieutenant Rong. This the lieutenant carried to Barry Wise.

"Here order. Turn camera off!" he demanded.

"Please, allow me to look at the order," Wise replied, so angry at what he'd just seen that he was willing to risk a cracked head of his own, just so Pete got it up to the satellite. He scanned the page and handed it back. "I cannot read this. Please excuse me," he went on, deliberately baiting the man and wondering exactly where the limits were, "but I cannot read your language."

It looked as though Rong's eyes would pop out of his head. "It say here, turn camera off!"

"But I can't read it, and neither can my company," Wise responded, keeping his voice entirely reasonable.

Rong saw the camera and microphone were both pointed his way, and now he realized that he was being had, and had badly. But he also knew he had to play the game. "It say here, must turn camera off now." Rong's fingers traced the page from one symbol to another.

"Okay, I guess you're telling me the truth." Wise stood erect and turned to face the camera. "Well, as you have just seen, we've been ordered by the local police to cease transmission from this place. To summarize, the widow of the Reverend Yu Fa An and members of his congregation came here today to pray for their departed pastor. It turns out that Reverend Yu's body was cremated and his ashes scattered. His widow, Yu Chun, was denied access to her home by the police because of alleged improper 'political' activity, by which I guess they mean religious worship, and as you just saw, the local police attacked and clubbed members of the congregation. And now we're being chased away, too. Atlanta, this is Barry Wise, reporting live from Beijing." Five seconds later, Nichols dropped the camera off his shoulder and turned to stow it in the truck. Wise looked back down at the police lieutenant and smiled politely, thinking, *You can shove this up your skinny little ass, Gomer!* But he'd done his job, getting the story out. The rest was in the hands of the world.

CHAPTER 31

The Protection of Rights

CNN transmits its news coverage twenty-four hours a day to satellite dishes all over the world, and so the report from the streets of Beijing was noted not only by the American intelligence services, but by accountants, housewives, and insomniacs. Of the last group, a goodly number had access to personal computers, and being insomniacs, many of them also knew the e-mail address for the White House. E-mail had almost overnight replaced telegrams as the method of choice for telling the U.S. government what you thought, and was a medium which they appeared to heed, or at least to read, count, and catalog. The latter was done in a basement office in the Old Executive Office Building, the OEOB, the Victorian monstrosity immediately to the west of The House. The people who ran this particular office reported directly to Arnold van Damm, and it was actually rather a thorough and well-organized measure of American public opinion, since they also had electronic access to every polling organization in the country—and, indeed, the entire world. It saved money for the White House not to conduct its own polling, which was useful, since this White House didn't really have a political office per se, somewhat to the despair of the Chief of Staff. Nevertheless, he ran that part of White House operations himself, and largely uncompensated. Arnie didn't mind. For him, politics was as natural as breathing, and he'd decided to serve this President faithfully long before, especially since serving him so often meant protecting him from himself and his frequently stunning political ineptitude.

The data which started arriving just after midnight, however, didn't require a political genius to understand it. Quite a few of the e-mails had actual names attached—not mere electronic "handles"—and a lot of them were **DEMANDING!!!** action. Arnie would remark later in the day that he hadn't known that so many Baptists were computer-literate, something he reproached himself for even thinking.

In the same building, the White House Office of Signals duly made a high-quality tape of the report and had it walked to the Oval Office. Elsewhere in the world, the CNN report from Beijing arrived at breakfast time, causing more than a few people to set their coffee (or tea) cups down immediately before a groan of anger. *That* occasioned brief dispatches from American embassies around the world, informing the Department of State that various foreign governments had reacted adversely to the story on CNN, and that various PRC embassies had found demonstrators outside their gates, some of them quite vociferous. This information rapidly found its way to the Diplomatic Protection Service, the State Department agency tasked with the

job of securing foreign diplomats and their embassies. Calls went out from there to the D.C. police to increase the uniformed presence near the PRC's various missions to America, and to arrange a rapid backup should any similar problems develop right here in Washington.

By the time Ben Goodley awoke and drove over to Langley for his morning briefing, the American intelligence community had pretty well diagnosed the problem. As Ryan had so colorfully said it himself, the PRC had stepped very hard on the old crank with the golf shoes, and even they would soon feel the pain. This would prove to be a gross understatement.

The good news for Goodley, if you could call it that, was that Ryan invariably had his breakfast-room TV tuned to CNN, and was fully aware of the new crisis before putting on his starched white button-down shirt and striped tie. Even kissing his wife and kids on their way out of The House that morning couldn't do much to assuage his anger at the incomprehensible stupidity of those people on the other side of the world.

"God damn it, Ben!" POTUS snarled when Goodley came into the Oval Office.

"Hey, Boss, *I* didn't do it!" the National Security Adviser protested, surprised at the President's vehemence.

"What do we know?"

"Essentially, you've seen it all. The widow of the poor bastard who got his brains blown out the other day came to Beijing hoping to bring his body back to Taiwan for burial. She found out that the body had been cremated, and the ashes disposed of. The local cops would not let her back into her house, and when some members of the parish came by to hold a prayer service, the local cops decided to break it up." He didn't have to say that the attack on the widow had been caught with particular excellence by the CNN cameraman, to the point that Cathy Ryan had commented upstairs that the woman definitely had a broken nose, and possibly worse, and would probably need a good maxillary surgeon to put her face back together. Then she'd asked her husband why the cops would hate anyone so much.

"She believes in God, I suppose," Ryan had replied in the breakfast room.

"Jack, this is like something out of Nazi Germany, something from that History Channel stuff you like to watch." And doctor or not, she'd cringed at the tape of the attacks on Chinese citizens armed only with Bibles.

"I've seen it, too," van Damm said, arriving in the Oval Office. "And we're getting a flood of responses from the public."

"Fuckin' barbarians," Ryan swore, as Robby Jackson came in to complete the morning's intelligence-briefing audience.

"You can hang a big roger on that one, Jack. Damn, I know Pap's going to see this, too, and today's the day for him to do the memorial service at Gerry

Patterson's church. It's going to be epic, Jack. Epic," the Vice President promised.

"And CNN's going to be there?"

"Bet your bippy, My Lord President," Robby confirmed.

Ryan turned to his Chief of Staff. "Okay, Arnie, I'm listening."

"No, *I'm* the one listening, Jack," van Damm replied. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I have to talk to the public about this. Press conference, maybe. As far as action goes, I'll start by saying that we have a huge violation of human rights, all the more so that they had the fucking arrogance to do it in front of world opinion. I'll say that America has trouble doing business with people who act in this way, that commercial ties do not justify or cancel out gross violations of the principles on which our country is founded, that we have to reconsider all of our relations with the PRC."

"Not bad," the Chief of Staff observed, with a teacher's smile to a bright pupil. "Check with Scott for other options and ideas."

"Yeah." Jack nodded. "Okay, broader question, how will the country react to this?"

"The initial response will be outrage," Arnie replied. "It looks bad on TV, and that's how most people will respond, from the gut. If the Chinese have the good sense to make some kind of amends, then it'll settle down. If not"—Arnie frowned importantly—"I have a bad feeling. The church groups are going to raise hell. They've offended the Italian and German governments—so our NATO allies are also pissed off at this—and smashing that poor woman's face isn't going to win them any friends in the women's rights movement. This whole business is a colossal loser for them, but I'm not sure they understand the implications of their actions."

"Then they're going to learn, the easy way or the hard way," Goodley suggested to the group.

Dr. Alan Gregory always seemed to stay at the same Marriott overlooking the Potomac, under the air approach to Reagan National Airport. He'd again taken the red-eye in from Los Angeles, a flight which hadn't exactly improved with practice over the years. Arriving, he took a cab to the hotel for a shower and a change of clothes, which would enable him to feel and look vaguely human for his 10:15 with the SecDef. For this at least, he would not need a taxi. Dr. Bretano was sending a car for him. The car duly arrived with an Army staff sergeant driving, and Gregory hopped in the back, to find a newspaper. It took only ten minutes to pull up to the River Entrance, where an Army major waited to escort him through the metal detector and onto the E-ring.

"You know the Secretary?" the officer asked on the way in.

“Oh, yeah, from a short distance, anyway.”

He had to wait half a minute in an anteroom, but only half a minute.

“Al, grab a seat. Coffee?”

“Yes, thank you, Dr. Bretano.”

“Tony,” the SecDef corrected. He wasn’t a formal man most of the time, and he knew the sort of work Gregory was capable of. A Navy steward got coffee for both men, along with croissants and jam, then withdrew. “How was the flight?”

“The red-eye never changes, sir—Tony. If you get off alive, they haven’t done it right.”

“Yeah, well, one nice thing about this job, I have a G waiting for me all the time. I don’t have to walk or drive very much, and you saw the security detail outside.”

“The guys with the knuckles dragging on the floor?” Gregory asked.

“Be nice. One of them went to Princeton before he became a SEAL.”

That must be the one who reads the comic books to the others, Al didn’t observe out loud. “So, Tony, what did you want me here for?”

“You used to work downstairs in SDIO, as I recall.”

“Seven years down there, working in the dark with the rest of the mushrooms, and it never really worked out. I was in the free-electron-laser project. It went pretty well, except the damned lasers never scaled up the way we expected, even after we stole what the Russians were doing. They had the best laser guy in the world, by the way. Poor bastard got killed in a rock-climbing accident back in 1990, or that’s what we heard in SDIO. He was bashing his head against the same wall our guys were. The ‘wiggle chamber,’ we called it, where you lase the hot gasses to extract the energy for your beam. We could never get a stable magnetic containment. They tried everything. I helped for nineteen months. There were some really smart guys working that problem, but we all struck out. I think the guys at Princeton will solve the fusion-containment problem before this one. We looked at that, too, but the problems were too different to copy the theoretical solutions. We ended up giving them a lot of our ideas, and they’ve been putting it to good use. Anyway, the Army made me a lieutenant colonel, and three weeks later, they offered me an early out because they didn’t have any more use for me, and so I took the job at TRW that Dr. Flynn offered, and I’ve been working for you ever since.” And so Gregory was getting eighty percent of his twenty-year Army pension, plus half a million a year from TRW as a section leader, with stock options, and one hell of a retirement package.

“Well, Gerry Flynn sings your praises about once a week.”

“He’s a good man to work for,” Gregory replied, with a smile and a nod.

“He says you can do software better than anyone in Sunnyvale.”

“For some things. I didn’t do the code for ‘Doom,’ unfortunately, but I’m still

your man for adaptive optics."

"How about SAMs?"

Gregory nodded. "I did some of that when I was new in the Army. Then later they had me in to play with Patriot Block-4, you know, intercepting Scuds. I helped out on the warhead software." It had been three days too late to be used in the Persian Gulf War, he didn't add, but his software was now standard on all Patriot missiles in the field.

"Excellent. I want you to look over something for me. It'll be a direct contract for the Office of the Secretary of Defense—me—and Gerry Flynn won't gripe about it."

"What's that, Tony?"

"Find out if the Navy's Aegis system can intercept a ballistic inbound."

"It can. It'll stop a Scud, but that's only Mach three or so. You mean a *real* ballistic inbound?"

The SecDef nodded. "Yeah, an ICBM."

"There's been talk about that for years..." Gregory sipped his coffee. "The radar system is up to it. May be a slight software issue there, but it would not be a hard one, because you'll be getting raid-warning from other assets, and the SPY radar can see a good five hundred miles, and you can do all sorts of things with it electronically, like blast out seven million watts of RF down half a degree of bearing. That'll fry electronic components out to, oh, seven or eight thousand meters. You'll end up having two-headed kids, and have to buy a new watch.

"Okay," he went on, a slightly spacey look in his eyes. "The way Aegis works, the big SPY radar gives you a rough location for your target-interception, so you can loft your SAMs into a box. That's why Aegis missiles get such great range. They go out on autopilot and only do actual maneuvering for the last few seconds. For that, you have the SPG radars on the ships, and the seeker-head on the missile tracks in on the reflected RF energy off the target. It's a killer system against airplanes, because you don't know you're being illuminated until the last couple of seconds, and it's hard to eyeball the missile and evade in so short a time.

"Okay, but for an ICBM, the terminal velocity is way the hell up there, like twenty-five thousand feet per second, like Mach eleven. That means your targeting window is very small ... in all dimensions, but especially depth. Also you're talking a fairly hard, robust target. The RV off an ICBM is fairly sturdy, not tissue paper like the boosters are. I'll have to see if the warhead off a SAM will really hurt one of those." The eyes cleared and he looked directly into Bretano's eyes. "Okay, when do I start?"

"Commander Matthews," THUNDER said into his intercom phone. "Dr. Gregory is ready to talk to the Aegis people. Keep me posted, Al" was Bretano's final order.

"You bet."

The Reverend Doctor Hosiah Jackson donned his best robe of black silk, a gift handmade by the ladies of his congregation, the three stripes on the upper arms designating his academic rank. He was in Gerry Patterson's study, and a nice one it was. Outside the white wooden door was his congregation, all of them well-dressed and fairly prosperous white folks, some of whom would be slightly uncomfortable with having a black minister talk to them—Jesus was white, after all (or Jewish, which was almost the same thing). This was a little different, though, because this day they were remembering the life of someone only Gerry Patterson had ever met, a Chinese Baptist named Yu Fa An, whom their minister had called Skip, and whose congregation they had supported and supported generously for years. And so to commemorate the life of a yellow minister, they would sit through the sermon of a black one while their own pastor preached the gospel in a black church. *It was a fine gesture on Gerry's part,* Hosiah Jackson thought, hoping it wouldn't get him into any trouble with this congregation. *There'd be a few out there, their bigoted thoughts invisible behind their self-righteous faces, but,* the Reverend Jackson admitted to himself, *they'd be tortured souls because of it.* Those times had passed. He remembered them better than white Mississippians did because he'd been the one walking in the streets—he'd been arrested seven times during his work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—and getting his parishioners registered to vote. That had been the real problem with the rednecks. Riding in a municipal bus was no big deal, but voting meant power, real civic power, the ability to elect the people who made the laws which would be enforced on black and white citizens alike, and the rednecks hadn't liked that at all. But times had changed, and now they accepted the inevitable—*after* it had come to pass—and they'd learned to deal with it, and they'd also learned to vote Republican instead of Democrat, and the amusing part of *that* to Hosiah Jackson was that his own son Robert was more conservative than these well-dressed rednecks were, and *he'd* gone pretty far for the son of a colored preacherman in central Mississippi. But it was time. Patterson, like Jackson, had a large mirror on the back of the door so that he could check his appearance on the way out. Yes, he was ready. He looked solemn and authoritative, as the Voice of God was supposed to look.

The congregation was already singing. They had a fine organ here, a real hundred-horsepower one, not the electronic kind he had at his church, but the singing ... they couldn't help it. They sang white, and there was no getting around it. The singing had all the proper devotion, but not the exuberant passion that he was accustomed to ... but he'd love to have that organ, Hosiah decided. The pulpit was finely appointed, with a bottle of ice water, and a microphone provided by the CNN crew, who were discreetly in both back comers of the church and not making any trouble, *which was unusual for news crews,* Reverend Jackson thought. His last thought before beginning was that the only other black man to stand in this pulpit before this moment was the man who'd painted the woodwork.

"Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. I am Hosiah Jackson. You all

probably know where my church is. I am here today at the invitation of my good friend and colleague, your pastor, Gerry Patterson.

"Gerry has the advantage over me today, because, unlike me, and I gather unlike any person in the church, he actually knew the man whom we are here to remember.

"To me, Yu Fa An was just a pen pal. Some years ago, Gerry and I had occasion to talk about the ministry. We met in the chapel at the local hospital. It'd been a bad day for both of us. We'd both lost good people that day, at about the same time, and to the same disease, cancer, and both of us needed to sit in the hospital chapel. I guess we both needed to ask God the same question. It's the question all of us have asked—why is there such cruelty in the world, why does a loving and merciful God permit it?

"Well, the answer to that question is found in Scripture, and in many places. Jesus Himself lamented the loss of innocent life, and one of his miracles was the raising of Lazarus from the dead, both to show that He was indeed the Son of God, and also to show His humanity, to show how much He cared about the loss of a good man.

"But Lazarus, like our two parishioners that day in the hospital, had died from disease, and when God made the world, He made it in such a way that there were, and there still are, things that need fixing. The Lord God told us to take dominion over the world, and part of that was God's desire for us to cure disease, to fix *all* the broken parts and so to bring perfection to the world, even as, by following God's Holy Word, we can bring perfection to ourselves.

"Gerry and I had a good talk that day, and that was the beginning of our friendship, as all ministers of the Gospel ought to be friends, because we preach the same Gospel from the same God.

"The next week we were talking again, and Gerry told me about his friend Skip. A man from the other side of the world, a man from a place where the religious traditions do not know Jesus. Well, Skip learned about all that at Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma, the same as many others, and he learned it so well that he thought long and hard and decided to join the ministry and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ..."

Skip's skin was a different color than mine," Gerry Patterson was saying in another pulpit less than two miles away. "But in God's eyes, we are all the same, because the Lord Jesus looks through our skin into our hearts and our souls, and He always knows what's in there."

"That's right," a man's voice agreed in the congregation.

"And so, Skip became a minister of the Gospel. Instead of returning to his native land, where freedom of religion is something their government protects, Skip decided to keep flying west, into communist China. Why there?"

Patterson asked. “Why there indeed! The other China does not have freedom of religion. The other China refuses to admit that there is such a thing as God. The other China is like the Philistines of the Old Testament, the people who persecuted the Jews of Moses and Joshua, the enemies of God Himself. Why did Skip do this? Because he knew that no other place needed to hear the Word of God more than those people, and that Jesus wants us to preach to the heathen, to bring His Holy Word to those whose souls cry out for it, and this he did. No United States Marine storming the shores of Iwo Jima showed more courage than Skip did, carrying his Bible into Red China and starting to preach the Gospel in a land where religion is a crime.”

And we must not forget that there was another man there, a Catholic cardinal, an old unmarried man from a rich and important family who long ago decided on his own to join the clergy of his church,” Jackson reminded those before him. ”His name was Renato, a name as foreign to us as Fa An, but despite that, he was a man of God who also took the Word of Jesus to the land of the heathen.

“When the government of that country found out about Reverend Yu, they took Skip’s job away. They hoped to *starve* him out, but the people who made that decision didn’t know Skip. They didn’t know Jesus, and they didn’t know about the faithful, did they?”

“Hell, no!” replied a white male voice from the pews, and that’s when Hosiah knew he had them.

“No, sir! That’s when your Pastor Gerry found out and that’s when you good people started sending help to Skip Yu, to support the man his godless government was trying to destroy, because they didn’t know that people of faith share a *commitment* to justice!”

Patterson’s arm shot out. “And Jesus pointed and said, see that woman there, she gives from her *need,* not from her riches. It takes more for a poor man or a poor woman to give than it does for a rich man to do it. *That* was when you good people began helping my congregation to support my friend Skip. And Jesus also said that which you do for the least of My brethren you do also unto Me. And so your church and my church helped this man, this lonely minister of the Gospel in the land of the pagans, those people who *deny* the Name and Word of God, those people who worship the corpse of a monster named Mao, who put his embalmed body on display as though it were the body of a saint! He was no saint. He was no man of God. He was hardly a man at all. He was a mass murderer worse than anything our country has ever seen. He was like the Hitler that our fathers fought to destroy sixty years ago. But to the people who run that country, that killer, that murderer, that destroyer of life and freedom is the new god. That ‘god’ is *false,”* Patterson told them, with passion entering his voice. “That ‘god’ is the voice of Satan. That ‘god’ is the mouthpiece for the fires of Hell. That ‘god’ was the

incarnation of evil—and that 'god' is dead, and now he's a stuffed animal, like the dead bird you might see over the bar in a saloon, or the deer head a lot of you have in your den—and they still worship him. They *still* honor his word, and they *still* revere his beliefs—the beliefs that *killed* millions of people just because their false god didn't like them." Patterson stood erect and brushed his hair back.

"There are those who say that what evil we see in the world is just the absence of good. But we know better than that. There is a devil in creation, and that devil has agents among us, and some of those agents run countries! Some of those agents start wars. Some of those agents take innocent people from their homes and put them in camps and murder them there like cattle in a slaughterhouse. Those are the agents of Satan! Those are the devotees of the Prince of Darkness. They are those among us who take the lives of the innocent, even the lives of innocent little babies ..."

And so, those three men of God went to the hospital. One of them, our friend Skip, went to assist his parishioner in her time of need. The other two, the Catholics, went because they, too, were men of God, and they, too, stood for the same things that we do, *because the Word of Jesus IS THE SAME FOR ALL OF US*!" Hosiah Jackson's voice boomed out.

"Yes, sir," the same white voice agreed, and there were nods in the congregation.

"And so those three men of God went to the hospital to save the life of a little baby, a little baby that the government of that heathen land wanted to kill—and why? They wanted to kill it because its mother and father believe in God—and, oh, no, they couldn't allow people like that to bring a child into the world! Oh, no, they couldn't allow people of faith to bring a child into their country, because that was like inviting in a spy. That was a danger to their godless government. And why is it a danger?

"It's a *danger* because they *know* that they are godless pagans! It's a *danger* because they *know* that God's Holy Word is the most powerful force in the world! And their only response to that kind of danger is to kill, to take the life that God Himself gives to each of us, because in denying God, they can also deny life, and you know, those pagans, those unbelievers, those killers *love* to have that kind of power. They *love* pretending that *they* are gods. They love their power, and they love using it in the service of Satan! They know they are destined to spend eternity in Hell, and they want to share their Hell with us here on earth, and they want to deny to us the only thing that can liberate us from the destiny they have chosen for themselves. *That* is why they condemned that innocent little baby to death.

"And when those three men went to the hospital to preserve the life of that innocent baby, they stood in God's own place. They took God's place, but they

did so in humility and in the strength of their faith. They stood in *God's* place to fulfill *God's* will, not to get power for themselves, not to be false heroes. They went there to serve, not to rule. To serve, as the Lord Jesus Himself served. As his apostles served. They went there to protect an innocent life. They went there to do the Lord God's work!"

You people probably don't know this, but when I was first ordained I spent three years in the United States Navy, and I served as a chaplain to the Marines. I was assigned to the Second Marine Division at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. When I was there, I got to know people we call heroes, and for sure a lot of Marines fall into that category. I was there to minister to the dead and dying after a terrible helicopter crash, and it was one of the great honors of my life to be there and to comfort dying young Marines—be—cause I *knew* they were going to see God. I remember one, a sergeant, the man had just gotten married a month before, and he died while he was saying a prayer to God for his wife. He was a veteran of Vietnam, that sergeant, and he had lots of decorations. He was what we call a tough guy," Patterson told the black congregation, "but the toughest thing about that Marine was that when he knew he was going to die, he prayed not for himself, but for his young wife, that God would comfort her. That Marine died as a Christian man, and he went from this world to stand proud before his God as a man who did his duty in every way he could.

"Well, so did Skip, and so did Renato. They sacrificed their lives to save a baby. God sent them. God gave those men their orders. And they heard the orders, and they followed them without flinching, without hesitating, without thinking except to be sure that they were doing the right thing.

"And today, eight thousand miles from here there is a new life, a new little baby, probably asleep now. That baby will never know all the hubbub that came just before she was born, but with parents like that, that baby will know the Word of God. And all that happened because three brave men of God went to that hospital, and two of them died there to do the Lord's Work.

"Skip was a Baptist. Renato was a Catholic.

"Skip was yellow. I'm white. You people are black.

"But Jesus doesn't care about any of that. We have all heard His words. We have all accepted Him as our Savior. So did Skip. So did Renato. Those two brave men sacrificed their lives for The Right. The Catholic's last words—he asked if the baby was okay, and the other Catholic, the German priest, said 'yes,' and Renato said, *'Bene.'* That's Italian. It means, 'That's good, that's all right.' He died knowing that he did the right thing, And that's not a bad thing, is it?"

"That's right!" three voices called out.

There is so much to learn from their example," Hosiah Jackson told his borrowed congregation.

"We must learn, first of all, that God's Word is the same for all of us. I'm a black man. You folks are white. Skip was Chinese. In that we are all different, but in God's Holy Word we are all the same. Of all the things we have to learn, of all the things we have to keep in our hearts every day we live, that is the most important. Jesus is Savior to us all, if only we accept Him, if only we take Him into our hearts, if only we listen when He talks to us. That is the first lesson we need to learn from the death of those two brave men.

"The next lesson we need to learn is that Satan is still alive out there, and while we must listen to the words of God, there are those out there who prefer to listen to the words of Lucifer. We need to recognize those people for what they are.

"Forty years ago, we had some of those people among us. I remember it, and probably you do, too. We got over all that. The reason we got over it is that we have all heard the Word of God. We've all remembered that our God is a God of Mercy. Our God is a God of Justice. If we remember that, we remember a lot more besides. God does not measure us by what we are against. Jesus looks into our hearts and measures us by what we are *for*.

"But we cannot be *for* justice except by being against *in*justice. We must remember Skip and Renato. We must remember Mr. and Mrs. Yang, and all like them, those people in China who've been denied the chance to hear the Word of God. The sons of Lucifer are *afraid* of God's Holy Word. The sons of Lucifer are *afraid* of us. The sons of Satan are *afraid* of God's Will, because in God's Love and in the Way of the Lord lies their destruction. They may hate God. They may hate God's word—but they *fear,* they *FEAR* the consequences of their own actions. They fear the damnation that awaits them. They may *deny* God, but they know the *righteousness* of God, and they know that every human soul cries out for knowledge of our Lord.

"That's why they feared Reverend Yu Fa An. That's why they feared Cardinal DiMilo, and that's why they fear us. Me and you good people. Those sons of Satan are *afraid* of us because they know that their words and their false beliefs can no more stand up to the Word of God than a house trailer can stand before a springtime tornado! And they know that all men are born with some knowledge of God's Holy Word. That's why they fear us.

"Good!" Reverend Hosiah Jackson exclaimed. "Then let's give them another reason to fear us! Let God's faithful show them the power and the conviction of our faith!"

But we can be sure that God was there with Skip, and with Cardinal DiMilo. God directed their brave hands, and through them God saved that innocent little child," Patterson told his black congregation. "And God welcomed to his bosom the two men He sent there to do His work, and today our friend Skip

and Cardinal DiMilo stand proudly before the Lord God, those good and faithful servants of His Holy Word.

"My friends, they did their job. They did the Lord's work that day. They saved the life of an innocent child. They showed the whole world what the power of faith can be.

"But what of our job?" Patterson asked.

It is *not* the job of the faithful to encourage Satan," Hosiah Jackson told the people before him. He'd captured their attention as surely as Lord Olivier on his best day—and why not? These were not the words of Shakespeare. These were the words of one of God's ministers. "When Jesus looks into our hearts, will He see people who support the sons of Lucifer? Will Jesus see people who give their money to support the godless killers of the innocent? Will Jesus see people who give their money to the new *Hitler?"*

"No!" A female voice shouted in reply. *"No!"*

"What is it that we, we the people of God, the people of faith—what is it that we stand for? When the sons of Lucifer kill the faithful, where do *you* stand? Will you stand for justice? Will you stand for your faith? Will you stand with the holy martyrs? Will you stand with Jesus?" Jackson demanded of his borrowed white congregation.

And as one voice, they answered him: *"Yes!"*

Jesus H. Christ," Ryan said. He'd walked over to the Vice President's office to catch the TV coverage.

"Told you my Pap was good at this stuff. Hell, I grew up with it over the dinner table, and he still gets inside my head," said Robby Jackson, wondering if he'd allow himself a drink tonight. "Patterson is probably doing okay, too. Pap says he's an okay guy, but my Pap is the champ."

"Did he ever think of becoming a Jesuit?" Jack asked with a grin.

"Pap's a preacherman, but he ain't quite a saint. The celibacy would be kinda hard on him," Robby answered.

Then the scene changed to Leonardo di Vinci International Airport outside Rome, where the Alitalia 747 had just landed and was now pulling up to the jetway. Below it was a truck, and next to the truck some cars belonging to the Vatican. It had already been announced that Renato Cardinal DiMilo would be getting his own full state funeral at St. Peter's Basilica, and CNN would be there to cover all of it, joined by SkyNews, Fox, and all the major networks. They'd been late getting onto the story at the beginning, but that only made this part of the coverage more full.

Back in Mississippi, Hosiah Jackson walked slowly down from the pulpit as the last hymn ended. He walked with grace and dignity to the front door, so as to greet all of the congregation members on the way out.

That took much longer than he'd expected. It seemed that every single one of them wanted to take his hand and thank him for coming—the degree of hospitality was well in excess of his most optimistic expectations. And there was no doubting their sincerity. Some insisted on talking for a few moments, until the press of the departing crowd forced them down the steps and onto the parking lot. Hosiah counted six invitations to dinner, and ten inquiries about his church, and if it needed any special work. Finally, there was just one man left, pushing seventy, with scraggly gray hair and a hooked nose that had seen its share of whiskey bottles. He looked like a man who'd topped out as assistant foreman at the sawmill.

"Hello," Jackson said agreeably.

"Pastor," the man replied, uneasily, as though wanting to say more.

It was a look Hosiah had seen often enough. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Pastor ... years ago ..." And his voice choked up again. "Pastor," he began again. "Pastor, I sinned."

"My friend, we all sin. God knows that. That's why he sent His Son to be with us and conquer our sins." The minister grabbed the man's shoulder to steady him.

"I was in the Klan, Pastor, I did ... sinful things ... I ... hurt nigras just cuz I hated them, and I—"

"What's your name?" Hosiah asked gently.

"Charlie Picket," the man replied. And then Hosiah knew. He had a good memory for names. Charles Worthington Picket had been the Grand Kleegle of the local Klavern. He'd never been convicted of a major crime, but his name was one that came up much of the time.

"Mr. Picket, those things all happened many years ago," he reminded the man.

"I ain't never—I mean, I ain't never *killed* nobody. Honest, Pastor, I ain't never done that," Picket insisted, with real desperation in his voice. "But I know'd thems that did, and I never told the cops. I never told them not to do it ... sweet Jesus, I don't know what I was back then, Pastor. I was ... it was..."

"Mr. Picket, are you sorry for your sins?"

"Oh, yes, oh Jesus, yes, Pastor. I've prayed for forgiveness, but—"

"There is no 'but,' Mr. Picket. God has forgiven you your sins," Jackson told him in his gentlest voice.

"Are you sure?"

A smile and a nod. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Pastor, you need help at your church, roofing and stuff, you call me, y’hear? That’s the house of God, too. Maybe I didn’t always know it, but by damn I know it now, sir.”

He’d probably never called a black man “sir” in his life, unless there’d been a gun to his head. So, the minister thought, at least one person had listened to his sermon, and learned something from it. And that wasn’t bad for a man in his line of work.

“Pastor, I gots to apologize for all the evil words and thoughts I had. Ain’t never done that, but I gots to do it now.” He seized Hosiah’s hand. “Pastor, I am sorry, sorry as a man can be for all the things I done back then, and I beg your forgiveness.”

“And the Lord Jesus said, ‘Go forth and sin no more.’ Mr. Picket, that’s all of scripture in one sentence. God came to forgive our sins. God has already forgiven you.”

Finally, their eyes met. “Thank you, Pastor. And God bless you, sir.”

“And may the Lord bless you, too.” Hosiah Jackson watched the man walk off to his pickup truck, wondering if a soul had just been saved. If so, Skip would be pleased with the black friend he’d never met.

CHAPTER 32

Coalition Collision

It was a long drive from the airport to the Vatican, every yard of it covered by cameras in the high-speed motorcade, until finally the vehicles entered the Piazza San Pietro, St. Peter's Square. There, waiting, was a squad of Swiss Guards wearing the purple-and-gold uniforms designed by Michelangelo. Some of the Guards pulled the casket containing a Prince of the Church, martyred far away, and carried it through the towering bronze doors into the cavernous interior of the church, where the next day a Requiem Mass would be celebrated by the Pope himself.

But it wasn't about religion now, except to the public. For the President of the United States, it was about matters of state. It turned out that Tom Jefferson had been right after all. The power of government devolved directly from the people, and Ryan had to act now, in a way that the people would approve, because when you got down to it, the nation wasn't his. It was theirs.

And one thing made it worse. SORGE had coughed up another report that morning, and it was late coming in only because Mary Patricia Foley wanted to be doubly sure that the translation was right.

Also in the Oval Office were Ben Goodley, Arnie van Damm, and the Vice President. "Well?" Ryan asked them.

"Cocksuckers," Robby said, first of all. "If they really think this way, we shouldn't sell them shit in a paper bag. Even at Top Gun after a long night of boilermakers, even Navy fighter pilots don't talk like this."

"It is callous," Ben Goodley agreed.

"They don't issue consciences to the political leaders, I guess," van Damm said, making it unanimous.

"How would your father react to information like this, Robby?" Ryan asked.

"His immediate response will be the same as mine: Nuke the bastards. Then he'll remember what happens in a real war and settle down some. Jack, we have to punish them."

Ryan nodded. "Okay, but if we shut down trade to the PRC, the first people hurt are the poor schlubs in the factories, aren't they?"

"Sure, Jack, but who's holding them hostage, the good guys or the bad guys? Somebody can *always* say that, and if fear of hurting them prevents you from taking any action, then you're only making sure that things *never* get better for them. So, you can't allow yourself to be limited that way," TOMCAT

concluded, “or *you* become the hostage.”

Then the phone rang. Ryan got it, grumbling at the interruption.

“Secretary Adler for you, Mr. President. He says it’s important.”

Jack leaned across his desk and punched the blinking button. “Yeah, Scott.”

“I got the download. It’s not unexpected, and people talk differently inside the office than outside, remember.”

“That’s great to hear, Scott, and if they talk about taking a few thousand Jews on a train excursion to Auschwitz, is that supposed to be funny, too?”

“Jack, I’m the Jew here, remember?”

Ryan let out a long breath and pushed another button. “Okay, Scott, you’re on speaker now. Talk,” POTUS ordered.

“This is just the way the bastards talk. Yes, they’re arrogant, but we already knew that. Jack, if other countries knew how *we* talk inside the White House, we’d have a lot fewer allies and a lot more wars. Sometimes intelligence can be too good.”

Adler really was a good SecState, Ryan thought. His job was to look for simple and safe ways out of problems, and he worked damned hard at it.

“Okay, suggestions?”

“I have Carl Hitch lay a note on them. We demand a statement of apology for this fuckup.”

“And if they tell us to shove it?”

“Then we pull Rutledge and Hitch back for ‘consultations,’ and let them simmer for a while.”

“The note, Scott?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Write it on asbestos paper and sign it in blood,” Jack told him coldly.

“Yes, sir,” SecState acknowledged, and the line went dead.

It was a lot later in the day in Moscow when Pavel Yefremov and Oleg Provalov came into Sergey Golovko’s office.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t have you in sooner,” the SVR chairman told his guests. “We’ve been busy with problems—the Chinese and that shooting in Beijing.” He’d been looking into it just like every other person in the world.

“Then you have another problem with them, Comrade Chairman.”

“Oh?”

Yefremov handed over the decrypt. Golovko took it, thanking the man with his accustomed good manners, then settled back in his chair and started

reading. In less than five seconds, his eyes widened.

"This is not possible," his voice whispered.

"Perhaps so, but it is difficult to explain otherwise."

"*I* was the target?"

"So it would appear," Provalov answered.

"But *why*?"

"That we do not know," Yefremov said, "and probably nobody in the city of Moscow knows. If the order was given through a Chinese intelligence officer, the order originated in Beijing, and the man who forwarded it probably doesn't know the reasoning behind it. Moreover, the operation is set up to be somewhat deniable, since we cannot even prove that this man is an intelligence officer, and not an assistant or what the Americans call a 'stringer.' In fact, their man was identified for us by an American," the FSS officer concluded.

Golovko's eyes came up. "How the hell did *that* happen?"

Provalov explained. "A Chinese intelligence officer in Moscow is unlikely to be concerned by the presence of an American national, whereas any Russian citizen is a potential counterintelligence officer. Mishka was there and offered to help, and I permitted it. Which leads me to a question."

"What do you tell this American?" Golovko asked for him.

The lieutenant nodded. "Yes, Comrade Chairman. He knows a good deal about the murder investigation because I confided in him and he offered some helpful suggestions. He is a gifted police investigator. And he is no fool. When he asks how this case is going, what can I say?"

Golovko's initial response was as predictable as it was automatic: *Say nothing.* But he restrained himself. If Provalov said nothing, then the American would have to be a fool not to see the lie, and, as he said, the American was no fool. On the other hand, did it serve Golovko's—or Russia's—purposes for America to know that his life was in danger? That question was deep and confusing. While he pondered it, he'd have his bodyguard come in. He beeped his secretary.

"Yes, Comrade Chairman," Major Shelepin said, coming in the door.

"Something new for you to worry about, Anatoliy Ivan'ch," Golovko told him. It was more than that. The first sentence turned Shelepin pale.

It started in America with the unions. These affiliations of working people, which had lost power in the preceding decades, were in their way the most conservative organizations in America, for the simple reason that their loss of power had made them mindful of the importance of what power they retained. To hold on to that, they resisted any change that threatened the smallest entitlement of their humblest member.

China had long been a *bête noir* for the labor movement, for the simple reason that Chinese workers made less in a day than American union automobile workers made during their morning coffee break. That tilted the playing field in favor of the Asians, and *that* was something the AFL/CIO was not prepared to approve.

So much the better that the government that ruled those underpaid workers disregarded human rights. That just made them easier to oppose.

American labor unions are nothing if not organized, and so every single member of Congress started getting telephone calls. Most of them were taken by staffers, but those from senior union officials in a member's state or district usually made it all the way through, regardless of which side the individual member stood on. Attention was called to the barbaric action of that godless state which also, by the way, shit on its workers *and* took American jobs through its unfair labor practices. The size of the trade surplus came up in every single telephone call, which would have made the members of Congress think that it was a carefully orchestrated phone campaign (which it was) had they compared notes on the telephone calls with one another (which they didn't).

Later in the day, demonstrations were held, and though they were about as spontaneous as those held in the People's Republic of China, they were covered by the local and/or national media, because it was a place to send cameras, and the newsies belonged to a union, too.

Behind the telephone calls and in front of the TV coverage of the demonstrations came the letters and e-mails, all of which were counted and cataloged by the members' staffers.

Some of them called the White House to let the President know what was happening on the Hill. Those calls *all* went to the office of Arnold van Damm, whose own staff kept a careful count of the calls, their position, and their degree of passion, which was running pretty high.

On top of that came the notices from the religious communities, virtually all of which China had managed to offend at once.

The one unexpected but shrewd development of the day didn't involve a call or letter to anyone in the government. Chinese manufacturers located on the island of Taiwan all had lobbying and public-relations agencies in America. One of these came up with an idea that caught on as rapidly as the powder inside a rifle cartridge. By midday, three separate printers were turning out peel-off stickers with the flag of the Republic of China and the caption "We're the good guys." By the following morning, clerks at retail outlets all over America were affixing them to items of Taiwanese manufacture. The news media found out about it even before the process had begun, and thus aided the Republic of China industrialists by letting the public know of their "them not us" campaign even before it had properly begun.

The result was that the American public was reacquainted with the fact that there were indeed two countries called China, and that only one of them killed people of the clergy and then beat up on those who tried to say a few prayers

on a public street. The other one even played Little League baseball.

It wasn't often that union leaders and the clergy both cried out so vociferously, and together they were being heard. Polling organizations scrambled to catch up, and were soon framing their questions in such a way that the answers were defined even before they were given.

The draft note arrived in the Beijing embassy early in the morning. When decrypted by an NS employee, it was shown to the embassy's senior watch officer, who managed not to throw up and decided to awaken Ambassador Hitch at once. Half an hour later, Hitch was in the office, sleepy and crabby at being awakened two hours before his accustomed time. The content of the note wasn't contrived to brighten his day. He was soon on the phone to Foggy Bottom.

"Yes, that's what we want you to say," Scott Adler told him on the secure phone.

"They're not going to like it."

"That doesn't surprise me, Carl."

"Okay, just so you know," Hitch told the SecState.

"Carl, we do think about these things, but the President is seriously pissed about—"

"Scott, I live here, y'know? I *know* what happened."

"What are they going to do?" EAGLE asked.

"Before or after they take my head off?" Hitch asked in return. "They'll tell me where to stick this note—a little more formally, of course."

"Well, make it clear to them that the American people demand some sort of amends. And that killing diplomats cannot be done with impunity."

"Okay, Scott. I know how to handle it. I'll get back to you later."

"I'll be awake," Adler promised, thinking of the long day in the office he was stuck with.

"See ya." Hitch broke the connection.

CHAPTER 33

Square One

"You may not talk to us this way," Shen Tang observed. "Minister, my country has principles which we do not violate. Some of those are respect for human rights, the right of free assembly, the right to worship God as one wishes, the right to speak freely. The government of the People's Republic has seen fit to violate those principles, hence America's response. Every other great power in the world recognizes those rights. China must as well."

"Must? You tell us what we *must* do?"

"Minister, if China wishes to be a member of the community of nations, then, yes."

"America will *not* dictate to us. You are not the rulers of the world!"

"We do not claim to be. But we can choose those nations with whom we have normal relations, and we would prefer them to recognize human rights as do all other civilized nations."

"Now you say we are uncivilized?" Shen demanded.

"I did not say that, Minister," Hitch responded, wishing he'd not let his tongue slip.

"America does not have the right to impose its wishes on us or any other nation. You come here and dictate trade terms to us, and now also you demand that we conduct our internal affairs so as to suit you. Enough! We will not kowtow to you. We are not your servants. I reject this note." Shen even tossed it back in Hitch's direction to give further emphasis to his words.

"That is your reply, then?" Hitch asked.

"That is the reply of the People's Republic of China," Shen answered imperiously.

"Very well, Minister. Thank you for the audience." Hitch bowed politely and withdrew. Remarkable, he thought, that normal—if not exactly friendly—relations could come unglued this fast. Only six weeks before, Shen had been over to the embassy for a cordial working dinner, and they'd toasted each other's country in the friendliest manner possible. But Kissinger had said it: Countries do not have friends; they have interests. And the PRC had just shit on some of America's most closely felt principles. And that was that. He walked back out to his car for the drive to the embassy.

Cliff Rutledge was waiting there. Hitch waved him into his private office.

"Well?"

"Well, he told me to shove it up my ass—in diplo-speak," Hitch told his visitor. "You might have a lively session this morning."

Rutledge had seen the note already, of course. "I'm surprised Scott let it go out that way."

"I gather things at home have gotten a little firm. We've seen CNN and all, but maybe it's even worse than it appears."

"Look, I don't condone anything the Chinese did, but all this over a couple of shot clergymen ..."

"One was a diplomat, Cliff," Hitch reminded him. "If you got your ass shot off, you'd want them to take it seriously in Washington, wouldn't you?"

The reprimand made Rutledge's eyes flare a little. "It's President Ryan who's driving this. He just doesn't understand how diplomacy works."

"Maybe, maybe not, but he is the President, and it's our job to represent him, remember?"

"Hard to forget it," Rutledge groused. He'd never be Undersecretary of State while that yahoo sat in the White House, and Undersecretary was the job he'd had his eye on for the last fifteen years. But neither would he get the job if he allowed his private feelings, however justified, to cloud his professional judgment. "We're going to be called home or sent home," he estimated.

"Probably," Hitch agreed. "Be nice to catch some baseball. How do the Sox look this season?"

"Forget it. A rebuilding year. Once again."

"Sorry about that." Hitch shook his head and checked his desk for new dispatches, but there were none. Now he had to let Washington know what the Chinese Foreign Minister had said. Scott Adler was probably sitting in his seventh-floor office waiting for the secure direct line to ring.

"Good luck, Cliff."

"Thanks a bunch," Rutledge said on his way out the door.

Hitch wondered if he should call home and tell his wife to start packing for home, but no, not yet. First he had to call Foggy Bottom.

So, what's going to happen?" Ryan asked Adler from his bed. He'd left orders to be called as soon as they got word. Now, listening to Adler's reply, he was surprised. He'd thought the wording of the note rather wimpy, but evidently diplomatic exchange had even stricter rules than he'd appreciated. "Okay, now what, Scott?"

"Well, we'll wait and see what happens with the trade delegation, but even money we call them and Carl Hitch home for consultations."

"Don't the Chinese realize they could take a trade hit from all this?"

“They don’t expect that to happen. Maybe if it does, it’ll make them think over the error of their ways.”

“I wouldn’t bet much on that card, Scott.”

“Sooner or later, common sense has to break out. A hit in the wallet usually gets a guy’s attention,” SecState said.

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” POTUS replied. “’Night, Scott.”

“’Night, Jack.”

“So what did they say?” Cathy Ryan asked.

“They told us to stick it up our ass.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Jack replied, flipping the light off.

The Chinese thought they were invincible. It must be nice to believe that. Nice, but dangerous.

The 265th Motor Rifle Division was composed of three regiments of conscripts —Russians who hadn’t chosen to avoid military service, which made them patriotic, or stupid, or apathetic, or sufficiently bored with life that the prospect of two years in uniform, poorly fed and largely unpaid, didn’t seem that much of a sacrifice. Each regiment was composed of about fifteen hundred soldiers, about five hundred fewer than full authorized strength. The good news was that each regiment had an organic tank battalion, and that all of the mechanized equipment was, if not new, then at least recently manufactured, and reasonably well maintained. The division lacked its organic tank regiment, however, the fist which gave a motor-rifle division its offensive capabilities. Also missing was the divisional antitank battalion, with its Rapier antitank cannons. These were anachronistic weapons which Bondarenko nonetheless liked because he’d played with them as an officer cadet nearly forty years before. The new model of the BMP infantry carrier had been modified to carry the AT-6 antitank missle, the one NATO called “Spiral,” actually a Russian version of the NATO Milan, courtesy of some nameless KGB spy of the 1980s. The Russian troops called it the Hammer for its ease of use, despite a relatively small warhead. Every BMP had ten of these, which more than made up for the missing battalion of towed guns.

What worried Bondarenko and Aliyev most was the lack of artillery. Historically the best trained and best drilled part of the Russian army, the artillery was only half present in the Far East’s maneuver forces, battalions taking the place of regiments. The rationale for this was the fixed defense line on the Chinese border, which had a goodly supply of fixed and fortified artillery positions, albeit of obsolete designs, though with trained crews and massive stocks of shells to pour into predetermined positions.

The general scowled in the confines of his staff car. It was what he got for

being smart and energetic. A properly prepared and trained military district didn't *need* a man like him, did it? No, his talents were needed by a shithole like this one. Just once, he thought, might a good officer get a reward for good performance instead of another "challenge," as they called it? He grunted. Not in this lifetime. The dunces and dolts drew the comfortable districts with no threats and lots of equipment to deal with them.

His worst worry was the air situation. Of all the Russian military arms, the air forces had suffered the most from the fall of the Soviet Union. Once Far East had had its own fleets of tactical fighters, poised to deal with a threat from American aircraft based in Japan or on aircraft carriers of their Pacific Fleet, that *plus* what was needed to face off the Chinese. No more. Now he had perhaps fifty usable aircraft in theater, and the pilots for those got perhaps seventy flight hours per year, barely enough to make sure they could take off and land safely. Fifty modern fighter-class aircraft, mainly for air-to-air combat, not air-to-ground. There were several hundred more, rotting at their bases, mainly in hardened shelters to keep them dry, their tires dry-rotted and internal seals cracked from lack of use because of the spare-parts shortage that grounded nearly the entire Russian air force.

"You know, Andrey, I can remember when the world shook with fear of our country's army. Now, they shake with laughter, those who bother to take note of us." Bondarenko took a sip of vodka from a flask. It had been a long time since he'd drunk alcohol on duty, but it was cold—the heater in the car was broken—and he needed the solace.

"Gennady Iosifovich, it is not as bad as it appears—"

"I agree! It is worse!" CINC-FAR EAST growled. "If the Chinks come north, I shall learn to eat with chopsticks. I've always wondered how they do that," he added with a wry smile. Bondarenko was always one to see the humor in a situation.

"But to others we appear strong. We have thousands of tanks, Comrade General."

Which was true. They'd spent the morning inspecting monstrous sheds containing of all things T-34/85 tanks manufactured at Chelyabinsk in 1946. Some had virgin guns, never fired. The Germans had shaken in their jackboots to see these tanks storm over the horizon, but that's what they were, World War II tanks, over nine hundred of them, three complete division sets. And there were even troops to maintain them! The engines still turned over, serviced as they were by the *grand*children of the men who'd used them in combat operations against the *fascisti.* And in the same sheds were shells, some made as recently as 1986, for the 85-mm guns. The world was mad, and surely the Soviet Union had been mad, first to store such antiques, then to spend money and effort maintaining them. And even now, more than ten years after the demise of that nation-state, the sheer force of bureaucratic inertia *still* sent conscripts into the sheds to maintain the antique collection. For what purpose? No one knew. It would take an archivist to find the documents, and while that might be of interest to some historian of a humorous bent, Bondarenko had better things to do.

“Andrey, I appreciate your willingness to see the lighter side of every situation, but we do face a practical reality here.”

“Comrade General, it will take months to get permission to terminate this operation.”

“That is probably true, Andruska, but I remember a story about Napoleon. He wished to plant trees by the side of the French roads to shade his marching troops. A staff officer said, but, Marshal, it will take twenty years for the trees to grow enough to accomplish that. And Napoleon said, yes, indeed, so we must start at once! And so, Colonel, we will start with that at once.”

“As you say, Comrade General.” Colonel Aliyev knew that it was a worthwhile idea. He only wondered if he would have enough time to pursue all of the ideas that needed accomplishing. Besides, the troops at the tank sheds seemed happy enough. Some even took the tanks out into the open to play with them, drive them about the nearby test range, even shoot the guns occasionally. One young sergeant had commented to him that it was good to use them, because it made the war movies he’d seen as a child seem even more real. Now *that,* Colonel Aliyev thought, was something to hear from a soldier. It made the movies better. Damn.

Who does that slant-eyed motherfucker think he is?” Gant demanded out in the garden.

“Mark, we laid a rather firm note on them this morning, and they’re just reacting to it.”

“Cliff, explain to me why it’s okay for other people to talk like that to us, but it’s not okay for us to talk that way to them, will you?”

“It’s called diplomacy,” Rutledge explained.

“It’s called horseshit, Cliff,” Gant hissed back. “Where I come from, if somebody disses you like that, you punch him right in the face.”

“But we don’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re above it, Mark,” Rutledge tried to explain. “It’s the little dogs that yap at you. The big powerful dogs don’t bother. They know they can rip your head off. And we know we can handle these people if we have to.”

“Somebody needs to tell *them* that, Cliffy,” Gant observed. “Because I don’t think they got the word yet. They’re talking like they own the world, and they think they can play tough-guy with us, Cliff, and until they find out they can’t, we’re going to have a lot more of their shit to deal with.”

“Mark, this is how it’s done, that’s all. It’s just how the game is played at this level.”

“Oh, yeah?” Gant countered. “Cliff, it’s not a game to them. I see that, but you don’t. After this break, we’re going back in there, and they’re going to threaten us. What do we do then?”

“We brush it off. How can they threaten us?”

“The Boeing order.”

“Well, Boeing will have to sell its airplanes to somebody else this year,” Rutledge said.

“Really? What about the interests of all those workers we’re supposed to represent?”

“Mark, at this level, we deal with the big picture, not the little one, okay?” Rutledge was actually getting angry with this stock trader.

“Cliffy, the big picture is made up of a lot of little ones. You ought to go back in there and ask if they like selling things to us. Because if they do, then they have to play ball. Because they need us a fucking lot more than we need them.”

“You don’t talk that way to a great power.”

“Are we a great power?”

“The biggest,” Rutledge confirmed.

“Then how come they talk that way to us?”

“Mark, this is my job. You’re here to advise me, but this is your first time to this sort of ball game, okay? I know how to play the game. It’s my job.”

“Fine.” Gant let out a long breath. “But when we play by the rules and they don’t, the game gets a little tedious.” Gant wandered off on his own for a moment. The garden was pretty enough. He hadn’t done this sort of thing enough to know that there was usually a garden of some sort for diplomats to wander in after two or three hours of talking at each other in a conference room, but he had learned that the garden was where a lot of the real work got done.

“Mr. Gant?” He turned to see Xue Ma, the diplomat/spook he’d chatted with before.

“Mr. Xue,” TELESCOPE said in his own greeting.

“What do you think of the progress of the talks?” the Chinese diplomat asked.

Mark was still trying to understand this guy’s use of language. “If this is progress, I’d hate to see what you call an adverse development.”

Xue smiled. “A lively exchange is often more interesting than a dull one.”

“Really? I’m surprised by all this. I always thought that diplomatic exchange was more polite.”

“You think this impolite?”

Gant again wondered if he was being baited or not, but decided *the hell with*

it. He didn't really need his government job anyway, did he? And taking it had involved a considerable personal sacrifice, hadn't it? Like a few million bucks. Didn't that entitle him to say what the hell he thought?

"Xue, you accuse us of threatening your national identity because we object to the murders your government—or its agents, I suppose—committed in front of cameras. Americans don't like it when people commit murder."

"Those people were breaking our laws," Xue reminded him.

"Maybe so," Gant conceded. "But in America when people break the law, we arrest them and give them a trial in front of a judge and jury, with a defense lawyer to make sure the trial is fair, and we damned sure don't shoot people in the head when they're holding a goddamned newborn infant !"

"That was unfortunate," Xue almost admitted, "but as I said, those men *were* breaking the law."

"And so your cops did the judge/jury/executioner number on them. Xue, to Americans that was the act of a barbarian."

The "B" word finally got through. "America cannot talk to China in that way, Mr. Gant."

"Look, Mr. Xue, it's your country, and you can run your country as you wish. We're not going to declare war on you for what you do inside your own borders. But there's no law that says we have to do business with you either, and so we can stop buying your goods—and I have news for you: The American people *will* stop buying your stuff if you continue to do stuff like that."

"Your people? Or your government?" Xue asked, with a knowing smile.

"Are you really *that* stupid, Mr. Xue?" Gant fired back.

"What do you mean?" The last insult had actually cracked through the shell, Gant saw.

"I mean America is a democracy. Americans make a lot of decisions entirely on their own, and one of them is what they spend their money on, and the average American will not buy something from a fucking barbarian." Gant paused. "Look, I'm a Jew, okay? Sixty-some years ago, America fucked up. We saw what Hitler and the Nazis were doing in Germany, and we didn't act in time to stop it. We really blew the call and a lot of people got killed unnecessarily, and we've been seeing things on TV about that since I was in short pants, and it ain't *never* going to happen again on our watch, and when people like you do stuff like what we just saw, it just sets off the Holocaust light in American heads. Do you get it now?"

"You cannot talk to us in that way."

Again with the broken record! The doors were opening. It was time to head back inside for the next round of confrontational diplo-speak.

"And if you persist in attacking our national sovereignty, we will buy elsewhere," Xue told him with some satisfaction.

“Fine, and we can do the same. And you need our cash a lot more than we need your trade goods, Mr. Xue.” He must have finally understood, Gant thought. His face actually showed some emotion now. So did his words:

“We will never kowtow to American attacks on our country.”

“We’re not attacking your country, Xue.”

“But you threaten our economy,” Xue said, as they got to the door.

“We threaten nothing. I am telling you that my fellow citizens will not buy goods from a country that commits barbarities. That is not a threat. It is a statement of fact.” Which was an even greater insult, Gant did not fully appreciate.

“If America punishes us, we will punish America.”

Enough was goddamned enough. Gant pulled the door open halfway and stopped to face the diplomat/spook:

“Xue, your dicks aren’t big enough to get in a pissing contest with us.” And with that, he walked on inside. A half hour later, he was on his way out again. The words had been sharp and heated, and neither side had seen any purpose in continuing that day—though Gant strongly suspected that once Washington heard about that morning’s exchanges, there wouldn’t *be* any other day.

In two days, he’d be totally jet-lagged but back at his office on 15th Street. He was surprised that he was looking forward to *that.*

Anything from WestPac?” Mancuso asked. ”They just put three submarines to sea, a Song and two of the Kilos the Russians sold them,” BG Lahr answered. ”We’re keeping an eye on them. La *Jolla* and *Helena* are close by. *Tennessee* is heading back to Pearl as of midday.” The former boomer had been on patrol for fifty days, and that was about enough. ”Our surface assets are all back to sea. Nobody’s scheduled to get back into Taipei for twelve days.”

“So, the Taipei hookers get two weeks off?” CINCPAC asked with a chuckle.

“And the bartenders. If your sailors are like my soldiers, they may need the relaxation,” the J-2 replied, with a smile of his own.

“Oh, to be young and single again,” Bart observed. “Anything else out there?”

“Routine training on their side, some combined air and ground stuff, but that’s up north by the Russian border.”

“How good do they look?”

Lahr shrugged. “Good enough to give the Russians something to think about, sir. On the whole, the PLA is trained up as good as I’ve ever known them to be, but they’ve been working hard for the past three or four years.”

“How many of them?” Bart asked, looking at his wall map, which was a lot more useful for a sailor than a soldier. China was just a beige shape on the left

border.

"Depends on where. Like, if they go north into Russia, it'd be like cockroaches in some ghetto apartment in New York. You'd need a lot o' Raid to deal with it."

"And you said the Russians are thin in their East?"

Lahr nodded. "Yep. Admiral, if I was that Bondarenko guy, I'd sweat it some. I mean, it's all theoretical as a threat and all, but as theoretical threats go, that's one that might keep me awake at night."

"And what about reports of gold and oil in eastern Siberia?"

Lahr nodded. "Makes the threat less theoretical. China's a net importer of oil, and they're going to need a lot more to expand their economy the way they plan to—and on the gold side, hell, everybody's wanted that for the last three thousand years. It's negotiable and fungible."

"Fungible?" That was a new word for Mancuso.

"Your wedding band might have been part of Pharaoh Ramses II's double-crown once," Lahr explained. "Or Caligula's necklace, or Napoleon's royal scepter. You take it, hammer it, and it's just raw material again, and it's valuable raw material. If the Russian strike's as big as our intel says, it'll be sold all over the world. Everybody'll use it for all sorts of purposes, from jewelry to electronics."

"How big's the strike supposed to be?"

Lahr shrugged. "Enough to buy you a new Pacific Fleet, and then some."

Mancuso whistled. That was real money.

It was late in Washington, and Adler was up late, again, working in his office. SecState was usually a busy post, and lately it had been busier than usual, and Scott Adler was getting accustomed to fourteen-hour days. He was reading over post reports at the moment, waiting for the other shoe to drop in Beijing. On his desk was a STU-6 secure telephone. The "secure telephone unit" was a sophisticated encryption device grafted onto an AT&T-made digital telephone. This one worked on a satellite-communications channel, and though its signal therefore sprinkled down all over the world from its Defense Department communications satellite, all the casual listener would get was raspy static, like the sound of water running out of a bathroom faucet. It had a randomized 512-bit scrambling system that the best computers at Fort Meade could break about a third of the time after several days of directed effort. And that was about as secure as things got. They were trying to make the TAPDANCE encryption system link into the STU units to generate a totally random and hence unbreakable signal, but that was proving difficult, for technical reasons that nobody had explained to the Secretary of State, and that was just as well. He was a diplomat, not a mathematician. Finally, the STU rang in its odd trilling warble. It took eleven seconds for the two STU units on opposite sides

of the world to synchronize.

"Adler."

"Rutledge here, Scott," the voice said on the other side of the world. "It didn't go well," he informed SecState at once. "And they're canceling the 777 order with Boeing, as we thought they would."

Adler frowned powerfully into the phone. "Super. No concessions at all on the shootings?"

"Zip."

"Anything to be optimistic about?"

"Nothing, Scott, not a damned thing. They're stonewalling like we're the Mongols and they're the Chin Dynasty."

Somebody needs to remind them that the Great Wall ultimately turned out to be a waste of bricks, EAGLE didn't bother saying aloud. "Okay, I need to discuss this with the President, but you're probably going to be flying home soon. Maybe Carl Hitch, too."

"I'll tell him. Any chance that we can make some concession, just to get things going?"

"Cliff, the likelihood that Congress will roll over on the trade issue is right up there with Tufts making the Final Four. Maybe less." Tufts University *did* have a basketball team, after all. "There's nothing we can give them that they would accept. If there's going to be a break, they're the ones who'll have to bend this time. Any chance of that?"

"Zero" was the reply from Beijing.

"Well, then, they'll just have to learn the hard way." The good news, Adler thought, was that the hard lessons were the ones that really did teach you something. Maybe even the Chinese.

W*hat* did that capitalist *diao ren* say?" Zhang asked. Shen told him what Xue had relayed, word-for-word. "And what does he represent?"

"We is personal assistant to the American Treasury Minister. Therefore we think he has the ear of both his minister and the American president," Shen explained. "He has not taken an active part in the talks, but after every session he speaks privately with Vice Minister Rutledge. Exactly what their relationship is, we do not know for certain, and clearly he is not an experienced diplomat. He talks like an arrogant capitalist, to insult us in so crude a way, but I fear he represents the American position more forthrightly than Rutledge does. I think he gives Rutledge the policy he must follow. Rutledge is an experienced diplomat, and the positions he takes are not his own, obviously. He wants to give us some concessions. I am sure of that, but Washington is dictating his words, and this Gant fellow is probably the conduit to Washington."

“Then you were right to adjourn the talks. We will give them a chance to reconsider their position. If they think they can dictate to us, then they are mistaken. You canceled the airplane order?”

“Of course, as we agreed last week.”

“Then *that* will give them something to think about,” Zhang observed smugly.

“If they do not walk out of the talks.”

“They wouldn’t dare.” *Walk away from the Middle Kingdom? Absurd.*

“There is one other thing that Gant man said. He said, not in so many words, that we need them—their money, that is—more than they need us. And he is not entirely wrong in that, is he?”

“We do not need their dollars more than we need our sovereignty. Do they really think they can dictate our domestic laws to us?”

“Yes, Zhang, they do. They apply an astounding degree of importance to this incident.”

“Those two policemen ought to be shot for what they did, but we cannot allow the Americans to dictate that sort of thing to us.” The embarrassment of the incident was one thing—and embarrassing the state was often a capital offense in the People’s Republic—but China had to make such a decision on its own, not at the order of an outsider.

“They call it barbaric,” Shen added.

“Barbaric? They say *that* to *us?*”

“You know that Americans have tender sensibilities. We often forget that. And their religious leaders have some influence in their country. Our ambassador in Washington has cabled some warnings to us about this. It would be better if we had some time to let things settle down, and truly it would be better to punish those two policemen just to assuage American sensibilities, but I agree we cannot allow them to dictate domestic policy to us.”

“And this Gant man says his ji is bigger than ours, does he?”

“So Xue tells me. Our file on him says that he’s a stock trader, that he’s worked closely with Minister Winston for many years. He’s a Jew, like lots of them are—”

“Their Foreign Minister is also a Jew, isn’t he?”

“Minister Adler? Yes, he is,” Shen confirmed after a moment’s thought.

“So, this Gant really does tell us their position, then?”

“Probably,” Foreign Minister Shen said.

Zhang leaned forward in his chair. “Then you will make them clear on ours. The next time you see this Gant, tell him *chou ni ma de bi.”* Which was rather a strong imprecation, best said to someone in China if you had a gun already in your hand.

“I understand,” Shen replied, knowing that he’d never say anything like that except to a particularly humble underling in his own office.

Zhang left. He had to talk this one over with his friend Fang Gan.

CHAPTER 34

Hits

Over the last week Ryan had come to expect bad news upon waking up, and as a result so had his family. He knew that he was taking it too seriously when his children started asking him about it over breakfast.

"What's happening with China, Dad?" Sally asked, giving Ryan one more thing to lament. Sally didn't say "daddy" anymore, and that was a title far more precious to Jack than "Mr. President." You expected it from your sons, but not from your daughter. He'd discussed it with Cathy, but she'd told him that he just had to roll with the punch.

"We don't know, Sally."

"But you're supposed to know everything!" And besides, her friends asked her about it at school.

"Sally, the President doesn't know everything. At least I don't," he explained, looking up from the morning *Early* **Bird.** "And if you never noticed, the TVs in my office are tuned to CNN and the other news networks because they frequently tell me more than CIA does."

"Really?" Sally observed. She watched too many movies. In Hollywood, CIA was a dangerous, lawbreaking, antidemocratic, fascist, and thoroughly evil government agency that nonetheless knew everything about everybody, and had really killed President Kennedy for its own purposes, whatever they were (Hollywood never quite got around to that). But it didn't matter, because whoever the star was always managed to thwart the nasty old CIA before the credits, or the last commercial, depending on the format.

"Really, honey. CIA has some good people in it, but basically it's just one more government agency."

"What about the FBI and Secret Service?" she asked.

"They're cops. Cops are different. My dad was a cop, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," and then she went back to the "Style" section of The Washington Post, which had both the comics and the stories that interested her, mainly ones having to do with the sort of music that her father put quotation marks around.

Then there was a discreet knock at the door, and Andrea came in. At this time of day, she also acted as his private secretary, in this case delivering a dispatch from the State Department. Ryan took it, looked at it, and managed not to pound on the table, because his children were present.

"Thanks, Andrea," he told her.

"Yes, Mr. President." And Special Agent Price-O'Day went back out to the corridor.

Jack saw his wife looking at him. The kids couldn't read all his facial expressions, but his wife could. To Cathy, Ryan couldn't lie worth a damn, which was also why she didn't worry about his fidelity. Jack had the dissimulation ability of a two-year-old, despite all the help and training he got from Arnie. Jack caught the look and nodded. Yeah, it was China again. Ten minutes later, breakfast was fully consumed and the TV was turned off, and the Ryan family headed downstairs to work, to school, or to the day-care center at Johns Hopkins, depending on age, with the requisite contingent of Secret Service bodyguards. Jack kissed them all in their turn, except for little Jack—SHORTSTOP to the Secret Service—because John Patrick Ryan, Jr., didn't go in for that sissy stuff. *There was something to be said for having daughters,* Ryan thought, as he headed for the Oval Office. Ben Goodley was there, waiting with the President's Daily Brief.

"You have the one from SecState?" CARDSHARP asked.

"Yeah, Andrea delivered it." Ryan fell into his swivel chair and lifted the phone, punching the proper speed-dial button.

"Good morning, Jack," SecState said in greeting, despite a short night's sleep gotten on the convertible sofa in his own office. Fortunately, his private bathroom also had a shower.

"Approved. Bring them all back," SWORDSMAN told EAGLE.

"Who handles the announcement?" Secretary Adler asked.

"You do it. We'll try to low-key it," the President said, with forlorn hope in his voice.

"Right," Adler thought. "Anything else?"

"That's it for now."

"Okay, see ya, Scott." Ryan replaced the phone. "What about China?" he asked Goodley. "Are they doing anything unusual?"

"No. Their military is active, but it's routine training activity only. Their most active sectors are up in their northeast and opposite Taiwan. Lesser activity in their southwest, north of India."

"With all the good luck the Russians are having with oil and gold, are the Chinese looking north with envy?"

"It's not bad speculation, but we have no positive indications of that from any of our sources." Everybody envied rich neighbors, after all. That's what had encouraged Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait, despite having lots of oil under his own sand.

"Any of our sources" includes SORGE, the President reminded himself. He pondered that for a second. "Tell Ed I want a SNIE on Russia and China."

"Quick?" Goodley asked. A Special National Intelligence Estimate could take

months to prepare.

"Three or four weeks. And I want to be able to hang my hat on it."

"I'll tell the DCI," Goodley promised.

"Anything else?" Ryan asked.

"That's it for now, sir."

Jack nodded and checked his calendar. He had a fairly routine day, but the next one would largely be spent on Air Force One flying hither and yon across America, and he was overnighting in—he flipped the page on the printout—Seattle, before flying home to Washington and another full day. It was just as easy for him to use the VC-25A as a red-eye ... oh, yeah, he had a breakfast speech in Seattle to the local Jaycees. He'd be talking about school reform. That generated a grunt. There just weren't enough nuns to go around. The School Sisters of Notre Dame had taught him at St. Matthew's Elementary School in northeast Baltimore back forty-plus years earlier—and taught him well, because the penalty for not learning or for misbehaving did not bear contemplation for a seven-year-old. But the truth of the matter was that he'd been a good, and fairly obedient—*dull,* Jack admitted to himself with a wry smile—child who'd gotten good marks because he'd had a good mom and a good dad, which was a lot more than too many contemporary American kids could say—*and how the hell was he supposed to fix* that? Jack asked himself. How could he bring back the ethos of his parents' generation, the importance of religion, and a world in which engaged people went to the altar as virgins? Now they were talking about telling kids that homosexual and lesbian sex was okay. *What would Sister Frances Mary have said about* that? Jack wondered. A pity she wasn't around to crack some senators and representatives over the knuckles with her ruler. It had worked on him and his classmates at St. Matthew's ...

The desk speaker buzzed. "Senator Smithers just arrived at the West Entrance." Ryan stood and went to his right, the door that came in from the secretaries' anteroom. For some reason, people preferred that one to the door off the corridor opposite the Roosevelt Room. Maybe it was more businesslike. But mainly they liked to see the President standing when the door opened, his hand extended and a smile on his face, as though he really was glad to see them. Sure, Wilbur.

Mary Smithers from Iowa, matronly, three kids and seven grandkids, he thought, *more talk about the Farm Bill.* What the hell was he supposed to know about farms? the President wondered. On those rare occasions that he purchased food, he did it at the supermarket—because that's where it all came from, wasn't it? One of the things on the briefing pages for his political appearances was always the local price for bread and milk in case some local reporter tested him. And chocolate milk came from brown cows.

Accordingly, Ambassador Hitch and Assistant Secretary Rutledge will be flying

back to Washington for consultations," the spokesman told the audience.

"Does this signal a break in relations with China?" a reporter asked at once.

"Not at all. 'Consultations' means just that. We will discuss the recent developments with our representatives so that our relations with China can more speedily be brought back to what they ought to be," the spokesman replied smoothly.

The assembled reporters didn't know what to make of that and so three more questions of virtually identical content were immediately asked, and answers of virtually identical content repeated for them.

"He's good," Ryan said, watching the TV, which was pirating the CNN (and other) coverage off the satellites. It wasn't going out live, oddly enough, despite the importance of the news being generated.

"Not good enough," Arnie van Damm observed. "You're going to get hit with this, too."

"I figured. When?"

"The next time they catch you in front of a camera, Jack."

And he had as much chance of ducking a camera as the leadoff hitter at opening day at Yankee Stadium, the President knew. Cameras at the White House were as numerous as shotguns during duck season, and there was no bag limit here.

Christ, Oleg!" It took a lot to make Reilly gasp, but this one crossed the threshold. "Are you serious?"

"So it would appear, Mishka," Provalov answered.

"And why are you telling me?" the American asked. Information like this was a state secret equivalent to the inner thoughts of President Grushavoy.

"There is no hiding it from you. I assume you tell everything we do together to Washington, and it was you who identified the Chinese diplomat, for which I and my country are in your debt."

The amusing part of that was that Reilly had darted off to track Suvorov/Koniev without a thought, just as a cop thing, to help out a brother cop. Only afterward—about a nanosecond afterward, of course—had he thought of the political implications. And he'd thought this far ahead, but only as speculation, not quite believing that it could possibly have gone this far forward.

"Well, yes, I have to keep the Bureau informed of my operations here," the legal attaché admitted, not that it was an earthshaking revelation.

"I know that, Mishka."

"The Chinese wanted to kill Golovko," Reilly whispered into his vodka. "*Fuck*."

“My word exactly,” Provalov told his American friend. “The question is—”

“Two questions, Oleg. First, why? Second, now what?”

“Third, who is Suvorov, and what is he up to?”

Which was obvious, Reilly thought. Was Suvorov merely a paid agent of a foreign country? Or was he part of the KGB wing of the Russian Mafia being paid by the Chinese to do something—but what, and to what purpose?

“You know, I’ve been hunting OC guys for a long time, but it never got anywhere near this big. This is right up there with all those bullshit stories about who ‘really’ killed Kennedy.”

Provalov’s eyes looked up. “You’re not saying...”

“No, Oleg. The Mafia isn’t that crazy. You don’t go around looking to make enemies that big. You can’t predict the consequences, and it isn’t good for business. The Mafia is a business, Oleg. They try to make money for themselves. Even their political protection is aimed only at that, and that has limits, and they know what the limits are.”

“So, if Suvorov is Mafia, then he is only trying to make money?”

“Here it’s a little different,” Reilly said slowly, trying to help his brain keep up with his mouth. “Here your OC guys think more politically than they do in New York.” And the reason for that was that the KGB types had all grown up in an intensely political environment. Here politics really was power in a more direct sense than it had ever been in America, where politics and commerce had always been somewhat separate, the former protecting the latter (for a fee) but also controlled by it. Here it had always been, and still remained, the other way around. Business needed to rule politics because business was the source of prosperity, from which the citizens of a country derived their comforts. Russia had never prospered, because the cart kept trying to pull the horse. The recipient of the wealth had always tried to generate that wealth—and political figures are always pretty hopeless in that department. They are only good at squandering it. Politicians live by their political theories. Businessmen use reality and have to perform in a world defined by reality, not theory. That was why even in America they understood one another poorly, and never really trusted one another.

“What makes Golovko a target? What’s the profit in killing him?” Reilly asked aloud.

“He is the chief adviser to President Grushavoy. He’s never wanted to be an elected official, and therefore cannot be a minister per se, but he has the president’s ear because he is both intelligent and honest—and he’s a patriot in the true sense.”

Despite his background, Reilly didn’t add. Golovko was KGB, formerly a deadly enemy to the West, and an enemy to President Ryan, but somewhere along the line they’d met each other and they’d come to respect each other—even *like* each other, so the stories in Washington went. Reilly finished off his second vodka and waved for another. He was turning into a Russian, the FBI agent thought. It was getting to the point that he couldn’t hold an intelligent

conversation without a drink or two.

"So, get him and thereby hurt your president, and thereby hurt your entire country. Still, it's one hell of a dangerous play, Oleg Gregoriyevich."

"A very dangerous play, Mishka," Provalov agreed. "Who would do such a thing?"

Reilly let out a long and speculative breath. "One very ambitious motherfucker." He had to get back to the embassy and light up his STU-6 in one big fucking hurry. He'd tell Director Murray, and Murray would tell President Ryan in half a New York minute. Then what? It was way the hell over his head, Mike Reilly thought.

"Okay, you're covering this Suvorov guy."

"We and the Federal Security Service now," Provalov confirmed.

"They good?"

"Very," the militia lieutenant admitted. "Suvorov can't fart without us knowing what he had to eat."

"And you have his communications penetrated."

Oleg nodded. "The written kind. He has a cell phone—maybe more than one, and covering them can be troublesome."

"Especially if he has an encryption system on it. There's stuff commercially available now that our people have a problem with."

"Oh?" Provalov's head came around. He was surprised for two reasons: first, that there was a reliable encryption system available for cell phones, and second, that the Americans had trouble cracking it.

Reilly nodded. "Fortunately, the bad guys haven't found out yet." Contrary to popular belief, the Mafia wasn't all that adept at using technology. Microwaving their food was about as far as they went. One Mafia don had thought his cell phone secure because of its frequency-hopping abilities, and then had entirely canceled that supposed advantage out by standing still while using it! The dunce-don had never figured that out, even after the intercept had been played aloud in Federal District Court.

"We haven't noticed any of that yet."

"Keep it that way," Reilly advised. "Anyway, you have a national-security investigation."

"It's still murder and conspiracy to commit murder," Provalov said, meaning it was still his case.

"Anything I can do?"

"Think it over. You have good instincts for Mafia cases, and that is probably what it is."

Reilly tossed off his last drink. "Okay. I'll see you tomorrow, right here?"

Oleg nodded. "That is good."

The FBI agent walked back outside and got into his car. Ten minutes later, he was at his desk. He took the plastic key from his desk drawer and inserted it into the STU, then dialed Washington.

All manner of people with STU phones had access to Murray's private secure number, and so when the large system behind his desk started chirping, he just picked it up and listened to the hiss of static for thirty seconds until the robotic voice announced, "Line is secure."

"Murray," he said.

"Reilly in Moscow," the other voice said.

The FBI Director checked his desk clock. It was pretty damned late there. "What's happening, Mike?" he asked, then got the word in three fast-spoken minutes.

Yeah, Ellen?" Ryan said when the buzzer went off.

"The AG and the FBI Director want to come over, on something important, they said. You have an opening in forty minutes."

"Fair enough." Ryan didn't wonder what it was about. He'd find out quickly enough. When he realized what he'd just thought, he cursed the Presidency once more. He was becoming jaded. In *this* job?

What the hell?" Ed Foley observed.

"Seems to be solid information, too," Murray told the DCI.

"What else do you know?"

"The fax just came in, only two pages, and nothing much more than what I just told you, but I'll send it over to you. I've told Reilly to offer total cooperation. Anything to offer from your side?" Dan asked.

"Nothing comes to mind. This is all news to us, Dan. My congrats to your man Reilly for turning it." Foley was an information whore, after all. He'd take from anybody.

"Good kid. His father was a good agent, too." Murray knew better than to be smug about it, and Foley didn't deserve the abuse. Things like this were not, actually, within CIA's purview, and not likely to be tumbled to by one of their operations.

For his part, Foley wondered if he'd have to tell Murray about SORGE. If this was for real, it had to be known at the very highest levels of the Chinese government. It wasn't a freelance operation by their Moscow station. People got shot for fucking around at this level, and such an operation would not

even occur to communist bureaucrats, who were not the most inventive people in the world.

“Anyway, I’m taking Pat Martin over with me. He knows espionage operations from the defensive side, and I figure I’ll need the backup.”

“Okay, thanks. Let me go over the fax and I’ll be back to you later today.”

He could hear the nod at the other end. “Right, Ed. See ya.”

His secretary came in thirty seconds later with a fax in a folder. Ed Foley checked the cover sheet and called his wife in from her office.

CHAPTER 35

Breaking News

Shit," Ryan observed quietly when Murray handed him the fax from Moscow. "Shit!" he added on further reflection. "Is this for real?"

"We think so, Jack," the FBI Director confirmed. He and Ryan went back more than ten years, and so he was able to use the first name. He filled in a few facts. "Our boy Reilly, he's an OC expert, that's why we sent him over there, but he has FCI experience, too, also in the New York office. He's good, Jack," Murray assured his President. "He's going places. He's established a very good working relationship with the local cops—helped them out on some investigations, held their hands, like we do with local cops over here, y'know?"

"And?"

"And this looks gold-plated, Jack. Somebody tried to put a hit on Sergey Nikolay'ch, and it looks as though it was an agency of the Chinese government."

"Jesus. Rogue operation?"

"If so, we'll find out when some Chinese minister dies of a sudden cerebral hemorrhage—induced by a bullet in the back of the head," Murray told the President.

"Has Ed Foley seen this yet?"

"I called it in, and sent the fax over. So, yeah, he's seen it."

"Pat?" Ryan turned to the Attorney General, the smartest lawyer Ryan had yet met, and that included all of his Supreme Court appointees.

"Mr. President, this is a stunning revelation, again, if we assume it's true, and not some sort of false-flag provocation, or a play by the Russians to make something happen—problem is, I can't see the rationale for such a thing. We appear to be faced with something that's too crazy to be true, and too crazy to be false as well. I've worked foreign counterintelligence operations for a long time. I've never seen nothing like this before. We've always had an understanding with the Russians that they wouldn't hit anybody in Washington, and we wouldn't hit anybody in Moscow, and to the best of my knowledge that agreement was never violated by either side. But this thing here. If it's real, it's tantamount to an act of war. That doesn't seem like a very prudent thing for the Chinese to do either, does it?"

POTUS looked up from the fax. "It says here that your guy Reilly turned the

connection with the Chinese ... ?"

"Keep reading," Murray told him. "He was there during a surveillance and just kinda volunteered his services, and—bingo."

"But can the Chinese really be this crazy..." Ryan's voice trailed off. "This isn't the Russians messing with our heads?" he asked.

"What would be the rationale behind that?" Martin asked. "If there is one, I don't see it."

"Guys, nobody is *this* crazy!" POTUS nearly exploded. It was penetrating all the way into his mind now. The world wasn't rational yet.

"Again, sir, that's something you're better equipped to evaluate than we are," Martin observed. It had the effect of calming Jack down a few notches.

"All the time I spent at Langley, I saw a lot of strange material, but this one really takes the prize."

"What do we know about the Chinese?" Murray asked, expecting to hear a reply along the lines of *jack shit,* because the Bureau had not experienced conspicuous success in its efforts to penetrate Chinese intelligence operations in America, and figured that the Agency had the same problem and for much the same reason—Americans of Chinese ethnicity weren't thick in government service. But instead he saw that President Ryan instantly adopted a guarded look and said nothing. Murray had interviewed thousands of people during his career and along the way had picked up the ability to read minds a little bit. He read Ryan's right then and wondered about what he saw there.

"Not enough, Dan. Not enough," Ryan replied tardily. His mind was still churning over this report. Pat Martin had put it right. It was too crazy to be true, and too crazy to be false. He needed the Foleys to go over this for him, and it was probably time to get Professor Weaver down from Brown University, assuming Ed and Mary Pat wouldn't throw a complete hissy-fit over letting him into both SORGE and this FBI bombshell. SWORDSMAN wasn't sure of much right now, but he was sure that he needed to figure this stuff out, and do it damned fast. American relations with China had just gone down the shitter, and now he had information to suggest they were making a direct attack on the Russian government. Ryan looked up at his guests. "Thanks for this, guys. If you have anything else to tell me, let me know quick as you can. I have to ponder this one."

"Yeah, I believe it, Jack. I've told Reilly to offer all the assistance he can and report back. They know he's doing that, of course. So, your pal Golovko wants you to know this one. How you handle that one's up to you, I suppose."

"Yeah, I get all the simple calls." Jack managed a smile. The worst part was the inability to talk things over with people in a timely way. Things like this weren't for the telephone. You wanted to see a guy's face and body language when you picked his brain—her brain, in MP's case—on a topic like this one. He hoped George Weaver was as smart as everyone said. Right now he needed a witch.

The new security pass was entirely different from his old SDI one, and he was heading for a different Pentagon office. This was the Navy section of the Pentagon. You could tell by all the blue suits and serious looks. Each of the uniformed services had a different corporate mentality. In the U.S. Army, everyone was from Georgia. In the Air Force, they were all from southern California. In the Navy, they all seemed to be swamp Yankees, and so it was here in the Aegis Program Office.

Gregory had spent most of the morning with a couple of serious commander-rank officers who seemed smart enough, though both were praying aloud to get the hell back on a ship and out to sea, just as Army officers always wanted to get back out in the field where there was mud to put on your boots and you had to dig a hole to piss in—but that's where the soldiers were, and any officer worth his salt wanted to be where the soldiers were. For sailors, Gregory imagined, it was saltwater and fish, and probably better food than the MREs inflicted on the guys in BDUs.

But from his conversations with the squids, he'd learned much of what he'd already known. The Aegis radar/missile system had been developed to deal with the Russian airplane and cruise-missile threat to the Navy's aircraft carriers. It entailed a superb phased-array radar called the SPY and a fair-to-middlin' surface-to-air missile originally called the Standard Missile, because, Gregory imagined, it was the only one the Navy had. The Standard had evolved from the SM-1 to the SM-2, actually called the SM-2-MR because it was a "medium-range" missile instead of an ER, or extended-range, one, which had a booster stage to kick it out of the ships' launch cells a little faster and farther. There were about two hundred of the ER versions sitting in various storage sheds for the Atlantic and Pacific fleets, because full production had never been approved—because, somebody thought, the SM-2-ER might violate the 1972 AntiBallistic Missile Treaty, which had, however, been signed with a country called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which country, of course, no longer existed. But after the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf, the Navy had looked at using the Standard Missile and Aegis system that shot it off against theater-missile threats like the Iraqi Scud. During that war, Aegis ships had actually been deployed into Saudi and other Gulf ports to protect them against the ballistic inbounds, but no missiles had actually been aimed that way, and so the system had never been combat-tested. Instead, Aegis ships periodically sailed out to Kwajalein Atoll, where their theater-missile capabilities were tested against ballistic target drones, and where, most of the time, they worked. But that wasn't quite the same, Gregory saw. An ICBM reentry vehicle had a maximum speed of about seventeen thousand miles per hour, or twenty-five thousand feet per second, which was almost ten times the speed of a rifle bullet.

The problem here was, oddly enough, one of both hardware and software. The SM-2-ER-Block-IV missile had indeed been designed with a ballistic target in mind, to the point that its terminal guidance system was infrared. You

could, theoretically, stealth an RV against radar, but anything plunging through the atmosphere at Mach 15-plus would heat up to the temperature of molten steel. He'd seen Minuteman warheads coming into Kwajalein from California's Vandenberg Air Force Base; they came in like man-made meteors, visible even in daylight, screaming in at an angle of thirty degrees or so, slowing down, but not visibly so, as they encountered thicker air. The trick was hitting them, or rather, hitting them hard enough to destroy them. In this, the new ones were actually easier to kill than the old ones. The original RVs had been metallic, some actually made of beryllium copper, which had been fairly sturdy. The new ones were lighter—therefore able to carry a heavier and more powerful nuclear warhead—and made from material like the tiles on the space shuttle. This was little different in feel from Styrofoam and not much stronger, since it was designed only to insulate against heat, and then only for a brief span of seconds. The space shuttles had suffered damage when their 747 ferry had flown through rainstorms, and some in the ICBM business referred to large raindrops as "hydro meteors" for the damage they could do to a descending RV. On rare occasions when an RV had come down through a thunderstorm, relatively small hailstones had damaged them to the point that the nuclear warhead might not have functioned properly.

Such a target was almost as easy a kill as an aircraft—shooting airplanes down is easy if you hit them, not unlike dropping a pigeon with a shotgun. The trick remained hitting the damned things.

Even if you got close with your interceptor, close won you no cigars. The warhead on a SAM is little different from a shotgun shell. The explosive charge destroys the metal case, converting it into jagged fragments with an initial velocity of about five thousand feet per second. These are ordinarily quite sufficient to rip into the aluminum skin that constitutes the lift and control surfaces of the strength-members of an airplane's internal framing, turning an aircraft into a ballistic object with no more ability to fly than a bird stripped of its wings.

But hitting one necessitates exploding the warhead far enough from the target that the cone formed of the flying fragments intersects the space occupied by the target. For an aircraft, this is not difficult, but for a missile warhead traveling *faster* than the explosive-produced fragments, it is—which explained the controversy over the Patriot missiles and the Scuds in 1991.

The gadget telling the SAM warhead where and when to explode is generically called the "fuse." For most modern missiles, the fusing system is a small, low-powered laser, which "nutates," or turns in a circle to project its beam in a cone forward of its flight path, until the beam hits and reflects off the target. The reflected beam is received by a receptor in the laser assembly, and *that* generates the signal telling the warhead to explode. But quick as it is, it takes a finite amount of time, and the inbound RV is coming in very fast. So fast, in fact, that if the laser beam lacks the power for more than, say, a hundred meters of range, there isn't enough time for the beam to reflect off the RV in time to tell the warhead to explode soon enough to form the cone of destruction to engulf the RV target. Even if the RV is immediately next to the SAM warhead when the warhead explodes, the RV is going faster than the

fragments, which cannot hurt it because they can't catch up.

And there's the problem, Gregory saw. The laser chip in the Standard Missile's nose wasn't very powerful, and the nutation speed was relatively slow, and that combination could allow the RV to slip right past the SAM, maybe as much as half the time, even if the SAM came within three meters of the target, and that was no good at all. They might actually have been better off with the old VT proximity fuse of World War II, which had used a non-directional RF emitter, instead of the new high-tech gallium-arsenide laser chip. But there was room for him to play. The nutation of the laser beam was controlled by computer software, as was the fusing signal. That was something he could fiddle with. To that end, he had to talk to the guys who made it, "it" being the current limited-production test missile, the SM-2-ER-Block-IV, and they were the Standard Missile Company, a joint venture of Raytheon and Hughes, right up the street in McLean, Virginia. To accomplish that, he'd have Tony Bretano call ahead. Why not let them know that their visitor was anointed by God, after all?

My God, Jack," Mary Pat said. The sun was under the yardarm. Cathy was on her way home from Hopkins, and Jack was in his private study off the Oval Office, sipping a glass of whiskey and ice with the DCI and his wife, the DDO. "When I saw this, I had to go off to the bathroom."

"I hear you, MP." Jack handed her a glass of sherry—Mary Pat's favorite relaxing drink. Ed Foley picked a Samuel Adams beer in keeping with his working-class origins. "Ed?"

"Jack, this is totally fucking crazy," the Director of Central Intelligence blurted. "Fucking" was not a word you usually used around the President, even this one. "I mean, sure, it's from a good source and all that, but, Jesus, you just don't do shit like this."

"Pat Martin was in here, right?" the Deputy Director (Operations) asked. She got a nod. "Well, then he told you this is damned near an act of war."

"Damned near," Ryan agreed, with a small sip of his Irish whiskey. Then he pulled out his last cigarette of the day, stolen from Mrs. Sumter, and lit it. "But it's a hard one to deny, and we have to fit this into government policy somehow or other."

"We have to get George down," Ed Foley said first of all.

"And show him SORGE, too?" Ryan asked. Mary Pat winced immediately. "I know we have to guard that one closely, MP, but, damn it, if we can't use it to figure out these people, we're no better off than we were before we had the source."

She let out a long breath and nodded, knowing that Ryan was right, but not liking it very much. "And our internal pshrink," she said. "We need a doc to check this out. It's crazy enough that we probably need a medical opinion."

“Next, what do we say to Sergey?” Jack asked. “He knows we know.”

“Well, start off with ‘keep your head down,’ I suppose,” Ed Foley announced. “Uh, Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“You give this to your people yet, the Secret Service, I mean?”

“No ... oh, yeah.”

“If you’re willing to commit one act of war, why not another?” the DCI asked rhetorically. “And they don’t have much reason to like you at the moment.”

“But why Golovko?” MP asked the air. “He’s no enemy of China. He’s a pro, a king-spook. He doesn’t *have* a political agenda that I know about. Sergey’s an *honest* man.” She took another sip of sherry.

“True, no political ambitions that I know of. But he is Grushavoy’s tightest adviser on a lot of issues—foreign policy, domestic stuff, defense. Grushavoy likes him because he’s smart and honest—”

“Yeah, that’s rare enough in this town, too,” Jack acknowledged. That wasn’t fair. He’d chosen his inner circle well, and almost exclusively of people with no political ambition, which made them an endangered species in the environs of Washington. The same was true of Golovko, a man who preferred to serve rather than to rule, in which he was rather like the American President. “Back to the issue at hand. Are the Chinese making some sort of play, and if so, what?”

“Nothing that I see, Jack,” Foley replied, speaking for his agency in what was now an official capacity. “But remember that even with SORGE, we don’t see that much of their inner thinking. They’re so different from us that reading their minds is a son of a bitch, and they’ve just taken one in the teeth, though I don’t think they really know that yet.”

“They’re going to find out in less than a week.”

“Oh? How’s that?” the DCI asked.

“George Winston tells me a bunch of their commercial contracts are coming up due in less than ten days. We’ll see then what effect this has on their commercial accounts—and so will they.”

The day started earlier than usual in Beijing. Fang Gan stepped out of his official car and hurried up the steps into the building, past the uniformed guard who always held the door open for him, and this time did not get a thank-you nod from the exalted servant of the people. Fang walked to his elevator, into it, then stepped off after arriving at his floor. His office door was only a few more steps. Fang was a healthy and vigorous man for his age. His personal staff leaped to their feet as he walked in—an hour early, they all realized.

"Ming!" he called on the way to his inner office.

"Yes, Comrade Minister," she said, on going through the still-open door.

"What items have you pulled off the foreign media?"

"One moment." She disappeared and then reappeared with a sheaf of papers in her hand. *"London Times, London Daily Telegraph, Observer, New York Times, Washington Post, Miami Herald, Boston Globe.* The Western American papers are not yet available." She hadn't included Italian or other European papers because she couldn't speak or read those languages well enough, and for some reason Fang only seemed interested in the opinions of English-speaking foreign devils. She handed over the translations. Again, he didn't thank her even peremptorily, which was unusual for him. Her minister was exercised about something.

"What time is it in Washington?" Fang asked next.

"Twenty-one hours, Comrade Minister," she answered.

"So, they are watching television and preparing for bed?"

"Yes, Comrade Minister."

"But their newspaper articles and editorials are already prepared."

"That is the schedule they work, Minister. Most of their stories are done by the end of a normal working day. At the latest, news stories—aside from the truly unusual or unexpected ones—are completely done before the reporters go home for their dinner."

Fang looked up at that analysis. Ming was a clever girl, giving him information on something he'd never really thought about. With that realization, he nodded for her to go back to her desk.

For their part, the American trade delegation was just boarding their plane. They were seen off by a minor consular official who spoke plastic words from plastic lips, received by the Americans through plastic ears. Then they boarded their USAF aircraft, which started up at once and began rolling toward the runway.

"So, how do we evaluate this adventure, Cliff?" Mark Gant asked.

"Can you spell 'disaster' ?" Rutledge asked in return.

"That bad?"

The Assistant Secretary of State for Policy nodded soberly. Well, it wasn't his fault, was it? That stupid Italian clergyman gets in the way of a bullet, and then the widow of that other minister-person had to pray for him in public, *knowing* that the local government would object. And, of course, CNN had to be there for both events to stir the pot at home ... How was a diplomat supposed to make peace happen if people kept making things worse instead of better?

"That bad, Mark. China may never get a decent trade agreement if this crap keeps going on."

"All they have to do is change their own policies a little," Gant offered.

"You sound like the President."

"Cliffy, if you want to join a club, you have to abide by the club rules. Is that so hard to understand?"

"You don't treat great nations like the dentist nobody likes who wants to join the country club."

"Why is the principle different?"

"Do you really think the United States can govern its foreign policy by *principle?"* Rutledge asked in exasperation. So much so, in fact, that he'd let his mind slip a gear.

"The President does, Cliff, and so does your Secretary of State," Gant pointed out.

"Well, if we want a trade agreement with China, we have to consider their point of view."

"You know, Cliff, if you'd been in the State Department back in 1938, maybe Hitler could have killed all the Jews without all that much of a fuss," Gant observed lightly.

It had the desired effect. Rutledge turned and started to object: "Wait a minute—"

"It was just his internal policy, Cliff, wasn't it? So what, they go to a different church—gas 'em. Who cares?"

"Now look, Mark—"

"You look, Cliff. A country has to stand for certain things, because if you don't, who the fuck are you, okay? We're in the club—hell, we pretty much run the club. Why, Cliff? Because people know what we stand for. We're not perfect. You know it. I know it. They all know it. But they also know what we will and won't do, and so, we can be trusted by our friends, and by our enemies, too, and so the world makes a little sense, at least in our parts of it. And that is why we're respected, Cliff."

"And all the weapons don't matter, and all the commercial power we have, what about them?" the diplomat demanded.

"How do you think we got them, Cliffy?" Gant demanded, using the diminutive of Rutledge's name again, just to bait him. "We are what we are because people from all over the world came to America to work and live out their dreams. They worked hard. My grandfather came over from Russia because he didn't like getting fucked over by the czar, and he worked, and he got his kids educated, and they got *their* kids educated, and so now I'm pretty damned rich, but I haven't forgotten what Grandpa told me when I was little either. He told me this was the best place the world ever saw to be a Jew. Why, Cliff? Because the dead white European men who broke us away from

England and wrote the Constitution had some good ideas and they lived up to them, for the most part. That's who we are, Cliff. And that means we have to *be* what we are, and *that* means we have to stand for certain things, and the world has to see us do it."

"But we have so many flaws ourselves," Rutledge protested.

"Of course we do! Cliff, we don't have to be perfect to be the best around, and we never stop trying to be better. My dad, when he was in college, he marched in Mississippi, and got his ass kicked a couple of times, but you know, it all worked out, and so now we have a black guy in the Vice Presidency. From what I hear, maybe he's good enough to take one more step up someday. Jesus, Cliff, how can you represent America to other nations if you don't get it?"

Diplomacy is business, Rutledge wanted to reply. *And I know how to do the business.* But why bother trying to explain things to this Chicago Jew? So, he rocked his seat back and tried to look dozy. Gant took the cue and stood for a seventy-foot walk. The Air Force sergeants who pretended to be stewardesses aboard served breakfast, and the coffee was pretty decent. He found himself in the rear of the aircraft looking at all the reporters, and that felt a little bit like enemy territory, but not, on reflection, as much as it did sitting next to that diplo-jerk.

The morning sun that lit up Beijing had done the same to Siberia even earlier in the day.

"I see our engineers are as good as ever," Bondarenko observed. As he watched, earthmoving machines were carving a path over a hundred meters wide through the primeval forests of pine and spruce. This road would serve both the gold strike and the oil fields. And this wasn't the only one. Two additional routes were being worked by a total of twelve crews. Over a third of the Russian Army's available engineers were on these projects, and that was a lot of troops, along with more than half of the heavy equipment in the olive-green paint the Russian army had used for seventy years.

"This is a 'Hero Project,' " Colonel Aliyev said. And he was right. The "Hero Project" idea had been created by the Soviet Union to indicate something of such great national importance that it would draw the youth of the nation in patriotic zeal—and besides, it was a good way to meet girls and see a little more of the world. This one was moving even faster than that, because Moscow had assigned the military to it, and the military was no longer worrying itself about an invasion from (or into) NATO. For all its faults, the Russian army still had access to a lot of human and material resources. Plus. there was real money in this project. Wages were very high for the civilians. Moscow wanted both of these resource areas brought on line—and quickly. And so the goldfield workers had been helicoptered in with light equipment, with which they'd built a larger landing area, which allowed still heavier equipment to be air-dropped, and with that a small, rough airstrip had been

built. That had allowed Russian air force cargo aircraft to lift in truly heavy equipment, which was now roughing in a proper air-landing strip for when the crew extending the railroad got close enough to deliver the cement and rebar to create a real commercial-quality airport. Buildings were going up. Some of the first things that had been sent in were the components of a sawmill, and one thing you didn't have to import into this region was wood. Large swaths were being cleared, and the trees cut down to clear them were almost instantly transformed into lumber for building. First, the sawmill workers set up their own rough cabins. Now, administrative buildings were going up, and in four months, they expected to have dormitories for over a thousand of the miners who were already lining up for the highly paid job of digging this gold out of the ground. The Russian government had decided that the workers here would have the option of being paid in gold coin at world-price, and that was something few Russian citizens wanted to walk away from. And so expert miners were filling out their application forms in anticipation of the flights into the new strike. Bondarenko wished them luck. There were enough mosquitoes there to carry off a small child and suck him dry of blood like mini-vampires. Even for gold coin, it was not a place he'd want to work.

The oil field was ultimately more important to his country, the general knew. Already, ships were fighting their way through the late-spring ice, shepherded by navy icebreakers like the *Yamal* and *Rossiya,* to deliver the drilling equipment needed to commence proper exploration for later production. But Bondarenko had been well briefed on this subject. This oil field was no pipe dream. It was the economic salvation of his country, a way to inject *huge* quantities of hard currency into Russia, money to buy the things it needed to smash its way into the twenty-first century, money to pay the workers who'd striven so hard and so long for the prosperity they and their country deserved.

And it was Bondarenko's job to guard it. Meanwhile, army engineers were furiously at work building harbor facilities so that the cargo ships would be able to land what cargo they had. The use of amphibious-warfare ships, so that the Russian navy could land the cargo on the beaches as though it were battle gear, had been examined but discarded. In many cases, the cargo to be landed was larger than the main battle tanks of the Russian army, a fact which had both surprised and impressed the commanding general of the Far East Military District.

One consequence of all this was that most of Bondarenko's engineers had been stripped away for one project or another, leaving him with a few battalions organically attached to his fighting formations. And he had uses of his own for those engineers, the general grumbled. There were several places on the Chinese border where a couple of regiments could put together some very useful obstacles against invading mechanized forces. But they'd be visible, and too obviously intended to be used against Chinese forces, Moscow had told him, not caring, evidently, that the only way they could be used against the People's Liberation Army was if that army decided to come north and *liberate* Russia!

What was it about politicians? Bondarenko thought. Even the ones in America

were the same, so he'd been told by American officers he'd met. Politicians didn't really care much about what something did, but they cared a great deal about what it *appeared* to do. *In that sense, all politicians of whatever political tilt all over the world were communists,* Bondarenko thought with an amused grunt, more interested *in show than reality.*

"When will they be finished?" the general-colonel asked.

"They've made amazing progress," Colonel Aliyev replied. "The routes will be fully roughed in—oh, another month or six weeks, depending on weather. The finishing work will take much longer."

"You know what worries me?"

"What is that, Comrade General?" the operations officer asked.

"We've built an invasion route. For the first time, the Chinese could jump across the border and make good time to the north Siberian coast." Before, the natural obstacles—mainly the wooded nature of the terrain—would have made that task difficult to the point of impossibility. But now there was a way to get there, and a reason to go there as well. Siberia now truly *was* something it had often been thought to be, a treasure house of cosmic proportions. *Treasure house,* Bondarenko thought. *And I am the keeper* of the keys. He walked back to his helicopter to complete his tour of the route being carved out by army engineers.

CHAPTER 36

SORGE Reports

President Ryan awoke just before six in the morning. The Secret Service preferred that he keep the shades closed, thus blocking the windows, but Ryan had never wanted to sleep in a coffin, even a large one, and so when he awoke momentarily at such times as 3:53 he preferred to see some sort of light outside the window, even if only the taillights of a patrolling police car or a lonely taxi-cab. Over the years, he'd become accustomed to waking early. That surprised him. As a boy, he'd always preferred to sleep late, especially on weekends. But Cathy had been the other way, like most doctors, and especially most surgeons: early to rise, and get to the hospital, so that when you worked on a patient you had all day to see how he or she tolerated the procedure.

So, maybe he'd picked it up from her, and in some sort of perverse one-upmanship he'd come to open his eyes even earlier. Or maybe it was a more recently acquired habit in this damned place, Jack thought, as he slid off the bed and padded off to the bathroom as another damned day started, this one like so many others, too damned early. What the hell was the matter? the President wondered. Why was it that he didn't need sleep as much anymore? Hell, sleep was one of the very few pure pleasures given to man on earth, and all he wanted was just a little more of it ...

But he couldn't have it. It was just short of six in the morning, Jack told himself as he looked out the window. Milkmen were up, as were paperboys. Mailmen were in their sorting rooms, and in other places people who had worked through the night were ending their working days. That included a lot of people right here in the White House: protective troops in the Secret Service, domestic staff, some people Ryan knew by sight but not by name, which fact shamed him somewhat. They were *his* people, after all, and he was supposed to know about them, know their names well enough to speak them when he saw the owners thereof—but there were just too many of them for him to know. Then there were the uniformed people in the White House Military Office—called *Wham-o* by insiders—who supplemented the Office of Signals. There was, in fact, a small army of men and women who existed only to serve John Patrick Ryan—and through him the country as a whole, or that was the theory. What the hell, he thought, looking out the window. It was light enough to see. The streetlights were clicking off as their photoelectric sensors told them the sun was coming up. Jack pulled on his old Naval Academy robe, stepped into his slippers—he'd only gotten them recently; at home he just walked around barefoot, but a President couldn't do that in front

of the troops, could he?—and moved quietly into the corridor.

There must have been some sort of bug or motion sensor close to the bedroom door, Jack thought. He never managed to surprise anyone when he came out into the upstairs corridor unexpectedly. The heads always seemed to be looking in his direction and there was the instant morning race to see who could greet him first.

The first this time was one of the senior Secret Service troops, head of the night crew. Andrea Price-O'Day was still at her home in Maryland, probably dressed and ready to head out the door—what shitty hours these people worked on his behalf, Jack reminded himself—for the hour-long drive into D.C. And with luck she'd make it home—when? Tonight? That depended on his schedule for today, and he couldn't remember offhand what he had happening.

"Coffee, Boss?" one of the younger agents asked.

"Sounds like a winner, Charlie." Ryan followed him, yawning. He ended up in the Secret Service guard post for this floor, a walk-in closet, really, with a TV and a coffeepot—probably stocked by the kitchen staff—and some munchies to help the people get through the night.

"When did you come on duty?" POTUS asked.

"Eleven, sir," Charlie Malone answered.

"Boring duty?"

"Could be worse. At least I'm not working the bad-check detail in Omaha anymore."

"Oh, yeah," agreed Joe Hilton, another one of the young agents on the deathwatch.

"I bet you played ball," Jack observed.

Hilton nodded. "Outside linebacker, sir. Florida State University. Not big enough for the pros, though."

Only about two-twenty, and it's all lean meat, Jack thought. Young Special Agent Hilton looked like a fundamental force of nature.

"Better off playing baseball. You make a good living, work fifteen years, maybe more, and you're healthy at the end of it."

"Well, maybe I'll train my boy to be an outfielder," Hilton said.

"How old?" Ryan asked, vaguely remembering that Hilton was a recent father. His wife was a lawyer at the Justice Department, wasn't she?

"Three months. Sleeping through the night now, Mr. President. Good of you to ask."

I wish they'd just call me Jack. I'm not God, *am I?* But that was about as likely as his calling his commanding general Bobby-Ray back when he'd been Second Lieutenant John P. Ryan, USMC.

"Anything interesting happen during the night?"

"Sir, CNN covered the departure of our diplomats from Beijing, but that just showed the airplane taking off."

"I think they just send the cameras down halfway hoping the airplane'll blow up so that they'll have tape of it—you know, like when the chopper comes to lift me out of here." Ryan sipped his coffee. These junior Secret Service agents were probably a little uneasy to have "The Boss," as he was known within the Service, talking with them as if he and they were normal people. If so, Jack thought, tough shit. He wasn't going to turn into Louis XIV just to make *them* happy. Besides, he wasn't as good-looking as Leonardo DiCaprio, at least according to Sally, who thought that young actor was the cat's ass.

Just then, a messenger arrived with the day's copies of the morning's *Early Bird.* Jack took one along with the coffee and headed back to read it over. A few editorials bemoaning the recall of the trade delegation—maybe it was the lingering liberalism in the media, the reason they were not, never had been, and probably never would be entirely comfortable with the amateur statesman in the White House. Privately, Ryan knew, they called him other things, some rather less polite, but the average Joe out there, Arnie van Damm told Jack once a week or so, still liked him a lot. Ryan's approval rating was still very high, and the reason for it, it seemed, was that Jack was perceived as a regular guy who'd gotten lucky—if they called *this* luck, POTUS thought with a stifled grunt.

He returned to reading the news articles, wandering back to the breakfast room, as he did so, where, he saw, people were hustling to get things set up—notified, doubtless, by the Secret Service that SWORDSMAN was up and needed to be fed. Yet more of the *His Majesty Effect,* Ryan groused. But he was hungry, and food was food, and so he wandered in, picked what he wanted off the buffet, and flipped the TV on to see what was happening in the world as he attacked his eggs Benedict. He'd have to devour them quickly, before Cathy appeared to yell at him about the cholesterol intake. All around him, to a radius of thirty miles or so, the government was coming to consciousness, or what passed for it, dressing, getting in their cars, and heading in, just as he was, but not as comfortably.

"Morning, Dad," Sally said, coming in next and walking to the TV, which she switched to MTV without asking. It was a long way since that bright afternoon in London when he'd been shot, Jack thought. He'd been "daddy" then.

In Beijing the computer on Ming's desk had been in auto-sleep mode for just the right number of minutes. The hard drive started turning again, and the machine began its daily routine. Without lighting up the monitor, it examined the internal file of recent entries, compressed them, and then activated the internal modem to shoot them out over the'Net. The entire process took about seventeen seconds, and then the computer went back to sleep. The data

proceeded along the telephone lines in the city of Beijing until it found its destination server, which was, actually, in Wisconsin. There it waited for the signal that would call it up, after which it would be dumped out of the server's memory, and soon thereafter written over, eliminating any trace that it had ever existed.

In any case, as Washington woke up, Beijing was heading for sleep, with Moscow a few hours behind. The earth continued its turning, oblivious of what transpired in the endless cycle of night and day.

Well?" General Diggs looked at his subordinate.

"Well, sir," Colonel Giusti said, "I think the cavalry squadron is in pretty good shape." Like Diggs, Angelo Giusti was a career cavalryman. His job as commander of 1st Armored's cavalry squadron (actually a battalion, but the cav had its own way of speaking) was to move out ahead of the division proper, locating the enemy and scouting out the land, being the eyes of Old Ironsides, but with enough combat power of its own to look after itself. A combat veteran of the Persian Gulf War, Giusti had smelled the smoke and seen the elephant. He knew what his job was, and he figured he had his troopers trained up about as well as circumstances in Germany allowed. He actually preferred the free-form play allowed by simulators to the crowded training fields of the Combat Maneuver Training Center, which was barely seventy-five square kilometers. It wasn't the same as being out there in your vehicles, but neither was it restricted by time and distance, and on the global SimNet system you could play against a complete enemy battalion, even a brigade if you wanted your people to get some sweat in their play. Except for the bumpy-float sensation of driving your Abrams around (some tankers got motion sickness from that), it conveyed the complexity better than any place except the NTC at Fort Irwin in the California desert, or the comparable facility the Army had established for the Israelis in the Negev.

Diggs couldn't quite read the younger officer's mind, but he'd just watched the Quarter Horse move around with no lack of skill. They'd played against some Germans, and the Germans, as always, were pretty good at the war business—but not, today, as good as First Tanks' cavalry troopers, who'd first outmaneuvered their European hosts, and then (to the surprise and distaste of the German brigadier who'd supervised the exercise) set an ambush that had cost them half a battalion of their Leos, as the Americans called the Leopard-II main battle tanks. Diggs would be having dinner with the brigadier later today. Even the Germans didn't know night-fighting as well as the Americans did—which was odd, since their equipment was roughly comparable, and their soldiers pretty well trained ... but the German army was still largely a conscript army, most of whose soldiers didn't have the time-in-service the Americans enjoyed.

In the wider exercise—the cavalry part had just been the "real" segment of a wider command post exercise, or CPX—Colonel Don Lisle's 2nd Brigade was

handling the fuller, if theoretical, German attack quite capably. On the whole, the Bundeswehr was not having a good day. Well, it no longer had the mission of protecting its country against a Soviet invasion, and with that had gone the rather furious support of the citizenry that the West German army had enjoyed for so many years. Now the Bundeswehr was an anachronism with little obvious purpose, and the occupier of a lot of valuable real estate for which Germans could think up some practical uses. And so the former West German army had been downsized and mainly trained to do peacekeeping duty, which, when you got down to it, was heavily armed police work. The New World Order was a peaceful one, at least so far as Europeans were concerned. The Americans had engaged in combat operations to the rather distant interest of the Germans, who, while they'd always had a healthy interest in war-fighting, were now happy enough that their interest in it was entirely theoretical, rather like a particularly intricate Hollywood production. It also forced them to respect America a little more than they would have preferred. But some things couldn't be helped.

"Well, Angelo, I think your troopers have earned themselves a beer or two at the local Gasthauses. That envelopment you accomplished at zero-two-twenty was particularly adroit."

Giusti grinned and nodded his appreciation. "Thank you, General. I'll pass that one along to my S-3. He's the one who thought it up."

"Later, Angelo."

"Roger that one, sir." Lieutenant Colonel Giusti saluted his divisional commander on his way.

"Well, Duke?"

Colonel Masterman pulled a cigar out of his BDU jacket and lit it up. One nice thing about Germany was that you could always get good Cuban ones here. "I've known Angelo since Fort Knox. He knows his stuff, and he had his officers particularly well trained. Even had his own book on tactics and battle-drill printed up."

"Oh?" Diggs turned. "Is it any good?"

"Not bad at all," the G-3 replied. "I'm not sure that I agree with it all, but it doesn't hurt to have everyone singing out of the same hymnal. His officers all think pretty much the same way. So, Angelo's a good football coach. Sure enough he kicked the Krauts' asses last night." Masterman closed his eyes and rubbed his face. "These night exercises take it out of you."

"How's Lisle doing?"

"Sir, last time I looked, he had the Germans well contained. Our friends didn't seem to know what he had around them. They were putzing around trying to gather information—short version, Giusti won the reconnaissance battle, and that decided things—again."

"Again," Diggs agreed. If there was any lesson out of the National Training Center, it was that one. Reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance. Find the enemy. Don't let the enemy find you. If you pulled that off, it was pretty hard

to lose. If you didn't, it was very hard to win.

"How's some sleep grab you, Duke?"

"It's good to have a CG who looks after his troopers, *mon Général."* Masterman was sufficiently tired that he didn't even want a beer first.

And so with that decided, they headed for Diggs's command UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter for the hop back to the divisional kazerne. Diggs particularly liked the four-point safety belt. It made it a lot easier to sleep sitting up.

***O**ne of the things I have to do today,* Ryan told himself, *is figure out what to do about the Chinese attempt on Sergey.* He checked his daily briefing sheet. Robby was out west again. That was too bad. Robby was both a good sounding board and a source of good ideas. So, he'd talk it over with Scott Adler, if he and Scott both had holes in their day, and the Foleys. *Who else?* Jack wondered. Damn, whom else could he trust with this? If this one leaked to the press, there'd be hell to pay. Okay, Adler had to be there. He'd actually met that Zhang guy, and if some Chinese minister-type had owned a piece of this, then he'd be the one, wouldn't he?

Probably. Not *certainly,* however. Ryan had been in the spook business too long to make that mistake. When you made *certainty* assumptions about things you weren't really sure about, you frequently walked right into a stone wall headfirst, and that could hurt. Ryan punched a button on his desk. "Ellen?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Later today, I need Scott Adler and the Foleys in here. It'll take about an hour. Find me a hole in the schedule, will you?"

"About two-thirty, but it means putting off the Secretary of Transportation's meeting about the air-traffic-control proposals."

"Make it so, Ellen. This one's important," he told her.

"Yes, Mr. President."

It was by no means perfect. Ryan preferred to work on things as they popped into his mind, but as President you quickly learned that you served the schedule, not the other way around. Jack grimaced. So much for the illusion of power.

Mary Pat Foley strolled into her office, as she did nearly every morning, and as always turned on her computer—if there was one thing she'd learned from SORGE, it was to turn the damned thing all the way off when she wasn't using it. There was a further switch on her phone line that manually blocked it, much as if she'd pulled the plug out of the wall. She flipped that, too. It was an old story for an employee of an intelligence service. Sure, she was

paranoid, but was she paranoid *enough?*

Sure enough, there was another e-mail from cgood@jadecastle.com. Chet Nomuri was still at work, and this download took a mere twenty-three seconds. With the download complete, she made sure she'd backed it up, then clobbered it out of her in-box so that no copies remained even in the ether world. Next, she printed it all up and called down for Joshua Sears to do the translations and some seat-of-the-pants analysis. SORGE had become routine in handling if not in importance, and by a quarter to nine she had the translation in hand.

"Oh, Lord. Jack's just going to love this one," the DDO observed at her desk. Then she walked the document to Ed's larger office facing the woods. That's when she found out about the afternoon trip to the White House.

Mary Abbot was the official White House makeup artist. It was her job to make the President look good on TV, which meant making him look like a cheap whore in person, but that couldn't be helped. Ryan had learned not to fidget too much, which made her job easier, but she knew he was fighting the urge, which both amused and concerned her.

"How's your son doing at school?" Ryan asked.

"Just fine, thank you, and there's a nice girl he's interested in."

Ryan didn't comment on that. He knew that there had to be some boy or boys at St. Mary's who found his Sally highly interesting (she was pretty, even to disinterested eyes), but he didn't want to think about that. It did make him grateful for the Secret Service, however. Whenever Sally went on a date, there would be at least a chase car full of armed agents close by, and *that* would take the starch out of most teenaged boys. So, the USSS did have its uses, eh? *Girl children,* Jack thought, *were God's punishment on you for being a man.* His eyes were scanning his briefing sheets for the mini-press conference. The likely questions and the better sorts of answers to give to them. It seemed very dishonest to do it this way, but some foreign heads of government had the question prescreened so that the answers could be properly canned. Not a bad idea in the abstract, Jack thought, but the American media would spring for that about as quickly as a coyote would chase after a whale.

"There," Mrs. Abbot said, as she finished touching up his hair. Ryan stood, looked in the mirror, and grimaced as usual.

"Thank you, Mary," he managed to say.

"You're welcome, Mr. President."

And Ryan walked out, crossing the hall from the Roosevelt Room to the Oval Office, where the TV equipment was set up. The reporters stood when he entered, as the kids at St. Matthew's had stood when the priest came into class. But in third grade, the kids asked easier questions. Jack sat down in a rocking swivel chair. Kennedy had done something similar to that, and Arnie

thought it a good idea for Jack as well. The gentle rocking that a man did unconsciously in the chair gave him a homey look, the spin experts all thought —Jack didn't know that, and knowing it would have caused him to toss the chair out the window, but Arnie did and he'd eased the President into it merely by saying it looked good, and getting Cathy Ryan to agree. In any case, SWORDSMAN sat down, and relaxed in the comfortable chair, which was the other reason Arnie had foisted it on him, and the real reason why Ryan had agreed. It was comfortable.

"We ready?" Jack asked. When the President asked that, it usually meant *Let's get this fucking show on the road!* But Ryan thought it was just a question.

Krystin Matthews was there to represent NBC. There were also reporters from ABC and Fox, plus a print reporter from the *Chicago Tribune*. Ryan had come to prefer these more intimate press conferences, and the media went along with it because the reporters were assigned by lot, which made it fair, and everyone had access to the questions and answers. The other good thing from Ryan's perspective was that a reporter was less likely to be confrontational in the Oval Office than in the raucous locker-room atmosphere of the pressroom, where the reporters tended to bunch together in a mob and adopt a mob mentality.

"Mr. President," Krystin Matthews began. "You've recalled both the trade delegation and our ambassador from Beijing. Why was that necessary?"

Ryan rocked a little in the chair. "Krystin, we all saw the events in Beijing that so grabbed the conscience of the world, the murder of the cardinal and the minister, followed by the roughing-up—to use a charitable term for it—of the minister's widow and some members of the congregation."

He went on to repeat the points he'd made in his previous press conference, making particular note of the Chinese government's indifference to what had happened.

"One can only conclude that the Chinese government doesn't care. Well, we care. The American people care. And this administration cares. You cannot take the life of a human being as casually as though you are swatting an insect. The response we received was unsatisfactory, and so, I recalled our ambassador for consultations."

"But the trade negotiations, Mr. President," the *Chicago Tribune* broke in.

"It is difficult for a country like the United States of America to do business with a nation which does not recognize human rights. You've seen for yourself what our citizens think of all this. I believe you will find that they find those murders as repellent as I do, and, I would imagine, as you do yourself."

"And so you will not recommend to Congress that we normalize trading relations with China?"

Ryan shook his head. "No, I will not so recommend, and even if I did, Congress would rightly reject such a recommendation."

"At what time might you change your position on this issue?"

“At such time as China enters the world of civilized nations and recognizes the rights of its common people, as all other great nations do.”

“So you are saying that China today is not a civilized country?”

Ryan felt as though he’d been slapped across the face with a cold, wet fish, but he smiled and went on. “Killing diplomats is not a civilized act, is it?”

“What will the Chinese think of that?” Fox asked.

“I cannot read their minds. I do call upon them to make amends, or at least to consider the feelings and beliefs of the rest of the world, and then to reconsider their unfortunate action in that light.”

“And what about the trade issues?” This one came from ABC.

“If China wants normalized trade relations with the United States, then China will have to open its markets to us. As you know, we have a law on the books here called the Trade Reform Act. That law allows us to mirror-image other countries’ trade laws and practices, so that whatever tactics are used against us, we can then use those very same tactics with respect to trade with them. Tomorrow, I will direct the Department of State and the Department of Commerce to set up a working group to implement TRA with respect to the People’s Republic,” President Ryan announced, making the story for the day, and a bombshell it was.

Christ, Jack,” the Secretary of the Treasury said in his office across the street. He was getting a live feed from the Oval Office. He lifted his desk phone and punched a button. ”I want a read of the PRC’s current cash accounts, global,” he told one of his subordinates from New York. Then his phone rang.

“Secretary of State on Three,” his secretary told him over the intercom. SecTreas grunted and picked up the phone.

“Yeah, I saw it too, Scott.”

So, Yuriy Andreyevich, how did it go?” Clark asked. It had taken over a week to set up, and mainly because General Kirillin had spent a few hours on the pistol range working on his technique. Now he’d just stormed into the officers’ club bar looking as though he’d taken one in the guts.

“Is he a Mafia assassin?”

Chavez had himself a good laugh at that. “General, he came to us because the Italian police wanted to get him away from the Mafia. He got in the way of a mob assassination, and the local chieftain made noises about going after him and his family. What did he get you for?”

“Fifty euros,” Kirillin nearly spat.

“You were confident going in, eh?” Clark asked. “Been there, done that.”

“Got the fuckin’ T-shirt,” Ding finished the statement with a laugh. And fifty euros was a dent even in the salary of a Russian three-star.

“Three points, in a five-hundred-point match. I scored four ninety-three!”

“Ettore only got four ninety-six?” Clark asked. “Jesus, the boy’s slowing down.” He slid a glass in front of the Russian general officer.

“He’s drinking more over here,” Chavez observed.

“That must be it.” Clark nodded. The Russian general officer was not, however, the least bit amused.

“Falcone is not human,” Kirillin said, gunning down his first shot of vodka.

“He could scare Wild Bill Hickok, and that’s a fact. And you know the worst part about it?”

“What is that, Ivan Sergeyevich?”

“He’s so goddamned humble about it, like it’s fucking normal to shoot like that. Jesus, Sam Snead was never that good with a five-iron.”

“General,” Domingo said after his second vodka of the evening. The problem with being in Russia was that you tended to pick up the local customs, and one of those was drinking. “Every man on my team is an expert shot, and by expert, 1 mean close to being on his country’s Olympic team, okay? Big Bird’s got us all beat, and none of us are used to losing any more’n you are. But I’ll tell you, I’m goddamned glad he’s on my team.” Just then, Falcone walked through the door. “Hey, Ettore, come on over!”

He hadn’t gotten any shorter. Ettore towered over the diminutive Chavez, and still looked like a figure from an E1 Greco painting. “General,” he said in greeting to Kirillin. “You shoot extremely well.”

“Not so good as you, Falcone,” the Russian responded.

The Italian cop shrugged. “I had a lucky day.”

“Sure, guy,” Clark reacted, as he handed Falcone a shot glass.

“I’ve come to like this vodka,” Falcone said on gunning it down. “But it affects my aim somewhat.”

“Yeah, Ettore.” Chavez chuckled. “The general told us you blew four points in the match.”

“You mean you have done better than this?” Kirillin demanded.

“He has,” Clark answered. “I watched him shoot a possible three weeks ago. That was five hundred points, too.”

“That was a good day,” Falcone agreed. “I had a good night’s sleep beforehand and no hangover at all.”

Clark had himself a good chuckle and turned to look around the room. Just then, another uniform entered the room and looked around. He spotted General Kirillin and walked over.

“Damn, who’s this recruiting poster?” Ding wondered aloud as he

approached.

“Tovarisch General,” the man said by way of greeting.

“Anatoliy Ivan’ch,” Kirillin responded. “How are things at the Center?”

Then the guy turned. “You are John Clark?”

“That’s me,” the American confirmed. “Who are you?”

“This is Major Anatoliy Shelepin,” General Kirillin answered. “He’s chief of personal security for Sergey Golovko.”

“We know your boss.” Ding held out his hand. “Howdy. I’m Domingo Chavez.”

Handshakes were exchanged all around.

“Could we speak in a quieter place?” Shelepin asked. The four men took over a comer booth in the club. Falcone remained at the bar.

“Sergey Nikolay’ch sent you over?” the Russian general asked.

“You haven’t heard,” Major Shelepin answered. It was the way he said it that got everyone’s attention. He spoke in Russian, which Clark and Chavez understood well enough. “I want my people to train with you.”

“Haven’t heard what?” Kirillin asked.

“We found out who tried to kill the Chairman,” Shelepin announced.

“Oh, he was the target? I thought they were after the pimp,” Kirillin objected.

“You guys want to tell us what you’re talking about?” Clark asked.

“A few weeks ago, there was an assassination attempt in Dzerzhinskiy Square,” Shelepin responded, explaining what they’d thought at the time. “But now it appears they hit the wrong target.”

“Somebody tried to waste Golovko?” Domingo asked. “Damn.”

“Who was it?”

“The man who arranged it was a former KGB officer named Suvorov—so we believe, that is. He used two ex-Spetsnaz soldiers. They have both been murdered, probably to conceal their involvement, or at least to prevent them from discussing it with anyone.” Shelepin didn’t add anything else. “In any case, we have heard good things about your Rainbow troops, and we want you to help train my protective detail.”

“It’s okay with me, so long as it’s okay with Washington.” Clark stared hard into the bodyguard’s eyes. He looked damned serious, but not very happy with the world at the moment.

“We will make the formal request tomorrow.”

“They are excellent, these Rainbow people,” Kirillin assured him. “We’re getting along well with them. Anatoliy used to work for me, back when I was a colonel.” The tone of voice told what he thought of the younger man.

There was more to this, Clark thought. A senior Russian official didn't just ask a former CIA officer for help with something related to his personal safety out of the clear blue. He caught Ding's eye and saw the same thought. Suddenly both were back in the spook business.

"Okay," John said. "I'll call home tonight if you want." He'd do that from the American Embassy, probably on the STU-6 in the station chief's office.

CHAPTER 37

Fallout

The VC-137 landed without fanfare at Andrews Air Force Base. The base lacked a proper terminal and the attendant jetways, and so the passengers debarked on stairs grafted onto a flatbed truck. Cars waited at the bottom to take them into Washington. Mark Gant was met by two Secret Service agents who drove him at once to the Treasury Department building across the street from the White House. He'd barely gotten used to being on the ground when he found himself in the Secretary's office.

"How'd it go?" George Winston asked.

"Interesting, to say the least," Gant said, his mind trying to get used to the fact that his body didn't have a clue where it was at the moment. "I thought I'd be going home to sleep it off."

"Ryan's invoking the Trade Recovery Act against the Chinese."

"Oh? Well, that's not all that much of a surprise, is it?"

"Look at this," SecTreas commanded, handing over a recently produced printout. "This" was a report on the current cash holdings of the People's Republic of China.

"How solid is this information?" TELESCOPE asked TRADER.

The report was an intelligence estimate in all but name. Employees within the Treasury Department routinely kept track of international monetary transactions as a means of determining the day-to-day strength of the dollar and other internationally traded currencies. That included the Chinese yuan, which had been having a slightly bad time of late.

"They're this thin?" Gant asked. "I thought they were running short of cash, but I didn't know it was quite this bad ..."

"It surprised me, too," SecTreas admitted. "It appears that they've been purchasing a lot of things on the international market lately, especially jet engines from France, and because they're late paying for the last round, the French company has decided to take a harder line—they're the only game in town. We won't let GE or Pratt and Whitney bid on the order, and the Brits have similarly forbidden Rolls-Royce. That makes the French the sole source, which isn't so bad for the French, is it? They've jacked up the price about fifteen percent, and they're asking for cash up front."

"The yuan's going to take a hit," Gant predicted. "They've been trying to cover this up, eh?"

"Yeah, and fairly successfully."

"That's why they were hitting us so hard on the trade deal. They saw this one coming, and they wanted a favorable announcement to bail them out. But they sure didn't play it very smart. Damn, you have this sort of a problem, you learn to crawl a little."

"I thought so, too. Why, do you think?"

"They're proud, George. Very, very proud. Like a rich family that's lost its money but not its social position, and tries to make up for the one with the other. But it doesn't work. Sooner or later, people find out that you're not paying your bills, and then the whole world comes crashing in on you. You can put it off for a while, which makes sense if you have something coming in, but if the ship don't dock, you sink." Gant flipped some pages, thinking: The other problem is that countries are run by politicians, people with no real understanding of money, who figure they can always maneuver their way out of whatever comes up. They're so used to having their own way that they never really think they can't have it that way all the time. One of the things Gant had learned working in D.C. was that politics was just as much about illusion as the motion-picture business was, which perhaps explained the affinity the two communities had for each other. But even in Hollywood you had to pay the bills, and you had to show a profit. Politicians always had the option of using T-bills to finance their accounts, and they also printed the money. Nobody expected the government to show a profit, and the board of directors was the voters, the people whom politicians conned as a way of life. It was all crazy, but that was the political game.

That's probably what the PRC leaders were thinking, Gant surmised. But sooner or later, reality raised its ugly head, and when it did all the time spent trying to avoid it was what really bit you on the ass. That was when the whole world said *gotcha.* And then you were well and truly got. In this case, the gotcha could be the collapse of the Chinese economy, and it would happen virtually overnight.

"George, I think State and CIA need to see this, and the President, too."

Lord." The President was sitting in the Oval Office, smoking one of Ellen Sumter's Virginia Slims and watching TV. This time it was C-SPAN. Members of the United States House of Representatives were speaking in the well about China. The content of the speeches was not complimentary, and the tone was decidedly inflammatory. All were speaking in favor of a resolution to condemn the People's Republic of China. C-SPAN2 was covering much the same verbiage in the Senate. Though the language was a touch milder, the import of the words was not. Labor unions were united with churches, liberals with conservatives, even free-traders with protectionists.

More to the point, CNN and the other networks showed demonstrations in the streets, and it appeared that Taiwan's "We're the Good Guys" campaign

had taken hold. Somebody (nobody was sure who yet) had even printed up stickers of the Red Chinese flag with the caption "We Kill Babies and Ministers." They were being attached to products imported from China, and the protesters were also busy identifying the American firms that did a lot of business on the Chinese mainland, with the aim of boycotting them.

Ryan's head turned. "Talk to me, Arnie."

"This looks serious, Jack," van Damm said.

"Gee, Arnie, I can see that. How serious?"

"Enough that I'd sell stock in those companies. They're going to take a hit. And this movement may have legs ..."

"What?"

"I mean it might not go away real soon. Next you're going to see posters with stills from the TV coverage of those two clerics being murdered. That's an image that doesn't go away. If there's any product the Chinese sell here that we can get elsewhere, then a lot of Americans will start buying it elsewhere."

The picture on CNN changed to live coverage of a demonstration outside the PRC Embassy in Washington. The signs said things like MURDERERS, KILLERS, and BARBARIANS!

"I wonder if Taiwan is helping to organize this ..."

"Probably not—at least not yet," van Damm thought. "If I were they, I wouldn't exactly mind, but I wouldn't need to play with this. They'll probably increase their efforts to distinguish themselves from the mainland—and that amounts to the same thing. Look for the networks to do stories about the Republic of China, and how upset *they* are with all this crap in Beijing, how they don't want to be tarred with the same brush and all that," the Chief of Staff said. "You know, 'Yes, we are Chinese, but *we* believe in human rights and freedom of religion.' That sort of thing. It's the smart move. They have some good PR advisers here in D.C. Hell, I probably know some of them, and if I were on the payroll, that's what I would advise."

That's when the phone rang. It was Ryan's private line, the one that usually bypassed the secretaries. Jack lifted it. "Yeah?"

"Jack, it's George across the street. Got a minute? I want to show you something, buddy."

"Sure. Come on over." Jack hung up and turned to Arnie. "SecTreas," he explained. "Says it's important." The President paused. "Arnie?"

"Yeah?"

"How much maneuvering room do I have with this?"

"The Chinese?" Arnie asked, getting a nod. "Not a hell of a lot, Jack. Sometimes the people themselves decide what our policy is. And the people will be making policy now by voting with their pocketbooks. Next we'll see some companies announce that they're suspending their commercial contracts with the PRC. The Chinese already fucked Boeing over, and in the full light of

day, which wasn't real smart. Now the people out there will want to fuck them back. You know, there are times when the average Joe Citizen stands up on his hind feet and gives the world the finger. When that happens, it's your job mainly to follow them, not to lead them," the Chief of Staff concluded. His Secret Service code name was CARPENTER, and he'd just constructed a box for his President to stay inside.

Jack nodded and stubbed out the smoke. He might be the Most Powerful Man in the World, but his power came from the people, and as it was theirs to give, it was also sometimes theirs to exercise.

Few people could simply open the door to the Oval Office and walk in, but George Winston was one of them, mainly because the Secret Service belonged to him. Mark Gant was with him, looking as though he'd just run a marathon chased by a dozen armed and angry Marines in jeeps.

"Hey, Jack."

"George. Mark, you look like hell," Ryan said. "Oh, you just flew in, didn't you?"

"Is this Washington or Shanghai?" Gant offered, as rather a wan joke.

"We took the tunnel. Jesus, have you seen the demonstrators outside? I think they want you to nuke Beijing," SecTreas observed. The President just pointed at his bank of television sets by way of an answer.

"Hell, why are they demonstrating here? I'm on their side—at least I think I am. Anyway, what brings you over?"

"Check this out." Winston nodded to Gant.

"Mr. President, these are the PRC's current currency accounts. We keep tabs on currency trading worldwide to make sure we know where the dollar is—which means we pretty much know where all the hard currency is in the world."

"Okay." Ryan knew about that—sort of. He didn't worry much about it, since the dollar was in pretty good shape, and the nonsqueaky wheel didn't need any grease. "So?"

"So, the PRC's liquidity situation is in the shitter," Gant reported. "Maybe that's why they were so pushy in the trade talks. If so, they picked the wrong way to approach us. They demanded instead of asked."

Ryan looked down the columns of numbers. "Damn, where have they been dumping all their money?"

"Buying military hardware. France and Russia, mostly, but a lot went to Israel, too." It was not widely known that the PRC had spent a considerable sum of money in Israel, mainly paid to IDI—Israel Defense Industries—to buy American-designed hardware manufactured under license in Israel. It was stuff the Chinese could not purchase directly from America, including guns for their tanks and air-to-air missiles for their fighter aircraft. America had winked at the transactions for years. In conducting this business, Israel had turned its back on Taiwan, despite the fact that both countries had produced their

nuclear weapons as a joint venture, back when they'd stuck together—along with South Africa—as international pariahs with no other friends in that particular area. In polite company, it was called *realpolitik*. In other areas of human activity, it was called *fuck your buddy*.

"And?" Ryan asked.

"And they've spent their entire trade surplus this way," Gant reported. "All of it, mainly on short-term purchase items, but some long-term as well, and for the long-term stuff they had to pay cash up front because of the nature of the transactions. The producers need the cash to run the production, and they don't want to get stuck holding the bag. Not too many people need five thousand tank guns," Gant explained. "The market is kinda exclusive."

"So?"

"So, China is essentially out of cash. And they have real short-term cash needs. Like oil," TELESCOPE went on. "China's a net importer of oil. Production in their domestic fields falls well short, even though their needs are not really that great. Not too many Chinese citizens own cars. They have enough cash for three months' worth of oil, and then they come up short. The international oil market demands prompt payment. They can skate for a month, maybe six weeks, but after that, the tankers will turn around in mid-ocean and go somewhere else—they can do that, you know—and then the PRC runs out. It'll be like running into a wall, sir. *Smack*. No more oil, and then their country starts coming to a stop, including their military, which is their largest oil consumer. They've been running unusually high for some years because of increased activity in their maneuvers and training and stuff. They probably have strategic reserves, but we don't know exactly how much. And that can run out, too. We've been expecting them to make a move on the Spratly Islands. There's oil there, and they've been making noises about it off and on for about ten years, but the Philippines and other countries in the area have made claims, too, and they probably expect us to side with the Philippines for historical reasons. Not to mention, Seventh Fleet is still the biggest kid on the block in that part of the world."

"Yeah." Ryan nodded. "If it came to a showdown, the Philippines appear to have the best claim on the islands, and we would back them up. We've shed blood together in the past, and that counts. Go on."

"So, John Chinaman is short of oil, and he may not have the cash to pay for it, especially if our trade with them goes down the toilet. They need our dollars. The yuan isn't very strong anyway. International trading is also done in dollars, and as I just told you, sir, they've spent most of them."

"What are you telling me?"

"Sir, the PRC is just about bankrupt. In a month or so, they're going to find that out, and it's going to be a bit of a shock for them."

"When did *we* find this out?"

"That's my doing, Jack," the Secretary of the Treasury said. "I called up these documents earlier today, and then I had Mark go over them. He's our

best man for economic modeling, even whacked out with jet lag."

"So, we can squeeze them on this?"

"That's one option."

"What if these demonstrations take hold?"

Gant and Winston shrugged simultaneously. "That's where psychology enters into the equation," said Winston. "We can predict it to some extent on Wall Street—that's how I made most of my money—but psychoanalyzing a country is beyond my ken. That's your job, pal. I just run your accounting office across the street."

"I need more than that, George."

Another shrug. "If the average citizen boycotts Chinese goods, and/or if American companies who do business over there start trimming their sails—"

"That's damned likely," Gant interjected. "This has got to have a lot of CEOs shitting their pants."

"Well, if that happens, the Chinese get one in the guts, and it's going to hurt, big time," TRADER concluded.

And how will they react to that? Ryan wondered. He punched his phone button. "Ellen, I need one." His secretary appeared in a flash and handed him a cigarette. Ryan lit it and thanked her with a smile and a nod.

"Have you talked this one over with State yet?"

A shake of the head. "No, wanted to show it to you first."

"Hmm. Mark, what did you make of the negotiations?"

"They're the most arrogant sons of bitches I've ever seen. I mean, I've met all sorts of big shots in my time, movers and shakers, but even the worst of them know when they need my money to do business, and when they know that, their manners get better. When you shoot a gun, you try to make sure you don't have it aimed at your own dick."

That made Ryan laugh, while Arnie cringed. You weren't supposed to talk that way to the President of the United States, but some of these people knew that you could talk that way to John Patrick Ryan, the man.

"By the way, along those lines, I liked what you told that Chinese diplomat."

"What's that, sir?"

"Their dicks aren't big enough to get in a pissing contest with us. Nice turn of phrase, if not exactly diplomatic."

"How did you know that?" Gant asked, the surprise showing on his face. "I never repeated that to anybody, not even to that jerk Rutledge."

"Oh, we have ways," Jack answered, suddenly realizing that he'd revealed something from a compartment named SORGE. *Oops.*

"Sounds like something you say at the New York Athletic Club," SecTreas observed. "But only if you're four feet or so away from the guy."

"But it appears it's true. At least in monetary terms. So, we have a gun we can point at their heads?"

"Yes, sir, we sure do," Gant answered. "It might take them a month to figure it out, but they won't be able to run away from it for very long."

"Okay, make sure State and the Agency find this out. And, oh, tell CIA that they're supposed to get this stuff to me first. Intelligence estimates are their job."

"They have an economics unit, but they're not all that good," Gant told the others. "No surprise. The smart people in this area work The Street, or maybe academia. You can make more money at Harvard Business School than you can in government service."

"And talent goes where the money is," Jack agreed. Junior partners at medium-sized law firms made more than the President, which sometimes explained the sort of people who ended up here. Public service was supposed to be a sacrifice. It was for him—Ryan had proven his ability to make money in the trading business, but for him service to his country had been learned from his father, and at Quantico, long before he'd been seduced into the Central Intelligence Agency and then later tricked into the Oval Office. And once here, you couldn't run away from it. At least, not and keep your manhood. That was always the trap. Robert Edward Lee had called duty the most sublime of words. And he would have known, Ryan thought. Lee had felt himself trapped into fighting for what was at best a soiled cause because of his perceived duty to his place of birth, and therefore many would curse his name for all eternity, despite his qualities as a man and a soldier. So, *Jack,* he asked himself, *in* your *case, where do talent and duty and right and wrong and all that other stuff lie? What the hell are* you *supposed to do now?* He was supposed to know. All those people outside the White House's campus-like grounds expected him to know all the time where the right thing was, right for the country, right for the world, right for every working man, woman, and innocent little kid playing T-ball. *Yeah,* the President thought, *sure. You're anointed by the wisdom fairy when you walk in here every day, or kissed on the ear by the muse, or maybe Washington and Lincoln whisper to you in your dreams at night.* He sometimes had trouble picking his tie in the morning, especially if Cathy wasn't around to be his fashion adviser. But he was supposed to know what to do with taxes, defense, and Social Security—why? Because it was his job to know. Because he happened to live in government housing at One Thousand Six Hundred Pennsylvania Avenue and had the Secret goddamned Service protect him everywhere he went. At the Basic School at Quantico, the officers instructing newly commissioned Marine second lieutenants had told them about the loneliness of command. The difference between that and what he had here was like the difference between a fucking firecracker and a nuclear weapon. This kind of situation had started wars in the past. That wouldn't happen now, of course, but it had once. It was a sobering thought. Ryan took a last puff on his fifth smoke of the day and killed it in the brown glass ashtray he kept hidden in a desk drawer.

"Thanks for bringing me this. Talk it over with State and CIA," he told them

again. “I want a SNIE on this, and I want it soon.”

“Right,” George Winston said, standing for the underground walk back to his building across the street.

“Mr. Gant,” Jack added. “Get some sleep. You look like hell.”

“I’m allowed to sleep in this job?” TELESCOPE asked.

“Sure you are, just like I am,” POTUS told him with a lop-sided smile. When they left, he looked at Arnie: “Talk to me.”

“Speak to Adler, and have him talk to Hitch and Rutledge, which you ought to do, too,” Arnie advised.

Ryan nodded. “Okay, tell Scott what I need, and that I need it fast.”

Good news,” Professor North told her, as she came back into the room.

Andrea Price-O’Day was in Baltimore, at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, seeing Dr. Madge North, Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

“Really?”

“Really,” Dr. North assured her with a smile. “You’re pregnant.”

Before anything else could happen, Inspector Patrick O’Day leapt to his feet and lifted his wife in his arms for a powerful kiss and a rib-cracking hug.

“Oh,” Andrea said almost to herself. “I thought I was too old.”

“The record is well into the fifties, and you’re well short of that,” Dr. North said, smiling. It was the first time in her professional career that she’d given this news to *two* people carrying guns.

“Any problems?” Pat asked.

“Well, Andrea, you are prime-ep. You’re over forty and this is your first pregnancy, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” She knew what was coming, but she didn’t invite it by speaking the word.

“That means that there is an increased likelihood of Down’s syndrome. We can establish that with an amniocentesis. I’d recommend we do that soon.”

“How soon?”

“I can do it today if you wish.”

“And if the test is ... ?”

“Positive? Well, then you two have to decide if you want to bring a Down’s child into the world. Some people do, but others don’t. It’s your decision to make, not mine,” Madge North told them. She’d done abortions in her career, but like most obstetricians, she much preferred to deliver babies.

“Down’s—how and ... I mean ...” Andrea said, squeezing her husband’s

hand.

“Look, the odds are very much in your favor, like a hundred to one or so, and those are betting odds. Before you worry about it, the smart thing is to find out if there’s anything to worry about at all, okay?”

“Right now?” Pat asked for his wife.

Dr. North stood. “Yes, I have the time right now.”

“Why don’t you take a little walk, Pat?” Special Agent Price-O’Day suggested to her husband. She managed to keep her dignity intact, which didn’t surprise her husband.

“Okay, honey.” A kiss, and he watched her leave. It was not a good moment for the career FBI agent. His wife was pregnant, but now he had to wonder if the pregnancy was a good one or not. If not—then what? He was an Irish Catholic, and his church forbade abortion as murder, and murders were things he’d investigated—and even witnessed once. Ten minutes later, he’d killed the two terrorists responsible for it. That day still came back to him in perverse dreams, despite the heroism he’d displayed and the kudos he’d received for all of it.

But now, he was afraid. Andrea had been a fine step-mother for his little Megan, and both he and she wanted nothing in all the world more than this news—if it was, really, good news. It would probably take an hour, and he knew he couldn’t spend it sitting down in a doctor’s outer office full of pregnant women reading old copies of *People* and *US Weekly*. But where to go? Whom to see?

Okay. He stood and walked out, and decided to head over to the Maumenee Building. It ought not be too hard to find. And it wasn’t.

Roy Altman was the telltale. The big former paratrooper who headed the SURGEON detail didn’t stand in one place like a potted plant, but rather circulated around, not unlike a lion in a medium-sized cage, always checking, looking with highly trained and experienced eyes for something that wasn’t quite right. He spotted O’Day in the elevator lobby and waved.

“Hey, Pat! What’s happening?” All the rivalry between the FBI and the USSS stopped well short of this point. O‘Day had saved the life of SANDBOX and avenged the deaths of three of Altman’s fellow agents, including Roy’s old friend, Don Russell, who’d died like a man, gun in hand and three dead assassins in front of him. O’Day had finished Don’s work.

“My wife’s over being checked out,” the FBI inspector answered.

“Nothing serious?” Altman asked.

“Routine,” Pat responded, and Altman caught the scent of a lie, but not an important one.

“Is she around? While I’m here, I thought I’d stop over and say hi.”

“In her office.” Altman waved. “Straight down, second on the right.”

“Thanks.”

“Bureau guy coming back to see SURGEON,” he said into his lapel mike.

“Roger,” another agent responded.

O’Day found the office door and knocked.

“Come in,” the female voice inside said. Then she looked up. “Oh, Pat, how are you?”

“No complaints, just happened to be in the neighborhood, and—”

“Did Andrea see Madge?” Cathy Ryan asked. FLOTUS had helped make the appointment, of course.

“Yeah, and the little box doodad has a plus sign in it,” Pat reported.

“Great!” Then Professor Ryan paused. “Oh, you’re worried about something.” In addition to being an eye doctor, she knew trouble when she saw it.

“Dr. North is doing an amniocentesis. Any idea how long it takes?”

“When did it start?”

“Right about now, I think.”

Cathy knew the problem. “Give it an hour. Madge is very good, and very careful in her procedures. They tap into the uterus and withdraw some of the amniotic fluid. That will give them some of the tissue from the embryo, and then they examine the chromosomes. She’ll have the lab people standing by. Madge is senior staff, and when she talks, people listen.”

“She seems pretty competent.”

“She’s a wonderful doc. She’s *my* OB. You’re worried about Down’s, right?”

A nod. “Yep.”

“Nothing you can do but wait.”

“Dr. Ryan, I’m—”

“My name’s Cathy, Pat. We’re friends, remember?” There was nothing like saving the life of a woman’s child to get on her permanent good side.

“Okay, Cathy. Yeah, I’m scared. It’s not—I mean, Andrea’s a cop, too, but—”

“But being good with a gun or just being tough doesn’t help much right now, does it?”

“Not worth a damn,” Inspector O’Day confirmed quietly. He was about as used to being frightened as he was of flying the Space Shuttle, but potential danger to his wife and/or kid—*kids* now, maybe—the kind of danger in which he was utterly helpless—well, that was one of the buttons a capricious Fate could push while she laughed.

“The odds are way in your favor,” Cathy told him.

“Yeah, Dr. North said so ... but ...”

“Yeah. And Andrea’s younger than I am.”

O'Day looked down at the floor, feeling like a total fucking wimp. More than once in his life, he'd faced down armed men—criminals with violent pasts—and intimidated them into surrender. Once in his life he'd had to use his Smith & Wesson 1076 automatic in anger, and both times he'd double-tapped the heads of the terrorists, sending them off to Allah—so they'd probably believed—to answer for the murder of the innocent woman. It hadn't been easy, exactly, but neither had it been all that hard. The endless hours of practice had made it nearly as routine as the working of his service automatic. But this wasn't danger to himself. He could deal with that. The worst danger, he was just learning, was to those you loved.

"Pat, it's okay to be scared. John Wayne was just an actor, remember?"

But that was it. The code of manhood to which most Americans subscribed was that of the Duke, and that code did not allow fear. In truth it was about as realistic as *Who Framed Roger Rabbit,* but foolish or not, there it was.

"I'm not used to it."

Cathy Ryan understood. Most doctors did. When she'd been a straight ophthalmic surgeon, before specializing in lasers, she'd seen the patients and the patients' families, the former in pain, but trying to be brave, the latter just scared. You tried to repair the problems of one and assuage the fears of the other. Neither task was easy. The one was just skill and professionalism; the other involved showing them that, although this was a horrid emergency which they'd never experienced before, for Cathy Ryan, M.D., FACS, it was just another day at the office. She was the Pro from Dover. She could handle it. SURGEON was blessed with the demeanor that inspired confidence in all she met.

But even that didn't apply here. Though Madge North was a gifted physician, she was testing for a predetermined condition. Maybe someday it could be fixed—genetic therapy offered that hope, ten years or so down the line—but not today. Madge could merely determine what already was. Madge had great hands, and a good eye, but the rest of it was in God's hands, and God had already decided one way or the other. It was just a matter of finding out what His decision had been.

"This is when a smoke comes in handy," the inspector observed, with a grimacing smirk.

"You smoke?"

He shook his head. "Gave it up a long time ago."

"You should tell Jack."

The FBI agent looked up. "I didn't know he smokes."

"He bums them off his secretary every so often, the wimp," Cathy told the FBI agent, with almost a laugh. "I'm not supposed to know."

"That's very tolerant for a doc."

"His life's hard enough, and it's only a couple a day, and he doesn't do it around the kids, or Andrea'd have to shoot me for ripping his face off."

“You know,” O’Day said, looking down again and speaking from the cowboy boots he liked to wear under his blue FBI suit, “if it comes back that it’s a Down’s kid, what the hell do we do then?”

“That’s not an easy choice.”

“Hell, under the law I don’t get a choice. I don’t even have a say in it, do I?”

“No, you don’t.” Cathy didn’t venture that this was an inequity. The law was firm on the point. The woman—in this case, the wife—alone could choose to continue the pregnancy or terminate it. Cathy knew her husband’s views on abortion. Her own views were not quite identical, but she did regard that choice as distasteful. “Pat, why are you borrowing trouble?”

“It’s not under my control.”

Like most men, Cathy saw, Pat O’Day was a control freak. She could understand that, because so was she. It came from using instruments to change the world to suit her wishes. But this was an extreme case. This tough guy was deeply frightened. He really ought not to be, but it was a question of the unknown for him. She knew the odds, and they were actually pretty good, but he was not a doctor, and all men, even the tough ones, she saw, feared the unknown. Well, it wasn’t the first time she’d baby-sat an adult who needed his hand held—and this one had saved Katie’s life.

“Want to walk over to the day-care center?”

“Sure.” O’Day stood.

It wasn’t much of a walk, and her intention was to remind O’Day what this was all about—getting a new life into the world.

“SURGEON’S on the way to the playpen,” Roy Altman told his detail. Kyle Daniel Ryan—SPRITE—was sitting up now, and playing very simply with very rudimentary toys under the watchful eyes of the lionesses, as Altman thought of them, four young female Secret Service agents who fawned over SPRITE like big sisters. But these sisters all carried guns, and they all remembered what had nearly happened to SANDBOX. A nuclear-weapons-storage site was hardly as well-guarded as this particular day-care center.

Outside the playroom was Trenton “Chip” Kelley, the only male agent on the detail, a former Marine captain who would have frightened the average NFL lineman with a mere look.

“Hey, Chip.”

“Hi, Roy. What’s happening?”

“Just strolling over to see the little guy.”

“Who’s the muscle?” Kelley saw that O’Day was carrying heat, but decided he looked like a cop. But his left thumb was still on the button of his “crash alarm,” and his right hand was within a third of a second of his service automatic.

“Bureau. He’s cool,” Altman assured his subordinate.

“’ Kay.” Kelley opened the door.

"Who'd he play for?" O'Day asked Altman, once inside.

"The Bears drafted him, but he scared Ditka too much." Altman laughed. "Ex-Marine."

"I believe it." Then O'Day walked up behind Dr. Ryan. She'd already scooped Kyle up, and his arms were around her neck. The little boy was babbling, still months away from talking, but he knew how to smile when he saw his mommy.

"Want to hold him?" Cathy asked.

O'Day cradled the infant somewhat like a football. The youngest Ryan examined his face dubiously, especially the Zapata mustache, but Mommy's face was also in sight, and so he didn't scream.

"Hey, buddy," O'Day said gently. Some things came automatically. When holding a baby, you don't stand still. You move a little bit, rhythmically, which the little ones seemed to like.

"It'll ruin Andrea's career," Cathy said.

"Make for a lot better hours for her, and be nice to see her every night, but, yeah, Cathy, be kinda hard for her to run alongside the car with her belly sticking out two feet." The image was good enough for a laugh. "I suppose they'll put her on restricted duty."

"Maybe. Makes for a great disguise, though, doesn't it?"

O'Day nodded. This wasn't so bad, holding a kid. He remembered the old Irish adage: *True strength lies in gentleness.* But what the hell, taking care of kids was also a man's duty. There was a lot more to being a man than just having a dick.

Cathy saw the display and had to smile. Pat O'Day had saved Katie's life, and done it like something out of a John Woo movie, except that Pat was a real tough guy, not the movie kind. His scenes weren't scripted; he'd had to do it for real, making it up as he'd gone along. He was a lot like her husband, a servant of the law, a man who'd sworn an oath to Do the Right Thing every time, and like her husband, clearly a man who took his oaths seriously. One of those oaths concerned Pat's relationship with Andrea, and they all came down to the same thing: preserve, protect, defend. And now, this tiger with a tie was holding a baby and smiling and swaying back and forth, because that's what you did with a baby in your arms.

"How's your daughter?" Cathy asked.

"She and your Katie are good friends. And she's got a thing going with one of the boys at Giant Steps."

"Oh?"

"Jason Hunt. I think it's serious. He gave Megan one of his Hot Wheels cars." O'Day laughed. That's when his cell phone went off. "Right side coat pocket," he told the First Lady.

Cathy fished in his pocket and pulled it out. She flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Who's this?" a familiar voice asked.

"Andrea? It's Cathy. Pat's right here." Cathy took Kyle and handed off the phone, watching the FBI agent's face.

"Yeah, honey?" Pat said. Then he listened, and his eyes closed for two or three seconds, and that told the tale. His tense face relaxed. A long breath came out slowly, and the shoulders no longer looked like a man anticipating a heavy blow. "Yeah, baby, I came over to see Dr. Ryan, and we're in the nursery. Oh, okay." Pat looked over and handed over the phone. Cathy cradled it between her shoulder and ear.

"So, what did Madge say?" Cathy asked, already knowing most of it.

"Normal—and it's going to be a boy."

"So, Madge was right, the odds were in your favor." And they still were. Andrea was very fit. She wouldn't have any problems, Cathy was sure.

"Seven months from next Tuesday," Andrea said, her voice already bubbling.

"Well, listen to what Madge says. I do," Cathy assured her. She knew all the stuff Dr. North believed in. Don't smoke. Don't drink. Do your exercises. Take the classes on prepared delivery along with your husband. Come see me in five weeks for your next checkup. Read *What to Expect When You're Expecting.* Cathy handed the phone back. Inspector O'Day had taken a few steps and turned away. When he turned back to take the phone, his eyes were unusually moist.

"Yeah, honey, okay. I'll be right over." He killed the phone and dumped it back in his pocket.

"Feel better?" she asked with a smile. One of the lionesses came over to take Kyle back. The little guy loved them all, and smiled up at her.

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry to bother you. I feel like a wuss."

"Oh, bullcrap." Rather a strong imprecation for Mrs. Dr. Ryan. "Like I said, life isn't a movie, and this isn't the Alamo. I know you're a tough guy, Pat, and so does Jack. What about you, Roy?"

"Pat can work with me any day. Congratulations, buddy," Altman added, turning back from the lead.

"Thanks, pal," O'Day told his colleague.

"Can I tell Jack, or does Andrea want to?" SURGEON asked.

"I guess you'll have to ask her about that one, ma'am."

Pat O'Day was transformed, enough spring in his step now to make him collide with the ceiling. He was surprised to see that Cathy was heading off to the OB-GYN building, but five minutes later it was obvious why. This was to be girl-girl bonding time. Even before he could embrace his wife, Cathy was there.

"Wonderful news, I'm so happy for you!"

"Yeah, well, I suppose the Bureau is good for something after all," Andrea joked.

Then the bear with the Zapata mustache lifted her off the floor with a hug and a kiss. "This calls for a small celebration," the inspector observed.

"Join us for dinner tonight at The House?" SURGEON asked.

"We can't," Andrea replied.

"Says who?" Cathy demanded. And Andrea had to bow to the situation.

"Well, maybe, if the President says it's okay."

"I say it's okay, girl, and there are times when Jack doesn't count," Dr. Ryan told them.

"Well, yes, then, I guess."

"Seven-thirty," SURGEON told them. "Dress is casual." It was a shame they were no longer regular people. This would have been a good chance for Jack to do steaks on the grill, something he remained very good at, and she hadn't made her spinach salad in months. Damn the Presidency anyway! "And, Andrea, you *are* allowed two drinks tonight to celebrate. After that, one or two a week."

Mrs. O'Day nodded. "Dr. North told me."

"Madge is a real stickler on the alcohol issue." Cathy wasn't sure about the data on that, but then, she wasn't an OB-GYN, and she'd followed Dr. North's rules with Kyle and Katie. You just didn't fool around when you were pregnant. Life was too precious to risk.

CHAPTER 38

Developments

It's all handled electronically. Once a country's treasury was in its collection of gold bricks, which were kept in a secure, well-guarded place, or else traveled in a crate with the chief of state wherever he went. In the nineteenth century, paper currency had gained wide acceptance. At first, it had to be redeemable for gold or silver—something whose weight told you its worth—but gradually this, too, was discarded, because precious metals were just too damned heavy to lug around. But soon enough even paper currency became too bulky to drag about, as well. For ordinary citizens, the next step was plastic cards with magnetic strips on the back, which moved your *theoretical* currency from your account to someone else's when you made a purchase. For major corporations and nations, it meant something even more theoretical. It became an electronic expression. A nation determined the value of its currency by estimating what quantity of goods and services its citizens generated with their daily toil, and that became the volume of its monetary wealth, which was generally agreed upon by the other nations and citizens of the world. Thus it could be traded across national boundaries by fiber-optic or copper cables, or even by satellite transmissions, and so billions of dollars, pounds, yen, or the new euros moved from place to place via simple keystrokes. It was a lot easier and faster than shipping gold bricks, but, for all the convenience, the system that determined a person's or a nation's wealth was no less rigid, and at certain central banks of the world, a country's net collection of those monetary units was calculated down to a fraction of a percentage point. There was some leeway built into the system, to account for trades in process and so forth, but that leeway was also closely calculated electronically. What resulted was no different in its effect from the numbering of the bricks of King Croesus of Lydia. In fact, if anything, the new system that depended on the movement of electrons or photons from one computer to another was even more exact, and even less forgiving. Once upon a time, one could paint lead bricks yellow and so fool a casual inspector, but lying to a computerized accounting system required a lot more than that.

In China, the lying was handled by the Ministry of Finance, a bastard orphan child in a Marxist country peopled by bureaucrats who struggled on a daily basis to do all manner of impossible things. The first and easiest impossibility—because it had to be done—was for its senior members to cast aside everything they'd learned in their universities and Communist Party meetings. To operate in the world financial system, they had to understand and play by—and within—the world monetary rules, instead of the Holy Writ of Karl Marx.

The Ministry of Finance, therefore, was placed in the unenviable position of having to explain to the communist clergy that their god was a false one, that their perfect theoretical model just didn't play in the real world, and that therefore they had to bend to a reality which they had rejected. The bureaucrats in the ministry were for the most part observers, rather like children playing a computer game that they didn't believe in but enjoyed anyway. Some of the bureaucrats were actually quite clever, and played the game well, sometimes even making a profit on their trades and transactions. Those who did so won promotions and status within the ministry. Some even drove their own automobiles to work and were befriended by the new class of local industrialists who had shed their ideological straitjackets and operated as capitalists within a communist society. That brought wealth into their nation, and earned the tepid gratitude, if not the respect, of their political masters, rather as a good sheepdog might. This crop of industrialists worked closely with the Ministry of Finance, and along the way influenced the bureaucracy that managed the income that they brought into their country.

One result of all this activity was that the Ministry of Finance was surely and not so slowly drifting away from the True Faith of Marxism into the shadowy in-between world of socialist capitalism—a world with no real name or identity. In fact, every Minister of Finance had drifted away from Marxism to some greater or lesser extent, whatever his previous religious fervor, because one by one they had all seen that their country needed to play on this particular international playground, and to do that, had to play by the rules, and, oh, by the way, this game was bringing prosperity to the People's Republic in a way that fifty years of Marx and Mao had singularly failed to do.

As a direct result of this inexorable process, the Minister of Finance was a candidate, not a full member of the Politburo. He had a voice at the table, but not a vote, and his words were judged by those who had never really troubled themselves to understand his words or the world in which he operated.

This minister was surnamed Qian, which, appropriately, meant coins or money, and he'd been in the job for six years. His background was in engineering. He'd built railroads in the northeastern part of his country for twenty years, and done so well enough to merit a change in posting. He'd actually handled his ministerial job quite well, the international community judged, but Qian Kun was often the one who had to explain to the Politburo that the Politburo couldn't do everything it wanted to do, which meant he was often about as welcome in the room as a plague rat. This would be one more such day, he feared, sitting in the back of his ministerial car on the way to the morning meeting.

Eleven hours away, on Park Avenue in New York, another meeting was under way. Butterfly was the name of a burgeoning chain of clothing stores which marketed to prosperous American women. It had combined new microfiber textiles with a brilliant young designer from Florence, Italy, into fully a six percent share of its market, and in America that was big money indeed.

Except for one thing. Its textiles were all made in the People's Republic, at a factory just outside the great port city of Shanghai, and then cut and sewn into clothing at yet another plant in the nearby city of Yancheng.

The chairman of Butterfly was just thirty-two, and after ten years of hustling, he figured he was about to cash in on a dream he'd had from all the way back in Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn. He'd spent nearly every day since graduating Pratt Institute conceiving and building up his business, and now it was *his* time. It was time to buy that G so that he could fly off to Paris on a whim, get that house in the hills of Tuscany, and another in Aspen, and really live in the manner he'd earned.

Except for that one little thing. His flagship store at Park and 50th today had experienced something as unthinkable as the arrival of men from Mars. People had demonstrated there. People wearing Versace clothing had shown up with cardboard placards stapled to wooden sticks proclaiming their opposition to trade with BARBARIANS! and condemning Butterfly for doing business with such a country. Someone had even shown up with an image of the Chinese flag with a swastika on it, and if there was *anything* you didn't want associated with your business in New York, it was Hitler's odious logo.

"We've got to move fast on this," the corporate counsel said. He was Jewish and smart, and had steered Butterfly through more than one minefield to bring it to the brink of ultimate success. "This could kill us."

He wasn't kidding, and the rest of the board knew it. Exactly four customers had gone past the protesters into the store today, and one of them had been returning something which, she said, she no longer wanted in her closet.

"What's our exposure?" the founder and CEO asked.

"In real terms?" the head of accounting asked. "Oh, potentially four hundred." By which he meant four hundred *million* dollars. "It could wipe us out in, oh, twelve weeks."

Wipe us out was not what the CEO wanted to hear. To bring a line of clothing this far was about as easy as swimming the Atlantic Ocean during the annual shark convention. This was his moment, but he found himself standing in yet another minefield, one for which he'd had no warning at all.

"Okay," he responded as coolly as the acid in his stomach allowed. "What can we do about it?"

"We can walk on our contracts," the attorney advised.

"Is that legal?"

"Legal enough." By which he meant that the downside exposure of shorting the Chinese manufacturers was less onerous than having a shop full of products that no person would buy.

"Alternatives?"

"The Thais," Production said. "There's a place outside Bangkok that would love to take up the slack. They called us today, in fact."

"Cost?"

"Less than four percent difference. Three-point-six-three, to be exact, and they will be off schedule by, oh, maybe four weeks max. We have enough stock to keep the stores open through that, no problem," Production told the rest of the board with confidence.

"How much of that stock is Chinese in origin?"

"A lot comes from Taiwan, remember? We can have our people start putting the Good Guys stickers on them ... and we can fudge that some, too." Not all that many consumers knew the difference between one Chinese place name and another. A flag was much easier to differentiate.

"Also," Marketing put in, "we can start an ad campaign tomorrow. 'Butterfly doesn't do business with dragons.' " He held up an illustration that showed the corporate logo escaping a dragon's fiery breath. That it looked terminally tacky didn't matter for the moment. They had to take action, and they had to do it fast.

"Oh, got a call an hour ago from Frank Meng at Meng, Harrington, and Cicero," Production announced. "He says he can get some ROC textile houses on the team in a matter of days, and he says they have the flexibility to retool in less than a month—and if we green-light it, the ROC ambassador will officially put us on their good-guy list. In return, we just have to guarantee five years' worth of business, with the usual escape clauses."

"I like it," Legal said. The ROC ambassador would play fair, and so would his country. They knew when they had the tiger by the balls.

"We have a motion on the table," the chairman and CEO announced. "All in favor?"

With this vote, Butterfly was the first major American company to walk out on its contracts with the People's Republic. Like the first goose to leave Northern Canada in the fall, it announced that a new and chilly season was coming. The only potential problem was legal action from the PRC businesses, but a federal judge would probably understand that a signed contract wasn't quite the same thing as a suicide note, and perhaps even regard the overarching political question sufficient to make the contract itself void. After all, counsel would argue in chambers—and in front of a New York jury if necessary—when you find out you're doing business with Adolf Hitler, you *have* to take a step back. Opposing counsel would argue back, but he'd know his position was a losing one, and he'd tell his clients so before going in.

"I'll tell our bankers tomorrow. They're not scheduled to cut the money loose for another thirty-six hours." This meant that one hundred forty million dollars would not be transferred to a Beijing account as scheduled. And now the CEO could contemplate going ahead with his order for the G. The corporate logo of a monarch butterfly leaving its cocoon, he thought, would look just great on the rudder.

We don't know for sure yet," Qian told his colleagues, "but I am seriously concerned."

"What's the particular problem today?" Xu Kun Piao asked.

"We have a number of commercial and other contracts coming due in the next three weeks. Ordinarily I would expect them to proceed normally, but our representatives in America have called to warn my office that there might be a problem."

"Who are these representatives?" Shen Tang asked.

"Mainly lawyers whom we employ to manage our business dealings for us. Almost all are American citizens. They are not fools, and their advice is something a wise man attends carefully," Qian said soberly.

"Lawyers are the curse of America," Zhang Han San observed. "And all civilized nations." *At least here we decide the law,* he didn't have to explain.

"Perhaps so, Zhang, but if you do business with America you need such people, and they are very useful in explaining conditions there. Shooting the messenger may get you more pleasant news, but it won't necessarily be accurate."

Fang nodded and smiled at that. He liked Qian. The man spoke the truth more faithfully than those who were supposed to listen for it. But Fang kept his peace on this. He, too, was concerned with the political developments caused by those two overzealous policemen, but it was too late to discipline them now. Even if Xu suggested it, Zhang and the others would talk him out of it.

Secretary Winston was at home watching a movie on his DVD player. It was easier than going to the movies, and he could do it without four Secret Service agents in attendance. His wife was knitting a ski sweater—she did her important Christmas presents herself, and it was something she could do while watching TV or talking, and it brought the same sort of relaxation to her that sailing his big offshore yacht did for her husband.

Winston had a multiline phone in the family room—and every other room in his Chevy Chase house—and the private line had a different ring so that he knew which one he had to answer himself.

"Yeah?"

"George, it's Mark."

"Working late?"

"No, I'm home. Just got a call from New York. It may have just started."

"What's that?" TRADER asked TELESCOPE.

"Butterfly—the ladies' clothing firm?"

"Oh, yeah, I know the name," Winston assured his aide. Well he might: His

wife and daughter loved the place.

"They're going to bail on their contracts with their PRC suppliers."

"How big?"

"About a hundred forty."

Winston whistled. "That much?"

"That big," Gant assured him. "And they're a trendsetter. When this breaks tomorrow, it's going to make a lot of people think. Oh, one other thing."

"Yeah?"

"The PRC just terminated its options with Caterpillar—equipment to finish up the Three Gorges project. That's about three-ten million, switching over to Kawa in Japan. That's going to be in the *Journal* tomorrow morning."

"That's real smart!" Winston grumbled.

"Trying to show us who's holding the whip, George."

"Well, I hope they like how it feels going up their ass," SecTreas observed, causing his wife to look over at him.

"Okay, when's the Butterfly story break?"

"It's too late for the *Journal* tomorrow, but it'll be on CNN-FN and CNBC for damned sure."

"And what if other fashion houses do the same?"

"Over a billion, right away, and you know what they say, George, a billion here, a billion there, pretty soon you're talking real money." It had been one of Everett McKinley Dirksen's better Washington observations.

"How much before their currency account goes in the tank?"

"Twenty, and it starts hurting. Forty, and they're in the shitter. Sixty, and they're fuckin' broke. Never seen a whole country sleeping over a steam vent, y'know? George, they also import food, wheat mainly, from Canada and Australia. That could *really* hurt."

"Noted. Tomorrow."

"Right." The phone clicked off.

Winston picked up the controller to un-pause the DVD player, then had another thought. He picked up the mini-tape machine he used for notes and said, "Find out how much of the PRC military purchases have been executed financially—especially Israel." He clicked the STOP button, set it down, and picked the DVD controller back up to continue his movie, but soon found he couldn't concentrate on it very well. Something big was happening, and experienced as he was in the world of commerce, and now in the business of international transactions, he realized that he didn't have a handle on it. That didn't happen to George Winston very often, and it was enough to keep him from laughing at *Men in Black*.

Her minister didn't look very happy, Ming saw. The look on his face made her think that he might have lost a family member to cancer. She found out more when he called her in to dictate his notes. It took fully ninety minutes this time, and then two entire hours for her to transcribe them into her computer. She hadn't exactly forgotten what her computer probably did with them every night, but she hadn't thought about it in weeks. She wished she had the ability to discuss the notes' content with Minister Fang. Over the years of working for him, she'd acquired rather a sophisticated appreciation for the politics of her country, to the point that she could anticipate not only the thoughts of her master, but also those of some of his colleagues. She was in effect, if not in fact, a confidant of her minister, and while she could not counsel him on his job, if he'd had the wit to appreciate the effect of her education and her time inside his head, he might have used her far more efficiently than as a mere secretary. But she was a woman in a land ruled by men, and therefore voiceless. Orwell had been right. She'd read *Animal Farm* some years ago. Everyone *was* equal, but some *were* more equal than others. If Fang were smart, he'd use her more intelligently, but he wasn't, and he didn't. She'd talk to Nomuri-san about that tonight.

For his part, Chester was just finalizing an order for one thousand six hundred sixty-one high-end NEC desktops at the China Precision Machine Import and Export Corporation, which, among other things, made guided missiles for the People's Liberation Army. That would make Nippon Electric Company pretty happy. The sad part was that he couldn't rig these machines to talk as glibly as the two in the Council of Ministers, but that would have been too dangerous, if a good daydream over a beer and a smoke. Chester Nomuri, cyber-spy. Then his beeper started vibrating. He reached down and gave it a look. The number was 745-4426. Applied to the keys on a phone, and selecting the right letters, that translated in personal code to *shin gan,* "heart and soul," Ming's private endearment for her lover and an indication that she wanted to come over to his place tonight. That suited Nomuri just fine. So, he'd turned into James Bond after all. Good enough for a private smile, as he walked out to his car. He flipped open his shoephone, dialed up his e-mail access, and sent his own message over the 'Net, 226-234: *bao bei,* "beloved one." She liked to hear him say that, and he didn't mind saying it. So, something other than TV for tonight. Good. He hoped he had enough of the Japanese scotch for the *après*-sex.

You knew you had a bad job when you welcomed a trip to the dentist. Jack had been going to the same one for nineteen years, but this time it involved a helicopter flight to a Maryland State Police barracks with its own helipad, followed by five minutes in a car to the dentist's office. He was thinking about

China, but his principal bodyguard mistook his expression.

"Relax, boss," Andrea told the President. "If he makes you scream, I'll cap him."

"You shouldn't be up so early," Ryan responded crossly.

"Dr. North said I could work my regular routine until further notice, and I just started the vitamins she likes."

"Well, Pat looks rather pleased with himself." It had been a pleasant evening at the White House. It was always good to entertain guests who had no political agenda.

"What is it about you guys? You strut like roosters, but *we* have to do all the work!"

"Andrea, I would *gladly* switch jobs with you!" Ryan joked. He'd had this discussion with Cathy often enough, claiming that having a baby couldn't be all that hard—men had to do almost all of the tough work in life. But he couldn't joke with someone else's wife that way.

Nomuri heard his computer beep in the distance, meaning it had received and was now automatically encrypting and retransmitting the data e-mailed from Ming's desktop. It made an entertaining interruption to his current activity. It had been five days since their last tryst, and that was a long enough wait for him ... and evidently for her as well, judging by the passion in her kisses. In due course, it was over, and they both rolled over for a smoke.

"How is the office?" Nomuri asked, with the answer to his question now residing in a server in Wisconsin.

"The Politburo is debating great finance. Qian, the minister in charge of our money, is trying to persuade the Politburo to change its ways, but they're not listening as Minister Fang thinks they ought."

"Oh?"

"He's rather angry with his old comrades for their lack of flexibility." Then Ming giggled. "Chai said the minister was very flexible with her two nights ago."

"Not a nice thing to say about a man, Ming," Nomuri chided.

"I would never say it about you and your jade sausage, *shin gan,"* she said, turning for a kiss.

"Do they argue often there? In the Politburo, I mean?"

"There are frequent disagreements, but this is the first time in months that the matter has not been resolved to Fang's satisfaction. They are usually collegial, but this is a disagreement over ideology. Those can be violent—at least in intellectual terms." Obviously, the Politburo members were too old to do much more than smack an enemy over the head with their canes.

“And this one?”

“Minister Qian says the country may soon be out of money. The other ministers say that is nonsense. Qian says we must accommodate the Western countries. Zhang and the others like him say we cannot show weakness after all they—especially the Americans—have done to us lately.”

“Don’t they see that killing that Italian priest was a bad thing?”

“They see it as an unfortunate accident, and besides, he was breaking our laws.”

Jesus, Nomuri thought, *they really do think they’re god-kings, don’t they? “Bao bei,* that is a mistake on their part.”

“You think so?”

“I have been to America, remember? I lived there for a time. Americans are very solicitous to their clergy, and they place a high value on religion. Spitting on it angers them greatly.”

“You think Qian is right, then?” she asked. “You think America will deny us money for this foolish action?”

“I think it is possible, yes. Very possible, Ming.”

“Minister Fang thinks we should take a more moderate course, to accommodate the Americans somewhat, but he did not say so at the meeting.”

“Oh? Why?”

“He does not wish to depart too greatly from the path of the other ministers. You say that in Japan people fear not being elected. Here, well, the Politburo elects its own, and it can expel those who no longer fit in. Fang does not wish to lose his own status, obviously, and to make sure that doesn’t happen, he takes a cautious line.”

“This is hard for me to understand, Ming. How do they select their members? How do the ‘princes’ choose the new ‘prince’?”

“Oh, there are party members who have distinguished themselves ideologically, or sometimes from work in the field. Minister Qian, for example, used to be chief of railroad construction, and was promoted for that reason, but mainly they are picked for political reasons.”

“And Fang?”

“My minister is an old comrade. His father was one of Mao’s faithful lieutenants, and Fang has always been politically reliable, but in recent years he has taken note of the new industries and seen how well they function, and he admires some of the people who operate them. He even has some into his office from time to time for tea and talk.”

So, the old pervert is a progressive *here?* Nomuri wondered. Well, the bar for that was pretty low in China. You didn’t have to jump real high, but that put him in advance of the ones who dug a trench under it, didn’t it?

“Ah, so the people have no voice at all, do they?”

Ming laughed at that. “Only at party meetings, and there you guard your voice.”

“Are you a member?”

“Oh, yes. I go to meetings once a month. I sit in the back. I nod when others nod, and applaud when they applaud, and I pretend to listen. Others probably listen better. It is not a small thing to be a party member, but my membership is because of my job at the ministry. I am here because they needed my language and computer skills—and besides, the ministers like to have young women under them,” she added.

“You’re never on top of him, eh?”

“He prefers the ordinary position, but it is hard on his arms.” Ming giggled.

Ryan was glad to see that he was brushing enough. The dentist told him to floss, as he always did, and Ryan nodded, as he always did, and he’d never bought floss in his life and wasn’t going to start now. But at least he’d undergone nothing more invasive than a couple of X rays, for which, of course, he’d gotten the lead apron. On the whole, it had been ninety minutes torn off the front of his day. Back in the Oval Office, he had the latest SORGE, which was good enough for a whispered “damn.” He lifted the phone for Mary Pat at Langley.

“They’re dense,” Ryan observed.

“Well, they sure as hell don’t know high finance. Even I know better than this.”

“TRADER has to see this. Put him on the SORGE list,” POTUS ordered.

“With your day-to-day approval only,” the DDO hedged. “Maybe he has a need-to-know on economics, but nothing else, okay?”

“Okay, for now,” Jack agreed. But George was coming along nicely on strategic matters, and might turn into a good policy adviser. He understood high-stress psychology better than most, and that was the name of the game. Jack broke the connection and had Ellen Sumter call the SecTreas over from across the street.

So, what else do they worry about?” Chester asked.

“They’re concerned that some of the workers and peasants are not as happy as they should be. You know about the riots they had in the coal region.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, the miners rioted last year. The PLA went in to settle things down. Several hundred people were shot, and three thousand arrested.” She shrugged while putting her bra back on. “There is unrest, but that is nothing especially

new. The army keeps control of things in the outlying regions. That's why they spend so much money, to keep the army reliable. The generals run the PLA's economic empire—all the factories and things—and they're good at keeping a lid on things. The ordinary soldiers are just workers and peasants, but the officers are all party members, and they are reliable, or so the Politburo thinks. It's probably true," Ming concluded. She hadn't seen her minister worry all that much about it. Power in the People's Republic decidedly grew from the barrel of a gun, and the Politburo owned all the guns. That made things simple, didn't it?

For his part, Nomuri had just learned things he'd never thought about before. He might want to make his own report on this stuff. Ming probably knew a lot of things that didn't go out as SONGBIRD material, and he'd be remiss not to send that to Langley, too.

It's like a five-year-old in a gun store," Secretary Winston observed. "These people have no business making economic decisions for a city government, much less a major country. I mean, hell, as stupid as the Japanese were a few years ago, at least they know to listen to the coaches."

"And?"

"And when they run into the brick wall, their eyes'll still be closed. That can smart some, Jack. They're going to get bit on the ass, and they don't see it coming." Winston could mix metaphors with the best of 'em, Ryan saw.

"When?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"Depends on how many companies do what Butterfly did. We'll know more in a few days. The fashion business will be the lead indicator, of all things."

"Really?"

"Surprised me, too, but this is the time for them to commit to the next season, and there's a *ton* of money in that business going on over there, man. Toss in all the toys for next Christmas. There's seventeen billion-plus just in that, Mark Gant tells me."

"Damn."

"Yeah, I didn't know Santa's reindeer had slanted eyes either, Jack. At least not to that extent."

"What about Taiwan?" Ryan wondered.

"You're not kidding. They're jumping into the growing gap with both feet. Figure they pick up a quarter, maybe a third, of what the PRC is going to lose. Singapore's going to be next. And the Thais. This little bump in the road will go a long way to restore the damage done to their economy a few years back. In fact, the PRC's troubles might rebuild the whole South Asian economy. It could be a swing of fifty billion dollars out of China, and it has to go somewhere. We're starting to take bids, Jack. It won't be a bad deal for our

consumers, and I'll bet those countries learn from Beijing's example, and kick their doors open a notch or so. So, our workers will profit from it, too—somewhat, anyway."

"Downside?"

"Boeing's squealing some. They wanted that triple-seven order, but you wait an' see. Somebody's going to take up that slack, too. One other thing."

"Yeah?" Ryan asked.

"It's not just American companies bailing out on them. Two big Italian places, and Siemens in Germany, they've announced termination of some business with their Chinese partners," TRADER said.

"Will it turn into a general movement ... ?"

"Too soon to say, but if I were these guys"—Winston shook the fax from CIA—"I'd be thinking about fence-mending real soon."

"They won't do it, George."

"Then they're going to learn a nasty lesson."

CHAPTER 39

The Other Question

No action with our friend?" Reilly asked.

"Well, he continues his sexual adventures," Provalov answered.

"Talk to any of the girls yet?"

"Earlier today, two of them. He pays them well, in euros or d-marks, and doesn't request any, uh, 'exotic' services from them."

"Nice to know he's normal in his tastes," the FBI agent observed, with a grunt.

"We have numerous photos of him now. We've put an electronic tracker on his cars, and we've also planted a bug on his computer keyboard. That'll allow us to determine his encryption password, next time he makes use of it."

"But he hasn't done anything incriminating yet," Reilly said. He didn't even make it a question.

"Not under our observation," Oleg confirmed.

"Damn, so, he was really trying to whack Sergey Golovko. Hard to believe, man."

"That is so, but we cannot deny it. And on Chinese orders."

"That's like an act of war, buddy. It's a big fucking deal." Reilly took a sip of his vodka.

"So it is, Mishka. Rather more complex than any case I've handled this year." It was, Provalov thought, an artful understatement. He'd gladly go back to a normal homicide, a husband killing his wife for fucking a neighbor, or the other way around. Such things, nasty as they were, were far less nasty than this one was.

"How's he pick the girls up, Oleg?" Reilly asked.

"He doesn't call for them on the phone. He seems to go to a good restaurant with a good bar and wait until a likely prospect appears at his elbow."

"Hmm, plant a girl on him?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean get yourself a pretty girl who does this sort of thing for a living, brief her on what she ought to say, and set her in front of him like a nice fly on your fishhook. If he picks her up, maybe she can get him to talk."

"Have you ever done such a thing?"

"We got a wiseguy that way in Jersey City three years ago. Liked to brag in front of women how tough he was, and the guys he whacked, that sort of thing. He's in Rahway State Prison now on a murder rap. Oleg, a lot more people have talked their way into prison than you'll ever catch on your own. Trust me. That's how it is for us, even."

"I wonder if the Sparrow School has any graduates working ... ?" Provalov mused.

It wasn't fair to do it at night, but nobody had ever said war was marked by fairness in its execution. Colonel Boyle was in his command post monitoring the operation of 1st Armored's Aviation Brigade. It was mainly his Apaches, though some Kiowa Warriors were up, too, as scouts for the heavy shooters. The target was a German heavy battalion, simulating a night's laagering after a day on the offense. In fact, they were pretending to be Russians—it was a NATO scenario that went back thirty years to the introduction of the first Huey Cobras, back in the 1970s, when the value of a helicopter gunship had first been noticed in Vietnam. And a revelation it had been. Armed for the first time in 1972 with TOW missiles, they'd proven to the tanks of the North Vietnamese just how fearsome a foe a missile-armed chopper could be, and that had been before night-vision systems had come fully on line. Now the Apache turned combat operations into sport shooting, and the Germans were still trying to figure a counter for it. Even their own night-vision gear didn't compensate for the huge advantage held by the airborne hunters. One idea that had almost worked was to lay a thermal-insulating blanket over the tanks so as to deny the helicopters the heat signature by which they hunted their motionless prey, but the problem there was the tank's main gun tube, which had proved impractical to conceal, and the blankets had never really worked properly, any more than a twin-bed coverlet could be stretched over a king-size bed. And so, now, the Apaches' laser-illumination systems were "painting" the Leos for enough seconds to guarantee hits from the Hellfire missiles, and while the German tanks tried to shoot back, they couldn't seem to make it work. And now the yellow "I'm dead" lights were blinking, and yet another tank battalion had fallen victim to yet another administrative attack.

"They should have tried putting SAM teams outside their perimeter," Colonel Boyle observed, watching the computer screen. Instead, the German colonel had tried IR lures, which the Apache gunners had learned to distinguish from the real thing. Under the rules of the scenario, proper tank decoys had not been allowed. They were a little harder to discriminate—the American-made ones almost exactly replicated the visual signature of an M1 tank, and had an internal heat source for fooling infrared gear at night—*and* fired off a Hoffman pyrotechnic charge to simulate a return shot when they took a hit. But they were made so well for their mission that they could not be mistaken for anything other than what they were, either a real M1 main battle tank, and hence friendly, or a decoy, and thus not really useful in a training

exercise, all in all a case of battlefield technology being too good for a training exercise.

“Pegasus Lead to Archangel, over,” the digital radio called. With the new radios, it was no longer a static-marred crackle.

“Archangel to Pegasus,” Colonel Boyle answered.

“Sir, we are Winchester and just about out of targets. No friendly casualties. Pegasus is RTB, over.”

“Roger, Pegasus. Looks good from here. Out.”

And with that, the Apache battalion of attack choppers and their Kiowa bird-dogs turned back for their airfield for the mission debrief and post-game beers.

Boyle looked over at General Diggs. “Sir, I don’t know how to do it much better than that.”

“Our hosts are going to be pissed.”

“The Bundeswehr isn’t what it used to be. Their political leadership thinks peace has broken out all the way, and their troopers know it. They could have put some of their own choppers up to run interference, but my boys are pretty good at air-to-air—we train for it, and my pilots really like the idea of making ace on their own—but their chopper drivers aren’t getting all the gas they need for operational training. Their best chopper drivers are down in the Balkans doing traffic observation.”

Diggs nodded thoughtfully. The problems of the Bundeswehr were not, strictly speaking, his problems. “Colonel, that was well done. Please convey my pleasure to your people. What’s next for you?”

“General, we have a maintenance stand-down tomorrow, and two days later we’re going to run a major search-and-rescue exercise with my Blackhawks. You’re welcome to come over and watch.”

“I just might, Colonel Boyle. You done good. Be seeing you.”

“Yes, sir.” The colonel saluted, and General Diggs walked out to his HMMWV, with Colonel Masterman in attendance.

“Well, Duke?”

“Like I told you, sir, Boyle’s been feeding his boys and girls a steady diet of nails and human babies.”

“Well, his next fitness report’s going to get him a star, I think.”

“His Apache commander’s not bad either.”

“That’s a fact,” the divisional G-3 agreed. “Pegasus” was his call sign, and he’d kicked some serious ass this night.

“What’s next?”

“Sir, in three days we have a big SimNet exercise against the Big Red One at Fort Riley. Our boys are pretty hot for it.”

"Divisional readiness?" Diggs asked.

"We're pushing ninety-five percent, General. Not much slack left to take up. I mean, sir, to go any farther, we gotta take the troops out to Fort Irwin or maybe the Negev Training Area. Are we as good as the Tenth Cav or the Eleventh? No, we don't get to play in the field as much as they do." And, he didn't have to add, no division in any army in the world got the money to train that hard. "But given the limitations we have to live with, there's not a whole lot more we can do. I figure we play hard on SimNet to keep the kids interested, but we're just about as far as we can go, sir."

"I think you're right, Duke. You know, sometimes I kinda wish the Cold War could come back—for training purposes, anyway. The Germans won't let us play the way we used to back then, and that's what we need to take the next step."

"Unless somebody springs for the tickets to fly a brigade out to California." Masterman nodded.

"That ain't gonna happen, Duke," Diggs told his operations officer. And more was the pity. First Tanks' troops were almost ready to give the Blackhorse a run for their money. Close enough, Diggs thought, that he'd pay to watch. "How's a beer grab you, Colonel?"

"If the General is buying, I will gladly assist him in spending his money," Duke Masterman said graciously, as their sergeant driver pulled up to the *kazerne's* O-Club.

Good morning, Comrade General," Gogol said, pulling himself to attention.

Bondarenko had felt guilt at coming to see this old soldier so early in the morning, but he'd heard the day before that the ancient warrior was not one to waste daylight. And so he wasn't, the general saw.

"You kill wolves," Gennady Iosifovich observed, seeing the gleaming pelts hanging on the wall of this rough cabin.

"And bear, but when you gild the pelts, they grow too heavy," the old man agreed, fetching tea for his guests.

"These are amazing," Colonel Aliyev said, touching one of the remaining wolf pelts. Most had been carried off.

"It's an amusement for an old hunter," Gogol said, lighting a cigarette.

General Bondarenko looked at his rifles, the new Austrian-made one, and the old Russian M1891 Mosin-Nagant sniper rifle.

"How many with this one?" Bondarenko asked.

"Wolves, bears?"

"Germans," the general clarified, with coldness in his voice.

"I stopped counting at thirty, Comrade General. That was before Kiev. There

were many more after that. I see we share a decoration," Gogol observed, pointing to his visitor's gold star, for Hero of the Soviet Union, which he'd won in Afghanistan. Gogol had two, one from Ukraine and the other in Germany.

"You have the look of a soldier, Pavel Petrovich, and a good one." Bondarenko sipped his tea, served properly, a clear glass in a metal—was it silver?—holder.

"I served in my time. First at Stalingrad, then on the long walk to Berlin."

I bet you did walk all the way, too, the general thought. He'd met his share of Great Patriotic War veterans, now mostly dead. This wizened old bastard had stared death in the face and spat at it, trained to do so, probably, by his life in these woods. He'd grown up with bears and wolves as enemies—as nasty as the German fascists had been, at least they didn't eat you—and so had been accustomed to wagering his life on his eye and his nerve. There was no real substitute for that, the kind of training you couldn't institute for an army. A gifted few learned how the hard way, and of those the lucky ones survived the war. Pavel Petrovich hadn't had an easy time. Soldiers might admire their own snipers, might value them for their skills, but you could never say "comrade" to a man who hunted men as though they were animals—because on the other side of the line might be another such man who wanted to hunt *you.* Of all the enemies, that was the one you loathed and feared the most, because it became personal to see another man through a telescopic sight, to see his face, and take his life as a deliberate act against *one* man, even gazing at his face when the bullet struck. Gogol had been one of those, Gennady thought, a hunter of individual men. And he'd probably never lost a minute's sleep over it. Some men were just born to it, and Pavel Petrovich Gogol was one of them. With a few hundred thousand such men, a general could conquer the entire world, but they were too rare for that...

... and maybe that was a good thing, Bondarenko mused.

"Might you come to my headquarters some night? I would like to feed you dinner and listen to your stories."

"How far is it?"

"I will send you my personal helicopter, Sergeant Gogol."

"And I will bring you a gilded wolf," the hunter promised his guest.

"We will find an honored place for it at my headquarters," Bondarenko promised in turn. "Thank you for your tea. I must depart and see to my command, but I *will* have you to headquarters for dinner, Sergeant Gogol." Handshakes were exchanged, and the general took his leave.

"I would not want him on the other side of a battlefield," Colonel Aliyev observed, as they got into their helicopter.

"Do we have a sniper school in the command?"

"Yes, General, but it's mainly inactive."

Gennady turned. "Start it up again, Andrushka! We'll get Gogol to come and

teach the children how it's done. He's a priceless asset. Men like that are the soul of a fighting army. It's our job to command our soldiers, to tell them where to go and what to do, but those are the men who do the fighting and the killing, and it's *our* job to make sure they're properly trained and supplied. And when they're too old, we use them to teach the new boys, to give them heroes they can touch and talk to. How the hell did we ever forget that, Andrey?" The general shook his head as the helicopter lifted off.

Gregory was back in his hotel room, with three hundred pages of technical information to digest as he sipped his Diet Coke and finished off his french fries. Something was wrong with the whole equation, but he couldn't put his finger on it. The Navy had tested its Standard-2-ER missile against all manner of threats, mainly on computer, but also against live targets at Kwajalein Atoll. It had done pretty well, but there'd never been a full-up live test against a for-real ICBM reentry vehicle. There weren't enough of them to go around. Mainly they used old Minuteman-II ICBMs, long since retired from service and fired out of test silos at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, but those were mostly gone. Russia and America had retired all of their ballistic weapons, chiefly as a reaction to the nuclear terrorist explosion at Denver and the even more horrific aftermath that had barely been averted. The negotiations to draw the numbers down to zero—the last ones had been eliminated in public just before the Japanese had launched their sneak attack on the Pacific Fleet—had gone so rapidly that a lot of the minor ancillary points had scarcely been considered, and only later had it been decided to take the "spare" launchers whose disposition had somehow been overlooked and retain them for ABM testing (every month a Russian officer checked the American ones at Vandenberg, and an American officer counted the Russian ones outside Plesetsk). The ABM tests were also monitored, but that entire area of effort was now largely theoretical. Both America and Russia retained a goodly number of nuclear warheads, and these could easily be affixed to cruise missiles, which, again, both sides had in relative abundance and no country could stop. It might take five hours instead of thirty-four minutes, but the targets would be just as dead.

Anti-missile work had been relegated to theater missiles, such as the ubiquitous Scuds, which the Russians doubtless regretted ever having built, much less sold to jerkwater countries that couldn't even field a single decent mechanized division, but who loved to parade those upgraded V- 2-class ballistic stovepipes because they looked impressive as hell to the people on the sidewalks. But the new upgrades on Patriot and its Russian counterpart SAM largely negated that threat, and the Navy's Aegis system had been tested against them, with pretty good success. Like Patriot, though, Standard was really a point-defense weapon with damned little cross-range ability to cover an area instead of maybe twenty square miles of important sea-estate.

All in all, it was a pity that they'd never solved the power-throughput problem with his free-electron lasers. Those could have defended whole

coastlines, if only ... and if only his aunt had balls, Gregory thought, she'd be his uncle. There was talk of building a chemical laser aboard a converted 747 that could sure as hell clobber a ballistic launch during boost phase, but to do *that,* the 747 had to be fairly close to the launch point, and so *that* was just one more version of theater defense, and of little strategic use.

The Aegis system had real possibilities. The SPY radar system was first-rate, and though the computer that managed the information was the flower of 1975 technology—a current Apple Macintosh had it beat by a good three orders of magnitude in all categories of performance—intercepting a ballistic warhead wasn't a question of computing speed so much as kinetic energy—getting the kill vehicle to the right place at the right time. Even that wasn't so great a feat of engineering. The real work had been done as far back as 1959, with the Nike Zeus, which had turned into Spartan and shown great promise before being shitcanned by the 1972 treaty with the Soviet Union, which was, belatedly, just as dead as the Safeguard system, which had been aborted at half-built. Well, the fact of the matter was that MIRV technology had negated that entire defense concept. No, you had to kill the ICBM in boost phase to kill all the MIRVs at once, and do it over the enemy's territory so that if he had a primitive arming system he'd only fry his own turf. The method for doing that was the Brilliant Pebbles system developed at Lawrence-Livermore National Laboratory, and though it had never been given a full-up test, the technology was actually pretty straightforward. Being hit by a matchstick traveling at fifteen thousand miles per hour would ruin your entire day. But that would never happen. The drive to fund and deploy such a system had died with all the ballistic launchers. In a way, it was a pity, Gregory thought. Such a system would have been a really cool engineering accomplishment—but it had little practical application today. The PRC retained its land-based ballistic launchers, but there were only ten or so of them, and that was a long way from the fifteen hundred the Soviets had once pointed at America. The Chinese had a missile submarine, too, but Gregory figured that CINCPAC could make that go away if he had to. Even if it was just tied alongside the pier, one two-thousand-pound smart bomb could take it out of play, and the Navy had a lot of those.

So, he thought, *figure the PRC gets really pissed at Taiwan, and figure the Navy has an Aegis cruiser tied alongside so that its sailors can get drunk and laid in the city, and those folks in Beijing pick that moment to push the button on one of their ICBMs, how can the Navy keep its cruiser from turning into slag, and oh, by the way, keep the city of Taipei alive ... ?*

The SM-2-ER had almost enough of the right ingredients to handle such a threat. If the missile was targeted on where the cruiser was, cross-range was not an issue. You just had to put the interceptor on the same line of bearing, because in essence the inbound rack wasn't moving at all, and you just had to put the SAM in the same place—Spot X—that the RV was going to be, at Time Y. The Aegis computer could figure where and when that was, and you weren't really hitting a bullet with a bullet. The RV would be about a meter across, and the kill-zone of the SAM's warhead would be about, what? Three meters across? Five? Maybe even eight or ten?

Call it eight, Al Gregory thought. Was the SM-2 *that* accurate? In absolute terms, probably yes. It had ample-sized control surfaces, and getting into the line of a jet aircraft—what the SM-2 had been designed to kill—had to take into account the maneuverability of the aircraft (pilots would do their damnedest to avoid the things), and so the eight-meter globe of destruction could probably be made to intercept the inbound RV in terms of pure geometry.

The issue was speed. Gregory popped open another Diet Coke from the room's minibar and sat back on the bed to consider how troublesome that issue was. The inbound RV, at a hundred thousand feet, would be traveling at about sixteen thousand miles per hour, 23,466 feet per second, eight times the speed of a rifle bullet, 7,150 meters per second. That was pretty damned fast. It was about the same speed as a high-explosive detonation. You could have the RV sitting next to a ton of TNT at the moment the explosive went off, and the explosion couldn't catch up with the RV. That was *FAST*.

So, the SAM's warhead has to go off well before it gets to where the RV is. Figuring out how much was a simple mathematical exercise. That meant that the proximity fuse on the SM-2 was the important variable in the equation, Gregory decided. He didn't know that he was wrong on this, didn't see what he was missing, and went on with his calculations. The software fix for the proximity laser fusing system looked less difficult than he'd imagined. Well, wasn't that good news?

It was another early day for Minister Fang Gan. He'd gotten a phone call at his home the previous night, and decided he had to arrive early for the appointment made then. This was a surprise for his staff, who were just setting up for the day when he breezed in, not looking as cross as he felt for the disturbance of his adamantine routine. It wasn't their fault, after all, and they had the good sense not to trouble him, and thus generate artificial wrath.

Ming was just printing up her downloads from the Web. She had pieces that she thought would be of interest, especially one from *The Wall Street Journal,* and another from *Financial Times.* Both commented on what she thought might be the reason for the minister's early arrival. His 9:20 appointment was with Ren He-Ping, an industrialist friendly with her boss. Ren arrived early. The slender, elderly man looked unhappy—no, she thought, worried—about something. She lifted her phone to get permission, then stood and walked him into the inner office, racing back outside to fetch morning tea, which she hadn't had a chance to serve her boss yet.

Ming was back inside in less than five minutes, with the fine porcelain cups on a decorated serving tray. She presented the morning drinks to both men with an elegance that earned her a thank-you from her boss, and then she took her leave. Ren, she saw, wasn't any happier to be in with her minister.

"What is the problem, Ren?"

“In two weeks, I will have a thousand workers with nothing to do, Fang.”

“Oh? What is the reason for that, my friend?”

“I do much business with an American business. It is called Butterfly. They sell clothing to wealthy American women. My factory outside Shanghai makes the cloth, and my tailoring plant at Yancheng turns the fabric into clothing, which we ship to America and Europe. We’ve been doing business with Butterfly for three years now, very satisfactorily for all concerned.”

“Yes? So, what, then, is the difficulty?”

“Fang, Butterfly just canceled an order worth one hundred forty million American dollars. They did it without any warning. Only last week they told us how happy they were with our products. We’ve invested a fortune into quality control to make sure they would stay with us—but they’ve left us like a dog in the street.”

“Why did this happen, Ren?” Minister Fang asked, fearing he knew the answer.

“Our representative in New York tells us that it’s because of the deaths of the two clergymen. He tells us that Butterfly had no choice, that Americans demonstrated outside his establishment in New York and prevented people from going inside to buy his wares. He says that Butterfly cannot do business with me for fear of having their own business collapse.”

“Do you not have a contract with them? Are they not obligated to honor it?”

Ren nodded. “Technically, yes, but business is a practical thing, Minister. If they cannot sell our goods, then they will not buy them from us. They cannot get the financing to do so from their bankers—bankers loan money in the expectation that it will be paid back, yes? There is an escape clause in the contract. We could dispute it in court, but it would take years, and we would probably not succeed, and it would also offend others in the industry, and thus prevent us from ever doing business in New York again. So, in practical terms there is no remedy.”

“Is this a temporary thing? Surely this difficulty will pass, will it not?”

“Fang, we also do business in Italy, with the House of d‘Alberto, a major trendsetter in European fashion. They also canceled their relationship with us. It seems that the Italian man our police killed comes from a powerful and influential family. Our representative in Italy says that no Chinese firm will be able to do business there for some time. In other words, Minister, that ‘unfortunate incident’ with the churchmen is going to have grave consequences.”

“But these people have to purchase their cloth somewhere,” Fang objected.

“Indeed they do. And they will do so in Thailand, Singapore and Taiwan.”

“Is that possible?”

Ren nodded quickly and sadly. “It is very possible. Sources have told me that they are busily contacting our former business partners to ‘take up the

slack,' as they put it. You see, the Taiwan government has launched an aggressive campaign to distinguish themselves from us, and it would appear that their campaign is, for the moment, highly successful."

"Well, Ren, surely you can find other customers for your goods," Fang suggested with confidence.

But the industrialist shook his head. He hadn't touched his tea and his eyes looked like wounds in a stone head. "Minister, America is the world's largest such market, and it appears it will soon be closed to us. After that is Italy, and that door, also, has been slammed shut. Paris, London, even the avant-garde marketers in Denmark and Vienna will not even return our phone calls. I've had my representatives contact all potential markets, and they all say the same thing: No one wants to do business with China. Only America could save us, but America will not."

"What will this cost you?"

"As I told you, one hundred forty million dollars just from the Butterfly account alone, and another similar amount from our other American and European businesses."

Fang didn't have to think long to calculate the take the PRC's government got from that.

"Your colleagues?"

"I have spoken with several. The news is the same. The timing could hardly be worse. *All* of our contracts are coming due at the same time. We are talking *billions* of dollars, Minister. *Billions,"* he repeated.

Fang lit a cigarette. "I see," he said. "What would it take to fix this?"

"Something to make America happy, not just the government, but the citizens, too."

"Is that truly important?" Fang asked, somewhat tiredly. He'd heard this rubbish so many times from so many voices.

"Fang, in America people can buy their clothing from any number of stores and manufacturers, any number of marketers. The people choose which succeeds and which fails. Women's clothing in particular is an industry as volatile as vapor. It does not take much to make such a company fail. As a result, those companies will not assume additional and unnecessary risks. To do business with the People's Republic, now, today, is something they see as an unnecessary risk."

Fang took a drag and thought about that. It was, actually, something he'd always known, intellectually, but never quite appreciated. America was a different place, and it did have different rules. And since China wanted American money, China had to abide by those rules. That wasn't politics. That was practicality.

"So, you want me to do what?"

"Please, tell your fellow ministers that this could mean financial ruin for us.

Certainly for my industry, and we are a valuable asset for our country. We bring wealth into China. If you want that wealth to spend on other things, then you must pay attention to what we need in order to get you that wealth." What Ren could not say was that he and his fellow industrialists were the ones who made the Politburo's economic (and therefore, also political) agenda possible, and that therefore the Politburo needed to listen to them once in a while. But Fang knew what the Politburo would say in reply. A horse may pull the cart, but you do not ask the horse where it wishes to go.

Such was political reality in the People's Republic of China. Fang knew that Ren had been around the world, that he had a sizable personal fortune which the PRC had graciously allowed him to accumulate, and that, probably more important, he had the intelligence and personal industry to thrive anywhere he chose to live. Fang knew also that Ren could fly to Taiwan and get financing to build a factory there, where he could employ others who looked and spoke Chinese, and he'd make money there *and* get some political influence in the bargain. Most of all, he knew that Ren knew this. Would he act upon it? Probably not. He was Chinese, a citizen of the mainland. This was *his* land, and he had no desire to leave it, else he would not be here now, pleading his case to the one minister—well, probably Qian Kun would listen also—whose ear might be receptive to his words. Ren was a patriot, but not a communist. What an odd duality that was ...

Fang stood. This meeting had gone far enough. "I will do this, my friend," he told his visitor. "And I will let you know what develops."

"Thank you, Comrade Minister." Ren bowed and took his leave, not looking better, but pleased that someone had actually listened to him. Listening was not what one expected of Politburo members.

Fang sat back down and lit another cigarette, then reached for his tea. He thought for a minute or so. "Ming!" he called loudly. It took seven seconds by his watch.

"Yes, Minister?"

"What news articles do you have for me?" he asked. His secretary disappeared for another few seconds, then reappeared, holding a few pages.

"Here, Minister, just printed up. This one may be of particular interest."

"This one" was a cover story from *The Wall Street Journal.* "Major Shift in China Business?" it proclaimed. The question mark was entirely rhetorical, he saw in the first paragraph. Ren was right. He had to discuss this with the rest of the Politburo.

The second major item in Bondarenko's morning was observing tank gunnery. His men had the newest variant of the T-80UM main battle tank. It wasn't quite the newest T- 99 that was just coming into production. This UM did, however, have a decent fire-control system, which was novel enough. The target range was about as simple as one could ask, large white cardboard

panels with black tank silhouettes painted on them, and they were set at fixed, known ranges. Many of his gunners had never fired a live round since leaving gunnery school—such was the current level of training in the Russian Army, the general fumed.

Then he fumed some more. He watched one particular tank, firing at a target an even thousand meters away. It should have been mere spitting distance, but as he watched, first one, then two more, of the tracer rounds missed, all falling short, until the fourth shot hit high on the painted turret shape. With that feat accomplished, the tank shifted aim to a second target at twelve hundred meters and missed that one twice, before achieving a pinwheel in the geometric center of the target.

"Nothing wrong with that," Aliyev said next to him.

"Except that the tank and the crew were all dead ninety seconds ago!" Bondarenko observed, followed by a particularly vile oath. "Ever see what happens when a tank blows up? Nothing left of the crew but sausage! Expensive sausage."

"It's their first time in a live-fire exercise," Aliyev said, hoping to calm his boss down. "We have limited practice ammunition, and it's not as accurate as warshots."

"How many live rounds do we have?"

Aliyev smiled. "Millions." They had, in fact, warehouses full of the things, fabricated back in the 1970s.

"Then issue them," the general ordered.

"Moscow won't like it," the colonel warned. Warshots were, of course, far more expensive.

"I am not here to *please* them, Andrey Petrovich. I am here to *defend* them." And someday he'd meet the fool who'd decided to replace the tank's loader crewman with a machine. It was slower than a soldier, and removed a crewman who could assist in repairing damage. Didn't engineers ever consider that tanks were actually supposed to go into battle? No, this tank had been designed by a committee, as all Soviet weapons had been, which explained, perhaps, why so many of them didn't work—or, just as badly, didn't protect their users. Like putting the gas tank inside the doors of the BTR armored personnel carrier. Who ever thought that a crewman might want to bail out of a damaged vehicle and perhaps even survive to fight afoot? The tank's vulnerability had been the very first thing the Afghans had learned about Soviet mobile equipment ... and how many Russian boys had burned to death because of it? *Well,* Bondarenko thought, *I have a new country now, and Russia does have talented engineers, and in a few years perhaps we can start building weapons worthy of the soldiers who carry them.*

"Andrey, is there anything in our command which does work?"

"That's why we're training, Comrade General." Bondarenko's service reputation was of an upbeat officer who looked for solutions rather than problems. His operations officer supposed that Gennady Iosifovich was

overwhelmed by the scope of the difficulties, not yet telling himself that however huge a problem was, it had to be composed of numerous small ones which *could* be addressed one at a time. Gunnery, for example. Today, it was execrable. But in a week it would be much better, especially if they gave the troops real rounds instead of the practice ones. Real “bullets,” as soldiers invariably called them, made you feel like a man instead of a schoolboy with his workbook. There was much to be said for that, and like many of the things his new boss was doing, it made good sense. In two weeks, they’d be watching more tank gunnery, and seeing more hits than misses.

CHAPTER 40

Fashion Statements

So, George?" Ryan asked.

"So, it's started. Turns out there are a ton of similar contracts coming due for the next season or something, plus Christmas toy contracts," SecTreas told his President. "And it's not just us. Italy, France, England, *everybody's* bugging out on them. The Chinese have made huge inroads into that industry, and they pissed off a lot of people in the process. Well, the chicken hasn't so much come home to roost as it's flown the coop, and that leaves our friends in Beijing holding the bag. It's a big bag, Jack. We're talking billions here."

"How badly will that hurt them?" SecState asked.

"Scott, I grant you it seems a little odd that the fate of a nation could ride on Victoria's Secret brassieres, but money is money. They need it, and all of a sudden there's a big hole in their current account. How big? Billions. It's going to make a hell of a bellyache for them."

"Any actual harm?" Ryan asked.

"Not my department, Jack," Winston answered. "That's Scott."

"Okay." Ryan turned his head to look at his other cabinet member.

"Before I can answer that, I need to know what net effect this will have on the Chinese economy."

Winston shrugged. "Theoretically, they could ride this out with minimal difficulties, but that depends on how they make up the shortfall. Their national industrial base is an incredibly muddled hodgepodge of private- and state-owned industries. The private ones are the efficient ones, of course, and the worst of the state-owned industries belong to their army. I've seen analyses of PLA operations that look like something out of *MAD* magazine, just impossible to credit on first reading. Soldiers don't generally know much about making things—they're better at breaking them—and tossing Marxism into the mix doesn't exactly help the situation. So, those 'enterprises' piss away vast quantities of cash. If they shut those down, or just cut them back, they could kiss this little shortfall off and move on—but they won't."

"That's right," Adler agreed. "The Chinese People's Liberation Army has a lot of political clout over there. The party controls it, but the tail wags the dog to a considerable extent. There's quite a bit of political and economic unrest over there. They need the army to keep things under control, and the PLA takes a big cut off the top of the national treasure because of that."

"The Soviets weren't like that," POTUS objected.

"Different country, different culture. Keep that in mind."

"Klingons," Ryan muttered, with a nod. "Okay, go on."

Winston took the lead. "We can't predict the impact this will have on their society without knowing how they're going to react to the cash shortfall."

"If they squeal when it starts to hurt, what do we do?" Ryan asked next.

"They're going to have to make nice, like reinstating the Boeing and Caterpillar orders, and doing it publicly."

"They won't—they can't," Adler objected. "Too much loss of face. Asian mind-set. That won't happen. They might offer us concessions, but they'll have to be hidden ones."

"Which is not politically acceptable to us. If I try to take *that* to Congress, first they'll laugh at me, then they'll crucify me." Ryan took a sip of his drink.

"And they won't understand why you can't tell Congress what to do. They think you're a strong leader, and therefore you're supposed to make decisions on your own," EAGLE informed his President.

"Don't they know *anything* about how our government works?" POTUS asked.

"Jack, I'm sure they have all sorts of experts who know more about the constitutional process than I do, but the Politburo members are not required to listen to them. They come from a very different political environment, and that's the one they understand. For us 'the people' means popular opinion, polls, and ultimately elections. For them, it means the peasants and workers who are supposed to do what they're told."

"We do business with these people?" Winston asked the ceiling.

"It's called realpolitik, George," Ryan explained.

"But we can't pretend they don't exist. There's over a billion of them, and, oh, by the way, they also have nuclear weapons, on ballistic launchers, even." Which added a decidedly unpleasant element to the overall equation.

"Twelve of them, according to CIA, and we can turn their country into a parking lot if we have to, just it'll take twenty-four hours instead of forty minutes," Ryan told his guests, managing not to get a chill when he said it. The possibility was too remote to make him nervous. "And they know that, and who wants to be the king of a parking lot? They are that rational, Scott, aren't they?"

"I think so. They rattle their saber at Taiwan, but not even much of that lately, not when we have Seventh Fleet there all the time." Which, however, burned up a lot of fuel oil for the Navy.

"Anyway, this cash problem won't actually cripple their economy?" Jack asked.

"I don't think so, unless they're pretty damned dumb."

"Scott, are they dumb?" Ryan asked State Department.

"Not that dumb—at least I don't think so," State told the President.

"Good, then I can go upstairs and have another drink." Ryan rose, and his guests did the same.

This is lunacy!" Qian Kun growled at Fang half a world away, discussing what turned out to be the same set of issues.

"I will not disagree with you, Qian, but we must make our case to the rest of our colleagues."

"Fang, this could mean ruin for us. With what shall we buy wheat and oil?"

"What are our reserves?"

The Finance Minister had to sit back and think about that one. He closed his eyes and tried to remember the numbers on which he got briefed the first Monday of every month. The eyes opened. "The harvest from last year was better than average. We have food for about a year—assuming an average harvest this year, or even a slightly short one. The immediate problem is oil. We've been using a lot of that lately, with the PLA's constant exercises up north and on the coast. In oil, we have perhaps four months in reserve, and the money to purchase another two months. After that, we will have to cut back our uses. Now, we are self-sufficient in coal, and so we'll have all the electricity we need. The lights will burn. The trains will run, but the PLA will be crippled." *Not that this is an entirely bad thing,* he didn't add. Both men acknowledged the value of the People's Liberation Army, but today it was really more of a domestic security service, like a large and well-armed police force, than a real guarantor of their national security, which had, really, no external threats to deal with.

"The army won't like that," Fang warned.

"I am not overly concerned with their likes and dislikes, Fang," the Finance Minister countered. "We have a country to bring out of the nineteenth century. We have industries to grow, and people to feed and employ. The ideology of our youth has not been as successful in bringing this about as we were educated to expect."

"Do you say that ... ?"

Qian shifted in his chair. "Remember what Deng said? It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white as long as it catches mice. And Mao exiled him soon thereafter, and so today we have two hundred million more mouths to feed, but the only additional funds with which we do it came to us from the black cat, not the white one. We live in a practical world, Fang. I, too, have my copy of *The Little Red Book,* but I've never tried to eat it."

This former railroad engineer had been captured by his bureaucracy and his job, just like the last one had been—he'd died at the relatively young age of

seventy-eight, before he could be expelled from his Politburo chair. Qian, a youthful sixty-six, would have to learn to watch his words, and his thoughts, more carefully. He was about to say so when Qian started speaking again.

"Fang, people like you and me, we must be able to speak freely to one another. We are not college students full of revolutionary zeal. We are men of years and knowledge, and we *must* have the ability to discuss issues frankly. We waste too much time in our meetings kneeling before Mao's cadaver. The man is *dead,* Fang. Yes, he was a great man, yes, he was a great leader for our people, but *no,* he *wasn't* the Lord Buddha, or Jesus, or whatever. He was only a man, and he had ideas, and most of them were right, but some of them were wrong, some of them don't work. The Great Leap Forward accomplished nothing, and the Cultural Revolution, in addition to killing off undesirable intellectuals and troublemakers, also starved millions of our people to death, and that is not desirable, is it?"

"That is true, my young friend, but it is important how you present your ideas," Fang warned his junior, non-voting member of the Politburo. *Present them stupidly, and you'll find yourself counting rice bags on a collective farm.* He was a little old to go barefoot into the paddies, even as punishment for ideological apostasy.

"Will you support me?" Qian asked.

"I will try," was the halfhearted answer. He had to plead Ren He-Ping's case as well this day, and it wouldn't be easy.

They'd counted on the funds transfer at Qian's ministry. They had contracts to pay for. The tanker had long since been scheduled, because they were booked well in advance, and this carrier was just now coming alongside the loading pier off the coast of Iran. She'd load four hundred and fifty-six thousand tons of crude oil over a period of less than a day, then steam back out of the Persian Gulf, turn southeast for the passage around India, then transit the crowded Malacca Strait past Singapore and north to the huge and newly built oil terminal at Shanghai, where she'd spend thirty or forty hours offloading the cargo, then retrace her journey back to the Gulf for yet another load in an endless procession.

Except that the procession wasn't quite endless. It would end when the money stopped, because the sailors had to be paid, the debt on the tanker serviced, and most of all, the oil had to be bought. And it wasn't just one tanker. There were quite a few of them on the China run. A satellite focused on just that one segment of the world's oil trade would have seen them from a distance, looking like cars on a highway going to and from the same two points continuously. And like cars, they didn't have to go merely between those two places. There were other ports at which to load oil, and others at which to offload it, and to the crews of the tankers, the places of origin and destination didn't really matter very much, because almost all of their time was spent at sea, and the sea was always the same. Nor did it matter to the

owners of the tankers, or the agents who did the chartering. What mattered was that they got paid for their time.

For this charter, the money had been wire-transferred from one account to another, and so the crew stood at their posts watching the loading process—monitoring it mainly by watching various dials and gauges; you couldn't see the oil going through the pipes, after all. Various crew members were on the beach to see to the victualing of their ship, and to visit the chandlers to get books and magazines to read, videocassette movies, and drink to go with the food, plus whatever consumable supplies had been used up on the inbound trip. A few crewmen looked for women whose charms might be rented, but that was an iffy business in Iran. None of them knew or thought very much about who paid for their services. Their job was to operate the ship safely and efficiently. The ship's officers mainly had their wives along, for whom the voyages were extended, if rather boring, pleasure cruises: Every modern tanker had a swimming pool and a deck for tanning, plus satellite TV for news and entertainment. And none of them particularly cared where the ship went, because for the women shopping was shopping, and any new port had its special charms.

This particular tanker, the World Progress, was chartered out of London, and had five more Shanghai runs scheduled until the charter ran out. The charter was paid, however, on a per-voyage basis, and the funds for this trip had been wired only seven days before. That was hardly a matter of concern for the owners or the ship's agent. After all, they were dealing with a nation-state, whose credit tended to be good. In due course, the loading was completed. A computerized system told the ship's first officer that the ship's trim was correct, and he so notified the master, who then told the chief engineer to wind up the ship's gas-turbine engines. This engine type made things easy, and in less than five minutes, the ship's power plant was fully ready for sea. Twenty minutes after that, powerful harbor tugs eased the ship away from the loading dock. This evolution is the most demanding for a tanker's crew, because only in confined waters is the risk of collision and serious damage quite so real. But within two hours, the tanker was under way under her own power, heading for the narrows at Bandar Abbas, and then the open sea.

Yes, Qian," Premier Xu said tiredly. "Proceed."

"Comrades, at our last meeting I warned you of a potential problem of no small proportions. That problem is with us now, and it is growing larger."

"Are we running out of money, Qian?" Zhang Han San asked, with a barely concealed smirk. The answer amused him even more.

"Yes, Zhang, we are."

"How can a nation run out of money?" the senior Politburo member demanded.

“The same way a factory worker can, by spending more than he has. Another way is to offend his boss and lose his job. We have done both,” Qian replied evenly.

“What ‘boss’ do we have?” Zhang inquired, with a disarming and eerie gentleness.

“Comrades, that is what we call trade. We sell our goods to others in return for money, and we use that money to purchase goods from those others. Since we are not peasants from ancient times bartering a pig for a sheep, we must use money, which is the means of international exchange. Our trade with America has generated an annual surplus on the order of seventy billion American dollars.”

“Generous of the foreign devils,” Premier Xu observed to Zhang *sotto voce.*

“Which we have almost entirely spent for various items, largely for our colleagues in the People’s Liberation Army of late. Most of these are long-term purchase items for which advance payment was necessary, as is normal in the international arms business. To this, we must add oil and wheat. There are other things which are important to our economy, but we will concentrate on these for the moment.” Qian looked around the table for approval. He got it, though Marshal Luo Cong, Defense Minister, and commander-in-chief of the People’s Liberation Army—*and* lord of the PLA’s sizable industrial empire—was now looking on with a gimlet eye. The expenditures of his personal empire had been singled out, and that was not calculated to please him.

“Comrades,” Qian continued, “we now face the loss of much, perhaps most, of that trade surplus with America, and other foreign countries as well. You see these?” He held up a fistful of telexes and e-mail printouts. “These are cancellations of commercial business orders and funds transfers. Let me clarify. *These* are *billions* of lost dollars, money which in some cases we have already spent—but money we will never have because we have angered those with whom we do business.”

“Do you tell me that they have such power over us? Rubbish!” another member observed.

“Comrade, they have the power to buy our trade goods for cash, or *not* buy them for cash. If they choose *not* to buy them, we do *not* get the money we need to spend for Marshal Luo’s expensive toys.” He used that word deliberately. It was time to explain the facts of life to these people, and a slap across the face was sure to get their attention. “Now, let us consider wheat. We use wheat to make bread and noodles. If you have no wheat, you have no noodles.

“Our country does not grow enough wheat to feed our people. We know this. We have too many mouths to feed. In a few months, the great producing countries, America, Canada, Australia, Argentina, and so forth, they will all have wheat to sell—but with what shall we buy it? Marshal Luo, your army needs oil to refine into diesel fuel and jet fuel, does it not? We need the same things for our diesel trains, and our airlines. But we cannot produce all the oil we need for our domestic needs, and so we must buy it from the Persian Gulf

and elsewhere—again, with what shall we buy it?"

"So, sell our trade goods to someone else?" a member asked, *with rather surprising innocence,* Qian thought.

"Who else might there be, comrade? There is only one America. We have also offended all of Europe. Whom does that leave? Australia? They are allied to Europe and America. Japan? They also sell to America, and *they* will move to replace our lost markets, not to buy from us. South America, perhaps? Those are all Christian countries, and we just killed a senior Christian churchman, didn't we? Moreover, in *their* ethical world, he died heroically. We have not just killed. We have created a holy martyr to their faith!

"Comrades, we have deliberately structured our industry base to sell to the American market. To sell elsewhere, we would first have to determine what they need that we can make, and then enter the market. You don't just show up with a boatload of products and exchange it for cash on the dock! It takes time and patience to become a force in such a market. Comrades, we have cast away the work of *decades.* The money we are losing will not come back for years, and until then, we must learn to live our national life differently."

"What are you saying?" Zhang shot back.

"I am saying that the People's Republic faces economic ruin because two of our policemen killed those two meddling churchmen."

"That is not possible!"

"It is not possible, Zhang? If you offend the man who gives you money, then he will give you no more. Can you understand that? We've gone far out of our way to offend America, and then we offended all of Europe as well. We have made ourselves outcasts—they call *us* barbarians because of that unhappy incident at the hospital. I do not defend them, but I must tell you what *they* say and think. And as long as they say those things and think those things, it is we who will pay for the error."

"I refuse to believe this!" Zhang insisted.

"That is fine. You may come to my ministry and add up the numbers yourself." Qian was feeling full of himself, Fang saw. Finally, he had them listening to him. Finally, he had them thinking about his thoughts and his expertise. "Do you think I make this story up to tell in some country inn over rice wine?"

Then it was Premier Xu leaning forward and thinking aloud. "You have our attention, Qian. What can we do to avert this difficulty?"

Having delivered his primary message quickly and efficiently, Qian Kun didn't know what to say now. There *wasn't* a way to avert it that these men would accept. But having given them a brief taste of the harsh truth, now he had to give them some more:

"We need to change the perception of American minds. We need to show them that we are not what they consider barbarians. We have to transform our image in their eyes. For starters, we must make amends for the deaths of those

two priests."

"Abase ourselves before the foreign devils? Never!" Zhang snarled.

"Comrade Zhang," Fang said, coming carefully to Qian's defense. "Yes, we are the Middle Kingdom, and no, we are not the barbarians. They are. But sometimes one must do business with barbarians, and that might mean understanding their point of view, and adapting to it somewhat."

"Humble ourselves before *them?"*

"Yes, Zhang. We need what they have, and to get it, we must be acceptable to them."

"And when they next demand that we make political changes, then what?" This was the premier, Xu, getting somewhat agitated, which was unusual for him.

"We face such decisions when and if they come," Qian answered, pleasing Fang, who didn't want to risk saying *that* himself.

"We cannot risk that," the Interior Minister, Tong Jie, responded, speaking for the first time. The police of the nation belonged to him, and he was responsible for civil order in the country—only if he failed would he call upon Marshal Luo, which would cause him both loss of face and loss of power at this table. In a real sense, the deaths of the two men had been laid at his place, for he had generated the formal orders on the suppression of religious activity in the PRC, increasing the harshness of law enforcement in order to increase the relative influence of his own ministry. "If the foreigners insist upon internal political changes, it could bring us all down."

And that was the core issue, Fang saw at once. The People's Republic rested absolutely upon the power of the party and its leaders, these men before him in this room. Like noblemen of old, each was attended by a trusted servant, sitting in the chairs against the wall, around the table, waiting for the order to fetch tea or water. Each had his rationale for power, whether it was Defense, or Interior, or Heavy Industry, or in his particular case, friendship and general experience. Each had labored long and hard to reach this point, and none of them relished the thought of losing what he had, any more than a provincial governor under the Ching Dynasty would have willingly reverted to being a mere mandarin, because that meant at least ignominy, and just as likely, death. These men knew that if a foreign country demanded and got internal political concessions, then their grip on power would loosen, and that was the one thing they dared not risk. They ruled the workers and peasants, and because of that, they also feared them. The noblemen of old could fall back upon the teachings of Confucius, or Buddha; on a spiritual foundation for their temporal power. But Marx and Mao had swept all that away, leaving only force as their defense. And if to maintain their country's prosperity they had to diminish that force, what would then happen? They didn't know, and these men feared the unknown as a child feared the evil monsters under his bed at night, but with far more reason. It had happened, right here in Beijing, not all that many years before. Not one of these men had forgotten it. To the public, they'd always shown steadfast determination. But each of them, alone in his

bathroom before the mirror, or lying in bed at night before sleep came, had shown fear. Because though they basked in the devotion of the peasants and workers, somehow each of them knew that the peasants and workers might fear them, but also hated them. Hated them for their arrogance, their corruption, for their privilege, their better food, their luxurious housing, their personal servants. Their servants, they all knew, loathed them as well, behind smiles and bows of obeisance, which could just as easily conceal a dagger, because that's how the peasants and workers had felt about the nobles of a hundred years before. The revolutionaries had made use of that hatred against the class enemies of that age, and new ones, they all knew, could make use of the same silent rage against themselves. And so they would cling to power with the same desperation as the nobles of old, except they would show even more ruthlessness, because unlike the nobles of old, they had no place to run to. Their ideology had trapped them in their golden cages more surely than any religion could.

Fang had never before considered all of these thoughts *in toto*. Like the others, he'd worried a lot when the college students had demonstrated, building up their "goddess of liberty" out of plaster or papier-mâché—Fang didn't remember, though he did remember his sigh of relief when the PLA had destroyed it. It came as a surprise to him, the realization of how snared he was here in this place. The power he and his colleagues exercised was like something shown before a mirror that could be turned on them all instantly under the proper circumstances. They had immense power over every citizen in their country, but that power was all an illusion—

—and, no, they couldn't allow another country to dictate political practices to them, because their lives all depended on that illusion. It was like smoke on a calm day, seemingly a pillar to hold up the heavens, but the slightest wind could blow it all away, and then the heavens would fall. On them all.

But Fang also saw that there was no way out. If they didn't change to make America happy, then their country would run out of wheat and oil, and probably other things as well, and they would risk massive social change in a grounds well from below. But if to prevent that, they allowed some internal changes, they would just be inviting the same thing on themselves.

Which would kill them the more surely?

Did it matter? Fang asked himself. Either way, they'd be just as dead. He wondered idly how it would come, the fists of a mob, or bullets before a wall, or a rope. No, it would be bullets. That was how his country executed people. Probably preferable to the beheading sword of old. What if the swordsman missed his aim, after all? It must have been a horrid mess. He only had to look around the table to see that everyone here had similar thoughts, at least those with *enough* wit. All men feared the unknown, but now they had to choose which unknown to fear, and the choice was yet another thing to dread.

"So, Qian, you say we risk running out of things because we can no longer get the money we need to purchase them?" Premier Xu asked.

"That is correct," the Finance Minister confirmed.

"In what other ways could we get money and oil?" Xu asked next.

"That is not within my purview, Chairman," Qian answered.

"Oil is its own currency," Zhang said. "And there is ample oil to our north. There is also gold, and many other things we need. Timber in vast quantities. And that which we need most of all—space, living space for our people."

Marshal Luo nodded. "We have discussed this before."

"What do you mean?" Fang asked.

"The Northern Resource Area, our Japanese friends once called it," Zhang reminded them all.

"*That* adventure ended in disaster," Fang observed at once. "We were fortunate not to have been damaged by it."

"But we were not damaged at all," Zhang replied lightly. "We were not even implicated. We can be sure of that, can we not, Luo?"

"This is so. The Russians have never strengthened their southern defenses. They even ignore our exercises that have raised our forces to a high state of readiness."

"Can we be sure of that?"

"Oh, yes," the Defense Minister told them all. "Tan?" he asked.

Tan Deshi was the chief of the Ministry of State Security, in charge of the PRC's foreign and domestic intelligence services. One of the younger men here at seventy, he was probably the healthiest of them all, a nonsmoker and a very light imbiber of alcohol. "When we first began our increased exercises, they watched with concern, but after the first two years, they lost interest. We have over a million of our citizens living in eastern Siberia—it's illegal, but the Russians do not make much issue of it. A goodly number of them report to me. We have good intelligence of the Russian defenses."

"And what is their state of readiness?" Tong Jie asked.

"Generally, quite poor. They have one full-strength division, one at two-thirds, and the rest are hardly better than cadre-strength. Their new Far East commander, a General-Colonel Bondarenko, despairs of making things better, our sources tell us."

"Wait," Fang objected. "Are we discussing the possibility of war with Russia here?"

"Yes," Zhang Han San replied. "We have done this before."

"That is true, but on the first such occasion, we would have had Japan as an ally, and America neutralized. On the second, we assumed that Russia would have been broken up beforehand along religious lines. Who are our allies in this case? How has Russia been crippled?"

"We've been a little unlucky," Tan answered. "The chief minister—well, the chief adviser to their President Grushavoy is still alive."

"What do you mean?" Fang asked.

“I mean that our attempt to kill him misfired.” Tan explained on for two minutes. The reaction around the table was one of mild shock.

“Tan had my approval,” Xu told them calmly.

Fang looked over at Zhang Han San. That’s where the idea must have originated. His old friend might have hated capitalists, but that didn’t stop him from acting like the worst pirate when it suited his goals. And he had Xu’s ear, and Tan as his strong right arm. Fang thought he knew all of these men, but now he saw that his assumption had been in error. In each was something hidden, and sinister. They were far more ruthless than he, Fang saw.

“That is an act of war,” Fang objected.

“Our operational security was excellent. Our Russian agent, one Klementi Suvorov, is a former KGB officer we recruited ages ago when he was stationed here in Beijing. He’s performed various functions for us for a long time and he has superb contacts within both their intelligence and military communities—that is, those segments of it that are now in the new Russian underworld. In fact he’s a common criminal—a lot of the old KGB people have turned into that—but it works for us. He likes money, and for enough of it, he will do anything. Unfortunately in this case, a pure happenstance prevented the elimination of this Golovko person,” Tan concluded.

“And now?” Fang asked. Then he cautioned himself. He was asking too many questions, taking too much of a personal position here. Even in this room, even with these old comrades, it didn’t pay to stand out too far.

“And now, that is for the Politburo to decide,” Tan replied blandly. It had to be affected, but was well acted in any case.

Fang nodded and leaned back, keeping his peace for the moment.

“Luo?” Xu asked. “Is this feasible?”

The Marshal had to guard his words as well, not to appear too confident. You could get in trouble around this table by promising more than you could deliver, though Luo was in the unique position—somewhat shared by Interior Minister Tong—of having guns behind him and his position.

“Comrades, we have long examined the strategic issue here. When Russia was the Soviet Union, this operation was not possible. Their military was much larger and better supported, and they had numerous intercontinental and theater ballistic missiles tipped with thermonuclear warheads. Now they have none, thanks to their bilateral agreement with America. Today, the Russian military is a shadow of what it was only ten or twelve years ago. Fully half of their draftees do not even report when called for service—if that happened here, we all know what would happen to the miscreants, do we not? They squandered much of their remaining combat power with their Chechen religious minority—and so, you might say that Russia is *already* splitting up along religious lines. In practical terms, the task is straightforward, if not entirely easy. The real difficulty facing us is distance and space, not actual military opposition. It’s many kilometers from our border to their new oil field on the Arctic Ocean—much fewer to the new goldfield. The best news of all is

that the Russian army is itself building the roads we need to make the approach. It reduces our problems by two thirds right there. Their air force is a joke. We should be able to cope with it—they sell us their best aircraft, after all, and deny them to their own flyers. To make our task easier, we would do well to disrupt their command and control, their political stability and so forth. Tan, can you accomplish that?"

"That depends on what, exactly, is the task," Tan Deshi replied.

"To eliminate Grushavoy, perhaps," Zhang speculated. "He is the only person of strength in Russia at the moment. Remove him, and their country would collapse politically."

"Comrades," Fang had to say, taking the risk, "what we discuss here is bold and daring, but also fraught with danger. What if we fail?"

"Then, my friend, we are no worse off than we appear to be already," Zhang replied. "But if we succeed, as appears likely, we achieve the position for which we have striven since our youth. The People's Republic will become the foremost power in all the world." *As is our right,* he didn't have to add. "Chairman Mao never considered failing to destroy Chiang, did he?"

There was no arguing with that, and Fang didn't attempt it. The switchover from fear to adventurousness had been as abrupt as it was now becoming contagious. Where was the caution these men exercised so often? They were men on a floundering ship, and they saw a means of saving themselves, and having accepted the former proposition, they were catapulted into the latter. All he could do was lean back and watch the talk evolve, waiting—hoping—that reason would break out and prevail.

But from whom would it come?

CHAPTER 41

Plots of State

Yes, Minister?" Ming said, looking up from her almost-completed notes.

"You are careful with these notes, aren't you?"

"Certainly, Comrade Minister," she replied at once. "I never even print these documents up, as you well know. Is there a concern?"

Fang shrugged. The stresses of today's meeting were gradually bleeding off. He was a practical man of the world, and he was an elderly man. If there was a way to deal with the current problem, he would find it. If there wasn't, then he would endure. He always had. He was not the one taking the lead here, and his notes would show that he was one of the few cautious skeptics at the meeting. One of the others, of course, was Qian Kun, who'd walked out of the room shaking his head and muttering to his senior aide. Fang then wondered if Qian was keeping notes. It would have been a good move. If things went badly, those could be his only defense. At this level of risk, the hazard wasn't relegation to a menial job, but rather having one's ashes scattered in the river.

"Ming?"

"Yes, Minister?"

"What did you think of the students in the square all those years ago?"

"I was only in school then myself, Minister, as you know."

"Yes, but what did you think?"

"I thought they were reckless. The tallest tree is always the first to be cut down." It was an ancient Chinese adage, and therefore a safe thing to say. Theirs was a culture that discouraged taking such action—but perversely, their culture also lionized those who'd had the courage to do so. As with every human tribe, the criterion was simple. If you succeeded, then you were a hero, to be remembered and admired. If you failed, nobody would remember you anyway, except, perhaps, as a negative example. And so safety lay always in the middle course, and in safety was life.

The students had been too young to know all that. Too young to accept the idea of death. The bravest soldiers were always the young ones, those spirits of great passions and beliefs, those who had not lived long enough to reflect on what shape the world took when it turned against you, those too foolish to know fear. For children, the unknown was something you spent almost all your time exploring and finding out. Somewhere along the line, you discovered that you'd learned all that was safe to learn, and that's where most

men stopped, except for the very few upon whom progress depended, the brave ones and the bold ones who walked with open eyes into the unknown, and humanity remembered those few who came back alive ...

... and soon enough forgot those who did not.

But it was the substance of history to remember those who did, and the substance of Fang's society to remind them of those who didn't. Such a strange dichotomy. *What societies,* he wondered, *encourage people to seek out the unknown? How did they do? Did they thrive, or did they blunder about in the darkness and lose their substance in aimless, undirected wanderings?* In China, everyone followed the words and thoughts of Marx, as modified by Mao, because he had boldly walked into the darkness and returned with revolution, and changed the path of his nation. But there things had stopped, because no one was willing to proceed beyond the regions Mao had explored and illuminated—and proclaimed to be all that China and the world in general needed to know about. *Mao was like some sort of religious prophet, wasn't he?* Fang reflected.

... Hadn't China just killed a couple of those?

"Thank you, Ming," he told her, waiting there for his next order. He didn't see her close the door as she went to her desk to transcribe the notes of this Politburo meeting.

Dear God," Dr. Sears whispered at his desk. As usual, the SORGE document had been printed up on the DDO's laser jet and handed over to him, and he'd walked back to his office to do the translation. Sometimes the documents were short enough to translate standing in front of her desk, but this one was pretty long. It was, in fact, going to take eight line-and-a-half-spaced pages off *his* laser printer. He took his time on this because of its content. He rechecked his translation. Suddenly he had doubts about his understanding of the Chinese language. He couldn't afford to mistranslate or misrepresent this sort of thing. It was just too hot. All in all, he took two and a half hours, more than double what Mrs. Foley probably expected, before he walked back.

"What took so long?" MP asked when he returned.

"Mrs. Foley, this is hot."

"How hot?"

"Magma," Sears said, as he handed the folder across.

"Oh?" She took the pages and leaned back in her comfortable chair to read it over. SORGE, source SONGBIRD. Her eyes cataloged the heading, yesterday's meeting of the Chinese Politburo. Then Sears saw it. Saw her eyes narrow as her hand reached for a butterscotch. Then her eyes shifted to him. "You weren't kidding. Evaluation?"

"Ma'am, I can't evaluate the accuracy of the source, but if this is for real, well, then we're looking in on a process I've never seen before outside history

books, and hearing words that nobody has ever heard in this building—not that I've ever heard about, anyway. I mean, every minister in their government is quoted there, and most of them are saying the same thing—"

"And it's not something we want them to say," Mary Patricia Foley concluded his statement. "Assuming this is all accurately reported, does it feel real?"

Sears nodded. "Yes, ma'am. It sounds to me like real conversation by real people, and the content tracks with the personalities as I know them. Could it be fabricated? Yes, it could. If so, the source has been compromised in some way or other. However, I don't see that this could be faked without their wanting to produce a specific effect, and that would be an effect which would not be overly attractive to them."

"Any recommendations?"

"It might be a good idea to get George Weaver down from Providence," Sears replied. "He's good at reading their minds. He's met a lot of them face-to-face, and he'll be a good backup for my evaluation."

"Which is?" Mary Pat asked, not turning to the last page, where it would be printed up.

"They're considering war."

The Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency stood and walked out her door, with Dr. Joshua Sears right behind her. She took the short walk to her husband's office and went through the door without even looking at Ed's private secretary.

Ed Foley was having a meeting with the Deputy Director (Science and Technology) and two of his senior people when MP walked in. He looked up in surprise, then saw the blue folder in her hand. "Yeah, honey?"

"Excuse me, but this can't wait even one minute." Her tone of voice told as much as her words did.

"Frank, can we get together after lunch?"

"Sure, Ed." DDS&T gathered his documents and his people and headed out.

When they were gone and the door closed, the DCI asked, "SORGE?"

Mary Pat just nodded and handed the folder across, taking a seat on the couch. Sears remained standing. It was only then that he realized his hands were a little moist. That hadn't happened to him before. Sears, as head of the DI's Office of China Assessments, worked mainly on political evaluations: who was who in the PRC's political hierarchy, what economic policies were being pursued—the Society Page for the People's Republic, as he and his people thought of it, and joked about it over lunch in the cafeteria. He'd never seen anything like this, nothing hotter than handling internal dissent, and while their methods for handling such things tended to be a little on the rough side, as he often put it—mainly it meant summary execution, which was more than a little on the rough side for those affected—the distances involved helped him to take a more detached perspective. But not on this.

“Is this for real?” the DC asked.

“Dr. Sears thinks so. He also thinks we need to get Weaver down from Brown University.”

Ed Foley looked over at Sears. “Call him. Right now.”

“Yes, sir.” Sears left the room to make the call.

“Jack has to see this. What’s he doing now?”

“He’s leaving for Warsaw in eight hours, remember? The NATO meeting, the photo opportunity at Auschwitz, stopping off at London on the way home for dinner at Buckingham Palace. Shopping on Bond Street,” Ed added. There were already a dozen Secret Service people in London working with the Metropolitan Police and MI-5, properly known as the Security Service. Twenty more were in Warsaw, where security concerns were not all that much of an issue. The Poles were very happy with America right now, and the leftover police agencies from the communist era still kept files on everyone who might be a problem. Each would have a personal baby-sitter for the entire time Ryan was in the country. The NATO meeting was supposed to be almost entirely ceremonial, a basic feel-good exercise to make a lot of European politicians look pretty for their polyglot constituents.

“Jesus, they’re talking about making a move on Grushavoy!” Ed Foley gasped, getting to page three. “Are they totally off their fuckin’ rockers?”

“Looks like they found themselves in a corner unexpectedly,” his wife observed. “We may have overestimated their political stability.”

Foley nodded and looked up at his wife. “Right now?”

“Right now,” she agreed.

Her husband lifted his phone and punched speed-dial #1.

“Yeah, Ed, what is it?” Jack Ryan asked.

“Mary and I are coming over.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“That important?” the President asked.

“This is CRITIC stuff, Jack. You’ll want Scott, Ben, and Arnie there, too. Maybe George Winston. The foundation of the issue is his area of expertise.”

“China?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, come on over.” Ryan switched phones. “Ellen, I need SecState, SecTreas, Ben, and Arnie in my office, thirty minutes from right now.”

“Yes, Mr. President,” his secretary acknowledged. This sounded hot, but Robby Jackson was on his way out of town again, to give a speech in Seattle, at the Boeing plant of all places, where the workers and the management wanted to know about the 777 order to China. Robby didn’t have much to say

on that point, and so he'd talk about the importance of human rights and America's core beliefs and principles, and all that wave-the-flag stuff. The Boeing people would be polite about it, and it was hard to be impolite to a black man, especially one with Navy Wings of Gold on his lapel, and learning to handle this political bullshit was Robby's main task. Besides, it took pressure off Ryan, and that was Jackson's primary mission in life, and oddly enough, one which he accepted with relative equanimity. So, his VC-20B would be over Ohio right about now, Jack thought. Maybe Indiana. Just then Andrea came in.

"Company coming?" Special Agent Price-O'Day asked. She looked a little pale, Jack thought.

"The usual suspects. You feeling okay?" the President asked.

"Stomach is a little upset. Too much coffee with breakfast."

Morning sickness? Ryan wondered. If so, too bad. Andrea tried so hard to be one of the boys. Admitting this female failing would scar her soul as though from a flamethrower. He couldn't say anything about it. Maybe Cathy could. It was a girl thing.

"Well, the DCI's coming over with something he says is important. Maybe they've changed the toilet paper in the Kremlin, as we used to say at Langley back when I worked there."

"Yes, sir." She smiled. Like most Secret Service agents, she'd seen the people and the secrets come and go, and if there were important things for her to know, she'd find out in due course.

General-Lieutenant Kirillin liked to drink as much as most Russians, and that was quite a lot by American standards. The difference between Russians and Brits, Chavez had learned, was that the Brits drank just as much, but they did it with beer, while the Russians made do with vodka. Ding was neither a Mormon nor a Baptist, but he was over his capacity here. After two nights of keeping up with the local Joneses, he'd nearly died on the morning run with his team, and only avoided falling out for fear of losing face before the Russian Spetsnaz people they were teaching to come up to Rainbow standards. Somehow he'd managed not to puke, though he had allowed Eddie Price to take charge of the first two classes that day while he'd wandered off to drink a gallon of water to chase down three aspirins. Tonight, he'd decided, he'd cut off the vodkas at two ... maybe three.

"How are our men doing?" the general asked.

"Just fine, sir," Chavez answered. "They like their new weapons, and they're picking up on the doctrine. They're smart. They know how to think before they act."

"Does this surprise you?"

"Yes, General, it does. It was the same for me once, back when I was a

squad sergeant in the Ninjas. Young soldiers tend to think with their dicks rather than their brains. I learned better, but I had to learn it the hard way in the field. It's sometimes a lot easier to get yourself into trouble than it is to think yourself out of it. Your Spetsnaz boys started off that way, but if you show them the right way, they listen pretty good. Today's exercise, for example. We set it up with a trap, but your captain stopped short on the way in and thought it through before he committed, and he passed the test. He's a good team leader, by the way. I'd say bump him to major." Chavez hoped he hadn't just put the curse of hell on the kid, realizing that praise from a CIA officer wasn't calculated to be career-enhancing for a Russian officer.

"He's my nephew. His father married my sister. He's an academician, a professor at Moscow State University."

"His English is superb. I'd take him for a native of Chicago." And so Captain Leskov had probably been talent-scouted by KGB or its successor agency. Language skills of that magnitude didn't just happen.

"He was a parachutist before they sent him to Spetsnaz," Kirillin went on, "a good light-infantryman."

"That's what Ding was, once upon a time," Clark told the Russian.

"Seventh Light Infantry. They de-established the division after I left. Seems like a long time now."

"How did you go from the American army into CIA?"

"His fault," Chavez answered. "John spotted me and foolishly thought 1 had potential."

"We had to clean him up and send him to school, but he's worked out pretty well—even married my daughter."

"He's still getting used to having a Latino in the family, but I made him a grandfather. Our wives are back in Wales."

"So, how did you emerge from CIA into Rainbow?"

"My fault, again," Clark admitted. "I did a memo, and it perked to the top, and the President liked it, and he knows me, and so when they set the outfit up, they put me in charge of it. I wanted Domingo here to be part of it, too. He's got young legs, and he shoots okay."

"Your operations in Europe were impressive, especially at the park in Spain."

"Not our favorite. We lost a kid there."

"Yeah," Ding confirmed with a tiny sip of his drink. "I was fifty yards away when that bastard killed Anna. Homer got him later on. Nice shot it was."

"I saw him shoot two days ago. He's superb."

"Homer's pretty good. Went home last fall on vacation and got himself a

Dall sheep at eight hundred-plus yards up in Idaho. Hell of a trophy. He made it into the Boone and Crockett book in the top ten."

"He should go to Siberia and hunt tiger. I could arrange that," Kirillin offered.

"Don't say that too loud." Chavez chuckled. "Homer will take you up on it."

"He should meet Pavel Petrovich Gogol," Kirillin went on.

"Where'd I hear that name?" Clark wondered at once.

"The gold mine," Chavez handled the answer.

"He was a sniper in the Great Patriotic War. He has two gold stars for killing Germans, and he's killed hundreds of wolves. There aren't many like him left."

"Sniper on a battlefield. The hunting must get real exciting."

"Oh, it is, Domingo. It is. We had a guy in Third SOG who was good at it, but he damned near got his ass killed half a dozen times. You know—" John Clark had a satellite beeper, and it started vibrating in his belt. He picked it up and checked the number. "Excuse me," he said and looked for a good place. The Moscow officers' club had a court-yard, and he headed for it.

What does this mean?" Arnie van Damm asked. The executive meeting had started with copies of the latest SORGE/SONGBIRD being passed out. Arnie was the fastest reader of the group, but not the best strategic observer.

"It doesn't mean anything good, pal," Ryan observed, turning to the third page.

"Ed," Winston asked, looking up from page two. "What can you tell me about the source? This looks like the insider-trading document from hell."

"A member of the Chinese Politburo keeps notes on his conversations with the other ministers. We have access to those notes, never mind how."

"So, this document and the source are both genuine?"

"We think so, yes."

"How reliable?" TRADER persisted.

The DCI decided to take a long step out on a thin limb. "About as reliable as one of your T-bills."

"Okay, Ed, you say so." And Winston's head went back down. In ten seconds, he muttered, "Shit ..."

"Oh, yeah, George," POTUS agreed. "'Shit' about covers it."

"Concur, Jack," SecState agreed.

Of those present, only Ben Goodley managed to get all the way through it without a comment. For his part, Goodley, for all the status and importance that came from his job as the President's National Security Adviser, felt

particularly junior and weak at the moment. Mainly he knew that he was far the President's inferior in knowledge of national-security affairs, that he was in his post mainly as a high-level secretary. He was a carded National Intelligence Officer, one of whom, by law and custom, accompanied the President everywhere he went. His job was to convey information to the President. Former occupants of his corner office in the West Wing of the White House had often told their presidents what to think and what to do. But he was just an information-conveyor, and at the moment, he felt weak even in that diminished capacity.

Finally, Jack Ryan looked up with blank eyes and a vacant face. "Okay. Ed, Mary Pat, what do we have here?"

"It looks as if Secretary Winston's predictions on the financial consequences of the Beijing Incident might be coming true."

"They're talking about precipitous consequences," Scott Adler observed coolly. "Where's Tony?"

"Secretary Bretano's down at Fort Hood, Texas, looking at the heavy troopers at Third Corps. He gets back late tonight. If we yank him back in a hurry, people will notice," van Damm told the rest.

"Ed, will you object if we get this to him, secure?"

"No."

"Okay." Ryan nodded and reached across his desk for his phone. "Send Andrea in, please." That took less than five seconds.

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Could you walk this over to Signals, and have them TAPDANCE it to THUNDER?" He handed her the document. "Then please bring it back here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks, Andrea," Ryan told the disappearing form. Then he took a drink of water and turned to his guests. "Okay, it looks pretty serious. How serious is it?"

"We're bringing Professor Weaver down from Brown to evaluate it for us. He's about the best guy in the country for reading their minds."

"Why the hell doesn't he work for me?" Jack asked.

"He likes it at Brown. He comes from Rhode Island. We've offered him a job across the river half a dozen times that I know of," DCI Foley told Ryan, "but he always says the same thing."

"Same at State, Jack. I've known George for fifteen years or more. He doesn't want to work for the government."

"Your kind of man, Jack," Arnie added for a little levity.

"Besides, he can make more money as a contractor, can't he? Ed, when he comes down, make sure he comes in to see me."

"When? You're flying out in a few hours," Ed pointed out.

“Shit.” Ryan remembered it now. Callie Weston was just finishing up the last of his official speeches in her office across the street. She was even coming across on Air Force One with the official party. Why was it that you couldn’t deal with things one at a time? Because at this level, they just didn’t arrive that way.

“All right,” Jack said next. “We need to evaluate how serious this is, and then figure a way to forestall it. That means—what?”

“One of several things. We can approach them quietly,” SecState Adler said. “You know, tell them that this has gone too far, and we want to work with them on the sly to ameliorate the situation.”

“Except Ambassador Hitch is over here now, consulting, remember? Where’s he doing it today, Congressional or Burning Tree?” POTUS asked. Hitch enjoyed golf, a hobby he could hardly pursue in Beijing. Ryan could sympathize. He was lucky to get in one round a week, and what swing he’d once had was gone with the wind.

“The DCM in Beijing is too junior for something like this. No matter what we said through him, they wouldn’t take it seriously enough.”

“And what, exactly, could we give them?” Winston asked. “There’s nothing big enough to make them happy that we could keep quiet. They’d have to give us something so that we could justify giving them anything, and from what I see here, they don’t want to give us anything but a bellyache. We’re limited in our action by what the country will tolerate.”

“You think they’d tolerate a shooting war?” Adler snapped.

“Be cool, Scott. There are practical considerations. Anything juicy enough to make these Chinese bastards happy has to be approved by Congress, right? To get such a concession through Congress would mean giving them the justification for it.” Winston waved the secret document in his hand. “But we can’t do that because Ed here would have a fit, and even if we did, somebody on the Hill would leak it to the papers in a New York minute, and half of them would call it danegeld, and say fuck the Chinks, millions for defense but not one penny for tribute. Am I right?”

“Yes,” Arnie answered. “The other half would call it responsible statesmanship, but the average Joe out there wouldn’t much like it. The average citizen would expect you to call Premier Xu on the phone and say, ‘Better not do this, buddy,’ and expect it to stick.”

“Which would, by the way, kill SONGBIRD,” Mary Pat added as a warning, lest they take that option seriously. “That would end a human life, and deny us further information that we need to have. And from my reading of this report, Xu would deny everything and just keep going forward. They really think they’re in a corner, but they can’t see a way to smart themselves out of it.”

“The danger is ... ?” TRADER asked.

“Internal political collapse,” Ryan explained. “They’re afraid that if anything upsets the political or economic conditions inside the country, the whole house of cards comes tumbling down. With serious consequences for the current royal family of the PRC.”

“Called the chop.” Ben Goodley had to say something, and that was an easy one. “Actually a rifle bullet today.” It didn’t help him feel much better. He was out of his depth and he knew it.

That’s when the President’s STU rang. It was SecDef Tony Bretano, THUNDER. “Yeah,” Ryan said. “Putting you on speaker, Tony. Scott, George, Arnie, Ed, Mary Pat, and Ben are here, and we just read what you got.”

“I presume this is real?”

“Real as hell,” Ed Foley told the newest member of the SORGE/ SONGBIRD chorus.

“This is worrisome.”

“On that we are agreed, Tony. Where are you now?”

“Standing on top of a Bradley in the parking lot. Never seen so many tanks and guns in my life. Feels like real power here.”

“Yeah, well, what you just read shows you the limits of our power.”

“So I gather. If you want to know what I think we should do about it—well, make it clear to them somehow that this would be a really bad play for them.”

“How do we do that, Tony?” Adler asked.

“Some animals—the puffer fish, for example. When threatened, it swallows a gallon of water and expands its size—makes it look too big to eat.”

Ryan was surprised to hear that. He’d no idea that Bretano knew anything about animals. He was a physics and science guy. Well, maybe he watched the Discovery Channel like everyone else.

“Scare them, you mean?”

“Impress them, better way of putting it.”

“Jack, we’re going to Warsaw—we can let Grushavoy know about this ... how about we invite him into NATO? The Poles are there already. It would commit all of Europe to come to Russia’s defense in the event of an invasion. I mean, that’s what alliances and mutual-defense treaties are all about. ‘You’re not just messing with me, Charlie. You’re messing with all my friends, too.’ It’s worked for a long time.”

Ryan considered that one, and looked around the room. “Thoughts?”

“It’s something,” Winston thought.

“But what about the other NATO countries? Will they buy into this? The whole purpose of NATO,” Goodley reminded them, “was to protect them from the Russians.”

“The Soviets,” Adler corrected. “Not the same thing anymore, remember?”

“The same people, the same language, sir,” Goodley persisted. He felt pretty secure on this one. “What you propose is an elegant possible solution to the present problem, but to make it happen we’d have to share SORGE with other countries, wouldn’t we?” The suggestion made the Foleys both wince. There were few things on the planet as talkative as a chief of government.

“What the hell, we’ve been watching their military with overheads for a long time. We can say that we’re catching stuff there that makes us nervous. Good enough for the unwashed,” the DCI offered.

“Next, how do we persuade the Russians?” Jack wondered aloud. “This could be seen in Moscow as a huge loss of face.”

“We have to explain the problem to them. The danger is to their country, after all,” Adler pronounced.

“But they’re not unwashed. They’ll want to know chapter and verse, and it is *their* national security we’re talking about here,” Goodley added.

“You know who’s in Moscow now?” Foley asked POTUS.

“John?”

“RAINBOW SIX. John and Ding both know Golovko, and he’s Grushavoy’s number one boy. It’s a nice, convenient back channel. Note that this also confirms that the Moscow rocket was aimed at him. Might not make Sergey Nikolay’ch feel better, but he’d rather know than guess.”

“Why can’t those stupid fucking people just say they’re sorry they shot those two people?” Ryan wondered crossly.

“Why do you think pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins?” the DCI asked in reply.

Clark’s portable phone was a satellite type with a built-in encryption system, really just a quarter-inch-thick plastic pad that actually made the phone easier to cradle against his shoulder. Like most such phones, it took time to synchronize with its companion on the other end, the task made harder by the delay inherent in the use of satellites.

“Line is secure,” the synthetic female voice said finally.

“Who’s this?”

“Ed Foley, John. How’s Moscow?”

“Pleasant. What gives, Ed?” John asked. The DCI didn’t call from D.C. on a secure line to exchange pleasantries.

“Get over to the embassy. We have a message we want you to deliver.”

“What sort?”

“Get to the embassy. It’ll be waiting. Okay?”

“Roger. Out.” John killed the phone and walked back inside.

“Anything important?” Chavez asked.

“We have to go to the embassy to see somebody,” Clark replied, simulating anger at the interruption of his quiet time of the day.

“See you tomorrow then, Ivan and Domingo,” Kirillin saluted them with his glass.

“What gives?” Chavez asked from thirty feet away.

“Not sure, but it was Ed Foley who paged me.”

“Something important?”

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Who drives?”

“Me.” John knew Moscow fairly well, having learned it first on missions in the 1970s that he was just as happy to forget about, when his daughters had been the age of his new grandson.

The drive took twenty minutes, and the hard part turned out to be persuading the Marine guard that they really were entitled to come inside after normal business hours. To this end, the man waiting for them, Tom Barlow, proved useful. The Marines knew him, and he knew them, and that made everything okay, sort of.

“What’s the big deal?” Jack asked, when they got to Barlow’s office.

“This.” He handed the fax across, a copy to each. “Might want to take a seat, guys.”

“Madre de Dios,” Chavez gasped thirty seconds later.

“Roger that, Domingo,” his boss agreed. They were reading a hastily laundered copy of the latest SORGE dispatch.

“We got us a source in Beijing, ’mano.”

“Hang a big roger on that one, Domingo. And we’re supposed to share the take with Sergey Nikolay’ch. Somebody back home is feeling real ecumenical.”

“Fuck!” Chavez observed. Then he read on a little. “Oh, yeah, I see. This does make some sense.”

“Barlow, we have a phone number for our friend?”

“Right here.” The CIA officer handed over a Post-it note and pointed to a phone. “He’ll be out at his dacha, out in the Lenin Hills. They haven’t changed the name yet. Since he found out he was the target, he’s gotten a little more security-conscious.”

“Yeah, we’ve met his baby-sitter, Shelepin,” Chavez told Barlow. “Looks pretty serious.”

“He’d better be. If I read this right, he might be called up to bat again, or maybe Grushavoy’s detail.”

“Is this for real?” Chavez had to wonder. “I mean, this is *casus belli* stuff.”

“Well, Ding, you keep saying that international relations is two countries fucking each other.” Then he dialed the phone. “Tovarisch Golovko,” he told the voice that answered it, adding in Russian, “It’s Klerk, Ivan Sergeyevich. That’ll get his attention,” John told the other two.

“Greetings, Vanya,” a familiar voice said in English. “I will not ask how you got this number. What can I do for you?”

“Sergey, we need to see you at once on an important matter.”

“What sort of matter?”

“I am the mailman, Sergey. I have a message to deliver to you. It is worthy of your attention. Can Domingo and I see you this evening?”

“Do you know how to get here?”

Clark figured he’d find his way out to the woods. “Just tell the people at the gate to expect two capitalist friends of Russia. Say about an hour from now?”

“I will be waiting.”

“Thank you, Sergey.” Clark replaced the phone. “Where’s the piss-parlor, Barlow?”

“Down the hall on the right.”

The senior field intelligence officer folded the fax and tucked it into his coat pocket. Before having a talk about something like this, he needed a bathroom.

CHAPTER 42

Birch Trees

They drove into the sunset, west from the Russian capital. Traffic had picked up in Moscow since his last real adventure here, and you could use the center lane in the wide avenues. Ding handled navigation with a map, and soon they were beyond the ring roads around the Russian capital and entering the hills that surrounded the city. They passed a memorial which neither had ever seen before, three huge—

"What the hell is that?" Ding asked.

"This is as close as the Germans got in 1941," John explained. "This is where they stopped 'em."

"What do you call those things?" "Those things" were immense steel I-beams, three of them welded at ninety-degree angles to look like enormous jacks.

"Hedgehogs, but in the SEALs we called 'em horned scullies. Hard to drive a tank over one," Clark told his younger partner.

"They take their history serious here, don't they?"

"You would, too, if you stopped somebody who wanted to erase your country right off the map, sonny. The Germans were pretty serious back then, too. It was a very nasty war, that one."

"Guess so. Take the next right, Mr. C."

Ten minutes later, they were in a forest of birch trees, as much a part of the Russian soul as vodka and borscht. Soon thereafter they came to a guard shack. The uniformed guard held an AK-47 and looked surprisingly grim. *Probably briefed on the threat to Golovko and others,* John imagined. But he'd also been briefed on who was authorized to pass, and they only had to show their passports to get cleared, the guard also giving them directions about which country lane to take.

"The houses don't look too bad," Chavez observed.

"Built by German POWs," John told him. "Ivan doesn't exactly like the Germans very much, but he does respect their workmanship. These were built for the Politburo members, mainly after the war, probably. There's our place."

It was a wood-frame house, painted brown and looking like a cross between a German country house and something from an Indiana farm, Clark thought. There were guards here, too, armed and walking around. *They'd been called*

from the first shack, John figured. One of them waved. The other two stood back, ready to cover the first one if something untoward happened.

"You are Klerk, Ivan Sergeyevich?"

"Da," John answered. "This is Chavez, Domingo Stepanovich."

"Pass, you are expected," the guard told them.

It was a pleasant evening. The sun was down now, and the stars were making their appearance in the sky. There was also a gentle westerly breeze, but Clark thought he could hear the ghosts of war here. Hans von Kluge's panzer grenadiers, men wearing the *feldgrau* of the Wehrmacht. World War II on this front had been a strange conflict, like modern TV wrestling. No choice between good and bad, but only between bad and worse, and on that score it had been six-five and pick 'em. But their host probably wouldn't see history that way, and Clark had no intention of bringing up the subject.

Golovko was there, standing on the sheltered porch by the furniture, dressed casually. Decent shirt, but no tie. He wasn't a tall man, about halfway between Chavez and himself in height, but the eyes always showed intelligence, and now they also showed interest. He was curious about the purpose of this meeting, as well he might be.

"Ivan Sergeyevich," Golovko said in greeting. Handshakes were exchanged, and the guests conducted inside. Mrs. Golovko, a physician, was nowhere in evidence. Golovko first of all served vodka, and directed them to seats.

"You said you had a message for me." The language for this meeting was to be English, John saw.

"Here it is." Clark handed the pages across.

"Spasiba." Sergey Nikolay'ch sat back in his chair and started to read.

He would have been a fine poker player, John thought. His face changed not at all through the first two pages. Then he looked up.

"Who decided that I needed to see this?" he asked.

"The President," Clark answered.

"Your Ryan is a good comrade, Vanya, and an honorable man." Golovko paused. "I see you have improved your human-intelligence capabilities at Langley."

"That's probably a good supposition, but I know nothing of the source here, Chairman Golovko," Clark answered.

"This is, as you say, hot."

"It is all of that," John agreed, watching him turn another page.

"Son of a bitch!" Golovko observed, finally showing some emotion.

"Yeah, that's about what I said," Chavez entered the conversation.

"They are well-informed. This does not surprise me. I am sure they have ample espionage assets in Russia," Golovko observed, with anger creeping into

his voice. “But this is—this is naked aggression they discuss.”

Clark nodded. “Yep, that’s what it appears to be.”

“This is genuine information?” Golovko asked.

“I’m just the mailman, Chairman,” Clark replied. “I vouch for nothing here.”

“Ryan is too good a comrade to play agent provocateur. This is madness.” And Golovko was telling his guests that he had no good intelligence assets in the Chinese Politburo, which actually surprised John. It wasn’t often that CIA caught the Russians short at anything. Golovko looked up. “We once had a source for such information, but no longer.”

“I’ve never worked in that part of the world, Chairman, except long ago when I was in the Navy.” And the Chinese part of that, he didn’t explain, was mainly getting drunk and laid in Taipei.

“I’ve traveled to Beijing several times in a diplomatic capacity, not recently. I cannot say that I’ve ever really understood those people.” Golovko finished reading the document and set it down. “I can keep this?”

“Yes, sir,” Clark replied.

“Why does Ryan give us this?”

“I’m just the delivery boy, Sergey Nikolay’ch, but I should think the motive is in the message. America does not wish to see Russia hurt.”

“Decent of you. What concessions will you require?”

“None that I am aware of.”

“You know,” Chavez observed, “sometimes you just want to be a good neighbor.”

“At this level of statecraft?” Golovko asked skeptically.

“Why not? It does not serve American interests to see Russia crippled and robbed. How big are these mineral finds, anyway?” John asked.

“Immense,” Golovko replied. “I’m not surprised you’ve learned of them. Our efforts at secrecy were not serious. The oil field is one to rival the Saudi reserves, and the gold mine is very rich indeed. Potentially, these finds could save our economy, could make us a truly wealthy nation and a fit partner for America.”

“Then you know why Jack sent this over. It’s a better world for both of us if Russia prospers.”

“Truly?” Golovko was a bright man, but he’d grown up in a world in which both America and Russia had often wished each other dead. Such thoughts died hard, even in so agile a mind as his.

“Truly,” John confirmed. “Russia is a great nation, and you are great people. You *are* fit partners for us.” He didn’t add that, this way, America wouldn’t have to worry about bailing them out. Now they’d have the wherewithal to see to their own enrichment, and America needed only offer expertise and advice about how to enter the capitalist world with both feet, and open eyes.

“This from the man who helped arrange the defection of the KGB chairman?” Golovko asked.

“Sergey, as we say at home, that was business, not personal. I don’t have a hard-on for Russians, and you wouldn’t kill an American just for entertainment purposes, would you?”

Indignation: “Of course not. That would be *nekulturniy.”*

“It is the same with us, Chairman.”

“Hey, man,” Chavez added. “From when I was a teenager, I was trained to kill your people, back when I was an Eleven-Bravo carrying a rifle, but, guess what, we’re not enemies anymore, are we? And if we’re not enemies, then we can be friends. You helped us out with Japan and Iran, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but we saw that we were the ultimate target of both conflicts, and it was in our national interest.”

“And perhaps the Chinese have us as *their* ultimate target. Then this is in our interest. They probably don’t like us any more than they like you.”

Golovko nodded. “Yes, one thing I do know about them is their sense of racial superiority.”

“Dangerous way for people to think, man. Racism means your enemies are just insects to be swatted,” Chavez concluded, impressing Clark with the mixture of East LA accent and master‘s-degree analysis of the situation at hand. “Even Karl Marx didn’t say that he was better than anybody else ’cuz of his skin color, did he?”

“But Mao did,” Golovko added.

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Ding went on. “I read his *Little Red Book* in graduate school. He didn’t want to be just a political leader. Hell, he wanted to be God. Let his ego get in the way of his brain—not an uncommon affliction for people who take countries over, is it?”

“Lenin was not such a man, but Stalin was,” Golovko observed. “So, then Ivan Emmetovich is a friend of Russia. What shall I do with this?”

“That’s up to you, pal,” Clark told him.

“I must speak to my president. Yours comes to Poland tomorrow, doesn’t he?”

“I think so.”

“I must make some phone calls. Thank you for coming, my friends. Perhaps another time I will be able to entertain you properly.”

“Fair enough.” Clark stood and tossed off the end of his drink. More handshakes, and they left the way they’d come.

“Christ, John, what happens now?” Ding asked, as they drove back out.

“I suppose everybody tries to beat some sense into the Chinese.”

“Will it work?”

A shrug and arched eyebrows: “News at eleven, Domingo.”

Packing for a trip isn’t easy, even with a staff to do it all for you. This was particularly true for SURGEON, who was not only concerned about what she wore in public while abroad, but was also the Supreme Authority on her husband’s clothes, a status which her husband tolerated rather than entirely approved. Jack Ryan was still in the Oval Office trying to do business that couldn’t wait—actually it mostly could, but there were fictions in government that had to be honored—and also waiting for the phone to ring.

“Arnie?”

“Yeah, Jack?”

“Tell the Air Force to have another G go over to Warsaw in case Scott has to fly to Moscow on the sly.”

“Not a bad idea. They’ll probably park it at some air force base or something.” Van Damm went off to make the phone call.

“Anything else, Ellen?” Ryan asked his secretary.

“Need one?”

“Yeah, before Cathy and I wing off into the sunset.” Actually, they were heading east, but Mrs. Sumter understood. She handed Ryan his last cigarette of the day.

“Damn,” Ryan breathed with his first puff. He’d be getting a call from Moscow sure as hell—wouldn’t he? That depended on how quickly they digested the information, or maybe Sergey would wait for the morning to show it to President Grushavoy. Would he? In Washington, something that hot would be graded CRITIC and shoved under the President’s nose inside twenty minutes, but different countries had different rules, and he didn’t know what the Russians did. For damned sure he’d be hearing from one of them before he stepped off the plane at Warsaw. But for now ... He stubbed the smoke out, reached inside his desk for the breath spray, and zapped his mouth with the acidic stuff before leaving the office and heading outside—the West Wing and the White House proper are not connected by an indoor corridor, due to some architectural oversight. In any case, inside six minutes he was on the residential level, watching the ushers organize his bags. Cathy was there, trying to supervise, under the eyes of the Secret Service as well, who acted as though they worried about having a bomb slipped in. But paranoia was their job. Ryan walked over to his wife. “You need to talk to Andrea.”

“What for?”

“Stomach trouble, she says.”

“Uh-oh.” Cathy had suffered from queasiness with Sally, but that was ages ago, and it hadn’t been severe. “Not really much you can do about it, you know.”

“So much for medical progress,” Jack commented. “She probably could use some girl-girl support anyway.”

Cathy smiled. “Oh, sure, womanly solidarity. So, you’re going to bond with Pat?”

Jack grinned back at her. “Yeah, maybe he’ll teach me to shoot a pistol better.”

“Super,” SURGEON observed dryly.

“Which dress for the big dinner?” POTUS asked FLOTUS.

“The light-blue one.”

“Slinky,” Jack said, touching her arm.

The kids showed up then, shepherded up to the bedroom level by their various detail leaders, except for Kyle, who was carried by one of his lionesses. Leaving the kids was never particularly easy, though all concerned were somewhat accustomed to it. The usual kisses and hugs took place, and then Jack took his wife’s hand and led her to the elevator.

It let them off at the ground level, with a straight walk out to the helicopter pad. The VH-3 was there, with Colonel Malloy at the controls. The Marines saluted, as they always did. The President and First Lady climbed inside and buckled into the comfortable seats, under the watchful eyes of a Marine sergeant, who then went forward to report to the pilot in the right-front seat.

Cathy enjoyed helicopter flight more than her husband did, since she flew in one twice a day. Jack was no longer afraid of it, but he did prefer driving a car, which he hadn’t been allowed to do in months. The Sikorsky lifted up gently, pivoted in the air, and headed off to Andrews. The flight took about ten minutes. The helicopter alighted close to the VC-25A, the Air Force’s version of the Boeing 747; it was just a few seconds to the stairs, with the usual TV cameras to mark the event.

“Turn and wave, honey,” Jack told Cathy at the top of the steps. “We might make the evening news.”

“Again?” Cathy grumped. Then she waved and smiled, not at people, but at cameras. With this task completed, they went inside the aircraft and forward to the presidential compartment. There they buckled in, and were observed to do so by an Air Force NCO, who then told the pilot it was okay to spool up the engines and taxi to the end of Runway Zero-one-right. Everything after that was ordinary, including the speech from the pilot, followed by the usual, stately takeoff roll of the big Boeing, and the climb out to thirty-eight thousand feet. Aft, Ryan was sure, everyone was comfortable, because the worst seat on this aircraft was as good as the best first-class seat on any airline in the world. On the whole this seemed a serious waste of the taxpayers’ money, but to the best of his knowledge no taxpayer had ever complained very loudly.

The expected happened off the coast of Maine.

“Mr. President?” a female voice asked.

“Yeah, Sarge?”

“Call for you, sir, on the STU. Where do you want to take it?”

Ryan stood. “Topside.”

The sergeant nodded and waved. “This way, sir.”

“Who is it?”

“The DCI.”

Ryan figured that made sense. “Let’s get Secretary Adler in on this, too.”

“Yes, sir,” she said as he started up the spiral stairs.

Upstairs, Ryan settled into a working-type seat vacated for him by an Air Force NCO who handed him the proper phone. “Ed?”

“Yeah, Jack. Sergey called.”

“Saying what?”

“He thinks it’s a good idea you coming to Poland. He requests a high-level meeting, on the sly if possible.”

Adler took the chair next to Ryan and caught the comment.

“Scott, feel like a hop to Moscow?”

“Can we do it quietly?” SecState asked.

“Probably.”

“Then, yes. Ed, did you field the NATO suggestion?”

“Not my turf to try that, Scott,” the Director of Central Intelligence replied.

“Fair enough. Think they’ll spring for it?”

“Three-to-one, yes.”

“I’ll agree with that,” Ryan concurred. “Golovko will like it, too.”

“Yeah, he will, once he gets over the shock,” Adler observed, with irony in his voice.

“Okay, Ed, tell Sergey that we are amenable to a covert meeting. SecState flying into Moscow for consultations. Let us know what develops.”

“Will do.”

“Okay, out.” Ryan set the handset down and turned to Adler. “Well?”

“Well, if they spring for it, China will have something to think about.” This statement was delivered with a dollop of hope.

The problem, Ryan thought once again as he stood, *is that Klingons don’t think quite the same way we do.*

The bugs had them all smirking. Suvorov/Koniev had picked up another

expensive hooker that night, and her acting abilities had played out in the proper noises at the proper moments. *Or maybe he was really that good in bed,* Provalov wondered aloud, to the general skepticism of the others in the surveillance van. *No,* the others thought, *this girl was too much of a professional to allow herself to get into it that much.* They all thought that was rather sad, lovely as she was to look at. But they knew something their subject didn't know. This girl had been a "dangle," pre-briefed to meet Suvorov/Koniev.

Finally the noise subsided, and they heard the distinctive snap of an American Zippo lighter, and the usual post-sex silence of a sated man and a (simulatedly) satisfied woman.

"So, what sort of work do you do, Vanya?" the female voice asked, showing the expected professional interest of an expensive hooker in a wealthy man she might wish to entertain again.

"Business" was the answer.

"What sort?" Again, just the right amount of interest. The good news, Provalov thought, was that she didn't need coaching. The Sparrow School must have been fairly easy to operate, he realized. Women did this sort of thing from instinct.

"I take care of special needs for special people," the enemy spy answered. His revelation was followed by a feminine laugh.

"I do that, too, Vanya."

"There are foreigners who need special services which I was trained to handle under the old regime."

"You were KGB? Really?" Excitement in her voice. This girl was good.

"Yes, one of many. Nothing special about it."

"To you, perhaps, but not to me. Was there really a school for women like me? Did KGB train women to ... to take care of the needs of men?"

A man's laugh this time: "Oh, yes, my dear. There was such a school. You would have done well there."

Now the laugh was coquettish. "As well as I do now?"

"No, not at what you charge."

"But am I worth it?" she asked.

"Easily" was the satisfied answer.

"Would you like to see me again, Vanya?" Real hope, or beautifully simulated hope, in the question.

"Da, I would like that very much, Maria."

"So, you take care of people with special needs. What needs are those?" She could get away with this because men so enjoyed to be found fascinating by beautiful women. It was part of their act of worship at this particular altar, and men *always* went for it.

“Not unlike what I was trained to do, Maria, but the details need not concern you.”

Disappointment: “Men always say that,” she grumped. “Why do the most interesting men have to be so mysterious?”

“In that is our fascination, woman,” he explained. “Would you prefer that I drove a truck?”

“Truck drivers don’t have your ... your manly abilities,” she replied, as if she’d learned the difference.

“A man could get hard just listening to this bitch,” one of the FSS officers observed.

“That’s the idea,” Provalov agreed. “Why do you think she can charge so much?”

“A real man need not pay for it.”

“Was I that good?” Suvorov/Koniev asked in their headphones.

“Any better and I would have to pay you, Vanya,” she replied, with joy in her voice. Probably a kiss went along with the proclamation.

“No more questions, Maria. Let it lie for now,” Oleg Gregoriyevich urged to the air. She must have heard him.

“You know how to make a man feel like a man,” the spy/assassin told her. “Where did you learn this skill?”

“It just comes naturally to a woman,” she cooed.

“To some women, perhaps.” Then the talking stopped, and in ten minutes, the snoring began.

“Well, that’s more interesting than our normal cases,” the FSS officer told the others.

“You have people checking out the bench?”

“Hourly.” There was no telling how many people delivered messages to the dead-drop, and they probably weren’t all Chinese nationals. No, there’d be a rat-line in this chain, probably not a long one, but enough to offer some insulation to Suvorov’s handler. That would be good fieldcraft, and they had to expect it. So, the bench and its dead-drop would be checked out regularly, and in *that* surveillance van would be a key custom-made to fit the lock on the drop-box, and a photocopier to make a duplicate of the message inside. The FSS had also stepped up surveillance of the Chinese Embassy. Nearly every employee who came outside had a shadow now. To do this properly meant curtailing other counterespionage operations in Moscow, but this case had assumed priority over everything else. It would soon become even more important, but they didn’t know that yet.

How many engineers do we have available?” Bondarenko asked Aliyev in the

east Siberian dawn.

"Two regiments not involved with the road-building," the operations officer answered.

"Good. Get them all down here immediately to work on the camouflage on these bunkers, and to set up false ones on the other side of these hills. Immediately, Andrey."

"Yes, General, I'll get them right on it."

"I love the dawn, the most peaceful time of day."

"Except when the other fellow uses it for his attack." Dawn was the universal time for a major offensive, so that one had all the light of the day to pursue it.

"If they come, it will be right up this valley."

"Yes, it will."

"They will shoot up the first line of defenses—what they think they are, that is," Bondarenko predicted, pointing. The first line was composed of seemingly real bunkers, made of rebarred concrete, but the gun tubes sticking out of them were fake. Whatever engineer had laid out these fortifications had been born with an eye for terrain worthy of Alexander of Macedon. They *appeared* to be beautifully sited, but a little too much so. Their positioning was a little too predictable, and they were visible, if barely so, to the other side, and something *barely* visible would be the first target hit. There were even pyrotechnic charges in the false bunkers, so that after a few direct hits they'd explode, and really make the enemy feel fine for having hit them. Whoever had come up with *that* idea had been a genius of a military engineer.

But the real defenses on the front of the hills were tiny observation posts whose buried phone lines led back to the real bunkers, and beyond them to artillery positions ten or more kilometers back. Some of these were old, also pre-sited, but the rockets they launched were just as deadly today as they'd been in the 1940s, design progeny of the Katushka artillery rockets the Germans had learned to hate. Then came the direct-fire weapons. The first rank of these were the turrets of old German tanks. The sights and the ammunition still worked, and the crewmen knew how to use them, and they had escape tunnels leading to vehicles that would probably allow them to survive a determined attack. The engineers who had laid this line out were probably all dead now, and General Bondarenko hoped they'd been buried honorably, as soldiers deserved. This line wouldn't stop a determined attack—no fixed line of defenses could accomplish that—but it would be enough to make an enemy wish he'd gone somewhere else.

But the camouflage needed work, and that work would be done at night. A high-flying aircraft tracing over the border with a side-looking camera could see far into his country and take thousands of useful, pretty pictures, and the Chinese probably had a goodly collection of such pictures, plus whatever they could get from their own satellites, or from the commercial birds that anyone could employ now for money—

"Andrey, tell intelligence to see if we can determine if the Chinese have accessed commercial photo satellites."

"Why bother? Don't they have their own—"

"We don't know how good their reconsats are, but we do know that the new French ones are as good as anything the Americans had up until 1975 or so, and that's good enough for most purposes."

"Yes, General." Aliyev paused. "You think something is going to happen here?"

Bondarenko paused, frowning as he stared south over the river. He could see into China from this hilltop. The ground looked no different, but for political reasons it was alien land, and though the inhabitants of that land were no different ethnically from the people native to *his* land, the political differences were enough to make the sight of them a thing of concern, even fear, for him. He shook his head.

"Andrey Petrovich, you've heard the same intelligence briefings I've heard. What concerns me is that their army has been far more active than ours. They have the ability to attack us, and we do not have the ability to defeat them. We have less than three full-strength divisions, and the level of their training is inadequate. We have much to do before I will begin to feel comfortable. Firming up this line is the easiest thing to do, and the easiest part of firming it up is hiding the bunkers. Next, we'll start rotating the soldiers back to the training range and have them work on their gunnery. That will be easy for them to do, but it hasn't been done in ten months! So much to do, Andrushka, so much to do."

"That is so, Comrade General, but we've made a good beginning."

Bondarenko waved his hand and growled, "Ahh, a good beginning will be a year from now. We've taken the first morning piss in what will be a long day, Colonel. Now, let's fly east and see the next sector."

General Peng Xi-Wang, commander of the Red Banner 34th Shock Army, only sixteen kilometers away, looked through powerful spotting glasses at the Russian frontier. Thirty-fourth Shock was a Type A Group Army, and comprised about eighty thousand men. He had an armored division, two mechanized ones, a motorized infantry division, and other attachments, such as an independent artillery brigade under his direct command. Fifty years of age, and a party member since his twenties, Peng was a long-term professional soldier who'd enjoyed the last ten years of his life. Since commanding his tank regiment as a senior colonel, he'd been able to train his troops incessantly on what had become his home country.

The Shenyang Military District comprised the northeasternmost part of the People's Republic. It was composed of hilly, wooded land, and had warm summers and bitter winters. There was a touch of early ice on the Amur River below Peng now, but from a military point of view, the trees were the real

obstacle. Tanks could knock individual trees down, but not every ten meters. No, you had to drive between and around them, and while there was room for that, it was hard on the drivers, and it ate up fuel almost as efficiently as tipping the fuel drum over on its side and just pouring it out. There were some roads and railroad rights-of-way, and if he ever went north, he'd be using them, though that made for good ambush opportunities, if the Russians had a good collection of antitank weapons. But the Russian doctrine, going back half a century, was that the best antitank weapon was a better tank. In their war with the fascists, the Soviet army had enjoyed possession of a superb tank in the T-34. They'd built a lot of the Rapier antitank guns, and duly copied NATO guided antitank weapons, but you dealt with those by blanketing an area with artillery fire, and Peng had lots of guns and mountains of shells to deal with the unprotected infantrymen who had to steer the missiles into their targets. He wished he had the Russian-designed Arena anti-missile system, which had been designed to protect their tanks from the swarm of NATO's deadly insects, but he didn't, and he heard it didn't work all that well anyway.

The spotting glasses were Chinese copies of a German Zeiss model adopted for use by the Soviet Army of old. They zoomed from twenty- to fifty-power, allowing him an intimate view of the other side of the river. Peng came up here once a month or so, which allowed him to inspect his own border troops, who stood what was really a defensive watch, and a light one at that. He had little concern about a Russian attack into his country. The People's Liberation Army taught the same doctrine as every army back to the Assyrians of old: The best defense is a good offense. If a war began here, better to begin it yourself. And so Peng had cabinets full of plans to attack into Siberia, prepared by his operations and intelligence people, because that was what operations people did.

"Their defenses look ill-maintained," Peng observed.

"That is so, Comrade," the colonel commanding the border-defense regiment agreed. "We see little regular activity there."

"They are too busy selling their weapons to civilians for vodka," the army political officer observed. "Their morale is poor, and they do not train anything like we do."

"They have a new theater commander," the army's intelligence chief countered. "A General-Colonel Bondarenko. He is well regarded in Moscow as an intellect and as a courageous battlefield commander from Afghanistan."

"That means he survived contact once," Political observed. "Probably with a Kabul whore."

"It is dangerous to underestimate an adversary," Intelligence warned.

"And foolish to overestimate one."

Peng just looked through the glasses. He'd heard his intelligence and political officer spar before. Intelligence tended to be an old woman, but many intelligence officers were like that, and Political, like so many of his colleagues, was sufficiently aggressive to make Genghis Khan seem womanly.

As in the theater, officers played the roles assigned to them. His role, of course, was to be the wise and confident commander of one of his country's premier striking arms, and Peng played that role well enough that he was in the running for promotion to General First Class, and if he played his cards very carefully, in another eight years or so, maybe Marshal. With that rank came real political power and personal riches beyond counting, with whole factories working for his own enrichment. Some of those factories were managed by mere colonels, people with the best of political credentials who knew how to kowtow to their seniors, but Peng had never gone that route. He enjoyed soldiering far more than he enjoyed pushing paper and screaming at worker-peasants. As a new second lieutenant, he'd fought the Russians, not very far from this very spot. It had been a mixed experience. His regiment had enjoyed initial success, then had been hammered by a storm of artillery. That had been back when the Red Army, the real Soviet Army of old, had fielded whole artillery *divisions* whose concentrated fire could shake the very earth and sky, and that border clash had incurred the wrath of the nation the Russians had once been. But no longer. Intelligence told him that the Russian troops on the far side of this cold river were not even a proper shadow of what had once been there. Four divisions, perhaps, and not all of them at full strength. So, however clever this Bondarenko fellow was, if a clash came, he'd have his hands very full indeed.

But that was a political question, wasn't it? Of course. All the really important things were.

"How are the bridging engineers?" Peng asked, surveying the watery obstacle below.

"Their last exercise went very well, Comrade General," Operations replied. Like every other army in the world, the PLA had copied the Russian "ribbon" bridge, designed by Soviet engineers in the 1960s to force crossings of all the streams of Western Germany in a NATO/Warsaw Pact war so long expected, but never realized. Except in fiction, mainly Western fiction that had had the NATO side win in every case. Of course. Would capitalists spend money on books that ended their culture? Peng chuckled to himself. Such people enjoyed their illusions ...

... almost as much as his own country's Politburo members. That's the way it was all over the world, Peng figured. The rulers of every land held images in their heads, and tried to make the world conform to them. Some succeeded, and those were the ones who wrote the history books.

"So, what do we expect here?"

"From the Russians?" Intelligence asked. "Nothing that I have heard about. Their army is training a little more, but nothing to be concerned about. If they wanted to come south across that river, I hope they can swim in the cold."

"The Russians like their comforts too much for that. They've grown soft with their new political regime," Political proclaimed.

"And if we are ordered north?" Peng asked.

“If we give them one hard kick, the whole rotten mess will fall down,” Political answered. He didn’t know that he was exactly quoting another enemy of the Russians.

CHAPTER 43

Decisions

The colonel flying Air Force One executed an even better landing than usual. Jack and Cathy Ryan were already awake and showered to alertness, helped by a light breakfast heavy on fine coffee. The President looked out the window to his left and saw troops formed up in precise lines, as the aircraft taxied to its assigned place.

"Welcome to Poland, babe. What do you have planned?"

"I'm going to spend a few hours at their big teaching hospital. Their chief eye-cutter wants me to look at his operation." It was always the same for FLOTUS, and she didn't mind. It came from being an academic physician, treating patients, but also teaching young docs, and observing how her counterparts around the world did their version of her job. Every so often, you saw something new that was worth learning from, or even copying, because smart people happened everywhere, not just at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. It was the one part of the First Lady folderol that she actually enjoyed, because she could learn from it, instead of just being a somewhat flat-chested Barbie doll for the world to gawk at. To this end she was dressed in a beige business suit, whose jacket she would soon exchange for a doc's proper white lab coat, which was always her favorite item of apparel. Jack was wearing one of his dark-blue white-pinstriped President-of-the-United-States suits, with a maroon striped tie because Cathy liked the color combination, and she really did decide what Jack wore, except for the shirt. SWORDSMAN wore only white cotton shirts with button-down collars, and despite Cathy's lobbying for something different, on that issue he stood firm. This had caused Cathy to observe more than once that he'd wear the damned things with his tuxedos if convention didn't demand otherwise.

The aircraft came to a halt, and the stagecraft began. The Air Force sergeant —this one always a man—opened the door on the left side of the aircraft to see that the truck-mounted stairs were already in place. Two more non-coms scurried down so that they could salute Ryan when he walked down. Andrea Price-O'Day was talking over her digital radio circuit to the chief of the Secret Service advance team to make sure it was safe for the President to appear in the open. She'd already heard that the Poles had been as cooperative as any American police force, and had enough security deployed here to defend against an attack by space aliens or Hitler's Wehrmacht. She nodded to the President and Mrs. Ryan.

"Showtime, babe," Jack told Cathy, with a dry smile.

"Knock 'em dead, Movie Star," she said in reply. It was one of their inside jokes.

John Patrick Ryan, President of the United States of America, stood in the door to look out over Poland, or at least as much of it as he could see from this vantage. The first cheers erupted then, for although he'd never even been close to Poland before, he was a popular figure here, for what reason Jack Ryan had no idea. He walked down, carefully, telling himself not to trip and spill down the steps. It looked bad to do so, as one of his antecedents had learned the hard way. At the bottom, the two USAF sergeants snapped off their salutes, which Ryan unconsciously returned, and then he was saluted again by a Polish officer. They did it differently, Jack saw, with ring and little finger tucked in, like American Cub Scouts. Jack nodded and smiled to this officer, then followed him to the receiving line. There was the U.S. ambassador to introduce him to the Polish president. Together they walked down a red carpet to a small lectern, where the Polish president welcomed Ryan, and Ryan made remarks to demonstrate his joy at visiting this ancient and important new American ally. Ryan had a discordant memory of the "Polack" jokes so popular when he'd been in high school, but managed not to relate any to the assembled throng. This was followed by a review past the honor guard of soldiers, about three companies of infantrymen, all spiffed up for this moment; Jack walked past them, looking in each face for a split second and figuring they just wanted to go back to barracks to change into their more comfortable fatigues, where they'd say that this Ryan guy looked okay for a damned American chief of state, and wasn't it good that this pain-in-the-ass duty was over. Then Jack and Cathy (carrying flowers given to her by two cute Polish kids, a boy and a girl, age six or so, because that was the best age to greet an important foreign woman) got into the official car, an American limo from the U.S. Embassy, for the drive into town. Once there, Jack looked over to the ambassador.

"What about Moscow?"

Ambassadors had once been Very Important People, which explained why each still had to be approved by vote of the United States Senate. When the Constitution had been drafted, world travel had been done by sailing ship, and an ambassador in a foreign land *was* the United States of America, and had to be able to speak for his country entirely without guidance from Washington. Modem communications had transformed ambassadors into glorified mailmen, but they still, occasionally, had to handle important matters with discretion, and this was such a case.

"They want the Secretary to come over as soon as possible. The backup aircraft is at a fighter base about fifteen miles from here. We can get Scott there within the hour," Stanislas Lewendowski reported.

"Thanks, Stan. Make it happen."

"Yes, Mr. President," the ambassador, a native of Chicago, agreed with a curt nod.

"Anything we need to know?"

"Aside from that, sir, no, everything's pretty much under control."

"I hate it when they say that," Cathy observed quietly. "That's when I look up for the falling sandbag."

"Not here, ma'am," Lewendowski promised. "Here things *are* under control."

That's nice to hear, President Ryan thought, *but what about the rest of the fucking world?*

Eduard Petrovich, this is not a happy development," Golovko told his president.

"I can see that," Grushavoy agreed tersely. "Why did we have to learn this from the Americans?"

"We had a very good source in Beijing, but he retired not long ago. He's sixty-nine years old and in ill health, and it was time to leave his post in their Party Secretariat. Sadly, we had no replacement for him," Golovko admitted. "The American source appears to be a man of similar placement. We are fortunate to have this information, regardless of its source."

"Better to have it than not to have it," Eduard Petrovich admitted. "So, now what?"

"Secretary of State Adler will be joining us in about three hours, at the Americans' request. He wishes to consult with us directly on a 'matter of mutual interest.' That means the Americans are as concerned with this development as we are."

"What will they say?"

"They will doubtless offer us assistance of some sort. Exactly what kind, I cannot say."

"Is there anything I don't already know about Adler and Ryan?"

"I don't think so. Scott Adler is a career diplomat, well regarded everywhere as an experienced and expert diplomatic technician. He and Ryan are friends, dating back to when Ivan Emmetovich was Deputy Director of CIA. They get along well and do not have any known disagreements in terms of policy. Ryan I have known for over ten years. He is bright, decisive, and a man of unusually fine personal honor. A man of his word. He was the enemy of the Soviet Union, and a skilled enemy, but since our change of systems he has been a friend. He evidently wishes us to succeed and prosper economically, though his efforts to assist us have been somewhat disjointed and confused. As you know, we have assisted the Americans in two black operations, one against China and one against Iran. This is important, because Ryan will see that he owes us a debt. He is, as I said, an honorable man, and he will wish to repay that debt, as long as it does not conflict with his own security interests."

"Will an attack on China be seen that way?" President Grushavoy asked.

Golovko nodded decisively. “Yes, I believe so. We know that Ryan has said privately that he both likes and admires Russian culture, and that he would prefer that America and Russia should become strategic partners. So, I think Secretary Adler will offer us substantive assistance against China.”

“What form will it take?”

“Eduard Petrovich, I am an intelligence officer, not a gypsy fortune-teller ...” Golovko paused. “We will know more soon, but if you wish me to make a guess...”

“Do so,” the Russian president commanded. The SVR Chairman took a deep breath and made his prediction:

“He will offer us a seat on the North Atlantic Council.” That startled Grushavoy:

“Join NATO?” he asked, with an open mouth.

“It would be the most elegant solution to the problem. It allies us with the rest of Europe, and would face China with a panoply of enemies if they attack us.”

“And if they make this offer to us ... ?”

“You should accept it at once, Comrade President,” the chief of the RSV replied. “We would be fools not to.”

“What will they demand in return?”

“Whatever it is, it will be far less costly than a war against China.”

Grushavoy nodded thoughtfully. “I will consider this. Is it really possible that America can recognize Russia as an ally?”

“Ryan will have thought this idea through. It conforms to his strategic outlook, and, as I said, I believe he honestly admires and respects Russia.”

“After all his time in CIA?”

“Of course. That is why he does. He knows us. He ought to respect us.”

Grushavoy thought about that one. Like Golovko, he was a Russian patriot who loved the very smell of Russian soil, the birch forests, the vodka and the borscht, the music and literature of his land. But he was not blind to the errors and ill fortune his country had endured over the centuries. Like Golovko, Grushavoy had come to manhood in a nation called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and had been educated to be a believer in Marxism-Leninism, but he’d gradually come to see that, although the path to political power had required worshiping at that godless altar, the god there had been a false one. Like many, he’d seen that the previous system simply didn’t work. But unlike all but a small and courageous few, he’d spoken out about the system’s shortcomings. A lawyer, even under the Soviet system when law had been subordinated to political whim, he’d crusaded for a rational system of laws which would allow people to predict the reaction of the state to their actions with something akin to confidence. He’d been there when the old system had fallen, and had embraced the new system as a teenager embraced

his first love. Now he was struggling to bring order—lawful order, which was harder still—to a nation which had known only dictatorial rule for centuries. If he succeeded, he knew he'd be remembered as one of the giants of human political history. If he failed, he'd just be remembered as one more starry-eyed visionary unable to turn his dream into reality. The latter, he thought in quiet moments, was the more likely outcome.

But despite that concern, he was playing to win. Now he had the gold and oil discoveries in Siberia, which had appeared as if gifts from the merciful God his education had taught him to deny. Russian history predicted—nay, demanded—that such gifts be taken from his country, for such had always been their hateful ill luck. Did God hate Russia? Anyone familiar with the past in his ancient country would think so. But today hope appeared as a golden dream, and Grushavoy was determined not to let this dream evaporate as all the others had. The land of Tolstoy and Rimsky-Korsakov had given much to the world, and now it deserved something back. Perhaps this Ryan fellow would indeed be a friend of his country and his people. His country needed friends. His country had the resources to exist alone, but to make use of those resources, he needed assistance, enough to allow Russia to enter the world as a complete and self-sufficient nation, ready to be a friend to all, ready to give and to take in honor and amity. The wherewithal was within his reach, if not quite within his hand. To take it would make him an Immortal, would make Eduard Petrovich Grushavoy the man who raised up his entire country. To do that he'd need help, however, and while that abraded his sense of *amour propre,* his patriotism, his duty to his country required that he set self aside.

"We shall see, Sergey Nikolay'ch. We shall see."

The time is ripe," Zhang Han San told his colleagues in the room of polished oak. "The men and weapons are in place. The prize lies right before our eyes. That prize offers us economic salvation, economic security such as we have dreamed of for decades, the ability," he went on, "to make China the world's preeminent power. That is a legacy to leave our people such as no leader has ever granted his descendants. We need only take it. It lies almost in our hands, like a peach upon a tree."

"It is feasible?" Interior Minister Tong Jie asked cautiously.

"Marshal?" Zhang handed the inquiry off to the Defense Minister.

Luo Cong leaned forward. He and Zhang had spent much of the previous evening together with maps, diagrams, and intelligence estimates. "From a military point of view, yes, it is possible. We have four Type A Group armies in the Shenyang Military District, fully trained and poised to strike north. Behind them are six Type B Group armies with sufficient infantry to support our mechanized forces, and four more Type C Group armies to garrison the land we take. From a strictly military point of view, the only issues are moving our forces into place and then supplying them. That is mainly a question of railroads, which will move supplies and men. Minister Qian?" Luo

asked. He and Zhang had considered this bit of stage-managing carefully, hoping to co-opt a likely opponent of their proposed national policy early on.

The Finance Minister was startled by the question, but pride in his former job and his innate honesty compelled him to respond truthfully: "There is sufficient rolling stock for your purposes, Marshal Luo," he replied tersely. "The concern will be repairing damage done by enemy air strikes on our rights-of-way and bridges. That is something the Railroad Ministry has examined for decades, but there is no precise answer to it, because we cannot predict the degree of damage the Russians might inflict."

"I am not overly worried about that, Qian," Marshal Luo responded. "The Russian air force is in miserable shape due to all their activity against their Muslim minorities. They used up a goodly fraction of their best weapons and spare parts. We estimate that our air-defense groups should preserve our transportation assets with acceptable losses. Will we be able to send railroad-construction personnel into Siberia to extend our railheads?"

Again Qian felt himself trapped. "The Russians have surveyed and graded multiple rights-of-way over the years in their hopes for extending the Trans-Siberian Railroad and settling people into the region. Those efforts date back to Stalin. Can we lay track rapidly? Yes. Rapidly enough for your purposes? Probably not, Comrade Marshal," Qian replied studiously. If he didn't answer honestly, his seat at this table would evaporate, and he knew it.

"I am not sanguine on this prospect, comrades," Shen Tang spoke for the Foreign Ministry.

"Why is that, Shen?" Zhang asked.

"What will other nations do?" he asked rhetorically. "We do not know, but I would not be optimistic, especially with the Americans. They become increasingly friendly with the Russians. President Ryan is well known to be friendly with Golovko, chief advisor to President Grushavoy."

"A pity that Golovko still lives, but we were unlucky," Tan Deshi had to concede.

"Depending on luck is dangerous at this level," Fang Gan told his colleagues. "Fate is no man's friend."

"Perhaps the next time," Tan responded.

"Next time," Zhang thought aloud, "better to eliminate Grushavoy and so throw their country into total chaos. A country without a president is like a snake without a head. It may thrash about, but it harms no one."

"Even a severed head can bite," Fang observed. "And who is to say that Fate will smile upon this enterprise?"

"A man can wait for Fate to decide for him, or he can seize the foul woman by the throat and take her by force—as we have all done in our time," Zhang added with a cruel smile.

Much more easily done with a docile secretary than with Destiny herself, Zhang, Fang didn't say aloud. He could go only so far in this forum, and he knew it.

“Comrades, I counsel caution. The dogs of war have sharp teeth, but any dog may turn and bite his master. We have all seen *that* happen, have we not? Some things, once begun, are less easily halted. War is such a thing, and it is not to be undertaken so lightly.”

“What would you have us do, Fang?” Zhang asked. “Should we wait until we run out of oil and wheat? Should we wait until we need troops to quell discord among our own people? Should we wait for Fate to decide for us, or should we choose our own destiny?”

The only reply to that came from Chinese culture itself, the ancient beliefs that came to all of the Politburo members almost as genetic knowledge, unaffected by political conditioning: “Comrades, Destiny awaits us all. It chooses us, not we it. What you propose here, my old friend, could merely accelerate what comes for us in any case, and who among us can say if it will please or displease us?” Minister Fang shook his head. “Perhaps what you propose is necessary, even beneficial,” he allowed, “but only after the alternatives have been examined fully and discarded.”

“If we are to decide,” Luo told them, “then we must decide soon. We have good campaigning weather before us. That season will only last so long. If we strike soon—in the next two weeks—we can seize our objectives, and then time works *for* us. Then winter will set in and make offensive campaigning virtually impossible against a determined defense. Then we can depend upon Shen’s ministry to safeguard and consolidate what we have seized, perhaps to share our winnings with the Russians ... for a time,” he added cynically. China would never share such a windfall, they all knew. It was merely a ploy fit to fool children and mushy-headed diplomats, which the world had in abundance, they all knew.

Through all this, Premier Xu had sat quietly, observing how the sentiments went, before making his decision and calling for a vote whose outcome would, of course, be predetermined. There was one more thing that needed asking. Not surprisingly, the question came from Tan Deshi, chief of the Ministry of State Security:

“Luo, my friend, how soon would the decision have to be made to ensure success? How easily could the decision be called back if circumstances warrant?”

“Ideally, the ‘go’ decision would be made today, so that we can start moving our forces to their preset jumping-off places. To stop them—well, of course, you can stop the offensive up to the very moment the artillery is to open fire. It is much harder to advance than it is to stay in place. Any man can stand still, no matter where he is.” The preplanned answer to the preplanned question was as clever as it was misleading. Sure, you could always stop an army poised to jump off, about as easily as you could stop a Yangtze River flood.

“I see,” Tan said. “In that case, I propose that we vote on *conditional* approval of a ‘go’ order, subject to change at any time by majority vote of the Politburo.”

Now it was Xu's turn to take charge of the meeting: "Comrades, thank you all for your views on the issue before us. Now we must decide what is best for our country and our people. We shall vote on Tan's proposal, a conditional authorization for an attack to seize and exploit the oil and goldfields in Siberia."

As Fang had feared, the vote was already decided, and in the interests of solidarity, he voted with the rest. Only Qian Kun wavered, but like all the others, he sided with the majority, because it was dangerous to stand alone in any group in the People's Republic, most of all this one. And besides, Qian was only a candidate member, and didn't have a vote at this most democratic of tables.

The vote turned out to be unanimous.

Long Chun, it would be called: Operation SPRING DRAGON.

Scott Adler knew Moscow as well as many Russian citizens did, he'd been here so many times, including one tour in the American Embassy as a wet-behind-the-ears new foreign-service officer, all those years before, during the Carter Administration. The Air Force flight crew delivered him on time, and they were accustomed to taking people on covert missions to odd places. This mission was less unusual than most. His aircraft rolled to a stop at the Russian fighter base, and the official car rolled up even before the mechanical steps unfolded. Adler hustled out, unaccompanied even by an aide. A Russian official shook hands with him and got him into the car for the drive into Moscow. Adler was at ease. He knew that he was offering Russia a gift fit for the world's largest Christmas tree, and he didn't think they were stupid enough to reject it. No, the Russians were among the world's most skillful diplomats and geopolitical thinkers, a trait that went back sixty years or more. It had struck him as sad, back in 1978, that their adroit people had been chained to a doomed political system—even back then, Adler had seen the demise of the Soviet Union coming. Jimmy Carter's "human rights" proclamation had been that president's best and least appreciated foreign-policy play, for it had injected the virus of rot into their political empire, begun the process of eating away their power in Eastern Europe, and also of letting their own people start to ask questions. It was a pot that Ronald Reagan had sweetened—upping the ante with his defense buildup that had stretched the Soviet economy to the breaking point and beyond, allowing George Bush to be there when they'd tossed in their cards and cast off from the political system that stretched back to Vladimir Il'ych Ulyanov, Lenin himself, the founding father, even the god of Marxism-Leninism. It was usually sad when a god died ...

... but not in this case, Adler thought as the buildings flashed by.

Then he realized that there was one more large but false god out there, Mao Zedong, awaiting final interment in history's rubbish heap. When would that come? Did this mission have a role to play in that funeral? Nixon's opening to

China had played a role in the destruction of the Soviet Union, which historians still had not fully grasped. Would its final echo be found in the fall of the People's Republic itself? That remained to be seen.

The car pulled into the Kremlin through the Spaskiy Gate, then proceeded to the old Council of Ministers Building. There Adler alighted and hurried inside, into an elevator to a third-floor meeting room.

"Mr. Secretary." The greeting came from Golovko. Adler should have found him an *eminence gris,* he thought. But Sergey Nikolay'ch was actually a man of genuine intellect and the openness that resulted directly from it. He was not even a pragmatist, but a man who sought what was best for his country, and would search for it everywhere his mind could see. *A seeker of truth,* SecState thought. That sort of man he and America could live with.

"Chairman. Thank you for receiving us so quickly."

"Please come with me, Mr. Adler." Golovko led him through a set of high double doors into what almost appeared to be a throne room. EAGLE couldn't remember if this building went back to the czars. President Eduard Petrovich Grushavoy was waiting for him, already standing politely, looking serious but friendly.

"Mr. Adler," the Russian president said, with a smile and an extended hand.

"Mr. President, a pleasure to be back in Moscow."

"Please." Grushavoy led him to a comfortable set of chairs with a low table. Tea things were already out, and Golovko handled the serving like a trusted earl seeing to the needs of his king and guest.

"Thank you. I've always loved the way you serve your tea in Russia." Adler stirred his and took a sip.

"So, what do you have to say to us?" Grushavoy asked in passable English.

"We have shown you what has become for us a cause for great concern."

"The Chinese," the Russian president observed. Everyone knew all of this, but the beginning of the conversation would follow the conventions of high-level talk, like lawyers discussing a major case in chambers.

"Yes, the Chinese. They seem to be contemplating a threat to the peace of the world. America has no wish to see that peace threatened. We've all worked very hard—your country and mine—to put an end to conflict. We note with gratitude Russia's assistance in our most recent conflicts. Just as we were allies sixty years ago, so Russia has acted again lately. America is a country that remembers her friends."

Golovko let out a breath slowly. Yes, his prediction was about to come true. Ivan Emmetovich was a man of honor, and a friend of his country. What came back to him was the time he'd held a pistol to Ryan's head, the time Ryan had engineered the defection of KGB chairman Gerasimov all those years before. Sergey Nikolay'ch had been enraged back then, as furious as he had ever been in a long and stressful professional life, but he'd held back from firing the pistol because it would have been a foolish act to shoot a man with diplomatic

status. Now he blessed his moderation, for now Ivan Emmetovich Ryan offered to Russia what he had always craved from America: predictability. Ryan's honor, his sense of fair play, the personal honesty that was the most crippling aspect of his newly acquired political persona, all combined to make him a person upon whom Russia could depend. And at this moment, Golovko could do that which he'd spent his life trying to do: He could see the future that lay only a few short minutes away.

"This Chinese threat, it is real, you think?" Grushavoy asked.

"We fear it is," the American Secretary of State answered. "We hope to forestall it."

"But how will we accomplish that? China knows of our military weakness. We have de-emphasized our defense capabilities of late, trying to shift the funds into areas of greater value to our economy. Now it seems we might pay a bitter price for that," the Russian president worried aloud.

"Mr. President, we hope to help Russia in that respect."

"How?"

"Mr. President, even as we speak, President Ryan is also speaking with the NATO chiefs of state and government. He is proposing to them that we invite Russia to sign the North Atlantic Treaty. That will ally the Russian Federation with all of Europe. It ought to make China take a step back to consider the wisdom of a conflict with your country."

"Ahh," Grushavoy breathed. "So, America offers Russia a full alliance of state?"

Adler nodded. "Yes, Mr. President. As we were allies against Hitler, so today we can again be allies against all potential enemies."

"There are many complications in this, talks between your military and ours, for example—even talks with the NATO command in Belgium. It could take months to coordinate our country with NATO."

"Those are technical matters to be handled by diplomatic and military technicians. At this level, however, we offer the Russian Federation our friendship in peace and in war. We place the word and the honor of our countries at your disposal."

"What of the European Union, their Common Market of economic alliances?"

"That, sir, is something left to the EEC, but America will encourage our European friends to welcome you completely into the European community, and offer all influence we can muster to that end."

"What do you ask in return?" Grushavoy asked. Golovko hadn't offered that prediction. This could be the answer to many Russian prayers, though his mind made the leap to see that Russian oil would be a major boon to Europe, and hence a matter of mutual, not unilateral, profit.

"We ask for nothing special in return. It is in the American interest to help

make a stable and peaceful world. We welcome Russia into that world. Friendship between your people and ours is desirable to everyone, is it not?"

"And in our friendship is profit also for America," Golovko pointed out.

Adler sat back and smiled agreement. "Of course. Russia will sell things to America, and America will sell things to Russia. We will become neighbors in the global village, friendly neighbors. We will compete economically, giving and taking from each other, as we do with many other countries."

"The offer you make is this simple?" Grushavoy asked.

"Should it be more complicated?" the SecState asked. "I am a diplomat, not a lawyer. I prefer simple things to complex ones."

Grushavoy considered all this for half a minute or so. Usually, diplomatic negotiations lasted weeks or months to do even the simplest of things, but Adler was right: Simple was better than complex, and the fundamental issue here was simple, though the downstream consequences might be breathtaking. America offered salvation to Russia, not just a military alliance, but the opening of all doors to economic development. America and Europe would partner with the Russian Federation, creating what could become both an open and integrated community to span the northern hemisphere. It stood to make Eduard Petrovich Grushavoy the Russian who brought his country a full century into the present/future of the world, and for all the statues of Lenin and Stalin that had been toppled, well, maybe some of his own likeness would be erected. It was a thought to appeal to a Russian politician. And after a few minutes, he extended his hand across the low table of tea things.

"The Russian Federation gladly accepts the offer of the United States of America. Together we once defeated the greatest threat to human culture. Perhaps we can do so again—better yet, together we may forestall it."

"In that case, sir, I will report your agreement to my President."

Adler checked his watch. It had taken twenty minutes. Damn, you could make history in a hurry when you had your act together, couldn't you? He stood. "I must be off then to make my report."

"Please convey my respects to President Ryan. We will do our best to be worthy allies to your country."

"He and I have no doubts of that, Mr. President." Adler shook hands with Golovko and walked to the door. Three minutes after that, he was back in his car and heading back to the airport. Once there, the aircraft had barely begun to taxi when he got on the secure satellite phone.

Mr. President?" Andrea said, coming up to Ryan just as the plenary session of the NATO chiefs was about to begin. She handed over the secure portable phone. "It's Secretary Adler."

Ryan took the phone at once. "Scott? Jack here. What gives?"

"It's a done deal, Jack."

"Okay, now I have to sell it to these guys. Good job, Scott. Hurry back."

"We're rolling now, sir." The line went dead. Ryan tossed the phone to Special Agent Price-O'Day.

"Good news?" she asked.

"Yep." Ryan nodded and walked into the conference room.

"Mr. President." Sir Basil Charleston came up to him. The chief of the British Secret Intelligence Service, he'd known Ryan longer than anyone else in the room had. One odd result of Ryan's path to the Presidency was that the people who knew him best were all spooks, mainly NATO ones, and these found themselves advising their chiefs of government on how to deal with America. Sir Basil had served no less than five Prime Ministers of Her Majesty's Government, but now he was in rather a higher position than before.

"Bas, how are you?"

"Doing quite well, thank you. May I ask a question?"

"Sure." *But I don't have to answer it,* Jack's smile added in reply.

"Adler is in Moscow now. Can we know why?"

"How will your PM react to inviting Russia into NATO?"

That made Basil blink, Ryan saw. It wasn't often that you could catch this guy unawares. Instantly, his mind went into overdrive to analyze the new situation. "China?" he asked after about six seconds.

Jack nodded. "Yeah. We may have some problems there."

"Not going north, are they?"

"They're thinking about it," Ryan replied.

"How good is your information on that question?"

"You know about the Russian gold strike, right?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. President. Ivan's been bloody lucky on both scores."

"Our intel strike in Beijing is even better."

"Indeed?" Charleston observed, letting Jack know that the SIS had also been pretty much shut out there.

"Indeed, Bas. It's class-A information, and it has us worried. We're hoping that pulling Russia into NATO can scare them off. Grushavoy just agreed on it. How do you suppose the rest of these folks will react to it?"

"They'll react cautiously, but favorably, after they've had a chance to consider it."

"Will Britain back us on this play?" Ryan asked.

"I must speak with the PM. I'll let you know." With that, Sir Basil walked over to where the British Prime Minister was chatting with the German Foreign Minister. Charleston dragged him off and spoke quietly into his ear.

Instantly, the Prime Minister's eyes, flaring a little wide, shot over to Ryan. The British PM was somewhat trapped, somewhat unpleasantly because of the surprise factor, but the substance of the trap was that Britain and America *always* supported each other. The "special relationship" was as alive and well today as it had been under the governments of Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. It was one of the few constants in the diplomatic world for both countries, and it belied Kissinger's dictum that great nations didn't have friendships, but rather interests. Perhaps it was the exception proving the rule, but if so, exception it was. Both Britain and America would hurl themselves in front of a train for the other. The fact that in England, President Ryan was Sir John Ryan, KCVO, made the alliance even more firm. In acknowledgment of that, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom walked over to the American chief of state.

"Jack, will you let us in on this development?"

"Insofar as I can. I may give Basil a little more on the side, but, yeah, Tony, this is for real, and we're damned worried about it."

"The gold and the oil?" the PM asked.

"They seem to think they're in an economic box. They're just about out of hard currency, and they're hurting for oil and wheat."

"You can't make an arrangement for that?"

"After what they did? Congress would hang me from the nearest lamppost."

"Quite," the Brit had to agree. BBC had run its own news miniseries on human rights in the PRC, and the Chinese hadn't come off very well. Indeed, despising China was the new European sport, which hadn't helped their foreign-currency holdings at all. As China had trapped themselves, so the Western nations had been perversely co-opted into building the wall. The citizens of these democracies wouldn't stand for economic or trade concessions any more than the Chinese Politburo could see its way to making the political sort. "Rather like Greek tragedy, isn't it, Jack?"

"Yeah, Tony, and our tragic flaw is adherence to human rights. Hell of a situation, isn't it?"

"And you're hoping that bringing Russia into NATO will give them pause?"

"If there's a better card to play, I haven't seen it in my deck, man."

"How set are they on the path?"

"Unknown. Our intelligence on this is very good, but we have to be careful making use of it. It could get people killed, and deny us the information we need."

"Like our chap Penkovskiy in the 1960s." One thing about Sir Basil, he knew how to educate his bosses on how the business of intelligence worked.

Ryan nodded, then proceeded with a little of his own disinformation. It was business, and Basil would understand: "Exactly. I can't have that man's life on my conscience, Tony, and so I have to treat this information very carefully."

“Quite so, Jack. I understand fully.”

“Will you support us on this?”

The PM nodded at once. “Yes, old boy, we must, mustn’t we?”

“Thanks, pal.” Ryan patted him on the shoulder.

CHAPTER 44

The Shape of a New World Order

It took all day, lengthening what was supposed to have been a pro forma meeting of the NATO chiefs into a minor marathon. It took all of Scott Adler's powers of persuasion to smooth things over with the various foreign ministers, but with the assistance of Britain, whose diplomacy had always been of the Rolls-Royce class, after four hours there was a head-nod-and-handshake agreement, and the diplomatic technicians were sent off to prepare the documents. All this was accomplished behind closed doors, with no opportunity for a press leak, and so when the various government leaders made it outside, the media learned of it like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. What they did not learn was the real reason for the action. They were told it had to do with the new economic promise in the Russian Federation, which seemed reasonable enough, and when you came down to it, was the root cause in any case.

In fact most of the NATO partners didn't know the whole story, either. The new American intelligence was directly shared only with Britain, though France and Germany were given some indications of America's cause for concern. For the rest, the simple logic of the situation was enough to offer appeal. It would look good in the press, and for most politicians all over the world, that was sufficient to make them doff their clothes and run about a public square naked. Secretary Adler cautioned his President about the dangers of drawing sovereign nations into treaty obligations without telling them all the reasons behind them, but even he agreed that there was little other choice in the matter. Besides, there *was* a built-in escape clause that the media wouldn't see at first, and hopefully, neither would the Chinese.

The media got the story out in time for the evening news broadcasts in America and the late-night ones in Europe, and the TV cameras showed the arrival of the various VIPs at the official dinner in Warsaw.

"I owe you one, Tony," Ryan told the British Prime Minister with a salute of his wineglass. The white wine was French, from the Loire Valley, and excellent. The hard liquor of the night had been an equally fine Polish vodka.

"Well, one can hope that it gives our Chinese friends pause. When will Grushavoy arrive?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, followed by more drinking. Vodka again, I suppose." The documents were being printed up at this very moment, and then would be bound in fine leather, as such important documents invariably were, after which they'd be tucked away in various dusty basement archives, rarely to be

seen by the eyes of men again.

"Basil tells me that your intelligence information is unusually good, and rather frightening," the PM observed, with a sip of his own.

"It is all of that, my friend. You know, we're supposed to think that this war business is a thing of the past."

"So they thought a hundred years ago, Jack. It didn't quite work out that way, did it?"

"True, but that was then, and this is now. And the world really has changed in the past hundred years."

"I hope that is a matter of some comfort to Franz Ferdinand, and the ten million or so chaps who died as an indirect result of his demise, not to mention Act Two of the Great European Civil War," the Prime Minister observed.

"Yeah, day after tomorrow, I'm going down to Auschwitz. That ought to be fun." Ryan didn't really want to go, but he figured it was something of an obligation under the circumstances, and besides, Arnie thought it would look good on TV, which was why he did a lot of the things he did.

"Do watch out for the ghosts, old boy. I should think there are a number of them there."

"I'll let you know," Ryan promised. Would it be like Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*? he wondered. The ghost of horrors past, accompanied by the ghost of horrors present, and finally the ghost of horrors yet to be? But he was in the business of preventing such things. That's what the people of his country paid him for. Maybe $250,000 a year wasn't much for a guy who'd twice made a good living in the trading business, but it was a damned sight more than most of the taxpayers made, and they gave it to him in return for his work. That made the obligation as sacred as a vow sworn to God's own face. Auschwitz had happened because other men hadn't recognized their obligation to the people whom *they* had been supposed to serve. Or something like that. Ryan had never quite made the leap of imagination necessary to understand the thought processes of dictators. Maybe Caligula had really figured that the lives of the Roman people were his possessions to use and discard like peanut shells. Maybe Hitler had thought that the German people existed only to serve his ambition to enter the history books—and if so, sure enough it had happened, just not quite the way he'd hoped it would. Jack Ryan knew objectively that he'd be in various history books, but he tried to avoid thinking about what future generations would make of him. Just surviving in his job from day to day was difficult enough. The problem with history was that you couldn't transport yourself into the future so that you could look back with detachment and see what the hell you were supposed to do. No, making history was a damned sight harder than studying it, and so he'd decided to avoid thinking about it altogether. He wouldn't be around to know what the future thought anyway, so there was no sense in worrying about it, was there? He had his own conscience to keep him awake at night, and that was hard enough.

Looking around the room, he could see the chiefs of government of more than fifteen countries, from little Iceland to the Netherlands to Turkey. He was President of the United States of America, by far the largest and most powerful country of the NATO alliance—until tomorrow, anyway, he corrected himself—and he wanted to take them all aside and ask each one how the hell he (they were all men at the moment) reconciled his self and his duties. How did you do the job honorably? How did you look after the needs of every citizen? Ryan knew that he couldn't reasonably expect to be universally loved. Arnie had told him that—that he only needed to be liked, not loved, by half-plus-one of the voters in America—but there had to be more to the job than that, didn't there? He knew all of his fellow chief executives by name and sight, and he'd been briefed in on each man's character. That one there, he had a mistress only nineteen years old. That one drank like a fish. That one had a little confusion about his sexual preference. And that one was a crook who'd enriched himself hugely on the government payroll. But they were all allies of his country, and therefore they were officially his friends. And so Jack had to ignore what he knew of them and treat them like what they appeared to be rather than what they really were, and the really funny part of that was that they felt themselves to be his superiors because they were better politicians than he was. And the funniest part of all was that they were right. They *were* better politicians than he was, Ryan thought, sipping his wine. The British Prime Minister walked off to see his Norwegian counterpart, as Cathy Ryan rejoined her husband.

"Well, honey, how did it go?"

"The usual. Politics. Don't any of these women have a real job?" she asked the air.

"Some do," Jack remembered from his briefings. "Some even have kids."

"Mainly grandkids. I'm not old enough for that yet, thank God."

"Sorry, babe. But there are advantages to being young and beautiful," POTUS told FLOTUS.

"And you're the best-looking guy here," Cathy replied with a smile.

"But I'm too tired. Long day at the bargaining table."

"Why are you bringing Russia into NATO?"

"To stop a war with China," Jack replied honestly. It was time she knew. The answer to her question got her attention.

"What?"

"I'll fill you in later, babe, but that's the short version."

"A war?"

"Yeah. It's a long story, and we hope that what we agreed to do today will prevent it."

"You say so," Cathy Ryan observed dubiously.

"Meet anybody you like?"

"The French President is very charming."

"Oh, yeah? He was a son of a bitch in the negotiating session today. Maybe he's just trying to get in your knickers," Jack told his wife. He'd been briefed in on the French President, and he was reputed to be a man of "commendable vigor," as the State Department report delicately put it. Well, the French had a reputation as great lovers, didn't they?

"I'm spoke for, Sir John," she reminded him.

"And so am I, my lady." He could have Roy Altman shoot the Frenchman for making a move on his wife, Ryan thought with amusement, but that would cause a diplomatic incident, and Scott Adler always got upset about those.... Jack checked his watch. It was about time to call this one a day. Soon some diplomat would make a discreet announcement that would end the evening. Jack hadn't danced with his wife. The sad truth was that Jack couldn't dance a lick, which was a source of minor contention with his wife, and a shortcoming he planned to correct someday ... maybe.

The party broke up on time. The embassy had comfortable quarters, and Ryan found his way to the king-sized bed brought in for his and Cathy's use.

Bondarenko's official residence at Chabarsovil was a very comfortable one, befitting a four-star resident and his family. But his wife didn't like it. Eastern Siberia lacked the social life of Moscow, and besides, one of their daughters was nine months pregnant, and his wife was in St. Petersburg to be there when the baby arrived. The front of the house overlooked a large parade ground. The back, where his bedroom was, looked into the pine forests that made up most of this province. He had a large personal staff to look after his needs. That included a particularly skilled cook, and communications people. It was one of the latter who knocked on his bedroom door at three in the local morning.

"Yes, what is it?"

"An urgent communication for you, Comrade General," the voice answered.

"Very well, wait a minute." Gennady Iosifovich rose and donned a cloth robe, punching on a light as he went to open the door. He grumbled as any man would at the loss of sleep, but generals had to expect this sort of thing. He opened the door without a snarl at the NCO who handed over the telex.

"Urgent, from Moscow," the sergeant emphasized.

"Da, spasiba," the general replied, taking it and walking back toward his bed. He sat in the comfortable chair that he usually dumped his tunic on and picked up the reading glasses that he didn't actually need, but which made reading easier in the semidarkness. It was something urgent—well, urgent enough to wake him up in the middle of the fucking—

"My God," CINC-FAR EAST breathed to himself, halfway down the cover sheet. Then he flipped it over to read the substance of the report.

In America it would be called a Special National Intelligence Estimate. Bondarenko had seen them before, even helped draft some, but never one like this.

It is believed that there is an imminent danger of war between Russia and the People's Republic of China. The Chinese objective in offensive operations will be to seize the newly discovered gold and oil deposits in eastern Siberia by rapid mechanized assault north from their border west of Khabarovsk. The leading elements will include the 34th Shock Army, a Type A Group Army ...

This intelligence estimate is based upon national intelligence assets with access to the political leaders of the PRC, and the quality of the intelligence is graded "1A," the report went on, meaning that the SVR regarded it as Holy Writ. Bondarenko hadn't seen that happen very much.

Far East Command is directed to make all preparations to meet and repel such an attack ...

"With what?" the general asked the papers in his hand. "With what, comrades?" With that he lifted the bedside phone. "I want my staff together in forty minutes," he told the sergeant who answered. He would not take the theatrical step of calling a full alert just yet. That would follow his staff meeting. Already his mind was examining the problem. It would continue to do so as he urinated, then shaved, his mind running in small circles, a fact which he recognized but couldn't change, and the fact that he couldn't change it didn't slow the process one small bit. The problem he faced as he scraped the whiskers from his face was not an easy one, perhaps an impossible one, but his four-star rank made it *his* problem, and he didn't want to be remembered by future Russian military students as the general who'd not been up to the task of defending his country against a foreign invasion. He was here, Bondarenko told himself, because he was the best operational thinker his country had. He'd faced battle before, and comported himself well enough not only to live but to wear his nation's highest decorations for bravery. He'd studied military history his whole life. He'd even spent time with the Americans at their battle laboratory in California, something he lusted to copy and re-create in Russia as the best possible way to prepare soldiers for battle, but which his country couldn't begin to afford for years. He had the knowledge. He had the nerve. What he lacked were the assets. But history was not made by soldiers who had what they needed, but by those who did not. When the soldiers had enough, the political leaders went into the books. Gennady Iosifovich was a soldier, and a *Russian* soldier. His country was *always* taken by surprise, because for whatever reason her political leaders didn't ever see war coming, and because of that soldiers had to pay the price. A distant voice told him that at least he wouldn't be shot for failure. Stalin was long dead, and with him the ethos of punishing those whom he had failed to warn or prepare. But Bondarenko didn't listen to that voice. Failure was too bitter an alternative for him to consider while he lived.

The Special National Intelligence Estimate made its way to American forces in Europe and the Pacific even more quickly than to Chabarsovil. For Admiral Bartolomeo Vito Mancuso, it came before a scheduled dinner with the governor of Hawaii. His Public Affairs Officer had to knock that one back a few hours while CINCPAC called his staff together.

"Talk to me, Mike," Mancuso commanded his J-2, BG Michael Lahr.

"Well, it hasn't come totally out of left field, sir," the theater intelligence coordinator replied. "I don't know anything about the source of the intelligence, but it looks like high-level human intelligence, probably with a political point of origin. CIA says it's highly reliable, and Director Foley is pretty good. So, we have to take this one very seriously." Lahr paused for a sip of water.

"Okay, what we know is that the PRC is looking with envious eyes at the Russian mineral discoveries in the central and northern parts of eastern Siberia. That plays into the economic problems they got faced with after the killings in Beijing caused the break in trade talks, and it also appears that their other trading partners are backing away from them as well. So, the Chinese now find themselves in a really tight economic corner, and that's been a *casus belli* as far back as we have written history."

"What can we do to scare them off?" asked the general commanding Pacific Fleet Marine Force.

"What we're doing tomorrow is to make the Russian federation part of NATO. Russian President Grushavoy will be flying to Warsaw in a few hours to sign the North Atlantic Treaty. *That* makes Russia an ally of the United States of America, and of *all* the NATO members. So, the thinking is that if China moves, they're not just taking on Russia, but all the rest of the North Atlantic Council as well, and *that* ought to give them pause."

"And if it doesn't?" Mancuso asked. As a theater commander-in-chief, he was paid to consider diplomatic failure rather than success.

"Then, sir, if the Chinese strike north, we have a shooting war on the Asian mainland between the People's Republic of China and an American ally. That means we're going to war."

"Do we have any guidance from Washington along those lines?" CINCPAC asked.

Lahr shook his head. "Not yet, Admiral. It's developing a little fast for that, and Secretary Bretano is looking to us for ideas."

Mancuso nodded. "Okay. What can we do? What kind of shape are we in?"

The four-star commanding Seventh Fleet leaned forward: "I'm in pretty decent shape. My carriers are all available or nearly so, but my aviators could use some more training time. Surface assets—well, Ed?"

Vice Admiral Goldsmith looked over to his boss. "We're good, Bart."

COMSUBPAC nodded. "It'll take a little time to surge more of my boats west, but they're trained up, and we can give their navy a major bellyache if

we have to."

Then eyes turned to the Marine. "I hope you're not going to tell me to invade the Chinese mainland with one division," he observed. Besides, all of Pacific Fleet didn't have enough amphibious-warfare ships to land more than a brigade landing force, and they knew that. Good as the Marines were, they couldn't take on the entire People's Liberation Army.

"What sort of shape are the Russians in?" Seventh Fleet asked General Lahr.

"Not good, sir. Their new Commander Far East is well regarded, but he's hurting for assets. The PLA has him outnumbered a good eight to one, probably more. So, the Russians don't have much in the way of deep-strike capabilities, and just defending themselves against air attack is going to be a stretch."

"That's a fact," agreed the general commanding the Air Force assets in the Pacific Theater. "Ivan's pissed away a lot of his available assets dealing with the Chechens. Most of their aircraft are grounded with maintenance problems. That means his drivers aren't getting the stick time they need to be proficient airmen. The Chinese, on the other hand, have been training pretty well for several years. I'd say their air force component is in pretty good shape."

"What can we move west with?"

"A lot," the USAF four-star answered. "But will it be enough? Depends on a lot of variables. It'll be nice to have your carriers around to back us up." Which was unusually gracious of the United States Air Force.

"Okay," Mancuso said next. "I want to see some options. Mike, let's firm up our intelligence estimates on what the Chinese are capable of, first of all, and second, what they're thinking."

"The Agency is altering the tasking of its satellites. We ought to be getting a lot of overheads soon, plus our friends on Taiwan—they keep a pretty good eye on things for us."

"Are they in on this SNIE?" Seventh Fleet asked.

Lahr shook his head. "No, not yet. This stuff is being held pretty close."

"Might want to tell Washington that they have a better feel for Beijing's internal politics than we do," the senior Marine observed. "They ought to. They speak the same language. Same thought processes and stuff. Taiwan ought to be a prime asset to us."

"Maybe, maybe not," Lahr countered. "If a shooting war starts, they won't jump in for the fun of it. Sure, they're our friends, but they don't really have a dog in this fight yet, and the smart play for them is to play it cautious. They'll go to a high alert status, but they will not commence offensive operations on their own hook."

"Will we really back the Russians if it comes to that? More to the point, will the Chinese regard that as a credible option on our part?" COMAIRPAC asked. He administratively "owned" the carriers and naval air wings. Getting them trained was his job.

"Reading their minds is CIA's job, not ours," Lahr answered. "As far as I know, DIA has no high-quality sources in Beijing, except what we get from intercepts out of Fort Meade. If you're asking me for a personal opinion, well, we have to remember that their political assessments are made by Maoist politicians who tend to see things their own way rather than with what we would term an objective outlook. Short version, I don't know, and I don't know anyone who does, but the asset that got us this information tells us that they're serious about this possible move. Serious enough to bring Russia into NATO. You could call that rather a desperate move toward deterring the PRC, Admiral."

"So, we regard war as a highly possible eventuality?" Mancuso summarized.

"Yes, sir," Lahr agreed.

"Okay, gentlemen. Then we treat it that way. I want plans and options for giving our Chinese brethren a bellyache. Rough outlines after lunch tomorrow, and firm options in forty-eight hours. Questions?" There were none. "Okay, let's get to work on this."

Al Gregory was working late. A computer-software expert, he was accustomed to working odd hours, and this was no exception. At the moment he was aboard USS *Gettysburg,* an Aegis-class cruiser. The ship was not in the water, but rather in dry dock, sitting on a collection of wooden blocks while undergoing propeller replacement. *Gettysburg* had tangled with a buoy that had parted its mooring chain and drifted into the fairway, rather to the detriment of the cruiser's port crew. The yard was taking its time to do the replacement because the ship's engines were about due for programmed maintenance anyway. This was good for the crew. Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, part of the Norfolk Naval Base complex, wasn't exactly a garden spot, but it was where most of the crew's families lived, and that made it attractive enough.

Gregory was in the ship's CIC, or Combat Information Center, the compartment from which the captain "fought" the ship. All the weapons systems were controlled from this large space. The SPY radar display was found on three side-by-side displays about the size of a good big-screen TV. The problem was the computers that drove the systems.

"You know," Gregory observed to the senior chief who maintained the systems, "an old iMac has a ton more power than this."

"Doc, this system is the flower of 1975 technology," the senior chief protested. "And it ain't all that hard to track a missile, is it?"

"Besides, Dr. Gregory," another chief put it, "that radar of mine is still the best fucking system ever put to sea."

"That's a fact," Gregory had to agree. The solid-state components could combine to blast six *megawatts* of RF power down a one-degree line of bearing, enough to make a helicopter pilot, for example, produce what cruel physicians

called FLKs: funny-looking kids. And more than enough to track a ballistic reentry vehicle at a thousand miles or more. The limitation there also was computer software, which was the new gold standard in just about every weapons system in the world.

"So, when you want to track an RV, what do you do?"

"We call it 'inserting the chip,' " the senior chief answered.

"What? It's hardware?" Al asked. He had trouble believing that. This wasn't a computer that you slid a board into.

"No, sir, it's software. We upload a different control program."

"Why do you need a second program for that? Can't your regular one track airplanes and missiles?" the TRW vice president demanded.

"Sir, I just maintain and operate the bitch. I don't design the things. RCA and IBM do that."

"Shit," Gregory observed.

"You could talk to Lieutenant Olson," the other chief thought aloud. "He's a Dartmouth boy. Pretty smart for a j.g."

"Yeah," the first chief agreed. "He writes software as sort of a hobby."

"Dennis the Menace. Weps and the XO get annoyed with him sometimes."

"Why?" Gregory asked.

"Because he talks like you, sir," Senior Chief Leek answered. "But he ain't in your pay grade."

"He's a good kid, though," Senior Chief Matson observed. "Takes good care of his troops, and he knows his stuff, doesn't he, Tim?"

"Yeah, George, good kid, going places if he stays in."

"He won't. Computer companies are already trying to recruit him. Shit, Compaq offered him three hundred big ones last week."

"That's a living wage," Chief Leek commented. "What did Dennis say?"

"He said no. I told him to hold out for half a mil." Matson laughed as he reached for some coffee.

"What d'ya think, Dr. Gregory? The kid worth that kinda money in the 'puter business?"

"If he can do really good code, maybe," Al replied, making a mental note to check out this Lieutenant Olson himself. TRW always had room for talent. Dartmouth was known for its computer science department. Add field experience to that, and you had a real candidate for the ongoing SAM project. "Okay, if you insert the chip, what happens?"

"Then you change the range of the radar. You know how it works, the RF energy goes out forever on its own, but we only accept signals that bounce back within a specific time gate. This"—Senior Chief Leek held up a floppy disk with a hand-printed label on it—"changes the gate. It extends the

effective rage of the SPY out to, oh, two thousand kilometers. Damned sight farther than the missiles'll go. I was on *Port Royal* out at Kwajalein five years ago doing a theater-missile test, and we were tracking the inbound from the time it popped over the horizon all the way in."

"You hit it?" Gregory asked with immediate interest.

Leek shook his head. "Guidance-fin failure on the bird, it was an early Block-IV. We got within fifty meters, but that was a cunt hair outside the warhead's kill perimeter, and they only allowed us one shot, for some reason or other nobody ever told me about. *Shiloh* got a kill the next year. Splattered it with a skin-skin kill. The video of that one is a son of a bitch," the senior chief assured his guest.

Gregory believed it. When an object going one way at fourteen thousand miles per hour got hit by something going the other way at two thousand miles per hour, the result could be quite impressive. "First-round hit?" he asked.

"You bet. The sucker was coming straight at us, and this baby doesn't miss much."

"We always clean up with Vandal tests off Wallops Island," Chief Matson confirmed.

"What are those exactly?"

"Old Talos SAMs," Matson explained. "Big stovepipes, ramjet engines, they can come in on a ballistic track at about twenty-two hundred miles per hour. Pretty hot on the deck, too. That's what we worry about. The Russians came out with a sea-skimmer we call Sunburn—"

"Aegis-killer, some folks call it," Chief Leek added. "Low and fast."

"But we ain't missed one yet," Matson announced. "The Aegis system's pretty good. So, Dr. Gregory, what exactly are you checking out?"

"I want to see if your system can be used to stop a ballistic inbound."

"How fast?" Matson asked.

"A for-real ICBM. When you detect it on radar, it'll be doing about seventeen thousand miles per hour, call it seventy-six hundred meters per second."

"That's real fast," Leek observed. "Seven, eight times the speed of a rifle bullet."

"Faster'n a theater ballistic weapon like a Scud. Not sure we can do it," Matson worried.

"This radar system'll track it just fine. It's very similar to the Cobra Dane system in the Aleutians. Question is, can your SAMs react fast enough to get a hit?"

"How hard's the target?" Matson asked.

"Softer than an aircraft. The RV's designed to withstand heat, not an impact.

Like the space shuttle. When you fly it through a rainstorm, it plays hell with the tiles."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yep." Gregory nodded. "Like foam coffee cups."

"Okay, so then the problem's getting the SM2 close enough to have the warhead pop off when the target's in the fragmentation cone."

"Correct." They might be enlisted men, Gregory thought, but that didn't make them dumb.

"Software fix in the seeker head, right?"

"Also correct. I've rewritten the code. Pretty easy job, really. I reprogrammed the way the laser mutates. Ought to work okay if the infrared homing system works as advertised. At least it did in the computer simulations up in Washington."

"It worked just fine on *Shiloh,* Doc. We got the videotape aboard somewhere," Leek assured him. "Wanna see it?"

"You bet," Dr. Gregory said with enthusiasm.

"Okay." Senior Chief Leek checked his watch. "I'm free now. Let me head aft for a smoke, and then we'll *roll the videotape,"* he said, sounding like Warner Wolf on WCBS New York.

"You can't smoke in here?"

Leek grunted annoyance. "It's the New Navy, Doc. The cap'n's a health Nazi. You gotta go aft to light up. Not even in chief's quarters," Leek groused.

"I quit," Matson said. "Not a pussy like Tim here."

"My ass," Leek responded. "There's a few real men left aboard."

"How come you sit sideways here?" Gregory asked, rising to his feet to follow them aft. "The important displays go to the right side of the ship instead of fore and aft. How come?"

" 'Cuz it helps you puke if you're in a seaway." Matson laughed. "Whoever designed these ships didn't like sailors much, but at least the air-conditioning works." It rarely got above sixty degrees in the CIC, causing most of the men who worked there to wear sweaters. Aegis cruisers were decidedly not known for their comforts.

This is serious?" Colonel Aliyev asked. It was a stupid question, and he knew it. But it just had to come out anyway, and his commander knew that.

"We have orders to treat it that way, Colonel," Bondarenko replied crossly. "What do we have to stop them?"

"The 265th Motor-Rifle Division is at roughly fifty percent combat efficiency," the theater operations officer replied. "Beyond that, two tank

regiments at forty percent or so. Our reserve formations are mostly theoretical," Aliyev concluded. "Our air assets—one regiment of fighter-interceptors ready for operations, another three who don't have even half their aircraft fit to fly."

Bondarenko nodded at the news. It was better than it had been upon his arrival in theater, and he'd done well to bring things that far, but that wouldn't impress the Chinese very much.

"Opposition?" he asked next. Far East's intelligence officer was another colonel, Vladimir Konstantinovich Tolkunov.

"Our Chinese neighbors are in good military shape, Comrade General. The nearest enemy formation is Thirty-fourth Shock Army, a Type A Group Army commanded by General Peng Xi-Wang," he began, showing off what he knew. "That one formation has triple or more our mechanized assets, and is well trained. Chinese aircraft—well, their tactical aircraft number over two thousand, and we must assume they will commit everything to this operation. Comrades, we do not have anything like the assets we need to stop them."

"So, we will use space to our advantage," the general proposed. "Of that we have much. We will fight a holding action and await reinforcements from the west. I'll be talking with Stavka later today. Let's draw up what we'll need to stop these barbarians."

"All down one line of railroad," Aliyev observed. "And our fucking engineers have been busily clearing a route for the Chinks to take to the oil fields. General, first of all, we need to get our engineers working on minefields. We have millions of mines, and the route the Chinese will take is easily predicted."

The overall problem was that the Chinese had strategic, if not tactical, surprise. The former was a political exercise, and like Hitler in 1941, the Chinese had pulled it off. At least Bondarenko would have tactical warning, which was more than Stalin had allowed his Red Army. He also expected to have freedom of maneuver, because also unlike Stalin, his President Grushavoy would be thinking with his brain instead of his balls. With freedom of maneuver Bondarenko would have the room to play a mobile war with his enemy, denying the Chinese a chance at decisive engagement, allowing hard contact only when it served his advantage. Then he'd be able to wait for reinforcements to give him a chance to fight a set-piece battle on his own terms, at a place and time of his choosing.

"How good are the Chinese, really, Pavel?"

"The People's Liberation Army has not engaged in large-scale combat operations for over fifty years, since the Korean War with the Americans, unless you cite the border clashes we had with them in the late '60s and early '70s. In that case, the Red Army dealt with them well, but to do that we had massive firepower, and the Chinese were only fighting for limited objectives. They are trained largely on our old model. Their soldiers will not have the ability to think for themselves. Their discipline is worse than draconian. The smallest infraction can result in summary execution, and that makes for

obedience. At the operational level, their general officers are well-trained in theoretical terms. Qualitatively, their weapons are roughly the equal of ours. With their greater funding, their training levels mean that their soldiers are intimately familiar with their weapons and rudimentary tactics," Zhdanov told the assembled staff. "But they are probably not our equal in operational-maneuver thinking. Unfortunately, they do have numbers going for them, and quantity has a quality all its own, as the NATO armies used to say of us. What they will want to do, and what I fear they will, is try to roll over us quickly—just crush us and move on to their political and economic objectives as quickly as possible."

Bondarenko nodded as he sipped his tea. This was mad, and the maddest part of all was that he was playing the role of a NATO commander from 1975—maybe a German one, which was truly insane—faced with adverse numbers, but blessed, as the Germans had not been, with space to play with, and Russians had always used space to their advantage. He leaned forward:

"Very well. Comrades, we will *deny* them the opportunity for decisive engagement. If they cross the border, we will fight a maneuver war. We will sting and move. We will hurt them and withdraw before they can counterattack. We will give them land, but we will not give them blood. The life of every single one of our soldiers is precious to us. The Chinese have a long way to go to their objectives. We will let them go a lot of that way, and we will bide our time and husband our men and equipment. We will make them pay for what they take, but we will not—we must not—give them the chance to catch our forces in decisive battle. Are we understood on that?" he asked his staff. "When in doubt, we will run away and deny the enemy what he wants. When we have what we need to strike back, we will make him wish he never heard of Russia, but until then, let him chase his butterflies."

"What of the border guards?" Aliyev asked.

"They will hurt the Chinese, and then they will pull out. Comrades, I cannot emphasize this enough: the life of every single private soldier is important to us. Our men will fight harder if they know we care about them, and more than that, they *deserve* our care and solicitude. If we ask them to risk their lives for their country, their country *must* be loyal to them in return. If we achieve that, they will fight like tigers. The Russian soldier knows how to fight. We must all be worthy of him. You are all skilled professionals. This will be the most important test of our lives. We must all be equal to our task. Our nation depends on us. Andrey Petrovich, draw up some plans for me. We are authorized to call up reserves. Let us start doing that. We have hectares of equipment for them to use. Unlock the gates and let them start drawing gear, and God permit the officers assigned to those cadres are worthy of their men. Dismissed." Bondarenko stood and walked out, hoping his declamation had been enough for the task.

But wars were not won by speeches.

CHAPTER 45

Ghosts of Horrors Past

President Grushavoy arrived in Warsaw with the usual pomp and circumstance. A good actor, Ryan saw, watching the arrival on TV. You never would have guessed from his face that his country was looking at a major war. Grushavoy passed the same receiving line, doubtless composed of the same troops Ryan had eyeballed on his arrival, made a brief but flowery arrival speech citing the long and friendly history shared by Poland and Russia (conveniently leaving out the equally long and less-than-friendly parts), then got into a car for the city, accompanied, Ryan was glad to see, by Sergey Nikolay'ch Golovko.

In the President's hand was a fax from Washington outlining what the Chinese had in the way of war assets to turn loose on their northern neighbors, along with an estimate from the Defense Intelligence Agency on what they called the "correlation of forces," which, Jack remembered, was a term of art used by the Soviet army of old. Its estimate of the situation was not especially favorable. Almost as bad, America didn't have much with which to help the Russians. The world's foremost navy was of little direct use in a land war. The United States Army had a division and a half of heavy troops in Europe, but that was thousands of miles from the expected scene of action. The Air Force had all the mobility it needed to project force anywhere on the globe, and that could give anyone a serious headache, but airplanes could not by themselves defeat an army. No, this would be largely a Russian show, and the Russian army, the fax said, was in terrible shape. The DIA had some good things to say about the senior Russian commander in theater, but a smart guy with a .22 against a dumb one with a machine gun was still at a disadvantage. So, he hoped the Chinese would be taken aback by this day's news, but CIA and State's estimate of that possibility was decidedly iffy.

"Scott?" Ryan asked his Secretary of State.

"Jack, I can't say. This ought to discourage them, but we can't be sure how tight a corner they think they are in. If they think they're trapped, they might still lash out."

"God damn it, Scott, is this the way nations do business ?" Jack demanded. "Misperceptions? Fears? Outright stupidity?"

Adler shrugged. "It's a mistake to think a chief of government is any smarter than the rest of us, Jack. People make decisions the same way, regardless of how big and smart they are. It comes down to how they perceive the question, and how best they can serve their own needs, preserve their own personal

well-being. Remember that we're not dealing with clergymen here. They don't have much in the way of consciences. Our notion of right and wrong doesn't play in that sort of mind. They translate what's good for their country into what's good for themselves, just like a king in the twelfth century, but in this case there isn't any bishop around to remind them that there may be a God looking down at them with a notebook." They'd gone out of their way, Adler didn't have to say, to eliminate a cardinal-archbishop just to get themselves into this mess.

"Sociopaths?" the President asked.

Secretary Adler shrugged. "I'm not a physician, just a diplomat. When you negotiate with people like this, you dangle what's good for their country—them—in front of their eyes and hope they reach for it. You play the game without entirely understanding them. These people do things neither one of us would ever do. And they run a major country, complete with nuclear weapons."

"Great," Ryan breathed. He stood and got his coat. "Well, let's go watch our new ally sign up, shall we?"

Ten minutes later, they were in the reception room of the Lazienski Palace. There was the usual off-camera time for the various chiefs of government to socialize over Perrier-and-a-twist before some nameless protocol official opened the double doors to the table, chairs, documents, and TV cameras.

The speech from President Grushavoy was predictable in every detail. The NATO alliance had been established to protect Western Europe against what his country had once been, and his former country had established its own mirror-image alliance called the Warsaw Pact right here in this very city. But the world had turned, and now Russia was pleased to join the rest of Europe in an alliance of friends whose only wish was peace and prosperity for all. Grushavoy was pleased indeed to be the first Russian in a very long time to be a real part of the European community, and promised to be a worthy friend and partner of his newly close neighbors. (The military ramifications of the North Atlantic Treaty were not mentioned at all.) And everyone present applauded. And Grushavoy pulled out an ancient fountain pen borrowed from the collection at The Hermitage in St. Petersburg to sign in the name of his country, and so bring membership in NATO up by one. And everyone applauded again as the various chiefs of state and government walked over to shake their new ally's hand. And the shape of the world changed yet again.

"Ivan Emmetovich," Golovko said, as he approached the American President.

"Sergey Nikolay'ch," Ryan said in quiet reply.

"What will Beijing think of this?" the chief of the Russian intelligence service asked.

"With luck, we'll know in twenty-four hours," Ryan answered, knowing that this ceremony had gone out on CNN's live global feed, and positive that it was being watched in China.

“I expect the language will be profane.”

“They’ve said nasty things about me lately,” Jack assured him.

“That you should have carnal relations with your mother, no doubt.”

“Actually, that I should have oral sex with her,” the President confirmed distastefully. “I suppose everybody says things like that in private.”

“In person, it can get a man shot.”

Ryan grunted grim semi-amusement. “Bet your ass, Sergey.”

“Will this work?” Golovko asked.

“I was going to ask you that. You’re closer to them than we are.”

“I do not know,” the Russian said, with a tiny sip of his vodka glass. “And if it does not .. :”

“In that case, you have some new allies.”

“And what of the precise wording of Articles Five and Six of the treaty?”

“Sergey, you may tell your president that the United States will regard an attack on any part of the territory of the Russian Federation as operative under the North Atlantic Treaty. On that, Sergey Nikolay’ch, you have the word and the commitment of the United States of America,” SWORDSMAN told his Russian acquaintance.

“Jack, if I may address you in this way, I have told my president more than once that you are a man of honor, and a man of your word.” The relief on his face was obvious.

“Sergey, from you those words are flattering. It’s simple, really. It’s your land, and a nation like ours cannot just stand by and watch a robbery of this scale taking place. It corrupts the foundations of international peace. It’s our job to remake the world into a peaceful place. There’s been enough war.”

“I fear there will be another,” Golovko said, with characteristic honesty.

“Then together your country and mine will make it the very last.”

“Plato said, ‘Only the dead have seen the end of war.’ ”

“So, are we to be bound by the words of a Greek who lived twenty-five centuries ago? I prefer the words of a Jew who lived five centuries later. It’s time, Sergey. It’s fucking time,” Ryan said forcefully.

“I hope you are right. You Americans, always so madly optimistic...”

“There’s a reason for that.”

“Oh? What would that be?” the Russian asked.

Jack fixed his eyes on his Russian colleague. “In my country, all things are possible. They will be in your country, too, if you just allow it. Embrace democracy, Sergey. Embrace freedom. Americans are not genetically different from the rest of the world. We’re mongrels. We have the blood of every country on earth in our veins. The only thing different between us and the rest

of the world is our Constitution. Just a set of rules. That's all, Sergey, but it has served us well. You've been studying us for how long?"

"Since I joined the KGB? Over thirty-five years."

"And what have you learned of America and how it works?" Ryan asked.

"Obviously not enough," Golovko answered honestly. "The spirit of your country has always puzzled me."

"Because it's too simple. You were looking for complexity. We allow people to pursue their dreams, and when the dreams succeed, we reward them. Others see that happen and chase after their own dreams."

"But the class issues?"

"What class issues? Sergey, not everybody goes to Harvard. I didn't, remember? My father was a cop. I was the first guy in my family to finish college. Look how I turned out. Sergey, we do not have class distinctions in America. You can be what you choose to be, if you are willing to work at it. You can succeed or you can fail. Luck helps," Ryan admitted, "but it comes down to work."

"All Americans have stars in their eyes," the Chairman of the SVR observed tersely.

"The better to see the heavens," Ryan responded.

"Perhaps. Just so they don't come crashing down on us."

So, what does this mean for us?" Xu Kun Piao asked, in an entirely neutral voice.

Zhang Han San and his premier had been watching the CNN feed in the latter's private office, complete with simultaneous translation through headphones now discarded. The senior Minister Without Portfolio made a dismissive wave of the hand.

"I've read the North Atlantic Treaty," he said. "It does not apply to us at all. Articles Five and Six limit its military application to events in Europe and North America only—all right, it includes Turkey, and, as originally written, Algeria, which was part of France in 1949. For incidents at sea, it applies only to the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, and then only north of the Tropic of Cancer. Otherwise, the NATO countries would have been compelled to join in the Korean War and Vietnam on the American side. Those things did not happen because the treaty did not apply outside its defined area. Nor does it apply to us. Treaty documents have discrete language and discrete application," he reminded his party chief. "They are not open-ended."

"I am concerned even so," Xu responded.

"Hostilities are not activities to be undertaken lightly," Zhang admitted. "But the real danger to us is economic collapse and the resulting social chaos. *That,* comrade, could bring down our entire social order, and *that* is something

we cannot risk. But, when we succeed in seizing the oil and gold, we need not worry about such things. With our own abundant oil supply, we will not face an energy crisis, and with gold we can buy anything we require from the rest of the world. My friend, you must understand the West. They worship money, and they base their economies on oil. With those two things they must do business with us. Why did America intervene in the Kuwait affair? Oil. Why did Britain, France, and all the other nations join in? Oil. He who has oil is their friend. We shall have oil. It is that simple," Zhang concluded.

"You are very confident."

The minister nodded. "Yes, Xu, I am, because I have studied the West for many years. The way they think is actually very predictable. The purpose of this treaty might be to frighten us, I suppose, but it is at most a paper tiger. Even if they wished to provide military assistance to Russia, they do not have the ability to do so. And I do not believe that they have that wish. They cannot know our plans, because if they did, they would have pressed their advantage over us in terms of currency reserves at the trade talks, but they did not, did they?" Zhang asked.

"Is there no way they could know?"

"It is most unlikely. Comrade Tan has no hint of foreign espionage in our country at anything approaching a high level, and his sources in Washington and elsewhere have not caught a sniff of such information being available to them."

"Then why did they just broaden NATO?" Xu demanded.

"Is it not obvious? Russia is becoming rich with oil and gold, and the capitalist states wish to partake in the Russians' good fortune. That is what they said in the press, isn't it? It is fully in keeping with the capitalist ethos: mutual greed. Who can say, perhaps in five years they will invite us into NATO for the same reason," Zhang observed with an ironic leer.

"You are confident that our plans have not been compromised ?"

"As we come to a higher alert level and begin moving troops, we may expect some reaction from the Russians. But the rest of them? Bah! Tan and Marshal Luo are confident as well."

"Very well," Xu said, not entirely persuaded, but agreeing even so.

It was morning in Washington. Vice President Jackson was de facto boss of the crisis-management team, a place assured by his previous job, Director of Operations—J-3—for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. One nice thing about the White House was the good security, made better still by bringing people in via helicopter and car, and by the fact that the Joint Chiefs could teleconference in from their meeting room—"the Tank"—over a secure fiber-optic link.

"Well?" Jackson asked, looking at the large television on the wall of the Situation Room.

“Mancuso has his people at work in Hawaii. The Navy can give the Chinese a bad time, and the Air Force can move a lot of assets to Russia if need be,” said Army General Mickey Moore, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. “It’s the land side of the equation that has me worried. We could theoretically move one heavy division—First Armored—from Germany east, along with some attachments, and maybe NATO will join in with some additional stuff, but the Russian army is in miserable shape at the moment, especially in the Far East, and there’s also the additional problem that China has twelve CSS-4 intercontinental ballistic missiles. We figure eight or more of them are aimed at us.”

“Tell me more,” TOMCAT ordered.

“They’re Titan-II clones. Hell,” Moore went on, “I just found out the background earlier today. They were designed by a CalTech-educated Air Force colonel of Chinese ethnicity who defected over there in the 1950s. Some bone-head trumped up some security charges against him—turned out they were all bullshit, would you believe—and he bugged out with a few suitcases’ worth of technical information right out of JPL, where he was working at the time. So, the ChiComms built what were virtually copies of the old Martin-Marietta missile, and, like I said, we figure eight of them are aimed back at us.”

“Warheads?”

“Five-megaton is our best guess. City-busters. The birds are bitches to maintain, just like ours were. We figure they’re kept defueled most of the time, and they probably need two to four hours to bring them up to launch readiness. That’s the good news. The bad news is that they upgraded the protection on the silos over the last decade, probably as a result of what we did in the Iraq bombing campaign and also the B-2 strikes into Japan on their SS-19 clones. The current estimate is that the covers are fifteen feet of rebarred concrete plus three feet of armor-class steel. We don’t have a conventional bomb that’ll penetrate that.”

“Why not?” Jackson demanded in considerable surprise.

“Because the GBU-29 we cobbled together to take out that deep bunker in Baghdad was designed to hang on the F-111. It’s the wrong dimensions for the B-2’s bomb bay, and the 111 s are all at the boneyard in Arizona. So, we have the bombs, okay, but nothing to deliver them with. Best option to take those silos out would be air-launched cruise missiles with W-80 warheads, assuming the President will authorize a nuclear strike on them.”

“What warning will we have that the Chinese have prepared the missiles for launch?”

“Not much,” Moore admitted. “The new silo configuration pretty well prevents that. The silo covers are massive beasts. We figure they plan to blow them off with explosives, like we used to do.”

“Do we have nuke-tipped cruise missiles?”

“No, the President has to authorize that. The birds and the warheads are co-

located at Whiteman Air Force Base along with the B-2s. It would take a day or so to mate them up. I'd recommend that the President authorize that if this Chinese situation goes any further," Moore concluded.

And the best way to deliver nuclear-tipped cruise missiles—off Navy submarines or carrier-based strike aircraft—was impossible because the Navy had been completely stripped of its nuclear weapons inventory, and fixing that would not be especially easy, Jackson knew. The fallout of the nuclear explosion in Denver, which had brought the world to the brink of a full-scale nuclear exchange, had caused Russia and America to take a deep breath and then to eliminate all of their ballistic launchers. Both sides still had nuclear weapons, of course. For America they were mostly B-61 and -83 gravity bombs and W-80 thermonuclear warheads that could be affixed to cruise missiles. Both systems could be delivered with a high degree of confidence and accuracy, and stealth. The B-2A bomber was invisible to radar (and hard enough to spot visually unless you were right next to it) and the cruise missiles smoked in so low that they merged not merely with ground clutter but with highway traffic as well. But they lacked the speed of ballistic weapons. That was the trouble with the fearsome weapons, but that was also their advantage. Twenty-five minutes from turning the "enable-launch" key to impact—even less for the sea-launched sort, which usually flew shorter distances. But those were all gone, except for the ones kept for ABM tests, and those had been modified to make them difficult to fit with warheads.

"Well, we just try to keep this one conventional. How many nuclear weapons could we deliver if we had to?"

"First strike, with the B-2s?" Moore asked. "Oh, eighty or so. If you figure two per target, enough to turn every major city in the PRC into a parking lot. It would kill upwards of a hundred million people," the Chairman added. He didn't have to say that he had no particular desire to do that. Even the most bloodthirsty soldiers were repelled by the idea of killing civilians in such numbers, and those who made four-star rank got there by being thoughtful, not psychotic.

"Well, if we let them know that, they ought to think hard about pissing us off that big," Jackson decided.

"They ought to be *that* rational, I suppose," Mickey Moore agreed. "Who wants to be the ruler of a parking lot?" But the problem with that, he didn't add, was that people who started wars of aggression were never completely rational.

How do we go about calling up reserves?" Bondarenko asked.

Theoretically, almost every Russian male citizen was liable to such a call-up, because most of them had served in their country's military at one time or another. It was a tradition that dated back to the czars, when the Russian army had been likened to a steamroller because of its enormous mass.

The practical problem today, however, was that the state didn't know where they all lived. The state required that the veterans of uniformed service tell the army when they moved from one residence to another, but the men in question, since until recently they'd needed the state's permission to move anywhere, assumed that the state knew where they were and rarely bothered, and the country's vast and cumbersome bureaucracy was too elephantine to follow up on such things. As a result, neither Russia, nor the Soviet Union before it, had done much to test its ability to call up trained soldiers who'd left their uniforms behind. There were whole reserve divisions that had the most modern of equipment, but it had never been moved after being rolled into their warehouses, and was attended only by cadres of active-duty mechanics who actually spent the time to maintain it, turning over the engines in accordance with written schedules which they followed as mindlessly as the orders that had been drafted and printed. And so, the general commanding the Far East Military Theater had access to thousands of tanks and guns for which he had no soldiers, along with mountains of shells and virtual lakes of diesel fuel.

The word "camouflage," meaning a trick to be played or a ruse, is French in origin. It really ought to be Russian, however, because Russians were the world's experts at this military art. The storage sites for the real tanks that formed the backbone of Bondarenko's theoretical army were so skillfully hidden that only his own staff knew where they were. A good fraction of the sites had even evaded American spy satellites that had searched for years for the locations. Even the roads leading to the storage sites were painted with deceptive colors, or planted with false conifer trees. This was all one more lesson of World War II, when the Soviet Army had totally befuddled the Germans so often that one wondered why the Wehrmacht even bothered employing intelligence officers, they had been snookered so frequently.

"We're getting orders out now," Colonel Aliyev replied. "With luck, half of them ought to find people who've worn the uniform. We could do better if we made a public announcement."

"No," Bondarenko replied. "We can't let them know we're getting ready. What about the officer corps?"

"For the reserve formations? Well, we have an ample supply of lieutenants and captains, just no privates or NCOs for them to command. I suppose if we need to we can field a complete regiment or so of junior officers driving tanks," Aliyev observed dryly.

"Well, such a regiment ought to be fairly proficient," the general observed with what passed for light humor. "How fast to make the call-up happen?"

"The letters are already addressed and stamped. They should all be delivered in three days."

"Mail them at once. See to it yourself, Andrey," Bondarenko ordered.

"By your command, Comrade General." Then he paused. "What do you make of this NATO business?"

"If it brings us help, then I am for it. I'd love to have American aircraft at my command. I remember what they did to Iraq. There are a lot of bridges I'd like to see dropped into the rivers they span."

"And their land forces?"

"Do not underestimate them. I've seen how they train, and I've driven some of their equipment. It's excellent, and their men know how to make use of it. One company of American tanks, competently led and supported, can hold off a whole regiment. Remember what they did to the army of the United Islamic Republic. Two active-duty regiments and a brigade of territorials crushed two heavy corps as if it were a sand-table exercise. That's why I want to upgrade our training. Our men are as good as theirs, Andrey Petrovich, but their training is the best I have ever seen. Couple that to their equipment, and there you have their advantage."

"And their commanders?"

"Good, but no better than ours. Shit, they copy our doctrine time and again. I've challenged them on this face-to-face, and they freely admit that they admire our operational thinking. But they make better use of our doctrine than we do—because they train their men better."

"And they train better because they have more money to spend."

"There you have it. They don't have tank commanders painting rocks around the motor pool, as we do," Bondarenko noted sourly. He'd just begun to change that, but just-begun was a long way from mission-accomplished. "Get the call-up letters out, and remember, we must keep this quiet. Go. I have to talk to Moscow."

"Yes, Comrade General." The G-3 made his departure.

Well, ain't that something?" Major General Diggs commented after watching the TV show.

"Makes you wonder what NATO is for," Colonel Masterman agreed.

"Duke, I grew up expecting to see T-72 tanks rolling through the Fulda Gap like cockroaches on a Bronx apartment floor. Hell, now they're our friends?" He had to shake his head in disbelief. "I've met a few of their senior people, like that Bondarenko guy running the Far East Theater. He's pretty smart, serious professional. Visited me at Fort Irwin. Caught on real fast, really hit it off with Al Hamm and the Blackhorse. Our kind of soldier."

"Well, sir, I guess he really is now, eh?"

That's when the phone rang. Diggs lifted it. "General Diggs. Okay, put him through.... Morning, sir.... Just fine, thanks, and—yes? What's that? ... This is serious, I presume.... Yes, sir. Yes, sir, we're ready as hell. Very well, sir. Bye." He set the phone back down. "Duke, good thing you're sitting down."

"What gives?"

"That was SACEUR. We got alert orders to be ready to entrain and move east."

"East where?" the divisional operations officer asked, surprised. An unscheduled exercise in Eastern Germany, maybe?

"Maybe as far as Russia, the eastern part. Siberia, maybe," Diggs added in a voice that didn't entirely believe what it said.

"What the hell?"

"NCA is concerned about a possible dust-up between the Russians and the Chinese. If it happens, we may have to go east to support Ivan."

"What the hell?" Masterman observed yet again.

"He's sending his J-2 down to brief us in on what he's got from Washington. Ought to be here in half an hour."

"Who else? Is this a NATO tasking?"

"He didn't say. Guess we'll have to wait and see. For the moment just you and the staff, the ADC, and the brigade sixes are in on the brief."

"Yes, sir," Masterman said, there being little else he could say.

The Air Force sends a number of aircraft when the President travels. Among these were C-5B Galaxies. Known to the Navy as "the aluminum cloud" for its huge bulk, the transport is capable of carrying whole tanks in its cavernous interior. In this case, however, they carried VC- 60 helicopters, larger than a tank in dimensions, but far lighter in weight.

The VH-60 is a version of the Sikorsky Blackhawk troop-carrier, somewhat cleaned up and appointed for VIP passengers. The pilot was Colonel Dan Malloy, a Marine with over five thousand hours of stick time in rotary-ring aircraft, whose radio call-sign was "Bear." Cathy Ryan knew him well. He usually flew her to Johns Hopkins in the morning in a twin to this aircraft. There was a co-pilot, a lieutenant who looked impossibly young to be a professional aviator, and a crew chief, a Marine staff sergeant E-6 who saw to it that everyone was properly strapped in, something that Cathy did better than Jack, who was not used to the different restraints in this aircraft.

Aside from that the Blackhawk flew superbly, not at all like the earthquake-while-sitting-on-a-chandelier sensation usually associated with such contrivances. The flight took almost an hour, with the President listening in on the headset/ear protectors. Overhead, all aerial traffic was closed down, even commercial flights in and out of every commercial airport to which they came close. The Polish government was concerned with his safety.

"There it is," Malloy said over the intercom. "Eleven o'clock."

The aircraft banked left to give everyone a good look out the polycarbonate windows. Ryan felt a sudden sense of enforced sobriety come over him. There was a rudimentary railroad station building with two tracks, and another spur

that ran off through the arch in yet another building. There were a few other structures, but mainly just concrete pads to show where there had been a large number of others, and Ryan's mind could see them from the black-and-white movies shot from aircraft, probably Russian ones, in World War II. They'd been oddly warehouse-like buildings, he remembered. But the wares stored in them had been human beings, though the people who'd built this place hadn't seen it that way; they had regarded them as vermin, insects or rats, something to be eliminated as efficiently and coldly as possible.

That's when the chill hit. It was not a warm morning, the temperature in the upper fifties or so, Jack thought, but his skin felt colder than that number indicated. The chopper landed softly, and the sergeant got the door open and the President stepped out onto the landing pad that had recently been laid for just this purpose. An official of the Polish government came up and shook his hand, introducing himself, but Ryan missed it all, suddenly a tourist in Hell itself, or so it felt. The official who would be serving as guide led them to a car for the short drive closer to the facility. Jack slid in beside his wife.

"Jack ..." she whispered.

"Yeah," he acknowledged. "Yeah, babe, I know." And he spoke not another word, not even hearing the well-prepared commentary the Pole was giving him.

"Arbeit Macht Frei" the wrought-iron arch read. *Work makes free* was the literal meaning, perhaps the most callously cynical motto ever crafted by the twisted minds of men calling themselves civilized. Finally, the car stopped, and they got out into the air again, and again the guide led them from place to place, telling them things they didn't hear but rather felt, because the very air seemed heavy with evil. The grass was wonderfully green, almost like a golf course from the spring rain ... from the nutrients in the soil? Jack wondered. Lots of those. More than two million people had met death in this place. Two million. Maybe three. After a while, counting lost its meaning, and it became just a number, a figure on a ledger, written in by some accountant or other who'd long since stopped considering what the digits represented.

He could see it in his mind, the human shapes, the bodies, the heads, but thankfully not the faces of the dead. He presently found himself walking along what the German guards had called *Himmel Straße,* the Road to Heaven. But why had they called it that? Was it pure cynicism, or did they really believe there was a God looking down on what they did, and if so, what had they thought He thought of this place and their activity? What kind of men could they have been? Women and children had been slaughtered immediately upon arrival here because they had little value as workers in the industrial facilities that I. G. Farben had built, so as to take the last measure of utility from the people sent here to die—to make a little profit from their last months. Not just Jews, of course; the Polish aristocracy and the Polish priesthood had been killed here. Gypsies. Homosexuals. Jehovah's Witnesses. Others deemed undesirable by Hitler's government. Just insects to be eliminated with Zyklon-B gas, a derivative of pesticide research by the German chemical industries.

Ryan had not expected this to be a pleasant side trip. What he'd anticipated

was an educational experience, like visiting the battlefield at Antietam, for example.

But this hadn't been a battlefield, and it didn't feel at all like one.

What must it have been like for the men who'd liberated this place in 1945? Jack wondered. Even hardened soldiers, men who'd faced death every day for years, must have been taken aback by what they'd found here. For all its horrors, the battlefield remained a place of honor, where men tested men in the most fundamental way—it was cruel and final, of course, but there was the purity of fighting men contesting with other fighting men, using weapons, but—but that was rubbish, Jack thought. There was little nobility to be found in war ... and far less in this place. On a battlefield, for whatever purpose and with whatever means, men fought against *men,* not women and kids. There was some honor to be had in the former, but not ... this. This was crime on a vast scale, and as evil as war was, at the human level it stopped short of what men called crime, the deliberate infliction of harm upon the innocent. How could men do such a thing? Germany was today, as it had been then, a Christian country, the same nation that had brought forth Martin Luther, Beethoven, and Thomas Mann. Did it all come down to their leader? Adolf Hitler, a nebbish of a man, born to a middle-grade civil servant, a failure at everything he'd tried ... except demagoguery. He'd been a fucking genius at that ...

... But why had Hitler hated anyone so much as to harness the industrial might of his nation not for conquest, which was bad enough, but for the base purpose of cold-blooded extermination? That, Jack knew, was one of history's most troublesome mysteries. Some said Hitler had hated the Jews because he'd seen one on the streets of Vienna and simply disliked him. Another expert in the field, a Jew himself, had posed the proposition that a Jewish prostitute had given the failed Austrian painter gonorrhea, but there was no documentary evidence upon which to base that. Yet another school of thought was more cynical still, saying that Hitler hadn't really cared about the Jews one way or another, but needed an enemy for people to hate so that he could become leader of Germany, and had merely seized upon the Jews as a target of opportunity, just something against which to mobilize his nation. Ryan found this alternative unlikely, but the most offensive of all. For whatever reason, he'd taken the power his country had given him and turned it to this purpose. In doing so, Hitler had cursed his name for all time to come, but that was no consolation to the people whose remains fertilized the grass. Ryan's wife's boss at Johns Hopkins was a Jewish doc named Bernie Katz, a friend of many years. How many such men had died here? How many potential Jonas Salks? Maybe an Einstein or two? Or poets, or actors, or just ordinary workers who would have raised ordinary kids ...

... and when Jack had sworn the oath of office mandated by the United States Constitution, he'd really sworn to protect such people as those, and maybe such people as these, too. As a man, as an American, and as President of the United States, did he not have a duty to prevent such things from ever happening again? He actually believed that the use of armed force could only be justified to protect American lives and vital American security interests. But

was that all America was? What about the principles upon which his nation was founded? Did America only apply them to specific, limited places and goals? What about the rest of the world? Were these not the graves of real people?

John Patrick Ryan stood and looked around, his face as empty right now as his soul, trying to understand what had taken place here, and what he could—what he *had to* learn from this. He had immense power at his fingertips every day he lived in the White House. How to use it? How to apply it? What to fight against? More important, what to fight *for?*

"Jack," Cathy said quietly, touching his hand.

"Yeah, I've seen enough, too. Let's get the hell away from this place." He turned to the Polish guide and thanked him for words he'd scarcely heard and started walking back to where the car was. Once more they passed under the wrought-iron arch of a lie, doing what two or three million people had never done.

If there were such a thing as ghosts, they'd spoken to him without words, but done it in one voice: *Never again.* And silently, Ryan agreed. Not while he lived. Not while America lived.

CHAPTER 46

Journey Home

They waited for SORGE, and rarely had anyone waited more expectantly even for the arrival of a firstborn child. There was a little drama to it, too, because SORGE didn't deliver every day, and they could not always see a pattern when it appeared and when it didn't. Ed and Mary Pat Foley both awoke early that morning, and lay in bed for over an hour with nothing to do, then finally arose to drink their breakfast coffee and read the papers in the kitchen of their middle-class home in suburban Virginia. The kids went off to school, and then the parents finished dressing and walked out to their "company" car, complete with driver and escort vehicle. The odd part was that their car was guarded but their house was not, and so a terrorist only had to be smart enough to attack the house, which was not all that hard. The *Early Bird* was waiting for them in the car, but it had little attraction for either of them this morning. The comic strips in the *Post* had been more interesting, especially "Non Sequitur," their favorite morning chuckle, and the sports pages.

"What do you think?" Mary Pat asked Ed. That managed to surprise him, since his wife didn't often ask his opinion of a field-operations question.

He shrugged as they passed a Dunkin' Donuts box. "Coin toss, Mary."

"I suppose. I sure hope it comes up heads this time."

"Jack's going to ask us in ... an hour and a half, I suppose."

"Something like that," the DDO agreed in a breathy voice.

"The NATO thing ought to work, ought to make them think things over," the DCI thought aloud.

"Don't bet the ranch on it, honey bunny," Mary Pat warned.

"I know." Pause. "When does Jack get on the airplane to come home?"

She checked her watch. "About two hours."

"We should know by then."

"Yeah," she agreed.

Ten minutes later, informed of the shape of the world en route by National Public Radio's *Morning Edition,* they arrived at Langley, again parking in the underground garage, and again taking the elevator up to the seventh floor, where, again, they split up, going to their separate offices. In this, Ed surprised his wife. She'd expected him to hover over her shoulder as she flipped on her office computer, looking for another brownie recipe, as she called it. This

happened at seven-fifty-four.

"You've got mail," the electronic voice announced as she accessed her special Internet account. Her hand wasn't quite shaking when she moved the mouse to click on the proper icon, but nearly so. The letter came up, went through the descrambling process, and came up as clear-text she couldn't read. As always, MP saved the document to her hard drive, confirmed that it was saved, then printed up a hard copy, and finally deleted the letter from her electronic in-box, completely erasing it off the Internet. Then she lifted her phone.

"Please have Dr. Sears come up right away," she told her secretary.

Joshua Sears had also come in early this morning, and was sitting at his desk reading the *New York Times* financial page when the call came. He was in the elevator in under a minute, and then in the office of the Deputy Director (Operations).

"Here," Mary Pat said, handing over the six pages of ideographs. "Take a seat."

Sears sat in a comfortable chair and started his translation. He could see that the DDO was a little exercised about this, and his initial diagnosis came as he turned to page two.

"This isn't good news," he said, without looking up. "Looks like Zhang is guiding Premier Xu in the direction he wants. Fang is uneasy about it, but he's going along, too. Marshal Luo is fully on the team. I guess that's to be expected. Luo's always been a hardball guy," Sears commented. "Talk here's about operational security, concern that we might know what they're up to—but they think they're secure," Sears assured the DDO.

As many times as she'd heard that sort of thing, it never failed to give her a severe case of the chills, hearing the enemy (to Mary Pat nearly everyone was an enemy) discuss the very possibility that she'd devoted her entire professional life to realizing. And almost always you heard their voices saying that, no, there wasn't anyone like her out there hearing them. She'd never really left her post in Moscow, when she'd been control officer for Agent CARDINAL. He'd been old enough to have been her grandfather, but she'd thought of him as her own newborn, as she gave him taskings, and collected his take, forwarding it back to Langley, always worried for his safety. She was out of that game now, but it came down to the same thing. Somewhere out there was a foreign national sending America information of vital interest. She knew the person's name, but not her face, not her motivation, just that she liked to share her bed with one of her officers, and she kept the official diary for this Minister Fang, and her computer sent it out on the Web, on a path that ended at her seventh-floor desk.

"Summary?" she asked Dr. Sears.

"They're still on the warpath," the analyst replied. "Maybe they'll turn off it at some later date, but there is no such indication here."

"If we warn them off ... ?"

Sears shrugged. “No telling. Their real concern is internal political dissension and possible collapse. This economic crisis has them worried about political ruin for them all, and that’s all they’re worried about.”

“Wars are begun by frightened men,” the DDO observed.

“That’s what history tells us,” Sears agreed. “And it’s happening again, right before our eyes.”

“Shit,” Mrs. Foley observed. “Okay, print it up and get it back to me, fast as you can.”

“Yes, ma’am. Half hour. You want me to show this to George Weaver, right?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. The academic had been going over the SORGE data for several days, taking his time to formulate his part of the SNIE slowly and carefully, which was the way he worked. “You mind working with him?”

“Not really. He knows their heads pretty well, maybe a little better than I do —he has a master’s in psychology from Yale. Just he’s a little slow formulating his conclusions.”

“Tell him I want something I can use by the end of the day.”

“Will do,” Sears promised, rising for the door. Mary Pat followed him out, but took a different turn.

“Yeah?” Ed Foley said, when she came into his office.

“You’ll have the write-up in half an hour or so. Short version: They are not impressed by the NATO play.”

“Oh, shit,” the DCI observed at once.

“Yeah,” his wife agreed. “Better find out how quick we can get the information to Jack.”

“Okay.” The DCI lifted his secure phone and punched the speed-dial button for the White House.

There was one last semi-official meeting at the American Embassy before departure, and again it was Golovko speaking for his President, who was away schmoozing with the British Prime Minister.

“What did you make of Auschwitz?” the Russian asked.

“It ain’t Disney World,” Jack replied, taking a sip of coffee. “Have you been there?”

“My uncle Sasha was part of the force that liberated the camp,” Sergey replied. “He was a tank commander—a colonel—in the Great Motherland War.”

“Did you talk to him about it?”

"When I was a boy. Sasha—my mother's brother, he was—was a true soldier, a hard man with hard rules for life, and a committed communist. That must have shaken him, though," Golovko went on. "He didn't really talk about what effect it had on him. Just that it was ugly, and proof to him of the correctness of his cause. He said he had an especially good war after that—he got to kill more Germans."

"And what about the things—"

"Stalin did? We never spoke of that in my family. My father was NKVD, as you know. He thought that whatever the state did was correct. Not unlike what the *fascisti* thought at Auschwitz, I admit, but he would not have seen it that way. Those were different times, Ivan Emmetovich. Harder times. Your father served in the war as well, as I recall."

"Paratrooper, One-Oh-First. He never talked much about it, just the funny things that happened. He said the night drop into Normandy was pretty scary, but that's all—he never said what it was like running around in the dark with people shooting at him."

"It cannot be very enjoyable, to be a soldier in combat."

"I don't suppose it is. Sending people out to do it isn't fun, either. God damn it, Sergey! I'm supposed to protect people, not risk their lives."

"So, you are not like Hitler. And not like Stalin," the Russian added graciously. "And neither is Eduard Petrovich. It is a gentler world we live in, gentler than that of our fathers and our uncles. But not gentle enough yet. When will you know how our Chinese friends reacted to yesterday's events?"

"Soon, I hope, but we're not exactly sure. You know how that works."

"Da." You depended on the reports of your agents, but you were never sure when they would come in, and in the expectation came frustration. Sometimes you wanted to wring their necks, but that was both foolish and morally wrong, as they both knew.

"Any public reaction?" Ryan asked. The Russians would have seen it sooner than his own people.

"A nonreaction, Mr. President. No public comment at all. Not unexpected, but somewhat disappointing."

"If they move, can you stop them?"

"President Grushavoy has asked that very question of Stavka, his military chiefs, but they have not yet answered substantively. We are concerned with operational security. We do not wish the PRC to know that we know anything."

"That can work against you," Ryan warned.

"I said that very thing this morning, but soldiers have their own ways, don't they? We are calling up some reserves, and warning orders have gone out to some mechanized troops. The cupboard, however, as you Americans say, is somewhat bare at the moment."

“What have you done about the people who tried to kill you?” Ryan asked, changing the subject.

“The main one is under constant observation at the moment. If he tries something else, we will then speak to him,” Golovko promised. “The connection, again, is Chinese, as you know.”

“I’ve heard.”

“Your FBI agent in Moscow, that Reilly fellow, is very talented. We could have used him in Second Directorate.”

“Yeah, Dan Murray thinks a lot of him.”

“If this Chinese matter goes further, we need to set up a liaison group between your military and ours.”

“Work through SACEUR,” Ryan told him. He’d already thought that one through. “He has instructions to cooperate with your people.”

“Thank you, Mr. President. I will pass that along. So, your family, it is well?” You couldn’t have this sort of meeting without irrelevant pleasantries.

“My oldest, Sally, is dating. That’s hard on Daddy,” Ryan admitted.

“Yes.” Golovko allowed himself a smile. “You live in fear that she will come upon such a boy as you were, yes?”

“Well, the Secret Service helps keep the little bastards under control.”

“There is much to be said for men with guns, yes,” the Russian agreed with some amusement, to lighten the moment.

“Yeah, but I think daughters are God’s punishment on us for being men.” That observation earned Ryan a laugh.

“Just so, Ivan Emmetovich, just so.” And Sergey paused again. Back to business: “It is a hard time for both of us, is it not?”

“Yeah, it is that.”

“Perhaps the Chinese will see us standing together and reconsider their greed. Together our fathers’ generation killed Hitler, after all. Who can stand against the two of us?”

“Sergey, wars are not rational acts. They are not begun by rational men. They’re begun by people who don’t care a rat-fuck about the people they rule, who’re willing to get their fellow men killed for their own narrow purposes. This morning I saw such a place. It was Satan’s amusement park, I suppose, but not a place for a man like me. I came away angry. I wouldn’t mind having a chance to see Hitler, long as I have a gun in my hand when I do.” It was a foolish thing to say, but Golovko understood.

“With luck, together we will prevent this Chinese adventure.”

“And if not?”

“Then together we will defeat them, my friend. And perhaps that will be the last war of all.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” the President replied. “I’ve had that thought before myself, but I suppose it’s a worthy goal.”

“When you find out what the Chinese say ... ?”

“We’ll get the word to you.”

Golovko rose. “Thank you. I will convey that to my President.”

Ryan walked the Russian to the door, then headed off to the ambassador’s office.

“This just came in.” Ambassador Lewendowski handed over the fax. “Is this as bad as it looks?” The fax was headed EYES-ONLY PRESIDENT, but it had come into *his* embassy.

Ryan took the pages and started reading. “Probably. If the Russians need help via NATO, will the Poles throw in?”

“I don’t know. I can ask.”

The President shook his head. “Too soon for that.”

“Did we bring the Russians into NATO with the knowledge of this?” The question showed concern that stopped short of outrage at the violation of diplomatic etiquette.

Ryan looked up. “What do you think?” He paused. “I need your secure phone.”

Forty minutes later, Jack and Cathy Ryan walked up the steps into their airplane for the ride home. SURGEON was not surprised to see her husband disappear into the aircraft’s upper communications level, along with the Secretary of State. She suspected that her husband might have stolen a smoke or two up there, but she was asleep by the time he came back down.

For his part, Ryan wished he had, but couldn’t find a smoker up there. The two who indulged had left their smokes in their luggage to avoid the temptation to violate USAF regulations. The President had a single drink and got into his seat, rocking it back for a nap, during which he found himself dreaming of Auschwitz, mixing it up with scenes remembered from *Schindler’s List.* He awoke over Iceland, sweating, to see his wife’s angelic sleeping face, and to remind himself that, bad as the world was, it wasn’t quite that bad anymore. And his job was to keep it that way.

Okay, is there any way to make them back off?” Robby Jackson asked the people assembled in the White House Situation Room.

Professor Weaver struck him as just one more academic, long of wind and short of conclusion. Jackson listened anyway. This guy knew more about the way the Chinese thought. He must. His explanation was about as incomprehensible as the thought processes he was attempting to make clear.

“Professor,” Jackson said finally, “that’s all well and good, but what the hell does something that happened nine centuries ago tell us about today? These

are Maoists, not royalists."

"Ideology is usually just an excuse for behavior, Mr. Vice President, not a reason for it. Their motivations are the same today as they would have been under the Chin Dynasty, and they fear exactly the same thing: the revolt of the peasantry if the economy goes completely bad," Weaver explained to this pilot, a technician, he thought, and decidedly not an intellectual. At least the President had some credentials as a historian, though they weren't impressive to the tenured Ivy League department chairman.

"Back to the real question here: What can we do to make them back off, short of war?"

"Telling them that we know of their plans might give them pause, but they will make their decision on the overall correlation of forces, which they evidently believe to be fully in their favor, judging from what I've been reading from this SORGE fellow."

"So, they won't back off?" the VP asked.

"I cannot guarantee that," Weaver answered.

"And blowing our source gets somebody killed," Mary Pat Foley reminded the assembly.

"Which is just one life against many," Weaver pointed out.

Remarkably, the DDO didn't leap across the table to rip his academic face off. She respected Weaver as an area specialist/consultant. But fundamentally he was one more ivory-tower theoretician who didn't consider the human lives that rode on decisions like that one. Real people had their lives end, and that was a big deal to those real people, even if it wasn't to this professor in his comfortable office in Providence, Rhode Island.

"It also cancels out a vital source of information in the event that they go forward anyway—which could adversely affect our ability to deal with the real-world military threat, by the way."

"There is that, I suppose," Weaver conceded diffidently.

"Can the Russians stop them?" Jackson asked. General Moore took the question.

"It's six-five and pick 'em," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs answered. "The Chinese have a lot of combat power to unleash. The Russians have a lot of room to absorb it, but not the combat power to repel it per se. If I had to bet, I'd put my money on the PRC—unless we come in. Our air-power could alter the equation somewhat, and if NATO comes in with ground forces, the odds change. It depends on what reinforcements we and the Russians can get into the theater."

"Logistics?"

"A real problem," Mickey Moore conceded. "It all comes down one railway line. It's double-tracked and electrified, but that's the only good news about it."

“Does anybody know how to run an operation like that down a railroad? Hell, we haven’t done it since the Civil War,” Jackson thought aloud.

“Just have to wait and see, sir, if it comes to that. The Russians have doubtless thought it over many times. We’ll depend on them for that.”

“Great,” the Vice President muttered. A lifelong USN sailor, he didn’t like depending on anything except people who spoke American and wore Navy Blue.

“If the variables were fully in our favor, the Chinese wouldn’t be thinking about this operation as seriously as they evidently are.” Which was about as obvious as the value of a double play with the bases loaded and one out in the bottom of the ninth.

“The problem,” George Winston told them, “is that the prize is just too damned inviting. It’s like the bank doors have been left open over a three-day weekend, and the local cops are on strike.”

“Jack keeps saying that a war of aggression is just an armed robbery writ large,” Jackson told them.

“That’s not far off,” SecTreas agreed. Professor Weaver thought the comparison overly simplistic, but what else could you expect of people like these?

“We can warn them off when we start seeing preparations on our overheads,” Ed Foley proposed. “Mickey, when will we start seeing that?”

“Conceivably, two days. Figure a week for them to get ramped up. Their forces are pretty well in theater already, and it’s just a matter of getting them postured—putting them all near their jump-off points. Then doing the final approach march will happen, oh, thirty-six hours before they start pulling the strings on their field guns.”

“And Ivan can’t stop them?”

“At the border? Not a chance,” the general answered, with an emphatic shake of the head. “They’ll have to play for time, trading land for time. The Chinese have a hell of a long trip to get the oil. That’s their weakness, a huge flank to protect and a god-awful vulnerable logistics train. I’d look out for an airborne assault on either the gold or the oil fields. They don’t have much in the way of airborne troops or airlift capacity, but you have to figure they’ll try it anyway. They’re both soft targets.”

“What can we send in?”

“First thing, a lot of air assets, fighters, fighter-bombers, and every aerial tanker we can scrape up. We may not be able to establish air superiority, but we can quickly deny it to them, make it a fifty-fifty proposition almost at once, and then start rolling their air force back. Again it’s a question of numbers, Robby, and a question of how well their flyers are trained. Probably better than the Russians, just because they have more hours on the stick, but technically the Russians actually have generally better aircraft, and probably better doctrine—except they haven’t had the chance to practice it.”

Robby Jackson wanted to grumble that the situation had too many unknowns, but if there hadn't been, as Mickey Moore had just told him, the Chinese wouldn't be leaning on their northern border. Muggers went after little old ladies with their Social Security money, not cops who had just cashed their paychecks on the way home from work. There was much to be said for carrying a gun on the street, and as irrational as street crime or war-starting might be, those who did it were *somewhat* reflective in their choices.

Scott Adler hadn't slept at all on the flight, as he'd played over and over in his mind the question of how to stop a war from starting. That was the primary mission of a diplomat, wasn't it? Mainly he considered his shortcomings. As the prime foreign-affairs officer of his country, he was supposed to know—he was *paid* to know—what to say to people to deflect them from irrational actions. At base that could mean telling them, *Do this and the full power and fury of America will descend on you and ruin your whole day*. Better to cajole them into being reasonable, because in reasonableness was their best salvation as a nation in the global village. But the truth was that the Chinese thought in ways that he could not replicate within his own mind, and so he wasn't sure what to say to make them see the light. The worst part of all was that he'd met this Zhang guy in addition to Foreign Minister Shen, and all he knew for sure was that they did not look upon reality as he did. They saw blue where he saw green, and he couldn't understand their strange version of green well enough to explain it into blue. A small voice chided him for possible racism, but this situation was too far gone for political correctness. He had a war to stop, and he didn't know how. He ended up staring at the bulkhead in front of his comfortable glove-leather seat and wishing it was a movie screen. He felt like seeing a movie now, something to get his mind off the hamster wheel that just kept turning and turning. Then he felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned to see his President, who motioned him to the circular staircase to the upper level. Again they chased two Air Force communicators off their seats.

"Thinking over the newest SORGE?"

"Yep." EAGLE nodded.

"Any ideas?"

The head moved in a different plane now. "No. Sorry, Jack, but it just isn't there. Maybe you need a new SecState."

Ryan grunted. "No, just different enemies. The only thing I see is to tell them we know what they're up to, and that they'd better stop."

"And when they tell us to shove it up our collective ass, then what?"

"You know what we need right now?" SWORDSMAN asked.

"Oh, yeah, a couple hundred Minuteman or Trident missiles would work just fine to show them the light. Unfortunately ..."

"Unfortunately, we did away with them to make the world a safer place.

Oops," Ryan concluded.

"Well, we have the bombs and the aircraft to deliver them, and—"

"No!" Ryan hissed. "No, God damn it, I will not initiate a nuclear war in order to stop a conventional one. How many people do you want me to kill?"

"Easy, Jack. It's my job to present options, remember? Not to advocate them—not that one anyway." He paused. "What did you think of Auschwitz?"

"It's the stuff of nightmares—wait a minute, your parents, right?"

"My father—Belzec in his case, and he lucked out and survived."

"Does he talk about it?"

"Never. Not a single word, even to his rabbi. Maybe a pshrink. He went to one for a few years, but I never knew what for."

"I can't let anything like that happen again. To stop that—yeah, to stop that," Ryan speculated aloud, "yeah, I might drop a B-83."

"You know the lingo?"

"A little. I got briefed in a long time ago, the names for the hardware stuck in my mind. Funny thing, I've never had nightmares about *that.* Well, I've never read into the SIOP—Single Integrated Operation Plan, the cookbook for ending the world. I think I'd eat a gun before I did that."

"A whole lot of presidents had to think those things over," Adler pointed out.

"Before my time, Scott, and they never expected them to happen anyway. They all figured they'd smart their way through it. 'Til Bob Fowler came along and damned near stumbled into calling in the codes. That was some wild Sunday night," Ryan said, remembering.

"Yeah, I know the story. You kept your head screwed on straight. Not many others did."

"Yeah. And look where it got me," POTUS observed with a grim chuckle. He looked out a window. They were over land now, probably Labrador, lots of green and lakes, and few straight lines to show the hand of man on the land. "What do we do, Scott?"

"We try to warn them off. They'll do things we can see with satellites, and then we can call them on it. Our last play will be to tell them that Russia is an American ally now, and messing with Ivan means messing with Uncle Sam. If that doesn't stop them, nothing else will."

"Offer some danegeld to buy them off?" the President wondered.

"A waste of time. I don't think it would work, but I'd be for-damned sure they'd see it as a sign of weakness and be encouraged by it. No, they respect strength, and we have to show them that. Then they'll react one way or another."

"They're going to go," Jack thought.

"Coin toss. Hope it comes up tails, buddy."

"Yeah." Ryan checked his watch. "Early morning in Beijing."

"They'll be waking up and heading in for work," Adler agreed. "What exactly can you tell me about this SORGE source?"

"Mary Pat hasn't told me much, probably best that way. One of the things I learned at Langley. You can know too much sometimes. Better not to know their faces, and especially their names."

"In case something bad happens?"

"When it does, it's pretty bad. Don't want to think what these people would do. Their version of the Miranda warning is, 'You can scream all you want. We don't mind.' "

"Funny," SecState thought.

"Actually it's not all that effective as an interrogation technique. They end up telling you exactly what you want to hear, and you end up dictating it to them instead of getting what they really know."

"What about the appeals process?" Scott asked, with a yawn. Finally, belatedly, he was getting sleepy.

"In China? That's when the shooter asks if you prefer the left ear or the right ear." Ryan stopped himself. Why was he making bad jokes on *this* subject?

The busy place in the Washington, D.C., area was the National Reconnaissance Office. A joint venture of CIA and the Pentagon, NRO ran the reconsats, the big camera birds circling the earth at low-medium altitude, looking down with their hugely expensive cameras that rivaled the precision and expense of the Hubble space telescope. There were three photo-birds up, circling the earth every two hours or so, and passing over the same spot twice a day each. There was also a radar-reconnaissance satellite that had much poorer resolution than the Lockheed- and TRW-MADE KH-11s, but which could see through clouds. This was important at the moment, because a cold front was tracing across the Chinese-Siberian border, and the clouds at its forward edge blanked out all visual light, much to the frustration of the NRO technicians and scientists whose multibillion-dollar satellites were useful only for weather forecasting at the moment. Cloudy with scattered showers, and chilly, temperature in the middle forties, dropping to just below freezing at night.

The intelligence analysts, therefore, closely examined the "take" from the Lacrosse radar-intelligence bird because that was the only game in town at the moment.

"The clouds go all the way down to six thousand feet or so. Even a Blackbird wouldn't be much use at the moment," one of the photo-interpreters observed. "Okay, what do we have here ... ? Looks like a higher level of

railroad activity, looks like flatcars mostly. Something on them, but too much clutter to pick out the shapes."

"What do they move on flatcars?" a naval officer asked.

"Tracked vehicles," an Army major answered, "and heavy guns."

"Can we confirm that supposition from this data?" the Navy guy asked.

"No," the civilian answered. "But ... there, that's the yard. We see six long trains sitting still in the yard. Okay, where's the ..." He accessed his desktop computer and called up some visual imagery. "Here we go. See these ramps? They're designed to offload rolling equipment from the trains." He turned back to the Lacrosse "take." "Yeah, these here look like tank shapes coming off the ramps, and forming up right here in the assembly areas, and that's the shape of an armored regiment. That's three hundred twenty-two main battle tanks, and about a buck and a quarter of APCs, and so ... yeah, I'd estimate that this is a full armored division detraining. Here's the truck park ... and this grouping here, I'm not sure. Looks bulky ... square or rectangular shapes. Hmm," the analyst concluded. He turned back to his own desktop and queried some file images. "You know what this looks like?"

"You going to tell us?"

"Looks like a five-ton truck with a section of ribbon bridge on it. The Chinese copied the Russian bridge design—hell, everybody did. It's a beautiful little design Ivan cobbled together. Anyway, on radar, it looks like this and"—he turned back to the recent satellite take—"that's pretty much what these look like, isn't it? I'll call that eighty percent likelihood. So, this group here I'll call two engineer regiments accompanying this tank division."

"Is that a lot of engineers to back up a single division?" the naval officer asked.

"Sure as hell," the Army major confirmed.

"I'd say so," the photo-interpreter agreed. "The normal TO and E is one battalion per division. So, this is a corps or army vanguard forming up, and I'd have to say they plan to cross some rivers, guys."

"Go on," the senior civilian told him.

"They're postured to head north."

"Okay," the Army officer said. "Have you ever seen this before?"

"Two years ago, they were running an exercise, but that was one engineer regiment, not two, and they left this yard and headed southeast. That one was a pretty big deal. We got a lot of visual overheads. They were simulating an invasion or at least a major assault. That one used a full Group A army, with an armored division and two mechanized divisions as the assault force, and the other mech division simulating a dispersed defense force. The attacking team won that one."

"How different from the way the Russians are deployed on their border?" This was the Navy intelligence officer.

“Thicker—I mean, for the exercise the Chinese defenders were thicker on the ground than the Russians are today.”

“And the attacking force won?”

“Correct.”

“How realistic was the exercise?” the major asked.

“It wasn’t Fort Irwin, but it was as honest as they can run one, and probably accurate. The attackers had the usual advantages in numbers and initiative. They punched through and started maneuvering in the defender’s trains area, had themselves a good old time.”

The naval officer looked at his colleague in green. “Just what they’d be thinking if they wanted to head north.”

“Concur.”

“Better call this one in, Norm.”

“Yep.” And both uniformed officers headed to the phones.

“When’s the weather clear?” the lingering civilian asked the tech.

“Call it thirty-six hours. It’ll start to clear tomorrow night, and we have the taskings already programmed in.” He didn’t have to say that the nighttime capabilities on the KH-11 satellites weren’t all that different from in the daylight—you just didn’t get much in the way of color.

CHAPTER 47

Outlooks and All-Nighters

Westbound jet lag, or travel-shock, as President Ryan preferred to call it, is always easier than eastbound's, and he'd gotten sleep on the airplane. Jack and Cathy walked off Air Force One and to the waiting helicopter, which got them to the landing pad on the South Lawn in the usual ten minutes. This time FLOTUS walked directly into the White House while POTUS walked left toward the West Wing, but to the Situation Room rather than the Oval Office. Vice President Jackson was waiting for him there, along with the usual suspects.

"Hey, Robby."

"How was the flight, Jack?"

"Long." Ryan stretched to get his muscles back under control. "Okay, what's happening?"

"Ain't good, buddy. We have Chinese mechanized troops heading for the Russian border. Here's what we got in from NRO." Jackson personally spread out the printouts from the photo-intelligence troops. "We got mechanized forces here, here, and here, and these are engineers with bridging equipment."

"How long before they're ready?" Ryan asked.

"Potentially as little as three days," Mickey Moore answered. "More likely five to seven."

"What are we doing?"

"We have a lot of warning orders out, but nobody's moving yet."

"Do they know we're onto this?" the President asked next.

"Probably not, but they must know we're keeping an eye on things, and they must know our reconnaissance capabilities. It's been in the open media for twenty-some years," Moore answered.

"Nothing from them to us over diplomatic channels?"

"Bupkis," Ed Foley said.

"Don't tell me they don't care. They have to care."

"Maybe they care, Jack," the DCI responded. "But they're not losing as much sleep over it as they are over internal political problems."

"Anything new from SORGE?"

Foley shook his head. “Not since this morning.”

“Okay, who’s our senior diplomat in Beijing?”

“The DCM at the embassy, but he’s actually fairly junior, new in the post,” the DCI said.

“Okay, well, the note we’re going to send won’t be,” Ryan said. “What time is it over there?”

“Eight-twelve in the morning,” Jackson said, pointing to a wall clock set on Chinese time.

“So, SORGE didn’t report anything from their working day yesterday?”

“No. That happens two or three days per week. It’s not unusual,” Mary Pat pointed out. “Sometimes that means the next one will be extra meaty.”

Everyone looked up when Secretary Adler came in; he had driven instead of helicoptered in from Andrews. He quickly came up to speed.

“That bad?”

“They look serious, man,” Jackson told SecState.

“Sounds like we have to send them that note.”

“They’re too far gone down this road to stop,” another person said. “It’s not likely that any note will work.”

“Who are you?” Ryan asked.

“George Weaver, sir, from Brown. I consult to the Agency on China.”

“Oh, okay. I’ve read some of your work. Pretty good stuff, Dr. Weaver. So, you say they won’t turn back. Tell us why,” the President commanded.

“It’s not because they fear revelation of what they’re up to. Their people don’t know, and won’t find out until Beijing tells them. The problem, as you know, is that they fear a potential economic collapse. If their economy goes south, sir, then you get a revolt of the masses, and that’s the one thing they really fear. They don’t see a way to avoid that other than getting rich, and the way for them to get rich is to seize the newly discovered Russian assets.”

“Kuwait writ large?” Ryan asked.

“Larger and more complex, but, yes, Mr. President, the situation is fundamentally similar. They regard oil both as a commodity and as an entry card into international legitimacy. They figure that if they have it, the rest of the world will have to do business with them. The gold angle is even more obvious. It’s the quintessential trading commodity. If you have it, you can sell it for anything you care to purchase. With those assets and the cash they can buy with them, they figure to bootstrap their national economy to the next level, and they just assume that the rest of the world will play along with them because they’re going to be rich, and capitalists are only interested in money.”

“They’re really that cynical, that shallow?” Adler asked, somewhat shocked at the thought, even after all he’d already been through.

"Their reading of history justifies that outlook, Mr. Secretary. Their analysis of our past actions, and those of the rest of the world, lead them to this conclusion. I grant you that they fail to appreciate what we call our reasons for the actions we took, but in strictly and narrowly factual terms, that's how the world looks to them."

"Only if they're idiots," Ryan observed tiredly. "We're dealing with idiots."

"Mr. President, you're dealing with highly sophisticated political animals. Their outlook on the world is different from ours, and, true, they do not understand us very well, but that does not make them fools," Weaver told the assembly.

Fine, Ryan thought for what seemed the hundredth time, *but then they're Klingons.* There was no sense saying that to Weaver. He'd simply launch into a long-winded rebuttal that wouldn't take the discussion anywhere. And Weaver would be right. Fools or geniuses, you only had to understand *what* they were doing, not why. The *what* might not make sense, but if you knew it, you also knew what had to be stopped.

"Well, let's see if they understand this," Ryan said. "Scott, tell the PRC that if they attack into Russia, America will come to Russia's aid, as required by the North Atlantic Treaty, and—"

"The NATO Treaty doesn't actually say that," Adler warned.

"I say it does, Scott, and more to the point, I told the Russians it does. If the Chinese realize we're not kidding, will it make a difference?"

"That opens up a huge can of worms, Jack," Adler warned. "We have thousands of Americans in China, thousands. Businessmen, tourists, a lot of people."

"Dr. Weaver, how will the Chinese treat foreign nationals in time of war?"

"I would not want to be there to find out. The Chinese can be fine hosts, but in time of war, if, for example, they think you're a spy or something, it could get very difficult. The way they treat their own citizens—well, we've seen that on TV, haven't we?"

"Scott, we also tell them that we hold their government leaders *personally* responsible for the safety and well-being of American citizens in their country. I mean that, Scott. If I have to, I'll sign the orders to track them down and bury their asses. Remind them of Tehran and our old friend Daryaei. That Zhang guy met him once, according to the former Indian Prime Minister, and I had him taken all the way out," Ryan announced coldly. "Zhang would do well to consider that."

"They will not respond well to such threats," Weaver warned. "It's just as easy to say we have a lot of their citizens here, and—"

"We can't do that, and they know it," Ryan shot back.

"Mr. President, I just told you, our concept of laws is alien to them. That sort of threat is one they *will* understand, and they will take it seriously. The question then is how valuable they regard the lives of their own citizens."

"And that is?"

"Less than we do," Weaver answered.

Ryan considered that. "Scott, make sure they know what the Ryan Doctrine means," he ordered. "If necessary, I *will* put a smart bomb through their bedroom windows, even if it takes us ten years to find them."

"The DCM will make that clear. We can also alert our citizens to get the next bird out."

"Yeah, I'd want to get the hell out of Dodge City," Robby Jackson observed. "And you can get that warning out over CNN."

"Depending on how they respond to our note. It's eight-thirty in the morning over there. Scott, that note has to be in their hands before lunch."

SecState nodded. "Right."

"General Moore, we have warning orders cut to the forces we can deploy?"

"Yes, sir. We can have Air Force units in Siberia in less than twenty-four hours. Twelve hours after that, they'll be ready to launch missions."

"What about bases, Mickey?" Jackson asked.

"Tons of 'em, from when they worried about splashing B-52s. Their northern coast is lousy with airstrips. We have our Air Attaché in Moscow sitting down with their people right now," General Moore said. The colonel in question was pulling a serious all-nighter. "The Russians, he says, are being very cooperative."

"How secure will the bases be?" the Vice President asked next.

"Their main protection will be distance. The Chinese will have to reach the best part of a thousand miles to hit them. We've tagged ten E-3B AWACS out of Tinker Air Force Base to go over and establish continuous radar coverage, plus a lot of fighters to do BARCAP. Once that's done, we'll think about what missions we'll want to fly. Mainly defensive at first, until we get firmly established."

Moore didn't have to explain to Jackson that there was more to moving an Air Force than just the aircraft. With each fighter squadron went mechanics, ordnancemen, and even air-traffic controllers. A fighter plane might have only one pilot, but it needed an additional twenty or more personnel to make it a functioning weapon. For more complex aircraft, the numbers just went higher.

"What about CINCPAC?" Jackson asked.

"We can give their navy a serious headache. Mancuso's moving his submarines and other ships."

"These images aren't all that great," Ryan observed, looking down at the radar overheads.

"We'll have visuals late tomorrow," Ed Foley told him.

"Okay, when we do, we'll have to show them to NATO, see what they'll do to help us out."

“First Armored has orders to stand by to entrain. The German railroads are in better shape today than they were in 1990 for DESERT SHIELD,” the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs informed them. “We can change trains just east of Berlin. The Russian railroads have a different gauge. It’s wider. That actually helps us, wider cars for our tracks to ride on. We figure we can move First Armored to the far side of the Urals in about seven days.”

“Who else?” Ryan asked.

“Not sure,” Moore answered.

“The Brits’ll go with us. Them we can depend on,” Adler told them all. “And Grushavoy was talking to their Prime Minister. We need to talk to Downing Street to see what developed from that.”

“Okay, Scott, please look into that. But first let’s get that note drafted for Beijing.”

“Right,” SecState agreed, and headed for the door.

“Jesus, I hope we can get them to see sense,” Ryan said to the maps and imagery before his eyes.

“Me, too, Jack,” the Vice President agreed. “But don’t bet the farm on it.”

What Adler had said to him on the flight from Warsaw came back to him. If only America still had ballistic missiles, deterrence would have been far easier. But Ryan had played a role in eliminating the damned things, and it seemed a very strange thing for him to regret now.

The note was generated and sent to the embassy in Beijing in less than two hours. The Deputy Chief of Mission, or DCM, in the embassy was a career foreign-service officer named William Kilmer. The formal note arrived as e-mail, and he had a secretary print it up in proper form and on expensive paper, which was folded into an envelope of creamy texture for hand delivery. He called the Chinese Foreign Ministry, requesting an urgent meeting with Foreign Minister Shen Tang. This was granted with surprising alacrity, and Kilmer walked to his own automobile, a Lincoln Town Car, and drove himself to the Ministry.

Kilmer was in his middle thirties, a graduate of the College of William and Mary in Virginia and Georgetown University in Washington. A man on his way up, his current position was rather ahead of his years, and the only reason he’d gotten it was that Ambassador Carl Hitch had been expected to be a particularly good mentor for bringing him along fromAAA ball into the bigs. This mission, delivering this note, made him think about just how junior he was. But he couldn’t very well run from the job, and career-wise he was taking a big step. Assuming he didn’t get shot. Unlikely, but ...

The walk to Shen’s office was a lonely one. The corridor seemed to stretch into infinity as he stepped down it in his best suit and shiny black shoes. The building and its appointments were supposed to be imposing, to show

representatives of foreign countries just how impressive the People's Republic of China was. Every country did it this way, some better than others. In this case the architect had earned his money, Kilmer thought. Finally—but sooner than he'd expected when he'd begun—he found the door and turned right to enter the secretaries' anteroom. Shen's male executive assistant led the American into a more comfortable waiting room and fetched water for him. Kilmer waited for the expected five minutes, because you didn't just barge in to see a senior government minister of a major power, but then the high doors —they were always double doors at this level of diplomacy—opened and he was beckoned in.

Shen was wearing a Mao jacket today instead of the usual Western-style business suit, a dark blue in color. He approached his guest and extended his hand.

"Mr. Kilmer, a pleasure to see you again."

"Thank you for allowing this impromptu audience, Minister."

"Please have a seat." Shen waved to some chairs surrounding the usual low table. When both of them were seated, Shen asked, "What can I do for you this day?"

"Minister, I have a note from my government to place into your hand." With that, Kilmer pulled the envelope from his coat pocket and handed it across.

The envelope was not sealed. Shen withdrew the two-page diplomatic message and leaned back to read it. His face didn't alter a dot before he looked up.

"This is a most unusual communication, Mr. Kilmer."

"Minister, my government is seriously concerned with recent deployments of your military."

"The last note delivered from your embassy was an insulting interference with our internal affairs. Now you threaten us with war?"

"Sir, America makes no threats. We remind you that since the Russian Federation is now a signatory of the North Atlantic Treaty, any hostilities directed at Russia will compel America to honor her treaty commitments."

"And you threaten the senior members of our government if something untoward should happen to Americans in our country? What do you take us for, Mr. Kilmer?" Shen asked in an even, unexcited voice.

"Minister, we merely point out that, as America extends to all of our visitors the protection of our laws, we hope that the People's Republic will do the same."

"Why should we treat American citizens any differently from the way we treat our own?"

"Minister, we merely request your assurance that this will be the case."

"Why should it not be the case? Do you accuse us of plotting a war of aggression against our neighbor?"

“We take note of recent military actions by the People’s Republic and request clarification.”

“I see.” Shen folded the papers back up and set them on the table. “When do you request a reply?”

“As soon as you find it convenient to do so, Minister,” Kilmer answered.

“Very well. I will discuss this matter with my colleagues on the Politburo and reply to you as quickly as we can.”

“I will convey that good news to Washington, Minister. I will not take more time from your day, sir. Thank you very much indeed for your time.” Kilmer stood and shook hands one more time. Kilmer walked through the anteroom without a glance left or right, turned left in the corridor, and headed toward the elevators. The corridor seemed just as long for this little walk, he thought, and the clicking of his heels on the tile floor seemed unusually loud. Kilmer had been an FSO long enough to know that Shen should have reacted more irately to the note. Instead he had received it like an invitation to an informal dinner at the embassy. That meant something, but Kilmer wasn’t sure what. Once in his car, he started composing his dispatch to Foggy Bottom, then quickly realized that this was something he’d better report by voice first over the STU.

How good is he, Carl?” Adler asked the ambassador. ”He’s an okay kid, Scott. Photographic memory, talent I wish I had. Maybe he was promoted a little fast, but he’s got the brains he needs, just a little short on field experience. I figure in another three years or so, he’ll be ready to run his own embassy and start his way up the ladder.”

In a place like Lesotho, SecState thought, which was a place to make “backwater” seem a compliment. Well, you had to start somewhere. “How will Shen react?”

“Depends. If they’re just maneuvering troops on routine training, they might be a little angry. If it’s for real and we’ve caught them with their hands in the cookie jar, they’ll act hurt and surprised.” Hitch paused for a yawn. “Excuse me. The real question is whether it’ll make them think things over.”

“Will it? You know most of ’em.”

“I don’t know,” Hitch admitted uncomfortably. “Scott, I’ve been there a while, sure, but I can’t say that I fully understand them. They make decisions on political considerations that Americans have a hard time comprehending.”

“The President calls them Klingons,” Adler told the ambassador.

Hitch smiled. “I wouldn’t go that far, but there is logic in the observation.” Then Adler’s intercom buzzed.

“Call from William Kilmer in Beijing on the STU, Mr. Secretary,” the secretary’s voice said.

“This is Scott Adler,” SecState said when he lifted the phone. “Ambassador Hitch is here with me. You’re on speaker.”

“Sir, I made the delivery. Minister Shen hardly blinked. He said he’d get back to us soon, but not exactly when, after he talked it over with his Politburo colleagues. Aside from that, not much of a reaction at all. I can fax you the transcript in about half an hour. The meeting didn’t last ten minutes.”

Adler looked over at Hitch, who shook his head and didn’t look happy at the news.

“Bill, how was his body language?” Hitch asked.

“Like he was on Prozac, Carl. No physical reaction at all.”

“Shen tends to be a little hyperactive,” Hitch explained. “Sometimes he has trouble sitting still. Conclusions, Bill?”

“I’m worried,” Kilmer replied at once. “I think we have a problem here.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kilmer. Send the fax quick as you can.” Adler punched the phone button and looked at his guest. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah. How soon will we know how they’re going to react to this?”

“Tomorrow morning, I hope, we—”

“We have a source inside their government?” Hitch asked. The blank look he got in reply was answer enough.

Thanks, Scott,” Ryan said, hanging up the phone. He was back in the Oval Office now, sitting in his personally-fitted swivel chair, which was about as comfortable as any artifact could make him. It didn’t help much at the moment, but he supposed it was one less thing to worry about.

“So?”

“So, we wait to see if SORGE tells us anything.”

“SORGE?” Professor Weaver asked.

“Dr. Weaver, we have a sensitive source of information that sometimes gives us information on what their Politburo is thinking,” Ed Foley told the academic. “And that information does not leave this room.”

“Understood.” Academic or not, Weaver played by the rules. “That’s the name for the special stuff you’ve been showing me?”

“Correct.”

“It’s a hell of a source, whoever it is. It reads like a tape of their meetings, captures their personalities, especially Zhang. He’s the real bad actor here. He’s got Premier Xu pretty well wrapped around his little finger.”

“Adler’s met him, during the shuttle talks after the Airbus shoot-down at Taipei,” Ryan said.

"And?" Weaver asked. He knew the name and the words, but not the man.

"And he's powerful and not a terribly nice chap," the President answered. "He had a role in our conflict with Japan, and also the fracas with the UIR last year."

"Machiavelli?"

"That's pretty close, more a theoretician than a lead actor, the man-behind-the-throne sort of guy. Not an ideologue per se, but a guy who likes to play in the real world—patriot, Ed?" Ryan asked the DCI.

"We've had our pshrink profile him." Foley shrugged. "Part sociopath, part political operator. A guy who enjoys the exercise of power. No known personal weaknesses. Sexually active, but a lot of their Politburo members are. Maybe it's a cultural thing, eh, Weaver?"

"Mao was like that, as we all know. The emperors used to have rather large stables of concubines."

"That's what people did before TV, I suppose," Arnie van Damm observed.

"Actually that's not far from the truth," Weaver agreed. "The carryover to today is cultural, and it's a fundamental form of personal power that some people like to exercise. Women's lib hasn't made it into the PRC yet."

"I must be too Catholic," the President thought aloud. "The idea of Mao popping little girls makes my skin crawl."

"They didn't mind, Mr. President," Weaver told him. "Some would bring their little sisters over after they got in bed with the Great Leader. It's a different culture, and it has different rules from ours."

"Yeah, just a little different," observed the father of two daughters, one just starting to date. What would the fathers of those barely nubile little girls have thought? Honored to have their daughters deflowered by the great Mao Zedong? Ryan had a minor chill from the thought, and dismissed it. "Do they care about human life at all? What about their soldiers?"

"Mr. President, the Judeo-Christian Bible wasn't drafted in China, and efforts by missionaries to get Christianity going over there were not terribly successful—and when Mao came along, he suppressed it fairly effectively, as we saw again recently. Their view of man's place in nature is different from ours, and, no, they do not value a single human life as we do. We're talking here about communists who view everything through a political lens, and that is over and above a culture in which a human life had little import. So, you could say it's a very infelicitous confluence of belief systems from our point of view."

Infelicitous, Ryan thought, there's a delicate turn of phrase. We're talking about a government that killed off twenty million-plus of its own people along the way, just in a few months, in pursuit of political perfection. "Dr. Weaver, best guess: What's their Politburo going to say?"

"They will continue on the path they're on," Weaver answered quickly. He was surprised at the reaction.

“God damn it, doesn’t anybody think common sense is going to break out?” Ryan snarled. He looked around the room, to see people suddenly looking down at the royal-blue rug.

“Mr. President, they fear war less than they fear the alternatives to war,” Weaver answered, rather courageously, Arnie van Damm thought. “To repeat, if they don’t enrich their country in oil and gold, they fear an economic collapse that will destroy their entire political order, and that, to them, is more frightening than the prospect of losing a hundred thousand soldiers in a war of conquest.”

“And I can stop it only by dropping a nuclear bomb on their capital—which will, by the way, kill a couple of million ordinary people. God damn it!” Ryan swore again.

“More like five million, maybe as many as ten,” General Moore pointed out, earning him a withering look from his Commander in Chief. “Yes, sir, that would work, but I agree the price of doing it’s a little high.”

“Robby?” Jack turned to his Vice President in hope of hearing something encouraging.

“What do you want me to say, Jack? We can hope they realize that this is going to cost them more than they expect, but it would appear the odds are against it.”

“One other thing we need to do is prepare the people for this,” Arnie said. “Tomorrow we should alert the press, and then you’ll have to go on TV and tell everybody what’s happening and why.”

“You know, I really don’t like this job very much—excuse me. That’s rather a puerile thing to say, isn’t it?” SWORDSMAN apologized.

“Ain’t supposed to be fun, Jack,” van Damm observed. “You’ve played the game okay to this point, but you can’t always control the other people at the card table.”

The President’s phone rang. Jack answered it. “Yes? Okay.” He looked up. “Ed, it’s for you.”

Foley stood and walked to take the phone. “Foley ... Okay, good, thanks.” He replaced the phone. “Weather’s clearing over Northeast China. We’ll have some visual imagery in half an hour.”

“Mickey, how fast can we get aerial recon assets in place?” Jackson asked.

“We have to fly them in. We have things we can stage out of California, but it’s a lot more efficient to fly them over in a C-17 and lift them off from a Siberian airfield. We can do that in, oh ... thirty-six hours from your order.”

“The order is given,” Ryan said. “What sort of aircraft are they?”

“They’re UAVs, sir. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, used to call them drones. They’re stealthy and they stay up a long time. We can download real-time video from them. They’re fabulous for battlefield reconnaissance, the best new toys the Air Force has fielded, so far as the Army is concerned. I can get them

going right now."

"Do it," Ryan told him.

"Assuming we have a place to land them. But we could stage them out of Elmendorf in Alaska if we have to." Moore lifted the phone and made his call to the National Military Command Center, the NMCC, in the Pentagon.

For General Peng, things were getting busy. The operation order was topped with the ideographs Long Chun, SPRING DRAGON. The "dragon" part sounded auspicious, since for thousands of years the dragon had been the symbol of imperial rule and also good fortune. There was still plenty of daylight. That suited Peng, and he hoped it would suit his soldiers. Daylight made for good hunting, and made it harder for large bodies of men to hide or move unseen, and that suited his mission.

He was not without misgivings. He was a general officer with orders to fight a war, and nothing makes such a man reflective like instructions to perform the things he'd claimed the ability to do. He would have preferred more artillery and air support, but he had a good deal of the former, and probably enough of the latter. At the moment, he was going over intelligence estimates and maps. He'd studied the Russian defenses on the far side of the border for years, to the point of occasionally putting reconnaissance specialists across the river to scout out the bunkers that had faced south for fifty years. The Russians were good military engineers, and those fixed defenses would take some dealing with.

But his attack plan was a simple one. Behind a massive artillery barrage, he'd put infantry across the Amur River in assault boats to deal with the Russian bunkers, simultaneously bringing up engineers to span the river with ribbon bridges in order to rush his mechanized forces across, up the hills on the far side, then farther north. He had helicopters, though not enough of the attack kind to suit his needs. He'd complained about this, but so had every other senior officer in the People's Liberation Army. The only thing about the Russian Army that worried him were their Mi-24 attack helicopters. They were clumsy machines but dangerous in their capabilities, if wisely used.

His best intelligence came from reams of Humint from Chinese citizens living illegally but comfortably in Russia—shopkeepers and workers, a fair number of whom were officers or stringers for the Ministry for State Security. He would have preferred more photographs, but his country had only a single orbiting reconnaissance satellite, and the truth was that the imagery purchased from the French SPOT commercial satellite company was better, at one-meter resolution, than his own country could manage. It was also easier to acquire over the Internet, and for that his intelligence coordinator had a blank check. They showed the nearest Russian mechanized formation over a hundred kilometers away. That confirmed the human intelligence that had said only things within artillery range were garrison units assigned to the border defenses. It was interesting that the Russian high command had not

surged forces forward, but they didn't have many to surge, and defending a border, with its numerous crenellations and meanders, used up manpower as a sponge used up water—and they didn't have that many troops to squander. He also possessed information that this General-Colonel Bondarenko was training his troops harder than his predecessor had, but that was not much cause for concern. The Chinese had been training hard for years, and Ivan would take time to catch up.

No, his only concern was distance. His army and its neighbors had a long way to go. Keeping them supplied would be a problem, because as Napoleon said that an army marched on its stomach, so tanks and tracked vehicles floated on a sea of diesel oil. His intelligence sources gave locations for large Russian stocks, but he couldn't count on seizing them intact, desirable though that might be, and even though he had plans for helicopter assaults on every one he had charted.

Peng put out his sixtieth cigarette of the day and looked up at his operations officer. "Yes?"

"The final order has arrived. Jump off at 0330 in three days."

"Will you have everything in place by then?" Peng asked.

"Yes, Comrade General, with twenty-four hours to spare."

"Good. Let's make sure that all our men are well fed. It may be a long time between meals for the next few weeks."

"That order has already been given, Comrade General," the colonel told him.

"And total radio silence."

"Of course, Comrade General."

Not a whisper," the sergeant said. "Not even carrier waves."

The RC-135 Rivet Joint aircraft was the first USAF bird to deploy, flying out of Anderson Air Force base on the island of Guam. It had refueled over the Sea of Okhotsk and entered Russian airspace over the port city of Ayan, and now, two hours later, was just east of Skovorodino on the Russian side of the border. The Rivet Joint was an extensively modified windowless version of the old Boeing 707, crammed with radio-receiving equipment and crewed with experienced ferret personnel, one of only two USAF crews who spoke passable Chinese.

"Sergeant, what's it mean when you have a lot of soldiers in the field and no radios?" the colonel in command of the mission asked. It was a rhetorical question, of course.

"Same thing it means when your two-year-old isn't making any noise, sir. He's crayoning the wall, or doing something else to get his bottom smacked." The sergeant leaned back in the pilot-type seat, looking at the numerous visual scans tuned to known PLA frequencies. The screen was blank except for mild

static. Maybe there'd been some chatter as the PLA had moved units into place, but now there was nothing but some commercial FM traffic, mainly music that was as alien to the American flight crew as Grand Ol' Opry would have been in Beijing. Two crewmen listening to the civilian stations noted that the lyrics of the Chinese love ballads were as mindless as those of their Nashville counterparts, though the stations were leaning more heavily to patriotic songs at the moment.

The same was noted at Fort Meade, Maryland. The National Security Agency had a lot of ferret satellites up and circling the globe, including two monster Rhyolitetypes in geosynchronous orbit over the equator, and all were tuned to Chinese military and government channels. The FM-radio chatter associated with military formations had trended down to zero in the last twelve hours, and to the uniformed and civilian analysts alike that meant just one thing: A quiet army is an army planning to do something.

The people at the National Reconnaissance Office had the main tasking in finishing up a Special National Intelligence Estimate, because people tended to believe photographs more than mere words. The imagery had been computer-matched with the radar-imaging satellites' "take," but surprisingly to no one, the assembly areas were mostly empty now. The tanks and other tracked vehicles had lingered only long enough to get reorganized after the train trip, and had moved out north, judging by the ruts they'd left in the mainly dirt roads of the region. They'd taken the time to spread their camouflage nets over the redeployed tanks, but that, too, had been a pro forma waste of time, because they could as little hide the track marks of hundreds of such vehicles as they could hide a mountain range. And scarcely any such effort had been taken with the hundreds of supply trucks, which, they saw, were still moving in tight little convoys, at about thirty kilometers per hour, heading for assembly areas just a few klicks south of where the shooters were. The imagery was printed up on six of the big laser printers custom-made for the NRO, and driven to the White House, where people were mainly sitting around in the Oval Office pulling a Presidential all-nighter, which was rather more special than those done by the deliveryman, an Army sergeant E-5 in this case. The civilian analyst who'd come with him stayed inside while the NCO walked back out to the government Ford sedan, having left behind a Newport hundred-millimeter cigarette for the President.

"Jack, you're bad," Jackson observed. "Bumming a smoke off that innocent young boy."

"Stick it, Robby," POTUS replied with a grin. The smoke made him cough, but it helped him stay awake as much as the premium coffee did. "You handle the stress your way, I'll handle it my way. Okay, what do we have here?" the President asked the senior analyst.

“Sir, this is as many armored vehicles in one area as I have ever seen in China, plus all their equipment. They’re going north, and soon, in less than three days, I’d say.”

“What about air?” Jackson asked.

“Right here, sir.” The analyst’s finger traced over one of the photos. “Dedicated fighter base at Jinxi is a good example. Here’s a squadron of Russian-made Su-27s, plus a whole regiment of J-7s. The Sukhoi’s a pretty good fighter plane, similar in mission and capabilities to an early F-15. The -7’s a day-fighter knockoff of the old MiG-21, modified for ground attack as well as mixing up in the furball. You can count sixty-eight aircraft. Probably at least four were in the air when the satellite went overhead. Note the fueling trucks right on the ramp, and this aircraft has ground crew tinkering with it. We estimate that this base was stood-down for five days—”

“—getting everything ready?” Jackson asked. That’s how people did it.

“Yes, sir. You will also note missile noses peeking out under the wings of all these aircraft. They appear to be loaded for combat.”

“White ones on the rails,” Robby observed. “They’re planning to go do some work.”

“Unless our note gets them to calm down,” Ryan said, with a minor degree of hope in his voice. A very minor note, the others in the room thought. The President got one last puff off the purloined Newport and stubbed it out. “Might it help for me to make a direct personal call to Premier Xu?”

“Honest answer?” It was Professor Weaver, rather the worse for wear at four in the Washington morning.

“The other sort isn’t much use to me at the moment,” Ryan replied, not quite testily.

“It will look good in the papers and maybe the history books, but it is unlikely to affect their decision-making process.”

“It’s worth a try,” Ed Foley said in disagreement. “What do we have to lose?”

“Wait until eight, Jack,” van Damm thought. “We don’t want him to think we’ve been up all night. It’ll inflate his sense of self-worth.”

Ryan turned to look at the windows on his south wall. The drapes hadn’t been closed, and anyone passing by could have noted that the lights had been on all night. But, strangely, he didn’t know if the Secret Service ever turned them off at night.

“When do we start moving forces?” Jack asked next.

“The Air Attaché will call from Moscow when his talks have been concluded. Ought to be any time.”

The President grunted. “Longer night than ours.”

“He’s younger than we are,” Mickey Moore observed. “Just a colonel.”

“If this goes, what are our plans like?” van Damm asked.

“Hyperwar,” Moore answered. “The world doesn’t know the new weapons we’ve been developing. It’ll make DESERT STORM look like slow motion.”

CHAPTER 48

Opening Guns

While others were pulling all-nighters, Gennady Iosifovich Bondarenko was forgetting what sleep was supposed to have been. His teleprinter was running hot with dispatches from Moscow, reading that occupied his time, and not always to his profit. Russia had still not learned to leave people alone when they were doing their jobs, and as a result, his senior communications officer cringed when he came in with new "FLASH" traffic.

"Look," the general said to his intelligence officer. "What I need is information on what equipment they have, where they are, and how they are postured to move north on us. Their politics and objectives are not as important to me as where they are right now!"

"I expect to have hard information from Moscow momentarily. It will be American satellite coverage, and—"

"God damn it! I remember when we had our own fucking satellites. What about aerial reconnaissance?"

"The proper aircraft are on their way to us now. We'll have them flying by tomorrow noon, but do we dare send them over Chinese territory?" Colonel Tolkunov asked.

"Do we dare not to?" CINC-FAR EAST demanded in reply.

"General," the G-2 said, "the concern is that we would be giving the Chinese a political excuse for the attack."

"Who said that?"

"Stavka."

Bondarenko's head dropped over the map table. He took a breath and closed his eyes for three blissful seconds, but all that achieved was to make him wish for an hour—no, just thirty minutes of sleep. That's all, he thought, just thirty minutes.

"A political excuse," the general observed. "You know, Vladimir Konstantinovich, once upon a time, the Germans were sending high-flying reconnaissance aircraft deep into Western Russia, scouting us out prior to their invasion. There was a special squadron of fighters able to reach their altitude, and their regimental commander asked for permission to intercept them. He was relieved of his command on the spot. I suppose he was lucky that he wasn't shot. He ended up a major ace and a Hero of the Soviet Union before some German fighter got him. You see, Stalin was afraid of provoking Hitler,

too!"

"Comrade Colonel?" Heads turned. It was a young sergeant with an armful of large-format photographs.

"Here, quickly!"

The sergeant laid them on the table, obscuring the topographical maps that had occupied the previous four hours. The quality wasn't good. The imagery had been transmitted over a fax machine instead of a proper photographic printer, but it was good enough for their purposes. There were even inserts, small white boxes with legends typed in, in English, to tell the ignorant what was in the pretty little pictures. The intelligence officer was the first to make sense of it all.

"Here they come," the colonel breathed. He checked the coordinates and the time indicated in the lower-right corner of the top photo. "That's a complete tank division, and it's right"—he turned back to the printed map—"right here, just as we expected. Their marshaling point is Harbin. Well, it had to be. All their rail lines converge there. Their first objective will be Belogorsk."

"And right up the valley from there," Bondarenko agreed. "Through this pass, then northwest." One didn't need to be a Nobel laureate to predict a line of advance. The terrain was the prime objective condition to which all ambitions and plans had to bend. Bondarenko could read the mind of the enemy commander well enough, because any trained soldier would see the contour lines on the map and analyze them the same way. Flat was better than sloped. Clear was better than wooded. Dry was better than wet. There was a lot of sloped terrain on the border, but it smoothed out, and there were too many valleys inviting speedy advance. With enough troops, he could have made every one of those valleys a deathtrap, but if he'd had enough troops, the Chinese wouldn't be lined up on his border. They'd be sitting in their own prepared defenses, fearing him. But that was not the shape of the current world for Commander-in-Chief Far East.

The 265th Motor Rifle was a hundred kilometers back from the border. The troops were undergoing frantic gunnery training now, because that would generate the most rapid return for investment. The battalion and regimental officers were in their command posts running map-table exercises, because Bondarenko needed them thinking, not shooting. He had sergeants for that. The good news for Bondarenko was that his soldiers enjoyed shooting live rounds, and their skill levels were improving rapidly. The bad news was that for every trained tank crew he had, the Chinese had over twenty.

"What an ambush we could lay, if we only had the men," Tolkunov breathed.

"When I was in America, watching them train, I heard a good if-only joke. If only your aunt had balls, then she'd be your uncle, Vladimir Konstantinovich."

"Quite so, Comrade General." They both turned back to the maps and the photos.

So, they know what we're doing," Qian Kun observed. "This is not a good development."

"You can know what a robber will do, but if he has a pistol and you don't, what difference does it make?" Zhang Han San asked in return. "Comrade Marshal?"

"One cannot hide so large a movement of troops," Marshal Luo said blandly. "Tactical surprise is always hard to achieve. But we do have strategic surprise."

"That is true," Tan Deshi told the Politburo. "The Russians have alerted some of their divisions for movement, but they are all in the west, and days away, and all will approach down this rail line, and our air force can close it, can't you, Luo?"

"Easily," the Defense Minister agreed.

"And what of the Americans?" Fang Gan asked. "In that note we just got, they have told us that they regard the Russians as allies. How many times have people underestimated the Americans, Zhang? Including yourself," he added.

"There are objective conditions which apply even to the Americans, for all their magic," Luo assured the assembly.

"And in three years we will be selling them oil and gold," Zhang assured them all in turn. "The Americans have no political memory. They always adapt to the changing shape of the world. In 1949, they drafted the NATO Treaty, which included their bitter enemies in Germany. Look at what they did with Japan, after dropping atomic bombs on them. The only thing we should consider: though few Americans will be deployed, and they will have to take their chances along with everyone else, perhaps we should avoid inflicting too many casualties. We would also do well to treat prisoners and captured civilians gently—the world does have sensibilities we must regard somewhat, I suppose."

"Comrades," Fang said, summoning up his courage for one last display of his inner feelings. "We still have the chance to stop this from happening, as Marshal Luo told us some days ago. We are not fully committed until shots are fired. Until then, we can say we were running a defense exercise, and the world will go along with that explanation, for the reasons my friend Zhang has just told us. But once hostilities are begun, the tiger is out of the cage. Men defend what is theirs with tenacity. You will recall that Hitler underestimated the Russians, to his ultimate sorrow. Iran underestimated the Americans just last year, causing disaster for them and the death of their leader. Are we *sure* that we can prevail in this adventure?" he asked. "Sure? We gamble with the life of our country here. We ought not to forget that."

"Fang, my old comrade, you are wise and thoughtful as ever," Zhang responded graciously. "And I know you speak on behalf of our nation and our people, but as we must not underestimate our enemies, so we ought not to

underestimate ourselves. We fought the Americans once before, and we gave them the worst military defeat in their history, did we not?"

"Yes, we did surprise them, but in the end we lost a *million* men, including Mao's own son. And why? Because we *over*estimated our own abilities."

"Not this time, Fang," Luo assured them all. "Not this time. We will do to the Russians the same thing we did to the Americans at the Yalu River. We will strike with power and surprise. Where they are weak, we will rush through. Where they are strong, we will encircle and surround. In 1950, we were a peasant army with only light weapons. Today," Luo went on, "we are a fully modern army. We can do things today such as even the Americas could not dream of back then. We *will* prevail," the Defense Minister concluded with firm conviction.

"Comrades, do we wish to stop now?" Zhang asked, to focus the debate. "Do we wish to doom our country's economic and political future? For that is the issue at hand. If we stand still, we risk national death. Who among us wishes to stand still then?"

Predictably no one, not even Qian, moved to pick up that gauntlet. The vote was entirely pro forma, and unanimous. As always, the Politburo achieved collegiality for its own sake. The ministers returned to their various offices. Zhang buttonholed Tan Deshi for several minutes before heading back to his. An hour after that, he dropped in on his friend, Fang Gan.

"You are not cross with me?" Fang asked.

"The voice of caution is something that does not offend me, my old friend," Zhang said, graciously taking his seat opposite the other's desk. He could afford to be gracious. He had won.

"I am afraid of this move, Zhang. We *did* underestimate the Americans in 1950, and it cost us many men."

"We have the men to spare," the senior Minister Without Portfolio pointed out. "And it will make Luo feel valuable."

"As if he needs that." Fang gestured his displeasure with that strutting martinet.

"Even a dog has his uses," his visitor pointed out.

"Zhang, what if the Russians are more formidable than you think?"

"I've taken care of that. We will create instability in their country in two days, the very day our attack begins."

"How?"

"You'll recall we had that failed attempt against Grushavoy's senior advisor, that Golovko fellow."

"Yes, and I counseled against that, too," Fang reminded his visitor.

"And there, perhaps, you were right," Zhang acknowledged, to smooth his host's feathers. "But Tan has developed the capability, and what better way to destabilize Russia than to eliminate their president? This we can do, and Tan

has his orders."

"You assassinate a government chief in a foreign land?" Fang asked, surprised at this level of boldness. "What if you fail?"

"We commit an act of war against Russia anyway. What have we to lose by this? Nothing—but there is much to gain."

"But the political implications ..." Fang breathed.

"What of them?"

"What if they turn the tables on us?"

"You mean attempt to attack Xu personally?" The look on his face provided the real answer to the question: *China would be better off without the nonentity.* But even Zhang would not say that aloud, even in the privacy of this room. "Tan assures me that our physical security is perfect. Perfect, Fang. There are no foreign intelligence operations of consequence in our country."

"I suppose every nation says such a thing—right before the roof caves in on them. We've done well with our spying in America, for example, and for that our good Comrade Tan is to be congratulated, but arrogance falls before the blow, and such blows are never anticipated. We would do well to remember that."

Zhang dismissed the thought: "One cannot fear everything."

"That is true, but to fear nothing is also imprudent." Fang paused to mend fences. "Zhang, you must think me an old woman."

That made the other minister smile. "Old woman? No, Fang, you are a comrade of many years' standing, and one of our most thoughtful thinkers. Why, do you suppose, I brought you onto the Politburo?"

To get my votes, of course, Fang didn't answer. He had the utmost respect for his senior colleague, but he wasn't blind to his faults. "For that I am grateful."

"For that the *people* ought to be grateful, you are so solicitous to their needs."

"Well, one must remember the peasants and workers out there. We serve them, after all." The ideological cant was just perfect for the moment. "This is not an easy job we share."

"You need to relax a little. Get that girl Ming out there, take her to your bed. You've done it before." It was a weakness both men shared. The tension of the moment abated, as Zhang wished it to.

"Chai sucks better," Fang replied, with a sly look.

"Then take her to your flat. Buy her some silk drawers. Get her drunk. They all like that."

"Not a bad idea," Fang agreed. "It certainly helps me sleep."

"Then do it by all means! We'll need our sleep. The next few weeks will be strenuous for us—but more so for our enemies."

"One thing, Zhang. As you said, we must treat the captives well. One thing the Americans do not forgive rapidly is cruelty to the helpless, as we have seen here in Beijing."

"Now, *they* are old women. They do not understand the proper use of strength."

"Perhaps so, but if we wish to do business with them, as you say, why offend them unnecessarily?"

Zhang sighed and conceded the point, because he knew it to be the smart play. "Very well. I will tell Luo." He checked his watch. "I must be off. I've having dinner with Xu tonight."

"Give him my best wishes."

"Of course." Zhang rose, bowed to his friend, and took his leave. Fang took a minute or so before rising and walking to the door. "Ming," he called, on opening it. "Come here." He lingered at the door as the secretary came in, allowing his eyes to linger on Chai. Their eyes met and she winked, adding a tiny feminine smile. Yes, he needed his sleep tonight, and she would help.

"The Politburo meeting ran late this day," Fang said, settling into his chair and doing his dictation. It took twenty-five minutes, and he dismissed Ming to do her daily transcription. Then he had Chai come in, gave her an order, and dismissed her. In another hour, the working day ended. Fang walked down to his official car, with Chai in trail. Together they rode to his comfortable apartment, and there they got down to business.

Ming met her lover at a new restaurant called the Jade Horse, where the food was better than average.

"You look troubled," Nomuri observed.

"Busy time at the office," she explained. "There is big trouble to come."

"Oh? What sort of trouble?"

"I cannot say," she demurred. "It will probably not affect your company."

And Nomuri saw that he'd taken his agent to the next—actually the last—step. She no longer thought about the software on her office computer. He never brought the subject up. Better that it should happen below the visible horizon. Better that she should forget what she was doing. Your conscience doesn't worry about things you've forgotten. After dinner, they walked back to Nomuri's place, and the CIA officer tried his best to relax her. He was only partially successful, but she was properly appreciative and left him at quarter to eleven. Nomuri had himself a nightcap, a double, and checked to make sure his computer had relayed her almost-daily report. Next week he hoped to have software he could cross-load to hers over the 'Net, so that she'd be transmitting the reports directly out to the recipe network. If Bad Things were happening in Beijing, NEC might call him back to Japan, and he didn't want

SONGBIRD'S reports to stop going to Langley.

As it happened, this one was already there, and it had generated all manner of excitement.

It was enough to make Ed Foley wish he'd lent a STU to Sergey Golovko, but America didn't give away its communications secrets that readily, and so the report had been redrafted and sent by secure fax to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, then hand-carried to SVR headquarters by a consular officer not associated with the CIA. Of course, now they'd assume that he was a spook, which would cause the Russians to shadow him everywhere he went, and use up trained personnel of the FSS. Business was still business, even in this New World Order.

Golovko, predictably, bounced hard off his high office ceiling.

John Clark got the news over his secure satellite phone. "What the hell?" RAINBOW Six asked, sitting still in his personal car not far from Red Square.

"You heard me," Ed Foley explained.

"Okay, now what?"

"You're tight with their special-operations people, right?"

"Somewhat," Clark allowed. "We're training them."

"Well, they might come to you for advice of some sort. You have to know what's happening."

"Can I tell Ding?"

"Yes," the DCI agreed.

"Good. You know, this proves the Chavez Premise."

"What's that?" Foley asked.

"He likes to say that international relations is largely composed of one nation fucking another."

It was enough to make Foley laugh, five thousand miles and eight time zones away. "Well, our Chinese friends are sure playing rough."

"How good is the information?"

"It's Holy Writ, John. Take it to the bank," Ed assured his distant field officer.

We have some source in Beijing, Clark didn't observe aloud. "Okay, Ed. If they come to me, I'll let you know. We cooperate, I presume."

"Fully," the DCI assured him. "We're allies now. Didn't you see CNN?"

“I thought it was the Sci-Fi Channel.”

“You ain’t the only one. Have a good one, John.”

“You, too, Ed. Bye.” Clark thumbed the END button and went on just to himself: “Holy jumpin’ Jesus.” Then he restarted the car and headed off to his rendezvous with Domingo Chavez.

Ding was at the bar that RAINBOW had adopted during its stay in the Moscow area. The boys congregated in a large corner booth, where they complained about the local beer, but appreciated the clear alcohol preferred by the natives.

“Hey, Mr. C,” Chavez said in greeting.

“Just got a call from Ed on my portable.”

“And?”

“And John Chinaman is planning to start a little war with our hosts, and that’s the good news,” Clark added.

“What the fuck is the bad news?” Chavez asked, with no small incredulity in his voice.

“Their Ministry of State Security just put a contract out on Eduard Petrovich,” John went on.

“Are they fuckin’ crazy?” the other CIA officer asked the booth.

“Well, starting a war in Siberia isn’t exactly a rational act. Ed let us in because he thinks the locals might want our help soon. Supposedly they know the local contact for the ChiComms. You have to figure a hot takedown’s going to evolve from this, and we’ve been training their troopies. I figure we might be invited in to watch, but they probably won’t want us to assist.”

“Agreed.”

That’s when General Kirillin came in, with a sergeant at his side. The sergeant stood by the door with his overcoat unbuttoned and his right hand close to the opening. The senior officer spotted Clark and came directly over.

“I don’t have your cell-phone number.”

“What do you want us for today, General?” Clark asked.

“I need for you to come with me. We have to see Chairman Golovko.”

“Do you mind if Domingo comes along?”

“That is fine,” Kirillin replied.

“I’ve talked to Washington recently. How much do you know?” Clark asked his Russian friend.

“Much, but not all. That’s why we need to see Golovko.” Kirillin waved them to the door, where his sergeant was doing his best Doberman imitation.

“Something happening?” Eddie Price asked. No one was guarding his expression, and Price knew how to read faces.

“Tell you when we get back,” Chavez told him. The staff car waiting outside had a chase car with four men in it, and the sergeant/bodyguard accompanying the general was one of the few enlisted men who’d been let into the cross-training that RAINBOW had been running. The Russians, they knew, were coming along very well. It didn’t hurt to draw people hand-selected from an already elite unit.

The cars moved through Moscow traffic with less than the usual regard for traffic and safety laws, then pulled into the main gate at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square. The elevator was held for them, and they made the top floor in a hurry.

“Thank you for coming so quickly. I assume you’ve spoken with Langley,” Golovko observed.

Clark held up his cell phone.

“The encryption unit is so small?”

“Progress, Chairman,” Clark observed. “I’m told this intelligence information is to be taken seriously.”

“Foleyeva has a fine source in Beijing. I’ve seen some of the ‘take’ from him. It would appear, first, that a deliberate attempt was made on my life, and now another is planned for President Grushavoy. I’ve already notified him. His security people are fully alerted. The Chinese lead agent in Moscow has been identified and is under surveillance. When he receives his instructions, we will arrest him. But we do not know who his contacts are. We assume they are former Spetsnaz people loyal to him, criminals, of course, doing special work for the underworld we’ve grown up here.”

That made sense, John thought. “Some people will do anything for money, Sergey Nikolay’ch. How can we help you?”

“Foley has instructed you to assist? Good of him. Given the nature of how the intelligence came to us, an American observer seems appropriate. For the takedown, we will use police, with cover from General Kirillin’s people. As RAINBOW commander, this will be your task.”

Clark nodded. It wasn’t all that demanding. “Fair enough.”

“We’ll keep you safe,” the general assured him.

“And you expect the Chinese to launch a war on Russia?”

“Within the week,” Golovko nodded.

“The oil and the gold?” Chavez asked.

“So it would seem.”

“Well, that’s life in the big city,” Ding observed.

“We will make them regret this barbaric act,” Kirillin told everyone present.

“That remains to be seen,” Golovko cautioned. He knew what Bondarenko was saying to Stavka.

“And with you guys in NATO, we’re coming to help out?” Clark asked.

"Your President Ryan is a true comrade," the Russian agreed.

"That means RAINBOW, too, then," John thought aloud. "We're all NATO troopers."

"Ain't never fought in a real war before," Chavez thought aloud. But now he was a simulated major, and he might just get drafted into this one. His life insurance, he remembered, was fully paid up.

"It's not exactly fun, Domingo," Clark assured him. *And I'm getting a little old for this shit.*

The Chinese Embassy was under continuous and expert surveillance by a large team of officers from the Russian Federal Security Service. Almost all of them were formerly of the KGB's Second Chief Directorate. Reconstituted under a new agency's aegis, they performed the same function as the FBI's Intelligence Division, and they gave away little to their American counterparts. No fewer than twenty of them were assigned to this task. They comprised all physical types, male and female, prosperous-and impoverished-looking, middle-aged and old—but no really young ones, because this case was too important for inexperienced officers. The vehicles assigned to the task included everything from dump trucks to motorbikes, and every mobile group had at least one radio, of types so advanced that the Russian Army didn't have them yet.

Kong Deshi emerged from the PRC embassy at seven-forty. He walked to the nearest Metro station and took the escalator down. This was entirely routine. At the same time, another minor consular officer left and headed in a different direction, but the FSS officers didn't know to watch him. He walked three blocks to the second lamppost on a busy street and, passing it, he pulled a strip of white paper tape from his coat pocket and stuck it vertically on the metal post. Then he walked on to a restaurant and had dinner alone, having fulfilled a mission whose purpose he didn't know. He was the flagman for the MSS in the embassy, but was not a trained intelligence officer.

Third Secretary Kong rode the train for the proper number of stops and got off, with four FSS officers in trail, another one waiting in the station, and two more at the top of the long escalator to the surface. Along the way, he purchased a newspaper from one of the kiosks on the street. Twice he stopped, once to light a cigarette and the other time to look around as if lost and trying to get his bearings. Both efforts, of course, were to spot a tail, but the FSS people were too numerous, some too near, and the close ones studiously, but not too studiously, looking elsewhere. The truth of the matter, as known to the FBI and the British Security Service as well, is that once a contact is identified, he is as naked and helpless as a newborn in the jungle, as long as those shadowing him are not total fools. These KGB-trained professionals were anything but fools. The only thing they didn't know was the identity of the flagman, but that, as usual, was something you might never get. The problem there was that you never knew how quickly to get the dead-drop that was about to be made.

The other problem for the control agent, Kong Deshi, was that once the location of the dead-drop was identified, it was as easily watched as the single cloud in an otherwise clear sky. The size of the surveillance troop was just to make sure there wasn't another drop. And there wasn't. Kong sat down on the expected bench. Here he violated fieldcraft by acting as though he could read a newspaper in the diminishing light, but as there was a streetlamp close by, it wouldn't tip off the casual onlooker.

"There," one of the FSS men observed. Kong's right hand made the emplacement. Three minutes later, he folded his paper and strolled off, in the same direction he'd been heading. The FSS detail let him go a long way before they moved in.

Again it was done from a van, and again the locksmith was inside and waiting with the custom-made key. Also in the van was a high-end American laptop computer with the onetime cipher pad preprogrammed in, an exact copy of Suvorov/Koniev's desktop machine in his upscale flat on the ring road. And so, the senior FSS officer on the case thought, their quarry was like a tiger prowling through the jungle with ten unknown rifles aimed at it, powerful, and dangerous, perhaps, but utterly doomed.

The transfer case was delivered. The locksmith popped it open. The contents were unfolded and photocopied, then replaced, and the case was resealed and returned to its spot on the metal plate under the bench. Already a typist was keying in the random letters of the message, and inside of four minutes, the clear-text came up.

"Yob tvoyu mat!" the senior officer observed. "They want him to kill President Grushavoy!"

"What is that?" a junior officer asked. The case-leader just handed over the laptop computer and let him read the screen.

"This is an act of war," the major breathed. The colonel nodded.

"It is that, Gregoriy." And the van pulled away. He had to report this, and do it immediately.

Lieutenant Provalov was home when the call came. He grumbled the usual amount as he re-dressed and headed to FSS headquarters. He hadn't grown to love the Federal Security Service, but he had come to respect it. With such resources, he thought, he could end crime in Moscow entirely, but they didn't share resources, and they retained the above-the-law arrogance their antecedent agency had once displayed. Perhaps it was necessary. The things they investigated were no less serious than murder, except in scale. Traitors killed not individuals, but entire regions. Treason was a crime that had been taken seriously in his country for centuries, and one that his nation's long-standing institutional paranoia had always feared as much as it had hated.

They were burning more than the usual amount of midnight oil here, Provalov saw. Yefremov was standing in his office, reading a piece of paper

with the sort of blank look on his face that frequently denoted something monstrous.

“Good evening, Pavel Georgiyevich.”

“Lieutenant Provalov. Here.” Yefremov handed over the paper. “Our subject grows ambitious. Or at least his controllers do.”

The militia lieutenant took the page and read it quickly, then returned to the top to give it a slower redigestion.

“When did this happen?”

“Less than an hour ago. What observations do you make?”

“We should arrest him at once!” the cop said predictably.

“I thought you’d say that. But instead we will wait and see whom he contacts. Then we will snatch him up. But first, I want to see the people he notifies.”

“What if he does it from a cell phone or a pay phone?”

“Then we will have the telephone company identify them for us. But I want to see if he has a contact within an important government office. Suvorov had many colleagues where he was in KGB. I want to know which of them have turned mercenary, so that we can root all of them out. The attack on Sergey Nikolay’ch displayed a frightening capability. I want to put an end to it, to scoop that all up, and send them all to a labor camp of strict regime.” The Russian penal system had three levels of camps. Those of “mild” regime were unpleasant. The “medium” ones were places to avoid. But those of “strict” regime were hell on earth. They were particularly useful for getting the recalcitrant to speak of things they preferred to keep quiet about in ordinary circumstances. Yefremov had the ability to control which scale of punishment a man earned. Suvorov already merited death, in Russia, usually delivered by a bullet ... but there were worse things than death.

“The president’s security detail has been warned?”

The FSS officer nodded. “Yes, though that was a tender one. How can we be sure that one of them is not compromised? That nearly happened to the American President last year, you may have heard, and it is a possibility we have to consider. They are all being watched. But Suvorov had few contacts with the Eighth Directorate when he was KGB, and none of the people he knew ever switched over to there.”

“You are sure of that?”

“We finished the cross-check three days ago. We’ve been busy checking records. We even have a list of people Suvorov might call. Sixteen of them, in fact. All of their phones have been tapped, and all are being watched.” But even the FSS didn’t have the manpower to put full surveillance details on those potential suspects. This had become the biggest case in the history of the FSS, and few of the KGB’s investigations had used up this much manpower, even back to Oleg Penkovskiy.

“What about the names Amalrik and Zimyanin?”

“Zimyanin came up in our check, but not the other. Suvorov didn’t know him, but Zimyanin did—they were comrades in Afghanistan—and presumably recruited the other himself. Of the sixteen others, seven are prime suspects, all Spetsnaz, three officers and four non-coms, all of them people who’ve put their talent and training on the open market. Two are in St. Petersburg, and might have been implicated in the elimination of Amalrik and Zimyanin. It would appear that their comradeship was lacking,” Yefremov observed dryly. “So, Provalov, do you have anything to add?”

“No, it would seem that you have covered all likely investigative avenues.”

“Thank you. Since it remains a murder case, you will accompany us when we make the arrest.”

“The American who assisted us ... ?”

“He may come along,” Yefremov said generously. “We’ll show him how we do things here in Russia.”

Reilly was back in the U.S. Embassy on the STU, talking to Washington.

“Holy shit,” the agent observed.

“That about covers it,” Director Murray agreed. “How good’s their presidential-protective detail?”

“Pretty good. As good as the Secret Service? I don’t know what their investigative support is like, but on the physical side, I’d have to say they’re okay.”

“Well, they’ve certainly been warned by now. Whatever they have is going to be perked up a notch or two. When will they do the takedown on this Suvorov guy?”

“Smart move is to sit on it until he makes a move. Figure the Chinese will get the word to him soon—like now, I suppose—and then he’ll make some phone calls. That’s when I’d put the arm on him, and not before.”

“Agreed,” Murray observed. “We want to be kept informed on all this. So, stroke your cop friend, will ya?”

“Yes, sir.” Reilly paused. “This war scare is for real?”

“It looks that way,” Murray confirmed. “We’re ramping up to help them out, but I’m not sure how it’s going to play out. The President’s hoping that the NATO gig will scare them off, but we’re not sure of that either. The Agency’s running in circles trying to figure the PRC out. Aside from that, I don’t know much.”

That surprised Reilly. He’d thought Murray was tight with the President, but supposed now that this information was too compartmentalized.

I'll take that," Colonel Aliyev said to the communications officer.

"It's for the immediate attention of—"

"He needs sleep. To get to him, you must go through me," the operations officer announced, reading through the dispatches. "This one can wait ... this one I can take care of. Anything else?"

"This one's from the President!" "President Grushavoy needs a lucid general more than he needs an answer to this, Pasha." Aliyev could use some sleep, too, but there was a sofa in the room, and its cushions were calling out to him.

"What's Tolkunov doing?"

"Updating his estimate."

"Is it getting better in any way?" Comms asked.

"What do you think?" Ops replied.

"Shit."

"That's about right, comrade. Know where we can purchase chopsticks for us to eat with?"

"Not while I have my service pistol," the colonel replied. At nearly two meters in height, he was much too tall to be a tanker or an infantryman. "Make sure he sees these when he wakes. I'll fix it with Stavka."

"Good. I'm going to get a few hours, but wake me, not him," Aliyev told his brother officer.

"*Da.*"

They were small men in the main. They started arriving at Never, a small railroad town just east of Skovorodino, on day coaches tacked onto the regular rail service on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Getting off, they found officers in uniform directing them to buses. These headed down a road paralleling the railroad right-of-way southeast toward a tunnel drilled ages before in the hills over the diminutive Urkan River. Beside the tunnel was an opening which appeared to the casual viewer to be a siding for service equipment for the railroad. And so it was, but this service tunnel went far into the hillside, and branching off it were many more, all constructed in the 1930s by political prisoners, part of Iosef Stalin's gulag labor empire. In these man-made caverns were three hundred T-55 tanks, built in the mid-1960s and never used, but rather stored here to defend against an invasion from China, along with a further two hundred BTR-60 wheeled infantry carriers, plus all the other rolling stock for a Soviet-pattern tank division. The post was garrisoned by a force of four hundred conscripts who, like generations before them, served their time servicing the tanks and carriers, mainly moving from one to another, turning over the diesel engines and cleaning the metal surfaces,

which was necessary because of water seepage through the stone roof. The "Never Depot," it was called on classified maps, one of several such places close to the main rail line that went from Moscow to Vladivostok. Cunningly hidden, partially in plain sight, it was one of the aces that General-Colonel Bondarenko had hidden up his sleeve.

As were the men. They were mostly in their thirties, confused, and more than a little angry at having been called away from their homes. However, like good Russians, or indeed good citizens in any land, they got their notices, figured that their country had a need, and it was their country, and so about three-fourths of them went as summoned. Some saw familiar faces from their time in the conscript army of the Soviet Union—these men were mainly from that time—and greeted old friends, or ignored those less happily remembered. Each was given a preprinted card telling him where to go, and so the tank crews and infantry squads formed up, the latter finding their uniforms and light weapons, plus ammunition, waiting in the assigned motor-carrier. The tank crewmen were all small men, about 167 centimeters in height—about five feet six inches to an American—because the interiors of the old Russian tanks did not permit tall men to fit inside.

The tankers returning to the steeds of their youth knew the good and bad points of the T-55s. The engines were made of roughly machined parts and would grind off a full kilogram of metal shavings into the oil sumps during the first few hours of running, but, they all figured, that would have been taken care of by the routine turning-over of the engines in the depot. The tanks were, in fact, in surprisingly good shape, better than the ones they'd used on active duty. This seemed both strange and unsurprising to the returning soldiers, because the Red Army had made little logical sense when they'd been in it, but that, for a Soviet citizen of the 1970s and '80s, was not unexpected either. Most remembered their service with some fondness, and for the usual reasons, the chance to travel and see new, different things, and the comradeship of men their own age—a time of life in which young men seek out the new and the exciting. The poor food, miserable pay, and strenuous duty were largely forgotten, though exposure to the rolling equipment brought back some of it with the instant memory that accompanied smells and feels from the past. The tanks all had full internal fuel tanks, plus the oil drums affixed to the rear that had made all of the men cringe when thinking about a battlefield—one live round could turn every tank into a pillar of fire, and so that was the fuel you burned off first, just so you could pull the handle to dump the damned things off when the first bullet flew.

Most agreeably of all, those who pressed the start buttons felt and heard the familiar rumble after only a few seconds of cranking. The benign environment of this cavern had been kind to these old, but essentially unused, tanks. They might have been brand new, fresh from the assembly lines of the massive factory at Nizhnyi Tagil, for decades the armory of the Red Army. The one thing that had changed, they all saw, was that the red star was gone from the glacis plate, replaced with an all-too-visible representation of their new white-blue-red flag, which, they all thought, was far too good an aiming point. Finally they were all called away from their vehicles by the young reserve

officers, who, they saw, looked a little worried. Then the speeches began, and the reservists found out why.

Damn, isn't she a lovely one," the FSS officer said, getting into the car. They'd followed their subject to yet another expensive restaurant, where he'd dined alone, then walked into the bar, and within five minutes fixed upon a woman who'd also arrived alone, pretty in her black, red-striped dress that looked to have been copied from some Italian designer. Suvorov/Koniev was driving back toward his flat with a total of six cars in trail, three of them with light-change switches on their dashboards to alter their visual appearance at night. The cop riding in the number-two car thought that was an especially clever feature.

He was taking his time, not racing his car to show his courage, but instead dazzling the girl with his man-of-the-world demeanor, the investigators thought. The car slowed as it passed one corner, a street with old iron lampposts, then changed direction, if not abruptly, then unexpectedly.

"Shit, he's going to the park," the senior FSS guy said, picking up his radio microphone to say this over the air. "He must have spotted a flag somewhere."

And so he did, but first he dropped off what appeared to be a very disappointed woman, holding some cash in her hand to ease the pain. One of the FSS cars paused to pick her up for questioning, while the others continued their distant pursuit, and five minutes later, it happened. Suvorov/ Koniev parked his car on one side of the park and walked across the darkened grass to the other, looking about as he did so, not noticing the fact that five cars were circling.

"That's it. He picked it up." He'd done it skillfully, but that didn't matter if you knew what to look for. Then he walked back to his car. Two of the cars headed directly over to his flat, and the three in trail just kept going when he pulled in.

He said he felt suddenly ill. I gave him my card," she told the interrogators. "He gave me fifty euros for my trouble." Which was fair payment, she thought, for wasting half an hour of her valuable time.

"Anything else? Did he look ill?"

"He said that the food suddenly disagreed with him. I wondered if he'd gotten cold feet as some men do, but not this one. He is a man of some sophistication. You can always tell."

"Very well. Thank you, Yelena. If he calls you, please let us know."

"Certainly." It had been a totally painless interview, which came as rather a surprise for her, and for that reason she'd cooperated fully, wondering what

the hell she'd stumbled into. A criminal of some sort? Drug trafficker, perhaps? If he called her, she'd call these people and to hell with him. Life for a woman of her trade was difficult enough.

He's on the computer," an electronics specialist said at FSS headquarters. He read the keystrokes off the keyboard bug they'd planted, and they not only showed up on his screen, but also ran live on a duplicate of the subject desktop system. "There, there's the clear-text. He's got the message."

There was a minute or so of thoughtful pause, and then he began typing again. He logged onto his e-mail service and started typing up messages. They all said some variant of "contact me as soon as you can," and that told them what he was up to. A total of four letters had gone out, though one suggested forwarding to one or more others. Then he logged off and shut his computer down.

"Now, let's see if we can identify his correspondents, shall we?" the senior investigator told his staff. That took all of twenty minutes. What had been routine drudgery was now as exciting as watching the World Cup football final.

The Myasishchev M-5 reconnaissance aircraft lifted off from Taza just before dawn. An odd-looking design with its twin booms, it was a forty-years-too-late Russian version of the venerable Lockheed U-2, able to cruise at seventy thousand feet at a sedate five hundred or so knots and take photographs in large numbers with high resolution. The pilot was an experienced Russian air force major with orders not to stray within ten kilometers of the Chinese border. This was to avoid provoking his country's potential enemies, and that order was not as easy to execute as it had been to write down in Moscow, because the borders between countries are rarely straight lines. So, the major programmed his autopilot carefully and sat back to monitor his instruments while the camera systems did all the real work. The main instrument he monitored was his threat-receiver, essentially a radio scanner programmed to note the energy of radar transmitters. There were many such transmitters on the border, most of the low- to mid-frequency search types, but then a new one came up. This was on the X-band, and it came from the south, and that meant that a Chinese surface-to-air missile battery was illuminating him with a tracking-and-targeting radar. *That* got his attention, because although seventy thousand was higher than any commercial aircraft could fly, and higher than many fighters could reach, it was well within the flight envelope of a SAM, as an American named Francis Gary Powers had once discovered over Central Russia. A fighter could outmaneuver most SAMs, but the M-5 was not a fighter and had trouble out-maneuvering clouds on a windless day. And so he kept his eye on the threat-receiver's dials while his ears registered the shrill *beep-beep* of the aural alert. The visual display showed that the pulse-repetition rate was in the tracking rather than the lock-up mode. So, a missile was probably not in the air, and the sky was clear enough that he'd probably see the smoke trail that such missiles always left, and today—no, no smoke

coming up from the ground. For defensive systems, he had only a primitive chaff dispenser and prayer. Not even a white-noise jammer, the major groused. But there was no sense in worrying. He was ten kilometers inside his own country's airspace, and whatever SAM systems the Chinese possessed were probably well inside their own borders. It would be a stretch for them to reach him, and he could always turn north and run while punching loose a few kilos of shredded aluminum foil to give the inbound missile something else to chase. As it played out, the mission involved four complete sweeps of the border region, and that required ninety otherwise boring minutes before he reprogrammed the M-5 back to the old fighter base outside Taza.

The ground crew supporting the mission had also been deployed from the Moscow area. As soon as the M-5 rolled to a stop, the film cassettes were unloaded and driven to the portable film lab for development, then forwarded, still wet, to the interpreters. They saw few tanks, but lots of tracks in the ground, and that was all they needed to see.

CHAPTER 49

Disarming

I know, Oleg. I understand that we developed the intelligence in Washington and forwarded it to your people immediately," Reilly said to his friend.

"You must be proud of that," Provalov observed.

"Wasn't the Bureau that did it," Reilly responded. The Russians would be touchy about having Americans provide them with such sensitive information. Maybe Americans would have reacted the same way. "Anyway, what are you going to do about it?"

"We're trying to locate his electronic correspondents. We have their addresses, and they are all on Russian-owned ISPs. FSS probably has them all identified by now."

"Arrest them when?"

"When they meet Suvorov. We have enough to make the arrests now."

Reilly wasn't sure about that. The people Suvorov wanted to meet could always say that they came to see him by invitation without having a clue as to the purpose of the meeting, and a day-old member of the bar could easily enough sell the "reasonable doubt" associated with that to a jury. Better to wait until they all did something incriminating, and then squeeze one of them real hard to turn state's evidence on the rest. But the rules and the juries were different here.

Anatoliy, what are you thinking about?" Golovko asked. "Comrade Chairman, I am thinking that Moscow has suddenly become dangerous," Major Shelepin replied. "The idea of former Spetsnaz men conspiring to commit treason on this scale sickens me. Not just the threat, but also the infamy of it. These men were my comrades in the army, trained as I was to be guardians of the State." The handsome young officer shook his head.

"Well, when this place was the KGB, it happened to us more than once. It is unpleasant, yes, but it is reality. People are corruptible. It is human nature," Golovko said soothingly. *Besides, the threat isn't against me now,* he didn't add. An unworthy thought, perhaps, but that also was human nature. "What is President Grushavoy's detail doing now?"

"Sweating, I should imagine. Who can say that this is the only threat? What

if this Kong bastard has more than one such agent in Moscow? We should pick him up, too."

"So we shall, when the time comes. He's been observed to do only one dead-drop over the past week, and we control that one—yes, yes, I know," Sergey added, when he saw the beginnings of Anatoliy's objections. "He isn't the only MSS operative in Moscow, but he's probably the only one on this case. Security considerations are universal. They must worry that one of their officers might be in *our* employ, after all. There are many wheels in such an operation, and they don't all turn in the same direction, my young friend. You know what I miss?"

"I should imagine it is having the second chief directorate under the same roof. That way the operation would be run cooperatively."

Golovko smiled. "Correct, Anatoliy Ivan'ch. For now, we can only do our job and wait for others to do theirs. And, yes, waiting is never an entertaining way to spend one's time." With that observation, both men resumed staring at the desk phones, waiting for them to ring.

The only reason that surveillance hadn't been tightened any more was that there wasn't enough room for the additional personnel, and Suvorov might take note of the thirty people who followed him everywhere. That day he awoke at his normal hour, washed up, had coffee and kasha for breakfast, left the apartment building at 9:15, and drove his car into the city, with a good deal of elusive company. He parked his car two blocks from Gor'kiy Park and walked the rest of the way there.

So did four others, also under surveillance. They met at a magazine kiosk at precisely 9:45 and walked together toward a coffee shop that was disagreeably crowded, too much so for any of the watchers to get close enough to listen in, though the faces were observed. Suvorov/Koniev did most of the talking, and the other four listened intently, and nods started.

Yefremov of the Federal Security Service kept his distance. He was senior enough that he could no longer guarantee that his face was unknown, and had to trust the more junior men to get in close, their earpieces removed and radio transmitters turned off, wishing they could read lips like the people in spy movies.

For Pavel Georgiyevich Yefremov, the question was, what to do now? Arrest them all and risk blowing the case—or merely continue to shadow, and risk having them go forward ... and perhaps accomplish the mission?

The question would be answered by one of the four contacts. He was the oldest of them, about forty, a Spetsnaz veteran of Afghanistan with the Order of the Red Banner to his name. His name was Igor Maximov. He held up his hand, rubbing forefinger and thumb, and, getting the answer to his question, he shook his head and politely took his leave. His departure was a cordial one, and his personal two-man shadow team followed him to the nearest Metro

station while the others continued talking.

On learning this, Yefremov ordered him picked up. That was done when he got off the Metro train five kilometers away at the station near his flat, where he lived with his wife and son. The man did not resist and was unarmed. Docile as a lamb, he accompanied the two FSS officers to their headquarters.

“Your name is Maximov, Igor Il‘ych,” Yefremov told him. “You met with your friend Suvorov, Klementi Ivan’ch, to discuss participation in a crime. We want to hear your version of what was discussed.”

“Comrade Yefremov, I met some old friends for coffee this morning and then I left. Nothing in particular was discussed. I do not know what you are talking about.”

“Yes, of course,” the FSS man replied. “Tell me, do you know two former Spetsnaz men like yourself, Amalrik and Zimyanin?”

“I’ve heard the names, but I don’t know the faces.”

“Here are the faces.” Yefremov handed over the photos from the Leningrad Militia. “They are not pleasant to look upon.”

Maximov didn’t blanch, but he didn’t look at the photos with affection either. “What happened to them?”

“They did a job for your comrade, Suvorov, but he was evidently displeased with how they went about it, and so, they went swimming in the River Neva. Maximov, we know that you were Spetsnaz. We know that you earn your living today doing illegal things, but that is not a matter of concern to us at the moment. We want to know exactly what was said at the coffee shop. You will tell us this, the easy way or the hard way. The choice is yours.” When he wanted to, Yefremov could come on very hard to his official guests. In this case, it wasn’t difficult. Maximov was not a stranger to violence, at least on the giving side. The receiving side was something he had no wish to learn about.

“What do you offer me?”

“I offer you your freedom in return for your cooperation. You left the meeting before any conclusions were reached. That is why you are here. So, do you wish to speak now, or shall we wait a few hours for you to change your mind?”

Maximov was not a coward—Spetsnaz didn’t have many of those, in Yefremov’s experience—but he was a realist, and realism told him that he had nothing to gain by noncooperation.

“He asked me and the others to participate in a murder. I presume it will be a difficult operation, otherwise why would he need so many men? He offers for this twenty thousand euros each. I decided that my time is more valuable than that.”

“Do you know the name of the target?”

Maximov shook his head. “No. He did not say. I did not ask.”

"That is good. You see, the target is President Grushavoy." That got a reaction, as Maximov's eyes flared.

"That is state treason," the former Spetsnaz sergeant breathed, hoping to convey the idea that he'd never do such a thing. He learned fast.

"Yes. Tell me, is twenty thousand euros a good price for a murder?"

"I would not know. If you want me to tell you that I have killed for money, no, Comrade Yefremov, I will not say that."

But you have, and you'd probably participate in this one if the price went high enough. In Russia, E20,000 was a considerable sum. But Yefremov had much bigger fish to fry. "The others at the meeting, what do you know of them?"

"All are Spetsnaz veterans. Ilya Suslov and I served together east of Qandahar. He's a sniper, a very good one. The others, I know them casually, but I never served with them."

Sniper. Well, those were useful, and President Grushavoy appeared in public a lot. He was scheduled to have an outdoor rally the very next day, in fact. It was time to wrap this up.

"So, Suvorov spoke of a murder for hire?"

"Yes, he did."

"Good. We will take your statement. You were wise to cooperate, Igor Il'ych." Yefremov had a junior officer lead him away. Then he lifted his phone. "Arrest them all," he told the field commander.

"The meeting broke up. We have all of them under surveillance. Suvorov is en route back to his flat with one of the three."

"Well, assemble the team and arrest them both."

Feeling better?" Colonel Aliyev asked.

"What time is it?"

"Fifteen-forty, Comrade General," Colonel Aliyev replied. "You slept for thirteen hours. Here are some dispatches from Moscow."

"You let me sleep that long?" the general demanded, instantly angry.

"The war has not begun. Our preparations, such as they are, are progressing, and there seemed no sense in waking you. Oh, we have our first set of reconnaissance photos. Not much better than the American ones we had faxed to us. Intelligence has firmed up its estimate. It's not getting any better. We have support now from an American ELINT aircraft, but they tell us that the Chinese aren't using their radios, which is not a surprise."

"God damn it, Andrey!" the general responded, rubbing his unshaven face with both hands.

"So, court-martial me after you've had your coffee. I got some sleep, too.

You have a staff. 1 have a staff, and I decided to let them do their jobs while we slept," the operations officer said defiantly.

"What of the Never Depot?"

"We have a total of one hundred eighty tanks operating with full crews. Shorter on the infantry component and artillery, but the reservists seem to be functioning with some degree of enthusiasm, and the 265th Motor Rifle is starting to act like a real division for the first time." Aliyev walked over a mug of coffee with milk and sugar, the way Bondarenko preferred it. "Drink, Gennady Iosifovich." Then he pointed to a table piled with buttered bread and bacon.

"If we live, I will see you promoted, Colonel."

"I've always wanted to be a general officer. But I want to see my children enter university, too. So, let's try to stay alive."

"What of the border troops?"

"I have transport assigned to each post—where possible, two sets of transport. I've sent some of the reservists in BTRs to make sure they have a little protection against the artillery fire when they pull out. We have a lot of guns in the photos from the M-5, Comrade General. And fucking mountains of shells. But the border troops have ample protection, and the orders have gone out so that they will not need permission to leave their posts when the situation becomes untenable—at the company-officer level, that is," Aliyev added. Commissioned officers were less likely to bug out than enlisted men.

"No word on when?"

The G-3 shook his head. "Nothing helpful from Intelligence. The Chinese are still moving trucks and such around, from what we can tell. I'd say another day, maybe as many as three."

So?" Ryan asked.

"So, the overheads show they're still moving the chess pieces on the board," Foley answered. "But most of them are in place."

"What about Moscow?"

"They're going to arrest their suspects soon. Probably going to pick up the control officer in Moscow, too. They'll sweat him some, but he does have diplomatic immunity, and you can't squeeze him much." Ed Foley remembered when KGB had arrested his wife in Moscow. It hadn't been pleasant for her—and less so for him—but they hadn't roughed her up, either. Messing with people who traveled on diplomatic passports didn't happen often, despite what they'd seen on TV a few weeks before. And the Chinese probably regretted that one a lot, pronouncements on the SORGE feeds to the contrary notwithstanding.

"Nothing from inside to encourage us?"

"Nope." The DCI shook his head.

"We ought to start moving the Air Force," Vice President Jackson urged.

"But then it could be seen as a provocation," Secretary Adler pointed out. "We can't give them any excuse."

"We can move First Armored into Russia, say it's a joint training exercise with our new NATO allies," TOMCAT said. "That could buy us a few days."

Ryan weighed that and looked over at the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. "Well, General?"

"It can't hurt all that much. They're already working with Deutsche Rail to get the move organized."

"Then do it," the President ordered.

"Yes, sir." General Moore moved to make the call.

Ryan checked his watch. "I have a reporter to talk to."

"Have fun," Robby told his friend.

Zhigansk, on the west side of the Lena River, had once been a major regional air-defense center for the old Soviet PVO Strany, the Russian air-defense command. It had a larger-than-average airfield with barracks and hangars, and had been largely abandoned by the new Russian military, with just a caretaker staff to maintain the facility in case it might be needed someday. This turned out to be a piece of lucky foresight, because the United States Air Force started moving in that day, mainly transport aircraft from the central part of America that had staged through Alaska and flown over the North Pole to get there. The first of thirty C-5 Galaxy transports landed at ten in the morning local time, taxiing to the capacious but vacant ramps to offload their cargo under the direction of ground crewmen who'd ridden in the large passenger area aft of the wing box in the huge transports. The first things wheeled off were the Dark Star UAVs. They looked like loaves of French bread copulating atop slender wings, and were long-endurance, stealthy reconnaissance drones that took six hours to assemble for flight. The crews got immediately to work, using mobile equipment shipped on the same aircraft.

Fighter and attack aircraft came into Suntar, far closer to the Chinese border, with tankers and other support aircraft—including the American E-3 Sentry AWACS birds—just west of there at Mirnyy. At these two air bases, the arriving Americans found their Russian counterparts, and immediately the various staffs started working together. American tankers could not refuel Russian aircraft, but to everyone's relief the nozzles for ground fueling were identical, and so the American aircraft could make use of the take fuel from the Russian JP storage tanks, which, they found, were huge, and mainly underground to be protected against nuclear airbursts. The most important element of cooperation was the assignment of Russian controllers to the American AWACS, so that Russian fighters could be controlled from the

American radar aircraft. Almost at once, some E-3s lifted off to test this capability, using arriving American fighters as practice targets for controlled intercepts. They found immediately that the Russian fighter pilots reacted well to the directions, to the pleased surprise of the American controllers.

They also found almost immediately that the American attack aircraft couldn't use Russian bombs and other ordnance. Even if the shackle points had been the same (they weren't), the Russian bombs had different aerodynamics from their American counterparts, and so the computer software on the American aircraft could not hit targets with them—it would have been like trying to jam the wrong cartridge into a rifle: even if you could fire the round, the sights would send it to the wrong point of impact. So, the Americans would have to fly in the bombs to be dropped, and shipping bombs by air was about as efficient as flying in gravel to build roads. Bombs came to fighter bases by ship, train, truck, and forklift, not by air. For this reason, the B-1s and other heavy-strike aircraft were sent to Andersen Air Force Base on Guam, where there *were* some bomb stores to be used, even though they were a long way from the supposed targets.

The air forces of the two sides established an immediate and friendly rapport, and in hours—as soon as the American pilots had gotten a little mandated crew rest—they were planning and flying missions together with relative ease.

The QUARTER HORSE went first. Under the watchful eyes of Lieutenant Colonel Angelo Giusti, the M1A2 main battle tanks and M3 Bradley cavalry scout vehicles rolled onto the flatcars of Deutsche Rail, accompanied by the fuel and other support trucks. Troops went into coaches at the head end of the train "consists" and were soon heading east to Berlin, where they'd change over to the Russian-gauge cars for the further trip east. Oddly, there were no TV cameramen around at the moment, Giusti saw. That couldn't last, but it was one less distraction for the unit that was the eyes of First Tanks. The division's helicopter brigade was sitting at its own base, awaiting the availability of Air Force transports to ferry them east. Some genius had decided against having the aircraft fly themselves, which, Giusti thought, they were perfectly able to do, but General Diggs had told him not to worry about it. Giusti would worry about it, but not out loud. He settled into a comfortable seat in the lead passenger coach, along with his staff, and went over maps just printed up by the division's cartography unit, part of the intelligence shop. The maps showed the terrain they might be fighting for. Mostly they predicted where the Chinese would be going, and that wasn't overly demanding.

So, what are we going to do?" Bob Holtzman asked.

"We're beginning to deploy forces to support our allies," Ryan answered. "We hope that the PRC will see this and reconsider the activities that now

appear to be under way."

"Have we been in contact with Beijing?"

"Yes." Ryan nodded soberly. "The DCM of our embassy in Beijing, William Kilmer, delivered a note from us to the Chinese government, and we are now awaiting a formal reply."

"Are you telling us that you think there will be a shooting war between Russia and China?"

"Bob, our government is working very hard to forestall that possibility, and we call on the Chinese government to think very hard about its position and its actions. War is no longer a policy option in this world. I suppose it once was, but no longer. War only brings death and ruin to people. The world has turned a corner on this thing. The lives of people—including the lives of soldiers—are too precious to be thrown away. Bob, the reason we have governments is to serve the needs and the interests of *people,* not the ambitions of rulers. I hope the leadership of the PRC will see that." Ryan paused. "A couple of days ago, I was at Auschwitz. Bob, that was the sort of experience to get you thinking. You could *feel* the horror there. You could hear the screams, smell the death smell, you could *see* the lines of people being led off under guns to where they were murdered. Bob, all of a sudden it wasn't just black-and-white TV anymore.

"It came to me then that there is no excuse at all for the government of a country, any country, to engage in killing for profit. Ordinary criminals rob liquor stores to get money. Countries rob countries to get oil or gold or territory. Hitler invaded Poland for *Lebensraum,* for room for Germany to expand—but, damn it, there were already people living there, and what he tried to do was to steal. That's all. Not statecraft, not vision. Hitler was a *thief* before he was a murderer. Well, the United States of America will not stand by and watch that happen again." Ryan paused and took a sip of water.

"One of the things you learn in life is that there's only one thing really worth having, and that's love. Well, by the same token there's only one thing worth fighting for, and that is justice. Bob, that's what America fights for, and if China launches a war of aggression—a war of robbery—America will stand by her ally and stop it from happening."

"Many say that your policy toward China has helped to bring this situation about, that your diplomatic recognition of Taiwan—" Ryan cut him off angrily.

"Bob, I will not have any of that! The Republic of China's government is a freely elected one. America *supports* democratic governments. Why? Because we stand for freedom and self-determination. Neither I nor America had anything to do with the cold-blooded murders we saw on TV, the death of the Papal Nuncio, Cardinal DiMilo, and the killing of the Chinese minister Yu Fa An. We had nothing to do with that. The revulsion of the entire civilized world came about because of the PRC's actions. Even then, China could have straightened it out by investigating and punishing the killers, but they chose not to, and the world reacted—to what they did all by themselves."

"But what is this all about? Why are they massing troops on the Russian border?"

"It appears that they want what the Russians have, the new oil and gold discoveries. Just as Iraq once invaded Kuwait. It was for oil, for money, really. It was an armed robbery, just like a street thug does, mugging an old lady for her Social Security check, but somehow, for some reason, we sanctify it when it happens at the nation-state level. Well, no more, Bob. The world will no longer tolerate such things. And America will not stand by and watch this happen to our ally. Cicero once said that Rome grew great not through conquest, but rather through defending her allies. A nation acquires respect from acting *for* things, not *against* things. You measure people not by what they are against, but by what they are *for*. America stands *for* democracy, *for* the self-determination of people. We stand for freedom. We stand *for* justice. We've told the People's Republic of China that if they launch a war of aggression, then America will stand with Russia and against the aggressor. We believe in a peaceful world order in which nations compete on the economic battlefield, not with tanks and guns. There's been enough killing. It's time for that to stop, and America will be there to make it stop."

"The world's policeman?" Holtzman asked. Immediately, the President shook his head.

"Not that, but we will defend our allies, and the Russian Federation is an ally. We stood with the Russian people to stop Hitler. We stand with them again," Ryan said.

"And again we send our young people off to war?"

"There need be no war, Bob. There is no war today. Neither America nor Russia will start one. That question is in the hands of others. It isn't hard, it isn't demanding, for a nation-state to stand its military down. It's a rare professional soldier who relishes conflict. Certainly no one who's seen a battlefield will voluntarily rush to see another. But I'll tell you this: If the PRC launches a war of aggression, and if because of them American lives are placed at risk, then those who make the decision to set loose those dogs are putting their own lives at risk."

"The Ryan Doctrine?" Holtzman asked.

"Call it anything you want. If it's acceptable to kill some infantry private for doing what his government tells him, then it's also acceptable to kill the people who tell the government what to do, the ones who send that poor, dumb private out in harm's way."

Oh, shit, Arnie van Damm thought, hovering in the doorway of the Oval Office. *Jack, did you have to say* that?

"Thank you for your time, Mr. President," Holtzman said. "When will you address the nation?"

"Tomorrow. God willing, it'll be to say that the PRC has backed off. I'll be calling Premier Xu soon to make a personal appeal to him."

"Good luck."

We are ready," Marshal Luo told the others. "The operation commences early tomorrow morning."

"What have the Americans done?"

"They've sent some aircraft forward, but aircraft do not concern me," the Defense Minister replied. "They can sting, as a mosquito does, but they cannot do real harm to a man. We will make twenty kilometers the first day, and then fifty per day thereafter—maybe more, depending on how the Russians fight. The Russian Air Force is not even a paper tiger. We can destroy it, or at least push it back out of our way. The Russians are starting to move mechanized troops east on their railroad, but we will pound on their marshaling facility at Chita with our air assets. We can dam them up and stop them to protect our left flank until we move troops in to wall that off completely."

"You are confident, Marshal?" Zhang asked—rhetorically, of course.

"We'll have their new gold mine in eight days, and then it's ten more to the oil," the marshal predicted, as though describing how long it would take to build a house.

"Then you are ready?"

"Fully," Luo insisted.

"Expect a call from President Ryan later today," Foreign Minister Shen warned the premier.

"What will he say?" Xu asked.

"He will give you a personal plea to stop the war from beginning."

"If he does, what ought I to say?"

"Have your secretary say you are out meeting the people," Zhang advised. "Don't talk to the fool."

Minister Shen wasn't fully behind his country's policy, but nodded anyway. It seemed the best way to avoid a personal confrontation, which Xu would not handle well. His ministry was still trying to get a feel for how to handle the American President. He was so unlike other governmental chiefs that they still had difficulty understanding how to speak with him.

"What of our answer to their note?" Fang asked.

"We have not given them a formal answer," Shen told him.

"It concerns me that they should not be able to call us liars," Fang said. "That would be unfortunate, I think."

"You worry too much, Fang," Zhang commented, with a cruel smile.

"No, in that he is correct," Shen said, rising to his colleague's defense. "Nations must be able to trust the words of one another, else no intercourse at all is possible. Comrades, we must remember that there will be an 'after the

war,' in which we must be able to reestablish normal relations with the nations of the world. If they regard us as outlaw, that will be difficult."

"That makes sense," Xu observed, speaking his own opinion for once. "No, I will not accept the call from Washington, and no, Fang, I will not allow America to call us liars."

"One other development," Luo said. "The Russians have begun high-altitude reconnaissance flights on their side of the border. I propose to shoot down the next one and say that their aircraft intruded on our airspace. Along with other plans, we will use that as a provocation on their part."

"Excellent," Zhang observed.

So?" John asked.

"So, he is in this building," General Kirillin clarified. "The takedown team is ready to go up and make the arrest. Care to observe?"

"Sure," Clark agreed with a nod. He and Chavez were both dressed in their RAINBOW ninja suits, black everything, plus body armor, which struck them both as theatrical, but the Russians were being overly solicitous to their hosts, and that included official concern for their safety. "How is it set up?"

"We have four men in the apartment next door. We anticipate no difficulties," Kirillin sold his guests. "So, if you will follow me."

"Waste of time, John," Chavez observed in Spanish.

"Yeah, but they want to do a show-and-tell." The two of them followed Kirillin and a junior officer to the elevator, which whisked them up to the proper floor. A quick, furtive look showed that the corridor was clear, and they moved like cats to the occupied apartment.

"We are ready, Comrade General," the senior Spetsnaz officer, a major, told his commander. "Our friend is sitting in his kitchen discussing matters with his guest. They're looking at how to kill President Grushavoy tomorrow on his way to parliament. Sniper rifle," he concluded, "from eight hundred meters."

"You guys make good ones here," Clark observed. Eight hundred was close enough for a good rifleman, especially on a slow-moving target like a walking man.

"Proceed, Major," Kirillin ordered.

With that, the four-man team walked back out into the corridor. They were dressed in their own RAINBOW suits, black Nomex, and carrying the equipment Clark and his people had brought over, German MP-10 submachine guns, and .45 Beretta sidearms, plus the portable radios from E-Systems. Clark and Chavez were wearing identical gear, but not carrying weapons. Probably the real reason Kirillin had brought them over, John thought, was to show them how much his people had learned, and that was fair enough. The Russian troopers looked ready. Alert and pumped up, but not nervous, just the

right amount of tenseness.

The officer in command moved down the corridor to the door. His explosives man ran a thin line of det-cord explosive along the door's edges and stepped aside, looking at his team leader for the word.

"Shoot," the major told him—

—and before Clark's brain could register the single-word command, the corridor was sundered with the crash of the explosion that sent the solid-core door into the apartment at about three hundred feet per second. Then the Russian major and a lieutenant tossed in flash-bangs sure to disorient anyone who might have been there with a gun of his own. It was hard enough for Clark and Chavez, and they'd known what was coming and had their hands over their ears. The Russians darted into the apartment in pairs, just as they'd been trained to do, and there was no other sound, except for a scream down the hall from a resident who hadn't been warned about the day's activities. That left John Clark and Domingo Chavez just standing there, until an arm appeared and waved them inside.

The inside was a predictable mess. The entry door was now fit only for kindling and toothpicks, and the pictures that decorated the wall did so without any glass in the frames. The blue sofa had a ruinous scorch mark on the right side, and the carpet was cratered by the other flash-bang.

Suvorov and Suslov had been sitting in the kitchen, always the heart of any Russian home. That had placed them far enough away from the explosion to be unhurt, though both looked stunned by the experience, and well they might be. There were no weapons in evidence, which was surprising to the Russians but not to Clark, and the two supposed miscreants were now facedown on the tile floor, their hands manacled behind them and guns not far behind their heads.

"Greetings, Klementi Ivan'ch," General Kirillin said. "We need to talk."

The older of the two men on the floor didn't react much. First, he was not really able to, and second, he knew that talking would not improve his situation. Of all the spectators, Clark felt the most sympathy for him. To run a covert operation was tense enough. To have one blown—it had never happened to John, but he'd thought about the possibility often enough—was not a reality that one wished to contemplate. Especially in this place, though since it was no longer the Soviet Union, Suvorov could take comfort in the fact that things might have been a little worse. But not that much worse, John was sure. It was time for him to say something.

"Well executed, Major. A little heavy on the explosives, but we all do that. I say that to my own people almost every time."

"Thank you, General Clark." The senior officer of the strike team beamed, but not too much, trying to look cool for his subordinates. They'd just done their first real-life mission, and pleased as they all were, the attitude they had to adopt was *of course we did it right.* It was a matter of professional pride.

"So, Yuriy Andreyevich, what will happen with them now?" John asked in

his best Leningrad Russian.

"They will be interrogated for murder and conspiracy to commit murder, plus state treason. We picked up Kong half an hour ago, and he's talking," Kirillin added, lying. Suvorov might not believe it, but the statement would get his mind wandering in an uncomfortable direction. "Take them out!" the general ordered. No sooner had that happened than an FSS officer came in to light up the desktop computer to begin a detailed check of its contents. The protection program Suvorov had installed was bypassed because they knew the key to it, from the keyboard bug they'd installed earlier. Computers, they all agreed, must have been designed with espionage in mind—but they worked both ways.

"Who are you?" a stranger in civilian clothes asked.

"John Clark" was the surprising answer in Russian. "And you?"

"Provalov. I am a lieutenant-investigator with the militia."

"Oh, the RPG case?"

"Correct."

"I guess that's your man."

"Yes, a murderer."

"Worse than that," Chavez said, joining the conversation.

"There is nothing worse than murder," Provalov responded, always the cop.

Chavez was more practical in his outlook. "Maybe, depends on if you need an accountant to keep track of all the bodies."

"So, Clark, what do you think of the operation?" Kirillin asked, hungry for the American's approval.

"It was perfect. It was a simple operation, but flawlessly done. They're good kids, Yuriy. They learn fast and they work hard. They're ready to be trainers for your special-operations people."

"Yeah, I'd take any of them out on a job," Ding agreed. Kirillin beamed at the news, unsurprising as it was.

CHAPTER 50

Thunder and Lightning

They got him," Murray told Ryan. "Our friend Clark was there to watch. Damned ecumenical of the Russkies."

"Just want to be an ally back to us, I suppose, and RAINBOW is a NATO asset. You suppose he'll sing?"

"Like a canary, probably," the FBI Director predicted. "The Miranda Rule never made it to Russia, Jack, and their interrogation techniques are a little more—uh, enthusiastic than ours are. Anyway, it's something to put on TV, something to get their public seriously riled up. So, boss, this war going to stop or go?"

"We're trying to stop it, Dan, but—"

"Yeah, I understand," Murray said. "Sometimes big shots act just like street hoods. Just with bigger guns."

This bunch has H-bombs, Jack didn't say. It wasn't something you wanted to talk about right after breakfast. Murray hung up and Ryan checked his watch. It was time. He punched the intercom button on his phone.

"Ellen, could you come in, please?"

It took the usual five seconds. "Yes, Mr. President."

"I need one, and it's time to call Beijing."

"Yes, sir." She handed Ryan a Virginia Slim and went back to the anteroom.

Ryan saw one of the phone lights go on and waited, lighting his smoke. He had his speech to Premier Xu pretty well canned, knowing that the Chinese leader would have a good interpreter nearby. He also knew that Xu would still be in the office. He'd been working pretty late over the past few days—it wasn't hard to figure out why. Starting a potential world war had to be a time-consuming business. So, it would be less than thirty seconds to make the guy's phone ring, then Ellen Sumter would talk to the operator on the far end—the Chinese had full-time switchboard operators rather than secretary-receptionists as in the White House—and the call would be put through. So, figure another thirty seconds, and then Jack would get to make his case to Xu: *Let's reconsider this one, buddy, or something bad will happen. Bad for our country. Bad for yours. Probably worse for* yours. Mickey Moore had promised something called Hyperwar, and that would be seriously bad news for someone unprepared for it. The phone light stayed on, but Ellen wasn't beeping him to get on the line ... why? Xu was still in his office. The embassy in Beijing was

supposed to be keeping an eye on the guy. Ryan didn't know how, but he was pretty sure they knew their job. It might have been as easy as having an embassy employee—probably an Agency guy—stand on the street with a cell phone and watch a lit-up office window, then report to the embassy, which would have an open line to Foggy Bottom, which had many open lines to the White House. But then the light on the phone blinked out, and the intercom started:

"Mr. President, they say he's out of the office," Mrs. Sumter said.

"Oh?" Ryan took a long puff. "Tell State to confirm his location."

"Yes, Mr. President." Then forty seconds of silence. "Mr. President, the embassy says he's in his office, as far as they can tell."

"And his people said ... ?"

"They said he's out, sir."

"When will he be back?"

"I asked. They said they didn't know."

"Shit," Ryan breathed. "Please get me Secretary Adler."

"Yeah, Jack," SecState said a few seconds later.

"He's dodging my call, Scott."

"Xu?"

"Yeah."

"Not surprising. They—the Chinese Politburo—don't trust him to talk on his own without a script."

Like Arnie and me, Ryan thought with a mixture of anger and humor. "Okay, what's it mean, Scott?"

"Nothing good, Jack," Adler replied. "Nothing good."

"So, what do we do now?"

"Diplomatically, there's not much we can do. We've sent them a stiff note, and they haven't answered. Your position vis-à-vis them and the Russian situation is as clear as we can make it. They know what we're thinking. If they don't want to talk to us, it means they don't care anymore."

"Shit."

"That's right," the Secretary of State agreed.

"You're telling me we can't stop it?"

"Correct." Adler's tone was matter-of-fact.

"Okay, what else?"

"We tell our civilians to get the hell out of China. We're set up to do that here."

"Okay, do it," Ryan ordered, with a sudden flip of his stomach.

"Right."

"I'll get back to you." Ryan switched lines and punched the button for the Secretary of Defense.

"Yeah," Tony Bretano answered.

"It looks like it's going to happen," Ryan told him.

"Okay, I'll alert all the CINCs."

In a matter of minutes, FLASH traffic was dispatched to each of the commanders-in-chief of independent commands. There were many of them, but at the moment the most important was CINCPAC, Admiral Bart Mancuso in Pearl Harbor. It was just after three in the morning when the STU next to his bed started chirping.

"This is Admiral Mancuso," he said, more than half asleep.

"Sir, this is the watch officer. We have a war warning from Washington. China. 'Expect the commencement of hostilities between the PRC and the Russian Federation to commence within the next twenty-four hours. You are directed to take all measures consistent with the safety of your command.' Signed Bretano, SecDef, sir," the lieutenant commander told him.

Mancuso already had both feet on the floor of the bedroom. "Okay, get my staff together. I'll be in the office in ten minutes."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The chief petty officer assigned to drive him was already outside the front door, and Mancuso noted the presence of four armed Marines in plain sight. The senior of them saluted while the others studiously looked outward at a threat that probably wasn't there ... but might be. Minutes later, he walked into his hilltop headquarters overlooking the naval base. Brigadier General Lahr was there, waiting for him.

"How'd you get in so fast?" CINCPAC asked him.

"Just happened to be in the neighborhood, Admiral," the J-2 told him. He followed Mancuso into the inner office.

"What's happening?"

"The President tried to phone Premier Xu, but he didn't take the call. Not a good sign from our Chinese brethren," the theater intelligence officer observed.

"Okay, what's John Chinaman doing?" Mancuso asked, as a steward's mate brought in coffee.

"Not much in our area of direct interest, but he's got a hell of a lot of combat power deployed in the Shenyang Military District, most of it right up on the Amur River." Lahr set up a map stand and started moving his hand on the acetate overlay, which had a lot of red markings on it. For the first time in his memory, Mancuso saw Russian units drawn in blue, which was the "friendly" color. It was too surprising to comment on.

"What are we doing?"

"We're moving a lot of air assets into Siberia. The shooters are here at Suntar. Reconnaissance assets back here at Zhigansk. The Dark Stars ought to be up and flying soon. It'll be the first time we've deployed 'em in a real shooting war, and the Air Force has high hopes for them. We have some satellite overheads that show where the Chinese are. They've camouflaged their heavy gear, but the Lacrosse imagery sees right through the nets."

"And?"

"And it's over half a million men, five Group-A mechanized armies. That's one armored division, two mechanized infantry, and one motorized infantry each, plus attachments that belong directly to the army commander. The forces deployed are heavy in tanks and APCs, fair in artillery, but light in helicopters. The air assets belong to somebody else. Their command structure for coordinating air and ground isn't as streamlined as it ought to be, and their air forces aren't very good by our standards, but their numbers are better than the Russians'. Manpower-wise, the Chinese have a huge advantage on the ground. The Russians have space to play with, but if it comes down to a slugging match, bet your money on the People's Liberation Army."

"And at sea?"

"Their navy doesn't have much out of port at the moment, but overheads show they're lighting up their boilers alongside. I would expect them to surge some ships out. Expect them to stay close in, defensive posture, deployment just to keep their coast clear."

Mancuso didn't have to ask what he had out. Seventh Fleet was pretty much out to sea after the warnings from previous weeks. His carriers were heading west. He had a total of six submarines camped out on the Chinese coast, and his surface forces were spun up. If the People's Liberation Army Navy wanted to play, they'd regret it.

"Orders?"

"Self-defense only at this point," Lahr said.

"Okay, we'll close to within two hundred fifty miles of their coast minimum for surface ships. Keep the carriers an additional hundred back for now. The submarines can close in and shadow any PLAN forces at will, but no shooting unless attacked, and I don't want anyone counter-detected. The Chinese have that one reconsat up. I don't want it to see anything painted gray." Dodging a single reconnaissance satellite wasn't all that difficult, since it was entirely predictable in course and speed. You could even keep out of the way of two. When the number got to three, things became difficult.

In the Navy, the day never starts because the day never ends, but that wasn't true for a ship sitting in wooden blocks. Then things changed, if not to an eight-hour day, then at least to a semi-civilian job where most of the crew

lived at home and drove in every morning (for the most part) to do their jobs. That was principally preventive maintenance, which is one of the U.S. Navy's religions. It was the same for Al Gregory; in his case, he drove his rented car in from the Norfolk motel and blew a kiss at the rent-a-cop at the guard shack, who waved everyone in. Once there had been armed Marines at the gates, but they'd gone away when the Navy had been stripped of its tactical nuclear weapons. There were still some nukes at the Yorktown ordnance station, because the Trident warheads hadn't yet all been disassembled out at Pantex in Texas, and some still occupied their mainly empty bunkers up on the York River, awaiting shipment west for final disposal. But not at Norfolk, and the ships that had guards mainly depended on sailors carrying Beretta M9 pistols which they might, or might not, know how to use properly. That was the case on USS *Gettysburg,* whose sailors recognized Gregory by sight and waved him aboard with a smile and a greeting.

"Hey, Doc," Senior Chief Leek said, when the civilian came into CIC. He pointed to the coffee urn. The Navy's real fuel was coffee, not distillate fuel, at least as far as the chiefs were concerned.

"So, anything good happening?"

"Well, they're going to put a new wheel on today."

"Wheel?"

"Propeller," Leek explained. "Controllable pitch, reversible screw, made of high-grade manganese-bronze. They're made up in Philadelphia, I think. It's interesting to watch how they do it, long as they don't drop the son of a bitch."

"What about your toy shop?"

"Fully functional, Doc. The last replacement board went in twenty minutes ago, didn't it, Mr. Olson?" The senior chief addressed his assistant CIC officer, who came wandering out of the darkness and into view. "Mr. Olson, this here's Dr. Gregory from TRW."

"Hello," the young officer said, stretching his hand out. Gregory took it.

"Dartmouth, right?"

"Yep, physics and mathematics. You?"

"West Point and Stony Brook, math," Gregory said.

"Hudson High?" Chief Leek asked. "You never told me that."

"Hell, I even did Ranger School between second- and first-class years," he told the surprised sailors. People looked at him and often thought "pussy." He enjoyed surprising them. "Jump School, too. Did nineteen jumps, back when I was young and foolish."

"Then you went into SDI, I gather," Olson observed, getting himself some CIC coffee. The black-gang coffee, from the ship's engineers, was traditionally the best on any ship, but this wasn't bad.

"Yeah, spent a lot of years in that, but it all kinda fizzled out, and TRW

hired me away before I made bird. When you were at Dartmouth, Bob Jastrow ran the department?"

"Yeah, he was involved in SDI, too, wasn't he?"

Gregory nodded. "Yeah, Bob's pretty smart." In his lexicon, pretty smart meant doing the calculus in your head.

"What do you do at TRW?"

"I'm heading up the SAM project at the moment, from my SDI work, but they lend me out a lot to other stuff. I mainly do software and the theoretical engineering."

"And you're playing with our SM-2s now?"

"Yeah, I've got a software fix for one of the problems. Works on the 'puter, anyway, and the next job's reprogramming the seeker heads on the Block IVs."

"How you going to do that?"

"Come on over and I'll show you," Gregory said. He and Olson wandered to a desk, with the chief in tow. "The trick is fixing the way the laser nutates. Here's how the software works ..." This started an hour's worth of discussion, and Senior Chief Leek got to watch a professional software geek explaining his craft to a gifted amateur. Next they'd have to sell all this to the Combat Systems Officer—"Weps"—before they could run the first computer simulations, but it looked to Leek as though Olson was pretty well sold already. Then they'd have to get the ship back in the water to see if all this bullshit actually worked.

T*he sleep had worked,* Bondarenko told himself. Thirteen hours, and he hadn't even awakened to relieve his bladder—so, he must have really needed it. Then and there he decided that Colonel Aliyev would screen successfully for general's stars.

He walked into his evening staff meeting feeling pretty good, until he saw the looks on their faces.

"Well?" he asked, taking his seat.

"Nothing new to report," Colonel Tolkunov reported for the intelligence staff. "Our aerial photos show little, but we know they're there, and they're still not using their radios at all. Presumably they have a lot of phone lines laid. There are scattered reports of people with binoculars on the southern hilltops. That's all. But they're ready, and it could start at any time—oh, yes, just got this from Moscow," the G-2 said. "The Federal Security Service arrested one K. I. Suvorov on suspicion of conspiring to assassinate President Grushavoy."

"What?" Aliyev asked.

"Just a one-line dispatch with no elaboration. It could mean many things, none of them good," the intelligence officer told them. "But nothing definite

either."

"An attempt to unsettle our political leadership? That's an act of war," Bondarenko said. He decided he had to call Sergey Golovko himself about that one!

"Operations?" he asked next.

"The 265th Motor Rifle is standing-to. Our air-defense radars are all up and operating. We have interceptor aircraft flying combat air patrol within twenty kilometers of the border. The border defenses are on full alert, and the reserve formation—"

"Have a name for it yet?" the commanding general asked.

"BOYAR," Colonel Aliyev answered. "We have three companies of motorized infantry deployed to evacuate the border troops if necessary, the rest are out of their depot and working up north of Never. They've done gunnery all day."

"And?"

"And for reservists they did acceptably," Aliyev answered. Bondarenko didn't ask what that meant, partly because he was afraid to.

"Anything else we can do? I want ideas, comrades," General Bondarenko said. But all he saw were headshakes. "Very well. I'm going to get some dinner. If anything happens, I want to know about it. Anything at all, comrades." This generated nods, and he walked back to his quarters. There he got on the phone.

"Greetings, General," Golovko said. It was still afternoon in Moscow. "How are things at your end?"

"Tense, Comrade Chairman. What can you tell me of this attempt on the president?"

"We arrested a chap named Suvorov earlier today. We're interrogating him and one other right now. We believe that he was an agent of the Chinese Ministry of State Security, and we believe also that he was conspiring to kill Eduard Petrovich."

"So, in addition to preparing an invasion, they also wish to cripple our political leadership?"

"So it would seem," Golovko agreed gravely.

"Why weren't we given fuller information?" Far East demanded.

"You weren't?" The chairman sounded surprised.

"No!" Bondarenko nearly shouted.

"That was an error. I am sorry, Gennady Iosifovich. Now, you tell me: Are you ready?"

"All of our forces are at maximum alert, but the correlation of forces is adverse in the extreme."

"Can you stop them?"

"If you give me more forces, probably yes. If you do not, probably no. What help can I expect?"

"We have three motor-rifle divisions on trains at this moment crossing the Urals. We have additional air power heading to you, and the Americans are beginning to arrive. What is your plan?"

"I will not try to stop them at the border. That would merely cost me all of my troops to little gain. I will let the Chinese in and let them march north. I will harass them as much as possible, and then when they are well within our borders, I will kill the body of the snake and watch the head die. *If,* that is, you give me the support I need."

"We are working on it. The Americans are being very helpful. One of their tank divisions is now approaching Poland on trains. We'll send them right through to where you are."

"What units?"

"Their First Tank division, commanded by a Negro chap named Diggs."

"Marion Diggs? I know him."

"Oh?"

"Yes, he commanded their National Training Center and also commanded the force they deployed to the Saudi kingdom last year. He's excellent. When will he arrive?"

"Five days, I should imagine. You'll have three Russian divisions well before then. Will that be enough, Gennady?"

"I do not know," Bondarenko replied. "We have not yet taken the measure of the Chinese. Their air power worries me most of all. If they attack our railhead at Chita, deploying our reinforcements could be very difficult." Bondarenko paused. "We are well set up to move forces laterally, west to east, but to stop them we need to move them northeast from their drop-off points. It will be largely a race to see who can go north faster. The Chinese will also be using infantry to wall off the western flank of their advance. I've been training my men hard. They're getting better, but I need more time and more men. Is there any way to slow them down politically?"

"All political approaches have been ignored. They pretend nothing untoward is happening. The Americans have approached them as well, in hope of discouraging them, but to no avail."

"So, it comes to a test of arms?"

"Probably," Golovko agreed. "You're our best man, Gennady Iosifovich. We believe in you, and you will have all the support we can muster."

"Very well," the general replied, wondering if it would be enough. "I will let you know of any developments here."

General Bondarenko knew that a proper general—the sort they had in movies, that is—would now eat the combat rations his men were having, but

no, he'd eat the best food available because he needed his strength, and false modesty would not impress his men at all. He did refrain from alcohol, which was probably more than his sergeants and privates were doing. The Russian soldier loves his vodka, and the reservists had probably all brought their own bottles to ease the chill of the nights—such would be the spoken excuse. He could have issued an order forbidding it, but there was little sense in drafting an order that his men would ignore. It only undermined discipline, and discipline was something he needed. That would have to come from within his men. The great unknown, as Bondarenko thought of it. When Hitler had struck Russia in 1941—well, it was part of Russian mythology, how the ordinary men of the land had risen up with ferocious determination. From the first day of the war, the courage of the Russian soldier had given the Germans pause. Their battlefield skills might have been lacking, but never their courage. For Bondarenko, both were needed; a skillful man need not be all that brave, because skill would defeat what bravery would only defy. Training. It was always training. He yearned to train the Russian soldier as the Americans trained their men. Above all, to train them to think—to encourage them to think. A thinking *German* soldier had nearly destroyed the Soviet Union—how close it had been was something the movies never admitted, and it was hard enough to learn about it at the General Staff academies, but three times it had been devilishly close, and for some reason the gods of war had sided with Mother Russia on all three occasions.

What would those gods do now? That was the question. Would his men be up to the task? Would *he* be up to the task? It was his name that would be remembered, for good or ill, not those of the private soldiers carrying the AK-47 rifles and driving the tanks and infantry carriers. Gennady Iosifovich Bondarenko, general-colonel of the Russian Army, commander-in-chief Far East, hero or fool? Which would it be? Would future military students study his actions and cluck their tongues at his stupidity or shake their heads in admiration of his brilliant maneuvers?

It would have been better to be a colonel again, close to the men of his regiment, even carrying a rifle of his own as he'd done at Dushanbe all those years before, to take a personal part in the battle, and take direct fire at enemies he could see with his own eyes. That was what came back to him now, the battle against the Afghans, defending that missited apartment block in the snow and the darkness. He'd earned his medals that day, but medals were always things of the past. People respected him for them, even his fellow soldiers, the pretty ribbons and metal stars and medallions that hung from them, but what did they mean, really? Would he find the courage he needed to be a commander? He was sure here and now that that sort of courage was harder to find than the sort that came from mere survival instinct, the kind that was generated in the face of armed men who wished to steal your life away.

It was so easy to look into the indeterminate future with confidence, to know what had to be done, to suggest and insist in a peaceful conference room. But today he was in his quarters, in command of a largely paper army that happened to be facing a real army composed of men and steel, and if he

failed to deal with it, his name would be cursed for all time. Historians would examine his character and his record and say, well, yes, he was a brave colonel, and even an adequate theoretician, but when it came to a real fight, he was unequal to the task. And if he failed, men would die, and the nation he'd sworn to defend thirty years before would suffer, if not by his hand, then by his responsibility.

And so General Bondarenko looked at his plate of food and didn't eat, just pushed the food about with his fork, and wished for the tumbler of vodka that his character denied him.

General Peng Xi-Wang was finishing up what he expected to be his last proper meal for some weeks. He'd miss the long-grain rice that was not part of combat rations—he didn't know why that was so: The general who ran the industrial empire that prepared rations for the front-line soldiers had never explained it to him, though Peng was sure that he never ate those horrid packaged foods himself. He had a staff to taste-test, after all. Peng lit an after-dinner smoke and enjoyed a small sip of rice wine. It would be the last of those for a while, too. His last pre-combat meal completed, Peng rose and donned his tunic. The gilt shoulderboards showed his rank as three stars and a wreath.

Outside his command trailer, his subordinates waited. When he came out, they snapped to attention and saluted as one man, and Peng saluted back. Foremost was Colonel Wa Cheng-Gong, his operations officer. Wa was aptly named. Cheng-Gong, his given name, meant "success."

"So, Wa, are we ready?"

"Entirely ready, Comrade General."

"Then let us go and see." Peng led them off to his personal Type 90 command-post vehicle. Cramped inside, even for people of small size, it was further crowded by banks of FM radios, which fed the ten-meter-tall radio masts at the vehicle's four corners. There was scarcely room for the folding map table, but his battle staff of six could work in there, even when on the move. The driver and gunner were both junior officers, not enlisted men.

The turbocharged diesel caught at once, and the vehicle lurched toward the front. Inside, the map table was already down, and the operations officer showed their position and their course to men who already knew it. The large roof hatch was opened to vent the smoke. Every man aboard was smoking a cigarette now.

Hear that?" Senior Lieutenant Valeriy Mikhailovich Komanov had his head outside the top hatch of the tank turret that composed the business end of his bunker. It was the turret of an old—ancient—JS-3 tank. Once the most

fearsome part of the world's heaviest main-battle tank, this turret had never gone anywhere except to turn around, its already thick armor upgraded by an additional twenty centimeters of applique steel. As part of a bunker, it was only marginally slower than the original tank, which had been underpowered at best, but the monster 122-mm gun still worked, and worked even better here, because underneath it was not the cramped confines of a tank hull, but rather a spacious concrete structure which gave the crewmen room to move and turn around. That arrangement cut the reloading speed of the gun by more than half, and didn't hurt accuracy either, because this turret had better optics. Lieutenant Komanov was, notionally, a tanker, and his platoon here was twelve tanks instead of the normal three, because these didn't move. Ordinarily, it was not demanding duty, commanding twelve six-man crews, who didn't go anywhere except to the privy, and they even got to practice their gunnery at a duplicate of this emplacement at a range located twenty kilometers away. They'd been doing that lately, in fact, at the orders of their new commanding general, and neither Komanov nor his men minded, because for every soldier in the world, shooting is fun, and the bigger the gun, the greater the enjoyment. Their 122-mms had a relatively slow muzzle velocity, but the shell was large enough to compensate for it. Lately, they'd gotten to shoot at worn-out old T-55s and blown the turret off each one with a single hit, though getting the single hit had taken the crews, on the average, 2.7 shots fired.

They were on alert now, a fact which their eager young lieutenant was taking seriously. He'd even had his men out running every morning for the last two weeks, not the most pleasant of activities for soldiers detailed to sit inside concrete emplacements for their two years of conscripted service. It wasn't easy to keep their edge. One naturally felt secure in underground concrete structures capped with thick steel and surrounded with bushes which made their bunker invisible from fifty meters away. Theirs was the rearmost of the platoons, sitting on the south slope of Hill 432—its summit was 432 meters high—facing the north side of the first rank of hills over the Amur Valley. Those hills were a lot shorter than the one they were on, and also had bunkers on them, but those bunkers were fakes—not that you could tell without going inside, because they'd also been made of old tank turrets—in their case from truly ancient KV-2s that had fought the Germans before rusting in retirement—set in concrete boxes. The additional height of their hill meant that they could see into China, whose territory started less than four kilometers away. And that was close enough to hear things on a calm night.

Especially if the thing they heard was a few hundred diesel engines starting up at once.

"Engines," agreed Komanov's sergeant. "A fucking lot of them."

The lieutenant hopped down from his perch inside the turret and walked the three steps to the phone switchboard. He lifted the receiver and punched the button to the regimental command post, ten kilometers north.

"This is Post Five Six Alfa. We can hear engines to our south. It sounds like tank engines, a lot of them."

“Can you see anything?” the regimental commander asked.

“No, Comrade Colonel. But the sound is unmistakable.”

“Very well. Keep me informed.”

“Yes, comrade. Out.” Komanov set the phone back in its place. His most-forward bunker was Post Five Nine, on the south slope of the first rank of hills. He punched that button.

“This is Lieutenant Komanov. Can you see or hear anything?”

“We see nothing,” the corporal there answered. “But we hear tank engines.”

“You see nothing?” “Nothing, Comrade Lieutenant,” Corporal Vladimirov responded positively.

“Are you ready?”

“We are fully ready,” Vladimirov assured him. “We are watching the south.”

“Keep me informed,” Komanov ordered, unnecessarily. His men were alert and standing-to. He looked around. He had a total of two hundred rounds for his main gun, all in racks within easy reach of the turret. His loader and gunner were at their posts, the former scanning the terrain with optical sights better than his own officer’s binoculars. His reserve crewmen were just sitting in their chairs, waiting for someone to die. The door to the escape tunnel was open. A hundred meters through that was a BTR-60 eight-wheeled armored personnel carrier ready to get them the hell away, though his men didn’t expect to make use of it. Their post was impregnable, wasn’t it? They had the best part of a meter of steel on the gun turret, and three meters of reinforced concrete, with a meter of dirt atop it—and besides, they were hidden in a bush. You couldn’t hit what you couldn’t see, could you? And the Chinks had slitty little eyes and couldn’t see very well, could they? Like all the men in this crew, Komanov was a European Russian, though there were Asians under his command. This part of his country was a mishmash of nationalities and languages, though all had learned Russian, if not at home, then in school.

“Movement,” the gunner said. “Movement on Rice Ridge.” That was what they called the first ridge line in Chinese territory. “Infantrymen.”

“You’re sure they’re soldiers?” Komanov asked.

“I suppose they might be shepherds, but I don’t see any sheep, Comrade Lieutenant.” The gunner had a wry sense of humor.

“Move,” the lieutenant told the crewman who’d taken his place in the command hatch. He reclaimed the tank commander’s seat. “Get me the headset,” he ordered next. Now he’d be connected to the phone system with a simple push-button microphone. With that, he could talk to his other eleven crews or to regiment. But Komanov didn’t don the earphones just yet. He wanted his ears clear. The night was still, the winds calm, just a few gentle breezes. They were a good distance from any real settlement, and so there were no sounds of traffic to interfere. Then he leveled his binoculars on the far ridge. Yes, there was the ghostly suggestion of movement there, almost like seeing someone’s hair blowing in the wind. But it wasn’t hair. It could only be

people. And as his gunner had observed, they would not be shepherds.

For ten years, the officers in the border bunkers had cried out for low-light goggles like those issued to the Spetsnaz and other elite formations, but, no, they were too expensive for low-priority posts, and so such things were only seen here when some special inspection force came through, just long enough for the regular troops to drool over them. No, they were supposed to let their eyes adapt to the darkness ... *as though they think we're cats,* Komanov thought. But all the interior battle lights in the bunkers were red, and that helped. He'd forbidden the use of white lights inside the post for the past week.

Brothers of this tank turret had first been produced in late 1944—the JS-3 had stayed in production for many years, *as though no one had summoned the courage to stop producing something with the name Iosif Stalin on it,* he thought. Some of them had rolled into Germany, invulnerable to anything the Fritzes had deployed. And the same tanks had given serious headaches to the Israelis, with their American- and English-built tanks, as well.

"This is Post Fifty. We have a lot of movement, looks like infantry, on the north slope of Rice Ridge. Estimate regimental strength," his earphones crackled.

"How many high-explosive shells do we have?" Komanov asked.

"Thirty-five," the loader answered.

And that was a goodly amount. And there were fifteen heavy guns within range of Rice Ridge, all of them old ML- 20 152-mm howitzers, all sitting on concrete pads next to massive ammo bunkers. Komanov checked his watch. Almost three-thirty. Ninety minutes to first light. The sky was cloudless. He could look up and see stars such as they didn't have in Moscow, with all its atmospheric pollution. No, the Siberian sky was clear and clean, and above his head was an ocean of light made brighter still by a full moon still high in the western sky. He focused his eyes through his binoculars again. Yes, there *was* movement on Rice Ridge.

So?" Peng asked.

"At your command," Wa replied.

Peng and his staff were forward of their guns, the better to see the effect of their fire.

But seventy thousand feet over General Peng's head was Marilyn Monroe. Each of the Dark Star drones had a name attached to it, and given the official name of the platform, the crews had chosen the names of movie stars, all of them, of course, of the female persuasion. This one even had a copy of the movie star's *Playboy* centerfold from 1953 skillfully painted on the nose, but

the eyes looking down from the stealthy UAV were electronic and multi-spectrum rather than china blue. Inside the fiberglass nosecone, a directional antenna cross-linked the "take" to a satellite, which then distributed it to many places. The nearest was Zhigansk. The farthest was Fort Belvoir, Virginia, within spitting distance of Washington, D.C., and that one sent its feed via fiberoptic cable to any number of classified locations. Unlike most spy systems, this one showed real-time movie-type imagery.

"Looks like they're getting ready, sir," an Army staff sergeant observed to his immediate boss, a captain. And sure enough, you could see soldiers ramming shells into the breeches of their field pieces, followed by the smaller cloth bags that contained the propellant. Then the breeches were slammed shut, and the guns elevated. The 30-30-class blank cartridges were inserted into the firing ports of the breech-blocks, and the guns were fully ready. The last step was called "pulling the string," and was fairly accurate. You just jerked the lanyard rope to fire the blank cartridge and that ignited the powder bags, and then the shell went north at high speed.

"How many guns total, Sergeant?" the captain asked.

"A whole goddamned pisspot full, sir."

"I can see that. What about a number?" the officer asked.

"North of six hundred, and that's just in this here sector, Cap'n. Plus four hundred mobile rocket launchers."

"We spotted air assets yet?"

"No, sir. The Chinese aren't nighttime flyers yet, least not for bombing."

Eagle Seven to Zebra, over," the AWACS senior controller radioed back to Zhigansk.

"Zebra to Seven, reading you five-by-five," the major running the ground base replied.

"We got bogies, call it thirty-two coming north out of Siping, estimate they're Sierra-Uniform Two-Sevens."

"Makes sense," the major on the ground told his wing commander. "Siping's their 667th Regiment. That's their best in terms of aircraft, and stick-time. That's their varsity, Colonel."

"Who do we have to meet them?"

"Our Russian friends out of Nelkan. Nearest American birds are well north and—"

"—and we haven't got orders to engage anybody yet," the colonel agreed. "Okay, let's get the Russians alerted."

"Eagle Seven to Black Falcon Ten, we have Chinese fighters three hundred kilometers bearing one-nine-six your position, angels thirty, speed five

hundred knots. They're still over Chinese territory, but not for much longer."

"Understood," the Russian captain responded. "Give me a vector."

"Recommend intercept vector two-zero-zero," the American controller said. His spoken Russian was pretty good. "Maintain current speed and altitude."

"Roger."

On the E-3B's radar displays, the Russian Su-27s turned to head for the Chinese Su-27s. The Russians would have radar contact in about nine minutes.

Sir, this don't look real nice," another major in Zhigansk said to his general.

"Then it's time to get a warning out," the USAF two-star agreed. He lifted a phone that went to the Russian regional command post. There hadn't as yet been time to get a proper downlink to them.

General, a call from the American technical mission at Zhigansk," Tolkunov said.

"This is General Bondarenko."

"Hello, this is Major General Gus Wallace. I just set up the reconnaissance shop here. We just put up a stealthy recon-drone over the Russian Chinese border at ..." He read off the coordinates. "We show people getting ready to fire some artillery at you, General."

"How much?" Bondarenko asked.

"Most I've ever seen, upwards of a thousand guns total. I hope your people are hunkered down, buddy. The whole damned world's about to land on 'em."

"What can you do to help us?" Bondarenko asked.

"My orders are not to take action until they start shooting," the American replied. "When that happens, I can start putting fighters up, but not much in the way of bombs. We hardly have any to drop," Wallace reported. "I have an AWACS up now, supporting your fighters in the Chulman area, but that's all for now. We have a C-130 ferrying you a downlink tomorrow so that we can get you some intelligence directly. Anyway, be warned, General, it looks here as though the Chinese are going to launch their attack momentarily."

"Thank you, General Wallace." Bondarenko hung up and looked at his staff. "He says it's going to start at any moment."

And so it did. Lieutenant Komanov saw it first. The line of hills his men called Rice Ridge was suddenly backlit by yellow flame that could only be the muzzle flashes of numerous field guns. Then came the upward-flying meteor shapes of artillery rockets.

"Here it comes," he told his men. Unsurprisingly, he kept his head up so

that he could see. His head, he reasoned, was a small target. Before the shells landed, he felt the impact of their firing; the rumble came through the ground like a distant earthquake, causing his loader to mutter, “Oh, shit,” probably the universal observation of men in their situation.

“Get me regiment,” Komanov ordered.

“Yes, Lieutenant,” the voice answered.

“We are under attack, Comrade Colonel, massive artillery fire to the south. Guns and rockets are coming our—”

Then the first impacts came, mainly near the river, well to his south. The exploding shells were not bright, but like little sparks of light that fountained dirt upward, followed by the noise. That *did* sound like an earthquake. Komanov had heard artillery fire before, and seen what the shells do at the far end, but this was as different from that as an exploding oil tank was from a cigarette lighter.

“Comrade Colonel, our country is at war,” Post Five Six Alfa reported to command. “I can’t see enemy troop movement yet, but they’re coming.”

“Do you have any targets?” regiment asked.

“No, none at this time.” He looked down into the bunker. His various positions could just give a direction to a target, and when another confirmed it and called in its own vector, they’d have a pre-plotted artillery target for the batteries in the rear—

—but those were being hit already. The Chinese rockets were targeted well behind him, and that’s what their targets had to be. He turned his head to see the flashes and hear the booms from ten kilometers back. A moment later, there was a fountaining explosion skyward. One of the first flight of Chinese rockets had gotten lucky and hit one of the artillery positions in the rear. *Bad news for that gun crew,* Komanov thought. The first casualties in this war. There would be many more ... perhaps including himself. Surprisingly, that thought was a distant one. Someone was attacking his country. It wasn’t a supposition or a possibility anymore. He could see it, and feel it. This was his country they were attacking. He’d grown up in this land. His parents lived here. His grandfather had fought the Germans here. His grandfather’s two brothers had, too, and both had died for their country, one west of Kiev and the other at Stalingrad. And now these Chink bastards were attacking his country, too? More than that, they were attacking *him,* Senior Lieutenant Valeriy Mikhailovich Komanov. These *foreigners* were trying to kill him, his men, and trying to steal part of his country.

Well, fuck that! he thought.

“Load HE!” he told his loader.

“Loaded!” the private announced. They all heard the breech clang shut.

“No target, Comrade Lieutenant,” the gunner observed.

“There will be, soon enough.”

“Post Five Nine, this is Five Six Alfa. What can you see?”

“We just spotted a boat, a rubber boat, coming out of the trees on the south bank ... more, more, more, many of them, maybe a hundred, maybe more.”

“Regiment, this is Fifty-six Alfa, fire mission!” Komanov called over the phone.

The gunners ten kilometers back were at their guns, despite the falling Chinese shells and rockets that had already claimed three of the fifteen gun crews. The fire mission was called in, and the preset concentration dialed in from range books so old they might as well have been engraved in marble. In each case, the high-explosive projectile was rammed into the breech, followed by the propellant charge, and the gun cranked up and trained to the proper elevation and azimuth, and the lanyards pulled, and the first Russian counterstrokes in the war just begun were fired.

Unknown to them, fifteen kilometers away a fire-finder radar was trained on their positions. The millimeter-wave radar tracked the shells in flight and a computer plotted their launch points. The Chinese knew that the Russians had guns covering the border, and knew roughly where they would be—the performance of the guns told that tale—but not exactly where, because of the skillful Russian efforts at camouflage. In this case, those efforts didn’t matter too greatly. The calculated position of six Russian howitzers was instantly radioed to rocket launchers that were dedicated counter-battery weapons. One Type-83 launcher was detailed to each target, and each of them held four monster 273-mm rockets, each with a payload of 150 kilograms of submunitions, in this case eighty hand grenade—sized bomblets. The first rocket launched three minutes after the first Russian counter-fire salvo, and required less than two minutes of flight time from its firing point ten kilometers inside Chinese territory. Of the first six fired, five destroyed their targets, and then others, and the Russian gunfire died in less than five minutes.

Why did it stop?” Komanov asked. He’d seen a few rounds hit among the Chinese infantry just getting out of their boats on the Russian side of the river. But the shriek of shells overhead passing south had just stopped after a few minutes. ”Regiment, this is Five Six Alfa, why has our fire stopped?”

“Our guns were taking counter-battery fire from the Chinese. They’re trying to get set back up now,” was the encouraging reply. “What is your situation?”

“Position Five-Zero has taken a little fire, but not much. Mainly they’re hitting the reverse slope of the southern ridge.” That was where the fake bunkers were, and the concrete lures were fulfilling their passive mission. This line of defenses had been set up contrary to published Russian doctrine, because whoever had set them up had known that all manner of people can

read books. Komanov's own position covered a small saddle-pass through two hills, fit for advancing tanks. If the Chinese came north in force, if this was not just some sort of probe aimed at expanding their borders—they'd done that back in the late 1960s—this was a prime invasion route. The maps and the terrain decided that.

"That is good, Lieutenant. Now listen: Do not expose your positions unnecessarily. Let them in close before you open up. Very close." That, Komanov knew, meant a hundred meters or so. He had two heavy machine guns for that eventuality. But he wanted to kill tanks. That was what his main gun had been designed to do.

"Can we expect more artillery support?" he asked his commander.

"I'll let you know. Keep giving us target information."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel."

For the fighter planes, the war began when the first PLAAF crossed over the Amur. There were four Russian fighter-interceptors up, and these, just like the invaders, were Sukhoi-27. Those on both sides had been made in the same factories, but the Chinese pilots had triple the recent flight time of the defending Russians, who were outnumbered eight to one.

Countering that, however was the fact that the Russian aircraft had support from the USAF E-3B Sentry AWACS aircraft, which was guiding them to the intercept. Both sets of fighters were flying with their target-acquisition radars in standby mode. The Chinese didn't know what was out there. The Russians did. That was a difference.

"Black Falcon Ten, this is Eagle Seven. Recommend you come right to new course two-seven-zero. I'm going to try an' bring you up on the Chinese from their seven o'clock." It would also keep them out of Chinese radar coverage.

"Understood, Eagle. Coming right to two-seven-zero." The Russian flight leader spread his formation out and settled down as much as he could, with his eyes tending to look off to his left.

"Okay, Black Falcon Ten, that's good. Your targets are now at your nine o'clock, distance thirty kilometers. Come left now to one-eight-zero."

"Coming left," the Russian major acknowledged. "We will try to start the attack Fox-Two," he advised. He knew American terminology. That meant launching infrared seekers, which did not require the use of radar, and so did not warn anyone that he was in harm's way. The Marquis of Queensberry had never been a fighter pilot.

"Roger that, Falcon. This boy's smart," the controller commented to his supervisor.

"That's how you stay alive in this business," the lieutenant colonel told the young lieutenant at the Nintendo screen.

“Okay, Falcon Ten, recommend you come left again. Targets are now fifteen kilometers ... make that seventeen kilometers to your north. You should have tone shortly.”

“Da. I have tone,” the Russian pilot reported, when he heard the warble in his headset. “Flight, prepare to fire ... Fox-Two!” Three of the four aircraft loosed a single missile each. The fourth pilot was having trouble with his IR scanner. In all cases, the blazing rocket motors wrecked their night vision, but none of the pilots looked away, as they’d been trained to do, and instead watched their missiles streak after fellow airmen who did not yet know they were under attack. It took twenty seconds, and as it turned out, two missiles were targeted on the same Chinese aircraft. That one took two hits and exploded. The second died from its single impact, and then things really got confusing. The Chinese fighters scattered on command from their commander, doing so in a preplanned and well-rehearsed maneuver, first into two groups, then into four, each of which had a piece of sky to defend. Everyone’s radar came on, and in another twenty seconds, a total of forty missiles were flying, and with this began a deadly game of chicken. The radar-homing missiles needed a radar signal to guide them, and that meant that the firing fighter could not switch off or turn away, only hope that his bird would kill its target and switch off his radar before his missile got close.

“Damn,” the lieutenant observed, in his comfortable controller’s seat in the E-3B. Two more Chinese fighters blinked into larger bogies on his screen and then started to fade, then another, but there were just too many of the Chinese air-to-air missiles, and not all of the Chinese illumination radars went down. One Russian fighter took three impacts and disintegrated. Another one limped away with severe damage, and as quickly as it had begun, this air encounter ended. Statistically, it was a Russian win, four kills for one loss, but the Chinese would claim more.

“Any chutes?” the senior controller asked over the intercom. The E-3 radar could track those, too.

“Three, maybe four ejected. Not sure who, though, not till we play the tape back. Damn, that was a quick one.”

The Russians didn’t have enough planes up to do a proper battle. Maybe next time, the colonel thought. The full capabilities of a fighter/AWACS team had never been properly demonstrated in combat, but this war held the promise to change that, and when it happened, some eyes would be opened.

CHAPTER 51

Falling Back

Senior Lieutenant Valeriy Mikhailovich Komanov learned something he'd never suspected. The worst part of battle—at least to a man in a fixed emplacement—was knowing that the enemy was out there, but being unable to shoot at him. The reverse slopes of the ridge to his immediate south had to be swarming with Chinese infantry, and his supporting artillery had been taken out in the first minutes of the battle. Whoever had set up the artillery positions had made the mistake of assuming that the guns were too far back and too shielded by terrain for the enemy to strike at them. Fire-finder radar/computer systems had changed that, and the absence of overhead cover had doomed the guncrews to rapid death, unless some of them had found shelter in the concrete-lined trenches built into their positions. He had a powerful gun at his fingertips, but it was one that could not reach over the hills to his south because of its flat trajectory. As envisioned, this defense line would have included leg infantry who'd depend on and also support the bunker strongpoints—and be armed with mortars which could reach over the close-in hills and punish those who were there but unseen behind the terrain feature. Komanov could only engage those he could see, and they—

"There, Comrade Lieutenant," the gunner said. "A little right of twelve o'clock, some infantry just crested the ridge. Range one thousand five hundred meters."

"I see them." There was just a hint of light on the eastern horizon now. Soon there would be enough light to see by. That would make shooting easier, but for both sides. In an hour, his bunker would be targeted, and they'd get to see just how thick their armor protection really was.

"Five Six Alfa, this is Five Zero. We have infantry eleven hundred meters to our south. Company strength and moving north toward us."

"Very well. Do not engage until they are within two hundred meters." Komanov automatically doubled the shooting range at which he'd been trained to open fire. What the hell, he thought, his crews would do that in their own minds anyway. A man thinks differently when real bullets are flying.

As if to emphasize that, shells started landing on the crest immediately behind his position, close enough to make him duck down.

"So they see us?" his loader asked.

"No, they're just barraging the next set of hills to support their

infantrymen."

"Look, look there, they're on top of false bunker One Six," the gunner said. Komanov shifted his glasses—

Yes, they were there, examining the old KV-2 gun turret with its vertical sides and old 155-mm gun. As he watched, a soldier hung a satchel charge on the side and backed away. Then the charge went off, destroying something that had never worked anyway. *That would make some Chinese lieutenant feel good,* Komanov thought. Well, Five Six Alfa would change his outlook somewhat, in another twenty or thirty minutes.

The bad part was that now he had perfect targets for his supporting artillery, and those old six-inch guns would have cut through them like a harvester's scythe. Except the Chinese were still hitting those positions, even though the Russian fire had stopped. He called Regiment again to relay his information.

"Lieutenant," his colonel answered, "the supporting battery has been badly hit. You are on your own. Keep me posted."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel. Out." He looked down at his crew. "Don't expect supporting fire." The weapons of World War III had just destroyed those of World War I.

"Shit," the loader observed.

"We'll be in the war soon, men. Be at ease. The enemy is now closer ..."

"Five hundred meters," the gunner agreed.

Well?" General Peng asked at his post atop Rice Ridge. "We've found some bunkers, but they are all unoccupied," Colonel Wa reported. "So far, the only fire we've taken has been indirect artillery, and we've counterbatteried that to death. The attack is going completely to plan, Comrade General." They could see the truth of that. The bridging engineers were rolling up to the south bank of the Amur now, with folded sections of ribbon bridge atop their trucks. Over a hundred Type 90 main-battle tanks were close to the river, their turrets searching vainly for targets so that they could support the attacking infantry, but there was nothing for them to shoot at, and so the tankers, like the generals, had nothing to do but watch the engineers at work. The first bridge section went into the water, flipping open to form the first eight meters of highway across the river. Peng checked his watch. Yes, things were going about five minutes ahead of schedule, and that was good.

Post Five Zero opened up first with its 12.7-mm machine gun. The sound of it rattled across the hillside. Five Zero was thirty-five hundred meters to his east, commanded by a bright young sergeant named Ivanov. *He opened up too early,* Komanov thought, reaching for targets a good four hundred meters away, but there was nothing to complain about, and the heavy machine gun could easily reach that far ... yes, he could see bodies crumpling from the heavy slugs—

—then a crashing *BOOM* as the main gun let loose a single round, and it reached into the saddle they defended, exploding there amidst a squad or so.

“Comrade Lieutenant, can we?” his gunner asked.

“No, not yet. Patience, Sergeant,” Komanov replied, watching to the east to see how the Chinese reacted to the fire. Yes, their tactics were predictable, but sound. The lieutenant commanding them first got his men down. Then they set up a base of fire to engage the Russian position, and then they started maneuvering left and right. Aha, a section was setting up something ... something on a tripod. An antitank recoilless rifle, probably. He could have turned his gun to take it out, but Komanov didn’t want to give away his position yet.

“Five Zero, this is Five Six Alfa, there’s a Chinese recoilless setting up at your two o’clock, range eight hundred,” he warned.

“Yes, I see it!” the sergeant replied. And he had the good sense to engage it with his machine gun. In two seconds, the green tracers reached out and ripped through the gun section once, twice, three times, just to be sure. Through his binoculars, he could see some twitching, but that was all.

“Well done, Sergeant Ivanov! Look out, they’re moving to your left under terrain cover.”

But there wasn’t much of that around here. Every bunker’s field of fire had been bulldozed, leveling out almost all of the dead ground within eight hundred meters of every position.

“We shall see about that, Comrade Lieutenant.” And the machine gun spoke again. Return fire was coming in now. Komanov could see tracers bouncing off the turret’s thick armor into the sky.

“Regiment, Five Six Alfa here. Post Five Zero is under deliberate attack now from infantry, and—”

Then more artillery shells started landing, called in directly on Five Zero. He hoped Ivanov was now under his hatch. The turret had a coaxial machine gun, an old but powerful PK with the long 7.62-mm cartridge. Komanov let his gunner survey the threat to his bunker while he watched how the Chinese attacked Sergeant Ivanov’s. Their infantry moved with some skill, using what ground they had, keeping fire on the exposed gun turret—enough artillery fell close enough to strip away the bushes that had hidden it at first. Even if your bullets bounced off, they were still a distraction to those inside. It was the big shells that concerned the lieutenant. A direct hit might penetrate the thinner top armor, mightn’t it? An hour before, he would have said no, but he could see now what the shells did to the ground, and his confidence had eroded quickly.

“Comrade Lieutenant,” his gunner said. “The people headed for us are turning away to attack Ivanov. Look.”

Komanov turned around to see. He didn’t need his binoculars. The sky was improving the light he had, and now he could see more than shadows. They were man shapes, and they were carrying weapons. One section was rushing

to his left, three of them carrying something heavy. On reaching a shallow intermediate ridgeline, they stopped and started putting something together, some sort of tube ...

... it was an HJ-8 anti-tank missile, his mind told him, fishing up the information from his months of intelligence briefings. They were about a thousand meters to his left front, within range of Ivanov ...

... and within range of his big DshKM machine gun. Komanov stood on his firing stand and yanked back hard on the charging handle, leveling the gun and sighting carefully. His big tank gun could do this, but so could he ...

So, you want to kill Sergeant Ivanov? his mind asked. Then he thumbed the trigger lever, and the big gun shook in his hands. His first burst was about thirty meters short, but his second was right on, and three men fell. He kept firing to make sure he'd destroyed their rocket launcher. He realized a moment later that the brilliant green tracers had just announced his location for all to see—tracers work in both directions. That became clear in two minutes, when the first artillery shells began landing around Position Five Six Alfa. He only needed one close explosion to drop down and slam his hatch. The hatch was the weakest part of his position's protection, with only a fifth of the protective thickness of the rest—else he'd be unable to open it, of course—and if a shell hit *that,* he and his crew would all be dead. The enemy knew their location now, and there was no sense in hiding.

"Sergeant," he told his gunner. "Fire at will."

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant!" And with that, the sergeant loosed his first high-explosive round at a machine-gun crew eight hundred meters away. The shell hit the gun itself and vaporized the infantrymen operating it. "There's three good Chinks!" he exulted. "Load me another!" The turret started turning, and the gunner started hunting.

Getting some resistance now," Wa told Peng. "There are Russian positions on the southern slope of the second ridge. We're hitting them now with artillery."

"Losses?"

"Light," the operations officer reported, listening in on the tactical radio.

"Good," said General Peng. His attention was almost entirely on the river. The first bridge was about a third complete now.

Those bridging engineers are pretty good," General Wallace thought, watching the "take" from Marilyn Monroe.

"Yes, sir, but it might as well be a peacetime exercise. They're not taking any fire," the junior officer observed, watching another section being tied off. "And it's a very efficient bridge design."

"Russian?"

The major nodded. "Yes, sir. We copied it, too."

"How long?"

"The rate they're going? About an hour, maybe an hour ten."

"Back to the gunfight," Wallace ordered.

"Sergeant, let's go back to the ridge," the officer told the NCO who was piloting the UAC. Thirty seconds later, the screen showed what looked like a tank sunk in the mud surrounded by a bunch of infantrymen.

"Jesus, that looks like real fun," Wallace thought. A fighter pilot by profession, the idea of fighting in the dirt appealed to him about as much as anal sex.

"They're not going to last much longer," the major said. "Look here. The gomers are behind some of the bunkers now."

"And look at all that artillery."

A total of a hundred heavy field guns were now pounding Komanov's immobile platoon. That amounted to a full battery fixed on each of them, and heavy as his buried concrete box was, it was shaking now, and the air inside filled with cement dust, as Komanov and his crew struggled to keep up with all the targets.

"This is getting exciting, Comrade Lieutenant," the gunner observed, as he loosed his fifteenth main-gun shot.

Komanov was in his commander's cupola, looking around and seeing, rather to his surprise, that his bunker and all the others under his command could not deal with the attackers. It was a case of intellectual knowledge finally catching up with what his brain had long proclaimed as evident common sense. He actually was *not* invincible here. Despite his big tank gun and his two heavy machine guns, he could not deal with all these *insects* buzzing about him. It was like swatting flies with an icepick. He reckoned that he and his crew had personally killed or wounded a hundred or so attackers—but no tanks. Where were the tanks he yearned to kill? He could do that job well. But to deal with infantry, he needed supporting artillery fire, plus foot soldiers of his own. Without them, he was like a big rock on the seacoast, indestructible, but the waves could just wash around him. And they were doing that now, and then Komanov remembered that all the rocks by the sea were worn down by the waves, and eventually toppled by them. His war had lasted three hours, not even that much, and he was fully surrounded, and if he wanted to survive, it would soon be time to leave.

The thought enraged him. Desert his post? *Run away?* But then he remembered that he had orders allowing him to do so, if and when his post became untenable. He'd received the orders with a confident chuckle. Run away from an impregnable mini-fortress? What nonsense. But now he was alone. Each of his posts was alone. And—

—the turret rang like an off-tone bell with a direct impact of a heavy shell,

and then—

—*"Shit!"* the gunner screamed. "Shit! My gun's damaged!"

Komanov looked out of one of his vision slits, and yes, he could see it. The gun tube was scorched and ... and actually bent. Was that possible? A gun barrel was the sturdiest structure men could make—but it was slightly bent. And so it was no longer a gun barrel at all, but just an unwieldy steel club. It had fired thirty-four rounds, but it would fire no more. With that gone, he'd never kill a Chinese tank. Komanov took a deep breath to collect himself and his thoughts. Yes, it was time.

"Prepare the post for destruction!" he ordered.

"Now?" the gunner asked incredulously.

"Now!" the lieutenant ordered. "Set it up!"

There was a drill for this, and they'd practiced it. The loader took a demolition charge and set it among the racked shells. The electrical cable was in a spool, which he played out. The gunner ignored this, cranking the turret right to fire his coaxial machine gun at some approaching soldiers, then turning rapidly the other way to strike at those who'd used his reaction to the others' movement for cover to move themselves. Komanov stepped down from the cupola seat and looked around. There was his bed, and the table at which they'd all eaten their food, and the toilet room and the shower. This bunker had become home, a place of both comfort and work, but now they had to surrender it to the Chinese. It was almost inconceivable, but it could not be denied. In the movies, they'd fight to the death here, but fighting to the death was a lot more comfortable for actors who could start a new film the next week.

"Come on, Sergeant," he ordered his gunner, who took one last long burst before stepping down and heading toward the escape tunnel.

Komanov counted off the men as they went, then headed out. He realized he hadn't phoned his intentions back to Regiment, and he hesitated, but, no, there wasn't time for that now. He'd radio his action from the moving BTR.

The tunnel was low enough that they had to run bent over, but it was also lit, and there was the outer door. When the reserve gunner opened it, they were greeted by the much louder sound of falling shells.

"You fucking took long enough," a thirtyish sergeant snarled at them. "Come on!" he urged, waving them to his BTR-60.

"Wait." Komanov took the twist-detonator and attached the wire ends to the terminals. He sheltered behind the concrete abutment that contained the steel door and twisted the handle once.

The demolition charge was ten kilograms of TNT. It and the stored shells created an explosion that roared out of the escape tunnel with a sound like the end of the world, and on the far side of the hill the heavy turret of the never-finished JS-3 tank rocketed skyward, to the amazed pleasure of the Chinese infantrymen. And with that, Komanov's job was done. He turned and followed

his men to board the eight-wheeled armored personnel carrier. It was ensconced on a concrete pad under a grass-covered concrete roof that had prevented anyone from seeing it, and now it raced down the hill to the north and safety.

Bugging out," the sergeant told the major, tapping the TV screen taking the feed from Marilyn Monroe. "This bunch just blew up their gun turret. That's the third one to call it a day."

"Surprised they lasted this long," General Wallace said. Sitting still in a combat zone was an idea entirely foreign to him. He'd never done fighting while moving slower than four hundred knots, and he considered that speed to be practically standing still.

"I bet the Russians will be disappointed," the major said.

"When do we get the downlink to Chabarsovil?"

"Before lunch, sir. We're sending a team down to show them how to use it."

The BTR was in many ways the world's ultimate SUV, with eight driving wheels, the lead four of which turned with the steering wheel. The reservist behind that wheel was a truck driver in civilian life, and knew how to drive only with his right foot pressed to the floor, Komanov decided. He and his men bounced inside like dice in a cup, saved from head injury only by their steel helmets. But they didn't complain. Looking out of the rifle-firing ports, they could see the impact of Chinese artillery, and the quicker they got away from that, the better they'd all feel.

"How was it for you?" the lieutenant asked the sergeant commanding the vehicle.

"Mainly we were praying for you to be a coward. What with all those shells falling around us. Thank God for whoever built that garage we were hidden in. At least one shell fell directly on it. I nearly shit myself," the reservist reported with refreshing candor. They were communicating in face-to-face shouts.

"How long to regimental headquarters?"

"About ten minutes. How many did you get?"

"Maybe two hundred," Komanov thought, rather generously. "Never saw a tank."

"They're probably building their ribbon bridges right now. It takes a while. I saw a lot of that when I was in Eighth Guards Army in Germany. Practically all we practiced was crossing rivers. How good are they?"

"They're not cowards. They advance under fire even when you kill some of

them. What happened to our artillery?"

"Wiped out, artillery rockets, came down like a blanket of hail, Comrade Lieutenant, *crump,"* he replied with a two-handed gesture.

"Where is our support?"

"Who the fuck do you think we are?" the sergeant asked in reply. They were all surprised when the BRT skidded to an unwarned stop. "What's happening?" he shouted at the driver.

"Look!" the man said in reply, pointing.

Then the rear hatches jerked open and ten men scrambled in, making the interior of the BTR as tight as a can of fish.

"Comrade Lieutenant!" It was Ivanov from Five Zero.

"What happened?"

"We took a shell on the hatch," he replied, and the bandages on his face told the truth of the tale. He was in some pain, but happy to be moving again. "Our BTR took a direct hit on the nose, killed the driver and wrecked it."

"I've never seen shelling like this, not even in exercises in Germany and the Ukraine," the BTR sergeant said. "Like the war movies, but different when you're really in it."

"Da," Komanov agreed. It was no fun at all, even in his bunker, but especially out here. The sergeant lit up a cigarette, a Japanese one, and held on to the overhead grip to keep from rattling around too much. Fortunately, the driver knew the way, and the Chinese artillery abated, evidently firing at random target sets beyond visual range of their spotters.

It's started, Jack," Secretary of Defense Bretano said. "I want to release our people to start shooting."

"Who, exactly?"

"Air Force, fighter planes we have in theater, to start. We have AWACS up and working with the Russians already. There's been one air battle, a little one, already. And we're getting feed from reconnaissance assets. I can cross-link them to you if you want."

"Okay, do that," Ryan told the phone. "And on the other issue, okay, turn 'em loose," Jack said. He looked over at Robby.

"Jack, it's what we pay 'em for, and believe me, they don't mind. Fighter pilots live for this sort of thing—until they see what happens, though they mainly never do. They just see the broke airplane, not the poor shot-up bleeding bastard inside, trying to eject while he's still conscious," Vice President Jackson explained. "Later on, a pilot may think about that a little. I did. But not everyone. Mainly you get to paint a kill on the side of your aircraft, and we all want to do that."

Okay, people, we are now in this fight," Colonel Bronco Winters told his assembled pilots. He'd gotten four kills over Saudi the previous year, downing those poor dumb ragheaded gomers who flew for the country that had brought biological warfare to his own nation. One more, and he'd be a no-shit fighter ace, something he dreamed about all the way back to his doolie year at Colorado Springs. He'd been flying the F-15 Eagle fighter for his entire career, though he hoped to upgrade to the new F-22A Raptor in two or three more years. He had 4,231 hours in the Eagle, knew all its tricks, and couldn't imagine a better aircraft to go up in. So, now he'd kill Chinese. He didn't understand the politics of the moment, and didn't especially care. He was on a Russian air base, something he'd never expected to see except through a gunsight, but that was okay, too. He thought for a moment that he rather liked Chinese food, especially the things they did to vegetables in a wok, but those were American Chinese, not the commie kind, and that, he figured, was that. He'd been in Russia for just over a day, long enough to turn down about twenty offers to snort down some vodka. Their fighter pilots seemed smart enough, maybe a little too eager for their own good, but friendly and respectful when they saw the four kills painted on the side panel of his F-15-Charlie, the lead fighter of the 390th Fighter Squadron. He hopped off the Russian jeep—they called it something else that he hadn't caught—at the foot of his fighter. His chief mechanic was there.

"Got her all ready for me, Chief?" Winters asked, as he took the first step on the ladder.

"You bet," replied Chief Master Sergeant Neil Nolan. "Everything is toplined. She's as ready as I can make her. Go kill us some, Bronco." It was a squadron rule that when a pilot had his hands on his aircraft, he went only by his call-sign.

"I'll bring you the scalps, Nolan." Colonel Winters continued his climb up the ladder, patting the decorated panel as he went. Chief Master Sergeant Nolan scurried up to help him strap in, then dropped off, detached the ladder, and got clear.

Winters began his start-up procedures, first of all entering his ground coordinates, something they still did on the Eagle despite the new GPS locator systems, because the F- 15C had inertial navigation in case it broke (it never did, but procedure was procedure). The instruments came on-line, telling Winters that his Eagle's conformal fuel tanks were topped off, and he had a full load of four AIM-120 AM-RAAM radar-guided missiles, plus four more of the brand-new AIM-9X Sidewinders, the super-snake version of a missile whose design went back to before his mom and dad had married in a church up on Lenox Avenue in Harlem.

"Tower, this is Bronco with three, ready to taxi, over."

"Tower, Bronco, you are cleared to taxi. Wind is three-zero-five at ten. Good luck, Colonel."

"Thank you, Tower. Boars, this is lead, let's get goin'" With that, he tripped his brakes and the fighter started moving, driven by its powerful Pratt & Whitney engines. A bunch of Russians, mainly groundcrewmen, but judging by the outfits, some drivers as well, were out on the ramp watching him and his flight. *Okay,* he thought, *we'll show 'em how we do things downtown.* The four taxied in pairs to the end of the runway and then roared down the concrete slabs, and pulled back into the air, wingman tucked in tight. Seconds later, the other two pulled up and they turned south, already talking to the nearest AWACS, Eagle Two.

"Eagle Two, this is Boar Leader in the air with four."

"Boar Leader, this is Eagle Two. We have you. Come south, vector one-seven-zero, climb and maintain flight level three-three. Looks like there's going to be some work for ya today, over."

"Suits me. Out." Colonel Winters—he'd just been deep-dip selected for his bird as a full bull colonel—wiggled a little in his seat to get things just right, and finished his climb to 33,000 feet. His radar system was off, and he wouldn't speak unnecessarily because someone out there might be listening, and why spoil the surprise? In a few minutes, he'd be entering the coverage of Chinese border radar stations. Somebody would have to do something about that. Later today, he hoped, the Little Weasel F-16s would go and see about those. But his job was Chinese fighter aircraft, and any bombers that might offer themselves. His orders were to remain over Russian airspace for the entire mission, and so if Joe Chink didn't want to come out and play, it would be a dull day. But Joe had Su-27s, and he thought those were pretty good. And Joe Chink Fighter Pilot probably thought he was pretty good, too.

So, they'd just have to see.

Otherwise, it was a good day for flying, two-tenths clouds and nice clean country air to fly in. His falcon's eyes could see well over a hundred miles from up here, and he had Eagle Two to tell him where the gomers were. Behind him, a second and third flight of four Eagles were each taking off. The Wild Boars would be fully represented today.

The train ride was fairly jerky. Lieutenant Colonel Giusti squirmed in his upright coach seat, trying to get a little bit comfortable, but the Russian-made coach in which he and his staff were riding hadn't been designed with creature comforts in mind, and there was no sense grumbling about it. It was dark outside, the early morning that children sensibly take to be nighttime, and there wasn't much in the way of lights out there. They were in Eastern Poland now, farm country, probably, as Poland was evolving into the Iowa of Europe, lots of pig farms to make the ham for which this part of the world was famous. Vodka, too, probably, and Colonel Giusti wouldn't have minded a snort of that at the moment. He stood and walked down the aisle of the car. Nearly everyone aboard was asleep or trying to be. Two sensible NCOs were stretched out on the floor instead of curled up on the seats. The dirty floor

wouldn't do their uniforms much good, but they were heading to combat operations, where neatness didn't really count all that much. Personal weapons were invariably stowed in the overhead racks, in the open for easy access, because they were all soldiers, and they didn't feel very comfortable without a usable weapon close by. He continued aft. The next coach had more troopers from Headquarters Company. His squadron sergeant major was in the back of that one, reading a paperback.

"Hey, Colonel," the sergeant major said in greeting. "Long ride, ain't it?"

"At least three more days to go, maybe four."

"Super," the senior non-com observed. "This is worse'n flying."

"Yeah, well, at least we got our tracks with us."

"Yes, sir."

"How's the food situation?"

"Well, sir, we all got our MREs, and I got me a big box of Snickers bars stashed. Any word what's happening in the world?"

"Just that it's started in Siberia. The Chinese are across the border and Ivan's trying to stop 'em. No details. We ought to get an update when we go through Moscow, after lunchtime, I expect."

"Fair 'nuff."

"How are the troopers taking things?"

"No problems, bored with the train ride, want to get back in their tracks, the usual."

"How's their attitude?"

"They're ready, Colonel," the sergeant-major assured him.

"Good." With that, Giusti turned and headed back to his seat, hoping he'd get a few hours anyway, and there wasn't much of Poland to see anyway. The annoying part was being so cut off. He had satellite radios in his vehicles, somewhere on the flatcars aft of this coach, but he couldn't get to them, and without them he didn't know what was happening up forward. A war was on. He knew that. But it wasn't the same as knowing the details, knowing where the train would stop, where and when he'd get to offload his equipment, get the Quarter Horse organized, and get back on the road, where they belonged.

The train part was working well. The Russian train service seemingly had a million flatcars designed expressly to transport tracked vehicles, undoubtedly intended to take their battle tanks west, into Germany for a war against NATO. Little had the builders ever suspected that the cars would be used to bring American tanks east to help defend Russia against an invader. Well, nobody could predict the future more than a few weeks. At the moment, he would have settled for five days or so.

The rest of First Armored was stretched back hundreds of miles on the east-west rail line. Colonel Don Lisle's Second Brigade was just finishing up boarding in Berlin, and would be tail-end Charlie for the division. They'd cross

Poland in daylight, for what that was worth.

The Quarter Horse was in the lead, where it belonged. Wherever the drop-off point was, they'd set up perimeter security, and then lead the march farther east, in a maneuver called Advance to Contact, which was where the "fun" started. And he needed to be well-rested for that, Colonel Giusti reminded himself. So he settled back in his seat and closed his eyes, surrendering his body to the jerks and sways of the train car.

Dawn patrol was what fighter pilots all thought about. The title for the duty went back to a 1930s Errol Flynn movie, and the term had probably originated with a real mission name, meaning to be the first up on a new day, to see the sun rise, and to seek out the enemy right after breakfast.

Bronco Winters didn't look much like Errol Flynn, but that was okay. You couldn't tell a warrior by the look of his face, though you could by the look on his face. He was a fighter pilot. As a youngster in New York, he'd ride the subway to La Guardia Airport, just to stand at the fence and watch the airplanes take off and land, knowing even then that he wanted to fly. He'd also known that fighters would be more fun than airliners, and known finally that to fly fighters he had to enter a service academy, and to do that he'd have to study. And so he'd worked hard all through school, especially in math and science, because airplanes were mechanical things, and that meant that science determined how they worked. So, he was something of a math whiz—that had been his college major at Colorado Springs—but his interest in it had ended the day he'd walked into Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi, because once he got his hands on the controls of an aircraft, the "study" part of his mission was accomplished, and the "learning" part really began. He'd been the number one student in his class at Columbus, quickly and easily mastering the Cessna Tweety Bird trainer, and then moving on to fighters, and since he'd been number one in his class, he'd gotten his choice—and that choice, of course, had been the F-15 Eagle fighter, the strong and handsome grandson of the F-4 Phantom. An easy plane to fly, it was a harder one to fight, since the controls for the combat systems are located on the stick and the throttles, all in buttons of different shapes so that you could manage all the systems by feel, and keep your eyes up and out of the aircraft instead of having to look down at instruments. It was something like playing two pianos at the same time, and it had taken Winters a disappointing six months to master. But now those controls came as naturally as twirling the wax into his Bismarck mustache, his one non-standard affectation, which he'd modeled on Robin Olds, a legend in the American fighter community, an instinctive pilot and a thinking—and therefore a very dangerous—tactician. An ace in World War II, an ace in Korea, and also an ace over North Vietnam, Olds was one of the best who'd ever strapped a fighter plane to his back, and one whose mustache had made Otto von Bismarck himself look like a pussy.

Colonel Winters wasn't thinking about that now. The thoughts were there even so, as much a part of his character as his situational awareness, the part

of his brain that kept constant track of the three-dimensional reality around him at all times. Flying came as naturally to him as it did to the gyrfalcon mascot at the Air Force Academy. And so did hunting, and now he was hunting. His aircraft had instrumentation that downloaded the take from the AWACS aircraft a hundred fifty miles to his rear, and he divided his eye time equally between the sky around him and the display three feet from his 20-10 brown eyes ...

... there ... two hundred miles, bearing one-seven-two, four bandits heading north. Then four more, and another flight of four. Joe Chink was coming up to play, and the pigs were hungry.

"Boar Lead, this is Eagle Two." They were using encrypted burst-transmission radios that were very difficult to detect, and impossible to listen in on.

"Boar Lead." But he kept his transmission short anyway. Why spoil the surprise?

"Boar Lead, we have sixteen bandits, one-seven-zero your position at angels thirty, coming due north at five hundred knots."

"Got 'em."

"They're still south of the border, but not for long," the young controller on the E-3B advised. "Boar, you are weapons-free at this time."

"Copy weapons-free," Colonel Winters acknowledged, and his left hand flipped a button to activate his systems. A quick look down to his weapons-status display showed that everything was ready to fire. He didn't have his tracking/targeting radar on, though it was in standby mode. The F-15 had essentially been designed as an appendage to the monstrous radar in its nose —a design consideration that had defined the size of the fighter from the first sketch on paper—but over the years the pilots had gradually stopped using it, because it could warn an enemy with the right sort of threat receiver, telling him that there was an Eagle in the neighborhood with open eyes and sharp claws. Instead he could now cross-load the radar information from the AWACS, whose radar signals were unwelcome, but nothing an enemy could do anything about, and not directly threatening. The Chinese would be directed and controlled by ground radar, and the Boars were just at the fuzzy edge of that, maybe spotted, maybe not. Somewhere to his rear, a Rivet Joint EC-135 was monitoring both the radar and the radios used by the Chinese ground controllers, and would cross-load any warnings to the AWACS. But so far none of that. So, Joe Chink was coming north.

"Eagle, Boar, say bandit type, over."

"Boar, we're not sure, but probably Sierra-Uniform Two-Sevens by point of origin and flight profile, over."

"Roger." Okay, good, Winters thought. They thought the Su-27 was a pretty hot aircraft, and for a Russian-designed bird it was respectable. They put their best drivers into the Flanker, and they'd be the proud ones, the ones who thought they were as good as he was. *Okay, Joe, let's see how good you are.*

“Boar, Lead, come left to one-three-five.”

“Two.” “Three.” “Four,” the flight acknowledged, and they all banked to the left. Winters took a look around to make sure he wasn’t leaving any contrails to give away his position. Then he checked his threat receiver. It was getting some chirps from Chinese search radar, but still below the theoretical detection threshold. That would change in twenty miles or so. But then they’d just be unknowns on the Chinese screens, and fuzzy ones at that. Maybe the ground controllers would radio a warning, but maybe they’d just peer at their screens and try to decide if they were real contacts or not. The robin’s-egg blue of the Eagles wasn’t all that easy to spot visually, especially when you had the sun behind you, which was the oldest trick in the fighter-pilot bible, and one for which there was still no solution ...

The Chinese passed to his right, thirty miles away, heading north and looking for Russian fighters to engage, because the Chinese would want to control the sky over the battlefield they’d just opened up. That meant that they’d be turning on their own search radars, and when that happened, they’d spend most of their time looking down at the scope instead of out at the sky, and that was dangerous. When he was south of them, Winters brought his flight right, west, and down to twenty thousand feet, well below Joe Chink’s cruising altitude, because fighter pilots might look back and up, but rarely back and down, because they’d been taught that height, like speed, was life. And so it was ... most of the time. In another three minutes, they were due south of the enemy, and Winters increased power to maximum dry thrust so as to catch up. His flight of four split on command into two pairs. He went left, and then his eyes spotted them, dark flecks on the brightening blue sky. They were painted the same light gray the Russians liked—and that would be a real problem if Russian Flankers entered the area, because you didn’t often get close enough to see if the wings had red stars or white-blue-red flags painted on them.

The audio tone came next. His Sidewinders could see the heat bloom from the Lyul’ka turbofan engines, and that meant he was just about close enough. His wingman, a clever young lieutenant, was now about five hundred yards to his right, doing his job, which was covering his leader. *Okay,* Bronco Winters thought. He had a good hundred knots of overtake speed now.

“Boar, Eagle, be advised these guys are heading directly for us at the moment.”

“Not for long, Eagle,” Colonel Winters responded. They weren’t flecks anymore. Now they were twin-rudder fighter aircraft. Cruising north, tucked in nice and pretty. His left forefinger selected Sidewinder to start, and the tone in his earphones was nice and loud. He’d start with two shots, one at the left-most Flanker, and the other at the right-most ... right about ...

“Fox-Two, Fox-Two with two birds away,” Bronco reported. The smoke trails diverged, just as he wanted them to, streaking in on their targets. His gunsight camera was operating, and the picture was being recorded on videotape, just as it had been over Saudi the previous year. He needed one kill to make ace—

—he got the first six seconds later, and the next half a second after that. Both Flankers tumbled right. The one on the left nearly collided with his wingman, but missed, and tumbled violently as pieces started coming off the airframe. The other one was rolling and then exploded into a nice white puffball. The first pilot ejected cleanly, but the second didn't.

Tough luck, Joe, Winters thought. The remaining two Chinese fighters hesitated, but both then split and started maneuvering in diverging directions. Winters switched on his radar and followed the one to the left. He had radar lock and it was well within the launch parameters for his AM-RAAM. His right forefinger squeezed the pickle switch.

"Fox-One, Fox-One, Slammer on guy to the west." He watched the Slammer, as it was called, race in. Technically a fire-and-forget weapon like the Sidewinder, it accelerated almost instantly to mach-two-plus and rapidly ate up the three miles between them. It only took about ten seconds to close and explode a mere few feet over the fuselage of its target, and that Flanker disintegrated with no chute coming away from it.

Okay, three. This morning was really shaping up, but now the situation went back to World War I. He had to search for targets visually, and searching for jet fighters in a clear sky wasn't ...

... there ...

"You with me, Skippy?" he called on the radio.

"Got you covered, Bronco," his wingman replied. "Bandit at your one o'clock, going left to right."

"On him," Winters replied, putting his nose on the distant spot in the sky. His radar spotted it, locked onto it, and the IFF transponder didn't say friendly. He triggered off his second Slammer: "Fox-One on the south guy! Eagle, Boar Lead, how we doing?"

"We show five kills to this point. Bandits are heading east and diving. Razorback is coming in from your west with four, angels three-five at six hundred, now at your ten o'clock. Check your IFF, Boar Lead." The controller was being careful, but that was okay.

"Boar, Lead, check IFF now!"

"Two." "Three." "Four," they all chimed in. Before the last of them confirmed his IFF transponder was in the transmit setting, his second Slammer found its target, running his morning's score to four. *Well, damn,* Winters thought, *this morning is* really *shaping up nice.*

"Bronco, Skippy is on one!" his wingman reported, and Winters took position behind, low, and left of his wingman. "Skippy" was First Lieutenant Mario Acosta, a red-haired infant from Wichita who was coming along nicely for a child with only two hundred hours in type. "Fox-Two with one," Skippy called. His target had turned south, and was heading almost straight into the streaking missile. Winters saw the Sidewinder go right into his right-side intake, and the resulting explosion was pretty impressive.

“Eagle, Boar Lead, give me a vector, over.”

“Boar Lead, come right at zero-nine-zero. I have a bandit at ten miles and low, angels ten, heading south at six-hundred-plus.”

Winters executed the turn and checked his radar display. “Got him!” And this one also was well within the Slammer envelope. “Fox-One with Slammer.” His fifth missile of the day leaped off the rail and rocketed east, angling down, and again Winters kept his nose on the target, ensuring that he’d get it on tape ... yes! “That’s a splash. Bronco has a splash, I think that’s five.”

“Confirm five kills to Bronco,” Eagle Two confirmed. “Nice going, buddy.”

“What else is around?”

“Boar Lead, the bandits are running south on burner, just went through Mach One. We show a total of nine kills plus one damage, with six bandits running back to the barn, over.”

“Roger, copy that, Eagle. Anything else happening at the moment?”

“Ah, that’s a negative, Boar Lead.”

“Where’s the closest tanker?”

“You can tank from Oliver-Six, vector zero-zero-five, distance two hundred, over.”

“Roger that. Flight, this is Bronco. Let’s assemble and head off to tank. Form up on me.”

“Two.” “Three.” “Four.”

“How we doing?”

“Skippy has one,” his wingman reported.

“Ducky has two,” the second element leader chimed in.

“Ghost Man has two and a scratch.”

It didn’t add up, Winters thought. Hell, maybe the AWACS guys got confused. That’s why they had videotape. All in all, not a bad morning. Best of all, they’d put a real dent in the ChiComm Flanker inventory, and probably punched a pinhole in the confidence of their Su-27 drivers. Shaking up a fighter jock’s confidence was almost as good as a kill, especially if they’d bagged the squadron commander. It would make the survivors mad, but it would make them question themselves, their doctrine, and their aircraft. And that was good.

So?”

“The border defenses did about as well as one could reasonably expect,” Colonel Aliyev replied. “The good news is that most of our men escaped with their lives. Total dead is under twenty, with fifteen wounded.”

“What do they have across the river now?”

“Best guess, elements of three mechanized divisions. The Americans say that they now have six bridges completed and operating. So, we can expect that number to increase rapidly. Chinese reconnaissance elements are pushing forward. We’ve ambushed some of them, but no prisoners yet. Their direction of advance is exactly what we anticipated, as is their speed of advance to this point.”

“Is there any good news?” Bondarenko asked.

“Yes, General. Our air force and our American friends have given their air force a very bloody nose. We’ve killed over thirty of their aircraft with only four losses to this point, and two of the pilots have been rescued. We’ve captured six Chinese pilots. They’re being taken west for interrogation. It’s unlikely that they’ll give us any really useful information, though I am sure the air force will want to grill them for technical things. Their plans and objectives are entirely straightforward, and they are probably right on, or even slightly in advance of their plans.”

None of this was a surprise to General Bondarenko, but it was unpleasant even so. His intelligence staff was doing a fine job of telling him what they knew and what they expected, but it was like getting a weather report in winter: Yes, it was cold, and yes, it was snowing, and no, the cold and the snow will probably not stop, and isn’t it a shame you don’t have a warm coat to wear? He had nearly perfect information, but no ability to do anything to change the news. It was all very good that his airmen were killing Chinese airmen, but it was the Chinese tanks and infantry carriers that he had to stop.

“When will we be able to bring air power to bear on their spearheads?”

“We will start air-to-ground operations this afternoon with Su-31 ground-attack aircraft,” Aliyev replied. “But ...”

“But what?” Bondarenko demanded.

“But isn’t it better to let them come in with minimal interference for a few days?” It was a courageous thing for his operations officer to say. It was also the right thing, Gennady Iosifovich realized on reflection. If his only strategic option was to lay a deep trap, then why waste what assets he had before the trap was fully set? This was not the Western Front in June of 1941, and he didn’t have Stalin sitting in Moscow with a figurative pistol to his head.

No, in Moscow now, the government would be raising all manner of political hell, probably calling for an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council, but that was just advertising. It was his job to defeat these yellow barbarians, and doing that was a matter of using what power he had in the most efficient manner possible, and that meant drawing them out. It meant making their commander as confident as a schoolyard bully looking down at a child five years his junior. It meant giving them what the Japanese had once called the Victory Disease. Make them feel invincible, and *then* leap at them like a tiger dropping from a tree.

“Andrey, only a few aircraft, and tell them not to risk themselves by

pressing their attacks too hard. We can hurt their air force, but their ground forces—we let them keep their advantage for a while. Let them get fat on this fine table set before them for a while."

"I agree, Comrade General. It's a hard pill to swallow, but in the end, harder for them to eat—assuming our political leadership allows us to do the right thing."

"Yes, that is the real issue at hand, isn't it?"

CHAPTER 52

Deep Battle

General Peng crossed over into Russia in his command vehicle, well behind the first regiment of heavy tanks. He thought of using a helicopter, but his operations staff warned him that the air battle was not going as well as the featherheads in the PLAAF had told him to expect. He felt uneasy, crossing the river in an armored vehicle on a floating bridge—like a brick tied to a balloon—but he did so, listening as his operations officer briefed him on the progress to this point.

"The Americans have surged a number of fighter aircraft forward, and along with them their E-3 airborne radar fighter-control aircraft. These are formidable, and difficult to counter, though our air force colleagues say that they have tactics to deal with them. I will believe that when I see it," Colonel Wa observed. "But that is the only bad news so far. We are several hours ahead of schedule. Russian resistance is lighter than I expected. The prisoners we've taken are very disheartened at their lack of support."

"Is that a fact?" Peng asked, as they left the ribbon bridge and thumped down on Russian soil.

"Yes, we have ten men captured from their defensive positions—we' ll see them in a few minutes. They had escape tunnels and personnel carriers set to evacuate the men. They didn't expect to hold for long," Colonel Wa went on. "They *planned* to run away, rather than defend to the last as we expected. I think they lack the heart for combat, Comrade General."

That information got Peng's attention. It was important to know the fighting spirit of one's enemy: "Did any of them stand and fight to the end?"

"Only one of their bunker positions. It cost us thirty men, but we took them out. Perhaps their escape vehicle was destroyed and they had no choice," the colonel speculated.

"I want to see one of these positions at once," Peng ordered.

"Of course, Comrade General." Wa ducked inside and shouted an order to the track driver. The Type 90 armored personnel carrier lurched to the right, surprising the MP who was trying to do traffic control, but he didn't object. The four tall radio whips told him what sort of track this was. The command carrier moved off the beaten track directly toward an intact Russian bunker.

General Peng got out, ducking his head as he did so, and walked toward the mainly intact old gun turret. The "inverted frying pan" shape told him that this was off an old Stalin-3 tank—a very formidable vehicle, once upon a time,

but now an obvious relic. A team of intelligence specialists was there. They snapped to attention when they saw the general approach.

"What did we kill it with?" Peng asked.

"We didn't, Comrade General. They abandoned it after firing fifteen cannon shots and about three hundred machine gun rounds. They didn't even destroy it before we captured it," the intelligence captain reported, waving the general down the tank hatch. "It's safe. We checked for booby traps."

Peng climbed down. He saw what appeared to be a comfortable small barracks, shell storage for their big tank gun, ample rounds for their two machine guns. There were empty rounds for both types of guns on the floor, along with wrappers for field rations. It appeared to be a comfortable position, with bunks, shower, toilet, and plenty of food storage. Something worth fighting for, the general thought. "How did they leave?" Peng asked.

"This way," the young captain said, leading him north into the tunnel. "You see, the Russians planned for everything." The tunnel led under the crest of the hill to a covered parking pad for—probably for a BTR, it looked like, confirmed by the wheel tracks on the ground immediately off the concrete pad.

"How long did they hold?"

"We took the place just less than three hours after our initial bombardment. So, we had infantry surrounding the main gun emplacement, and soon thereafter, they ran away," the captain told his army commander.

"I see. Good work by our assault infantry." Then Peng saw that Colonel Wa had brought his command track over the hill to the end of the escape tunnel, allowing him to hop right aboard.

"Now what?" Wa asked.

"I want to see what we did to their artillery support positions."

Wa nodded and relayed the orders to the track commander. That took fifteen minutes of bouncing and jostling. The fifteen heavy guns were still there, though the two Peng passed had been knocked over and destroyed by counter-battery fire. The position they visited was mainly intact, though a number of rockets had fallen close aboard, near enough that three bodies were still lying there untended next to their guns, the bodies surrounded by sticky pools of mainly dried blood. More men had survived, probably. Close to each gun was a two-meter-deep narrow trench lined with concrete that the bombardment hadn't done more than chip. Close by also was a large ammo-storage bunker with rails on which to move the shells and propellant charges to the guns. The door was open.

"How many rounds did they get off?" he asked.

"No more than ten," another intelligence officer, this one a major, replied. "Our counter-battery fire was superb here. The Russian battery was fifteen guns, total. One of them got off twenty shots, but that was all. We had them out of action in less than ten minutes. The artillery-tracker radars worked

brilliantly, Comrade General."

Peng nodded agreement. "So it would appear. This emplacement would have been fine twenty or thirty years ago—good protection for the gunners and a fine supply of shells, but they did not anticipate an enemy with the ability to pinpoint their guns so rapidly. If it stands still, Wa, you can kill it." Peng looked around. "Still, the engineers who sited this position and the other one, they were good. It's just that this sort of thing is out of date. What were our total casualties?"

"Killed, three hundred fifty, thereabouts. Wounded, six hundred twenty," operations replied. "It was not exactly cheap, but less than we expected. If the Russians had stood and fought, it could have been far worse."

"Why did they run so soon?" Peng asked. "Do we know?"

"We found a written order in one of the bunkers, authorizing them to leave when they thought things were untenable. That surprised me," Colonel Wa observed. "Historically, the Russians fight very hard on the defense, as the Germans found. But that was under Stalin. The Russians had discipline then. And courage. Not today, it would seem."

"Their evacuation was conducted with some skill," Peng thought out loud. "We ought to have taken more prisoners."

"They ran too fast, Comrade General," operations explained.

"He who fights and runs away," General Peng quoted, "lives to fight another day. Bear that in mind, Colonel."

"Yes, Comrade General, but he who runs away is not an immediate threat"

"Let's go," the general said, heading off to his command track. He wanted to see the front, such as it was.

So?" Bondarenko asked the lieutenant. The youngster had been through a bad day, and being required to stand and make a report to his theater commander made it no better. "Stand easy, boy. You're alive. It could have been worse."

"General, we could have held if we'd been given a little support," Komanov said, allowing his frustration to appear.

"There was none to give you. Go on." The general pointed at the map on the wall.

"They crossed here, and came through this saddle, and over this ridge to attack us. Leg infantry, no vehicles that we ever saw. They had man-portable anti-tank weapons, nothing special or unexpected, but they had massive artillery support. There must have been an entire battery concentrated just on my one position. Heavy guns, fifteen-centimeter or more. And artillery rockets that wiped out our artillery support almost immediately."

"That's the one surprise they threw at us," Aliyev confirmed. "They must have a lot more of those fire-finder systems than we expected, and they're

using their Type 83 rockets as dedicated counter-battery weapons, like the Americans did in Saudi. It's an effective tactic. We'll have to go after their counter-battery systems first of all, or use self-propelled guns to fire and move after only two or three shots. There's no way to spoof them that I know of, and jamming radars of that type is extremely difficult."

"So, we have to work on a way to kill them early on," Bondarenko said. "We have electronic-intelligence units. Let them seek out those Chink radars and eliminate them with rockets of our own." He turned. "Go, on. Lieutenant. Tell me about the Chinese infantry."

"They are not cowards, Comrade General. They take fire and act properly under it. They are well-drilled. My position and the one next to us took down at least two hundred, and they kept coming. Their battle drill is quite good, like a soccer team. If you do *this,* they do *that,* almost instantly. For certain, they call in artillery fire with great skill."

"They had the batteries already lined up, Lieutenant, lined up and waiting," Aliyev told the junior officer. "It helps if you are following a prepared script. Anything else?"

"We never saw a tank. They had us taken out before they finished their bridges. Their infantry looked well-prepared, well-trained, even eager to move forward. I did not see evidence of flexible thinking, but I did not see much of anything, and as you say, their part of the operation was preplanned, and thoroughly rehearsed."

"Typically, the Chinese tell their men a good deal about their planned operations beforehand. They don't believe in secrecy the way we do," Aliyev said. "Perhaps it makes for comradely solidarity on the battlefield."

"But things are going their way, Andrey. The measure of an army is how it reacts when things go badly. We haven't seen that yet, however." *And would they ever?* Bondarenko wondered. He shook his head. He had to banish that sort of thinking from his mind. If he had no confidence, how could his men have it? "What about your men, Valeriy Mikhailovich? How did they fight?"

"We *fought,* Comrade General," Komanov assured the senior officer. "We killed two hundred, and we would have killed many more with a little artillery support."

"Will your men fight some more?" Aliyev asked.

"Fuck, yes!" Komanov snarled back. "Those little bastards are invading *our* country. Give us the right weapons, and we'll fucking kill them all!"

"Did you graduate tank school?"

Komanov bobbed his head like a cadet. "Yes, Comrade General, eighth in my class."

"Give him a company with BOYAR," the general told his ops officer. "They're short of officers."

Major General Marion Diggs was in the third train out of Berlin; it wasn't his choosing, just the way things worked out. He was thirty minutes behind Angelo Giusti's cavalry squadron. The Russians were running their trains as closely together as safety allowed, and probably even shading that somewhat. What *was* working was that the Russian national train system was fully electrified, which meant that the engines accelerated well out of stations and out of the slow orders caused by track problems, which were numerous.

Diggs had grown up in Chicago. His father had been a Pullman porter with the Atcheson, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, working the Super Chief between Chicago and Los Angeles until the passenger service had died in the early 1970s; then, remarkably enough, he'd changed unions to become an engineer. Marion remembered riding with him as a boy, and loving the feel of such a massive piece of equipment under his hands—and so, when he'd gone to West Point, he'd decided to be a tanker, and better yet, a cavalryman. Now he owned a lot of heavy equipment.

It was his first time in Russia, a place he certainly hadn't expected to see when he'd been in the first half of his uniformed career, when the Russians he'd worried about seeing had been mainly from First Guards Tank and Third Shock armies, those massive formations that had once sat in East Germany, always poised to take a nice little drive to Paris, or so NATO had feared.

But no more, now that Russia was part of NATO, an idea that was like something from a bad science-fiction movie. There was no denying it, however. Looking out the windows of the train car, he could see the onion-topped spires of Russian Orthodox churches, ones that Stalin had evidently failed to tear down. The railyards were pretty familiar. Never the most artistic examples of architecture or city planning, they looked the same as the dreary yards leading into Chicago or any other American city. No, only the train yards that you built under your Christmas tree every year were pretty. But they didn't have any Christmas trees in evidence here. The train rolled to a stop, probably waiting for a signal to proceed—

—but no, this looked to be some sort of military terminal. Russian tanks were in evidence off to the right, and a lot of sloped concrete ramps—the Russians had probably built this place to ship their own tracked vehicles west, he judged.

"General?" a voice called.

"Yo!"

"Somebody here to see you, sir," the same voice announced.

Diggs stood and walked back to the sound. It was one of his junior staff officers, a new one fresh from Leavenworth, and behind him was a Russian general officer.

“You are Diggs?” the Russian asked in fair English.

“That’s right.”

“Come with me please.” The Russian walked out onto the platform. The air was fresh, but they were under low, gray clouds this morning.

“You going to tell me how things are going out east?” Diggs asked.

“We wish to fly you and some of your staff to Chabarsovil so that you can see for yourself.”

That made good sense, Diggs thought. “How many?”

“Six, plus you.”

“Okay.” The general nodded and reached for the captain who’d summoned him from his seat. “I want Colonels Masterman, Douglas, Welch, Turner, Major Hurst, and Lieutenant Colonel Garvey.”

“Yes, sir.” The boy disappeared.

“How soon?”

“The transport is waiting for you now.”

One of theirs, Diggs thought. He’d never flown on a Russian aircraft before. How safe would it be? How safe would it be to fly into a war zone? Well, the Army didn’t pay him to stay in safe places.

“Who are you?”

“Nosenko, Valentin Nosenko, general major, Stavka.”

“How bad is it?”

“It is not good, General Diggs. Our main problem will be getting reinforcements to the theater of action. But they have rivers to cross. The difficulties, as you Americans say, should even out.”

Diggs’s main worry was supply. His tanks and Bradleys all had basic ammo loads already aboard, and two and a half additional such loads for each vehicle were on supply trucks sitting on other trains like this one. After that, things got a little worrisome, especially for artillery. But the biggest worry of all was diesel fuel. He had enough to move his division maybe three or four hundred miles. That was a good long way in a straight line, but wars never allowed troops to travel in straight lines. That translated to maybe two hundred miles of actual travel at best, and that was not an impressive number at all. Then there was the question of jet fuel for his organic aircraft. So, his head logistician, Colonel Ted Douglas, was the first guy he needed, after Masterman, his operations brain. The officers started showing up.

“What gives, sir?” Masterman asked.

“We’re flying east to see what’s going on.”

“Okay, let me make sure we have some communications gear.” Masterman disappeared again. He left the train car, along with two enlisted men humping satellite radio equipment.

“Good call, Duke,” LTC Garvey observed. He was communications and electronic intelligence for First Tanks.

“Gentlemen, this is General Nosenko from Stavka. He’s taking us east, I gather?”

“Correct, I am an intelligence officer for Stavka. This way, please.” He led them off, to where four cars were waiting. The drive to a military airport took twenty minutes.

“How are your people taking this?” Diggs asked.

“The civilians, you mean? Too soon to tell. Much disbelief, but some anger. Anger is good,” Nosenko said. “Anger gives courage and determination.”

If the Russians were talking about anger and determination, the situation must be pretty bad, Diggs thought, looking out at the streets of the Moscow suburbs.

“What are you moving east ahead of us?”

“So far, four motor-rifle divisions,” Nosenko answered. “Those are our best-prepared formations. We are assembling other forces.”

“I’ve been out of touch. What else is NATO sending? Anything?” Diggs asked next.

“A British brigade is forming up now, the men based at Hohne. We hope to have them on the way here in two days.”

“No way we’d go into action without at least the Brits to back us up,” Diggs said. “Good, they’re equipped about the same way we are.” And better yet, they trained according to the same doctrine. *Hohne,* he thought, their 22nd Brigade from Haig Barracks, Brigadier Sam Turner. Drank whiskey like it was Perrier, but a good thinker and a superior tactician. And his brigade was all trained up from some fun and games down at Grafenwöhr. “What about Germans?”

“That’s a political question,” Nosenko admitted.

“Tell your politicians that Hitler’s dead, Valentin. The Germans are pretty good to have on your side. Trust me, buddy. We play with them all the time. They’re down a little from ten years ago, but the German soldier ain’t no dummy, and neither are his officers. Their reconnaissance units are particularly good.”

“Yes, but that is a political question,” Nosenko repeated. And that, Diggs knew, was that, at least for now.

The aircraft waiting was an II-86, known to NATO as the Camber, manifestly the Russian copy of Lockheed’s C-141 Starlifter. This one had Aeroflot commercial markings, but retained the gun position in the tail that the Russians liked to keep on all their tactical aircraft. Diggs didn’t object to it at the moment. They’d scarcely had the chance to sit down and strap in when the aircraft started rolling.

“In a hurry, Valentin?”

"Why wait, General Diggs? There's a war on," he reminded his guest.

"Okay, what do we know?"

Nosenko opened the map case he'd been carrying and laid out a large sheet on the floor as the aircraft lifted off. It was of the Chinese-Russian border on the Amur River, with markings already penciled on. The American officers all leaned over to look.

"They came in here, and drove across the river ..."

How fast are they moving?" Bondarenko asked.

"I have a reconnaissance company ahead of them. They report in every fifteen minutes," Colonel Tolkunov replied. "They are moving in a deliberate manner. Their reconnaissance screen is composed of WZ-501 tracked APCs, heavy on radios, light on weapons. They are on the whole not very enterprising, however. As I said, deliberate. They move by leapfrogging half a kilometer at a bound, depending on terrain. We're monitoring their radios. They're not encrypted, though their spoken language is deceptive in terminology. We're working on that."

"Speed of advance?"

"Five kilometers in an hour is the fastest we've seen, usually slower than that. Their main body is still getting organized, and they haven't set up a logistics train yet. I'd expect them to attempt no more than thirty kilometers in a day on flat open ground, based on what I've seen so far."

"Interesting." Bondarenko looked back at his maps. They'd start going north-northwest because that's what the terrain compelled them to do. At this speed, they'd be at the gold strike in six or seven days.

Theoretically, he could move 265th Motor Rifle to a blocking position ... here ... in two days and make a stand, but by then they'd have at least three, maybe eight, mechanized divisions to attack his one full-strength unit, and he couldn't gamble on that so soon. The good news was that the Chinese were bypassing his command post—*contemptuously?* he wondered, *or just because there was nothing there to threaten them, and so nothing to squander force*

on? No, they'd run as fast and hard as they could, bringing up foot infantry to wall off their line of advance. That was classic tactics, and the reason was because it worked. Everyone did it that way, from Hannibal to Hitler.

So, their lead elements moved deliberately, and they were still forming up their army over the Amur bridgehead.

"What units have we identified?"

"The lead enemy formation is their 34th Red Banner Shock Army, Commanded by Peng Xi-Wang. He is politically reliable and well-regarded in Beijing, an experienced soldier. Expect him to be the operational army group commander. The 34th Army is mainly across the river now. Three more Group

A mechanized armies are lined up to cross as well, the 31st, 29th, and 43rd. That's a total of sixteen mechanized divisions, plus a lot of other attachments. We think the 65th Group B Army will be next across. Four infantry divisions plus a tank brigade. Their job will be to hold the western flank, I would imagine." That made sense. There was no Russian force east of the breakthrough worthy of the name. A classic operation would also wheel east to Vladivostok on the Pacific Coast, but that would only distract forces from the main objective. So, the turn east would wait for at least a week, probably two or three, with just light screening forces heading that way for the moment.

"What about our civilians?" Bondarenko asked.

"They're leaving the towns in the Chinese path as best they can, mainly cars and buses. We have MP units trying to keep them organized. So far nothing has happened to interfere with the evacuation," Tolkunov said. "See, from this it looks as if they're actually bypassing Belogorsk, just passing east of it with their reconnaissance elements."

"That's the smart move, isn't it?" Bondarenko observed. "Their real objective is far to the north. Why slow down for anything? They don't want land. They don't want people. They want oil and gold. Capturing civilians will not make those objectives any easier to accomplish. If I were this Peng fellow, I would be worried about the extent of my drive north. Even unopposed, the natural obstacles are formidable, and defending his line of advance will be a beast of a problem." Gennady paused. Why have any sympathy for this barbarian? His mission was to kill him and all his men, after all. But how? If even marching that far north was a problem—and it was—then how much harder would it be to strike through the same terrain with less-prepared troops? The tactical problems on both sides were the kind men in his profession did not welcome.

"General Bondarenko?" a foreign voice asked.

"Yes?" He turned to see a man dressed in an American flight suit.

"Sir, my name is Major Dan Tucker. I just flew in with a downlink for our Dark Star UAVs. Where do you want us to set up, sir?"

"Colonel Tolkunov? Major, this is my chief of intelligence."

The American saluted sloppily, as air force people tended to do. "Howdy, Colonel."

"How long to set up?"

The American was pleased that this Tolkunov's English was better than his own Russian. "Less than an hour, sir."

"This way." The G-2 led him outside. "How good are your cameras?"

"Colonel, when a guy's out taking a piss, you can see how big his dick is."

Tolkunov figured that was typical American braggadocio, but it set him wondering.

Captain Feodor Il'ych Aleksandrov commanded the 265th Motor Rifle's divisional reconnaissance element—the division was supposed to have a full battalion for this task, but he was all they had—and for that task he had eight of the new BRM reconnaissance tracks. These were evolutionary developments of the standard BMP infantry combat vehicle, upgraded with better automotive gear—more reliable engine and transmission systems—plus the best radios his country made. He reported directly to his divisional commander, and also, it seemed, to the theater intelligence coordinator, some colonel named Tolkunov. That chap, he'd discovered, was very concerned with his personal safety, always urging him to stay close—but not too close—not to be spotted, and to avoid combat of any type. His job, Tolkunov had told him at least once every two hours for the last day and a half, was to stay alive and to keep his eye on the advancing Chinese. He wasn't supposed to so much as injure one little hair on their cute little Chink heads, just stay close enough that if they mumbled in their sleep, to copy down the names of the girl-friends they fucked in their dreams.

Aleksandrov was a young captain, only twenty-eight, and rakishly handsome, an athlete who ran for personal pleasure—and running, he told his men, was the best form of exercise for a soldier, especially a reconnaissance specialist. He had a driver, gunner, and radio operator for each of his tracks, plus three infantrymen whom he'd personally trained to be invisible.

The drill was for them to spend about half their time out of their vehicles, usually a good kilometer or so ahead of their Chinese counterparts, either behind trees or on their bellies, reporting back with monosyllabic comments on their portable radios, which were of Japanese manufacture. The men moved light, carrying only their rifles and two spare magazines, because they weren't supposed to be seen or heard, and the truth was that Aleksandrov would have preferred to send them out unarmed, lest they be tempted to shoot someone out of patriotic anger. However, no soldier would ever stand for being sent out on a battlefield weaponless, and so he'd had to settle for ordering them out with bolts closed on empty chambers. The captain was usually out with his men, their BRM carriers hidden three hundred or so meters away in the trees.

In the past twenty-four hours, they'd become intimately familiar with their Chinese opponents. These were also trained and dedicated reconnaissance specialists, and they were pretty good at their jobs, or certainly appeared to be. They were also moving in tracked vehicles, and also spent a lot of their time on foot, ahead of their tracks, hiding behind trees and peering to the north, looking for Russian forces. The Russians had even started giving them names.

"It's the gardener," Sergeant Buikov said. That one liked touching trees and bushes, as though studying them for a college paper or something. The gardener was short and skinny, and looked like a twelve-year-old to the Russians. He seemed competent enough, carrying his rifle slung on his back,

and using his binoculars often. He was a Chinese lieutenant, judging by his shoulderboards, probably commander of this platoon. He ordered his people around a lot, but didn't mind taking the lead. So, he was probably conscientious. *He is, therefore, the one we should kill first,* Aleksandrov thought. Their BRM reconnaissance track had a fine 30-mm cannon that could reach out and turn the gardener into fertilizer from a thousand meters or so, but Captain Aleksandrov had forbidden it, worse luck, Buikov thought. He was from this area, a woodsman of sorts who'd hunted in the forests many times with his father, a lumber-jack. "We really ought to kill him."

"Boris Yevgeniyevich, do you wish to alert the enemy to our presence?" Aleksandrov asked his sergeant.

"I suppose not, my captain, but the hunting season is—"

"—closed, Sergeant. The season is closed, and no, he is not a wolf that you can shoot for your own pleasure, and— down," Aleksandrov ordered. The gardener was looking their way with his field glasses. Their faces were painted, and they had branches tucked into their field clothing to break up their outlines, but he was taking no chances. "They'll be moving soon. Back to the track."

The hardest part of their drill was to avoid leaving tracks for the Chinese to spot. Aleksandrov had "discussed" this with his drivers, threatening to shoot anyone who left a trail. (He knew he couldn't do that, of course, but his men weren't quite sure.) Their vehicles even had upgraded mufflers to reduce their sound signature. Every so often, the men who designed and built Russian military equipment got things right, and this was such a case. Besides, they didn't crank their engines until they saw the Chinese doing the same. Aleksandrov looked up. Okay, the gardener was waving to those behind him, the wave that meant to bring their vehicles up. They were doing another leapfrog jump, with one section standing fast and providing over-watch cover for the next move, should something happen. He had no intention of making anything happen, but of course they couldn't know that. Aleksandrov was surprised that they were maintaining their careful drill into the second day. They weren't getting sloppy yet. He'd expected that, but it seemed that the Chinese were better drilled even than his expectations, and were assiduously following their written doctrine. Well, so was he.

"Move now, Captain?" Buikov asked.

"No, let's sit still and watch. They ought to stop at that little ridge with the logging road. I want to see how predictable they are, Boris Yevgeniyevich." But he did trigger his portable radio. "Stand by, they're jumping again."

The other radio just clicked on and off, creating a whisper of static, rather than a spoken reply. Good, his men were adhering to their radio discipline. The second echelon of Chinese tracks moved forward carefully, at about ten-kilometer speed, following this opening in the forest. Interesting, he thought, that they weren't venturing too far into the adjoining woods. No more than two or three hundred meters. Then he cringed. A helicopter chattered overhead. It was a Gazelle, a Chinese copy of the French military helicopter.

But his track was back in the woods, and every time it stopped, the men ran outside to stretch the camo-net around it. His men, also, were well-drilled. And *that,* he told his men, was why they didn't dare leave a visible trail if they wanted to live. It wasn't much of a helicopter, but it did carry rockets—and their BRM was an armored personnel carrier, but it wasn't *that* armored.

"What's he doing?" Buikov asked.

"If he's looking, he's not being very careful about it."

The Chinese were driving up a pathway built ages ago for an unbuilt spur off the Trans-Siberian Railroad. It was wide, in some places five hundred meters, and fairly well-graded. Someone in years past had thought about building this spur to exploit the unsurveyed riches of Siberia—enough to cut down a lot of trees, and they'd barely grown back in the harsh winters. Just saplings in this pathway now, easily ground into splinters by tracked vehicles. Farther north, the work was being continued by army engineers, making a path to the new gold find, and beyond that to the oil discoveries on the Arctic Coast. When they got that far, the Chinese would find a good road, ready-made for a mechanized force to exploit. But it was a narrow one, and the Chinese would have to learn about flank security if they kept this path up.

Aleksandrov remembered a Roman adventure into Germany, a soldier named Quintilius Varus, commanding three legions, who'd ignored his flanks, and lost his army in the process to a German named Armenius. Might the Chinese make a similar mistake? No, everyone knew of the Teutonenberg Forest disaster. It was a textbook lesson in every military academy in the known world. Quintilius Varus had been a political commander, given that command because he'd been beloved of his emperor, Caesar Augustus, obviously not because of his operational skill. It was a lesson probably better remembered by soldiers than by politicians. And the Chinese army was commanded by soldiers, wasn't it?

"That's the fox," Buikov said. This was the other officer in the Chinese unit, probably the subordinate of the gardener. Similar in size, but he had less interest in plants than he had in darting about. As they watched, he disappeared into the tree line to the east, and if he went by the form card, he'd be invisible for five to eight minutes.

"I could use a smoke," Sergeant Buikov observed.

"That will have to wait, Sergeant."

"Yes, Comrade Captain. May I have a sip of water, then?" he asked petulantly. It wasn't water he wanted, of course.

"Yes, I'd like a shot of vodka, too, but I neglected to bring any with me, as, I am sure, you did as well."

"Regrettably, yes, Comrade Captain. A good slug of vodka helps keep the chill away in these damp woods."

"And it also dulls the senses, and we need our senses, Boris Yevgeniyevich, unless you enjoy eating rice. Assuming the Chinks take prisoners, which I rather doubt. They do not like us, Sergeant, and they are not a civilized

people. Remember that."

So, they don't go to the ballet. Neither do I, Sergeant Buikov didn't say aloud. His captain was a Muscovite, and spoke often of cultural matters. But like his captain, Buikov had no love for the Chinese, and even less now that he was looking at Chinese soldiers on the soil of his country. He only regretted not killing some, but killing was not his job. His job was watching them piss on his country, which somehow only made him angrier.

"Captain, will we ever get to shoot them?" the sergeant asked.

"In due course, yes, it will be our job to eliminate their reconnaissance elements, and yes, Boris, I look forward to that as well." *And, yes, I could use a smoke as well. And I'd love a glass of vodka right now.* But he'd settle for some black bread and butter, which he did have in his track, three hundred meters to the north.

Six and a half minutes this time. The fox had at least looked into the woods to the east, probably listened for the sound of diesel engines, but heard nothing but the chirping of birds. Still, this Chink lieutenant was the more conscientious of the two, in Buikov's opinion. *They should kill him first, when the time came,* the sergeant thought. Aleksandrov tapped the sergeant on the shoulder. "Our turn to leapfrog, Boris Yevgeniyevich."

"By your command, Comrade Captain." And both men moved out, crouching for the first hundred meters, and taking care not to make too much noise, until they heard the Chinese tracks start their engines. In five more minutes, they were back in their BRM and heading north, slowly picking their way through the trees, Aleksandrov buttered some bread and ate it, sipping water as he did so. When they'd traveled a thousand meters, their vehicle stopped, and the captain got on his big radio.

Who is Ingrid?" Tolkunov asked.

"Ingrid Bergman," Major Tucker replied. "Actress, good-lookin' babe in her day. All the Dark Stars are named for movie stars, Colonel. The troops did it." There was a plastic strip on the monitor top to show which Dark Star was up and transmitting. Marilyn Monroe was back at Zhigansk for service, and Grace Kelly was the next one up, scheduled to go in fifteen hours. "Anyway"—he flipped a switch and then played a little with his mouse control—"there's the Chinese lead elements."

"Son of a bitch," Tolkunov said, demonstrating his knowledge of American slang.

Tucker grinned. "Pretty good, ain't it? Once I sent one over a nudist colony in California—that's like a private park where people walk around naked all the time. You can tell the difference between the flat-chested ones and the ones with nice tits. Tell the natural blondes from the peroxide ones, too. Anyway, you use this mouse to control the camera—well, somebody else is doing it now up at Zhigansk. Anything in particular that you're interested in?"

“The bridges on the Amur,” Tolkunov said at once. Tucker picked up a radio microphone.

“This is Major Tucker. We have a tasking request. Slew Camera Three onto the big crossing point.”

“Roger,” the speaker next to the monitor said.

The picture changed immediately, seeming to race across the screen like a ribbon from ten o‘clock down to four o’clock. Then it stabilized. The field of view must have been four kilometers across. It showed a total of what appeared to be eight bridges, each of them approached by what looked like a parade of insects.

“Give me control of Camera Three,” Tucker said next.

“You got it, sir,” the speaker acknowledged.

“Okay.” Tucker played with the mouse more than the keyboard, and the picture zoomed in—“isolated”—on the third bridge from the west. There were three tanks on it at once, moving at about ten kilometers per hour south to north. The display showed a compass rose in case you got disoriented, and it was even in color. Tolkunov asked why.

“No more expensive than black-and-white cameras, and we put it on the system because it sometimes shows you things you don’t get from gray. First time for overheads, even the satellites don’t do color yet,” Tucker explained. Then he frowned. “The angle’s wrong, can’t get the divisional markings on the tanks without moving the platform. Wait.” He picked up the microphone again. “Sergeant, who’s crossing the bridges now?”

“Appears to be their Three-Oh-Second armored division, sir, part of the Twenty-Ninth Group-A Army. The Thirty-Fourth Army is fully across now. We estimate one full regiment of the Three-Oh-Second is across and moving north at this time,” the intel weenie reported, as though relating the baseball scores from yesterday.

“Thanks, Sarge.”

“Roger that, Maj.”

“And they can’t see this drone?” Tolkunov asked.

“Well, on radar it’s pretty stealthy, and there’s another little trick we have on it. Goes back to World War II, called Project Yehudi back then, you put lights on the thing.”

“What?” Tolkunov asked.

“Yeah, you spot airplanes because they’re darker’n the sky, but if you put lightbulbs on ’em, they turn invisible. So, there are lights on the airframe, and a photo sensor dials the brightness automatically. They’re damned near impossible to spot—they cruise at sixty thousand feet, way the hell above contrail level, and they got no infrared signature at all, hardly—even if you know where to look, and they tell me you can’t hardly *make* an air-to-air missile lock onto one. Pretty cool toy, eh?”

"How long have you had this?"

"I've been working on it, oh, about four years now."

"I've heard of Dark Star, but this capability is amazing."

Tucker nodded. "Yeah, it's pretty slick. Nice to know what the other guy's doing. First time we deployed it was over Yugoslavia, and once we learned how to use it, and how to coordinate it with the shooters, well, we learned to make their lives pretty miserable. Tough shit, Joe."

"Joe?"

"Joe Chink." Tucker pointed at the screen. "That's what we mainly call him." The friendly nickname for Koreans had once been Luke the Gook. "Now, Ingrid doesn't have it yet, but Grace Kelly does, a laser designator, so you can use these things to clobber targets. The fighter just lofts the bomb in from, oh, maybe twenty miles away, and we guide it into the target. I've only done that at Red Flag, and we can't do it from here with this terminal, but they can up at Zhigansk."

"Guide bombs from six hundred kilometers away?"

"Yeah. Hell, you can do it from Washington if you want. It all goes over the satellite, y'know?"

"Yob tvoyu maht!"

"Soon we're going to make the fighter jocks obsolete, Colonel. Another year or so and we'll be doing terminal guidance on missiles launched from a coupla hundred miles away. Won't need fighter pilots then. Guess I'll have to buy me a scarf. So, Colonel, what else do you want to see?"

The 11-86 landed at a rustic fighter base with only a few helicopters on it, Colonel Mitch Turner noted. As divisional intelligence officer, he was taking in a lot of what he saw in Russia, and what he saw wasn't all that encouraging. Like General Diggs, he'd entered the Army when the USSR had been the main enemy and principal worry for the United States Army, and now he was wondering how many of the intelligence estimates he'd help draft as a young spook officer had been pure fantasy. Either that or the mighty had fallen farther and faster than any nation in history. The Russian army wasn't even a shadow of what the Red Army had been. The "Rompin', Stompin' Russian Red Ass" so feared by NATO was as dead as the stegosaurus toys his son liked to play with, and right now that was not such a good thing. The Russian Federation looked like a rich family of old with no sons to defend it, and the girl kids were getting raped. Not a good thing. The Russians, like America, still had nuclear weapons—bombs, deliverable by bombers and tactical fighters. However, the Chinese had missiles to deliver theirs, and they were targeted at cities, and the Big Question was whether the Russians had the stones to trade a few cities and, say, forty million people for a gold mine and some oil fields. Probably not, Turner figured. Not something a smart man would do. Similarly,

they could not afford a war of attrition against a country with nine times as many people *and* a healthier economy, even over this ground. No, if they were to defeat the Chinese, it had to be with maneuver and agility, but their military was in the shitter, and neither trained nor equipped to play maneuver warfare.

This, Turner thought on reflection, *was going to be an interesting war.* It was not the sort he wanted to fight. Better to clobber a dumb little enemy than mix it up with a smart powerful one. It might not be glorious, but it was a hell of a lot safer.

"Mitch," General Diggs said, as they stood to walk off the airplane. "Thoughts?"

"Well, sir, we might have picked a better place to fly to. Way things look, this is going to be a little exciting."

"Go on," the general ordered.

"The other side has better cards. More troops, better-trained troops, more equipment. Their task, crossing a lot of nasty country, is not enviable, but neither is the Russian task, defending against it. To win they have to play maneuver warfare. But I don't see that they have the horsepower to pull it off."

"Their boss out here, Bondarenko. He's pretty good."

"So was Erwin Rommel, sir, but Montgomery whupped his ass."

There were staff cars lined up to drive them into the Russian command post. The weather was clearer here, and they were close enough to the Chinese that a clear sky wasn't something to enjoy anymore.

CHAPTER 53

Deep Concerns

So, what's happening there?" Ryan asked.

"The Chinese are seventy miles inside Russia. They have a total of eight divisions over the river, and they're pushing north," General Moore replied, moving a pencil across the map spread on the conference table. "They blew through the Russian border defenses pretty fast—it was essentially the Maginot Line from 1940. I wouldn't have expected it to hold very long, but our overheads showed them punching through fairly professionally with their leading infantry formations, supported by a lot of artillery. Now they have their tanks across—about eight hundred to this point, with another thousand or so to go."

Ryan whistled. "That many?"

"When you invade a major country, sir, you don't do it on the cheap. The only good news at this point is that we've really given their air force a bloody nose."

"AWACS and -15s?" Jackson asked.

"Right." The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs nodded. "One of our kids made ace in a single engagement. A Colonel Winters."

"Bronco Winters," Jackson said. "I've heard the name. Fighter jock. Okay, what else?"

"Our biggest problem on the air side is going to be getting bombs to our airmen. Flying bombs in is not real efficient. I mean, you can use up a whole C-5 just to deliver half the bombs for one squadron of F-15Es, and we've got a lot of other things for the C-5s to do. We're thinking about sending the bombs into Russia by train to Chita, say, and then flying them up to Suntar from there, but the Russian railroad is moving just tanks and vehicles for now, and that isn't going to change soon. We're trying to fight a war at the end of one railroad line. Sure, it's double-tracked, but it's still just one damned line. Our logistical people are already taking a lot of Maalox over this one."

"Russian airlift capacity?" Ryan asked.

"FedEx has more," General Moore replied. "In fact, FedEx has a lot more. We're going to ask you to authorize call-up of the civilian reserve air fleet, Mr. President."

"Approved," Ryan said at once.

“And a few other little things,” Moore said. He closed his eyes. It was pushing midnight, and nobody had gotten much sleep lately. “VMH-1 is standing-to. We’re in a shooting war with a country that has nuclear weapons on ballistic launchers. So, we have to think about the possibility—remote maybe, but still a possibility—that they could launch at us. So, VMH-1 and the Air Force’s First Heli at Andrews are standing-to. We can get a chopper here to lift you and your family out in seven minutes. That concerns you, Mrs. O’Day,” Moore said to Andrea.

The President’s Principal Agent nodded. “We’re dialed in. It’s all in The Book,” she said. That nobody had opened that particular book since 1962 was beside the point. It was written down. Mrs. Price-O’Day looked a little peaked.

“You okay?” Ryan asked.

“Stomach,” she explained.

“Try some ginger?” Jack went on.

“Nothing much works for this, Dr. North tells me. Please excuse me, Mr. President.” She was embarrassed that he’d noticed her discomfort. She always wanted to be one of the boys. But the boys didn’t get pregnant, did they?

“Why don’t you drive home?”

“Sir, I—”

“Go,” Ryan said. “That’s an order. You’re a woman, and you’re pregnant. You can’t be a cop all the time, okay? Get some relief here and go. Right now.”

Special Agent Price-O’Day hesitated, but she did have an order, so she walked out the door. Another agent came in immediately.

“Machismo from a woman. What’s the goddamned world coming to?” Ryan asked the assembly.

“You’re not real liberated, Jack,” Jackson observed with a grin.

“It’s called objective circumstances, I think. She’s still a girl, even if she does carry a pistol. Cathy says she’s doing fine. This nausea stuff doesn’t last forever. Probably feels like it to her, though. Okay, General, what else?”

“Kneecap and Air Force One are on hot-pad alert ’round the clock. So, if we get a launch warning, in seven minutes or less, you and the Vice President are on choppers, five more minutes to Andrews, and three more after that you’re doing the takeoff roll. The drill is, your family goes to Air Force One and you go to Kneecap,” he concluded. Kneecap was actually the National Emergency Airborne Command Post (NEACP), but the official acronym was too hard to pronounce. Like the VC-25A that served as Air Force One, Kneecap was a converted 747 that was really just a wrapper for a bunch of radios flying in very close formation.

“Gee, that’s nice to know. What about my family?” POTUS asked.

“In these circumstances, we keep a chopper close to where your wife and kids are at all times, and then they’ll fly in whatever direction seems the safest

at the moment. If that's not Andrews, then they'll get picked up later by a fixed-wing aircraft and taken to whatever place seems best. It's all theoretical," Moore explained, "but something you might as well know about."

"Can the Russians stop the Chinese?" Ryan asked, turning his attention back to the map.

"Sir, that remains to be seen. They do have the nuclear option, but it's not a card I would expect them to play. The Chinese do have twelve CSS-4 ICBMs. It's essentially a duplicate of our old Titan-II liquid fuels, with a warhead estimated to be between three and five megatons."

"City-buster?" Ryan asked.

"Correct. No counterforce capability, and there's nothing we have left to use against it in that role anyway. The CEP on the warhead is estimated to be plus or minus a thousand meters or so. So, it'd do a city pretty well, but that's about all."

"Any idea where they're targeted?" Jackson asked. Moore nodded at once.

"Yes. The missile is pretty primitive, and the silos are oriented on their targets because the missile doesn't have much in the way of cross-range maneuverability. Two are targeted on Washington. Others on LA, San Francisco, and Chicago. Plus Moscow, Kiev, St. Petersburg. They're all leftovers from the Bad Old Days, and they haven't been modified in any way."

"Any way to take them out?" Jackson asked.

"I suppose we could stage a mission with fighter or bomber aircraft and go after the silos with PGMs," Moore allowed. "But we'd have to fly the bombs to Suntar first, and even then it'll be rather a lengthy mission for the F- 117s."

"What about B-2s out of Guam?" Jackson asked.

"I'm not sure they can carry the right weapons. I'll have to check that."

"Jack, this is something we need to think about, okay?"

"I hear you, Robby. General, have somebody look into this, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

Gennady Iosifovich!" General Diggs called on entering the map room.

"Marion Ivanovich!" The Russian came over to take his hand, followed by a hug. He even kissed his guest, in the Russian fashion, and Diggs flinched from this, in the American fashion. "In!"

And Diggs waited for ten seconds: "Out!" Both men shared the laugh of an insider's joke.

"The turtle bordello is still there?"

"It was the last time I looked, Gennady." Then Diggs had to explain to the others. "Out at Fort Irwin—we collected all the desert tortoises and put them

in a safe place so the tanks wouldn't squish 'em and piss off the tree-huggers. I suppose they're still in there making little turtles, but the damned things screw so slow they must fall asleep doing it."

"I have told that story many times, Marion." Then the Russian turned serious. "I am glad to see you. I will be more glad to see your division."

"How bad is it?"

"It is not good. Come." They walked over to the big wall map. "These are their positions as of thirty minutes ago."

"How are you keeping track of them?"

"We now have your Dark Star invisible drones, and I have a smart young captain on the ground watching them as well."

"That far ..." Diggs said. Colonel Masterman was right beside him now. "Duke?" Then he looked at his Russian host. "This is Colonel Masterman, my G-3. His last job was as a squadron commander in the Tenth Cav."

"Buffalo Soldier, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Masterman confirmed with a nod, but his eyes didn't leave the map. "Ambitious bastards, aren't they?"

"Their first objective will be here," Colonel Aliyev said, using a pointer. "This is the Gogol Gold Strike."

"Well, hell, if you're gonna steal something, might as well be a gold mine, right?" Duke asked rhetorically. "What do you have to stop them with?"

"Two-Six-Five Motor Rifle is here." Aliyev pointed.

"Full strength?"

"Not quite, but we've been training them up. We have four more motor-rifle divisions en route. The first arrives at Chita tomorrow noon." Aliyev's voice was a little too optimistic for the situation. He didn't want to show weakness to Americans.

"That's still a long way to move," Masterman observed. He looked over at his boss.

"What are you planning, Gennady?"

"I want to take the four Russian divisions north to link up with the 265th, and stop them about here. Then, perhaps, we will use your forces to cross east through here and cut them off."

Now it wasn't the Chinese who were being ambitious, both Diggs and Masterman thought. Moving First Infantry Division (Mechanized) from Fort Riley, Kansas, to Fort Carson, Colorado, would have been about the same distance, but it would have been on flat ground and against no opposition. Here that task would involve a lot of hills and serious resistance. *Those factors* did *make a difference,* the American officers thought.

"No serious contact yet?"

Bondarenko shook his head. “No, I’m keeping my mechanized forces well away from them. The Chinese are advancing against no opposition.”

“You want ’em to fall asleep, get sloppy?” Masterman asked.

“Da, better that they should get overconfident.”

The American colonel nodded. That made good sense, and as always, war was as much a psychological game as a physical one. “If we jump off the trains at Chita, it’s still a long-approach march to where you want us, General.”

“What about fuel?” Colonel Douglas asked.

“That is the one thing we have plenty of,” answered Colonel Aliyev. “The blue spots on the map, fuel storage—it is the same as your Number Two Diesel.”

“How much?” Douglas asked.

“At each fuel depot, one billion two hundred fifty million liters.”

“Shit!” Douglas observed. *“That* much?”

Aliyev explained, “The fuel depots were established to support a large mobile force in a border conflict. They were built in the time of Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev. Huge concrete-and-steel storage tanks, all underground, well hidden.”

“They must be,” Mitch Turner observed. “I’ve never been briefed on them.”

“So, we evaded even your satellite photos, yes?” That pleased the Russian. “Each depot is manned by a force of twenty engineers, with ample electric pumps.”

“I like the locations,” Masterman said. “What’s this unit here?”

“That is BOYAR, a reserve mechanized force. The men have just been called up. Their weapons are from a hidden equipment-storage bunker. It’s a short division, old equipment—T- 55s and such—but serviceable. We’re keeping that force hidden,” Aliyev said.

The American G-3 arched his eyebrows. Maybe they were outmanned, but they weren’t dumb. That BOYAR force was in a particularly interesting place ... if Ivan could make proper use of it. Their overall operational concept looked good—theoretically. A lot of soldiers could come up with good ideas. The problem was executing them. Did the Russians have the ability to do that? Russia’s military theorists were as good as any the world had ever seen—good enough that the United States Army regularly stole their ideas. The problem was that the U.S. Army could apply those theories to a real battlefield, and the Russians could not.

“How are your people handling this?” Masterman asked.

“Our soldiers, you mean?” Aliyev asked. “The Russian soldier knows how to fight,” he assured his American counterpart.

“Hey, Colonel, I am not questioning their guts,” Duke assured his host. “How’s their spirit, for one thing?”

Bondarenko handled that one: “Yesterday I had to face one of my young officers, Komanov, from the border defenses. He was furious that we were unable to give him the support he needed to defeat the Chinese. And I was ashamed,” the general admitted to his guests. “My men have the spirit. Their training is lacking—I just got here a few months ago, and my changes have barely begun to take effect. But, you will see, the Russian soldier has always risen to the occasion, and he will today—if we here are worthy of him.”

Masterman didn’t share a look with his boss. Diggs had spoken well of this Russian general, and Diggs was both a good operational soldier and a good judge of men. But the Russian had just admitted that his men weren’t trained up as well as they ought to be. The good news was that on the battlefield, men learned the soldier’s trade rapidly. The bad news was that the battlefield was the most brutal Darwinian environment on the face of the planet. Some men would learn, but others would die in the process, and the Russians didn’t have all that many they could afford to lose. This wasn’t 1941, and they weren’t fighting with half their population base this time around.

“You’re going to want us to move out fast when the trains drop us off at Chita?” Tony Welch asked. He was the divisional chief of staff.

“Yes,” Aliyev confirmed.

“Okay, well, then I need to get down there and look over the facilities. What about fuel for our choppers?”

“Our air force bases have fuel storage similar to the diesel depots,” Aliyev told him. “Your word is infrastructure, yes? That is the one thing we have much of. When will they arrive?”

“The Air Force is still working that out. They’re going to fly our aviation brigade in. Apaches first. Dick Boyle’s chomping at the bit.”

“We will be very pleased to see your attack helicopters. We have all too few of our own, and our air force is also slow delivering them.”

“Duke,” Diggs said, “get on the horn to the Air Force. We need some choppers right the hell now, just so we can get around and see what we need to see.”

“Roger,” Masterman replied.

“Let me get a satellite radio set up,” Lieutenant Colonel Garvey said, heading for the door.

Ingrid Bergman was heading south now. General Wallace wanted a better idea for the Chinese logistical tail, and now he was getting it. The People’s Republic of China was in many ways like America had been at the turn of the previous century. Things moved mainly by rail. There were no major highways as Americans understood them, but a lot of railroads. Those were efficient for moving large quantities of anything over medium-to-long distances, but they were also inflexible, and hard to repair—especially the

bridges—and most of all the tunnels, and so that was what he and his targeting people were looking at. The problem was that they had few bombs to drop. None of his attack assets—mainty F-15E Strike Eagles at the moment—had flown over with bombs on their wings, and he had barely enough air-to-mud munitions for an eight-ship strike mission. It was like going to a dance and finding no girls there. The music was fine, and so was the fruit punch, but there really wasn't anything to do. Perversely, his -15E crews didn't mind. They got to play fighter plane, and all such people prefer shooting other airplanes down to dropping bombs on mud soldiers. It just came with the territory. The one thing he had going now was that his scarf-and-goggles troops were playing hell with the PRC air force, with over seventy confirmed kills already for not a single air-to-air loss. The advantage of having E-3B AWACS aircraft was so decisive that the enemy might as well have been flying World War I Fokkers, and the Russians were learning rapidly how to make use of E-3B support. Their fighters were good aerodynamic platforms, just lacking in legs. The Russians had never built a fighter with fuel capacity for more than about one hour's flight time. Nor had they ever learned how to do midair refueling, as the Americans had. And so the Russian MiG and Sukhoi fighters could go up, take their instructions from the AWACS, and participate in one engagement, but then they had to return to base for gas. Half of the kills his Eagle drivers had collected so far were of Chinese fighters that had broken off their fights to RTB for gas as well. It wasn't fair, but Wallace, like all Air Force fighter types, could hardly have cared less about being fair in combat.

But Wallace was fighting a defensive war to this point. He was successfully defending Russian airspace. He was not taking out Chinese targets, not even attacking the Chinese troops on the ground in Siberia. So, though his fighters were having a fine, successful war, they just weren't accomplishing anything important. To that end, he lifted his satellite link to America.

"We ain't got no bombs, General," he told Mickey Moore.

"Well, your fellow Air Scouts are maxed out on taskings, and Mary Diggs is screaming to get some trash haulers to get him his chopper brigade moved to where he needs it."

"Sir, this is real simple. If you want us to kill some Chinese targets, we have to have bombs. I hope I'm not going too fast for you," Wallace added.

"Go easy, Gus," Moore warned.

"Well, sir, maybe it just looks a little different in Washington, but where I'm sitting right now, I have missions, but not the tools to carry those missions out. So, you D.C. people can either send me the tools or rescind the missions. Your call, sir."

"We're working on it," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs assured him.

Do I have any orders?" Mancuso asked the Secretary of Defense.

"Not at this time," Bretano sold CINCPAC.

“Sir, may I ask why? The TV says we’re in a shooting war with China. Am I supposed to play or not?”

“We are considering the political ramifications,” THUNDER explained.

“Excuse me, sir?”

“You heard me.”

“Mr. Secretary, all I know about politics is voting every couple of years, but I have a lot of gray ships under my command, and they’re technically known as warships, and my country is at war.” The frustration in Mancuso’s voice was plain.

“Admiral, when the President decides what to do, you will find out. Until then, ready your command for action. It’s going to happen. I’m just not sure when.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Mancuso hung up and looked at his subordinates. “Political ramifications,” he said. “I didn’t think Ryan was like that.”

“Sir,” Mike Lahr soothed. “Forget ‘political’ and think ‘psychological,’ okay? Maybe Secretary Bretano just used the wrong word. Maybe the idea is to hit them when it’ll do the most good—because we’re messing with their heads, sir, remember?”

“You think so?”

“Remember who the Vice President is? He’s one of us, Admiral. And President Ryan isn’t a pussy, is he?”

“Well ... no, not that I recall,” CINCPAC said, remembering the first time he’d met the guy, and the shoot-out he’d had aboard *Red October*. No, Jack Ryan wasn’t a pussy. “So, what do you suppose he’s thinking?”

“The Chinese have a land war going on—air and land, anyway. Nothing’s happening at sea. They may not expect anything to happen at sea. But they are surging some ships out, just to establish a defense line for the mainland. If we get orders to hit those ships, the purpose will be to make a psychological impact. So, let’s plan along those lines, shall we? Meanwhile, we keep getting more assets in place.”

“Right.” Mancuso nodded and turned to face the wall. Pacific Fleet was nearly all west of the dateline now, and the Chinese had probably no clue where his ships were, but he knew about them. USS *Tucson* was camped out on 406, the single PRC ballistic-missile submarine. It was known to the west as a “Xia” class SSBN, and his intelligence people disagreed on the sub’s actual name, but “406” was the number painted on its sail, and that was how he thought of it. None of that mattered to Mancuso. The first shoot order he planned to issue would go to *Tucson*—to put that missile-armed sub at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. He remembered that the PRC had nuclear-tipped missiles, and those in his area of responsibility would disappear as soon as he had authorization to deal with them. USS *Tucson* was armed with Mark 48 ADCAP fish, and they’d do the job on *that* target, assuming that he was right and President Ryan wasn’t a pussy after all.

And so, Marshal Luo?" Zhang Han San asked.

"Things go well," he replied at once. "We crossed the Amur River with trivial losses, captured the Russian positions in a few hours, and are now driving north."

"Enemy opposition?"

"Light. Very light, in fact. We're starting to wonder if the Russians have any forces deployed in sector at all. Our intelligence suggests the presence of two mechanized divisions, but if they're there, they haven't advanced to establish contact with us. Our forces are racing forward, making better than thirty kilometers per day. I expect to see the gold mine in seven days."

"Is anything going badly?" Qian asked.

"Only in the air. The Americans have deployed fighters to Siberia, and as we all know, the Americans are very clever with their machines, especially the ones that fly. They have inflicted some losses on our fighter aircraft," the Defense Minister admitted.

"How large are the losses?"

"Total, over one hundred. We've gotten twenty-five or so of theirs in return, but the Americans are masters of aerial combat. Fortunately, their aircraft can do little to hinder the advance of our tanks, and, as you have doubtless noted, they have not attacked into our territory at all."

"Why is that, Marshal?" Fang asked.

"We are not certain," Luo answered, turning to the MSS chief. "Tan?"

"Our sources are not certain, either. The most likely explanation is that the Americans have made a political decision not to attack us directly, but merely to defend their Russian 'ally' in a pro forma way. I suppose there is also the consideration that they do not wish to take losses from our air defenses, but the main reason for their restraint is undoubtedly political."

Heads nodded around the table. It was indeed the most likely explanation for the American lack of action, and all of these men understood political considerations.

"Does this mean that they are measuring their action against us in such a way as to cause us minimal injury?" Tong Jie asked. It was so much the better for him, of course, since the Interior Ministry would have to deal with the internal dislocations that systematic attacks might cause.

"Remember what I said before," Zhang pointed out. "They *will* do business with us once we've secured our new territory. So, they already anticipate this. It seems plain that they will support their Russian friends, but only so much. What else are the Americans but mercenaries? This President Ryan, what was he?"

"He was a CIA spy, and by all accounts an effective one," Tan Deshi

reminded them.

"No," Zhang disagreed. "He was a trader in stocks before he joined CIA, and then he was a stock trader again after he left—and whom does he bring into his cabinet? Winston, another hugely rich capitalist, a trader in stocks and securities, a typical American rich man. I tell you, money is the key to understanding these people. They do business. They have no political ideology, except to fatten their purses. To do that, you try not to make blood enemies, and now, here, with us, they do not try to anger us too greatly. I tell you, I understand these people."

"Perhaps," Qian said. "But what if there are objective circumstances which prevent more aggressive action?"

"Then why is their navy not taking action? Their navy is most formidable, but it does nothing, correct, Luo?"

"Not to this point, but we are wary of them," the marshal warned. He was a soldier, not a sailor, even though the PLAN did come under his command. "We have patrol aircraft looking for them, but so far we have not spotted anything. We know they are not in harbor, but that is all."

"They do nothing with their navy. They do nothing with their land forces. They sting us slightly with their air forces, but what is that? The buzzing of insects." Zhang dismissed the issue.

"How many have underestimated America, and this Ryan fellow, and done so to their misfortune?" Qian demanded. "Comrades, I tell you, this is a dangerous situation we are in. Perhaps we can succeed, all well and good if that comes to pass, but overconfidence can be any man's undoing."

"And overestimating one's enemy ensures that you will never do anything," Zhang Han San countered. "Did we get to where we are, did our country get to where we are, by timidity? The Long March was not made by cowards." He looked around the table, and no one summoned the character to argue with him.

"So, things go well in Russia?" Xu asked the Defense Minister.

"Better than the plan," Luo assured them all.

"Then we proceed," the Premier decided for them all, once others had made the real decisions. The meeting soon adjourned, and the ministers went their separate ways.

"Fang?"

The junior Minister-Without-Portfolio turned to see Qian Kun coming after him in the corridor. "Yes, my friend?"

"The reason the Americans have not taken firmer action is that they act at the end of a single railroad to move them and their supplies. This takes time. They have not dropped bombs on us, probably, because they don't have any. And where does Zhang get this rubbish about American ideology?"

"He is wise in the ways of international affairs," Fang replied.

"Is he? Is he really? Is he not the one who tricked the Japanese into commencing a war with America? And why—so that we and they could seize Siberia. And then did he not quietly support Iran and their attempt to seize the Saudi kingdom? And why? So that we could then use the Muslims as a hammer to beat Russia into submission—so that we could seize Siberia. Fang, all he thinks about is Siberia. He wishes to see it under our flag before he dies. Perhaps he wishes to have his ashes buried in a golden urn, like the emperors," Qian hissed. "He's an adventurer, and those men come to bad ends."

"Except those who succeed," Fang suggested.

"How many of them succeed, and how many die before a stone wall?" Qian shot back. "I say the Americans will strike us, and strike us hard once their forces are assembled. Zhang follows his own political vision, not facts, not reality. He may lead our country to its doom."

"Are the Americans so formidable as that?"

"If they are not, Fang, why does Tan spend so much of his time trying to steal their inventions? Don't you remember what America did to Japan and Iran? They are like the wizards of legend. Luo tells us that they've savaged our air force. How often has he told us how formidable our fighters are? All the money we spent on those wonderful aircraft, and the Americans slaughter them like hogs fattened for market! Luo claims we've gotten twenty-five of theirs. He *claims* only twenty-five. More likely we've gotten one or two! Against over a hundred losses, but Zhang tells us the Americans don't want to challenge us. Oh, really? What held them back from smashing Japan's military, and then annihilating Iran's?" Qian paused for breath. "I fear this, Fang. I fear what Zhang and Luo have gotten us into."

"Even if you are right, what can we do to stop it?" the minister asked.

"Nothing," Qian admitted. "But *someone* must speak the truth. *Someone* must warn of the danger that lies before us, if we are to have a country left at the end of this misbegotten adventurism."

"Perhaps so. Qian, you are as ever a voice of reason and prudence. We will speak more," Fang promised, wondering how much of the man's words was alarmism, and how much was good sense. He'd been a brilliant administrator of the state railroads, and therefore was a man with a firm grasp on reality.

Fang had known Zhang for most of his adult life. He was a highly skilled player on the political stage, and a brilliantly gifted manipulator of people. But Qian was asking if those talents translated into a correct perception of reality, and did he *really* understand America and Americans—and most of all, this Ryan fellow? Or was he just forcing oddly shaped pegs into the slots he'd engraved in his own mind? Fang admitted that he didn't know, and more to the point, didn't know the answers to the implicit questions. He did not know himself whether Zhang was right or not. And he really should. But who might? Tan of the Ministry of State Security? Shen of the Foreign Ministry? Who else? Certainly not Premier Xu. All he did was to confirm the consensus achieved by others, or to repeat the words spoken into his ear by Zhang.

Fang walked to his office thinking about all these things, trying to organize his thoughts. Fortunately, he had a system for achieving that.

It started in Memphis, the headquarters of Federal Express. Faxes and telexes arrived simultaneously, telling the company that its wide-body cargo jets were being taken into federal service under the terms of a Phase I call-up of the Civilian Reserve Air Fleet. That meant that all freight-capable aircraft that the federal government had helped to finance (that was nearly all of them, because no commercial bank could compete with Washington when it came to financing things) were now being taken, along with their crews, under the control of the Air Mobility Command. The notice wasn't welcome, but neither was it much of a surprise. Ten minutes later came follow-up messages telling the aircraft where to go, and soon thereafter they started rolling. The flight crews, the majority of them military-trained, wondered where their ultimate destinations were, sure that they'd be surprising ones. The pilots would not be disappointed in this.

FedEx would have to make do with its older narrow-body aircraft, like the venerable Boeing 727s with which the company had gotten started two decades earlier. That, the dispatchers knew, would be a stretch, but they had assistance agreements with the airlines, which they would now activate in order to try to keep up with the continuing shipment of legal documents and live lobsters all over America.

Just how inefficient is it?" Ryan asked.

"Well, we can deliver one day's worth of bombs in three days' worth of flying—maybe two if we stretch things a little, but that's as good as it's going to get," Moore told him. "Bombs are heavy things, and getting them around uses up a lot of jet fuel. General Wallace has a nice list of targets to service, but to do that he needs bombs."

"Where are the bombs going to come from?"

"Andersen Air Force Base on Guam has a nice pile," Moore said. "Ditto Elmendorf in Alaska, and Mountain Home in Idaho. Various other places. It's not so much a question of time and distance as of weight. Hell, the Russian base he's using at Suntar is plenty big for his purposes. We just have to get the bombs to him, and I've just shunted a lot of Air Force lifters to Germany to start loading First Armored's aviation assets to where Diggs is. That's going to take four days of nonstop flying."

"What about crew rest?" Jackson asked.

"What?" Ryan looked up.

"It's a Navy thing, Jack. The Air Force has union rules on how much they can fly. Never had those rules out on the boats," Robby explained. "The C-5

has a bunk area for people to sleep. I was just being facetious." He didn't apologize. It was late—actually "early" was the correct adjective—and nobody in the White House was getting much sleep.

For his part, Ryan wanted a cigarette to help him deal with the stress, but Ellen Sumter was home and in bed, and no one on night duty in the White House smoked, to the best of his knowledge. But that was the wimp part of his character speaking, and he knew it. The President rubbed his face with his hands and looked over at the clock. He had to get some sleep.

It's late, honey-bunny," Mary Pat said to her husband.

"I never would have guessed. Is that why my eyes keep wanting to close?"

There was, really, no reason for them to be here. CIA had little in the way of assets in the PRC. SORGE was the only one of value. The rest of the intelligence community, DIA and NSA, each of them larger than the Central Intelligence Agency in terms of manpower, didn't have any directly valuable human sources either, though NSA was doing its utmost to tap in on Chinese communications. They were even listening in on cell phones through their constellation of geosynchronous ferret satellites, downloading all of the "take" through the Echelon system and then forwarding the "hits" to human linguists for full translation and evaluation. They were getting some material, but not all that much. SORGE was the gemstone of the collection, and both Edward and Mary Patricia Foley were really staying up late to await the newest installment in Minister Fang's personal diary. The Chinese Politburo was meeting every day, and Fang was a dedicated diarist, not to mention a man who enjoyed the physical attractions of his female staff. They were even reading significance into the less regular writings of WARBLER, who mainly committed to her computer his sexual skills, occasionally enough to make Mary Pat blush. Being an intelligence officer was often little different from being a paid voyeur, and the staff psychiatrist translated all of the prurient stuff into what was probably a very accurate personality profile, but to them it just meant that Fang was a dirty old man who happened to exercise a lot of political power.

"It's going to be another three hours at best," the DCI said.

"Yeah," his wife agreed.

"Tell you what ..." Ed Foley rose off the couch, tossed away the cushions, and reached in to pull out the foldaway bed. It was marginally big enough for two.

"When the staff sees this, they'll wonder if we got laid tonight."

"Baby, I have a headache," the DCI reported.

CHAPTER 54

Probes and Pushes

Much of life in the military is mere adherence to Parkinson's Law, the supposition that work invariably expands to fill the time allocated for it. In this case, Colonel Dick Boyle arrived on the very first C-5B Galaxy, which, immediately upon rolling to a stop, lifted its nose "visor" door to disgorge the first of three UH-60A Blackhawk helicopters, whose crewmen just as immediately rolled it to a vacant piece of ramp to unfold the rotor blades, assure they were locked in place, and ready the aircraft for flight after the usual safety checks. By that time, the C-5B had refueled and rolled off into the sky to make room for the next Galaxy, this one delivering AH-64 Apache attack helicopters—in this case complete with weapons and other accoutrements for flying real missions against a real armed enemy.

Colonel Boyle busied himself with watching everything, even though he knew that his troops were doing their jobs as well as they could be done, and would do those jobs whether he watched and fussed over them or not. Perversely, what Boyle wanted to do was to fly to where Diggs and his staff were located, but he resisted the temptation because he felt he should be supervising people whom he'd trained to do their jobs entirely without supervision. That lasted three hours until he finally saw the logic of the situation and decided to be a commander rather than a shop supervisor, and lifted off for Chabarsovil. The flying was easy enough, and he preferred the medium-low clouds, because there had to be fighters about, and not all of them would be friendly. The GPS navigation system guided him to the right location, and the right location, it turned out, was a concrete helipad with soldiers standing around it. They were wearing the "wrong" uniform, a state of mind that Boyle knew he'd have to work on. One of them escorted Boyle into a building that looked like the Russian idea of a headquarters, and sure enough, it was.

"Dick, come on over," General Diggs called. The helicopter commander saluted as he approached.

"Welcome to Siberia, Dick," Marion Diggs said in greeting.

"Thank you, sir. What's the situation?"

"Interesting," the general replied. "This is General Bondarenko. He's the theater commander." Boyle saluted again. "Gennady, this is Colonel Boyle, who commands my aviation brigade. He's pretty good."

"What's the air situation, sir?" Boyle asked Diggs.

“The Air Force is doing a good job on their fighters so far.”

“What about Chinese helicopters?”

“They do not have many,” another Russian officer said. “I am Colonel Aliyev, Andrey Petrovich, theater operations. The Chinese do not have many helicopters. We’ve only seen a few, mainly scouts.”

“No troop carriers? No staff transport?”

“No,” Aliyev answered. “Their senior officers prefer to move around in tracked vehicles. They are not married to helicopters as you Americans are.”

“What do you want me to do, sir?” Boyle asked Diggs.

“Take Tony Turner to Chita. That’s the railhead we’re going to be using. We need to get set up there.”

“Drive the tracks in from there, eh?” Boyle looked at the map.

“That’s the plan. There are closer points, but Chita has the best facilities to off-load our vehicles, so our friends tell us.”

“What about gas?”

“The place you landed is supposed to have sizable underground fuel tanks.”

“More than you will need,” Aliyev confirmed. Boyle thought that was quite a promise.

“And ordnance?” Boyle asked. “We’ve got maybe two days’ worth on the C-5s so far. Six complete loads for my Apaches, figuring three missions per day.”

“Which version of the Apache?” Aliyev asked.

“Delta, Colonel. We’ve got the Longbow radar.”

“Everything works?” the Russian asked.

“Colonel, not much sense bringing them if they don’t,” Boyle replied, with a raised eyebrow. “What about secure quarters for my people?”

“At the base where you landed, there will be secure sleeping quarters for your aviators—bombproof shelters. Your maintenance people will be housed in barracks.”

Boyle nodded. It was the same everywhere. The weenies who built things acted as if pilots were more valuable than the people who maintained the aircraft. And so they were, until the aircraft needed repairs, at which point the pilot was as useful as a cavalryman without a horse.

“Okay, General. I’ll take Tony to this Chita place and then I’m going back to see to my people’s needs. I could sure use one of Chuck Garvey’s radios.”

“He’s outside. Grab one on your way.”

“Okay, sir. Tony, let’s get moving,” he said to the chief of staff.

“Sir, as soon as we get some infantry in, I want to put security on those fueling points,” Masterman said. “Those places need protecting.”

"I can give you what you need," Aliyev offered.

"Fine by me," Masterman responded. "How many of those secure radios did Garvey bring?"

"Eight, I think. Two are gone already," General Diggs warned. "Well, there'll be more on the train. Go tell Boyle to send two choppers here for our needs."

"Right." Masterman ran for the door.

The ministers all had offices and, as in every other such office in the world, the cleanup crews came in, in this case about ten every night. They picked up all sorts of trash, from candy wrappers to empty cigarette packs to papers, and the latter went into special burn-bags. The janitorial staff was not particularly smart, but they had had to pass background checks and go through security briefings that were heavy on intimidation. They were not allowed to discuss their jobs with anyone, not even a spouse, and not ever to reveal what they saw in the wastebaskets. In fact, they never thought much about it—they were less interested in the thoughts or ideas of the Politburo members than they were in the weather forecasts. They'd rarely even seen the ministers whose offices they cleaned, and none of the crew had ever so much as spoken a single word to any of them; they just tried to be invisible on those rare occasions when they saw one of the godlike men who ruled their nation. Maybe a submissive bow, which was not even acknowledged by so much as a look, because they were mere furniture, menials who did peasants' work because, as peasants, that was all they were suited for. The peasants knew what computers were, but such machines were not for the use of such men as they were, and the janitorial staff knew it.

And so when one of the computers made a noise while a cleaner was in the office, he took no note of it. Well, it seemed odd that it should whir when the screen was dark, but why it did what it did was a mystery to him, and he'd never even been so bold as to touch the thing. He didn't even dust the keyboard as he cleaned the desktop—no, he always avoided the keys.

And so, he heard the whir begin, continue for a few seconds, then stop, and he paid no mind to it.

Mary Pat Foley opened her eyes when the sun started casting shadows on her husband's office wall, and rubbed her eyes reluctantly. She checked her watch. Seven-twenty. She was usually up long before this—but she usually didn't go to bed after four in the morning. Three hours of sleep would probably have to do. She stood and headed into Ed's private washroom. It had a shower, like hers. She'd make use of her own shortly, and for the moment settled for some water splashed on her face and a reluctant look in the mirror that resulted in a grimace at what the look revealed.

The Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency shook her head, and then her entire body to get the blood moving, and then put her blouse on. Finally, she shook her husband's shoulder.

"Out of the hutch, honey-bunny, before the foxes get you."

"We still at war?" the DCI asked from behind closed eyes.

"Probably. I haven't checked yet." She paused for a stretch and slipped her feet into her shoes. "I'm going to check my e-mail."

"Okay, I'll call downstairs for breakfast," Ed told her.

"Oatmeal. No eggs. Your cholesterol is too high," Mary Pat observed.

"Yeah, baby," he grumbled in submissive reply.

"That's a good honey-bunny." She kissed him and headed out.

Ed Foley made his bathroom call, then sat at his desk and lifted the phone to call the executive cooking staff. "Coffee. Toast. Three-egg omelet, ham, and hash browns." Cholesterol or not, he had to get his body working.

You've got mail," the mechanical voice said.

"Great." The DDO breathed. She downloaded it, going through the usual procedures to save and print, but rather more slowly this morning because she was groggy and therefore mistake-prone. That sort of thing made her slow down and be extra careful, something she'd learned to do as the mother of a newborn. And so in four minutes instead of the usual two, she had a printed hard copy of the latest SORGE feed from Agent SONGBIRD. Six pages of relatively small ideographs. Then she lifted the phone and punched the speed-dial button for Dr. Sears.

"Yes?"

"This is Mrs. Foley. We got one."

"On the way, Director." She had some coffee before he arrived, and the taste, if not the effect of the caffeine, helped her face the day.

"In early?" she asked.

"Actually I slept in last night. We need to improve the selection on the cable TV," he told her, hoping to lighten the day a little. One look at her eyes told him how likely that was.

"Here." She handed the sheets across. "Coffee?"

"Yes, thank you." His eyes didn't leave the page as his hand reached out for the cup. "This is good stuff today."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, it's Fang's account of a Politburo discussion of how the war's going ... they're trying to analyze our actions ... yeah, that's about what I'd expect

..."

"Talk to me, Dr. Sears," Mary Pat ordered.

"You're going to want to get George Weaver in on this, too, but what he's going to say is that they're projecting their own political outlook onto us generally, and onto President Ryan in particular ... yeah, they're saying that we are not hitting them hard for political reasons, that they think we don't want to piss them off too much ..." Sears took a long sip of coffee. "This is really good stuff. It tells us what their political leadership is thinking, and what they're thinking isn't very accurate." Sears looked up. "They misunderstand us worse than we misunderstand them, Director, even at this level. They see President Ryan's motivation as a strictly political calculation. Zhang says that he's laying back so that we can do business with them, after they consolidate their control over the Russian oil and goldfields."

"What about their advance?"

"They say—that is, Marshal Luo says—that things are going according to plan, that they're surprised at the lack of Russian opposition, and also surprised that we haven't struck any targets within their borders."

"That's because we don't have any bombs over there yet. Just found that out myself. We're having to fly the bombs in so that we can drop them."

"Really? Well, they don't know that yet. They think it's deliberate inaction on our part."

"Okay, get me a translation. When will Weaver get in?"

"Usually about eight-thirty."

"Go over this with him as soon as he arrives."

"You bet." Sears took his leave.

Bedding down for the night?" Aleksandrov asked.

"So it would seem, Comrade Captain," Buikov answered. He had his binoculars on the Chinese. The two command-reconnaissance vehicles were together, which only seemed to happen when they secured for the night. It struck both men as odd that they confined their activities to daylight, but that wasn't a bad thing for the Russian watchers, and even soldiers needed their sleep. More than most, in fact, both of the Russians would have said. The stress and strain of keeping track of the enemies of their country—and doing so *within* their own borders—were telling on both of them.

The Chinese drill was thorough, but predictable. The two command tracks were together. The others were spread out, mainly in front of them, but one three hundred meters behind to secure their rear. The crews of each track stayed together as a unit. Each broke out a small petrol stove for cooking their rice—*probably* rice, the Russians all thought. And they settled down to get four

or five hours of sleep before waking, cooking breakfast, and moving out before dawn. Had they not been enemies, their adherence to so demanding a drill might have excited admiration. Instead, Buikov found himself wondering if he could get two or three of their BRMs to race up on the invaders and immolate them with the 30-mm rapid-fire cannons on their tracked carriers. But Aleksandrov would never allow it. You could always depend on officers to deny the sergeants what they wanted to do.

The captain and his sergeant walked back north to their track, leaving three other scouts to keep watch on their "guests," as Aleksandrov had taken to calling them.

"So, Sergeant, how are you feeling?" the officer asked in a quiet voice.

"Some sleep will be good." Buikov looked back. There was now a ridgeline in addition to the trees between him and the Chinks. He lit a cigarette and let out a long, relaxed breath. "This is harder duty than I expected it to be."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Comrade Captain. I always thought we could kill our enemies. Baby-sitting them is very stressful."

"That is so, Boris Yevgeniyevich, but remember that if we do our job properly, then Division will be able to kill more than just one or two. We are their eyes, not their teeth."

"As you say, Comrade Captain, but it is like making a movie of the wolf instead of shooting him."

"The people who make good wildlife movies win awards, Sergeant."

The odd thing about the captain, Buikov thought, *was that he was always trying to reason with you.* It was actually rather endearing, as if he was trying to be a teacher rather than an officer.

"What's for dinner?"

"Beef and black bread, Comrade Captain. Even some butter. But no vodka," the sergeant added sourly.

"When this is over, I will allow you to get good and drunk, Boris Yevgeniyevich," Aleksandrov promised.

"If we live that long, I will toast your health." The track was where they'd left it, and the crew had spread out the camouflage netting. *One thing about this officer,* Buikov thought, *he got the men to do their duty without much in the way of complaint. The same sort of good comradely solidarity my grandfather spoke about, as he told his endless tales of killing Germans on the way to Vienna, just like in all the movies,* the sergeant thought.

The black bread was canned, but tasty, and the beef, cooked on their own small petrol heater, wasn't so bad as to choke a dog. About the time they finished, Sergeant Grechko appeared. He was the commander of the unit's #3 BRM, and he was carrying ...

"Is that what I think it is?" Buikov asked. "Yuriy Andreyevich, you are a

comrade!"

It was a half-liter bottle of vodka, the cheapest "BOΔKA" brand, with a foil top that tore off and couldn't be resealed.

"Whose idea is this?" the captain demanded.

"Comrade Captain, it is a cold night, and we are Russian soldiers, and we need something to help us relax," Grechko said. "It's the only bottle in the company, and one slug each will not harm us, I think," the sergeant added reasonably.

"Oh, all right." Aleksandrov extended his metal cup, and received perhaps sixty grams. He waited for the rest of his crew to get theirs, and saw that the bottle was empty. They all drank together, and sure enough, it tasted just fine to be Russian soldiers out in the woods, doing their duty for their Motherland.

"We'll have to refuel tomorrow," Grechko said.

"There will be a fuel truck waiting for us, forty kilometers north at the burned-down sawmill. We'll go up there one at a time, and hope our Chinese guests do not get overly ambitious in their advance."

That must be your Captain Aleksandrov," Major Tucker said. "Fourteen hundred meters from the nearest Chinese. That's pretty close," the American observed.

"He's a good boy," Aliyev said, "Just reported in. The Chinese follow their drill with remarkable exactitude. And the main body?"

"Twenty-five miles back—forty kilometers or so. They're laagering in for the night, too, but they're actually building campfires, like they want us to know where they are." Tucker worked the mouse to show the encampments. The display was green-on-green now. The Chinese armored vehicles showed as bright spots, especially from the engines, which glowed from residual heat.

"This is amazing," Aliyev said in frank admiration.

"We decided back around the end of the 1970s that we could play at night when everybody else can't. It took a while to develop the technology, but it by-God works, Colonel. All we need now is some Smart Pigs."

"What?"

"You'll see, Colonel. You'll see," Tucker promised. Best of all, this "take" came from Grace Kelly, and she *did* have a laser designator plugged in to the fuselage, tooling along now at 62,000 feet and looking down with her thermal-imaging cameras. Under Tucker's guidance, the UAV kept heading south, to continue the catalog of the Chinese units advancing into Siberia. There were sixteen ribbon bridges on the Amur River now, and a few north of there, but the really vulnerable points were around Harbin, well to the south, inside Chinese territory. Lots of railroad bridges between there and Bei'an, the terminus of the railroad lifeline to the People's Liberation Army. Grace Kelly

saw a lot of trains, mainly diesel engines, but even some old coal-burning steam engines that had come out of storage in order to keep the weapons and supplies coming north. Most interesting of all was the recently built traffic circle, where tank cars were unloading something, probably diesel fuel, into what appeared to be a pipeline that PLAA engineers were working very hard to extend north. That was something they'd copied from America. The U.S. and British armies had done the same thing from Normandy east to the front in late 1944, and *that,* Tucker knew, was a target worthy of note. Diesel fuel wasn't just the food of a field army. It was the very air it breathed.

There were huge numbers of idle men about. Laborers, probably, there to repair damaged tracking, and the major bridging points had SAM and FLAK batteries in close attendance. So, Joe Chink knew that the bridges were important, and he was doing his best to guard them.

For what good that would do, Tucker thought. He got on the satellite radio to talk things over with the crew up at Zhigansk, where General Wallace's target book was being put together. The crunchies on the ground were evidently worried about taking on the advancing People's Liberation Army, but to Major Tucker, it all looked like a collection of targets. For point targets, he wanted J-DAMs, and for area targets, some smart pigs, the J-SOWs, and then Joe Chink was going to take one on the chin, and probably, like all field armies, this one had a glass jaw. If you could just hit it hard enough.

The Russians on the ground had no idea what FedEx was, and were more than a little surprised that any private, nongovernment corporation could actually own something as monstrous as a Boeing 747F freighter aircraft.

For their part, the flight crews, mainly trained by the Navy or Air Force, had never expected to see Siberia except maybe through the windows of a B-52H strategic bomber. The runways were unusually bumpy, worse than most American airports, but there was an army of people on the ground, and when the swinging door on the nose came up, the ground crews waved the forklifts in to start collecting the palletized cargo. The flight crews didn't leave the aircraft. Fueling trucks came up and connected the four-inch hoses to the proper nozzle points and started refilling the capacious tanks so that the aircraft could leave as soon as possible, to clear the ramp space. Every 747F had a bunking area for the spare pilots who'd come along for the ride. They didn't even get a drink, those who'd sleep for the return flight, and they had to eat the boxed lunches they'd been issued at Elmendorf on the outbound flight. In all, it took fifty-seven minutes to unload the hundred tons of bombs, which was scarcely enough for ten of the F-15Es parked at the far end of the ramp, but that was where the forklifts headed.

Is that a fact?" Ryan observed.

“Yes, Mr. President,” Dr. Weaver replied. “For all their sophistication, these people can be very insular in their thinking, and as a practical matter, we are all guilty of projecting our own ways of thinking onto other people.”

“But I have people like you to advise me. Who advises them?” Jack asked.

“They have some good ones. Problem is, their Politburo doesn’t always listen.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve seen that problem here, too. Is this good news or bad news, people?”

“Potentially it could be both, but let’s remember that we understand them now a lot better than they understand us,” Ed Foley told those present. “That gives us a major advantage, if we play our cards intelligently.”

Ryan leaned back and rubbed his eyes. Robby Jackson wasn’t in much better shape, though he’d slept about four hours in the Lincoln Bedroom (unlike President Lincoln— it was called that simply because a picture of the sixteenth President hung on the wall). The good Jamaican coffee helped everyone at least simulate consciousness.

“I’m surprised that their Defense Minister is so narrow,” Robby thought aloud, his eyes tracing over the SORGE dispatch. “You pay the senior operators to be big-picture thinkers. When operations go as well as the one they’re running, you get suspicious. I did, anyway.”

“Okay, Robby, you used to be God of Operations across the river. What do you recommend?” Jack asked.

“The idea in a major operation is always to play with the other guy’s head. To lead him down the path you want him to go, or to get inside his decision cycle, just prevent him from analyzing the data and making a decision. I think we can do that here.”

“How?” Arnie van Damm asked.

“The common factor of every successful military plan in history is this: You show the guy what he expects and hopes to see, and then when he thinks he’s got the world by the ass, you cut his legs off in one swipe.” Robby leaned back, holding court for once. “The smart move is to let them keep going for a few more days, make it just seem easier and easier for them while we build up our capabilities, and then when we hit them, we land on them like the San Francisco earthquake—no warning at all, just the end of the fuckin’ world hits ’em. Mickey, what’s their most vulnerable point?”

General Moore had that answer: “It’s always logistics. They’re burning maybe nine hundred tons of diesel fuel a day to keep those tanks and tracks moving north. They have a full five thousand engineers working like beavers running a pipeline to keep up with their lead elements. We cut that, and they can make up some of the shortfall with fuel trucks, but not all of it—”

“And we use the Smart Pig to take care of those,” Vice President Jackson finished.

“That’s one way to handle it,” General Moore agreed.

"Smart Pig?" Ryan asked.

Robby explained, concluding: "We've been developing this and a few other tricks for the last eight years. I spent a month out at China Lake a few years ago with the prototype. It works, if we have enough of them."

"Gus Wallace has that at the top of his Christmas list."

"The other trick is the political side," Jackson concluded.

"Funny, I have an idea for that. How is the PRC presenting this war to its people?"

It was Professor Weaver's turn: "They're saying that the Russians provoked a border incident—same thing Hitler did with Poland in 1939. The Big Lie technique. They've used it before. Every dictatorship has. It works if you control what your people see."

"What's the best weapon for fighting a lie?" Ryan asked.

"The truth, of course," Arnie van Damm answered for the rest. "But they control their news distribution. How do we get the truth to their population?"

"Ed, how is the SORGE data coming out?"

"Over the 'Net, Jack. So?"

"How many Chinese citizens own computers?"

"Millions of them—the number's really jumped in the past couple of years. That's why they're ripping that patent off Dell Computer that we made a stink about in the trade talks and—oh, yeah ..." Foley looked up with a smile. "I like it."

"That could be dangerous," Weaver warned.

"Dr. Weaver, there's no safe way to fight a war," Ryan said in reply. "This isn't a negotiation between friends. General Moore?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get the orders out."

"Yes, sir."

"The only question is, will it work?"

"Jack," Robby Jackson said, "it's like with baseball. You play the games to find out who the best is."

The first reinforcing division to arrive at Chita was the 201st. The trains pulled into the built-for-the-purpose offloading sidings. The flatcars had been designed (and built in large numbers) to transport tracked military vehicles. To that end, flip-down bridging ramps were located at each end of every single car, and when those were tossed down in place, the tanks could drive straight off to the concrete ramps to where every train had backed up. It was a

little demanding—the width of the cars was at best marginal for the tank tracks—but the drivers of each vehicle kept their path straight, breathing a small sigh of relief when they got to the concrete. Once on the ground, military police troops, acting as traffic cops, directed the armored vehicles to assembly areas. The 201st Motor Rifle Division's commander and his staff were there already, of course, and the regimental officers got their marching orders, telling them what roads to take northeast to join Bondarenko's Fifth Army, and by joining it, to make it a real field army rather than a theoretical expression on paper.

The 201st, like the follow-on divisions, the 80th, 34th, and 94th, were equipped with the newest Russian hardware, and were at their full TO&E. Their immediate mission was to race north and east to get in front of the advancing Chinese. It would be quite a race. There weren't many roads in this part of Russia, and what roads there were here were unpaved gravel, which suited the tracked vehicles. The problem would be diesel fuel, because there were few gas stations for the trucks which ran the roads in peacetime pursuits, and so the 201st had requisitioned every tanker truck its officers could locate, and even that might not be enough, the logisticians all worried, not that they had much choice in the matter. If they could get their tanks there, then they'd fight them as pillboxes if it came to that.

About the only thing they had going for them was the network of telephone lines, which enabled them to communicate without using radios. The entire area was under the strictest possible orders for radio silence, to deny all conceivable knowledge to the enemy; and the air forces in the area, American and Russian, were tasked to eliminate all tactical reconnaissance aircraft that Chinese would be sending about. So far, they'd been successful. A total of seventeen J-6 and -7 aircraft, thought to be the reconnaissance variants of their classes, had been "splashed" short of Chita.

The Chinese problem with reconnaissance was confirmed in Paris, of all places. SPOT, the French corporation which operated commercial photosatellites, had received numerous requests for photos of Siberia, and while many of them came from seemingly legitimate western businesses, mainly news agencies, all had been summarily denied. Though not as good as American reconnaissance satellites, the SPOT birds were good enough to identify all the trains assembled at Chita.

And since the People's Republic of China still had a functioning embassy in Moscow, the other concern was that their Ministry of State Security had Russian nationals acting as paid spies, feeding data to Russia's new enemy. Those individuals about whom the Russian Federal Security Service had suspicions were picked up and questioned, and those in custody were interrogated vigorously.

This number included Klementi Ivanovich Suvorov.

"You were in the service of an enemy country," Pavel Yefremov observed.

“You killed for a foreign power, and you conspired to kill our country’s president. We know all this. We’ve had you under surveillance for some time now. We have this.” He held up a photocopy of the onetime pad recovered from the dead-drop on the park bench. “You may talk now, or you may be shot. It is your life at risk, not mine.”

In the movies, this was the part where the suspect was supposed to say defiantly, “You’re going to kill me anyway,” except that Suvorov had no more wish to die than anyone else. He loved life as much as any man, and he’d never expected to be caught any more than the most foolish of street criminals did. If anything, he’d expected arrest even less than one of those criminals, because he knew how intelligent and clever he was, though this feeling had understandably deflated over the last few days.

The outlook of Klementi Ivan’ch Suvorov was rather bleak at the moment. He *was* KGB-trained, and he knew what to expect—a bullet in the head—unless he could give his interrogators something sufficiently valuable for them to spare his life, and at the moment even life in a labor camp of strict regime was preferable to the alternative.

“Have you truly arrested Kong?”

“We told you that before, but, no, we have not. Why tip them off that we’ve penetrated their operation?” Yefremov said honestly.

“Then you can use me against them.”

“How might we do that?” the FSS officer asked.

“I can tell them that the operation they propose is going forward, but that the situation in Siberia wrecked my chance to execute it in a timely fashion.”

“And if Kong cannot leave their embassy—we have it guarded and isolated now, of course—how would you get that information to him?”

“By electronic mail. Yes, you can monitor their landlines, but to monitor their cellular phones is more difficult. There’s a backup method for me to communicate with him electronically.”

“And the fact that you haven’t made use of it so far will not alert them?”

“The explanation is simple. My Spetsnaz contact was frightened off by the outbreak of hostilities, and so was I.”

“But we’ve already checked your electronic accounts.”

“Do you think they are all written down?” He tapped the side of his head. “Do you think I am totally foolish?”

“Go on, make your proposal.”

“I will propose that I can go forward with the mission. I require them to authorize it by a signal—the way they set the shades in their windows, for example.”

“And for this?”

“And for this I will not be executed,” the traitor suggested.

"I see," Yefremov said quietly. He would have been perfectly content to shoot the traitor right here and now, but it might be politically useful to go forward with his proposal. He'd kick that one upstairs.

The bad part about watching them was that you had to anticipate everything they did, and that meant that they got to have more sleep, about an hour's worth, Aleksandrov figured, and no more than that only because they were predictable. He'd had his morning tea. Sergeant Buikov had enjoyed two morning cigarettes with his, and now they lay prone on wet dew-dampened ground, with their binoculars to their eyes. The Chinese had also had soldiers out of their tracks all night, set about a hundred meters away from them, so it seemed. *They weren't very adventurous,* the captain thought. He would have spread his sentries much farther out, at least half a kilometer, in pairs with radios to go with their weapons. For that matter, he would have set up a mortar in the event that they spotted something dangerous. But the fox and the gardener seemed to be both conservative and confident, which was an odd combination of characteristics.

But their morning drill was precise. The petrol heaters came out for tea—*probably tea,* they all figured—and whatever it was that they had for breakfast. Then the camouflage nets came down. The outlying sentries came in and reported in person to their officers, and everyone mounted up. The first hop on their tracks was a short one, not even half a kilometer, and again the foot-scouts dismounted and moved forward, then quickly reported back for the second, much longer morning frog leap forward.

"Let's move, Sergeant," Aleksandrov ordered, and together they ran to their BRM for their first trek into the woods for their own third installment of frog leap backwards.

There they go again," Major Tucker said, after getting three whole hours of sleep on a thin mattress four feet from the Dark Star terminal. It was Ingrid Bergman up again, positioned so that she could see both the reconnaissance element and main body of the Chinese army. "You know, they really stick to the book, don't they?"

"So it would seem," Colonel Tolkunov agreed.

"So, going by that, tonight they'll go to about here." Tucker made a green mark on the acetate-covered map. "That puts them at the gold mine day after tomorrow. Where do you plan to make your stand?" the major asked.

"That depends on how quickly the Two Zero One can get forward."

"Gas?" Tucker asked.

"Diesel fuel, but, yes, that is the main problem with moving so large a force."

"Yeah, with us it's bombs."

"When will you begin to attack Chinese targets?" Tolkunov asked.

"Not my department, Colonel, but when it happens, you'll see it here, live and in color."

Ryan had gotten two hours of nap in the afternoon, while Arnie van Damm covered his appointments (the Chief of Staff needed his sleep, too, but like most people in the White House, he put the President's needs before his own), and now he was watching TV, the feed from Ingrid Bergman.

"This is amazing," he observed. "You could almost get on the phone and tell a guy where to go with his tank."

"We try to avoid that, sir," Mickey Moore said at once. In Vietnam it had been called the "squad leader in the sky" when battalion commanders had directed sergeants on their patrols, not always to the enlisted men's benefit. The miracle of modern communications could also be a curse, with the expected effect that the people in harm's way would ignore their radios or just turn the damned things off until they had something to say themselves.

Ryan nodded. He'd been a second lieutenant of Marines once, and though it hadn't been for long, he remembered it as demanding work for a kid just out of college.

"Do the Chinese know we're doing this?"

"Not as far as we can tell. If they did, they'd sure as hell try to take the Dark Star down, and we'd notice if they tried. That's not easy, though. They're damned near invisible on radar, and tough to spot visually, so the Air Force tells me."

"Not too many fighters can reach sixty thousand feet, much less cruise up there," Robby agreed. "It's a stretch even for a Tomcat." His eyes, too, were locked on the screen. No officer in the history of military operations had ever had a capability akin to this, not even two percent of it, Jackson was sure. Most of war-fighting involved finding the enemy so that you knew where to kill him. These new things made it like watching a Hollywood movie—and if the Chinese knew they were there, they'd freak. Considerable efforts had been designed into Dark Star to prevent that from happening. Their transmitters were directional, and locked onto satellites, instead of radiating outward in the manner of a normal radio. So, they might as well have been black holes up there, orbiting twelve miles over the battlefield.

"What's the important thing here?" Jack asked General Moore.

"Logistics, sir, always logistics. Told you this morning, sir, they're burning up a lot of diesel fuel, and replenishing that is a mother of a task. The Russians have the same problem. They're trying to race a fresh division north of the Chinese spearhead, to made a stand around Aldan, close to where the gold strike is. It's only even money they can make it, even over roads and without

opposition. They have to move a lot of fuel, too, and the other problem for them is that it'll wear out the tracks on their vehicles. They don't have lowboy trailers like ours, and so their tanks have to do it all on their own. Tanks are a lot more delicate to operate than they look. Figure they'll lose a quarter to a third of their strength just from the approach march."

"Can they fight?" Jackson asked.

"They're using the T-80U. It would have given the M60A3 a good fight, but no, not as good as our first-flight M1, much less the M1A2, but against the Chinese M-90, call it an even match, qualitatively. It's just that the Chinese have a lot more of them. It comes down to training. The Russian divisions that they're sending into the fight are their best-trained and -equipped. Question is, are they good enough? We'll just have to see."

"And our guys?"

"They start arriving at Chita tomorrow morning. The Russians want them to assemble and move east-southeast. The operational concept is for them to stop the Chinese cold, and then we chop them off from their supplies right near the Amur River. It makes sense theoretically," Mickey Moore said neutrally, "and the Russians say they have all the fuel we'll need in underground bunkers that have been there for damned near fifty years. We'll see."

CHAPTER 55

Looks and Hurts

General Peng was all the way forward now, with the leading elements of his lead armored division, the 302nd. Things were going well for him—sufficiently well, in fact, that he was becoming nervous about it. *No opposition at all?* he asked himself. Not so much as a single rifle round, much less a barrage of artillery. Were the Russians totally asleep, totally devoid of troops in this sector? They had a full army group command section at Chabarsovil, commanded by that Bondarenko fellow, who was reported to be a competent, even a courageous, officer. But where the hell were his troops? Intelligence said that a complete Russian motor-rifle division was here, the 265th, and a Russian motor-rifle division was a superbly designed mechanized formation, with enough tanks to punch a hole in most things, and manned with enough infantry to hold any position for a long time. Theoretically. But where the hell was it? And where were the reinforcements the Russians had to be sending? Peng had asked for information, and the air force had supposedly sent photo-reconnaissance aircraft to look for his enemies, but with no result. He had expected to be mainly on his own for this campaign, but not *entirely* on his own. Fifty kilometers in advance of the 302nd Armored was a reconnaissance screen that had reported nothing but some tracks in the ground that might or might not have been fresh. The few helicopter flights that had gone out had reported nothing. They should have spotted *something,* but no, only some civilians, who for the most part got the hell out of the way and stayed there.

Meanwhile, his troops had crewed up this ancient railroad right-of-way, but it wasn't much worse than traveling along a wide gravel road. His only potential operational concern was fuel, but two hundred 10,000-liter fuel trucks were delivering an adequate amount from the pipeline the engineers were extending at a rate of forty kilometers per day from the end of the railhead on the far bank of the Amur. In fact, that was the most impressive feat of the war so far. Well behind him, engineer regiments were laying the pipe, then covering it under a meter of earth for proper concealment. The only things they couldn't conceal were the pumping stations, but they had the spare parts to build plenty more should they be destroyed.

No, Peng's only real concern was the location of the Russian Army. The dilemma was that either his intelligence was faulty, and there *were* no Russian formations in his area of interest, or it was accurate and the Russians were just running away and denying him the chance to engage and destroy them. But since when did Russians *not* fight for their land? Chinese soldiers surely would. And it just didn't fit with Bondarenko's reputation. None of this

situation made sense. Peng sighed. *But battlefields were often that way,* he told himself. For the moment, he was on—actually slightly ahead of—schedule, and his first strategic objective, the gold mine, was three days away from his leading reconnaissance element. He'd never seen a gold mine before.

I'll be damned!" Pavel Petrovich said. "This is *my* land. No Chink's going to chase me off of it!"

"They are only three or four days away, Pasha."

"So? I have lived here for over fifty years. I'm not going to leave now." The old man was well to the left of defiant. The chief of the mining company had come personally to drive him out, and expected him to come willingly. But he'd misread the old man's character.

"Pasha, we can't leave you here in their way. This is their objective, the thing they invaded us to steal—"

"Then I shall *fight* for it!" he retorted. "I killed Germans, I've killed bears, I've killed wolves. Now, I will kill Chinese. I'm an old man, not an old *woman,* comrade!"

"Will you fight against enemy soldiers?"

"And why not?" Gogol asked. "This is my land. I know all its places. I know where to hide, and I know how to shoot. I've killed soldiers before." He pointed to his wall. The old service rifle was there, and the mining chief could easily see the notches he'd cut on the stock with a knife, one for every German. "I can hunt wolves and bear. I can hunt men, too."

"You're too old to be a soldier. That's a young man's job."

"I need not be an athlete to squeeze a trigger, comrade, and I know these woods." To emphasize his words, Gogol stood and took down his old sniper rifle from the Great Patriotic War, leaving the new Austrian rifle. The meaning was clear. He'd fought with this arm before, and he was quite willing to do so again. Hanging on his wall still were a number of the gilded wolf skins, most of which had single holes in the head. He touched one, then looked back at his visitors. "I am a Russian. I will fight for my land."

The mining chief figured he'd buck this information up to the military. Maybe they could take him out. For himself, he had no particular desire to entertain the Chinese army, and so he took his leave. Behind him, Pavel Petrovich Gogol opened a bottle of vodka and enjoyed a snort. Then he cleaned his rifle and thought of old times.

T*he train terminal was well-designed for their purposes,* Colonel Welch thought. Russian engineers might have designed things clunky, but they'd also designed them to work, and the layout here was a lot more efficient than it looked on

first inspection. The trains reversed direction on what American railroaders called a wye—Europeans called it a turning triangle—which allowed trains to back up to any one of ten off-loading ramps, and the Russians were doing it with skill and aplomb. The big VL80T electric locomotive eased backwards, with the conductors on the last car holding the air-release valve to activate the brakes when they reached the ramp. When the trains stopped, the soldiers jumped from their passenger coaches and ran back to their individual vehicles to start them up and drive them off. It didn't take longer than thirty minutes to empty a train. That impressed Colonel Welch, who'd used the Auto Train to take his family to Disney World, and the off-loading procedure in Sanford, Florida, usually took an hour and a half or so. Then there was no further waiting. The big VL (Vladimir Lenin) engines immediately moved out for the return trip west to load up another ten thousand tons of train cars and cargo. It certainly appeared as though the Russians could make things happen when they had to.

"Colonel?" Welch turned to see a Russian major, who saluted crisply.

"Yes?"

"The first train with your personnel is due in four hours twenty minutes. We'll take them to the southern assembly area. There is fuel there if they need it, and then we have guides to direct them east."

"Very good."

"Until then, if you wish to eat, there is a canteen inside the station building."

"Thank you. We're okay at the moment." Welch walked over to where his satellite radio was set up, to get that information to General Diggs.

Colonel Bronco Winters now had seven red stars painted on the side panel of his F-15C, plus four of the now-defunct UIR flags. He could have painted on some marijuana or coca leaves as well, but that part of his life was long past, and those kills had been blacker than his uncle Ernie, who still lived in Harlem. So, he was a double-ace, and the Air Force hadn't had many of those on active duty in a very long time. He took his flight to what they had taken to calling Bear Station, on the western edge of the Chinese advance.

It was an Eagle station. There were now over a hundred F-16 fighters in Siberia, but they were mainly air-to-mud rather than air-to-air, and so the fighting part of the fighter mission was his department, while the -16 jocks grumbled about being second-class citizens. Which they were, as far as Colonel Winters thought. Damned little single-engine pukes.

Except for the F-16CGs. They were useful because they were dedicated to taking out enemy radars and SAM sites. The Siberian Air Force (so they now deemed themselves) hadn't done *any* air-to-mud yet. They had orders not to, which offended the guys whose idea of fun was killing crunchies on the ground instead of more manly pursuits. They didn't have enough bombs for a

proper bombing campaign yet, and so they were coming up just to ride guard on the E-3Bs in case Joe Chink decided to go after them—it was a hard mission, but marginally doable, and Bronco was surprised that they hadn't made the attempt yet. It was a sure way to lose a lot of fighter planes, but they'd lost a bunch anyway, and why not lose them to a purpose ... ?

"Boar Lead, this is Eagle Two, over."

"Boar Leader."

"We show something happening, numerous bandits one-four-five your position, angels three-three, range two hundred fifty miles, coming north at six hundred knots—make that count thirty-plus bandits, looks like they're coming right for us, Boar Lead," the controller on the AWACS reported.

"Roger, copy that. Boar, Lead," he told his flight of four. "Let's get our ears perked up."

"Two." "Three." "Four," the rest of his flight chimed in.

"Boar Leader, this is Eagle Two. The bandits just went supersonic, and they are heading right for us. Looks like they're not kidding. Vector right to course one-three-five and prepare to engage."

"Roger, Eagle. Boar Lead, come right to one-three-five."

"Two." "Three." "Four."

Winters checked his fuel first of all. He had plenty. Then he looked at his radar display for the picture transmitted from the AWACS, and sure enough, there was a passel of bandits inbound, like a complete ChiComm regiment of fighters. The bastards had read his mind.

"Damn, Bronco, this looks like a knife fight coming."

"Be cool, Ducky, we got better knives."

"You say so, Bronco," the other element leader answered.

"Let's loosen it up, people," Colonel Winters ordered. The flight of four F-15Cs separated into two pairs, and the pairs slipped apart as well so that each could cover the other, but a single missile could not engage both.

The display between his legs showed that the Chinese fighters were just over a hundred miles off now, and the velocity vectors indicated speeds of over eight hundred knots. Then the picture dirtied up some.

"Boar Lead, looks like they just dropped off tanks."

"Roger that." So, they'd burned off fuel to get altitude, and now they were committed to the battle with full internal fuel. That would give them better legs than usual, and they had closed to less than two hundred miles between them and the E-3B Sentry they clearly wanted to kill. There were thirty people on that converted 707, and Winters knew a lot of them. They'd worked together for years, mainly in exercises, and each controller on the Sentry had a specialty. Some were good at getting you to a tanker. Some were good at sending you out to hunt. Some were best at defending themselves against enemies. This third group would now take over. The Sentry crewmen would

think this wasn't cricket, that it wasn't exactly fair to chase deliberately after a converted obsolete airliner ... just because it acted as bird-dog for those who were killing off their fighter-pilot comrades. *Well, that's life,* Winters thought. But he wasn't going to give any of these bandits a free shot at another USAF aircraft.

Eighty miles now. "Skippy, follow me up," the colonel ordered.

"Roger, Lead." The two clawed up to forty thousand feet, so that the cold ground behind the targets would give a better contrast for their infrared seekers. He checked the radar display again. There had to be a good thirty of them, and that was a lot. If the Chinese were smart, they'd have two teams, one to engage and distract the American fighters, and the other to blow through after their primary target. He'd try to concentrate on the latter, but if the former group's pilots were competent, that might not be easy.

The warbling tone started in his headphones. The range was now sixty miles. *Why not now?* he asked himself. They were beyond visual range, but not beyond range of his AM-RAAM missiles. Time to shoot 'em in the lips.

"Going Slammer," he called on the radio.

"Roger, Slammer," Skippy replied from half a mile to his right.

"Fox-One!" Winters called, as the first one leapt off the rails. The first Slammer angled left, seeking its designated target, one of the enemy's leading fighters. The closure speed between missile and target would be well over two thousand miles per hour. His eyes dropped to the radar display. His first missile appeared to hit—yes, the target blip expanded and started dropping. Number Eight. Time for another: "Fox-One!"

"Fox-One," his wingman called. Seconds later: "Kill!" Lieutenant Acosta called.

Winters's second missile somehow missed, but there wasn't time for wondering why. He had six more AMRAAMs, and he pickled four of them off in the next minute. By that time, he could see the inbound fighters. They were Shenyang J-8IIs, and they had radars and missiles, too. Winters flipped on his jammer pod, wondering if it would work or not, and wondering if their infrared missiles had all-aspect targeting like his Sidewinders. He'd probably find out soon, but first he fired off two 'winders. "Breaking right, Skippy."

"I'm with you, Bronco," Acosta replied.

Damn, Winters thought, *there are still at least twenty of the fuckers.* He headed down, speeding up as he went and calling for a vector.

"Boar Lead, Eagle, there's twenty-three of them left and they're still coming. Dividing into two elements. You have bandits at your seven o'clock and closing."

Winters reversed his turn and racked his head against the g-forces to spot it. Yeah, a J-8 all right, the Chinese two-engine remake of the MiG-21, trying to get position to launch on him—no, two of the bastards. He reefed the turn in tight, pulling seven gees, and after ten endless seconds, getting his nose on the

targets. His left hand selected Sidewinder and he triggered two off.

The bandits saw the smoke trails of the missiles and broke apart, in opposite directions. One would escape, but both the heat-seekers locked on the guy to the right, and both erased his aircraft from the sky. But where had the other one gone? Winters' eyes swept a sky that was both crowded and empty at the same time. His threat receiver made its unwelcome screeching sound, and now he'd find out if the jammer pod worked or not. Somebody was trying to lock him up with a radar-guided missile. His eyes swept around looking for who that might be, but he couldn't see anyone—

—Smoke trail! A missile, heading in his general direction, but then it veered and exploded with its target—friend or foe, Winters couldn't tell.

"Boar Flight, Lead, check in!" he ordered.

"Two." "Three." A pause before: "Four!"

"Skippy, where are you?"

"Low and right, one mile, Leader. Heads up, there's a bandit at your three and closing."

"Oh, yeah?" Winters yanked his fighter to the right and was rewarded with an immediate warbling tone—but was it friend or foe? His wingman said the latter, but he couldn't tell, until—

Whoever it was, it had launched at him, and so he triggered a Sidewinder in reply, then dove hard for the deck while punching off flares and chaff to distract it. It worked. The missile, a radar seeker, exploded harmlessly half a mile behind him, but his Sidewinder didn't miss. He'd just gotten another kill, but he didn't know how many today, and there wasn't time to think things over.

"Skippy, form up on me, we're going north."

"Roger, Bronco."

Winters had his radar on, and he saw at least eight enemy blips to the north. He went to afterburner to chase, checking his fuel state. Still okay. The Eagle accelerated rapidly, but just to be safe, he popped off a string of chaff and flares in case some unknown Chinese was shooting at him. The threat receiver was screeching continuously now, though not in the distinctive chirping tone that suggested lock-up. He checked his weapons board. Three AIM-9X Sidewinders left. Where the hell had this day gone to?

"Ducky is hit, Ducky is hit!" a voice called. "Aw, shit!"

"Ghost Man here, got the fucker for you, Ducky. Come right, let me give you a damage check."

"One engine gone, other one's running hot," the second element leader reported, in a voice more angry than afraid. He didn't have time for fear yet. Another thirty seconds or so and that would start to take hold, Winters was sure.

"Ducky, you're trailing vapor of some sort, recommend you find a place to

set it down."

"Eagle Two, Bronco, what's happening?"

"Bronco, we have six still inbound, putting Rodeo on it now. You have a bandit at your one o'clock at twenty miles, angels three-one, speed seven-five-zero."

"Roger that, Eagle. I'm on him." Winters came a little right and got another acquisition tone. "Fox-Two!" he called. The smoke trail ran straight for several miles, then corkscrewed to the left as it approached the little dot of gray-blue and ... yes!

"Rodeo Lead," a new voice called. "Fox-One, Fox-One with two!"

"Conan, Fox-One!"

Now things were really getting nervous. Winters knew that he might be in the line of fire for those Slammers. He looked down to see that the light on his IFF was a friendly, constant green. The Identification Friend or Foe was supposed to tell American radars and missiles that he was on their side, but Winters didn't entirely trust computer chips with his life, and so he squinted his eyes to look for smoke trails that weren't going sideways. His radar could see the AWACS now, and it was moving west, taking the first part of evasive action, but its radar was still transmitting, even with Chinese fighters within ... twenty miles? Shit! But then two more blips disappeared, and the remaining ones all had friendly IFF markers.

Winters checked his weapons display. No missiles left. How had all that happened? He was the United States Air Force champ for situational awareness, but he'd just lost track of a combat action. He couldn't remember firing all his missiles.

"Eagle Two, this is Boar Lead. I'm Winchester. Do you need any help?" "Winchester" meant out of weapons. That wasn't entirely true. He still had a full magazine of 20-mm cannon shells, but suddenly all the gees and all the excitement were pulling on him. His arms felt leaden as he eased his Eagle back to level flight.

"Boar Lead, Eagle. Looks like we're okay now, but that was kinda exciting, fella."

"Roger that, Eagle. Same here. Anything left?"

"Negative, Boar. Rodeo Lead got the last two. I think we owe that major a couple of beers."

"I'll hold you to that, Eagle," Rodeo Lead observed.

"Ducky, where are you?" Winters called next.

"Kinda busy, Bronco," a strained voice replied. "I got a hole in my arm, too."

"Bronco, Ghost Man. Ducky's got some holes in the airframe. I'm going to shepherd him back to Suntar. Thirty minutes, about."

"Skippy, where you be?"

"Right behind you, Leader. I think I got four, maybe five, in that furball."

"Any weapons left?"

"Slammer and 'winder, one each. I'll look after you, Colonel," Lieutenant Acosta promised. "How'd you make out?"

"Two, maybe more, not sure," the squadron commander answered. The final tally would come from the AWACS, plus a check of his own videotape. Mainly he wanted to get out of the aircraft and take a good stretch, and he now had time to worry about Major Don Boyd—Ducky—and his aircraft.

So, we want to mess with their heads, Mickey?" Admiral Dave Seaton asked.

"That's the idea," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs told the chief of naval operations.

"Makes sense. Where are their heads at?"

"According to what CIA says, they think we're limiting the scope of operations for political reasons—to protect their sensibilities, like."

"No foolin'?" Seaton asked with no small degree of incredulity.

Moore nodded. "Yep."

"Well, then it's like a guy holding aces and eights, isn't it?" the CNO thought aloud, referring to the last poker hand held by James Butler—"Wild Bill"—Hickok in Deadwood, South Dakota. "We just pick the mission that's sure to flip them out."

"What are you thinking?" Moore asked.

"We can slam their navy pretty hard. Bart Mancuso's a pretty good operator. What are they most afraid of ... ?" Seaton leaned back in his swivel chair. "First thing Bart wants to do is take out their missile submarine. It's at sea now with *Tucson* in trail, about twenty thousand yards back."

"That far?"

"It's plenty close enough. It's got an SSN in close proximity to protect it. So, *Tucson* takes 'em both out—zap." Moore didn't get the terminology, but Seaton was referring to the Chinese ships as "it," meaning an enemy, a target worthy only of destruction. "Beijing might not know it's happened right away, unless they've got an 'I'm Dead' buoy on the sail. Their surface navy's a lot easier. That'll be mainly aircraft targets, some missiles to keep the surface community happy."

"Submarine-launched missiles?"

"Mickey, you don't sink ships by making holes that let air in. You sink ships by making holes that let water in," Seaton explained. "Okay, if this is supposed to be for psychological effect, we hit everything simultaneously. That'll mean staging a lot of assets, and it runs the risk of being overly complicated, having the other guy catch a sniff of what's happening before we

do anything. It's a risk. Do we really want to run it?"

"Ryan's thinking 'big picture.' Robby's helping him."

"Robby's a fighter pilot," Seaton agreed. "He likes to think in terms of movie stuff. Hell, Tom Cruise is taller than he is," Seaton joked.

"Good operational thinker. He was a pretty good J-3," Moore reminded the senior sailor.

"Yeah, I know, it's just that he likes to make dramatic plays. Okay, we can do it, only it complicates things." Seaton looked out the window for a second. "You know what might really flip them out?"

"What's that?" Moore asked. Seaton told him. "But it's not possible for us to do, is it?"

"Maybe not, but we're not dealing with professional military people, are we? They're politicians, Mickey. They're used to dealing with images instead of reality. So, we give them an image."

"Do you have the pieces in place to do that?"

"Let me find out."

"This is crazy, Dave."

"And deploying First Armored to Russia isn't?" the CNO demanded.

Lieutenant Colonel Angelo Giusti was now certain that he'd be fully content never to ride on another train as long as he lived. He didn't know that all of the Russian State Railroad's sleeper cars were being used to transport Russian army forces—they'd never sent any of the cars as far west as Berlin, not to slight the Americans, but because it had simply never occurred to anyone to do so. He took note of the fact that the train veered off to the north, off the main track, thumping over various switches and interlockings as it did so, and then the train came to a halt and started going backwards slowly. They seemed to be in the yard alone. They'd passed numerous westbound trains in the past two hours, all with engines dragging empty flatcars, and the conductor who appeared and disappeared regularly had told them that this was the approximate arrival time scheduled, but he hadn't really believed it, on the premise that a railroad with such uncomfortable seats probably didn't adhere to decent schedules either. But here they were, and the off-loading ramps were obvious for what they were.

"People, I think we're here," the commander of the Quarter Horse told his staff.

"Praise Jesus," one of them observed. A few seconds later, the train jolted to a stop, and they were able to walk out onto the concrete platform, which, they saw, stretched a good thousand meters to the east. Inside of five minutes, the soldiers of Headquarters Troop were out and walking to their vehicles, stretching and grousing along the way.

“Hey, Angie,” called a familiar voice.

Giusti looked to see Colonel Welch and walked up to him with a salute.

“What’s happening?” Giusti asked.

“It’s a mess out east of here, but there is good news.”

“What might that be?”

“There’s plenty of fuel stashed for us. I’ve been flying security detachments out, and Ivan says he’s got fuel depots that’re the size of fuckin’ supertankers. So, we’re not going to run out of gas.”

“That’s good to know. What about my choppers?” Welch just pointed. There was an OH-58D Kiowa Warrior sitting not three hundred yards away. “Thank God for that. What’s the bad news?”

“The PLA has four complete Group-A armies in Siberia and heading north. There hasn’t been any heavy contact yet because Ivan’s refusing combat at the moment, until they can get something big enough to meet them with. They have one motor-rifle division in theater and four more heading up there. The last of ’em just cleared this railyard an hour and a half ago.”

“That’s, what? Sixteen heavy divisions in the invasion force?”

Welch nodded. “Thereabouts.”

“What’s my mission?”

“Assemble your squadron and head southeast. The idea is First Armored will cut off the bottom of the break-in and interrupt their supply line. Russian blocking force will then try to stop them about two hundred miles northeast of here.”

“Can they do it?” Four Russian divisions against sixteen Chinese didn’t seem especially favorable odds.

“Not sure,” Welch admitted. “Your job is to get out and establish lead security for the division. Advance to and secure the first big fuel depot. We’ll play it from there.”

“Support?”

“At the moment, the Air Force is mainly doing fighter work. No deep strikes yet because they don’t have enough bombs to sustain any kind of campaign.”

“What about resupply?”

“We have two basic loads for all the tracks. That’ll have to do for a while. At least we have four units of fire for the artillery.” That meant four days’ worth of shells—based on what the Army computed that a day of combat required. The supply weenies who did those calculations weren’t stingy on shells to shoot at the other guy. And in the entire Persian Gulf war, not a single tank had completely shot out its first basic load of shells, they both knew. But that was a different war. No two were ever the same, and they only got worse.

Giusti turned when he heard the first engine start up. It was an M3A2 Bradley Scout track, and the sergeant in the commander's hatch looked happy to be moving. A Russian officer took over as traffic cop, waving the Brad forward, then right toward the assembly area. The next train backed up to the next ramp over. That would be "A" or Avenger Troop, with the first of Quarter Horse's really heavy equipment, nine of the M1A2 main battle tanks.

"How long before everything's here?" Giusti asked.

"Ninety minutes, they told me," Welch answered.

"We'll see."

What's this?" a captain asked the screen in front of him. The E-3B Sentry designated Eagle Two was back on the ground at Zhigansk. Its crew was more than a little shaken. Being approached by real fighters with real blood in their eyes was qualitatively different from exercises and postmission analysis back stateside. The tapes of the engagement had been handed off to the wing intelligence staff, who viewed the battle with some detachment, but they could see that the PLAAF had thrown a full regiment of first-line fighters at the AWACS, and more than that, done it on a one-way mission. They'd come in on burner, and that would have denied them a trip back to their base. So, they'd been willing to trade over thirty fighters for a single E-3B. But there was more to the mission than that, the captain saw.

"Look here," he told his colonel. "Three, no, four reconnaissance birds went northwest." He ran the tape forward and backward. "We didn't touch any of them. Hell, they didn't even see them."

"Well, I'm not going to fault the Sentry crew for that, Captain."

"Not saying that, sir. But John Chinaman just got some pictures of Chita, and also of these Russian units moving north. The cat's out of the bag, Colonel."

"We've got to start thinking about some counter-air missions on these airfields."

"We have bombs to do it?"

"Not sure, but I'm taking this to General Wallace. What's the score on the air fight?"

"Colonel Winters got four for sure and two probables. Damn, that guy's really cleaning up. But it was the -16 guys saved the AWACS. These two J-8s got pretty damned close before Rodeo splashed them."

"We'll put some more coverage on the E-3s from now on," the colonel observed.

"Not a bad idea, sir."

Yes?" General Peng said, when his intelligence officer came up to him.

"Aerial reconnaissance reports large mechanized formations one hundred fifty kilometers west of us, moving north and northeast."

"Strength?" the general asked.

"Not sure. Analysis of the photos is not complete, but certainly regimental strength, maybe more."

"Where, exactly?"

"Here, Comrade General." The intelligence officer unfolded a map and pointed. "They were spotted here, here, and from here to here. The pilot said large numbers of tanks and tracked vehicles."

"Did they shoot at him?"

"No, he said there was no fire at all."

"So, they are rushing to where they are going ... racing to get to our flank, or to get ahead of us ... ?" Peng considered this, looking down at the map. "Yes, that's what I would expect. Any reports from our front?"

"Comrade General, our reconnaissance screen reports that they have seen the tracks of vehicles, but no visual sightings of the enemy at all. They have taken no fire, and seen nothing but civilians."

Quickly," Aleksandrov urged.

How the driver and his assistant had gotten the ZIL- 157 to this place was a mystery whose solution didn't interest the captain. That it had gotten here was enough. His lead BRM at that moment had been Sergeant Grechko's, and he'd filled up his tanks, and then radioed to the rest of the company, which for the first time broke visual contact with the advancing Chinese and raced north to top off as well. It was dangerous and against doctrine to leave the Chinese unseen, but Aleksandrov couldn't guarantee that they'd all have a chance to refuel otherwise. Then Sergeant Buikov had a question.

"When do *they* refuel, Comrade Captain? We haven't seen them do it, have we?"

That made his captain stop and think. "Why, no, we haven't. Their tanks must be as empty as ours."

"They had extra fuel drums the first day, remember? They dropped them off sometime yesterday."

"Yes, so maybe they have one more day of fuel, maybe only half a day, but then someone must refill them—but who will that be, and how ... ?" the officer wondered. He turned to look. The fuel came out of the portable pump at about forty liters or ten gallons per minute. Grechko had taken his BRM south to reestablish contact with the Chinese. They were still sitting still, between frog-leap bounds, probably half an hour away if they stuck with their

drill, from which they hadn't once deviated. And people had once said that the Red Army was inflexible ...

"There, that's it," Aleksandrov's driver said. He handed the hose back and capped the tank.

"You," the captain told the driver of the fuel truck. "Go east."

"To where?" the man asked. "There's nothing there."

That stopped his thinking for a few seconds. There had been a sawmill here once, and you could see the wide swaths of saplings left over from when whoever had worked here had cut trees for lumber. It was the closest thing to open ground they'd seen in over a day.

"I came from the west. I can get back there now, with the truck lighter, and it's only six kilometers to the old logging road."

"Very well, but do it quickly, Corporal. If they see you, they'll blast you."

"Farewell then, Comrade Captain." The corporal got back into the truck, started up, and turned to the north to loop around.

"I hope someone gives him a drink tonight. He's earned it," Buikov said. There was much more to any army than the shooters.

"Grechko, where are you?" Aleksandrov called over his radio.

"Four kilometers south of you. They're still dismounted, Captain. Their officer seems to be talking on the radio."

"Very well. You know what to do when they remount." The captain set the radio microphone down and leaned against his track. This business was getting very old. Buikov lit a smoke and stretched.

"Why can't we just kill a *few* of them, Comrade Captain? Would it not be worth it to get *some* sleep?"

"How many times must I tell you what our fucking mission is, Sergeant!" Aleksandrov nearly screamed at his sergeant.

"Yes, Captain," Buikov responded meekly.

CHAPTER 56

March to Danger

Lieutenant Colonel Giusti started off in his personal HMMWV, the new incarnation of the venerable jeep. *Using a Bradley would have been more comfortable, even more sensible, but overly dramatic,* he thought, *and there wouldn't be any contact anytime soon.* Besides, the right front seat in this vehicle was better for his back after the endless train ride. In any case, he was following a Russian UAZ-469, which looked like a Russian interpretation of an American SUV, and whose driver knew the way. The Kiowa Warrior helicopter he'd seen at the railyard was up and flying, scouting ahead and reporting back that there was nothing there but mostly empty road, except for some civilian traffic being kept out of the way by Russian MPs. Right behind Giusti's command vehicle was a Bradley flying the red-and-white guidon of the First of the Fourth Cavalry. The regiment had, for American arms, a long and distinguished history—its combat action had begun on July 30, 1857, against the Cheyenne Indians at Solomon River—and this campaign would add yet another battle streamer to the regimental standard ... and Giusti hoped he'd live long enough to attach it himself. The land here reminded him of Montana, rolling foothills with pine trees in abundance. The views were decently long, just what a mechanized trooper liked, because it meant you could engage an enemy at long range. American soldiers especially preferred that, because they had weapons that could reach farther than those of most other armies.

"DARKHORSE SIX to SABRE SIX, over," the radio crackled.

"SABRE SIX," LTC Giusti responded.

"SABRE, I'm now at checkpoint Denver. The way continues to be clear. Negative traffic, negative enemy indications, over. Proceeding east to checkpoint Wichita."

"Roger that, thank you, out." Giusti checked the map to be sure he knew exactly where the chopper was.

So, twenty miles ahead there was still nothing to be concerned about, at least according to the captain flying his lead helicopter. *Where would it start?* Giusti wondered. On the whole, he would have preferred to stand still and sit in on the divisional commander's conference, just to find out what the hell was happening, but as cavalry-screen commander, it was his job to go out forward and find the enemy, then report back to IRON Six, the divisional commander. He really didn't have much of a mission yet, aside from driving up to the Russian fuel depot, refueling his vehicles there, and setting up security, then pulling out and continuing his advance as the leading elements

of the First Armored's heavy forces got there. It was his job, in short, to be the ham in the sandwich, as one of his troop commanders liked to joke. But this ham could bite back. Under his command were three troops of armored cavalry, each with nine M1A2 Abrams main-battle tanks and thirteen M3A2 Bradley cavalry scout vehicles, plus a FISTV track for forward observers to call in artillery support—somewhere behind him, the First Armored's artillery would be off-loading soon from its train, he hoped. His most valuable assets were D and E troops, each with eight OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopters, able both to scout ahead and to shoot with Hellfire and Stinger missiles. In short, his squadron could look after itself, within reasonable limits.

As they got closer, his troopers would become more cautious and circumspect, because good as they were, they were neither invincible nor immortal. America had fought against China only once, in Korea nearly sixty years earlier, and the experience had been satisfactory to neither side. For America, the initial Chinese attack had been unexpected and massive, forcing an ignominious retreat from the Yalu River. But for China, once America had gotten its act together, the experience had cost a million lives, because firepower was always the answer to raw numbers, and America's lasting lesson from its own Civil War was that it was better to expend *things* than to expend *people.* The American way of war was not shared by everyone, and in truth it was tailored to American material prosperity as much as to American reverence for human life, but it was the American way, and that was the way its warriors were schooled.

I think it's about time to roll them back a little," General Wallace observed over the satellite link to Washington.

"What do you propose?" Mickey Moore asked.

"For starters, I want to send my F-16CGs after their radar sites. I'm tired of having them use radar to direct their fighters against my aircraft. Next, I want to start going after their logistical choke points. In twelve hours, the way things are going, I'll have enough ordnance to start doing some offensive warfare here. And it's about time for us to start, General," Wallace said.

"Gus, I have to clear that with the President," the Chairman told the Air Force commander in Siberia.

"Okay, fine, but tell him we damned near lost an AWACS yesterday—with a crew of thirty or so—and I'm not in a mood to write that many letters. We've been lucky so far, and an AWACS is a hard kill. Hell, it cost them a full regiment of fighters to fail in that mission. But enough's enough. I want to go after their radar sites, and I want to do some offensive counter-air."

"Gus, the thinking here is that we want to commence offensive operations in a systematic way for maximum psychological effect. That means more than just knocking some antennas down."

"General, I don't know what it looks like over there, but right here it's

getting a little exciting. Their army is advancing rapidly. Pretty soon our Russian friends are going to have to make their stand. It'll be a whole lot easier if the enemy is short on gas and bullets."

"We know that. We're trying to figure a way to shake up their political leadership."

"It isn't politicians coming north trying to kill us, General. It's soldiers and airmen. We have to start crippling them before they ruin our whole damned day."

"I understand that, Gus. I will present your position to the President," the Chairman promised.

"Do that, will ya?" Wallace killed the transmission, wondering what the hell the lotus-eaters in Washington were thinking about, assuming they were thinking at all. He had a plan, and he thought it was a pretty good systematic one. His Dark Star drones had given him all the tactical intelligence he needed. He knew what targets to hit, and he had enough ordnance to do the hitting, or at least to start doing it.

If they let me, Wallace thought.

Well, it wasn't a complete waste," Marshal Luo said. "We got some pictures of what the Russians are doing."

"And what's that?" Zhang asked.

"They're moving one or two—probably two—divisions northeast from their rail assembly point at Chita. We have good aerial pictures of them."

"And still nothing in front of our forces?"

Luo shook his head. "Our reconnaissance people haven't seen anything more than tracks in the ground. I have to assume there are Russians in those woods somewhere, doing reconnaissance of their own, but if so, they're light forces who're working very hard to keep out of the way. We know they've called up some reserves, but they haven't shown up either. Maybe their reservists didn't report. Morale in Russia is supposed to be very low, Tan tells us, and that's all we've really seen. The men we captured are very disheartened because of their lack of support, and they didn't fight all that well. Except for the American airplanes, this war is going extremely well."

"And they haven't attacked our territory yet?" Zhang wanted to be clear on that.

Another shake of the head. "No, and I can't claim that they're afraid to do it. Their fighter aircraft are excellent, but to the best of our knowledge they haven't even attempted a photo-reconnaissance mission. Maybe they just depend on satellites now. Certainly those are supposed to be excellent sources of information for them."

"And the gold mine?"

“We’ll be there in thirty-six hours. And at that point we can make use of the roads their own engineers have been building to exploit the mineral finds. From the gold mine to the oil fields—five to seven days, depending on how well we can run supplies up.”

“This is amazing, Luo,” Zhang observed. “Better than my fondest hopes.”

“I almost wish the Russians would stand and fight somewhere, so that we could have a battle and be done with it. As it is, my forces are stringing out somewhat, but only because the lead elements are racing forward so well. I’ve thought about slowing them down to maintain unit integrity, but—”

“But speed works for us, doesn’t it?” Zhang observed.

“Yes, it would seem to,” the Defense Minister agreed. “But one prefers to keep units tightly grouped in case there is some contact. However, if the enemy is running, one doesn’t want to give him pause to regroup. So, I’m giving General Peng and his divisions free rein.”

“What forces are you facing?”

“We’re not sure. Perhaps a regiment or so could be ahead of us, but we see no evidence of it, and two more regiments are trying to race ahead of us, or attack our flank, but we have flank security out to the west, and they’ve seen nothing.”

Bondarenko hoped that someday he’d meet the team that had developed this American Dark Star drone. Never in history had a commander possessed such knowledge as this, and without it he would have been forced to commit his slender forces to battle just to ascertain what stood against him. Not now. He probably had a better feel for the location of the advancing Chinese than their own commander did.

Better yet, the leading regiment of the 201st Motor Rifle Division was only a few kilometers away, and the leading formation was the division’s steel fist, its independent tank regiment of ninety-five T-80U main-battle tanks.

The 265th was ready for the reinforcement, and its commander, Yuriy Sinyavskiy, proclaimed that he was tired of running away. A career professional soldier and mechanized infantryman, Sinyavskiy was a profane, cigar-chomping man of forty-six years, now leaning over a map table in Bondarenko’s headquarters.

“This, this is my ground, Gennady Iosifovich,” he said, stabbing at the point with his finger. It was just five kilometers north of the Gogol Gold Field, a line of ridges twenty kilometers across, facing open ground the Chinese would have to cross. “And put the Two-Oh-First’s tanks just here on my right. When we stop their advance guard, they can blow in from the west and roll them up.”

“Reconnaissance shows their leading division is strung out somewhat,” Bondarenko told him.

It was a mistake made by every army in the world. The sharpest teeth of any field force are its artillery, but even self-propelled artillery, mounted on tracks for cross-country mobility, can't seem to keep up with the mechanized forces it is supposed to support. It was a lesson that had even surprised the Americans in the Persian Gulf, when they'd found their artillery could keep up with the leading tank echelons only with strenuous effort, and across flat ground. The People's Liberation Army had tracked artillery, but a lot of it was still the towed variety, and was being pulled behind trucks that could not travel cross-country as well as the tracked kind.

General Diggs observed the discussion, which his rudimentary Russian could not quite keep up with, and Sinyavskiy spoke no English, which really slowed things down.

"You still have a lot of combat power to stop, Yuriy Andreyevich," Diggs pointed out, waiting for the translation to get across.

"If we cannot stop them completely, at least we can give them a bloody nose" was the belated reply.

"Stay mobile," Diggs advised. "If I were this General Peng, I'd maneuver east—the ground is better suited for it—and try to wrap you up from your left."

"We will see how maneuver-minded they are," Bondarenko said for his subordinate. "So far all they have done is drive straight forward, and I think they are becoming complacent. See how they are stretched out, Marion. Their units are too far separated to provide mutual support. They are in a pursuit phase of warfare, and that makes them disorganized, *and* they have little air support to warn them of what lies ahead. I think Yuriy is right: This is a good place for a stand."

"I agree it's good ground, Gennady, just don't marry the place, okay?" Diggs warned.

Bondarenko translated that for his subordinate, who answered back in machine-gun Russian around his cigar.

"Yuriy says it is a place for a fucking, not a wedding. When will you join your command, Marion?"

"My chopper's on the way in now, buddy. My cavalry screen is at the first fuel depot, with First Brigade right behind. We should be in contact in a day and a half or so."

They'd already discussed Diggs's plan of attack. First Armored would assemble northwest of Belogorsk, fueling at the last big Russian depot, then leap out in the darkness for the Chinese bridgehead. Intelligence said that the PLA's 65th Type-B Group Army was there now, digging in to protect the left shoulder of their break-in. Not a mechanized force, it was still a lot for a single division to chew on. If the Chinese plan of attack had a weakness, it was that they'd bet all their mechanized forces on the drive forward. The forces left behind to secure the breakthrough were at best motorized—carried by wheeled vehicles instead of tracked ones—and at worst leg infantry, who had

to walk where they went. That made them slow and vulnerable to men who sat down behind steel as they went to battle in their tracked vehicles.

But there were a hell of a lot of them, Diggs reminded himself.

Before he could leave, General Sinyavskiy reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a flask. “A drink for luck,” he said in his only words of broken English.

“Hell, why not?” Diggs tossed it off. It was good stuff, actually. “When this is all over, we will drink again,” he promised.

“Da,” the general replied. “Good luck, Diggs.”

“Marion,” Bondarenko said. “Be careful, comrade.”

“You, too, Gennady. You got enough medals, buddy. No sense getting your ass shot off trying to win another.”

“Generals are supposed to die in bed,” Bondarenko agreed on the way to the door.

Diggs trotted out to the UH-60. Colonel Boyle was flying this one. Diggs donned the crash helmet, wishing they’d come up with another name for the damned thing, and settled in the jump seat behind the pilots.

“How we doing, sir?” Boyle asked, letting the lieutenant take the chopper back off.

“Well, we have a plan, Dick. Question is, will it work?”

“Do I get let in on it?”

“Your Apaches are going to be busy.”

“There’s a surprise,” Boyle observed.

“How are your people?”

“Ready” was the one-word reply. “What are we calling this?”

“CHOPSTICKS.” Diggs then heard a laugh over the intercom wire.

“I love it.”

Okay, Mickey,” Robby Jackson said. ”I understand Gus’s position. But we have a big picture here to think about.”

They were in the Situation Room looking at the Chairman on TV from the Pentagon room known as The Tank. It was hard to hear what he was muttering that way, but the way he looked down was a sufficient indication of his feelings about Robby’s remark.

“General,” Ryan said, “the idea here is to rattle the cage of their political leadership. Best way to do that is to go after them in more places than one, overload ’em.”

“Sir, I agree with that idea, but General Wallace has his point, too. Taking

down their radar fence will degrade their ability to use their fighters against us, and they still have a formidable fighter force, even though we've handled them pretty rough so far."

"Mickey, if you handle a girl this way down in Mississippi, it's called rape," the Vice President observed. "Their fighter pilots look at their aircraft now and they see caskets, for Christ's sake. Their confidence has got to be gone, and that's all a fighter jock has to hold on to. Trust me on this one, will ya?"

"But Gus—"

"But Gus is too worried about his force. Okay, fine, let him send some Charlie-Golfs against their picket fence, but mainly we want those birds armed with Smart Pigs to go after their ground forces. The fighter force can look after itself."

For the first time, General Mickey Moore regretted Ryan's choice of Vice President. Robby was thinking like a politician rather than an operational commander—and that came as something of a surprise. He was seemingly less worried about the safety of his forces than of ...

... *than of what the overall objective was,* Moore corrected himself. And *that* was not a completely bad way to think, was it? Jackson had been a pretty good J-3 not so long before, hadn't he?

American commanders no longer thought of their men as expendable assets. That was not a bad thing at all, but sometimes you had to put forces in harm's way, and when you did that, some of them did not come home. And that was what they were paid for, whether you liked it or not. Robby Jackson had been a Navy fighter pilot, and he hadn't forgotten the warrior ethos, despite his new job and pay grade.

"Sir," Moore said, "what orders do I give General Wallace?"

Cecil B. goddamned DeMille," Mancuso observed crossly.

"Ever wanted to part the Red Sea?" General Lahr asked.

"I ain't God, Mike," CINCPAC said next.

"Well, it *is* elegant, and we *do* have most of the pieces in place," his J-2 pointed out.

"This is a political operation. What the hell are we, a goddamned focus group?"

"Sir, you going to continue to rant, or are we going to get to work on this?"

Mancuso wished for a *lupara* to blast a hole in the wall, or Mike Lahr's chest, but he *was* a uniformed officer, and he *did* now have orders from his Commander-in-Chief.

"All right. I just don't like to have other people design my operations."

"And you know the guy."

"Mike, once upon a time, back when I had three stripes and driving a submarine was all I had to worry about, Ryan and I helped steal a whole Russian submarine, yeah—and if you repeat that to anyone, I'll have one of my Marines shoot your ass. Sink some of their ships, yeah, splash a few of their airplanes, sure, but 'trailing our coat' in sight of land? Jesus."

"It'll shake them up some."

"If they don't sink some of my ships in the attempt."

Hey, Tony," the voice on the phone said. It took Bretano a second to recognize it.

"Where are you now, Al?" the Secretary of Defense asked.

"Norfolk. Didn't you know? I'm on USS *Gettysburg* upgrading their SAMs. It was your idea, wasn't it?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose it was," Tony Bretano agreed, thinking back.

"You must have seen this Chinese thing coming a long way off, man."

"As a matter of fact, we—" The SecDef paused for a second. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if the ChiComms loft an ICBM at us, this Aegis system does give us something to fall back on, if the computer simulations are right. They ought to be. I wrote most of the software," Gregory went on.

Secretary Bretano didn't want to admit that he hadn't really thought about that eventuality. Thinking things through was one of the things he was paid for, after all. "How ready are you?"

"The electronics stuff is okay, but we don't have any SAMs aboard. They're stashed at some depot or something, up on the York River, I think they said. When they load them aboard, I can upgrade the software on the seeker heads. The only missiles aboard, the ones I've been playing with, they're blue ones, exercise missiles, not shooters, I just found out. You know, the Navy's a little weird. The ship's in a floating dry dock. They're going to lower us back in the water in a few hours." He couldn't see his former boss's face at the moment. If he could, he would have recognized the *oh, shit* expression on his Italian face.

"So, you're confident in your systems?"

"A full-up test would be nice, but if we can loft three or four SAMs at the inbound, yeah, I think it oughta work."

"Okay, thanks, Al."

"So, how's this war going? All I see on TV is how the Air Force is kicking some ass."

"They are, the TV's got that right, but the rest—can't talk about it over the phone. Al, let me get back to you, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

In his office, Bretano switched buttons. "Ask Admiral Seaton to come in to see me." That didn't take very long.

"You rang, Mr. Secretary," the CNO said when he came in.

"Admiral, there's a former employee of mine from TRW in Norfolk right now. I set him up to look at upgrading the Aegis missile system to engage ballistic targets."

"I heard a little about that. How's his project going?" Dave Seaton asked.

"He says he's ready for a full-up test. But, Admiral, what if the Chinese launch one of their CSS-4s at us?"

"It wouldn't be good," Seaton replied.

"Then how about we take our Aegis ships and put them close to the likely targets?"

"Well, sir, the system's not certified for ballistic targets yet, and we haven't really run a test, and—"

"Is it better than nothing?" the SecDef asked, cutting him off.

"A little, I suppose."

"Then let's make that happen, and make it happen right now."

Seaton straightened up. "Aye aye, sir."

"Gettysburg first. Have her load up what missiles she needs, and bring her right here," Bretano ordered.

"I'll call SACLANT right now."

It was the strangest damned thing, Gregory thought. This ship—not an especially big ship, smaller than the one he and Candi had taken a cruise on the previous winter, but still an oceangoing *ship*—was in an elevator. That's what a floating dry dock was. They were flooding it now, to make it go down, back into the water to see if the new propeller worked. Sailors who worked on the dry dock were watching from their perches on—whatever the hell you called the walls of the damned thing.

"Weird, ain't it, sir?"

Gregory smelled the smoke. It had to be Senior Chief Leek. He turned. It was.

"Never seen this sort of thing before."

"Nobody does real often, 'cept'n those guys over there who operate this thing. Did you take the chance to walk under the ship?"

"Walk *under* ten thousand tons of metal?" Gregory responded. "I don't think so."

“You was a soldier, wasn’t you?”

“Told you, didn’t I? West Point, jump school, ranger school, back when I was young and foolish.”

“Well, Doc, it’s no big deal. Kinda interesting to see how she’s put together, ‘specially the sonar dome up forward. If I wasn’t a radar guy, I probably woulda been a sonar guy, ’cept there’s nothing for them to do anymore.”

Gregory looked down. Water was creeping across the gray metal floor—*deck?* he wondered—of the dry dock.

“Attention on deck!” a voice called. Sailors turned and saluted, including Chief Leek.

It was Captain Bob Blandy, *Gettysburg’s* CO. Gregory had met him only once, and then just to say hello.

“Dr. Gregory.”

“Captain.” They shook hands.

“How’s your project been going?”

“Well, the simulations look good. I’d like to try it against a live target.”

“You got sent to us by the SecDef?”

“Not exactly, but he called me in from California to look at the technical aspects of the problem. I worked for him when he was head of TRW.”

“You’re an SDI guy, right?”

“That and SAMs, yes, sir. Other things. I’m one of the world’s experts on adaptive optics, from my SDI days.”

“What’s that?” Captain Blandy asked.

“The rubber mirror, we called it. You use computer-controlled actuators to warp the mirror to compensate for atmospheric distortions. The idea was to use that to focus the energy beam from a free-electron laser. But it didn’t work out. The rubber mirror worked just fine, but for some reason we never figured out, the damned lasers didn’t scale up the way we hoped they would. Didn’t come up to the power requirements to smoke a missile body.” Gregory looked down in the dry dock again. It certainly took its time, but they probably didn’t want to drop anything this valuable. “I wasn’t directly involved in that, but I kibitzed some. It turned out to be a monster of a technical problem. We just kept bashing our heads against the wall until we got tired of the squishy sound.”

“I know mechanical engineering, some electrical, but not the high-energy stuff. So, what do you think of our Aegis system?”

“I love the radar. Just like the Cobra Dane the Air Force has up at Shemya in the Aleutians. A little more advanced, even. You could probably bounce a signal off the moon if you wanted to.”

“That’s a little out of our range gate,” Blandy observed. “Chief Leek here been taking good care of you?”

“When he leaves the Navy, we might have a place for him at TRW. We’re part of the ongoing SAM project.”

“And Lieutenant Olson, too?” the skipper asked.

“He’s a very bright young officer, Captain. I can think of a lot of companies who might want him.” If Gregory had a fault, it was being too truthful.

“I ought to say something to discourage you from that, but—”

“Cap’n!” A sailor came up. “Flash-traffic from SACLANT, sir.” He handed over a clipboard. Captain Blandy signed the acknowledgment sheet and took the message. His eyes focused very closely.

“Do you know if the SecDef knows what you’re up to?”

“Yes, Captain, he does. I just spoke to Tony a few minutes ago.”

“What the hell did you tell him?”

Gregory shrugged. “Not much, just that the project was coming along nicely.”

“Uh-huh. Chief Leek, how’s your hardware?”

“Everything’s a hundred percent on line, Cap’n. We got a job, sir?” the senior chief asked.

“Looks like it. Dr. Gregory, if you will excuse me, I have to see my officers. Chief, we’re going to be getting under way soon. If any of your troops are on the beach, call ’em back. Spread the word.”

“Aye aye, sir.” He saluted as Captain Blandy hustled back forward. “What’s that all about?”

“Beats me, Chief.”

“What do I do? Getting under way?” Gregory asked.

“Got your toothbrush? If not, you can buy one in the ship’s store. Excuse me, Doc, I have to do a quick muster.” Leek tossed his cigarette over the side and went the same way that the captain had.

And there was precisely nothing for Gregory to do. There was no way for him to leave the ship, except to jump down into the flooding floating dry dock, and that didn’t look like a viable option. So, he headed back into the superstructure and found the ship’s store open. There he bought a toothbrush.

Bondarenko spent the next three hours with Major General Sinyavskiy, going over approach routes and fire plans.

“They have fire-finder radar, Yuriy, and their counter-battery rockets have a long reach.”

“Can we expect any help from the Americans?”

“I’m working on that. We have superb reconnaissance information from

their movie-star drones."

"I need the location of their artillery. If we can take that away from them, it makes my job much easier."

"Tolkunov!" the theater commander yelled. It was loud enough that his intelligence coordinator came running.

"Yes, Comrade General!"

"Vladimir Konstantinovich, we'll be making our stand here," Bondarenko said, pointing to a red line on the map. "I want minute-to-minute information of the approaching Chinese formations—especially their artillery."

"I can do that. Give me ten minutes." And the G-2 disappeared back out to where the Dark Star terminal was. Then his boss thought about it.

"Come on, Yuriy, you have to see this."

"General," Major Tucker said by way of greeting. Then he saw a second one. "General," he said again.

"This is General Sinyavskiy. He commands Two-Six-Five. Would you please show him the advancing Chinese?" It wasn't a question or a request, just phrased politely because Tucker was a foreigner.

"Okay, it's right here, sir, we've got it all on videotape. Their leading reconnaissance elements are ... here, and their leading main-force units are right here."

"Fuck," Sinyavskiy observed in Russian. "Is this magic?"

"No, this is—" Bondarenko switched languages. "Which unit is this, Major?"

"Grace Kelly again, sir. *To Catch a Thief* with Cary Grant, Hitchcock movie that one was. The sun'll be down in another hour or so and we'll be getting it all on the thermal-imaging systems. Anyway, here's their leading battalion, all look like their Type-90 tanks. They're keeping good formation discipline, and they just refueled about an hour ago, so, figure they're good for another two hundred or so kilometers before they stop again."

"Their artillery?"

"Lagging behind, sir, except for this tracked unit here." Tucker played with the mouse some and brought up another picture.

"Gennady Iosifovich, how can we fail with such information?" the division commander asked.

"Yuriy, remember when we thought about attacking the Americans?"

"Madness. The Chinks can't see this drone?" Sinyavskiy asked, somewhat incredulously.

"It's stealthy, as they call it, invisible on radar."

"Nichevo."

"Sir, I have a direct line to our headquarters at Zhigansk. If you guys are going to make a stand, what do you want from us?' Tucker asked. "I can

forward your request to General Wallace."

"I have thirty Su-25 attack bombers and also fifty Su-24 fighter bombers standing by, plus two hundred Mi-24 helicopters." Getting the last in theater had been agonizingly slow, but finally they were here, and they were the Ace of Diamonds Bondarenko had facedown on the card table. He hadn't let so much as one approach the area of operations yet, but they were two hundred kilometers away, fueled and armed, their flight crews flying to practice their airmanship and shooting live weapons as rehearsal—for some, the first live weapons they'd ever shot.

"That's going to be a surprise for good old Joe," Tucker observed with a whistle. "Where'd you hide them, sir? Hell, General, *I* didn't know they were around."

"There are a few secure places. We want to give our guests a proper greeting when the time is right," Gennady Iosifovich told the young American officer.

"So, what do you want us to do, sir?"

"Take down their logistics. Show me this Smart Pig you've been talking to Colonel Tolkunov about."

"That we can probably do, sir," Tucker said. "Let me get on the phone to General Wallace."

So, they're turning me loose?" Wallace asked.

"As soon as contact is imminent between Russian and Chinese ground forces." Mickey Moore then gave him his targets. "It's most of the things you wanted to hit, Gus."

"I suppose," the Air Force commander allowed, somewhat grudgingly. "And if the Russians ask for help?"

"Give it to them, within reason."

"Right."

LTC Giusti, SABRE SIX, got off the helicopter at the Number Two fueling point and walked toward General Diggs.

"They weren't kidding," Colonel Masterman was saying. "This *is* a fuckin' lake." One and a quarter *billion* liters translated to more than three hundred million gallons, or nearly a million tons of fuel, about the carrying capacity of four supertankers, all of Number Two Diesel, or close enough that the fuel injectors on his tanks and Bradleys wouldn't notice the difference. The manager of the site, a civilian, had said that the fuel had been there for nearly forty years, since Khrushchev had had a falling-out with Chairman Mao, and

the possibility of war with the *other* communist country had turned from an impossibility into a perceived likelihood. Either it was remarkable prescience or paranoid wish fulfillment, but in either case it worked to the benefit of First Armored Division.

The off-loading facilities could have been better, but the Soviets evidently hadn't had much experience with building gas stations. It was more efficient to pump the fuel into the division's fuel bowsers, which then motored off to fill the tanks and tracks four or six at a time.

"Okay, Mitch, what do we have on the enemy?" General Diggs asked his intelligence officer.

"Sir, we've got a Dark Star tasked directly to us now, and she'll be up for another nine hours. We're up against a leg-infantry division. They're forty kilometers that way, mainly sitting along this line of hills. There's a regiment of ChiComm tanks supporting them."

"Artillery?"

"Some light and medium, all of it towed, setting up now, with fire-finder radars we need to worry about," Colonel Turner warned. "I've asked General Wallace to task some F-16s with HARMs to us. They can tune the seekers on those to the millimeter-band the fire-finders use."

"Make that happen," Diggs ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"Duke, how long to contact?" the general asked his operations officer.

"If we move on schedule, we'll be in their neighborhood about zero-two-hundred."

"Okay, let's get the brigade commanders briefed in. We party just after midnight," Diggs told his staff, not even regretting his choice of words. He was a soldier about to go into combat, and with that came a different and not entirely pleasant way of thinking.

CHAPTER 57

Hyperwar

It had been rather a tedious couple of days for USS *Tucson.* She'd been camped out on *406* for sixteen days, and was holding station seventeen thousand yards —eight and a half nautical miles—astern of the Chinese boomer, with a nuclear-powered fast-attack camped out just to the south of it at the moment. The SSN, at least, supposedly had a name, *Hai Long,* the intelligence weenies said it was. But to *Tucson*'s sonarman, *406* was Sierra-Eleven, and *Hai Long* was Sierra-Twelve, and so they were known to the fire-control tracking party.

Tracking both targets was not demanding. Though both had nuclear power plants, the reactor systems were noisy, especially the feed pumps that ran cooling water through the nuclear pile. That, plus the sixty-hertz generators, made for two pairs of bright lines on the waterfall sonar display, and tracking both was about as difficult as watching two blind men in an empty shopping mall parking lot at high noon on a cloudless day. But it was more interesting than tracking whales in the North Pacific, which some of PACFLT's boats had been tasked to do of late, to keep the tree-huggers happy.

Things had gotten a little more interesting lately. *Tucson* ran to periscope/ antenna depth twice a day, and the crew had learned, much to everyone's surprise, that Chinese and American armed forces were trading shots in Siberia, and *that* meant, the crew figured, that *406* might have to be made to disappear, and *that* was a mission, and while it might not exactly be fun, it was what they were paid to do, which made it a worthwhile activity.

406 had submarine-launched ballistic missiles aboard, twelve Ju Lang-1 CSS-N-3s, each with a single megaton-range warhead. The name meant "Great Wave," so the intelligence book said. It also said they had a range of less than three thousand kilometers, which was less than half the range needed to strike California, though it could hit Guam, which was American territory. That didn't really matter. What did matter was that *406* and *Hai Long* were ships of war belonging to a nation with which the United States was now trading shots.

The VLF radio fed off an antenna trailed off the after corner of *Tucson*'s sail, and it received transmissions from a monstrous, mainly underground transmitter located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The tree-huggers complained that the energy emanating from this radio confused migrating geese in the fall, but no hunters had yet complained about smaller bags of waterfowl, and so the radio remained in service. Built to send messages to American missile submarines, it still transmitted to the fast-attacks that

remained in active service. When a transmission was received, a bell went off in the submarine's communications room, located aft of the attack center, on the starboard side.

The bell *dinged.* The sailor on watch called his officer, a lieutenant, j.g., who in turn called the captain, who took the submarine back up to antenna depth. Once there, he elevated the communications laser to track in on the Navy's own communications satellite, known as SSIX, the Submarine Satellite Information Exchange, telling it that he was ready for a transmission. The reply action message came over a directional S-band radio for the higher bandwidth. The signal was cross-loaded into the submarine's crypto machines, decoded, and printed up.

TO: USS TUCSON (SSN-770)
FROM: CINCPAC

1. UPON RECEIVING "XQT SPEC OP" SIGNAL FROM VLS YOU WILL ENGAGE AND DESTROY PRC SSBN AND ANY PRC SHIPS IN CONTACT.
2. REPORT RESULTS OF ATTACK VIA SSIX.
3. SUBSEQUENT TO THIS OPERATION, CONDUCT UNRESTRICTED OPERATIONS AGAINST PRC NAVAL UNITS.
4. YOU WILL NOT RPT NOT ENGAGE COMMERCIAL TRAFFIC OF ANY KIND.

CINCPAC SENDS

END MESSAGE

"Well, it's about goddamned time," the CO observed to his executive officer.

"Doesn't say when to expect it," the XO observed.

"Call it two hours," the captain said. "Let's close to ten thousand yards. Get the troops perked up. Spin up the weapons."

"Aye."

"Anything else close?"

"There's a Chinese frigate off to the north, about thirty miles."

"Okay, after we do the subs, we'll Harpoon that one, then we'll close to finish it off, if necessary."

"Right." The XO went forward to the attack center. He checked his watch. It was dark topside. It didn't really matter to anyone aboard the submarine, but darkness made everybody feel a little more secure for some reason or other, even the XO.

It was tenser now. Giusti's reconnaissance troopers were now within twenty miles of the expected Chinese positions. That put them inside artillery range, and that made the job serious.

The mission was to advance to contact, and to find a hole in the Chinese positions for the division to exploit. The secondary objective was to shoot through the gap and break into the Chinese logistical area, just over the river from where they'd made their breakthrough. There they would rape and pillage, as LTC Giusti thought of it, probably turning north to roll up the Chinese rear with one or two brigades, and probably leaving the third to remain in place astride the Chinese line of communications as a blocking force.

His troopers had all put on their "makeup," as some called it, their camouflage paint, darkening the natural light spots of the face and lightening the dark ones. It had the overall effect of making them look like green and black space aliens. The advance would be mounted, for the most part, with the cavalry scouts mostly staying in their Bradleys and depending on the thermal-imaging viewers used by the driver and gunner to spot enemies. They'd be jumping out occasionally, though, and so everyone checked his PVS-11 personal night-vision system. Every trooper had three sets of fresh AA batteries that were as important as the magazines for their M16A2 rifles. Most of the men gobbled down an MRE ration and chased it with water, and often some aspirin or Tylenol to ward off minor aches and pains that might come from bumps or sprains. They all traded looks and jokes to lighten the stress of the night, plus the usual brave words meant as much for themselves as for others. Sergeants and junior officers reminded the men of their training, and told them to be confident in their abilities.

Then, on radioed command, the Bradleys started off, leading the heavier main-battle tanks off to the enemy, moving initially at about ten miles per hour.

The squadron's helicopters were up, all sixteen of them, moving very cautiously because armor on a helicopter is about as valuable as a sheet of newspaper, and because someone on the ground only needed a thermal-imaging viewer to see them, and a heat-seeking missile would snuff them out of the sky. The enemy had light flak, too, and that was just as deadly.

The OH-58D Kiowa Warriors had good night-vision systems, and in training the flight crews had learned to be confident of them, but people didn't often die in training. Knowing that there were people out there with live weapons and the orders to make use of them made everyone discount some of the lessons they'd learned. Getting shot down in one of those exercises meant being told over the radio to land, and maybe getting a tongue-lashing from the company commander for screwing up, which usually ended with a reminder that in real combat operations, he'd be dead, his wife a widow, and his children orphans. But they weren't, really, and so those words were never taken as seriously as they were now. Now it could be real, and all of the flight crews had wives or sweethearts, and most of them had children as well.

And so they moved forward, using their own night-vision equipment to sweep the ground ahead, their hands a little more tingly than usual on the controls.

Division Headquarters had its own Dark Star terminal set up, with an Air Force captain running it. Diggs didn't much like being so far in the rear with his men going out in harm's way, but command wasn't the same thing as leadership. He'd been told that years before at Fort Leavenworth's Command and General Staff School, and he'd experienced it in Saudi Arabia only the previous year, but even so, he felt the need to be out forward, close to his men, so that he could share the danger with them. But the best way for him to mitigate the danger to them was to stay back here and establish effective control over operations, along with Colonel Masterman.

"Cookstoves?" Masterman asked.

"Yep," the USAF captain—his name was Frank Williams—agreed. "And these bright ones are campfires. Cool night. Ground temperature's about forty-three degrees, air temperature is forty-one. Good contrast for the thermal viewing systems. They seem to use the kind of stoves we had in the Boy Scouts. Damn, there's a bunch of 'em. Like hundreds."

"Got a hole in their lines?"

"Looks thin right here, 'tween these two hills. They have a company on this hilltop, and another company here—I bet they're in different battalions," Williams said. "Always seems to work that way. The gap between them looks like a little more 'n a kilometer, but there's a little stream at the bottom."

"Bradleys don't mind getting a little wet," Diggs told the junior officer. "Duke?"

"Best bet for a blow-through I've seen so far. Aim Angelo for it?"

Diggs thought about that. It meant committing his cavalry screen, and that also meant committing at least one of his brigades, but such decisions were what generals were for. "What else is around?"

"I'd say their regimental headquarters is right about here, judging by the tents and trucks. You're going to want to hit it with artillery, I expect."

"Right about the time QUARTER HORSE gets there. No sense alerting them too soon," Masterman suggested. General Diggs thought it over one more time and made his first important decision of the night:

"Agreed. Duke, tell Giusti to head for that gap."

"Yes, sir." Colonel Masterman moved off toward the radios. They were doing this on the fly, which wasn't exactly the way they preferred, but that was often the world of real-time combat operations.

"Roger," Diggs called.

Colonel Roger Ardan was his divisional artillery commander—

GUNFIGHTER Six on the divisional radio net—a tall thin man, rather like a not-tall-enough basketball player.

"Yes, sir."

"Here's your first fire mission. We're going to shoot Angelo Giusti through this gap. Company of infantry here and here, and what appears to be a regimental command post here."

"Enemy artillery?"

"Some one-twenty-twos here, and what looks like two-oh-threes, eight inch, right here."

"No rocket-launchers?"

"None I've seen yet. That's a little odd, but they're not around that I can see," Captain Williams told the gunner.

"What about radars?" Colonel Ardan asked.

"Maybe one here, but hard to tell. It's under some camo nets." Williams selected the image with his mouse and expanded it.

"We'll take that one on general principles. Put a pin in it," Ardan said.

"Yes, sir. Print up a target list?"

"You bet, son."

"Here you go," Williams said. A command generated two sheets of paper out of the adjacent printer, with latitude-longitude positions down to the second of angle. The captain handed it across.

"How the hell did we ever survive without GPS and overheads?" Ardan wondered aloud. "Okay, General, this we can do. When?"

"Call it thirty minutes."

"We'll be ready," GUNFIGHTER promised. "I'll TOT the regimental command post."

"Sounds good to me," Diggs observed.

First Armored had a beefed-up artillery brigade. The second and the third battalions of the First Field Artillery Regiment had the new Paladin self-propelled 155-mm howitzer, and the 2nd Battalion, 6th Field Artillery, had self-propelled eight-inch, plus the division's Multiple Launch Rocket System tracks, which ordinarily were under the direct order of the divisional commander, as his personal shotgun. These units were six miles behind the leading cavalry troops, and on order left the roads they were on and pulled off to firing positions north and south of the gravel track. Each of them had a Global Positioning Satellite, or GPS, receiver, and these told them where they were located down to an accuracy of less than three meters. A transmission over the Joint Tactical Information Distribution System, or J-TIDS, told them the locations of their targets, and onboard computers computed azimuth and range to them. Then they learned the shell selection, either "common" high-

explosive or VT (for variable-time). These were loaded and the guns trained onto the distant targets, and the gunners just waited for the word to pull the strings. Their readiness was radioed back to the divisional HQ.

All set, sir," Colonel Ardan reported.

"Okay, we'll wait to see how Angelo's doing."

"Your screen is right here," Captain Williams told the senior officers. For him it was like being in a skybox at a football game, except that one team didn't know he was there, and didn't know the other team was on the field as well. "They're within three klicks of the enemy's first line of outposts."

"Duke, tell Angelo. Get it out on the IVIS."

"Done," Masterman replied. The only thing they couldn't do was cross-deck the "take" from the Dark Star drone.

SABRE Six was now in his Bradley instead of the safer Abrams main-battle tank. He could see better out of this one, Giusti judged.

"IVIS is up," the track commander called. Colonel Giusti ducked down and twisted around the gun-turret structure to see where the sergeant was sitting. Whoever had designed the Bradley hadn't considered that a senior officer might use it—and his squadron didn't have one of the new "God" tracks yet, with the IVIS display in the back.

"First enemy post is right over there, sir, at eleven o'clock, behind this little rise," the sergeant said, tapping the screen.

"Well, let's go say hi."

"Roger that, Colonel. Kick it, Charlie," he told the driver. For the rest of the crew: "Perk it up, people. Heads up. We're in Indian Country."

How are things up north?" Diggs asked Captain Williams.

"Let's see." The captain deselected Marilyn Monroe and switched over to the "take" from Grace Kelly. "Here we go, the leading Chinese elements are within fifteen klicks of the Russians. Looks like they're settled in for the night, though. Looks like we'll be in contact first."

"Oh, well." Diggs shrugged. "Back to Miss Monroe."

"Yes, sir." More computer maneuvers. "Here we are. Here's your leading cavalry element, two klicks from John Chinaman's first hole in the ground."

Diggs had grown up watching boxing on TV. His father had been a real fan of Muhammad Ali, but even when Ali had lost to Leon Spinks, he'd known the

other guy was in the ring with him. Not now. The camera zoomed in to isolate the hole. There were two men there. One was hunched down smoking a cigarette, and that must have ruined the night vision of one of them, maybe both, which explained why they hadn't seen anything yet, though they ought to have heard something ... the Brad wasn't all that quiet ...

"There, he just woke up a little," Williams said. On the TV screen, the head turned abruptly. Then the other head came up, and the bright point of the cigarette went flying off to their right front. Giusti's track was coming in from their left, and now both heads were oriented in that general direction.

"How close can you get?" Diggs asked.

"Let's see ..." In five seconds, the two nameless Chinese infantrymen in their hand-dug foxhole took up half the screen. Then Williams did a split screen, like the picture-in-picture feature of some television sets. The big part showed the two doomed soldiers, and the little one was locked on the leading Bradley Scout, whose gun turret was now turning a little to the left ... about eleven hundred meters now ...

They had a field phone in the hole, Diggs could see now, sitting on the dirt between the two grunts. Their hole was the first in the enemy combat outpost line, and their job would have been to report back when something evil this way came. They heard something, but they weren't sure what it was, were probably waiting until they saw it. *The PLA didn't have night-vision goggles, at least not at this level,* Diggs thought. That was important information. "Okay, back it off."

"Right, sir." Williams dumped the close-up of the two grunts, returning to the picture that showed both them and the approaching Brad. Diggs was sure that Giusti's gunner could see them now. It was just a question of when he chose to take the first shot, and that was a call for the guy in the field to make, wasn't it?

"There!" The muzzle of the 25-mm chain gun flashed three times, causing the TV screen to flare, and there was a line of the tracers, streaking to the hole —

—and the two grunts were dead, killed by three rounds of high-explosive incendiary-tracer ammunition. Diggs turned.

"GUNFIGHTER, commence firing!"

"Fire!" Colonel Ardan said into his microphone. Moments later, the ground shook under their feet, and a few seconds after that came the distant sound of thunder, and more than ninety shells started arcing into the air.

Colonel Ardan had ordered a TOT, or time-on-target barrage, on the regimental command post behind the small pass that the Quarter Horse was driving for. An American invention from World War II, TOT was designed so that every round fired from the various guns targeted on the single spot on the

map would arrive at the same instant, and so deny the people there the chance to dive for cover at the first warning. In the old days, that had meant laboriously computing the flight time of every single shell, but computers did that now in less time than it took to frame the thought. This particular mission had fallen to 2nd/6th and its eight-inchers, universally regarded as the most accurate heavy guns in the United States Army. Two of the shells were common impact-fused high-explosive, and the other ten were VT. That stood for "variable time," but really meant that in the nose of each shell was a tiny radar transponder set to explode the shell when it was about fifty feet off the ground. In this way, the fragments lancing away from the exploding shell were not wasted into the ground, but instead made an inverted cone of death about two hundred feet across at its base. The common shells would have the effect of making craters, immolating those who might be in individual shelter holes.

Captain Williams switched Marilyn's focus to the enemy command post. From a high perspective the thermal cameras even caught the bright dots of the shells racing through the night. Then the camera zoomed back in on the target. By Diggs's estimation, all of the shells landed in less than two seconds The effects were horrific. The six tents there evaporated, and the glowing green stick figures of human beings fell flat and stopped moving. Some pieces separated from one another, an effect Diggs had never seen.

"Whoa!" Williams observed. "Stir-fry."

What was it about the Air Force? General Diggs wondered. *Or maybe it was just the kid's youth.*

On the screen, some people were still moving, having miraculously survived the first barrage, but instead of moving around (or of running away, because artillery barrages didn't arrive in groups of only one) they remained at their posts, some looking to the needs of the wounded. It was courageous, but it doomed most of them to death. The only one or two people in the regimental command post who were going to live were the ones who'd pick winning lottery tickets later in life. If there were going to be as many as two, that is. The second barrage landed twenty-eight seconds after the first, and then a third thirty-one seconds after that, according to the time display in the upper-right corner of the screen.

"Lord have mercy," Colonel Ardan observed in a whisper. He'd never in his career seen the effect of fire in this way. It had always been a distant, detached thing to the cannon-cocker, but now he saw what his guns actually did.

"Target, cease fire," Diggs said, using tanker-talk for *It's* dead, *you* k*illed it, find another one.* A year before in the sands of Saudi Arabia, he'd watched combat on a computer screen and felt the coldness of war, but this was infinitely worse. This was like watching a Hollywood special-effects movie, but it wasn't computer-generated animation. He'd just watched the command section of an infantry regiment, perhaps forty people, erased from the face of the earth in less than ninety seconds, and they had, after all, been human beings, something this young Air Force captain didn't seem to grasp. To him it was doubtless some sort of Nintendo game. Diggs decided that it was probably

better to think of it that way.

The two infantry companies on the hilltops north and south of the little pass were clobbered by a full battery each. The next question was what that would generate. With the regimental CP down, things might get a little confusing for the divisional commander. Somebody would hear the noise, and if someone from regiment had been on the phone, the disconnect first of all would make people think, *huh,* because that was the normal human reaction, even for soldiers in a combat zone; bad phone connections were probably the rule rather than the exception, and they'd probably use phones rather than radios because they were more secure and more reliable—except when shellfire killed the phone and/or cut the lines. So, the enemy division commander was probably just waking up with a tug on his shoulder, then he'd be a little confused by what he was told.

"Captain, do we know where the enemy's divisional CP is yet?"

"Probably right here, sir. Not completely sure, but there's a bunch of trucks."

"Show me on a map."

"Here, sir." The computer screen again. Diggs had a sudden thought: This young Air Force officer might eat his meals off it. More to the point, the CP was just in range of his MLRS batteries. And it had a lot of radio masts. Yeah, that was where the ChiComm general was.

"GUNFIGHTER, I want this hit right now."

"Yes, sir." And the command went out over JTIDS to the 2nd/6th Field Artillery. The MLRS tracks were already set up awaiting orders, and the target assigned was well within the slewing angle for their launchers. The range, forty-three kilometers, was just within their capability. Here also the work was done by computer. The crewmen trained the weapons on the correct azimuth, locked their suspension systems to stabilize the vehicles, and closed the shutters on their windows to protect against blast and the ingress of the rocket exhaust smoke, which was lethal when breathed. Then it was just a matter of pushing the red firing button, which happened on command of the battery commander, and all nine vehicles unleashed their twelve rockets each, about a second apart, every one of which contained 644 grenade-sized submunitions, all targeted on an area the size of three football fields.

The effect of this, Diggs saw three minutes after giving the order, was nearly seventy thousand individual explosions in the target area, and as bad as it had been for the regimental CP, that had been trick or treat compared to this. Whatever division he'd been facing was now as thoroughly decapitated as though by Robespierre himself.

After the initial fire, Lieutenant Colonel Giusti found that he had no targets. He sent one troop through the gap while holding the north side of it himself, taking no fire at all. The falling 155s on the hills to his front and rear

explained much of that, for surely it was a storm of steel and explosives. Someone somewhere fired off a parachute flare, but nothing developed from it. Twenty minutes after the initial barrage, the leading elements of First Brigade came into view. He waited until they were within a hundred meters before pulling off to the east to rejoin his squadron in the shallow valley. He was now technically inside enemy lines, but as with the first good hit in a football game, the initial tension was now gone, and there was a job to be done.

Dick Boyle, like most aviators, was qualified in more than one sort of aircraft, and he could have chosen to fly-lead the mission in an Apache, which was one of the really enjoyable experiences for a rotary-wing pilot, but instead he remained in his UH-60 Blackhawk, the better to observe the action. His target was the independent tank brigade which was the organizational fist of the 65th Type B Group Army, and to service that target he had twenty-eight of his forty-two AH-64D Apache attack helicopters, supported by twelve Kiowa Warriors and one other Blackhawk.

The Chinese tank force was twenty miles northwest of their initial crossing point, agreeably sitting in open ground in circular formation so as to have guns pointing in all directions, none of which were a matter of concern to Dick Boyle and his men. It had probably made sense to laager them that way forty years ago, but not today, not in the night with Apaches nearby. With his OH-58Ds playing the scout role, the attack formation swept in from the north, down the valley. Whatever colonel was in command of this force had selected a place from which he could move to support any of the divisions in the 65th Army, but that merely concentrated his vehicles in a single spot, about five hundred meters across. Boyle's only worry was SAMs and maybe flak, but he had Dark Star photos to tell him where that all was, and he had a team of four Apaches delegated to handle the threat first of all.

It was in the form of two missile batteries. One was composed of four DK-9 launchers very similar to the American Chaparral, with four Sidewinder-class heat-seekers mounted on a tracked chassis. Their range would be about seven miles, just a touch longer than the effective range of his Hellfire missiles. The other was their HQ-61A, which Boyle thought of as the Chinese version of the Russian SA- 6. There were fewer of these, but they had ten miles of range and supposedly a very capable radar system, and also had a hard floor of about a hundred meters, below which they couldn't track a target, which was a good thing to know, if true. His tactic would be to detect them and take them out as quickly as possible, depending on his EH-60 electronic-intelligence helicopter to sniff them out. The code for one of these was HOLIDAY. The heat-seekers were called DUCKS.

The Chinese soldiers on the ground would also have simple man-portable heat-seekers that were about as capable as the old American Redeye missile, but his Apaches had suppressed exhausts that were expected to defeat the heat-seekers—and those who had voiced the expectations weren't flying

tonight. They never did.

There were more air missions tonight, and not all of them were over Russian territory. Twenty F-117A Stealth fighters had deployed to Zhigansk, and they'd mainly sat on the ground since their first arrival, waiting for bombs to be flown over, along with the guidance package attachments that changed them from simple ballistic weapons to smart bombs that went deliberately for a special piece of real estate. The special weapons for the Black Jets were the GBU27 laser-guided hard-target penetrators. These were designed not merely to hit objects and explode, but to lance inside them before detonating, and they had special targets. There were twenty-two such targets tonight, all located in or near the cities of Harbin and Bei'an, and every one was a railroad bridge abutment.

The People's Republic depended more on its rail transportation than most countries, because it lacked the number of motor vehicles to necessitate the construction of highways, and also because the inherent efficiency of railroads appealed to the economic model in the heads of its political leaders. They did not ignore the fact that such a dependence on a single transportation modality could make them vulnerable to attack, and so at every potential chokepoint, like river crossings, they'd used the ample labor force of their country to build multiple bridges, all of heavily-built rebarred concrete abutments. *Surely,* they'd thought, *six separate crossing points at a single river couldn't* all *be damaged beyond timely repair.*

The Black Jets refueled from the usual KC-135 tanker aircraft and continued south, unseen by the radar fence erected by the PRC government along its northeastern border, and kept going. The heavily automated aircraft continued to their destinations on autopilot. They even made their bombing runs on autopilot, because it was too much to expect a pilot, however skilled, both to fly the aircraft and guide the infrared laser whose invisible grounded dot the bomb's seeker-head sought out. The attacks were made almost simultaneously, just a minute apart from east to west at the six parallel bridges over the Songhua Jiang River at Harbin. Each bridge had major pier abutments on the north and south bank. Both were attacked in each case. The bomb drops were easier than contractor tests, given the clear air and the total lack of defensive interference. In every case, the first set of six bombs fell true, striking the targets at Mach-1 speed and penetrating in for a distance of twenty-five to thirty feet before exploding. The weapons each had 535 pounds of Tritonal explosive. Not a particularly large quantity, in tight confinement it nevertheless generated hellish power, rupturing the hundreds of tons of concrete around it like so much porcelain, albeit without the noise one would expect from such an event.

Not content with this destruction, the second team of F- 117s struck at the northern abutments, and smashed them as well. The only lives directly lost were those of the engineer and fireman of a northbound diesel locomotive pulling a trainload of ammunition for the army group across the Amur River,

who were unable to stop their train before running over the edge.

The same performance was repeated in Bei'an, where five more bridges were dropped into the Wuyur He River, and in this dual stroke, which had lasted a mere twenty-one minutes, the supply line to the Chinese invasion force was sundered for all time to come. The eight aircraft left over—they'd been a reserve force in case some of the bombs should fail to destroy their targets—headed for the loop siding near the Amur used by tank cars. This was, oddly enough, not nearly as badly hit as the bridges, since the deep-penetrating bombs went too far into the ground to create much of surface craters, though some train cars were upset, and one of them caught fire. All in all, it had been a routine mission for the F-117s. Attempts to engage them with the SAM batteries in the two cities failed because the aircraft never appeared on the search-radar screens, and a missile launch was not even attempted.

The bell went off again, and the ELF message printed up as EQT SPEC OP, or "execute special operation" in proper English. *Tucson* was now nine thousand yards behind Sierra-Eleven, and fifteen from Sierra-Twelve.

"We're going to do one fish each. Firing order Two, One. Do we have a solution light?" the captain asked.

"Valid solutions for both fish," the weapons officer replied.

"Ready Tube Two."

"Tube Two is ready in all respects, tube flooded, outer door is open, sir."

"Very well. Match generated bearings and ... shoot!"

The handle was turned on the proper console. "Tube Two fired electrically, sir." Tucson shuddered through her length with the sudden explosion of compressed air that ejected the weapon into the seawater.

"Unit is running hot, straight, and normal, sir," Sonar reported.

"Very well, ready Tube One," the captain said next.

"Tube One is ready in all respects, tube is flooded, outer door is open," Weps announced again.

"Very well. Match generated bearings and shoot!" This command came as something of an exclamation. The captain figured he owed it to the crew, which was at battle stations, of course.

"Tube One fired electrically, sir," the petty officer announced after turning the handle again, with exactly the same physical effect on the ship.

"Unit Two running hot, straight, and normal, sir," Sonar said again. And with that, the captain took the five steps to the Sonar Room.

"Here we go, Cap'n," the leading sonarman said, pointing to the glass screen with a yellow grease pencil.

The nine thousand yards' distance to 406 translated to four and a half nautical miles. The target was traveling at a depth of less than a hundred feet, maybe transmitting to its base on the radio or something, and steaming along at a bare five knots, judging by the blade count. That worked out to a running time of just under five minutes for the first target, and then another hundred sixty seconds or so to the second one. The second shot would probably get a little more complicated than the first. Even if they failed to hear the Mark 48 ADCAP torpedo coming, a deaf man could not miss the sound of 800 pounds of Torpex going off underwater three miles away, and he'd try to maneuver, or do something more than break out the worry beads and say a few Hail Maos, or whatever prayer these people said. The captain leaned back into the attack center.

"Reload ADCAP into Tube Two, and a Harpoon into Tube One."

"Aye, Cap'n," the Weapons Officer acknowledged.

"Where's that frigate?" he asked the lead sonarman.

"Here, sir, Luda-class, an old clunker, steam-powered, bearing two-one-six, tooling along at about fourteen knots, by blade count."

"Time on Unit Two," the skipper called.

"Minute twenty seconds to impact, sir." The captain looked at the display. If Sierra-Eleven had sonarmen on duty, they weren't paying much attention to the world around them. That would change shortly.

"Okay, go active in thirty seconds."

"Aye, aye."

On the sonar display, the torpedo was dead on the tone line from *406*. It seemed a shame to kill a submarine when you didn't even know its name ...

"Going active on Unit Two," Weps called.

"There it is, sir," the sonarman said, pointing to a different part of the screen. The ultrasonic sonar lit up a new line, and fifteen seconds later—

—"Sierra-Eleven just kicked the gas, sir, look here, cavitation and blade count is going up, starting a turn to starboard ... ain't gonna matter, sir," the sonarman knew from the display. You couldn't outmaneuver a -48.

"What about—Twelve?"

"He's heard it, too, Cap'n. Increasing speed and—" The sonarman flipped his headphones off. "Yeow! That hurt." He shook his head hard. "Unit impact on Sierra-Eleven, sir."

The captain picked up a spare set of headphones and plugged them in. The sea was still rumbling. The target's engine sounds had stopped almost at once —the visual display confirmed that, though the sixty-hertz line showed her generators were still—no, they stopped, too. He heard and saw the sound of blowing air. Whoever he was, he was trying to blow ballast and head for the roof, but without engine power ... no, not much of a chance of that, was there? Then he shifted his eyes to the visual track of Sierra-Twelve. The fast-

attack had been a little more awake, and was turning radically to port, and really kicking on the power. His plant noise was way up, as was his blade count ... and he was blowing ballast tanks, too ... why?

"Time on Unit One?" the captain called.

"Thirty seconds for original plot, probably a little longer now."

Not much longer, the skipper thought. The ADCAP was motoring along on the sunny side of sixty knots this close to the surface ... Weps went active on it, and the fish was immediately in acquisition. A well-trained crew would have fired off a torpedo of their own, just to scare their attacker off, and maybe escape if the first fish missed—not much of a play, but it cost you nothing to do it, and maybe got you the satisfaction of having company arrive in hell right after you knocked on the door ... but they didn't even get a decoy off. They must have all been asleep ... certainly not very awake ... not very alert ... didn't they know there was a war going on ... ? Twenty-five seconds later, they found out the hard way, when another splotch appeared on the sonar display.

Well, he thought, *two for two. That was pretty easy.* He stepped back into the attack center and lifted a microphone. "Now hear this. This is the captain speaking. We just launched two fish on a pair of ChiComm submarines. We won't be seeing either one of them anymore. Well done to everybody. That is all." Then he looked over at his communications officer: "Prepare a dispatch to CINCLANT. 'Four Zero Six destroyed at ... Twenty-Two-Fifty-Six Zulu along with escorting SSN. Now engaging Frigate.' Send that off when we get to antenna depth."

"Yes, sir."

"Tracking party, we have a frigate bearing two-one-six. Let's get a track on him so we can Harpoon his ass."

"Aye, sir," said the lieutenant manning the tracking plot.

It was approaching six in the evening in Washington, where everybody who was somebody was watching TV, but not the commercial kind. The Dark Star feeds were going up on encrypted satellite links, and being distributed around Washington over dedicated military fiber-optic lines. One of those, of course, led to the White House Situation Room.

"Holy God," Ryan said. "It's like some kind of fucking video game. How long have we had this capability?"

"It's pretty new, Jack, and yeah," the Vice President agreed, "it is kind of obscene—but, well, it's just what the operators see. I mean, the times I splashed airplanes, I got to see it, just I was in a G-suit with a Tomcat strapped to my back. Somehow this feels dirtier, man. Like watching a guy and a gal go at it, and not in training films—"

"What?"

"That's what you call porno flicks on the boats, Jack, 'training films.' But this is like peeking in a window on a guy's wedding night, and he doesn't know about it ... feels kinda dirty."

"The people will like it," Arnie van Damm predicted. "The average guy out there, especially kids, to them it'll be like a movie."

"Maybe so, Arnie, but it's a snuff film. Real lives being snuffed out, and in large numbers. That division CP Diggs got with his MLRS rockets—I mean, Jesus Christ. It was like an act of an angry pagan god, like the meteor that got the dinosaurs, like a murderer wasting a kid in a schoolyard," Robby said, searching for just how dirty it felt to him. But it was business, not personal, for what little consolation that might be to the families of the departed.

Getting some radio traffic," Tolkunov told General Bondarenko. The intelligence officer had half a dozen electronic-intelligence groups out, listening in on the frequencies used by the PLA. They usually spoke in coded phrases which were difficult to figure out, especially since the words changed on a day-to-day basis, along with identifying names for the units and personalities involved.

But the security measures tended to fall by the wayside when an emergency happened, and senior officers wanted hard information in a hurry. In this case, Bondarenko had watched the take from Grace Kelly and felt little pity for the victims, wishing only that he'd been the one inflicting the casualties, because it was *his* country the Chinks had invaded.

"The American artillery doctrine is impressive, isn't it?" Colonel Tolkunov observed.

"They've always had good artillery. But so do we, as this Peng fellow will discover in a few hours," CINC-FAR EAST replied. "What do you think he'll do?"

"It depends on what he finds out," the G-2 replied. "The information that gets to him will probably be fairly confusing, and it will concern him, but less than his own mission."

And that made sense, Gennady Iosifovich had to agree. Generals tended to think in terms of the missions assigned to them, leaving the missions of others to those others, trusting them to do the jobs assigned to *them.* It was the only way an army could function, really. Otherwise you'd be so worried about what was happening around you that you'd never get your own work done, and the entire thing would quickly grind to a halt. It was called tunnel vision when it didn't work, and good teamwork when it did.

"What about the American deep strikes?"

"Those Stealth aircraft are amazing. The Chinese rail system is completely disrupted. Our guests will soon be running short of fuel."

"Pity," Bondarenko observed. The Americans were efficient warriors, and

their doctrine of deep-strike, which the Russian military had scarcely considered, could be damned effective if you brought it off, and if your enemy couldn't adapt to it. Whether the Chinese could adapt was something they'd have to see about. "But they still have sixteen mechanized divisions for us to deal with."

"That is so, Comrade General," Tolkunov agreed.

FALCON THREE to FALCON LEADER, I see me a SAM track. It's a Holiday," the pilot reported. "Hilltop two miles west of the CLOVERLEAF—wait, there's a Duck there, too."

"Anything else?" FALCON LEAD asked. This captain commanded the Apaches tasked to SAM suppression.

"Some light flak, mainly two-five mike-mike set up around the SAMs. Request permission to fire, over."

"Stand by," FALCON LEAD replied. "EAGLE LEAD, this is FALCON LEAD, over."

"EAGLE LEAD copies, FALCON," Boyle replied from his Blackhawk.

"We have SAM tracks in view. Permission to engage, over."

Boyle thought fast. His Apaches now had the tank laager in sight and surrounded on three sides. Okay, Falcon was approaching the hill overlooking the laager, code-named CLOVERLEAF. Well, it was about time.

"Permission granted. Engage the SAMs. Out."

"Roger, engaging. FALCON THREE, this is LEAD. Take ' em out."

"Take your shot, Billy," the pilot told his gunner.

"Hellfire, now!" The gunner in the front seat triggered off his first missile. The seven-inch-wide missile leaped off its launch-rail with a flare of yellow light, and immediately tracked on the laser dot. Through his thermal viewer, he saw a dismounted crewman looking that way, and he immediately pointed toward the helicopter. He was yelling to get someone's attention, and the race was between the inbound missile and human reaction time. The missile had to win. He got the attention of someone, maybe his sergeant or lieutenant, who then looked in the direction he was pointing. You could tell by the way he cocked his head that he didn't see anything at first, while the first one was jerking his arm like a fishing pole, and the second one saw it, but by that time there was nothing for him to do but throw himself to the ground, and even that was a waste of energy. The Hellfire hit the base of the launcher assembly and exploded, killing everything within a ten-meter circle.

"Tough luck, Joe." Then the gunner switched over to the other one, the Holiday launcher. This crew had been alerted by the sound, and he could see them scurrying to light up their weapon. They'd just about gotten to their places when the Duck launcher blew up.

Next came the flak. There were six gun mounts, equally divided between 25- and 35-mm twin gun sets, and those could be nasty. The Apache closed in. The gunner selected his own 20-mm cannon and walked it across every site. The impacts looked like flashbulbs, and the guns were knocked over, some with exploding ammo boxes.

"EAGLE LEAD, FALCON THREE, this hilltop is cleaned off. We're circling to make sure. No coverage over the CLOVERLEAF now. It's wide open."

"Roger that." And Boyle ordered his Apaches in.

It was about as fair as putting a professional boxer into the ring against a six-year-old. The Apaches circled the laagered tanks just like Indians in the movies around a circled wagon train, except in this one, the settlers couldn't fire back. The Chinese tank crewmen were mainly sleeping outside, next to their mounts. Some crews were in their vehicles, standing guard after a fashion, and some dismounted crewmen were walking around on guard, holding Type 68 rifles. They'd been alerted somewhat by the explosions on the hilltop overlooking the laager. Some of the junior officers were shouting to get their men up and into their tanks, not knowing the threat, but thinking naturally enough that the safe place to be was behind armor, from which place they could shoot back to defend themselves. They could scarcely have been more wrong.

The Apaches danced around the laager, sideslipping as the gunners triggered off their missiles. Three of the PLA tanks used their thermal viewers and actually saw helicopters and shot at them, but the range of the tank guns was only half that of the Hellfires, and all of the rounds fell well short, as did the six handheld HN-5 SAMs that were fired into the night. The Hellfires, however, did not, and in every case—only two of them missed—the huge warheads had the same effect on the steel tanks that a cherry bomb might have on a plastic model. Turrets flew into the air atop pillars of flame, then crashed back down, usually upside-down on the vehicles to which they'd been attached. There'd been eighty-six tanks here, and that amounted to three missiles per helicopter, with a few lucky gunners getting a fourth shot. All in all, the destruction of this brigade took less than three minutes, leaving the colonel who'd been in command to stand at his command post with openmouthed horror at the loss of the three hundred soldiers he'd been training for over a year for this very moment. He even survived a strafing of his command section by a departing Apache, seeing the helicopter streak overhead so quickly that he didn't even have time to draw his service pistol.

"EAGLE LEAD, FALCON LEAD. The CLOVERLEAF is toast, and we are RTB, over."

Boyle could do little more than shake his head. "Roger, FALCON. Well done, Captain."

"Roger, thank you, sir. Out." The Apaches formed up and headed northwest to their base to refuel and rearm for the next mission. Below, he could see the First Brigade, blown through the gap in Chinese lines, heading southeast into the Chinese logistics area.

Task Force 77 had been holding station east of the Formosa Strait until receiving orders to race west. The various Air Bosses had word that one of their submarines had eliminated a Chinese boomer and fast-attack submarine, which was fine with them, and probably just peachy for the task force commander. Now it was their job to go after the People's Liberation Army Navy, which, they all agreed, was a hell of a name for a maritime armed force. The first aircraft to go off, behind the F-14Ds flying barrier combat air patrol, or BARCAP, for the Task Force, were the E-2C Hawkeye radar aircraft, the Navy's two-engine prop-driven mini-AWACS. These were tasked to finding targets for the shooters, mainly F/A-18 Hornets.

This was to be a complex operation. The Task Force had three SSNs assigned to "sanitize" the area of ChiComm submarines. The Task Force commander seemed especially concerned with the possibility of a Chinese diesel-powered SSK punching a hole in one of his ships, but that was not an immediate concern for the airmen, unless they could find one tied alongside the pier.

The only real problem was target identification. There was ample commercial shipping in the area, and they had orders to leave that entirely alone, even ships flying the PRC flag. Anything with a SAM radar would be engaged beyond visual range. Otherwise, a pilot had to have eyeballs on the target before loosing a weapon. Of weapons they had plenty, and ships were fragile targets as far as missiles and thousand-pound bombs were concerned. The overall target was the PLAN South Sea Fleet, based at Guangszhou (better known to Westerners as Canton). The naval base there was well-sited for attack, though it was defended by surface-to-air missile batteries and some flak.

The F-14s on the lead were guided to aerial targets by the Hawkeyes. Again since there was commercial air traffic in the sky, the fighter pilots had to close to visual range for a positive ID of their targets. This could be dangerous, but there was no avoiding it.

What the Navy pilots didn't know was that the Chinese knew the electronic signature of the APD-138 radar on the E-2Cs, and therefore they also knew that something was coming. Fully a hundred Chinese fighters scrambled into the air and set up their own combat air patrol over their East Coast. The Hawkeyes spotted that and radioed a warning to the advancing fighters, setting the stage for a massive air engagement in the predawn darkness.

There was no elegant way to go about it. Two squadrons of Tomcats, twenty-four in all, led the strike force. Each carried four AIM-54C Phoenix missiles, plus four AIM-9X Sidewinders, The Phoenixes were old—nearly fifteen years old for some of them, and in some cases the solid-fuel motor bodies were developing cracks that would soon become apparent. They had a theoretical range of over a hundred miles, however, and that made them useful things to hang on one's airframe.

The Hawkeye crews had orders to make careful determination of what was

a duck and what was a goose, but it was agreed quickly that two or more aircraft flying in close formation were not Airbuses full of civilian passengers, and the Tomcats were authorized to shoot a full hundred miles off the Chinese mainland. The first salvo was composed of forty-eight. Of these, six self-destructed within five hundred yards of their launching aircraft, to the displeased surprise of the pilots involved. The remaining forty-two streaked upward in a ballistic path to a height of over a hundred thousand feet before tipping over at Mach-5 speed and switching on their millimeter-band Doppler homing radars. By the end of their flight, their motors were burned out, and they did not leave the smoke trail that pilots look for. Thus, though the Chinese pilots knew that they'd been illuminated, they couldn't see the danger coming, and therefore could not see anything to evade. The forty-two Phoenixes started going off in their formations, and the only survivors were those who broke into radical turns when they saw the first warheads go off. All in all, the forty-eight launches resulted in thirty-two kills. The surviving Chinese pilots were shaken but also enraged. As one man, they turned east and lit up their search radars, looking for targets for their own air-to-air missiles. These they found, but beyond range of their weapons. The senior officer surviving the initial attack ordered them to go to afterburner and streak east, and at a range of sixty miles, they fired off their PL-10 radar-guided air-to-air missiles. These were a copy of the Italian Aspide, in turn a copy of the old American AIM-7E Sparrow. To track a target, they required that the launching aircraft keep itself and its radar pointed at the target. In this case, the Americans were heading in as well, with their own radars emitting, and what happened was a great game of chicken, with the fighter pilots on either side unwilling to turn and run—and besides, they all figured that to do so merely guaranteed one's death. And so the race was between airplanes and missiles, but the PL-10 had a speed of Mach 4 against the Phoenix's Mach 5.

Back on the Hawkeyes, the crewmen kept track of the engagement. Both the aircraft and the streaking missiles were visible on the scopes, and there was a collective holding of breath for this one.

The Phoenixes hit first, killing thirty-one more PLAAF fighters, and also turning off their radars rather abruptly. That made some of their missiles "go dumb," but not all, and the six Chinese fighters that survived the second Phoenix barrage found themselves illuminating targets for a total of thirty-nine PL-10s, which angled for only four Tomcats.

The American pilots affected by this saw them coming, and the feeling wasn't particularly pleasant. Each went to afterburner and dove for the deck, loosing every bit of chaff and flares he had in his protection pods, plus turning the jamming pods up to max power. One got clean away. Another lost most of them in the chaff, where the Chinese missiles exploded like fireworks in his wake, but one of the F-14s had nineteen missiles chasing him alone, and there was no avoiding them all. The third missile got close enough to trigger its warhead, and then nine more, and the Tomcat was reduced to chaff itself, along with its two-man crew. That left one Navy fighter whose radar-intercept officer ejected safely, though the pilot did not.

The remaining Tomcats continued to bore in. They were out of Phoenix

missiles now, and closed to continue the engagement with Sidewinders. Losing comrades did nothing more than anger them for the moment, and this time it was the Chinese who turned back and headed for their coast, chased by a cloud of heat-seeking missiles.

This bar fight had the effect of clearing the way for the strike force. The PLAN base had twelve piers with ships alongside, and the United States Navy went after its Chinese counterpart—as usually happened, on the principle that in war people invariably kill those most like themselves before going after the different ones.

The first to draw the wrath of the Hornets were the submarines. They were mainly old Romeo-class diesel boats, long past whatever prime they'd once had. They were mainly rafted in pairs, and the Hornet drivers struck at them with Skippers and SLAMs. The former was a thousand-pound bomb with a rudimentary guidance package attached, plus a rocket motor taken off obsolete missiles, and they proved adequate to the task. The pilots tried to guide them between the rafted submarines, so as to kill two with a single weapon, and that worked in three out of five attempts. SLAM was a land-attack version of the Harpoon anti-ship missile, and these were directed at the port and maintenance facilities without which a naval base is just a cluttered beach. The damage done looked impressive on the videotapes. Other aircraft tasked to a mission called IRON HAND sought out Chinese missile and flak batteries, and engaged those at safe distance with HARM anti-radiation missiles which sought out and destroyed acquisition and illumination radars with high reliability.

All in all, the first U.S. Navy attack on the mainland of East Asia since Vietnam went off well, eliminating twelve PRC warships and laying waste to one of its principal naval bases.

Other bases were attacked with Tomahawk cruise missiles launched mainly from surface ships. Every PLAN base over a swath of five hundred miles of coast took one form of fire or another, and the ship count was jacked up to sixteen, all in a period of a little over an hour. The American tactical aircraft returned to their carriers, having spilled the blood of their enemies, though also having lost some of their own.

CHAPTER 58

Political Fallout

It was a difficult night for Marshal Luo Cong, the Defense Minister for the People's Republic of China. He'd gone to bed about eleven the previous night, concerned with the ongoing operations of his military forces, but pleased that they seemed to be going well. And then, just after he'd closed his eyes, the phone rang.

His official car came at once to convey him to his office, but he didn't enter it. Instead he went to the Defense Ministry's communications center, where he found a number of senior- and mid-level officers going over fragmentary information and trying to make sense of it. Minister Luo's presence didn't help them, but just added stress to the existing chaos.

Nothing seemed clear, except that they could identify holes in their information. The 65th Army had seemingly dropped off the face of the earth. Its commanding general had been visiting one of his divisions, along with his staff, and hadn't been heard from since 0200 or so. Nor had the division's commanding general. In fact, nothing at all was known about what was happening up there. To fix that, Marshal Luo ordered a helicopter to fly up from the depot at Sunwu. Then came reports from Harbin and Bei'an of air raids that had damaged the railroads. A colonel of engineers was dispatched to look into that.

But just when he thought he'd gotten a handle on the difficulties in Siberia, then came reports of an air attack on the fleet base at Guangszhou, and then the lesser naval bases at Haikuo, Shantou, and Xiachuandao. In each case, the headquarters facilities seemed hard-hit, since there was no response from the local commanders. Most disturbing of all was the report of huge losses to the fighter regiments in the area—reports of American naval aircraft making the attacks. Then finally, worst of all, a pair of automatic signals, the distress buoys from his country's only nuclear-powered missile submarine and the hunter submarine detailed to protect her, the Hai Long, were both radiating their automated messages. It struck the marshal as unlikely to the point of impossibility that so many things could have happened at once. And yet there was more. Border radar emplacements were off the air and could not be raised on radio or telephone. Then came another phone call from Siberia. One of the divisions on the left shoulder of the breakthrough—the one the commanding general of 65th Type B Group Army had been visiting a few hours before—reported ... that is, a junior communications officer said, a subunit of the division reported, that unknown armored forces had lanced through its western defenses, going east, and ... disappeared?

“How the hell does an enemy attack successfully and disappear?” the marshal had demanded, in a voice to make the young captain wilt. “Who reported this?”

“He identified himself as a major in the Third Battalion, 745th Guards Infantry Regiment, Comrade Marshal,” was the trembling reply. “The radio connection was scratchy, or so it was reported to us.”

“And who made the report?”

“A Colonel Zhao, senior communications officer in the intelligence staff of 71st Type C Group Army north of Bei’an. They are detailed to border security in the breakthrough sector,” the captain explained.

“I know that!” Luo bellowed, taking out his rage on the nearest target of opportunity.

“Comrade Marshal,” said a new voice. It was Major General Wei Dao-Ming, one of Luo’s senior aides, just called in from his home after one more of a long string of long days, and showing the strain, but trying to smooth the troubled waters even so. “You should let me and my staff assemble this information in such a way that we can present it to you in an orderly manner.”

“Yes, Wei, I suppose so.” Luo knew that this was good advice, and Wei was a career intelligence officer, accustomed to organizing information for his superiors. “Quick as you can.”

“Of course, Comrade Minister,” Wei said, to remind Luo that he was a political figure now rather than the military officer he’d grown up as.

Luo went to the VIP sitting room, where green tea was waiting. He reached into the pocket of his uniform tunic and pulled out some cigarettes, strong unfiltered ones to help him wake up. They made him cough, but that was all right. By the third cup of tea, Wei returned with a pad of paper scribbled with notes.

“So, what is happening?”

“The picture is confused, but I will tell you what I know, and what I think,” Wei began.

“We know that General Qi of Sixty-fifth Army is missing, along with his staff. They were visiting 191st Infantry Division, just north and west of our initial breakthrough. The 191st is completely off the air as well. So is the 615th Independent Tank Brigade, part of Sixty-fifth Army. Confused reports talk of an air attack on the tank brigade, but nothing precise is known. The 735th Guards Infantry Regiment of the 191st division is also off the air, cause unknown. You ordered a helicopter out of Sunwu to take a look and report back. The helicopter will get off at dawn. Well and good.

“Next, there are additional reports from that sector, none of which make sense or help form any picture of what is happening. So, I have ordered the intelligence staff of the Seventy-first Army to send a reconnaissance team across the river and ascertain what’s happening there and report back. That will take about three hours.

"The good news is that General Peng Xi-Wang remains in command of 34th Shock Army, and will be at the gold mine before midday. Our armored spearhead is deep within enemy territory. I expect the men are waking up right now and will be moving within the hour to continue their attack.

"Now, this news from the navy people is confusing, but it's not really a matter of consequence. I've directed the commander of South Sea Fleet to take personal charge of the situation and report back. So say about three hours for that.

"So, Comrade Minister, we will have decent information shortly, and then we can start addressing the situation. Until then, General Peng will soon resume his offensive, and by evening, our country will be much richer," Wei concluded. He knew how to keep his minister happy. His reward for this was a grunt and a nod. "Now," General Wei went on, "why don't you get a few hours of sleep while we maintain the watch?"

"Good idea, Wei." Luo took two steps to the couch and lay down across it. Wei opened the door, turned off the lights, then he closed the door behind himself. The communications center was only a few more steps.

"Now," he said, stealing a smoke from a major, "what the hell is happening out there?"

"If you want an opinion," a colonel of intelligence said, "I think the Americans just flexed their muscles, and the Russians will do so in a few hours."

"What? Why do you say that? And why the Russians?"

"Where has their air force been? Where have their attack helicopters been? We don't know, do we? Why don't we know? Because the Americans have swatted our airplanes out of the sky like flies, that's why."

"We've deluded ourselves that the Russians don't want to fight, haven't we? A man named Hitler once thought the same thing. He died a few years later, the history books say. We similarly deluded ourselves into thinking the Americans would not strike us hard for political reasons. Wei, some of our political leaders have been off chasing the dragon!" The aphorism referred to opium-smoking, a popular if illegal pastime in the southern part of China a few centuries before. "There were no political considerations. They were merely building up their forces, which takes time. And the Russians didn't fight us because they wanted us to get to the end of the logistical string, and then the fucking Americans cut that string off at Harbin and Bei'an! General Peng's tanks are nearly three hundred kilometers inside Russia now, with only two hundred kilometers of fuel in their tanks, and there'll be no more fuel coming up to them. We've taken over two *thousand* tanks and turned their crews into badly trained light infantry! That is what's happening, Comrade Wei," the colonel concluded.

"You can say that sort of thing to me, Colonel. Say it before Minister Luo, and your wife will pay the state for the bullet day after tomorrow," Wei warned.

“Well, I know it,” Colonel Geng He-ping replied. “What will happen to you later today, Comrade General Wei, when you organize the information and find out that I am correct?”

“The remainder of today will have to take care of itself” was the fatalistic reply. “One thing at a time, Geng.” Then he assembled a team of officers and gave them each a task to perform, found himself a chair to sit in, and wondered if Geng might have a good feel for the situation—

“Colonel Geng?”

“Yes, Comrade General?”

“What do you know of the Americans?”

“I was in our embassy in Washington until eighteen months ago. While there, I studied their military quite closely.”

“And—are they capable of what you just said?”

“Comrade General, for the answer to that question, I suggest you consult the Iranians and the Iraqis. I’m wondering what they might try next, but thinking exactly like an American is a skill I have never mastered.”

They’re moving,”, Major Tucker reported with a stretch and a yawn. ”Their reconnaissance element just started rolling. Your people have pulled way back. How come?”

“I ordered them to collect Comrade Gogol before the Chinese kill him,” Colonel Tolkunov told the American. “You look tired.”

“Hell, what’s thirty-six hours in the same chair?” A helluva sore back, that’s what it is, Tucker didn’t say. Despite the hours, he was having the time of his life. For an Air Force officer who’d flunked out of pilot training, making him forever an “unrated weenie” in Air Force parlance, a fourth-class citizen in the Air Force pecking order—below even helicopter pilots—he was earning his keep more and better than he’d ever done. He’d probably been more valuable to his side in this war than even that Colonel Winters, with all his air-to-air snuffs. But if anyone ever said such a thing to him, he’d have to *aw-shucks* it and look humbly down at his shoes. *Humble, my ass,* Tucker thought. He was proving the value of a new and untested asset, and doing so like the Red Baron in his red Fokker Trimotor. The Air Force was not a service whose members cultivated humility, but his lack of pilot’s wings had compelled him to do just that for all ten of his years of uniformed service. The next generation of UAVs would have weapons attached, and maybe even be able to go air-to-air, and then, maybe, he’d show those strutting fighter jock-itches who had the real balls in this man’s Air Force. Until then, he’d just have to be content gathering information that helped the Russians kill Joe Chink and all his brothers, and if this was Nintendo War, then little Danny Tucker was the by-God cock of the by-God walk in this virtual world.

“You have been most valuable to us, Major Tucker.”

"Thank you, sir. Glad to help," Tucker replied with his best little-boy smile. *Maybe I'll grow me a good mustache.* He set the thought aside with a smile, and sipped some instant coffee from an MRE pack—the extra caffeine was about the only thing keeping him up at the moment. But the computer was doing most of the work, and it showed the Chinese reconnaissance tracks moving north.

Son of a bitch," Captain Aleksandrov breathed. He'd heard about Gogol's wolf pelts on state radio, but he hadn't seen the TV coverage, and the sight took his breath away. Touching one, he halfway expected it to be cold and stiff like wire, but, no, it was like the perfect hair of a perfect blonde ...

"And who might you be?" The old man was holding a rifle and had a decidedly gimlet eye.

"I am Captain Fedor Il'ych Aleksandrov, and I imagine you are Pavel Petrovich Gogol."

A nod and a smile. "You like my furs, Comrade Captain?"

"They are unlike anything I have ever seen. We have to take these with us."

"Take? Take where? I'm not going anywhere," Pasha said.

"Comrade Gogol, I have my orders—to get you away from here. Those orders come from Headquarters Far East Command, and those orders will be obeyed, Pavel Petrovich."

"No Chink is going to chase me off my land!" his old voice thundered.

"No, Comrade Gogol, but soldiers of the Russian Army will not leave you here to die. So, that is the rifle you killed Germans with?"

"Yes, many, many Germans," Gogol confirmed.

"Then come with us, and maybe you can kill some yellow invaders."

"Who exactly are you?"

"Reconnaissance company commander, Two-Six-Five Motor Rifle Division. We've been playing hide-and-seek with the Chinks for four long days, and now we're ready to do some real fighting. Join us, Pavel Petrovich. You can probably teach us a few things we need to know." The young handsome captain spoke in his most reasonable and respectful tones, for this old warrior truly deserved it. The tone turned the trick.

"You promise me I will get to take one shot?"

"My word as a Russian officer, comrade," Aleksandrov pledged, with a bob of his head.

"Then I come." Gogol was already dressed for it—the heat in his cabin was turned off. He shouldered his old rifle and an ammunition pack containing forty rounds—he'd never gone into the field with more than that—and walked to the door. "Help me with my wolves, boy, will you?"

“Gladly, Grandfather.” Then Aleksandrov found out how heavy they were. But he and Buikov managed to toss them inside their BRM, and the driver headed off.

“Where are they?”

“About ten kilometers back. We’ve been in visual contact with them for days, but they’ve pulled us back. Away from them.”

“Why?”

“To save you, you old fool,” Buikov observed with a laugh. “And to save these pelts. These are too good to drape over the body of some Chinese strumpet!”

“I think, Pasha—I am not sure,” the captain said, “but I think it’s time for our Chinese guests to get a proper Russian welcome.”

“Captain, look!” the driver called.

Aleksandrov lifted his head out the big top hatch and looked forward. A senior officer was waving to him to come forward more quickly. Three minutes later, they halted alongside him.

“You are Aleksandrov?”

“Yes, Comrade General!” the young man confirmed to the senior officer.

“I am General Sinyavskiy. You’ve done well, boy. Come out here and talk to me,” he ordered in a gruff voice that was not, however, unkind.

Aleksandrov had only once seen his senior commander, and then only at a distance. He was not a large man, but you didn’t want him as a physical enemy in a small room. He was chewing on a cigar that had gone out seemingly hours before, and his blue eyes blazed.

“Who is this?” Sinyavskiy demanded. Then his face changed. “Are you the famous Pasha?” he asked more respectfully.

“Senior Sergeant Gogol of the Iron and Steel Division,” the old man said with great dignity, and a salute which Sinyavskiy returned crisply.

“I understand you killed some Germans in your day. How many, Sergeant?”

“Count for yourself, Comrade General,” Gogol said, handing his rifle over.

“Damn,” the general observed, looking at the notches, like those on the pistol of some American cowboy. “I believe you really did it. But combat is a young man’s game, Pavel Petrovich. Let me get you to a place of safety.”

Gogol shook his head. “This captain promised me one shot, or I would not have left my home.”

“Is that a fact?” The commanding general of 265th Motor Rifle looked around. “Captain Aleksandrov, very well, we’ll give our old comrade his one shot.” He pointed to a place on the map before him. “This should be a good spot for you. And when you can, get him the hell away from there,” Sinyavskiy told the young man. “Head back this way to our lines. They’ll be expecting you. Boy, you’ve done a fine job shadowing them all the way up.

Your reward will be to see how we greet the bastards."

"Behind the reconnaissance element is a large force."

"I know. I've been watching them on TV for a day and a half, but our American friends have cut off their supplies. And we will stop them, and we will stop them right here."

Aleksandrov checked the map reference. It looked like a good spot with a good field of fire, and best of all, an excellent route to run away on. "How long?" he asked.

"Two hours, I should think. Their main body is catching up with the screen. Your first job is to make their screen vehicles disappear."

"Yes, Comrade General, that we can do for you!" the captain responded with enthusiasm.

Sunrise found Marion Diggs in a strangely bizarre environment. Physically, the surroundings reminded him of Fort Carson, Colorado, with its rolling hills and patchy pine woods, but it was unlike America in its lack of paved roads or civilization, and that explained why the Chinese had invaded here. With little civilian population out here, there was no infrastructure or population base to provide for the area's defense, and that had made things a lot easier for John Chinaman. Diggs didn't mind it, either. It was like his experience in the Persian Gulf—no noncombatants to get in the way—and that was good.

But there were a lot of Chinese to get in the way. Mike Francisco's First Brigade had debauched into the main logistics area for the Chinese advance. The ground was carpeted with trucks and soldiers, but while most of them were armed, few were organized into cohesive tactical units, and that made all the difference. Colonel Miguel Francisco's brigade of four battalions had been organized for combat with the infantry and tank battalions integrated into unified battalion task groups of mixed tanks and Bradleys, and these were sweeping across the ground like a harvesting machine in Kansas in August. If it was painted green, it was shot.

The monstrous Abrams main-battle tanks moved over the rolling ground like creatures from Jurassic Park—alien, evil, and unstoppable, their gun turrets traversing left and right—but without firing their main guns. The real work was being done by the tank commanders and their M2 .50 machine guns, which could turn any truck into an immobile collection of steel and canvas. Just a short burst into the engine made sure that the pistons would never move again, and the cargo in the back would remain where it was, for inspection by intelligence officers, or destruction by explosives-carrying engineer troops who came behind the tanks in their HMMWVs. Some resistance was offered by the Chinese soldiers, but only by the dumb ones, and never for long. Even those with man-portable anti-tank weapons rarely got close enough to use them, and those few who popped up from Wolfholes only scratched the paint on the tanks, and usually paid for their foolishness with

their lives. At one point, a battalion of infantry did launch a deliberate attack, supported by mortars that forced the tank and Bradley crews to button up and reply with organized fire. Five minutes of 155-mm fire and a remorseless advance by the Bradleys, spitting fire from their chain guns and through the firing ports for the mounted infantry inside, made them look like fire-breathing dragons, and these dragons were not a sign of good luck for the Chinese soldiers. That battalion evaporated in twenty minutes, along with its dedicated but doomed commander.

Intact enemy armored vehicles were rarely seen by the advancing First Brigade. Where it went, Apache attack helicopters had gone before, looking for targets for their Hellfire missiles, and killing them before the ground troops could get close. All in all, it was a perfect military operation, totally unfair in the balance of forces. It wasn't the least bit sporting, but a battlefield is not an Olympic stadium, and there were no uniformed officials to guard the supposed rules of fair play.

The only exciting thing was the appearance of a Chinese army helicopter, and two Apaches blazed after it and destroyed it with air-to-air missiles, dropping it in the Amur River close to the floating bridges, which were now empty of traffic but not yet destroyed.

What have you learned, Wei?" Marshal Luo asked, when he emerged from the conference room he'd used for his nap.

"The picture is still unclear in some respects, Comrade Minister," the general answered.

"Then tell me what is clear," Luo ordered.

"Very well. At sea, we have lost a number of ships. This evidently includes our ballistic missile submarine and its escorting hunter submarine, cause unknown, but their emergency beacons deployed and transmitted their programmed messages starting at about zero-two-hundred hours. Also lost are seven surface warships of various types from our South Sea Fleet. Also, seven fleet bases were attacked by American aircraft, believed to be naval carrier aircraft, along with a number of surface-to-air missile and radar sites on the southeastern coast. We've succeeded in shooting down a number of American aircraft, but in a large fighter battle, we took serious losses to our fighter regiments in that region."

"Is the American navy attacking us?" Luo asked.

"It appears that they are, yes," General Wei answered, choosing his words with care. "We estimate four of their aircraft carriers, judging by the number of aircraft involved. As I said, reports are that we handled them roughly, but our losses were severe as well."

"What are their intentions?" the minister asked.

"Unclear. They've done serious damage to a number of bases, and I doubt

we have a single surface ship surviving at sea. Our navy personnel have not had a good day," Wei concluded. "But that is not really a matter of importance."

"The attack on the missile submarine is," Luo replied. "That is an attack on a strategic asset. That is something we must consider." He paused. "Go on, what else?"

"General Qi of Sixty-fifth Army is missing and presumed dead, along with all of his senior staff. We've made repeated attempts to raise him by radio, with no result. The 191st Infantry Division was attacked last night by heavy forces of unknown identity. They sustained heavy losses due to artillery and aircraft, but two of their regiments report that they are holding their positions. The 735th Guards Infantry Regiment evidently took the brunt of the attack, and reports from there are fragmentary.

"The most serious news is from Harbin and Bei'an. Enemy aircraft attacked all of the railroad bridges in both cities, and all of them took damage. Rail traffic north has been interrupted. We're trying now to determine how quickly it might be reestablished."

"Is there any good news?" Marshal Luo asked.

"Yes, Comrade Minister. General Peng and his forces are getting ready now to resume their attack. We expect to have the Russian goldfield in our control by midday," Wei answered, inwardly glad that he didn't have to say what had happened to the logistical train behind Peng and his 34th Shock Army. Too much bad news could get the messenger killed, and he was the messenger.

"I want to talk to Peng. Get him on the phone," Luo ordered.

"Telephone lines have been interrupted briefly, but we do have radio contact with him," Wei told his superior.

"Then get me Peng on the radio," Luo repeated his order.

What is it, Wa?" Peng asked. Couldn't he even take a piss without interruption?

"Radio, it's the Defense Minister," his operations officer told him.

"Wonderful," the general groused, heading back to his command track as he buttoned his fly. He ducked to get inside and lifted the microphone. "This is General Peng."

"This is Marshal Luo. What is your situation?" the voice asked through the static.

"Comrade Marshal, we will be setting off in ten minutes. We have still not made contact with the enemy, and our reconnaissance has seen no sizable enemy formations in our area. Have you developed any intelligence we can use?"

"Be advised we have aerial photography of Russian mechanized units to

your west, probably division strength. I would advise you to keep your mechanized forces together, and guard your left flank."

"Yes, Comrade Marshal, I am doing that," Peng assured him. The real reason he stopped every day was to allow his divisions to close up, keeping his fist tight. Better yet, 29th Type A Group Army was right behind his if he needed support. "I recommend that 43rd Army be tasked to Hank guard."

"I will give the order," Luo promised. "How far will you go today?"

"Comrade Marshal, I will send a truckload of gold back to you this very evening. Question: What is this I've heard about damage to our line of supply?"

"There was an attack last night on some railroad bridges in Harbin and Bei'an, but nothing we can't fix."

"Very well. Comrade Marshal, I must see to my dispositions."

"Carry on, then. Out."

Peng set the microphone back in its holder. "Nothing he can't fix, he says."

"You know what those bridges are like. You'd need a nuclear weapon to hurt them," Colonel Wa Cheng-Gong observed confidently.

"Yes, I would agree with that." Peng stood, buttoned his tunic, and reached for a mug of morning tea. "Tell the advance guard to prepare to move out. I'm going up front this morning, Wa. I want to see this gold mine for myself."

"How far up front?" the operations officer asked.

"With the lead elements. A good officer leads from the front, and I want to see how our people move. Our reconnaissance screen hasn't detected anything, has it?"

"Well, no, Comrade General, but—"

"But what?" Peng demanded.

"But a prudent commander leaves leading to lieutenants and captains," Wa pointed out.

"Wa, sometimes you talk like an old woman," Peng chided.

There," Yefremov said. "They took the bait."

It was just after midnight in Moscow, and the embassy of the People's Republic of China had most of its lights off, but not all; more to the point, three windows had their lights on, and their shades fully open, and they were all in a row. It was just as perfect as what the Americans called a "sting" operation. He'd stood over Suvorov's shoulder as he'd typed the message: *I have the pieces in place now. I have the pieces in place now. If you wish for me to carry out the operation, leave three windows in a row with the lights on and the windows fully open.* Yefremov had even had a television camera record the

event, down to the point where the traitor Suvarov had tapped the ENTER key to send the letter to his Chink controller. And he'd gotten a TV news crew to record the event as well, because the Russian people seemed to trust the semi-independent media more than their government now, for some reason or other. Good, now they had proof positive that the Chinese government was conspiring to kill President Grushavoy. That would play well in the international press. And it wasn't an accident. The windows all belonged to the Chief of Mission in the PRC embassy, and he was, right now, asleep in his bed. They'd made sure of that by calling him on the phone ten minutes earlier.

"So, what do we do now?"

"We tell the President, and then, I expect, we tell the TV newspeople. And we probably spare Suvarov's life. I hope he likes it in the labor camp."

"What about the killings?"

Yefremov shrugged. "He only killed a pimp and a whore. No great loss, is it?"

Senior Lieutenant Komanov had not exactly enjoyed his last four days, but at least they'd been spent profitably, training his men to shoot. The reservists, now known as BOYAR FORCE, had spent them doing gunnery, and they'd fired four basic loads of shells over that time, more than any of them had ever shot on active duty, but the Never Depot had been well stocked with shells. Officers assigned to the formation by Far East Command told them that the Americans had moved by to their south the previous day, and that their mission was to slide north of them, and do it today. Only thirty kilometers stood between them and the Chinese, and he and his men were ready to pay them a visit. The throaty rumble of his own diesel engine was answered by the thunder of two hundred others, and BOYAR started moving northeast through the hills.

Peng and his command section raced forward, calling ahead on their radios to clear the way, and the military-police troops doing traffic control waved them through. Soon they reached the command section of the 302nd Armored, his leading "fist" formation, commanded by Major General Ge Li, a squat officer whose incipient corpulence made him look rather like one of his tanks.

"Are you ready, Ge?" Peng asked. The man was well-named for his task. "Ge" had the primary meaning of "spear."

"We are ready," the tanker replied. "My leading regiments are turning over and straining at the leash."

"Well, shall we observe from the front together?"

"Yes!" Ge jumped aboard his own command tank—he preferred this to a

personnel carrier, despite the poorer radios, and led the way forward. Peng immediately established a direct radio connection with his subordinate.

"How far to the front?"

"Three kilometers. The reconnaissance people are moving now, and they are another two kilometers ahead."

"Lead on, Ge," Peng urged. "I want to see that gold mine."

It was a good spot, Aleksandrov thought, *unless the enemy got his artillery set up sooner than expected,* and he hadn't seen or heard Chinese artillery yet. He was on the fairly steep reverse side of an open slope that faced south, rather like a lengthy ramp, perhaps three kilometers in length, not unlike a practice shooting range at a regimental base. The sun was starting to crest the eastern horizon, and they could see now, which always made soldiers happy. Pasha had stolen a spare coat and laid his rifle across it, standing in the open top hatch of the BRM, looking through the telescopic sight of his rifle.

"So, what was it like to be a sniper against the Germans?" Aleksandrov asked once he'd settled himself in.

"It was good hunting. I tried to stick to killing officers. You have more effect on them that way," Gogol explained. "A German private—well, he was just a man—an enemy, of course, but he probably had no more wish to be on a battlefield than I did. But an officer, those were the ones who directed the killing of my comrades, and when you got one of them, you confused the enemy."

"How many?"

"Lieutenants, eighteen. Captains, twelve. Only three majors, but nine colonels. I decapitated nine Fritz regiments. Then, of course, sergeants and machine-gun crews, but I don't remember them as well as the colonels. I can still see every one of those, my boy," Gogol said, tapping the side of his head.

"Did they ever try to shoot at you?"

"Mainly with artillery," Pasha answered. "A sniper affects the morale of a unit. Men do not like being hunted like game. But the Germans didn't use snipers as skillfully as we did, and so they answered me with field guns. That," he admitted, "could be frightening, but it really told me how much the Fritzes feared me," Pavel Petrovich concluded with a cruel smile.

"There!" Buikov pointed. Just off the trees to the left.

"Ahh," Gogol said, looking through his gunsight. "Ahh, yes."

Aleksandrov laid his binoculars on the fleeting shape. It was the vertical steel side on a Chinese infantry carrier, one of those he'd been watching for some days now. He lifted his radio. "This is GREEN WOLF ONE. Enemy in sight, map reference two-eight-five, nine-zero-six. One infantry track coming north. Will advise."

“Understood, GREEN WOLF,” the radio crackled back.

“Now, we must just be patient,” Fedor Il’ych said. He stretched, touching the camouflage net that he’d ordered set up the moment they’d arrived in this place. To anyone more than three hundred meters away, he and his men were just part of the hill crest. Next to him, Sergeant Buikov lit a cigarette, blowing out the smoke.

“That is bad for us,” Gogol advised. “It alerts the game.”

“They have little noses,” Buikov replied.

“Yes, and the wind is in our favor,” the old hunter conceded.

Lordy, Lordy,” Major Tucker observed. ”They’ve bunched up some.”

It was Grace Kelly again, looking down on the battlefield-to-be like Pallas Athena looking down on the plains of Troy. And about as pitilessly. The ground had opened up a little, and the corridor they moved across was a good three kilometers wide, enough for a battalion of tanks to travel line-abreast, a regiment in columns of battalions, three lines of thirty-five tanks each with tracked infantry carriers interspersed with them. Colonels Aliyev and Tolkunov stood behind him, speaking in Russian over their individual telephones to the 265th Motor Rifle’s command post. In the night, the entire 201st had finally arrived, plus leading elements of the 80th and 44th. There were now nearly three divisions to meet the advancing Chinese, and included in that were three full divisional artillery sets, plus, Tucker saw for the first time, a shitload of attack helicopters sitting on the ground thirty kilometers back from the point of expected contact. Joe Chink was driving into a motherfucker of an ambush. Then a shadow crossed under Grace Kelly, out of focus, but something moving fast.

It was two squadrons of F-16C fighter-bombers, and they were armed with Smart Pigs.

That was the nickname for J-SOW, the Joint Stand-Off Weapon. The night before, other F-16s, the CG version, the new and somewhat downsized version of the F-4G Wild Weasel, had gone into China and struck at the line of border radar transmitters, hitting them with HARM antiradar missiles and knocking most of them off the air. That denied the Chinese foreknowledge of the inbound strike. They had been guided by two E-3B Sentry aircraft, and protected by three squadrons of F-15C Eagle air-superiority fighters in the event some Chinese fighters appeared again to die, but there had been little such fighter activity in the past thirty-six hours. The Chinese fighter regiments had paid a bloody price for their pride, and were staying close to home in what appeared to be a defense mode—on the principle that if you weren’t attacking, then you were defending. In fact they were doing little but flying

standing patrols over their own bases—that's how thoroughly they had been whipped by American and Russian fighters—and that left the air in American and Russian control, which was going to be bad news for the People's Liberation Army.

The F-16s were at thirty thousand feet, holding to the east. They were several minutes early for the mission, and circled while awaiting word to attack. Some concertmaster was stage-managing this, they all thought. They hoped he didn't break his little baton-stick-thing.

Getting closer," Pasha observed with studied nonchalance.

"Range?" Aleksandrov asked the men down below in the track.

"Twenty-one hundred meters, within range," Buikov reported from inside the gun turret. "The fox and the gardener approach, Comrade Captain."

"Leave them be for the moment, Boris Yevgeniyevich."

"As you say, Comrade Captain." Buikov was comfortable with the no-shoot rule, for once.

How much farther to the reconnaissance screen?" Peng asked.

"Two more kilometers," Ge replied over the radio. "But that might not be a good idea."

"Ge, have you turned into an old woman?" Peng asked lightly.

"Comrade, it is the job of lieutenants to find the enemy, not the job of senior generals," the division commander replied in a reasonable voice.

"Is there any reason to believe the enemy is nearby?"

"We are in Russia, Peng. They're here somewhere."

"He is correct, Comrade General," Colonel Wa Cheng-gong pointed out to his commander.

"Rubbish. Go forward. Tell the reconnaissance element to stop and await us," Peng ordered. "A good commander leads from the front!" he announced over the radio.

"Oh, shit," Ge observed in his tank. "Peng wants to show off his *ji-ji.* Move out," he ordered his driver, a captain (his entire crew was made of officers). "Let's lead the emperor to the recon screen."

The brand-new T-98 tank surged forward, throwing up two rooster tails of dirt as it accelerated. General Ge was in the commander's hatch, with a major acting as gunner, a duty he practiced diligently because it was his job to keep his general alive in the event of contact with the enemy. For the moment, it meant going ahead of the senior general with blood in his eye.

Why did they stop?" Buikov asked. The PLA tracks had suddenly halted nine hundred meters off, all five of them, and now the crews dismounted, manifestly to take a stretch, and five of them lit up smokes.

"They must be waiting for something," the captain thought aloud. Then he got on the radio. "GREEN WOLF here, the enemy has halted about a kilometer south of us. They're just sitting still."

"Have they seen you?"

"No, they've dismounted to take a piss, looks like, just standing there. We have them in range, but I don't want to shoot until they're closer," Aleksandrov reported.

"Very well, take your time. There's no hurry here. They're walking into the parlor very nicely."

"Understood. Out." He set the mike down. "Is it time for morning break?"

"They haven't been doing that the last four days, Comrade Captain," Buikov reminded his boss.

"They appear relaxed enough."

"I could kill any of them now," Gogol said, "but they're all privates, except for that one ..."

"That's the fox. He's a lieutenant, likes to run around a lot. The other officer's the gardener. He likes playing with plants," Buikov told the old man.

"Killing a lieutenant's not much better than killing a corporal," Gogol observed. "There's too many of them."

"What's this?" Buikov said from his gunner's seat. "Tank, enemy tank coming around the left edge, range five thousand."

"I see it!" Aleksandrov reported. "... Just one? Only one tank—oh, all right, there's a carrier with it—"

"It's a command track, look at all those antennas!" Buikov called.

The gunner's sight was more powerful than Aleksandrov's binoculars. The captain couldn't confirm that for another minute or so. "Oh, yes, that's a command track, all right. I wonder who's in it ... "

There they are," the driver called back. "The reconnaissance section, two kilometers ahead, Comrade General."

"Excellent," Peng observed. Standing up to look out of the top of his command track with his binoculars, good Japanese ones from Nikon. There was Ge in his command tank, thirty meters off to the right, protecting him as though he were a good dog outside the palace of some ancient nobleman.

Peng couldn't see anything to be concerned about. It was a clear day, with some puffy white clouds at three thousand meters or so. If there were American fighters up there, he wasn't going to worry about them. Besides, they'd done no ground-attacking that he'd heard about, except to hit those bridges back at Harbin, and one might as well attack a mountain as those things, Peng was sure. He had to hold on to the sill of the hatch lest the pitching of the vehicle smash him against it—*it was a track specially modified for senior officers, but no one had thought to make it*

safer to stand in, he thought sourly. He wasn't some peasant-private who could smash his head with no consequence ... Well, in any case, it was a good day to be a soldier, in the field leading his men. A fair day, and no enemy in sight.

"Pull up alongside the reconnaissance track," he ordered his driver.

Who the hell is this?" Captain Aleksandrov wondered aloud. "Four big antennas, at least a division commander," Buikov thought aloud. "My thirty will settle his hash."

"No, no, let's let Pasha have him if he gets out"

Gogol had anticipated that. He was resting his arms on the steel top of the BRM, tucking the rifle in tight to his shoulder. The only thing in his way was the loose weave of the camouflage netting, and that wasn't an obstacle to worry about, the old marksman was sure.

"Stopping to see the fox?" Buikov said next.

"Looks that way," the captain agreed.

Comrade General!" the young lieutenant called in surprise.

"Where's the enemy, Boy?" Peng asked loudly in return.

"General, we haven't seen much this morning. Some tracks in the ground, but not even any of that for the past two hours."

"Nothing at all?"

"Not a thing," the lieutenant replied.

"Well, I thought there'd be something around." Peng put his foot in the leather stirrup and climbed to the top of his command vehicle.

It's a general, has to be, look at that clean uniform!" Buikov told the others as he slewed his turret around to center his sight on the man eight hundred meters away. It was the same in any army. Generals never got dirty.

“Pasha,” Aleksandrov asked, “ever kill an enemy general before?”

“No,” Gogol admitted, drawing the rifle in very tight and allowing for the range....

Better to go to that ridgeline, but our orders were to stop at once,” the lieutenant told the general.

“That’s right,” Peng agreed. He took out his Nikon binoculars and trained them on the ridge, perhaps eight hundred meters off. Nothing to see except for that one bush ...

Then there was a flash—

“Yes!” Gogol said the moment the trigger broke. Two seconds, about, for the bullet to—

They’d never hear the report of the shot over the sound of their diesel engines, but Colonel Wa heard the strange, wet thud, and his head turned to see General Peng’s face twist into surprise rather than pain, and Peng grunted from the sharp blow to the center of his chest, and then his hands started coming down, pulled by the additional weight of the binoculars—and then his body started down, falling off the top of the command track through the hatch into the radio-filled interior.

That got him,” Gogol said positively. ”He’s dead.” He almost added that it might be fun to skin him and lay his hide in the river for a final swim and a gold coating, but, no, you only did that to wolves, not people—not even Chinese.

“Buikov, take those tracks!”

“Gladly, Comrade Captain,” and the sergeant squeezed the trigger, and the big machine gun spoke.

They hadn’t seen or heard the shot that had killed Peng, but there was no mistaking the machine cannon that fired now. Two of the reconnaissance tracks exploded at once, but then everything started moving, and fire was returned.

“Major!” General Ge called.

“Loading HEAT!” The gunner punched the right button, but the autoloader, never as fast as a person, took its time to ram the projective and then the

propellant case into the breech.

Back us up!" Aleksandrov ordered loudly. The diesel engine was already running, and the BRM's transmission set in reverse. The corporal in the driver's seat floored the pedal and the carrier jerked backward. The suddenness of it nearly lost Gogol over the side, but Aleksandrov grabbed his arm and dragged him down inside, tearing his skin in the process. "Go north!" the captain ordered next.

"I got three of the bastards!" Buikov said. Then the sky was rent by a crash overhead. Something had gone by too fast to see, but not too fast to hear.

"That tank gunner knows his business," Aleksandrov observed. "Corporal, get us out of here!"

"Working on it, Comrade Captain."

"GREEN WOLF to command!" the captain said next into the radio.

"Yes, GREEN WOLF, report."

"We just killed three enemy tracks, and I think we got a senior officer. Pasha, Sergeant Gogol, that is, killed a Chinese general officer, or so it appeared."

"He was a general, all right," Buikov agreed. "The shoulder boards were pure gold, and that was a command track with four big radio antennas."

"Understood. What are you doing now, GREEN WOLF?"

"We're getting the fuck away. I think we'll be seeing more Chinks soon."

"Agreed, GREEN WOLF. Proceed to divisional CP. Out."

"Yuriy Andreyevich, you will have heavy contact in a few minutes. What is your plan?"

"I want to volley-fire my tanks before firing my artillery. Why spoil the surprise, Gennady?" Sinyavskiy asked cruelly. "We are ready for them here."

"Understood. Good luck, Yuriy."

"And what of the other missions?"

"BOYAR is moving now, and the Americans are about to deploy their magical pigs. If you can handle the leading Chinese elements, those behind ought to be roughly handled."

"You can rape their daughters for all I care, Gennady."

"That is *nekulturniy,* Yuriy. Perhaps their wives," he suggested, adding, "We are watching you on the television now."

"Then I will smile for the cameras," Sinyavskiy promised.

The orbiting F-16 fighters were under the tactical command of Major General Gus Wallace, but he, at the moment, was under the command—or at least operating under the direction—of a Russian, General-Colonel Gennady Bondarenko, who was in turn guided by the action of this skinny young Major Tucker and Grace Kelly, a soulless drone hovering over the battlefield.

"There they go, General," Tucker said, as the leading Chinese echelons resumed their drive north.

"I think it is time, then." He looked to Colonel Aliyev, who nodded agreement.

Bondarenko lifted the satellite phone. "General Wallace?"

"I'm here."

"Please release your aircraft."

"Roger that. Out." And Wallace shifted phone receivers. "EAGLE ONE, this is ROUGHRIDER. Execute, execute, execute. Acknowledge."

"Roger that, sir, copy your order to execute. Executing now. Out." And the colonel on the lead AWACS shifted to a different frequency: "CADILLAC LEAD, this is EAGLE ONE. Execute your attack. Over."

"Roger that," the colonel heard. "Going down now. Out."

The F-16s had been circling above the isolated clouds. Their threat receivers chirped a little bit, reporting the emissions of SAM radars somewhere down there, but the types indicated couldn't reach this high, and their jammer pods were all on anyway. On command, the sleek fighters changed course for the battlefield far below and to their west. Their GPS locators told them exactly where they were, and they also knew where their targets were, and the mission became a strictly technical exercise.

Under the wings of each aircraft were the Smart Pigs, four to the fighter, and with forty-eight fighters, that came to 192 J-SOWs. Each of these was a canister thirteen feet long and not quite two feet wide, filled with BLU-108 submunitions, twenty per container. The fighter pilots punched the release triggers, dropped their bombs, and then angled for home, letting the robots do the rest of the work. The Dark Star tapes would later tell them how they'd done.

The Smart Pigs separated from the fighters, extended their own little wings to guide themselves the rest of the way to the target area. They knew this information, having been programmed by the fighters and were now able to follow guidance from their own GPS receivers. This they did, acting in accordance with their own onboard minicomputers, until each reached a spot five thousand feet over their designated segment of the battlefield. They didn't know that this was directly over the real estate occupied by the Chinese 29th Type A Group Army and its three heavy divisions, which included nearly seven hundred main-battle tanks, three hundred armored personnel carriers,

and a hundred mobile guns. That made a total of roughly a thousand targets for the nearly four thousand descending submunitions. But the falling bomblets were guided, too, and each had a seeker looking for heat of the sort radiated by an operating tank, personnel carrier, self-propelled gun, or truck. There were a lot of them to look for.

No one saw them coming. They were small, no larger, really, than a common crow, and falling rapidly; they were also painted white, which helped them blend in to the morning sky. Each had a rudimentary steering mechanism, and at an altitude of two thousand feet they started looking for and homing in on targets. Their downward speed was such that a minor deflection of their control vanes was sufficient to get them close, and close meant straight down.

They exploded in bunches, almost in the same instant. Each contained a pound and a half of high-explosive, the heat from which melted the metal casing, which then turned into a projectile—the process was called "self-forging"—which blazed downward at a speed of ten thousand feet per second. The armor on the top of a tank is always the thinnest, and five times the thickness would have made no difference. Of the 921 tanks on the field, 762 took hits, and the least of these destroyed the vehicles' diesel engine. Those less fortunate took hits through the turret, which killed the crews at once and/or ignited the ammunition storage, converting each armored vehicle into a small man-fabricated volcano. Just that quickly, three mechanized divisions were changed into one badly shaken and disorganized brigade. The infantry carriers fared no better, and it was worse for the trucks, most of them carrying ammunition or other flammable supplies.

All in all, it took less than ninety seconds to turn 29th Type A Group Army into a thinly spread junkyard and funeral pyre.

Holy God," Ryan said. "Is this for real?"

"Seeing is believing. Jack, when they came to me with the idea for J-SOW, I thought it had to be something from a science-fiction book. Then they demo'd the submunitions out at China Lake, and I thought, Jesus, we don't need the Army or the Marines anymore. Just send over some F-18s and then a brigade of trucks full of body bags and some ministers to pray over them. Eh, Mickey?"

"It's some capability," General Moore agreed. He shook his head. "Damn, just like the tests."

"Okay, what's happening next?"

Next" was just off the coast near Guangszhou. Two Aegis cruisers, *Mobile Bay* and *Princeton,* plus the destroyers *Fletcher,* Fife, and *John Young,* steamed in

line-ahead formation out of the morning fog and turned broadside to the shore. There was actually a decent beach at this spot. There was nothing much behind it, just a coastal-defense missile battery that the fighter-bombers had immolated a few hours before. To finish that job, the ships trained their guns to port and let loose a barrage of five-inch shells. The crack and thunder of the gunfire could be heard on shore, as was the shriek of the shells passing overhead, and the explosions of the detonations. That included one missile that the bombs of the previous night had missed, plus the crew getting it ready for launch. People living nearby saw the gray silhouettes against the morning sky, and many of them got on the telephone to report what they saw, but being civilians, they reported the wrong thing, of course.

It was just after nine in the morning in Beijing when the Politburo began its emergency session. Some of those present had enjoyed a restful night's sleep, and then been disturbed by the news that came over the phone at breakfast. Those better informed had hardly slept at all past three in the morning and, though more awake than their colleagues, were not in a happier mood.

"Well, Luo, what is happening?" Interior Minister Tong Jie asked.

"Our enemies counterattacked last night. This sort of thing we must expect, of course," he admitted in as low-key a voice as circumstances permitted.

"How serious were these counterattacks?" Tong asked.

"The most serious involved some damage to railroad bridges in Harbin and Bei'an, but repairs are underway."

"I hope so. The repair effort will require some months," Qian Kun interjected.

"Who said that!" Luo demanded harshly.

"Marshal, I supervised the construction of two of those bridges. This morning I called the division superintendent for our state railroad in Harbin. All six of them have been destroyed—the piers on both sides of the river are totally wrecked; it will take over a month just to clear the debris. I admit this surprised me. Those bridges were very sturdily built, but the division superintendent tells me they are quite beyond repair."

"And who is this defeatist?" Luo demanded.

"He is a loyal party member of long standing and a very competent engineer whom you will *not* threaten in my presence!" Qian shot back. "There is room in this building for many things, but there is *not* room here for a *lie!"*

"Come now, Qian," Zhang Han Sen soothed. "We need not have that sort of language here. Now, Luo, how bad is it really?"

"I have army engineers heading there now to make a full assessment of the damage and to commence repairs. I am confident that we can restore service shortly. We have skilled bridging engineers, you know."

“Luo,” Qian said, “your magic army bridges can support a tank or a truck, yes, but not a locomotive that weighs two hundred tons pulling a train weighing four thousand. Now, what else has gone wrong with your Siberian adventure?”

“It is foolish to think that the other side will simply lie down and die. Of course they fight back. But we have superior forces in theater, and we will smash them. We will have that new gold mine in our pocket before this meeting is over,” the Defense Minister promised. But the pledge seemed hollow to some of those around the table.

“What else?” Qian persisted.

“The American naval air forces attacked last night and succeeded in sinking some of our South Sea Fleet units.”

“Which units?”

“Well, we have no word from our missile submarine, and—”

“They sank our only missile submarine?” Premier Xu asked. “How is this possible? Was it sitting in harbor?”

“No,” Luo admitted. “It was at sea, in company with another nuclear submarine, and that one is also possibly lost.”

“Marvelous!” Tong Jie observed. “Now the Americans strike at our strategic assets! That’s half our nuclear deterrent gone, and that was the *safe* half of it. What goes on, Luo? What is happening now?”

At his seat, Fang Gan took note of the fact that Zhang was strangely subdued. Ordinarily he would have leaped to Luo’s defense, but except for the one conciliatory comment, he was leaving the Defense Minister to flap in the wind. What might that mean?

“What do we tell the people?” Fang asked, trying to center the meeting on something important.

“The people will believe what they are told,” Luo said.

And everyone nodded nervous agreement on that one. They *did* control the media. The American CNN news service had been turned off all over the People’s Republic, along with all Western news services, even in Hong Kong, which usually enjoyed much looser reins than the rest of the country. But the thing no one addressed, but everyone knew to worry about, was that every soldier had a mother and a father who’d notice when the mail home stopped coming. Even in a nation as tightly controlled as the PRC, you couldn’t stop the Truth from getting out—or rumors, which, though false, could be even worse than an adverse Truth. People *would* believe things other than those they were told to believe, if those other things made more sense than the Official Truth proclaimed by their government in Beijing.

Truth was something so often feared in this room, Fang realized, and for the first time in his life he wondered why that had to be. If the Truth was something to fear, might that mean they were doing something wrong in here? But, no, that couldn’t be true, could it? Didn’t they have a perfect

political model for reality? Wasn't that Mao's bequest to their country?

But if that were true, why did they fear having the people find out what was really happening?

Could it be that they, the Politburo members, could handle the Truth and the peasantry could not?

But then, if they feared having the peasantry get hold of the Truth, didn't that have to mean that the Truth was harmful to the people sitting in this room? And if the Truth was a danger to the peasants and workers, then didn't *they* have to be wrong?

Fang suddenly realized how dangerous was the thought that had just entered his mind.

"Luo, what does it mean to us strategically," the Interior Minister asked, "if the Americans remove half of our strategic weapons? Was that done deliberately? If so, for what cause?"

"Tong, you do not sink a ship by accident, and so, yes, the attack on our missile submarine must have been a deliberate act," Luo answered.

"So, the Americans deliberately removed from the table one of our only methods for attacking them directly? Why? Was that not a political act, not just a military one?"

The Defense Minister nodded. "Yes, you could see it that way."

"Can we expect the Americans to strike at us directly? To this date they have struck some bridges, but what about our government and vital industries? Might they strike directly at *us?"* Tong went on.

"That would be unwise. We have missiles targeted at their principal cities. They know this. Since they disarmed themselves of nuclear missiles some years ago—well, they still have nuclear bombs that can be delivered by bombers and tactical aircraft, of course, but not the ability to strike at us in the way that we could strike at them—and the Russians, of course."

"How sure are we that they are disarmed?" Tong persisted.

"If they have ballistic arms, they've concealed it from everyone," Tan Deshi told them all. Then he shook his head decisively. "No, they have no more."

"And that gives us an advantage, doesn't it?" Zhong asked, with a ghoulish smile.

USS *Gettysburg* was alongside the floating pier in the York River. Once the warheads for Trident missiles had been stored here, and there must still have been some awaiting dismantlement, because there were Marines to be seen, and only Marines were entrusted to guard the Navy's nuclear weapons. But none of those were on the pier. No, the trucks that rolled out from the weapons depot were carrying long, square cross-sectioned boxes that contained SM-2 ER Block-IVD surface-to-air missiles. When the trucks got to

the cruiser, a traveling crane lifted them up to the foredeck of the ship, where, with the assistance of some strong-backed sailors, the boxes were rapidly lowered into the vertical launch cells of the forward missile launcher. It took about four minutes per box, Gregory saw, with the captain pacing his wheelhouse all the while. Gregory knew why. He had an order to take his cruiser right to Washington, D.C., and the order had the word "expedite" on it. Evidently, "expedite" was a word with special meaning for the United States Navy, like having your wife call for you from the baby's room at two in the morning. The tenth box was duly lowered, and the crane swung clear of the ship.

"Mr. Richardson," Captain Blandy said to the Officer of the Deck.

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant answered.

"Let's get under way."

Gregory walked out on the bridge wing to watch. The Special Sea Detail cast off the six-inch hawsers, and scarcely had they fallen clear of the cleats on the main deck when the cruiser's auxiliary power unit started pushing the ten thousand tons of gray steel away from the floating pier. And the ship was for sure in a hurry. She was not fifteen feet away when the main engines started turning, and less than a minute after that, Gregory heard the *WHOOSH* of the four jet-turbines taking a big gulp of air, and he could *feel* the ship accelerate for the Chesapeake Bay, almost like being on a city transit bus.

"Dr. Gregory?" Captain Blandy had stuck his head out the pilothouse door.

"Yeah, Captain?"

"You want to get below and do your software magic on our birds?"

"You bet." He knew the way, and in three minutes was at the computer terminal which handled that task.

"Hey, Doc," Senior Chief Leek said, sitting down next to him. "All ready? I'm supposed to help."

"Okay, you can watch, I suppose." The only problem was that it was a clunky system, about as user-friendly as a chain saw, but as Leek had told him a week before, this was the flower of 1975 technology, back when an Apple-II with 64K of RAM was the cat's own ass. Now he had more computing power in his wristwatch. Each missile had to be upgraded separately, and each was a seven-step process.

"Hey, wait a minute," Gregory objected. The screen wasn't right.

"Doc, we loaded six Block-IVD. The other two are stock SM-2 ER Block IIIC radar-homers. What can I tell you, Cap'n Blandy's conservative."

"So I only do the upgrade on holes one through six?"

"No, do 'em all. It'll just ignore the changes you made to the infrared homing code. The chips on the birds can handle the extra code, no sweat, right, Mr. Olson?"

"Correct, Senior Chief," Lieutenant Olson confirmed. "The missiles are

current technology even if the computer system isn't. It probably costs more to make missile seeker-heads with current technology that can talk to this old kludge than it would to buy a new Gateway to upgrade the whole system, not to mention having a more reliable system overall, but you'll have to talk to NAVSEA about that."

"Who?" Gregory asked.

"Naval Sea Systems Command. They're the technical geniuses who won't put stabilizers on these cruisers. They think it's good for us to puke in a seaway."

"Feathermerchants," Leek explained. "Navy's full of 'em—on land, anyway." The ship heeled strongly to starboard.

"Cap'n's in a hurry, ain't he?" Gregory observed. *Gettysburg* was making a full-speed right-angle turn to port.

"Well, SACLANT said it's the SecDef's idea. I guess that makes it important," Mr. Olson told their guest.

I think this is imprudent," Fang told them all.

"Why is that?" Luo asked.

"Is fueling the missiles necessary? Is there not a danger of provocation?"

"I suppose this is a technical matter," Qian said. "As I recall, once you fuel them, you cannot keep them fueled for more than—what? Twelve hours?"

The technocrat caught the Defense Minister off guard with that question. He didn't know the answer. "I will have to consult with Second Artillery for that," he admitted.

"So, then, you will not prepare them for launch until we have a chance to consider the matter?" Qian asked.

"Why—of course not," Luo promised.

"And so the real problem is, how do we tell the people what has transpired in Siberia?"

"The people will believe what we tell them to believe!" Luo said yet again.

"Comrades," Qian said, struggling to keep his voice reasonable, "we cannot conceal the rising of the sun. Neither can we conceal the loss of our rail-transport system. Nor can we conceal the large-scale loss of life. Every soldier has parents, and when enough of them realize their son is lost, they will speak of it, and the word will get out. We must face facts here. It is better, I think, to tell the people that there is a major battle going on, and there has been loss of life. To proclaim that we are winning when we may not be is dangerous for all of us."

"You say the people will rise up?" Tong Jie asked.

“No, but I say there could be dissatisfaction and unrest, and it is in our collective interest to avoid that, is it not?” Qian asked the assembly.

“How will adverse information get out?” Luo asked.

“It frequently does,” Qian told them. “We can prepare for it, and mitigate the effect of adverse information, or we can try to withstand it. The former offers mild embarrassment to us. The latter, if it fails, could be more serious.”

“The TV will show what we wish them to show, and the people will see nothing else. Besides, General Peng and his army group are advancing even as we speak.”

What do they call it?”

“This one’s Grace Kelly. The other two are Marilyn Monroe and—can’t remember,” General Moore said. “Anyway, they named ’em for movie stars.”

“And how do they transmit?”

“The Dark Star uploads directly to a communications satellite, encrypted, of course, and we distribute it out of Fort Belvoir.”

“So, we can send it out any way we want?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, Ed, the Chinese are telling their people what?”

“They started off by saying the Russians committed a border intrusion and they counterattacked. They’re also saying that they’re kicking Ivan’s ass.”

“Well, that’s not true, and it’ll be especially untrue when they reach the Russian stop-line. That Bondarenko guy’s really played his cards beautifully. They’re pretty strung out. We’ve chopped their supply line for fair, and they’re heading into a real motherfucker of an ambush,” the DCI told them. “How about it, General?”

“The Chinese just don’t know what’s ahead of them. You know, out at the NTC we keep teaching people that he who wins the reconnaissance battle wins the war. The Russians know what’s happening. The Chinese do not. My God, this Dark Star has really exceeded our expectations.”

“It’s some shiny new toy, Mickey,” Jackson agreed. “Like going to a Vegas casino when you’re able to read the cards halfway through the deck. You just can’t hardly lose this way.”

The President leaned forward. “You know, one of the reasons we took it on the chin with Vietnam is how the people got to see the war every night on Huntley-Brinkley. How will it affect the Chinese if their people see the war the same way, but live this time?”

“The battle that’s coming? It’ll shake them up a lot,” Ed Foley thought. “But how do we—oh, oh, yeah ... Holy shit, Jack, are you serious?”

“Can we do it?” Ryan asked.

“Technically? It’s child’s play. My only beef is that it really lets people know one of our capabilities. This is sensitive stuff, I mean, right up there with the performance of our reconnaissance satellites. It’s not the sort of thing you just let out.”

“Why not? Hell, couldn’t some university duplicate the optics?” the President asked.

“Well, yeah, I guess. The imagery systems are good, but they’re not all that new a development, except some of the thermal systems, but even so—”

“Ed, let’s say we can shock them into stopping the war. How many lives would it save?”

“Quite a few,” the DCI admitted. “Thousands. Maybe tens of thousands.”

“Including some of our people?”

“Yes, Jack, including some of ours.”

“And from a technical point of view, it’s really child’s play?”

“Yes, it’s not technically demanding at all.”

“Then turn the children loose, Ed. Right now,” Ryan ordered.

“Yes, Mr. President.”

CHAPTER 59

Loss of Control

With the death of General Peng, command of 34th Shock Army devolved to Major General Ge Li, CG also of 302nd Armored. His first task was to get himself clear, and this he did, ordering his tank off the long gun-range slope while one of the surviving reconnaissance tracks recovered Peng's body. All of those tracked vehicles also pulled back, as Ge figured his first task was to determine what had happened, rather than to avenge the death of his army commander. It took him twenty minutes to motor back to his own command section, where he had a command track identical to the one Peng had driven about in. He needed the radios, since he knew the field phones were down, for whatever reason he didn't know.

"I need to talk to Marshal Luo," he said over the command frequency, which was relayed back to Beijing via several repeater stations. It took another ten minutes because the Defense Minister, he was told, was in a Politburo meeting. Finally, the familiar voice came over the radio.

"This is Marshal Luo."

"This is Major General Ge Li, commanding Three-Oh-Second Armored. General Peng Xi-Wang is dead," he announced.

"What happened?"

"He went forward to join the reconnaissance section to see the front, and he was killed by a sniper bullet. The recon section ran into a small ambush, looked like a single Russian personnel carrier. I drove it off with my own tank," Ge went on. It was fairly true, and it seemed like the sort of thing he was supposed to say.

"I see. What is the overall situation?" the Defense Minister asked.

"Thirty-fourth Shock Army is advancing—well, it was. I paused the advance to reorganize the command group. I request instructions, Comrade Minister."

"You will advance and capture the Russian gold mine, secure it, and then continue north for the oil field."

"Very well, Comrade Minister, but I must advise you that Twenty-ninth Army, right behind us, sustained a serious attack an hour ago, and was reportedly badly hit."

"How badly?"

"I do not know. Reports are sketchy, but it doesn't sound good."

“What sort of attack was it?”

“An air attack, origin unknown. As I said, reports are very sketchy at this time. Twenty-ninth seems very disorganized at the moment,” Ge reported.

“Very well. You will continue the attack. Forty-third Army is behind Twenty-ninth and will support you. Watch your left flank—”

“I know of the reports of Russian units to my west,” Ge said. “I will orient a mechanized division to deal with that, but ...”

“But what?” Luo asked.

“But, Comrade Marshal, we have no reconnaissance information on what lies before us. I need such information in order to advance safely.”

“You will find your safety in advancing rapidly into enemy territory and destroying whatever formations you find,” Luo told him forcefully. “Continue your advance!”

“By your command, Comrade Minister.” There wasn’t much else he could say to that.

“Report back to me as necessary.”

“I will do that,” Ge promised.

“Very well. Out.” Static replaced the voice.

“You heard him,” Ge said to Colonel Wa Cheng-gong, whom he’d just inherited as army operations officer. “Now what, Colonel?”

“We continue the advance, Comrade General.”

Ge nodded to the logic of the situation. “Give the order.”

It took hold four minutes later, when the radio commands filtered down to battalion level and the units started moving.

They didn’t need reconnaissance information now, Colonel Wa reasoned. They knew that there had to be some light Russian units just beyond the ridgeline where Peng had met his foolish death. *Didn’t I warn him?* Wa raged to himself. *Didn’t Ge warn him?* For a general to die in battle was not unexpected. But to die from a single bullet fired by some lone rifleman was worse than foolish. Thirty years of training and experience wasted, lost to a single rifleman!

There they go again,” Major Tucker said, seeing the plume of diesel exhaust followed by the lurching of numerous armored vehicles. ”About six kilometers from your first line of tanks.”

“A pity we can’t get one of these terminals to Sinyavskiy,” Bondarenko said.

“Not that many of them, sir,” Tucker told him. “Sun Microsystems is still building them for us.”

That was General Ge Li," Luo told the Politburo. "We've had some bad luck. General Peng is dead, killed by a sniper bullet, I just learned."

"How did that happen?" Premier Xu asked.

"Peng had gone forward, as a good general should, and there was a lucky Russian out there with a rifle," the Defense Minister explained. Then one of his aides appeared and walked to the marshal's seat, handing him a slip of paper. He scanned it. "This is confirmed?"

"Yes, Comrade Marshal. I requested and got confirmation myself. The ships are in sight of land even now."

"What ships? What land?" Xu asked. It was unusual for him to take an active part in these meetings. Usually he let the others talk, listened passively, and then announced the consensus conclusions reached by the others.

"Comrade," Luo answered. "It seems some American warships are bombarding our coast near Guangszhou."

"Bombarding?" Xu asked. "You mean with guns?"

"That's what the report says, yes."

"Why would they do that?" the Premier asked, somewhat nonplussed by this bit of information.

"To destroy shore emplacements, and—"

"Isn't that what one does prior to invading, a preparation to putting troops on the beach?" Foreign Minister Shen asked.

"Well, yes, it could be that, I suppose," Luo replied, "but—"

"Invasion?" Xu asked. "A direct attack on our own soil?"

"Such a thing is most unlikely," Luo told them. "They lack the ability to put troops ashore in sufficiently large numbers. America simply doesn't have the troops to do such a—"

"What if they get assistance from Taiwan? How many troops do the bandits have?" Tong Jie asked.

"Well, they have some land forces," Luo allowed. "But we have ample ability to—"

"You told us a week ago that we had all the forces required to defeat the Russians, even if they got some aid from America," Qian observed, becoming agitated. "What fiction do you have for us now, Luo?"

"Fiction!" the marshal's voice boomed. "I tell you the facts, but now you accuse me of that?"

"What have you *not* told us, Luo?" Qian asked harshly. "We are not peasants here to be told what to believe."

“The Russians are making a stand. They have fought back. I told you that, and I told you this sort of thing is to be expected—and it is. We fight a war with the Russians. It’s not a burglary in an unoccupied house. This is an armed contest between two major powers—and we will win because we have more and better troops. They do not fight well. We swept aside their border defenses, and we’ve pursued their army north, and they didn’t have the manhood to stand and fight for their own land! We will *smash* them. Yes, they will fight back. We must expect that, but it won’t matter. We will *smash* them, I tell you!” he insisted.

“Is there any information which you have not told us to this point?” Interior Minister Tong asked, in a voice more reasonable than the question itself.

“I have appointed Major General Ge to assume command of the Thirty-fourth Shock Army. He reported to me that Twenty-ninth Army sustained a serious air attack earlier today. The effects of this attack are not clear, probably they managed to damage communications—and an *air* attack cannot seriously hurt a large mechanized *land* force. The tools of war do not permit such a thing.”

“Now what?” Premier Xu asked.

“I propose that we adjourn the meeting and allow Minister Luo to return to his task of managing our armed forces,” Zhang Han Sen proposed. “And that we reconvene, say, at sixteen hours.”

There were nods around the table. Everyone wanted the time to consider the things that they’d heard this morning—and perhaps to give the Defense Minister the chance to make good his words. Xu did a head count and stood.

“Very well. We adjourn until this afternoon.” The meeting broke up in an unusually subdued manner, without the usual pairing off and pleasantries between old comrades. Outside the conference room, Qian buttonholed Fang again.

“Something is going badly wrong. I can feel it.”

“How sure are you of that?”

“Fang, I don’t know what the Americans have done to my railroad bridges, but I assure you that to destroy them as I was informed earlier this morning is no small thing. Moreover, the destruction inflicted was deliberately systematic. The Americans—it must have been the Americans—deliberately crippled our ability to supply our field armies. You only do such a thing in preparation to smashing them. And now the commanding general of our advancing armies is suddenly killed—stray bullet, my ass! That *tset ha tset ha* Luo leads us to disaster, Fang.”

“We’ll know more this afternoon,” Fang suggested, leaving his colleague and going to his office. Arriving there, he dictated another segment for his daily journal. For the first time, he wondered if it might turn out to be his testament.

For her part, Ming was disturbed by her minister’s demeanor. An elderly man, he’d always nonetheless been a calm and optimistic one for the most part. His

mannerisms were those of a grandfatherly gentleman even when taking her or one of the other office girls to his bed. It was an endearing quality, one of the reasons the office staff didn't resist his advances more vigorously—and besides, he *did* take care of those who took care of *his* needs. This time she took her dictation quietly, while he leaned back in his chair, his eyes closed, and his voice a monotone. It took half an hour, and she went out to her desk to do the transcription. It was time for the midday meal by the time she was done, and she went out to lunch with her co-worker, Chai.

"What is the matter with him?" she asked Ming.

"The meeting this morning did not go well. Fang is concerned with the war."

"But isn't it going well? Isn't that what they say on TV?"

"It seems there have been some setbacks. This morning they argued about how serious they were. Qian was especially exercised about it, because the American attacked our rail bridges in Harbin and Bei'an."

"Ah." Chai shoveled some rice into her mouth with her chopsticks. "How is Fang taking it?"

"He seems very tense. Perhaps he will need some comfort this evening."

"Oh? Well, I can take care of him. I need a new office chair anyway," she added with a giggle.

Lunch dragged on longer than usual. Clearly their minister didn't need any of them for the moment, and Ming took the time to walk about on the street to gauge the mood of the people there. The feeling was strangely neutral. She was out just long enough to trigger her computer's downtime activation, and though the screen was blank, in the auto-sleep mode, the hard drive started turning, and silently activated the onboard modem.

Mary Pat Foley was in her office, though it was past midnight, and she was logging onto her mail account every fifteen minutes, hoping for something new from SORGE.

"You've got mail!" the mechanical voice told her.

"Yes!" she said back to it, downloading the document at once. Then she lifted the phone. "Get Sears up here."

With that done, Mrs. Foley looked at the time entry on the e-mail. It had gone out in the early afternoon in Beijing ... what might that mean? she wondered, afraid that any irregularity could spell the death of SONGBIRD, and the loss of the SORGE documents.

"Working late?" Sears asked on entering.

"Who isn't?" MP responded. She held out the latest printout. "Read."

"Politburo meeting, in the morning for a change," Sears said, scanning the

first page. “Looks a little raucous. This Qian guy is raising a little hell—oh, okay, he chatted with Fang after it and expressed serious concerns ... agreed to meet later in the day and—oh, shit!”

“What’s that?”

“They discussed increasing the readiness of their ICBM force ... let’s see ... nothing firm was decided for technical reasons, they weren’t sure how long they could keep the missiles fueled, but they were shook by our takeout of their missile submarine ...”

“Write that up. I’m going to hang a CRITIC on it,” the DDO announced.

CRITIC—shorthand for “critical”—is the highest priority in the United States government for message traffic. A CRITIC-FLAGGED document must be in the President’s hands no less than fifteen minutes after being generated. That meant that Joshua Sears had to get it drafted just as quickly as he could type in his keyboard, and that made for errors in translation.

Ryan had been asleep for maybe forty minutes when the phone next to his bed went off.

“Yeah?”

“Mr. President,” some faceless voice announced in the White House Office of Signals, “we have CRITIC traffic for you.”

“All right. Bring it up.” Jack swung his body across the bed and planted his feet on the rug. As a normal human being living in his home, he wasn’t a bathrobe person. Ordinarily he’d just pad around his house barefoot in his underwear, but that wasn’t allowed anymore, and he always kept a long blue robe handy now. It was a gift from long ago, when he’d taught history at the Naval Academy—a gift from the students there—and bore on the sleeves the one wide and four narrow stripes of a Fleet Admiral. So dressed, and wearing leather slippers that also came with the new job, he walked out into the upstairs corridor. The Secret Service night team was already up and moving. Joe Hilton came to him first.

“We heard, sir. It’s on the way up now.”

Ryan, who’d been existing on less than five hours of sleep per night for the past week, had an urgent need to lash out and rip the face off someone—anyone—but, of course, he couldn’t do that to men who were just doing their job, with miserable hours of their own.

Special Agent Charlie Malone was at the elevator. He took the folder from the messenger and trotted over to Ryan.

“Hmm.” Ryan rubbed his hand over his face as he flipped the folder open. The first three lines jumped into his consciousness. “Oh, shit.”

“Anything wrong?” Hilton asked.

“Phone,” Ryan said.

"This way, sir." Hilton led him to the Secret Service upstairs cubbyhole office.

Ryan lifted the phone and said, "Mary Pat at Langley." It didn't take long. "MP, Jack here. What gives?"

"It's just what you see. They're talking about fueling their intercontinental missiles. At least two of them are aimed at Washington."

"Great. Now what?"

"I just tasked a KH-11 to give their launch sites a close look. There's two of them, Jack. The one we need to look at is Xuanhua. That's at about forty degrees, thirty-eight minutes north, one hundred fifteen degrees, six minutes east. Twelve silos with CCC-4 missiles inside. This is one of the newer ones, and it replaced older sites that stored the missiles in caves or tunnels. Straight, vertical, in-the-ground silos. The entire missile field is about six miles by six miles. The silos are well separated so that a single nuclear impact can't take out any two missiles," MP explained, manifestly looking at overheads of the place as she spoke.

"How serious is this?"

A new voice came on the line. "Jack, it's Ed. We have to take this one seriously. The naval bombardment on their coast might have set them off. The damned fools think we might be attempting a no-shit invasion."

"What? What with?" the President demanded.

"They can be very insular thinkers, Jack, and they're not always logical by our rules," Ed Foley told him.

"Great. Okay. You two come on down here. Bring your best China guy with you."

"On the way," the DCI replied.

Ryan hung up and looked at Joe Hilton. "Wake everybody up. The Chinese may be going squirrelly on us."

The drive up the Potomac River hadn't been easy. Captain Blandy hadn't wanted to wait for a river pilot to help guide him up the river—naval officers tend to be overly proud when it comes to navigating their ships—and that had made it quite tense for the bridge watch. Rarely was the channel more than a few hundred yards wide, and cruisers are deepwater ships, not riverboats. Once they came within a few yards of a mudbank, but the navigator got them clear of it with a timely rudder order. The ship's radar was up and running—people were actually afraid to turn off the billboard system because it, like most mechanical contrivances, preferred operation to idleness, and switching it off might have broken something. As it was, the RF energy radiating from the four huge billboard transmitters on *Gettysburg's* superstructure had played hell with numerous television sets on the way northwest, but that couldn't be

helped, and probably nobody noticed the cruiser in the river anyway, not at this time of night. Finally, *Gettysburg* glided to a halt within sight of the Woodrow Wilson bridge, and had to wait for traffic to be halted on the D.C. Beltway. This resulted in the usual road rage, but at this time of night there weren't that many people to be outraged, though one or two did honk their horns when the ship passed through the open drawbridge span. Perhaps they were New Yorkers, Captain Blandy thought. From there it was another turn to starboard into the Anacostia River, through another drawbridge, this one named for John Philip Sousa—accompanied by more surprised looks from the few drivers out—and then a gentle docking alongside the pier that was also home to USS *Barry,* a retired destroyer relegated to museum status.

The line handlers on the pier, Captain Blandy saw, were mainly civilians. Wasn't that a hell of a thing?

The "evolution"—that, Gregory had learned, was what the Navy called parking a boat—had been interesting but unremarkable to observe, though the skipper looked quite relieved to have it all behind him.

"Finished with engines," the CO told the engine room, and let out a long breath, shared, Gregory could see, by the entire bridge crew.

"Captain?" the retired Army officer asked.

"Yes?"

"What is this all about, exactly?"

"Well, isn't it kinda obvious?" Blandy responded. "We have a shooting war with the Chinese. They have ICBMs, and I suppose the SecDef wants to be able to shoot them down if they loft one at Washington. SACLANT is also sending an Aegis to New York, and I'd bet Pacific Fleet has some looking out for Los Angeles and San Francisco. Probably Seattle, too. There's a lot of ships there anyway, and a good weapons locker. Do you have spare copies of your software?"

"Sure."

"Well, we'll have a phone line from the dock in a few minutes. We'll see if there's a way for you to upload it to other interested parties."

"Oh," Dr. Gregory observed quietly. He really should have thought that one all the way through.

This is RED WOLF FOUR. I have visual contact with the Chinese advance guard," the regimental commander called on the radio. "About ten kilometers south of us."

"Very well," Sinyavskiy replied. Just where Bondarenko and his American helpers said they were. Good. There were two other general officers in his command post, the CGs of 201st and 80th Motor Rifle divisions, and the commander of the 34th was supposed to be on his way as well, though 94th

had turned and reoriented itself to attack east from a point about thirty kilometers to the south.

Sinyavskiy took the old, sodden cigar from his mouth and tossed it out into the grass, pulling another from his tunic pocket and lighting it. It was a Cuban cigar, and superb in its mildness. His artillery commander was on the other side of the map table—just a couple of planks on saw-horses, which was perfect for the moment. Close by were holes dug should the Chinese send some artillery fire their way, and most important of all, the wires which led to his communications station, set a full kilometer to the west—that was the first thing the Chinese would try to shoot at, because they'd expect him to be there. In fact the only humans present were four officers and seven sergeants, in armored personnel carriers dug into the ground for safety. It was their job to repair anything the Chinese might manage to break.

"So, Comrades, they come right into our parlor, eh?" he said for those around him. Sinyavskiy had been a soldier for twenty-six years. Oddly, he was not the son of a soldier. His father was an instructor in geology at Moscow State University, but ever since the first war movie he'd seen, this was the profession he'd craved to join. He'd done all the work, attended all the schools, studied history with the manic attention common in the Russian army, and the Red Army before it. This would be his Battle of the Kursk Bulge, remembering the battle where Vatutin and Rokossovskiy had smashed Hitler's last attempt to retake the offensive in Russia—where his mother country had begun the long march that had ended at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. There, too, the Red Army had been the recipient of brilliant intelligence information, letting them know the time, place, and character of the German attack, and so allowing them to prepare so well that even the best of the German field commanders, Erich von Manstein, could do no more than break his teeth on the Russian steel.

And so it will be here, Sinyavskiy promised himself. The only unsatisfactory part was that he was stuck here in this camouflaged tent instead of in the line with his men, but, no, he wasn't a captain anymore, and his place was here, to fight the battle on a goddamned printed map.

"RED WOLF, you will commence firing when the advance guard gets to within eight hundred meters."

"Eight hundred meters, Comrade General," the commander of his tank regiment acknowledged. "I can see them quite clearly now."

"What exactly can you see?"

"It appears to be a battalion-strength formation, principally Type 90 tanks, some Type 98s but not too many of those, spread out as though they went to sub-unit commanders. Numerous tracked personnel carriers. I do not see any artillery-spotting vehicles, however. What do we know of their artillery?"

"It's rolling, not set up for firing. We're watching them," Sinyavskiy assured him.

"Excellent. They are now two kilometers off by my range finder."

“Stand by.”

“I will do that, Command.”

“I hate waiting,” Sinyavskiy commented to the officers around him. They all nodded, having the same prejudice. He hadn’t seen Afghanistan in his younger years, having served mainly in 1st and 2nd Guards Tank armies in Germany back then, preparing to fight against NATO, an event which blessedly had never taken place. This was his very first experience with real combat, and it hadn’t really started yet, and he was ready for it to start.

Okay, if they light those missiles up, what can we do about it?” Ryan asked.

“If they launch ’em, there’s not a goddamned thing but run for cover,” Secretary Bretano said.

“That’s good for us. We’ll all get away. What about the people who live in Washington, New York, and all the other supposed targets?” POTUS asked.

“I’ve ordered some Aegis cruisers to the likely targets that are near the water,” THUNDER went on. “I had one of my people from TRW look at the possibility of upgrading the missile systems to see if they might do an intercept. He’s done the theoretical work, and he says it looks good on the simulators, but that’s a ways from a practical test, of course. It’s better than nothing, though.”

“Okay, where are the ships?”

“There’s one here now,” Bretano answered.

“Oh? When did that happen?” Robby Jackson asked.

“Less than an hour ago. *Gettysburg.* There’s another one going to New York —and San Francisco and Los Angeles. Also Seattle, though that’s not really a target as far as we know. The software upgrade is going out to them to get their missiles reprogrammed.”

“Okay, that’s something. What about taking those missiles out, before they can launch?” Ryan asked next.

“The Chinese silos have recently been upgraded in protection, steel armor on the concrete covers—shaped like a Chinese coolie hat, it will probably deflect most bombs, but not the deep penetrators, the GBU-27s we used on the railroad bridges—”

“If they have any left over there. Better ask Gus Wallace,” the Vice President warned.

“What do you mean?” Bretano asked.

“I mean we never made all that many of them, and the Air Force must have dropped about forty last night.”

“I’ll check that,” SecDef promised.

“What if he doesn’t?” Jack asked.

“Then either we get some more in one big hurry, or we think up something else,” TOMCAT replied.

"Like what, Robby?"

"Hell, send in a special-operations team and blow them the fuck up," the former fighter pilot suggested.

"I wouldn't much want to try that myself," Mickey Moore observed.

"Beats the hell out of a five-megaton bomb going off on Capitol Hill, Mickey," Jackson shot back. "Look, the preferred thing to do is find out if Gus Wallace has the right bombs. It's a long stretch for the Black Jets, but you can tank them going and coming—and put fighters up to protect the tankers. It's complicated, but we practice that sort of thing. If he doesn't have the goddamned bombs, we fly them to him, assuming there are any. You know, weapons storage isn't a cornucopia, guys. There's a finite, discrete number for every item in the inventory."

"General Moore," Ryan said, "call General Wallace and find out, right now, if you would."

"Yes, sir." Moore stood and left the Situation Room.

"Look," Ed Foley said, pointing to the TV. "It's started."

The wood line erupted in a sheet of flame two kilometers across. The sight caused the eyes of the Chinese tankers to flare, but most of the front rank of tank crews didn't have time for much more than that. Of the thirty tanks in that line, only three escaped immediate destruction. It was little better for the personnel carriers interspersed with them.

"You may commence firing, Colonel," Sinyavskiy told his artillery commander.

The command was relayed at once, and the ground shook beneath their feet.

It was spectacular to see on the computer terminal. The Chinese had walked straight into the ambush, and the effect of the Russian opening volley was ghastly to behold.

Major Tucker took in a deep breath as he saw several hundred men lose their lives.

"Back to their artillery," Bondarenko ordered.

"Yes, sir." Tucker complied at once, altering the focus of the high-altitude camera and finding the Chinese artillery. It was mainly of the towed sort, being pulled behind trucks and tractors. They were a little slow getting the word. The first Russian shells were falling around them before any effort was made to stop the trucks and lift the limbers off the towing hooks, and for all that the Chinese gunners worked rapidly.

But theirs was a race against Death, and Death had a head start. Tucker

watched one gun crew struggle to manhandle their 122-mm gun into a firing position. The gunners were loading the weapon when three shells landed close enough to upset the weapon and kill more than half their number. Zooming in the camera, he could see one private writhing on the ground, and there was no one close by to offer him assistance.

"It is a miserable business, isn't it?" Bondarenko observed quietly.

"Yeah," Tucker agreed. When a tank blew up it was easy to tell yourself that a tank was just a *thing*. Even though you knew that three or four human beings were inside, you couldn't see them. As a fighter pilot never killed a fellow pilot, but only shot down his aircraft, so Tucker adhered to the Air Force ethos that death was something that happened to objects rather than people. Well, that poor bastard with blood on his shirt wasn't a *thing*, was he? He backed off the camera, taking a wider field that permitted godlike distancing from the up-close-and-personal aspects of the observation.

"Better that they should have remained in their own country, Major," the Russian explained to him.

Jesus, what a mess," Ryan said. He'd seen death up-close-and-personal himself in his time, having shot people who had at the time been quite willing to shoot him, but that didn't make this imagery any the more palatable. Not by a long fucking shot. The President turned.

"Is this going out, Ed?" he asked the DCI.

"Ought to be," Foley replied.

And it was, on a URL—"Uniform Resource Locator" in 'Netspeak-called http://www.darkstarfeed.cia.gov/siberiabattle/realtime.ram. It didn't even have to be advertised. Some 'Net crawlers stumbled onto it in the first five minutes, and the "hits" from people looking at the "streaming video" site climbed up from 0 to 10 in a matter of three minutes. Then some of them must have ducked into chat rooms to spread the word. The monitoring program for the URL at CIA headquarters also kept track of the locations of the people logging into it. The first Asian country, not unexpectedly, was Japan, and the fascination of the people there in military operations guaranteed a rising number of hits. The video also included audio, the real-time comments of Air Force personnel giving some perverse color-commentary back to their comrades in uniform. It was sufficiently colorful that Ryan commented on it.

"It's not meant for anyone much over the age of thirty to hear," General Moore said, coming back into the room.

"What's the story on the bombs?" Jackson asked at once.

"He's only got two of them," Moore replied. "The nearest others are at the

factory, Lockheed-Martin, Sunnyvale. They're just doing a production run right now."

"Uh-oh," Robby observed. "Back to Plan B."

"It might have to be a special operation, then, unless, Mr. President, that is, you are willing to authorize a strike with cruise missiles."

"What kind of cruise missiles?" Ryan asked, knowing the answer even so.

"Well, we have twenty-eight of them on Guam with W-80 warheads. They're little ones, only about three hundred pounds. It has two settings, one-fifty or one-seventy kilotons."

"Thermonuclear weapons, you mean?"

General Moore let out a breath before replying. "Yes, Mr. President."

"That's the only option we have for taking those missiles out?" He didn't have to say that he would not voluntarily launch a nuclear strike.

"We could go in with conventional smart bombs—GBU- 10s and -15s. Gus has enough of those, but not deep penetrators, and the protection on the silos would have a fair chance at deflecting the weapon away from the target. Now, that might not matter. The CSS-4 missiles are delicate bastards, and the impact even of a miss could scramble their guidance systems ... but we couldn't be sure."

"I'd prefer that those things not fly."

"Jack, nobody wants them to fly," the Vice President said. "Mickey, put together a plan. We need *something* to take them out, and we need it in one big fuckin' hurry."

"I'll call SOCOM about it, but, hell, they're down in Tampa."

"Do the Russians have special-operations people?" Ryan asked.

"Sure, it's called Spetsnaz."

"And some of these missiles are targeted on Russia?"

"It certainly appears so, yes, sir," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs confirmed.

"Then they owe us one, and they damned well owe it to themselves," Jack said, reaching for a phone. "I need to talk to Sergey Golovko in Moscow," he told the operator.

The American President," his secretary said.

"Ivan Emmetovich!" Golovko said in hearty greeting. "The reports from Siberia are good."

"I know, Sergey, I'm watching it live now myself. Want to do it yourself?"

"It is possible?"

"You have a computer with a modem?"

"One cannot exist without the damned things," the Russian replied.

Ryan read off the URL identifier. "Just log onto that. We're putting the feed from our Dark Star drones onto the Internet."

"Why is that, Jack?" Golovko asked at once.

"Because as of two minutes ago, one thousand six hundred and fifty Chinese citizens are watching it, and the number is going up fast."

"A political operation against them, yes? You wish to destabilize their government?"

"Well, it won't hurt our purposes if their citizens find out what's happening, will it?"

"The virtues of a free press. I must study this. Very clever, Ivan Emmetovich."

"That's not why I called."

"Why is that, *Tovarisch Prezidyent?"* the SVR chairman asked, with sudden concern at the change in his tone. Ryan was not one to conceal his feelings well.

"Sergey, we have a very adverse indication from their Politburo. I'm faxing it to you now," he heard. "I'll stay on the line while you read it."

Golovko wasn't surprised to see the pages arrive on his personal fax machine. He had Ryan's personal numbers, and the Americans had his. It was just one way for an intelligence service to demonstrate its prowess in a harmless way. The first sheets to come across were the English translation of the Chinese ideographs that came through immediately thereafter.

Sergey, I sent you our original feed in case your linguists or psychologists are better than ours," the President said, with an apologetic glance at Dr. Sears. The CIA analyst waved it off. "They have twelve CSS-4 missiles, half aimed at you, half at us. I think we need to do something about those things. They may not be entirely rational, the way things are going now."

"And your shore bombardment might have pushed them to the edge, Mr. President," the Russian said over the speakerphone. "I agree, this is a matter of some concern. Why don't you bomb the things with your brilliant bombs from your magical invisible bombers."

"Because we're out of bombs, Sergey. They ran out of the sort they need."

"Nichevo" was the reaction.

"You should see it from my side. My people are thinking about a commando-type operation."

"I see. Let me consult with some of my people. Give me twenty minutes, Mr.

President."

"Okay, you know where to reach me." Ryan punched the kill button on the phone and looked sourly at the tray of coffee things. "One more cup of this shit and I'm going to turn into an urn myself."

The only reason he was alive now, he was sure, was that he'd withdrawn to the command section for 34th Army. His tank division was being roughly handled. One of his battalions had been immolated in the first minute of the battle. Another was now trying to maneuver east, trying to draw the Russians out into a running battle for which his men were trained. The division's artillery had been halved at best by Russian massed fire, and 34th Army's advance was now a thing of the past. His current task was to try and use his two mechanized divisions to establish a base of fire from which he could try to wrest back control of the battle. But every time he tried to move a unit, something happened to it, as though the Russians were reading his mind.

"Wa, pull what's left of Three-Oh-Second back to the ten o'clock start-line, and do it now!" he ordered.

"But Marshal Luo won't—"

"And if he wishes to relieve me, he can, but he isn't here *now,* is he?" Ge snarled back. "Give the order!"

"Yes, Comrade General."

With this toy in our hands, the Germans would not have made it as far as Minsk," Bondarenko said.

"Yeah, it helps to know what the other guy's doing, doesn't it?"

"It's like being a god on Mount Olympus. Who thought this thing up?"

"Oh, a couple of people at Northrop started the idea, with an airplane called Tacit Rainbow, looked like a cross between a snow shovel and a French baguette, but it was manned, and the endurance wasn't so good."

"Whoever it is, I would like to buy him a bottle of good vodka," the Russian general said. "This is saving the lives of my soldiers."

And beating the living shit out of the Chinese, Tucker didn't add. But combat was that sort of game, wasn't it?

"Do you have any other aircraft up?"

"Yes, sir. Grace Kelly's back up to cover First Armored."

"Show me."

Tucker used his mouse to shrink one video window and then opened another. General Diggs had a second terminal up and running, and Tucker just

stole its take. There were what looked like two brigades operating, moving north at a measured pace and wrecking every Chinese truck and track they could find. The battlefield, if you could call it that, was a mass of smoke columns from shot-up trucks, reminding Tucker of the vandalized Kuwaiti oil fields of 1991. He zoomed in to see that most of the work was being done by the Bradleys. What targets there were simply were not worthy of a main-gun round from the tanks. The Abrams just rode herd on the lighter infantry carriers, doing protective overwatch as they ground mercilessly forward. The major slaved one camera to his terminal and went scouting around for more action ...

"Who's this?" Tucker asked.

"That must be BOYAR," Bondarenko said.

It was what looked like twenty-five T-55 tanks advancing on line, and these tanks were using their main guns ... against trucks and some infantry carriers ...

Load HEAT," Lieutenant Komanov ordered. "Target track, one o'clock! Range two thousand."

"I have him," the gunner said a second later.

"Fire!"

"Firing," the gunner said, squeezing the trigger. The old tank rocked backwards from the shot. Gunner and commander watched the tracer arcing out ...

"Over, damn it, too high. Load another HEAT."

The loader slammed another round into the breech in a second: "Loaded!"

"I'll get the bastard this time," the gunner promised, adjusting his sights down a hair. The poor bastard out there didn't even know he'd been shot at the first time ...

"Fire!"

"Firing ..."

Yet another recoil, and ...

"Hit! Good shooting Vanya!"

Three Company was doing well. The time spent in gunnery practice was paying off handsomely, Komanov thought. This was much better than sitting in a damned bunker and waiting for them to come to you ...

What is that?" Marshal Luo asked.

"Comrade Marshal, come here and see," the young lieutenant colonel urged.

“What is this?” the Defense Minister asked with a trailing-off voice ... *“Cao ni ma,”* he breathed. Then he thundered: *“What the hell is this?”*

“Comrade Marshal, this is a web site, from the Internet. It purports to be a live television program from the battlefield in Siberia.” The young field-grade officer was almost breathless. “It shows the Russians fighting Thirty-fourth Shock Army ...”

“And?”

“And they’re slaughtering our men, according to this,” the lieutenant colonel went on.

“Wait a minute—what—how is this possible?” Luo demanded.

“Comrade, this heading here says *darkstar*. ‘Dark Star’ is the name of an American unmanned aerial vehicle, a reconnaissance drone, reported to be a stealth aircraft used to collect tactical intelligence. Thus, it appears that they are using this to feed information, and putting the information on the Internet as a propaganda tool.” He had to say it that way, and it was, in fact, the way he thought about it.

“Tell me more.”

The officer was an intelligence specialist. “This explains the success they’ve had against us, Comrade Marshal. They can see everything we do, almost before we do it. It’s as though they listen to our command circuit, or even listen into our staff and planning meetings. There is no defense against this,” the staff officer concluded.

“You young defeatist!” the marshal raged.

“Perhaps there is a way to overcome this advantage, but I do not know what it is. Systems like this can see in the dark as well as they can in the sunlight. Do you understand, Comrade Marshal? With this tool they can see everything we do, see it long before we approach their formations. It eliminates any possibility of surprise ... see here,” he said, pointing at the screen. “One of Thirty-fourth Army’s mechanized divisions is maneuvering east. They are here”—he pointed to a printer map on the table—“and the enemy is here. If our troops get to this point unseen, then perhaps they can hit the Russians on their left flank, but it will take two hours to get there. For the Russians to get one of their units to a blocking position will take but one hour. That is the advantage,” he concluded.

“The Americans do that to us?”

“Clearly, the feed on the Internet is from America, from their CIA.”

“This is how the Russians have countered us, then?”

“Clearly. They’ve outguessed us at every turn today. This must be how they do it.”

“Why do the Americans put this information out where everyone can see it?” Luo wondered. The obvious answer didn’t occur to him. Information given out to the public had to be carefully measured and flavored for the peasants

and workers to draw the proper conclusions from it.

"Comrade, it will be difficult to say on state television that things are going well when this is available to anyone with a computer."

"Ahh." Less a sound of satisfaction than one of sudden dread. "Anyone can see this?"

"Anyone with a computer and a telephone line." The young lieutenant colonel looked up, only to see Luo's receding form.

"I'm surprised he didn't shoot me," the officer observed.

"He still might," a full colonel told him. "But I think you frightened him." He looked at the wall clock. It was sixteen hours, four in the afternoon.

"Well, it is a concern."

"You young fool. Don't you see? Now he can't even conceal the truth from the Politburo."

Hello, Yuri," lark said. It was different to be in Moscow in time of war. The mood of the people on the street was unlike anything he'd ever seen. They were concerned and serious—you didn't go to Russia to see the smiling people any more than you went to England for the coffee—but there was something else, too. Indignation. Anger ... determination? Television coverage of the war was not as strident and defiant as he'd expected. The new Russian news media were trying to be even-handed and professional. There was commentary to the effect that the army's inability to stop the Chinese cold spoke ill of their country's national cohesion. Others lamented the demise of the Soviet Union, whom China would not have dared to threaten, much less attack. More asked what the hell was the use of being in NATO if none of the other countries came to the aid of their supposed new ally.

"We told the television people that if they told anyone of the American division now in Siberia, we'd shoot them, and of course they believed us," Lieutenant General Kirillin said with a smile. That was something new for Clark and Chavez to see. He hadn't smiled much in the past week.

"Things looking up?" Chavez inquired.

"Bondarenko has stopped them at the gold mine. They will not even see that, if my information is correct. But there is something else," he added seriously.

"What's that, Yuriy?" Clark asked.

"We are concerned that they might launch their nuclear weapons."

"Oh, shit," Ding observed. "How serious is that?"

"It comes from your President. Golovko is speaking with President Grushavoy right now."

"And? How do they plan to go about it? Smart bombs?" John asked.

"No, Washington has asked us to go in with a special-operations team," Kirillin said.

"What the hell?" John gasped. He pulled his satellite phone out of his pocket and looked for the door. "Excuse me, General. E.T. phone home."

You want to say that again, Ed?" Foley heard.

"You heard me. They've run out of the bombs they need. Evidently, it's a pain in the ass to fly bombs to where the bombers are."

"Fuck!" the CIA officer observed, out in the parking lot of this Russian army officers' club. The encryption on his phone didn't affect the emotion in his voice. "Don't tell me, since RAINBOW is a NATO asset, and Russia's part of NATO now, and since you're going to be asking the fucking Russians to front this operation, in the interest of North Atlantic solidarity, we're going to get to go and play, too, right?"

"Unless you choose not to, John. I know you can't go yourself. Combat's a kid's game, but you have some good kids working for you."

"Ed, you expect me to send my people in on something like that and I stay home and fucking knit socks?" Clark demanded heatedly.

"That's your call to make. You're the RAINBOW commander."

"How is this supposed to work? You expect us to jump in?"

"Helicopters—"

"Russian helicopters. No thanks, buddy, I—"

"Our choppers, John. First Armored Division had enough and they're the right kind ..."

They want me to do *what?"* Dick Boyle asked.

"You heard me."

"What about fuel?"

"Your fueling point's right about here," Colonel Masterman said, holding the just-downloaded satellite photo. "Hilltop west of a place called Chicheng. Nobody lives there, and the numbers work out."

"Yeah, except out flight path takes us within ten miles of this fighter base."

"Eight F-117s are going to hit it while you're on the way in. Ought to close down their runways for a good three days, they figure."

"Dick," Diggs said, "I don't know what the problem is exactly, but Washington is really worried that Joe is going to launch his ICBMs at us at home, and Gus Wallace doesn't have the right bombs to take them out

reliably. That means a special-ops force, down and dirty. It's a strategic mission, Dick. Can you do it?"

Colonel Boyle looked at the map, measuring distance in his mind ... "Yeah, we'll have to mount the outrigger wings on the Blackhawks and load up to the max on gas, but, yeah, we got the range to get there. Have to refuel on the way back, though."

"Okay, can you use your other birds to ferry the fuel out?"

Boyle nodded. "Barely."

"If necessary, the Russians can land a Spetsnaz force anywhere through here with additional fuel, so they tell me. This part of China is essentially unoccupied, according to the maps."

"What about opposition on the ground?"

"There is a security force in the area. We figure maybe a hundred people on duty, total, say a squad at each silo. Can you get some Apaches out there to run interference?"

"Yeah, they can get that far, if they travel light." *Just cannon rounds and 2.75-inch rockets,* he thought.

"Then get me your mission requirements," General Diggs said. It wasn't quite an order. If he said it was impossible, then Diggs couldn't make him do it. But Boyle couldn't let his people go out and do something like this without being there to command them.

The MI-24s finished things off. The Russian doctrine for their attack helicopters wasn't too different from how they used their tanks. Indeed, the MI-24—called the Hind by NATO, but strangely unnamed by the Russians themselves—was referred to as a flying tank. Using AT-6 Spiral missiles, they finished off a Chinese tank battalion in twenty minutes of jump and shoot, sustaining only two losses in the process. The sun was setting now, and what had been Thirty-fourth Shock Army was wreckage. What few vehicles had survived the day were pulling back, usually with wounded men clinging to their decks.

In his command post, General Sinyavskiy was all smiles. Vodka was snorted by all. His 265th Motor Rifle Division had halted and thrown back a force more than double its size, suffering fewer than three hundred dead in the process. The TV news crews were finally allowed out to where the soldiers were, and he delivered the briefing, paying frequent compliments to his theater commander, Gennady Iosefovich Bondarenko, for his cool head and faith in his subordinates. "He never lost his nerve," Sinyavskiy said soberly. "And he allowed us to keep ours for when the time came. He is a Hero of Russia," the division commander concluded. "And so are many of my men!"

Thank you for that, Yuriy Andreyevich, and, yes, for that you will get your next star," the theater commander told the television screen. Then he turned to his staff. "Andrey Petrovich, what do we do tomorrow?"

"I think we will let Two-Six-Five start moving south. We will be the hammer, and Diggs will be the anvil. They still have a Type-A Group army largely intact to the south, the Forty-third. We will smash it starting day after tomorrow, but first we will maneuver it into a place of our choosing."

Bondarenko nodded. "Show me a plan, but first, I am going to sleep for a few hours."

"Yes, Comrade General."

CHAPTER 60

Skyrockets in Flight

It was the same Spetsnaz people they'd trained for the past month or so. Nearly everyone on the transport aircraft was a commissioned officer, doing sergeants' work, which had its good points and its bad ones. The really good thing was that they all spoke passable English. Of the RAINBOW troopers, only Ding Chavez and John Clark spoke conversational Russian.

The maps and photos came from SRV and CIA, the latter transmitted to the American Embassy in Moscow and messengered to the military airfield out of which they'd flown. They were in an Aeroflot airliner, fairly full with over a hundred passengers, all of them soldiers.

"I propose that we divide by nationalities," Kirillin said. "Vanya, you and your RAINBOW men take this one here. My men and I will divide the rest among us, using our existing squad structures."

"Looks okay, Yuriy. One target's pretty much as good as another. When will we be going in?"

"Just before dawn. Your helicopters must have good range to take us all the way down, then back with only one refueling."

"Well, that'll be the safe part of the mission."

"Except this fighter base at Anshan," Kirillin said. "We pass within twenty kilometers of it."

"Air Force is going to hit that, they tell me, Stealth fighters with smart bombs, they're gonna post-hole the runways before we drive past."

"Ah, that is a fine idea," Kirillin said.

"Kinda like that myself," Chavez said. "Well, Mr. C, looks like I get to be a soldier again. It's been a while."

"What fun," Clark observed. Oh, yeah, sitting in the back of a helicopter, going deep into Indian Country, where there were sure to be people with guns. Well, could be worse. Going in at dawn, at least the gomers on duty would be partly asleep, unless their boss was a real prick. *How tough was discipline in the People's Liberation Army?* John wondered. Probably pretty tough. Communist governments didn't encourage back talk.

"How, exactly, are we supposed to disable the missiles?" Ding asked.

"They're fueled by a ten-centimeter pipe—two of them, actually—from underground fueling tanks adjacent to the launch silo. First, we destroy the

pipes," Kirillin said. "Then we look for some way to access the missile silo itself. A simple hand grenade will suffice. These are delicate objects. They will not sustain much damage," the general said confidently.

"What if the warhead goes off?" Ding asked.

Kirillin actually laughed at that. "They will not, Domingo Stepanovich. These items are very secure in their arming procedures, for all the obvious reasons. And the sites themselves will not be designed to protect against a direct assault. They are designed to protect against nuclear blast, not a squad of engineer-soldiers. You can be sure of that."

Hope you're right on that one, fella, Chavez didn't say aloud.

"You seem knowledgeable on this subject, Yuriy." "Vanya, this mission is one Spetsnaz has practiced more than once. We Russians have thought from time to time about taking these missiles—how you say? Take them out of play, yes?"

"Not a bad idea at all, Yuriy. Not my kind of weapons," Clark said. He really did prefer to do his killing close enough to see the bastard's face. Old habits died hard, and a telescopic sight was just as good as a knife in that respect. Much better. A rifle bullet didn't make people flop around and make noise the way a knife across the throat did. But death was supposed to be administered one at a time, not whole cities at once. It just wasn't tidy or selective enough.

Chavez looked at his Team-2 troopers. They didn't look overtly tense, but good soldiers did their best to hide such feelings. Of their number, only Ettore Falcone wasn't a career soldier, but instead a cop from the Italian Carabinieri, which was about halfway between military and police. Chavez went over to see him.

"How you doing, BIG BiRD?" Ding asked.

"It is tense, this mission, no?" Falcone replied.

"It might be. You never really know until you get there."

The Italian shrugged. "As with raids on mafiosi, sometimes you kick the door and there is nothing but men drinking wine and playing cards. Sometimes they have *machinapistoli,* but you must kick the door to find out."

"You do a lot of those?"

"Eight," Falcone replied. "I am usually the first one through the door because I am usually the best shot. But we have good men on the team there, and we have good men on the team here. It should go well, Domingo. I am tense, yes, but I will be all right. You will see," BIG BiRD ended. Chavez clapped him on the shoulder and went off to see Sergeant-Major Price.

"Hey, Eddie."

"Do we have a better idea for the mission yet?"

"Getting there. Looks like mainly a job for Paddy, blowing things up."

"Connolly's the best explosives man I've ever seen," Price observed. "But don't tell him that. His head's swollen enough already."

"What about Falcone?"

"Ettore?" Price shook his head. "I will be very surprised if he puts a foot wrong. He's a very good man, Ding, bloody machine—a robot with a pistol. That sort of confidence rarely goes bad. Things are too automatic for him."

"Okay, well, we've picked our target. It the north- and east-most silo. Looks like it's on fairly flat ground, two four-inch pipes running to it. Paddy'll blow those, and then try to find a way to pop the cover off the silo or otherwise find an access door—there's one on the overhead. Then get inside, toss a grenade to break the missile, and we get the hell out of Dodge City."

"Usual division of the squad?" Price asked. It had to be, but there was no harm in making sure.

Chavez nodded. "You take Paddy, Louis, Hank, and Dieter, and your team handles the actual destruction of the missile. I take the rest to do security and overwatch." Price nodded as Paddy Connolly came over.

"Are we getting chemical gear?"

"What?" Chavez asked.

"Ding, if we're going to be playing with bloody liquid-fueled missiles, we need chemical-warfare gear. The fuels for these things—you don't want to breathe the vapor, trust me. Red-fuming nitric acid, nitrogen tetroxide, hydrazine, that sort of thing. Those are bloody corrosive chemicals they use to power rockets, not like a pint of bitter at the Green Dragon, I promise you. And if the missiles are fueled and we blow them, well, you don't want to be close, and you *definitely* don't want to be downwind. The gas cloud will be bloody lethal, like what you chaps use in America to execute murderers, but rather less pleasant."

"I'll talk to John about that." Chavez made his way back forward.

Oh, shit," Ed Foley observed when he took the call. "Okay, John, I'll get hold of the Army on that one. How long 'til you're there?"

"Hour and a half to the airfield."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, sure, Ed, never been better."

Foley was struck by the tone. Clark had been CIA's official iceman for close to twenty years. He'd gone out on all manner of field operations without so much as a blink. But being over fifty—had it changed him, or did he just have a better appreciation of his own mortality now? The DCI figured that sort of thing came to everybody. "Okay, I'll get back to you." He switched phones. "I need General Moore."

"Yes, Director?" the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs said in greeting. "What can I do for you?"

“Our special-operations people say they need chemical-warfare gear for their mission and—”

“Way ahead of you, Ed. SOCOM told us the same thing. First Armored’s got the right stuff, and it’ll be waiting for them at the field.”

“Thanks, Mickey.”

“How secure are those silos?”

“The fueling pipes are right in the open. Blowing them up ought not to be a problem. Also, every silo has a metal access door for the maintenance people, and again, getting into it ought not to be a problem. My only concern is the site security force; there may be as much as a whole infantry battalion spread out down there. We’re waiting for a KH-11 to overfly the site now for a final check.”

“Well, Diggs is sending Apaches down to escort the raiding force. That’ll be an equalizer,” Moore promised. “What about the command bunker?”

“It’s centrally located, looks pretty secure, entirely underground, but we have a rough idea of the configuration from penetrating radar.” Foley referred to the KH-14 Lacrosse satellite. NASA had once published radar photos that had shown underground tributaries of the Nile that emptied into the Mediterranean Sea at Alexandria. But the capability hadn’t been developed for hydrologists. It had also spotted Soviet missile silos that the Russians had thought to be well camouflaged, and other sensitive facilities, and America had wanted to let the Russians know that the locations were not the least bit secret. “Mickey, how do you feel about the mission?”

“I wish we had enough bombs to do it,” General Moore replied honestly.

“Yeah,” the DCI agreed.

The Politburo meeting had gone past midnight.

“So, Marshal Luo,” Qian said, “things went badly yesterday. How badly? We need the truth here,” he concluded roughly. If nothing else, Qian Kun had made his name in the past few days, as the only Politburo member with the courage to take on the ruling clique, expressing openly the misgivings that they’d all felt. Depending on who won, it could mean his downfall, either all the way to death or simply to mere obscurity, but it seemed he didn’t care. That made him unusual among the men in the room, Fang Gan thought, and it made him a man to be respected.

“There was a major battle yesterday between 34th Shock Army and the Russians. It appears to have been a draw, and we are now maneuvering to press our advantage,” the Defense Minister told them. They were all suffering from fatigue in the room, and again the Finance Minister was the only one to rise to his words.

“In other words, a battle was fought, and we lost it,” Qian shot back.

"I didn't say that!" Luo responded angrily.

"But it is the truth, is it not?" Qian pressed the point.

"I told you the truth, Qian!" was the thundering reply.

"Comrade Marshal," the Finance Minister said in a reasonable tone, "you must forgive me for my skepticism. You see, much of what you've said in this room has turned out to be less than completely accurate. Now, I do not blame you for this. Perhaps you have been misinformed by some of your subordinates. All of us are vulnerable to that, are we not? But now is the time for a careful examination of objective realities. I am developing the impression that objective reality may be adverse to the economic and political objectives on whose pursuit this body has sent our country and its people. Therefore, we must *now* know what the facts are, and what also are the dangers facing us. So, Comrade Marshal, now, what is the military situation in Siberia?"

"It has changed somewhat," Luo admitted. "Not entirely to our benefit, but the situation is by no means lost." He'd chosen his words a little too carefully.

By no means lost, everyone around the table knew, was a delicate way of saying that a disaster had taken place. As in any society, if you knew the aphorisms, you could break the code. Success here was always proclaimed in the most positive terms. Setbacks were brushed aside without admission as something less than a stunning success. Failure was something to be blamed on individuals who'd failed in their duty—often to their great misfortune. But a real policy disaster was invariably explained as a situation that could yet be restored.

"Comrades, we still have our strengths," Zhang told them all. "Of all the great powers of the world, only we have intercontinental missiles, and no one will dare strike us hard while we do."

"Comrade, two days ago the Americans totally destroyed bridges so stout that one would have thought that only an angry deity could so much as scratch them. How secure can those missiles be, when we face a foe with invisible aircraft and magical weapons?" Qian asked. "I think we may be approaching the time when Shen might wish to approach America and Russia to propose an end to hostilities," he concluded.

"You mean surrender?" Zhang asked angrily. *"Never!"*

It had already started, though the Politburo members didn't know it yet. All over China, but especially in Beijing, people owning computers had logged onto the Internet. This was especially true of young people, and university students most of all.

The CIA feed, http://www.darkstarfeed.cia.gov/siberia-battle/realtime.ram, had attracted a global audience, catching even the international news organizations by surprise. CNN, Fox, and Europe's SkyNews had immediately pirated it, and then called in their expert commentators to explain things to

their viewers in the first continuous news coverage of an event since February of 1991. CIA had taken to pirating CNN in turn, and now available on the CIA website were live interviews from Chinese prisoners. They spoke freely, they were so shocked at their fates—stunned at how near they'd come to death, and so buoyantly elated at their equally amazing survival when so many of their colleagues had been less fortunate. That made for great verbosity, and it was also something that couldn't be faked. Any Chinese citizen could have spotted false propaganda, but equally, any could discern this sort of truth from what he saw and heard.

The strange part was that Luo hadn't commented on the Internet phenomenon, thinking it irrelevant to the political facts of life in the PRC, but in that decision he'd made the greatest political misapprehension of his life.

They met in college dorm rooms first of all, amid clouds of cigarette smoke, chattering animatedly among themselves as students do, and like students everywhere they combined idealism with passion. That passion soon turned to resolve. By midnight, they were meeting in larger groups. Some leaders emerged, and, being leaders, they felt the need to take their associates somewhere. When the crowds mingled outside, the individual leaders of smaller groups met and started talking, and super-leaders emerged, rather like an instant military or political hierarchy, absorbing other groups into their own, until there were six principal leaders of a group of about fifteen hundred students. The larger group developed and then fed upon its own energy. Students everywhere are well supplied with piss and vinegar, and these Chinese students were no different. Some of the boys were there hoping to score with girls—another universal motivation for students—but the unifying factor here was rage at what had happened to their soldiers and their country, and even more rage at the lies that had gone out over State TV, lies so clearly and utterly refuted by the reality they saw over the Internet, a source they'd learned to trust.

There was only one place for them to go, Tiananmen Square, the "Square of Heavenly Peace," the psychological center of their country, and they were drawn there like iron filings to a magnet. The time of day worked for them. The police in Beijing, like police everywhere, worked twenty-four-hour days divided into three unequal shifts, and the shift most lightly manned was that from 2300 to 0700. Most people were asleep then, and as a direct result there was little crime to suppress, and so this shift was the smallest in terms of manning, and also composed of those officers loved the least by their commanders, because no man in his right mind prefers the vampire life of wakefulness in darkness to that in the light of day. And so the few police on duty were those who had failed to distinguish themselves in their professional skills, or were disliked by their captains, and returned the compliment by not taking their duties with sufficient gravity.

The appearance of the first students in the square was barely noted by the two policemen there. Their main duties involved directing traffic and/or telling (frequently inebriated) foreign tourists how to stumble back to their hotels, and the only danger they faced was usually that of being blinded by the flashes of foreign cameras held by oafishly pleasant but drunken *gwai.*

This new situation took them totally by surprise, and their first reaction was to do nothing but watch. The presence of so many young people in the square was unusual, but they weren't *doing* anything overtly unlawful at the moment, and so the police just looked on in a state of bemusement. They didn't even report what was going on because the watch captain was an ass who wouldn't have known what to do about it anyway.

What if they strike at our nuclear arms?" Interior Minister Tong Jie asked.

"They already have," Zhang reminded them. "They sank our missile submarine, you will recall. If they also strike at our land-based missiles, then it would mean they plan to attack us as a nation, not just our armed forces, for then they would have nothing to hold them back. It would be a grave and deliberate provocation, is that not so, Shen?"

The Foreign Minister nodded. "It would be an unfriendly act."

"How do we defend against it?" Tan Deshi asked.

"The missile field is located far from the borders. Each is in a heavily constructed concrete silo," Defense Minister Luo explained. "Moreover, we have recently fortified them further with steel armor to deflect bombs that might fall on them. The best way to add to their defense would be to deploy surface-to-air missiles."

"And if the Americans use their stealthy bombers, then what?" Tan asked.

"The defense against that is passive, the steel hats we put on the silos. We have troops there—security personnel of Second Artillery Command—but they are there only for site security against intruders on the ground. If such an attack should be made, we should launch them. The principle is to use them or lose them. An attack against our strategic weapons would have to be a precursor to an attack against our nationhood. That is our one trump card," Luo explained. "The one thing that even the Americans truly fear."

"Well, it should be," Zhang Han Sen agreed. "That is how we tell the Americans where they must stop and what they must do. In fact, it might now be a good time to tell the Americans that we have those missiles, and the willingness to use them if they press us too hard."

"Threaten the Americans with nuclear arms?" Fang asked. "Is that wise? They know of our weapons, surely. An overt threat against a powerful nation is most unwise."

"They must know that there are lines they may not cross," Zhang insisted. "They can hurt us, yes, but we can hurt them, and this is one weapon against which they have no defense, and their sentimentality for their people works for us, not them. It is time for America to regard us as an equal, not a minor country whose power they can blithely ignore."

"I repeat, Comrade," Fang said, "that would be a most unwise act. When someone points a gun at your head, you do not try to frighten him."

“Fang, you have been my friend for many years, but in this you are wrong. It is *we* who hold that pistol now. The Americans only respect strength controlled by resolve. This will make them think. Luo, are the missiles ready for launch?”

The Defense Minister shook his head. “No, yesterday we did not agree to ready them. To do so takes about two hours—to load them with fuel. After that, they can be kept in a ready condition for about forty-eight hours. Then you defuel them, service them—it takes about four hours to do that—and you can refuel them again. We could easily maintain half of them in a ready-launch condition indefinitely.”

“Comrades, I think it is in our interest to ready the missiles for flight.”

“No!” Fang countered. “That will be seen by the Americans as a dangerous provocation, and provoking them this way is madness!”

“And we should have Shen remind the Americans that we have such weapons, and they do not,” Zhang went on.

“That invites an attack on us!” Fang nearly shouted. “They do not have rockets, yes, but they have other ways of attacking us, and if we do that now, when a war is already under way, we guarantee a response.”

“I think not, Fang,” Zhang replied. “They will not gamble millions of their citizens against all of ours. They have not the strength for such gambling.”

“Gambling, you say. Do we gamble with the life of our country? Zhang, you are mad. This is lunacy,” Fang insisted.

“I do not have a vote at this table,” Qian observed. “But I have been a Party member all of my adult life, and I have served the People’s Republic well, I think. It is our job here to build a country, not destroy it. What have we done here? We’ve turned China into a thief, a highway robber—and a *failed* highway robber at that! Luo has said it. We have lost our play for riches, and now we must adjust to that. We can recover from the damage we have done to our country and its people. That recovery will require humility on our part, not blustering defiance. To threaten the Americans now is an act of weakness, not strength. It’s the act of an impotent man trying to show off his *gau.* It will be seen by them as a foolish and reckless act.”

“If we are to survive as a nation—if *we* are to survive as the rulers of a powerful China,” Zhang countered, “we must let the Americans know that they cannot push us further. Comrades, make no mistake. Our lives lie on this table.” And that focused the discussion. “I do not suggest that we launch a nuclear strike on America. I propose that we demonstrate to America our resolve, and if they press us too far, then we will punish them—and the Russians. Comrades, I propose that we fuel up our missiles, to place them in a ready posture, and then have Shen tell the Americans that there are limits beyond which we cannot be pushed without the gravest possible consequences.”

“No!” Fang retorted. “That is tantamount to the threat of nuclear war. *We must not do such a thing!”*

"If we do not, then we are all doomed," said Tan Deshi of the Ministry of State Security. "I am sorry, Fang, but Zhang is correct here. Those are the only weapons with which we can hold the Americans back. They will be tempted to strike at them—and if they do ..."

"If they do, then we must use them, because if they take those weapons away from us, then they can strike us at will, and destroy all we have built in sixty years," Zhang concluded. "I call a vote."

Suddenly and irrationally, Fang thought, the meeting had struck out on a path with no logic or direction, leading to disaster. But he was the only one who saw this, as for the first time in his life he took a stand against the others. The meeting finally broke up. The Politburo members drove directly home. None of them passed through Tiananmen Square on the way, and all of them fell rapidly asleep.

There were twenty-five UH-60A Blackhawks and fifteen Apaches on the ramp. Every one had stubby wings affixed to the fuselage. Those on the Blackhawks were occupied with fuel tanks. The Apaches had both fuel and rockets. The flight crews were grouped together, looking at maps.

Clark took the lead. He was dressed in his black Ninja gear, and a soldier directed him and Kirillin—he was in the snowflake camouflage used by Russian airborne troops—to Colonel Boyle.

"Howdy, Dick Boyle."

"I'm John Clark, and this is Lieutenant General Yuriy Kirillin. I'm RAINBOW," John explained. "He's Spetsnaz."

Boyle saluted. "Well, I'm your driver, gentlemen. The objective is seven hundred sixteen miles away. We can just about make it with the fuel we're carrying, but we're going to have to tank up on the way back. We're doing that right here"—he pointed to a spot on the navigation chart—"hilltop west of this little town named Chicheng. We got lucky. Two C-130s are going to do bladder drops for us. There will be a fighter escort for top cover, F-15s, plus some F-16s to go after any radars along the way, and when we get to about here, eight F-117s are going to trash this fighter base at Anshan. That should take care of any Chinese fighter interference. Now, this missile base has an associated security force, supposed to be battalion strength, in barracks located here"—this time it was a satellite photo—"and five of my Apaches are going to take that place down with rockets. The others will be flying direct support. The only other question is, how close do you want us to put you on these missile silos?"

"Land right on top of the bastards," Clark told him, looking over at Kirillin.

"I agree, the closer the better."

Boyle nodded. "Fair enough. The helicopters all have numbers on them indicating the silo they're flying for. I'm flying lead, and I'm going right to this

one here."

"That means I go with you," Clark told him.

"How many?"

"Ten plus me."

"Okay, your chem gear's in the aircraft. Suit up, and we go. Latrine's that way," Boyle pointed. It would be better for every man to take a piss before the flight began. "Fifteen minutes."

Clark went that way, and so did Kirillin. Both old soldiers knew what they needed to do in most respects, and this one was as vital as loading a weapon.

"Have you been to China before, John?"

"Nope. Taiwan once, long ago, to get screwed, blued, and tattooed."

"No chance for that on this trip. We are both too old for this, you know."

"I know," Clark said, zipping himself up. "But you're not going to sit back here, are you?"

"A leader must be with his men, Ivan Timofeyevich."

"That is true, Yuriy. Good luck."

"They will not launch a nuclear attack on my country, or on yours," Kirillin promised. "Not while I live."

"You know, Yuriy, you might have been a good guy to have in 3rd SOG."

"And what is that, John?"

"When we get back and have a few drinks, I will tell you."

The troops suited up outside their designated helicopters. The U.S. Army chemical gear was bulky, but not grossly so. Like many American-issue items, it was an evolutionary development of a British idea, with charcoal inside the lining to absorb and neutralize toxic gas, and a hood that—

"We can't use our radios with this," Mike Pierce noted. "Screws up the antenna."

"Try this," Homer Johnston suggested, disconnecting the antenna and tucking it into the helmet cover.

"Good one, Homer," Eddie Price said, watching what he did and trying it himself. The American-pattern Kevlar helmet fit nicely into the hoods, which they left off in any case as too uncomfortable until they really needed it. That done, they loaded into their helicopters, and the flight crews spooled up the General Electric turboshaft engines. The Blackhawks lifted off. The special-operations troops were set in what were—for military aircraft—comfortable seats, held in place with four-point safety belts. Clark took the jump seat, aft and between the two pilots, and tied into the intercom.

"Who, exactly, are you?" Boyle asked.

"Well, I have to kill you after I tell you, but I'm CIA. Before that, Navy."

"SEAL?" Boyle asked.

"Budweiser badge and all. Couple years ago we set up this group, called RAINBOW, special operations, counterterror, that sort of thing."

"The amusement park job?"

"That's us."

"You had a -60 supporting you for that. Who's the driver?"

"Dan Malloy. Goes by 'BEAR' when he's driving. Know him?"

"Marine, right?"

"Yep." Clark nodded.

"Never met him, heard about him a little. I think he's in D.C. now."

"Yeah, when he left us he took over VMH-1."

"Flies the President?"

"Correct."

"Bummer," Boyle observed.

"How long you been doing this?"

"Flying choppers? Oh, eighteen years. Four thousand hours. I was born in the Huey, and grew up into these. Qualified in the Apache, too."

"What do you think of the mission?" John asked.

"Long" was the reply, and Clark hoped that was the only cause for concern. A sore ass you could recover from quickly enough.

I wish there was another way to do this one, Robby," Ryan said over lunch. It seemed utterly horrid to be sitting here in the White House Mess, eating a cheeseburger with his best friend, while others—including two people he knew well—Jack had learned, were heading into harm's way. It was enough to kill his appetite as dead as the low-cholesterol beef in the bun. He set it down and sipped at his Coke.

"Well, there is—if you want to wait the two days it's going to take Lockheed-Martin to assemble the bombs, then a day to fly them to Siberia, and another twelve hours to fly the mission. Maybe longer. The Black Jet only flies at night, remember?" the Vice President pointed out.

"You're handling it better than I am."

"Jack, I don't like it any more than you do, okay? But after twenty years of flying off carriers, you learn to handle the stress of having friends in tight corners. If you don't, might as well turn in your wings. Eat, man, you need your strength. How's Andrea doing?"

That generated an ironic smile. "Puked her guts out this morning. Had her use my own crapper. It's killing her, she was embarrassed as a guy caught

naked in Times Square."

"Well, she's in a man's job, and she doesn't want to be seen as a wimp," Robby explained. "Hard to be one of the boys when you don't have a dick, but she tries real hard. I'll give her that."

"Cathy says it passes, but it isn't passing fast enough for her." He looked over to see Andrea standing in the doorway, always the watchful protector of her President.

"She's a good troop," Jackson agreed.

"How's your dad doing?"

"Not too bad. Some TV ministry agency wants him and Gerry Patterson to do some more salt-and-pepper shows on Sunday mornings. He's thinking about it. The money could dress up the church some."

"They were impressive together."

"Yeah, Gerry didn't do bad for a white boy—and he's actually a pretty good guy, Pap says. I'm not sure of this TV-ministry stuff, though. Too easy to go Hollywood and start playing to the audience instead of being a shepherd to your flock."

"Your father's a pretty impressive gent, Robby."

Jackson looked up. "I'm glad you think so. He raised us pretty good, and it was pretty tough on him after Mom died. But he can be a real sundowner. Gets all pissy when he sees me drink a beer. But, what the hell, it's his job to yell at people, I suppose."

"Tell him that Jesus played bartender once. It was his first public miracle."

"I've pointed that out, and then he says, if Jesus wants to do it, that's okay for Jesus, boy, but *you* ain't Jesus." The Vice President had a good chuckle. "Eat, Jack."

"Yes, Mom."

This food isn't half bad," Al Gregory said, two miles away in the wardroom of USS *Gettysburg*.

"Well, no women and no booze on a ship of war," Captain Blandy pointed out. "Not this one yet, anyway. You have to have some diversion. So, how are the missiles?"

"The software is fully loaded, and I e-mailed the upgrade like you said. So all the other Aegis ships ought to have it."

"Just heard this morning that the Aegis office in the Pentagon is having a bit of a conniption fit over this. They didn't approve the software."

"Tell 'em to take it up with Tony Bretano," Gregory suggested.

"Explain to me again, what exactly did you upgrade?"

“The seeker software on the missile warhead. I cut down the lines of code so it can recycle more quickly. And I reprogrammed the nutation rate on the laser on the fusing system so that I can handle a higher rate of closure. It should obviate the problem the Patriots had with the Scuds back in ’91—I helped with that software fix, too, back then, but this one’s about half an order of magnitude faster.”

“Without a hardware fix?” the skipper asked.

“It would be better to increase the range of the laser, yes, but you can get away without it—at least it worked okay on the computer simulations.”

“Hope to hell we don’t need to prove it.”

“Oh, yeah, Captain. A nuke headed for a city is a bad thing.”

“Amen.”

There were five thousand of them now, with more coming, summoned by the cell phones that they all seemed to have. Some even had portable computers tied into cellular phones so that they could tap into the Internet site out here in the open. It was a clear night, with no rain to wreck a computer. The leaders of the crowd—they now thought of it as a demonstration—huddled around them to see more, and then relayed it to their friends. The first big student uprising in Tiananmen Square had been fueled by faxes. This one had taken a leap forward in technology. Mainly they milled around, talking excitedly with one another, and summoning more help. The first such demonstration had failed, but they’d all been toddlers then and their memory of it was sketchy at best. They were all old and educated enough to know what needed changing, but not yet old and experienced enough to know that change in their society was impossible. And they didn’t know what a dangerous combination that could be.

The ground below was dark and unlit. Even their night-vision goggles didn’t help much, showing only rough terrain features, mainly the tops of hills and ridges. There were few lights below. There were some houses and other buildings, but at this time of night few people were awake, and all of the lights were turned off.

The only moving light sources they could see were the rotor tips of the helicopters, heated by air friction to the point that they would be painful to touch, and hot enough to glow in the infrared spectrum that the night goggles could detect. Mainly the troops were lulled into stuporous lassitude by the unchanging vibration of the aircraft, and the semi-dreaming state that came with it helped to pass the time.

That was not true of Clark, who sat in the jump seat, looking down at the satellite photos of the missile base at Xuanhua, studying by the illumination of

the IR light on his goggles, looking for information he might have missed on first and twenty-first inspection. He was confident in his men. Chavez had turned into a fine tactical leader, and the troops, experienced sergeants all, would do what they were told to the extent of their considerable abilities.

The Russians in the other helicopters would do okay, too, he thought. Younger—by eight years on average—than the RAINBOW troopers, they were all commissioned officers, mainly lieutenants and captains with a leavening of a few majors, and all were university graduates, well educated, and that was almost as good as five years in uniform. Better yet, they were well motivated young professional soldiers, smart enough to think on their feet, and proficient in their weapons.

The mission should work, John thought. He leaned to check the clock on the helicopter's instrument panel. Forty minutes and they'd find out. Turning around, he noticed the eastern sky was lightening, according to his goggles. They'd hit the missile field just before dawn.

It was a stupidly easy mission for the Black Jets. Arriving overhead singly, about thirty seconds apart, each opened its bomb bay doors and dropped two weapons, ten seconds apart. Each pilot, his plane controlled by its automatic cruising system, put his laser dot on a preplanned section of the runway. The bombs were the earliest Paveway-II guidance packages bolted to Mark-84 2,000-pound bombs with cheap-$7.95 each, in fact—M905 fuses set to go off a hundredth of a second after impact, so as to make a hole in the concrete about twenty feet across by nine feet deep. And this all sixteen of them did, to the shocked surprise of the sleepy tower crew, and with enough noise to wake up every person within a five-mile radius—and just that fast, Anshan fighter base was closed, and would remain so for at least a week. The eight F-117s turned singly and made their way back to their base at Zhigansk. Flying the Black Jet wasn't supposed to be any more exciting than driving a 737 for Southwest Airlines, and for the most part it wasn't.

Why the hell didn't they send one of those Dark Stars down to cover the mission?" Jack asked.

"I suppose it never occurred to anybody," Jackson said. They were back in the situation room.

"What about satellite overheads?"

"Not this time," Ed Foley advised. "Next pass over is in about four hours. Clark has a satellite phone. He'll clue us in."

"Great." Ryan leaned back in a chair that suddenly wasn't terribly comfortable.

Objective in sight," Boyle said over the intercom. Then the radio. "BANDIT SIX to chicks, objective in sight. Check in, over."

"Two." "Three." "Four." "Five." "Six." "Seven." "Eight." "Nine." "Ten."

"COCHISE, check in."

"This is COCHISE LEADER with five, we have the objective."

"Crook with five, objective in sight," the second attack-helicopter team reported.

"Okay, move in as briefed. Execute, execute, execute!"

Clark was perked up now, as were the troops in the back. Sleep was shaken off, and adrenaline flooded into their bloodstreams. He saw them shake their heads and flex their jaws. Weapons were tucked in tight, and every man moved his left hand to the twist-dial release fitting on the belt buckle.

COCHISE flight went in first, heading for the barracks of the security battalion tasked to guard the missile base. The building could have been transported bodily from any WWII American army base—a two-story wood-frame construction, with a pitched roof, and painted white. There was a guard shack outside, also painted white, and it glowed in the thermal sights of the Apache gunners. They could even see the two soldiers there, doubtless approaching the end of their duty tour, standing slackly, their weapons slung over their shoulders, because *nobody* ever came out here, rarely enough during the day, and never in living memory at night—unless you counted the battalion commander coming back drunk from a command-staff meeting.

Their heads twisted slightly when they thought they heard something strange, but the four-bladed rotor on the Apache was also designed for sound suppression, and so they were still looking when they saw the first flash—

—the weapons selected were the 2.75-inch-diameter free-flight rockets, carried in pods on the Apaches' stub wings. Three of the section of five handled the initial firing run, with two in reserve should the unexpected develop. They burned in low, so as to conceal their silhouettes in the hills behind them, and opened up at two hundred meters. The first salvo of four blew up the guard shack and its two sleepy guards. The noise would have been enough to awaken those in the barracks building, but the second salvo of rockets, this time fifteen of them, got there before anyone inside could do more than blink his eyes open. Both floors of the two-story structure were hit, and most of those inside died without waking, caught in the middle of dreams. The Apaches hesitated then, still having weapons to fire. There was a subsidiary guard post on the other side of the building; COCHISE LEAD looped around the barracks and spotted it. The two soldiers there had their rifles up and fired blindly into the air, but his gunner selected his 20-mm cannon and swept them aside as though with a broom. Then the Apache pivoted in the air and he salvoed his remaining rockets into the barracks, and it was immediately apparent that if anyone was alive in there, it was by the grace of God Himself, and whoever it was would not be a danger to the mission.

"COCHISE Four and Five, Lead. Go back up Crook, we don't need you here."

"Roger, Lead," they both replied. The two attack helicopters moved off, leaving the first three to look for and erase any signs of life.

Crook flight, also of five Apaches, smoked in just ahead of the Blackhawks. It turned out that each silo had a small guard post, each for two men, and those were disposed of in a matter of seconds with cannon fire. Then the Apaches climbed to higher altitude and circled slowly, each over a pair of missile silos, looking for anything moving, but seeing nothing.

BANDIT Six, Colonel Dick Boyle, flared his Blackhawk three feet over Silo #1, as it was marked on his satellite photo.

"Go!" the co-pilot shouted over the intercom. The RAINBOW troopers jumped down just to the east of the actual hole itself; the "Chinese hat" steel structure, which looked like an inverted blunt ice-cream cone, prohibited dropping right down on the door itself.

The base command post was the best-protected structure on the entire post. It was buried ten meters underground, and the ten meters was solid reinforced concrete, so as to survive a nuclear bomb's exploding within a hundred meters, or so the design supposedly promised. Inside was a staff of ten, commanded by Major General Xun Qing-Nian. He'd been a Second Artillery (the Chinese name for their strategic missile troops) officer since graduating from university with an engineering degree. Only three hours before, he'd supervised the fueling of all twelve of his CSS-4 intercontinental ballistic missiles, which had never happened before in his memory. No explanation had come with that order, though it didn't take a rocket scientist—which he was, by profession—to connect it with the war under way against Russia.

Like all members of the People's Liberation Army, he was a highly disciplined man, and always mindful of the fact that he had his country's most valuable military assets under his personal control. The alarm had been raised by one of the silo-guard posts, and his staff switched on the television cameras used for site inspection and surveillance. They were old cameras, and needed lights, which were switched on as well.

What the fuck!" Chavez shouted. "Turn the lights off!" he ordered over his radio.

It wasn't demanding. The light standards weren't very tall, nor were they very far away. Chavez hosed one with his MP-10, and the lights went out, thank you. No other lasted for more than five seconds at any of the silos.

We are under attack," General Xun said in a quiet and disbelieving voice. "We are under attack," he repeated. But he had a drill for this. "Alert the guard force," he told one NCO. "Get me Beijing," he ordered another.

At Silo #1, Paddy Connolly ran to the pipes that led to the top of the concrete box that marked the top of the silo. To each he stuck a block of Composition B, his explosive of choice. Into each block he inserted a blasting cap. Two men, Eddie Price and Hank Patterson, knelt close by with their weapons ready for a response force that was nowhere to be seen.

"Fire in the hole!" Patterson shouted, running back to the other two. There he skidded down to the ground, sheltered behind the concrete, and twisted the handle on his detonator. The two pipes were blown apart a millisecond later.

"Masks!" he told everyone on the radio... but there was no vapor coming off the fueling pipes. That was good news, wasn't it?

"Come on!" Eddie Price yelled at him. The three men, guarded now by two others, looked for the metal door into the maintenance entrance for the silo.

"Ed, we're on the ground, we're on the ground," Clark was saying into his satellite phone, fifty yards away. "The barracks are gone, and there's no opposition on the ground here. Doing our blasting now. Back to you soon. Out."

Well, shit," Ed Foley said in his office, but the line was now dead.

What?" It was an hour later in Beijing, and the sun was up. Marshal Luo, having just woken up after not enough sleep following the worst day he'd known since the Cultural Revolution, had a telephone thrust into his hands. "What is this?" he demanded of the phone.

"This is Major General Xun Qing-Nian at Xuanhua missile base. We are under attack here. There is a force of men on the ground over our heads trying to destroy our missiles. I require instructions!"

"Fight them off!" was the first idea Luo had.

"The defense battalion is dead, they do not respond. Comrade Minister, what do I do?"

"Are your missiles fueled and ready for launch?"

"Yes!"

Luo looked around his bedroom, but there was no one to advise him. His country's most priceless assets were now about to be ripped from his control. His command wasn't automatic. He actually thought first, but in the end, it wouldn't matter how considered his decision was.

"Launch your missiles," he told the distant general officer.

"Repeat your command," Luo heard.

"Launch your missiles!" his voice boomed. *"Launch your missiles NOW!"*

"By your command," the voice replied.

Fuck," Sergeant Connolly said. "This is some bloody door!" The first explosive block had done nothing more than scorch the paint. This time he attached a hollow-charge to the upper and lower hinges and backed off again. "This one will do it," he promised as he trailed the wires back.

The crash that followed gave proof to his words. When next they looked in, the door was gone. It had been hurled inward, must have flown into the silo like a bat out of—

—"Bloody hell!" Connolly turned. "Run! *RUN!"*

Price and Patterson needed no encouragement. They ran for their lives. Connolly caught them reaching for his protective hood as he did so, not stopping until he was over a hundred yards away.

"The bloody missile's fueled. The door ruptured the upper tank. It's going to blow!"

"Shit! Team, this is Price, the missiles are fueled, I repeat the missiles are fueled. Get the fucking hell away from the silo!"

The proof of that came from Silo #8, off to Price's south. The concrete structure that sat atop it surged into the air, and under it was a volcanic blast of fire and smoke. Silo #1, theirs, did the same, a gout of flame going sideways out of the open service door.

The infrared signature was impossible to miss. Over the equator, a DSP satellite focused in on the thermal bloom and cross-loaded the signal to Sunnyvale, California. From there it went to NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command, dug into the sub-basement level of Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado.

"Launch! Possible launch at Xuanhua!"

"What's that?" asked CINC-NORAD.

"We got a bloom, a huge—*two* huge ones at Xuanhua," the female captain announced. "Fuck, there's another one."

"Okay, Captain, settle down," the four-star told her. "There's a special op taking that base down right now. Settle down, girl."

In the control bunker, men were turning keys. The general in command had never really expected to do this. Sure, it was a possibility, the thing he'd trained his entire career for, but, no, not this. No. Not a chance.

But someone was trying to destroy his command—and he did have his orders, and like the automaton he'd been trained to be, he gave the orders and turned his command key.

The Spetsnaz people were doing well. Four silos were now disabled. One of the Russian teams managed to crack the maintenance door on their first try. This team, General Kirillin's own, sent its technical genius inside, and he found the missile's guidance module and blew it apart with gunfire. It would take a week at least to fix this missile, and just to make sure *that* didn't happen, he affixed an explosive charge to the stainless steel body and set the timer for fifteen minutes. "Done!" he called.

"Out!" Kirillin ordered. The lieutenant general, now feeling like a new cadet in parachute school, gathered his team and ran to the pickup point. As guilty as any man would be of mission focus, he looked around, surprised by the fire and flame to his north—

—but more surprised to see three silo covers moving. The nearest was only three hundred meters away, and there he saw one of his Spetsnaz troopers walk right to the suddenly open silo and toss something in—then he ran like a rabbit—

—because three seconds later, the hand grenade he'd tossed in exploded, and took the entire missile up with it. The Spetsnaz soldier disappeared in the fireball he'd caused, and would not be seen again—

—but then something worse happened. From exhaust vents set left and right of Silos #5 and #7 came two vertical fountains of solid white-yellow flame, and less than two seconds later appeared the blunt, black shape of a missile's nosecone.

Fuck," breathed the Apache pilot coded CROOK Two. He was circling a kilometer away, and without any conscious thought at all, lowered his nose, twisted throttle, and pulled collective to jerk his attack helicopter at the rising missile.

“Got it,” the gunner called. He selected his 20-mm cannon and held down the trigger. The tracers blazed out like laser beams. The first set missed, but the gunner adjusted his lead and walked them into the missile’s upper half—

—the resulting explosion threw CROOK Two out of control, rolling it over on its back. The pilot threw his cyclic to the left, continuing the roll before he stopped it, barely, a quarter of the way through the second one, and then he saw the fireball rising, and the burning missile fuel falling back to the ground, atop Silo #9, and on all the men there who’d disabled that bird.

The last missile cleared its silo before the soldiers there could do much about it. Two tried to shoot at it with their personal weapons, but the flaming exhaust incinerated them in less time than it takes to pull a trigger. Another Apache swept in, having seen what CROOK Two had accomplished, but its rounds fell short, so rapidly the CSS-4 climbed into the air.

Oh, fuck,” Clark heard in his radio earpiece. It was Ding’s voice. ”Oh, fuck.”

John got back on his satellite phone.

“Yeah, how’s it going?” Ed Foley asked.

“One got off, one got away, man.”

“What?”

“You heard me. We killed all but one, but that one got off... going north, but leaning east some. Sorry, Ed. We tried.”

It took Foley a few seconds to gather his thoughts and reply. “Thanks, John. I guess I have some things to do here.”

There’s another one,” the captain said.

CINC-NORAD was trying to play this one as cool as he could. Yes, there was a spec-op laid on to take this Chinese missile farm down, and so he expected to see some hot flashes on the screen, and okay, all of them so far had been on the ground.

“That should be all of them,” the general announced.

“Sir, this one’s moving. This one’s a launch.”

“Are you sure?”

“Look, sir, the bloom is moving off the site,” she said urgently. “Valid launch, valid launch—valid threat!” she concluded. “Oh, my God...”

“Oh, shit,” CINC-NORAD said. He took one breath and lifted the Gold Phone. No, first he’d call the NMCC.

The senior watch officer in the National Military Command Center was a Marine one-star named Sullivan. The NORAD phone didn’t ring very often.

"NMCC, Brigadier General Sullivan speaking."

"This is CINC-NORAD. We have a valid launch, valid threat from Xuanhua missile base in China. I say again, we have a valid launch, valid threat from China. It's angling east, coming to North America."

"Fuck," the Marine observed.

"Tell me about it."

The procedures were all written down. His first call went to the White House military office.

Ryan was sitting down to dinner with the family. An unusual night, he had nothing scheduled, no speeches to give, and that was good, because reporters always showed up and asked questions, and lately—

"Say that again?" Andrea Price-O'Day said into her sleeve microphone. "What?"

Then another Secret Service agent bashed into the room. *"Marching Order!"* he proclaimed. It was a code phrase often practiced but never spoken in reality.

"What?" Jack said, half a second before his wife could make the same sound.

"Mr. President, we have to get you and your family out of here," Andrea said. "The Marines have the helicopters on the way."

"What's happening?"

"Sir, NORAD reports an inbound ballistic threat"

"What? China?"

"That's all I know. Let's go, right now," Andrea said forcefully.

"Jack," Cathy said in alarm.

"Okay, Andrea." The President turned. "Time to go, honey. Right now."

"But—what's happening?"

He got her to her feet first, and walked to the door. The corridor was full of agents. Trenton Kelly was holding Kyle Daniel—the lionesses were nowhere in sight—and the principal agents for all the other kids were there. In a moment, they saw that there was not enough room in the elevator. The Ryan family rode. The agents mainly ran down the wide, white marble steps to the ground level.

"Wait!" another agent called, holding his left hand up. His pistol was in his right hand, and none of them had seen *that* very often. They halted as commanded—even the President doesn't often argue with a person holding a gun.

Ryan was thinking as fast as he knew how: “Andrea, where do I go?”

“You go to KNEECAP. Vice President Jackson will join you there. The family goes to Air Force One.”

At Andrews Air Force base, just outside Washington, the pilots of First Heli, the USAF 1st Helicopter Squadron, were sprinting to their Bell Hueys. Each had an assignment, and each knew where his Principal was, because the security detail of each was reporting in constantly. Their job was to collect the cabinet members and spirit them away from Washington to preselected places of supposed safety. Their choppers were off the ground in less than three minutes, scattering off to different preselected pickup points.

Jack, what is this?” It took a lot to make his wife afraid, but this one had done it.

“Honey, we have a report that a ballistic missile is flying toward America, and the safest place for us to be is in the air. So, they’re getting you and the kids to Air Force One. Robby and I will be on KNEECAP. Okay?”

“Okay? Okay? What is this?” “It’s bad, but that’s all I know.”

On the Aleutian island of Shemya, the huge Cobra Dane radar scanned the sky to the north and west. It frequently detected satellites, which mainly fly lower than ICBM warheads, but the computer that analyzed the tracks of everything that came into the system’s view categorized this contact as exactly what it was, too high to be a low-orbit satellite, and too slow to be a launch vehicle.

“What’s the track?” a major asked a sergeant.

“Computer says East Coast of the United States. In a few minutes we’ll know more... for now, somewhere between Buffalo and Atlanta.” That information was relayed automatically to NORAD and the Pentagon.

The entire structure of the United States military went into hyperdrive, one segment at a time, as the information reached it. That included USS *Gettysburg,* alongside the pier in the Washington Navy Yard.

Captain Blandy was in his in-port cabin when the growler phone went off. “Captain speaking... go to general quarters, Mr. Gibson,” he ordered, far more calmly than he felt.

Throughout the ship, the electronic gonging started, followed by a human voice: “General Quarters—General Quarters—all hands man your battle stations.”

Gregory was in CIC, running another simulation. “What’s that mean?”

Senior Chief Leek shook his head. “Sir, that means something ain’t no simulation no more.” *Battle stations* alongside the fucking pier? “Okay, people, let’s start lighting it all up!” he ordered his sailors.

The regular presidential helicopter muttered down on the South Lawn, and the Secret Service agent at the door turned and yelled: *“COME ON!”*

Cathy turned. “Jack, you coming with us?”

“No, Cath, I have to go to KNEECAP. Now, get along. I’ll see you later tonight, okay?” He gave her a kiss, and all the kids got a hug, except for Kyle, whom the President took from Kelley’s arms for a quick hold before giving him back. “Take care of him,” he told the agent.

“Yes, sir. Good luck.” Ryan watched his family run up the steps into the chopper, and the Sikorsky lurched off before they could have had a chance to sit and strap down.

Then another Marine helicopter appeared, this one with Colonel Dan Malloy at the controls. This one was a VH-60, whose doors slid open. Ryan walked quickly to it, with Andrea Price-O’Day at his side. They sat and strapped down before it lumbered back into the air.

“What about everybody else?” Ryan asked.

“There’s a shelter under the East Wing for some...” she said. Then her voice trailed off and she shrugged.

“Oh, shit, what about everybody else?” Ryan demanded.

“Sir, I have to look after *you.”*

“But—what—”

Then Special Agent Price-O’Day started retching. Ryan saw and pulled out a barf bag, one with a very nice Presidential logo printed on it, and handed it to her. They were over the Mall now, just passing the George Washington Monument. Off to the right was southwest Washington, filled with the working- and middle-class homes of regular people who drove cabs or cleaned up offices, tens of thousands of them... there were people visible in the Mall, on the grass, just enjoying a walk in the falling darkness, just being people...

And you just left behind a hundred or so. Maybe twenty will fit in the shelter under the East Wing... what about the rest, the ones who make your bed and fold your socks and shine your shoes and serve dinner and pick up after the kids—what about them, Jack? a small voice asked. Who flies them off to safety?

He turned his head to see the Washington Monument, and beyond that the reflecting pool and the Lincoln Memorial. He was in the same line as those men, in the city named for one, and saved in time of war by another... and he was running away from danger... the Capitol Building, home of the Congress. The light was on atop the dome. Congress was in session, doing the country’s work, or trying to, as they did... but he was running away... eastern

Washington, mainly black, working-class people who did the menial jobs for the most part, and had hopes to send their kids to college so that they could make out a little better than their parents had... eating their dinner, watching TV, maybe going out to a movie tonight or just sitting on their porches and shooting the bull with their neighbors—

—Ryan's head turned again, and he saw the two gray shapes at the Navy Yard, one familiar, one not, because Tony Bretano had—

Ryan flipped the belt buckle in his lap and lurched forward, knocking into the Marine sergeant in the jump seat. Colonel Malloy was in the right-front seat, doing his job, flying the chopper. Ryan grabbed his left shoulder. The head came around.

"Yes, sir, what is it?"

"See that cruiser down there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Land on it"

"Sir, I—"

"Land on it, that's an order!" Ryan shouted at him.

"Aye aye," Malloy said like a good Marine.

The Blackhawk turned, arcing down the Anacostia River, and flaring as Malloy judged the wind. The Marine hesitated, looking back one more time. Ryan insistently jerked his hand at the ship.

The Blackhawk approached cautiously.

"What are you doing?" Andrea demanded.

"I'm getting off here. You're going to KNEECAP."

"NO!" she shouted back. "I stay with you!"

"Not this time. Have your baby. If this doesn't work out, I hope the kid turns out like you and Pat." Ryan moved to open the door. The Marine sergeant got there first. Andrea moved to follow.

"Keep her aboard, Marine!" Ryan told the crew chief. "She goes with you!"

"NO! " Price-O'Day screamed.

"Yes, sir," the sergeant acknowledged, wrapping his arms around her.

President Ryan jumped to the nonskid decking of the cruiser's landing area and ducked as the chopper pulled back into the sky. Andrea's face was the last thing he saw. The rotor wash nearly knocked him down, but going to one knee prevented that. Then he stood up and looked around.

"What the hell is—Jesus, sir!" the young petty officer blurted, recognizing him.

"Where's the captain?"

"Captain's in CIC, sir."

"Show me!"

The petty officer led him into a door, then a passageway that led forward. A few twists and turns later, he was in a darkened room that seemed to be set sideways in the body of the ship. It was cool in here. Ryan just walked in, figuring he was President of the United States, Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, and the ship belonged to him anyway. It took a stretch to make his limbs feel as though they were a real part of his body, and then he looked around, trying to orient himself. First he turned to the sailor who'd brought him here.

"Thanks, son. You can go back to your place now."

"Aye, sir." He turned away as though from a dream/nightmare and resumed his duties as a sailor.

Okay, Jack thought, now what? He could see the big radar displays set fore and aft, and the people sitting sideways to look at it. He headed that way, bumping into a cheap aluminum chair on the way, and looked down to see what looked like a Navy chief petty officer in a khaki shirt whose pocket—well, damn—Ryan exercised his command prerogative and reached down to steal the sailor's cigarette pack. He lifted one out, and lit it with a butane lighter. Then he walked to look at the radar display.

"Jesus, sir," the chief said belatedly.

"Not quite. Thanks for the smoke." Two more steps and he was behind a guy with silver eagles on his collar. That would be the captain of USS *Gettysburg.* Ryan took a long and comforting drag on the smoke.

"God damn it! There's no smoking in my CIC!" the captain snarled.

"Good evening, Captain," Ryan replied. "I think at this moment we have a ballistic warhead inbound on Washington, presumably with a thermonuclear device inside. Can we set aside your concerns about secondhand smoke for a moment?"

Captain Blandy turned around and looked up. His mouth opened as wide as a U.S. Navy ashtray. "How—who—what?"

"Captain, let's ride this one out together, shall we?"

"Captain Blandy, sir," the man said, snapping to his feet.

"Jack Ryan, Captain." Ryan shook his hand and bade him sit back down. "What's happening now?"

"Sir, the NMCC tells us that there's a ballistic inbound for the East Coast. I've got the ship at battle stations. Radar's up. Chip inserted?" he asked.

"The chip is in, sir," Senior Chief Leek confirmed.

"Chip?"

"Just our term for it. It's really a software thing," Blandy explained.

Cathy and the kids were pulled up the steps and hustled into the forward cabin. The colonel at the controls was in an understandable hurry. With Three and Four already turning, he started engines One and Two, and the VC-25 started rolling the instant the truck with the steps pulled away, making one right-angle turn, and then lumbering down Runway One-Nine Right into the southerly wind. Immediately below him, Secret Service and Air Force personnel got the First Family strapped in, and for the first time in fifteen minutes, the Secret Service people allowed themselves to breathe normally. Not thirty seconds later, Vice President Jackson's helicopter landed next to the E-4B National Emergency Airborne Command Post, whose pilot was as anxious to get off the ground as the driver of the VC- 25. That was accomplished in less than ninety seconds. Jackson had never strapped in, and stood to look around. "Where's Jack?" the Vice President asked. Then he saw Andrea, who looked as though she just miscarried her pregnancy.

"He stayed, sir. He had the pilot drop him on the cruiser in the Navy Yard."

"He did what?"

"You heard me, sir."

"Get him on the radio—*right now!"* Jackson ordered.

Ryan was actually feeling somewhat relaxed. No more rushing about, here he was, surrounded by people calmly and quietly going about their jobs—outwardly so, anyway. The captain looked a little tense, but captains were supposed to, Ryan figured, being responsible in this case for a billion dollars' worth of warship and computers.

"Okay, how are we doing?"

"Sir, the inbound, if it's aimed at us, is not on the scope yet."

"Can you shoot it down?"

"That's the idea, Mr. President," Blandy replied. "Is Dr. Gregory around?"

"Here, Captain," a voice answered. A shape came closer. "Jesus!"

"That's not my name—I know you!" Ryan said in considerable surprise "Major—Major ..."

"Gregory, sir. I ended up a half a colonel before I pulled the plug. SDIO. Secretary Bretano had me look into upgrading the missiles for the Aegis system," the physicist explained. "I guess we're going to see if it works or not."

"What do you think?" Ryan asked.

"It worked fine on the simulations" was the best answer available.

"Radar contact. We got us a bogie," a petty officer said. "Bearing three-four-niner, range nine hundred miles, speed—that's the one, sir. Speed is one thousand four hundred knots—I mean fourteen *thousand* knots, sir." *Damn,* he didn't have to add.

“Four and a half minutes out,” Gregory said.

“Do the math in your head?” Ryan asked.

“Sir, I’ve been in the business since I got out of West Point.”

Ryan finished his cigarette and looked around for—

“Here, sir.” It was the friendly chief with an ashtray that had magically appeared in CIC. “Want another one?”

“Why not?” the President reasoned. He took a second one, and the senior chief lit it up for him. “Thanks.”

“Gee, Captain Blandy, maybe you’re declaring a blanket amnesty?”

“If he isn’t, I am,” Ryan said.

“Smoking lamp is lit, people,” Senior Chief Leek announced, an odd satisfaction in his voice.

The captain looked around in annoyance, but dismissed it.

“Four minutes, it might not matter a whole lot,” Ryan observed as coolly as the cigarette allowed. Health hazard or not, they had their uses.

“Captain, I have a radio call for the President, sir.”

“Where do I take it?” Jack asked.

“Right here, sir,” yet another chief said, lifting a phone-type receiver and pushing a button.

“Ryan.”

“Jack, it’s Robby.”

“My family get off okay?”

“Yeah, Jack, they’re fine. Hey, what the hell are you doing down there?”

“Riding it out. Robby, I can’t run away, pal. I just can’t.”

“Jack if this thing goes off—”

“Then you get promoted,” Ryan cut him off.

“You know what I’ll have to do?” the Vice President demanded.

“Yeah, Robby, you’ll have to play catch-up. God help you if you do.” *But it won’t be my problem,* Ryan thought. There was some consolation in that. Killing some guy with a gun was one thing. Killing a million with a nuke... no, he just couldn’t do that without eating a gun afterward. *You’re just too Catholic, Jack, my boy.*

“Jesus, Jack,” his old friend said over the digital, encrypted radio link. Clearly thinking about what horrors he’d have to commit, son of a preacher-man or not...

“Robby, you’re the best friend any man could hope to have. If this doesn’t work out, look after Cathy and the kids for me, will ya?”

“You know it.”

"We'll know in about three minutes, Rob. Get back to me then, okay?"

"Roger," the former Tomcat driver replied. "Out."

"Dr. Gregory, what can you tell me?"

"Sir, the inbound is probably their equivalent of one of our old W-51s. Five megatons, thereabouts. It'll do Washington, and everything within ten miles—hell, it'll break windows in Baltimore."

"What about us, here?"

"No chance. Figure it'll be targeted inside a triangle defined by the White House, the Capitol Building, and the Pentagon. The ship's keel might survive, only because it's under water. No people. Oh, maybe some really lucky folks in the D.C. subway. That's pretty far underground. But the fires will suck all the air out of the tunnels, probably." He shrugged. "This sort of thing's never happened before. You can't say for sure until it does."

"What chances that it'll be a dud?"

"The Pakistanis have had some failed detonations. We had fizzles once, mainly from helium contamination in the secondary. That's why the terrorist bomb at Denver fizzled—"

"I remember."

"Okay," Gregory said. "It's over Buffalo now. Now it's reentering the atmosphere. That'll slow it down a little."

"Sir, the track is definitely on us, the NMCC says," a voice said.

"Agreed," Captain Blandy said.

"Is there a civilian alert?" Ryan asked.

"It's on the radio, sir," a sailor said. "It's on CNN, too."

"People will be panicking out there," Ryan murmured, taking another drag.

Probably not. Most people don't really know what the sirens mean, and the rest won't believe the radio, Gregory thought. "Captain, we're getting close." The track crossed over the Pennsylvania/New York border—

"System up?" Blandy asked.

"We are fully on line, sir," the Weapons Officer answered. "We are ready to fire from the forward magazine. Firing order is selected, all Block IVs."

"Very well." The captain leaned forward and turned his key in the lock. "System is fully enabled. Special-Auto." He turned. "Sir, that means the computer will handle it from here."

"Target range is now three hundred miles," a kid's voice announced.

They're so cool about this, Ryan thought. *Maybe they just don't believe it's real... hell, it's hard enough for me...* He took another drag on the cigarette, watching the blip come down, following its computer-produced velocity vector right for Washington, D.C.

“Any time now,” the Weapons Officer said.

He wasn’t far off. *Gettysburg* shuddered with the launch of the first missile.

“One away!” a sailor said off to the right. “One is away clean.”

“Okay.”

The SM2-ER missile had two stages. The short booster kicked the assembly out of its silo-type hole in the forward magazine, trailing an opaque column of gray smoke.

“The idea is to intercept at a range of two hundred miles,” Gregory explained. “The interceptor and the inbound will rendezvous at the same spot, and—zap!”

“Mainly farmland there, place you go to shoot pheasants,” Ryan said, remembering hunting trips there in his youth.

“Hey, I got a visual on the fucker,” another voice called. There was a TV camera with a ten-power lens slaved into the fire-control radar, and it showed the inbound warhead, just a featureless white blob now, like a meteor, Ryan thought.

“Intercept in four—three—two—one—”

The missile came close, but exploded behind the target.

“Firing Two!” *Gettysburg* shook again.

“Two away clean!” the same voice as before announced.

It was over Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, now, its speed “down” to thirteen thousand miles per hour...

Then a third missile launched, followed a second later by a fourth. In the “Special-Auto” setting, the computer was expending missiles until it saw a dead target. That was just fine with everyone aboard.

“Only two Block IVs left,” Weps said.

“They’re cheap,” Captain Blandy observed. “Come on, baby!”

Number Two also exploded behind the target, the TV picture showed.

“Three—two—one—now!”

So did Number Three.

“Oh, shit, oh, my God!” Gregory exclaimed. That caused heads to snap around.

“What?” Blandy demanded.

The IR seekers, they’re going for the centroid of the infrared source, and that’s *behind* the inbound.”

“What?” Ryan asked, his stomach in an instant knot.

“The brightest part of the target is *behind* the target. The missiles are going for *that!* Oh, fuck!” Dr. Gregory explained.

“Five away... Six away... both got off clean,” the voice to the right announced again.

The inbound was over Frederick, Maryland, now, doing twelve thousand knots...

“That’s it, we’re out of Block IVs.”

“Light up the Block IIIs,” Blandy ordered at once.

The next two interceptors did the same as the first two, coming within mere feet of the target, but exploding just behind it, and the inbound was traveling faster than the burn rate of explosive in the Standard-2-ER missile warheads. The lethal fragments couldn’t catch up—

“Firing Seven! Clean.” *Gettysburg* shook yet again.

“That one’s a radar homer,” Blandy said, clenching his fist before his chest.

Five and Six performed exactly as the four preceding them, missing by mere yards, but a miss in this case was as good as a mile.

Another shudder.

“Eight! Clean!”

“We have to get it before it gets to five or six thousand feet. That’s optimal burst height,” Gregory said.

“At that range, I can engage it with my five-inch forward,” Blandy said, some fear in his voice now.

For his part, Ryan wondered why he wasn’t shaking. Death had reached its cold hand out for him more than once... the Mall in London ... his own home ... *Red October*... some nameless hill in Colombia. Someday it would touch him. Was this the day? He took a last drag on the smoke and stabbed it out in the aluminum ashtray.

“Okay, here comes seven—five—four—three—two—one—now!”

“Miss! *Fuck!”*

“Nine away—Ten away, both clean! We’re out of missiles,” the distant chief called out. “This is it, guys.”

The inbound crossed over the D.C. Beltway, Interstate Highway 695, now at an altitude of less than twenty thousand feet, streaking across the night sky like a meteor, and so some people thought it was, pointing and calling out to those nearby. If they continued to look at it until detonation, their eyes would explode, and they would then die blind...

“Eight missed! Missed by a cunt hair!” a voice announced angrily. Clear on the TV, the puff of the explosion appeared mere inches from the target.

“Two more to go,” the Weapons Officer told them.

Aloft, the forward port-side SPG-62 radar was pouring out X-band radiation at the target. The rising SM-2 missile, its rocket motor still burning, homed in on the reflected signal, focusing, closing, seeing the source of the reflected

energy that drew it as a moth to a flame, a kamikaze robot the size of a small car, going at nearly two thousand miles per hour, seeking an object going six times faster... two miles ... one mile... a thousand yards... five hundred, one hun—

—On the TV screen the RV meteor changed to a shower of sparks and fire—

"Yeah!" twenty voices called as one.

The TV camera followed the descending sparks. The adjacent radar display showed them falling within the city of Washington.

"You're going to want to get people to collect those fragments. Some of them are going to be plutonium. Not real healthy to handle," Gregory said, leaning against a stanchion. "Looked like a skin-skin kill. Oh, God, how did 1 fuck up my programming like that?" he wondered aloud.

"I wouldn't sweat it too bad, Dr. Gregory," Senior Chief Leek observed. "Your code also helped the last one home in more efficient-like. I think I might want to buy you a beer, fella."

CHAPTER 61

Revolution

As usual, the news didn't get back quickly to the place where it had actually started. Having given the launch order, Defense Minister Luo had little clue what to do next. Clearly, he couldn't go back to sleep. America might well answer his action with a nuclear strike of its own, and therefore his first rational thought was that it might be a good idea for him to get the hell out of Beijing. He rose, made normal use of his bathroom, and splashed water on his face, but then again his mind hit a brick wall. What to do? The one name he knew to call was Zhang Han Sen. Once connected, he spoke very quickly indeed.

"You did—*what* happened, Luo?" the senior Minister Without Portfolio asked with genuine alarm.

"Someone—Russians or Americans, I'm not sure which—struck at our missile base at Xuanhua, attempting to destroy our nuclear deterrent. I ordered the base commander to fire them off, of course," Luo told his associate minister, in a voice that was both defiant and defensive. "We agreed on this in our last meeting, did we not?"

"Luo, yes, we discussed the possibility. But *you fired them without consulting with us?"* Zhang demanded. Such decisions were always collegial, never unilateral.

"What choice did I have, Zhang?" Marshal Luo asked in reply. "Had I hesitated a moment, there would have been none left to fire."

"I see," the voice on the phone said. "What is happening now?"

"The missiles are flying. The first should hit their first targets, Moscow and Leningrad, in about ten minutes. I had no choice, Zhang. I could not allow them to disarm us completely."

Zhang could have sworn and screamed at the man, but there was no point in that. What had happened had happened, and there was no sense expending intellectual or emotional energy on something he could not alter. "Very well. We need to meet. I will assemble the Politburo. Come to the Council of Ministers Building at once. Will the Americans or Russians retaliate?"

"They cannot strike back in kind. They have no nuclear missiles. An attack by bombers would take some hours," Luo advised, trying to make it sound like good news.

At his end of the connection, Zhang felt a chill in his stomach that rivaled liquid helium. As with many things in life, this one—contemplated theoretically in a comfortable conference room—was something very different now that it had turned into a most uncomfortable reality. And yet—was it? It was a thing too difficult to believe. It was too unreal. There were no outward signs—you'd at least expect thunder and lightning outside the windows to accompany news like this, even a major earthquake, but it was merely early morning, not yet seven o'clock. Could this be real?

Zhang padded across his bedroom, switched on his television, and turned it to CNN—it had been turned off for most of the country, but not *here,* of course. His English skills were insufficient to translate the rapid-fire words coming over the screen now. They were showing Washington, D.C., with a camera evidently atop the CNN building there—wherever that was, he had not the faintest idea. It was a black American speaking. The camera showed him standing atop a building, microphone in hand like black plastic ice cream, speaking very, very rapidly—so much so that Zhang was catching only one word in three, and looking off to the camera's left with wide, frightened eyes.

So, he knows what is coming there, doesn't he? Zhang thought, then wondered if he would see the destruction of the American capital via American news television. That, he thought, would have *some* entertainment value.

"Look!" the reporter said, and the camera twisted to see a smoke trail race across the sky—

—*What the hell is that?* Zhang wondered. Then there was another... and more besides... and the reporter was showing real fear now...

... it was good for his heart to see such feelings on the face of an American, especially a black American *reporter.* Another one of those *monkeys* had caused his country such great harm, after all ...

So, now he'd get to see one incinerated... or maybe not. The camera and the transmitter would go, too, wouldn't they? So, just a flash of light, maybe, and a blank screen that would be replaced by CNN headquarters in Atlanta...

... more smoke trails. Ah, yes, they were surface-to-air missiles... could such things intercept a nuclear missile? *Probably not,* Zhang judged. He checked his watch. The sweep hand seemed determined to let the snail win this race, it jumped so slowly from one second to the next, and Zhang felt himself watching the display on the TV screen with anticipation he knew to be perverse. But America had been his country's principal enemy for so many years, had thwarted two of his best and most skillfully laid plans—and now he'd see its destruction by means of one of its very own agencies, this cursed medium of television news, and though Tan Deshi claimed that it was not an organ of the American government, surely that could not be the case. The Ryan regime in Washington must have a very cordial relationship with those minstrels, they followed the party line of the Western governments so fawningly...

... two more smoke trails... the camera followed them and... what was that? Like a meteor, or the landing light of a commercial aircraft, a bright light, seemingly still in the sky—no, it was moving, unless that was the fear of the cameraman showing—oh, yes, that was it, because the smoke trails seemed to seek it out... but not quite closely enough, it would seem... *and so, farewell, Washington,* Zhang Han Sen thought. Perhaps there'd be adverse consequences for the People's Republic, but he'd have the satisfaction of seeing the death of —

—what was that? Like a bursting firework in the sky, a shower of sparks, mainly heading down... what did *that* mean...?

It was clear sixty seconds later. Washington had not been blotted from the map. *Such a pity,* Zhang thought ... *especially since there would be consequences* ... With that, he washed and dressed and left for the Council of Ministers Building.

Dear God," Ryan breathed. The initial emotions of denial and elation were passing now. The feelings were not unlike those following an auto accident. First was disbelief, then remedial action that was more automatic than considered, then when the danger was past came the whiplash after-fear, when the psyche started to examine what had passed, and what had almost been, and fear after survival, fear after the danger was past, brought on the real shakes. Ryan remembered that Winston Churchill had remarked that there was nothing more elating than rifle fire that had missed—"to be shot at without result" was the exact quote the President remembered. If so, Winston Spencer Churchill must have had ice water in his cardiovascular system, or he enjoyed braggadocio more than this American President did.

"Well, I hope that was the only one," Captain Blandy observed.

"Better be, Cap'n. We be out of missiles," Chief Leek said, lighting up another smoke in accordance with the Presidential amnesty.

"Captain," Jack said when he was able to, "every man on this ship gets promoted one step by Presidential Order, and USS *Gettysburg* gets a Presidential Unit Citation. That's just for starters, of course. Where's a radio? I need to talk to KNEECAP."

"Here, sir." A sailor handed him a phone receiver. "The line's open, sir."

"Robby?"

"Jack?"

"You're still Vice President," SWORDSMAN told TOMCAT.

"For now, I suppose. Christ, Jack, what the hell were you trying to do?"

"I'm not sure. It seemed like the right idea at the time." Jack was seated now, both holding the phone in his hand and cradling it between cheek and shoulder, lest he drop it on the deck. "Is there anything else coming in?"

"NORAD says the sky is clear—only one bird got off. Targeted on us. Shit, the Russians still have dedicated ABM batteries all around Moscow. *They* probably could have handled it better than us." Jackson paused. "We're calling in the Nuclear Emergency Search Team from Rocky Mountain Arsenal to look for hot spots. DOD has people coordinating with the D.C. police... Jesus, Jack, that was just a little intense, y'know?"

"Yeah, it was that way here, too. Now what?" the President asked.

"You mean with China? Part of me says, load up the B-2 bombers on Guam with the B-61 gravity bombs and send them to Beijing, but I suppose that's a little bit of an overreaction."

"I think some kind of public statement—not sure what kind yet. What are you gonna be doing?"

"I asked. The drill is for us to stay up for four hours before we come back to Andrews. Same for Cathy and the kids. You might want to call them, too."

"Roger. Okay, Robby, sit tight. See you in a few hours. I think I'm going to have a stiff one or two."

"I hear that, buddy."

"Okay, POTUS out." Ryan handed the phone back. "Captain?"

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"Your entire ship's crew is invited to the White House, right now, for some drinks on the house. I think we all need it."

"Sir, I will not disagree with that."

"And those who stay aboard, if they feel the need to bend an elbow, as Commander in Chief, I waive Navy Regulations on that subject for twenty-four hours."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Chief?" Jack said next.

"Here, sir." He handed his pack and lighter over. "I got more in my locker, sir."

Just then two men in civilian clothes entered CIC. It was Hilton and Malone from the night crew.

"How'd you guys get here so fast?" Ryan asked.

"Andrea called us, sir—did what we think happened just happen?"

"Yep, and your President needs a bottle and a soft chair, gentlemen."

"We have a car on the pier, sir. You want to come with us?"

"Okay—Captain, you get buses or something, and come to the White House right away. If it means locking the ship up and leaving her without anyone aboard, that's just fine with me. Call the Marine Barracks at Eighth and I for security if you need to."

"Aye, aye, Mr. President. We'll be along shortly."

I might be drunk before you get there, the President thought.

The car Hilton and Malone had brought down was one of the black armored Chevy Suburbans that followed the President everywhere he went. This one just drove back to the White House. The streets were suddenly filled with people simply standing and looking up—it struck Ryan as odd. The thing was no longer in the sky, and whatever pieces were on the ground were too dangerous to touch. In any case, the drive back to the White House was uneventful, and Ryan ended up in the Situation Room, strangely alone. The uniformed people from the White House Military Office—called Wham-O by the staff, which seemed particularly inappropriate at the moment—were all in a state somewhere between bemused and stunned. And the immediate consequence of the great effort to whisk senior government officials out of town—the scheme was officially called the Continuation of Government—had had the reverse effect. The government was at the moment still fragmented in twenty or so helicopters and one E-4B, and quite unable to coordinate itself. Ryan figured that the emergency was better designed to withstand a nuclear attack than to avoid one, and that, at the moment, seemed very strange.

Indeed, the big question for the moment was *What the hell do we do now?* And Ryan didn't have much of a clue. But then a phone rang to help him.

"This is President Ryan."

"Sir, this is General Dan Liggett at Strike Command in Omaha. Mr. President, I gather we just dodged a major bullet."

"Yeah, I think you can say that, General."

"Sir, do you have any orders for us?"

"Like what?"

"Well, sir, one option would be retaliation, and—"

"Oh, you mean because they blew a chance to nuke us, we should take the opportunity to nuke them for real?"

"Sir, it's my job to present options, not to advocate any," Liggett told his Commander-in-Chief.

"General, do you know where I was during the attack?"

"Yes, sir. Gutsy call, Mr. President."

"Well, I am now trying to deal with my own restored life, and I don't have a clue what I ought to do about the big picture, whatever the hell that is. In another two hours or so, maybe we can think of something, but at the moment I have no idea at all. And you know, I'm not sure I want to have any such idea. So, for the moment, General, we do nothing at all. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes, Mr. President. Nothing at all happens with Strike Command."

"I'll get back to you."

"Jack?" a familiar voice called from the door.

“Arnie, I hate drinking alone—except when there’s nobody else around. How about you and me drain a bottle of something? Tell the usher to bring down a bottle of Midleton, and, you know, have him bring a glass for himself.”

“Is it true you rode it out on the ship down at the Navy Yard?”

“Yep.” Ryan bobbed his head.

“Why?”

“I couldn’t run away, Arnie. I couldn’t run off to safety and leave a couple of million people to fry. Call it brave. Call it stupid. I just couldn’t bug out that way.”

Van Damm leaned into the corridor and made the drink order to someone Jack couldn’t see, and then he came back in. “I was just starting dinner at my place in Georgetown when CNN ran the flash. Figured I might as well come here—didn’t really believe it like I should have, I suppose.”

“It was somewhat difficult to swallow. I suppose I ought to ask myself if it was our fault, sending the special-operations people in. Why is it that people second-guess everything we do here?”

“Jack, the world is full of people who can only feel big by making other people look small, and the bigger the target, the better they feel about it. And reporters love to get their opinions, because it makes a good story to say you’re wrong about anything. The media prefers a good story to a good truth most of the time. It’s just the nature of the business they’re in.”

“That’s not fair, you know,” Ryan observed, when the head usher arrived with a silver tray, a bottle of Irish whiskey, and some glasses with ice already in them. “Charlie, you pour yourself one, too,” the President told him.

“Mr. President, I’m not supposed—”

“Today the rules changed, Mr. Pemberton. If you get too swacked to drive home, I’ll have the Secret Service take you. Have I ever told you what a good guy you are, Charlie? My kids just plain love you.”

Charles Pemberton, son and grandson of ushers at the White House, poured three drinks, just a light one for himself, and handed the glasses over with the grace of a neurosurgeon.

“Sit down and relax, Charlie. I have a question for you.”

“Yes, Mr. President?”

“Where did you ride it out? Where did you stay when that H-bomb was coming down on Washington?”

“I didn’t go to the shelter in the East Wing, figured that was best for the womenfolk. I—well, sir, I took the elevator up to the roof and figured I’d just watch.”

“Arnie, there sits a brave man,” Jack said, saluting with his glass.

“Where were you, Mr. President?” Pemberton asked, breaking the etiquette

rules because of pure curiosity.

"I was on the ship that shot the damned thing down, watching our boys do their job. That reminds me, this Gregory guy, the scientist that Tony Bretano got involved. We look after him, Arnie. He's one of the people who saved the day."

"Duly noted, Mr. President." Van Damm took a big pull on his glass. "What else?"

"I don't have a what-else right now," SWORDSMAN admitted.

Neither did anyone in Beijing, where it was now eight in the morning, and the ministers were filing into their conference room like sleepwalkers, and the question on everyone's lips was "What happened?"

Premier Xu called the meeting to order and ordered the Defense Minister to make his report, which he did in the monotone voice of a phone recording.

"You ordered the launch?" Foreign Minister Shen asked, aghast.

"What else was I to do? General Xun told me his base was under attack. They were trying to take our assets away—we spoke of this possibility, did we not?"

"We spoke of it, yes," Qian agreed. "But to do such a thing without our approval? That was a political action without reflection, Luo. What new dangers have you brought on us?"

"And what resulted from it?" Fang asked next.

"Evidently, the warhead either malfunctioned or was somehow intercepted and destroyed by the Americans. The only missile that launched successfully was targeted on Washington. The city was not, I regret to say, destroyed."

"You regret to say—you *regret* to say?" Fang's voice spoke more loudly than anyone at the table could ever remember. "You fool! If you had succeeded, *we would be facing national death now!* You *regret?"*

At about that time in Washington, a mid-level CIA bureaucrat had an idea. They were feeding live and taped coverage from the Siberian battlefield over the Internet, because independent news coverage wasn't getting into the People's Republic. "Why not," he asked his supervisor, "send them CNN as well?" That decision was made instantaneously, though it was possibly illegal, maybe a violation of copyright laws. But on this occasion, common sense took precedence over bureaucratic caution. CNN, they decided quickly, could bill them later.

And so, an hour and twenty minutes after the event, http://www.darkstarfeed.cia.gov/siberiabattle/realtime.rambegan to cover the

coverage of the near-destruction of Washington, D.C. The news that a nuclear war had been begun but aborted stunned the students in Tiananmen Square. The collective realization that they themselves might be the targets of a retaliatory strike did not put fear so much as rage into their young hearts. There were about ten thousand of them now, many with their portable laptop computers, and many of those hooked into cell phones for Internet access. From overhead you could tell their positions just by the tiny knots of pressed-together bodies. Then the leaders of the demonstration got together and started talking fast among themselves. They knew they had to do something, they just didn't know exactly what. For all they knew, they might well all be facing death.

The ardor was increased by the commentators CNN had hurriedly rushed into their studios in Atlanta and New York, many of whom opined that the only likely action for America was to reply in kind to the Chinese attack, and when the reporter acting as moderator asked what "in kind" meant, the reply was predictable.

For the students, the question now was not so much life and death as saving their nation—the thirteen hundred *million* citizens whose lives had been made forfeit by the mad-men of the Politburo. The Council of Ministers Building was not all that far away, and the crowd started heading that way.

By this time, there was a police presence in the Square of Heavenly Peace. The morning watch replaced the night team and saw the mass of young people —to their considerable surprise, since this had not been a part of their morning briefing. The men going off duty explained that nothing had happened at all that was contrary to the law, and for all they knew, it was a spontaneous demonstration of solidarity and support for the brave PLA soldiers in Siberia. So, there were few of them about, and fewer still of the People's Armed Police. It would probably not have mattered in any case. The body of students coalesced, and marched with remarkable discipline to the seat of their country's government. When they got close, there were armed men there. These police officers were not prepared to see so many people coming toward them. The senior of their number, a captain, walked out alone and demanded to know who was in charge of this group, only to be brushed aside by a twenty-two-year-old engineering student.

Again, it was a case of a police officer totally unaccustomed to having his words disregarded, and totally nonplussed when it took place. Suddenly, he was looking at the back of a young man who was supposed to have stopped dead in his tracks when he was challenged. The security policeman had actually expected the students to stop as a body at his command, for such was the power of law in the People's Republic, but strong as the force of law was, it was also brittle, and when broken, there was nothing behind it. There were also only forty armed men in the building, and all of them were on the first floor in the rear, kept out of the way because the ministers wanted the armed peasants out of sight, except in ones and twos. The four officers on duty at the main entrance were just swept aside as the crowd thundered in through the double doors. All drew their pistols, but only one fired, wounding three students before being knocked down and kicked into senselessness. The other

three just ran to the main post to find the reserve force. By the time they got there, the students were running up the wide, ceremonial stairs to the second floor.

The meeting room was well soundproofed, a security measure to prevent eavesdropping. But soundproofing worked in both directions, and so the men sitting around the table did not hear anything until the corridor was filled with students only fifty meters away, and even then the ministers just turned about in nothing more than annoyance—

—the armed guard force deployed in two groups, one running to the front of the building on the first floor, the other coming up the back on the second, led by a major who thought to evacuate the ministers. The entire thing had developed much too quickly, with virtually no warning, because the city police had dropped the ball rather badly, and there was no time to call in armed reinforcements. As it played out, the first-floor team ran into a wall of students, and while the captain in command had twenty men armed with automatic rifles, he hesitated to order opening fire because there were more students in view than he had cartridges in his rifles, and in hesitating, he lost the initiative. A number of students approached the armed men, their hands raised, and began to engage them in reasonable tones that belied the wild-eyed throng behind them.

It was different on the second floor. The major there didn't hesitate at all. He had his men level their rifles and fire one volley high, just to scare them off. But these students didn't scare. Many of them crashed through doors off the main corridor, and one of these was the room in which the Politburo was sitting.

The sudden entrance of fifteen young people got every minister's attention.

"What is this!" Zhang Han Sen thundered. "Who are you?"

"And who are *you?"* the engineering student sneered back. "Are you the maniac who started a nuclear war?"

"There is no such war—who told you such nonsense?" Marshal Luo demanded. His uniform told them who he was.

"And you are the one who sent our soldiers to their death in Russia!"

"What is this?" the Minister Without Portfolio asked.

"I think these are the people, Zhang," Qian Kun observed. *"Our* people, Comrade," he added coldly.

Into the vacuum of power and direction, more of the students forced their way into the room, and now the guard force couldn't risk shooting—too many of their country's leadership was right there, right in the field of fire.

"Grab them, grab them! They will not shoot these men!" one student shouted. Pairs and trios of students raced around the table, each to a separate seat.

"Tell me, boy," Fang said gently to the one closest to him, "how did you learn all this?"

“Over our computers, of course,” the youngster replied, a little impolitely, but not grossly so.

“Well, one finds truth where one can,” the grandfatherly minister observed.

“So, Grandfather, is it true?”

“Yes, I regret to say it is,” Fang told him, not quite knowing what he was agreeing to.

Just then, the troops appeared, their officer in the lead with a pistol in his hand, forging their way into the conference room, wide-eyed at what they saw. The students were not armed, but to start a gunfight in this room would kill the very people he was trying to safeguard, and now it was his turn to hesitate.

“Now, everyone be at ease,” Fang said, pushing his seat gently back from the table. “You, Comrade Major, do you know who I am?”

“Yes, Minister—but—”

“Good, Comrade Major. First, you will have your men stand down. We need no killing here. There has been enough of that.”

The officer looked around the room. No one else seemed to be speaking just yet, and into that vacuum had come words which, if not exactly what he wanted to hear, at least had some weight in them. He turned and without words—waving his hands—had his men relax a little.

“Very good. Now, comrades,” Fang said, turning back to his colleagues. “I propose that some changes are needed here. First of all, we need Foreign Minister Shen to contact America and tell them that a horrible accident has occurred, and that we rejoice that no lives were lost as a result, and that those responsible for that mistake will be handled by us. To that end, I demand the immediate arrest of Premier Xu, Defense Minister Luo, and Minister Zhang. It is they who caused us to embark on the foolish adventure in Russia that threatens to bring ruin to us all. You three have endangered our country, and for this crime against the people, you must pay.

“Comrades, what is your vote?” Fang demanded.

There were no dissents; even Tan and Interior Minister Tong nodded their assent.

“Next, Shen, you will immediately propose an end to hostilities with Russia and America, telling them also that those responsible for this ruinous adventure will be punished. Are we agreed on that, Comrades?”

They were.

“For myself, I think we ought all to give thanks to Heaven that we may be able to put an end to this madness. Let us make this happen quickly. For now, I will meet with these young people to see what other things are of interest to them. You, Comrade Major, will conduct the three prisoners to a place of confinement. Qian, will you remain with me and speak to the students as well?”

"Yes, Fang," the Finance Minister said. "I will be pleased to."

"So, young man," Fang said to the one who'd seemed to act like a leader. "What is it you wish to discuss?"

The Blackhawks were long on their return flight. The refueling went off without a hitch, but it was soon apparent that almost thirty men, all Russians, had been lost in the attack on Xuanhua. It wasn't the first time Clark had seen good men lost, and as before, the determining factor was nothing more than luck, but that was a lousy explanation to have to give to a new widow. The other thing eating at him was the missile that had gotten away. He'd seen it lean to the east. It hadn't gone to Moscow, and that was all he knew right now. The flight back was bleakly silent the whole way, and he couldn't fix it by calling in on his satellite phone because he'd taken a fall at some point and broken the antenna off the top of the damned thing. He'd failed. That was all he knew, and the consequences of this kind of failure surpassed his imagination. The only good news he could come up with was that no one in his family lived close to any likely target, but lots of other people did. Finally the chopper touched down, and the doors were opened for the troopers to get out. Clark saw General Diggs there and went over to him.

"How bad?"

"The Navy shot it down over Washington."

"What?"

"General Moore told me. Some cruiser—*Gettysburg,* I think he said—shot the bastard down right over the middle of D.C. We got lucky, Mr. Clark."

John's legs almost buckled at that news. For the past five hours, he'd been imagining a mushroom cloud with his name on it over some American city, but God, luck, or the Great Pumpkin had intervened, and he'd settle for that.

"What gives, Mr. C?" Chavez asked, with considerable worry in his voice. Diggs gave him the word, too.

"The Navy? The fuckin' Navy? Well, I'll be damned. They are good for something, eh?"

Jack Ryan was about half in the bag by this time, and if the media found out about it, the hell with them. The cabinet was back in town, but he'd put off the meeting until the following morning. It would take time to consider what had to be done. The most obvious response, the one talking heads were proclaiming on the various TV stations, was one he could not even contemplate, much less order. They'd have to find something better than wholesale slaughter. He wouldn't order that, though some special operation to take out the Chinese Politburo certainly appealed to his current state of mind.

A lot of blood had been spilled, and there would be some more, too. To think it had all begun with an Italian cardinal and a Baptist preacher, killed by some trigger-happy cop. Did the world really turn on so perverse an axis as that?

That, Ryan thought, *calls for another drink.*

But some good had to come from this. You had to learn lessons from this sort of thing. But what was there to learn? It was too confusing for the American President. Things had happened too fast. He'd gone to the brink of something so deep and so dreadful that the vast maw of it still filled his eyes, and it was just too much for one man to handle. He'd bounced back from facing imminent death himself, but not the deaths of millions, not as directly as this. The truth of the matter was that his mind was blanked out by it all, unable to analyze, unable to correlate the information in a way that would help him take a step forward, and all he really wanted and needed to do was to embrace his family, to be certain that the world still had the shape he wanted it to have.

People somehow expected him to be a superman, to be some godlike being who handled things that others could not handle—*well, yeah,* Jack admitted to himself. Maybe he had shown courage by remaining in Washington, but after courage came deflation, and he needed something outside himself to restore his manhood. The well he'd tapped wasn't bottomless at all, and this time the bucket was clunking down on rocks...

The phone rang. Arnie got it. "Jack? It's Scott Adler."

Ryan reached for it. "Yeah, Scott, what is it?"

"Just got a call from Bill Kilmer, the DCM in Beijing. Seems that Foreign Minister Shen was just over to the embassy. They have apologized for launching the missile. They say it was a horrible accident and they're glad the thing didn't go off—"

"That's fucking nice of them," Ryan observed.

"Well, whoever gave the order to launch is under arrest. They request our assistance in bringing an end to hostilities. Shen said they'd take any reasonable action to bring that about. He said they're willing to declare a unilateral cease-fire and withdraw all their forces back to their own borders, and to consider reparations to Russia. They're surrendering, Jack."

"Really? Why?"

"There appears to have been some sort of riot in Beijing. Reports are very sketchy, but it seems that their government has fallen. Minister Fang Gan seems to be the interim leader. That's all I know, Jack, but it looks like a decent beginning. With your permission, and with the concurrence of the Russians, I think we ought to agree to this."

"Approved," the President said, without much in the way of consideration. *Hell,* he told himself, *you don't have to dwell too much on ending a war, do you?* "Now what?"

"Well, I want to talk to the Russians to make sure they'll go along. I think

they will. Then we can negotiate the details. As a practical matter, we hold all the cards, Jack. The other side is folding."

"Just like that? We end it all just like that?" Ryan asked.

"It doesn't have to be Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel, Jack. It just has to work."

"Will it work?"

"Yes, Jack, it ought to."

"Okay, get hold of the Russians," Ryan said, setting his glass down.

Maybe this was the end of the last war, Jack thought. If so, no, it didn't have to be pretty.

It was a good dawn for General Bondarenko, and was about to get better. Colonel Tolkunov came running into his command center holding a sheet of paper.

"We just copied this off the Chinese radio, military and civilian. They are ordering their forces to cease fire in place and to prepare to withdraw from our territory."

"Oh? What makes them think we will let them go?" the Russian commander asked.

"It's a beginning, Comrade General. If this is accompanied by a diplomatic approach to Moscow, then the war will soon be over. You have won," the colonel added.

"Have I?" Gennady Iosifovich asked. He stretched. It felt good this morning, looking at his maps, seeing the deployments, and knowing that he held the upper hand. If this was the end of the war, and he was the winner, then that was sufficient to the moment, wasn't it? "Very well. Confirm this with Moscow."

It wasn't that easy, of course. Units in contact continued to trade shots for some hours, until the orders reached them, but then the firing died down, and the invading troops withdrew away from their enemies, and the Russians, with orders of their own, didn't follow. By sunset, the shooting and the killing had stopped, pending final disposition. Church bells rang all over Russia.

Golovko took note of the bells and the people in the streets, swigging their vodka and celebrating their country's victory. Russia felt like a great power again, and that was good for the morale of the people. Better yet, in another

few years they'd start reaping the harvest of their resources—and before that would come bridge loans of enormous size... and maybe, just maybe, Russia would turn the corner, finally, and begin a new century well, after wasting most of the previous one.

It was nightfall before the word got out from Beijing to the rest of China. The end of the war so recently started came as a shock to those who'd never really understood the reasons or the facts in the first place. Then came word that the government had changed, and that was also a puzzling development for which explanations would have to wait. The interim Premier was Fang Gan, a name known from pictures rather than words or deeds, but he looked old and wise, and China was a country of great momentum rather than great thoughts, and though the course of the country would change, it would change slowly so far as its people were concerned. People shrugged, and discussed the puzzling new developments in quiet and measured words.

For one particular person in Beijing, the changes meant that her job would change somewhat in importance if not in actual duties. Ming went out to dinner—the restaurants hadn't closed—with her foreign lover, gushing over drinks and noodles with the extraordinary events of the day, then walked off to his apartment for a dessert of Japanese sausage.

RED RABBIT

TOM CLANCY

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS ✦ NEW YORK

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RED RABBIT

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To Danny O and the men of Engine 52 and Ladder 52

Heroes are often the most ordinary of men.
HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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Alex, of course, for holding the other one at all times.

Tom and the lads at Her Majesty's Royal Palace and Fortress. So fine a body of men is difficult to find, and a rare pleasure to discover.

The FSOs at the United States Embassy, Budapest, for so graciously handling an unannounced walk-in.

And to Michael, Melissa, Gilbert, and CDR Marsha, in anticipation of your superior professionalism.

The most momentous thing in human life is the art of winning the soul to good or to evil.

PYTHAGORAS

Without recognizing the ordinances of Heaven, it is impossible to be a superior man.

CONFUCIUS

PROLOGUE

THE BACK GARDEN

THE SCARY PART, Jack decided, was going to be driving. He'd already bought a Jaguar—pronounced *jag-you-ah* over here, he'd have to remember—but both times he'd walked to it at the dealership, he'd gone to the left-front door instead of the right. The dealer hadn't laughed at him, but Ryan was sure he'd wanted to. At least he hadn't climbed into the passenger seat by mistake and really made an ass of himself. He'd have to remember all that: The "right" side of the road was the *left.* A right turn crossed oncoming traffic, not a left turn. The left lane was the slow lane on the interstates—*motorways,* he corrected himself. The plugs in the wall were all cockeyed. The house didn't have central heating, despite the princely price he'd paid for it. There was no air-conditioning, though that probably wasn't necessary here. It wasn't the hottest of climates: The locals started dropping dead in the street when the mercury topped 75. Jack wondered what the D.C. climate would do to them. Evidently, the "mad dogs and Englishmen" ditty was a thing of the past.

But it could have been worse. He did have a pass to shop for food at the Army-Air Force Exchange Service—otherwise known as the PX at nearby Greenham Commons Air Base—so at least they'd have proper hot dogs, and brands that resembled the ones he bought at the Giant at home in Maryland.

So many other discordant notes. British television was different, of course, not that he really expected much chance to vegetate in front of the phosphor screen anymore, but little Sally needed her ration of cartoons. Besides, even when you were reading something important, the background chatter of some mindless show was comforting in its own way. The TV news wasn't too bad, though, and the newspapers were particularly good—better than those he normally read at home, on the whole, but he'd miss the morning *Far Side.* Maybe the *International Tribune* had it, Ryan hoped. He could buy it at the

train station kiosk. He had to keep track of baseball anyway.

The movers—*re*movers, he reminded himself—were beavering away under Cathy's direction. It wasn't a bad house, though smaller than their place at Peregrine Cliff, now rented to a Marine colonel teaching the earnest young boys and girls at the Naval Academy. The master bedroom overlooked what seemed to be about a quarter-acre of garden. The realtor had been particularly enthused about that. And the previous owners had spent a lot of time there: It was wall-to-wall roses, mainly red and white, to honor the houses of Lancaster and York, it would seem. There were pink ones in between to show that they'd joined together to form the Tudors, though that house had died out with Elizabeth I—and ultimately made way for the new set of Royals, whom Ryan had ample reason to like.

And the weather wasn't bad at all. They'd been in country three days and it hadn't rained at all. The sun rose very early and set late, and in the winter, he'd heard, it never came up and immediately went back down again. Some of the new friends he'd made at the State Department had told him that the long nights could be hard on the little kids. At four years and six months, Sally still qualified for that. Five-month-old Jack probably didn't notice such things, and fortunately, he slept just fine—he was doing so right now, in fact, in the custody of his nanny, Margaret van der Beek, a young redhead and daughter of a Methodist minister in South Africa. She'd come highly recommended . . . and then had been cleared by a background check performed by the Metropolitan Police. Cathy was a little concerned about the whole idea of a nanny. The idea of somebody else raising her infant grated on her like fingernails on a chalkboard, but it was an honored local custom, and it had worked out pretty well for one Winston Spencer Churchill. Miss Margaret had been vetted through Sir Basil's agency—her own agency, in fact, was officially sanctioned by Her Majesty's government. Which meant precisely nothing, Jack reminded himself. He'd been thoroughly briefed in the weeks before coming over. The "opposition"—a British term also used at Langley—had penetrated the British intelligence community more than once. CIA believed they hadn't done so at Langley yet, but Jack had to wonder about that. KGB was pretty damned good, and people were greedy all over the world. The Russians didn't pay very well, but some people sold their souls and their freedom for peanuts. They also didn't carry a flashing sign on their clothing that said I AM A TRAITOR.

Of all his briefings, the security ones had been the most tiresome. Jack's dad had been the cop in the family, and Ryan himself had never quite mastered that mode of thinking. It was one thing to look for hard data amid the cascade of crap that worked its way up the intelligence system, quite another to look with suspicion at everyone in the office and yet expect to work cordially with them. He wondered if any of the others regarded him that way . . . *probably not,* he decided. He'd paid his dues the hard way, after all, and had the pale scars on his shoulder to prove it, not to mention the nightmares of that night on Chesapeake Bay, the dreams in which his weapon never fired despite his efforts, Cathy's frantic cries of terror and alarm ringing in his ears. He'd won that battle, hadn't he? Why did the dreams think otherwise? Something to talk to a pshrink about, perhaps, but as the old wives' tale went, you had to be

crazy to go to a pshrink. . . .

Sally was running about in circles, looking at her new bedroom, admiring the new bed being assembled by the removers. Jack kept out of the way. Cathy had told him he was unfitted even to supervise this sort of thing, despite his tool kit, without which no American male feels very manly, which had been among the first things unpacked. The removers had their own tools, of course—and they, too, had been vetted by SIS, lest some KGB-controlled agent plant a bug in the house. It just wouldn't do, old boy.

"Where's the tourist?" an American voice asked. Ryan went to the foyer to see who it—

"Dan! How the hell are you?"

"It was a boring day at the office, so Liz and I came out to see how things are going for you." And sure enough, just behind the Legal Attaché was his beauty-queen wife, the long-suffering St. Liz of the FBI Wives. Mrs. Murray went over to Cathy for a sisterly hug and kiss, then the two of them went immediately off to the garden. Cathy loved the roses, of course, which was fine with Jack. His dad had carried all the gardening genes in the Ryan family, and passed on none to his son. Murray gazed at his friend. "You look like hell."

"Long flight, boring book," Jack explained.

"Didn't you sleep on the way across?" Murray asked in surprise.

"On an airplane?" Ryan responded.

"It bothers you that much?"

"Dan, on a ship, you can see what's holding you up. Not in an airplane."

That gave Murray a chuckle. "Better get used to it, bud. You're gonna be building up a lot of frequent-flyer miles hopping back and forth to Dulles."

"I suppose." Strangely, Jack hadn't really considered that when he'd accepted the posting. *Dumb,* he'd realized too late. He'd be going back and forth to Langley at least once a month—not the greatest thing for a reluctant flyer.

"The moving going okay? You can trust this bunch, you know. Bas has used them for twenty-plus years, my friends at the Yard like them, too. Half of these guys are ex-cops." And cops, he didn't have to say, were more reliable than spooks.

"No bugs in the bathroom? Great," Ryan observed. During his very short experience of it so far, Ryan had learned that life in the intelligence service was a little different from teaching history at the Naval Academy. There probably *were* bugs—but wired to Basil's office . . .

"I know. Me, too. Good news, though: You'll be seeing a lot of me—if you don't mind."

Ryan nodded tiredly, trying to manage a grin. "Well, at least I'll have somebody to have a beer with."

"That's the national sport. More business gets done in pubs than at the office. Their version of the country club."

"The beer's not too bad."

"Better than the piss we have at home. I'm fully converted on that score."

"They told me at Langley that you do a lot of intel work for Emil Jacobs."

"Some." Murray nodded. "Fact of the matter is, we're better at it than a lot

of you Agency types. The Operations people haven't recovered from seventy-seven yet, and I'm not sure that'll happen for a while."

Ryan had to agree. "Admiral Greer thinks so, too. Bob Ritter is pretty smart—maybe a little too smart, if you know what I mean—but he doesn't have enough friends in Congress to get his empire expanded the way that he wants."

Greer was the CIA's chief analyst, Ritter the Ops director. The two were often at odds.

"They don't trust Ritter like they do the DDI. Carryover from the Church Committee mess ten years ago. You know, the Senate never seems to remember who ran those operations. They canonize the boss and crucify the troops who tried to follow his orders—though badly. Damn, was that a—" Murray searched for the word. "The Germans call it a *schweinerei.* No translation, exactly, but, you know, it just sounds like what it is."

Jack grunted with amusement. "Yeah, better than fuckup."

The CIA's effort to assassinate Fidel Castro, which had been run out of the office of the Attorney General during the time of Camelot, had been right out of Woody Woodpecker, with a sprinkling of the Three Stooges: politicians trying to imitate James Bond, a character made up by a *failed* Brit spook. The movies just weren't the real world, as Ryan had learned the hard way, first in London, and then in his own living room.

"So, Dan, how good are they really?"

"The Brits?" Murray led Ryan out onto the front lawn. The removers *were* vetted by SIS—but Murray was FBI. "Basil is world-class. That's why he's lasted so long. He was a brilliant field spook, and he was the first guy to get a bad vibe about Philby—and remember, Basil was just a rookie then. He's good at administration, one of the most agile thinkers I've ever come across. The local politicians on both sides of the aisle like him and trust him. That isn't easy. Kinda like Hoover was for us once, but without the cult-of-personality thing. I like him. Good dude to work with. And Bas likes you a lot, Jack."

"Why?" Ryan asked. "I haven't done much of anything."

"Bas has an eye for talent. He thinks you have the right stuff. He flat loved that thing you dreamed up last year to catch security leaks—the Canary Trap—and rescuing their next king didn't exactly hurt, y'know? You're going to be a popular boy down at Century House. If you live up to your billing, you might just have a future in the spook business."

"Great." Ryan still wasn't entirely sure that was what he wanted to do, though. "Dan, I'm a stockbroker who turned into a history teacher, remember?"

"Jack, that's behind you now. Look forward, will ya? You were pretty good picking stocks at Merrill Lynch, right?"

"I made a few bucks," Ryan admitted. Actually, it was a lot of bucks, and his portfolio was still growing. People were getting fat on The Street back home.

"So, apply your brains to something really important," Dan suggested. "I hate to tell you, Jack, but there aren't that many smart people in the intelligence community. I know. I work there. A lot of drones, a lot of moderately smart people, but damned few stars, pal. You have the stuff to be a star. Jim Greer thinks so. So does Basil. You think outside the box. I do, too.

That's why I'm not chasing bank robbers in Riverside, Philadelphia, anymore. But I never made any million bucks playing the market."

"Getting lucky doesn't make you a great guy, Dan. Hell, Cathy's dad, Joe, has made a lot more 'n I ever will, and he's an opinionated, overbearing son of a bitch."

"Well, you made his daughter the wife of an honorary knight, didn't you?"

Jack smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, I suppose I did."

"That'll open a lot of doors over here, Jack. The Brits do like their titles." He paused. "Now—how about I drag you guys out for a pint? There's a nice pub up the hill, The Gypsy Moth. This moving stuff'll drive you crazy. It's almost as bad as building a house."

HIS OFFICE WAS in the first basement level of The Centre, a security measure that had never been explained to him, but it turned out there was an exact counterpart room in the headquarters of the Main Enemy. There, it was called MERCURY, messenger of the gods—very apt, if his nation acknowledged the concept of a god. The messages passed through the code and cipher clerks, came to his desk, and he examined them for content and code words, before routing them to the proper offices and officers for action; then, when the messages came back down, he routed things the other way. The traffic broke into a regular routine; mornings were usually inbound traffic and afternoons usually outbound. The tedious part was the encrypting, of course, since so many of the people out in the field used one-time pads unique to themselves—the single copies of those pads were located in the set of rooms to his right. The clerks in there transmitted and kept secrets ranging from the sex lives of Italian parliamentarians to the precise targeting hierarchy of American nuclear-strike plans.

Strangely, none of them talked about what they did or what they encrypted, inbound or outbound. The clerks were pretty mindless. Perhaps they were recruited with those psychological factors in mind—it would not have surprised him. This was an agency designed by geniuses for operation by robots. If someone could actually build such robots, he was sure they'd have them here, because you could trust machines not to diverge too greatly from their intended path.

Machines couldn't think, however, and for his own job, thinking and remembering were useful things, if the agency was to function—and function it must. It was the shield and the sword of a state which needed both. And he was the postmaster of sorts; he had to remember what went where. He didn't know everything that went on here, but he knew a lot more than most people in this building: operation names and locations, and, often enough, operational missions and taskings. He generally did not know the proper names and faces of field officers, but he knew their targets, knew the code names of their recruited agents, and, for the most part, knew what those agents were providing.

He'd been here, in this department, for nine and a half years. He'd started in 1973, just after graduating from Moscow State University with a degree in mathematics, and his highly disciplined mind had gotten him spotted early on by a KGB talent scout. He played a particularly fine game of chess, and that, he supposed, was where his trained memory came from, all that study of the

games of the old grandmasters, so that in a given situation he'd know the next move. He'd actually thought of making chess his career, but though he'd studied hard, it wasn't quite hard enough, it seemed. Boris Spassky, just a young player himself then, had annihilated him six games to none, with two desperate draws, and so ended his hopes of fame and fortune . . . and travel. He sighed at his desk. Travel. He'd studied his geography books, too, and in closing his eyes could see the images—mainly black-and-white: Venice's Grand Canal, London's Regent Street, Rio de Janeiro's magnificent Copacabana beach, the face of Mt. Everest, which Hillary had climbed when he himself had just been learning to walk . . . all those places he would never get to see. Not him. Not a person with his access and his security clearances. No, KGB was very careful with such people. It trusted no one, a lesson that had been learned the hard way. What was it about his country that so many tried to escape from it? And yet so many millions had died fighting for the *rodina*. . . . He'd been spared military service because of his mathematics and his chess potential, and then, he supposed, because of his recruitment to #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square. Along with it came a nice flat, fully seventy-five square meters, in a recently finished building. Military rank, too—he'd become a senior captain within weeks of his majority, which, on the whole, wasn't too bad. Even better, he'd just started getting paid now in certificate rubles, and so was able to shop in the "closed" stores for Western consumer goods—and, best of all, with shorter lines. His wife appreciated that. He'd soon be in the entry level of the *nomenklatura*, like a minor czarist prince, looking up the ladder and wondering how far he might climb. But unlike the czars, he was here not by blood but by merit—a fact that appealed to his manhood, Captain Zaitzev thought.

Yes, he'd earned his way here, and that was important. That's why he was trusted with secrets, this one for example: an agent code-named CASSIUS, an American living in Washington; it seemed he had access to valuable political intelligence that was treasured by people on the fifth floor, and which was often seconded to experts in the U.S.-Canada Institute, which studied the tea leaves in America. Canada wasn't very important to the KGB, except for its participation in the American air-defense systems, and because some of its senior politicians didn't like their powerful southern neighbor, or so the *rezident* in Ottawa regularly told his superiors upstairs. Zaitzev wondered about that. The Poles might not love their eastern neighbor either, but the Poles mostly did what they were told—the Warsaw *rezident* had reported with unconcealed pleasure in his dispatch the previous month—as that union hothead had found out to his discomfort. "Counterrevolutionary scum" had been the term used by Colonel Igor Alekseyevich Tomachevskiy. The Colonel was thought to be a rising star, due for a posting to the West. That's where the really good ones went.

TWO AND A half miles across town, Ed Foley was first in the door, with his wife, Mary Patricia, just behind him, leading Eddie by the hand. Eddie's young blue eyes were wide with a child's curiosity, but even now the four-and-a-half-

year-old was learning that Moscow wasn't Disney World. The culture shock was about to fall like Thor's own hammer, but it would expand his horizons a bit, his parents thought. As it would theirs.

"Uh-huh," Ed Foley said on his first look. An embassy consular officer had lived here before, and he'd at least made an effort to clean the place up, no doubt helped by a Russian domestic—the Soviet government provided them, and diligent they were . . . for both their bosses. Ed and Mary Pat had been thoroughly briefed for weeks—nay, months—before taking the long Pan Am flight out of JFK for Moscow.

"So, this is home, eh?" Ed observed in a studiously neutral voice.

"Welcome to Moscow," Mike Barnes told the newbies. He was another consular officer, a career FSO on the way up, and had this week's duty as the embassy greeter. "The last occupant was Charlie Wooster. Good guy, back at Foggy Bottom now, catching the summer heat."

"How are the summers here?" Mary Pat asked.

"Kinda like Minneapolis," Barnes answered. "Not real hot, and the humidity's not too bad, and the winters are actually not as severe—I grew up in Minneapolis," he explained. "Of course, the German army might not agree, or Napoleon, but, well, nobody ever said Moscow was supposed to be like Paris, right?"

"Yeah, they told me about the nightlife," Ed chuckled. It was all right with him. They didn't need a stealthy Station Chief in Paris, and this was the biggest, ripest plum assignment he'd never expected to get. Bulgaria, maybe, but not the very belly of the beast. Bob Ritter must have been really impressed by his time in Tehran. Thank God Mary Pat had delivered Eddie when she had. They'd missed the takeover in Iran by, what, three weeks? It had been a troublesome pregnancy, and Mary Pat's doc had insisted on their coming back to New York for the delivery. Kids were a gift from God, all right. . . . Besides, that had made Eddie a New Yorker, too, and Ed had damned well wanted his son to be a Yankees and Rangers fan from birth. The best news of this assignment, aside from the professional stuff, was that he'd see the best ice hockey in the world right here in Moscow. Screw the ballet and the symphony. These fuckers knew how to skate. Pity the Russkies didn't understand baseball. Probably too sophisticated for the muzhiks. All those pitches to choose from . . .

"It's not real big," Mary Pat observed, looking at one cracked window. They were on the sixth floor. At least the traffic noise wouldn't be too bad. The foreigners' compound—ghetto—was walled and guarded. This was for their protection, the Russians insisted, but street crime against foreigners wasn't a problem in Moscow. The average Russian citizen was forbidden by law to have foreign currency in his possession, and there was no convenient way to spend it in any case. So there was little profit in mugging an American or Frenchman on the streets, and there was no mistaking them—their clothing marked them about as clearly as peacocks among crows.

"Hello!" It was an English accent. The florid face appeared a moment later. "We're your neighbors. Nigel and Penny Haydock," the face's owner said. He was about forty-five, tall and skinny, with prematurely gray and thinning hair. His wife, younger and prettier than he probably deserved, appeared an instant

later with a tray of sandwiches and some welcoming white wine.

"You must be Eddie," the flaxen-haired Mrs. Haydock observed. That's when Ed Foley noticed the maternity dress. She was about six months gone, by the look of her. So the briefings had been right in every detail. Foley trusted CIA, but he'd learned the hard way to verify everything, from the names of people living on the same floor to whether the toilet flushed reliably. *Especially in Moscow,* he thought, heading for the bathroom. Nigel followed.

"The plumbing works reliably here, but it is noisy. No one complains," Haydock explained.

Ed Foley flipped the handle and, sure enough, it was noisy.

"Fixed that myself. Bit of a handyman, you see," he said. Then, more quietly, "Be careful where you speak in this place, Ed. Bloody bugs everywhere. Especially the bedrooms. The bloody Russians like to count our orgasms, so it seems. Penny and I try not to disappoint." A sly grin. Well, to some cities you brought your own nightlife.

"Two years here?" The toilet seemed to run forever. Foley was tempted to lift the tank cover to see if Haydock had replaced the plumbing hardware inside with something special. He decided he didn't have to look to check that.

"Twenty-nine months. Seven to go. It's a lively place to work. I'm sure they told you, everywhere you go, you'll have a 'friend' handy. Don't underestimate them, either. The Second Directorate chaps are thoroughly trained. . . ." The toilet ran its course, and Haydock changed his voice. "The shower—the hot water is pretty reliable, but the spray pipe, it rattles, just like the one in our flat. . . ." He turned the faucet to demonstrate. Sure enough, it rattled. *Had someone worked on the wall to loosen it?* Ed wondered. Probably. Probably this very handyman with him.

"Perfect."

"Yes, you will get a lot of work done in here. Shower with a friend and save water—isn't that what they say in California?"

Foley managed his first laugh in Moscow. "Yeah, that's what they say, all right." He gave his visitor a look. He was surprised that Haydock had introduced himself so early, but maybe it was just reverse-English tradecraft to be so obvious. The business of espionage had all manner of rules, and the Russians were rule-followers. So, Bob Ritter had told him, toss away *part* of the rulebook. Stick to your cover and be a dumbass unpredictable American every chance you get. He'd also told the Foleys that Nigel Haydock was one guy they could trust. He was the son of another intelligence officer—a man betrayed by Kim Philby himself, one of the poor bastards who'd parachuted into Albania into the waiting arms of the KGB reception committee. Nigel had been five years old then, just old enough always to remember what it was like to lose your father to the enemy. Nigel's motivation was probably as good as Mary Pat's, and that was pretty damned good. Better even than his own, Ed Foley might admit after a few drinks. Mary Pat hated the bastards as the Lord God Himself hated sin. Haydock wasn't the Station Chief here, but he was the head bird-dog for the SIS's operation in Moscow, and that made him pretty good. The CIA's Director, Judge Moore, trusted the Brits: after Philby, he'd seen them go through SIS with a flamethrower hotter than even James Jesus Angleton's fly rod and cauterize every possible leak. In turn, Foley trusted

Judge Moore, and so did the President. That was the craziest part of the intelligence business: You couldn't trust *anybody*—but you had to trust *somebody*.

Well, Foley thought, checking the hot water with his hand, *nobody ever said the business made much sense.* Like classical metaphysics. It just was.

"When's the furniture get here?"

"The container ought to be on a truck in Leningrad right now. Will they tamper with it?"

Haydock shrugged. "Check everything," he warned, then softened. "You can never know how thorough they are, Edward. The KGB is a great bloody bureaucracy—you don't know the meaning of the word until you see it in operation here. For example, the bugs in your flat—how many of them actually work? They're not British Telecom, nor are they AT&T. It's the curse of this country, really, and it works for us, but that, too, is unreliable. When you're followed, you can't know if it's an experienced expert or some bloody nimrod who can't find his way to the loo. They look alike and dress alike. Just like our people, when you get down to it, but their bureaucracy is so large that there's a greater likelihood it will protect the incompetent—or maybe not. God knows, at Century House we have our share of drones."

Foley nodded. "At Langley, we call it the Intelligence Directorate."

"Quite. We call ours the Palace of Westminster," Haydock observed, with his own favorite prejudice. "I think we've tested the plumbing enough."

Foley turned off the faucet and the two men returned to the living room, where Penny and Mary Pat were getting acquainted.

"Well, we have enough hot water anyway, honey."

"Glad to hear it," Mary Pat responded. She turned back to her guest. "Where do you shop around here?"

Penny Haydock smiled: "I can take you there. For special items, we can order from an agency in Helsinki, excellent quality: English, French, German—even American, for things like juices and preserved foods. The perishables are Finnish in origin, and they're generally very good, especially the lamb. Don't they have the finest lamb, Nigel?"

"Indeed it is—as good as New Zealand," her husband agreed.

"The steaks leave something to be desired," Mike Barnes told them, "but every week we get steaks flown in from Omaha. Tons of them—we distribute them to all our friends."

"That is the truth," Nigel confirmed. "Your corn-fed beef is superb. I'm afraid we're all quite addicted to it."

"Thank God for the U.S. Air Force," Barnes went on. "They fly the beef into all their NATO bases, and we're on the distribution list. They come in frozen, not quite as good as fresh at Delmonico's, but close enough to remind you of home. I hope you guys brought a grill. We tend to take them up on the roof to cook out. We import charcoal, too. Ivan just doesn't seem to understand about that." The apartment had no balcony, perhaps to protect them from the diesel smell that pervaded the city.

"What about going to work?" Foley asked.

"Better to take the metro. It really is great," Barnes told him.

"Leaving me with the car?" Mary Pat asked, with a hopeful smile. This was

going exactly to plan. That was expected, but anything that went well in this business came as something of a surprise, like the right presents under the Christmas tree. You always hoped Santa got the letter, but you could never be sure.

"You might as well learn how to drive in this city," Barnes said. "At least you have a nice car." The previous resident in this apartment had left behind a white Mercedes 280 for them, which was indeed a nice car. Actually, a little too nice at only four years old. Not that there were all that many cars in Moscow, and the license plates surely marked it as belonging to an American diplomat, and thus easy to spot by any traffic cop, and by the KGB vehicle that would follow it most places it went. Again, it was reverse-English. Mary Pat would have to learn to drive like an Indianapolis resident on her first trip to New York. "The streets are nice and wide," Barnes told her, "and the gas station is only three blocks that way." He pointed. "It's a huge one. The Russians like to build them that way."

"Great," she observed for Barnes's benefit, already dropping into her cover as a pretty, ditsy blonde. Around the world, the pretty ones were supposed to be the dumb ones, and blondes most of all. It was a hell of a lot easier to play dumb than to be smart, after all, Hollywood actors notwithstanding.

"What about servicing the car?" Ed asked.

"It's a Mercedes. They don't break much," Barnes assured them. "The German embassy has a guy who can fix anything that goes bad. We're cordial with our NATO allies. You guys soccer fans?"

"Girls' game," Ed Foley responded immediately.

"That's rather coarse of you," Nigel Haydock observed.

"Give me American football any time," Foley countered.

"Bloody foolish, uncivilized game, full of violence and committee meetings," the Brit sniffed.

Foley grinned. "Let's eat."

They sat down. The interim furniture was adequate, something like you'd find in a no-tell motel in Alabama. You could sleep on the bed, and the bug spray had probably done for all the crawly things. Probably.

The sandwiches were okay. Mary Pat went to get glasses and turned on the taps—

"Recommend against that one, Mrs. Foley," Nigel warned. "Some people come down with stomach complaints from the tap water. . . ."

"Oh?" She paused. "And my name's Mary Pat, Nigel."

Now they were properly introduced. "Yes, Mary Pat. We prefer bottled water for drinking. The tap water is good enough for bathing, and you can boil it in a pinch for coffee and tea."

"It's even worse in Leningrad," Nigel warned. "The natives are more or less immunized, they tell me, but we foreigners can get some serious GI problems there."

"What about schools?" Mary Pat had been worried about that.

"The American-British school looks after the children well," Penny Haydock promised. "I work there myself part-time. And the academic program there is top-drawer."

"Eddie's starting to read already, isn't he, honey?" the proud father

announced.

"Just *Peter Rabbit* and that sort of thing, but not bad for four," an equally pleased mother confirmed for the rest. For his part, Eddie had found the sandwich plate and was gnawing through something. It wasn't his treasured bologna, but a hungry kid is not always discriminating. There were also four large jars of Skippy's Super Chunk peanut butter packed away in a safe place. His parents figured they could get grape jelly anywhere, but probably not Skippy. The local bread, everyone said, was decent, if not exactly the Wonder Bread that American children had been raised on. And Mary Pat had a bread-maker in their cargo container, now on a truck or train between Moscow and Leningrad. A good cook, she was a positive artist at baking bread, and expected that to be her entrée into the embassy social set.

NOT ALL THAT far away from where they sat, a letter changed hands. The deliverer was from Warsaw, and had been dispatched by his government—actually, by an agency of his government to an agency of the recipient government. The messenger was not all that pleased by his mission. He was a communist—he had to be in order to be entrusted with such a task—but he was nonetheless a Pole, as was the subject of the message and the mission. And that was the rub.

The message was in fact a photocopy of the original, which had arrived by hand to an office—an important one—in Warsaw only three days before.

The messenger, a full colonel in his country's intelligence service, was personally known to the recipient, by sight if not especially by affection. The Russians used their western neighbors for many tasks. The Poles had a real talent for intelligence operations, for the same reason the Israelis did: They were surrounded by enemies. To their west was Germany, and to their east was the Soviet Union. The unhappy circumstances involved in both had resulted in Poland's putting many of its best and brightest into the intelligence business.

The recipient knew all that. In fact, he already knew word for word the content of the message. He'd learned it the previous day. He was not surprised at the delay, though. The Polish government had taken that day to consider the contents and its import before forwarding it, and the recipient took no umbrage. Every government in the world took at least one day to go over such things. It was just the nature of men in positions of authority to diddle and waver, even though they had to know that delay was a waste of time and air. Even Marxism-Leninism couldn't alter human nature. Sad, but true. The New Soviet Man, like the New Polish Man, was, in the end, still a man.

The ballet being played out now was as stylized as any performed by the Kirov troupe in Leningrad. The recipient even imagined he could hear the music playing. He actually preferred Western jazz to classical, but in any case the music at the ballet was just the garnish, the system that told the dancers when to leap together like pretty, trained dogs. The ballerinas were far too slender for Russian tastes, of course, but real women were far too heavy for those little fairies they called men to toss about.

Why was his mind wandering? He resumed his seat, falling back slowly into his leather chair as he unfolded the letter. It was written in Polish, and he didn't speak or read Polish, but affixed to it was a translation in literate Russian. Of course, he'd have his own translators go over it, plus two or three psychiatrists to consider the mental state of the drafter and to compose their own multipage analysis, which he'd have to read, time waster though that would be. Then he'd have to report on it, to provide his political superiors—no, his political *peers*—with all of these additional insights so that they could waste *their* time going over the message and its import before considering what to do about it.

The Chairman wondered if this Polish colonel realized how easy his own political bosses had had it. In the end, all they'd had to do was forward it to their own political masters for action, bucking the decision up the tree of responsibility as government functionaries all do, regardless of place or philosophy. Vassals were vassals the world over.

The Chairman looked up at him. "Comrade Colonel, thank you for bringing this to my attention. Please extend my greetings and my respects to your commander. Dismissed."

The Pole snapped to attention, saluted in the curious Polish way, did his best parade-ground about face, then headed off to the door.

Yuriy Andropov watched the door close before turning his attention back to the message and its appended translation.

"So, Karol, you threaten us, eh?" He clucked his tongue and shook his head before going on as quietly as before. "You are brave, but your judgment needs adjustment, my cleric comrade."

He looked up again, pondering. The office had the usual artwork covering the walls, and for the same reason as in any other office—to avoid blankness. Two were oil paintings by Renaissance masters, borrowed from the collection of some long-dead czar or nobleman. A third portrait, rather a good one, actually, was of Lenin, the pale complexion and domed forehead known to millions all around the world. A nicely framed color photograph of Leonid Brezhnev, the current General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, hung near it. The photo was a lie, a picture of a young and vigorous man, not the senile old goat who now sat at the head of the Politburo table. Well, all men grew old, but in most places, such men left their jobs for honorable retirement. But not in his country, Andropov realized . . . and looked down at the letter. And not this man, either. This job, too, was for life.

But he is threatening to change that part of the equation, the Chairman of the Committee for State Security thought. And in that was the danger.

Danger?

The consequences were unknown, and that was danger enough. His Politburo colleagues would see it the same way, old, cautious, and frightened men that they were.

And so he had not merely to report the danger. He must also present a means of dealing with it effectively.

The portraits that ought to have been on his wall right now were of two men who were semiforgotten. One would have been Iron Feliks—Dzerzhinskiy himself, the founder of the Cheka, the antecedent of the KGB.

The other ought to have been Josef Vissarionovich Stalin. The leader had once posed a question that was relevant to the very situation that faced Andropov now. Then, it had been 1944. Now—now maybe it was even more relevant.

Well, that remained to be seen. And he'd be the man to make that determination, Andropov told himself. All men could be made to disappear. The thought should have surprised him when it leapt into his head, but it didn't. This building, built eighty years earlier to be the palatial home office of the Rossiya Insurance Company, had seen a lot of that, and its inhabitants had issued orders to cause many, many more deaths. They used to have executions in the basement. That had ended only a few years before, as KGB expanded to include all the space in even this massive structure—and another on the inner ring road around the city—but the cleanup crew occasionally whispered about the ghosts to be seen on quiet nights, sometimes startling the old washerwomen with their buckets and brushes and witch-like hair. The government of this country didn't believe in such things as spirits and ghosts any more than it believed in a man's immortal soul, but doing away with the superstitions of the simple peasants was a more difficult task than getting the intelligentsia to buy into the voluminous writings of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Karl Marx, or Friedrich Engels, not to mention the turgid prose attributed to Stalin (but actually done by a committee formed of frightened men, and all the worse because of it), which was, blessedly, no longer much in demand except to the most masochistic of scholars.

No, Yuriy Vladimirovich told himself, *getting people to believe in Marxism wasn't all that hard.* First, they hammered it into their heads in grammar schools, and the Young Pioneers, and high schools, and the Komsomolets, the Young Communist League, and then the really smart ones became full Party members, keeping their Party cards "next to their hearts," in the cigarette pockets of their shirts.

But by then, they knew better. The politically aware members professed their belief at Party meetings because they had to do that to get ahead. In the same way, the smart courtiers in pharaonic Egypt kneeled and shielded their eyes from the bright-light-emanating face, lest they be blinded—they held up their hands because, in Pharaoh, in the person of their Living God, was personal power and prosperity, and so they knelt their obeisance and denied their senses and their sensibility and got ahead. So it was here. Five thousand years, was it? He could check a history book. The Soviet Union turned out some of the world's foremost medieval historians, and doubtless some competent antiquarians as well, because that was one area of scholarship where politics didn't matter much. The facts of ancient Egypt were too distant from contemporary reality to matter to the philosophical speculation of Marx or the endless ramblings of Lenin. And so some fine scholars went into that field. More went into the pure sciences, because pure science was pure science and a hydrogen atom had no politics.

But agriculture did. Manufacturing did. And so the best and brightest stayed away from those areas, opting instead for political studies. Because there success was to be found. You didn't have to believe it any more than you believed that Ramses II was the living son of the sun god, or whatever the hell

god he was supposed to have issued from. Instead, Yuriy Vladimirovich figured, the courtiers saw that Ramses had numerous wives and even more numerous progeny, and that, on the whole, wasn't a bad life for a man to have. The classical equivalent of a dacha in the Lenin Hills and summers on the beach at Sochi. So, did the world ever really change?

Probably not, the Chairman of the Committee for State Security decided. And his job was largely to protect against change.

And this letter threatened change, didn't it? It was a threat, and he might have to do something about the threat. That meant doing something about the man behind it.

It had happened before. It could happen again, he decided.

Andropov would not live long enough to learn that in considering this action, he would set in motion the demise of his own country.

CHAPTER 1

RUMBLINGS AND DREAMS

WHEN DO YOU START, JACK?" Cathy asked in the quiet of their bed.

And her husband was glad it was their bed. Comfortable as the New York hotel had been, it is never the same, and besides, he'd had quite enough of his father-in-law, with his Park Avenue duplex and immense sense of self-importance. Okay, Joe Muller had a good ninety million in the bank and his diversified portfolio, and it was growing nicely with the new presidency, but enough was enough.

"Day after tomorrow," her husband answered. "I suppose I might go in after lunch, just to look around."

"You ought to be asleep by now," she said.

There were drawbacks to marrying a physician, Jack occasionally told himself. You couldn't hide much from them. A gentle, loving touch could convey your body temperature, heart rate, and Christ knew what else, and docs hid their feelings about what they found with the skill of a professional poker player. Well, some of the time.

"Yeah, long day." It was short of five in the evening in New York, but his "day" had lasted longer than the normal twenty-four. He really had to learn to sleep on airplanes. It wasn't as though his seat had been uncomfortable. He'd upgraded the government-issue tickets to first class on his own American Express card, and soon the frequent-flyer miles would build up so much that such upgrades would be automatic. *Yeah, great,* Jack thought. They'd know him by sight at Heathrow and Dulles. Well, at least he had his new black diplomatic passport and didn't have to be troubled with inspections and such. Ryan was technically assigned to the U.S. Embassy at London's Grosvenor Square, just across the street from the building that had housed Eisenhower's WW2 office, and with that assignment came the diplomatic status that made

him a super-person, untrammeled by such inconveniences as civil law. He could smuggle a couple pounds of heroin into England, and no one could so much as touch his bags without permission—which he could summarily withhold, claiming diplomatic privilege and urgent business. It was an open secret that diplomats didn't trouble themselves with customs duties for such things as perfumes for their wives (or significant others) and/or booze for themselves, but to Ryan's Catholic measure of personal conduct, these were venial sins, not mortal.

The usual muddle of thoughts in a fatigued brain, he recognized. Cathy would never allow herself to operate in this mental state. Sure, as an intern they'd kept her on duty for endless hours—the idea being to get her accustomed to making good decisions under miserable circumstances—but part of her husband wondered how many patients were sacrificed on the altar of medical boot camp. If trial lawyers ever managed to figure out how to make money off of that . . .

Cathy—Dr. Caroline Ryan, M.D., FACS, her white lab coat and plastic name tag announced—had struggled through that phase of her training, and more than once her husband had worried about her drive home in her little Porsche sports car, after thirty-six straight hours on duty in obstetrics, or pediatrics, or general surgery, fields she wasn't interested in herself, but about which she had to know a little in order to be a proper Johns Hopkins doc. Well, she'd known enough to patch up his shoulder that afternoon in front of Buckingham Palace. He hadn't bled to death in front of his wife and daughter, which would have been pretty ignominious for everyone involved, especially the Brits. *Would my knighthood have been awarded posthumously?* Jack wondered with a stifled chuckle. Then, finally, his eyes closed for the first time in thirty-nine hours.

"I HOPE HE likes it over there," Judge Moore said, at his end-of-the-day senior staff get-together.

"Arthur, our cousins know their hospitality," James Greer pointed out. "Basil ought to be a good teacher."

Ritter didn't say anything. This Ryan amateur had gotten himself a lot of—way the hell too much—publicity for any employee of the CIA, even more so since he was a DI guy. As far as Ritter was concerned, the Directorate of Intelligence was the tail wagging the Operations Directorate dog. Sure, Jim Greer was a fine spook and a good man to work with, but he wasn't a *field* spook, and—Congress to the contrary—that's what the Agency needed. At least Arthur Moore understood that. But on The Hill, if you said "field intelligence officer" to the representatives who controlled appropriations, they recoiled like Dracula from a golden crucifix and collectively went *ewwwwww*. Then it was time to speak.

"What do you suppose they'll let him in on?" the DDO wondered aloud.

"Basil will regard him as my personal representative," Judge Moore said, after a moment's consideration. "So, everything they share with us, they will share with him."

"They're going to co-opt him, Arthur," Ritter warned. "He's into things they don't know about. They will try to squeeze things out of Ryan. He doesn't know how to defend against that."

"Bob, I briefed him on that myself," Greer announced. The DDO knew that already, of course, but Ritter had a real talent for acting grumpy when he didn't get his way. Greer wondered what it had been like to be Bob's mother. "Don't underestimate this kid, Bob. He's smart. I'll wager you a steak dinner that he gets more things out of the Brits than they get out of him."

"Sucker bet," the Deputy Director (Operations) snorted.

"At Snyder's," the Deputy Director (Intelligence) goaded further. It was the favorite steak house for both executives, located just across the Key Bridge in Georgetown.

Judge Arthur Moore, the Director of Central Intelligence, or DCI, watched the exchange with amusement. Greer knew how to twist Ritter's tail, and somehow Bob never quite figured out how to defend against it. Maybe it was Greer's down-east accent. Texans like Bob Ritter (and Arthur Moore himself) deemed themselves superior to anyone who talked through his nose, certainly over a deck of playing cards or around a bottle of bourbon whiskey. The Judge figured he was above such things, though they were fun to watch.

"Okay, dinner at Snyder's." Ritter extended his hand. And it was time for the DCI to resume control of the meeting.

"Now that we've settled that one, gentlemen, the President wants me to tell him what's going to happen in Poland."

Ritter didn't leap at that. He had a good Station Chief in Warsaw, but the guy only had three proper field officers in his department, and one of them was a rookie. They did, however, have one very good source agent-in-place inside the Warsaw government's political hierarchy, and several good ones in their military.

"Arthur, *they* don't know. They're dancing around this Solidarity thing on a day-to-day basis," the DDO told the others. "And the music keeps changing on them."

"It's going to come down to what Moscow tells them to do, Arthur," Greer agreed. "And Moscow doesn't know either."

Moore took off his reading glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Yeah. They don't know what to do when someone openly defies them. Joe Stalin would have shot everyone in sight, but the current bunch doesn't have the gumption to do that, thank the Good Lord for that."

"Collegial rule brings out the coward in everyone, and Brezhnev just doesn't have the ability to lead. From what I hear, they have to walk him to the men's room." It was a slight exaggeration, but it appealed to Ritter that Soviet leadership was softening.

"What's CARDINAL telling us?" Moore referred to the Agency's premiere agent-in-place in the Kremlin, the personal assistant to Defense Minister Dmitriy Fedorovich Ustinov. His name was Mikhail Semyonovich Filitov, but to all but a bare handful of active CIA personnel, he was simply CARDINAL.

"He says that Ustinov despairs of anything useful coming out of the Politburo until they do have a leader who can actually lead. Leonid is slowing down. Everybody knows it, even the man on the street. You can't camouflage a TV picture, can you?"

"How long do you suppose he has left?"

A collection of shrugs, then Greer took the question: "The doctors I've talked

to say he could drop over tomorrow, or he could dote along for another couple of years. They say they see mild Alzheimer's, but only mild. His general condition is progressive cardiovascular myopathy, they think, probably exacerbated by incipient alcoholism."

"They *all* have that problem," Ritter observed. "CARDINAL confirms the heart problem, by the way, along with the vodka."

"And the liver is important, and his is probably suboptimum," Greer went on, with a gross understatement. Then Moore finished the thought.

"But you can't tell a Russian to stop drinking any more than you can tell a grizzly bear not to shit in the woods. You know, if anything ever brings these guys down, it will be their inability to handle the orderly transition of power."

"Well, gee, Your Honor." Bob Ritter looked up with a wicked grin. "I guess they just don't have enough lawyers. Maybe we could ship them a hundred thousand of ours."

"They're not that stupid. Better we shoot a few Poseidon missiles at them. Less net damage to their society," the DDI said.

"Why do people disparage my honorable profession?" Moore asked the ceiling. "If anybody saves their system, it will have to be a lawyer, gentlemen."

"You think so, Arthur?" Greer asked.

"You can't have a rational society without the rule of law, and you can't have the rule of law without lawyers to administer it." Moore was the former Chief Judge of the Texas State Court of Appeals. "They don't have those rules yet, not when the Politburo can reach out and execute anyone they don't like without a semblance of an appeals process. It must be like living in hell. You can't depend on anything. It's like Rome under Caligula—if he got a notion, that notion had the force of law. Hell, though, even Rome had *some* laws the emperors had to abide by. Not our Russian friends." The others couldn't really appreciate how horrid a concept that was to their Director. He'd once been the finest trial lawyer in a state noted for the quality of its legal community, and then a learned judge on a bench replete with thoughtful, fair men. Most Americans were as accustomed to the rule of law as to the ninety feet between bases on a baseball diamond. For Ritter and Greer, it was more important that, before his legal career, Arthur Moore had been a superior field spook. "So, what the hell do I tell the President?"

"The truth, Arthur," Greer suggested. "We don't know because *they* don't know."

That was the only truthful and rational thing he could say, of course, but: "Damn it, Jim, they *pay* us to know!"

"It comes down to how threatened the Russians feel. Poland is just a cat's paw for them, a vassal state that jumps when they say 'jump,' " Greer said. "The Russians can control what their own people see on TV and in *Pravda*—"

"But they can't control the rumors that come across the border," said Ritter. "And the stories their soldiers tell when they come home from service there—*and* in Germany, *and* in Czechoslovakia, *and* in Hungary, and what they hear on Voice of America and Radio Free Europe." CIA controlled the first of those outlets directly, and, while the other was theoretically almost independent, that was a fiction nobody believed. Ritter himself had a great deal of input on

both propaganda arms of the American government. The Russians understood and respected good agitprop.

"How squeezed do you suppose they feel?" Moore wondered aloud.

"Just two or three years ago, they thought they were on the crest of the wave," Greer announced. "Our economy was in the toilet with inflation and we had gas lines, the Iran mess. They'd just got Nicaragua to drop into their lap. Our national morale was bad, and . . ."

"Well, that's changing, thank God," Moore went on for him. "Full reversal?" he asked. It was too much to hope for, but at heart Arthur Moore was an optimist—otherwise, how could he be DCI?

"We're heading that way, Arthur," Ritter said. "They're slow to catch on. They are not the most agile of thinkers. That's their greatest weakness. The top dogs are wedded to their ideology to the point that they can't see around it. You know, we can hurt these bastards—hurt 'em bad—if we can analyze their weaknesses thoroughly and come up with a way to exploit them."

"You really think so, Bob?" the DDI asked.

"I don't think it—I damned well know it!" the DDO shot back. "They are *vulnerable,* and best of all, they don't yet know that they are vulnerable. It's time to do something. We've got a President now who'll back our play if we can come up with something good enough for him to invest his political capital. Congress is so afraid of him, they won't stand in the way."

"Robert," the DCI said, "it sounds to me like you've got something rattling up your sleeve."

Ritter thought for a few seconds before going on. "Yes, Arthur, I do. I've been thinking about this since they brought me in from the field eleven years ago. I haven't written a single word of it down." He didn't have to explain why. Congress could subpoena any piece of paper in the building—well, almost any piece—but not something carried only in a man's mind. But perhaps this was the time to set it down. "What is the Soviets' fondest wish?"

"To bring us down," Moore answered. That didn't exactly require a Nobel-class intellect.

"Okay, what is our fondest wish?"

Greer took that one. "We aren't allowed to think in those terms. We want to find a modus vivendi with them." That was what *The New York Times* said, anyway, and wasn't that the voice of the nation? "Okay, Bob. Spit it out."

"How do we attack them?" Ritter asked. "And by that I mean nail the bastards right where they live, hurt them—"

"Bring them down?" Moore asked.

"Why the hell not?" Ritter demanded.

"Is it possible?" the DCI asked, interested that Ritter was thinking along such lines.

"Well, Arthur, if they can aim that big a gun at us, why can't we do it to them?" Ritter had the bit in his teeth now. "They send money into political groups in our country to try and make it hard on our political process. They have antinuclear demonstrations all across Europe, calling to eliminate our Theater Nuclear Weapons while they rebuild theirs. We can't even leak what we know about that to the media—"

"And if we did, the media wouldn't print it," Moore observed. After all, the

media didn't like nuclear weapons either, though it was willing to tolerate Soviet weapons because they, for one reason or another, were not destabilizing. What Ritter really wanted to do, he feared, was to see if the Soviets had influence on the American mass media. But even if it did, such an investigation would bear only poisoned fruit. The media held on to their vision of its integrity and balance as a miser held his hoard. But they knew without having the evidence that KGB *did* have some power over the American media, because it was so easy to establish and exercise. Flatter them, let them in on supposed secrets, and then become a trusted source. But did the Soviets know how dangerous a game that could be? The American news media did have a few core beliefs, and tampering with them was like tinkering with a live bomb. One wrong move could be expensive. No one in this Seventh-Floor office was under much illusion about the genius of the Russian intelligence service. It had skilled people, certainly, and trained them thoroughly and well, but KGB also had its weaknesses. Like the society it served, KGB applied a political template to reality, and largely ignored the information that didn't match up with the holes. And so, after months, even years, of painstaking planning and preparation, they often had operations go bad because one of their officers had decided that life in the land of the enemy wasn't quite so bad as it was portrayed. The cure for a lie was always the truth. It just had a way of smacking you in the face, and the smarter you were, the worse it hurt.

"That's not important," Ritter said, surprising both his colleagues.

"Okay, keep going," Moore ordered.

"What we need to do is examine their vulnerabilities and attack them—with the objective of destabilizing their entire country."

"That's a very tall order, Robert," Moore observed.

"You take an ambition pill, Bob?" Greer asked, intrigued even so. "Our political masters will blanch at that large an objective."

"Oh, I know." Ritter held up his hands. "Oh, no, we mustn't hurt them. They might nuke us. Come on, they're a hell of a lot less likely to lash out than we are. People, they are *afraid* of us, a lot more than we are of them. They are afraid of *Poland,* for Christ's sake. Why? Because there's a disease in Poland that their own people might catch. It's called rising expectations. And rising expectations are the one thing they can't satisfy. Their economy is as stagnant as stump water. If we give them a little push . . ."

" 'All we have to do is kick in the door, and the whole rotten structure will collapse,' " Moore quoted. "That's been said before, but Adolf had himself a nasty little surprise when the snow started falling."

"He was an idiot who didn't read his Machiavelli," Ritter retorted. "First, you conquer 'em, then you murder 'em. Why give them warning?"

"Whereas our current adversaries could have taught old Niccolò a lesson or two," Greer agreed. "Okay, Bob, exactly what do you propose?"

"A systematic examination of Soviet weaknesses with an eye to exploitation. In simplest terms, we investigate the possible shape of a plan to cause great discomfort to our enemy."

"Hell, we ought to be doing that all the time anyway," Moore said, agreeing at once with the concept. "James?"

"I have no problem with it. I can get a team together in my shop to toss some ideas together."

"Not the usual suspects," the DDO urged. "We'll never get anything useful from the regular crew. It's time to think way the hell outside the usual box."

Greer thought about that for a moment, then nodded agreement. "Okay, I'll do the picking. Special project. Pick a name for it?"

"How about INFECTION?" Ritter asked.

"And if it turns into an operation, call it PLAGUE?" the DDI asked with a laugh.

Moore shared in the chuckle. "No, I've got it. MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH. Something from Poe sounds about right to me."

"This is really about having the DO take over the DI, isn't it?" Greer thought aloud.

It wasn't a serious undertaking yet, just an interesting academic exercise, the same way a corporate trader might look into the fundamental strengths and weaknesses of a company he might want to take over . . . and then, if the circumstances justified, break it up for parts. No, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was the center of their professional world, the Bobby Lee to their Army of the Potomac, the New York Yankees to their Boston Red Sox. Defeating them, however attractive a dream it might be, was little more than that, a dream.

Even so, Judge Arthur Moore approved of that sort of thinking. If man's reach didn't exceed his grasp, then what the hell was heaven for?

APPROACHING TWENTY-THREE hours in Moscow, Andropov was enjoying a cigarette—an American Marlboro, in fact—and sipping at his vodka, the premium Starka brand, which was brown like American bourbon. On the record player was another American product, an LP of Louis Armstrong on the trumpet, blowing some superb New Orleans jazz. Like many Russians, the Chairman of the KGB regarded blacks as little more than monkey cannibals, but the ones in America had invented their own fine art form. He knew that he ought to have been a devotee of Borodin or one of the other classical Russian composers, but there was just something about the vitality of American jazz that rang some sort of bell in his mind.

But the music was merely an aid for thinking. Yuriy Vladimirovich Andropov had heavy brows over his brown eyes and a lantern jaw suggestive of another ethnic origin, but his mind was entirely Russian, which meant part Byzantine, part Tartar, part Mongol, and all focused on achieving his own goals. Of these he had many, but above all: He wanted to be the leader of his country. Someone had to save it, and he knew exactly how much it needed saving. One of the advantages of being Chairman of the Committee for State Security was that few things were secret from him, and this in a society that was replete with lies, where lies were indeed the highest of art forms. This was especially true of the Soviet economy. The command-driven structure of that flaccid colossus meant that every factory—and every factory manager—had a production goal that both it and he had to meet. The goals might or might not

be realistic. That didn't matter. What did matter was that their enforcement was draconian. Not as draconian as they'd once been, of course. In the 1930s and '40s, failure to meet the goal set forth in The Plan could mean death right here in this very building, because those who failed to meet The Plan were "wreckers," saboteurs, enemies of the state, *traitors* in a nation where state treason was a crime worse than any other, and so demanded a penalty worse than any other, usually a .44-caliber bullet from one of the old Smith & Wesson revolvers the czars had purchased from America.

As a result, factory managers had learned that if they couldn't meet The Plan's expectations in fact, they'd do so on paper, thus prolonging both their lives and the perks of their office. The facts of their failure were usually lost in the elephantine bureaucracy that had been inherited from the czars and then nurtured to further growth under Marxism-Leninism. His own agency had a lot of that same tendency, Andropov knew. He could say something, even thunder out the words, but that didn't mean that any real result had to happen. Sometimes it did—indeed, fairly often of late, because Yuriy Vladimirovich kept his own personal notes and would follow up a week or so later. And, gradually, his agency was learning to change.

But there was no changing the fact that obfuscation was the foil of even his brand of ruthlessness. Even Stalin reborn could not change that—and *nobody* wanted Stalin reborn. Institutional obfuscation had reached all the way to the summit of the Party hierarchy. The Politburo was no more decisive than the management staff of State Farm "Sunrise." No one had learned efficiency, he'd observed on his climb to the top of the heap, and as a result a great deal happened with a wink and a nod, with an understanding that it really wasn't all that important.

And because so little progress actually happened, it devolved on him and KGB to make right all the things that went wrong. If the organs of the State could not come up with what the State needed, then KGB had to go steal it from those who did have it. Andropov's spy agency, and its sister service, the military's GRU, stole all manner of weapons designs from the West. *They were so efficient,* he thought with a grunt, *that Soviet pilots occasionally died from the same design defects that had killed American pilots years before.*

And that was the rub. However efficient KGB was, its most stirring successes merely guaranteed that his country's military was five years behind the West *at best.* And the one thing he and his field officers couldn't steal from the West was the quality control in their industries that made advanced weapons possible. *How many times,* he wondered, *had his people secured designs from America and elsewhere only to learn that his country simply could not replicate them?*

And that was what he had to fix. The mythical tasks of Hercules seemed trivial in comparison, Andropov told himself, stubbing out his cigarette. Transform his nation? In Red Square, they kept the mummy of Lenin as some sort of Communistic god, the relic of the man who had transformed Russia from a backward monarchic state into . . . a backward socialist state. The Moscow government expressed contempt for any countries that tried to combine socialism with capitalism—except for one little thing: KGB tried to steal from them, too. The West rarely shed blood and treasure to find out

about Soviet weapons—except to find out what was wrong with them. The Western intelligence services did their best to frighten their parent governments, proclaiming every new Soviet weapon to be Satan's own tool of destruction, but then they later found out that the Soviet tiger wore lead boots, and couldn't catch the deer, however frightening the tiger's teeth might appear. Whatever original ideas Russian scientists did come up with—and there were many of them—were duly stolen and converted by the West into instruments that actually worked.

The design bureaus made their promises to the military and to the Politburo. They told them how their new systems would improve, with just a little more funding . . . *Hah!* And all the time, this new American president was doing what his predecessors hadn't: He was feeding *his* tiger. The American industrial monster was eating raw red meat, and actually manufacturing in numbers the weapons they'd developed over the preceding decade. His field officers and their agents reported that morale in the American military was rising for the first time in a generation. Their Army in particular was training on increased tempos, and their new weapons . . .

. . . Not that the Politburo believed him when he told them. Its members were too insular, they were unexposed to the real world beyond the Soviet frontiers. They assumed that all the world was more or less like it was here, in accord with the political theories of Lenin—written sixty years ago! As if the world hadn't changed at all since then! Yuriy Vladimirovich raged silently. He expended enormous funds to find out what was happening in the world, had the data run through exquisitely trained and qualified experts, presented superbly organized reports to the old men who sat around that oaken table—and *still* they didn't listen!

And then there was the current problem.

This is how it will start, Andropov told himself, with another long sip of his Starka. It takes only one person, if it's the right person. Being the right person meant that people listened, paid attention to his words and deeds. And some people just got that sort of attention.

And those were the ones you had to be afraid of . . .

Karol, Karol, why must you make such trouble?

And trouble it would be if he took the action he threatened. The letter he'd sent to Warsaw hadn't been just for those lackeys in Warsaw—he had to have known where it would end up. He was no fool. In fact, he was as shrewd as any political figure Yuriy had ever known. You couldn't be a Catholic clergyman in a communist country and rise to the very pinnacle of the world's largest church, to be *their* General Secretary, even, without knowing how to operate the levers of power. But his post went back nearly two thousand years, if you happened to believe all that nonsense—well, maybe so. The age of the Roman church was an objective fact, wasn't it? Historical facts were historical facts, but that didn't make the belief structure underneath it any more valid than Marx said it was—or *wasn't,* to be more precise. Yuriy Vladimirovich had never considered belief in God to make any more sense than belief in Marx and Engels. But he knew that everyone had to believe in something, not because it was true, but because it in itself was a source of power. Lesser people, the ones who needed to be told what to do, had to believe in

something larger than themselves. Primitives living in the remaining jungles of the world still heard in the thunder, not just the clash of hot air and cold, but the voice of some living thing. Why? Because they knew they were weaklings in a strong world, and they thought they could influence whatever deity controlled them with slaughtered pigs or even slaughtered children, and those who controlled that *influence* then acquired the power to shape their society. Power was its own currency. Some Great Men used it to gain comfort, or women—one of his own predecessors here at KGB had used it to get women, actually young girls, but Yuriy Vladimirovich did not share that particular vice. No, power was enough in and of itself. A man could bask in it as a cat warmed itself by a fire, with the simple enjoyment that came from having it close by, knowing that he enjoyed the ability to rule others, to bring death or comfort to those who served him, who pleased him with their obeisance and their fawning acknowledgment that he was greater than they.

There was more to it, of course. You had to *do* something with that power. You had to leave footprints in the sands of time. Good or bad, it didn't matter, just so they were large enough to command notice. In his case, a whole country needed his direction because, of all the men on the Politburo, only he could see what needed to be done. Only he could chart the course his nation needed to follow. And if he did it right, then he would be remembered. He knew that someday his life would end. In Andropov's case, it was a liver ailment. He ought not to drink his vodka, but with power also came the absolute right to choose his own path. No other man could tell him what to do. His latent intelligence knew that this was not always the wise thing to do, but Great Men did not listen to lesser men, and he considered himself the foremost of the former. Was not his force of will strong enough to define the world in which he lived? Of course it was, and so he had the occasional drink or two, or sometimes three, in the evening. Even more at official dinners. His country had long since passed beyond the point of rule by a single man—that had ended thirty years before with the passing of "Koba," Josef Vissarionovich Stalin, who'd ruled with a ruthlessness to make Ivan the Terrible quake in his boots. No, that sort of power was too dangerous to ruler and ruled. Stalin had made as many errors as good judgments, and as useful as the latter had been, the former had very nearly doomed the Soviet Union to perpetual backwardness—and, in fact, by creating the world's most formidable bureaucracy, he'd largely foresworn progress for his nation.

But one man, the right man, could lead and direct his political associates on the Politburo in the correct direction, and then by helping to select the new members, could accomplish the needed goals by influence rather than by terror. Just maybe, then, he could get his country moving again, keeping the single control that all nations needed, but adding the flexibility that they needed just as much for new things to happen—to achieve the True Communism—to see the Radiant Future that the writings of Lenin proclaimed awaited the Faithful.

Andropov did not quite see the contradiction in his own mind. Like so many Great Men, he was blind to those things that conflicted with his own capacious ego.

And, in any case, it all came back to Karol and the danger he posed.

He made a mental note for the morning staff meeting. He had to see what the possibilities were. The Politburo would wonder aloud how to deal with the problem announced by the Warsaw Letter, and eyes would turn to his chair, and he'd need something to say. The trick would be in finding something that would not frighten his colleagues out of their conservative wits. They were so fearful, these supposedly powerful men.

He read so many reports from his field officers, the talented spies of the First Chief Directorate, always probing into the thoughts of their counterparts. It was so strange, how much fear there was in the world, and the most fearful of all were so often those who held the power in their hands.

No, Andropov drained his glass and decided against another nightcap. The reason for their fear was that they worried they did not have the power. They were not strong. They were henpecked by their wives, just like factory workers and peasant farmers. They dreaded losing what they so greedily held, and so they used their power in ignoble enterprises directed at crushing those who would seize what they held. Even Stalin, that mightiest of despots, had used his power mainly to eliminate those who might sit in his elevated chair. And so the great Koba had spent his energy not looking forward, not looking outward, but looking down. He was like a woman in her kitchen who feared mice under her skirt, instead of a man with the power and the will to slay an onrushing tiger.

But could he do otherwise? Yes! Yes, he could look forward and see the future and chart a path to it. Yes, he could communicate his vision to the lesser men who sat around the table in the Kremlin, and lead them with the force of his will. Yes, he could find and refocus the vision of Lenin and all the thinkers of the governing philosophy of his country. Yes, he could alter the course of his nation and be forever remembered as a Great Man. . . .

But first, here and now, he'd need to deal with Karol and his annoying threat to the Soviet Union.

CHAPTER 2

VISIONS AND HORIZONS

CATHY ALMOST PANICKED at the thought of driving him to the train station. Seeing him walk to the left side of the car, she'd assumed, as any American would, that he'd be driving, and so she was visibly surprised when he tossed her the keys.

The pedals, she discovered, were the same as in an American car, because people all around the world were right-footed, even if those in England drove left-handed. The gear shift was in the center console, and so she had to use her left hand to shift. Backing out of the brick driveway was not terribly different from normal. Both instantly wondered if it was as hard for Brits to transform their driving to the right—in more ways than one—side of the road when they came to America, or hopped the ferry to France. Jack decided he'd ask somebody over a beer someday.

"Just remember, left is right, and right is left, and you drive on the wrong side of the road."

"Okay," she replied with annoyance. She knew she'd have to learn, and the rational part of her brain knew that this was as good a time as ever, even though *now* had a nasty way of appearing out of the ground like a guerrilla out of a spider hole. The way out of the mini-development took them past a one-story building that looked like it housed a doctor's office, past the park with the swing set that had sold Jack on this particular house. Sally liked swings, and she'd surely meet and make new friends here. And Little Jack would get some sun there, too. In the summer, anyway.

"Turn left, babe. It's a right turn here when you go left, you don't cross traffic."

"I know," Dr. Caroline Ryan said, wondering why Jack hadn't called for a cab. She still had a ton of work to do with the house, and didn't need a driving

lesson. Well, at least it seemed to be a nimble car, she found, giving it a kick that was answered by rapid acceleration. Not her old Porsche, though.

"Bottom of the hill, turn right."

"Uh-huh." Good, this would be simple. She'd have to find her way home, and she hated asking for directions. It came from being a surgeon, as in command of her world as a fighter pilot in his cockpit. . . . And, being a surgeon, she wasn't allowed to panic, was she?

"Right here," Jack told her. "Remember oncoming traffic." There was none at the moment, but that would change, probably as soon as he got out of the car. He didn't envy her attempt to learn local navigation solo, but the surest way to learn to swim was to jump in—assuming you didn't drown. But the Brits were hospitable people, and if necessary some kind local driver would probably lead her all the way home.

The train station was about as impressive as a Bronx elevated platform, a smallish stone building with stairs and/or escalators that led down to the tracks. Ryan bought his ticket with cash, but noted a sign that offered books of commuter tickets for daily use. He picked up a copy of *The Daily Telegraph.* That would mark him to the locals as a conservative sort of person. Those of a more liberal bent chose *The Guardian.* He decided to pass on the tabloids that had naked women on the inside. Hell of a thing to see right after breakfast.

He had to wait about ten minutes for the train, which arrived with little noise, being a cross between an American electric intercity train and a subway. His ticket was first class, which placed him in a small compartment. The windows went up and down if you pulled on a leather strap, and the compartment door hinged outward to let him exit directly instead of walking down the corridor. With that set of discoveries made, Ryan sat down and scanned the paper's front page. As in America, local politics covered about half of the sheet, and Ryan looked at two of the articles, figuring he might as well learn the local customs and beefs. The schedule said about forty minutes to Victoria Station. Not too bad, and much better than driving it, Dan Murray had told him. In addition, parking a car in London was even worse than it was in New York, wrong side of the street and all.

The ride on the train was agreeably smooth. The trains were evidently a government-run monopoly, and somebody spent money on the road-beds. A conductor took his ticket with a smile—doubtless marking Jack as a Yank instantly—and moved on, leaving Ryan to his paper. The passing scenery soon overtook his interest. The countryside was green and lush. The Brits did love their lawns. The row houses here were smaller than those in his childhood neighborhood in Baltimore, with what looked like slate roofs, and Jesus, the streets were narrow here. You'd really have to pay attention while driving, lest you end up in someone's living room. That probably wouldn't sit well, even to Englishmen accustomed to dealing with the shortcomings of visiting Yanks.

It was a clear day, some white fluffy clouds aloft, and the sky a delightful blue. He'd never experienced rain over here. Yet they had to have it. Every third man on the street carried a furled umbrella. And a lot of them wore hats. Ryan hadn't done that since his time in the Marine Corps. England was just different enough from America to be dangerous, he decided. There were a lot of similarities, but the differences rose up and bit you on the ass when you

least expected them. He'd have to be very careful with Sally crossing the street. At four and a half, she was just imprinted enough to look the wrong way at the wrong time. He'd seen his little girl in the hospital once, and that was, by God, enough for a lifetime.

He was rumbling through a city now, a thick one. The right-of-way was elevated. He looked around for recognizable landmarks. Was that St. Paul's Cathedral off to the right? If so, he'd be at Victoria soon. He folded his paper. Then the train slowed, and—yeah. Victoria Station. He opened the compartment door like a native and stepped out on the platform. The station was a series of steel arches with embedded glass panes, long since blackened by the stack gasses of steam trains long departed. . . . But nobody had ever cleaned the glass. Or was it just air pollution that did it? There was no telling. Jack followed the rest of the people to the brick wall that seemed to mark the station's waiting/arrival area. Sure enough, there were the usual collection of magazine stands and small stores. He could see the way out and found himself in the open air, fumbling in his pocket for his Chichester map of London. Westminster Bridge Road. It was too far to walk, so he hailed a cab.

From the cab, Ryan looked around, his head swiveling, just like the tourist he wasn't quite anymore. And there it was.

Century House, so named because it was 100 Westminster Bridge Road, was what Jack took to be a typical interwar structure of fair height and a stone façade that was . . . peeling off? The edifice was covered with an orange plastic netting that was manifestly intended to keep the façade from falling onto pedestrians. Oops. Maybe somebody was ripping through the building, looking for Russian bugs? Nobody had warned him about that at Langley. Just up the road was Westminster Bridge, and across that were the Houses of Parliament. Well, it was in a nice neighborhood, anyway. Jack trotted up the stone steps to the double door and made his way inside for all of ten feet, where he found an entry-control desk manned by someone in a sort of cop uniform.

"Can I help you, sir?" the guard asked. The Brits always said such things as though they really wanted to help you. Jack wondered if there might be a pistol just out of view. If not there, then not too far away. There had to be security here.

"Hi, I'm Jack Ryan. I'm starting work here."

Instant smile and recognition: "Ah, Sir John. Welcome to Century House. Please let me call upstairs." Which he did. "Someone's on his way down, sir. Please have a seat."

Jack barely had a chance to feel the seat when someone familiar came through the revolving door.

"Jack!" he called out.

"Sir Basil." Ryan rose to take his extended hand.

"Didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"I'm letting Cathy get everything unpacked. She doesn't trust me to do it anyway."

"Yes, we men do have our limitations, don't we?" Sir Basil Charleston was pushing fifty, tall and imperially thin, as the poet had once called it, with brown hair not yet going gray. His eyes were hazel and bright-looking, and he

wore a suit that wasn't cheap, gray wool with a broad white pin-stripe, looking to all the world like a very prosperous London merchant banker. In fact, his family had been in that line of work, but he'd found it confining, and opted instead to use his Cambridge education in the service of his country, first as a field intelligence officer, and later as an administrator. Jack knew that James Greer liked and respected him, as did Judge Moore. He'd met Charleston himself a year earlier, soon after being shot, then he'd learned that Sir Basil admired his invention of the Canary Trap, which had been his path to high-level notice at Langley. Basil had evidently used it to plug a few annoying leaks. "Come along, Jack. We need to get you properly outfitted." He didn't mean Jack's suit, which was Savile Row and as expensive as his own. No, this meant a trip to personnel.

The presence of C, as the job title went, made it painless. They already had a set of Ryan's fingerprints from Langley, and it was mainly a matter of getting his picture taken and inserted in his pass-card, which would allow him through all the electronic gates, just like the ones at the CIA. They checked it through a dummy gate and saw that it worked. Then it was up in the executive elevator to Sir Basil's capacious corner office.

It was better than the long, narrow room that Judge Moore made do with. A decent view of the river and the Palace of Westminster. The DG waved Jack into a leather chair.

"So, any first impressions?" Charleston asked.

"Pretty painless so far. Cathy hasn't been to the hospital yet, but Bernie—her boss at Hopkins—says that the boss-doc there is a good guy."

"Yes, Hammersmith has a good reputation, and Dr. Byrd is regarded as the best eye surgeon in Britain. Never met him, but I'm told he's a fine chap. Fisherman, loves to take salmon out of the rivers in Scotland, married, three sons, eldest is a *lef*tenant in the Coldstream Guards."

"You had him checked out?" Jack asked incredulously.

"One cannot be too careful, Jack. Some of your distant cousins across the Irish Sea are not overly fond of you, you know."

"Is that a problem?"

Charleston shook his head. "Most unlikely. When you helped to bring down the ULA, you probably saved a few lives in the PIRA. That's still sorting itself out, but that is mainly a job for the Security Service. We don't really have much business with them—at least nothing that will concern you directly." Which led to Jack's next question.

"Yes, Sir Basil—what exactly is my job to be here?"

"Didn't James tell you?" Charleston asked.

"Not exactly. He likes his surprises, I've learned."

"Well, the Joint Working Group mainly focuses on our Soviet friends. We have some good sources. So do your chaps. The idea is to share information in order to improve our overall picture."

"Information. Not sources," Ryan observed.

Charleston smiled understandingly. "One must protect those, as you know."

Jack did know about that. In fact, he was allowed to know damned little about CIA's sources. Those were the most closely guarded secrets in the Agency, and doubtless here as well. Sources were real people, and a slip of the

tongue would get them killed. Intelligence services valued sources more for their information than for their lives—the intelligence business was a business, after all—but sooner or later you started worrying about them and their families and their personal characteristics. *Mainly booze,* Ryan thought. Especially for the Russians. The ordinary Soviet citizen drank enough to qualify him as an alcoholic in America.

"No problem there, sir. I do not know the name or identity of one CIA source over there. Not one," Ryan emphasized. It wasn't quite true. He hadn't been told, but you could guess a lot from the character of the information transmitted and the way he/she quoted people—they were usually "he," but Ryan wondered about a few of the sources. It was an intriguing game that all analysts played, invariably in the confines of their own minds, though Ryan had speculated a few times with his personal boss, Admiral Jim Greer. Usually, the DDO had warned him not to speculate too loudly, but the way he'd blinked twice had told Ryan more than he'd wanted to convey. Well, they'd hired him for his analytical ability, Ryan knew. They didn't really want him to turn it off. When the information transmitted got a little kinky, it told you that something had happened to the source, like being caught, or going nuts. "The admiral is interested in one thing, though. . . ."

"What's that?" the DG asked.

"Poland. It looks to us as though it's coming a little unglued, and we're wondering how far, how fast, and what it'll do—the effects, I mean."

"So are we, Jack." A thoughtful nod. People—especially reporters in their Fleet Street pubs—were speculating a lot about that. And reporters also had good sources, in some areas as good as his own. "What does James think?"

"It reminds both of us of something that happened in the 1930s." Ryan leaned back in the chair and relaxed. "The United Auto Workers. When they organized Ford, there was trouble. Big time. Ford even hired thugs to work the union organizers over. I remember seeing photos of—who was it?" Jack paused for a moment's thought. "Walter Reuther? Something like that. It was in *Life* magazine back then. The thugs were talking to him and a few of his guys—the first few pictures show them smiling at each other like men do right before the gloves come off—and then a brawl started. You have to wonder about Ford's management—letting something like that happen in front of reporters is bad enough, but reporters with *cameras?* Damn, that's big-league dumb."

"The Court of Public Opinion. Yes," Charleston agreed. "It is quite real, and modern technology has made it even more so, and, yes, that is troubling to our friends across the wire. You know, this CNN news network that just started up on your side of the ocean. It just might change the world. Information has its own way of circulating. Rumors are bad enough. You cannot stop them, and they have a way of acquiring a life of their own—"

"But a picture really is worth a thousand words, isn't it?"

"I wonder who first said that. Whoever he was, he was no one's fool. It's even more true for a moving picture."

"I presume we're using that . . ."

"Your chaps are reticent about doing so. I am less so. It's easy enough to have an embassy functionary have a pint with some reporter and maybe drop

the odd hint in the course of a conversation. One thing about reporters, they are not ungracious if you give them the odd decent story."

"At Langley, they hate the press, Sir Basil. And I do mean *hate.*"

"Rather backward of them. But, then, we can exercise more control over the press here than you can in America, I suppose. Still and all, it's not that hard to outsmart them, is it?"

"I've never tried. Admiral Greer says that talking to a reporter is like dancing with a rottweiler. You can't be sure if he's going to lick your face or rip your throat out."

"They're not bad dogs at all, you know. You just need to train them properly."

Brits and their dogs, Ryan reflected. *They like their pets more than their kids.* He didn't care for big dogs all that much. A Labrador like Ernie was different. Labs had a soft mouth. Sally really missed him.

"So, what's your take on Poland, Jack?"

"I think the pot's going to simmer until the lid slides off, and then when it boils over, there's going to be a hell of a mess. The Poles haven't really bought into communism all that well. Their army has *chaplains,* for Christ's sake. A lot of their farmers operate on a free-agent basis, selling hams and stuff. The most popular TV show over there is *Kojak,* they even show it on Sunday morning to draw people away from going to church. That shows two things. The people there like American culture, and the government is still afraid of the Catholic Church. The Polish government is unstable, and they know they're unstable. Allowing a little wiggle room is probably smart, at least in the short term, but the fundamental problem is that they operate a fundamentally unjust regime. Unjust countries are not stable, sir. However strong they appear, they're rotten underneath."

Charleston nodded thoughtfully. "I briefed the PM just three days ago out at Chequers, and told her much the same thing." The Director General paused for a moment, then decided. He lifted a file folder from the pile on his desk and handed it across.

The cover read MOST SECRET. *So*, Jack thought, *now it starts.* He wondered if Basil had learned to swim by falling into the Thames, and thought everyone should learn the same way.

Flipping the cover open, he saw that this information came from a source called WREN. He was clearly Polish, and by the look of the report, well placed, and what he said—

"Damn," Ryan observed. "This is reliable?"

"Very much so. It's a five-five, Jack." By that he meant that the source was rated 5 on a scale of 5 for reliability, and the importance of the information reported was graded the same way. "You're Catholic, I think." He knew, of course. It was just the English way of talking.

"Jesuits at high school, Boston College, and Georgetown, plus the nuns at Saint Matthew's. I'd better be."

"What do you think of your new Pope?"

"First non-Italian in four centuries, maybe more: That's saying something right there. When I heard the new one was Polish, I expected it to be Cardinal Wiszynski from Warsaw—guy's got the brains of a genius and the cunning of a

fox. This guy, I didn't know beans about, but from what I've read since, he's a very solid citizen. Good parish priest, good administrator, politically very astute . . ." Ryan paused. He was discussing the head of his church as though he were a political candidate, and he was damned sure there was more substance to him than that. This had to be a man of deep faith, with the sort of core convictions that an earthquake couldn't budge or crack. He'd been chosen by other such men to be the leader and spokesman for the world's largest church, which, by the way, also happened to be Ryan's church. He'd be a man who didn't fear much of anything, a man for whom a bullet was his get-out-of-jail-free card, a key to God's own presence. And he'd be a man who felt God's presence in everything he did. He was not someone you could scare, not someone you could turn away from what he deemed the right thing.

"If he wrote this letter, Sir Basil, it's not a bluff. When was it delivered?"

"Less than four days ago. Our chap broke a rule getting it to us so quickly, but its importance is patently clear, is it not?"

Welcome to London, Jack, Ryan thought. He'd just fallen into the soup. A big pot, like they used to boil missionaries in the cartoons.

"Okay, it's been forwarded to Moscow, right?"

"So our chap tells us. So, Sir John, what will Ivan have to say about this?" And with that question, Sir Basil Charleston lit the fire under Jack's personal cauldron.

"That's a multifaceted question," Ryan said, dodging as artfully as the situation allowed.

It wasn't very far: "He will say something," Charleston observed, leveling his hazel eyes at Ryan.

"Okay, they won't like it. They will see it as a threat. The questions are how seriously they will take it and how much credence they will attach to it. Stalin might have laughed it off . . . or maybe not. Stalin defined paranoia, didn't he?" Ryan paused and looked out the windows. Was that a rain cloud blowing in? "No, Stalin would have acted somehow."

"Think so?" Charleston was evaluating him, Jack knew. This was like the orals for his doctorate at Georgetown. Father Tim Riley's rapier wit and needlepoint questions. Sir Basil was more civilized than the acerbic priest, but this exam was not going to be an easy one.

"Leon Trotsky was no threat to him. That assassination came from a combination of paranoia and pure meanness. It was a personal thing. Stalin made enemies, and he never forgot them. But the current Soviet leadership doesn't have the guts to do the stuff he did."

Charleston pointed out the plate glass window toward Westminster Bridge. "My lad, the Russians had the intestinal fortitude to kill a man right on that bridge, less than five years ago—"

"And got blamed for it," Ryan reminded his host. It had been a combination of good luck and a very smart British doctor, and it hadn't been worth a damn in saving the poor bastard's life. They had identified the cause of death, though, and it hadn't resulted from a street hood.

"Think they lost any sleep over that incident? I do not," C assured him.

"Looks bad. They don't do much of this anymore, not that I've heard about."

"Only at home, I grant you that. But Poland is 'home' for them, well within

their sphere of influence."

"But the Pope lives in Rome, and that *isn't.* It comes down to how scared they are, sir. Father Tim Riley at Georgetown, back when I got my doctorate, he said never to forget that wars are begun by frightened men. They fear war, but more than that, they fear what will happen if they don't start one—or take equivalent action, I suppose. So, the real questions are, as I said, how seriously they will take the threat and how serious it will appear to them. On the former, yes, I don't think this is a bluff. The Pope's character, background, and personal courage—those are not things to be doubted. So the threat is a real one. The larger question is how to evaluate the magnitude of the threat to them. . . ."

"Go on," the Director General ordered gently.

"If they're smart enough to recognize it—yes, sir, in their position, I'd be concerned about it . . . maybe even a little frightened. As much as the Soviets think they're a superpower—America's equal and all that—deep down they know that their state is not really legitimate. Kissinger gave a lecture to us at Georgetown. . . . " Jack leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment to recapture the performance. "It was something he said near the end, talking about the character of the Russian leaders. Brezhnev was showing him around some official building or other in the Kremlin, where Nixon was going to come for his last summit meeting. He was lifting cloth covers off the statuary, showing how they'd taken the time to clean everything up in preparation for the visit. Why do that, I wondered at the time. I mean, sure, they have maids and maintenance people. Why make a point of showing it to Henry? It has to be a sense of inferiority, fundamental insecurity. We keep hearing that they're ten feet tall, but I don't think so, and the more I learn about them, the less formidable I think they are. The Admiral and I have argued this one back and forth for the last couple of months. They have a large military. Their intelligence services are first-rate. They are *big.* Big ugly bear, like Muhammad Ali used to say, but you know, Ali beat the bear twice, didn't he?

"That's a roundabout way of saying that, yes, sir, I think this letter will scare them. Question is, scare them enough to do something?" Ryan shook his head. "Possibly yes, but we have insufficient data at this time. If they decide to push that particular button, will we know beforehand?"

Charleston had been waiting for Ryan to turn the tables on him. "One can hope so, but it's impossible to be sure."

"In the year I've been at Langley, the impression I get is that our knowledge of the target is deep but narrow in some areas, shallow and broad in others. I've yet to meet somebody who feels comfortable analyzing them—well, that's not exactly true. Some are comfortable, but their analyses are often—to me at least—unreliable. Like the stuff we get on their economy—"

"James lets you into that?" Basil was surprised.

"The Admiral sent me all around the barn the first couple of months. My first degree was economics from Boston College. I passed my CPA exam before I went away with the Marine Corps—certified public accountant. You call it something different over here. Then, after I left the Corps, I did okay in the stock-and-bond business before I finished up my doctorate and went into teaching."

"Exactly how much did you make on Wall Street?"

"While I was at Merrill Lynch? Oh, between six and seven million. A lot of that was the Chicago and North Western Railroad. My uncle Mario—my mom's brother—told me that the employees were going to buy out the stock and try to get the railroad profitable again. I took a look at it and liked what I saw. It paid off a net of twenty-three to one on my investment. I ought to have dropped more into it, but they taught me to be conservative at Merrill Lynch. Never worked in New York, by the way. I was in the Baltimore office. Anyway, the money's still in stocks, and the market looks pretty healthy at the moment. I still dabble in it. You never know when you're going to stumble across a winner, and it's still an interesting hobby."

"Indeed. If you see anything promising, do let me know."

"No fees—but no guarantees, either," Ryan joked.

"I'm not accustomed to those, Jack, not in this bloody business. I'm going to assign you to our Russian working group with Simon Harding. Oxford graduate, doctorate in Russian literature. You'll see just about everything he sees—everything but source information—" Ryan stopped him with two raised hands.

"Sir Basil, I do not want to know that stuff. I don't need it, and knowing it would keep me awake at night. Just so I see the raw. I prefer to do my own analysis. This Harding guy is smart?" Ryan asked with deliberate artlessness.

"Very much so. You've probably seen his product before. He did the personal evaluation on Yuriy Andropov we turned out two years ago."

"I did read that. Yeah, that was good work. I figured he was a pshrink."

"He's read psychology, but not quite enough for a degree. Simon's a clever lad. Wife is an artist, painter, lovely lady."

"Right now?"

"Why not? I must get back to my work. Come, I'll walk you down."

It wasn't far. Ryan immediately learned that he'd be sharing an office right here on the top floor. This came as a surprise. Getting to the Seventh Floor at Langley took years, and often meant climbing over bloody bodies. Somebody, Jack speculated, must have thought he was smart.

Simon Harding's office was not overly impressive. The two windows overlooked the upriver side of the building, mainly two- and three-story brick structures of indeterminate occupancy. Harding himself was crowding forty, pale and fair-haired with china-blue eyes. He wore an unbuttoned vest—waistcoat locally—and a drab tie. His desk was covered with folders trimmed in striped tape, the universal coding for secret material.

"You must be Sir John," Harding said, setting down his briar pipe.

"The name's Jack," Ryan corrected him. "I'm really not allowed to pretend I'm a knight. Besides, I don't own a horse or a steel shirt." Jack shook hands with his workmate. Harding had small, bony hands, but those blue eyes looked smart.

"Take good care of him, Simon." Sir Basil immediately took his leave.

There was already a swivel chair in place at a suspiciously clean desk. Jack tried it out. The room was going to be a little crowded, but not too badly so. His desk phone had a scrambler under it for making secure calls, Ryan wondered if it worked as well as the STU he'd had at Langley. GCHQ out at

Cheltenham worked closely with NSA, and maybe it was the same innards with a different plastic case. He'd have to keep reminding himself that he was in a foreign country. That ought not to be too hard, Ryan hoped. People did talk funny here: gr*ah*ss, r*ah*sberry and c*ah*stle, for example, though the effect of American movies and global television was perverting the English language to the American version slowly but surely.

"Did Bas talk to you about the Pope?" Simon asked.

"Yeah. That letter could be a bombshell. He's wondering how Ivan's going to react to it."

"We all are, Jack. You have any ideas?"

"I just told your boss, if Stalin was sitting there, he might want to shorten the Pope's life, but that would be a hell of a big gamble."

"The problem, I think, is that although they are rather collegial in their decision-making, Andropov is in the ascendancy, and he might be less reticent than the rest of them."

Jack settled back in to his chair. "You know, my wife's friends at Hopkins flew over there a couple of years ago. Mikhail Suslov had diabetic retinopathy of the eyes—he was also a high myope, very nearsighted—and they went over to fix it, and to teach some Russian docs how to do the procedure. Cathy was just a resident then. But Bernie Katz was on the fly team. He's the director at Wilmer. Super eye surgeon, hell of a good guy. The Agency interviewed him and the others after they came back. Ever see that document?"

There was interest in his eyes now: "No. Is it any good?"

"One of the things I've learned being married to a doc is that I listen to what she says about people. I'd damned sure listen to Bernie. It's worth reading. There's a universal tendency for people to talk straight to surgeons and, like I said, docs are good for seeing things that most of us miss. They said Suslov was smart, courteous, businesslike, but underneath he was the sort of guy you wouldn't trust with a gun in his hand—or more likely a knife. He really didn't like the fact that he needed Americans to save his sight for him. It didn't tickle his fancy that no Russians were able to do what he needed done. On the other hand, they said that the hospitality was Olympic-class once they did the job. So they're not complete barbarians, which Bernie halfway expected—he's Jewish, family from Poland, back when it belonged to the czar, I think. Want me to have the Agency send that one over?"

Harding waved a match over his pipe. "Yes, I would like to see that. The Russians—they're a rum lot, you know. In some ways, wonderfully cultured. Russia is the last place in the world where a man can make a decent living as a poet. They revere their poets, and I rather admire that about them, but at the same time . . . you know, Stalin himself was reticent about going after artists—the writing sort, that is. I remember one chap who lived years longer than one would have expected. . . . Even so, he eventually died in the Gulag. So, their civilization has its limits."

"You speak the language? I never learned it."

The Brit analyst nodded. "It can be a wonderful language for literature, rather like Attic Greek. It lends itself to poetry, but it masks a capacity for barbarism that makes the blood run cold. They are a fairly predictable people in many ways, especially their political decisions, within limits. Their

unpredictability lies in playing off their inherent conservatism against their dogmatic political outlook. Our friend Suslov is seriously ill, heart problems—from the diabetes, I suppose—but the chap behind him is Mikhail Yevgeniyevich Alexandrov, equal parts Russian and Marxist, with the morals of Lavrenti Beria. He bloody hates the West. I expect he counseled Suslov—they are old, old friends—to accept blindness rather than submit to American physicians. And if this Katz chap is Jewish, you said? That would not have helped, either. Not an attractive chap at all. When Suslov departs—a few months, we think—he'll be the new ideologue on the Politburo. He will back Yuriy Vladimirovich on anything he wishes to do, even if it means a physical attack on His Holiness."

"You really think it could go that far?" Jack asked.

"Could it? Possibly, yes."

"Okay, has this letter been sent to Langley?"

Harding nodded. "Your local Station Chief came over to collect it today. I would expect your chaps have their own sources, but there's no sense taking chances."

"Agreed. You know, if Ivan does anything that extreme, there's going to be hell to pay."

"Perhaps so, but they do not see things in the same way we do, Jack."

"I know. Hard to make the full leap of imagination, however."

"It does take time," Simon agreed.

"Does reading their poetry help?" Ryan wondered. He'd only seen a little of it, and only in translation, which was not how one read poetry.

Harding shook his head. "Not really. That's how some of them protest. The protests have to be sufficiently roundabout that the more obtuse of their readers can just enjoy the lyrical tribute to a particular girl's figure without noticing the cry for freedom of expression. There must be a whole section of KGB that analyzes the poems for the hidden political content, to which no one pays particular attention until the Politburo members notice that the sexual content is a little too explicit. They are a bunch of prudes, you know. . . . How very odd of them to have that sort of morality and no other."

"Well, one can hardly knock them for disapproving *Debbie Does Dallas,*" Ryan suggested.

Harding nearly choked on his pipe smoke. "Quite so. Not exactly *King Lear,* is it? They did produce Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Pasternak."

Jack hadn't read any of them, but this didn't seem the time to admit to it.

"HE SAID *WHAT*?" Alexandrov asked.

The outrage was predictable, but remarkably muted, Andropov thought. Perhaps he only raised his voice for a fuller audience, or more likely his subordinates over at the Party Secretariat building.

"Here is the letter, and the translation," the KGB Chairman said, handing over the documents.

The chief-ideologue-in-waiting took the message forms and read them over slowly. He didn't want his rage to miss a single nuance. Andropov waited,

lighting a Marlboro as he did so. His guest didn't touch the vodka that he'd poured, the Chairman noted.

"This holy man grows ambitious," he said finally, setting the papers down on the coffee table.

"I would agree with that," Yuriy observed.

Amazement in his voice: "Does he feel invulnerable? Does he not know that there are consequences for such threats?"

"My experts feel that his words are genuine, and, no, they believe he does not fear the possible consequences."

"If martyrdom is what he wishes, perhaps we should accommodate him. . . ." The way his voice trailed off caused a chill even in Andropov's cold blood. It was time for a warning. The problem with ideologues was that their theories did not always take reality into proper account, a fact to which they were mostly blind.

"Mikhail Yevgeniyevich, such actions are not to be undertaken lightly. There could be political consequences."

"No, not great ones, Yuriy. Not great ones," Alexandrov repeated himself. "But, yes, I agree, what we do in reply must be considered fully before we take the necessary action."

"What does Comrade Suslov think? Have you consulted him?"

"Misha is very ill," Alexandrov replied, without any great show of regret. That surprised Andropov. His guest owed much to his ailing senior, but these ideologues lived in their own little circumscribed world. "I fear his life is coming to its end."

That part was not a surprise. You only had to look at him at the Politburo meetings. Suslov had the desperate look you saw on the face of a man who knew that his time was running out. He wanted to make the world right before he departed from it, but he also knew that such an act was beyond his capacity, a fact that had come to him as an unwelcome surprise. Did he finally grasp the reality that Marxism-Leninism was a false path? Andropov had come to that conclusion about five years before. But that wasn't the sort of thing one talked about in the Kremlin, was it? And not with Alexandrov, either.

"He has been a good comrade these many years. If what you say is true, he will be sorely missed," the KGB Chairman noted soberly, genuflecting to the altar of Marxist theory and its dying priest.

"That is so," Alexandrov agreed, playing his role as his host did—as all Politburo members did, because it was expected . . . because it was necessary. Not because it was true, or even approximately so.

Like his guest, Yuriy Vladimirovich believed not because he believed, but because what he *purported* to believe was the source of the real thing: power. What, the Chairman wondered, would this man say next? Andropov needed him, and Alexandrov needed *him* as well, perhaps even more. Mikhail Yevgeniyevich did not have the personal power needed to become General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He was respected for his theoretical knowledge, his devotion to the state religion that Marxism-Leninism had become, but no one who sat around the table thought him a proper candidate for leadership. But his support would be vital to whoever did have that ambition. As in medieval times, when the eldest son became the lord

of the manor, and the second son became the bishop of the attendant diocese, so Alexandrov, like Suslov in his time, had to provide the spiritual—was that the proper word?—justification for his ascension to power. The system of checks and balances remained, just more perversely than before.

"You will, of course, take his place when the time comes," Andropov offered as the promise of an alliance.

Alexandrov demurred, of course . . . or pretended to: "There are many good men in the Party Secretariat."

The Chairman of the Committee for State Security waved his hand dismissively. "You are the most senior and the most trusted."

Which Alexandrov well knew. "You are kind to say so, Yuriy. So, what will we do about this foolish Pole?"

And that, so baldly stated, would be the cost of the alliance. To get Alexandrov's support for the General Secretaryship, Andropov would have to make the ideologue's blanket a little thicker by . . . well, by doing something he was already thinking about anyway. That was painless, wasn't it?

The KGB Chairman adopted a clinical, businesslike tone of voice: "Misha, to undertake an operation of this sort is not a trivial or a simple exercise. It must be planned very carefully, prepared with the greatest caution and thoroughness, and then the Politburo must approve it with open eyes."

"You must have something in mind. . . ."

"I have many things in mind, *but* a daydream is not a plan. To move forward requires some in-depth thinking and planning merely to see if such a thing is possible. One cautious step at a time," Andropov warned. "Even then, there are no guarantees or promises to be made. This is not something for a movie production. The real world, Misha, is complex." It was as close as he could come to telling Alexandrov not to stray too far from his sand-box of theories and toys and into the real world of blood and consequences.

"Well, you are a good Party man. You know what the stakes in this game are." With those words, Alexandrov told his host what was expected by the Secretariat. For Mikhail Yevgeniyevich, the Party and its beliefs were the State—and the KGB was the Sword and Shield of the Party.

Oddly, Andropov realized, this Polish Pope surely felt the same about his beliefs and his view of the world. But those beliefs weren't, strictly speaking, an ideology, were they? *Well, for these purposes, they might as well be,* Yuriy Vladimirovich told himself.

"My people will look at this carefully. We cannot do the impossible, Misha, but—"

"But what is impossible for this agency of the Soviet state?" A rhetorical question with a bloody answer. And a dangerous one, more dangerous than this academician realized.

How alike they were, the KGB Chairman realized. This one, comfortably sipping his brown Starka, believed absolutely in an ideology that could not be proven. And he desired the death of a man who also believed things that could not be proved. What a curious state of affairs. A battle of ideas, both sets of which feared the other. Feared? What did Karol fear? Not death, certainly. His letter to Warsaw proclaimed that without words. Indeed, he cried aloud for death. He *sought* martyrship. *Why would a man seek that?* the Chairman

wondered briefly. To use his life or death as a weapon against his enemy. Surely he regarded both Russia and communism as enemies, one for nationalistic reasons, the other for reasons of his religious conviction. . . . But did he *fear* that enemy?

No, probably not, Yuriy Vladimirovich admitted to himself. That made his task harder. His was an agency that needed fear to get its way. Fear was its source of power, and a man lacking fear was a man he could not manipulate. . . .

But those whom he could not manipulate could always be killed. Who, after all, remembered much about Leon Trotsky?

"Few things are truly impossible. Merely difficult," the Chairman belatedly agreed.

"So, you will look into the possibilities?"

He nodded cautiously. "Yes, starting in the morning." And so the processes began.

CHAPTER 3

EXPLORATIONS

WELL, JACK'S GOT HIS DESK in London," Greer told his colleagues on the Seventh Floor.

"Glad to hear it," Bob Ritter observed. "Think he knows what to do with it?"

"Bob, what is it with you and Ryan?" the DDI asked.

"Your fair-haired boy is moving up the ladder too fast. He's going to fall off someday and it's going to be a mess."

"You want me to turn him into just one more ordinary desk-weenie?" James Greer had often enough fended off Ritter's beefs about the size and consequent power of the Intelligence Directorate. "You have some burgeoning stars in your shop, too. This kid's got possibilities, and I'm going to let him run until he hits the wall."

"Yeah, I can hear the *splat* now," the DDO grumbled. "Okay, which one of the crown jewels does he want to hand over to our British cousins?"

"Nothing much. The appraisal of Mikhail Suslov that the doctors up at Johns Hopkins did when they flew over to fix his eyes."

"They don't have that already?" Judge Moore asked. It wasn't as though it were a super-sensitive document.

"I guess they never asked. Hell, Suslov won't be around much longer anyway, from what we've been seeing."

The CIA had many ways to determine the health of senior Soviet officials. The most commonly used was photographs or, better yet, motion-picture coverage of the people in question. The Agency employed physicians—most often full professors at major medical schools—to look at the photos and diagnose their ills without getting within four thousand miles of them. It wasn't good medicine, but it was better than nothing. Also, the American Ambassador, every time he went into the Kremlin, came back to the embassy

and dictated his impressions of everything he saw, however small and insignificant it might seem. Often enough, people had lobbied for putting a physician in the post of ambassador, but it had never happened. More often, direct DO operations had been aimed at collecting urine samples of important foreign statesmen, since urine was a good diagnostic source of information. It made for some unusual plumbing arrangements at Blair House, across the street from the White House, where foreign dignitaries were often quartered, plus the odd attempt to break into doctors' offices all over the world. And gossip, there was always gossip, especially over there. All of this came from the fact that a man's health played a role in his thinking and decision-making. All three men in this office had joked about hiring a gypsy or two and observed, rightly, that it would have produced results no less accurate than they got from well-paid professional intelligence officers. At Fort Meade, Maryland, was yet another operation, code-named STARGATE, where the Agency employed people who were well to the left of gypsies; it had been started mainly because the Soviets also employed such people.

"How sick is he?" Moore asked.

"From what I saw three days ago, he won't make Christmas. Acute coronary insufficiency, they say. We have a shot of him popping what looks like a nitroglycerine pill, not a good sign for Red Mike," James Greer concluded with Suslov's in-house nickname.

"And Alexandrov replaces him? Some bargain," Ritter observed tersely. "I think the gypsies switched them at birth—another True Believer in the Great God Marx."

"We can't all be Baptists, Robert," Arthur Moore pointed out.

"This came in two hours ago on the secure fax from London," Greer said, passing the sheets around. He'd saved the best for last. "Might be important," the DDI added.

Bob Ritter was a multilingual speed-reader: "Jesus!"

Judge Moore took his time. *As a judge should,* he thought. About twenty seconds later than the DDO: "My goodness." A pause. "Nothing about this from our sources?"

Ritter shifted in his chair. "Takes time, Arthur, and the Foleys are still settling in."

"I presume we'll hear about this from CARDINAL." They didn't often invoke *that* agent's code name. In the pantheon of CIA crown jewels, he was the Cullinan Diamond.

"We should, if Ustinov talks about it, as I expect he will. If they do something about it—"

"Will they, gentlemen?" the DCI asked.

"They'll sure as hell think about it," Ritter opined at once.

"It's a big step to take," Greer thought more soberly. "You suppose His Holiness is courting it? Not too many men walk up to the tiger, open the cage door, and then make faces at him."

"I'll have to show this to the President tomorrow." Moore paused for a moment's thought. His weekly meeting at the White House was set for 10:00 the following morning. "The Papal Nuncio is out of town, isn't he?" It turned out that the others didn't know. He'd have to have that one checked out.

"What would you say to him, anyway?" This was Ritter. "You have to figure that the other guys in Rome tried to talk him out of this."

"James?"

"Kinda takes us back to Nero, doesn't it? It's almost as though he's threatening the Russians with his own death. . . . Damn, do people really think that way?"

"Forty years ago, you put your life on the line, James." Greer had served his time on fleet boats in the Second World War, and often wore a miniature of his gold dolphins on the lapel of his suit coat.

"Arthur, I took my chances, along with everybody else on the boat. I did *not* tell Tojo where I was in a personal letter."

"The man has some serious *cojones,* guys," Ritter breathed. "We have seen this sort of thing before. Dr. King never took a step back in his life, did he?"

"And I suppose the KKK was as dangerous to him as the KGB is to the Pope," Moore completed the thought. "Men of the cloth have a different way of looking at the world. It's called 'virtue,' I think." He sat forward. "Okay, when the President asks me about this—and for damned sure he will—what the hell do I tell him?"

"Our Russian friends might just decide that His Holiness has lived long enough," Ritter answered.

"That's a hell of a big and dangerous step to take," Greer objected. "Not the sort of thing a committee does."

"This committee might," the DDO told the DDI.

"There would be hell to pay, Bob. They know that. These men are chess players, not gamblers."

"This letter backs them into a corner." Ritter turned. "Judge, I think the Pope's life might be in danger."

"It's much too early to say that," Greer objected.

"Not when you remember who's running KGB. Andropov is a Party man. What loyalty he has is to that institution, damned sure not to anything we would recognize as a principle. If this frightens, or merely worries them, they will think about it. The Pope has hurled down his gauntlet at their feet, gentlemen," the Deputy Director (Operations) told the others. "They just might pick it up."

"Has any Pope ever done this?" Moore asked.

"Resign his post? Not that I can remember," Greer admitted. "I don't even know if there's a mechanism for this. I grant you it's one hell of a gesture. We have to assume he means it. I don't see this as a bluff."

"No," Judge Moore agreed. "It can't be that."

"He's loyal to his people. He has to be. He was a parish priest once upon a time. He's christened babies, officiated at weddings. He *knows* these people. Not as an amorphous mass—he's been there to baptize and bury them. They are *his* people. He probably thinks of all Poland as his own parish. Will he be loyal to them, even at the peril of his life? How can he not be?" Ritter leaned forward. "It's not just a question of personal courage. If he doesn't do it, the Catholic Church loses face. No, guys, he's serious as hell, and he isn't bluffing. Question is, what the hell can we do about it?"

"Warn the Russians off?" Moore wondered aloud.

"No chance," Ritter shot back. "You know better than that, Arthur. If they set up an operation, it'll have more cutouts than anything the Mafia's ever done. How good do you suppose security is around him?"

"Not a clue," the DCI admitted. "I know the Swiss Guards exist, with their pretty uniforms and pikes. . . . Didn't they fight once?"

"I think so," Greer observed. "Somebody tried to kill him, and they fought a rear-guard action while he skipped town. Most of them got killed, I think."

"Now they mostly pose for pictures and tell people where the bathroom is, probably," Ritter thought out loud. "But there has to be something to what they do. The Pope is too prominent a figure not to attract the odd nutcase. The Vatican is technically a sovereign state. It has to have some of the mechanisms of a country. I suppose we could warn them—"

"Only when we have something to warn them about. Which we don't have, do we?" Greer pointed out. "He knew when he sent this off that he'd be rattling a few cages. What protection he does have must be alerted already."

"This will get the President's attention, too. He's going to want to know more, and he's going to want options. Jesus, people, ever since he made that Evil Empire speech, there's been trouble across the river. If they really do something, even if we can't pin it on them, he's going to erupt like Mount Saint Helens. There's damned near a hundred million Catholics right here in America, and a lot of them voted for him."

For his part, James Greer wondered how far out of control this might spin. "Gentlemen, all we have to this point is a fax of a photocopy of a letter delivered to the government in Warsaw. We do not know for certain that it's gone to Moscow yet. We have no sign of any reaction to this from Moscow. Now, we can't tell the Russians we know about it. So we can't warn them off. We can't tip our hand in any way. We can't tell the Pope that we're concerned, for the same reason. If Ivan's going to react, hopefully one of Bob's people will get us the word, and the Vatican has its own intelligence service, and we know that's pretty good. So, for the moment, all we have is an interesting bit of information that is probably true, but even that is not yet confirmed."

"So, for the moment, you think we just sit on this and think it through?" Moore asked.

"There's nothing else we can do, Arthur. Ivan won't act very fast. He never does—not on something with this degree of political import. Bob?"

"Yeah, you're probably right," the DDI agreed. "Still, the President needs to hear about it."

"It's a little thin for that," Greer cautioned. "But, yes, I suppose so." Mainly he knew that *not* telling the President, and then having something dire happen, would cause all of them to seek new employment. "If it goes further in Moscow, we ought to hear about it before anything drastic happens."

"Fine, I can tell him that," Judge Moore agreed. *Mr. President, we're taking a very close look at this.* That sort of thing usually worked. Moore rang his secretary and asked for some coffee to be sent in. Tomorrow at ten, they'd brief the President in the Oval Office, and then after lunch would be his weekly sit-down with the chiefs of the other services, DIA and NSA, to see what interesting things they had happening. The order should have been reversed, but that's just how things were usually scheduled.

HIS FIRST DAY at work had lingered quite a bit longer than expected before he'd been able to leave. Ed Foley was impressed by the Moscow Metro. The decorator must have been the same madman who'd designed Moscow State University's wedding-cake stonework—evidently beloved of Joe Stalin, whose personal aesthetic had run the gamut from Y to Z. It was strangely reminiscent of the czarist palaces, as interpreted by a terminal alcoholic. That said, the metro was superbly engineered, if somewhat clunky. More to the point, the crush of people was very agreeable to the spook. Making a brush-pass or other sort of pickup from an agent would not be overly trying, so long as he kept to his training, and that was something Edward Francis Foley was good at. Mary Pat would love it here, he was sure now. The milieu for her would be like Disney World was for Eddie. The crush of people, all speaking Russian. His Russian was pretty good. Hers was literary, having learned it at her grandfather's knee, though she'd have to de-tune it, lest she be made out as someone whose language skills were a little too good to be merely those of the wife of a minor embassy official.

The subway worked well for him. With one station only a couple of blocks from the embassy, and the other practically at their apartment house's doorstep, even the most paranoid Directorate Two shadow would not find his use of it terribly suspicious, despite the well-known American love for cars. He didn't look around any more than a tourist would, and thought that maybe he'd made one tail. There'd probably be more than that for the moment. He was a new embassy employee, and the Russians would want to see if he wiggled like a CIA spook. He decided to act like an innocent American abroad, which might or might not be the same thing to them. It depended on how experienced his current shadow was, and there was no telling that. For certain, he'd have a tail for a couple weeks. That was an expected annoyance. So would Mary Pat. So, probably, would Eddie. The Soviets were a paranoid bunch, but then, he could hardly complain about that, could he? Not hardly. It was his job to crack into the deepest secrets of their country. He was the new Chief of Station, but he was supposed to be a stealthy one. This was one of Bob Ritter's new and more creative ideas. Typically, the identity of the boss spook in an embassy wasn't expected to be a secret. Sooner or later, everyone got burned one way or another, either ID'd by a false-flag operation or through an operational error, and that was like losing one's virginity. Once gone, it never came back. But the Agency only rarely used a husband-wife team in the field, and he'd spent years building his cover. A graduate of New York's Fordham University, Ed Foley had been recruited fairly young, vetted by an FBI background check, and then gone to work for *The New York Times* as a reporter on a general beat. He'd turned in a few interesting stories, but not too many, and had eventually been told that, while the *Times* wasn't going to fire him, it might be better for him to seek employment with a smaller newspaper where he might blossom better on his own. He'd taken the hint and gotten a job with the State Department as a Press Attaché, a job that paid a decent bureaucratic wage, though without a supergrade's destiny. His official

job at the embassy would be to schmooze the elite foreign corespondents of the great American papers and TV networks, granting them access to the ambassador and other embassy officials, and then keeping out of the way while they filed their important stories.

His most important job was to appear competent, but little more. Already the local *Times* correspondent was telling his colleagues that Foley hadn't had the right stuff to make it big as a journalist at America's Foremost Newspaper, and since he wasn't old enough to teach yet—the other resting place for incompetent reporters—he was doing the next worst thing, being a government puke. It was his job to foster that arrogance, knowing that the KGB would have its people ping on the American press corps for their evaluation of the embassy personnel. The best cover of all for a spook was to be regarded as dull and dim, because the dull and the dim weren't smart enough to be spies. For that, he thanked Ian Fleming and the movies he'd inspired. James Bond was a clever boy. Not Ed Foley. No, Ed Foley was a functionary. The crazy part was that the Soviets, whose entire country was governed by dull functionaries, more often than not fell for this story just as readily as if they were someone fresh off the pig farm in Iowa.

There is nothing predictable about the espionage business . . . except here, the Station Chief told himself. The one thing you could depend on with the Russians was predictability. Everything was written down in some huge book, and everybody here played the game by the book.

Foley got aboard the subway car, looking around at his fellow passengers, seeing how they looked at him. His clothing marked him as a foreigner as clearly as a glowing halo marked a saint in a Renaissance painting.

"Who are you?" a neutral voice asked, rather to Foley's surprise.

"Excuse me?" Foley replied in badly accented Russian.

"Ah, you are American."

"*Da,* that is so. I work at American embassy. My first day. I am new in Moscow." Shadow or not, he knew that the only sensible thing was to play this straight.

"How do you like it here?" the inquisitor asked. He looked like a bureaucrat, maybe a KGB counterespionage spook or a stringer. Or maybe just some officer-sitter for some government-run business who suffered from curiosity. There were some of those. Would an ordinary citizen approach him? Probably not, Foley judged. The atmosphere tended to limit curiosity to the space between a person's ears . . . except that Russians were curious as hell about Americans of every stripe. Told to disdain or even to hate Americans, the Russians frequently regarded them as Eve had regarded the apple.

"The metro is very impressive," Foley answered, looking around as artlessly as he could.

"Where in America do you come from?" was the next question.

"New York City."

"You play ice hockey in America?"

"Oh, yes! I've been a fan of the New York Rangers since I was a child. I want to see the hockey here." Which was entirely truthful. The Russian skate-and-pass game was the closest thing to Mozart in the world of sports. "The embassy has good tickets, they told me today. Central Army," he added.

"Bah!" the Muscovite snorted. "I am Wings fan."

The guy might just be genuine, Foley thought with surprise. The Russians were as picky about their hockey clubs as American baseball fans were with their home teams. But the Second Chief Directorate probably had hockey fans working there, too. "Too careful" was a concept he did not admit to, especially here.

"Central Army is the champion team, isn't it?"

"Too prissy. Look what happened to them in America."

"In America we play a more physical—is that the right word?—game. To you they must seem like hooligans, yes?" Foley had taken the train to Philadelphia to see that game. The Flyers—more widely known as the Broad Street Bullies—had beaten the snot out of the somewhat arrogant Russian visitors, rather to his amusement. The Philadelphia team had even wheeled out its secret weapon, the aging Kate Smith, singing "God Bless America," which for that team was like breakfasting on nails and human infants. Damn, what a game that one had been!

"They play roughly, yes, but they are not fairies. Central Army thinks they are the Bolshoi, the way they skate and pass. It's good to see them humbled sometimes."

"Well, I remember the '80 Olympics, but honestly that was a miracle for us to defeat your fine team."

"Miracle! *Bah!* Our coach was asleep. Our heroes were asleep. Your children played a spirited game, and they won honestly. The coach needed to be shot." Yeah, this guy talked like a fan.

"Well, I want my son to learn hockey over here."

"How old is he?" Genuine interest in the man's eyes.

"Four and a half," Foley answered.

"A good age to learn to skate. There are many opportunities for children to skate in Moscow, aren't there, Vanya?" he observed to the man next to him, who'd watched the exchange with a mixture of curiosity and unease.

"Make sure he gets good skates," the other man said. "Bad ones can injure the ankles." A typical Russian response. In this often harsh country, solicitude for children was endearingly genuine. The Russian bear had a soft heart for kids, but one of icy granite for adults.

"Thank you. I will be sure to do that."

"You live in the foreigners' compound?"

"Correct," Foley confirmed.

"Next stop is yours."

"Oh, *spasiba,* and good day to you." He made his way to the door, turning to nod a friendly good-bye to his newfound Russian friends. *KGB?* he wondered. Perhaps, but not certainly. He'd determine that by whether or not he saw them on the train a month or so from now.

What Ed Foley didn't know was that the entire exchange had been observed by a man a mere two meters away, holding a copy of today's *Sovietskiy Sport.* His name was Oleg Zaitzev, and Oleg Ivanovich *was* KGB.

The Station Chief left the subway car and followed the crush to the escalator. At one time, it would have led him to a full-standing portrait of Stalin, but that was gone now, and not replaced. The outside air was acquiring

the early autumn chill, just enough to feel good after the stuffiness of the metro. Around him, ten or more men lit up their foul-smelling cigarettes and walked their separate ways. It was only half a block to the walled compound of apartment blocks, with its guard shack and the uniformed attendant, who looked Foley over and decided he was an American by the quality of his overcoat, without acknowledging his passage by even a nod, and certainly not a smile. The Russians didn't smile much. It was something that struck all American visitors to the country; the outwardly dour nature of the Russian people seemed almost inexplicable to foreigners.

TWO STOPS FARTHER DOWN, Oleg Zaitzev wondered if he should write up a contact report. KGB officers were encouraged to do so, partly as a sign of loyalty, partly to show their eternal vigilance against citizens of the Main Enemy, as America was known within his professional community. It was mostly to show their institutional paranoia, a characteristic openly fostered by KGB. But by profession Zaitzev was a paper-pusher and he didn't feel the need to generate more meaningless paper. It would just be looked at, read in a cursory way at most, and tossed into some file box by some other bureaucrat from his upstairs office, never to be read again. His time was too precious for that sort of nonsense. Besides, he hadn't even talked to the foreigner, had he? He left the train at the proper stop, rode up the moving stairs into the crisp evening air, lighting his Trud cigarette as he got outside. It was a vile thing. He had access to the "closed" stores and could have bought French, British, or even American smokes, but they were too costly, and his funds were not as unlimited as his choices. So, he smoked the well-known "Labor" brand, like untold millions of his countrymen. The quality of his clothing was a tiny bit better than that worn by most of his comrades, but not overly so. Not so much that he stood out from the others. It was two blocks to his apartment building. His flat was #3 on the first—the Americans would have called it the second—floor instead of higher up, and that was fine with him, because it meant that he didn't risk a heart attack if the elevator didn't work, which happened about once a month. Today it worked. The elderly woman who occupied the janitor/superintendent's flat on the ground floor had her door closed today, instead of open to denote some mechanical problem she'd have to warn him about. So nothing in the building was broken today. Not quite cause for celebration, just one of the small things in life for which to be grateful to God or whoever determined the vagaries of fate. The cigarette died as he walked through the main door. Zaitzev flicked the butt into the ashtray and walked to the elevator, which, remarkably, was waiting for him with the door open.

"Good evening, Comrade Zaitzev," the operator said in greeting.

"Good evening, Comrade Glenko." The man was a disabled veteran of the Great Patriotic War, with the medals to prove it. Artilleryman, so he said. Probably the building informer, the man who reported unusual occurrences to some other KGB stringer, in return for which he got a niggardly stipend to supplement whatever pension the Red Army paid him. That was the extent of their exchange. Glenko turned the handle and brought the elevator car

smoothly to his floor and opened the door. From there, it was a mere five meters to his home.

Opening his apartment door, he was greeted by the smell of boiling cabbage—so cabbage soup for dinner. Not unusual. It was a staple of the Russian diet, along with rich black bread.

"Papa!" Oleg Ivanovich bent down to scoop up his little Svetlana. She was the light of Zaitzev's life, with her cherubic face and welcoming smile.

"How is my little *zaichik* today?" He scooped her up in his arms and accepted her darling little kiss.

Svetlana attended a day-care center crowded with other children her age—not quite a preschool, not quite a nursery. Her clothing comprised about the only colorful things to be had in his country, in this case a green pullover shirt and gray pants over little red leather shoes. If his access to the "closed" shops had one advantage, it was in what he could get his little girl. The Soviet Union didn't even have cloth diapers for its infants—mothers usually made them out of old bedsheets—much less the disposable kind favored in the West. As a result, there was a premium on getting the little ones toilet-trained, which little Svetlana had managed some time ago, much to her mother's relief. Oleg followed the smell of cabbage to his wife in the kitchen.

"Hello, darling," Irina Bogdanova said from the stove. Cabbage, potatoes, and what he hoped was some ham cooking. Tea and bread. No vodka yet. The Zaitzevs drank, but not to excess. They usually waited until Svetlana went down to bed. Irina worked as an accountant at the GUM department store. The possessor of a degree from Moscow State University, she was liberated in the Western sense, but not emancipated. Hanging by the kitchen table was the string bag she carried in her purse everywhere she went, eyes always on the lookout for something she might buy to eat or brighten their drab flat. It meant standing in line, which was the task of women in the Soviet Union, along with cooking dinner for her man, regardless of his professional status in life or hers. She knew that he worked for State Security, but did not know his job there, just that it paid a fairly comfortable salary, and came with a uniform that he rarely wore, and a rank soon to take a jump upward. So, whatever he did, he did it well enough, she judged, and that was sufficient. The daughter of an infantry-man in the great Patriotic War, she'd gone to state schools and gotten above-average marks, but never quite achieved what she'd wished. She'd shown some talent at the piano, but not enough to go onward to a state conservatory. She'd also tried her hand at writing, but there, too, she'd fallen short of the necessary talent to get published. Not an unattractive woman, she was thin by Russian standards. Her mouse-brown hair fell to her shoulders and was usually well brushed-out. She read a good deal, whichever books she could get that were worth her time, and enjoyed listening to classical music. She and her husband occasionally attended concerts at the Tchaikovsky. Oleg preferred the ballet, and so they went there as well, helped, Irina assumed, by his job at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square. He was not yet so senior as to allow them to hobnob with senior State Security officials at comradely parties. Perhaps when he got his colonelcy, she hoped. For the moment they lived the middle-class life of state-employed bureaucrats, scratching by on their combined salaries. The good news was that they had occasional access to

the “closed” KGB stores where at least they could buy nice things for her and Svetlana. And, who knew, maybe they could afford to have another child in due course. They were both young enough, and a little boy would brighten their home.

“Anything interesting today?” she asked. It was almost their daily joke.

“There is never anything interesting at the office,” he joked in reply. No, just the usual messages to and from field officers, which he forwarded to the appropriate pigeonholes for in-house couriers to hand-carry upstairs to the offices of the control officers who really ran things at KGB. A very senior colonel had come down to see the operation the previous week, which he’d done without a smile, a friendly word, or a question for twenty minutes, before disappearing off to the elevator banks. Oleg knew the man’s seniority only from the identity of his escort: the colonel who ran his own operation. Whatever words had been exchanged had been too distant for him to overhear—people tended to talk in whispers, if at all, in his department—and he was trained not to show much interest.

But training could only go so far. Captain Oleg Ivanovich Zaitzev was too bright to turn his mind all the way off. Indeed, his job required something approaching judgment for its proper execution, but that was something to be exercised as gingerly as a mouse’s stroll through a roomful of cats. He always went to his immediate superior and always started off with the most humble of questions before getting approval. In fact, his judgmental questions were always approved. Oleg was gifted in that, and he was beginning to get recognized as such. His majority wasn’t all that far off. More money, more access to the closed stores, and, gradually, more independence—no, that wasn’t quite right. A little less circumscription on what he would be able to do. Someday he might even ask if a message going out made good sense. *Do we* really *want to do* this, *comrade?* he’d wanted to ask every so often. Operational decisions were not his to make, of course, but he could—or would be able to in the future—question the wording of a directive in the most oblique terms. Every so often he’d see something going out to Officer 457 in Rome, for example, and wonder if his country really wanted to risk the consequences of having the mission order go bad. And sometimes they did go bad. Just two months before, he’d seen a dispatch from Bonn warning that something had gone wrong with the West German counterintelligence service, and the field officer had urgently requested instructions—and the instructions had been to continue his mission without questioning the intelligence of his superiors. And *that* field officer had disappeared right off the network. *Arrested and shot?* Oleg wondered. He knew some of the field officers’ names, virtually all of the operations’ names, and a lot of the operational targets and objectives. Most of all, he knew the code names of hundreds of foreign nationals who were agents of the KGB. At its best, it could be like reading a spy novel. Some of the field officers had a literary streak. Their dispatches were not the terse communiqués of military officers. No, they liked to communicate the state of mind of their agents, the *feel* of the information and the mission assigned. They could be like travelogue writers describing things for a paying audience. Zaitzev wasn’t really supposed to digest such information, but he was a man with a mind, and besides, there were telltale

codes built into every dispatch. The third word misspelled, for example, could be a warning that the officer had been compromised. Every officer had a different such key system, and Zaitzev had a list of them all. Only twice had he caught such irregularities, and on one of those occasions his supervisors had told him to ignore it as a clerical error—a fact that still astounded him. But the mistake had never been repeated, and so, maybe it really had just been an enciphering error by the officer in question. After all, his superior had told him, men trained at The Centre didn't often get caught in the field. They were the best in the world, and the Western enemies were not *that* clever, were they? Then Captain Zaitzev had nodded submission to the moment, written down his warning notation, and made sure it was in the permanent files, covering his ass like any good bureaucrat.

What if his immediate superior were under the control of some Western spy agency, he'd wondered at the time and later on, usually after a few drinks in front of his TV set. Such a compromise would be perfection itself. Nowhere in KGB was there a single written list of their officers and agents. No, "compartmentalization" was a concept invented here back in the 1920s, or perhaps earlier still. Even Chairman Andropov was not allowed to have such a thing within his reach, lest *he* defect to the West and take it with him. KGB trusted no one, least of all its own Chairman. And so, oddly, only people in his own department had access to such broad information, but they were not operations personnel. They were just communicators.

But wasn't the one person KGB *always* tried to compromise the cipher clerk in a foreign embassy? Because he or she was the one functionary, the one not bright enough to be entrusted with anything of importance—wasn't *she* the one person who *was* so entrusted? It was so often a woman, after all, and KGB officers were trained to seduce them. He'd seen dispatches along those lines, some of them describing the seduction in graphic detail, perhaps to impress the men upstairs with their manly prowess and the extent of their devotion to the State. Being paid to fuck women didn't strike Zaitzev as conspicuously heroic, but then, perhaps the women were surpassingly ugly, and performing a man's duty under such circumstances might have been difficult.

What it came down to, Oleg Ivanovich reflected, was that functionaries were so often entrusted with cosmic secrets, and he was one of them, and wasn't that amusing? More amusing than his cabbage soup, certainly, nutritious though it might be. So even the Soviet state trusted some people, despite the fact that "trust" was a concept as divorced from its way of collective thinking as a man is from Mars. And he was such a man. Well, one result of that irony was the cute green shirt his little daughter wore. He set a few books on the kitchen chair and hoisted Svetlana there so that she could eat her dinner. Svetlana's hands were a little small for the zinc-aluminum tableware, but at least it wasn't too heavy for her to use. He still had to butter her bread for her. It was good to be able to afford real butter.

"I saw something nice at the special store on the way home," Irina observed as women do over dinner, to catch their husbands in a good mood. The cabbage was especially good today, and the ham was Polish. So she'd shopped today at the "closed" store, all right. She'd gotten into the habit only nine months before, and now she wondered aloud how she'd ever lived without it.

"What's that?" Oleg asked, sipping his Georgian tea.

"Brassieres, Swedish ones."

Oleg smiled. Those of Soviet manufacture always seemed to be designed for peasant girls who suckled calves instead of children—far too big for a woman of his wife's more human proportions. "How much?" he asked without looking up.

"Only seventeen rubles each."

Seventeen certificate *rubles,* he didn't correct her. A certificate ruble had actual value. You could, theoretically, even exchange it for a foreign "hard" currency, as opposed to the valueless paper that they used to pay the average factory worker, whose value was entirely theoretical . . . like everything else in his country, when you got down to it.

"What color?"

"White." Perhaps the special store had black or red ones, but it was a rare Soviet woman who would wear such things. People were very conservative in their habits here.

With dinner finished, Oleg left the kitchen to his wife and took his little girl into the living room and the TV set. The TV news announced that the harvest was under way, as it was every year, with the heroic laborers on the collective farms bringing in the first crop of summer wheat in the northern areas, where they had to grow and harvest it quickly. A fine crop, the TV said. *Good,* Oleg thought, *no bread shortages this winter . . . probably.* You could never really be sure about what was said on the TV. Next, some complaining coverage of the American nuclear weapons being deployed in the NATO countries, despite the reasonable Soviet requests that the West forgo such unnecessary, destabilizing, and provocative actions. Zaitzev knew that the Soviet SS-20s were going into place elsewhere, and they, of course, were in no way destabilizing. The big show on TV tonight was *We Serve the Soviet Union,* about military operations, fine young Soviet men serving their country. Today would be rare coverage of men doing their "international duty" in Afghanistan. The Soviet media didn't often cover that, and Oleg was curious as to what they'd show. There were occasional discussions over lunch at work about the war in Afghanistan. He tended to listen rather than talk, because he'd been excused from military service, something he didn't regret one little bit. He'd heard too many stories about the casual brutality in the infantry units, and besides, the uniforms were not attractive to wear. His rarely worn KGB uniform was bad enough. Still, pictures told stories that mere words did not, and he had the keen eye for detail that his job required.

"YOU KNOW, every year they harvest wheat in Kansas, and it never makes the *NBC Nightly News,"* Ed Foley said to his wife.

"I suppose feeding themselves is a major accomplishment," Mary Pat observed. "How's the office?"

"Small." Then he waved his hands in such a way as to say that nothing interesting had happened.

Soon she'd have to drive their car around to check for alert signals. They

were working Agent CARDINAL here in Moscow, and he was their most important assignment. The colonel knew that he'd have new handlers here. Setting that arrangement up would be touchy, but Mary Pat was accustomed to handling the touchy ones.

CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTIONS

IT WAS FIVE IN THE EVENING in London, and noon in Langley, when Ryan lit up his secure phone to call home. He'd have to get used to the time zones. Like a lot of people, he found that his creative times of day tended to divide themselves into two parts. Mornings were best for digesting information, but later afternoons were better for contemplation. Admiral Greer tended to be the same way, and so Jack would find himself disconnected from his boss's work routine, which wasn't good. He also had to get used to the mechanics of handling documents. He'd been in government service long enough to know that it would never be as easy as he expected, nor as simple as it ought to be.

"Greer," a voice said, after the secure link was established.

"Ryan here, sir."

"How's England, Jack?"

"Haven't seen it rain yet. Cathy starts her new job tomorrow morning."

"How's Basil?"

"I can't complain about the hospitality, sir."

"Where are you now?"

"Century House. They gave me an office on the top floor with a guy in their Russian section."

"I bet you want an STU for your home."

"Good call, sir." The old bastard was pretty good at reading minds.

"What else?"

"Nothing comes immediately to mind, Admiral."

"Anything interesting yet?"

"Just settling in, sir. Their Russian section looks smart. The guy I'm working with, Simon Harding, reads the tea leaves pretty well," Ryan said, glad that Simon was off at the moment. Of course, maybe the phone was bugged . . .

nah . . . not for a Knight Commander of the Victorian Order . . . or would they?

"Kids okay?"

"Yes, sir. Sally's trying to figure out the local TV."

"Kids adapt pretty well."

Better than adults do. "I'll let you know, Admiral."

"The Hopkins document ought to be on your desk tomorrow."

"Thanks. I think they'll like it. Bernie said some interesting things. This other thing with the Pope . . ."

"What are our cousins saying?"

"They're concerned. So am I. I think His Holiness has rattled their cage pretty hard, and I think Ivan's going to notice."

"What's Basil saying?"

"Not much. I do not know what assets they have on site. I imagine they're waiting to see what they can find out." Jack paused. "Anything from our end?"

"Not yet" was the terse reply. It was a step up from *nothing I can talk to you about. Does Admiral Greer really trust me now?* Jack wondered. Sure, Greer liked him, but did he really trust him to be a good analyst? Perhaps this London sojourn was, if not boot camp, then maybe a second trip through the Basic School. That was where the Marine Corps made sure that young men with lieutenant's bars really had the right stuff to lead Marines in the field. It was reputed to be the hardest school in the Corps. It hadn't been especially easy for Ryan, but he had graduated at the top of his class. Maybe he'd just been lucky . . . ? He hadn't served long enough to find out, courtesy of a broken CH-46 over the island of Crete, an event that still visited him in the occasional nightmare. Fortunately, his gunnery sergeant and a navy corpsman had stabilized him, but Jack still got a chill even thinking about helicopters. "Tell me what you think, Jack."

"If my job were to keep the Pope alive, I'd be a little nervous. The Russians can play rough when they want to. What I cannot evaluate is how the Politburo might react—I mean, how much starch they might have in their backbone. When I talked to Basil, I said it comes down to how scared they are by his threat, if you call it a threat."

"What would you call it, Jack?" the DDI asked from 3,400 miles away.

"Yes, sir, you have me there. I suppose it is a threat of sorts to their way of thinking."

"Of sorts? How does it look to them?" Jim Greer would have been one tough son of a bitch teaching graduate-level history or political science. Right up there with Father Tim at Georgetown.

"Noted, Admiral. It's a threat. And they will see it as such. I am not sure, however, how serious a threat they will take it to be. It's not as though they believe in God. To them, 'God' is politics, and politics is just a process, not a belief system as we understand the term."

"Jack, you need to learn to see reality through the eyes of your adversary. Your analytical ability is first-rate, but you have to work on perception. This isn't stocks and bonds, where you dealt with hard numbers, not perceptions of numbers. They say El Greco had a stigmatism in his eyes that gave everything

a visual slant. They see reality through a different lens, too. If you can replicate that, you'll be one of the best around, but you have to make that leap of imagination. Harding's pretty good at that. Learn from him to see the inside of their heads."

"You know Simon?" Jack asked.

"I've been reading his analyses for years."

None of this is an accident, Jack, he told himself, with more surprise than there ought to have been. His second important lesson of the day. "Understood, sir."

"Don't sound too surprised, my boy."

"Aye-aye, sir," Ryan responded like a Marine shavetail. *I won't make that mistake again, Admiral.* And in that moment, John Patrick Ryan became a real intelligence analyst.

"I'll have the embassy deliver the STU to you. You know about keeping it secure," the DDI added as a cautionary note.

"Yes, sir. I can do that."

"Good. Lunchtime here."

"Yes, sir. Talk to you tomorrow." Ryan replaced the receiver in the cradle and then extracted the plastic key from the slot in the phone set. That went into his pocket. He checked his watch. Time to close up shop. He'd already cleared his desk of classified folders. A woman came around about 4:30 with a shopping cart to take them back to central-records storage. Right on cue, Simon came back in.

"What time's your train?"

"Six-ten."

"Time for a beer, Jack. Interested?"

"Works for me, Simon." He rose and followed his roommate out the door.

It was only a four-minute walk to the Fox and Cock, a very traditional pub a block from Century House. A little too traditional: It looked like a relic from Shakespeare's time, with massive wooden timbers and plaster walls. It had to be for architectural effect; no real building could have survived that long, could it? Inside was a cloud of tobacco smoke and a lot of people wearing jackets and ties. Clearly an upscale pub, a lot of the patrons were probably from Century House. Harding confirmed it.

"It's our watering hole. The publican used to be one of us, probably makes more here than he ever did at the shop." Without being bidden, Harding ordered two pints of Tetley's bitter, which arrived quickly. Then he ushered Jack to a corner booth.

"So, Sir John, how do you like it here?"

"No complaints so far." He took a sip. "Admiral Greer thinks you're pretty smart."

"And Basil thinks he's rather bright as well. Good chap to work for?" Harding asked.

"Yeah, big-time. He listens and helps you think. Doesn't stomp on you when you goof. He'd rather teach than embarrass you—that's my experience, anyway. Some of the more senior analysts have had him tear a stripe off their ass. I guess I'm not senior enough for that yet." Ryan paused. "You supposed to be my training officer over here, Simon?"

The directness of the question surprised his host. “I wouldn’t say that exactly. I’m a Soviet specialist. You’re more a generalist, I take it?”

“Try ‘apprentice,’ ” Ryan suggested.

“Very well. What do you want to know?”

“How to think like a Russian.”

Harding laughed into his beer. “That’s something we all learn every day. The key is to remember that to them everything is politics, and politics, remember, is all about nebulous ideas, aesthetics. Especially in Russia, Jack. They can’t deliver real products like automobiles and television sets, so they have to concentrate on everything fitting into their political theory, the sayings of Marx and Lenin. And, of course, Lenin and Marx knew sod-all about doing real things in the real world. It’s like a religion gone mad, but instead of thunderbolts or biblical plagues, they kill their apostates with firing squads. In their world outlook, everything that goes wrong is the result of political apostasy. Their political theory ignores human nature, and since their political theory is Holy Writ, and therefore is never wrong, it must be human nature that’s wrong. It’s not logically consistent, you see. Ever study metaphysics?”

“Boston College, second year. The Jesuits make you spend a semester on it,” Ryan confirmed, taking a long sip. “Whether you want to or not.”

“Well, communism is metaphysics applied ruthlessly to the real world, and when things don’t fit, it’s the fault of the square sods who don’t fit into their round bloody holes. That can be rather hard on the poor sods, you see. And so, Joe Stalin murdered roughly twenty million of them, partly because of political theory, partly because of his own mental illness and bloody-mindedness. That insane bugger defined paranoia. One pays a price for being ruled by a madman with a twisted book of rules, you see.”

“But how faithful is the current political leadership to Marxist theory?”

A thoughtful nod. “That’s the question, Jack. The answer is, we don’t bloody know. They all claim to be true believers, but are they?” Harding paused for a contemplative sip of his own. “Only when it suits them, I think. But that depends on who one is talking about. Suslov, for example, believes totally—but the rest of them? To some greater or lesser extent, they do and they don’t. I suppose you can characterize them as people who used to go to church every Sunday, then fell away from the habit. Part of them still believes, but some greater or lesser part does not. What they *do* believe in is the fact that the state religion is the source of their power and status. And so, for all the common folk out there, they must *appear* to believe, because believing is the only thing that gives them that power and status.”

“Intellectual inertia?” Ryan wondered aloud.

“Exactly, Jack. Newton’s first law of motion.”

Part of Ryan wanted to object to the discourse. The world had to make more sense than that. But did it? What rule said that it had to? he asked himself. And who enforced such rules? And was it expressed that simply? What Harding had just explained in less than two hundred words purported to justify hundreds of billions of dollars in expenditures, strategic weapons of incomprehensible power, and millions of people whose uniforms denoted enmity that demanded aggression and death in time of war or near-war.

But the world was about ideas, good and bad, and the conflict between this

one and Ryan's own defined the reality in which Ryan worked, defined the belief system of the people who'd tried to kill him and his family. And that was as real as it had to be, wasn't it? No, there was no rule that compelled the world to make sense. People decided on their own what made sense and what did not. So, was everything about the world a matter of perception? Was it all a thing of the mind? What was reality?

But *that* was the question behind all of metaphysics. When Ryan had studied it at Boston College, it had been so purely theoretical that it seemed to have no attachment at all to reality. It had been a lot for Ryan to absorb at age nineteen, and, he realized, just as much to absorb at age thirty-two. But here the marks were often recorded in human blood, not on a report card.

"Christ, Simon. You know, it would be a lot easier if they did believe in God."

"Then, Jack, it would be just another religious war, and those are bloody affairs, too, you may recall. Think of it as the crusades, one version of God against another. Those wars were quite nasty enough. The true believers in Moscow think that they are riding the wave of history, that they are bringing perfection to the human condition. It must drive them mad when they see that their country can scarcely feed itself, and so they try to ignore it—but it is difficult to ignore an empty belly, isn't it? So they blame it all on us and on 'wreckers'—traitors and saboteurs—in their own country. Those are the people they imprison or kill." Harding shrugged. "Personally, I regard them as infidels, believers in a false god. It's just easier that way. I've studied their political theology, but that has limited value because, as I said, so many of them do not really believe in the substance of their system. Sometimes they think like tribal Russians, whose outlook on the world has always been skewed by our standards. Russian history is such a muddle that studying it has its own limits in terms of Western logic. They're xenophobes of a very high order, always have been—but for fairly reasonable historical causes. They've always had threats from both east and west. The Mongols, for example, have been as far west as the Baltic, and the Germans and French have hammered on the gates of Moscow. As we say, they're a rum lot. One thing I do know is that no sane man wants them as masters. A pity, really. They have so many marvelous poets and composers."

"Flowers in a junkyard," Ryan suggested.

"Exactly, Jack. Very good." Harding fished for his pipe and lit it with a kitchen match. "So, how do you like the beer?"

"Excellent, much better than at home."

"I don't know how you Americans can stomach it. But your beef is better than ours."

"Corn-fed. Turns out better meat than grass does," Ryan sighed. "I'm still getting used to life over here. Every time I start feeling comfortable, something hits me like a snake in high grass."

"Well, you've had less than a week to get used to us."

"My kids will be talking funny."

"Civilized, Jack, civilized," Harding observed with a good laugh. "You Yanks do ravage our language, you know."

"Yeah, right." Pretty soon he'd refer to baseball as "rounders," which was a

girls' game over here. They didn't know dick about a good fastball.

FOR HIS PART, Ed Foley found himself suddenly outraged by the bugs that he knew had to be in his apartment. Every time he made love to his wife, some KGB desk weenie was listening in. Probably a nice perverse diversion for their counterespionage spooks, but it was, by God, the Foleys' love life, and was nothing sacred? He and Mary Pat had been briefed in on what to expect, and his wife had actually joked about it, on the flight over—you couldn't bug airplanes. She'd called it a way of showing those barbarians how real people lived, and he'd laughed, but here and now it wasn't so goddamned funny. It was like being an animal in the goddamned zoo, with people watching and laughing and pointing. Would KGB keep a log of how often he and his wife got it on? *They might,* he thought, looking for marital difficulties as a pretext for recruiting him or Mary Pat. Everyone did it. So, they'd have to make love regularly just to discourage that possibility, though playing a reverse false-flag did have interesting theoretical possibilities of its own. . . . No, the Station Chief decided, it'd be an unnecessary complication for their stay in Moscow, and being Chief of Station was already complex enough.

Only the ambassador, the defense attaché, and his own officers were allowed to know who he was. Ron Fielding was the overt COS, and his job was to wiggle like a good worm on the hook. When parking his car, he'd occasionally leave his sun visor down or rotated ninety degrees; sometimes he'd wear a flower in his buttonhole and take it out halfway down a block as though signalling someone or, best of all, he'd bump into people, simulating a brush-pass. That sort of thing could make the Second Chief Directorate counterspooks go nuts—race after innocent Muscovites, perhaps snatch a few up for interrogations, or put a squad of officers on the poor random bastard to watch everything he did. If nothing else, it forced KGB to waste assets on fool's errands, chasing after phantom geese. Best of all, it persuaded them that Fielding was a clumsy Station Chief. It always made the other side feel good, and *that* was always a smart move for CIA. The game he played made other power moves look like a game of Chutes and Ladders.

But the fact that there were probably bugs in his bedroom pissed him off. And he couldn't do the usual things to contravene them, like playing the radio and talking under it. No, he couldn't act like a trained spook. He had to be dumb, and playing dumb required brains and discipline and the utmost thoroughness. Not a single mistake was allowed. That one mistake could get people killed, and Ed Foley had a conscience. It was a dangerous thing for a field spook to have, but it was impossible not to have. You had to care about your agents, those foreign nationals who worked for you and fed you information. All—well, nearly all—had problems. The big one here was alcoholism. He expected every agent he ran into to be a boozer. Some were quite mad. Most were people who wanted to get even—with their bosses, with the system, with the country, with communism, with their spouses, with the whole perverse world. Some, a very few, might be genuinely attractive people. But Foley would not pick them. They would pick him. And he'd have to play

the cards he was dealt. The rules of this game were hard and damned harsh. His life was safe. Oh, sure, he might get a little roughed up—or Mary Pat—but they both had diplomatic passports, and to seriously mess with him meant that somewhere in America some Soviet diplomat of fairly high rank might get a rough time at the hands of some street thugs—who might or might not be trained law-enforcement personnel. Diplomats didn't like such things, and so it was avoided; in fact, the Russians played by the rules more faithfully than the Americans did. So he and his wife were safe, but their agents, if and when blown, would get less mercy than a mouse would get from a particularly sadistic cat. There was still torture here, still interrogations that lasted into long hours. Due process of law was whatever the government at the time felt like it was. And the appeals process was limited to whether or not the shooter's pistol was loaded. So he had to treat his agents, whether drunks, whores, or felons, like his own children, changing their diapers, getting them a bedtime glass of water, and wiping their noses.

All in all, Ed Foley thought, it was one hell of a game. And it kept him awake at night. Could the Russians tell that? Were there cameras in the walls? Wouldn't *that* be perverse? But American technology wasn't that advanced, so he was damned sure the Russians' wasn't. Probably. Foley reminded himself that there were smart people here, and a lot of them worked for KGB.

What amazed him was that his wife slept the sleep of the just, lying there next to him. She really was a better field spook than he was. She took to it like a seal to ocean water, chasing after her fish. But what about the sharks? He supposed it was normal for a man to worry about his wife, however capable she might be as a spook. That was just how men were programmed, as she was programmed to be a mother. Mary Pat looked like an angel to him in the dim light, the cute little sleep-smile she had, and the way her baby-fine blond hair always got messed up the instant she lay down on the pillow. To the Russians, she was a potential spy, but to Edward Foley she was his beloved wife, workmate, and mother of his child. It was so strange that people could be so many different things, depending on who looked at them, and yet all were true. With that philosophical thought—Christ, he *did* need sleep!—Ed Foley closed his eyes.

"SO, WHAT DID HE SAY?" Bob Ritter asked.

"He's not terribly pleased," Judge Moore replied, to nobody's surprise. "But he understands that there's not a hell of a lot we can do about it. He'll probably make a speech next week about the nobility of the workingman, especially the unionized sort."

"Good," Ritter grunted. "Let him tell the air-traffic controllers." The DDO was the master of the cheap shot, though he had the good sense not to say such things in the wrong company.

"Where's the speech?" the DDI asked.

"Chicago, next week. There's a large ethnic Polish population there," Moore explained. "He'll talk about the shipyard workers, of course, and point out that he once headed his own union. I haven't seen the speech yet, but I expect it

will be mainly vanilla, with a few chocolate chips tossed in."

"And the papers will say that he's courting the blue-collar vote," Jim Greer observed. Sophisticated as they purported to be, the newspapers didn't catch on to much until you presented it to them with french fries and ketchup. They were masters of political discourse, but they didn't know shit about how the real game was played until they were briefed-in, preferably with single-syllable words. "Will our Russian friends notice?"

"Perhaps. They have good people reading the tea leaves at the U.S.-Canada Institute. Maybe someone will drop a word en passant in a casual conversation over at Foggy Bottom that we look upon the Polish situation with some small degree of concern, since we have so many American citizens of Polish ancestry. Can't take it much further than that at the moment," Moore explained.

"So, we're concerned about Poland, but not the Pope right now," Ritter clarified the situation.

"We don't know about that yet, do we?" the DCI asked rhetorically.

"Won't they wonder why the Pope didn't let us in on his threat . . . ?"

"Probably not. The wording of the letter suggests a private communication."

"Not so private that Warsaw didn't forward it to Moscow," Ritter objected.

"As my wife likes to say, that's different," Moore pointed out.

"You know, Arthur, sometimes this wheels-inside-of-other-wheels stuff gives me a headache," Greer observed.

"The game has rules, James."

"So does boxing, but those are a lot more straightforward."

" 'Protect yourself at all times,' " Ritter pointed out. "That's Rule Number One here, too. Well, we don't have any specific warnings yet, do we?" Heads shook wordlessly. No, they didn't. "What else did he say, Arthur?"

"He wants us to find out if there's any danger to His Holiness. If anything happens to him, our President is going to be seriously pissed."

"Along with a billion or so Catholics," Greer agreed.

"You suppose the Russians might contract the Northern Irish Protestants to do the hit?" Ritter asked, with a nasty smile. "They don't like him either, remember. Something for Basil to look into."

"Robert, that's a little too far off the wall, I think," Greer analyzed. "They hate communism almost as much as Catholicism, anyway."

"Andropov doesn't think that far outside the box," Moore decided. "Nobody over there does. If he decides to take the Pope out, he'll use his own assets and try to be clever about it. That's how we'll know if, God forbid, it goes that far. And if it looks as if he's leaning that way, we'll have to dissuade him from that notion."

"It won't get that far. The Politburo is too circumspect," said the DDI. "And it's too unsubtle for them. It's not the sort of thing a chess player does, and chess is still their national game."

"Tell that to Leon Trotsky," Ritter said sharply.

"That was personal. Stalin wanted to eat his liver with onions and gravy," Greer replied. "That was pure personal hatred, and it achieved nothing on the political level."

"Not the way Uncle Joe looked at it. He was genuinely afraid of Trotsky—"

"No, he wasn't. Okay, you can say he was a paranoid bastard, but even he knew the difference between paranoia and genuine fear." Greer knew that statement was a mistake the moment the words escaped his lips. He covered his tracks: "And even if he was afraid of the old goat, the current crop isn't like that. They lack Stalin's paranoia but, more to the point, they lack his decisiveness."

"Jim, you're wrong. The Warsaw Letter is a potentially dangerous threat to their political stability, and they *will* take that seriously."

"Robert, I didn't know you were that religious," Moore joked.

"I'm not, and neither are they, but they will be worried about this. I think they will be worried a lot. Enough to take direct action? That I'm not sure of, but they will damned well think about it."

"That remains to be seen," Moore countered.

"Arthur, that is my assessment," the DDO shot back, and with the A-word, it became serious, at least within the cloisters of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"What changed your mind so quickly, Bob?" the Judge asked.

"The more I think about it, from their point of view, the more serious it starts to look."

"You planning anything?"

That made Ritter a little uneasy. "It's a little early to hit the Foleys with a major tasking, but I am going to send them a heads-up, at least to get them thinking about it."

This was an operational question, on which the others typically deferred to Bob Ritter and his field-spook instincts. Taking information from an agent was often simpler and more routine than getting instructions *to* an agent. Since it was assumed that every employee of the Moscow embassy was followed on a regular or irregular basis, it was dangerous to make them do something that looked spookish. This was especially true for the Foleys—they were so new that they would be tightly covered. Ritter didn't want them blown, for the usual reasons and for one other: His selection of this husband/wife team had been a daring play, and if it didn't work, it would come back at him. A high-stakes poker player, Ritter didn't like losing his chips any more than the next man. He had very high hopes for the Foleys. He didn't want their potential blown two weeks into their assignment in Moscow.

The other two didn't comment, which allowed Ritter to proceed, running his shop as he saw fit.

"You know," Moore observed, with a lean-back into his chair, "here we are, the best and brightest, the best-informed members of this presidential administration, and we don't know beans about a subject that may turn out to be of great importance."

"True, Arthur," Greer agreed. "But we don't know with considerable authority. That's more than anybody else can say, isn't it?"

"Just what I needed to hear, James." It meant that those outside this building were free to pontificate, but that these three men were not. No, they had to be cautious in everything they said, because people tended to view their opinions as facts—which, you learned up here on the Seventh Floor, they most certainly were not. If they were that good, they'd be doing something more profitable with their lives, like picking stocks.

RYAN SETTLED BACK into his easy chair with a copy of the *Financial Times.* Most people preferred to read it in the morning, but not Jack. Mornings were for general news, to prepare him for the workday at Century House—back home, he'd listened to news radio during the hour-or-so drive, since the intelligence business so often tracked the news. Here and now, he could relax with the financial stuff. This British paper wasn't quite the same as *The Wall Street Journal,* but the different twist it put on things was interesting—it gave him a new slant on abstract problems, to which he could then apply his American-trained expertise. Besides, it helped to keep current. There were bound to be financial opportunities out here, waiting for people to harvest them. Finding a few would make this whole European adventure worth the time. He still regarded his CIA sojourn as a side trip in life, whose ultimate destination was too far off in the haze. He'd play his cards one at a time.

"Dad called today," Cathy said, perusing her medical journal. This was *The New England Journal of Medicine,* one of the six she subscribed to.

"What did Joe want?"

"Just asked how we were doing, how the kids are, that sort of thing," Cathy responded.

Didn't waste any words about me, did he? Ryan didn't bother asking. Joe Muller, senior VP of Merrill Lynch, didn't approve of the way his son-in-law had left the trading business, after having had the bad grace to run off with his own daughter, first to teach, and then to play fox-and-hounds with spies and other government employees. Joe didn't much care for the government and its minions—he deemed them unproductive takers of what he and others made. Jack was sympathetic, but someone had to deal with the tigers of the world, and one of those somebodies was John Patrick Ryan. Ryan liked money as much as the next guy, but to him it was a tool, not an end in itself. It was like a good car—it could take you to nice places but, once there, you didn't sleep in the car. Joe didn't see things that way and didn't even try to understand those who thought otherwise. On the other hand, he did love his daughter, and he had never hassled her about becoming a surgeon. Perhaps he figured taking care of sick people was okay for girls, but making money was man's work.

"That's nice, honey," Ryan said from behind the *FT.* The Japanese economy was starting to look shaky to Ryan, though not to the paper's editorial board. Well, they'd been wrong before.

IT WAS A sleepless night in Moscow. Yuriy Andropov had smoked more than his usual complement of Marlboros, but had held himself to only one vodka after he'd gotten home from a diplomatic reception for the ambassador from Spain—a total waste of his time. Spain had joined NATO, and its counterintelligence service was depressingly effective at identifying his

attempts to get a penetration agent into their government. He'd probably be better advised to try the king's court. Courtiers were notoriously talkative, after all, and the elected government would probably keep the newly restored monarch informed, for no other reason than their desire to suck up to him. So he had drunk the wine, nibbled on the finger food, and chattered on with the usual small talk. *Yes, it has been a fine summer, hasn't it?* Sometimes he wondered if his elevation to the Politburo was worth the demands on his time. He hardly ever had time to read anymore—just his work and his diplomatic/political duties, which were endless. Now he knew what it must be like to be a woman, Andropov thought. No wonder they all nagged and groused so much at their men.

But the thought that never left his mind was the Warsaw Letter. *If the government of Warsaw persists in its unreasonable repression of the people, I will be compelled to resign the papacy and return to be with my people in their time of trouble.* That bastard! Threatening the peace of the world. Had the Americans put him up to it? None of his field officers had turned up anything like that, but one could never be sure. The American President was clearly no friend to his country, he was always looking for ways to sting Moscow—the nerve of that intellectual nonentity, saying that the Soviet Union was the center of evil in the world! That fucking *actor* saying such things! Even the howls of protest from the American news media and academia hadn't lessened the sting. Europeans had picked up on it—worst of all, the *Eastern* European intelligentsia had seized on it, which had caused all manner of problems for his subordinate counterintelligence throughout the Warsaw Pact. As if they weren't busy enough already, Yuriy Vladimirovich grumbled, as he pulled another cigarette out of the red-and-white box and lit it with a match. He didn't even listen to the music that was playing, as his brain turned the information over and over in his head.

Warsaw *had to* clamp down on those counterrevolutionary trouble-makers in Danzig—strangely, Andropov always thought of that port city by the old German name—lest its government come completely unglued. Moscow had told them to sort things out in the most direct terms, and the Poles knew how to follow orders. The presence of Soviet Army tanks on their soil would help them understand what was necessary and what was not. If this Polish "Solidarity" rubbish went much further, the infection would begin to spread—west to Germany, south to Czechoslovakia . . . and east to the Soviet Union? They couldn't allow that.

On the other hand, if the Polish government could suppress it, then things would quiet down again. *Until the next time?* Andropov wondered.

Had his outlook been just a little broader, he might have grasped the fundamental problem. As a Politburo member, he was insulated from the more unpleasant aspects of life in his country. He lacked for nothing. Good food was no farther away than his telephone. His lavish apartment was well furnished, outfitted with German appliances. The furniture was comfortable. The elevator in his building was *never* out of service. He had a driver to take him to and from the office. He had a protective detail to make sure that he was never troubled by street hooligans. He was as protected as Nikolay II had been and, like all men, he assumed that his living conditions were normal, even though

intellectually he knew that they were anything but. The people outside his windows had food to eat, TV and films to watch, sports teams to cheer for, and the chance to own an automobile, didn't they? In return for giving them all those things, he enjoyed a somewhat better lifestyle. That was entirely reasonable, wasn't it? Didn't he work harder than they all did? What the hell *else* did those people want?

And now this Polish priest was trying to upset the entire thing.

And he just might do it, too, Andropov thought. Stalin had once famously asked how many divisions the Pope had at his command, but even he must have known that not all the power in the world grew out of the barrel of a gun.

If Karol *did* resign the papacy, then what? He'd try to come back to Poland. Might the Poles keep him out—revoke his citizenship, for example? No, somehow he'd manage to get back into Poland. Andropov and the Poles had their agents inside the church, of course, but such things only went so far. To what extent did the church have his agencies infiltrated? There was no telling. So no, any attempt to keep him out of Poland was probably doomed to failure, and, once attempted, if the Pope did get into Poland, *that* would be an epic disaster.

They could try diplomatic contacts. The right Foreign Ministry official could fly to Rome and meet clandestinely with Karol and try to dissuade him from following through on his threat. But what cards would he be able to play? An overt threat on his life . . . that would not work. That sort of challenge would be an invitation to martyrdom and sainthood, which likely would only encourage him to make the trip. For a believer, it would be an invitation to Heaven, one sent by the devil himself, and he'd pick up that gauntlet with alacrity. No, you could not threaten such a man with death. Even threatening his people with harsher measures would only encourage him further—he'd want to come home to protect them all the sooner, so as to appear more heroic to the world.

The sophistication of the threat he had sent to Warsaw was something that only appreciated with contemplation, Andropov admitted to himself. But there was one certain answer to it: Karol would have to find out for himself if there really was a god.

Is there a god? Andropov wondered. A question for the ages, answered by many people in many ways until Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin had settled the matter—at least so far as the Soviet Union was concerned. *No*, Yuriy Vladimirovich told himself, it was too late for him to reconsider his own answer to that question. *No, there is no God.* Life was here and now, and when it ended, it ended, and so what you did was the best you could, living your life as fully as possible, taking the fruit you could reach and building a ladder to seize those you could not.

But Karol was trying to change that equation. He was trying to shake the ladder—or perhaps the tree? That question was a little too deep.

Andropov turned in his chair and poured some vodka out of the decanter, then took a contemplative sip. Karol was trying to enforce his false beliefs on his own, trying to shake the very foundations of the Soviet Union and its far-flung alliances, trying to tell people that there was something better to believe

in. In that, he was trying to upset the work of generations, and he and his country could not permit it. But he could not forestall Karol's effort. He could not persuade him to turn away. No, Karol would have to be stopped in a manner that would forestall him fully and finally.

It would not be easy, and it would not be entirely safe. But doing nothing was even less safe, for him, for his colleagues, and for his country.

And so, Karol had to die. First, Andropov would have to come up with a plan. Then he'd have to take it to the Politburo. Before he proposed action, he'd have to have the action fully plotted out, with a guarantee of success. Well, that was what he had KGB for, wasn't it?

CHAPTER 5

GETTING CLOSE

AN EARLY RISER, Yuriy Vladimirovich was showered, shaved, dressed, and eating his breakfast before seven in the morning. For him it was bacon, three scrambled eggs, and thickly cut Russian bread with Danish butter. The coffee was German in origin, just like the kitchen appliances his apartment boasted. He had the morning *Pravda,* plus selected cuttings from Western newspapers, translated by KGB linguists, and some briefing material prepared in the early hours of the morning at The Centre and hand-delivered to his flat every morning at six. There was nothing really important today, he saw, lighting his third cigarette and drinking his second cup of coffee. All routine. The American President hadn't rattled his sabre the night before, which was an agreeable surprise. Perhaps he'd dozed off in front of the TV, as Brezhnev often did.

How much longer would Leonid continue to head the Politburo? Andropov wondered. Clearly the man would not retire. If he did, his children would suffer, and they enjoyed being the royal family of the Soviet Union too much to let their father do that. Corruption was never a pretty thing. Andropov did not suffer from it himself—indeed, that was one of his core beliefs. That was why the current situation was so frustrating. He would—he *had to*—save his country from the chaos into which it was falling. *If I live long enough, and Brezhnev dies soon enough, that is.* Leonid Ilyich was clearly in failing health. He'd managed to stop smoking—at the age of seventy-six, which, Yuriy Vladimirovich admitted to himself, was fairly impressive—but the man was in his dotage. His mind wandered. He had trouble remembering things. He occasionally dozed off at important meetings, to the dismay of his associates. But his grasp of power was a death-grip. He'd engineered the downfall of Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev through a masterful series of political

maneuvers, and *nobody* in Moscow forgot that tidbit of political history—a trick like that was unlikely to work on someone who'd engineered it himself. No one had even suggested to Leonid that he might wish to slow down—if not actually step slightly aside, then at least let others undertake some of his more administrative duties and allow him to concentrate his abilities on the really major questions. The American President was not all that much younger than Brezhnev, but he had lived a healthier life, or perhaps came from hardier peasant stock.

In his reflective moments, it struck Andropov as strange that he objected to this sort of corruption. He saw it precisely as such, but only rarely asked himself *why* he saw it so. In those moments, he actually did fall back on his Marxist beliefs, the very ones he'd discarded years ago, because even he had to fall back on some sort of ethos, and that was all he had. Stranger still, it was an area in which Marx and Christianity actually overlapped in their beliefs. Must have been an accident. After all, Karl Marx had been a Jew, not a Christian, and whatever religion he rejected or embraced ought to have been his own, not one foreign to him and his heritage. The KGB Chairman dismissed the entire line of thought with an annoyed shake of the head. He had enough on his professional plate, even as he finished what lay before him. There was a discreet knock on the door.

"Come," Andropov called, knowing who it was by the sound.

"Your car is ready, Comrade Chairman," the head of the security detail announced.

"Thank you, Vladimir Stepanovich." He rose from the table, lifted his suit jacket, and shrugged into it for the trip to work.

This was a routine fourteen-minute drive through central Moscow. His ZIL automobile was entirely handmade, actually similar in appearance to the American Checker taxicab. It ran straight down the center of the expansive avenues, in a broad lane kept clear by officers of the Moscow Militia exclusively for senior political officials. They stood out there all day in the heat of summer and the punishing cold of winter, one cop every three blocks or so, making sure no one obstructed the way for longer than it took to make a crossing turn. It made the drive to work as convenient as taking a helicopter, and far easier on the nerves.

Moscow Centre, as KGB was known throughout the world of intelligence, was located in the former home office of the Rossiya Insurance Company, and a mighty company it must have been to build such an edifice. Andropov's car pulled through the gate into the inner courtyard, right up to the bronze doors, where his car door was yanked open, and he alit to the official salutes from uniformed Eighth Directorate men. Inside, he walked to the elevator, which was held for him, of course, and then rode to the top floor. His detail examined his face to ascertain his mood—as such men did all over the world—and, as usual, saw nothing: He guarded his feelings as closely as a professional cardplayer. On the top floor was a walk of perhaps fifteen meters to his secretary's door. That was because Andropov's office had no door of its own. Instead, there was a clothes dresser in the anteroom, and the entrance to his office lay within that. This chicanery dated back to Lavrenti Beria, Stalin's own chief of clandestine services, who'd had a large and hardly unreasonable

fear of assassination and had come up with this security measure, lest a commando team reach all the way into NKVD headquarters. Andropov found it theatrical, but it was something of a KGB tradition and, in its way, roundly entertaining for visitors—it had been around too long to be a secret from anyone able to get this far, in any case.

His schedule gave him fifteen free minutes at the beginning of the day to review the papers on his desk before the daily briefings began, followed by meetings that were scheduled days or even weeks in advance. Today it was almost all internal-security matters, though someone from the Party Secretariat was scheduled before lunch to discuss strictly political business. *Oh, yes, that thing in Kiev*, he remembered. Soon after becoming KGB Chairman, he'd found that Party affairs paled in importance next to the agreeably broad canvas he had here at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square. The charter of KGB, insofar as it had such a limitation, was to be the "Sword and Shield" of the Party. Hence its primary mission, theoretically, was to keep an eye on Soviet citizens who might not be as enthusiastic as they ought toward their own country's government. Those Helsinki Watch people were becoming a major annoyance. The USSR had made an agreement in the Finnish capital seven years before, regarding the monitoring of human rights, and they evidently took it seriously. Worse, they had attracted the on-and-off attention of the Western news media. Reporters could be a huge nuisance, and you couldn't rough them up the way you used to—not all of them, anyway. The capitalist world treated them like demigods, and expected everyone else to do the same, when everyone knew they were all spies of some kind. It was amusing to see how the American government overtly forbade its intelligence services from adopting journalistic covers. Every other spy service in the world did it. As if the Americans would follow their own lily-white laws, which had been passed only to make other countries feel good about having *The New York Times* snooping around their countries. It wasn't even worth a dismissive snort. Preposterous. *All* foreign visitors in the Soviet Union were spies. Everyone knew it, and that was why his Second Chief Directorate, whose job was counterespionage, was so large a part of the KGB.

Well, the problem that had cost him an hour of sleep the night before wasn't all that different, was it? Not when you got down to it. Yuriy Vladimirovich punched a button on his intercom.

"Yes, Comrade Chairman," his secretary—a man, of course—answered immediately.

"Send Aleksey Nikolay'ch in to see me."

"At once, comrade." It took four minutes by Andropov's desk clock.

"Yes, Comrade Chairman." Aleksey Nikolayevich Rozhdestvenskiy was a senior colonel in the First Chief—"Foreign"—Directorate, a very experienced field officer who'd served extensively in Western Europe, though never in the Western Hemisphere. A gifted field officer and runner-of-agents, he'd been bumped up to The Centre for his street-smart expertise and to act more or less as an in-house expert for Andropov to consult when he needed information on field operations. Not tall, not especially handsome, he was the sort of man who could turn invisible on any city street in the world, which partly explained his success in the field.

"Aleksey, I have a theoretical problem. You've worked in Italy, as I recall."

"For three years in Station Rome, Comrade Chairman, yes, under Colonel Goderenko. He's still there, as *rezident.*"

"A good man?" Andropov asked.

He gave an emphatic nod of the head. "A fine senior officer, yes, Comrade Chairman. He runs a good station. I learned much from him."

"How well does he know the Vatican?"

That made Rozhdestvenskiy blink. "There is not much to be learned there. We do have some contacts, yes, but it has never been a matter of great emphasis. The Catholic Church is a difficult target to infiltrate, for the obvious reasons."

"What about through the Orthodox Church?" Andropov asked.

"There are some contacts there, yes, and we have had some feedback, but rarely anything of value. More along the line of gossip and, even then, nothing we cannot get through other channels."

"How good is security around the Pope?"

"Physical security?" Rozhdestvenskiy asked, wondering where this was going.

"Precisely," the Chairman confirmed.

Rozhdestvenskiy felt his blood temperature drop a few degrees. "Comrade Chairman, the Pope does have some protection about him, mainly of the passive sort. His bodyguards are Swiss, in plainclothes—that comic-opera group that parades around in striped jumpsuits is mostly for show. They occasionally have to grab a believer overcome by his proximity to the head priest, that sort of thing. I am not even sure if they carry weapons, though I must assume that they do."

"Very well. I want to know how difficult it might be to get physically close to the Pope. Do you have any ideas?"

Ah, Rozhdestvenskiy thought. "Personal knowledge? No, comrade. I visited Vatican City several times when I was in Rome. The art collection there, as you may imagine, is impressive, and my wife is interested in such things. I took her there perhaps half a dozen times. The area crawls with priests and nuns. I confess I never looked about for security provisions, but nothing was readily apparent, aside from what you'd expect—measures against thefts and vandalism, that sort of thing. There are the usual museum guards, whose main function seems to be to tell people where the lavatories are.

"The Pope lives in the Papal Apartments, which adjoin the church of St. Peter's. I have never been there. It is not the sort of place in which I had any professional interest. I know our ambassador is there occasionally for diplomatic functions, but I was not invited—my posting was that of Assistant Commercial Attaché, you see, Comrade Chairman, and I was too junior," Rozhdestvenskiy went on. "You say you wish to know about getting close to the Pope. I presume by that you mean . . . ?"

"Five meters, closer if possible, but certainly five meters."

Pistol range, Rozhdestvenskiy grasped at once. "I don't know enough myself. That would be a job for Colonel Goderenko and his people. The Pope gives audiences for the faithful. How you get into those, I do not know. He also appears in public for various purposes. I do not know how such things are

scheduled."

"Let's find out," Andropov suggested lightly. "Report directly to me. Do not discuss this with anyone else."

"Yes, Comrade Chairman," the colonel said, coming to attention with the receipt of the order. "The priority?"

"Immediate," Andropov replied, in the most casual of voices.

"I shall see to it myself, Comrade Chairman," Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy promised. His face revealed nothing of his feelings. Indeed, he had few of those. KGB officers were not trained to have much in the way of scruples, at least outside politics, in which they were supposed to have a great deal of faith. Orders from above carried the force of Divine Will. Aleksey Nikolay'ch's only concerns at the moment were centered on the potential political fallout to be had from dropping this particular nuclear device. Rome was more than a thousand kilometers from Moscow, but that would probably not be far enough. However, political questions were not his to ask, and he scrubbed the matter from his mind—for the moment, anyway. While he did so, the intercom box on the Chairman's desk buzzed. Andropov flipped the top-right switch.

"Yes?"

"Your first appointment is here, Comrade Chairman." His secretary announced.

"How long will this take, Aleksey, do you suppose?"

"Several days, probably. You want an immediate assessment, I assume, followed by what sort of specific data?"

"Correct. For the moment, just a general assessment," Yuriy Vladimirovich said. "We're not planning any sort of operation just yet."

"By your order, Comrade Chairman. I'll go down to the communications center directly."

"Excellent. Thank you, Aleksey."

"I serve the Soviet Union" was the automatic reply. Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy came to attention again, then left-faced for the door. He had to duck his head going out into the secretary's room, as most men did, and from there he turned right and out into the corridor.

So, how does *one get close to the Pope, this Polish priest?* Rozhdestvenskiy wondered. It was, at least, an interesting theoretical question. KGB abounded with theoreticians and academics who examined everything, from how to assassinate chiefs of foreign governments—useful in the event that a major war was about to be undertaken—to the best way to steal and interpret medical records from hospitals. The broad scope of KGB field operations knew few limitations.

One could not have guessed much from the colonel's face as he walked to the elevator bank. He pushed the button and waited for forty seconds until the doors opened.

"Basement," he told the operator. The elevators all had operators. Elevators were too good a potential dead-drop location to leave unattended. Even then, the operators were trained to look for brush-passes. Nobody was trusted in this building. There were too many secrets to be had. If there were one single place in the Soviet Union in which an enemy would want to place a

penetration agent, this building was it, and so everyone looked at everyone else in some sort of black game, always watching, measuring every conversation for an inner meaning. Men made friends here as they did in every walk of life. They chatted about their wives and children, about sports and weather, about whether to buy a car or not, about getting a dacha in the country for the lucky ones with seniority. But rarely did men chat about work, except with their immediate workmates, and then only in conference rooms where such things were supposed to be discussed. It never occurred to Rozhdestvenskiy that these institutional restrictions reduced productivity and might actually hinder the efficiency of his agency. That circumscription was just part of the institutional religion of the Committee for State Security.

He had to pass a security checkpoint to enter the communications room. The watch NCO checked his photo pass and waved him through without much in the way of acknowledgment.

Rozhdestvenskiy had been here before, of course, often enough that he was known by face and name to the senior operators, and he knew them. The desks were arranged with a lot of space between them, and the background noise of the teleprinters prevented ordinary conversation from being overheard at a distance of more than three or four meters, even by the most sensitive ears. This, and nearly everything else about the arrangement of the room, had evolved over the years until the security provisions were as close to perfect as anyone could imagine, though that didn't keep the efficiency experts on the third floor from wandering about with their scowls, always looking for something wrong. He walked to the desk of the senior communications watch officer.

"Oleg Ivanovich," he said in greeting.

Zaitzev looked up to see his fifth visitor of the young day, the fifth visitor and the fifth *interruption.* It was often a curse being the senior watch officer here, especially on the morning shift. The overnight watch was boring, but at least you could work in a straight line.

"Yes, Colonel, what can I do for you this morning?" he asked pleasantly, junior officer to senior.

"A special message to Station Rome, personal to the *rezident.* I think a one-time pad for this one. I'd prefer that you handle it yourself." *Instead of having a cipher clerk do the encryption,* he didn't say. This was somewhat unusual, and it pricked Zaitzev's interest. He would have to see it anyway. Eliminating the cipher clerk just halved the number of people that would see this particular message.

"Very well." Captain Zaitzev took up a pad and pencil. "Go on."

"Most Secret. IMMEDIATE AND URGENT. FROM MOSCOW CENTRE, OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN. TO COLONEL RUSLAN BORISSOVICH GODERENKO, *REZIDENT,* ROME. MESSAGE FOLLOWS: ASCERTAIN AND REPORT MEANS OF GETTING PHYSICALLY CLOSE TO THE POPE. ENDS."

"That's all?" Zaitzev asked, surprised. "And if he asks what that means? It's not very clear in its intent."

"Ruslan Borissovich will understand what it means," Rozhdestvenskiy assured him. He knew that Zaitzev wasn't asking anything he shouldn't. One-time cipher pads were a nuisance to use, and so messages sent that way were

supposed to be explicit in all details, lest the back-and-forth clarification messages compromise the communications links. As it was, this message would be telexed, and so was certain to be intercepted, and equally certain to be recognized by its formatting as a one-time-pad encipherment, hence a message of some importance. American and British code-breakers would probably attack it, and everyone was wary of them and their clever tricks. The West's damned intelligence agencies worked so closely together.

"If you say so, Comrade Colonel. I'll send it out within the hour." Zaitzev checked the wall clock to make sure he could do that. "It should be on his desk when he gets into his office."

It will take twenty minutes for Ruslan to decrypt it, Rozhdestvenskiy estimated. *Then will he query us about it, as Zaitzev suggests? Probably. Goderenko is a careful, thorough man—and politically astute. Even with Andropov's name at the top, Ruslan Borissovich will be curious enough to ask for a clarification.*

"If there is a reply, call me as soon as you have the clear text."

"You are the point of contact for this line?" Zaitzev asked, just to make sure he routed things correctly. After all, the message header, as this colonel had dictated it to him, said "Office of the Chairman."

"That is correct, Captain."

Zaitzev nodded, then handed the message blank to Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy for his signature/confirmation. Everything in KGB had to have a paper trail. Zaitzev looked down at the checklist. Message, originator, recipient, encryption method, point of contact . . . yes, he had everything, and all spaces were properly signed. He looked up. "Colonel, it will go out shortly. I will call you to confirm transmission time." He would also send a paper record upstairs for the permanent operations files. He made a final written notation and handed off the carbon copy.

"Here's the dispatch number. It will also be the operation-reference number until such time as you change it."

"Thank you, Captain." The colonel took his leave.

Oleg Ivanovich looked again at the wall clock. Rome was three hours behind Moscow time. Ten or fifteen minutes for the *rezident* to clear-text the message—the field people were so clumsy at such things, he knew—and then to think about it, and then . . . ? Zaitzev made a small wager with himself. The Rome *rezident* would send back a request for clarification. Sure as hell. The captain had been sending out messages and getting them back from this man for some years. Goderenko was a careful man who liked things clear. So he'd leave the Rome pad in his desk drawer in readiness for the return message. He counted: 209 characters, including blank spaces and punctuation. A pity they couldn't do this on one of those new American computers they were playing with upstairs. But there was no sense wishing for the moon. Zaitzev pulled out the cipher-pad book from his desk drawer and unnecessarily wrote down its number before walking to the west side of the capacious room. He knew nearly all of them by number, a product of his chess background, Zaitzev imagined.

"Pad one-one-five-eight-nine-zero," he told the clerk behind the metal screen, handing off the paper slip. The clerk, a man of fifty-seven long years, most of them here, walked a few meters to fetch the proper cipher book. It

was a loose-leaf binder, about ten centimeters across by twenty-five high, filled with punched paper pages, probably five hundred or more. The current page was marked with a plastic tag.

The pages looked like those in a telephone book, until you looked closely and saw that the letters didn't form names in any known language, except by random accident. There were on average two or three such occurrences per page. Outside Moscow, on the Outer Ring Road, was the headquarters of Zaitzev's own directorate, the Eighth, the part of KGB tasked with making and breaking codes and ciphers. On the roof of the building was a highly sensitive antenna which led to a teletype machine. The receiver that lay between the antenna and the teletype listened in on random atmospheric noise, and the teletype interpreted these "signals" as dot-dash letters, which the adjacent teletype machine duly printed up. In fact, several such machines were cross-connected in such a way that the randomness of the atmospheric noise was re-randomized into totally unpredictable gibberish. From that gibberish were made the one-time pads, which were supposed to be totally random transpositions that no mathematical formula could predict or, therefore, decrypt. The one-time-pad cipher was universally regarded as the most secure of encryption systems. That was important, since the Americans were the world leaders at cracking ciphers. Their "Venona" project had even compromised Soviet ciphers of the late 1940s and '50s, much to the discomfort of Zaitzev's parent agency. The most secure one-time pads were also the most cumbersome and inconvenient, even for experienced hands like Captain Zaitzev. But that couldn't be helped. And Andropov himself wanted to know how to get physically close to the Pope.

That's when it hit Zaitzev: *Physically close to the Pope.* But why would anyone want that? Surely Yuriy Vladimirovich didn't want anyone to hear his confession.

What was he being asked to transmit?

The Rome *rezident,* Goderenko, was a highly experienced field officer whose *rezidentura* operated many Italian and other nationals as agents for the KGB. He forwarded all manner of information, some overtly important, some merely amusing, though potentially useful in compromising otherwise important people with embarrassing foibles. Was it that only the important had such weaknesses, or did their positions merely allow them to entertain themselves in manners which all men dreamt about but few could indulge in? Whatever the answer, Rome would have to be a good city for it. *City of the Caesars,* Zaitzev thought, *it ought to be.* He thought of the travel and history books he'd read on the city and the era—classical history in the Soviet Union had some political commentary, but not all that much. The political spin applied to every single aspect of life was the most tiring intellectual feature of life in his country, often enough to drive a man to drink—which, in the USSR, wasn't all that distant a drive, of course. Time to go back to work. He took a cipher wheel from his top drawer. It was like a phone dial—you set the letter to be transposed at the top of one dial, then rotated the other to the letter indicated on the page of the transposition pad. In this case, he was working from the beginning of the twelfth line of page 284. That reference would be included in the first line of the transmission so that the recipient would know how to get

clear text from the transmitted gibberish.

It was laborious despite the use of the cipher wheel. He had to set the clear-text letter he'd written in the message form, then dial to the transposition letter on the printed page of the cipher-pad book, and write down each individual result. Each operation required him to set his pencil down, dial, pick up the pencil again, recheck his results—twice in his case—and begin again. (The cipher clerks, who did nothing else, worked two-handed, a skill Zaitzev had not acquired.) It was beyond tedious, hardly the sort of work designed for someone educated in mathematics. Like checking spelling tests in a primary school, Zaitzev grumbled to himself. It took more than six minutes to get it right. It would have taken less time had he been allowed to have a helper in the process, but that would have violated the rules, and here the rules were adamantine.

Then, with the task done, he had to repeat everything to make sure he hadn't transmitted any garbles, because garbles screwed everything up on both ends of the system, and this way, if they happened, he could blame them on the teletype operators—which everyone did anyway. Another four and a half minutes confirmed that he hadn't made any errors. Good.

Zaitzev rose and walked to the other side of the room, through the door into the transmission room. The noise there was enough to drive a man mad. The teletypes were of an old design—actually, one had been stolen from Germany in the 1930s—and sounded like machine guns, though without the banging noise of exploding cartridges. In front of each machine was a uniformed typist—they were all men, each sitting erect like a statue, his hands seemingly affixed to the keyboard in front of him. They all had ear protection, lest the noise in the room land them in a psychiatric hospital. Zaitzev walked his message form to the room supervisor, who took the sheet without a word—he wore ear-protectors, too—and walked it to the leftmost typist in the back row. There, the supervisor clipped it to a vertical board over the keyboard. At the top of the form was the identifier for the destination. The typist dialed the proper number, then waited for the warbling sound of the teleprinter at the other end—it had been designed to get past the ear plugs, and it also lit up a yellow light on the teletype machine. He then typed in the gibberish.

How they did that without going mad, Zaitzev did not understand. The human mind craved patterns and good sense, but typing TKALNNETPTN required robotic attention to detail and a total denial of humanity. Some said that the typists were all expert pianists, but that couldn't be true, Zaitzev was sure. Even the most discordant piano piece had *some* unifying harmony to it. But not a one-time-pad cipher.

The typist looked up after just a few seconds: "Transmission complete, comrade." Zaitzev nodded and walked back to the supervisor's desk.

"If anything comes in with this operation-reference number, bring it to me immediately."

"Yes, Comrade Captain," the supervisor acknowledged, making a notation on his set of "hot" numbers.

With that done, Zaitzev headed back for his desk, where the work pile was already quite high enough, and only marginally less mind-numbing than that of the robots in the next room. Perhaps that was why something started

whispering at the back of his head: *physically close to the Pope . . . why?*

THE ALARM WENT OFF at a quarter of six. That was an uncivilized hour. At home, Ryan told himself, it was quarter of *one,* but that thought did not bear reflection. He flipped the covers clear off the bed and rose, staggering to the bathroom. There was still a lot to get used to here. The toilets flushed pretty much the same, but the sink . . . *Why the hell*, Ryan wondered, *did you need two spouts to put water in the sink, one for hot and one for cold?* At home you just held your hand under the damned spout, but here the water had to mix up in the sink first, and that slowed you down. The first morning look in the mirror was difficult. *Do I really look like that?* he always wondered on the way back into the bedroom to pat his wife on the rump.

"It's time, honey."

An oddly feminine grumble. "Yeah. I know."

"Want me to get Little Jack?"

"Let him sleep," Cathy advised. The little guy hadn't felt like sleeping the previous evening. So now, of course, he wouldn't feel like waking up.

" 'Kay." Jack headed to the kitchen. The coffee machine only needed its button punched, and Ryan was able to handle that task. Just before flying over, he'd seen a new American company IPO. It sold premium coffee, and since Jack had always been something of a coffee snob, he'd invested $100,000 and gotten himself some of their product—as fine a country as England might be, it was not a place you visited for the coffee. At least he could get Maxwell House from the Air Force, and perhaps he'd get this new Starbucks outfit to ship him some of their brew. One more mental note to make. Next he wondered what Cathy might make for breakfast. Surgeon or not, she regarded the kitchen as her domain. Her husband was allowed to make sandwiches and fix drinks, but that was about it. That suited Jack, for whom a stove was terra incognita. The stove here was gas, like his mom had used, but with a different trademark. He stumbled to the front door, hoping to find a newspaper.

It was there. Ryan had signed up for the *Times,* to go with the *International Herald Tribune* he picked up at the train station in London. Finally, he switched on the TV. Remarkably, there was a start-up version of cable TV in this subdivision, and, mirabile dictu, it had the new American CNN news service—just in time for baseball scores. So England was civilized after all. The Orioles had knocked off Cleveland the previous night, 5-4, in eleven innings. The ballplayers were doubtless in bed right now, sleeping off the postgame beers they'd quaffed at their hotel bar. What a pleasant thought that was. They had a good eight hours of sack time ahead of them. At the turn of the hour, the CNN night crew in Atlanta summarized the previous day's events. Nothing overly remarkable. The economy was still a little fluky. The Dow Jones had snapped back nicely, but the unemployment rate always lagged behind, and so did working-class voters. Well, that was democracy for you. Ryan had to remind himself that his view of the economy was probably different from that of the guys who made the steel and assembled the Chevys.

His dad had been a union member, albeit a police lieutenant and part of management rather than labor, and his dad had voted Democrat most of the time. Ryan hadn't registered in either party, opting instead to be an independent. It limited the junk mail you got, and who cared about primaries, anyway?

"Morning, Jack," Cathy said, entering the kitchen in her pink housecoat. It was shabby, which was surprising, since his wife was always a fastidious dresser. He hadn't asked, but supposed it had sentimental significance.

"Hey, babe." Jack rose to give his wife the first kiss of the day, accompanied by a rather limp hug. "Paper?"

"No. I'll save it for the train." She pulled open the refrigerator door and pulled some things out. Jack didn't look.

"Having coffee this morning?"

"Sure. I don't have any procedures scheduled." If she had a surgery scheduled, Cathy kept off the coffee, lest the caffeine give her hands a minor tremor. You couldn't have that when you were screwing an eyeball back together. No, today was get-acquainted day with Professor Byrd. Bernie Katz knew him and called him a friend, which boded well, and besides, Cathy was about as good as eye surgeons got, and there was no reason for her to be the least bit concerned about a new hospital and a new boss. Still, such concerns were human, though Cathy was too macho to let it show. "How does bacon and eggs grab you?" she asked.

"I'm allowed to have some cholesterol?" her husband asked in surprise.

"Once a week," Mrs. Dr. Ryan replied, imperiously. Tomorrow she'd serve him oatmeal.

"Sounds good to me, babe," Ryan said, with some pleasure.

"I know you'll get something bad for you at the office anyway."

"Moi?"

"Yeah, croissant and butter, probably. They're made entirely out of butter anyway, you know."

"Bread without butter is like a shower without soap."

"Tell me that when you get your first heart attack."

"My last physical, my cholesterol was . . . what?"

"One fifty-two," Cathy answered, with an annoyed yawn.

"And that's pretty good?" her husband persisted.

"It's acceptable," she admitted. But hers had been one forty-six.

"Thank you, honey," Ryan acknowledged, turning to the op-ed page of the *Times.* The letters to the editor here were a positive hoot, and the quality of the writing throughout the papers was superior to anything he found in the American print media. Well, they had invented the language over here, Ryan figured, and fair was fair. The turn of phrase here was often as elegant as poetry, and occasionally too subtle for his American eye to appreciate. He'd pick it up, he figured.

The familiar sound and pleasant smell of frying bacon soon permeated the room. The coffee—tempered with milk instead of cream—was agreeable, and the news wasn't of the sort to ruin breakfast. Except for the ungodly time, things were not all that bad, and besides, the worst part of waking up was already behind him.

"Cathy?"

"Yeah, Jack?"

"Have I told you yet that I love you?"

She ostentatiously checked her watch. "You're a little late, but I'll write that off to the early hour."

"What's your day look like, honey?"

"Oh, meet the people, look around at how things are laid out. Meet my nurses especially. I hope I get good ones."

"Is that important?"

"Nothing screws surgery up worse than a clumsy scrub nurse. But the people at Hammersmith are supposed to be pretty good, and Bernie says that Professor Byrd is about the best guy they have over here. He teaches at Hammersmith and Moorefields. He and Bernie go back about twenty years. He's been to Hopkins a lot, but somehow I've never bumped into him. Over easy?" she asked.

"Please."

Then came the sound of cracking eggs. Like Jack, Cathy believed in a proper cast-iron skillet. Harder to clean, perhaps, but the eggs tasted a lot better that way. Finally came the sound of the toaster lever being depressed.

The sports page—it was called "sport" (singular) over here—told Jack everything he'd ever need to know about soccer, which wasn't much.

"How'd the Yankees do last night?" Cathy asked.

"Who cares?" her husband countered. He'd grown up with Brooks Robinson and Milt Pappas and the Orioles. His wife was a Yankees fan. It was hard on the marriage. Sure, Mickey Mantle had been a good ballplayer—probably loved his mother, too—but he'd played in pinstripes. And that was that. Ryan rose and fixed the coffee for his wife, handing it to her with a kiss.

"Thanks, honey." Cathy handed Jack his breakfast.

The eggs looked a little different, as though the chickens had eaten orange corn to make the yellows come out so bright. But they tasted just fine. Five satisfying minutes after that, Ryan headed for the shower to make room for his wife.

Ten minutes later, he was picking out a shirt—white cotton, button-down—striped tie, and his Marine Corps tie pin. At 6:40, there was a knock at the door.

"Good morning." It was Margaret van der Beek, the nanny/governess. She lived just a mile away and drove herself. Recommended from an agency vetted by the SIS, she was a South Africa native, the daughter of a minister, thin, pretty, and seemingly very nice. She carried a huge purse. Her hair was napalm-red, which hinted at Irish ancestry, but it was apparently strictly South African-Dutch. Her accent was different from those of most locals, but nonetheless pleasant to Jack's ear.

"Good morning, Miss Margaret." Ryan waved her into the house. "The kids are still asleep, but I expect them up at any moment."

"Little Jack sleeps well for five months."

"Maybe it's the jet lag," Ryan thought out loud, though Cathy had said that infants didn't suffer from it. Jack had trouble swallowing that. In any case, the little bastard—Cathy snarled at Jack whenever he said that—hadn't gone to

sleep until half past ten the previous night. That was harder on Cathy than on Jack. He could sleep through the noise. She couldn't.

"Almost time, honey," Jack called.

"I know, Jack," came the retort. The she appeared, carrying their son, with Sally following in her yellow bunny-rabbit sleeper.

"Hey, little girl." Ryan went over to lift his daughter for a hug and kiss.

Sally smiled back and rewarded her daddy with a ferocious hug. How children could wake up in such a good humor was a perverse mystery to him. Maybe it was some important bonding instinct, to make sure their parents looked after them, like when they smiled at mommy and daddy practically from their first moment. Clever little critters, babies.

"Jack, put a bottle on," Cathy said, heading with the little guy to the changing table.

"Roger that, doc," the intelligence analyst responded dutifully, doubling back into the kitchen for a bottle of the junk he'd mixed up the previous night —that *was* man's work, Cathy had made clear to him during Sally's infancy. Like moving furniture and taking out the garbage, the household tasks for which men were genetically prepared.

It was like cleaning a rifle to a soldier: unscrew the top, reverse the nipple, place bottle in pot with four to five inches of water, turn on stove, and wait a few minutes.

That would be Miss Margaret's task, however. Jack saw the taxi outside the window, just pulling onto the parking pad.

"Car's here, babe."

"Okay," was the resigned response. Cathy didn't like leaving her kids for work. Well, probably no mother did. Jack watched her head into the half-bath to wash her hands, then emerge to put on the suit coat that went with her gray outfit—even gray cloth-covered flat shoes. She wanted to make a good first impression. A kiss for Sally, and one for the little guy, and she headed for the door, which Jack held open for her.

The taxi was an ordinary Land Rover saloon car—only London required the classic English taxi for public livery, though some of the older ones found their way into the hinterland. Ryan had arranged the morning pickup the previous day. The driver was one Edward Beaverton, and he seemed awfully chipper for a man who had to work before 7:00 A.M.

"Howdy," Jack said. "Ed, this is my wife. She's the good-looking Dr. Ryan."

"Good morning, mum," the driver said. "You're a surgeon, I understand."

"That's right, ophthalmic—"

Her husband cut her off: "She cuts up eyeballs and sews them back together. You should watch, Eddie, it's fascinating to see how she does it."

The driver shuddered. "Thank you, sir, but, no, thank you."

"Jack just says that to make people throw up," Cathy told the driver. "Besides, he's too much of a wuss to come watch any real surgery."

"And properly so, mum. Much better to cause surgery than to attend it."

"Excuse me?"

"You're a former Marine?"

"That's right. And you?"

"I was in the Parachute Regiment. That's what they taught us: Better to

inflict harm on the other bloke than to suffer it yourself."

"Most Marines would agree with that one, pal," Ryan agreed with a chuckle.

"That's not what they taught us at Hopkins," Cathy sniffed.

IT WAS AN hour later in Rome. Colonel Goderenko, titularly the Second Secretary at the Soviet Embassy, had about two hours per day of diplomatic duties, but most of his time was taken up by his job as *rezident,* or Chief of Station for the KGB. It was a busy posting. Rome was a major information nexus for NATO, a city in which one could obtain all manner of political and military intelligence, and that was his main professional concern. He and his six full- and part-time officers ran a total of twenty-three agents—Italian (and one German) nationals who fed information to the Soviet Union for political or pecuniary reasons. It would have been better for him if their motivation was mainly ideological, but that was rapidly becoming a thing of the past. The *rezidentura* in Bonn had a better atmosphere in which to work. Germans were Germans, and many of them could be persuaded that helping out their co-linguists in the DDR was preferable to working with the Americans, British, and French who called themselves allies of the Fatherland. For Goderenko and his fellow Russians, Germans would never be allies, whatever politics they might claim to have, though the fig leaf of Marxism-Leninism could sometimes be a useful disguise.

In Italy, things were different. The lingering memory of Benito Mussolini was pretty well faded now, and the local true-believer communists were more interested in wine and pasta than revolutionary Marxism, except for the bandits of the Red Brigade—and they were dangerous hooligans rather than politically reliable operatives. Vicious dilettantes more than anything else, though not without their uses. He occasionally saw to their trips to Russia, where they studied political theory and, more to the point, learned proper fieldcraft skills that at least had some tactical use.

On his desk was a pile of overnight dispatches, topmost of which was a message flimsy from Moscow Centre. The header told him it was important, and the cipher book: 115890. This was in his office safe, in the credenza behind his desk. He had to turn in his swivel chair and half-kneel to dial in the combination to open the door, after first deactivating the electronic alarm that was wired to the dial. That took a few seconds. Atop the book was his cipher wheel. Goderenko cordially hated using one-time pads, but they were as much a part of his life as using the toilet. Distasteful, but necessary. Decryption of the dispatch took him ten minutes. Only when it was done did he grasp the actual message. *From the Chairman himself?* he thought. As with any mid-level government official across the world, it was like being called to the principal's office.

The Pope? Why the hell does Yuriy Vladimirovich care a rat's ass about getting close to the Pope? Then he thought for a second. *Oh, of course. It's not about the head of the Catholic Church. It's about Poland. You can take the Polack out of Poland, but you can't take Poland out of the Polack. It's political.* That made it important.

But it did not please Goderenko.

"ASCERTAIN AND REPORT MEANS OF GETTING PHYSICALLY CLOSE TO THE POPE," he read again. In the professional language of the KGB, that could only mean one thing.

Kill the Pope? Goderenko thought. That would be a political disaster. As Catholic as Italy was, the Italians were not a conspicuously religious people. *La dolce vita*, the sweet life—that was the religion of this country. The Italians were the most profoundly disorganized people in the world. How they had ever been allies to the Hitlerites boggled the imagination. For the Germans, everything was supposed to be *in Ordnung*, properly arranged, clean and ready for use at all times. About the only things the Italians kept in proper order were their kitchens and perhaps their wine cellars. Aside from that, everything was so casual here. To a Russian, coming to Rome was a culture shock, akin to being bayoneted in the chest. The Italians had no sense of discipline. You only had to observe their traffic to see that, and driving in it was what flying a fighter plane must be like.

But the Italians were all born with a sense of style and propriety. There were some things one could not do here. Italians had a collective sense of beauty that was difficult for any man to fault, and to violate that code could have the most serious of consequences. For one thing, it could compromise his intelligence sources. Mercenaries or not . . . Even mercenaries would not work against their very religion, would they? Every man had some scruples, even—no, he corrected himself, *especially*—here. So the political consequences of something like this potential mission could adversely affect the productivity of his *rezidentura* and would seriously impact recruitment.

So, what in hell do I do now? he asked himself. A senior colonel in the KGB's First Chief Directorate and a highly successful *rezident,* he had a certain degree of flexibility in his actions. He was also a member of a huge bureaucracy, and the easiest thing for him to do was what all bureaucrats did. He would delay, obfuscate, and obstruct.

There was some degree of skill required for this, but Ruslan Borissovich Goderenko knew all he needed to know about that.

CHAPTER 6

BUT NOT TOO CLOSE

NEW THINGS ARE ALWAYS INTERESTING, and that was true for surgeons, too. While Ryan read his paper, Cathy looked out the train window. It was another bright day, with a sky as blue as his wife's pretty eyes. For his part, Jack had the route pretty well memorized, and boredom invariably made him sleepy. He slumped in the corner of the seat and found his eyelids getting heavy.

"Jack, are you going to sleep? What if you miss the stop?"

"It's a terminal," her husband explained. "The train doesn't just stop there; it *ends* there. Besides, never stand up when you can sit down, and never sit down when you can lie down."

"Who ever told you that?"

"My gunny," Jack said, from behind closed eyes.

"Who?"

"Gunnery Sergeant Phillip Tate, United States Marine Corps. He ran my platoon for me until I got killed in that chopper crash—ran it after I left, too, I suppose." Ryan still sent him Christmas cards. Had Tate screwed up, that "killed" might not have been the limp joke he pretended it was. Tate and a Navy Hospital Corpsman Second Class named Michael Burns had stabilized Ryan's back, at the very least preventing a permanent crippling injury. Burns got a Christmas card, too.

About ten minutes to Victoria, Ryan rubbed his eyes and sat up straight.

"Welcome back," Cathy observed dryly.

"You'll be doing it by the middle of next week."

She snorted. "For an ex-Marine, you sure are lazy."

"Honey, if there's nothing to do, you might as well use the time productively."

"I do." She held up her copy of *The Lancet.*

"What have you been reading up on?"

"You wouldn't understand," she replied. It was true. Ryan's knowledge of biology was limited to the frog he'd disassembled in high school. Cathy had done that, too, but she'd probably put it together again and watched it hop back to its lily pad. She could also deal cards like a Vegas cardsharp, a talent that flat amazed her husband every time she demonstrated it. But she wasn't worth a damn with a pistol. Most physicians probably weren't, and here guns were regarded as unclean objects, even by the cops, some of whom were allowed to carry them. Funny country.

"How do I get to the hospital?" Cathy asked, as the train slowed for its last stop.

"Take a cab the first time. You can take the tube, too," Jack suggested. "It's a new city. Takes time to learn your way around."

"How's the neighborhood?" she asked. It came from growing up in New York and working in Baltimore's inner city, where you did well to keep your eyes open.

"Damned sight better than the one around Hopkins. You won't be seeing too much gunshot trauma in the ER. And the people are as nice as they can be. When they figure out that you're an American, they practically give you the joint."

"Well, they were nice to us in the grocery store yesterday," Cathy allowed. "But, you know, they don't have grape juice here."

"My God, no civilization at all!" Jack exclaimed. "So get Sally some of the local bitter."

"You moron!" she laughed. "Sally likes her grape juice, remember, and Hi-C cherry. All they have here is black-currant juice. I was afraid to buy it."

"Yeah, and she's going to learn to spell funny, too." Jack didn't worry about his little Sally. Kids were the most adaptable of creatures. Maybe she'd even learn the rules for cricket. If so, she could explain the incomprehensible game to her daddy.

"My God, *everybody* smokes here," Cathy observed as they pulled into Victoria Station.

"Honey, think of it as a future income source for all the docs."

"It's an awful and a *dumb* way to die."

"Yes, dear." Whenever Jack smoked a cigarette, there was hell to pay in the Ryan house. One more cost of being married to a doc. She was right, of course, and Jack knew it, but everyone was entitled to at least one vice. Except Cathy. If she had one, she concealed it with great skill. The train slowed to a halt, allowing them to stand and open the compartment door.

They stepped out into the arriving rush of office workers. *Just like Grand Central Terminal in New York*, Jack thought, *but not quite as crowded.* London had a lot of stations, laid out like the legs of an octopus. The platform was agreeably wide, and the rush of people politer than New York would ever be. Rush hour was rush hour everywhere, but the English city had a patina of gentility that was hard not to like. Even Cathy would soon be admiring it. Ryan led his wife to the outside, where a rank of cabs waited. He walked her to the first one in line.

"Hammersmith Hospital," he told the driver. Then he kissed his wife goodbye.

"See you tonight, Jack." She always had a smile for him.

"Have a good one, babe." And Ryan made his way to the other side of the building. Part of him hated the fact that Cathy had to work. His mom never had. His father, like all men of his generation, had figured that it was the man's job to put food on the table. Emmet Ryan had liked the fact that his son had married a physician, but his chauvinistic attitude about a woman's place had somehow or other carried over to his son despite the fact that Cathy made a lot more than Jack did, probably because ophthalmologists were more valuable to society than intelligence analysts. Or the marketplace thought so, anyway. Well, she couldn't do what he did, and he couldn't do what she did, and that was that.

At Century House, the uniformed security guard recognized him with a wave and a smile.

"Good morning, Sir John."

"Hey, Bert." Ryan slid his card into the slot. The light blinked green, and Jack transited the security gate. From there, it was just a few steps to the elevator.

Simon Harding was just arriving, too. The usual greeting: "Morning, Jack."

"Hey," Jack grunted in reply on the way to his desk. There was a manila envelope waiting for him. The cover tag said it had been messengered over from the U.S. Embassy in Grosvenor Square. He ripped the top open to see that it was the report from Hopkins on Mikhail Suslov. Jack flipped through the pages and saw something he'd forgotten. Bernie Katz, ever the thorough doc, had evaluated Suslov's diabetes as dangerously advanced, and predicted that his longevity was going to be limited.

"Here, Simon. Says here the head commie's sicker than he looks."

"Pity," Harding observed, taking it as he fumbled with his pipe. "He's not a very nice chap, you know."

"So I've heard."

Next in Ryan's pile were the morning briefing papers. They were labeled SECRET, which meant that the contents might not be in the newspapers for a day or two. It was interesting even so, because this document occasionally gave sources, and that sometimes told you if the information was good or not. Remarkably, not all the data received by the intelligence services was very reliable. A lot of it could be classified as gossip, because even important people inside the world's government loops indulged in it. They were jealous and backbiting sons-of-bitches, like anyone else. Especially in Washington. Perhaps even more so in Moscow? He asked Harding.

"Oh, yes, very much so. Their society depends so much on status, and the backstabbing can be—well, Jack, you could say that it's their national sport. I mean, we have it here as well, of course, but over there it can be remarkably vicious. Rather like it must have been in a medieval court, I imagine—people jockeying for position every bloody day. The infighting inside their major bureaucracies must be horrific."

"And how does that affect this sort of information?"

"I often think I should have read psychology at Oxford. We have a number

of psychiatrists on staff here—as I'm sure you do at Langley."

"Oh, yeah. I know a few of the pshrinks. Mainly in my directorate, but some in S and T, too. We're not as good at that as we ought to be."

"How so, Jack?"

Ryan stretched in his chair. "A couple of months ago, I was talking to one of Cathy's pals at Hopkins, his name's Solomon, neuropsychiatrist. You'd have to understand Sol. He's real smart—department chairman and all that. He doesn't believe much in putting his patients on the couch and talking to them. He thinks most mental illness comes from chemical imbalances in the brain. They nearly chopped him out of the profession for that but, twenty years later, they all realized that he was right. Anyway, Sol told me that most politicians are like movie stars. They surround themselves with sycophants and yes-men and people to whisper nice shit into their ears—and a lot of them start believing it, because they *want* to believe it. It's all a great big game to them, but a game where everything is process and damned little of it is product. They're not like real people. They don't do any real work, but they appear to. There's a line in *Advise and Consent:* Washington is a town where you deal with people not as they are, but as they are reputed to be. If that's true in Washington, then how much more must it be in Moscow? There, *everything* is politics. It's all symbols, right? So the infighting and backstabbing must really be wild there. I figure that has to affect us in two ways. First, it means that a lot of the data we get is skewed, because the sources of the data either don't know reality even when it jumps up and bites them on the ass, or they twist the data for their own ends as they process it and pass it on—whether consciously or unconsciously. Second, it means that even the people on the other side who need the data don't know good from bad, so even if we can figure it out, we can't predict what it means because they can't decide for themselves what the hell to do with it—*even if* they know what the hell it is in the first place. We here have to analyze faulty information that will probably be incorrectly implemented by the people to whom it's supposed to go. So, how the hell do we predict what they will do when they themselves don't know the right thing to do?"

That was worth a grin around the pipe stem. "Very good, Jack. You're starting to catch on. Very little they do makes any bloody sense, objectively speaking. However, it isn't all that hard to predict their behavior. You decide for yourself what the intelligent action is, and then reverse it. Works every time," Harding laughed.

"But the other thing Sol said that worries me is that people like that who have power in their hands can be dangerous sons-of-bitches. They don't know when to stop, and they don't know how to use their power intelligently. I guess that's how Afghanistan got started."

"Correct." Simon nodded seriously. "They are captured by their own ideological illusions, and they can't see their way clear of it. And the real problem is, they *do* control a bloody great lot of power."

"I'm missing something in the equation," Ryan said.

"We all are, Jack. That's part of the job."

It was time to change subjects: "Anything new on the Pope?"

"Nothing yet today. If Basil has anything, I ought to hear about it before lunch. Worried about that?"

Jack nodded soberly. “Yeah. The problem is, if we do see a real threat, what the hell can we do about it? It’s not like we can put a company of Marines around him, is it? Exposed as he is—I mean, he’s in public so much that you can’t protect him.”

“And people like him don’t shrink from danger, do they?”

“I remember when Martin Luther King got whacked. Hell, he knew—he *must* have known—there were guns out there with his name on them. But he never backed away. It just wasn’t part of his ethos to run and hide. Won’t be any different in Rome, buddy, and every other place he goes.”

“Moving targets are supposed to be harder to hit,” Simon observed half-heartedly.

“Not when you know where he’s moving to a month or two in advance. If KGB decides to put a hit on the guy, damn, I don’t see much we can do about it.”

“Except perhaps to warn him.”

“Great. So he can laugh about it. He probably would, you know. He’s been through Nazis and communists for the past forty years. What the hell is left to scare the guy with?” Ryan paused. “If they decide to do it, who pushes the button?”

“I should think it would have to be voted on by the Politburo itself in plenary session. The political implications are too severe for any one member, however senior, to try something like this on his own authority, and remember how collegial they are—no one moves anywhere by himself, even Andropov, who’s the most independent-minded of the lot.”

“Okay, that’s—what? Fifteen guys have to vote up or down on it. Fifteen mouths, plus staffs and family members to talk to about it. How good are our sources? Will we hear about it?”

“Sensitive question, Jack. I cannot answer that one, I’m afraid.”

“Can’t-can’t or can’t-I’m-not-allowed-to?” Jack asked more pointedly.

“Jack, yes, we have sources of which I am aware, but which I cannot discuss with you.” Harding actually seemed embarrassed to say it.

“Hey, I understand, Simon.” Jack had some of those himself. For instance, he couldn’t even speak the words TALENT KEYHOLE here, for which he was cleared, but which was NOFORN, no talking about this one to a foreigner—even though Simon and certainly Sir Basil knew quite a bit about it. It was so perverse, because it mainly denied information to people who might have made good use of it. If Wall Street acted this way, all of America would be under the poverty line, Jack groused. Either people were trustworthy or they were not. But the game had its rules, and Ryan played by those rules. That was the cost of admittance into this particular club.

“This is bloody good stuff,” Harding said, flipping to page three of Bernie Katz’s debriefing.

“Bernie’s smart,” Ryan confirmed. “That’s why Cathy likes working for him.”

“But he’s an eye doctor, not a psychiatrist, correct?”

“Simon, at that level of medicine, everybody is a little bit of everything. I asked Cathy: The diabetic retinopathy Suslov had is indicative of a major health problem. The diabetes messes up the little blood vessels in the back of

the eye, and you can see it when you do an examination. Bernie and his team fixed it partway—you can't fix it all the way—and gave him back about, oh, seventy-five to eighty percent of his sight, good enough to drive a car in daylight, anyway, but the underlying health problem is a mother. It isn't just the small blood vessels in the eye, right? He's got that problem all over his body. Figure Red Mike will croak from kidney failure or heart disease in the next two years at the outside."

"Our chaps think he's got five years or so," Harding offered.

"Well, I'm not a doc. You can have some people talk to Bernie about it if you want, but everything is right there. Cathy says you can tell a lot about diabetes from looking at the eyeball."

"Does Suslov know that?"

Ryan shrugged. "That is a good question, Simon. Docs don't always tell their patients, probably less so over there. Figure Suslov's being treated by a politically reliable doctor of professorial rank. Here, that would mean a top-drawer guy who really knows his stuff. Over there . . . ?"

Harding nodded. "Correct. He may know his Lenin more than his Pasteur. Did you ever hear about Sergey Korolev, their chief rocket designer? That was a particularly ugly incident. The poor bugger was essentially murdered on the table because two senior surgeons didn't like each other, and one wouldn't bail the other out when the boat began to leak badly. It was probably good for the West, but he was a fine engineer, and he was killed by medical incompetence."

"Anybody pay up for that one?" Ryan asked.

"Oh, no. They were both too politically important, lots of patrons in high places. They're safe, until they kill one of their friends, and that won't happen. I'm sure they both have competent young people under them to cover their backsides."

"You know what they need in Russia? Lawyers. I don't like ambulance-chasers, but I guess they do keep people on their toes."

"In any case, no, Suslov probably does not know the gravity of his condition. At least that's what our medical consultants think. He still drinks his vodka according to HUMINT reports, and that is definitely contraindicated." Harding grimaced. "And his replacement will be Alexandrov, every bit as unpleasant a chap as his mentor. I'll have to see about updating his dossier." He made a note.

As for Ryan, he turned back to his morning briefing pages before starting on his official project. Greer wanted Ryan to work on a study of management practices in the Soviet armament industry, to see how—and if—that segment of the Soviet economy worked. Ryan and Harding would be cooperating on the study, which would use both British and American data. It was something that suited Ryan's academic background. It might even get him noticed high up.

THE RETURN MESSAGE came in at 11:32 hours. *Fast work in Rome*, Zaitzev thought, as he began the decryption. He'd call Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy as

soon as he got through it, but it was going to take a while. The captain checked the wall clock. It would delay his lunch, too, but the priority condemned him to some stomach growls. About the only good news was that Colonel Goderenko had started his encipherment sequence at the top of page 285.

> MOST SECRET
> IMMEDIATE AND URGENT
> FROM: REZIDENT ROME
> TO: OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN, MOSCOW CENTRE
> REFERENCE: YOUR OP DISPATCH 15-8-82-666
> GETTING CLOSE TO THE PRIEST IS NOT DIFFICULT WITHOUT FIXED TIME CONSTRAINTS. GUIDANCE WILL BE NEEDED FOR A FULL EVALUATION OF YOUR REQUEST. PRIEST ENGAGES IN PREDICTABLE PUBLIC AUDIENCES AND APPEARANCES WHICH ARE KNOWN WELL IN ADVANCE. TO MAKE USE OF THIS OPPORTUNITY WILL NOT RPT NOT BE EASY DUE TO LARGE CROWDS ATTENDING FUNCTIONS. SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS FOR HIM DIFFICULT TO ASSESS WITHOUT FURTHER GUIDANCE. RECOMMEND AGAINST PHYSICAL ACTION TO BE TAKEN AGAINST PRIEST DUE TO EXPECTED ADVERSE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES. DIFFICULT TO HIDE ORIGIN OF AN OPERATION AGAINST PRIEST.
> ENDS.

Well, Zaitzev thought, *the* rezident *didn't like this idea very much.* Would Yuriy Vladimirovich listen to this bit of advice from the field? That, Zaitzev knew, was far above his pay grade. He lifted his phone and dialed.

"Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy," the brusque voice answered.

"Captain Zaitzev in Communications Central. I have a reply to your six-six-six, Comrade Colonel."

"On my way," Rozhdestvenskiy responded.

The colonel was as good as his word, passing through the control point three minutes later. By that time, Zaitzev had returned the cipher book to central storage and slipped the message form, plus the translation, into a brown envelope, which he handed to the colonel.

Has anyone seen this?" Rozhdestvenskiy asked.

"Certainly not, comrade," Zaitzev replied.

"Very well." Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy walked away without another word. For his part, Zaitzev left his work desk and headed off to the cafeteria for lunch. The food was the best reason to work at The Centre.

What he could not leave behind as he stopped at the lavatory to wash his hands was the message sequence. Yuriy Andropov wanted to kill the Pope, and the *rezident* in Rome didn't like the idea. Zaitzev wasn't supposed to have any opinions. He was just part of the communications system. It rarely occurred to the hierarchy of the Committee for State Security that its people actually had minds . . .

. . . and even consciences . . .

Zaitzev took his place in line and got the metal tray and utensils. He decided on the beef stew and four thick slices of bread, with a large glass of tea. The cashier charged him fifty-five kopecks. His usual luncheon mates had already been and gone, so he ended up picking an end seat at a table filled with people he didn't know. They were talking about football, and he didn't join in, alone with his thoughts. The stew was quite good, as was the bread, fresh from the ovens. About the only thing they didn't have here was proper

silverware, as they did in the private dining rooms on the upper floors. Instead they used the same feather-light zinc-aluminum as all the other Soviet citizens. It worked well enough, but because it was so light, it felt awkward in his hands.

So, he thought, *I was right. The Chairman is thinking about murdering the Pope.* Zaitzev was not a religious man. He had not been to a church in his entire life —except those large buildings converted to museums since the Revolution. All he knew about religion was the propaganda dispensed as a matter of course in Soviet public education. And yet some of the children he'd known in school had talked about believing in God, and he hadn't reported them, because informing just wasn't his way. The Great Questions of Life were things he didn't much think about. For the most part, life in the Soviet Union was limited to yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The economic facts of life really didn't allow a person to make long-term plans. There were no country houses to buy, no luxury cars to desire, no elaborate vacations to save for. In committing what it called socialism on the people, the government of his country allowed—forced—everyone to aspire to much the same things, regardless of individual tastes, which meant getting on an endless list and being notified when one's name came up—and being unknowingly bumped by those with greater Party seniority—or not, because some people had access to better places. His life, like everyone else's, was like that of a steer on a feed lot. He was cared for moderately well and fed the same bland food at the same time on endlessly identical days. There was a grayness, an overarching boredom, to every aspect of life—alleviated in his case only by the content of the messages which he processed and forwarded. He wasn't supposed to think about the messages, much less remember them, but without anybody to talk to, all he could do was dwell on them in the privacy of his own mind. Today his mind had just one occupant, and it would not silence itself. It raced around like a hamster in an exercise wheel, going round and round but always returning to the same place.

Andropov wants to kill the Pope.

He'd processed assassination messages before. Not many. KGB was gradually drifting away from it. Too many things went wrong. Despite the professional skill and cleverness of the field officers, policemen in other countries were endlessly clever and had the mindless patience of a spider in its web, and until KGB could just wish a person dead and have it come to pass, there would be witnesses and evidence, because a cloak of invisibility was something found only in tales for children.

More often he processed messages about defectors or suspected would-be defectors—or, just as deadly, suspicion of officers and agents who'd "doubled," gone over to serve the enemy. He'd even seen such evidence passed along in message form, calling an officer home for "consultations" from which they'd rarely returned back to their *rezidenturas.* Exactly what happened to them—that was just the subject of gossip, all of it unpleasant. One officer who'd gone bad, the story went, had been loaded alive into a crematorium, the way the German SS was supposed to have done. He'd heard there was a film of it, and he'd talked to people who knew people who knew people who'd seen it. But he had never actually seen it himself, nor met anyone who had.

Some things, Oleg Ivanovich thought, were too beyond the pale even for the KGB. No, most of the stories talked of firing squads—which often fucked up, so the stories went—or a single pistol round in the head, as Lavrenti Beriya had done himself. Those stories, *everyone* believed. He'd seen photos of Beria, and they seemed to drip with blood. And Iron Feliks would doubtless have done it between bites of his sandwich. He was the kind of man to give ruthlessness an evil name.

But it was generally felt, if not widely spoken, that KGB was becoming more *kulturniy* in its dealings with the world. More cultured. More civilized. Kinder and gentler. Traitors, of course, were executed, but only after a trial in which they were at least given a pro forma chance to explain their actions and, if they were innocent, to prove it. It almost never happened, but only because the State only prosecuted the truly guilty. The investigators in the Second Chief Directorate were among the most feared and skilled people in the entire country. It was said they were never wrong and never fooled, like some kind of gods.

Except that the State said that there were no gods.

Men, then—and women. Everyone knew about the Sparrow School, about which the men often spoke with twisty grins and winking eyes. *Ah, to be an instructor or, better still, a quality-assurance officer there!* they dreamed. And to be paid for it. As his Irina often noted, all men were pigs. *But*, Zaitzev mused, *it could be fun to be a pig.*

Kill the Pope—why? He was no threat to this country. Stalin himself had once joked, *How many divisions does the Pope have?* So why kill the man? Even the *rezident* warned against it. Goderenko feared the political repercussions. Stalin had ordered Trotsky killed, and had dispatched a KGB officer to do it, *knowing* that he'd suffer long-term imprisonment for the task. But he'd done it, faithful to the Will of the Party, in a professional gesture that they talked about in the academy training classes—along with the more casual advice that *we really don't do that sort of thing anymore.* It was not, the instructors didn't add, *kulturniy.* And so, yes, KGB was drifting away from that sort of behavior.

Until now. Until today. And even our senior *rezident* is advising against it. Why? Because he doesn't want himself and his agency—and his country! —to be so *nekulturniy*?

Or because to do so would be worse than foolish? It would be *wrong* . . . ? "Wrong" was a concept foreign to citizens in the Soviet Union. At least, what people perceived as things that were morally wrong. Morality in his country had been replaced by what was politically correct or incorrect. Whatever served the interests of his country's political system was worthy of praise. That which did not was worthy of . . . death?

And who decided such things?

Men did.

Men did because there was no morality, as the world understood the term. There was no God to pronounce what was good and what was evil.

And yet . . .

And yet, in the heart of every man was an inborn knowledge of right and wrong. To kill another man was wrong. To take a man's life you had to have a just cause. But it was also men who decided what constituted such cause. The

right men in the right place with the right authority had the ability and the right to kill because—why?

Because Marx and Lenin said so.

That was what the government of his country had long since decided.

Zaitzev buttered his last piece of bread and dipped it in the remaining gravy in his bowl before eating it. He knew he was thinking overly deep, even dangerous, thoughts. His parent society did not encourage or even permit independent thinking. You were not supposed to question the Party and its wisdom. Certainly not here. In the KGB cafeteria, you *never, ever, not even once* heard someone wonder aloud if the Party and the Motherland it served and protected were even capable of doing an incorrect act. Oh, maybe once in a while, people speculated on tactics, but even then the talk was within limits that were taller and stronger than the Kremlin's own brick walls.

His country's morality, he mused, had been predetermined by a German Jew living in London, and the son of a czarist bureaucrat who simply hadn't liked the czar much and whose overly adventurous brother had been executed for taking direct action. That man had found shelter in that most capitalistic of nations, Switzerland, then had been dispatched back to Mother Russia by the Germans in the hope that he could upset the czar's government, allowing Germany then to defeat the other Western nations on the Western Front of the First World War. All in all, it didn't sound like something ordained by any deity for some great plan for human advancement, did it? Everything Lenin had used as a model for changing his country—and through it, the entire world—had come from a book written by Karl Marx, more writings by Friedrich Engels, and his own vision for becoming the chief of a new kind of country.

The only thing that distinguished Marxism-Leninism from a religion was the lack of a godhead. Both systems claimed absolute authority over the affairs of men, and both claimed to be right a priori. Except that his country's system chose to assert that authority by exercising the power of life and death.

His country said it worked for justice, for the good of the workers and peasants all around the world. But other men, higher up in the hierarchy, decided who the workers and peasant were, and they themselves lived in ornate dachas and multiroom flats, and had automobiles and drivers . . . and privileges.

What privileges they had! Zaitzev had also dispatched messages about pantyhose and perfumes that the men in this building wanted for their women. These items were often delivered in the diplomatic bag from embassies in the West, things his own country could not produce, but which the *nomenklatura* craved, along with their West German refrigerators and stoves. When he saw the big shots racing down the center of Moscow's streets in their chauffeured Zils, then Zaitzev understood how Lenin had felt about the czars. The czar had claimed divine right as his personal deed to power. The Party chieftains claimed their positions by the will of the people.

Except that the People had never given anything to them by public acclamation. The Western democracies had elections—*Pravda* spat upon them every few years—but they *were* real elections. England was now run by a nasty-looking woman, and America by an aged and buffoonish actor, but both

had been chosen by the people of their countries, and the previous rulers had been removed by popular choice. Neither leader was well-loved in the Soviet Union, and he'd seen many official messages sent out to ascertain their mental state and deeply held political beliefs; the concern in those messages had been manifest, and Zaitzev himself had his worries, but as distasteful and unstable as these leaders might be, their people had chosen them. The Soviet people had decidedly not selected the current crop of princes on the Politburo.

And now the new communist princes were thinking about murdering a Polish priest in Rome. But how did *he* threaten the *Rodina*? This Pope fellow had no military formations at his command. A political threat, then? But how? The Vatican was supposed to have diplomatic identity, but nationhood without military power was—what? If there was no God, then whatever power the Pope exercised had to be an illusion, of no more substance than a puff of cigarette smoke. Zaitzev's country had the greatest army on earth, a fact proclaimed regularly by *We Serve the Soviet Union*, the TV show that everybody watched.

So, why do they want to kill a man who poses no threat? Would he part the oceans with a wave of his staff or bring down plagues on the land? Of course not.

And to kill a harmless man is a crime, Zaitzev told himself, exercising his mind for the first time in his tenure at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square, silently asserting his free will. He'd asked a question and come up with an answer.

It would have been helpful if he'd had someone to talk to about that, but of course that was out of the question. That left Zaitzev without a safety valve—a way to process his feelings and bring them to some kind of resolution. The laws and customs of his nation forced him to recycle his thoughts over and over, and ultimately that led in only one direction. That it was a direction of which the State would not approve was, in the end, a product of the State's own making.

On finishing his lunch, he sipped his tea and lit a cigarette, but that contemplative act didn't help the state of his mind. The hamster was still running in its wheel. No one in the huge dining room noticed. To those who saw Zaitzev, he was just one more man enjoying his after-meal smoke in solitude. Like all Soviet citizens, Zaitzev knew how to hide his feelings, and so his face gave nothing away. He just looked at the wall clock so that he wouldn't be late going back to work for his afternoon watch, just one more bureaucrat in a large building full of them.

UPSTAIRS, it was a little different. Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy hadn't wanted to interrupt the Chairman's lunch, and so he'd sat in his own office waiting for the hands on the clock to move, munching on his own sandwich but ignoring the cup of soup that had come with it. Like his Chairman, he smoked American Marlboro cigarettes, which were milder and better made than their Soviet counterparts. It was an affectation he'd picked up in the field, but as a high-ranking First Chief Directorate officer, he could shop at the special store in Moscow Centre. They were expensive, even for one paid in "certificate"

rubles, but he only drank cheap vodka, so it evened out. He wondered how Yuriy Vladimirovich would react to Goderenko's message. Ruslan Borissovich was a very capable *rezident*, careful and conservative, and a man senior enough to be allowed to talk back, as it were. His job, after all, was to feed good information to Moscow Centre, and if he thought something might compromise that mission, it was his duty to warn them about it—and besides, the original dispatch had not carried an obligatory directive in it, just an instruction to ascertain a situation. So, no, Ruslan Borissovich would probably not get into any trouble from his reply. But Andropov might bark and, if he did, then he, Colonel A. N. Rozhdestvenskiy, would bear the noise, which was never fun. His place here was enviable in one way and frightening in another. He had the ear of the Chairman, but being that close meant that he had to be close to the teeth, too. In the history of KGB, it was not unknown for some people to suffer for the actions of others. But it was unlikely in this case. Though an undeniably tough man, Andropov was also a reasonably fair one. Even so, it didn't pay to be too close to a rumbling volcano. His desk phone rang. It was the Chairman's private secretary.

"The Chairman will see you now, Comrade Colonel."

"Spasiba." He rose and walked down the corridor.

"We have a reply from Colonel Goderenko," Rozhdestvenskiy reported, handing it over.

For his part, Andropov was not surprised, and to Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy's invisible relief, he did not lose his temper.

"I expected this. Our people have lost their sense of daring, haven't they, Aleksey Nikolay'ch?"

"Comrade Chairman, the *rezident* gives you his professional assessment of the problem," the field officer answered.

"Go on," Andropov commanded.

"Comrade Chairman," Rozhdestvenskiy replied, choosing his words with the greatest care, "you cannot undertake an operation like the one you are evidently considering without political risks. This priest has a good deal of influence, however illusory that influence may be. Ruslan Borissovich is concerned that an attack on him might affect his ability to gather information, and that, comrade, is his primary task."

"The assessment of political risk is my job, not his."

"That is true, Comrade Chairman, but it is his territory, and it is his job to tell you what he thinks you need to know. The loss of some of his agents' services could be costly to us both in direct and indirect terms."

"How costly?"

"That is impossible to predict. The Rome *rezidentura* has a number of highly productive agents for NATO military and political intelligence information. Can we live without it? Yes, I suppose we could, but better that we should live with it. The human factors involved make prediction difficult. Running agents is an art and not a science, you see."

"So you have told me before, Aleksey." Andropov rubbed his eyes tiredly. His skin was a little sallow today, Rozhdestvenskiy noted. Was his liver problem kicking up again?

"Our agents are all people, and individual people have their individual

peculiarities. There is no avoiding it," Rozhdestvenskiy explained for perhaps the hundredth time. It could have been worse; Andropov actually listened some of the time. His predecessors had not all been so enlightened. Perhaps it came from Yuriy Vladimirovich's intelligence.

"That's what I like about signals intelligence," the Chairman of KGB groused. That was what everyone in the business said, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy noted. The problem was in getting signals intelligence. The West was better at it than his country, despite their infiltration of the West's signals agencies. The American NSA and British GCHQ, in particular, worked constantly to defeat Soviet communications security and occasionally, they worried, succeeded at it. Which was why KGB depended so absolutely on one-time pads. They couldn't trust anything else.

"HOW GOOD IS THIS?" Ryan asked Harding.

"We think it's the genuine article, Jack. Part of it comes from open sources, but most comes from documents prepared for their Council of Ministers. At that level, they don't lie to themselves much."

"Why not?" Jack asked pointedly. "Everyone else there does."

"But here you're dealing with something concrete, products that have to be delivered to their army. If they do not appear, it will be noted, and inquiries will be made. In any case," Harding went on, qualifying himself carefully, "the most important material here has to do with policy questions, and for that you gain nothing by lying."

"I suppose. I raised a little hell at Langley last month when I ripped through an economics assessment that was going on to the President's office. I said it couldn't possibly be true, and the guy who drew it up said it was just what the Politburo saw at their meetings—"

"And you said what, Jack?" Harding interrupted.

"Simon, I said, whether the big shots saw it or not, it simply could not be true. That report was total bullshit—which makes me wonder how the hell their Politburo makes policy when the data they base it on is about as truthful as Alice-in-goddamned-Wonderland. You know, when I was in the Marine Corps, we worried that Ivan Ivanovich the Russian Soldier might be ten feet tall. He isn't. There may be a lot of them, but they're actually smaller than our people because they don't eat as well as children, and their weapons suck. The AK-47's a nice rifle, but I'll take the M-16 over it any time, and a rifle is a damned sight simpler than a portable radio. So I finally get into CIA and find out the tactical radios their army uses are for shit, and so it turns out I was right about that back when I was a shavetail butter-bar in the Green Machine. Bottom line, Simon, they lie to the Politburo on what are supposed to be economic realities, and if they lie to those folks, they'll lie about anything."

"So, what happened to the report to your President?"

"They sent it to him, but with five pages of mine appended to the back. I hope he got that far. They say he reads a lot. Anyway, what I'm saying is that they base their policy on lies, and maybe we can make better policy by appreciating reality a little bit better. I think their economy's in the shitter,

Simon. It can't be performing as well as their data says it is. If it were, we'd be seeing the positive results in the products they make, but we don't, do we?"

"Why be afraid of a country that can't feed itself?"

"Yep." Ryan nodded.

"In the Second World War—"

"In 1941, Russia got invaded by a country that they never liked much, but Hitler was too damned stupid to make their antipathy for their own government work for him, so he implemented racist policies that were *calculated* to drive the Russian people back into the arms of Joe Stalin. So that's a false comparison, Simon. The Soviet Union is fundamentally unstable. Why? Because it's an unjust society, and there ain't no such thing as a *stable* unjust society. Their economy . . ." He paused. "You know, there ought to be a way to make that work for us . . ."

"And do what?"

"Shake their foundations some. Maybe a mild earthquake," Ryan suggested.

"And bring them crashing down?" Harding asked. His eyebrows went up. "They do have a lot of nuclear weapons, you might want to remember."

"Okay, fine, we try to arrange a soft landing."

"Bloody decent of you, Jack."

CHAPTER 7

SIMMERING

ED FOLEY'S JOB as Press Attaché was not overly demanding in terms of the time required to stroke the local American correspondents and occasionally others. "Others" included reporters purportedly from *Pravda* and other Russian publications. Foley assumed that all of them were KGB officers or stringers—there was no difference between the two since KGB routinely used journalistic covers for its field officers. As a result, most Soviet reporters in America as often as not had an FBI agent or two in close attendance, at least when the FBI had agents to spare for the task, which wasn't all that often. Reporters and field intelligence officers had virtually identical functions.

He'd just been pinged hard by a *Pravda* guy named Pavel Kuritsyn, who was either a professional spook or sure as hell had read a lot of spy novels. Since it was easier to act dumb than smart, he'd fumbled through his Russian, smiling with apparent pride at how well he'd mastered the complex language. For his part, Kuritsyn had advised the American to watch Russian TV, the quicker to master the mother tongue. Foley had then drafted a contact report for the CIA files, noting that this Pavel Yevgeniyevich Kuritsyn smelled like a Second Chief Directorate boy who was checking *him* out, and opining that he thought he'd passed the test. You couldn't be sure, of course. For all he knew, the Russians did employ people who read minds. Foley knew that they'd experimented in almost everything, even something called remote viewing, which to his professional mind was a step down from gypsy fortune-tellers—but which had gotten the Agency to start a program of its own, much to Foley's disgust. For Ed Foley, if you couldn't hold it, then it wasn't real. But there was no telling what those pantywaists in the Directorate of Intelligence would try, just to bypass what the DO people—the *real* spooks in CIA—had to do every goddamned day.

It was enough that Ivan had eyes, and Christ knew how many ears, in the embassy, though the building was regularly swept by electronics experts. (Once they'd even succeeded in planting a bug in the ambassador's own office.) Just across the street was a former church that was used by KGB. In the U.S. Embassy, it was known as Our Lady of the Microchips, because the structure was full of microwave transmitters aimed at the embassy, their function being to interfere with all the listening devices that Station Moscow used to tap in to Soviet phone and radio systems. The amount of radiation that came in flirted with dangerous-to-your-health levels, and as a result the embassy was protected with metal sheeting in the drywall, which reflected a lot of it right back at the people across the street. The game had rules, and the Russians pretty much played within them, but the rules often didn't make a hell of a lot of sense. There had been quiet protests to the local natives about the microwaves, but these were invariably met with shrugs of "Who, us?" And that was as far as it usually went. The embassy doc said he wasn't worried—but *his* office was in the basement, shielded from the radiation by stone and dirt. Some people said you could cook a hot dog by putting it on the east-facing windowsills.

Two people who did know about Ed Foley were the ambassador and the Defense Attaché. The former was Ernest Fuller. Fuller looked like an illustration from a book about patricians: tall, slim, with a regal mane of white hair. In fact, he'd grown up on an Iowa hog farm, gotten a scholarship to Northwestern University, and then a law degree, which had taken him to corporate boardrooms, where he finally ended up as CEO of a major auto company. Along the way, he'd served three years in the U.S. Navy in World War II on the light cruiser USS *Boise* during the Guadalcanal campaign. He was regarded as a serious player and a gifted amateur by the embassy's FSOs.

The Defense Attaché was Brigadier General George Dalton. By profession an artilleryman, he got along well with his Russian counterparts. Dalton was a bear of a man with curly black hair, who'd played linebacker for West Point twenty-odd years before.

Foley had an appointment with both of them—ostensibly, to talk over relations with the American news correspondents. Even his internal embassy business needed a cover in this station.

"How's your son adjusting?" Fuller asked.

"He misses his cartoons. Before we came over, I bought one of those new tape machines—you know, the Betamax thing—and some tapes, but those only last so long, and they cost an arm and a leg."

"There's a local version of Roadrunner-Coyote," General Dalton told him. "It's called *Wait a Moment,* something like that. It's not as good as Warner Brothers, but better than that damned exercise show in the morning. The gal on that could whip a command sergeant-major."

"I noticed that yesterday morning. Is she part of their Olympic weight-lifting squad?" Foley joked. "Anyway . . ."

"First impressions—any surprises?" Fuller asked.

Foley shook his head. "About what I was briefed to expect. Looks like everywhere I go, I have company. How long you suppose that will last?"

"Maybe a week or so. Take a walk around—better yet, watch Ron Fielding

when he takes a walk. He does his job pretty well."

"Anything major under way?" Ambassador Fuller asked.

"No, sir. Just routine operations at the moment. But the Russians have something very large happening at home."

"What's that?" Fuller asked.

"They call it Operation RYAN. Their acronym for Surprise Nuclear Attack on the Motherland. They're worried that the President might want to nuke them, and they have officers running around back home trying to get a feel for his mental state."

"You're serious?" Fuller asked.

"As a heart attack. I guess they took the campaign rhetoric a little too seriously."

"I have had a few odd questions from their foreign ministry," the Ambassador said. "But I just wrote it off to small talk."

"Sir, we're investing a lot of money in the military, and that makes them nervous."

"Whereas, when they buy ten thousand new tanks, it's normal?" General Dalton observed.

"Exactly," Foley agreed. "A gun in my hand is a defensive weapon, but a gun in your hand is an offensive weapon. It's a matter of outlook, I suppose."

"Have you seen this?" Fuller asked, handing across a fax from Foggy Bottom.

Foley scanned it. "Uh-oh."

"I told Washington it would worry the Soviets a good deal. What do you think?"

"I concur, sir. In several ways. Most important will be the potential unrest in Poland, which could spread throughout their empire. That's the one area in which they think long-term. Political stability is their sine qua non. What are they saying in Washington?"

"The Agency just showed it to the President, and he handed it off to the Secretary of State, and he faxed it to me for comment. Can you rattle any bushes, see if they're talking about it in the Politburo?"

Foley thought for a moment and nodded. "I can try." It made him slightly uncomfortable, but that was his job, wasn't it? It meant getting a message to one or more of his agents, but that was what they were for. The troubling part was that it meant exposing his wife. Mary Pat would not object—hell, she *loved* the spy game in the field—but it always bothered her husband to expose her to danger. He supposed it was chauvinism. "What's the priority on this?"

"Washington is very interested," Fuller said. That made it important, but not quite an emergency tasking.

"Okay, I'll get on it, sir."

"I don't know what assets you're running here in Moscow—and I don't want to know. It's dangerous to them?"

"They shoot traitors over here, sir."

"This is rougher than the car business, Foley. I do understand that."

"Hell, it wasn't this rough in the Central Highlands," General Dalton noted. "Ivan plays pretty mean. You know, I've been asked about the President, too, usually over drinks by senior officers. They're really that worried about him,

eh?"

"It sure looks that way," Foley confirmed.

"Good. Never hurts to rattle the other guy's confidence a little, keep him looking over his shoulder some."

"Just so it doesn't go too far," Ambassador Fuller suggested. He was relatively new to diplomacy, but he had respect for the process. "Okay, anything that I need to know about?"

"Not from my end," the COS replied. "Still getting used to things. Had a Russian reporter in today, maybe a KGB counterspook checking me out, guy named Kuritsyn."

"I think he's a player," General Dalton said at once.

"I caught a whiff of that. I expect he'll check me out through the *Times* correspondent."

"You know him?"

"Anthony Prince." Foley nodded. "And that pretty much sums him up. Groton and Yale. I bumped into him a few times in New York when I was at the paper. He's very smart, but not quite as smart as he thinks he is."

"How's your Russian?"

"I can pass for a native—but my wife can pass for a poet. She's really good at it. Oh, one other thing. I have a neighbor in the compound, Haydock, husband Nigel, wife Penelope. I presume they're players, too."

"Big-time," General Dalton confirmed. "They're solid."

Foley thought so, but it never hurt to be sure. He stood. "Okay, let me get some work done."

"Welcome aboard, Ed," the Ambassador said. "Duty here isn't too bad once you get used to it. We get all the theater and ballet tickets we want through their foreign ministry."

"I prefer ice hockey."

"That's easy, too," General Dalton responded.

"Good seats?" the spook asked.

"First row."

Foley smiled. "Dynamite."

FOR HER PART, Mary Pat was out on the street with her son. Eddie was too big for a stroller, which was too bad. You could do a lot of interesting things with a stroller, and she figured the Russians would be hesitant to mess with an infant and a diaper bag—especially when they both came with a diplomatic passport. She was just taking a walk at the moment, getting used to the environment, the sights and smells. This was the belly of the beast, and here she was, like a virus—a deadly one, she hoped. She'd been born Mary Kaminsky, the granddaughter of an equerry to the House of Romanov. Grandfather Vanya had been a central figure of her youth. From him she'd learned Russian as a toddler, and not the base Russian of today, but the elegant, literary Russian of a bygone time. She could read the poetry of Pushkin and weep, and in this she was more Russian than American, for the Russians had venerated their poets for centuries, while in America they were mainly relegated to writing pop songs. There was much to admire and much to love about this country.

But not its government. She'd been twelve, looking forward to her teens

with enthusiasm, when Grandfather Vanya had told her the story of Aleksey, the crown prince of Russia—a good child, so her grandfather said, but an unlucky one, stricken with hemophilia and for that reason a fragile child. Colonel Vanya Borissovich Kaminsky, a minor nobleman in the Imperial Horse Guards, had taught the boy to ride a horse, because that was one physical skill a prince needed in that age. He'd had to be ever so careful—Aleksey often went about in the arms of a sailor in the Imperial navy, lest he trip and fall and bleed—but he'd accomplished the task, to the gratitude of Nikolay II and Czarina Alexandra, and along the way the two had become as close as, if not father and son, then uncle and nephew. Grandfather Vanya had gone to the front and fought against the Germans, but early in the war had been captured at the Battle of Tannenberg. It had been in a German prisoner-of-war camp that he'd learned of the revolution. He'd managed to come back to Mother Russia, and fought with the White Guards in the doomed counterrevolutionary effort—then learned that the czar and his entire family had been murdered by the usurpers at Ekaterinberg. He'd known then that the war was lost, and he'd managed to escape and make his way to America, where he'd begun a new life, but one in perpetual mourning for the dead.

Mary Pat remembered the tears in his eyes when he told the tale, and the tears had communicated to her his visceral hatred for the Bolsheviks. It had muted somewhat. She wasn't a fanatic, but when she saw a Russian in a uniform, or in a speeding ZIL, headed for a Party meeting, she saw the face of the enemy, an enemy that needed defeating. That communism was her country's adversary was merely sauce for the goose. If she could find a button that would bring down this odious political system, she'd push it without a blink of hesitation.

And so the appointment to Moscow had been the best of all dream assignments. Just as Vanya Borissovich Kaminsky had told her his ancient and sad story, so he had given her a mission for her life, and a passion for its achievement. Her choice to join CIA had been as natural as brushing out her honey-blond hair.

And now, walking about, for the first time in her life she really understood her grandfather's passionate love for things past. Everything was different from what she knew in America, from the pitch of the building roofs to the color of the asphalt in the streets to the blank expressions on the faces of the people. They looked at her as they passed, for in her American clothes she stood out like a peacock among crows. Some even managed a smile for little Eddie, because dour as the Russians were, they were unfailingly kind to children. For the fun of it, she asked for directions from a militiaman, as the local police were called, and he was polite to her, helping with her poor pronunciation of his language and giving directions. So that was one good thing. She had a tail, she noted, a KGB officer, about thirty-five, following behind by about fifty yards, doing his best to remain invisible. His mistake was in looking away when she turned. That's probably how he had been trained, so that his face would not become too familiar to his surveillance target.

The streets and sidewalks were wide here, but not overly crowded with people. Most Russians were at work, and there was no population of free

women here, out shopping or heading to social affairs or golf outings—maybe the wives of the really important party members, that was all. Kind of like the idle rich at home, Mary Pat reflected, if there were still such people. Her mom had always worked, at least in her memory—still did, in fact. But here working women used shovels while the men drove dump trucks. They were always fixing potholes in the streets, but never quite fixing them well enough. *Just like in Washington and New York,* she thought.

There were street vendors here, though, selling ice cream, and she bought one for little Eddie, whose eyes were taking it all in. It troubled her conscience to inflict this place and this mission on her son, but he was only four and it would be a good learning experience for him. At least he'd grow up bilingual. He'd also learn to appreciate his country more than most American kids, and that, she thought, was a good thing. So, she had a tail. How good was he? Perhaps it was time to find out. She reached into her purse and surreptitiously removed a length of paper tape. It was red in color, a bright red. Turning a corner, she stuck it to a lamppost in a gesture so casual as to be invisible and kept going. Then, fifty yards down the new block, she turned to look back as though lost . . . and she saw him walk right past that lamppost. So he hadn't seen her leave the flag signal. Had he seen her, he would at least have looked . . . and he was the only one following her; her route had been so randomly chosen that there wouldn't be anyone else assigned to her, unless there was a really major surveillance effort applied to her, and that didn't seem likely. She'd never been blown on any of her field assignments. She remembered every single moment of her training at The Farm in Tidewater, Virginia. She'd been at the top of her class, and she knew she was good—and better still, she knew that you were never so good that you could forget to be careful. But as long as you were careful, you could ride any horse. Grandfather Vanya had taught her to ride, too.

She and little Eddie would have many adventures in this city, Mary Pat thought. She'd let it wait until the KGB got tired of hanging a shadow on her, and then she could really cut loose. She wondered whom she might recruit to work for CIA, in addition to running the established agents-in-place. Yeah, she was in the belly of the beast, all right, and her job was to give the son of a bitch a bleeding ulcer.

"VERY WELL, Aleksey Nikolay'ch, you know the man," Andropov said. "What do I tell him now?"

It was a sign of the Chairman's intelligence that he didn't lash out with a scorching reply, to put the Rome *rezident* back in his place. Only a fool stomped on his senior subordinates.

"He asks for guidance—the scope of the operation and so forth. We should give it to him. This brings into question exactly what you are contemplating, Comrade Chairman. Have you thought it through to that point?"

"Very well, Colonel, what do *you* think we should do?"

"Comrade Chairman, there is an expression the Americans use which I have learned to respect: That is above my pay grade."

"Are you telling me that you do not play Chairman yourself—in your own mind?" Yuriy Vladimirovich asked, rather pointedly.

"Honestly, no, I limit my thinking to that which I understand—operational

questions. I am not competent to trespass into high political confines, comrade."

A clever answer, if not a truthful one, Andropov noted. But Rozhdestvenskiy would be unable to discuss whatever high-level thoughts he might have, because no one else at KGB was cleared to discuss such things. Now, he *might* be interviewed by some very senior member of the Party's Central Committee, on orders from the Politburo, but such an order would almost have to come from Brezhnev himself. And that, Yuriy Vladimirovich thought, was not likely at this time. So, yes, the colonel would think about it in the privacy of his own mind, as all subordinates did, but as a professional KGB officer, rather than a Party flack, he would leave such thoughts right there.

"Very well, we will dispense with the political considerations entirely. Consider this a theoretical question: How would one kill this priest?"

Rozhdestvenskiy looked uneasy.

"Sit," the Chairman told his subordinate. "You have planned complex operations before. Take your time to walk through this one."

Rozhdestvenskiy took his seat before speaking. "First of all, I would ask for assistance from someone better-versed in such things. We have several such officers here in The Centre. But . . . since you ask me to think about it in theoretical terms . . ." The colonel's voice trailed off and his eyes went up and to the left. When he started speaking again, his words came slowly.

"First of all, we would use Goderenko's station only for information—reconnaissance of the target, that sort of thing. We would not want to use Station Rome's people in any active way. . . . In fact, I would advise against using Soviet personnel at all for the active parts of the operation."

"Why?" Andropov asked.

"The Italian police are professionally trained, and for an investigation of this magnitude, they would throw people into it, assign their very best men. At any event like this, there will be witnesses. Everyone on earth has two eyes and a memory. Some have intelligence. That sort of thing cannot be predicted. While on the one hand, this militates in favor of, let us say, a sniper and a long-range shot, such a methodology would point to a state-level operation. Such a sniper would have to be well-trained and properly equipped. That would mean a soldier. A soldier means an army. An army means a nation-state—and which nation-state would wish to kill the Pope?" Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy asked. "A truly black operation cannot be traced back to its point of origin."

Andropov lit a cigarette and nodded. He'd chosen well. This colonel was no man's fool. "Go on."

"Ideally, the shooter would have no ties whatsoever to the Soviet Union. We must be sure of that because we cannot ignore the possibility that he will be arrested. If he is arrested, he will be questioned. Most men talk under questioning, either for psychological or physical reasons." Rozhdestvenskiy reached into his pocket and pulled out his own cigarette. "I remember reading about a Mafia killing in America. . . ." Again, the voice tailed off and his eyes fixed on the far wall while examining something in the past.

"Yes?" the Chairman prompted.

"A killing in New York City. One of their senior people was at odds with his

peers, and they decided to not merely kill him, but to do so with some degree of ignominy. They had him killed by a black man. To the Mafia, that is particularly disgraceful," Rozhdestvenskiy explained. "In any case, the shooter was immediately thereafter killed by another man, presumably a Mafia assassin who then made a successful escape—no doubt he had assistance, which proves that it was a carefully planned exercise. The crime was never solved. It was a perfect technical exercise. The target was killed and so was the assassin. The true killers—those who had planned the exercise—accomplished their mission, and gained prestige within their organization, but were never punished for it."

"Criminal thugs," Andropov snorted.

"Yes, Comrade Chairman, but a properly carried-out mission is worthy of study, even so. It does not completely apply to our task at hand, because it was *supposed* to look like a well-executed Mafia murder. But the shooter got close to his target because he was manifestly *not* a member of a Mafia gang and could not later implicate or identify those who paid him to commit the act. That is precisely what we would wish to achieve. Of course, we cannot copy this operation in full—for example, killing off our shooter would point directly to us. This cannot be like the elimination of Leon Trotsky. In that case, the origin of the operation was not really concealed. As with the Mafia killing I just cited, it was supposed to be something of a public announcement." That a Soviet state action was a direct parallel to this New York City gangster rubout did not need much elaboration in Rozhdestvenskiy's eyes. But in his operational brain, the Trotsky killing and the Mafia assassination were an interesting confluence of tactics and objectives.

"Comrade, I need some time to consider this fully."

"I'll give you two hours," Chairman Andropov responded generously.

Rozhdestvenskiy stood, came to attention, and walked out through the clothes dresser into the secretary's room.

Rozhdestvenskiy's own office was small, of course, but it was private and on the same floor as the Chairman's. A window overlooked Dzerzhinskiy Square, with all its traffic and the statue of Iron Feliks. His swivel chair was comfortable, and his desk had three telephones because the Soviet Union had somehow failed to master multiline phones. He had a typewriter of his own, which he rarely used, preferring to have a secretary come in from the executive pool. There was talk that Yuriy Vladimirovich used one of them for something other than taking dictation, but Rozhdestvenskiy did not believe it. The Chairman was too much of an aesthete for that. Corruption just wasn't his way, which appealed to him. It was hard to feel loyal to a man such as Brezhnev. Rozhdestvenskiy took the Sword and Shield motto of his agency seriously. It was his job to protect his country and its people, and they needed protecting—sometimes from the members of their own Politburo.

But why did they need protection from this priest? he asked himself.

He shook his head and applied his mind to the exercise. He tended to think with his eyes open, examining his thoughts like a film on an invisible screen.

The first consideration was the nature of the target. The Pope seemed to be a tall man in the pictures, and he usually dressed in white. One could scarcely ask for a finer shooting target than that. He rode about in an open vehicle,

which made him an even better target, because it drove about slowly, so that the faithful could see him well.

But who would be the shooter? Not a KGB officer. Not even a Soviet citizen. A Russian exile, perhaps. KGB had them throughout the West, many of them sleeper agents, living their lives and awaiting their activation calls. . . . But the problem was, so many of them went native and ignored their activation notices, or called the counterintelligence service in their country of residence. Rozhdestvenskiy didn't like that sort of long-term assignment. It was too easy for an officer to forget who he was and become what his cover said he was supposed to be.

No, the shooter had to be an outsider, not a Russian national, not a non-Russian former Soviet citizen, not even a foreigner trained by KGB. Best of all would be a renegade priest or nun, but people like that didn't just fall into your lap, except in Western spy fiction and TV shows. The real world of intelligence operations was rarely that convenient.

So, what sort of shooter did he need? A non-Christian? A Jew? A Muslim? An atheist would be too easy to associate with the Soviet Union, so no, not one of those. To get a Jew to do it—that would be rich! One of the Chosen People. Best of all, an Israeli. Israel had its fair share of religious fanatics. It *was* possible . . . but unlikely. KGB had assets in Israel—many of the Soviet citizens who emigrated there were KGB sleepers—but Israeli counterintelligence was notoriously efficient. The possibility of such an operation being blown was too high, and this was one operation that could not be blown. So that left Jews out.

Maybe a madman from Northern Ireland. Certainly the Protestants there loathed the Catholic Church, and one of their chieftains—Rozhdestvenskiy couldn't remember his name, but he looked like an advertisement for a brewery—had said he wished the Pope dead. The man was even supposed to be a minister himself. But, sadly, such people hated the Soviet Union even more, because their IRA adversaries claimed to be Marxists—something Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy had trouble accepting. If they were truly Marxists, he could have used Party discipline to get one of them to undertake the operation . . . but no. What little he knew of Irish terrorists told him that getting one to put Party discipline above his ethnic beliefs was far too much to ask. Attractive as it might be in a theoretical sense, it would be too hard to arrange.

That left Muslims. A lot of them were fanatics, with as little to do with the core beliefs of their religion as the Pope did with Karl Marx. Islam was just too big, and it suffered from the diseases of bigness. But if he wanted a Muslim, where to get him? KGB did have operations in many countries, with Islamic populations, as did other Marxist nations. *Hmm,* he thought, *that's a good idea.* Most of the Soviet Union's allies had intelligence services, and most of them were under KGB's thumb.

The best of them was the DDR's Stasi, superbly operated by its director, Markus Wolf. But there were few Muslims there. The Poles were good, as well, but there was no way he would use them for this operation. The Catholics had it penetrated—and that meant the West had it penetrated as well, if only at second hand. Hungary—no, again the country was too Catholic, and the only

Muslims there were foreigners in ideological training camps for terrorist groups, and those he probably ought not to use. The same was true of the Czechs. Romania was not regarded as a true Soviet ally. Its ruler, though a stern communist, played too much like the gypsy gangsters native to his country. That left . . . Bulgaria. Of course. Neighbor to Turkey, and Turkey was a Muslim country, but one with a secularized culture and a lot of good gangster material. And the Bulgars had a lot of cross-border contacts, often covered as smuggling activity, which they used to get NATO intelligence, just as Goderenko did in Rome.

So, they would use the *rezident* in Sofia to get the Bulgars to do their dirty work. They had a debt of long standing to KGB, after all. Moscow Centre had enabled them to dispose of their wayward national on Westminster Bridge in a very clever operation that been partially blown only by the worst case of bad luck.

But there was a lesson in that, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy reminded himself. Just as with that Mafia killing, the operation could not be so clever as to point directly to KGB. No, this one had to look gangsterish in its execution. Even then, there were dangers. Western governments would have their suspicions—but with no direct or even indirect connection to Dzerzhinskiy Square, they would not be able to talk about it in public. . . .

Would that be good enough? he asked himself.

The Italians, the Americans, and the British would all wonder. They would whisper, and perhaps those whispers would find their way into the public press. Did that matter?

It depended on how important this operation was to Andropov and the Politburo, didn't it? There would be risks, but in the great political reckoning, you weighed the risks against the importance of the mission.

So Station Rome would be the reconnaissance element. Station Sofia would contract the Bulgarians to hire the shooter—it would probably have to be done with a pistol. Getting close enough to use a knife was too difficult a task to plan for seriously, and rifles were too hard to conceal, though a sub-machine gun was always the weapon of choice for something like this. And the shooter would not even be a citizen of a socialist country. No, they'd get one from a NATO country. There was some degree of complexity here. But not all that much.

Rozhdestvenskiy lit up another cigarette and mentally walked back and forth through his reasoning, looking for errors, looking for weaknesses. There were some. There were always some. The real problem would be in finding a good Turk to do the shooting. For that they had to depend on the Bulgars. Just how good were their clandestine services? Rozhdestvenskiy had never worked directly with them, and knew them only by reputation. That reputation was not entirely good. They reflected their government, which was cruder and more thuggish than Moscow, not very *kulturniy,* but he supposed that was partly Russian chauvinism on the KGB's part. Bulgaria was Moscow's little brother, politically and culturally, and big brother-little brother thinking was inescapable. They just had to be good enough to have decent contacts in Turkey, and that meant just one good intelligence officer, preferably one trained in Moscow. There would be a lot of those, and KGB's own academy

would have the necessary records. The Sofia *rezident* might even know him personally.

This theoretical exercise was shaping up, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy thought to himself, with some degree of pride. So he still knew how to set up a good field operation, despite having become a headquarters drone. He smiled as he stubbed out his smoke. Then he lifted his white phone and dialed 111 for the Chairman's office.

CHAPTER 8

THE DISH

THANK YOU, ALEKSEY NIKOLAY'CH. That is a most interesting concept. So, how do we move forward, then?"

"Comrade Chairman, we have Rome keep us updated on the Pope's schedule—as far in advance as possible. We do not let them know of the existence of any operation. They are merely a source of information. When the time comes, we might wish for one of their officers to be in the area merely to observe, but it is better for all concerned that Goderenko knows as little as possible."

"You do not trust him?"

"No, Comrade Chairman. Excuse me; I did not mean to give that impression. But the less he knows, the less he might ask questions or inadvertently ask things of his personnel that might tip matters off, even innocently. We choose our Chiefs of Station for their intelligence, for their ability to see things where others do not. Should he sense that something is happening, his professional expertise might compel him at least to keep watch—and that might impede the operation."

"Freethinkers," Andropov snorted.

"Can it be any other way?" Rozhdestvenskiy asked reasonably. "There is always that price when you hire men of intelligence."

Andropov nodded. He was not so much a fool as to ignore the lesson.

"Good work, Colonel. What else?"

"Timing is crucial, Comrade Chairman."

"How long to set something like this up?" Andropov asked.

"Certainly a month, likely more. Unless you have people already in place, these things always take longer than you hope or expect," Rozhdestvenskiy explained.

"I shall need that much time to get approval for this. But we will go forward

with operational planning, so that when approval comes, we can execute as rapidly as possible."

Execute, Rozhdestvenskiy thought, *was the right choice of words,* but even he found it cold. And he had said *when* approval comes, not *if,* the colonel noted. Well, Yuriy Vladimirovich was supposed to be the most powerful man on the Politburo now, and that suited Aleksey Nikolay'ch. What was good for his agency was also good for him, especially in his new job. There might be general's stars at the end of this professional rainbow, and that possibility suited him as well.

"How would you proceed?" the Chairman asked.

"I should cable Rome to assuage Goderenko's fears and tell him that his tasking for the moment is to ascertain the Pope's schedule for traveling, appearances, and so forth. Next, I will cable Ilya Bubovoy. He's our *rezident* in Sofia. Have you met him, Comrade Chairman?"

Andropov searched his memory. "Yes, at a reception. He's overweight, isn't he?"

Rozhdestvenskiy smiled. "Yes, Ilya Fedorovich has always fought that, but he's a good officer. He's been there for four years, and he enjoys good relations with the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost."*

"Grown a mustache, has he?" Andropov asked, with a rare hint of humor. Russians often chided their neighbors for facial hair, which seemed to be a national characteristic of Bulgarians.

"That I do not know," the colonel admitted. He was not yet so obsequious as to promise to find out.

"What will your cable to Sofia say?"

"That we have an operational requirement for—"

The Chairman cut him off: "Not in a cable. Fly him here. I want security very tight on this, and flying him back and forth from Sofia will raise few eyebrows."

"By your order. Immediately?" Rozhdestvenskiy asked.

"Da. Yes, at once."

The colonel came to his feet. "Right away, Comrade Chairman. I will go to communications directly."

Chairman Andropov watched him leave. One nice thing about KGB, Yuriy Vladimirovich thought, when you gave orders here, things actually happened. Unlike the Party Secretariat.

COLONEL ROZHDESTVENSKIY took the elevator back down to the basement and headed for communications. Captain Zaitzev was back at his desk, doing his paperwork as usual—that's all he had, really—and the colonel went right up to him.

"I have two more dispatches for you."

"Very well, Comrade Colonel." Oleg Ivan'ch held out his hand.

"I have to write them out," Rozhdestvenskiy clarified.

"You can use that desk right there, comrade." The communicator pointed. "Same security as before?"

"Yes, one-time pad for both. One more for Rome, and the other for Station Sofia. Immediate priority," he added.

"That is fine." Zaitzev handed him the message form blanks and turned back to his work, hoping the dispatches wouldn't be too lengthy. They had to be pretty important for the colonel to come down here even before they were drafted. Andropov must have a real bug up his rectum. Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy was the Chairman's personal gofer. It had to be kind of demeaning for someone with the skills to be a *rezident* somewhere interesting. Travel, after all, was the one real perk KGB offered its employees.

Not that Zaitzev got to travel. Oleg Ivanovich knew too much to be allowed in a Western country. After all, he might not come back—KGB always worried about that. And for the first time, he wondered why. That was the kind of day it had been. Why did KGB worry so much about possible defections? He'd seen dispatches openly discussing the troublesome possibility, and he'd seen officers who had been brought home to "talk" about it here in The Centre and often never returned to the field. He'd always known about it, but he'd never actually thought about it for as much as thirty seconds.

They left because—because they thought their state was wrong? Could they actually think it was so bad they would do something so drastic as *betray* their Motherland? That, Zaitzev belatedly realized, was a very big thought.

And yet, what was KGB but an agency that lived on betrayal? How many hundreds—thousands—of dispatches had he read about just that? Those were Westerners—Americans, Britons, Germans, Frenchmen—all used by KGB to find out things that his country wanted to know—and they were all traitors to their mother countries, weren't they? They did it mainly for money. He'd seen a lot of those messages, too, discussions between The Centre and the *rezidenturas* discussing the amounts of payment. He knew that The Centre was always niggardly with the money it paid out, which was to be expected. The agents wanted American dollars, British pounds sterling, Swiss francs. And cash, real paper money—they always wanted to be paid in cash. Never rubles or even certificate rubles. It was the only money they trusted, clearly enough. They betrayed their country for money, but only for *their* own money. Some of them even demanded millions of dollars, not that they ever got it. The most he'd ever seen authorized was £50,000, paid out for information about British and American naval ciphers. *What would the Western powers* not *pay for the communications information in* his *mind?* Zaitzev thought idly. It was a question with no answer. He did not really have the ability to frame the question properly, much less consider the answer seriously.

"Here you go," Rozhdestvenskiy said, handing over the message blanks. "Send them out at once."

"As soon as I get them enciphered," the communicator promised.

"And the same security as before," the colonel added.

"Certainly. Same identifier tag on both?" Oleg Ivanovich asked.

"Correct, all with this number," he replied, tapping the 666 in the upper-right corner.

"By your order, Comrade Colonel. I'll see to it right now."

"And call me when they go out."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel. I have your office number," Zaitzev assured him.

There was more to it than the mere words, Oleg knew. The tone of his voice had told him much. This *was* going out under the direct order of the Chairman, and all this attention made it a matter of the highest priority, not just something of routine interest to an important man. This wasn't about ordering pantyhose for some bigwig's teenage daughter.

He walked to the cipher-book storage room to get two books, the ones for Rome and Sofia, and then he pulled out his cipher wheel and laboriously encrypted both messages. All in all, it took forty minutes. The message to Colonel Bubovoy in Sofia was a simple one: Fly to Moscow immediately for consultations. Zaitzev wondered if that would make the *rezident*'s knees wobble a little. Colonel Bubovoy could not know what the numerical identifier meant, of course. He'd find out soon enough.

The rest of Zaitzev's day went routinely. He managed to lock up his confidential papers and walk out before six in the evening.

LUNCH AT CENTURY HOUSE was good, but British-eccentric. Ryan had learned to enjoy the British Ploughman's Lunch, mainly because the bread was so uniformly excellent over here.

"So, your wife's a surgeon?"

Jack nodded. "Yeah, eye cutter. She's actually starting to use lasers for some things now. She's hoping to be a pioneer in that stuff."

"Lasers? What for?" Harding asked.

"Some of it's like welding. They use a laser to cauterize a leaky blood vessel, for instance—they did it with Suslov. Blood leaked inside the eye, so they drilled into the eyeball and drained out all the fluid—aqueous humor, I think they call it—and then used lasers to weld shut the leaky vessels. Sounds pretty yucky, doesn't it?"

Harding shuddered at the thought. "I suppose it's better than being blind."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Like when Sally was in shock-trauma. The idea of somebody carving up my little girl didn't exactly thrill me." Ryan remembered how fucking awful that had been, in fact. Sally still had the scars on her chest and abdomen from it, though they were fading.

"What about you, Jack? You've been under the knife before," Simon observed.

"I was asleep, and they didn't make videos of the operations—but you know, Cathy would probably be interested in seeing all three of them."

"Three?"

"Yeah, two when I was in the Marines. They stabilized me on the ship, then flew me to Bethesda for the rest of it—I was asleep practically the whole time, thank God, but the neurosurgeons there weren't quite good enough, and that left me with a bad back. Then, when Cathy and I were dating—no, we were engaged then—my back blew up again over dinner in Little Italy, and she took me into Hopkins and had Sam Rosen take a look at me. Sam fixed it all up. Good guy, and a hell of a doc. You know, sometimes it's nice to be married to a doctor. She knows some of the best people in the world." Ryan took a big bite of turkey and baguette. It was better than the burgers in the CIA cafeteria.

“Anyway, that’s the short version of a three-year adventure that started with a broke helicopter on Crete. It ended up with me being married, so I guess it all worked out okay.”

Harding filled his pipe out of a leather pouch and lit it. “So, how’s your report coming on Soviet management and practices?”

Jack set his beer down. “It’s amazing how screwed up they are, especially when you compare their internal documents with the hard data we learn when our guys get hands-on with their gear. What they call quality control, we call a dog’s breakfast. At Langley, I saw some stuff on their fighter planes that the Air Force got, mainly through the Israelis. The goddamned parts don’t fit together! They can’t even cut aluminum sheets into regular shapes. I mean, a high-school kid in shop class would have to do better or flunk out of school. We know they have competent engineers, especially the guys who work in theoretical stuff, but their manufacturing practices are so primitive that you’d expect better from third-graders.”

“Not in all areas, Jack,” Harding cautioned.

“And not all the Pacific Ocean’s blue, Simon. There are islands and volcanoes, sure. I know that. But the rule is the ocean is blue, and the rule in the Soviet Union is shitty work. The problem is that their economic system doesn’t reward people for doing good work. There’s a saying in economics: ‘Bad money drives out good.’ That means poor performance will take over if good performance isn’t recognized. Well, over there, mainly it isn’t, and for their economy it’s like cancer. What happens in one place gradually carries over to the whole system.”

“There are some things at which they are very good indeed,” Harding persisted.

“Simon, the Bolshoi Ballet isn’t going to attack into West Germany. Neither is their Olympic team,” Jack retorted. “Their military may be competently led at the higher levels, but their equipment is crummy, and the middle-level management is practically nonexistent. Without my gunnery sergeant and my squad leaders, I could not have used my platoon of Marines efficiently, but the Red Army doesn’t have sergeants as we understand them. They have competent officers—and, again, some of their theoretical people are world-class—and their soldiers are probably patriotic Russians and all that, but without proper training at the tactical level, they’re like a beautiful car with flat tires. The engine might turn over and the paint job might shine, but the car isn’t going anywhere.”

Harding took a few contemplative puffs. “Then what are we worried about?”

Jack shrugged. “There’s a hell of a lot of them, and quantity does have a quality all its own. If we go forward with our defense buildup, however, we can stop anything they try. A Russian tank regiment is just a collection of targets if we have the right equipment and our guys are properly trained and led. Anyway, that’s what my report is probably going to say.”

“It’s a little early for a conclusion,” Simon told his new American friend. Ryan hadn’t yet learned how a bureaucracy was supposed to work.

“Simon, I used to make my money in trading. You succeed in that business by seeing things a little faster than the next guy, and that means you don’t

wait until you have every last little crumb of information. I can see where this information is pointing me. It's bad over there, and it's getting worse. Their military is a distillation of what is good and bad in their society. Look at how badly they're doing in Afghanistan. I haven't seen your data, but I've seen what they have at Langley, and it isn't pretty. Their military is performing very poorly in that rockpile."

"I think they will ultimately succeed."

"It's possible," Jack conceded, "but it'll be an ugly win. We did a lot better in Vietnam." He paused. "You guys have ugly memories of Afghanistan, don't you?"

"My great-uncle was there in 1919. He said it was worse than the Battle of the Somme. Kipling did a poem that ends with an instruction to a soldier to blow his brains out rather than be captured there. I'm afraid some Russians have learned that lesson, to their sorrow."

"Yeah, the Afghans are courageous, but not overly civilized," Jack agreed. "But I think they're going to win. There's talk at home about giving them the Stinger SAM. That would neutralize the helicopters the Russians are using, and without those, Ivan's got a problem."

"Is the Stinger that good?"

"Never used it myself, but I've heard some nice things about it."

"And the Russian SAM-seven?"

"They kind of invented the idea of a man-portable SAM, didn't they? But we got a bunch through the Israelis in seventy-three, and our guys weren't all that impressed. Again, Ivan had a great idea, then couldn't execute it properly. That's their curse, Simon."

"Then explain KGB to me," Harding challenged.

"Same as the Bolshoi Ballet and their ice hockey teams. They load a lot of talent and money into that agency, and they get a fair return for it—but they have a lot of spooks skip over the wall, too, don't they?"

"True," Simon had to concede.

"And why, Simon?" Jack asked. "Because they fill their heads with how corrupt and messed up we are, and then when their people get here and look around, it isn't all that bad, is it? Hell, we have safe houses all over America with KGB guys in them, watching TV. Not many of them decide to go home, either. I've never met a defector, but I've read a lot of transcripts, and they all say pretty much the same thing. Our system is better than theirs, and they're smart enough to tell the difference."

"We have some living here as well," Harding admitted. He didn't want to admit that the Russians also had a few Brits—nowhere near as many, just enough to be a considerable embarrassment to Century House. "You're a hard man to debate, Jack."

"I just speak the truth, buddy. That's what we're here for, isn't it?"

"That's the theory," Harding had to admit. This Ryan fellow would never be a bureaucrat, the Brit decided, and wondered if that was a good thing or bad. The Americans took a different slant on things, and the contrast to his own organization's take was entertaining, at least. Ryan had a lot to learn . . . but he also had a few things to teach, Harding realized. "How's your book coming along?"

Ryan's face changed. "Haven't gotten much work done lately. I do have my computer set up. Hard to concentrate on that after a full day here—but if I don't make the time, the thing will never get done. At heart, I'm lazy," Ryan admitted.

"Then how did you become rich?" Harding demanded. He got a grin.

"I'm also greedy. Gertrude Stein said it, pal: 'I've been rich and I've been poor. It's better to be rich.' Truer words have never been spoken."

"I must discover that for myself someday," the British civil servant observed.

Oops, Ryan thought. *Well, it wasn't his fault, was it?* Simon was smart enough to make money in the real world, but he didn't seem to think in those terms. It made good sense to have a smart guy here in the analyst pool at Century House, even though that meant sacrificing his own well-being for his country. But that was not a bad thing, and Ryan reflected that he was doing it, too. His advantage was that he'd made his money up front and could afford to kiss this job off and go back to teaching whenever the urge struck him. It was a sort of independence that most government employees would never know. . . . *And their work probably suffered because of it,* Jack thought.

ZAITZEV MADE HIS WAY out past the various security checkpoints. Some people were frisked at random by the guards to make sure that they weren't taking anything out with them, but the checks—he'd suffered through his share of them—were too cursory to be effective, he thought. Just enough to be a nuisance, and not regular enough to be a real threat—perhaps once in thirty days—and, if you got frisked one day, you knew you were safe for at least the next five or so, because the guards knew all the faces of the people they checked out, and even here there was human contact and friendly relationships among the employees, especially at the working level—a kind of blue-collar solidarity that was in some ways surprising. As it happened, Zaitzev was allowed to pass without inspection and made his way into the capacious square, then walked to the metro station.

He didn't usually dress in the paramilitary uniform—most KGB employees did not choose to do so, as though their employment might make them seem tainted to their fellow citizens. Neither did he hide it. If anyone asked, he gave an honest answer, and the questioning usually stopped there, because everyone knew that you didn't ask questions about what went on at the Committee for State Security. There were occasional movies and TV shows about KGB, and some of them were even fairly honest, though they gave little away concerning methods and sources beyond what some fiction writer might imagine, which wasn't always all that accurate. There was a small office at The Centre that consulted on such things, usually taking things out and—rarely—putting accurate things in, because it was in his agency's interest to be fearful and forbidding to Soviet citizens and foreigners alike. *How many ordinary citizens supplement their incomes by being informers?* Zaitzev wondered. He almost never saw any dispatches about that—that sort of thing rarely went overseas.

The things that did go out of the country were troubling enough. Colonel Bubovoy would probably be in Moscow the next day. There was regular air service between Sofia and Moscow through Aeroflot. Colonel Goderenko in Rome had been told to sit down and shut up, and to forward to The Centre the Pope's appearance schedule for the indefinite future. Andropov hadn't lost interest in that bit of information.

And now the Bulgarians would be involved. Zaitzev worried about that, but he didn't need to wonder all that much. He'd seen those dispatches before. The Bulgarian State Security Service was the loyal vassal of KGB. The communicator knew that. He'd seen enough messages go to Sofia, sometimes through Bubovoy, sometimes directly, and sometimes for the purpose of ending someone's life. KGB didn't do much of that anymore, but *Dirzhavna Sugurnost* did, on occasion. Zaitzev imagined that they had a small subunit of the DS officers who were trained and skilled and *practiced* at that particular skill. And the message header had the 666 suffix, so this dispatch concerned the same thing that Rome had been initially queried on. So this was going forward.

His agency—his country—wanted to kill that Polish priest, and that, Zaitzev thought, was probably a bad thing.

He took the escalator down to the subterranean station amid the usual afterwork crowd. Usually, the crowd of people was comforting. It meant that Zaitzev was in his element, surrounded by his countrymen, people just like himself, serving one another and the State. But was that true? *What would these people think of Andropov's mission?* It was hard to gauge. The subway ride was usually quiet. Some people might talk to friends, but group discussions were rare, except perhaps for some unusual sporting event, a bad referee's call at a soccer match, or a particularly spectacular play on the hockey rink. Other than that, people were usually alone with their thoughts.

The train stopped, and Zaitzev shuffled aboard. As usual, there were no seats available. He grasped the overhead handrail and kept thinking.

Are the others on the train thinking as well? If so, about what? Jobs? Children? Wives? Lovers? Food? You couldn't tell. Even Zaitzev couldn't tell, and he'd seen these people—these *same* people—on the metro for years. He knew only a few names, mainly given names overheard in conversations. No, he knew them only by their favorite sports teams. . . .

It struck him suddenly and hard how alone he was in his society. *How many real friends do I have?* Zaitzev asked himself. The answer was shockingly few. Oh, sure, there were people at work he chatted with. He knew the most intimate details about their wives and children—but friends in whom he could confide, with whom he could talk over some troubling development, to whom he could go for guidance in a troubling situation . . . No, he didn't have any of those. That made him unusual in Moscow. Russians often made deep and close friendships, and consecrated them often enough with the deepest and sometimes the darkest of secrets, as though daring one of their intimates to be a KGB informer, as though courting a trip to the Gulag. But his job denied him that. He'd never dare to discuss the things he did at work, not even to his coworkers.

No, whatever problems he had with this 666 series of messages were ones

he had to work out for himself. Even his Irina couldn't know. She might talk with her friends at GUM, and that would surely be death for him. Zaitzev let out a breath and looked around. . . .

There he was again, that American embassy official, reading *Sovietskiy Sport* and minding his own business. He was wearing a raincoat—rain had been forecast, but had not materialized—but not a hat. The coat was open, not buttoned or belted. He was less than two meters away. . . .

On an impulse, Zaitzev shifted his position from one side of the car to the other, switching hands on the overhead rail as though to stretch a stiff muscle. That move put him next to the American. And, on further impulse, Zaitzev slid his hand into the raincoat pocket. There was nothing in there, no keys or pocket change, just empty cloth. But he had established that he could reach into this American's pocket and remove his hand without notice. He backed away, sweeping his eyes around the subway car to see if anyone had noticed or had even been looking his way. But . . . no, almost certainly not. His maneuver had gone undetected, even by the American.

FOLEY DIDN'T EVEN let his eyes move as he read to the bottom of the hockey article. Had he been in New York or any other Western city, he would have thought that someone had just attempted to pick his pocket. Strangely, he didn't expect that here. Soviet citizens were not allowed to have Western currency, and so there was nothing but trouble to be gained in robbing an American on the street, much less picking his pocket. And KGB, which was probably still shadowing him, was most unlikely to do anything like that. If they wanted to lift his wallet, they'd use a two-man team, as professional American pickpockets did, one to delay and distract, and the other to make the lift. You could get almost anyone that way, unless the target was alerted, and staying alert for so long was a lot to ask, even of an expert professional spook. So you employed passive defenses, like wrapping a rubber band or two around the wallet—simple, but very effective, and one of the things they taught you at The Farm, the sort of basic tradecraft that didn't announce *"spy!"* to everyone. The NYPD advised people to do the same thing on the streets of Manhattan, and he was *supposed* to look like an American. Since he had a diplomatic passport and "legal" cover, theoretically, his person was inviolable. Not necessarily from a street thug, of course, and both the KGB and the FBI were not above having a highly trained street thug rough someone up, albeit within carefully thought-through parameters, lest things get out of control. The entire state of affairs made the Imperial Court of Byzantium look simple by comparison, but Ed Foley didn't make the rules.

Those rules now did not allow him to check his pocket or make the least sign that he knew that someone's hand had been in there. Maybe someone had dropped him a note—a notice of desire to defect, even. But why him? His cover was supposed to be as solid as a T-bill, unless someone in the embassy had made a very shrewd guess and then ratted him out. . . . But no, even then, KGB wouldn't tip their hand this quickly. They'd watch him for a few weeks at least, just to see what else he might lead them to. KGB played the game too

skillfully for that sort of play, so, no, there wasn't much chance that whoever had searched his pocket was a Second Chief Directorate guy. And probably not a pickpocket, either. *Then what?* Foley wondered. He'd have to be patient to find out, but Foley knew a lot about patience. He kept on reading his newspaper. If it were someone who wanted to do a little business, why scare him off? At the very least, he'd let him feel clever. It was always useful to help other people feel smart. That way, they could continue their mistakes.

Three more stops before he got off the subway. Foley had known up front that it would be a lot more productive to ride it than to drive the car. That Mercedes was just too standout-ish for this place. It would make Mary Pat stand out, too, but to her way of thinking, that worked for her rather than against. His wife had brilliant field instincts, better than his, but she often scared him in her daring. It wasn't so much that Mary Pat was a risk-taker. Every member of the DO took risks. It was her relish for doing so that occasionally worried him. For him, playing with the Russians was part of the job. It was business, as Don Vito Corleone would have put it, not personal. But for Mary Patricia, it was as personal as hell, because of her grandfather.

She'd lusted to be part of CIA before they'd met in the Student Union at Fordham, and then again at the CIA recruiter's desk, and they'd hit it off soon after that. She'd already had her Russian-language skills. She could pass for a native. She could alter her accent for any region of the country. She could feign being an instructor in poetry at Moscow State University, and she was pretty, and pretty women had an advantage over everyone else. It was the oldest of prejudices, that the attractive among us had to be good people, that the bad people had to be ugly because they did ugly things. Men were especially deferential to pretty women, other women were less so, because they envied their looks, but even they were nice by instinct. So Mary Pat could skate on a lot of things, because she was just that pretty American girl, that ditsy blonde, because blondes were universally thought to be dumb, even here in Russia, where they were not all that uncommon. The ones here were probably natural blondes, too, because the local cosmetics industry was about as advanced as it must have been in twelfth-century Hungary, and there wasn't much Clairol Blond #100G in the local drugstores. No, the Soviet Union paid scant attention to the needs of its womenfolk, which led his mind to another question—why had the Russians stopped at only one revolution? In America there would have been hell to pay for the lack of choices in clothes and cosmetics the women had here. . . .

The train stopped at his station. Foley made his way to the door and walked to the escalator. Halfway up, his curiosity got the better of him. He rubbed his nose as though with a case of the sniffles, and fished in his pocket for a handkerchief. He rubbed his nose with it and then shoved it in his coat pocket, which, he discovered, was empty. So what had that been all about? There was no telling. Just one more random event in a life filled with them?

But Edward Foley hadn't been trained to think in terms of random events. He'd continue this regular schedule, and be sure to catch this same subway train every day for a week or so, just to see if there might be a repeat.

ALBERT BYRD SEEMED a competent eye cutter. He was shorter and older than Jack. He had a beard, black and showing hints of gray—like a lot of beards in England, she'd noted. And tattoos. More than she'd ever encountered before. Professor Byrd was a skilled clinician, good with his patients, and a very adept surgeon, liked and trusted by his nursing team—always the sign of a good doc, Cathy knew. He seemed to be a good teacher, but Cathy already knew most of what he had to teach, and knew more about lasers than he did. The argon laser here was new, but not as new as the one at Hopkins, and it would be two weeks before they even had a xenon-arc laser, for which she was Wilmer Eye Institute's best jockey at Hopkins.

The bad news was in the physical facilities. Health care in Britain was effectively a government monopoly. Everything was free—and, like everywhere in the world, you got what you paid for. The waiting rooms were far shabbier than Cathy was used to, and she remarked on it.

"I know," Professor Byrd said tiredly. "It's not a priority."

"The third case I saw this morning, Mrs. Dover, she'd been on the waiting list for eleven months—for a cataract evaluation that took me twenty minutes. My God, Albert, at home her family physician just calls my secretary and I see her in three or four days. I work hard at Hopkins, but not that hard."

"What would you charge?"

"For that? Oh . . . two hundred dollars. Since I'm an assistant professor at Wilmer, I come a little higher than a new resident." But, she didn't add, she was a damned sight smarter than the average resident, more experienced, and a faster worker. "Mrs. Dover is going to need surgery to correct it," she added. "Want me to do it?"

"Complicated?" Byrd asked.

She shook her head. "Routine procedure. About ninety minutes' work because of her age, but it doesn't look as though there should be any complications."

"Well, Mrs. Dover will go on the list."

"How long?"

"It's not an emergency procedure . . . nine to ten months," Byrd figured.

"You're kidding," Cathy objected. "That long?"

"That's about normal."

"But that's nine or ten months during which she can't see well enough to drive a car!"

"She won't ever see a bill," Byrd pointed out.

"Fine. She can't read the newspapers for the best part of a year. Albert, that's awful!"

"It's our national health-care system," Byrd explained.

"I see," Cathy said. But she didn't really. The surgeons here were proficient enough, but they did only a bit more than half the procedures she and her colleagues did at Hopkins—and she'd never felt overworked in the Maumenee Building. Sure, you worked hard. But people needed you, and her job was to restore and improve the sight of people who required expert medical care—and to Caroline Ryan, M.D., FACS, that was a religious calling. It wasn't that the local docs were lazy, it was just that the system allowed—nay, encouraged

—them to take a very laissez-faire attitude toward their work. She'd arrived in a very new medical world, and it wasn't all that brave.

Neither had she seen a CAT scanner. They'd essentially been invented in Britain by EMI, but some bean counter in the British government—the Home Office, they'd told her—had decided that the country only needed a few of them, and so most hospitals lost the lottery. The CAT scan had just come into being a few years before she'd entered the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, but in the ensuing decade they'd become as much a part of medicine as the stethoscope. Practically every hospital in America had one. They cost a million dollars apiece, but the patient paid for the use of the things, and they paid themselves off quickly enough. She only rarely needed one—to examine tumors around the eye, for example—but when you did, you damned well needed it right now!

And at Johns Hopkins, the floors were mopped every day.

But the people had the same needs, and she was a doc, and that, Cathy decided, was that. One of her medical school colleagues had gone to Pakistan and come back with the kind of experience in eye pathologies that you couldn't get in a lifetime in American hospitals. Of course, he'd also come back with amoebic dysentery, which was guaranteed to lessen anyone's enthusiasm for foreign travel. At least that wouldn't happen here, she told herself. Unless she caught it in a doctor's waiting room.

CHAPTER 9

SPIRITS

THUS FAR, Ryan had not managed to catch the same train home as his wife, always managing to get home later than she did. By the time he got home, he'd be able to think about doing some work on his Halsey book. It was about 70 percent done, with all the serious research behind him. He just had to finish the writing. What people never seemed to understand was that this was the hard part; researching was just locating and recording facts. Making the facts seem to come together in a coherent story was the difficult part, because human lives were never coherent, especially a hard-drinking warrior like William Frederick Halsey, Jr. Writing a biography was more than anything else an exercise in amateur psychiatry. You seized incidents that happened in his life at randomly selected ages and education levels, but you could never know the little key memories that formed a life—the third-grade schoolyard fight, or the admonishment from his maiden aunt Helen that resonated in his mind for his entire life, because men rarely revealed such things to others. Ryan had such memories, and some of them appeared and disappeared in his consciousness at seemingly random intervals, when the message from Sister Frances Mary in Second Grade at St. Matthew's School leaped into his memory as though he were seven years old again. A skilled biographer seemed to have the ability to simulate such things, but it sometimes came down to making things up, to applying your own personal experiences to the life of another person and that was . . . fiction, and history wasn't supposed to be fiction. Neither was an article in a newspaper, but Ryan knew from his own experience that much purported "news" was made up from whole cloth. But nobody ever said that writing a biography was easy. His first book, *Doomed Eagles,* had been in retrospect a much easier project. Bill Halsey, Fleet Admiral, USN, had fascinated him since reading the man's own autobiography

as a boy. He'd commanded naval forces in battle, and while that had seemed exciting to a boy of ten years, it was positively frightening to a man of thirty-two, because now he understood the things that Halsey didn't discuss in full—the unknowns, having to trust intelligence information without really knowing where it came from, how it was gathered, how it was analyzed and processed, how it was transmitted to him, and whether or not the enemy was listening in. Ryan was now in that loop, and having to wager his life on the work that he did himself was frightening as hell—rather more so, actually, to be wagering the lives of others whom he might or, more likely, might not know.

There was a joke he remembered from his time in the Marine Corps, Ryan thought, as the green English countryside slid past his window: The motto of the intelligence services was "We bet *your* life." That was now his business. He had to wager the lives of others. Theoretically, he might even come up with an intelligence estimate that risked the fate of his country. You had to be so damned sure of yourself and your data. . . .

But you couldn't always be sure, could you? He'd scoffed at many official CIA estimates to which he'd been exposed back at Langley, but it was a damned sight easier to spit on the work of others than it was to produce something better yourself. His Halsey book, tentatively titled *Fighting Sailor,* would upset a few conventional-wisdom apple carts, and deliberately so. Ryan thought that the conventional thinking in some areas was not merely incorrect, but stuff that could not possibly be true. Halsey had acted rightly in some cases where the all-seeing eye of hindsight had castigated him for being wrong. And that was unfair. Halsey could only be judged responsible for the information that was available to him. To say otherwise was like castigating doctors for not being able to cure cancer. They were smart people doing their best, but there were some things they didn't know yet—they were working like hell to find them out, but the process of discovery took time then, and it was still taking time now, Ryan thought. Was it ever. And Bill Halsey could only know what he was given, or what a reasonably intelligent man might deduce from that information, given a lifetime of experience and what he knew of the psychology of his enemy. And even then the enemy did not willingly cooperate in his own destruction, did he?

That's my job, all right, Ryan thought behind blank eyes. It was a quest for Truth, but it was more than that. He had to replicate for his own masters the thinking processes of others, to explain them to his own superiors, so that they, Ryan's bosses, could better understand their adversaries. He was playing pshrink without a diploma. In a way, that was amusing. It was less so when you considered the magnitude of the task and the potential consequences of failure. It came down to two words: *dead people.* In the Basic School at Quantico Marine Base, they'd hammered the same lesson home often enough. Screw up leading your platoon, and some of your Marines don't go home to their mothers and wives, and that would be a heavy burden to carry on your conscience for the rest of your life. The profession of arms attached a large price tag to mistakes. Ryan hadn't served long enough to learn that lesson for himself, but it had frightened him on quiet nights, feeling the roll of the ship on her way across the Atlantic. He'd talked it over with Gunny Tate, but the sergeant—then an "elderly" man of thirty-four—had just told him to

remember his training, trust his instincts, and to think before acting if he had the time, and then warned that you didn't always have the luxury of time. And he'd told his young boss not to worry, because he seemed pretty smart for a second lieutenant. Ryan would never forget that. The respect of a Marine gunnery sergeant didn't come cheaply.

So he had the brains to make good intelligence estimates and the guts to put his name behind them, but he had to be damned sure they were good stuff before he put them out. Because he *was* betting the lives of other people, wasn't he?

The train slowed to a stop. He walked up the steps, and there were a few cabs topside. Jack imagined they had the train schedule memorized.

"Good evening, Sir John." Jack saw it was Ed Beaverton, his morning pickup.

"Hi, Ed. You know," Ryan said, getting into the front seat for a change. Better legroom. "My name is actually Jack."

"I can't call you that," Beaverton objected. "You're a knight."

"Only honorary, not a real one. I do not own a sword—well, only my Marine Corps one, and that's back home in the States."

"And you were a lieutenant, and I was only a corporal."

"And you jumped out of airplanes. Damned if I ever did anything that stupid, Eddie."

"Only twenty-eight times. Never broke anything," the taxi driver reported, turning up the hill.

"Not even an ankle?"

"Just a sprain or two. The boots help with that, you see," the cabbie explained.

"I haven't learned to like flying yet—damned sure I'll never jump out of an airplane." No, Jack was sure, he never would have opted for Force Recon. Those Marines just weren't wired right. He'd learned the hard way that flying over the beach in helicopters was scary enough. He still had dreams about it—the sudden sensation of falling, and seeing the ground rush up—but he always woke up just before impact, usually lurching up to a sitting position in the bed and then looking around the darkened bedroom to make sure he wasn't in that damned CH-46 with a bad aft rotor, falling to the rocks on Crete. It was a miracle that he and a lot of his Marines hadn't been killed. But his had been the only major injury. The rest of his platoon had gotten away with nothing worse than sprains.

Why the hell are you thinking about that? he demanded of himself. It was more than eight years in his past.

They were pulling up in front of the house in Grizedale Close. "Here we are, sir."

Ryan handed him his fare, plus a friendly tip. "The name's Jack, Eddie."

"Yes, sir. I'll see you in the morning."

"Roger that." Ryan walked off, knowing he'd never win that battle. The front door was unlocked in anticipation of his arrival. His tie went first, as he headed to the kitchen.

"Daddy!" Sally fairly screamed, as she ran to his arms. Jack scooped her up and gave and got a hug. "How's my big girl?"

"Fine."

Cathy was at the stove, fixing dinner. He set Sally down and headed to his wife for a kiss. "How is it," her husband asked, "that you're always home first? At home you're usually later."

"Unions," she replied. "Everybody clocks out on time here, and 'on time' is usually pretty early—not like Hopkins." Where, she didn't add, just about everyone on the professional staff worked late.

"Must be nice to work bankers' hours."

"Even dad doesn't leave his office this early, but everybody over here does. And lunch means a full hour—half the time away from the hospital. Well," she allowed, "the food's a little better that way."

"What's for dinner?"

"Spaghetti." And Jack saw that the pot was full of her special meat sauce. He turned to see a baguette of French bread on the counter.

"Where's the little guy?"

"Living room."

"Okay." Ryan headed that way. Little Jack was in his crib. He'd just mastered sitting up—it was a little early for that, but that was fine with his dad. Around him was a collection of toys, all of which found their way into his mouth. He looked up to see his father and managed a toothless smile. Of course, that merited a pickup, which Jack accomplished. His diaper felt dry and fresh. Doubtless, Miss Margaret had changed him before scooting off—as always, before Jack made it home from the shop. She was working out fairly well. Sally liked her, and that was the important part. He set his son back down, and the little guy resumed playing with a plastic rattle and watching the TV—especially the commercials. Jack went off to the bedroom to change into more comfortable clothes, then back to the kitchen. Then the doorbell chimed, much to everyone's surprise. Jack went to answer it.

"Dr. Ryan?" the voice asked in American English. It was a guy of Ryan's height and general looks, dressed in a jacket and tie, holding a large box.

"That's right."

"I got your STU for you, sir. I work comms at the embassy," the guy explained. "Mr. Murray said I should bring this right over."

The box was a cardboard cube about two and a half feet on a side, and blank, with no printing on it. Ryan let the man into the house and led him directly to his den. It took about three minutes to extract the oversized phone from the box. It went next to Jack's Apple IIe computer.

"You're NSA?" Ryan asked.

"Yes, sir. Civilian. Used to be in the Army Security Agency, E-5. Got out and got a pay increase as a civilian. Been over here two years. Anyway, here's your encryption key." He handed over the plastic device. "You know how these things work, right?"

"Oh yeah." Ryan nodded. "Got one on my desk downtown."

"So you know the rules about this. If anything breaks, you call me"—he handed over his card—"and nobody but me or one of my people is allowed to look at the inside. If that happens, the system self-destructs, of course. Won't start a fire or anything, but it does stink some, 'cause of the plastic. Anyway, that's it." He broke down the box.

"You want a Coke or anything?"

"No, thanks. Gotta get home." And with that, the communications expert walked back out the door to his car.

"What was that, Jack?" Cathy asked from the kitchen.

"My secure phone," Jack explained, returning to his wife's side.

"What's that for?"

"So I can call home and talk to my boss."

"Can't you do that from the office?"

"There's the time difference and, well, there are some things I can't talk about there."

"Secret-agent stuff," she snorted.

"That's right." Just like the pistol he had in his closet. Cathy accepted the presence of his Remington shotgun with some equanimity—he used it for hunting, and she was prepared to tolerate that, since you could cook and eat the birds, and the shotgun was unloaded. But she was less comfortable with a pistol. And so, like civilized married people, they didn't talk about it, so long as it was well out of Sally's reach, and Sally knew that her father's closet was off-limits. Ryan had gotten fond of his Browning Hi-Power 9mm automatic, which *was* loaded with fourteen Federal hollow-point cartridges and two spare magazines, plus tritium match sights and custom-made grips. If he ever needed a pistol again, this would be the one. He'd have to find a place to practice shooting, Ryan reminded himself. Maybe the nearby Royal Navy base had a range. Sir Basil could probably make a phone call and straighten it out. As an honorary knight, he didn't own a sword, but a pistol was the modern equivalent, and it could be a useful tool on occasion.

So could a corkscrew. "Chianti?" Ryan asked.

Cathy turned. "Okay, I don't have anything scheduled for tomorrow."

"Cath, I've never understood what a glass or two of wine tonight would have to do with surgery tomorrow—it's ten or twelve hours away."

"Jack, you don't mix alcohol with surgery," she explained patiently. "Okay? You don't drink and drive. You don't drink and cut, either. Not ever. Not once."

"Yes, doctor. So tomorrow you just set glasses prescriptions for people?"

"Uh-huh, simple day. How about you?"

"Nothing important. Same crap, different day."

"I don't know how you stand it."

"Well, it's interesting, secret crap, and you have to be a spook to understand it."

"Right." She poured the spaghetti sauce into a bowl. "Here."

"I haven't got the wine open yet."

"So work faster."

"Yes, Professor the Lady Ryan," Jack responded, taking the bowl of sauce and setting it on the table. Then he pulled the cork out of the Chianti.

Sally was too big a girl for a high chair but still small enough for a booster seat, which she carried to the chair herself. Since the dinner was "pisgetty," her father tucked the cloth napkin into her collar. The sauce would probably get to her pants anyway, but it would teach his little girl about napkins, and that, Cathy thought, was important. Then Ryan poured the wine. Sally didn't

ask for any. Her father had indulged her once (over his wife's objections), and that had ended that. Sally got some Coca-Cola.

SVETLANA WAS ASLEEP, finally. She liked to stay up as long as she could, every night the same, or so it seemed, until she finally put her head down. She slept with a smile, her father saw, like a little angel, the sort that decorated Italian cathedrals in the travel books he used to read. The TV was on. Some World War II movie, it sounded like. They were all the same. The Germans attacked cruelly—well, occasionally there was a German character with something akin to humanity, usually a German communist, it would be revealed along the way, torn by conflicting loyalties to his class (working class, of course) and his country—and the Soviets resisted bravely, losing a lot of defiant men at first until turning the tide, usually outside Moscow in December 1941, at Stalingrad in January 1943, or the Kursk Bulge in the summer of 1943. There was always a heroic political officer, a courageous private soldier, a wise old sergeant, and a bright young junior officer. Toss in a grizzled general who wept quietly and alone for his men, then had to set his feelings aside and get the job done. There were about five different formulas, all of them variations of the same theme, and the only real difference was whether Stalin was seen as a wise, godlike ruler or simply wasn't mentioned at all. *That* depended on when the film had been shot. Stalin had fallen out of fashion in the Soviet film industry about 1956, soon after Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev had made his famous but then-secret speech revealing what a monster Stalin had been—something Soviet citizens still had trouble with, especially the cabdrivers, or so it seemed. Truth in his country was a rare commodity, and almost always one hard to swallow.

But Zaitzev wasn't watching the movie now. Oleg Ivanovich sipped at his vodka, eyes focused on the TV screen, without seeing it. It had just struck him how huge a step he'd taken that afternoon on the metro. At the time, it had almost been a lark, like a child playing a prank, reaching into that American's pocket like a sneak-thief, just to see if he could do it. No one had noticed. He'd been clever and careful about it, and even the American hadn't noticed, or else he would have reacted.

So he'd just proven that he had the ability to . . . *what?* To *do* what? Oleg Ivan'ch asked himself with surprising intensity.

What the hell had he done on the metro coach? What had he been thinking about? Actually, he hadn't really thought about it at all. It had just been some sort of foolish impulse . . . hadn't it?

He shook his head and took another sip of his drink. He was a man of intelligence. He had a university degree. He was an excellent chess player. He had a job that required the highest security clearance, that paid well, and that had just put him at the bottom entry level of the *nomenklatura.* He was a person of importance—not much, but some. The KGB trusted him with knowledge about many things. The KGB had confidence in him . . . but . . .

But what*?* he asked himself. What came after the "but" part? His mind was wandering in directions he didn't understand and could barely see. . . .

The priest. It came down to that, didn't it? Or did it? What was he thinking? Zaitzev asked himself. He didn't really know if he was thinking anything at all. It was as though his hand had developed a mind of its own, taking action

without the brain's or the mind's permission, leading off in a direction that he didn't understand.

Yes, it had to be that damned priest. Was he bewitched? Was some outside force taking control of his body?

No! That is not possible! Zaitzev told himself. That was something from ancient tales, the sort of thing old women discussed—prattled about—over a boiling pot.

But why, then, did I put my hand in the American's pocket? his mind demanded of itself, but there was no immediate answer.

Do you want to be a part of murder? some small voice asked. *Are you willing to facilitate the murder of an innocent man?*

Was he innocent? Zaitzev asked himself, taking another swallow. Not a single dispatch crossing his desk suggested otherwise. In fact, he could hardly remember any mention of this Father Karol in any KGB messages during the past couple years. Yes, they'd taken note of his trip back to Poland soon after being elected Pope, but what man didn't go home after his promotion to see his friends and seek their approval of his new place in the world?

The Party was made up of men, too. And men made mistakes. He saw them every day, even from the skilled, highly trained officers of KGB, who were punished, or chided, or just remarked upon by their superiors in The Centre. Leonid Ilyich made mistakes. People chuckled about them over lunch often enough—or talked more quietly about the things his greedy children did, especially his daughter. Hers was a petty corruption, and while people talked about it, they usually spoke quietly. But he was thinking about a much larger and more dangerous kind of corruption.

Where did the legitimacy of the State come from? In the abstract, it came from the people, but the people had no say in things. The Party did, but only a small minority of the people were in the Party, and of those only a much smaller minority achieved anything resembling power. And so the legitimacy of his State resided atop what was by any logical measure . . . a fiction . . .

And that was a very big thought. Other countries were ruled by dictators, often fascists on the political Right. Fewer countries were ruled by people on the political Left. Hitler represented the most powerful and dangerous of the former, but he'd been overthrown by the Soviet Union and Stalin on one side, and by the Western states on the other. The two most unlikely of allies had combined to destroy the German threat. And who were they? They claimed to be democracies, and while that claim was consistently denigrated by his own country, the elections held in those countries were real—they had to be, since his country and his agency, the KGB, spent time and money trying to influence them—and so *there,* the Will of the People had some reality to it, or else why would KGB try to affect it? Exactly how much, Zaitzev didn't know. There was no telling from the information available in his own country, and he didn't bother listening to the Voice of America and other obvious propaganda arms of the Western nations.

So, it wasn't the people who wanted to kill the priest. It was Andropov, certainly, and the Politburo, possibly, who wished to do it. Even his workmates at The Centre had no particular bone to pick with Father Karol. There was no talk of his enmity to the Soviet Union. The State TV and radio

had not called out for class hatred against him, as they did for other foreign enemies. There had been no pejorative articles about him in *Pravda* that he'd seen of late. Just some rumbles about the labor problems in Poland, and those were not overly loud, more the sort of thing a neighbor might say about a misbehaving child next door.

But that's what it had to be all about. Karol was Polish, and a source of pride for the people there, and Poland was politically troubled because of labor disputes. Karol wanted to use his political or spiritual power to protect his people. That was understandable, wasn't it?

But was killing him understandable?

Who would stand up and say, "No, you cannot kill this man because you dislike his politics"? The Politburo? No, they'd go along with Andropov. He was the heir apparent. When Leonid Ilyich died, he'd be the one to take his chair at the head of the table. Another Party man. Well, what else could he be? The Party was the Soul of the People, so the saying went. That was about the only mention of "soul" the Party permitted.

Did some part of a man live on after death? That was what the soul was supposed to be, but here the Party was the soul, and the Party was a thing of men, and little more. And corrupt men at that.

And they wanted to kill a priest.

He'd seen the dispatches. In a very small way, he, Oleg Ivanovich Zaitzev, was helping. And that was eating at something inside him. A conscience? Was he supposed to have one of those? But a conscience was something that measured one set of facts or ideas against another and was either content or not. If not, if it found some action at fault, then the conscience started complaining. It whispered. It forced him to look and keep looking until the issue was resolved, until the wrong action was stopped, or reversed, or atoned for—

But how did you stop the Party or the KGB from doing something?

To do that, Zaitzev knew, you had, at the very least, to demonstrate that the proposed action was contrary to political theory or would have adverse political consequences, because politics was the measure of right and wrong. But wasn't politics too fleeting for that? Didn't "right" and "wrong" have to depend on something more solid than mere politics? Wasn't there some higher value system? Politics was just *tactics,* after all, wasn't it? And while tactics were important, strategy was more so, because strategy was the measure of what you used tactics for, and strategy in this case was supposed to be what was right—transcendentally right. Not just right at the moment, but right for all times—something historians could examine in a hundred or a thousand years and pronounce as correct action.

Did the Party think in such terms? How exactly did the Communist Party of the Soviet Union make its decisions? What was good for the people? But who measured that? Individuals did, Brezhnev, Andropov, Suslov, the rest of the full voting members of the Politburo, advised by the nonvoting candidate members, further advised by the Council of Ministers and the members of the Central Committee of the Party, all the senior members of the *nomenklatura*—the ones to whom the *rezident* in Paris shipped perfume and pantyhose in the diplomatic bag. Zaitzev had seen enough of those dispatches. And he'd heard

the stories. Those were the ones who lavished presents and status upon their children, the ones who raced down the center lane of the broad Moscow boulevards, the corrupt Marxist princes who ruled his country with hands of iron.

Did those princes think in terms of what was good for the *narod*—the masses, as they were called—the numberless workers and peasants whom they ruled, for whose good they supposedly looked after?

But probably the minor princes under Nikolay Romanov had thought and spoken the same way. And Lenin had ordered them all shot as enemies of the people. As modern movies spoke of the Great Patriotic War, so earlier movies had portrayed them for less sophisticated audiences as evil buffoons, hardly serious enemies, easily hated and easily killed, caricatures of real people who were all so different from those men who'd replaced them, of course. . . .

As the princes of old had driven their troika-harnessed sleds over the very bodies of the peasants on their way to the royal court, so today the officers of the Moscow militia kept the center lane open for the new *nomenklatura* members who didn't have time for traffic delays.

Nothing had really changed. . . .

Except that the czars of old had at least paid lip service to a higher authority. They'd financed St. Basil's Cathedral here in Moscow, and other noblemen had financed countless other churches in lesser cities, because even the Romanovs had acknowledged a power higher than theirs. But the Party acknowledged no higher order.

And so it could kill without regret, because killing was often a political necessity, a *tactical* advantage to be undertaken when and where convenient.

Was that all this was? Zaitzev asked himself. *Were they killing the Pope just because it was more convenient?*

Oleg Ivan'ch poured himself another portion of vodka from the nearby bottle and took another swallow.

There were many inconveniences in his life. It was too long a walk from his desk to the water cooler. There were people at work whom he didn't like—Stefan Yevgeniyevich Ivanov, for example, a more senior major in communications. How he'd managed to get promoted four years ago was a mystery to everyone in the section. He was disregarded by the more senior people as a drone who was unable to do any useful work. Zaitzev supposed every business had one such person, an embarrassment to the office, but not easily removed because . . . because he was just there and that was all there was to it. Were Ivanov out of the way, Oleg could be promoted—if not in rank, then in status to chief of the section. Every single breath Ivanov took was an inconvenience to Oleg Ivan'ch, but that didn't give him the right to kill the more senior communicator, did it?

No, he'd be arrested and prosecuted, and perhaps even executed for murder. Because it was forbidden by law. Because it was *wrong.* The law, the Party, and his own conscience told him that.

But Andropov wanted to kill Father Karol, and his conscience didn't say nay. Would some other conscience do so? Another swallow of vodka. Another snort. A *conscience,* on the *Politburo?*

Even in the KGB, there were no ruminations. No debates. No open

discussion. Just action messages and notices of completion or failure. Evaluations of foreigners, of course, discussions of the thinking of foreigners, real agents, or mere agents of influence—called "useful fools" in the KGB lexicon. Never had a field officer written back about an order and said, "No, comrade, we ought not to do that because it would be morally wrong." Goderenko in Rome had come closest, posing the observation that killing Karol might have adverse consequences on operations. Did that mean that Ruslan Borissovich had a troubled conscience as well? No. Goderenko had three sons—one in the Soviet navy; another, he'd heard, at the KGB's own academy out on the Ring Road; and the third in Moscow State University. If Ruslan Borissovich had any difficulties with the KGB, any action could mean, if not death, then at least serious embarrassment for his children, and few men took action like that.

So, was his the only conscience in KGB? Zaitzev took a swallow to ponder that one. Probably not. There were thousands of men in The Centre, and thousands more elsewhere, and just the laws of statistics made it likely that there were plenty of "good" men (however one defined that), but how did one identify them? It was certain death—or lengthy imprisonment—to try to go looking for them. That was the baseline problem he had. There was no one in whom he could confide his doubts. No one with whom he could discuss his worries—not a doctor, not a priest . . . not even his wife, Irina . . .

No, he had only his vodka bottle, and though it helped him think, after a fashion, it wasn't much of a companion. Russian men were not averse to shedding tears, but they wouldn't have helped either. Irina might ask a question, and he wouldn't be able to answer to anyone's satisfaction. All he had was sleep. It would not help, he was sure, and in this he was right.

Another hour and two more slugs of the vodka at least drugged him into sleepiness. His wife was dozing in front of the TV—the Red Amy had won the Battle of Kursk, again, and the movie ended at the beginning of a long march that would lead to the Reichstag in Berlin, full of hope and enthusiasm for the bloody task. Zaitzev chuckled to himself. It was more than he had at the moment. He carried his empty glass to the kitchen, then roused his wife for the trip to the bedroom. He hoped that sleep would come quickly. The quarter-liter of alcohol in his belly should help. And so it did.

"YOU KNOW, ARTHUR, there are a lot of things we don't know about him," Jim Greer said.

"Andropov, you mean?"

"We don't even know if the bastard's married," the DDI continued.

"Well, Robert, that's your department," the DCI observed, with a look at Bob Ritter.

"We think he is, but he's never brought his wife, if any, to an official function. That's usually how we find out," the DDO had to admit. "They often hide their families, like Mafia dons. They're so anal about hiding everything over there. And, yeah, we're not all that good about digging the information up, because it's not operationally important."

"How he treats his wife and kids, if any," Greer pointed out, "can be useful in profiling the guy."

"So you want me to task CARDINAL on something like that? He could do it, I'm sure, but why waste his time that way?"

"Is it a waste? If he's a wife-beater, it tells us something. If he's a doting father, it tells us something else," the DDI persisted.

"He's a thug. You can look at his photo and see that. Look how his staff acts around him. They're stiff, like you'd have expected from Hitler's staff," Ritter responded. A few months before, a gaggle of American state governors had flown to Moscow for some sub-rosa diplomacy. The governor of Maryland, a liberal Democrat, had reported back that when Andropov had entered the reception room, he'd spotted him at once as a thug, then learned that it was Yuriy Vladimirovich, Chairman of the Committee for State Security. The Marylander had possessed a good eye for reading people, and that evaluation had gone into the Andropov file at Langley.

"Well, he wouldn't have been much of a judge," Arthur Moore observed. He'd read the file, too. "At least not at the appeals level. Too interested in hanging the poor son of a bitch just to see if the rope breaks or not." Not that Texas hadn't had a few judges like that, once upon a time, but it was much more civilized now. There were fewer horses that needed stealing than men who needed killing, after all. "Okay, Robert, what can we do to flesh him out a little? Looks like he's going to be their next General Secretary, after all. Strikes me as a good idea."

"I can rattle some cages. Why not ask Sir Basil what he can do? They're better at the social stuff than we are, and it takes the heat off our people."

"I like Bas, but I don't like having him hold that many markers for us," Judge Moore answered.

"Well, James, your protégé is over there. Have him ask the question. You get him an STU at home yet?"

"Ought to have gotten there today, yes."

"So call your lad and have him ask, nice and casual-like."

Greer's eyes went to the Judge. "Arthur?"

"Approved. Lowercase this, though. Tell Ryan that it's for his personal interest, not ours."

The Admiral checked his watch. "Okay, I can do that before I head home."

"Now, Bob, any progress on MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH?" the DCI asked with amusement, just to close down the afternoon meeting. It was a fun idea, but not a very serious one.

"Arthur, let's not discount it too much, shall we? They *are* vulnerable to the right sort of bullet, once we load it in the gun."

"Don't talk that way in front of Congress. They might foul their panties," Greer warned, with a laugh. "We're supposed to enjoy peaceful coexistence with them."

"That didn't work very well with Hitler. Stalin and Chamberlain both tried to make nice with the son of a bitch. Where did it get them? They are our enemies, gentlemen, and the sad truth is that we can't have a real peace with them, like it or not. Their ideas and ours are too out of sync for that." He held up his hands. "Yeah, I know, we're not supposed to think that way, but thank

God the President does, and we still work for him."

They didn't have to comment on that. All three had voted for the current President, despite the institutional joke that the two things one never found at Langley were communists and . . . Republicans. No, the new President had a little iron in his spine and a fox's instinct for opportunity. It especially appealed to Ritter, who was the cowboy of the three, if also the most abrasive.

"Okay. I have some budget work to do for that hearing with the Senate day after tomorrow," Moore announced, breaking up the meeting.

RYAN WAS AT his computer, thinking over the Battle of Leyte Gulf, when the phone rang. It was the first time for it, with its oddly trilling ringer. He reached in his pocket for the plastic key, slid it into the appropriate slot, then lifted the receiver.

"STAND BY," a mechanical voice said, "SYNCHRONIZING THE LINE; STAND BY, SYNCHRONIZING THE LINE; STAND BY, SYNCHRONIZING THE LINE—LINE IS SECURE," it said at last.

"Hello," Ryan said, wondering who had an STU and would call him this late. It turned out to be the obvious answer.

"Hi, Jack," a familiar voice greeted him. One nice thing about the STU: The digital technology made voices as clear as if the speaker were sitting in the room.

Ryan checked the desk clock. "Kinda late there, sir."

"Not as late as in Jolly Old England. How's the family?"

"Mainly asleep at the moment. Cathy is probably reading a medical journal," which was what she did instead of watching TV, anyway. "What can I do for you, Admiral?"

"I have a little job for you."

"Okay," Ryan responded.

"Ask around—casual-like—about Yuriy Andropov. There are a few things about him we don't know. Maybe Basil has the information we want."

"What exactly, sir?" Jack asked.

"Is he married, and does he have any kids?"

"We don't know if he's married?" Ryan realized that he hadn't seen that information in the dossier, but he'd assumed it was elsewhere, and had taken no particular note of it.

"That's right. The Judge wants to see if Basil might know."

"Okay, I can ask Simon. How important is this?"

"Like I said, casual-like, like it's your own interest. Then call me back from there, your home, I mean."

"Will do, sir. We know his age, birthday, education, and stuff, but not if he's married or has any kids, eh?"

"That's how it works sometimes."

"Yes, sir." And that got Jack thinking. They knew everything about Brezhnev but his dick size. They *did* know his daughter's dress size—12—which someone had thought important enough to get from the Belgian milliner who'd sold the silken wedding dress to her doting father, through the

ambassador. But they didn't know if the likely next General Secretary of the Soviet Union was married. *Christ, the guy was pushing sixty, and they didn't know? What the hell?* "Okay, I can ask. That ought not to be too hard."

"Otherwise, how's London?"

"I like it here, and so does Cathy, but she's a little dubious about their state medical-care system."

"Socialized medicine? I don't blame her. I still get everything done at Bethesda, but it helps a little that I have 'admiral' in front of my name. It's not quite as fast for a retired chief bosun's mate."

"I bet." In Ryan's case, it helped a whole lot that his wife was on the faculty at Johns Hopkins. He didn't talk to anyone in a lab coat without "professor" on his nametag, and he'd learned that in the field of medicine, the really smart ones were the teachers, unlike the rest of society.

THE DREAMS CAME after midnight, though he had no way of knowing that. It was a clear Moscow summer day, and a man in white was walking across the Red Square. St. Basil's Cathedral was behind him, and he was walking against the traffic past Lenin's mausoleum. Some children were with him, and he was talking to them in a kindly way, as a favored uncle might . . . or perhaps a parish priest. Then Oleg knew that's what he was, a parish priest. But why in white? With gold brocade, even. The children, four or five each of boys and girls, were holding his hands and looking up at him with innocent smiles. Then Oleg turned his head. Up at the top of the tomb, where they stood for the May Day parades, were the Politburo members: Brezhnev, Suslov, Ustinov, and Andropov. Andropov was holding a rifle and pointing at the little procession. There were other people around—faceless people walking aimlessly, going about their business. Then Oleg was standing with Andropov, listening to his words. He was arguing for the right to shoot the man. *Be careful of the children, Yuriy Vladimirovich,* Suslov warned. *Yes, be careful,* Brezhnev agreed. Ustinov reached over to adjust the sights on the rifle. They all ignored Zaitzev, who moved among them, trying to get their attention.

But why? Zaitzev asked. *Why are you doing this?*

Who is this? Brezhnev asked Andropov.

Never mind him, Suslov snarled. *Just shoot the bastard!*

Very well, Andropov said. He took his aim carefully, and Zaitzev was unable to intervene, despite being right there. Then the Chairman squeezed the trigger.

Zaitzev was back on the street now. The first bullet struck a child, a boy on the priest's right, who fell without a sound.

Not him*, you idiot—the priest!* Mikhail Suslov screamed like a rabid dog.

Andropov shot again, this time hitting a little blonde girl standing at the priest's left. Her head exploded in red. Zaitzev bent down to help her, but she said it was all right, and so he left her and returned to the priest.

Look out, why don't you?

Look out for what, my young comrade? The priest asked pleasantly, then he turned. *Come, children, we're off to see God.*

Andropov fired again. This time the bullet struck the priest square in the chest. There was a splash of blood, about the size and color of a rose. The priest grimaced, but kept going, with the smiling children in tow.

Another shot, another rose on the chest, to the left of the first. But still he kept going, walking slowly.

Are you hurt? Zaitzev asked.

It is nothing, the priest replied. *But why didn't you stop him?*

But I tried! Zaitzev insisted.

The priest stopped walking, turning to look him square in the face. *Did you?*

That's when the third bullet struck him right in the heart.

Did you? the priest asked again. Now the children were looking at him and not the priest.

Zaitzev found himself sitting up in the bed. It was just before four in the morning, the clock said. He was sweating profusely. There was only one thing to do. He rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom. There he urinated, then had himself a glass of water, and padded off to the kitchen. Sitting down by the sink, he lit a cigarette. Before he went back to sleep, he wanted to be fully awake. He didn't want to walk back into *that* dream.

Out the window, Moscow was quiet, the streets completely empty—not even a drunk staggering home. A good thing, too. No apartment house elevators would be working at this hour. There was not a car in view, which was a little odd, but not so much as in a Western city.

The cigarette achieved its goal. He was now awake enough to go back to sleep afresh. But even now he knew that the vision wouldn't leave him. Most dreams faded away, just like cigarette smoke, but this one would not. Zaitzev was sure of that.

CHAPTER 10

BOLT FROM THE BLUE

HE HAD A LOT of thinking to do. It was as if the decision had made itself, as if some alien force had overtaken his mind and, through it, his body, and he had been transformed into a mere spectator. Like most Russians, he didn't shower, but washed his face and shaved with a blade razor, nicking himself three times in the process. Toilet paper took care of that—the symptoms, anyway, if not the cause. The images from the dream still paraded before his eyes like that war film on television. They continued to do so during breakfast, causing a distant look in his eyes that his wife noticed but decided not to comment on. Soon enough it was time to go to work. He went along the way like an automaton, taking the right path to the metro station by rote memory, his brain both quiescent and furiously active, as though he'd suddenly split into two separate but distantly connected people, moving along parallel paths to a destination he couldn't see and didn't understand. He was being carried there, though, like a chip of wood down mountain rapids, the rock walls passing so rapidly by his left and right that he couldn't even see them. It came almost as a surprise when he found himself aboard the metro carriage, traveling down the darkened tunnels dug by political prisoners of Stalin's under the direction of Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, surrounded by the quiet, almost faceless bodies of other Soviet citizens also making their way to workplaces for which they had little love and little sense of duty. But they went to them because it was how they earned the money with which they bought food for their families, minuscule cogs in the gigantic machine that was the Soviet state, which they all purported to serve and which purported to serve them and their families. . . .

But it was all a lie, wasn't it? Zaitzev asked himself. Was it? How did the murder of a priest serve the Soviet State? How did it serve all these people?

How did it serve him and his wife and his little daughter? By feeding them? By giving him the ability to shop in the "closed" shops and buy things that the other workers could not even think about getting for themselves?

But he *was* better off than nearly everyone else on the subway car, Oleg Ivan'ch reminded himself. Ought he not be grateful for that? Didn't he eat better food, drink better coffee, watch a better TV set, sleep on better sheets? Didn't he have all the creature comforts that these people would like to have? *Why am I suddenly so badly troubled?* the communicator asked himself. The answer was so obvious that it took nearly a minute for him to grasp the answer. It was because his position, the one that gave him the comforts he enjoyed, also gave him knowledge, and in this case, for the first time in his life, knowledge was a curse. He knew the thoughts of the men who determined the course his country was taking, and in that knowledge he saw that the course was a false one . . . an evil one, and inside his mind was an agency that looked at the knowledge and judged it wrong. And in that judgment came the need to do something to change it. He could not object and expect to keep what passed for freedom in his country. There was no agency open to him through which he could make his judgment known to others, though others might well concur with his judgment, might ask the men who governed their country for a redress of their grievances. No, there was no way for him to act within such a system as it existed. To do that, you had to be so very senior that before you voiced doubts you had to think carefully, lest you lose your privilege, and so whatever consciences you had were tempered by the cowardice that came with having so much to lose. He'd never heard of any senior political figure in his country standing up that way, standing on a matter of principle and telling his peers that they were doing something wrong. No, the system precluded that by the sort of people it selected. Corrupted men only selected other corrupted men to be their peers, lest they have to question the things that gave them their own vast privileges. Just as the princes under the czars rarely if ever considered the effect their rule had on the serfs, so the new princes of Marxism never questioned the system that gave them their place in the world. Why? Because the world hadn't changed its shape—just its color, from czarist white to socialist red—and in keeping the shape, it kept its method of working, and in a red world, a little extra spilled blood was difficult to notice.

The metro carriage stopped at his station, and Zaitzev made his way to the sliding metal door, to the platform, left to the escalator, up to the street on a fine, clear, late-summer day, again part of a crowd, but one that dispersed as it moved. A medium-sized contingent walked at a steady pace toward the stone edifice of The Centre, through the bronze doors, and past the first security checkpoint. Zaitzev showed his pass to the uniformed guard, who checked the picture against his face and jerked his head to the right, signaling that it was all right for him to enter the vast office building. Showing the same lack of emotion as he would any other day, Zaitzev took the stone steps down to the basement level through another checkpoint and finally into the open-bay work area of the signals center.

The night crew was just finishing up. At Zaitzev's desk was the man who worked the midnight-to-eight shift, Nikolay Konstantinovich Dobrik, a newly

promoted major like himself.

"Good morning, Oleg," Dobrik said in comradely greeting, accompanied by a stretch in his swivel chair.

"And to you, Kolya. How was the night watch?"

"A lot of traffic last night from Washington. That madman of a president was at it again. Did you know that we are 'the focus of evil in the modern world'?"

"He said that?" Zaitzev asked incredulously.

Dobrik nodded. "He did. The Washington *rezidentura* sent us the text of his speech—it was red meat for his party faithful, but it was incendiary even so. I expect the ambassador will get instructions from the foreign ministry about it, and the Politburo will probably have something to say. But at least it gave me a lively watch to read it all!"

"They didn't put it on the pad, did they?" A complete transmission on a one-time cipher pad would have been a nightmare job for the clerks.

"No, it was a machine job, thank God," Dobrik replied. His choice of words wasn't entirely ironic. That euphemism was a common one, even at The Centre. "Our officers are trying to make sense of his words even now. The political department will be going over it for hours—days, more likely, complete with the psychiatrists, I wager."

Zaitzev managed a chuckle. The back-and-forth between the head doctors and the field officers would undoubtedly be entertaining to read—and, like good clerks, they tended to read all of the entertaining dispatches.

"You have to wonder how such men get to rule major countries," Dobrik observed, standing up and lighting a cigarette.

"I think they call it the democratic process," Zaitzev responded.

"Well, in that case, thanks be for the Collective Will of the People as expressed through the beloved Party." Dobrik was a good Party member, despite the planned irony of his remark, as was everyone in this room, of course.

"Indeed, Kolya. In any case"—Zaitzev looked over at the wall clock. He was six minutes early—"I relieve you, Comrade Major."

"And I thank you, Comrade Major." Dobrik headed off to the exit.

Zaitzev took the seat, still warm from Dobrik's backside, and signed in on the time sheet, noting the time. Next he dumped the contents of the desk ashtray into the trash bucket—Dobrik never seemed to do that—and started a new day at the office. Relieving his colleague had been a rote process, if a pleasant one. He hardly knew Dobrik, except for these moments at the start of his day. Why anyone would volunteer for continuous night duty mystified him. At least Dobrik always left a clean desk behind, not one piled up with unfinished work, which gave Zaitzev a few minutes to get caught up and mentally organized for the day.

In this case, however, those few minutes merely brought back the images that, it seemed, were not about to go away. And so Oleg Ivanovich lit up his first work cigarette of the day and shuffled the papers on the metal desk while his mind was elsewhere, doing things that he himself didn't want to know about just yet. It was ten minutes after the hour when a cipher clerk came to him with a folder.

"From Station Washington, Comrade Major," the clerk announced.

"Thank you, comrade," Zaitzev acknowledged.

Taking the manila folder, he opened it and started leafing through the dispatches.

Ah, he thought, *this CASSIUS fellow has reported in* . . . yes, more political intelligence. He didn't know the name or face that went along with CASSIUS, but he had to be an aide to a senior parliamentarian, possibly even a senator. He delivered high-quality political intelligence that hinted at access to hard intelligence information. So a servant to a very senior American politician worked for the Soviet Union, too. He wasn't paid, which made him an ideologically motivated agent, the very best sort.

He read through the dispatch and then searched his memory for the right recipient upstairs . . . Colonel Anatoliy Gregorovich Fokin, in the political department, whose address was Washington Desk, Line PR, First Department, First Chief Directorate, up on the fourth floor.

OUTSIDE OF TOWN, Colonel Ilya Fedorovich Bubovoy walked off his morning flight from Sofia. To catch it, he'd had to arise at three in the morning, an embassy car taking him to the airport for the flight to Moscow. The summons had come from Aleksey Rozhdestvenskiy, whom he'd known for some years and who had shown him the courtesy to call the day before and assure him that nothing untoward was meant by this summons to The Centre. Bubovoy had a clear conscience, but it was nice to know, even so. You never could be sure with KGB. Like children called to the principal's office, officers were often known to have a few upper-gastric butterflies on the way into headquarters. In any case, his tie was properly knotted, and his good shoes shined properly. He did not wear his uniform, as his identity as the Sofia *rezident* was technically secret.

A uniformed sergeant of the Red Army met him at the gate and led him out to a car—in fact, the sergeant was KGB, but that wasn't for public knowledge: Who knew if CIA or other Western services had eyes at the airport? Bubovoy picked up a copy of *Sovietskiy Sport* at a kiosk on the walk out to the car. It would be thirty-five minutes in. Sofia's soccer team had just beaten Moscow Dynamo, 3-2, a few days before. The colonel wondered if the local sportswriters would be calling for the heads of the Moscow team, couched in appropriate Marxist rhetoric, of course. Good socialists always won, but the sportswriters tended to get confused when one socialist team lost to another.

FOLEY WAS ON the metro as well, running a little late this morning. A power failure had reset his alarm clock without formal notice, so he'd been awakened by sunlight through the windows instead of the usual metallic buzz. As always, he tried not to look around too much, but he couldn't help checking for the owner of the hand that had searched his pocket. But none of the faces

looked back at him. He'd try again that afternoon, on the train that left the station at 17:41, just in case. In case of what? Foley didn't know, but that was one of the exciting things about his chosen line of work. If it had been just happenstance, all well and good, but for the next few days he'd be on the same train, in the same coach, standing in much the same place. If he had a shadow, the man wouldn't remark on it. The Russians actually found it comforting to trail someone who followed a routine—the randomness of Americans could drive them to distraction. So, he'd be a "good" American, and show them what they want, and they wouldn't find it strange. The Moscow Chief of Station shook his head in amazement.

Reaching his stop, he took the escalator up to the street level, and from there it was a short walk to the embassy, just across the street from Our Lady of the Microchips, and the world's largest microwave oven. Foley always liked to see the flag on the pole, and the Marines inside, more proof that he was in the right place. They always looked good, in their khaki shirts over dress-blue uniform trousers, holstered pistols, and white caps.

His office was as shabby as usual—it was part of his cover to be a little on the untidy side.

But his cover did not include the communications department. It couldn't. Heading embassy comms was Mike Russell, formerly a lieutenant colonel in the Army Security Agency—ASA was the Army's own communications-security arm—and now a civilian with the National Security Agency, which officially did the same for the entire government. Moscow was a hardship tour for Russell. Black and divorced-single, he didn't get much female action here, since the Russians were notoriously dubious of people with dark skin. The knock on the door was distinctive.

"Come on in, Mike," Foley said.

"Morning, Ed." Russell was under six feet, and he needed to watch his eating by the look of his waist. But he was a good guy with codes and comms, and that was sufficient for the moment. "Quiet night for you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, just this." He fished an envelope out of his coat pocket and handed it over. "Nothing important, looks like." He had also decrypted the dispatch. Even the ambassador wasn't cleared as high as the head of communications. Foley was suddenly glad for Russian racism. It made Mike that much less likely to get turned. *That* was a scary thought. Of all the people in the embassy, Mike Russell was the one guy who could rat everyone out, which was why intelligence services always tried to corrupt cipher clerks, the underpaid and spat-upon people who had enormous information power in any embassy.

Foley took the envelope and opened it. The dispatch inside was lower than routine, proof positive that CIA was just one more government bureaucracy, however important its work might be. He snorted and entered the paper into his shredder, where rotating steel wheels reduced it to fragments about two centimeters square.

"Must be nice to get your day's work done in ten seconds," Russell observed, with a laugh.

"Wasn't like that in Vietnam, I bet."

"Not hardly. I remember once one of my troops DF'd a VC transmitter at MAC-V headquarters, and that was one busy night."

"Get him?"

"Oh yeah," Russell replied with a nod. "The locals were seriously pissed about that little dink. He came to a bad end, they told me." Russell had been a first lieutenant then. A Detroit native, his father had built B-24 bombers during World War II, and had never stopped telling his son how much more satisfying that had been than making Fords. Russell detested everything about this country (they didn't even appreciate good soul music!), but the extra pay that came with duty here—Moscow was officially a hardship posting—would buy him a nice place on the Upper Peninsula someday, where he'd be able to hunt birds and deer to his heart's content. "Anything to go out, Ed?"

"Nope, not today—not yet, anyway."

"Roger that. Have a good one." And Russell disappeared out the door.

It wasn't like the spy novels—the job of a CIA officer was composed of a good deal more boredom than excitement. At least two-thirds of Foley's time as a field officer was taken up with writing reports that somebody at Langley might or might not read, and/or waiting for meets that might or might not come off. He had case officers to do most of the street work, because his identity was too sensitive to risk exposure—something about which he had to lecture his wife on occasion. Mary Pat just liked the action a little too much. It was somewhat worrying, though neither of them faced much real physical danger. They both had diplomatic immunity, and the Russians were assiduous about respecting that, for the most part. Even if things should get a little rough, it would never be really rough. Or so he told himself.

"GOOD MORNING, Colonel Bubovoy," Andropov said pleasantly, without rising.

"Good day to you, Comrade Chairman," the Sofia *rezident* replied, swallowing his relief that Rozhdestvenskiy hadn't lied to him. You could never be too careful, after all, or too paranoid.

"How go things in Sofia?" Andropov waved him to the leather seat opposite the big oak desk.

"Well, Comrade Chairman, our fraternal socialist colleagues remain cooperative, especially with Turkish matters."

"Good. We have a proposed mission to undertake and I require your opinion of its feasibility." The voice stayed entirely pleasant.

"And what might that be?" Bubovoy asked.

Andropov outlined the plans, watching his visitor's face closely for his reaction. There was none. The colonel was too experienced for that, and besides, he knew the look he was getting.

"How soon?" he asked.

"How quickly could you set things up?"

"I will need to get cooperation from our Bulgarian friends. I know who to go to—Colonel Boris Strokov, a very skillful player in the DS. He runs their operations in Turkey—smuggling and such—which gives him entrée into

Turkish gangster organizations. The contacts are very useful, especially when a killing is necessary."

"Go on," the Chairman urged quietly.

"Comrade Chairman, such an operation will not be simple. Without a means of getting a gunman into the private residence of the target, it will mean making the attempt at a public appearance, at which there will necessarily be many people. We can tell our gunman that we have the means of getting him away, but that will be a lie, of course. From a tactical point of view, it would be better to have a second man present, to kill him immediately after he takes his shot—with a suppressed weapon. For the second killer, escape is far easier, since the attention of the crowd will be on the first gunman. It also alleviates the possible problem of our gunman talking to the police. The Italian police do not have a good public reputation, but this is not, strictly speaking, true. As our *rezident* in Rome can tell you, their investigative arms are quite well organized and highly professional. Thus, it is in our interest to have our gunman eliminated at once."

"But won't that suggest the involvement of an intelligence service?" Andropov asked. "Is it too elegant?"

Bubovoy leaned back and spoke judiciously. This was what Andropov wanted to hear, and he was ready to deliver it. "Comrade Chairman, one must weigh one hazard against another. The greatest danger is if our assassin talked about how he came to be in Rome. A dead man tells no tales, as they say. And a silenced voice cannot give out information. The other side can speculate, but it is merely speculation. For our part, we can easily release information through the press sources we control about Muslim animosity toward the head of the Roman church. The Western news services will pick it up and, with proper guidance, we can help shape the public understanding of what has taken place. The United States and Canada Institute has some excellent academicians for this purpose, as you know. We can use them to formulate the black propaganda, and then use people from the First Chief Directorate to propagate it. This proposed operation is not without risk, of course, but, though complex, it is not all that difficult from a conceptual point of view. The real problems will be in its execution and in operational security. That's why it's critical to eliminate the assassin immediately. The most important thing is the denial of information to the other side. Let them speculate all they wish, but without hard information, they will *know* nothing. This operation will be very closely held, I presume."

"Less than five people at present. How many more?" Andropov asked, impressed at Bubovoy's expertise and sangfroid.

"At least three Bulgarians. Then they will select the Turk—it must be a Turk, you see."

"Why?" Though Andropov figured he knew the answer.

"Turkey is a Muslim country, and there is a long-standing antipathy between the Christian churches and Islam. This way, the operation will generate additional discord between the two religious groups—consider that a bonus," the Sofia *rezident* suggested.

"And how will you select the assassin?"

"I will leave that to Colonel Strokov—his ancestry is Russian, by the way.

His family settled in Sofia at the turn of the century, but he thinks like one of us. He is *nashi,*" Bubovoy assured his boss, "a graduate of our own academy, and an experienced field operator."

"How long to set this up?"

"That depends more on Moscow than Sofia. Strokov will need approval from his own command, but that is a political question, not an operational one. After he gets his orders . . . two weeks, perhaps as many as four."

"And the chances of success?" the Chairman asked.

"Medium to high, I should think. The DS field officer will drive the killer to the proper place, and then kill him a moment after the mission is accomplished, before making his escape. That is more dangerous than it sounds. The assassin will probably have a pistol, and it will not be a suppressed weapon. So the crowd will be drawn to the sound. Most people will draw back, but some will leap forward into danger, hoping to detain the gunman. If he falls from a silent bullet in the back, they will still rush in, while our man, like others in the crowd, draws back. Like waves on the beach," Bubovoy explained. He could see it all happening in his mind. "Shooting a pistol is not as easy as the cinema would have us believe, though. Remember, on a battlefield, for every man killed, two or three are wounded and survive. Our gunman will get no closer than four or five meters. That's close enough for an expert, but our man will not be an expert. And then there's the complicating factor of medical care. Unless you're shot through the heart or brain, skilled surgeons can often reach into the grave and pull a wounded man back out. So, realistically, it is a fifty-percent operation. The consequences of failure, therefore, must be taken into account. That is a political question, Comrade Chairman," Bubovoy concluded, meaning that it wasn't his ass on the line, exactly. At the same time, he knew that mission success meant general's stars, which, for the colonel, was an acceptable gamble with a huge upside and little in the way of a downside. It appealed to his careerism as well as his patriotism.

"Very well. What needs to be done?"

"First of all, the DS operates under political guidance. The section that Colonel Strokov commands operates with few written records, but it is directly controlled by the Bulgarian Politburo. So we would have to get political authorization, which necessarily means approval from our own political leadership. The Bulgarians will not authorize their cooperation without an official request from our government. After that, it's actually a straightforward operation."

"I see." Andropov went silent for half a minute or so. There was a Politburo meeting the day after tomorrow. *Was it too soon to float this mission?* he wondered. How difficult might it be to make his case? He'd have to show them the Warsaw Letter, and they would not be the least bit pleased by it. He'd have to present it in such a way as to make the urgency of the matter plain and . . . frightening to them.

Would they be frightened? Well, he could help them along that path, couldn't he? Andropov pondered the question for a few more seconds and came to a favorable conclusion.

"Anything else, Colonel?"

"It hardly needs saying that operational security must be airtight. The Vatican has its own highly effective intelligence service. It would be a mistake to underestimate their capabilities," Bubovoy warned. "Therefore, our Politburo and the Bulgarians must know that this matter cannot be discussed outside of their own number. And for our side, that means no one, even in the Central Committee or the Party Secretariat. The smallest leak would be ruinous to the mission. But, at the same time," he went on, "we have much working for us. The Pope necessarily cannot isolate himself, nor can he be protected as we or any other nation-state would do with such a threat to its chief of state. In an operational sense, he is, actually, rather a 'soft' target—*if,* that is, we can find an assassin willing to risk his life to get sufficiently close to take his shot."

"So, if I can get authorization from the Politburo, and then we make the request for assistance from our Bulgarian brothers, and then you can get this Colonel Strokov moving, how long before it actually happens?"

"A month, I should think, perhaps two months, but not more than that. We would need some support from Station Rome, for issues of timing and such, but that's all. Our own hands would be entirely clean—especially if Strokov assists in eliminating the assassin immediately upon completion of his mission."

"You'd want this Strokov fellow to act personally?"

"Da." Bubovoy nodded. "Boris Andreyevich is not averse to getting his hands wet. He's done this sort of thing before."

"Very well." Andropov looked down at his desk. "There will be no written records of this operation. Once I have proper authorization, you will receive notice to proceed from my office, but only by operational code, and that is 15-8-82-666. Any complex information will be relayed by messenger or by face-to-face contact only. Is that clear?"

"It is clear, Comrade Chairman. Nothing gets written down except the operation number. I expect I will be flying a good deal between Sofia and Moscow, but that is not a problem."

"The Bulgarians are trustworthy?" Andropov asked, suddenly worried.

"Yes, they are, Comrade Chairman. We have a long-standing operational relationship with them, and they are expert at this sort of thing—more than we are, in fact. They have had more practice. When someone must die, it's often the Bulgars who take care of matters for us."

"Yes, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy has told me that. I just have no direct knowledge of it."

"You could, of course, meet with Colonel Strokov any time you wish," Bubovoy suggested.

Andropov shook his head. "Better that I should not, I think."

"As you wish, Comrade Chairman." *That figures,* Bubovoy thought. Andropov was a party man, not used to getting his hands dirty. Politicians were all the same—bloodthirsty, but personally tidy, depending on others to carry out their nasty wishes. Well, that was his job, the colonel decided, and since politicians controlled the good things in his society, he needed to please them to get the honey from the hive. And he had as big a sweet tooth as anyone else in the Soviet Union. At the end of this mission might be general's

stars, a nice flat in Moscow—even a modest dacha in the Lenin Hills. He'd be glad to return to Moscow, and so would his wife. If the price of it was the death of some foreigner who was a political inconvenience to his country, well, that was just too bad. He should have been more careful about who he was offending.

"Thank you for coming and for giving me your expertise, Comrade Colonel. You will be hearing from me."

Bubovoy stood. "I serve the Soviet Union," he said, and made his way through the hidden door.

Rozhdestvenskiy was in the secretaries' room, waiting for him.

"How did it go, Ilya?"

"I am not sure I am allowed to say" was the guarded reply.

"If this is about Operation -666, then you are allowed, Ilya Fedorovich," Rozhdestvenskiy assured him, leading him out the door into the corridor.

"Then the meeting went well, Aleksey Nikolay'ch. More than that, I can only say with the Chairman's approval." This might be a security test, after all, however much a friend Rozhdestvenskiy might be.

"I told him you could be relied upon, Ilya. This could be good for both of us."

"We serve, Aleksey, just like everybody else in this building."

"Let me get you to your car. You can make the noon flight easily." A few minutes later, he was back in Andropov's office.

"Well?" the Chairman asked.

"He says the meeting went well, but he will not say another word without your permission. Ilya Fedorovich is a serious professional, Comrade Chairman. Am I to be your contact for the mission?"

"Yes, you are, Aleksey," Andropov confirmed. "I will send a signal to that effect." Andropov didn't feel the need to run the operation himself. His was a big-picture mind, not an operational one. "What do you know of this Colonel Boris Strokov?"

"Bulgarian? The name is familiar. He's a senior intelligence officer who has in the past specialized in assassination operations. He has ample experience—and obviously Ilya knows him well."

"How does one specialize in assassinations?" the Chairman asked. It was an aspect of the KGB he hadn't been briefed in on.

"His real work is something else, obviously, but the DS has a small group of officers with experience in this sort of thing. He is the most experienced. His operational record is flawless. If memory serves, he's personally eliminated seven or eight people whose deaths were necessary—mostly Bulgarians, I think. Probably a Turk or two as well, but no Westerners that I know of."

"Is it difficult to do?" Yuriy Vladimirovich asked.

"I have no such experience myself," Rozhdestvenskiy admitted. He didn't add that he didn't especially want any. "Those who do say that their concern is not so much in accomplishing the mission as in completing it—that is, avoiding police investigation afterwards. Modern police agencies are fairly effective at investigating murders, you see. In this case, you can expect a most vigorous investigation."

"Bubovoy wants this Strokov fellow to go on the mission and then eliminate

the assassin immediately afterward."

Rozhdestvenskiy nodded thoughtfully. "That makes good sense. We have discussed that option ourselves, as I recall."

"Yes." Andropov closed his eyes for a moment. Again, the image paraded itself before his mind. Certainly it would solve a lot of political problems. "Yes, my next job will be to get the Politburo's approval for the mission."

"Quickly, Comrade Chairman?" Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

"Tomorrow afternoon, I think."

DOWN IN COMMUNICATIONS, Zaitzev had allowed his daily routine to absorb his consciousness. It suddenly struck him how mindless his job was. They wanted this job to be done by machines, and he'd become that machine. He had it all committed to memory, which operational designator went to which case officer upstairs and what the operations were all about. So much information slid into his mind along the way that it rather amazed him. It had happened so gradually that he'd never really noticed. He noticed now.

But it was 15-8-82-666 that kept swimming around his mind. . . .

"Zaitzev?" a voice asked. The communicator turned to see Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy.

"Yes, Comrade Colonel?"

"A dispatch for *rezident* Sofia." He handed across the message form, properly made out.

"On the machine or the pad, comrade?"

The colonel paused for a moment, weighing the two options. He came down on the side of consistency: "The pad, I think."

"As you wish, Comrade Colonel. I will have it out in a few minutes."

"Good. It will be waiting for Bubovoy when he gets back to his desk." He made the comment without thinking about it. People all over the world talk too much, and no amount of training can entirely stop them from doing so.

So, the Sofia rezident *was just here?* Zaitzev didn't have to ask. "Yes, Comrade Colonel. Shall I call you to confirm the dispatch?"

"Yes, thank you, Comrade Major."

"I serve the Soviet Union," Zaitzev assured him.

Rozhdestvenskiy made his way back upstairs, while Zaitzev went through the normal, mind-numbing routine of encryption.

> MOST SECRET
> IMMEDIATE AND URGENT
> FROM: OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN, MOSCOW CENTRE
> TO: REZIDENT SOFIA
> REFERENCE: OPERATIONAL DESIGNATOR 15-8-82-666
> FOR ALL FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS YOUR OPERATIONAL CONTACT WILL BE COLONEL ROZHDESTVENSKIY. BY ORDER OF THE CHAIRMAN.

It was just a housekeeping message, but coded "Immediate and Urgent." That meant it was important to Chairman Andropov, and the reference made

it an operation, not just a query to some *rezident.*

They really want to do it, Zaitzev realized.

What the hell could he do about it? No one in this room—no one in the entire building—could forestall this operation. But outside the building . . . ?

Zaitzev lit a cigarette. He'd be taking the metro home as usual. Would that American be there as well?

He was contemplating treason, he thought chillingly. The crime had a fearsome sound to it, with an even more fearsome reality. But the other side of that coin was to sit here and read over the dispatches while an innocent man was killed . . . and, no, he could not do that.

Zaitzev took a message blank off a centimeter-thick pad of them on his desk. He set the single sheet of paper on the desk surface and wrote in English, using a #1 soft pencil: IF YOU FIND THIS INTERESTING, WEAR A GREEN TIE TOMORROW. That was as far as his courage stretched this afternoon. He folded the form and tucked it inside his cigarette pack, careful to do everything with normal motions, because anything the least bit unusual in this room was noticed. Next, he scribbled something on another blank form, then crumpled and tossed it into the waste can, and went back to his usual work. For the next three hours, Oleg Ivan'ch would rethink his action every time he reached in his pocket for a smoke. Every time, he'd consider taking out the folded sheet of paper and ripping it to small bits before relegating it to the waste can and then the burn bag. But every time, he'd leave it there, telling himself that he'd done nothing yet. Above all, he tried to set his mind free, to do his regular work and deliberately put himself on auto-pilot, trying to let the day go by. Finally, he told himself that his fate was in hands other than his own. If he got home without anything unusual happening, he'd take the folded form out of his cigarette pack and burn it in his kitchen, and that would be the end of it. About four in the afternoon, Zaitzev looked up at the water-stained ceiling of Communications and whispered something akin to a prayer.

Finally, the workday ended. He took the usual route at the usual pace to the usual metro stop, down the escalator, onto the platform. The metro schedule was as predictable as the coming and going of the tides, and he boarded the carriage along with a hundred others.

Then his heart almost stopped cold in his chest: There was the American, standing in exactly the same place, reading a newspaper in his right hand, with his left holding on to the overhead rail, his raincoat unbuttoned and loose around his slender frame. The open pocket beckoned to him as the Sirens had to Odysseus. Zaitzev made his way to the center of the railcar, shuffling between other riders. His right hand fished in his shirt pocket for the cigarette pack. He deftly removed the message blank from the pack and palmed it, shuffling about the car as it slowed for a station, making room for another passenger. It worked perfectly. He jostled into the American and made the transfer, then drew back.

Zaitzev took a deep breath. The deed was done. What happened now was indeed in other hands.

Was the man really an American—or some false-flag from the Second Chief Directorate?

Had the "American" seen his face?

Did that matter? Weren't his fingerprints on the message form? Zaitzev didn't have a clue. He'd been careful when tearing off the form—and, if questioned, he could always say that the pad just lay on his desk, and anyone could have taken a form—even asked him for it! It might be enough even to foil a KGB investigation if he stuck to his story. Soon enough, he was off the subway car and walking into the open air. He hoped nobody saw his hands shake as he lit up a smoke.

FOLEY'S HIGHLY TRAINED senses had failed him. With his coat loose about him, he hadn't noticed any touch, except for the usual bumps associated with the subway, whether in Moscow or New York. But as he made his way off the train, he stuck his left hand into the left-side pocket, and there was something there, and he knew that it wasn't something he'd placed there himself. A quizzical look crossed his face, which his training quickly erased. He succumbed to the temptation to look around for a tail, but instantly realized that, given his regular schedule, there'd be a fresh face here on the surface to track him, or most likely a series of cameras atop the surrounding buildings. Movie film was as cheap here as everywhere else in the world. And so he walked home, just as on any other day, nodded at the guard at the gate, and then made his way into the elevator, then through the door.

"I'm home, honey," Ed Foley announced, taking out the paper only after the door was closed. He was reasonably certain that there were no cameras in the apartment—even American technology wasn't that far along yet, and he'd seen enough of Moscow to be unimpressed with their technical capabilities. His fingers unfolded the paper, and then he stopped cold in his tracks.

"What's for dinner?" he called out.

"Come and see, Ed." Mary Pat's voice came from the kitchen.

Hamburgers were sizzling on the stove. Mashed potatoes and gravy, plus baked beans, your basic American working-class dinner. But the bread was Russian, and that wasn't bad. Little Eddie was in front of the TV, watching a *Transformers* tape, which would keep him occupied for the next twenty minutes.

"Anything interesting happen today?" Mary Pat asked from the stove. She turned for her kiss, and her husband replied with their personal code phrase for the unusual.

"Not a thing, baby." That piqued her interest enough that when he held up the sheet of paper, she took it, and her eyes went wide.

It wasn't so much the handwritten message as the printed header: STATE SECURITY OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION.

Damn. His wife's lips mouthed the word.

The Moscow COS nodded thoughtfully.

"Can you watch the burgers, honey? I have to get something."

Ed took the spatula and flipped one over. His wife was back quickly, holding a kelly green tie.

CHAPTER 11

HAND JIVE

OF COURSE, there was little to be done at the moment. Dinner was served and eaten, and Eddie went back to his VCR and cartoon tapes. Four-year-olds were easy to please, even in Moscow. His parents got down to business. Years ago, they'd seen *The Miracle Worker* on TV, in which Annie Silvan (Anne Bancroft) taught Helen Keller (Patty Duke) the use of the manual alphabet, and they'd decided it was a useful skill to learn as a means of communicating not quickly but quietly and with their own shorthand.

W[ell], what do [yo]u think? Ed asked Mary.

This could b[e] pretty h[ot], his wife replied.

Y[ep].

Ed, this guy works in MERCURY, th[eir] version anyway! Wow!

More likely he just has access to their mess[age] forms, the Chief of Station cautioned slowly. *But I'll wear the green tie and take the same subway train for the next w[eek] or so.*

FAB, his wife agreed, which was shorthand for Fuckin' A, Bubba!

Hope it isn't a trap or a false-flag, Ed observed.

Part of the terr[itory], h[oney], MP responded. The thought of being burned didn't frighten her, though she didn't want to suffer the embarrassment. She looked for opportunities more than her husband did—he worried more. But, strangely, not this time. If the Russians had "made" him as the Chief of Station or even just as a field spook—*not likely,* Ed thought—they'd be total idiots to burn him like this, not this fast and not this amateurishly. Unless they were trying to make some sort of political point, and he couldn't see the logic of that—and the KBG was as coldly logical as Mr. Spock ever was on planet Vulcan. Even the FBI wouldn't play this loose a game. So this opportunity had to be real, unless KGB was shaking down every embassy employee it could,

just to see what might fall off the tree. Possible, but damned unlikely, and therefore worth the gamble, Foley judged. He'd wear the green tie and see what happened, and be damned careful to check all the faces on the subway car.

Tell L[angley]? Mary asked next.

He just shook his head. *2 early 4 that.*

She nodded agreement. Next, Mary Pat mimed riding a horse. That meant that there was a chase and they were really in the game, finally. It was as though she were afraid that her skills were going stale. *Damned little chance of that,* her husband thought. He was willing to bet that his wife had gone all the way through parochial school without a single rap on the knuckles, because the sisters had never once caught her misbehaving. . . .

And, for that matter, Ed reflected, neither had he.

W[ell], tomor[row] will be inter[esting], he told her, getting a sexy nod as a reply.

The hard part for the rest of the evening was not dwelling on the opportunity. Even with their training, their thoughts kept coming back to the idea of working an agent in the Russian MERCURY. It was a conceptual homer in the bottom of the ninth in the seventh game of the World Series—Reggie Jackson Foley as Mister October.

Damn.

"SO, SIMON, what do we really know about the guy?"

"Not all that much on the personal level," Harding admitted. "He's a Party man first, last, and always. His horizons have been broadened, I suppose, from his chairmanship of KGB. There's talk that he prefers Western liquor to his own vodka, and stories that he enjoys American jazz, but those could be stories floated in-house by The Centre to help him appear amenable to the West—not bloody likely, in my humble opinion. The man is a thug. His Party record is not one of gentleness. One doesn't advance in that organization except by toughness—and remarkably often the high-flyers are men who have crushed their own mentors along the way. It's a Darwinian organization gone mad, Jack. The fittest survive, but they prove themselves to be the fittest by smashing those who are a threat to them, or merely smashing people to prove their own ruthlessness in the arena they've chosen."

"How smart is he?" Ryan asked next.

Another draw on the briar pipe. "He's no fool. Highly developed sense of human nature, probably a good—even a brilliant—amateur psychologist."

"You haven't compared him to someone from Tolstoy or Chekhov," Jack noted. Simon was a lit major, after all.

Harding dismissed the thought. "Too easy to do so. No, people like him most often do not appear in literature, because novelists lack the requisite imagination. There was no warning of a Hitler in German literature, Jack. Stalin evidently thought himself another Ivan the Terrible, and Sergei Eisenstein played along with his epic movie about the chap, but that sort of thing is only for those without the imagination to see people as they are

instead of being like someone else they understand. No, Stalin was a complex and fundamentally incomprehensible monster, unless you have psychiatric credentials. I do not," Harding reminded him. "One need not understand them fully to predict their actions, because such people are rational within their own context. One need only understand that, or so I have always believed."

"Sometimes I think I ought to get Cathy involved in this work."

"Because she's a physician?" Harding asked.

Ryan nodded. "Yeah, she's pretty good reading people. That's why we had the docs report in on Mikhail Suslov. None of them were pshrinks," Jack reminded his workmate.

"So, no, we know remarkably little on Andropov's personal life," Harding admitted. "No one's ever been tasked to delve too deeply into it. If he gets elevated to the General-Secretaryship, I imagine his wife will become a semipublic figure. In any case, there's no reason to think him a homosexual or anything like that. They are quite intolerant of that aberration over there, you know. Some colleague would have used it against him along the way and wrecked his career for fair. No, the closet they live in within the Soviet Union is a very deep one. Better to be celibate," the analyst concluded.

Okay, Ryan thought, *I'll call the Admiral tonight and tell him that the Brits don't know, either.* It was strangely disappointing, but somehow predictable. For all that the intelligence services knew, the frequency of holes in their knowledge was often surprising to the outsiders, but not so to those on the inside. Ryan was still new enough at the game to be surprised and disappointed. A married man would be used to compromise, to letting his wife have her way on all manner of things, because every married man is pussy-whipped to one extent or another—unless he is a total thug, and few people fit into that category. Fewer still could rise up any hierarchy that way, because in any organization you had to go along in order to get along. That was human nature, and even the Communist Party of the Soviet Union couldn't repeal that, for all their talk about the New Soviet Man that they kept trying to build over there. *Yeah,* Ryan thought, *sure.*

"Well," Harding said, checking his watch, "I think we've served Her Majesty enough for one day."

"Agreed." Ryan stood up and collected his jacket off the clothes tree. Take the tube this time to Victoria Station, and catch the Lionel home. The routine was getting to him. It would have been better to get a place in town and cut down the commute, but that way Sally wouldn't have much in the way of green grass to play on, and Cathy had been adamant about that. Renewed proof that he was indeed pussy-whipped, Jack thought on the way to the elevator. Well, it could have been worse. He did have a good wife to do the whipping, after all.

COLONEL BUBOVOY came back to the embassy on his way home from the airport. A short dispatch was waiting, which he quickly decrypted: He'd be working through Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy. No particular surprise there. Aleksey Nikolay'ch was Andropov's lapdog. And that was probably a good job,

the *rezident* thought. You just had to keep the boss happy, and Yuriy Vladimirovich was probably not the demanding bastard that Beria had been. Party people might be overly precise in their demands, but anyone who'd worked in the Party Secretariat doubtless knew how to work with people. The age of Stalin had indeed passed.

So, it looked as though he had an assassination to arrange, Bubovoy thought. He wondered how Boris Strokov would react to it. Strokov was a professional, with little in the way of excess emotion, and less in the way of a professional conscience. To him, work was work. But the magnitude of this was higher than anything he would have encountered working for the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost.* Would that frighten him or excite him? It would be interesting to see. There was a coldness to his Bulgarian colleague that both alarmed and impressed the KGB officer. His particular skills could be useful things to have in one's pocket. And if the Politburo needed this annoying Pole killed, then he would just have to die. Too bad, but if what he believed was true, then they were just sending him off to heaven as a holy martyr, weren't they? Surely that was the secret ambition of every priest.

Bubovoy's only concern was the political repercussions. Those would be epic, and so it was good that he was just a cutout in the operation. If it went bad, well, it wouldn't be his fault. That Strokov was the best man for the job, based on his curriculum vitae, was something no man could deny, something a board of inquiry, if any, could confirm. He'd warned the Chairman that a shot, however closely taken, would not necessarily be fatal. He'd have to put that in a memo to make sure the thin paper trail on operation 15-8-82-666 would have his formal evaluation in it. He'd draft it himself and send it by diplomatic bag to The Centre—and keep his own copy in his office safe, just to make sure his own backside was properly covered.

But for now he would have to wait for the authorization to come from the Politburo. Would those old women elect to go forward with this? That was the question, and one on which he would not make a wager. Brezhnev was in his dotage. Would that make him bloodthirsty or cautious? It was too hard a question for the colonel to puzzle out. They were saying that Yuriy Vladimirovich was the heir apparent. If so, here was his chance to win his spurs.

"SO, MIKHAIL YEVGENIYEVICH, will you support me tomorrow?" Andropov asked over drinks in his flat.

Alexandrov swirled the expensive brown vodka in his glass. "Suslov will not attend tomorrow. They say his kidneys have failed, and he has no more than two weeks," the ideologue-in-waiting said, briefly dodging the issue. "Will you support me for his chair?"

"Need you ask, Misha?" the Chairman of the Committee for State Security responded. "Of course I will support you."

"Very well. So, what are the chances for success in this operation you propose?"

"About fifty-fifty, my people tell me. We will use a Bulgarian officer to set it

up, but for security reasons the assassin will have to be a Turk. . . .”

“A black-ass Muslim?” Alexandrov asked sharply.

“Misha, whoever it is will almost certainly be apprehended—dead, according to our plan. It is impossible to expect a clean getaway in such a mission. Thus, we cannot use one of our own. The nature of the mission places constraints upon us. Ideally, we would use a trained sniper—from Spetsnaz, for example—from three hundred meters, but that would mark the assassination as a killing done by a nation-state. No, this must appear to be the act of a single madman, as the Americans have them. You know, even with all the evidence the Americans had, some fools over there still blamed Kennedy on us or Castro. No, the evidence we leave must be a clear sign that we were *not* involved. That limits our operational methods. I think this is the best plan we can come up with.”

“How closely have you studied it?” Alexandrov asked, taking a swallow.

“It has been closely held. Operations like this must be. Security must be airtight, Mikhail Yevgeniyevich.”

The Party man conceded the point: “I suppose that is so, Yuriy—but the risk of failure . . .”

“Misha, in every aspect of life, there is risk. The important thing is that the operation not be tied to us. That we can assure with certainty. If nothing else, a serious wound will at least lessen Karol’s ardor for making trouble for us, will it not?”

“It should—”

“And half a chance of failure means half a chance of total success,” Andropov reminded his guest.

“Then I will support you. Leonid Ilyich will go along as well. That will carry the day. How long after that to get things moving?”

“A month or so, perhaps six weeks.”

“That quickly?” Party matters rarely sped along that well.

“What is the point of taking such, such—‘executive action,’ isn’t that what the Americans call it?—if it is to take so long? If it is to be done, better that it should be done quickly, so as to forestall further political intrigue by this man.”

“Who will replace him?”

“Some Italian, I suppose. His selection was a major aberration. Perhaps his death will encourage the Romans to go back to their old habits,” Andropov suggested. It generated a laugh from his guest.

“Yes, they are so predictable, these religious fanatics.”

“So tomorrow I will float the mission, and you will support me?” Andropov wanted that one very clear.

“Yes, Yuriy Vladimirovich. You will have my support. And you will support me for Suslov’s full voting seat at the table.”

“Tomorrow, comrade,” Andropov promised.

CHAPTER 12

HANDOFF

THIS TIME, the alarm clock worked, and woke them both. Ed Foley rose and headed for the bathroom, quickly made way for his wife, then headed to Eddie's room to shake him loose while Mary Pat started breakfast. Their son immediately switched on the TV and got the morning exercise show that every city in the world seemed to have, starring, as everywhere in the world, a woman of impressive physique—she looked capable of waltzing through the Army's Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Because he had seen the Lynda Carter series at home on cable, Eddie called her Worker-*Womannnnnn!* Mary Pat was of the opinion that the Russian's blond hair came out of a bottle, while Ed thought it hurt just to watch the things she did. With no decent paper or sports page to read, however, he had little choice in the matter, and semi-vegetated in front of the TV while his son giggled through the end of the wake-up-and-sweat program. It was done live, the Chief of Station saw. So, whoever this broad was, she had to wake up at four in the morning, and so this was probably her morning workout as well. Well, then, at least it was honest. Her husband must have been a Red Army paratrooper, and she could probably beat the shit out of him, Ed Foley thought, waiting for the morning news.

That started at 6:30. The trick was to watch it and then try to figure out what was really happening in the world—*just like at home,* the CIA officer thought, with an early-morning grumble. Well, he'd have the *Early Bird* at the embassy for that, sent by secure fax from Washington for the senior embassy staffers. For an American citizen, living in Moscow was like being on a desert island. At least they had a satellite dish at the embassy so they could download CNN and other programming. It made them feel like real people—almost.

Breakfast was breakfast. Little Eddie liked Frosted Flakes—the milk was from Finland, because his mother didn't trust the local grocery store, and the foreigners-only store was convenient to the compound. Ed and Mary Pat didn't talk much over breakfast, in deference to the bugs that littered their walls. They never talked at home about important matters, except via hand code—and *never* in front of their son, because little kids were incapable of keeping secrets of any kind. In any case, their KGB surveillance people were probably bored with the Foleys by now, which they'd both worked hard at, inserting just enough randomness in their behavior to make them look like Americans. But a considered amount. Not too much. They'd planned it out carefully and thoroughly at Langley, with the help of a tame KGB Second Chief Directorate defector.

Mary Pat had her husband's clothes all laid out on the bed, including the green tie to go with his brown suit. Like the President, Ed looked good in brown, his wife thought. Ed would wear a raincoat again, and he would keep it unbuttoned and loose around his body should another message be passed, and his senses would be thoroughly sandpapered all day.

"What are your plans for the day?" he asked Mary Pat in the living room.

"The usual. I might get together with Penny after lunch."

"Oh? Well, say hello for me. Maybe we can get together for dinner later this week."

"Good idea," his wife said. "Maybe they can explain rugby to me."

"It's like football, honey, just the rules are a little goofy," the Station Chief explained. "Well, off to keep the reporters happy."

"Right!" Mary Pat laughed, working her eyes at the walls. "That guy from the *Boston Globe* is such an ass."

Outside, the morning was pleasant enough—just a hint of cool air to suggest the approach of autumn. Foley walked off toward the station, waving at the gate guard. The guy on morning duty actually smiled once in a while. He'd clearly been around foreigners too much, or had been trained to do so by KGB. His uniform was that of the Moscow Militia—the city police—but Foley thought he looked a little too intelligent for that. Muscovites thought of their police as a rather low form of life, and such an agency would not attract the brightest of people.

The couple blocks to the metro station passed quickly. Crossing the streets was reasonably safe here—far more so than in New York—because private cars were pretty rare. And it was a good thing. Russian drivers made the Italians look prudent and orderly. The guys driving the ubiquitous dump trucks must all have been former tank crewmen, judging by their road manners. He picked up his copy of *Pravda* at the kiosk and took the escalator down to the platform. A man of the strictest habits, he arrived at the station at exactly the same time every morning, then checked the clock hanging from the ceiling to make sure. The subway trains ran on an inhumanly precise schedule, and he walked aboard at exactly 7:43 A.M. He hadn't looked over his shoulder. It was too far into his residency in Moscow to rubberneck like a new tourist, and that, he figured, would make his KGB shadow think that his American subject was about as interesting as the kasha that Russians liked for breakfast along with the dreadful local coffee. Quality control was something

the Soviets reserved for their nuclear weapons and space program, though Foley had doubts about those, based on what he'd seen in this city, where only the metro seemed to work properly. Such a strange combination of casual-klutz and Germanlike precision they were. You could tell how well things worked over here by what they were used for, and intelligence operations had the highest priority of all, lest the Soviets' enemies find out not what they had, but what they didn't have. Foley had agent CARDINAL to tell him and America what the Soviet Union had in the military realm. Generally, it was good stuff to learn, but that was mainly because the more you learned, the less you had to worry. No, it was political intelligence that counted most here because, as backward as they were, they were still big enough to cause trouble if you couldn't counter them early on. Langley was very worried about the Pope at the moment. He'd evidently done something that might be embarrassing to the Russians. And Ivan didn't like being embarrassed in the political field any more than American politicians—just that Ivan didn't go running off to *The Washington Post* to get even. Ritter and Moore were very concerned about what Ivan might do—and even more worried about what Yuriy Andropov might do. Ed Foley didn't have a feel for that particular Russian. Like most in CIA, he knew the guy only by his face, name, and his evident liver problems—that information had leaked out through a means the Station Chief didn't know. Maybe the Brits . . . *if you could trust the Brits,* Ed cautioned himself. He had to trust them, but something kept making the hackles on his neck get nervous about them. Well, they probably had doubts about CIA. Such a crazy game this was. He scanned the front page. Nothing surprising, though the piece on the Warsaw Pact was a little interesting. They still worried about NATO. Maybe they really did worry about having the German army come east again. They were certainly paranoid enough. . . . Paranoia had probably been invented in Russia. *Maybe Freud discovered it on a trip here,* he mused, lifting his eyes for a pair tracking him . . . no, none, he decided. Was it possible that the KGB *wasn't* tracking him? Well, possible, yes, but likely, no. If they had a guy—more likely a team—shadowing him, the coverage would be expert—but why put expert—but why put expert coverage on the Press Attaché? Foley sighed to himself. Was he too much of a worrier, or not paranoid enough? And how did you tell the difference? Or might he have exposed himself to a false-flag operation by wearing a green tie? *How the hell do you tell?*

If he *was* burned, then so was his wife, and that would put the brakes on two very promising CIA careers. He and Mary Pat were Bob Ritter's fair-haired pair, the varsity, the young all-pro team at Langley, and it was a reputation that had to be both protected carefully and also built upon. The President of the United States himself would read their "take" and maybe make decisions based on the information they brought in. Important decisions that could affect the policy of their country. The responsibility was not something to dwell on. It could drive you nuts, make you too cautious—so cautious that you never accomplished anything. No, the biggest problem in the intelligence business was in drawing the line between circumspection and effectiveness. If you leaned too far the one way, you never got anything useful done. If you went too far the other way, then you got yourself burned, and your agents,

and over here that meant virtual certain death for people for whose lives *you* were responsible. It was a dilemma fit to drive a man to drink.

The metro stopped at his station and he went out the door, then up the escalator. He was pretty sure that nobody had fished in his pocket. On the street level, he checked. Nothing. So whomever it was, either he only rode the afternoon train or the Chief of Station had been "made" by the opposition. It would give him something to worry about all day.

"THIS ONE'S FOR YOU," Dobrik said, handing it over. "From Sofia."

"Oh?" Zaitzev responded.

"It's in the book, your-eyes-only, Oleg Ivan'ch," the night-duty officer said. "At least it's short."

"Ah," Zaitzev said, taking the message and seeing the header: 15-8-82- 666. So they figured that with a number instead of a name, the header didn't need to be encrypted. He didn't react or say anything further. It just wasn't done. Surely, Kolya wondered about it—it was the office sport in Communications, wondering about the things one couldn't read. This message had come in just forty minutes after his departure. "Well, something to start my watch with. Anything else, Nikolay Konstantinovich?"

"No, aside from that, you have a clean desk." Dobrik was an efficient worker, whatever faults he might have had. "And now I am properly relieved of duty. At home I have a fresh bottle of vodka."

"You should eat first, Kolya," Zaitzev warned.

"That's what my mother says, Oleg. Perhaps I'll have a sandwich with my breakfast," he joked.

"Sleep well, Comrade Major, I relieve you," Zaitzev said, as he took his seat. Ten minutes later, he had the brief dispatch decrypted. The Sofia *rezident* acknowledged that Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy was his point of contact for Operation 15-8-82-666. So that *t* was properly crossed. And 15-8-82- 666 was a full-fledged operation now. He tucked the decrypted message into a manila envelope, sealed it, and then dripped hot wax on the seal.

They're really going to do it, Oleg Ivanovich told himself with a frown. *What do I do now?*

Work his usual day, and then look for a green tie on the metro home. And pray he saw it? Or pray he didn't?

Zaitzev shook the thought off and called for a messenger to hand-deliver the dispatch to the top floor. A moment later, a basketful of dispatches landed on his desk for processing.

"OUCH," Ed Foley said aloud at his desk. The message—a lengthy one—came from Ritter and Moore, speaking for the President. He'd have to rattle some serious bushes for this.

Station Moscow didn't have a written list of agents, even by code names,

and even in Foley's office safe, which in addition to a combination had a two-phase alarm built in, a keypad on the outside, and one on the inside with a different code, which Foley had set himself. The embassy's Marines had orders to respond to either alarm with drawn weapons, since the contents of this safe were about the most sensitive documents in the whole building.

But Foley had the names of every Russian citizen who worked for the Agency hard cut into his eyelids, along with their specialty areas. Twelve such agents were currently operating. They'd just lost one the week before he'd arrived in Moscow—burned. No one knew how, though Foley was concerned that the Russians might have a mole in Langley itself. It was heresy to think it, but as CIA tried to do it to KGB, so KGB tried to do it to CIA, and there was no referee on the playing field to let the players know what the score was. The lost agent, whose code name had been SOUSA, was a lieutenant colonel in the GRU and had helped identify some major leaks in the German defense ministry and other NATO sources, through which KGB had gotten political-military intelligence of a high order. But that guy was dead—still breathing, perhaps, but dead even so. Foley hoped they wouldn't load the guy alive into a furnace, as had been done with another GRU source back in the 1950s. Rather a cruel method of execution, even for the Russians under Khrushchev, and something that had kept his case officer awake for a very long time, the COS was sure.

So they'd have to get two, maybe three, of their agents working on this one. They had a good guy in KGB and another in the Party Central Committee. Maybe one of them might have heard about a possible operation against the Pope.

Damn, Foley thought, *are they* that *crazy?* It required a considerable stretch of his imagination. An Irishman by ancestry, and Roman Catholic by education and religious affiliation, Ed Foley had to make a mental effort to set aside his personal thoughts. Such a plot was beyond the pale, perhaps, but he was dealing with people who didn't recognize the concept of limits, certainly not from any outside agency. For them, God was politics, and a threat to their political world was like Lucifer himself challenging the order of heaven. Except that the simile only went so far. This was more like Michael the Archangel challenging the order of Hell. Mary Pat called it the belly of the beast, and this one was one nasty fuckin' beast.

"DADDY!" SALLY EXCLAIMED, waking up with her usual smile. He guided her to the bathroom and then downstairs, where her oatmeal was waiting. Sally still wore her bunny-rabbit sleepers, with feet and a long zipper. This one was yellow. And it was the largest size, and her feet were stretching it. She'd have to change to some other sleepwear soon, but that was Cathy's department.

The routine was set. Cathy fed Little Jack and, halfway through, her husband set down his paper and headed upstairs to shave. By the time he was dressed, she was finished with her duty, and went off to get cleaned up and dressed while Jack burped the little guy and got him into his socks to keep his feet warm, and also to give him something to pull off so that he could see if

the feet tasted the same as they had the previous day, which was a newly acquired skill.

Soon the doorbell rang, and it was Margaret van der Beek, soon followed by Ed Beaverton, which allowed the parents to escape off to work. At Victoria Station, Cathy kissed her husband good-bye and headed for the tube station for the ride to Moorefields, while Jack took a different train to Century House, and the day was about to start for real.

"Good morning, Sir John."

"Hey, Bert." Ryan paused. Bert Canderton had "army" written all over him, and it was time to ask. "What regiment were you?"

"I was Regimental Sergeant Major of the Royal Green Jackets, sir."

"Infantry?"

"Correct, sir."

"I thought you guys wore red coats," Ryan observed.

"Well, that's your fault—you Yanks, that is. In your revolutionary war, my regiment took so many casualties from your riflemen that the colonel of the regiment decided a green tunic might be safer. It's been that way ever since."

"How did you end up here?"

"I'm waiting for an opening at the Tower to be a Yeoman Warder, sir. Should have a new red coat in a month or so, they tell me."

Canderton's rent-a-cop blouse had some service ribbons on it, probably not for brushing and flossing his teeth, and a regimental sergeant major in the British army was *somebody*, like a master gunnery sergeant in the Marine Corps.

"I've been there, been to the club they have," said Ryan. "Good bunch of troops."

"Indeed. I have a friend there, Mick Truelove. He was in the Queen's Regiment."

"Well, sar-major, keep the bad guys out," Ryan said, as he worked his card into the electronic slot that controlled the entry gate.

"I will do that, sir," Canderton promised.

Harding was at his desk when Ryan came in. Jack hung his jacket on the tree.

"Come in early, Simon?"

"Your Judge Moore sent a fax to Bas last night—just after midnight, as a matter of fact. Here." He handed it across.

Ryan scanned it. "The Pope, eh?"

"Your President is interested, and so is the PM, as it happens," Harding said, relighting his pipe. "Basil called us in early to go over what data we have."

"Okay, what *do* we have?"

"Not much," Harding admitted. "I can't talk to you about our sources—"

"Simon, I'm not dumb. You have somebody in close, either a confidante of a Politburo member or someone in the Party Secretariat. He's not telling you anything?" Ryan had seen some very interesting "take" in here, and it had to have come from somebody inside the big red tent.

"I can't confirm your suspicion," Harding cautioned, "but no, none of our sources have given us anything, not even that the Warsaw Letter has arrived in Moscow, though we know it must have."

"So, we don't know jackshit?"

Simon nodded soberly. "Correct."

"Amazing how often that happens."

"It's just a part of the job, Jack."

"And the PM has her panties in a wad?"

Harding hadn't heard that Americanism before, and it caused him to blink twice. "So it would seem."

"So, what are we supposed to tell her? She damned sure doesn't want to hear that we don't know."

"No, our political leaders do not like to hear that sort of thing."

Neither do ours, Ryan admitted to himself. "So, how good is Basil at a song-and-dance number?"

"Quite good, actually. In this case, he can say that your chaps do not have very much, either."

"Ask other NATO services?"

Harding shook his head. "No. It might leak out to the opposition—first, that we're interested, and second, that we don't know enough."

"How good are our friends?"

"Depends. The French SDECE occasionally turns good information, but they do not like to share. Neither do our Israeli friends. The Germans are thoroughly compromised. That Markus Wolf chap in East Germany is a bloody genius at this business—perhaps the best in the world, and under Soviet control. The Italians have some talented people, but they, too, have problems with penetration. You know, the best service on the continent might well be the Vatican itself. But if Ivan is doing anything at the moment, he's covering it nicely. Ivan is quite good at that, you know."

"So I've heard," Ryan agreed. "When does Basil have to go to Downing Street?"

"After lunch—three this afternoon, I understand."

"And what will we be able to give him?"

"Not very much, I'm afraid—worse, Basil might want me with him."

Ryan grunted. "That ought to be fun. Met her before?"

"No, but the PM has seen my analyses. Bas says she wants to meet me." He shuddered. "It'd be much better if I had something substantive to tell her."

"Well, let's see if we can come up with a threat analysis, okay?" Jack sat down. "What exactly *do* we know?"

Harding handed a sheaf of documents across. Ryan leaned back in his chair to pick through them.

"You got the Warsaw Letter from a Polish source, right?"

Harding hesitated, but it was clear he had to answer this one: "That is correct."

"So nothing from Moscow itself?" Jack asked.

He shook his head. "No. We know the letter was forwarded to Moscow, but that's all."

"We're really in the dark, then. You might want to have a beer before you go across the river."

Harding looked up from his notes. "Why, thank you, Jack. I really needed to hear that bit of encouragement."

They were silent for a moment.

"I work better on a computer," Ryan said. "How hard is it to get one in here?"

"Not easy. They have to be tempest-checked to make sure someone outside the building cannot read the keystrokes electronically. You can call administration about it."

But not today, Ryan didn't say aloud. He'd learned that the bureaucracy at Century House was at least as bad as the one at Langley, and after a few years of working in the private sector, it could drive him to distraction. *Okay,* he'd try to come up with some ideas to save Simon from getting a new asshole installed in his guts. The Prime Minister was a lady, but in terms of demands, Father Tim at Georgetown had nothing on her.

OLEG IVAN'CH got back from lunch at the KGB cafeteria and faced facts. Very soon, he would have to decide what to say to his American, and how to say it.

If he was a regular embassy employee, he would have passed the first note along to the CIA chief in the embassy—there had to be one, he knew, an American *rezident* whose job it was to spy on the Soviet Union, just as Russians spied on everyone in the world. The big question was whether they were spying on *him.* Could he have been "doubled" by the Second Chief Directorate, whose reputation would frighten the devil in hell himself? Or could this ostensible American have been a Russian bearing a "false-flag"?

So, first of all, Oleg had to make damned sure he was dealing with the real thing. How to do that . . . ?

Then it came to him. *Yes,* he thought. That was something KGB could never bring off. That would ensure that he was dealing with someone able to do what he needed done. No one could fake that. In celebration, Zaitzev lit up another cigarette and went back into the morning dispatches from the Washington *rezidentura.*

IT WAS HARD to like Tony Prince. The *New York Times* correspondent in Moscow was well-regarded by the Russians, and, as far as Ed Foley was concerned, that spoke to a weakness in his character.

"So, how do you like the new job, Ed?" Prince asked.

"Still settling in. Dealing with the Russian press is kind of interesting. They're predictable, but unpredictably so."

"How can people be unpredictably predictable?" the *Times* correspondent inquired, with a crooked smile.

"Well, Tony, you know what they're going to say, just not how they're going to ask it." *And half of them are spooks or at least stringers, anyway, in case you haven't noticed.*

Prince affected a laugh. He felt himself to be the intellectual superior. Foley had failed as a general-beat reporter in New York, whereas Prince had parlayed his political savvy to one of the top jobs in American journalism. He had some good contacts in the Soviet government, and he cultivated them assiduously, frequently sympathizing with them over the boorish, *nekulturniy* behavior of the current regime in Washington, which he occasionally tried to

explain to his Russian friends, often pointing out that *he* hadn't voted for this damned actor, and neither had anyone in his New York office.

"Have you met the new guy, Alexandrov, yet?"

"No, but one of my contacts knows him, says he's a reasonable sort, talks like he's in favor of peaceful coexistence. More liberal than Suslov. I hear *he's* pretty sick."

"I've heard that, too, but I'm not sure what's wrong with him."

"He's diabetic, didn't you hear? That's why the Baltimore docs came over to work on his eyes. Diabetic retinopathy," Prince explained, speaking the word slowly so that Foley could comprehend it.

"I'll have to ask the embassy doc what that means," Foley observed, making an obvious note on his pad. "So, this Alexandrov guy is more liberal, you think?" "Liberal" was a word that meant "good guy" to Prince.

"Well, I haven't met him myself, but that's what my sources think. They also think that when Suslov departs from this life, Mikhail Yevgeniyevich will take his place."

"Really? I'll have to drop that on the ambassador."

"And the Station Chief?"

"You know who that is? I don't," Foley said.

An eye roll. "Ron Fielding. Hell, *everybody* knows that."

"No, he isn't," Ed protested as sharply as his acting talent allowed. "He's the senior consular officer, not a spook."

Prince smiled, thinking, *You never could figure things out, could you?* His Russian contacts had fingered Fielding to him, and he knew they wouldn't lie to him. "Well, that's just a guess, of course," the reporter went on.

And if you thought it was me, you'd blurt it right out, wouldn't you? Foley thought right back at him. *You officious ass.* "Well, I'm cleared for some things, as you know, but not that one."

"I know who does know," Prince offered.

"Yeah, but I'm not going to ask the Ambassador, Tony. He'd rip my face off."

"He's just a political appointment, Ed—nothing special. This ought to be a posting for somebody who knows diplomacy, but the President didn't ask me for advice."

Thank God, the Station Chief commented inwardly.

"Fielding sees him a lot, doesn't he?" Prince went on.

"A consular officer works directly with the Ambassador, Tony. You know that."

"Yeah. Convenient, isn't it? How much do you see him?"

"The boss, you mean? Once a day, usually," Foley answered.

"And Fielding?"

"More. Maybe two or three times."

"There you have it," Prince concluded grandly. "You can always tell."

"You read too many James Bond books," Foley said dismissively. "Or maybe Matt Helm."

"Get real, Ed," Prince bristled with elegant gentleness.

"If Fielding is the head spook, who are his underlings? Damned if I know."

"Well, those are always pretty covert," Prince admitted. "No, on that I don't

have a clue."

"Pity. That's one of the games you play in the embassy—who are the spooks."

"Well, I can't help you."

"It's not something I need to know anyway, I guess," Foley admitted.

You never were curious enough to be a good reporter, Prince thought, with a casual, pleasant smile. "So, does this keep you busy?"

"It's not a ball-breaker. Anyway, can we make a deal?"

"Sure," Prince replied. "What is it?"

"If you hear anything interesting, let us know here?"

"You can read about it in the *Times,* usually on the front page above the fold," he added, to make sure Foley knew how important he was, along with his penetrating analysis.

"Well, some things, you know, the Ambassador likes to get a heads-up. He told me to ask, off-the-record-like."

"That's an ethical issue, Ed."

"If I tell Ernie that, he won't be real happy."

"Well, you work for him. I don't."

"You are an American citizen, right?"

"Don't wave the flag at me, okay?" Prince responded wearily. "Okay, if I find out they're about to launch nuclear weapons, I'll let you know. But it looks to me like we're more likely to do something that stupid than they are."

"Tony, give me a break."

"This 'focus of evil in the world' crap wasn't exactly Abe Lincoln talking, was it?"

"You saying the President was wrong?" the Chief of Station asked, wondering just how far his opinion of this ass might sink.

"I know about the Gulag, okay? But that's a thing of the past. The Russians have mellowed since Stalin died, but the new administration hasn't figured that one out yet, have they?"

"Look, Tony, I'm just a worker bee here. The Ambassador asked me to forward a simple request. I take it your response is 'no'?"

"You take it correctly."

"Well, don't expect any Christmas cards from Ernie Fuller."

"Ed, my duty is to *The New York Times* and my readers, period."

"Okay, fine. I had to ask," Foley said defensively. He hadn't expected anything better from the guy, but he'd suggested this to Ambassador Fuller himself to feel Prince out, and the Ambassador had approved it.

"I understand." Prince checked his watch. "Hey, I have a meeting scheduled at the CPSU Central Committee building."

"Anything I ought to know about?"

"Like I said, you can read it in the *Times.* They fax you the *Early Bird* out of Washington, don't they?"

"Yeah, it eventually trickles down here."

"Then, day after tomorrow, you can read it," Prince advised, standing to take his leave. "Tell Ernie."

"I'll do that," Foley said, extending his hand. Then he decided he'd walk Prince to the elevator. On the way back, he'd hit the men's room to wash his

hands. His next stop after that was the Ambassador's office.

"Hi, Ed. Meet with that Prince guy?"

Foley nodded his head. "Just cut him loose."

"Did he nibble at your hook?"

"Nope. Just spat it right back at me."

Fuller smiled crookedly. "What did I tell you? There used to be some patriotic reporters back when I was your age, but they've mostly grown out of it over the last few years."

"I'm not surprised. When Tony was a new kid in New York, he never liked the cops very much, but he was good at getting them to talk to him. Persuasive bastard, when he wants to be."

"Did he work on you?"

"No, sir. I'm not important enough for that."

"What did you think of the Washington request about the Pope?" Fuller asked, changing the subject.

"I'm going to have some people look into it, but—"

"I know, Ed. I don't *want* to know exactly what you're doing about it. If you find anything, will you be able to tell me about it?"

"Depends, sir," Foley answered, meaning *probably not.*

Fuller accepted that. "Okay. Anything else shaking?"

"Prince is on to something, ought to be in the papers day after tomorrow. He's on his way to the Central Committee, or so he told me. He confirmed that Alexandrov will replace Mikhail Suslov when Red Mike checks out. If they're telling him, it must be official. I think we can believe that one. Tony has good contacts with their political types, and it tracks with what our other friends tell us about Suslov."

"I've never met the guy. What gives with him?"

"He's one of the last true believers. Alexandrov is another one. He thinks Marx is the One True God, and Lenin is his prophet, and their political and economic system really does work."

"Really? Some people never learn."

"Yep. You can take that to the bank, sir. There are a few left, but Leonid Ilyich isn't one of them, and neither is his heir apparent, Yuriy Vladimirovich. But Alexandrov is Andropov's ally. There's a Politburo meeting later today."

"When will we know what they discussed?"

"Couple of days, probably." *But exactly how we find out, you do not need to know, sir,* Foley didn't add.

He didn't have to. Ernie Fuller knew the rules of the game. The U.S. Ambassador to every country was thoroughly briefed on the embassy he was taking over. To get into Moscow involved voluntary brainwashing at Foggy Bottom and Langley. In reality, the American ambassador to Moscow was his country's chief intelligence officer in the Soviet Union, and Uncle Ernie was a pretty good one, Foley thought.

"Okay, keep me posted if you can."

"Will do, sir," the Chief of Station promised.

CHAPTER 13

COLLEGIALITY

ANDROPOV ARRIVED IN THE KREMLIN at 12:45 for the 1:00 P.M. meeting. His driver pulled the handmade ZIL through the Spasskiy Gate's towering brick structure, past the security checkpoints, past the saluting soldiers of the ceremonial Tamanskiy Guards Division stationed outside Moscow and used mainly for parades and pretty-soldier duties. The soldier saluted smartly, but the gesture went unnoticed by the people inside the car. From there it was a hundred fifty meters to the destination, where another soldier wrenched open the door. Andropov noted this salute and nodded absently to let the senior sergeant know that he was seen, then made his way inside the yellow-cream-colored building. Instead of taking the stone steps, Andropov turned right to go to the elevator for the ride to the second floor, followed by his aide, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy, for whom this was the most interesting and about to be the most intimidating part of his official duties since joining KGB.

There was yet more security on the upper floors: uniformed Red Army officers with holstered side arms, in case of trouble. But there would be no trouble in his ascension to the General Secretaryship, Andropov thought. This would be no palace coup. He'd be elected by his political peers in the usual way that the Soviet Union handled the transition of power—awkwardly and badly, but predictably. The one with the most political capital would chair this counsel of peers, because they would trust him not to rule by force of will, but by collegial consensus. None of them wanted another Stalin, or even another Khrushchev, who might lead them on adventures. These men did not enjoy adventures. They'd all learned from history that gambling carried with it the possibility of losing, and none of them had come this far to risk losing anything at all. They were the chieftains in a nation of chess players, for whom victory was something determined by skillful maneuvers taken

patiently and progressively over a period of hours, whose conclusion would seem as foreordained as the setting of the sun.

That was one of the problems today, Andropov thought, taking his seat next to Defense Minister Ustinov. Both sat near the head of the table, in the seats reserved for members of the Defense Counsel or *Soviet Orborony,* the five most senior officials in the entire Soviet government, including the Secretary for Ideology—Suslov. Ustinov looked up from his briefing papers.

"Yuriy," the minister said in greeting.

"Good day, Dmitriy." Andropov had already reached his accommodation with the Marshal of the Soviet Union. He'd never obstructed his requests for funding for the bloated and misdirected Soviet military, which was blundering around Afghanistan like a beached whale. It would probably win in the end, everyone thought. After all, the Red Army had never failed . . . unless you remembered Lenin's first assault into Poland in 1919, which had ended in an ignominious rout. No, they preferred to remember defeating Hitler after the Germans had come to within sight of the Kremlin itself, stopping only when attacked by Russia's historically most reliable ally, General Winter. Andropov was not a devotee of the Soviet military, but it remained the security blanket for the rest of the Politburo, because the army made sure the country did what they told it to do. That was not because of love, but because the Red Army had guns in large numbers. So did the KGB, and the Ministry of the Interior, in order to act as a check on the Red Army—no sense giving them ideas. Just to make sure, KGB also had the Third Chief Directorate, whose job it was to keep an eye on every single rifle company in the Red Army. In other countries, it was called checks and balances. Here it was a balance of terror.

Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev came in last of all, walking like the aged peasant he was, his skin dropping on his once manly face. He was approaching eighty years, a number he might meet but would not surpass, by the look of him. That was both good news and bad. There was no telling what thoughts wiggled their way around the inside of his doting brain. He'd been a man of great personal power once—Andropov could remember it plainly enough. He'd been a vigorous man who'd enjoyed walking in the forests to kill elk or even bear—the mighty hunter of wild animals. But not now. He hadn't shot anything in years—except, perhaps, people, at second or third hand. But that didn't make Leonid Ilyich mellow with age. Far from it. The brown eyes were still sly, still looking for treachery, and sometimes finding it where there was none. Under Stalin, that was frequently a death sentence. But not now. Now you'd just be broken, stripped of power, and relegated to a provincial post where you'd die of boredom.

"Good afternoon, comrades," the General Secretary said, as pleasantly as his grumbly voice allowed.

At least there was no obvious bootlicking anymore, every communist courtier jousting with each other to curry favor with the Marxist emperor. You could waste half the meeting with that twaddle, and Andropov had important things to discuss.

Leonid Ilyich had been prebriefed, and after sipping his post-lunch tea, the General Secretary turned his face to the KGB Chairman. "Yuriy Vladimirovich, you have something to discuss with us?"

"Thank you, Comrade General Secretary. Comrades," he began, "something has come up which commands our attention." He waved to Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy, who quickly circulated around the table, handing out copies of the Warsaw Letter.

"What you see is a letter dispatched to Warsaw last week by the Pope of Rome." Each man had a photocopy of the original—some of them spoke Polish—plus an exact translation into literary Russian, complete with footnotes. "I feel that this is a potential political threat to us."

"I have already seen this letter," Alexandrov said from his distant "candidate" seat. In deference to the seniority of the terminally ill Mikhail Suslov, the latter's seat at Brezhnev's left hand (and next to Andropov) was empty, though his place at the table had the same collection of papers as everyone else's—maybe Suslov had read them on his deathbed, and he'd lash out one last time from his waiting niche in the Kremlin wall.

"This is outrageous," Marshal Ustinov said immediately. He was also well into his seventies. "Who does this priest think he is!"

"Well, he is Polish," Andropov reminded his colleagues, "and he feels he has a certain duty to provide his former countrymen with political protection."

"Protection from what?" the Minister of the Interior demanded. "The threat to Poland comes from their own counterrevolutionaries."

"And their own government lacks the balls to deal with them. I told you last year we needed to move in on them," the First Secretary of the Moscow Party reminded the rest.

"And if they resist our move?" the Agricultural Minister inquired from his seat at the far end of the table.

"You may be certain of that," the Foreign Minister thought out loud. "At least politically, they will resist."

"Dmitriy Fedorovich?" Alexandrov directed his question at Marshal Ustinov, who sat there in his military uniform, complete with a square foot of ribbons, and two Hero of the Soviet Union gold stars. He'd won them both for political courage, not on the battlefield, but he was one of the smartest people in the room, having earned his spurs as People's Commissar of Armaments in the Great Motherland War, and for helping shepherd the USSR into the Space Age. His opinion was predictable, but respected for its sagacity.

"The question, comrades, is whether the Poles would resist with armed force. That would not be militarily threatening, but it would be a major political embarrassment, both here and abroad. That is, they could not stop the Red Army on the battlefield, but should they make the attempt, the political repercussions would be serious. That is why I supported our move last year to bring political pressure on Warsaw—which was successfully accomplished, you will recall." At the age of seventy-four, Dmitriy Fedorovich had learned caution, at least on the level of international politics. The unspoken concern was the effect such resistance would have on the United States of America, which liked to stick its nose where it didn't belong.

"Well, this might well incite additional political unrest in Poland, or so my analysts tell me," Andropov told his colleagues, and the room got a little chilly.

"How serious is this, Yuriy Vladimirovich? How serious might it become?" It

was Brezhnev speaking for the first time from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

"Poland continues to be unstable, due to counterrevolutionary elements within their society. Their labor sector, in particular, is restless. We have our sources within this 'Solidarity' cabal, and they tell us that the pot continues to boil. The problem with the Pope is that if he does what he threatens and comes to Poland, the Polish people will have a rallying point, and if a sufficient number of them become involved, the country might well try to change its form of government," the Chairman of the KGB said delicately.

"That is not acceptable," Leonid Ilyich observed in a quiet voice. At this table, a loud voice was just a man venting his stress. A quiet one was far more dangerous. "If Poland falls, then Germany falls . . ." and then the entire Warsaw Pact, which would leave the Soviet Union without its buffer zone to the West. NATO was strong, and would become more so, as the new American defense buildup began to take effect. They'd already been briefed on that troublesome subject. Already, the first new tanks were being given to line units, preparatory to shipping them to West Germany. And so were the new airplanes. Most frightening of all was the vastly increased training regimen for the American soldiers. It was as though they were actually preparing for a strike east.

The fall of Poland and Germany would mean that a trip to Soviet territory would be shortened by more than a thousand kilometers, and there was not a man at this table who did not remember the last time the Germans had entered the Soviet Union. Despite all the protestations that NATO was a defensive alliance whose entire purpose was to keep the Red Army from driving down the Champs Élysées, to Moscow NATO and all the other American alliances looked like an enormous noose designed to fit around their collective necks. They'd all considered that before at great length. And they really didn't need political instability to add to their problems. Communists—though not quite so fervent as Suslov and his ideological heir, Alexandrov—feared above all the possible turning away of their people from the True Faith, which was the source of their own very comfortable personal power. They'd all come to power at second hand to a popular peasant revolt which had overthrown the Romanov dynasty—or so they all told themselves, despite what history really said—and they had no illusions about what a revolt would do to them. Brezhnev shifted in his chair. "So, this Polish priest is a threat."

"Yes, comrades, he is," Andropov said. "His letter is a genuine and sincere thrust at the political stability of Poland, and thus of the entire Warsaw Pact. The Catholic Church remains politically powerful throughout Europe, including our fraternal socialist allies. If he were to resign the papacy and travel back to his homeland, that in itself would be a huge political statement.

"Josef Vissarionovich Stalin once asked how many army divisions the Pope had. The answer is none, of course, but we cannot disregard his power. I suppose we could try diplomatic contacts to dissuade him from this course . . ."

"A complete waste of time," the Foreign Minister observed at once. "We have had occasional diplomatic contacts in the Vatican itself, and they listen to us politely, and they speak reasonably, and then they take whatever action they want to take. No, we cannot influence him, even with direct threats to

the church. They merely see threats as challenges."

And that put the matter squarely in the middle of the table. Andropov was grateful to the Foreign Minister, who was also in his camp for the issue of succession. He wondered idly if Brezhnev knew or cared about what would happen after he died—well, he'd care about his children's fate and protection, but that was easily handled. Sinecure Party posts could be found for all of them, and there would be no future marriages to require the china and tableware from the Hermitage.

"Yuriy Vladimirovich, what can KGB do about this threat?" Brezhnev inquired next. *He is so easy to manage,* Andropov reflected briefly and gratefully.

"It may be possible to eliminate the threat by eliminating the man who makes it," the Chairman replied, with an even, unemotional voice.

"To kill him?" Ustinov asked.

"Yes, Dmitriy."

"What are the dangers of that?" the Foreign Minister asked at once. Diplomats always worried about such things.

"We cannot entirely eliminate them, but we can control them. My people have come up with an operational concept, which would involve shooting the Pope at one of his public appearances. I have brought my aide, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy, to brief us in on it. With your permission, comrades?" He received a collection of nods. Then he turned his head: "Aleksey Nikolay'ch?"

"Comrades." The colonel rose and walked to the lectern, trying to keep his shaking knees under control. "The operation has no name, and will have none for security reasons. The Pope appears in public every Wednesday afternoon. He generally parades around Saint Peter's Square in a motor vehicle, which offers him no protection against attack and comes within three or four meters of the assembled multitude." Rozhdestvenskiy had chosen his words carefully. Every man at the table knew biblical matters and terminology. You could not grow up, even here, without acquiring knowledge of Christianity—even if it was just enough to despise everything about it.

"The question then is how to get a man with a pistol to the front rank of spectators, so that he can take his shot at sufficiently close range to make a successful shot likely."

"Not 'certain'?" the Minister of the Interior asked harshly.

Rozhdestvenskiy did his best not to wilt. "Comrade Minister, we rarely deal in absolute certainties. Even a skilled pistol shot cannot guarantee a perfect shot against a moving target, and the tactical realities here will not allow a carefully aimed round. The assassin will have to bring his weapon up rapidly from a place of concealment, and fire. He will be able to get off two, possibly three, shots before the crowd collapses on him. At that point, a second officer will then kill the assassin from behind with a silenced pistol—and then make his own escape. This will leave no one behind to speak to the Italian police. For this, we will use our Bulgarian socialist allies to select the assassin, to get him to the scene, and then to eliminate him."

"How will our Bulgarian friend get away under these circumstances?" Brezhnev asked. His personal knowledge of firearms allowed him to skip over technical issues, Andropov saw.

"It is likely that the crowd will concentrate on the assassin, and will not take note of the intelligence officer's follow-up shot. It will be virtually silent and there will be a great deal of crowd noise. He will then simply back away and make his escape," Rozhdestvenskiy explained. "The officer we want on this is well experienced in operations of this kind."

"Does he have a name?" Alexandrov asked.

"Yes, comrade, and I can give it to you if you wish, but for security reasons . . ."

"Correct, Colonel," Ustinov put in. "We do not really need to know his name, do we, comrades?" Heads shook around the table. For these men, secrecy came as naturally as urination.

"Not a rifleman?" Interior asked.

"That would risk exposure. The buildings around the square are patrolled by the Vatican's own security force, Swiss mercenaries, and—"

"How good are these Swiss militiamen?" another voice asked.

"How good do they need to be to see a man with a rifle and to raise an alarm?" Rozhdestvenskiy asked, reasonably. "Comrades, when you plan an operation like this one, you try to keep the variables under strict control. Complexity is a dangerous enemy in any such undertaking. As planned, all we need to do is to insert two men into a crowd of thousands and get them close. Then it's just a matter of taking the shot. A pistol is easily concealed in loose clothing. The people there are not screened or searched in any way. No, comrades, this plan is the best we can establish—unless you would have us dispatch a platoon of Spetsnaz soldiers into the Vatican Apartments. That would obviously work, but the origin of such an operation would be impossible to conceal. This mission, if it comes off, depends only on two people, only one of whom will survive, and who will almost certainly escape cleanly."

"How reliable are the participants?" the Chairman of the Party Control Commission asked.

"The Bulgarian officer has personally killed eight men, and he has good contacts within the Turkish criminal community, from which he will select our assassin."

"A Turk?" the Party man asked.

"Yes, a Muslim," Andropov confirmed. "If the operation can be blamed on a Turkish follower of Mohammed, so much the better for us. Correct?"

"It would not hurt our purposes," the Foreign Minister confirmed. "In fact, it might well have the effect of making Islam look more barbaric to the West. That would cause America to increase its support for Israel, and that would annoy the Muslim countries from whom they buy their oil. There is an elegance to it all, which appeals to me, Yuriy."

"So, the complexity of the operation is entirely limited to its consequences," Marshal Ustinov observed, "and not to the undertaking itself."

"Correct, Dmitriy," Andropov confirmed.

"What are the chances that this operation might be linked to us?" asked the Ukrainian Party Secretary.

"If all we leave behind is a dead Turk, connections will be very difficult to establish," the KGB Chairman replied. "This operation has no name. The

number of people involved is less than twenty, and most of them are in this room, right here. There will be no written records. Comrades, the security of this operation will be absolute. I must insist that none of you speak about this to anyone. Not your wives, not your private secretaries, not your political advisers. In that way, we can ensure against leaks. We must remember that the Western intelligence services are always trying to discover our secrets. In this case, that cannot be allowed to happen."

"You should have limited this discussion to the Defense Counsel," Brezhnev thought aloud.

"Leonid Ilyich, I thought of that," Andropov responded. "But the political implications of this matter command attention by the entire Politburo."

"Yes, I can see that," the General Secretary agreed with a nod. What he did not see was that Andropov had carefully followed this course so as not to be seen as an adventurer by the men who would someday soon elect him to his own head chair. "Very well, Yuriy. I cannot object to that," Brezhnev said thoughtfully.

"It's still a dangerous thing to contemplate," said the Secretary of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. "I must say that I am not entirely comfortable with this plan."

"Gregoriy Vasil'yevich," the Ukrainian Party boss responded, "about Poland—if their government falls, there will be consequences for me that I do not find attractive. Nor should you," he warned. "If this Pole returns home, the results could be ruinous to all of us."

"I understand that, but murder of a chief of state is nothing to be undertaken lightly. I think we ought to warn him first. There are ways to get his attention."

The Minister for Foreign Affairs shook his head. "I've already said it—a waste of time. Men like this do not understand what death is. We could threaten his church members in the Warsaw Pact, but that would probably only have the opposite effect of what we desire. It would give us the worst of all worlds, the consequences of attacking the Roman Church without the option of eliminating this troublesome churchman. No." He shook his head. "If it is to be done, then it must be done properly, decisively, and speedily. Yuriy Vladimirovich, how long to accomplish this mission?"

"Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy?" the KGB Chairman asked.

All heads turned to the colonel, and he did his best to keep his voice level. This was very deep water for a mere colonel. The entire operation now rested on his shoulders, a possibility he had somehow never fully considered. But if he was to get his general's stars, he had to take this responsibility, didn't he?

"Comrade Minister, I would estimate four to six weeks, if you authorize the operation today, and so notify the Bulgarian Politburo. We will be using one of their assets, for which their permission is necessary."

"Andrey Andreyevich?" Brezhnev asked. "How cooperative will they be in Sofia?"

The Foreign Minister took a moment. "That depends on what we ask them and how we ask it. If they know the purpose of the operation, they might dally somewhat."

"Can we ask their cooperation without telling them what it is for?" Ustinov

asked.

"Yes, I think so. We can just offer them a hundred new tanks or some fighter aircraft, as a gesture of socialist solidarity," the Minister for Foreign Affairs suggested.

"Be generous," Brezhnev agreed. "I'm sure they have a request floating in the Defense Ministry, yes, Dmitriy?"

"Always!" Marshal Ustinov confirmed. "It's all they ever ask for, more tanks and more MiGs!"

"Then load the tanks on a train and send them to Sofia. Comrades, we have a vote to take," the General Secretary told the Politburo. The eleven voting members felt a little bit railroaded. The seven "candidate," or nonvoting, members just watched and nodded.

As usual, the vote was unanimous. No one voted no, despite the fact that some of them had doubts concealed in their silence. In this room, one did not want to stray too far from the *kollectiv* spirit. Power here was as circumscribed as everywhere else in the world, a fact upon which they rarely reflected and on which they *never* acted.

"Very well." Brezhnev turned his head to Andropov. "KGB is authorized to undertake this operation, and may God have mercy on his Polish soul," he added, in a bit of peasant levity. "So, what is next?"

"Comrade, if I may . . ." Andropov said, getting a nod. "Our brother and friend Mikhail Andreyevich Suslov will soon depart this life, after long and devoted service to the Party we all hold dear. His chair is already empty due to his illness, and needs filling. I propose Mikhail Yevgeniyevich Alexandrov as the next Central Committee Secretary for Ideology, with full voting membership in the Politburo."

Alexandrov even managed to blush. He held up his hands and spoke with the utmost sincerity. "Comrades, my—our—friend is still alive. I cannot take his place while he still lives."

"It is good of you to put it that way, Misha," the General Secretary observed, using the affectionate abbreviation for his Christian name. "But Mikhail Andreyevich is gravely ill and has not long to live. I suggest that we table Yuriy's motion for the moment. Such an appointment must, of course, be ratified by the Central Committee as a whole." But that was less than a formality, as everyone here knew. Brezhnev had just given his blessing to Alexandrov's promotion, and that was all he needed.

"Thank you, Comrade General Secretary." And now Alexandrov could look at the empty chair at Brezhnev's left hand and know that in a few weeks it would soon be his officially. He'd weep like all the others when Suslov died, and the tears would be just as cold. And Mikhail Andreyevich would even understand. His biggest problem now was facing death, the greatest of life's mysteries, and wondering what lay on the other side of it. It was something everyone at the table would have to face, but for all of them it was sufficiently distant to be dismissed . . . for the moment. That, Yuriy Andropov thought, was one difference between them and the Pope, who was soon to die at their hands.

The meeting broke up just after four in the afternoon. The men took their leave, as always, with friendly words and shaken hands, before they went

their separate ways. Andropov, with Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy in tow, headed out toward the end. Soon he would be the last to leave, as was the prerogative of the General Secretary.

"Comrade Chairman, a moment, if you would allow it," Rozhdestvenskiy said, heading for the men's room. He emerged a minute and a half later with an easier stride.

"You did well, Aleksey," Andropov told him, as they resumed their way out —the Chairman took the steps down instead of the elevator. "So, what did you make of it?"

"Comrade Brezhnev is frailer than I expected."

"Yes, he is. It didn't help him very much to stop smoking," Andropov reached into his coat pocket for his Marlboros—at the Politburo meetings, people now avoided smoking, out of deference to Leonid Ilyich, and the KGB Chairman needed a cigarette right now. "What else?"

"It was remarkably collegial. I expected more disagreement, more arguing, I suppose." Discussions between spooks at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square were far more lively, especially when discussing operations.

"They are all cautious players, Aleksey. Those with so much power at their fingertips always are—and they should be. But they often do not take action because they fear doing anything new and different." Andropov knew that his country needed new and different things, and wondered how difficult it would be for him to bring them about.

"But, Comrade Chairman, our operation—"

"That's different, Colonel. When they feel threatened, then they can take action. They fear the Pope. And they are probably right to. Don't you think?"

"Comrade Chairman, I am a colonel only. I serve. I do not rule."

"Keep it that way, Aleksey. It's safer." Andropov entered the car and sat down, and immediately became lost in his thoughts.

AN HOUR LATER, Zaitzev was finishing up his day and awaiting his relief. Then Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy appeared at his side without warning.

"Captain, I need you to send this out to Sofia immediately." He paused. "Does anyone else see these messages?"

"No, Comrade Colonel. The message designator labels it as something to come to me only. That is in the order book."

"Good. Let's keep it that way." He handed over the blank.

"By your order, Comrade Colonel." Zaitzev watched him head off. He barely had time to get this done before taking his leave.

MOST SECRET
IMMEDIATE AND URGENT
FROM: OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN, MOSCOW CENTRE
TO: REZIDENT SOFIA
REFERENCE: OPERATIONAL DESIGNATOR 15-8-82-666
OPERATION APPROVED. NEXT STEP INTERMEDIATE APPROVAL BULGARIAN POLITBURO. EXPECT FULL APPROVAL TEN DAYS OR LESS. CONTINUE PLANNING FOR OPERATION.

Zaitzev saw it telexed off, then handed the copy to a messenger to be hand-delivered to the top floor. Then he took his leave, walking a little more swiftly than usual. Out on the street, he fished out his cigarette pack to get himself another Trud before going down the escalator to the metro platform. There, he checked the ceiling clock. He'd actually walked too quickly, he saw, and so let the train go without him, fumbling with his cigarette pack as an excuse if anyone was watching him—but then again, if anyone were watching him now, he was already a dead man. The thought made his hands shake, but it was too late for that. The next train came out of the tunnel exactly on time, and he boarded the proper carriage, shuffling in with fifteen or so other workers. . . .

And there he was. Reading a newspaper, wearing an unbuttoned raincoat, his right hand on the chrome overhead bar.

Zaitzev wandered that way. In his right hand was the second note that he'd just fished out of his cigarette pack. Yes, he saw belatedly, the man was wearing a bright green tie, held in place by a gold-colored tie bar. A brown suit, a clean white shirt that looked expensive, and his face was occupied with the paper. The man did not look around. Zaitzev slid closer.

ONE OF THE things Ed Foley had studied at The Farm was how to perfect his peripheral vision. With training and practice, your eyes could actually see a wider field than the unschooled realized. At CIA camp, he'd learned by walking down the street and reading house numbers without turning his head. Best of all, it was like riding a bicycle. Once learned, it was always there if you just concentrated when you needed to. And so he noticed that someone was moving slowly toward him—white male, about five-nine, medium build, brown eyes and hair, drab clothes, needed a haircut. He didn't see the face clearly enough to remember it or to pick it out of a lineup. A Slavic face, that was all. Expressionless, and the eyes were definitely in his direction. Foley didn't allow his breathing to change, though his heart might have increased its frequency by a few extra beats.

Come on, Ivan. I'm wearing the fucking tie, just like you said. He'd gotten on at the right stop. KGB headquarters was just a block from the escalator. So, yeah, this guy was probably a spook. And not a false-flag. If this was some Second Chief Directorate guy, they would have staged it differently. This was too obvious, too amateurish, not the way KGB would do things. They would have done it at a different subway stop.

This guy's fuckin' real, Foley told himself. He forced himself to be patient, which wasn't easy, even for this experienced field officer, but he took an imperceptible deep breath and waited, telling the nerve endings in his skin to report the least shift in the weight of his topcoat on his shoulders. . . .

ZAITZEV LOOKED AROUND the car as casually as he could. There were no eyes on him, none even looking in this general direction. So his right hand slid into the open pocket, quickly but not too quickly. Then he withdrew.

BINGO, FOLEY THOUGHT, as his heart skipped two or three beats. *Okay, Ivan, what's the message this time?*

Again, he had to be patient. No sense getting this guy killed. If he was really a guy from the Russian MERCURY, then there was no telling how important this might be. Like the first nibble on a deep-sea fishing boat. Was this a marlin, a shark, or a lost boot? If a nice blue marlin, how big? But he couldn't even pull back on the fishing rod to set the hook yet. No, that would come later, if it came at all. The recruitment phase of field operations—taking some innocent Soviet citizen and making him an agent, an information-procuring asset of the CIA, a *spy*—that was harder than going to a CYO dance and getting laid. The real trick was not getting the girl pregnant—or the agent killed. No, the way the game was played, you had the first fast dance, then the first slow dance, then the first kiss, then the first grope, and then, if you got lucky, unbuttoning the blouse . . . and then . . .

The reverie stopped when the train did. Foley removed his hand from the overhead rail and looked around. . . .

And there he was, actually looking at him, and the face went into the mental photo album.

Bad tradecraft, buddy. That can get your ass killed. Never look right at your case officer in a public place, Foley thought, his eyes passing right over him, no expression at all on his own face as he walked past the guy, deliberately taking the long way to the door.

ZAITZEV WAS IMPRESSED by the American. He'd actually looked at his new Russian contact, but his eyes had revealed nothing, had not even looked at him directly, but past him to the end of the carriage. And, just that quickly, the American had walked away. *Be what I hope you are*, Oleg Ivan'ch's mind thought, just as loudly as it could.

FIFTY METERS UP on the open street, Foley refused even to let his hand go into the coat. He was certain that a hand had been there. He'd felt it, all right. And Ivan Whoever hadn't done it looking for change.

Foley walked past the gate guard, into the building, and went up in the elevator. His key went into the lock, and the door opened. Only when it was closed behind him did he reach into the pocket.

Mary Pat was there, watching his face, and she saw the unguarded flash of recognition and discovery.

Ed took the note out. It was the same blank message form and, as before, it had writing on it. Foley read it once, then again, and a third time before

handing it over to his wife.

Mary Pat's eyes flared, too.

It was a fish, Foley thought. *Maybe a big one.* And he was asking for something substantive. Whoever he was, he wasn't stupid. It would not be easy to arrange what he wanted, but he'd be able to pull it off. It just meant making the gunnery sergeant angry, and more important, visibly angry, because the embassy was always under surveillance. Something like this could not appear routine, or deliberate, but it didn't have to be an Oscar-class bit of acting either. He was sure the Marines could bring it off. Then he felt Mary Pat's hand in his.

"Hey, honey," he said, for the microphones.

"Hi, Ed." Her hand entered his.

This guy's re[al], her hand said. He answered with a nod.

Tomor[row] mor[ning], she asked, and got another nod.

"Honey, I have to run back to the embassy. I left something in my desk, damn it." Her answer was a thumbs-up.

"Well, don't take too long. I have dinner on. Got a nice roast from the Finnish store. Baked potatoes and frozen corn on the cob."

"Sounds good," he agreed. "Half an hour, max."

"Well, don't be late."

"Where are the car keys?"

"In the kitchen." And they both walked that way.

"Do I have to leave without a kiss?" he asked in his best pussy-whipped voice.

"I guess not" was the playful reply.

"Anything interesting at work today?"

"Just that Price guy from the *Times."*

"He's a jerk."

"Tell me about it. Later, honey." Foley headed for the door, still wearing his topcoat.

He waved to the gate guard on the way back out, a frustrated grimace on his face for theatrical effect. The guards would probably write down his passage—maybe even call it in somewhere—and, with luck, his drive to the embassy would be matched against the tapes from the apartment, and the Second Chief Directorate pukes would tick off whatever box they had on their surveillance forms and decide that Ed Foley had fucked up and indeed left something at the office. He'd have to remember to drive back with a manila envelope on the front seat of the Mercedes. Spooks earned their living most of all by remembering everything and forgetting nothing.

The drive to the embassy was faster than taking the metro at this time of day, but that was factored in to everything else his working routine encompassed. In just a few minutes, he pulled into the embassy gate, past the Marine sentry, and took a visitor's slot before running in, past some more Marines, and up to his office. There he lifted the phone and made a call, while he took a manila envelope and slid a copy of the *International Herald Tribune* into it.

"Yeah, Ed?" The voice belonged to Dominic Corso, one of Foley's field officers. Actually older than his boss, Corso was covered as a Commercial

Attaché. He'd worked Moscow for three years and was well regarded by his Station Chief. Another New Yorker, he was a native of the Borough of Richmond—Staten Island—the son of an NYPD detective. He looked like what he was, a New York guinea, but he was a quite a bit smarter than ethnic bigots would like to have admitted. Corso had the fey brown eyes of an old red fox, but he kept his intelligence under wraps.

"Need you to do something."

"What's that?"

Foley told him.

"You're serious?" It wasn't exactly a normal request.

"Yep."

"Okay, I'll tell the gunny. He's going to ask why." Gunnery Sergeant Tom Drake, the NCO-in-Charge of the Marine detail at the embassy, knew whom Corso worked for.

"Tell him it's a joke, but it's an important one."

"Right." Corso nodded. "Anything I need to know?"

"Not right now."

Corso blinked. *Okay, this was sensitive if the COS wasn't sharing information, but that wasn't so unusual, was it?* Corso reflected. In CIA, you often didn't know what your own team was doing. He didn't know Foley all that well, but he knew enough to respect him.

"Okay, I'll go see him now."

"Thanks, Dom."

"How's the boy like Moscow?" the field officer asked his boss on the way out the door.

"He's adjusting. Be better when he can skate some. He really likes hockey."

"Well, he's in the right town for that."

"Ain't that the truth." Foley gathered his papers and stood. "Let's get this one done, Dom."

"Right now, Ed. See you tomorrow."

CHAPTER 14

DANGER SIGNAL

IF THERE IS ANYTHING CONSTANT in the business of espionage, it is a persistent lack of sleep for the players. That comes from stress, and stress is always the handmaiden of spooks. When sleep was slow in coming for Ed and Mary Pat Foley, they could at least talk with their hands in bed.

He's re[al as] h[ell], b[aby], Foley told his wife under the covers.

Y[ep], she agreed. *Have w[e] ev[er] had a g[uy] fr[om] that far in[side]?* she wondered.

N[o] way José, he replied.

Lan[gley] will flip.

B[ig]-time, her husband agreed. Bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, two outs, full count, and the pitcher had hung a curveball right over Main Street, and he was about to stroke it over the scoreboard. *Assuming we don't fuck it all up,* Foley warned himself.

Want me to get inv[olved]? she wondered next.

Need to wait n s[ee].

A sigh told him, *Yeah, I know.* Even for them, patience came hard. Foley could see that curveball, hanging right over the middle of the plate, just about belt-high, and the Louisville Slugger was tight in his hands: his eyes were locked on the ball so tight that he could see the stitches turning as it approached—and this one was going out of the park, going down-fuckin'-town. He'd show Reggie Jackson who was the hitter on this playground . . .

If he didn't fuck it up, he thought again. But Ed Foley had done this kind of operation in Tehran, had developed an agent in the revolutionary community, and had been the only field officer in the station to get a feel for how bad it was for the Shah, and that series of reports had lit up his star at Langley and made him one of Bob Ritter's varsity.

And he was going to take this one deep, too.

At Langley, MERCURY was the one place that everyone was afraid of—*everybody* knew that an employee there under foreign control could damned near bring the whole building down. That was why they all went "on the box" twice a year, polygraphed by the best examiners FBI had—they didn't even trust CIA's own polygraph experts for that tasking. A bad field officer or a bad senior analyst could burn agents and missions, and that was bad for everyone involved—but a leaker in MERCURY would be like turning a female KGB officer loose on Fifth Avenue with an American Express Gold Card. She'd be able to get anything her heart desired. Hell, the KGB might even pay a million bucks for such a source. It would bust the Russian exchequer, but they would cash in one of Nikolay II's Fabergé eggs, and be glad for it. Everyone knew there had to be a KGB counterpart office to MERCURY, but nobody in any intelligence service had ever bagged a Russian national from there.

Foley found himself wondering what it was like, how the room looked. At Langley it was immense, the size of a parking garage, with no internal walls or dividers, so that everyone could see everyone else. There were seven drum-shaped cassette storage structures, named for Disney's Seven Dwarfs; they even had TV cameras on the inside, should some lunatic try to get in there, though he'd almost certainly be killed by such an adventure, since the motorized retrievers turned powerfully and without warning. Besides, only the big mainframe computers—including the fastest and most powerful one, made by Cray Research—knew which cassette had which data and lay in which storage slot. The security there was unreal, multilayered, and checked on a daily—maybe an hourly—basis. The people who worked there were occasionally and randomly followed home from work, probably by the FBI, which was pretty good at such stuff, for a bunch of gumshoed cops. It must have been oppressive for the people who worked there, but if anyone had ever complained about it, those reports hadn't come to Ed Foley. Marines had to run their three miles per day and undergo formal inspections, and CIA employees had to put up with the overpowering institutional paranoia, and that was just how things were. The polygraph was a particular pain in the ass, and the Agency even had psychiatrists who trained people in how to defeat them. He'd undergone such training, and so had his wife—and still CIA put them on the box at least once a year, whether to test their loyalty or to see if they still remembered their training, who could tell?

But did KGB do that as well? They'd be crazy not to, but he wasn't sure if they had polygraph technology, and so . . . maybe, maybe not. There was so much about KGB that he and CIA didn't know. Langley made a lot of SWAGs—stupid wild-ass guesses—mainly from people who said, "Well, we do it this way, and therefore they must, too," which was total horseshit. No two people, and damned-sure no two countries, had ever done anything exactly the same way, and that was why Ed Foley deemed himself one of the best in this crazy business. He knew better. He never stopped looking. He never did anything the same way twice, except as a ruse, to give a false impression to someone else—especially Russians, who probably (almost certainly, he figured) suffered from the same bureaucratic disease that circumscribed minds at CIA.

Wh[at] if this g[uy] wants a tick[et] out? Mary Pat asked.

First class on Pan Am, her husband answered, as fast as his fingers could move, *and he gets to screw the stew.*

U R bad, Mary Patricia responded, with the gagging sound of a suppressed laugh. But she knew he was right. If this guy wanted to play spy, it might be smarter just to yank his ass out of the USSR and fly him to Washington, and toss in a lifetime pass to Disney World for after the debrief. A Russian would go into sensory overload in the Magic Kingdom, not to mention the newly opened Epcot Center. Coming out of Space Mountain, Ed had joked that CIA ought to rent the whole place for one day and take the Soviet Politburo around, let them ride every ride and gobble down the burgers and swill the Cokes, and then, on the way out, tell them, "This is what Americans do for fun. Unfortunately, we can't show you the things we do when we're serious." And if that didn't scare the piss out of them, nothing would. But it would scare the piss out of them, both Foleys were sure. They—even the important ones with access to everything KGB got out of the Main Enemy—even they were the most insular and provincial of people. For the most part, they really did believe the propaganda because they had nothing to measure it against, because they were as much victims of their system as the poor dumb muzhiks — peasants—driving the dump trucks.

But the Foleys didn't live in a fantasy world.

So, w[e] d[o] what he says, then what? she asked next.

One step at a time, he replied, and she nodded in the darkness. Like having a baby, this couldn't be rushed unless you wanted a funny-looking kid. It told Mary Pat that her husband wasn't a total curmudgeon, though, and that elicited a kiss in the darkness.

ZAITZEV WASN'T COMMUNICATING with his wife. For him, right now, even a half liter of vodka couldn't help him sleep. He'd made his request. Only tomorrow would he know for sure if he was dealing with someone able to help him. What he'd asked wasn't entirely reasonable, but he didn't have the time or the security to be reasonable. He was secure in the knowledge that even KGB couldn't fake what he'd specified. Oh, sure, maybe they could get the Poles or the Romanians or some other socialist country to do it, but not the Americans. Even KGB had its limits.

So, again, he got to wait, but sleep didn't come. Tomorrow he would not be a very happy comrade. He could feel the hangover coming already, like an earthquake trapped and contained inside his skull. . . .

"HOW'D IT GO, SIMON?" Ryan asked.

"It could have been worse. The PM didn't rip my head off. I told her that we only have what we have, and Basil backed me up. She wants more. She said that in my presence."

"No surprise. Ever hear of a president who wanted less information,

buddy?"

"Not recently," Harding admitted. Ryan saw the stress bleeding off his workmate. Damned sure he'd have a beer at the pub before heading home. The Brit analyst loaded his pipe and lit it, taking a long pull.

"If it makes you feel any better, Langley doesn't have any more than you guys do."

"I know. She asked, and that's what Basil said. Evidently, he talked to your Judge Moore before driving over."

"So we're all ignorant together."

"Bloody comforting," Simon Harding snorted.

It was far past going-home time. Ryan had waited to see what Simon would say about the meeting at 10 Downing Street, because Ryan was also here to gather intelligence on the Brits. They would understand, because that was the game they all played. He checked his watch.

"Well, I've got to boogie on home. See you tomorrow."

"Sleep well," Harding said, as Ryan headed out the door. Jack was reasonably sure that Simon would not. He knew what Harding made, as a mid-level civil servant, and it wasn't quite enough for this stressful a day. *But,* he told himself out on the street, *that's Life in the Big City.*

"WHAT DID YOU tell your people, Bob?" Judge Moore asked.

"Just what you told me, Arthur. The President wants to know. No feedback yet. Tell the Boss he's going to have to be patient."

"I said that. He was not overly pleased," the DCI responded.

"Well, Judge, I can't stop the rain from falling. We don't have power over a lot of things, and time is one of them. He's a big boy; he can understand that, can't he?"

"Yes, Robert, but he likes to get what he needs. He's worried about His Holiness, now that the Pope has kicked over the anthill—"

"Well, we think he has. The Russians might be smart enough to work through diplomatic channels and tell him to cool down and let things work out, and—"

"Bob, that wouldn't work," Admiral Greer put in. "He's not the sort of guy you can warn off with lawyer talk, is he?"

"No," Ritter admitted. This Pope was not a man to compromise on issues of great importance. He'd seen himself through all manner of unpleasantness, from Hitler's Nazis to Stalin's NKVD, and he'd kept his church together by circling the wagons, like settlers against Indian attacks in those old Western movies. He hadn't managed to keep his church alive in Poland by giving in on important issues, had he? And, by holding his ground, he'd maintained enough moral and political strength to threaten the other of the world's superpowers. No, this guy wasn't going to fold under pressure.

Most men feared death and ruin. This one didn't. The Russians would never understand why, but they would understand the respect it earned him. It was becoming clear to Bob Ritter and the other senior intelligence officers in this room that the one single response that would make sense to the Politburo was

an attack on the Pope. And the Politburo had met today, though what they had discussed and concluded were frustratingly unknown.

"Bob, do we have any assets who can find out what they talked about in the Kremlin today?"

"We have a few, and they will be alerted in the next two days—or, if they come up with something important, they can decide to get the information on their own hook. If they become aware of something this hot, you'd expect them to figure it out on their own and get a packet of information out to their handlers," Ritter told the DCI. "Hey, Arthur, I don't like waiting and not knowing any more than you do, but we have to let this thing take its course. You know the dangers of a balls-to-the-wall alert to our agents as well as I do."

And all three of them did. That sort of thing had gotten Oleg Penkovskiy killed. The information he'd gotten out had probably averted a nuclear war—and had assisted in the recruitment of CIA's longest-lived agent-in-place, CARDINAL—but that hadn't done Penkovskiy much good. On his discovery, no less a figure than Khrushchev himself had demanded his blood—and gotten it.

"Yeah," Greer agreed, "and this isn't all *that* important in the great scheme of things, is it?"

"No," Judge Moore had to admit, though he didn't especially look forward to explaining that one to the President. But the new Boss did understand things once you made them clear. The really scary part was what the President might do if the Pope were to die unexpectedly. The Boss, too, was a man of principle, but also a man of emotions. It would be as enraging as waving the Soviet flag in front of a fighting bull. You couldn't let emotion get in the way of statecraft—it only called out more emotion, frequently the mourning of the newly dead. And the miracle of modern technology only served to make the number of such people all the larger. The DCI reproached himself for that thought. The new President was a thoughtful man. His emotions were the servant of his intellect, and his intellect was far larger than it was generally believed, especially by the media, who only saw the smile and the theatrical personality. But the media, like a lot of politicians, was a lot more comfortable dealing with appearances than reality. It was a lot less intellectually demanding, after all. Judge Moore looked at his principal subordinates. "Okay, but let's remember that it can be lonely facing him in the Oval Office when you don't have what he wants."

"I'm sure it is, Arthur," Ritter sympathized.

HE COULD STILL TURN BACK, Zaitzev told himself, as sleep still had not come. Next to him, Irina was breathing placidly in sleep. The sleep of the just, it was called. Not the sleeplessness of the traitor.

All he had to do was stop. That was all. He'd taken two small steps, but no more. The American might know his face, but that was easily fixed—take a different metro, walk onto a different carriage. He'd never see him again; their contact would be as broken as a water glass dropped to the floor, and his life

would return to normal, and his conscience . . .

. . . would never trouble him again? He snorted. It was his conscience that had gotten him into this mess. No, that wasn't going to go away.

But the other side of that coin was perpetual worry and sleeplessness, and fear. He hadn't really tasted the fear yet. That would come, he was sure. Treason had only one punishment. Death for the traitor, followed by ruin for his survivors. They'd be sent off to Siberia—to count trees, as the euphemism went. It was the Soviet hell, a place of eternal damnation, from which death was the only escape.

In fact, it was exactly what his conscience would do to him if he didn't follow through on his action, Zaitzev realized, finally losing his battle and sliding off into sleep.

A SECOND LATER, so it seemed to him, the alarm clock went off. At least, he hadn't been tormented with dreams. That was the only good news this morning. His head pounded, threatening to push his eyeballs out of their sockets. He staggered into the bathroom, where he splashed water onto his face and took three aspirin, which, he forlornly hoped, might ease his hangover in a few hours.

He couldn't face sausages for breakfast, since his stomach was also irritated, and so he settled for cereal and milk with some buttered bread on the side. He thought about coffee, but decided a glass of milk would be easier on his stomach.

"You drank too much last night," Irina told him.

"Yes, darling, I know that now," he managed to say, not unpleasantly. His condition wasn't her fault, and she was a good wife to him, and a good mother for Svetlana, his little *zaichik*. He knew that he'd survive this day. He just wouldn't like it much. Worst of all, he had to get going early, and this he did, shaving very badly along the way, but becoming presentable with a clean shirt and tie. He tucked four more aspirin into his coat pocket before walking out the door, and, to get his blood moving, he took the stairs down instead of the elevator. There was a mild chill in the morning air, which helped somewhat on the way to the metro. He bought a copy of *Izvestia* and smoked a Trud, and that helped move him along, too.

If anyone recognized him—well, few would. He was not in the usual carriage, and he was not on the usual train. He was usually fifteen minutes later. He was just one more anonymous face on a subway train filled with anonymous people.

And so no one would note that he was getting off at the wrong station.

The American Embassy was just a couple of blocks away, and he headed that way, checking his watch.

He knew the proper timing because he'd been here once before, as a cadet in the KGB Academy, brought here early one morning in a bus along with forty-five other members of his class. They'd even worn their official uniforms for the trip, probably to remind them of their professional identity. Even then, it had seemed a foolish waste of time, but the academy commandant back

then had been a hard-liner, and now the trip served a purpose that would have outraged the man. Zaitzev lit another cigarette as the building came into view.

He checked his watch. At precisely 0730 hours every day, they raised their flag. The academy commandant, ten years before, had pointed and said, "See there, comrades, that is the enemy! That is where he lives in our fine city of Moscow. In that building live spies which those of you who enter the Second Chief Directorate will endeavor to identify and expel from our fair land. There live and work the ones who spy on our country and our people. *That* is their flag. Remember it always." And then, exactly on time, the flag had been hoisted to the top of a white pole with a bronze eagle at the top, hauled up by members of the United States Marine Corps in their pretty uniforms. Zaitzev had checked his watch in the metro station. It should be right about . . . now.

A BUGLE BLEW a tune that he didn't know. He could just make out the white caps of the Marines, barely visible above the stone parapet of the building's flat roof. He was on the other side of the street, just by the old church, which KGB had crammed full of electronic devices.

There, he thought, staring, along with a handful of other passersby on the cracked cement sidewalk.

Yes, he saw. The top part of the flag as it appeared was red and white horizontal stripes, not the blue canton with its fifty white stars. The flag was being hoisted upside down! It was unmistakably wrong. And it went all the way to the top of the pole that way.

So, they did as I asked. Quickly, Zaitzev walked to the end of the block and turned right, then right again, and back to the metro station he'd just left, and, with the payment of a large five-kopeck copper coin, he boarded another subway car for the trip to Dzerzhinskiy Square.

Just that quickly, his hangover went away, as though by magic. He scarcely even noticed until he took the escalator up to the street level.

The Americans want to help me, the communications officer told himself. *They will* help *me. Perhaps I can save the life of that Polish priest after all.* There was a spring in his step as he entered The Centre.

"SIR, what the fuck was that all about?" Gunnery Sergeant Drake asked Dominic Corso. They'd just fixed the flag back properly atop its pole.

"Gunny, I can't say," was the best Corso could do, though his eyes said a little more.

"Aye aye, sir. How do I log it?"

"You don't log it, Gunny. Somebody made a dumb mistake, and you fixed it."

"You say so, Mr. Corso." The gunnery sergeant would have to explain it to his Marines, but he'd explain it in much the same way in which it had just

been explained to him, though, in his case, rather more profanely. If anyone in the Marine Embassy Regiment asked him, he'd just say he'd gotten orders from somebody in the embassy, and Colonel d'Amici would just have to deal with it. What the hell, he could hand the colonel off to Corso. They were both wops, maybe they'd understand each other, the sergeant from Helena, Montana, hoped. If not, then Colonel d'Amici would tear him and his Marines each a new and bloody asshole.

ZAITZEV TOOK HIS seat after relieving Major Dobrik. The morning traffic was a little lighter than usual, and he began his normal morning routine. Forty minutes later, that changed again.

"Comrade Major," a newly familiar voice said. Zaitzev turned to see Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy.

"Good morning, Comrade Colonel. You have something for me?"

"This." Rozhdestvenskiy handed over the message blank. "Please send it out immediately, on the pad."

"By your command. Information copy to you?"

"Correct." Rozhdestvenskiy nodded.

"I presume it's permissible to use an internal messenger to get that to your hand?"

"Yes, it is."

"Very well. I'll have it out in a few minutes."

"Good." Rozhdestvenskiy took his leave.

Zaitzev looked at the dispatch. It was agreeably short. Encryption and transmission took only fifteen minutes.

MOST SECRET
IMMEDIATE AND URGENT
FROM: OFFICE OF CHAIRMAN, MOSCOW CENTRE
TO: REZIDENT SOFIA
REFERENCE: OPERATIONAL DESIGNATOR 15-8-82-666
OPERATIONAL APPROVAL EXPECTED TODAY, VIA CHANNELS DISCUSSED IN OUR MEETING. REPORT WHEN PROPER CONTACTS ESTABLISHED.

And that meant that operation -666 was going forward. The day before, that notice had chilled Zaitzev, but not today. Today he knew he'd be doing something to prevent it. If anything bad happened now, it would be the fault of the Americans. That made a considerable difference. Now he just had to figure how to establish some sort of regular contact with them. . . .

UPSTAIRS, Andropov had the Foreign Minister in his office.

"So, Andrey, how do we go about this?"

"Ordinarily our Ambassador would meet with their First Secretary, but, in the interests of security, we might want to try another method of approach."

"How much executive authority does their First Secretary have?" the Chairman asked.

"About as much as Koba did thirty years ago. Bulgaria is run in a very tight way. Their Politburo members represent various constituencies, but only their Party First Secretary really has decision-making power."

"Ah." That was good news to Yuriy Vladimirovich. He lifted his desk phone. "Send in Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy," he told his secretary.

The colonel appeared through the dresser door in two minutes. "Yes, Comrade Chairman."

"Andrey, this is Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy, my executive assistant. Colonel, does our Sofia *rezident* talk directly to the Bulgarian head of government?"

"Rarely, comrade, but he has done so occasionally in the past." Rozhdestvenskiy was surprised that the Chairman didn't know that, but he was still learning how field operations worked. At least he had the good sense to ask questions, and he was not embarrassed to do so.

"Very well. For security reasons, we would prefer that the entire Bulgarian Politburo not know the scope of this operation -666. So, do you think we could have Colonel Bubovoy brief in their party chief and get approval by a more direct route?"

"To that end, a signed letter from Comrade Brezhnev would probably be necessary," Rozhdestvenskiy answered.

"Yes, that would be the best way to do it," the Foreign Minister agreed at once. "A good thought, colonel," he added approvingly.

"Very well. We'll get that today. Leonid Ilyich will be in his office, Andrey?"

"Yes, Yuriy. I will call ahead and tell him what is needed. I can have it drafted in my office if you wish, or would you prefer it to be done here?"

"With your permission, Andrey," Andropov said graciously, "better that we should do it. And we'll have it couriered to Sofia for delivery tomorrow or the day after."

"Better to give our Bulgarian comrade a few days, Yuriy. They are our allies, but they remain a sovereign country, after all."

"Quite so, Andrey." Every country in the world had a bureaucracy, whose entire purpose was to delay important things from happening.

"And we don't want the world to know that our *rezident* is making a highly important call on the man," the Foreign Minister added, teaching the KGB Chairman a little lesson in operational security, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy noted.

"How long after that, Aleksey Nikolay'ch?" Andropov asked his aide.

"Several weeks, at least." He saw annoyance in his boss's eyes and decided to explain. "Comrade Chairman, selecting the right assassin will not be a matter of lifting a phone and dialing a number. Strokov will necessarily be careful in making his selection. People are not as predictable as machines, after all, and this is the most important—and most sensitive—aspect of the operation."

"Yes, I suppose that is so, Aleksey. Very well. Notify Bubovoy that a hand-

delivered message is on the way."

"Now, Comrade Chairman, or after we have it signed and ready for dispatch?" Rozhdestvenskiy asked the question like a skilled bureaucrat, letting his boss know the best way without saying it out loud.

This colonel would go far, the Foreign Minister thought, taking note of his name for the first time.

"A good point, Colonel. Very well, I will let you know when the letter is ready to go."

"By your command, Comrade Chairman. Do you need me further?"

"No, that is all for now," Andropov answered, sending him on his way.

"Yuriy Vladimirovich, you have a good aide."

"Yes, there is so much for me still to learn here," Andropov admitted. "And he educates me every day."

"You are fortunate in having so many expert people."

"That is the truth, Andrey Andreyevich. That is the truth."

DOWN THE HALL in his office, Rozhdestvenskiy drew up the brief dispatch for Bubovoy. This was moving fast, he thought, but not fast enough for the Chairman of the KGB. He really wanted that priest dead. The Politburo certainly seemed fearful of political earthquakes, but Rozhdestvenskiy himself was doubtful of that. The Pope, after all, was just one person, but the colonel had tailored his advice to what his boss wanted to hear, like a good functionary, while also letting the Chairman know the things he needed to know. His job actually carried great power with it. Rozhdestvenskiy knew that he could break the careers of officers whom he did not like and influence operations to a significant degree. If CIA ever tried to recruit him, he could be an agent of great value. But Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy was a patriot, and besides, the Americans probably had no idea who he was and what he did. The CIA was more feared than it deserved to be. The Americans didn't really have a feel for espionage. The English did, but KGB and its antecedents had enjoyed some success at infiltrating it in the past. Less so today, unfortunately. The young Cambridge communists of the 1930s were all old now, either in British prisons or drawing their government pensions in peace, or living out their years in Moscow, like Kim Philby, considered a drunk even by Muscovites. He probably drank because he missed his country—missed the place in which he'd grown up, the food and drink and football games, the newspapers with which he'd always philosophically disagree, but he'd miss them even so. *What a terrible thing it must be to be a defector,* Rozhdestvenskiy thought.

WHAT WILL I DO? Zaitzev asked himself. *What will I ask for?*

Money? CIA probably paid its spies very well—more money than he would ever be able to spend. Luxuries beyond his imagination. A videotape machine!

They were just becoming available in Russia, mainly made in Hungary, patterned after Western machines. The bigger problem was in getting tapes—pornographic ones were particularly in demand. Some of his KGB coworkers spoke of such things. Zaitzev had never seen one himself, but he was curious, as any man might be. The Soviet Union was run by such conservative men. Maybe the Politburo members were just too old to enjoy sex, and so saw no need for younger citizens to indulge.

He shook his head. Enough! He had to decide what to tell the American in the metro. That was a task that he chewed on with his lunch in the KGB cafeteria.

CHAPTER 15

MEETING PLACE

MARY PAT WAS EXPECTED to come into the embassy sometimes, to see her husband about family matters or to purchase special food items from the commissary. To do this, she always dressed up—better than she did for the Moscow streets—with her hair well-brushed and held in place by a youthful headband, and her makeup done, so that when she drove into the compound parking lot she would look like a typical air-headed American blonde. She smiled to herself. She liked being a natural blonde, and anything that made her appear dumb worked for her cover.

So she breezed in the front door, waving airily at the ever-polite Marines, and into the elevator. She found her husband alone in his office.

"Hey, baby." Ed rose to kiss her, then drew back to take in the whole picture. "Looking good."

"Well, it's an effective disguise." It had worked fine in Iran, too, especially when she'd been pregnant. That country didn't treat women especially well, but it did extend them an odd deference, especially when pregnant, she'd found, right before she'd skipped the country for good. It was one station she didn't particularly miss.

"Yeah, babe. Just gotta get you a surfboard and a nice beach, maybe the Banzai Pipeline."

"Oh, Ed, that's just so *tubular.* And Banzai Beach is in Hawaii, dummy." A quick gear change. "The flag go up wrong?"

"Yep. The TV cameras didn't show anyone on the street paying particular attention to it. But you could see it from a block away, and the security cameras don't look that far out. We'll see if our friend drops a message in my pocket on the ride home tonight."

"What did the Marines say?" she asked.

"They asked why, but Dom didn't tell them anything. Hell, he doesn't know either, does he?"

"He's a good spook, Dominic is," Mary Pat judged.

"Ritter likes him. Oh," Foley remembered. He fished a message out of his drawer and handed it across.

"Shit," his wife breathed, scanning it quickly. "The *Pope?* Those motherfuckers want to kill the Pope?" Mary Pat didn't always talk like a California blonde.

"Well, there's no information to suggest that directly, but, if they want to, we're supposed to find out."

"Sounds like a job for WOODCUTTER," who was their man in the Party Secretariat.

"Or maybe CARDINAL?" Ed wondered.

"We haven't flagged him yet," MP pointed out, but it would soon be time to check in with him. They checked his apartment every night for the light-and-blinds combination in his living room. His apartment was agreeably close to their own, and the ratline was well established, beginning with a piece of paper tape on a lamppost. Setting that flag signal was MP's job. She'd already walked Little Eddie by it half a dozen times. "Is this a job for him?" she asked.

"The President wants to know," her husband pointed out.

"Yeah." But CARDINAL was their most important agent-in-place, and not one to be alerted unless it was really critical. CARDINAL would also know to get something like this out on his own if he became aware of it. "I'd hold off on that unless Ritter says different."

"Agreed," Ed Foley conceded. If Mary Pat advised caution, then caution was justified. After all, she was the one who enjoyed taking risks and betting her skill against the house odds. But that didn't mean that his wife was a reckless player, either. "I'll sit on that one for a while."

"Be nice to see what your new contact will do next."

"Bet your cute little tushy, babe. Want to meet the Ambassador?"

"I suppose it's time," she agreed.

"SO, RECOVER FROM yesterday?" Ryan asked Harding. It was the first time he'd beaten his workmate into the office.

"Yes, I suppose I have."

"If it makes you feel any better, I haven't met the President yet, myself. And I'm not exactly looking forward to the experience. Like Mark Twain said about the guy who got himself tarred and feathered, if it weren't for the honor of the thing, he would just as soon have missed it."

Harding managed a brief laugh. "Precisely, Jack. One does go a little weak in the knees."

"Is she as tough as they say?"

"I'm not sure I'd want to play rugger against her. She's also very, very bright. Doesn't miss a thing, and asks bloody good questions."

"Well, answering them is what they pay us for, Simon," Ryan pointed out. There was no sense being afraid of people who were only doing their job as

well, and who needed good information to do it properly.

"And her, too, Jack. She has to do questions in Parliament."

"On this sort of thing?" Jack asked, surprised.

"No, not this. It's occasionally discussed with the opposition, but under strict rules."

"You worry about leaks?" Jack asked, wondering. In America, there were select committees whose members were thoroughly briefed on what they could say and what they could not. The Agency did worry about leaks—they were politicians, after all—but he'd never heard of a serious one off The Hill. Those more often came from inside the Agency, and mainly from the Seventh Floor . . . or from the White House's West Wing. That didn't mean that CIA was comfortable with leaks of any kind, but at least these were more often than not sanctioned, and often they were disinformation with a political purpose behind them. It was probably the same here, especially since the local news media operated under controls that would have given *The New York Times* a serious conniption fit.

"One always wonders about them, Jack. So, anything new come in last night?"

"Nothing new on the Pope," Ryan reported. "Our sources, such as they are, have run into a brick wall. Will you be turning your field spooks loose?"

"Yes, the PM made it clear to Basil that she wants more information. If something happens to His Holiness, well—"

"—she blows a head gasket, right?"

"You Americans do have a way with words, Jack. And your President?"

"He'll be seriously pissed, and by that I do not mean hitting the booze. His dad was Catholic, and his mom raised him a Protestant, but he wouldn't be real happy if the Pope so much as catches a late-summer cold."

"You know, even if we turn some information, it is not at all certain that we'll be able to do a thing with it."

"I kinda figured that, but at least we can say something to his protective detail. We can do that much, and maybe he can change his schedule—no, he won't. He'd rather take the bullet like a man. But maybe we can interfere somehow with what the Bad Guys are planning. You just can't know until you have a few facts to rub together. But that's not really our job, is it?"

Harding shook his head, as he stirred his morning tea. "No, the field officers feed it to us, and we try to determine what it means."

"Frustrating?" Ryan wondered. Harding had been at the job much longer than he had.

"Frequently. I know the field officers sweat blood doing their jobs—and it can be physically dangerous to the ones who do not have a 'legal' cover—but we users of information can't always see it from their perspective. As a result, they do not appreciate us as much as we appreciate them. I've met with a few of them over the years, and they are good chaps, but it's a clash of cultures, Jack."

The field guys are probably pretty good at analysis themselves, when you get down to it, Ryan thought. *I wonder how often the analyst community really appreciates that?* It was something for Ryan to slip into his mental do-not-forget file. The Agency was supposed to be one big happy team, after all. Of

course it wasn't, even at the Seventh Floor level.

"Anyway, we had this come in from East Germany." Jack handed the folder across. "Some rumbles in their political hierarchy last week."

"Those bloody Prussians," Harding breathed, as he took it and flipped to the first page.

"Cheer up. The Russians don't much like them either."

"I don't blame them a bit."

ZAITZEV WAS DOING some hard thinking at his desk, as his brain worked on autopilot. He'd have to meet with his new American friend. There was danger involved, unless he could find a nice, anonymous place. The good news was that Moscow abounded with such places. The bad news was that the Second Chief Directorate of the KGB probably knew all of them. But if it was crowded enough, that didn't matter.

What would he say?

What would he ask for?

What would he offer them?

Those were all good questions, weren't they? The dangers would only increase. The best possible outcome would be for him to leave the Soviet Union permanently, with his wife and daughter.

Yes, that was what he'd ask for, and if the Americans said no, he'd just melt back into his accustomed reality, knowing that he'd tried. He had things they would want, and he'd make it clear to them that the price of that information was his escape.

Life in the West, he thought. All the decadent things the State preached to everyone who could read a newspaper or watch TV, all the awful things they talked about. The way America treated its minorities. They even showed pictures on TV of the slum areas—but they also showed automobiles. If America oppressed its blacks, why, then, did it allow them to purchase so many automobiles? Why did it permit them to riot in the streets? Had that sort of thing happened in the USSR, the government would have called in armed troops. So no, the state propaganda could not be entirely true, could it? And, besides, wasn't he white? What did he care about some discontented blacks who could buy any car they wished? Like most Russians, he'd only seen black people on TV—his first reaction was to wonder if there really were such a thing as a chocolate man, but, yes, there were. KGB ran operations in Africa. But then he asked himself: Could he remember a KGB operation in America using a black agent? Not very many, perhaps one or two, and those had both been sergeants in the American army. If blacks were oppressed, how then did they get to become sergeants? In the Red Army, only the politically reliable were admitted to Sergeant School. So, one more lie uncovered—and that one only because he worked for KGB. What other lies was he being told? Why not leave? Why not ask the Americans for a ticket out?

But will they grant it? Zaitzev wondered.

Surely they would. He could tell them about all manner of KGB operations in the West. He had the names of officers and the code names of agents—

traitors to the Western governments, people whom they would definitely wish to eliminate.

Was that being an accessory to murder? he asked himself.

No, it was not. Those persons were *traitors*, after all. And a traitor was a traitor. . . .

And what does that make you, Oleg Ivanovich? The little voice in his mind asked, just to torment him.

But he was strong enough now to shake it off with a simple movement of his head left and right. Traitor? No, he was *preventing* a murder, and that was an honorable thing. And he was an honorable man.

But he still had to figure a way to do it. He had to meet with an American spy and say what he wanted.

Where and how?

It would have to be a crowded place, where people could bump into each other so naturally that even a counterspy from the Second Chief Directorate would not be able to see what was happening or hear what was being said.

And suddenly he realized: His own wife worked in such a place.

So he'd write it down on another blank message form and transfer it on the metro as he'd already done twice. Then he'd see if the Americans really wanted to play his game. He was in the Chairman's seat now, wasn't he? He had something they wanted, and he controlled how they could get it, and he would make the rules in this game, and they would have to play by those rules. It was just that simple, wasn't it?

Yes, he told himself.

Wasn't this rich? He'd be doing something the KGB had always wanted to do, dictate terms to the American CIA.

Chairman for a day, the communicator told himself. The words had a delicious taste to them.

IN LONDON, Cathy watched as two local ophthalmic surgeons worked on one Ronald Smithson, a bricklayer with a tumor behind his right eye. The X-rays showed a mass about half the size of a golf ball, which had been so worrisome that Mr. Smithson had only waited five weeks for the procedure to be done. That was maybe thirty-three days longer than it would have been at Hopkins, but considerably faster than was usual over here.

The two Moorefields surgeons were Clive Hood and Geoffrey Phillips, both experienced senior residents. It was a fairly routine procedure. After exposing the tumor, a sliver was removed for freezing and dispatch to Pathology—they had a good histopathologist on duty and he would decide if the growth was benign or malignant. Cathy hoped for the former, as the malignant variety of this tumor could be troublesome for its victims. But the odds were heavily on the patient's side, she thought. On visual examination it didn't look terribly aggressive, and her eye was right about 85 percent of the time. It was bad science to tell herself that, and she knew it. It was almost superstition, but surgeons, like baseball players, knew about superstition. That was why they put their socks on the same way every morning—pantyhose, in her case—

because they just fell into a pattern of living, and surgeons were creatures of habit, and they tended to translate those dumb personal habits into the outcome of their procedures. So, with the frozen section off to Pathology, it was just a matter of excising the pinkish-gray encapsulated mass. . . .

"What time is it, Geoffrey?" Dr. Hood asked.

"Quarter to one, Clive," Dr. Phillips reported, checking the wall clock.

"How about we break for lunch, then?"

"Fine with me. I could use something to eat. We'll need to call in another anesthesiologist to keep Mr. Smithson unconscious," their gas-passer observed.

"Well, call and get one, Owen, would you?" Hood suggested.

"Righto," Dr. Ellis agreed. He left his chair at the patient's head and walked to the wall phone. He was back in seconds. "Two minutes."

"Excellent. Where to, Geoffrey?" Hood asked.

"The Frog and Toad? They serve a fine bacon, lettuce, and tomato with chips."

"Splendid," Hood said.

Cathy Ryan, standing behind Dr. Phillips, kept her mouth shut behind the surgical mask, but her china-blue eyes had gone wide. *They were leaving a patient unconscious on the table while they went to lunch?* Who were these guys, witch doctors?

The backup anesthesiologist came in just then, all gowned up and ready to take over. "Anything I need to know, Owen?" he asked Ellis.

"Entirely routine," the primary gas-passer replied. He pointed to the various instruments measuring the patient's vital signs, and they were all in the dead center of normal values, Cathy saw. But even so . . .

Hood led them out to the dressing room, where the four medics shucked their greens and grabbed their coats, then left for the corridor and the steps down to street level. Cathy followed, not knowing what else to do.

"So, Caroline, how do you like London?" Hood asked pleasantly.

"We like it a lot," she answered, still somewhat shell-shocked.

"And your children?"

"Well, we have a very nice nanny, a young lady from South Africa."

"One of our more civilized local customs," Phillips observed approvingly.

The pub was scarcely a block away, west on City Road. A table was quickly found. Hood immediately fished out a cigarette and lit it. He noticed Cathy's disapproving look.

"Yes, Mrs. Ryan, I know it's not healthy and bad form for a physician, but we are all entitled to one human weakness, aren't we?"

"You're seeking approval from the wrong person," she responded.

"Ah, well, I'll blow the smoke away from you, then." Hood had himself a chuckle as the waiter came over. "What sort of beer do you have here?" he asked him.

It was good that he smoked, Cathy told herself. She had trouble handling more than one major shock at a time, but at least that one gave her fair warning. Hood and Phillips both decided on John Courage. Ellis preferred Tetley's. Cathy opted for a Coca-Cola. The docs mainly talked shop, as physicians often do.

For her part, Caroline Ryan sat back in her wooden chair, observing three

physicians enjoying beer, and, in one case, a smoke, while their blissfully unconscious patient was on nitrous oxide in Operating Room #3.

"So, how do we do things here? Differently from Johns Hopkins?" Hood asked, as he stubbed out his cigarette.

Cathy nearly gagged, but decided not to make any of the comments running around her brain. "Well, surgery is surgery. I'm surprised that you don't have very many CAT scans. Same for MRI and PET scanners. How can you do without them? I mean, at home, for Mr. Smithson, I wouldn't even think of going in without a good set of shots of the tumor."

"She's right, you know," Hood thought, after a moment's reflection. "Our bricklayer chum could have waited several months more if we'd had a better idea of the extent of the growth."

"You wait that long for a hemangioma?" Cathy blurted out. "At home, we take them out immediately." She didn't have to add that these things *hurt* to have inside your skull. It caused a frontal protrusion of the eyeball itself, sometimes with blurring of vision—which was why Mr. Smithson had gone to this local doctor to begin with. He'd also reported god-awful headaches that must have driven him mad until they'd given him a codeine-based analgesic.

"Well, here things operate a little differently."

Uh-huh. That must be a good way to practice medicine, by the hour instead of by the patient. Lunch arrived. The sandwich was okay—better than the hospital food she was accustomed to—but she still couldn't get over these guys drinking *beer!* The local beer was about double the potency of American stuff, and they were drinking a full pint of it—*sixteen ounces! What the* hell *was this?*

"Ketchup for your chips, Cathy?" Ellis slid the bottle over. "Or should I say Lady Caroline? I hear that His Highness is your son's godfather?"

"Well, sort of. He agreed to it—Jack asked him on the spur of the moment in the hospital at the Naval Academy. The real godparents are Robby and Sissy Jackson. Robby's a Navy fighter pilot. Sissy plays concert piano."

"Was that the black chap in the papers?"

"That's right. Jack met him when they were both teachers at the Naval Academy, and they're very close friends."

"Quite so. So the news reports were correct? I mean—"

"I try not to think about it. The only good thing that happened that night was that Little Jack arrived."

"I quite understand that, Cathy," Ellis responded around his sandwich. "If the news accounts were accurate, it must have been a horrid evening."

"It wasn't fun." She managed a smile. "The labor and delivery was the good part."

The three Brits had a good laugh at that remark. All had kids, and all had been there for the deliveries, which were no more fun for British women than for American women. Half an hour later, they headed back to Moorefields. Hood smoked another cigarette along the way, though he had the good manners do stay downwind of his American colleague. Ten more minutes, and they were back in the OR. The pinch-hitting gas-passer reported that nothing untoward had taken place, and surgery resumed.

"Want me to assist now?" Cathy asked hopefully.

"No, thank you, Cathy," Hood replied. "I have it," he added, bending over

his patient, who, being soundly asleep, wouldn't smell the beer on his breath.

Caroline Ryan, M.D., FACS, thought to congratulate herself for not screaming her head off, but mostly she leaned in as closely as she could to make sure these two Englishmen didn't screw up and remove the patient's ear by mistake. *Maybe the alcohol would help steady their hands,* she told herself. But she had to concentrate to keep her own hands from trembling.

THE CROWN AND CUSHION was a delightful, if typical, London pub. The sandwich was just fine, and Ryan enjoyed a pint of John Smith Ale while talking shop with Simon. He thought vaguely about serving beer at the CIA cafeteria, but that would never fly. Someone in Congress would find out and raise hell in front of the C-Span cameras, while enjoying a glass of Chardonnay with his lunch in the Capitol Building, of course, or something a little stronger in his office. The culture was just different here, and *vive la difference,* he thought, walking across Westminster Bridge Road toward Big Ben—the bell, not the bell *tower*, which was, in fact, St. Mary's Bell Tower, tourist errors to the contrary. The Parliamentarians there had three or four pubs right there in the building, Ryan was sure. And they probably didn't get any drunker than their American colleagues.

"You know, Simon, I think everyone's worried about this."

"It's a pity he had to send that letter to Warsaw, isn't it?"

"Could you expect him not to?" Ryan countered. "They are his people. It is his homeland, after all, isn't it? It's his parish the Russians are trying to stomp on."

"That is the problem," Harding agreed. "But the Russians will not change. Impasse."

Ryan nodded. "Yeah. What's the chance that the Russians will back off ?"

"Absent a solid reason to, not a very great chance. Will your President try to warn them off?"

"Even if he could, he wouldn't. Not on something like this, buddy."

"So we have two sides. One is driven by what it deems to be the proper moral course of action—and the other by political necessity, by fear of not acting. As I said, Jack, it's a bloody impasse."

"Father Tim at Georgetown liked to say that wars are begun by frightened men. They're afraid of the consequences of war, but they are more afraid of not fighting. Hell of a way to run a world," Ryan thought out loud, opening the door for his friend.

"August 1914 as the model, I expect."

"Right, but at least those guys all believed in God. The second go-round was a little different in that respect. The players in that one—the Bad Guys, anyway—didn't live under that particular constraint. Neither do the guys in Moscow. You know, there have to be some limits on our actions, or we can turn into monsters."

"Tell that to the Politburo, Jack," Harding suggested lightly.

"Yeah, Simon, sure." Ryan headed off to the men's room to dump some of his liquid lunch.

THE EVENING DIDN'T come quickly enough for either of the players. Ed Foley wondered what was coming next. There was no guarantee that this guy would follow up on what he'd started. He could always get cold feet—actually, it'd be rather a sensible thing for him to do. Treason was dangerous outside the U.S. Embassy. He was still wearing a green tie—the other one; he had only two—for luck, because he'd gotten to the point where luck counted. Whoever the guy was, just so he didn't get cold feet.

Come on, Ivan, keep coming and we'll give you the joint, Foley thought, trying to reach out with his mind. *Lifetime ticket to Disney World, all the football games you can handle. Oleg Penkovskiy wanted to meet Kennedy and, yeah, we can probably swing that with the new President. Hell, we'll even throw in a movie in the White House theater.*

AND ACROSS TOWN, Mary Pat was thinking exactly the same thing. If this went one more step, she'd play a part in the opening drama. If this guy worked in the Russian MERCURY, and if he wanted a ticket out of Mother Russia, then she and Ed would have to figure a way to make that happen. There *were* ways, and they'd been used before, but they weren't what you'd call "routine." Soviet border security wasn't exactly perfect, but it was pretty tight—tight enough to make you sweat playing with it, and though she had the sort of demeanor that often worked well while playing serious games, it didn't make you feel comfortable. And so she started kicking some ideas around, just in her head, as she worked around the apartment and little Eddie took his afternoon nap, and the hours crept by, one lengthy second at a time.
ED FOLEY HADN'T sent any messages off to Langley yet. It wasn't time. He had nothing substantive to report, and there was no sense getting Bob Ritter all excited over something that hadn't developed yet. It happened often enough: People made approaches to CIA and then felt a chill inside their shoes and backed away. You couldn't chase after them. More often than not, you didn't even know who they were and, if you did, and if they decided not to play, the sensible thing for the other guy was to report you to KGB. That fingered you as a spook—rendering your value to your country as approximately zero—and covered his ass nicely as a loyal and vigilant Soviet citizen, doing his duty to the Motherland.

People didn't realize that CIA almost never recruited its agents. No, those people came to you—sometimes cleverly, sometimes not. That left you open to be fooled by a false-flag operation. The American FBI was particularly good at that sort of play, and KGB's Second Chief Directorate was known to use the gambit, too, just to identify spooks on the embassy staff, which was always something worth doing. If you knew who they were, you could follow them and watch them service their dead-drops, and then camp out on the drop site to see who else stopped off there. Then you had your traitor, who could lead you to other traitors, and with luck you could roll up a whole spy ring, which earned you a gold star—well, a nice red star—in your copybook. Counterespionage officers could make their whole careers on one such case, both in Russia and in America, and so they worked pretty hard at it. The

Second Directorate people were numerous—supposedly, half of KGB's personnel were in there—and they were smart, professional spooks with all sorts of resources, and the patience of a vulture circling over the Arizona desert, sniffing the air for the smell of a dead jackrabbit, then homing in to feast on the carcass.

But KGB was more dangerous than a vulture. A vulture didn't actively hunt. Ed Foley could never be sure if he had a shadow as he traveled around Moscow. Oh, sure, he might spot one, but that could just be a deliberate effort to put a clumsy—or an exceedingly clever—officer on his tail to see if he'd try to shake him. All intelligence officers were trained in surveillance and countersurveillance, and the techniques were both universally valid and universally recognized, and so Foley *never* used them. Not ever. Not even once. It was too dangerous to be clever in this game, because you could never be clever enough. There were other countermoves to use when necessary, like the preplanned brush-pass known to every spook in the world, but very difficult to spot even so, because of its very simplicity. No, when that failed, it was usually because your agent got rattled. It was a lot harder to be an agent than a field officer. Foley had diplomatic cover. The Russians could have movie film of him buggering Andropov's pet goat and not be able to do a thing about it. He was technically a diplomat, and protected by the Vienna Convention, which made his person inviolable—even in time of war, though things got a little dicier then. But that, Foley judged, was not a problem. He'd be fried like everyone else in Moscow then, and so would not be lonely in whatever after-life spies inhabited.

He wrenched his mind away from the irrelevancies, entertaining though they might be. It came down to one thing: Would his friend Ivan take the next step, or would he just fade back into the woodwork, taking satisfaction that he'd managed to make the U.S. Embassy dance to his tune one cool Moscow morning? To find that out, you had to turn over the cards. Would it be blackjack, or just a pair of fours?

That's why you got into this business, Ed, Foley reminded himself—the thrill of the chase. It sure as hell was a thrill, even if the game disappeared into the mists of the forest. It was more fun skinning the bear than smelling it.

Why was this guy doing what he was doing? Money? Ideology? Conscience? Ego? Those were the classic reasons, as summarized by the acronym MICE. Some spies just wanted the mayonnaise jar full of one-hundred-dollar bills. Some came to believe in the politics of the foreign countries they served with the religious fervor of the newly converted. Some were troubled because their Motherland was doing something they couldn't abide. Some just knew they were better men than their bosses, and this was a way to get even with the sons-of-bitches.

Historically, ideological spies were the most productive. Men would put their lives on the betting line for their beliefs—which was why religious wars were so bloody. Foley preferred the monetarily motivated. They were always rational, and they'd take chances, because the bigger the risk, the greater their reward. Ego-driven agents were touchy and troublesome. Revenge was never a pretty motive for doing anything, and those people were usually unstable. Conscience was almost as good as ideology. At least they were driven by a

principle of sorts. The truth of the matter was that CIA paid its agents well, just out of the spirit of fair play if nothing else, and besides, it didn't hurt to have that word out on the street. Knowing that you'd be properly compensated made for one hell of a tiebreaker for those who had trouble making up their minds. Whatever your baseline motivation, being paid was always attractive. The ideological needed to eat, too. So did the conscience-driven. And the ego types saw that living well was indeed a pretty good form of revenge.

Which one are you, Ivan? Foley wondered. *What is driving you to betray your country?* The Russians were a ferociously patriotic people. When Stephen Decatur said, "Our country, right or wrong," he could well have been speaking as a Russian citizen. But the country was so badly run—tragically so. Russia had to be the world's unluckiest nation—first too large to be governed efficiently; then taken over by the hopelessly inept Romanovs; and then, when even they couldn't hold back the vitality of their nation, dropped screaming into the bloody maw of the First World War, suffering such huge casualties that Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov—Lenin—had been able to take over and set in place a political regime calculated to do destruction to itself; then handing the wounded country over to the most vicious psychopath since Caligula, in the person of Josef Stalin. The accumulation of that sort of abuse was beginning to shake the faith of the people here. . . .

Your mind sure is wandering, Foley, the Chief of Station told himself. Another half hour. He'd leave the embassy on time and catch the metro, with his topcoat open and loose around him, and just wait and see. He headed off to the men's room. Occasionally, his bladder got as excited as his intellect.

ACROSS TOWN, Zaitzev took his time. He'd be able to write on only one message blank—throwing one away in plain view was too dangerous, the burn bag could not be trusted, and he could hardly light one up in his ashtray—and so he mentally composed his message, then rethought the words, then rethought them again, and again, and again.

The process took him more than an hour in full, and then he was able to write it up surreptitiously, fold it, and tuck it into his cigarette pack.

LITTLE EDDIE SLID his favorite *Transformers* tape into the VCR. Mary Pat watched idly, behind her son's rapt attention on the living room floor. Then it hit her.

That's what I am, she realized. *I transform myself from ditsy blonde housewife to CIA spy. And I do it seamlessly.* The thought appealed to her. She was giving the Soviet Bear a peptic ulcer, hopefully a bleeding one that wouldn't be fixed by drinking milk and taking Rolaids. *In another forty minutes, Ed will find out if his new friend really wants to play and, if he wants to play, I'll have to work the agent. I'll hold his hand and lead him along and take his information and send it*

off to Langley.

What will he give us? she wondered. *Something nice and juicy? Does he work in their communications center, or does he just have access to a blank message pad? Probably a lot of those in The Centre . . . well, maybe, depending on their security procedures.* Those would be pretty stringent. Only a very few people would be trusted with KGB signals. . . .

And that was the worm dangling on the hook, she knew, watching a Kenworth diesel tractor turn into a two-legged robot. This Christmas, they'd have to start buying those toys. She wondered if Little Eddie would need help transforming them.

THE TIME CAME. Ed would leave the embassy door exactly on time, which would be a comfort to his shadow, if any. If there was, he'd notice a green tie again, and think that the earlier one was not all that unusual—not unusual enough to be any sort of signal for an agent he might be working. *Even the KGB couldn't think every embassy employee was a spook,* Foley told himself. Despite the paranoia that was pandemic in the Soviet Union, even they knew the rules of the game, and his friend from the *The New York Times* had probably told his own contacts that Foley was a dumb son of a bitch who hadn't even made it as a police reporter in the Big Apple, where the busy police made that field about as difficult as watching TV on a weekend. The best possible cover for a spook was to be too dumb, and what better person to set it up for him than that arrogant ass, Anthony—*never* just plain Tony—Prince.

Out on the street, the air was cool with approaching autumn. Ed wondered if the Russian winter was all it was cracked up to be. If so, you could always dress for cold weather. It was heat that Foley detested, though he remembered playing stickball out on the streets, and the sprinklers on the tops of some of the fire hydrants. The innocence of youth was far behind him. A damned far way behind, the chief of station reflected, checking his watch as he entered the metro station. As before, the efficiency of the metro worked for him, and he entered the usual subway car.

THERE, ZAITZEV THOUGHT, maneuvering that way. His American friend was doing everything exactly as before, reading his paper, his right hand on the grab rail, his raincoat hanging loose around him . . . and in a minute or two, he was standing next to him.

FOLEY'S PERIPHERAL VISION was still working, The shape was there, dressed exactly as before. *Okay, Ivan, make your transfer. . . . Be careful, boy, be very*

careful, his mind said, knowing that this sort of thing was going to be too dangerous to sustain. No, they'd have to set up a dead-drop somewhere convenient. But first they'd have to do a meet, and he'd let Mary Pat handle that one for him, probably. She just had a better disguise. . . .

ZAITZEV WAITED UNTIL the train slowed. Bodies shifted as it did so, and he reached quickly in and out of the offered pocket. Then he turned away, slowly, not so far as to be obvious, just a natural motion easily explained by the movement of the metro car.

YES! WELL DONE, IVAN. Every fiber of his being wanted to turn and eyeball the guy, but the rules didn't allow that. If there was a shadow in the car, those people noticed that sort of thing, and it wasn't Ed Foley's job to be noticed. So he waited patiently for his subway stop, and this time he turned right, away from Ivan, and made his way off the car, onto the platform, and up to the cool air on the street.

He didn't reach into his pocket. Instead, he walked all the way home, as normal as a sunset on a clear day, into the elevator, not reaching in even then, because there could well be a video camera in the ceiling.

Not until he got into his flat did Foley pull out the message blank. This time it was anything but blank, covered with black ink letters—as before, written in English. Whoever Ivan was, Foley reflected, he was educated, and that was very good news, wasn't it?

"Hi, Ed." A kiss for the microphones. "Anything interesting happen at work?"

"The usual crap. What's for dinner?"

"Fish," she answered, looking at the paper in her husband's hand and giving an immediate thumbs-up.

Bingo! They both thought. They had an agent. A no-shit spy in KGB. Working for *them.*

CHAPTER 16

A FUR HAT FOR THE WINTER

THEY DID WHAT?" Jack asked.

"They broke for lunch in the middle of surgery and went to a pub and had a beer each!" Cathy replied, repeating herself.

"Well, so did I."

"You weren't doing *surgery!*"

"What would happen if you did that at home?"

"Oh, nothing much," Cathy said. "You'd probably lose your license to practice medicine—after Bernie amputated your fucking hands with a chain saw!"

That got Jack's attention. Cathy didn't talk like that.

"No shit?"

"I had a bacon, lettuce, and tom-AH-to sandwich with chips—that's french fries for us dumb colonials. *I* had a Coke, by the way."

"Glad to hear it, doctor." Ryan walked over to give his wife a kiss. She appeared to need it.

"I've never seen anything like it," she went on. "Oh, maybe out in Bumfuck, Montana, they do stuff like that, but not in a real hospital."

"Cathy, settle down. You're talking like a stevedore."

"Or maybe a foulmouthed ex-Marine." She finally managed a smile. "Jack, I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. Those two eye cutters are technically senior to me, but if they *ever* tried that sort of shit at home, they'd be finished. They wouldn't even let them work on dogs."

"Is the patient okay?"

"Oh, yeah. The frozen section came back cold as ice—totally benign, not malignant—and we took out the growth and closed him back up. He'll be just fine—four or five days for recovery. No impairment to his sight, no more

headaches, but those two bozos operated on him with booze in their systems!"

"No harm, no foul, babe," he suggested, lamely.

"Jack, it isn't supposed to be that way."

"So report them to your friend Byrd."

"I ought to. I really ought to."

"And what would happen?"

That lit her up again: "I don't know!"

"It's a big deal to take the bread off somebody's table, and you'd be branded as a troublemaker," Jack warned.

"Jack, at Hopkins, I'd've called them on it right then and there, and there would have been hell to pay, but over here—over here I'm just a guest."

"And the customs are different."

"Not *that* different. Jack, it's grossly unprofessional. It's potentially harmful to the patient, and that's a line you *never* cross. At Hopkins, if you have a patient in recovery, or you have surgery the next day, you don't even have a glass of wine with dinner, okay? That's because the good of the patient comes before everything else. Okay, sure, if you're driving home from a party and you see a hurt person on the side of the road, and you're the only one around, you do what you can, and get him to a doc who's got it all together, and you probably tell that doc that you had a couple before you saw the emergency. I mean, sure, during internship, they work you through impossible hours so you can train yourself to make good decisions when you're not fully functional, but there's *always* somebody to back you up if you're not capable, and you're supposed to be able to tell when you're in over your head. Okay? I had that happen to me once on pediatric rotation, and it scared the hell out of me when that little kid stopped breathing, but I had a good nurse backing me up and we got the senior resident down in one big fucking hurry, and we got him going again with no permanent damage, thank God. But, Jack, you don't go creating a suboptimal situation. You don't go looking for them. You deal with them when they happen, but you don't voluntarily jump into the soup, okay?"

"Okay, Cath, so, what are you going to do?"

"I don't *know.* At home, I'd go right to Bernie, but I'm not at home. . . ."

"And you want my advice?"

Her blue eyes fixed on her husband's. "Well, yes. What do you think?"

What he thought didn't really matter, Jack knew. It was just a question of guiding her to her own decision. "If you do nothing, how will you feel next week?"

"Terrible. Jack, I saw something that—"

"Cathy." He hugged her. "You don't need me. Go ahead and do what you think is right. Otherwise, well, it'll just eat you up. You're never sorry for doing the right thing, no matter what the adverse consequences are. Right is right, my lady."

"They said *that,* too. I'm not comfortable with—"

"Yeah, babe. Every so often at work, they call me Sir John. You roll with the punch. It's not like it's an insult."

"Over here, they call a surgeon Mr. Jones or Mrs. Jones, not *Doctor* Jones. What the hell is that all about?"

"Local custom. It goes back to the Royal Navy in the eighteenth century. A

ship's doctor was usually a youngish lieutenant, and aboard ship that rank is called mister rather than *lef*tenant. Somehow or other it carried over to civilian life, too."

"How do you know that?" Cathy demanded.

"Cathy you are a doctor of medicine. I am a doctor of history, remember? I know a lot of things, like putting a Band-Aid on a cut, after that painful Merthiolate crap. But that's as far as my knowledge of medicine goes—well, they taught us a little at the Basic School, but I don't expect to patch up a bullet wound any time soon. I'll leave that to you. Do you know how?"

"I patched you up last winter," she reminded him.

"Did I ever thank you for that?" he asked. Then he kissed her. "Thanks, babe."

"I have to talk to Professor Byrd about it."

"Honey, when in doubt, do what you think is right. That's why we have a conscience, to remind us what the right thing is."

"They won't like me for it."

"So? Cathy, *you* have to like you. Nobody else. Well, me, of course," Jack added.

"Do you?"

A very supportive smile: "Lady Ryan, I worship your dirty drawers."

And finally she relaxed. "Why, thank you, Sir John."

"Let me go upstairs and change." He stopped in the doorway. "Should I wear my formal sword for dinner?"

"No, just the regular one." And now she could smile, too. "So, what's happening in your office?"

"A lot of learning the things we don't know."

"You mean finding out new stuff?"

"No, I mean realizing all the stuff we don't know that we should know. It never stops."

"Don't feel bad. Same in my business."

And Jack realized that the similarity between both businesses was that if you screwed up, people might die. And that was no fun at all.

He reappeared in the kitchen. By now Cathy was feeding Little Jack. Sally was watching TV, that great child pacifier, this time some local show instead of a Roadrunner-Coyote tape. Dinner was cooking. Why an assistant professor of ophthalmology insisted on cooking dinner herself like a truck driver's wife baffled her husband, but he didn't object—she was good at it. Had they had cooking lessons at Bennington? He picked a kitchen chair and poured himself a glass of white wine.

"I hope this is okay with the professor."

"Not doing surgery tomorrow, right?"

"Nothing scheduled, Lady Ryan."

"Then it's okay." The little guy went to her shoulder for a burp, which he delivered with great gusto.

"Damn, Junior. Your father is impressed."

"Yeah." She took the edge of the cloth diaper on her shoulder to wipe his mouth. "Okay, how about a little more?"

John Patrick Ryan, Jr. did not object to the offer.

"What things don't you know? Still worried about that guy's wife?" Cathy asked, cooled down somewhat.

"No news on that front," Jack admitted. "We're worried what they might do on something."

"Can't say what it is?" she asked.

"Can't say what it is," he confirmed. "The Russians, as my buddy Simon says, are a rum bunch."

"So are the Brits," Cathy observed.

"Dear God, I married Carrie Nation." Jack took a sip. It was Pinot Grigio, a particularly good Italian white that the local liquor stores carried.

"Only when I cut somebody open with a knife." She liked saying it that way, because it always gave her husband chills.

He held up his glass. "Want one?"

"When I'm finished, maybe." She paused. "Nothing you can talk about?"

"Sorry, babe. It's the rules."

"And you never break them?"

"Bad habit to get into. Better not to start."

"What about when some Russian decides to work for us?"

"That's different. Then he's working for the forces of Truth and Beauty in the world. We," Ryan emphasized, "are the Good Guys."

"What do they think?"

"They think they are. But so did a guy named Adolf," he reminded her. "And he wouldn't have liked Bernie very much."

"But he's long dead."

"Not everybody like him is, babe. Trust me on that one."

"You're worried about something, Jack. I can see it. Can't say, eh?"

"Yes. And no, I can't."

"Okay." She nodded. Intelligence information didn't interest her beyond her abstract desire to learn what was going on in the world. But as a physician there were many things she really wanted to know—like the cure for cancer—but didn't, and, reluctantly, she'd come to accept that. But medicine didn't allow much in the way of secrets. When you found something that helped patients, you published your discovery in your favorite medical journal so the whole world could know about it right away. Damned sure CIA didn't do that very often, and part of that offended her. Another tack, then. "Okay, when you do find out something important, what happens then?"

"We kick it upstairs. Here, it goes right to Sir Basil, and I call it in to Admiral Greer. Usually a phone call over the secure phone."

"Like the one upstairs?"

"Yep. Then we send it over by secure fax or, if it's really hot, it goes by diplomatic courier out of the embassy, when we don't want to trust the encryption systems."

"How often does that happen?"

"Not since I've been here, but I don't make those decisions. What the hell, the diplomatic bag goes over in eight or nine hours. Damned sight faster than it used to happen."

"I thought that phone thingee upstairs was unbreakable?"

"Well, some things you do are nearly perfect, too, but you still take extra

care with them, right? Same with us."

"What would that be for? Theoretically speaking, that is." She smiled at her cleverness.

"Babe, you know how to phrase a question. Let's say we got something, oh, on their nuclear arsenal, something from an agent way the hell inside, and it's really good stuff, but losing it might ID the agent for the opposition. That is what you send via the bag. The name of the game is protecting the source."

"Because if they ID the guy—"

"He's dead, maybe in a very unpleasant way. There's a story that once they loaded a guy into a crematorium alive and then turned on the gas—and they made a film of it, *pour encourager les autres,* as Voltaire put it."

"Nobody does that anymore!" Cathy objected immediately.

"There's a guy at Langley who claims to have seen the film. The poor bastard's name was Popov, a GRU officer who worked for us. His bosses were very displeased with him."

"You're serious?" Cathy persisted.

"As a heart attack. Supposedly, they used to show the film to people in the GRU Academy as a warning about not crossing the line—it strikes me as bad psychology but, like I said, I've met a guy who says he saw the film. Anyway, that's one of the reasons we try to protect our sources."

"That's a little hard to believe."

"Oh, really? You mean, like a surgeon breaking for lunch and having a beer?"

"Well . . . yes."

"It's an imperfect world we live in, babe." He'd let things go. She'd have all weekend to think things over, and he'd get some work done on his Halsey book.

BACK IN MOSCOW, fingers were flying. *How u gonna tell Lan*[*gley*], she asked.

N[ot] sure, he replied.

Cour[ier], she suggested. *This could be re[ally] hot.*

Ed nodded agreement. *Rit[ter] will be exci[ted].*

D[amn] st[raight], she agreed. *Want m[e] 2 han[dle] the me[et]?* she asked.

Y[our] Ru[ssian] is pre[etty] g[ood], he agreed.

This time she nodded. She spoke an elegant literary Russian reserved to the well-educated over here, Ed knew. The average Soviet couldn't believe that a foreigner spoke his language that well. When walking the street or conversing with a shop clerk, she never let that skill slip, instead stumbling over complex phrases. To do otherwise would have been noticed at once, and so avoiding it was an important part of her cover, even more than her blond hair and American mannerisms. It would finger her immediately to their new agent.

When? she asked next.

Iv[an] sez tom[orrow]. Up 4 it? he responded.

She patted his hip and gave a cute, playful smile, which translated to *bet your ass.*

Foley loved his wife as fully as a man could, and part of that was his respect

for her love of the game they both played. Paramount Central Casting could not have given him a better wife. They'd be making love tonight. The rule in boxing might be no sex before a fight, but for Mary Pat the rule was the reverse, and if the microphones in the walls noticed, well, *fuck 'em,* the Chief of Station Moscow thought, with a sly smile of his own.

"WHEN DO YOU leave, Bob?" Greer asked the DDO.

"Sunday. ANA to Tokyo, and from there on to Seoul."

"Better you than me. I hate those long flights," the DDI observed.

"Well, you try to sleep about half the way," and Ritter was good at that. He had a conference scheduled with the KCIA, to go over things on both North Korea and the Chinese, both of which he was worried about—as were the Koreans. "Nothing much happening in my shop at the moment, anyway."

"Smart of you to skip town while we have the President chewing my backside about the Pope," Judge Moore thought aloud.

"Well, I'm sorry about that, Arthur," Ritter retorted, with an ironic smile. "Mike Bostock will be handling things in my absence." Both senior executives knew and liked Bostock, a career field spook and an expert on the Soviets and the Central Europeans. He was a little too much of a cowboy to be trusted on The Hill, though, which everyone thought was a pity. Cowboys had their uses —like Mary Pat Foley, for example.

"Still nothing out of the Politburo meeting?"

"Not yet, Arthur. Maybe they just talked about routine stuff. You know, they don't always sit there and plan the next nuclear war."

"No." Greer chuckled. "They think we're always doing that. Jesus, they're a paranoid bunch."

"Remember what Henry said: 'Even paranoids have enemies.' And that *is* our job," Ritter reminded them.

"Still ruminating over your MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH plan, Robert?"

"Nothing specific yet. The in-house people I've talked to about it—damn it, Arthur, you tell our people to think outside of the box, and what do they do? They build a better box!"

"We don't have many entrepreneur types here, remember. Government agency. Pay caps. Tends to militate against creative thinking. That's what we're for," Judge Moore pointed out. "How do we change that?"

"We have a few people from the real world. Hell, I've got one on my team—he doesn't know how to think *inside* the box."

"Ryan?" Ritter asked.

"That's one of them," Jim Greer confirmed with a nod.

"He's not one of us," the DDO observed at once.

"Bob, you can't have it both ways," the DDI shot back. "Either you want a guy who thinks like one of our bureaucrats, or a guy who thinks creatively. Ryan knows the rules, he's an ex-Marine who even knows how to think on his feet, and pretty soon he's going to be a star analyst." Greer paused. "He's about the best young officer I've seen in a few years, and what your beef with him is, Robert, I do not understand."

"Basil likes him," Moore added to the conversation, "and Basil's a hard man to fool."

"Next time I see Jack, I'd like to let him know about RED DEATH."

"Really?" Moore asked. "It's way over his pay grade."

"Arthur, he knows economics better than anyone I have in the DI. I didn't put him in my economics section only because he's too smart to be limited that way. Bob, if you want to wreck the Soviet Union—without a war—the only way to do it is to cripple their economy. Ryan made himself a pile of money because he knows all that stuff. I'm telling you, he knows how to separate the wheat from the chaff. Maybe he can figure a way to burn down a wheat field. Anyway, what does it hurt? Your project is entirely theoretical, isn't it?"

"Well?" the DCI turned to Ritter. Greer was right, after all.

"Oh, what the hell, okay," the DDO conceded the point. "Just so he doesn't talk about this to *The Washington Post.* We don't need that idea out in the open. Congress and the press would have a meltdown."

"Jack, talk to the press?" Greer asked. "Not likely. He doesn't curry favor with people, including us. He's one guy I think we can trust. The whole Russian KGB doesn't have enough hard currency to buy him off. That's more than I can say for myself," he joked.

"I'll remember you said that, James," Ritter promised, with a thin smile of his own. Such jokes were usually limited to the Seventh Floor at Langley.

A DEPARTMENT STORE was a department store anywhere in the world, and GUM was supposedly Moscow's counterpart to Macy's in New York. *Theoretically,* Ed Foley thought, walking in the main entrance. Just like the Soviet Union was theoretically a voluntary union of republics, and Russia theoretically had a constitution that existed over and above the will of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. And there was theoretically an Easter Bunny, too, he thought, looking around.

They took the escalator to the second floor—the escalator was of the old sort, with thick wooden runners instead of the metal type which had long since taken over in the West. The fur department was over on the right, toward the back, and, on initial visual inspection, the selection there wasn't all that shabby.

Best of all, so was Ivan, wearing the same clothes that he'd worn on the metro. *Maybe his best suit?* Foley wondered. If so, he'd better get his ass to a Western country as soon as possible.

Other than the at-best-mediocre quality of the goods here, a department store was a department store, though here the departments were semi-independent shops. But their Ivan was smart. He'd suggested a meet in a part of the place where there would certainly be high-quality goods. For millennia, Russia had been a place of cold winters, a place where even the elephants had needed fur coats, and since 25 percent of the human blood supply goes to the brain, men needed hats. The decent fur hats were called *shapkas,* roughly tubular fur head coverings that had little in the way of precise shape, but did

serve to keep the brain from freezing. The really good ones were made out of muskrat—mink and sable went only to the most expensive specialty stores, and those were mainly limited to well-to-do women, the wives and/or mistresses of Party bosses. But the noble muskrat, a swamp creature that smelled—well, the smell was taken out of the skin somehow, lest the wearer of the hat be mistaken for a tidal wetland garbage dump—had very fine fur or hair or whatever it was, and was a good insulator. So, fine, a rat with a high R rating. But that wasn't the important part, was it?

Ed and Mary Pat could also communicate with their eyes, though the bandwidth was pretty narrow. The time of day helped. The winter hats had just been stocked in the store, and the fall weather didn't have people racing to buy new ones yet. There was just one guy in a brown jacket, and Mary Pat moved in that direction, after shooing her husband away, as though to buy him something as a semi-surprise.

The man was shopping, just as she was, and he was in the hat department. *He's not a dummy, whoever he is,* she thought.

"Excuse me," she said in Russian.

"Yes?" His head turned. Mary Pat checked him out; he was in his early thirties, but looked older than that, as life in Russia tended to age people more rapidly, even more rapidly than New York City. Brown hair, brown eyes—rather smart-looking in the eyes. That was good.

"I am shopping for a winter hat for my husband, as you suggested," she added in her very best Russian, "on the metro."

He didn't expect it to be a girl, Mrs. Foley saw at once. He blinked hard and looked at her, trying to square the perfect Russian with the fact that she had to be an American.

"On the metro?"

"That's right. My husband thought it better that I should meet you, rather than he. So . . ." She lifted a hat and riffled the fur, then turned to her new friend, as though asking his opinion. "So, what do you wish of us?"

"What do you mean?" he blurted back at her.

"You have approached an American and requested a meeting. Do you want to assist me in buying a hat for my husband?" she asked very quietly indeed.

"You are CIA?" he asked, his thought now back under semicontrol.

"My husband and I work for the American government, yes. And you work for KGB."

"Yes," he replied, "in communications, Central Communications."

"Indeed?" She turned back to the gable and lifted another *shapka. Holy shit,* she thought, but was he telling the truth, or did he just want a cheap ticket to New York?

"Really? How can I be sure of that?"

"I say it is so," he replied, surprised and slightly outraged that his honesty should come into question. Did this woman think he was risking his life as a lark? "Why do you talk to me?"

"The message blanks you passed on the metro did get my attention," she said, holding up a dark brown hat and frowning, as though it were too dark.

"Madam, I work in the Eighth Chief Directorate."

"Which department?"

"Simple communications processing. I am not part of the signals intelligence service. I am a communications officer. I transmit outgoing signals to the various *rezidenturas,* and when signals come to my desk from out in the field, I forward them to the proper recipients. As a result, I see many operational signals. Is that sufficient to your purpose?" He was at least playing the game properly, gesturing to the *shapka* and shaking his head, then pointing to another, its fur dyed a lighter brown, almost a blond color.

"I suppose it might be. What do you ask of us?"

"I have information of great importance—very great importance. In return for that information, I require passage to the West for myself, my wife, and my daughter."

"How old is your daughter?"

"Three years and seven months. Can you deliver what I require?"

That question shot a full pint of adrenaline into her bloodstream. She'd have to make this decision almost instantly, and with that decision she was committing the whole power of CIA onto a single case. Getting three people out of the Soviet Union was not going to be a picnic.

But this guy works in MERCURY, Mary Pat realized. He'd know things a hundred well-placed agents couldn't get to. Ivan here was custodian of the Russian Crown Jewels, more valuable even than Brezhnev's balls, and so—

"Yes, we can get you and your family out. How soon?"

"The information I have is very time-sensitive. As soon as you can arrange. I will not reveal my information until I am in the West, but I assure you the information is a matter of great importance—it is enough to force me into this action," he added as an additional dangle.

Don't overplay your hand, Ivan, she thought. An ego-driven agent would tell them he had the launch codes for the Russian Strategic Rocket Forces, when he just had his mother's recipe for borscht, and getting the bastard out would be a waste of resources that had to be used with the greatest care. But, against that possibility, Mary Pat had her eyes. She looked into this man's soul, and saw that whatever he was, "liar" probably wasn't among them.

"Yes, we can do this very quickly if necessary. We need to discuss place and methods. We cannot talk any longer here. I suggest a meeting place to discuss details."

"That is simple," Zaitzev replied, setting the place for the following morning.

You're in a hurry. "What name do I call you?" she finally asked.

"Oleg Ivan'ch," he answered automatically, then realized he'd spoken the truth, in a situation where dissimulation might have served him better.

"That is good. My name is Maria," she replied. "So, which *shapka* would you recommend?"

"For your husband? This one, certainly," Zaitzev said, handing over the dirty-blond one.

"Then I shall buy it. Thank you, comrade." She fussed over the hat briefly, then walked off, checking the price tag, 180 rubles, more than a month's pay for a Moscow worker. To effect the purchase, she handed the *shapka* over to one clerk, then walked to a cash register, where she paid her cash—the Soviets hadn't discovered credit cards yet—and got a receipt in return, which she

handed to the first clerk, who gave her the hat back.

So, it was true—the Russians really were more inefficient than the American government. Amazing that it was possible, but seeing was believing, she told herself, clutching the brown-paper bag and finding her husband, whom she quickly walked outside.

"So, what did you buy me?"

"Something you'll like," she promised, holding up the bag, but her sparkling blue eyes said it all. Then she checked her watch. It was just 3:00 A.M. in Washington and, if they phoned this one in, it was too early. This wasn't something for the night crew, even the trusted people in MERCURY. She'd just learned that one the hard way. No, this one would get written up, encrypted, and put in the diplomatic bag. Then it was just a matter of getting approval from Langley.

THEIR CAR HAD just been swept by an embassy mechanic the previous day—everybody in the embassy did it routinely, so this didn't finger them as spooks, and the telltales on door and hood hadn't been disturbed the previous night. The Mercedes 280 also had a fairly sophisticated alarm. So Ed Foley just turned up the sound on the radio-tape player. In the slot was a Bee Gees tape sure to offend anyone listening to a bug, and easily loud enough to overpower it. In her passenger seat, Mary Pat danced to the music, like a good California girl.

"Our friend needs a ride," she said, just loudly enough to be heard by her husband. "Him, wife, and daughter, age three and a half."

"When?" Ed wanted to know.

"Soon."

"How?"

"Up to us."

"He's serious?" Ed asked his wife, meaning, *Worth our time?*

"Think so."

You couldn't be sure, but MP had a good eye for reading people, and he was willing to wager on those cards. He nodded. "Okay."

"Any company?" she asked next.

Foley's eyes were about equally divided between the street and the mirrors. If they were being followed, it was by the Invisible Man. "Nope."

"Good." She turned the sound down some. "You know, I like it, too, Ed, but easy on the ears."

"Fine, honey. I have to go back to the office this afternoon."

"What for?" she asked in the semiangry voice every husband in the world knows.

"Well, I have some paperwork from yesterday—"

"And you want to check the baseball scores," she huffed. "Ed, why can't we get satellite TV in our apartment block?"

"They're working on getting it for us, but the Russians are making a little trouble. They're afraid it might be a spy tool," he added in a disgusted voice.

"Yeah," she observed. "Sure. Give me a break." Just in case KGB had a very

clever black-bag guy who prowled the parking lot at night. Maybe the FBI could pull that one off but, though they had to guard against the possibility, she doubted that the Russians had anybody that clever. Their radios were just too bulky. Even so, yes. They were paranoid, but were they paranoid *enough?*

CATHY TOOK SALLY and Little Jack outside. There was a park just a block and a half away, off Fristow Way, where there were a few swings that Sally liked and grass for the little guy to pull at and try to eat. He'd just figured out how to use his hands, badly and awkwardly, but whatever found its way into his little fist immediately thereafter found its way to his mouth, a fact known by every parent in the world. Still and all, it was a chance to get the kids some sun—the winter nights would be long and dark here—and it got the house quiet for Jack to get some work done on his Halsey book.

He'd already taken out one of Cathy's medical textbooks, *Principles of Internal Medicine,* to read up on shingles, the skin disease that had tormented the American admiral at a very inconvenient time. Just from reading the subchapter on the ailment—related to chicken pox, it turned out—it must have been like medieval torture to the then elderly naval aviator. Even more so that his beloved carrier battle group, *Enterprise* and *Yorktown,* would have to sail into a major engagement without him. But he'd taken it like a man—the only way William Frederick Halsey, Jr., had ever taken anything—and recommended his friend Raymond Spruance to take his place. The two men could scarcely have been more different. Halsey the profane, hard-drinking, chain-smoking former football player. Spruance, the nonsmoking, teetotaling intellectual reputed never to have raised his voice in anger. But they'd become the closest of friends, and would later in the war switch off command of the Pacific Fleet, renaming it from Third Fleet to Fifth Fleet and back again when command was exchanged. *That,* Ryan thought, *was the most obvious clue that Halsey had been the intellectual, too, and not the blustering hell-for-leather aggressor that the contemporary newspapers had proclaimed him to be.* Spruance the intellectual would not have befriended a knuckle-dragger. But their staffs had snarled at each other like tomcats fighting over a tabby in heat, probably the military equivalent of "my daddy can whip your daddy," engaged in by children up to the age of seven or so—and no more intellectually respectable.

He had Halsey's own words on the illness, though what he'd really said must have been muted by his editor and cowriter, since Bill Halsey really had spoken like a Chief Bosun's Mate with a few drinks under his belt—probably one of the reasons reporters had liked him so much. He'd made such good copy.

His notes and some source documents were piled next to his Apple IIe computer. Jack used WordStar as his word-processing program. It was fairly complicated, but a damned sight better than using a typewriter. He wondered which publisher would be right for the book. The Naval Institute Press was after him again, but he found himself wondering whether to switch over to a big-league publisher. But he had to finish the damned book first, didn't he? And so, back into Halsey's complex brain.

But he was hesitating today. That was unusual. His typing—three fingers and a thumb (two thumbs on a good day)—was the same, but his brain wasn't concentrating properly, as though it wanted to look at something else. This was an occasional curse of his CIA analysis work. Some problems just wouldn't go away, forcing his mind to go over the same material time and again until he stumbled upon the answer to a question that often enough made little sense in and of itself. The same thing had occasionally happened during his time at Merrill Lynch, when he'd investigated stock issues, looking for hidden worth or danger in the operations and finances of some publicly traded company. That had occasionally put him at odds with the big boys up in the New York office, but Ryan had never been one to do something just because a superior told him to. Even in the Marine Corps, an officer, however junior, was expected to think, and a stockbroker with clients was entrusted by them to safeguard their money as though it were his own. Mostly, he'd succeeded. After putting his own funds into Chicago and North Western Railroad, he'd been hammered by his supervisors, but he'd stood his ground, and those clients who'd listened to him had cashed in rather nicely—which had earned him a crowd of new clients. So Ryan had learned to listen to his instincts, to scratch the itches he couldn't quite see and could barely feel. This was one of those, and "this" was the Pope. The information he had did not form a complete picture, but he was used to that. In the stock-trading business, he'd learned how and when to bet his money on incomplete pictures, and nine times out of ten he'd been right.

He had nothing to bet on this one but his itch, however. Something was happening. He just didn't know what. All he'd seen was a copy of a warning letter sent to Warsaw, and certainly forwarded to Moscow, where a bunch of old men would look upon it as a threat.

That wasn't much to go on, was it? Ryan asked himself. He found himself wishing for a cigarette. Such things helped his thinking process sometimes, but there'd be hell to pay if Cathy smelled smoke in their house. But chewing gum, even bubble gum, just didn't cut it at times like this.

He needed Jim Greer. The Admiral often treated him like a surrogate son—his own son had been killed as a Marine lieutenant in Vietnam, Ryan had learned along the way—giving him the occasional chance to talk through a problem. But he wasn't that close to Sir Basil Charleston, and Simon was too near to him in age, if not quite in experience. And this was not a problem to be kicked around alone. He wished he could discuss it with his wife—doctors, he knew, were pretty smart—but that wasn't allowed, and, anyway, Cathy didn't really know the situation well enough to understand the threats. No, she'd grown up in a more privileged environment, daughter of a millionaire stock-and-bonds trader, living in a large Park Avenue apartment, all the best schools, her own new car for her sixteenth birthday, and all the hazards of life held off well beyond arm's length. Not Jack. His dad had been a cop, mostly a homicide investigator, and, while his father hadn't brought work home, Jack had asked enough questions to understand that the real world could be a place of unpredictable danger and that some people just didn't think like real people. They were called Bad Guys—and they could be pretty goddamned bad. He'd never lived without a conscience. Whether he'd picked that up in

distant childhood or Catholic schools, or it had been part of his genetic makeup, Jack didn't know. He did know that breaking the rules was rarely a good thing, but he also knew that the rules were a product of reason, and reason was paramount, and so the rules *could* be broken if you had a good—a very goddamned good—reason for doing so. That was called judgment, and the Marines, oddly enough, had nurtured that particular flower. You made an estimate of the situation and thought through the options, and then you acted. Sometimes you had to do it in a very big hurry—and that was why officers were paid more than sergeants, though you were always well advised to listen to your gunny if you had the time.

But Ryan had none of those things now, and that was the bad news. There was no immediately identifiable threat in view, and that was the good news. But now he was in an environment in which the threats were not always readily visible, and it was his job to find them out by piecing the available information together. But there wasn't much of that now either. Just a possibility, which he had to apply to the minds of people he didn't know and would never meet, except as paper documents written up by other people he didn't know. It was like being the navigator on a ship in Christopher Columbus's little fleet, thinking land might be out there, but not knowing where or when he might come upon it—and hoping to God it wouldn't be at night, in a storm, and that the land would not appear as a barrier reef to rip the bottom of his ship out. His own life was not in danger, but, as he'd been compelled by professional obligation to treat the money of his clients as his own, so he had to regard the life of a man in potential danger as having the importance of the life of his own child.

And that was where the itch came from. He could call Admiral Greer, Ryan thought, but it wasn't even seven in the morning in Washington yet, and he'd be doing his boss no favor by waking him up to the trilling sound of his home STU. Especially as he had nothing to tell, just a few things to ask. So he leaned back in his chair and stared at the green screen of his Apple monitor, looking for something that just wasn't there.

CHAPTER 17

FLASH TRAFFIC

ED FOLEY WROTE IN HIS OFFICE:

PRIORITY: FLASH
TO: DDO/CIA
CC: DCI, DDI
FROM: COS MOSCOW
SUBJECT: RABBIT
TEXT FOLLOWS:
WE HAVE A RABBIT, A HIGHLY PLACED WALK-IN, CLAIMS TO BE COMMO OFFICER IN KGB CENTRE, WITH INFORMATION OF INTEREST TO USG. ESTIMATION: HE IS TRUTHFUL. 5/5.
URGENTLY REQUEST AUTHORIZATION FOR IMMEDIATE EXFILTRATION FROM REDLAND. PACKAGE INCLUDES RABBIT WIFE AND DAUGHTER (3).
5/5 PRIORITY REQUESTED.
ENDS

There, Foley thought, *that's concise enough.* The shorter the better with messages like this one—it provided less opportunity for the opposition to work on the text and crack the cipher, in the event they got their hands on it.

But the only hands that would touch this one were CIA. He was betting a lot on this op-dispatch. 5/5 meant that the estimated importance of the information available, as well as its presumed accuracy and the priority for his proposed action, was class-5, the highest. He gave an identical evaluation for the accuracy of the subject. Four aces—not the sort of dispatch you sent out every day. It was the classification he'd give to a message from Oleg Penkovskiy, or from Agent CARDINAL himself, and that was about as hot a potato as they came. He thought for a moment, wondering if he was guessing

correctly, but, over his career, Ed Foley had learned to go with his instincts. He'd also measured his own thoughts against those of his wife, and her instincts were just as finely tuned. Their Rabbit—the CIA term of art for a person wanting a fast ticket out of whatever bad place he found himself in—claimed a lot, but he gave every sign of being what he claimed: the possessor of some very hot information. That made him a conscience defector, and thus pretty reliable. If he were a plant, a false-flag, he would have asked for money, because that's how KGB thought defectors thought—and CIA had never done anything to disabuse them of that notion.

So, it just *felt* right, though "feels right" isn't something you send by Diplomatic Courier to the Seventh Floor. They'd have to play along with this. They had to trust him. He was Chief of Station in Moscow, the CIA's top field posting, and with that came a truckload of credibility. They'd have to weigh it against whatever misgivings they were feeling. If a summit meeting were scheduled, then that might queer the deal, but the President had no such plans, nor did SecState. So there was nothing in the way of Langley approving some form of action—if they thought he was right. . . .

Foley didn't even know why he was questioning himself. He was The Man in Moscow, and that, by God, was that. He lifted the phone and punched three buttons.

"Russell," a voice said.

"Mike, this is Ed. I need you here."

"Right."

It took a minute and a half. The door opened.

"Yeah, Ed?"

"Something for the bag."

Russell checked his watch. "Not much margin, guy."

"It's short. I'll have to come down with you on this one."

"Well, let's get it on, then, bro." Russell walked out the door, with Foley in pursuit. Fortunately, the corridor was empty, and his office was not far.

Russell sat down in his swivel chair and lit up his cipher machine. Foley handed the sheet over. Russell clipped it to a fixture right over the keyboard. "Short enough," he said approvingly, and started typing. He was nearly as skillful as the Ambassador's own secretary, and he finished the job in a minute, including some padding—sixteen surnames taken at random from the Prague telephone book. When the new page came out of the machine, Foley took it, folded it, tucked it in a manila envelope, and sealed it. Wax was dripped over the closure, and Foley handed the envelope back to Russell.

"Back in five, Ed," the communications officer said on his way out the door. He took the elevator down to the first floor. The diplomatic courier was there. His name was Tommy Cox, a former Army warrant officer/helicopter pilot who'd been shot down four times in the Central Highlands as part of the First Cavalry Division, and a man who had only the most negative feelings for his country's adversaries. The Diplomatic Bag was a canvas carry-on-type bag that would be handcuffed to his wrist during transit. He was already booked on a Pan Am 747 direct flight to New York's Kennedy International, a flight of eleven hours, during which he would neither drink nor sleep, though he did have three paperback mysteries to read along the way. He'd be leaving the

embassy in an official car in ten minutes, and his diplomatic credentials meant he wouldn't be troubled with security or immigration procedures. The Russians were actually fairly cordial about that, though they probably drooled over the chance of seeing what was inside the canvas bag. For sure, it wasn't Russian perfume or pantyhose for a friend in New York or Washington.

"Good flight, Tommy."

Cox nodded. "Roger that, Mike."

Russell headed back to Foley's office topside. "Okay, it's in the bag. Flight leaves in an hour and ten minutes, man."

"Good."

"Is a Rabbit what I think it is?"

"Can't say, Mike," Foley pointed out.

"Yeah, I know, Ed. Excuse my question." Russell wasn't one to break the rules, though he had as much curiosity as the next man. And he knew what a Rabbit was, of course. He'd spent his entire life inside the black world in one capacity or another, and the jargon wasn't all that hard to pick up. But the black world had walls, and that was that.

Foley took his copy of the message, tucked it in his office safe, and set both the combination and the alarm. Then he headed down to the embassy cafeteria, where a TV was tuned in to ESPN. There he learned that his Yankees had lost another one—three straight, and in a pennant race! *Is there no fairness in the world?* he grumbled.

MARY PAT WAS doing housework, which was boring, but a good opportunity for her to put her brain in neutral while her imagination ran wild. Okay, she'd be meeting Oleg Ivanovich again. It would be up to her to figure a way to get the "package"—yet another CIA term of art, meaning the material or person(s) to be taken out of the country—to a safe place. There were many ways to do such a thing. They were all dangerous, but she and Ed and other CIA field spooks were trained to do dangerous things. Moscow was a city of millions, and in such an environment three people on the move were just part of the background noise, like one single leaf falling in an autumn forest, one more buffalo in the herd in Yellowstone National Park, one more car on the L.A. Freeway during rush hour. That wasn't hard, was it?

Well, actually, it was. In the Soviet Union, every aspect of personal life was subject to control. As applied to America, sure, the package was just one more car on the L.A. Freeway, but going to Las Vegas meant crossing a state line, and you had to have a reason for that. Nothing was easy here in the sense that everything was easy in America.

And there was something else. . . .

It would be better, Mary Pat thought, *that the Russians didn't know he was gone.* After all, it was not a murder if there wasn't a corpse to let everyone know that somebody had died. And it wasn't a defection unless they knew that one of their citizens had turned up somewhere else—where he wasn't supposed to be. *So, how much the better . . . was it possible . . . ?* she wondered.

Wouldn't that *be a kick in the ass? But how to make it happen?* It was

something to speculate on while she vacuumed the living room rug. And, oh, by the way, vacuuming would invalidate whatever bugs the Russians had implanted in the walls. . . . And so she stopped at once. Why waste that chance? She and Ed could communicate with their hands, but the bandwidth was like maple syrup in January.

She wondered if Ed would go for this. *He might,* she thought. It wasn't the sort of thing he'd think up. Ed, for all his skills, wasn't a cowboy. Though he had his talents, and good ones they were, he was more a bomber pilot than a fighter pilot. But Mary Pat thought like Chuck Yeager in the X-1, like Pete Conrad in the lunar module. She was just better at thinking long-ball.

The idea also had strategic implications. If they could get their Rabbit out unknown to the opposition, then they could make indefinite use of whatever he knew, and that possibility, if you could figure out how to make it happen, was very enticing indeed. It wouldn't be easy, and it might be a needless complication—and if so, it could be discarded—but it was worth thinking about, if she could get Ed's brain into it. She'd need his planning talents and his reality-checking ability, but the basic idea set her head abuzz. It would come down to available assets. . . . And that would be the hard part. But "hard" didn't mean "impossible." And, for Mary Pat, "impossible" didn't mean "impossible" either, did it? she asked herself.

Hell, no.

THE PAN AM FLIGHT rolled off on time, lurching across the lumpy taxiways of Sheremetyevo Airport, which was famous in the world of aviation for its roller-coaster paving. But the runways were adequate, and the big JT-9D Pratt and Whitney turbofan engines pushed the airframe to rotation speed, and the aircraft took flight. Tommy Cox, in seat 3-A, noted with a smile the usual reaction when an American airliner departed Moscow: The passengers all cheered and/or applauded. There was no rule, and the flight crew didn't encourage it. It just happened all on its own—that's how impressed Americans were with Soviet hospitality. It appealed to Cox, who had no love for the people who'd supplied the machine guns that had splashed his Huey four times and, by the way, earned him a total of three Purple Heart medals, a miniature ribbon of which decorated the lapels of all his suitcoats, along with the two repeat stars. He looked out the window, watching the ground fall away to his left and, when he heard the welcome *ding,* fished out a Winston to light with his Zippo. It was a pity he couldn't drink or sleep on these flights, but the movie was one he hadn't seen, remarkably enough. In this job you learned to appreciate the small things. Twelve hours to New York, but a direct flight was better than having to stop over in Frankfurt or Heathrow. Such places were just an opportunity for him to drag this fucking canvas bag around, sometimes without benefit of a cart or trolley. Well, he had a full pack of smokes, and the dinner menu didn't look too bad. And the government actually paid him to sit down for twelve hours, baby-sitting a piece of cheap luggage. It was better than flying his Huey around the Central Highlands. Cox was long past wondering what important information he transported in his

bag. And if other people were that interested, that was their problem.

RYAN HAD GOTTEN a hot three pages done—not a very productive day, and he couldn't claim that the artistry of his prose demanded a slow writing pace. His language was literate—he'd learned his grammar from priests and nuns for the most part, and his word mechanics were serviceable—but not particularly elegant. In his first book, *Doomed Eagles,* every bit of artistic language he'd attempted to put into his manuscript had been edited out, to his quiet and submissive fury. And so the few critics who had read and commented on his historical epic had faintly praised the quality of his analysis, but then tersely noted that it might be a good textbook for academic students of history, but not something on which a casual reader might wish to waste his money. And so the book had netted 7,865 copies sold—not much to show for two and a half years' work, but that, Jack reminded himself, was just his first outing, and maybe a new publisher would get him an editor who was more an ally than an enemy. He could hope, after all.

But the damned thing would not get done until he did it, and three pages wasn't much to show for a full day in his den. He was time-sharing his brain with another problem, and that wasn't a useful productivity tool.

"How did it go?" Cathy asked, suddenly appearing at his shoulder.

"Not too bad," he lied.

"Where are you up to?"

"May. Halsey is fighting off his skin disease."

"Dermatitis? That can be nasty, even today," Cathy noted. "It can drive the poor patients crazy."

"Since when are you a dermatologist?"

"M.D., Jack, remember? I may not know it all, but I know most of it."

"All that, and humble, too." He made a face.

"Well, when you get a cold, don't I take good care of you?"

"I suppose." She did, actually. "How are the kids?"

"Fine. Sally had a good time on the swings, and she made a new friend, Geoffrey Froggatt. His father's a solicitor."

"Great. Isn't there anything but lawyers around here?"

"Well, there's a doctor and a spook," Cathy pointed out. "Trouble is, I can't tell people what you do, can I?"

"So what *do* you tell them?" Jack asked.

"That you work for the embassy." Close enough.

"Another desk-sitting bureaucrat," he grumped.

"Well, you want to go back to Merrill Lynch?"

"Ugh. Not in this lifetime."

"Some people like making tons of money," she pointed out.

"Only as a hobby, babe." Were he to go back to trading, his father-in-law would gloat for a year. No, not in this lifetime. He'd served his time in hell, like a good Marine. "I have more important things to do."

"Like what?"

"I can't tell you," he countered.

"I know that," his wife responded, with a playful smile. "Well, at least it isn't insider trading."

Actually, it was, Ryan couldn't say—the nastiest sort. Thousands of people working every day to find out things they weren't supposed to know, and then taking action they weren't supposed to take.

But both sides played that game—played it diligently—because it wasn't about money. It was about life and death, and those games were as nasty as they got. But Cathy didn't lose any sleep over the cancer tissue she consigned to the hospital incinerator and probably those cancer cells wanted to live, too, but that was just too damned bad, wasn't it?

COLONEL BUBOVOY HAD the dispatch on his desk and read it. His hands didn't shake, but he lit a cigarette to help his contemplation. So, the Politburo was willing to go forward with this. Leonid Ilyich himself had signed the letter to the Bulgarian Party chairman. He'd have the ambassador call Monday morning to set up the meeting, which ought not to take too long. The Bulgarians were lapdogs of the Soviet Union, but occasionally useful lapdogs. The Soviets had assisted in the murder of Georgiy Markov on Westminster Bridge in London—KGB had supplied the weapon, if you could call it that, an umbrella to deliver the poison-filled metal miniball to transfer the ricin, and so silence the annoying defector who'd talked too much on BBC World Service. That had been a while, and such debts had no expiration date, did they? Not at this level of statecraft. So Moscow was calling in the debt. Besides that, there was the agreement from 1964, when it had been agreed that DS would handle KGB's wet work in the West. And Leonid Ilyich was promising to transfer a full battalion's worth of the new version of the T-72 main-battle tank, which was always the sort of thing to make a communist chief of state feel better about his political security. And it was cheaper than the MiG-29s the Bulgarians were asking for. As though a Bulgarian pilot could handle such an aircraft—the Russian joke was that they had to tuck their mustaches into the flight helmet before closing the visor, Bubovoy reminded himself. Mustaches or not, the Bulgarians were regarded as the children of Russia—an attitude that went back to the czars. And, for the most part, they were obedient children, though like them they had little appreciation of right and wrong, so long as they weren't caught. So he'd show proper respect for this chief of state and be received cordially as the messenger of a greater power, and the Chairman would hem and haw a little bit and then agree. It would be as stylized as a performance of ballet dancer Aleksander Gudonov, and just as predicable in its conclusion.

And then he'd meet with Boris Strokov and get an idea how quickly the operation might proceed. Boris Andreyevich would find the prospect exciting. This would be the biggest mission of his life, like playing in the Olympics, not so much daunting as exhilarating, and there was a sure promotion to be had for its successful completion—perhaps a new car for Strokov and/or a nice dacha outside Sofia. Or even both. *And for myself?* the KGB officer wondered. *A promotion, certainly.* General's stars and a return to Moscow, a plush office at

The Centre, a nice flat on Kutusovskiy Prospekt. Going back to Moscow appealed to the *rezident,* who'd spent a lot of years outside the borders of the *Rodina. Enough,* he thought. *More than enough.*

"WHERE'S THE COURIER?" Mary Pat asked, vacuuming the living room rug.

"Over Norway by now," her husband thought out loud.

"I have an idea," she said.

"Oh?" Ed asked with no small degree of trepidation.

"What if we can get the Rabbit out and they don't know?"

"How the hell do we do that?" her husband asked, in surprise. What was she thinking about now? "Getting him and his family out in the first place won't exactly be easy."

She told him the idea she'd evolved in her tricky little head, and an original one it was.

Trust you to come up with something like that, he thought, with a neutral expression. But then he started thinking about it. "Complicated," the Chief of Station observed tersely.

"But doable," she countered.

"Honey, that's a big thought." But he was thinking about it, Mary Pat saw in his eyes.

"Yeah, but if we can pull it off, what a coup," she said, getting under the sofa. Eddie slid himself closer to the TV so that he could hear what the Transformer robots were saying. A good sign. If Eddie couldn't hear, then neither would the KGB microphones.

"It's worth thinking about," Ed conceded. "But doing it—damn."

"Well, they pay us to be creative, don't they?"

"No way in hell we could pull that one off here"—not without involving a whole lot of assets, some of whom might not be entirely reliable, which was, of course, their greatest fear, and one they couldn't easily defend against. That was one of the problems in the spook business. If the counterspies in KGB ID'd one of their assets, they were very often clever about how they handled it. They could, for example, have a little chat with the guy and tell him to keep operating, and then, maybe, he'd live to the end of the year. Their agents were trained to give a danger-wave-off signal, but who was to say that the agent would do it? It demanded a lot from the supposed dedication of their assets, more than some—most—of them would probably give.

"So, there are other places they can go. Eastern Europe, for example. Get them out that way," she suggested.

"I suppose it's possible," he conceded again. "But the mission here *is* to get them out, not score style points from the East German judge."

"I know, but think about it. If we can get him away from Moscow, that gives us a lot more flexibility in our options, doesn't it?"

"Yes, honey. It also means communications problems." And that meant the risk of screwing everything up. The KISS principle—"keep it simple, stupid"—was as much a part of the CIA ethos as the trench coat and fedora hat that people used in bad movies. Too many cooks fucked up the soup.

Yet what she'd suggested had real merit. Getting the Rabbit out in a way that made the Soviets think him dead would mean that they'd take no precautions. It would be like sending Captain Kirk into KGB headquarters by transporter—and invisible—and extracting him without anyone knowing he'd been there, along with tons of hot information. It would be as close to the perfect play as anything that had ever happened. *Hell,* Ed thought, *as perfect a play as* never *happened in the real world.* He reflected for a moment that he was blessed to have a wife as creative in her work as she was in bed.

And that was pretty damned good.

Mary Pat saw her husband's face, and she knew how to read his mind. He was a cautious player, but she'd pushed a very sensitive button, and he was smart enough to see the merit in it. Her idea was a complication . . . but maybe not that great of one. Getting the package out of Moscow would be no day at the beach under the best of circumstances. The hard part would be in crossing the Finnish border—it was always Finland, and everyone knew it. There were ways to do it, and it mostly involved trick cars with hidden passenger accommodations. The Russians had trouble countering that tactic, because if the driver of the car had diplomatic credentials, then international convention limited their search options. Any diplomat who wanted to make fast money could make a small pile by smuggling drugs—and some did, she was sure, and few of them ever got caught. With a get-out-of-jail-free card, you could accomplish a lot. But even that was not an entirely free pass. If the Soviets knew this guy was missing, then rules might get broken because the data inside his head was so valuable. The other side of the diplomatic-rules violation was that it would result only in a protest, muddled up by the public disclosure that an accredited foreign diplomat was spying—and if some of their diplomats got roughed up in the process, well, the Soviets had been known to sacrifice large numbers of military forces for a political end and just think of it as a price of doing business. For the information the Rabbit had, they'd gladly shed blood—including some of their own. Mary Pat wondered how well this guy understood the danger he was in, and how formidable the forces were arrayed against him. What it came down to was whether or not the Sovs knew something was afoot. If not, their routine surveillance procedures, no matter how thorough, were predictable. If alerted, however, they could put the entire city of Moscow under lockdown.

But everything they did in the CIA's Clandestine Service was done carefully, and there were backup procedures for when things went wrong, as well as other measures, some desperate, that had proven to be effective when you put them in play. You just tried to avoid doing that.

"Finishing up," she warned her husband.

"Okay, Mary Pat, you have me thinking." And with that his formidable mind started sifting through ideas. *Sometimes he needs a little push,* Mary Pat thought, but once you had him going in the right direction, he was like George Patton with the bit in his teeth. She wondered how much sleeping Ed would be doing tonight. Well, she'd be able to tell, wouldn't she?

“BASIL LIKES YOU,” Murray said. The womenfolk were in the kitchen. Jack and Dan were out in the garden, pretending to inspect the roses.

“Really?”

“Yeah, a lot.”

“Damned if I know why,” Ryan said. “I haven’t turned much work out yet.”

“Your roomie reports to him about you every day. Simon Harding is a comer, in case nobody told you. That’s why he went with Bas to Number Ten.”

“Dan, I thought you were Bureau, not Agency,” Jack noted, wondering just how far the Legal Attaché spread himself.

“Well, the guys down the hall are pals, and I interface with the local spooks some.” *The guys down the hall* was Dan’s way of saying CIA people. Yet again Jack wondered just which branch of the government Murray actually belonged to. But everything about him said “cop” to one who knew what to look for. Was this some elaborate kind of disguise, too? No, not possible. Dan had been the personal troubleshooter for Emil Jacobs, the quiet, competent FBI Director, and that was far too elaborate for a government cover. Besides, Murray didn’t run agents in London, did he?

Did he? Nothing was ever what it seemed to be. Ryan hated that aspect of his CIA job, but he had to admit that it kept his mind fully awake. Even drinking a beer in his backyard.

“Well, nice to hear, I suppose.”

“Basil’s hard to impress, my boy. But he and Judge Moore like each other. Jim Greer, too. Basil just plain loves his analytical ability.”

“He’s pretty smart,” Ryan agreed. “I’ve learned a lot from him.”

“He’s making you one of his stars.”

“Really?” It didn’t always seem that way to Ryan.

“Haven’t you noticed how quick he’s moving you up? Like you were a professor from Harvard or something, fella.”

“Boston College and Georgetown, remember?”

“Yeah, well, us Jesuit products run the world—we’re just humble about it. They don’t teach ‘humble’ at Harvard.”

For sure they don’t encourage their graduates to do anything as plebeian as police work, Ryan thought. He remembered the Harvard kids in Boston, many of whom thought they owned the world—because daddy had bought it for them. Ryan preferred to make the purchase himself, doubtless because of his working-class background. But Cathy wasn’t like those upper-class snots, and she *had* been born with a golden spoon in her mouth. Of course, nobody was ever disgraced to point to his son or daughter the doctor, and certainly not to a graduate of Johns Hopkins. *Maybe Joe Muller wasn’t so bad a guy after all,* Ryan thought briefly. He’d helped raise a pretty good daughter. Too bad he was an overbearing asshole to his son-in-law.

“So, you like it at Century House?”

“Better than Langley. Too much like a monastery out there. At least in London you live in a city. You can step out for a beer or do some shopping over lunch.”

“Shame the building’s coming apart. It’s the same trouble they’ve had in some other buildings in London—the mortar or grout, whatever you call it, it’s defective. So the façade’s peeling off. Embarrassing, but the contractor’s gotta

be long dead. Can't take a corpse to court."

"You never have?" Jack asked, lightheartedly.

Murray shook his head. "No, I've never popped a cap on anyone. Came close once, but stopped short. Good thing, too. Turned out the mutt wasn't armed. Would have been embarrassing to explain that to the judge," he added, sipping his beer.

"So, how are the local cops doing?" It was Murray's job to interface with them after all.

"They're pretty good, really. Well organized, good investigators for the major stuff. Not much street crime for them to worry about."

"Not like New York or D.C."

"Not hardly. So, anything interesting shaking at Century House?" he asked.

"Not really. Mainly, I've been looking over old stuff, back-checking old analysis against newly developed data. Nothing worth writing home about—but I have to do that anyway. The Admiral is keeping me on a long leash, but it's still a leash."

"What do you think of our cousins?"

"Basil is pretty smart," Ryan observed. "But he's careful about what he shows me. That's fair, I suppose. He knows that I'm reporting back to Langley, and I really don't need to know much about sources. . . . But I can make some guesses. 'Six' has gotta have some good people in Moscow." Ryan paused. "Damned if I'd ever play that game. Our prisons are pretty nasty. I don't even want to think about what the Russian ones are like."

"You wouldn't live long enough to find out, Jack. They're not the most forgiving people in the world, especially on espionage. You're a lot safer whacking a cop right in front of the precinct station than playing spy."

"And with us?"

"It's amazing—how patriotic convicts are, that is. Spies do very hard time in the Federal prisons. Them and child molesters. They get a lot of attention from Bubba and his armed-robber friends—you know, honest crooks."

"Yeah, my dad talked about that once in a while, how there's a hierarchy in prison, and you don't want to be on the bottom.

"Better to be a pitcher than a catcher." Murray laughed.

It was time for a real question: "So, Dan, just how tight are you with the spook shops?"

Murray surveyed the horizon. "Oh, we get along pretty nicely" was all he was willing to say.

"You know, Dan," Jack observed, "if there's anything I've learned to worry about over here, it's understatement."

Murray liked that one. "Well, then you're living in the wrong place, son. They all talk like that over here."

"Yeah, especially in the spook shops."

"Well, if we talked like everybody else, then the mystique would be gone, and people would understand how screwed up everything really is." Murray had a sip and grinned broadly. "We couldn't maintain the confidence of the people that way. I bet it's the same with doctors and stockbrokers," the FBI rep suggested.

"Every business has its own insiders language." The supposed reason was

that it offered more speedy and efficient communications to those inside the fold—but the truth of the matter, of course, was that it denied knowledge and/or access to outsiders. But that was really okay if you were one of the people on the inside.

THE BAD NEWS happened in Budapest, and it resulted from pure bad luck. The agent wasn't even all that important. He provided information on the Hungarian Air Force, but that was an organization that no one took very seriously at best, along with the rest of the Hungarian military, which had rarely distinguished itself on the field of battle. Marxism-Leninism had never really taken firm root here anyway, but the state did have a hardworking, if not especially competent, intelligence/counterintelligence service, and not all of them were stupid. Some of them were even KGB-TRAINED, and if there was anything the Soviets knew, it was intelligence and counterintelligence. This officer, Andreas Morrisay, was just sitting, drinking his morning coffee in a shop on Andrassy Utca, when he saw someone make a mistake. He would not have caught it had he not been bored with his newspaper, but there it was. A Hungarian national—you could tell from his clothing—dropped something. It was about the size of a tin of pipe tobacco. He quickly bent down to pick it up, and then, remarkably enough, he stuck it to the underside of his table. And, Andreas saw, it didn't fall off. It must have some sort of adhesive on the side. And that sort of thing was not only unusual, but also one of the things he'd been shown in a training film at the KGB Academy outside Moscow. It was a very simple and obsolete form of dead-drop, something used by enemy spies to transfer information. It was, Andreas thought, like walking unexpectedly into the cinema and watching a spy film and knowing what was happening just on pure instinct. His immediate reaction was to walk off to the men's room, where there was a pay phone. There he dialed his office and spoke for less than thirty seconds. Next he made use of the men's room, because this might take a while, and he was suddenly excited. No harm was done. The head office of his agency was only a half-dozen blocks away, and two of his coworkers came in, took their seats, and ordered their coffee, talking with apparent animation about something or other. Andreas was relatively new in his job—just two years—and he'd yet to catch anyone doing anything. But this was his day, the officer knew. He was looking at a spy. A Hungarian national who was working for some foreign power, and even if he were giving information to the Soviet KGB, he was committing a crime for which he could be arrested—though in that case, it would be cleared up quickly by the KGB liaison officer. After another ten minutes, the Hungarian rose and walked out, with one of the two other officers in trail.

What followed was, well, nothing, for more than an hour. Andreas ordered some strudel—every bit as tasty here as it was in Vienna, three hundred kilometers away, and this despite the Marxist government in the country, because the Hungarians loved their food, and Hungary was a productive agricultural country, despite the command economy imposed on the farmers to the east. Andreas lit up a string of cigarettes, read his newspaper, and just

waited for something to happen.

Presently, it did. A man dressed a little too well to be a Hungarian citizen took his seat at the table next to his, lit a cigarette of his own, and read *his* newspaper.

Here it worked for Andreas that he was badly nearsighted. His glasses were so thick that it took a few seconds for anyone to see where his eyes were pointed, and he remembered his training enough not to allow his eyes to linger on any one spot more than a few brief seconds. Mainly he appeared to be reading his paper, like half a dozen others in this elegant little shop, which had somehow survived the Second World War. He watched the American—Andreas had it fixed in his mind that this one had to be an American—sip his own coffee and read his own paper, until he set his coffee cup down in the saucer, then reached into his hip pocket for a handkerchief, which he used to wipe his nose, and then replaced in the pocket. . . .

But first he retrieved the tobacco tin from under the table. It was a move so skillfully done that only a trained counterintelligence officer could have spotted it, but, Andreas told himself, that was exactly what he was. And it was his pride that generated his first and most costly mistake of the day.

The American finished his coffee and took his leave, with Andreas in close pursuit. The foreigner walked toward the underground station a block away and nearly made it. But not quite. He turned in surprise when he felt a hand on his upper arm.

"Could I see the tobacco tin that you took from the table?" Andreas said, politely, because this foreigner was probably, technically speaking, a diplomat.

"Excuse me?" the foreigner said, and his accent made him either British or American.

"The one in your pants pocket," Andreas clarified.

"I do not know what you are talking about, and I have business to do." The man started to walk away.

He didn't get far. Andreas pulled out his pistol. It was a Czech Agrozet Model 50 and it effectively ended the conversation. But not quite.

"What is this? Who are you?"

"Papers." Andreas held out his hand, keeping his pistol in close. "We already have your contact. You are," he added, "under arrest."

In the movies, the American would have drawn his own side arm and tried to make his escape down the twenty-eight steps into the ancient metro. But the American's fear was that this guy had seen too many movies himself, and it might make him nervous enough to pull the trigger on his Czech piece-of-shit handgun. So he reached into his coat pocket, very slowly and deliberately, lest he scare the idiot, and withdrew his passport. It was a black one, the sort issued to diplomats, and instantly recognizable to lucky asses like this stupid, fucking Hunky. The American's name was James Szell, and he was by ancestry Hungarian, one of the many minorities welcomed to the America of the previous century.

"I am an American diplomat, properly accredited to your government. You will take me to my embassy immediately." Inwardly, Szell was seething. His face didn't show it, of course, but his five years in the field had just come to a

screeching halt. All this over a rookie second-rate agent furnishing second-rate information about a third-rate communist air force. *Goddamn it!*

"First you will come with me," Andreas told him. He motioned with his pistol. "This way."

THE PAN AM 747 LANDED at Kennedy half an hour early due to favorable winds. Cox put his books back in his carry-on and stood, managing to be the first passenger off, with a little help from the stewardess. From there, it was a quick walk through customs—his canvas bag told everyone who and what he was—and from there to the next shuttle to Washington National. A total of ninety minutes later, he was in the back of a cab to the State Department at Foggy Bottom. Inside that capacious building, he opened the Diplomatic Bag and parceled out the various contents. The envelope from Foley was handed to a courier, who drove up the George Washington Parkway to Langley, where things also move fairly fast.

The message was hand-carried to MERCURY, the CIA's message center, and, once decrypted and printed up, hand-delivered to the Seventh Floor. The original was put in the burn bag, and no hard copies were kept, though an electronic one was transferred to a VHS cassette, which ended up in a slot in Sneezy.

Mike Bostock was in his office, and when he saw the envelope from Moscow, he decided that everything else could wait. It surely could, he saw at once, but when he checked his watch he knew that Bob Ritter was over eastern Ohio and heading west on an All Nippon Airlines 747. So he called Judge Moore at home, and requested that he come in to the office. Grumbling, the DCI agreed to do so, at once, also telling Bostock to call Jim Greer as well. Both lived agreeably close to CIA headquarters, and they came out of the executive elevator just eight minutes apart.

"What is it, Mike?" Moore asked on his arrival.

"From Foley. Looks like he has something interesting." Cowboy or not, Bostock was one to understate things.

"Damn," the DCI breathed. "And Bob's already gone?"

"Yes, sir, just an hour ago."

"What is it, Arthur?" Admiral Greer asked, wearing a cheap golf shirt.

"We got us a Rabbit." Moore handed the message over.

Greer took his time going over it. "This could be very interesting," he thought, after a moment's reflection.

"Yes, it could." Moore turned to the deputy of the Operations Directorate. "Mike, talk to me."

"Foley thinks it's hot. Ed's as good a field officer as anybody we have, and so's his wife. He wants to exfiltrate this guy and his family soonest. We pretty much have to go with his instincts on this one, Judge."

"Problems?"

"The question is: How do we accomplish the mission? Ordinarily, we leave that to the people in the field, unless they try to pull something crazy, but Ed and Mary are too smart for that." Bostock took a breath and looked out the

floor-length windows to the Potomac Valley, out beyond the VIP parking lot. "Judge, Ed seems to think this guy has some very hot information. We can't question him on that. The obvious supposition is that the Rabbit's pretty far inside, and he wants to get the hell out of Dodge City. Adding the wife and daughter to the package is a serious complication. Again, we pretty much have to go with the instincts of our field personnel. It would be nice if we could run the guy as an agent, have him deliver information on a continuing basis, but for some reason either that isn't feasible, or Ed thinks he has what we need and want already."

"Why couldn't he tell us more?" Greer observed, still holding the dispatch.

"Well, it's possible that he was time-limited on getting this to the bagman, or he didn't trust the courier system with stuff that could ID the guy to the opposition. Whatever this guy has, Ed didn't want to trust normal communications channels, and that, gentlemen, is a message in and of itself."

"So, you say approve the request?" Moore asked.

"Not a hell of a lot else we can do," Bostock pointed out rather obviously.

"Okay—approved," the DCI said officially. "Get it off to him, right now."

"Yes, sir." And Bostock left the room.

Greer had himself a chuckle. "Bob's going to be pissed."

"What can be so important that Foley would want to short-circuit procedures this abruptly?" Moore wondered aloud.

"We're just going to have to wait to find out."

"I suppose, but you know, patience has never been my long suit."

"Well, think of this as a chance to acquire a virtue, Arthur."

"Great." Moore stood. He could go home now and grumble all day, like a kid on Christmas Eve, wondering what was going to be under the tree—if Christmas was really going to happen this year.

CHAPTER 18

CLASSICAL MUSIC

THE BOUNCE-BACK SIGNAL arrived after midnight in Moscow, where it was printed up and walked to Mike Russell's desk by the night communications officer and promptly forgotten. Due to the eight-hour time difference from Washington, this was often the busiest time for inbound signals, and that one was just another piece of paper with gibberish on it, one which he was not allowed to decrypt.

AS MARY PAT had expected, Ed hadn't gotten any sleep to speak of, but had done his best not to roll around too much, lest he disturb his wife. Doubts were also part of the espionage game. Was Oleg Ivan'ch a false-flag, some random attempt from the KGB on which he'd bitten down a little too fast and a little too hard? Had the Soviets just gone fishing at random and landed a big blue marlin on the first try? Did KGB play such games? Not according to his lengthy mission briefing at Langley. They'd played similar games in the past, but those had been targeted deliberately toward people whom they knew to be players, from whom they could get a line on other agents just by following them around to check out drop sites. . . .

But you didn't play it this way. You didn't ask for a ticket out on the first go-round unless you really wanted something specific, like the neutralization of a particular target—and that couldn't be it. He and Mary Pat hadn't *done* much of anything yet. Hell, only a handful of people at the embassy knew who and what he was. He hadn't recruited new agents yet, nor worked any existing ones. That wasn't, strictly speaking, his job. The Chief of Station wasn't

supposed to work the field. He was supposed to direct and supervise those who did, like Dom Corso and Mary Pat and the rest of his small but expert crew.

And if Ivan knew who he was, why tip its hand so quickly—it would only tell CIA more than it knew now, or could easily learn. You didn't play the spy game that way.

Okay, what if the Rabbit was a throwaway, whose job it was to ID Foley and then give over useless or false information—what if the whole job had as its objective nothing more than to ID the COS Moscow? But they couldn't have targeted him without knowing who he was, could they? Even KGB didn't have the assets to shotgun such a mission and ping on every embassy staffer—it was way too clumsy and was certain to alert embassy personnel to something very strange under way.

No, KGB was too professional for that.

So they couldn't target him without knowing, and if they knew, they'd want to hide that information, lest they alert CIA to a source or method that they'd be far better advised to conceal.

So Oleg Ivanovich couldn't be a false-flag, and that was that.

So, he *had to be* the real thing. Didn't he?

For all his intelligence and experience, Foley could not come up with a construct that made the Rabbit anything but the genuine item. The problem was that it made little sense.

But what in espionage ever made sense?

What *did* make sense was the necessity of getting this guy out. They had a Rabbit, and the Rabbit needed to run away from the Bear.

"YOU CAN'T SAY what's bothering you?" Cathy asked.

"Nope."

"But it's important?"

"Yep." He nodded. "Yeah, it sure is, but the problem is that we don't know how serious."

"Something for me to worry about?"

"Well, no. It's not World War Three or anything like that. But I really can't talk about it."

"Why?"

"You know why—it's classified. You don't tell me about your patients, do you? That's because you have rules of ethics, and I have rules of classification." Smart as Cathy was, she still hadn't fully grasped that one yet.

"Isn't there any way I can help?"

"Cathy, if you were cleared for this, maybe you could offer insights. But maybe not. You're not a pshrink, and that's the medical field that applies to this—how people respond to threats, what their motivations are, how they perceive reality, and how those perceptions determine their actions. I've been trying to get inside the heads of people I haven't met to figure out what they're going to do about something. I've been studying how they think for quite a while, even before I joined the Agency, but you know—"

"Yeah, it's hard to look inside somebody's brain. And you know what?"

"What's that?"

"It's harder with the sane ones than the crazy ones. People can think rationally and still do crazy things."

"Because of their perceptions?"

She nodded. "Partially that, but partially because they've chosen to believe totally false things—for entirely rational reasons, but the things they believe in are still false."

This struck Ryan as worth pursuing. "Okay. Tell me about . . . Josef Stalin, for instance. He killed a lot of people. Why?"

"Part of it was rational, and part of it was wild paranoia. When he saw a threat, he dealt with it decisively. But he tended to see threats that weren't there or weren't serious enough to merit deadly force. Stalin lived on the borderline between madness and normality, and he crossed back and forth like a guy on a bridge who couldn't make up his mind about where he lived. In international affairs, he was supposed to be just as rational as everybody else, but he had a ruthless streak and nobody ever said 'no' to him. One of the docs at Hopkins wrote a book on the guy. I read it when I was in med school."

"What did it say?"

Mrs. Dr. Ryan shrugged. "It wasn't all that satisfactory. The current thinking is that it's chemical imbalances in the brain that cause mental illness, not whether your dad slapped you around too much or you saw your mom in bed with a goat. But we can't test Stalin's blood chemistry now, can we?"

"Not hardly. I think they finally burned him up and put him in—where? I don't remember," Jack admitted. It wasn't the Kremlin wall, was it? Or maybe they just buried the pine box instead of burning it all up. It wasn't worth finding out, was it?

"It's funny. A lot of historical figures did the stuff they did because they were mentally unstable. Today, we could fix them with lithium or other stuff we've learned about—mainly in the last thirty years or so—but back then, all they had was alcohol and iodine. Or maybe an exorcism," she added, wondering if those were real.

"And Rasputin had a bad chemical imbalance, too?" Jack wondered aloud.

"Maybe. I don't know much about that, except he was supposed to be a crazy kinda priest, wasn't he?"

"Not a priest, some kinda mystic civilian. I suppose today he'd be a TV evangelist, right? Whatever he was, he brought down the House of Romanov—but they were pretty useless anyway."

"And then Stalin took over?"

"Lenin first, then Stalin. Vladimir Ilyich checked out from strokes."

"Hypertensive, maybe, or just cholesterol buildup and he clotted in the brain and that did him. And Stalin was worse, right?"

"Lenin was no day at the beach, but Stalin was pretty amazing—Tamerlane come back to the twentieth century, or maybe one of the Caesars. When the Romans reconquered a rebellious city, they killed everything there was, right down to the dogs."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but the Brits always spared the dogs. Too sentimental about them,"

Jack added.

"Sally misses Ernie," Cathy reminded him in female fashion—almost, but not totally irrelevant to the conversation. Ernie was their dog back home.

"So do I, but he's going to have a lot of fun this fall—duck season soon. He'll get to retrieve all the dead birds out of the water."

Cathy shivered. She'd never hunted anything more alive than the hamburger at the local supermarket—but she carved up human beings with knives. *Like* that *makes any sense,* Ryan thought with a wry smile. But the world had no rule that required logic on its surface—not the last time he'd checked.

"Don't worry, babe. Ernie will like it. Trust me."

"Yeah, sure."

"He loves to go swimming," Jack pointed out, extending the needle. "So, what interesting eyeball problems at the hospital next week?"

"Just routine stuff—checking eyes and prescribing glasses all week."

"No fun stuff, like cutting some poor bastard's left eye in half and then sewing it back together?"

"That's not a procedure," she pointed out.

"Babe, I could never cut into a person's eyeball with a knife without tossing my cookies—or maybe fainting." The very thought of it made him shiver.

"Wimp" was all she had to say about that admission. She didn't understand that this was a skill not covered in the Marine Corps Basic School at Quantico, Virginia.

MARY PAT COULD feel that her husband was still awake, but it wasn't a time to talk, even with their personal hand-jive technique. Instead she was thinking about operations—how to get the package out. Moscow would be too hard. Other parts of the Soviet Union were no easier, because Moscow Station didn't have all that many assets it could use elsewhere in this vast country—intelligence operations tended to be centered in national capitals because that was where you could place "diplomats" who were truly wolves in sheep's clothing. The obvious counter for that was to use your government capital just for strictly government-related administrative services, distanced from military and other sensitive affairs, but nobody would do that, for the simple reason that government big shots wanted all their functionaries within arm's length so that *they*—the big shots—could enjoy their exercise of power. And that was what they all lived for, whether it was in Moscow, Hitler's Berlin, or Washington, D.C.

So, if not out of Moscow, then where? There were only so many places the Rabbit was free to go. Nowhere west of the wire, as she thought of the Iron Curtain that had fallen across Europe in 1945. And there were few places where a man like him could plausibly want to go that were convenient to CIA. The beaches at Sochi, perhaps. Theoretically, the Navy could get a submarine there and make the snatch, but you couldn't just whistle up a submarine, and the Navy would have a cow over that, just for having it asked of them.

That left the fraternal socialist states of Eastern Europe, which were about

as exciting as tourist spots as central Mississippi in the summer: a good place to go if you got off on cotton plantations and blazing heat, but otherwise why bother? Poland was out. Warsaw had been rebuilt after the Wehrmacht's harsh version of urban renewal, but Poland right now was a very tight place due to its internal political troubles, and the easiest exit point, Gdansk, was now as tightly guarded as the Russian-Polish border. It hadn't helped that the Brits had arranged for the purloining of a new Russian T-72 main battle tank there. Mary Pat hoped the stolen tank was useful to somebody, but some idiot in London had bragged about it to the newspapers and the story had broken, ending Gdansk's utility as a port of exit for the next few years. The DDR, perhaps? But few Russians cared a rat's ass about Germany, and there was little there for them to want to see. Czechoslovakia? An interesting city supposedly, landmarked with imperial architecture, and a good cultural life. Their symphonies and ballet were almost on a class with the Russians' own, and the art galleries were supposedly excellent. But the Czech-Austrian border was also very tightly guarded.

That left . . . Hungary.

Hungary, she thought. Budapest was also an old imperial city, once ruled sternly by the Austrian Hapsburg dynasty, conquered by the Russians in 1945 after a nasty, prolonged battle with the German SS, probably rebuilt to whatever former glory it had enjoyed a hundred years before. It was not enthusiastically communist, as they'd demonstrated in 1956, before being harshly put down by the Russians, at Khrushchev's personal orders, and then under Andropov's stewardship as USSR Ambasssador reestablished as a happy socialist brotherhood, though one more loosely governed after the brief and bloody rebellion. The head rebels had all been hanged, shot, or otherwise disposed of. Forgiveness had never been a Marxist-Leninist virtue.

But a lot of Russians took the train to Budapest. It was the neighbor of Yugoslavia, the communist San Francisco, a place where Russians could not go without permission, but Hungary traded freely with Yugoslavia, and so Soviet citizens could purchase VCRs, Reebok running shoes, and Fogal pantyhose there. Typically, Russians went there with one suitcase full and two or three empty, and a shopping list for all their friends.

Soviets could travel there with reasonable freedom, because they had Comecon rubles, which all socialist countries were required to honor by the socialist Big Brother in Moscow. Budapest was, in fact, the boutique of the Eastern Bloc. You could even get X-rated tapes for the tape machines that were manufactured there—rip-offs of Japanese designs, reverse-engineered and made in their own fraternal socialist factories. The tapes were smuggled in from Yugoslavia and copied—everywhere, everything from *The Sound of Music* to *Debbie Does Dallas.* Budapest had decent art galleries and historical sites, good orchestras, and the food was supposed to be pretty good. An entirely plausible place for the Rabbit to go, with every ostensible intention of going back to his beloved *Rodina.*

That's the beginning of a plan, Mary Pat thought. That was also enough lost sleep for one night.

“SO, WHAT HAPPENED?” the Ambassador asked.

“An AVH spook was having coffee one table away from where my agent made a drop,” Szell explained in the Ambassador’s private office. It was located on the top floor, in the corner—in fact, in the quarters once occupied by Jozsef Cardinal Mindszenty during his lengthy residency at the U.S. Embassy. A beloved figure both in the eyes of the American staffers and the Hungarian people, he’d been imprisoned by the Nazis, released by the arriving Red Army, and promptly returned to prison for not being enthusiastic enough over the advent of the New Faith of Russia, though, technically, he’d been imprisoned on the far-fetched charges of being a raging royalist who wished to return the House of Hapsburg to imperial rule. The local communists hadn’t been overly strong on creative writing. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, the Hapsburgs had been about as popular in Budapest as a bargeload of plague rats.

“Why were you doing it, Jim?” Ambassador Peter “Spike” Ericsson asked. He’d have to reply to the venomous, but entirely predictable, communiqué that had arrived with the Station Chief, which was now sitting in the center of his desk.

“Bob Taylor’s wife—she’s pregnant, remember?—had some plumbing problems, and they flew ’em both off to Second Army General Hospital up at Kaiserslauten to get checked out.”

Ericsson grunted. “Yeah, I forgot.”

“Anyway, the short version is, I blew it,” Szell had to admit. It just wasn’t his way to cover things up. It would cause a major hiccup in his CIA career, but that couldn’t be helped. Damned sure it was a lot rougher right now for that poor clumsy bastard who’d screwed up the transfer. The Hungarian State Security Authority—*Allavedelmi Hatosag,* or AVH—officers who’d interrogated him evidently hadn’t had a good gloat in some time, and had made a point of telling him how easily he’d been bagged. *Fucking amateurs,* Szell raged. But the end of the game was that he was now PNG’d, declared *persona non grata* by the Hungarian government, and requested to leave the country in forty-eight hours—preferably, with his tail tucked firmly between his legs.

“Sorry to lose you, Bob, but there’s nothing much I can do.”

“And I’m pretty useless to the team now anyway. I know.” Szell let out a long and frustrated breath. He’d been here long enough to set up a pretty good little spy shop, providing fairly good political and military information—none of it overly important, because Hungary was not an overly important country, but you just never knew when something of interest would happen, even in Lesotho—which might well be his next posting, Szell reflected. He’d have to buy some sunblock and a nice bush jacket. . . . At least he’d get to catch the World Series back at home.

But for now, Station Budapest was out of business. *Not that Langley would really miss it,* Szell consoled himself.

The signal about this would go to Foggy Bottom via embassy telex—encrypted, of course. Ambassador Ericsson drafted his reply to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, rejecting out of hand the absurd allegation that James Szell, Second Secretary to the Embassy of the United States of America, had done

anything inconsistent with his diplomatic status, and lodging an official protest in the name of the U.S. Department of State. Perhaps in the next week, Washington would send some Hungarian diplomat back—whether he was a sheep or a goat would be decided in Washington. Ericsson thought it would be a sheep. Why let on that the FBI had ID'd a goat, after all? Better to let the goat continue to munch away in whatever garden it had invaded—under close observation. And so the game went on. The Ambassador thought it a stupid game, but every member of his staff played it with greater or lesser enthusiasm.

THE MESSAGE ABOUT SZELL, it turned out, was sufficiently under the radar so that when it was forwarded to CIA headquarters, it was tucked into routine traffic as not worthy of interfering with the DCI's weekend—Judge Moore got a morning brief every single day anyway, of course, and this item would wait until 8:00 A.M. Sunday, the watch officers collectively decided, because judges liked an orderly life. And Budapest wasn't all that important in the Great Scheme of Things, was it?

SUNDAY MORNING IN Moscow was much the same as Sunday morning everywhere else, albeit with fewer people getting dressed up for church. That was true for Ed and Mary Pat, also. A Catholic priest celebrated mass at the U.S. Embassy on Sunday mornings, but most of the time they didn't make it—though they were both Catholic enough to feel guilt for their slothful transgressions. They both told themselves that their guilt was mitigated by the fact that they were both doing God's own work right in the center of the land of the heathen. So the plan for today was to take Eddie for a walk in the park, where he might meet some kids to play with. At least, that was Eddie's mission brief. Ed rolled out of bed and headed to the bathroom first, followed by his wife and then by little Eddie. No morning paper, and the Sunday TV programming was every bit as bad as it was the rest of the week. So they actually had to talk over breakfast, something many Americans find hard to do. Their son was still young and impressionable enough to find Moscow interesting, though nearly all of his friends were Americans or Brits: inmates, like his entire family, in the compound/ghetto, guarded by MGB or KGB—opinions were divided on that question, but everyone knew it made little real difference.

The meeting was set for 11:00. Oleg Ivan'ch would be easy to spot—as would she, Mary Pat knew. Like a peacock among crows, her husband liked to say (even though the peacock was actually a male bird). She decided to play it down today. No makeup, just casually brushed-out hair, jeans, and a pullover shirt. She couldn't change her figure very much—the local aesthetic preferred women of her height to be about ten kilograms heavier. Diet, she supposed. Or maybe when you had food available in what was largely a hungry country,

you ate it. Maybe the fat layer you acquired made the winters more comfortable? Whatever, the level of fashion for the average Russian female was like something from a Dead End Kids movie. You could tell the wives of important people easily, because their clothes looked almost middle-class, as opposed to the more normal Appalachia class of dress. But that was grossly unfair to the people of Appalachia, Mary Pat decided.

"You coming, Ed?" she asked after breakfast.

"No, honey. I'll clean up the kitchen and get into this new book I got last week."

"The truck driver did it," she offered. "I've read that guy before."

"Thanks a bunch," her husband grumbled.

And with that, she checked her watch and headed out. The park was just three of the long blocks to the east. She waved to the gate guard—definitely KGB, she thought—and headed to the left, holding little Eddie's hand. The traffic on the street was minimal by American standards, and it was definitely getting cooler out. She was glad she'd dressed her son in a long-sleeve shirt. A turn to look down at him revealed no obvious tail. There could, of course, be binoculars in the apartments across the street, but somehow she thought not. She'd pretty well established herself as a dumb American blonde, and just about everyone bought it. Even Ed's press contacts thought her dumber than him—and they thought him to be an ass—which could not have suited her any better. Those chattering blackbirds repeated everything she and Ed said to one another, until the word was as uniformly spread as the icing on one of her cakes. It all got back to KGB as quickly as any rumor could go—damned near the speed of light in that community, because reporters did intellectual incest as a way of life—and the Russians listened to them and put everything in their voluminous dossiers until it became something that "everybody knows." A good field officer always used others to build his or her cover. Such a cover was random-sounding—just as real life always was—and that made it plausible, even to a professional spook.

The park was about as bleak as everything else in Moscow. A few trees, some badly trodden grass. Almost as though KGB had had all the parks trimmed to make them bad contact points. That it would also limit places for young Muscovites to rendezvous and trade some kisses probably would not have troubled the consciences at The Centre, which were probably about the Pontius Pilate level on a reflective day.

And there was the Rabbit, a hundred meters or so away, nicely located, near some play items that would appeal to a three-year-old—or a four-year-old. Walking closer, she saw again that Russians doted on their little ones, and, in this case, maybe a little more—the Rabbit was KGB, and so he had access to better consumer goods than the average Russian, which, like a good parent in any land, he lavished on his little girl. That was a good sign for his character, Mary Pat decided. Maybe she could even like this guy, an unexpected gift for a field officer. So many agents were screwed up as badly as a South Bronx street mugger. He didn't observe her approach any more than to turn and scan the area in boredom, as men walking their children did. The two Americans headed the right way in what would surely appear to be a random act.

"Eddie, there's a little girl you can say hello to. Try out your Russian on

her," his mommy suggested.

"Okay!" and he raced off in the manner of toddlers. Little Eddie ran right up to her and said "Hello."

"Hello."

"My name is Eddie."

"My name is Svetlana Olegovna. Where do you live?"

"That way." Eddie pointed back to the foreigners' ghetto.

"That is your son?" the Rabbit asked.

"Yes, Eddie Junior. Edward Edwardovich to you."

"So," Oleg Ivan'ch said next, without amusement, "is he also CIA?"

"Not exactly." Almost theatrically, she extended her hand to him. She had to protect him, just in case cameras were about. "I am Mary Patricia Foley."

"I see. Does your husband like his *shapka*?"

"Actually, he does. You have good taste in furs."

"Many Russians do." Then he switched gears. It was time to go back to business. "Have you decided that you can help me or not?"

"Yes, Oleg Ivan'ch, we can. Your daughter is darling. Her name is Svetlana?"

The communications officer nodded. "Yes, that is my little *zaichik*."

The irony of that was positively eerie. Their Rabbit called his little girl his bunny. It generated a brilliant smile. "So, Oleg, how do we get you to America?"

"You ask me this?" he asked with no small degree of incredulity.

"Well, we need some information. Your hobbies and interests, for example, and your wife's."

"I play chess. More than anything else, I read books on old chess matches. My wife is more classically educated than I. She loves music—classical music, not the trash you make in America."

"Any particular composer?"

He shook his head. "Any of the classical composers, Bach, Mozart, Brahms—I do not know all of the names. It is Irina's passion. She studied piano as a child, but wasn't quite good enough to get official state training. That is her greatest regret, and we do not have a piano for her to practice on," he added, knowing that he had to give her this kind of information to assist in her efforts to save him and his family. "What else do you require?"

"Do any of you have any health problems—medications, for example?" They were speaking in Russian again, and Oleg noted her elegant language skills.

"No, we are all quite healthy. My Svetlana has been through all the usual childhood diseases, but without complications of any sort."

"Good." *That simplifies a lot of things,* Mary Pat thought. "She's a lovely little girl. You must be very proud of her."

"But will she like life in the West?" he worried aloud.

"Oleg Ivan'ch, no child has ever had reason to dislike life in America."

"And how does your little Edward like things in the Soviet Union?"

"He misses his friends, of course, but right before we came over, we took him to Disney World. He still talks a lot about that."

Then came a surprise: "Disney World? What is that?"

"It is a large commercial business made for the pleasure of children—and

for adults who remember their childhood. It's in Florida," she added.

"I've never heard of it."

"You will find it remarkable and most enjoyable. More so for your daughter." She paused. "What does your wife think of your plans?"

"Irina knows nothing of this," Zaitzev said, surprising the hell out of his American interlocutor.

"What did you say?" *Are you out of your fucking mind?* MP wondered at once.

"Irina is a good wife to me. She will do what I tell her to do." Russian male chauvinism was of the aggressive variety.

"Oleg Ivan'ch, that is most dangerous for you. You must know that."

"The danger to me is being caught by KGB. If that happens, I am a dead man, and so is someone else," he added, thinking a further dangle was in his interest.

"Why are you leaving? What convinced you that it is necessary?" she had to ask.

"KGB is planning to kill a man who does not deserve to die."

"Who?" And she had to ask that one, too.

"That I will tell you when I am in the West."

"That is a fair response," she had to say in reply. *Playing a little cagey, aren't we?*

"One other thing," he added.

"Yes?"

"Be very careful what items you transmit to your headquarters. There is reason to believe your communications are compromised. You should use one-time pads, as we do at The Centre. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

"All communications about you were first encrypted and then dispatched by Diplomatic Bag to Washington." When she said that, the relief on his face was real, much as he tried to hide it. And the Rabbit had just told her something of very great importance. "Are we penetrated?"

"That, also, is something I will discuss only in the West."

Oh, shit, Mary Pat thought. *They have a mole somewhere, and he might be in the White House Rose Garden for all we know. Oh, shit . . .*

"Very well, we will take the utmost security with your case," she promised. But that meant that there'd be a two-day minimum turnaround time for important signals. It was back to World War One procedures with this guy. Ritter would just love that. "Can you tell me what methods might be safe?"

"The British changed their cipher machines about four months ago. We have as yet had no success in cracking them. That I know. Exactly which of your signals are compromised, I do not know, but I do know that some are fully penetrated. Please keep this in mind."

"That I will do, Oleg Ivan'ch." This guy had information that CIA needed—big-time. Cracked communications were the most dangerous things that could happen to any covert agency. Wars had been won and lost over such things as that. The Russians lacked American computer technology, but they did have some of the world's finest mathematicians, and the brain between a person's ears was the most dangerous instrument of all, and a damned site more competent that the ones that sat on a desk or a floor. Did Mike Russell have

any of the old one-time pads at the embassy? CIA had used them once upon a time, but their cumbersome nature had caused them to be discarded. NSA told everybody who'd listen that on his best day, Seymour Cray couldn't brute-force their ciphers, even with his brand-new CRAY-2 supercomputer on amphetamines. If they were wrong, it could hurt America in ways too vast to comprehend. But there were many cipher systems, and those who cracked one could not necessarily crack another. Or so everybody said . . . but communications security was not her area of expertise. Even she had to trust someone and something once in a while. But this was like being shot in the back by the starting gun in a hundred-meter race and having to run for the tape anyway. Damn.

"It is an inconvenience, but we will do what is necessary to protect you. You want to be taken out soon."

"This week would be very helpful—not so much for my needs as for the needs of a man whose life is in danger."

"I see," she said, not quite seeing. This guy might be laying a line on her, but if so, he was doing it like a real pro, and she wasn't getting that signal from this guy. No, he didn't read like an experienced field spook. He was a player, but not her kind of player.

"Very well. When you get to work tomorrow, make a contact report," she told him.

That one surprised him: "Are you serious?"

"Of course. Tell your supervisor that you met an American, the wife of a minor embassy official. Describe me and my son—"

"And tell them you are a pretty but shallow American female who has a handsome and polite little boy," he surmised. "And your Russian needs a little work, shall we say?"

"You learn quickly, Oleg Ivan'ch. I bet you play a good game of chess."

"Not good enough. I will never be a Grand Master."

"We all have our limitations, but in America you will find them far more distant than they are in the Soviet Union."

"By the end of the week?"

"When my husband wears his bright red tie, you set the time and place for a meeting. Possibly by tomorrow afternoon you will get your signal, and we will make the arrangements."

"Good day to you, then. Where did you learn your Russian?"

"My grandfather was equerry to Aleksey Nikolayevich Romanov," she explained. "In my childhood, he told me many stories about the young man and his untimely death."

"So, your hatred for the Soviet Union runs deep, eh?"

"Only for your government, Oleg. Not for the people of this country. I would see you free."

"Someday, perhaps, but not soon."

"History, Oleg Ivan'ch, is made not of a few big things but of many small things." That was one of her core beliefs. Again, for the cameras that might be there or not, she shook his hand and called her son. They walked around the park for another hour before heading back home for lunch.

But for lunch instead they all drove to the embassy, talking on the way

about nothing more sensitive than the admirably clear weather. Once there, they all had hot dogs in the embassy canteen, and then Eddie went to the day-care room. Ed and Mary Pat went to his office.

"He said what?" the Chief of Station snapped.

"He said his wife—named Irina, by the way—doesn't know his plans," Mary Pat repeated.

"Son of a *bitch!*" her husband observed at once.

"Well, it does simplify some of our exposure. At least she can't let anything slip." His wife was always the optimist, Ed saw.

"Yeah, baby, until we try to make the exfiltration, and she decides not to go anywhere."

"He says she'll do what he says. You know, the men here like to rule the roost."

"That wouldn't work with you," the Chief of Station pointed out. For several reasons, not the least of which was that her balls were every bit as big as his.

"I'm not Russian, Eddie."

"Okay, what else did he say?"

"He doesn't trust our comms. He thinks some of our systems are compromised."

"Jesus!" He paused. "Any other good news?"

"The reason he's skipping town is that KGB wants to kill somebody who, he says, doesn't deserve to be killed."

"Did he say who?"

"Not until he breathes free air. But there is good news. His wife is a classical music buff. We need to find a good conductor in Hungary."

"Hungary?"

"I was thinking last night. Best place to get him out from. That's Jimmy Szell's station, isn't it?"

"Yeah." They both knew Szell from time at The Farm, CIA's training installation in Tidewater, Virginia, off Interstate 64, a few miles from Colonial Williamsburg. "I always thought he deserved something bigger." Ed took a second to think. "So, out of Hungary via Yugoslavia, you're thinking?"

"I always knew you were smart."

"Okay . . ." His eyes fixed on a blank part of the wall while his brain went to work. "Okay, we can make that work."

"Your flag signal's a red tie on the metro. Then he slips you the meeting arrangement, we do that, and the Rabbit skips out of town, along with Mrs. Rabbit and the Bunny—oh, you'll love this, he already calls his daughter *zaichik."*

"Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail?" Ed exercised his sense of humor.

"I like that. Call it Operation BEATRIX," she suggested. Both of them had read Mrs. Potter's *Peter Rabbit* as kids. Who hadn't?

"The problem's going to be getting Langley's approval. If we can't use normal comm channels, coordinating everything is going to be a major pain in the ass."

"They never told us at The Farm that this job was easy. So remember what John Clark told us. Be flexible."

"Yeah, like linguine." He let out a long breath. "With the communications

limitations, it essentially means we plan it and run it out of this office, with no help from the Home Office."

"Ed, that's the way it's supposed to be anyway. All Langley does is tell us we can't do what we want to do"—which was, after all, the function of every home office in every business in the world.

"Whose comms can we trust?"

"The Rabbit says the Brits just set up a new system they can't crack—yet, anyway. Do we have any one-time pads left here?"

The COS shook his head. "Not that I know of." Foley lifted his phone and punched the right numbers. "Mike? You're in today? Want to come over here? Thanks."

Russell arrived in a couple minutes. "Hey, Ed—hello, Mary. What are you doing in the shop today?"

"Got a question."

"Okay."

"Got any one-timers left?"

"Why do you ask?"

"We just like the extra security," she replied. The studiedly casual reply didn't work.

"You telling me my systems aren't secure?" Russell asked in well-hidden alarm.

"There is reason to believe some of our encryption systems are not fully secure, Mike," Ed told the embassy Communications Officer.

"Shit," he breathed, then turned with some embarrassment. "Oh, sorry, Mary."

She smiled. "It's okay, Mike. I don't know what the word means, but I've heard it spoken before." The joke didn't quite get to Russell. The previous revelation was too earthshaking for him to see much humor at the moment.

"What can you tell me about that?"

"Not a thing, Mike," the Station Chief said.

"But you think it's solid?"

"Regrettably, yes."

"Okay, back in my safe I do have a few old pads, eight or nine years old. I never got rid of them—you just never know, y'know?"

"Michael, you're a good man." Ed nodded his approval.

"They're good for maybe ten dispatches of about a hundred words each—assuming they still have matching pads at Fort Meade, but the guys I report to don't throw much away. They will have to dig them out of some file drawer, though."

"How hard to use them?"

"I hate the goddamned things. You know why. Damn it, guys, the new STRIPE cipher is just a year old. The new Brit system is an adaptation of it. I know the team in Z-Division who developed it. I'm talking 128-bit keying, plus a daily key that's unique to the individual machines. No way in hell you can crack that."

"Unless they have an agent-in-place at Fort Meade, Mike," Ed pointed out.

"Then let me get my hands on him, and I'll skin the motherfucker alive with my Buck hunting knife." The very thought had jacked up his blood pressure

enough that he didn't apologize to the lady present for his vulgarity. This black man had killed and skinned his share of white-tailed deer, but he still had a hankering to convert a bear into a rug, and a big ol' Russian brown bear would suit him just fine. "Okay, I can't tell The Fort about this?"

"Not with STRIPE you can't," Foley answered.

"Well, when you hear a big, angry shout from the West, you'll know what it is."

"Better you don't discuss this with anybody right now, Mike," Mary Pat thought out loud. "They'll find out soon enough through other channels."

That told Russell that the Rabbit signal he'd dispatched the other day was about somebody they wanted to get out in a hurry, and now he figured he knew why. Their Rabbit was a communications specialist, and damned sure when you got one of those, you got him the hell on the first train out of Dodge. *Soon enough* meant right the hell now, or as close to it as you could arrange.

"Okay, get me your signal. I'll encrypt it on my STRIPE machine and then one-time-pad it. If they're reading my signals"—he managed not to shudder—"will that tell them anything?"

"You tell me," Ed Foley replied.

Russell thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No, it shouldn't. Even when you can crack the other guy's systems, you never get more than a third of the traffic. The systems are too complex for that—unless the other guy's agent-in-place is reading the cleartext on the far end. Ain't no defense against that, least not from my point of view."

And that was the *other* very scary thought. It was, after all, the same game they played and the same objective they were constantly trying to achieve. Get a guy all the way inside who could get the all-the-way-inside information back out. Like their agent CARDINAL, a word they *never* spoke aloud. But that was the game they'd chosen and, while they knew the other side was pretty good, they figured that they were better. And that was the name of that tune.

"Okay, Mike. Our friend believes in one-time pads. I guess everybody does."

"Ivan sure as hell does, but it must drive their troops crazy, having to go through every signal one letter at a time."

"Ever work the penetration side?" Ed Foley asked him.

Russell shook his head at once. "Not smart enough. Good thing, too. A lot of those guys end up in rubber rooms cutting out paper dolls with blunted scissors. Hey, I know a lot of the guys in Z-Division. The boss guy there just turned down the chair in math at Cal Tech. He's pretty smart," Russell estimated. "Damned sight smarter than I'll ever be. Ed Popadopolous's—his name is Greek—father used to run a restaurant up in Boston. Ask me if I want his job."

"No, eh?"

"Not even if they threw in Pat Cleveland as a fringe benefit." And that was one fine-looking lady, Ed Foley knew. Mike Russell really did need a woman in his life. . . .

"Okay, I'll get you a dispatch in about an hour. Okay?"

"Cool." Russell headed out.

"Well, I think we rattled his cage pretty hard," MP thought aloud.

"Admiral Bennett at Fort Meade ain't going to be real happy either. I got a signal to draft."

"Okay, I'll see how Eddie's doing with his crayons." And Mary Patricia Kaminsky Foley took her leave as well.

JUDGE ARTHUR MOORE'S morning briefing normally happened at 7:30 in the morning, except on Sunday, when he slept late, and so it took place at 9:00. His wife even recognized the knock of the National Intelligence Officer who delivered the daily intelligence news, always in the private study of his Great Falls house, which was swept weekly by the Agency's best debugging expert.

The world had been relatively quiet the previous day—even communists liked to relax on weekends, he'd learned on taking the job.

"Anything else, Tommy?" the Judge asked.

"Some bad news from Budapest," the NIO answered. "Our Station Chief, James Szell, got burned by the opposition making a pickup. Details unknown, but he got himself PNG'd by the Hungarian government. His principal deputy, Robert Taylor, is out of the country on personal business. So Station Budapest is out of business for the moment."

"How bad is that?" Not too bad, the DCI thought.

"Not a major tragedy. Nothing much seems to happen in Hungary. Their military is pretty much a minor player in the Warsaw Pact, and their foreign policy, aside from the things they do in their immediate neighborhood, is just a mirror image of Moscow's. The station's been passing us a fair amount of military information, but the Pentagon doesn't worry too much about it. Their army doesn't train enough to be a threat to much of anybody, and the Soviets regard them as unreliable," the NIO concluded.

"Is Szell somebody to screw up?" Moore asked. He vaguely remembered meeting the guy at an Agency get-together.

"Actually, Jimmy is well regarded. As I said, sir, we don't have any details yet. He'll probably be home by the end of the week."

"Okay. That does it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Nothing new on the Pope?"

"Not a word, sir, but it'll take time for our people to shake all their trees."

"That's what Ritter says."

IT TOOK FOLEY almost an hour to write up his dispatch. It had to be short but comprehensive, and that taxed his writing ability. Then he walked it down to Mike Russell's office. He sat there and watched a grumbling chief communications officer one-time-pad the words one goddamned letter at a time, pad it with more Czech surnames, then super-encrypt on his STRIPE encryption machine. With that done, it went on the secure fax machine,

which, of course, encrypted the text one more time, but in a graphics fashion rather than an alphanumeric one. The fax encryption was relatively simple, but since the opposition—which was assumed to monitor the embassy's satellite transmitter—could not tell if the signal was graphics or text, that was just one more hoop for their decryption people to jump through. The signal went up to a geosynchronous satellite and back down to different downlinks, one at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, another at Sunnyvale, California, and, of course, one at Fort Meade, Maryland, to which the other stations sent their "take" via secure fiber-optic landlines.

The communications people at Fort Meade were all uniformed non-comms, and when one of them, an Air Force E-5, ran it through his decoding machine, he was surprised to see the notation that said the super-encryption was on a one-time pad, NHG-1329.

"Where the hell is that?" he asked his watch supervisor, a Navy senior chief.

"Damn," the chief commented. "I haven't seen one of those in a long time." He had to open a three-ring binder and root through it until he found the storage site inside the big communications vault at the far corner of the room. That was guarded by an armed Marine staff sergeant whose sense of humor, like that of all the Marines who worked here, had been surgically removed at Bethesda Naval Medical Center prior to his assignment to Fort Meade.

"Hey, Sarge, gotta go inside for something," he told the jarhead.

"You gotta see the Major first," the sergeant informed him. And so the senior chief walked to the desk of the USAF major who was sitting at his desk, reading the morning paper.

"Morning, Major. I need to get something out of the vault."

"What's that, Chief?"

"A one-time pad, NHG-1329."

"We still have any of them?" the major asked in some surprise.

"Well, sir, if not, you can use this to start a fire on your grill with." He handed the dispatch over.

The Air Force officer inspected it. "Tell me about it. Okay." He scribbled an authorization on a pad in the corner of his desk. "Give this to the Marine."

"Aye aye, sir." The senior chief walked back to the vault, leaving the Air Force puke to wonder why the squids always talked so funny.

"Here you go, Sam," the chief said, handing over the form.

The Marine unlocked the swinging door, and the senior chief headed inside. The box the pad was in wasn't locked, presumably because anyone who could get past the seven layers of security required to get to this point was probably as trustworthy as the President's wife.

The one-time pad was a small-ring binder. The Navy chief signed for it on the way out, then went back to his desk. The Air Force sergeant joined him, and together they went through the cumbersome procedure of decrypting the dispatch.

"Damn," the young NCO observed about two-thirds of the way through. "Do we tell anybody about that?"

"That's above our pay grade, sonny. I expect the DCI will let the right people know. And forget you ever heard that," he added. But neither really would, and both knew it. With all the wickets they had to pass through to be

here, the idea that their signal systems were not secure was rather like hearing that their mother was turning tricks on Sixteenth Street in D.C.

"Yeah, Chief, sure," the young wing-wiper replied. "How do we deliver this one?"

"I think a courier, sonny. You want to whistle one up?"

"Aye aye, sir." The USAF sergeant took his leave with a smile.

The courier was an Army staff sergeant, driving a tan Army Plymouth Reliant, who took the sealed envelope, tucked it into the attaché case on his front seat, and drove down the Baltimore-Washington Parkway to the D.C. Beltway, and west on that to the George Washington Parkway, the first right off of which was CIA. At that point, the dispatch—whatever the hell it was, he didn't know—ceased being his responsibility.

The address on the envelope sent it to the Seventh Floor. Like many government agencies, CIA never really slept. On the top floor was Tom Ridley, a carded National Intelligence Officer, and the very one who handled Judge Moore's weekend briefings. It took him about three seconds to see that this one had to go to the judge right now. He lifted his STU secure phone and hit speed-dial button 1.

"This is Arthur Moore," a voice said presently.

"Judge, Tom Ridley here. Something just came in." "Something" means it was really something.

"Now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you come out here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Jim Greer, too?"

"Yes, sir, and probably Mr. Bostock also."

That made it interesting. "Okay, call them and then come on out." Ridley could almost hear the *God damn it, don't I* ever *get a day off!* at the other end before the line went dead. It took another few minutes to call the two other senior Agency officials, and then Ridley went down to his car for the drive out, pausing only to make three Xerox copies.

IT WAS LUNCHTIME in Great Falls. Mrs. Moore, ever the perfect hostess, had lunch meats and soft drinks set out for her unexpected guests before retiring to her sitting room upstairs.

"What is it, Tommy?" Moore asked. He liked the newly appointed NIO. A graduate of Marquette University, he was a Russian expert and had been one of Greer's star analysts before fleeting up to his present post. Soon he'd be one of the guys who always accompanied the President on Air Force One.

"This came in late this morning via Fort Meade," Ridley said, handing out the copies.

Mike Bostock was the fastest reader of the group: "Oh, Lord."

"This will make Chip Bennett happy," James Greer predicted.

"Yeah, like a trip to the dentist," Moore observed last of all. "Okay, people, what does this tell us?"

Bostock took it first. “It means we want this Rabbit in our hutch in one big hurry, gentlemen.”

“Through Budapest?” Moore asked, remembering his morning brief.

“Uh-oh,” Bostock observed.

“Okay.” Moore leaned forward. “Let’s get our thinking organized. First, how important is this information?”

James Greer took it. “He says KGB’s going to kill somebody who doesn’t deserve it. That kinda suggests the Pope, doesn’t it?”

“More importantly, he says our communications systems might be compromised,” Bostock pointed out. “That’s the hottest thing I see in this signal, James.”

“Okay, in either case, we want this guy on our side of the wire, correct?”

“Judge, you can bet your bench on that,” the Deputy DDO shot back. “As quickly as we can make it happen.”

“Can we use our own assets to accomplish it?” Moore asked next.

“It won’t be easy. Budapest has been burned down.”

“Does that change the importance of getting his cute little cottontail out of Redland?” the DCI asked.

“Nope.” Bostock shook his head.

“Okay, if we can’t do it ourselves, do we call in a marker?”

“The Brits, you mean?” Greer asked.

“We’ve used them before. We have good relations with them, and Basil does like to generate debts with us,” Moore reminded them. “Mike, can you live with that?” he asked Bostock.

A decisive nod. “Yes, sir. But it might be nice to have one of our people around to keep an eye on things. Basil can’t object to that.”

“Okay, we need to decide which of our assets we can send. Next,” Moore went on, “how fast?”

“How does tonight grab you, Arthur?” Greer observed to general amusement. “The way I read this, Foley’s willing to run the operation out of his own office, and he’s pretty hot to trot, too. Foley’s a good boy. I think we let him run with it. Budapest is probably a good exit point for our Rabbit.”

“Concur,” Mike Bostock agreed. “It’s a place a KGB officer can get to, like on vacation, and just disappear.”

“They’ll know he’s gone pretty fast,” Moore thought out loud.

“They knew when Arkady Shevchenko skipped, too. So what? He still gave us good information, didn’t he?” Bostock pointed out. He’d helped oversee that operation, which had really been ramrodded by the FBI in New York City.

“Okay. What do we send back to Foley?” Moore asked.

“One word: ‘Approved.’ ” Bostock *always* backed his field officers.

Moore looked around the room. “Objections? Anybody?” Heads just shook.

“Okay, Tommy. Back to Langley. Send that to Foley.”

“Yes, sir.” The NIO stood and walked out. One nice thing about Judge Moore. When you needed a decision, you might not like what you got, but you always got it.

CHAPTER 19

CLEAR SIGNAL

THE TIME DIFFERENCE was the biggest handicap in working his station, Foley knew. If he waited around the embassy for a reply, he might have to wait for hours, and there was no percentage in that. So, right after the signal went out, he'd collected his family and gone home, with Eddie conspicuously eating another hot dog on the way out to the car, and a facsimile copy of the New York *Daily News* in his hand. It was the best sports page of the New York papers, he'd long thought, if a little lurid in its headlines. Mike Lupica knew his baseball better than the rest of the wannabe ballplayers, and Ed Foley had always respected his analysis. He might have made a good spook if he'd chosen a useful line of work. So now he could see why the Yankees had fallen on their asses this season. It looked as though the goddamned Orioles were going to take the pennant, and that, to his New York sensibilities, was a crime worse than how the Rangers looked this year.

"So, Eddie, you looking forward to skating?" he asked his son, belted in the back seat.

"Yeah!" the little guy answered at once. Eddie Junior was his son, all right, and maybe here he'd really learn how to play ice hockey the right way. Waiting in his father's closet was the best pair of junior hockey skates that money could buy, and another pair for when his feet got bigger. Mary Pat had already checked out the local junior leagues, and those, her husband thought, were about the best this side of Canada, and maybe better.

On the whole, it was a shame he couldn't have an STU in his house, but the Rabbit had told him that they might not be entirely secure, and besides, it would have told the Russians that he wasn't just the embassy officer who baby-sat the local reporters.

Weekends were the dullest time for the Foley family. Neither minded the

time with the little guy, of course, but they could have done that at their now-rented Virginia home. They were in Moscow for their work, which was a passion for both of them, and something their son, they hoped, would understand someday. So for now his father read some books with him. The little guy was picking up on the alphabet, and seemed to read words, though as calligraphic symbols rather than letter constructs. It was enough for his father to be pleased about, though Mary Pat had a few minor doubts. After thirty minutes of that, Little Eddie talked his dad through a half hour of *Transformers* tapes, to the great satisfaction of the former and the bemusement of the latter.

The Station Chief's mind, of course, was on the Rabbit, and now it returned to his wife's suggestion of getting the package out without KGB's knowing they were gone. It was during the *Transformers* tape that it came back to him. You couldn't have a murder without a body, but with a body you damned sure had a murder. But what if the body wasn't the right one?

The essence of magic, he'd once heard Doug Henning say, was controlling the perception of the audience. If you could determine what they saw, then you could also dictate what they thought they saw, and from that precisely what they would remember seeing, and what they would then tell others. The key to *that* was in giving them something that they expected to see, even if it was unbelievable. People—even intelligent people—believed all manner of impossible things. It was sure as hell true in Moscow, where the rulers of this vast and powerful country believed in a political philosophy as out of tune with contemporary reality as the Divine Right of Kings. More to the point, they knew it was a false philosophy, and yet they commanded themselves to believe it as though it were Holy Scripture written in gold ink by God's own hand. So these people *could* be fooled. They worked pretty hard to fool themselves, after all.

Okay, how to fool them? Foley asked himself. Give the other guy something he expected to see, and he'd see it, whether it was really there or not. They wanted the Sovs to believe that the Rabbit and his family had . . . not skipped town, but had . . . died?

Dead people, so Captain Kidd had supposedly said, tell no tales. And neither did the *wrong* dead people.

The Brits did this once in World War II, didn't they? Foley wondered. Yes, he'd read the book in high school, and even then, at Fordham Prep, the operational concept had impressed him. Operation MINCEMEAT, it had been called. That concept had been very elegant indeed, as it had involved making the opposition feel smart, and people everywhere loved to feel smart. . . .

Especially the dumb ones, Foley reminded himself. And the German intelligence services in World War II hadn't been worth the powder to blow them to hell. They were so inept that the Germans would have been better advised to do without them entirely—Hitler's astrologer would have been just as good, and probably a lot cheaper in the long run.

But the Russians, on the other hand, were pretty damned smart—smart enough that you wanted to be very careful playing head games with them, but not so smart that if they found something they expected to find, they would toss it in the trash can and go looking for what they *didn't* expect. No, that was

just human nature, and even the New Soviet Man they kept trying to build was subject to human nature, much as the Soviet government tried to breed it out of him.

So, how would we go about that? he wondered quietly, as on the television a diesel truck-tractor changed into a two-legged robot, the better to fight off the forces of evil—whoever they were. . . .

Oh. Yeah. It was pretty obvious, wasn't it? You just had to give them what they needed to see to prove that the Rabbit and his little hutch-mates were dead, to give them what dead people always left behind. *That* would be a major complication, but not so vast of one as to be impossible to arrange. But they'd need assistance. That thought did not make Ed Foley feel secure. In his line of work, you trusted yourself more than you trusted anyone or anything else—and after that, maybe, others of your own organization, but as few of them as possible. After *that,* when it became necessary to trust people in some other organization, you really gritted your teeth. Okay, sure, on his premission brief at Langley, he'd been told that Nigel Haydock could be relied upon as a very tame—and very able—Brit, and a pretty good field spook working for a closely allied service, and, okay, sure, he liked the look of the guy, and, okay, sure, they'd hit it off fairly well. But, God damn it, he wasn't Agency. But Ritter had told him that, in a pinch, Haydock could be relied upon for a helping hand, and the Rabbit himself had told him that Brit comms hadn't been cracked yet, and he had to trust the Rabbit to be an honest player. Foley's life wasn't riding on that, but damned sure his career was.

Okay, but what—no, *how*—to work this one. Nigel was the Commercial Attaché at the Brit Embassy, right across the river from the Kremlin itself, a station that went back to the czars, and one that had supposedly pissed Stalin off royally, to see the Union Jack every morning from his office window. And the Brits had helped recruit, and had later run GRU Colonel Oleg Penkovskiy, the agent who'd prevented World War III and, along the way, recruited CARDINAL, the brightest jewel in CIA's crown. So if he had to trust anyone, it would have to be Nigel. Necessity was the mother of many things, and if the Rabbit came to grief, well, they'd know that SIS was penetrated. Again. He realized he'd have to apologize to Nigel just for thinking this way, but this was business, not personal.

Paranoia, Eddie, the COS told himself. *You can't suspect everybody.*

The hell I can't!

But, probably, he knew, Nigel Haydock thought the same thing about him. That was just how the game was played.

And if they got the Rabbit out, it was proof positive that Haydock was straight. No way in hell that Ivan would let this bunny skip town alive. He just knew too much.

Did Zaitzev have any idea at all of the danger he was walking into? He *trusted* CIA to get him and his family out of Dodge City alive. . . .

But with all the information to which he had access, wasn't he making an informed judgment?

Jesus, there were enough interlocking wheels in this to make a bicycle factory, weren't there?

The tape ended, and Master Truck Robot—or whatever the hell his name

was—transformed himself back into a truck and motored off to the sound of "Transformers, more than meets the eye . . ." It was sufficient to the moment that Eddie liked it. So, he'd arranged some quality time with his son and some good think time for himself—not a bad Sunday evening on the whole.

"SO, WHAT'S THE PLAN, Arthur?" Greer asked.

"Good question, James," the DCI answered. They were watching TV in his den, the Orioles and the White Sox playing in Baltimore. Mike Flanagan was pitching, and looked to be on his way to another Cy Young Award, and the rookie shortstop the Orioles had just brought up was playing particularly well, and looked to have a big-league future. Both men were drinking beer and eating pretzels, as though they were real people enjoying a Sunday afternoon of America's pastime. That was partly true.

"Basil will help. We can trust him," Admiral Greer opined.

"Agreed. Whatever problems he had are a thing of the past, and he'll compartmentalize it as tight as the Queen's jewel box. But we'll want one of our people involved at his end."

"Who, do you suppose?"

"Not the COS London. Everybody knows who he is, even the cabdrivers." There was no disputing that. The London Station Chief had been in the spook business for a very long time, and was more an administrator now than an active field officer. The same could be said of most of his people, for whom London was a sinecure job, and mainly a sunset posting for people looking forward to retirement. They were good men all, of course, just ready to hang up the spikes. "Whoever it is, he'll have to go to Budapest, and he'll have to be invisible."

"So, somebody they don't know."

"Yep." Moore nodded as he took a bite of his sandwich and reached for some chips. "He won't have to do very much, just let the Brits know he's there. Keep 'em honest, like."

"Basil's going to want to interview this guy."

"No avoiding that," Moore agreed. "And he's entitled to dip his beak, too." That was a line he had picked up as a judge on a rare organized-crime appeals case. He and his fellow jurists in Austin, Texas, had laughed about it for weeks, after rejecting the appeal, 5-0.

"We'll want one of our people in for that, too."

"Bet your bippy, James," Moore agreed again.

"And better that our guy is based over there. Timing might get a little tough."

"You bet."

"How about Ryan?" Greer asked. "He's way the hell under the radar. Nobody knows who he is—he's one of mine, right? He doesn't even look like a field officer."

"His face has been in the papers," Moore objected.

"You think KGB reads the society page? At most they might have noticed him as a rich wannabe writer, and if he has a file, it's in some sub-basement at

The Centre. That ought not to be a problem."

"You think so?" Moore wondered. For sure, this would give Bob Ritter a bellyache. But that wasn't entirely a bad thing. Bob had visions of taking over all CIA operations, and, good man that he was, he would never be DCI, for any number of reasons, not the least of which was that Congress didn't much like spooks with Napoleonic complexes. "Is he up to it?"

"The boy's an ex-Marine and he knows how to think on his feet, remember?"

"He *has* paid his dues, James. He doesn't take a leak sitting down," the DCI conceded.

"And all he has to do is keep an eye on our friends, not play spook on enemy soil."

"Bob will have a conniption fit."

"It won't hurt our purposes to keep Bob in his place, Arthur." *Especially,* he didn't add, *if this works out.* And work out it should. Once out of Moscow, it ought to be a fairly routine operation. Tense, of course, but routine.

"What if he screws things up?"

"Arthur, Jimmy Szell dropped the ball in Budapest, and he's an experienced field officer. I know, probably not even his fault, probably just bad luck, but it proves the point. A lot of this racket is just luck. The Brits will be doing all the real work, and I'm sure Basil will pick a good team."

Moore weighed the thought quietly. Ryan was very new at CIA, but he was a rising star. What helped was his adventure, not yet a year old, where twice he'd faced loaded guns and gotten it done anyway. One nice thing about the Marine Corps, they didn't turn out many pussies. Ryan *could* think and act on his feet, and that was a nice thing to have in your pocket. Better yet, the Brits liked him. He'd seen the comments from Sir Basil Charleston on Ryan's tenure at Century House—he was taking quite a liking to the young American analyst. So this was a chance to bring a new talent along, and though he wasn't a graduate of The Farm, that didn't mean he was a babe in the woods. Ryan had been through the woods, and he'd killed himself a couple of wolves along the way, hadn't he?

"James, it's a little outside the box, but I won't say no for that reason. Okay, cut him loose. I hope your boy doesn't wet his pants."

"What did Foley call this operation?"

"BEATRIX, he said. You know, like *Peter Rabbit."*

"Foley, that boy is going places, Arthur, and his wife, Mary Patricia, she is a real piece of work."

"There we surely agree, James. She'd make a great rodeo rider, and he'd be a pretty good town marshal west of the Pecos," the DCI said. He liked to see some of the young talent the Agency was producing. Where they all came from—well, they came from a lot of different places, but they all seemed to have the same fire in the belly that he'd had thirty years before, working with Hans Tofte. They weren't terribly different from the Texas Rangers he'd learned to admire as a little boy—the smart, tough people who did what had to be done.

"How do we get the word to Basil?"

"I called Chip Bennett last night, told him to have his people gin up some

one-timers. Ought to be at Langley this evening. We'll fly them to London on the 747 tonight, and shoot some on from there to Moscow. So we'll be able to communicate securely, if not conveniently."

THAT, IN FACT, was just about done. A computer system used for taking down the dot-dash signals of International Morse Code was connected to a highly sensitive radio tuned to a frequency used by no human agency, transforming the garbage noise into Roman letters. One of the technicians at Fort Meade remarked along the way that the intergalactic noise they were copying down was the residual static produced by the Big Bang, for which Penzias and Miller had collected a Nobel Prize a few years before, and that was as random as things got—unless you could decode it to learn what God thought, which was beyond the skills even of NSA's Z-division. A dot-matrix printer put the letters to carbon-paper sets—three copies of each, the original to the originators, and a copy each for CIA and NSA. They all contained enough letters to transcribe the first third of the Bible, and each page and each line were alphanumerically identified to make decryption possible. Three people separated the pages, made sure that the sets were properly arranged, and then slipped them into ring binders for some semblance of ease of use. Then two were handed off to an Air Force NCO, who drove the CIA copies off to Langley. The lead technician wondered what was so goddamned important to require such massive one-time pads, which NSA had long before gotten past with its institutional worship of electronic technology, but his was not—ever—to reason why, was it? Not at Fort Meade, Maryland, it wasn't.

RYAN WAS WATCHING TV, trying to get used to the British sitcoms. He'd grown to like British humor—they'd invented Benny Hill, after all. That guy had to be mentally disabled to do some of the things he did—but the regular series TV took a little getting used to. The signals were just different, and though he spoke English as well as any American, the nuances here—exaggerated, of course, on TV—had a subtle dimension that occasionally slipped by him. But not his wife, Jack observed. His wife was laughing hard enough to gag, and at things he barely comprehended. Then came the trilling note of his STU in his upstairs den. He trotted upstairs to get it. It wouldn't be a wrong number. Whoever had set his number up—British Telecom, a semiprivate corporation that did exactly what the government told it to do—would have chosen a number so far off the numerical trail that only an infant could dial his secure phone by mistake.

"Ryan," he said, after his phone mated up with the one at the other end.

"Jack, Greer here. How's Sunday evening in Jolly Old England?"

"It rained today. I didn't get to cut the grass," Ryan reported. He didn't mind much. He *hated* cutting grass, having learned as a child that however much you sliced it down, the goddamned stuff just grew back in a few days to look scraggly again.

"Well, here the Orioles are leading the White Sox five-two after six innings. I think your team looks good for the pennant."

"Who in the National League?"

"If I had to bet, I'd say the Phillies all the way, my boy."

"I got a buck says you're wrong, sir. My O's look good from here." *Which isn't* there, *damn it.* Since losing the Colts, he'd transferred his loyalty to baseball. The game was more interesting, tactically speaking, though lacking the manly combat of NFL football. "So, what's happening in Washington on a Sunday afternoon, sir?"

"Just wanted to give you a heads-up. There's a signal on its way to London that's going to involve you. New tasking. It'll take maybe three or four days."

"Okay." It perked his interest, but he'd have to see what it was before he got overly excited about it. Probably some new analysis that they wanted him for. Those were usually economics, because the Admiral liked his way of working through the numbers games. "Important?"

"Well, we're interested in what you can do with it" was all the DDI wanted to say.

This guy must teach foxes how to outsmart dogs and horses. Good thing he wasn't a Brit. The local aristocracy would shoot him for ruining their steeplechases, Ryan told himself. "Okay, sir, I'll be looking for it. I don't suppose you can give me a play-by-play?" he asked with a little hope in his voice.

"That new shortstop—Ripken, is it?—just doubled down the left-field line, drove in run number six, one out, bottom of the seventh."

"Thank you for that, sir. It beats *Fawlty Towers*."

"What the hell is that?"

"It's what they call a comedy over here, Admiral. It's funny if you can understand it."

"Brief me in next time I come over," the DDI suggested.

"Aye aye, sir."

"Family okay?"

"We're all just fine, sir, thank you for asking."

"Okay. Have a good one. See ya."

"What was that?" Cathy asked in the living room.

"The boss. He's sending me something to work on."

"What exactly?" She never stopped trying.

"He didn't say, just a heads-up that I have something new to play with."

"And he didn't tell you what it was?"

"The Admiral likes his surprises."

"Hmph" was her response.

THE COURIER SETTLED into his first-class seat. The package in his carry-on bag was tucked under the seat in front, and he had a collection of magazines to read. Since he was covert, not an official diplomatic courier, he could pretend to be a real person, a disguise that he'd shed at Heathrow's Terminal Four immigration desk, there to catch an embassy car for the ride into Grosvenor Square. Mainly he looked forward to a nice pub and some Brit beer before he flew back home in a day and a half. It was a waste of talent and training for the newly hatched field officer, but everyone had to pay his dues, and this, for a guy fresh out of The Farm, was just that. He consoled himself

with the thought that whatever it was, it had to be a little bit important. Sure, Wilbur. If it were all that important, he'd be on the Concorde.

ED FOLEY WAS sleeping the sleep of the just. The next day, he'd find an excuse to head over to the British Embassy and have a sit-down with Nigel and plan the operation. If that went well, he'd wear his reddest tie and take the message from Oleg Ivan'ch, set up the next face-to-face and go forward with the operation. *Who is it,* he wondered, *who the KGB is trying to kill? The Pope?* Bob Ritter had his knickers in a twist over that. *Or somebody else?* The KGB had a very direct way of dealing with people it didn't like. CIA did not. They hadn't actually killed anyone since the fifties, when President Eisenhower had used CIA—actually quite skillfully—as an alternative to employing uniformed troops in an overt fashion. But that skill hadn't been conveyed to the Kennedy Administration, which had screwed up nearly everything it touched. Too many James Bond books, probably. Everything in fiction was simpler than the real world, even fiction written by a former field spook. In the real world, zipping your zipper could be hard.

But he was planning a fairly complex operation and telling himself that it wasn't all *that* complex. Was he making a mistake? Foley's mind wandered while the rest of his consciousness slept. Even asleep, he kept going over and over things. In his dreams, he saw rabbits running around a green field while foxes and bears watched. The predators didn't move on them, perhaps because they were too fast and/or too close to their rabbit holes for them to waste a chase. But what happened when the rabbits got too far away from their holes? Then the foxes could catch them, and the bears could move in to swallow them whole. . . . And his job was to protect the little bunnies, wasn't it?

Even so, in his dream the foxes and bears just watched while he, the eagle, circled high and looked down. He, the eagle, had sworn off rabbits, though a fox might be a nice morsel to rip apart, if his talons got it properly, just behind the head to snap the neck, and leave him for the bear to eat, because bears didn't really care whom they ate. No, Mr. Bear didn't care one little bit. He was just a big old bear, and his belly was always empty. He'd even eat an eagle if he got the chance, but the eagle was too swift and too smart, wasn't he? Only so long as he kept his eyes open, the noble eagle told himself; he had great abilities and fine sight, but even he had to be careful. And so the eagle soared aloft, riding the thermals and watching. He couldn't enter the fray, exactly. At most, he could swoop down and warn the cute little bunnies that there was danger about, but the bunnies were proverbially dumb bunnies, munching their grass and not looking around as much as they ought to. That was his job, the noble eagle told himself, to use his superb eyesight to make sure he knew everything he needed to know. The bunny's job was to run when he needed to run, and with help from the eagle, to run to a different field, one without foxes and bears around it, so that he could be free to raise more cute little bunnies and live happily ever after, like Beatrix Potter's little Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail.

Foley rolled over, and the dream ended, the eagle watching for danger, and

the rabbits eating their grass, and the foxes and bears a good way off, just watching but not moving, because they didn't know which bunny would stray too far from its safe little hole.

THE ALARM CLOCK'S deliberately annoying buzz caused Foley's eyes to snap open, and he rolled over to switch it off. Then he jerked himself out of bed and into the bathroom. He suddenly missed his house in Virginia. It had more than one bathroom—two and a half, in fact, which allowed some degree of flexibility should an emergency occur. Little Eddie got up when summoned, then almost immediately sat on the floor in front of the TV set and called out "Worker-womannnn!" when the exercise show came on. That generated a smile from his mom and dad. Even the KGB guys on the other end of the bug wires probably had a little chuckle at that.

"Anything important planned for the office today?" Mary Pat asked in the kitchen.

"Well, ought to be the usual weekend traffic from Washington. I have to run over to the Brit Embassy before lunch."

"Oh? What for?" his wife asked.

"I want to stop over and see Nigel Haydock about a couple of things," he told her, as she set the bacon frying. Mary Pat always did bacon and eggs on the day of important spook work. He wondered if their KGB listeners would ever tumble to that. Probably not. Nobody was that thorough, and American eating habits probably interested them only insofar as foreigners usually ate better than Russians.

"Well, say hello for me."

"Right." He yawned and took a sip of coffee.

"We need to have them over—maybe next weekend?"

"Works for me. Roast beef and the usual?"

"Yeah, I'll try to get some frozen corn on the cob." Russians grew corn you could buy in the open farmers' markets, and it was okay, but it wasn't the Silver Queen that they'd come to love in Virginia. So they usually settled for the frozen corn the Air Force flew in from Rhein-Main, along with the Chicago Red hot dogs that they served in the embassy canteen and all the other tastes of home that became so important on a posting like this one. *It was probably just as true in Paris,* Ed thought. Breakfast went quickly, and half an hour later, he was almost dressed.

"Which tie today, honey?"

"Well, in Russia, you should wear red once in a while," she said, handing the tie over with a wink, along with the lucky silver tie bar.

"Um-hmm," he agreed, looking in the mirror to snug it into his collar. "Well, here is Edward Foley, Senior, foreign-service officer."

"Works for me, honey." She kissed him, a little loudly.

"Bye, Daddy," Junior said as his father headed for the door. A high five instead of a kiss. He'd gotten a little too old for the sissy stuff.

The rest of the trip was stultifyingly routine. Walk to the metro. Buy his paper at the kiosk and catch the exact same train for the same five-kopeck

fare, because if he caught the same one going home, so as to be marked by KGB as a creature of strict routine, then he had to mirror-image morning and afternoon habits. At the embassy, he entered his office and waited for Mike Russell to bring in the morning message traffic. More than usual, he saw at once, flipping through the messages and checking the headers.

"Anything about what we talked about?" the communications officer asked, lingering for a moment.

"Doesn't look like it," Foley replied. "Got you a little torqued?"

"Ed, getting secure stuff in and out is my only job, y'know?"

"Look at it from my side, Mike. If they tumble to me, I'm as useless as tits on a boarhog. Not to mention the guys who get killed because of it."

"Yeah, I hear you." Russell paused. "I just can't believe they can crack my systems, Ed. Like you said, you'd be losing people left and right."

"I want to agree with you, but we can't be too careful, can we?"

"Roger that, man. I catch anybody dicking around in my shop, they won't live long enough to talk to the FBI," he promised darkly.

"Don't get too carried away."

"Ed, when I was in Vietnam, nonsecure signals got soldiers killed. That's as important as things get, y'know?"

"If I hear anything, I'll make sure you know about it, Mike."

"Okay." Russell headed out, not quite trailing smoke out of his ears.

Foley organized his message traffic—it was addressed to the Chief of Station, of course, not to anyone's name—and started reading through it. There was still concern about KGB and the Pope, but, aside from the Rabbit, he had nothing new to report, and it was only hope that told him the Flopsy had anything to report on that subject. A lot of interest in last week's Politburo meeting, but for that he'd have to wait for his sources to report in. Questions about Leonid Brezhnev's health, but while they knew the names of his physicians—a whole team of them—none of them talked to CIA directly. You could see the picture on TV and know that Leonid Ilyich wasn't going to be running the marathon in the next Olympics. But people like that could linger for years, good news and bad news. Brezhnev wasn't going to be doing anything new and different, but, as he became increasingly irrational, there was no telling what dumbass things he might try—damned sure he wasn't going to be pulling out of Afghanistan. He didn't care a rap about the lives of young Russian soldiers, not when he heard Death's footsteps approaching his own door. The succession was of interest to CIA, but it was fairly settled that Yuriy Vladimirovich Andropov would be the next guy at the seat at the head of the table, absent a sudden death or a major foot put wrong in a political sense. Andropov was too canny a political operator for that, however. No, he was the current czarevich, and that was that. Hopefully, he wouldn't be too vigorous—and he wouldn't if the stories about his liver disease were true. Every time Foley saw him on Russian TV, he looked for the yellow tinge on his skin that announced that particular ailment—but makeup could hide that, if they used makeup on their political chieftains. . . . *Hmm, how to check that?* he wondered. Something to send back to the Science and Technology Directorate at Langley, maybe.

ZAITZEV TOOK HIS SEAT, after relieving Kolya Dobrik, and looked over his message traffic. He decided to memorize as much as possible, and so he took a little longer than usual forwarding the messages to their end-recipients. There was one from Agent CASSIUS again, routed for political-intelligence people upstairs, and also at the U.S.—Canada Institute, where the academicians read the tea leaves for The Centre as a backup. There was one from NEPTUNE, requesting money for the agent who was giving KGB such good communications intelligence. NEPTUNE suggested the sea, didn't it? Zaitzev searched his memory for previous signals from that source. Wasn't it mainly about the American navy? And *he* was the reason he worried about American signals security. Surely KGB was paying him a *huge* amount of money, hundreds of thousands of dollars in American cash, something KGB had a problem getting ahold of—it was far easier for the Soviet Union to pay in diamonds, since it could mine for diamonds in eastern Siberia. They'd paid some Americans in diamonds, but they'd been caught by the vigilant American FBI, and KGB had never tried to negotiate their release . . . so much for loyalty. The Americans tried to do that, he knew, but most of the time the people they tried to get out had already been executed—a thought that stopped his thoughts cold in their tracks.

But there was no turning back now, and CIA was competent enough that KGB feared it, and didn't *that* mean that he was in good hands?

Then he remembered one other thing he had to do today. In his drawer was a pad of contact reports. Mary had suggested he report their meeting, and so he did. He described her as pretty, in her late twenties or early thirties, mother of a fairly nice little son, and none too bright—*very American in mannerisms,* he wrote—with modest language skills, good vocabulary but poor syntax and pronunciation, which made her Russian understandable but stilted. He didn't make an evaluation of her likelihood to be an intelligence officer, which, he figured, was the smart thing to do. After fifteen minutes of writing, he walked it over to the department security officer.

"This was a waste of time," he said, handing it to the man, a captain passed over for promotion twice.

The security officer scanned it. "Where did you meet her?"

"It's right there." He pointed to the contact form. "I took my *zaichik* for a walk in the park, and she showed up with her little boy. His name is Eddie, actual name is evidently Edward Edwardovich—Edward Junior, as the Americans say it—age four, I think she said, a nice little boy. We talked a few minutes about not very much, and the two of them walked away."

"Your impression of her?"

"If she is a spy, then I am confident of the victory of socialism," Zaitzev replied. "She is rather pretty, but far too skinny, and not overly bright. What I suppose is a typical American housewife."

"Anything else?"

"It's all there, Comrade Captain. It took longer to write that up than it did to speak with her."

"Your vigilance is noted, Comrade Major."

"I serve the Soviet Union." And Zaitzev headed back to his desk. *It was a good idea on her part*, he thought, *to cross this* t *so assiduously.* There might have been a shadow on her, after all, and if not, then there would be a new entry in her KGB file, reported by a KGB officer, certifying that she was no threat to world socialism.

Back at his desk, he returned to making extra-careful mental notes of his daily work. The more he gave CIA, the better he'd be paid. Maybe he would take his daughter to that Disney Planet amusement park, and maybe his little *zaichik* would enjoy herself there. His signals included other countries, too, and he memorized those as well. One code-named MINISTER in England was interesting. He was probably in their Foreign Ministry, and provided excellent political/diplomatic intelligence that they loved upstairs.

FOLEY TOOK AN embassy car for the drive to the British Embassy. They were cordial enough once he showed his ID, and Nigel came down to meet him in the grand foyer, which was indeed quite grand.

"Hello, Ed!" He gave a hearty handshake and a smile. "Come this way." They went up the marble stairs and then right to his office. Haydock closed the door and pointed him to a leather chair.

"What can I do for you?"

"We got a Rabbit," Foley said, skipping the preliminaries.

And that said it all. Haydock knew that Foley was a spook—a "cousin" in the British terminology.

"Why are you telling me?"

"We're going to need your help getting him out. We want to do that through Budapest, and our station there just got burned down. How's your shop there?"

"The chief is Andy Hudson. Former officer in the Parachute Regiment, able chap. But do back up, Edward. What can you tell me, and why is this so important?"

"He's a walk-in, I guess you'd say. He seems to be a communications guy. He feels real as hell, Nigel. I've requested permission to bust him right out, and Langley has green-lighted it. Pair of fives, man," he added.

"So, high priority and high reliability on this chappie?"

Foley bobbed his head. "Yep. Want the good news?"

"If there is any."

"He says our comms may be compromised, but your new system hasn't been cracked yet."

"Good to hear. So, that means I can communicate freely, but you cannot?"

Another nod. "I learned this morning that a communications aid is on its way to me—perhaps they ginned up a couple of pads for me to use. I'll find out later today, maybe."

Haydock leaned back in his chair and lit up a smoke, a low-tar Silk Cut. He'd switched to them to make his wife happy.

"You have a plan?" the Brit spook asked.

"I figure he takes the train to Budapest. For the rest of it, well . . ." Foley

outlined the idea he and Mary Pat had figured out.

"That *is* creative, Edward." Haydock thought. "When did you read up on MINCEMEAT? It's part of the syllabus at our academy, you know."

"Back when I was a kid. I always thought it was pretty clever."

"In the abstract, not a bad idea—but, you know, the pieces you need are not something you pick up at the ironmongers."

"I kinda figured that, Nigel. So, if we want to make the play, better that we get moving on it right quick."

"Agreed." Haydock paused. "Basil will want to know a few things. What else can I tell him?"

"He ought to get a hand-carried letter from Judge Moore this morning. All I can really say is, this guy looks pretty real."

"You said he's a communications officer—in The Centre, is it?"

"Yep."

"That could be very valuable indeed," Haydock agreed. "Especially if he's a mail clerk." He pronounced it *clark*. The invocation of the name of Foley's training officer almost caused him to smile . . . but not quite.

It was a slower nod this time, with Foley's eyes locked in on his host. "That's what we're thinking, guy."

It finally got home. "Bloody hell," Haydock breathed. "That would be valuable. And he's just a walk-in?"

"Correct. A little more complicated than that, but that's what it comes down to, bud."

"Not a trap, not a false-flag?"

"I've thought about that, of course, but it just doesn't make sense, does it?" Foley asked. The Brit knew he was Agency, but didn't know he was Station Chief. "If they've ID'd me, why tip their hand this early?"

"True," Nigel had to agree. "That would be clumsy. So, Budapest, is it? Easier than out of Moscow—at least there's that."

"There's bad news, too. His wife isn't in on the plan." Foley had to tell him that.

"You must be joking, Edward."

"Wish I was, man. But that's how it's going down."

"Ah. Well, what's life without a few complications? Any preferences how to get your Rabbit out?" He asked, not quite letting Foley know what he was thinking.

"That's for your guy Hudson in Budapest, I suppose. It's not my turf, not my place to tell him how to run his operation."

Haydock just nodded. It was one of those things that went without saying but had to be said anyway. "When?" he asked.

"Soon, as soon as possible. Langley's almost as hot for this as I am." And, he didn't add, it was sure as hell a way for him to make an early mark as Chief of Station Moscow.

"Rome, you're thinking? Sir Basil has been rattling my windows about that."

"Your Prime Minister interested?"

"About as much as your President, I should imagine. That play might well muddy the waters rather thoroughly."

"Big-time," Foley agreed. "Anyway, I wanted to give you a heads-up. Sir

Basil will probably have a signal for you later today."

"Understood, Edward. When that arrives, I'll be able to begin taking action." He checked his watch—too soon to offer his guest a beer in the embassy pub. Pity.

"When you get authorization, give me a call. Okay?"

"Certainly. We shall get things sorted out for you, Ed. Andy Hudson's a good officer, and he runs a tight operation in Budapest."

"Great." Foley stood.

"How about a dinner soon?" Haydock asked.

"I guess we'd better do it soon. Penny looks about due. When will you be flying her home?"

"A couple of weeks. The little bugger is rolling about and kicking all the time now."

"Always a good sign, man."

"And we have a good physician right here in the embassy, should he be a little early." Just that the embassy doc didn't really want to deliver a baby. They never did.

"Well, if it's a boy, Eddie will lend you his *Transformers* tapes," Ed promised.

"*Transformers*? What's that?"

"If it's a boy, you'll find out," Foley assured him.

CHAPTER 20

STAGING

THE JUNIOR FIELD OFFICER arrived in London's Heathrow Terminal Four just before seven in the morning. He breezed through immigration and customs and headed out, where he saw his driver holding the usual sign card, this one in a false name, of course, since CIA spooks only used their real names when they had to. The driver's name was Leonard Watts. Watts drove an embassy Jaguar, and, since he had a diplomatic passport and tags on the car, he wasn't all that concerned with speed limits.

"How was the flight?"

"Fine. Slept most of the way."

"Well, welcome to the world of field operations," Watts told him. "The more sleep you get, the better."

"I suppose." It was his first overseas assignment, and not a very demanding one. "Here's the package." And his cover wasn't enhanced by the fact that he was traveling with only the courier package and a small bag that had spent the trip in the overhead bin, with a clean shirt, clean underwear, and shaving kit.

"Name's Len, by the way."

"Okay, I'm Pete Gatewood."

"First time in London?"

"Yeah," Gatewood answered, trying to get used to sitting in the left front seat without a steering wheel to protect him, and being driven by a NASCAR reject. "How long to get to the embassy?"

"Half hour." Watts concentrated on his driving. "What are you carrying?"

"Something for the COS, is all I know."

"Well, it isn't routine. They woke me up for it," Watts groused.

"Where have you worked?" Gatewood asked, hoping to get this maniac to

slow down some.

"Oh, around. Bonn, Berlin, Prague. Getting ready to retire, back to Indiana. We got a football team to watch now."

"Yeah, and all the corn, too," Gatewood observed. He'd never been to Indiana, and had no particular wish to tour the farming state, which did, he reminded himself, turn out some fairly good basketball players.

Soon enough, or nearly so, they were passing a large green park on the left, and a few blocks after that, the green rectangle of Grosvenor Square. Watts stopped the car to let Gatewood out. He dodged around the "flower pots" designed to keep car bombers from getting too close to the concrete that surrounded the surpassingly ugly building, and walked it. The Marines inside checked his ID and made a call. Presently, a middle-aged woman came into the entrance foyer and led him to an elevator that took him to the third floor, just next door to the technical group that worked closely with the British GCHQ at Cheltenham. Gatewood walked into the proper corner office and saw a middle-aged man sitting at an oaken desk.

"You're Gatewood?"

"Yes, sir. You're . . . ?"

"I'm Randy Silvestri. You have a package for me," the COS London announced.

"Yes, sir." Gatewood opened the zipper on his bag and pulled out the large manila envelope. He handed it over.

"Interested in what's in it?" Silvestri asked, eyeing the youngster.

"If it concerns me, I expect you'll tell me, sir."

The Station Chief nodded his approval. "Very good. Annie will take you downstairs for breakfast if you want, or you can catch a cab for your hotel. Got some Brit money?"

"A hundred pounds, sir, in tens and twenties."

"Okay, that'll handle your needs. Thanks, Gatewood."

"Yes, sir." And Gatewood left the office.

Silvestri ripped open the package after determining that the closure hadn't been disturbed beforehand. The flat ring binder had what looked like forty or fifty printed sheets of paper—all space-and-a-half random letters. So, a one-time-cipher pad—for Station Moscow, the cover note said. He'd have that couriered to Moscow on the noon British Airways flight. And two letters, one for Sir Basil, with hand delivery indicated. He'd have a car drive him to Century House after calling ahead. The other one was for that Ryan kid that Jim Greer liked so much, also for hand delivery via Basil's office. He wondered what was up. It had to be nontrivial for this sort of handling. He picked up his phone and hit speed-dial #5.

"This is Basil Charleston."

"Basil, it's Randy. Something just came in for you. Can I bring it over?"

A sound of shuffling papers. Basil would know this was important. "Say, ten o'clock, Randy?"

"Right. See you then." Silvestri sipped his coffee and estimated the time required. He could sit here for about an hour before heading over. Next he punched his intercom button.

"Yes, sir?"

"Annie, I have a package to be couriered to Moscow. We got a bagman on deck?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, could you take this down to him?"

"Yes, sir." CIA secretaries are not paid to be verbose.

"Good. Thanks." Silvestri hung up.

JACK AND CATHY were on the train, passing through Elephant and Castle—and he'd still not learned how the damned place had gotten *that* name, Jack reminded himself. The weather looked threatening. *England wasn't broad enough for a storm system to linger*, Ryan thought. Maybe there was just a series of rain clouds coming across the Atlantic? In any case, between yesterday and today, his personal record of fair weather over here seemed to be ending. Too bad.

"Just glasses this week, babe?" he asked his wife, her head buried as usual in a medical journal.

"All week," she confirmed. Then she looked up. "It's not as exciting as surgery, but it's still important, you know."

"Cath, if you do it, it must be important."

"And you can't say what you'll be doing?"

"Not until I get to my desk." And probably not then, either. Whatever it was, it had doubtless been transmitted via secure printer or fax line overnight . . . unless it was something really important, and had been sent via courier. The time difference actually made that fairly convenient. The early 747 from Dulles usually got in between six and seven in the morning, and then it was forty minutes more to his desk. The government could work more efficiently than Federal Express when it wanted to. Another fifteen minutes of his *Daily Telegraph* and her *NEJM* and they parted company at Victoria. Cathy perversely took the tube. Ryan opted for a cab. It hustled past the Palace of Westminster, then hopped across the Thames. Ryan paid the four pounds fifty and added a healthy tip. Ten seconds later, he was inside.

"Good morning, Sir John," Bert Canderton called in greeting.

"Howdy, Sar-Major," Ryan said in reply, sliding his pass through the gate, then to the elevator and up to his floor.

Simon was already in his seat, going over message traffic. His eyes came up when Jack entered. "Morning, Jack."

"Hey, Simon. How was the weekend?"

"Didn't get any gardening done. Bloody rain."

"Anything interesting this morning?" He poured himself a cup of coffee. Simon's English Breakfast Tea wasn't bad for tea, but tea just didn't make it for Jack, at least not in the morning. They didn't have bear claws here, either, and Jack had neglected to get his croissant on the way in.

"Not yet, but something's coming in from America."

"What is it?"

"Basil didn't say, but when something comes in by hand on a Monday morning, it's usually interesting. Must be Soviet-related. He's told me to stand

by for it."

"Well, might as well start the week with something interesting." Ryan sipped his coffee. It wasn't quite up to what Cathy made, but better than tea. "When's it coming in?"

"About ten. Your Station Chief, Silvestri, is driving it over."

Ryan had only met him once. He'd seemed competent enough, but you expected that of a COS, even one in a sunset posting.

"Nothing new from Moscow?"

"Just some new rumors about Brezhnev's health. It seems that stopping smoking did him precious little good," Harding said, lighting his pipe. "Nasty old bugger," the Brit analyst added.

"What about this stuff from Afghanistan?"

"Ivan's getting cleverer. Those Mi-24 helicopters seem to be rather effective. Bad news for the Afghans."

"How do you think that's going to play out?"

Harding shrugged. "It's a question of how many casualties Ivan is willing to take. They have the firepower they need to win, and so it's a matter of political will. Unfortunately for the Mujahideen, the leadership in Moscow doesn't trouble itself very much with casualties."

"Unless something changes the equation," Ryan thought out loud.

"Like what?"

"Like an effective surface-to-air missile to neutralize their helos. We have the Stinger. Never used it myself, but the write-up's pretty good."

"But can a mob of illiterate savages use a missile properly?" Harding asked dubiously. "A modern rifle, certainly. A machine gun, sure. But a missile?"

"The idea is to make a new weapon soldier-proof, Simon. You know, simple enough that you don't have to think while you're dodging bullets. There's not much time to think then, and you make the steps as short as you can. Like I said, I've never used that one, but I've played with anti-tank weapons, and they're pretty simple."

"Well, your government will have to decide to give them the SAMs, and they haven't yet. Hard for me to get overly excited about it. Yes, they are killing Russians, and I reckon that's good, but they are bloody savages."

And they killed a lot of Brits once, Ryan reminded himself, *and Brit memories are as long as anyone else's.* There was also the issue of having Stingers fall into Russian hands, which would not make the United States Air Force terribly happy. But that was well above his pay grade. There were some rumbles in Congress about it, though.

Jack settled into his seat, sipped his coffee, and read his message traffic. After that he'd get back to his real job of analyzing the Soviet economy. That would be like drafting a road map of a plateful of spaghetti.

SILVESTRI'S JOB in London was not a secret. He'd been in the spook business too long, and while he hadn't been burned per se, the East Bloc had pretty much guessed which government agency he worked for by the end of his stay in Warsaw, where he'd run a very tight shop and winkled out a lot of good

political intelligence. This was to be his final tour of duty—the same was true of most of his officers—and since he was respected by various allied services, he'd drawn the London posting, where his main job was interfacing with the British Secret Intelligence Service. So he had an embassy Daimler drive him over across the river.

He didn't even need a pass to get through security. Sir Basil himself was waiting for him at the entrance, where hands were cordially shaken before the trip upstairs.

"What's the news, Randy?"

"Well, I have a package for you, and one for that Ryan guy," Silvestri announced.

"Indeed. Should I call him in?"

The London COS had read the cover sheet and knew what was in the packages. "Sure, Bas, no problem. Harding, too, if you want."

Charleston lifted his phone and made the summons. The two analysts arrived in less than two minutes. They had all met at least once. Ryan, in fact, was the least familiar with the other American. Sir Basil pointed them to seats. He'd already ripped his envelope open. Silvestri handed Ryan his own message.

For his part, Jack was already thinking *oh, shit.* Something unusual was in the offing, and he'd learned not to trust new and different things at CIA.

"This *is* interesting," Charleston observed.

"Do I open this now?" Ryan asked. Silvestri nodded, so he took out his Swiss Army Knife and sliced through the heavy manila paper. His message was only three pages, personally signed by Admiral Greer.

A Rabbit, he saw. He knew the terminology. Somebody wanted a ticket out of . . . Moscow . . . and CIA was providing it, with the help of SIS because Station Budapest was currently out of business. . . .

"Tell Arthur that we will be pleased to assist, Randy. We will, I assume, get a chance to speak with him before you fly him off to London?"

"It's only fair, Bas," Silvestri confirmed. "How hard to pull this one off, you suppose?"

"Out of Budapest?" Charleston thought for a moment. "Not all that difficult, I should think. The Hungarians have a rather nasty secret-police organization, but the country as a whole is not devoutly Marxist—oh, this Rabbit says that KGB may have compromised your communications. *That* is what Langley is excited about."

"Damned straight, Basil. If that's a hole, we have to plug it up fast."

"This guy's in their MERCURY? Jesus Christ," Ryan breathed.

"You got that one right, sonny," Silvestri agreed.

"But what the hell am I going into the field for?" Jack demanded next. "I'm not a field officer."

"We need one of ours to keep an eye on things."

"I quite understand, Randy," Charleston observed, his head still down in his briefing papers. "And you want someone whom the opposition doesn't know?"

"So it seems."

"But why me?" Ryan persisted.

"Jack," Sir Basil soothed, "your only job will be to watch what happens. It's

just pro forma."

"But what about my cover?"

"We'll give you a new diplomatic passport," C answered. "You will be quite safe. The Vienna Convention, you know."

"But . . . but . . . it'll be fake."

"They won't know that, dear boy."

"What about my *akzint*?" It was painfully obvious that his accent was an American's, not a Brit's.

"In Hungary?" Silvestri asked with a smile.

"Jack, with their bloody language, I seriously doubt they will notice the difference, and in any case, with your new documents, your person is quite inviolable."

"Relax, kid. It's better than your little girl's teddy bear. Trust me on that one, okay?" Silvestri assured him.

"And you'll have a security officer with you at all times," Charleston added.

Ryan had to sit back and take a breath. He couldn't allow himself to appear to be a wuss, not in front of these guys and not before Admiral Greer. "Okay, excuse me. It's just that I've never been in the field before. It's all kinda new to me." He hoped that was adequate backpedaling. "What exactly will I be doing, and how do I go about it?"

"We'll fly you into Budapest out of Heathrow. Our chaps will pick you up at the airport and take you to the embassy. You will sit it out there—a couple of days, I expect—and then watch how Andy gets your Rabbit out of Redland. Randy, how long would you expect?"

"To get this moving? End of the week, maybe a day or two longer," Silvestri thought. "The Rabbit will fly or take the train to Budapest, and your man will figure how to get him the hell out of Dodge City."

"Two or three days for that," Sir Basil estimated. "Mustn't be too quick."

"Okay, that keeps me away from home for four days. What's my cover story?"

"For your wife?" Charleston asked. "Tell her that you have to go to—oh, to Bonn, shall we say, on NATO business. Be vague on the time factor," he advised. He was inwardly amused to have to explain this to the Innocent American Abroad.

"Okay," Ryan conceded the point. *Not like I have a hell of a lot of choice in the matter, is there?*

UPON GETTING BACK to the embassy, Foley walked to Mike Barnes's office. Barnes was the Cultural Attaché, the official expert on artsy-fartsy stuff. That was a major assignment in Moscow. The USSR had a fairly rich cultural life. The fact that the best part of it dated back to the czars didn't seem to matter to the current regime, probably, Foley thought, because all Great Russians wanted to appear *kulturniy,* and superior to Westerners, especially Americans, whose "culture" was far newer and far crasser than the country of Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. Barnes was a graduate of the Juilliard School and Cornell, and especially appreciated Russian music.

"Hey, Mike," Foley said in greeting.

"How's keeping the newsies happy?" Barnes asked.

"The usual. Hey, got a question for you."

"Shoot."

"Mary Pat and I are thinking about traveling some, maybe to Eastern Europe. Prague and like that. Any good music to be heard that way?"

"The Prague symphony hasn't opened up yet. But Jozsef Rozsa is in Berlin right now, and then he's going to Budapest."

"Who's he? I don't know the name," Foley said, as his heart nearly leapt out of his chest.

"Hungarian native, cousin of Miklos Rozsa, Hollywood composer—*Ben Hur,* and like that. Musical family, I guess. He's supposed to be excellent. The Hungarian State Railroad has four orchestras, believe it or not, and Jozsef is going to conduct number one. You can go there by train or fly, depends on how much time you have."

"Interesting," Foley thought aloud. *Fascinating,* he thought inside.

"You know, the Moscow State Orchestra opens up beginning of next month. They have a new conductor, guy named Anatoliy Sheymov. Haven't heard him yet, but he's supposed to be pretty good. I can get you tickets easy. Ivan likes to show off to us foreigners, and they really are world-class."

"Thanks, Mike, I'll think about it. Later, man." Foley took his leave.

And he smiled all the way back to his office.

"BLOODY HELL," Sir Basil observed, reading over the newest cable from Moscow. "What bloody genius came up with this idea?" he asked the air. Oh, he saw. The American officer, Edward Foley. *How the hell will he make* this *come about?* the Director General wondered.

He'd been about to leave for lunch at Westminster Palace across the river, and he couldn't break that one off. Well, it would be something to ruminate over with his roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.

"LUCKY ME," Ryan observed, back in his office.

"Jack, it will be less dangerous than crossing the street"—which could be a lively exercise in London.

"I can take care of myself, Simon," Ryan reminded his workmate. "But if I screw up, somebody else takes the fall."

"You'll not be responsible for any of that. You'll just be there to observe. I don't know Andy Hudson myself, but he has an excellent professional reputation."

"Great," Ryan commented. "Lunchtime, Simon, and I feel like a beer."

"Duke of Clarence all right?"

"Isn't that the guy who drowned in a barrel of malmsey wine?"

"Worse ways to go, Sir John," Harding observed.

"What is malmsey anyway?"

"Strong and sweet, rather like a Madeira. It now comes from those islands, in fact."

One more piece of trivia learned, Ryan thought, going to get his coat.

IN MOSCOW, Zaitzev checked his personnel file. He'd accrued twelve days of vacation time. He and his family hadn't gotten a time slot at Sochi the previous summer—the KGB quota had been filled in July and August—and so they had gone without. It was easier to schedule a vacation with a preschool child, as in any other country—you got to run away from town whenever you wished. Svetlana was in state-provided day care, but missing a few days of blocks and crayons was a lot easier to arrange than a week or two of state primary school, which was frowned upon.

UPSTAIRS, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy was going over the latest message from Colonel Bubovoy in Sofia, just brought in by courier. So the Bulgarian premier had agreed to Moscow's request with a decent lack of annoying questions. The Bulgars knew their place. The chief of state of a supposedly sovereign nation knew how to take his orders from a field-grade officer of Russia's Committee for State Security. *Which was just as it should be,* the colonel thought. And now Colonel Strokov of the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost* would be out picking his shooter, undoubtedly a Turk, and Operation -666 could go forward. He would report this to Chairman Andropov later in the day.

"THREE HUMAN BODIES?" Alan Kingshot asked in considerable surprise. He was Sir Basil's most senior field officer, a very experienced operator who'd worked the streets of every major European city, first as a "legal" officer and later as a headquarters troubleshooter, in his thirty-seven years of service to Queen and Country. "Some sort of switch, is it?"

"Yes. The chap who suggested it is a fan of MINCEMEAT, I imagine," Basil responded.

Operation MINCEMEAT was a World War II legend. It had been designed to give Germany the impression that the next major Allied operation would not be the planned Operation HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily, and so it had been decided to suggest to German intelligence that Corsica was the intended invasion target. To do this, the Germans were given the body of a dead alcoholic who'd been transformed after a death of dissipation into a major of the Royal Marines, putatively a planning officer for the fictitious operation to seize Corsica. The body had been dropped in the water off the Spanish coast by the submarine HMS *Seraph*, from which it had washed to shore, been duly

picked up, delivered to the local police, autopsied, and the document case handcuffed to the cadaver's wrist handed over to the local *Abwehr* officer. He'd fired the papers off to Berlin, where they'd had the intended effect, moving several German divisions to an island with no more military significance than the fact that it was Napoleon's birthplace. The story was called *The Man Who Never Was,* the subject of a book and a movie, and further proof of the wretched performance of German intelligence, which couldn't tell the difference between the body of a dead drunk and that of a professional soldier.

"What else do we know? I mean," Kingshot pointed out, "what age and gender, sir?"

"Yes, and hair color and so forth. The manner of death will also be important. We do not know those things yet. So the initial question is a broad one: Is it possible to do this?"

"In the abstract, yes, but before we can go forward with it, I shall need a lot of specifics. As I said, height, weight, hair and eye color, gender to be sure. With that, we can go forward."

"Well, Alan, get thinking about it. Get me a specific list of what you need by tomorrow noon."

"What city will this be in?"

"Budapest probably."

"Well, that's something," the field spook thought aloud.

"Damned grisly business," Sir Basil muttered after his man left.

ANDY HUDSON WAS sitting in his office, relaxing after his Ploughman's Lunch in the embassy's pub, along with a pint of John Courage beer. Not a tall man, he had eighty-two parachute jumps under his belt, and had the bad knees to prove it. He'd been invalided out of active service eight years before, but because he liked a little excitement in his life, he'd opted to join the Secret Intelligence Service, and worked his way rapidly up the ladder mainly on the strength of his superior language skills. Here in Budapest, he needed those. The Hungarian language is known as Indo-Altaic to philologists. Its nearest European neighbor is Finnish and, after that, Mongolian. It has no relationship at all with any European language, except for some Christian names, which were conveyed when the Magyar people succumbed to Christianity, after killing off enough missionaries to become bored with doing so. Along the way, they'd also lost whatever warrior ethos they'd once had. The Hungarians were about the most unwarlike people on the continent.

But they were pretty good at intrigue, and, like any society, they had a criminal element—but theirs had mainly gone into the Communist Party and power apparat. The Secret Police here, the *Allavedelmi Hatosag,* could be as nasty as the Cheka had been under Iron Feliks himself. But nasty wasn't quite the same as efficient. It was as though they tried to make up for their inbred inefficiency by viciousness against those whom they blundered into catching. And their police were notoriously stupid—there was a Hungarian aphorism, "As stupid as six pairs of policeman's boots," which Hudson had largely found

to be true. They weren't the Metropolitan Police, but Budapest wasn't London, either.

In fact, he found life pleasant here. Budapest was a surprisingly pretty city, very French in its architecture, and surprisingly casual for a communist capital. The food was remarkably good, even in the government-run worker canteens that dotted every street corner, where the fare was not elegant but tasty. Public transportation was adequate to his purposes, which were mainly political intelligence. He had a source—called PARADE—inside the Foreign Ministry who fed him very useful information about the Warsaw Pact and East Bloc politics in general, in return for cash, and not very much cash at that, so low were his expectations.

Like the rest of Central Europe, Budapest was an hour ahead of London. The embassy messenger knocked on Hudson's door, then reached in to toss an envelope onto his desk. Hudson set down his small cigar and lifted it. From London, he saw. Sir Basil himself . . .

Bloody hell, Hudson thought. His life was about to get a little bit more interesting.

"More details to follow," it ended. About right. You never knew it all until you had to do it. Sir Basil wasn't a bad chap to work for but, like most spymasters, he greatly enjoyed being clever, which was something never fully appreciated out in the field, where the worker bees had wasps to worry about. Hudson had a staff of three, including himself. Budapest wasn't a major station, and for him it was a way station until something more important opened up. As it was, he was young to be a Station Chief. Basil was giving him the chance to stretch his legs. That suited Hudson. Most Station Chiefs sat in their offices like spiders in their web, which looked dramatic but could actually be quite boring, since it involved writing endless reports. He ran field tasks himself. That ran the risk of his being burned, as Jim Szell had been—bloody awful luck, nothing more than that, Hudson had learned from a source named BOOT, who was right inside the AVH. But in the danger came the charm of the job. It was less dangerous than jumping out the back of a Lockheed Hercules with sixty pounds of weapons and rations strapped to your back. Also less dangerous than patrolling Belfast with Provos about. But it was the skills learned in the city streets of Ulster that gave him his street smarts as a spook. As with everything else in life, you took the bitter with the sweet. But better, he told himself, to take his bitter by the pint.

He had a rabbit coming out. That ought not to be difficult, though this rabbit had to be an important one, so much so that CIA was asking for assistance from "Six," and that didn't happen every day. Only when the bloody Yanks buggered things up, which was, Hudson thought, not too infrequent.

There was nothing for him to do as yet. He could not know what needed to be done until he had a lot more specifics, but in the abstract he knew how to get people out of Hungary. It wasn't all that hard. The Hungarians were insufficiently wedded to Marxism to be that serious an adversary. So, he sent off a "message received" dispatch to Century House and awaited further developments.

THE BRITISH AIRWAYS noon flight to Moscow was a Boeing 737 twin-engine jet. The flight took about four hours, depending on winds, which were fairly calm today. On arriving at Sheremetyevo Airport, the Diplomatic Courier walked out the forward door and breezed through immigration control on the strength of his canvas bag and diplomatic passport, then walked to the waiting embassy car for the drive into town. The courier had been there and done that many times, enough so that his driver and the embassy guards knew him by sight, and he knew his own way around the embassy. With his delivery made, he headed down to the canteen for a hot dog and a beer, and settled into his newest paperback book. It occurred to him that he needed to exercise some, since his job was entirely occupied with sitting down, in cars and mainly in airplanes. It couldn't be healthy, he thought.

MIKE RUSSELL LOOKED over the monstrous one-time pad he'd been sent, hoping that he wouldn't have to use it all in one day. The sheer drudgery of transposing random letters was enough to drive a man mad, and there had to be an easier way. That was what his KH-7 encrypting machines were for, but Foley had suggested to him that the -7 was not fully secure, which thought outraged the professional in him. The KH-7 was the most sophisticated encryption machine ever made, easy to use, and utterly impossible—so he thought—to crack. He knew the design team of mathematicians who'd figured out the algorithms. The algebraic formulas used in the -7 were sufficiently over his head that he had to strain to see the bottom. . . . But what one mathematician could make, another, in theory, could break, and the Russians had good ones. And from that fact came the nightmare: The communications that it was his job to protect were being read by the enemy.

And that just wouldn't do.

So, he had to use this pad for super-critical communications, inconvenient or not. It wasn't as though he had much of a social life in Moscow. Ordinary Russian citizens viewed his dark skin as an indication of some relationship with some tree-climbing African monkey, which was so offensive to Russell that he never talked about it to anyone, just let it generate rage in his heart, the sort of deep-soul anger that he'd felt for the Ku Klux Klan before the FBI had put those ignorant crackers out of business. Maybe they still hated him, but a steer could lust after a lot of things without being able to fuck them, and so it was with those bigoted idiots who'd forgotten that Ulysses Simpson Grant had defeated Bobby Lee, after all. They could hate all they wanted, but the prospect of Leavenworth Federal Pen kept them in their dark little holes. *The Russians are just as bad*, Russell thought, *racist cocksuckers.* But he had his books and his tape player for cool jazz, and the extra pay that came with this hardship post. And for now he'd show Ivan a signal he couldn't crack, and Foley would get his Rabbit out. He lifted his phone and dialed the proper numbers.

"Foley."

"Russell. Want to come down to my office for a minute?"

"On the way," the Station Chief replied. Four minutes. "What is it, Mike?" he asked, coming through the door.

Russell held up the ring binder. “Only three copies of this. Us, Langley, and Fort Meade. You want secure, my man, you got secure. Just try to keep the messages short, okay? This shit can really jack up my blood pressure.”

“Okay, Mike. Shame there isn’t a better way of doing that.”

“Maybe someday. Ought to be a way to do it with a computer—you know, put the pad on a floppy disk. Maybe I’ll write to Fort Meade about it,” Russell thought. “This stuff can make you cross-eyed.”

Better you than me, Foley couldn’t say. “Okay, I’ll have something for you later today.”

“Right.” Russell nodded. He didn’t have to add that it would also be enciphered on his KH-7 and *then* super-encrypted with the pad. He hoped that Ivan would intercept the signal and give his cryptanalysts the document to work on. Thinking about those bastards going nuts over one of his signals was one of the things he liked to smile about. Fine, give their world-class math aces this stuff to fool with.

But there was no telling. If KGB had managed, for example, to plant a bug in the building, it would be powered not by an internal battery, but rather by microwave emanations from Our Lady of the Microchips across the street. He had two permanent staff people who roamed the embassy, searching for unexplained RF signals. Every so often, they found one and dug the bug out, but the last of those had been twenty months before. Now they said that the embassy was fully swept and fully clean. But nobody believed that. Ivan was just too clever. Russell wondered how Foley kept his identity a secret, but that was not his problem. Keeping the comms secure was hard enough.

BACK IN HIS OFFICE, Foley drafted his next signal to Langley, trying to keep it as short as possible to make it easy for Russell. It would surely open some eyes on the Seventh Floor. He hoped that the Brits hadn’t gotten word on the idea to Washington yet. That would be seen as a major impropriety, and senior officials everywhere got their noses out of joint on trivial crap like that. But with some things you just didn’t have time to run it through channels, and as a senior Station Chief, it was expected that he would show some initiative once in a while.

And along with initiative, maybe a little panache.

Foley checked his watch. He was wearing his reddest tie, and he was an hour and a half from taking the metro home, and the Rabbit needed to see him and the flag signal. A little voice was telling Foley to get BEATRIX moving as fast as practicable. Whether it was danger to the Rabbit or something else, he couldn’t tell, but Foley was one to trust his instincts.

CHAPTER 21

VACATION

IT WASN'T EASY, really, to make sure one took the right subway train. Both the Rabbit and Foley were using the inhuman efficiency of what had to be the only aspect of Soviet life that actually functioned properly, and the remarkable thing was that the trains ran on a schedule that was as regular and predictable as the setting of the sun, just far more frequent. Foley got his dispatch into Mike Russell's hands, then put his raincoat on and walked out the embassy front door at exactly the right moment, walked at exactly the usual pace, and got to the subway platform at exactly the right time, then turned to verify it with the clock that hung on the ceiling of the station. Yeah, he'd done it again. The train pulled in, just as the previous train pulled out, and Foley walked aboard the usual car, turning to see . . . yes, the Rabbit was there. Foley unfolded his paper. His unbuttoned raincoat hung loosely on his shoulders.

Zaitzev was actually surprised to see the red tie, but he could hardly complain. As usual, he inched his way in the proper direction.

It was almost routine now, the COS thought. He felt the hand surreptitiously enter his pocket and withdraw. Then his acute senses felt the man take a step away. Hopefully, there would be little more of this. It was safe for Foley, but decidedly unsafe for the Rabbit, however skillful he might have become at this exercise. The presence of others on this subway car—some faces he recognized from repetition—could well represent people of the Second Chief Directorate. There could be intermittent surveillance on him, using a bunch of different officers. That would be a sensible tactic for the opposition to use, on and off, to diminish the chance that he'd spot them.

In due course, as before, the train arrived at the appointed stop, and Foley walked off. In a few more weeks, he'd have to put the lining in his coat, and

maybe even wear the *shapka* Mary Pat had bought him. He had to start thinking about what would happen *after* they got the Rabbit out. If BEATRIX worked all the way, he'd have to maintain his cover activities for a time—or maybe switch to driving to the embassy, a change in routine that the Russians would not note as unusual. He was an American, after all, and Americans were famous for driving everywhere. The metro was getting tedious. Too crowded, often with people who didn't know what a shower was for. The things he did for his country, Foley thought. No, he corrected himself, the things he did *against* his country's enemies. That was what made it worthwhile. *Giving the big ol' Bear a bellyache—maybe even stomach cancer,* he mused, walking to his apartment.

"YES, ALAN?" Charleston asked, looking up from his desk.

"This is a major operation, I take it?" Kingshot asked.

"Major in its objective, yes," the Director General confirmed. "As routine as possible in its operation. We only have three people in Budapest, and it would not be overly brilliant to fly in a goon squad."

"Anyone else going?"

"Jack Ryan, the American," Sir Basil said.

"He's no field officer," Kingshot objected immediately.

"It's fundamentally an American operation, Alan. They reasonably requested that one of their people go along to observe. In return, we'll have a day or two to debrief their Rabbit at a safe house of our choosing. He will doubtless have a good deal of useful information, and we'll get the first chance to speak with him."

"Well, I hope this Ryan fellow doesn't queer the pitch for us."

"Alan, he's shown himself to be fairly levelheaded in time of trouble, hasn't he?" Sir Basil asked, reasonable as ever.

"Must be his Marine training," Kingshot observed with dark generosity.

"And he's very clever, Alan. He's been giving us excellent work on his analysis project."

"If you say so, sir. To get the three bodies, I need to get some help from Special Branch, and then spend time on my knees hoping for something dreadful to happen."

"What are you thinking?"

Kingshot explained his nascent operational concept. It was really the only way to make something like this happen. And, as Sir Basil had observed earlier in the day, it was as grisly as an autopsy.

"How likely is such a thing to happen?" Basil asked.

"I need to talk with the police to answer that one."

"Who's your contact there?"

"Chief Superintendent Patrick Nolan. You've met him."

Charleston closed his eyes for a moment. "The huge chap, arrests rugby forwards for light exercise?"

"That's Nolan. They call him 'Tiny' on the force. I think he eats barbells with his porridge. Am I free to discuss this Operation BEATRIX with him?"

"Just in terms of our needs, Alan."

"Very good, sir," Kingshot agreed, and left the room.

"YOU WANT *WHAT?"* Nolan asked over a pint in a pub a block from New Scotland Yard, just after four in the afternoon.

"You heard me, Tiny," Kingshot said. He lit a cigarette to fit in with the rest of the bar's patrons.

"Well, I must say I've heard a lot of strange things in my time with the Yard, but never that." Nolan was a good six-four and two hundred thirty pounds, very little of it fat. He spent at least an hour, three times a week, in the Yard's exercise room. He rarely carried a handgun on duty. He'd never needed one to help a felon see the futility of resistance. "Can you say what this is for?" he asked.

"Sorry, not allowed to. All I can say is that's it's a matter of some importance."

A long pull on his beer. "Well, you know that we do not keep such things in cold storage, even in the Black Museum."

"I was thinking a traffic smash. They happen all the time, don't they?"

"Yes, they do, Alan, but not to a family of three."

"Well, how often *do* such things happen?" Kingshot asked.

"Perhaps twenty such incidents in an average year, and their occurrence is wholly irregular. You cannot depend on it in any given week."

"Well, we'll just have to hope for good luck, and if it doesn't happen, then it simply does not happen." That would be an inconvenience. Perhaps it would be better to enlist the help of the Americans. They killed at least fifty thousand people per year on their highways. He'd suggest that to Sir Basil in the morning, Kingshot decided.

"Good luck? Not sure I'd call it that, Alan," Nolan pointed out.

"You know what I mean, Tiny. All I can say is that it's bloody important."

"And if it happens out on the M4, then what?"

"We collect the bodies—"

"And the survivors of the deceased?" Nolan asked.

"We substitute weighted bags for the bodies. The condition of the corpses will preclude an open-casket ceremony, won't it?"

"Yes, there is that. Then what?"

"We'll have our people deal with the bodies. You really do not need to know the details." The SIS had a close and cordial relationship with the Metropolitan Police, but it went only so far.

Nolan finished his pint. "Yes, I'll leave the nightmares to you, Alan." He managed not to shiver. "I should start keeping my eyes open at once, is it?"

"Immediately."

"And we should consider taking the leavings from more than one such incident?"

"Obviously." Kingshot nodded. "Another round?"

"Good idea, Alan," Nolan agreed. And his host waved to the barman. "You know, someday I'd love to know what you are using me for."

"Someday after we're both retired, Patrick. You'll be pleased to know what you are helping with. That I can promise you, old man."

"If you say so, Alan." Nolan conceded the point. For now.

"WHAT THE HELL?" Judge Moore observed, reading the latest dispatch from Moscow. He handed the fresh copy over to Greer, who scanned it and passed it along to Mike Bostock.

"Mike, your boy Foley has a lively imagination," the Admiral commented.

"This sounds more like Mary Pat. She's the cowboy—well, cow*girl*, I suppose you'd say. It *is* original, guys."

"Original isn't the word," the DCI said, rolling his eyes somewhat. "Okay, Mike, is it doable?"

"Theoretically, yes—and I like the operational concept. To get a defector and keep Ivan ignorant of the fact. That's style, gentlemen," Bostock said admiringly. "The ugly part is that you need three bodies, one of them a child."

The three intelligence executives managed not to shudder at the thought. It was easiest, oddly, for Judge Moore, who'd managed to get his hands wet thirty years earlier. But that had been in time of war, when the rules were a lot looser. But not loose enough for him to keep from having regrets. That was what had gotten him back into the law. He couldn't take back the things he'd done wrong, but he could make sure they wouldn't happen again. *Or something like that,* he told himself now. *Something like that.*

"Why a car crash?" Moore asked. "Why not a house fire? Doesn't that suit the tactical purposes better?"

"Good point," Bostock agreed at once. "Less physical trauma to have to explain away."

"I'll shoot that off to Basil." Even the most brilliant of people, Moore realized, could be limited in their thinking. Well, that was why he kept telling people to think outside the box. And every so often, someone managed to do that. Just not often enough.

"You know," Mike Bostock said, after a little thinking. "This will be something if we can pull it off."

" 'If' can be a very large word, Mike," Greer cautioned.

"Well, maybe this time the glass is half full," the Deputy DDO suggested. "Fine. The main mission is getting this guy out, but the goose can use a little sauce once in a while."

"Hmph," Greer observed dubiously.

"Well, I'll call Emil over at the Bureau and see what he has to say about this," Moore said. "More his turf than ours."

"And if some lawyer gets hold of it, then what, Arthur?"

"James, there are ways of dealing with lawyers."

A pistol is often useful, Greer didn't say. He nodded concurrence. One bridge to cross at a time was always a good rule, especially in this crazy business.

“HOW DID THINGS go today, honey?” Mary Pat asked.

“Oh, the usual” was the reply for the microphones in the ceiling. More significant was the double thumbs-up, followed by the pass of the note from his coat pocket. They had a meeting place and a time. MP would handle that. She read the note and nodded. She and Eddie would take another walk to meet little Svetlana, the *zaichik*. Then it was just a matter of getting the Rabbit out of town, and since he was KGB, it ought not to be overly hard. That was one advantage of having him work at The Centre. They were taking out a minor nobleman, after all, not just another *muzhik* from the widget factory.

Dinner, he saw, was steak, the usual celebratory meal. MP was as psyched about this as he was—probably more so. With just a little luck, this Operation BEATRIX would make their reputation, and a good field rep was something they both wanted.

RYAN TOOK THE usual train back to Chatham. He’d missed his wife again, but she’d had a routine day, so she’d probably left early, like all the government-employed docs with whom she worked. He wondered if this bad habit would carry over when they went home to Peregrine Cliff. Probably not. Bernie Katz liked to have his desk clean, and waiting lists at zero, and the local work habits were driving his wife to drink. The good news was that, with no surgery scheduled this week, they’d be able to have wine that evening with dinner.

He wondered how long he’d be away from home. It wasn’t something he was used to. One advantage of being an analyst was that he did all of his work at the office, then drove home. He’d rarely slept away from his wife in all the time they’d been married, a rule almost sacred in their marriage. He liked it when he woke up at three in the morning and could roll over and kiss her in mid-dream, then see her smile in her sleep. His marriage to Cathy was the anchor to his life, the very center of his universe. But now duty would take him away from her for several days—not something he looked forward to. Nor did he look forward to flying on another goddamned airplane into a communist country with false identity papers and overseeing a black operation there—he didn’t know shit about them, just what he’d picked up talking to the occasional field spook at Langley . . . and from his own experiences here in London, and at home over the Chesapeake, when Sean Miller and his terrorists had come to his house with guns blazing. It was something he tried very hard to forget. It might have been different had he stayed in the Marine Corps, but there he would have been surrounded by fellow warriors. He’d have been able to bathe in their respect, to remember his feat of arms with pride at having done the right thing at the right time, to recount his deeds to the interested, to pass along the tactical lessons learned the hard way on the field of demibattle over beers at the O-club, even to smile about something that one didn’t ordinarily smile about. But he’d left the Marine Corps with a bad back, and had had to endure his combat as a very

frightened civilian. Courage, though, he'd once been told, was being the only one who knew how terrified you were. And, yeah, he supposed, he'd shown that quality when it had counted. And his job in Hungary would be only to watch, and then, the important part, to sit in while Sir Basil's boys interviewed the Rabbit at some safe house in London, or wherever, before the Air Force, probably, flew them to Washington in their own special-mission KC-135 out of RAF Bentwaters, with nice food and plenty of liquor to ease the flight fright.

He walked off the train and up the steps, and caught a cab for Grizedale Close, where he found that Cathy had sent Miss Margaret away and was busy in the kitchen, assisted, he saw, by Sally.

"Hey, babe." Kiss. He lifted Sally for the usual hug. Little girls give the best hugs.

"So, what was the important message about?" Cathy asked.

"No big deal. Kinda disappointing, actually."

Cathy turned to look her husband in the eye. Jack couldn't lie worth a damn. It was one of the things she liked about him, actually. "Uh-huh."

"Honest, babe," Ryan said, knowing the look, and then deepening the hole in which he was standing. "I didn't get shot at or anything."

"Okay," she acknowledged, meaning, *We'll talk about it later.*

Blew it again, Jack, Ryan told himself. "How's the glasses business?"

"Saw six people, had time for eight or nine, but that's all I had on my list."

"Have you told Bernie about working conditions here?"

"Called him today, right after I got home. He had himself a good laugh and told me to enjoy the vacation."

"What about the guys who had a brewski during a procedure?"

Cathy turned. "He said, and I quote, 'Jack's in the CIA, isn't he? Have him shoot the bastards.' End of quote." She turned back to her cooking.

"You need to tell him that we don't do that sort of thing." Jack managed a smile. This, at least, wasn't a lie, and he hoped she could tell.

"I know. You'd never be able to carry it on your conscience."

"Too Catholic," he confirmed.

"Well, at least I know you'll never fool around on me."

"May God strike me dead with cancer if I ever do." It was the one imprecation about cancer that she almost approved of.

"You'll never have reason to, Jack." And that was true enough. She didn't like guns and she didn't like bloodshed, but she did love him. And that was sufficient to the moment.

Dinner turned out okay, followed by the usual evening activities, until it was time for their four-year-old to put on her yellow sleeper and climb into her big-girl bed.

With Sally in bed and Little Jack dozing as well, there was time for the usual mindless TV watching. Or so Jack hoped, until . . .

"Okay, Jack, what's the bad news?"

"Nothing much," he answered. The worst possible answer. Cathy was just too good at reading his mind.

"What's that mean?"

"I have to go on a little trip—to Bonn," Jack remembered the advice from Sir Basil. "It's a NATO thing I got stuck with."

"Doing what?"

"I can't say, babe."

"How long?"

"Three or four days, probably. They think I am uniquely suited to this for some damned reason or other."

"Uh-huh." Ryan's semi-truthfulness was just oblique enough to foil her mind reading for once.

"You're not going to be carrying a gun or anything?"

"Honey, I am an analyst, not a field officer, remember? That sort of thing is not my job. For that matter, I don't think field spooks carry guns very much anyway. Too hard to explain away if somebody notices."

"But—"

"James Bond is in the movies, babe, not real life."

Ryan returned his attention to the TV. ITV was doing a repeat of *Danger—UXB,* and again Jack found himself wondering if Brian would survive his job of defusing unexploded bombs and then marry Suzy when he returned to civilian life. EOD, now *there* was a miserable job, but, if you made a mistake, at least it wouldn't hurt for very long.

"HEARD ANYTHING FROM BOB?" Greer asked just before six in the evening.

Judge Moore stood up from his expensive swivel chair and stretched. Too much time sitting down, and not enough moving around. Back in Texas, he had a small ranch—called that because he owned three quarter horses; you couldn't be a prominent citizen in Texas unless you owned a horse or two—and three or four times a week, he'd saddle Aztec up and ride around for an hour or so, mainly to get his head clear, to allow himself to think outside his office. That was how he tended to get his best thinking done. Maybe, Moore thought, that's why he felt so goddamned unproductive here. An office just wasn't a very good place for thinking, but every executive in the world pretended it was. Christ knew why. That's what he needed at Langley—his own stable. There was plenty of room on the Langley campus—a good five times what he had in Texas. But if he ever did that, the stories would spread around the world: The American DCI liked to ride horses with his black Stetson hat—that went along with the horse—and probably a Colt .45 on his hip—that was optional—and *that* just wouldn't look good to the TV crews that would sooner or later appear at the perimeter fence with their minicams. And so, for reasons of personal vanity, he had to deny himself the chance to do some good creative thinking. It was totally asinine, the former judge told himself, to allow such considerations to affect the way he did his work. Over in England, Basil could chase foxes on the back of a nice hunter-thoroughbred, and would anyone over there care? Hell, no. He'd be admired for it, or at worst thought a tiny bit eccentric, in a country where eccentricity was an admirable quality. But in the Land of the Free, men were enslaved by customs imposed on them by news reporters and elected officials who screwed their secretaries. Well, there was no rule that the world had to make sense, was there?

"Nothing important. Just a cable that said his meetings with our Korean friends were going well," Moore reported.

"You know, those people scare me a little," Greer observed. He didn't have to explain why. The KCIA occasionally had its field personnel deal a little too directly with employees of the other Korean government. The rules were a little different over there. The ongoing state of war between North and South was still a very real thing and, in time of war, some people lost their lives. CIA hadn't done such things in almost thirty years. Asian people hadn't adopted Western ideas of the value of human life. Maybe because their countries were just too crowded. Maybe because they have different religious beliefs. Maybe a lot of things, but for whatever reason they were just a little different in the operational parameters they felt free to work within—or without.

"They're our best eye on North Korea and China, James," Moore reminded him. "And they are very faithful allies."

"I know, Arthur." It was nice to hear things about the People's Republic of China once in a while. Penetrating *that* country was one of CIA's most frustrating tasks. "I just wish they weren't so cavalier about murder."

"They operate within fairly strict rules, and both sides seem to play by them."

And on both sides, killings had to be authorized at a very high level. Not that this would matter all that much to the corpse in question. "Wet" operations interfered with the main mission, which was gathering information. That was something people occasionally forgot, but something that CIA and KGB mainly understood, which was why both agencies had gotten away from it.

But when the information retrieved frightened or otherwise upset the politicians who oversaw the intelligence services, then the spook shops were ordered to do things that they usually preferred to avoid—and so, then, they took their action through surrogates and/or mercenaries, mainly. . . .

"Arthur, if KGB wants to hurt the Pope, how do you suppose they'd go about it?"

"Not one of their own," Moore thought. "Too dangerous. It would be a political catastrophe, like a tornado going right through the Kremlin. It would sure as hell kibosh Yuriy Vladimirovich's political career and, you know, I don't see him taking that much risk for any cause. Power is just too important to him."

The DDI nodded. "Agreed. I think he's going to resign his chairmanship soon. Has to. They wouldn't even let him jump from KGB boss to the General Secretaryship. That's a little too sinister even for them. They still remember Beria—the ones who sit around that table do, anyway."

"That's a good point, James," Moore said, turning back from the window. "I wonder how much longer Leonid Illyich has." Ascertaining Brezhnev's health was a constant CIA interest—hell, it was a matter of interest to everyone in Washington.

"Andropov is our best indicator on that. We're pretty sure he's Brezhnev's replacement. When it looks like Leonid Illyich is heading for the last roundup, then Yuriy Vladimirovich changes jobs."

"Good point, James. I'll float that to State and the White House."

Admiral Greer nodded. “It’s what they pay us for. Back to the Pope,” he suggested.

“The President is still asking questions,” Moore confirmed.

“If they do anything, it won’t be a Russian. Too many political pitfalls, Arthur.”

“Again, I agree. But what the hell does that leave us?”

“They use the Bulgarians for wet work,” Greer pointed out.

“So, look for a Bulgarian shooter?”

“How many Bulgars make pilgrimages to Rome, you suppose?”

“We can’t tell the Italians to look into that, can we? It would leak sure as hell, and we can’t have that. It would look pretty stupid in the press. It’s just something we can’t do, James.”

Greer let out a long breath. “Yeah, I know, not without something firm.”

“Firmer than what we have now—and that’s air, James, just plain damned air.” *It would be nice,* Judge Moore thought, *if CIA were as powerful as the movies and the critics think we are. Not all the time. Just once in a while.* But they weren’t, and that was a fact.

THE NEXT DAY started in Moscow before it started anywhere else. Zaitzev awoke at the ringing of his windup alarm clock, grumbled and cursed like every workingman in the world, then stumbled off to the bathroom. Ten minutes later, he was drinking his morning tea and eating his black bread and butter.

Less than a mile away, the Foley family was doing much the same thing. Ed decided on an English muffin and grape jelly with his coffee for a change, joined by Little Eddie, who took a break from Worker Woman and his *Transformers* tapes. He was looking forward to the preschool that had been set up for Western children right there in the ghetto, where he showed great promise with crayons and the newly arrived Hot Wheels tricycles, plus being champion at the Sit ’n Spin.

He told himself that he could relax today. The meeting would be in the evening, and MP would handle that. In another week or so . . . maybe . . . BEATRIX would be all over, and he could relax again, letting his field officers do the running around this damned ugly city. Sure enough, the goddamned Baltimore Orioles were in the playoffs, and looking to go head to head with the Philadelphia Phillies, relegating his Bronx Bombers to the Hot Stove League yet again. What was with the new ownership, anyway? How could rich people be so stupid?

He’d have to keep to his metro routine. If KGB had him shadowed, it would be unusual—or would it?—for them to mark the specific train he was getting on. There was a question for him. If they did a one-two tail, the number two guy would stay on the platform and, after the train left, write down the time off the clock in the station—that was the only one that made sense, since it was the one that governed the trains themselves. KGB was thorough and professional, but would they be *that* good? That sort of precision was positively Germanic, but if the bastards could make the trains run that

precisely, then probably KGB could take note of it, and the precise timing was what had enabled *him* to contact the Rabbit.

God damn this life, anyway! Foley raged briefly. But he'd known that before he'd accepted the posting to Moscow, and it was *exciting* here, wasn't it? *Yeah, like Louis XVI was probably excited on the cart ride to the guillotine,* Ed Sr. thought.

Someday he'd lecture on this down at The Farm. He hoped they'd appreciate just how hard it had been to write the lesson plan for his Operation BEATRIX lecture. Well, they might be a little impressed.

Forty minutes later, he purchased his copy of *Izvestia* and rode down the interminable escalator to the platform, as usual not noting the sideways looks of Russians looking at a real, live American as though he were a creature in the zoo. It would never have happened to a Russian in New York, where every ethnic group could be found, especially behind the wheel of a yellow cab.

THE MORNING ROUTINE was set in concrete by now. Miss Margaret was hovering over the kids, and Eddie Beaverton was outside the door. The kids were duly hugged and kissed, and the parents headed off to work. If there was anything Ryan hated, it was this routine. If only he'd been able to persuade Cathy to buy a flat in London, then every work day would have been a good two hours shorter—but, no, Cathy wanted green stuff around for the kids to play on. And soon they wouldn't see the sun until they got to work, and soon thereafter, hardly even then.

Ten minutes later, they were in their first-class compartment rolling northwest for London, Cathy in her medical journal and Jack in his *Daily Telegraph.* There was an article about Poland, and this reporter was unusually well-informed, Ryan saw at once. The articles in Britain tended to be a lot less long-winded than in *The Washington Post*, and for once Jack found himself regretting that. This guy had been well-briefed and/or he was pretty good at analysis. The Polish government was really caught between a rock and a hard place, and was getting squeezed, and there was talk, he saw, that the Pope was making some rumbles about the welfare of his homeland and his people, and *that,* the reporter noted, could upset a lot of apple carts.

Ain't that the truth, Jack thought. The really bad news was that it was in the open now. Who'd leaked it? He knew the reporter's name. He was a specialist in foreign affairs, mainly European. So, who'd leaked this? Somebody in the Foreign Office? Those people were, on the whole, pretty smart, but, like their American counterparts at Foggy Bottom, they occasionally spoke without thinking, and over here that could happen over a friendly pint in one of the thousands of comfortable pubs, maybe in a quiet corner booth, with a government employee paying off a marker or just wanting to show the media how smart he was. Would a head roll over this one? he wondered. Something to talk about with Simon.

Unless Simon had been the leaker. He was senior enough and well liked by his boss. Maybe Basil had authorized the leak? Or maybe they both knew a guy in Whitehall and had authorized him to have a friendly pint with a guy

from Fleet Street.

Or maybe the reporter was smart enough to put two and two together all by himself. Not all the smart guys worked at Century House. Damned sure not all the smart ones in America worked at Langley. Generally speaking, talent went to where the money was, because smart people wanted large houses and nice vacations just like everyone else did. Those who went into government service knew that they could live comfortably, but not lavishly—but the best of them also knew that they had a mission to fulfill in life, and that was why you found very good people wearing uniforms or carrying guns and badges. In his own case, Ryan had done well in the trading business, but he finally found it unsatisfying. And so not all talented people sought after money. Some found themselves on some sort of quest.

Is that what you're doing, Jack? he asked himself, as the train pulled into Victoria Station.

"What deep thoughts this morning?" his wife asked.

"Huh?" Jack responded.

"I know the look, honey," she pointed out. "You're chewing over something important."

"Cathy, are you an eye cutter or a pshrink?"

"With you, I'm a pshrink," she replied, with a playful smile.

Jack stood and opened the compartment door. "Okay, my lady. You have eyeballs to regulate, and I have secrets to figure out." He waved his wife out the door. "What new things did you learn from *The Asshole and Armpit Monthly Gazette* on the way in?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Probably," Jack conceded, heading off to the cabstand. They took a robin's-egg-blue one instead of the usual black.

"Hammersmith Hospital," Ryan told the driver, "and then One Hundred Westminster Bridge Road."

"MI-Six, is it, sir?"

"Excuse me?" Ryan replied innocently.

"Universal Export, sir, where James Bond used to work." He chuckled and pulled off.

Well, Ryan reflected, the CIA exit off the George Washington Parkway wasn't marked NATIONAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION anymore. Cathy thought it was pretty funny. There was no keeping secrets from London cabdrivers. Cathy hopped out in the large underpass at Hammersmith, and the driver U-turned and went the last few blocks to Century House. Ryan went through the door, past Sergeant Major Canderton, and up to his office.

Coming in the door, he dropped the *Telegraph* on Simon's desk before doffing his raincoat.

"I saw it, Jack," Harding said at once.

"Who's talking?"

"Not sure. Foreign Office, probably. They've been briefed in on this. Or perhaps someone from the PM's office. Sir Basil is not pleased," Harding assured him.

"Nobody called the paper?"

"No. We didn't know about this until it was published this morning."

"I thought the local papers had a more cordial relationship with the government over here."

"Generally, they do, which leads me to believe it was the PM's office that did the leak." Harding's face was innocent enough, but Jack found himself trying to read it. That was something his wife was far better at. He had the feeling that Harding was not being entirely truthful, but he had no real reason to complain about that, did he?

"Anything new from the overnights?"

Harding shook his head. "Nothing of great interest. Nothing on this BEATRIX operation, either. Tell your wife about your impending trip?"

"Yeah, and I didn't tell you that she's pretty good at reading my mind."

"Most wives can, Jack." Harding had a good laugh at that.

ZAITZEV HAD THE same desk and the same pile of message traffic, always different in exact details, but always the same really: reports from field officers transmitting data from foreign nationals on all manner of subjects. He had hundreds of operation names memorized, and untold thousands of details resident between his ears, including the actual names of some of the agents and the code names of many, many others.

As on the previous workdays, he took his time, reading over all the morning traffic before sending it upstairs, trusting his trained memory to record and file away all of the important details.

Some, of course, contained information that was hidden in multiple ways. There was probably a penetration agent within CIA, for example, but his code name—TRUMPET—was all Zaitzev knew. Even the data he transmitted were concealed by the use of layered super-encryption, including a one-time pad. But the data went to a colonel on the sixth floor who specialized in CIA investigations and worked closely with the Second Chief Directorate—so, by implication, TRUMPET was giving KGB something in which the Second Directorate was interested, and *that* meant agents operating *for* CIA right here in Moscow. Which was enough to give him chills, but the Americans he'd talked to—he'd warned them about communications security, and that would flag any dispatch about him to a very limited number of people. And he knew that TRUMPET was being paid huge amounts of money, and so, probably he was not a senior CIA official, who, Zaitzev judged, were probably very well paid. An ideological agent would have given him cause to worry, but there were none of them in America whom he knew about—and he would know, wouldn't he?

In a week, perhaps less, the communicator told himself, he'd be in the West and safe. He hoped his wife would not go totally amok when he told her his plans, but probably she would not. She had no immediate family. Her mother had died the previous year, to Irina's great sorrow, and she had neither brothers nor sisters to hold her back, and she was not happy working at GUM because of all the petty corruption there. And he would promise to get her the piano she longed to have, but which even his KGB post couldn't get for her, so meager was the supply.

So he shuffled his papers, perhaps more slowly than usual, but not greatly so, he thought. There were few really hard workers, even in KGB. The cynical adage in the Soviet Union was "As long as they pretend to pay us, we will pretend to work," and the principle applied here as well. If you exceeded your quota, they'd just increase it the following year without any improvement in your working conditions—and so, few worked hard enough to be noticed as Heroes of Socialist Labor.

Just after 11:00, Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy appeared in the comms room. Zaitzev caught his eye and waved him over.

"Yes, Comrade Major?" the colonel asked.

"Comrade Colonel," he said quietly, "there have been no recent communications about six-six-six. Is there anything I need to know?"

The question took Rozhdestvenskiy aback. "Why do you ask?"

"Comrade Colonel," Zaitzev went on humbly, "it was my understanding that this operation is important and that I am the only communicator cleared for it. Have I acted improperly in any way?"

"Ah." Rozhdestvenskiy relaxed. "No, Comrade Colonel, we have no complaints with your activities. The operation no longer requires communications of this type."

"I see. Thank you, Comrade Colonel."

"You look tired, Major Zaitzev. Is anything the matter?"

"No, comrade. I suppose I could use a vacation. I didn't get to go anywhere during the summer. A week or two off duty would be a blessing, before the winter hits."

"Very well. If you have any difficulties, let me know, and I'll try to smooth things out for you."

Zaitzev managed a grateful smile. "Why, thank you, Comrade Colonel."

"You do good work down here, Zaitzev. We're all entitled to some time off, even State Security people."

"Thank you again, Comrade Colonel. I serve the Soviet Union."

Rozhdestvenskiy nodded and took his leave. As he walked out the door, Zaitzev took a long breath and went back to work memorizing dispatches . . . but not for the Soviet Union. *So,* he thought, *-666 was being handled by courier now.* He'd learn no more about it, but he'd just learned that it was going forward on a high-priority basis. They were really going to do it. He wondered if the Americans would get him out quickly enough to forestall it. The information was in his hands, but the ability to do anything about it was not. It was like being Cassandra of old, daughter of King Priam of Troy, knowing what was going to happen, but unable to get anyone to do anything about it. Cassandra had angered the gods somehow or other and received that curse as a result, but what had *he* done to deserve it? Zaitzev wondered, suddenly angry at CIA's inefficiency. But he couldn't just board a Pan American flight out of Sheremetyevo International Airport, could he?

CHAPTER 22

PROCUREMENTS AND ARRANGEMENTS

THE SECOND FACE-TO-FACE meeting was back at GUM department store, where a certain Little Bunny needed some fall/winter clothing, which her father wanted to get her—which was something of a surprise for Irina Bogdanova, but a pleasant one. Mary Pat, the supreme expert on shopping in the Foley family, wandered about looking at the various items on sale, surprised to see that they weren't all Soviet schlock. Some were even attractive . . . though not quite attractive enough to buy. She dawdled again in the fur department—the furs here might have sold fairly well in New York, though they were not quite on a par with Fendi. There weren't enough Italian designers in Russia. But the quality of the furs—that is, the animal skins themselves—wasn't too shabby. The Soviets just didn't know how to sew them together properly. *That was too bad, really,* she thought. The saddest thing about the Soviet Union was how the government of that gray country prevented its citizens from actually accomplishing much. There was so little originality here. The best things to buy were all old, pre-revolutionary art works, usually small ones, almost always religious pieces, sold at impromptu flea markets to raise needed money for some family or other. She'd already purchased several pieces, trying not to feel like a thief in doing so. To assuage her conscience, she never haggled, almost always paying the price asked instead of trying to chisel it down by a few percent. That would have been like armed robbery, she thought, and her ultimate mission in Moscow—this was a core belief for her—was to help these people, though in a way they could hardly have understood or approved. But, for the most part, Muscovites liked her American smile and friendliness. And certainly they liked the blue-stripe certificate rubles she paid with, cash money that would give them access to luxury items or, almost as good, cash that they could exchange at a rate of

three or four to one.

She wandered about for half an hour, then saw her target in the children's clothing area. She maneuvered that way, taking time to lift and examine various items before coming up behind him.

"Good evening, Oleg Ivan'ch," she said quietly, handling a parka meant for a girl of three or four.

"Mary, is it?"

"That is correct. Tell me, do you have any vacation days available to you?"

"Yes, I do. Two weeks of it, in fact."

"And you told me that your wife likes classical music?"

"That is also correct."

"There is a fine conductor. His name is Jozsef Rozsa. He will start performing in the main concert hall in Budapest on Sunday evening. The best hotel for you to check in to is the Astoria. It is a short distance from the train station, and is popular with Soviet guests. Tell all your friends what you are doing. Arrange to buy them things in Budapest. Do everything that a Soviet citizen does. We will handle the rest," she assured him.

"All of us," Zaitzev reminded her. "All of us come out?"

"Of course, Oleg. Your little *zaichik* will see many wonders in America, and the winters are not so fierce as they are here," MP added.

"We Russians enjoy our winters," he pointed out, with a little amour propre.

"In that case, you will be able to live in an area as cold as Moscow. And if you desire warm weather in February, you can drive or fly to Florida and relax on a sunny beach."

"You are tourist agent, Mary?" the Rabbit asked.

"For you, Oleg, I am just that. Are you comfortable passing information to my husband on the metro?"

"Yes."

You shouldn't be, Mary Pat thought. "What is your best necktie?"

"A blue one with red stripes."

"Very well, wear that one two days before you take the train to Budapest. Bump into him and apologize, and we will know. Two days before you leave Moscow, wear your blue-striped tie and bump into him on the metro," she repeated. You had to be careful doing this. People could make the goddamnedest mistakes in the simplest of matters, even when—no, *especially* when—their lives were on the line. That was why she was making it as easy as possible. Only one thing to remember. Only one thing to do.

"*Da,* I can do that easily."

Optimistic bastard, aren't you? "Excellent. Please be very careful, Oleg Ivan'ch." And with that, she went on her way. But then she stopped five or six meters away and turned. In her purse was a Minox camera. She shot five frames, and then walked away.

"WELL, DIDN'T YOU see anything worth getting?" her husband asked, out in their used Mercedes 280.

"No, nothing really worthwhile. Maybe we should try a trip up to Helsinki

to get some winter stuff," she suggested. "You know, take the train, like. Ought to be fun to do it that way. Eddie should like it."

The Station Chief's eyebrow went up. *Probably better to take the train,* he thought. *Doesn't look rushed or forced. Carry lots of suitcases, half of them empty to bring back all the shit you'll buy there with your Comecon rubles,* Ed Foley thought. *Except you don't come back . . . and if Langley and London get their shit together, maybe we can make it a real home-run ball. . . .*

"Home, honey?" Foley asked. Wouldn't it be a hoot if KGB *didn't* have their home and car bugged, and they were doing all this secret-agent crap for no reason at all? he thought idly. Well, at worst, it was good practice, wasn't it?

"Yeah, we've done enough for one day."

"BLOODY HELL," Basil Charleston breathed. He lifted his phone and punched three buttons.

"Yes, sir?" Kingshot asked, coming into the room.

"This." C handed the dispatch across.

"Shit," Kingshot breathed.

Sir Basil managed a smile. "It's always the obvious, simple things, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Even so, does make one feel rather thick," he admitted. "A house fire. Works better than what we originally thought."

"Well, something to remember. How many house fires do we have in London, Alan?"

"Sir Basil, I have not a clue," the most senior field spook in the SIS admitted. "But find out I shall."

"Get this to your friend Nolan as well."

"Tomorrow morning, sir," Kingshot promised. "At least it improves our chances. Are CIA working on this as well?"

"Yes."

AS WAS THE FBI. Director Emil Jacobs had heard his share of oddball requests from the folks on "the other side of the river," as CIA was sometimes called in official Washington. But this was positively gruesome. He lifted his phone and punched his direct line to the DCI.

"There's a good reason for this, I presume, Arthur?" he asked without preamble.

"Not over the phone, Emil, but yes."

"Three Caucasians, one male in his early thirties, one female same age, and a little girl age three or four," Jacobs said, reading it off the hand-delivered note from Langley. "My field agents will think the Director's slipped a major gear, Arthur. We'd probably be better off asking local police forces for assistance—"

"But—"

"Yes, I know, it would leak too quickly. Okay, I can send a message to all my SACs and have them check their morning papers, but it won't be easy to keep something like this from leaking out."

"Emil, I understand that. We're trying to get help from the Brits on this as well. Not the sort of thing you can just whistle up, I know. All I can say is that

it's very important, Emil."

"You due on The Hill anytime soon?"

"House Intelligence Committee tomorrow at ten. Budget stuff," Moore explained. Congress was always going after that information, and Moore always had to defend his agency from people on The Hill, who would just as soon cut CIA off at the ankles—so that they could complain about "intelligence failures" later on, of course.

"Okay, can you stop off here on the way? I gotta hear this cock-and-bull story," Jacobs announced.

"Eight-forty or so?"

"Works for me, Arthur."

"See you then," Moore promised.

Director Jacobs replaced his phone, wondering what could be so goddamned important as to request the Federal Bureau of Investigation to play grave robber.

ON THE METRO HOME, after buying his little *zaichik* a white parka with red and green flowers on it, Zaitzev thought over his strategy. When would he tell Irina about their impromptu vacation? If he sprang it on her as a surprise, there would be one sort of problem—Irina would worry about her accounting job at GUM, but the office was, by her account, so loosely run that they'd hardly notice a missing body. But if he did give her too much warning, there would be another problem—she'd try to micromanage everything, like every wife in the known world, since, in her mind, he was unfitted to figure out anything. That was rather amusing, Oleg Ivan'ch thought, given the current circumstances.

So, then, no, he would not tell her ahead of time, but instead spring this trip on her as a surprise, and use this Hungarian conductor as the excuse. Then the big surprise would come in Budapest. He wondered how she'd react to that piece of news. Perhaps not well, but she was a Russian wife, trained and educated to accept the orders of her man, which, all Russian men thought, was as it should be.

Svetlana loved riding the metro. That was the thing with little children, Oleg had learned. To them everything was an adventure to take in with their wide children's eyes, even something as routine as riding the underground train. She didn't walk or run. She pranced, like a puppy—or like a bunny, her father thought, smiling down at her. Would his little *zaichik* find better adventures in the West?

Probably so . . . if I get her there alive, Zaitzev reminded himself. There was danger involved, but somehow his fear was not for himself, but for his daughter. How odd that was. Or was it? He didn't know anymore. He knew that he had a mission of sorts, and that was all that he actually saw before him. The rest of it was just a collection of intermediate steps, but at the end of the steps was a bright, shining light, and that was all he could really see. It was very strange how the light had grown brighter and brighter since his first doubts about Operation -666 until now, when it occupied all his mental eyes

could see. Like a moth drawn to a light, he kept circling in closer and closer, and all he could really hope was that the light was not a flame that would kill him.

"Here, Papa!" Svetlana said, recognizing their stop, taking his hand, and dragging him forward to the sliding doors. A minute later, she jumped on the moving steps of the escalator, excited by that ride as well. His child was like an American adult—or how Russians supposed them to be, always seeing opportunities and possibilities and the fun to be had, instead of the dangers and threats that careful, sober Soviet citizens saw everywhere. But if Americans were so foolish, why were Soviets always trying—and failing—to catch up with them? Was America really right where the USSR was so often wrong? It was a deeper question that he'd scarcely considered. All he knew of America was the obvious propaganda he saw every night on television or read about in the official State newspapers. He knew that had to be wrong, but his knowledge was unbalanced, since he did not really know true information. And so his leap to the West was fundamentally a leap of faith. If his country was so wrong, then the alternative superpower had to be right. It was a big, long, and dangerous leap, he thought, walking down the sidewalk and holding his little girl's hand. He told himself that he ought to be more fearful.

But it was too late to be frightened, and turning back would have been as harmful to him as going forward. Above everything else, it was a question of who would destroy him—his country or himself—if he failed to carry out his mission. And on the other side, would America reward him for trying to do what he deemed the right thing? It seemed that he was like Lenin and the other revolutionary heroes: He saw something that was objectively wrong, and he was going to try to prevent it. Why? Because he had to. He had to trust that his country's enemies would see right and wrong as he did. Would they? While the American President had denounced his nation as the focus of all the evil in the world, his country said much the same thing of America. Who was right? Who was wrong? But it was *his* country and *his* employer that was conspiring to murder an innocent man, and that was as far as he could see into the right/wrong question.

As Oleg and Svetlana turned left to go into their apartment building, he recognized one final time that his course was set. He could not change it, but could only toss the dice and wait to see how they came up.

And where would his daughter grow up? That also rested on the flying dice.

IT HAPPENED FIRST in York, the largest city in northern England. Fire-safety engineers tell everyone who will listen that the least important thing about fires is what causes them to start, because they always start for the same reasons. In this case, it was the one that firefighters most hate to discover. Owen Williams, after a friendly night at his favorite pub, The Brown Lion, managed to down six pints of dark beer, which, added to a lengthy and tiring day working his job as a carpenter, had made him rather sleepy by the time he got to his third-floor flat, but that didn't stop him from switching on the TV in his bedroom and lighting a final cigarette of the day. His head propped up on

a plumped pillow, he took a few puffs before fading out from the alcohol and the day's hard work. When that happened, his hand relaxed, and the cigarette fell onto the bedclothes. There it smoldered for about ten minutes before the white cotton sheets started to burn. Since Williams was unmarried—his wife had divorced him a year before—there was no one nearby to take note of the acrid, evil smell, and gradually the smoke wafted up to the ceiling as the low-level fire progressively consumed the bedclothes and then the mattress.

People rarely die from fire, and neither did Owen Williams. Instead, he started breathing in the smoke. Smoke—engineers often use the term "fire gas"—mainly consists of hot air, carbon monoxide, and soot particles, which are unburned material from the fire's fuel. Of these, the carbon monoxide is often the deadliest component, since it forms a bond with the red blood cells. This bond is actually stronger than the bond that hemoglobin forms with the free oxygen that the blood conveys to the various parts of the human body. The overall effect on the human consciousness is rather like that of alcohol—euphoria, like being pleasantly drunk, followed by unconsciousness and, if it goes too far, as in this case, death from oxygen starvation of the brain. And so, with a fire all around him, Owen Williams never woke, only fell deeper and deeper into a sleep that took him peacefully into eternity at the age of thirty-two years.

It wasn't until three hours later that a shift worker who lived on the same floor came home from work and noticed a smell in the third-floor corridor that lit up his internal alarm lights. He pounded on the door, and, getting no response, ran to his own flat and dialed 999.

There was a firehouse only six blocks away, and there, as with any other such house in the world, the firefighters rolled out of their military-style single beds, pulled on their boots and their turn-out coats, slid down the brass rail to the apparatus floor, punched the button to lift the automatic doors, and raced out on the street in their Dennis pumper, followed by a ladder truck. The drivers both knew the streets as well as any taxi driver and arrived at the apartment building less than ten minutes after their bells had chimed them awake. The pumper crew halted their vehicle, and two men dragged the draft hoses to the corner fire hydrant, charging the line in a skillful and well-practiced drill. The ladder men, whose primary job was search and rescue, raced inside to find that the concerned citizen who'd called in the alarm had already pounded on every door on the third floor and gotten his neighbors awake and out of their apartments. He pointed the lead fireman to the correct door, and that burly individual knocked it down with two powerful swings of his axe. He was greeted by a dense cloud of black smoke, the smell of which got past his air mask and immediately announced "mattress" to his experienced mind. This was followed by a quick prayer that they'd gotten here in time, and then instant dread that they had not. Everything, including the time of day, was against them in the dark, early morning. He ran into the back bedroom, smashed out the windows with his steel axe to vent the smoke outside, and then turned to see what he'd seen thirty or more times before—a human form, nearly hidden by the smoke and not moving. By then, two more of his colleagues were in the room. They dragged Owen Williams out into the corridor.

“Oh, shit!” one of them observed. The senior paramedic on the crew put an oxygen mask on the colorless face and started hitting the button to force pure oxygen into the lungs, and a second man began pounding on the victim’s chest to get his heart restarted while, behind them, the enginemen snaked a two-and-a-half-inch hose into the flat and started spraying water.

All in all, it was a textbook exercise. The fire was snuffed out in less than three minutes. Soon thereafter, the smoke had largely cleared, and the firemen took off their protective air masks. But, out in the corridor, Owen Williams showed not a flicker of life. The rule was that nobody was dead until a physician said so, and so they carried the body like a large and heavy limp rag to the white ambulance sitting on the street. The paramedic crew had their own battle drill, and they followed it to the letter, first putting the body on their gurney, then checking his eyes, then his airway—it was clear—and using their ventilator to get more oxygen into him, plus more CPR to get the heart moving. The peripheral burns would have to wait. The first thing to be done was to get the heart beating and lungs breathing, as the driver pulled out onto the darkened streets for Queen Victoria Hospital, just more than a mile away.

But by the time they got there, the paramedics in the back knew that it was just a waste of their highly valuable time. The casualty-receiving area was ready for them. The driver reversed direction and backed in, the rear doors were wrenched open, and the gurney was wheeled out, with a young doctor observing but not touching anything yet.

“Smoke inhalation,” the fireman-paramedic said, on coming in the swinging doors. “Severe carbon monoxide intoxication.” The extensive but mainly superficial burns could wait for the moment.

“How long?” the ER doc asked at once.

“Don’t know. It does not look good, doctor. CO poisoning, eyes fixed and dilated, fingernails red, no response to CPR or oxygen as yet,” the paramedic reported.

The medics all tried. You don’t just kiss off the life of a man in his early thirties, but an hour later it was clear that Owen Williams would not open his blue eyes ever again, and, on the doctor’s command, lifesaving efforts were stopped and a time of death announced, to be typed in on the death certificate. The police were there, also, of course. They mostly chatted with the firemen until the cause of death was established. The blood chemistry was taken—they’d drawn blood immediately to check blood gasses—and after fifteen minutes, the lab reported that the level of carbon monoxide was 39 percent, deep into the lethal range. He’d been dead before the firemen had rolled off their cots. And that was that.

It was the police rather than the firemen who took it from there. A man had died, and it had to be reported up the chain of command.

That chain ended in London in the steel-and-glass building that was New Scotland Yard, with its revolving triangular sign that made tourists think that the name of the London police force was, in fact, Scotland Yard, when actually that had been a street name years before for the old headquarters building. There, a Post-it note on a teletype machine announced that Chief Superintendent Nolan of Special Branch wanted to be informed at once of any death by fire or accident, and the teletype operator lifted a phone and called

the appropriate number.

That number was to the Special Branch watch officer, who asked a few questions, then called York for further information. Then it was his job to awaken "Tiny" Nolan just after four in the morning.

"Very well," the Chief Superintendent said, after collecting himself. "Tell them to do nothing whatsoever with the body—nothing at all. Make sure they understand, nothing at all."

"Very well, sir," the sergeant in the office confirmed. "I will relay that."

And seven miles away, Patrick Nolan went back to sleep, or at least tried to, while his mind wondered again what the hell SIS wanted a roasted human body for. It had to be something interesting, just that it was also quite disgusting to contemplate—enough that it denied him sleep for twenty minutes or so, before he faded back out.

THE MESSAGES WERE flying back and forth across the Atlantic and Eastern Europe all that night, and all of them were processed by the signals specialists in the various embassies, the underpaid and overworked clerical people who, virtually alone, were needed to transmit all of the most sensitive information from originators to end-users, and so, virtually alone, were the people who knew it all but did nothing with it. They were also the ones whom enemies tried so hard to corrupt, and who were, as a result, the most carefully watched of all staffers, whether at headquarters or in the various embassies, though for all the concern, there was usually no compensating solicitude for their comfort. But it was through these so often unappreciated but vital people that the dispatches found their way to the proper desks.

One recipient was Nigel Haydock, and it was to him that the most important of the morning's messages went, because only he, at this moment, knew the scope of BEATRIX, there in his office, where he was covered as Commercial Attaché to Her Britannic Majesty's Embassy, on the eastern bank of the Moscow River.

Haydock usually took his breakfast at the embassy, since with his wife so gravidly pregnant, he felt it improper for him to have her fix the morning meal for him—and besides, she was sleeping a lot, in preparation for not sleeping at all when the little bugger arrived, Nigel thought. So there he was at his desk, drinking his morning tea and eating a buttered muffin when he got to the dispatch from London.

"Bloody hell," he breathed, then paused to think. It was brilliant, this American play on MINCEMEAT—nasty and grisly, but brilliant. And it appeared that Sir Basil was going forward with it. That tricky old bugger. It was the sort of thing Bas would like. The current C was a devotee of the old school, one who liked the feel of devious operations. *His over-cleverness might be the downfall of him someday, but,* Haydock thought, *one has to admire his panache.* So get the Rabbit to Budapest and arrange his escape from there. . . .

ANDY HUDSON PREFERRED coffee in the morning, accompanied by eggs, bacon, fried tomatoes, and toast. “Bloody brilliant,” he said aloud. The audacity of this operation appealed to his adventurous nature. So they’d have to get three individuals—an adult male, an adult female, and a little girl—all out of Hungary covertly. Not overly difficult, but he’d have to check his rat line, because this was one operation he didn’t want to bollix up, especially if he had thoughts of promotion in the future. The Secret Intelligence Service was singular among British government bureaucracies insofar as, while it rewarded success fairly well, it was singularly unforgiving of failure—there was no union at Century House to protect the worker bees. But he’d known that going in, and they couldn’t take his pension away in any case—once he had the seniority to qualify for one, Hudson cautioned himself. But while this operation wasn’t quite the World Cup, it would be rather like scoring the winning goal for Arsenal against Manchester United at Wembly Stadium.

So his first task of the day was to see after his cross-border connections. *Those were reliable,* he thought. He’d spent a good deal of time setting them up, and he’d checked them out before. But he’d check them out again, starting today. He’d also check in with his AVH contact . . . or would he? Hudson wondered. What would that get him? It could allow him to find out if the Hungarian secret police force was on a state of alert or looking for something, but if that were true, the Rabbit would not be leaving Moscow. His information had to be highly important for an operation of this complexity to be run by CIA through SIS, and KGB was too careful and conservative an agency to take any sort of chances with information of that importance. The other side was never predictable in the intelligence business. There were just too many people with slightly different ideas for everyone to operate in lockstep. So, no, AVH wouldn’t know very much, if anything at all. KGB trusted no one at all, absent direct oversight, preferably with guns.

So the only smart thing for him to do would be to look in on his escape procedures, and even to do that circumspectly, and otherwise wait for this Ryan chap to arrive from London to look over his shoulder. . . . *Ryan,* he thought, *CIA*. The same one who—no chance of that. Just a coincidence. Had to be. That Ryan was a bootneck—an *American* bootneck. *Just too much of a coincidence,* the COS Budapest decided.

RYAN HAD REMEMBERED his croissants, and this time he’d taken them with him in the cab from Victoria to Century House, along with the coffee. He arrived to see Simon’s coat on the tree, but no Simon. *Probably off with Sir Basil,* he decided, and sat down at his desk, looking at the pile of overnights to go through. The croissants—he’d pigged out and bought three of them, plus butter and grape-jelly packets—were sufficiently flaky that he risked ending up wearing them instead of eating them, and this morning’s coffee wasn’t half bad. He made a mental note to write to Starbucks and suggest that they open some outlets in London. The Brits needed good coffee to get them off their

damned tea, and this new Seattle company might just pull it off, assuming they could train people to brew it up right. He looked up when the door opened.

"Morning, Jack."

"Hey, Simon. How's Sir Basil this morning?"

"He's feeling very clever indeed with this Operation BEATRIX. It's under way, in a manner of speaking."

"Can you fill me in on what's happening?"

Simon Harding thought for a moment, then explained briefly.

"Is somebody out of his fucking mind?" Ryan demanded at the conclusion of the minibrief.

"Jack, yes, it is creative," Harding agreed. "But there should be little in the way of operational difficulties."

"Unless I barf," Jack responded darkly.

"So take a plastic bag," Harding suggested. "Take one from the airplane with you."

"Funny, Simon." Ryan paused. "What is this, some sort of initiation ceremony for me?"

"No, we don't do that sort of thing. The operational concept comes from your people, and the request for cooperation comes from Judge Moore himself."

"Fuck!" Jack observed. "And they dump me in the shitter, eh?"

"Jack, the objective here is not merely to get the Rabbit out, but to do so in such a way as to make Ivan believe he's dead, not defected, along with his wife and daughter."

Actually, the part that bothered Ryan was the corpses. What could be more distasteful than that? *And he doesn't even know the nasty part yet,* Simon Harding thought, glad that he'd edited that part out.

ZAITZEV WALKED INTO the administrative office on The Centre's second floor. He showed his ID to the girl and waited a few minutes before going into the supervisor's office.

"Yes?" the bureaucrat said, only half looking up.

"I wish to take my vacation days. I want to take my wife to Budapest. There's a conductor there she wants to hear—and I wish to travel there by train instead of by air."

"When?"

"In the next few days. As soon as possible, in fact."

"I see." The KGB's travel office did many things, most of them totally mundane. The travel agent—what else could Zaitzev call him?—still didn't look up. "I must check the availability of space on the train."

"I want to travel International Class, compartments, beds for three—I have a child, you see."

"That may not be easy," the bureaucrat noted.

"Comrade, if there are any difficulties, please contact Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy," he said mildly.

That name caused him to look up, Zaitzev saw. The only question was whether or not he'd make the call. The average desk-sitter did not go out of his way to become known to a senior official, and, like most people in The Centre, he had a healthy fear of those on the top floor. On the one hand, he might want to see if someone were taking the colonel's name in vain. On the other hand, calling his attention to that senior officer as an officious little worm in Administration would do him little good. He looked at Zaitzev, wondering if he had authorization to invoke Rozhdestvenskiy's name and authority.

"I will see what I can do, Comrade Captain," he promised.

"When can I call you?"

"Later today."

"Thank you, comrade." Zaitzev walked out and down the corridor to the elevators. So that was done, thanks to his temporary patron on the top floor. To make sure everything was all right, he had his blue striped tie folded and in his coat pocket. Back at his desk, he went back to memorizing the content of his routine message traffic. A pity, he thought, that he could not copy out of the one-time-pad books, but that was not practical, and memorizing them was a sheer impossibility even for his trained memory.

UNDERWAY WAS THE single word on the message from Langley, Foley saw. So they were going forward. That was good. Headquarters was hot to trot on BEATRIX, and that was probably because the Rabbit had warned them about general communications security, the one thing sure to cause a general panic on the Seventh Floor at headquarters. But could it possibly be true? No. Mike Russell didn't think so, and, as he'd already observed, were it true, some of his agents would have been swept up like confetti after a parade, and that hadn't happened . . . unless KGB was really being clever and had doubled his agents, operating them under Soviet control, and he'd be able to determine that, wouldn't he? *Well, probably,* Foley judged. Certainly they could not all be double agents. Some things were just impossible to hide, unless KGB's Second Chief Directorate had the cleverest operation in the history of espionage, and while that was theoretically possible, it was the tallest of tall orders, and something that they'd probably avoid since the quality of some information going out would have to be good—too good to let go voluntarily. . . .

But he couldn't entirely discount that possibility. For sure, NSA would be taking steps right now to examine their KH-7 and other cipher machines, but Fort Meade had a very active Red Team whose only job was to crack their own systems, and while Russian mathematicians were pretty smart—always had been—they weren't aliens from another planet . . . unless they had an agent of their own deep inside Fort Meade, and that was a worry that everyone had. How much would KGB pay for that sort of information? Millions, perhaps. They didn't have all *that* much cash to pay their people and, in addition to being niggardly, KGB was singularly disloyal to its people, regarding them all as expendable assets. Oh, sure, they got Kim Philby out and safely ensconced in Moscow. The Western spy agencies knew where he lived

and had even photographed the turncoat bastard. They even knew how much he drank—a lot, even by Russian standards. But when the Russians lost an agent to arrest, did they ever try to bargain for him, do a trade? No, not since CIA had bargained for Francis Gary Powers, the unlucky U-2 pilot whom they'd shot down in 1961 and then traded for Rudolf Abel, but Abel had been one of their own officers, a colonel and a pretty good one, operating in New York. That *had to be* a deterrent to any American national in the spook business who had illusions of getting rich off Mother Russia's bank account. And traitors did hard time in the federal prison system, which had to be one hell of a deterrent.

But traitors were real, however misguided they were. At least the age of the ideological spy was largely ended. Those had been the most productive and the most dedicated, back when people really had believed that communism was the leading wave of human evolution, but even Russians no longer believed in Marxism-Leninism, except for Suslov—who was just about dead—and his successor-to-be, Alexandrov. So, no, KGB agents in the West were almost entirely mercenary bastards. Not the freedom fighters Ed Foley ran on the streets of Moscow, the COS told himself. That was an illusion all CIA officers held dearly, even his wife.

And the Rabbit? He was mad about something. A murder, he said, a proposed killing. Something that offended the sense of an honorable and decent man. So, yes, the Rabbit was honorable in his motivations, and therefore worthy of CIA's attention and solicitude.

Jesus, Ed Foley thought, *the illusions you have to have to carry on this stupid fucking business.* You had to be psychiatrist, loving mother, stern father, close friend, and father confessor to the idealistic, confused, angry, or just plain greedy individuals who chose to betray their country. Some of them drank too much; some of them were so enraged that they endangered themselves by taking grotesque risks. Some were just plain mad, demented, clinically disturbed. Some became sexual deviants—hell, some started off that way and just got worse. But Ed Foley had to be their social worker, which was such an odd job description for someone who thought of himself as a warrior against the Big Ugly Bear. *Well,* he told himself, *one thing at a time.* He'd knowingly chosen a profession with barely adequate pay, virtually no credit ever to be awarded, and no recognition for the dangers, physical and psychological, that attended it, serving his country in a way that would never be appreciated by the millions of citizens he helped to protect, despised by the news media—whom he in turn despised—and never being able to defend himself with the truth of what he did. What a hell of a life.

But it did have its satisfactions, like getting the Rabbit the hell out of Dodge City.

If BEATRIX worked.

Foley told himself that now, once more, he knew what it was like to pitch in the World Series.

ISTVAN KOVACS LIVED a few blocks from the Hungarian parliamentary

palace, an ornate building reminiscent of the Palace of Westminster, on the third floor of a turn-of-the-century tenement, whose four toilets were on the first floor of a singularly dreary courtyard. Hudson took the local metro over to the government palace and walked the rest of the way, making sure that he didn't have a tail. He'd called ahead—remarkably, the city's phone lines were secure, uncontrolled mainly because of the inefficiency of the local phone systems.

Kovacs was so typically Hungarian as to deserve a photo in the nonexistent tourist brochures: five-eight, swarthy, a mainly circular face with brown eyes and black hair. But he dressed rather better than the average citizen because of his profession. Kovacs was a smuggler. It was almost an honored livelihood in this country, since he traded across the border to a putatively Marxist country to the south, Yugoslavia, whose borders were open enough that a clever man could purchase Western goods there and sell them in Hungary and the rest of Eastern Europe. The border controls on Yugoslavia were fairly loose, especially for those who had an understanding with the border guards. Kovacs was one such person.

"Hello, Istvan," Andy Hudson said, with a smile. "Istvan" was the local version of Steven, and "Kovacs" the local version of Smith, for its ubiquity.

"Andy, good day to you," Kovacs replied in greeting. He opened a bottle of Tokaji, the local tawny wine made of grapes with the noble rot, which afflicted them every few years. Hudson had come to enjoy it as the local variant of sherry, with a different taste but an identical purpose.

"Thank you, Istvan." Hudson took a sip. This was good stuff, with six baskets of nobly rotten grapes on the label, indicating the very best. "So, how is business?"

"Excellent. Our VCRs are popular with the Yugoslavs, and the tapes they sell me are popular with everyone. Oh, to have such a prick as those actors do!" He laughed.

"The women aren't bad, either," Hudson noted. He'd seen his share of such tapes.

"How can a *kurva* be so beautiful?"

"The Americans pay their whores more than we do in Europe, I suppose. But, Istvan, they have no heart, those women." Hudson had never paid for it in his life—at least not up front.

"It's not their hearts that I want." Kovacs had himself another hearty laugh. He'd been hitting the Tokaji already this day, so he wasn't making a run tonight. Well, nobody worked all the time.

"I may have a task for you."

"Bringing what in?"

"Nothing. Bringing something out," Hudson clarified.

"That is simple. What trouble the *határ rség* give us is when we come in, and then not much." He held up his right hand, rubbing thumb and forefinger together in the universal gesture for what the border guards wanted—money or something negotiable.

"Well, this package might be bulky," Hudson warned.

"How bulky? A tank you want to take out?" The Hungarian army had just taken delivery of new Russian T-72s, and that had made the TV, in an attempt

to buck up the fighting spirit of the troops. *A waste of time,* Hudson thought. "That might be hard, but it can be done, for a price." But the Poles had already given one of those to SIS, a fact not widely known.

"No, Istvan, smaller than that. About my size, but three packages."

"Three people?" Kovacs asked, getting a dull stare in return. He got the message. "Bah, a simple task—*baszd meg*!" he concluded: Fuck it.

"I thought I could count on you, Istvan," Hudson said with a smile. "How much?"

"For three people into Yugoslavia . . ." Kovacs pondered that for a moment. "Oh. Five thousand d-mark."

"Ez kurva drága!" Hudson objected, or ostensibly so. It was cheap at the price, hardly a thousand quid. "Very well, you thief! I'll pay it because you are my friend—but just this one time." He finished his drink. "You know, I could just fly the packages out," Hudson suggested.

"But the airport is the one place where the *határ rség* are alert," Kovacs pointed out. "The poor bastards are always in the light, with their senior officers about. No chance for them to be open to . . . negotiations."

"I suppose that is so," Hudson agreed. "Very well. I will call you to keep track of your schedule."

"That is fine. You know where to find me."

Hudson stood. "Thanks for the drink, my friend."

"It lubricates the business," Kovacs said, as he opened the door for his guest. Five thousand West German marks would cover a lot of obligations and buy him a lot of goods to resell in Budapest for a handsome profit.

CHAPTER 23

ALL ABOARD

ZAITZEV CALLED THE TRAVEL OFFICE at 1530. He hoped that this didn't show an unusual eagerness, but everyone was interested in their vacation arrangements, he figured.

"Comrade Major, you are on the train day after tomorrow. It leaves Kiev Station at thirteen hours thirty and arrives in Budapest two days later at fourteen hours exactly. You and your family are booked into Carriage nine-oh-six in compartments A and B. You are also booked into Budapest's Hotel Astoria, Room three-oh-seven, for eleven days. The hotel is directly across the street from the Soviet Culture and Friendship House, which is, of course, a KGB operation with a liaison office, should you need any local assistance."

"Excellent. Thank you very much for your help." Zaitzev thought for a moment. "Is there anything I might purchase for you in Budapest?"

"Why, thank you, comrade." His voice just lit up. "Yes, perhaps some pantyhose for my wife," the functionary said in a furtive voice.

"What size?"

"My wife is a real Russian," he replied, meaning decidedly not anorexic.

"Very good. I will find something—or my wife will assist me."

"Excellent. Have a grand trip."

"Yes, I shall," Zaitzev promised him. With that settled, Oleg Ivan'ch left his desk and went to his watch supervisor to announce his plans for the coming two weeks.

"Isn't there some upstairs project that only you are cleared for?" the lieutenant colonel asked.

"Yes, but I asked Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy, and he said not to be concerned about it. Feel free to call him to confirm that, comrade," Zaitzev told him.

And he did, in Zaitzev's presence. The brief call ended with a "thank you, comrade," and then he looked up at his subordinate. "Very well, Oleg Ivan'ch, you are relieved of your duties beginning this evening. Say, while you are in Budapest . . ."

"Certainly, Andrey Vasili'yevich. You may pay me for them when I get back." Andrey was a decent boss, who never screamed, and helped his people when asked. A pity he worked for an agency that murdered innocent people.

And then it was just a matter of cleaning up his desk, which wasn't difficult. KGB regulations dictated that every desk be set up exactly the same way, so that a worker could switch desks without confusion, and Zaitzev's desk was arranged exactly according to office specifications. With his pencils properly sharpened and lined up, his message log up to the moment, and all his books properly in place, he dumped his trash and walked to the men's room. There he selected a stall, removed his brown tie, and replaced it with his striped one. He checked his watch. He was actually a little early. So Zaitzev took his time on the way out, smoked two cigarettes instead of one, and took a moment to enjoy the clear afternoon, stopping off to get a paper along the way, and, to pamper himself, six packs of Krasnopresnensky, the premium cigarette smoked by Leonid Brezhnev himself, for two rubles forty. Something nice to smoke on the train. Might as well spend his rubles now, he decided. They'd be valueless where he was going. Then he walked down to the metro station and checked the clock. The train, of course, came right on time.

FOLEY WAS IN the same place, doing the same thing in exactly the same way, his mind racing as the train slowed to a stop at *this* station. He felt the tiny vibration from the boarding passengers and the grunts of people bumping into one another. He straightened up to turn the page. Then the train lurched off. The engineers—or motormen, whatever the hell you called them—were always a little heavy on the throttle. A moment later, there was a presence to his left. Foley didn't see it, but he could feel it. Two minutes later, the subway train slowed for another station. It lurched to a stop, and someone bumped into him. Foley turned slightly to see who it was.

"Excuse me, comrade," the Rabbit said. He was wearing a blue tie with red stripes.

"No problem," Foley responded dismissively, as his heart leapt inside his chest.

Okay, two days from now, Kiev Station. The train to Budapest. The Rabbit moved a step or two away, and that was that. The signal had been passed.

Skyrockets in flight. Foley folded his paper, and made his way to the sliding doors. The usual walk to his apartment. Mary Pat was fixing dinner.

"Like my tie? You didn't tell me this morning."

MP's eyes lit up. *Day after tomorrow,* she realized. They'd have to get the word out, but that was just a procedural thing. She hoped Langley was ready. BEATRIX was going a little fast, but why dawdle?

"So, what's for dinner?"

"Well, I wanted to get a steak, but I'm afraid you'll have to settle for fried

chicken today."

"That's okay, honey. Steak for day after tomorrow, maybe?" she asked.

"Sounds good to me. Honey, where's Eddie?"

"Watching *Transformers,* of course." She pointed to the living room.

"That's my boy," Ed observed, with a smile. "He knows the important stuff." Foley kissed his wife tenderly.

"Later, tiger," Mary Pat breathed back. But a successful operation merited a discreet celebration. Not that this one was successful yet, but it was certainly headed that way, and it was their first in Moscow. "Got the pictures?" she whispered.

He pulled them out of his jacket pocket. They were not exactly magazine-cover quality, but they did give good representations of the Rabbit and his little bunny. They didn't know what Mrs. Rabbit looked like, but this would have to do. They'd get the shots to Nigel and Penny. One of them would cover the train station to make sure the Rabbit family got going on time.

"Ed, there's a problem with the shower," Mary Pat said. "The spray thingee isn't right."

"I'll see if Nigel has the right tools." Foley walked out the door and down the hall. In a few minutes, they were back, Nigel carrying his toolbox.

"Hello, Mary." Nigel waved on his way to the bathroom. Once there, he made a fuss about opening his toolbox, then turning on the water, and now any bug the KGB might have here was jammed.

"Okay, Ed, what is it?"

Ed handed over the photos. "The Rabbit and the Bunny. We have nothing on Mrs. Rabbit yet. They'll all be taking the one P.M. train to Budapest, day after tomorrow."

"Kiev Station," Haydock said, with a nod. "You'll want me to get a picture of Mrs. Rabbit."

"Correct."

"Very well. I can do that." The wheels started turning at once. As Commercial Attaché, he could come up with a cock-and-bull story to cover it, Haydock reasoned. He'd get a tame reporter to accompany him and make it look like a news story—something about tourism, perhaps. Paul Matthews of the *Times* would play along. Easily done. He'd have Matthews bring a photographer and take professional photos of the whole Rabbit family for London and Langley to use. And Ivan shouldn't suspect a thing. However important the Rabbit's information might be, the Rabbit himself was just a cipher, one of many thousands of KGB employees not important enough to be taken any note of. So tomorrow morning Haydock would call the Soviet state railroad and say that the Soviets' sister service in Britain—which was also state-owned—was interested in how the Russians ran theirs, and so . . . yes, that would work. There was nothing the Soviets liked better than others wanting to learn from their glorious system. Good for their egos. Nigel reached over to turn off the water.

"There, I think that has it fixed, Edward."

"Thanks, pal. Any good places in Moscow to buy tools?"

"I don't know, Ed. I've had these since I was a lad. Belonged to my father, you see."

Then Foley remembered what had happened to Nigel's father. Yeah, he wanted BEATRIX to succeed. He wanted to take every opportunity to shove a big one up the Bear's hairy ass. "How's Penny?"

"The baby hasn't dropped yet. So at least another week, probably more. Strictly speaking, she isn't due for another three weeks, but—"

"But the docs *never* get that one right, buddy. Never," Foley told his friend. "Best advice, stay close. When you planning to fly home?"

"Ten days should be about right, the embassy physician tells us. It's only a two-hour flight, after all."

"Your doc is an optimist, pal. These things never go according to plan. I don't suppose you want a little Englishman to be born in Moscow, eh?"

"No, Edward, we don't."

"Well, keep Penny off the trampoline," Foley suggested with a wink.

"Yes, I will do that, Ed." American humor could be rather crass, he thought.

This could be interesting, Foley thought, walking his friend to the door. He'd always thought Brit children were born at the age of five and sent immediately off to boarding school. Did they raise them the same way Americans did? He'd have to see.

THE BODY OF Owen Williams was never collected—it turned out he had no immediate family, and his ex-wife had no interest in him at all, especially dead. The local police, on receipt of a telex from Chief Superintendent Patrick Nolan of London's Metropolitan Police, transferred the body to an aluminum casket, which was loaded in a police van and driven south toward London. But not quite. The van stopped at a preselected location, and the aluminum box was transferred to another, unmarked, van for the drive into the city. It ended up in a mortuary in the Swiss Cottage district of north London.

The body was not in very good shape, and, since it had not yet seen a mortician, it had also not been treated in any way. The unburned underside was a blue-crimson shade of postmortem lividity. Once the heart stops, the blood is pulled by gravity to the lower regions of the body—in this case, the back—where, lacking oxygen, it tends to turn the caucasian body a pale bluish color, leaving the upper side with a disagreeable ivory pallor. The mortician here was a civilian who occasionally contracted specialty work to the Secret Intelligence Service. Along with a forensic pathologist, he examined the body for anything unusual. The worst thing was the smell of roasted human meat, but their noses were covered with surgical masks to attenuate the odor.

"Tattoo, underside of the forearm, partially but not entirely burned off," the mortician reported.

"Very well." The pathologist lit the flame of a propane blowtorch and applied it to the arm, burning all evidence of the tattoo off the body. "Anything else, William?" he asked a couple minutes later.

"Nothing I can see. The upper body is well charred. Hair is mainly gone"—the smell of burned human hair is particularly vile—"and one ear nearly burned off. I presume this chap was dead before he burned."

"Ought to have been," the pathologist said. "The blood gasses had the CO

well spiked into lethal range. I doubt this poor bugger felt a thing." Then he burned off the fingerprints, lingering to sear both hands with the torch so that it would not appear to have been a deliberate mutilation of the body.

"There," the pathologist said finally. "If there's a way to identify this body, I do not know what it is."

"Freeze it now?" the undertaker asked.

"No, I don't think so. If we chill it down to, oh, two or three degrees Celsius, no noticeable decomposition ought to take place."

"Dry ice, then."

"Yes. The metal casket is well insulated and it seals hermetically. Dry ice doesn't melt, you know. It goes directly from a solid to a gas. Now we need to get it dressed." The doctor had brought the underclothing with him. None of it was British in origin, and all of it was badly damaged by fire. All in all, it was a distasteful job, but one that pathologists and morticians get used to very early in their professions. It was just a different way of thinking for a different kind of job. But this was unusually gruesome, even for these two. Both would have an extra drink before turning in that night. When they finished, the aluminum box was reloaded on the van and driven to Century House. There would be a note on Sir Basil's desk in the morning to let him know that Rabbit A was ready for his last flight.

LATER THAT NIGHT and three thousand miles away, in Boston, Massachusetts, there was a gas explosion on the second floor of a two-story frame dwelling overlooking the harbor. Three people were there when it happened. The two adults were not married, but both were drunk, and the woman's four-year-old daughter—not related to the male resident—was already in bed. The fire spread quickly, too quickly for the two adults to respond to it through their intoxication. The three deaths didn't take long, all of them from smoke inhalation rather than incineration. The Boston Fire Department responded within ten minutes, and their search-and-rescue ladder men battled their way through the flames under cover of two hose streams, found the bodies, and dragged them out, but they knew that they'd been too late again. The captain of the responding company could tell almost instantly what had gone wrong. There had been a gas leak in the kitchen from the old stove that the landlord hadn't wanted to replace, and so three people had died of his parsimony. (He'd gladly collect the insurance check, of course, and say how sorry he was about the tragic incident.) This was not the first such case. It wouldn't be the last, either, and so he and his men would have some nightmares about the three bodies, especially the little girl's. But that just went with the job.

The story was early enough to make the eleven o'clock news on the rule that "If it bleeds, it leads." The Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Boston field division was up and watching, actually waiting for coverage of the baseball playoffs—he'd been at an official dinner and missed the live broadcast on NBC—and saw the story and instantly remembered the lunatic telex he'd gotten earlier in the day. That caused a curse to be muttered and a phone to be lifted.

"FBI," said the young agent guarding the phones when he picked up.

"Get Johnny up," the SAC ordered. "A family got burned up in a fire on Hester Street. He'll know what to do. Have him call me at home if he has to."

"Yes, sir." And that was that, except for Assistant Special Agent in Charge John Tyler, who'd been reading a book in his bed—a native of South Carolina, he preferred college football to professional baseball—when the phone rang. He managed to grumble on the way to the bathroom, then collected his side arm and car keys for the ride south. He'd seen the telex from Washington, too, and wondered what sort of drugs Emil Jacobs was taking, but his was not to reason why.

NOT TOO LONG after that, but five time zones to the east, Jack Ryan rolled out of bed, got his paper, and switched on the TV. CNN also carried the fire story from Boston—it was a slow news night at home—and he breathed a quiet prayer for the victims of the fire, followed by speculation about the gas pipe connection in his own stove. His house, though, was a lot newer than the standing lumberyard that defined a house in south Boston. When they went, they went big, and they went fast. Too fast for those people to get out, evidently. He remembered his father often saying how much he respected firemen, people who ran *into* burning buildings instead of away from them. The worst part of the job had to be what they found unmoving on the inside. He shook his head as he opened his morning paper and reached for his coffee, while his physician wife saw the tail end of the fire story and thought her own thoughts. She remembered treating burn victims in her third year of medical school and the horrid screams that went with debriding burned tissue off the underlying wounds, and there wasn't a damned thing you could do about it. But those people in Boston were dead now, and that was that. She didn't like it, but she'd seen a lot of death, because sometimes the Bad Guy won, and that was just how things worked. It was not a pleasant thought for a parent, especially since the little girl in Boston had been Sally's age and now would never get older. She sighed. At least she'd be doing some surgery that morning, something that really made a difference with somebody's health.

SIR BASIL CHARLESTON lived in an expensive townhouse in London's posh Belgravia district south of Knightsbridge. A widower whose grown children had long since moved away, he was accustomed to living alone, though he had a discreet security detail in attendance at all times. He also had a maid service which came in three times a week to straighten up, though he didn't bother with a cook, preferring to dine out or even fix small meals for himself. He had, of course, the usual accoutrements of a king spook: three different sorts of secure phones, a secure telex, and a new secure fax machine. There was no live-in secretary, but when the office was busy and he wasn't there, a courier service kept him apprised of the printed material circulating in Century House. Indeed, since he had to assume that the "opposition" kept an eye on his home, he deemed it smarter to remain at home in time of crisis, the better to project the image of calmness. It really didn't matter. He was firmly tied to the SIS by an electronic umbilical cord.

And so it was this morning. Someone at Century House had decided to let him know that SIS had an adult male body to use in Operation BEATRIX: just the sort of thing he needed with breakfast, Basil noted, with a twisted expression. They needed three, though, one of them a female child, which was *really* not something to contemplate with his morning tea and Scottish oatmeal.

However, it was hard not to get excited about this BEATRIX operation. If their Rabbit was speaking the truth—not all of them did—this chap would have all manner of useful information in his head. The most useful of all, of course, would be if he could identify Soviet agents within Her Majesty's government. That was properly the job of the Security Service—erroneously called MI-5—but the two agencies cooperated closely, more closely than CIA and FBI did in America, or so it appeared to Charleston. Sir Basil and his people had long suspected a high-level leak somewhere in the Foreign Office, but they'd been unable to close in on him or her. So, if they got their Rabbit out—it wasn't done until it was done, he reminded himself—that was certainly one question his people would be asking in the safe house they used outside of Taunton in the rolling hills of Somerset.

"NOT GOING TO work today?" Irina asked her husband. He ought to have left for the office by now, surely.

"No, and I have a surprise for you," Oleg announced.

"What is that?"

"We're going to Budapest tomorrow."

That snapped her head around. "What?"

"I decided to take my vacation days, and there's a new conductor in Budapest now, Jozsef Rozsa. I knew you liked classical music, and I decided to take you and *zaichik* there, dear."

"Oh," was all she had to say. "But what about my job at GUM?"

"Can't you get free of that?"

"Well, yes, I suppose," Irina admitted. "But why Budapest?"

"Well, the music, and we can buy some things there. I have a list of items to get for people at The Centre," he told her.

"Ah, yes . . . we can get some nice things for Svetlana," she thought out loud on reflection. Working at GUM, she knew what was available in Hungary that she'd never get in Moscow, even in the "closed" stores. "Who is this Rozsa, anyway?"

"He's a young Hungarian conductor touring Eastern Europe. He has a fine reputation, darling. The program is supposed to be Brahms and Bach, I think—one of the Hungarian state orchestras and," he added, "a lot of good shopping." There wasn't a woman in all the world who wouldn't respond favorably to that opportunity, Oleg judged. He waited patiently for the next objection:

"I don't have anything to wear."

"My dear, that is why we're going to Budapest. You will be able to buy anything you need there."

"Well . . ."

"And remember to pack everything you need in one bag. We'll take empty bags for all the things we're buying for ourselves and our friends."

"But—"

"Irina, think of Budapest as one big consumer-goods store. Hungarian VCRs, Western jeans and pantyhose, real perfume. You will be the envy of your office at GUM," he promised her.

"Well . . ."

"I thought so. My darling, we are going on vacation!" he told her, a little manly force in his voice.

"If you say so," she responded, with the hint of an avaricious smile. "I will call in to the office later and let them know. I suppose they won't miss me too badly."

"The only people they miss in Moscow are the Politburo members, and they only miss them for the day and a half it takes to replace them," he announced.

And so that was settled. They were taking the train to Hungary. Irina started thinking about what to pack. Oleg would leave that to her. *Inside a week or ten days, we will all have much better clothes,* the KGB communications officer told himself. And maybe in a month or two, they would go to that Disney Planet place in the American province of Florida. . . .

He wondered if CIA knew how much trust he was putting in them, and he prayed—an unusual activity for a KGB officer—that they would perform as well as he hoped.

"GOOD MORNING, JACK."

"Hey, Simon. What's new in the world?" Jack set his coffee down before taking his coat off.

"Suslov died last night," Harding announced. "It will be in their afternoon papers."

"What a pity. Another bat found his way back into hell, eh?" *At least he died with good eyesight, thanks to Bernie Katz and the guys from Johns Hopkins,* Ryan thought. "Complications of diabetes?"

Harding shrugged. "Plus being old, I should imagine. Heart attack, our sources tell us. Amazing that the nasty old bugger actually had a heart. In any case, his replacement will be Mikhail Yevgeniyevich Alexandrov."

"And he's not exactly a day at the beach. When will they plant Suslov?"

"He's a senior Politburo member. I would expect a full state funeral, marching band, the lot, then cremation and a slot in the Kremlin wall."

"You know, I've always wondered, what does a real communist think about when he knows he's dying? You suppose they wonder if it was all a great big fucking mistake?"

"I have no idea. But Suslov was evidently a true believer. He probably thought of all the good he'd done in his life, leading humanity to the 'Radiant Future' they like to talk about."

Nobody's that dumb, Ryan wanted to retort, but Simon was probably right. Nothing lingered longer in a man's mind than a bad idea, and certainly Red

Mike had held his bad ideas close to whatever heart had finally cashed in. But a communist's best-case scenario for after death corresponded with Ryan's worst, and if the communist was wrong, then, quite literally, there was hell to pay. *Tough luck, Mishka, hope you took some sunblock with you.*

"Okay, what's up for today?"

"The PM wants to know if this will have any effect on Politburo policy."

"Tell her no, it won't. In political terms, Alexandrov might as well be Suslov's twin brother. He thinks Marx is God, and Lenin is his prophet, and Stalin was mostly right, just a little too *nekulturniy* in his application of political theory. The rest of the Politburo doesn't really believe that stuff anymore, but they have to pretend that they do. So call Alexandrov the new conductor of the ideological symphony orchestra. They don't much like the music anymore, but they dance to it anyway, 'cause it's the only dance they know. I don't think he will affect their policy decisions a dot. I bet they listen when he talks, but they let it go in one ear and out the other; they pretend to respect him, but they really don't."

"It's a little more complex than that, but you've caught the essentials," Harding agreed. "The thing is, I have to find a way to produce ten double-spaced pages that say it."

"Yeah, in bureaucratese." Ryan had never quite mastered that language, which was one of the reasons Admiral Greer liked him so much.

"We have our procedures, Jack, and the PM—indeed, all of the Prime Ministers—like to have it in words they understand."

"The Iron Lady understands the same language as a stevedore, I bet."

"Only when she speaks those words, Sir John, not when others try to speak them to her."

"I suppose. Okay," Ryan had to concede the point. "What documents do we need?"

"We have an extensive dossier file on Alexandrov. I've already called down for it."

So this day would be occupied with creative writing, Ryan decided. It would have been more interesting to look into their economy, but instead he'd have to help do a prospective, analytical obituary for a man whom nobody had liked, and who'd probably died intestate anyway.

THE PREPARATION WAS even easier than he'd hoped. Haydock had expected the Russians to be pleased, and, sure enough, one call to his contact in the Ministry of Transportation had done the trick. At ten the next morning, he, Paul Matthews, and a *Times* photographer would be at the Kiev station to do a story about Soviet state rail and how it compared to British Rail, which needed some help, most Englishmen thought, especially in upper management.

Matthews probably suspected that Haydock was a "six" person, but had never let on, since the spook had been so helpful feeding stories to him. It was the usual way of creating a friendly journalist—even taught at the SIS Academy—but it was officially denied to the American CIA. *The United States*

Congress passes the most remarkable and absurd laws to hamstring its intelligence services, the Brit thought, though he was sure the official rules were broken on a daily basis by the people in the field. He'd violated a few of the much looser rules of his own mother service. And had never been caught, of course. Just as he had never been caught working agents on the streets of Moscow. . . .

"HI, TONY." Ed Foley extended a friendly hand to the Moscow correspondent of *The New York Times.* He wondered if Prince knew how much Ed despised him. But it probably went both ways. "What's happening today?"

"Looking for a statement by the Ambassador on the death of Mikhail Suslov."

Foley laughed. "How about he's glad the nasty old cocksucker is dead?"

"Can I quote you on that?" Prince held up his scribble pad.

Time to back up. "Not exactly. I have no instructions in that matter, Tony, and the boss is tied up on other things at the moment. No time loose to see you until later afternoon, I'm afraid."

"Well, I need *something,* Ed."

" 'Mikhail Suslov was an important member of the Politburo, and an important ideological force in this country, and we regret his untimely passing.' That good enough?"

"Your first quote was better and a lot more truthful," the *Times* correspondent observed.

"You ever meet him?"

Prince nodded. "Couple of times, before and after the Hopkins docs worked on his eyes—"

"Is that for real? I mean, I heard a few stories about it, but nothing substantive." Foley acted the words out.

Prince nodded again. "It was true enough. Glasses like Coke-bottle bottoms. Courtly gent, I thought. Well-mannered and all that, but there was a little 'tough guy' underneath. I guess he was the high priest of communism, like."

"Oh, took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, did he?"

"You know, there was something of the aesthete about him, like he really was a priest of a sort," Prince said, after a moment's reflection.

"Think so?"

"Yeah, something otherworldly about the guy, like he could see things the rest of us couldn't, like a priest or something. He sure enough believed in communism. Didn't apologize for it, either."

"Stalinist?" Foley asked.

"No, but thirty years ago he would have been. I can see him signing the order to kill somebody. Wouldn't lose any sleep over it—not our Mishka."

"Who's going to replace him?"

"Not sure," Prince admitted. "My contacts say they don't know."

"I thought he was tight with another Mike, that Alexandrov guy," Foley offered, wondering if Prince's contacts were as good as he thought they were. Fucking with Western reporters was a game for the Soviet leadership. It was different in Washington, where a reporter had power to use over politicians.

That didn't apply here. The Politburo members didn't fear reporters at all—much the reverse, actually.

Prince's contacts weren't all that great: "Maybe, but I'm not sure. What's the talk here?"

"Haven't been to the lunch room yet, Tony. Haven't heard the gossip yet," Foley parried. *You don't* really *expect a tip from me, do you?*

"Well, we'll know by tomorrow or day after."

But it would look good for you if you were the first reporter to make the prediction, and you want me to help you, right? Not is this lifetime, Foley thought, but then he had to reconsider. Prince would not be a particularly valuable friend, but perhaps a usable one, and it never made sense to make enemies for the fun of it. On the other hand, to be too helpful to the guy might suggest either that Foley was a spook or knew who the spooks were, and Tony Prince was one of those guys who liked to talk and tell people how smart he is. . . . *No, it's better for Prince to think I'm dumb, because he'll tell everyone he knows how smart* he *is and how dumb* I *am.*

The best cover of them all, he'd learned at The Farm, was to be thought a dullard, and while it was a little hurtful to his ego to play that game, it was helpful to the mission, and Ed Foley was a mission-oriented guy. So . . . *fuck Prince and what he thinks.* I'm *the guy in this city who makes a difference.*

"Tell you what, I'll ask around—see what people think."

"Fair enough." *Not that I expected anything useful from you,* Prince thought a little too loudly.

He was less skillful than he thought at concealing his feelings. He would never be a good poker player, the Chief of Station thought, seeing him out the door. He checked his watch. Lunchtime.

LIKE MOST EUROPEAN stations, Kiev's was a pale yellow—just like a lot of old royal palaces, in fact, as if in the early nineteenth century there had been a continent-wide surplus of mustard, and some king or other had liked the color, and so everyone had painted his palace that way. *It never happened in Britain, thank God,* Haydock thought. The ceiling was glass set in iron frames to let the light in but, as in London, the glass was rarely, if ever, cleaned, and was instead coated with soot from long-gone steam engines and their coal-fired boiler fires.

But Russians were still Russians. They came to the platform carrying their cheap suitcases, and they were almost never alone, mostly in family groups, even if only one of them was leaving, so that proper goodbyes could be experienced, with passionate kisses, male-to-female, and male-to-male, which always struck the Englishman as peculiar. But it was a local custom, and all local customs were peculiar to visitors. The train to Kiev, Belgrade, and Budapest was scheduled to leave at 1:00 P.M. on the dot, and the Russian railroads, like the Moscow Metro, kept to a fairly precise schedule.

Just a few feet away, Paul Matthews was conversing with a representative of the Soviet state railway, talking about the motive power—it was all electric, since Comrade Lenin had decided to bring electricity and eliminate lice all

across the USSR. The former, strangely, had proved easier than the latter.

The big VL80T locomotive, two hundred tons of steel, sat at the head of the train on Track Three, with three-day coaches, a dining car, and six international class sleepers, plus three mail cars just behind the engine. On the platform were the various conductors and stewards, looking rather surly, as Russians in service-related jobs tended to do.

Haydock was looking around, the photos of the Rabbit and the Bunny seared into his memory. The station clock said it was 12:15, and that tallied with his wristwatch. Would the Rabbit show? Haydock usually preferred to be early for a flight or a train, perhaps from a fear of being late left over from his childhood. Whatever the reason, he'd have been here by now for a one o'clock train. But not everyone thought that way, Nigel reminded himself—his wife, for example. He was slightly afraid that she'd deliver the baby in their car on the way to the hospital. It would make a hell of a mess, the spook was sure, while Paul Matthews asked his questions, and the photographer shot his Kodak film. Finally . . .

Yes, that was the Rabbit, along with Mrs. Rabbit and the little Bunny. Nigel tapped the shoulder of the photographer.

"This family approaching now. Lovely little girl," he observed, for anyone close enough to listen. The photographer fired off ten frames at once, then switched to another Nikon and fired off ten more. *Excellent,* Haydock thought. He'd have them printed up before the embassy closed down for the night, get several printed off to—no, he'd personally hand them to Ed Foley, and make sure the others went by Queen's Messenger—the Brits' rather more dignified term for a diplomatic courier—so they'd be sure to be in Sir Basil's hands before he turned in. He wondered how they would arrange for hiding the fact of the Rabbit's defection—it certainly meant getting cadavers. Distasteful, but possible. He was glad he didn't have to figure out all the details.

As it turned out, the Rabbit family walked within ten feet of him and his reporter friend. No words were exchanged, though the little girl, like little girls everywhere, turned to look at him as she passed. He gave her a wink and got a little smile in return. And then they passed by, walked up to the attendant, and showed their paper ticket forms.

Matthews kept on asking his questions and got very polite answers from the smiling Russian trainman.

At 12:59:30, the conductor—or at least so Haydock assumed, from the shabby uniform—walked up and down the side of the train and made sure all the doors but one were secure. He blew a whistle and waved a paddle-like wand to let the engineer know it was time to move off, and at 1:00 on the dot, the horn sounded, and the train started inching away from the platform, gaining speed slowly as it headed west into the capacious railyard, heading for Kiev, Belgrade, and Budapest.

CHAPTER 24

ROLLING HILLS

IT WAS AN ADVENTURE for Svetlana most of all, but actually for all of them, since none of the Zaitzev family had ever taken an intercity train. The railyards on the way out were like any railyards: miles of parallel and converging and diverging track packed with box- and flatcars carrying who-knew-what to who-knew-where. The roughness of the tracks only seemed to increase the apparent speed. Oleg and Irina both lit cigarettes and looked with casual interest out the large but grubby windows. The seats were not unreasonable, and Oleg could see how the beds folded down from the overhead.

They had two compartments, in fact, with a connecting door. The paneling was wood—birch, by the look of it—and each compartment, remarkably, had its own lavatory, and so *zaichik* would have her very own, for the first time in her life, a fact she had yet to appreciate.

Five minutes after leaving the station, the conductor came by for their tickets, which Zaitzev handed over.

"You are State Security?" the conductor asked politely. *So the KGB travel office called ahead for me,* Zaitzev thought. *Good of them.* That desk-sitter probably really wanted the pantyhose for his wife.

"I am not permitted to discuss that, comrade," Oleg Ivan'ch answered, with a hard look, making sure that the trainman appreciated his importance. That was one way to ensure proper service. A KGB officer wasn't quite as good as a Politburo member, but it beat the hell out of being a mere factory manager. It wasn't so much that people dreaded KGB, but that they just didn't want to go out of their way to come to the agency's adverse notice.

"Yes, of course, comrade. If you need anything, please call for me. Supper is at eighteen hours, and the dining car is the next one forward." He pointed the

way.

"How is the food?" Irina decided to ask. Surely, being the wife of a KGB officer had its advantages. . . .

"It is not bad, comrade," the conductor answered politely. "I eat there myself," he added, which said something, Oleg and Irina both thought.

"Thank you, comrade."

"Enjoy your trip with us," he said, and he took his leave.

Oleg and Irina both took out books. Svetlana pressed her nose to the window to watch the world passing by, and so the trip began, with only one of them knowing the final destination. Western Russia is mostly a region of rolling plains and distant horizons, not unlike Kansas or eastern Colorado. It was boring to everyone but their *zaichik,* for whom everything was new and exciting, especially the cattle that were mainly munching on grass. *Cows,* she thought, *are pretty cool.*

BACK IN MOSCOW, Nigel Haydock thanked the bureaucrat from the Transport Ministry for his splendid help, along with Paul Matthews, and then they made their way off to the British Embassy. The embassy had a photo lab, and the photographer went that way, while Matthews followed Nigel to his office.

"So, Paul, is there a useful story in that?"

"I suppose there might be. Is it important that there should be?"

"Well, it's valuable to me that the Sovs should think I can bring attention to the glory of their country," Haydock explained with a chuckle.

You are a -6 chap, aren't you? Matthews thought without voicing his suspicion. "I suppose I can generate something. God knows British Rail needs a boost. Maybe this will encourage the exchequer to send some more money their way."

"Not a bad idea at all," Nigel agreed. It was clear that his guest had his suspicions but had the good grace to keep them quiet, perhaps until a later day, when Nigel was back at a desk in Century House, and they were at a Fleet Street pub.

"You want to see our photos?"

"Would you mind?"

"Not at all. We throw most of them away, as you know."

"Excellent," Haydock announced. Then he reached into the credenza behind his desk. "Drink, Paul?"

"Thank you, Nigel. Yes, a sherry would be nice."

Two sherries later, the photographer came in with a folder full of prints. Haydock took it and leafed through them. "You do excellent work. You know, when I use my Nikon, I never quite get the light right. . . ." he said. There, a nice family shot of the Rabbit—and, most important, Mrs. Rabbit. There were three, each one better than the last. He slid them into his drawer and handed the folder back. Matthews took his cue.

"Well, must get back to my office and write this story up. Thanks for the lead, Nigel."

"My pleasure, Paul. See your own way out?"

"Not a problem, old man." And Matthews and his photographer disappeared into the corridor. Haydock returned his attention to the photos. Mrs. Rabbit was typically Russian, with her round, Slavic face—she could have had a million identical sisters throughout the Soviet Union. She needed to lose a few pounds and get a makeover in the West . . . *if they make it that far,* he cautioned himself. Height, about five feet four or so; weight, about a hundred forty pounds, not at all unpleasant. The child, he saw, was darling with her lively blue eyes and happy expression—too young to learn to hide her feelings behind a blank mask, as nearly all the adults here did. No, children were the same everywhere in their innocence and insatiable curiosity. But, most important, they now had high-quality photos of the Rabbit family.

The courier was on the top floor, near the office of the Ambassador, Sir John Kenny. Haydock passed him a manila envelope sealed by metal clasp, glue, and wax over the flap. The address on the front designated the Foreign Office box that went straight to Century House across the Thames from Whitehall. The courier's bag was an expensive leather attaché case with the coat of arms of the Royal House of Windsor embossed on both sides. There was also a pair of handcuffs for him to secure it to his wrist, despite the stern rules of the Vienna Convention. The Queen's Messenger had a car waiting to take him to Sheremetyevo International Airport for the British Airways 737 afternoon return flight to Heathrow. The photos would be in Sir Basil's hand before he went home for the evening, and surely some Century House experts would be staying late that night to go over them. That would be the last official check to see if the Rabbit was genuine. His face would be compared with those of known KGB field and security officers—and if there was a hit, then Ed and Mary Foley were in for a bad time. But Haydock didn't expect that to happen. He agreed with his CIA counterparts. This one looked and felt real. But then, so did good Directorate Two people, didn't they? His last stop was at Communications to get a quick message off to SIS Headquarters that an important message was en route via courier on Operation BEATRIX. That would perk up everyone's eyeballs, and an SIS man would be waiting at the mailroom in Whitehall for this particular envelope. *As laggardly as a government bureaucracy could be,* Haydock thought, *when you had something important to do, it usually got done quickly, at least in the SIS.*

THE FLIGHT TOOK two hours and twenty minutes—a little late due to adverse winds—before arriving at Heathrow's Terminal Three. There, a Foreign Office representative whisked the courier off to downtown London in a black Jaguar saloon car, and the Queen's Messenger made his delivery and went off to his own office. Before he even got there, an SIS officer had taken the package and hustled down to Westminster Bridge and across the Thames.

"You have it?" Sir Basil asked.

"Here, sir." The messenger passed over the envelope. Charleston checked the closures and, satisfied that it had not been tampered with, slit it open with his paper knife. Then, for the first time, he saw what the Rabbit looked like. Three minutes later, Alan Kingshot walked in. C handed over the color prints.

Kingshot took the top photo and gave it a long look. “So, this is our Rabbit, is it?”

“Correct, Alan,” Sir Basil confirmed.

“He looks ordinary enough. His wife, as well. The little girl is rather cute,” the senior field spook thought out loud. “On the way to Budapest now, are they?”

“Left Kiev Station five and a half hours ago.”

“Fast work from Nigel.” Kingshot gave the faces a closer look, wondering what information lay in the brain behind the man’s face, and whether or not they’d get to use it. “So, BEATRIX goes forward. Do we have the bodies?”

“The male from York is close enough. We’ll need to burn his face off, I’m afraid,” C observed distastefully.

“No surprise there, sir,” Kingshot agreed. “What about the other two?”

“Two candidates from America. Mother and daughter killed in a house fire in Boston, I believe. The FBI is working on that as we speak. We need to get this photo to them at once to make sure the bodies match up properly.”

“I’ll take care of that now if you wish, sir.”

“Yes, Alan, please do that.”

The machine downstairs was a color-photo transmitter like the one used by newspapers—relatively new and, its operator told Kingshot, very easy to use. He gave the photo only a cursory look. Transmission to an identical machine made by Xerox and located at Langley took less than two minutes. Kingshot took the photo back and returned to C’s office.

“Done, sir.” Sir Basil waved him to a seat.

Charleston checked his watch, giving it five minutes because CIA headquarters was a large building, and the communications people were in the basement. Then he called Judge Arthur Moore on the secure, dedicated line.

“Afternoon, Basil,” Moore’s voice said over the digitized circuit.

“Hello, Arthur. You have the photo?”

“Just got here. Looks like a nice little family,” the DCI observed. “This is from the train station?”

“Yes, Arthur, they are en route as we speak. They will arrive in Budapest in about twenty—no, nineteen hours.”

“Okay. Ready at your end, Basil?”

“We soon will be. There is the matter of those unfortunate people from Boston, however. We have the male body. It appears on first inspection that it will serve our needs quite well.”

“Okay, I’ll have the FBI expedite things here,” Moore replied. He’d have to get this photo to the Hoover Building ASAP. *Might as well share this grisly business with Emil,* he thought.

“Very good, Arthur. I shall keep you posted.”

“Great, Bas. See you.”

“Excellent.” Charleston hung up his phone, then looked over at Kingshot. “Have our people prepare the body for transport to Budapest.”

“Timing, sir?”

“Three days should be about right,” Sir Basil thought out loud.

“Right.” Kingshot left the room.

C thought for a moment and decided it was time to warn the American. He punched another button on his phone. This took only a minute and a half.

"Yes, sir," Ryan said, entering his office.

"Your trip to Budapest, three days from today—perhaps four, but more likely three."

"Where do I leave from?"

"There's a morning British Airways flight from Heathrow. You can leave from here, or just take a taxi from Victoria Station. You'll be accompanied on the flight by one of our people, and met in Budapest by Andy Hudson, he's our Chief of Station there. Good man. Runs a good little station."

"Yes, sir," Ryan said, not knowing what the hell else to say in preparation for his first field mission as a spook. Then it was time for a question. "What, exactly, is going to happen, sir?"

"I'm not sure yet, but Andy has good connections with local smugglers. I would expect him to arrange a crossing into Yugoslavia, and then home from there by commercial aircraft."

Great. More fucking airplanes, Ryan thought. *Couldn't we take the train?* But ex-Marines weren't supposed to show fear. "Okay, I guess that works."

"You may speak with our Rabbit—discreetly," Charleston warned. "And then you'll be allowed to sit in on our initial debriefing out in Somerset. Finally, I rather expect you'll be one of the chaps to escort him back to the States, probably on U.S. Air Force transport out of RAF Bentwaters."

Better and better, Jack thought. His hatred for flying was something he'd have to get over, and intellectually he knew that sooner or later he'd do it. It was just that he hadn't quite gotten over it *yet.* Well, at least he wouldn't be flying anywhere in a CH-46 with a fluky transmission. He drew the line there.

"My total time away from home?" *And sleeping apart from my wife,* Ryan thought.

"Four days, perhaps as many as seven. It depends on how things work out in Budapest," C replied. "That is difficult to predict."

NONE OF THEM had ever eaten at sixty miles per hour. The adventure for their little girl just got better and better. Dinner was adequate. The beef was about average for the Soviet Union, and so they could not be disappointed by it, along with potatoes and greens, and, of course, a carafe of vodka, one of the better brands, to erase the pain of travel. They were heading into the setting sun, now in country used exclusively for farming. Irina leaned across the table to cut the *zaichik*'s meat for her, watching their little angel eat her dinner, like the big girl she proclaimed herself to be, along with a glass of cold milk.

"So, looking forward to the trip now, my dear?" Oleg asked his wife.

"Yes, especially the shopping." Of course.

Part of Oleg Ivan'ch was calm—in fact, the calmest he'd been in weeks. It was really happening. His treason—part of his consciousness thought of it that way—was under way. How many of his countrymen, he wondered—indeed, how many of his coworkers at The Centre—would take the chance if they had

the courage to do so? You couldn't know. He lived in a country and worked at an office where everyone concealed their inner thoughts. And at KGB, even the Russian custom of sanctifying especially close friendships by speaking things that could put you in prison, trusting that a true friend would never denounce you—no, a KGB officer didn't do such things. KGB was founded on the dichotomous balance of loyalty and betrayal. Loyalty to the state and its principles, and betrayal of any who violated them. But since he didn't believe in those principles anymore, he had turned to treason to save his soul.

And now the treason was under way. If the Second Chief Directorate knew of his plans, they would have been mad to allow him on this train. He could leave it at any intermediate stop—or just jump off the train when it slowed, approaching some preplanned point—and escape to Western hands, which could be waiting anywhere for him. No, he was safe, at least as long as he was on this train. And so he could be calm for now, and he'd let the days come as they would and see what happened. He kept telling himself that he was doing the right thing, and from that knowledge came his feeling, however illusory, of personal safety. If there were a God, surely He would protect a man on the run from evil.

DINNER IN THE Ryan house was spaghetti again. Cathy had a particularly good recipe for sauce—from her mom, who didn't have a single drop of Italian blood in her veins—and her husband loved it, especially with good Italian bread, which Cathy had found at a local bakery in downtown Chatham. No surgery tomorrow, so they had wine with dinner. Time to tell her.

"Honey, I have to travel in a few days."

"The NATO thing?"

" 'Fraid so, babe. Looks like three or four days—maybe a little more."

"What's it about, can you say?"

"Nope, not allowed."

"Spook business?"

"Yep." He was allowed to say that.

"What's a spook?" Sally asked.

"It's what daddy does," Cathy said, without thinking.

"Spook, like in the *Wizzerdaboz*?" Sally went on.

"What?" her father asked.

"The Cowardly Lion says he believes in spooks, remember?" Sally pointed out.

"Oh, you mean the *Wizard of Oz.*" It was her favorite movie so far this year.

"That's what I *said,* Daddy." How could her daddy be so stupid?

"Well, no, Daddy isn't one of those," Jack told his daughter.

"Then why did Mommy say so?" Sally persisted. *She has the makings of a good FBI agent,* Jack thought at that moment.

It was Cathy's turn. "Sally, Mommy was just making a joke."

"Oh." Sally went back to work on her *pisghetti.* Jack gave his wife a look. They couldn't talk about his work in front of his daughter—not ever. Kids never kept secrets for more than five minutes, did they? So, he'd learned,

never say anything in front of a kid that you didn't want on the first page of *The Washington Post.* Everyone on Grizedale Close thought that John Patrick Ryan worked at the U.S. Embassy and was lucky enough to be married to a surgeon. They didn't need to know that he was an officer of the Central Intelligence Agency. Too much curiosity. Too many jokes.

"Three or four days?" Cathy asked.

"That's what they tell me. Maybe a little longer, but not too much, I think."

"Important?" Sally had gotten her inquisitive nature from her mother, Jack figured . . . and maybe a little bit from himself.

"Important enough that they're throwing my ass on an airplane, yeah." That actually worked. Cathy knew of her husband's hatred for air travel.

"Well, you have your Valium prescription. Want a beta-blocker, too?"

"No thanks, babe, not this time."

"You know, if you got airsick, it would be easier to understand." And easier to treat, she didn't have to add.

"Babe, you were there when my back went out, remember? I have some bad memories from flying. Maybe when we go home, we can take the boat," he added, with some hope in his voice. But, no, it wouldn't work out that way. It never did in the real world.

"Flying is fun," Sally protested. She definitely got that from her mother. TRAVEL IS INEVITABLY TIRING, and so the Zaitzev family was agreeably surprised to see their beds turned out when they got back to their compartments. Irina got her daughter changed into her little yellow nightgown with flowers on what would have been the bodice. She gave her parents the usual good-night kiss and climbed onto her bed all by herself—she insisted on doing that—and slid under the covers. Instead of sleeping, she propped her head on the pillow and looked out the window at the darkened countryside passing by. Just a few lights from buildings on the collective farms but, for all that, fascinating to the little girl.

Her mother and father left the connecting door partly open, lest she have a nightmare or other sudden need to get a reassuring hug. Before going to bed, Svetlana had looked under the bed to see if there might be a hiding place for a big black bear, and she was satisfied that no such hiding place existed. Oleg and Irina opened books and gradually nodded off to the rocking of the train.

"BEATRIX IS RUNNING," Moore told Admiral Greer. "The Rabbit and his family are on the train, probably crossing into the Ukraine right about now."

"I hate waiting like this," the DDI observed. It was easier for him to admit it. He'd never gone into the field on an intelligence mission. No, his job had always been at a desk, looking over important information. It was times like this that reminded him of the simple pleasures of standing watch on a ship of war—mainly submarines, in his case—where you could look at wind and wave, feel the breeze on your face and, merely by speaking a few words, change the course and speed of your ship instead of waiting to see what the ocean and distant enemy might do to you. You had the illusion there of being master of your fate.

"Patience is the hardest of the virtues to acquire, James, and the higher you get, the more you need the bastard. For me, this is like sitting on the bench, waiting for the lawyers to get to the damned point. It can take forever, especially when you know what the fools are going to say," Moore admitted. He'd also been there and done that, out in the field. But so much of that job was composed of waiting, too. No man controlled his fate, a knowledge that came late in life. You just tried to muddle along from one point to another, making as few mistakes as possible.

"Tell the President about this one yet?"

Moore shook his head. "No sense getting him overly excited. If he thinks this guy has information that he doesn't have—hell, why disappoint him? We do enough of that here, don't we?"

"Arthur, we never have enough information, and the more we get, the more we appreciate what we need and don't have."

"James, my boy, neither one of us is educated to be a philosopher."

"Comes with the gray hair, Arthur." Then Mike Bostock walked in.

"Couple more days and BEATRIX goes into the history books," he announced with a smile.

"Mike, where the hell did you learn to believe in Santa Claus?" the DCI asked.

"Judge, it's like this: We got us a defector who's defecting right now. We have a good team to get him out of Redland. You trust your troops to do the job you send them out to do."

"But they're not all our troops," Greer pointed out.

"Basil runs a good shop, Admiral. You know that."

"True," Greer admitted.

"So, you just wait to see what's under the Christmas tree, Mike?" Moore asked.

"I sent Santa my letter, and Santa always delivers. Everybody knows that." He was beaming at the possibilities. "What are we going to do with him when he arrives?"

"The farmhouse out at Winchester, I imagine," Moore thought out loud. "Give him a nice place to depressurize—let him travel around some on day trips."

"What stipend?" Greer inquired.

"Depends," Moore said. He was the one who controlled that out of the Agency's black budget. "If it's good information . . . oh, as much as a million, I imagine. And a nice place to work after we tickle all of it out of him."

"Where, I wonder?" Bostock put in.

"Oh, we let him decide that."

It was both a simple and a complex process. The arriving Rabbit family would have to learn English. New identities. They'd need new names, for starters, probably make them Norwegian immigrants to explain away the accents. CIA had the power to admit a total of one hundred new citizens every year through the Immigration and Naturalization Service (and they'd never used them all up). The Rabbits would need a set of Social Security numbers, driver's licenses—probably driving lessons beforehand, maybe for both, certainly for the wife—from the Commonwealth of Virginia. (The Agency had

a cordial relationship with the state government. Richmond never asked too many questions.)

Then came the psychological help for people who'd walked away from everything they'd ever known and had to find their footing in a new and grossly different country. The Agency had a Columbia University professor of psychology on retainer to handle that. Then they'd get some older defectors to hand-walk them through the transition. None of this was ever easy on the new immigrants. For Russians, America was like a toy store for a child who'd never known such a thing as a toy store existed—it was overwhelming in every respect, with virtually no common points of comparison, almost like a different planet. They had to make it as comfortable for the defectors as possible. First, for the information, and second, to make sure they didn't want to go back—it would be almost certain death, at least for the husband, but it had happened before, so strong was the call of home for every man.

"If he likes a cold climate, send him to Minneapolis-Saint Paul," Greer suggested. "But, gentlemen, we are getting a little bit ahead of ourselves."

"James, you are always the voice of sober counsel," the DCI observed with a smile.

"Somebody has to be. The eggs haven't hatched yet, people. *Then* we count the chicks."

And what if he doesn't know squat? Moore thought. *What if he's just a guy who wants a ticket out?*

God damn this business! the DCI completed the thought.

"Well, Basil will keep us posted, and we have your boy Ryan looking out for our interests."

"That's great news, Judge. Basil must be laughing into his beer about that."

"He's a good boy, Mike. Don't underestimate him. Those who did are in Maryland State Penitentiary now, waiting for the appeals process to play out," Greer said, in defense of his protégé.

"Well, yeah, he was a Marine once," Bostock conceded. "What do I tell Bob when he calls in?"

"Nothing," the DCI said at once. "Until we find out from the Rabbit what part of our comms are compromised, we are careful what goes out on a wire. Clear?"

Bostock nodded his head like a first-grader. "Yes, sir."

"I've had S and T go over our phone lines. They say they're clean. Chip Bennett is still raising hell and running in circles at Fort Meade." Moore didn't have to say that this alleged claim from the Rabbit was the scariest revelation to Washington since Pearl Harbor. But maybe they'd be able to turn it around on Ivan. Hope sprang eternal at Langley, just like everywhere else. It was unlikely that the Russians knew anything his Directorate of Science and Technology didn't, but you had to pay to see the cards.

RYAN WAS QUIETLY packing his things. Cathy was better at it, but he didn't know what he'd need. How did one pack for being secret-agent man? Business suit. His old Marine utilities? (He still had them, butter bar on the collar and

all.) Nice leather shoes? Sneaks? That, he thought, sounded appropriate. He ended up deciding on a middle-of-the-road suit and two pairs of walking shoes, one semiformal, one informal. And it all had to fit in one bag—for that, an L.L. Bean canvas two-suiter that was easy to carry and fairly anonymous. He left his passport in the desk drawer. Sir Basil would be giving him a nice new British one, another diplomatic or fuck-you passport. Probably a new name to go with it. *Damn,* Jack thought, *a new name to remember and respond to.* He was used to having only one.

One nice thing about Merrill Lynch: You always knew who the hell you were. *Sure,* Jack's mind went on, *let the whole damned world know you were a flunky of Joe Muller. Not in this lifetime.* Any opinionated asshole could make money, and his father-in-law was one of them.

"Finished?" Cathy asked from behind him.

"Just about, babe," Jack answered.

"It's not dangerous, what you're doing, is it?"

"I don't expect it to be, babe." But Jack couldn't lie, and his uncertainty conveyed just enough.

"Where are you going?"

"I told you, remember, Germany." *Uh-oh. She caught me again.*

"Some NATO thing?"

"That's what they tell me."

"What do you do in London, Jack? Century House, that's intelligence stuff, and—"

"Cathy, I've told you before. I'm an analyst. I go over information from various sources, and I try to figure out what it means, and I write reports for people to read. You know, it's not all that different from what I did at Merrill Lynch. My job is to look at information and figure out what it really means. They think I'm good at it."

"But nothing with guns?" Half a question and half an observation. Jack supposed it was from her work in the Emergency Room at Hopkins. As a group, doctors didn't much care for firearms, except the ones who liked hunting birds in the fall. She didn't like the Remington shotgun in his closet, unloaded, and she liked the Browning Hi-Power hidden on the shelf in his closet, loaded, even less.

"Honey, no, no guns, not at all. I'm not that kind of spook."

"Okay," she semi-conceded. She didn't believe him completely, but she knew he couldn't say what he was doing any more than she could discuss her patients with him. In that understanding came her frustration. "Just so you're not away too long."

"Babe, you know I hate being away from you. I can't even sleep worth a damn unless you're next to me."

"So take me with you?"

"So you can go shopping in Germany? For what? Dirndls for Sally?"

"Well, she likes the Heidi movies." It was a weak offering.

"Nice try, babe. Wish you could, but you can't."

"Oh, damn," Lady Ryan observed.

"We live in an imperfect world, babe."

She especially hated *that* aphorism of his, and her reply was an

ungrammatical grunt. But, really, there was no reply she could make.

Minutes later, in bed, Jack wondered what the hell he would be doing. Reason told him that it would be routine in every respect, except for the location. But except for one little thing, Abe Lincoln had enjoyed that play at Ford's Theater. He'd be on foreign soil—no, *hostile* foreign soil. He was already living in a foreign place, and, friendly as the Brits were, only home was home. But the Brits liked him. The Hungarians wouldn't. They might not take a shot at him, but neither would they give him the key to the city. And what if they found out he was traveling on a false passport? What did the Vienna Convention say about *that*? But he couldn't wimp out on this one, could he? He *was* an ex-Marine. He was *supposed* to be fearless. Yeah, sure. About the only good thing that had happened at his house a few months back was that he'd made a head call before the bad guys had crashed the party, and so hadn't been *able* to wet his pants with a gun to his head. He'd gotten it done, but he damned sure didn't feel heroic. He'd managed to survive, managed to kill that one guy with the Uzi, but the only thing he felt good about was *not* killing that bastard Sean Miller. No, he'd let the State of Maryland handle that one, by the numbers, unless the Supreme Court stepped in again, and that didn't strike him as very likely in this particular case, with a bunch of Secret Service agents dead. The courts didn't ignore dead cops very often.

But what would happen in Hungary? He'd just be a watcher, the semi-official CIA officer overseeing the evacuation of some fool Russian who wanted to move out of his place in Moscow. *Damn, why the hell does this sort of thing always seem to happen to me?* Jack wondered. It was like hitting the devil's lottery, and his number kept coming up. Would that ever stop? He was paid to look into the future and make his predictions, but inside he knew that he couldn't do it worth a damn. He needed other people to tell him what *was* happening, so that then he could compare it with things that everyone knew *had* happened, and then combine the two into a wild-ass guess on what somebody *might* do. And, sure, he'd done okay at that in the trading business, but nobody ever got killed over a few shares of common stock. And now, maybe, *his* cute little ass would be on the line. Great. Just fucking great. He stared at the ceiling. Why were they always white? Wouldn't black be a better color for sleeping? You could always see white ceilings, even in a darkened room. Was there a reason for that?

Was there a reason why he couldn't sleep? Why was he asking damned-fool questions with no answers? However this played out, he'd almost certainly be okay. Basil wouldn't let anything happen to him. It would look very bad to Langley, and the Brits couldn't afford that—too embarrassing. Judge Moore wouldn't forget, and it would become part of CIA's institutional memory, and that would be bad for the next ten years or more. So, no, SIS wouldn't let anything bad happen to him.

On the other hand, they wouldn't be the only players on the field and, as in baseball, the problem was that both teams played to win, and you needed the right timing to send that 95-mph fastball out to the cheap seats.

But you can't wimp out, Jack, he told himself. Others, whose opinions he valued, would be ashamed of him—worse, he'd be ashamed of himself. So, like it or not, he had to suit up and go out on the field and hope he didn't drop

the damned ball.

Or just go back to Merrill Lynch, but, no, he'd rather face bayonets than do that. *I really would,* Ryan realized, in considerable surprise. Did that make him brave, or just hardheaded? *There's a question,* he thought. And the only answer had to come from someone else, someone who would only see one side of the equation. You could only see the physical part, never the thought that went into it. And that wasn't enough to judge from, much as newsmen and historians tried to shape reality in that way, as though they really understood such things at a distance of miles or years. Yeah, sure.

In any case, his bags were packed, and with luck the worst part of this trip would be the airplane ride. Much as he hated it, it was fairly predictable . . . unless a wing fell off.

"WHAT THE *FUCK* is this all about?" John Tyler asked nobody in particular. The telex in his hand only gave orders, not the reasons behind them.

The bodies had been transported to the city coroner, with a request for no action to be taken with them. Tyler thought for a moment and then called the Assistant U.S. Attorney he usually worked with.

"You want *what*?" Peter Mayfair asked in some incredulity. He'd graduated third in his Harvard Law School class three years before and was racing up the career ladder at the U.S. Attorney's office. People called him Max.

"You heard me."

"What is this all about?"

"I don't know. I just know it comes straight from Emil's office. It sounds like stuff from the other side of the river, but the telex doesn't say beans. How do we do it?"

"Where are the bodies?"

"Coroner's office, I guess. There's a note on them—mother and daughter—that says don't post them. So I suppose they're in the freezer."

"And you want them raw, like?"

"Frozen, I suppose, but yeah, raw." *What a hell of a way to put it,* the Assistant Special Agent in Charge thought.

"Any families involved?"

"The police haven't located any yet that I know of."

"Okay, we hope it stays that way. If there's no family to say no, we declare them indigent and get the coroner to release them to federal custody, you know, like a dead drunk on the street. They just put them in a cheap box and bury them in Potter's Field. Where you going to take them?"

"Max, I don't know. Guess I send a reply telex to Emil and he'll tell me."

"Fast?" Mayfair asked, wondering what priority went on this.

"Last week, Max."

"Okay, if you want, I'll drive down to the coroner's right now."

"Meet you there, Max. Thanks."

"You owe me a beer and dinner at Legal Seafood," the U.S. Attorney told him.

"Done." He'd have to deliver on this one.

CHAPTER 25

EXCHANGING THE BOGIES

THE BODIES WERE LOADED in cheap aluminum boxes, the sort used for transporting bodies by air, and then loaded on a van used by the FBI and driven to Logan International Airport. Special Agent Tyler called Washington to ask what came next, and fortunately his car radio was encrypted.

FBI Director Emil Jacobs, it turned out, hadn't thought things all the way through quite yet either, and he had to call Judge Moore at CIA, where more rapid dancing was done, until it was decided to load them on the British Airways 747 scheduled to leave Boston for London Heathrow, so that Basil's people could collect them. This was done with alacrity because BA cooperated readily with American police agencies, and Flight 214 rolled away from the gate on time at 8:10 and soon thereafter climbed to altitude for the three-thousand-mile hop to Heathrow's Terminal Four.

IT WAS APPROACHING five in the morning when Zaitzev awoke in his upper bunk, not sure why he had done so. He rolled a little to look out the window when it hit him: The train was stopped at a station. He didn't know which one —he didn't have the schedule memorized—and he felt a sudden chill. What if some Second Chief Directorate men had just boarded? In the daylight, he might have shaken it off, but KGB had the reputation of arresting people in the middle of the night, when they'd be less likely to resist effectively, and suddenly the fear came back. Then he heard feet walking down the corridor . . . but they passed him by, and moments later the train started moving again, pulling away from the wooden station building, and presently the view

outside was just darkness again. *Why did this frighten me?* Zaitzev asked himself. Why now? Wasn't he safe now? *Or almost so,* he corrected himself. The answer was, no, not until his feet stood on foreign soil. He had to remind himself of that fact, until he stood on foreign, nonsocialist soil. And he wasn't there yet. With that reminder refixed in his mind, he rolled back and tried to get back to sleep. The motion of the train eventually overcame his anxiety, and he returned to dreams that were not the least bit reassuring.

THE BRITISH AIRWAYS 747 also flew through darkness, its passengers mainly asleep while the flight crew monitored its numerous instruments and sipped their coffee, taking time to enjoy the night stars, and watched the horizon for the first hint of dawn. That usually came over the west coast of Ireland.

RYAN AWOKE EARLIER than usual. He slipped out of bed without disturbing his wife, dressed casually, and went outside. The milkman was driving into the cul-de-sac at the end of Grizedale Close. He stopped his truck and got out with the half-gallon of whole milk his kids drank like a Pratt & Whitney engine guzzled jet fuel, and a loaf of bread. He was halfway to the house before he noticed his customer.

"Anything amiss, sir?" the milkman asked, thinking perhaps a child was ill, the usual reason for the parents of young children to be up and about at this time of day.

"No, just woke up a little early," Ryan replied with a yawn.

"Anything special you might need?"

"Just a cigarette," Ryan replied, without thinking. Under Cathy's iron rule, he hadn't had one since arriving in England.

"Well, here, sir." The man extended a pack with one shaken loose.

It surprised the hell out of Ryan. "Thanks, buddy." But he took it anyway, along with the light from a butane lighter. He coughed with the first drag, but got over it pretty fast. It was a remarkably friendly feeling in the still, predawn air, and the wonderful thing about bad habits was how quickly one picked them back up. It was a strong cigarette, like the Marlboros he'd smoked in his senior year of high school, part of the ascension to manhood back in the late 1960s. *The milkman ought to quit,* Jack thought, *but he probably wasn't married to a Hopkins surgeon.*

He didn't often get to talk to his customers, either. "You like living here, sir?"

"Yes, I do. The people here are very friendly."

"We try to be, sir. Have a good day, then."

"Thanks, buddy. You, too," Ryan said, as the man walked back to his truck. Milkmen had mostly gone extinct in America, victims of supermarkets and 7-Eleven stores. *A pity,* Jack thought. He remembered Peter Wheat bread and honey-dipped donuts when he'd been a little kid. Somehow it had all gone

away without his noticing it around the seventh grade or so. But the smoke and the quiet air wasn't at all a bad way to wake up. There was no sound at all. Even the birds were still asleep. He looked up to see the lights of aircraft high in the sky. People traveling to Europe, probably Scandinavia, by the apparent courses they were flying—out of Heathrow, probably. *What poor bastard has to get up this early to make a meeting?* he wondered. Well . . . he finished the cigarette and flicked it out on the lawn, wondering if Cathy might spot it. Well, he could always blame it on somebody else. A pity the paperboy hadn't come yet. So Jack went inside and turned on the kitchen TV to get CNN. He caught the sports. The Orioles had won again and would be going to the World Series against the Phillies. That was good news, or nearly so. Had he been home, he would have gotten tickets to catch a game or two at Memorial Stadium and seen the rest on TV. Not this year. His cable system didn't have a single channel to catch baseball games, though the Brits were starting to watch
NFL football. They didn't really get it, but for some reason they enjoyed watching it. *Better than their regular TV*, Ryan thought with a snort. Cathy liked their comedy, but for some reason it just didn't click with him. But their news programming was pretty good. It was just taste, he assumed. *Non est disputandum*, as the Romans had said. Then he saw dawn coming, the first hint of light on the eastern horizon. It'd be more than an hour before morning actually began, but coming it was, and even the desire for more sleep would not hold it back.

Jack decided to get the coffee going—just a matter of flipping the switch on the drip machine he'd gotten Cathy for her birthday. Then he heard the *flop* of the paper on the front step, and he went to get it.

"Up early?" Cathy said, when he got back.

"Yeah. Didn't see any sense in rolling back over." Jack kissed his wife. She got a funny look on her face after the kiss but shook it off. Her tobacco-sniffing nose had delivered a faint message, but her intellect had erroneously dismissed it as too unlikely.

"Got the coffee going?"

"Flipped the button," Jack confirmed. "I'll let you do the rest."

"What do you want for breakfast?"

"I get a choice?" Ryan asked, somewhat incredulously. She was on another health kick of late. No donuts.

"GOOD MORNING, *ZAICHIK!* " Oleg said to his daughter.

"Papa!" She reached both her arms out with that smile kids have when they awaken. It was something they lost long before adulthood, and something universally astonishing to parents while it lasted. Oleg lifted her from the bed and gave her a hug. Her little bare feet went down on the carpeted floor, and then she took two steps to her private toilet. Irina came in to lay her clothes out, and both withdrew to the adult side of the accommodations. Within ten minutes, they were on their way to the dining car. Oleg looked over his shoulder to see the attendant hustling forward to make up their compartments

first. Yes, there were advantages to being KGB, even if it was just for another day.

Somewhere during the night, the train had stopped at a state farm and taken on fresh milk, which Svetlana loved for her morning meal. The adults in the party had mediocre (at best) coffee and buttered bread. (The kitchen was out of eggs.) At least the bread and butter were fresh and tasty. There was a stack of newspapers at the back end of the car. Oleg picked up a *Pravda* and sat down to read it—the usual lies. One other thing about being KGB was that you knew better than to believe what was in the papers. Izvestia *at least had stories about real people, some of which were even true,* he thought. But a Soviet train would, of course, carry only the most politically correct newspapers, and "Truth" was it, Zaitzev snorted.

RYAN MAINTAINED TWO complete sets of shaving and grooming things for the occasional exigencies of travel. His Bean bag was hanging by its large brass hook in his closet, ready for whenever Sir Basil dispatched him to Budapest. He looked at it while knotting his tie, wondering when he'd be going. Then Cathy reentered the bedroom and got herself dressed. Her white lab coat doubtless hung on a hook on her office door—both of them, probably, Hammersmith and Moorefields, with the appropriate name tags.

"Cath?"

"Yeah?"

"Your office coat—did you keep your Hopkins name tag, or did you get new ones?" He'd never bothered to ask.

"Local ones. Too hard to explain it to every new patient who might notice." But some asked about her accent anyway, or would ask why the name tag proclaimed her to be Lady Caroline Ryan, M.D., FACS. The "Lady" part appealed to her woman's vanity. Jack watched her brush her hair out, something that always gave him pleasure. She would have been an absolute knockout with somewhat longer hair, but she never let it grow, saying that the surgical caps ruined whatever set she might have gotten. That would change the next time they got invited to a formal dinner. They were due for one. The Queen liked both of them, and so did the Prince of Wales, and they were on the local version of the A-list. You had to accept such invitations, though Cathy had an excuse if she was doing surgery the next day. Spooks, on the other hand, were expected to be delighted at the honor, even if it meant three short hours of sleep before the next day at work.

"What's on the agenda for today?"

"Giving a lecture on the xenon-arc laser. They're going to be buying one soon, and I'm the only person in London who knows how to use it right."

"My wife, the laser jockey."

"Well, at least I can talk about what I do," she responded, "secret-agent man."

"Yes, dear," Ryan sighed. *Maybe I should pack my Browning today just to piss her off.* But if anyone on the train noticed, he'd at best be regarded as unclean, and at worst would be asked by a police constable what he was doing with

such a thing on his person. And even his diplomatic status would not entirely protect him from the resulting hassle.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Jack and Cathy were in their compartment, heading northwest to London, she again reading her medical journals, and he going through the *Telegraph*. John Keegan had a column on the inside and he was a historian for whom Ryan had considerable respect as an analyst of complex information. Why Basil hadn't recruited him for Century House was a mystery to Jack. Maybe Keegan was just doing too well as an historian, able to spread his ideas to the masses—well, at least the smart civilians out there. That made sense. Nobody ever got rich as a British civil servant, and the anonymity—well, it was nice once in a while to get a pat on the head for doing something especially well. Bureaucrats were denied that all over the world.

ABOUT THE TIME their express train passed by the Elephant and Castle station, Flight 214 rolled to an early stop at Heathrow's Terminal Four. It didn't come to a jetway. Instead it came to a halt where the shuttle buses waited to take people to Immigration and Customs. No sooner had the wheels been chocked than the cargo hatch came open. The last two items loaded at Logan had been the two coffins, and they became the first items of baggage to be manhandled off. The tags on one corner of each told the handlers where to send them, and two anonymous men from Century House were there to watch the process anyway. Placed on a four-wheel cart—called a trolley in England—they were pulled off to an area for parked cars and small trucks, where the boxes were quickly loaded on a small four-wheeled truck with no marking on its sides at all. The two men from SIS hopped aboard and drove off, easterly for London, entirely without a clue what this job was all about. It was often that way.

The truck arrived at 100 Westminster Bridge Road forty minutes later. There the boxes were removed and placed on another trolley for a ride to the freight elevator and a trip down to the second-level basement.

Two more men were waiting there. The boxes were duly opened, and both men thanked fate that there was a goodly supply of dry ice inside and the bodies were not yet venting the particularly foul smell of dead and mortifying human tissue. Wearing rubber gloves, they lifted the bodies—neither was especially heavy—and transferred them to stainless-steel tables. Neither body was clothed and, in the case of the little girl, their job was particularly sad.

It would get more so. Comparing the bodies with the *Times*-generated photograph, it was determined, unsurprisingly, that the child's face didn't match the picture. The same was true of the grown woman, though her body mass and configuration were about right. Her face was virtually untouched by the fire, the toxic gasses of which had ended her life. And so both of them

would have to be grossly disfigured to be usable for Operation BEATRIX. This was done with propane blowtorches. First, the senior of the two turned on the powerful exhaust fan in the ceiling. Both then donned fire-protective coveralls and lit their torches. These were heartlessly applied to both faces. Hair color was wrong in both cases, and so that was burned off first of all. Then the torches were applied at close range to both faces. It went quickly, but not quickly enough for the two SIS employees. The one doing the little girl breathed a series of prayers for her child's soul, knowing that she was wherever innocent children went. That which remained was just cold meat, of no value to its previous owner, but of some value to the United Kingdom—and doubtless the United States of America as well, else they would not be doing such ghoulish work as this. It was when the little girl's left eye exploded from internal pressure that her tormentor had to turn away and vomit. But it had to be done. Her eyes were the wrong color.

Hands and feet had to be well-charred, and both bodies were examined for tattoos, scars, or other distinguishing characteristics, but none were found, not even an appendectomy scar.

All in all, it took ninety minutes before they were satisfied with their work. Then the bodies had to be dressed. Clothing of Soviet origin was maneuvered onto the bodies, and then *that* had to be burned so that the fibers would be enmeshed with the surface burns. With all this grisly work done, the bodies were reloaded into their transport boxes, and more dry ice was added to keep them cool enough to retard decay. The boxes were set near a third identical such box in the corner of the room. By then it was lunchtime, but neither of them cared much for food at the moment. A few shots of whiskey were more what they needed, and there were plenty of pubs within walking distance.

"JACK?"Sir Basil stuck his head through the door to find Ryan going over his documents, like a good analyst.

"Yes, sir," Ryan responded, looking up.

"Are you packed?"

"My stuff is at home, but yes, sir."

"Good. You're on the BA flight from Heathrow Terminal Three at eight this evening. We'll have a car to run you home to pick up your things—say, about three-thirty?"

"I haven't gotten my passport and visa yet," Ryan told C.

"You'll have it after lunch. Your overt cover is as an auditor from the Foreign Office. As I recall, you had an accountant's charter once upon a time. Perhaps you can look over the books while you're there." This was funny, Charleston thought.

Ryan tried to return the favor. "Probably more interesting than the local stock market. Anyone going with me?"

"No, but you'll be met at the airport by Andy Hudson. He's our Station Chief in Budapest. Good man," Sir Basil promised. "Stop in to see me before you head off."

"Will do, sir." And Basil's head vanished back into the corridor.

"Simon, how about a pint and a sandwich?" Ryan said to his workmate.

"Fine idea." Harding stood and got his coat. They walked off to the Duke of Clarence.

LUNCH ON THE TRAIN was pleasant: borscht, noodles, black bread, and a proper dessert—strawberries from some farm or other. The only problem was that Svetlana didn't care for borscht, which was odd for a Russian native, even a child. She picked at the sour cream topping, then later attacked the noodles with gusto and positively devoured the late-season strawberries. They'd just climbed through the low Transylvanian mountains on the Bulgarian border. The train would pass through Sofia, then turn northwest for Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and finally Hungary.

The Zaitzevs lingered over lunch, Svetlana peering out the windows as the train approached Sofia.

Oleg Ivanovich did the same, puffing on his cigarette. Passing through Sofia, he found himself wondering which building housed the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost*. Was Colonel Bubovoy there, working on his plot, probably with that Colonel Strokov? How far along might they be? Was the Pope's life in immediate danger? How would he feel if the Polish priest was murdered before he could get his warning out? Could he or should he have moved faster? *These damned questions*, and no one in whom he could confide them! *You are doing your best, Oleg Ivan'ch*, he told himself, *and no man can do more than that!*

The Sofia station looked like a cathedral, an impressive stone building with an almost religious purpose. Somehow he wasn't worried now about a KGB arrest team boarding the train. His only thoughts were to press on, get to Budapest, and see what the CIA did there . . . and hope they were competent. KGB could do a job like this with consummate professionalism, almost like stage magicians. Was CIA also that good? On Russian TV, they were frequently portrayed as evil but bumbling adversaries—but that wasn't what they said at The Centre. No, at #2 Dzerzhinskiy Square, they were thought to be evil spirits, always on the prowl, clever as the devil himself, the most deadly of enemies. So, which was true? Certainly he'd find out quickly enough—one way or another. Zaitzev stubbed out his cigarette and led his family back to their compartments.

"LOOKING FORWARD TO the mission, Jack?" Harding asked.

"Yeah, like the dentist. And don't tell me how easy it'll be. You've never gone out in the field either."

"Your own people suggested this, you know."

"So, when I get home—if I get home—I'll slug Admiral Greer," Ryan responded, half—but only half—joking. "I'm not trained for this, Simon, remember?"

"How many people are trained to deal with a direct physical attack? You've

done that," Simon reminded him.

"Okay, I was a marine lieutenant once, for—what was it?—eleven months or so, before the helicopter crunched on Crete and I got my back broke. Shit, I don't even like roller-coasters. My mom and dad loved the goddamned things; they were always taking me up in them at Gwynn Oak Amusement Park when I was a little kid. Expected me to like the damned things, too. Dad," Ryan explained, "was a paratrooper in the One hundred first Airborne, back forty years ago. Falling out of the sky didn't worry him too much." That was followed by a snort. One nice thing about the Marine Corps, they didn't make you jump out of an airplane. *Well, damn,* Jack thought suddenly. Was he more worried about this than the airline flight? That caused a downward look and an ironic chuckle. "Do your field officers carry weapons?"

That generated a laugh. "Only in the movies, Jack. They're bloody heavy to lug about, and they can be difficult to explain. There are no double-o people in SIS—at least not to my knowledge. The French occasionally kill people, and they are actually rather good at it. So are the Israelis, but people do make mistakes, even trained professionals, and that sort of thing can be difficult to explain to the press."

"You can't invoke a D-notice?"

"Theoretically, yes, but they can be difficult to enforce. Fleet Street has its own rules, you see."

"So does *The Washington Post*, as Nixon found out. So I ought not to kill anyone."

"I would try to avoid it," Simon agreed, munching on his turkey sandwich.

BELGRADE—BEOGRAD TO its natives—also had a fine station. In the previous century, evidently, architects had worked hard to outdo each other, like the pious ones who'd built cathedrals in the Middle Ages. The train was several hours late, he saw with surprise. He couldn't see why. The train hadn't stopped for any length of time anywhere. Perhaps it wasn't traveling as fast as it was supposed to. Leaving Belgrade, it snaked up some modest hills, and none too quickly at that. He imagined this country would be pretty in winter. Wasn't there an upcoming Olympiad hereabouts? The winter probably came here about the same time it did in Moscow. It was a little late this year, but that usually meant it would be unusually harsh when it arrived. He wondered what winter would be like in America. . . .

"READY, JACK?" Charleston asked in his office.

"I suppose." Jack looked at his new passport. Since it was a diplomatic one, it was a little more ornate than the usual, and bound in red leather, with the Royal Coat of Arms on the front cover. He paged through it to see the stamps of all the places he had *not* visited. Thailand, the People's Republic of China. *Damn*, Jack thought, *I really do get around*. "Why this visa?" he asked. The U.K.

didn't require them for anybody.

"Hungary controls movement in and out rather sternly. They require an entry and exit visa. You'll not be needing the latter, I expect," C observed. "Hudson will probably be taking you out in a southerly direction. He has good relations with the local smugglers."

"Walking over any mountains?" Ryan asked.

Basil shook his head. "No, we don't often do that. Car or truck, I should think. Ought not to be any problem at all, my boy." He looked up. "It really is quite routine, Jack."

"You say so, sir." *It damned sure isn't for me.*

Charleston stood. "Good luck, Jack. See you back in a few days."

Ryan took his hand. "Roger that, Sir Basil." Semper fi, *pal.*

There was a car waiting on the street. Jack hopped in the left-front seat, and the driver headed east. The ride took about fifty minutes with the light afternoon traffic, almost as fast as the train would have been.

On getting to Chatham, Ryan found his daughter napping, Little Jack playing with his feet—fascinating things they were—in the playpen, and Miss Margaret sitting with a magazine in the living room.

"Dr. Ryan, I didn't expect—"

"That's okay, I have to take a business trip." He walked to the wall phone in the kitchen and tried calling Cathy, only to learn that she was giving her damned lecture on her laser toy. *It was the one she used for welding blood vessels back shut,* he thought. Something like that. Frowning, he went upstairs for his bag. He'd try to call her from the airport. But, just in case, he scribbled a note.

OFF TO BONN. TRIED TO CALL. WILL TRY AGAIN. LOVE, JACK. This one found its way to the refrigerator door. Ryan bent down to give Sally a kiss and then reached down to lift his son for a hug, a sloppy one, as it turned out. The little guy dribbled the way a car engine dripped oil. That necessitated a paper towel on the way out.

"Have a good trip, Dr. Ryan," the nanny called.

"Thanks, Margaret. See ya." As soon as the car pulled off, she called Century House to let people know Sir John was on the way to Heathrow. Then she went back to her magazine, this month's *Tattler*.

THE TRAIN CAME to an unexpected halt in a yard right at the Hungarian frontier, near the town of Zombor. Zaitzev hadn't known about this, and the surprise was soon compounded. There were cranes on their side of the train, and no sooner had the train stopped than a crowd of coveralled workmen appeared.

The Hungarian State Railway operated on standard gauge, the tracks 1,435 milimeters—4 feet, 8½ inches—apart, which was the world's standard, and which incongruously dated back to the two-horse chariots used by the Romans. But the Russian train gauge was five feet, or 1,524 millimeters—for some reason no one remembered. The solution to that here was to lift the train bodies off the Russian tracks—the wheel sets—and lower them onto a different set. That took about an hour, but it was efficiently done, for all that.

It utterly fascinated Svetlana, and it even impressed her father that the task was performed so routinely. An hour and twenty minutes later, they were moving almost due north on narrower tracks behind a new electric locomotive, crossing the rich agricultural soil of Hungary. Almost at once, Svetlana chirped at the sight of men in local dress riding horses, which struck both parents and child as quite exotic.

THE AIRCRAFT WAS a fairly new Boeing 737 and, for this trip, Ryan decided to take a friend. He bought a pack of cigarettes at the airport and lit one up at once on the concourse.

The good news was that he'd been given a first-class window seat, 1-A. The scenery up in the sky was the only good part of flying, with the additional bonus that nobody could see the fear in your face, except maybe the stewardess, because like doctors they could probably also smell fear. But up front the booze was free, and so Ryan tried to order whiskey, only to find that the selection was Scotch (which he didn't like), vodka (which he didn't like), or gin (which he could not stand in his presence). It was the wrong airline for Jack Daniel's, but the wine list was okay, and, climbing to cruise altitude, the no-smoking light *ding*ed off, and Ryan lit up another smoke. Not as good as a nice bourbon, but better than nothing at all. At least it enabled him to lean back and pretend to relax behind closed eyes, occasionally looking out to see if the stuff under the aircraft was green or blue. The flight was agreeably smooth, with only a few bumps to make him grab for the armrests, and three glasses of a decent French white helped smooth his anxiety out. About halfway there, over Belgium, he got back to thinking. How many people hated flying? Maybe a third, maybe half? How many of them detested it as much as he did? Half of those? So, probably, he wasn't alone. Fearful people tried to hide it, and a look around showed faces much the same as his probably was. So at least he probably wasn't the only wimp on the airplane. And the wine was nice and fruity. And if the ULA hadn't been able to punch his ticket with Uzis right in his home on the Chesapeake Bay, then random chance was probably on his side as well. So he might as well relax and enjoy the ride—he was stuck here one way or another, after all, and the Boeing cruised along at 500 knots or so.

There were a few bumps in the descent, but for Ryan this was the one part of the flight during which he felt safe—when the aircraft was returning to earth. Intellectually, he knew that this was actually the most dangerous part, but somehow his gut didn't see it that way. He heard the whine of various servos, and then the whooshing sound that announced the open landing-gear doors, and then felt safe enough to see the ground rushing toward him. The landing was bumpy, but Jack welcomed it. He was back on the ground, where you could stand up and ambulate all by yourself at a reasonably safe speed. Good.

THEY WERE IN another train yard, packed with boxcars and cattle cars, and their train car jostled back and forth through switches and turns. Once more, *zaichik* had her nose against the glass, and finally they passed under a glass roof and the train jerked to a stop in Eastern Station. Semi-uniformed and rather scruffy-looking porters drew up by the baggage car. *Zaichik* practically leaped off the car to look around, almost outracing her mother, who fumbled after her with their carry-on bags. Oleg walked to the baggage car and oversaw the transfer of his bags to the two-wheel hand truck. They walked away from the train, through the old and rather seedy ticket room, and from there outside to the cabstand. There were a lot of cabs, all of them Russian-made Ladas—the Soviet version of an old Fiat—and all the same color, which might have been beige under the dirt. Zaitzev tipped the porter one Comecon ruble and supervised the loading of their bags into the car. The trunk of the diminutive taxicab was far too small. Three bags went to the front seat, and Svetlana would have to sit in her mother's lap for the ride to the hotel. The cab pulled away, made a swift and legally dubious U-turn, and then raced at breakneck speed down what appeared to be a major shopping street.

The Astoria Hotel was only four minutes from the station. It seemed to be an impressive structure, looking almost like a grand hotel of another age. The lobby was modest in size, though not in appointments, and much carved oak was in evidence. The desk clerk expected them, and greeted them with a smile. Soon after giving Zaitzev the room key, he pointed across the street to the Soviet-Hungarian Culture and Friendship Center, which was so obviously a KGB operation that it might as well have had a statue of Iron Feliks in front. The bellman led them to the tiny elevator and then to the third floor, turning right for Room 307, a corner room that would be their home for the next ten days, or so everyone but Oleg thought. He also got a ruble for his trouble and withdrew, leaving the family in a room little larger than the combined space of their train accommodations, and with only a single bathroom, albeit one with a bath/shower, which all three of them needed. Oleg let his wife and daughter go first.

As shabby as the room was by Western standards, however, by Soviet ones it was almost palatial. There was a chair by the window, and Zaitzev sat down and surveyed the streets for a CIA officer. That, he knew, was a fool's errand, but he could hardly resist the temptation.

THE MEN HE was looking for were not Americans at all, but rather Tom Trent and Chris Morton, both of whom worked for Andy Hudson. Both had dark hair and hadn't washed that day so that they could appear to be working-class Hungarians. Trent had staked out the train station and spotted them coming in, while Morton had camped out in the hotel. With good photographic prints provided by the *Times* photographer in Moscow, identifying the Zaitzev family had been simplicity itself. As a final check, Morton, who spoke flawless Russian, walked to the reception desk and verified his "old friend's" room

number at the desk, in return for a twenty-florint banknote and a wink. Then he wandered down to the bar, while surveying the hotel's ground floor for future reference. So far, they decided on the subway ride back to the embassy, things were going remarkably well. The train had arrived late, but their information on the hotel had been bang-on for once.

ANDY HUDSON WAS a man of average height and appearance, except his sandy hair marked him as a foreigner in a land where everyone looked pretty much alike. *Certainly at the airport they all did,* Ryan thought.

"Can we talk?" Ryan asked on the way away from the airport.

"Yes, the car is clean." Like all such vehicles, it was regularly swept and parked in a secure location.

"How sure are you of that?"

"The opposition doesn't break the rules of diplomatic conduct. Strange, but true. And besides, the car has a very sophisticated alarm. Not sure I could fiddle it myself, as a matter of fact. In any case, welcome to Budapest, Sir John." He pronounced the city's name as *Byudapesht*, as opposed to the way Ryan thought it was spoken.

"So, you know who I am?"

"Yes, I was home in London last March. I was in town when you performed your heroics—bloody fool, you ought to have gotten yourself killed, except for the stupid bloody Irish."

"I've said that to myself many times, Mr. Hud—"

"Andy," Hudson suggested at once.

"Fine. My name is Jack."

"Good flight?"

"Any flight you walk off of is a good one, Andy. So, tell me about the mission and how you're going to go about it."

"Entirely routine. We observe the Rabbit and his family—we'll keep them under intermittent surveillance—and when the time is right, we'll whisk them out of the city and into Yugoslavia."

"How?"

"Car or truck, haven't decided yet," Hudson answered. "Hungary is the only possible problem. The Yugoslavs care sod-all about people crossing their border—they have a million citizens working overseas in various capacities. And our relations with the border guards is very cordial indeed," Andy assured him.

"Payoffs?"

Hudson nodded as he took a turn around a modest-sized park. "It's a good way for them to outfit their families with fashionable items. I know people who smuggle hard drugs in—I make no use of them, of course. Drugs are one thing the locals at least pretend to care about, but some border guards are more open to negotiation than others—hell, they probably all are, or damned nearly all. It's remarkable what you can get for some hard currency or a pair of Reebok running shoes. The black market here is a lively one, and since it often brings hard currency into the country, the political leadership will look the other way so long as it doesn't get too out of hand, you see."

"Then how did the CIA station get clobbered?"

"Bad bloody luck." Hudson went on to explain for a minute or two. "Like

being run over by a lorry on an empty road."

"Damn, does that sort of thing really happen?"

"Not often, rather like winning a state lottery."

"You gotta play to win," Ryan murmured. It was the motto for the Maryland State Lottery, which was just one more form of tax for those dumb enough to partake, just one that was a little more cynical than the other kinds.

"Yes, that's right. It's a chance we all take."

"And how does that apply to getting the Rabbit and his family out?"

"One in ten thousand."

To Ryan, those sounded like betting odds, but there was one other hang-up to worry about. "Have they told you his wife and kid don't know how extended his vacation is?"

That made Hudson's head turn. "You're bloody joking."

"Nope. That's what he told our people in Moscow. Complication?"

His hands flexed on the wheel. "Only if she's noisy. I suppose we can handle that if we must." But it was plain on his face that it was something to worry about.

"European women, they tell me, are less assertive than American ones."

"They are, as a matter of fact," Hudson agreed. "Particularly true of the Russians, I believe. Well, we shall see."

One last turn onto Harm Utca, and they were at the British Embassy. Hudson parked the car and got out.

"That building there is the *Budapesti Rendõrfõkápitanság,* the police headquarters. Good to be in a secure location—they are little threat to us. The local police are not very highly regarded. The local language is bloody impossible. Indo-Altaic, philologists call it. Origin is somewhere in Mongolia, if you can believe it. Unrelated to any language you've ever heard about. Not too many people here speak English, but some German, because Austria is the next country over. Not to worry, you'll have one of us with you at all times. I'll take you on a walkabout tomorrow morning. Don't know about you, but traveling always tires me out."

"Yeah," Ryan agreed at once. "I call it travel shock."

"So, we'll get you settled in your quarters upstairs. The embassy canteen is quite adequate, and your quarters will be comfortable if not elaborate. Let me get your bag."

You couldn't knock the hospitality, Jack thought ten minutes later. A bed, private bath, a TV, and a VCR with a dozen or so tapes. He decided on *The Cruel Sea* with Jack Hawkins, and he made it to the end before fading off to sleep.

CHAPTER 26

TOURISTS

ALL OF THEM WOKE UP about the same time. Little *zaichik* was first, quickly followed by her mother and finally her father. The Hotel Astoria even had room service, an unheard-of luxury for Soviet citizens. Their room had a telephone, and Irina, after taking down the orders, called it in to the right extension, then was told that their food would arrive in about thirty minutes.

"I could fix it faster," Irina observed, with a hint of sourness. But even she had to admit that not having to fix it wasn't a bad deal for her at all. And so they all took turns in the bathroom in anticipation of their morning meal.

RYAN GOT HIMSELF showered and found his way to the embassy canteen about a quarter to eight. Evidently, the Brits liked their luxuries as much as American foreign service officers. He got himself a pile of scrambled eggs and bacon—Ryan loved English bacon, though their most popular sausages seemed to him to use sawdust as a filler—and four slices of white toast, figuring that he'd need a big breakfast to make it through this day. The coffee wasn't all that bad. On asking, he found out that it was Austrian in origin, which explained the quality.

"The Ambassador insisted on that," Hudson said, sitting down across the table from his American guest. "Dickie loves his coffee."

"Who?" Jack asked.

"Richard Dover. He's the Ambassador—back in London at the moment, just left day before yesterday. Too bad. He'd enjoy meeting you. Good boss, he is. So, sleep well?"

"No complaints. What the hell, only one hour's worth of time difference. Is there a way for me to call London? I didn't get a chance to talk to my wife before I left yesterday. Don't want her to worry," Jack explained.

"Not a problem, Sir John," Hudson told him. "You can do that from my office."

"She thinks I'm in Bonn on NATO business."

"Really?"

"Cathy knows I'm Agency, but she doesn't know much about what I do—and besides, *I* don't know what the hell I'm doing here anyway. Analyst," Ryan explained, "not an operations guy."

"So the signal about you said. Bollocks," the field officer observed tersely. "Think of this as a new experience for your collection."

"Thanks a bunch, Andy." Ryan looked up with a very crooked smile. "I got plenty already, pal."

"Well, then, the next time you do a memo, you'll have a better appreciation for how things are at the sharp end."

"Fine with me, just so I don't get blunted by a brick wall."

"It's my job to prevent that."

Ryan took a long sip of the coffee. It wasn't up to Cathy's but, for industrial coffee, not too shabby. "What's the plan for today?"

"Finish breakfast, and I'm your tour guide. We'll get you a feel for the land and start thinking about how we complete Operation BEATRIX."

THE ZAITZEV FAMILY was agreeably surprised by the quality of the food. Oleg had heard good things about Hungarian cuisine, but the proof of the pudding is always in the eating, and the surprise was a pleasant one. Eager to see the new city, they finished, got dressed, and asked for directions. Since Irina was the one most interested in the local opportunities, she asked for the best shopping street. This, the desk clerk said, was Váci Utca, to which they could take the local metro, which, he told them, was the oldest in Europe. And so they walked to Andrassy Utca and walked down the steps. The Budapest Metro, they saw, was really an ordinary streetcar tram, just underground. Even the tram car was of wooden construction, with the same overhead catenary you usually found over the street. But it was underground, if barely so, and it moved efficiently enough. Barely ten minutes after boarding, they were at Vorosmarty Tér, or Red Marty Square, a short walk from Váci Street. They didn't notice the man who accompanied them at a discreet distance—Tom Trent—who was quite amazed to see them walking directly toward the British Embassy on Harm Utca.

RYAN WENT BACK to his room to get his raincoat—Hudson had advised a topcoat for the morning's jaunt—and then hustled down to the foyer, then outside onto the street. The weather was broken clouds, which suggested rain

later in the day. Hudson nodded at the security officer at the door and led Ryan out, rather to his surprise when he got there. Hudson's first look was to the left at police headquarters, but there was Tom Trent, not seventy-five yards away. . . .

Following the Rabbit family?

"Uh, Jack?"

"Yeah, Andy?"

"That's our bloody Rabbit, Mrs. Rabbit, and the little Bunny."

Ryan turned to look, and was startled to see the three people from the photos walking right toward him. "What the hell . . . ?"

"Must be going shopping on the next block. It's a tourist area—shops and everything. Bloody strange coincidence," Hudson observed, wondering what the hell this might mean.

"Follow them?" Jack asked.

"Why not?" Hudson asked rhetorically. He lit a smoke of his own—he liked small cigars—and waited for his companion to ignite a cigarette as the Rabbits passed. They waited for Trent to pass by before heading that way as well.

"Does this mean anything?" Ryan asked.

"I do not know," Hudson answered. But while he wasn't visibly uneasy, the tone of his voice carried a message of its own. They followed anyway.

Things were clear almost immediately. Within minutes, it was apparent that the Rabbits were shopping, with Mrs. Rabbit taking the lead, as all mama rabbits usually do.

Váci Street was seemingly an old one, though the buildings must have been restored after World War II, Ryan thought. This city had been fought for, and viciously so, in early 1945. Ryan looked in the shop windows and saw the usual variety of goods, though of poorer quality, and lesser quantities than one saw in America or London. Certainly they were impressive to the Rabbit family, whose matriarch gestured with enthusiasm at every window she passed.

"Woman thinks she's on Bond Street," Hudson observed.

"Not quite." Jack chuckled back. He'd already dropped a fair bit of his personal exchequer there. Bond Street was perhaps the finest shopping street in all the world, if you could afford to walk the sidewalk there. But what was Moscow like, and how did this shopping area look to a Russian?

All women, it seemed to Jack, were alike in one respect. They liked window shopping, until the strain of not buying things drove them over the edge. In Mrs. Rabbit's case, it lasted about 0.4 blocks before she walked into a clothing store, dragging little Bunny with her, while Mr. Rabbit went in last, with visible reluctance.

"This is going to be a while," Ryan predicted. "Been there, done that, got the T-shirt."

"What's that, Jack?"

"You married, Andy?"

"Yes."

"Kids?"

"Two boys."

"You're lucky. Girls require more expensive upkeep, buddy." They walked

forward to eyeball the store in question. Women's and girls' stuff. *Yeah,* Jack thought, *they'll be a while.*

"Well, good, we know what they look like. Time for us to be off, Sir John." Hudson waved up and down Váci Utca as though describing it to a new visitor to Budapest, and then led his guest back to the embassy, his eyes sweeping like radar antennae. He kept gesturing out of sync with his words. "So, we know what they look like. I don't see any obvious coverage. That is good. If this were one of your sting operations, they would not have let the bait come so near to us like this—at least, I would not do it that way, and KGB is fairly predictable."

"Think so?"

"Oh, yes. Ivan is very good, but predictable, rather like they play football, or chess, I suppose: a very straightforward game with excellent execution, but little in the way of originality or flair. Their activities are always circumscribed. It's their culture. They do not encourage people to stand out from the crowd, do they?"

"True, but their leaders often have."

"That one died thirty years ago, Jack, and they do not want another one."

"Concur." No sense arguing the point. The Soviet system did not encourage individualism of any sort. "Now where?"

"The concert hall, the hotel, points of interest. We've had enough surprises for one morning, I think."

LITTLE BOYS GENERALLY detest shopping, but that is not ordinarily true of little girls. It was certainly not true of *zaichik*, who had never seen such a variety of brightly colored clothing, even in the special shops to which her parents had recently achieved access. With her mother selecting and watching, Svetlana tried on a total of six coats, ranging from forest green to an incandescent red with a black velvet collar, and while she tried two after that one, the red one was the one they purchased, and which *zaichik* insisted on wearing right away. The next stop was for Oleg Ivan'ch, who bought three videocassette recorders, all unlicensed Hungarian copies of Sony Betamax machines from Japan. This shop, he learned, would deliver them to his hotel room—visiting Westerners shopped there—and this purchase took care of half of his office shopping list. He decided to toss in some tapes also, the sort that he didn't want his daughter to see, but which would have gone over well with his friends at The Centre. And so, Zaitzev parted with nearly two thousand Comecon rubles, for which he would have little use in the West anyway.

The shopping expedition continued nearly to lunch, by which time they were carrying more goods than it was comfortable to lug about, and so they walked back to the ancient metro and headed back to their hotel to dump them off before doing something for their daughter.

HEROES SQUARE WAS a place built by the Hapsburgs to honor their royal (but not entirely willing) possession of Hungary at the end of the previous century, with statues of previous Hungarian kings, back to St. Stephen —"Istvan" in the Magyar language—whose crown Jimmy Carter had returned to the country just a few years before, the one with the bent cross on the top.

"That happened, so they say," Hudson explained, "when Stephen slammed his crown atop the other one. Returning it was probably a clever move on Carter's part. It's a symbol of their nationhood, you see. The communist regime could not very well reject it, and in accepting it, they had to acknowledge that the history of the country long predates Marxism-Leninism. I am not really a fan of Mr. Carter, but that was, I think, a subtle move on his part. The Hungarians mainly detest communism, Jack. The nation is fairly religious."

"There *are* a lot of churches," Ryan observed. He'd counted six or seven on the way to this park.

"That's the other thing that gives them a sense of political identity. The government doesn't like it, but it's too big and too dangerous a thing to destroy, and so there's rather an uneasy peace between the two."

"If I had to bet, I'd put my money down on the church."

Hudson turned. "As would I, Sir John."

Ryan looked around. "Hell of a big square." It looked like more than a square mile of pavement.

"That goes back to 1956," Hudson explained. "The Sovs wanted this to be large enough to bring in troop carriers. You can land an AN-ten Cub right here, which makes it quicker to bring in airborne troops if the locals ever revolt again. You could bring, oh, say ten or twelve Cubs, a hundred and fifty soldiers each, and they would defend the center of the city against the counterrevolutionaries and wait for the tanks coming in from the east. It's not a brilliant plan, but that is how they think."

"But what if you park two city buses here and shoot the tires out?"

"I didn't say it was perfect, Jack," Hudson replied. "Even better, a few land mines. Might as well kill a few of the bastards and start a nice little fire. No way a pilot would be able to see them on his approach. And transport pilots are the blindest and dumbest lot going."

And Ivan figures he'd insert his troops before things really got out of hand. Yeah, it made sense, Ryan thought.

"You know who the Soviet ambassador was in 'fifty-six?"

"No—wait a minute, I do . . . wasn't it Andropov?"

Hudson nodded. "Yuriy Vladimirovich himself. It explains why he is so beloved of the locals. A bloody great lot of people lost their lives in that adventure."

Ryan remembered being in grammar school then—too young to appreciate the complications: It was the fall of a presidential election year, and at the same time Britain and France had decided to invade Egypt to protect their rights with the Suez Canal. Eisenhower had been hamstrung by two simultaneous crises, and had perforce been unable to do much of anything. But America had gotten a good bunch of immigrants out of it. Not a total loss.

"And the local Secret Police?"

"Just down Andrassy Utca from here, Number sixty. It's an ordinary-looking building that positively drips with blood. Not as bad now as it used to be. The original lot there were devotees of Iron Feliks, more ruthless than Hitler's Gestapo. But after the failed rebellion, they moderated somewhat and changed their name from *Allamvedelmi Osztaly* to *Allavedelmi Hivatal.* State Security *Bureau* instead of State Security *Section.* The former boss was replaced, and they got gentler. Formerly, they had a deserved reputation for torture. Supposedly, that is a thing of the past. The reputation alone is enough to make a suspect crumble. Good thing to have a diplomatic passport," Andy concluded.

"How good are they?" Jack asked next.

"Oafish. Perhaps they recruited competent people once, but that is well in the past. Probably a lingering effect of how evil they were in the forties and fifties. Good people don't want to work there and there's no real benefit from doing so, of the kind that KGB can offer its recruits. In fact, this country has some superb universities. They turn out remarkably good engineers and people in the sciences. And the Semmelweis medical school is first-rate."

"Hell, half the guys in the Manhattan Project were Hungarians, weren't they?"

Hudson nodded. "Indeed they were, and many of them Hungarian Jews. Not too many of those left, though in the big war the Hungarians saved about half of theirs. The Chief of State, Admiral Horthy, was probably killed over that—he died under what are euphemistically called 'mysterious circumstances.' Hard to say what sort of chap he actually was, but there is a school of thought that says he was a rabid anti-Communist, but decidedly not a pro-Nazi. Perhaps just a man who picked a bad place and time to be born. We may never know for sure." Hudson enjoyed being a tour guide for a change. Not a bad change of pace from being a king—well, maybe prince—spook.

But it was time to get back to business. "Okay, how are we going to do this?" Jack asked. He was looking around for a tail, but if there was one about, it was invisible to him, unless there was a team of the ubiquitous—dirty—Lada automobiles following them about. He'd have to trust Hudson to scan for that possibility.

"Back to the car. We'll go see the hotel." It was just a few minutes of driving time down Andrassy Utca, a route of remarkably French-style architecture. Ryan had never been to Paris, but, closing his eyes, he thought he might well have been.

"There, that's it," Hudson said, pulling over. One nice thing about communist countries: It wasn't hard to find a parking space.

"Nobody watching us?" Ryan wondered, trying not to look too obvious in his turning around.

"If so, he's being very clever about it. Now, right there across the street is the local KGB station. The Soviet Cultural and Friendship House, sadly lacking in culture or friendship, but we reckon thirty or forty KGB types there—none interested in us," Hudson added. "The average Hungarian would probably rather catch gonorrhea than go inside. Hard to tell you how detested the Soviets are in this country. The locals will take their money and perhaps even shake hands after the money is exchanged, but not much more than that. They

remember 1956 here, Jack."

The hotel struck Ryan as something from what H. L. Mencken had called the gilded age—champagne ambition on a beer budget.

"I've stayed in better," Jack observed. It wasn't the Plaza in New York or London's Savoy.

"Our Russian friends probably have not."

Damn. If we get them to America, they're going to be in hog heaven, Jack thought at once.

"Let's go inside. There's a rather nice bar," Hudson told him.

And so there was, off to the right and down some steps, almost like a New York City disco bar, though not quite as noisy. The band wasn't there yet, just some records playing, and not too loudly. The music, Jack noted, was American. How odd. Hudson ordered a couple glasses of Tokaji.

Ryan sipped his. It wasn't bad.

"It's bottled in California, too, I think. Your chaps call it Tokay, the national drink of Hungary. It's an acquired taste, but better than grappa."

Ryan chuckled. "I know. That's Italian for 'lighter fluid.' My uncle Mario used to love it. *De gustibus*, as they say." He looked around. There was nobody within twenty feet. "Can we talk?"

"Better just to look about. I'll come here tonight. This bar closes after midnight, and I need to see what the staff is like. Our Rabbit is in Room 307. Third floor, corner. Easy access via the fire stairs. Three entrances, front and either side. If, as I expect, there's only a single clerk at the desk, it's just a matter of distracting him to get our packages up and the Rabbit family out."

"Packages up?"

Hudson turned. "Didn't they tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

Bloody hell, Hudson thought, *they* never *get the necessary information out to everyone who needs it. Never changes*.

"We'll talk about it later," he told Ryan.

Uh-oh, Ryan thought at once. Something was up that he wouldn't like. Sure as hell. Maybe he should have brought his Browning with him. *Oh, shit*. He finished his drink and went looking for the men's room. The symbology helped. The room had not been recently scrubbed, and it was a good thing he didn't need to sit down. He emerged to find Andy waiting for him, and followed him back outside. Soon they were back in his car.

"Okay, can we discuss that little problem now?" Jack asked.

"Later," Hudson told him. It just made Ryan worry a little more.

THE PACKAGES WERE just arriving at the airport—three rather large boxes with diplomatic stickers on them—and an official from the embassy was at the ramp to make sure they weren't tampered with. Someone had made sure to put them in identifying boxes from an electronics company—the German company Siemens, in this case—thus making it seem that they were coding machines or something else bulky and sensitive. They were duly loaded in the embassy's own light truck and driven downtown with nothing more than

curiosity in their wake. The presence of an embassy officer had prevented their being x-rayed, and that was important. That might have damaged the microchips inside, of course, the customs people at the airport thought, and so made up their official report to the *Belügyminisztérium.* Soon it would be reported to everyone interested, including the KGB, that the U.K. Budapest Embassy had taken on some new encryption gear. The information would be duly filed and forgotten.

"ENJOY YOUR TOUR?" Hudson asked, back in his office.

"Beats doing a real audit. Okay, Andy," Ryan shot back. "You want to walk me through this?"

"The idea comes from your people. We're to get the Rabbit family out in such a way that KGB think them dead, and hence not defectors who will cooperate with the West. To that end, we have three bodies to put into the hotel room after we get Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail out."

"Okay, that's right," Ryan said. "Simon told me about it. Then what?"

"Then we torch the room. The three bodies are victims of domestic fires. They ought to have arrived today."

All Ryan could still feel was a visceral disgust. His face showed it.

"This is not always a tidy business, Sir John," the SIS COS informed his guest.

"Christ, Andy! Where are the bodies from?"

"Does that matter to anyone?"

A long breath. "No, I suppose not." Ryan shook his head. "Then what?"

"We drive them south. We'll meet with an agent of mine, Istvan Kovacs, a professional smuggler who is being well paid to get us over the border into Yugoslavia. From there into Dalmatia. Quite a few of my countrymen like to get some sun there. We put the Rabbit family aboard a commercial airliner to take them—and you—back to England, and the operation is concluded to everyone's satisfaction."

"Okay." *What else can I say?* Jack thought. "When?"

"Two or three days, I think."

"Are you going to be packing?" he wondered next.

"A pistol, you mean?"

"Not a slingshot," Ryan clarified.

Hudson just shook his head. "Not really very useful things, guns. If we run into trouble, there will be trained soldiers with automatic rifles, and a pistol is useless to anyone, except to cause the opposition to fire at us with rather a higher probability of hitting us. No, should that happen, you're better off talking your way out of it, using the diplomatic papers. We already have British passports for the Rabbits." He lifted a large envelope from his desk drawer. "Mr. Rabbit reportedly speaks good English. That should suffice."

"It's all thought through, eh?" Ryan wasn't sure if it seemed that way to him or not.

"It's what they pay me for, Sir John."

And I don't have standing to criticize, Ryan realized. "Okay, you're the pro

here. I'm just a fucking tourist."

"Tom Trent reported in." There was a message on Hudson's desk. "He did not see any coverage on the Rabbit family. So the operation looks entirely unremarkable to this point. I would say things are going very well indeed." *Except for the frozen burned bodies in the embassy basement,* he didn't add. "Seeing them this morning helped. They look entirely ordinary, and that helps. At least we're not trying to smuggle Grace Kelly out of the country. People like that get noticed, but women like Mrs. Rabbit do not."

"Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail . . ." Ryan whispered.

"Just a matter of moving them to a different hutch."

"You say so, man," Ryan responded dubiously. This guy just lived a different sort of life from his own. Cathy cut up people's eyeballs for a living, and that would have made Jack faint dead away like a broad confronting a rattlesnake in the bathtub. Just a different way of earning a living. It sure as hell wasn't his.

TOM TRENT WATCHED them take the long walk from the hotel to the local zoo, which was always a good place for children. The male lion and tiger were both quite magnificent, and the elephant house—built in a drunken Arabian pastel style—housed several adequate pachyderms. With an ice cream cone bought for the little girl, the tourist part of the day came to its end. The Rabbit family walked back to the hotel, with the father carrying the sleeping child for the last half kilometer or so. This was the hardest part for Trent, for whom staying invisible on a square mile of cobblestone landing field taxed even his professional skills, but the Rabbit family was not all that attentive, and on getting back to the Astoria, he ducked into a men's room to switch his reversible coat to change at least his outward colors. Half an hour later, the Zaitzevs walked out again, but turned immediately to enter the people's restaurant just next door. The food there was wholesome if not especially exciting and, more to the point, quite inexpensive. As he watched, they piled their plates high with the local cuisine and sat down to devour it. They all saved room for apple strudel, which in Budapest was just as fine as a man could eat in Vienna, but for about a tenth of the price. Another forty minutes, and they looked thoroughly tired and well stuffed, not even taking a postprandial walk around the block to settle their stomachs before riding the elevator back to the third floor and, presumably, their night's sleep. Trent took half an hour to make sure, then caught a cab for Red Marty Park. He'd had a long day and now needed to write up his report for Hudson.

THE COS AND RYAN were drinking beer in the canteen when he arrived back at the embassy. Introductions were made, and another pint of beer secured for Trent.

"Well, what do you think, Tom?"

"It certainly appears that they are just what we've been told to expect. The little girl—the father calls her *zaichik;* means 'bunny,' doesn't it?—seems a very sweet child. Other than that, an ordinary family doing ordinary things. He purchased three TV tape machines over on Váci Street. The store delivered them to the hotel. Then they went on a bimble."

"A what?"

"A walkabout, just wandering around as tourists do," Trent explained. "To the zoo. The little girl was properly impressed by the animals, but most of all by a new red coat with a black collar they bought this morning. All in all, they seem rather a pleasant little family," the spook concluded.

"Nothing out of the ordinary?" Hudson asked.

"Not a thing, Andy, and if there is any coverage on them, I failed to see it. The only surprise of the day was in the morning when they walked right past the embassy here on the way to shopping. *That* was rather a tender moment, but it seems to have been entirely coincidental. Váci Utca is the best shopping area for Easterners and Westerners. I expect the desk clerk told them to take the underground here."

"Pure vanilla, eh?" Jack asked, finishing his beer.

"So it would appear," Trent replied.

"Okay, when do we make our move?" the American asked next.

"Well, that Rozsa chap opens his concert series tomorrow night. Day after, then? We give Mrs. Rabbit a chance to hear her music. Can we get tickets for ourselves?" Hudson asked.

"Done," Trent answered. "Box six, right side of the theater, fine view of the entire building. Helps to be a diplomat, doesn't it?"

"The program is . . . ?"

"J. S. Bach, the first three Brandenberg concerti, then some other opuses of his."

"Ought to be pleasant enough," Ryan observed.

"The local orchestras are actually quite good, Sir John."

"Andy, enough of that knighthood shit, okay? My name is Jack. John Patrick, to be precise, but I've gone by 'Jack' since I was three years old."

"It is an honor, you know."

"Fine, and I thanked Her Majesty for it, but we don't do that sort of thing where I live, okay?"

"Well, wearing a sword can be inconvenient when you try to sit down," Trent sympathized.

"And caring for the horse can be such a bother." Hudson had himself a good laugh. "Not to mention the expense of jousting."

"Okay, maybe I had that coming," Ryan admitted. "I just want to get the Rabbit the hell out of Dodge."

"Which we shall do, Jack," Hudson assured him. "And you will be there to see it."

"EVERYBODY'S IN BUDAPEST," Bostock reported. "The Rabbit and his family are staying in a no-tell motel called the Astoria."

"Isn't there a part of New York by that name?" the DCI asked.

"Queens," Greer confirmed. "What about the hotel?"

"Evidently, it suits our purposes," the Deputy DDO informed them. "Basil says the operation is nominal to this point. No surveillance on our subjects has been spotted. Everything looks entirely routine. I guess our cousins have a competent Station Chief in Budapest. The three bodies arrived there today. Just a matter of crossing the t's and dotting the i's."

"Confidence level?" the DDI asked.

"Oh, say, seventy-five percent, Admiral," Bostock estimated. "Maybe better."

"What about Ryan?" Greer asked next.

"No beefs from London on how he's doing. I guess your boy is handling himself."

"He's a good kid. He ought to."

"I wonder how unhappy he is," Judge Moore wondered.

The other two each had a smile and a head shake at that. Bostock spoke first. Like all DO people, he had his doubts about members of the far more numerous DI.

"Probably not as comfortable as he is at his desk with his comfy swivel chair."

"He'll do fine, gentlemen," Greer assured them, hoping he was right.

"I wonder what this fellow has for us . . . ?" Moore breathed.

"We'll know in a week," Bostock assured them. He was always the optimist. And three out of four constituted betting odds, so long as your own ass wasn't on the line.

Judge Moore looked at his desk clock and added six hours. People would be asleep in Budapest now, and almost there in London. He remembered his own adventures in the field, mostly composed of waiting for people to show up for meets or filling out contact reports for the at-home bureaucrats who still ran things at CIA. You just couldn't get free of the fact that the Agency was a government operation, subject to all of the same restrictions and inefficiencies that attended that sad reality. But this time, for this BEATRIX operation, they *were* making things happen speedily for once . . . only because this Rabbit person said that government communications were compromised. *Not* because he'd said he had information about an innocent life that might be lost. The government had its priorities, and they did not always correspond to the needs of a rational world. He was Director of Central Intelligence, supposedly—and by federal law—in command of the entire intelligence-gathering and -analysis operations of the government of the United States of America. But getting this bureaucracy to operate efficiently was the functional equivalent of beaching a whale and commanding it to fly. You could scream all you wanted, but you couldn't fight gravity. Government was a thing made by men, and so it ought to be possible for men to change it, but in practice that just didn't happen. So, three chances out of four, they'd get their Russian out and get to debrief him in a comfortable safe house in the Virginia hills, pick his brain clean, and maybe they'd find out some important and useful things, but the game wouldn't change and neither, probably, would CIA.

"Anything we need to say to Basil?"

"Nothing comes to mind, sir," Bostock answered. "We just sit as still as we can and wait for his people to carry out the mission."

"Right," Judge Moore conceded.

DESPITE THE THREE PINTS of dark British beer, Ryan did not sleep well. He couldn't think of anything that he might be missing. Hudson and his crew seemed competent enough, and the Rabbit family had looked ordinary enough on the street the previous morning. There were three people, one of whom really wanted out of the USSR, which struck Ryan as something entirely reasonable . . . though the Russians were some of the most rabidly patriotic people in all the world. But every rule had exceptions, and evidently this man had a conscience and felt the need to stop . . . something. Whatever it was, Jack didn't know, and he knew better than to guess. Speculation wasn't analysis, and good analysis was what they paid him his meager salary for.

It would be interesting to find out. Ryan had never spoken directly with a defector. He'd read over their stuff, and had sent written questions to some of them to get answers to specific inquiries, but he'd never actually looked one in the eye and watched his face when he answered. As in playing cards, it was the only way to read the other guy. He didn't have the ability at it that his wife had—there was something to be said for medical training—but neither was he a three-year-old who'd believe anything. No, he wanted to see this guy, talk to him, and pick his brain apart, just to evaluate the reliability of what he said. The Rabbit could be a plant, after all. KGB had done that in the past, Ryan had heard. There'd been one defector who'd come out after the assassination of John Kennedy who'd proclaimed to the very heavens that KGB had taken no part in that act. It was, in fact, sufficient to make the Agency wonder if maybe KGB had done precisely that. KGB could be tricky, but like all clever, tricky people, they inevitably overplayed their hand sooner or later —and the later they did it, the worse they overplayed it. They understood the West and how its people really thought things through. No, Ivan wasn't ten feet tall, and neither was he a genius at everything, despite what the frightmongers in Washington—and even some at Langley—thought.

Everyone had the capacity for making mistakes. He'd learned that from his father, who'd made a living catching murderers, some of whom thought themselves very clever indeed. No, the only difference between a wise man and a fool was in the magnitude of his mistakes. To err was human, and the smarter and more powerful you were, the greater the scope of your screwup. Like LBJ and Vietnam, the war Jack had barely avoided due to his age—a colossal screwup foisted on the American people by the most adroit political tactician of his age, a man who'd thought his political abilities would translate to international power politics, only to learn that an Asian communist didn't think the same way that a senator from Texas did. All men had their limitations. It was just that some were more dangerous than others. And while genius knew it had limits, idiocy was always unbounded.

He lay in his bed, smoking a cigarette and looking at the ceiling, wondering what would come tomorrow. Another manifestation of Sean Miller and his

terrorists?

Hopefully not, Jack thought, still wondering why Hudson wouldn't have a gun close by for the coming adventures. Had to be some European thing, he decided. Americans on hostile soil liked to have at least one friend around.

CHAPTER 27

RABBIT RUN

***ONE MORE DAY** in a strange city,* Zaitzev thought, as the sun began to rise in the east, two hours earlier than in Moscow. At home he'd still be sleeping, Oleg Ivan'ch told himself. In due course, he hoped, he'd be waking up somewhere else, in an altogether different time zone yet again. But for now he just lay still, savoring the moment. There was virtually no sound outside, perhaps a few delivery trucks on the streets. The sun was not quite yet above the horizon. It was dark, but no longer night; brightening up, but not yet morning; the middle part of the early day. It could be a pleasant moment. It was a time children could like, a magical time when the world belonged only to those few who were awake, and all others were still unseen in their beds, and the kids could walk around like little kings, until their mothers caught them and dragged them back into their beds.

But Zaitzev just lay there, hearing the slow breathing of his wife and daughter, while he was now fully awake, free to think entirely alone.

When would they contact him? What would they say? Would they change their minds? Would they betray his trust?

Why was he so goddamned uneasy about everything? Wasn't it time to trust the CIA just a little bit? Wasn't he going to be a huge asset to them? Would he not be valuable to them? Even KGB, as stingy as a child with the best toys, gave comfort and prestige to its defectors. All the alcohol Kim Philby could drink. All the *zhopniki* Burgess could ass-fuck, or so the stories went. In both cases, the stories went, the appetites were fairy large. But such stories always grew with the telling, and they depended at least partly on the Soviet antipathy for homosexuals.

He wasn't one of those. He was a man of principle, wasn't he? Zaitzev asked himself. Of course he was. For principle he was taking his own life in his

hands and juggling it. Like knives in the circus. And like that juggler, only he would be hurt by a misjudgment. Oleg lit his first smoke of the day, trying to think things through for the hundredth time, looking for another viable course of action.

He *could* just go to the concerts, continue his shopping, take the train back to Kiev Station, and be a hero to his workmates for getting them their tape machines and pornographic movies, and the pantyhose for their wives, and probably a few things for himself. And KGB would never be the wiser.

But then the Polish priest will die, at Soviet hands . . . hands you have the power to forestall, and then *what sort of man will you see in the mirror, Oleg Ivan'ch?*

It always came back to the same thing, didn't it?

But there was little point in going back to sleep, so he smoked his cigarette and lay there, watching the sky brighten outside his hotel window.

CATHY RYAN DIDN'T really wake up until her hand found empty bed where it ought to have found her husband. That automatically, somehow, caused her to come fully awake in an instant and just as quickly to remember that he was out of town and out of the country—theirs *and* this one—and that as a result she was alone, effectively a single mother, which was not something she'd bargained for when she'd married John Patrick Ryan, Sr. She wasn't the only woman in the world whose husband traveled on business—her father did it often enough, and she'd grown up with that. But this was the first time for Jack, and she didn't like it at all.

It wasn't that she was unable to cope. She had to cope on a daily basis with worse tribulations than this one. Nor was she concerned that Jack might be getting a little on the side while he was away. She'd often enough wondered that about her father on his trips—her parents' marriage had occasionally been a rocky one—and didn't know what her mother (now deceased) had wondered about. But with Jack, no, that ought not to be a problem. But she loved him, and she knew that he loved her, and people in love were supposed to be together. Had they met while he was still an officer in the Marine Corps, it would have been a problem with which she would have had to deal—and worse, she might someday have had to deal with a husband who'd gone in harm's way, and that, she was sure, was the purest form of hell to live with. But no, she'd not met him until after all that. Her own father had taken her to dinner, bringing Jack along as an afterthought, a bright young broker with keen instincts, ready to move from the Baltimore office up to New York, only to be surprised—pleasantly at first—by the interest they'd instantly found in each other, and then had come the revelation that Jack wanted to take his money and go back to teaching history, of all things. It was something she had to deal with more than Jack, who barely tolerated Joseph Muller, Senior Vice President of Merrill Lynch Pierce Fenner and Smith, plus whatever acquisitions they'd made in the past five years. Joe was still "Daddy" to her and "him" (which translated to "that pain in the ass") to Jack.

What the hell is he working on? she wondered. *Bonn? Germany? NATO stuff?* The goddamned intelligence business, looking at secret stuff and making

equally secret observations on it that went to other people who might or might not read it and think about it. She, at least, was in an honest line of work, making sick people well, or at least helping them to see better. But not Jack.

It wasn't that he did useless things. He'd explained it to her earlier in the year. There were bad people out there, and somebody had to fight against them. Fortunately, he didn't do that with a loaded gun—Cathy hated guns, even the ones that had prevented her kidnapping and murder at their home in Maryland on the night that had ended blessedly with Little Jack's birth. She'd treated her share of gunshot wounds in the emergency room during her internship, enough to see the harm they inflicted, though not the harm they might have prevented in other places. Her world was somewhat circumscribed in that respect, a fact she appreciated, which was why she *allowed* Jack to keep a few of the damned things close by, where the kids could not reach them, even standing on a chair. He'd once tried to teach her how to use them, but she'd refused even to touch the things. Part of her thought that she was overreacting, but she was a woman, and that was that. . . . And Jack didn't seem to mind that very much.

But why isn't he here? Cathy asked herself in the darkness. What could be so damned important as to take her husband away from his wife and children?

He couldn't tell her. And *that* really made her angry. But there was no fighting it, and it wasn't as if she were dealing with a terminal cancer patient. And it wasn't as if he were boffing some German chippie on the side. But . . . damn. She just wanted her husband back.

EIGHT HUNDRED MILES AWAY, Ryan was already awake, out of the shower, shaved, brushed, and ready to face the day. Something about travel made it easy for him to wake up in the morning. But now he had nothing to do until the embassy canteen opened. He looked at the phone by his bed and thought about calling home, but he didn't know how to dial out on this phone system, and he probably needed Hudson's permission—and assistance—to accomplish the mission. Damn. He'd awakened at three in the morning, thinking to roll over and give Cathy a kiss on the cheek—it was something Jack liked to do, even though she never had any memory of it. The good news was that she always kissed back. She really did love him. Otherwise, the return kiss would not have come. People can't dissimulate while asleep. It was an important fact in Ryan's personal universe.

There was no use turning on the bedside radio. Hungarian—actually Magyar—was a language probably found on the planet Mars. For damned sure, it didn't belong on Planet Earth. He'd not heard one, not even one, word that he recognized from English, German, or Latin, the three languages he'd studied at one time or another in his life. The locals also spoke as quickly as a machine gun, adding to the difficulty on his part. Had Hudson dropped him off anywhere in this city, he would have been unable to find his way back to the British Embassy, and *that* was a feeling of vulnerability he hadn't had since he was four years old. He might as well have been on an alien planet, and having

a diplomatic passport wouldn't help, since he was accredited *by* the wrong country *to* this alien world. Somehow he'd not fully considered that on the way in. Like most Americans, he figured that with a passport and an American Express card he could safely travel the entire world in his shorts, but that world was only the capitalist world, where somebody would speak enough English to point him to a building with the American flag on the roof and U.S. Marines in the lobby. Not in this alien city. He didn't know enough to find the men's room—well, he'd found one in a bar the previous day, Ryan admitted to himself. The feeling of helplessness was hovering at the border of his consciousness like the proverbial monster under the bed, but he was a grown-up American male citizen, over thirty, formerly a commissioned officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. It wasn't the way he usually felt about things. And so he watched the numbers change on his digital clock radio, bringing him closer to his personal date with destiny, whatever the hell that was going to be, one red-lit number at a time.

ANDY HUDSON WAS already up and about. Istvan Kovacs was preparing for one of his normal smuggling runs, this time bringing Reebok running shoes into Budapest from Yugoslavia. His hard cash was in a steel box under his bed, and he was drinking his morning coffee and listening to music on the radio when a knock on the door made him look up. He walked to answer it in his underwear.

"Andy!" he said in surprise.

"Did I wake you, Istvan?"

Kovacs waved him inside. "No, I've been up for half an hour. What brings you here?"

"We need to move our package tonight," Hudson replied.

"When, exactly?"

"Oh, about two in the morning."

Hudson reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of banknotes. "Here is half of the agreed sum." There was no point in paying this Hungarian what they were really worth. It would alter the whole equation.

"Excellent. Can I get you some coffee, Andy?"

"Yes, thank you."

Kovacs waved him to the kitchen table and poured a cup. "How do you want to go about it?"

"I will drive our package to near the border, and you will take them across. I presume you know the border guards at the crossing point."

"Yes, it will be Captain Budai Laszlo. I've done business with him for years. And Sergeant Kerekes Mihály, good lad, wants to go to university and be an engineer. They do twelve-hour shifts at the crossing point, midnight to noon. They will already be bored, Andy, and open to negotiation." He held up his hand and rubbed a thumb over his forefinger.

"What is the usual rate?"

"For four people?"

"Do they need to know our package is people?" Hudson asked in return.

Kovacs shrugged. “No, I suppose not. Then some pairs of shoes. The Reeboks are very popular, you know, and some Western movie tapes. They already have all the tape-player machines they need,” Kovacs explained.

“Be generous,” Hudson suggested, “but not too generous.” *Mustn’t make them suspicious*, he didn’t have to add. “If they are married, perhaps something for their wives and children. . . .”

“I know Budai’s family well, Andy. That will not be a problem.” Budai had a young daughter, and giving something for little Zsóka would cause no problems for the smuggler.

Hudson made a calculation for distance. Two and a half hours to the Yugoslav border should be about right at that time of night. They’d be using a small truck for the first part of the journey. Istvan would handle the rest in his larger truck. And if anything went wrong, Istvan would expect to be shot by the British Secret Service officer. That was one benefit of the world-famous James Bond movies. But, more to the point, five thousand d-mark went a very long way in Hungary.

“I will be driving to what destination?”

“I will tell you tonight,” Hudson answered.

“Very well. I shall meet you at Csurgo at two tomorrow morning without fail.”

“That is very good, Istvan.” Hudson finished his coffee and stood. “It is good to have such a reliable friend.”

“You pay me well,” Kovacs observed, defining their relationship.

Hudson was tempted to say how much he trusted his agent, but that wasn’t strictly true. Like most field spooks, he didn’t trust anybody—not until after the job was completed. Might Istvan be in the pay of the AVH? Probably not. No way they could afford five thousand West German marks on anything approaching a regular basis, and Kovacs liked the good life too much. If the communist government of this country ever fell, he’d be among the first to become a millionaire, with a nice house in the hills of Pest on the other side of the Danube, overlooking Buda.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Hudson found Ryan at the front of the line in the embassy canteen.

“Like your eggs, I see,” the COS observed.

“Local, or do you truck it in from Austria?”

“The eggs are local. The farm products here are actually quite good. But we like our English bacon.”

“Developed a taste for it myself,” Jack reported. “What’s happening?” he asked. Andy’s eyes had a certain excitement in them.

“It’s tonight. First we go to the concert hall, and then we make our pickup.”

“Giving him a heads-up?”

Hudson shook his head. “No. He might act differently. I prefer to avoid that complication.”

“What if he’s not ready? What if he has second thoughts?” Jack worried.

“In that case, it’s a blown mission. And we disappear into the mists of

Budapest, and come tomorrow morning many faces will be red in London, Washington, and Moscow."

"You're pretty cool about this, buddy."

"In this job, you take things as they come. Getting excited about them doesn't help at all." He managed a smile. "So long as I take the Queen's shilling and eat the Queen's biscuit, I shall do the Queen's work."

"Semper fi, man," Jack observed. He added cream to his coffee and took a sip. Not great, but good enough for the moment.

SO WAS THE food in the state-run cafeteria next door to the Hotel Astoria. Svetlana had chosen and positively inhaled a cherry Danish pastry, along with a glass of whole milk.

"The concert is tonight," Oleg told his wife. "Excited?"

"You know how long it has been since I've been to a proper concert?" she retorted. "Oleg, I shall never forget this kindness on your part." She was surprised by the look on his face, but made no comment on it.

"Well, my dear, today we have more shopping to do. Ladies' things. You will have to handle that for me."

"Anything for myself?"

"To that end, we have eight hundred and fifty Comecon rubles, just for you to spend," Oleg Ivan'ch told her, with a beaming smile, wondering if anything she bought would be in use by the end of the week.

"YOUR HUSBAND STILL off on business?" Beaverton asked.

"Unfortunately," Cathy confirmed.

Too bad, the former Para didn't say. He'd become a good student of human behavior over the years, and her unhappiness with the current situation was plain. Well, Sir John was doubtless off doing something interesting. He'd taken the time to do a little research on the Ryans. She, the papers said, was a surgeon, just as she'd told him weeks before. Her husband, on the other hand, despite his claim to be a junior official at the American Embassy, was probably CIA. It had been hinted at by the London papers back when he'd had that run-in with the ULS terrorists, but that supposition had *never* been repeated. Probably because someone had asked Fleet Street—politely—not to say such a thing ever again. That told Eddie Beaverton everything he needed to know. The papers had also said he was, if not rich, certainly comfortably set, and that was confirmed by the expensive Jaguar in their driveway. So, Sir John was away on secret business of some sort or other. There was no sense in wondering what, the cabdriver thought, pulling up to the miniature Chatham train station. "Have a good day, mum," he told her when she got out.

"Thanks, Eddie." The usual tip. It was good to have such a generous steady customer.

For Cathy it was the usual train ride into London, with the company of a medical journal, but without the comfort of having her husband close by, reading his *Daily Telegraph* or dozing. It was funny how you could miss even a sleeping man next to you.

“THAT’S THE CONCERT HALL.”

Like Ryan’s old Volkswagen Rabbit, the Budapest Concert Hall was well made in every detail, but little, hardly filling the city block it sat upon, its architecture hinting at the Imperial style found in better and larger form in Vienna, two hundred miles away. Andy and Ryan went inside to collect the tickets arranged by the embassy through the Hungarian Foreign Ministry. The foyer was disappointingly small. Hudson asked for permission to see where the box was, and, by virtue of his diplomatic status, an usher took them upstairs and down the side corridor to the box.

Inside, it struck Ryan as similar to a Broadway theater—the Majestic, for example—not large, but elegant, with its red-velvet seating and gilt plaster, a place for the king to come when he deigned to visit the subject city far from his imperial palace up the river in Vienna. A place for the local big shots to greet their king and pretend they were in the big leagues, when they and their sovereign knew differently. But for all that, it was an earnest effort, and a good orchestra would cover for the shortcomings. The acoustics were probably excellent, and that was what really mattered. Ryan had never been to Carnegie Hall in New York, but this would be the local equivalent, just smaller and humbler—though grudgingly so.

Ryan looked around. The box was admirably suited for that. You could scan just about every seat in the theater.

“Our friends’ seats—where are they?” he asked quietly.

“Not sure. Tom will follow them in and see where they sit before he joins us.”

“Then what?” Jack asked next.

But Hudson cut him off with a single word: “Later.”

BACK AT THE EMBASSY, Tom Trent had his own work to do. First of all, he got two gallons of pure grain alcohol, 190 proof, or 95 percent pure. It was technically drinkable, but only for one who wanted a very fast and deep drunk. He sampled it, just a taste to make sure it was what the label said. This was not a time to take chances. One millimetric taste was enough for that. This was as pure as alcohol ever got, with no discernible smell, and only enough taste to let you know that it wasn’t distilled water. Trent had heard that some people used this stuff to spike the punch at weddings and other formal functions to . . . liven things up a bit. Surely this would accomplish that task to a fare-thee-well.

The next part was rather more distasteful. It was time to inspect the boxes. The embassy basement was now off-limits to everyone. Trent cut loose the sealing tape and lifted off the cardboard to reveal . . .

The bodies were in translucent plastic bags, the sort with handles, used by morticians to transport bodies. The bags even came in more than one size, he saw, probably to accommodate the bodies of children and adults of various dimensions. The first body he uncovered was that of a little girl. Blessedly, the plastic obscured the face, or what had once been a face. All he could really see was a blackened smudge, and for the moment, that was good. He didn’t need

to open the bag, and that, too, was good.

The next boxes were heavier but somehow easier. At least these bodies were adults. He manhandled them onto the concrete floor of the cellar and left them there, then moved the dry ice to the opposite corner, where the frozen CO_2 would evaporate on its own without causing harm or distraction to anyone. The bodies would have about fourteen hours to thaw out, and that, he hoped, would be enough. Trent left the basement, being careful to lock the door.

Then he went to the embassy's security office. The British legation had its own security detail of three men, all of them former enlisted servicemen. He'd need two of them tonight. Both were former sergeants in the British army, Rodney Truelove and Bob Small, and both were physically fit.

"Lads, I need your help tonight with something."

"What's that, Tom?" Truelove asked.

"We'll just need to move some objects, and do it rather covertly," Trent semi-explained. He didn't bother telling them it would be something of great importance. These were men for whom everything was treated as a matter of some importance.

"Sneak in and sneak out?" Small asked.

"Correct," Trent confirmed to the former color sergeant in the Royal Engineers. Small was from the Royal Regiment of Wales, the men of Harlech.

"What time?" Truelove inquired next.

"We'll leave here about oh-two-hundred. Ought not to take more than an hour overall."

"Dress?" This was Bob Small.

And that was a good question. To wear coats and ties didn't feel right, but to wear coveralls would be something a casual observer might notice. They'd have to dress in such a way as to be invisible.

"Casual," Trent decided. "Jackets but no coats. Like a local. Shirts and pants, that should be sufficient. Gloves, too." *Yeah, they'll surely want to wear gloves,* the spook thought.

"No problem with us," Truelove concluded. As soldiers, they were accustomed to doing things that made no sense and taking life as it came. Trent hoped they'd feel that way the following morning.

FOGAL PANTYHOSE WERE French in origin. The packaging proclaimed that. Irina nearly fainted, holding the package in her hand. The contents were real but seemed not to be, so sheer as to be a manufactured shadow and no more substantial than that. She'd heard about these things, but she'd never held them in her hand, much less worn any. And to think that any woman in the West could own as many as she needed. The wives of Oleg's Russian colleagues would swoon wearing them, and how envious her own friends at GUM would be! And how careful they'd be putting them on, afraid to create a run, careful not to blunder into things with their legs, like children who bruised every single day. These hose were far too precious to endanger. She had to get the right size for the women on Oleg's list . . . plus six pairs for

herself.

But what size? To buy any article of clothing that was too large was a deadly insult to a woman in any culture, even Russia, where women tended more to the Rubenesque than to a starving waif in the Third World . . . or Hollywood. The sizes shown on the packages were A, B, C, and D. This was an additional complication, since in Cyrillic, "B" corresponded to the Roman "V" and "C" to "S," but she took a deep breath and bought a total of twenty pairs of size C, including the six for herself. They were hideously expensive, but the Comecon rubles in her purse were not all hers, and so with another deep breath she paid cash for the collection, to the smile of the female salesclerk, who could guess what was going on. Walking out of the store with such luxuries made her feel like a czarist princess, a good sensation for any female in the world. She now had 489 rubles left to spend on herself, and that almost produced a panic. So many nice things. So little money. So little closet space at home.

Shoes? A new coat? A new handbag?

She left out jewelry, since that was Oleg's job, but, like most men, he didn't know a thing about what women wore.

What about foundation garments? Irina wondered next. A Chantarelle brassiere? Did she dare purchase something that elegant? That was at least a hundred rubles, even at this favorable exchange rate. . . . And it would be something only she knew she had on. Such a brassiere would feel like . . . hands. Like the hands of your lover. Yes, she had to get one of those.

And cosmetics. She had to get cosmetics. It was the one thing Russian women always paid attention to. She was in the right city for that. Hungarian women cared about skin care as well. She'd go to a good store and ask, comrade to comrade. Hungarian women—their faces proclaimed to the world that they cared about their skin. In this the Hungarians were most *kulturniy*.

It took another two hours of utter bliss, so pleasant that she didn't even notice her husband and daughter waiting about. She was living every Soviet woman's dream, spending money in—well, if not the West, then the next best thing. And it was wonderful. She'd wear the Chantarelle to the concert tonight, listen to Bach, and pretend she was in another time and another place, where everyone was *kulturniy* and it was a good thing to be a woman. It was a pity that no such place existed in the Soviet Union.

OUTSIDE THE SUCCESSION of women's stores, Oleg just stood around and smoked his cigarettes like any other man in the world, intensely bored by the details of women's shopping. How they could enjoy the process of picking and comparing, picking and comparing, never making a decision, just sucking in the ambience of being surrounded by things they couldn't wear and didn't really like? They always took the dress and held it up to their necks and looked in a mirror and decided *nyet*, not this one. On and on and on, past the sunset and into the night, as though their very souls depended on it. Oleg had learned patience with his current life-threatening adventure, but one thing he'd never learned, and never expected to learn, was how to watch a woman shop . . . without wishing to throttle her. Just standing there like a fucking beast of burden, holding the things she'd finally decided to purchase—then waiting while she decided to change her mind or not. Well, it couldn't last

forever. They did have tickets to the concert that night. They had to go back to the hotel, try to get a sitter for *zaichik*, get dressed, and go to the concert hall. Even Irina would appreciate that.

Probably, Oleg Ivan'ch thought bleakly. As though he didn't have enough to worry about. But his little girl wasn't concerned about a thing, Oleg saw. She ate her ice cream and looked around at this different place with its different sights. There was much to be said for a child's innocence. A pity one lost it—and why, then, did children try so hard to grow up and leave their innocence behind? Didn't they know how wonderful the world was for them alone? Didn't they know that, with understanding, the wonders of the world only became burdens? And pain.

And doubts, Zaitzev thought. *So many doubts.*

But no, *zaichik* didn't know that, and by the time she found out, it would be too late.

Finally, Irina walked outside, with a beaming smile such as she'd not had since delivering their daughter. Then she really surprised him—she came up to him for a hug and a kiss.

"Oh, Oleg, you are so good to me!" And another passionate kiss of a woman sated by shopping. Even better than one sated by sex, her husband suddenly thought.

"Back to the hotel, my dear. We must dress for the concert."

The easy part was the ride on the metro, then into the Astoria and up to Room 307. Once there, they decided more or less by default to take Svetlana with them. Getting a sitter would have been an inconvenience—Oleg had thought about a female KGB officer from the Culture and Friendship House across the street, but neither he nor his wife felt comfortable with such arrangements, and so *zaichik* would have to behave herself during the concert. His tickets were in the room, Orchestra Row 6, seats A, B, and C, which put him right on the aisle, where he preferred to be. Svetlana would wear her new clothes this evening, which, he hoped, would make her happy. It usually did, and these were the best clothes she'd ever had.

The bathroom was crowded in their room. Irina worked hard and long to get her face right. It was easier for her husband, and easier still for their daughter, for whom a wet washcloth across her grimacing face was enough. Then they all got dressed in their best clothing. Oleg buckled his little girl's shiny black shoes over the white tights to which she'd taken an immediate love. Then she put on the red coat with the black collar, and the little Bunny was all ready for the adventures of the evening. They took the elevator down to the lobby and caught a cab outside.

FOR TRENT IT was a little awkward. Staking out the lobby ought to have been difficult, but the hotel staff seemed not to notice him, and so when the package left, it was a simple matter of walking out to his car and following their cab to the concert hall, just a mile down the street. Once there, he found a parking place close by and walked quickly to the entrance. Drinks were being served there, and the Zaitzevs availed themselves of what looked like

Tokaji before heading in. Their little girl was as radiant as ever. *Lovely child,* Trent thought. He hoped she'd like life in the West. He watched them head into the theater to their seats, and then he turned to go up the stairs to his box.

RYAN AND HUDSON were already there, sitting on the old chairs with their velvet cushions.

"Andy, Jack," Trent said in greeting. "Sixth row, left side of center, just on the aisle."

Then the houselights started flickering. The curtain drew back, the meandering tones of musicians tuning their various instruments trailed off, and the conductor, Jozsef Rozsa, appeared from stage right. The initial applause was little more than polite. It was his first concert in the series, and he was new to this audience. That struck Ryan as odd—he was a Hungarian, a graduate of their own Franz Liszt Academy. Why wasn't their greeting more enthusiastic? He was a tall and thin guy with black hair and the face of an aesthete. He bowed politely to the audience and turned back to the orchestra. His little baton stick—whatever it was called, Ryan didn't know—was there on the little stand, and when he lifted it, the room went dead still, and then his right arm shot out to the string section of the Hungarian State Railroad Orchestra #1.

Ryan was not the student of music that his wife was, but Bach was Bach, and the concerto built in majesty almost from the first instant. Music, like poetry or painting, Jack told himself, was a means of communication, but he'd never quite figured out what composers were trying to say. It was easier with a John Williams movie score, where the music so perfectly accompanied the action, but Bach hadn't known about moving pictures, and so he must have been "talking about" things that his original audiences would have recognized. But Ryan wasn't one of those, and so he just had to appreciate the wonderful harmonies. It struck him that the piano wasn't right, and only when he looked did he see that it wasn't a piano at all, but rather an ancient harpsichord, played, it seemed, by an equally ancient virtuoso with flowing white hair and the elegant hands of . . . a surgeon, Jack thought. Jack did know piano music. Their friend Sissy Jackson, a solo player with the Washington Symphony, said Cathy was too mechanical in her playing, but Ryan only noted that she never missed a key—you could always tell—and to him that was sufficient. *This guy,* he thought, watching his hands and catching the notes through the wonderful cacophony, *didn't miss a single note,* and every one, it seemed, was precisely as loud or soft as the concert required, and so precisely timed as to define perfection. The rest of the orchestra seemed about as well practiced as the Marine Corps Silent Drill Team, everything as precise as a series of laser beams.

The one thing Ryan couldn't tell was what the conductor was doing. Wasn't the concerto written down? Wasn't conducting just a matter of making sure—beforehand—that everybody knew his part and did it on time? He'd have to ask Cathy about it, and she'd roll her eyes and remark that he really was a

Philistine. But Sissy Jackson said that Cathy was a mechanic on the keyboard, lacking in soul. So there, Lady Caroline!

The string section was also superb, and Ryan wondered how the hell you ran a bow along a string and made the exact noise you wanted to. *Probably because they do it for a living,* he told himself, and he sat back to enjoy the music. It was only then that he watched Andy Hudson, whose eyes were on the package. He took the moment to look that way as well.

The little girl was squirming, doing her best to be good, and maybe taking note of the music, but it couldn't be as good as a tape of *The Wizard of Oz*, and that couldn't be helped. Still and all, she was behaving well, the little Bunny sitting between Ma and Pa Rabbit.

Mama Rabbit was watching the concert with rapt attention. Papa Rabbit was being politely attentive. Maybe they should call ahead to London and get Irina a Walkman, Jack thought, along with some Christopher Hogwood tapes. . . . Cathy seemed to like him a lot, along with Nevile Marriner.

In any case, after about twenty minutes, they finished the Menuetto, the orchestra went quiet, and when Conductor Rozsa turned to face the audience . . .

The concert hall went berserk with cheering and shouts of *"Bravo!"* Jack didn't know what he'd done differently, but evidently the Hungarians did. Rozsa bowed deeply to the audience and waited for the noise to subside before turning back and commanding quiet again as he raised his little white stick to start Brandenberg #2.

This one started with a brass and strings, and Ryan found himself entranced by the individual musicians more than whatever the conductor had done with them. *How long do you have to study to get that good?* he wondered. Cathy played two or three times a week at home in Maryland—their Chatham house wasn't big enough for a proper grand piano, rather to her disappointment. He'd offered to get an upright, but she'd declined, saying that it just wasn't the same. Sissy Jackson said that she played three hours or more every single day. But Sissy did it for a living, while Cathy had another and somewhat more immediate passion in her professional life.

The second Brandenberg concerto was shorter than the first, ending in about twelve minutes, and the third followed at once. Bach must have loved the violins more than any other instrument, and the local string section was pretty good. In any other setting Jack might have given himself over to the moment and just drunk in the music, but he did have something more important planned for this evening. Every few seconds, his eyes drifted left to see the Rabbit family. . . .

BRANDENBERG #3 ENDED roughly an hour after #1 had begun. The houselights came on, and it was time for the intermission. Ryan watched Papa Rabbit and Mrs. Rabbit leave their seats. The reason was plain. The Bunny needed a trip to the little girls' room, and probably Papa would avail himself of the local plumbing as well. Hudson saw that and leapt to his feet, back out of the box, into the private corridor, closely followed by Tom Trent, and down

the steps to the lobby and into the men's room, while Ryan stayed in the box and tried to relax. The mission was now fully under way.

NOT FIFTY YARDS AWAY, Oleg Ivan'ch was standing in the line to use the men's room. Hudson managed to get right behind him. The lobby was filled with the usual buzz of small talk. Some people went to the portable bar for more drinks. Others were puffing on cigarettes, while twenty men or so were waiting to relieve their bladders. The line moved fairly rapidly—men are more efficient at this than women are—and soon they were in the tiled room.

The urinals were as elegant as everything else, seemingly carved from Carerra marble for this noble purpose. Hudson stood like everyone else, hoping that his clothing did not mark him as a foreigner. Just inside the wood-and-glass door, he took a breath and, leaning forward, called on his Russian.

"Good evening, Oleg Ivanovich," Hudson said quietly. "Do not turn around."

"Who are you?" Zaitzev whispered back.

"I am your travel agent. I understand you wish to take a little trip."

"Where might that be?"

"Oh, in a westerly direction. You are concerned for the safety of someone, are you not?"

"You are CIA?" Zaitzev could not utter the acronym in anything but a hiss.

"I am in an unusual line of work," Hudson confirmed. No sense confusing the chap at the moment.

"So, what will you do with me?"

"This night you will sleep in another country, my friend," Hudson told him, adding, "along with your wife and your lovely little daughter." Hudson watched his shoulders slump—with relief or fear, the British spook wondered. Probably both.

Zaitzev cleared his throat before whispering again. "What must I do?"

"First, you must tell me that you wish to go forward with your plan."

Only the briefest hesitation before: "*Da*. We will proceed."

"In that case, just do your business in here—" they were approaching the head of the line "—and then enjoy the rest of the concert, and return to your hotel. We shall speak again there at one-thirty or so. Can you do that?"

Just a curt nod and a gasping single syllable: "*Da*." Oleg Ivan'ch really needed to use the urinal now.

"Be at ease, my friend. All is planned. All will go well," Hudson said to him. The man would need assurance and confidence now. This had to be the most frightening moment of his life.

There was no further reply. Zaitzev took the next three steps to the marble urinal, unzipped, and relieved himself in more than one way. He turned to leave without seeing Hudson's face.

But Trent saw his, as he stood there and sipped a glass of white wine. If he'd made any signal to a fellow KGB spook in the room, the British officer hadn't seen it. No rubbing the nose or adjusting his tie, no physical sign at all. He just walked back through the swinging door and back to his seat. BEATRIX was looking better and better.

THE AUDIENCE WAS back in its seats. Ryan was doing his best to look like just one more classical music fan. Then Hudson and Trent reentered the box.

"Well?" Ryan rasped.

"Bloody good music, isn't it?" Hudson replied casually. "This Rozsa chap is first-rate. Amazing that a communist country can turn out anything better than a reprise of the *Internationale.* Oh, after it's over," Hudson added, "how about a drink with some new friends?"

Jack let out a very long breath. "Yeah, Andy, I'd like that." *Son of a bitch*, Ryan thought. *It's really going to happen*. He had lots of doubts, but they'd just subsided half a step or so. It wasn't really very much, but it was a damned sight better than it could have been.

THE SECOND HALF of the concert started with more Bach, the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. Instead of strings, this one was a celebration of brass, and the lead cornet here might have taught Louis Armstrong himself something about the higher notes. This was as much Bach as Ryan had ever heard at one time, and that old German composer had really had his shit wired, the former Marine thought, for the first time relaxing enough to enjoy it somewhat. Hungary was a country that respected its music, or so it seemed. If there was anything wrong with this orchestra, he didn't notice it, and the conductor looked as though he were in bed with the love of his life, so transfixed he was by the joy of the moment. Jack wondered idly if Hungarian women were any good at that. There was an earthy look to them, but not much smiling. . . . Maybe that was the communist government. Russians were not known for smiling, either.

"SO, ANY NEWS?" Judge Moore asked.

Mike Bostock handed over the brief dispatch from London. "Basil says his COS Budapest is going to make his move tonight. Oh, you'll love this part. The Rabbit is staying in a hotel right across the street from the KGB *rezidentura*."

Moore's eyes flared a bit. "You have to be kidding."

"Judge, do you think I'd say that for the fun of it?"

"When does Ritter get back?"

"Later today, flying back on Pan Am. From what he sent to us from Seoul, everything went pretty well with the KCIA meetings."

"He'll have a heart attack when he finds out about BEATRIX," the DCI predicted.

"It *will* get his eyes opened," the Deputy DDO agreed.

"Especially when he finds out that this Ryan boy is in on it?"

"On that, sir, you can bet the ranch, the cattle, and the big house."

Judge Moore had himself a good chuckle at that one. "Well, I guess the Agency is bigger than any one individual, right?"

"So they tell me, sir."

"When will we know?"

"I expect Basil will let us know when the plane takes off from Yugoslavia. It's going to be a long day for our new friends, though."

THE NEXT SELECTION was Bach's "Sheep May Safely Graze." Ryan recognized it as the tune played in a Navy recruiting commercial. It was a gentle piece, very different from that which had preceded it. He wasn't sure if this evening's performance was a showcase for Johann Sebastian or for the conductor. In either case, it was pleasant enough, and the audience was wildly appreciative, noisier than for the concert selection. One more piece. Ryan had a program, but hadn't bothered looking at it, since it was printed in Magyar, and he couldn't read Martian any better than he could decipher the spoken form.

The last selection was Pachelbel's Canon, a justly famous piece, one that had always struck Ryan like a movie of a pretty girl saying her prayers back in the seventeenth century, trying to concentrate on her devotions instead of thinking about the handsome boy down the lane from her farmhouse—and not quite succeeding.

WITH THE END, Jozsef Rozsa turned to the audience, which leapt again to its feet and howled its approval for endless minutes. Yeah, Jack thought, the local boy had gone away, but he'd come home to make good, and the home boys from the old days were glad to have him back. The conductor hardly smiled, as though exhausted from running the marathon. And he was sweating, Jack saw. Was conducting that hard? If you were that far into it, maybe it was. He and his Brit companions were standing and applauding as much as everyone else—no sense standing out—before, finally, the noise stopped. Rozsa waved to the orchestra, which caused the cheering to continue, and then to the concertmaster of the orchestra, the first fiddle. It seemed gracious of Rozsa, but probably the thing you had to do if you wanted the musicians to put out their best for you. And then, at long last, it was time for the crowd to break up.

"Enjoy the music, Sir John?" Hudson asked with a sly grin.

"It beats what they play on the radio at home," Ryan observed. "Now what?"

"Now we get a nice drink in a quiet place." Hudson nodded to Trent, who made his own way off, and took Ryan in tow.

The air was cool outside. Ryan immediately lit a cigarette, along with every other man in view and most of the women. Hungarians didn't plan to live all that long, or so it seemed. He felt as tied to Hudson as a child to his mother, but that wouldn't last too much longer. The street had mostly apartment-type buildings. In a Western city, it would have been condos, but those probably didn't exist here. Hudson waved for Ryan to follow and they walked two

blocks to a bar, ending up following about thirty people leaving the concert. Andy got a corner booth from which he could scan the room, and a waiter came with a couple glasses of wine.

"SO, WE GO?" Jack asked.

Hudson nodded. "We go. I told him we'd be to the hotel about one-thirty."

"And then?"

"And then we drive to the Yugoslav border."

Ryan didn't ask further. He didn't have to.

"The security to the south is trivial. Different the other way," Andy explained. "Near the Austrian border, it's fairly serious, but Yugoslavia, remember, is a sister communist state—that's the local fiction in any case. I'm no longer sure what Yugoslavia is, politically speaking. The border guards on the Hungarian side do well for themselves—many friendly arrangements with the smugglers. That is a growth industry, but the smart ones don't grow too much. Do that and the Belügyminisztérium, their Interior Ministry, might take notice. Better to avoid that," Hudson reminded him.

"But if this is the back door into the Warsaw Pact—hell, KGB's gotta know, right?"

Hudson completed the question. "So, why don't they shut things down? I suppose they could, but the local economy would suffer, and the Sovs get a lot of the things they like here, too. Trent tells me that our friend has made some major purchases here. Tape machines and pantyhose—bloody pantyhose, their women kill for the things. Probably most are overtly intended for friends and colleagues back in Moscow. So, if KGB intervened, or forced the AVH to do so, then they would lose a source of things they themselves want. So a little corruption doesn't do any major damage, and it supplies the greed of the other side. Never forget that they have their weaknesses, too. Probably more than we do, in fact, much as people argue to the contrary. They want the things we have. Official channels can't work very well, but the unofficial ones do. There's a saying in Hungarian that I like: *A nagy kapu mellett, mindig van egy kis kapu.* Next to the big gate, there is always a little door. That little door is what makes things work over here."

"And I'm going through it."

"Correct." Andy finished his wine and decided against another. He had a ways to drive tonight, in the dark, over inferior roads. Instead, he lit one of his cigars.

Ryan lit a smoke of his own. "I've never done this before, Andy."

"Frightened?"

"Yeah," Jack admitted freely. "Yeah, I am."

"First time is never easy. I've never had people with machine guns come into my home."

"I don't recommend it as after-dinner entertainment," Jack replied, with a twisted smile. "But we managed to luck our way out of it."

"I don't really believe in luck—well, sometimes, perhaps. Luck does not go about in search of a fool, Sir John."

"Maybe so. Kinda hard to notice from the inside." Ryan thought back, again, to that dreadful night. The feel of the Uzi in his hands. Having to get that one shot right. No second chance in that ballgame. And he'd dropped to one knee, taken aim, and gotten it right. He'd never learned the name of the guy in the boat he'd stitched up. *Strange,* he reflected. *If you kill a man right by your home, you should at least know his name.*

But, yeah, if he could do that, he could damned well do this. He checked his watch. It would be a while still, and he wasn't driving tonight, and another glass of wine seemed a good idea. But he'd stop it there.

BACK AT THE ASTORIA, the Zaitzevs got their little Bunny to bed, and Oleg ordered some vodka to be brought up. It was the generic Russian vodka brand that the working class drank, a half-liter bottle with a foil closure at the top that essentially forced you to drink it all in one sitting. Not an altogether bad idea for this night. The bottle arrived in five minutes, and by then *zaichik* was asleep. He sat on the bed. His wife sat in the one upholstered chair. They drank from tumblers out of the bathroom.

Oleg Ivan'ch had one task yet to perform. His wife didn't know his plan. He didn't know how she'd react to it. He knew she was unhappy. He knew that this trip was the high point of their marriage. He knew she hated her job at GUM, that she wanted to enjoy the finer things in life. But would she willingly leave her motherland behind?

On the plus side of the ledger, Russian women did not enjoy much in the way of freedom, within their marriages or without. They usually did what their husbands told them to do—the husband might pay for it later, but only later. And she loved him and trusted him, and he'd shown her the best of good times in the past few days, and so, yes, she'd go along.

But he'd wait before telling her. Why spoil things by taking a risk right now? Right across the street was the KGB's Budapest *rezidentura*. And if they got word of what he had planned, then he was surely a dead man.

BACK AT THE British Embassy, sergeants Bob Small and Rod Truelove lifted the plastic bags and carried them to the embassy's nondescript truck—the license tags had already been switched. Both tried to ignore the contents, then went back to get the alcohol containers, plus a candle and a cardboard milk carton. Then they were ready. Neither had so much as a glass of beer that night, though both wished otherwise. They drove off just after midnight, planning to take their time to scout the objective before committing to a course of action. The hard part would be getting the right parking place, but, with more than hour to pick it, they were confident that one would appear in due course.

THE BAR WAS emptying out, and Hudson didn't wish to be the last one in there. The bar bill was fifty forints, which he paid, not leaving a tip, because it wasn't the local custom, and it wouldn't do to be remembered. He motioned to Ryan and headed out but, on second thought, made his way to the loo. The thought struck Ryan as very practical, too.

Outside, Ryan asked what came next.

"We take a stroll up the street, Sir John," Hudson answered, using the knightly title as an unfair barb. "Thirty-minute stroll to the hotel, I think, will be about right." The exercise would also give them a chance to make sure they weren't being followed. If the opposition were onto their operation, they'd be unable to resist the temptation to shadow the two intelligence officers, and, on mainly empty city streets, it wouldn't be too difficult to "make" them along the way . . . unless the opposition consisted of KGB. They were cleverer than the locals by a sizable margin.

ZAITZEV AND HIS WIFE had the comfortable glow of three very stiff drinks each. Oddly, his wife showed little sign of approaching sleep, however. Too excited by the night's fine entertainment, Oleg thought. Maybe it was for the better. Just that one more worry to go—except for how the CIA planned to get them out of Hungary. What would it be? A helicopter near the border, flying them under Hungarian radar coverage? That was what he would have chosen. Would CIA be able to hop them from inside Hungary to Austria? Just how clever were they? Would they let him know? Might it be something really clever and daring? And frightening? he wondered.

Would it succeed? If not . . . well, the consequences of failure did not bear much contemplation.

But neither would they go entirely away. Not for the first time, Oleg considered that his own death might result from this adventure, and prolonged misery for his wife and child. The Soviets would not kill them, but it would mark them forever as pariahs, doomed to a life of misery. And so they were hostages to *his* conscience as well. How many Soviets had stopped short of defection just on that basis? Treason, he reminded himself, was the blackest of crimes, and the penalties for it were equally forbidding.

Zaitzev poured out the remainder of the vodka and gunned it down, waiting the last half hour before the CIA arrived to save his life . . .

Or whatever they planned to do with him and his family. He kept checking his watch while his wife finally dozed off and back, smiling and humming the Bach concert with a head that lolled back and forth. At least he'd given her as fine a night as he'd ever managed to do. . . .

THERE WAS A parking place just by the hotel's side door. Small drove up to it and backed in neatly. Parallel parking is an art form in England that he still

remembered how to perform. Then they sat, Small with a cigarette and Truelove with his favorite briar pipe, looking out at empty streets, just a few pedestrians in the distance, with Small keeping an eye on the rearview mirror for activity at the KGB residency. There were some lights on up on the second floor, but nothing moving that he could see. Probably some KGB chap had just forgotten to flip the switch on the way out.

THERE IT WAS, Ryan saw, just three blocks, on the right-hand side of the street.

Showtime.

The remaining walk passed seemingly in an instant. Tom Trent, he saw, was by the corner of the building. People were coming out of the building, probably from the basement bar Hudson had shown him, about right for closing time, just in twos and threes, nobody leaving alone. *Must be a saloon for the local singles crowd,* Jack thought, *setting up one-night stands for the terminally lonely*. So, they had them in communist countries too, eh?

As they approached, Hudson flicked a finger across his nose. That was the sign for Trent to go inside and distract the desk clerk. How he did that, Ryan would never know, but minutes later when they walked in the door, the lobby was totally empty.

"Come on." Hudson hurried over to the stairs, which wrapped around the elevator shaft. Getting to the third floor took less than a minute. And there was Room 307. Hudson turned the knob. The Rabbit had not locked it. Hudson opened it slowly.

Zaitzev saw the door open. Irina was mostly asleep now. He looked at her to be sure, then stood.

"Hello," Hudson said in quiet greeting. He extended his hand.

"Hello," Zaitzev said, in English. "You are travel agent?"

"Yes, we both are. This is Mr. Ryan."

"Ryan?" Zaitzev asked. "There is KGB operation by that name."

"Really?" Jack asked, surprised. He hadn't heard about that one yet.

"We can discuss that later, Comrade Zaitzev. We must leave now."

"Da." He turned to shake his wife awake. She started violently when she saw the two unexpected men in her room.

"Irina Bogdanova," Oleg said with a touch of sternness in his voice. "We are taking an unexpected trip. We are leaving right now. Get Svetlana ready."

Her eyes came fully open in surprise. "Oleg, what is this? What are we doing?"

"We are leaving right now for a new destination. You must get moving now."

Ryan didn't understand the words, but the content was pretty clear. Then the woman surprised him by coming to her feet and moving like an automaton. The daughter was on a small children's bed. Mother Rabbit lifted the sleeping child to semi-wakefulness and got her clothes organized.

"What are we doing exactly?" the Rabbit asked.

"We are taking you to England—tonight," Hudson emphasized.

"Not America?"

"England first," Ryan told him. "Then I will take you to America."

"Ah." He was in a very tense state, Ryan saw, but that was to be expected.

This guy had laid his life on the craps table, and the dice were still in the air. It was Ryan's job to make sure they didn't come up snake eyes. "What do I bring?"

"Nothing," Hudson said. "Not a bloody thing. Leave all your papers here. We have new ones for you." He held up three passports with a lot of faked stamps on the inside pages. "For now I will hold these for you."

"You are CIA?"

"No, I am British. Ryan here is CIA."

"But—why?"

"It's a long story, Mr. Zaitzev," Ryan said. "But right now we must leave."

The little girl was dressed now, but still sleepy, as Sally had been on that horrible night at Peregrine Cliff, Jack saw.

Hudson looked around, suddenly delighted to see the empty vodka bottle on the night table. Bloody good luck that was. Mother Rabbit was still confused, by the combination of three or four drinks and the post-midnight earthquake that had exploded around her. It had taken less than five minutes and everyone looked ready to leave. Then she saw her pantyhose bag, and moved toward it.

"Nyet," Hudson said in Russian. "Leave them. There are many of those where we are taking you."

"But—but—but . . ."

"Do what he says, Irina!" Oleg snarled, his equilibrium upset by the drink and the tension of the moment.

"Everyone ready?" Hudson asked. Next, Irina scooped her daughter up, her face a mass of utter confusion, and they all went to the door. Hudson looked out into the corridor, then waved for the others to follow. Ryan took the rear, closing the door, after making sure it was unlocked.

The lobby was still vacant. They didn't know what Tom Trent had done, but whatever it was, it had worked. Hudson led the others out the side door and onto the street. There was the embassy car Trent had brought over, and Hudson had the spare set of keys. On the way, he waved at the truck for Small and Truelove. The car was a Jaguar, painted a dark blue, with left-hand drive. Ryan loaded them into the backseat, closed the door, and hopped in the front. The big V-8 started instantly—the Jag was lovingly maintained for purposes like this one—and Hudson started driving.

THEIR TAILLIGHTS WERE still visible as Small and Truelove stepped out of their truck, hustling to the back. Each took one of the adult bags and headed in the side door. The lobby was still empty, and they raced up the stairs, each with a heavy and limp burden. The upstairs corridor was also empty. The two retired soldiers moved as stealthily as possible into the room. There they unzipped the bags, and with gloved hands removed the bodies. That was a hard moment on each of them. Professional soldiers that they were, both with combat experience, the immediate sight of a burned human body was hard to take without a deep breath and an inner command to take charge of their feelings. They laid the man's and the woman's bodies from different countries

and continents side by side on the double bed. Then they left the room to return to the truck, taking the empty body bags with them. Small got the smallest of the bags out of the truck, while Truelove got the rest of the necessary gear, and back in they went.

Small's job proved the hardest; removing the little girl's body from the plastic bag was something he'd work hard to erase from his memory. She went on the cot, as he thought of it, in her nearly incinerated nightgown. He might have patted her little head had her hair not been entirely burned off with a blowtorch, and all he could do was whisper a prayer for her innocent little soul before his stomach nearly lost control, and to prevent that he turned abruptly away.

THE FORMER ROYAL Engineer was already into his own task. He made sure they'd left nothing. The last of the plastic bags was folded and tucked into his belt. They both still had their work gloves, and so there was nothing they'd brought to be left in the room. He took his time looking around, and then waved Small out into the corridor.

Then he tore the top off the milk carton—it had been washed clean and dried beforehand. He lit the candle with his butane lighter and dripped a dollop of hot wax into the bottom of the carton, to make sure it would have a good place to stand. Then he blew out the candle and made sure it was secure in its place.

THEN CAME THE dangerous part. Truelove opened the top of the alcohol container, first pouring nearly a quart into the carton, to within just less than an inch of the top of the candle. Next he poured the alcohol on the adult bed, and more onto the child's cot. The remainder went on the floor, much of it around the milk carton. Finished, he tossed the empty alcohol container to Bob Small.

Okay, Truelove thought, fully a gallon of pure grain alcohol soaked into the bedclothes and another on the cheap rug on the floor. A demolitions expert—in fact, he had many fields of technical expertise, like most military engineers—he knew to be careful for the next part. Bending down, he flicked his lighter again and lit the candle wick with the same care a heart surgeon might have exercised in a valve replacement. He didn't waste a second leaving the room, except to make sure the door was properly locked and the do-not-disturb card hung on the knob.

"TIME TO LEAVE, Robert," Rodney said to his colleague, and in thirty seconds they were out the side door and off to the street.

“How long on the candle?” Small asked by the truck.

“Thirty minutes at most,” the Royal Engineer sergeant answered.

“That poor little girl—you suppose?” he almost asked.

“People die in house fires every day, mate. They didn’t do it special for this lot.”

Small nodded to himself. “I reckon.”

Just then Tom Trent appeared in the lobby. They’d never found the camera he lost in an upstairs room, but he tipped the desk clerk for his effort. It turned out that he was the only employee on duty until five in the morning.

Or so the chap thinks, Trent told himself, getting into the truck.

“Back to the embassy, lads,” the spook told the security men. “There’s a good bottle of single-malt Scotch whiskey waiting for us all.”

“Good. I could use a dram,” Small observed, thinking of the little girl. “Or two.”

“Can you say what this adventure is all about?”

“Not tonight. Perhaps later,” Trent replied.

CHAPTER 28

BRITISH MIDLANDS

THE CANDLE BURNED NORMALLY, not knowing the part it was playing in the night's adventures, consuming wick and wax at a slow pace, gradually burning down to the still surface of the alcohol—soon to play the part of an accelerant in an arson fire. All in all, it took thirty-four minutes before the surface of the flammable fluid ignited. What started then is called a class-B fire by professionals—a flammable-liquid event. The alcohol burned with an enthusiasm hardly less than that of gasoline—this was why the Germans had used alcohol rather than kerosene in their V-2 missile—and rapidly consumed the cardboard of the milk carton, releasing the burning quart of alcohol onto the floor. That ignited the soaked surface of the hotel room's rug. The blue wave of the fire-front raced across the room's floor in a matter of seconds, like a living thing, a blue line followed by an incandescent white mass as the fire reached up to consume the available oxygen in the high-ceilinged room. Another moment and both beds ignited as well, enveloping the bodies in them with flames and searing heat.

The Hotel Astoria was an old one, lacking both smoke detectors and automatic sprinklers to warn of danger or extinguish the blaze before it got too dangerous. Instead the flames climbed almost immediately to the water-stained white ceiling, burning off paint and charring the underlying plaster, plus attacking the cheap hotel furniture. The inside of the room turned into a crematorium for three human beings already dead, eating their bodies like the carnivorous animal the ancient Egyptians thought a fire to be. The worst of the damage took just five minutes, but while the fire died down somewhat after its first glut of consumption, it didn't die just yet.

The desk clerk in the lobby had a more complex job than one might have expected. At two-thirty every morning, he placed a please-wait-back-in-a few-

minutes sign on the desk, and took the elevator to the top floor to walk the corridors. He found the usual—nothing at all in this floor, and all the others, until getting to number three.

Coming down the steps, he noticed an unusual smell. That perked his senses, but not all that much until his feet touched the floor. Then he turned left and saw a wisp of smoke coming out from under the door to 307. He took the three steps to the door, and touched the knob, finding it hot, but not painfully so. That was when he made his mistake.

Taking the passkey from his pocket, he unlocked the door, and without feeling the wooden portion to see if that was hot, he pushed the door open.

The fire had largely died down, starved of oxygen, but the room remained hot, the hotel walls insulating the incipient blaze as efficiently as a barbecue pit. Opening the door admitted a large volume of fresh air and oxygen to the room, and barely had he had the chance to see the horror within when a phenomenon called flashover happened.

It was the next thing to an explosion. The room reignited in a blast of flame and a further intake of air, sufficiently strong that it nearly pulled the clerk off his feet and into the room even as an outward blast of flame pushed him the other way—and saved his life. Slapping his hands to his flash-burned face, he fell to his knees and struggled to the manual-pull alarm on the wall next to the elevator—without pulling 307's door back shut. That sounded alarm bells throughout the hotel and also reported to the nearest firehouse, three kilometers away. Screaming with pain, he walked, or fell, down the stairs to the lobby, where he first threw a glass of water on his burned face, then called the emergency number next to the phone to report the fire to the city fire department. By this time people were coming down the stairs. For them, getting past the third floor had been harrowing, and the clerk, burned as he was, got an extinguisher to spray on them, but he was unable to climb back to use the fire hose in its little cabinet on the involved floor. It would not have mattered anyway.

The first fire truck arrived less than five minutes after the pull alarm had sounded. Hardly needing to be told—the fire was visible from outside, since the room's windows had shattered from the heat of the renewed blaze—they forced their way past the escaping hotel guests. Within a minute after arriving, the first seventy-millimeter hose was spraying water into the room. It took less than five minutes to knock the fire down, and through the smoke and horrid smell, the firemen forced their way inside to find what they feared—a family of three, dead in their beds.

The fire lieutenant in command of the first responders cradled the dead child in his arms and ran down and out onto the street, but he could see it was a waste. The child had roasted like a piece of meat in an oven. Hosing her body down only exposed the ghastly effect a fire has on a human body, and there was nothing for him to do but say a prayer for her. The lieutenant was the brother of a priest and a devout Catholic in this Marxist country, and he prayed to his God for mercy for the little girl's soul, not knowing that the very same thing had happened over four thousand miles away and ten days earlier.

THE RABBITS WERE out of the city in a matter of minutes. Hudson drove carefully, within the posted speed limits, lest there be a cop around, though there was virtually no traffic in evidence, merely the occasional truck, commercial ones with canvas sides, carrying who knew what to who knew where. Ryan was in the right-front seat, half turned to look in the back. Irina Zaitzev was a mask of tipsy confusion, not comprehending enough to be frightened. The child was asleep, as children invariably were at this time of night. The father was trying to be stoic, but the edge of fear was visible on his face, even in the darkness. Ryan tried to put himself in his place, but found it impossible to do so. To betray one's country was too great a leap of imagination for him. He knew there were those who stabbed America in the back, mainly for money, but he didn't pretend to understand their motivation. Sure, back in the '30s and '40s there had been those for whom communism looked like the leading wave of human history, but those thoughts were all as dead as V. I. Lenin was today. Communism was a dying idea, except in the minds of those who needed it to be the source of their personal power. . . . And perhaps some still believed in it because they'd never been exposed to anything else, or because the idea had been too firmly planted in their distant youth, as a minister or priest believed in God. But the words of Lenin's *Collected Works* were not Holy Writ to Ryan and never would be. As a new college graduate, he'd sworn his oath to the Constitution of the United States and promised to "bear true faith and allegiance to the same" as a second lieutenant of the United States Marine Corps, and that was that.

"How long, Andy?"

"A little over an hour to Csurgo. Traffic ought not to be a problem," Hudson answered.

And it wasn't. In minutes, they were outside the boundaries of Hungary's capital, and then the lights of houses and businesses just stopped as though someone had flipped the master switch for electricity to the region. The road was two-lane blacktop, and none too wide at that. Telephone poles, no guardrails. *And this is a major commercial highway?* Ryan wondered. They might as well have been driving across central Nevada. Perhaps one or two lights every kilometer, farmhouses where people liked to have one on to help find their way to the bathroom. Even the road signs looked decrepit and not very helpful—not the mint-green highway signs of home or the friendly blue ones of England. It didn't help that the words on them were in Martian. Otherwise they were the European sort, showing the speed limit in black numbers on a white disc within a red circle.

Hudson was a competent driver, puffing away on his cigars and driving as though he were on his way to Covent Garden in London. Ryan thanked God that he'd made a trip to the head before walking to the hotel—otherwise he might lose control of his bladder. Well, probably his face didn't show how nervous he was, Jack hoped. He kept telling himself that his own life wasn't on the line, but those of the people in the back were, and they were now his responsibility, and something in him, probably something learned from his policeman father, made that a matter of supreme importance.

"What is your full name?" Oleg asked him, breaking the silence

unexpectedly.

"Ryan, Jack Ryan."

"What sort of name is Ryan?" the Rabbit pressed on.

"My ancestry is Irish. John corresponds to Ivan, I think, but people call me Jack, like Vanya, maybe."

"And you are in CIA?"

"Yes, I am."

"What is your job in CIA?"

"I am an analyst. Mostly I sit at a desk and write reports."

"I also sit at desk in Centre."

"You are a communications officer?"

A nod. "*Da*, that is my job in Centre." Then Zaitzev remembered that his important information was not for the back of a car, and he shut back up.

Ryan saw that. He had things to say, but not here, and that was fair enough for the moment.

The trip went smoothly. Four cigars for Hudson, and six cigarettes for Ryan, until they approached the town of Csurgo.

Ryan had expected something more than this. Csurgo was barely a wide place in the road, with not even a gas station in evidence, and surely not an all-night 7-Eleven. Hudson turned off the main road onto a dirt track, and three minutes later there was the shape of a commercial truck. It was a big Volvo, he saw in a moment, with a black canvas cover on the back and two men standing next to it, both smoking. Hudson pulled around it, finding concealment behind some nondescript sort of shed a few yards from it, and stopped the Jaguar. He hopped out, and motioned to the rest to do the same.

Ryan followed the Brit spook to the two men. Hudson walked right up to the older of the two and shook his hand.

"Hello, Istvan. Good of you to wait for us."

"Hello, Andy. It is a dull night. Who are your friends?"

"This is Mr. Ryan. These are the Somerset family. We're going across the border," Hudson explained.

"Okay," Kovacs agreed. "This is Jani. He's my driver for tonight. Andy, you can ride in front with us. The rest will be in the back. Come," he said, leading the way.

The truck's tailgate had ladder steps built in. Ryan climbed up first, and bent down to lift the little girl—Svetlana, he remembered, was her name—and watched her mother and father climb up. In the cargo area, he saw, were some large cardboard boxes, perhaps containers for the tape machine Hungarians made. Kovacs climbed up also.

"You all speak English?" he asked, and got nods. "It is a short way to the border, just five kilometer. You will hide in boxes here. Please make no noise. Is important. You understand? Make no noise." He got more nods, noting that the man—definitely not an Englishman, he could see—translated to his wife. The man took the child, Kovacs saw also. With his cargo hidden away, he closed the tailgate and walked forward.

"Five thousand d-mark for this, eh?" Istvan asked.

"That is correct," Hudson agreed.

"I should ask more, but I am not a greedy man."

"You are a trusted comrade, my friend," Hudson assured him, briefly wishing that he had a pistol in his belt.

The Volvo's big diesel lit up with a rumbling roar and the truck jerked off, back to the main road, with Jani at the large, almost flat steering wheel.

It didn't take long.

And that was a good thing for Ryan, crouching in the cardboard box in the back. He could only guess how the Russians felt, like unborn babies in a horrible womb, one with loaded guns outside it.

Ryan was afraid even to smoke a final cigarette, fearing someone might smell the smoke over the pungent diesel exhaust, which was altogether unlikely.

"So, Istvan," Hudson asked in the cab, "what is the routine?"

"Watch. We usually travel at night. Is more—dramatic, you say? I know the Határ-rség here many years now. Captain Budai Laszlo is good man to do business with. He has wife and little daughter, always want present for daughter Zsóka. I have," Kovacs promised, holding up a paper bag.

The border post was sufficiently well lighted that they could see it three kilometers off, and blessedly there was little traffic this time of night. Jani drove up normally, slowing and stopping there when the private of the border guards, the *Határ-rség,* waved for them to halt.

"Is Captain Budai here?" Kovacs asked at once. "I have something for him." The private headed into the guardhouse and returned instantly with a more senior man.

"Laszlo! How are you this cold night?" Kovacs called in Magyar, then jumped down from the cab with the paper shopping bag.

"Istvan, what can I say, it is dull night," the youngish captain replied.

"And your little Zsóka, she is well?"

"Her birthday is next week. She will be five."

"Excellent!" the smuggler observed. He handed over the bag. "Give her these."

"These" were a pair of candy-apple-red Reebok sneakers with Velcro closures.

"Lovely," Captain Budai observed, with genuine pleasure. He took them out to look at them in the light. Any female child in the world loved the things, and Laszlo was as happy as his daughter would be in four days. "You are a good friend, Istvan. So, what do you transport tonight?"

"Nothing of value. I'm making a pickup this morning in Beograd, though. Anything you need?"

"My wife would love some tapes for the Walkman you got her last month." The amazing thing about Budai was that he was not an overly greedy man. That was one of the reasons Kovacs liked to travel across the border on his watch.

"What groups?"

"The Bee Gees, I think she called them. For me, some show tunes, if you don't mind."

"Anything in particular? The music from American movies, like *Star Wars,* perhaps."

"I have that one, but not the new one, the *Empire Attacks Back,* perhaps?"

"Done." They shook hands. "How about some Western coffee?"

"What kind?"

"Austrian or American, maybe? There's a place in Beograd that has American Folgers coffee. It is very tasty," Kovacs assured him.

"I have never tried that."

"I'll get you some and you can try it—no charge."

"You are a good man," Budai observed. "Have a good night. Pass," he concluded, waving to his corporal.

And it was just that easy. Kovacs walked back around and climbed into his truck. He wouldn't have to part with the present he had for Sergeant Kerekes Mikaly, and that was good, too.

Hudson was surprised. "No paper check?"

"Laszlo just runs the name through the teletype to Budapest. Some people there are also on my payroll. They are more greedy than he is, but is not major expense. Jani, go," he said to the driver, who started up and pulled across the line painted on the pavement. And just that easily, the truck left the Warsaw Pact.

In the back, Ryan had rarely felt so good to feel a vehicle start to move. It stopped again in a minute, but this was a different border.

And going into Yugoslavia, Jani handled it, just trading a few words with the guard, not even killing the engine, before being waved forward and into the semi-communist country. He drove three kilometers before being told to pull off onto a side road. There, after a few bumps, the Volvo stopped. Yugoslavian border security, Hudson saw, was sod-all.

Ryan was already out of his cardboard box and standing at the back when the canvas cover was flipped aside.

"We're here, Jack," Hudson said.

"Where is that exactly?"

"Yugoslavia, my lad. The nearest town is Légrád, and here we part company."

"Oh?"

"Yes, I'm turning you over to Vic Lucas. He's my counterpart in Belgrade. Vic?" Hudson beckoned.

The man who came into view might have been Hudson's twin, except for the hair, which was black. He was also two or three inches taller, Jack decided on second inspection. He went forward to get the Rabbits out of the boxes. That happened in a hurry, and Ryan helped them down, handing the little girl —remarkably, still asleep—to her mother, who looked more confused than ever.

Hudson walked them to a car, a station wagon—"estate wagon" to the Brits —which would at least have ample room for everyone.

"Sir John—Jack, that is—well done, and thanks for all your help."

"I didn't do shit, Andy, but you handled this pretty damned well," Ryan said, taking his hand. "Come see me in London for a pint sometime."

"That I shall do," Hudson promised.

The estate wagon was a British Ford. Ryan helped the Rabbits into their seats and then took the right-front again.

"Mr. Lucas, where do we go now?"

"To the airport. Our flight is waiting," the Belgrade COS replied.

"Oh? Special flight?"

"No, the commercial aircraft is experiencing 'technical difficulties' at the moment. I rather expect they will be cleared up about the time we get aboard."

"Good to know," Ryan observed. Better this than a real broken airplane, then he realized that one more harrowing adventure lay ahead. His hatred of flying was suddenly back, now that they were in semi-free country.

"Right, let's be off," Lucas said, starting his engine and pulling off.

Whatever sort of spook Vic Lucas was, he must have thought himself Stirling Moss's smarter brother. The car rocketed down the road into the Yugoslavian darkness.

"So, how has your night been, Jack?"

"Eventful," Ryan answered, making sure his seat belt was properly fastened.

The countryside here was better lit and the road better engineered and maintained, or so it seemed, flashing by at what felt like seventy-five miles per hour, rather fast for a strange road in the dark. Robby Jackson drove like this, but Robby was a fighter pilot, and therefore invincible while at the controls of any transportation platform. This Vic Lucas must have felt the same way, calmly looking forward and turning the wheel in short, sharp increments. In the back, Oleg was still tense, and Irina still trying to come to terms with some new and incomprehensible reality, while their little daughter continued to sleep like a diminutive angel. Ryan was chain-smoking. It seemed to help somewhat, though if Cathy smelled it on his breath there would be hell to pay. Well, she'd just have to understand, Jack thought, watching telephone poles flash by the car like fence pickets. He was doing Uncle Sam's business.

Then Ryan saw a police car sitting by the side of the road, its officers sipping coffee or sleeping through their watch.

"Not to worry," Lucas said. "Diplomatic tags. I am the senior political counselor at Her Britannic Majesty's Embassy. And you good people are my guests."

"You say so, man. How much longer?"

"Half an hour, roughly. Traffic's been very kind to us so far. Not much truck traffic. This road can be crowded, even late at night with cross-border trade. That Kovacs chap's been working with us for years. I could make quite a good living in partnership with him. He often brings those Hungarian tape machines this way. They're decent machines, and they're giving the bloody things away, what with the labor costs in Hungary. Surprising they don't try to sell them in the West, though I expect they'd have to pay the Japanese for the patent infringements. Not too scrupulous about such things on the other side of the line, you see." Lucas took another high-speed turn.

"Jesus, guy, how fast do you go in daylight?"

"Not much faster than this. Good night vision, you see, but the suspension on this car slows me down. American design, you see. Too soft for proper handling."

"So buy a Corvette. Friend of mine has one."

"Lovely things, but made out of plastic." Lucas shook his head and reached for a cigar. Probably a Cuban one, Ryan was sure. They loved the things in

England.

Half an hour later, Lucas congratulated himself. “There it is. Just on time.”

Airports are airports all over the world. The same architect probably designed them all, Ryan thought. The only differences were the signs for the rest rooms. In England they called them toilets, which had always struck him as a little crude in an otherwise gentle country. Then he got a surprise. Instead of driving to the terminal, Lucas took the path through the open gate right onto the flight line.

“I have an arrangement with the airport manager,” he explained. “He likes single malts.” Still and all, Lucas stayed on the yellow-lined car path, right to a lonely aircraft jetway with an airliner parked next to it. “Here we are,” the Brit spook announced.

They all stepped out of the car, this time with Mrs. Rabbit holding the Bunny. Lucas led them up the exterior stairs into the jetway’s control booth, and from there right into the aircraft’s open door.

The captain, hatless but wearing four stripes on his shoulders, was standing right there. “You’re Mr. Lucas?”

“That is correct, Captain Rogers. And here are your extra passengers.” He pointed to Ryan and the Rabbit family.

“Excellent.” Captain Rogers turned to his lead stew. “We can board the aircraft now.”

The second-ranking flight attendant took them to the four front-row first-class seats, where Ryan was singularly surprised to be happy belting himself in to 1-B, the aisle seat just behind the front bulkhead. He watched thirty or so working-class passengers come aboard after sunning themselves on the Dalmatian Coast—a favorite for Brits of late—none of them looking very happy for the three-hour delay on what was already supposed to be the day’s last flight to Manchester. Things happened quickly after that. He heard both engines start up, and then the BAC-111—the British counterpart to the Douglas DC-9—backed away from the jetway and taxied out on the ramp.

“What now?” Oleg asked, in what was almost a normal voice.

“We fly to England,” Ryan replied. “Two hours or so, I guess, and we’ll be there.”

“So easy?”

“You think this was easy?” Ryan asked, with no small amount of incredulity in his voice. Then the intercom turned on.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Rogers speaking. I am glad to say that we finally got the electronic problem repaired. Thank you ever so much for your patience, and after we lift off, the drinks will be free to all passengers.” That evoked a cheer from the back of the aircraft. “For the moment, please pay attention to the flight attendants for your safety message.”

Put your seat belts on, dummies, and they work like this, *for those of you stupid enough not to notice that you have the fucking things in your personal automobiles, too*. And then in three more minutes the British Midlands airliner clawed its way into the sky.

As promised, before they’d gotten to ten thousand feet, the no-smoking light *ding*ed off and the drink cart arrived. The Russian asked for vodka and got three miniatures of Finlandia. Ryan got himself a glass of wine and the

promise of more. He wouldn't sleep on this flight, but he wouldn't worry as much as usual, either. He was leaving the communist world behind at five hundred miles per hour, and that was probably the best way to do it.

Oleg Ivan'ch, he saw, drank vodka as though it were water after a hot day of cutting the grass. His wife, over in 1-C, was doing the same. Ryan felt positively virtuous sipping gently at his French wine.

"SIGNAL IN FROM BASIL," Bostock reported over the phone. "The Rabbit is in the air. ETA Manchester in ninety minutes."

"Great," Judge Moore breathed, relieved as always when a black operation worked out as planned. Better still, they'd run it without Bob Ritter, who, though a good man, was not entirely indispensable.

"Three more days and we can debrief him," Bostock said next. "The nice house out by Winchester?"

"Yeah, we'll see if he likes horse country." The house even had a Steinway piano for Mrs. Rabbit to play and lots of green for the kid to run around on.

ALAN KINGSHOT WAS just pulling into the parking area at the Manchester airport, along with two subordinates. There would be a large back Daimler automobile to take the arriving defectors out to Somerset in the morning. He hoped they didn't mind driving. It would be nearly a two-hour drive. For the moment, they'd be quartering at a nice country house just a few minutes from the airport. They'd probably done quite enough traveling for the moment, with still more to come before the end of the week. But then he started thinking about it. Might that be too hard on them? The question gave him something to ponder at one of the airport's bars.

RYAN WAS PRETTY well potted. Maybe alcohol interacted with anxiety, he thought, taking a moment to go to the forward rest room on the airliner, and feeling better when he got back and was strapped in. He almost never took his seat belt off. The food served was just sandwiches—English ones, with their unnatural affection for a weed called watercress. What he really wanted now was a good corned beef, but the Brits didn't even know what corned beef was, thinking it the canned junk that looked like dog food to most Americans. In fact, the Brits probably fed better stuff to their dogs, as enthralled as they were with their pets. The lights passing underneath the airliner proved that they were overflying Western Europe. The Eastern part was never well lit, as he'd learned coming south from Budapest.

BUT ZAITZEV wasn't sure. What if this was a very elaborate ruse to get him to spill the beans? What if the Second Chief Directorate had staged a huge *maskirovka* village for his brief benefit?

"Ryan?"

Jack turned. "Yes?"

"What will I see in England when we get there?"

"I don't know what the plan is after we get to Manchester," Ryan reported.

"You are CIA?" the Rabbit asked again.

"Yes." Jack nodded.

"How can I be sure of this?"

"Well . . ." Ryan fished out his wallet. "Here are my driver's license, credit cards, some cash. My passport is fake, of course. I'm an American, but they fixed me up with a British one. Oh," Ryan realized, "you're worried that this is all faked?"

"How can I be sure?"

"My friend, in less than an hour, you will be certain it is not. Here—" He opened his wallet again. "This is my wife, my daughter, and our new son. My address at home—in America, that is—is here on my driver's license, 5000 Peregrine Cliff Road, Anne Arundel County, Maryland. That is right on the Chesapeake Bay. It takes me about an hour to drive from there to CIA Headquarters at Langley. My wife is an eye surgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. It is world-famous. You must have heard of it."

Zaitzev just shook his head.

"Well, a couple years ago, three docs from Hopkins fixed the eyes of Mikhail Suslov. I understand he just died. His replacement, we think, will be Mikhail Yevgeniyevich Alexandrov. We know a little about him, but not enough. In fact, we don't know enough about Yuriy Vladimirovich."

"What do you not know?"

"Is he married? We've never seen a picture of his wife, if any."

"Yes, everyone knows this. His wife is Tatiana, elegant woman, my wife says she has noble features. But no children for them," Oleg concluded.

Well, there's factoid #1 from the Rabbit, Ryan thought.

"How is it possible that you do not know this?" Zaitzev demanded.

"Oleg Ivan'ch, there are many things we do not know about the Soviet Union," Jack admitted. "Some are important, and some are not."

"Is this true?"

"Yes, it is."

Something rattled loose in Zaitzev's head. "You say your name Ryan?"

"That's right."

"Your father policeman?"

"How did you know that?" Ryan asked in some surprise.

"We have small dossier on you. Washington *rezidentura* do it. Your family attacked by hooligans, yes?"

"Correct." *KGB is interested in me, eh?* Jack thought. "Terrorists, they tried to kill me and my family. My son was born that night."

"And you join CIA after that?"

"Again, yes—officially, anyway. I've done work for the Agency for several

years." Then curiosity took full hold. "What does my dossier say about me?"

"It say you are rich fool. You were officer in naval infantry, and your wife is rich and you marry her for that reason. To get more money for self."

So, even the KGB is a prisoner of its own political prejudices, Jack thought. *Interesting.*

"I am not poor," Jack told the Rabbit. "But I married my wife for love, not money. Only a fool does that."

"How many capitalists are fools?"

Ryan had himself a good laugh. "A lot more than you might think. You do not need to be very smart in America to become rich." New York and Washington in particular were full of rich idiots, but Ryan thought the Rabbit needed a little while before he learned that lesson. "Who did the dossier on me?"

"Reporter in Washington *rezidentura* of *Izvestia* is junior KGB officer. He do it last summer."

"And how did you come to know about it?"

"His dispatch come to my desk, and I forward to America-Canada Institute—is KGB office. You know that, yes?"

"Yes," Jack confirmed. "That is one we do know." That was when his ears popped. The airliner was descending. Ryan gunned down the last of his third white wine and told himself it would all be over in a few minutes. One thing he'd learned from Operation BEATRIX: This field work wasn't for him.

The no-smoking sign *ding*ed back on. Ryan brought his chair to its full upright position, and then the lights of Manchester appeared through the windows, the car headlights and the airport fence, and in a few more seconds . . . *thump,* the wheels touched down in Merry Old England. It might not be the same as America, but for the moment it would do.

Oleg, he saw, had his face against the window, checking out the tail colors of the aircraft. There were too many for this to be a Soviet Air Force base and a huge *maskirovka*. He visibly started to relax.

"We welcome you to Manchester," the pilot said over the intercom. "The time is three-forty, and the temperature outside is fifty-four degrees Fahrenheit. We appreciate your patience earlier today, and we hope to see you again soon in British Midlands Airways."

Yeah, Jack thought. *In your dreams, skipper*.

Ryan sat and waited as the aircraft taxied to the international-arrivals area. A truck-borne stairway came to the front door, which the lead stew duly opened. Ryan and the Rabbit family were first off and down the steps, where they were guided to some cars instead of the waiting transfer bus.

Alan Kingshot was there to take his hand. "How was it, Jack?"

"Just like a trip to Disney World," Ryan answered, without a trace of audible irony in his voice.

"Right. Let's get you all loaded and off to a comfortable place."

"Works for me, pal. What is it, quarter of three?" Ryan hadn't changed his watch back yet. Britain was an hour behind the rest of Europe.

"That's right," the field spook confirmed.

"Damn," Jack reacted. Too damned late to call home and tell Cathy he was back. But, then, he wasn't really back. Now he had to play CIA representative

for the first interview of the Red Rabbit. Probably Sir Basil had him doing this because he was too junior to be very effective. Well, maybe he'd show his British host just how dumb he was, Ryan growled to himself. But first it was time for sleep. Stress, he'd learned, was about as tiring as jogging—just harder on the heart.

BACK IN BUDAPEST, the three bodies were at the city morgue, an institution as depressing behind the Iron Curtain as in front of it. When Zaitzev's identity as a Russian citizen had been confirmed, a call had been made to the Soviet Embassy, where it was speedily established that the man in question was a KGB officer. *That* generated interest in the *rezidentura,* just across the street from the hotel where he'd ostensibly died, and more telephone calls were made.

Before five in the morning, Professor Zoltán Bíró was awakened in his bed by the AVH. Bíró was professor of pathology at the Ignaz Semmelweis Medical College. Named for one of the fathers of the germ theory that had transformed the science of medicine in the nineteenth century, it remained a good one, even attracting students from West Germany, none of whom would attend the postmortem examinations ordered by the country's Belügyminisztérium, which would also be attended by the physician-in-residence at the Soviet Embassy.

The first done would be the adult male. Technicians took blood samples from all three bodies for analysis in the adjacent laboratory.

"This is the body of a male Caucasian, approximately thirty-five years of age, length approximately one hundred seventy-five centimeters, weight approximately seventy-six kilograms. Color of hair cannot be determined due to extensive charring from a domestic fire. Initial impression is death by fire—more probably from carbon monoxide intoxication, as the body shows no evidence of death throes." Then the dissection began with the classical Y incision to open the body cavity for viewing of the internal organs.

He was examining the heart—unremarkable—when the lab reports came in.

"Professor Bíró, carbon monoxide in all three blood samples are well into lethal range," the voice on the speaker said, giving the exact numbers.

Bíró looked over at his Russian colleague. "Anything else you need? I can do a full postmortem on all three victims here, but the cause of death is determined. This man was not shot. We will do fuller blood-chemistry checks, of course, but it's unlikely that they were poisoned, and there is clearly no bullet wound or other penetrating trauma in this man. They were all killed by fire. I will send you the full laboratory report this afternoon." Bíró let out a long breath. *"A kurva életbe!"* he concluded with a popular Magyar epithet.

"Such a pretty little girl," the Russian internist observed. Zaitzev's wallet had somehow survived the fire, along with its family photos. The picture of Svetlana had been particularly engaging.

"Death is never sentimental, my friend," Bíró told him. As a pathologist, he knew that fact all too well.

"Very well. Thank you, Comrade Professor." And the Russian took his leave, already thinking through his official report to Moscow.

CHAPTER 29

REVELATION

THE SAFE HOUSE WAS palatial, the country home of somebody with both money and taste, built in the previous century by the look of it, with stucco and the sort of heavy oaken timbers used to build ships like HMS *Victory* once upon a time. But landlocked, it was about as far from blue water as one could get on this island kingdom.

Evidently, Alan Kingshot knew it well enough, since he drove them there and then got them settled inside. The two-person staff that ran the place looked like cops to Ryan, probably married and retired from the Police Force of the Metropolis, as the London Constabulary was officially known. They kindly escorted their new guests to a rather nice suite of rooms. Irina Zaitzev's eyes were agog at the accommodations, which were impressive even by Ryan's standards. All Oleg Ivanovich did was set his shaving kit in the bathroom, strip off his clothes, and collapse onto the bed, where alcohol-aided sleep proved to be less than five minutes away.

WORD GOT TO Judge Moore just before midnight that the package was safely ensconced in a very secure location, and with that information he also went to bed. All that remained was to tell the Air Force to get a KC-135 or a similar aircraft ready to fly the package home, and that would take a mere telephone call to an officer in the Pentagon. He wondered what the Rabbit would say, but he could wait for that. Patience, once the dangerous stuff was behind, was not all that difficult for the Director of Central Intelligence. It was like Christmas Eve, and while he wasn't exactly sure what would be under the

tree, he could be confident that it wouldn't be anything bad.

FOR SIR BASIL Charleston at his Belgravia house, the news came before breakfast, when a messenger from Century House arrived with the word. *An altogether pleasant way to start a working day,* he thought, certainly better than some others he'd had. He left home for the office just before seven A.M., ready for his morning brief to outline the success of Operation BEATRIX.

RYAN WAS AWAKENED by traffic noise. Whoever had built this magnificent country home hadn't anticipated the construction of a motorway just three hundred yards away, but somehow Ryan had avoided a hangover from all the drinks on the flight in, and the lingering excitement of the moment had gotten him fully awake after a mere six and a half hours of slumber. He washed up and made his way to the pleasant not-so-little breakfast room. Alan Kingshot was there, working on his morning tea.

"Probably coffee for you, eh?"

"If you have any."

"Only instant," Kingshot warned.

Jack stifled his disappointment. "Better than no coffee at all."

"Eggs Benedict?" the retired woman cop asked.

"Ma'am, for that I will forgive the absence of Starbucks," Jack replied, with a smile. Then he saw the morning papers, and he thought that reality and normality had finally returned to his life. Well, almost.

"Mr. and Mrs. Thompson run this house for us," Kingshot explained. "Nick was a homicide detective with the Yard, and Emma was in administration."

"That's what my dad used to do," Ryan observed. "How did you guys get working for SIS?"

"Nick worked on the Markov case," Mrs. Thompson answered.

"And did a damned good job of it, too," Kingshot told Ryan. "He would have been a fine field officer for us."

" 'Bond, James Bond'?" Nick Thompson said, walking into the kitchen. "I think not. Our guests are moving about. It sounds as though the little girl got them up."

"Yeah," Jack observed. "Kids will do that. So, we do the debrief here or somewhere else?"

"We were planning to do it in Somerset, but I decided last night not to drive them around too much. Why stress them out?" Kingshot asked rhetorically. "We just took title to this house last year, and it's as comfortable a place as any. The one in Somerset—near Taunton—is a touch more isolated, but these people ought not to bolt, you think?"

"If he goes home, he's one dead Rabbit," Ryan thought out loud. "He has to know that. On the plane, he was worried that we were KGB and this was all an elaborate *maskirovka* setup, I think. His wife did a lot of shopping in Budapest.

Maybe we have somebody take her shopping around here?" the American wondered. "Then we can talk to him in comfort. His English seems okay. Do we have anybody here with good Russian?"

"My job," Kingshot told Ryan.

"First thing we want to know, why the hell did he decide to skip town?"

"Obviously, but then, what's all this lot about compromised communications?"

"Yeah." Ryan took a deep breath. "I imagine people are jumping out windows about that one."

"Too bloody right," Kingshot confirmed.

"So, Al, you've worked Moscow?"

The Brit nodded. "Twice. Good sport it was, but rather tense the whole time I was there."

"Where else?"

"Warsaw and Bucharest. I speak all the languages. Tell me, how was Andy Hudson?"

"He's a star, Al. Very smooth and confident all the way—knows his turf, good contacts. He took pretty good care of me."

"Here's your coffee, Sir John," Mrs. Thompson said, bringing his cup of Taster's Choice. The Brits were good people, and their food, Ryan thought, was wrongly maligned, but they didn't know beans about coffee, and that was that. But it was still better than tea.

The Eggs Benedict arrived shortly thereafter, and at that dish, Mrs. Thompson could have given lessons. Ryan opened his paper—it was the *Times*—and relaxed to get reacquainted with the world. He'd call Cathy in about an hour when he was at work. With luck, he might even see her in a couple days. In a perfect world, he'd have a copy of an American paper, or maybe the *International Tribune*, but the world was not yet perfect. There was no sense asking how the World Series was going. It was going to start tomorrow, wasn't it? How good were the Phillies this year? Well, as usual, you played the games to find out.

"So, how was the trip, Jack?" Kingshot asked.

"Alan, those field officers earn every nickel they make. How you deal with the constant tension, I do not understand."

"Like everything else, Jack, you get used to it. Your wife is a surgeon. The idea of cutting people open with a knife is not at all appealing to me."

Jack barked a short laugh. "Yeah, me too, pal. And she does eyeballs. Nothing important, right?"

Kingshot shuddered visibly at the thought, and Ryan reminded himself that working in Moscow, running agents—and probably arranging rescue missions like they'd done for the Rabbit—could not have been much more fun than a heart transplant.

"Ah, Mr. Somerset," Ryan heard Mrs. Thompson say. "Good morning, and welcome."

"*Spasiba*," Oleg Ivan'ch replied in a sleepy voice. Kids could get you up at the goddamnedest hours, with their smiling faces and lovely dispositions. "That is my new name?"

"We'll figure something more permanent later," Ryan told him. "Again,

welcome."

"This is England?" the Rabbit asked.

"We're eight miles from Manchester," the British intelligence officer replied. "Good morning. In case you don't remember, my name is Alan Kingshot. This is Mrs. Emma Thompson, and Nick will be back in a few minutes." Handshakes were exchanged.

"My wife be here soon. She see to *zaichik*," he explained.

"How are you feeling, Vanya?" Kingshot asked.

"Much travel, much fear, but I am safe now, yes?"

"Yes, you are entirely safe," Kingshot assured him.

"And what would you like for breakfast?" Mrs. Thompson asked.

"Try this," Jack suggested, pointing at his plate. "It's great."

"Yes, I will—what is called?"

"Eggs Benedict," Jack told him. "Mrs. Thompson, this hollandaise sauce is just perfect. My wife needs your recipe, if I may impose." And maybe Cathy could teach her about proper coffee. *That would be an equitable trade,* Ryan thought.

"Why, certainly, Sir John," she replied with a beaming smile. No woman in all the world objects to praise for her cooking.

"For me also, then," Zaitzev decided.

"Tea or coffee?" she asked her guest.

"You have English Breakfast tea?" the Rabbit asked.

"Of course," she answered.

"Please for me, then."

"Certainly." And she disappeared back into the kitchen.

It was still a lot for Zaitzev to take. Here he was, in the breakfast room of a manor house fit for a member of the old nobility, surrounded by a green lawn such as one might see at Augusta National, with monstrous oak trees planted two hundred years before, a carriage house, and stables in the distance. It was something he might have imagined as worthy of Peter the Great, the things of books and museums, and he was in it as an honored guest?

"Nice house, isn't it?" Ryan asked, finishing off the Eggs Benny.

"Is amazing," Zaitzev responded, wide eyes sweeping around.

"Belonged to a ducal family, bought by a textiles manufacturer a hundred years ago, but his business fell on hard times, and the government bought it last year. We use it for conferences and as a safe house. The heating system is a little primitive," Kingshot reported. "But that is not a problem at the moment. We've had a very pleasant summer, and the fall looks promising as well."

"At home, there'd be a golf course around this place," Jack said, looking out the windows. "A big one."

"Yes," Alan agreed. "It would be splendid for that."

"When I go America?" the Rabbit asked.

"Oh, three or four days," Kingshot answered. "We would like to talk with you a little, if you don't mind."

"When do we start?"

"After breakfast. Take your time, Mr. Zaitzev. You are no longer in the Soviet Union. We shall not pressure you at all," Alan promised.

My ass, Ryan thought. *Buddy, they're going to suck your brain out of your head and strain it for your thoughts one molecule at a time*. But the Rabbit had just gotten a free ride out of Mother Russia, with the prospect of a comfortable life for him and his family in the West, and everything in life had its price.

He loved his tea. Then the rest of the family came out and, over the next twenty minutes, Mrs. Thompson nearly ran out of Hollandaise sauce, while the arriving Russians ensured steady employment for the local egg farmers.

Irina left the breakfast room to tour the house and was greatly excited to see a concert grand Bösendorfer piano, turning like a kid at Christmas to ask if she might tickle the keys. She was years out of practice, but the look on her face was like a return of childhood as she struggled through "On the Bridge at Avignon," which had been her favorite exercise tune many years before—and which she still remembered.

"A friend of mine plays professionally," Jack said, with a smile. It was hard not to appreciate her joy of the moment.

"Who? Where?" Oleg asked.

"Sissy—actually, Cecilia Jackson. Her husband and I are friends. He's a fighter pilot for the U.S. Navy. She is number-two piano soloist at the Washington Symphony. My wife plays, too, but Sissy is really good."

"You are good to us," Oleg Ivan'ch said.

"We try to take decent care of our guests," Kingshot told him. "Shall we talk in the library?" He pointed the way.

The chairs were comfortable. The library was another stellar example of nineteenth-century woodwork, with thousands of books and three rolling ladders—it isn't a proper English library without a ladder. The chairs were plush. Mrs. Thompson brought in a tray of ice water and glasses, and business began.

"So, Mr. Zaitzev, can you begin to tell us about yourself?" Kingshot asked. He was rewarded by name, ancestry, place of birth, and education.

"No military service?" Ryan asked.

Zaitzev shook his head. "No, KGB spot me and they protect me from army time."

"And that was in university?" Kingshot asked for clarity. A total of three tape recorders were turning.

"Yes, that is correct. My first year they speak to me for first time."

"And when did you join KGB?"

"Immediately I leave Moscow State University. They take me into communications department."

"And how long there?"

"Since, well, for nine and half years in total, set aside my time in academy and other training."

"And where do you work now?" Kingshot led him on.

"I work in Central Communications in basement of Moscow Centre."

"And what exactly did you do there?" Alan finally asked.

"During my watch, all dispatches come in from field to my desk. My job is to maintain security, to be sure proper procedures followed, and then I forward to action officers upstairs. Or to United States-Canada Institute sometimes," Oleg said, gesturing to Ryan.

Jack did his best not to let his mouth fall open. This guy really *was* an escapee from the Soviet counterpart to CIA's MERCURY. This guy saw it all. Everything, or damned near. He'd just helped a gold mine escape from behind the wire. *Son of a bitch!*

Kingshot did a somewhat better job of concealing his feelings, but he let his eyes slip over to Ryan's, and that expression said it all.

Bloody hell.

"So, do you know the names of your field officers and their agents?" Kingshot asked.

"KGB officer names—I know many names. Agents, the names I know very few, but I know code names. In Britain, our best agent is code-named MINISTER. He give us high-value diplomatic and political intelligence for many years—twenty years, I think, perhaps more."

"You said KGB has compromised our communications," Ryan observed.

"Yes, somewhat. That is agent NEPTUNE. How much he give, I am not sure, but I know KGB read much of American naval communications."

"What about other communications?" Jack asked immediately.

"Naval communications, that I am sure. Others, I am not sure, but you use same cipher machines for all, yes?"

"Actually not," Alan told him. "So, you say British communications are secure?"

"If broken, I do not know it," Zaitzev replied. "Most American diplomatic and intelligence information we get come from Agent CASSIUS. He is aide to senior politician in Washington. He give us good information on what CIA do and what CIA learn from us."

"But you said he's not part of CIA?" Ryan asked.

"No, I think he is politician aide, helper, member of staff—like that," Zaitzev said rather positively.

"Good." Ryan lit up a smoke and offered one to Zaitzev, who took it at once.

"I run out of my *Krasnopresnenskiye,*" he explained.

"I should give you all of mine. My wife wants me to quit. She's a doctor," Jack explained.

"Bah," the Rabbit responded.

"So, why did you decide to leave?" Kingshot asked, taking a sip of tea. The reply nearly made him drop the cup.

"KGB want to kill Pope."

"You're serious?" It was the more experienced man who asked that question, not Ryan.

"Serious? I risk my life, my wife life, my daughter life. *Da,* I am serious," Oleg Ivanovich assured his interlocutors with an edge on his voice.

"Fuck," Ryan breathed. "Oleg, we need to know about this."

"It start in August. Fifteen August it start," Zaitzev told them, spinning out his tale without interruption for five or six minutes.

"No name for the operation?" Jack asked when he stopped.

"No name, just dispatch number fifteen-eight-eighty-two-six-six-six. That is date of first message from Andropov to *rezidentura* Rome, and number of message, yes? Yuriy Vladimirovich ask how get close to Pope. Rome say bad idea. Then Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy—he is main assistant to chairman, yes?—

he send signal to *rezidentura* Sofia. Operation go from Sofia. So, operation -six-six-six probably run for KGB by *Dirzhavna Sugurnost*. I think officer name is Strokov, Boris Andreyevich."

Kingshot had a thought and rose, leaving the room. He came back with Nick Thompson, a former detective superintendent of the Metropolitan Police.

"Nick, does the name Boris Andreyevich Strokov mean anything to you?"

The former cop blinked hard. "Indeed it does, Alan. He's the chappie we think killed Georgiy Markov on Westminster Bridge. We had him under surveillance, but he flew out of the country before we had enough cause to pick him up for questioning."

"Wasn't he under diplomatic cover?" Ryan asked, and was surprised by Thompson's answer.

"Actually not. He came in undocumented and left the same way. I saw him myself at Heathrow. But we didn't put the pieces together quickly enough. Dreadful case it was. The poison they gave Markov was horrific stuff."

"You eyeballed this Strokov guy?"

Thompson nodded. "Oh, yes. He might have noticed me. I wasn't being all that careful under the circumstances. He's the one who killed Markov. I'd stake my life on it."

"How can you be sure?"

"I chased murderers for near on twenty years, Sir John. You get to know them in all that time. And that's what he was, a murderer," Thompson said with total confidence. Ryan could remember his father being like this, even on frustrating cases when he knew what he needed but couldn't quite prove it to a jury.

"The Bulgarians have a sort of contract with the Soviets," Kingshot explained. "Back in 1964 or so, they agreed to handle all the 'necessary' eliminations for the KGB. In return, they get various perks, mostly political. Strokov, yes, I've heard that name before. Did you get a photo of the chap, Nick?"

"Fifty or more, Alan," Thompson assured him. "I'll never forget that face. He has the eyes of a corpse—no life in them at all, like a doll's eyes."

"How good is he?" Ryan asked.

"As an assassin? Quite good, Sir John. Very good indeed. His elimination of Markov on the bridge was expertly done—it was the third attempt. The first two would-be assassins bungled the job, and they called Strokov in to get it right. And that he did. Had things gone just a little differently, we would not have realized it was a murder at all."

"We think he's worked elsewhere in the West," Kingshot said. "But very little good information. Just gossip really. Jack, this is a dangerous development. I need to get this information to Basil soonest." And with that, Alan left the room to get to a secure phone. Ryan turned back to Zaitzev.

"And that's why you decided to leave?"

"KGB want kill innocent man, Ryan. I see plot grow. Andropov himself say do this. I handle the messages. How can man stop KGB?" he asked. "I cannot stop KGB, but I will not help KGB kill priest—he is innocent man, yes?"

Ryan's eyes looked down at the floor. "Yes, Oleg Ivan'ch, he is." *Dear God in heaven*. He checked his watch. He had to get this information out PDQ, but

nobody was awake at Langley yet.

"BLOODY HELL," Sir Basil Charleston said into his secure phone. "Is this reliable information, Alan?"

"Yes, sir, I believe it to be entirely truthful. Our Rabbit seems a decent chap, and a rather clever one. He seems to be motivated exclusively by his conscience." Next, Kingshot told him about the first revelation of the morning, MINISTER.

"We need to get 'five' looking into that." The British Security Service—once known as MI-5—was the counterespionage arm of their government. They'd need a little more specific information to run that putative traitor down, but they already had a starting point. Twenty years, was it? What a productive traitor that fellow had to be, Sir Basil thought. Time for him to see Parkhurst Prison on the Isle of Wight. Charleston had spent years cleaning up his own shop, once a playground for the KGB. But no more, and never bloody again, the Knight Commander of the Bath swore to himself.

WHOM DO I TELL? Ryan wondered. Basil would doubtless call Langley—Jack would make sure of that, but Sir Basil was a supremely reliable guy. Next came a more difficult question: *What the hell can I/we do about this?*

Ryan lit another smoke to consider that one. It was more police work than intelligence work. . . .

And the central issue would be classification.

Yeah, that's going to be the problem. If we tell anybody, the word will get out somehow, and then somebody will know we have the Rabbit—and guess what, Jack? The Rabbit is now more important to the CIA than the life of the Pope.

Oh, shit, Ryan thought. It was like a trick of jujitsu, like a sudden reversal of polarity on the dial of a compass. North was now south. Inside was now outside. And the needs of American intelligence might now supersede the life of the Bishop of Rome. His face must have betrayed what he was thinking.

"What is amiss, Ryan?" the Rabbit asked. It seemed to Jack a strange word for him to know.

"The information you just gave us. We've been worrying about the safety of the Pope for a couple of months, but we had no specific information to make us believe his life was actually at risk. Now you have given that information to us, and someone must decide what to do with it. Do you know anything at all about the operation?"

"No, almost nothing. In Sofia the action officer is the *rezident*, Colonel Bubovoy, Ilya Fedorovich. Senior colonel, he is—Ambassador, can I say? To Bulgarian DS. This Colonel Strokov, this name I know from old cases. He is officer assassin for DS. He do other things, too, yes, but when man need bullet, Strokov deliver bullet, yes?"

This struck Ryan as something from a bad movie, except that in the movies

the big, bad CIA was the one with a special assassination department, like a cupboard with vampire bats inside. When the director needed somebody killed, he'd open the door, and one of the bats flew out and made its kill, then flew back docilely to the cupboard and hung upside down until the next man needed killing. Sure, Wilbur. Hollywood had everything figured out, except that government bureaucracies all ran on paper—nothing happened without a written order of some sort, because only a piece of white paper with black ink on it would cover somebody's ass when things went bad—and if somebody really needed killing, someone inside the system had to sign the order, and who would sign *that* kind of order? That sort of thing became a *permanent* record of something bad, and so the signature blank would be bucked all the way to the Oval Office, and once there it just wasn't the sort of paper that would find its way into the Presidential Library that memorialized the person known inside the security community as National Command Authority. And nobody in between would sign the order, because government employees never stuck their necks out—that wasn't the way they were trained.

Except me, Ryan thought. But he wouldn't kill someone in cold blood. He hadn't even killed Sean Miller in very hot blood, and while that was a strange thing to be proud of, it beat the hell out of the alternative.

But Jack wasn't afraid of sticking it out. The loss of his government paycheck would be a net profit for John Patrick Ryan. He could go back to teaching, perhaps at a nice private university that paid halfway decently, and he'd be able to dabble with the stock market on the side, something with which his current job interfered rather badly. . . .

What the hell am I going to do? The worst part of all was that Ryan considered himself to be a Catholic. Maybe he didn't make it to mass every week. Maybe they'd never name a church after him, but, God damn it, the Pope was someone he was compelled by his lengthy education—Catholic schools all the way, including almost twelve years of Jesuits—to respect. And added to that was something equally important—the education he'd received at the gentle hands of the United States Marine Corps at Quantico's Basic School. They'd taught him that when you saw something that needed doing, you damned well did it, and you hoped that your senior officers would bless it afterward, because decisive action had saved the day more than once in the history of the Corps. "It's a lot easier to get forgiveness than permission" was what the major who'd taught that particular class had said, then added with a smile, "But don't you people ever quote me on that." You just had to apply judgment to your action, and such judgment came with experience—but experience often came from bad decisions.

You're over thirty now, Jack, and you've had experience that you never wanted to get, but be damned if you haven't learned a hell of a lot from it. He would have been at least a captain by now, Jack thought. Maybe even a junior major, like Billy Tucker, who'd taught that class. Just then, Kingshot walked back into the room.

"Al, we have a problem," Ryan told him.

"I know, Jack. I just told Sir Basil. He's thinking about it."

"You're a field spook. What do you think?"

"Jack, this is well over my level of expertise and command."

"You turn your brain off, Al?" Ryan asked sharply.

"Jack, we cannot compromise our source, can we?" Kingshot shot back. "That is the paramount consideration here and now."

"Al, we know that somebody is going to try to whack the head of my church. We know his name, and Nick has a photo album on the fucker, remember?" Ryan took a deep breath before going on. "I am not going to sit here and do nothing about it," Ryan concluded, entirely forgetting the presence of the Rabbit for the moment.

"You do nothing? I risk my life for this and you do nothing?" Zaitzev demanded, catching on to the rapid-fire English exchanged in front of him. His face showed both outrage and puzzlement.

Al Kingshot handled the answer. "That is not for us to say. We cannot compromise our source—you, Oleg. We must protect you as well."

"Fuck!" Ryan stood and walked out of the room. But what the hell could he actually do? Jack asked himself. Then he went looking for the secure phone and dialed a number from memory.

"Murray," a voice said after the STUs married up.

"Dan, it's Jack."

"Where you been? I called two nights ago and Cathy said you were in Germany on NATO business. I wanted to—" Ryan just cut him off.

"Stick it, Dan. I was somewhere else doing something else. Listen up. I need some information and I need it in a hurry," Jack announced, lapsing briefly back into the voice of an officer of Marines.

"Shoot," Murray replied.

"I need to know the Pope's schedule for the next week or so." It was Friday. Ryan hoped the Bishop of Rome didn't have anything hopping for the weekend.

"What?" The FBI official's voice communicated predictable puzzlement.

"You heard me."

"What the hell for?"

"Can't tell you—oh, shit," Ryan swore, and then went on. "Dan, we have reason to believe there's a contract out on the Pope."

"Who?" Murray asked.

"It ain't the Knights of Columbus," was all Ryan felt comfortable saying.

"Shit, Jack. Are you serious?"

"What the hell do you think?" Ryan demanded.

"Okay, okay. Let me make some phone calls. What exactly am I free to say?"

That question stopped Ryan cold in his tracks. *Think, boy, think*. "Okay, you're a private citizen and a friend of yours is going to Rome and he wants to eyeball His Holiness. You want to know what's the best way to accomplish that mission. Fair enough?"

"What's Langley say about this?"

"Dan, frankly, I don't care a rat's ass right now, okay? Please, get me that information. I'll call back in an hour. Okay?"

"Roger that, Jack. One hour." Murray hung up. Ryan knew he could trust Murray. He was himself a Jesuit product, like so many FBI agents, in his case a Boston College alum, just like Ryan, and so whatever additional loyalties he had would work in Ryan's favor. Breathing a little easier, Ryan returned to the

ducal library.

"Whom did you call, Jack?" Kingshot asked.

"Dan Murray at the embassy, the FBI rep. You ought to know him."

"The Legal Attaché—yes, I do. Okay, what did you ask?"

"The Pope's schedule for the coming week."

"But we don't know anything yet," Kingshot objected.

"Does that make you feel any better, Al?" Jack inquired delicately.

"You did not compro—"

"Compromise our source? You think I'm that stupid?"

The Brit spook nodded to the logic of the moment. "Very well. No harm done, I expect."

The next hour of the first interview returned to routine things. Zaitzev fleshed out for the Brits what he knew about MINISTER. It was sufficiently juicy to give them a good start on IDing the guy. It was immediately clear that Kingshot wanted his hide on the barn door. There was no telling how much good information KGB was getting from him—it was definitely a him, Zaitzev made clear, and "him" was probably a senior civil servant in Whitehall, and soon his residence would be provided by Her Majesty's Government for the indefinite future—"at the Queen's pleasure" was the official phrase. But Jack had more pressing concerns. At 2:20 in the afternoon, he went back to the STU in the next room.

"Dan, it's Jack."

The Legal Attaché spoke without preamble. "He has a busy week ahead, the embassy in Rome tells me, but the Pope is always in the open on Wednesday afternoons. He parades around in his white jeep in St. Peter's Square, right in front of the cathedral, for the people to see him and take his blessing. It's an open car, and, if you want to pop a cap, that sounds to me like a good time to try—unless they have a shooter infiltrated all the way inside. Maybe a cleaning man, plumber, electrician, hard to say, but you have to assume that the inside staff is pretty loyal, and that people keep an eye on them."

Sure, Jack thought, *but those are the guys best suited to do something like this. Only the people you trust can really duck you. Damn.* The best people to look into this were with the Secret Service, but he didn't know anybody in there, and even if he did, getting them into the Vatican bureaucracy—the world's oldest—would require divine intervention.

"Thanks, pal. I owe you one."

"*Semper fi,* bud. Will you be able to tell me more? This sounds like a major case you're working on."

"Probably not, but it's not for me to say, Dan. Gotta run. Later, man." Ryan hung up and reentered the library.

The sun was over the yardarm, and a wine bottle had just appeared, a French white from the Loire Valley, probably a nice old one. There was dust on the bottle. It had been there for a while, and the cellar downstairs would not be stocked with Thunderbird and Wild Irish Rose.

"Zaitzev here has all manner of good information on this MINISTER chap." *Just a matter of dredging it up,* Kingshot didn't add. But tomorrow they'd have skilled psychologists sitting in, using their pshrink skills to massage his memories—maybe even hypnosis. Ryan didn't know if that actually worked or

not; though some police forces believed in the technique, a lot of defense lawyers foamed at the mouth over it, and Jack didn't know who was right on that issue. On the whole, it was a shame that the Rabbit wasn't able to come out with photos taken of KGB files, but it would have been asking a lot to request that the guy place his neck not so much on the block as inside the guillotine head-holder and shout for the operator to come over. And so far, Zaitzev had impressed Ryan with his memory.

Might he be a plant, a false defector sent West to give the Agency and others false information? It was possible, but the proof of that pudding would lie in the quality of the agents he identified to the Western counterintelligence services. If MINISTER was really giving out good information, the quality of it would tell the Security Service if he were that valuable an agent. The Russians were never the least bit loyal to their agents—they'd *never*, not once, tried to bargain for an American or British traitor rotting away in prison, as America had often done, sometimes successfully. No, the Russians considered them expendable assets, and such assets were . . . expended, with little more than a covert decoration that would never be worn by its "honored" recipient. It struck Ryan as very strange. The KGB was the most professional of services in so many ways—didn't they know that showing loyalty to an agent would help make other agents willing to take greater chances? Perhaps it was a case of national philosophy overruling common sense. A lot of that went on in the USSR.

By 4:00 local time, Jack could be sure that somebody would be at work at Langley. He asked one more question of the Rabbit.

"Oleg Ivan'ch, do you know if KGB can crack our secure phone systems?"

"I think not. I am not sure, but I know that we have an agent in Washington—code name CRICKET—whom we have asked to get information on your STU telephones for us. As yet he has not been able to provide what our communications people wish. We are afraid that you can read our telephone traffic, however, and so we mainly avoid using telephones for important traffic."

"Thanks." And Ryan went back to the STU in the next room. The next number was another he had memorized.

"This is James Greer."

"Admiral, this is Jack."

"I am told the Rabbit is in his new hutch," the DDI said by way of a greeting.

"That is correct, sir, and the good news is that he believes our comms are secure, including this one. The earlier fears appear to have been exaggerated or misinterpreted."

"Is there bad news?" the DDI asked warily.

"Yes, sir. Yuriy Andropov wants to kill the Pope."

"How reliable is that assertion?" James Greer asked at once.

"Sir, that's the reason he skipped. I'll have chapter and verse to you in a day or two at most, but it's official, there is a no-shit KGB operation to assassinate the Bishop of Rome. We even have the operation designator. You will want to let the Judge in on that, and probably NCA will want to know as well."

"I see," Vice Admiral Greer said from thirty-four hundred miles away.

"That's going to be a problem."

"Damned straight it is." Ryan took a breath. "What can we do about it?"

"That's the problem, my boy," the DDI said next. "First, can we do anything about it? Second, do we want to do anything about it?"

"Admiral, why would we *not* want to do something about it?" Ryan asked, trying to keep his voice short of insubordinate. He respected Greer as a boss and as a man.

"Back up, son. Think it all the way through. First, our mission in life is to protect the United States of America, and no one else—well, allies, too, of course," Greer added for the tape recorders that had to be on this line. "But our primary duty is to our flag, not to any religious figure. We *will* try to help him if we can, but if we cannot, then we cannot."

"Very well," Ryan responded through gritted teeth. *What about right and wrong?* He wanted to ask, but that would have to wait a few moments.

"We do not ordinarily give away classified information, and you can imagine how tightly held this defection is going to be," Greer went on.

"Yes, sir." But at least it wasn't going to be NOFORN—not for distribution to foreigners. The Brits were foreigners, and they already knew all about BEATRIX and the Rabbit, but the Brits weren't big on sharing, except, sometimes, with America, and usually with a big quid pro quo tacked onto it. It was just how things worked. Similarly, Ryan wasn't allowed to discuss a single thing about some operations he was cleared into. TALENT KEYHOLE was the code name: the reconnaissance satellites, though CIA and the Pentagon had fallen all over themselves giving the raw data to the British during the Falklands War, plus every intercept the National Security Agency had from South America. Blood was still thicker than water. "Admiral, how will it look in the papers if it becomes known that the Central Intelligence Agency had data on the threat to the Pope and we just sat on our hands?"

"Is that a—"

"Threat? No, sir, not from me. I play by the rules, sir, and you know it. But somebody there will leak the information just because he's pissed about it, and you know that, and when that happens, there'll be hell to pay."

"Point taken," Greer agreed. "Are you proposing anything?"

"That's above my pay grade, sir, but we have to think hard about possible action of some sort."

"What else are we getting from our new friend?"

"We have the code names of three major leaks. One is MINISTER, sounds like a political and foreign policy leak in Whitehall. Two for our side of the ocean: NEPTUNE sounds naval, and that's the source of our communications insecurity. Somebody in Redland is reading the Navy's mail, sir. And there's one in D.C. called CASSIUS. Sounds like a leaker on The Hill, top-drawer political intelligence, plus stuff about our operations."

"Our—you mean CIA?" the DDI asked, with sudden concern in his voice. No matter how old a player you were, no matter how much experience you had, the idea that your parent agency might be compromised scared the living hell out of you.

"Correct," Ryan answered. He didn't need to press that button very hard. Nobody at Langley was entirely comfortable with all the information that

went to the "select" intelligence committees in the House and Senate. Politicians talked for a living, after all. Hell, there were few things harder than making a political figure keep his mouth shut. "Sir, this guy is a fantastically valuable source. We'll get him cut loose from over here in three days or so. I think the debriefing process will take months. I've met his wife and daughter. They seem nice enough—the little girl is Sally's age. I think this guy's the real deal, sir, and there's gold in them thar hills."

"How comfortable is he?"

"Well, they're all probably in sensory overload at the moment. I'd think hard about getting a pshrink assigned to them to help with the transition. Maybe more than one. We want to keep him settled down—we want him confident in his new life. That might not be easy, but it'll damned sure pay off for us."

"We have a couple of guys for that. They know how to talk them through the transition part. Is the Rabbit a flight risk?"

"Sir, I see nothing to suggest that, but we have to remember that he's made one hell of a broad jump, and the stuff he landed in isn't exactly what he's used to."

"Noted. Good call, Jack. What else?"

"That's all for the moment. We've only been talking to the guy about five and a half hours, just preliminary stuff so far, but the waters look pretty deep."

"Okay. Arthur is on the phone with Basil right now. I'm going to head over that way and give him your read. Oh, Bob Ritter just got back from Korea—jet-lagged all to hell and gone. We're going to tell him about your adventure in the field. If he tries to bite your head off, it's our fault, mine and the Judge's."

Ryan took a long look down at the carpet. He didn't quite understand why Ritter disliked him, but they didn't swap Christmas cards, and that was a fact. "Gee, thanks, sir."

"Don't sweat it. From what I understand, it sounds like you acquitted yourself pretty well."

"Thanks, Admiral. I didn't trip over my own feet. That's all I'm going to claim, if that's okay with you."

"Fair enough, my boy. Get your write-up completed and fax it to me PDQ."

IN MOSCOW, the secure fax went into the office of Mike Russell. Oddly, it was a graphic, the first-edition cover of *Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter. The address on the cover sheet told him who was supposed to get it. And on the page was a handwritten message: "Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail have moved to a new hutch."

So, Russell thought, *they did have a Rabbit case, and it had been successfully run.* Nothing he could claim to know for certain, but he knew the language spoken in the community. He walked down to Ed Foley's office and knocked on the door.

"Come," Foley's voice called.

“This just came in from Washington, Ed.” Russell handed the fax across.

“Well, that’s good news,” the COS observed. He folded the signal into his jacket pocket for Mary Pat. “There’s an additional message in this fax, Mike,” Foley said.

“What’s that?”

“Our comms are secure, pal. Otherwise it would not have come in this way.”

“Well, thank the Good Lord for that,” Russell said.

CHAPTER 30

FLAVIAN AMPHITHEATER

RYAN? HE DID *WHAT*?" Bob Ritter growled.

"Bob, you want to settle down? It's nothing to get your tits in a flutter about," James Greer said, half soothingly and half an indirect challenge in the CIA's in-house power playground. Judge Moore looked on in amusement. "Jack went into the field to observe an operation for which we had no available field officer. He didn't step on his crank with the golf shoes, and the defector is in a safe house in the English Midlands right now, and from what I hear, he's singing like a canary."

"Well, what's he telling us?"

"For starters," Judge Moore answered, "it seems that our friend Andropov wants to assassinate the Pope."

Ritter's head snapped around. "How solid is that?"

"It's what made the Rabbit decide to take a walk," the DCI said. "He's a conscience defector, and that set him off."

"Okay, good. What does he know?" the DDO asked.

"Bob, it seems that this defector—his name is Oleg Ivanovich Zaitzev, by the way—was a senior watch officer in The Centre's communications, their version of our MERCURY."

"Shit," Ritter observed an instant later. "This is for real?"

"You know, sometimes a guy puts a quarter in the slot and pulls the handle and he really does get the jackpot," Moore told his subordinate.

"Well, damn."

"I didn't think you'd object. And the good part," the DCI went on, "is that Ivan doesn't know he's gone."

"How the hell did we do that?"

"It was Ed and Mary Pat who twigged to that possibility." Then Judge

Moore explained how it had been carried out. “They both deserve a nice pat on the head, Bob.”

“And all while I was out of town,” Ritter breathed. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“Yes, there’s a bunch of attaboy letters to be drawn up,” Greer said next. “Including one for Jack.”

“I suppose,” the DDO conceded. He went quiet for a moment, thinking over the possibilities of Operation BEATRIX. “Anything good so far?”

“Aside from the plot against the Pope? Two code names of penetration agents they have working: NEPTUNE—he sounds like somebody working in the Navy—and CASSIUS. He’s probably on The Hill. More to come, I expect.”

“I talked to Ryan a few minutes ago. He’s pretty excited about this guy, says his knowledge is encyclopedic, says there’s gold in these hills, to quote the boy.”

“Ryan does know a thing or two about gold,” Moore thought out loud.

“Fine, we’ll make him our portfolio manager, but he isn’t a field officer,” Ritter groused.

“Bob, he succeeded. We don’t punish people for that, do we?” the DCI asked. This had gone far enough. It was time for Moore to act like the appeals-court judge he had been until a couple years before: the Voice of God.

“Fine, Arthur. You want me to sign the letter of commendation?” Ritter saw the freight train coming, and there was no sense in standing in its way. What the hell, it would just go into the files anyway. CIA commendations almost never saw the light of day. The Agency even classified the names of field officers who’d died heroically thirty years before. It was like a back door into heaven, CIA style.

“Okay, gentlemen, now that we’ve settled the administrative issues, what about the plot to kill the Pope?” Greer asked, trying to bring order back to the meeting of supposed sober senior executives.

“How solid is the information?” Ritter wanted to know.

“I talked to Basil a few minutes ago. He thinks we need to take it seriously, but I think we need to talk to this Rabbit ourselves to quantify the danger to our Polish friend.”

“Tell the President?”

Moore shook his head. “He’s tied up all day today with legislative business, and he’s flying out to California late this afternoon. Sunday and Monday, he’ll be giving speeches in Oregon and Colorado. I’ll see him Tuesday afternoon, about four.” Moore could have asked for an urgent meeting—he could break into the President’s schedule on really vital matters—but until they had the chance to speak face-to-face with the Rabbit, that was out of the question. The President might even want to speak to the guy himself. He was like that.

“What kind of shape is Station Rome in?” Greer asked Ritter.

“The Chief of Station is Rick Nolfi. Good guy, but he retires in three months. Rome’s his sunset post. He asked for it. His wife, Anne, likes Italy. Six officers there, mainly working on NATO stuff—two pretty experienced, four rookies,” Ritter reported. “But before we get them alerted we need to think this threat through, and a little Presidential guidance won’t hurt. The problem is, how the hell do we tell people about this in such a way as not to compromise the source? Guys,” Ritter pointed out, “if we went to all the trouble of concealing

the defection, it doesn't make much sense to broadcast the information we get from him out to the four winds, y'know?"

"That is the problem," Moore was forced to agree.

"The Pope doubtless has a protective detail," Ritter went on. "But they can't have the same latitude that the Secret Service does, can they? And we don't know how secure they are."

"IT'S THE OLD STORY," Ryan was saying at the same time in Manchester. "If we use the information too freely, we compromise the source and lose all of its utility. But if we don't use it for fear of compromising it, then we might as well not have the fucking source to begin with." Jack finished off his wine and poured another glass. "There's a book on this, you know."

"What's that?"

"*Double-Edged Secrets*. A guy named Jasper Holmes wrote it. He was a U.S. Navy crippie in World War Two, worked signals intelligence in FRUPAC with Joe Rochefort and his bunch. It's a pretty good book on how the intelligence business works down where the rubber meets the road."

Kingshot made a mental note to look that book up. Zaitzev was out on the lawn—a very plush one—with his wife and daughter at the moment. Mrs. Thompson wanted to take them all shopping. They had to have their private time—their bedroom suite was thoroughly bugged, of course, complete to a white-noise filter in the bathroom—and keeping the wife and kid happy was crucial to the entire operation.

"Well, Jack, whatever the opposition has planned, it will take time for them to set it up. The bureaucracies over there are even more moribund than ours, you know."

"KGB, too, Al?" Ryan wondered. "I think that's the one part of their system that actually works, and Yuriy Andropov isn't known for his patience, is he? Hell, he was their ambassador in Budapest in 1956, remember? The Russians worked pretty decisively back then, didn't they?"

"That was a serious political threat to their entire system," Kingshot pointed out.

"And the Pope isn't?" Ryan fired back.

"You have me there," the field spook admitted.

"Wednesday. That's what Dan told me. He's all the way in the open every Wednesday. Okay, the Pope can appear at that porch he uses to give blessings and stuff, and a halfway good man with a rifle can pop him doing that, but a man with a rifle is too visible to even a casual observer, and a rifle says 'military' to people, and 'military' says 'government' to everybody. But those probably aren't scheduled very far in advance—at least they're irregular, but every damned Wednesday afternoon he hops in his jeep and parades around the Piazza San Pietro right in the middle of the assembled multitude, Al, and that's pistol range." Ryan sat back in his chair and took another sip of the French white.

"I am not sure I'd want to fire a pistol at that close a range."

"Al, once upon a time they got a guy to do Leon Trotsky with an ice axe—engagement range maybe two feet," Ryan reminded him. "Sure, different situation now, but since when have the Russians been reticent about risking their troops—and this will be that Bulgarian bastard, remember? *Your* guy

called him an expert killer. It's amazing what a real expert can do. I saw a gunnery sergeant at Quantico—that guy could write his name with a forty-five at fifty feet. I watched him do it once." Ryan had never really mastered the big Colt automatic, but that gunny sure as hell had.

"You're probably being overly concerned."

"Maybe," Jack admitted. "But I'd feel a hell of a lot better if His Holiness wore a Kevlar jacket under his vestments." He wouldn't, of course. People like that didn't scare the way civilians did. It wasn't the sense of invincibility that some professional soldiers had. It was just that to them death wasn't something to be afraid of. Any really observant Catholic was supposed to feel that way, but Jack wasn't one of those. Not quite.

"As a practical matter, what can one do? Look for one face in a crowd, and who's to say it's the right face?" Kingshot asked. "Who's to say Strokov hasn't hired someone else to do the actual shooting? I can see myself shooting someone, but not in a crowd."

"So, you use a suppressed weapon, a big can-type silencer. Cut down the noise, and you remove a lot of the danger of being identified. All the eyes are going to be on the target, remember, not looking sideways into the crowd."

"True," Al conceded.

"You know, it's too damned easy to find reasons to do nothing. Didn't Dr. Johnson say that doing nothing is in every man's power?" Ryan asked forlornly. "That's what we're doing, Al, finding reasons not to do anything. Can we let the guy die? Can we just sit here and drink our wine and *let* the Russians kill the man?"

"No, Jack, but we cannot go off like a loose hand grenade, either. Field operations have to be planned. You need professionals to think things through in a professional way. There are many things professionals can do, but first they have orders to do them."

But that was being decided elsewhere.

"PRIME MINISTER, we have reason to believe that the KGB has an operation under way to assassinate the Pope of Rome," C reported. He'd come over on short notice, interrupting her afternoon political business.

"Really?" she asked Sir Basil in dry reply. She was used to hearing the strangest of things from her Intelligence Chief, and had cultivated the habit of not responding too violently to them. "What is the source for that information?"

"I told you several days ago about Operation BEATRIX. Well, we and the Americans have got him out successfully. We even managed to do it in such a way that the Sovs think him dead. The defector is in a safe house outside Manchester right now," C told his chief of government.

"Have we told the Americans?"

Basil nodded. "Yes, Prime Minister. He's their fox, after all. We'll let him fly to America next week, but I discussed the case briefly earlier today with Judge Arthur Moore, their Director of Central Intelligence. I expect he'll brief the President in early next week."

"What action do you suppose they will take?" she asked next.

"Difficult to say, ma'am. It's a rather dicey proposition, actually. The defector—his name is Oleg—is a most important asset, and we must work very hard to protect his identity, and also knowledge of the fact that he is now on our side of the Curtain. Exactly how we might warn the Vatican of the potential danger is a complex issue, to say the least."

"This is a real operation the Soviets have under way?" the PM asked again. It was rather a lot to swallow, even for them, who she believed capable of almost anything.

"It appears so, yes," Sir Basil confirmed. "But we do not know the priority, and, of course, we know nothing of the schedule."

"I see." The Prime Minister fell quiet for a moment. "Our relations with the Vatican are cordial but not especially close." That fact went all the way back to Henry VIII, though the Roman Catholic Church had gradually come to letting bygones be bygones over the intervening centuries.

"Regrettably, that is so," C agreed.

"I see," she said again, and thought some more before speaking again. When she leaned forward, she spoke with dignity and force. "Sir Basil, it is not the policy of Her Majesty's Government to stand idly by while a friendly Chief of State is murdered by our adversaries. You are directed to look into any possible action that might forestall this eventuality."

Some people shot from the hip, Sir Basil thought. Others shot from the heart. For all her outward toughness, the United Kingdom's Chief of Government was one of the latter.

"Yes, Prime Minister." The problem was that she didn't say how the hell he was supposed to do this. Well, he'd coordinate with Arthur at Langley. But for right now he had a mission that would be difficult at best. What exactly was he supposed to do, deploy a squadron of the Special Air Service to St. Peter's Square?

But you didn't say no to this Prime Minister, at least not in a 10 Downing Street conference room.

"Anything else this defector has told us?"

"Yes, ma'am. He has identified by code name a Soviet penetration agent, probably in Whitehall. The code name is MINISTER. When we get more information about the man in question, we'll have the Security Service root about after him."

"What does he give them?"

"Political and diplomatic intelligence, ma'am. Oleg tells us that it is high-level material, but he has not as yet given us information that would directly identify him."

"Interesting." It was not a new story. This one could be one of the Cambridge group that had been so valuable to the USSR back in the war years and then all the way into the 1960s, or perhaps a person recruited by them. Charleston had been instrumental in purging them out of SIS, but Whitehall wasn't quite his patch. "Do keep me posted on that." A casual order from her had the force of a granite slab hand-delivered from Mt. Sinai.

"Of course, Prime Minister."

"Would it be helpful if I spoke to the American President on this matter

with the Pope?"

"Better to let CIA brief him first, I think. It wouldn't do to short-circuit their system. This defector was, after all, mainly an American operation, and it's Arthur's place to speak to him first."

"Yes, I suppose so. But when I do talk to him, I want him to know that we are taking it with the utmost seriousness, and that we expect him to take some substantive action."

"Prime Minister, I should think he will not take it lying down, as it were."

"I agree. He's such a good chap." The full story on America's covert support for the Falkland Islands War would not see the light of day for many years. America had to keep her fences with South America well mended, after all. But neither was the PM one to forget such assistance, covert or not.

"This BEATRIX operation, it was well executed?" she asked C.

"Flawlessly, ma'am," Charleston assured her. "Our people did everything exactly by the book."

"I trust you will look after those who carried it out."

"Most certainly, ma'am," C assured her.

"Good. Thank you for coming over, Sir Basil."

"A pleasure as always, Prime Minister." Charleston stood, thinking that that Ryan fellow would have called her his sort of broad. As, indeed, she was. But all the way back to Century House, he worried about the operation he now had to get under way. What, exactly, would he be doing about it? Figuring such things out, of course, was why he was so lavishly paid.

"HI, HONEY," Ryan said.

"Where are you?" Cathy asked at once.

"I can't say exactly, but I'm back in England. The thing I had to do on the continent—well, it developed into something I have to look after here."

"Can you come home and see us?"

" 'Fraid not." One major problem was that, although his Chatham home was actually within driving distance, he wasn't confident enough yet to drive that far without crunching himself on a side road. "Everybody okay?"

"We're fine, except that you aren't here," Cathy responded, with an edge of anger/disappointment in her voice. One thing she was sure of: Wherever Jack had been, it sure as hell hadn't been Germany. But she couldn't say that over the phone. She understood the intelligence business that much.

"I'm sorry, babe. I can tell you that what I'm doing is pretty important, but that's all."

"I'm sure," she conceded. And she understood that Jack wanted to be home with his family. He wasn't one to skip town for the fun of it.

"How's work?"

"I did glasses all day. Got some surgery tomorrow morning, though. Wait a minute, here's Sally."

"Hi, Daddy," a new and small voice said.

"Hi, Sally. How are you?"

"Fine." What kids *always* said.

"What did you do today?"

"Miss Margaret and I colored."

"Anything good?"

"Yeah, cows and horses!" she reported with considerable enthusiasm. Sally especially liked pelicans and cows.

"Well, I need to talk to Mommy."

"Okay." And Sally would think of this as a deep and weighty conversation, as she went back to the *Wizzerdaboz* tape in the living room.

"And how's the little guy?" Jack asked his wife.

"Chewing on his hands, mostly. He's in the playpen right now, watching the TV."

"He's easier than Sally was at that age," Jack observed with a smile.

"He's not colicky, thank God," Mrs. Dr. Ryan agreed.

"I miss you," Jack said, rather forlornly. It was true. He *did* miss her.

"I miss you, too."

"Gotta get back to work," he said next.

"When will you be home?"

"Couple of days, I think."

"Okay." She had to surrender to that unhappy fact. "Call me."

"Will do, babe."

"Bye."

"See you soon. Love ya."

"I love you, too."

"Bye."

"Bye, Jack."

Ryan put the phone back in the cradle and told himself that he wasn't designed for this kind of life. Like his father before him, he wanted to sleep in the same bed as his wife—had his father ever slept away from home? Jack wondered. He couldn't remember such a night. But Jack had chosen a line of work in which that was not always possible. It was supposed to have been. He was an analyst who worked at a desk and slept at home, but somehow it wasn't working out that way, God damn it.

Dinner was beef Wellington with Yorkshire pudding. Mrs. Thompson could have been head chef at a good restaurant. Jack didn't know where the beef came from, but it seemed more succulent than the usual grass-fed British sort. Either she got the meat in a special place—they still had specialty butcher shops over here—or she really knew how to tenderize it, and the Yorkshire pudding was positively ethereal. Toss in the French wine, and this dinner was just plain brilliant—an adjective popular in the U.K.

The Russians attacked the food rather as Georgiy Zhukov had attacked Berlin, with considerable gusto.

"Oleg Ivan'ch, I have to tell you," Ryan admitted in a fit of honesty, "the food in America is not always of this quality." He'd timed this for Mrs. Thompson's appearance at the dining-room door. Jack turned to her. "Ma'am, if you ever need a recommendation as a chef, you just call me, okay?"

Emma had a very friendly smile. "Thank you, Sir John."

"Seriously, ma'am, this is wonderful."

"You're very kind."

Jack wondered if she'd like his steaks on the grill and Cathy's spinach salad. The key was getting good corn-gorged Iowa beef, which wasn't easy here, though he could try the Air Force commissary at Greenham Commons. . . .

It took nearly an hour to finish dinner, and the after-dinner drinks were excellent. They even served Starka vodka, in a gesture of additional hospitality to their Russian guests. Oleg, Jack saw, really gunned it down.

"Even the Politburo does not eat so well," the Rabbit observed, as dinner broke up.

"Well, we raise good beef in Scotland. This was Aberdeen Angus," Nick Thompson advised, as he collected the plates.

"Fed on corn?" Ryan asked. They didn't have that much corn over here, did they?

"I do not know. The Japanese feed beer to their Kobe beef," the former cop observed. "Perhaps they do that up in Scotland."

"That would explain the quality," Jack replied with a chuckle. "Oleg Ivan'ch, you must learn about British beer. It's the best in the world."

"Not American?" the Russian asked.

Ryan shook his head. "Nope. That's one of the things they do better than us."

"Truly?"

"Truly," Kingshot confirmed. "But the Irish are quite good as well. I do love my Guinness, though it's better in Dublin than in London."

"Why waste the good stuff on you guys?" Jack asked.

"Once a bloody Irishman, always a bloody Irishman," Kingshot observed.

"So, Oleg," Ryan asked, lighting up an after-dinner smoke, "is there anything different we ought to be doing—to make you comfortable, I mean?"

"I have no complaints, but I expect CIA will not give me so fine a house as this one."

"Oleg, I am a millionaire and don't live in a house this nice," Ryan confirmed with a laugh. "But your home in America will be more comfortable than your apartment in Moscow."

"Will I get car?"

"Sure."

"Wait how long?" Zaitzev asked.

"Wait for what? To buy a car?"

Zaitzev nodded.

"Oleg, you can pick from any of hundreds of car dealerships, pick the car you like, pay for it, and drive it home—we usually let our wives pick the color," Jack added.

The Rabbit was incredulous. "So easy?"

"Yep. I used to drive a Volkswagen Rabbit, but I kinda like the Jaguar now. I might get one when I get home. Nice engine. Cathy likes it, but she might go back to a Porsche. She's been driving them since she was a teenager. Of course, it's not real practical with two kids," Ryan added hopefully. He didn't like the German two-seater that much. Mercedes seemed to him a much safer design.

"And buy house, also easy?"

"Depends. If you buy a new house, yes, it's pretty easy. To buy a house that

somebody already owns, first you have to meet the owner and make an offer, but the Agency will probably help you with that."

"Where will we live?"

"Anywhere you want." *After we pick your brain clean,* Ryan didn't add. "There's a saying in America: 'It's a free country.' It's also a big country. You can find a place you like and move there. A lot of defectors live in the Washington area. I don't know why. I don't much like it. The summers can be miserable."

"Beastly hot," Kingshot agreed. "And the humidity is awful."

"You think it's bad there, try Florida," Jack suggested. "But a lot of people love it down there."

"And travel from one part to another, no papers?" Zaitzev asked.

For a KGB puke, this guy doesn't know shit, Jack thought. "No papers," Ryan assured him. "We'll get you an American Express card to make that easy." Then he had to explain credit cards to the Rabbit. It took ten minutes, it was so alien a concept to a Soviet citizen. By the end, Zaitzev's head was visibly swimming.

"You do have to pay the bill at the end of the month," Kingshot warned him. "Some people forget that, and they can get into serious financial trouble as a result."

C WAS IN HIS Belgravia townhouse, sipping some Louis XIII brandy and chatting with a friend. Sir George Hendley was a colleague of thirty years' standing. By profession a solicitor, he'd worked closely with the British government for most of his life, often consulting quietly with the Security Service and the Foreign Office. He had a "Most Secret" clearance, plus one into compartmented information. He'd been a confidant of several prime ministers over the years, and was considered as reliable as the Queen herself. He thought it just came along with the Winchester school tie.

"The Pope, eh?"

"Yes, George," Charleston confirmed. "The PM wants us to look into protecting the man. Trouble is, I haven't a clue at the moment. We can't contact the Vatican directly about it."

"Quite so, Basil. One can trust their loyalty, but not their politics. Tell me, how good do you suppose their own intelligence service is?"

"I'd have to say it's top-drawer in many areas. What better confidant than a priest, after all, and what better way to transfer information than inside the confessional? Plus all the other techniques that one can use. Their political intelligence is probably as good as ours—perhaps even better. I would imagine they know everything that happens in Poland, for example. And Eastern Europe probably has few secrets from them as well. One cannot underestimate their ability to call on a man's highest loyalty, after all. We've kept an ear on their communications for decades."

"Is that so?" Hendley asked.

"Oh, yes. During World War Two, they were very valuable to us. There was a German cardinal in the Vatican back then, chap named Mansdorf—odd, isn't it? Sounds like a Jewish name. First name Dieter, archbishop of Mannheim, then promoted to the Vatican diplomatic service. Traveled a lot. Kept us posted on the inner secrets of the Nazi Party from 1938 through to the end of

the war. He didn't much care for Hitler, you see."

"And their communications?"

"Mansdorf actually gave us his own cipher book to copy. They changed it after the war, of course, and so we got little more in the way of their private mail later on, but they never changed their cipher system, and the chaps at GCHQ have occasional success listening in. Good man, Dieter Cardinal Mansdorf. Never got recognized for his service, of course. Died in 'fifty-nine, I think."

"So how do we know that the Romans don't know about this operation already?" Not a bad question, Charleston thought, but he'd long since considered that one.

"It is being held very closely, our defector tells us. Hand-delivered messages, not going out on their machine ciphers, that sort of thing. And a bare handful of people involved. The one important name we do know is a Bulgarian field officer, Boris Strokov, colonel in the DS. We suspect he's the chap who killed Georgiy Markov just up the road from my office." Which Charleston considered an act of lèse-majesté, perhaps even executed as a direct challenge to the Secret Intelligence Service. CIA and KGB had an informal covenant: Neither service ever killed in the other's capital. SIS had no such agreement with anyone, a fact that might have cost Georgiy Markov his life.

"So, you think he might be the prospective assassin?"

C waved his hands. "It's all we have, George."

"Not much," Hendley observed.

"Too thin for comfort, but it's better than nothing. We have numerous photos of this Strokov fellow. The Yard was close to arresting him when he flew out of Heathrow—for Paris, actually, and from there on to Sofia."

"Perhaps he was in a hurry to leave?" Hendley suggested.

"He's a professional, George. How many chances do such people take? In retrospect, it's rather amazing that the Yard got a line on him at all."

"So, you think he might be in Italy." A statement, not a question.

"It's a possibility, but whom can we tell?" C asked. "The Italians have criminal jurisdiction to a point. The Lateran Treaty gives them discretionary jurisdiction, subject to a Vatican veto," Charleston explained. He'd had to look into the legalities of the situation. "The Vatican has its own security service—the Swiss Guards, you know—but however good the men are, it's necessarily a thin reed, what with the restrictions imposed on them from above. And the Italian authorities cannot flood the area with their own security forces, for obvious reasons."

"So, the PM has saddled you with an impossible task."

"Yes, again, George," Sir Basil had to agree.

"So, what can you do?"

"All I can really come up with is to put some officers in the crowd and look for this Strokov fellow."

"And if they see him?"

"Ask him politely to depart the area?" Basil wondered aloud. "It would work, probably. He is a professional, and being spotted—I suppose we'd ostentatiously take photographs of him—would give him serious pause, perhaps enough to abandon the mission."

"Thin." Hendley thought of that idea.

"Yes, it is," C had to agree. But it would at least give him something to tell the Prime Minister.

"Whom to send?"

"We have a good Station Chief in Rome, Tom Sharp. He has four officers in his shop, plus we could send a few more from Century House, I suppose."

"Sounds reasonable, Basil. Why did you call me over?"

"I was hoping you'd have an idea that's eluded me, George." A final sip from the snifter. As much as he felt like some more brandy for the night, he demurred.

"One can only do what one can," Hendley sympathized.

"He's too good a man to be cut down this way—at the hands of the bloody Russians. And for what? For standing up for his own people. That sort of loyalty is supposed to be rewarded, not murdered in public."

"And the PM feels the same way."

"She is comfortable taking a stand." For which the PM was famous throughout the world.

"The Americans?" Hendley asked.

Charleston shrugged. "They haven't had a chance to speak to the defector yet. They trust us, George, but not that much."

"Well, do what you can. This KGB operation probably will not happen in the immediate future, anyway. How efficient are the Soviets, anyway?"

"We shall see" was all C had to say.

IT WAS QUIETER HERE than in his own house, despite the nearby presence of the motorway, Ryan thought, rolling out of bed at 6:50. The sink continued the eccentric British way of having two faucets, one hot and one cold, making sure that your left hand boiled while the right one froze when you washed your hands. As usual, it felt good to shave and brush and otherwise get yourself ready for the day, even if you had to start it with Taster's Choice.

Kingshot was already in the kitchen when Jack got there. Funny how people slept late on Sunday but frequently not on Saturday.

"Message from London," Al said by way of greeting.

"What's that?"

"A question. How would you feel about a flight to Rome this afternoon?"

"What's up?"

"Sir Basil is sending some people to the Vatican to suss things out. He wants to know if you want to go. It's a CIA op, after all."

"Tell him yes," Jack said without a moment's thought. "When?" Then he realized he was being impetuous again. Damn.

"Noon flight out of Heathrow. You ought to have time to go home and change clothes."

"Car?"

"Nick will drive you over," Kingshot told him.

"What are you going to tell Oleg?"

"The truth. It ought to make him feel more important," Al thought aloud. It was always a good thing for defectors.

RYAN AND THOMPSON left within the hour, with Jack's bags in the "boot."

"This Zaitzev chap," Nick said out on the motorway. "He seems rather an important defector."

"Bet your ass, Nick. He's got all kinds of hot information between his ears. We're going to treat him like a hod full of gold bricks."

"Good of CIA to let us talk to him."

"It'd be kinda churlish not to. You guys got him out for us, and covering the defection up was pretty slick." Jack couldn't say too much more. As trusted as Nick Thompson was, Jack couldn't know how much clearance he had.

The good news was that Thompson knew what not to ask. "So, your father was a police officer?"

"Detective, yeah. Mainly homicide. Did that more than twenty years. He topped out at lieutenant. Said captains never got to do anything more than administrative stuff, and dad wasn't into that. He liked busting bad guys and sending them to the joint."

"The what?"

"Prison. The Maryland State Prison is one evil-looking structure in Baltimore, by Jones Falls. Kinda like a medieval fortress, but more forbidding. The inmates call it Frankenstein's Castle."

"Fine with me, Sir John. I've never had much sympathy for murderers."

"Dad didn't talk about them much. Didn't bring his work home. Mom didn't like hearing about it. Except once, a father killed his son over a crab cake. That's like a little hamburger made out of crab meat," Jack explained. "Dad said it seemed like a shitty thing to get killed over. The father—the killer—copped right out, all broken up about it. But it didn't do his son much good."

"Amazing how many murderers react that way. They gather up the rage to take a life, then afterwards they are consumed by remorse."

"Too soon old, too late smart," Jack quoted from the Old West.

"Indeed. The whole business can be so bloody sad."

"What about this Strokov guy?"

"Different color of horse, entirely," Thompson replied. "You don't see many of those. For them it's part of the job, ending a life. No motive in the usual sense, and they leave little behind in the way of physical evidence. They can be very difficult to find, but mainly we do find them. We have time on our side, and sooner or later someone talks and it gets to our ear. Most criminals talk their own way into prison," Nick explained. "But people like this Strokov fellow, they do not talk—except when he gets home and writes up his official report. But we never see those. Getting a line on him was plain luck. Mr. Markov remembered being poked by the umbrella, remembered the color suit the man was wearing. One of our constables saw him wearing the same suit and thought there was something odd about him—you know, instead of flying right home, he waited to make sure Markov died. They'd bungled two previous attempts, you see, and so they called him in because of his expertise. Good professional, Strokov. He wanted to be completely sure, and he waited to read the death notice in the newspapers. In that time, we talked to the staff at his hotel and started assembling information. The Security Service got involved, and they were helpful in some ways but not in others—and the

government got involved. The government was worried about creating an international incident, and so they held us up—cost us two days, I reckon. On the first of those two days, Strokov took a taxi to Heathrow and flew off to Paris. I was on the surveillance team. Stood within fifteen feet of him. We had two detectives with cameras, shot a lot of pictures. The last was of Strokov walking down the jetway to the Boeing. Next day, the government gave us permission to detain him for questioning."

"Day late and a dollar short, eh?"

Thompson nodded. "Quite. I would have liked to put him in the dock at the Old Bailey, but that fish got away. The French shadowed him at De Gaulle International, but he never left the international terminal, never talked with anyone. The bugger showed no remorse at all. I suppose for him it was like chopping firewood," the former detective said.

"Yeah. In the movies you make your hit and have a martini, shaken not stirred. But it's different when you kill a good guy."

"All Markov ever did was broadcast over BBC World Service," Nick said, gripping the wheel a little tightly. "I imagine the people in Sofia were somewhat put out with what he said."

"The people on the other side of the Curtain aren't real big on Freedom of Speech," Ryan reminded him.

"Bloody barbarians. And now this chap is planning to kill the Pope? I am not a Catholic, but he is a man of God, and he seems rather a good chap. You know, the most vicious criminal hesitates before trifling with a man of the clergy."

"Yeah, I know. Doesn't do to piss God off. But they don't believe in God, Nick."

"Fortunate for them that I am not God."

"Yeah, it would be nice to have the power to right all the wrongs in the world. The problem is, that's what Markov's bosses think they're doing."

"That is why we have laws, Jack—yes, I know, they make up their own."

"That's the problem," Jack agreed as they came into Chatham.

"This is a pleasant area," Thompson said, turning up the hill on City Way.

"Not a bad neighborhood. Cathy likes it. I would have preferred closer to London, but, well, she got her way."

"Women usually do." Thompson chuckled, turning right onto Fristow Way and then left on Grizedale Close. And there was the house. Ryan got out and retrieved his bags.

"Daddy!" Sally screamed when he walked in the door. Ryan dropped his bags and scooped her up. Little girls, he'd long since learned, gave the best hugs, though their kisses tended to be a little sloppy.

"How's my little Sally?"

"Fine." It was oddly like a cat, coming out of her mouth.

"Oh, hello, Dr. Ryan," Miss Margaret said in greeting. "I didn't expect you."

"Just making a low pass. Have to change cleans for dirties and head back out."

"You going away *again*?" Sally asked with crushing disappointment in her voice.

"Sorry, Sally. Daddy has business."

Sally wriggled out of his arms. “Phooey.” And she went back to the TV, putting her father firmly in his place.

Jack took the cue to go upstairs. Three—no, four—clean shirts, five sets of underwear, four new ties, and . . . yes, some casual wear, too. Two new jackets, two pairs of slacks. His Marine tie bar. That about did it. He left the pile of dirties on the bed and, with his bags packed, headed back down. Oops. He set his bags down and went back upstairs for his passport. No sense using the fake Brit one anymore.

“Bye, Sally.”

“Bye, Daddy.” But then she thought again and jumped to her feet to give him another hug. She wouldn’t grow up to break hearts, but to rip them out and cook them over charcoal. But that was a long way off, and for now her father had the chance to enjoy her. Little Jack was asleep on his back in the playpen, and his father decided not to disturb him.

“See ya, buddy,” Ryan said as he turned to the door.

“Where are you going?” Miss Margaret asked.

“Out of the country. Business,” Jack explained. “I’ll call Cathy from the airport.”

“Good trip, Dr. Ryan.”

“Thanks, Margaret.” And back out the door.

“How are we on time?” Ryan asked, back in the car.

“No problem,” Thompson thought out loud. If they were late, this airliner, too, would have a minor mechanical problem.

“Good.” Jack adjusted his seat to lean back and get a few winks.

He awoke just outside Heathrow Terminal Three. Thompson drove up to where a man in civilian clothes was standing. He looked like some sort of government worker.

He was. As soon as Ryan alighted from the car, the man came over with a ticket envelope.

“Sir, your flight leaves in forty minutes, Gate Twelve,” the man reported. “You’ll be met in Rome by Tom Sharp.”

“What’s he look like?” Jack asked.

“He will know you, sir.”

“Fair enough.” Ryan took the tickets and headed to the back of the car for his bags.

“I’ll take care of that for you, sir.”

This sort of traveling had its possibilities, Jack thought. He waved at Thompson and headed into the terminal, looking for Gate Twelve. That proved easy enough. Ryan took a seat close by the gate and checked his ticket —1-A again, a first-class ticket. The SIS must have had a comfortable understanding with British Airways. Now all he had to do was survive the flight.

He boarded twenty minutes later, sitting down, strapping in, and turning his watch forward one hour. He endured the usual rigmarole of useless safety briefing and instructions on how to buckle his seat belt, which, in Jack’s case, was already clicked and snugged in.

The flight took two hours, depositing Jack at Leonardo da Vinci Airport at 3:09 local time. Jack walked off the aircraft and looked for the Blue Channel

to get his diplomatic passport stamped after a wait of about five seconds—one other diplomat had been ahead of him, and the bonehead had forgotten which pocket his passport was in.

With that done, he retrieved his bags off the carousel and headed out. A man with a gray and brown beard seemed to be eyeballing him.

"You're Jack Ryan?"

"You must be Tom Sharp."

"Correct. Let me help you with your bags." Why people did this, Ryan didn't know, though on reflection, he'd done it himself often enough, and the Brits were the world champions at good manners.

"And you are?" Ryan asked.

"Station Chief Rome," Sharp replied. "C called to say you were coming in, Sir John, and that I ought to meet you personally."

"Good of Basil," Jack thought out loud.

Sharp's car was, in this case, a Bentley sedan, bronze in color, with left-hand driver's seat in deference to the fact that they were in a barbarian country.

"Nice wheels, fella."

"My cover is Deputy Chief of Mission," Sharp explained. "I could have had a Ferrari, but it seemed a little too ostentatious. I do little actual field work, you see, just administrative things. I actually *am* the DCM of the embassy. Too much diplomatic work—that can drive one mad."

"How's Italy?"

"Lovely place, lovely people. Not terribly well organized. They say we Brits muddle through things, but we're bloody Prussians compared to this lot."

"Their cops?"

"Quite good, actually. Several different police forces. Best of the lot are the Carabinieri, paramilitary police of the central government. Some of them are excellent. Down in Sicily they're trying to get a handle on the Mafia—pig of a job that is, but, you know, eventually I think they will succeed. "

"You briefed in on why they sent me down?"

"Some people think Yuriy Vladimirovich wants to kill the Pope? That's what my telex said."

"Yeah. We just got a defector out who says so, and we think he's giving us the real shit."

"Any details?"

" 'Fraid not. I think they sent me down here to work with you until somebody figures out the right thing to do. Looks to me like an attempt might be made Wednesday."

"The weekly appearance in the square?"

Jack nodded. "Yep." They were on the highway from the airport to Rome. The country looked odd to Ryan, but it took a minute to figure out why. Then he got it. The pitch of the roofs was different—shallower than what he was used to. They probably didn't get much snow here in winter. Otherwise the houses looked rather like sugar cubes, painted white to reject the heat of the Italian sun. Well, every country had its unique architecture.

"Wednesday, eh?"

"Yeah. We're also looking for a guy named Boris Strokov, colonel in the Bulgarian DS. Sounds like a professional killer."

Sharp concentrated on the road. “I’ve heard the name. Wasn’t he a suspect in the Georgiy Markov killing?”

“That’s the guy. They ought to be sending some photos of him.”

“Courier on your flight,” Sharp reported. “Taking a different way into the city.”

“Any ideas on what the hell to do?”

“We’ll get you settled at the embassy—my house, actually, two blocks away. It’s rather nice. Then we’ll drive down to Saint Peter’s and look around, get a feel for things. I’ve been there to see the artwork and such—the Vatican art collection is on a par with the Queen’s—but I’ve never worked there per se. Ever been to Rome?”

“Never.”

“Very well, let’s take a drive-about first instead, give you a quick feel for the place.”

Rome seemed a remarkably disorganized place—but so did a street map of London, whose city fathers had evidently not been married to the city mothers. And Rome was older by a thousand years or so, built when the fastest thing going was a horse, and they were slower in real life than in a John Ford Western. Not many straight lines for the roads, and a meandering river in the middle. Everything looked old to Ryan—no, not old but *old,* as though dinosaurs had once walked the streets. That was a little hard to reconcile with the automobile traffic, of course.

“That’s the Flavian Amphitheater. It was called the Coliseum because the Emperor Nero had built a large statue of himself right there”—Sharp pointed—“and the people took to calling the stadium by that name, rather to the annoyance of the Flavian family, which built the place out of proceeds from the Jewish rebellion that Josephus wrote about.”

Jack had seen it on TV and in the movies, but that wasn’t quite the same as driving past it. Men had built that with nothing more than sweat power and hemp ropes. Its shape was strangely reminiscent of Yankee Stadium in New York. But Babe Ruth had never spilled a guy’s guts out in the Bronx. A lot of that had happened here. It was time for Ryan to make an admission.

“You know, if they ever invent a time machine, I think I might like to come back and see what it was like. Makes me a barbarian, doesn’t it?”

“Just their version of rugby,” Sharp said. “And the football here can be pretty tough.”

“Soccer is a girl’s game,” Jack snorted.

“You *are* a barbarian, Sir John. Soccer,” he explained in his best accent, “is a gentleman’s game played by thugs, while rugby is a thug’s game played by gentlemen.”

“I’ll take your word for it. I just want to see the *International Tribune*. My baseball team’s in the World Series, and I don’t even know how it’s going.”

“Baseball? Oh, you mean rounders. Yes, that is a girl’s game,” Sharp announced.

“I’ve had this talk before. You Brits just don’t understand.”

“As you do not understand proper football, Sir John. In Italy it’s even more a national passion than at home. They tend to play a fiery game, rather different from the Germans, for example, who play like great bloody

machines."

It was like listening to the distinction between a curveball and a slider or a screwball and a forkball. Ryan wasn't all that good a baseball fan to be able to grasp all the distinctions; it depended on the TV announcer, who probably just made it up anyway. But he knew that there wasn't a player in baseball who could smack a good curveball on the outside corner.

Saint Peter's Basilica was five minutes after that.

"Damn!" Jack breathed.

"Big, isn't it?"

It wasn't big; it was *vast*.

Sharp went to the left side of the cathedral, ending up in what looked like an area of shops—jewelry, it seemed—where he parked.

"Let's take a look, shall we?"

Ryan took the chance to leave the car and stretch his legs, and he had to remind himself that he was not here to admire the architecture of Bramante and Michelangelo. He was here to scout the terrain for a mission, as he had been taught to plan for at Quantico. It wasn't really all that hard if you spoke the language.

From above, it must have looked like an old-fashioned basketball key. The circular part of the piazza looked to be a good two hundred yards in diameter, then narrowed down to perhaps a third of that as you got away from the monstrous bronze doors to the church itself.

"When he sees the crowd, he boards his car—rather like a cross between a jeep and a golf trolley—just there, and he follows a cleared path in the crowd along this way," Sharp explained, "around there, and back. Takes about, oh, twenty minutes or so, depending on whether he stops the car for—what you Americans call pressing the flesh. I suppose I shouldn't compare him to a politician. He seems a very decent chap, a genuinely good man. Not all the popes have been so, but this one is. And he's no coward. He's had to live through the Nazis and the communists, and that never turned him a single degree from his path."

"Yeah, he must like riding the point of the lance," Ryan murmured in reply. There was just one thing occupying his mind now. "Where's the sun going to be?"

"Just at our backs."

"So, if there's a bad guy, he'll stand just about here, sun behind him, not in his eyes. People looking that way from the other side have the sun in *their* eyes. Maybe it's not all that much, but when your ass is on the line, you play every card in your hand. Ever been in uniform, Tom?"

"Coldstream Guards, *lef* tenant through a captaincy. Saw some action in Aden, but mainly served in the BOAR. I agree with your estimate of the situation," Sharp said, turning to do his own evaluation. "And professionals are somewhat predictable, since they all study out of the same syllabus. But what about a rifle?"

"How many men you have to use for this?"

"Four, besides myself. C might send more down from London, but not all that many."

"Put one up there?" Ryan gestured to the colonnade. Seventy feet high?

Eighty? About the same height as the perch Lee Harvey Oswald had used to do Jack Kennedy . . . *with an Italian rifle,* Jack reminded himself. That was good for a brief chill.

"I can probably get a man up there disguised as a photographer." And long camera lenses made for good telescopes.

"How about radios?"

"Say, six civilian-band walkie-talkies. If we don't have them at the embassy, I can have them flown in from London."

"Better to have military ones, small enough to conceal—we had one in the Corps that had an earpiece like from a transistor radio. Also better if it's encrypted, but that might be hard." *And such systems,* Ryan didn't add, *are not entirely reliable.*

"Yes, we can do that. You have a good eye, Sir John."

"I wasn't a Marine for long, but the way they teach lessons in the Basic School, it's kinda hard to forget them. This is one hell of a big place to cover with six men, fella."

"And not something SIS trains us to do," Sharp added.

"Hey, the U.S. Secret Service would cover this place with over a hundred trained agents—shit, maybe more—plus try to get intel on every hotel, motel, and flophouse in the area." Jack let out a breath. "Mr. Sharp, this is not possible. How thick are the crowds?"

"It varies. In the summer tourist season, there are enough people here to fill Wembley Stadium. This coming week? Certainly thousands," he estimated. "How many is hard to reckon."

This mission is a real shitburger, Ryan told himself.

"Any way to hit the hotels, try to get a line on this Strokov guy?"

"More hotels in Rome than in London. It's a lot to cover with four field officers. We can't get any help from the local police, can we?"

"What guidance on that from Basil?" Ryan inquired, already guessing the answer.

"Everything is on close hold. No, we cannot let anyone know what we're doing."

He couldn't even call for help from CIA's local station, Jack realized. Bob Ritter would never sanction it. *Shitburger* was optimistic.

CHAPTER 31

BRIDGE BUILDER

SHARP'S OFFICIAL RESIDENCE was as impressive in its way as the safe house outside Manchester. There was no guessing what—whom—it had been built for, and Ryan was tired of asking anyway. He had a bedroom and a private bathroom, and that was enough. The ceilings were high in every room, presumably defense against the hot summers Rome was known for. It had been about 80 during the afternoon drive, warm, but not too bad for someone from the Baltimore-Washington area, though to an Englishman it must have seemed like the very boiler room of hell. *Whoever had written about mad dogs and Englishmen must have lived in another age,* Jack thought. In London, people started dropping dead in the street when it got to 75. As it was, he thought he had three days to worry, and one in which to execute whatever plan he and Sharp managed to come up with—in the hope that nothing at all would happen, and that CIA would come up with a way to warn His Holiness's security troops that they needed to firm up their means of seeing to his physical safety. Christ, the guy even wore white, the better to make a perfect sight picture for whatever gun the bad guy might use—like a great big paper target blank for the bad guy to put his rounds into. George Armstrong Custer hadn't walked into a worse tactical environment, but at least he'd done it with open eyes, albeit clouded by lethal pride and faith in his own luck. The Pope didn't live under that illusion. No, he believed that God would come and collect him whenever it suited His purpose, and that was *that*. Ryan's personal beliefs were not all that different from the Polish priest's, but he figured that God had given him brains and free will for a reason—did that make Jack an instrument of God's will? It was too deep a question for the moment, and besides, Ryan wasn't a priest to dope that one out. Maybe it was a lack of

faith. Maybe he believed in the real world too much. His wife's job was to fix health problems, and were those problems visited upon people by God Himself? Some thought so. Or were those problems things God merely allowed to happen so that people like Cathy could fix them, and thus do His work? Ryan tended to this view, and the Church must have agreed, since it had built so many hospitals across the world.

But for damned sure, the Lord God didn't approve of murder, and it was now Jack's mission to stop one from happening, if that was possible. Certainly he wasn't one to stand by and ignore it. A priest would have to limit himself to persuasion or, at most, passive interference. Ryan knew that if he saw a criminal drawing a bead on the Pope—or, for that matter, anyone else—and he had a gun in his hand, he wouldn't hesitate more than a split second to interrupt the act with a pistol bullet of his own. Maybe that was just how he was made up, maybe it was the things he'd learned from his dad, maybe it was his training in the Green Machine, but for whatever reason, the use of physical force would not make him faint away—at least not until after he'd done the act. There were a few people in hell to prove that fact. And so Jack started the mental preparation for what he'd have to do, maybe, if the Bad Guys were in town and he saw them. Then it hit him that he wouldn't even have to answer for it—not with diplomatic status. The State Department had the right to withdraw his protection under the Vienna Convention, but, no, not in a case like this they wouldn't. So whatever he did could be a freebie, and that wasn't so bad a deal, was it?

The Sharps took him out for dinner—just a neighborhood place, but the food was brilliant, renewed proof that the best Italian restaurants are often the little mom-and-pop places. Evidently, the Sharps ate there often, the staff was so friendly to them.

"Tom, what the hell are we going to do?" Jack asked openly, figuring that Annie had to know what he did for a living.

"Churchill called it KBO—keep buggering on." He shrugged. "We do the best we can, Jack."

"I suppose I'd feel a hell of a lot better with a platoon of Marines to back my play."

"As would I, my boy, but one does the best one can with what one has."

"Tommy," Mrs. Sharp said. "What exactly are you two talking about?"

"Can't say, my dear."

"But you are CIA," she said next, looking at Jack.

"Yes, ma'am," Ryan confirmed. "Before that, I taught history at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, and before that I traded stocks, and before that I was a Marine."

"Sir John, you're the one who—"

"And I'll never live it down, either." Why the hell, Jack wondered, hadn't he just kept his wife and daughter behind that tree on the Mall in London and let Sean Miller do his thing? Cathy would have gotten some pictures and that would have helped with the police, after all. No good—or dumb—deed ever went unpunished, he supposed. "And you can stop the Sir John stuff. I do not own a horse or a steel shirt." And his only sword was the Mameluke that the Marine Corps gave to its officers upon graduation at Quantico.

"Jack, a knight is ceremonially one who will take up arms in protection of the sovereign. You've done that twice, if memory serves. You are, therefore, entitled to the honorific," Sharp pointed out.

"You guys never forget, do you?"

"Not something like that, Sir John. Courage under fire is one of the things worth remembering."

"Especially in nightmares, but in those the gun never works, and, yeah, sometimes I have them," Jack admitted, for the first time in his life. "What are we doing tomorrow, Tom?"

"I have embassy work in the morning. Why don't you scout the area some more, and I can join you for lunch."

"Fair enough. Meet where?"

"Just inside the Basilica, to the right, is Michelangelo's *Pietá.* Just there at one fifteen exactly."

"Fair enough," Jack agreed.

"SO, WHERE IS RYAN?" the Rabbit asked.

"Rome," Alan Kingshot answered. "He's looking into what you told us." All of this day had been occupied with uncovering what he knew of KGB operations in the UK. It turned out to be quite a lot, enough that the three-man Security Service team had positively drooled as they took their notes. Ryan had been wrong, Kingshot thought over dinner. This fellow wasn't a gold mine. No, he was Kimberly, and the diamonds just spilled out from his mouth. Zaitzev was relaxing a little more, enjoying his status. *As well he might,* Alan thought. Like the man who'd invented the computer chip, this Rabbit was set for life, all the carrots he could eat, and men with guns would protect his hole in the ground against all bears.

The Bunny, as he thought of her, had discovered Western cartoons today. She especially liked "Roadrunner," immediately noting the similarity to the Russian "Hey, Wait a Minute," and laughing through every one of them.

Irina, on the other hand, was rediscovering her love for the piano, playing the big Bösendorfer in the home's music room, making mistakes but learning from them, and starting to recover her former skills, to the admiring looks of Mrs. Thompson, who'd never learned to play herself, but who'd found reams of sheet music in the house for Mrs. Zaitzev to try her hand at.

This family, Kingshot thought, *will do well in the West.* The child was a child. The father had tons of good information. The mother would breathe free and play her music to her heart's content. They would wear their newfound freedom like a loose and comfortable garment. They were, to use the Russian word, *kulturniy,* or cultured people, fit representatives of the rich culture which had long predated communism. Good to know that not all defectors were alcoholic ruffians.

"LIKE A CANARY on amphetamines, Basil says," Moore told his senior people in the den of his home. "He says this guy will give us more information than we can easily use."

"Oh, yeah? Try us," Ritter thought out loud.

"Indeed, Bob. When do we get him over here?" Admiral Greer asked.

"Basil asked for two more days to get him over. Say, Thursday afternoon. I'm having the Air Force send a VC-137 over. Might as well do it first class," the Judge observed generously. It wasn't *his* money, after all. "Basil's alerted his people in Rome, by the way, just in case KGB is running fast on their operation to whack the Pope."

"They're not that efficient," Ritter said with some confidence.

"I'd be careful about that, Bob," the DDI thought out loud. "Yuriy Vladimirovich isn't noted for his patience." Greer was not the first man to make that observation.

"I know, but their system grinds slower than ours."

"What about the Bulgarians?" Moore asked. "They think the shooter is a guy named Strokov, Boris Strokov. He's probably the guy who killed Georgiy Markov on Westminster Bridge. Experienced assassin, Basil thinks."

"It figures they'd use the Bulgars," Ritter observed. "They're the Eastern Bloc's Murder Incorporated, but they're still communists, and they're chess players, not high-noon types. But we still haven't figured out how to warn the Vatican. Can we talk to the Nuncio about this?"

They'd all had a little time to think through that question, and now it was time to face it again. The Papal Nuncio was the Vatican's ambassador to the United States, Giovanni Cardinal Sabatino. Sabatino was a longtime member of the Pope's own diplomatic service and was well regarded by the State Department's career foreign-service officers, both for his sagacity and his discretion.

"Can we do it in such a way as not to compromise the source?" Greer wondered.

"We can say some Bulgarian talked too much—"

"Pick that fictional source carefully, Judge," Ritter warned. "Remember, the DS has that special subunit. It reports directly to their Politburo, and they don't write much down, according to what sources we have over there. Kinda like the commie version of Albert Anastasia. This Strokov guy is one of them, or so we have heard."

"We could say their party chairman talked to a mistress. He has a few," Greer suggested. The Director of Intelligence had all manner of information on the intimate habits of world leaders, and the Bulgarian party boss was a man of the people in the most immediate of senses. Of course, if this ever leaked, life might get difficult for the women in question, but adultery had its price, and the Bulgarian chairman was such a copious drinker that he might not remember to whom he'd (never) said what would be attributed to him. That might serve to salve their consciences a little.

"Sounds plausible," Ritter opined.

"When could we see the Nuncio?" Moore asked.

"Middle of the week, maybe?" Ritter suggested again. They all had a full week before them. The Judge would be on The Hill doing budget business until Wednesday morning.

"Where?" They couldn't bring him here, after all. The churchman wouldn't come. Too much potential unpleasantness if anyone noticed. And Judge Moore couldn't go to the Nuncio. His face, also, was too well known by the

Washington establishment.

"Foggy Bottom," Greer thought out loud. Moore went to see the Secretary of State often enough, and the Nuncio wasn't exactly a stranger there.

"That'll work," the DCI decided. "Let's get it set up." Moore stretched. He hated having to do work on a Sunday. Even a judge of the appeals court got weekends off.

"There's still the issue of what they can actually do with the information," Ritter warned them. "What is Basil doing?"

"He's got his Rome Station rooting around, only five of them, but he's going to send some more troops from London tomorrow just in case they try to make their hit on Wednesday—that's when His Holiness appears in public. I gather he has a pretty busy work schedule, too."

"Shame he can't call off the ride around the plaza, but I guess he wouldn't listen if anybody asked."

"Not hardly," Moore agreed. He didn't bring up the word from Sir Basil that Ryan had been dispatched to Rome. Ritter would just throw another conniption fit, and Moore wasn't up to that on a Sunday.

RYAN AROSE EARLY, as usual, had his breakfast, and caught a taxi to St. Peter's. It was good to walk around the square—which was almost entirely round, of course—just to stretch his legs. It seemed odd that here, inside the capital of the Italian Republic, was a titularly sovereign state whose official language was Latin. He wondered if the Caesars would have liked that or not, the last home of their language also being the home of the agency that had brought down their world-spanning empire, but he couldn't go to the Forum to ask whatever ghosts lived there.

The church commanded his attention. There were no words for something that large. The funds to build it had necessitated the indulgence selling that had sparked Martin Luther to post his protest on the cathedral door and so start the Reformation, something the nuns at St. Matthew's had not approved of, but for which the Jesuits of his later life had taken rather a broader view. The Society of Jesus also owed its existence to the Reformation—they'd been founded to fight against it.

That didn't much matter at the moment. The basilica beggared description, and it seemed a fit headquarters for the Roman Catholic Church. He walked in and saw that, if anything, the interior seemed even more vast than the outside. You could play a football game in there. A good hundred yards away was the main altar, reserved for use by the Pope himself, under which was the crypt where former popes were buried, including, tradition had it, Simon Peter himself. "Thou art Peter," Jesus was quoted in the Gospel, "and upon this rock I shall build my church." Well, with the help of some architects and what must have been an army of workers, they'd certainly built a church here. Jack felt drawn into it as though it were God's own personal house. The cathedral in Baltimore would scarcely have been an alcove here. Looking around, he saw the tourists, also staring at the ceiling with open mouths. *How had they built this place without structural steel?* Jack wondered. It was all stone resting on

stone. *Those old guys really knew their stuff*, Ryan reflected. The sons of those engineers now worked for Boeing or NASA. He spent a total of twenty minutes walking around, then reminded himself that he wasn't, after all, a tourist.

This had once been the site of the original Roman Circus Maximus. The big racetrack for chariots, like those in the movie *Ben-Hur*, had then been torn down and a church built here, the original St. Peter's, but over time that church had deteriorated, and so a century-plus-long project to build this one had been undertaken and was finished in the sixteenth century, Ryan remembered. He went back outside to survey the area once again. Much as he looked for alternatives, it seemed that his first impression had been the correct one. The Pope got in his car *there*, drove around *that way*, and the place of greatest vulnerability was . . . *right about there.* The problem was that *there* was a semicircular space perhaps two hundred yards long.

Okay, he thought, *time to do some analysis.* The shooter would be a pro. A pro would have two considerations: one, getting a good shot off; and two, getting the hell out of here alive.

So Ryan turned to see potential exit routes. To the left, closest to the façade of the church, people would really pile up there in their desire to get the first look at the Pope as he came out. Farther down, the open vehicle path widened somewhat, increasing the range of the shot—something to be avoided. But the shooter still needed to get his ass out of Dodge City, and the best way to do that was toward the side street where Sharp had parked the day before. You could stash a car there, probably, and if you made it that far, you'd go pedal-to-the-metal and race the hell off to wherever you had a backup car parked—a backup, because the cops would sure as hell be looking for the first one, and Rome had a goodly supply of police officers who'd run through fire to catch whoever had popped a cap on the Pope.

Back to the shooting place. He wouldn't want to be in the thickest part of the crowd, so he wouldn't want to be too close to the church. But he'd want to boogie out through *that* arch. Maybe sixty or seventy yards. Ten seconds, maybe? With a clear path, yeah, about that. Double it, just to be sure. He'd probably yell something like *"There he goes!"* as a distraction. It might make him easier to identify later, but Colonel Strokov will be figuring to sleep Wednesday night in Sofia. *Check flight times*, Jack told himself. *If he takes the shot and gets away, he won't be swimming home, will he? No, he'll opt for the fastest way out—unless he has a really deep hidey-hole here in Rome*.

That was a possibility. The problem was that he was dealing with an experienced field spook, and he could have a lot of things planned. But this was reality, not a movie, and professionals kept things simple, because even the simplest things could go to shit in the real world.

He'll have at least one backup plan. Maybe more, but sure as hell he'll have one.

Dress up like a priest, maybe? There were a lot of them in evidence. Nuns, too—more than Ryan had ever seen. *How tall is Strokov?* Anything over five-eight and he'd be too tall for a nun. But if he dressed as a priest, you could hide a fucking RPG in a cassock. That was a pleasant thought. But how fast could one run in a cassock? That was a possible downside.

You have to assume a pistol, probably a suppressed pistol. A rifle—no, its dangers lay in its virtues. It was so long that the guy standing next to him

could bat the barrel off target, and he'd never get a good round off. An AK-47, maybe, able to go rock-and-roll? But, no, it was only in the movies that people fired machine guns from the hip. Ryan had tried it with his M-16 at Quantico. It felt real John Wayne, but you just couldn't hit shit that way. The sights, the gunnery sergeants had all told his class at the Basic School, are there for a reason. Like Wyatt Earp shooting on TV—draw and fire from the hip. It just didn't work unless your other hand was on the fucker's shoulder. The sights are there for a reason, to tell you where the weapon is pointed, because the bullet you're shooting is about a third of an inch in diameter, and you are, in fact, shooting *at* a target just that small, and a hiccup could jerk you off target, and under stress your aim just gets worse . . . unless you're used to the idea of killing people. Like Boris Strokov, colonel of the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost*. What if he was one of those who just didn't rattle, like Audie Murphy of the Third Infantry Division in WWII? But how many people like that were around? Murphy had been one in eight million American soldiers, and nobody had seen that deadly quality in him before it just popped out on the battlefield, probably surprising even him. Murphy himself probably never appreciated how different he was from everybody else.

Strokov is a pro, Jack reminded himself. *And so he'll act like a pro. He'll plan every detail, especially the getaway*.

"You must be Ryan," a British voice said quietly. Jack turned to see a pale man with red hair.

"Who are you?"

"Mick King," the man replied. "Sir Basil sent the four of us down. Sussing the area out?"

"How obvious am I?" Ryan worried suddenly.

"You could well be an architecture student." King blew it off. "What do you think?"

"I think the shooter would stand right about here, and try to boogie on out that way," Jack said, pointing. King looked around before speaking.

"It's a dicey proposition, however one plans it, with all the people sure to be here, but, yes, that does look the most promising option," the spook agreed.

"If I were planning to do it myself, I'd want to use a rifle from up there. We'll need to have somebody topside to handle that possibility."

"Agreed. I'll have John Sparrow go up there. The chap with short hair over there. He brought a ton of cameras with him."

"One more man to camp out in the street that way. Our bird will probably have a car to skip town with, and that's where I'd park it."

"A little too convenient, don't you think?"

"Hey, I'm an ex-Marine, not a chess master," Ryan replied. But it was good to have somebody second-guessing him. There were a lot of tactical possibilities here, and everybody read a map a little differently, and Bulgarians might well study out of a different playbook altogether.

"It's a pig of a mission they've given us. Best hope is that this Strokov fellow doesn't show up. Oh, here he is," King said, handing Ryan an envelope.

It was full of eight-by-ten prints, actually of pretty good quality.

"Nick Thompson told me he has lifeless eyes," Ryan said, looking at one of them.

"Does seem rather a cold chap, doesn't he?"

"When we come here Wednesday, we going to be carrying?"

"I certainly shall be," King said positively. "Nine-millimeter Browning. There ought to be a few more at the embassy. I know you can shoot accurately under pressure, Sir John," he added, with casual respect.

"It doesn't mean I like to, pal." And the best engagement range for any pistol was contact range, holding the gun right against the other bastard. Kinda hard to miss that way. It would even cut the noise down, too. Plus, it was a hell of a good way to tell someone not to do anything untoward.

For the next two hours, the five men walked the piazza, but they kept coming back to the same place.

"We can't cover it all, not without a hundred men," Mick King finally said. "And if you can't be strong everywhere, you might as well pick one place and be strong there."

Jack nodded, remembering how Napoleon had ordered his generals to come up with a plan for protecting France from invasion, and when a senior officer had spread his troops evenly along the borders, he'd heartlessly inquired if the guy was trying to protect against smuggling. So, yeah, if you couldn't be strong *everywhere*, then you planned to be strong *somewhere*, and prayed that you'd picked the right spot. The key, as always, was to put yourself into the other guy's head, just as they'd taught him to do as an intelligence analyst. Think the way your adversary thinks, and stop him that way. It sounded so good and so easy theoretically. It was rather different in the field, however.

They caught Tom Sharp walking into the basilica, and together they went off to a restaurant for lunch and a talk.

"Sir John is right," King said. "The best spot is over on the left side. We have photos of the bugger. We put you, John"—he said to Sparrow—"atop the colonnade with your cameras. Your job will be to sweep the crowd and try to spot the bastard, and radio your information to us."

Sparrow nodded, but his face showed what he thought of the job as the beers arrived.

"Mick, you had it right from the beginning," Sparrow said. "It's a pig of a job. We ought to have the whole bloody SAS regiment here, and even *that* would not be enough." The 22nd Special Air Service Regiment was actually just a company or two in size, brilliant troopers that they were.

"Ours is not to reason why, lad," Sharp told them all. "So good to know that Basil knows his Tennyson." The resulting snorts around the lunch table told the tale.

"What about radios?" Jack asked.

"On the way by courier," Sharp answered. "Small ones, they'll fit in a pocket, and they have ear pieces, but not small microphones, unfortunately."

"Shit," Ryan observed. The Secret Service would have exactly what they needed for this mission, but you couldn't just call them up and have them delivered. "What about the Queen's protective detail? Who does that?"

"The Metropolitan Police, I believe. Why—"

"Lapel mikes," Ryan answered. "It's what the Secret Service uses at home."

"I can ask," Sharp responded. "Good idea, Jack. They might well have what we need."

"They ought to cooperate with us," Mick King thought aloud.

"I'll see to it this afternoon," Sharp promised.

Yeah, Ryan thought, *we'll be the best-equipped guys ever to blow a mission*.

"They call this beer?" Sparrow asked after his first sip.

"Better than American canned piss," another of the new arrivals thought aloud.

Jack didn't rise to the bait. Besides, you went to Italy for the wine, not the beer.

"What do we know about Strokov?" Ryan asked.

"They faxed me the police file on him," Sharp reported. "Read it this morning. He's five-eleven, about fifteen stone. Evidently, he likes to eat too much. So, not an athlete—certainly not a sprinter. Brown hair, fairly thick. Good language skills. Speaks accented English, but reportedly speaks French and Italian like a native. Thought to be an expert with small arms. He's been in the business twenty years—age forty-three or so. Selected for the special DS assassination unit about fifteen years ago, with eight kills attributed to him, possibly more—we don't have good information on that."

"Delightful chap, sounds like," Sparrow thought aloud. He reached for one of the photos. "Ought not to be difficult to spot. Better to get some of these prints reduced to pocket size, so that we can all carry them with us."

"Done," Sharp promised. The embassy had its own little photo lab, mainly for his use.

Ryan looked around the table. At least it was good to be surrounded by professionals. Given the chance to perform, they probably wouldn't blow it—like a good bunch of Marines. It was not all that much, but it was something.

"What about side arms?" Ryan asked next.

"All the nine-millimeter Brownings we need," Tom Sharp assured him.

Ryan wanted to ask if they had hollow-point ammunition, but they probably just had military-issue hardball. That Geneva Convention bullshit. The nine-millimeter Parabellum cartridge was thought by Europeans to be powerful, but it was hardly a BB compared to the .45 Colt with which he'd been trained. So, then, why did he own a Browning Hi-Power? Jack asked himself. But the one he had at home was loaded with Federal 147-grain hollow-points, regarded by the American FBI as the only useful bullet to shoot out of the thing, good both for penetration and for expanding to the diameter of a dime inside the target's body, to make him bleed out in a hurry.

"He'd better be bloody close," Mick King announced. "I haven't fired one of the things in years." Which reminded Jack that England did not have the gun culture America has, even in their security services. James Bond was someone from the movies, Ryan had to remember. Ryan himself was probably the best pistol shot in the room, and he was a long way from being an expert. The pistols Sharp would hand out would be military-issue, the ones with invisible sights and crummy grips. The one Ryan owned had Pachmayr grips that fit his hand so nicely that it might have been a custom-made glove. Damn, nothing about this job was going to be easy.

"Okay. John, you'll be atop the colonnade. Find out how you get there, and arrange to get up there Wednesday morning early."

"Right." He had press credentials to make that easy. "I'll recheck the timing

for everything as well."

"Good," Sharp replied. "We'll spend the afternoon going over the ground more. Look for things we may have overlooked. I'm thinking we put one man over on the side street to try and spot our friend Strokov coming in. If we spot him, we shadow him all the way in."

"Not stop him out there?" Ryan asked.

"Better to get him in closer," Sharp thought out loud. "More of us, less chance for him to bolt. If we're onto him, Jack, he won't be doing anything untoward, will he? We'll see to that."

"Will he be that predictable?" Jack worried.

"He's doubtless been here already. Indeed, we could just spot him today or tomorrow, couldn't we?"

"I wouldn't bet the ranch on it," Jack shot back.

"We play the card we are dealt, Sir John," King said. "And hope for luck."

There was no arguing with that, Ryan realized.

"If I were planning this operation, I'd be trying very hard to keep it simple. The most important preparation he'll be making is up here." Sharp tapped the side of his head. "He, too, will be somewhat tense, no matter how experienced he is in this business. Yes, he's a clever bugger, but he is not bloody Superman. The key to his success is surprise. Well, he doesn't really have that, does he? And blown surprise is the worst nightmare of a field officer. Lose that and everything comes apart like a wrecked watch. Remember, if he sees one thing that he doesn't like, he will probably just walk away and plan to come back again. There is no clock on this mission from his point of view."

"Think so?" Ryan wasn't the least bit sure of that.

"Yes, I do. If there were, from an operational standpoint, they would well have executed the mission already, and the Pope would already be chatting directly with God. According to what I've heard from London, this mission has been in planning for more than six weeks. So, clearly he's taking his time. I'll be very surprised if it happens day after tomorrow, but we must act as though it will."

"I wish I had your confidence, man."

"Sir John, field officers think and act like field officers, whatever their nationality," Sharp said with confidence. "Our mission is a difficult one, yes, but we speak his language, as it were. If this were a balls-out mission, it would have been done already. Agreed, gentlemen?" he asked, and got nods from around the table, except from the American.

"What if we're missing something?" Ryan wondered.

"That is a possibility," Sharp admitted, "but it's a possibility we have to both live with and discount. We have only the information we have, and we must design our plan around that."

"Not much choice for us, is it, Sir John?" Sparrow asked. "We have only what we have."

"True," Ryan admitted, rather miserably. There had come the sudden thought that other things might be happening as well. What if there were a diversion? What if somebody tossed firecrackers—to draw eyes toward the noise and away from the real action? *That*, he suddenly thought, was a real possibility.

Damn.

"WHAT'S THIS ABOUT RYAN?" Ritter asked, storming into Judge Moore's office.

"Basil thought that since BEATRIX was a CIA operation from the get-go, why not send one of our officers down there to take a look at things? I don't see that it can hurt anything," Moore told his DDO.

"Who the hell does Ryan think he's working for?"

"Bob, why don't you just settle down? What the hell can he do to hurt things?"

"Damn it, Arthur—"

"Settle down, Robert," Moore shot back in the voice of a judge used to having his own way on everything from the weather on down.

"Arthur," Ritter said, calming down a whisker, "it's not a place for him."

"I see no reason to object, Bob. None of us think anything's going to happen anyway, do we?"

"Well . . . no, I suppose not," the DDO admitted.

"So he's just broadening his horizons, and from what he learns, he'll be a better analyst, won't he?"

"Maybe so, but I don't like having some desk-sitter playing field spook. He isn't trained for this."

"Bob, he used to be a Marine," Moore reminded him. And the U.S. Marine Corps had its own cachet, independent of the CIA. "He's not going to wet his pants on us, is he?"

"I suppose not."

"And all he's going to do is look around at nothing happening, and the exposure to some field officers will not do his education any harm, will it?"

"They're Brits, not our guys," Ritter objected weakly.

"The same guys who brought the Rabbit out for us."

"Okay, Arthur, I'll give you this one."

"Bob, you throw a hell of a conniption fit, but why not use them for something important?"

"Yes, Judge, but the DO is my shop to run. You want me to get Rick Nolfi into this?"

"You think it's necessary?"

Ritter shook his head. "No, I expect not."

"Then we let the Brits run this mini-op and keep it cool here at Langley until we can interview the Rabbit and quantify the threat to the Pope, all right?"

"Yes, Arthur." And the Deputy Director (Operations) of the Central Intelligence Agency headed back to his office.

DINNER WENT WELL. The Brits made good company, especially when the talk turned to non-mission-related things. All were married. Three had kids, with

one expecting his first shortly.

"You have two, as I recall?" Mick King asked Jack.

"Yeah, and number two arrived on a busy night."

"Too bloody right!" Ray Stones, one of the new arrivals, agreed with a laugh. "How did the missus take it?"

"Not too bad after Little Jack arrived, but the rest of the evening was subpar."

"I believe it," King observed.

"So, who told us that the Bulgarians want to kill the Pope?" Sparrow asked.

"It's KGB that wants his ass," Jack replied. "We just got a defector out. He's in a safe house, and he's singing like the girl in *Aida*. This is the most important thing so far."

"Reliable information?" King inquired.

"We think it's gold-plated and copper-bottomed, yeah. Sir Basil has bought into it. That's why he flew you guys down," Jack let them know, in case they hadn't already figured that one out. "I've met the Rabbit myself, and I think he's the real deal."

"CIA operation?" This was Sharp.

Jack nodded. "Correct. We had an operational problem, and you guys were kind enough to help us out. I'm not cleared to say much more, sorry."

They all understood. They didn't want their asses exposed by loose talk about a black operation.

"This must go to Andropov himself—the Pope's giving them trouble in Poland, is it?"

"It would seem so. Maybe he has command of more divisions than they appreciate."

"Even so, this seems a little extreme—how will the world see the assassination of His Holiness?" King wondered aloud.

"Evidently, they fear that less than a total political collapse in Poland, Mick," Stones thought out loud. "And they're afraid that he might be able to bring that about. The sword and the spirit, as Napoleon said, Mick. The spirit always wins in the end."

"Yes, I reckon so, and here we are at the epicenter of the world of the spirit."

"My first time here," Stones said. "It *is* bloody impressive. I must bring the family down here sometime."

"They do know their food and wine," Sparrow observed, going through his veal. "What about the local police?"

"Rather good, actually," Sharp told him. "Pity we can't enlist their assistance. They know the territory—it is their patch, after all."

But these guys are the pros from Dover, Ryan thought, with some degree of hope. Just that there weren't enough of them. "Tom, you talk to London about the radios?"

"Ah, yes, Jack. They're sending us ten. Earpieces and lapel microphones to speak into. Sideband, rather like what the army use. I don't know if they're encrypted, but fairly secure in any case, and we'll use proper radio discipline. So at least we'll be able to communicate clearly. We'll practice with them tomorrow afternoon."

"And Wednesday?"

"We'll arrive about nine in the morning, pick our individual surveillance areas, and mill about while the crowd arrives."

"This isn't what they trained me for in the Corps," Ryan thought aloud.

"Sir John," Mick King responded, "this isn't what they trained any of us for. Yes, we are all experienced intelligence officers, but this really is a job for someone in the protective services, like the police constables who guard Her Majesty and the PM or your Secret Service chaps. Hell of a way to earn a living, this is."

"Yes, Mick, I expect we'll all appreciate them a little more after this lot," Ray Stones observed, to general agreement around the table.

"John." Ryan turned to Sparrow. "You've got the most important job, spotting this motherfucker for the rest of us."

"Lovely," Sparrow replied. "All I have to do is examine five-thousand-plus faces for the one that might or might not be there. Lovely," the spook repeated.

"What will you be using?"

"I have three Nikon cameras and a good assortment of lenses. I think tomorrow I might buy some seven-by-fifty binoculars also. I just hope I can find a good perch to scan from. The height of the parapet worries me. There's a dead space extending out from the base of the columns about thirty yards or so that I can't see at all. That limits what I can do, lads."

"Not much choice," Jack thought out loud. "You can't see shit from ground level."

"That is the problem we have," Sparrow agreed. "Our best choice would be two men, one—actually, more than one—on each side with good spotting glasses. But we lack the manpower, and we'd have to get permission from the Pope's own security people, which is, I gather, quite out of the question."

"Getting them involved would be useful, but—"

"But we can't let the whole world know about the Rabbit. Yeah, I know. The Pope's life is secondary to that consideration. Isn't that just great?" Ryan growled.

"What is the security of your country worth, Sir John, and ours also?" King asked rhetorically.

"More than his life," Ryan answered. "Yeah, I know, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Has any Pope ever been murdered?" Sharp asked. Nobody knew the answer.

"Somebody tried once. The Swiss Guards fought a stonewall action to protect his retreat. Most of them went down hard, but the Pope escaped alive," Ryan said, remembering something from a comic book he'd read at St. Matthew's in the—what was it? Fourth grade or so?

"I wonder how good they are, those Swiss chaps?" Stones asked.

"They're pretty enough in the striped uniforms. Probably well motivated. Question of training, really," Sharp observed. "That's the difference between a civilian and a soldier—training. The chaps in plainclothes are probably well briefed, but if they carry pistols, are they allowed to use them? They work for a church, after all. Probably not trained to shoot people outright."

"You had that guy jump out from a crowd and fire off a starter pistol at the Queen—on the way to Parliament, wasn't it?" Ryan remembered. "There was a cavalry officer on a horse right there. I was surprised he didn't cut the asshole in half with his sabre—that would have been my instinct—but he didn't."

"Parade sword, just for ceremonial occasions. You probably couldn't cut cold butter with it," Sparrow said. "Nearly trampled the bastard with his horse, though."

"The Secret Service would have dropped him on the spot. Sure, the gun was loaded with blanks," Ryan said, "but it damned sure looked and sounded like the real thing. Her Majesty kept her head screwed on pretty tight. I would have shit myself."

"I'm sure Her Majesty availed herself of the proper facilities at Westminster Palace. She has her own loo there, you know," King told the American.

"In the event, he was some disturbed fellow, doubtless cutting out paper dolls in a mental hospital now," Sharp said, but, like every other British subject, his heart had stopped cold watching the incident on TV, and he, too, had been surprised that the lunatic had survived the event. Had one of the Yeomen of the Tower been there with his ceremonial fighting spear—called a partisan—he surely would have been pinned to the pavement like a butterfly in a collection box. Perhaps God did look after fools, drunks, and little children after all. "So, if Strokov does show up, and does take his shot, you suppose the local Italians will do for him?"

"One can hope," King said.

Wouldn't that be just great? Jack thought. The professionals can't protect the Pope, but local waiters and clothing salesmen beat the fucker to death. That'll look great on *NBC Nightly News*.

BACK IN MANCHESTER, the Rabbit and his family finished yet another superb dinner from Mrs. Thompson.

"What does an ordinary English worker eat?" Zaitzev asked.

"Not quite this well," Kingshot admitted. He sure as hell didn't. "But we try to take decent care of our guests, Oleg."

"Have I told you enough about MINISTER?" he asked next. "Is all I know." The Security Service had picked his brain pretty thoroughly on the subject that afternoon, going over every single fact at least five times.

"You've been most helpful, Oleg Ivan'ch. Thank you." In fact, he'd given the Security Service quite a lot. Most often, the way you caught such penetration agents was by identifying the information he'd transferred. Only a limited number of people would have access to all of it, and the "Five" people would observe all of them until one did something difficult to explain. Then they would see who arrived at the dead-drop site to retrieve the package, and from that they'd get the bonus of identifying his KGB control officer, and get two breaks for the price of one—or perhaps even more, because the case officer would be working more than one agent, and the discoveries could branch out like the limbs of a tree. Then you tried to arrest a peripheral agent before

going after the main target, because then the KGB could not know how their main penetration agent had been exposed, and *that* would protect the primary source, Oleg Zaitzev, from discovery. The counterintelligence business was as baroque as medieval-court intrigue and was both loved and hated by the players for its intricacy, but that just made the apprehension of a real Bad Guy that much more rewarding.

"And what of the Pope?"

"As I said the other day, we have a team in Rome right now to look into the matter," Kingshot answered. "Not much we can say—in fact, not much we can really do, but we are taking action based on your information, Oleg."

"That is good," the defector thought out loud, hoping it hadn't all been for nothing. He'd not really looked forward to exposing Soviet agents throughout the West. He'd do that, to safeguard his own position in his new home, of course, and for the money he'd get for turning traitor to his Motherland, but his highest concern was in saving that one life.

TUESDAY MORNING, Ryan slept later than usual, arising just after eight, figuring he'd need to bankroll his rest for the following day. He'd sure as hell need it then.

Sharp and the rest of the team were already up.

"Anything new?" Jack asked, coming into the dining room.

"We have the radios," Sharp reported. There was, indeed, one at every place at the table. "They're excellent—the very same sort your Secret Service use—same manufacturer, Motorola. Brand new, and they are encrypted. Lapel microphones and earpieces."

Ryan looked at his. The earpiece was clear plastic, curled up like a phone cord, and nearly invisible. That was good news. "Batteries?"

"Brand new, and two sets of replacements for each. Good to know that Her Majesty is well looked after."

"Okay, so nobody can listen in, and we can swap information," Ryan said. It was one more piece of good news set against a big black pile of the bad sort. "What's the plan for the day?"

"Back to the piazza, do some more looking, and hope we see our friend Strokov."

"And if we do?" Ryan asked.

"We follow him back to his accommodations and try to see if there's a way to speak with the chap this evening."

"If we get that far, just talk to him?"

"What do you suppose, Sir John?" Sharp replied with a cold look.

You really willing to go that far, Mr. Sharp? Jack didn't ask. Well, the bastard was a multiple murderer, and as civilized as the Brits were, under all the good manners and world-class hospitality, they knew how to do business, and while Jack wasn't entirely sure that he'd be able to go all the way, these guys probably didn't have his inhibitions. Ryan figured he could live with that, as long as he wasn't the trigger man himself. Besides, they'd probably give him a chance to change countries first. Better a talking defector than a silent corpse.

"Would that give anything away?"

Sharp shook his head. "No. He's the chappie who killed Georgiy Markov, remember? We can always say it is a case of visiting Her Majesty's justice on someone who needed to learn about it."

"We don't approve of murder at home, Jack," John Sparrow advised. "It would indeed be a pleasure to have him answer for that."

"Okay." Ryan could live with that, too. He was certain his dad would approve.

Oh, yeah.

THE REST OF the day, they all played tourist and tested their radios. It turned out that the radios worked both inside and outside the basilica, and, better yet, inside to outside the immense stone structure. Each man would use his own name as an identifier. It made more sense than setting up numbers or code names that they'd all have to remember—one more confusing factor that they wouldn't need if the shit hit the fan. All the while, they looked around for the face of Boris Strokov, hoping for a miracle, and reminding themselves that miracles did occasionally happen. People really did hit the lottery—they had one in Italy, too—and the football pools every week, and so it *was* possible, just damned unlikely, and this day, it did not happen.

Nor did they find a better or more likely place from which to take a shot at a man in a slow-moving vehicle. It seemed to them all that Ryan's first impression of the tactical realities of the place was correct. That felt good to Jack until he realized that if he'd blown it, then it was his fault, not theirs.

"You know," Ryan said to Mick King—Sharp was back doing Deputy-Chief-of-Mission business for the British ambassador—"more than half the crowd is going to be in the middle there."

"Works for us, Jack. Only a fool would take the shot from in there, unless he plans to have Scotty beam him up to the starship *Enterprise*. No escape possible from that place."

"True," Jack agreed. "What about inside somewhere, get the Pope on the way to the car?"

"Possible," Mick agreed. "But that would mean that somehow Strokov or someone under his control is already inside the Papal administration—household, whatever one calls it—and is thus free to make his killing whenever he wishes. Somehow I think that infiltrating that organization would be difficult. It would mean maintaining a difficult psychological disguise for an extended period of time. No." He shook his head. "I would discount that possibility."

"Hope you're right, man."

"So do I, Jack."

They all left at about four, each catching a separate cab to within a few blocks of the Brit Embassy and walking the rest of the way.

Dinner was quiet that night. Each of them had his own worries, and everyone hoped that whatever the hell Colonel Strokov of the DS had in mind, it wasn't for this week, and that they could all fly back to London the

following evening none the worse off for the experience. One thing Ryan had learned: Experienced field spooks that they were, they were no more comfortable with this mission than he was. It was good not to be alone in his anxiety. Or was that just schadenfreude? What the hell, was this how it felt the night before D-Day? No, there was no German Army waiting for them. Their job was to prevent a possible murder, and the danger was not even to themselves. It was to someone else who either didn't know or didn't care about the danger to himself, and so they had assumed responsibility for his life. Mick King had gotten it right from his first impression the day before. It was a pig of a mission.

"MORE STUFF FROM the Rabbit," Moore reported at the usual evening get-together.

"What's that?"

"Basil says there's a deep-penetration agent in their Foreign Office, and the Rabbit gave them enough information to narrow him down to four potential individuals. 'Five' is already looking at them. And he gave them some more on this CASSIUS guy over here. He's been working for them just over ten years. Definitely a senior aide to a senator on the Intelligence Committee—sounds like a political adviser. So it's probably somebody who's been briefed in and has a clearance. That cuts it down to eighteen people for the Bureau to check out."

"What's he giving them, Arthur?" Greer asked.

"Sounds like whatever we tell The Hill about KGB operations gets back to Dzerzhinskiy Square in less than a week."

"I want that son of a bitch," Ritter announced. "If that's true, then we've lost agents because of him." And Bob Ritter, whatever his faults, looked after his agents like a mama grizzly bear with her cubs.

"Well, he's been doing this long enough that he's probably pretty comfortable in his fieldcraft."

"He told us about a Navy guy—NEPTUNE, wasn't it?" Greer remembered.

"Nothing new there, but we'll be sure to ask him about it. That could be anybody. How careful is the Navy with their crypto gear?"

Greer shrugged. "Every single ship has communications people, petty officers, and a commissioned communications officer. They're supposed to destroy the setting sheets and circuit boards on a daily basis, and toss them over the side—and not just one. Two people have to see it, supposedly. And they're all cleared—"

"But only people with clearances can fuck us in the ass," Ritter reminded them.

"Only the people you trust with your money can steal from you," Judge Moore observed. He'd seen enough criminal cases along that score. "That's the problem. Imagine how Ivan's going to feel if he finds out about the Rabbit."

"That," Ritter said, "is different."

"Very good, Bob," the DCI reacted with a laugh. "My wife says that to me all the time. It must be the war cry of women all over the world—*that's*

different. The other side thinks they're the forces of Truth and Beauty, too, remember."

"Yeah, Judge, but we're going to whip 'em."

It was good to see such confidence, especially in a guy like Bob Ritter, Moore thought.

"Still thinking about THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH, Robert?"

"Putting some ideas together. Give me a few weeks."

"Fair enough."

IT WAS JUST one in the morning in Washington when Ryan awoke on Italian time. The shower helped get him alert, and the shave got his face smooth. By seven-thirty, he was heading down for breakfast. Mrs. Sharp fixed coffee in the Italian style, which surprisingly tasted as though someone had emptied an ashtray into the pot. Jack wrote that off to differing national tastes. The eggs and (English) bacon were just fine, as was the buttered toast. Someone had decided that men going into action needed full bellies. A pity the Brits didn't know about hash brown potatoes, the most filling of unhealthy breakfast foods.

"All ready?" Sharp asked, coming in.

"I guess we all have to be. What about the rest of the crew?"

"We rendezvous at the front of the basilica in thirty-five minutes." And it was only a five-minute drive from there. "Here's a friend for you to take along." He handed over a pistol.

Jack took it and slid the slide back. It was, fortunately, empty.

"You may need this, too." Sharp handed over two loaded magazines. Sure enough, they were hardball—full-metal-jacketed—cartridges, which would go right through the target, making only a nine-millimeter hole in and out. But Europeans thought you could drop an elephant with them. *Yeah, sure,* Jack thought, wishing for a .45 Colt M1911A1, which was much better suited for putting a man on the ground and leaving him there until the ambulance crew arrived. But he'd never mastered the big Colt, though he had, barely, qualified with it. It was with a rifle that Ryan could really shoot, but nearly anyone could shoot a rifle. Sharp didn't provide a holster. The Browning Hi-Power would have to go in his belt, and he'd have to keep his jacket buttoned to conceal it. The bad thing about carrying a pistol was that they were heavy damned things to port around with you, and without a proper holster he'd have to keep adjusting it in his belt to make sure it didn't fall out or slide down his pants. That just wouldn't do. It would also make sitting down a pain in the gut, but there wouldn't be much of that today. The spare magazine went into his coat pocket. He pulled the slide back, locked it in place, and slid the loaded one into the butt, then dropped the locking lever to release the slide. The weapon was now loaded and "in battery," meaning ready to fire. On reflection, Ryan carefully dropped the hammer. A safety might have sufficed, but Ryan had been trained not to trust safeties. To fire the weapon, he'd have to remember to cock the hammer, something he'd fortunately forgotten to do with Sean Miller. But this time, if the worst happened, he would not.

"Time to boogie?" Jack asked Sharp.

"Does that mean go?" the Chief of Station Rome asked. "I meant to ask the other time you said that."

"Yeah, like, boogie on down the road. It's an Americanism. 'Boogie' used to be a kind of dance, I think."

"And your radio." Sharp pointed. "It clips on the belt over your wallet pocket. On/off switch"—he demonstrated—"earpiece fastens to your collar, and the microphone onto your collar. Clever bit of kit, this."

"Okay." Ryan got everything arranged properly, but left the radio off. The spare batteries went into his left-side coat pocket. He didn't expect to need them, but safe was always better than sorry. He reached behind to find the on/off switch and flipped it off and on. "What's the range on the radios?"

"Three miles—five kilometers—the manual says. More than we need. Ready?"

"Yeah." Jack stood, set his pistol snugly on the left side of his belt, and followed Sharp out to the car.

Traffic was agreeably light this morning. Italian drivers were not, from what he'd seen so far, the raving maniacs he'd heard them to be. But the people out now would be people heading soberly to work, whether it was selling real estate or working in a warehouse. One of the difficult things for a tourist to remember was that a city was just another city, not a theme park set in place for his personal amusement.

And damned sure this morning Rome wasn't here for anything approaching that, was it? Jack asked himself coldly.

Sharp parked his official Bentley about where they expected Strokov to park. There were other cars there, people who worked in the handful of shops, or perhaps early shoppers hoping to get their buying done before Wednesday's regularly scheduled chaos.

In any case, this most expensive of British motorcars had diplomatic tags, and nobody would fool with it. Getting out, he followed Sharp into the piazza and reached back with his right hand to flip his radio on without exposing his pistol.

"Okay," he said into his lapel. "Ryan is here. Who else is on the net?"

"Sparrow in place on the colonnade," a voice answered immediately.

"King, in place."

"Ray Stones, in place."

"Parker, in place," Phil Parker, the last of the arrivals from London, reported from his spot on the side street.

"Tom Sharp here with Ryan. We'll do a radio check every fifteen minutes. Report immediately if you see the least thing of interest. Out." He turned to Ryan. "So, that's done."

"Yeah." He checked his watch. They had hours to go before the Pope appeared. What would he be doing now? He was supposed to be a very early riser. Doubtless the first important thing he did every day was to say Mass, like every Catholic priest in the world, and it was probably the most important part of his morning routine, something to remind himself exactly what he was —a priest sworn to God's service—a reality he'd known and probably celebrated within his own mind through Nazi and communist oppression for

forty-odd years, serving his flock. But now his flock, his parish, straddled the entire world, as did his responsibility to them, didn't it?

Jack reminded himself of his time in the Marine Corps. Crossing the Atlantic on his helicopter-landing ship—unknowingly on his way to a life-threatening helicopter crash—on Sunday they'd held church services, and at that moment the church pennant had been run up to the truck. It flew *over* the national ensign. It was the U.S. Navy's way of acknowledging that there was *one* higher loyalty than the one a man had for his country. That loyalty was to God Himself—the one power higher than that of the United States of America, and his country acknowledged that. Jack could feel it, here and now, carrying a gun. He could feel that fact like a physical weight on his shoulders. There were people who wanted the Pope—the Vicar of Christ on earth—dead. And that, suddenly, was massively offensive to him. The worst street criminal gave a priest, minister, or rabbi a free pass, because there might really be a god up there, and it wouldn't do to harm His personal representative among the people. How much more would God be annoyed by the murder of His #1 Representative on Planet Earth. The Pope was a man who'd probably never hurt a single human being in his life. The Catholic Church was not a perfect institution—nothing with mere people in it was or ever could be. But it was founded on faith in Almighty God, and its policies rarely, if ever, strayed from love and charity.

But those doctrines were seen as a threat by the Soviet Union. What better proof of who the Bad Guys were in the world? Ryan had sworn as a Marine to fight his country's enemies. But here and now he swore to himself to fight against God's own enemies. The KGB recognized no power higher than the Party it served. And, in proclaiming that, they defined themselves as the enemy of all mankind—for wasn't mankind made in God's own image? Not Lenin's. Not Stalin's. God's.

Well, he had a pistol designed by John Moses Browning, an American, perhaps a Mormon—Browning had come from Utah, but Jack didn't know what faith he'd adhered to—to help him see about that.

Time passed slowly for Ryan. Constant reference to his watch didn't help. People were arriving steadily. Not in large numbers, but rather like a baseball crowd, arriving single, or in pairs, or in small family groups. Lots of children, infants carried by their mothers, some escorted by nuns—school trips, almost certainly—to see the Pontifex Maximus. That term, too, came from the Romans, who with remarkable clarity likened a priest to a *pontifex*—bridge builder—between men and what was greater than men.

Vicar of Christ on earth was what kept repeating in Jack's mind. This Strokov bastard—hell, he would have killed Jesus Himself. A new Pontius Pilate—if not an oppressor himself, then certainly the representative of the oppressors, here to spit in God's face. It wasn't that he could harm God, of course. Nobody was that big, but in attacking one of God's institutions and God's personal representative—well, that was plenty bad enough. God was supposed to punish such people in His own good time . . . and maybe the Lord chose His instruments to handle that for Him . . . maybe even ex-Marines from the United States of America . . .

Noon. It would be a warm day. What had it been like to live here in Roman

times without air-conditioning? Well, they hadn't known the difference, and the body adapted itself to the environment—something in the medulla, Cathy had told him once. It would have been more comfortable to take his jacket off, but not with a pistol stuck in his belt. . . . There were street vendors about, selling cold drinks and ice cream. *Like money changers in the Temple?* Jack wondered. *Probably not.* The priests in evidence didn't chase them away. *Hmm, a good way for the bad guy to get close with his weapon?* he suddenly wondered. But they were a good way off, and it was too late to worry about that, and none of them matched the photos he had. Jack had a small print of Strokov's face in his left hand, and looked down at it every minute or so. The bastard might be wearing a disguise, of course. He'd be stupid not to, and Strokov probably wasn't stupid. Not in his business. Disguises didn't cover everything. Hair length and color, sure. But not height. It took major surgery to do that. You could make a guy look heavier, but not lighter. Facial hair? *Okay, look for a guy with a beard or mustache* . Ryan turned and scanned the area. Nope. Nothing obvious, anyway.

Half an hour to go. The crowd was buzzing now, people speaking a dozen or more languages. He could see tourists and the faithful from many lands. Blond heads from Scandinavia, African blacks, Asians. Some obvious Americans . . . but no obvious Bulgarians. What did Bulgarians look like? This new problem was that the Catholic Church was supposed to be universal, and that meant people of every physical description. Lots of possible disguises.

"Sparrow, Ryan. See anything likely?" Jack asked his lapel.

"Negative," the voice in his ear answered. "I'm scanning the crowd around you. Nothing to report."

"Roger," Jack acknowledged.

"If he's here, he's bloody invisible," Sharp said, standing next to Ryan. They were eight or ten yards from the interlocking steel barriers brought in for the Pope's weekly appearance. They looked heavy. *Two men to put them on the truck, or four?* Jack wondered. He discovered that the mind liked to wander at times like this, and he had to guard against that. *Keep scanning the crowd,* he told himself.

There's too many goddamned faces! the self responded angrily. *And as soon as the fucker gets into place, he'll be looking away*.

"Tom, how about we edge forward and sweep along the railing?"

"Good idea," Sharp agreed at once.

The crowd was difficult, but not impossible, to slip through. Ryan checked his watch. Fifteen minutes. People were now edging against the barriers, wanting to get close. There was a belief from medieval times that the mere touch of a king could cure the ill or bring good fortune, and evidently that belief lingered—and how much more true if the man in question was the Pontifex Maximus? Some of the people here would be cancer victims, entreating God for a miracle. Maybe some miracles actually happened. Docs called that spontaneous remission and wrote it off to biological processes they didn't yet understand. But maybe they really were miracles—to the recipients they certainly were exactly that. It was just one more thing Ryan didn't understand.

People were leaning forward more, heads were turning to the face of the

church.

"Sharp/Ryan, Sparrow. Possible target, twenty feet to your left, standing three ranks back of the barrier. Blue coat," Jack's earpiece crackled. He headed that way without waiting for Sharp. It was hard pressing through the crowd, but it wasn't a New York subway crush. Nobody turned to curse at him. Ryan looked forward. . . .

Yes . . . right there. He turned to look at Sharp and tapped his nose twice.

"Ryan is on the target," he said into his lapel. "Steer me in, John."

"Forward ten feet, Jack, immediately left of the Italian-looking woman in the brown dress. Our friend has light brown hair. He is looking to his left."

Bingo, Jack thought in silent celebration. It took two more minutes and he was standing right behind the cocksucker. *Hello, Colonel Strokov*.

Hidden in the thickness of the crowd, Jack unbuttoned his jacket.

The man was farther back than he would have done it, Jack thought. His field of fire was limited by the bodies around him, but the woman directly in front of him was short enough that he could easily draw and fire right over her, and his field of view was fairly unrestricted.

Okay, Boris Andreyevich, if you want to play, this game's going to surprise you some. If the Army or the Navy ever look on heaven's scenes/They will find the streets are guarded by United States Marines, motherfucker.

Tom Sharp took the chance to slide through the crowd in front of Strokov, brushing past as he went. On the other side, he turned in Ryan's direction and reached up with his fist into the sky. Strokov was armed.

The noise of the crowd rose in frequency, and the languages all melded into one murmuring hiss of noise that suddenly went dead still. A bronze door had opened out of Ryan's view.

Sharp was four feet away, just one person, an adolescent boy, between him and Strokov . . . easy for him to dart right and get his hands on the man.

Then a cavalcade of screams erupted. Ryan inched back and pulled out his pistol, thumbing the hammer back, putting his pistol fully in battery. His eyes were locked on Strokov.

"King, the Pope is coming out now! Vehicle is in view."

But Ryan couldn't answer. Neither could he see the Popemobile.

"Sparrow, I see him. Ryan/Sharp, he will enter your field of view in a few seconds."

Unable to say a word, unable to see His Holiness approach, Jack's eyes were locked on his target's shoulders. You can't move your arm without having them move, too, and when he did that . . .

Shooting a man in the back is murder, Jack. . . .

In his peripheral vision, Ryan saw the front-left corner of the white jeep/golf cart slowly moving left to right. The man in front of him was looking in that general direction . . . but not quite . . . why?

But then his right shoulder moved ever so slightly. . . . At the bottom of Ryan's field of view, his right elbow came into view, meaning that his forearm was now parallel to the ground.

And then his right foot moved back, ever so slightly. The man was getting ready to—

Ryan pressed the muzzle of his pistol against the base of his spine. He could

feel the vertebrae of his backbone on the muzzle of his Browning. Jack saw his head rock back, just a few millimeters. Ryan leaned forward and rasped a whisper into his ear.

"If that gun in your hand goes off, you'll be pissing into a diaper the rest of your life. Now, real slow, with your fingertips, hand it back to me, or I will shoot you where you stand."

Mission accomplished, Ryan's brain announced. *This fucker isn't going to kill anybody. Go ahead, resist if you want. Nobody's that fast*. His finger was so tight on the trigger that if Strokov turned suddenly, the pistol would go off on its own accord, and sever his spine for all time to come.

The man hesitated, and surely his mind was running at the speed of light through various options. There were drills for what to do when someone had a gun in one's back, and he'd even practiced them in his intelligence academy, but here, now, twenty years later, with a real pistol against his spine, those lessons with play guns seemed a very distant thing, and could he bat the gun away so fast to keep it from destroying a kidney? Probably not. And so, his right hand came back just as he'd just been told. . . .

Ryan jumped at the sound of one-two-three pistol shots, not fifteen feet away. It was the sort of moment in which the world stops its turning, hearts and lungs stop functioning, and every mind has an instant of total clarity. Jack's eyes were drawn to the sound. There was the Holy Father, and on his snow-white cassock was a spot of red, the size of a half-dollar, in the chest, and on his handsome face was the shock of something too fast for him yet to feel the pain, but his body was already collapsing, slumping and turning to the left, folding into itself as he started to go down.

It required all of Ryan's discipline not to squeeze the trigger. His left hand snatched the pistol out of his subject's hand.

"Stand still, you motherfucker. Don't take a step, don't turn, don't do anything. Tom!" he called loudly.

"Sparrow, they have him, they have the gunman. The gunman is down on the pavement, must be ten people on him. The Pope took two, possibly three, hits."

The reaction of the crowd was almost binary in character. Those closest to the shooter jumped on him like cats on a single unlucky mouse, and whoever the shooter was, he was invisible under a mound of tourists, perhaps ten feet from where Ryan, Sharp, and Strokov stood. The people immediately around Ryan were drawing away—rather slowly, actually. . . .

"Jack, let's get our friend away from here, shall we?" And the three men moved into the escape arch, as Ryan had come to think of it.

"Sharp to all. We have Strokov with us. Leave the area separately and rendezvous at the embassy."

A minute later, they were in Sharp's official Bentley. Ryan got in back with the Bulgarian.

Strokov was clearly feeling better about things now. "What is this? I am member of Bulgarian embassy and—"

"We'll remember you said that, old man. For now, you are a guest of Her Britannic Majesty's government. Now, be a good chap and sit still, or my friend will kill you."

"Interesting tool of diplomacy, this." Ryan lifted the gun he'd taken from Strokov—East Bloc issue, with a large and awkward can-type silencer screwed on the business end. Sure as hell he'd been planning to shoot somebody.

But whom? Suddenly, Ryan wasn't sure.

"Tom?"

"Yes, Jack?"

"Something was more wrong than we thought."

"I think you're right," Sharp agreed. "But we have someone to clear that up for us."

The drive back to the embassy illustrated what had been to Ryan a hidden talent. The Bentley had an immensely powerful engine, and Sharp knew how to use it, exploding away from the Vatican like a drag-racing top fuel eliminator. The car screeched to a halt in the small parking lot next to the embassy, and the three of them went in through a side door, and from there to the basement. With Ryan covering, Sharp handcuffed the Bulgarian and sat him in a wooden chair.

"Colonel Strokov, you must answer for Georgiy Markov," Sharp told him. "We've been after you for some years now."

Strokov's eyes went as wide as doorknobs. As fast as the Bentley had gone, Tom Sharp's mind had been driving faster still.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we have these photos of you leaving Heathrow Airport after killing our good friend on Westminster Bridge. The Yard was onto you, old boy, but you left minutes before they got permission to arrest you. That's your bad luck. So, now, it was our job to arrest you. You will find us rather less civilized than the Yard, Colonel. You murdered a man on British soil. Her Majesty the Queen does not approve of that sort of thing, Colonel."

"But—"

"Why are we bothering to talk with this bastard, Tom?" Ryan asked, catching on. "We have our orders, don't we?"

"Patience, Jack, patience. He's not going anywhere at the moment, is he?"

"I want to have a phone to call my embassy," Strokov said—rather weakly, Ryan thought.

"Next he'll want a lawyer," Sharp observed humorously. "Well, in London you could have a solicitor to assist you, but we are not *in* London, are we, old boy?"

"And we are not Scotland Yard," Jack added, taking his lead from Sharp. "I should have just done him at the church, Tom."

Sharp shook his head. "Too noisy. Better we just let him . . . disappear, Jack. I'm sure Georgiy would understand."

It was clear from Strokov's face that he was not accustomed to having men discuss his own fate in the way that he had so often determined for himself the fates of others. It was easier to be brave, he was finding, when he was the fellow holding the gun.

"Well, I wasn't going to kill him, Tom, just sever his spine below the waist. You know, put him in a wheelchair the rest of his life, make him as incontinent as a baby. How loyal you suppose his government will be to him?"

Sharp nearly gagged on the thought. "Loyal, the *Dirzhavna Sugurnost*?

Please, Jack. Be serious. They'd just put him in a hospital, probably a mental hospital, and they'll wipe his ass once or twice a day if he's lucky."

That one went through the hoop, Ryan saw. None of the East Bloc services were big on loyalty-down, even to those who'd shown a lot of loyalty-up. And Strokov knew it. No, once you screwed the pooch, you were in very deep shit, and your friends evaporated like the morning mist—and somehow Strokov didn't strike Ryan as one who had all that many friends anyway. Even in his own service he'd be like an attack dog—valuable, perhaps, but not loved or trusted around the kids.

"In any case, while Boris and I discuss the future, you have a flight to catch," Sharp told him. It was just as well. Ryan was running out of impromptu lines. "Give my regards to Sir Basil, will you?"

"You bet, Tommy." Ryan left the room and took a deep breath. Mick King and the rest were waiting out there for him. Someone at Sharp's official residence had packed his bags, and there was an embassy minibus waiting to take them all to the airport. There, a British Airways Boeing 737 was waiting, and they caught it just in time, all with first-class tickets. Ryan was next to King for the flight.

"What the hell," Jack asked, "are we going to do with him?"

"Strokov? Good question," Mick replied. "Are you sure you want to know the answer?"

CHAPTER 32

MASQUED BALL

ON THE TWO-HOUR FLIGHT back to Heathrow, Ryan availed himself of three miniatures of single-malt scotch, mainly because it was the only hard stuff they had. Somehow, his fear of flying receded into the background—it helped that the flight was so smooth that the aircraft might as well have been sitting still on the ground, but Ryan also had a head full of other thoughts.

"What went wrong, Mick?" Ryan asked over the Alps.

"What went wrong was that our friend Strokov wasn't planning to do the assassination himself. He got someone else to do the actual shooting."

"Then why was he carrying a pistol with a silencer on the front end?"

"You want a guess? I'd wager he was hoping to kill the assassin himself and then blend into the crowd and make his escape. You can't read everyone's mind, Jack," King added.

"So, we failed," Ryan concluded.

"Perhaps. It depends on where the bullets went. John said there was one hit in the body, one perhaps in the hand or arm, and one other that might have gone wild, or at worst was a peripheral strike. So, whether the man survives or not is up to whatever surgeon is working on him now." King shrugged. "Out of our hands, my friend."

"Fuck," Ryan breathed quietly.

"Did you do your best, Sir John?"

That snapped his head around. "Yes—I mean, of course. We all did."

"And that is all a man can do, isn't it? Jack, I've been in the field for, what? Twelve years. Sometimes things go according to plan. Sometimes they do not. Given the information we had and the manpower we were able to deploy, I don't see how we could have done any better. You're an analyst, aren't you?"

"Correct."

"Well, for a desk boffin, you acquitted yourself well, and now you know a good deal more about field operations. There are no guarantees in this line of work." King took another swallow of his drink. "I can't say that I like it, either. I lost an agent in Moscow two years ago. He was a young captain in the Soviet army. Seemed a decent sort. Wife and a young son. They shot him, of course. Lord only knows what happened to his family. Maybe she's in a labor camp, or maybe in some godforsaken town in Siberia, for all I know. You never find that out, you know. Nameless, faceless victims, but victims still."

"THE PRESIDENT IS PISSED," Moore told his senior executives, his right ear still burning from a conversation ten minutes before.

"That bad?" Greer asked.

"That bad," the DCI confirmed. "He wants to know who did it and why, and he'd prefer to know before lunch."

"That's not possible," Ritter said.

"There's the phone, Bob. You call him and tell him that," the Judge suggested. None of them had ever seen the President angry. It was, for the most part, something people tried to avoid.

"So, Jack was right?" Greer offered.

"He might have made a good guess. But he didn't stop it from happening, either," Ritter observed.

"Well, it gives you something to say, Arthur," Greer said, with a little hope in his voice.

"Maybe so. I wonder how good Italian doctors are."

"What do we know?" Greer asked. "Anything?"

"One serious bullet wound in the chest. The President ought to be able to identify with that," Moore thought out loud. "Two other hits, but not serious ones."

"So, call Charlie Weathers up at Harvard and ask him what the likely prognosis is." This was from Ritter.

"The President's already talked to the meatball surgeons at Walter Reed. They're hopeful but noncommittal."

"I'm sure they all say, 'If I was on it, it'd be okay.' " Greer had experience with military doctors. Fighter pilots were shrinking violets next to battlefield surgeons.

"I'm going to call Basil and have the Rabbit flown here as soon as the Air Force can get a plane ready. If Ryan's available—they ought to be flying him back from Rome right now, if I know Basil—I want him on the aircraft, too."

"Why?" Ritter asked.

"So he can brief us—maybe the President, too—on his threat analysis prior to the event."

"Christ, Arthur." Greer nearly exploded. "They told us about the threat four, five days ago."

"But we wanted to interview the guy ourselves," Moore acknowledged. "I know, James, I know."

RYAN FOLLOWED MICK KING off the airliner. At the bottom of the steps was somebody who had to be from Century House. Ryan saw that the man was staring right at him.

"Dr. Ryan, could you come with me, please? We'll have a man get your bags," the fellow promised.

"Where now?"

"We have a helicopter to take you to RAF Mildenhall, and—"

"My ass. I don't do helicopters since one nearly killed me. How far is it?"

"An hour and a half's drive."

"Good. Get a car," Jack ordered. Then he turned. "Thanks for the try, guys." Sparrow, King, and the rest shook his hand. They had indeed all tried, even though no one would ever know about their effort. Then Jack wondered what Tom Sharp would be doing with Strokov, and decided that Mick King was right. He really didn't want to know.

RAF MILDENHALL is just north of Cambridge, the home of one of the world's great universities, and Ryan's driver was in another Jaguar, and didn't much care about whatever speed limits there were on British roads. When they pulled past the RAF Ground Defense Regiment's security troops, the car didn't go to the aircraft waiting there on the ramp, but rather to a low building that looked like—and was—a VIP terminal. There, a man handed Ryan a telex that took about twenty seconds to read and resulted in a muttered "Great." Then Jack found a phone and called home.

"Jack?" his wife said when she recognized his voice. "Where the hell are you?" She must have been exercised. Cathy Ryan didn't ordinarily talk like that.

"I'm at RAF Mildenhall. I have to fly back to Washington."

"Why?"

"Let me ask you this, honey: How good are Italian doctors?"

"You mean—the Pope?"

"Yep." She couldn't see his tired but curt nod.

"Every country has good surgeons—Jack, what's going on? Were you there?"

"Cath, I was about forty feet away, but I can't tell you any more than that, and you can't repeat it to anybody, okay?"

"Okay," she replied, with wonder and frustration in her voice. "When will you be home?"

"Probably in a couple of days. I have to talk to some people at headquarters, and they'll probably send me right back. Sorry, babe. Business. So, how good are the docs in Italy?"

"I'd feel better if Jack Cammer was working on him, but they have to have some good ones. Every big city does. The University of Padua is about the

oldest medical school in the world. Their ophthalmologists are about as good as we are at Hopkins. For general surgery, they must have some good people, but the guy I know best for this is Jack." John Michael Cammer was Chairman of Hopkins' Department of Surgery, holder of the prestigious Halstead Chair, and one hell of a good man with a knife. Cathy knew him well. Jack had met him once or twice at fund-raisers and been impressed by his demeanor, but wasn't a physician and couldn't evaluate the man's professional abilities. "It's fairly straightforward to treat a gunshot wound, mostly. Unless the liver or spleen is hit. The real problem is bleeding. Jack, it's like when Sally got hurt in the car with me. If you get him there fast, and if the surgeon knows his stuff, you have a good chance of surviving—unless the spleen's ruptured or the liver is badly lacerated. I saw the TV coverage. His heart wasn't hit—wrong angle. I'd say better than even money he'll recover. He's not a young man, and that won't help, but a really good surgical team can do miracles if they get to him fast enough." She didn't talk about the nasty variables of trauma surgery. Bullets could ricochet off ribs and go in the most unpredictable directions. They could fragment and do damage in widely separated places. Fundamentally, you couldn't diagnose, much less treat, a bullet wound from five seconds of TV tape. So the odds on the Pope's survival were better than even money, but a lot of 5-1 horses had beaten the chalk horse and won the Kentucky Derby.

"Thanks, babe. I'll probably be able to tell you more when I get home. Hug the kids for me, okay?"

"You sound tired," she said.

"I *am* tired, babe. It's been a busy couple of days." And it wasn't going to get any quieter. "Bye for now."

"I love you, Jack," she reminded him.

"I love you, too, babe. Thanks for saying that."

Ryan waited more than an hour for the Zaitzev family. So the offer of a helicopter would have just enabled him to wait here longer—fairly typical of the U.S. military. Ryan sat on a comfortable couch and drifted off to sleep for perhaps half an hour.

The Rabbits arrived by car. A USAF sergeant shook Jack awake and pointed him to the waiting KC-135. It was essentially a windowless Boeing 707, also equipped to refuel other aircraft. The lack of windows didn't help his attitude very much, but orders were orders, and he climbed up the steps and found a plush leather seat just forward of the wing box. The aircraft had hardly lifted off the ground when Oleg fell into the seat beside his own.

"What happened?" Zaitzev demanded.

"We caught Strokov. I got him myself, and he had a gun in his hand," Ryan reported. "But there was another shooter."

"Strokov? You arrested him?"

"Not exactly an arrest, but he decided to come with me to the British Embassy. SIS has him now."

"I hope they kill the *zvoloch,*" Zaitzev snarled.

Ryan didn't reply, wondering if that might actually happen. Did the Brits play that rough? He had committed rather a nasty murder on their soil—hell, within sight of Century House.

"The Pope, will he live?" the Rabbit asked. Ryan was surprised to see his degree of interest. Maybe the guy was a real conscience defector after all.

"I don't know, Oleg. I called my wife—she's a surgeon. She says that it's better than a fifty-fifty chance that he will survive."

"That is something," Zaitzev thought out loud.

"WELL?" Andropov asked.

Colonel Rozhdestvenskiy stood a little more erect. "Comrade Chairman, we know little at this point. Strokov's man took the shot, as you know, and he hit his target in a deadly area. Strokov was unable to eliminate him as planned, for reasons unknown. Our Rome *rezidentura* is working carefully to discover what happened. Colonel Goderenko is taking personal charge. We will know more when Colonel Strokov flies back to Sofia. He is scheduled to be on the regular flight at nineteen hours. So, to this point it appears we have had a partial success."

"There is no such thing as a partial success, Colonel!" Andropov pointed out heatedly.

"Comrade Chairman, I told you weeks ago that this was a possibility. You will recall that. And even if this priest survives, he will not be going back to Poland anytime soon, will he?"

"I suppose not," Yuriy Vladimirovich grumbled.

"And that was the real mission, wasn't it?"

"Da," the Chairman admitted.

"No signals as yet?"

"No, Comrade Chairman. We've had to break in a new watch officer in Communications, and—"

"What is that?"

"Major Zaitzev, Oleg Ivanovich, he and his family died in a hotel fire in Budapest. He had been our communicator for mission six-six-six."

"Why was I not informed of this?"

"Comrade Chairman," Rozhdestvenskiy soothed, "it was fully investigated. The bodies have been returned to Moscow and were duly buried. They all died of smoke inhalation. The autopsy procedures were viewed in person by a Soviet physician."

"You are sure of this, Colonel?"

"I can get the official report to you if you wish," Rozhdestvenskiy said with confidence. "I have read it myself."

Andropov shook it off. "Very well. Keep me informed on whatever comes in. And I want to be notified at once of the condition of this troublesome Pole."

"By your order, Comrade Chairman." Rozhdestvenskiy made his way out while the Chairman went back to other business. Brezhnev's health had taken a definite downturn. Very soon Andropov would have to step away from KGB in order to protect his ascension to the head seat at the table, and that was the main item on his plate at the moment. And, besides, Rozhdestvenskiy was right. This Polish priest would not be a problem for months, even if he survived, and that was sufficient to the moment.

“WELL, ARTHUR?” Ritter asked.

“He’s calmed down a little bit. I told him about Operation BEATRIX. I told him that we and the Brits had people right there. He wants to meet the Rabbit we just got out, personally. So, he’s still pretty pissed, but at least it’s not at us,” Moore reported on his arrival back from the White House.

“The Brits have this Strokov guy in custody,” Greer let the DCI know. Word had just come in from London. “Would you believe Ryan’s the guy who put the bag on him? The Brits have him now at their Rome embassy. Basil’s trying to decide what to do with him. Best bet, Strokov ran the operation and enlisted this Turkish thug to do the shooting. The Brits say they caught him with a silenced pistol in his hand. The thinking is that his job was to take the shooter out, like that Mafia hit in New York a while back, to put big-league deniability on the assassination attempt.”

“Your boy captured him?” the DCI asked in some surprise.

“He was there with a team of experienced British field spooks, and maybe his Marine training helped,” Ritter allowed. “So, James, your fair-haired boy gets another attaboy.”

Don’t bite your tongue off when you sign the Letter of Commendation, Robert, Greer managed not to say. “Where are they all now?”

“Halfway home, probably. The Air Force is flying them over,” Ritter told them. “ETA at Andrews is about eleven-forty, they told me.”

THERE WERE WINDOWS in the front office, Ryan found out, and the flight crew was friendly enough. He was even able to talk a little about baseball. The Orioles had just one more game to win to finish the Phillies off, he was pleased and surprised to learn. The flight crew didn’t even hint at asking why they were driving him back to America. They’d done it too many times and, besides, they never got good answers anyway. Aft, the Rabbit Family was sound asleep, a feat Ryan had not yet managed to accomplish.

“How long?” he asked the pilot.

“Well, that’s Labrador there.” He pointed. “Call it three hours more, and we’ll be feet-dry almost all the way. Why don’t you get some sleep, sir?”

“I don’t sleep in the air,” Jack admitted.

“Don’t feel too bad, sir. Neither do we,” the copilot told him. And that was good news, on reflection, Jack thought.

SIR BASIL CHARLESTON was having his own meeting with his Chief of Government at the moment. Neither in America nor in the U.K. did reporters write stories about when and why the chiefs of the various intelligence

services met with their political masters.

"So, tell me about this Strokov fellow," she ordered.

"Not a very pleasant chap," C replied. "We reckon he was there to kill the actual shooter. He had a suppressed weapon to eliminate the noise. So, it would appear that the idea was to kill His Holiness and leave a dead assassin behind. Dead men still tell no tales, you see, Prime Minister. But perhaps this one will, after all. The Italian police must be chatting with him right now, I would imagine. He is a Turkish national, and I'll wager he had a criminal record, and/or experience in smuggling things into Bulgaria."

"So, it was the Russians who were behind this?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. That seems virtually certain. Tom Sharp is talking to Strokov in Rome. We'll see how loyal he is to his masters."

"What will we do with him?" the PM asked. The answer was in the form of another question that she would have to answer. She did.

IT DID NOT occur to Strokov that when Sharp invoked the names of Aleksey Nikolay'ch Rozhdestvenskiy and Ilya Fedorovich Bubovoy, his own fate was sealed. He was merely dumbfounded that the British Secret Intelligence Service had the KGB so thoroughly penetrated. Sharp saw no reason to disabuse him of that notion. Shocked beyond his capacity to react intelligently, Strokov forgot all of his training and started singing. His duet with Sharp lasted two and a half hours, all of it on tape.

RYAN WAS MORE on autopilot than the Boeing was before it touched down at Runway Zero-One Right at Andrews Air Force Base. He'd been on the go for what? Twenty-two hours? Something like that. Something more easily done as a Marine second lieutenant (age twenty-two) than as a married father of two (age *thirty*-two) who'd had a fairly stressful day. He was also feeling his liquor somewhat.

There were two cars waiting at the bottom of the steps—Andrews had yet to install a jetway. He and Zaitzev took the first. Mrs. Rabbit and the Bunny took the second. Two minutes after that, they were on Suitland Parkway, heading into D.C. Ryan drew the task of explaining what they were passing along the way. Unlike his arrival in England, Zaitzev was not under the impression that this might be a *maskirovka.* And the detour past the Capitol Building ended whatever lingering suspicions he might have had. George Lucas on his best day could not have faked this scenery. The cars crossed the Potomac and went north of the George Washington Parkway, finally taking the marked exit to Langley.

"So, this is the home of the Main Enemy," the Rabbit said.

"I just think of it as the place I used to work."

"Used to?"

"Didn't you know? I'm stationed back in England now," Jack told him.

The whole debriefing team was under the canopy by the main entrance. Ryan knew only one of them, Mark Radner, a Russian scholar from Dartmouth who got called down for some special work—one of the people who liked working for CIA, but not full-time. Ryan was now able to understand that. When the car stopped, he got out first and went to James Greer.

"You've had a busy couple of days, my boy."

"Tell me about it, Admiral."

"How was it in Rome?"

"First, tell me about the Pope," Jack shot back.

"He came through surgery okay. He's critical, but we asked Charlie Weathers up at Harvard about that, and he said not to worry. People that age who come through surgery are always classified as being in critical condition —probably just a way to drive the bill up. Unless something unusual crops up, he'll probably be fine. Charlie says they grow good cutters in Rome. His Holiness ought to be home in three to four weeks, Charlie says. They won't rush it with a guy his age."

"Thank God. Sir, when I had that Strokov bastard I thought we'd done it, y'know? Then when I heard the shots—Jesus, what a moment that was, Admiral."

Greer nodded. "I can imagine. But the good guys won this one. Oh, your Orioles took the series from Philly. Game just ended twenty minutes ago. That new shortstop you have, Ripken, looks to me like he's going places."

"Ryan." Judge Moore came over next. "Well done, son." Another handshake.

"Thank you, Director."

"Nice going, Ryan," Ritter said next. "Sure you wouldn't like to try our training course at the Farm?" The handshake was surprisingly cordial. Ritter must have had a drink or two in the office, Jack surmised.

"Sir, right now, I'd be just as happy to go back to teaching history."

"It's more fun to make it, boy. Remember that."

The party moved inside, past the memorial on the right-side wall to the dead officers, many of whose names were still secret, then left to the executive elevator. The Rabbit family went its own way. There were hotel-like accommodations for VIP visitors and back-from-overseas field officers on the sixth floor, and evidently the CIA was bedding them down there. Jack followed the senior executives to the Judge's office.

"How good is our new Rabbit?" Moore asked.

"Well, sure as hell he gave us good information on the Pope, Judge," Ryan answered in considerable surprise. "And the Brits sound pretty happy with what he's told them about that Agent MINISTER. I'm kinda curious who this CASSIUS guy is."

"And NEPTUNE," Greer added. The Navy needed secure communications to survive in the modern world, and James Greer still had blue suits in his closet.

"Any other thoughts?" This was Moore again.

"Has anyone thought about how desperate the Russians are? I mean, sure, the Pope was—I guess he still is—a political threat of some sort to them, but, damn it, this was not a rational operation, was it?" Jack asked. "Looks to me as though they're a lot more desperate than we usually think. We ought to be able to exploit that." The mixture of alcohol and fatigue made it easier than

usual for Ryan to speak his mind, and he'd been chewing on this idea for about twelve hours.

"How?" Ritter asked, reminding himself that Ryan was something of a whiz at economics.

"I'll tell you one thing for sure: The Catholic Church is not going to be very happy. Lots of Catholics in Eastern Europe, guys. That is a capability we need to think about using. If we approach the Church intelligently, they might just cooperate with us. The Church is big on forgiveness, sure, but you're supposed to go to confession first."

Moore raised an eyebrow.

"The other thing is, I've been studying their economy. It's very shaky, a lot more than our people think it is, Admiral," Jack said, turning to his immediate boss.

"What do you mean?"

"Sir, the stuff our guys are looking at, it's the official economics reports that come into Moscow, right?"

"We work pretty hard to get it, too," Moore confirmed.

"Director, why do we think it's true?" Ryan asked. "Just because the Politburo gets it? We know they lie to us, and they lie to their own people. What if they lie to themselves? If I were an examiner for the SEC, I think I could put a whole lot of guys in Allenwood Federal Prison. What they say they have doesn't jibe with what we can identify them as actually having. Their economy is teetering, and if that goes bad, even a little bit, the whole shebang comes down."

"How could we exploit that?" Ritter asked. His own blue-team analysis had said something very similar four days earlier, but even Judge Moore didn't know that.

"Where do they get their hard currency—I mean, what do they get it from?"

"Oil." Greer answered the question. The Russians exported as much oil as the Saudis.

"And who controls the world price of oil?"

"OPEC?"

"And who," Ryan went on, "controls OPEC?"

"The Saudis."

"Aren't they our friends?" Jack concluded. "Look at the USSR as a takeover target, like we did at Merrill Lynch. The assets are worth a lot more than the parent corporation, because it's so badly run. This isn't hard stuff to figure out." *Even by a guy exhausted by a long day, five thousand miles of air travel, and a little too much booze,* he didn't add. There were a lot of smart people at CIA, but they thought too much like government workers, and not enough like Americans. "Don't we have *anybody* who thinks outside the box?"

"Bob?" Moore asked.

Ritter was warming to the young analyst by the minute. "Ryan, you ever read Edgar Allan Poe?"

"In high school," Ryan replied in some small confusion.

"How about a story called 'The Masque of the Red Death'?"

"Something about a plague coming in to ruin the party, wasn't it?"

"Get some rest. Before you fly back to London tomorrow, you're going to get

briefed in on something."

"Sleep sounds like a plan, gentlemen. Where do I crash for the night?" he asked, letting them know, if they hadn't already guessed, that he was ready to collapse.

"We have a place for you at the Marriott up the road. You're all checked in. There's a car waiting at the entrance for you. Go on, now," Moore told him.

"Maybe he's not so dumb after all," Ritter speculated.

"Robert, it's nice to see that you're strong enough to change," Greer smilingly observed as he reached for Moore's own office bottle of expensive bourbon whiskey. It was time to celebrate.

THE FOLLOWING DAY in *Il Tempo*, a morning newspaper in Rome, was a story about a man found dead in a car of an apparent heart attack. It would be a little time before the body was identified and it was finally determined that he was a Bulgarian tourist who'd evidently come to the end of his life quite unexpectedly. How clear his conscience had been was not apparent from physical examination.

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THE TEETH OF THE TIGER

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THE TEETH OF THE TIGER

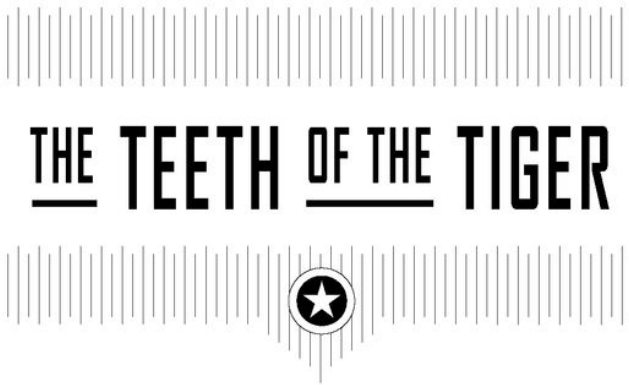

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To Chris and Charlie.
Welcome aboard

. . . and, of course, Lady Alex, whose light burns
as brightly as ever

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Mike for the inspiration
And a raft of others for small but important tidbits of knowledge

“People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.”

—GEORGE ORWELL

“This is a war of the unknown warriors; but let all strive without failing in faith or in duty . . .”

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

Whether the State can loose and bind
In Heaven as well as on Earth:
If it be wiser to kill mankind
Before or after the birth—
These are matters of high concern
Where State-kept schoolmen are;
But Holy State (we have lived to learn)
Endeth in Holy War.

Whether The People be led by The Lord,
Or lured by the loudest throat:
If it be quicker to die by the sword
Or cheaper to die by vote—
These are things we have dealt with once,
(And they will not rise from their grave)
For Holy People, however it runs,
Endeth in wholly Slave.

Whatsoever for any cause,
Seeketh to take or give
Power above or beyond the Laws,
Suffer it not to live!
Holy State or Holy King—
Or Holy People's Will—
Have no truck with the senseless thing.
Order the guns and kill!
Saying—after—me:—

Once there was The People—Terror gave it birth;
Once there was The People and it made a Hell of Earth
Earth arose and crushed it. Listen, O ye slain!
Once there was The People—it shall never be again!

—RUDYARD KIPLING, "Macdonough's Song"

PROLOGUE

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER

DAVID GREENGOLD had been born in that most American of communities, Brooklyn, but at his Bar Mitzvah, something important had changed in his life. After proclaiming "Today I am a man," he'd gone to the celebration party and met some family members who'd flown in from Israel. His uncle Moses was a very prosperous dealer in diamonds there. David's own father had seven retail jewelry stores, the flagship of which was on Fortieth Street in Manhattan.

While his father and his uncle talked business over California wine, David had ended up with his first cousin, Daniel. His elder by ten years, Daniel had just begun work for the Mossad, Israel's main foreign-intelligence agency, and, a quintessential newbie, he had regaled his cousin with stories. Daniel's obligatory military service had been with the Israeli paratroopers, and he'd made eleven jumps, and had seen some action in the 1967 Six Day War. For him, it had been a happy war, with no serious casualties in his company, and just enough kills to make it seem to have been a sporting adventure—a hunting trip against game that was dangerous, but not overly so, with a conclusion that had fitted very well indeed with his prewar outlook and expectations.

The stories had provided a vivid contrast to the gloomy TV coverage of Vietnam that led off every evening news broadcast then, and with the enthusiasm of his newly reaffirmed religious identity, David had decided on the spot to emigrate to his Jewish homeland as soon as he graduated from high school. His father, who'd served in the U.S. Second Armored Division in the Second World War, and on the whole found the adventure less than pleasing, had been even less happy by the possibility of his son's going to an Asian jungle to fight a war for which neither he nor any of his acquaintances had much enthusiasm—and so, when graduation came, young David flew El Al to Israel and really never looked back. He brushed up on his Hebrew, served his uniformed time, and then, like his cousin, he was recruited by the Mossad.

In this line of work, he'd done well—so well that today he was the Station Chief in Rome, an assignment of no small importance. His cousin Daniel, meanwhile, had left and gone back to the family business, which paid far better than a civil servant's wage. Running the Mossad Station in Rome kept him busy. He had three full-time intelligence officers under his command, and they took in a goodly quantity of information. Some of this information came from an agent they called Hassan. He was Palestinian by ancestry, and had good connections in the PFLP, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the things he learned there he shared with his enemies, for

money—enough money, in fact, enough to finance a comfortable flat a kilometer from the Italian parliament building. David was making a pickup today.

The location was one he'd used before, the men's room of the Ristorante Giovanni near the foot of the Spanish Steps. First taking the time to enjoy a lunch of Veal Francese—it was superb here—he finished his white wine and then rose to collect his package. The dead drop was on the underside of the leftmost urinal, a theatrical choice but it had the advantage of never being inspected or cleaned. A steel plate had been glued there, and even had it been noticed, it would have looked innocent enough, since the plate bore the embossed name of the manufacturer, and a number that meant nothing at all. Approaching it, he decided to take advantage of the opportunity by doing what men usually do with a urinal, and, while engaged, he heard the door creak open. Whoever it was took no interest in him, however, but, just to make sure, he dropped his cigarette pack, and as he bent down to retrieve it with his right hand, his left snatched the magnetic package off its hiding place. It was good fieldcraft, just like a professional magician's, attracting attention with the one hand and getting the work done with the other.

Except in this case it didn't work. Scarcely had he made the pickup when someone bumped into him from behind.

"Excuse me, old man—*signore,* that is," the voice corrected itself in what sounded like Oxford English. Just the sort of thing to make a civilized man feel at ease with a situation.

Greengold didn't even respond, just turned to his right to wash his hands and take his leave. He made it to the sink, and turned on the water, when he looked in the mirror.

Most of the time, the brain works faster than the hands. This time he saw the blue eyes of the man who had bumped into him. They were ordinary enough, but their expression was not. By the time his mind had commanded his body to react, the man's left hand had reached forward to grab his forehead, and something cold and sharp bit into the back of his neck, just below the skull. His head was pulled sharply backward, easing the passage of the knife into his spinal cord, severing it completely.

Death did not come instantly. His body collapsed when all of the electrochemical commands to his muscles ceased. Along with that went all feeling. Some distant fiery sensations at his neck were all that remained, and the shock of the moment didn't allow them to grow into serious pain. He tried to breathe, but couldn't comprehend that he would never do that again. The man turned him around like a department store mannequin and carried him to the toilet stall. All he could do now was look and think. He saw the face, but it meant nothing to him. The face looked back, regarding him as a thing, an object, without even the dignity of hatred. Helplessly, David scanned with his eyes as he was set down on the toilet. The man appeared to reach into his coat to steal his wallet. Was that what this was, just a robbery? A robbery of a senior Mossad officer? Not possible. Then the man grabbed David by the hair to lift up his drooping head.

"Salaam aleikum," his killer said: Peace be unto you. So, this was an Arab? He didn't look the least bit Arabic. The puzzlement must have been evident on

his face.

"Did you really trust Hassan, Jew?" the man asked. But he displayed no satisfaction in his voice. The emotionless delivery proclaimed contempt. In his last moments of life, before his brain died from lack of oxygen, David Greengold realized that he'd fallen for the oldest of espionage traps, the False Flag. Hassan had given him information so as to be able to identify him, to draw him out. Such a stupid way to die. There was time left for only one more thought:

Adonai echad.

The killer made sure his hands were clean, and checked his clothing. But knife thrusts like this one didn't cause much in the way of bleeding. He pocketed the wallet, and the dead-drop package, and after adjusting his clothing made his way out. He stopped at his table to leave twenty-three Euros for his own meal, including only a few cents for the tip. But he would not be coming back soon. Finished with Giovanni's, he walked across the square. He'd noticed a Brioni's on his way in, and he felt the need for a new suit.

* * *

HEADQUARTERS, United States Marine Corps, is not located in the Pentagon. The largest office building in the world has room for the Army, Navy, and Air Force, but somehow or other the Marines got left out, and have to satisfy themselves with their own building complex called the Navy Annex, a quarter of a mile away on Lee Highway in Arlington, Virginia. It isn't that much of a sacrifice. The Marines have always been something of a stepchild of the American military, technically a subordinate part of the Navy, where their original utility was to be the Navy's private army, thus precluding the need to embark soldiers on warships, since the Army and the Navy were never supposed to be friendly.

Over time, the Marine Corps became a rationale unto itself, for more than a century the only American land fighting force that foreigners ever saw. Absolved of the need to worry about heavy logistics, or even medical personnel—they had the squids to handle that for them—every Marine was a rifleman, and a forbidding, sobering sight to anyone who did not have a warm spot in his heart for the United States of America. For this reason, the Marines are respected, but not always beloved, among their colleagues in America's service. Too much show, too much swagger, and too highly developed a sense of public relations for the more staid services.

The Marine Corps acts like its own little army, of course—it even has its own air force, small, but possessed of sharp fangs—and that now included a chief of intelligence, though some uniformed personnel regarded that as a contradiction in terms. The Marine intelligence headquarters was a new establishment, part of the Green Machine's effort to catch up with the rest of the services. Called the M-2—"2" being the numerical identifier of someone in the information business—the chief's name was Major General Terry Broughton, a short, compact professional infantryman who'd been stuck with this job in order to bring a little reality to the spook trade: The Corps had

decided to remember that at the end of the paper trail was a man with a rifle who needed good information in order to stay alive. It was just one more secret of the Corps that the native intelligence of its personnel was second to none—even to the computer wizards of the Air Force whose attitude was that anyone able to fly an airplane just *had to be* smarter than anybody else. Eleven months from now, Broughton was in line to take command of the Second Marine Division, based at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. This welcome news had just arrived a week before, and he was still in the best of good moods from it.

That was good news for Captain Brian Caruso as well, for whom an audience with a general officer was, if not exactly frightening, certainly reason for a little circumspection. He was wearing his Class-A olive-colored uniform, complete to the Sam Browne belt, and all the ribbons to which he was entitled, which wasn't all that many, though some of them were kind of pretty, as well as his gold parachute-jumper's wings, and a collection of marksmanship awards large enough to impress even a lifelong rifleman like General Broughton.

The M-2 rated a lieutenant-colonel office boy, plus a black female gunnery sergeant as a personal secretary. It all struck the young captain as odd, but nobody had ever accused the Corps of logic, Caruso reminded himself. As they liked to say: two hundred thirty years of tradition untrammeled by progress.

"The General will see you now, Captain," she said, looking up from the phone on her desk.

"Thank you, Gunny," Caruso said, coming to his feet and heading for the door, which the sergeant held open for him.

Broughton was exactly what Caruso had expected. A whisker under six feet, he had the sort of chest that might turn away a high-speed bullet. His hair was a tiny bit more than stubble. As with most Marines, a bad hair day was what happened when it got to half an inch, and required a trip to the barber. The general looked up from his paperwork and looked his visitor up and down with cold hazel eyes.

Caruso did not salute. Like naval officers, Marines do not salute unless under arms or "covered" with a uniform cap. The visual inspection lasted about three seconds, which only felt like a week or so.

"Good morning, sir."

"Have a seat, Captain." The general pointed to a leathercovered chair.

Caruso did sit down, but remained at the position of attention, bent legs and all.

"Know why you're here?" Broughton asked.

"No, sir, they didn't tell me that."

"How do you like Force Recon?"

"I like it just fine, sir," Caruso replied. "I think I have the best NCOs in the whole Corps, and the work keeps me interested."

"You did a nice job in Afghanistan, says here." Broughton held up a folder with red-and-white-striped tape on the edges. That denoted top-secret material. But special-operations work often fell into that category, and, sure as hell, Caruso's Afghanistan job had not been something for the *NBC Nightly News.*

"It was fairly exciting, sir."

"Good work, says here, getting all your men out alive."

"General, that's mostly because of that SEAL corpsman with us. Corporal Ward got shot up pretty bad, but Petty Officer Randall saved his life, and that's for sure. I put him in for a decoration. Hope he gets it."

"He will," Broughton assured him. "And so will you."

"Sir, I just did my job," Caruso protested. "My men did all—"

"And that's the sign of a good young officer," the M-2 cut him off. "I read your account of the action, and I read Gunny Sullivan's, too. He says you did just fine for a young officer in his first combat action." Gunnery Sergeant Joe Sullivan had smelled the smoke before, in Lebanon and Kuwait, and a few other places that had never made the TV news. "Sullivan worked for me once," Broughton informed his guest. "He's due for promotion."

Caruso bobbed his head. "Yes, sir. He's sure enough ready for a step up in the world."

"I've seen your fit-rep on him." The M-2 tapped another folder, this one not with TS formatting. "Your treatment of your men is generous in its praise, Captain. Why?"

That made Caruso blink. "Sir, they did very well. I could not have expected more under any circumstances. I'll take that bunch of Marines up against anybody in the world. Even the new kids can all make sergeant someday, and two of them have 'gunny' written all over them. They work hard, and they're smart enough that they start doing the right thing before I have to tell them. At least one of them is officer material. Sir, those are my people, and I am damned lucky to have them."

"And you trained them up pretty well," Broughton added.

"That's my job, sir."

"Not anymore, Captain."

"Excuse me, sir? I have another fourteen months with the battalion, and my next job hasn't been determined yet." Though he'd happily stay in Second Force Recon forever. Caruso figured he'd screen for major soon, and maybe jump to battalion S-3, operations officer for the division's reconnaissance battalion.

"That Agency guy who went into the mountains with you, how was he to work with?"

"James Hardesty, says he used to be in the Army Special Forces. Age forty or so, but he's pretty fit for an older guy, speaks two of the local languages. Doesn't wet his pants when bad things happen. He—well, he backed me up pretty well."

The TS folder went up again in the M-2's hands. "He says here you saved his bacon in that ambush."

"Sir, nobody looks smart getting into an ambush in the first place. Mr. Hardesty was reconnoitering forward with Corporal Ward while I was getting the satellite radio set up. The bad guys were in a pretty clever little spot, but they tipped their hand. They opened up too soon on Mr. Hardesty, missed him with their first burst, and we maneuvered uphill around them. They didn't have good enough security out. Gunny Sullivan took his squad right, and when he got in position, I took my bunch up the middle. It took a total of ten

to fifteen minutes, and then Gunny Sullivan got our target, took him right in the head from ten meters. We wanted to take him alive, but that wasn't possible the way things played out." Caruso shrugged. Superiors could generate officers, but not the exigencies of the moment, and the man had had no intention of spending time in American captivity, and it was hard to put the bag on someone like that. The final score had been one badly shot-up Marine, and sixteen dead Arabs, plus two live captives for the Intel pukes to chat with. It had ended up being more productive than anyone had expected. The Afghans were brave enough, but they weren't madmen—or, more precisely, they chose martyrdom only on their own terms.

"Lessons learned?" Broughton asked.

"There is no such thing as too much training, sir, or being in too good a shape. The real thing is a lot messier than exercises. Like I said, the Afghans are brave enough, but they are not trained. And you can never know which ones are going to slug it out, and which ones are going to cave. They taught us at Quantico that you have to trust your instincts, but they don't issue instincts to you, and you can't always be sure if you're listening to the right voice or not." Caruso shrugged, but he just went ahead and spoke his mind. "I guess it worked out okay for me and my Marines, but I can't really say I know why."

"Don't think too much, Captain. When the shit hits the fan, you don't have time to think it all the way through. You think beforehand. It's in how you train your people, and assign responsibilities to them. You prepare your mind for action, but you never think you know what form the action is going to take. In any case, you did everything pretty well. You impressed this Hardesty guy—and he *is* a fairly serious customer. That's how this happened," Broughton concluded.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"The Agency wants to talk to you," the M-2 announced. "They're doing a talent hunt, and your name came up."

"To do what, sir?"

"Didn't tell me that. They're looking for people who can work in the field. I don't think it's espionage. Probably the paramilitary side of the house. I'd guess that's the new counterterror shop. I can't say I'm pleased to lose a promising young Marine. However, I have no say in the matter. You are free to decline the offer, but you do have to go up and talk to them beforehand."

"I see." He didn't, really.

"Maybe somebody reminded them of another ex-Marine who worked out fairly well up there . . ." Broughton half observed.

"Uncle Jack, you mean? Jesus—excuse me, sir, but I've been dodging that ever since I showed up at the Basic School. I'm just one more Marine O-3, sir. I'm not asking for anything else."

"Good," was all Broughton felt like saying. He saw before him a very promising young officer who'd read the *Marine Corps Officer's Guide* front to back, and hadn't forgotten any of the important parts. If anything he was a touch too earnest, but he'd been the same way once himself. "Well, you're due up there in two hours. Some guy named Pete Alexander, another ex–Special Forces guy. Helped run the Afghanistan operation for the Agency back in the 1980s. Not a bad guy, so I've heard, but he doesn't want to grow his own

talent. Watch your wallet, Captain," he said in dismissal.

"Yes, sir," Caruso promised. He came to his feet, into the position of attention.

The M-2 graced his guest with a smile. "Semper Fi, son."

"Aye, aye, sir." Caruso made his way out of the office, nodded to the gunny, never said a word to the half-colonel, who hadn't bothered looking up, and headed downstairs, wondering what the hell he was getting into.

HUNDREDS OF miles away, another man named Caruso was thinking the same thing. The FBI had made its reputation as one of America's premier law-enforcement agencies by investigating interstate kidnappings, beginning soon after passage of the Lindbergh Law in the 1930s. Its success in closing such cases had largely put an end to kidnapping-for-money—at least for smart criminals. The Bureau closed *every single one* of those cases, and professional criminals had finally caught on that this form of crime was a sucker's game. And so it had remained for years, until kidnappers with objectives other than money had decided to delve into it.

And those people were much harder to catch.

Penelope Davidson had vanished on her way to kindergarten that very morning. Her parents had called the local police within an hour after her disappearance, and soon thereafter the local sheriff's office had called the FBI. Procedure allowed the FBI to get involved as soon as it was possible for the victim to have been taken across a state line. Georgetown, Alabama, was just half an hour from the Mississippi state line, and so the Birmingham office of the FBI had immediately jumped on the case like a cat on a mouse. In FBI nomenclature, a kidnapping case is called a "7," and nearly every agent in the office got into his car and headed southwest for the small farming-market town. In the mind of each agent, however, was the dread of a fool's errand. There was a clock on kidnapping cases. Most victims were thought to be sexually exploited and killed within four or six hours. Only a miracle could get the child back alive that quickly, and miracles didn't happen often.

But most of them were men with wives and children themselves, and so they worked as though there were a chance. The office ASAC—Assistant Special Agent in Charge—was the first to talk to the local sheriff, whose name was Paul Turner. The Bureau regarded him as an amateur in the business of investigations, out of his depth, and Turner thought so as well. The thought of a raped and murdered little girl in his jurisdiction turned his stomach, and he welcomed federal assistance. Photos were passed out to every man with a badge and a gun. Maps were consulted. The local cops and FBI Special Agents headed to the area between the Davidson house and the public school to which she'd walked five blocks every morning for two months. Everyone who lived on that pathway was interviewed. Back in Birmingham, computer checks were made of possible sex offenders living within a hundred-mile radius, and agents and Alabama state troopers were sent to interview them, too. Every house was searched, usually with permission of the owner, but often enough without, because the local judges took a stern view of kidnapping.

For Special Agent Dominic Caruso, it wasn't his first major case, but it was his first "7," and while he was unmarried and childless, the thought of a

missing child caused his blood first to chill, and then to boil. Her "official" kindergarten photo showed blue eyes and blond hair turning brown, and a cute little smile. This "7" wasn't about money. The family was working class and ordinary. The father was a lineman for the local electric co-op, the mother worked part-time as a nurse's aide in the county hospital. Both were churchgoing Methodists, and neither, on first inspection, seemed a likely suspect for child abuse, though that would be looked into, too. A senior agent from the Birmingham Field Office was skilled in profiling, and his initial read was frightening: This unknown subject could be a serial kidnapper and killer, someone who found children sexually attractive, and who knew that the safest way to commit this crime was to kill the victim afterward.

He was out there somewhere, Caruso knew. Dominic Caruso was a young agent, hardly a year out of Quantico, but already in his second field assignment—unmarried FBI agents had no more choice in picking their assignments than a sparrow in a hurricane. His initial assignment had been in Newark, New Jersey, all of seven months, but Alabama was more to his taste. The weather was often miserable, but it wasn't a beehive like that dirty city. His assignment now was to patrol the area west of Georgetown, to scan and wait for some hard bit of information. He wasn't experienced enough to be an effective interviewer. The skill took years to develop, though Caruso thought he was pretty smart, and his college degree was in psychology.

Look for a car with a little girl in it, he told himself, *one* not *in a car seat?* he wondered. It might give her a better way to look out of the car, and maybe wave for help . . . So, no, the subject would probably have her tied up, cuffed, or wrapped with duct tape, and probably gagged. *Some little girl, helpless and terrified.* The thought made his hands tighten on the wheel. The radio crackled.

"Birmingham Base to all '7' units. We have a report that the '7' suspect might be driving a white utility van, probably a Ford, white in color, a little dirty. Alabama tags. If you see a vehicle matching that description, call it in, and we'll get the local PD to check it out."

Which meant, don't flash your gum-ball light and pull him over yourself unless you have to, Caruso thought. It was time to do some thinking.

If I were one of those creatures, where would I be... ? Caruso slowed down. He thought . . . a place with decent road access. Not a main road per se . . . a decent secondary road, with a turnoff to something more private. Easy in, easy out. A place where the neighbors couldn't see or hear what he's up to . . .

He picked up his microphone.

"Caruso to Birmingham Base."

"Yeah, Dominic," responded the agent on the radio desk. The FBI radios were encrypted, and couldn't be listened into by anyone without a good descrambler.

"The white van. How solid is that?"

"An elderly woman says that when she was out getting her paper, she saw a little girl, right description, talking to some guy next to a white van. The possible subject is male Caucasian, undetermined age, no other description. Ain't much, Dom, but it's all we got," Special Agent Sandy Ellis reported.

"How many child abusers in the area?" Caruso asked next.

“A total of nineteen on the computer. We got people talking to all of them. Nothing developed yet. All we got, man.”

“Roger, Sandy. Out.”

More driving, more scanning. He wondered if this was anything like his brother Brian had experienced in Afghanistan: alone, hunting the enemy . . . He started looking for dirt paths off the road, maybe for one with recent tire tracks.

He looked down at the wallet-sized photo again. A sweet-faced little girl, just learning the ABC’s. A child for whom the world has always been a safe place, ruled by Mommy and Daddy, who went to Sunday school and made caterpillars out of egg cartons and pipe cleaners, and learned to sing “Jesus loves me, this I know / ’Cause the Bible tells me so . . .” His head swiveled left and right. There, about a hundred yards away, a dirt road leading into the woods. As he slowed, he saw that the path took a gentle S-curve, but the trees were thin, and he could see . . .

. . . cheap frame house . . . and next to it . . . the corner of a van . . . ? But this one was more beige than white . . .

Well, the little old lady who’d seen the little girl and the truck . . . how far away had it been . . . sunlight or shadows . . . ? So many things, so many inconstants, so many variables. As good as the FBI Academy was, it couldn’t prepare you for everything—hell, not even close to everything. That’s what they told you, too—told you that you had to trust your instinct and experience . . .

But Caruso had hardly a year’s experience.

Still...

He stopped the car.

“Caruso to Birmingham Base.”

“Yeah, Dominic,” Sandy Ellis responded.

Caruso radioed in his location. “I’m going 10-7 to walk in and take a look.”

“Roger that, Dom. Do you request backup?”

“Negative, Sandy. It’s probably nothing, just going to knock on the door and talk to the occupant.”

“Okay, I’ll stand by.”

Caruso didn’t have a portable radio—that was for local cops, not the Bureau—and so was now out of touch, except for his cell phone. His personal side arm was a Smith & Wesson 1076, snug in its holster on his right hip. He stepped out of the car, and closed the door without latching it, to avoid making noise. People always turned to see what made the noise of a slammed car door.

He was wearing a darker than olive green suit, a fortunate circumstance, Caruso thought, heading right. First he’d look at the van. He walked normally, but his eyes were locked on the windows of the shabby house, halfway hoping to see a face, but, on reflection, glad that none appeared.

The Ford van was about six years old, he judged. Minor dings and dents on the bodywork. The driver had backed it in. That put the sliding door close to the house, the sort of thing a carpenter or plumber might do. Or a man moving a small, resisting body. He kept his right hand free, and his coat unbuttoned. Quick-draw was something every cop in the world practiced,

often in front of a mirror, though only a fool fired as part of the motion, because you just couldn't hit anything that way.

Caruso took his time. The window was down on the driver-side door. The interior was almost entirely empty, bare, unpainted metal floor, the spare tire and jack . . . and a large roll of duct tape . . .

There was a lot of that stuff around. The free end of the roll was turned down, as though to make sure he'd be able to pull some off the roll without having to pick at it with his fingernails. A lot of people did that, too. There was, finally, a throw rug, tucked—no, *taped,* he saw, to the floor, just behind the right-side passenger seat . . . and was that some tape dangling from the metal seat framing? What might that mean?

Why there? Caruso wondered, but suddenly the skin on his forearms started tingling. It was a first for that sensation. He'd never made an arrest himself, had not yet been involved in a major felony case, at least not to any sort of conclusion. He'd worked fugitives in Newark, briefly, and made a total of three collars, always with another, more experienced agent to take the lead. He was more experienced now, a tiny bit seasoned . . . But not all that much, he reminded himself.

Caruso's head turned to the house. His mind was moving quickly now. What did he really have? Not much. He'd looked into an ordinary light truck with no direct evidence at all in it, just an empty truck with a roll of duct tape and a small rug on the steel floor.

Even so . . .

The young agent took the cell phone out of his pocket and speed-dialed the office.

"FBI. Can I help you?" a female voice asked.

"Caruso for Ellis." That moved things quickly.

"What you got, Dom?"

"White Ford Econoline van, Alabama tag Echo Romeo Six Five Zero One, parked at my location. Sandy—"

"Yeah, Dominic?"

"I'm going to knock on this guy's door."

"You want backup?"

Caruso took a second to think. "Affirmative—roger that."

"There's a county mountie about ten minutes away. Stand by," Ellis advised.

"Roger, standing by."

But a little girl's life was on the line . . .

He headed toward the house, careful to keep out of the sight lines from the nearest windows. That's when time stopped.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard the scream. It was an awful, shrill sound, like someone looking at Death himself. His brain processed the information, and he suddenly found that his automatic pistol was in his hands, just in front of his sternum, pointed up into the sky, but in his hands even so. It had been a woman's scream, he realized, and something just went *click* inside his head.

As quickly as he could move without making much noise, he was on the porch, under the uneven, cheaply made roof. The front door was mostly wire screening to keep the bugs out. It needed painting, but so did the whole house.

Probably a rental, and a cheap one at that. Looking through the screen he could see what seemed to be a corridor, leading left to the kitchen and right to a bathroom. He could see into it. A white porcelain toilet and a sink were all that was visible from this perspective.

He wondered if he had probable cause to enter the house, and instantly decided that he had enough. He pulled the door open and slipped in as stealthily as he could manage. A cheap and dirty rug leading down the corridor. He headed that way, gun up, senses sandpapered to ultimate alertness. As he moved, the angles of vision changed. The kitchen became invisible, but he could see into the bathroom better . . .

Penny Davidson was in the bathtub, naked, china blue eyes wide open, and her throat cut from ear to ear, with a whole body's supply of blood covering her flat chest and the sides of the tub. So violently had her neck been slashed that it lay open like a second mouth.

Strangely, Caruso didn't react physically. His eyes recorded the snapshot image, but for the moment all he thought about was that the man who'd done it was alive, and just a few feet away.

He realized that the noise he heard came from the left and ahead. The living room. A television. The subject would be in there. Might there be a second one? He didn't have time for that, nor did he particularly care at the moment.

Slowly, carefully, his heart going like a trip-hammer, he edged forward and peeked around the corner. There he was, late thirties, white male, hair thinning, watching the TV with rapt attention—it was a horror movie, the scream must have come from that—and sipping Miller Lite beer from an aluminum can. His face was content and in no way aroused. He'd probably been through that, Dominic thought. And right in front of him—Jesus—was a butcher knife, a bloody one, on the coffee table. There was blood on his T-shirt, as if sprayed. From a little girl's throat.

"The trouble with these mutts is that they never resist," an instructor had told his class at the FBI Academy. "Oh, yeah, they're John Wayne with an attitude when they have little kids in their hands, but they don't resist armed cops—ever. And, you know, that's a damned shame," the instructor had concluded.

You are not going in to jail today. The thought entered Caruso's mind seemingly of its own accord. His right thumb pulled back the spurless hammer until it clicked in place, putting his side arm fully in battery. His hands, he noted briefly, felt like ice.

Just at the corner, where you turned left to enter the room, was a battered old end table. Octagonal in shape, atop it was a transparent blue glass vase, a cheap one, maybe from the local Kmart, probably intended for flowers, but none were there today. Slowly, carefully, Caruso cocked his leg, then kicked the table over. The glass vase shattered loudly on the wooden floor.

The subject started violently, and turned to see an unexpected visitor in his house. His defensive response was instinctive rather than reasoned—he grabbed for the butcher knife on the coffee table. Caruso didn't even have time to smile, though he knew the subject had made the final mistake of his life. It's regarded as holy gospel in American police agencies that a man with a knife in his hand less than twenty-one feet away is an immediate and lethal

threat. He even started to rise to his feet.

But he never made it.

Caruso's finger depressed the trigger of his Smith, sending the first round straight through the subject's heart. Two more followed in less than a second. His white T-shirt blossomed in red. He looked down at his chest, then up at Caruso, total surprise on his face, and then he sat back down, without speaking a word or crying out in pain.

Caruso's next action was to reverse direction and check out the house's only bedroom. Empty. So was the kitchen, the rear door still locked from the inside. There came a moment's relief. Nobody else in the house. He took another look at the kidnapper. The eyes were still open. But Dominic had shot true. First he disarmed and handcuffed the dead body, because that was how he'd been trained. A check of the carotid pulse came next, but it was wasted energy. The guy saw nothing except the front door of hell. Caruso pulled his cell phone out and speed-dialed the office again.

"Dom?" Ellis asked when he got the phone.

"Yeah, Sandy, it's me. I just took him down."

"What? What do you mean?" Sandy Ellis asked urgently.

"The little girl, she's here, dead, throat cut. I came in, and the guy came up at me with a knife. Took him down, man. He's dead, too, dead as fuckin' hell."

"Jesus, Dominic! The county sheriff is just a couple of minutes out. Stand by."

"Roger, standing by, Sandy."

Not another minute passed before he heard the sound of a siren. Caruso went out on the porch. He decocked and holstered his automatic; then he took his FBI credentials out of his coat pocket, and held them up in his left hand as the sheriff approached, his service revolver out.

"It's under control," Caruso announced in as calm a voice as he could muster. He was pumped up now. He waved Sheriff Turner into the house, but stayed outside by himself while the local cop went inside. A minute or two later, the cop came back out, his own Smith & Wesson holstered.

Turner was the Hollywood image of a southern sheriff, tall, heavyset, with beefy arms, and a gun belt that dug deeply into his waistline. Except he was black. Wrong movie.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Want to give me a minute?" Caruso took a deep breath and thought for a moment how to tell the story. Turner's understanding of it was important, because homicide was a local crime, and he had jurisdiction over it.

"Yeah." Turner reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of Kools. He offered one to Caruso, who shook his head.

The young agent sat down on the unpainted wooden deck and tried to put it all together in his head. What, exactly, had happened? What, exactly, had he just done? And how, exactly, was he supposed to explain it? The whispering part of his mind told him that he felt no regret at all. At least not for the subject. For Penelope Davidson—too damned late. An hour sooner? Maybe even a half hour? That little girl would not be going home tonight, would never more be tucked into bed by her mother, or hug her father. And so Special Agent Dominic Caruso felt no remorse at all. Just regret for being too

slow.

"Can you talk?" Sheriff Turner asked.

"I was looking for a place like this one, and when I drove past, I saw the van parked . . ." Caruso began. Presently, he stood and led the sheriff into the house to relate the other details.

"Anyway, I tripped over the table. He saw me, and went for his knife, turned toward me—and so, I drew my pistol and shot the bastard. Three rounds, I think."

"Uh-huh." Turner went over to the body. The subject hadn't bled much. All three rounds had gone straight through the heart, ending its ability to pump almost instantly.

Paul Turner wasn't anywhere nearly as dumb as he looked to a government-trained agent. He looked at the body, and turned to look back at the doorway from which Caruso had taken his shots. His eyes measured distance and angle.

"So," the sheriff said, "you tripped on that end table. The suspect sees you, grabs his knife, and you, being in fear of your life, take out your service pistol and take three quick shots, right?"

"That's how it went down, yeah."

"Uh-huh," observed a man who got himself a deer almost every hunting season.

Sheriff Turner reached into his right-side pants pocket and pulled out his key chain. It was a gift from his father, a Pullman porter on the old Illinois Central. It was an old-fashioned one, with a 1948 silver dollar soldered onto it, the old kind, about an inch and a half across. He held it over the kidnapper's chest, and the diameter of the old coin completely covered all three of the entrance wounds. His eyes took a very skeptical look, but then they drifted over toward the bathroom, and his eyes softened before he spoke his verdict on the incident.

"Then that's how we'll write it up. Nice shootin', boy."

FULLY A dozen police and FBI vehicles appeared within as many minutes. Soon thereafter came the lab truck from the Alabama Department of Public Safety to perform the crime-scene investigative work. A forensic photographer shot twenty-three rolls of 400-speed color film. The knife was taken from the subject's hand and bagged for fingerprints and blood-type matching with the victim—it was all less than a formality, but criminal procedure was especially strict in a murder case. Finally, the body of the little girl was bagged and removed. Her parents would have to identify her, but blessedly her face was reasonably intact.

One of the last to arrive was Ben Harding, the Special Agent in Charge of the Birmingham Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. An agent-involved shooting meant a formal report from his desk to that of Director Dan Murray, a distant friend. First, Harding came to make sure that Caruso was in decent physical and psychological shape. Then he went to pay respects to Paul Turner, and get his opinion of the shooting. Caruso watched from a distance, and saw Turner gesture through the incident, accompanied by nods from Harding. It was good that Sheriff Turner was giving his official stamp of approval. A captain of state troopers listened in as well, and he nodded, too.

The truth of the matter was that Dominic Caruso didn't really give a damn. He knew he'd done the right thing, just an hour later than it ought to have been. Finally, Harding came over to his young agent.

"How you feeling, Dominic?"

"Slow," Caruso said. "Too damned slow—yeah, I know, unreasonable to expect otherwise."

Harding grabbed his shoulder and shook it. "You could not have done much better, kid." He paused. "How'd the shooting go down?"

Caruso repeated his story. It had almost acquired the firmness of truth in his mind now. He could probably have spoken the exact truth and not been hammered for it, Dom knew, but why take the chance? It was, officially, a clean shoot, and that was enough, so far as his Bureau file was concerned.

Harding listened, and nodded thoughtfully. There'd be paperwork to complete and FedEx up the line to D.C. But it would not look bad in the newspapers for an FBI agent to have shot and killed a kidnapper the very day of the crime. They'd probably find evidence that this was not the only such crime this mutt had committed. The house had yet to be thoroughly searched. They'd already found a digital camera in the house, and it would surprise no one to see that the mutt had a record of previous crimes on his Dell personal computer. If so, Caruso had closed more than one case. If so, Caruso would get a big gold star in his Bureau copybook.

Just how big, neither Harding nor Caruso could yet know. The talent hunt was about to find Dominic Caruso, too.

And one other.

CHAPTER 1

THE CAMPUS

THE TOWN of West Odenton, Maryland, isn't much of a town at all, just a post office for people who live in the general area, a few gas stations and a 7-Eleven, plus the usual fast-food places for people who need a fat-filled breakfast on the drive from Columbia, Maryland, to their jobs in Washington, D.C. And half a mile from the modest post office building was a mid-rise office building of government-undistinguished architecture. It was nine stories high, and on the capacious front lawn a low decorative monolith made of gray brick with silvery lettering said HENDLEY ASSOCIATES, without explaining what, exactly, Hendley Associates was. There were few hints. The roof of the building was flat, tar-and-gravel over reinforced concrete, with a small penthouse to house the elevator machinery and another rectangular structure that gave no clue about its identity. In fact, it was made of fiberglass, white in color, and radio-transparent. The building itself was unusual only in one thing: Except for a few old tobacco barns that barely exceeded twenty-five feet in height, it was the only building higher than two stories that sat on a direct line of sight from the National Security Agency located at Fort Meade, Maryland, and the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency at Langley, Virginia. Some other entrepreneurs had wished to build on that sight line, but zoning approval had never been granted, for many reasons, all of them false.

Behind the building was a small antenna farm not unlike that found next to a local television station—a half-dozen six-meter parabolic dishes sat inside a twelve-foot-high, razor-wire-crowned Cyclone fence enclosure and pointed at various commercial communications satellites. The entire complex, which wasn't terribly complex at all, comprised fifteen and a third acres in Maryland's Howard County, and was referred to as "The Campus" by the people who worked there. Nearby was the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, a government-consulting establishment of long standing and well-established sensitivity of function.

To the public, Hendley Associates was a trader in stocks, bonds, and international currencies, though, oddly, it did little in the way of public business. It was not known to have any clients, and while it was whispered to be quietly active in local charities (the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine was rumored to be the main recipient of Hendley's corporate largesse), nothing had ever leaked to the local media. In fact, it had no public-relations department at all. Neither was it rumored to be doing anything untoward, though its chief executive officer was known to have had a somewhat troubled past, as a result of which he was shy of publicity, which, on a few rare occasions, he'd dodged quite adroitly and amiably, until, finally,

the local media had stopped asking. Hendley's employees were scattered about locally, mostly in Columbia, lived upper-middle-class lifestyles, and were generally as remarkable as Beaver's father, Ward Cleaver.

Gerald Paul Hendley, Jr., had had a stellar career in the commodities business, during which he'd amassed a sizable personal fortune and then turned to elected public service in his late thirties, soon becoming a United States senator from South Carolina. Very quickly, he'd acquired a reputation as a legislative maverick who eschewed special interests and their campaign money offers, and followed a rather ferociously independent political track, leaning toward liberal on civil-rights issues, but decidedly conservative on defense and foreign relations. He'd never shied away from speaking his mind, which had made him good and entertaining copy for the press, and eventually there were whispered-about presidential aspirations.

Toward the end of his second six-year term, however, he'd suffered a great personal tragedy. He'd lost his wife and three children in an accident on Interstate 185 just outside of Columbia, South Carolina, their station wagon crushed beneath the wheels of a Kenworth tractor-trailer. It had been a predictably crushing blow, and soon thereafter, at the very beginning of the campaign for his third term, more misfortune had struck him. It became known through a column in the *New York Times* that his personal investment portfolio—he'd always kept it private, saying that since he took no money for his campaigning, he had no need to disclose his net worth except in the most general of terms—showed evidence of insider trading. This suspicion was confirmed with deeper delving by the newspapers and TV, and despite Hendley's protest that the Securities and Exchange Commission had never actually published guidelines about what the law meant, it appeared to some that he'd used his inside knowledge on future government expenditures to benefit a real-estate investment enterprise which would profit him and his co-investors over fifty million dollars. Worse still, when challenged on the question in a public debate by the Republican candidate—a self-described "Mr. Clean"—he'd responded with two mistakes. First, he'd lost his temper in front of rolling cameras. Second, he'd told the people of South Carolina that if they doubted his honesty, then they could vote for the fool with whom he shared the stage. For a man who'd never put a political foot wrong in his life, that surprise alone had cost him five percent of the state's voters. The remainder of his lackluster campaign had only slid downhill, and despite the lingering sympathy vote from those who remembered the annihilation of his family, his seat had ended up an upset-loss for the Democrats, which had further been exacerbated by a venomous concession statement. Then he'd left public life for good, not even returning to his antebellum plantation northwest of Charleston but rather moving to Maryland and leaving his life entirely behind. One further flamethrower statement at the entire congressional process had burned whatever bridges might have remained open to him.

His current home was a farm dating back to the eighteenth century, where he raised Appaloosa horses—riding and mediocre golf were his only remaining hobbies—and lived the quiet life of a gentleman farmer. He also worked at The Campus seven or eight hours per day, commuting back and forth in a chauffeured stretch Cadillac.

Fifty-two now, tall, slender and silver-haired, he was well known without being known at all, perhaps the one lingering aspect of his political past.

"YOU DID well in the mountains," Jim Hardesty said, waving the young Marine to a chair.

"Thank you, sir. You did okay, too, sir."

"Captain, anytime you walk back through your front door after it's all over, you've done well. I learned that from my training officer. About sixteen years ago," he added.

Captain Caruso did the mental arithmetic and decided that Hardesty was a little older than he looked. Captain in the U.S. Army Special Forces, then CIA, plus sixteen years made him closer to fifty than forty. He must have worked very hard indeed to keep in shape.

"So," the officer asked, "what can I do for you?"

"What did Terry tell you?" the spook asked.

"He told me I'd be talking with somebody named Pete Alexander."

"Pete got called out of town suddenly," Hardesty explained.

The officer accepted the explanation at face value. "Okay, anyway, the general said you Agency guys are on some kind of talent hunt, but you're not willing to grow your own," Caruso answered honestly.

"Terry is a good man, and a damned fine Marine, but he can be a little parochial."

"Maybe so, Mr. Hardesty, but he's going to be my boss soon, when he takes over Second Marine Division, and I'm trying to stay on his good side. And you still haven't told me why I'm here."

"Like the Corps?" the spook asked. The young Marine nodded.

"Yes, sir. The pay ain't all that much, but it's all I need, and the people I work with are the best."

"Well, the ones we went up the mountain with are pretty good. How long did you have them?"

"Total? About fourteen months, sir."

"You trained them pretty well."

"It's what they pay me for, sir, and I had good material to start with."

"You also handled that little combat action well," Hardesty observed, taking note of the distant replies he was getting.

Captain Caruso was not quite modest enough to regard it as a "little" combat action. The bullets flying around had been real enough, which made the action big enough. But his training, he'd found, had worked just about as well as his officers had told him it would in all the classes and field exercises. It had been an important and rather gratifying discovery. The Marine Corps actually did make sense. Damn.

"Yes, sir," was all he said in reply, however, adding, "And thank you for your help, sir."

"I'm a little old for that sort of thing, but it's nice to see that I still know how." And it had been quite enough, Hardesty didn't add. Combat was still a kid's game, and he was no longer a kid. "Any thoughts about it, Captain?" he asked next.

"Not really, sir. I did my after-action report."

Hardesty had read it. “Nightmares, anything like that?”

The question surprised Caruso. Nightmares? Why would he have those? “No, sir,” he responded with visible puzzlement.

“Any qualms of conscience?” Hardesty went on.

“Sir, those people were making war on my country. We made war back. You ought not to play the game if you can’t handle the action. If they had wives and kids, I’m sorry about that, but when you screw with people, you need to understand that they’re going to come see you about it.”

“It’s a tough world?”

“Sir, you’d better not kick a tiger in the ass unless you have a plan for dealing with his teeth.”

No nightmares and no regrets, Hardesty thought. That was the way things were supposed to be, but the kinder, gentler United States of America didn’t always turn out its people that way. Caruso was a warrior. Hardesty rocked back in his seat and gave his guest a careful look before speaking.

“Cap’n, the reason you’re here . . . you’ve seen it in the papers, all the problems we’ve had dealing with this new spate of international terrorism. There have been a lot of turf wars between the Agency and the Bureau. At the operational level, there’s usually no problem, and there isn’t all that much trouble at the command level—the FBI director, Murray, is solid troop, and when he worked Legal Attaché in London he got along well with our people.”

“But it’s the mid level staff pukes, right?” Caruso asked. He’d seen it in the Corps, too. Staff officers who spent a lot of their time snarling at other staff officers, saying that their daddy could beat up the other staff’s daddy. The phenomenon probably dated back to the Romans or the Greeks. It had been stupid and counterproductive back then, too.

“Bingo,” Hardesty confirmed. “And you know, God Himself might be able to fix it, but even He would have to have a really good day to bring it off. The bureaucracies are too entrenched. It’s not so bad in the military. People there shuffle in and out of jobs, and they have this idea of ‘mission,’ and everybody generally works to accomplish it, especially if it helps them all hustle up the ladder individually. Generally speaking, the farther you are from the sharp end, the more likely you are to immerse yourself in the minutiae. So, we’re looking for people who know about the sharp end.”

“And the mission is—what?”

“To identify, locate, and deal with terrorist threats,” the spook answered.

“‘Deal with’?” Caruso asked.

“Neutralize—shit, okay, when necessary and convenient, kill the son of a bitches. Gather information on the nature and severity of the threat, and take whatever action is necessary, depending on the specific threat. The job is fundamentally intelligence-gathering. The Agency has too many restrictions on how it does business. This special sub-group doesn’t.”

“Really?” *That* was a considerable surprise.

Hardesty nodded soberly. “Really. You won’t be working for CIA. You may use Agency assets as resources, but that’s as far as it goes.”

“So, who am I working for?”

“We have a little way to go before we can discuss that.” Hardesty lifted what had to be the Marine’s personnel folder. “You score in the top three

percent among the Marine officers in terms of intelligence. Four-point-oh in nearly everything. Your language skills are particularly impressive."

"My dad is an American citizen—native-born, I mean—but his dad came off the boat from Italy, ran—still runs—a restaurant in Seattle. So, Pop actually grew up speaking mostly Italian, and a lot of that came down on me and my brother, too. Took Spanish in high school and college. I can't pass for a native, but I understand it pretty well."

"Engineering major?"

"That's from my dad, too. It's in there. He works for Boeing—aerodynamicist, mainly designs wings and control surfaces. You know about my mom—it's all in there. She's mainly a mom, does things with the local Catholic schools, too, now that Dominic and I are grown."

"And he's FBI?"

Brian nodded. "That's right, got his law degree and signed up to be a G-man."

"Just made the papers," Hardesty said, handing over a faxed page from the Birmingham papers. Brian scanned it.

"Way to go, Dom," Captain Caruso breathed when he got to the fourth paragraph, which further pleased his host.

IT WAS scarcely a two-hour flight from Birmingham to Reagan National in Washington. Dominic Caruso walked to the Metro station and hopped a subway train for the Hoover Building at Tenth and Pennsylvania. His badge absolved him of the need to pass through the metal detector. FBI agents were supposed to carry heat, and his automatic had earned a notch in the grip—not literally, of course, but FBI agents occasionally joked about it.

The office of Assistant Director Augustus Ernst Werner was on the top floor, overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue. The secretary waved him right in.

Caruso had never met Gus Werner. He was a tall, slender, and very experienced street agent, an ex-Marine, and positively monkish in appearance and demeanor. He'd headed the FBI Hostage Rescue Team and two field divisions, and been at the point of retirement before being talked into his new job by his close friend, Director Daniel E. Murray. The Counter-Terrorism Division was a stepchild of the much larger Criminal and Foreign Counter Intelligence divisions, but it was gaining in importance on a daily basis.

"Grab yourself a seat," Werner said, pointing, as he finished up a call. That just took another minute. Then Gus replaced the phone and hit the DO NOT DISTURB button.

"Ben Harding faxed this up to me," Werner said, holding the shooting report from the previous day. "How did it go?"

"It's all in there, sir." He'd spent three hours picking his own brain and putting it all down on paper in precise FBI bureaucratese. Strange that an act requiring less than sixty seconds to perform should require so much time to explain.

"And what did you leave out, Dominic?" The question was accompanied by the most penetrating look the young agent had ever encountered.

"Nothing, sir," Caruso replied.

"Dominic, we have some very good pistol shots in the Bureau. I'm one of

them," Gus Werner told his guest. "Three shots, all in the heart from a range of fifteen feet, is pretty good range shooting. For somebody who just tripped over an end table, it's downright miraculous. Ben Harding didn't find it remarkable, but Director Murray and I do—Dan's a pretty good marksman, too. He read this fax last night and asked me to render an opinion. Dan's never whacked a subject before. I have, three times, twice with HRT—those were cooperative ventures, as it were—and once in Des Moines, Iowa. That one was a kidnapping, too. I'd seen what he'd done to two of his victims—little boys—and, you know, I really didn't want some psychiatrist telling the jury that he was the victim of an adverse childhood, and that it really wasn't his fault, and all that bullshit that you hear in a nice clean court of law, where the only thing the jury sees are the pictures, and maybe not even them if the defense counsel can persuade the judge that they're overly inflammatory. So, you know what happened? I got to be the law. Not to enforce the law, or write the law, or explain the law. That one day, twenty-two years ago, I got to *be* the law. God's Own Avenging Sword. And you know, it felt good."

"How did you know . . . ?"

"How did I know for sure that he was our boy? He kept souvenirs. Heads. There were eight of them there in his house trailer. So, no, there wasn't any doubt at all in my mind. There was a knife nearby, and I told him to pick it up, and he did, and I put four rounds in his chest from a range of ten feet, and I've never had a moment's regret." Werner paused. "Not many people know that story. Not even my wife. So, don't tell me you tripped over a table, drew your Smith, and printed three rounds inside the subject's ventricle standing on one foot, okay?"

"Yes, sir." Caruso responded ambiguously. "Mr. Werner—"

"Name's Gus," the Assistant Director corrected.

"Sir," Caruso persisted. Senior people who used first names tended to make him nervous. "Sir, were I to say something like that, I'd be confessing to the next thing to murder, in an official government document. He *did* pick up that knife, he *was* getting up to face me, he *was* just ten or twelve feet away, and at Quantico they taught us to regard that as an immediate and lethal threat. So, yes, I took the shot, and it was righteous, in accordance with FBI policy on the use of lethal force."

Werner nodded. "You have your law degree, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. I'm admitted to the bar in Virginia and D.C. both. I haven't taken the Alabama bar exam yet."

"Well, stop being a lawyer for a minute," Werner advised. "This was a righteous shooting. I still have the revolver I whacked that bastard with. Smith Model 66 four-inch. I even wear it to work sometimes. Dominic, you got to do what every agent would like to do just once in his career. You got to deliver justice all by yourself. Don't feel bad about it."

"I don't, sir," Caruso assured him. "That little girl, Penelope—I couldn't save her, but at least that bastard won't ever do it again." He looked Werner right in the eye. "You know what it feels like."

"Yeah." He looked closely at Caruso. "And you're sure you have no regrets?"

"I caught an hour's nap on the flight up, sir." He delivered the statement without a visible smile.

But it generated one on Werner's face. He nodded. "Well, you'll be getting an official attaboy from the office of the Director. No OPR."

OPR was the FBI's own "Internal Affairs" office, and while respected by rank-and-file FBI agents, was not beloved of them. There was a saying, "If he tortures small animals and wets his bed, he's either a serial killer or he works for the Office of Professional Responsibility."

Werner lifted Caruso's folder. "Says here you're pretty smart... good language skills, too . . . Interested in coming to Washington? I'm looking for people who know how to think on their feet, to work in my shop."

Another move, was what Special Agent Dominic Caruso heard.

GERRY HENDLEY was not an overly formal man. He wore a jacket and tie to work, but the jacket ended up on a clothes tree in his office within fifteen seconds of arrival. He had a fine executive secretary—like himself, a native of South Carolina—named Helen Connolly, and after running through his day's schedule with her, he picked up his *Wall Street Journal* and checked the front page. He'd already devoured the day's *New York Times* and *Washington Post* to get his political fix for the day, grumbling as always how they never quite got it right. The digital clock on his desk told him that he had twenty minutes before his first meeting, and he lit up his computer to get the morning's *Early Bird* as well, the clipping service that went to senior government officials. This he scanned to see if he'd missed anything in his morning read of the big-time papers. Not much, except for an interesting piece in the *Virginia Pilot* about the annual Fletcher Conference, a circle-think held by the Navy and Marine Corps every year at the Norfolk Navy Base. They talked about terrorism, and fairly intelligently, Hendley thought. People in uniform often did. As opposed to elected officials.

We kill off the Soviet Union, Hendley thought, *and we expected everything in the world to settle down. But what we* didn't *see coming was all these lunatics with leftover AK-47s and education in kitchen chemistry, or simply a willingness to trade their own lives for those of their perceived enemies.*

And the other thing they hadn't done was prepare the intelligence community to deal with it. Even a president experienced in the black world and the best DCI in American history hadn't managed to get all that much done. They'd added a lot more people—an extra five hundred personnel in an agency of twenty thousand didn't sound like a lot, but it had doubled the operations directorate. That had given the CIA a force only half as horribly inadequate as it had been before, but that wasn't the same as adequate. And in return for it, the Congress had further tightened oversight and restrictions, thus further crippling the new people hired to flesh out the governmental skeleton crew. They never learned. He himself had talked at infinite length to his colleagues in the World's Most Exclusive Men's Club, but while some listened, others did not, and almost all of the remainder vacillated. They paid too much attention to the editorial pages, often of newspapers not even native to their home states, because *that,* they foolishly figured, was what the American People thought. Maybe it was this simple: Any newly elected official was seduced into the game the same way Cleopatra had snookered Gaius Julius Caesar. It was the staffs, he knew, the "professional" political helpers

who “guided” their employers into the right way to be reelected, which had become the Holy Grail of public service. America did not have a hereditary ruling class, but it did have plenty of people happy to lead their employers onto the righteous path of government divinity.

And working inside the system just didn’t work.

So, to accomplish anything, you just had to be outside the system.

Way the hell outside the system.

And if anybody noticed, well, he was already disgraced anyway, wasn’t he?

He spent his first hour discussing financial matters with some of his staff, because that was how Hendley Associates made its money. As a commodities trader, and as a currency arbitrageur, he’d been ahead of the curve almost from the beginning, sensing the momentary valuation differences—he always called them “Deltas”—which were generated by psychological factors, by perceptions that might or might not turn out to be real.

He did all his business anonymously through foreign banks, all of which liked having large cash accounts, and none of which were overly fastidious about where the money came from, so long as it was not overtly dirty, which his certainly was not. It was just another way of keeping outside the system.

Not that every one of his dealings was strictly legal. Having Fort Meade’s intercepts on his side made the game a lot easier. In fact, it was illegal as hell, and not the least bit ethical. But in truth Hendley Associates did little in the way of damage on the world stage. It could have been otherwise, but Hendley Associates operated on the principle that pigs got fed and hogs got slaughtered, and so they ate only a little out of the international trough. And, besides, there was no real governing authority for crimes of this type and this magnitude. And tucked away in a safe within the company vault was an official Charter signed by the former President of the United States.

Tom Davis came in. The titulary head of bond trading, Davis’s background was similar in some ways to Hendley’s, and he spent his days glued to his computer. He didn’t worry about security. In this building all of the walls had metal sheathing to contain electronic emanations, and all of the computers were tempest-protected.

“What’s new?” asked Hendley.

“Well,” Davis answered, “we have a couple of potential new recruits.”

“Who might they be?”

Davis slid the files across Hendley’s desk. The CEO took them and opened both.

“Brothers?”

“Twins. Fraternals. Their mom must have punched out two eggs instead of one that month. Both of them impressed the right people. Brains, mental agility, fitness, and between them a good mix of talents, plus language skills. Spanish, especially.”

“This one speaks Pashtu?” Hendley looked up in surprise.

“Just enough to find the bathroom. He was in country eight weeks or so, took the time to learn the local patois. Acquitted himself pretty well, the report says.”

“Think they’re our kind of people?” Hendley asked. Such people did not walk in the front door, which was why Hendley had a small number of very

discreet recruiters sprinkled throughout the government.

"We need to check them out a little more," Davis conceded, "but they do have the talents we like. On the surface, both appear to be reliable, stable, and smart enough to understand why we're here. So, yeah, I think they're worth a serious look."

"What's next for them?"

"Dominic is going to transfer to Washington. Gus Werner wants him to join the counterterror office. He'll probably be a desk man to start with. He's a little young for HRT, and he hasn't proven his analytical abilities yet. I think Werner wants to see how smart he is first. Brian will fly to Camp Lejeune, back to working with his company. I'm surprised the Corps hasn't seconded him to intelligence. He's an obvious candidate, but they do like their shooters, and he did pretty well over in camel-land. He'll be fast-tracked to major's rank, if my sources are correct. So, first, I think I'll fly down and have lunch with him, feel him out some, then come back to D.C. And do the same with Dominic. Werner was impressed with him."

"And Gus is a good judge of men," the former senator noted.

"That he is, Gerry," Davis agreed. "So—anything new shaking?"

"Fort Meade is buried under a mountain, as usual." The NSA's biggest problem was that they intercepted so much raw material it would take an army to sort through it all. Computer programs helped by homing in on key words and such, but nearly all of it was innocent chatter. Programmers were always trying to improve the catcher program, but it had proven to be virtually impossible to give a computer human instincts, though they were still trying. Unfortunately, the really talented programmers worked for game companies. That was where the money was, and talent usually followed the money path. Hendley couldn't complain about that. After all, he'd spent his twenties and half of his thirties doing the same. So, he often went looking for rich and very successful programmers for whom the money chase had become not so much boring as redundant. It was usually a waste of time. Nerds were often greedy bastards. Just like lawyers, but not quite as cynical. "I've seen half a dozen interesting intercepts today, though . . ."

"Such as?" Davis asked. The company's chief recruiter, he was also a skilled analyst.

"This." Hendley handed the folder across. Davis opened it and scanned down the page.

"Hmm," was all he said.

"Could be scary, if it turns into anything," Hendley thought aloud.

"True. But we need more." That was not earthshaking. They *always* needed more.

"Who do we have down there right now?" He ought to have known, but Hendley suffered from the usual bureaucratic disease: He had trouble keeping all the information current in his head.

"Right now? Ed Castilanno is in Bogotá, looking into the Cartel, but he's in deep cover. Real deep," Davis reminded his boss.

"You know, Tom, this intelligence business sometimes sucks the big one."

"Cheer up, Gerry. The pay's a hell of a lot better—at least for us underlings," he added with a tiny grin. His bronze skin contrasted starkly with

the ivory teeth.

"Yeah, must be terrible to be a peasant."

"At least da massa let me get educated, learn my letters and such. Could have been worse, don' have to chop cotton no more, Mas Gerry." Hendley rolled his eyes. Davis had, in fact, gotten his degree from Dartmouth, where he took a lot less grief for his dark skin than for his home state. His father grew corn in Nebraska, and voted Republican.

"What's one of those harvesters cost now?" the boss asked.

"You kidding? Far side of two hundred thousand. Dad got a new one last year and he's *still* bitching about it.'Course, this one'll last until his grandchildren die rich. Cuts through an acre of corn like a battalion of Rangers going through some bad guys." Davis had made a good career in CIA as a field spook, becoming a specialist in tracking money across international borders. At Hendley Associates he'd discovered that his talents were also quite useful in a business sense, but, of course, he'd never lost his nose for the real action. "You know, this FBI guy, Dominic, he did some interesting work in financial crimes in his first field assignment in Newark. One of his cases is developing into a major investigation into an international banking house. He knows how to sniff things out pretty well for a rookie."

"All that, and he can kill people on his own hook," Hendley agreed.

"That's why I like his looks, Gerry. He can make decisions in the saddle, like a guy ten years older."

"Brother act. Interesting," Hendley observed, eyes on the folders again.

"Maybe breeding tells. Grandfather was a homicide cop, after all."

"And before that in the 101st Airborne. I see your point, Tom. Okay. Sound them both out soon. We're going to be busy soon."

"Think so?"

"It's not getting any better out there." Hendley waved at the window.

THEY WERE at a sidewalk café in Vienna. The nights were turning less cold, and the patrons of the establishment were enduring the chill to enjoy a meal on the wide sidewalk.

"So, what is your interest with us?" Pablo asked.

"There is a confluence of interests between us," Mohammed answered, then clarified: "We share enemies."

He gazed off. The women passing by were dressed in the formal, almost severe local fashion, and the traffic noise, especially the electric trams, made it impossible for anyone to listen in on their conversation. To the casual, or even the professional, observer, these were simply two men from other countries—and there were a lot of them in this imperial city—talking business in a quiet and amiable fashion. They were speaking in English, which was also not unusual.

"Yes, that is the truth," Pablo had to agree. "The enemies part, that is. What of the interests?"

"You have assets for which we have use. We have assets for which you have use," the Muslim explained patiently.

"I see." Pablo added cream to his coffee and stirred. To his surprise, the coffee here was as good as in his own country.

He'd be slow to reach an agreement, Mohammed expected. His guest was not as senior as he would have preferred. But the enemy they shared had enjoyed greater success against Pablo's organization than his own. It continued to surprise him. They had ample reason to employ effective security measures, but as with all monetarily motivated people they lacked the purity of purpose that his own colleagues exercised. And from that fact came their higher vulnerability. But Mohammed was not so foolish as to assume that made them his inferiors. Killing one Israeli spy didn't make him Superman, after all. Clearly they had ample expertise. It just had limits. As his own people had limits. As everyone but Allah Himself had limits. In that knowledge came more realistic expectations, and gentler disappointments when things went badly. One could not allow emotions to get in the way of "business," as his guest would have misidentified his Holy Cause. But he was dealing with an unbeliever, and allowances had to be made.

"What can you offer us?" Pablo asked, displaying his greed, much as Mohammed had expected.

"You need to establish a reliable network in Europe, correct?"

"Yes, we do." They'd had a little trouble of late. European police agencies were not as restrained as the American sort.

"We have such a network." And since Muslims were not thought to be active in the drug trade—drug dealers often lost their heads in Saudi Arabia, for example—so much the better.

"In return for what?"

"You have a highly successful network in America, and you have reason to dislike America, do you not?"

"That is so," Pablo agreed. Colombia was starting to make progress with the Cartel's uneasy ideological allies in the mountains of Pablo's home country. Sooner or later, the FARC would cave in to the pressure and then, doubtless, turn on their "friends"—really "associates" was a loose enough word—as their price of admission to the democratic process. At that time, the security of the Cartel might be seriously threatened. Political instability was their best friend in South America, but that might not last forever. The same was true of his host, Pablo considered, and that *did* make them allies of convenience. "Precisely what services would you require of us?"

Mohammed told him. He didn't add that no money would be exchanged for the Cartel's service. The first shipment that Mohammed's people shepherded into—Greece? Yes, that would probably be the easiest—would be sufficient to seal the venture, wouldn't it?

"That is all?"

"My friend, more than anything else we trade in ideas, not physical objects. The few material items we need are quite compact, and can be obtained locally if necessary. And I have no doubt that you can help with travel documents."

Pablo nearly choked on his coffee. "Yes, that is easily done."

"So, is there any reason why this alliance cannot be struck?"

"I must discuss it with my superiors," Pablo cautioned, "but on the surface I see no reason why our interests should be in conflict."

"Excellent. How may we communicate further?"

“My boss prefers to meet those with whom he does business.”

Mohammed thought that over. Travel made him and his associates nervous, but there was no avoiding it. And he did have enough passports to see him through the airports of the world. And he also had the necessary language skills. His education at Cambridge had not been wasted. He could thank his parents for that. And he blessed his English mother for her gift of complexion and blue eyes. Truly he could pass for a native of any country outside of China and Africa. The remains of a Cambridge accent didn’t hurt, either.

“You need merely tell me the time and the place,” Mohammed replied. He handed over his business card. It had his e-mail address, the most useful tool for covert communications ever invented. And with the miracle of modern air travel, he could be anywhere on the globe in forty-eight hours.

CHAPTER 2

JOINING UP

HE CAME in at a quarter to five. Anyone who passed him on the street would not have given him a second look, though he might have caught the eye of the odd unattached female. At six-one, a hundred eighty or so pounds—he worked out regularly—black hair and blue eyes, he wasn't exactly movie star material, but neither was he the sort of man that a pretty young female professional would have summarily kicked out of bed.

He also dressed well, Gerry Hendley saw. Blue suit with a red pinstripe—it looked English-made—vest, red-and-yellow-striped tie, nice gold tie bar. Fashionable shirt. Decent haircut. The confident look that came from having both money and a good education to go with a youth that would not be misspent. His car was parked in the visitors' lot in front of the building. A yellow Hummer 2 SUV, the sort of vehicle favored by people who herded cattle in Wyoming, or money in New York. And, probably, that was why . . .

"So, what brings you here?" Gerry asked, waving his guest to a comfortable seat on the other side of his mahogany desk.

"I haven't decided what I want to do yet, just sort of bumping around, looking for a niche I might fit into."

Hendley smiled. "Yeah, I'm not so old that I can't remember how confusing it is when you get out of school. Which one did you go to?"

"Georgetown. Family tradition." The boy smiled gently. That was one good thing about him that Hendley saw and appreciated—he wasn't trying to impress anyone with his name and family background. He might even be a little uneasy with it, wanting to make his own way and his own name, as a lot of young men did. The smart ones, anyway. It was a pity that there was no place for him on The Campus.

"Your dad really likes Jesuit schools."

"Even Mom converted. Sally didn't go to Bennington. She got through her premed up at Fordham in New York. Hopkins Med now, of course. Wants to be a doc, like Mom. What the hell, it's an honorable profession."

"Unlike law?" Gerry asked.

"You know how Dad is about that," the boy pointed out with a grin. "What was your undergraduate degree in?" he asked Hendley, knowing the answer already, of course.

"Economics and mathematics. I took a double major." It had been very useful indeed for modeling trading patterns in commodities markets. "So, how's your family doing?"

"Oh, fine. Dad's back writing again—his memoirs. Mostly he bitches that he isn't old enough to do that sort of book, but he's working pretty hard to get it

done right. He's not real keen on the new President."

"Yeah, Kealty has a real talent for bouncing back. When they finally bury the guy, they'd better park a truck on top of his headstone." That joke had even made the *Washington Post.*

"I've heard that one. Dad says it can only take one idiot to unmake the work of ten geniuses." That adage had *not* made the *Washington Post.* But it was the reason the young man's father had set up The Campus, though the young man himself didn't know it.

"That's overstating things. This new guy only happened by accident."

"Yeah, well, when it comes time to execute that klukker retard down in Mississippi, how much you want to bet he commutes the sentence?"

"Opposition to capital punishment is a matter of principle to him," Hendley pointed out. "Or so he says. Some people do feel that way, and it is an honorable opinion."

"Principle? To him that's the nice old lady who runs a grammar school."

"If you want to have a political discussion, there's a nice bar and grill a mile down Route 29," Gerry suggested.

"No, that's not it. Sorry for the digression, sir."

This boy is holding his cards pretty close, Hendley thought. "Well, it's not a bad subject for one. So, what can I do for you?"

"I'm curious."

"About what?" the former senator asked.

"What you do here," his visitor said.

"Mainly currency arbitrage." Hendley stretched to show his weary relaxation at the end of a working day.

"Uh-huh," the kid said, just a slight bit dubiously.

"There's really money to be made there, if you have good information, and if you have the nerves to act on it."

"You know, Dad likes you a lot. He says it's a shame you and he don't see each other anymore."

Hendley nodded. "Yeah, and that's my fault, not his."

"He also said you were too smart to fuck up the way you did."

Ordinarily, it would have been a positively seismic faux pas, but it was obvious from looking in the boy's eyes that he hadn't meant it as any sort of insult but rather as a question . . . or was it? Hendley suddenly asked himself.

"It was a bad time for me," Gerry reminded his guest. "And anybody can make a mistake. Your dad even made a few himself."

"That's true. But Dad was lucky to have Arnie around to cover his ass." That left his host an opening, which he jumped at.

"How's Arnie doing?" Hendley asked, making the dodge to maneuver for time, still wondering why the kid was here, and actually starting to get a little uneasy about it, though he was not sure why he should feel that way.

"Fine. He's going to be the new chancellor for the University of Ohio. He ought to be good at it, and he needs a calm sort of job, Dad thinks. I think he's right. How that guy managed not to have a heart attack is beyond me and Mom both. Maybe some people really do thrive on the action." His eyes never left Hendley's through the entire discourse. "I learned a lot talking to Arnie."

"What about from your father?"

"Oh, a thing or two. Mainly, I learned things from the rest of the bunch."

"Who do you mean?"

"Mike Brennan for one. He was my Principal Agent," Jack Jr. explained. "Holy Cross graduate, career Secret Service. Hell of a pistol shot. He's the guy who taught me to shoot."

"Oh?"

"The Service has a range on the Old Post Office Building, couple of blocks from the White House. I still get to go there occasionally. Mike's an instructor in the Secret Service Academy now, up at Beltsville. Really good guy, smart and laid-back. Anyway, you know, he was my babysitter, like, and I used to ping on him about stuff, ask him what Secret Service people do, how they train, how they think, the things they look for while they're protecting Mom and Dad. I learned a lot from him. And all the other people."

"Like?"

"FBI guys, Dan Murray, Pat O'Day—Pat's the Major Case Inspector for Murray. He's getting ready to retire. Can you believe it, he's going to raise beef cattle up in Maine. Funny damned place to punch cattle. He's a shooter, too, like Wild Bill Hickock with an attitude, but it's too easy to forget he's a Princeton grad. Pretty smart guy, Pat is. He taught me a lot about how the Bureau runs investigations. And his wife, Andrea, she's a mind reader. Ought to be, she ran Dad's detail during a very scary time, master's degree in psychology from University of Virginia. I learned a shitload from her. And the Agency people, of course, Ed and Mary Pat Foley—God Almighty, what a pair they are. But you know who the most interesting one of all was?"

He did. "John Clark?"

"Oh yeah. The trick was getting him to talk. I swear, compared to him, the Foleys are Desi and Lucy. But once he trusts you, he will open up some. I cornered him when he got his Medal of Honor—it was on TV briefly, retired Navy chief petty officer gets his decoration from Vietnam. About sixty seconds of videotape on a slow news day. You know, not one reporter asked what he did after he left the Navy. Not one. Jesus, they are *thick.* Bob Holtzman knew part of it, I think. He was there, standing in the corner, across the room from me. He's pretty smart for a newsie. Dad likes him, just doesn't trust him as far as he can sling an anchor. Anyway, Big John—Clark, I mean—he's one serious honcho. He's been there, and done that, and he has the T-shirt. How come he isn't here?"

"Jack, my boy, when you come to the point, you do come to the point," Hendley said, with a touch of admiration in his voice.

"When you knew his name, I knew I had you, sir." A briefly triumphant look in the eyes. "I've been checking you out for a couple of weeks."

"Oh?" And with that, Hendley felt his stomach contract.

"It wasn't hard. It's all on the public record, just a question of mix and match. Like the connect-the-dots things they give to little kids in their activity books. You know, it amazes me that this place never made the news—"

"Young man, if that's a threat—"

"What?" Jack Jr. was surprised by the interruption. "You mean, blackmail you? No, Senator, what I meant to say is that there's so much raw information lying around out there, that you have to wonder how reporters miss it. I mean,

even a blind squirrel will find an acorn once in a while, y'know?" He paused for a moment before his eyes lit up. "Oh, I get it. You handed them what they expected to find, and they ran with it."

"It's not that hard, but it's dangerous to underestimate them," Hendley warned.

"Just don't talk to them. Dad told me a long time ago: 'A closed mouth gathers no foot.' He always let Arnie do the leaks. Nobody else said anything to the press without Arnie's guidance. I swear, I think the media was scared of that guy. He's the one who lifted a *Times* reporter's White House pass and made it stick."

"I remember that," Hendley responded. There had been quite a stink about it, but soon enough even the *New York Times* realized that having no reporter in the White House Press Room hurt in a very tender spot. It had been an object lesson in manners which had lasted for almost six months. Arnie van Damm had a longer and nastier memory than the media, which was quite something in and of itself. Arnold van Damm was a serious player of five-card-draw poker.

"What's your point, Jack? Why are you here?"

"Senator, I want to play in the bigs. This here, I think, is the bigs."

"Explain," Hendley commanded. Just how much had the boy put together?

John Patrick Ryan, Jr., opened his briefcase. "For starters, this is the only building taller than a private residence on the sight line from NSA Fort Meade to CIA Langley. You can download satellite photos off the Internet. I printed them all up. Here." He handed a small binder across. "I checked with the zoning offices, and I found out that three other office buildings were planned for this area, and all were denied construction permits. The records didn't say why, but nobody made a fuss about it. The medical center down the road, however, got really nice finance terms from Citibank on their revised plans. Most of your personnel are former spooks. Your security people are all former military police, rank E-7 or higher. The electronic security system here is better than they have at Fort Meade. How the hell did you manage that, by the way?"

"Private citizens have a lot more freedom negotiating with contractors. Go on," the former senator said.

"You never did anything illegal. That conflict-of-interest charge that killed your Senate career was a crock of shit. Any decent lawyer could have had it tossed right out of court on a summary judgment, but you rolled over and played dead on it. I remember how Dad always liked you for your brains, and he always said you were a straight shooter. He didn't say that about all that many people on The Hill. The senior people at CIA liked working with you, and you helped with funding for a project some other folks on The Hill had a conniption fit over. I don't know why it is, but a lot of people there hate the intelligence services. Used to drive Dad nuts, how every time he had to sit down with senators and congressmen over that stuff, had to bribe them with pet projects for their districts and stuff. Jeez, Dad *hated* that. Whenever he did it, he'd grumble for a week before and after. But you helped him a lot. You used to be pretty good working inside the Capitol Building. But when you had your political problem, you just caved in. I thought it was pretty hard to

believe. But what I really had trouble swallowing was how Dad never talked about it at all. He never said a single word. When I asked, he changed the subject. Even Arnie never talked about it—and Arnie answered every question I ever hit him with. So, the dogs didn't bark, y'know?" Jack leaned back, keeping his eyes on his host at all times. "Anyway, I never said anything either, but I sniffed around during my senior year at Georgetown, and I kept talking to people, and those folks taught me how to look into things quietly. Again, it's not all that hard."

"And so, what conclusion did you reach?"

"You would have been a good president, Senator, but losing your wife and kids was a big hit. We were all busted up about that. Mom really liked your wife. Please excuse me for bringing it up, sir. That's why you left politics, but I think you're too much of a patriot to forget about your country, and I think Hendley Associates is your way of serving your country—but off the books, like. I remember Dad and Mr. Clark talking over drinks upstairs one night—my senior year of high school, it was. I didn't catch much of it. They didn't want me there, and so I went back to watching the History Channel. Coincidence, they had a show about SOE that night, the British Special Operations Executive from World War Two. They were mostly bankers. 'Wild Bill' Donovan recruited lawyers to start up the OSS, but the Brits used bankers to screw over people. I wondered why, and Dad said bankers are smarter. They know how to make money in the real world, whereas lawyers aren't quite as smart—that's what Dad said, anyway. I guess he figured that's what he did. With his trading background, I mean. But you're a different sort of pirate, Senator. I think you're a spook, and I think Hendley Associates is a privately funded spook shop that works off the books—completely outside the federal budget process. So, you don't have to worry about senators and congress-critters snooping around and leaking stuff because they think you do *bad* things. Hell, I did a Google search and there's only six mentions of your company on the Internet. You know, there's more pieces than that about my mom's hairstyle. *Women's Wear Daily* used to like clobbering her. Really pissed Dad off."

"I remember." Jack Ryan, Sr., had once cut loose in front of reporters on that issue, and paid the price of being laughed at by the chattering classes. "He talked to me about how Henry VIII would have given the reporters some special haircuts for that."

"Yeah, with an ax at the Tower of London. Sally used to laugh about it some. She needled Mom about her hair, too. I guess that's one nice thing about being a man, eh?"

"That and shoes. My wife didn't like Manolo Blahniks. She liked sensible shoes, the sort that didn't make her feet hurt," Hendley said, remembering, and then running into a concrete wall. It still hurt to talk about her. It probably always would, but at least the pain did affirm his love for her, and that was something. Much as he loved her memory, he could not smile in public about her. Had he remained in politics, he'd have had to do that, pretend that he'd gotten over it, that his love was undying but also unhurtful. Yeah, sure. One more price of political life was giving up your humanity along with your manhood. And it was not worth that price. Even to be President of

the United States. One of the reasons why he and Jack Ryan, Sr., had always gotten along was that they were so alike.

"You really think this is an intelligence agency?" he asked his guest as lightly as the situation allowed.

"Yes, sir, I do. If NSA, say, pays attention to what the big central banks are doing, you are ideally located to take advantage of the signals-intelligence they gather and cross-deck to Langley. Must give your currency-trading troops the best sort of insider information, and if you play your cards carefully—that is, if you don't get greedy—you can make a ton of long-term money without anybody really noticing. You do that by not attracting investors. They'd talk way too much. So, that activity funds the things you do here. Exactly what it is you do, that I have not speculated on very much."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yes, sir, that is a fact."

"You haven't talked to your father about this?"

"No, sir." Jack Jr. shook his head. "He'd just blow it off. Dad told me a lot when I asked, but not stuff like this."

"What did he tell you?"

"People stuff. You know, dealing with politicians, which foreign president likes little girls or little boys. Jeez, a lot of that going around, especially overseas. What sort of people they were, how they think, what their individual priorities and eccentricities are. Which country took good care of its military. Which country's spook services were good, and which ones were not. A lot of things about the people on The Hill. The sort of stuff you read in books or the papers, except what Dad told me was the real shit. I knew not to repeat it anywhere," the young Ryan assured his host.

"Even in school?"

"Nothing I didn't see in the *Post* first. The papers are pretty good about finding stuff out, but they're too quick to repeat damaging things about people they don't like, and they frequently don't publish stuff about people they do like. I guess the news business is pretty much the same as women trading gossip over the phone or the card table. Less a matter of hard facts than sniping at people you don't care for."

"They're as human as everybody else."

"Yes, sir, they are. But when my mom operates on somebody's eyes, she doesn't care if she likes the person or not. She swore an oath to play her game by the rules. Dad's the same way. That's how they raised me to be," John Patrick Ryan, Jr., concluded. "Same thing every dad tells every son: If you're going to do it, do it right or don't do it at all."

"Not everybody thinks that way anymore," Hendley pointed out, though he'd told his two sons, George and Foster, exactly the same thing.

"Maybe so, Senator, but that's not my fault."

"What do you know about the trading business?" Hendley asked.

"I know the basics. I can talk the talk, but I haven't learned the nitty-gritty enough to walk the walk."

"And your degree from Georgetown?"

"History, strong minor in economics, kinda like Dad. Sometimes I'd ask him about his hobby—he still likes to play the market, and he has friends in the

business, like George Winston, his Secretary of the Treasury. They talk a lot. George has tried and tried to get Dad to come inside his company, but he won't do anything more than go in and schmooze. They're still friends, though. They even hack away at golf together. Dad's a lousy golfer."

Hendley smiled. "I know. Ever try it yourself?"

Little Jack shook his head. "I already know how to swear. Uncle Robby was pretty good. Jeez, Dad really misses him. Aunt Sissy still comes to the house a lot. She and Mom play piano together."

"That was pretty bad."

"That redneck racist fuck," Junior observed. "Excuse me. Robby was the first guy I ever knew who got murdered." The amazing thing was that his murderer had been taken alive. The Secret Service detail had been half a second behind the Mississippi State Police in getting to him, but some civilian had tackled the bastard before anyone could get a round off, and so he'd gone to jail alive. That fact had at least eliminated any conspiracy nonsense. It had been a Ku Klux Klan member, sixty-seven years old, who just couldn't abide the thought that Ryan's retirement had brought his black Vice President to the position of President of the United States. His trial, conviction, and sentencing had gone off with startling speed—the assassination had all been on videotape, not to mention there'd been six witnesses all within two yards of the killer. Even the Stars and Bars atop the State House in Jackson had flown at half-staff for Robby Jackson, to the dismay and disgust of some. *"Sic volvere Parcas,"* Jack observed.

"What's that?"

"The Fates, Senator. One spins the thread. One measures the thread. And one cuts the thread. 'So spin the Fates,' the Roman adage is. I never saw Dad so broken up about anything. Mom handled it better, really. I guess docs are used to people dying. Dad—well, he just wanted to whack the guy himself. It was pretty tough." The news cameras had caught the President weeping at the funeral service at the Naval Academy Chapel. *Sic volvere Parcas.* "So, Senator, how does my fate spin out here?"

It didn't catch Hendley short. He'd seen this question coming a quarter mile away, but it was not an especially easy question even so. "What about your father?"

"Who says he has to know? You have six subsidiary corporations that you probably use to hide your trading activities." Finding that out hadn't been all that easy, but Jack knew how to dig.

"Not 'hide,'" Hendley corrected. "'Disguise,' maybe, but not 'hide.'"

"Excuse me. As I told you, I used to hang out with spooks."

"You learned a lot."

"I had some pretty good teachers."

Ed and Mary Pat Foley, John Clark, Dan Murray, and his own father. Damned Skippy, he's had some pretty good teachers, Hendley thought.

"What exactly do you think you'd do here?"

"Sir, I'm pretty smart, but not that smart. I'll have to learn a lot. I know that. So do you. What do I want to do? I want to serve my country," Jack said evenly. "I want to help get things done that need doing. I don't need money. I have trust funds set up from Dad and Granddad—Joe Muller, Mom's dad, I

mean. Hell, if I wanted, I could get a law degree and end up like Ed Kealty, working my way toward the White House on my own, but my dad isn't a king and I'm not a prince. I want to make my own way and see how things play out."

"Your dad can't know about this, at least not for a while."

"So? He kept a lot of secrets from *me.*" Jack thought that was pretty funny. "Turnabout is fair play, isn't it?"

"I'll think about it. You have an e-mail address?"

"Yes, sir." Jack handed across a card.

"Give me a couple of days."

"Yes, sir. Thanks for letting me in to see you." He stood, shook hands, and made his way out.

The boy had grown up in a hurry, Hendley thought. Maybe having a Secret Service detail helped with that—or hurt, depending on what sort of person you happened to be. But this boy had come from good stock, as much from his mother as his father. And clearly he was smart. He had a lot of curiosity, usually a sign of intelligence.

And intelligence was the only thing there was never enough of, anywhere in the world.

"SO?" Ernesto asked.

"It was interesting," Pablo replied, lighting a Dominican cigar.

"What do they want of us?" his boss asked.

"Mohammed began by talking about our common interests, and our common enemies."

"If we tried to do business over there, we would lose our heads," Ernesto observed. With him, it was always business.

"I pointed that out. He replied that theirs is a small market, hardly worth our time. They merely export raw materials. And that is true. But he can help us, he said, with the new European market. Mohammed tells me that his organization has a good base of operations in Greece, and with the demise of international borders in Europe that would be the most logical point of entry for our consignments. They will not charge us for their technical assistance. They say they wish to establish goodwill only."

"They must want our help very badly," Ernesto observed.

"They have their own considerable resources, as they have demonstrated, *jefe.* But they seem to need some expertise for smuggling weapons in addition to people. In any case, they ask little, and they offer much."

"And what they offer will make our business more convenient?" Ernesto wondered.

"It will certainly make the *Yanquis* devote their resources to different tasks."

"It could create havoc in their country, but the political effects could be serious . . ."

"*Jefe,* the pressure they put upon us now can scarcely get worse, can it?"

"This new *norteamericano* president is a fool, but dangerous even so."

"And so, we can have our new friends distract him, *jefe,*" Pablo pointed out. "We will not even use any of our assets to do so. We have little risk, and the potential reward is large, isn't it?"

"I see that, but, Pablo, if it is traced to us, the cost could be serious."

"That's true, but again, how much additional pressure can they put on us?" Pablo asked. "They're attacking our political allies through the Bogotá government, and if they succeed in producing the effect they desire then the harm to us will be very serious indeed. You and the other members of the Council might become fugitives in our own land," the Cartel's intelligence chief warned. He didn't have to add that such an eventuality would take much of the fun out of the immense riches the Council members enjoyed. Money has little utility without a comfortable place to spend it. "There is an adage in that part of the world: The enemy of my enemy is my friend. *Jefe,* if there is a major downside to this proposal venture, I do not see it."

"You think I should meet with this man, then?"

"*Sí,* Ernesto. There should be no harm. He is more wanted by the *gringos* than we are. If we fear betrayal, then he should fear it even more so, shouldn't he? And in any case, we will take proper precautions."

"Very well, Pablo. I will discuss this with the Council with a recommendation that we hear him out," Ernesto conceded. "How difficult would it be to set up?"

"I would expect him to fly through Buenos Aires. Surely he knows how to travel safely. He probably has more false passports than we do, and he truly does not look conspicuously Arabian."

"His language skills?"

"Adequate," Pablo answered. "Speaks English like an Englishman, and that is a passport all its own."

"Through Greece, eh? Our product?"

"His organization has used Greece as a sally port for many years. *Jefe,* it's easier to smuggle our product than a group of men, and so on first inspection their methods and assets seem to be adaptable to our purposes. Our own people will have to examine them, of course."

"Any idea what his plans for North America might be?"

"I did not ask, *jefe.* It does not really concern us."

"Except insofar as it tightens border security. That could be an inconvenience"—Ernesto held up his hand—"I know, Pablo, not a serious one.

"As long as they help us out, I don't care what they want to do to America."

CHAPTER 3

GRAY FILES

ONE OF Hendley's advantages was that most of his assets worked elsewhere. They didn't have to be paid, housed, or fed. The taxpayers paid all of the overhead without knowing it, and, indeed, the "overhead" itself didn't know exactly what it was. Recent evolution in the world of international terrorism had caused America's two principal intelligence agencies, CIA and NSA, to work even more closely than they had in the past, and since they were an inconvenient hour's drive apart—negotiating the northern part of the D.C. Beltway can be like driving through a shopping mall parking lot during Christmas week—they did most of their communication via secure microwave links, from the top of NSA's headquarters building to the top of CIA's. That this sight line transited the roof of Hendley Associates had gone unnoticed. And it ought not to have mattered anyway, since the microwave link was encrypted. It had to be, since microwaves leaked off their line of transmission due to all manner of technical reasons. The laws of physics could be exploited, but not changed to suit the needs of the moment.

The bandwidth on the microwave channel was immense, due to compression algorithms that were little different from those used on personal computer networks. The King James Version of the Holy Bible could have flown from one building to another in seconds. These links were always up and running, most of the time swapping nonsense and random characters in order to befuddle anyone who might try to crack the encryption—but since this system was TAPDANCE encrypted, it was totally secure. Or so the wizards at NSA claimed. The system depended on CD-ROMs stamped with totally random transpositions, and unless you could find a key to atmospheric RF noise, that was the end of that. But every week, one of the guard detail from Hendley, accompanied by two of his colleagues—all of them randomly chosen from the guard force—drove to Fort Meade and picked up the week's encryption disks. These were inserted in the jukebox attached to the cipher machine, and when each was ejected after use, it was hand-carried to a microwave oven to be destroyed, under the eyes of three guards, all of them trained by years of service not to ask questions.

This somewhat laborious procedure gave Hendley access to all of the activity of the two agencies, since they were government agencies and they wrote everything down, from the "take" from deep-cover agents to the cost of the mystery meat served in the cafeteria.

Much—even most—of the information was of no interest to Hendley's crew, but nearly all of it was stored on high-density media and cross-referenced on a Sun Microsystems mainframe computer that had enough power to administer

the entire country, if need be. This enabled Hendley's staff to look in on the stuff the intelligence services were generating, along with the top-level analysis being done by experts in a multitude of areas and then cross-decked to others for comment and further analysis. NSA was getting better at this sort of work than CIA, or so Hendley's own top analyst thought, but many heads on a single problem often worked well—until the analysis became so convoluted as to paralyze action, a problem not unknown to the intelligence community. With the new Department of Homeland Security—for whose authorization Hendley thought he would have voted "Nay"—in the loop, CIA and NSA were both recipients of FBI analysis. That often just added a new layer of bureaucratic complexity, but the truth of the matter was the FBI agents took a slightly different take on raw intelligence. They thought in terms of building a criminal case to be put before a jury, and that was not at all a bad thing when you got down to it.

Each agency had its own way of thinking. The Federal Bureau of Investigation was composed of cops who had one slant. The Central Intelligence Agency had quite another, and it did have the power—occasionally exercised—to take some action, though that was quite rare. The National Security Agency, on the third hand, just got information, analyzed it, and passed it on to others—whether those individuals did anything with it was a question beyond Agency purview.

Hendley's chief of Analysis/Intelligence was Jerome Rounds. Jerry to his friends, he had a doctorate in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. He'd worked in the State Department's Office of Intelligence and Research—I&R—before moving on to Kidder, Peabody as a different sort of analyst for a different sort of paycheck, before then-Senator Hendley had personally spotted him during lunch in New York. Rounds had made a name for himself in the trading house as the in-house mind reader, but though he'd made himself a goodly pile of money, he'd found that money faded in importance once your kids' education was fully guaranteed and your sailboat was paid off. He'd chafed on Wall Street, and he'd been ready for the offer Hendley had made four years earlier. His duties included reading the minds of other international traders, which was something he'd learned to do in New York. He worked very closely with Sam Granger, who was both the head of currency trading at The Campus and also chief of the Operations Department.

It was near closing time when Jerry Rounds came into Sam's office. It was the job of Jerry and his staff of thirty to go over all the downloads from NSA and CIA. They all had to be speed-readers with sensitive noses. Rounds was the local equivalent of a bloodhound.

"Check this out," he said, dropping a sheet of paper on Granger's desk and taking a seat.

"Mossad lost a—Station Chief? Hmmph. How did that happen?"

"The local cops are thinking robbery. Killed with a knife, wallet missing, no sign of a protracted struggle. Evidently, he wasn't carrying heat with him at the time."

"Civilized place like Rome, why bother?" Granger observed. But they would now, for a while at least. "How did we find out?"

"Made the local papers that an official at the Israeli Embassy got whacked

while taking a leak. The Agency Chief of Station fingered him for a spook. Some people at Langley are running around in circles trying to figure what it all means, but they'll probably fall back on Occam's razor and buy what the local cops think. Dead man. No wallet. Robbery where the crook got a little carried away."

"You think the Israelis will buy that?" Granger wondered.

"About as soon as they serve roast pork at an embassy dinner. He was knifed between the first and second vertebrae. A street hood is more likely to slash the throat, but a pro knows that's messy and noisy. The Carabinieri are working the case—but it sounds as though they don't have dick to work with, unless somebody at the restaurant has a hell of a good memory. I wouldn't want to wager much on that one."

"So, what's it all mean?"

Rounds settled back in the chair. "When's the last time a Station Chief of any service got killed?"

"It's been a while. The Agency lost one in Greece—that local terrorist group. The COS was fingered by some prick . . . one of their own, defector, skipped over the wall, drinking vodka now and feeling lonely, I imagine. The Brits lost a guy a few years ago in Yemen . . ." He paused. "You're right. You don't gain much by killing a Station Chief. Once you know who he is, you watch him, find out who his contacts and sub-officers are. If you whack one, you lose assets instead of gaining any. So, you're thinking a terrorist, maybe sending a message to Israel?"

"Or maybe eliminating a threat they especially disliked. What the hell, the poor bastard was Israeli, wasn't he? Embassy official. Maybe just that was enough, but when a spook—especially a senior spook—goes down, you don't assume it's an accident, do you?"

"Any chance Mossad will ask for our help?" But Granger knew better. The Mossad was like the kid in the sandbox who never, ever, shared toys. They'd ask for help only if they were, A, desperate, and, B, convinced someone else could give them something they'd never get on their own. Then they'd act like the returning prodigal son.

"They won't confirm that this guy—named Greengold—was Mossad. That might be a little helpful to the Italian cops, might even get their counter-spook agency involved, but if it's been said, there is no evidence of it that Langley knows about."

But Langley would not think in such terms, Granger realized. So did Jerry. He could see it in his eyes. CIA didn't think in those terms because the intelligence business had become very civilized. You didn't kill off the other guy's assets, because that was bad for business. Then he might do something to your assets, and if you were fighting a guerrilla war on the streets of some foreign city, you were not getting the actual job done. The actual job was to get information back to your government, not to carve notches on your pistol grips. So, the Carabinieri would think in terms of a street crime because any diplomat's person was inviolable to the forces of any other country, protected by international treaty and by a tradition that went all the way back to the Persian Empire under Xerxes.

"Okay, Jerry, you're the man with the trained nose," Sam observed. "What

are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking there's a nasty ghost out on the street, maybe. This Mossad guy is at a gilt-edged restaurant in Rome, having lunch and a glass of nice wine. Maybe he's making a pickup at a dead drop—I checked the map, the restaurant is a brisk walk from the embassy building, a little too far for a regular lunch place, unless this Greengold guy was a jogging type, and it was the wrong time of day for that. So, unless he was really hot for the chef at Giovanni's, even money it's a dead drop or a meet of some sort. If so, he was set up. Not set up to be ID'd by his opposition, whoever that may be, but ID'd to be whacked. To the local cops, it may look like a robbery. To me, it looks like a deliberate assassination, and expertly done. The victim was instantly incapacitated. No chance to resist in any way. That's how you'd want to take a spook down—you never know how good he might be at self-defense, but if I were an Arab, I'd figure a Mossad guy for the bogeyman. I would not take many chances. No pistol, so he left nothing behind in the form of physical evidence, no bullet, no cartridge case. He takes the wallet to make it look like a robbery, but he killed a Mossad *rezident,* and he delivered a message, probably. Not that he dislikes Mossad, but that he can kill their people as easy as zipping his pants."

"You planning a book on the subject, Jerry?" Sam asked lightly. The chief analyst was taking a single factoid of hard information and spinning it into a complete soap opera.

Rounds just tapped his nose and smiled. "Since when do you believe in coincidences? Something smells about this one."

"What's Langley think?"

"Nothing yet. They've assigned it to the Southern Europe Desk for evaluation. I expect we'll see something in a week or so, and it won't say much. I know the guy who runs that shop."

"Dumb?"

Rounds shook his head. "No, that's not fair. He's smart enough, but he doesn't stick his neck out. Nor is he especially creative. I bet this doesn't even go as far as the Seventh Floor."

A new CIA Director had replaced Ed Foley, who was now retired and reportedly doing his own "I Was There" book, along with his wife, Mary Pat. In their day, they'd been pretty good, but the new DCI was a politically attractive judge beloved of President Kealty. He didn't do anything without Presidential approval, which meant it had to be run through the mini-bureaucracy of the National Security Council team in the White House, which was about as leaky as RMS *Titanic,* and hence beloved of the press. The Directorate of Operations was still growing, still training new field officers at The Farm in Tidewater, Virginia, and the new DDO wasn't a bad man at all—Congress had insisted on someone who knew how to work the field, somewhat to Kealty's dismay, but he knew how to play the game with Congress. The Directorate of Operations might be growing back into proper shape, but it would never do anything overtly bad under the current administration. Nothing to make Congress unhappy. Nothing to make the freelance haters of the intelligence community get loud about anything other than their routine complaints about historical wives' tales and grand conspiracy theories, and

how CIA had caused Pearl Harbor and the San Francisco Earthquake.

"So, nothing will come of this, you figure?" Granger asked, knowing the answer.

"Mossad will look around, tell its troops to stay awake, and that'll work for a month or two, and then most of them will settle down to their normal routines. Same with other services. Mainly, the Israelis will try to figure how their guy got fingered. Hard to speculate on that with the information at hand. Probably something simple. Usually is. Maybe he recruited the wrong guy and it bit him, maybe their ciphers got cracked—a bribed cipher clerk at the embassy, for example—maybe somebody talked to the wrong guy at the wrong cocktail party. The possibilities are pretty wide, Sam. It only takes one little slip to get a guy killed out there, and the best of us can make that sort of error."

"Something to put in the manual about what to do on the street, and what not to do." He'd done his own street time, of course, but mainly in libraries and banks, rooting around for information so dry as to make dust look moist, and finding the occasional diamond in a pile of it. He'd always maintained a cover and stuck to it until it had become as real to him as his birthday.

"Unless some other spook craps out on the street somewhere," Rounds observed. "Then we'll know if there really is a ghost out there."

THE AVIANCA flight from Mexico touched down at Cartagena five minutes early. He'd flown Austrian Air to London Heathrow, and then a British Airways flight to Mexico City before taking Colombia's flag carrier to the South American country. It was an old American Boeing, but he was not one to worry about the safety of air travel. The world had far greater dangers. At the hotel, he opened his bag to retrieve his day planner, took a walk outside, and spotted a public phone to make his call.

"Please tell Pablo that Miguel is here . . . *Gracias."* And with that he walked to a cantina for a drink. The local beer wasn't all that bad, Mohammed found. Though it was contrary to his religious beliefs, he had to fit in to this environment, and here everybody drank alcohol. After sitting for fifteen minutes, he walked back to his hotel, scanning twice for a tail, which he did not see. So, if he was being shadowed, it was by experts, and there was little defense against that, not in a foreign city where everyone spoke Spanish and no one knew the direction to Mecca. He was traveling on a British passport that said his name was Nigel Hawkins of London. There was indeed a flat at the indicated address. That would protect him even from a routine police stop, but no cover legend went forever, and if it came to that . . . then it came to that. You could not live your life in fear of the unknown. You made your plans, took the necessary precautions, and then you played the game.

It was interesting. The Spanish were ancient enemies of Islam, and this country was composed mostly of the children of Spain. But there were people in this country who loathed America almost as much as he did—only *almost,* because America was to them a source of vast income for their cocaine . . . as America was a source of vast income for the oil of his homeland. His own personal net worth was in the hundreds of millions of American dollars, stored in various banks around the world, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and most

recently, the Bahamas. He could afford his own private plane, of course, but that would be too easy to identify, and, he was sure, too easy to shoot down over water. Mohammed was contemptuous of America, but he was not blind to her power. Too many good men had gone unexpectedly to Paradise for forgetting that. It was hardly a bad destiny, but his work was among the living, not the dead.

"HEY, CAPTAIN."

Brian Caruso turned to see James Hardesty. It wasn't even seven in the morning. He'd just finished leading his short company of Marines through their morning routine of exercise and the three-mile run, and like all his men he'd worked up a good sweat in the process. He'd dismissed his people to their showers, and was on his way back to his quarters when he'd encountered Hardesty. But before he could say anything, a more familiar voice called.

"Skipper?" the captain turned to see Gunnery Sergeant Sullivan, his senior NCO.

"Yeah, Gunny. The people looked pretty sharp this morning."

"Yes, sir. You didn't work us too hard. Good of you, sir," the E-7 observed.

"How did Corporal Ward do?" Which was why Brian hadn't worked them too hard. Ward had said he was ready to get back into the swing, but he was still coming off some nasty wounds.

"He's puffing some, but he didn't cave on us. Corpsman Randall is keeping an eye on the lad for us. You know, for a squid, he isn't too bad," the gunny allowed. Marines are typically fairly solicitous to their Navy corpsmen, especially the ones tough enough to play in the weeds with Force Recon.

"Sooner or later the SEALs are going to invite him out to Coronado."

"True enough, Skipper, and then we're gonna have to break in a new squid."

"What you need, Gunny?" Caruso asked.

"Sir—oh, he's here. Hey, Mr. Hardesty. Just heard you were down to see the boss. Beg pardon, Captain."

"No problem. See you in an hour, Gunny."

"Aye, aye, sir." Sullivan saluted smartly and headed back to the barracks.

"He's a pretty good NCO," Hardesty thought aloud.

"Big time," Caruso agreed. "Guys like him run the Corps. They just tolerate people like me."

"How's about some breakfast, Cap'n?"

"Need a shower first, but sure."

"What's on the agenda?"

"Today's class work is on comms, to make sure we can all call in air and artillery support."

"Don't they know that?" Hardesty asked in surprise.

"You know how a baseball team does batting practice before every game, with the batting coach around? They all know how to swing a bat, right?"

"Gotcha." The reason they were called fundamentals was because they really were fundamental. And these Marines, like ballplayers, wouldn't object to the day's lesson. One trip into the tall weeds had taught them all how important the fundamentals were.

It was a short walk to Caruso's quarters. Hardesty helped himself to some

coffee and a newspaper, while the young officer showered. The coffee was pretty good for a single man's making. The paper, as usual, didn't tell him much he didn't already know, except for late sports scores, but the comics were always good for a laugh.

"Ready for breakfast?" the youngster asked, all cleaned up.

"How's the food here?" Hardesty stood.

"Well, kinda hard to screw up breakfast, isn't it?"

"True enough. Lead on, Captain." Together they drove the mile or so to the Consolidated Mess in Caruso's C-class Mercedes. The car marked him as a single man, to Hardesty's relief.

"I didn't expect to see you again for a while," Caruso said, from behind the wheel.

"Or at all?" the former Special Forces officer asked lightly.

"That, too, yes, sir."

"You passed the exam."

It was enough to turn his head. "What exam was that, sir?"

"I didn't think you'd notice," Hardesty observed with a chuckle.

"Well, sir, you have succeeded in confusing me this morning." Which, Captain Caruso was sure, was part of today's plan.

"There's an old saying: 'If you're not confused, you're misinformed.'"

"That sounds a little ominous," Captain Caruso said, turning right into the parking lot.

"It can be." He got out and followed the officer toward the building.

It was a large single-story building full of hungry Marines. The cafeteria line had racks and trays of the usual American breakfast foods, Frosted Flakes to bacon and eggs. And even some—

"You can try the bagels, but they aren't all that good, sir," Caruso warned as he got two English muffins and real butter. He was clearly too young to worry about cholesterol and the other difficulties that came with increasing years. Hardesty got himself a box of Cheerios, because he *had* gotten that old, rather to his annoyance, along with low-fat milk and non-sugar sweetener. The coffee mugs were large, and the seating permitted a surprising amount of anonymity, though there had to be four hundred people in here, of various ranks from corporal to full-bull colonel. His host steered him to a table in a crowd of young sergeants.

"Okay, Mr. Hardesty, what can I do for you?"

"Number one, I know you have security clearances, up to TS, right?"

"Yes, sir. Some compartmented stuff, but that doesn't concern you at all."

"Probably," Hardesty conceded. "Okay, what we're about to discuss goes a little higher than that. You cannot repeat this to anyone at all. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes, sir. This is code-word stuff. I understand." In fact, he didn't, thought Hardesty. This was actually beyond code word, but that explanation would have to wait for another venue. "Please go on, sir."

"You've been noticed by some fairly important people as a prime recruit prospect for a rather . . . a rather special organization that does not exist. You've heard this sort of thing before in movies or read it in books. But this is quite real, son. I am here to offer you a place in that organization."

"Sir, I am a Marine officer, and I like that."

"It will not prejudice your career in the Marines. As a matter of fact, you've been deep-dipped for promotion to major. You'll be getting that letter next week. So, you'll have to leave your current billet anyway. If you stay in the Marine Corps, you'll be sent to Headquarters Marine Corps next month, to work in the intelligence/special-operations shop. You're also going to get a Silver Star for your action in Afghanistan."

"What about my people? I put them in for decorations, too." It was the mark of this kid that he'd worry about that, Hardesty thought.

"Everyone's been approved. Now, you'll be able to return to the Corps whenever you wish. Your commission and routine advancement will not suffer from this at all."

"How did you manage that?"

"We have friends in high places," his guest explained. "So do you, as a matter of fact. You will continue to be paid through the Corps. You may have to set up new banking arrangements, but that's routine stuff."

"What will this new posting entail?" Caruso asked.

"It will mean serving your country. Doing things that are necessary to our national security, but doing them in a somewhat irregular manner."

"Doing what, exactly?"

"Not here, not now."

"Can you be any more mysterious, Mr. Hardesty? I might start understanding what you're talking about and spoil the surprise."

"I don't make the rules," he replied.

"Agency, eh?"

"Not exactly, but you'll find out in due course. What I need now is a yes or a no. You can leave this organization at any time if you find it not to your liking," he promised. "But this isn't the proper venue for a fuller explanation."

"When would I have to decide?"

"Before you finish your bacon and eggs."

The reply caused Captain Caruso to set his muffin down. "This isn't some sort of joke, right?" He'd taken his share of razzing due to his family connections.

"No, Captain, it isn't a joke."

The pitch was deliberately designed to be nonthreatening. People like Caruso, however courageous they might be, often regarded the unknown—more properly, the not-understood unknown—with some degree of trepidation. His profession was dangerous enough already, and the intelligent among us do not blissfully go seeking after danger. Theirs is usually a reasoned approach to hazard, after first making sure their training and experience are adequate to the task. And so Hardesty had made sure to tell Caruso that the womb of the United States Marine Corps would always be available to take him back. It was almost true, and that was close enough for his purposes, if not, perhaps, to the young officer's.

"What's your love life like, Captain?"

The question surprised him, but he answered it truthfully. "No attachments. There's a few girls I date, but nothing very serious yet. Is that a concern?" Just how dangerous might this be? he wondered.

"Only from a security point of view. Most men cannot keep secrets from their wives." But girlfriends were a different question altogether.

"Okay, how dangerous will this job be?"

"Not very," Hardesty lied, not skillfully enough to be entirely successful.

"You know, I've been planning to stay in the Corps at least long enough to be a light colonel."

"Your evaluator at Headquarters Marine Corps thinks you're good enough to make full-bull someday, unless you step on your crank along the way. Nobody thinks that's likely, but it has happened to a lot of good men." Hardesty finished his Cheerios and returned his attention to the coffee.

"Nice to know I have a guardian angel up there somewhere," Caruso observed dryly.

"As I say, you've been noticed. The Marine Corps is pretty good at spotting talent and helping it along."

"And so have some other people—spotted me, I mean."

"That's correct, Captain. But all I am offering you is a chance. You'll have to prove yourself along the way." The challenge was well considered. Capable young men had trouble turning away from one. Hardesty knew he had him.

IT HAD been a long drive from Birmingham to Washington. Dominic Caruso did it in one long day because he didn't much like cheap motels, but even starting at five in the morning didn't make it any shorter. He drove a white Mercedes C-class four-door much like his brother's, with lots of luggage piled in the back. He had been stopped twice, but on both occasions the state police cars had responded favorably to his FBI credentials—called "creedos" by the Bureau—and pulled away with nothing more than a friendly wave. There was a brotherhood among law-enforcement officers that extended at least as far as ignoring speeding violations. He arrived at Arlington, Virginia, just at ten that night, where he let a bellman unpack his car for him and took the elevator to his room on the third floor. The in-room bar had a split of a decent white wine, which he downed after the needed shower. The wine and boring TV helped him sleep. He left notice for a seven o'clock wake-up call, and faded out with the help of HBO.

"GOOD MORNING," Gerry Hendley said at 8:45 the next morning. "Coffee?"

"Thank you, sir." Jack availed himself of a cup and took his seat. "Thanks for calling back."

"Well, we looked at your academic records. You did okay at Georgetown."

"For what it costs, you might as well pay attention—and, besides, it wasn't all that hard." John Patrick Ryan, Jr., sipped at his coffee and wondered what would be coming next.

"We're prepared to discuss an entry-level job," the former senator told him right away. He'd never been one for beating about the bush, which was one of the reasons he and his visitor's father had gotten along so well.

"Doing what, exactly?" Jack asked, with his eyes perked up.

"What do you know about Hendley Associates?"

"Only what I've already told you."

"Okay, nothing of what I'm about to tell you can be repeated anywhere. Not

anywhere. Are you clear on that?"

"Yes, sir." And just that fast, everything was clear as hell. He'd guessed right, Jack told himself. Damn.

"Your father was one of my closest friends. I say 'was' because we can't see each other anymore, and we talk very rarely. Usually because he calls here. People like your dad never retire—never all the way, anyway. Your father was one of the best spooks who ever lived. He did some things that were never written down—at least not on government paper—and probably never will be written down. In this case, 'never' means fifty years or so. Your father is doing his memoirs. He's doing two versions, one for publication in a few years, and another that won't see the light of day for a couple of generations. It will not be published until after his death. That's his order."

It stuck hard at Jack that his father was making plans for after his own death. His dad—dead? It was a lot to grasp except in a distant, intellectual sense. "Okay," he managed to say. "Does Mom know this stuff?"

"Probably—no, almost certainly not. Some of it may not exist even at Langley. The government occasionally does things that are not committed to paper. Your father had a gift for stumbling into the middle of stuff like that."

"And what about you?" Junior asked.

Hendley leaned back and took a philosophical tone. "The problem is that no matter what you do, there's somebody who won't like it much. Like a joke. No matter how funny it is, somebody will be offended by it. But at a high level, when somebody is offended, instead of calling you on it to your face, he goes off and cries his eyes out to a member of the press, and it goes public, usually with a great big disapproving tone attached to it. Most often that's careerism raising its ugly head—getting ahead by backstabbing somebody senior to you. But it's also because people in senior positions like to make policy in accordance with their own version of right and wrong. That's called ego. Problem is, everyone has a different version of right and wrong. Some of them can be downright crazy.

"Now, take our current President. In the Senate Cloakroom, once Ed told me he was so opposed to capital punishment that he couldn't even have abided executing Adolf Hitler. That was after a few drinks—he tends to be verbose when he's been drinking, and the sad fact is that he drinks a little too much on occasion. When he said that to me, I joked about it. I told him not to say it in a speech—the Jewish vote is big and powerful and they might see it less as a deeply held principle than as a high-order insult. In the abstract a lot of people oppose capital punishment. Okay, I can respect that, though I do not agree with it. But the drawback to that position is that you cannot then deal decisively with people who do harm to others—sometimes serious harm—without violating your principles, and to some people, their consciences or political sensibilities will not let them do it. Even though the sad fact of the matter is that due process of law is not always effective, frequently outside our borders, and, on rare occasions, inside them.

"Okay, how does this affect America? CIA doesn't kill people—ever. At least not since the 1950s. Eisenhower was very skillful at using CIA. He was, in fact, so brilliant at exercising power that people never knew anything was happening and thought him a dullard because he didn't do the old war dance

in front of cameras. More to the point, it was a different world back then. World War Two was recent history, and the idea of killing a lot of people—even innocent civilians—was a familiar one, mainly from the bombing campaigns," Hendley clarified. "It was just a cost of doing business."

"And Castro?"

"That was President John Kennedy and his brother Robert. They had a hard-on for doing Castro. Most people think it was embarrassment over the Bay of Pigs fiasco. I personally think it might have come more from reading too many James Bond novels. There was a glamour in murdering people back then. Today we call it sociopathy," Hendley noted sourly. "Problem was, first, that it's a lot more fun to read about than actually to do it, and, second, it's not an easy thing to accomplish without highly trained and highly motivated personnel. Well, I guess they found out. Then, when it became public, somehow the involvement of the Kennedy family was glossed over, and CIA paid the price for doing—badly—what the sitting President had told them to do. President Ford's Executive Order put an end to it all. And so, CIA doesn't deliberately kill people anymore."

"What about John Clark?" Jack asked, remembering the look in that guy's eyes.

"He's an aberration of sorts. Yes, he has killed people more than once, but he was always careful enough to do it only when it was tactically necessary at the moment. Langley *does* allow people to defend themselves in the field, and he had a gift for making it tactically necessary. I've met Clark a couple of times. Mainly, I know him by reputation. But he's an aberration. Now that he's retired, maybe he'll write a book. But even if he does, it'll never have the full story in it. Clark plays by the rules, like your dad. Sometimes he bends those rules, but to my knowledge he's never once broken them—well, not as a federal employee," Hendley corrected himself. He and the elder Jack Ryan had once had a long talk about John Clark, and they were the only two people in all the world who knew the whole story.

"Once I told Dad that I wouldn't want to be on Clark's bad side."

Hendley smiled. "That's true enough, but you could also trust John Clark with the lives of your children. When we met last, you asked me a question about Clark. I can answer now: If he were younger, he'd be here," Hendley said revealingly.

"You just told me something," Jack said at once.

"I know. Can you live with it?"

"Killing people?"

"I didn't say that, exactly, did I?"

Jack Jr. put his coffee cup down. "Now I know why Dad says you're smart."

"Can you live with the fact that your father has taken a few lives in his time?"

"I know about that. Happened the night I was born. It's practically a family legend. The newsies made a lot of it while Dad was President. They kept bringing it up like it was leprosy or something. Except there's a cure for leprosy."

"I know. In a movie it's downright cool, but in real life people get the heebie-jeebies about it. The problem with the real world is that sometimes—

not often, but sometimes—it's necessary to do that sort of thing, as your father discovered . . . on more than one occasion, Jack. He never flinched. I think he even had bad dreams about it. But when he had to do it, he did it. That's why you're alive. That's why a lot of other people are alive."

"I know about the submarine thing. That's pretty much in the open, but—"

"More than just that. Your father never went out looking for trouble, but when it found him—as I said, he did what was necessary."

"I sorta remember when the people who attacked Mom and Dad—the night I was born, that is—were executed. I asked Mom about it. She's not real big on executing people, you see. In that case, she didn't mind very much. She was uncomfortable with it, but I suppose you'd say she saw the logic of the situation. Dad—you know, he didn't really like it either, but he didn't cry any tears over it."

"Your father had a gun to that guy's—the leader, I mean—his head, but he didn't squeeze off the round. It wasn't necessary, and so he held back. Had I been in his position, well, I don't know. It was a hard call, but your father made the right choice when he had ample reason not to."

"That's what Mr. Clark said. I asked him about it once. He said the cops were right there, so why bother? But I never really believed him. That's one hardcase mother. I asked Mike Brennan, too. He said it was impressive for a civilian to hold off. But he would not have killed the guy. Training, I guess."

"I'm not sure about Clark. He's not really a murderer. He doesn't kill people for fun or for money. Maybe he would have spared the guy's life. But no, a trained cop is not supposed to do anything like that. What do you think you would have done?"

"You can't know until you're there," Jack answered. "I thought it through once or twice. I decided Dad handled it okay."

Hendley nodded. "You're right. He handled the other part right, too. The guy in the boat he drilled in the head, he had to do it to survive, and when you have that choice, there's only one way to go."

"So, Hendley Associates does what, exactly?"

"We gather and act upon intelligence information."

"But you're not part of the government," Jack objected.

"Technically, no, we're not. We do things that have to be done, when the agencies of the government are unable to handle them."

"How often does that happen?"

"Not very," Hendley replied offhandedly. "But that may change—or it might not. Hard to tell right now."

"How many times—"

"You do not need to know," Hendley replied, with raised eyebrows.

"Okay. What does Dad know about this place?"

"He's the guy who persuaded me to set it up."

"Oh . . ." And just that fast it was all clear. Hendley had kissed off his political career in order to serve his country in a way that would never be recognized, never be rewarded. Damn. Did his own father have the stones to try this one? "And if you get into trouble somehow . . . ?"

"In a safety-deposit box belonging to my personal attorney are a hundred presidential pardons, covering any and all illegal acts that might have been

committed between the dates that my secretary will fill in when she types up the blanks, and signed by your father, a week before he left office."

"Is that legal?"

"It's legal enough," Hendley replied. "Your dad's Attorney General, Pat Martin, said it would pass muster, though it would be pure dynamite if it ever became public."

"Dynamite, hell, it would be a nuke on Capitol Hill," Jack thought aloud. It was, in fact, something of an understatement.

"That's why we're careful here. I cannot encourage my people to do things that might end them up in prison."

"Just lose their credit rating forever."

"You have your father's sense of humor, I see."

"Well, sir, he *is* my dad, you know? Comes along with the blue eyes and black hair."

The academic records said that he had the brains. Hendley could see that he had the same inquisitive nature, and the ability to sort the wheat from the chaff. Did he have his father's guts . . . ? Better never to have to find out. But even his best people couldn't predict the future, except in currency fluctuations—and on that they cheated. That was the one illegal thing he could get prosecuted for, but, no, that would never happen, would it?

"Okay, time for you to meet Rick Bell. He and Jerry Rounds do the analysis here."

"Have I met them before?"

"Nope. Neither has your father. That's one of the problems with the intelligence community. It's gotten too damned big. Too many people—the organizations are always tripping over themselves. If you have the best hundred people in pro football on the same team, the team will self-destruct from internal dissension. Every man was born with an ego, and they're like the proverbial long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Nobody objects too much because the government isn't supposed to function too efficiently. It would scare people if it did. That's why we're here. Come on. Jerry's office is right down the hall."

"CHARLOTTESVILLE?" Dominic asked. "I thought—"

"Since the time of Director Hoover, the Bureau has had a safe house facility down there. Technically, it doesn't belong to the FBI. It's where we keep the Gray Files."

"Oh." He'd heard about that from a senior instructor at the Academy. The Gray Files—outsiders never even knew the term—were supposed to be Hoover's files on political figures, all manner of personal irregularities, which politicians collected as other men collected stamps and coins. Supposedly destroyed at Hoover's death in 1972, in fact they'd been sequestered in Charlottesville, Virginia, in a large safe house on a hilltop across the gentle valley from Tom Jefferson's Monticello and overlooking the University of Virginia. The old plantation house had been built with a capacious wine cellar, which for more than fifty years had held rather more precious contents. It was the blackest of Bureau secrets, known only to a handful of people, which did not necessarily include the sitting FBI Director, but rather

controlled by only the most trusted of career agents. The files were never opened, at least not the political ones. That junior senator during the Truman administration, for example, did not need to have his penchant for underage females revealed to the public. He was long dead in any case, as was the abortionist. But the fear of these records, whose continuation was widely believed to be carried on, explained why Congress rarely attacked the FBI on matters of appropriations. A really good archivist with a computerized memory might have inferred their existence from subtle holes in the Bureau's voluminous records, but that would have been a task worthy of Heracles. Besides, there were much juicier secrets than that to be found in the White Files squirreled off in a former West Virginia coal mine—or so an historian might think.

"We're going to detach you from the Bureau," Werner said next.

"What?" Dominic Caruso asked. "Why?" The shock of that pronouncement nearly ejected him from his chair.

"Dominic, there's a special unit that wants to talk to you. Your employment will continue there. They will fill you in. I said 'detach,' not 'terminate,' remember. Your pay will continue. You'll be kept on the books as a Special Agent on special assignment to counterterrorism investigations directly under my office. You'll continue to get normal promotions and pay raises. This information is secret, Agent Caruso," Werner went on. "You cannot discuss it with anyone but me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir, but I cannot say I understand."

"You will in due course. You will continue to investigate criminal activity, and probably to act upon it. If your new assignment turns out to be not to your liking, you can tell me, and we'll reassign you to a new field division for more conventional duties. But, I repeat, you cannot discuss your new assignment with anyone but me. If anyone asks, you're still a Special Agent of the FBI, but you are unable to discuss your work with anyone. You will not be vulnerable to any adverse action of any kind as long as you do your job properly. You will find that the oversight is looser than you're used to. But you will be accountable to someone at all times."

"Sir, this is still not very clear," Special Agent Caruso observed.

"You will be doing work of the highest national importance, mainly counterterrorism. There will be danger attached to it. The terrorist community is not a civilized one."

"This is an undercover assignment, then?"

Werner nodded. "Correct."

"And it's run out of this office?"

"More or less," Werner dodged with a nod.

"And I can bail out whenever I want?"

"Correct."

"Okay, sir, I'll give it a look. What do I do now?"

Werner wrote on a small pad of paper and handed it across. "Go to that address. Tell them you want to see Gerry."

"Right now, sir?"

"Unless you have something else to do."

"Yes, sir." Caruso stood, shook hands, and took his leave. At least it would

be a pleasant drive into the Virginia horse country.

CHAPTER 4

BOOT CAMP

THE DRIVE back across the river to the Marriott allowed Dominic to collect his bags—with a twenty-dollar bill to the bellman—and then punch in his destination on the Mercedes's navigation computer. Soon he was southbound on Interstate 95, leaving Washington behind. The skyline of the national capital actually looked pretty good in his rearview mirror. The car drove well, about what you'd expect of a Mercedes; the local talk radio was pleasingly conservative—cops tended to be that way—and traffic wasn't too bad, though he found himself pitying the poor bastards who had to drive into D.C. every day to push paper in the Hoover Building and all the other government-grotesque buildings surrounding The Mall. At least FBI Headquarters had its own pistol range for stress management. Probably well used, Dominic thought.

Just before hitting Richmond, the female voice on his computer told him to take a right onto the Richmond Beltway, which presently delivered him to I-64 west toward the rolling, wooded hills. The countryside was pleasant, and green enough. Probably a lot of golf courses and horse farms. He'd heard that the CIA had its safe houses here from back when they had to debrief Soviet defectors. He wondered what the places were used for now. Chinese, maybe? Frenchmen, perhaps. Certainly they hadn't been sold. The government didn't like letting go of things, except maybe to close down military bases. The clowns from the Northeast and Far West loved to do that. They didn't much like the Bureau either, though they were probably afraid of it. He didn't know what it was about cops and soldiers that bothered some politicians, but he didn't much worry about it. He had his rice bowl, and they had theirs.

After another hour and fifteen minutes or so, he started looking for his exit sign, but the computer didn't need him.

"PREPARE TO TURN RIGHT AT THE NEXT EXIT," the voice said, about two minutes ahead of time.

"Fine, honey," Special Agent Caruso replied, without getting an acknowledgment. A minute later, he took the suggested exit—without so much as a VERY GOOD from the computer—and then took some ordinary city streets through the pleasant little town and up some gentle hills to the north wall of this valley, until finally:

"TAKE THE NEXT LEFT AND YOU HAVE ARRIVED AT YOUR DESTINATION . . ."

"That's nice, honey, thank you," he observed.

"YOUR DESTINATION" was the end of an entirely ordinary-looking country road, maybe a driveway, since it had no lines painted on it. A few hundred yards farther and he saw two redbrick abutments and a white-rail gate that

was conveniently swung open. There was a house another three hundred yards off, with six white pillars holding up the front part of the roof. The roof appeared to be slate—rather old slate, at that—and the walls were weathered brick that hadn't been red in over a hundred years. This place had to be over a century old, maybe two. The driveway was recently raked pea-sized gravel. The grass—there was a *lot* of grass here—was a luscious golf-course green. Someone came out of a side door and waved him around to the left. He twisted the wheel to head behind the house, and got a surprise. The mansion —what *did* you call a house this big?—was larger than it first appeared, and had a fairsized parking lot, which at the moment held a Chevy Suburban, a Buick SUV, and—another Mercedes C-class just like his, with North Carolina tags. The likelihood of this coincidence was too remote even to enter his imagina—

"Enzo!"

Dominic snapped his head around. "Aldo!"

People often remarked on their resemblance, though it was even more apparent when they were apart. Both had dark hair and fair skin. Brian was the taller by twenty-four millimeters. Dominic was perhaps ten pounds heavier. Whatever differences in mannerisms they'd had as boys had stayed with them as they'd grown up together. Since both were partly Italian in ancestry, they hugged warmly—but they didn't kiss. They weren't *that* Italian.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Dominic was the first to ask.

"Me? What about you?" Brian shot back, heading to help with his brother's bags. "I read about your shoot in Alabama. What's the story?"

"Pedophile," Dominic replied, pulling out his two-suiter. "Raped and killed a cute little girl. I got there about half an hour too late."

"Hey, ain't nobody perfect, Enzo. Papers said you put an end to his career."

Dominic looked right into Brian's eyes. "Yeah, I managed to accomplish that."

"How, exactly?"

"Three in the chest."

"Works every time," Captain Brian Caruso observed. "And no lawyers to cry over his body."

"No, not this time." His words were not the least bit jolly, but his brother heard the cold satisfaction.

"With this, eh?" The Marine lifted his brother's automatic from its holster. "Looks nice," he said.

"It shoots pretty good. Loaded, bro, do be careful."

Brian ejected the magazine and cleared the chamber. "Ten millimeter?"

"That's right. FBI-issue. Makes nice holes. The Bureau went back to it after Inspector O'Day had that shoot-out with the bad guys—you know, Uncle Jack's little girl."

Brian remembered the story well: the attack on Katie Ryan at her school shortly after her dad had become President, the shoot-out, the kills.

"That dude had his shit wired pretty tight," he said. "And you know, he's not even an ex-Marine. He was a Navy puke before he turned cop. That's what they said at Quantico, anyway."

"They did a training tape of the job. I met him once, just shook his hand

with twenty other guys. Son of a bitch can shoot. He talked about waiting for your chance and making the first shot count. He double-tapped both their heads."

"How did he keep his cool?" The rescue of Katie Ryan had struck home for both Caruso boys. She was, after all, their first cousin, and a nice little girl, the image of her mother.

"Hey, you smelled the smoke over there. How did you keep yours?"

"Training. I had Marines to look after, bro."

Together, they manhandled Dominic's things inside. Brian showed the way upstairs. They had separate bedrooms, next to each other. Then they came back to the kitchen. Both got coffee and sat at the kitchen table.

"So, how's life in the Marine Corps, Aldo?"

"Gonna make major soon, Enzo. Got myself a Silver Star for what I did over there—wasn't that big a deal, really, I just did what they trained me to do. One of my men got shot up, but he's okay now. We didn't bag the guy we were after—he wasn't in a mood to surrender, so Gunny Sullivan sent him off to see Allah—but we got two live ones and they talked some, gave us some good information, the Intel guys told me."

"What did you get the pretty ribbon for?" Dominic asked pointedly.

"Mainly for staying alive. I shot three of the bad guys myself. Weren't even hard shots, really. I just took 'em. Later they asked me if I had any nightmares about it. The Marine Corps just has too many doctors around—and they're all squids."

"Bureau's the same way, but I blew it off. No bad dreams about that bastard. The poor little girl. I should've shot his dick off."

"Why didn't you?"

"'Cause that doesn't kill your ass, Aldo. But three in the heart does."

"You didn't shoot him on the spur of the moment, did you?"

"Not exactly, but—"

"And that's why you're here, Special Agent Caruso," a man said, entering the room. He was over six feet, a very fit fifty, both of the others thought.

"Who are you, sir?" Brian asked.

"Pete Alexander," the man answered.

"I was supposed to meet you last—"

"No, actually you weren't, but that's what we told the general." Alexander sat down with his own cup of coffee.

"So, who are you, then?" Dominic asked.

"I'm your training officer."

"Just you?" Brian asked.

"Training for what?" Dominic asked at the same time.

"No, not just me, but I'm the one who'll be here all the time. And the nature of the training will show you what you're training for," he answered. "Okay, you want to know about me. I graduated Yale thirty years ago, in political science. I was even a member of Skull and Bones. You know, the boys' club that conspiracy theorists like to prattle about. Jesus, like people in their late teens can really accomplish anything beyond getting laid, on a *good* Friday night." His brown eyes and the look in them hadn't come from a college, however, even an Ivy League one. "Back in the old days, the Agency liked to

recruit people from Yale and Harvard and Dartmouth. The kids there have gotten over it. They all want to be merchant bankers now and make money. I worked twenty-five years in the Clandestine Service, and then I got recruited by The Campus. Been with them ever since."

"The Campus? What's that?" the Marine asked. Alexander noticed that Dominic Caruso did not. He was listening and watching very closely. Brian would never stop being a Marine, and Dominic would never stop being FBI. They never did. It was both good and bad, in both cases.

"*That* is a privately funded intelligence service."

"Privately funded?" Brian asked. "How the hell—"

"You'll see how it works later, and when you do, you will be surprised how easily it's done. What concerns you right here and right now is *what* they do."

"They kill people," Dominic said immediately. The words came out seemingly of their own accord.

"Why do you think that?" Alexander asked innocently.

"The outfit is small. We're the only people here, judging by the parking pad outside. I'm not experienced enough to be an expert agent. All I did was whack somebody who needed it, and next day I'm up in Headquarters talking to an assistant director, and a couple of days after that I drive to D.C. and get sent down here. This place is very, very special, very, very small, and it has top-level approval for whatever it does. You're not selling U.S. Savings Bonds here, are you?"

"The book on you is that you have good analytical ability," Alexander said. "Can you learn to keep your mouth shut?"

"It's not needed in this particular place, I should think. But, yeah, I know how, when the situation calls for it," Dominic said.

"Okay, here's the first speech. You guys know what 'black' means, right? It means a program or project that is not acknowledged by the government. People pretend it doesn't exist. The Campus takes that one step further: We really do not exist. There is not a single written document in the possession of any government employee that has a single word about us. From this moment on, you two young gentlemen do not exist. Oh, sure, you, Captain—or is it Major already?—Caruso, you get a paycheck that's going to be direct-deposited into whatever bank account you set up this week, but you are no longer a Marine. You are on detached duty, whose nature is unknown. And you, Special Agent Dominic Caruso—"

"I know. Gus Werner told me. They dug a hole and pulled it in after them."

Alexander nodded. "You will both leave your official identification documents, dog tags, everything, here before you leave. You can keep your names, maybe, but a name is just a couple of words, and nobody believes a name in this business anyway. That's the funny part about my time in the field with the Agency. Once on a job, I changed names without thinking about it. Damned embarrassing when I realized it. Like an actor: All of a sudden I'm Macbeth when I'm supposed to be Hamlet. No harm came of it, though, and I didn't croak at the end of the play."

"What, exactly, will we be doing?" This was Brian.

"Mostly, you'll be doing investigative work. Tracking money. The Campus is particularly good at that. You'll find out how and why later. You will probably

deploy together. You, Dominic, will do most of the heavy lifting on the investigative side. You, Brian, will back him up on the muscle side, and along the way you'll learn to do what—what was it you called him a little while ago?"

"Oh, you mean Enzo? I call him that because he had a heavy foot when he got his driver's license. You know, like Enzo Ferrari."

Dominic pointed to his brother and laughed. "He's Aldo because he dresses like a dweeb. Like in that wine commercial, Aldo Cella: 'He's not a slave to fashion'? It's a family joke."

"Okay, go to Brooks Brothers and dress better," Pete Alexander told Brian. "Your cover mainly will be as a businessman or a tourist. So, you'll have to dress neatly, but not like the Prince of Wales. You'll both let your hair grow out, especially you, Aldo."

Brian rubbed a hand over his head stubble. It marked him anywhere in the civilized world as a United States Marine. It could have been worse. Army Rangers were even more radical in the hair department. Brian would look like a fairly normal human being in a month or so. "Damn, I'll have to buy a comb."

"What's the plan?"

"For today, just relax and settle in. Tomorrow we wake up early and make sure you two are in decent physical shape. Then there's weapons proficiency—and the sit-down classwork. You're both computer-literate, I presume."

"Why do you ask?" This was Brian.

"The Campus mainly works like a virtual office. You'll be issued computers with built-in modems, and that's how you'll communicate with the home office."

"What about security?" Dominic asked.

"The machines have pretty good security built in. If there's a way to crack them, nobody's found it yet."

"That's good to know," Enzo observed, dubiously. "They use computers in the Corps, Aldo?"

"Yeah, we have all the modern conveniences, even toilet paper."

"AND YOUR name is Mohammed?" Ernesto asked.

"That is correct, but for now, call me Miguel." Unlike with Nigel, it was a name he'd be able to remember. He had not begun by invoking Allah's blessing on this meeting. These unbelievers would not have understood.

"Your English is—well, you *sound* English."

"I was educated there," Mohammed explained. "My mother was English. My father was Saudi."

"Was?"

"Both are dead."

"My sympathies," Ernesto offered with questionable sincerity. "So, what can we do for each other?"

"I told Pablo here about the idea. Has he filled you in?"

"*Sí,* he has, but I wish to hear it directly from you. You understand that I represent six others who share my business interests."

"I see. Do you have the power to negotiate for all of them?"

"Not entirely, but I will present what you say to them—you need not meet with them all—and they have never rejected my suggestions. If we come to an agreement here, it can be fully ratified by the end of the week."

"Very well. You know the interests I myself represent. I am empowered to make an agreement, as well. Like you, we have a major enemy nation to the north. They are putting ever-greater pressure on my friends. We wish to retaliate, and to deflect their pressure in other directions."

"It is much the same with us," Ernesto observed.

"Therefore, it is in our mutual interests to cause unrest and chaos within America. The new American president is a weak man. But for that reason he can be a dangerous one. The weak are quicker to use force than the strong. Even though they use it inefficiently, it can be an annoyance."

"Their methods of intelligence-gathering concern us. You also?"

"We have learned caution," Mohammed replied. "What we do not have is a good infrastructure in America. For this we need assistance."

"You don't? That's surprising. Their news media is full of reports about the FBI and other agencies busily tracking your people within their borders."

"At the moment, they are chasing shadows—and sowing discord in their own land by doing so. It complicates the task of building a proper network so that we can conduct offensive operations."

"The nature of those operations does not concern us?" Pablo asked.

"That is correct. It is nothing you have not done yourselves, of course." *But not in America,* he did not add. Here in Colombia the gloves were all the way off, but they'd been careful to limit themselves in the U.S., their "customer" nation. So much the better. It would be entirely out of character with anything they'd done. Operational security was a concept both sides fully understood.

"I see," the senior Cartel man noted. He was no fool. Mohammed could see that in his eyes. The Arab was not going to underestimate these men or their capabilities . . .

Nor would he mistake them for friends. They could be as ruthless as his own men, he knew that. Those who denied God could be every bit as dangerous as those who worked in His Name.

"So what can you offer us?"

"We have conducted operations in Europe for a long time," said Mohammed. "You wish to expand your marketing efforts there. We've had a highly secure network in place for over twenty years. The changes in European commerce—the diminution of the importance of borders, and so forth—works in your favor, as it has worked in ours. We have a cell in the port city of Piraeus that can easily accommodate your needs, and contacts within the transnational trucking companies. If they can transport weapons and people for us, they can surely transport your products easily enough."

"We will need a list of names, the people with whom we can discuss the technical aspects of this business," Ernesto told his guest.

"I have it with me." Mohammed held up his personal laptop computer. "They are accustomed to doing business in return for monetary considerations." He saw his hosts nod without asking about how much money. Clearly, this was not a matter of great concern for them.

Ernesto and Pablo were thinking: There were over three hundred million

people in Europe, and many of them would doubtless enjoy the Colombians' cocaine. Some European countries even allowed the use of drugs in discreet, controlled—and taxed—settings. The money involved was insufficient to make a decent profit, but it did have the advantage of setting the proper atmosphere. And nothing, not even medicinal-quality heroin, was as good as Andean coca. For that they would pay their Euros, and this time it would be enough to make this venture profitable. The danger, of course, was in the distribution side. Some careless street dealers would undoubtedly be arrested, and some of them would talk. So, there had to be ample insulation between the wholesale distribution and retail sides, but that was something they knew how to do—no matter how professional the European policemen were, they could not be all that different from the Americans. Some of them would even happily take the Cartel's Euros, and grease the skids. Business was business. And if this Arab could help with that—for free, which was truly remarkable—so much the better. Ernesto and Pablo did not react physically to the business offer on the table. An outsider might have taken their demeanor for boredom. It was anything but that, of course. This offer was heaven-sent. A whole new market was going to open up, and with the new revenue stream it brought, maybe they could buy their country entirely. They'd have to learn a new way of doing business, but they'd have the money to experiment, and they were adaptable creatures: fish, as it were, swimming in a sea of peasants and capitalists.

"How do we contact these people?" Pablo inquired.

"My people will make the necessary introductions."

Better and better, Ernesto thought.

"And what services will you require of us?" he finally asked.

"We will need your help to transport people into America. How would we go about this?"

"If you mean physically moving people from your part of the world into America, the best thing is to fly them into Colombia—right here to Cartagena, in fact. Then we will arrange for them to be flown into other Spanish-speaking countries to the north. Costa Rica, for example. From there, if they have reliable travel documents, they can fly there directly, via an American airline, or through Mexico. If they appear Latin and speak Spanish, they can be smuggled across the Mexican-American border—it is a physical challenge, and some of them might be apprehended, but if so, they'd simply be returned to Mexico, for another attempt. Or, again with proper documents, they could just walk across the border into San Diego, California. Once in America, it's a question of maintaining your cover. If money is not an issue—"

"It isn't," Mohammed assured him.

"Then you retain a local attorney—few of them have much in the way of scruples—and arrange the purchase of a suitable safe house to serve as a base of operations. Forgive me—I know we agreed that such operations need not concern us—but if you gave me some idea of what you have in mind, I could advise you."

Mohammed thought for a few moments, and then explained.

"I see. Your people must be properly motivated to do such things," Ernesto observed.

"They are." Could this man have any doubt of that? Mohammed wondered.

"And with good planning and nerve, they can even survive. But you must never underestimate the American police agencies. In our business we can make financial arrangements with some of them, but that is very unlikely in your case."

"We understand that. Ideally, we would want our people to survive, but sadly we know that some will be lost. They understand the risk." He didn't talk about Paradise. These people would not understand. The God they worshipped folded into their wallets.

What sort of fanatic throws his people away like that? Pablo asked himself. His men freely took their risks, measuring the money to be gained against the consequences of failure, and made decisions out of their own free will. Not these people. Well, one couldn't always choose one's business associates.

"Very well. We have a number of blank American passports. It is your job to be certain that the people you send us can speak proper English or Spanish, and can present themselves properly. I trust none of them will partake in flying lessons?" Ernesto meant it as a joke.

Mohammed did not take it as one.

"The time for that is past. Success rarely succeeds twice in my field of endeavor."

"Fortunately, we have a different field," Ernesto responded. And it was true. He could send shipments in cargo container boxes via commercial vessels and trucks all over America. If one of them was lost, and the programmed destination discovered, America had many legal protections for his downstream employees. Only the foolish ones went to prison. Over the years, they'd learned to defeat sniffer dogs and all the other means of discovery. The most important thing was that they used people who were willing to take risks, and most of them survived to retire back to Colombia and join the upper middle class, their prosperity the result of something in the distant, fading past, never to be repeated or spoken of.

"So," Mohammed said. "When can we commence operations?"

This man is anxious, Ernesto noted. But he would accommodate him. Whatever he managed to accomplish would draw manpower away from America's counter-smuggling operations, and that was good. The relatively minor cross-border losses he had learned to endure would shrink to even more trivial levels. The street price of cocaine would drop, but demand would increase somewhat, and so there would be no net loss in sales revenue. That would be the tactical profit. More to the point, America would become less interested in Colombia, and shift her focus of intelligence operations elsewhere. That would be his strategic advantage from this endeavor . . .

. . . and he always had the option of sending information to the CIA. Terrorists had appeared unexpectedly in his backyard, he could say, and their operations would be understood to be beyond the pale even for the Cartel. While that would not gain him the affection of America, it would not hurt him, either. And any of his own people who'd provided assistance to the terrorists could be dealt with internally, as it were. The Americans would actually respect that.

So, there was a real upside, and a controllable downside. On the whole, he

decided, this had the makings of a valuable and profitable operation.

"Señor Miguel, I will propose this alliance to my colleagues, with my recommendation that we undertake it. You can expect a final decision by the end of this week. Will you remain in Cartagena, or will you be traveling?"

"I prefer not to remain in one place too long. I fly out tomorrow. Pablo can reach me via the Internet with your decision. For the moment, I thank you for a cordial business meeting."

Ernesto stood and took his guest's hand. He decided then and there to consider Miguel as a businessman in a similar but not competitive field of endeavor. Not a friend, certainly, but an ally of convenience.

"HOW THE hell did you manage this?" Jack asked.

"Ever hear of a company called INFOSEC?" Rick Bell asked in return.

"Encryption stuff, right?"

"Correct. Information Systems Security Company. The company's domiciled outside of Seattle. They have the best information-security program there is. Headed by a former deputy head of the Z-Division over at Fort Meade. He and three colleagues set the company up about nine years ago. I'm not sure NSA can crack it, short of brute-forcing it with their new Sun Workstations. Just about every bank in the world uses it, especially the ones in Liechtenstein and the rest of Europe. But there's a trapdoor in the program."

"And nobody's found it?" Buyers of computer programs had learned over the years to have outside experts go over such programs line by line, as a defense against playful software engineers, of which there were far too many.

"Those NSA guys do good code," Bell responded. "I have no idea what's in there, but these guys still have their old NSA school ties hanging in the closet, y'know?"

"And Fort Meade listens in, and we get what they dig up when they fax it to Langley," Jack said. "Anybody at CIA good at tracking money?"

"Not as good as our people."

"Takes a thief to catch a thief, eh?"

"Helps to know the mind-set of the adversary," Bell confirmed. "It's not a large community we're dealing with here. Hell, we know most of them—we're in the same business, right?"

"And that makes me an additional asset?" Jack asked. He was not a prince under American law, but Europeans still thought in such terms. They'd bow and scrape just to shake his hand, regard him as a promising young man however thick his head might turn out to be, and seek his favor, first because of the possibility he might speak a kind word into the right ear. It was called corruption, of course, or at least the atmosphere for it.

"What did you learn in the White House?" Bell asked.

"A little, I suppose," Jack responded. Mostly, he'd learned things from Mike Brennan, who'd cordially detested all the diplomatic folderol, to say nothing of the political stuff that happened there every day. Brennan had talked it over with his foreign colleagues often enough, who saw the same things in their own capitals, and who thought much the same of it, from behind the same blank faces when they stood post. It was probably a better way to learn all this stuff than his father had, Jack thought. He hadn't been forced to learn to swim

while struggling not to drown. It was something his father had never spoken about, except when angry at the whole corrupting process.

"Be careful talking to Gerry about it," said Bell. "He likes to say how clean and upright the trading business is by comparison."

"Dad really likes the guy. I guess maybe they're a little alike."

"No," Bell corrected, "they're a *lot* alike."

"Hendley got out of politics because of the accident, right?"

Bell nodded. "That's it. Wait until you have a wife and kids. It's about the biggest hit a man can take. Even worse than you might think. He had to go and identify the bodies. It wasn't pretty. Some people would eat a gun after that. But he didn't. He'd been thinking about a run for the White House himself, thought maybe Wendy would make a good First Lady. Maybe so, but his lust for that job died along with his wife and kids." He didn't go further. The senior people at The Campus protected the boss, in reputation at least. They thought him a man who deserved loyalty. There was no considered line of succession at The Campus. Nobody had thought that far forward, and the subject never came up in board meetings. Those were mainly concerned with non–business matters anyway. He wondered if John Patrick Ryan, Jr., would take note of that one blank spot in the makeup of The Campus. "So," Bell went on, "what do you think so far?"

"I read the transcripts they gave me of what the central bank heads say back and forth to each other. It's surprising how venal some of that stuff is." Jack paused. "Oh, yeah, shouldn't be surprised, should I?"

"Any time you give people control of that much money or power, some corruption is bound to happen. What surprises me is the way their friendships cross national lines. A lot of these guys profit personally when their own currencies are hurt, even if it means a little inconvenience for their fellow citizens. Back in the old-old days, the nobility frequently felt more at ease with foreign nobility than with the people on their own estates who bowed down to the same king. That characteristic hasn't died yet—at least not over there. Here the big industrialists might work together to lobby Congress, but they don't often hand freebies to them, and they don't trade secrets. Conspiracy at that level isn't impossible, but concealing it for a long time is pretty tough. Too many people, and every one has a mouth. Europe's getting the same way. There's nothing the media likes better than a scandal, here or there, and they'd rather clobber a rich crook than a cabinet minister. The latter is often a good source, after all. The former is just a crook."

"So, how do you keep your people honest?"

It was a good question, Bell thought, and one they worried about all the time, though it wasn't spoken about much.

"We pay our people pretty well, and everyone here is part of a group investment plan that makes them feel comfortable. The annualized return is about nineteen percent over the last few years."

"That's not bad," Junior understated. "All within the law?"

"That depends on the lawyer you talk to, but no U.S. Attorney is going to make a big deal about it, and we're very careful how we manage it. We don't like greed here. We could turn this place into the biggest thing since Ponzi, but then people would notice. So, we don't flaunt anything. We make enough

to cover our operations and to make sure the troops are well provided for." They also kept track of the employees' money, and the trades they made, if any. Most didn't, though some worked accounts through the office, which, again, was profitable but not greedy. "You'll give us account numbers and codes to all of your personal finances, and the computers will keep track of them."

"I have a trust account through Dad, but it's managed through an accounting firm in New York. I get a nice allowance, but no access to the principal. What I make on my own is mine alone, however, unless I send it into the CPAs. Then they build it up and send me a statement every quarter. When I turn thirty, I'm allowed to play with it on my own." Turning thirty was a little distant for young Jack to concern himself about at the moment, however.

"We know," Bell assured him, "it's not a question of lack of trust. It's just that we want to make sure nobody's developed a gambling habit."

Probably the best mathematicians of all time were the ones who'd made up the rules for gambling games, Bell thought. They'd provided just enough illusion that you had a chance to sucker you in. Born inside the human mind was the most dangerous of drugs. That was called "ego," too.

"So, I start out on the 'white' side of the house? Watching currency fluctuations and stuff?" said Jack.

Bell nodded. "Correct. You need to learn the language first."

"Fair enough." His father had started off a lot more humbly than this, as a junior accounting manager at Merrill Lynch who'd had to cold-call people. Paying one's dues was probably bad for the ego but good for the soul. His father had often lectured him on the Virtue of Patience. He'd said that it was a pain in the ass to acquire, even after acquiring it. But the game had rules, even in this place. *Especially in this place,* Jack realized on reflection. He wondered what happened to people on The Campus who crossed over the line. Probably nothing good.

"BUON VINO," Dominic observed. "For a government installation, the wine cellar isn't half bad." The year on the bottle read 1962, long before he and his brother had been born . . . for that matter, so long ago their mom had just been thinking about Mercy High School, a few blocks from their grandparents' place on Loch Raven Boulevard in Baltimore . . . toward the end of the last Ice Age, probably. But Baltimore was a hell of a long way from the Seattle they'd grown up in. "How old is this place?" he asked Alexander.

"The property? It goes back to before the Civil War. The house was started in seventeen-something. Burned down and rebuilt in 1882. Government got hold of it just before Nixon was elected. The owner was an old OSS guy, J. Donald Hamilton, worked with Donovan and his crowd. He got a fair price when he sold it, moved out to New Mexico and died there in 1986, I think, aged ninety-four. They say he was a mover and shaker in his day, stuck it out pretty far in World War One, and helped Wild Bill work against the Nazis. There's a painting of him in the library. Looks like a guy to step aside for. And, yeah, he did know his wines. This one's from Tuscany."

"Goes nicely with veal," Brian said. He'd done the cooking.

“This veal goes well with anything. You didn’t learn that in the Marine Corps,” Alexander observed.

“From Pop. He is a better cook than Mom,” Dominic explained. “You know, it’s an old-country thing. And Grandpop, that son of a bitch, can still do it, too. He’s what, Aldo, eighty-two?”

“Last month,” Brian confirmed. “Funny old guy, travels the whole world to get to Seattle, and then he never leaves the city for sixty years.”

“Same house for the last forty,” Dominic added, “a block from the restaurant.”

“This his recipe for the veal?”

“Bet your bippy, Pete. The family goes back to Florence. Went up there two years when the Med FMF was making a port call in Naples. His cousin has a restaurant just upriver from the Ponte Vecchio. When they found out who I was, they went nuts feeding me. You know, Italians love the Marines.”

“Must be the green suit, Aldo,” Dominic said.

“Maybe I just cut a manly figure, Enzo. Ever think of that?” Captain Caruso demanded.

“Oh, sure,” Special Agent Caruso replied, taking another bite of the Veal Francese. “The next Rocky sits before us.”

“You boys always like this?” Alexander asked.

“Just when we drink,” Dominic replied, and his brother laughed.

“Enzo can’t hold his liquor worth a damn. Now, we Marines, we can do anything.”

“I have to take this from somebody who thinks Miller Lite is really beer?” the FBI Caruso asked the air.

“You know,” Alexander said, “twins are supposed to be alike.”

“Only identical twins. Mom punched out two eggs that month. It had Mom and Dad fooled until we were a year old or so. We’re not at all alike, Pete.” Dominic delivered this pronouncement with a smile shared by his brother.

But Alexander knew better. They only dressed differently—and that would soon be changing.

CHAPTER 5

ALLIANCES

MOHAMMED TOOK the first Avianca flight to Mexico City and there he waited for British Airways Flight 242 to London. He felt safe in airports, where everything was anonymous. He had to be careful of the food, since Mexico was a nation of unbelievers, but the first-class lounge protected him from their cultural barbarism, and the many armed police officers ensured that people rather like himself did not crash the party, such as it was. So, he picked a corner seat away from windows and read a book he'd picked up in one of the shops and managed not to be bored to death. He never read the Koran in such a place, of course, nor anything about the Middle East, lest someone ask him a question. No, he had to live his cover "legend" as well as any professional intelligence officer, so that he did not come to an end as abrupt as the Jew Greengold in Rome. Mohammed even used the bathroom facilities carefully, in case someone tried the same trick on him.

He didn't even make use of his laptop computer, though there was ample opportunity to do so. Better, he judged, to sit still like a lump. In twenty-four hours he'd be back on the European mainland. It hit him that he lived in the air more than anywhere else. He had no home, just a series of safe houses, which were places of dubious reliability. Saudi Arabia was closed to him, and had been for nearly five years. Afghanistan was similarly out-of-bounds. How strange that the only lands where he could feel something close to safe were the Christian countries of Europe, which Muslims had struggled and failed to conquer on more than one occasion. Those nations had a nearly suicidal openness to strangers, and one could disappear in their vastness with only modest skills—hardly any, in fact, if you had money. These people were so self-destructively open, so afraid to offend those who would just as soon see them and their children dead and their entire cultures destroyed. It was a pleasing vision, Mohammed thought, but he didn't live within dreams. Instead, he worked *for* them. This struggle would last longer than his lifetime. Sad, perhaps, but true. But it was better to serve a cause than one's own interests. There were enough of those in the world.

He wondered what his supposed allies from yesterday's meeting were saying and thinking. They were certainly not true allies. Oh, yes, they shared enemies, but that was not the summation of an alliance. They would—might—facilitate matters, but no more than that. Their men would not assist his men in any real endeavor. Throughout history, mercenaries had never been really effective soldiers. To fight effectively, you had to *believe.* Only a believer would risk his life, because only a believer had nothing to fear. Not with Allah Himself on his side. What was there to fear, then? Only one thing, he admitted

to himself. Failure. Failure was not an option. The obstacles between him and success were things to be dealt with in any way that was convenient. Just things. Not people. Not souls. Mohammed fished a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. In this sense, at least, Mexico was a civilized country, though he refused to speculate on what the Prophet would have said about tobacco.

* * *

"EASIER IN a car, isn't it, Enzo?" Brian teased his brother as they crossed the finish line. The three-mile run wasn't a big deal for the Marine, but for Dominic, who had just maxed out his PT test for the FBI, it had been a bit of a stretch.

"Look, turkey," Dominic gasped out, "I just have to run faster than my subjects."

"Afghanistan would've killed your ass." Brian was running backward now, the better to observe his struggling brother.

"Probably," Dominic admitted. "But Afghans don't rob banks in Alabama and New Jersey." Dominic had never in his life traded toughness to his brother, but clearly the Marines had made him maintain greater fitness than the FBI did. But how good was he with a pistol? At last it was over, and he walked back toward the plantation house.

"Do we pass?" Brian asked Alexander on the way in.

"Easy, both of you. This isn't Ranger School, guys. We don't expect you to try out for the Olympics team, but, out in the field, running away is a nice ability to have."

"At Quantico, Gunny Honey liked to say that," Brian agreed.

"Who?" Dominic asked.

"Nicholas Honey, Master Gunnery Sergeant, United States Marine Corps, and, yeah, he probably took a lot of razzing because of his name—but probably not from the same guy twice. He was one of the instructors at the Basic School. They also called him 'Nick the Prick,'" Brian said, grabbing a towel and tossing it to his brother. "He's one bad-ass Marine. But he said that running away is the one skill an infantryman needs."

"Did you?" Dominic asked.

"I've only seen combat once, and that was just for a couple of months. Mostly, we were looking down at mountain goats who had heart attacks from climbing those fucking hills."

"That bad, eh?"

"Worse." Alexander joined in. "But fighting wars is for kids, not sensible adults. You see, Agent Caruso, out in the weeds you also wear sixty-five pounds on your back."

"That must be fun," Dominic said to his brother, not without respect.

"Big time. Okay, Pete, what other pleasant things are on the plan of the day?"

"Get cleaned up first," Alexander advised. Now that he was certain that both were in reasonable physical shape—though he'd had little doubt of that, and it wasn't all *that* important anyway, despite what he'd said—they could look into

the hard stuff. The important stuff.

"THE BUCK is going to take a hit," Jack told his new boss.

"How bad?"

"Just a scratch. The Germans are going to short the dollar against the Euro, about five hundred million worth."

"Is that a big deal?" Sam Granger asked.

"You're asking me?" Jack responded.

"That's right. You have to have an opinion. It doesn't have to be correct, but it has to make some kind of sense."

Jack Ryan, Jr., handed over the intercepts. "This guy Dieter's talking with his French counterpart. He makes it sound like a routine transaction, but the translator says the tone of his voice has some nastiness to it. I speak a little German, but not well enough for that sort of nuance," the young Ryan told his boss. "I cannot say that I understand why the Germans and French would be in any sort of conspiracy against us."

"It suits current German interests to cozy up to the French. I do not see a long-term bilateral alliance of any sort, however. Fundamentally, the French are afraid of the Germans, and the Germans look down on the French. But the French have imperial ambitions—well, they always have. Look at their relations with America. Kind of like brother and sister, age twelve or so. They love each other, but they can't get along very well. Germany and France, that's similar but more complex. The French used to kick their ass, but then the Germans got organized and kicked the French ass. And both countries have long memories. That's the curse of Europe. There's a lot of contentious history over there, and they have trouble forgetting it."

"What does that have to do with this?" the young Ryan asked.

"Directly, nothing at all, but as background maybe the German banker wants to get close to this guy to make a future play. Maybe the Frenchman is letting him think he's getting close so that the French central bank can score points on Berlin. This is a funny game. You can't clobber your adversary too hard because then he won't play with you anymore, and, besides that, you don't go out of your way to make enemies. All in all, it's like a neighborhood poker game. If you do too well, then you make enemies, and it's a lot less fun to live there because nobody will come over to your house to play. If you're the dumbest at the table, the others will gang up on you in the nicest possible way and steal from you—not enough to hurt you but enough to tell themselves how smart they are. So what happens is that everyone plays a touch under his game, and it stays fairly friendly. Nobody over there is any farther than a general strike away from a major national liquidity crisis, and when that happens you need friends. I forgot to tell you, the central bankers regard everyone else on the continent as peasants. That can include the heads of the various governments."

"And us?"

"Americans? Oh, yeah. Meanly born, poorly educated—but exceedingly lucky—peasants."

"With big guns?" Little Jack asked.

"Yeah, peasants with guns always make the aristocracy nervous," Granger

agreed, stifling a laugh. “They still have that class crap over there. They have trouble understanding how badly it holds them back in the marketplace, because the big shots rarely come up with a really new idea. But that’s not our problem.”

Oderint dum metuant, Jack thought. One of the few things he remembered from Latin. Supposedly the personal motto of the Emperor Gaius Caligula: *Let them hate so long as they fear.* Hadn’t civilization advanced any further than that in the past two millennia?

“What is our problem?” he asked.

Granger shook his head. “I didn’t mean it that way. They don’t like us much—they never have liked us, really—but at the same time they can’t live without us. Some of them are starting to think they can, after the death of the Soviet Union, but if they ever try reality will bite them on the ass hard enough to draw blood. Don’t confuse the thoughts of the aristocracy with those of the people. That’s the problem with them. They really do think that people follow their lead, but they don’t. They follow their own wallets, and the average guy in the street will figure things out all by himself if he has enough time to think it through.”

“So, The Campus just makes money off their fantasy world?”

“You got it. You know, I hate soap operas. Do you know why I hate them?” He got a blank look. “Jack, it’s because they reflect reality so precisely. Real life, even at this level, is full of petty bullshit and egos. It isn’t love that makes the world go ’round. It isn’t even money. It’s bullshit.”

“Hey, I’ve heard cynicism in my time, but—”

“Granger cut him off with a raised hand. “Not cynicism. Human nature. The one thing that hasn’t changed in ten thousand years of recorded history. I wonder if it ever will. Oh, sure, there’s the good part of human nature, too: nobility, charity, self-sacrifice, even courage in some cases—and love. Love counts. It counts a lot. But along with it comes envy, covetousness, greed, all the seven deadly sins. Maybe Jesus knew what He was talking about, eh?”

“Is this philosophy or theology?” *I thought this was supposed to be the intelligence business,* the young Ryan thought.

“I turn fifty next week. Too soon old and too late smart. Some cowboy said that a hundred or so years ago.” Granger smiled. “Problem is, you’re too damned old when you realize it to be able to do anything about it.”

“What would you do, start a new religion?”

Granger had himself a good laugh as he turned to refill his coffee cup from his personal Gevalia machine. “No, none of the bushes around my house burn. The trouble with thinking deep thoughts is that you still have to cut the grass, and put food on the table. And, in our case, protect our country.”

“So, what do we do about this German thing?”

Granger gave the intercept another look and thought for a second. “Nothing, not right now, but we remember that Dieter has earned a point or two with Claude, which he may cash in on in six months or so. The Euro is still too new to see how it’s going to play out. The French think that the financial leadership of Europe will slide to Paris. The Germans think it’ll go to Berlin. In fact, it’ll go to the country with the strongest economy, the most efficient workforce. That won’t be France. They have pretty good engineers, but their

population isn't as well organized as the Germans are. If I had to bet, I'd bet on Berlin."

"The French won't like that."

"That's a fact, Jack. That's a fact," Granger repeated. "What the hell. The French have nukes, and the Germans don't—for now, anyway."

"You serious?" the young Ryan demanded.

A smile. "No."

"THEY TAUGHT us some of that at Quantico," Dominic said. They were in a medium-sized shopping mall that catered to the college crowd due to the proximity of UVA.

"What did they say?" Brian asked.

"Don't stay in the same place relative to your subject. Try to alter your appearance—sunglasses, like that. Wigs if they're available. Reversible jackets. Don't stare at him, but don't turn away if he looks at you. It's a lot better if it's more than one agent on a target. One man can't track a trained adversary for very long without being made. A trained subject is hard to tail under the best of circumstances. That's why the big offices have the SSGs, Special Surveillance Groups. They're FBI employees, but they're not sworn, and they don't carry guns. Some guys call them the Baker Street Irregulars, as in Sherlock Holmes. They look like anything except a cop, street people—bums—workers in coveralls. They can be dirty. They can be panhandlers. I met some at the New York Field Office once, they work OC and FCI—organized crime and foreign counterintelligence. They're pros, but they're the most unlikely-looking damn pros you ever want to meet."

"Hardworking people like that?" Brian asked his brother. "Surveillance, I mean."

"Never tried it myself, but from what I've heard, it takes a lot of manpower, like fifteen or twenty, to work one subject, plus cars, plus aircraft—and a really good bad guy can outfox us even then. The Russians especially. Those bastards are trained pretty well."

"So, what the hell are we supposed to do?" Captain Caruso asked.

"Just learn the basics," Alexander told them. "See the woman over there with the red sweater?"

"Long dark hair?" Brian asked.

"That's the one," Pete confirmed. "Determine what she buys, what sort of car she drives, and where she lives."

"Just the two of us?" Dominic demanded. "You're not asking much, are you?"

"Did I tell you this was easy work?" Alexander asked innocently. He handed over two radios. "The earpieces go in your ears, and the microphones clip to your collars. Range is about three kilometers. You both have your car keys." And with that he walked away, toward an Eddie Bauer store to buy himself a pair of shorts.

"Welcome to the shit, Enzo," Brian said.

"At least he gave us a mission brief."

"It was brief, all right."

Their subject had walked into an Ann Taylor store. They both headed down

that way, each getting a large cup of coffee at the Starbucks as a jackleg disguise.

"Don't throw the cup away," Dominic told his brother.

"Why?" Brian asked.

"In case you gotta take a piss. The perversity of the world has a way of impinging on your carefully made plans in situations like this. That's a practical lesson from a class at the Academy."

Brian didn't comment, but it seemed sensible enough. One at a time they donned their radios and made sure they worked properly.

"Aldo to Enzo, over," Brian called on Channel 6.

"Enzo copies, bro. Let's switch off on visual surveillance, but we'll stay within sight of each other, okay?"

"Makes sense. Okay, I'll head toward the store."

"Ten-four. That's roger to you, bro." Dominic turned to see his brother draw off. Then he settled down to sipping his coffee and looking off the subject—never directly at her, but about 20 degrees to the side.

"What's she up to?" Aldo asked.

"Picking a blouse, looks like." The subject was thirty or so, with shoulder-length brown hair, fairly attractive, wearing a wedding band but no diamond, and a cheap gold-colored necklace probably purchased at Wal-Mart on the other side of the road. Peach-colored blouse/shirt. Pants rather than a skirt, black in color, black flat "sensible" shoes. Fairly large purse. Did not appear overly alert to her surroundings, which was good. She appeared to be alone. She finally settled on a blouse, white silk by the look of it, paid for it with a credit card, and walked out of Ann Taylor.

"Subject is moving, Aldo."

Seventy yards away, Brian's head perked up and turned directly toward his brother. "Talk to me, Enzo."

Dominic raised his coffee cup as though to take a drink. "Turning left, coming your way. You can take over in a minute or so."

"Ten-four, Enzo."

They'd parked their cars on opposite sides of the shopping mall. That turned out to be a good thing, as their subject turned right and headed for the door out to the parking lot.

"Aldo, get close enough to make her tag," Dominic ordered.

"What?"

"Read her tag number to me, and describe the car. I'm heading for my car."

"Okay, roger that, bro."

Dominic didn't run to his car, but he walked as fast as circumstances allowed. He got in, started the engine, and lowered all his windows.

"Enzo to Aldo, over."

"Okay, she's driving a dark green Volvo station wagon, Virginia tag Whiskey Kilo Romeo Six One Niner. Alone in the car, starting up, turning north. I'm on the way to my wheels."

"Roger that. Enzo is in pursuit." He got around the Sears department store that anchored the east end of the mall as quickly as traffic allowed, and reached in his coat pocket for his cell phone. And called information to get the number of the Charlottesville FBI office, which the phone company dialed for

him for an additional charge of fifty cents. “Heads up, this is Special Agent Dominic Caruso. My creed-o number is one six five eight two one. I need a tag number run, right now, Whiskey Kilo Romeo Six One Niner.”

Whoever was on the other end of the phone typed his credentials number into a computer and verified Dominic’s identity.

“What are you doing this far from Birmingham, Mr. Caruso?”

“No time for that. Please run the tag.”

“Roger, okay, it’s a Volvo, green in color, a year old, registered to Edward and Michelle Peters, at Six Riding Hood Court, Charlottesville. That’s just inside the city line on the west side of town. Anything else? Do you need backup?”

“Negative. Thank you, I can handle it from here. Caruso out.” He killed his cell phone and relayed the address to his brother over the radio. Both then did the same thing, and entered the address into their navigation computers.

“This is cheating,” Brian observed, smiling as he did so.

“Good guys don’t cheat, Aldo. They just get the job done. Okay, I have eyeballs on the subject. She’s heading west on Shady Branch Road. Where are you?”

“About five hundred yards back of you—shit! I have a red light.”

“Okay, sit it out. Looks like she’s heading home, and we know where that is.” Dominic closed his target to within a hundred yards, keeping a pickup truck between himself and the subject car. He’d rarely done this sort of thing before, and he was surprised at how tense it was.

“PREPARE TO TURN RIGHT IN FIVE HUNDRED FEET,” the computer told him.

“Thanks, honey,” Dominic grumbled.

But then the Volvo turned at the corner suggested by the computer. So, it wasn’t so bad after all, was it? Dominic took a breath and settled down some.

“Okay, Brian, looks like she’s going right home. Just follow me in,” he said over the radio.

“Roger, following you in. Any idea who this broad is?”

“Michelle Peters, so says the DMV.” The Volvo turned left, then right, into a cul-de-sac, where it pulled into a driveway that ended at a two-car garage attached to a medium-sized house of two stories and white aluminum siding. He parked his car a hundred yards up the street and took a sip of his coffee. Brian showed up thirty seconds later, doing the same half a block up.

“See the car?” Dominic called.

“That’s affirmative, Enzo.” The Marine paused. “Now what do we do?”

“You come on down for a cup of my coffee,” a female voice suggested. “I’m the broad in the Volvo,” the voice clarified.

“Oh, shit,” Dominic whispered away from the microphone. He got out of his Mercedes and waved to his brother to do the same.

Upon joining up, the Caruso brothers walked to 6 Riding Hood Court. The door opened as they came up the driveway.

“Set up all the way,” Dominic said quietly. “Should have figured that one out from the beginning.”

“Yep. Color us dumb,” Brian thought.

“Not really,” Mrs. Peters said from the door. “But getting my address from

the DMV really was cheating, you know."

"Nobody told us anything about rules, ma'am," Dominic told her.

"There aren't any—not very often, anyway, not in this business."

"So, you listened in on the radio circuit the whole time?" Brian asked.

She nodded as she led them to the kitchen. "That's right. The radios are encrypted. Nobody else knew what you were talking about. How do you boys like your coffee?"

"So, you spotted us all the way?" This was Dominic.

"Actually, no. I didn't use the radios to cheat—well, not all that much." She had an engaging smile, which helped to soften the blows to her visitors' egos. "You're Enzo, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You were a little close, but only a really sharp-eyed target would have noticed, given the limited time frame. The make of the car helped. A lot of those little Benzes in this area. But the best choice of car would be a pickup—a dirty one. A lot of the yokels *never* wash them, and some of the academics at the school have adopted the same sort of behavior to fit in, like. Out on Interstate 64, well, you'd better have an aircraft, of course, and a Porta-Potti. Discreet surveillance can be the toughest job in the business. But now you boys know that."

Then the door opened and Pete Alexander came in. "How'd they do?" he asked Michelle.

"I'll give them a B."

And suddenly Dominic thought that was generous.

"And forget what I said before—calling the FBI to get a DMV on me was pretty smart."

"Not cheating?" Brian asked.

Alexander took that one. "The only rule is to accomplish the mission without being compromised. We don't tally up style points at The Campus."

"Just body count," Mrs. Peters confirmed, to Alexander's evident annoyance.

That was enough to make Brian's stomach contract a little. "Uh, guys, I know I've asked it before, but what exactly *are* we training for?" Dominic leaned in visibly as well.

"Patience, fellas," Pete cautioned.

"Okay." Dominic nodded submission. "I'll give you that this time." But not too much longer, he didn't have to add.

"SO, YOU'RE not going to exploit this?" Jack asked at closing time.

"We could, but it's not really worth the time. We'd only turn a couple of hundred thousand at best, probably not that much. But you did okay spotting it," Granger allowed.

"How much message traffic like this comes through here on a weekly basis?"

"One or two, four in a really busy week."

"And how many plays do you make?" Junior asked.

"One in five. We do so carefully, but even so, we always run the risk of being noticed. If the Europeans saw that we were outguessing them too much, then they'd look into how we were doing it—they'd probably shake down

their own people, looking for a human leaker. That's how they think over there. It's a big place for conspiracy theory, you see, because of the way they operate themselves. But the game they play regularly sort of militates against it."

"What else do you look into?"

"Starting next week, you'll have access to the secure accounts—people call them numbered accounts because they're supposedly identified by code numbers. Now it's mainly code words, because of computer technology. They probably picked that up from the intelligence community. They often hire spooks to look after their security—but not good ones. The good ones stay away from money-management businesses, mainly out of snobbery. It's not important enough for a senior spook," Granger explained.

"The 'secured' accounts, do they identify the owners?" Jack asked.

"Not always. Sometimes it's all done via code word, though sometimes the banks have internal memoranda that we can tap into. Not always, though, and the bankers never speculate internally about their clients—at least not in written form. I'm sure they chat back and forth over lunch, but you know, a lot of them, they really don't care very much about where the money comes from. Dead Jews in Auschwitz, some Mafia capo in Brooklyn—it's all money fresh off the presses."

"But if you turned this over to the FBI—"

"We can't, because it's illegal, and we don't, because then we'd lose a way to track the bastards and their money. On the legal side, there's more than one jurisdiction, and for some of the European countries—well, banking is a big moneymaker, and no government ever turns its back on tax revenue. The dog doesn't bite anybody in their backyard. What it does down the block, they don't care about."

"I wonder what Dad thinks of that?"

"Not much, I'll bet," Granger opined.

"Not hardly," Jack agreed. "So, you track the secured accounts to follow the bad guys and their money?"

"That's the idea. It's a lot harder than you might imagine, but when you score, you score big."

"So, I'm going to be a bird dog?"

"That's right. If you're good enough," Granger added.

MOHAMMED WAS almost directly overhead at that moment. The Great Circle Route from Mexico City to London passed close enough to Washington, D.C., for him to look down from thirty-seven thousand feet and see the American capital laid out like a paper map. Now, were he a member of the Department of Martyrdom, he might have climbed the spiral stairs to the upper level and used a gun to kill the flight crew and dive the aircraft . . . but that had been done before, and now the cockpit doors were protected, and there might well be an armed policeman up there in business class to spoil the show. Worse yet, an armed soldier in civilian clothes. Mohammed had little respect for police officers, but he'd learned the hard way not to disregard Western soldiers. However, he was not a member of the Department of Martyrdom, much as he admired those Holy Warriors. His ability to seek out information made him

too valuable to be thrown away in such a noble gesture. That was good, and that was bad, but good or bad, it was a fact, and he lived in the world of facts. He would meet Allah and enter Paradise at the time written by God's Own Hand in God's Own Book. For the moment, he had another six and a half more hours of confinement in this seat.

"More wine, sir?" the pink-faced stewardess asked. What a prize she might be in Paradise . . .

"Ah, yes, thank you," he replied in his best Cambridge English. It was contrary to Islam, but not to drink would look suspicious, he thought again, and his mission was much too important to risk. Or, at least, so he often told himself, Mohammed admitted to himself, with a minor chink in his conscience. He soon tossed off the drink and then adjusted the seat controls. Wine might be contrary to the laws of Islam, but it did help one sleep.

"MICHELLE SAYS the twins are competent for beginners," Rick Bell told his boss.

"The tracking exercise?" Hendley asked.

"Yeah." He didn't have to say that a proper training exercise would have entailed eight to ten cars, two aircraft, and a total of twenty agents, but The Campus didn't have anything approaching those assets. Instead, it had a wider latitude in dealing with its subjects, a fact which had advantages and disadvantages. "Alexander seems to like them. He says they're bright enough, and they have mental agility."

"Good to know. Anything else happening?"

"Rick Pasternak has something new, he says."

"What might that be?" Gerry asked.

"It's a variant on succinylcholine, a synthetic version of curare, shuts down the skeletal muscles almost immediately. You collapse and can't breathe. He says it would be a miserable death, like taking a bayonet through the chest."

"Traceable?" Hendley asked.

"That is the good news. Esterases in the body break the drug down rapidly into acetylcholine, so it is also likely to be undetectable, unless the target happens to croak right outside a primo medical center with a very sharp pathologist who is looking for something out of the ordinary. The Russians looked at it—would you believe it, back in the 1970s. They were thinking about battlefield applications, but it proved to be impractical. It's surprising KGB didn't make use of it. It'll look like a big-time myocardial infarction, even on a marble slab an hour later."

"How'd he get it?"

"A Russian colleague was visiting with him at Columbia. Turned out he was Jewish and Rick got him talking. He talked enough that Rick developed a delivery system right there in his lab. It's being perfected right now."

"You know, it's amazing that the Mafia never figured it out. If you want somebody killed, you hire a doc."

"Goes against the old school tie for most of them." But most of them didn't have a brother at Cantor Fitzgerald who'd ridden the ninety-seventh floor down to sea level one Tuesday morning.

"Is this variant better than what we have already?"

"Better than what anyone has, Gerry. He says it's almost a hundred percent reliable if used properly."

"Expensive?"

Bell shook his head. "Not hardly."

"It's tested, it really works?"

"Rick says it killed six dogs—all big ones—pretty as you please."

"Okay, approved."

"Roger that, boss. Ought to have them in two weeks."

"What's happening out there?"

"We don't know," Bell admitted with downcast eyes. "One of the guys at Langley is saying in his memos that maybe we hurt them badly enough to slow them down, if not shut them down, but I get nervous when I read stuff like that. Like the 'there's no top to this market' shit that you get before the bottom falls out. *Hubris ante nemesis.* Fort Meade can't track them on the 'Net, but maybe that means they're just getting a little smarter. There's a lot of good encryption programs out on the market, and two of them NSA hasn't cracked yet—at least, not reliably. They're working on that one a couple of hours every day with their big mainframes. As you always say, Gerry, the smartest programmers don't work for Uncle anymore—"

"—they develop video games." Hendley finished the sentence. The government had never paid people well enough to attract the best—and that would never be fixed. "So, just an itchy nose?"

Rick nodded. "Until they're dead, in the ground, with a wood stake through the heart, I'm going to worry about them."

"Kinda hard to get them all, Rick."

"Sure as hell." Even their personal Dr. Death at Columbia couldn't help with that.

CHAPTER 6

ADVERSARIES

THE 747-400 touched down gently at Heathrow five minutes early at 12:55 P.M. Like most of the passengers, Mohammed was all too eager to get out of the Boeing wide-body. He cycled through passport control, smiling politely, availed himself of a washroom, and, feeling somewhat human again, walked to the Air France departure lounge for his connecting flight to Nice. It was ninety minutes to departure time, and then ninety minutes to his destination. In the cab, he demonstrated the sort of French that one might learn in a British university. The cab driver corrected him only twice, and on checking in to the hotel he surrendered his British passport—reluctantly, but the passport was a secure document which he'd used many times. The bar-code strip found on the inside of the cover page of the new passports troubled him. His didn't have that feature, but when it expired in another two years he'd have to worry about some computer tracking him wherever he went. Well, he had three solid and secure British identities, and it was just a matter of getting passports for all three of them, and keeping a very low profile so that no British police constable would check into those identities. No cover could ever stand up to even a casual investigation, much less an in-depth one, and that bar code could someday mean that the immigration officer would get a flashing light on his panel, which would be followed by the appearance of a policeman or two. The infidels were making things hard on the faithful, but that was what infidels did.

The hotel did not have air-conditioning, but the windows could be opened, and the ocean breeze was pleasant. Mohammed hooked up his computer to the phone on the desk. Then the bed beckoned him, and he succumbed to its call. As much as he traveled, he had not found a cure for jet lag. For the next couple of days, he'd live on cigarettes and coffee until his body clock decided that it knew where he was at the moment. He checked his watch. The man meeting him would not be there for another four hours, which, Mohammed thought, was decent of him. He'd be eating dinner when his body would be expecting breakfast. Cigarettes and coffee.

IT *WAS* breakfast time in Colombia. Pablo and Ernesto both preferred the Anglo-American version, with bacon or ham and eggs, and the excellent local coffee.

"So, do we cooperate with that towel-headed thug?" Ernesto asked.

"I don't see why not," Pablo replied, stirring cream into his cup. "We will make a great deal of money, and the opportunity to create chaos within the house of the *norteamericanos* will serve our interests well. It will set their

border guards to looking at people rather than at container boxes, and it will not do any harm to us, either directly or indirectly."

"What if one of these Muslims is taken alive and made to talk?"

"Talk about what? Who will they meet, except some Mexican *coyotes*?" Pablo asked in reply.

"*Sí,* there is that," Ernesto agreed. "You must think me a frightened old woman."

"*Jefe,* the last man who thought that of you is long dead." That earned Pablo a grunt and a crooked smile.

"Yes, that is true, but only a fool is not cautious when the police forces of *two* nations pursue him."

"So, *jefe,* we give them others to pursue, do we not?" This was potentially a dangerous game he was entering into, Ernesto thought. Yes, he'd be making a deal with allies of convenience, but he was not so much cooperating with them as making use of them, creating straw men for the Americans to seek after and kill. But these fanatics didn't *mind* being killed, did they? They *sought after* death. And so, by making use of them, he was really doing *them* a service, wasn't he? He could even—very carefully—betray them to the *norteamericanos* and not incur their wrath. And besides, how could these men possibly harm him? On his turf? Here in Colombia? Not likely. Not that he planned to betray them, but if he did how would they find out? If their intelligence services were all that good, they would not be needing his assistance in the first place. And if the *Yanqui*—and his *own*—governments had not been able to get to him here in Colombia, how could these people?

"Pablo, how exactly will you communicate with this fellow?"

"Via computer. He has several e-mail addresses, all with European service providers."

"Very well. Tell him, yes, it is approved by the council." Not too many people knew that Ernesto *was* the council.

"Muy bien, jefe." And Pablo went to his laptop. His message went out in less than a minute. Pablo knew his computers. Most international criminals and terrorists did.

IT WAS in the third line of the e-mail: "And, Juan, Maria is pregnant. She's having twins." Both Mohammed and Pablo had the best encryption programs commercially available—programs which, the vendors said, could not be cracked by anyone. But Mohammed believed in that as much as he believed in Santa Claus. All those companies lived in the West, and owed allegiance to their own homelands and to no other. Moreover, using programs like this only highlighted his e-mails for whichever watcher programs were being used by the National Security Agency, British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), and French Director General Security Exterior (DGSE). Not to mention whatever additional unknown agencies might be tapping into international communications, legally or not, none of whom had any love for him and his colleagues. The Israeli Mossad would certainly pay a lot to have his head atop a pike, even though they didn't—couldn't—know of his role in the elimination of David Greengold.

He and Pablo had arranged a code, innocent phrases that could mean

anything, which could be couriered around the world to cutouts who would then deliver them. Their electronic accounts were paid by anonymous credit cards, and the accounts themselves were in large and completely reputable Europe-based Internet Service Providers. In its way, the Internet was as effective as Swiss banking laws in terms of anonymity. And too many e-mail messages transited the ether every day for anyone to screen them all, even with computer assistance. As long as he didn't use any easily predicted buzzwords, his messages should be secure, Mohammed judged.

So, the Colombians would cooperate—Maria was pregnant. And she was having twins—the operation could begin at once. He would tell his guest this evening over dinner, and the process would begin immediately. The news was even worth a glass of wine or two, in anticipation of the merciful forgiveness of Allah.

THE PROBLEM with the morning run was that it was more boring than the society page of an Arkansas newspaper—but it had to be done, and each of the brothers used the time to think . . . mainly about how boring it was. It only took half an hour. Dominic was thinking about getting a small portable radio, but he'd never do it. He never managed to think about such things when he was in a shopping mall. And his brother probably enjoyed this crap. Being in the Marines had to be bad for you.

Then came breakfast.

"So, boys, are we all awake?" said Pete Alexander.

"How come you don't break a sweat in the morning?" Brian asked. The Marines had many inside stories about the Special Forces, none of them complimentary and few of them accurate.

"There are some advantages to getting old," the training officer replied. "One of them is taking it easy on the knees."

"Fine. What's today's lesson plan?" *You lazy bastard,* the captain didn't add. "When are we getting those computers?"

"Pretty soon."

"You said the encryption security is pretty good," Dominic said. "How good is 'pretty good'?"

"NSA can crack it, if they direct their mainframes to it for a week or so and brute-force it. They can crack anything, given the time to apply. Most commercial systems they can already break. They have an arrangement with most of the programmers," he explained. "And they play ball . . . in return for some NSA algorithms. Other countries could do it, too, but it requires a lot of expertise to understand cryptology fully, and few people have the resources or time to acquire it. So, a commercial program can make it hard, but not too hard if you have the source code. That's why our adversaries try to relay messages in face-to-face meetings, or use codes instead of ciphers, but since that is so time-inefficient they're gradually getting away from it. When they have time-urgent material to transfer, we can often crack it."

"How many messages going across the 'Net?" Dominic asked.

Alexander let out a breath. "*That's* the hard part. There're billions of them, and the programs we have to sweep them aren't good enough yet. Probably never will be. The trick is to ID the address of the target and key in on that. It

takes time, but most bad guys are lazy about how they log on to the system—and it's hard to keep track of a bunch of different identities. These guys are not supermen, and they don't have microchips wired into their heads. So, when we get a computer belonging to a bad guy, the first thing we do is print up his address book. That's like striking gold. Even though they can sometimes transmit gibberish, which can cause Fort Meade to spend hours—even days—trying to crack something that isn't supposed to make any sense. The pros used to do that by sending names from the Riga phone book. It's gibberish in every language *but* Latvian. No, the biggest problem is linguists. We don't have enough Arab speakers. It's something they're working on out at Monterey, and at some universities. There are a lot of Arab college students on the payroll right now. Not at The Campus, though. The good news for *us* is that we get the translations from NSA. We don't need much in the way of linguistics."

"So, we're not here to gather intelligence, are we?" Brian asked. Dominic had already figured that one out.

"No. What you can scare up, fine, we'll find a way to make use of it, but our job is to act upon intelligence, not to accumulate it."

"Okay, so we're back to the original question," Dominic observed. "What the hell is the mission?"

"What do you think it is?" Alexander asked.

"I think it's something Mr. Hoover would not have been happy about."

"Correct. He was a nasty son of a bitch, but he was a stickler for civil rights. We at The Campus are not."

"Keep talking," Brian suggested.

"Our job is to act upon intelligence information. To take decisive action."

"Isn't the term for that 'executive action'?"

"Only in the movies," Alexander replied.

"Why us?" Dominic asked.

"Look, the fact of the matter is that CIA is a government organization. A whole lot of chiefs and not enough Indians. How many government agencies encourage people to put their necks on the line?" he asked. "Even if you do it successfully, the lawyers and accountants nibble you to death like ducks. So, if somebody needs to depart this mortal coil, the authorization has to come from up the line, up the chain of command. Gradually—well, not all that gradually—the decisions went to the Big Boss in the West Wing. And not many presidents want that sheet of paper to turn up in their personal archives, where some historian might find it and do an exposé. So, we got away from that sort of thing."

"And there are not many problems that can't be solved by a single .45 bullet at the right time and place," Brian said like a good Marine.

Pete nodded again. "Correct."

"So, we are talking political assassination? That could be dangerous," Dominic observed.

"No, that has too many political ramifications. That sort of thing hasn't happened in centuries, and not very often even then. However, there are people out there who rather urgently need to meet God. And sometimes, it's up to us to arrange the rendezvous."

"Damn." This was Dominic.

"Wait a minute. Who authorizes this?" Major Caruso asked.

"We do."

"Not the President?"

A shake of the head. "No. As I said before, there aren't too many Presidents with the stones to say yes to something like that. They worry too much about the newspapers."

"But what about the law?" Special Agent Caruso asked, predictably.

"The law is, as I've heard one of you once say, so memorably, if you want to kick a tiger in his ass, you'd better have a plan for dealing with his teeth. You guys will be the teeth."

"Just us?" Brian wondered.

"No, not just you, but what others there might or might not be, you do not need to know."

"Shit . . ." Brian sat back in his chair.

"Who set this place—The Campus—up?"

"Somebody important. It's got deniable authorization. The Campus has no ties to the government at all. None," Alexander emphasized.

"So, we'll be shooting people technically on our own?"

"Not much shooting. We have other methods. You will probably not be using firearms much. They're too hard to move around, with airports and all."

"In the field naked?" Dominic asked. "No cover at all?"

"You will have a good cover legend, but no diplomatic protection of any kind. You will live by your wits. No foreign intelligence service will have any way of finding you. The Campus does not exist. It's not on the federal budget, even the black part. So, nobody can trace any money to us. That's how it's done, of course. That's one of the ways we have of tracking people. Your cover will be as international businessmen, bankers and investment stuff. You'll be educated in all the terminology so that you can carry on a conversation on an airplane, for example. Such people don't talk much about what they're up to, to keep their business secrets close. So, if you're not overly talkative, it will not be seen as unusual."

"Secret Agent Man . . ." Brian said quietly.

"We pick people who can think on their feet, who are self-starters, and who don't faint at the sight of blood. Both of you have killed people out in the real world. In both of your cases, you were faced with the unexpected, and both of you handled the situation efficiently. Neither of you had any regrets. That will be your job."

"What about protection for us?" The FBI agent again.

"There's a get-out-of-jail-free card for both of you."

"My ass," Dominic said again. "There isn't any such thing."

"A signed presidential pardon," Alexander clarified.

Fuck . . . Brian thought for a second. "It was Uncle Jack, wasn't it?"

"I can't answer that, but if you wish you can see your pardons before you go into the field." Alexander set down his coffee cup. "Okay, gentlemen. You'll have a few days to think this one over, but you'll have to make your decisions. This is not a small thing I'm asking of you. It's not going to be a fun job, nor will it be easy or pleasant, but it will be a job which will serve the interests of

your country. It's a dangerous world out there. Some people need to be dealt with directly."

"And if we whack the wrong guy?"

"Dominic, there is that possibility, but, no matter who it is, I can promise you that you will not be asked to kill Mother Teresa's little brother. We're pretty careful about who we target. You'll know who it is, plus how and why we need to deal with him or her before we send you out."

"Kill women?" Brian asked. That was not part of the Marine ethos.

"It's never happened, as far as I know, but it's a theoretical possibility. So, if that's enough for breakfast, you guys need to think it over."

"Jesus," Brian said after Alexander left the room. "What's lunch going to be like?"

"Surprised?"

"Not completely, Enzo, but the way he just said it like that..."

"Hey, bro, how many times have you wondered why we couldn't simply take care of business ourselves?"

"You're the cop, Enzo. *You're* the guy who's supposed to say *Oh, shit,* remember?"

"Yeah, but that shoot of mine in Alabama—well, I kinda stepped a little over the line some, y'know? All the way driving to D.C., I thought over how I'd explain it to Gus Werner. But he didn't blink even a little."

"So, what do you think?"

"Aldo, I'm willing to listen some more. There's a saying in Texas that there's more men need killin' than horses need stealin'."

The reversal of roles struck Brian as more than a little surprising. After all, he was the gung ho Marine. Enzo was the guy who was trained to give people their constitutional rights before he slapped the cuffs on.

That they were both able to take a life without having bad dreams later was obvious to the brothers, but this went a little farther than that. This was premeditated murder. Brian usually went into the field with an exquisitely trained sniper under his command, and he knew what they did wasn't far removed from murder, either. But being in uniform made it different. It put some sort of blessing on it. The target was an enemy, and on the battlefield it was everyone's job to look after his own life, and if he failed to do it, well, that was his failing, not that of the man who killed him. But this would be more than that. They'd be hunting individual people down with the deliberate intent of killing them, and that wasn't what he'd been brought up and trained to do. He'd be dressed in civilian clothes—and killing people under those circumstances made him a *spy,* not an officer of the United States Marine Corps. There was honor in the latter, but damned little in the former, or so he'd been trained to think. The world no longer had a Field of Honor, and real life wasn't a duel in which men had identical weapons and an open field on which to make use of them. No, he'd been trained to plan his operations in a way that gave his enemy no chance at all, because he had men under his command whose lives he was sworn to preserve. Combat had rules. Harsh rules, to be sure, but rules even so. Now he was being asked to set those rules aside and become—what? A paid assassin? The teeth of some notional wild beast? The masked avenger from some old movie on Nick at Nite? This didn't

fit into his tidy picture of the real world.

When he'd been sent to Afghanistan, he hadn't—hadn't what? He hadn't disguised himself as a fishmonger on a city street. There'd been no city street in those goddamned mountains. It had been more like a big-game hunt, one in which the game had weapons of its own. And there was honor in such a hunt, and for his efforts he'd gotten the approval of his country: a combat decoration for bravery that he might or might not display.

All in all, it was a lot to consider over his second cup of morning coffee.

"Jesus, Enzo," he breathed.

"Brian, you know what the dream of every cop is?" Dominic asked.

"To break the law and get away with it?"

Dominic shook his head. "I had this talk with Gus Werner. No, not to break the law, but just once to *be* the law. To be God's Own Avenging Sword, was the way he put it—to strike down the guilty without lawyers and other bullshit to get in the way, to see justice done all by yourself. It doesn't happen very often, they say, but, you know, I got to do it down in Alabama, and it felt pretty good. You just have to be sure you're bagging the right mutt."

"How can you be sure?" Aldo asked.

"If you're not, you back off the mission. They can't hang you for *not* committing murder, bro."

"So, it is murder?"

"Not if the mutt has it coming, it isn't." It was an aesthetic point, but an important one to someone who had already committed murder under the shelter of the law, and had had no bad dreams about it.

"IMMEDIATELY?"

"Yes. How many men do we have already?" Mohammed asked.

"Sixteen."

"Ah." Mohammed took a sip of a fine French white from the Loire Valley. His guest was drinking Perrier and lemon. "Their language skills?"

"Sufficient, we think."

"Excellent. Tell them to make preparations to travel. We'll fly them in to Mexico. There they will meet with our new friends, and travel to America. And once there, they can do their work."

"Insh'Allah," he observed. God willing.

"Yes, God willing," Mohammed said in English, reminding his guest of what language he should be using.

They were in a sidewalk restaurant overlooking the river, off to one side, with no one nearby. Both men spoke normally, two well-dressed men over a friendly dinner, not huddled or conspiratorial in their demeanor. This took some amount of concentration, since some degree of conspiratorial posture came naturally to what they were doing. But neither of them was a stranger to such meetings.

"So, how was it to kill the Jew in Rome?"

"It was very satisfactory, Ibrahim, to feel his body go slack as I cut his spine, and then the surprised look on his face."

Ibrahim smiled broadly. It wasn't every day they got to kill a Mossad officer, much less a Station Chief. The Israelis would always be their most hated

enemies, if not the most dangerous. “God was good to us that day.”

The Greengold mission had been a recreational exercise for Mohammed. It hadn’t even been strictly necessary. Setting up the meet and feeding the Israeli juicy information had been . . . fun. Not terribly difficult, even. Though it would not soon be repeated. No, Mossad would not let any of its officers do anything without overwatch for some time. They were not fools, and they *did* learn from their mistakes. But killing a tiger had satisfactions all its own. A pity he had no pelt. But where would he hang it? He had no fixed home anymore, only a collection of safe houses that might or might not be totally safe. But you couldn’t worry about everything. You’d never get anything done. Mohammed and his colleagues didn’t fear death, only failure. And they had no plans to fail.

“I need the meeting arrangements and so forth. I can take care of travel. Arms will be provided by our new friends?”

A nod. “Correct.”

“And how will our warriors enter America?”

“That is for our friends to handle. But you will send in a group of three at first, to make sure the arrangements are satisfactorily secure.”

“Of course.” They knew all about operational security. There had been many lessons, none of them gentle. Members of his organization peopled many prisons around the world, those who were unlucky enough to have avoided death. That was a problem, one which his organization had never been able to fix. To die in action, that was noble and courageous. To be caught by a policeman like a common criminal was ignoble and humiliating, but somehow his men found it preferable to die without accomplishing a mission. And Western prisons were not all that terrible for many of his colleagues. Confining, perhaps, but at least the food was regular, and Western nations did not violate their dietary rules.

These nations were so weak and foolish regarding their enemies, they showed mercy to those who gave them none in return. But that was not Mohammed’s fault.

“DAMN,” Jack said. It was his first day on the “black” side of the house. His training in high finance had gone very rapidly, due to his upbringing. His grandfather Muller had taught him well during his infrequent visits to the family home. He and Jack’s father were civil to each other, but Grandpa Joe thought real men worked in the trading business rather than in the dirty world of politics—though he had to admit, of course, that his son-in-law had worked out fairly well in Washington. But the money he could have made on Wall Street . . . why would any man turn away from that? Muller had never said that to Little Jack, of course, but his opinion was clear enough. In any case, Jack could have gotten an entry-level job in any of the large houses, and probably worked up the line pretty fast from there. But what mattered to him now was that he had skipped through the financial side of The Campus and was now in the Operations Department—it wasn’t actually named that, but that’s what it was called by its members. “They’re that good?”

“What’s that, Jack?”

“NSA intercept.” He handed the sheet across. Tony Wills read it.

The intercept had identified a known associate of terrorists—exactly what function he performed was not known yet, but he'd been positively identified from voiceprint analysis.

"It's the digital phones. They generate a very clean signal, easy for the voiceprint computer to ID the voices. I see they haven't ID'd the other guy." Wills handed the sheet back.

The nature of the conversation was innocuous, so much so that one might wonder why the call had been placed. But some people just liked to chat on the phone. And, maybe, they were talking in code, discussing biological warfare, or a campaign to set bombs in Jerusalem. Perhaps. More likely, they were just passing the time. There was a lot of that in Saudi Arabia. What impressed Jack was that the call had been picked up and read in real time.

"Well, you know how digital phones work, right? They're always broadcasting the HERE I AM signal to the local cell, and every phone has its unique addressing code. Once we identify that code, it's just a matter of listening in when the phone rings, or the phone holder makes a call. Similarly, we can ID the number and phone of the inbound caller. The hard part is to get the identity in the first place. Now they have another phone ident for the computer to monitor."

"How many phones do they keep track of?" Jack asked.

"Just over a hundred thousand, and that's just in Southwest Asia. Nearly all of them are dry holes, except for the one in ten thousand that counts—and sometimes they can show real results," Wills told him.

"So, to bag a cold call, a computer listens in and keys on 'hot' words?"

"Hot words and hot names. Unfortunately, so many people are named Mohammed over there—it's the most popular given name in the world. A lot of them go by patronymics or nicknames. Another problem is that there's a big market in cloned phones—they clone them in Europe, mainly London, where most of the phones have the international software. Or a guy can get six or seven phones and use them once each before tossing them. They're not dumb. They *can* get overconfident, though. Some of them end up telling us a lot of things, and occasionally it's useful. It all goes in the big NSA/CIA book, to which we have access on our terminals."

"Okay, who's this guy?"

"His name is Uda bin Sali. Rich family, close friends of the king. The big daddy's a very senior Saudi banker. He has eleven sons and nine daughters. Four wives, a man of commendable vigor. Not a bad guy, supposedly, but he's a little too doting with his kids. Gives them money instead of attention, like a Hollywood big shot. Uda here discovered Allah in a big way back in his late teens, and he's on the extreme right of the Wahabi branch of Sunni Islam. Doesn't like us very much. This boy we keep track of. He might be a gateway into their banking arrangements. His CIA file has a picture. He's about twenty-seven, five-eight, slender build, neatly trimmed beard. Flies to London a lot. Likes the ladies he can purchase by the hour. Not married yet. That's unusual, but if he's gay he conceals it well. The Brits have gotten girls into his bed. They report that he's vigorous, about what you'd expect for his age, and fairly inventive."

"Hell of a thing for a trained intelligence officer to do," Jack observed.

“Lots of services enlist the help of hookers,” Wills explained. “They don’t mind talking, and for the right wad of cash they’ll do just about anything. Uda here likes chicken-in-a-basket. Never tried that myself. Asian specialty. Know how to call up his dossier?”

“Nobody taught me,” Jack replied.

“Okay.” Wills frog-walked his swivel chair over and demonstrated. “This is the general index. Your access password is SOUTHWEST 91.”

Junior duly typed in the password, and the dossier came up as an Acrobat graphics file.

The first photo was probably from his passport, followed by six more, in a more informal format. Jack Jr. managed not to blush. He’d seen his share of *Playboy*s while growing up, even in Catholic schools. Will continued the day’s lesson.

“You can learn a lot from how a guy does it with women. Langley has a shrink who analyzes that in great detail. It’s probably one of the annexes on this file. At Langley, it’s called ‘Nuts and Sluts’ information. The doc is named Stefan Pizniak. Harvard Medical School professor. As I recall, he says this kid is normal in his drives, given his age, liquidity, and his social background. As you’ll see, he hangs out a lot with merchant bankers in London, like a new kid learning the business. The word is that he’s smart, affable, and handsome. Careful and conservative in his money work. He does not drink. So, he is somewhat religious. Doesn’t flaunt it or lecture others about it, but lives in accordance with the major rules of his religion.”

“What makes him a bad guy?” Jack asked.

“He talks a lot to people we know about. There’s no word on who he hangs with in Saudi. We’ve never put any coverage on him in his own backyard. Even the Brits haven’t, and they have a lot more assets in place. CIA doesn’t have much, and his profile isn’t high enough to merit a closer look, or so they think. It’s a shame. His daddy’s supposed to be a good guy. It’ll break his heart to find out his son’s hanging with the wrong crowd at home.” With that wisdom imparted, Wills went back to his own workstation.

Junior examined the face on his computer screen. His mom was pretty good at reading people from a single look, but it was a skill she hadn’t passed along to him. Jack had trouble enough figuring women out—along with most of the men in the world, he comforted himself. He continued to stare at the face, trying to read the mind of someone six thousand miles away, who spoke a different language and adhered to a different religion. What thoughts circulated behind those eyes? His father, he knew, liked the Saudis. He was especially close to Prince Ali bin Sultan, a prince and senior official in the Saudi government. Young Jack had met him, but only in passing. A beard and a sense of humor were the only two things he remembered. It was one of Jack Sr.’s core beliefs that all men were fundamentally the same, and he’d passed that opinion along to his son. But that also meant that, just as there were bad people in America, so there were also bad people elsewhere in the world, and his country had recently had some hard lessons from that sad fact. Unfortunately, the sitting President hadn’t quite figured out what to do about it yet.

Junior read on through the dossier. So, this was how it began here at The

Campus. He was working a case—well, kinda working some sort of case, he corrected himself. Uda bin Sali was working at being an international banker. Sure enough, he moved money around. His father's money? Jack wondered. If so, his daddy was one very wealthy son of a bitch. He played with all the big London banks—London was still the world's banking capital. Jack would never have guessed that the National Security Agency had the sort of ability to crack this kind of thing.

A hundred million here, a hundred million there, pretty soon you were talking about real money. Sali was in the capital-preservation business, which meant not so much growing the money entrusted to him as making sure the lockbox had a really good lock. There were seventy-one subsidiary accounts, sixty-three of which were identified by bank, number, and password, so it seemed. Girls? Politics? Sports? Money management? Cars? The oil business? What did rich Saudi princelings talk about? That was a big blank spot in the files. Why didn't the Brits listen in? The interviews with his hookers hadn't revealed very much, except that he was a good tipper for those girls who'd shown him an especially good time in his house in Berkeley Square . . . an upscale part of town, Jack noted. He mainly got around by taxi. Owned a car—a black Aston Martin convertible, no less—but didn't drive it much, the British information revealed. Did *not* have a chauffeur. Went to the embassy a lot. All in all, it was a lot of information that revealed not very much. He remarked on this to Tony Wills.

"Yeah, I know, but if he turns up hinky, you can be sure there're two or three things in there that ought to have jumped off the page at you. That's the problem with this damned business. And, remember, we're seeing the processed 'take.' Some poor schlub had to take really raw data and distill it down to this. Exactly what significant facts got lost along the way? No way to tell, my boy. No way to tell."

This is what my dad used to do, Junior reminded himself. *Trying to find diamonds in a bucket full of shit.* He'd expected it to be easier, somehow. All right, so what he had to do was find money moves that were not easily explained. It was the worst sort of scut work, and he couldn't even go to his father for advice. His dad would probably have flipped out to learn that he was working here. Mom would not be overly pleased, either.

Why did that matter? Wasn't he a man now, able to do what he wanted to do with his life? Not exactly. Parents had power over you that never went away. He'd always be trying to please them, to show them that they'd raised him the right way, and that he was doing the right thing. Or something like that. His father had been lucky. They'd never learned about all the things he'd had to do. Would they have liked it?

No. They would have been upset—furious—with all the chances he'd taken with his life. And that was just the stuff his son knew about. There were a lot of blank spots in his memory, times his father hadn't been home, and Mom hadn't explained why . . . and so, now, here he was, if not doing the same thing, then sure as hell heading in that direction . . . Well, his father had always said that the world was a crazy place, and so here he was, figuring out just how crazy it might really be.

CHAPTER 7

TRANSIT

IT STARTED in Lebanon, with a flight to Cyprus. From there, a KLM flight to Schipol Airport in the Netherlands, and from there to Paris. In France the sixteen men overnighted in eight separate hotels, taking the time to walk the streets and exercise their English—there had been little point in having them learn French, after all—and struggle with a local population that could have been more helpful. The good news, as they saw it, was that certain female French citizens went out of their way to speak decent English, and were very helpful indeed. For a fee.

They were ordinary in most details, all in their late twenties, clean-shaven, average in size and looks, but better dressed than was the average. They all concealed their unease well, albeit with lingering but furtive glances at the cops they saw—they all knew not to attract the attention of anyone in a police officer's uniform. The French police had a reputation for thoroughness which did not appeal to the new visitors. They were traveling on Qatari passports at the moment, which were fairly secure, but a passport issued from the French Foreign Minister himself would not stand up to a directed inquiry. And so they kept a low profile. They had all been briefed not to look around much, to be polite, and to make the effort to smile at everyone they encountered. Fortunately for them, it was tourist season in France, and Paris was jammed with people like them, many of whom also spoke little French, much to the bemused contempt of the Parisians, who in every case took their money anyway.

THE NEXT day's breakfast hadn't concluded with any new explosive revelations, and neither had lunch. Both Caruso brothers listened to their lessons from Pete Alexander, doing their best not to doze off, because these lessons seemed pretty straightforward.

"Boring, you think?" Pete asked over lunch.

"Well, none of it's earthshaking," Brian responded after a few seconds.

"You'll find it's a little different in a foreign city, out on the street in a market, say, looking for your subject in a crowd of a few thousand. The important part is to be invisible. We'll work on that this afternoon. You had any experience in that, Dominic?"

"Not really. Just the basic stuff. Don't look too directly at the subject. Reversible clothes. Different ties, if you're in an environment that calls for a necktie. And you depend on others to switch off on coverage. But we won't have the same backup we have in the Bureau for a discreet surveillance, will we?"

"Not even close. So, you keep your distance until it's time to move in. At that point, you move in as quickly as circumstances allow—"

"And whack the guy?" Brian asked.

"Still uneasy about it?"

"I haven't walked out yet, Pete. Let's say I have my concerns, and leave it at that."

Alexander nodded. "Fair enough. We prefer people who know how to think, and we know that thinking carries its own penalties."

"I guess that's how you have to look at it. What if the guy we're supposed to do away with turns out to be okay?" the Marine asked.

"Then you back off and report in. It's theoretically possible that an assignment can be erroneous, but to the best of my knowledge it's never happened."

"Never?"

"Not ever, not once," Alexander assured him.

"Perfect records make me nervous."

"We try to be careful."

"What are the rules? Okay, maybe I don't need to know—right now—who sends us out to kill somebody, but it would be nice to know what the criteria are to write up some fucker's death warrant, y'know?"

"It will be someone who has, directly or indirectly, caused the death of American citizens, or is directly involved in plans to do so in the future. We're not after people who sing too loud in church or who have books overdue at the library."

"You're talking about terrorists, right?"

"Yup," Pete replied simply.

"Why not just arrest them?" Brian asked next.

"Like you did in Afghanistan?"

"That was different," the Marine protested.

"How?" Pete asked.

"Well, for one thing we were uniformed combatants operating in the field under orders from legally constituted command authority."

"You took some initiative, right?"

"Officers are supposed to use their heads. My overall mission orders came from up the chain of command, however."

"And you don't question them?"

"No. Unless they're crazy, you're not supposed to do that."

"What about when *not* doing something is crazy?" Pete asked. "What if you have a chance to take action against people who are planning to do something very destructive?"

"That's what CIA and FBI are for."

"But when they can't get the job done, for one reason or another, then what? Do you just let the bad guys move ahead with their plans and handle them afterward? That can be expensive," Alexander told him. "Our job is to do the things that are necessary when the conventional methods are unable to accomplish the mission."

"How often?" This was Dominic, seeking to protect his brother.

"It's picking up."

"How many hits have you made?" Brian again.

"You don't need to know."

"Oh, I do love hearing that one," Dominic observed with a smile.

"Patience, boys. You're not in the club yet," Pete told them, hoping they were smart enough not to object at this point.

"Okay, Pete," Brian said, after a moment's thought. "We both gave our word that what we learn here stays here. Fine. It's just that murdering people in cold blood isn't exactly what I've been trained to do, y'know?"

"You're not supposed to feel good about it. Over in Afghanistan, did you ever shoot anybody looking the other way?"

"Two of them," Brian admitted. "Hey, the battlefield isn't the Olympic Games," he semiprotested.

"Neither is the rest of the world, Aldo." The look on the Marine's face said, *Well, you got me there.* "It's an imperfect world, guys. If you want to try to make it perfect, go ahead, but it's been tried before. Me, I'd settle for something safer and more predictable. Imagine if somebody had taken care of Hitler back in 1934 or so, or Lenin in 1915 in Switzerland. The world would have been better, right? Or maybe bad in a different way. But we're not in that business. We will not be involved in political assassinations. We're after the little sharks who kill innocent people in such a way that conventional procedures cannot handle them. It's not the best system. I know that. We all know that. But it's something, and we're going to try to see if it works. It can't be much worse than what we have already, can it?"

Dominic's eyes never left Pete's face during that discourse. He'd just told them something that maybe he hadn't meant to tell them. The Campus didn't have any killers yet. They were going to be the first. There had to be a lot of hopes riding on them. That was a lot of responsibility. But it all made sense. It was plain that Alexander was not teaching them from his own real-world experience. A training officer was supposed to be somebody who'd actually gone out and done it. That was why most of the instructors at the FBI Academy were experienced field agents. They could tell you how it felt. Pete could only tell them what had to be done. But why, then, had they picked him and Aldo?

"I see your point, Pete," Dominic said. "I'm not leaving yet."

"Neither am I," Brian told his training officer. "I just want to know what the rules are."

Pete didn't tell them they'd be making the rules up as they went along. They'd figure that one out soon enough.

AIRPORTS ARE the same all over the world. Instructed to be polite, they all checked their bags, waited in the correct lounges, smoked their cigarettes in the designated smoking areas, and read the books they'd purchased in the airport kiosks. Or pretended to. Not all of them had the language skills they would have wished. Once at cruising altitude, they ate their airline meals, and most of them took their airline naps. Nearly all of them were seated in the aft rows of their seating sections, and when they stirred, they wondered which of their seatmates they might meet again in a few days or weeks, however long it took to work out the details. Each of them hoped to meet Allah soon, and to

garner the rewards that would come for fighting in their Holy Cause. It occurred to the more intellectual of them that even Mohammed, blessings and peace be upon him, was limited in his ability to communicate the nature of Paradise. He'd had to explain it to people with no knowledge of passenger jet aircraft, automobiles, and computers. What, then, was its true nature? It had to be so thoroughly wonderful as to defy description, but even so, a mystery yet to be discovered. And they would discover it. There was a degree of excitement in that thought, a sort of anticipation too sublime to discuss with one's colleagues. A mystery, but an infinitely desirable one. And if others had to meet Allah, too, as a result, well, that also was written in the Great Book of Destiny. For the moment, they all took their naps, sleeping the sleep of the just, the sleep of the Holy Martyrs yet to be. Milk, honey, and virgins.

SALI, JACK found, had some mystery about him. The CIA file on the guy even had the length of his penis appended in the "Nuts and Sluts" section. The British whores said he was grossly average in size but uncommonly vigorous in application—and a fine tipper, which appealed to their commercial sensibilities. But unlike most men, he didn't talk about himself much. Talked mainly about the rain and chill of London, and complimentary things about his companion of the moment, which appealed to her vanity. His occasional gift of a nice handbag—Louis Vuitton in most cases—sat well with his "regulars," two of whom reported to Thames House, the new home of both the British Secret Service and the Security Service. Jack wondered if they were getting paid by both Sali and H.M. Government for services rendered. Probably a good deal for the girls involved, he was sure, though Thames House probably wouldn't spring for shoes and a bag.

"Tony?"

"Yeah, Jack?" Wills looked up from his workstation.

"How do we know if this Sali is a bad guy?"

"We don't for sure. Not until he actually does something, or we intercept a conversation between him and somebody we don't like."

"So, I'm just checking this bird out."

"Correct. You'll be doing a lot of that. Any feel for the guy yet?"

"He's a horny son of a bitch."

"It's hard to be rich and single, in case you haven't noticed, Junior."

Jack blinked. Maybe he had that coming. "Okay, but I'll be damned if I pay for it, and he's paying a lot."

"What else?" Wills asked.

"He doesn't talk a hell of a lot."

"What's that tell you?"

Ryan sat back in his swivel chair to think it over. *He* didn't talk to his girlfriends much, either, at least not about his new job. As soon as you said "financial management," most women tended to doze off in self-defense. Did *that* mean anything? Maybe Sali just wasn't a talker. Maybe he was sufficiently secure that he didn't feel the need to impress his lady friends with anything but his cash—he always used cash, not credit cards. And why that? To keep his family from knowing? Well, Jack didn't talk to Mom and Dad about his love life, either. In fact, he rarely took a girlfriend to the family home. His

mom tended to scare girls away. Not his dad, strangely enough. The M.D. Dr. Ryan struck other women as powerful, and while most young women found it admirable, many also found it intimidating as hell. His father dialed all the power stuff way back and came off as a slender and distinguished gray-haired teddy bear to family guests. More than anything else, his dad liked to play catch with his son on the grass overlooking the Chesapeake Bay, maybe harkening back to a simpler time. He had Kyle for that. The littlest Ryan was still in grammar school, at the stage where he asked furtive questions about Santa Claus, but only when Mom and Dad weren't around. There was probably a kid in class who wanted to let everybody know what he knew—there was always one of those—and Katie had wised up by now. She still liked to play Barbies, but she knew that her mom and dad bought them at the Toys R Us in Glen Burnie, and assembled the accoutrements on Christmas Eve, a process his father truly loved, much as he might bitch about it. When you stopped believing in Santa Claus, the whole damn world just started a downhill slide . . .

"It tells us he's not a talker. Not much else," Jack said after a moment's reflection. "We're not supposed to convert inference into facts, are we?"

"Correct. A lot of people think otherwise, but not here. Assumption is the mother of all fuckups. That shrink at Langley specializes in spinning. He's good, but you need to learn to distinguish between speculation and facts. So, tell me about Mr. Sali," Wills commanded.

"He's horny, and he doesn't talk much. He plays very conservatively with the family's money."

"Anything that makes him look like a bad guy?"

"No, but he's worth watching because of his religious—well, extremism's the wrong word. There are some things missing here. He's not boisterous, not showy the way rich people his age usually are. Who started the file on him?" Jack asked.

"The Brits did. Something about this guy tweaked the interest of one of their senior analysts. Then Langley took a brief look and started a file of their own. Then he was intercepted talking to a guy who's also got a file at Langley—the conversation wasn't about anything important, but there it was," Wills explained. "And you know, it's a lot easier to open a file than it is to close one. His cell phone is coded in to the NSA computers, and so they report on him whenever he turns it on. I've been through the file, too. He's worth keeping an eye on, I think—but I'm not sure why. You learn to trust your instincts in this business, Jack. So, I'm nominating you to be the in-house expert on this kid."

"And I'm looking for how he handles his money . . . ?"

"That's right. You know, it doesn't take much to finance a bunch of terrorists—at least not much by his reckoning. A million bucks a year is a lot of money to those people. They live hand-to-mouth, and their maintenance expenses aren't that high. So, you're supposed to look at the margins. Chances are he'll try to hide whatever he does in the shadows of his big transactions."

"I'm not an accountant," Jack pointed out. His father had gotten his CPA a long time ago, but never used it, even to do his own taxes. He had a law firm for that.

"Can you do arithmetic?"

"Well, yeah."

"So, attach a nose to it."

Oh, great, John Patrick Ryan, Jr., thought. Then he reminded himself that actual intelligence operations weren't about shoot-the-bad-guy-and-bang-Ursula-Undress while the credits rolled. That was only in the movies. This was the real world.

"OUR FRIEND is in that much of a hurry?" Ernesto asked in considerable surprise.

"So it would seem. The *norteamericanos* have been hard on them of late. I imagine they want to remind their enemies that they still have fangs. A thing of honor for them, perhaps," Pablo speculated. His friend would understand that readily enough.

"So, what do we do now?"

"When they are settled in Mexico City, we arrange for transport into America, and, I presume, we arrange for weapons."

"Complications?"

"If the *norteamericanos* have our organizations penetrated, they might have some prewarning, plus whispers of our involvement. But we have considered this already."

They'd considered it briefly, yes, Ernesto reflected, but that had been at a convenient distance. Now the knocker on the door was rattling, and it was time for further reflection. But he couldn't renege on this deal. That, too, was a matter both of honor and of business. They were preparing an initial shipment of cocaine to the E.U. That promised to be a really sizable market.

"How many people are coming?"

"Fourteen, he says. They have no weapons at all."

"What will they need, do you suppose?"

"Light automatics should do it, plus pistols, of course," Pablo said. "We have a supplier in Mexico who can handle it for less than ten thousand dollars. For an additional ten, we can have the weapons delivered to the end users in America, to avoid complications during the crossing."

"*Bueno,* make it so. Will you fly to Mexico yourself?"

Pablo nodded. "Tomorrow morning. I will coordinate with them and the *coyotes* this first time."

"You will be careful," Ernesto pointed out. His suggestions had the force of an explosive device. Pablo took some chances, but his services were very important to the Cartel. He would be hard to replace.

"Of course, *jefe.* I need to evaluate how reliable these people are if they are to assist us in Europe."

"Yes, that is so," Ernesto agreed warily. As with most deals, when it came time to take action, there were second thoughts. But he was not an old woman. He had never been afraid to act decisively.

THE AIRBUS pulled up to its gate, the first-class passengers were allowed to deplane first, and they followed the colored arrows on the floor to immigration and customs, where they assured the uniformed bureaucrats that they had nothing to declare, and their passports were duly stamped, and they

walked off to collect their luggage.

The leader of the group was named Mustafa. A Saudi by birth, he was clean-shaven, which he didn't like, though it exposed skin that the women seemed to like. He and a colleague named Abdullah walked together to get their bags, and then out to where their rides were supposed to be waiting. This would be the first test of their newfound friends in the Western Hemisphere. Sure enough, someone was holding a cardboard square with "MIGUEL" printed on it. That was Mustafa's code name for this mission, and he walked over to shake the man's hand. The greeter said nothing, but motioned them to follow him. Outside, a brown Plymouth minivan waited. The bags went in back, and the passengers slid into the middle seat. It was warm in Mexico City, and the air was fouler than anything they'd ever experienced. What ought to have been a sunny day was ruined by a gray blanket over the city—air pollution, Mustafa thought.

The driver continued to say nothing as he drove them to their hotel. This actually impressed them. If there was nothing to say, then one should keep quiet.

The hotel was a good one, as expected. Mustafa checked in using the false Visa card that had been faxed ahead, and in five minutes he and his friend were in their spacious room on the fifth floor. They looked around for obvious bugs before speaking.

"I didn't think that damned flight would ever end," Abdullah groused, looking in the minibar for bottled water. They'd been briefed to be careful drinking the stuff that came out of the tap.

"Yes, I agree. How did you sleep?"

"Not well. I thought the one good thing about alcohol was that it made you unconscious."

"For some. Not for all," Mustafa told his friend. "There are other drugs for that."

"Those are hateful to God," Abdullah observed. "Unless a physician administers them."

"We have friends now who do not think that way."

"Infidels," Abdullah almost spat.

"The enemy of your enemy is your friend."

Abdullah twisted the top off an Evian bottle. "No. You can trust a true friend. Can we trust these men?"

"Only as far as we must," Mustafa allowed. Mohammed had been careful in his mission brief. These new allies would help them only as a matter of convenience, because they also wished harm to the Great Satan. That was good enough for now. Someday these allies would become enemies, and they'd have to deal with them. But that day had not yet come. He stifled a yawn. Time to get some rest. Tomorrow would be a busy day.

JACK LIVED in a condo in Baltimore, a few blocks from Orioles Park at Camden Yards, where he had season tickets, but which was dark tonight because the Orioles were in Toronto. Not a good cook, he ate out as he usually did, alone this time because he didn't have a date, which was not as unusual as he might have wished. Finished, he walked back to his condo, switched on

his TV, and then thought better of it, went to his computer instead, and logged on to check his e-mail and surf the 'Net. That's when he made a note to himself. Sali lived alone as well, and while he often had whores for company, it wasn't every night. What did he do on the other nights? Log on to his computer? A lot of people did. Did the Brits have a tap on his phone lines? They must. But the file on Sali didn't include any e-mails . . . why? Something worth checking out.

"WHAT YOU thinking, Aldo?" Dominic asked his brother. ESPN had a baseball game on; the Mariners were playing the Yankees, to the current detriment of the former.

"I'm not sure I like the idea of shooting some poor bastard down on the street, bro."

"What if you know he's a bad guy?"

"And what if I whack the wrong guy just because he drives the same kind of car and has the same mustache? What if he leaves a wife and kids behind? Then I'm a fucking murderer—a contract killer, at that. That's not the sort of thing they taught us at the Basic School, y'know?"

"But if you *know* he's a bad guy, then what?" the FBI agent asked.

"Hey, Enzo, that's not what they trained you to do, either."

"I know that, but this here's a different situation. If I know the mutt's a terrorist, and I know we can't arrest him, and I know he's got more plans, then I think I can handle it."

"Out in the hills, in Afghanistan, you know, our intel wasn't always gold-plated, man. Sure, I learned to put my own ass on the line, but not some poor other schlub's."

"The people you were after over there, who'd they kill?"

"Hey, they were part of an organization that made war on the United States of America. They probably weren't Boy Scouts. But I never saw any direct evidence of it."

"What if you had?" Dominic asked.

"But I didn't."

"You're lucky," Enzo responded, remembering a little girl whose throat had been slashed ear to ear. There was a legal adage that hard cases made for bad law, but the books could not anticipate all the things that people did. Black ink on white paper was a little too dry for the real world sometimes. But he'd always been the passionate one of the two. Brian had always been a touch cooler, like Fonzie on *Happy Days.* Twins, yes, but fraternal ones. Dominic was more like his father, Italian and passionate. Brian had turned out more like Mom, chillier from a more northerly climate. To an outsider, the differences might have appeared less than trivial, but to the twins themselves it was frequently the subject of jabs and jokes. "When you see it, Brian, when it's right there in front of you, it sets you off, man. It lights a fire in the gut."

"Hey, been there, done that, got the T-shirt, okay? I whacked five men all by myself. But it was business, not personal. They tried to ambush us, but they didn't read the manual right, and I used fire and maneuver to fake 'em out and roll 'em up, just like they taught me to do. It's not my fault they were inept. They could have surrendered, but they preferred to shoot it out. That was a

bad call on their part, but 'a man should do what he thinks is best.'" His all-time favorite movie was John Wayne's *Hondo.*

"Hey, Aldo, I'm not saying you're a wuss."

"I know what you're saying, but, look, I don't want to turn into one of them, okay?"

"That's not the mission here, bro. I got my doubts, too, but I'm going to stay around and see how it plays out. We can always kiss it off whenever we want."

"I suppose."

Then Derek Jeter doubled up the middle. Pitchers probably thought of *him* as a terrorist, didn't they?

ON THE other side of the building, Pete Alexander was on a secure phone to Columbia, Maryland.

"So, how are they doing?" he heard Sam Granger ask.

Pete sipped at his glass of sherry. "They're good kids. They both have doubts. The Marine talks openly about it, and the FBI guy keeps his mouth shut about it, but the wheels are turning over slowly."

"How serious is it?"

"Hard to say. Hey, Sam, we always knew that training would be the hard part. Few Americans want to grow up to be professional killers—at least not the ones we need for this."

"There was a guy at the Agency who would have fit right in—"

"But he's too damned old, and you know it," Alexander countered at once. "Besides, he has his sunset job over across the pond in Wales, and he seems to be comfortable in it."

"If only . . ."

"If only your aunt had balls, she'd be your uncle," Pete pointed out. "Selecting candidates is your job. Getting them trained up is mine. These two have the brains and they have the skills. The hard part is temperament. I'm working on that. Be patient."

"In the movies, it's a lot easier."

"In the movies, everybody is borderline psychopath. Is that who we want on the payroll?"

"I guess not." There were plenty of psychopaths to be found. Every large police department knew of several. And they'd kill people for modest monetary considerations, or a small quantity of drugs. The problem with such people was that they didn't take orders well, and they were not very smart. Except in the movies. Where was that little Nikita girl when you really needed her?

"So, we have to deal with good, reliable people who have brains. Such people think, and they do not always think predictably, do they? A guy with a conscience is nice to have, but every so often he's going to wonder if he's doing the right thing. Why did you have to send two Catholics? Jews are bad enough. They're born with guilt—but Catholics learn it all in school."

"Thank you, Your Holiness," Granger responded, deadpan.

"Sam, we knew going in that this was not going to be easy. Jesus, you send me a Marine and an FBI agent. Why not a couple of Eagle Scouts, y'know?"

"Okay, Pete. It's your job. Any idea on timing? There's some work piling up on us," Granger observed.

"Maybe a month and I'll know if they'll play or not. They *will* need to know the why in addition to the who, but I always told you that," Alexander reminded his boss.

"True," Granger admitted. It really *was* a lot easier in the movies, wasn't it? Just let your fingers do the walking to "Assassins R Us" in the Yellow Pages. They had thought about hiring former KGB officers at first. They all had expert training, and all wanted money—the going rate was less than twenty-five thousand dollars per kill, a pittance—but such people would probably report back to Moscow Centre in the hope of being rehired, and The Campus would then become known within the global "black" community. They couldn't have that.

"What about the new toys?" Pete asked. Sooner or later, he'd have to train the twins with the new tools of the trade.

"Two weeks, they tell me."

"That long? Hell, Sam, I proposed them nine months ago."

"It's not something you get at the local Western Auto. They have to be manufactured from scratch. You know, highly skilled machinists in out-of-the-way places, people who don't ask questions."

"I told you, get the guys who do this sort of thing for the Air Force. They're always making up clever little gadgets." Like tape recorders that fit in cigarette lighters. Now, *that* was probably inspired by the movies. And for the really good things, the government almost never had the right people in-house, which was why they employed civilian contractors, who took the money, did the job, and kept their mouths shut because they wanted more such contracts.

"They're all being worked on, Pete. Two weeks," he emphasized.

"Roger that. Until then, I have all the suppressed pistols I need. They're both doing nicely with the tracking and tailing drills. Helps that they're so ordinary-looking."

"So, bottom line, things are going well?" Granger asked.

"Except for the conscience thing, yeah."

"Okay, keep me posted."

"Will do."

"See ya."

Alexander set the receiver back down. Goddamned consciences, he thought. It would be nice to have robots, but somebody might notice Robby striding down the street. And they couldn't have that. Or maybe the Invisible Man, but in the H. G. Wells story, the drug that made him transparent also made him mad, and this gig was already crazy enough, wasn't it? He tossed off the last of his sherry, and then on reflection, went off to refill his glass.

CHAPTER 8

CONVICTION

MUSTAFA AND Abdullah arose at dawn, said their morning prayers, and ate, and then hooked up their computers and checked their e-mail. Sure enough, Mustafa had an e-mail from Mohammed, forwarding a message from someone else, supposedly named Diego, with instructions for a meeting at . . . 10:30 A.M. local time. He sorted through the rest of his electronic mail, most of it something the Americans called "spam." He'd learned that this was a canned pig product, which seemed entirely appropriate. Both of them walked outside —but separately—just after 9:00, mainly to get the blood moving and examine the neighborhood. They checked carefully but furtively for tails and found none. They got to the planned rendezvous point at 10:25.

Diego was already there, reading a paper, wearing a white shirt with blue stripes.

"Diego?" Mustafa asked pleasantly.

"You must be Miguel," the contact replied with a smile, rising to shake hands. "Please be seated." Pablo scanned around. Yes, there was "Miguel's" backup, sitting alone and ordering coffee, doing overwatch like a professional. "So, how do you like Mexico City?"

"I did not know it was so large and bustling." Mustafa waved around. The sidewalks were crowded with people heading in all directions. "And the air is so foul."

"That is a problem here. The mountains hold in the pollution. It takes strong winds to clear the air. So, coffee?"

Mustafa nodded. Pablo waved to the waiter and held up the coffeepot. The sidewalk café was European in character, but not overly crowded. The tables were about half occupied, in knots of people meeting for business or socially, doing their talking and minding their own business. The new coffeepot arrived. Mustafa poured and waited for the other to speak.

"So, what can I do for you?"

"All of us are here as requested. How soon can we go?"

"How soon do you wish?" Pablo asked.

"This afternoon would be fine, but that might be a little soon for your arrangements."

"Yes. But what about tomorrow, say about thirteen hundred hours?"

"That would be excellent," Mustafa responded in pleasant surprise. "How will the crossing be arranged?"

"I will not be directly involved, you understand, but you will be driven to the border and handed over to someone who specializes in getting people and certain goods into America. You will be required to walk about six kilometers.

It will be warm, but not greatly so. Once in America, you will be driven to a safe house outside Santa Fe, New Mexico. There you can either fly to your final destinations or rent cars."

"Weapons?"

"What exactly will you require?"

"Ideally, we would like AK-47s."

Pablo shook his head at once. "Those we cannot supply, but we can get you Uzi and Ingram submachine guns. Nine-millimeter Parabellum caliber, with, say, six thirty-round magazines each, fully loaded for your purposes."

"More ammunition," Mustafa said at once. "Twelve magazines, plus three additional boxes of ammunition for each weapon."

Pablo nodded. "That is easily done." The increased expense would be only a couple of thousand dollars. The weapons would have been bought on the open market, along with the ammunition. They were technically traceable to their origin and/or purchaser, but that was only a theoretical problem, not a practical one. The guns would be mainly Ingrams, not the better-made and more accurate Israeli Uzis, but these people wouldn't care. Who knows, they might even have religious or moral objections to touching a Jewish-made weapon. "Tell me, how are you set for traveling expenses?"

"We have five thousand American dollars each in cash."

"You can use that for minor expenses, like food and gasoline, but for other things you need credit cards. Americans will not accept cash to rent cars, and *never* to buy airplane tickets."

"We have them," Mustafa replied. He and each member of the team had Visa cards issued to them in Bahrain. They even had consecutive numbers. All were drawn on an account in a Swiss bank, whose account held just over five hundred thousand dollars. Sufficient to their purposes.

The name on the card, Pablo saw, was JOHN PETER SMITH. Good. Whoever had set this up hadn't made the mistake of using explicitly Middle Eastern names. Just as long as the card didn't fall into the hands of a police officer who might ask Mr. Smith where exactly he came from. He hoped they had been briefed on the American police and their habits.

"Other documents?" Pablo asked.

"Our passports are Qatari. We have international driver's licenses. We all speak acceptable English and can read maps. We know about American laws. We will keep within the speed limits and drive carefully. The nail that sticks up is hammered down. So we will not stick up."

"Good," Pablo observed. So, they had been briefed. Some might even remember it. "Remember that one mistake can ruin the entire mission for all of you. And it is easy to make mistakes. America is an easy country in which to live and move about, but their police are very efficient. If you are not noticed, you are safe from them. Therefore, you must avoid being noticed. Fail in that, and you could all be doomed to failure."

"Diego, we will not fail," Mustafa promised.

Fail at what? Pablo wondered, but did not ask. *How many women and children will you kill?* But it didn't really matter to him. It was a cowardly way to kill, but the rules of honor in his "friend's" culture were very different from his own. This was business, and that was all he needed to know.

THREE MILES, push-ups, and a coffee chaser, and that was life in southern Virginia.

"Brian, you used to carrying a firearm?"

"Usually an M16 and five or six extra mags. Some fragmentation grenades, too, go in the basic load, yeah, Pete."

"I was talking about side arms, actually."

"M9 Beretta, that's what I'm used to."

"Any good with it?"

"It's in my package, Pete. I qualified expert at Quantico, but so did most of my class. No big deal."

"You used to carrying it around?"

"You mean in civilian clothes? No."

"Okay, get used to it."

"Is it legal?" Brian asked.

"Virginia is a shall-issue state. If you've got a clean record, the commonwealth will grant you a concealed carry permit. What about you, Dominic?"

"I'm still FBI, Pete. I'd feel kinda naked out on the street without a friend."

"What do you carry?"

"Smith & Wesson 1076. Shoots the ten-millimeter cartridge, double action. The Bureau's gone to the Glock lately, but I like the Smith better." *And, no, I didn't carve a notch in the grips,* he didn't add. Though he had thought about it.

"Okay, well, when you're off-campus here, I want you both to carry, just to get used to the idea, Brian."

A shrug. "Fair enough." It beat the hell out of a sixty-five-pound rucksack.

THERE WAS a lot more to it than just Sali, of course. Jack was working on a total of eleven different people, all but one of them Middle Eastern, all in the money business. The one European lived in Riyadh. He was German, but had converted to Islam, which had struck someone as odd enough to deserve electronic surveillance. Jack's university German was good enough to read the guy's e-mails, but they didn't reveal very much. He'd evidently gone native in his habits, didn't even drink beer. He was evidently popular with his Saudi friends—one thing about Islam was that if you obeyed the rules and prayed the correct way, they didn't much care what you looked like. It would have been admirable except for the fact that most of the world's terrorists prayed to Mecca. But that, Jack reminded himself, wasn't the fault of Islam. The night he himself had been born, people had tried to kill him while he was still in his mother's womb—and they'd identified themselves as Catholics. Fanatics were fanatics, the world around. The idea that people had tried to murder his mother was enough to make him want to pick his Beretta .40. His father, well, his dad was able to look after himself, but messing with women constituted a big step over the line, and that was a line you could cross only once and in one direction. There was no coming back.

He didn't remember any of it, of course. The ULA terrorists had all gone off to meet their God—courtesy of the State of Maryland—before he'd entered first grade, and his parents had never talked about it. His sister Sally had,

though. She still had dreams about it. He wondered if Mom and Dad had them, too. Did events like that go away eventually? He'd seen things on the History Channel to suggest that World War II veterans still had images of combat return to them at night, and that had been over sixty years ago. Such memories had to be a curse.

"Tony?"

"Yeah, Junior?"

"This guy Otto Weber, what's the big deal? He's about as exciting as vanilla ice cream."

"If you're a bad guy, do you suppose you wear a neon sign on your back, or do you think you try to hide down in the grass?"

"With the snakes," Junior completed the thought. "I know—we're looking for little things."

"Like I told you. You can do fourth-grade arithmetic. Attach a nose to it. And, yes, you're looking for things that are *supposed* to be damned near invisible, okay? That's why this job is so much fun. And innocent little things are mostly innocent little things. If he downloads kiddie porn off the'Net, it's not because he's a terrorist. It's because he's a pervert. That's not a capital offense in most countries."

"I bet it is in Saudi."

"Probably, but they don't chase after it, I bet."

"I thought they were all puritans."

"Over there, a man keeps his libido to himself. But if you do something with a real live kid, you're in big trouble. Saudi Arabia is a good place to abide by the law. You can park your Mercedes and leave the keys in the ignition and the car'll be there when you get back. You can't even do that in Salt Lake City."

"Been there?" Jack asked.

"Four times. The people are friendly as long as you treat them properly, and if you make a real friend over there, he's a friend for life. But their rules *are* different, and the price for breaking them can be pretty steep."

"So, Otto Weber plays by the rules?"

Wills nodded. "Correct. He's bought all the way into the system, religion and all. They like him for that. Religion is the center of their culture. When a guy converts and lives by Islamic rules, it validates their world, and they like that, just like anybody would. I don't think Otto's a player, though. The people we're looking for are sociopaths. They can happen anywhere. Some cultures catch them early and change them—or kill them. Some cultures don't. We're not as good at that as we ought to be, and I suspect the Saudis probably are. But the really good ones can skate in any culture, and some of them use the disguise of religion. Islam is not a belief system for psychopaths, but it can be perverted to the use of such people, just like Christianity can. Ever take psych courses?"

"No, wish I had," Ryan admitted.

"So, buy some books. Read them. Find people who know about that stuff and ask questions. Listen to the answers." Wills turned back to his computer screen.

Shit, Junior thought. This job just kept getting worse. How long, he

wondered, before they expected him to turn up something useful? A month? A year? What the hell was a passing grade at The Campus . . .

. . . and what, exactly, would happen when he did turn up something useful?

Back to Otto Weber . . .

THEY COULDN'T stay in their room all day without having people wonder why. Mustafa and Abdullah left just after eating a light lunch in the coffee shop, and took a walk. Three blocks away they found an art museum. Admission was free, but inside they found out why. It was a museum of modern art and its painting and sculpture were well beyond their comprehension. They wandered through it over a period of two hours, and both of them concluded that paint must be cheap in Mexico. Nevertheless, it gave them the chance to burnish their covers, as they pretended to appreciate the garbage hanging on the walls and sitting on the floors.

Then they strolled back to their hotel. The one good thing was the weather. It was warm to those of European extraction, but quite pleasant to the visiting Arabs, gray haze and all. Tomorrow they would see desert again. One last time, perhaps.

IT WAS impossible, even for a well-supported government agency, to search all the messages that flew through cyberspace every night, and so the NSA used computer programs to screen for key phrases. The electronic addresses of some known or suspected terrorists or suspected stringers had been identified over the years, and these were watched, as were the server computers of Internet Service Providers, or ISPs. All in all, it used up vast amounts of storage space, and as a result delivery trucks were constantly bringing new disk storage devices to Fort Meade, Maryland, where they were hooked up to the mainframe computers so that if a target person was identified, then his e-mails dating back for months or even years could be screened. If there were ever a game of falcon and mouse, this was it. The bad guys, of course, knew that the screening program looked for specific words or phrases, and so they had taken to using their own code words—which was another trap in itself, since codes gave a false sense of security, one that was easily exploited by an agency with seventy years of experience reading the minds of America's enemies.

The process had its limits. Too free a use of signal-intelligence information revealed its existence, causing the targets to change their methods of encryption, and so compromising the source. Using it too little, on the other hand, was as bad as not having it at all. Unfortunately, the intelligence services leaned more to the latter than the former. The creation of a new Department of Homeland Security had, theoretically, set up a central clearinghouse for all threat-related information, but the size of the new superagency had crippled it from the get-go. The information was all there, but in too great a quantity to be processed, and with too many processors to turn out a viable product.

But old habits died hard. The intelligence community remained intact, a superagency overtop its own bureaucracy or not, and its segments talked to

each other. As always, they savored what the insiders knew as opposed to those who knew it not . . . and wished to keep it that way.

The National Security Agency's principal means of communication with the Central Intelligence Agency was essentially to say *This is interesting, what do you think?* That was because each of the two agencies held a different corporate ethos. They talked differently. They thought differently. And insofar as they acted at all, they acted differently.

But at least they thought in parallel directions, not divergent ones. On the whole, CIA had the better analysts, and NSA was better at gathering information. There were exceptions to both general rules; and in both cases, the really talented individuals knew one another, and, among themselves, they mostly spoke the same language.

THAT BECAME clear the next morning with the interagency cable traffic. A senior analyst at Fort Meade headed it as FLASH-traffic to his counterpart at Langley. That ensured that it would be noticed at The Campus. Jerry Rounds saw it at the top of his morning e-mail pile, and he brought it to the next morning's conference.

"'We will sting them badly this time,' the guy says. What could that mean?" Jerry Rounds wondered aloud. Tom Davis had overnighted in New York. He had a breakfast meeting with the bond people at Morgan Stanley. It was annoying when business got in the way of business.

"How good's the translation?" Gerry Hendley asked.

"The footnote says there's no problem on that end. The intercept is clear and static-free. It's a simple declarative sentence in literate Arabic, no particular nuances to worry about," Rounds declared.

"Origin and recipient?" Hendley went on.

"The originator is a guy named Fa'ad, last name unknown. We know this guy. We think he's one of their midlevel operations people—a plans rather than field guy. He's based somewhere in Bahrain. He only talks on his cell phone when he's in a moving car or a public place, like a market or something. Nobody's gotten a line on him yet. The recipient," Bell went on, "is supposedly a new guy—more likely an old guy on a newly cloned phone. It's an old analog phone, and so they couldn't generate a voiceprint."

"So, they probably have an operation running . . ." Hendley observed.

"Looks that way," Rounds agreed. "Nature and location unknown."

"So, we don't know dick." Hendley reached for his coffee cup and managed a frown best measured on the Richter scale. "What are they going to do about it?"

Granger took that one: "Nothing useful, Gerry. They're in a logic trap. If they do anything at all, like upgrading the color on the threat rainbow, they're sounding the alarm, and they've done that so much that it's become counterproductive. Unless they disclose the text and the source, nobody'll take it seriously. If they do disclose anything, we burn the source for fair."

"And if they don't sound the alarm, Congress will shove whatever ends up happening right up their ass." Elected officials were much more comfortable being the problem rather than the solution. There was political hay to be made from nonproductive screaming. So, CIA and other services would

continue to work at identifying the people with the distant cell phones. That was unglamorous, slow police work, and it ran at a speed that grossly impatient politicians could not dictate—and throwing money at the problem didn't make it any better, which was doubly frustrating to people who didn't know how to do anything else.

"So, they straddle the issue, and do something they know won't work—"

"—and hope for a miracle," Granger agreed with his boss.

Police departments all across America would be alerted, of course—but for what purpose, and against what threat, nobody knew. And cops were always looking for Middle Eastern faces to pull over and question anyway, to the point that cops were bored with what was almost always a nonproductive exercise in doing something the ACLU was already raising hell about. There were six Driving While Arab cases pending in various federal district courts, four involving physicians, and two with demonstrably innocent students whom the local police had hassled a little too vigorously. Whatever case law resulted from those incidents would do far more harm than good. It was just what Sam Granger called it, a logic trap.

Hendley's frown got a little deeper. It was echoed, he was sure, at a half-dozen government agencies which, for all their funding and personnel, were about as useful as tits on a boar hog. "Anything we can do?" he asked.

"Stay alert and call the cops if we see anything unusual," Granger answered. "Unless you have a gun handy."

"To shoot some innocent clown who's probably taking citizenship classes," Bell added. "Not worth the trouble."

I should have stayed in the Senate, Hendley thought. At least being part of the problem had its satisfactions. It was good for the spleen to vent it once in a while. Screaming here was totally counterproductive, and bad for the morale of his people.

"Okay, then, we pretend we're ordinary citizens," the boss said at last. The senior staff nodded agreement, and went on to the remaining routine business of the day. Toward the end, Hendley asked Rounds how the new boy was doing.

"He's smart enough to ask a lot of questions. I have him reviewing known or suspected stringers for unaccountable money transfers."

"If he can stand doing that, God bless him," Bell observed. "That can drive a man crazy."

"Patience is a virtue," Gerry noted. "It's just a son of a bitch to acquire."

"We alert all of our people to this intercept?"

"Might as well," Bell responded.

"Done," Granger told them all.

"SHIT," Jack observed fifteen minutes later. "What's it mean?"

"We might know tomorrow, next week—or never," Will answered.

"Fa' ad . . . I know that name . . ." Jack turned back to his computer and keyed up some files. "Yeah! He's the guy in Bahrain. How come the local cops haven't sweated him some?"

"They don't know about him yet. Tracking him's an NSA gig so far, but maybe Langley will see if they can learn some more about him."

"Are they as good as the FBI for police work?"

"Actually, no, they're not. Different training, but it's not that removed from what a normal person can do—"

Ryan the Younger cut him off. "Bullshit. Reading people is something cops are good at. It's an acquired skill, and you also have to learn how to ask questions."

"Says who?" Wills demanded.

"Mike Brennan. He was my bodyguard. He taught me a lot."

"Well, a good spook has to read people, too. Their asses depend on it."

"Maybe, but if you want your eyes fixed, you talk to my mom. For ears, you talk to somebody else."

"Okay, maybe so. For now, check out our friend Fa'ad."

Jack turned back to his computer. He scrolled back to the first interesting conversation they'd intercepted. Then he thought better of it and went back to the very beginning, the first time he'd attracted notice. "Why doesn't he change phones?"

"Maybe he's lazy. These guys are smart, but they have blind spots, too. They fall into habits. They're clever, but they do not have formal training, like a trained spook, KGB or like that."

NSA had a large but covert listening post in Bahrain, covered in the American Embassy, and supplemented by U.S. Navy warships that called there on a regular basis, but were not seen as an electronic threat in that environment. The NSA teams that regularly sailed on them even intercepted people walking the waterfront with their cell phones.

"This guy is dirty," he observed a minute later. "This guy's a bad guy, sure as hell."

"He's been a good barometer, too. He says a lot of things we find interesting."

"So, somebody ought to pick him up."

"They're thinking about that at Langley."

"How big's the station in Bahrain?"

"Six people. Station Chief, two field spooks, and three sundry employees, signals and stuff."

"*That's all?* There? Just a handful?"

"That's right," Wills confirmed.

"Damn. I used to ask Dad about this. He usually shrugged and grumbled."

"He tried pretty hard to get CIA more funding and more employees. Congress wasn't always accommodating."

"Have we ever taken a guy up and, you know, 'talked' to him?"

"Not lately."

"Why not?"

"Manpower," Wills answered simply. "Funny thing about employees, they all expect to be paid. We're not that big."

"So why doesn't CIA ask the local cops to pick him up? Bahrain's a friendly country."

"Friendly, but not a vassal. They have their ideas about civil rights, too, just not the same as ours. Also, you can't pick a guy up for what he knows and what he thinks. Only for what he's done. As you can see, we don't know that

he's actually done anything."

"So, put a tail on his ass."

"And how can CIA do that with only two field spooks?" Wills asked.

"Jesus!"

"Welcome to the real world, Junior." The Agency ought to have recruited some agents, maybe cops in Bahrain, to help out with such tasks, but that hadn't happened yet. The Station Chief could also have requested more people, of course, but Arabic-speaking and -looking field officers were a little thin over at Langley, and those they had went to more obviously troublesome postings.

THE RENDEZVOUS took place as planned. There were three vehicles, each with a driver who spoke scarcely a word, and that in Spanish. The drive was pleasant, and distantly reminiscent of home. The driver was cautious; he didn't speed or do anything else to attract attention, but they moved right along in any case. Nearly all of the Arabs smoked cigarettes, and exclusively American brands, like Marlboro. Mustafa did as well, and wondered—as had Mohammed before him—what the Prophet would have said about cigarettes. Probably nothing good, but he *hadn't* said anything, had he? And so, Mustafa could smoke as much as he wished. The issue of dangers to his health was a distant concern now, after all. He expected to live another four or five days, but little more than that, if things went according to plan.

He'd expected some excited chattering from his people, but there was none. Hardly anyone spoke a word. They just looked blankly out at the passing countryside, speeding past a culture about which they knew little, and they would not learn more.

"OKAY, BRIAN, here's your carry permit." Pete Alexander handed it over.

It might as well have been a second driver's license, and it went into his wallet. "So, I'm street-legal now?"

"As a practical matter, no cop is going to hassle a Marine officer for carrying a pistol, concealed or not, but better to dot the I's and cross the T's. You going to carry the Beretta?"

"It's what I'm used to, and the fifteen rounds make for security. What am I supposed to carry it in?"

"Use one of these, Aldo," Dominic said, holding up his fanny pack. It looked like a money belt, or the kind of pouch used more often by women than by men. A pull on the string ripped it open, and revealed the pistol and two extra magazines. "A lot of agents use this. More comfortable than a hip holster. Those can dig into your kidneys on a long car ride."

For the moment, Brian would tuck his into his belt. "Where to today, Pete?"

"Back to the mall. More tracking drills."

"Great," Brian responded. "Why don't you have invisibility pills?"

"H. G. Wells took the formula with him."

CHAPTER 9

GOING WITH GOD

JACK'S DRIVE to The Campus took about thirty-five minutes, listening to NPR's *Morning Edition* all the way because, like his father, he didn't listen to contemporary music. The similarities with his dad had both vexed and fascinated John Patrick Ryan, Jr., throughout his life. Through most of his teenage years, he'd fought them off, trying to establish his own identity in contrast to his button-down father, but then in college he had somehow drifted back, hardly even noticing the process. He'd thought he was just doing the sensible thing, for instance, to date girls who might be good wife candidates, though he'd never quite found the perfect one. This he unconsciously judged by his mom. He'd been annoyed by teachers at Georgetown who said he was a chip off the old block, and at first taken some offense at it, then reminded himself that his father wasn't all that bad a guy. He could have done worse. He'd seen a lot of rebellion even at a university as conservative as G-Town, with its Jesuit traditions and rigorous scholarship. Some of his classmates had even made a show of rejecting their parents, but what asshole would do something like that? However staid and old-fashioned his father surely was, he'd been a pretty good dad, as dads went. He'd never been overbearing and let him go his own way and choose his own path . . . in confidence that he'd turn out okay? Jack wondered. But, no. If his father had been that conspiratorial, Jack would have noticed, surely.

He thought about conspiracy. There had been a lot of that in the newspapers and pulp-book media. His father had even joked more than once about having the Marine Corps paint his "personal" helicopter black. That would have been a hoot, Jack thought. Instead, his surrogate father had been Mike Brennan, whom he'd regularly bombarded with questions, many of them about conspiracy. He'd been hugely disappointed to learn that the United States Secret Service was one hundred percent confident that Lee Harvey Oswald had assassinated Jack Kennedy, and all by himself. At their academy at Beltsville, outside Washington, Jack had held, and even shot, a replica of the 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano rifle that had taken the former President's life, and been fully briefed on the case—to his own satisfaction, if not that of the conspiracy industry that so fervently and commercially believed otherwise. The latter had even proposed that his father, as a former CIA official, had been the final beneficiary of a conspiracy that had gone on for at least fifty years for the express purpose of giving CIA the reins of government. Yeah, sure. Like the Trilateral Commission, and the World Order of Freemasons, and whoever else the fiction writers could make up. From both his father and Mike Brennan, he'd heard a lot of CIA stories, few of which bragged on the

competence of that federal agency. It was pretty good, but nowhere near as competent as Hollywood proposed. But Hollywood probably believed that Roger Rabbit was real—after all, his picture had made money, right? No, the CIA had a couple of profound shortcomings . . .

. . . and was The Campus a means of correcting them . . . ? That was a question. *Damn,* Junior thought, turning onto Route 29, *maybe the conspiracy theorists might be right after all . . . ?* His own internal answer was a snort and a grimace.

No, The Campus wasn't like that at all, not like the SPECTRE of the old James Bond movies, or the THRUSH of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* reruns on Nick at Nite. Conspiracy theory depended on the ability of large numbers of people to keep their mouths shut, and as Mike had told him so many times, Bad Guys couldn't keep their mouths shut. There were no deaf-and-dumb people in federal prisons, Mike had told him many times, but criminals never quite figured that one out, the idiots.

Even the people he was tracking had that problem, and they were, supposedly, smart and highly motivated. Or so they thought. But, no, not even they were the Bad Guys of the movies. They needed to talk, and talking would be their downfall. He wondered which it was: Did people who did evil things need to brag, or did they need others to tell them they were doing good in some perverse way upon which they all agreed? The guys he was looking at were Muslims, but there were other Muslims. He and his father both knew Prince Ali of Saudi Arabia, and he was a good guy, the guy who'd given his dad the sword from which he'd gotten his Secret Service code name, and he still stopped by the house at least once a year, because the Saudis, once you made friends with them, were the most loyal people in the world. Of course, it helped if you were an ex-President. Or, in his case, the son of a former President, now making his own way in the "black" world . . .

Damn, how will Dad react to this*?* Jack wondered. *He's going to have a cow. And Mom? A real hissy fit.* That was good for a laugh as he turned left. But Mom didn't need to find out. The cover story would work for her—and Grandpa—but not for Dad. Dad had helped set this place up. Maybe he needed one of those black helicopters after all. He slid into his own parking place, number 127. The Campus couldn't be all that big and powerful, could it? Not with less than a hundred fifty employees. He locked his car and headed in, remarking to himself that this every-morning-to-work thing sucked. But everybody had to start somewhere.

He walked in the back entrance, like most of the others. There was a reception/security desk. The guy there was Ernie Chambers, formerly a sergeant first class in the 1st Infantry Division. His blue uniform blazer had a miniature of the Combat Infantryman's Badge, just in case you didn't notice the shoulders and the hard black eyes. After the first Persian Gulf War, he'd changed jobs from grunt to MP. He'd probably enforced the law and directed traffic pretty well, Jack thought, waving good-morning at him.

"Hey, Mr. Ryan."

"'Morning, Ernie."

"You have a good one, sir." To the ex-soldier, everybody was named "sir."

IT WAS two hours earlier outside Ciudad Juárez. There, the van pulled into a vehicle-service plaza and stopped by a cluster of four other vehicles. Behind them were the other minivans who'd followed them all the way to the American border. The men roused from their sleep and stumbled into the chill morning air to stretch.

"Here I leave you, *señor,*" the driver said to Mustafa. "You will join the man by the tan Ford Explorer. *Vaya con Dios, amigos,*" he said in that most charming of dismissals: Go with God.

Mustafa walked over and found a tallish man wearing a cowboy-type hat. He didn't appear very clean, and his mustache needed trimming. "*Buenos dias,* I am Pedro. I will be taking you the rest of the way. There are four of you for my vehicle, yes?"

Mustafa nodded. "That is correct."

"There are water bottles in the truck. You may wish to have something to eat. You can buy anything you like from the shop." He waved to the building. Mustafa did, his colleagues did much the same, and after ten minutes they all boarded the vehicles and headed out.

They went west, mostly along Route 2. Immediately, the vehicles broke up, no longer "flying formation," as it were. There were four of them, all large American-made SUVTYPE vehicles, all of them coated with a thick coating of dirt and grit so that they did not appear new. The sun had climbed above the horizon to their rear, casting its shadows onto the khaki-colored ground.

Pedro appeared to have spoken his piece back at the plaza. Now he said nothing, except an occasional belch, and chain-smoked his cigarettes. He had the radio on to an AM station, and hummed along with the Spanish music. The Arabs sat in silence.

"HEY, TONY," Jack said in greeting. His workmate was already on his workstation.

"Howdy," Wills responded.

"Anything hot this morning?"

"Not after yesterday, but Langley is talking about putting some coverage on our friend Fa'ad—again."

"Will they really do it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. The Station Chief in Bahrain is saying that he needs more personnel to make it happen, and the personnel weenies at Langley are probably batting that back and forth right now."

"My dad liked to say that the government is really run by accountants and lawyers."

"He ain't far wrong on that one, buddy. God knows where Ed Kealty fits in that, though. What does your dad think of him?"

"Can't stand the son of a bitch. He won't talk in public about the new administration because he says that's wrong, but if you say something about the guy over dinner, you might end up wearing your wine home. It's funny. Dad hates politics, and he really tries hard to keep his cool, but that guy is definitely not on the Christmas card list. But he keeps it quiet, won't talk to any reporters about it. Mike Brennan tells me the Service doesn't like the new guy, either. And they *have* to like him."

"There are penalties for being a professional," Wills agreed.

And then Junior lit up his computer and looked at the night traffic between Langley and Fort Meade. It was a lot more impressive in its volume than its content. It seemed that his new friend, Uda, had—

"Our pal Sali had lunch with somebody yesterday," Jack announced.

"Who with?" Wills asked.

"The Brits don't know. Appears Middle Eastern, age about twenty-eight, one of those thin—well, narrow—beards around the jawline, and mustache, but no ident on the guy. They spoke in Arabic, but nobody got close enough to overhear anything."

"Where'd they eat?"

"Pub on Tower Hill called 'Hung, Drawn and Quartered.' It's on the edge of the financial district. Uda drank Perrier. His pal had a beer. And they had a British ploughman's lunch. They sat in a corner booth, made it hard for whoever was watching to get close and listen in."

"So, they wanted privacy. It doesn't necessarily make them bad guys. Did the Brits tail him?"

"No. That probably means a single-man tail on Uda?"

"Probably," Wills agreed.

"But it says they got a photo of the new guy. Not included in the report."

"It was probably someone from the Security Service—MI5—doing the surveillance. And probably a junior guy. Uda isn't regarded as very important, not enough for full coverage. None of those agencies have all the manpower they want. Anything else?"

"Some money trades that afternoon. Looks pretty routine," Jack said, scrolling through the transactions. *I'm looking for something small and harmless,* he reminded himself. But small, harmless things were, for the most part, small and harmless. Uda moved money around every day, in large and small amounts. Since he was in the wealth-preservation business, he rarely speculated, dealing mostly in real-estate transactions. London—and Britain in general—was a good place to preserve cash. Real-estate prices were fairly high but very stable. If you bought something, it might not go up very much, but it sure as hell wasn't going to have the bottom drop out. So, Uda's daddy was letting the kid stretch his legs some, but not letting him run out and play in the traffic. How much personal liquidity did Uda have? Since he paid off his whores in cash and expensive handbags, he must have his own cash supply. Maybe modest, but "modest" by Saudi standards wasn't exactly modest by many others. The kid *did* drive an Aston Martin, after all, and his dwelling was not in a trailer park . . . so—

"How do I differentiate between Sali's trading his family money and trading his own?"

"You don't. We think he keeps the two accounts close, in the sense both of being covert and near to each other. Your best bet on that is to see how he sets up his quarterly statements to the family."

Jack groaned. "Oh, great, it'll take me a couple of days to add up all the transactions, and then to analyze them."

"Now you know why you're not a real CPA, Jack." Wills managed a chuckle.

Jack nearly snarled, but there was only one way to accomplish this task, and

it *was* his job, wasn't it? First, he tried to see if his program could shortcut the process. Nope. Fourth-grade arithmetic with a nose attached. What fun. At least by the time he finished, he'd probably be better at entering numbers into the numeric keypad on the right side of the keyboard. *There* was something to look forward to! Why didn't The Campus employ some forensic accountants?

THEY TURNED off Route 2 onto a dirt road that wound its way north. The road had seen a good deal of use, some of it recent, judging by the tracks. The general area was somewhat mountainous. The real peaks of the Rocky Mountain chain were off to the west, far enough away that he couldn't see them, but the air was thinner here than he was accustomed to, and it would be warm walking. He wondered how far that would be, and how close they were to the U.S. border. He'd heard that the American-Mexican border was guarded, but not well guarded. The Americans could be lethally competent in some areas, but utterly infantile in others. Mustafa and his people hoped to avoid the former and to make use of the latter. About eleven in the morning, he saw a large, boxy truck in the distance, and their SUV headed toward it. The truck, he saw as they came closer, was empty, its large red doors wide open. The Ford Explorer came to within a hundred meters and stopped. Pedro switched off the engine and got out.

"We are here, my friends," he announced. "I hope you are ready to walk."

All four of them got out, and as before they stretched their legs and looked around. A new man walked in their direction, as the other three SUVs parked and disgorged their passengers.

"Hello, Pedro," the new Mexican greeted the lead driver, evidently an old friend.

"*Buenos dias,* Ricardo. Here are the people who want to go to America."

"Hello." He shook hands with the first four. "My name is Ricardo, and I am your *coyote.*"

"What?" Mustafa asked.

"It is just a term. I take people across the border, for a fee. In your case, of course, I have already been paid."

"How far?"

"Ten kilometers. A modest walk," he said comfortably. "The country will mostly be like this. If you see a snake, just walk away from it. It will not chase you. But if you get within a meter, it can strike you and kill you. Aside from that, there is nothing to fear. If you see a helicopter, you must fall to the ground and not move. The Americans do not guard their border well, and, oddly enough, not as well in daylight as at night. We have also taken some precautions."

"What is that?"

"There were thirty people in that van," he said, pointing to the large truck they'd seen coming in. "They will walk in ahead of and to the west of us. If anyone is caught, it will be them."

"How long will it take?"

"Three hours. Less, if you are fit. Do you have water?"

"We know the desert," Mustafa assured him.

"As you say. Let us be off, then. Follow me, *amigo.*" And with that, Ricardo

started walking north. His clothes were all khaki, he wore a military-style web belt with three canteens attached, and he carried military-style binoculars, plus an Army-style floppy hat. His boots were well worn. His stride was purposeful and efficient, not overly fast for show, just to cover ground efficiently. They fell in behind him, forming a single file to conceal their numbers from any possible trackers, with Mustafa in the lead, about five meters behind their coyote.

THERE WAS a pistol range about three hundred yards from the plantation house. It was outdoors, and had steel targets, a set just like those at the FBI Academy, with headplates, circular and roughly the size of a human head. They made an agreeable *clang* when hit, and then they fell down, as a human target would do if hit there. Enzo turned out to be better at this. Aldo explained that the Marine Corps didn't emphasize pistol shooting too much, whereas the FBI paid particular attention to it, figuring that anybody could shoot a shoulder weapon accurately. The FBI brother used the two-handed Weaver stance, while the Marine tended to stand up straight and shoot one-handed, the way the services taught their people.

"Hey, Aldo, that just makes you a better target," Dominic warned.

"Oh yeah?" Brian rippled off three rounds and got three satisfying *clang*s as a result. "Hard to shoot after you take one between the running lights, bro."

"And what's this one-shot/one-kill crap? Anything worth shooting is worth shooting twice."

"How many did you give that mutt in Alabama?" Brian asked.

"Three. I didn't feel like taking any chances," Dominic explained.

"You say so, bro. Hey, let me try that Smith of yours."

Dominic cleared his weapon before handing it over. The magazine went separately. Brian dry-fired it a few times to get used to the feel, then loaded and cycled the action. His first shot *clanged* a headplate. So did his second. The third one missed, though number four did not, a third of a second later. Brian handed the weapon back. "Feels different in the hand," he explained.

"You get used to it," Dominic promised.

"Thanks, but I like the extra six rounds in the magazine."

"Well, it's what you like."

"What's with all the head-shot stuff, anyway?" Brian wondered. "Okay, shooting sniper rifle, it's the surest one-shot stopper, but not with a pistol."

"When you can do a guy in the head from fifteen yards," Pete Alexander answered, "it's just a nice talent to have. It's the best way of ending an argument I know."

"Where did you come from?" Dominic asked.

"You didn't scan, Agent Caruso. Remember that even Adolf Hitler had friends. Don't they teach that at Quantico?"

"Well, yes," Dominic admitted, somewhat crestfallen.

"When your primary target is down, you scan the area for any friends he might have had. Or you get the hell out of town. Or both."

"You mean run away?" Brian asked.

"Not unless you're on a track. You make your way clear in such a way as to be inconspicuous. That can mean walking into a bookstore and making a

purchase, getting a coffee, whatever. You have to make your decision based on circumstances, but keep your objective in mind. Your objective is *always* to get clear of the immediate area as quickly as circumstances allow. Move too fast and people will notice. Move too slow and they might remember seeing you and your subject close together. They will never report the person they didn't notice. So, you want to be one of those. What you wear out on a job, the way you act out in the field, the way you walk, the way you think—all of that must be designed to make you invisible," Alexander told them.

"In other words, Pete, you're saying that when we kill these people we're training for," Brian observed quietly, "you want us to be able to do it and walk away so that we can get away with it."

"Would you prefer to be caught?" Alexander asked.

"No, but the best way to kill somebody is to pop him in the head with a good rifle from a couple of hundred meters away. That works every time."

"But what if we want him dead in such a way that nobody knows he was killed?" the training officer asked.

"How the hell do you manage that?" This was Dominic.

"Patience, lads. One thing at a time."

THERE WERE the remains of some sort of fence. Ricardo just walked through it, using a hole that did not look recent. The fence posts had been painted a rich green, but that had mainly rusted off. The fencing material was in even worse shape. Getting through was the least of their problems. The coyote went a further fifty meters or so, and selected a large rock, then sat down, lit a smoke, and took a drink from his canteen. It was his first stop. The walk had not been difficult at all, and clearly he'd done this many times. Mustafa and his friends did not know that he'd brought several hundred groups across the border along this very route, and had only been arrested once—and that had not amounted to very much, except for stinging his pride. He'd also forfeited his fee, because he was an honorable coyote. Mustafa went over to him.

"Are your friends okay?" Ricardo asked.

"It has not been strenuous," Mustafa replied, "and I have seen no snakes."

"Not too many along here. People usually shoot them, or throw rocks. No one cares much for snakes."

"Are they dangerous—truly, I mean?"

"Only if you are a fool, and even then you are unlikely to die. You will be ill for a few days. No more than that, but it can make walking rather painful. We will wait here for a few minutes. We are ahead of schedule. Oh, yes, welcome to America, *amigo.*"

"That fence is all there is?" Mustafa asked in amazement.

"The *norteamericano* is rich, yes, and clever, yes, but he is also lazy. My people would not go there except that there is work the gringo is too lazy to do on his own."

"How many people do you smuggle into America, then?"

"I, you mean? Thousands. Many thousands. For this, I am well paid. I have a fine house, and six other coyotes work for me. The gringos worry more about people smuggling drugs across the border, and I avoid doing that. It is not worth the trouble. I let two of my men do that for me. The pay for that is very

high, you see."

"What kind of drugs?" Mustafa asked.

"The kind for which I am paid." He grinned and took another swig from his canteen.

Mustafa turned as Abdullah came up.

"I thought this would be a difficult walk," his number two observed.

"Only for city dwellers," Ricardo replied. "This is my country. I was born of the desert."

"As was I," Abdullah observed. "It is a pleasant day." Better than sitting in the back of a truck, he didn't have to add.

Ricardo lit up another Newport. He liked menthol cigarettes, easier on the throat. "It does not get hot for another month, perhaps two. But then it can be truly hot, and the wise man takes a good water supply. People have died out here without water in the August heat. But none of mine. I make sure everyone has water. The Mother Nature, she has no love and no pity," the coyote observed. At the end of his walk, he knew a place where he could get a few *cervezas* before driving east to El Paso. From there, it was back to his comfortable home in Ascensión, too far from the border to be bothered with would-be emigrants, who had a bad habit of stealing things they might need for the crossing. He wondered how much stealing they did on the gringo side of the line, but it was not his problem, was it? He finished his cigarette and stood. "Three more kilometers to go, my friends."

Mustafa and his friends fell in and restarted the trudge north. Only three kilometers more? At home, they walked farther to a bus stop.

PUNCHING NUMBERS into a keypad was about as much fun as running naked in a garden of cactus. Jack was the sort to need intellectual stimulation, and while some men might find that in investigative accounting, he was not one of them.

"Bored, eh?" Tony Wills asked.

"Mightily," Jack confirmed.

"Well, that's the reality of gathering and processing intelligence information. Even when it's exciting, it's pretty dull—well, unless you're really on the scent of a particularly elusive fox. Then it can be kinda fun, though it's not like watching your subject out in the field. I've never done that."

"Neither did Dad," Jack observed.

"Depends on which stories you read. Your pop occasionally found his way to the sharp end. I don't imagine he liked it much. He ever talk about it?"

"Not ever. Not even once. I don't even think Mom knows much about that. Well, except the submarine thing, but most of what I know about that comes from books and stuff. I asked Dad once, and all he said was, 'You believe everything you see in the papers?' Even when that Russian guy, Gerasimov, got on TV, all Dad did was grunt."

"The word on him at Langley was that he was a king spook. Kept all the secrets like he was supposed to. But he mostly worked up in the Seventh Floor. I never made it that high myself."

"Maybe you can tell me something."

"Like what?"

"Gerasimov, Nikolay Borissovich Gerasimov. Was he really the head of KGB? Did my dad really drag his ass out of Moscow?"

Wills hesitated for a moment, but there was no avoiding it. "Yeah. He was the KGB chairman, and, yes, your dad did arrange his defection."

"No shit? How the hell did Dad arrange that one?"

"That is a very long story and you are not cleared for it."

"Then why did he rat Dad out?"

"Because he was an unwilling defector. Your father forced him to bug out. He wanted to get even after your dad became President. But, you know, Nikolay Borissovich sang—maybe not like a canary, but he sang anyway. He's in the Witness Protection Program right now. They still bring him in every so often to get him to sing some more. The people you bag, they never give you everything all at once, and so you go back to them periodically. It makes them feel important—enough that they sing some more, usually. He's still not a happy camper. He can't go home. They'd shoot his ass. The Russians have never been real forgiving on state treason. Well, neither are we. So, he lives here with federal protection. Last I heard, he took up golf. His daughter got married to some old-money aristocrat asshole in Virginia. She's a real American now, but her dad will die an unhappy man. He wanted to take the Soviet Union over, by which I mean he *really* wanted that job, but your father screwed that one up for all time, and Nick still carries the grudge."

"I'll be damned."

"Anything new with Sali?" Wills asked, bringing things back to reality.

"There's some little stuff. You know, fifty thousand here, eighty thousand there—pounds, not dollars. Into accounts I don't know much about. He goes through anywhere from two to eight thousand pounds a week in what he probably considers petty cash."

"Where does that cash originate?" Wills asked.

"Not entirely clear, Tony. I figure he skims some off his family account, maybe two percent that he can write off as expenses. Not quite enough to alert his father that's he stealing from Mom and Pop. I wonder how they'd react to that?" Jack speculated.

"They wouldn't cut his hand off, but they could do something worse—cut his money off. You see this guy working for a living?"

"You mean real work?" Jack had himself a brief laugh. "Somehow I don't see that happening. He's been on the gravy train too long to like driving spikes into the ties. I've been to London a lot. Hard to figure how a working stiff survives there."

Wills began humming. "'How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they seen Paree?'"

Jack flushed. "Look, Tony, yeah, I know I grew up rich, but Dad always made sure I had a summer job. I even worked construction for two months. Made life hard for Mike Brennan and his pals. But Dad wanted me to know what it was like to do real work. I hated it at first, but, looking back, it was probably a good thing, I guess. Mr. Sali here has never done that. I mean, I could survive in a real-world entry-level job if I had to. It'd be a lot harder adjustment for this guy."

"Okay, how much unexplained money, total?"

"Maybe two hundred thousand pounds—three hundred thousand bucks, call it. But I haven't really pinned it down yet, and it's not all that much money."

"How much longer to narrow it down?"

"At this rate? Hell, maybe a week if I'm lucky. This is like tracking a single car during New York rush hour, y'know?"

"Keep it up. Isn't supposed to be easy, or fun."

"Aye, aye, sir." It was something he'd picked up from the Marines at the White House. They'd even said that to *him* once in a while, until his father had noticed and put an immediate end to it. Jack turned back to his computer. He kept his real notes on a pad of white lined paper, just because it was easier for him that way, then transferred them to a separate computer file every afternoon. As he wrote, he noted that Tony was leaving their little room for a trip upstairs.

"THIS KID'S got the eye," Wills told Rick Bell on the top floor.

"Oh?" It was a little early for any results from the rookie, regardless who his father was, Bell thought.

"I put him on a young Saudi living in London, name of Uda bin Sali—money changer for his family's interests. The Brits have a loose tail on him because he called somebody they found interesting once."

"And?"

"And Junior has found a couple of hundred thousand pounds that can't be accounted for."

"How solid is that?" Bell asked.

"We'll have to put a regular on it, but, you know . . . this kid's got the right sort of nose."

"Dave Cunningham, maybe?" A forensic accountant, he'd joined The Campus out of the Department of Justice, Organized Crime Division. Pushing sixty, Dave had a legendary nose for numbers. The trading department at The Campus mainly used him for "conventional" duties. He could have done very well on Wall Street, but he'd just loved bagging bad guys for a living. At The Campus, he could pursue that avocation well past government retirement rules.

"Dave'd be my pick," Tony agreed.

"Okay, let's cross-load Jack's computer files to Dave and see what he turns over."

"Works for me, Rick. You see the take-report from NSA yesterday?"

"Yeah. Got my attention," Bell answered, looking up. Three days before, message traffic from sources that the government intelligence services found interesting had dropped by seventeen percent and two *particularly* interesting sources had almost completely stopped. When radio traffic in a military unit did that, it often meant a standdown prior to real operations. The sort of thing that made signals-intelligence people nervous. The majority of the time, it meant nothing at all, just random chance in operation, but it had developed into something real often enough that the signal-spooks frequently went into a tizzy about it.

"Any ideas?" Wills asked.

Bell shook his head. "I stopped being superstitious about ten years ago."

Clearly, Tony Wills had not: “Rick, we’re due. We’ve been due for a long time.”

“I know what you’re saying, but we can’t run this place on that sort of stuff.”

“Rick, this is like sitting at a ball game—dugout seats, maybe, but you still can’t go on the field when you want.”

“To do what, kill the umpire?” Bell asked.

“No, just the guy planning to throw a beanball.”

“Patience, Tony, patience.”

“Son of a bitch of a virtue to acquire, isn’t it?” Wills had never quite learned it, despite all his experience.

“Think you have it bad? What about Gerry?”

“Yeah, Rick, I know.” He stood. “Later, man.”

THEY’D SEEN not another human being, not a car, not a helicopter. Clearly, there was nothing of value out here. No oil, no gold, not even copper. Nothing worth guarding or protecting. The walk had just been enough to be healthy. Some scrubby bushes, even some stunted trees. A few tire tracks, but none of them recent. This part of America might as well have been Saudi Arabia’s Empty Quarter, the Rub’ al-Khali, where even a hardy desert camel would have found it grim going.

But clearly the walk was over. As they crested a small rise, they saw five more vehicles sitting all alone, with men standing by them talking among themselves.

“Ah,” Ricardo said, “they are early, too. Excellent.” He could dump these morose foreigners and get on with his business. He stopped and let his clients catch up.

“This is our destination?” Mustafa asked, with hope in his voice. It had been an easy walk, far easier than he’d expected.

“My friends there will take you to Las Cruces. There you can make your travel plans for the future.”

“And you?” Mustafa asked.

“I go home to my family,” Ricardo answered. Wasn’t that simple enough? Maybe this guy didn’t have a family?

The remaining walk took only ten minutes. Ricardo got in the lead SUV after shaking hands with his party. They were friendly enough, albeit in a guarded fashion. It could have been harder to get them here, but illegal-immigrant traffic was far thicker in Arizona and California, and that was where the U.S. Border Patrol had most of its personnel. The gringos tended to grease the squeaky wheel—like everyone else in the world, perhaps, but still it was not terribly farsighted of them. Sooner or later, they’d realize that there was cross-border traffic here, too. Just not the dramatic sort. Then he might have to find a new way to make a living. He’d done well the past seven years, however—enough to set up a little business and raise his children into a more legitimate line of work.

He watched his party board their transport and motor off. He also headed in the general direction of Las Cruces, then turned south on I-10 toward El Paso. He’d long since stopped wondering what his clients planned to do in America.

Probably not tending gardens or doing construction work, he judged, but he'd been paid ten thousand dollars in American cash. So, they were important to someone . . . but not to him.

CHAPTER 10

DESTINATIONS

FOR MUSTAFA and his friends, the ride to Las Cruces was a surprisingly welcome break, and though they didn't show it, there was obvious excitement now. They were in America. Here were the people they proposed to kill. The mission was now somehow closer to fulfillment, not by a mere handful of kilometers, but by a magical, invisible line. They were in the home of the Great Satan. Here were the people who had rained death upon their homeland, and upon the Faithful throughout the Muslim world, the people who so fawningly supported Israel.

At Deming, they turned east for Las Cruces. Sixty-two miles—a hundred kilometers—to their next intermediate stop, along I-10. There were billboards advertising road hotels and places to eat, tourist attractions of types routine and inconceivable, and more rolling land, and horizons which seemed far even as the car ate up the distances at a steady seventy miles per hour.

Their driver, as before, looked Mexican, and said nothing. Probably another mercenary. Nobody said anything, the driver because he didn't care, his passengers because their English was accented, and the driver might take note of it. This way he'd only remember that he'd picked up some people on a dirt road in southern New Mexico and driven them someplace else.

It was probably harder for the others in his party, Mustafa thought. They had to trust him to know what he was doing. He was the mission commander, the leader of a warrior band about to divide into four parts that would never reunite. The mission had been painstakingly planned. The only future communications would be via computer, and few enough of those. They'd function independently, but to a simple timetable and toward a single strategic objective. This plan would shake America as no other plan had ever done, Mustafa told himself, looking into a station wagon as it passed them. Two parents, and what appeared to be two little ones, a boy about four, and a smaller one perhaps a year and a half. Infidels, all of them. Targets.

His operational plan was all written down, of course, in fourteen-point Geneva type on sheets of plain white paper. Four copies. One for each team leader. The other data was in files on the personal computers that all of the men had in their small carry-bags, along with spare shirts and clean underwear and little else. They would not need much, and the plan was to leave very little behind in order to further befuddle the Americans.

It was enough to generate a thin smile at the passing countryside. Mustafa lit up a cigarette—he only had three left—and took a deep breath of tobacco smoke, and the air-conditioning blew cold air on him. Behind them, the sun was declining in the sky. They'd make their next—and last—stop in the

darkness, which, he considered, was good tactical planning. He knew it was only an accident, but, if so, it meant that Allah Himself was smiling on their plan. As He ought to do, of course. They were all doing His work.

* * *

ANOTHER DULL day's work done, Jack told himself on the way to his car. One bad thing about The Campus was that he couldn't discuss it with anybody. *Nobody* was cleared for this stuff, though it was not yet evident why. He could, surely, kick this around with his dad—the President was by definition cleared for anything, and ex-Presidents had the same access to information, if not by law, then by the rules of practicality. But, no, he couldn't do that. Dad would not be pleased by his new job. Dad could make a phone call and screw all of that up, and Jack had had enough of a taste to keep himself hungry for a few months at least. Even so, the ability to kick a few things around with *somebody* who knew what was going on would have been a blessing of sorts. Just someone to say, yes, it really *is* important, and, yes, you really *are* contributing to Truth, Justice, and the American Way.

Could he really make a difference? The world worked the way it worked, and he couldn't change it much. Even his father, for all the power that had come to him, had been unable to do that. How much less could he, a junior prince of sorts, be able to accomplish? But if the broken parts of the world were ever to be fixed, it would have to be at the hands of someone who didn't care if it were impossible or not. Probably someone too young and dumb to know that impossible things were . . . impossible. But neither his mother nor his father believed in that word, and that's the way they had raised him. Sally was graduating medical school soon, and she was going into oncology—the one thing their mother had regretted not doing with her own medical career—and she told everyone who asked that she was going to be there when the cancer dragon was finally slain once and for all. So, believing in impossibility was not part of the Ryan creed. He just didn't know how yet, but the world was full of things to learn, wasn't it? And he was smart and well educated, and having a sizable trust fund meant that he could go forward without fear of starving if he offended the wrong person. That was the most important freedom his father had bequeathed him, and John Patrick Ryan, Jr., was smart enough to know just how important it was—if not to grasp the responsibility that such freedom carried with it.

INSTEAD OF cooking their own dinner, they decided to go to a local steak house that night. It was full of college kids from the University of Virginia. You could tell—they all looked bright, but not as bright as they thought they were, and they were all a little too loud, a little too confident in themselves. That was one of the advantages of being children—much as they would have detested that appellation—kids whose needs were still looked after by loving parents, albeit at a comfortable distance. To the two Caruso boys, it was a humorous look at what they'd themselves been only a few short years ago, before harsh training and experience in the real world had turned them into

something else. Exactly what, they were not yet sure. What had seemed so simple in school had become infinitely complex after leaving the academic womb. The world was not digital, after all—it was an analog reality, always untidy, always with loose ends that could never be tied up neatly like shoelaces, and so it was possible to trip and fall with every incautious step. And caution only came with experience—with a few trip-and-falls that brought pain, only the worst of which taught remembered lessons. Those lessons had come early to the brothers. Not as early as they'd come to other generations, but still soon enough for them to realize the consequences of errors in a world that had never learned to forgive.

"Not a bad place," Brian judged, halfway through his filet mignon.

"Hard to mess up a decent piece of beef, no matter how dumb the cook is." This place obviously had a cook, not a chef, but the steak fries were pretty good for nearly raw carbohydrates, and the broccoli was fresh out of the freezer bag, Dominic thought.

"I really ought to eat better than this," the Marine major observed.

"Enjoy it while you can. We're not thirty yet, are we?"

That was good for a laugh. "Used to seem like an awfully big number, didn't it?"

"Where old age starts? Oh yeah. Well, you're pretty young for a major, right?"

Aldo shrugged. "I suppose. My boss liked me, and I had some good people working for me. I never did take a liking to MREs, though. They keep you going, but that's about all I can say for them. My gunny loved the things, said they were better than what he'd grown up in the Corps with."

"In the Bureau, you tend to live on Dunkin' Donuts and—well, they make about the best industrial coffee in America. It's hard to keep your belt loose on that kind of diet."

"You're in decent shape for a deskbound warrior, Enzo," Brian observed rather generously. At the end of the morning run, his brother occasionally looked as though he was about to drop. But a three-mile run was just like morning coffee for a Marine, something to open the eyes. "I still wish I knew exactly what we're training for," Aldo said after another bite.

"Bro, we're training to kill people, that's all we need to know. Sneak up without being seen, and then get the hell away without being noticed."

"With pistols?" Brian responded dubiously. "Kinda noisy, and not as sure as a rifle. I had a sniper with my team in Afghanistan. He did some bad guys at damned near a mile. Used a Barrett .50 rifle, big mother, like an old BAR on steroids. Shoots the .50 round from the Ma Deuce machine gun. Accurate as hell, and it makes for a definitive hit, y'know? Kinda hard to walk away with a half-inch hole in you." Especially since his sniper, Corporal Alan Roberts, a black kid from Detroit, had preferred head shots, and the .50 *really* did the job on heads.

"Well, maybe suppressed ones. You can silence a handgun fairly well."

"I've seen those. We trained with them at Recon School, but they're awful bulky for carrying under a business suit, and you still have to take them out and stand still and aim them at the target's head. Unless they send us to James Bond School to get courses in magic, we're not going to be killing many

people with handguns, Enzo."

"Well, maybe we'll be using something else."

"So you don't know, either?"

"Hey, man, my checks still come from the Bureau. All I know is that Gus Werner sent me here, and that makes it most-of-the-way kosher . . . I think," he concluded.

"You mentioned him before. Who is he, exactly?"

"Assistant Director, head of the new Counter-Terrorism Division. You don't fuck with Gus. He was head of the Hostage Rescue Team, got all his other tickets punched, too. Smart guy, and tough as hell. I don't think he faints at the sight of blood. But he's also got a real head on his shoulders. Terrorism is the new thing at the Bureau, and Dan Murray didn't pick him for the job just because he can shoot a gun. He and Murray are tight, they go back twenty-plus years. Murray ain't no dummy, either. Anyway, if he sent me here, it's gotta be okay with somebody. So, I'll play along until they tell me to break the law."

"Me, too, but I'm still a little nervous."

LAS CRUCES had a regional airport for short hauls and puddle jumpers. Along with that came rent-a-car outlets. They pulled in, and it was time for Mustafa to get nervous. He and one of his colleagues would hire cars here. Two more would make use of a similar business in the town itself.

"It is all prepared for you," the driver told them. He handed over two sheets of paper. "Here are the reservation numbers. You'll be driving Ford Crown Victoria four-door sedans. We could not get you station wagons as requested without going to El Paso, and that was not desirable. Use your Visa card in there. Your name is Tomas Salazar. Your friend is Hector Santos. Show them the reservation numbers and just do what they tell you to do. It is very easy." Neither man struck the driver as overly Latin in appearance, but the people at this rental office were both ignorant paddies who spoke little Spanish beyond *"taco"* and *"cerveza."*

Mustafa got out of the car and walked in, waving for his friend to follow.

Immediately, he knew it would be easy. Whoever owned this business, he hadn't troubled himself with recruiting intelligent people. The boy running the desk was hunched over it, reading a comic book with attention that looked a little too rapt.

"Hello," Mustafa said, with false confidence. "I have reservation." He wrote the number down on a pad and handed it to him.

"Okay." The attendant didn't show his annoyance at being diverted from the newest Batman adventure. He knew how to work the office computer. Sure enough, the computer spat out a rental form already filled out in most details.

Mustafa handed over his international driver's license, which the employee Xeroxed, and then he stapled the photocopy to his copy of the rental form. He was delighted that Mr. Salazar took all of the insurance options—he got extra money for encouraging people to do that.

"Okay, your car is the white Ford in slot number four. Just go out that door and turn right. The keys are in the ignition, sir."

"Thank you," Mustafa said in accented English. *Was it really* this *easy?*

Evidently, it was. He'd just got the seat in his Ford adjusted when Saeed showed up at slot number five for a light green twin to his sedan. Both had maps of the state of New Mexico, but they didn't need them, really. Both men started their cars and eased out of their parking slots and headed off to the street, where the SUVs were waiting. It was simple enough to follow them. The town of Las Cruces had traffic, but not all that much at the dinner hour.

There was another rental car agency just eight blocks north on what appeared to be the main street of Las Cruces. This one was called Hertz, which struck Mustafa as vaguely Jewish in character. His two comrades walked in, and, ten minutes later, walked back out and got in their leased cars. Again, they were Fords of the same make as his and Saeed's. With that done, perhaps the most hazardous mission they had to accomplish, it was time to follow the SUVs north for a few kilometers—about twenty, as it turned out—then off this road onto another dirt one. There seemed to be a lot of those here . . . just like home, in fact. Another kilometer or so, and there was a house standing alone, with only a truck parked nearby to suggest residency. There, all the vehicles parked and the occupants got out for what would be, Mustafa realized, their last proper meeting.

"We have your weapons here," Juan told them. He pointed to Mustafa. "Come with me, please."

The inside of this ordinary-looking wood-frame structure appeared to be a virtual arsenal. A total of sixteen cardboard boxes held sixteen MAC-10 sub-machine guns. Not an elegant firearm, the MAC is made of machine-steel stampings, with a generally poor finish on the metal. With each weapon were twelve magazines, apparently all loaded, and taped together end-to-end with black electrician's tape.

"The weapons are virgins. They have not been fired," Juan told them. "We also have suppressors for each of them. They are not efficient silencers, but they improve balance and accuracy. This gun is not as easily handled as the Uzi—but those are also more difficult to obtain here. For this weapon, its effective range is about ten meters. It is easily loaded and unloaded. It fires from an open bolt, of course, and the rate of fire is quite high." It would, in fact, empty a thirty-round magazine in less than three seconds, which was a little *too* fast for sensible use, but these people didn't seem overly particular to Juan.

They weren't. Each of the sixteen Arabs lifted a weapon and hefted it, as though to say hello to a new friend. Then one lifted a magazine pair—

"Stop ! *Halto!*" Juan snapped at once. "You will not load these weapons inside. If you wish to test-fire them, we have targets outside."

"Will this not be too noisy?" Mustafa asked.

"The nearest house is four kilometers away," Juan answered dismissively. The bullets could not travel that far, and he assumed the noise could not either. In this, he was mistaken.

But his guests assumed he knew everything about the area, and they were always willing to shoot guns off, especially the rock-and-roll kind. Twenty meters from the house was a sand berm with some crates and cardboard boxes scattered about. One by one, they inserted the magazines into their SMGs and pulled back the bolts. There was no official command to fire. Instead, they

took their lead from Mustafa, who grasped the strap dangling from the muzzle and pulled his trigger back.

The immediate results were agreeable. The MAC-10 made the appropriate noise, jumping up and right as all such weapons did, but since this was his first time and this was just range shooting, he managed to walk his rounds into a cardboard box about six meters to his left front. In seemingly no time at all, the bolt slammed shut on an empty chamber, having fired and ejected thirty Remington 9mm pistol cartridges. He thought of extracting the magazine and reversing it to enjoy another two or three seconds of blazing bliss, but he managed to control himself. There would be another time for that, in the not-too-distant future.

"The silencers?" he asked Juan.

"Inside. They screw on the muzzle, and it's better to screw them on—easier to control how they spray their bullets, you see." Juan spoke with some authority. He'd used the MAC-10 to eliminate business competitors and other unpleasant people in Dallas and Santa Fe over the years. Despite that, he looked on his guests with a certain unease. They grinned too much. They were not as he was, Juan Sandoval told himself, and the sooner they went on their way, the better. It would not be so for the people at their destinations, but that was not his concern. His orders came from on high. *Very* on high, his immediate superior had made clear to him the week before. And the money had been commensurate. Juan had no particular complaint, but, as a good reader of people, he had a red light flashing behind his eyes.

Mustafa followed him back in and picked up the suppressor. It was perhaps ten centimeters in diameter, and half a meter or so long. As promised, it screwed onto the thread on the gun's muzzle, and on the whole, it did improve the weapon's balance. He hefted it briefly and decided that he'd prefer to use it this way. Better to reduce muzzle climb, and make for more accurate shooting. The reduction in noise had little bearing on his mission, but accuracy did. But the suppressor made an easily concealed weapon unacceptably bulky. So, he unscrewed it for now, and replaced the silencer in its carry-bag. Then he went outside to gather his people. Juan followed him back out.

"Some things you need to know," he told the team leaders. Juan went on in a slow, measured voice: "The American police are efficient, but they are not all-powerful. If, during your driving, one pulls you over, all you need to do is to speak politely. If he asks you to get out of the car, then get out as he says. He is allowed by American laws to see if you have a weapon on your person—to search you with his hands—but if he asks you to search your car, simply say no, I do not wish you to do that—and by their laws he may *not* search your car. I will say this again: If an American policeman asks to search your car, you need only say no, and then he may not do it. Then drive away. When you drive, do not go faster than the number on the highway signs. If you do that, you will probably not be disturbed in any way. If you go faster than the speed limit, all you do is to give the police a reason to pull you over. So, *do not do that.* Exercise patience at all times. Do you have any questions?"

"What if a policeman is too aggressive, can we—"

Juan knew that question was coming. "Kill one? Yes, it is possible to do so,

but then you will have many more police chasing you. When a police officer pulls you over, the very first thing he will do is radio his location, and the license number of your car, and a description, to his headquarters. So, even if you kill him, his comrades will look for you in a matter of minutes—and in large numbers. It is not worth the satisfaction of killing the policeman. You will only invite more trouble on yourselves. American police forces have many cars, and even aircraft. Once they start looking for you, they *will* find you. So, your only defense against that is to escape notice. Do not speed. Do not break their traffic laws. Do that and you will be safe. Violate those laws, and you will be caught, guns or not. Do you understand this?"

"We understand," Mustafa assured him. "Thank you for your assistance."

"We have maps for all of you. They are good maps, from the American Automobile Association. You all have cover stories, yes?" Juan asked, hoping to get this over as quickly as he could.

Mustafa looked at his friends for additional inquiries, but they were too eager to get on with their business to be sidetracked now. Satisfied, he turned to Juan. "Thank you for your help, my friend."

Friend be damned, Juan thought, but he took the man's hand and walked them around to the front of the building. Bags were quickly transferred from the SUVs to the sedans, and then he watched them pull off, heading back to State Route 185. It was only a few miles to Radium Springs, and the entrance onto I-25 North. The foreigners gathered one last time, to shake hands—and even share a few kisses, Juan was surprised to see. Then they split up into four teams of four men each and entered their rental cars.

Mustafa settled in his car. He set his cigarette packs on the seat next to him, made sure that the mirrors were properly aligned for his eyes, and buckled his seat belt—he'd been told that not buckling was as likely as speeding to get himself pulled over. Above all things, he didn't want to be pulled over by a policeman. Despite the briefing instructions he'd received from Juan, it was a risk he felt no desire to run. Passing by, a cop might not recognize them for what they were, but face-to-face was something else again, and he had no illusions about how Americans thought of Arabs. For that reason, all copies of the Holy Koran were tucked away in the trunk.

It would be a long time, Abdullah would spell him at the wheel, but the first stint would be his. North on I-25 to Albuquerque, then east on I-40 almost all the way to their target. Over three thousand kilometers. He'd have to start thinking in miles now, Mustafa told himself. One point six kilometers to a mile. He'd have to multiply every number by that constant, or just disregard metric altogether as far as his car was concerned. Whatever, he drove north on Route 185 until he saw the leaf-green sign and the arrow for I-25 North. He settled back in his seat, checked traffic as he merged, and increased speed to sixty-five miles per hour, setting the Ford's cruise control right on that number. After that, it was just a matter of steering, and watching all of the anonymous traffic which, like him and his friends, was headed north to Albuquerque . . .

JACK DIDN'T know why it was hard to go to sleep. It was past eleven in the evening, he'd seen his nightly take of TV, and had his two or three—tonight it

had been three—drinks. He should have been sleepy. He *was* sleepy, as a matter of fact, but sleep wasn't coming. And he didn't know why. Just close your eyes and think happy thoughts, his mom had told him as a little boy. But thinking happy thoughts was the hard part now that he wasn't a kid anymore. He'd entered into a new world that had few enough of those in it. His job was to examine the known and suspected facts concerning people he'd probably never meet, try to decide if they wanted to kill other people he'd never meet, then pass the information on to other people who might or might not try to do something about it. Exactly *what* they would try to do he did not know, though he had his suspicions . . . and ugly suspicions they were. Roll over, refluff the pillow, try to find a cool spot in the pillowcase, head back down, get some sleep . . .

. . . it wasn't happening. It would, eventually. It always did, seemingly half a second before the clock radio went off.

God damn *it!* he raged at the ceiling.

He was hunting terrorists. Most of them believed something good—no, something heroic—about themselves as they went about their crimes. To them it wasn't a crime at all. For Muslim terrorists, it was the illusion that they were doing God's work. Except the Holy Koran didn't really say that. It particularly disapproved of killing innocent people, noncombatants. How did that really work? Did Allah greet suicide bombers with a smile, or something else? In Catholicism, personal conscience was sovereign. If you truly believed you were doing the right thing, then God couldn't slam you for it. Was Islam the same in its rules? Besides, since there was only *one* God, maybe the rules *were* the same for everybody. Problem was, which set of religious rules came closest to what God really thought? And how the hell did you tell which was which? The Crusades had done some pretty vile things. But that was a classic case of someone giving a religious title for a war that was really about economics and simple ambition. A nobleman just didn't want to appear to be fighting for money— and with God on your side, there was nothing you couldn't do. Swing the sword, and whatever neck you severed was okay. The bishop said so.

Right. The real problem was that religion and political power made a shitty mix, though one easily adopted by the young and enthusiastic, for whom adventure was something that just pulled at your sleeve. His father had talked about that, sometimes, over dinner on the Residence Level of the White House, explaining that one of the things you had to tell young soldier and Marine recruits was that even war had rules, and that breaking them carried stiff penalties. American soldiers learned that pretty easily, Jack Sr. had told his son, because they came from a society in which undisciplined violence was harshly punished, which was better than abstract principle for teaching right and wrong. After a smack or two, you kinda picked up the message.

He sighed, and rolled over again. He was really too young to think about such Great Questions of Life, even though his degree from Georgetown suggested otherwise. Colleges typically did not tell you that ninety percent of your education came after you hung the parchment on the wall. People might ask for a rebate.

IT WAS past closing time at The Campus. Gerry Hendley was in his top-floor office, going over data that he hadn't been able to fit into the normal working day. It was the same for Tom Davis, who had reports from Pete Alexander.

"Trouble?" Hendley asked.

"The twins are still thinking a little too much, Gerry. We should have anticipated it. They're both smart, and they're both people who play within the rules, for the most part, so when they see themselves being trained to violate those rules it worries them. The funny part, Pete says, is that the Marine's the one who's worrying so much. The FBI one is playing along much better."

"I would have expected it to go the other way."

"So did I. And Pete." Davis reached for his ice water. He never drank coffee this late at night. "Anyway, Pete says he's unsure how it's going to play out, but he has no choice other than to continue the training. Gerry, I should have warned you more about this. I figured we'd have this problem. Hell, it's our first time. The sort of people we want—like I said, they're not psychopaths. They *will* ask questions. They *will* want to know why. They *will* have second thoughts. We can't recruit robots, can we?"

"Like when they tried to whack Castro," Hendley observed. He'd read into the classified files on that mad, failed adventure. Bobby Kennedy had ramrodded Operation MONGOOSE. They'd probably decided over drinks, or maybe after some touch football, to play that game. After all, Eisenhower had used CIA for similar purposes during his presidency, so why shouldn't they? Except that a former lieutenant in the Navy who'd lost his command to ramming, and a lawyer who'd never practiced law, did not instinctively know all the things that a career soldier who'd gone to five stars fully understood from the very beginning. And besides, they'd had the power. The Constitution itself had made Jack Kennedy Commander in Chief, and with that sort of power invariably came the urge to make use of it, and so reshape the world into something more amenable to his personal outlook. And so, CIA had been ordered to make Castro go away. But CIA had never had an assassination department, and had never trained people to perform such missions. And so, the Agency had gone to the Mafia, whose commission members had little reason to admire Fidel Castro—who had shut down what had been about to become their most profitable venture ever. It'd been so sure a thing that some of the organized-crime big shots had invested their own, personal, money in the Havana casinos, only to have them closed down by the communist dictator.

And did not the Mafia know how to kill people?

Well, in fact, no, they had never been very efficient at it—especially at killing people able to fight back—Hollywood movies to the contrary. And even so, the government of the United States of America had tried to use them as contractors for the assassination of a foreign chief of state—because CIA didn't know how to make such a thing happen. It was, in retrospect, somewhat ludicrous. Somewhat ? Gerry Hendley asked himself. It had come within an inch of exposure as a government-engineered train wreck. Enough to force President Gerry Ford into drafting his executive order that made such action illegal, and *that* order had lasted until President Ryan had decided to take out

the religious dictator of Iran with two smart bombs. Remarkably, the time and circumstances had disabled the news media from commenting on the killing. It had been done, after all, by the United States Air Force, with properly marked —albeit stealthy—bomber aircraft in a time of an undeclared but very real war in which weapons of mass destruction had been used against American citizens. Those factors had combined to make the entire operation not only legitimate but laudable, as ratified by the American people at the following election. Only George Washington had garnered a larger plurality at the polls, a fact which still made the senior Jack Ryan uneasy. But Jack had known the import of the killing of Mahmoud Haji Daryaei, and so, before leaving office, had talked Gerry into establishing The Campus.

But Jack didn't tell me how hard this would be, Hendley reminded himself. That was how Jack Ryan had always operated: Pick good people, give them a mission and the tools to accomplish it, then let them do it with minimal guidance from on high. It was what had made him a good boss, and a pretty good president, Gerry thought. But it didn't make life much easier on his subordinates. Why the *hell* had he taken the assignment? Hendley asked himself. But then came a smile. How would Jack react when he found out his own son was part of The Campus? Would he see the humor of it?

Probably not.

"So, Pete says just to play it out?"

"What else can he say?" Davis asked in reply.

"Tom, ever wish you were back on your dad's farm in Nebraska?"

"It's awful hard work, and kind of dull out there." And there was no way you were going to keep Davis down on the farm after he'd been a CIA field officer. He might be a pretty good bond trader now in his "white" life, but Davis was no more white in his true avocation than he was in his skin color. He liked the action in the "black" world too much.

"What do you think of the Fort Meade stuff?"

"My gut tells me we're due for something. We've stung them. They'll want to sting us back."

"You think they can recover? Haven't our troops in Afghanistan bit into them pretty hard?"

"Gerry, some people are too dumb, or too dedicated, to notice being hurt. Religion is a powerful motivator. And even if their shooters are too dumb to know the import of what they're doing—"

"—they're smart enough to carry out missions," Hendley agreed.

"And isn't that why we're here?" Davis asked.

CHAPTER 11

CROSSING THE RIVER

THE SUN rose promptly at dawn. Mustafa was startled awake by the combination of bright light and a bump in the road. He shook his head clear and turned to see Abdullah smiling at the wheel.

"Where are we?" the team leader asked his principal subordinate.

"We are half an hour east of Amarillo. It has been a pleasant drive for the past three hundred and fifty miles, but I will soon need petrol."

"Why didn't you wake me hours ago?"

"Why? You were sleeping pleasantly, and the road has been almost completely clear all night, except for those damned big trucks. These Americans must all sleep at night. I do not think I have seen more than thirty real automobiles in the past several hours."

Mustafa checked the speedometer. The car was only doing sixty-five. So, Abdullah was not speeding. They hadn't been stopped by any policemen. There was nothing to be upset about—except that Abdullah had not followed his orders as precisely as Mustafa would have preferred.

"There." The driver pointed at a blue service sign. "We can get petrol and some food. I was planning to wake you up here anyway, Mustafa. Be at ease, my friend." The fuel gauge was almost on the "E," Mustafa saw. Abdullah had been foolish to let it get that low, but there was no sense in berating him for it.

They pulled into a sizable travel plaza. The gas pumps were labeled Chevron and were automated. Mustafa took out his wallet and inserted his Visa card in the slot, then filled up the Ford with over twenty gallons of premium gasoline.

By that time, the other three had cycled through the plaza's men's room and were examining the food options. Looked like doughnuts again. Ten minutes after pulling the car off the interstate highway, they were back onto it, heading east for Oklahoma. In another twenty minutes, they'd entered it.

In the back of the car, Rafi and Zuhayr were awake and talking, and, as he drove, Mustafa listened in without joining the conversation.

The land was flat, similar to home in its topography, though far greener. The horizon was surprisingly far away, enough so that estimating distance seemed impossible on first glance. The sun was above the horizon, and it burned into his eyes until he remembered the sunglasses in his shirt pocket. They helped somewhat.

Mustafa remarked to himself on his current state of mind. He found the driving pleasant, the passing terrain pleasing to the eye, and the work, such as it was, easy. Every ninety minutes or so, he saw a marked police car, usually passing his Ford at a good clip, too fast for the policeman inside to eyeball

him and his friends. It had been good advice to cruise right on the speed limit. They moved along nicely, but people regularly passed them, even the big trucks. Not breaking the law even a little made them invisible to the police whose main business was to punish those in too great a hurry. He was confident that their mission security was solid. Had it not been the case, they'd have been followed, or pulled over on a particularly deserted stretch of highway into a trap with guns and many, many enemies. But that hadn't happened. An additional advantage of driving right on the speed limit was that anyone tailing them would stand out. It was just a matter of checking his mirror. No one lingered there for more than a few minutes. Any police shadow would be a man—it would have to be a man—in his twenties or thirties. Maybe two of them, one to drive and one to look. The men would be physically fit looking, with conservative haircuts. They'd tail for a few minutes before breaking contact, as someone else took the surveillance job over. They'd be clever, of course, but the nature of the mission made their procedures predictable. Some cars would disappear and reappear. But Mustafa was fully alert, and no car had appeared more than once. They might be tailed by aircraft, of course, but helicopters were easy to spot. The only real danger was a small fixed-wing aircraft, but he could not worry about everything. If it were written, then written it was, and there was no defense against that. For the moment, the road was clear and the coffee was excellent. It would be a fine day. OKLAHOMA CITY 36 MILES, the green road sign proclaimed.

NPR ANNOUNCED that it was Barbra Streisand's birthday, a vital piece of information with which to begin the day, John Patrick Ryan, Jr., told himself as he rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom. A few minutes later, he saw that his clock-controlled coffeemaker had functioned properly and dripped two cups into the white plastic pot. He decided to hit McDonald's this morning and get an Egg McMuffin and hash browns on the way to work. It wasn't exactly a healthy breakfast, but it was filling, and at twenty-three he wasn't overly worried about cholesterol and fat, as his father was, courtesy of his mother. Mom would already be dressed and ready to be driven to Hopkins (by her principal agent of the Secret Service) for her morning's work, without coffee if she was operating today, because she worried that caffeine might give her hand a slight tremor—and drive her little knife into the poor bastard's brain after skewering the eyeball like the olive in a martini (that was his father's joke, which usually resulted in a playful slap from Mom). Dad would go to work on his memoirs, assisted by a ghostwriter (which he detested—but the publisher had insisted). Sally was in the pretend doc stage of medical school; he didn't know what she was doing at this moment. Katie and Kyle would be dressing for school. But Little Jack had to go to work. It had recently occurred to him that college had been his last real vacation. Oh, sure, every little boy and girl wants nothing more than to grow up and take proper charge of his or her life, but then you get there—and it's too late to go back. This work every-day thing was a drag. Okay, fine, you got paid for it—but he was *already* rich, the scion of a distinguished family. The money, in his case, was already *made,* and he wasn't the kind of wastrel likely to piss it all away and become a self-unmade man, was he? He set his empty coffee cup in the

dishwasher and went to the bathroom to shave.

That was *another* drag. Damn, a teenybopper was so pleased to see the first bunch of peach fuzz turn dark and bristly, and then you got to shave once or twice a week, usually before a date. But every damned morning—what a pain in the ass that was! He remembered watching his father do it, as young boys often do, and thinking how neat it was to be a grown man. Yeah, sure. Growing up just wasn't worth the hassle. It was better to have a mom and dad to take care of all the administrative bullshit. And yet. . .

And yet, he was doing important stuff now, and that did have its satisfactions, sort of. Once you got past all the housekeeping that accompanied it. Well. Clean shirt. Pick a tie and tie tack. Slide the jacket on. Out the door. At least he had a fun car to drive. He might get himself another. A ragtop, maybe. Summer was coming, and it would be cool to have the wind blowing in your hair. Until some pervert with a knife slashed the canvas top, and you had to call the insurance company and the car vanished into the shop for three days. When you got down to it, growing up was like going to the shopping mall to buy underwear. Everyone needed it, but there wasn't much you could do with it except take it off.

The drive to work was about as routine as driving to school, except he didn't have to worry about an exam anymore. Except that if he screwed up, he'd lose the job, and *that* black mark would follow him a lot longer than an "F" in sociology would. So, he didn't want to screw up. The problem with this job was that every day was spent in learning, not in applying knowledge. The whole big lie about college was that it taught you what you needed to know for life. Yeah, right. It probably hadn't done that for his dad—and for Mom, hell, she *never* stopped reading her medical journals to learn about new stuff. Not just American journals, either, English and French, too, because she spoke pretty good French and she said that French docs were good. Better than their politicians were, but, then again, anyone who judged America by its political leaders probably thought the U.S. of A. was a nation of fuckups. At least since his dad had checked out of the White House.

He was listening to NPR again. It was his favorite news station, and it beat listening to the current brand of popular music. He'd grown up listening to his mom on the piano, mostly Bach and his peers—maybe a little John Williams in a gesture toward modernity, though he wrote more for brass than the ivories.

Another suicide bomber in Israel. Damn, his dad had tried awfully hard to settle that one down, but despite some earnest efforts, even by the Israelis, it had all come undone. The Jews and Muslims just could not seem to get along. His dad and Prince Ali bin Sultan talked about it whenever they got together, and the frustration they displayed was painful to see. The prince hadn't been screened for the kingship of his country—which was possibly good luck, Jack thought, since being a king had to be even worse than being President—but he remained an important figure whose words the current king listened to most of the time . . . which brought him to . . .

Uda bin Sali. There'd be more news on him this morning. Yesterday's take from the British SIS, courtesy of the CIA pukes at Langley. CIA pukes? Jack asked himself. His own father had worked there, had served with distinction

before moving up in the world, and had told his kids many times not to believe anything they saw in the movies about the intelligence business. Jack Jr. had asked him questions and mainly gotten unsatisfactory answers, and now he was learning what the business was really like. Mostly boring. Too much like accounting, like chasing after mice in Jurassic Park, though at least you had the advantage of being invisible to the raptors. Nobody knew that The Campus existed, and so long as that remained true everyone there was safe. That made for a comfortable feeling, but again, boring. Junior was still young enough to think excitement was fun.

Left off U.S. Route 29 and on to The Campus. The usual parking place. Smile and a wave at the security guard and up to his office. It was then that Junior realized he'd driven right past McDonald's, and so he picked two Danish off the treat tray, and made a cup of coffee on his way to his cubbyhole. Light up the computer and go to work.

"Good morning, Uda," Jack Jr. said to the computer screen. "What have you been up to?" The clock window on the computer said 8:25 AM. That translated to early afternoon in London's financial district. Bin Sali had an office in the Lloyd's insurance building, which, Junior remembered from previous hops across the pond, looked like a glassed-in oil refinery. Upscale neighborhood and some very wealthy neighbors. The report didn't say which floor, but Jack had never been in the building anyway. Insurance. Had to be the most boring job in the world, waiting for a building to burn down. So, yesterday Uda had made some phone calls, one of them to . . . aha! "I know that name from somewhere," the young Ryan told the screen. It was the name of a very rich Middle Eastern fellow who also had been known to play in the wrong playground on occasion, and who was also under surveillance by the Brit Security Service. So, what had they talked about?

There was even a transcript. The conversation had been in Arabic, and the translation . . . might as well have been instructions from the wife to buy a quart of milk on the way home from work. About that exciting and revealing —except that Uda had replied to a totally innocuous statement with "Are you sure?" *Not* the sort of thing you said to the wife when she said to get a quart of skim milk on the way home.

"The tone of voice suggests hidden meaning," the Brit analyst had opined gently at the bottom of the report.

Then, later in the day, Uda had left his office early and entered another pub and met with the same guy he'd been talking to on the phone. So, the conversation hadn't been innocuous after all? But, though they hadn't managed to overhear the conversation in a pub booth, neither had the phone chat specified a meeting or a meeting place . . . and Uda didn't spend much time in that particular pub.

"'Morning, Jack," Wills greeted as he came in and hung up his suit jacket. "What's happening?"

"Our friend Uda is wiggling like a live fish." Jack punched the PRINT command and handed the printout across to his roomie even before he'd had a chance to sit down.

"It seems to suggest that possibility, doesn't it?"

"Tony, this guy is a player," Jack said with some conviction in his voice.

"What did he do after the phone conversation? Any unusual transactions?"

"I haven't checked yet, but if there is, then he was ordered to do it by his friend, and then they met so that he could confirm it over a pint of John Smith's Bitter."

"You're making a leap of imagination. We try to avoid that here," Wills cautioned.

"I know," Junior growled. It was time to check out the previous day's money-moving.

"Oh, you're to be meeting somebody new today."

"Who's that?"

"Dave Cunningham. Forensic accountant, used to work for Justice—organized-crime stuff. He's pretty good at spotting financial irregularities."

"Does he think I found something interesting?" Jack asked with hope in his voice.

"We'll see when he gets here—after lunch. He's probably looking over your stuff right now."

"Okay," Jack responded. Maybe he'd caught the scent of something. Maybe this job really did have an element of excitement to it. Maybe they'd give him some purple ribbon for his adding machine. Sure.

THE DAYS were down to a routine. Morning run and PT, followed by breakfast and a talk. In substance, no different from Dominic's time at the FBI Academy, or Brian's at the Basic School. It was this similarity that distantly troubled the Marine. Marine Corps training was directed at killing people and breaking things. So was this.

Dominic was somewhat better at the surveillance part of it, because the FBI Academy taught it out of a book the Marines didn't have. Enzo was also pretty good with his pistol, though Aldo preferred his Beretta to his brother's Smith & Wesson. His brother had whacked a bad guy with his Smith, whereas Brian had done his job with an M16A2 rifle at a decently long range—fifty meters, close enough to see the looks on their faces when the bullets struck home, and far enough that a returning snapshot would not be close enough to be a serious worry. His gunny had chided him on not grabbing some dirt when the AKs had been turned in his direction, but Brian had learned an important lesson in his only exposure to combat. He'd found that, in that moment, his mind and his thinking went into hyperdrive, the world around him seemed to slow down, and his thinking had become extraordinarily clear. In retrospect, it had surprised him that he hadn't seen bullets in flight, his mind had been operating so fast—well, the last five rounds in the AK-47 magazine were usually tracers, and he *had* seen those in flight, though never in his immediate direction. His mind often went back to that busy five or six minutes, critiquing himself for things he might have done better, and promising that he would not repeat those errors of thinking and command, though Gunny Sullivan had been very respectful to his captain later during Caruso's after-action review with his Marines at their firebase.

"How was the run today, fellas?" Pete Alexander asked.

"Delightful," Dominic answered. "Maybe we should try it wearing fifty-pound backpacks."

"That could be arranged," Alexander replied.

"Hey, Pete, we used to do that in Force Recon. It ain't fun," Brian objected at once. "Turn down the sense of humor, bro," he added for his brother.

"Well, it's good to see you're still in shape," Pete observed comfortably. *He* didn't have to do the morning runs, after all. "So what's up?"

"I still wish I knew more about our goal here, Pete," Brian said, looking up from his coffee.

"You're not the most patient guy in the world, are you?" the training officer shot back.

"Look, in the Marine Corps we train every day, but even when it isn't clear exactly what we're training for, we know we're Marines, and we aren't getting set up to sell Girl Scout cookies in front of the Wal-Mart."

"What do you think you're getting set up for now?"

"To kill people without warning, with no rules of engagement that I can recognize. It looks a lot like murder." Okay, Brian thought, he'd said it out loud. What would happen next? Probably a drive back to Camp Lejeune and the resumption of his career in the Green Machine. Well, it could be worse.

"Okay, well, I guess it's time," Alexander conceded. "What if you had orders to terminate somebody's life?"

"If the orders are legitimate, I carry them out, but the law—the system—allows me to think about how legit the orders are."

"Okay, a hypothetical. Let's say you are ordered to terminate the life of a known terrorist. How do you react?" Pete asked.

"That's easy. You waste him," Brian answered immediately.

"Why?"

"Terrorists are criminals, but you can't always arrest them. These people make war on my country, and if I'm ordered to make war back, fine. That's what I signed on to do, Pete."

"The system doesn't always allow us to do that," Dominic observed.

"But the system does allow us to waste criminals on the spot, *in flagrante delicto,* like. You did it, and I haven't heard about any regrets, bro."

"And you won't. It's the same for you. If the President says to do somebody, and you're in uniform, he's the Commander in Chief, Aldo. You have the legal right—hell, the duty—to kill anybody he says."

"Didn't some Germans make that argument back in 1946?" Brian asked.

"I wouldn't worry too much about that. We'd have to lose a war for that to be a concern. I don't see that happening anytime soon."

"Enzo, if what you just said is true, then if the Germans had won World War Two, nobody'd need to care about those six million dead Jews. Is that what you're saying?"

"People," Alexander interrupted, "this isn't a class in legal theory."

"Enzo's the lawyer here," Brian pointed out.

Dominic took the bait: "If the President breaks the law, then the House of Representatives impeaches him and the Senate convicts him, and he's out on the street, and *then* he's subject to criminal sanctions."

"Okay. But what about the guys who carry out his orders ?" Brian responded.

"That all depends," Pete told them both. "If the outgoing President has

given them presidential pardons, what liability do they have?"

That answer jerked Dominic's head back. "None, I suppose. The President has sovereign power to pardon under the Constitution, the way a king did back in the old days. Theoretically, a president could pardon himself, but that would be a real legal can of worms. The Constitution is the supreme law of the land. In effect, the Constitution is God, and there is no appeal from that. You know, except when Ford pardoned Nixon, it's an area that has never really been looked into. But the Constitution is designed to be reasonably applied by reasonable men. That may be its only weakness. Lawyers are advocates, and that means they're not always reasonable."

"So, theoretically speaking, if the President gives you a pardon for killing somebody, you cannot be punished for the crime, right?"

"Correct." Dominic's face screwed in on itself somewhat. "What are you telling me?"

"Just a hypothetical," Alexander answered, backing up perceptibly. In any case, it ended the class on legal theory, and Alexander congratulated himself for telling them an awful lot and nothing at all at the same time.

THE CITY names were so alien to him, Mustafa remarked quietly to himself. Shawnee. Okemah. Weleetka. Pharaoh. That was strangest of all. They were not in Egypt, after all. That was a Muslim nation, albeit a confused one, with politics that didn't recognize the importance of the Faith. But that would be turned around sooner or later. Mustafa stretched in his seat and reached for a smoke. Half a tank of gas still. This Ford surely had a capacious fuel tank in which to burn Muslim oil. They were such ungrateful bastards, the Americans. Islamic countries sold them oil, and what did America give in return? Weapons to the Israelis to kill Arabs with, damned little else. Dirty magazines, alcohol, and other corruption to afflict even the Faithful. But which was worse, to corrupt, or to be corrupted, to be a victim of unbelievers? Someday all would be put right, when the Rule of Allah spanned the world. It *would* come, someday, and he and his fellow warriors were even now on the leading wave of Allah's Will. Theirs would be martyrs' deaths, and that was a proud thing. In due course their families would learn of their fates—they could probably depend on Americans for that—and mourn their deaths, but celebrate their faithfulness. The American police agencies loved to show their efficiency after the battle was already lost. It was enough to make him smile.

DAVE CUNNINGHAM looked his age. He was pushing sixty pretty hard, Jack judged. Thinning gray hair. Bad skin. He'd quit smoking, but not soon enough. But his gray eyes sparkled with the curiosity of a weasel in the Dakotas, seeking after prairie dogs to eat.

"You're Jack Junior?" he asked on coming in.

"Guilty," Jack admitted. "What did you make of my numbers?"

"Not bad for an amateur," Cunningham allowed. "Your subject appears to be warehousing and laundering money—for himself, and for somebody else."

"Who is somebody else?" Wills asked.

"Not sure, but he's Middle Eastern, and he's rich, and he's tight with a buck. Funny. Everybody thinks they throw money around like drunken sailors. Some

do," the accountant observed. "But some are misers. When they let go of the nickel, the buffalo screams." That showed his age. Buffalo nickels were a thing so far in the past that Jack didn't even get the joke. Then Cunningham laid some paper on the desk between Ryan and Wills. Three transactions were circled in red.

"He's a little sloppy. All his questionable transfers are done in ten-thousand-pound slugs. It makes them easy to spot. He disguises them as personal expenses—it goes into that account, probably to hide it from his parents. Saudi accountants tend to be sloppy. I guess it takes over a million of something to get them upset. They probably figure a kid like this can cut loose ten thousand pounds for a particularly nice night with the ladies, or at a casino. Young rich kids like to gamble, though they're not very good at it. If they live closer to Vegas or Atlantic City, it would do wonders for our balance of trade."

"Maybe they like European hookers better than ours?" Jack wondered aloud.

"Sonny, in Vegas you can order up a blond, blue-eyed Cambodian donkey and it'll be at your door half an hour after you set the phone down." Mafia kingpins had their favorite activities as well, Cunningham had learned over the years. It had originally offended the Methodist grandfather, but with the realization that it was just one more way to track criminals, he'd learned to welcome such expenditures. Corrupt people did corrupt things. Cunningham had also been part of Operation ELEGANT SERPENTS, which had sent six members of Congress to the federal countryclub prison at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, using methods just like this one to track his quarry. He figured it made for high-class caddies for the young fighter pilots who flew out of there, and probably good exercise for the former representatives of the people.

"Dave, is our friend Uda a player?" Jack asked.

Cunningham looked up from his papers. "He surely does wiggle like one, son."

Jack sat back in his chair with a great feeling of satisfaction. He'd actually accomplished something . . . maybe something important?

THE LAND got a little hilly as they entered Arkansas. Mustafa found that his reactions were a little slow after driving four hundred miles, and so he pulled off at a service plaza and, after filling the car, let Abdullah take the wheel. It was good to stretch. Then it was back onto the highway. Abdullah drove conservatively. They passed only elderly people, and stayed in the right lane to avoid being crushed by the passing truck traffic. In addition to their desire to avoid police notice, there was no real hurry. They had two more days to identify their objective and accomplish their mission. And that was plenty. He wondered what the other three teams were doing. They'd all had shorter distances to cover. One of them was probably already in its target city. Their orders were to select a decent but not opulent hotel less than an hour's drive from the objective, to conduct a reconnaissance of the objective, and then to confirm their readiness via e-mail, and sit tight until released by Mustafa to accomplish their missions. The simpler the orders, the better, of course, less chance for confusion and mistakes. They were good men, fully briefed. He

knew them all. Saeed and Mehdi were, like himself, Saudi in origin, like himself children of wealthy families who'd come to despise their parents for their habit of bootlicking Americans and others like them. Sabawi was Iraqi in origin. Not born to wealth, he had come to be a true believer. A Sunni like the rest, he wanted to be remembered even by the Shi'a majority in his country as a faithful follower of the Prophet. The Shi'a in Iraq, so recently liberated—by *unbelievers*!—from Sunni rule paraded about their country as though they alone were the Faithful. Sabawi wanted to show the error in that false belief. Mustafa hardly ever concerned himself with such trivia. For him, Islam was a large tent, with room for nearly all . . .

"My ass is tired," Rafi said from the backseat.

"That cannot be helped, my brother," Abdullah replied from the driver's seat. As driver, he deemed himself to be in temporary command.

"I know that, but my ass is still tired," Rafi observed.

"We could have taken horses, but they would be too slow, and they can also be hard on the ass, my friend," Mustafa observed. This pronouncement was greeted by laughter, and Rafi went back to his copy of *Playboy*.

The map showed easy going until they reached the city of Small Stone. They'd have to be fully awake for that. But for now, the road wound through pleasant hills covered with green trees. It was quite a change from northern Mexico, which had been so much like the sandy hills of home . . . to which they would never return . . .

For Abdullah, the driving was a pleasure. The car was not so fine as the Mercedes his father drove, but it sufficed for the moment, and the feel of the wheel was sweet in his hands, as he leaned back and smoked his Winston with a contented smile on his lips. There were people in America who raced cars like this on great oval tracks, and what a pleasure that must be! To drive as fast as you could, to be in competition with others—and to defeat them! That must be better than having a woman . . . well, almost . . . or just different, he corrected himself. Now, to have a woman *after* winning a race, *that* would be pleasurable indeed. He wondered if there were cars in Paradise. Good, fast ones, like the Formula One cars favored in Europe, hugging the corners, then really letting it go on the straightaways, to drive as fast as car and road allowed. He could try that here. The car was probably good for two hundred kilometers per hour—but, no, their mission was more important.

He flipped his cigarette butt out the window. Just then a white police car went zipping by, with blue stripes on the side. Arkansas State Police. Now *that* looked like a fast car, and the man inside had a splendid cowboy hat, Abdullah thought. Like every human being on the planet, he'd seen his share of American movies, including the cowboy sort, men on horseback herding cattle, or just shooting it out with handguns in their drinking saloons, settling issues of honor. The imagery appealed to him—but that was what it was supposed to do, he reminded himself. One more attempt by the infidel to seduce the Faithful. To be fair, though, American movies were made mainly for the American audience. How many Arab movies had he seen showing the forces of Salah ad-Din—a Kurd, of all things—crushing the invading Christian Crusaders? They were there to teach history, and to encourage manhood in Arab men, the better to crush the Israelis, which, alas, had not yet happened.

So it was, probably, with American Westerns. Their concept of manhood was not all that different from the Arabs', except that they used revolvers instead of the manlier sword. The pistol did, of course, have superior reach, and so Americans were practical fighters, in addition to being very clever at it. No braver than Arabs, of course, just cleverer.

He'd have to be careful of Americans and their handguns, Abdullah told himself. If any of them shot like movie cowboys, their mission could come to a premature end, and that wouldn't do.

He wondered what the policeman in the passing white car carried on his belt—and was he a proficient shot? They could find out, of course, but there was only one way to do that and it would endanger their mission. So, Abdullah watched the police car pull ahead until it faded from view, and he settled down to watching tractor-trailers whiz past while he cruised eastward at a steady sixty-five miles and three cigarettes per hour, plus a grumbling stomach. SMALL STONE 30 MILES.

"THEY'RE GETTING excited over at Langley again," Davis told Hendley.

"What did you hear?" Gerry asked.

"A field officer got something strange from a source agent over in Saudi. Something about how some suspected players were out of town, so to speak, location unknown, but he thinks Western Hemisphere, like ten or so of them."

"How solid is that?" Hendley asked.

"A 'three' in terms of reliability, though the source is ordinarily well regarded. Some headquarters puke decided to downgrade it, reason unknown." That was one of the problems at The Campus. They were dependent on others for most of their analysis. Though they had some particularly fine people in their own analysis offices, the real work was done on the other side of the Potomac River, and CIA had blown its share of calls in the past few years—make that decades, Gerry reminded himself. Nobody hit 1.000 in this league, and a lot of CIA bureaucrats were overpaid even with meager government salaries. But as long as their filing was properly done, nobody really cared or even noticed. What was significant was that the Saudis had a way of deporting their own potential troublemakers by allowing them to go elsewhere and do their crimes, and if they suffered for it, the Saudi government would be cooperative as hell, thus covering all of its bases quite easily.

"What do you think?" he asked Tom Davis.

"Hell, Gerry, I'm not a gypsy. No crystal ball, no Delphic Oracle." Davis let out a frustrated breath. "Homeland Security has been notified, and so that means FBI and the rest of their analytical team, but this is 'soft' intelligence, y'know? Nothing to hang a hat on. Three names, but no photos, and any bonehead can get ID in a new name." Even popular novels told people how to do it. You didn't even need all that much patience, because no state in the union cross-referenced birth and death certificates, which would have been an easy thing, even for government bureaucrats to accomplish.

"So, what happens?"

Davis shrugged. "The usual. Airport security people will get another notice to stay awake, and so, they'll hassle more innocent people to make sure

nobody tries to hijack an airliner. Cops all over will look for suspicious cars, but that'll mostly mean that people driving erratically get pulled over. There's been too much wolf-crying. Even the police have trouble taking it seriously, Gerry, and who can blame them?"

"So, all of our defenses are neutralized—by us?"

"For all practical purposes, yes. Until CIA has a lot more field assets to identify them before they get here, we're in a reactive mode, not a proactive one. What the hell," he grimaced, "my bond trading has been going great the last two weeks." Tom Davis had found the money business to be rather to his liking—or, at least, easily mastered. Maybe going into CIA right out of the University of Nebraska had been a mistake? he asked himself every so often.

"Any follow-up on the CIA report?"

"Well, somebody over there has suggested another talk with our asset, but it hasn't cleared the Seventh Floor yet."

"Jesus!" Hendley swore.

"Hey, Jerry, why are you surprised? You never worked there like I did, but down on The Hill, you must have seen this sort of thing before."

"Why the *fuck* didn't Kealty keep Foley as DCI?"

"He has a lawyer friend he likes better, remember? And Foley was a professional spook, and therefore unreliable. Look, let's face it—Ed Foley helped some, but a real fix will take a decade. That's one of the reasons we're here, right?" Davis added with a smile. "How are our two hitmen trainees doing down at Charlottesville?"

"The Marine is still having a conscience attack."

"Chesty Puller must be rolling over in his crypt," Davis opined.

"Well, we can't hire mad dogs. Better to ask questions now than out in the field on an assignment."

"I suppose. What about the hardware?"

"Next week."

"It's taken long enough. Testing phase?"

"In Iowa. Pigs. They have a similar cardiovascular system, so our friend tells us."

How appropriate, Davis thought.

SMALL STONE turned out to be not much of a navigation problem, and after dipping southwest on I-40, now they were going northeast. Mustafa was now back at the wheel, and the two in back were dozing after filling up on roast beef sandwiches and Coca-Cola.

It was mostly boring now. Nothing can remain captivating for more than twenty hours, and even dreams of their mission a day and a half in the future could scarcely keep their eyes open, and so Rafi and Zuhayr were sleeping like exhausted children. He motored northeast with the sun behind his left shoulder and started to see signs indicating the distance to Memphis, Tennessee. He thought for a moment—it was hard to think very clearly after being in a car so long—and realized that he had only two more states to go. Their progress was steady, if slow. It would have been better to take a plane, but getting their machine guns through the airports would probably have been difficult, he thought with a smile. And as overall mission commander he had

more than one team to worry about. That was why he'd selected the most difficult and distant target of the four, to set the example to the others. But sometimes leadership was just a pain in the ass, Mustafa told himself, as he adjusted himself in the seat.

The next half hour passed quickly. Then came a bridge of considerable size and height, and a sign that announced the Mississippi River, followed by a sign that welcomed them to TENNESSEE, THE VOLUNTEER STATE. His mind wandering from so much driving, Mustafa started to wonder what that might mean, but the thought died aborning. Whatever it meant, he had to cross Tennessee on the way to Virginia. Rest would not come for at least fifteen more hours. He'd drive about a hundred kilometers east of Memphis, then turn the car over to Abdullah.

He'd just crossed a great river. His entire country had no permanent rivers, just wadis that flooded briefly with a rare passing shower and soon went dry again. America was such a rich country. That was probably the source of their arrogance, but his mission, and that of his three colleagues, was to take that arrogance down a few pegs. And that, *Insh'Allah,* they would do, in less than two more days.

Two days to Paradise, was the thought that lingered in his mind.

CHAPTER 12

ARRIVING

TENNESSEE PASSED quickly for those in the back, only because Mustafa and Abdullah shared the wheel for the three hundred fifty kilometers from Memphis to Nashville, during which Rafi and Zuhayr mainly slept. One and three quarters kilometers per minute, he calculated. It translated to another . . . what? Twenty more hours or so. He thought about speeding up, to make the trip go faster—but, no, that was foolish. Taking unnecessary chances was always foolish. Hadn't they learned that from the Israelis? The enemy was always waiting, like a sleeping tiger. Waking one up unnecessarily was very foolish indeed. You only woke up the tiger when your rifle was already aimed, and only then so that the tiger could know that he'd been outsmarted, and unable to take action. Just to be awake long enough to appreciate his own foolishness, enough to know fear. America would know fear. For all their weapons and their cleverness, all these arrogant people would tremble.

He found himself smiling into the darkness now. The sun had set again, and his car's headlights bored white cones into the darkness, illuminating the white lines on the highway that dashed in and out of his vision as he drove eastward at a steady sixty-five miles per hour.

THE TWINS were now rising at 0600 and going out to do their daily dozen exercises without Pete Alexander's supervision, which, they'd decided, they really didn't need. The run was getting easier for both of them, and the rest of the exercises had also mutated into a routine. By 7:15, they were done and heading in for breakfast and the first skullsession with their training officer.

"Those shoes need some work, bro," Dominic observed.

"Yeah," Brian agreed, taking a sad look at his aging Nike sneaks. "They've served me well for a few years, but it looks like they need to go off to shoe heaven."

"Foot Locker in the mall." He referred to the Fashion Square shopping mall down the hill in Charlottesville.

"Hmm, maybe a Philly cheesesteak for lunch tomorrow?"

"Works for me, bro," Dominic agreed. "Nothing like grease, fat, and cholesterol for lunch, especially with cheese fries on the side. Assuming your shoes will last another day."

"Hey, Enzo, I like the smell. These sneaks and me been around the block a few times."

"Like those dirty T-shirts. God damn it, Aldo, can't you ever dress properly?"

"Just let me wear my utilities again, buddy. I *like* being a Marine. You

always know where you stand."

"Yeah, in the middle of the shit," Dominic observed.

"Maybe so, but you work with a better class of guys there." And, he didn't add, they were all on your side, and they all carried automatic weapons. It made for a feeling of security rarely found in civilian life.

"Going out to lunch, eh?" Alexander said.

"Tomorrow, maybe," Dominic answered. "Then we need to arrange a proper burial for Aldo's running shoes. We got a can of Lysol around here, Pete?"

Alexander had himself a good laugh. "I thought you'd never ask."

"You know, Dominic," Brian said, looking up from his eggs, "if you weren't my brother, I wouldn't take this crap off of you."

"Really?" The FBI Caruso tossed him an English muffin. "I swear, you Marines are all talk. I always used to whip him when we were kids," he added for Pete's benefit.

Brian's eyes nearly popped out of his head: "My ass!"

And another training day got started.

AN HOUR later, Jack was back on his workstation. Uda bin Sali had enjoyed another athletic night, with Rosalie Parker again. He must like her a lot. Ryan wondered how the Saudi would react if he knew that after every session she gave a play-by-play to the British Security Service. But for her, business was business, which would have deflated a lot of male egos in the British capital. Sali surely had one of those, Junior thought. Wills came in at quarter to nine with a bag of Dunkin' Donuts.

"Hey, Anthony. What's shakin'?"

"You tell me," Wills shot back. "Doughnut?"

"Thanks, buddy. Well, Uda had some more exercise last night."

"Ah, youth, a wonderful thing, but wasted on the young."

"George Bernard Shaw, right?"

"I knew you were literate. Sali discovered a new toy a few years back, and I guess he's going to play with it till it breaks—or falls off. Must be tough duty for his shadow team, standing out in the cold rain and knowing he's getting his weasel greased upstairs." It was a line from the *Sopranos* on HBO, which Wills admired.

"You suppose they're the ones who debrief her?"

"No, that's a job for the guys over at Thames House. Must get old after a while. Pity they don't send us all the transcripts, though," he added with a chuckle. "Might be good for getting the blood flowing in the morning."

"Thanks, I can always buy a *Hustler* at the magazine store if I feel scuzzy some night."

"It's not a clean business we're in, Jack. The kind of people we look at, they aren't the kind you invite over for dinner."

"Hey, White House, remember? Half the people we hosted for a State Dinner—Dad could hardly shake hands with them. But Secretary Adler told him it was business, and so Dad had to be nice to the sunzabitches. Politics attracts some really scummy people, too."

"Amen. So, anything else new on Sali?"

"I haven't gone over yesterday's money moves yet. Hey, if Cunningham

stumbles over anything significant, what happens next?"

"That's up to Gerry and the senior staff." *You're way too junior to get your panties in a wad about that,* he didn't add, though the young Ryan got the message anyway.

"WELL, DAVE?" Gerry Hendley was asking upstairs.

"He's laundering money and sending some of it off to persons unknown. Liechtenstein bank. If I had to guess, it's to cover credit card accounts. You can get a Visa or MasterCard through that particular bank, and so it could well be to cover credit card accounts for persons unknown. Could be a mistress or a close friend, or somebody in whom we might have direct interest."

"Any way to find out?" Tom Davis asked.

"They use the same accounting program most banks do," Cunningham answered, meaning that with a little patience, The Campus could crack their way inside and learn more. There were firewalls in the way, of course. It was a job better left to the National Security Agency, and so the trick was to get NSA to task one of its computer weenies to do the cracking. That would mean faking a request by CIA to do the job, and that, the accountant figured, was a little harder to accomplish than just typing a note into a computer terminal. He also suspected that The Campus had someone inside both intelligence agencies who could do the faking so that no discernible paper trail would be left behind.

"Is it strictly necessary?"

"Maybe in a week or so, I can find more data. This Sali guy might just be a rich kid playing stickball out in the traffic, but . . . but my nose tells me he's a player of some sort," Cunningham admitted. He'd developed good instincts over the years, as a result of which two former Mafia kingpins were now living in solitary cells at Marion, Illinois. But he didn't trust his own instincts as well as his former and current superiors did. A career accountant with a foxhound's nose, he was also very conservative in talking about it.

"A week, you think?"

Dave nodded. "About that."

"How's the Ryan kid?"

"Good instincts. He found something most people would have missed. Maybe his youth works for him. Young target, young bloodhound. Usually, it doesn't work. This time . . . looks like maybe it did. You know, when his dad appointed Pat Martin to be Attorney General, I heard some things about Big Jack. Pat really liked him, and I worked with Mr. Martin enough to respect him a lot. This kid may be going places. It'll take about ten years to be sure of that, of course."

"We're not supposed to believe in breeding over here, Dave," Tom Davis observed.

"Numbers is numbers, Mr. Davis. Some people have a good nose, some don't. He doesn't yet, not really, but he's sure heading that way." Cunningham had helped start the Justice Department's Special Accounting Unit, which specialized in tracking terrorist money. Everyone needed money to operate, and money always left a trail somewhere, but it was often found after the fact more easily than before. Good for investigations, but not as good for active

defense.

"Thanks, Dave," Hendley said in dismissal. "Keep us posted, if you would."

"Yes, sir." Cunningham gathered his papers and made his way out.

"You know, he'd be a little more effective if he had a personality," Davis said fifteen seconds after the door closed.

"Nobody's perfect, Tom. He's the best guy they ever had at Justice for this sort of thing. I bet when he fishes, there's nothing left in the lake after he leaves."

"No argument here, Gerry."

"So, this Sali gent might be a banker for the bad guys?"

"It looks like a possibility. Langley and Fort Meade are still in a dither over the current situation," Hendley went on.

"I've seen the paperwork. It's a whole lot of paper for not much hard data." In the business of intelligence analysis, you got into the speculation phase too rapidly, the point when experienced analysts started applying fear to existing data, following it to God knew where, trying to read the minds of people who didn't speak all that much, even to each other. Might there be people out there with anthrax or smallpox in little bottles in their shaving kits? How the hell could you tell? That had been done once to America, but when you got down to it *everything* had been done once to America, and while it had given the country the confidence that her people could deal with damned near anything, it had also given Americans the realization that bad things could indeed happen here and that those responsible might not always be identifiable. The new President did not convey any assurance that we'd be able to stop or punish such people. That was a major problem in and of itself.

"You know, we're a victim of our own success," the former senator said quietly. "We've managed to handle every nation-state that ever crossed us, but these invisible bastards who work for their vision of God are harder to identify and track. God is omnipresent. So are His perverted agents."

"Gerry, my boy, if it was easy, we wouldn't be here."

"Tom, thank God I can always count on you for moral support."

"We live in an imperfect world, you know. There isn't always enough rain to make the corn grow, and, if there is, sometimes the rivers flood. My father taught me that."

"I always meant to ask you—how the hell did your family ever end up in goddamned Nebraska?"

"My great-grandfather was a soldier—cavalryman, Ninth Cavalry, black regiment. He didn't feel like moving back to Georgia when his hitch ran out. He'd spent some time at Fort Crook outside of Omaha, and the dumbass didn't mind the winters. So, he bought a spread near Seneca and farmed corn. That's how history started for us Davises."

"Wasn't any Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska?"

"No, they stayed in Indiana. Smaller farms there, anyway. My great-grandfather shot himself some buffalo when he got started. There's the biggest damned head over the fireplace at home. Damned thing still smells. Dad and my brother mainly hunt longhorn antelope now, the 'speed-goat,' they call it at home. Never got to like the taste."

"What's your nose say on this new intel, Tom?" Hendley asked.

"I'm not planning to go to New York anytime soon, buddy."

EAST OF Knoxville, the road divided. I-40 went east. I-81 went north, and the rented Ford took the latter through the mountains explored by Daniel Boone when the western frontier of America had scarcely stretched out of sight of the Atlantic Ocean. A road sign showed the exit for the home of someone named Davy Crockett. Whoever that was, Abdullah thought, driving downhill through a pretty mountain pass. Finally, at a town named Bristol, they were in Virginia, their final major territorial boundary. About six more hours, he calculated. The land here, in the sunlight, was lush in its greenness, with horse and dairy farms on both sides of the road. Even churches, usually white-painted wooden buildings with crosses atop the steeples. Christians. The country was clearly dominated by them.

Unbelievers.

Enemies.

Targets.

They had their guns in the trunk to deal with them. First, I-81 north to I-64. They'd long since memorized their routing. The other three teams were surely in place now. Des Moines, Colorado Springs, and Sacramento. Each a city large enough to have at least one good shopping mall. Two were provincial capitals. None were major cities, however. All were what they called "Middle America," where the "good" people lived, where the "ordinary," "hardworking" Americans made their homes, where they felt safe, far from the great centers of power—and corruption. Few, if any, Jews to be found in those cities. Oh, maybe a few. Jews like to run jewelry stores. Maybe even in the shopping malls. That would be an added bonus, but only something to be scooped up if it accidentally offered itself. Their real objective was to kill ordinary Americans, the ones who considered themselves safe in the womb of ordinary America. They would soon learn that safety in this world was an illusion. They'd learn that the thunderbolt of Allah reached everywhere.

"SO, THIS is it?" Tom Davis asked.

"Yes, it is," Dr. Pasternak replied. "Be careful. It's fully loaded. The red tag, you see. The blue one is not charged."

"What does it deliver?"

"Succinylcholine, a muscle relaxant, essentially a synthetic and more potent form of curare. It shuts down all the muscles, including the diaphragm. You can't breath, speak, or move. You're fully awake. It'll be a miserable death," the physician added in a cold, distant voice.

"Why is that?" Hendley asked.

"You can't breathe. Your heart rapidly goes into anoxia, essentially a massive induced heart attack. It won't feel very good at all."

"Then what?"

"Well, the onset of symptoms would take about sixty seconds. Thirty seconds more for the full effects of the drug to present themselves. The victim would collapse then, say, ninety seconds after the injection. Breathing stops completely about the same time. The heart is starved for oxygen. It will try to beat, but it's not delivering any oxygen to the body, or to itself. Heart tissue

will die in about two or three minutes—and will be extremely painful as it does so. Unconsciousness will happen at about the three-minute mark unless the victim had been exercising beforehand—in that case, the brain will be highly infused with oxygen. Ordinarily, the brain has about three minutes' worth of oxygen in it to function without additional oxygen infusion, but at about the three-minute mark—after onset of symptoms, that is; four and a half minutes after being stuck—the victim will lose consciousness. Complete brain death will take another three minutes or so. After that, the succinylcholine will metabolize in the body, even after death. Not entirely, but enough so that only a really sharp pathologist will pick it up on a toxicology scan, and then only if he's prepped to look for it. The only real trick is to get your test subject in the buttocks."

"Why there?" Davis asked.

"The drug works just fine with an IM—intramuscular—injection. When people are posted, it's always faceup so that you can see and remove the organs. They rarely turn the body over. Now, this injection system does leave a mark, but it's hard to spot under the best of circumstances, and then only if you're looking at the right area. Even drug addicts—that will be one of the things they check for—don't inject themselves in the rump. It will appear to be an unexplained heart attack. Those happen every day. Rare, but not at all unknown. Tachycardia can make it happen, for example. The injector pen is a modified insulin pen like the kind Type I diabetics use. Your mechanics did a great job of disguising it. You can even write with it, but if you rotate the barrel, it swaps out the pen part for the insulin part. A gas charge in the back of the barrel injects the transfer agent. The victim will probably notice it, like a bee sting but less painful, but inside a minute and a half, he won't be telling anybody about it. His most likely reaction will be a minor 'Ouch' and then rub the spot—if that much. Like a mosquito bite on the neck. You might slap at it, but you don't call the police."

Davis held the safe "blue" pen. It was a little bulky, like a third-grader might use on his first official introduction to a ballpoint pen after using thick-barrel pencils and crayons for a couple of years. So, as you approached your subject, you took it out of your coat pocket, and swung it in a reverse stabbing motion, and just kept going. Your backup hitter would watch the subject fall to the sidewalk, maybe even stop to render assistance, then watch the bastard die, and get up and go on his way—well, maybe call an ambulance so that his body could get sent to the hospital and be properly dismantled under medical supervision.

"Tom?"

"I like it, Gerry," Davis replied. "Doc, how confident are you about this stuff dissipating after the subject goes down for the count?"

"Confident," Dr. Pasternak answered, and both of his hosts remembered that he was professor of anesthesiology at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. He probably knew his stuff. Besides, they'd trusted him enough to let him in on the secrets of The Campus. It was a little late to stop trusting him now. "It's just basic biochemistry. Succinylcholine is made up of two acetylcholine molecules. Esterases in the body break the chemical down into acetylcholine fairly rapidly, so it is very likely to be undetectable,

even by someone up at Columbia-Presbyterian. The only hard part: to have it done covertly. If you could bring him into a doctor's office, for example, it would just be a matter of infusing potassium chloride. That would put the heart into fibrillation. When cells die, they give off potassium anyway, and so the relative increase would not be noticed, but the IV mark would be hard to hide. There are a lot of ways to do this. I just had to pick one that is applied relatively conveniently by fairly unskilled people. As a practical matter, a really good pathologist might not be able to determine the exact cause of death—and he would know that he didn't know, and that would bother him—but that's only if the body is examined by a really talented guy. Not too many of them around. I mean, the best guy up at Columbia is Rich Richards. He really hates not knowing something. He's a real intellectual, a problem solver, and genius biochemist in addition to being a superb physician. I asked him about this, and he told me it would be extremely difficult to detect even if he had a heads-up on what to look for. Ordinarily, extraneous factors come into play, the specific biochemistry of the victim's body, what he's had to eat or drink, ambient temperature would be a huge factor. On a cold winter day, outside, the esterases might not be able to break down the succinylcholine because of a diminution of chemical processes."

"So, don't do a guy in Moscow in January?" Hendley asked. This deep science stuff was troublesome for him, but Pasternak knew his stuff.

The professor smiled. Cruelly. "Correct. Also Minneapolis."

"Miserable death?" Davis asked.

He nodded. "Decidedly unpleasant."

"Reversible?"

Pasternak shook his head. "Once the succinylcholine is in the bloodstream, there's nothing you can do about it... well, theoretically you could put the guy on a ventilator and breathe for him until the drug metabolizes—I've seen that done with Pavulon in an OR—but that would be a stretch. Theoretically possible to survive, but very, very unlikely. People have survived being shot right between the eyes, gentlemen, but it's not exactly common."

"How hard do you have to hit your target?" Davis asked.

"Not very, just a good poke. Enough to penetrate his clothing. A thick coat might be a problem because of the length of the needle. But ordinary business wear, no problem."

"Is anyone immune to the drug?" Hendley asked.

"Not to this one, no. That would be one in a billion."

"No chance he'd make noise?"

"As I explained, it's like a bee sting at most—more than a mosquito, but not enough to make a man cry out in pain. At most, you'd expect for the victim to be puzzled, maybe to turn around and see what caused it, but your agent will be walking away normally, not running. Under those conditions, without a target to yell at, and since the initial discomfort is transitory, the most likely reaction is to rub the spot and walk on . . . for about, oh, ten yards or so."

"So, rapid-acting, lethal, and undetectable, right?"

"All of the above," Dr. Pasternak agreed.

"How do you reload it?" Davis required. *Damn, how has CIA* not *developed something this good?* he wondered. Or KGB, for that matter.

“You unscrew the barrel, like this”—he demonstrated—“and take it apart. You use an ordinary syringe to inject a new supply of the drug, and swap out the gas charge. These little gas capsules are the only hard part to manufacture. You toss the used one into a trash can or the gutter—they’re only four millimeters long and two millimeters wide—and reinsert the fresh one. When you screw in the replacement, a little spike in the back of the barrel punctures it and recharges the system. The gas capsules are coated with sticky stuff to make them harder to drop.” And just that fast, the blue one was “hot” except for the absence of succinylcholine. “You want to be careful with the syringe, of course, but you’d have to be pretty stupid to stick yourself. If you cover your man as a diabetic, you can explain away the presence of syringes. There’s an ID card to get insulin refills that works just about anywhere in the world, and diabetes has no outward symptoms.”

“Damn, Doc,” Tom Davis observed. “Anything else you could deliver this way?”

“Botulism toxin is similarly lethal. It’s a neurotoxin; it blocks nerve transmissions, and it causes death by asphyxia, also fairly rapidly, but it’s readily detectable in the blood during a post-, and kind of hard to explain away. It’s available fairly readily around the world, but in microgram doses, because of its use in cosmetic surgery.”

“Docs shoot women in the face with that, don’t they?”

“Only the dumb ones,” Pasternak replied. “It takes wrinkles away, sure, but since it kills the nerves in the face, it also takes away your ability to smile much. That’s not my field, exactly. There are a lot of toxic and lethal chemicals. It’s the combination of rapid action and difficult detectability that made this a problem. Another quick way to kill someone is to use a small knife at the back of the skull, where the spinal cord enters the base of the brain. The trick is getting right behind your victim and then hitting a fairly small target with the knife, and not having the knife jam between the vertebrae—at that range, why not a silenced .22 pistol? It’s fast enough, but it leaves something behind. This method can easily be misdiagnosed as a heart attack. It’s just about perfect,” the physician concluded, in a voice sufficiently cold as to sprinkle snow on the carpet.

“Richard,” Hendley said, “you have earned your fee on this one.”

The professor of anesthesiology stood, checking his watch. “No fee, Senator. This one’s for my little brother. Let me know if you need me for anything else. I have a train to catch back to New York.”

“Jesus,” Tom Davis said, after he left. “I always knew docs had to have evil thoughts.”

Hendley picked up a package on his desk. There were a total of ten “pens” in it, with computer-printed instructions for this use, a plastic bag full of gas capsules, and twenty large vials of succinylcholine, plus a bunch of throwaway syringes. “He and his brother must have been pretty close.”

“Know him?” Davis asked.

“Yeah, I did. Good guy, wife and three kids. Name was Bernard, Harvard Business School graduate, smart guy, very astute trader. Worked on the ninety-seventh floor of Tower One. Left a lot of money behind—anyway, his family’s well taken care of. That’s something.”

"Rich is a nice guy to have on our side," Davis thought aloud, suppressing the shiver that came along with the opinion.

"That he is," Gerry agreed.

THE DRIVE ought to have been pleasant. The weather was fair and clear, the road not at all crowded and mostly straight northeast. But it was not pleasant. Mustafa kept getting "How far now?" and "Are we there yet?" from Rafi and Zuhayr in the backseat, to the point that more than once he considered pulling the car over and strangling them. Maybe it was hard sitting in the backseat, but he had to *drive this Goddamned car!!!* Tension. He was feeling it, and they probably were, too, and so he took a deep breath and commanded himself to be calm. The end of their journey was hardly four hours away, and what was that compared to their transcontinental trek? Certainly it was farther than the Holy Prophet ever walked or rode from Mecca to Medina and back—but he stopped that thought at once. He had no standing to compare himself with Mohammed, did he? *No, you do not.* One thing he was sure of. On getting to his destination, he was going to bathe and *sleep* just as long as he could. *Four hours to rest* was what he kept saying to himself, as Abdullah slept in the right-front seat.

THE CAMPUS had its own cafeteria, whose food was catered from a variety of outside sources. Today it was from a Baltimore deli called Atman's whose corned beef was pretty good, if not quite New York class—saying that might result in a fistfight, he thought, as he picked up a corned beef on a kaiser roll. What to drink? If he was having a New York lunch, then cream soda, but Utz, the local potato chips, of course, because they'd even had them in the White House—at his father's insistence. They probably had something from Boston there now. It was not exactly a renowned restaurant town, but every city has at least one good eatery, even Washington, D.C.

Tony Wills, his normal luncheon mate, was nowhere to be seen. So, he looked around and spotted Dave Cunningham, not surprisingly eating alone. Jack headed that way.

"Hey, Dave, mind if I sit down?" he asked.

"Take a seat," Cunningham said, cordially enough.

"How's the numbers business?"

"Exciting," was the implausible reply. Then he elaborated. "You know, the access we have into those European banks is amazing. If the Department of Justice had this sort of access, they'd really clean up—except you can't introduce this kind of evidence into a court of law."

"Yeah, Dave, the Constitution can really be a drag. And all those damned civil-rights laws."

Cunningham nearly choked on his egg salad on white. "Don't you start. The FBI runs a lot of operations that are a little shady—usually because some informant lays stuff on us, maybe because somebody asked, or maybe not, and they spin that off—but within the rules of criminal procedure. Usually it's part of a plea bargain. There are not enough crooked lawyers to handle all of their needs. The Mafia guys, I mean."

"I know Pat Martin. Dad thinks a lot of him."

"He's honest and very, very smart. He really ought to be a judge. That's where honest lawyers belong."

"Doesn't pay very much." Jack's official salary at The Campus was well above anything any federal employee made. Not bad for entry level.

"That *is* a problem, but—"

"But there's nothing all that admirable about poverty, my dad says. He toyed with the idea of zeroing out salaries for elected officials so that they'd have to know what real work was, but he eventually decided that it would make them even more susceptible to bribery."

The accountant picked up on that: "You know, Jack, it's amazing how little you need to bribe a member of Congress. Makes the bribes hard to identify," the CPA groused. "Like being down in the weeds for an aircraft."

"What about our terrorist friends?"

"Some of them like a comfortable life. A lot of them come from moneyed families, and they like their luxuries."

"Like Sali."

Dave nodded. "He has expensive tastes. His car costs a *lot* of money. Very impractical. The mileage it gets must be awful, especially in a city like London. The gas prices over there are pretty steep."

"But mainly he takes cabs."

"He can afford it. It probably makes sense. Parking a car in the financial district must be costly, too, and the cabs in London are good." He looked up. "You know that. You've been to London a lot."

"Some," Jack agreed. "Nice city, nice people." He didn't have to add that a protective detail of Secret Service agents and local cops didn't hurt much. "Any further thoughts on our friend Sali?"

"I need to go over the data more closely, but like I said, he sure acts like a player. If he was a New York Mafia subject, I'd figure him for an apprentice consiglieri."

Jack nearly gagged on his cream soda. "That high up?"

"Golden Rule, Jack. He who has the gold makes the rules. Sali has access to a ton of money. His family's richer than you appreciate. We're talking four or five billion dollars here."

"That much?" Ryan was surprised.

"Take another look at the money accounts he's learning to manage. He hasn't played with as much as fifteen percent of it. His father probably limits what he's allowed to do. He's in the capital-preservation business, remember. The guy who owns the money, his father, won't hand him the whole pile to play with, regardless of his educational background. In the money business, it's what you learn *after* you hang your degrees on the wall that really matters. The boy shows promise, but he's still following his zipper everywhere he goes. That's not an unusual thing for a rich young kid, but if you have a few gigabucks in your wallet, you want to keep your boy on a leash. Besides, what he appears to be funding—well, what we suspect he's funding—isn't really capital-intensive. You spotted some trades on the margins. That was pretty smart. Did you notice that when he flies home to Saudi, he charters a G-V?"

"Uh, no," Jack admitted. "I didn't look into that. I just figured he flies first-class everywhere."

"He does, same way you and your father used to. *Real* first class. Jack, nothing is too small to check out."

"What do you think of his credit card usage?"

"Entirely routine, but that's noteworthy even so. He could charge *anything* if he wanted to, but he seems to pay cash for a lot of expenditures—and he spends *less* cash than he converts to his own use. Like with those hookers. The Saudis don't care about that, so he's paying cash there because he *wants* to, not because he *has* to. He's trying to keep some parts of his life covert for reasons not immediately apparent. Maybe just practice. I would not be surprised to find out that he's got more credit cards than the ones we know about—unused accounts. I'll be riffling through his bank accounts later today. He doesn't really know about how to be covert yet. Too young, too inexperienced, no formal training. But, yes, I think he's a player, hoping to move into the big leagues pretty soon. The young and rich are not known for their patience," Cunningham concluded.

I should have guessed that myself, Junior told himself. *I need to think this stuff through better. Another important lesson. Nothing too small to be checked out. What sort of guy are we dealing with? How does he see the world? How does he want to change the world?* His father had always told him how important it was to look at the world through the eyes of your adversary, to crawl inside his brain and *then* look out at the world.

Sali is a guy driven by his passions in women—but was there more to it? Was he hiring the hookers because they were good screws or because he was screwing the enemy? The Islamic world thought of America and the U.K. as essentially the same enemy. Same language, same arrogance, damned sure the same military, since the Brits and Americans cooperated so closely on so many things. That was worth considering. *Make no assumptions without looking out through his eyeballs.* Not a bad lesson for one lunchtime.

ROANOKE SLID off to their right. Both sides of I-81 were composed of rolling green hills, mostly farms, many of them dairy farms, judging from all the cows. Green highway signs telling of roads that, for his purpose, led nowhere. And more of the white-painted boxy churches. They passed school buses, but no police cars. He'd heard that some American states put highway police in ordinary-looking cars, ones not very different from his own, but probably with additional radio antennas. He wondered if the drivers wore cowboy hats here. That'd be decidedly out of place, even in an area with so many cows. "The Cow," the Second Sura of the Koran, he thought. If Allah tells you to slaughter a cow, you must slaughter it without asking too many questions. Not an old cow, nor a young one, just a cow pleasing to the Lord. Were not all sacrifices pleasing to Allah, so long as they were not sacrifices founded in conceit? Surely they were, if offered in the humility of the Faithful, for Allah welcomed and was pleased by the offerings of the truly Faithful.

Yes.

And he and his friends would make more sacrifices by slaughtering the unbelievers.

Yes.

Then he saw a sign for INTERSTATE HIGHWAY 64—but it was to the west,

the wrong one. They had to go east, to cross the eastern mountains. Mustafa closed his eyes and remembered the map he'd looked at so many times. North for about an hour, then east. Yes.

"BRIAN, THOSE shoes are going to come apart in the next few days."

"Hey, Dom, I ran my first four-and-a-half-minute mile in these," the Marine objected. You remembered and treasured such moments.

"Maybe so, but next time you try that, they're going to come apart and beat the shit out of your ankle."

"Think so? Bet you a buck you're wrong."

"You're on," Dominic said at once. They shook hands formally on the wager.

"They look pretty scruffy to me, too," Alexander observed.

"You want me to buy new T-shirts, too, Mom?"

"They'll self-destruct in another month," Dominic thought aloud.

"Oh, yeah! Well, I outshot your ass with my Beretta this morning."

"Luck happens," Enzo sniffed. "See if you can make it two in a row."

"I'll put five bucks on that."

"Deal." Another handshake. "I could get rich this way," Dominic said. Then it was time to think about dinner. Veal Piccata tonight. He had a thing for good veal, and the local stores had nice stuff. Pity about the calf, but he hadn't been the one to cut its throat.

THERE: I-64, next exit. Mustafa was tired enough that he might have given the driving over to Abdullah, but he wanted to finish himself, and he figured he could handle another hour. They were heading for a pass in the next range of mountains. Traffic was heavy, but in the other direction. They climbed up the highway toward . . . yes, there it was, a shallow mountain pass with a hotel on the south side—and then out onto a vista of a most pleasant valley to the south. A sign proclaimed its name, but the letters were too confusing for him to get them into his head as a coherent word. He did take in the view, off to his right. Paradise itself could scarcely have been more lovely—there was even a place to pull over, get out and take in the sight. But, of course, they had not the time. It was fitting that the drive was gently downhill, and it changed his mood entirely. Less than an hour to go. One more smoke to celebrate the timing. In the back, Rafi and Zuhayr were awake again, taking in the scenery. It would be their last such opportunity.

One day of rest and reconnaissance—time to coordinate via e-mail with their three other teams—and then they could accomplish their mission. That would be followed by Allah's Own Embrace. A very happy thought.

CHAPTER 13

MEETING PLACE

AFTER TWO thousand–plus miles of driving, the arrival was entirely anticlimactic. Not a kilometer off Interstate 64 was a Holiday Inn Express, which looked satisfactory, especially since there was a Roy Rogers immediately next door and a Dunkin' Donuts not a hundred meters uphill. Mustafa walked in and took two connecting rooms, paying with his Visa card out of the Liechtenstein bank. Tomorrow they'd go exploring, but for now all that beckoned was sleep. Even food was not important at this moment. He moved the car to the first-floor rooms he'd just leased, and switched off the engine. Rafi and Zuhayr unlocked the doors, then came back to open the trunk. They took their few bags in, and under them the four submachine guns still wrapped in thick, cheap blankets.

"We are here, comrades," Mustafa announced, entering the room. It was an entirely ordinary motel, not the more luxurious hotels they'd become accustomed to. They had one bathroom and a small TV each. The connecting door was opened. Mustafa allowed himself to fall backward on his bed, a double, but all for him. Some things were left to be done, however.

"Comrades, the guns must always be hidden, and the shades drawn *at all times.* We've come too far for foolish risks," he warned them. "This city has a police force, and do not think they are fools. We journey to Paradise at a time of our choosing, not at a time determined by an error. Remember that." And then he sat up, and removed his shoes. He thought about a shower, but he was too tired for that, and tomorrow would come soon enough.

"Which way to Mecca?" Rafi asked.

Mustafa had to think about that for a second, divining the direct line to Mecca and to the city's centerpiece, the Kaaba stone, the very center of the Islamic universe, to which they directed the Salat, verses from the Holy Koran said five times per day, recited from the knees.

"That way," he said, pointing southeast, on a line that transected northern Africa on its way to that holiest of Holy Places.

Rafi unrolled his prayer rug, and went to his knees. He was late in his prayers, but he had not forgotten his religious duty.

For his own part, Mustafa whispered to himself, "lest it be forgotten," in the hope that Allah would forgive him in his current state of fatigue. But was not Allah infinitely merciful? And besides, this was hardly a great sin. Mustafa removed his socks, and lay back in the bed, where sleep found him in less than a minute.

In the next room over, Abdullah finished his own Salat, and then plugged his computer into the side of the telephone. He dialed up an 800 number and

heard the warbling screech as his computer linked up with the network. In another few seconds, he learned that he had mail. Three letters, plus the usual trash. The e-mails he downloaded and saved, and then he logged off, having been online a mere fifteen seconds, another security measure they'd all been briefed on.

* * *

WHAT ABDULLAH didn't know was that one of the four accounts had been intercepted and partially decrypted by the National Security Agency. When his account—identified only by a partial word and some numbers—tapped into Saeed's, it was also identified, but only as a recipient, not an originator.

Saeed's team had been the first to arrive at its destination of Colorado Springs, Colorado—the city was identified only by a code name—and was comfortably camped out in a motel ten kilometers from its objective. Sabawi, the Iraqi, was in Des Moines, Iowa, and Mehdi in Provo, Utah. Both of those teams were also in place and ready for the operation to commence. Less than thirty-six hours to execute their mission.

He'd let Mustafa do the replies. The reply was, in fact, already programmed: "190, 2" designating the 190th verse of the Second Sura. Not exactly a battle cry, but rather an affirmation of the Faith that had brought them here. The meaning was: *Proceed with your mission.*

BRIAN AND Dominic were watching the History Channel on their cable system, something about Hitler and the Holocaust. It had been studied so much you'd think it'd defy efforts to find something new, yet somehow historians managed every so often. Some of it was probably because of the voluminous records the Germans had left behind in the Hartz Mountain caves, which would probably be the subject of scholarly study for the next few centuries, as people continued to try to discern the thought processes of the human monsters who'd first envisioned and then committed such crimes.

"Brian," Dominic asked, "what do you make of this stuff?"

"One pistol shot could have prevented it, I suppose. Problem is, nobody can see that far into the future—not even gypsy fortune-tellers. Hell, Adolf whacked a bunch of them, too. Why didn't *they* get the hell out of town?"

"You know, Hitler lived most of his life with only one bodyguard. In Berlin, he lived in a second-floor apartment, with a downstairs entrance, right? He had one SS troop, probably not even a sergeant, guarding the door. Pop him, open the door, go upstairs, and waste the motherfucker. Would have saved a lot of lives, bro," Dominic concluded, reaching for his white wine.

"Damn. You sure about that?"

"The Secret Service teaches that. They send one of their instructors down to Quantico to lecture every class on security issues. The fact surprised us, too. A lot of questions on it. The guy said you could walk right past the SS guard on your way to the liquor store, like. *Easy* hit, man. Easier'n hell. The thinking is that Adolf thought he was immortal, that there wasn't a bullet anywhere with his name on it. Hey, we had a President whacked on a train platform waiting

for his train to arrive. Which one was it? Chester Arthur, I think. McKinley got shot by a guy who walked right up to him with a bandage around his hand. I guess people were a little careless back then."

"Damn. It'd make our job a lot easier, but I'd still prefer a rifle from five hundred meters or so."

"No sense of adventure, Aldo?"

"Ain't nobody paying me enough money to play kamikaze, Enzo. No future in that, y'know?"

"What about those suicide bombers over in the Mideast?"

"Different culture, man. Don't you remember from second grade? You can't commit suicide because it's a mortal sin and you can't go to confession after. Sister Frances Mary made that pretty clear, I thought."

Dominic laughed. "Damn, haven't thought of her in a while, but she always thought you were the cat's ass."

"That's 'cause I didn't screw around in class like you did."

"What about in the Marines?"

"Screwing around? The sergeants took care of that before it came to my attention. *Nobody* messed with Gunny Sullivan, not even Colonel Winston." He looked at the TV for another minute or so. "You know, Enzo, maybe there are times when one bullet can prevent a lot of grief. That Hitler needed his ticket punched. But even trained military officers couldn't bring it off."

"The guy who placed the bomb just assumed that everybody in the building had to be dead, without going back inside to make sure. They say it every day in the FBI Academy, bro—assumptions are the mother of all fuckups."

"You want to make sure, yeah. Anything worth shooting is worth shooting twice."

"Amen," Dominic agreed.

IT HAD gotten to the point that Jack Ryan, Jr., woke up to the morning news on NPR expecting to hear about something dreadful. He guessed that came from seeing so much raw intelligence information, but without the judgment to know what was hot and what was not.

But though he did not know all that much, what he did know was more than a little worrying. He'd become fixated by Uda bin Sali—probably because Sali was the only "player" he knew much about. And that had to be because Sali was his personal case study. He had to figure this bird out, because if he didn't he'd be . . . encouraged to seek other employment . . . ? He hadn't seen that possibility until now, which by itself did not speak well for his future in the spook business. Of course, his father had taken a long time to find something he was good at—nine years, in fact, after graduating Boston College—and he himself had not yet lived one whole year past his Georgetown sheepskin. So, would he make the grade at The Campus? He was about the youngest person there. Even the secretary pool was composed of women older than he was. Damn, *that* was an entirely new thought.

Sali *was* a test for him, and probably a very important one. Did that mean that Tony Wills already had Sali figured out, and he was off chasing data already fully analyzed? Or did it mean that he had to make his case and sell it after he'd reached his own conclusions? It was a big thought for standing in

front of the bathroom mirror with his Norelco. This wasn't school anymore. A failing grade here meant failing—life? No, not that bad, but not good, either. Something to think about with coffee and CNN in the kitchen.

FOR BREAKFAST, Zuhayr walked up the hill, where he purchased two dozen doughnuts and four large coffees. America was such a crazy country. So many natural riches—trees, rivers, magnificent roads, incredible prosperity—but all in the service of idolaters. And here he was, drinking their coffee and eating their doughnuts. Truly, the world was mad, and if it ran on any plan at all, it was Allah's Own Plan, and not something even for the Faithful to understand. They just had to obey that which was written. On returning to the motel, he found both TVs tuned in to the news—CNN, the global news network—the Jewish-oriented one, that is. Such a pity that no Americans watched Al-Jazeera, which at least tried to speak to Arabs, though to his eyes it had already caught the American disease.

"Food," Zuhayr announced. "And drink." One box of doughnuts went into his room, and the other to Mustafa, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes after eleven hours of snoring slumber.

"How did you sleep, my brother?" Abdullah asked the team leader.

"It was a blessed experience, but my legs are still stiff." His hand shot out for the large cup of coffee, and he snatched a maple-frosted doughnut from the box, downing half of it in one monstrous bite. He rubbed his eyes and looked at the TV to see what was happening in the world this day. The Israeli police had shot and killed another holy martyr before he'd been able to trigger his bodysuit of Semtex.

"DUMB FUCK," Brian observed. "How hard can it be to pull a string?"

"I wonder how the Israelis twigged to him. You gotta figure they have paid informants inside that Hamas bunch. This has got to be a code-worded Major Case for their police, lots of resources assigned, plus help from their spook shops."

"They torture people, too, don't they?"

Dominic nodded after a second's consideration. "Yeah, supposedly it's controlled by their court system and all that, but they interrogate a little more vigorously than we do."

"Does it work?"

"We talked that one around at the Academy. You put a bowie knife to somebody's dick, chances are he'll see the wisdom of singing, but it's not something anybody wanted to think much about. I mean, yeah, in the abstract it can even seem funny, but doing it yourself—probably not very palatable, y'know? The other question is, how much good information does it really generate? The guy's just as likely to say anything to get the knife away from his little friend, make the pain stop, whatever. Crooks can be really good liars unless you know more than they do. Anyway, we can't do it. You know, the Constitution and all that. You can threaten them with bad jail time, and scream at them, but even then there're lines you can't cross."

"They sing anyway?"

"Mostly. Interrogation's an art form. Some guys are really good at it. I never

really had much of a chance to learn it, but I did see some guys play the game. The real trick is to develop a rapport with the mutt, saying stuff like, yeah, that nasty little girl really asked for it, didn't she? Makes you want to puke afterward, but the name of the game is getting the bastard to fess up. After he gets into the joint, his neighbors will hassle him a lot worse than I ever would. One thing you don't want to be in a prison is a child abuser."

"I believe it, Enzo. That friend of yours in Alabama, maybe you did him a favor."

"Depends on if you believe in hell or not," Dominic responded. He had his own thoughts about that.

WILLS WAS early this morning. Jack saw him on his workstation when he came in. "You beat me in, for once."

"My wife's car came back from the shop. Now she can take the kids to school for a change," he explained. "Check the feed from Meade," he directed.

Jack lit up his computer, sat through the start-up procedures, and typed in his personal encryption code to access the interagency traffic download file from the downstairs computer room.

The top of the electronic pile was a FLASH-priority dispatch from NSA Fort Meade to CIA, *and* FBI, *and* Homeland Security, one of whom would have surely briefed the President on it this morning. Strangely, there was almost nothing to it, just a numeric message, a set of numbers.

"So?" Junior asked.

"So, it might be a passage from the Koran. The Koran has a hundred fourteen suras—chapters—with a variable number of verses. If this is such a reference, it's a verse with nothing particularly dramatic in it. Scroll down and see for yourself."

Jack clicked his mouse. "That's all?"

Woods nodded. "That's all, but the thinking at Meade is that such a dull message is likely to denote something else—something important. Spooks tend to use a lot of reverse English when they hit the cue ball."

"Well, *duh*! You're telling me that because it appears to have no importance to it, it may be important? Hell, Tony, you can make that observation about anything! What else do they know? The network, where the guy logged on from, that sort of thing?"

"It's a European network, privately owned, with 800 numbers all over the world, and we know some bad guys have used it. You can't tell where the members log in from."

"Okay, so, first, we do not know if the message has any significance. Second, we do not know where the message originated. Third, we do not have any way of knowing who's read it or where the hell they are. The short version is that we don't know shit, but everybody's getting in a flutter about it. What else? The originator, what do we know about him?"

"He—or she, for all we know—is thought to be a possible player."

"What team?"

"Guess. The NSA profilers say that this guy's syntax seems to indicate Arabic as a first language—based on previous traffic. The shrinks at CIA agree. They've copied messages from this bird before. He says nasty things to nasty

people on occasion, and they're time-linked with some other very bad things."

"Is it possible that he's making some signal related to the bomber the Israeli police bagged earlier today?"

"Possible, yes, but not terribly likely. The originator isn't linked to Hamas, as far as we know."

"But we don't really know, do we?"

"With these guys you can't be totally sure about anything."

"So, we're back to where we started. Some people are running around over something they don't really know shit about."

"That's the problem. In these bureaucracies it's better to cry wolf and be wrong than to have your mouth shut when the big gray critter runs off with a sheep in his mouth."

Ryan sat back in his chair. "Tony, how many years were you at Langley?"

"A few," Wills answered.

"How the hell did you stand it?"

The senior analyst shrugged. "Sometimes I wonder."

Jack turned back to his computer to scan the rest of the morning's message traffic. He decided to see if Sali had been doing anything unusual over the last few days, just to cover his own ass, and in thinking that, John Patrick Ryan, Jr., started thinking like a bureaucrat, without even knowing it.

"TOMORROW IT'S going to be a little different," Pete told the twins. "Michelle is your target, but this time she'll be disguised. Your mission is to ID her and track her to her destination. Oh, did I tell you, she's really good at disguises."

"She's going to take an invisible pill, right?" Brian asked.

"That's *her* mission," Alexander elucidated.

"You going to issue us magic glasses to see through the makeup?"

"Not even if we had any—which we don't."

"Some pal you are," Dominic observed coldly.

BY ELEVEN that morning, it was time to scout the objective.

Conveniently located just a quarter mile north on U.S. Route 29, the Charlottesville Fashion Square Mall was a medium-sized shopping mall that catered to a largely upscale clientele of local gentry and students at the nearby University of Virginia. It was anchored by a JCPenney at one end and a Sears at the other, with Belk's men's and women's stores in the middle. Unexpectedly, there was no food court per se—whoever had done the reconnaissance had been sloppy. A disappointment, but not all that uncommon. The advance teams the organization employed were often mere stringers, for whom missions of this sort were something of a lark. But, Mustafa saw on going in, it would do little harm.

A central courtyard opened into all four of the mall's main corridors. An information stand even supplied diagrams of the mall, showing store locations. Mustafa looked one over. A six-pointed Star of David leaped off the page at his eyes. A synagogue, here? Was *that* possible? He walked down to see, halfway hoping that it was indeed possible.

But it wasn't. It was, rather, the mall's security office, where sat a male

employee in a uniform of light blue shirt and dark blue pants. On inspection, the man did not have a gun belt. And that was good. He *did* have a phone, which would undoubtedly call the local police. So, this black man would have to be the first. With that decided, Mustafa reversed directions, walked past the restrooms and the Coke machine, and turned right, away from the men's store.

This was a fine target place, he saw. Only three main entrances, and a clear field of fire from the Central Court. The individual stores were mainly rectangular, with open access from the corridors. On the following day, at about this time, it would be even more crowded. He estimated two hundred people in his immediate sight, and though he'd hoped all the way into this city that they'd have the chance to kill perhaps a thousand, anything over two hundred would be a victory of no small dimension. There were all manner of stores here, and unlike Saudi malls, men and women shopped on the same floor. Many children, too. There were four stores listed as specialty children's goods—and even a Disney Store! That he had not expected, and to attack one of America's most treasured icons would be sweet indeed.

Rafi appeared at his side. "Well?"

"It could be a larger target, but the arrangement is nearly perfect for us. All on one level," Mustafa replied quietly.

"Allah is beneficent as always, my friend," Rafi said, unable to conceal his enthusiasm.

People circulated about. Many young women were pushing their little ones about in strollers—he saw that you could rent them from a stand just by the hair salon.

There was one purchase he had to make. He accomplished it in the Radio Shack next to a Zales Jewelers. Four portable radios and batteries, for which he paid in cash, and for which he got a brief lecture on how the radios worked.

All in all, it could have been better, in a theoretical sense, but it wasn't supposed to be a busy city street. Besides, there would be policemen on the street with guns who would interfere with their mission. So, as always in life, you measured the bitter against the sweet, and here there was much of the sweet for all of them to taste. The four of them all got pretzels from Auntie Anne's and headed out past the JCPenney back to their car. Formal planning would take place at their motel rooms, with more doughnuts and coffee.

JERRY ROUNDS'S official job was as head of strategic planning for The Campus's white side. This job he performed fairly well—he might have been the very Wolf of Wall Street had he not chosen to become an Air Force intelligence officer on leaving the University of Pennsylvania. The service had even paid for his master's degree from the Wharton School of Business before he'd made full-bull colonel. This had given him an unexpected master's degree to hang on the wall, which also gave him a superb excuse to be in the trading business. It was even a fun diversion for the former chief USAF analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency's headquarters building at Bolling AFB in Washington. But along the way he'd found that being an "unrated weenie"—he'd never worn the silver wings of a USAF aviator—didn't compensate for being a second-class citizen in a service completely run by those who did poke

holes in the sky, even if he were smarter than twenty of them in the same room. Coming to The Campus had seriously broadened his horizons in a lot of ways.

"What is it, Jerry?" Hendley asked.

"The folks at Meade and over across the river just got excited about something," Rounds replied, handing some papers across.

The former senator read the traffic for a minute or so and handed it all back. In a moment, he knew he'd seen most of it before. "So?"

"So, this time they may be right, boss. I've been keeping an eye on the background stuff. The thing is, we have a combination of reduced message traffic from known players, and then this flies over the transom. I spent my life in DIA looking at coincidences. This here's one of them."

"Okay, what are they doing about it?"

"Airport security is going to be a little tighter starting today. The FBI is going to set people at some departure gates."

"Nothing on TV about it?"

"Well, the boys and girls at Homeland Security may have gotten a little smarter about advertising. It's counter-productive. You don't catch a rat by shouting at him. You do it by showing him what he wants to see, and then breaking his goddamned neck."

Or maybe by having a cat spring on him unexpectedly, Hendley didn't say. But that was a harder mission.

"Any ideas for us?" he asked instead.

"Not at the moment. It's like seeing a front move in. There may be heavy rain and hail in it, but there's no convenient way to stop it."

"Jerry, how good is our data on the planning guys, the ones who give the orders?"

"Some of it's pretty good. But it's the people who convey the orders, not the ones who originate them."

"And if they drop off the table?"

Rounds nodded immediate agreement. "Now you're talking, boss. Then the real big shots might poke their heads up out of their holes. Especially if they don't know that storm's coming in."

"For now, what's the biggest threat?"

"The FBI is thinking car bombs, or maybe somebody with a C-4 overcoat, like in Israel. It's possible, but from an operational point of view, I'm not so sure." Round sat down in the offered chair. "It's one thing to give the guy his explosives package and put him on a city bus for the ride to his objective, but, as applied to us, it's more complicated. Bring the bomber here, get him outfitted—which means having the explosives in place, which is a further complication—*then* getting him familiar with the objective, *then* getting him there. The bomber is *then* expected to maintain his motivation a long way from his support network. A lot of things can go wrong, and that's why black operations are kept as simple as possible. Why go out of your way to purchase trouble?"

"Jerry, how many hard targets do we have?" Hendley asked.

"Total? Six or so. Of those, four are real, no-shit targets."

"Can you get me locations and profiles?"

"Any time you say."

"Monday." No sense thinking about it over the weekend. He had two days of riding all planned out. He was entitled to a couple of days off once in a while.

"Roger that, boss." Rounds stood and headed out. Then he stopped at the door. "Oh, there's a guy at Morgan and Steel, bond department. He's a crook. He's playing fast and very loose with some client money, about one-fifty worth." By which he meant a hundred and fifty million dollars of other people's money.

"Anybody on to him?"

"Nope, I ID'd this guy on my own. Met him two months ago up in New York, and he didn't sound quite right, and so I put a watch on his personal computer. Want to see his notes?"

"Not our job, Jerry."

"I know, I shorted our business with him to make sure he didn't dick with our funds, but I think he knows it's time to leave town, like maybe a trip overseas, one-way ticket. Somebody ought to have a look. Maybe Gus Werner?"

"I'll have to think about that. Thanks for the heads-up."

"Roger that." And Rounds disappeared out the door.

"SO, WE just try to sneak up on her without being noticed, right?" Brian asked.

"That's the mission," Pete agreed.

"How close?"

"Close as you can get."

"You mean close enough to put one in the back of her head?" the Marine asked.

"Close enough to see her earrings," Alexander decided was the most polite way of putting it. It was even accurate, since Mrs. Peters wore her hair fairly long.

"So, not to shoot her in the head, but to cut her throat?" Brian pressed the question.

"Look, Brian, you can put it any way you want. Close enough to touch her, okay?"

"Okay, just so's I understand," Brian said. "We have to wear our fanny packs?"

"Yes," Alexander replied, though it wasn't true. Brian was being a pain in the ass again. Who'd ever heard of a Marine with conscience attacks?

"It'll make us easier to spot," Dominic objected.

"So, disguise it somehow. Be creative," the training officer suggested a little testily.

"When do we find out what all of this is for, exactly?" Brian asked.

"Soon."

"You keep saying that, man."

"Look, you can drive back to North Carolina whenever you want."

"I've thought about it," Brian told him.

"Tomorrow's Friday. Think about it over this weekend, okay?"

"Fair enough." Brian backed off. The tone of the interplay had gotten a little

uglier than he'd actually wanted. It was time to back down. He didn't dislike Pete at all. It was the not knowing, and his distaste for what it *looked* like. Especially with a woman as the target. Hurting women was not part of his creed. Or children, which was what had set his brother off—not that Brian disapproved. He wondered briefly if he might have done the same thing, and told himself, sure, for a kid, but without being quite sure. When dinner was finished, the twins handled the cleanup, then settled in front of the downstairs TV for some drinks and the History Channel.

IT WAS much the same the next state up, with Jack Ryan, Jr., drinking a rum and Coke and flipping back and forth between History and History International, with an occasional sojourn to Biography, which was showing a two-hour look at Joseph Stalin. *That guy,* Junior thought, *was one seriously cold motherfucker.* Forcing one of his own confidants to sign the imprisonment order for his own wife. Damn. But how did that physically unprepossessing man exercise such control over people who were his own peers? What was the power he'd wielded over others? Where had it come from? How had he maintained it? Jack's own father had been a man of considerable power, but he had *never* dominated people in anything like that way. Probably never even thought about it, much less killing people for what amounted to the fun of it. Who were these people? Did they still exist?

Well, they had to. The one thing that never changed in the world was human nature. The cruel and the brutal still existed. Perhaps society no longer encouraged them as they had in, say, the Roman Empire. The gladiatorial games had trained people to accept and even to be entertained by violent death. And the dark truth of the matter was that if Jack had been given access to a time machine, he might—he *would*—have journeyed back to the Flavian Amphitheater to see it, just once. But that was human curiosity, not blood lust. Just a chance to gain historical knowledge, to see and *read* a culture connected to, yet different from, his own. He might even toss his cookies watching .. . or maybe not. Maybe his curiosity was that strong. But for damned sure, if he ever went back, he'd take a friend along for the ride. Like the Beretta .45 he'd learned to shoot with Mike Brennan. He wondered how many others might have taken the trip. Probably quite a few. Men. Not women. Women would have needed a lot of societal conditioning to want to look at that. But men? Men grew up on movies like *Silverado* and *Saving Private Ryan.* Men wanted to know how well they might have handled such things. So, no, human nature didn't really change. Society tended to stomp on the cruel ones, and since man was a creature of reason, most people shied away from behavior that could put them in prison or the death chamber. So, man *could* learn over time, but the basic drives probably did not, and so you fed the nasty little beast with fantasies, books and movies, and dreams, thoughts that walked through your consciousness while waiting for sleep to come. Maybe cops had a better time. *They* could exercise the little critter by handling those who stepped over the line. There was probably satisfaction in that, because you got both to feed the critter and to protect the society.

But if the beast still lived in the hearts of men, somewhere there would be men who would use whatever talents they had to—not so much control it as

harness it to their own will, to use it as a tool in their personal quest for power. Such men were called Bad Guys. The unsuccessful ones were called sociopaths. The successful ones were called . . . Presidents.

Where did all this leave him? Jack Jr. wondered. He was still a kid, after all, even though he denied it and as a matter of law he was a grown man. Did a grown man stop growing? Stop wondering and asking questions? Stop seeking after information—or, as he thought of it, *truth*?

But once you had *truth,* what in hell did you do with it? He didn't know that one yet. Maybe it was just one more thing to learn. Surely he had the same drive to learn as his father, else why was he watching this program instead of some mindless sitcom? Maybe he'd buy a book on Stalin and Hitler. Historians were always digging into old records. Problem was, then they applied their own personal ideas to what they found. He probably really needed a shrink to look things over. They had their ideological prejudices, too, but at least there was a patina of professionalism to their thought processes. It annoyed Junior that he went to sleep every night with thoughts unresolved and truths unfound. But that, he figured, was the whole point to this thing called life.

THEY WERE all praying. All quietly. Abdullah was murmuring through the words of his Koran. Mustafa was running through the same book in the sanctity of his own mind—not all of it, of course, just the parts that supported his mission for the coming day. To be brave, to remember their Holy Mission, to accomplish it without mercy. Mercy was Allah's business.

What if we survive? he asked himself, and was surprised at the thought.

They had a plan for this, of course. They'd drive back west and try to find their way back to Mexico, and then fly back home—to be welcomed with great rejoicing by their other comrades. In truth, he didn't expect this to happen, but hope was something no man sets completely aside, and however Paradise might beckon, life on earth was all that he actually knew.

That thought startled him, too. Did he just express doubt in his Faith? No, not that. Not that, exactly. Just a random thought. *There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His messenger,* he chanted in his own mind, expressing the *Shahada,* which was the very foundation of Islam. No, he couldn't deny his Faith now. His Faith had brought him across the world, to the very location of his martyrdom. His Faith had raised and nurtured his life, through childhood, through the anger of his father, into the very home of the infidels who spat upon Islam and nurtured the Israelis, there to affirm his Faith with his life. And his death, probably. Almost certainly, unless Allah Himself desired otherwise. Because all things in life were written by Allah's Own Hand . . .

THE ALARM went off just before six. Brian knocked on his brother's door.

"Wake up, G-man. We're wasting sunlight."

"Is that a fact?" Dominic observed from the far end of the corridor. "Beat ya, Aldo!" Which was a first.

"Then let's get it done, Enzo," Brian responded, and together they headed outside. An hour and a quarter later, they were back and at the breakfast table.

"It's a good day to be alive," Brian observed with his first sip of coffee.

"The Marine Corps must brainwash your ass, bro," Dominic observed, with a sip of his own.

"No, the endorphins just kick in. That's how the human body lies to itself."

"You grow out of it," Alexander told them. "All ready for your little field exercise?"

"Yes, Sergeant Major," Brian replied with a smile. "We get to whack Michelle for lunch."

"Only if you can track her without being spotted."

"It would be easier in the woods, you know. I'm trained in that particular skill."

"Brian, what do you think we've been doing here?" Pete inquired gently.

"Oh, is that what it is?"

"First get new shoes," Dominic advised.

"Yeah, I know. These are just about dead." The canvas uppers were separating from the rubber bottoms, and the bottoms were pretty shot, too. He hated doing it. He'd put a lot of miles in his running shoes, and a man can be sentimental about such things, which was frequently a matter of annoyance to his spouse.

"We'll hit the mall early. Foot Locker right next to the place they rent strollers," Dom reminded his brother.

"Yeah, I know. Okay, Pete, any advice on Michelle?" Brian asked. "You know, if we're out on a mission, we usually get a mission brief."

"That's a fair question, Captain. I'd suggest you look for her at Victoria's Secret, just across from The Gap. If you get close enough without being spotted, you win. If she says your name when you're more than ten feet away, you lose."

"This isn't strictly fair," Dominic pointed out. "She knows what we look like—especially height and weight. A real bad guy wouldn't have that information in his pocket. You can fake being taller, but not being shorter."

"And my ankles can't take high heels, y'know?" Brian added.

"You don't have the legs for it anyway, Aldo," Alexander needled. "Who ever said this job was easy?"

Except we still don't know what the fucking job is, Brian didn't respond. "Fair enough, we improvise, adapt, and overcome."

"Who are you now, Dirty Harry?" Dominic asked, finishing off his McMuffin.

"In the Corps, he's our favorite civilian, bro. Probably would have made a pretty good gunny."

"Especially with his .44 Smith."

"Kinda noisy for a handgun. Kinda tough on the hand, too. Except maybe the Auto-Mag. Ever shot one of those?"

"No, but I handled the one in the gun locker at Quantico. Damned thing ought to come with a trailer to haul it around with, but I bet it makes nice holes."

"Yeah, but if you want to conceal it, you better be Hulk Hogan."

"I hear that, Aldo." As a practical matter, the fanny packs they used didn't so much conceal a pistol as make it more convenient to carry. Any cop knew what it was on first sight, though few civilians recognized it. Both brothers

carried a loaded pistol and a spare magazine in their packs, when they wore them. Pete wanted them to do so today just to make it harder to track Michelle Peters without being spotted. Well, you expected such things of training officers, didn't you?

THE SAME day began five miles away at Holiday Inn Express, and on this day, unlike the others, they all unrolled their prayer rugs and, as one man, said their morning Salat for what they all expected to be the last time. It took but a few minutes and then they all washed, to purify themselves for their task. Zuhayr even took the time to shave around his new beard, neatly trimming the part he wanted to wear into eternity, until, when satisfied, he dressed.

It wasn't until they were completely ready that they realized it was hours short of the proper time. Abdullah walked up the hill to Dunkin' Donuts for breakfast and coffee, this time even returning with a newspaper, which circulated its way around both rooms while the men drank their coffee and smoked their cigarettes.

Fanatics they might seem to their enemies, but they remained human, and the tension of the moment was unpleasant, and getting only worse by the minute. The coffee only pumped more caffeine into their systems, making hands shake and eyes narrow on the TV news. They checked their watches every few seconds, willing unsuccessfully for the hands to turn faster around the dials, then drank more of the coffee.

"NOW WE'RE getting excited, too?" Jack asked Tony at The Campus. He gestured at his workstation. "What's here that I don't see, buddy?"

Wills rocked back in his chair. "It's a combination of things. Maybe it's real. Maybe it's just a coincidence. Maybe it's just a construct in the minds of professional analysts. You know how you tell what it really is?"

"Wait a week, look back, and see if anything actually happened?"

That was enough to make Tony Wills laugh. "Junior, you *are* learning the spook business. Jesus, I've seen more predictions go wrong in the intelligence business than they have on Preakness day at Pimlico. You see, unless you do know, you just *don't* know, but people in the business don't like to think that way."

"I remember when I was a kid, Dad used to get in shitty moods sometimes —"

"He was in CIA during the Cold War. The big shots were always asking for predictions that nobody could really give—at least not that meant anything. Your father was usually the guy who said, 'Wait awhile and you'll see for yourselves,' and that *really* pissed them off, but, you know, he was usually right, and there weren't any disasters on his watch."

"Will I ever be that good?"

"It's a lot to hope for, kid, but you never know. You're lucky to be here. At least the Senator knows what 'don't know' means. It means his people are honest, and they know they're not God."

"Yeah, I remember that from the White House. It always amazed me how many people in D.C. thought they really were."

DOMINIC DID the driving. It was a pleasant three or four miles down the hillside into town.

"Victoria's Secret? Suppose we'll bag her buying a nightie?" Brian wondered.

"We can only dream," Dominic said, turning left onto Rio Road. "We're early. Get your shoes first?"

"Makes sense. Park by the Belk's men's store."

"Roger that, Skipper."

* * *

"IS IT time?" Rafi asked. He'd done so three times in the past thirty minutes.

Mustafa checked his watch: 11:48. Close enough. He nodded.

"My friends, pack your things."

Their weapons were not loaded, but placed inside shopping bags. Assembled, they were too bulky and too obvious. Each man had twelve loaded magazines, with thirty rounds each, taped together in six pairs. Every weapon had a large sound suppressor tapped to screw onto the barrel. The purpose of these wasn't so much silence as control. He remembered what Juan had told him back in New Mexico. These weapons tended to jerk off target, climbing high and right. But he'd already gone over the weapons issues with his friends, and they all knew how to shoot, had all shot these things when they'd gotten them, and so they should know what to expect. Besides, they were going to what American soldiers called a target-rich environment.

Zuhayr and Abdullah carried out their travel things, locking them into the trunk of their rented Ford. On reflection, Mustafa decided to put the guns there, too, and so all four of them, each carrying his shopping bag, walked out to the car and set the bags standing up on the floor of the trunk. With that done, Mustafa got into the car, unthinkingly bringing the room key in his pocket. The drive was not a long one. The objective was already in sight.

The parking lot had the usual entrance points. He chose the northwest entrance, next to the Belk's men's store, where they could park close in. There, he switched off the engine and said his last prayer of the morning. The other three did much the same, getting out and walking to the back of the car. Mustafa popped the trunk. They were less than fifty meters from the door. Strictly speaking, there was little point in concealment, but Mustafa remembered the security desk. To delay police response, it had to begin there. So, he told them to keep their weapons in the shopping bags, and, bags dangling from their left hands, they walked to the door.

It was a Friday, not so busy a shopping day as Saturday, but close enough for their purposes. They came inside, passing the LensCrafters, which was busy —most of these people would probably escape unhurt, which was regrettable, but the main shopping area was still before them.

BRIAN AND Dominic were in the Foot Locker store, but Brian didn't see anything he liked. The Stride Rite next door was only for kids, so the twins proceeded forward, turning right. American Eagle Outfitters would doubtless

have something, maybe in leather, with high tops that would be easier on the ankles.

TURNING LEFT, Mustafa passed a toy store and various clothing businesses on his way to the Center Court. His eyes were sweeping the area rapidly. Perhaps a hundred people in his immediate sight, and judging by K*B Toys, the retail stores would all be well peopled. He passed the Sunglass Hut and turned right for the security office. It was conveniently located, just a few steps from the restrooms. All four went into the men's room together.

A few people had noted their presence—four men of identically exotic appearance was unusual—but an American shopping mall is the nearest thing to a zoo for humans, and it took a lot for people to take much note of anything unusual, much less dangerous.

In the men's room, they all took their weapons from the shopping bags and assembled them. Bolts were pulled back. Magazines were inserted in the pistol grips. Each man slipped the five magazine pairs into pants pockets. Two screwed the lengthy suppressors onto their weapons. Mustafa and Rafi did not, deciding after rapid reflection that they preferred to hear the noise.

"Are we ready?" the leader asked. The replies were only nods.

"Then we shall eat lamb together in Paradise. To your places. When I shoot first, you will all begin."

BRIAN WAS trying on some low-top leather boots. Not quite the same as the boots he wore in the Marine Corps, but they looked and felt comfortable, and they fitted his feet as though custom designed. "Not bad."

"Want me to box them up?" the clerk—a girl—asked.

Aldo thought for a moment and decided: "No, I'll break them in right away." He handed her his disreputable Nikes, which she put in the box for the boots, and led him to the cash register.

MUSTAFA WAS looking at his watch. He figured two minutes for his friends to get in place.

Rafi, Zuhayr, and Abdullah were walking into the main concourse of the mall now, holding their weapons low, and, amazingly, largely escaping notice from the shoppers who bustled along and minded their own business. When the sweep hand reached twelve, Mustafa took a deep breath and walked out of the men's room, and to the left.

The security guard was at his chest-high desk, reading a magazine, when he saw a shadow on the desktop. He looked up to see a man of olive complexion.

"Can I help you, sir?" he asked politely. He had no time to react after that.

"Allahu Ackbar!" was the shouted reply. Then the Ingram came up.

Mustafa held the trigger for but a second, but in that second, a total of nine bullets entered the black man's chest. The impact of nine bullets pushed him backward half a step, and he fell, dead, to the tiled floor.

"WHAT THE hell was that?" Brian instantly asked his brother—the only person nearby—as all heads turned to the left.

* * *

RAFI WAS only twenty-five feet to their right-front when he heard the gunfire, and it was time for him to start. He dropped into a half crouch and brought his Ingram up. He turned right toward the Victoria's Secret store. The customers there all had to be women of no morals even to look at such whorish clothing, and perhaps, he thought, some would serve him in Paradise. He just pointed and held the trigger down.

The sound was deafening, like a colossal zipper of explosions. Three women were immediately hit and went down at once. Others just stood still for a second, their eyes wide with shock and disbelief, not taking any action at all.

For his part, Rafi was disagreeably surprised by the fact that more than half of his rounds had not hit anything. The poorly balanced weapon had jerked in his hand, spraying the ceiling. The bolt closed on an empty chamber. He looked down at it in surprise, then ejected the first magazine and reversed it, slapping it back into the port and looking for more targets. They'd started to run now, and so he brought the Ingram to his shoulder.

"FUCK!" Brian said. *What the hell is going on?* his mind shouted.

"Fuckin' right, Aldo." Dominic swiveled his fanny pack to the front of his belly and jerked at the string that opened the two-zipper closure. A second later, his Smith & Wesson was in his hands. "Cover my ass!" he commanded his brother. The shooter with the SMG was a bare twenty feet away, on the other side of a jewelry kiosk, facing away, but this wasn't Dodge City, there were no rules about facing down a criminal.

Dominic fell to one knee, and bringing the automatic up in both hands, he loosed two ten-millimeter hollow points into the center of the man's back, and then one more into the center of the back of his head. His target dropped straight down, and judging by the red explosion from the third shot, wouldn't be doing much else. The FBI agent jumped to the prostrate body and kicked the gun away. He noted immediately what it was, and then he saw that the body had extra magazines in its pockets. The immediate thought was *Oh, shit!* Then he heard the crackling roar of more gunfire to his left.

"More of 'em, Enzo!" Brian said, right at his brother's side, his Beretta in his right hand. "This one's all gone. Any ideas?"

"Follow me, cover my ass!"

MUSTAFA FOUND himself in a low-end jewelry store. There were six women in view, in front of and behind the counter. He lowered his weapon to his hip and fired, emptying his first magazine into them and feeling the momentary satisfaction of seeing them fall. When the gun stopped shooting, he ejected the empty magazine and reversed it to reload, cocking the bolt as he did so.

BOTH TWINS came to their feet and started moving west, not fast, but not slow either, with Dominic in the lead and Brian two steps back, their eyes mainly going to where the noise was. All Brian's training came flooding back into his consciousness. *Use cover and concealment wherever possible. Locate and*

engage the enemy.

Just then a figure came left to right from Kay Jewelers, holding an SMG and spraying to his left into another jewelry store. The mall was a cacophony of screams and gunfire now, with people running blindly toward exits instead of first looking for where the danger was. A lot of those went down, mostly women. Some children.

Somehow this all passed the brothers by. They scarcely even saw the victims. There just wasn't time for that, and what training they'd had took over completely. The first target in view was the one standing there hosing the jewelry store.

"Going right," Brian said, darting that way with his head down but looking in the direction of his target.

* * *

BRIAN ALMOST died that way. Zuhayr was standing at Claire's Boutique, having just turned away from dumping a full magazine into it. Suddenly unsure of which way to go next, he turned left and saw a man with a pistol in his hand. He carefully shouldered his weapon and squeezed the trigger—

—two rounds fired off uselessly, then nothing. His first magazine had been expended, and it took two or three seconds for him to realize it. Then he ejected and reversed it, ramming it back into the bottom of his machine gun and looking back up—

—but the man was gone. Where? Without targets, he reversed direction and walked with a measured pace into the Belk's women's store.

BRIAN CROUCHED by the Sunglass Hut, peeking around the right side.

There, moving to the left. He brought his Beretta into his right hand and squeezed off one round—

—but it missed the head by a whisker when the man ducked.

"Fuck!" Brian then stood and put both hands on the pistol, leading just a hair and firing off four rounds. All four went into the thorax, below the shoulders.

MUSTAFA HEARD the noise but didn't feel the impacts. His body was full of adrenaline, and, under such circumstances, the body simply does not feel pain. Just a second later, he coughed up blood, which came as quite a surprise. More so, when he tried to turn to his left, his body didn't do what his mind commanded. The puzzlement lasted just another second or two when—

—DOMINIC WAS facing the second one, gun up and aimed. Again, he fired, as trained, for center-of-mass, and the Smith was on single-action, barking twice.

So good was his aim that the first round hit the target's weapon—

—THE INGRAM jumped in Mustafa's hands. He barely held on to it, but then

he saw who'd attacked him and took careful aim and squeezed—but nothing happened. On looking down, he saw a bullet hole in the steel side of the Ingram, just where the bolt was. He took another second or two to realize that he was now disarmed. But his enemy was still before him and he raced toward him, hoping to use his gun as a club if nothing else.

DOMINIC WAS amazed. He'd seen at least one of his rounds take him in the chest—and the other one had broken his weapon. For some reason, he did not fire again. Instead he clubbed the bastard in the face with his Smith and headed forward, where there was more gunfire.

MUSTAFA FELT his legs weaken. The blow in the face did hurt, even though the five bullets had not. He tried to turn again, but his left leg would bear no weight, and he fell, turning to land on his back, where, suddenly, breathing came very hard indeed. He tried to sit up, even to roll, but as his legs had failed him, so the left side of his body was useless.

"THAT'S TWO down," Brian said. "Now what?"

The screaming had abated, but not by much. But the gunfire was still there, and it had changed character . . .

ABDULLAH blessed fate for putting the suppressor on his weapon. His shooting was more accurate than he'd ever hoped.

He was in the Sam Goody music store, which was filled with students. It was also a store with no rear exit, because it was so close to the westernmost entrance. Abdullah's face was grinning broadly as he walked into the store, firing as he went. The faces he saw were full of disbelief—and for an amused moment he told himself that *dis*belief was the reason he was killing them. He emptied his first magazine quickly, and indeed the suppressor allowed him to hit with half his shots. Men and women—boys and girls—screamed, stood still and staring for a few precious, deadly seconds, and then started running away. But at less than ten meters, it was just as easy to hit them in the back, and they really had nowhere to run. He just stood there, hosing the room, letting the targets select themselves. Some ran up the other side of the CD racks, trying to escape out the main door. These he shot as they passed, hardly two meters away. In seconds, he'd emptied his first magazine pair, and dumped it, pulling another from his pants pocket and slamming it home and cocking the bolt. But there was a mirror on the store's back wall, and in it he saw—

"JESUS, another one!" Dominic said.

"Okay." Brian darted to the other side of the entrance and took position against the wall, bringing his Beretta up. This put him on the same pseudo-corridor as the terrorist, but the setup didn't benefit a right-handed shooter worth a damn. He had to choose between shooting weak-hand—something he didn't practice as much as he should have done—or exposing his body to return fire. But something in his Marine mind just said *Fuck it* and he stepped to his left, pistol up in both hands.

Abdullah saw him and smiled, bringing his weapon to his shoulder—or trying to.

Aldo fired off two aimed shots into the target's chest, saw no effect, and then emptied his magazine. More than twelve rounds entered the man's body —

—ABDULLAH FELT them all, and he felt his body jerk with each impact. He tried firing his own weapon, but he missed with all of his shots, and then his body was no longer under his control. He fell forward, trying to recover his balance.

BRIAN EJECTED his empty magazine and pulled the other one from his fanny pack, slapping it in and dropping the slide-release lever. He was going on autopilot now. The bastard was still moving! Time to fix that. He walked over to the prone body, kicked the gun aside, and fired one round right into the back of his head. The skull split open—blood and brains exploded out onto the floor.

"JESUS, ALDO!" Dominic said, coming to his brother's side.

"Fuck that! We got at least one more out there. I'm down to one clip, Enzo."

"Me, too, bro."

Amazingly, most of the people on the floor, including the shot ones, were still alive. The blood on the floor could have been rain in a thunderstorm. But both brothers were too wired to be sickened by what they saw. They moved back out into the mall and headed east.

The carnage was just as bad here. The floor was defiled by numerous pools of blood. There were screams and whimpers. Brian passed a little girl, perhaps three years old, standing over the body of her mother, her arms fluttering like a baby bird's. No time, no damned time to do anything about it. He wished Pete Randall were close. He was a good corpsman. But even Petty Officer Randall would be overwhelmed by this mess.

There was still more chatter from a suppressed submachine gun. It was in the Belk's women's store, off to their left. Not all that far off by the sound of it. The sound of automatic-weapons fire is distinctive. Nothing else sounds quite the same. They split up, each taking one side of the short corridor leading past the Coffee Beanery and Bostonian Shoes into the next combat area.

The first floor of Belk's started off with perfumes and makeup. As before, they ran to the sound of the guns. There were six women down at perfume, and three more in makeup. Some were obviously dead. Others were just as obviously alive. Some called out for help, but there was no time for that. The twins split up again. The noise had just stopped. It had been off to their left front, but it wasn't there now. Had the terrorist run away? Was he just out of ammo?

There were expended cartridge cases all over the floor—nine-millimeter brass, they both saw. He'd had himself a good old time here, Dominic saw. The mirrors affixed to the building's internal pillars were nearly all shattered by gunfire. To his trained eye, it seemed as though the terrorist had walked in the front, sprayed the first people he'd seen—all women—and then worked his

way back and to the left, probably going to wherever he saw the most potential targets. Probably just one guy, Brian's mind told him.

Okay, what are we up against? Dominic wondered. *How's he going to react? How does he think?*

For Brian it was simpler: *Where are you, you motherfucker?* For the Marine, he was an armed enemy, and nothing else. Not a person, not a human being, not even a thinking brain, just a target holding a weapon.

ZUHAYR EXPERIENCED a sudden diminution of excitement. He'd been more excited than at any moment in his life. He'd had only a few women in his life, and surely he'd killed more women here today than he'd ever fucked . . . but to him, here and now, somehow it felt just the same.

And all that struck him as very satisfying. He hadn't heard the shooting from before, none of it. He'd scarcely heard his own gunfire, so focused was he on his business. And good business it had been. The look on their faces when they saw him and his machine gun . . . and the look when the bullets struck . . . *that* was a pleasing sight. But he was down to his last two magazine pairs now. One was in his gun, and the other in his pocket.

Strange, he thought, that he could hear the relative silence now. There were no live women in his immediate area. Well . . . no unwounded women. Some of those he'd shot were making noise. Some were even trying to crawl away...

He couldn't have that, Zuhayr knew. He started walking toward one of them, a dark-haired woman wearing whorish red pants.

BRIAN WHISTLED to his brother and pointed. There he was, about five-eight, wearing khaki pants and a similarly colored bush jacket, fifty yards away. A playground shot for a rifle, something for a boot at Parris Island to do, but not quite so easy for his Beretta, however good a marksman he was.

Dominic nodded and started heading that way, but swiveling his head in all directions.

"TOO BAD, woman," Zuhayr said in English. "But do not be afraid, I send you to see Allah. You will serve me in Paradise." And he tried to fire a single round into her back. But the Ingram doesn't allow that easily. Instead he rippled off three rounds from a range of one meter.

BRIAN SAW the whole thing, and something just came loose. The Marine stood up and aimed with both hands. *"You motherfucker!"* he screamed, and fired as rapidly as accuracy allowed, from a range of perhaps a hundred feet. He fired a total of fourteen shots, almost emptying his weapon. And some of them, remarkably, hit the target.

Three, in fact, one of which got the target right in the belly, and another in center chest.

* * *

THE FIRST one *hurt.* Zuhayr felt the impact as he might have felt a kick in the testicles. It caused his arms to drop as though to cover up and protect from another injury. His weapon was still in his hands, and he fought through the pain to bring it back up as he watched the man approach.

BRIAN DIDN'T forget everything. In fact, a lot came flooding back into his consciousness. He had to remember the lessons of Quantico—and Afghanistan—if he wanted to sleep in his own bed that night. And so he took an indirect path forward, dodging around the rectangular goods tables, keeping his eyes on his target and trusting Enzo to look around. But he did that, too. His target didn't have command of his weapon. He was looking straight at the Marine, his face strangely fearful . . . but smiling? *What the hell?*

He walked right in now, straight at the bastard.

FOR HIS part, Zuhayr stopped fighting the suddenly massive weight on his weapon, and stood as straight as he could, looking in the eyes of his killer. *"Allahu Ackbar,"* he said.

"THAT'S NICE," Brian replied, and fired right into his forehead. "I hope you like it in hell." Then he bent down and picked up the Ingram, slinging it over his back.

"Clear it and leave it, Aldo," Dominic commanded. Brian did just that.

"Jesus, I hope somebody called 911," he observed.

"Okay, follow me upstairs," Dominic said next.

"What—why?"

"What if there's more'n four of 'em?" The reply question was like a punch in Brian's mouth.

"Okay, I got your six, bro."

It struck both of them as incredible that the escalator was still working, but they rode it up, both crouching and scanning all around. There were women all over the place—all over meaning as far from the escalator as possible—

"FBI!" Dominic called. "Is everybody okay here?"

"Yes," came multiple, separate, and equivocal replies from around the second floor.

Enzo's professional identity came back into full command : "Okay, we have it under control. The police will be here shortly. Until they get here, just sit tight."

The twins walked from the top of the "up" escalator to the top of the "down" one. It was immediately clear that the shooters hadn't come up here.

The ride down was dreadful beyond words. Again, there were pools of blood on a straight line from perfume to handbags, and now the lucky ones who were merely wounded were crying out for help. And, again, the twins had more important things to do. Dominic led his brother out into the main concourse. He turned left to check the first one he'd shot. This one was dead beyond question. His last ten-millimeter bullet had exploded out through his right eye.

On reflection, that left only one, if he was still alive.

HE WAS, despite all of his hits. Mustafa was trying to move, but his muscles were drained of blood and oxygen, and were not listening to the commands that came through the central nervous system. He found himself looking up, somewhat dreamily it seemed, even to him.

"You have a name?" one of them asked.

Dominic had only halfway expected an answer. The man was clearly dying, and not slowly, either. He turned to look for his brother—not there. "Hey, Aldo!" he called, to no immediate response.

BRIAN WAS in Legends, a sporting-goods shop, taking a quick look. His initiative was rewarded, and he took it back to the mall corridor.

Dominic was there, talking to his "suspect," but without getting much of a response.

"Hey, raghead," Brian said, returning. Then he knelt down in the blood beside the dying terrorist. "I got something for you."

Mustafa looked up in some puzzlement. He knew that death was close, and while he didn't exactly welcome it, he was content in his own mind that he'd done his duty to his Faith, and to Allah's Law.

Brian grabbed the terrorist's hands and crossed them on his bleeding chest. "I want you to carry this to hell with you. It's a pigskin, asshole, made from the skin of a real Iowa pig." And Brian held his hands on the football as he looked into the bastard's eyes.

The eyes went wide with recognition—and horror at the moment's transgression. He willed his arms to move away, but the infidel's hands overpowered his efforts.

"Yeah, that's right. I am Iblis himself, and you're going to my place." Brian smiled until the eyes went lifeless.

"What's that about?"

"Save it," Brian responded. "Come on."

They headed for where it had all started. A lot of women were on the floor, most of them moving some. All of them bleeding, and some quite a lot—"Find a drugstore. I need bandages, and make sure somebody called 911."

"Right." Dominic ran off, looking, while Brian knelt next to a woman of about thirty, shot in the chest. Like most Marines, and all marine officers, he knew rudimentary first aid. First he checked her airway. Okay, she was breathing. She was bleeding from two bullet holes in her upper left chest. There was a little pink froth on her lips. Lung shot, but not a bad one. "Can you hear me?"

A nod, and a rasp: "Yes."

"Okay, you're going to be okay. I know it hurts, but you are going to be okay."

"Who are you?"

"Brian Caruso, ma'am, United States Marines. You're going to be fine. Now I have to try'n help some others."

"No, no—I—" She grasped his arm.

"Ma'am, there's other people here hurt worse than you. You *will* be fine."

And with that he pulled away.

The next one was pretty bad. A child, maybe, five years old, a boy, with three hits in his back, and bleeding like an overturned bucket. Brian turned him over. The eyes were open.

"What's your name, kid?"

"David," came the reply, surprisingly coherent.

"Okay, David, we're going to get you fixed up. Where's your mom?"

"I don't know." He was worried about his mother, more fearful for her than for himself, as any child would be.

"Okay, I'll take care of her, but let me look after you first, okay?" He looked up to see Dominic running toward him.

"There ain't no drugstore!" Dominic half shouted.

"Get something, T-shirts, anything!" he ordered his cop brother. And Dominic raced into the outfitters store where Brian had gotten his boots. He came out a few seconds later with an arm full of sweatshirts with various logos on the front.

And just then the first cop arrived, his service automatic out in both hands.

"Police!" the cop shouted.

"Over here, God damn it!" Brian roared in return. It took perhaps ten seconds for the officer to make it over. "Leather that pistol, trooper. The bad guys are all down," Brian told him in a more measured voice. "We need every damned ambulance you have in this town, and tell the hospital that they got a shitload of casualties coming. You got a first-aid kit in your car?"

"Who are you?" the cop demanded, without holstering his pistol.

"FBI," Dominic answered from behind the cop, holding his credentials up in his left hand. "The shooting part is over, but we got a lot of people down here. Call everybody. Call the local FBI office and everybody else. Now get on that radio, Officer, and right the hell now!"

Like most American cops, Officer Steve Barlow had a portable Motorola radio, with a microphone/speaker clipped to the epaulet of his uniform shirt, and he made a frantic call for backup and medical assistance.

Brian turned his attention to the little boy in his arms. At this moment, David Prentiss was the entire world for Captain Brian Caruso. But all the damage was internal. The kid had more than one sucking chest wound, and this was not good.

"Okay, David, let's take it real easy. How bad does it hurt?"

"Bad," the little boy replied after half a breath. His face was going pale.

Brian set him on the countertop of the Piercing Pagoda, then realized there might be *something* there to help—but he found nothing more than cotton balls. He crammed two of them into each of the three holes in the child's back, then rolled him back over. But the little boy was bleeding on the inside. He was bleeding so much internally that his lungs would collapse, and he'd go to sleep and die from asphyxiation in minutes unless somebody sucked his chest out, and there was not a single thing that Brian could do about it.

"Christ!" Of all people, it was Michelle Peters, holding the hand of a ten-year-old girl whose face was as aghast as a child could manage.

"Michelle, if you know anything about first aid, pick somebody and get your ass to work," Brian ordered.

But she didn't, really. She took a handful of cotton balls from the ear-piercing place and wandered off.

"Hey, David, you know what I am?" Brian asked.

"No," the child answered, with some curiosity peering past the pain he was feeling in his chest.

"I'm a Marine. You know what that is?"

"Like a soldier?"

The boy was dying right in his arms, Brian realized. *Please, God, not this one, not this little boy.*

"No, we're a lot better than soldiers. A Marine's about the best thing a man can be. Maybe someday when you grow up, maybe you can be a Marine like me. What do you think?"

"Shoot bad guys?" David Prentiss asked.

"You bet, Dave," Brian assured him.

"Cool," David thought, and then his eyes closed.

"David? Stay with me, David. Come on, Dave, open those eyes back up. We need to talk some more." He gently set the body back on the counter and felt for a carotid pulse.

But there wasn't any.

"Oh, shit. Oh, shit, man," Brian whispered. With that, all the adrenaline evaporated from his bloodstream. His body became a vacuum, and his muscles slack.

The first firefighters raced in, wearing khaki turnout coats and carrying boxes of what had to be medical gear. One of them took command, directing his people into various directions. Two headed to where Brian was. The first of them took the body from his arms and looked at it briefly, then set it on the floor, and then he moved away without a word to anyone, leaving Brian standing there, with a dead child's blood on his shirt.

Enzo was nearby, just standing and looking, now that professionals—mainly volunteer firefighters, actually, but proficient for all that—were assuming control of the area. Together they walked out the nearest exit into the clear noontime air. The entire engagement had lasted less than ten minutes.

Just like real combat, Brian realized. A lifetime—no, many lifetimes had come to their premature ends in what was relatively a blink of time. His pistol was back in his fanny pack. The expended magazine was probably back in Sam Goody. What he'd just experienced was the nearest thing to being Dorothy, sucked into a Kansas tornado. But he hadn't emerged into the Land of Oz. It was still central Virginia, and a bunch of people were dead and wounded behind them.

"Who are you guys?" It was a police captain.

Dominic held up his FBI ID, and that was enough for the moment.

"What happened?"

"Looks like terrorists, four of them, came in and shot up the place. They're all dead. We got 'em, all four of them," Dominic told him.

"You hurt?" the captain asked Brian, gesturing to the blood on his shirt.

Aldo shook his head. "Not a scratch. Cap'n, you got a lot of hurt civilians in there."

"What were you guys doing here?" the captain asked next.

“Buying shoes,” Brian answered, a bitter edge on his voice.

“No shit . . .” the police captain observed, looking at the mall entrance, and standing still only because he was afraid of what he was going to see inside. “Any ideas?”

“Get your perimeter set up,” Dominic said. “Check every license plate. Check the dead bad guys for ID. You know the drill, right? Who’s the local SAC?”

“Just a Resident Agent here. Nearest real office is Richmond. Called there already. The SAC’s a guy named Mills.”

“Jimmy Mills? I know him. Well, the Bureau ought to send a lot of troops here. Your best move is to secure the crime scene and stand by, get the wounded people clear. It’s a fucking mess in there, Cap’n.”

“I believe it. Well, I’ll be back.”

Dominic waited for the police captain to walk inside, then he elbowed his brother and together they walked to his Mercedes. The police car at the parking lot entrance—two uniforms, one of which held a shotgun—saw the FBI ID and waved them past. Ten minutes later, they were back at the plantation house.

“What’s going on?” Alexander asked in the kitchen. “The radio said—”

“Pete, you know about the second thoughts I’ve been having?” Brian asked.

“Yeah, but what—”

“You can forget about them, Pete. Forever and always,” Brian announced.

CHAPTER 14

PARADISE

THE NEWS crews flocked to Charlottesville like vultures on a fallen carcass—or started to until things got more complex.

The next news flash came from a place called Citadel Mall in Colorado Springs, Colorado, then came one from Provo, Utah, and finally Des Moines, Iowa. *That* made it a colossal story. The Colorado mall hit involved six dead cadets from the U.S. Air Force Academy—several more had been pulled outside to safety by their classmates—and twenty-six civilian deaths.

But word of Colorado Springs had gotten quickly to Provo, Utah, and there the local police chief, with a good cop's instinct, had dispatched radio cars to every shopping center in town. At Provo Towne Center, they scored. Each car carried the mandatory police shotgun, and an epic shoot-out developed between four armed terrorists and six cops—all of whom knew how to shoot. That produced two badly wounded cops, three dead civilians—a total of eleven local citizens had joined in the pitched battle—and four very dead terrorists in what the FBI would later term a bungled attack. Des Moines might have turned out the same, except that the local city police were slow to react, and the final score there was four terrorists dead, but thirty-one citizens to keep them company.

In Colorado, two surviving terrorists were holed up in a retail store with a police SWAT team just fifty yards away, and a company of National Guard riflemen—activated with alacrity by the state's governor—on the way and champing at the bit to live out every soldier's fantasy: to use fire and maneuver to immolate the invaders and set their remains out for cougar bait. It took over an hour for this to come to pass, but aided by smoke grenades, the weekend warriors used enough firepower to destroy an invading army and ended the lives of two criminals—Arabs, as it turned out, to no one's surprise—in spectacular fashion.

By this time, all of America was watching TV, with reporters in New York and Atlanta telling America what they knew, which was little, and trying to explain the events of the day, which they did with the accuracy of grammar-school children. They endlessly repeated the hard facts they had managed to gather, and hauled in "experts" who knew little but said a lot. It was good for filling airtime, at least, if not to inform the public.

THERE WERE TVs at The Campus, too, and most work stopped as the troops watched them.

"Holy Jesus," Jack Jr. observed. Others had murmured or thought much the same, but it was somewhat worse for them, since they were technically

members of the intelligence community, which had not provided strategic warning against this attack on their home country.

"It's pretty simple," Tony Wills observed. "If we do not have human-intelligence assets in the field, then it's hard for us to get any kind of warning, unless the bad guys are really loose on how they use their cell phones. But the news media likes to tell people how we track the bad guys, and the bad guys learn from that. The White House staffers, too—they like to tell reporters how smart they are, and they leak data on signals intelligence. You sometimes wonder if they're stringers for the terrorists, the way they give away code-word-sensitive information." In reality, the staff pukes were just showing off to the reporters, of course, which was about the only thing they knew how to do.

"So, the rest of the day the newsies will be screaming about 'another intelligence failure,' right?"

"Bet on it," Wills responded. "The same people who trash the intelligence community will now complain that it can't do the job—but without acknowledging their own role in crippling it every chance they get. Same thing from Congress, of course. Anyway, let's get back to work. NSA will be looking for a little cheering on the part of the opposition—they're human, too, right? They like to thump their chests some when they pull off an operation. Let's see if our friend Sali is one of them."

"But who's the big kahuna who ordered this one?" Jack asked.

"Let's see if we can find out." More important, Wills didn't add at the moment, was determining *where* the bastard was. A face with a location attached to it was a lot more valuable than a face without one.

UPSTAIRS, Hendley had his senior people together in front of *his* TV set.

"Thoughts?"

"Pete called up from Charlottesville. Care to guess where our two trainees were?" Jerry Rounds asked.

"You're kidding," Tom Davis responded.

"No, I'm not. They whacked the bad guys for fair, without outside assistance, and they're back at the house now. Bonus: Brian—the Marine—had been having second thoughts about his function. That, Pete reports, is a thing of the past. He can't wait to go out on some real missions. Pete thinks they're just about ready, too."

"So, we just need some solid targets?" Hendley asked.

"My people will be checking the feed from NSA. You gotta assume that the bad guys will be talking back and forth now. Their downtime in chatting back and forth should be coming to an end even now," Rick Bell thought aloud. "If we're ready to go active, then we can go active, and soon."

That was Sam Granger's department. He'd kept quiet to this point, but now it was time to speak.

"Well, guys, we have two kids ready to go out and service some targets," he said, using a phrase the Army had invented twenty years before. "They are good kids, Pete tells me, and from what happened today I think they will be properly motivated."

"What is the opposition thinking?" Hendley asked. It wasn't hard to figure out, but he wanted additional opinions.

"They wanted to sting us cleverly. The objective here manifestly is to strike at Middle America," Rounds led off. "They think they can strike fear in our hearts by showing us they can attack us anywhere, not just at obvious targets like New York. That was the element of cleverness in this operation. Probably fifteen to twenty total terrorists, plus some support personnel, maybe. That's a fairly large number, but not unprecedented—they maintained good operational security. Their people were well motivated. I would not say that they were particularly well trained, though, they just decided to toss a mad dog in the backyard to bite some of the kids, as it were. They've demonstrated their political willingness to do some very bad things, but that's not a surprise; also to throw dedicated personnel away, but that's not a surprise either. The attack was low-tech in nature, just some bad guys with light automatic weapons. They have demonstrated viciousness, but not real professionalism. In less than two days, the FBI will have them tracked down to their point of origin, probably, and maybe their routes of entry. They did not learn to fly or anything like that, so they probably have not been in-country all that long. I'd be interested in learning who scouted out their objectives. The element of timing suggests some pre planning, but not much, I'd guess—it's not hard to read the time off a wristwatch. They didn't plan on getting away after doing their shooting. They probably came in with their objectives already identified. At this point, I'd bet a few bucks that they've only been inside our borders for a week or two—even less, depending on their method of ingress. The Bureau will have that one nailed down pretty soon."

"Pete reports the weapons were Ingram submachine guns. They look pretty —that's why they show up in TV and the movies," Granger explained. "But they are not really efficient weapons."

"How did they get them?" Tom Davis asked.

"Good question. Figure the FBI already has the ones from Virginia, and is busy tracking them down by serial number. They're good at it. We should have the information by tonight. That will give them leads on how the weapons got into the terrorists' hands, and then the investigation will get going."

"WHAT'S THE Bureau going to do, Enzo?" Brian asked.

"It's a major case. It'll have a code word assigned, and every agent in the country can be called in to work on it. Right now, first thing they're looking for is the car the bad guys used. Maybe it's stolen. More likely it's rented. You have to sign for those, leave a copy of your driver's license, credit card, all the normal stuff you do in order to exist in America. It can all be followed. It all leads somewhere, bro. That's why you chase them all down."

"How are you guys doing?" Pete asked, entering the room.

"A drink helps," Brian answered. He'd already cleaned his Beretta, as Dominic had done with his Smith & Wesson. "It wasn't fun, Pete."

"It isn't supposed to be. Okay, I just talked with the home office. They want to see you guys in a day or so. Brian, you had some qualms before, and you say that's changed. That still true?"

"You've trained us to identify, close on, and kill people, Pete. And I can live with that—just so's we're not doing something completely off the reservation."

Dominic just nodded agreement, but his eyes didn't leave Alexander.

"Okay, good. There's an old joke in Texas about why the lawyers are so good down there. The answer is, there's more men who need killin' than horses that need stealin'. Well, those who need killing, maybe you two can help them along some."

"Are you finally going to tell us who we're working for, exactly?" Brian asked.

"You will find that out in due course—just a day or so."

"Okay, I can wait that long," Brian said. He was doing some quick analysis of his own. General Terry Broughton might know something. For damned sure that Werner guy in FBI did, but this former tobacco plantation they'd been training on didn't belong to any part of the government he knew about. CIA had "The Farm" near Yorktown, Virginia, but that was about a hundred fifty miles away. This place didn't feel like "Agency," at least not in accordance with his assumptions, wrong though they could be. In fact, this place didn't smell "government" at all, not to his nose. But one way or another, in a couple of days he'd know something substantive, and he could wait that long.

"What do we know about the guys we whacked today?"

"Nothing much. That'll have to wait awhile. Dominic, how long before they start finding stuff out?"

"By noon tomorrow they'll have a lot of information, but we don't have a pipeline into the Bureau, unless you want me to—"

"No, I don't. We might have to let them know that you and Brian aren't the new version of the Lone Ranger, but it ought not to go very far."

"You mean I'll have to talk to Gus Werner?"

"Probably. He has enough juice in the Bureau to say you're on 'special assignment' and make it stick. I imagine he'll be patting himself on the back for talent-scouting you for us. You two did pretty damned well, by the way."

"All we did," the Marine said, "was what we've been trained to do. We had just enough time to get our shit together, and after that it was all automatic. They taught me at the Basic School that the difference between making it and not making it is usually just a few seconds' worth of thinking. If we'd been in the Sam Goody when it all started instead of a few minutes later, it might have been different in the final outcome. One other thing—two men are about four times as effective as one man. There's actually a study about it. 'Non-Linear Tactical Factors In Small-Unit Engagements,' I think the title is. It's part of the syllabus at Recon School."

"Marines really do know how to read, eh?" Dominic asked, reaching for a bottle of bourbon. He poured two stiff ones, handing one to his brother and taking a pull on his own.

"The guy in the Sam Goody—he smiled at me," Brian said in reflective amazement. "I didn't think about it at the time. I guess he wasn't afraid to die."

"It's called martyrdom, and some people really do think that way," Pete told them both. "So, what did you do?"

"I shot him, close range, maybe six or seven times—"

"Far side of ten times, bro," Dominic corrected him. "Plus the last one in the back of his head."

"He was still moving," Brian explained. "And I didn't have any cuffs to slap on him. And, you know, I'm not really all that worried about it." And besides, he would have bled out anyway. The way things had worked out, his trip into the next dimension had just happened sooner.

"B-3 AND bingo! We have a bingo," Jack announced from his workstation. "Sali is a player, Tony. Look here," he said, pointing to his computer screen.

Wills punched up his "take" from NSA, and there it was. "You know, chickens are supposed to cackle after they lay an egg, just to let the world know how good they are. Works with these birds, too. Okay, Jack, it's official. Uda bin Sali is a player. Who is this addressed to?"

"It's a guy he chats on the 'Net with. He mainly talks to him about money moves."

"Finally!" Wills observed, checking the document on his own workstation. "They want photos of the guy, a whole spread. Maybe Langley is finally going to put some coverage on him. Praise the Lord!" He paused. "Got a list of the people he e-mails to?"

"Yep. Want it?" Jack keyed it up and hit the PRINT command. In just fifteen seconds, he handed the sheet over to his roomie. "Numbers and dates of e-mails. I can print up all the interesting ones, and the reasons I find them interesting, if you want."

"We'll let that sit for the moment. I'll get this up to Rick Bell."

"I'll hold the fort."

DID YOU SEE THE NEWS ON TV, Sali had written to a semi regular correspondent. THIS OUGHT TO GIVE THE AMERICANS A STOMACHACHE!

"Yeah, it sure will," Jack told the screen. "But you just tipped your hand, Uda. Oops."

SIXTEEN MORE martyrs, Mohammed thought, watching a TV in Vienna's Bristol Hotel. It was only painful in the abstract. Such people were, really, expendable assets. They were less important than he, and that was the truth, because of his value to the organization. He had the looks and the language skills to travel anywhere, and the brainpower to plan his missions well.

The Bristol was an especially fine hotel, just across the street from the even more ornate Imperial, and the minibar had some good cognac, and he liked good cognac. The mission had not gone all that well . . . he'd hoped for hundreds of dead Americans, instead of several dozen, but with all the armed police and even some armed citizens, the high end of his expectations had been overly optimistic. But the strategic objective had been achieved. All Americans now knew that they were not safe. No matter where they might live, they could be struck by his Holy Warriors, who were willing to trade their lives for the Americans' sense of security. Mustafa, Saeed, Sabawi, and Mehdi were now in Paradise—if that place really existed. He sometimes thought it was a tale told to impressionable children, or to the simpleminded who actually listened to the preaching of the imams. You had to choose your preachers carefully, since not all the imams saw Islam the way Mohammed did. But they did not want to rule all of it. He did—or maybe just a piece of it, just so long as it included the Holy Places.

He couldn't talk aloud about matters like this. Some senior members of the organization really did believe, they were more to the conservative—reactionary—side of the Faith than were those such as the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia. To his eyes the latter were just the corrupt rich of that hideously corrupt country, people who mouthed the words while indulging their vices at home and abroad, spending their money. And money was easily spent. You could not take it to the afterlife, after all. Paradise, if it truly existed, had no need of money. And if it did not exist, then there was no use for money, either. What *he* wanted, what he hoped to—no, what he *would* have in his lifetime—was power, the ability to direct people, to bend others to his will. For him, religion was the matrix that set the shape of the world that he would be controlling. He even prayed on occasion, lest he forget that shape—more so when he met with his "superiors." But as the chief of operations, it was he and not they who determined their organization's course through the obstacles placed in their path by the idolaters of the West. And in choosing the path, he also chose the nature of their strategy, which came from their religious beliefs, which were easily guided by the political world in which they operated. Your enemy shaped your strategy, after all, since his strategy was that which had to be thwarted.

So, now, the Americans would know fear as they'd not known it before. It was not their political capital or their financial capital that was at risk. It was all of their lives. The mission had been designed from the beginning mainly to kill women and children, the most precious and most vulnerable parts of any society.

And with that done, he twisted the top off another small bottle of cognac.

Later, he'd light up his laptop and get reports from his underlings in the field. He'd have to tell one of his bankers to put some more currency into his Liechtenstein account. It wouldn't do to tap that account dry. Then the Visa accounts would be eliminated, and vanish forever into the ether-world. Otherwise, the police would come after him, with a name and perhaps with photos. That would not do. He'd be in Vienna another few days, then back home for a week to meet with his seniors and plan future operations. With such a success under his belt, they'd listen more closely now. His alliance with the Colombians had paid off, despite their misgivings, and he was riding the crest of the wave. A few nights more of celebration and he'd be ready to return to the rather less lively nightlife of his home, which was mostly coffee or tea—and talk, endless talk. Not action. Only through action could he achieve the goals set for him . . . by his seniors . . . and himself.

"MY GOD, Pablo," Ernesto said, turning his own TV off.

"Come now, it's not that much of a surprise," Pablo responded. "You didn't expect them to set up a table to sell Girl Scout cookies."

"No, but this?"

"That is why they are called terrorists, Ernesto. They kill without warning and attack people unable to defend themselves." There had been a lot of TV coverage from Colorado Springs, where the presence of National Guard trucks made such a dramatic backdrop. There the uniformed civilians had even dragged the two terrorist bodies out—ostensibly to clear the area where the

smoke grenades had started some fires, but really to display the bodies, of course. The local military in Colombia liked to do similar things. Soldiers showing off. Well, the Cartel's own *sicarios* often did the same, didn't they? But it wasn't something he'd point out in this setting. It was important to Ernesto that his identity be that of a "businessman," and not a drug dealer or terrorist. In his mirror, he saw a man who provided a valuable product and service to the public, for which he was paid, and to protect which he had to deal with his competitors.

"But how will the *norteamericanos* react?" Ernesto asked the air.

"They will bluster and investigate it like any street murder, and some things they will find out, but most things they will not—and we have a new distribution network in Europe, which," he reminded his boss, "is *our* objective."

"I did not expect so spectacular a crime, Pablo."

"But we discussed all this," Pablo said in the calmest of voices. "Their hope was to commit some spectacular demonstration"—he did not say *crime,* of course—"which would strike fear into their hearts. Such rubbish is important to them, as we all knew beforehand. The important thing to us is that it will direct their troublesome activities away from our interests.

Sometimes he had to be patient explaining things to his boss. The important thing was the money. With money, you could buy power. With money, you could buy people and protection, and not only safeguard your own life and the life of your family, but also control your country. Sooner or later, they would arrange the election of someone who would say the words the *norteamericanos* wanted to hear, but who would do little, except maybe deal with the Cali group, which suited them fine. Their only real concern was that they might buy the protection of a turncoat, one who would take their money and then turn on them like a disloyal dog. Politicians were all made of the same cloth, after all. But he'd have informers inside the camp of such people, backup security of his own. They would "avenge" the assassination of the false friend whose life he'd have to take in such circumstances. All in all, it was a complex game, but a playable one. And he knew how to maneuver the people and the government—even the North American one, if it came to that. His hands reached far, even into the minds and souls of those who had no idea whose hand was pulling their strings. This was especially true of those who spoke against legalizing his product. Should *that* happen, then his profit margin would evaporate, and, along with it, his power. He couldn't have that. No. For him and his organization, the status quo was a perfectly fine *modus vivendi* with the world as a whole. It was not perfection—but perfection was something he could not hope to achieve in the real world.

THE FBI had worked fast. Picking out the Ford with New Mexico tags had not been taxing, though every single tag number in the parking lot had been "run" and tracked down to its owner, and in many cases the owner had been interviewed by a sworn, gun-toting agent. In New Mexico, it had been discovered that the National car rental agency had security cameras, and the tape for the day in question was available, and, remarkably, it showed another rental that was of direct interest to the Des Moines, Iowa, field office. Less

than an hour later, the FBI had the same agents back to check out the Hertz office just half a mile away, and that, too, had TV cameras inside. Between printed records and the TV tapes, they had false names (Tomas Salazar, Hector Santos, Antonio Quinones, and Carlos Oliva) to play with, images of their equally false driver's licenses, and cover names for four subjects. The documentation was also important. The international driver's licenses had been obtained in Mexico City, and telexes were fired off to the Mexican Federal Police, where cooperation was immediate and efficient.

In Richmond, Des Moines, Salt Lake City, and Denver, Visa card numbers were queried. The chief of security at Visa was a former senior FBI agent, and here computers not only identified the bank of origin for the credit accounts, but also tracked four cards through a total of sixteen gas stations, showing the paths taken and the speed of advance for all four terrorist vehicles. Serial numbers off the Ingram machine guns were processed through the FBI's sister agency, the Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. There it was determined that all sixteen weapons had been part of a shipment hijacked eleven years earlier in Texas. Some of their sisters had turned up in drug-related shootings all across the country, and *that* piece of information opened a whole new line of investigation for the Bureau to run down. At the four major crime scenes, fingerprints were taken of the dead terrorists, plus blood for DNA identification.

The cars, of course, were removed to the FBI offices and thoroughly dusted for fingerprints and also sampled for DNA evidence to see if perhaps additional persons had been in them. The management and staff of each hotel were interviewed, and also the employees of the various fast-food establishments, as were employees of local bars and other restaurants. The phone records of the motels were obtained to check out what, if any, telephone calls had been made. These turned up mainly Internet Service Providers, and the laptop computers of the terrorists were seized, dusted for prints, and then analyzed by the Bureau's in-house techno-weenies. A total of seven hundred agents were assigned exclusively to the case, code-named ISLAMTERR.

The victims were mostly in local hospitals, and those who could speak were interviewed that evening to ascertain what they knew or could remember. Bullets from their bodies were taken for evidence and would be matched with the weapons seized and taken to northern Virginia, site of the brand-new FBI Laboratory, for testing and analysis. All of this information went to the Department of Homeland Security, which, of course, forwarded every bit of it to CIA, NSA, and the rest of the American intelligence community, whose field intelligence officers were already pinging their agents for any relevant information. The spooks also queried those foreign intelligence services thought to be friendly—this was an exaggeration in most cases, of course—for feedback and information relating to the case. All of the information thus gleaned came to The Campus via the CIA/NSA link. All of the data intercepted found its way to The Campus's enormous central computer room in the basement, where it was classified as to type and set up for the analysts who'd arrive in the morning.

UPSTAIRS, everyone had gone home for the night, except for the security staff and those who cleaned up after every day. The workstations used by the analysis staff were protected in several ways to make sure they could not be turned on without authorization. Security was tight there, but it was kept low-key, the better to maintain it, and monitored by closed-circuit television cameras whose "take" was always under electronic and human scrutiny.

IN HIS apartment, Jack thought about calling his father, but decided not to. He was probably getting bombarded by TV and print newsies, despite his well-known practice of saying nothing about anything in order to give the sitting President, Edward Kealty, free rein. There *was* a secure and very private line that only the kids knew about, but Jack decided to leave that one to Sally, who was a little more excitable than he was. Jack let it go with sending his dad an e-mail that essentially said *What the hell* and *I sure wish you were still in the White House.* But he knew that Jack Sr. was most likely thanking God that he wasn't, maybe even hoping that Kealty would listen to his advisers for a change—what good ones he had—and think before acting. His father probably *had* called some friends abroad to find out what they knew and thought, and maybe passed on some high-level opinions, since foreign governments mostly listened to what he had to say, quietly, in private rooms. Big Jack was still somewhat inside the system. He could call friends left over from his presidency to find out what was really going on. But Jack didn't think that one all the way through.

HENDLEY HAD a secure telephone in his office and at his home, called an STU-5, a brand-new product of AT&T and NSA. It had come to him through irregular means.

He was on it at that moment.

"Yes, that's right. We'll have the feed tomorrow morning. Not much point in sitting in the office and staring at a mostly blank screen right now," the former senator said reasonably, sipping at his bourbon and soda. Then he listened to the following inquiry.

"Probably," he responded to a rather obvious question. "But nothing 'hard' yet... about what you'd expect at this point, yes."

Another lengthy question.

"We have two guys right now, just about ready . . . Yes, we do—about four of them. We're taking a close look at them right now—tomorrow, that is. Jerry Rounds is thinking hard on the subject, along with Tom Davis—that's right, you don't know him, do you? Black guy, from other side of the river, both parts of the building. He's pretty smart, has a good feel for financial stuff, and also the operational side. Surprising that you never crossed paths with him. Sam? He's hot to trot—believe it. The trick is picking the right targets . . . I know, you can't be a part of that. Please pardon my calling them 'targets.'"

A lengthy monologue, plus a tag question.

"Yes, I know. That's why we're here. Soon, Jack. Soon . . . Thanks, buddy. You, too. See ya sometime." And he hung up, knowing that he wouldn't actually be seeing his friend anytime soon ... maybe never again in person. And that was a goddamned shame. There weren't many people who

understood things like this, and more was the pity. One more call to make, and this on a regular phone.

CALLERID told Granger who it was before he picked up.

"Yeah, Gerry?"

"Sam, those two recruits. You sure they're ready to play in the bigs?"

"Ready as they need to be," the chief of operations assured his boss.

"Get 'em up here for lunch. You, me, them, and Jerry Rounds."

"I'll call Pete first thing in the morning." No sense doing it right away. It was barely a two-hour drive, after all.

"Good. You have any misgivings?"

"Gerry, the proof of the pudding, you know? We have to see sooner or later."

"Yeah, right. See you tomorrow."

"'Night, Gerry." Granger hung the phone back up and went back to his book.

THE MORNING news was particularly sensational all over America—all over the world, for that matter. The satellite feeds from CNN, FOX, MSNBC, and every other agency that owned TV cameras and an uplink truck provided the world with a lead story that could not be buried by anything less than a nuclear detonation. The European papers expressed ritual sympathy with America for its newest travail—soon to be forgotten and retracted, in effect if not in particulars. The American news media talked about how frightened American citizens were. Not with any poll numbers to back it up, of course, but across the country citizens were suddenly buying firearms for their own personal protection, which purpose would not be served well, or at all. Police knew without being told to take a close look at anyone who might have come from a country east of Israel, and if some dumbass lawyers called that ethnic profiling, then to hell with him. The crimes of the previous day had not been committed by a tour group from Norway.

Church attendance was up, a little.

All across America, people went to work and did their jobs, with a "What do you think of all this?" aimed at coworkers, who invariably shook their heads and went back to the business of making steel, automobiles, or delivering the mail. They were not terribly fearful, in fact, because even with four such incidents, it had all happened far from where most of them lived, and such events happened very rarely, and not enough to be a seriously personal threat. But all the working men in the country knew in their hearts that somebody, somewhere, really needed to have his ass kicked.

Twelve miles away, Gerry Hendley saw his papers—the *New York Times* was delivered by special messenger, while the *Washington Post* had arrived by a normal pickup truck. In both cases, the editorials could have been written by the same clone, urging calm and circumspection, noting that the country had a President to react to these dreadful events, and calmly instructing the President to think before acting. The Op-Ed pieces were somewhat more interesting. Some columnists actually reflected the average citizen. There would be a national cry for vengeance on this day, and for Hendley the good

news was that he might just be able to respond to it. The bad news was that no one would ever know, if he did it right.

All in all, this Saturday would not be a slow news day.

And The Campus's parking lot would be full, which would escape the notice of those who drove past the place. The cover story, if one were needed, was that the four massacres of the previous day had caused some instability in the financial markets—which, it turned out later in the day, was true.

Jack Jr. correctly assumed it would be a casual-dress day, and drove his Hummer 2 into work wearing jeans, a pullover shirt, and sneaks. The security people were fully uniformed, of course, and as stone-faced as ever.

Tony Wills was just lighting up his computer when Jack came in at 8:14.

"Hey, Tony," the young Ryan said in greeting. "What's the traffic like?"

"See for yourself. They're not asleep," Wills told his trainee.

"Roger that." He set down his coffee on the desk and slid into his comfortable swivel chair before lighting up his computer and getting through the security systems that protected what was on it. The morning "take" from NSA—that outfit *never* slept. And it was immediately clear that the people he kept track of paid attention to the news.

It was to be expected that the people in whom NSA had so much interest were not friends of the United States of America, but, even so, Jack Jr. was surprised—even shocked—by the content of some of the e-mails he read. He remembered his own feelings when the United States Army had charged into Saudi Arabia after the forces of the now defunct United Islamic Republic, and the *rush* of satisfaction when he'd seen a tank explode from direct fire. He hadn't thought for a moment about the three men who'd just perished within their steel tomb, rationalizing that they had taken up arms against America, and that was something that bore a price, a wager of sorts, and if the coin came up tails, well, that was why they called it gambling. Partly that had been his youth, since for a child everything seems directed to him as the center of the known universe, an illusion that takes time to discard. But for the most part the people killed the day before had been innocent civilians, noncombatants, mostly women and children, and to take pleasure in their deaths was just plain barbarism. But here it was. Twice now, America had expended blood to save the mother country of Islam, and some Saudis were talking like *this*?

"Damn," he whispered. Prince Ali wasn't like this. He and Jack's father were *friends.* They were *pals.* They'd visited each other's homes. He himself had spoken with the guy, picked his brain, listened closely to what he'd had to say. Okay, sure, he'd mostly been a kid then, but Ali wasn't this sort of guy. But neither had his own father ever been Ted Bundy, and Bundy had been an American citizen, had probably even voted. So, living in a country did not make you a roving ambassador.

"Not everybody loves us, kid," Wills said, looking over at his face.

"What have we ever done to hurt them?" Junior asked.

"We're the biggest, richest kid on the block. What we say goes, even when we don't tell people what to do. Our culture is overpowering, whether it's Coca-Cola or *Playboy* magazine. That sort of thing can offend people's religious beliefs, and in some parts of the world religious beliefs define how

they think. They do not recognize our principle of religious freedom, and if we allow something that offends their closely held beliefs, then in their mind it's our fault."

"Are you defending these birds?" Jack Jr. demanded.

"No, I am explaining how they think. To understand something does not mean approval of it." Commander Spock had said that once, but evidently Jack had missed that episode. "Your job, remember, is to understand how they think."

"Fine. They think fucked-up. I understand that. Now I have numbers to check out," and Jack set the e-mail transcripts aside and started looking into money moves. "Hey, Uda is working today. Hmm, he does some of this from his home, doesn't he?"

"That's right. Nice thing about computers," Wills said. "He doesn't have the lash-up at home he has at the office, though. Any interesting moves?"

"Just two, into the Liechtenstein bank. Let me run this account . . ." Ryan did some mouse work and came up with an ID on the account. It wasn't an especially big one. In fact, by Sali's standards it was downright tiny. Just half a million Euros, used mostly for credit card expenditures, his own and . . . others . . .

"Hey, this account supports a bunch of Visa cards," he said to Wills.

"Really?"

"Yeah, like a dozen or so. No, it's . . . sixteen, aside from the ones he uses . . ."

"Tell me about the account," Wills ordered. Sixteen suddenly seemed a very important number.

"It's a numbered one. NSA got it because of the trapdoor in the bank's accounting program. It's not big enough to be very important, but it is covert."

"Can you pull up the Visa numbers?"

"The account numbers? Sure." Jack selected the account numbers, cut-and-pasted them to a new document, and printed it. Then he handed it across.

"No, you look at this," Wills said, handing across a sheet of his own.

Jack took it, and instantly the account numbers looked familiar. "What's your list about?"

"Those bad boys in Richmond all had Visa cards, used'em to buy gas across the country—looks like their trip originated in New Mexico, by the way. Jack, you tied Uda bin Sali to yesterday. It looks like he's the guy who bankrolled their expense accounts."

Jack looked at the sheets again, comparing one list of numbers with the others. Then he looked up.

"Fuck," he breathed.

And Wills thought about the miracle of computers and modern communications. The shooters from Charlottesville had used the Visa cards to purchase gas and food, all right, and their little friend Sali had just pumped some money into the bank account that paid the bills. He'd probably act Monday to kill off the accounts, to drop them off the face of the earth. But he'd be too late.

"Jack, who told Sali to drop money into the bank account?" *We got us a target,* Wills did not say. *Maybe more than one.*

CHAPTER 15

RED COATS AND BLACK HATS

THEY LET Jack do the computer work, cross-referencing the e-mails to and from Uda bin Sali that day. It was actually fairly miserable work, since Jack had the skills but not yet the soul of an accountant. But he soon learned that the notice to fund the account came from someone named 56MoHa@eurocom.net, who'd logged in over an 800 line from Austria.

They couldn't track him down any more closely than that, but now they had a new name on the Internet to keep track of. It was the cyber identity of somebody who gave orders to a suspected—*known*—banker for terrorists, and that made 56MoHa@eurocom.net very interesting indeed. It was up to Wills to twig NSA to keep track of that one, in case they had not already made it a "handle of interest," as such identities were known. It was widely believed in the computer community that such handles were largely anonymous, and largely they were, but once they became known to the proper agencies they could be pursued. It was usually by illegal means, but if the line between legal and illegal conduct on the Internet could operate in favor of teenaged pranksters, the same was true for the intelligence community, whose computers were difficult to locate, much less to hack. The most immediate problem was that Eurocom.net did not maintain any long-term storage of its message traffic, and once they fell off the server RAM—by being read by the intended recipient—they were essentially gone forever. Maybe NSA would note that this mutt had written to Uda bin Sali, but lots of people did, for money-changing purposes, and even NSA didn't have the manpower to read and analyze every single e-mail that crossed its computerized path.

THE TWINS arrived just before 11:00 A.M., guided by their in-car GPS computers. The identical C-class Mercedes sedans were directed to the small visitors' parking lot located directly behind the building. There Sam Granger met them, shook hands, and walked them inside. They were immediately issued lapel passes to get them past the security personnel, whom Brian immediately typed as former military NCOs.

"Nice place," Brian observed as they headed for the elevators.

Bell smiled. "Yeah, in private industry we can hire better decorators." It also helped if you happened to like the decorator's taste in art, which, fortunately, he did.

"You said 'private industry,'" Dominic observed at once. This was not, he thought, a time to enjoy the subtlety of the moment. This was the agency he worked for, and *everything* here was important.

"You'll get fully briefed today," Bell said, wondering how much truth he had

just relayed to his guests.

The Muzak in the elevators was no more offensive than usual, and the lobby on the top floor—where the boss always was—was pretty vanilla, though it was Breyers vanilla instead of the Safeway house brand.

* * *

"SO, YOU tumbled to this today?" Hendley was asking. This new kid, he thought, really did have his father's nose.

"It just jumped off the screen at me," Jack replied. About what one would expect him to say, except that it had not leaped off anyone else's screen.

The boss's eyes went to Wills, whose analytical ability he knew well. "Jack's been looking at this Sali guy for a couple of weeks. We thought he might be a minor-league player, but today he moved up to triple-A status, maybe more," Tony speculated. "He's indirectly tied to yesterday."

"NSA twig to this yet?" Hendley asked.

Wills shook his head. "No, and I don't think they will. It's too indirect. They and Langley are keeping an eye on his guy, but as a barometer, not a principal." *Unless somebody at one place or the other has a lightbulb moment,* he didn't have to add. They happened, just not very often. In both bureaucracies, an off-the-reservation insight often got lost in the system, or was buried by those to whom it did not immediately occur. Every place in the world had its own orthodoxy, and woe betide the apostates who worked there.

Hendley's eyes swept over the two-page document. "Sure wiggles like a fish, doesn't he?" Then his phone buzzed, and he picked up the receiver. "Okay, Helen, send them in . . . Rick Bell is bringing in those two guys we talked about," he explained to Wills.

The door opened, and Jack Jr.'s eyes popped somewhat.

So did Brian's. "Jack? What are you doing here?"

Dominic's face changed a moment later. "Hey, Jack! What's happening?" he exclaimed.

For his part, Hendley's eyes twisted into a hurt expression. He hadn't thought this all the way through, a rare error on his part. But the room had only one door, unless you counted the private washroom.

The three cousins shook hands, momentarily ignoring the boss, until Rick Bell took control of the moment.

"Brian, Dominic, this is the big boss, Gerry Hendley." Handshakes were exchanged in front of the two analysts.

"Rick, thanks for bringing that up. Well done to both of you," Hendley said in dismissal.

"I guess it's back to the workstation. See you, guys," Jack said to his cousins.

The surprise of the moment didn't fade immediately, but Brian and Dominic settled into their chairs and filed the happenstance away for the moment.

"Welcome," Hendley said to them, leaning back in his chair. Well, sooner or later they'd find out, wouldn't they? "Pete Alexander tells me that you've done very well down at the country house."

"Aside from the boredom," Brian responded.

"Training is like that," Bell said in polite sympathy.

"What about yesterday?" Hendley asked.

"It wasn't fun," Brian said first. "It was a lot like that ambush in Afghanistan. Ka-boom, it started, and then we had to deal with it. Good news, the bad guys weren't all that bright. They acted like free agents instead of a team. If they'd been trained properly—if they'd acted like a team with proper security—it would have gone different. As it was, it was just a matter of taking out one at a time. Any idea on who they were?"

"What the FBI knows to this point, they seem to have come into the country through Mexico. Your cousin ID'd the source of their funding for us. He's a Saudi expatriate living in London, and he may be one of their backers. They were all Arabian in origin. They've positively ID'd five of them as Saudi citizens. The guns were stolen about ten years ago. They rented the cars—all four groups—in Las Cruces, New Mexico, and probably drove independently to their objectives. Their routes have been tracked by gas purchases."

"Motivation was strictly ideological?" Dominic asked.

Hendley nodded. "Religious—their version of it, yes. So it would seem."

"Is the Bureau looking for me?" Dominic asked next.

"You'll have to call Gus Werner later today so he can fill out his paperwork, but don't expect any hassles. They have a cover story all cooked up already."

"Okay."

This was Brian: "I assume that this is what we've been training for? To hunt down some of these people before they can do any more bad things over here?"

"That's about right," Hendley confirmed.

"Okay," Brian said. "I can live with that."

"You will go into the field together, covered as people in the banking and trading business. We'll brief you in on the stuff you need to know to maintain that cover. You'll operate mainly out of a virtual office via laptop computer."

"Security?" Dominic wondered.

"That will not be a problem," Bell assured him. "The computers are as secure as we can make them, and they can double as Internet phones for times when voice communications are required. The encryption systems are highly secure," he emphasized.

"Okay," Dominic said dubiously. Pete had told them much the same, but he'd never trusted any encryption system. The FBI's radio systems, secure as they were supposed to be, *had* been cracked once or twice by clever bad guys or by computer geeks, the kind who liked to call the local FBI field office to tell them how smart they were. "What about our legal cover?"

"This is the best we can do," Hendley said, handing a folder across. Dominic took it and flipped it open. His eyeballs widened immediately.

"Damn! How the hell did you get this?" he asked. The only presidential pardon he'd ever seen had been in a legal textbook. This one was effectively blank, except that it was signed. A blank pardon? Damn.

"You tell me," Hendley suggested.

The signature gave him the answer, and his legal education came back. This pardon was bulletproof. Even the Supreme Court couldn't toss this one out,

because the President's sovereign authority to pardon was as explicit as freedom of speech. But it would not be very helpful outside American borders. "So, we'll be doing people here at home?"

"Possibly," Hendley confirmed.

"We're the first shooters on the team?" Brian asked.

"Also correct," the former senator answered.

"How will we be doing it?"

"That will depend on the mission," Bell answered. "For most of them, we have a new weapon that is one hundred percent effective, and very covert. You'll be learning about that, probably tomorrow."

"We in a hurry?" Brian asked further.

"The gloves are all the way off now," Bell told them both. "Your targets will be people who have done, are planning to do, or who support missions aimed at causing serious harm to our country and her citizens. We are not talking about political assassinations. We will only target people who are directly involved in criminal acts."

"There's more to it than that. We're not the official executioners for the state of Texas, are we?" This was Dominic.

"No, you are not. This is outside the legal system. We're going to try to neutralize enemy forces by the elimination of their important personnel. That should at the least disrupt their ability to do business, and we hope it will also force their senior people to show themselves, so that they can be addressed, too."

"So this"—Dominic closed the folder and passed it back to his host—"is a hunting license, with no bag limit and an open season."

"Correct, but within reasonable limits."

"Suits me," Brian observed. Only twenty-four hours earlier, he remembered, he'd been holding a dying little boy in his arms. "When do we go to work?"

Hendley handled the reply.

"Soon."

* * *

"UH, TONY, what are they doing here?"

"Jack, I didn't know they'd be in today."

"Nonresponsive." Jack's blue eyes were unusually hard.

"You've figured out why this place was set up, right?"

And that was enough of an answer. Damn. His own cousins? Well, one was a Marine, and the FBI one—the lawyer one, as Jack had thought of him once—had well and truly whacked some pervert down in Alabama. It had made the papers, and he'd even discussed it briefly with his father. It was hard to disapprove of it, assuming the circumstances had been within the law, but Dominic had always been the sort to play by the rules—that was almost the Ryan family motto. And Brian had probably done something in the Marines to get noticed. Brian had been the football type in his high school, while his brother had been the family debater. But Dominic wasn't a pussy. At least one bad guy had found that out the hard way. Maybe some people needed to learn

that you didn't mess with a big country that had real men in its employ. Every tiger had teeth and claws . . .

. . . and America grew large tigers.

With that settled, he decided to go back looking for 56MoHa@eurocom.net. Maybe the tigers would go looking for more food. That made him a bird dog. But that was okay. Some birds needed their flying rights revoked. He'd arrange to query that "handle" via NSA's taps into the world's cyber communications jungle. Every animal left a trail somewhere, and he'd go sniffing for it. Damn, Jack thought, this job had its diversions after all, now that he saw what the real objective was.

MOHAMMED WAS at his computer. Behind him, the television was going on about the "intelligence failure," which made him smile. It could only have the effect of further diminishing American intelligence capabilities, especially with the operational distractions sure to come from the investigative hearings the American Congress would conduct. It was good to have such allies within the target country. They were not very different from the seniors in his own organization, trying to make the world coincide with their vision rather than with the realities of life. The difference was that his seniors at least listened to him, because he did achieve real results, which, fortunately, coincided with their ethereal visions of death and fear. Even more fortunately, there were people out there willing to cast away their lives to make those visions real. That they were fools mattered not to Mohammed. One used such tools as one had, and, in this case, he had hammers to strike down the nails he saw across the world.

He checked his e-mails to see that Uda had complied with his instructions on the banking business. Strictly speaking, he could have just let the Visa accounts die, but then some officious bank employee might have poked around to see why the last set of bills had not been paid. Better, he thought, to leave some surplus cash in the account and to leave the account active but dormant, because a bank would not mind having surplus cash in its electronic vault, and if *that* account went dormant, no bank employee would do any investigation into it. Such things happened all the time. He made sure that the account number and access code remained hidden on his computer in a document only he knew about.

He considered sending a letter of thanks to his Colombian contacts, but nonessential messages were a waste of time and an invitation to vulnerability. You didn't send messages for fun or for good manners. Only what was strictly necessary, and as brief as possible. He knew enough to fear the American ability to gather electronic intelligence. The Western news media often talked about "intercepts," and so his organization had sworn completely off the satellite telephones they'd used for convenience. Instead they most often used messengers, who relayed information they'd carefully memorized. It was inconveniently slow, but it had the virtue of being completely secure ... unless the messenger was corrupted somehow. Nothing was totally secure. Every system had its weaknesses. But the Internet was the best thing going. Individual accounts were beautifully anonymous, since they could be set up by anonymous third parties, and their identities relayed to the real end users, and

therefore they existed only as electrons or photons—as alike as grains of sand in the Empty Quarter, as secure and anonymous as anything could be. And there were literally billions of Internet messages every day. Perhaps Allah could keep track of them, but only because Allah knew the mind and heart of every man, a capability He had not granted even to the Faithful. And so Mohammed, who rarely stayed in the same location for more than three days, felt free to use his computer at will.

THE BRITISH Security Service, its headquarters located at Thames House, upriver from the Palace of Westminster, maintained literally hundreds of thousands of wiretaps—the privacy laws of the United Kingdom were a lot more liberal than those of the United States . . . for the agencies of the state, that is—four of which applied to Uda bin Sali. One of those was for his cellular phone, and rarely developed much of anything valuable. His electronic accounts at work in the financial district and at home were the most valuable, since he distrusted voice communications and preferred electronic mail for all of his important contacts with the outside world. This included letters to and from home, mostly to reassure his father that the family money was secure. Strangely, he didn't even trouble himself to use an encryption program, assuming that the sheer volume of message traffic on the 'Net would preclude official surveillance. Besides, there were many people in the capital-preservation business in London—a lot of the city's valuable real estate was actually titled to foreigners—and money-trafficking was something that even most of the players found boring. The money alphabet had only a few elements, after all, and its poetry did little to move the soul.

But his e-mail line never chirped without an echo chirp at Thames House, and those fragments of signals went to GCHQ—Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham, north and west of London, from which they were relayed via satellite to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and from there to Fort Meade, Maryland, via fiber-optic cable, for inspection mainly by one of the supercomputers in the headquarters buildings' enormous and strangely dungeon like basement. From there, material regarded as important went to CIA's Langley, Virginia, headquarters, after transiting a certain building's flat roof, after which the signals were digested by yet another set of computers.

"Something new here, from Mr. Fifty-six," Junior said almost to himself, meaning 56MoHa@eurocom.net. He had to think for a few seconds. It was mostly numbers. But one of the numbers was the electronic address of a European commercial bank. Mr. 56 wanted some money, or so it appeared, and now that they knew that Mr. 56 was a "player," they had a new bank account to look at. That would happen the following day. It might even develop a name and a mailing address, depending on the individual bank's in-house procedures. But probably not. All the international banks were gravitating toward identical procedures, the better to maintain their competitive advantages, one over the other, until the playing field was as flat as a football pitch, as everyone adopted the most depositor-friendly procedures possible. Every person had his own version of reality, but everyone's money was equally green—or orange in the case of the Euro, decorated as it was with buildings never built and bridges never crossed. Jack

made appropriate notes and shut his machine down. He'd be having dinner tonight with Brian and Dominic, just to catch up with family stuff. There was a new seafood restaurant on U.S. 29 that he wanted to check out. And his working day was done. Jack made a few notes for the next Monday morning—he didn't expect to be in on Sunday, national emergency or not. Uda bin Sali merited a very close examination. Exactly how close, he wasn't sure, though he'd begun to suspect that Sali would be meeting one or two people he knew well.

"HOW SOON?" It had been a bad question from Brian Caruso, but coming from Hendley's mouth it had rather more immediacy.

"Well, we have to put a plan of some sort together," Sam Granger replied. For everyone here, it was the same. What had been a slam dunk in the abstract became more complex when you had to face the reality of it. "First, we need a set of targets who make sense, and then a plan for servicing them in a way that also makes some sort of sense."

"Operational concept?" Tom Davis wondered aloud.

"The idea is to move logically—from our point of view, but to an outsider it should appear random—from target to target, making people stick their heads up like prairie dogs so's we can take them one at a time. It's simple enough in concept, but more difficult in the practical world." It was a lot easier to move chess pieces around a board than it was to manage people to move, on command, to the squares desired, a fact often lost on movie directors. Something as prosaic as a missed bus connection or a traffic accident, or the need to take a piss, could play hell with the most elegant theoretical plan. The world, one had to remember, was analog, not digital, in the way it operated. And "analog" actually meant "sloppy."

"So, you saying we need a psychiatrist?"

Sam shook his head. "They have some of those at Langley. It hasn't helped them very much."

"Ain't that the truth." Davis laughed. But this was not a time for humor. "Speed," he observed.

"Yes, the faster the better," Granger agreed. "Deny them the time to react and think."

"Also, better to deny them the ability to know anything's going on," said Hendley.

"Make people disappear?"

"Too many people have apparent heart attacks, and somebody'll get suspicious."

"You suppose they have any of our agencies penetrated?" the former senator wondered aloud. The other two in the room winced at the suggestion.

"Depends on what you mean." Davis took the question. "A penetration agent? That would be hard to arrange, absent a really juicy bribe, and even then it would be hard to set up, unless the Agency had a guy who went to them looking for a bankroll. Maybe that is a possibility," he added after a moment's reflection. "The Russians were always niggardly with money—they didn't have that much hard currency to toss around. These people, hell, they have more than they need. So . . . maybe . . ."

"But that works for us," Hendley thought. "Not too many people at the Agency know we exist. So, if they start thinking CIA is offing people, they can use their penetration agent, if any, to tell them it's not happening?"

"So then their expertise is counterproductive to them?" Granger speculated.

"They'd think 'Mossad,' wouldn't they?"

"Who else?" Davis asked in return. "Their own ideology works against them." It had been a ploy rarely—but sometimes successfully—used against KGB. Nothing like making the other guy feel clever. And if it made it tough for the Israelis, nobody in the American intelligence community would lose much sleep over it. "Ally" or not, the Israelis were not entirely beloved by their American counterparts. Even the Saudi spooks played with them, because national interests often overlapped in the most unlikely of ways. And for this series of plays, Americans would be looking out only for the mother country, and doing so completely off the books.

"The targets we have identified, where are they?" Hendley asked.

"All in Europe. They tend to be bankers or communications people. They move money around, or they handle messages, do briefings. One seems to gather intelligence. He travels a lot. Maybe he scouted locations for yesterday, but we haven't been on him long enough to know. We have some targets who do comms, but we want to leave those alone. They're too valuable. The other concern is to avoid targets whose demise will tell the opposition how we twigged to them. It has to appear random. I think for some we set it up in such a way that the opposition think they've gone over the hill. Took the money and bugged out—grabbed a piece of the good life and dropped off the earth. We can even leave e-mail messages like that behind."

"And if they have a code to show it's their messages, and not somebody who's taken charge of their computers?" Davis asked.

"That works for us as much as it works against us. It's a natural play, to arrange your disappearance in such a way as to suggest you've been whacked. Nobody's going to come looking for a dead man, right? They must have that kind of concern. They hate us for corrupting their society, and so they must know that their people can be corrupted. They will have brave ones, and they'll have cowardly ones. These people are not unified in their outlook. They're not robots. Some will be true believers, sure, but others are in it for the ride, the fun, the glamour of what they're doing, but when it comes to the nut-crunching time, life will be more attractive to them than death." Granger knew people and motivations, and, no, they were not robots. In fact, the smarter they were, the less likely they were to be motivated by the simple. Most of the Muslim extremists, interestingly enough, were either in Europe or had been educated there. In a comfortable womb, they'd been isolated by their ethnic background—but also liberated from the repressive societies from which they'd sprung. Revolution had always been a creature of rising expectations—not a product of oppression, but of proto-liberation. It was a time of personal confusion and a time for seeking after identity, a period of psychological vulnerability when an anchor was needed and grasped at, whatever the anchor happened to be. It was sad to have to kill people who were more lost than anything else, but they'd chosen their path freely, if not intelligently, and if that path led to the wrong place, that was not the fault of

their victims, was it?

THE FISH was pretty good. Jack tried the rockfish, the striped bass of the Chesapeake Bay. Brian opted for the salmon, and Dominic the crusted sea perch. Brian had chosen the wine, a French white from the Loire Valley.

"So, how the hell did you get here?" Dominic asked his cousin.

"I looked around, and this place interested me. So, I looked into it, and the more I found out, the less I could figure out. So, I came over and talked to Gerry, and I talked my way into a job."

"Doing what?"

"They call it analysis. It's more like mind reading. One guy in particular. Arabian name, plays with money in London. Mainly family money, dicks around with it, mainly trying to protect his father's pile—it's a nice pile," Jack assured his companions. "He trades real estate. Nice way to preserve capital. The London market isn't going down anytime soon. The Duke of Westminster is one of the richest guys in the world. He owns most of central London. Our little friend is emulating His Grace."

"What else?"

"What else is that he's fed money into a certain bank account that's the source of payment for a bunch of Visa cards, four of whose owners you guys met yesterday." It wasn't a completed circle yet, but that wouldn't take the FBI much longer to close it up tight. "He also talked in his e-mails about the 'wonderful events' of yesterday."

"How did you get access to his e-mails?" Dominic asked.

"I can't say. You'll have to get that from somebody else."

"About ten miles that way, I bet," Dominic said, pointing northeast. The spook community tended to work on lines that were ordinarily forbidden to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In any case, Cousin Jack just maintained a fairly blank look that would not have won him any money at a high-stakes poker table.

"So, he funds bad guys?" Brian asked.

"Correct."

"That does not make him a good guy," Brian developed the thought a little further.

"Probably not," Junior agreed.

"Maybe we'll meet him. What else can you tell us?" Brian continued.

"Expensive place, a town house on Berkeley Square—nice part of London, couple of blocks from the U.S. Embassy. Likes to use whores for his sexual recreation. He especially likes one girl named Rosalie Parker. The British Security Service keeps an eye on him, and they regularly debrief his main squeeze—the Parker girl. He pays her top dollar, in cash. Miss Parker is supposed to be popular with rich people. I suppose she slings it pretty good," Jack added with distaste. "There's a new photo on the computer file. He's about our age, olive complexion, a sort of beard—the kind a guy might have to look sexy, you know? Drives an Aston Martin. Hot car. Usually goes around London in cabs, though. He doesn't have a place in the country, but he takes country trips on weekends to getaway hotels, mostly with Miss Parker or another rent-a-broad. Works downtown in the financial district. Has an office

in the Lloyd's of London building—third floor, I think. He makes three or four trades per week. Mainly, I think he just sits there and watches the TV and stock tickers, reads the papers, stuff like that."

"So, he's a spoiled rich kid who wants some excitement in his life?" Dominic summarized.

"Correct. Except maybe he likes to go out and play in the traffic."

"That's dangerous, Jack," Brian pointed out. "It could even get somebody Excedrin Headache number three-five-six." Brian was wearing his game face, in anticipation of meeting the guy who had financed the death of David Prentiss.

And suddenly Jack thought that Miss Rosalie Parker of London might not be getting all that many more Louis Vuitton bags. Well, she probably had a nice retirement plan already arranged if she was as smart as the Security Service and Special Branch thought she was.

"How's your dad doing?" Dominic asked.

"Writing his memoirs," Jack answered. "I wonder how much he'll be able to put in? You know, even Mom doesn't know much about what he did at CIA, and the little bit I know—well, there's a lot of stuff he can't write about. Even the things that are sort of out in the public eye, he can't confirm they really happened."

"Like getting the head of the KGB to defect. That's gotta be some story. That guy's been on TV. I guess he's still pissed at your dad for keeping him from taking the Soviet Union over. Probably thinks he could have saved it."

"Maybe so. Dad has a lot of secrets, all right. So do some of his pals from the Agency. One guy in particular, named Clark. Scary guy, but him and Dad are pretty tight. I think he's in England now, boss of that new secret counterterrorism bunch that the press talks about every year or so, the 'men of black,' they call 'em."

"They're real," Brian said. "Out at Hereford in Wales. They're not that secret. The senior guys from Force Recon have been out there to train with 'em. Never been there myself, but I know two guys who have. Them and the Brit SAS. They're serious troops."

"How far inside were you, Aldo?" his brother asked.

"Hey, the special-operations community is pretty tight. We cross-train, share new equipment and stuff. Most important part is when we sit down with beers and share war stories. Everybody has a different way of looking at problems, and, you know, sometimes the other guy has a better idea than you have. The Rainbow team—that's the 'men of black' the newsies talk about—they're very smart, but they've learned a thing or two from us over the years. Thing is, they're smart enough to listen to new ideas. The boss man, this Clark guy, he's supposed to be very smart."

"He is. I've met him. Dad thinks he's the cat's ass." He paused before going on. "Hendley knows him, too. Why he isn't here, I don't know. I asked the first day I came here. Maybe because he's too old."

"He's a shooter?"

"I asked Dad once. Dad said he couldn't say. That's how he says yes. I guess I caught him at a weak moment. Funny thing about Dad, he can't lie worth a damn."

"I guess that's why he loved being President so much."

"Yeah, I think that's the main reason he quit. He figured Uncle Robby could handle it better than he did."

"Until that cracker bastard wasted his ass," Dominic observed. The shooter, one Duane Farmer, was currently sitting on death row in Mississippi. "The last of the Klan," the newspapers called him, and so he was, at age sixty-eight, just a damned-by-everybody bigot who could not abide the thought of a black President, and had used his grandfather's World War One revolver to make it so.

"That was bad," John Patrick Ryan, Jr., agreed. "You know, except for him, I wouldn't have been born. It's a big family story. Uncle Robby's version of it was pretty good. He loved telling stories. Him and Dad were pretty tight. After Robby got wasted, the political pukes were running around in circles, some of them wanted Dad to pick up the flag again, like, but he didn't do it, and so, I guess, he helped that Kealty guy get elected. Dad can't stand him. That's the other thing he never learned, how to be nice to people he hates. He just didn't like living at the White House very much."

He was good at it, being President, Dominic thought.

"You tell him that. Mom didn't mind leaving, either. That First Lady stuff wrecked her doctor work, and she *really* hated what it did with Kyle and Katie. You know that old saying, the most dangerous place in the world is between a mom and her kids? It's for real, guys. Only time I ever saw her lose her temper—Dad does that a lot more than Mom does—was when somebody told her that her official duties required her not to go to Kyle's pageant at his day-care center. Jeez, she really came unglued. Anyway, the nannies helped—and the newspeople hammered her about that, how it wasn't American and all that. You know, if anybody had ever taken a picture of Dad taking a piss, I bet someone would have said he wasn't doing it right."

"That's what critics are for, to tell you how much smarter they are than the person they're criticizing."

"In the Bureau, Aldo, they're called lawyers, or the Office of Professional Responsibility," Dominic informed the table. "They have their sense of humor surgically removed before they join up."

"The Marines have reporters, too—and I bet not one of them ever went through boot camp." At least the guys who worked in the IG had been through the Basic School.

"I guess we should cheer up," Dominic announced, holding up his wineglass. "Ain't nobody going to criticize us."

"And live," Jack added with a chuckle. *Damn,* he thought, *what the hell is Dad going to say when he finds out about me?*

CHAPTER 16

AND THE PURSUING HORSES

SUNDAY WAS a day of rest for most people, and at The Campus it was much the same, except for the security people. Gerry Hendley believed that maybe God had had a point, that seven-day schedules accomplished a lot less than adding 16.67 percent to a man's weekly productivity. It also dulled the brain by denying it free-form exercise, or just the luxury of doing nothing at all.

But today it was different, of course. Today they'd be planning real black operations for the first time. The Campus had been active just over nineteen months, and that time had mostly been spent in establishing their cover as a trading and arbitrage business. His department heads had taken the Acela trains back and forth to New York many times to meet their white-world counterparts, and though it had seemed slow at the time, in retrospect it had been very quickly indeed that they'd made their reputation in the money-management community. They'd hardly ever shown the world their real results, of course, from speculating on currencies and a few very carefully chosen stock issues, sometimes even insider trades on companies which themselves didn't know the business that was coming their way. Staying covert had been the overall objective, but since The Campus had to be self-supporting, it also had to generate real income. In World War II, the Americans had peopled its black-operations establishments with lawyers, while the Brits had used bankers. Both had proven to be good for screwing people . . . and killing them. It had to be something about the way they looked at the world, Hendley thought over his coffee.

He gazed at the others: Jerry Rounds, his head of Strategic Planning; Sam Granger, his chief of Operations. Even before the building had been completed, the three of them had been thinking about the shape of the world, and how a few of the corners could best be rounded off. Rick Bell was here, too, his chief of Analysis, the one who spent his working days sorting through the "take" from NSA and CIA, and trying to find meaning in the flood of unrelated information—aided, of course, by the thirty-five thousand analysts at Langley, Fort Meade, and other such places. Like all senior analysts, he also liked to frolic in the operations playground, and here that was actually possible, since The Campus was too small to have been overtaken by its own bureaucracy. He and Hendley worried that it might not always be so, and both made sure that no empires were being built.

To the best of their knowledge, theirs was the only institution in all the world like this. And it had been set up in such a way that it could be erased from the landscape in a matter of two or three months. Since Hendley Associates did not invite outside investors, their public profile was low enough

that the radar never spotted their machinations, and, in any case, the community they were in did not advertise. It was easy to hide in a field in which everyone did the same, and nobody ratted on anyone else, unless very badly stung. And The Campus didn't sting. At least not with money.

"So," Hendley began, "are we ready?"

"Yes," Rounds said for Granger. Sam nodded soberly and smiled.

"We're ready," Granger announced officially. "Our two boys have earned their spurs in a way we never anticipated."

"They earned 'em, all right," Bell agreed. "And the Ryan boy has identified a good first target, this Sali fellow. The events of Friday have generated a lot of message traffic. They turn out a lot of cheerleaders. A lot of them are stringers and wanna-bes, but even if we pop one of them by mistake it's no great loss. I have the first four all lined up. So, Sam, do you have a plan for dealing with them?"

That was Davis's cue. "We're going to do reconnaissance by fire. After we whack one or two, we'll see what reaction, if any, results, and we will take our guidance from there. I agree that Mr. Sali looks like a profitable first target. Question is, is his elimination going to be overt or covert?"

"Explain," Hendley ordered.

"Well, if he's found dead on the street, that's one thing. If he disappears with his daddy's money and leaves behind a note saying that he wants to stop what he's doing and just retire, that's something else," Sam explained.

"Kidnapping? It's dangerous." The Metropolitan Police in London had a closure rate on kidnappings that nibbled at one hundred percent. That was a dangerous game to play, especially on their first move.

"Well, we can hire an actor, dress him up right, fly him to New York Kennedy, and then just have him disappear. In fact, we dispose of the body and keep the money. How much does he have access to, Rick?"

"Direct access? Hell, it's over three hundred million bucks."

"Might look good in the corporate exchequer," Sam speculated. "And it wouldn't hurt his dad much, would it?"

"His father's money—all of it? Try the sunny side of three billion," Bell answered. "He'll miss it, but it wouldn't break him. And given his opinion of his son, it might even develop as good cover for our operation," he hypothesized.

"I am not recommending this as a course of action, but it is an alternative," Granger concluded.

It had been talked about before, of course. It was too obvious a play to escape notice. And three hundred million dollars would have looked just fine in a Campus account, say in the Bahamas or Liechtenstein. You could hide money anywhere that had telephone lines. It was just electrons anyway, not gold bricks.

Hendley was surprised that Sam had brought this up so soon. Maybe he wanted to get a read on his colleagues. They were clearly not overcome with emotion at the thought of ending this Sali's life, but to steal from him in the process pushed some very different buttons. A man's conscience could be a funny thing, Gerry concluded.

"Let's set that aside for the moment. How hard will the hit be?" Hendley

asked.

"With what Rick Pasternak gave us? It's child's play, so long as our people don't make a complete hash of it. Even then the worst thing that can happen is that it'll look like a mugging that went wrong," Granger told them.

"What if our guy drops the pen?" Rounds worried.

"It's a pen. You can write with it. It'll pass inspection with any cop in the world," Granger replied confidently. He reached in his pocket and passed his sample around the table. "This one's cold," he assured them.

They'd all been briefed in. To all appearances, it was an expensive ballpoint, gold-plated, with obsidian on the clip. By depressing the clip and turning the nib cover, you switched the point from a real pen to a hypodermic with a lethal transfer agent. It would paralyze the victim in fifteen to twenty seconds, and kill him in three minutes, with no cure, and a very transient signature in the body. As the pen went around the conference table, the executives invariably felt the hypo point, and then experimented with using it for a simulated hit, mostly as an ice-pick strike, though Rounds handled it like a diminutive sword.

"It would be nice to try it on a dry run," he observed quietly.

"Anyone here want to volunteer as the victim?" Granger asked the table. No heads nodded. The mood of the room didn't surprise him much. It was time for a sober pause, the sort of thing that comes over a man when he signs his application for life insurance, a product that is valuable only if you are dead, which rather takes the fun out of the moment.

"Fly them to London together?" Hendley asked.

"Correct." Granger nodded, and turned back to his business voice. "We have them scout out the target, pick their moment, and make their hit."

"And wait to see the results?" Rounds asked, rhetorically.

"Correct. Then they can fly off to the next target. The whole operation should not take more than a week. Then we fly them home and await developments. If somebody taps into his money pile after his demise, we'll probably know, right?"

"We ought to," Bell confirmed. "And if anyone purloins it, we'll know where it goes."

"Excellent," Granger observed. After all, that was what "reconnaissance-by-fire" meant.

THEY WOULDN'T be here long, the twins both thought. They were quartered in adjoining rooms at the local Holiday Inn, and this Sunday afternoon they were both watching TV with one guest.

"How's your mom?" Jack asked.

"Fine, doing a lot of stuff with the local schools—parochial ones. A little more than a teacher's aide, but not actually teaching. Dad's working some new project—supposedly Boeing is back looking at an SST, supersonic airliner. Dad says they'll probably never build it, unless Washington coughs up a lot of money, but with the Concorde retired people are thinking about it again, and Boeing likes to keep their engineers busy. They're a little nervous about the Airbus people, and they don't want to be caught with their pants down if the French start getting ambitious."

"How was the Corps?" Jack asked Brian.

"The Corps is the Corps, cuz. It just rolls along, keeping busy for the next war that'll come along."

"Dad was worried when you went to Afghanistan."

"It was a little exciting. The people there, they're tough, and they're not dumb, but they're not trained that well, either. So, when we bumped heads with 'em, we came out ahead. If we saw something that looked hinky, we called air in on it, and that usually took care of things."

"How many?"

"How many did we take out? Some. Not enough, but some. The Green Berets went in first, and the Afghans learned from that that a stand-up fight was not in their interest. Mostly, we did pursuit and reconnaissance, birddogging for the airedales. We had a CIA guy with us, and a signals-intelligence detachment. The bad guys used their radios a little too much. When we got a hit, we'd move in to about a mile or so and give it a look-see, and if it was interesting enough we'd call in air and scramble the hell out of it. Scary to watch," Brian summarized.

"I bet." Jack popped open a can of beer.

"So this Sali guy, the one with the girlfriend, Rosalie Parker?" Dominic asked. Like most cops, he had a good memory for names. "You said that he was jumpin' up and down about the shootings?"

"Yup," Jack said. "Thought they were just swell."

"So who was the cheerleading with?"

"Pals he e-mails to. The Brits have his phones tapped, and the e-mails—well, as I said, I can't tell you about the e-mails. Those European phone systems aren't anywhere near as secure as people think—I mean, everybody knows about intercepting cell phones and stuff, but the cops over there pull stuff we can't do here. The Brits especially, they use intercepts to track the IRA guys. I heard that the rest of the European countries are even freer to act."

"They are," Dominic assured him. "At the Academy, we had some in the national Academy program—that's like a doctoral course for cops. They'd talk about that sort of thing after you got a few drinks into them. So, this Sali guy liked what those mutts did, eh?"

"Like his team won the Super Bowl," Jack replied at once.

"And he bankrolls them?" Brian asked.

"That's right."

"Interesting," was all Brian had to say after getting that question answered.

HE COULD have stayed another night, but he had things to do in the morning, and so he was driving back to London in his Aston Martin Vanquish, Bowland black. Its interior was charcoal, and its handmade twelve-cylinder engine was pushing out most of its 460 horsepower as he headed east on the M4 at a hundred miles per hour. In its way, the car was better than sex. It was a pity Rosalie wasn't with him, but—he looked over at his companion—Mandy was an agreeable bed warmer, if a little too skinny for his usual tastes. If only she could put some meat on her bones, but European fashion did not encourage that. The fools who determined the rules of women's bodies were probably pederasts who wished them all to look like young boys. Madness, Sali thought.

Pure madness.

But Mandy enjoyed riding in this car, more than Rosalie did. Rosalie, sadly, was fearful of driving fast, not as trusting of his skills as she should have been. He hoped he could take this car home—he'd fly it there, of course. His brother had a fast car of his own, but the dealer had told him that this four-wheeled rocket topped out at over three hundred kilometers per hour—that was 196 miles per hour—and the Kingdom had some fine, flat, straight roads. Okay, so he had a cousin who flew Tornado fighters for the Royal Saudi Air Force, but this car was *his,* and that made all the difference. Unfortunately, the police here in England would not allow him to exercise it properly—one more traffic ticket and he might lose his driver's license, the spoilsports—but at home there would be no such problems. And after seeing what it could *really* do, he'd fly it back to Gatwick and use it to excite women, which was almost as good as just driving it. Certainly Mandy was properly excited by it. He'd have to get her a nice Vuitton bag and have it messengered to her flat tomorrow. It didn't hurt to be generous with women, and Rosalie needed to learn that she had some competition.

Racing into town as rapidly as the traffic and the police allowed, he zoomed past Harrods, through the vehicle tunnel, and past the Duke of Wellington's house before turning right onto Curzon Street and then left onto Berkeley Square. A flash of his lights told the man he paid to guard his parking place to move his car, and he was able to park just in front of his three-story brownstone town house. With continental manners, he got out of the car and raced around to open Mandy's door and gallantly escorted her up the steps to the huge oak front door, and, smiling, held it open for her. In a few minutes, she'd be opening an even nicer door for him, after all.

"THE LITTLE bugger's back," Ernest observed, making the proper note of the time on his clipboard. The two Security Service officers were in a British Telecom van parked fifty yards away. They'd been there for about two hours. This young Saudi madman drove as though he were the reincarnation of Jimmy Clark.

"I suppose he had a better weekend than we did," Peter agreed. Then he turned to punch the buttons to activate various wiretap systems in the Georgian town house. These included three cameras whose tapes were collected every third day by a penetration team. "He is a vigorous little bastard."

"Probably uses Viagra," Ernest thought aloud, and somewhat enviously.

"One must be a good sport, Ernie, my lad. It will cost him two weeks of our pay. And for what she is about to receive, she will surely be truly grateful."

"Bugger," Ernest observed sourly.

"She's thin, but not *that* thin, boyo." Peter had himself a good laugh. They knew what Mandy Davis charged her "tricks," and, like men everywhere, they wondered what special things she might do to earn it, all while holding her in contempt. As counterintelligence officers, they did not quite have the degree of sympathy a seasoned police constable might have had for relatively unskilled women trying to earn their way. Seven hundred fifty pounds for an evening's visit, and two thousand pounds for a complete night. Exactly what

her custom was for a full weekend, no one had asked.

They both picked up the earphones to make sure the microphones worked, switching channels to track them through the house.

"He's an impatient sod," Ernest observed. "Suppose she'll stay the night?"

"I'll wager she doesn't, Ernie. Then maybe he'll get on the bloody phone and we can get something useful off the bastard."

"Bloody wog," Ernest muttered, to his partner's agreement. They both thought Mandy was prettier than Rosalie. Fit for a government minister.

THEY WERE correct in their judgment. Mandy Davis left at 10:23 A.M., stopping at the door for one last kiss, and a smile certain to break any man's heart, and then she walked downhill on Berkeley Street heading toward Piccadilly, where she did not turn right at the Boots drugstore for the Underground station on the corner of Piccadilly and Stratton, but rather caught a cab that took her downtown, to New Scotland Yard. There, she'd be debriefed by a friendly young detective whom she rather fancied, though she was too skilled in her profession to mix business of the business sort with business of the pleasure sort. Uda was a vigorous john, and a generous one, but whatever illusions existed in their relationship were his, not hers.

THE NUMBERS came up on the LED register, and were saved and time-stamped in their laptop computers—there were two of them, and at least one more at Thames House. On each of Sali's phones was a pin register that noted the destination of every call he made. A similar device did the same for all incoming calls, while three tape machines recorded every word. This one was an overseas call, to a mobile phone.

"He's calling his friend Mohammed," Peter observed. "I wonder what they'll be talking about."

"At least ten minutes of his adventure this weekend, I'll wager."

"Yes, he does like to talk," Peter agreed.

"SHE'S TOO skinny, but she is an accomplished harlot, my friend. There is something to be said for unbelieving women," Sali assured his colleague. She and Rosalie really liked him. He could always tell.

"I am glad to hear that, Uda," Mohammed said patiently from Paris. "Now, to business."

"As you wish, my friend."

"The American operation went well."

"Yes, I saw. How many in total?"

"Eighty-three dead and a hundred forty-three wounded. It could have been more, but one of the teams made an error. More importantly, the news reports were everywhere. All they had on TV today was coverage of our holy martyrs and their attacks."

"That is truly wonderful. A great blow for Allah."

"Oh, yes. Now, I need some money transferred into my account."

"How much?"

"A hundred thousand British pounds should do for now."

"I can have that done by ten in the morning." In fact, he could have done it

an hour or two faster, but he planned on sleeping in the following morning. Mandy had tired him out. Now he was lying in bed, drinking French wine and smoking a cigarette, watching the TV without getting too involved. He wanted to catch Sky News at the top of the hour. “Is that all?”

“Yes, for now.”

“It shall be done,” he told Mohammed.

“Excellent. Good night, Uda.”

“Wait, I have a question—”

“Not now. We must be cautious,” Mohammed warned. Using a mobile phone had its dangers. He heard a sigh in reply.

“As you wish. Good night.” And both killed their respective phones.

“THE PUB out in Somerset was rather nice—the Blue Boar, it was,” said Mandy. “The food was decent. Uda had turkey and two pints on Friday night. Last night we dined at a restaurant across from the hotel, The Orchard. He had Chateaubriand and I had the Dover Sole. We went out to shop briefly on Saturday afternoon. He really didn’t want to go out much, mostly just wanted to stay in bed.” The cute detective was taping it all, plus making notes, as was another policeman. They both were being as clinical as she was.

“Did he talk about anything? The news on TV or in the papers?”

“He watched the news on TV. But he didn’t speak a word. I said that it was appalling, all that killing, but all he did was grunt. He can be the most heartless chap, though he’s always nice to me. We’ve still not had a cross word,” she told them, caressing both with her blue eyes.

It was hard for the cops to regard her with professionalism. She had the looks of a fashion model, though at five foot one she was too short for it. There was also a sweetness about her that must have stood her in good stead. But inside was a heart of pure ice. It was sad, but not really their concern.

“Did he make any telephone calls?”

She shook her head. “None at all. He didn’t bring his mobile phone this weekend. He told me that he was all mine and I wouldn’t have to share him with anyone else this weekend. That was a first. Other than that, it was the usual.” She thought of something else: “He does bathe more now. I had him shower both days, and he didn’t even complain. Well, I helped. I went into the shower with him.” She gave them a coquettish smile. That pretty much ended the interview.

“Thank you, Miss Davis. As always, you’ve been very helpful.”

“Just doing my bit. You think he’s a terrorist or something?” she had to ask.

“No. If you were in any danger, we’d give you fair warning.”

Mandy reached into her Louis Vuitton purse and pulled out a knife with a five-inch blade. It wasn’t legal for her to carry such a thing concealed, but in her line of work she needed one sure friend to accompany her, and the detectives understood. She probably knew how to make proper use of it, they surmised. “I can look after myself,” she assured them both. “But Uda isn’t like that. He’s actually rather a gentle man. That’s one thing you get to know in my business, reading men. Unless he’s a bloody fine actor, he’s not a dangerous sort. He plays with money, not guns.”

Both cops took that pronouncement seriously. She was right—if there was

anything a hooker was good at, it was reading men. Those who couldn't often died before reaching twenty.

After Mandy took a cab home, the two Special Branch detectives wrote up what she'd told them, and then e-mailed it to Thames House, where it became another entry in the Security Service files on the young Arab.

BRIAN AND Dominic arrived at The Campus at 8:00 A.M. on the dot. Their newly issued security passes allowed them to take the elevator up to the top floor, where they sat and drank coffee for half an hour until Gerry Hendley showed up. Both of the twins sprang to attention, especially Brian.

"Good morning," the former senator said on his way past, then he stopped. "You want to talk to Sam Granger first, I think. Rick Pasternak will be here at around ninefifteen. Sam should be in any time now. I have to see to my desk right now, okay?"

"Yes, sir," Brian assured him. What the hell, the coffee wasn't bad.

Granger came out of the elevator just two minutes later. "Hey, guys. Follow me." And they did.

Granger's office was not as large as Hendley's, but it wasn't a trainee's cubbyhole, either. He pointed to the two visitors' chairs and hung up his coat.

"How soon will you be ready for an assignment?"

"How does today grab you?" Dominic asked in reply.

Granger smiled at the reply, but overly eager people could worry him. On the other hand, three days before . . . maybe eagerness was not so bad a thing after all.

"Is there a plan?" Brian asked.

"Yeah. We worked on it over the weekend." Granger started with the operational concept: reconnaissance by fire.

"Makes sense," Brian observed. "Where do we do it?"

"On the street, probably. I'm not going to tell you how to perform a mission. I will tell you what we want done. How you do it is going to be up to you. Now, for your first target we have a good crib sheet on his location and habits. It will just be a matter of identifying the right target and deciding how to do the job."

Do the job, Dominic thought. Like something from *The Godfather.*

"Who is he and why?"

"His name is Uda bin Sali, he's twenty-six, he lives in London."

The twins exchanged amused looks. "I should have known," Dominic said. "Jack told us about him. He's the money puke who likes hookers right?"

Granger opened the manila file he'd picked up on the way in and handed it across. "Photos of Sali and his two girlfriends. Location and photos of his house in London. Here's one of him in his car."

"Aston Martin," Dominic observed. "Nice wheels."

"He works in the financial district, has an office at the Lloyd's insurance building." More photos. "One complication. He usually has a tail. The Security Service—MI5—keeps an eye on him, but the troop they have assigned seems to be a rookie, and there's only one. So, when you make your hit, keep that in mind."

"Not using a gun, are we?" Brian asked.

"No, we have something better. No noise, nice and covert. You'll see when Rick Pasternak gets here. No firearms for this mission. European countries don't like guns much, and hand-to-hand is too dangerous. The idea is that it looks like he just had a heart attack."

"Residue?" Dominic asked.

"You can ask Rick about that. He'll give you chapter and verse."

"What are we using to deliver the drug?"

"One of these." Granger opened his desk drawer and took out the "safe" blue pen. He handed it across and told them how it worked.

"Sweet," Brian observed. "Just stab him in the ass, like?"

"Exactly right. It transfers seven milligrams of the drug—it's called succinylcholine—and that pretty much takes care of business. The subject collapses, is brain-dead in a few minutes, and all-the-way dead in less than ten."

"What about medical attention? What if there's an ambulance just across the street?"

"Rick says it won't matter unless he's in an operating room with doctors standing right at his side."

"Fair enough." Brian picked up the photo of their first target, looking at it, but really seeing young David Prentiss. "Tough luck, buddy."

"I SEE our friend had a nice weekend," Jack was saying to his computer. This day's report included a photo of a Miss Mandy Davis, along with a transcript of her interview with the Metropolitan Police Special Branch. "She's a looker."

"Not cheap, either," Wills observed from his workstation.

"How much longer has Sali got?" Jack asked him.

"Jack, it's better not to speculate on that," Wills warned.

"Because the two hitters—hell, Tony, they're cousins of mine."

"I do not know much about that, and I do not want to find out. The less we know, the less problems we can have. Period," he emphasized.

"You say so, man," Jack responded. "But whatever sympathy I might have had for this prick died when he started cheerleading and funding people with guns. There are lines you can't cross."

"Yeah, Jack, there are. Be careful that you don't step too far yourself."

Jack Ryan, Jr., thought about that for a second. Did he want to be an assassin? Probably not, but there were people who needed killing, and Uda bin Sali had crossed over into that category. If his cousins were going to take him down, they were just doing the Lord's work—or his country's work, which, to the way he'd been brought up, was pretty much the same thing.

"THAT FAST, Doc?" Dominic asked.

Pasternak nodded. "That fast."

"That reliable?" Brian inquired next.

"Five milligrams is enough. This pen delivers seven. If anyone survives, it would have to be a miracle. Unfortunately, it will be a very unpleasant death, but that can't be helped. I mean, we could use botulism toxin—it's a very fast-acting neurotoxin—but that leaves residue in the blood that would come out in a postmortem toxicology scan. Succinylcholine metabolizes very nicely.

Detecting it would take another miracle, unless the pathologist knows exactly what to look for, and that is unlikely."

"How fast again?"

"Twenty to thirty seconds, depending on how close you get to a major blood vessel, then the agent will cause total paralysis. Won't even be able to blink his eyes. He will not be able to move his diaphragm, so no breathing, no oxygen through the lungs. His heart will continue to beat, but since it will be the organ using the most oxygen, the heart will go ischemic in a matter of seconds—that means that without oxygen, the heart tissue will start to die from lack of oxygen. The pain will be massive. Ordinarily, the body has a reserve supply of oxygen. How much depends on physical condition—the obese have less oxygen reserves than the slender among us. Anyway, the heart will be the first. It will try to continue beating, but that only makes the pain worse. Brain death will occur in three to six minutes. Until then, he'll be able to hear but not see—"

"Why not?" Brian asked.

"The eyelids probably will close. We're talking total paralysis here. So, he'll be lying there, in enormous pain, unable to move at all, with his heart trying to pump unoxygenated blood until his brain cells expire from anoxia. After that, it's theoretically possible to keep the body alive—muscle cells last the longest without oxygen—but the brain will be gone. Okay, it's not as sure as a bullet in the brain, but it makes no noise, and leaves virtually no evidence. When the heart cells die, they generate enzymes that we look for in a probable heart attack. So, whatever pathologist gets the body to post will think 'heart attack,' or 'neurological seizure'—a brain tumor can cause that—and maybe he'll carve the brain up to look for one. But as soon as the blood work comes back, the enzyme test will say 'heart attack,' and that should settle matters right then and there. The blood work will not show the succinylcholine because it metabolizes even after death. They will have an unexpected massive heart attack on their hands, and those happen every day. They'll run his blood for cholesterol and some other risk factors, but nothing will change the fact that he's dead from a cause they'll never figure out."

"Jesus," Dominic breathed. "Doc, how the hell did you get into this business?"

"My little brother was a vice president at Cantor Fitzgerald," was all he had to say.

"So we want to be careful with these pens, eh?" Brian asked. The doc's reason was good enough for him.

"I would," Pasternak advised them.

CHAPTER 17

AND THE LITTLE RED FOX, AND THE FIRST FENCE

THEY FLEW out of Dulles International Airport on a British Airways flight, which turned out to be a 747 whose control surfaces their own father had designed twenty-seven years earlier. It occurred to Dominic that he'd been in diapers then, and that the world had turned over quite a few times from that day to this.

Both had brand-new passports in their own names. All other relevant documents were in their laptops, fully encrypted, along with modems and communications software, also fully encrypted. Aside from that, they were casually dressed, like most others in the first-class section. The stewardesses fluttered about efficiently, giving everyone munchies, along with white wine for both of the brothers. As they got to altitude, the food was decent—about the best thing that can be said about airline food—and so was the movie selection: Brian picked *Independence Day* while Dominic settled for *The Matrix*. Both had enjoyed science fiction since childhood. In the coat pockets of both were their gold pens. The reload cartridges were in their shaving kits, packed away in their regular luggage somewhere below. It would be about six hours to Heathrow, and both hoped to get some sleep on the way.

"Any second thoughts, Enzo?" Brian asked quietly.

"No," Dominic replied. "Just so it all works out." The prison cells in England lacked plumbing, he didn't add, and, no matter how embarrassing it might be for a Marine officer, it would be positively humiliating for a sworn special agent of the FBI.

"Fair enough. 'Night-night, bro."

"Roger that, jarhead." And both played with the complex seat controls to settle back to a nearly flat surface. And so the Atlantic passed beneath them for three thousand miles.

BACK IN his apartment, Jack Jr. knew that his cousins were gone overseas, and though he hadn't exactly been told why, their mission didn't require a spectacular leap of imagination. Surely Uda bin Sali would not live out the week. He'd learn about it from the morning message traffic out of Thames House, and he found himself wondering what the Brits would be saying, how excited and/or regretful they might be. Certainly, he'd learn a lot about how the job had been done. That excited his curiosity. He'd spent enough time in London to know that guns were not done over there, unless it was a government-sanctioned killing. In such a case—if the Special Air Service dispatched someone especially disliked by No. 10 Downing Street, for example—the police knew not to press too deeply into the case. Maybe just some pro

forma interviews, enough to establish a case file before slipping it into the UNSOLVED cabinet to gather dust and little interest. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure those things out.

But this would be an American hit on British soil, and *that,* he was sure, would not be pleasing to Her Majesty's Government. It was a matter of propriety. Besides, this was not an action by the American government. As a matter of law, it was a premeditated murder, upon which all governments frowned rather severely. So, whatever happened, he hoped they'd be careful. Even his father couldn't run much interference for this.

"OH, UDA, you are a *beast*!" Rosalie Parker exclaimed as he finally rolled off her body. She checked her watch. He'd gone late, and she had an appointment just after lunch the next day with an oil executive from Dubai. He was a rather dear old fellow, and a good tipper, even if he had told her once that she reminded him of one of his favorite daughters, the nasty old bugger.

"Stay the night," Uda urged.

"I can't, love. I have to pick up my mum for lunch and then take her shopping at Harrods. Good Lord, I must be off," she said with well-feigned excitement, springing to an upright position.

"No." Uda reached for her shoulder and pulled it back.

"Oh, you devil!" A chuckle and a warm smile.

"He is called *'Shahateen,'"* Uda corrected. "And he is not part of my family."

"Well, you can wear a girl out, Uda." Not that it was a bad thing, but she had things to do. So she stood and got her clothes off the floor, where he tended to throw them.

"Rosalie, my love, there is only you," he moaned. And she knew that was a lie. It was she who had introduced him to Mandy, after all.

"Is that so?" she asked.

"Oh, that one. She is far too skinny. She doesn't eat. She's not like you, my princess."

"You're so nice." Bend over, kiss, then put the bra on. "Uda, you are the best, the very best," she said. It was always good for the male ego to be stroked, and his ego was bigger than most.

"You just say that to make me feel good," Sali accused her.

"Do you think I'm an actress? Uda, you make my eyeballs pop out. But I have to go, love."

"As you say." He yawned. He'd buy her some shoes the next day, Uda decided. There was a new Jimmy Choo store close to his office that he'd been meaning to check out, and her feet were a spot-on size 6. He rather liked her feet, in fact.

Rosalie made a quick dart into the bathroom to check the mirror. Her hair was a fright—Uda kept messing it up, as though to mark his property. A few seconds with a brush made it almost presentable.

"I must be off, love." She bent down to kiss him again. "Don't get up. I know where the door is." And a final kiss, lingering and inviting . . . for the next time. Uda was as regular as regular could be. And she'd be back here. Mandy was good, and a friend, but she knew how to treat these wogs, and, best of all, she didn't have to starve herself like a bloody runway model. Mandy had too

many American and European regulars to eat normally.

Outside, she hailed a cab.

"Where to, dear?" the cabby asked.

"New Scotland Yard, please."

IT'S ALWAYS disorienting to wake up on an airplane, even in good seats. The window shades went up and the cabin lights came on, and the earphones played news that might or might not be new—since it was British, it wasn't easy to tell. Breakfast was served—plenty of fat, along with no-shit Starbucks coffee that was about a six on a one-to-ten scale. Maybe a seven. Through the windows to his right, Brian saw the green fields of England instead of the slate black of the stormy ocean that had passed during his thankfully dreamless sleep. Both twins were afraid of dreams right now, for the past they contained, and the future they feared, despite their commitment to it. Twenty more minutes and the 747 touched down gently at Heathrow. Immigration was a gentle formality—the Brits did it much better than the Americans, Brian thought. Baggage was on the carousel quickly enough, and then they walked out to the cabs.

"Where to, gentlemen?"

"Mayfair Hotel on Stratton Street."

The driver took this information with a nod and headed off east toward the city. The drive took about thirty minutes with the start of the morning rush hour. It was the first time in England for Brian, though not for Dominic. The sights were pleasant for the latter, and both new and adventurous for the former. It seemed like home, Brian thought, except that people drove on the wrong side of the road. On first inspection, drivers also seemed more courteous, but that was hard to gauge. There was at least one golf course with emerald green grass, but aside from that, rush hour here wasn't all that different from the one in Seattle.

Half an hour later, they were looking at Green Park, which was, indeed, itself beautifully green, then the cab turned left, two more blocks, and right, and there was the hotel. Just on the other side of the street was a dealership for Aston Martin cars, looking as shiny as the diamonds in the window of Tiffany's in New York City. Clearly an upscale neighborhood. Though Dominic had been to London before, he hadn't stayed here. European hotels could teach lessons to any American establishment in terms of service and hospitality. Six more minutes had them in their connecting rooms. The bathtubs were large enough to exercise a shark, and the towels hung on a steam-heated rack. The minibar was generous in its selection, if not in its prices. Both twins took the time to shower. A check of the time made it a quarter to nine, and since Berkeley Square was only a hundred yards away, they took the moment to leave the hotel and head left for the landmark where nightingales sang.

Dominic elbowed his brother and pointed left. "Supposedly MI5 used to have a building that way, up Curzon Street. For the embassy, you go to the top of the hill, go left, two more blocks, then right, and left to Grosvenor Square. Ugly building, but that's the government for you. And our friend lives right about—there, on the other side of the park, half a block from the Westminster

Bank. That's the one with the horse on the sign."

"Looks pricey here," Brian observed.

"Believe it," Dominic confirmed. "These houses go for a ton of money. Most of 'em are broken up into three apartments, but our friend Uda keeps the whole thing for himself, a Disneyland for sex and dissipation. Hmm," he observed, seeing a British Telecom van parked about twenty yards ahead of them. "I bet that's the surveillance team . . . kinda obvious." There were no people visible in the truck, but that was because the windows were plastic treated to keep the light inside. It was the only inexpensive vehicle on the street—in this neighborhood, everything was at least a Jaguar. But the king of the hill, auto-wise, was the black Vanquish on the other side of the park.

"Damn, that's one bad-ass automobile," Brian observed. And indeed it looked as though it were doing a hundred miles per hour just sitting in front of the house.

"The real champ is the McLaren F1. Million bucks, but it only seats one up front, I think. Fast as a fighter plane. The one you're looking at is quarter-mil' worth of car, bro."

"Fuck . . ." Brian reacted. "That much?"

"They're handmade, Aldo, by guys who work on the Sistine Chapel in their off-hours. Yeah, it's a lot of wheels. Wish I could afford it. You could probably put the engine in a Spitfire and shoot down some Germans, y'know?"

"Probably gets lousy mileage," Brian observed.

"Oh, well . . . Everything has its little price—shit. There's our boy."

And just then the door to the house opened, and a young man walked out. The suit he wore was three-piece, and Johnny Reb gray in color. He stood in the middle of the four stone steps and looked at his watch. As though on cue, a black London cab came down the hill and he walked down the steps to hop in.

Five-ten, 155 to 160 pounds, Dominic thought. *Black beard down the line of his jaw, like from a pirate movie. Sucker ought to wear a sword... but he doesn't.*

"Younger than us," Brian observed, as they continued to walk. Then, on Dominic's initiative, they crossed over the park and headed back the other way, slowing for a covetous look at the Aston Martin before heading on their way. The hotel had a coffee shop, where they got some coffee and a light breakfast of croissants and marmalade.

"I don't like the idea of having coverage on our bird," Brian said.

"Can't be helped. The Brits must think he's a little hinky, too. But he's just going to have a heart attack, remember. It's not like we're going to pop him, even with a suppressed weapon. No marks, no noise."

"Okay, fine, we check him out downtown, but if it doesn't look good we blow it off and step back to think it over, okay?"

"Agreed." Dominic nodded. They'd have to be clever about it. He'd probably take the lead, because it would be his job to spot the guy's police tail. But there was no sense in waiting too long, either. They'd looked at Berkeley Square just to get a feel for it, and hoping to eyeball the target. It would not be a good place to make a hit, not with a surveillance team camped out thirty yards away. "The good news is that his tail is supposed to be a rookie. If I can ID the guy, then, when I get ready, you just bump into him and—hell, I'll ask

directions to something or other. You'll only need a second to make the pop. Then we both keep on going like nothing happened. Even if people yell for an ambulance, nothing more than a casual turn, and you keep on going."

Brian thought his way through that. "We have to check out the neighborhood first."

"Agreed." They finished breakfast without another word.

* * *

SAM GRANGER was already in his office. It was 3:15 A.M. when he got in and lit up his own computer. The twins had gotten to London at about 1:00 A.M. his time, and something in the back of his head told him that they would not dally on their mission. This first mission would validate—or not—The Campus's idea of a virtual office. If things went according to plan, he'd get notification of the operation's progress even faster than Rick Bell's news over the intelligence network's wire service. Now came the part he always knew he'd hate: waiting for others to effect the mission he'd drawn up in his own mind, here at his own desk. Coffee helped. A cigar would have helped even better, but he didn't have a cigar. That's when his door opened.

It was Gerry Hendley.

"You, too?" Sam asked, with both surprise and amusement.

Hendley smiled. "Well, first time, right? I couldn't sleep at home."

"I hear you. Got a deck of cards?" he wondered aloud.

"I wish." Hendley was actually pretty good with a deck of cards. "Any word from the twins?"

"Not a peep. They got in on time, probably at the hotel by now. I imagine they got in, freshened up, and went out for a look-see. The hotel is only a block or so from Uda's house. Hell, for all I know they might have popped him in the ass already. The timing's about right. He'd be going to work about now, if the locals have his routine figured out, and I think we can depend on that."

"Yeah, unless he got an unexpected call, or he saw something in the morning paper that caught his interest, or his favorite shirt wasn't properly pressed. Reality is analog, Sam, not digital, remember?"

"Don't we know it," Granger agreed.

THE FINANCIAL district looked exactly like what it was, though somewhat homier than New York's tower targets of steel and glass. There were some of those, too, of course, but they weren't as oppressive. Half a block from where they got out of the cab was a portion of the original Roman wall that had surrounded the legion town of Londinium, as the British capital had originally been known, a place selected for its good wells and large river. The people here were mostly well dressed, they noticed, and the shops all upscale in a city where few things were low scale. The bustle factor was high, with crowds of people moving about with speed and purpose. There was also a good supply of pubs, most of which had chalkboards near the doors to advertise their food. The twins picked one in easy sight of the Lloyd's building; agreeably, it had outside tables, as though it were a Roman restaurant near the Spanish Steps.

The clear sky belied London's wet reputation. Both twins were sufficiently well dressed not to appear too obviously to be American tourists. Brian spotted an ATM machine and got some cash, which he split with his brother, and then they ordered coffee—they were too American to get tea—and waited.

IN HIS office, Sali was working on his computer. He had a chance to buy a town house in Belgravia—a neighborhood even more upscale than his own—for eight and a half million pounds, which wasn't quite a bargain, but neither was it excessive. Certainly he could rent it out for a good sum, and it was a freehold, meaning that in buying the house he'd also own the land, instead of paying ground rent to the Duke of Westminster. It wasn't excessive, either, but it did add up. He made a note to go look at it this week. Otherwise, the currency valuations were fairly stable. He'd played with currency arbitrage on and off for a few months, but he didn't really think he had the education to delve deeply into it. At least not yet. Maybe he would talk to a few people skilled in that game. Anything that could be done could also be learned, and with access to more than two hundred million pounds, he was able to play without doing his father's money too much damage. In fact, he was up this year by nine million pounds, which wasn't too bad. For the next hour, he sat at his computer and looked for trends—the trend is your friend—trying to make sense out of it. The real trick, he knew, was spotting them early—early enough to get in low before bailing out high—but, though he was closing in on it, he hadn't learned that particular skill yet. Had he done so, his trading account would have been up by thirty-one million pounds, instead of a mere nine. Patience, he thought, was a damnably hard virtue to acquire. How much better to be young and brilliant.

His office had a TV, too, of course, and he switched it to an American financial channel that spoke of a coming weakness in the pound against the dollar, though the reasons for it were not entirely convincing, and he thought better of buying thirty million dollars on speculation. His father had warned him about speculating before, and since it was his father's money he had listened attentively and granted the old bastard his wishes. Over the previous nineteen months, he was only down three million pounds, and most of those mistakes were a year behind him. The real-estate portfolio was doing very nicely. He was mostly buying property from older Englishmen and selling a few months later to his own countrymen, who usually paid cash or its electronic equivalent. All in all, he considered himself a real-estate speculator of great and growing talents. And, of course, a superb lover. It was approaching noon, and already his loins were aching for Rosalie. Might she be available this evening? For a thousand pounds, she ought to be, Uda thought. So, just before noon, he lifted his phone and hit the number 9 speed-dial button.

"My beloved Rosalie, this is Uda. If you can come over tonight, about seven-thirty, I will have something nice for you. You know my number, darling." And he set the phone down. He'd wait until four or so, and if she did not call him back, he'd call Mandy. It was a rare day indeed when both of them were unavailable. He preferred to believe they spent such time shopping or having

dinner with friends. After all, who paid them better than he did? And he wanted to see Rosalie's face when she got the new shoes. English women really liked this Jimmy Choo fellow. To his eye, the designs looked grotesquely uncomfortable, but women were women, not men. For his fantasies, he drove his Aston Martin. Women preferred sore feet. There was no understanding them.

BRIAN GOT bored too easily to just sit and stare at the Lloyd's building. Besides, it hurt his eyes. It was more than undistinguished, it was positively grotesque, like a glassed-in DuPont plant for making nerve gas or some other noxious chemical. It was also probably bad field craft to stare at any one thing for any length of time. There was some shopping on this street, again none of it cheap. A men's tailor shop and similarly nice-looking places for women, and what appeared to be a very expensive shoe store. That was one item he didn't bother with much. He had good black leather dress shoes—he was wearing them now—a good pair of sneaks that he'd bought on a day best forgotten, and four pairs of combat boots, two black and two the buff color the Marine Corps was heading to, except for parades and other official stuff that did not often concern the snake-eating Marines of Force Recon. All Marines were supposed to be "pretty" troops, but the snake-eating ones were thought to be from the side of the family that you didn't talk much about. And he was still coming to terms with the shoot-out of the previous week. Even the people he'd gone after in Afghanistan hadn't made any overt attempts to kill women and kids, at least that he knew about. They were barbarians, sure, but even barbarians were supposed to have limits. Except for the bunch of people that this guy played with. It wasn't manly—even the beard wasn't manly. The Afghans' were, but this guy just looked like some sort of pimp. He was, in short, unworthy of the Marine's steel, not a man to be killed, but a cockroach to be eliminated. Even if he did drive a car worth more than a Marine captain made in ten years, *before* taxes. A Marine officer might save up for a Chevy Corvette, but, no, this POS had to have the grandson of James Bond's car, to go along with the whores he rented. You could call him a lot of things, but "man" was definitely not among them, the Marine thought, subconsciously working himself up for the mission.

"Tallyho, Aldo," Dominic said, putting cash down on the table to cover the bill. Both stood and walked *away* from the target at first. At the corner, both stopped and turned as though looking around for something. There was Sali...

. . . and there was Sali's tail. Dressed as a working man, expensively. He'd also appeared out of a pub, Dominic saw. He was indeed a rookie. His eyes were too obviously fixed on the subject, though he did stay back, fifty yards or so, clearly unconcerned about being spotted by his target. Sali was probably not the most alert of subjects, unschooled in counter surveillance. He doubtless thought himself perfectly safe. Probably thought himself pretty clever, too. All men had their illusions. This one's would prove to be more serious than normal.

The brothers scanned the street. Hundreds of people were in direct view. Lots of cars moving on the street. Visibility was good—a little too good—but Sali was presenting himself to them as though it were deliberate, and it was

just too good to pass up . . .

"Plan A, Enzo?" Brian asked quickly. They had three plans thought out, plus the wave-off signal.

"Roger that, Aldo. Let's do it." They split up, heading in opposite directions in the hope that Sali would turn toward the pub where they'd endured the bad coffee. Both wore sunglasses to hide the direction of their gaze. In Aldo's case, this meant the spook who was tailing Sali. It was probably routine as hell for him, something he'd been doing for a few weeks, and you couldn't do anything that long without settling into a routine, anticipating what your subject was going to do, fixing on him and not scanning the street as you were supposed to do. But he was working in London, maybe his home turf, a place where he figured he knew all that was knowable and had nothing to fear. More dangerous illusions. His only job was to watch a not very intriguing subject in whom Thames House had some unexplained interest. The subject's habits were well established, and he was not a danger to anyone, at least not on this turf. A spoiled rich kid, that was all. Now he was turning left after crossing the street. Shopping today, it looked like. Shoes for one of his ladies, the Security Service officer surmised. Better presents than he could afford for *his* significant other, and he was *engaged,* the spook groused within his own mind.

THEY HAD a nice pair of shoes in the window, Sali saw, black leather and gold hardware. He hopped boyishly up onto the curb, then turned left toward the store entrance, smiling in anticipation of the look Rosalie would have in her eyes when she opened the box.

Dominic took out his Chichester map of central London, a small red book that he opened as he walked past the subject, without taking so much as a glance, letting his peripheral vision do the work. His eyes were fixed on the tail. Looked even younger than he and his brother were, probably his first job out of whatever academy the Security Service conducted, assigned to an easy target for that very reason. He'd probably be a little nervous, hence his fixed eyes and balled-fist hands. Dominic hadn't been all that different only a year or so before, in Newark, young and earnest. Dominic stopped and turned quickly, gauging the distance from Brian to Sali. Brian would be doing exactly the same thing, of course, and his job was to synchronize movement with his brother, who had the lead. Okay. Again his peripheral vision took over, until the last few steps.

Then his eyes fixed on the tail. The Brit's eyes noted this, and his gaze shifted as well. He stopped almost automatically and heard the Yank tourist ask stupidly: "Excuse me, could you tell me where . . ." He held up his map book to illustrate how lost he was.

BRIAN REACHED into his coat pocket and pulled out the gold pen. He twisted the nib and the black point changed to an iridium tip when he pressed down on the obsidian clip. His eyes locked on the subject. At a range of three feet, he took half a step right as though to avoid someone who wasn't there at all, and bumped into Sali.

"THE TOWER of London. Why, you go right there," the MI5 guy said, turning to point.

Perfect.

"EXCUSE ME," Brian said, and let the man pass with a half step to his left, and the pen came down in a backward stabbing motion, and caught the subject square in the right ass cheek. The hollow syringe point penetrated perhaps as much as three millimeters. The CO_2 charge fired, injecting its seven milligrams of succinylcholine into the tissue of the largest muscle on Sali's anatomy. And Brian Caruso kept right on walking.

"OH, THANKS, buddy," Dominic said, tucking the Chichester's back into his pocket and taking a step in the proper direction. When he was clear of the tail, he stopped and turned—this was bad tradecraft, and he knew it—to see Brian putting the pen back into his coat pocket. His brother then rubbed his nose in the prearranged signal of MISSION ACCOMPLISHED.

SALI WINCED ever so slightly at the bump or stick—whatever it was—on his ass, but it was nothing serious. His right hand reached back to rub the spot, but the pain faded immediately, and he shrugged it off and kept heading for the shoe store. He took perhaps ten more steps and then he realized—

—his right hand was trembling ever so slightly. He stopped to look at it, reaching over with his left hand—

—that was trembling, too. Why was—

—his legs collapsed under him, and his body fell vertically down to the cement sidewalk. His kneecaps positively bounced on the surface, and they hurt, rather a lot in fact. He tried to take in a deep breath to ward off the pain and the embarrassment—

—but he *didn't* breathe. The succinylcholine had fully infused his body now, and had neutralized every nerve muscle interface that existed in his body. The last to go were his eyelids, and Sali, his face now rapidly approaching the sidewalk, didn't see himself hit. Instead, he was enveloped by blackness—actually, redness from the low-frequency light that penetrated the thin tissue of his eyelids. Very rapidly, his brain was overwhelmed first by the confusion that had to come before panic.

What is this? his mind demanded of itself. He could *feel* what was happening. His forehead was against the rough surface of semi-finished cement. He could hear the footsteps of people to his left and right. He tried to turn his head—no, first he had to open his eyes—

—but they did not open. *What* is *this?!!!*—

—he wasn't breathing—

—he commanded himself to breathe. As though in a swimming pool underwater, and coming to the surface after holding his breath for an uncomfortably long time, he told his mouth to open and his diaphragm to expand—

—*but nothing happened!*—

—*What is this?* his mind shouted at itself.

His body operated on its own programming. As carbon dioxide built up in

his lungs, automatic commands went from there to his diaphragm to expand his lungs to take in more air to replace the poison in his lungs. But nothing happened, and, with that bit of information, his body went into panic all by itself. Adrenal glands flooded the bloodstream—the heart was still pumping—with adrenaline, and, with that natural stimulant, his awareness increased and his brain went into overdrive . . .

What is this? Sali asked himself urgently yet again, for now the panic was beginning to take over. His body was betraying him in ways that surpassed imagination. He was suffocating in the dark on a sidewalk in the middle of central London in broad daylight. The overload of CO_2 in his lungs did not really cause pain, but his body reported the fact to his mind as such. Something was going very wrong, and it made no sense, like being hit in the street by a lorry—no, like being run over by a lorry in his *living room.* It was happening too fast for him to grasp it all. It made no sense, and it was so—surprising, astonishing, astounding.

But neither could it be denied.

He continued to command himself to breathe. It had to happen. It had never *not* happened, and so it must. He felt his bladder emptying next, but the flash of shame was immediately overcome by the building panic. He could *feel* everything. He could *hear* everything. But he couldn't *do* anything, nothing at all. It was like being caught naked in the King's own court in Riyadh with a pig in his arms—

—and then the pain started. His heart was beating frantically, now at 160 beats per minute, but in doing so it was only sending unoxygenated blood out into his cardiovascular system, and in doing that the heart—the only really active organ in his body—had used up all of the free and reserve oxygen in his body—

—and denied of oxygen, the faithful heart cells, immune to the muscle relaxant that it had itself infused throughout its owner's body, started to die.

It was the greatest pain the body can know, as each separate cell started to die, starting at the heart, the danger to which was immediately reported to the body as a whole, and the cells were now dying by the thousands, each connected to a nerve that screamed into the brain that DEATH was happening, and happening now—

He couldn't even grimace. It was like a fiery dagger in his chest, twisting, pushing deeper and deeper. It was the feel of Death, something delivered by the hand by Iblis himself, by Lucifer's own hand...

And that was the instant Sali saw Death coming, riding across a field of fire to take his soul, to Perdition. Urgently, but in a state of internal panic, Uda bin Sali thought as loudly as he could the words of the Shahada: *There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His messenger... There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His messenger . . . There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His messenger—*

—Thereisnogodbutallahandmohammedishismessenger.

His brain cells, too, were deprived of oxygen, and they, too, started to die, and in that process the data they contained was dumped into a diminishing awareness. He saw his father, his favorite horse, his mother before a table full with food—and Rosalie, Rosalie riding him from on top, her face full of

delight, that somehow became more distant . . . fading . . . fading . . . fading . . .

. . . to black.

People had gathered around him. One bent down and said, “Hello, are you all right?” A stupid question, but that’s what people asked in such circumstances. Then the person—he was a salesman of computer peripherals heading to the nearby pub for a pint and a British ploughman’s lunch—shook his shoulder. There was no resistance at all, like turning over a piece of meat in the butcher’s shop . . . And that frightened him more than a loaded pistol would have done. At once he rolled the body over and felt for a pulse. There *was* one. The heart was beating frantically—but the man wasn’t breathing. Bloody hell . . .

Ten meters away, Sali’s tail had his cell phone out and was dialing 999 for emergency services. There was a fire station only blocks away, and Guy’s Hospital was just across Tower Bridge. Like many spooks, he had started to identify with his subject, even though detesting him, and the sight of the man crumpled on the sidewalk had shaken him deeply. What had happened? Heart attack? But he was a young man . . .

BRIAN AND Dominic rendezvoused at a pub, just uphill from the Tower of London. They picked a booth, and scarcely had they sat down when a waitress came to them and asked what they wanted.

“Two pints,” Enzo told her.

“We have Tetley’s Smooth and John Smith’s, love.”

“Which one do you drink?” Brian shot back.

“John Smith’s, of course.”

“Two of those,” Dominic ordered. He took the lunch menu from her.

“Not sure I want anything to eat, but the beer’s a good idea,” Brian said, taking the menu, his hands shaking ever so slightly.

“And a cigarette, maybe.” Dominic chuckled. Like most kids, they’d experimented with smoking in high school, but both had sworn off it before getting hooked. Besides, the cigarette machine in the corner was made of wood, and was probably too complex for a foreigner to operate.

“Yeah, right,” Brian dismissed the thought.

Just as the beers arrived, they heard the dissonant note of a local ambulance three blocks away.

“How you feel?” Enzo asked his brother.

“Little shaky.”

“Think about last Friday,” the FBI agent suggested to the Marine.

“I didn’t say I regretted it, dumbass. You just get a little worked up. You distract the tail?”

“Yeah, he was looking right into my eyes when you made the stick. Your subject walked maybe twenty feet before he collapsed. I didn’t see any reaction from the stick. You?”

Brian shook his head. “Not even an ‘ouch,’ bro.” He took a sip. “This is pretty good beer.”

“Yeah, shaken, not stirred, Double-Oh-Seven.”

In spite of himself, Brian laughed aloud. “You asshole!” he said.

“Well, that’s the business we’ve fallen into, right?”

CHAPTER 18

AND THE DEPARTING FOXHOUNDS

JACK JR. found out first. He was just starting his coffee and doughnuts, and had lit up his computer, navigating his way first to the message traffic from CIA to NSA, and at the very top of the electronic pile was a FLASH-priority alert for NSA to pay special attention to "known associates" of Uda bin Sali, who had, CIA said the Brits had reported, evidently dropped dead of a heart attack in central London. The Security Service FLASH traffic, included in the CIA-gram, said in terse English prose that he'd collapsed on the street before the eyes of their surveillance officer, and had been rushed by ambulance to Guy's Hospital, where he "had failed to revive." The body was now being posted, MI5 said.

IN LONDON, Special Branch Detective Bert Willow called Rosalie Parker's apartment.

"Hello." She had a charming, musical voice.

"Rosalie, this is Detective Willow. We need to see you as soon as possible here at the Yard."

"I'm afraid I am busy, Bert. I have a client coming any minute. It will take two hours or so. I can come directly after that. Will that be okay?"

At the other end of the line, the detective took a deep breath, but, no, it really wasn't that urgent. If Sali had died of drugs—the most likely cause that had occurred to him and his colleagues—he hadn't gotten them from Rosalie, who was neither an addict nor a supplier. She wasn't stupid for a girl whose entire education had been in state schools. Her work was too lucrative to take that risk. The girl even attended church occasionally, her file read. "Very well," Bert told her. He was curious about how she'd take the news, but didn't expect anything important to develop there.

"Excellent. Bye-ee," she said before hanging up.

AT GUY'S Hospital, the body was already in the postmortem lab. It had been undressed and laid face up on a stainless steel table by the time the senior duty pathologist came in. He was Sir Percival Nutter, a distinguished academic physician, and chairman of the hospital's Department of Pathology, sixty years of age. His technicians had already drawn 0.1 liter of blood for the lab to work on. It was quite a lot, but they'd be running every test known to man.

"Very well, he has the body of a male subject approximately twenty-five years of age—get his identification to get the proper dates, Maria," he told the microphone that hung down from the ceiling, which led to a tape recorder. "Weight?" This question was directed to a junior resident.

"Seventy-three point six kilograms. One hundred eighty-one centimeters in length," the brand-new physician responded.

"There are no distinguishing marks on the body, on visual inspection, suggesting a cardiovascular or neurological incident. What's the hurry on this, Richard? The body is still warm." No tattoos and so on. Lips were somewhat bluish. His nonofficial comments would be edited from the tape, of course, but a body still warm was quite unusual.

"Police request, sir. Seems he dropped dead on the street while being observed by a constable." It wasn't exactly the truth, but it was close enough.

"Did you see any needle marks?" Sir Percy asked.

"No, sir, not a hint of that."

"So, lad, what do you think?"

Richard Gregory, the new M.D. doing his first pathology rotation, shrugged in his surgical greens. "From what the police say, the way he went down, sounds like a possible massive heart attack or a seizure of some sort—unless it's drug-related. He looks healthy for that, and there are no needle-mark clusters to suggest drugs."

"Rather young for a fatal infarction," the senior man said. To him, the body might as easily have been a piece of meat in the market, or a dead deer in Scotland, not the remaining shell of a human being who'd been alive—what? —as little as two or three hours earlier. Bad bloody luck for the poor bastard. Looked vaguely Middle Eastern. The smooth, unmarked skin on the hands did not suggest manual labor, though he did appear reasonably fit. He lifted the eyelids. Eyes were brown enough to appear black at a distance. Good teeth, not much dental work. On the whole, a young man who appeared to have taken decent care of himself. This was odd. Congenital heart defect, perhaps? They'd have to crack his chest for that. Nutter didn't mind doing it—it was just a routine part of the job, and he'd long since learned to forget about the immense sadness associated with it—but on such a young body, it struck him as a waste of time, even though the cause of death was mysterious enough to be of intellectual interest, perhaps even something for an article in *The Lancet,* something he'd done many times in the preceding thirty-six years. Along the way, his dissection of the dead had saved hundreds, even thousands, of living people, which was why he'd chosen pathology. You also didn't have to talk to your patients much.

For the moment, they'd wait for the blood-toxicology readings to come out of the serology lab. It would at least give him a direction for his investigation.

BRIAN AND Dominic took a cab back to their hotel. Once there, Brian lit up his laptop and logged on. The brief e-mail he sent was automatically encrypted and dispatched in a matter of four minutes. He figured an hour or so for The Campus to react, assuming nobody wet his pants, which was unlikely. Granger looked like a guy who could have done this job himself, fairly tough for an old guy. His time in the Corps had taught him that you read the tough ones from the eyes. John Wayne had played football for USC. Audie Murphy, rejected by a Marine recruiter—to the everlasting shame of the Corps—had looked like a street waif, but he'd killed more than three hundred men all by himself. He'd also had cold eyes when provoked.

It was suddenly and surprisingly lonely for both Carusos.

They'd just murdered a man they didn't know and to whom neither had spoken a single word. It had all seemed logical and sensible at The Campus, but that was now a place far away in both linear distance and spiritual vastness. But the man they'd killed had funded the creatures who'd shot up Charlottesville, killing women and children without mercy, and, in facilitating that act of barbarism, he'd made himself guilty as a matter of law and common morality. So, it wasn't as though they'd wasted Mother Teresa's little brother on his way to Mass.

Again, it was harder on Brian than on Dominic, who walked over to the minibar and took out a can of beer. This he threw to his brother.

"I know," Brian responded. "He had it coming. It's just that—well, it's not like Afghanistan, y'know?"

"Yeah, this time we got to do to him what they tried to do to you. It's not our fault he's a bad guy. It's not our fault he thought the mall shoot was almost as good as getting laid. He did have it coming. Maybe he didn't shoot anybody, but he damned sure bought the guns, okay?" Dominic asked as reasonably as circumstances allowed.

"I ain't going to light a candle for him. Just—damn it, this isn't what we're supposed to do in a civilized world."

"What civilized world is that, bro? We offed a guy who needed to meet God. If God wants to forgive him, that's His business. You know, there're people who think anybody in uniform is a mercenary killer. Baby-killers, that sort of thing."

"Well, that's just fucked up," Brian snarled back. "What I'm afraid of is, what if we turn into *them*?"

"Well, we can always back off a job, can't we? And they told us they'll always give us the reason for the hit. We won't turn into them, Aldo. I won't let it happen. Neither will you. So, we have things to do, right?"

"I suppose." Brian took a big pull on the beer and pulled the gold pen from his coat pocket. He had to recharge it. That took less than three minutes, and it was again ready to rock and roll. Then he twisted it back to a writing instrument and put it back in his coat pocket. "I'll be okay, Enzo. You're not supposed to feel good about killing a guy on the street. Though I still wonder if it doesn't make sense simply to pick the guy up and interrogate him."

"The Brits have civil-rights rules like ours. If he asks for a lawyer—you know he's been briefed to do that, right?—the cops can't even ask him the time, just like at home. All he has to do is smile and keep his trap shut. That's one of the drawbacks of civilization. It makes sense for criminals, I suppose, most of them, but these guys aren't criminals. It's a form of warfare, not street crime. That's the problem, and you can't hardly threaten a guy who wants to die in the performance of his duty. All you can do is stop him, and stopping a person like that means his heart has to discontinue beating."

Another pull on the beer. "Yeah, Enzo. I'm okay. I wonder who our next subject is."

"Give 'em an hour to chew on it. How about a walk?"

"Works for me." Brian stood, and in a minute they were back out on the street.

It was a little too obvious. The British Telecom van was just pulling away, but the Aston Martin was still in place. He wondered if the Brits would put a black-bag team into the house to toss it for interesting things, but that black sports car was right here, and it sure looked sexy.

"Wish you could get it in the estate sale?" Brian asked.

"Can't drive it at home. Wheel's on the wrong side," Dominic pointed out. But his brother was right. It was felonious for such a car to go to waste. Berkeley Square was pretty enough, but too small for anything except letting the infants crawl around on the grass and get some fresh air and sun. The house would probably be sold, too, and it would go for a large sum. Lawyers —"solicitors" over here—to tie things up, taking their cut before returning the residuary property to whatever family a snake left behind. "Hungry yet?"

"I could eat something," Brian allowed. So they walked some more. They headed toward Piccadilly and found a place called Pret A Manger, which served sandwiches and cold drinks. After a total of forty minutes away from the hotel, they headed back in and Brian lit up his computer again.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED CONFIRMED BY LOCAL SOURCES. MISSION CLEAN, the message from The Campus read, and went on: SEATS CONFIRMED FLIGHT BA0943 DEPART HEATHROW TOMORROW 07:55 ARRIVE MUNICH 10:45. TICKETS AT COUNTER. There was a page of details, followed by ENDS.

"Okay," Brian observed. "We have another job."

"Already?" Dominic was surprised at the efficiency of The Campus.

Brian wasn't. "I guess they're not paying us to be tourists, bro."

"YOU KNOW, we need to get the twins out of Dodge quicker," Tom Davis remarked.

"If they're covert, it's not necessary," Hendley said.

"If somebody spots them somehow or other, better that they should not be around. You can't interview a ghost," Davis pointed out. "If the police have nothing to track, then they have less to think about. They can query the passenger list on a flight, but if the names they look for—assuming they have names—just go about normal business, then they have a blank wall with no evidence hanging on it. Better yet, if whatever face might or might not have been spotted just evaporates, then they have *gornischt,* and they're most likely to write it off as an eyewitness who couldn't be trusted anyway." It is not widely appreciated that police agencies trust eyewitnesses the least of all forms of criminal evidence. Their reports are too volatile, and too unreliable to be of much use in a court of law.

"AND?" SIR Percival asked.

"CPK-MB, and troponin are greatly elevated, and the lab says his cholesterol was two hundred thirteen," Dr. Gregory said. "High for one his age. No evidence whatever of drugs of any sort, not even aspirin. So, we have enzyme evidence of a coronary incident, and that's all at the moment."

"Well, we'll have to crack his chest," Dr. Nutter observed, "but that was in the cards anyway. Even with elevated cholesterol, he's young for a major cardiovascular obstruction, don't you think?"

"Were I to wager, sir, I think prolonged QT interval, or arrhythmia." Both of which left little postmortem evidence except in a negative sense, unfortunately, but both of which were uniformly fatal.

"Correct." Gregory seemed a bright young medical school graduate, and like most of them, exceedingly earnest. "In we go," Nutter said, reaching for the big skin knife. Then they'd use the rib cutters. But he was pretty sure what they'd find. The poor bastard had died of heart failure, probably caused by a sudden—and unexplained—onset of cardiac arrhythmia. But whatever caused it, it had been as lethal as a bullet in the brain. "Nothing else on the toxicology scan?"

"No, sir, nothing whatever." Gregory held up the computer printout. Except for reference marks on the paper, it was almost entirely blank. And that pretty much settled that.

IT WAS like listening to a World Series game on the radio, but without the color-commentary filler. Somebody at the Security Service was eager to let CIA know what was going on with the subject about which Langley clearly had some interest, and so whatever dribs and drabs of information came in were immediately dispatched to CIA, and thence to Fort Meade, which was scanning the ether waves for any resulting interest from the terrorist community around the world. The latter's news service, it appeared, was not as efficient as its enemies had hoped.

"HELLO, DETECTIVE Willow," Rosalie Parker said with her customary want-to-fuck-me smile. She made love for a living, but that didn't mean that she disliked it. She breezed in wearing her visitor's badge and took her seat opposite his desk. "So, what can I do for you this fine day?"

"Bad news, Miss Parker." Bert Willow was formal and polite, even with whores. "Your friend Uda bin Sali is dead."

"What?" Her eyes went wide with shock. "What happened?"

"We're not sure. He just dropped down on the street, just across the street from his office. It appears that he had a heart attack."

"Really?" Rosalie was surprised. "But he seemed so healthy. There was never a hint that anything was wrong with him. I mean, just last night . . ."

"Yes, I saw that in the file," Willow responded. "Do you know if he ever used drugs of any sort?"

"No, never. He occasionally drank, but even that not much."

To Willow's eyes, she was shocked and greatly surprised, but there wasn't a hint of tears in her eyes. No, for her, Uda had been a business client, a source of income, and little more. The poor bastard had probably thought otherwise. Doubly bad luck for him, then. But that wasn't really Willow's concern, was it?

"Anything unusual in your most recent meeting?" the cop asked.

"No, not really. He was quite randy, but, you know, some years ago I had a john die on me—I mean, he came and went, as they say. It was bloody awful, not the sort of thing you forget, and so I keep an eye on my clients for that. I mean, I'd never leave one to die. I'm not a barbarian, you know. I really do have a heart," she assured the cop.

Well, your friend Sali doesn't anymore, Willow thought, without saying it. "I

see. So last night he was completely normal?"

"Entirely. Not a single sign that anything was amiss." She paused to work on her composure. Better to appear more regretful, lest he think her to be an uncaring robot. "This is terrible news. He was so generous, and always polite. How very sad for him."

"And for you," Willow said in sympathy. After all, she'd just lost a major source of income.

"Oh. Yes, oh yes, for me too, love," she said, catching up with the news finally. But she didn't even try to fool the detective with tears. Waste of time. He'd see right through it. Pity about Sali. She'd miss the presents. Well, surely she'd get some more referral business. Her world hadn't ended. Just his. And that was his bad luck—with some thrown in for her, but nothing she couldn't recover from.

"Miss Parker, did he ever give you any hints on his business activities?"

"Mostly, he talked about real estate, you know, buying and selling those posh houses. Once, he took me to a house he was buying in the West End, said he wanted my opinion on painting it, but I think he was just trying to show me how important he was."

"Ever meet any of his friends?"

"Not too many—three, maybe four, I think. All were Arabs, most about his age, perhaps five years older, but not more than that. They all looked me over closely, but no business resulted from it. That surprised me. Arabs can be horny buggers, but they are good at paying a girl. You think he might have been involved in illegal activity?" she asked delicately.

"It's a possibility," Willow allowed.

"Never saw a hint of it, love. If he played with bad boys, it was out of my sight entirely. Love to help you, but there's nothing to say." She seemed sincere to the detective, but he reminded himself that when it came to dissimulation, a whore of this class could probably have shamed Dame Judith Anderson.

"Well, thank you for coming in. If anything—anything at all—comes to mind, do give me a call."

"That I will, love." She stood and smiled her way out the door. He was a nice chap, this Detective Willow. Pity he couldn't afford her.

Bert Willow was already back on his computer, typing up his contact report. Miss Parker actually seemed a nice girl, literate and very charming. Part of that had been learned for her business persona, but maybe part of it was genuine. If so, he hoped she'd find a new line of work before her character was completely destroyed. He was a romantic, Willow was, and someday it might be his downfall. And he knew it, but he had no desire to change himself for his job as she had probably done. Fifteen minutes later, he e-mailed the report to Thames House, and then printed it up for the Sali file, which would in due course go to the closed files in Central Records, probably never to be heard from again.

* * *

"TOLD YOU," Jack said to his roomie.

"Well, then you can pat yourself on the back," Wills responded. "So, what's the story, or do I have to call up the documents?"

"Uda bin Sali dropped dead of an apparent heart attack. His Security Service tail didn't see anything unusual, just the guy collapsing on the street. *Zap,* no more Uda to swap funds for the bad guys."

"How do you feel about it?" Wills asked.

"It's fine with me, Tony. He played with the wrong kids, on the wrong playground. End of story," Ryan the younger said coldly. *I wonder how they did it?* he wondered more quietly. "Was it our guys helping him along, you think?"

"Not our department. We provide information to others. What they do with it out of our sight is not for us to speculate upon."

"Aye, aye, sir." The remainder of the day looked as though it would be pretty dull after such a fast beginning.

MOHAMMED GOT the news over his computer—rather, he was told in code to call a cutout named Ayman Ghailani whose cell phone number he had committed to memory. For that purpose, he took a walk outside. You had to be careful using hotel phones. Once on the street, he walked to a park and sat down on a bench, with a pad and pen in his hand.

"Ayman, this is Mohammed. What is new?"

"Uda is dead," the cutout reported somewhat breathlessly.

"What happened?" Mohammed asked.

"We're not sure. He fell near his office and was taken to the nearest hospital. He died there," was the reply.

"He was not arrested, not killed by the Jews?"

"No, there is no report of that."

"So, it was a natural death?"

"So it appears at this time."

I wonder if he did the funds transfer before he left this life? Mohammed thought. "I see . . ." He didn't, of course, but he had to fill the silence with some words. "So, there is no reason to suspect foul play?"

"Not at this time, no. But when one of our people dies, one always—"

"Yes, I know, Ayman. One always suspects. Does his father know?"

"That is how I found out."

His father will probably be glad to be rid of the wastrel, Mohammed thought. "Who do we have to make sure of the cause of death?"

"Ahmed Mohammed Hamed Ali lives in London. Perhaps through a solicitor . . . ?"

"Good idea. See that it is done." A pause. "Has anyone told the Emir?"

"No, I don't think so."

"See to it." It was a minor matter, but, even so, he was supposed to know everything.

"I shall," Ayman promised.

"Very well. That is all, then." And Mohammed thumbed the kill button on his cell phone.

He was back in Vienna. He liked the city. For one thing, they'd handled the

Jews here once, and many Viennese managed to control their regrets over it. For another, it was a good place to be a man with money. Fine restaurants staffed by people who knew the value of skilled service to their betters. The former imperial city had a lot of cultural history to appreciate when he was of a mind to be a tourist, which happened more often than one might imagine. Mohammed found that he often did his best thinking when looking at something of no importance to his work. Today, an art museum, perhaps. He'd let Ayman do the scut work for now. A London solicitor would root about for information surrounding Uda's death, and, being a good mercenary, he'd let them know of anything untoward. But sometimes people simply died. It was the hand of Allah, which was not something easily understood, and never predicted.

* * *

OR MAY BE not so dull. NSA cross-decked some new message traffic after lunch. Jack did some mental arithmetic and decided it was evening on the other side of the pond. The electronic weenies of the Italian Carabinieri—their federal police, who walked about in rather spiffy uniforms—had made some intercepts, which they'd forwarded to the U.S. Embassy in Rome, and which had gone right up on the satellite to Fort Belvoir—the main East Coast downlink. Somebody named Mohammed had called somebody named Ayman —they knew this from the recorded conversation, which had also mentioned the death of Uda bin Sali, which had caused an electronic "Bingo" on various computers, flagging it for a signals-intelligence analyst, and causing the embassy puke to squirt the bird.

"'Has anyone told the Emir?' Who the hell is the Emir?" Jack asked.

"That's a nobleman's title, like a duke or something," Wills answered. "What's the context?"

"Here." Jack handed a printed sheet across.

"That looks interesting." Wills turned and queried his computer for EMIR, and got only one reference. "According to this, it's a name or title that cropped up about a year ago in a tapped conversation, context uncertain, and nothing significant since. The Agency thinks it's probably shorthand for a medium-sized hitter in their organization."

"In this context, looks bigger than that to me," Jack thought aloud.

"Maybe," Tony conceded. "There's a lot about these guys that we don't know yet. Langley will probably write it off to somebody in a supervisory position. That's what I would do," he concluded, but not confidently.

"We have anybody on staff who knows Arabic?"

"Two guys who speak the language—from the Monterey school—but no experts on the culture, no."

"I think it's worth a look."

"Then write it up and we'll see what they think. Langley has a bunch of mind readers, and some of them are pretty good."

"Mohammed is the most senior guy we know in this outfit. Here, he's referring to somebody senior to himself. That is something we need to check

out," the younger Ryan pronounced with all the power he possessed.

For his part, Wills knew that his roomie was right. He'd also just implicitly identified the biggest problem in the intelligence business. Too much data, too little analytical time. The best play would be to fake an inquiry to CIA from NSA and to NSA from CIA, asking for some thoughts on this particular issue. But they had to be careful with that. Requests for data happened a million times a day, and, due to the volume, they were never, ever checked—the comm link was secure, after all, wasn't it? But asking for time from analysts could too easily result in a telephone call, which required both a number and a person to pick up the phone. *That* could lead to a leak, and leaks were the single thing The Campus could not afford. And so, inquiries of this kind went to the top floor. Maybe twice a year. The Campus was a parasite on the body of the intelligence community. Such creatures were not supposed to have a mouth for speaking, but only for sucking blood.

"Write your ideas up for Rick Bell, and he'll discuss it with the Senator," Wills advised.

"Great," Jack grumbled. He hadn't learned patience yet. More to the point, he hadn't learned much about bureaucracies. Even The Campus had one. The funny thing was that if he'd been a mid level analyst at Langley, he could have picked up a phone, dialed a number, and talked to the right person for an expert opinion, or something close to it. But this wasn't Langley. CIA was actually pretty good about obtaining and processing information. It was doing something effective with it that constantly befuddled the government agency. Jack wrote up his request and the reasons for it, wondering what would result.

* * *

THE EMIR took the news calmly. Uda had been a useful underling, but not an important one. He had many sources of money for his operations. He was tall for his ethnicity, not particularly handsome, with a Semitic nose and olive skin. His family was distinguished and very wealthy, though his brothers—he had nine—controlled most of the family money. His home in Riyadh was large and comfortable, but not a palace. Those he left to the Royal Family, whose numerous princelings paraded about as though each of them were the king of this land and protector of the Holy Places. The Royal Family, whose members he knew well, were objects of silent contempt for him, but his emotions were something buried within his soul.

In his youth, he'd been more demonstrative. He'd come to Islam in his early teens, inspired by a very conservative imam whose preachings had eventually gotten him into trouble, but who had inspired a raft of followers and spiritual children. The Emir was merely the cleverest of the lot. He, too, had spoken his mind, and as a result been sent off to England for his education—really to get him out of the country—but in England, in addition to learning the ways of the world, he'd been exposed to something entirely alien. Freedom of speech and expression. In London, it is mostly celebrated at Hyde Park Corner, a tradition of spleen venting that dates back hundred of years, sort of a safety valve for the British population, and which, like a safety value, merely vents

troublesome thoughts into the air without letting them take much hold anywhere. Had he gone to America, it would have been the radical press. But what had struck him as hard as the arrival of a spaceship from Mars was that people were able to challenge the government in any terms they pleased. He'd grown up in one of the world's last absolute monarchies, where the very soil of the nation *belonged* to the king, and the law was what the reigning monarch said it was—subject in name if not in substance to the Koran and the Shar'ia, the Islamic legal traditions which dated back to the Prophet himself. These laws were fair—or at least consistent—but very stern indeed. The problem was that not everyone agreed about the words of the Koran, and therefore about how the Shar'ia applied to the physical world. Islam had no pope, no real philosophical hierarchy as other religions understood the concept, and therefore no cohesive standard of application to reality. The Shi'a and the Sunni were often—always—at each other's throats over that question, and even within Sunni Islam, the Wahabis—the principal sect of the Kingdom—adhered to a stern belief system indeed. But for the Emir this very apparent weakness of Islam was its most useful attribute. One only had to convert a few individual Muslims to his particular belief system, which was remarkably easy, since you didn't have to go looking for those people. They identified themselves virtually to the point of advertising their identities. And most of them were people educated in Europe or America, where their foreign origin forced them to cleave together just to maintain a comfortable intellectual place of self-identity, and so they built upon a foundation of outsiderness that had led many of them to a revolutionary ethos. That was particularly useful, since along the way they'd acquired a knowledge of the enemy's culture that was vital in targeting his weaknesses. The religious conversions of these people had largely been pre installed, as it were. After that, it was just a matter of identifying their objects of hatred—that is, the people to be blamed for their youthful discontent—and then deciding how to do away with their self-generated enemies, one at a time, or as a grand coup de main, which appealed to their sense of drama, if not their scant understanding of reality.

And at the end of it, the Emir, as his associates had taken to calling him, would be the new Mahdi, the ultimate arbiter of all of the global Islamic movement. The intrareligious disputes (Sunnis and Shi'a, for example) he planned to handle through a sweeping fatwa, or religious pronouncement of tolerance—that would look admirable even to his enemies. And, after all, weren't there a hundred or more Christian sects who had largely ended their own internal strife? He could even reserve to himself tolerance of the Jews, though he would have to save that for later years, after he had settled into the seat of ultimate power, probably with a palace of suitable humility outside the city of Mecca. Humility was a useful virtue for the head of a religious movement, for as the pagan Thucydides had proclaimed, even before the Prophet, of all manifestations of power, that which most impresses men is restraint.

It was the tallest of orders, the thing he wanted to accomplish. It would require time and patience, and its success was hardly guaranteed. It was his misfortune that he had to depend upon zealots, each of whom had a brain, and the consequent strong opinions. Such people could, conceivably, turn on

him and seek to replace him with religious outlooks of their own. They might even believe their own concepts—they might be *true* zealots, as the Prophet Mohammed had been, but Mohammed, blessings and peace be upon him, had been the most honorable of men, and had fought a good and honorable fight against pagan idolaters, while his own effort was mainly within the community of Faithful. Was he, then, an honorable man? A difficult question. But didn't Islam need to be brought into the current world, and not remain trapped in antiquity? Did Allah desire His Faithful to be prisoners of the seventh century? Certainly not. Islam had once been the center of human scholarship, a religion of advancement and learning that had, sadly, lost its way at the hands of the great Khan, and then been oppressed by the infidels of the West. The Emir *did* believe in the Holy Koran, and the teachings of the imans, but he was not blind to the world around him. Nor was he blind to the facts of human existence. Those who had power guarded it jealously, and religion had little to do with that, because power was a narcotic all its own. And people needed something—preferably *someone*—to follow if they were to advance. Freedom, as the Europeans and Americans understood the concept, was too chaotic—he'd learned *that* at Hyde Park Corner, too. There had to be order. He was the man to provide it.

So, Uda bin Sali was dead, he thought, taking a sip of juice. A great misfortune for Uda, but a minor irritation to the Organization. The Organization had access to, if not a sea of money, then a number of comfortably large lakes, a small one of which Uda had managed. A glass of orange juice had fallen off the table, but thankfully it had not stained the carpet under it. It required no action on his part, even at second hand.

"Ahmed, this is sad news, but not a matter of great importance to us. No action need be taken."

"It shall be as you say," Ahmed Musa Matwalli responded respectfully. He killed his phone. It was a cloned phone, bought from a street thief for that one purpose, and then he tossed it into the river Tevere—the Tiber—off the Ponte Sant'Angelo. It was a standard security measure for speaking with the great commander of the Organization, whose identity was known to but a few, all of whom were among the most faithful of the Believers. At the higher echelons, security was tight. They all studied various manuals for intelligence officers. The best had been bought from a former KGB officer, who had died after the sale, for so it had been written. Its rules were simple and clear, and they did not deviate from them a dot. Others had been careless, and they'd all paid for their foolishness. The former USSR had been a hated enemy, but its minions had never been fools. Only unbelievers. America, the Great Satan, had done the entire world a favor by destroying that abortion of a nation. They'd done it only for their own benefit, of course, but that, too, must have been written by the Hand of God, because it had also served the interests of the Faithful, for what man could plot better than Allah Himself?

CHAPTER 19

BEER AND HOMICIDE

THE FLIGHT into Munich was silky smooth. German customs were formal but efficient, and a Mercedes-Benz cab took them to the Hotel Bayerischer.

Their current subject was somebody named Anas Ali Atef, reportedly an Egyptian by nationality, and a civil engineer by education, if not by profession. Five feet nine inches or so, 145 pounds, clean-shaven. Black hair and dark brown eyes, supposed to be skilled at unarmed combat and a good man with a gun, if he had one. He was thought to be a courier for the opposition, and also worked to recruit talent—one of whom, for certain, had been shot dead in Des Moines, Iowa. They had an address and a photo on their laptops. He drove an Audi TT sports car, painted battleship gray. They even had the tag number. Problem: He was living with a German national named Trudl Heinz, and was supposedly in love with her. There was a photo of her, too. Not exactly a Victoria's Secret model, but not a skank, either—brown hair and blue eyes, five feet three inches, 120 pounds. Cute smile. Too bad, Dominic thought, that she had questionable taste in men, but that was not his problem.

Anas worshipped regularly at one of the few mosques in Munich, which was conveniently located a block from his apartment building. After checking in and changing their clothes, Dominic and Brian caught a cab to that location and found a very nice *Gasthaus*—a bar and grill—with outside tables from which to observe the area.

"Do all Europeans like to sit on the sidewalk and eat?" Brian wondered.

"Probably easier than going to the zoo," Dominic said.

The apartment house was four stories, proportioned like a cement block, painted white with a flat but strangely barnlike roof. There was a remarkably clean aspect to it, as though it was normal in Germany for everything to be as pristine as a Mayo Clinic operating room, but that was hardly cause for criticism. Even the cars here were not as dirty as they tended to be in America.

"Was darf es sein?" the waiter asked, appearing at the table.

"Zwei Dunkelbieren, bitte," Dominic replied, using about a third of his remaining high-school German. Most of the rest was about finding the *Herrnzimmer,* always a useful word to know, in any language.

"American, yes?" the waiter went on.

"Is my accent that bad?" Dominic asked, with a limp smile.

"Your speech is not Bavarian, and your clothes look American," the waiter observed matter-of-factly, as though to say the sky was blue.

"Okay, then two glasses of dark beer, if you please, sir."

"Two Kulmbachers, *sofort,*" the man responded and hurried back inside.

"I think we just learned a little lesson, Enzo," Brian observed.

"Buy some local clothes, first chance we get. Everybody's got eyes," Dominic agreed. "Hungry?"

"I could eat something."

"We'll see if they have a menu in English."

"That must be the mosque our friend uses, down the road a block, see?" Brian pointed discreetly.

"So, figure he'll probably walk this way . . . ?"

"Seems likely, bro."

"And there's no clock on this, is there?"

"They don't tell us 'how,' they just tell us 'what,' the man said," Brian reminded his brother.

"Good," Enzo observed as the beer arrived. The waiter looked to be about as efficient as a reasonable man could ask. "*Danke sehr.* Do you have a menu in English?"

"Certainly, sir." And he produced one from an apron pocket as though by magic.

"Very good, and thank you, sir."

"He must have gone to Waiter University," Brian said as the man walked away again. "But wait till you see Italy. Those guys are artists. That time I went to Florence, I thought the bastard was reading my mind. Probably has a doctorate in waitering."

"No inside parking at that building. Probably around back," Dominic said, coming back to business.

"Is the Audi TT any good, Enzo?"

"It's a German car. They make decent machines over here, man. The Audi isn't a Mercedes, but it ain't no Yugo, either. I don't know that I've ever seen one outside of *Motor Trend.* But I know what they look like, kinda curvy, slick, like it goes fast. Probably does, with the autobahns they have here. Driving in Germany can be like running the Indy 500, or so they say. I don't really see a German driving a slow car."

"Makes sense." Brian scanned the menu. The names of the dishes were in German, of course, but with English subtitles. It looked as though the commentary was for Brits rather than Americans. They still had NATO bases here, maybe to guard against the French rather than the Russians, Dominic thought with a chuckle. Though, historically, the Germans didn't need much help from that direction.

"What do you wish to have, *mein Herrn*?" the waiter asked, reappearing as though transported down by Scottie himself.

"First, what is your name?" Dominic asked.

"Emil. *Ich heisse Emil.*"

"Thank you. I'll have the sauerbraten and potato salad."

Then it was Brian's turn. "And I'll have the bratwurst. Mind if I ask a question?"

"Of course," Emil responded.

"Is that a mosque down the street?" Brian asked, pointing.

"Yes, it is."

"Isn't that unusual?" Brian pushed the issue.

"We have many Turkish guest workers in Germany, and they are also Mohammedans. They will not eat the sauerbraten or drink the beer. They do not get on well with us Germans, but what can one do about it?" The waiter shrugged, with only a hint of distaste.

"Thank you, Emil," Brian said, and Emil hurried back inside.

"What does that mean?" Dominic wondered.

"They don't like 'em very much, but they don't know what to do about it, and they're a democracy, just like we are, so they have to be polite to 'em. The average Fritz in the street isn't all that keen on their 'guest workers,' but there's not much real trouble about it, just scuffles and like that. Mainly bar fights, so I'm told. So, I guess the Turks have learned to drink the beer."

"How'd you learn that?" Dominic was surprised.

"There's a German contingent in Afghanistan. We were neighbors—our camps, like—and I talked some with the officers there."

"Any good?"

"They're Germans, bro, and this bunch was professionals, not draftees. Yeah, they're pretty good," Aldo assured him. "It was a reconnaissance group. Their physical routine is tough as ours, they know mountains pretty good, and they are well drilled at the fundamentals. The noncoms got along like thieves, swapped hats and badges a lot. They also brought beer along with their TO and E, so they were kinda popular with my people. You know, this beer is pretty damned good."

"Like in England. Beer is a kind of religion in Europe, and everybody goes to church."

Then Emil appeared with lunch—*Mittagessen*—and that, they both learned, was also okay. But both kept watching the apartment house.

"This potato salad is dynamite, Aldo," Dominic observed between bites. "I never had anything like it. Lots of vinegar and sugar, kinda crispy on the palate."

"Good food isn't all Italian."

"When we get home, gotta try to find a German restaurant."

"Roger that. Lookie, lookie, Enzo."

It wasn't their subject, but it was his squeeze, Trudl Heinz. Just like the photo on their computers, walking out of the apartment house. Pretty enough to turn a man's head briefly, but not a movie star. Her hair had been blond once, but that had changed in her midteens, by the look of her. Nice legs, better-than-average figure. A pity she'd linked up with a terrorist. Maybe he'd latched onto her as part of his cover, and so much the better for him that it had side benefits. Unless they were living platonically, which didn't seem likely. Both Americans wondered how he treated her, but you couldn't tell something like that from watching her walk. She went up the other side of the street, but passed the mosque. So, she wasn't heading there at the moment.

"I'm thinking . . . if he goes to church, we can poke him coming out. Lots of anonymous people around, y'know?" Brian thought aloud.

"Not a bad concept. We'll see how faithful this guy is this afternoon, and what the crowd's like."

"Call that a definite maybe," Dominic replied. "First, let's finish up here and then get some clothes that'll fit us in better."

"Roger that," Brian said. He checked the time: 14:00. Eight in the morning at home. Only one hour of jet lag from London, easily written off.

JACK CAME in earlier than usual, his interest piqued by what he took to be an ongoing operation in Europe, and wondering what today's message traffic would show.

It turned out to be fairly routine, with some additional traffic on Sali's death. Sure enough, MI5 had reported his death to Langley as having been the apparent result of a heart attack, probably caused by the onset of fatal arrhythmia. That's what the official autopsy read, and his body had been released to a solicitors' firm representing the family. Arrangements were being made to fly him home to Saudi Arabia. His apartment had been looked at by the London version of a black-bag team, which had not, however, turned up anything of particular interest. That included his office computer, whose hard drive had been copied and the data carted off. It was being examined bit by bit by their electronic weenies, details to follow. That could take a lot of time, Jack knew. Stuff hidden on a computer was technically discoverable, but, theoretically, you could also take the pyramids of Giza apart stone by stone to see what was hidden under them. If Sali had been really clever about burying things into slots only he knew about, or in a code to which only he knew the key . . . well, it would be tough. Had he been that clever? Probably not, Jack thought, but you could only tell by looking, and that was why people always looked. It'd take at least a week, to be sure. A month, if the little bastard was good with keys and codes. But just finding hidden stuff would tell them that he'd been a real player and not just a stringer, and the varsity at GCHQ would be assigned to it. Though none of them would be able to discover what he'd taken away to death with him inside his head.

"Hey, Jack," Wills said, coming in.

"'Morning, Tony."

"Nice to be eager. What have they turned on our departed friend?"

"Nothing much. They're airmailing the box home later today, probably, and the pathologist called it a heart attack. So, our guys are clean."

"Islam pretty much requires that the body be disposed of quickly, and in an unmarked grave. So, once the body's gone, it's all-the-way gone. No exhumation to check for drugs and stuff."

"So, we did do it? What did we use?" Ryan asked.

"Jack, I do not know, and I do not want to know what, if anything, we had to do with his untimely death. Nor do I have any desire to find out. Nor should you, okay?"

"Tony, how the hell can you be in this business and *not* be curious?" Jack Jr. demanded.

"You learn what is not good to know, and you learn not to speculate on such things," Wills explained.

"Uh-huh," Jack reacted dubiously. *Sure, but* I'm *too young for that shit,* he didn't say. Tony was good at what he did, but he lived inside a box. So did Sali right now, Jack thought, and it wasn't a good place to be. *And besides, we* did *waste his ass.* Exactly how, he didn't know. He could have asked his mom about what drugs or chemicals there might be that could accomplish this

mission, but, no, he couldn't do that. She'd sure as hell tell his father, and Big Jack would sure as hell want to know why his son had asked such a question —and might even guess the answer. So, no, that was out of the question. All the way out.

With the official government traffic on Sali's death, Jack started looking for NSA and related intercepts from other interested sources.

There was no further reference to the Emir in the daily traffic. That had just come and gone, and previous references were limited to the one Tony had pulled up. Similarly, his request for a more global search of signals records at Fort Meade and Langley had not been approved by the people upstairs, disappointingly but not surprisingly. Even The Campus had its limits. He understood the unwillingness of the people upstairs to risk having somebody wonder who'd made such a request, and, not finding an answer, to make a deeper query. But there were *thousands* of such requests back and forth every day, and one more couldn't raise that much of a ruckus, could it? He decided not to ask, however. There was no sense in being identified as a boat rocker this early into his new career. But he did instruct his computer to scan all new traffic for the word "Emir," and, if it came up, he could log it and then have a firmer case for his special inquiry the next time, if there was a next time. Still, a title like that—to his mind, it was indicative of the ID for a specific person, even if the only reference CIA had about it was "probably an in-house joke." The judgment had come from a senior Langley analyst, which carried a lot of weight in that community, and therefore in this one as well. The Campus was supposed to be the outfit that corrected CIA's mistakes and/or inabilities, but since they had fewer people on staff, they had to accept a lot of ideas that came from the supposedly disabled agency. It did not make all that much logical sense, but he hadn't been consulted when Hendley had set the place up, and therefore he had to assume that the senior staff knew their business. But as Mike Brennan had told him about police work, assumption was the mother of all screwups. It was also a widely known adage of the FBI. Everybody made mistakes, and the size of any mistake was directly proportional to the seniority of the man making it. But such people didn't like to be reminded of that universal truth. Well, nobody really did.

THEY BOUGHT the clothes off the rack. They were generally like what one would buy in America, but the differences, while individually subtle, added up to an entirely different look. They also got shoes to match the outfits, and, after changing at their hotel, they went back out on the street.

The passing grade came when Brian was stopped on the street by a German citizen asking directions to the *Hauptbahnhoff,* at which time Brian had to respond in English that he was new here, and the German woman backed away with an embarrassed smile and buttonholed somebody else.

"It means the main train station," Dominic explained.

"So, why can't she catch a cab?" Brian demanded.

"We live in an imperfect world, Aldo, but now you must look like a good Kraut. If anyone else asks you, just say *Ich bin ein Aüslander.* It means 'I'm a foreigner,' and that'll get you out of it. Then they'll probably ask the question in better English than you'd hear in New York."

"Hey, look!" Brian pointed to the Golden Arches of a McDonald's, a more welcome sight than the Stars and Stripes over the U.S. Consulate, though neither felt like eating there. The local food was simply too good. By nightfall they were back at the Hotel Bayerischer, enjoying just that.

"WELL, THEY'RE in Munich, and they spotted the subject's building and mosque, but not him yet," Granger reported to Hendley. "They eyeballed his lady friend, though."

"Things going smoothly, then?" the Senator asked.

"No complaints to this point. Our friend is not being looked at by the German police. Their counterintelligence service knows who he is, but they're not running any sort of case on him. They've had some problems with domestic Muslims, and some of them are being covered, but this guy hasn't popped up on the radar screen yet. And Langley hasn't pressed the issue. Their relations with Germany aren't all that good at the moment."

"Good news and bad news?"

"Right." Granger nodded. "They can't feed us much information, but we don't have to worry about fooling a tail. The Germans are funny. If you keep your nose clean and everything's *in Ordnung,* you're reasonably safe. If you step over the line, they can make your life pretty miserable. Historically, their cops are very good, but their spooks are not. The Soviets and the Stasi both had their spook shop thoroughly penetrated, and they're still living that down today."

"They do black ops?"

"Not really. Their culture is too legalistic for that. They raise honest people who play by the rules, and that's a crippling influence on special operations—those they do try occasionally crater badly. You know, I bet the average German citizen even pays his taxes on time, and in full."

"Their bankers know how to play the international game," Hendley objected.

"Yeah, well, maybe that's because international bankers don't really recognize the concept of having a country to be loyal to," Granger responded, sticking the needle in slightly.

"Lenin once said the only country a capitalist knows is the ground he stands on when he makes a deal. There are some like that," Hendley allowed. "Oh, did you see this?" He handed over the request from downstairs to root around for somebody called "the Emir."

The director of operations scanned the page and handed it back. "He doesn't make much of a case for it."

Hendley nodded. "I know. That's why I denied it. But . . . but, you know, it caused his instincts to twitch, and he had the brains to ask a question."

"And the boy's smart."

"Yes, he is. That's why I had Rick set him up with Wills as a roommate and training officer. Tony is bright, but he doesn't reach outside very much. So, Jack can learn the business and also learn about its limitations. We'll see how much he chafes from that. If this kid stays with us, he just might go places."

"You think he has his father's potential?" Granger wondered. Big Jack had been a king spook before going on to bigger things.

"I think he might grow into it, yes. Anyway, this 'Emir' business strikes me as a fundamentally good idea on his part. We don't know much about how the opposition operates. It's a Darwinian process out there, Sam. The bad guys learn from their antecedents, and they get smarter—on our nickel. They're not going to offer themselves up to get a smart bomb in the ass. They're not going to try to be TV stars. Good for the ego, maybe, but fatal. A herd of gazelles doesn't knowingly head toward the lion pride."

"True," Granger agreed, thinking back to how his own ancestor had handled obstreperous Indians in the Ninth U.S. Cavalry Regiment. Some things didn't change much. "Gerry, the problem is, all we can do about their organizational model is to speculate. And speculation is not knowledge."

"So, tell me what you think," Hendley ordered.

"Minimum two layers between the head of it all: Is it one man or a committee? We do not and cannot know right now. And the shooters: We can get all those we want, but that's like cutting grass. You cut it, it grows, you cut it, it grows, ad infinitum. You want to kill a snake, best move is to take off the head. Okay, fine, we all know that. Trick is finding the head, because it's a *virtual* head. Whoever it is, or are, they're operating a lot like we are, Gerry. That's why we're doing a recon-by-fire, to see what we can shake loose. And we have all of our analytical troops looking for that, here, and at Langley, and Meade."

A tired sigh. "Yeah, Sam, I know. And maybe something will shake loose. But patience is a mother to live by. The opposition is probably basking in the sun right now, feeling good about stinging us, killing all those women and kids—"

"Nobody likes that, Gerry, but even God took seven days to make the world, remember?"

"You turning preacher on me?" Hendley asked, with narrowed eyes.

"Well, the eye-for-an-eye part works for me, bud, but it takes time to find the eye. We have to be patient."

"You know, when Big Jack and I talked about the need for a place like this, I was actually dumb enough to think we could solve problems more quickly if we had the authority to do so."

"We'll be quicker than the government ever will, but we're not *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Hey, look, the operational end just got under way. We've made only one hit. Three more to go before we can expect to see any real response from the other side. Patience, Gerry."

"Yeah, sure." He didn't add that time zones didn't help much, either.

"YOU KNOW, there's one other thing."

"What's that, Jack?" Wills asked.

"It would be better if we knew what operations were going on. It would enable us to focus our data hunt a little more efficiently."

"It's called 'compartmentalization.'"

"No, it's called horseshit," Jack shot back. "If we're on the team, we can help. Things that might look like non sequiturs appear different if you know the context that appears out of nowhere. Tony, this whole building is supposed to be a compartment, right? Subdividing it like they do at Langley

doesn't help get the job done, or am I missing something?"

"I see your point, but that's not how the system works."

"Okay, I knew you'd say that, but how the hell do we fix what's broke at CIA if all we do is just to clone their operation?" Jack demanded.

And there wasn't a ready answer for that which would satisfy the questioner, was there? Wills asked himself. There simply wasn't, and this kid was catching on way too fast. What the hell had he learned in the White House? For damned sure, he'd asked a lot of questions. And he'd listened to all the answers. And even thought about them.

"I hate to say this, Jack, but I'm only your training officer, not the Big Boss of this outfit."

"Yeah, I know. Sorry about that. I guess I got used to my dad having the ability to make things happen—well, it looked that way to me, at least. Not to him, I know, not all the time. Maybe impatience is a family characteristic." Doubly so, since his mom was a surgeon, accustomed to fixing things on her own schedule, which was generally *right the hell now*. It was hard to be decisive sitting at a workstation, a lesson his dad had probably had to learn in his time, back when America had lived in the gunsights of a really serious enemy. These terrorists could sting, but they couldn't do serious structural harm to America, though it *had* been tried in Denver once. These guys were like swarming insects rather than vampire bats . . .

But mosquitoes could transmit yellow fever, couldn't they?

SOUTH OF Munich, in the port city of Piraeus, a container was lifted off its ship by a gantry crane and lowered to a waiting truck trailer. Once secured, the trailer went off, behind the Volvo truck driving out of the port, bypassing Athens, and heading north into the mountains of Greece. The manifest said it was going to Vienna, a lengthy nonstop drive over decent highways, delivering a cargo of coffee from Colombia. It didn't occur to the port security people to conduct a search, since all the bills of lading were in good order and passed the bar-code scans properly. Already men were assembling to deal with the part of the cargo not intended to be mixed with hot water and cream. It took a lot of men to break down a metric ton of cocaine into dose-sized packets, but they had a single-story warehouse, recently acquired, in which to accomplish the task, and then they would be driving individually all over Europe, taking comfort in the lack of internal borders the continent had adopted since the formation of the European Union. With this cargo, the word of a business partner was being kept, and a psychological profit was being recompensed by a monetary one. The process went on through the night, while Europeans slept the sleep of the just, even those who would soon be making use of the illegal part of the cargo as soon as they found a street dealer.

THEY SAW the subject at 9:30 the following morning. They were having a leisurely breakfast at another *Gasthaus* half a block from the one that employed their friend Emil, and Anas Ali Atef was walking purposely up the street, and came within twenty feet of the twins, who were breakfasting on strudel and coffee, along with twenty or so German citizens. Atef didn't notice

he was being watched; his eyes looked forward and did not discreetly scan the area as a trained spook would have done. Evidently, he felt safe here. And that was good.

"There's our boy," Brian said, spotting him first. As with Sali, there was no neon sign over his head to mark him, but he matched the photo perfectly, and he had come out of the right apartment building. His mustache made an error in identification unlikely. Reasonably well dressed. Except for his skin and mustache, he might have passed for a German. At the end of the block, he boarded a streetcar, destination unknown, but heading east.

"Speculate?" Dominic asked his brother.

"Off to have breakfast with a pal, or to plot the downfall of the Infidel West —we really can't say, man."

"Yeah, it'd be nice to have real coverage on him, but we're not conducting an investigation, are we? This mutt recruited at least one shooter. He's earned his way onto our shit list, Aldo."

"Roger that, bro," Brian agreed. His conversion was complete. Anas Ali Atef was just a face to him now, and an ass to be stuck with his magic pen. Beyond that, he was someone for God to talk to in due course, a jurisdiction that didn't directly concern either of them at the moment.

"If this was a Bureau op, we'd have a team in the apartment right now, at least to toss his computer."

Brian conceded the point. "Now what?"

"We see if he goes to church, and, if he does, we see how easy it might be to pop him on the way in or out."

"Does it strike you that this is going a little fast?" Brian wondered aloud.

"I suppose we could sit in the hotel room and jerk off, but that's hard on the wrist, y'know?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Finishing breakfast, they left cash on the table but not a large tip. That would too surely mark them as Americans.

THE STREETCAR wasn't as comfortable as his car, but it was ultimately more convenient because of the necessity of finding a parking place. European cities had not been designed with automobiles in mind. Neither had Cairo, of course, and the traffic jams there could be incredible—even worse than they were here—but at least in Germany they had reliable mass transportation. The trains were glorious. The quality of the lines impressed the man who'd had engineering training a few—was it really just a few? he asked himself; it seemed like a complete lifetime—years before. The Germans were a curious people. Standoffish and formal, and oh so superior, they thought, to all the other races. They looked down on Arabs—and, indeed, on most other Europeans as well—and opened their doors to foreigners only because their internal laws—imposed upon them sixty years earlier by Americans after World War II—said that they must. But because they were compelled to do so, they did, mostly without open complaint, because these mad people obeyed the law as though it had been delivered to them by God's own hand. They were the most docile people he'd ever encountered, but underneath that docility was the capacity for violence—*organized* violence—such as the world

hardly knew. Within living memory, they'd risen up to slaughter the Jews. They'd even converted their death camps into museums, but museums in which the pieces and machines undoubtedly still worked, as though standing ready. What a pity they could not summon the political will to make it so.

The Jews had humiliated his country four separate times, in the process killing his eldest brother, Ibrahim, in the Sinai while he'd been driving a Soviet T-62 tank. He didn't remember Ibrahim. He'd been far too young then, and only had photographs to give him an idea of what he'd looked like, though his mother still wept for his memory. He'd died trying to finish the job these Germans had started, only to fail, killed by a cannon shot from an American M60A1 main battle tank at the battle of the Chinese farm. It was the Americans who protected the Jews. America was ruled by its Jews. That was why they supplied his enemies with weapons, fed them with intelligence information, and loved killing Arabs.

But the Germans' failure at their task hadn't tamed their arrogance. Just redirected it. He could see it on the streetcar, the brief sideways looks, the way old women scuttled a few steps away from where he stood. Someone would probably wipe down the overhead bar with disinfectant after he got off, Anas grumbled to himself. By the Prophet, these were unpleasant people.

The ride took another seven minutes exactly, and it was time to get off, at Dom Strasse. From there, it was a one block walk. Along the way, he saw more of the glances, the hostility in the eyes, or, even worse, the eyes that took note of his presence and just passed on, as though having seen a stray dog. It would have been satisfying to take some action here in Germany—right here in Munich!—but his orders were specific.

His destination was a coffee shop. Fa'ad Rahman Yasin was already there, dressed casually, like a working man. There were many like him in this café.

"Salaam aleikum," Atef said in greeting. Peace be unto you.

"Aleikum salaam," Fa'ad said in return. "The pastry here is excellent."

"Yes," Atef agreed, speaking softly in Arabic. "So, what is new, my friend?"

"Our people are pleased with last week. We have shaken the Americans badly," Fa'ad said.

"Not enough for them to disown the Israelis. They love the Jews more than their own children. Mark my words on this. And they will lash out at us."

"How?" Fa'ad demanded. "Lash out, yes, at whomever their spy agencies know about, but that will only inflame the faithful and drive more to our cause. No, our organization they do not know about. They do not even know our name." This was because their organization did not really have a name. "Organization" was merely a descriptive word for their association of the Faithful.

"I hope you are correct. So, do I have more orders?"

"You have done well—three of the men you recruited chose martyrdom in America."

"Three?" Atef was agreeably surprised. "They died well, I trust?"

"They died in Allah's Holy Name. That should be good enough. So, do you have any more recruits ready for us?"

Atef sipped his coffee. "Not quite, but I have two leaning in our direction. This is not easy, as you know. Even the most faithful wish to enjoy the fruits

of a good life." As he was doing himself, of course.

"You have done well for us, Anas. Better to be sure than to be overly demanding of them. Take your time. We can be patient."

"How patient?" Atef wanted to know.

"We have additional plans for America, to sting them worse. This time we killed hundreds. The next time, we shall kill thousands," Fa'ad promised, with a sparkle in his eye.

"How, exactly?" Atef asked immediately. He could have been—*should* have been—a plans officer. His engineering education made him ideal for such things. Didn't they know that? There were people in the organization who thought with their balls instead of their brains.

"That I am not at liberty to say, my friend." Because he didn't know, Fa'ad Rahman Yasin did not say. He wasn't sufficiently trusted by those higher in the organization, which would have outraged him had he known it.

The son of a whore probably doesn't know himself, Atef thought at the same time.

"We approach the hour of prayer, my friend," Anas Ali Atef said, checking his watch. "Come with me. My mosque is only ten minutes away." It would soon be time for the Salat. It was a test for his colleague, to make sure that he was truly faithful.

"As you say." Both rose and walked to the streetcar, which fifteen minutes later stopped a block from the mosque.

"HEADS UP, Aldo," Dominic said. They'd been checking out the neighborhood, really just to get a feel for the area, but there was their friend, walking down the street with what had to be a friend of his own.

"Who's wog number two, I wonder?" Brian said.

"Nobody we know, and we can't freelance. You packin'?" Dominic asked.

"Bet your bippy, bro. You?"

"Hang a big roger on that," Dominic answered. Their target was about thirty yards off, walking right at them, probably heading to the mosque, which was half a block behind them. "What do you think?"

"Wave off, better to bag him on the way out."

"Okay." And both turned right to look into the window of a hat shop. They heard—they damned near *felt*—him pass by. "How long you suppose it'll take?"

"Damned if I know, man, I haven't been to church myself in a couple of months."

"Super," Brian growled. "My own brother's an apostate."

Dominic stifled a laugh. "You always were the altar boy in the family."

* * *

SURE ENOUGH, Atef and his friend walked in. It was time for daily prayers, the Salat, the second of Islam's Five Pillars. They would bend and kneel, facing Mecca, whispering favored phrases from the Holy Koran, affirming their faith as they did so. On entering the building, they removed their shoes, and, to

Yasin's surprise, this mosque suffered from a German influence. There were individualized cubbyholes in the wall of the atrium for their shoes, all of them properly numbered, to prevent confusion . . . or theft. That was a rare offense indeed in any Muslim country, because the Islamic penalty for thievery was very harsh, and to do so in Allah's Own House would have been a deliberate offense to God Himself. They then entered the mosque proper and made their obeisance to Allah.

It didn't take long, and with it came a kind of refreshment for Atef's soul, as he reaffirmed his religious beliefs. Then it was over. He and his friend made their way back to the atrium, collected their shoes, and walked outside.

They weren't the first out the large doors, and the others had served to alert the two Americans. It was really a question of which way they'd go. Dominic was watching the street, looking for a police or intelligence officer, but didn't see any. He was betting that their subject would head toward his apartment. Brian took the other direction. It looked as though forty or so people had gone in for prayers. Coming out, they scattered to the four winds, singly or in small groups. Two got into the fronts of taxicabs—presumably their own—and drove off to catch fares. That did not include any of their coreligionists, who were probably working-class schlubs who walked or took public transportation. It hardly made them seem villainous to the twins, both of whom closed in, but neither too fast nor two obviously. Then the subject and his pal came out.

They turned left, directly toward Dominic, thirty yards away.

From his perspective, Brian saw it all. Dominic removed the gold pen from the inside pocket of his not-quite-a-suit jacket, furtively twisting the tip to arm it, then holding it in his right hand like an ice pick. He was heading on a close reciprocal course to the subject...

It was, perversely, a thing of beauty to watch. Just six feet away, Dominic appeared to trip over something, and fell right into the Atef guy. Brian didn't even see the stick. Atef went down with his brother, and that would have covered the discomfort of the stab. Atef's pal helped both of them up. Dominic made his apology and headed on his way, with Brian following the target. He hadn't seen Sali check out, and so this was interesting in a grim sort of way. The subject walked about fifty feet, then stopped in his tracks. He must have said something, because his friend turned as though to ask a question, just in time to see Atef fall down. One arm came up to protect his face from the fall, but then the entire body went limp.

The second man was clearly dumbfounded by what he saw. He bent down to see what was wrong, first in puzzlement, then in concern, and then in panic, rolling the body over and speaking loudly to his fallen friend. Brian passed them about then. Atef's face was as composed and unmoving as a doll's. The guy's brain was active, but he couldn't even open his eyes. Brian stood there for a minute, then wandered off, without looking back, but he gestured to a German passerby to provide assistance, which the German did, reaching into his coat and pulling out a cell phone. He'd probably call for an ambulance. Brian walked to the next intersection and turned to observe, checking his watch. The ambulance was there in six and a half minutes. The Germans really were well organized. The responding fireman/paramedic checked the pulse, looked up in surprise, and then with alarm. His coworker

on command pulled a box from inside the vehicle, and, as Brian watched, Atef was intubated and bagged. The two firemen were well trained, clearly going through a process they'd practiced in the station and had probably used on the street many times. In their urgency, they did not move Atef into the ambulance, but instead treated him as best they could on the spot.

Ten minutes since he'd gone down, Brian saw by his watch. Atef was already brain-dead, and that was the name of that tune. The Marine officer turned left and walked to the next corner, where he caught a taxi, fumbling through the name of the hotel, but the driver figured it out. Dominic was in the lobby when he got there. Together they headed for the bar.

The one good thing about wasting a guy right out of church was that they could be reasonably certain that he wasn't going to hell. At least, that was one less thing to trouble their consciences. The beer helped, too.

CHAPTER 20

THE SOUND OF HUNTING

MUNICH AT 14:26 in the afternoon translated into 8:26 A.M. Eastern Standard Time at The Campus. Sam Granger was in his office early, wondering if he'd see an e-mail. The twins were working fast. Not recklessly so, but they were certainly making use of the technology with which they'd been provided, and they were not wasting The Campus's time or money along the way. He'd already set up Subject No. 3, of course, encrypted and ready to go out on the 'Net. Unlike with Sali in London, he could not expect any "official" notice about the death from the German intelligence service, the *Bundesnachrichtendienst,* which had taken scant notice of Anas Ali Atef. It would be, if anything, a matter for the city police in Munich, but more likely a case for the local coroner's office—just one more fatal heart attack for a country in which too many citizens smoked and ate fatty foods.

The e-mail arrived at 8:43 from Dominic's computer, reporting the successful hit in considerable detail, almost like an official investigative report to the FBI. The fact that Atef had had a friend close by was probably a bonus. That an enemy had witnessed the killing probably meant that no suspicion would be attached to the subject's demise. The Campus would do its best to get the official report on Atef's departure, however, just to make sure, though that would have its elements of difficulty.

DOWNSTAIRS, RYAN and Wills did not know anything about it, of course. Jack was going through his routine tasks of scanning message traffic within the American intelligence services—which took over an hour—and after that, a scan of Internet traffic to and from known or suspected terrorist addresses. The overwhelming majority of it was so routine it was like e-mails between a husband and wife over what to pick up at the Safeway on the way home from work. Some of those e-mails could easily be coded messages of significant import, but there was no telling that without a program or crib sheet. At least one terrorist had used "hot weather" to mean heavy security at a location of interest to his colleagues, but the message had been sent in July, when the weather was, indeed, warmer than was comfortable. And *that* message had been copied down by the FBI, and the Bureau hadn't taken particular notice of it at first. But one new message positively leaped off the screen at him this morning.

"Hey, Tony, you want to look at this one, buddy."

The addressee was their old friend 56MoHa@eurocom. net, and the content reconfirmed his identity as a nexus for bad-guy message traffic:

ATEF IS DEAD. HE DIED RIGHT BEFORE MY EYES HERE IN MUNICH. AN

AMBULANCE WAS SUMMONED AND THEY TREATED HIM ON THE SIDEWALK BUT HE DIED IN THE HOSPITAL OF A HEART ATTACK. REQUIRE INSTRUCTIONS. FA'AD. And his address was Honeybear@ostercom.net, which was new to Jack's computer index.

"Honeybear?" Wills observed with a chuckle. "This guy must surf for women on the 'Net."

"So, he does cybersex, fine. Tony, if we just whacked a guy named Atef over in Germany, here's confirmation of the event, plus a new target for us to track." Ryan turned back to his workstation and used his mouse to check sources. "Here, NSA picked up on it, too. Maybe they think he's a possible player."

"You sure like making leaps of imagination," Wills observed tersely.

"My ass!" Jack was actually angry for once. He was beginning to understand why his father had often been so pissed off at intelligence information that arrived in the Oval Office. "God damn it, Tony, how much clearer do things have to be?"

Wills took a deep breath and spoke as calmly as usual. "Settle down, Jack. This is single-source, a single report on something that might or might not have taken place. You don't throw your hat over the barn about something until it's confirmed by a known source. This Honeybear identity could be a lot of things, few of which we can certify as a good guy or a bad guy."

For his part, Jack Jr. wondered if he was being tested—again!—by his training officer. "Okay, let's walk through it. MoHa Fifty-six is a source that we're highly confident is a player, probably an operations officer for the bad guys. We've been sweeping the 'Net for him since I've been here, okay? So, we sweep the ether and this letter turns up in his mailbox at the same time we believe we—us—have a kill team in the field. Unless you're going to tell me that Uda bin Sali really did have a myocardial infarction while he was daydreaming about his favorite whore in downtown London. And that the Brit Security Service found the event highly interesting only because it's not every day that a suspected terrorist banker drops dead on the street. Have I missed anything?"

Wills smiled. "Not a bad presentation. A little thin on the evidence, but your proposition was well organized. So, you think I should walk it upstairs?"

"No, Tony, I think you should run it upstairs," Ryan said, easing back on the obvious anger. *Take a deep breath and count to ten.*

"Then I guess I'll do it."

FIVE MINUTES later, Wills walked into Rick Bell's office. He handed over two sheets of paper.

"Rick, do we have a team at work in Germany?" Wills asked. The response was not the least bit surprising.

"Why do you ask?" Bell had a poker face that would have impressed a marble statue.

"Read," Wills suggested.

"Damn," the chief of analysis reacted. "Who pulled this fish out of the electronic ocean?"

"Take a guess," Tony suggested.

"Not bad, for the kid." Bell looked very closely at his guest. "How much does he suspect?"

"At Langley, he'd sure as hell be getting people nervous."

"Like you are?"

"You might say that," Wills replied. "He makes good leaps of imagination, Rick."

Bell made a face this time. "Well, it's not exactly the Olympic long-jump competition, is it?"

"Rick, Jack puts two and two together about as fast as a computer tells the difference between one and zero. He's right, isn't he?"

Bell took a second or two before replying. "What do you think?"

"I think they got that Sali character for sure, and this is probably mission number two. How are they doing it?"

"You really do not want to know. It's not as clean as it looks," Bell answered. "This Atef guy was a recruiter. He sent at least one guy to Des Moines."

"That's a good enough reason," Wills judged.

"Sam feels the same way. I'll turn this over to him. Follow-up?"

"This MoHa guy needs a closer look. Maybe we can track him down," Wills said.

"Any idea where he is?"

"Italy, looks like, but a lot of people live on the boot. Lots of big cities with lots of ratholes. But Italy is a good place for him. Centrally located. Air service everywhere. And the terrorists have let Italy alone lately, and so nobody's hunting down the dog that isn't barking."

"Same in Germany, France, and the rest of Central Europe?"

Wills nodded. "Looks that way. They're next, but I don't think they fully appreciate it. Heads in the sand–like, Rick."

"True," Bell agreed. "So, what do we do with your student?"

"Ryan? Good question. Sure as hell, he's a quick learner. He's particularly good at connecting things," Wills thought out loud. "He makes big leaps of imagination, sometimes too far, but, still, it's not a bad quality for an analyst to have."

"Grade to this point?"

"B-plus, maybe a low A, and that's only because he's new. He's not as good as I am, but I've been in the business since before he was born. He's a comer, Rick. He'll go far."

"That good?" Bell asked. Tony Wills was known as a careful conservative analyst, and one of the best Langley had ever turned out, despite the green eyeshade and the garters on the sleeves.

Wills nodded. "That good." He was also scrupulously honest. It was his natural character, but he could also afford to be. The Campus paid far better than any government agency. His kids were all grown—the last one was in his final year at the University of Maryland in physics, and, after that, he and Betty could think about the next big step in life, though Wills liked it here and had no immediate plans to leave. "But don't tell him I said so."

"Big head?"

"No, that wouldn't be fair. But I don't want him to start thinking he knows

it all yet."

"Nobody with half a brain thinks that way," Bell said.

"Yeah." Wills stood. "But why take the chance?"

Wills headed out, but Bell still didn't know what to do with the Ryan kid. Well, something to talk with the Senator about.

"NEXT STOP. Vienna," Dominic informed his brother. "We got another subject."

"You wonder how steady this job will be?" Brian wondered aloud.

His brother laughed. "Man, there's enough mutts in America to keep us busy for the rest of our lives."

"Yeah, save money, fire all the judges and juries."

"My name ain't Dirty Harry Callahan, you jarhead."

"And I'm not Chesty Puller, either. How do we get there? Fly, train—maybe drive?"

"Driving might be fun," Dominic said. "I wonder if we can rent a Porsche . . . ?"

"Oh, great," Brian grunted. "Okay, log off so I can download the file, will ya?"

"Sure. I'll see what the concierge can set up for us." And he headed out of the room.

"THIS IS the only confirmation we have?" Hendley asked.

"Correct." Granger nodded. "But it tallies exactly with what our guys on the ground told us."

"They're going too fast. What if the other side thinks, 'Two heart attacks in less than a week' . . . ? Then what?"

"Gerry, the nature of this mission is recon-by-fire, remember? We halfway want the other side to get a little nervous, but soon their arrogance will set in and they'll write it off as random chance. If this were TV or the movies, they'd think CIA was playing hardball, but it isn't the movies, and they know that CIA doesn't play that kind of game. The Mossad, maybe, but they're already wary of the Israelis. Hey"—a lightbulb went off in Granger's brain—"what if they're the guys who offed the Mossad officer in Rome?"

"I don't pay you to speculate, Sam."

"It's a possibility," Granger persisted.

"It's also possible that the Mafia hit the poor bastard because they mistook him for a fellow mafioso who owed money to the mob. But I wouldn't bet the ranch on it."

"Yes, sir." Granger walked back to his office.

MOHAMMED HASSAN AL-DIN was in Rome at the moment, at the Hotel Excelsior, drinking his coffee and working on his computer. It was bad news about Atef. He was—he'd been—a good recruiter, with just the right mix of intelligence, plausibility, and commitment to persuade others to join the cause. He'd wanted to enter the field himself, to take lives and be a Holy Martyr, but though he might have been good at it, a man who could recruit was more valuable than a man willing to throw away his own life. It was

simple arithmetic, something a graduate engineer like Atef should have understood. What was it with him? A brother, wasn't it, killed by the Israelis back in 1973? A long time to hold a grudge, even for men in his organization, but not without precedent. Atef was with his brother now, though, in Paradise. That was good fortune for him, but bad fortune for the organization. So it was written, Mohammed comforted himself, and so it would be, and so the struggle would go on until the last of their enemies were dead.

He had a pair of cloned phones on his bed, phones he could use without fear of interception. Should he call the Emir about this? It was worth thinking about. Anas Ali Atef was the second heart attack in less than a week, and in both cases they'd been young men, and that was odd, statistically very unusual. Fa'ad had been standing right next to Anas Ali at the time, though, and so he hadn't been shot or poisoned by an Israeli intelligence officer—a Jew would probably have killed *both* of them, Mohammed thought—and so with an eyewitness right there, there seemed little cause to suspect foul play. For the other, well, Uda had liked the life of a whoremonger, and he would hardly have been the first man to die of that weakness of the flesh. So, it just seemed like an unlikely coincidence and thus unworthy of an urgent call to the Emir himself. He made a note of the dual incidents on his computer, however, encrypted the file, and shut down. He felt like a walk. It was a pleasant day in Rome. Hot by most European standards, but the very breath of home for him. Just up the street was a pleasant sidewalk restaurant whose Italian food was only average, but the average here was better than in many fine restaurants across the world. You'd think that all Italian women would be obese, but, no, they suffered from the Western female disease of thinness, like West African children, some of them. Like young boys instead of mature, experienced women. So sad. But instead of eating, he crossed the Via Veneto to get a thousand Euros from the cash machine. The Euro had made European travel so much more convenient, praise Allah. It was not yet the equal of the American dollar in terms of stability, but, with luck, it might soon become so, which would ease his travel convenience even more.

Rome was a difficult city not to love. Conveniently located, international in character, awash with foreigners, and full of hospitable people who bowed and scraped for cash money like the peasants they all were. A good city for women, with shopping such as Riyadh could scarcely offer. His English mother had liked Rome, and the reasons were obvious. Good food and wine and a fine historical atmosphere that antedated even the Prophet himself, blessing and peace be upon him. Many had died here at the hands of the Caesars, butchered for public enjoyment in the Flavian Amphitheater, or killed because they had displeased the emperor in one way or another. The streets had probably been very peaceful here during the empire period. What better way to ensure it than to enforce the laws ruthlessly? Even the weak could recognize the price for bad behavior. So it was in his homeland, and so, he hoped, it would remain after the Royal Family had been done away with—either killed or chased abroad, perhaps to the safety of England or Switzerland, where people with money and noble status were treated well enough to live out their lives in indolent comfort. Either alternative would suit Mohammed and his colleagues. Just so that they would no longer rule his

country, filled with corruption, kowtowing to the infidels and selling them oil for money, ruling the people as though they were the sons of Mohammed himself. That would come to an end. His distaste for America quailed before his hatred for the rulers of his own country. But America was his primary target because of its power, whether held to its own use or parceled out for others to use in America's own imperial interests. America threatened everything he held dear. America was an infidel country, patron and protector of the Jews. America had invaded his own country and stationed troops and weapons there, undoubtedly with the ultimate objective of subordinating all of Islam, and thus ruling a *billion* of the Faithful for its own narrow and parochial interests. Stinging America had become his obsession. Even the Israelis were not as attractive as targets. Vicious though they might be, the Jews were merely America's cat's-paws, vassals who did America's bidding in return for money and weapons, without even knowing how cynically they were being used. The Iranian Shiites had been correct. America was the Great Satan, Iblis himself, so great in power that it was hard to strike decisively at it, but still vulnerable in its evil before the righteous forces of Allah and the Faithful.

THE CONCIERGE at the Hotel Bayerischer had outdone himself, Dominic thought, securing a Porsche 911 whose forward-mounted trunk barely held their bags, and that only with a little squeezing. But it was enough, and better even than a rented small-engine Mercedes. The 911 had balls. Brian would get to fumble with the maps as they went southeast through the Alps to Vienna. That they were going south to kill someone was beside the point for the moment. They were serving their country, which was about as big as loyalty got.

"Do I need a crash helmet?" Brian asked, getting in, which in the case of this car almost meant sitting on the pavement.

"Not with me driving, Aldo. Come on, bro. It's time to rock and roll."

The car was a horrible shade of blue, but the tank was filled, and the six-cylinder engine was properly tuned. The Germans did like things *in Ordnung*. Brian navigated them out of Munich and onto the autobahn southeast to Vienna, and from there Enzo decided to see how fast this Porsche could really go.

"DO YOU think maybe they need some backup?" Hendley asked Granger, whom he'd just called into his office.

"What do you mean?" Sam responded. "They" had to be the Caruso brothers, of course.

"I mean they do not have much in the way of intelligence support," the former Senator pointed out.

"Well, we've never really thought about that, have we?"

"Exactly." Hendley leaned back in his chair. "In a sense, they're operating naked. Neither one has much in the way of intelligence experience. What if they hit the wrong guy? Okay, they probably won't get bagged doing it, but it won't help their morale, either. I remember a Mafia guy, in the Atlanta Federal Pen, I think. He killed some poor bastard he thought was trying to kill him, but it was the wrong guy, and he came unglued as a result. Sang like a

canary. That's how we got our first big break on the Mafia and how it was organized, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, it was a Mafia soldier named Joe Valachi, yeah, but he was a criminal, remember?"

"And Brian and Dominic are good guys. So, guilt could hit them worse. Maybe some intel backup is a good idea."

Granger was surprised at the suggestion. "I can see the need for better intelligence evaluation, and this 'virtual office' stuff has its limitations, I admit. They can't ask questions, like, but if they have one, they can still e-mail us for advice—"

"Which they haven't done," Hendley pointed out.

"Gerry, they're only two steps into the mission. It's not time to panic yet, y'know? These are two very bright and very capable young officers. That's why we picked them. They know how to think on their own, and that's precisely what we want in our operations people."

"We're not just making assumptions, we're *launching* assumptions into the future. You think that's a good idea?" Hendley had learned how to pursue ideas on Capitol Hill, and he was deadly effective at it.

"Assumptions are always a bad thing. I know that, Gerry. But so are complications. How do we know we're sending the right guy? What if it just *adds* a level of uncertainty? Do we want to do that?" Hendley, thought Granger, was suffering from the deadliest congressional disease. It was too easy to oversight something to death.

"What I'm saying is that it's a good idea to have somebody out there who thinks a little different, who takes a different kind of approach to the data that goes out there. The Caruso boys are pretty good. I know that. But they are inexperienced. The important thing is to have a different brain out there to take a different view of the facts and the situation."

Granger felt himself being backed into a corner. "Okay, look, I can see the logic of that, but it's a level of complication that we don't need."

"Okay, so look at it this way—what if they see something for which they are not prepared? In that case, they need a second—whatever you call it—opinion of the data at hand. That will make them less likely to make a mistake in the field. The one thing that bothers me is that they make a mistake, and it's a fatal mistake for some poor schlub, and that the error affects the way they carry out their missions in the future. Guilt, remorse, and maybe then they start talking about it, okay? Can we completely discount that?"

"No, maybe not entirely, but it also means that we just add an additional element to the equation that can say no when a yes is the right way to go. Saying no is something anybody can do. It isn't necessarily right. You can take caution too far."

"I don't think so."

"Fine. So, who do you want to send?" Granger asked.

"Let's think about it. Ought to be—*has* to be somebody they know and trust . . ." His voice trailed off.

Hendley had made his operations chief nervous. He had an idea fixed in his head, and Hendley knew all too well that he was the head of The Campus, and that within this building his word was law, and there was nobody to appeal it

to. So, if Granger was to select a name for this notional job, it had to be somebody who would not screw everything up.

THE AUTOBAHN was superbly, even brilliantly, engineered. Dominic found himself wondering who'd set it up. Then he thought that the road looked as though it had been there for a long time. And it linked Germany and Austria . . . maybe Hitler himself had ordered this road built? Wasn't that a hoot? In any case, there was no speed limit here, and the Porsche's six-cylinder engine was purring like a stalking tiger on the scent of some warm meat. And the German drivers were amazingly polite. All you had to do was flash your lights, and they hustled out of your way as though having received a divine edict. Definitely unlike America, where some little old lady in her overage Pinto was in the far-left lane because she was left-handed and *liked* holding up the maniacs in their Corvettes. The Bonneville Salt Flats could scarcely have been more fun.

For his part, Brian was doing his best not to cringe. He closed his eyes occasionally, thinking back to nap-of-the-earth flying in the Recon Marines through mountain passes in the Sierra Nevada, often enough in CH-46 helicopters older than he was. They hadn't killed him. This probably wouldn't either, and, as a Marine officer, he wasn't allowed to show fear or weakness. And it *was* exciting. Rather like riding in a roller coaster without the safety bar across the seat. But he saw that Enzo was having the time of his life, and he consoled himself with the fact that his seat belt *was* attached, and that this little German car was probably engineered by the same design crew that had done the Tiger tank. Getting through the mountains was the scariest part, and when they entered farm country, the land got flatter and the road straighter, thanks be to God.

"The hills are alive with the sound of myoosikkkk," Dominic sang, horribly.

"If you sing like that in church, God'll strike your ass dead," Brian warned, pulling out the city maps for the approach to Wien, as Vienna was known to its citizens.

And the city streets were a rat warren. The capital of Austria—Osterreich—predated the Roman legions, with no street straight for a longer distance than would be needed by a legion to parade past its *tribunus militaris* on the emperor's birthday. The map showed inner and outer ring roads, which probably marked the former site of medieval walls—the Turks had come here more than once hoping to add Austria to their empire, but that trinket of military history had not been part of the official Marine Corps reading list. A largely Catholic country, because the ruling House of Hapsburg had been so, it had not kept the Austrians from exterminating its prominent and prosperous Jewish minority after Hitler had subsumed Osterreich into the Greater German Reich. That had been after the *Anschluss* plebiscite of 1938. Hitler had been born here, not in Germany as widely believed, and the Austrians had repaid that loyalty with some of their own, becoming more Nazified than Hitler himself, or so objective history reported, not necessarily the Austrians' now. It was the one country in the world where *The Sound of Music* had fallen flat at the box office, maybe because the movie had been uncomplimentary toward the Nazi party.

For all that, Vienna looked like what it was, a former imperial city with wide, tree-lined boulevards and classical architecture, and remarkably well-turned-out citizens. Brian navigated them to the Hotel Imperial on Kartner Ring, a building that looked to be an adjunct to the well-known Schonbrunn Palace.

"You have to admit they put us up in nice places, Aldo," Dominic observed.

It was even more impressive inside, with gilt plaster and lacquered woodwork, every segment of which appeared to have been installed by master craftsmen imported from Renaissance Florence. The lobby was not spacious, but the reception desk was impossible to miss, manned as it was by people wearing clothing that marked them as hotel staff as surely as a Marine in dress blues.

"Good day," the concierge said in greeting. "Your name is Caruso?"

"Correct," Dominic said, surprised at the concierge's ESP. "You should have a reservation for my brother and myself?"

"Yes, sir," the concierge replied with enthusiastic subordination. His English might have been learned at Harvard. "Two connecting rooms overlooking the street."

"Excellent." Dominic fished out his American Express black card and handed it across.

"Thank you."

"Any messages for us?" Dominic asked.

"No, sir," the concierge assured him.

"Can you have the valet attend to our car? It's rented. We're not sure if we'll be keeping it or not."

"Of course, sir."

"Thank you. Can we see our rooms?"

"Yes. You are on the first floor—excuse me, the second floor, as you say in America. Franz," he called.

The bellman's English was just as good. "This way, if you please, gentlemen." No elevator, but rather a walk up a flight of red-carpeted steps directly toward a full-length portrait of somebody who looked very important indeed, in his white military uniform and beautifully combed-out chin whiskers.

"Who might that be?" Dominic asked the bellman.

"The Emperor Franz Josef, sir. He visited the hotel upon its opening in the nineteenth century."

"Ah." It explained the attitude of the staff here, but you couldn't knock the style of this place. Not by a long shot.

In another five minutes, they were settled into their accommodations. Brian came wandering into his brother's room. "God damn, the Residence Level at the White House isn't this good."

"Think so?" Dominic asked.

"Dude, I *know* so. Been there, done that. Uncle Jack had me up after I got my commission—no, actually it was after I came through the Basic School. Shit, this place is something. I wonder what it costs?"

"What the hell, it's on my card, and our friend is nearby at the Bristol. Kinda interesting to hunt rich bastards, isn't it?" That brought them back to

business. Dominic pulled his laptop out of his bag. The Imperial was used to guests with computers, and the setup for it was very efficient indeed. For the moment, he opened the most recent file. He'd only scanned it before. Now he took his time with every single word.

* * *

GRANGER WAS thinking it through. Gerry wanted somebody to baby-sit the twins, and it seemed as though his mind was fixed on it. There were a lot of good people in the intelligence department under Rick Bell, but as former intelligence officers at CIA and elsewhere, they were all too old to be proper companions for the twins, young as the Caruso kids were. It wouldn't look right to have people in their late twenties chumming around Europe with somebody in his middle fifties. So, better somebody younger. There weren't many of those, but there was one . . .

He picked up his phone.

FA' AD WAS only two blocks away on the third floor of the Bristol Hotel, a famous and very upper-crust accommodation known particularly for its superior dining room and its nearness to the State Opera, which sat just across the street, consecrated to the memory of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who had been the court musician for the House of Hapsburg before dying an early death, right here in Vienna. But Fa'ad wasn't the least bit interested in such history. Current events were his obsession. Watching Anas Ali Atef die right before his eyes had shaken him badly. That had not been the death of infidels, something you could watch on TV and smile quietly about. He'd been standing there, watching the life drain invisibly from his friend's body, watching the German paramedics fight vainly for his life—evidently doing their very best even for a person they must have despised. That was a surprise. And, yes, they were Germans just doing their job, but they'd *done* that job with obstinate determination, then they'd raced his comrade to the nearest hospital, where the German doctors had probably done the same, only to fail. A doctor had come to him in the waiting room and sadly told him the news, saying unnecessarily that they'd done everything that could have been done, and that it had looked like a massive heart attack, and that further laboratory work would be done to make certain that this indeed had been the cause of death, and finally asking for information on his family, if any, and who would see about the body after they were done picking it apart. Strange thing about the Germans, how precise they always were about everything. Fa'ad had made what arrangements he could, and then boarded a train for Vienna, sitting alone in a first-class seat and trying to come to terms with the dreadful event.

He was making his report to the organization. Mohammed Hassan al-Din was his gateway for that. He was probably in Rome at the moment, though Fa'ad Rahman Yasin was not quite sure. He didn't have to be sure. The Internet was a good enough address, formless as it was. It was just so very sad for a young and vigorous and valuable comrade to fall down dead on the street. If it served any purpose at all, only Allah Himself knew what it might

be—but Allah had His Plan for everything, and it was not always something for men to know. Fa'ad took a minibottle of cognac from his minibar and drank it right out of the glass container instead of pouring it into one of the snifters on top of the cabinet. Sinful or not, it helped steady his nerves, and anyway he never did it in public. Damn such bad luck! He took another look at the minibar. Two more cognacs remained, and after that, several miniatures of Scotch whisky, the favorite drink of Saudi Arabia, Shar'ia or not.

"GOT YOUR passport?" Granger asked as soon as he'd sat down.

"Well, sure. Why?" Ryan asked.

"You're going to Austria. Plane leaves tonight from Dulles. Here's your ticket." The director of operations tossed the folder across the desk.

"What for?"

"You're booked into the Imperial Hotel. There you will link up with Dominic and Brian Caruso to keep them advised of intelligence developments. You can use your regular e-mail account, and your laptop is equipped with the proper encryption technology."

What the hell? Jack wondered. "Excuse me, Mr. Granger. Can we go back a couple of steps? Exactly what's going on here?"

"Your father asked that question once or twice, I bet." Granger managed a smile that would chill the ice in a highball. "Gerry thinks the twins need backup on the intelligence side. So, you are detailed to provide that backup, kind of a consultant to them while they're in the field. This does not mean that you'll actually be doing anything but keeping an eye on intel developments through the virtual office. You've done some pretty good work on that. You have a good nose for tracking things on the 'Net—damned sight better than Dom and Brian. Getting your eyes in the field might be useful. That's why. You can decline the job, but in your place, I'd take it. Okay?"

"When's the flight?"

"It's on your ticket folder."

Jack looked. "Damn, I'll have to hustle."

"So, hustle. There'll be a car to take you to Dulles. Get going."

"Yes, sir," Jack replied, coming to his feet. Just as well he had a car service heading his way. He didn't like the idea of leaving his Hummer in the Dulles parking lot. Thieves had fallen in love with the things. "Oh, who is cleared to know this?"

"Rick Bell will let Wills know. Aside from that, nobody, I repeat, *nobody*. Clear?"

"Clear, sir. Okay, I'm out of here." He looked in the ticket folder to find an American Express black card. At least the trip was on the company dime. How many of these things did The Campus have sitting around in its file drawers? he wondered. But for damned sure it was all he needed for this day.

* * *

"WHAT'S THIS?" Dominic asked his computer. "Aldo, we've got company coming over tomorrow morning."

“Who?” Brian asked.

“Doesn’t say. It says to take no action until he links up with us, though.”

“Jesus, who do they think we are, Louis the Fish? It’s not our fault the last guy jumped right into our lap. Why fuck around?”

“These are government types. If you get too efficient, they get scared,” Dominic thought aloud. “What about dinner, bro?”

“Fine, we can check their version of Vitello Milanese. You suppose they have any decent wines here?”

“Only one way to find out, Aldo.” Dominic picked a tie out of his suitcase. The hotel dining room looked about as formal as Uncle Jack’s old house.

CHAPTER 21

STREETCAR NAME DESIRED

IT WAS a new adventure for Jack in two different ways. He'd never been to Austria before. He'd damned sure never gone into the field as a spook to join up with an assassination team, and while the idea of terminating the lives of people who liked killing Americans seemed quite a good thing at a desk in West Odenton, Maryland—in seat 3A of an Airbus 330, thirty-four thousand feet over the Atlantic Ocean, it was suddenly a dicey state of affairs. Well, Granger had told him he wouldn't really have to do anything. And that was fine with Jack. He still knew how to shoot a pistol—he regularly went shooting at the Secret Service's range in downtown D.C., or sometimes at their academy at Beltsville, Maryland, if Mike Brennan was around. But Brian and Dom weren't shooting people, were they? Not according to the MI5 report that had come to his computer. Heart attack—how the hell did you fake a heart attack well enough that a pathologist took the bait? He'd have to ask them about that. Presumably, he was cleared for it.

In any case, the food was better than average for airline slop, and even an airline can't ruin the booze when it is still in the bottle. With enough alcohol in him, sleep came fairly easily, and the first-class seat was the old-fashioned kind instead of the new gollywog with a hundred moving parts, none of which were comfortable. As usual, about half the people up front watched movies all night. Every person had his own way of dealing with travel shock, as his father invariably called it. Jack's was to sleep through it.

THE WIENER schnitzel was excellent, as were the local wines.

"Whoever does this needs to talk to Granddad," Dominic said, after the last bite. "He may know something that Pop-Pop can learn from."

"He's probably Italian, bro, or at least somewhere along the line." Brian finished off his glass of the excellent local white the waiter had recommended. About fifteen seconds later, the waiter took note of it and refilled the glass before vanishing again. "Damn, a man could get used to this eatery. Beats the hell out of MREs."

"With luck, you may never have to eat that crap again."

"Sure, if we just continue this line of work," Aldo responded dubiously. They were essentially alone in a corner booth. "So, what do we know about the new subject?"

"Courier, supposedly. He carries messages in his head—the ones they don't send via the 'Net. Would have been useful to pick his brain some, but that's not the mission. We have a physical description, but no photo this time. That's a little worrisome. He doesn't sound all that important. That's worrisome,

too."

"Yeah, I hear you. He must have pissed the wrong people off. Tough luck." His pangs of conscience were a thing of the past, but he really wanted to bag one closer to the top of the food chain. The absence of a photo for ID was indeed worrisome. They'd have to be careful. You didn't want to hit the wrong guy.

"Well, he didn't get on the list by singing too loud at church, y'know?"

"And he ain't the Pope's nephew." Brian completed the litany. "I hear you, man." He checked his watch. "Time to hit the rack, bro. We have to see who's coming tomorrow. How are we supposed to meet him?"

"Message said he'd come to us. Hell, maybe he's going to stay here, too."

"The Campus has funny ideas about security, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it's not like the movies." Dominic had himself a quiet laugh. He waved for the check. They'd pass on dessert. In a place like this, it could be lethal. Five more minutes and they were in their beds.

"THINK YOU'RE clever, eh?" Hendley asked Granger over the secure phones in both their homes.

"Gerry, you told me to send an intel weenie, right? Who else can we spare out of Rick's shop? Everybody's been telling me how sharp the kid is. Okay, let him prove it at the sharp end."

"But he's a rookie," Hendley protested.

"And the twins aren't?" Granger asked in reply. *Gotcha. From now on, you'll let me run my shop* my *way,* he thought just as loudly as he could. "Gerry, he's not going to get his hands wet, and this will probably make him a better analyst. He's related to them. They know him. He knows them. They will trust and believe what he has to say, and Tony Wills says he's the brightest young analyst he's seen since he left Langley. So, he's perfect for the assignment, isn't he?"

"He's too junior." But Hendley knew he was losing this one.

"Who isn't, Gerry? If we had any guys available with experience in this line of work, we would have put 'em on the payroll."

"If this blows up—"

"Then I go up in smoke. I know that. Can I watch some TV now?"

"See you tomorrow," Hendley said.

"'Night, buddy."

HONEYBEAR WAS surfing the 'Net, chatting with somebody named Elsa K 69, who said she was twenty-three years old, 160 centimeters in height, and fifty-four kilograms in weight, with decent but not exceptional measurements, brown hair, blue eyes, and a nasty, inventive mind. She also had good typing skills. In fact, though Fa'ad had no way of knowing it, it was a man, fifty years old, half drunk and rather lonely. They chatted in English. The "girl" on the other end said "she" was a secretary in London. It was a city the Austrian accountant knew well.

"She" was real enough for Fa'ad, who soon got deeply into the perverse fantasy. It wasn't as good as a real woman by a long shot, but Fa'ad was careful about indulging his passions in Europe. You never knew if the woman

you rented might be someone from the Mossad, who'd be just as happy to cut it off as to take it inside. He didn't fear death much, but like all men he did fear pain. In any case, the fantasy lasted almost half an hour, which left him sated enough to take note of the "handle" in case "she" showed up again. He could not know that the Tyrolean accountant made a similar notation in his Buddy File before retiring to a cold and lonely bed.

WHEN JACK woke up, the window blinds were raised to reveal the purple-gray of mountains about twenty thousand feet below. His watch showed that he'd been aboard about eight hours, and had probably slept for six of them. Not too bad. He had a mild headache from the wine, but the wake-up coffee was good, as was the pastry, which combined to get him semi-awake as Flight 94 cruised in for landing.

The airport was hardly a large one, considering it was the flagship port of entry for a sovereign country, but Austria had about the same population as New York City, which had *three* airports. The aircraft thumped down, and the captain welcomed them all to his homeland, telling them that the local time was 9:05 A.M. So, he'd have one day of heavy jet lag to deal with, but with luck maybe he'd be approximately okay tomorrow.

He cleared immigration easily—the flight had only been about half full—recovered his bags and headed outside for a cab.

"Hotel Imperial, please."

"Where?" the driver asked.

"Hotel Imperial," Ryan repeated.

The driver thought for a moment. *"Ach so,* Hotel Imperial, *ja?"*

"Das ist richtig," Junior assured him, and sat back to enjoy the ride. He had a hundred Euros, and assumed that would be enough, unless this guy had attended the New York City school of taxi driving. In any case, there'd be ATM machines on the street.

The drive took half an hour, fighting the rush-hour traffic. A block or two from the hotel, he passed a Ferrari dealership, which was something new for him—he'd seen Ferraris only on TV before, and wondered, as all young men wonder, what it might be like to drive one.

The hotel staff greeted him like an arriving prince, and delivered him to a fourth-floor suite whose bed looked very inviting indeed. He immediately ordered breakfast and unpacked. Then he remembered why he was here, and picked up the phone, asking for a connection with Dominic Caruso's room.

"HELLO?" It was Brian. Dom was in the gold-encrusted shower.

"Hey, cuz, it's Jack," he heard.

"Jack who—wait a minute, *Jack*?"

"I'm upstairs, Marine. Just flew in an hour ago. Come on up, so we can talk."

"Right. Give me ten minutes," Brian said, and headed into the bathroom. "Enzo, you ain't gonna believe who's upstairs."

"Who?" Dominic asked, toweling himself off.

"Let it be a surprise, man." Brian went back to the sitting room, not sure whether to laugh or barf as he read the *International Herald Tribune*.

"YOU GOTTA be fucking kidding," Dominic breathed as the door opened.

"You ought to see it from my side, Enzo," Jack answered. "Come on in."

"Food's good in Motel 6, isn't it?" Brian observed, following his brother.

"Actually, I prefer Holiday Inn Express. I need to pick up a Ph.D. for my curriculum vitae, y'know?" Jack laughed and waved them to the chairs. "I got extra coffee."

"They do it well here. I see you discovered the croissants." Dominic poured himself a cup and stole a pastry. "Why the hell did they send you?"

"I guess because you both know me." Junior buttered his second. "Tell you what. Let me finish breakfast and we can take a walk down to the Ferrari dealership and talk about it. How do you like Vienna?"

"Just got here yesterday afternoon, Jack," Dominic informed him.

"I didn't know that. I gather you had a productive time in London, though."

"Not bad," Brian answered. "Tell you about it later."

"Right." Jack continued his breakfast while Brian went back to his *International Trib.* "They're still excited at home about the shootings. Had to take my shoes off at the airport. Good thing I had clean socks. Looks like they're trying to see if anybody's trying to leave town in a hurry."

"Yeah, that was pretty damned bad, man," Dominic observed. "Anybody you know get clobbered?"

"No, thank God. Even Dad didn't, with all the people he knows in the investment crowd. What about you guys?"

Brian gave him a funny look. "Nobody we knew, no." He hoped that little David Prentiss's soul would not be offended.

Jack finished the last croissant. "Let me shower and you guys can show me around."

Brian finished the paper and turned the TV on to CNN—the only American station the Imperial had—to check on the news at 0500 in New York. The last of the victims had been buried the previous day, and the reporters were asking the bereaved how they felt about their loss. *What a dumbass question!* the Marine raged. You were supposed to leave twisting the knife to the bad guys. And politicians were ranting on about What America Has to Do.

Well, Brian thought, *we're doing it for you, guys.* But if they found out, they'd probably foul their silk drawers. But that just made him feel better about it. Somebody had to play a little catch-up ball, and that was his job now.

AT THE Bristol, Fa'ad was just waking up. He, too, had ordered coffee and pastry. He was scheduled to meet a fellow courier the next day to receive a message that he'd then pass on in due course. The Organization operated with great security for its important communications. The really serious messages were all passed exclusively by word of mouth. The couriers knew only their incoming and outgoing counterparts, so that they were organized in cells of three only, another lesson learned from the dead KGB officer. The inbound courier was Mahmoud Mohamed Fadhil, who'd be arriving from Pakistan. Such a system could be broken, but only through painstaking and lengthy police work, which was easily foiled if only one man removed himself from the ratline. The trouble was that the unexpected removal of a rat from the line

could prevent a message from reaching its destination entirely, but that had not yet happened, and was not expected to. It was not a bad life for Fa'ad. He traveled a lot, always first-class, resided only in top-of-the-line hostelries, and, all in all, it was rather comfortable. He occasionally felt guilty for this. Others did what he thought were the dangerous and admirable things, but on taking the job he'd been briefed that the organization could not function without him and his eleven comrades, which was good for his morale. So was the knowledge that his function, while of great importance, was also quite safe. He received messages and passed them on, often to the operatives themselves, all of whom treated him with great respect, as though he had originated the mission instructions himself, of which he did not disabuse them. So, in two days, he'd receive more orders for transfer, whether to his nearest geographic colleague—Ibrahim Salih al-Adel, home-based in Paris—or to an operative currently unknown. Today he would find out, and make such communications as were necessary, and act upon developments. The job could be both boring and exciting at the same time, and with the comfortable hours and zero risk to his person, it was easy to be a hero of the movement, as he sometimes allowed himself to think of himself.

THEY WALKED east on Kartner Ring, which almost at once angled northeast and changed its name to Schubertring. On the north side of it was the Ferrari dealership.

"So, how are you guys doing?" Jack asked, out in the open, and with the traffic noise beyond the reach of any possible tapping device.

"Two down. One more to go, right here in Vienna, then off somewhere else, wherever it is. I kinda thought you would know," Dominic said.

Jack shook his head. "Nope. I haven't been briefed on that."

"Why did they send you?" This one came from Brian.

"I'm supposed to give you second guesses, I think. Back you up on the intel side and be some sort of consultant. That's what Granger told me, anyway. I know what happened in London. We got lots of inside stuff from the Brits—indirectly, that is. It was written off as a heart attack. Munich I do not know much about. What can you tell me?"

Dominic answered. "I got him coming out of church. He went down on the sidewalk. Ambulance arrived. The paramedics worked him over and carted him off to the hospital. All I know."

"He's dead. We caught that on an intercept," Ryan told them. "He was accompanied by a guy named 'Honeybear' on the 'Net. Saw his buddy go down and reported it in to a guy with the handle Fifty-six MoHa, somewhere in Italy, we think. The Munich guy—his name was Atef—was a recruiter and courier. We know he recruited a shooter in the mess last week. So, you can be sure he earned his way onto the hit list."

"We know. They told us that," Brian said.

"How are you doing these people, exactly?"

"With this." Dominic pulled his gold pen from the suit jacket pocket. "You swap the point out by twisting the nib and stick them, preferably in the ass. It injects a drug called succinylcholine, and that ruins the subject's whole day. The drug metabolizes in the bloodstream even after death, and can't be

detected easily unless the pathologist's a genius, and a lucky one at that."

"Paralyzes them?"

"Yep. They collapse, and then they can't breathe. Takes about thirty seconds for the drug to take hold, and then they drop down, and, after that, it's just a matter of mechanics. It *looks* like a heart attack afterward, and it tests out like that, too. Perfect for what we do."

"Damn," Jack said. "So, you guys were in Charlottesville, too, eh?"

"Yeah." This was Brian. "Not much fun. I had a little boy die in my arms, Jack. That was pretty tough."

"Well, nice shooting."

"They weren't very smart," Dominic evaluated them. "No smarter than street hoods. No training. They didn't check their backs. I guess they figured they didn't have to, with automatic weapons. But they learned different. Still, we were lucky—Son of a bitch!" he observed, as they got to the Ferraris.

"Damn. They are pretty," Jack agreed at once. Even Brian was impressed.

"That's the old one," Dominic told them. "575M, V-twelve, five hundred–plus horses, six-speed transmission, two hundred twenty big ones to drive it away. The really cool one's the Ferrari Enzo. That baby's the fucking bomb, guys. Six hundred sixty horses. They even named it after me. See, back in the far corner."

"How much?" Junior asked.

"The far side of six hundred thousand bucks. But if you want to get something hotter, you gotta call Lockheed Burbank." And sure enough, the car had twin openings on the front that looked like jet intakes. The entire machine looked like personal transportation for Luke Skywalker's rich uncle.

"Still knows his cars, eh?" Jack observed. A private jet probably got better mileage, too, but the car was sleekly pretty.

"He'd rather sleep with a Ferrari than with Grace Kelly," Brian snorted. His own priorities were rather more conventional, of course.

"You can ride a car longer than a girl, people." Which was one version of efficiency. "Damn, I bet that honey moves pretty fast."

"You could get a private pilot's license," Jack suggested.

Dominic shook his head. "Nah. Too dangerous."

"Son of a bitch." Jack almost laughed out loud. "As compared with what you've been doing?"

"Junior, I'm used to that, y'know?"

"You say so, man." Jack just shook his head. Damn, those were pretty cars. He liked his Hummer at home. In the snow he could drive anywhere, and he'd win any collision on the highway, and, if it wasn't exactly sporty, what the hell? But the little boy in him could understand the list on his cousin's face. If Maureen O'Hara had been born a car, maybe she'd be one of these. The red body color would have gone nicely with her hair. After ten minutes, Dominic figured he'd drooled enough, and they walked on.

"So, we know everything about the subject except for what he looks like?" Brian asked half a block up the street.

"Correct," Jack confirmed. "But how many Arabs do you expect there to be in the Bristol?"

"A lot of them in London. Trick is going to be to ID the subject. Doing the

job right on the sidewalk ought not to be too hard." And, looking around, that seemed likely. Street traffic wasn't as thick as in New York or London, but it wasn't Kansas City after dark either, and doing the job in broad daylight had its own attractions. "I guess we stake out the hotel's main entrance, and whatever side entrance there is. Can you see if you can get more data from The Campus?"

Jack checked his watch and did the mental arithmetic. "They should be open for business in two hours or so."

"Then check your e-mail," Dominic told him. "We'll wander around and look for a likely subject."

"Right." They walked across the street and headed back to the Imperial. Once back in his room, Jack flopped onto the bed and grabbed a nap.

THERE WAS nothing he had to do right now, Fa'ad thought, so he might as well get some air. Vienna had plenty of things to look at, and he hadn't exhausted them all yet. So, he dressed properly, like a businessman, and walked outside.

"BINGO, ALDO." Dominic had a cop's memory for faces, and they had practically walked into this one.

"Isn't he—"

"Yep. Atef's pal from Munich. You wanna bet he's our boy?"

"Sucker bet, bro." Dominic cataloged the target. *Middle Eastern as hell, medium height, five feet ten inches or so, light build at about hundred fifty pounds, black and brown, slightly Semitic nose, dresses well and expensively, like a businessman, walks around with purpose and confidence.* They walked within ten feet of him, careful not to stare, even with their sunglasses. *Gotcha, sucker.* Whoever these people were, they didn't know dick about hiding in plain sight. They walked to the corner.

"Damn, that was easy enough," Brian observed. "Now what?"

"We let Jack check it out with the home office and just be cool, Aldo."

"Roger, copy that, bro." He unconsciously checked his coat to make sure the gold pen was in place, as he might have checked his holster for his M9 Beretta automatic in uniform and in the field. It felt as though he were an invisible lion in a Kenyan field full of wildebeest. It didn't get much better than that. He could pick out the one he wanted to kill and eat, and the poor bastard didn't even know he was being stalked. *Just like they do it.* He wondered if this guy's colleagues would see the irony of having such tactics used against them. It wasn't how Americans were conditioned to act, but then all that stuff about showdowns on main street at high noon was something invented by Hollywood, anyway. A lion was not in the business of risking his life, and as they'd told him in the Basic School, if you found yourself in a fair fight, then you hadn't planned it very well beforehand. Fighting fair was okay in the Olympic Games, but this wasn't that. No big-game hunter walked up to a lion making noise and holding a sword. Instead, he did the sensible thing: He took cover behind a log and did it with a rifle from two hundred yards or so. Even the Masai tribesmen of Kenya, for whom killing a lion was the passage into manhood, had the good sense to do it in a squad-sized unit of ten, and not all

of them teenagers, to make sure it was the lion's tail they took back to the kraal. It wasn't about being brave. It was about being effective. Just being in this business was dangerous enough. You did your best to take every element of unnecessary risk out of the equation. It was business, not a sport. "Do him out here on the street?"

"Worked before, Aldo, didn't it? I don't figure we can hit him in the hotel saloon."

"Roge-o, Enzo. Now what do we do?"

"Play tourist, I suppose. The opera house looks impressive. Let's take a look.... The sign says they're doing Wagner's *The Valkyries.* I've never seen that one."

"I've never seen an opera in my life. I suppose I ought to someday—part of the Italian soul, ain't it?"

"Oh yeah, I got more soul than I can control, but I'm partial to Verdi."

"My ass. When you been to the opera?"

"I have some of the CDs," Dominic answered, with a smile. As it turned out, the State Opera House was a magnificent example of imperial architecture, built and executed as though for God Himself to attend a performance, and bedecked in scarlet and gold. Whatever its faults might have been, the House of Hapsburg had shown impressive taste. Dominic thought briefly about checking out the cathedrals in town, but decided it wasn't fitting, given the reason they were here. In all, they walked around for two hours, then headed back to the hotel and up to Jack's room.

"NO JOY from the home office," Jack told them.

"No problem. We saw the guy. He's an old friend from Munich," Brian reported. They walked into the bathroom and opened the faucets, which would put out enough white noise to annoy any microphones in the room. "He's a pal of Mr. Atef. He was there when we popped him in Munich."

"How can you be sure?"

"A hundred percent sure, we can't be—but what are the odds that he just happened to be in both cities, and the right hotel, man?" Brian asked reasonably.

"Hundred percent certainty is better," Jack objected.

"I agree, but when you're on the right side of thousand-to-one odds, you put the money down and toss the dice," Dominic responded. "By Bureau rules, he's at least a known associate, somebody we'd take aside to interview. So, he probably isn't out collecting for the Red Cross, y'know?" The agent paused. "Okay, it's not perfect, but it's the best we got, and I think it's worth going with."

It was gut-check time for Jack. Did he have the authority to give a go-no-go on this? Granger hadn't said so. He was intel backup for the twins. But what, exactly, did that mean? Great. He had a job without a job description, and no assigned authority. This did not make much sense. He remembered his father saying once that headquarters people weren't supposed to second-guess the troops out in the field, because the troops had eyes, and were supposed to be trained to think on their own. But in this case his training was probably at least as good as theirs. *But* he hadn't seen the face of the supposed subject and

they had. If he said no, they could just as easily tell him where to stick his opinion, and, since he had no power to enforce it, they'd win the day and he'd just stand around with his dick in his hand, wondering who was right on the call. The spook business was suddenly very unpredictable, and he was stuck in the middle of a swamp without a helicopter to lift his ass out.

"Okay, guys, it's your call." This seemed a lot like taking the coward's way out to Jack, and even more so when he said, "I'd still feel better if we were a hundred percent sure."

"So would I. But like I said, man, a thousand to one constitutes betting odds. Aldo?"

Brian thought it over and nodded. "It works for me. He looked very concerned over his pal in Munich. If he's a good guy, he has funny friends. So, let's do him."

"Okay," Jack breathed, bowing to the inevitable. "When?"

"As soon as convenient," Brian responded. He and his brother would discuss tactics later, but Jack didn't need to know about that.

HE WAS lucky, Fa'ad decided at 10:14 that night. He got an instant message from Elsa K 69, who evidently remembered him kindly.

WHAT SHALL WE DO TONIGHT? he asked "her."

I'VE BEEN THINKING. IMAGINE WE ARE IN ONE OF THE K-LAGERS. I AM A JEWESS, AND YOU ARE THE KOMMAN-DANT . . . I DO NOT WISH TO DIE WITH THE REST, AND I OFFER YOU PLEASURE IN RETURN FOR MY LIFE . . . "she" proposed.

It could scarcely have been a more pleasant fantasy for him. GO AHEAD AND BEGIN, he typed.

And so it went for a while, until: PLEASE, PLEASE, I AM NOT AN AUSTRIAN. I AM AN AMERICAN MUSIC STUDENT TRAPPED BY THE WAR . . .

Better and better. OH, YES? I HAVE HEARD MUCH ABOUT AMERICAN JEWS AND THEIR WHORISH WAYS . . .

And so it went for nearly an hour. At the end, he sent her to the gas anyway. After all, what were Jews good for, really?

PREDICTABLY, Ryan couldn't sleep. His body hadn't yet acclimated to the shift of six time zones, despite the decent amount of sleep he'd had on the plane. How flight crews did it was a mystery to him, though he suspected they simply stayed synchronized to wherever they lived, disregarding wherever they happened to be at the time. But you have to stay constantly mobile to do that, and he wasn't. So, he plugged in his computer and decided to Google his way into Islam. The only Muslim he knew was Prince Ali of Saudi Arabia, and *he* was not a maniac. He even got along well with Jack's shy little sister, Katie, who found his neatly trimmed beard fascinating. He was able to download the Koran, and he started reading it. The holy book had forty-two suras, broken down into verses, just like his own Bible. Of course, he rarely looked at it, much less read it, because as a Catholic he expected the priests to tell him about the important parts, letting him skip all the work of reading about who the hell begat what the hell—maybe it had been interesting, and even fun, at

the time, but not today, unless you were into genealogy, which wasn't a subject of dinner-table conversation in the Ryan family. Besides, everyone knew that every Irishman was descended from a horse thief who'd skipped the country to avoid being hanged by the nasty English invaders. A whole collection of wars had come out of that, one of which had come within a whisker of preventing his own birth in Annapolis.

It was ten minutes later that he realized that the Koran was almost a word-for-word clone of what all the Jewish prophets had scribbled down, divinely inspired to do so, of course, because they said so. And so did this Mohammed guy. Supposedly, God talked to him, and he played executive secretary and wrote it all down. It was a pity there hadn't been a video camera and tape recorder for all these birds, but there hadn't, and, as a priest had explained to him at Georgetown, faith was faith, and either you believed as you were supposed to, or you didn't.

Jack *did* believe in God, of course. His mom and dad had instructed him in the basics, and sent him through Catholic schools, and he'd learned the prayers and the rules, and he'd done First Communion, and Confession—now called "Reconciliation" in the kinder, gentler Church of Rome—and Confirmation. But he hadn't seen the inside of a church for quite a while. It wasn't that he was against the Church, just that he was grown up now, and maybe not going was a (dumb) way of showing Mom and Dad that he was able to make his own decisions about how he'd live his life, and that Mom and Dad couldn't order him around anymore.

He noted that there was no place in the fifty pages he'd skimmed through that said anything about shooting innocent people so that you could screw the womenfolk among them in heaven. The penalty for suicide was right on the level with what Sister Frances Mary had explained in second grade. Suicide was a mortal sin you really wanted to avoid, because you couldn't go to confession afterward to scrub it off your soul. Islam said that faith was good, but you couldn't just think it. You had to live it, too. Bingo, as far as Catholic teaching went.

At the end of ninety minutes, it came to him—rather an obvious conclusion—that terrorism had about as much to do with the Islamic religion as it did with Catholic and Protestant Irishmen. Adolf Hitler, the biographers said, had thought of himself as a Catholic right up until the moment he'd eaten the gun—evidently, he'd never met Sister Frances Mary or he would have known better. But that bozo had obviously been crazy. So, if he was reading this right, Mohammed would probably have clobbered terrorists. He had been a decent, honorable man. Not all of his followers were the same way, though, and those were the ones he and the twins had to deal with.

Any religion could be twisted out of shape by the next crop of madmen, he thought, yawning, and Islam was just the next one on the list.

"Gotta read more of this," he told himself on the way to the bed. "Gotta."

FA'AD WOKE up at eight-thirty. He'd be meeting Mahmoud today, just down the street at the drugstore. From there, they'd take a cab somewhere—probably a museum—for the actual message transfer, and he'd learn what was supposed to happen, and what he'd have to do to make it so. It really was a

pity that he didn't have his own residence. Hotels were comfortable, especially the laundry service, but he was approaching his tolerance limit.

Breakfast came. He thanked the waiter and tipped him two Euros, then read the paper that sat on the wheeled table. Nothing of consequence seemed to be happening. There was a coming election in Austria, and each side was enthusiastically blackguarding the other, as the political game was played in Europe. It was a lot more predictable at home, and easier to understand. By nine in the morning, he had the TV turned on, and he found himself checking his watch with increasing frequency. These meetings always made him a little anxious. What if Mossad had identified him? The answer to that was clear enough. They'd kill him with no more thought than flicking at an insect.

OUTSIDE, DOMINIC and Brian were walking about, almost aimlessly, or so it might have seemed to a casual observer. The problem was, there *were* a few of those around. There was a magazine kiosk just by their hotel, and the Bristol had doormen. Dominic considered leaning against a lamppost and reading a paper, but that was one thing they'd told him in the FBI Academy *never* to do, because even spies had seen the movies where the actors were always doing that. And so, professional or not, realistic or not, the whole world was conditioned to be mindful of anyone who read a newspaper while leaning on a lamppost. Following a guy already outside without being spotted was child's play compared to waiting for him to appear. He sighed, and kept walking.

Brian was thinking along the same lines. He thought about how cigarettes might help at moments like this. It gave you something to do, like in the movies, Bogart and his unfiltered coffin nails, which had eventually killed him. *Bad luck, Bogie,* Brian thought. Cancer must have been a bitch of a disease. He wasn't exactly delivering the breath of spring to his subjects, but at least it didn't last months. Just a few minutes, and the brain winked out. Besides, they had it coming in one way or another. Maybe they would not have agreed with that, but you had to be careful about the enemies you made. Not all of them would be dumb and defenseless sheep. And surprise was a bitch. The best thing to have on the battlefield, surprise. If you surprised the other guy, he didn't have a chance to strike back, and that was just fine because this *was* business, not personal. Like a steer at the stockyards, he walked into a little room, and even if he looked up he'd just see the guy with the air hammer, and after that it was off to cattle heaven, where the grass was always green and the water sweet, and there weren't any wolves around...

Your mind is wandering, Aldo, Brian thought to himself. Both sides of the street served his purpose just fine. So he crossed over and headed for the ATM machine directly across from the Bristol, took out his card, and punched in the code number, to be rewarded with five hundred Euros. Checked his watch: 10:53. Was this bird coming out? Had they missed him somehow?

Traffic had settled down. The red streetcars rumbled back and forth. People here minded their own business. They walked along without looking sideways, unless they were interested in something specific. No eye contact with strangers, no instinct to greet people at all. A stranger was supposed to stay that way, evidently. He appreciated it here even more than in Munich, just how *in Ordnung* these people were. You could probably eat dinner right off the

floor in their houses, as long as you cleaned up the floor afterward.

Dominic had taken up position on the other side of the street, covering the direction to the opera house. There were only two ways for this character to go. Left or right. He could cross the street or not. No more options than that, unless he had a car coming to pick him up, in which case the mission was a washout. But tomorrow was always another day. 10:56, his watch said. He had to be careful, not look at the hotel's entrance too much. Doing this made him feel vulnerable . . .

There—bingo! It was the subject, all right, dressed in a blue pin-striped suit and a maroon tie, like a guy going to an important business meeting. Dominic saw him, too, and turned to approach from the northwest. Brian waited to see what he was going to do.

FA' AD DECIDED to trick his arriving friend. He'd approach from across the street, just to be different, and so he crossed over, in the middle of the block, dodging the traffic. As a boy, he'd enjoyed entering the corral for his father's horses and dodging among them. Horses had brains enough not to run into things unnecessarily, of course, more than could be said for some of the cars heading up Kartner Ring, but he got across safely.

THE ROAD here was curious, with one paved path like a private driveway, a thin grass median, then the road proper with its cars and streetcars, then another grass median, and the final car path before the opposite sidewalk. The subject darted across and started walking west, toward their hotel. Brian took up position ten feet behind and took out his pen, swapping out the point and checking visually to make sure he was ready.

MAX WEBER was a motorman who'd worked for the city transit authority for twenty-three years, driving his streetcar back and forth eighteen times per day, for which he was paid a comfortable salary for a workingman. He was now going north, leaving Schwartzenberg Platz, turning left just as the street changed from Rennweg into Schwartzenberg Strasse to go left on the Kartner Ring. The light was in his favor, and his eye caught the ornate Hotel Imperial, where all the rich foreigners and diplomats liked to stay. Then his eyes came back to the road. You couldn't steer a streetcar, and it was the job of those in automobiles to keep out of his way. Not that he went very fast, hardly ever more than forty kilometers per hour, even out at the end of the line. It was not an intellectually demanding job, but he did it scrupulously, in accordance with the manual. The bell rang. Somebody needed to get off at the corner of Kartner and Wiedner Hauptstrasse.

THERE. **THERE** was Mahmoud. Looking the other way. Good, Fa'ad thought, maybe he could surprise his colleague, and have a joke for the day. He stopped on the sidewalk and scanned the miniroad for traffic before dashing across the street.

OKAY, RAGHEAD, Brian thought, closing the distance in just three steps and

—

***OUCH,* FA'AD** thought. It was quite literally a slight pain in the ass. He ignored it and kept going, cutting through a gap in the traffic on the street. There was a streetcar coming, but it was too far away to be a matter of concern. Traffic was not coming from his right, and so . . .

BRIAN JUST kept walking. He figured he'd go to the magazine stand. It would give him a good chance to turn and watch while he ostensibly made a purchase.

WEBER SAW the idiot making ready to dash across the tracks. Didn't these fools know only to do that at the *Ecke,* where he had to stop for the red lights like everyone else? They taught children to do that at the *Kindergarten*. Some people thought their time was more valuable than gold, as though they were Franz Josef himself, risen from the hundred-year dead. He didn't change his speed. Idiot or not, he'd get well clear of the tracks before—

—FA'AD FELT his right leg collapse under him. What was this? Then his left leg, and he was falling for no reason at all—and then other things started happening faster than he could understand them, and as though from an outside vantage point he saw himself falling down—and there was a streetcar . . . coming!

MAX REACTED a little too slowly. He could hardly believe what his eyes told him. But it could not be denied. He tromped his foot down on the brakes, but the fool was less than two meters away, and—*lieber Gott!*

The streetcar had a pair of bars running horizontally under its nose to prevent exactly this, but they hadn't been checked in several weeks, and Fa'ad was a slender man—slender enough that his feet slid right under the safe bars and his body then pushed them vertically upward and out of the way—

—and Max felt the dreadful *thump-thump* of his passage over the man's body. Somebody would call for an ambulance, but they would be far better off calling a priest. This poor schlemiel would not ever get to where he was going, the fool, saving time at the cost of his life. The fool!

ACROSS THE street, Mahmoud turned just in time to see his friend die. His eyes imagined more than saw the streetcar jump upward, as though to avoid killing Fa'ad, and just that fast his world changed, as Fa'ad's world ended for all time to be.

"JESUS," BRIAN thought, twenty yards away, holding a magazine in his hands. That poor fucker hadn't lived long enough to die of the poison. He saw that Enzo had moved down the opposite side of the street, perhaps figuring to pop him if and when he'd gotten across, but the succinylcholine had worked as advertised. He'd just picked a particularly bad place to collapse. Or a lucky one, depending on your point of view. He took the magazine and crossed the

street. There was an Arab-looking guy by the drugstore whose face was even more upset than the citizens around him. There were screams, a lot of hands to mouths, and, damned sure, it was not a pretty sight, though the streetcar had stopped directly over the body.

"Somebody's going to have to hose down the street," Dominic said quietly. "Nice pop, Aldo."

"Well, I guess a five-point-six from the East German judge. Let's get moving."

"Roger that, bro."

And they headed right, past the cigarette store, toward Schwartzenberg Platz.

Behind them there was a little screaming from the women, while the men took it all more soberly, with many turning away. There was not a thing to be done. The doorman at the Imperial darted inside to summon an ambulance and the *Feuerwehr*. They took about ten minutes to arrive. The firemen got there first, and for them the grim sight was immediate and decisive. His whole blood supply, so it seemed, had spilled out, and there was no saving him. The police were there, too, and a police captain, who'd arrived from his station on nearby Friedrichstrasse, told Max Weber to back his streetcar off the body. It revealed much—and little. The body had been chopped into four irregular pieces, as though ripped apart by a predatory creature from prehistory. The ambulance, which had come, was stopped not quite in the middle of the street—the street cops were waving the cars along, but the drivers and passengers took the time to look at the carnage, with half of them staring with grim fascination and the other half turning away in horror and disgust. Even some reporters were there, with their cameras and notepads—and Minicams for the TV scribblers.

They needed three body bags to collect the body. An inspector from the transit authority arrived to question the motorman, whom the police already had in hand, of course. All in all, it took about an hour to remove the body, inspect the streetcar, and clear the road. It was done rather efficiently, in fact, and by 12:30 everything was back *in Ordnung*.

Except for Mahmoud Mohamed Fadhil, who had to go to his hotel and light up his computer to send an e-mail to Mohammed Hassan al-Din, now in Rome, for instructions.

By that time, Dominic was on his own computer, composing an e-mail for The Campus to tell them of the day's work, and ask for instructions on the next assignment.

CHAPTER 22

SPANISH STEPS

"YOU'RE KIDDING," Jack said at once.

"God, grant me a dumb adversary," Brian responded. "That's one prayer they teach at the Basic School. Trouble is, sooner or later they're going to get smart."

"Like crooks," Dominic agreed. "The problem with law enforcement is that we generally catch the dumb ones. The smart ones we rarely even hear about. That's why it took so long to do the Mafia, and they're not really all *that* smart. But, yeah, it's a Darwinian process, and we'll be helping to breed brains into them one way or another."

"News from home?" Brian asked.

"Check the time. They won't even be getting in for another hour," Jack explained. "So, the guy really got run over?"

Brian nodded. He'd gone down and been run over like the official Mississippi state animal—a squashed dog on the road. "By a streetcar. Good news is that it covered up the mess." *Tough luck, Mr. Raghead.*

* * *

IT WASN'T even a mile to the St. Elizabeth's *Krankenhaus* on Invalidenstrasse, where the ambulance crew carried in the body parts. They'd called ahead, and so there was no particular surprise at the three rubberized bags. These were duly laid on a table in pathology—there was no point in their going to casualty receiving, because the cause of death was so obvious as to be blackly comical. The only hard part was to retrieve blood for a toxicology scan. The body had been so mauled as to be largely drained of blood, but internal organs—mainly the spleen and brain—had enough to be drawn out with a syringe and sent off to the lab, which would look for narcotics and/or alcohol. The only other thing to look for in the postmortem exam was a broken leg, but the passage of the streetcar over the body—they had his name and ID from his wallet, and the police were checking the local hotels to see if maybe he'd left a passport behind, so that the appropriate embassy could be notified—meant that even a broken knee would be almost impossible to discover. Both of his legs had been totally crushed in a matter of less than three seconds. The only surprising thing was that his face was placid. One would have expected open eyes and a grimace of pain from the death, but, then, even traumatic death had few hard-and-fast rules, as the pathologist knew. There was little point in doing an in-depth examination. Maybe if he'd

been shot they could find a bullet wound, but there was no reason to suspect that. The police had already talked to seventeen eyewitnesses who'd been within thirty meters of the event. All in all, the pathology report could just as easily have been a form letter as a signed official document.

"JESUS," GRANGER observed. "How the hell did they arrange that?" Then he lifted his phone. "Gerry? Come on down. Number three is in the bag. You have to see this report." After replacing the phone, he thought aloud, "Okay, now where do we send them next?"

That was settled on a different floor. Tony Wills was copying all of Ryan's downloads, and the one at the top of the download file was impressive in its bloody brevity. So, he lifted his phone for Rick Bell.

IT WAS hardest of all for Max Weber. It took half an hour for the initial denial and shock to wear off. He started vomiting, his eyes replaying the sight of the crumpled body sliding below his field of vision, and the horrible *thump-thump* of his streetcar. It hadn't been his fault, he told himself. That fool, *das Idiot,* had just fallen down right before him, like a drunk might do, except it was far too early for a man to have too many beers. He'd had accidents before, mostly fender work on cars that had turned too abruptly in front of him. But he'd never seen and hardly heard of a fatal accident with a streetcar. He'd *killed* a man. He, Max Weber, had taken a life. It was not his fault, he told himself about once a minute for the next two hours. His supervisor gave him the rest of the day off, and so he clocked out and drove home in his Audi, stopping at a *Gasthaus* a block from his home because he didn't want to drink alone this day.

JACK WAS running through his downloads from The Campus, with Dom and Brian standing by, having a late lunch and beers. It was routine traffic, e-mail to and from people suspected of being players, the majority of them ordinary citizens of various countries who'd once or twice written magic words that had been taken note of by the Echelon intercept system at Fort Meade. Then there was one like all the others, except that the addressee was 56MoHa@eurocom.net.

"Hey, guys, our pal on the street was about to have a meet with another courier, looks like. He's writing our old friend Fifty-six MoHa, and requesting instructions."

"Oh?" Dominic came over to look. "What does that tell us?"

"I just have a Internet handle—it's on AOL: Gadfly097@aol.com. If he gets a reply from MoHa, maybe we'll know something. We think he's an operations officer for the bad guys. NSA tagged him about six months ago. He encrypts his letters, but they know how to crack that one, and we can read most of his e-mails."

"How quick will you see a reply?" Dominic wondered.

"Depends on Mr. MoHa," Jack said. "We just have to sit tight and wait."

"Roger that," Brian said from his seat by the window.

"I SEE young Jack didn't slow them down," Hendley observed.

"Did you think he would? Jeez, Gerry, I told you," Granger said, having already thanked God for His blessings, but quietly. "Anyway, now they want instructions."

"Your plan was to take down four targets. So, who's number four?" the Senator asked.

It was Granger's turn to be humble. "Not sure yet. To be honest, I didn't expect them to work this efficiently. I've been kinda hoping that the hits so far might generate a target of opportunity, but nobody's prairie-dogging yet. I have a few candidates. Let me run through them this afternoon." His phone rang. "Sure, come on over, Rick." He set the phone down. "Rick Bell says he has something interesting."

The door opened in less than two minutes. "Oh, hey, Gerry. Glad you're here. Sam"—Bell turned his head—"we just had this come in." He handed the rough printout of the e-mail across.

Granger scanned it. "We know this guy . . ."

"Sure as hell. He's a field ops officer for our friends. We figured he was based in Rome. Well, we figured right." Like all bureaucrats—especially the senior ones—Bell enjoyed patting his own back.

Granger handed the page across to Hendley. "Okay, Gerry, here's number four."

"I don't like serendipity."

"I don't like coincidences either, Gerry, but if you win the lottery you don't give the money back," Granger said, thinking that Coach Darrell Royal had been right: Luck didn't go looking for a stumblebum. "Rick, is this guy worth making go away?"

"Yes, he is," Bell confirmed, with an enthusiastic nod. "We don't know all that much about him, but what we know is all bad. He's an operations guy—of that we are a hundred percent sure, Gerry. And it feels right. One of his people sees another go down, reports in, and this guy gets it and replies. You know, if I ever meet the guy who came up with the Echelon program, I might have to buy him a beer."

"Reconnaissance-by-fire," Granger observed, patting himself very firmly on the back. "Damn, I knew it would work. You shake a hornet's nest, and some bugs are bound to come out."

"Just so they don't sting your ass," Hendley warned. "Okay, now what?"

"Turn 'em loose before the fox goes to ground," Granger replied instantly. "If we can bag this guy, maybe we can really shake something valuable loose from the tree."

Hendley turned his head. "Rick?"

"It works for me. Go-mission," he said.

"Okay, then it's a go-mission," Hendley agreed. "Get the word out."

THE NICE thing about electronic communications was that they did not take very long. In fact, Jack already had the important part.

"Okay, guys, Fifty-six MoHa's first name is Mohammed—not great news; it's the most common first name in the world—and he says he's in Rome, at the Hotel Excelsior on the Via Vittorio Veneto, number one twenty-five."

"I've heard of that one," Brian said. "It's expensive, pretty nice. Our friends like to stay in nice places, looks like."

"He's checked in under the name Nigel Hawkins. That's English as hell. You suppose he's a Brit citizen?"

"With a first name of Mohammed?" Dominic wondered aloud.

"Could be a cover name, Enzo," Jack replied, pricking Dominic's balloon. "Without a picture, we can't guess about his background. Okay, he's got a cell phone, but Mahmoud—that's the guy who saw the bird go down this morning—must be supposed to know it." Jack paused. "Why didn't he just call in, I wonder? Hmm. Well, the Italian police have sent us stuff that came from electronic intercepts. Maybe they're watching the airwaves, and our boy is being careful . . . ?"

"Makes sense, but why . . . but why is he sending stuff out over the 'Net?"

"He thinks it's secure. NSA has cracked a lot of the public encryption systems. The vendors don't know that, but the boys at Fort Meade are pretty good at that stuff. Once you crack it, it stays cracked, and the other guy never knows." In fact, he didn't know the real reason. The programmers could be, and often had been, persuaded to insert trapdoors either for patriotism or for cash, and, often enough, for both. 56MoHa was using the most expensive such program, and its literature proclaimed loudly that *nobody* could crack it because of its proprietary algorithm. That wasn't explained, of course, just that it was a 256-bit encryption process, which was supposed to impress people with the size of the number. The literature didn't say that the software engineer who'd generated it had once worked at Fort Meade—which was why he'd been hired—and was a man who remembered swearing his oath, and, besides, a million dollars of tax-free money had been a hell of a tiebreaker. It had helped him buy his house in the hills of Marin County. And so the California real-estate market was even now serving the security interests of the United States of America.

"So, we can read their mail?" Dominic asked.

"Some of it," Jack confirmed. "The Campus downloads most of what NSA gets at Fort Meade, and when they cross-deck it to CIA for analysis, we intercept *that.* It's less complicated than it sounds."

Dominic figured a lot out in a matter of seconds. *"Fuck..."* he breathed, looking up at the high ceiling in Jack's suite. "No wonder..." A pause. "No more beers, Aldo. We're driving to Rome." Brian nodded.

"Don't have room for a third, right?" Jack asked.

"'Fraid not, Junior, not in a 911."

"Okay, I'll catch a plane to Rome." Jack walked to the phone and called downstairs. Within ten minutes, he was booked on an Alitalia 737 to Leonardo da Vinci International, leaving in an hour and a half. He considered changing his socks. If there was anything in life that incurred his loathing, it was taking his shoes off in an airport. He was packed in a few minutes and out the door, stopping only to thank the concierge on the way out. A Mercedes taxi hustled him out of town.

Dominic and Brian had hardly unpacked at all and were ready to go in ten minutes. Dom called the valet while Brian went back to the outside magazine kiosk and got plastic-coated maps to cover the route south and west. Between

that and the Euros he'd picked up earlier in the day, he figured they were set, assuming Enzo didn't drive them off an Alp. The ugly-blue Porsche arrived at the front of the hotel, and he came over as the doorman forced their bags in the tiny forward-sited trunk. In another two minutes, he was head-down in the maps looking for the quickest way to the Sudautobahn.

JACK GOT aboard the Boeing after enduring the humiliation that was now a global cost of flying commercial—it was more than enough to make him think back to Air Force One with nostalgia, though he also remembered that he'd gotten used to the comfort and attention with remarkable speed, and only later learned what normal people had to go through, which was like running into a brick wall. For the moment, he had hotel accommodations to worry about. How to do that from an airplane? There was a pay phone attached to his first-class seat, and so he swiped his black card down the plastic receiver and made his first ever attempt to conquer European telephones. What hotel? Well, why not the Excelsior? On his second attempt, he got through to the front desk and learned that, indeed, they had several rooms available. He bagged a small suite, and feeling very good about himself, he took a glass of Tuscan white from the friendly stewardess. Even a hectic life, he'd learned, could be a good life, if you knew what your next step was, and for the moment his horizon was one step away at a time.

GERMAN HIGHWAY engineers must have taught the Austrians everything they knew, Dominic thought. Or maybe the smart ones had all read the same book. In any case, the road was not unlike the concrete ribbons that crisscrossed America, except that the signage was so different as to be incomprehensible, mainly because it had no language except for city names—and they were foreign, too. He figured out that a black number on a white background inside a red circle was the speed limit, but that was in kilometers, three of which fitted into two miles with parking room left over. And the Austrian speed limits were not quite as generous as the German ones. Maybe they didn't have enough doctors to fix all the screwups, but, even in the growing hills, the curves were properly banked and the shoulders gave you enough bailout room in case somebody got seriously confused with left and right. The Porsche had a cruise control, and he pegged his to five klicks over the posted limit, just to have the satisfaction of going a little too fast. He couldn't be sure that his FBI ID would get him out of a ticket here, as it did all across the U.S. of A.

"How far, Aldo?" he asked the navigator in the Death Seat.

"Looks like a little over a thousand kilometers from where we are now. Call it ten hours, maybe."

"Hell, that's just warming-up time. May need gas in another two hours or so. How you fixed for cash?"

"Seven hundred Monopoly bucks. You can spend these in Italy, too, thank God—with the old lira you went nuts doing the math. Traffic ain't bad," Brian observed.

"No, and it's well behaved," Dominic agreed. "Good maps?"

"Yeah, all the way down. In Italy, we'll need another one for Rome."

"Okay, ought not to be too hard." And Dominic thanked a merciful God that he had a brother who could read maps. "When we stop for gas, we can get something to eat."

"Roger that, bro." Brian looked up to see mountains in the distance—no way to tell how far off they were, but it must have been a forbidding sight back when people walked or rode horses to get around. They must have had a lot more patience than modern man, or maybe a lot less sense. For the moment, the seat was comfortable, and his brother was not quite being maniacal in his driving.

THE ITALIANS turned out good airplane drivers in addition to good people for race cars. The pilot positively kissed the runway, and the rollout was as welcome as always. He'd flown too much to be as antsy about it as his father had once been, but, like most people, he felt safer walking or traveling on something he could see. Here also he found Mercedes taxicabs, and a driver who spoke passable English and knew the way to the hotel.

Highways look much the same all over the world, and for a moment Jack wondered where the hell he was. The land outside the airport looked agricultural, but the pitch of the roofs was different than at home. Evidently, it didn't snow much here, they were so shallow. It was late spring, and it was warm enough that he could wear a short-sleeve shirt, but it wasn't oppressive in any way. He'd come to Italy with his father once on official business—an economic meeting of some sort, he thought—but he'd been ridden around by an embassy car all the time. It was fun to pretend to be a prince of the realm, but you didn't learn to navigate that way, and all that stood out in his memory were the places he'd seen. He didn't know a single thing about how the hell he'd gotten there. This was the city of Caesar and a lot of other names that identified people whom history remembered for having done things good and bad. Mostly bad, because that was how history worked. And that, he reminded himself, was why he was in town. A good reminder, really, that he was not the arbiter of good and bad in the world, just a guy working backhandedly for his country, and so the authority to make such a decision did not rest entirely on his shoulders. Being president, as his father had been for just over four years, could not have been a fun job, despite all the power and importance that came with it. With power came responsibility in direct proportion, and if you had a conscience, that had to wear pretty hard on you. There was comfort in just doing things other people thought necessary. And, Jack reminded himself, he could always say no, and while there might be consequences, they would not be all that severe. Not as severe as the things he and his cousins were doing, anyway.

Via Vittorio Veneto looked more business than touristy. The trees on the sides were rather lame looking. The hotel was, surprisingly, not a tall building at all. Nor did it have an ornate entrance. Jack paid off the cabdriver and went inside, with the doorman bringing his bags. The inside was a celebration of woodwork, and the staff were welcoming as they could be. Perhaps this was an Olympic sport at which all Europeans excelled, but someone led him to his room. There was air-conditioning, and the cool air in the suite was welcoming indeed.

"Excuse me, what's your name?" he asked the bellman.

"Stefano," the man replied.

"Do you know if there is a man named Hawkins here—Nigel Hawkins?"

"The Englishman? Yes, he is three doors away, right down the corridor. A friend?"

"He's a friend of my brother's. Please don't say anything to him. Perhaps I can surprise him," Jack suggested, handing him a twenty-Euro note.

"Of course, signore."

"Very good. Thank you."

"Prego," Stefano responded, and walked back to the lobby.

This had to be dumb operational art, Jack told himself, but if they didn't have a photo of the bird, they had to get some idea of what he looked like. With that done, he lifted the phone and tried to make a call.

"YOU HAVE an incoming call," Brian's phone started saying in low tones, repeating itself three times before he fished it out of his coat pocket.

"Yeah." Who the hell was calling him? he wondered.

"Aldo, it's Jack. Hey, I'm in the hotel—the Hotel Excelsior. Want me to see if I can get you guys some rooms here? It's pretty nice. I think you guys would like it here."

"Hold on." He set the phone down in his lap. "You'll never believe where Junior's checked in to." He didn't have to identify it.

"You're kidding," Dominic responded.

"Nope. He wants to know if he should get us a reservation. What do I tell him?"

"Damn..." Some quick thought. "Well, he's our intel backup, isn't he?"

"Sounds a little too obvious to me, but if you say so"—he picked the phone back up—"Jack, that's affirmative, buddy."

"Great. Okay, I'll set it up. Unless I call back and say no, you come on in here."

"Roger that one, Jack. See ya."

"Bye," Brian heard, and hit the kill button. "You know, Enzo, this doesn't sound real smart to me."

"He's there. He's on the scene, and he's got eyes. We can always back out if we have to."

"Fair enough, I guess. Map says we're coming up on a tunnel in about five miles." The clock on the dash said 4:05. They were making good time, but heading straight at a mountain just past the town or city of Badgastein. Either they needed a tunnel or a big team of goats to clear that hill.

JACK LIT up his computer. It took him ten minutes to figure out how to use the phone system for that purpose, but he finally got logged on, to find his mailbox brimming with bits and bytes targeted at him. There was an attaboy from Granger for the completed mission in Vienna, though he hadn't had a thing to do with it. But below that was an assessment from Bell and Wills on 56MoHa. For the most part, it was disappointing. Fifty-six was an operations officer for the bad guys. He either did things or planned things, and one of the things he'd probably done or planned had gotten a lot of people killed in four

shopping malls back at home, and so this bastard needed to meet God. There were no specifics about what he'd done, how he'd been trained, how capable he was, or whether or not he was known to carry a gun, all of which was information he'd like to see, but after reading the decrypted e-mails he reencrypted them and saved them in his ACTION folder to go over with Brian and Dom.

THE TUNNEL was like something in a video game. It went on and on to infinity, though at least the traffic inside wasn't piled up in a fiery mass as had happened a few years before in the Mont Blanc tunnel between France and Switzerland. After a period of time that seemed to last half of forever, they came out the other side. It looked to be downhill from here.

"Gas plaza ahead," Brian reported. Sure enough, there was an ELF sign half a mile away, and the Porsche's tank needed filling.

"Gotcha. I could use a stretch and a piss." The service plaza was pretty clean by American standards, and the eatery was different, without the Burger King or Roy Rogers you expected in Virginia—the men's room plumbing was all *in Ordnung,* however—and the gas was sold by the liter, which well disguised the price until Dominic did the mental arithmetic: "Jesus, they really charge for this stuff!"

"Company card, man," Brian said soothingly, and tossed over a pack of cookies. "Let's boogie, Enzo. Italy awaits."

"Fair enough." The six-cylinder engine purred back to life, and they went back on the road.

"Good to stretch your legs," Dominic observed as he went to his top gear.

"Yeah, it helps," Brian agreed. "Four hundred fifty miles to go, if my addition's right."

"Walk in the park. Call it six hours, if the traffic's okay." He adjusted his sunglasses and shook his shoulders some. "Staying in the same hotel with our subject—damn."

"I've been thinking. He doesn't know dick about us, maybe doesn't even know he's being hunted. Think about it: two heart attacks, one in front of a witness; and a traffic accident, also with a witness he knows. That's pretty bad luck, but no overt suggestion of hostile action, is there?"

"In his place, I'd be a little nervous," Dominic thought aloud.

"In his place, he probably already is. If he sees us in the hotel, we're just two more infidel faces, man. Unless he sees us more than once, we're down in the grass, not up on the scope. Ain't no rule says it *has* to be hard, Enzo."

"I hope you're right, Aldo. That mall was scary enough to last me a while."

"Concur, bro."

This wasn't the towering part of the Alps. That lay to the north and west, though it would have been bad on the legs had they been walking it, as the Roman legions had done, thinking their paved roads were a blessing. Probably better than mud, but not that much, especially humping a backpack that weighed about as much as his Marines had carried into Afghanistan. The legions had been tough in their day, and probably not all that different from the guys who did the job today in camouflaged utilities. But back then they'd had a more direct way of dealing with bad guys. They'd killed their families,

their friends, their neighbors, and even their dogs, and, more to the point, they were *known* for doing all that. Not exactly practical in the age of CNN, and, truth be told, there were damned few Marines who would have tolerated participating in wholesale slaughter. But taking them out one at a time was okay, so long as you were sure you weren't killing off innocent civilians. Doing that shit was the other side's job. It was really a pity they could not all come out on a battlefield and have it out like men, but, in addition to being vicious, terrorists were also practical. There was no sense committing to a combat action in which you'd not merely lose, but be slaughtered like sheep in a pen. But real men would have built their forces up, trained and equipped them, and then turned them loose, instead of sneaking around like rats to bite babies in their cribs. Even war had rules, promulgated because there were *worse* things than war, things that were strictly forbidden to men in uniform. You did not hurt noncombatants deliberately, and you tried hard to avoid doing it by accident. The Marines were now investing considerable time, money, and effort in learning city fighting, and the hardest part of it was avoiding civilians, women with kids in strollers—even knowing that some of those women had weapons stashed next to little Johnny, and that they'd love to see the back of a United States Marine, say two or three meters away, just to be sure of bullet placement. Playing by the rules had its limitations. But for Brian that was a thing of the past. No, he and his brother were playing the game by the enemy's rules, and as long as the enemy didn't know it would be a profitable game. How many lives might they have saved already by taking down a banker, a recruiter, and a courier? The problem was that you could never know. That was complexity theory as applied to real life, and it was *a priori* impossible. Nor would they ever know what good they'd be doing and what lives they might be saving when they got this 56MoHa bastard. But not being able to quantify it didn't mean it wasn't real, like that child killer his brother had dispatched in Alabama. They were doing the Lord's work, even if the Lord was not an accountant.

At work in the field of the Lord, Brian thought. Certainly these alpine meadows were green and lovely enough, he thought, looking for the lonely goatherd. *Odalayeee-oh* . . .

"HE'S WHERE?" Hendley asked.

"The Excelsior," Rick Bell answered. "Says he's right up the hall from our friend."

"I think our boy needs a little advice on fieldcraft," Granger observed darkly.

"Think it through," Bell suggested. "The opposition doesn't know a thing. They're as likely to be worried about the guy who picks up the wash as about Jack or the twins. They have no names, no facts, no hostile organization—hell, they don't even know for sure that anybody's out to get them."

"It's not very good fieldcraft," Granger persisted. "If Jack gets eyeballed—"

"Then what?" Bell asked. "Okay, fine, I know I'm just an intel weenie, not a field spook, but logic still applies. They do not and *cannot* know anything about The Campus. Even if Fifty-six MoHa is getting nervous, it will be undirected anxiety, and, hell, he's probably got a lot of that in his system

anyway. But you can't be a spook and be afraid of anybody, can you? As long as our people are in the background noise, they have nothing to worry about—unless they do something real dumb, and these kids are not that kind of dumb, if I read them right."

Through all of this, Hendley just sat in his chair, letting his eyes flicker back and forth from one to the other. So, this was what it must have been like to be "M" in the James Bond movies. Being the boss had its moments, but it had its stresses, too. Sure, he had that undated presidential pardon in a safety-deposit box, but that didn't mean he ever wanted to make use of it. That would make him even more of a pariah than he already was, and the newsies would never leave him alone, to his dying day, not exactly his idea of fun.

"Just so they don't pretend to be room service and whack him in the hotel room," Gerry thought aloud.

"Hey, if they were that dumb, they'd already be in some German prison," Granger pointed out.

THE CROSSOVER into Italy was no more formal than crossing over from Tennessee into Virginia, which was one benefit of the European Union. The first Italian city was Villaco, where the people looked a lot more German than Sicilian to their fellow Italians, and from there southwest on the A23. They still needed to learn a little about interchanges, Dominic thought, but these roads were definitely better than they'd run for the famous Mille Miglia, the thousand-mile sports car race of the 1950s, canceled because too many people got killed watching it from the side of the country roads. The land here was not distinguishable from Austria, and the farm buildings were much the same as well. All in all, it was pretty country, not unlike eastern Tennessee or western Virginia, with rolling hills and cows that probably got milked twice a day to feed children on both sides of the border. Next came Udine, then Mestre, and they changed highways again for the A4 to Padova, switched over to A13, and an hour more to Bologna. The Apennine mountains were to their left, and the Marine part of Brian looked at the hills and shuddered at the battlefield they represented. But then his stomach started growling again.

"You know, Enzo, every town we pass has at least one great restaurant—great pasta, homemade cheese, Vitello Francese, the wine cellar from hell . . ."

"I'm hungry, too, Brian. And, yeah, we're surrounded by Italian soul food. Unfortunately, we have a mission."

"I just hope the son of a bitch is worth what we're missing, man."

"Ours is not to reason why, bro," Dominic offered.

"Yeah, but you can stick the other half of that sentence up your ass."

Dominic started laughing. He didn't like it, either. The food in Munich and Vienna had been excellent, but all around them was the place where good food had been invented. Napoleon himself had traveled with an Italian chef on his campaigns, and most of modern French cuisine had evolved directly from that one man, as racehorses were all linear descendants of an Arabian stallion named Eclipse. And he didn't even know the man's name. Pity, he thought, passing a tractor-trailer whose driver probably knew the best local places. Shit.

They drove with their lights on—a rule in Italy, enforced by the Polizia

Stradale, who were not renowned for their leniency—at a steady 150 kilometers per hour, just over ninety miles to the hour, and the Porsche seemed to love it. Gas mileage was over twenty five—or so Dominic guessed. The arithmetic of kilometers and liters against miles and gallons was too much for him while concentrating on the road. At Bologna, they joined up with the A1 and continued south toward Firenze, the city of origin for the Caruso family. The road cut through the mountains, going southwest, and was beautifully engineered.

Bypassing Florence was very hard. Brian knew of a fine restaurant near the Ponte Vecchio that belonged to distant cousins, where the wine was *bellissima,* and the food worthy of a king, but Rome was only two more hours away. He remembered going there by train that one time in his undress greens with the Sam Browne belt to proclaim his professional identity, and, sure enough, the Italians had liked the United States Marines, like all civilized people. He'd hated taking the train back to Rome and thence to Naples and his ship, but his time had not been his own.

As it wasn't now. There were more mountains as they headed south, but now some of the signs proclaimed ROMA, and that was good.

JACK ATE in the Excelsior's dining room, and the food was everything he'd expected, and the staff treated him like a prodigal member of the family come home after a protracted absence. His only complaint was that nearly everyone here was smoking. Well, perhaps Italy didn't know about secondhand smoke dangers. He'd grown up hearing all about it from his mother—who'd often aimed the remarks at Dad, who was always struggling to quit the habit once and for all, and never quite made it. He took his time with dinner. Only the salad was ordinary. Even the Italians couldn't change lettuce, though the dressings were brilliant. He'd taken a corner table to be able to survey the room. The other diners looked as ordinary as he did. All were well dressed. The guest services book in his room didn't say a tie was required, but he'd just assumed it, and, besides, Italy was the world headquarters of style. He hoped to get a suit while here, if time permitted. There were thirty or forty people here. Jack discounted the ones with wives handy. So, he was looking for someone about thirty years old, eating dinner alone, registered as Nigel Hawkins. He ended up with three possibilities. He decided to look for people who didn't look Arabic in their ethnicity, and that weeded one out. So, what to do now? Was he supposed to do anything at all? How could it hurt, unless he identified himself as an intelligence officer?

But . . . why take chances? he asked himself. *Why not just be cool?*

And with that thought, he backed off, mentally at least. Better to ID the guy another way.

ROME WAS indeed a fine city, Mohammed Hassan al-Din told himself. He periodically thought about renting an apartment, or even a house. You could even rent one in the Jewish Quarter; there were some fine kosher restaurants in that part of the city, where one could order anything on the menu with confidence. He'd looked once at an apartment on the Piazza Campo di Fiori, but while the price—even the tourist price—had not been unreasonable, the

idea of being tied down to a single location had frightened him off. Better to be mobile in his business. The enemies couldn't strike at that which they could not find. He'd taken chance enough killing the Jew Greengold—he'd been tonguelashed by the Emir himself for that bit of personal amusement, and told never to do anything like it ever again. What if the Mossad had gotten a picture of him? How valuable would he be to the Organization then? the Emir had demanded angrily. And that man was known by his colleagues for his volcanic temper. So, no more of that. He didn't even carry the knife with him, but kept it in a place of honor in his shaving kit, where he could take it out and inspect the Jew blood on the folding blade.

So, for now, in Rome, he lived here. Next time—after he went back home—he'd return and stay at another, maybe that nice one by the Trevi Fountain, he thought, though this location suited his activities better. And the food. Well, Italian food was richly excellent, better in his estimation than the simple fare of his home country. Lamb was good, but not every day. And here people didn't look at you like an infidel if you had a small sip of wine. He wondered if Mohammed, his own eponym, had knowingly allowed the Faithful to drink spirits made from honey, or simply hadn't known that mead existed. He'd tried it while at Cambridge University, and concluded that only someone who desperately needed to be drunk would ever sample it, much less spend a night with it. So, Mohammed was not quite perfect. And neither was he, the terrorist reminded himself. He did hard things for the Faith, and so he was allowed to take a few diversions from the true path. If one had to live with rats, better to have a few whiskers, after all. The waiter came to take away his dishes, and he decided to pass on dessert. He had to maintain his trim figure if he was to maintain his cover as an English businessman, and fit into his Brioni suits. So, he left the table and walked out to the elevator lobby.

RYAN THOUGHT about a nightcap at the bar, but on reflection decided against it and walked out. There was somebody there already, and he got in the elevator first. There was a casual meeting of the eyes, as Ryan moved to punch the 3 button but saw it already lighted. So, this well-dressed Brit—he looked like a Brit—was on his floor . . .

. . . wasn't *that* interesting . . . ?

It took only a few seconds for the car to stop and the door to open.

The Excelsior is not a tall hotel, but it is an expansive one, and it was a lengthy walk, and the elevator man was heading in the right direction, Ryan slowed his pace to follow from a greater distance, and sure enough, he passed Jack's room and kept going, one . . . two . . . and at the third door he stopped and turned. Then he looked back at Ryan, wondering, perhaps, if he was being tailed. But Jack stopped and fished out his own key, then, looking down at the other man, in the casual, stranger-to-stranger voice that all men know, said, "G'nite."

"And to you, sir," was the reply in well-educated *English* English.

Jack walked into the room, thinking he'd heard that accent before . . . like the Brit diplomats whom he'd met in the White House, or on trips to London with his dad. It was either the speech of someone to the manor born, or who planned to buy his own when the time came and who'd banked enough

pounds sterling to pretend to be a Peer of the Realm. He had the peaches-and-cream skin of a Brit, and the upper-class accent—

—and he was checked in under the name of Nigel Hawkins.

"And I got one of your e-mails, pal," Jack whispered to the rug. "Son of a bitch."

IT TOOK almost an hour to navigate through the streets of Rome, whose city fathers may not have been married to the city mothers, and none of whom had known shit about city planning, Brian thought, working to find a way to Via Vittorio Veneto. Eventually, he knew they were close when he passed through what may once have been a gate in the city walls designed to keep Hannibal Barca out, but then a left and a right, and they learned that in Rome streets with the same name do not always go straight, which necessitated a circle on the Palazzo Margherita to return back to the Hotel Excelsior, where Dominic decided he'd had quite enough driving for the next few days. Within three minutes, their bags were out of the trunk and they were at the reception desk.

"You have a message to call Signor Ryan when you get in. Your rooms are just next to his," the clerk told them, then he waved at the bellman, who guided them to the elevator.

"Long drive, man," Brian said, leaning back against the paneled walls.

"Tell me about it," Dominic agreed.

"I mean, I know you like fast cars and fast women, but next time how about a damned airliner? Maybe you can score with a stew, y'know?"

"You friggin' jarhead." Followed by a yawn.

"This way, signori," the bellman suggested, with a wave of his arm.

"The message at the desk, where is he?"

"Signor Ryan? He is right here." The bellman pointed.

"That's convenient," Dominic thought aloud, until he remembered something else. He let himself get moved in, and the connecting door to Brian's room opened, and he gave the bellman a generous tip. Then he took the message slip out of his pocket and called.

"HELLO?"

"We're right next door, ace. What's shaking?" Brian asked.

"Two rooms?"

"Roger that."

"Guess who's just down from you?"

"Tell me."

"A British guy, a Mr. Nigel Hawkins," Jack told his cousin, and waited for the shock to subside. "Let's talk."

"Come right on over, Junior."

That took no more time than Jack needed to slip into his loafers.

"Enjoy the drive?" Jack asked.

Dominic had poured his minibar wine into a glass. There wasn't much left. "It was long."

"You did all the driving?"

"Hey, I wanted to get here alive, man."

"You turkey," Brian snarled. "He thinks driving a Porsche is like sex, except better."

"It is if you have the right technique, but even sex can wear a man out. Okay." Dominic set his glass down. "Did you say . . . ?"

"Yeah, right there." Jack pointed at the wall. And moved his hand to his eyes. *I've seen the mutt.* The reply was just nods. "Well, you guys get some sleep. I'll call you tomorrow, and we can think about our appointment. Cool?"

"Very cool," Brian agreed. "Ring us up about nine, okay?"

"You bet. Later." And Jack headed for the door. Soon thereafter, he was back on his computer. And then it hit him. He wasn't the only guy here with one of those, was he? That might be valuable . . .

EIGHT O'CLOCK came earlier than it should have. Mohammed was up, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and on his machine checking his e-mail. Mahmoud was in Rome as well, having arrived the previous night, and near the top of 56MoHa's mailbox was a letter from Gadfly097, requesting a meeting site. Mohammed thought about that and then decided to exercise his sense of humor.

RISTORANTE GIOVANNI, PIAZZA DI SPAGNA, he replied: 13:30. BE CAREFUL IN YOUR ROUTINE. By which he meant to employ countersurveillance measures. There was no definite reason to suspect foul play in the loss of three field personnel, but he hadn't lived to the age of thirty-one in the business of intelligence by being foolish. He had the ability to tell the harmless from the dangerous, he thought. He'd gotten David Greengold six weeks earlier, because the Jew hadn't seen the False Flag play even when it bit him on the ass—well, the back of the neck, Mohammed thought with a lowercase smile, remembering the moment. Maybe he should start carrying the knife again, just for good luck. Many men in his line of work believed in luck, as a sportsman or athlete might. Perhaps the Emir had been right. Killing the Mossad officer had been a gratuitously unnecessary risk, since it courted enemies. The Organization had enough of those, even if the enemies did not know who and what the organization was. Better that they should be a mere shadow to the infidels . . . a shadow in a darkened room, unseen and unknown. Mossad was hated by his colleagues, but it was hated because it was feared. The Jews were formidable. They were vicious, and they were endlessly clever. And who could say what knowledge they had, what Arab traitors bought with American money for Jewish ends. There was not a hint of treachery in the Organization, but he remembered the words of the Russian KGB officer Yuriy: Treason is only possible from those whom you trust. It had probably been a mistake to kill the Russian so quickly. He'd been an experienced field officer who'd operated most of his career in Europe and America, and there'd probably been no end to the stories he could have told, each of them with a lesson to be learned. Mohammed remembered talking to him and remembered being impressed with the breadth of his experience and judgment. Instinct was nice to have, but instinct often merely mimicked mental illness in its rampant paranoia. Yuriy had explained in considerable detail how to judge people, and how to tell a professional from a harmless civilian. He could have told many more stories, except for the 9mm bullet he'd

gotten in the back of the head. It had also violated the Prophet's strict and admirable rules of hospitality. *If a man eat your salt, even though he be an infidel, he will have the safety of your house.* Well, the Emir was the one who'd violated that rule, saying lamely that he'd been an atheist and therefore beyond the law.

But he'd learned a few lessons, anyway. All his e-mails were encrypted on the best such program there was, individually keyed to his own computer, and therefore beyond anyone's capacity to read except himself. So, his communications were secure. He hardly looked Arab. He didn't sound Arabic. He didn't dress Arabic. Every hotel he stayed at knew that he drank alcohol, and such places knew that Muslims did not drink. So, he ought be completely safe. Well, yes, the Mossad knew that someone like him had killed that Greengold pig, but he didn't think they'd ever gotten a photo of him, and unless he'd been betrayed by the man whom he'd hired to fool the Jew, they had no idea of who and what he was. Yuriy had warned him that you could never know everything, but also that being overly paranoid could alert a casual tail as to what he was, because professional intelligence officers knew tricks that no one else would ever use—and they could be seen to use them from careful observation. It was all like a big wheel, always turning, always coming back to the same place and moving on in the same way, never still, but never moving off its primary path. A great wheel . . . and he was just a cog, and whether his function was to help it move or make it slow down, he didn't really know.

"Ah." He shook that off. He was more than a cog. He was one of the motors. Not a great motor, perhaps, but an important one, because while the great wheel might move on without him, it would never move so quickly and surely as it did now. And, God willing, he would keep it moving until it crushed his enemies, the Emir's enemies, and Allah's Own Enemies.

So, he dispatched his message to Gadfly097, and called for coffee to be delivered.

RICK BELL had arranged for a crew to be on the computers around the clock. Strange that The Campus hadn't been doing that from the beginning, but now it did. The Campus was learning as it went, just as everyone else did, on both sides of the scrimmage line. At the moment it was Tony Wills, driven by his personal appreciation that there was a six-hour time difference between Central Europe and the American East Coast. A good computer jockey, he downloaded the message from 56 to 097 within five minutes of its dispatch and immediately forwarded it to Jack.

That required fewer seconds than it took to think it. Okay, they knew their subject and they knew where he was going to be, and that was just fine. Jack lifted his phone.

"You up?" Brian heard.

"I am now," he growled back. "What is it?"

"Come on over for coffee. Bring Dom with you."

"Aye, aye, sir." Followed by *click*.

* * *

"I HOPE this is good," Dominic said. His eyes looked like piss holes in the snow.

"If you want to soar with the eagles in the morning, buddy, you can't wallow with the pigs at night. Be cool. I ordered coffee."

"Thanks. So, what's up?"

Jack walked over to his computer and pointed to the screen. They both leaned down to read.

"Who is this guy?" Dominic asked, thinking *Gadfly097 . . . ?*

"He came in from Vienna yesterday, too."

Across the street somewhere, maybe? Brian wondered, followed by, *Did he see my face?*

"Okay, I guess we're up for the appointment," Brian said, looking at Dom and getting a thumbs-up.

The coffee arrived in a few more minutes. Jack served, but the brew, they all found, was gritty, Turkish in character, though far worse even than the Turks served. Still, better than no coffee at all. They did not speak on point. Their tradecraft was good enough that they didn't talk business in a room that hadn't been swept for bugs—which they didn't know how to do, and for which they did not have the proper equipment.

Jack gunned down his coffee and headed into the shower. In it was a red chain, evidently to be pulled in case of a heart attack, but he felt reasonably decent and didn't use it. He wasn't so sure about Dominic, who really did look like cat puke on the rug. In his case, the shower worked wonders, and he came back out shaved and scrubbed pink, ready to rumble.

"The food here is pretty good, but I'm not sure about the coffee," he announced.

"Not sure. Jesus, I bet they serve better coffee in Cuba," Brian said. "MRE coffee is better than this."

"Nobody's perfect, Aldo," Dominic observed. But he didn't like it either.

"So, figure half an hour?" Jack asked. He needed about three more minutes to be ready.

"If not, send an ambulance," Enzo said, heading for the door, and hoping the shower gods were merciful this morning. It was hardly fair, he thought. Drinking gave you a hangover, not driving.

But thirty minutes later, all three were in the lobby, neatly dressed and wearing sunglasses against the bright Italian sun that sparkled outside. Dominic asked the doorman for directions and got pointed to the Via Sistina, which led directly to the Trinità dei Monti church, and the steps were just across the street, and looked to be eighty or so feet down—there was an elevator serving the subway stop, which was farther down still, but going downhill was not too outrageous a task. It hit all three that Rome had churches the way New York City had candy stores. The walk down was pleasant. The scene, indeed, would be wonderfully romantic if you had the right girl on your arm. The steps had been designed to follow the slope of the hill by the architect Francesco De Sanctis, and was the home of the annual Donna sotto le Stelle fashion extravaganza. At the bottom was a fountain in

which lay a marble boat commemorating a major flood, something in which a stone boat would be of little use. The piazza was the intersection of only two streets, and was named for the presence of the Spanish Embassy to the Holy See. The playing field, as it were, was not very large—smaller than Times Square, for example—but it bustled with activity and vehicle traffic, and enough pedestrians to make passage there a dicey proposition for all involved.

Ristorante Giovanni sat on the western side, an undistinguished building of yellow/cream-painted brick, with a large canopied eating area outside. Inside was a bar at which everyone had a lighted cigarette. This included a police officer having a cup of coffee. Dominic and Brian walked in and looked around, scoping the area out before coming back outside.

"We have three hours, people," Brian observed. "Now what?"

"We want to be back here—when?" Jack asked.

Dominic checked his watch. "Our friend is supposed to show up at about one-thirty. Figure we sit down for lunch about twelve forty-five and await developments. Jack, can you ID the guy by sight?"

"No problem," Junior assured them.

"Then I guess we have about two hours to wander around. I was here a couple years ago. There's good shopping."

"Is that a Brioni store over there?" Jack asked, pointing.

"Looks like it," Brian answered. "Won't hurt our cover to do some shopping."

"Then let's do it." He'd never gotten an Italian suit. He had several English ones, from No. 10 Savile Row in London. Why not try here? This spook business was crazy, he reflected. They were here to kill a terrorist, but beforehand they'd do some clothes shopping. Even women wouldn't do that . . . expect maybe for shoes.

In fact, there were all manner of stores to be seen on the Via del Babuino —"Baboon Street," of all things—and Jack took the time to look in many of them. Italy was indeed the world capital of style, and he tried on a light gray silk jacket that seemed to have been custom-made for him by a master tailor, and he purchased it on the spot, for eight hundred Euros. Then he had to carry the plastic bag over his shoulder, but was this not beautiful cover? What secret agent man would hobble himself with such an unlikely burden?

MOHAMMED HASSAN left the hotel at 12:15, taking the same walking route that the twins had done two hours earlier. He knew it well. He'd walked the same path on his way for Greengold's killing, and the thought comforted him. It was a fine, sunny day, the temperature reaching to about 30 degrees Celsius, a warm day, but not really a hot one. A good day for American tourists. Christian ones. American Jews went to Israel so that they could spit on Arabs. Here they were just Christian infidels looking to take photographs and buy clothes. Well, he'd bought his suits here as well. There was that Brioni shop just off the Piazza di Spagna. The salesman there, Antonio, always treated him well, the better to take his money. But Mohammed came from a trading culture as well, and you couldn't despise a man for that.

It was time for the midday meal, and the Ristorante Giovanni was as good as any Roman restaurant, and better than most. His favorite waiter recognized

him and waved him to his regular table on the right side, under the canopy.

"THAT'S OUR boy," Jack told them, waving with his glass. The three Americans watched his waiter bring a bottle of Pellegrino water to the table, along with a glass of ice. You didn't see much ice in Europe, where people thought it something to ski or skate on, but evidently 56 liked his water cold. Jack was better placed to look in his direction. "I wonder what he likes to eat."

"The condemned is supposed to have a decent last meal," Dominic noted. Not that mutt in Alabama, of course. He'd probably had bad taste anyway. Then he wondered what they served for lunch in hell. "His guest is supposed to show at one-thirty, right?"

"Correct. Fifty-six told him to be careful in his routine. That might mean to check for a tail."

"Suppose he's nervous about us?" Brian wondered.

"Well," Jack observed, "they have had some bad luck lately."

"You have to wonder what he's thinking," Dominic said. He leaned back in his chair and stretched, catching a glance at their subject. It was a little warm to be wearing a jacket and tie, but they were supposed to look like businessmen, not tourists. Now he wondered if that was a good cover or not. You had to take temperature into account. Was he sweating because of the mission or the ambient temperature? He hadn't been overly tense in London, Munich, or Vienna, had he? No, not then. But this was a more crowded—no, the landscape in London had been more crowded, hadn't it?

There are good serendipities and bad ones. This time, a bad one happened. A waiter with a tray of glasses of Chianti tripped on the big feet of a woman from Chicago, in Rome to check out her roots. The tray missed the table, but the glasses got both twins in the lap. Both were wearing light-colored suits to deal with the heat, and—

"Oh, shit!" Dominic exclaimed, his biscuit-colored Brooks Brothers trousers looking as though he had been hit in the groin with a shotgun. Brian was in even worse shape.

The waiter was aghast. *"Scusi, scusi, signori!"* he gasped. But there was nothing to be done about it. He started jabbering about sending their clothes to the cleaners. Dom and Brian just looked at each other. They might as easily have borne the mark of Cain.

"It's okay," Dominic said in English. He'd forgotten all of his Italian oaths. "Nobody died." The napkins would not do much about this. Maybe a good dry cleaner, and the Excelsior probably had one on staff, or at least close by. A few people looked over, either in horror or amusement, and so his face was as well marked as his clothing. When the waiter retreated in shame, the FBI agent asked, "Okay, now what?"

"Beats the hell out of me," Brian responded. "Random chance has not acted in our favor, Captain Kirk."

"Thanks a bunch, Spock," Dom snarled back.

"Hey, I'm still here, remember?" Jack told them both.

"Junior, you can't—" But Jack cut Brian off.

"Why the hell not?" He asked quietly. "How hard is it?"

"You're not trained," Dominic told him.

"It's not playing golf at the Masters, is it?"

"Well—" It was Brian again.

"Is it?" Jack demanded.

Dominic pulled his pen out of his coat pocket and handed it across.

"Twist the nib and stick it in his ass, right?"

"It's all ready to go," Enzo confirmed. "But be careful, for Christ's sake."

It was 1:21 now. Mohammed Hassan had finished his glass of water and poured another. Mahmoud would soon be here. Why take the chance of interrupting an important meeting? He shrugged to himself and stood, walking inside for the men's room, which had pleasant memories.

"You sure you want to do this?" Brian asked.

"He's a bad guy, isn't he? How long does this stuff take to work?"

"About thirty seconds, Jack. Use your head. If it doesn't feel right, back away and let him go," Dominic told him. "This isn't a fucking game, man."

"Right." *What the hell, Dad did this once or twice,* he told himself. Just to make sure, he bumped into a waiter and asked where the men's room was. The waiter pointed, and Jack went that way.

It was an ordinary wooden door with a symbolic label rather than words because of Giovanni's international clientele. *What if there's more than one guy in there?* he asked himself.

Then you blow it off, dumbass.

Okay...

He walked in, and there *was* somebody else, drying his hands. But then he walked out, and Ryan was alone with 56MoHa, who was just zipping up and starting to turn. Jack pulled the pen from his inside jacket pocket and turned the tip to expose the iridium syringe tip. He resisted the instinctive urge to check the tip with his finger as not a very smart move, and slid past the well-suited stranger, and then, as told, dropped his hand and got him right in the left cheek. He expected to hear the discharge of the gas but didn't.

Mohammed Hassan al-Din jumped at the sudden sharp pain, and turned to see what looked like an ordinary young man—Wait, he'd seen this face at the hotel . . .

"Oh, sorry to bump into you, pal."

The way he said it lit off warning lights in his consciousness. He was an American, and he'd bumped into him, and he'd felt a stick in his buttocks, and —

And he'd killed the Jew here, and—

"Who are you?"

Jack had counted off fifteen seconds or so, and he was feeling his oats—

"I'm the man who just killed you, Fifty-six MoHa," he replied evenly.

The man's face changed into something feral and dangerous. His right hand went into his pocket and came out with a knife, and suddenly it wasn't at all funny anymore.

Jack instinctively backed away with a jump. The terrorist's face was the very image of death. He opened his folding knife and locked onto Jack's throat as his target. He brought the knife up and took half a step forward and—

The knife dropped from his hand—he looked down at his hand in

amazement, then looked back up—

—or tried to. His head didn't move. His legs lost their strength. He fell straight down. His knees bounced painfully on the tile floor. And he fell forward, turning left as he did so. His eyes stayed open, and then he was faceup, looking at the metal plate glued to the bottom of the urinal, where Greengold had wanted to retrieve the package from before, and . . .

"Greetings from America, Fifty-six MoHa. You fucked with the wrong people. I hope you like it in hell, pal." His peripheral vision saw the shape move to the door, and the increase and decrease of light as the door opened and closed.

Ryan stopped there and decided to go back. There was a knife by the guy's hand. He took the handkerchief from his pocket and grasped the knife, then just slid it under the body. Better not to dick with it anymore, he thought. Better to—no, one more thing entered his mind. He reached into 56's pants pocket and found what he sought. Then he took his leave. The crazy part was that he felt a great need to urinate at the moment, and walked fast to make that urge subside. In a matter of seconds, he was back at the table.

"That went okay," he told the twins. "I guess we need to get you guys back to the hotel, eh? There's something I need to do. Come on," he commanded.

Dominic left enough Euros to cover the meal, with a tip. The clumsy waiter chased after them, offering to pay for laundering their clothes, but Brian waved him off with a smile, and they walked across the Piazza di Spagna. Here they took the elevator up to the church, and then walked down the street toward the hotel. They were back to the Excelsior in about eight minutes, with both twins feeling rather stupid to have red stains on their clothes.

The reception clerk saw this and asked if they needed a cleaning service.

"Yes, could you send somebody up?" Brian asked in reply.

"Of course, signore. In five minutes."

The elevator, they felt, was not bugged. "Well?" Dominic asked.

"Got him, and I got this," Jack said, holding up a room key just like theirs.

"What's that for?"

"He's got a computer, remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

When they got to MoHa's room, they found it had already been cleaned. Jack stopped off in his room and brought his laptop and the FireWire external drive that he used. It had ten gigabytes of empty space that he figured he could fill up. Inside his victim's room, he attached the connector cable to the port and lit up the Dell laptop Mohammed Hassan had used.

There was no time for finesse; both his 'puter and the Arab's used the same operating system, and he effected a global transfer of everything off the Arab's computer into the FireWire drive. It took six minutes, and then he wiped everything with his handkerchief and walked out of the room, wiping the doorknob as well. He came out in time to see the valet taking Dominic's wine-stained suit.

"Well?" Dominic asked.

"Done. The guys at home might like to get this." He held up the FireWire to emphasize his point.

"Good thinking, man. Now what?"

"Now I gotta fly home, fella. Get an e-mail off to the home office, okay?"

"Roger that, Junior."

Jack got himself repacked and called the concierge, who told him there was a British Airways flight at Da Vinci Airport for London, with connecting service to D.C. Dulles, but he'd have to hurry. That he did, and ninety minutes later was pulling away from the Jetway, sitting in seat 2A.

MAHMOUD WAS there when the police arrived. He recognized the face of his colleague as the gurney was wheeled out of the men's room, and was thunderstruck. What he didn't know was that the police had taken the knife and made note of the bloodstains on it. This would be sent to their laboratory, which had a DNA lab whose personnel had been trained by the London Metropolitan Police, the world leaders in DNA evidence. Without anyone to report to, Mahmoud went back to his hotel and booked passage on a flight to Dubai on Emirate Airways for the following day. He had to report today's misfortune to someone, perhaps the Emir himself, whom he'd never met and knew only by his forbidding reputation. He'd seen one colleague die, and watched the body of another. What horrendous misfortune was this? He'd consider this with some wine. Allah the Merciful would surely forgive him for the transgression. He'd seen too much in too little time.

* * *

JACK JR. got a mild case of the shakes on the flight to Heathrow. He needed somebody to talk to, but that would take a long time to make happen, and so he gunned down two miniatures of Scotch before landing in England. Two more followed in the front cabin of the 777 inbound to Dulles, but sleep would not come. He'd not only killed somebody but had taunted him as well. Not a good thing, but neither was it something to pray to God about, was it? The FireWire drive had three gigabytes off 56's Dell laptop. Exactly what was on it? That he could not know for now. He could have attached it to his own laptop and gone exploring, but, no, that was a job for a real computer geek. They'd killed four people who had struck out at America, and now America had struck back on their turf and by their rules. The good part was that the enemy could not possibly know what kind of cat was in the jungle. They'd hardly met the teeth.

Next, they'd meet the brain.

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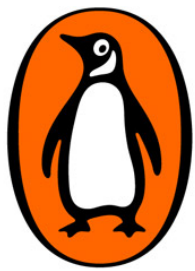

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